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**THE EUROPEAN UNION AND  
EGYPT COMPREHENSIVE AND  
STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP:  
AN IN-DEPTH ANALYSIS OF THE  
DYNAMICS AND CHALLENGES**

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## Introduction

Since its creation in 2003, the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) has provided a platform for political dialogue, economic cooperation, and the promotion of shared values, and Egypt has served as a pivotal platform fostering political dialogue, economic cooperation and the promotion of sharing values.

The European Union-Egypt Agreement (Agreement), presented on 17 March 2024, signifies a strategic and comprehensive partnership aimed at advancing mutual interests across various domains, including diplomatic development, economic stability and migration. While on the one hand the matter of energy procurement has emerged as a significant push factor, driving the European Union-Egypt partnership, on the other hand, concerns have been raised regarding human rights violations in Egypt. The European Union-Egypt Agreement, marks a significant milestone in the ENP, signifying a strategic and comprehensive alliance aimed at advancing mutual interests across various domains, including diplomatic development, economic stability, and migration management.

This paper seeks to delve into the dynamics of the European Union-Egypt relationship. It not only outlines the key components of the Agreement, but sheds light on the main push factors driving this collaboration and addresses the critical issues surrounding human rights violations in Egypt.

### 1. The European Neighbourhood Policy

North Africa has consistently held significant strategic value for the European Union (EU), acting as both a close neighbour and partner, while also being a potential source of instability (EUISS, 2023). The significance of this region to the EU was underscored on 28 November 1995, when fifteen foreign ministers of European Union Member States (EUMS) and twelve stakeholders of third Mediterranean member states signed the declaration of the Euro-Mediterranean partnership (Toute l'Europe, 2010). In light of the EU enlargement, there was a growing recognition among EUMS of the need to reassess their neighbourhood policy in response to the redefinition of European borders.

The European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) was launched in 2003 based on an idea originating from Sweden, Finland, the United Kingdom and Poland (at the time a candidate country) (Delcour, 2007). Initially, it encompassed sixteen countries from the eastern neighbourhood (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine and Russia) and the southern neighbourhood (Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia) (DG NEAR, 2024). The policy gained momentum with a French proposal when President Sarkozy introduced the concept of the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) during a campaign speech in 2007 (Altemir, 2014).

The ENP provides a multilateral platform for political dialogue, the exchange of perspectives, and the sharing of know-how among third states. At its core is the principle of granting increased access to the Internal Market in exchange for advancements in the EU's foundational values (democracy, rule of law and human rights) (Delcour, 2007).

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As the interdependence between both continents deepens, ensuring stability and security becomes increasingly imperative. The ENP underwent two renewals: first in 2011 following the Arab Spring, and again in 2015 (DG NEAR, 2024). In 2015, during the Eastern Partnership Summit held in Riga, the EU progressively differentiated and benchmarked the policies with Southern and Eastern neighbourhoods (Toute l'Europe, 2014). Drawing from lessons learned in the initial years of the ENP, the policy underwent a shift towards greater specificity, moving away from its original one-size-fits-all approach. Bilateral negotiations became increasingly prominent, with states crafting their national strategies to align more closely with EU values. Originally conceived as a uniform strategy, the ENP evolved into a more differentiated and tailored framework as policies were renewed (Pisani-Ferry & al., 2018).

The ENP has been conceptualised by the EU and for the EU (Delcour, 2007). The EU used to have an asymmetrical power over the countries from the neighbourhood (due to economic power and union between EUMS). However, this dynamic has progressively changed. The EU's interest in third states has grown, driven by its increasing energy dependency on said States (even if the relation used to be very asymmetrical) and secondly for the externalisation of migration management (Delcour, 2007). Since 2022, particularly with the onset of the war in Ukraine, energy supply has emerged as a key driver, leading countries including Algeria to gain increased significance (Ghafar & al. 2023).

## **2. The EU-Egypt Agreement**

On 17 March 2024, a Joint Declaration on the Strategic and Comprehensive Partnership between the EU and the Arab Republic of Egypt was presented (Pugnet, 2024). This underscores the pillars of “mutual interest”, encompassing a wide spectrum of valuable matters such as diplomatic relations, economic stability, investment and trade, water management, migration and mobility, security and human capital.

According to the partnership, there will be an intensified political dialogue between the EU and Egypt, including the organisation of a Summit every two years. Additionally, the EU will assist Egypt in the implementation of the National Strategy for Human Rights, in alignment with the provisions of the Association Agreement and the Partnership Priorities 2021-2027 (DG NEAR, March 2024). Moreover, the EU will support Egypt's short and medium-term economic development needs. As there has been a rise in borrowing costs, the EU will also support Egypt in implementing economic policies focused on showcasing credibility, bolstering confidence and unlocking private inflows (DG NEAR, March 2024).

