

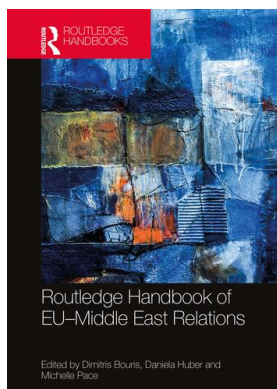
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### **EU–Egypt relations at a crossroads**

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EU–EGYPT RELATIONS AT A  
CROSSROADS*Gerasimos Tsourapas***Introduction**

Any discussion of the European Union (EU) as an international actor would be incomplete without a reference to EU–MENA relations, and EU–Egypt relations in particular. “Egypt is the most important country in the world”, Napoleon Bonaparte was quoted as grandiosely declaring, and few would dispute the country’s centrality in the Arab world (Lazarou et al., 2013). Currently at 99.4 million inhabitants and with a 2.38% annual population growth rate, Egypt constitutes the most populous country in the Middle East, while accounting for roughly one-quarter of the Arab world’s population (Cammatt et al., 2015; Tsourapas, 2019).<sup>1</sup> Beyond demographics, Egypt’s importance is underscored by the fact that it has been at the historical centre of social, intellectual and political movements in the Arab world. The Muslim Brotherhood, the pan-Arabism movement, as well as the League of Arab States trace their roots to Egypt, as do notable theoreticians of political Islam, from Hassan al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb to Muhammad al-Ghazzali and Yusuf al-Qaradawi (Vatikiotis, 1991; Sayyid-Marsot, 2007). The 1952 overthrow of the British-backed King Farouk (the great-great-grandson of Muhammad Ali of Egypt) by a group of Egyptian military men, the Free Officers, was one of the first military coups d’état in the region (Gordon, 1992). One of the group’s leaders, Gamal Abdel Nasser, rose to become a symbol of and inspiration for the Arab world until his death in 1970. Anwar Sadat, the successor to the presidency of Egypt, initiated a period of controversial structural reforms and economic liberalisation processes in Egypt that have been emulated across the Arab world to this day (Waterbury, 1983). Finally, the ousting of Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak in February 2011 has arguably inspired the regional process of the ongoing Arab Spring (Lynch, 2014). From 1952 to 2011, Egypt was continuously ruled by members of a military elite – starting with Nasser, who selected Sadat to be his successor, who then chose Mubarak.

Egypt has historically set the example for neighbouring Arab states, leading the way in both war (with Israel, in 1948, 1956, 1967 and 1973) and in peace, as the first Arab state to sign a peace treaty with Israel (Dawisha, 1976; Korany and Dessouki, 2008), while also playing a key role in the Middle East peace process (Pace, 2008). Egypt’s cultural prevalence has rendered the Egyptian dialect the most familiar and recognisable of Arab vernaculars, essentially becoming the lingua franca of the Arab world. Its “soft power” has been further augmented by the

migration of teachers, doctors and other professionals across North Africa and the Middle East and beyond (Tsourapas, 2019). Preceding the 2011 events, then US President Barack Obama's decision to deliver his 2009 address to the Muslim world from Cairo was due to the fact that Egypt "represents the heart of the Arab world" (Cooper, 2009). Last, but certainly not least, the departure of Hosni Mubarak after 18 days of protests in February 2011 (Hafez and Ghaly, 2012), an event unparalleled in the nation's history, guaranteed that the "Egyptian case" will continue to preoccupy researchers for years to come.

Given Egypt's regional importance, it is not surprising that the country has been of vital strategic importance for the EU going back to the 1977 EC-Egypt Cooperation Agreement. Egypt currently constitutes one of the primary targets of EU technical and economic assistance in the region (İşleyen, 2015). This chapter analyses the evolution of the EU's relationship with Cairo across different time periods – before the 2011 Arab uprisings, in the 2011–2013 period in which Egypt continued on a process of democratisation via the rule of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, and post-2013 as the military regime consolidated power again across the country. Throughout this time, an analysis of EU–Egypt relations demonstrates the duality of the Union's approach towards its neighbourhood, torn between promoting good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights while also being unwilling to cut off ties with regimes that engage in anti-democratic practices. While striking a balance between the two has never been an easy task to accomplish, the EU's turbulent relationship with Egypt arguably demonstrates the limits of "normative power Europe" (Manners, 2002; Laïdi, 2008), while discounting the purely neorealist accounts of European foreign policymaking (cf. Pace, 2012; Schumacher and Bouris, 2017).

