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Relations with North Africa: a new priority in Portuguese bilateral foreign policy?

Maria do Céu Pinto Arena

Department of International Relations and PA, School of Economics, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal



ABSTRACT

Portugal has remained quite distant from coastal North African states for many centuries. Having recently emerged as a prominent player across North Africa, Portugal's current relationship with the Maghreb countries is unprecedented in its history. Lisbon has invested in building the Maghreb axis as a 'new priority' in the architecture of Portugal's bilateral foreign policy. This policy already took off, and is now beyond the rhetorical plan, where it stood for many years. Portugal and its partner countries across the Mediterranean have reiterated their willingness to keep up with the positive momentum, especially from the past 10 years, deepening bilateral political dialogue and bolstering trade relations. This article puts Portuguese relations with North Africa into context and offers an up-to-date analysis on recent (and ongoing) developments in Luso–Maghreb relations.

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to analyse if and how Portugal has articulated a specific bilateral foreign policy towards Arab North African (Maghreb) countries,¹ and whether this policy has proceeded in a fortuitous or haphazard way, or if it is part of the overall Portuguese foreign policy strategy. In the late 2000s, some authors started referring to North Africa as an emerging fourth dimension of Portuguese foreign policy (Noivo, 2010b: 14–15; Gorjão, 2010a, 2010b: 16; Noivo, 2010a: 1). The existing scholarly literature on Portugal's policy towards the Maghreb is very limited, both at national and international level, especially in contemporary foreign policy.² This article puts Portuguese relations with North Africa into an up-to-date context, thereby offering a new contribution to knowledge on this particular issue.

Portugal's limited interest in the Maghreb has lagged behind several other external priorities; and the extent to which the country is 'Mediterranean' has also been a subject of debate (Gillespie, 2002: 15). For many centuries, Portugal's

CONTACT Maria do Céu Pinto Arena  ceupinto@eeg.uminho.pt  Department of International Relations and PA, EEG, University of Minho, Gualtar Campus, Braga, Portugal

external priorities were focused on the Atlantic and its overseas territories. Since World War II, Portuguese foreign policy has been confined to a rather reductionist Atlanticist orientation – that is, to join NATO and show unremitting loyalty to the United States, as well as protecting its colonial empire and relations with the Portuguese-speaking world. However, since the 1974 Revolution, Portugal has shifted the focus of its foreign policy from the Atlantic and Africa, over to Europe.

Being part of the European Communities allowed Portugal to broaden its horizons. While its Atlantic and Lusophone foreign policy lodestars endured, integration in the Communities made Portugal become aware of additional foreign policy possibilities and concerns (Kanner, 2001: 123), namely by identifying strategic, political, diplomatic and economic niches where it could act (Faria, 1996, 1999). Portugal invested in a new stage of its relations with the southern Mediterranean neighbourhood, on a bilateral or multilateral basis. It supported all Community/European Union (EU) initiatives aimed at enhancing and improving relations with Arab Mediterranean countries, and made an effort to articulate an independent, consistent and structured foreign policy towards North Africa. It has proved, especially at a late stage, to be a destination of significant interest for both expanding Portuguese investments and burgeoning political contacts, working under the logic of diversifying the country's relations with its neighbourhood, and thus promoting greater economic exchanges.

The first part of the article will trace the evolution of Portuguese bilateral foreign policy, trying to explain the reasons for a policy reorientation towards its southern neighbourhood in the period after the Revolution, starting in the 1980s. The succeeding section enquires into Portuguese bilateral relations with each country (Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria and Libya) in order to assess whether there is a general relationship pattern, and, more specifically, if the Maghreb represents a new foreign policy priority.

From an Atlantic tradition to Mediterranean developments

Given its vast Atlantic coast, it is not surprising that the Portuguese political orientation was almost entirely marked by the Atlantic Ocean, and by the opportunities and challenges it posed, pushing into the background other international strategic theatres.

North Africa was absent from Portuguese foreign policy for quite a long time, following the withdrawal from the last Portuguese outpost in Morocco, El Jadida, in the eighteenth century (Faria, 1996: 213). The Portuguese presence in North Africa is better understood when considering the political map of the late fifteenth century. Portugal alternated peaceful trade and war policies with the Moroccan kingdoms. Lisbon held a set of strongholds and forts with the vague goal of a final conquest of the territories of the opponents of faith, which, in any case, helped to control the shipping lanes, assured strategic access between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, ensured a footing for an aggressive piracy

policy, and, not least, were part of a real structure to support navigation along the African coast. Many of the Portuguese options were still conditioned by the rivalry with Castile, afterwards Spain (Barata, *n.d.*; Faria, 1996: 213). In case of attacks by its rival Iberian neighbour, defence would be organized from the sea (Faria, 1996: 213).

