

THE EU-ALGERIA ASSOCIATION AGREEMENT AND THE NEED FOR STRUCTURAL REFORM: A CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract: *Since the mid-1990s, Algeria has begun revising its foreign trade policy, ending the monopoly of state-owned enterprises over foreign trade operations, and moving toward trade liberalization. The signing of bilateral trade agreements is considered one such policy. This study aims to evaluate the reality of the Association Agreement between the European Union and Algeria within the framework of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership. It seeks to determine whether this agreement, which serves as a model for trade liberalization between the North and the South, is particularly relevant to Algeria. The study also explores the underlying reasons for the agreement's mixed outcomes, notably Algeria's delayed accession compared to its neighbors. The paper found a significant disparity in benefits. While the agreement proved effective in liberalizing European imports into Algeria, it failed to stimulate or diversify Algerian non-oil exports. These perceived negative outcomes prompted Algeria to reassess the agreement, leading to renegotiations that postponed the deadline for establishing the free trade area and reimposed customs duties on sensitive products.*

Keywords: *EU-Algeria Association Agreement; trade liberalization; Euro-Mediterranean Partnership; European Union.*

JEL Classification: F13, F15, F14

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1 Introduction

Following the establishment of the European Union, it became evident that the next logical step was to pivot southward and develop a framework for cooperation with the Mediterranean littoral states. Accordingly, in 1995, the Barcelona Process was launched, establishing a structured work plan for collaborative projects among Mediterranean Basin countries—particularly in the spheres of security, development, and culture. This initiative later evolved into a broader vision of Mediterranean integration, a process that ultimately led to the founding of the Union for the Mediterranean.

For the Mediterranean nations, the process serves as a critical mechanism to foster institutional and economic alignment with their northern partner and to secure vital technical and developmental support. Conversely, from the European Union's perspective, the initiative is strategically designed to foster a predictable, stable investment environment, particularly in the energy sector, thereby ensuring reliable access to the region's significant energy resources (Kagiannas et al., 2003).

Moreover, significant research (Ben Slimane et al., 2020; Campaniello, 2014) contended that the Euro-Mediterranean partnership was not merely an economic instrument aimed at linking the markets of the European Union with those of the Southern Mediterranean; it was also conceived as a pathway for cooperation across diverse fields and the realization of a shared area of prosperity.

Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreements, for its part, constituted a core component of the broader Barcelona Process strategy, this initiative was launched by the European Community with the dual objectives of enhancing cooperative relations with the nations of the Mediterranean's southern shore and establishing a long-term vision for a "shared area of prosperity." according to the Council of the European Union (2005) the agreement's mandate was explicitly tripartite, focusing on:

- regular political and security dialogue;
- economic, trade, and financial cooperation; and
- social, cultural, and educational cooperation.

Algeria's resistance to EU cooperation on migration was fundamentally rooted in the entrenched institutional features of its domestic security regime. However, this did not prevent it from pursuing bilateral cooperation (Zardo, Loschi, 2022). Algeria signed the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Agreement in Valencia in April 2002. Although the agreement encompassed a broad range of domains, the economic dimension was of paramount importance to Algeria. This primacy stemmed from two key factors: first, the European Union was, and remains, Algeria's principal foreign trade partner, accounting for approximately 60% of its external trade at the time (Ministry of Commerce and Export Promotion, 2017); and second, the nation's economy was undergoing a critical transition driven by domestic economic reforms, which necessitated a greater degree of trade liberalization and market openness.

Despite Algeria's significant economic standing vis-à-vis the European Union as a primary energy supplier, its accession to the Partnership Agreement was comparatively delayed. Unlike neighboring countries—such as Tunisia (1995), Morocco (1996), and Egypt (2001)—Algeria did not finalize its agreement until 2002.

Many analysts attribute this delayed entry to two interrelated factors: the structural fragility of the Algerian economy, stemming from its prior state-led, inward-looking orientation, and deep concerns regarding the potential adverse impacts of the agreement on vulnerable domestic industries and institutions.

A compelling case can be made that Algeria's economic crisis in the late 1980s, exacerbated by a deteriorating domestic security environment, led to a period of significant international isolation. This dual pressure ultimately necessitated an appeal to international financial institutions, initiating a wave of structural economic reforms that fundamentally reshaped the nation's economic and social policy landscape.

Darbouche (2010) argues that Algeria's inherent strategic disposition has made it inherently resistant to alignment with the European Union's foreign policy frameworks in the Mediterranean. Consequently, it has acquired a reputation within European policy circles as North Africa's most challenging and intractable partner.

This agreement serves multiple strategic purposes for the European Union: it enhances its political foothold in the region, promotes stability, acts as a

counterbalance to Chinese influence, and opens up new markets. Meanwhile, developing countries are drawn to the deal by the promise of preferential access to the vast EU market, increased financial assistance, and the opportunity to solidify their domestic economic reforms (Francois, McQueen, & Wignaraja, 2005). As the study by Stojčić et al (2018) concluded, it appears that trade liberalization not only increases exports but also helps prevent their decline. Furthermore, access to new markets, coupled with inflows of foreign capital and the accompanying technological knowledge, paves the way for transforming local production and enhancing its competitiveness.