In the realm of investments and trade, the aim of the agreement is to enhance cooperation in various sectors including renewable energy, renewable hydrogen, advanced industrialisation, agriculture, food security, connectivity, digitalisation, and water security and management. According to predictions, these areas will attract up to 5 billion euros in European investments. It is also worth highlighting that the EU and Egypt are developing the Gregy electric interconnector project which is expected to enhance Europe's energy security (European Commission, 2024).

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Since 2022, Egypt and the EU have served as co-chairs of the Global Counter Terrorism Forum (GCTF), an informal, apolitical and multilateral counterterrorism platform. The GCTF's goal is to reduce terrorist recruitment and enhance civilian capacities to address terrorist threats within their respective borders and regions. In alignment with this goal, the two contracting parties aim to strengthen dialogue on counter-terrorism, centring on preventing and countering security threats and challenges, improving law enforcement and strengthening capacity-building efforts (DG NEAR, March 2024).

Furthermore, over 200 million euro from the package are allocated to migration and mobility. More specifically, similarly to the deal concluded with Tunisia, the EU is investing its funds to increase Egypt's capacity to control migration through efforts ranging from border management to anti-smuggling, and to facilitate legal migration (Werr, 2024).

Finally, the last pillar of the Agreement concerns demography and human capital. Through the Agreement, Egypt gains the opportunity to engage in negotiations for its inclusion in additional EU programs such as Creative Europe and Horizon Europe. Moreover, the EU commits to assisting Egypt in technical and vocational education, ensuring alignment between skills and labour market demands (DG NEAR, March 2024).

### **3. Energy and Migration as Push Factors to Sign the Agreement**

The EU's energy dependencies are anticipated to escalate in the coming years, with projections indicating that by 2030, the EU will import approximately 70% of its consumption (Delcour 2007). The economic repercussions of the Covid-19 pandemic significantly impacted African economies, leading to a surge in anti-western sentiments (Faleg & al. 2023). The economic shockwaves resulting from the Ukrainian war further exacerbated these sentiments, driving the two continents apart (Faleg & al. 2023).

This breaking point between Africa and the EU changed the tone and content of policy discussions (Faleg & al., 2023). As China's Belt and Road Initiative expanded its influence, the EU pivoted its focus towards the East, exacerbating the perceived divide between the EU and Africa (Faleg & al., 2023). The EU identified a moment for action, recognising the missed opportunity of the Arab Spring (ElBaradei, 2020), where energy and development priorities overshadowed political concerns (Martinez, 2011; Dworkin, 2018).

Indeed, the EU's imperative to diversify its energy sources presents an opportunity for a diplomatic collaboration with Egypt (Tsimitakis, 2021), which emerges as a more viable partner than Algeria, perceived as too close to Russia (Ghafar & al., 2023). The strategic partnership includes stepping up gas and other energy flows to reduce reliance on Russian gas (AFP, 2024).

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It is not an accident that the European Commission was accompanied by five countries, which have a deep interest in this deal, to sign this Agreement (Euractiv, 2024). In fact, their energy dependence ranges from 52%, corresponding to Austria's energy dependency, to 89% in Cyprus. Belgium (currently holding the EU's presidency), Greece, and Italy have around 70% of dependency (Verdes, 2023). Austria not only has an energy stake in the agreement, but it pushed for a new asylum migration pact at the time (Kabelka, 2022) (Solis & al., 2023), given it is the EU country with the second-highest number of refugees per capita, following Cyprus (Kabelka, 2022).

Within the agreement, 200 million euros will be designated to manage migration (Werr, 2024). According to the Italian Prime Minister, this deal represents the most effective approach to addressing migration flows (Werr, 2024). It is not the only one made in the region: it follows similar agreements signed with Libya, Tunisia and Mauritania (AFP, 2024). However, as it will be analysed in the following paragraph, concerns have been raised concerning the rights of the 9 million migrants and refugees who have fled from surrounding conflicts and are currently in Egypt (AFP, 2024).

#### **4. Human Rights Concerns in Egypt**

Following the conclusion of the Partnership between the Arab Republic of Egypt and the EU, concerns were raised by several human rights associations which highlighted Egypt's critical situation regarding human rights. Human rights violations have targeted both the Egyptian people as well as refugees (HRW, 2024). Organisations such as Freedom House, Human Rights Watch (HRW) and Amnesty International have described Egypt as "an authoritarian country where freedom of expression and assembly are legally recognised but severely restricted in practice" (Liboreiro & Genovese, 18 March 2024).