The Mediterranean was a strategic area: an oceanic rear to the narrow Portuguese hinterland; a pressure point upon the peninsula, and for generating conditions of internal balance with Castile, Granada and Aragon, as well as for maintaining control over the maritime triangle: North Sea, Mediterranean and South Atlantic (Borges de Macedo, 1987: 101–107).

In the twentieth century, the overseas connections to the Portuguese-speaking countries were determined by the priority of defending the colonial territories in Africa. As regards the south, one must bear in mind that a hypothetical involvement would be seen as an ‘overlap’ with Spanish national interests, thus generating tension in Iberian relations (Silva & Pereira, 1998: 86).

Following the Carnation Revolution of 1974, other inputs were introduced into the articulation of Portuguese foreign policy, no longer so much focused on the historical and geographical ‘constants’ (de Macedo, 1976). Democratization caused an ‘epistemological break’ – due to the loss of many overseas territories – and was a catalyst for the reassessment of its foreign policy guidelines. After joining the European Community in 1986, Portugal sought to diversify its foreign relations (Vasconcelos, 1996a, 1996b; Silva & Pereira, 1998: 86–87). The Mediterranean slowly emerged as a priority for post-Salazar Portugal, particularly under Cavaco Silva, who grasped the opportunity to derive international influence from developing a European–Mediterranean–Portuguese triangle as a focus of diplomatic activity. This was also a way to consolidate the then young Portuguese democracy, as well as to further enhance the influence of Portugal on the international scene. In a context of diplomatic diversification, there was a resurgence of interest over North Africa (Robinson, 2013: 25–6).

The relations of Portugal with the Maghreb took on renewed importance under the government of Cavaco Silva, a trend that was pursued by his successor, António Guterres. In the 1990s, Portuguese governments injected ‘new life’ into bilateral relations with the Arab North African countries (Lã, 2009: 92). In 1995, foreign affairs minister Jaime Gama chose Morocco for his first official visit outside the European Union (EU), shortly after he took office. This interest was confirmed by the organization of the first Luso–Moroccan summit, held in Porto in 1996, attended by both prime ministers. During the summit, prime minister Guterres proposed the institutionalization of an annual summit along similar lines to the Luso–Spanish summit, bearing witness to his commitment to establishing relations with the Maghreb. Another important step was that taken by J. Gama in May 1996, when he became the minister of foreign affairs under the new government that followed the November 1995 elections, and was thus the first minister of foreign affairs of a Western country to visit Algeria.

The symbolic visit of Gama reiterated the interest of the new Portuguese government in developing strong ties with its Maghreb neighbours (Cravinho & Brito, 1997).

Portugal holds that to ensure a climate of greater certainty and predictability in its southern periphery, first of all it must engage in a structured policy to support the region's socioeconomic development. To the extent that such involvement in Northern Africa embraces issues emanating from even further south – from sub-Saharan Africa – Portugal believes it could make a special contribution, given its traditional ties with that continent.

Proximity gives Portugal a leading stake in the stability of societies towards the south. Political and economic developments in the Maghreb are a recurring issue of concern. Moreover, security challenges of a hard and soft nature are certainly also part of the equation (Julião, 2004: 2).

With regard to vulnerabilities, three of them are of particular concern to Portugal. Firstly, the energy issue: it is clear that a strong reliance on these countries as providers of energy resources carries the inherent risk associated with heavy energy dependence. Energy imports from North Africa are another source of dependence. There is a very specific interest in the security of the Europe–Maghreb pipeline, which starts in Algeria, goes through Morocco and enters the Iberian Peninsula in Spain, and is of huge strategic importance to both Iberian countries.

Secondly, the fundamentalist jihadist threat that in some Maghreb countries calls into question the regimes' very sustainability, which feeds largely on high rates of unemployment and poverty, affecting on average 60% of the population (Pinheiro, 2008: 167).

Lisbon sees this region as particularly permeable to Islamic extremist movements. Lisbon assesses that the latest political changes in the region – derived from the so-called 'Arab Spring' – can have positive long-term consequences; whereas in the short-term they may have heightened the risks of violence and created new issues of political instability, which may degenerate into new political and territorial divisions. The conflicts in this region tend to contaminate adjacent areas, including Libya and the Sahel belt, where an unstable political and social situation, not only facilitates the presence of terrorist groups, but also feeds all types of trafficking (CEDN, 2013: 13).

