

The East Mediterranean and Regional Security: A Transatlantic Dialogue

# THE SIEGE MENTALITY:

## How Fear of Migration Explains the EU's Approach to Libya

Roderick Parkes



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## INTRODUCTION

The European Union's stance towards the crisis in Libya is bewildering – at least without deep background on Europe's workings. The EU classifies problems and players in odd ways, and the way it links them up is odder still. Libya is a complex problem in its own right, but the EU treats it through three broader complexes: one around the integration of its regional market, one around the transformation of the Arab world, and one around its attempts to find a *modus vivendi* with Turkey.

Each has involved an effort by the EU to reform other countries, and each has failed for the same reason: The EU pictures itself as the main pole for neighboring regions, meaning it both underestimates the shift of power away from Europe and overestimates the risk of attracting migrants. Ultimately this makes its fears of being overwhelmed by migrants self-fulfilling, because instead of working with emerging international partners, it surrounds itself with a buffer of oppressive autocratic regimes.

This chapter explains those three complexes in turn, each time picking out four key characteristics. It ends by showing how they have culminated in a readiness for the EU to get “geopolitical”<sup>1</sup> – not in Libya, which genuinely requires its geopolitical engagement, but rather vis-à-vis Turkey, whom the EU accuses of weaponizing migration flows all along its southern flank.

## MIGRATION: WHY THE EU TURNED A “RING OF FRIENDS” INTO A “SAFETY RING”

The EU's posture towards its neighbors can increasingly be explained by one thing: fear of migrants. Fifteen years ago, the EU set itself the task of reforming a huge swath of nearby countries using trade, aid and technical support. Its aim, increasingly, was to reduce the drivers of migration. And its failure explains its swing from high-handed engagement to protectionism:

**The EU pictures itself at the center of a huge regional economy, demarcated into rings of countries.**

In 2004 the EU enlarged and pushed its borders deep into the Mediterranean (Malta and Cyprus) and Eastern Europe. It now pictured itself at the heart of a huge regional economy, stretching south to Nigeria and Ethiopia and east to Ukraine and Armenia. Its stated goal was market integration and normative convergence, and it began transforming its neighbors in salami slices: It sorted them into rings, and leveraged market access to reform these one by one.<sup>2</sup> In the inner ring were the Western Balkans and Turkey, countries prepped for EU accession. In the second, an arc from Belarus right round to Morocco, which received technical support. A thick outer ring, across Eurasia, the Americas and above all Africa, benefited from trade and aid.

<sup>1</sup> Steven Blockmans and Daniel Gros, “From a political to a politicised Commission?” Policy Insight No 2019/12, Brussels: CEPS, <http://aei.pitt.edu/100392/>.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Emerson, “Just Good Friends? The European Union's Multiple Neighbourhood Policies,” *The International Spectator* 46, no.4 (2011): 45-62.



Water system and bridge funded by the EU Emergency Trust Fund for Africa. (ec.europa.eu)

### The EU cannot absorb immigration.

Although unspoken at first, a fear of large-scale disorderly migration always motivated the EU's engagement abroad. The EU addressed the drivers of forced migration (illiberal government, unemployment, conflict) with the long-term vision of people crossing this huge region as freely and smoothly as goods and capital. Only so could the EU protect and extend its own internal border-free travel zone, the Schengen Area. But herein lay a problem: The EU's internal travel zone was originally conceived as means to get freight across borders quicker.<sup>3</sup> That leaves the EU with no collective labor market to absorb immigrants, whereas *they* are free to use Schengen to pick and choose their preferred destination (Germany, France, Sweden). Consequently, even a small influx of immigration can trigger political crisis here.