### EU–Egypt relations before 2011

Egypt's uniquely central position in the Arab world renders it an ideal case study of EU foreign policy towards its "southern neighbourhood". At the same time, Egyptian policymakers' own perception of their country has also affected their stance towards Europe. Egypt often attempted to claim a leading role in negotiations between the EU and southern Mediterranean countries (Lazarou et al., 2013). In fact, Egypt has "always claimed for itself the role of the EU's main southern Mediterranean partner" (Comelli, 2010). In 2012, the volume of bilateral trade reached €23.8 billion, up from €11.5 billion in 2004 – the year in which the EU–Egypt Association Agreement (AA) entered into force (Pinfari, 2013). To an extent this has resulted in lengthy negotiations and late adoption of agreements. The initiation of the 2007 EU–Egypt Action Plan, taking place significantly later than that of other Mediterranean countries, is not the exception to the rule: the Euro-Mediterranean AA negotiations between the EU and Egypt lasted for five years (1994–1999). It took another 20 months for Egypt to initial the agreement (January 2001), and another four months for Cairo to sign it (Del Sarto, 2006).

While Brussels claims that "human rights, democracy and the rule of law are core values of the European Union", promoting and defending them "both within its borders and when engaging in relations with non-EU countries" (European External Action Service – European Union External Action, 2020), the Egyptian case suggests that the EU does not hesitate to maintain the negotiation process even at a time of a country's serious internal political de-liberalisation.<sup>2</sup> The adoption of the EU–Egypt Action Plan coincided with the introduction of the 2007 constitutional amendments, which were

heavily criticised for strengthening authoritarian rule through the adoption of a repressive anti-terrorism law and effectively abolishing judicial supervision of elections. It was in this time of the Mubarak regime offering “some of the forms of liberalising reform, but virtually none of the substance” that the EU–Egypt Action Plan was adopted (Brown et al., 2007), seriously undermining the proposed EU emphasis on exporting its values to the “Neighbourhood”.

If one is to look further into the past of the EU–Egypt relationship, the dichotomy between the Union’s normative claims and its policies in practice becomes all the clearer. In 2003, Europe’s normative priorities were, again, disputed as the European Commission granted the request of the Mubarak regime and suspended funding it had already approved for a number of civil society projects which, according to Egyptian authorities, included persons linked to Islamic fundamentalism (Johansson-Nogues, 2006). In fact, efforts at integrating Egypt to the EU’s “sphere of influence” continued throughout the late Mubarak years (Roccu, 2015). Along similar lines, EU officials signed a Memorandum of Understanding agreement with Egypt in early 2008, a few weeks before the European Parliament published a condemning report on the state of human rights protection in Egypt in early 2008. Yielding to pressure by the Egyptian government, which criticised the European Parliament for interfering in domestic Egyptian affairs, the EU concluded a three-year, €558 million package deal that, ultimately, put the emphasis on matters of security (be it economic or political) rather than democratisation. In fact, the European Commission delegation in Cairo went as far as to question the Parliament’s critique of political developments in Egypt (Lazarou et al., 2013).

The disparity between “soft power” and “hard interests”, as well as between EP positions and those of the European Commission is also evident in the EU’s reaction to the de-liberalisation process that took place in Egypt in the 2004–2008 period. In the wake of protests instigated, inter alia, by the introduction of Gamal Mubarak as a potential successor to his father, the 2004 *Kifaya* [Enough] movement, together with the Muslim Brotherhood and other discontented forces in Egyptian society pushed for political reform (Pace, 2008). As a result, the first multi-party presidential elections in Egyptian history took place in 2005 (cf. Wickham, 2004). The process, however, was far from democratic: organised under the tight constraints of the Emergency Law, it was fraught with fraudulent practices, ranging from vote rigging and discrimination techniques (such as preventing veiled women from casting their ballot) to pure intimidation and the arbitrary choice of candidates – by the ruling National Democratic Party (El Din). In the aftermath of the elections which gave President Mubarak a fifth six-year term in office and, while Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice cancelled a visit to Egypt in protest of the subsequent jailing of prominent opposition figure Ayman Nour, the EU concluded discussions of the Action Plan (Durac, 2009). With the notable exception of Denmark which, citing a lack of political reform, gradually reduced its aid to Egypt, both the EU and prominent Member States continued to provide aid allocations offering, at the same time, a separate energy accord (Achrainer, 2020). Overall, in spite of its violations of civil and political rights, the Mubarak regime continued to have supporters in Europe, who saw it as a contributor to regional stability, a major actor in the broader Middle East conflict, a partner country in the War on Terror and a pillar against disintegration or Islamism (Brownlee, 2012).