Thirdly, the political stability and security in the region is considered of primary importance, as political violence in the Maghreb can cause large-scale migration, due to high rates of demographic growth. The demographic pressure on the European continent – another of Lisbon's concerns – originates from the migratory phenomena that cross the Mediterranean from south to north, especially from sub-Saharan Africa. It is true that the migration from North Africa has not affected Portugal in the way it has affected Spain, France and Italy. Portuguese officials reckon that stability and economic growth represent the only possible response to the rapid population growth, and the huge youth

unemployment rates that mainly affect young North Africans (CEDN, 2013: 13). However, new political or economic crises in Morocco or Algeria, and the situation of a nearly failed state in Libya, could change this scenario. Islamic extremism and transnational terrorist activities are a major factor in Portugal's security perceptions, both on a national and regional basis.

For many years, Portugal felt inhibited to act in the area for fear of clashing with some of the other European partners holding a strong historical presence in the area, such as Spain and France. Portugal has the advantage of presenting itself in the area without causing any colonial traumas, or raising any territorial claims (Sampaio, 2005: 162). This perception allowed Portugal to put aside any feelings of embarrassment over its Iberian neighbour, with its stronger historical, political and strategic ties in the region. Furthermore, Lisbon possesses other assets regarding its relations with Maghreb countries: it is not so vulnerable to migration pressures from the region; it pursues a quiet diplomacy and has quite warm relations with most of the regimes; it has no pending claims, such as territorial claims or debts; and it has an economic structure similar to that of Maghreb countries, in terms of small and medium companies, for instance (Esteves, 2009: 9).

The current ties are of a different nature, and trade circumstances now favour more intense relations, particularly in areas such as security, energy and construction. Emerging as a prominent player across North Africa, after a decade of economic stagnation, Portuguese–Maghreb relations have taken off at a rampant pace due to the lack of export growth, and relocation of EU subsidies to eastern countries under the enlargement. Lisbon has been exploring existing opportunities to offset this loss by diversifying export markets in emerging countries.

The programme of the current government identifies the Maghreb region not only as a partner, but also as a truly important foundation for the consolidation of Portuguese foreign policy in the regional neighbourhood, and in the name of cooperative security (Programa do XIX Governo. n.d).

Portugal and North Africa: a survey of bilateral relations

It is legitimate to speak about a Portuguese foreign policy for North Africa, to the extent that there has been a combined effort towards the institutionalization of relations with partners in that region. This proactive approach corresponds to Portuguese interests, but it is also the expression of natural concerns in terms of economic development, as well as in terms of the political and social stability of southern Mediterranean countries (Lã, 2009: 93).

Several analysts, such as Gorjão, have noticed that Portugal's foreign policy is in the process of being rebalanced along the classic three-pillar structure. A new, fourth pillar should be introduced to the conceptual strategic picture. Economic, military, security, political and strategic reasons account for this prioritization

(Gorjão, 2010b: 16). Besides the reasons explained above, the Maghreb has become an increasingly important economic partner. Economic diplomacy is the building block of Portuguese diplomatic negotiations in North Africa. Exports of Portuguese goods and services more than tripled between 2009 and 2013, while in 2009 exports to the five Maghreb countries³ were worth €576 million; in 2013 they were almost multiplied by three, to €1502, with special relevance to Algeria and Morocco. Furthermore, imports have remained stable over the last five years (Baptista, 2014).

On the political front, new Portuguese embassies were opened in these countries⁴ or upgraded (if already existing). Official visits have become more frequent and, in some cases, annual summits between heads of states (with Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) were institutionalized. Bilateral cooperation agreements and protocols have been signed between Portuguese authorities and North African leaders within the political, trade, cultural, social, educational and defence spheres.

In the late 2000s, prime minister José Sócrates was particularly keen on strengthening ties with North Africa during his two mandates. He stated that 'North Africa and the Maghreb are a strategic orientation of Portuguese foreign policy' (Rocha, 2009). This reflects the special importance Lisbon granted to the strategic relationship with its Arab neighbours. Indeed, it is fair to say that Sócrates was the actual architect of Portugal's revitalized North African strategy.

The ensuing and current government of P. Passos Coelho has pursued this policy, despite the temporary recess caused by the 'Arab spring', and by the focus on the debt crisis, which hit Portugal particularly hard. There has been a flurry of diplomatic activity since 2012, with many high-level visits. The incumbent foreign affairs minister, Rui Machete, has tried to boost this relationship with a new cycle of visits to the Maghreb countries. In early 2014, he made state visits to Morocco, and later on to Tunisia and Algeria. These visits reflect Portugal's resolution to give a new momentum to bilateral relations with those countries. They occurred at a time when Portugal started co-presiding with Mauritania over the 5+5 Dialogue (until October 2015). In 2015, annual summits between heads of states with Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria were resumed.