### International engagement has given way to buffering.

The EU initially focused its reform efforts on those countries closest to it, but was drawn to migration pressures from sub-Saharan Africa. Around 2005 the EU refocused its development aid on the causes of migration in (West) Africa. Almost at once, it experienced a new and bigger wave of irregular migration. Forced to acknowledge that migration was not curable after all, it now created "migration partnerships," bilateral development frameworks in which it gained a flexible workforce, while reducing the cost for immigrants of remitting wages home to Africa. Soon after, it faced a new wave of people, not least through Libya. Now the EU simply created a buffer. It used development aid to bribe African governments, and turned the inner ring of states into a "safety ring."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> In the early 1980s, the EU was looking for ways to deepen European market integration, and the idea of lifting border controls between member states promised a means to keep traffic fluid. The possible benefits to tourists and unemployed workers in borderlands were clear too. But member states pursued the option because there was little risk of mass immigration from their neighbors: European labor markets are scarcely integrated and labor mobility low. On the roots of Schengen: Ruben Zaiotti, *Cultures of border control: Schengen and the evolution of European frontiers* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> Irene Diaz de Aguilar Hidalgo, "The Niger-Libya migration route. An odyssey shaped by Saharan connections and European fears, 2000-2017," Framework Document, 1/2018, Madrid: Instituto Español de Estudios Estratégicos, [http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_marco/2018/DIEEEM01-2018\\_Migraciones\\_Europa\\_Niger-Libia\\_IreneDiazdeAguilar\\_ENGLISH.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/en/Galerias/fichero/docs_marco/2018/DIEEEM01-2018_Migraciones_Europa_Niger-Libia_IreneDiazdeAguilar_ENGLISH.pdf).



EU senior officials met in March 2017 to discuss migration partnerships and challenges. (ec.europa.eu)

### The EU's fear of African migration became self-fulfilling.

Insofar as they have had any effect, the EU's attempts to reduce migration at source have probably led to an increase. Its early focus on alleviating the “root causes” of migration spurred modernization in Africa, causing instability. The newly prosperous looked for opportunities abroad, logically focusing on the EU as the development driver.<sup>5</sup> As for its “migration partnerships,” these reduced the cost of migrants remitting wages from Europe, giving African partner countries an incentive to push workers towards the EU.<sup>6</sup> Its recent buffering approach has relied on oppressive governments and militias, as well as leading to a growth in smuggling networks. The sum effect has been to let increasingly wealthy African states off the hook when it comes to taking responsibility for their citizens.

## LIBYA: WHY THE EU PREFERS CONTAINMENT TO ENGAGEMENT

A scattering of autocratic leaders—particularly in the Arab and Muslim worlds—were able to secure themselves an exemption from EU reform policies by offering stability in return for cash.<sup>7</sup> The result, over time, was chaos and collapse. But because the EU had few established partners in these countries, it stuck with a policy of containment. Libya (like Syria and Eritrea) is a case in point.

5 Hein De Haas, “Turning the Tide? Why Development Will Not Stop Migration,” *Development and Change* 38, no.5 (2007): 819-841.

6 Luigi Scazzieri, John Springford, “How the EU and third countries can manage migration,” Policy brief November 2017. London CER, <https://www.cer.eu/publications/archive/policy-brief/2017/how-eu-and-third-countries-can-manage-migration>.

7 Danuta Huber, “Mixed signals’ still? The EU’s democracy and human rights policy since the outbreak of the Arab Spring,” Working Paper 13/2012. Rome: IAI.

### **Libya leveraged an exemption from EU reforms.**

The EU has typically been readier to engage with regimes to its east than its west, despite their similar levels of readiness to adopt EU rules.<sup>8</sup> It seems the EU has greater fears about destabilizing Morocco than Ukraine — again, perhaps due to its greater fear of mass immigration from the south. This is borne out by its relations with Muammar Gaddafi. When the financial crisis hit, Gaddafi sought relations with the EU, but through blackmail: He threatened to turn the Mediterranean “black” with migrants if Europe did not prop up his regime.<sup>9</sup> The threat was idle. African workers see Libya not as a stepping stone to Italy, but as a market for jobs in the oil and household sectors.<sup>10</sup> Europeans nevertheless propped up Gaddafi, and later a string of Libyan strongmen who promised to hold back migrants.

### **Libya presents a theater where EU engagement might have had a positive impact.**

The EU has a foreign policy toolbox honed to deal with tricky situations: In the 1970s, when the UK joined, EU leaders consolidated the rather technocratic methods they had used to build cross-border links inside the EU and turned them into a full Cold War toolbox for action outside.<sup>11</sup> These tools remain relevant in spots like today’s Libya. By getting cities across the region to link up, for instance, the EU might have created a political bedrock in Libya, as well as improving the treatment of migrants.<sup>12</sup> But the EU seems to consider

its means too soft and technocratic to use. It has deferred instead to member states like France and Italy, which boast a more retrograde understanding of geopolitics.

**THE EU HAS TYPICALLY BEEN READIER TO ENGAGE WITH REGIMES TO ITS EAST THAN ITS WEST, DESPITE THEIR SIMILAR LEVELS OF READINESS TO ADOPT EU RULES.**

### **The EU’s crisis mentality led it to mishandle the real migration dynamics.**

Reduced to a position of watching events across the Mediterranean, the EU misread the dynamics there. At the beginning of the Libyan civil war, the EU overlooked the return south to Mali of heavily-armed militias who had been in Gaddafi’s pay. Surprised by the sudden violence, the EU responded by helping West African countries, including regional hegemon Nigeria, strengthen their border controls.