## Europe, Egypt and the 2011 revolution

The EU is committed to offer a new partnership providing more effective support to those countries in the Southern Neighbourhood pursuing political and economic reforms.

*European Union High Representative Catherine Ashton, following a visit to Egypt, 22 February 2011*

It should come as no surprise that European reactions to the Egyptian uprisings were tepid, with the British Prime Minister, the German Chancellor, and the French President praising Mubarak for “his moderating role over the years” a few days before the latter was forced to resign his post (Hewitt, 2011). Experience has shown that pre-2011 European policy in the Mediterranean was shaped by an underlying fear of Islamist empowerment and presumed subsequent political upheaval, oftentimes leading to the adoption of policies at the expense of “normative” priorities such as political reform or democratisation (Collyer, 2016). In North Africa, examples range from Algeria in the early 1990s, when the Islamic Salvation Front was about to win in the country’s first multi-party elections, to Tunisia’s “Jasmine Revolution” where, according to Swedish foreign minister and ex-prime minister Carl Bildt, “it is quite obvious that [EU strategy] has failed” (Phillips, 2011). Similar security concerns were also evident in the Egyptian case, where any desire to pressure for political reform was side-lined by a fear that anything but the most cautious of regime changes could destabilise the country and, domino-effect-style, the region.

Grounded on this fear of instability, EU strategy in Egypt was to not engage in talks with any of the local opposition actors. According to this trend, characteristic not only of European but American approaches to “democracy promotion”, negotiations tended to take place predominantly with the ruling elite and policymakers, rather than with other (opposition) forces. In the European case, the adopted Action Plan had not been discussed with any nongovernmental political actors or civil society organisations; rather, it was the result of negotiations with government officials, who resisted any change to the political status quo and whose impact is evident in the final version of the document (Youngs, 2006). It is in light of this strategy that the EU’s awkward reaction to the Egyptian uprising can be best understood, given that it found itself at a loss over new, credible political partners in post-revolutionary Egypt. Some argued that, in human rights matters, the EU appears to be more critical with European countries (such as Moldova or Ukraine) that may join the Union in the future, rather than with Mediterranean countries. But, as Laïdi argues (2008), in the case of Egypt, even the limited critiques directed at the government eventually disappeared from the official Action Plan document. The maintenance, however, of vague normative overtones could create serious legitimacy problems for the perception of the EU in the Middle East.

By the time of the June 2012 elections, Egyptians’ faith in European support for democratisation was particularly low: by mid-2012, only 19% of respondents to an EU Neighbourhood Barometer survey indicated that they would “tend to trust” the EU, while only 14% believed the EU to be an “important partner” of Egypt (EU Neighbourhood Barometer, 2014). Despite a tepid response to the 2011 Revolution, the EU worked hard to support the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood in the aftermath of the election of Mohamed Morsi in June 2012 – perhaps having drawn some lessons from its disregard of the 2006 Palestinian elections, in which the EU failed to recognise the democratically elected Hamas government (Bouris, 2014). Amidst calls, particularly by Catherine Ashton, for the new government to respect “consensus-building and

inclusion” (Bouris, 2014), European support revolved primarily around economic cooperation. These calls – made by European and American policymakers alike – reflected the overall climate of uncertainty and, for some, growing worry around the hegemony of Islamist actors in Egyptian and, more broadly, Middle East politics (Wickham, 2013).