In the defence area, the aim is to replicate with the Maghreb countries the military and technical cooperation model that Portugal already has with African Portuguese-speaking countries (Rocha, 2009). The bilateral military cooperation and the bilateral agreements signed with the Kingdom of Morocco (1993), Tunisia (1995, updated in 2013), Algeria (2005) and Libya (2008) are also worth mentioning.

Undeniably, Portugal has relatively scarce resources to offer when compared to other European neighbours familiar with the Mediterranean terrain. As already noted, trade relations with North African countries still account for a limited share of Portugal's external trade: 2.8% of exports and 1.5% of imports⁵

(AICEP, April 2015: 6). Portugal's combined trade with Maghreb countries has varied from year to year, but has generally been on a rising curve.

On the other hand, these limitations can become an asset in a region where resentment and suspicion towards European colonization still loom. Portugal's geographic proximity provides a practical export market for Maghreb countries.

Lisbon shares with the north of Africa a wide range of qualities, from similar climate and history, to mentality, economic scale and complementarity in some sectors, as well as a capital of goodwill and empathy. It has chosen to invest in building a cohesive political relationship, while bolstering the economic and commercial spheres. For nearly a decade, the development of political agreements and partnerships has been accompanied by a growing volume of business. The next section will examine the evolution of Portugal's relations with each of the countries of the Arab Maghreb: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and, lastly, Libya.

Morocco

Portugal has international waters that converge with those of Morocco. It is a truism to say that Rabat is the closest foreign capital to Lisbon. The centuries-old relationship began when Portugal started to occupy parts of coastal Morocco, with the conquest of Ceuta in 1415. In 1774, with the signing of the Peace and Friendship Agreement, the war between the two countries came to an end (von Kemnitz, 2009: 5).

In the past decades, the relations were somewhat strained due to disagreements on fisheries. Bilateral treaties used to govern the right of the Portuguese fleet to fish in Moroccan territorial waters, until Portugal joined the EEC in 1986. Then, the European Commission began negotiating global fishing agreements with Morocco.

In the contemporary era, the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourhood and Cooperation, signed in 1994, laid the general basis for the relationships between both states. It established the legal framework for broad cooperation, while laying the basis for a wider dialogue and global cooperation on more institutionalized grounds. As a complement, it also provided a framework for on-going bilateral consultations on three distinct levels: annual meetings of Heads of State, annual meetings of foreign affairs ministers and regular consultations between other members of the governments. The summits have been held at regular intervals, and so far have reached the 12th edition (the latest in April 2015).

Alongside the ministerial meetings, business and political leaders gather in order to review and deepen cooperation on various sectorial areas, with new areas of cooperation and investment often opening up. The institutional density of the relationship between both countries is also visible in the number of

agreements and protocols signed, which already exceed 40 in various areas (Portal da Embaixada de Portugal em Marrocos, n.d.).

On the economic side, the relationship is booming, and the trade balance has traditionally been favourable to Portugal (Lã, 2012: XXI-5). Portuguese exports more than doubled in 2008 (Jornal Público Online, 2008; Pires, 2014a): from less than €180 million in 2006, Portuguese exports exceeded the €700 million mark – that is, were almost multiplied by four – in 2014 (Lã, 2012: XXI-5; TVI24, 2014).

Despite the 2009 crisis, Portuguese sales to Morocco have evolved at a staggering rate, with an increase of about 40% in 2010, 28% in 2011, reaching a growth rate of 54% in the first quarter of 2012, and 63% in 2013 (Lã, 2012: XXI-5; Pires, 2014a). Morocco is Portugal's main partner amongst all countries in North Africa and the Middle East, and entered the top 10 of Portugal's most important clients in 2013⁶ (AICEP Marrocos, 2013: 6), having taken the 12th position in 2014 (AICEP Marrocos, September 2014).

Morocco is also the preferred target for Portuguese investment in this area and, in this context, Portugal has doubled the existing lines of credit from €200 million to €400 million in the last decade. The severe economic crisis which has swept Europe, and especially Portugal, has led, on the one hand, to several projects being dropped in Morocco and, on the other hand, to the difficult financial situation of Portuguese companies, where the use of the credit line has fallen abruptly (Lã, 2012: XXI-5).

The record was set between 1999 and 2003, when Portugal was the first investor in this country. Since 2003, investments are of a lesser magnitude. In the early 2000s, Portuguese capital was attracted to Morocco due to its development process, including the privatization of large public companies. For a few years, Portugal was the biggest investor in this neighbouring country. With the success of most of these investments and the approaching crisis in Portugal, in the meantime most of these investments have been sold, undermining Portugal's stake in the internationalization of the Moroccan economy.