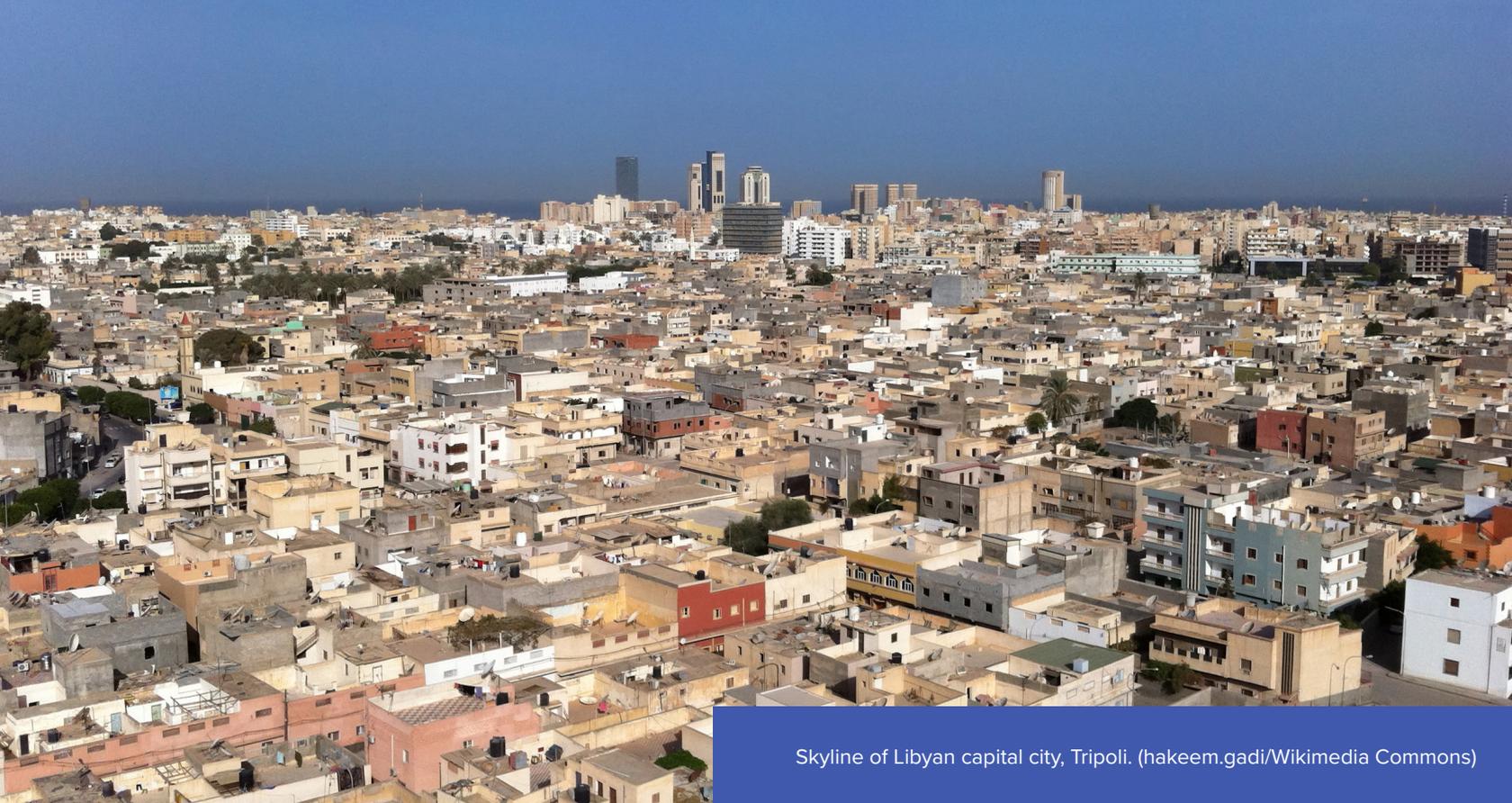
8 Tina Freyburg, Sandra Lavenex, Frank Schimmelfennig, Tatiana Skripka and Anne Wetzel “Democracy promotion through functional cooperation? The case of the European Neighbourhood Policy,” *Democratization*, 18 no.4 (2011): 1026-1054.