This support included the development of rural areas and European contributions to the extension of the Cairo Metro, combined with €449 million in funds provided under the 2011–2013 National Indicative Programme (NIP) for Egypt and the promise of an additional 90 million as part of the SPRING (Support for Partnership, Reform and Inclusive Growth) programme under the slogan “more [help] for more [reforms]” (Pinfari, 2013). In late 2012, the European Investment Bank decided to double its lending to Egypt with up to €1 billion on an annual basis, while the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development similarly increased its lending to the country to €1 billion per annum (Börzel et al., 2017). Yet, as Pinfari notes,

the financial power of the EU vis-à-vis Egyptian authorities was undermined by a series of factors. The “Euro crisis” undoubtedly weakened the attractiveness of the European model. Moreover, Egypt’s growth rate has slowed down substantially since 2011 and therefore the Egyptian leadership has been less interested than in the past in the co-financing of medium- to long-term development projects (which is what the EU can do best) and . . . looked instead for large bulk-sum grants aimed at redressing some of its macroeconomic indexes, or even for gifts of oil and fuel – areas in which the EU appeared as a less attractive partner when compared not just to the Gulf states but also to other powers such as Russia or China.

(Pinfari, 2013: 461–462)

At the same time, voices increased within the EU to consider the extent to which aid conditionality would be able to work as an instrument of political reform and the consolidation of democratisation in Egypt, particularly as Morsi was facing destabilising attempts from regional Arab states, including Jordan and Libya (Tsourapas, 2018). Faced with a rising number of anti-democratic measures adopted by the Morsi government – including the constitutional decree placing him temporarily above judicial supervision – the European Parliament’s March 2013 resolution stated that the EU should “not grant any budgetary support to the Egyptian authorities if no major progress is made regarding respect for human rights and freedoms, democratic governance and the rule of law” (European Parliament, 2013). The European Court of Auditors’ June 2013 report similarly argued that “EU aid has not been effective in improving governance” (European Court of Auditors, 2013). In response, Catherine Ashton argued that the Commission had adopted an attitude of “strategic patience” towards Egypt, calling on European colleagues to be a “critical friend [of Egypt] in times that are extremely difficult” (Pinfari, 2013).

On 30 June 2013, massive protests against the Muslim Brotherhood were accompanied by a two-day ultimatum by the Egyptian military for Mohamed Morsi to step down. He did not do so and, on 3 July 2013, he was imprisoned together with most of the Muslim Brotherhood leaders. As the military cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood over the following weeks, General Abdel Fatah al-Sisi took power as the country’s ruler, while Adly Mansour became the interim president (Kirkpatrick, 2013). This created an issue for the EU, torn between the wish to rid themselves of an unreliable partner – the Muslim Brotherhood – and the need to respect processes of democratisation. As in earlier times, the EU opted for the middle ground, in which officials avoided calling the ousting of Morsi a military “coup” (Rettman, 2013).

### ***Plus Ça Change? Egypt, Europe and the post-2013 order***

By August 2013, the consolidation of the military regime reached its apex via the killing of some 1,000 demonstrators in two locations, the al-Nahda Square and the Rabaa al-Adawiya Square (Fahim and Sheikh, 2013b). Despite the unprecedented level of violence, the EU did not adopt concrete measures at the Foreign Affairs Council Meeting that followed, nor was a consensus reached on an arms embargo. That said, a number of voices raised their concern, including the European External Action Service (EEAS), which stated that the EU is “not in favour of military interventions” (Rettman, 2013) – a statement that was echoed by then UK foreign minister William Hague, who noted that this constituted “a dangerous precedent . . . if one president can be deposed by the military then of course another one can be in the future” (BBC News, 2013). Meanwhile, then Germany’s foreign minister Guido Westerwelle condemned Morsi’s ousting as a “major setback for democracy in Egypt” (Pinfari, 2013). The arrest of many senior members of the Muslim Brotherhood and Morsi’s incommunicado detention also attracted substantial criticism and were described by the then Swedish foreign minister Carl Bildt as “very disturbing” (Rettman, 2013). The channels of “dialogue” mentioned by European Commissioner for Enlargement and European Neighbourhood Policy Stefan Fuele and Catherine Ashton in the reply to the European Court of Auditors also proved instrumental: they positioned both Ashton and Leon as key mediators in the negotiations to find a peaceful alternative to the forceful removal of pro-Morsi camps in Cairo negotiations that, as mentioned earlier, ended in failure. Throughout the summer months, European officials did offer limited support to the Muslim Brotherhood – it bears noting, for instance, that Ashton was the first high-ranking foreign officials to visit Morsi in prison (Ashton, 2012; Fahim and Sheikh, 2013a). Yet a wait-and-see attitude persisted.