Morocco is currently involved in a major process of economic development, with significant investments in infrastructure to modernize its economy. Portuguese construction companies have participated, and made major investments (Lusa, 2008). These companies have effectively been the main drivers of the strong relationship between the two countries.

Algeria

Portugal and Algeria are becoming close partners, but the relationship has lagged behind until recently. It still needs a broader institutional platform if a comparison is to be made regarding the relationship between Lisbon and Morocco. This failure is largely due to an ideological divide between the states, dating from the Portuguese colonial period, when Algiers led the anti-colonialist front and hosted insurrectionist movements in Portugal's African colonies. The

regional rivalry with Morocco and Lisbon's proximity to Moroccan King Hassan II also operated as a factor of self-exclusion in the relations with Algeria (Esteves, 2008). Although it was inchoate for a long time, the relationship was marked by a certain level of pragmatism, especially since diplomatic relations were established in March 1975.

Starting in 1981, Joint Committees were created in several areas, although on an irregular basis, the intervals provided for the meetings were not observed. Official visits have also been quite scant. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning the signing of some major agreements in the fields of trade (1976), economic and technical cooperation (1981), finances (1993), culture (1982) and transportation (1977). Regarding economic and trade relations, they were virtually nil and unfavourable to Portugal for many years.

Despite this static scenario, the relationship between both countries entered a new stage after the election of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, which altered the internal situation in Algeria, promoting more openness towards Europe, and the liberalization of the economy. The framework of the Luso–Algerian relationship was laid after 2003, with the visit of President Jorge Sampaio to Algeria and, later on, with President Bouteflika's visit to Portugal in September 2004. These visits were supplemented in 2005 by the signing of the Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourhood and Cooperation, in force since March 2006, and by the Algerian president's visit to Portugal, during which seven economic agreements were signed (Esteves, 2008).

The natural evolution of the relationship allows Algeria to presently be Portugal's eighth supplier of natural gas, on which Portugal depends for about 40% of its needs. The dependence on the energy resources of this country is a drawback, but can also be seen as an opportunity, given Portuguese companies' 'extensive experience and know-how in complementary services' (Esteves, 2008).

On a more recent note, it is clear that both parties intend to further institutionalize their relationships. Since 2007, there have been four Luso–Algerian summits. Meetings were resumed in March 2015, after a gap since 2010 (last summit held). Prime minister José Sócrates, the craftsman of this approach, said that Lisbon 'has a special relationship with this country' (Lusa, 2008). The strong commitment of both countries to pursue a high-level political dialogue was underlined, following the visit to Algiers, in late 2007, of Portuguese prime minister and then president of the European Council, as well as the participation of the Algerian president in the EU–Africa summit held in December.

As regards economic relations, they have gradually improved, as exemplified by the presence of 37 Portuguese companies in the 2008 Algiers International Fair, amongst which were some major economic groups. Between late 2007 and mid-2008, former prime minister Sócrates travelled to Algeria three times (Dnoticias.pt, 2008), bearing witness to the importance he accorded to that country.

Algeria is the most important natural gas supplier to Portugal. Shipping is done through the Maghreb pipeline to Tangiers, and across the Strait of Gibraltar to Tarifa, entering the national territory in the southeast (ERSE, 2009). It was indeed thanks to this partnership that Portugal was not affected by the cutting of the gas supply from Russia to Ukraine, since 40% of the natural gas supply is ensured by Algiers (Tagusgas, 2014; ERSE, 2009).⁷

The Algerian government-owned Sonatrach hydrocarbon group also acquired a stake in Electricidade de Portugal (EDP). Now, the intention is to cooperate with the Portuguese energy company, in order to enter the Latin American markets via Brazil.

The large infrastructure improvements programme that Algeria intends to accomplish in the short and medium term is very appealing for Portuguese companies. Algeria has a five-year development plan for 2015–2019, a public investment programme worth more than €185 billion. Opportunities for Portuguese companies arise mainly in the major works/infrastructures through value-added services, which Algeria is lacking. Areas where Portugal and its industry can contribute with know-how and relevant experience are engineering and transportation projects, construction of bridges and dams, management of services, such as motorways and ports, as well as mega-projects, such as the Algiers subway, and possibly building a new political capital (Esteves, 2008).

Portugal is also a major investor in Algeria – over €500 million were invested by the end of the last decade in sectors as diverse as energy (cooperation in the combined cycle subsector, and Sonatrach's acquisition of 2.035% of EDP's share capital), management of supply and water networks, transportation and infrastructures (Esteves, 2008).

