



Disasters Having Greater Socio-Political Effects on the EU's Southern Neighbourhood

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September's natural disasters—an earthquake in Morocco and flooding in Libya—led to the deaths of more than 15,000 people (4,000 and 11,000, respectively). Urban population density, inadequate infrastructure, and insufficient emergency management contribute to large numbers of victims of natural disasters in the Middle East and North Africa. The frequency of similar events will increase as climate change affects the Mediterranean basin and will contribute to higher migration in the region and to the European Union.

Climate Change in the Mediterranean. Infrastructure development and maintenance in the EU's southern neighbourhood are insufficient given the effects of climate change in the region. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) defines the Mediterranean Basin as one of the areas where its consequences will be felt most, predicting that the knock-on effects will include multiple shocks and systemic failures in states. According to World Bank estimates, from 1980 to 2014, the number of natural disasters in the Middle East and North Africa tripled and resulted in losses of about \$1 billion a year. Temperatures in the Mediterranean are also rising 20% faster than the global average. The record-high temperature of the Mediterranean (28.7°C) in July this year increased the strength of Cyclone Daniel, which exacerbated the scale of flooding in Libya.

One of the biggest challenges for the region stemming from a warming climate is the degradation of water resources. Currently, the Middle East is home to 12 of the world's 17 most water-scarce countries, and the World Bank estimates that by 2050, climate change-related water scarcity will cost countries in the region 6-14% of their GDP. Agricultural advances and conservation strategies have failed to increase resilience to droughts and floods. Since the 1990s, deforestation has increased—forests protect against desertification and help with water retention—and unsustainable agricultural practices have resulted in water

loss, soil salinisation, and overexploitation of non-renewable groundwater resources.

Corruption and government involvement in internal conflicts and regional rivalries further impede effective resource management, often translating into instrumentalisation of resources. Turkey, for example, seeks to secure its hegemonic position in managing the Euphrates by expanding dams, which has led to a 60% reduction in the flow of water from the river to drought-affected Iraq, among others. Israel has repeatedly bombed water infrastructure in Lebanon and Syria, which are now also facing water shortages.

Crisis Management. Despite the adoption of successive strategies for responding to crises in the EU's southern neighbourhood, both at the regional and state levels, the mechanisms are still lacking reach. The effectiveness of EU support, such as the ongoing Prevention, Preparedness and Response to Natural and Man-made Disasters (PPRD) programme since 2010, is limited by the region's systemic problems. This is influenced by staff and institutional shortages and the politicisation of disasters and humanitarian efforts. Weakness in government and corruption contribute to the lack of adherence to basic safety standards when building new or maintaining existing infrastructure. For example, members of the Libyan administration affiliated with Gen. Khalifa Haftar, whose forces control eastern Libya, including Derna where the flooding took place, dismantled water infrastructure to sell

its components, contributing to the deterioration of the condition of dams. In 2021, an auditing firm indicated that €2.3 million had been allocated by Libya's Ministry of Water Resources for maintenance of dams (various defects have been reported since the 2000s). However, the project was never implemented as a result of the chaos caused by the two contesting centres of power in the country. After the September floods, Haftar's forces took over aid convoys so that his army would be seen delivering aid.

There has not been a similar scale of neglect in Morocco; however, the country has rejected offers of support from France, Germany, and other countries, and from the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR) as a result of deteriorating Moroccan-French relations and a [growing anti-Western narrative in the region](#). Rescue teams working in Morocco have criticised the authorities' decision. In addition, some Arab states are refusing to publish accurate data on natural hazards, citing security. UNDRR reports indicate that the budget of Tunisia, for example, does not have dedicated spending on emergency management.

There is also a lack of properly trained and equipped rescue teams. This is due to, among other things, insufficient political will to transfer funds for this purpose, as well as the emigration of people with proper training. The underfunding of emergency-response institutions is also linked to the strong centralisation of power in the region. The EU's southern neighbourhood has some of the lowest levels of funding for local governments (between 6% and 18% of government spending, compared to the global average of 22%), despite their positioning and importance in dealing with the effects of crises. In addition, a mid-term assessment of the region's efforts under the Sendai Format (an agreement among UN members to reduce the negative effects of disasters) finds insufficient investment by Arab states in disaster reduction and points to political aspects that hinder its implementation.

Population Movements. Next to conflict, natural disasters are the most important reason for migration in the region. In Iraq, more than 60,000 drought-stricken farmers migrated to urban areas in 2006-2008. A similar phenomenon occurred in Syria and it became one of the causes of tensions that led to the 2011 revolution. In 2019, more than 800,000 new displacements because of natural disasters were recorded in Arab countries. In coastal regions of Lebanon (where 60% of its population lives), Morocco (65%), and Tunisia (85%), rising sea levels, which increase groundwater salinity and thus degrade agricultural land, will force additional migration. Just a half-metre sea level rise in Alexandria could force 1.5 million residents to leave their homes. Massive and rapid population displacement is also a risk factor making access to and management of resources more difficult, increasing vulnerability to impoverishment,

especially if displacement is accompanied by the destruction of homes and livelihoods. This is the case in Lebanon where 1.5 million refugees arrived between 2012 and 2015 as a consequence of the civil war in Syria. Lebanon's population jumped by nearly 30%, contributing to the country's extreme water shortage.

Rapid urban growth in the region is also adding to the extent of disaster consequences. Dynamically rising real estate values and the [large proportion of impoverished](#) among the population have resulted in 31% of Arab urban residents living in slums, informal settlements, or other inadequate housing conditions. Another consequence of intensive urbanisation is groundwater contamination and hazards caused by waste or polluted air. In addition, the authorities are unable to monitor compliance with building safety standards. As a result, more than 500 people have died in Egypt since 2014 in building collapses. At the same time, the suburban poor are the most vulnerable to the effects of disaster, especially as countries in the EU's southern neighbourhood only give limited consideration to the need for social support in disaster-management strategies.

Conclusions and Perspective. The scale and frequency of natural disasters in the EU's southern neighbourhood are likely to increase in the coming years, becoming an increasingly important factor in destabilising the region. This is due not only to climate change, but also to the increasing movement of people from the countryside to cities, putting additional strain on fragile infrastructure. The region's urban population is growing uncontrollably, making it more difficult to manage already limited natural resources. Coupled with government ineptitude, climate change increases the risk of natural disasters, while making it difficult to respond effectively.

Recurring disasters and limited reconstruction efforts are also prompting the region's residents to emigrate to European countries, usually by irregular routes. To curb this phenomenon, support in building disaster-management tools in the region must be accompanied by a push for greater transparency and combating the corruption and impunity of the authorities, which lead to or exacerbate the impacts of disasters. Therefore, efforts such as the PPRD should also address the political aspects that hinder disaster response, emphasising that systemic change is essential to the effectiveness of the EU's instruments for cooperation with the southern neighbourhood. At the same time, the progressive nature of climate change and the degree to which it is felt already in the Mediterranean indicate that population movements will intensify. Therefore, the EU's cooperation on migration with the countries of the region should not be limited to combating its causes, but should also take into account the development of channels for safe and legal migration.