



# RETHINKING **SECURITY** IN THE 2020s SERIES

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*COMMENTARY BY SHADA ISLAM & CLEOPATRA KITTI*

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# Why the EU should put women front and centre of its new agenda for the Southern Mediterranean.

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The European Commission's [latest effort](#) to re-imagine relations with countries in the Southern Mediterranean<sup>1</sup> is a welcome development.

Twenty five years after the [Barcelona Declaration](#), with its ground-breaking commitment to a comprehensive Euro-Mediterranean partnership, and ten years after unfulfilled hopes of change raised by the Arab Spring, there is a compelling need for a stronger EU effort to work with its Southern Mediterranean neighbours, giving priority to the region's immense climate change challenge<sup>2</sup>.

The region needs hope – and change. According to [a new opinion poll](#) by *The Guardian* and *YouGov*, a majority of those surveyed in Sudan, Tunisia, Algeria, Iraq, and Egypt do not regret the Arab Spring protests. Conversely, more than half of respondents in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Sudan say their lives are worse than before the uprising.

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<sup>1</sup> Algeria, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Palestine, Syria and Tunisia.

<sup>2</sup> According to the Mediterranean Experts on Climate and environmental Change report first Mediterranean assessment report, the region warms 20% faster than the rest of the world.

Even in Tunisia—arguably the closest country to a democratic success story—50% say their lives are worse today, while only a little more than a quarter of respondents say their lives are better.

Reassuringly, the new paper is an effort to correct past mistakes. With its focus on ensuring a green, digital, resilient and just recovery, guided by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Agreement and the European Green Deal, the EU is looking – thankfully – beyond its earlier view of the Southern Mediterranean solely through a distorted migration and security prism.

Yet, there is one overarching shortcoming: we believe the EU blueprint falls woefully short in recognizing the pivotal role of women as key transformational actors in the region.

This oversight must be corrected as soon as possible. An EU agenda for change which aspires to be ambitious, innovative and sustainable cannot make only occasional references – as the current document does – to the role of women in peace, development and security or merely note the need for “special attention” to promote the role of women in society and the economy”.

Instead, the EU must put women front and centre of all domestic, regional and international initiatives for sustainable growth and development as well as policies aimed at ensuring green and digital transitions in the southern Mediterranean.

The reason is simple. As pillars of their communities at local level and within the family structure, women have an important role to play in tackling climate change and enabling a post-Covid recovery.

In order to succeed and be sustainable, government policies must be backed up by women and be able to count on their full, active and enthusiastic participation in changing mindsets through a bottom-up approach.

This means that the EU, working with governments in the region, must deliver policies that are founded in a new green economic model and that offer dignity and opportunities to women.

Take women's still under-developed contribution to the region's economic wellbeing. If the [participation of women in the labour market](#) equalled that of men, the regional GDP in the southern Mediterranean could rise by as much as 47% over the next decade. Yet the region has the highest youth unemployment rate worldwide and the situation is particularly severe for [young women](#).

In 2014, the unemployment rate of young women exceeded that of young men in MENA by around 20 percentage points. Young women with higher education have even less chances on the labour market than their lower educated peers.

Women entrepreneurs also find it difficult to access credit and other financial resources such as assets, capital and productive resources. Small wonder then that a below-average percentage of employers are women (6%, compared with a global average of around 24%); the same is true for the percentage of self-employed people who are women (13%, compared to 31%-38% globally).

To change this vicious cycle, we believe that it is important to recognize the role of women as contributors to the formal economy but also their unaccounted contribution to the GDP as caretakers, entrepreneurs and workers in the informal economy.

Even more importantly, the EU should work with governments in the region to develop gender-responsive and action-oriented initiatives that empower women in their daily lives.

As pillars of family life and values and gatekeepers to young people's aspirations in both urban and less-connected rural communities, women can only inspire hope and confidence in their children when they themselves have reason to be hopeful and confident. And this means giving women the respect and opportunities they deserve.

To this end we propose a "Dignity Index" and an "Opportunity Index" which allow policymakers to assess if government policies are providing women with what they require to become full-fledged stakeholders in their country's future.

The "Dignity Index" would look at indicators such as existing legal codes, rights to equal employment, wage and justice, access to social services as well as leadership roles in local, regional and national governments.

The “Opportunity Index” would capture opportunities for youth and women as regards access to education, health and services, the availability of skills training which can be matched to job market needs in their countries, the wider Mediterranean region and in the EU.

Women in our southern neighbourhood face other well-documented challenges of course including legalised discrimination with differential laws on issues such as marriage, freedom of movement, and inheritance, as well as limited to no legal protection from domestic violence.

Underrepresentation in political processes is also an abiding problem, with women complaining not only of glass ceilings but also “sticky floors”, a reference to patriarchal, cultural and social norms that continue to play a central role in societies.

Also, women and girls constitute the majority of displaced civilian populations and are at a higher risk of exploitation and abuse in conflict and displacement settings.

Many governments and local civil society organization are making important inroads in tackling these and other challenges. Their work is admirable and deserves full EU support and collaboration.

However, having spent several years working with and inter-acting with our counterparts in the southern neighbourhood, we are convinced that the EU and the region’s governments have not fully grasped the critical importance of women as agents of sustainable change and inclusive transformation.

And yet it is so clear: Bringing hope, growth and development to the Southern Mediterranean is conditional on giving women the respect, dignity and opportunities they need to become true change-makers - in their families, communities and on the regional and national levels.

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## About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.

## Rethinking Security in the 2020s Series

This project takes critical aim at yesterday's approaches to security and defence, with a view towards developing proactive solutions to the evolving nature of insecurity and hybrid warfare. The series has three overarching themes, namely "New Geopolitical Landscape in the MENA Region", "Peacebuilding and Conflict Prevention" and "Transnational Challenges to Water and Energy"

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