During the trade mission conducted under the Luso–Algerian Business Forum framework in early 2014, deputy prime minister Paulo Portas announced the signing of contracts that exceeded the €100 million mark (Pires, 2014b; *Expresso/Sapo.pt*, 2014). These contracts were seen as a major achievement in terms of Portuguese competitiveness and entrepreneurial strategy, and as a precedent that may open future doors to other awards of tenders to national companies. In 2013 alone, Portuguese exports to Algeria grew by over 23%, and the trade balance was favourable to Portugal for the first time in many years (SIC notícias, 2014).

Overall, bilateral trade has nevertheless favoured Algeria in the last decade, given the weight it holds in the supply of hydrocarbons. In 2012, Algeria held the 14th position amongst the full range of export markets, and ranked 6th amongst third countries (Marques, 2013: 35). However, in the first five months of 2013, it rose to the 11th position (1.4%, together with Brazil) and the 5th place (4.7%), respectively, surpassing even China in the latter period. Such performance was due to a considerable increase in Portuguese exports to Algeria (+23.7%), compared to 2012, and a sharp fall in imports (–49.9%) (Marques, 2013: 35). According to the National Statistics Institute, exports to Algeria have

increased significantly and continuously over the past five years, which resulted in an average annual growth rate of 29.8% (AICEP Argélia, 2014: 15). Capital goods and intermediate products dominate Portuguese exports to Algeria. As has been highlighted, the Portuguese presence in the Algerian economy has steadily grown in recent years, particularly in the areas of engineering, construction and public works (CGD, 2012: 18).

Imports from Algeria, heavily dependent on purchases of hydrocarbons, showed some fluctuations during the period 2009–2013, which corresponded to a decrease in imports of 49.9%, compared to 2012 (AICEP Argélia, 2014: 15). Although remaining a major supplier, Algeria has lost weight in the supply of oil to Portugal (it was the 7th in the ranking of suppliers in 2012, but then dropped to the 9th position in the following year).

Tunisia

The relations between Portugal and Tunisia have grown in recent years in volume and depth. They were reinstated in 1974, and, although today the relationship is denser and closer on a bilateral level, the closeness came about within the broader scope of the EC's proximity to the Mediterranean countries.

The relationship took off sluggishly. Indeed, the Joint Committees established by the Luso–Tunisian Framework Agreement on Cooperation, signed in December 1988, did not meet biannually as scheduled: only four Joint Committees were held between 1986 and 2001. Awareness of the mutual interests grew particularly in the late 1990s, and recorded an incremental increase in the first decade of the 2000s. In fact, the compendium of agreements between both parties is large and quite diverse.

The Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourhood and Cooperation concluded in 2003⁸ laid out a more institutionalized level of bilateral relations between Tunis and Lisbon. It established annual summits between both governments. The first Luso–Tunisian summit (held in Portugal in March 2007)⁹ was marked by the establishment of economic and financial arrangements in order to complete the more political nature of the partnerships developed so far. The composition of the delegations, just in itself, provided evidence of the importance of the summit: led by prime minister José Sócrates and by his Tunisian counterpart, Mohamed Ghannouchi, accompanied by the relevant ministerial teams, including the ministers of the Economy, Trade, Transportation and Public Works, amongst others (Notícias RTP Online, 2007).

Amongst the six agreements signed, special reference should be made to the establishment of the Luso–Tunisian Economic Council, and to the enhanced cooperation in the fields of maritime, air, road and rail transportation, to facilitate the transaction of goods between both countries.

In terms of bilateral dialogue, both governments also underlined the 'total match of viewpoints' between both administrations regarding major

international issues (Portal do Governo, 2010), and the commitment to the second EU–Africa summit in Lisbon during the Portuguese presidency of the EU. The importance of this relationship was emphasized in the following year by the minister of foreign affairs Luis Amado ahead of the second summit. The minister highlighted how the relationship was translating into ‘an impressive portfolio of investments’ (Jornal Expresso Online, 2008).

Prior to the second summit, Portugal and Tunisia also agreed on a military partnership in April 2009, whose core was ‘to bring the cooperation between Portugal and Tunisia to a strategic level’. According to defence minister N. Severiano Teixeira, the three-year partnership especially targeted ‘the economy and defence industries, training, education, and military medicine’ (Jornal Destak Online, 2009). The Convention in the Field of Defence was renewed in 2013, progressively strengthening the relationship between both countries. In May 2014, the Tunisian defence minister made a three-day visit to Portugal (Governo de Portugal, 2014a).