9 Barbie Latza Nadeau, “Femme Fascista: How Giorgia Meloni became the star of Italy’s far right,” *World Policy Journal* 35, no.2 (2018): 14-21.

10 Even in 2015, with Libya an extremely hostile environment and smuggling networks rife, only an estimated 20% of those entering Libya intended to move on to the EU. Fransje Molenaar and Floor El Kamouni-Janssen, “Turning the tide. The politics of irregular migration in the Sahel and Libya,” The Hague: Clingendael, CRU Report, February 2017, p.2, [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/turning\\_the\\_tide.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/pdfs/turning_the_tide.pdf).

11 Veit Bachmann and James Sidaway, “Zivilmacht Europa: A critical geopolitics of the European Union as a global power,” *Transactions*, 34, no.1 (2000): 94-109; Robert Cooper, “The Postmodern State and the World Order,” Paper 19/1996. London: Demos.

12 Tarek Megerisi, “Order from chaos: Stabilising Libya the local way,” July 2018, Berlin: European Council for Foreign Relations, [https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/order\\_from\\_chaos\\_stabilising\\_libya\\_the\\_local\\_way](https://www.ecfr.eu/publications/summary/order_from_chaos_stabilising_libya_the_local_way).



Skyline of Libyan capital city, Tripoli. (hakeem.gadi/Wikimedia Commons)

More recently, it has pressed Morocco to reinforce its southern border, which it perceived as a second route for Africans to the EU. The effect of all this has been to undermine efforts in West Africa to create a regional labor market particularly on the part of Morocco, which saw immigration from Cote D'Ivoire and Nigeria as a way to build bridges to those countries.<sup>13</sup>

**The effect of EU policy in Libya has been to build smuggling networks to Europe.**

Early in the Libyan civil war, the EU took the lead in managing Libya's customs controls. But the Europeans overseeing the customs posts were unsympathetic to the way of life in the southern borderlands, and cracked down hard on the relatively harmless smuggling of subsidized foodstuffs. Local smugglers, facing stiff penalties for minor offenses, felt they might as well risk smuggling lucrative cargoes of weapons and humans. They linked into networks right across West Africa.

West African states now began pushing their young male population northwards, as well as closing down consular support for those seeking to return home. For the young men who survive the trip across the Sahel, the journey across the Mediterranean is a doddle.

## **TURKEY: HOW EU ENGAGEMENT LED TO THE “WEAPONIZATION OF MIGRATION”**

In 2005, the EU elevated Turkey to an inner “ring of friends,” and began readying it to join the bloc. This involved an intensive tutelage relationship, whereby the EU defined a growing range of Turkish domestic and foreign

<sup>13</sup> Kelsey Norman, “Between Europe and Africa: Morocco as a country of immigration,” *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa*, 7 no.4, (2016): 421-439.



Greek Consulate in Turkey. (M. Flesier/Wikimedia Commons)

policies. But the EU had no real intention of allowing Turkey to join, eventually poisoning relations and precluding alternative forms of partnership.

#### **Greek-Turkish tensions, and not Turkey itself, have been Europeanized.**

In the 2000s, Athens had given up hope of other EU member states supporting it in case of war. At the same time, Greece perceived that EU enlargement had successfully dissipated tensions between old enemies like Ireland and the UK, and it chose to trust in this process to pacify its relations with Turkey.<sup>14</sup> In many ways, Greece was calling the bluff of the other members. States like the UK and Germany had felt able to make positive noises to Turkey's (large, Muslim) population about one day joining the EU because they assumed Greece would always veto this. Greece, by shifting its position, forced its EU partners to resolve the territorial dispute in the Aegean or bear responsibility for the

failure. Athens had Europeanized Greek-Turkish relations.

#### **European engagement helped polarize Turkey.**

Until as late as 2013, it seemed EU integration would indeed settle the question of Turkey's post-imperial identity, anchoring it to Europe, and cementing a secular constitution.<sup>15</sup> The EU had begun to build up cross-border links to Turkey. But the EU response to the Gezi Park protests, and its maintenance of visa restrictions towards Turks, damaged its power of attraction. Power in Turkey shifted back from the pro-European urban middle classes to rural working classes, polarizing the country on identity lines and facilitating the government's shift to a majoritarian democracy. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is now able to play the familiar strongman role, demanding from the EU market access and an exemption from Europe's reform agenda in return for stability.

<sup>14</sup> Ioannis Armakolas and Giorgos Triantafyllou, "Greece and EU enlargement to the Western Balkans: Understanding an ambivalent relationship," *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, 17 no.4 (2017): 611-629.

