

# From Brexit Towards a New EU-MENA Relationship

by [Maurizio Geri \(/experts/maurizio-geri\)](#)

Jul 15, 2016

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Maurizio Geri \(/experts/maurizio-geri\)](#)

Maurizio Geri is an analyst on peace, security and defense for different think tanks and NATO, based in Rome and Brussels. Geri is a contributor to Fikra Forum.

**J**uly 15, 2016

With Britain's new Prime Minister Theresa May at the helm, Great Britain will soon leave the EU and return to its historical position as a bridge between Europe and America. But what will become of the EU after Brexit, an event that some have seen as equally momentous as the fall of Berlin wall?

Because of Brexit, the EU now fears two responses: a domino effect of withdraws from the EU and increased populism. While an interest in isolation is a common reaction to the fears of globalization, and populism a common trend in mature democracies in crisis, a domino effect or even a crisis for European integration and democracy should not be considered an unavoidable outcome. In contrast, each country has its own national interests, making a domino effect a rather unlikely regional outcome. While various isolationist politicians in Europe have jumped on this apparent opportunity, increasing isolation in a globalized world seems too much a leap in the dark for European countries. It is possible that some peripheral countries may decide to leave the EU, but the six founders of the European Coal and Steel Community, created "to make war not only unthinkable but materially impossible", will never separate and are already increasing their political and security integration on top of their extensive economic relationship.

Brexit could instead represent an occasion for the EU to make a slow, strategic shift toward the MENA region. Besides a new contract with Europeans for a real democratic and inclusive Union, the European institutions need a future vision on how to communicate with the rest of the countries on the Mediterranean Sea – and Brexit could potentially set a development of this vision in motion. Much like the events following the fall of the Berlin wall when the EU expanded to Eastern Europe, Brexit could incentivize a stronger relationship between the EU and the South of the Mediterranean. This may seem like a far-fetched possibility, not least because states divided by water tend to have a different relationship than border states, but the regional context may make this a reality. Crises also present an occasion for resilience and creative solutions – the original European Coal and Steel Community itself arose only years after the Second World War. The economic crisis, the refugee and migrant crisis, Brexit, and the democratic crisis of populism in the EU could provide a stimulus for new visionary policies in the EU towards its external borders, in particular those in the South.

The natural geographical and historical relationship between Western Europe and those nations in the southern Mediterranean predates its relationship with those communities across the Urals. Besides its historic relationship, the EU has pressing challenges that have developed from the increasingly globalized community, involving the MENA region now more than ever. The refugee crisis, risks of terrorism, and economic migration have made greater

regional coordination an imperative for safety on both sides. These trends need answers through long-term policies rather than the temporary reactions currently at the fore of EU responses. Brexit seems the perfect time to rethink the purpose of the EU and lead it to rethink how it deals with the rest of the Mediterranean countries -- not necessarily as 'part of the Union' but as 'partners of the Union.'

With 28 member states of the EU and 15 Mediterranean partner countries set up with the Barcelona process, attempts at creating a "Union of Mediterranean" have been active since 2008, and the possibility of a Euro-Mediterranean partnership has been a topic for decades. Nevertheless, an enlargement of the EU towards a Euro-Mediterranean Union doesn't seem the way forward at this stage, as now it seems more imperative to focus on consolidation rather than expansion. But a newly imagined partnership with Mediterranean countries is possible and desirable. The coming negotiation over the future of Britain's relationship with the EU could be an occasion to define a substantial and attractive status that could be extended to third-party states that have long expressed an interest in the EU, such as Turkey and Morocco. Realistic prospects of Turkey's actual entrance to the EU at this point seem unrealistic, but a new type of partnership status could be a solution.

Enacting this process, however, requires not only institutional framework but also grassroots exchanges among peoples. Civil society and Europe's business class can do quite a bit to put this shift into practice: cultural exchange programs, such as those between Morocco and Spain, would encourage European youth to learn Arabic and understand the historical relationships between Mediterranean cultures. NGOs can be encouraged to continue building MENA civil societies in their difficult paths towards democratization, now that democracy in Europe is more less guaranteed by strong institutions and steady civil society. And businessmen can help build regional businesses from tourism to industry, potentially aiding with Europe's economic stagnation and reducing the flow of economic migrants into the EU by providing local opportunities. Obviously these societal exchanges require a solution to the prominent issue of security, since conflict inhibits interest in exchange of people, ideas, and goods.

Italy is in many ways an ideal country to pioneer this realignment. As one of the six founders of European integration, Italy is also geographically and historically connected to MENA region through population and cultural exchanges for thousands of years, beginning with the Roman Empire. Italy could help the EU begin partnering with Tunisia and Libya first, for example, aiding the countries' processes of democratization that have been threatened by terrorist infiltration. Moreover, Italy could continue its requests for the EU to apply the Migrant compact for the economic development of the MENA region, which has so far been rejected by other actors in the EU, particularly Germany, because of its lack of 'political vision'.

Looking back, historians may discover that Brexit boosted the possibility of a new Euromediterranean era. This may be a slow process, but it seems to be the way forward in these globalized times for Europe is further embracing economic, social, and political cooperation with North Africa and Middle East through equal and mutual cooperation. This change needs long-term visionary leadership and the requisite political will, but this shift will ultimately help the EU prevent future crises instead of forcing it to react to challenges after the fact. ❖

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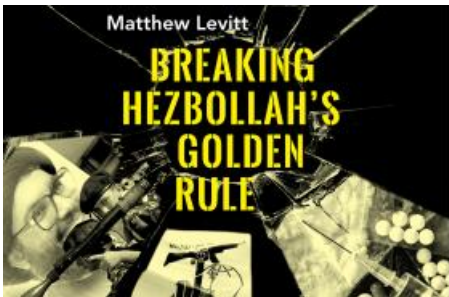
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