In the second bilateral summit held in Tunis in March 2010, Lisbon sought to consolidate the relationships already initiated, in particular the encouragement to business entities to diversify and intensify their investments, as well as participation in open tenders for both parties (Jornal de Notícias Online, 2010). Both countries agreed to give priority to certain sectors, such as renewable energy, tourism, mechanical engineering and electrical industries, in addition to the environmental, textile, clothing, leather and footwear industries. The Portuguese government tried to explore the chances of tapping into Tunisia’s plan for the development of 40 solar projects between 2010 and 2016. Lisbon also extended the credit line valued at €100 million (SIC Notícias Online, 2010).

After a four-year break, in June 2014, current foreign affairs minister Rui Machete visited Tunis to preside over the second meeting of the Luso–Tunisian Business Council. During the two-day visit, Tunisian officials confirmed the country’s adhesion to the North–South Council of Europe, based in Lisbon. They also agreed to hold the annual bilateral summit between heads of government in 2015 (Lusa, 2014), which took place in May.

The economic relationship is still on the rise, although Tunisia is strengthening its position as a destination for Portuguese exports, having risen from 40th place in 2006, to 32nd by the end of 2013. During the same period, the share of Portuguese exports to that market more than doubled, rising from 0.15% to 0.35%. From the economic point of view, one can speak of complementary economies, as Portugal imports mainly primary products (minerals/metals, chemicals and energy), and exports mainly finished products and machinery. Traditionally unfavourable to Portugal, at present the trade balance has become fundamentally positive, which is indicative of the efforts of Portuguese diplomacy over the last decade (AICEP Tunísia, 2013).

Libya

Of all the states analysed, Libya is clearly the one significant with which relations are less expressive and most recent, despite having been established in 1976. Due to the isolation Tripoli was subject to, because of the sanctions imposed by the UN Security Council concerning the Lockerbie and UTA Flight 772 of the French airline Union de Transports Aériens (UTA) bombings of the late 1980s, the relationship faltered. The legal framework for the bilateral relationship linking both countries is quite short or narrow. It is mostly based on the Agreement on Trade, Economic, Scientific and Technical Cooperation, dated 1976. Most of the Joint Committees foreseen in that agreement have not met yet. Although a cultural agreement was signed in 1976, it has not been implemented, so the cultural links have conspicuously lagged behind.

Improved relations only began in the early 2000s, particularly with the signing of the Agreement on the Promotion and Reciprocal Protection of Investments in June 2003 in Sirte. This agreement laid the grounds for building stronger foundations and mutual trust, in order to increase investment in the economies of both countries.

The cornerstone for a more intensive cooperation was nevertheless the opening of the Portuguese embassy in Libya in September 2006 (Portugal Digital Online, 2006). This had already been agreed during the official visit of J. Socrates to Tripoli in October 2005. Thereafter, Tripoli hosted the first thematic fair on Portugal in February 2007, which was attended by about 20 Portuguese companies, mostly representing the construction sector.

Between 2006 and 2010, Portuguese exports to Libya increased by 70%. Sócrates visited Libya four times in six years, received Gaddafi in Lisbon during the EU–Africa summit, opened the new embassy and signed an agreement on economic cooperation and business with the Libyan Arab Jamahiriya (Económico-Financeiro, 2011). In October 2005, he paid a visit to Gaddafi in Tripoli (RTPNotícias, 2005).

Since the vast majority of foreign interests are oriented to Libyan profits from its important energy resources, Portuguese diplomacy looked forward to carving its niche in the lucrative Libyan construction sector. Portugal's intention was to take advantage of Libya's abundant wealth due to Tripoli's then plan for major investment in infrastructure by gaining tenders: 'airports, roads, housing, dams and works of art [...] can represent a business opportunity for Portuguese companies in this market' (AECOPS, 2008). Following the closing of the second Europe–Africa summit in December 2007 (to which Gaddafi contributed), held under the Portuguese Presidency of the EU Council, Portugal and Libya signed several institutional and business cooperation agreements. The agreements especially focused the areas of energy, public works, construction and finance. Major Portuguese companies were involved (Notícias RTP Online, 2007).

In July 2008, during his second visit to Tripoli, Sócrates signed a comprehensive economic cooperation agreement, and four memorandums of understanding (MoU) (Jornal de Notícias, 2008; Sapó/Lusa, 2008b), in order to boost trade relations, increase Portuguese exports and facilitate the supply of liquefied gas and oil to Portugal. These agreements also defined the mould of Libyan investments in Portugal, as well as the application of Libyan funds in the Portuguese financial system, the establishment of partnerships in the African market and the allocation of structural public works. The Portuguese government signed a MoU between the Libyan Investment Authority and the Ministry of Economy, aimed at exploring investment opportunities in Portugal in various sectors, such as properties, tourism, oil and petrochemicals. The other memorandum between GALP and the National Oil Corporation (NOC) aimed at a long-term agreement for the purchase and sale of liquefied natural gas. A MoU was also signed between Libyan Investment Authority (LIA) and EDP, to examine potential long-term cooperation, particularly in gas and other energy sources (Sapó/Lusa, 2008b).