With the possible exception of the January 2014 launch of “Shaping Egypt’s Association to the European Research Area and Cooperation Action Plus”, little occurred in terms of EU–Egypt relations in 2013 and early 2014. This ambivalence continued following the Egyptian Presidential elections of May 2014. The EU observation mission mentioned that these elections were “free but not always very fair” (Kirkpatrick, 2014), while Brussels did not prioritise the regime’s crackdown on dissent, instead taking “good note of the overall peaceful and orderly conduct of the elections” (quoted in Viceré and Fabbrini, 2017). Achraïner argues that this was due to evolving geopolitics in the broader region:

The situation in Syria was getting increasingly complex, with the Assad regime and Daesh being strengthened simultaneously. Elections in Libya had sharpened the Islamist–secularist divide and, effectively, resulted in two parliaments and governments. In Yemen, the conflict between the government and Houthi rebels began to escalate. Hence, the EU wanted to prevent turmoil in Egypt by all means and hoped that a strong Egyptian government could play a constructive role in solving regional conflicts.

*(Achraïner, 2020: 496)*

After all, particularly given the rise of irregular migration flows across the Mediterranean, Egypt was a powerful ally:

European countries with concerns that a rise in instability in the Arab world could lead to a sharp increase in the levels of illegal migration are very keen to support the stability of Egypt – even at the expense of Western democratic values.

*(Ezzat, 2014)*

Europe continued building bridges – albeit modestly – with the new status quo actors in Egypt, as al-Sisi paid official visits to Italy and France, in an effort “to restore Egypt’s standing” (Egypt Independent, 2014). At the same time, Egypt was involved in a major rapprochement with non-Western actors, including China, Russia, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Achraïner, 2020). To European policymakers, the fate of the military regime appeared stronger by the day.

In this context, a growing *rapprochement* between EU and the new Egyptian regime occurred, not unexpectedly in the fields of security and economics, as a win-win approach: on the Egyptian side, despite the growing consolidation of the military regime, its socio-economic foundations remained perilous. On the European side, there was a growing need to recruit Egyptian help in taming the rise of irregular migration and refugee flows across the Mediterranean. In May 2015, EU Commissioner for Migration and Home Affairs Dimitris Avramopoulos visited Cairo in order to strengthen relations on these issues (European Commission, 2015). In its migration diplomacy, the Egyptian regime stressed its importance vis-à-vis the regulation of irregular migration towards Europe (Adamson and Tsourapas, 2019). As Egyptian Ambassador Naela Garb reported in 2016,

International support might not be enough to help ease the burden several countries bear to accommodate the growing number of migrants. We stand ready to enhance our engagement with international donors and financial institutions to mobilise additional resources for developmental projects with immediate bearing on youth susceptible to illegal migration in Egypt and elsewhere.

(Gabr, 2016)

At the same time, specific deals were signed with Siemens, the German company that agreed to supply gas and wind power plants to Egypt for €8 billion in January 2015, while Egypt has been a traditional buyer of European – particularly French – weapons (Reuters, 2015). The Italian company Eni also announced, in August 2015, the largest discovery of gas in the Mediterranean, the Zohr Gas Field, located inside the Egyptian offshore (Achraïner, 2020). As economic linkages intensified, the Egyptian regime continued to crack down on political dissent, further damaging its human rights record (U.S. Embassy in Egypt, 2017; Human Rights Watch, 2019). Yet, European discourse remained on the need to improve bilateral relations, signalling a deepening of cooperation. President of the European Council Donald Tusk visited Cairo in September 2015. High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of the European Commission Federica Mogherini followed with a trip in November, in which she declared that “it was very important for me to pay an official bilateral visit to Cairo to revitalise our bilateral relations”, stressing that “within intense work we are going to restart on all the different levels of our cooperation” (European External Action Service, 2015). Following the agreement on a €68 million grant to Egypt the following day, Mogherini argued that “I really wish this can be the beginning . . . of a long and strong partnership, friendship and the first one of many agreements we can sign in the future” (European External Action Service, 2016). By June 2016, when the EU published its Global Strategy, there was an acknowledged shift towards “state and societal resilience [as] our strategic priority in the neighbourhood” (quoted in Schumacher et al., 2017), arguably in order to enable Egypt to overcome political or socio-economic crises without threatening social stability or state legitimacy.