According to a 2024 HRW Report, prison conditions are deplorable (HRW, 2024). Detainees declare being denied the right to health care, exposed to fluorescent lights 24 hours a day, and subjected to sexual violence (Egyptianfront, 2022). Moreover, a 2023 HRW Report stated that political opponents disappear in unofficial detention facilities and are tortured. However, based on available information, no investigation regarding said incidents has been pursued by Egyptian authorities (HRW, 2023).

Violations of the right to freedom of expression have also been documented. For instance, according to the collected data, two singers were sentenced to a year in prison and fined 10,000 EGP for "violating family values in Egyptian society and profiting from a video including dancing and singing" on 28 March 2022 (Knell (ed.), April 2022). Furthermore, journalists affiliated with the independent media platform Mada Masr faced accusations of insulting parliamentarians and misusing social media, leading to their referral to the Mansour Economic Court (HRW, 2023). Finally, human rights defenders have also been targeted, with arbitrary travel bans being imposed on human rights lawyers, journalists and other key members of civil society due to their peaceful work (HRW, 2022).

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As mentioned above, migration is one of the pillars on which the EU-Egypt Agreement is constructed, but concerns have been raised by several organisations regarding the treatment of refugees in Egypt. According to Amnesty International, “Egyptian authorities routinely arrest refugees and migrants for entering or staying in the country irregularly, detain them in cruel and inhuman conditions and unlawfully deport some without adequate assessment of their protection needs” (Amnesty International, 2024).

Concerns have been raised especially regarding the mistreatment of Sudanese refugees. Between April 2023 and January 2024, 450,000 Sudanese and 8,827 individuals of other nationalities have crossed into Egypt and following the conclusion of the Agreement, more than 25 organisations signed a joint statement calling on the Egyptian government “to immediately stop the serious abuses against Sudanese seeking refuge in Egypt” (UNHCR, 2024). The data shows a significant increase in the number of immigration-related detentions (5,200 in 2023 and 3,800 in 2022), with migrants residing in unsanitary conditions due to the absence of essential infrastructure in the places where they are detained. Furthermore, individuals are denied access to their family and the UNHCR, meaning the UN agency cannot register detainees and start their identification process (Global Detention Project and Committee for Justice, 2024).

Incidents of *refoulement* of Sudanese refugees have surfaced. Although official information on deportations is publicly unavailable, the media or public humanitarian sphere have provided evidence of the increase in the number of deportations. According to the collected data, more than 2,000 individuals were forcibly removed from Egypt and deported to Sudan. Moreover, UNHCR revealed that more than fifty registered refugees were deported to unsafe territories in 2023, making evident that the fundamental principle of *non-refoulement* failed to be upheld (Global Detention Project and Committee for Justice, 2024).

The evidence presented paints a troubling picture of the human rights situation in Egypt, encompassing violations against both its citizens and refugees. The EU-Egypt Agreement, which includes migration as one of its key aspects, underscores the importance of addressing these concerns comprehensively. The reported violations of human rights in Egypt and the mistreatment of refugees, particularly Sudanese individuals, reflect a failure to uphold basic human rights standards which is in stark contrast with the EU's commitment to fundamental human rights (HRW, 2023). Therefore, it is imperative for Egypt and the EU to work together to uphold human rights and foster a culture of accountability.

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## 5. Conclusion

The EU and Egypt Comprehensive and Strategic Partnership, ratified on 17 March 2024, underscores the EU's increasing bilateral engagement in the region. North Africa has always held significance for the EU, both as a neighbour and as a strategic partner. However, a pivotal moment was reached following the Covid-19 pandemic and its impact on African economies. While the EU has turned its focus towards the East, it remains committed to the Southern part of the ENP, with Egypt emerging as a key partner despite being at the centre of major conflicts and migrant flows.

Moreover, the EU's need to diversify its energy imports, due to the Ukrainian war, has led to increased collaboration with neighbouring countries. The deal grants Egypt access to substantial EU funding (7,4 billion), aimed at promoting economic development and facilitating legal migration. This shift prioritises economic development and green energy initiatives over political aspects such as the rule of law, with the EU aiming to encourage Egypt's transition towards a more like-minded political development. However, the strategic partnership has raised concerns regarding the treatment of migrants, particularly Sudanese migrants, with reports of harsh detention conditions and deportations.

The EU has steadily been trying to externalise the management of its borders and influence its "ring of friends", often prioritising economic and energy development. The EU-Egypt agreement marks a significant step in the relationship between the two countries, with hopes that the economic and political investments outlined in the deal will not only drive economic growth but contribute to improving human rights conditions in Egypt, ensuring that human right values are respected, implemented, and upheld in the region.

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