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POLICY BRIEF

European and like-minded states in Egypt: interests at the expense of human rights

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EuroMed Rights July 2021

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This policy brief investigates the link between the interests of European states and their position on the human rights situation in Egypt. Since the late 20th century, the main concern of EU and like-minded states in the Mediterranean region has been **political stability** to meet their own security and economic interests. However, the pursuit of these interests has often occurred at the expense of EU and like-minded states' commitment to protecting human rights. Over the past few years, human rights organisations have repeatedly called on Western governments to rethink their cooperation with Egyptian authorities in light of the unprecedented crackdown on human rights and civil society. Ahead of the 10th anniversary of Egypt's 2011 revolution, 12 international human rights organisations have written an [open letter](#) to the EU to reverse course in its relations with the Egyptian government. In March 2021, 31 states have signed a [joint declaration](#) at the United Nations Human Rights Council to condemn the human rights situation in Egypt, which represented a significant first step, but most of the calls of Egyptian and international civil society remain unanswered. We will examine some European states' interests in order to understand what holds them back in condemning the human rights situation in Egypt.

I- Egypt as a key ally for EU and like-minded states in the Mediterranean

Egypt has played a **historical role** in supporting Western countries' interests in the Mediterranean. Under the presidency of Anwar Sadat, Egypt was the first country to conclude a **peace treaty with Israel** in 1979 at Camp David. Following the peace agreement, Egypt has become a key partner of European and like-minded states in their Middle Eastern politics. President Hosni Mubarak also played the role of facilitator between Iraq and Kuwait in 1990-91 and joined Western countries in the war against Iraq in the 90s. After 9/11, concern for regional security-building gained prominence in Western policies in the Mediterranean. Mubarak seized this opportunity to attract European and like-minded states' sympathy and expressed strong **support to the fight against terrorism**. Egypt has proven to be an important regional ally of the US and European states in their "war against terror". Until today, acting President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi regularly underscores [Egypt's commitment](#) to fighting religious extremism and cooperating on regional security issues. Over the past decades, the Egyptian government has excessively exploited the terrorist threat not only to crack down on its internal opponents, but also to attract military aid from its Western partners. Egypt is the third largest buyer of military equipment worldwide, and many European countries have concluded lucrative [arms deals](#) with the regime over the last years. Finally, stability in Egypt and in the Mediterranean region is also essential for **Western economic interests**. Egypt is at the crossroads between Europe, Africa and Asia and 8% of international maritime trade passes through the Suez Canal. In the energy sector, Egypt's oil reserves are modest, but the country has important revenues from its [gas fields](#). Valuing these interests, US and European states show little consideration for the authoritarian streak of the Egyptian regime and its lack of respect for human rights. In fact, Europe and the US have treated many authoritarian regimes in the region as allies as they fear that not doing so would lead to [political destabilisation](#).

However, after the ouster of President Mubarak in January 2011, most European states, as for example [France](#) and [Germany](#), have shown support for the Egyptian revolution and have recognised the necessity of a democratic opening to ensure long-term stability. There was hope for change, until al-Sisi acceded to *de facto* power in 2013 and then *de jure* in June 2014. In the years that followed the revolution, European states were outspoken on the deteriorating human rights situation in Egypt and have, for example, strongly condemned the [Raba'a massacre](#) in August 2013. Nevertheless, their bilateral relations with Egypt have soon returned to normal. The civil wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, the migration flows to the European shores and the terrorist attacks in Europe in 2015 and 2016 hastened a **short-term security strategy** to the detriment of the long-term goals of democratisation, good governance and respect for human rights. European governments and the EU have sought closer cooperation with al-Sisi's government [based on](#) immediate interests, and the trade-off has occurred at the expense of human rights. They enjoy a certain [complacency](#) in their relations with the regime of al-Sisi as it is perceived as an island of stability in the middle of conflict zones.

II- The interests of EU and like-minded states in Egypt after 2011

Security and economic considerations are still [at the core](#) of the relationship between Egypt and most EU and like-minded states today. A great majority of them has developed their bilateral cooperation with Egypt based on **counterterrorism interests**. It is particularly the case for Nordic countries, such as Denmark and Norway who have no other interests in the region than [security](#). They have developed a Middle Eastern policy based on fighting religious extremism and promoting democratisation. France and the United Kingdom (UK) have maintained a close dialogue with Egypt on a range of regional security issues, and Germany has also emphasised this aspect in its bilateral relations after the terrorist attacks in the EU in 2015. Many European states are exporting arms and military equipment to Egypt to support the fight against terrorism. The alarming human rights situation in Egypt hasn't discouraged them from concluding **lucrative arms deals** over the recent years. In May 2021, French President Emmanuel Macron concluded a EUR 4 billion deal with al-Sisi for the sale of [30 Rafale fighter jets](#). In 2013, EU countries agreed to [suspend exports licences](#) of military equipment to Egypt following the Raba'a massacre, but this commitment hasn't been respected. Furthermore, Egypt has recently received praise for its **cooperation on migration** from Austria, Italy and Germany. European states also [appreciate](#) that Egypt is hosting millions of migrants and refugees, and above all that *"no boat has left the Egyptian coasts since 2016"*. In addition to being an ally for European states in the field of terrorism and migration, Egypt also remains a key local **interlocutor in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict** and continues to be perceived as an **important mediator in all conflicts** affecting the region. The role of the Egyptian government in the [ceasefire](#) between Gaza and Israel in May 2021 is the most recent example. As the main European protector of Israel's interests, Germany strongly [values](#) Egypt's mediation efforts. Overall, all European states have stressed the importance of this role during their bilateral meetings with Egyptian representatives. Finally, Egypt is considered as an **important emerging market** and the EU is Egypt's first [trading partner](#). At state level, the US, Germany and Italy are Egypt's most important Western clients. Egypt is, for the majority of European states, their largest Arab and African export market, although the volume of trade with Egypt remains low when compared to the total trade volume. In 2020, European states' [foreign direct investment](#) to Egypt amounted to USD 9.1 billion, with Italy, the UK and the Netherlands investing more than one billion each. They mostly invest in the energy sector (gas and renewable energy) and in property. Italy, Greece and Cyprus also have close relations with Egypt due to their energy interests.