Again, isolated voices of dissent continued to exist. The murder of Italian PhD student Giulio Regeni, for instance, who had disappeared on 25 January and found in March 2016, created ongoing tensions, particularly as the EP continued to press on this issue (Kirchgaessner, 2016). But the institutionalisation of the EU’s relations with Egypt persisted, particularly



given fears that irregular migration through North Africa would increase in the aftermath of the March 2016 EU–Turkey Deal. In fact, a number of EU officials – including former EP President Martin Schulz – argued for a similar type of agreement with Egypt (Achrainer, 2020: 505). As such, mutual visits increased in frequency throughout the post-2016 period. The seventh EU–Egypt Association Council meeting, which occurred in Brussels on 25 July 2017, culminated in the signing of the EU–Egypt partnership priorities for 2017–2020, setting the framework for enhanced dialogue and cooperation (European Council, 2017). At the moment of writing in early 2020, relations between Europe and Egypt appear particularly close, as cooperation deepens across three different issues, according to the revised ENP and to Egypt’s Vision 2030 document: economic and social development, foreign policy and enhancing stability (Arab Republic of Egypt, 2015). In terms of the first, bilateral relations focus on supporting investment, enhancing the private sector, strengthening energy synergies, and fully implementing the 2004 free trade agreement, as per EU core interests. In terms of foreign policy, the two sides have agreed to coordinate policymaking in terms of crisis management and humanitarian assistance. Finally, despite some vagueness in the area of stability, the two sides pledged attention to improving the capacity of institutions, empowering local authorities and tackling corruption. It appears, at least on paper, that any obstacles to bilateral rapprochement that surfaced in the turbulent 2011–2013 period have now perished.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has examined the evolving nature of the EU–Egypt relationship from the era of Hosni Mubarak to the present day, paying particular attention to the Egyptian military’s takeover of power, following a brief experiment with democratisation, in 2013. Throughout this process, the Egyptian case shows the important challenges that the EU faces in its ambition to be a global actor and a normative power. Nowhere does this become more evident, than in its relations with the Mediterranean. There is a distinct element of policy interdependence in the relationship between Europe and North Africa (cf. Tsourapas, 2018), which directly affects EU strategies, although political stability and regional cooperation in the “Med region” continues to be a key EU interest. Trade relations, oil and gas supplies, migratory pressures, security concerns, all areas in which the EU is linked to its Neighbourhood, are directly dependent on the upholding of these values and norms. Nevertheless, an analysis of EU–Egypt relations demonstrates how Brussels’ normative arguments leave a lot to be desired. Willingly or not, the EU comes through as being far from normative in practice.

Although it may appear that EU foreign policymaking towards Egypt today is reminiscent of the pre-2013 era, in which Europe was keen to sustain an authoritarian regime in power, there are also key differences that should be identified. For one, the sheer number of external actors involved in Egypt today – primarily Gulf states, but also Russia and China – suggests that European political power (normative, material, or otherwise) is necessarily limited; the fact that a number of global powers are invested in the al-Sisi regime implies that Europe’s influence on Egyptian leadership may be more limited today than in previous years. At the same time, while the Egyptian military continues to hold power now as it did before 2011, the el-Sisi regime has not hesitated to be more brutal and violent in its treatment of political dissent – both within Egyptian territory and across the diaspora. Most importantly, European actors cannot afford to neglect the unpredictability of the 2011 Egyptian Revolution, or the possibility that such protests may recur in the immediate future, particularly as another wave of popular protests continues across North Africa and the broader Middle East.

## Notes

- 1 See the CIA World Factbook on Egypt, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/egypt/>. For the socio-political repercussions of Egypt's demographic profile, see Ibrahim (1982) and Winckler (2009).
- 2 That said, Egypt is far from the only case in which this happens – in North Africa alone, EU policy-making is similar in the cases of Tunisia (Tsourapas, 2013), Morocco (Cavatorta et al., 2008) or Libya (Joffé, 2011; Tsourapas, 2017).

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