<sup>15</sup> Soner Cagaptay, "The Middle Class Strikes Back," June 5, 2013, *New York Times*, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/06/06/opinion/turkeys-middle-class-strikes-back.html>.

### **The EU has proved unable to build a geostrategic partnership with Turkey.**

By keeping Turkey locked in an artificial grouping of accession states alongside Western Balkan countries, Brussels has disconnected Ankara from its strategic environment. Although power has seeped away from Europe, the EU would still not think to sit down with Turkey and, say, Ukraine and Russia (not least because it sorted them into different rings of states back in 2005). Nor does the EU view Turkey as a means of reaching out to Central Asia, or as a partner in improving the treatment of China's Turkic populations. As for Turkey's decision to build physical and diplomatic links to Muslim countries in Africa and the Middle East, the EU sees this as a risk to its transport links to Europe, which have been built up as part of the accession process.<sup>16</sup>

### **The EU has made the Greek-Turkish border into a geopolitical hotspot.**

EU states have once again started building buffers to the Aegean: During the 2015 migration crisis, they created a buffer towards Greece by posting border guards to the Western Balkans. The EU Commission, meanwhile, created asylum camps on the Greek islands, which it administers, but for which it denies responsibility. Consequently, Greece has returned to its "front-line" strategy, setting up a geopolitical fault line in the Aegean between Europe and Turkey. Taken together, this has turned the tiny overfilled asylum camps on the Greek islands into the focal point of huge regional tensions. Turkey is able to use these camps as a means of keeping Europe plugged into the situation in Syria and its broader strategic neighborhood, feeding migrants into them.

## **TURKEY, LIBYA, AND TURKEY IN LIBYA: A TEST CASE FOR THE "GEOPOLITICAL EU"**

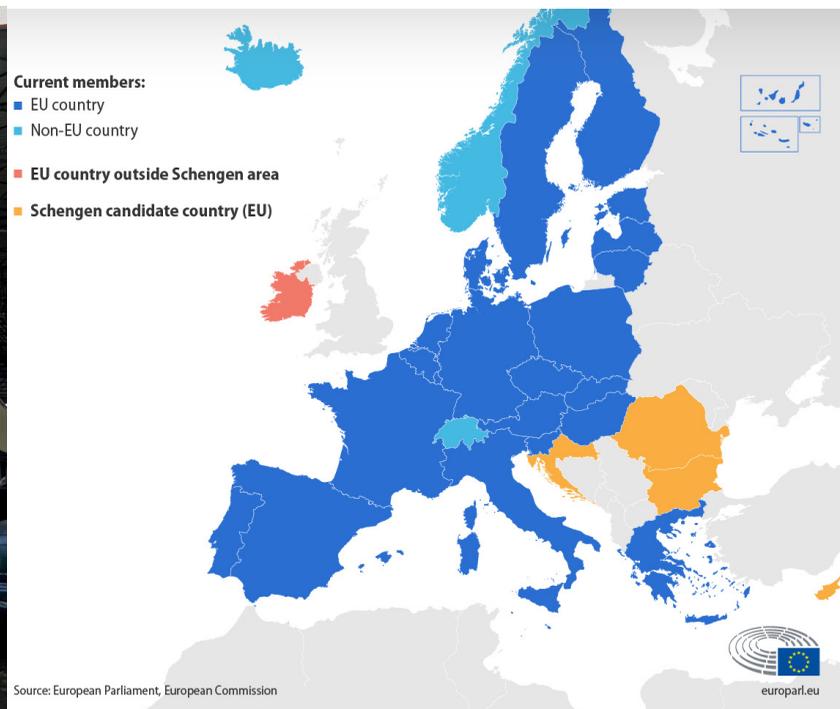
When the EU looks at the crises along its southern flank, it perceives Turkey and its actions across the Mediterranean as a test for a new European geopolitics. Whereas the EU's old geopolitics involved building cross-border links, its new geopolitics is designed to prevent Turkey from weaponizing this vulnerability in multiple theaters, of which Libya is just one.

**BY KEEPING TURKEY  
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FROM ITS STRATEGIC  
ENVIRONMENT.**

<sup>16</sup> Asya Akca "Neo-Ottomanism: Turkey's foreign policy approach to Africa," Washington, DC: CSIS, <https://www.csis.org/neo-ottomanism-turkeys-foreign-policy-approach-africa>.