The European Union's European Neighbourhood Policy towards Egypt reflects these interests, and values stability above all. In its 2017-2020 partnership priorities (now extended until the end of 2021), the EU considers Egypt as a key partner to [promote peace, prosperity and stability](#) in the Southern Neighbourhood region. The pillars of EU-Egypt cooperation include (1) Economic modernisation, energy sustainability and environment, (2) Social development and social protection, and (3) Governance, enhancing stability and modern democratic state. The EU affirms that democracy and the respect for human rights are essential for Egypt's long-term stability and sustainable development, although these items seem to be at the bottom of the bilateral cooperation agenda. In the last EU-Egypt Association Council, EU High Representative Federica Mogherini emphasised Egypt's efforts in **countering terrorism, dealing with irregular migration** as well as **cooperating on regional security issues**.

III- EU and like-minded states' mixed approach towards the human rights situation in Egypt

EU and like-minded states have been **relatively outspoken** on the deteriorating human rights situation in Egypt over the past few years. The great majority of them have condemned *at least once* the human rights situation in Egypt. However, few do it on a regular basis. Overall, the degree of condemnation of EU and like-minded states of the human rights situation has sharply [declined](#) over the past years in comparison to the aftermath of the 2013 coup.

In Europe, Nordic countries, Ireland and the Netherlands are very outspoken on the human rights situation in Egypt, but they also have a low level of interests and are geographically distant. Italy, the UK, Germany and France have adopted a mixed approach towards the Egyptian government by raising concerns through public statements and during their bilateral discussions with al-Sisi or Egyptian representatives, but to an extent that doesn't affect their interests. Germany regularly [criticises](#) the crackdown on civil society, but in 2017 it has concluded a new bilateral [agreement](#) on fighting terrorism and curbing "irregular" migration. The successive French governments have also been ambiguous in their responses. In 2017, French President Emmanuel Macron did not raise human issues in his dialogue with al-Sisi and said that he wouldn't "lecture" him on human rights, but in January 2019, he criticised publicly, for the first time, Egypt's human rights record at a press conference with al-Sisi during an official visit in Cairo. Macron stated that fighting religious fundamentalism cannot be considered separately from the issue of human rights. Yet, the French government has continued to sell arms to Egypt and has [flouted](#) the legal obligation which prohibits countries from delivering military equipment to countries where there is "*a substantial risk that these weapons could be used to commit or facilitate serious violations of international humanitarian or human rights law*". Regarding Italy, the government is still [close to Egypt](#) despite the great mobilisation of Italian civil society following the murder of [Giulio Regeni](#) and the detention of [Patrick Zaki](#). In April 2016, after much pressure from the Regeni family and civil society, Rome recalled its ambassador to Cairo in response to a series of implausible theories the Egyptian government put forward regarding Regeni's death. But, by the end of 2016, we observed a gradual re-establishment of the relations, and in 2017, Italy sent its ambassador back to Cairo, even though the investigation of Regeni's murder has not been concluded, and significant inconsistencies remain in the Egyptian investigation.

EU and like-minded States have been outspoken so long as their profits and interests in Egypt and in the region weren't harmed. This short-sighted view ignores that the crackdown on human rights and civil society in Egypt is an immediate threat to their interests and violates their commitment to protecting human rights.

Conclusion: what room for improvement and change?

Efforts can be pursued to show that a stronger policy on human rights is helpful to further EU and like-minded states' interests and to get them to respect their own commitment to human rights. Egyptian governments have extensively exploited the terrorist threat to legitimise internal repression and receive military support from both Europe and the US since 9/11. Cooperation on counterterrorism is part of almost all bilateral partnerships between EU/like-minded states and Egypt. However, attention should be brought to the Egyptian government's own definition of [the terrorist threat](#). Over the past few years, human rights defenders have continuously been imprisoned [on charges](#) of joining terrorist groups, while some have been put on Egypt's terrorist list for their work. In the meantime, the Sinai remains non-accessible for journalists or for external investigation. Egypt should stop being considered as a key ally of Europe in this regard as it makes a mockery of the genuine fight against terrorism. Migration also remains a key concern of European states, who too often forget that it is a human right and are keen to fall into the Egyptian government's trap to attract international funding or support. Western states should also remember that economic development [happens best](#) in a country that respects human rights and is corruption free. Despite a high amount of Western foreign direct investment and flourishing trade relations, Egypt remains at the edge of bankruptcy and is highly [dependent on](#) foreign aid. Lastly, EU and like-minded states may also overvalue Egypt's role as an important regional mediator or warrant of European interests in regional conflicts. Egypt's support for Khalifa Haftar in Libya for example, goes strongly against [French interests](#) in the region.

Finally, attention should be brought to the dichotomy between what EU and like-minded states expect in Egypt and in the Mediterranean and the means they effectively use to obtain these objectives. EU and like-minded states' first concern in the region is stability to secure their own security and economic interests. However, human rights are key to fostering the various interests they pursue in Egypt. Furthermore, they have a commitment to democracy, good governance and human rights to achieve long-term stability and security in the region, as they recognised after January 2011. History shouldn't repeat itself.