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Borderlands. Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East

By Raffaella Del Sarto, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021, p.1-196, ISBN 978-0-19-883355-0 Full-text via DOI: [10.1093/oso/9780198833550.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198833550.001.0001)

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This book comes at an ultimate achievement, with several other previous publications, of the BORDERLANDS research project funded by the European Research Council between 2011 and 2017. Gathering twelve researchers, this project as well as this final publication clearly rely on their research and extensive fieldwork in order to provide the reader with a readable and manageable sum of knowledge in one piece. The time span of the book comprises two decades of Euro-MENA relations, from 1995 to 2015, respectively marking the launch of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EMP) also known as the Barcelona Process and ending with the refugee crisis of 2015, resulting from the ongoing conflict in Syria and Libya, a year during which the EU chose to reformulate its policies toward its southern neighborhood.

The main topic discusses the interconnectedness between Europe and the Mediterranean Middle East and North African states despite and beyond the “fortress Europe” as an often prevailing narrative. Instead of focusing on the migration issue, the perspective here focuses on the extension of European norms, rules and practices to the countries in the southern neighborhood, thereby transforming them into Europe’s borderlands, a *modus operandi* best encapsulated in the European Neighborhood Policy (ENP) adopted in 2003-2004. The investigation is brought through six elegantly written chapters and a stimulating conclusion. The coherence of the book is solidly built thanks to the concept of borderlands the author borrows from the literature of border studies in order to shape an alternative vision of the foreign policies, far from any normative idea of promoting democracy or any ‘Europeanization’ process that has dominated the discourse in a large academic literature in the European studies. Defined as areas in close geographic proximity to a border, borderlands unveil areas characterized by multiple and disaggregated borders with different degrees of permeability, thus highlighting the less visible cooperation through the lens of different kind of issues, goods and categories of people. Therefore, the concept of borderlands conceptualizes Europe as a form of empire with fuzzy borders, an Empire which seeks to export selectively the European order as seemingly imperial interests.

In order to explore the EU’s policies that are mainly shaped by security concerns and economic interests, the book originally propose to discuss the asymmetrical and selective integration of MENA states into the EU’s Internal Market. Thus, it unveils the impact of such neoliberal restructuring in the MENA region in the absence of democratic reforms with the consequence of contributing to the growing socio-economic inequalities and societal polarization. Another side effect appears to be the strengthening of authoritarian regimes through the cooptation of some MENA governments of EU’s management on migration, counterterrorism and border controls. Last but not least, one of the key asset of this borderlands perspective lay in the focus on the MENA states responses and agencies toward the EU’s policies thus raising the unusual question of their margins of manoeuvre and, even more interesting, the interdependency between MENA states and Europe despite the clear asymmetry of power.

The structure of the book first brings a historical background of EU-MENA relationships thus highlighting the continuity from the imperial policies of single European states during colonial era into the quasi-imperial policy of the common European bloc. The next chapter

deals with the modus operandi of the exportation of the European order, mainly focusing on trade policies and cooperation on migration, security and border controls. While it highlights the co-optation of political and economic elites in the MENA states, it also reveals that interests and rationale of European policies towards the southern periphery remained unchanged during the two decades under scrutiny – which includes transformation as important as the Arab uprisings in 2011. The next chapter assesses the impact of EU's policies on the MENA state when it comes to the political and socio-economic order. It actually shows that when combined with specific choices made by MENA governments, European policies have contributed to rising inequalities, crony capitalism and more largely strengthening authoritarian regimes. The last chapter raises the question of interdependence that underpins the dynamics of Europe-MENA. Beyond the interconnectedness between the two regions, it brings to light the strategies and policies adopted by MENA leaders with empirical evidence of the bargaining power that countries may have acquired in their relationship with Europe, notably when it comes to migration, security or cooperation. These aspects bringing interdependency at the forefront of the debate on border and security, as a rather prominent current debate, are also an added value in the theoretical debate in the International relations literature.

The book ends with a difficult question of today's and future EU-MENA relations in the present context of a fading US power and a diminishing European power of attraction in front of the increasingly influential position of other players in the region, Russia but also China. In sum, the book sounds like a critical assessment of the EU policies toward the MENA states. When looking at the present situation in various MENA states and economies on the one hand and in European policies on the other, things don't seem to have known any major changes of orientation, unfortunately. As if learning a lesson appears quite difficult. In any case, this book provides scholars but also policy makers and political actors with a comprehensive and uncompromising overview of the European policies toward the Middle East.

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