

GEPS Briefing: Amid controversies on migration, signs of increasing fragmentation in Africa-EU relations

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Abstract

When the European Parliamentary Research Service published its analysis of ten issues to watch in 2018 most were rather inward looking topics like the Brexit, European elections or the future of the euro area. But two issues at the interface of EU internal and external action stood out: terrorism and migration.¹ The influence of the related agendas has become highly visible in Africa-EU relations.² At the recent Abidjan Summit debates became controversial and at times trapped in the diverging interests of the EU and AU and their respective member states in the field of migration. Yet, as this Briefing will argue, the symbolically charged Summit rhetoric is not necessarily a sign of a fundamental rupture, but rather has covered up signs of increasing fragmentation in Africa-EU relations.

1 Another such issue listed is “disinformation and cybersecurity”, see: European Parliamentary Research Service (EPRS): Ten issues to watch in 2018, In-depth Analysis, Author: Étienne Bassot, Members’ Research Service
January 2018 — PE 614.650.

2 After the accession of Morocco to the African Union, this summit was the first one held under the heading “AU-EU Summit”. But since the partnership still runs under “Africa-EU partnership”, this briefing continues to use this term to refer to relations in general.

About the author

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Amid controversies on migration, signs of increasing fragmentation in Africa-EU relations

Judith Vorrath

The CNN pictures of alleged slave markets in Libya that had just been released rendered the issue of migration even more contentious at the consultations of the Abidjan Summit end of November 2017. Even though such phenomena are far from new and had been reported before from Libya, the visual proof of the trade in human beings for labor exploitation sparked a heated debate. Migration has clearly become a dominant issue in Africa-EU relations. Reports on the Abidjan Summit pictured two opposing sides with inherently different interests. Indeed, the views on migration differ between both continents. According to World Bank data, the inflow of remittances to sub-Saharan African countries alone was about 34.8 billion US-Dollars in 2015.¹ High mobility within African regions linked to labor migration, petty trade and pastoralism is another important factor for local livelihood while longer-term migration also is a way of easing the demographic pressure in some countries. On the European side, at least among EU member states, the main focus is rather on reducing (irregular) migration from or through the neighborhood and increasing swift repatriation of asylum seekers. The lengthy drafting of the final declaration that was just published a week after the Abidjan Summit, therefore, has been seen by observers as an expression of these different interests and strained relations. Indeed, an inter-continental partnership breaking the donor-recipient logic as initially envisaged by the Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) in 2007 is still out of reach. But it is premature to conclude a fundamental rift as both sides know that they need each other more than ever. Rather the awareness of interdependence and the urgency of security and migration challenges risk to lead to ad hoc responses and a further fragmentation of relations.

1. Is Europe losing ground in Africa?

Due to some longer-term trends, particularly the rising importance of China, India, Turkey or the Gulf States in Africa, Europe's influence seems to be in decline. The consequences of Brexit including serious cuts in European development funds, but also a potential weakening of European foreign policy vis-à-vis certain African states could well add to this picture. Moreover, the value-based model of the EU is losing traction as fundamental principles are even called into question in EU member states. The EU may have never fully lived up to its aspiration of being a "norm entrepreneur" in its neighborhood and the partnership on democratic governance and human rights has always been rather unpopular with the African side – in contrast to the peace and security partnership. But the recent Summit has demonstrated that these issues have almost dropped off the agenda.

However, the EU and its member states are still providing the largest amount of development aid to Africa.² With its strong support to peace operations and the African Peace and Security Architecture as well as the presence of CSDP missions the EU is an important security provider. Moreover, Europe remains Africa's principal trading partner. Additional funding through schemes like the EU External Investment Plan with 4.1 billion Euros to attract private investments of a larger scale can also be interpreted as an attempt to keep up with other important economic powers on the con-

¹ International Bank for Reconstruction and Development / The World Bank, Migration and Remittances Factbook 2016, third edition, Washington D.C. 2016, p. 36. As the publication notes the true amount of remittances is likely to be higher due to unrecorded flows.

² OECD, Development aid at a glance: Statistics by region, 2. Africa, 2017 edition: <http://www.oecd.org/dac/financing-sustainable-development/development-finance-data/Africa-Development-Aid-at-a-Glance.pdf> [27 February 2018].

continent.³ Attention for the African continent has rarely been that high in European politics as for example the recent German initiatives (Compact, Marshall Plan, Pro!Africa) demonstrate. Overall, there is rather more engagement than less. The problem, however, is that there is a proliferation of cooperation schemes and ad hoc measures which lack a fundamental political leit-motif – on both sides.

2. The trap of trade-offs

The shifting European agenda clearly drives many emerging programs at the regional or country level in the wider Southern neighborhood. More importantly, “[t]he EU institutions are increasingly risk-averse and primarily driven by short-term security and migration concerns.”⁴ On the African side, the bargaining power of some state elites has visibly increased particularly along the main migration routes towards Europe. Yet, among those countries which concluded migration partnerships with the EU, many are facing a difficult security and political situation, for example Mali, Niger, Nigeria and Chad. The multitude of European actors on the ground in Mali symbolizes the increasing relevance of the region in foreign and security policy. Apart from the military training mission (EUTM) and the civilian CSDP mission EUCAP Sahel Mali, several European countries including Germany are engaged in the UN mission (MINUSMA) while France is still running the counter-terrorism Operation Barkhane in the region. The G5 Sahel Joint Force that shall strengthen cross-border operations against terrorist groups as well as drug and human trafficking is supported by the EU with an increased contribution of 100 million

Euros.⁵ No one can seriously claim a down-grading of European engagement in the light of these measures. The effects, however, may be ambivalent.