Libya was considered a 'great market' for Portuguese companies, where the construction, construction materials, basic sanitation and energy sectors are priority areas (Revista Visão Online, 2009).

In the context of bilateral exchanges, the trade balance has been traditionally unfavourable to Portugal, given the high share of imports of oil products. During the period 2000–2010, the average annual growth of Portuguese exports to Libya was 46%, 13.6 percentage points higher than the average annual growth of imports in the same period (CGD, 2012: 39).

In 2011 Portuguese exports to this market decreased by 46%, and has since fluctuated, reaching a critical level in 2014. The political and economic circumstances, and the deteriorating security situation in Libya – which consequently has diminished Libya's crude exports – raise questions over the restoration of Portuguese exports to this market.

Conclusion

For centuries Portugal has neglected its Mediterranean ties given the Atlantic predominance of the country's foreign policy relations. Emerging as a prominent player across North Africa, Portugal's current relationship with North African countries is now unprecedented in its history. Lisbon has invested in building the Maghreb axis as a 'new priority' in Portuguese foreign policy architecture. This policy has already taken off, and has now gone beyond the rhetorical plan – where it stood for many years. Especially in the past 10 years, Portugal and its partner countries across the Mediterranean have reiterated their willingness to continue this positive momentum, deepening political dialogue, and bolstering economic cooperation. This new stage was only boosted from 2005 onwards, although it was initiated in the second half of the 1990s.

Official visits have become more frequent and, in some cases, annual summits between heads of states (with Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria) were institutionalized. Bilateral cooperation agreements and protocols have been increasingly concluded between Portuguese authorities and North African leaders within the political, trade, cultural, environmental, social, educational and defence spheres. Cooperation activities are carried out within the framework of those agreements. Other activities include organizing mutual visits, strengthening ties with the embassies or commercial representative units of the related countries, sharing information and experience, and participation in the conferences/seminars/training programmes and joint committees.

The outbreak of the Arab Spring interrupted this process temporarily, especially in Libya and Tunisia. Nevertheless, the government of Passos Coelho has tried to make up for this intermission by taking a much stronger stake in bilateral relations with Maghreb countries, clearly seen as a 'strategic priority' for the government (interview with Ana Paula Cordeiro, 8 September 2015). It has continued the institutionalization of high-level summits with heads of state and government, which were resumed in 2014, after the recess caused by the uprisings in the Arab world. Portuguese dignitaries at senior ministerial level and below, such as the secretary of state and the director-general from the Foreign Affairs Ministry, have made frequent visits to the region.

While the linchpin of Portuguese external relations remains the EU, transatlantic relations and the PALOP (Portuguese-speaking African States), the Sócrates and Passos Coelho governments have rebalanced the relationship between the three dominant pillars in Portuguese foreign policy by adding a new pillar. The 'rebalance' policy towards North Africa has been designed to achieve two main objectives: to get Lisbon more deeply involved with its southern neighbourhood, and to strengthen trade relations with the Maghreb.

Current ties are diverse and trade circumstances now favour more intense relations, both in traditional and new areas. With the exception of Libya, the trade balance with the remaining four Maghreb countries is favourable to Portugal. Economically, the Maghreb has been gaining increasing importance. Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia are steadily becoming more significant markets for Portuguese exports. Everything seems to indicate that this trend will continue, and it is very likely that economic relations with Libya will play an ever-increasing part, once the security situation improves. The Maghreb is also an important player for Portugal, due to the natural gas imports from Algeria, and oil from Libya.

One can therefore effectively speak about a Portuguese foreign policy for North Africa, to the extent that there is a clear strategy, and a defined pattern of relationships with the countries in that geographical area. However, more needs to be done to further the political relationships, and reinforce Portugal's market share in exports to North Africa.

Notes

1. That is, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia and Libya.
2. The notable exceptions are Faria (1996, 1999).
3. Including Mauritania.
4. The latest was in Tripoli, in September 2007.
5. As compared to Portuguese-speaking African countries, which account for 8% of exports and 2.8% of imports.
6. The great increase in sales recorded in 2013 can be explained by the sales of diesel fuel by Galp (energy products accounted for 38% of total exports), due to the entry into operation of the Sines refinery, a unit that has enabled the country to become a fuel exporter (Gonçalves, 2014).
7. The remaining 60% is imported from Nigeria.
8. It entered into force in 2006.
9. The first Luso–Algerian summit was also held that year.

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