



PERSPECTIVES

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Geography Still Commands the Mediterranean World

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The migrant crisis in Europe that followed the wars in Libya and Syria exposed the Mediterranean world's long-dormant interconnectedness. That unity is deeply rooted in the geography of the region.

The Mediterranean world as it was originally constituted – a world that was obscured for centuries by the prevailing political and economic systems in the Middle East and North Africa on the one hand and the European continent on the other – is now reasserting itself. This process is largely explained by the region's geography.

A look at the map shows that although the Mediterranean Sea borders three continents (Europe, Asia, and Africa), it is essentially a closed sea with only narrow outlets to the oceans (through the Gibraltar Strait and the Suez Canal). The Mediterranean is full of peninsulas and islands, and those geographical features enable the nations that control them to be dominant maritime and economic powers.

If we look around the sea, we can see that geographical barriers close it off from the heart of Africa, the rest of the Middle East, and Central and Northern Europe. The barrier in North Africa is the Sahara Desert, while in the Middle East it is the Syrian Desert and the rugged land of Anatolia, along with the Euphrates River. In Europe, the Mediterranean is closed off by the Alps, the Balkan mountainous territory, and, further afield, the Rhine and Danube Rivers.

From a geographical perspective, North Africa does not quite belong to the rest of the African continent, as there is hardly any infrastructure or economic activity in the Sahara. North Africa has always been more influenced by the Mediterranean region, particularly southern Europe.

The same goes for Syrian territory, which is disconnected from the rest of the Middle East by a desert that stretches to Mesopotamia (modern Iraq) and the Arabian Peninsula. The only connection Syria has to the region is through northern Iraq.

Modern technologies may make the Apennine, Balkan, and Pyrenees barriers more penetrable, but those geographical features – which shaped the behavior of the Mediterranean peoples for centuries – are still there. Geography integrated the territories of three continents into one economic space, a dynamic that played out over millennia in the Mediterranean.

Take, for example, the Phoenicians, who established their colonies in North Africa and modern Spain and controlled many islands in the Mediterranean. Their colonies and territories, which were more related to one another than to the inland territories of either the Middle East or North Africa, came to comprise a veritable trade empire.

The same was accomplished by the Greeks, who colonized the Mediterranean and Black Seas. Connectivity by sea facilitated the creation of a trade empire, with metropolises in mainland Greece reaping most of the benefit.

However, the Phoenicians, the Greeks, and, later, the Carthaginians lacked sufficient human resources to politically dominate the Mediterranean coastline. These seafaring peoples did not manage to shut off the Mediterranean from other rising powers.

This brings us to the Romans. The Roman Empire, which essentially closed off the sea to outside powers, perfectly demonstrated the geographical interconnectedness of the Mediterranean world.

The extent to which geography dominates the Mediterranean world can be determined by examining the extent of the Roman conquest. Roman legions did not go beyond the rich North African provinces, as the territories deep in the heart of Africa were not economically worth the effort to control. Caesar, Augustus, Diocletian, and other Roman leaders were also not particularly keen to capture all of Germany, as the Rhine and Danube Rivers were viewed as good defensive barriers. The same could be said about the Middle East, where the Romans did not (for the most part) attempt to permanently occupy lands beyond the Euphrates River.

Connecting to the Modern Epoch

The Mediterranean region was united in the past. For the Phoenicians, the Greeks, and especially the Romans, what was going on in North Africa and the Middle East was very important, as the lands were connected to one another both economically and militarily.

The Arab conquests disrupted this connection. In the seventh century, North Africa and the Middle East became Islamic while the rest of the Mediterranean remained Christian. In the centuries to follow, the economic and military development of these regions diverged. In some instances – the Crusades, for example – the regions came into direct conflict.

Their paths diverged further in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. During that period, Europe industrialized while the Middle East and North Africa lagged behind.

European colonization followed by two devastating world wars caused Mediterranean interconnectedness to reassert itself, with Germans and Italians in Africa and the British defending themselves in Egypt. During that period, what happened in North Africa was again of consequence to Europeans. But that interconnectedness receded once more – until the Syrian and Libyan conflicts of the early 2010s reignited the idea.

We live in a highly connected world in which modern technologies sometimes trump geography – but geographical features still play a powerful role in shaping human behavior. Today's Mediterranean migrant crisis echoes events that occurred in the region centuries ago, with varying intensity. It is once again clear that Italy, Spain, and Greece, although all part of a grand European project (the EU), are nevertheless inextricably linked to events in North Africa and the Middle East.

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