The multitude of agreements and initiatives linked to migration and terrorism may be seen as a problem in its own right. So far about 146 programs worth approximately 2.4 billion Euros have been approved under the Emergency Trust Fund for stability and addressing root causes of irregular migration and displaced persons in Africa (EUTF for Africa) alone.⁶ The more problematic aspect, however, is the dilution of different agendas without a visible overarching strategy. The issue of migration tends to trickle into almost every other European policy in relation to Africa and its regions in recent years. For example, the EU Sahel Strategy in 2011 pointed out the dangers of transnational organized crime mostly with regard to drug trafficking, or more precisely cocaine smuggling. The following Action Plan for 2015-2020 almost exclusively highlighted human smuggling and trafficking as a concrete criminal threat. This shift may be one in rhetoric mostly and refer only to one particular field, but there also are concrete impacts on the ground. A recent analysis of the situation in Mali emphasizes that MINUSMA has increasingly been linked with controlling migration which may slow down the peace process in the country.⁷ Apparently, the European engagement relies on the assumption that “all good things go together” without full consideration of substantial trade-offs. Stabilization named as a top priority in the EU’s Strategy for the Southern Neighborhood may well be undermined by measures to contain or reduce migration. Moreover, rather technical approaches are pursued as a way to navigate the difficult political terrain.

3 For more details see: EU, Factsheet EU External Investment Plan, https://ec.europa.eu/europeaid/sites/devco/files/factsheet-eip-20171120_en.pdf [27 February 2018]

4 Jean Bossuyt, (with support from Dalil Djinnit): Can EU-Africa relations be deepened? A perspective on power-relations, interests and incentives, European Centre for Development Policy Management/ECDFM: Briefing Note No. 97, Maastricht November 2017, p. 3.

5 European Commission, Press release: EU mobilises the international community for Africa’s Sahel region, Brussels, 23 February 2018.

6 European Commission: EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa – Factsheet, December 2017, p. 1.

7 Charlotte Wiedemann: Viel Militär, weniger Sicherheit: Mali-Fünf Jahre nach Beginn der Intervention, Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung: e-Paper, January 2018, p. 9.

3. The misfit of technical solutions

This can be seen in one particular area of cooperation where the agendas for tackling terrorism and migration supposedly converge: border management and security. The activities under the action plan of the Valletta migration summit in November 2015 include European support for extending national control capacities at land, sea and air borders. There is a strong focus on the Mediterranean, most notably on Libya due to the increasingly dangerous migration routes and security challenges in the country. Apart from attempts to include Libya into the EU Seahorse Mediterranean Network and the training of its coast guard by EUNAVFOR MED, its UN-backed government will receive 285 million Euros from Italy and the EU for extending its border facilities until 2023.⁸ But strengthening border security and management is also part of the cooperation with West African states. The migration partnerships foresee the support by CSDP missions and the inclusion of EU agencies like the European Border and Coast Guard Agency. One pillar of the EUTF is improving border management, combating transnational trafficking and criminal networks as well as terrorism-related activities through projects like the „Programme to support the strengthening of security in the Mopti region and the management of border areas” in Mali.⁹ Moreover, some EU member states also conduct bilateral programs of train and equip in border control.

There are potential negative side-effects like the relocation of main migration routes to less stable areas and increasing dangers for migrants. Some fear

a securitization of EU policy under the cooperation schemes on migration. Yet, the main part of the EUTF, for example, is spent on socio-economic development like promoting education and employment. The more problematic aspect of the plethora of projects in this field is a rather isolated short-term approach and almost an obsession with capacity-building. This is a general scheme in EU security cooperation as 14 out of 16 CSDP missions have a capacity-building component. While capacities in many transit countries are clearly weak, conditions for effective and sustainable improvements in border management are often equally futile. First, for an effective tackling of cross-border terrorism, organized crime and human smuggling and trafficking, the criminal justice sector is core. Yet, many programs in the security realm focus on the military and/or agencies at the borders. Controls may have a short-term deterrent effect including for irregular migrants, but in order to pursue cases after arrests or seizures the role of (specialized) police units, prosecutors and courts is crucial. Programs supporting those actors e.g. by the EU in fact exist, but they seem to be barely linked to those on border security and management. Second, the rather short-term technical approach ignores relevant power structures and economic incentives at (West) African borders. The main concern with capacity-building in the security sector usually are negative human rights implications. This danger is real, but strengthening border controls can also interfere in the political economy of borderlands since cross-border smuggling as well as informal arrangements around official crossing points are important sources of income in often marginalized regions. Again, some European programs are trying to tackle this aspect by providing alternative sources of income. But apart from the time economic transformation will take, the ultimate issue is the political relationship of center and periphery.

The developments described have not rendered EU-Africa relations less important, but rather changed the ground of cooperation. The dominant agendas of ter-

⁸ euobserver, 'EU and Italy put aside €285m to boost Libyan coast guard', by Nikolaj Nielsen, Brussels, 29 November 2017: <https://euobserver.com/migration/140067> [27 February 2018].

⁹ European Commission, EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa, as of: 18 December 2017, pp. 3-4: https://ec.europa.eu/trustfundforafrica/sites/euetfa/files/eu_emergency_trust_fund_for_africa_18-12-2017.pdf [27 February 2018].

rorism and migration vis-à-vis certain African regions have not only sidelined established institutions and formats like the African Peace and Security Architecture, but increasingly fragmented responses to core challenges in the wider Southern Neighborhood of the EU. Apart from pro-actively dealing with serious trade-offs in European foreign and security policy and avoiding negative side-effects as far as possible, a stronger political basis of an Africa-EU partnership needs to be revived. Moreover, policy makers should have a wider perspective on the chances, not just the problems of interdependence and inter-continental links including with regard to African and European diasporas on both sides of the Mediterranean.

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