Cars passing through a border control in Schengen. (europarl.europa.eu)



A map identifying Schengen, the EU's passport-free travel area. (europarl.europa.eu)

### The EU pictures Turkey as its weak hinge.

Fifteen years ago, the EU envisioned expanding Schengen to the east and possibly even the south. Today it sees the Schengen Area hemmed in by a hostile geopolitical situation. To the east, it sees a “counter-Schengen” (the Eurasian Economic Union, where Russia uses its neighbors’ dependence on migrant remittances to dominate them) and the “anti-Schengen” (the zone around Libya, a de facto border-free area where arms, fighters and dangerous ideas circulate).<sup>17</sup> It perceives Turkey sitting at the hinge between all three. Turkey, the EU believes, can politicize the movement of Muslim workers within the Eurasian Economic Union, and of course direct flows within Libya and across the Central Mediterranean. Above all, it can funnel Syrians, Afghans and Iraqis directly into the Schengen Area.

### Turkey instrumentalizes migration only as a last resort.

Despite the Turkish president’s frequent rhetoric about “opening the floodgates to the EU,” weaponizing migration from Syria is a last resort for Turkey.

Each time Ankara allows migrants to put off from the shores of the Aegean, Turkey not only squanders the main vector of its foreign policy (solidarity towards Muslims), it also loses control over all its other borders (migrants from the Horn of Africa begin using Turkey as a means of entering the EU, for instance).<sup>18</sup> In this context, Turkey rather sees itself as a victim of the weaponization of migration, not least after Russia displaced large numbers of Syrian refugees after Ankara downed a Russian jet in November 2015. Nevertheless, its role as a buffer to the EU has allowed it to establish a kind of protection racket, playing on EU fears.

17 Florence Gaub, “The Arab common market: Fighters, weapons, ideologies,” Policy Brief, 2016/22, Paris: EUISS, [https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06755?seq=1#metadata\\_info\\_tab\\_contents](https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep06755?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents).

18 In 2019, a rumor went out that Turkey was about to open the border for migrants to Greece. Thirty-thousand migrants moved across Turkey towards Greece, but an estimated 1 million moved within Syria towards Turkey.



Turkey's concrete barrier wall along the Syrian border.  
(W.J. Gauthier/Wikimedia Commons)

### The EU's new geopolitical approach has worsened Turkey's threat perception.

Officials in Ankara accuse the EU of military action to weaponize migration. They say, for instance, that the creation of an EU naval operation off Libya coincided with a wave of Syrians into Turkey. This is nonsense of course, but it is easy to see how the EU's heavy-handed and poorly communicated policies might have played into Turkey's threat perception.

When Europeans launched their Mediterranean operation, Libyan people smugglers altered their business model, shifting from middle-class Syrians who demanded safe passage to the EU, and catering to the mass African market whom they put to sea in large, unsafe vessels with a promise of rescue by EU vessels.<sup>19</sup> Syrian middle classes then took the far safer land route towards the EU, via Turkey.

### Europe has fallen into an old geopolitics.

From the 1970s, the EU developed a modern form of geopolitics, based on building up cross-border links. But its fear of migration and its eurocentrism have gradually led it to see those links as a vulnerability. It feels exposed to population explosion in Africa, the loss of habitable land through climate change, war and chaos. This is classic Malthusian geopolitics, *realpolitik*.<sup>20</sup> It is entirely at odds with the EU's decentralized network structure. It also obscures the positive lessons drawn during the migration crisis — for instance that it *is* possible to build up inter-linked regional labor markets in Africa (the Horn and West Africa),<sup>21</sup> or to persuade African leaders to repatriate nationals from Libya (following the slave market scandal there).<sup>22</sup> 

### About the Author

*Dr. Roderick Parkes is the Head of the Alfred von Oppenheim Centre for European Studies at the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP) in Berlin.*

19 House of Lords, European Union Committee, "Operation Sophia: a failed mission," HL Paper 5, 2nd Report of Session 2017.

20 Stefano Guzzini, "Which geopolitics?" in: *The Return of Geopolitics to Europe?* Guzzini ed. (Cambridge: CUP, 2012) p. 24.

21 Clare Castillejo, "The influence of EU migration policy on regional free movement in the IGAD and ECOWAS regions," Discussion Paper, 11/2019, Bonn: DIE, <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/205251/1/die-dp-2019-11.pdf>.

22 Bel Trew, "New deal to return African migrants from Libya" *The Times*, December 1, 2017, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/flights-from-libya-to-double-in-repatriation-plan-after-slavery-footage-rm5ssms5b>.

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