2 The Euro-Mediterranean Agreement: The Trade Aspect

A prevailing view among scholars is that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Agreement had multiple objectives, and the economic dimension was paramount. Achieving full trade liberalization with the Southern Mediterranean countries was a key outcome of this agreement. Gillespie (1997) and Licari (1998) have emphasized that the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership Agreement's core engine was its detailed blueprint for comprehensive trade liberalization with the Southern Mediterranean countries.

The economic and financial partnership represents the culmination of long-standing European Union policies towards non-member Mediterranean states. Its primary objectives are to foster sustainable economic and social development, enhance living standards, elevate employment levels, narrow the developmental disparity, and promote regional cooperation and integration (Licari, 1998; Chourou, 1998; 2003).

Furthermore, foreign direct investment (FDI) inflows were intended to complement trade liberalization in these countries, particularly as they viewed FDI as the primary engine of economic growth (Darbouche, 2008), the aim of the Free Trade Area (FTA) was anticipated to catalyze economic expansion, leading to a rise in both GDP and export volumes (Abesadze, 2015).

The institutional foundation for Algerian-European cooperation was laid in 1976 through the signing of a cooperation agreement involving Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco. This framework agreement signified the commencement of a new chapter in Euro-Maghreb relations, effectively operationalizing the European Community's revised strategic approach towards the southern

Mediterranean rim.

The trade provisions of the agreement allowed for Algerian industrial exports to enter the European Economic Community (EEC) market duty-free. Agricultural products, however, were subject to restrictive quotas. Despite this privileged access, Algeria derived limited benefit from these concessions, as its export basket remained overwhelmingly hydrocarbon-dominated, with manufactured goods failing to gain a substantive foothold. The weight of agricultural exports relative to each country's total exports to the Community is markedly uneven across the three Maghreb nations. Specifically, they range from 6 to 8 percent in Algeria, approximately 35 percent in Tunisia, and nearly 60 percent in Morocco (Pisani & Sordel, 1977).

Within the EU-Algeria Association Agreement, the commercial chapter served as the cornerstone for achieving a comprehensive free trade zone by 2017. Given the EU's status as Algeria's foremost economic partner, the agreement mandated a structured 10-year transition.

This involved a gradual tariff dismantling mechanism for industrial goods, which commenced on September 1, 2007, and was programmed to reach full liberalization by the start of 2017, thereby eliminating all corresponding customs duties.

Full Exemption from customs duties and charges having equivalent effect as of September 1, 2005, These products are also exempt from all quantitative restrictions or measures having equivalent effect, This category covers 829 specific tariff lines, and progressive dismantling of customs duties and charges having equivalent effect for products falling under Annex 3, until total elimination after 5 years, starting from the second year following the agreement's entry into force, The elimination is carried out according to the following schedule (Algeria Customs, 2008):

- Two years after the agreement entered into force: a 20% reduction of the basic customs duties;
- Three years after the agreement entered into force: a 30% reduction of the basic customs duties;
- Four years after the agreement entered into force: a 40% reduction of the basic customs duties;

- Five years after the agreement entered into force: a 60% reduction of the basic customs duties;
- Six years after the agreement entered into force: an 80% reduction of the basic customs duties;
- Seven years after the agreement entered into force: all remaining duties are eliminated.

Table 1: Tariff Dismantlement Schedule for List 3 Products

Duty Rate	Tariff Reduction Rate (%)									
	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016
5%	4.5	3.5	3.0	2.5	2.0	1.5	1.0	0.5	0.2	0.0
15%	13.5	12.0	10.5	9.0	7.5	6.0	4.5	3.0	1.5	0.0
30%	27.0	24.0	21.0	18.0	15.0	12.0	9.0	6.0	3.0	0.0

Source: Algeria Customs, 2008.

This table illustrates the detailed, multi-year linear reduction schedule for customs duties on products under List 3 of the EU-Algeria Association Agreement. It serves as a concrete example of the agreement's core mechanism for phased market opening from the Algerian side.

For agricultural products, a tariff reduction ranging from 20 to 100 percent on customs duties and charges having equivalent effect, within the limits of pre-established tariff quotas, and for processed agricultural products, immediate concessions apply a tariff reduction ranging from 20% to 100% of customs duties and charges having equivalent effect for products listed in List 1 of Protocol 5, Annex 2. For certain products, these concessions are limited by tariff quotas.

Table 2: Tariff Dismantlement Schedule for List 2 Products

Duty Rate	Tariff Reduction Rate (%)			
	2008/09/01	2009/09/01	2010/09/01	2011/09/01
5%	3.5	3.0	2.0	1.0
15%	10.5	9.0	6.0	12.0
30%	24.0	21.0	18.0	12.0

Source: Algeria Customs, 2008.

This table presents the accelerated dismantlement schedule for products under List 2 of the EU-Algeria Association Agreement, intended for a faster liberalization track.

For deferred concessions, the products listed in List 2 of Protocol 5, Annex 2, will be subject to a review of possible liberalization beginning in the fifth year after the agreement entered into force.

3 First Setback: An Amendment to Tariff Reduction Schedules

Over time, a consensus emerged within Algerian policymaking circles that the agreement had yielded disproportionately modest returns for the country, leading to a reassessment of its utility and a sense of unfulfilled potential

Given the mixed and highly unsatisfactory results from Algeria's perspective, informal consultations to revise the tariff dismantlement schedule for industrial goods and agricultural concessions were initiated. This move followed the decision of the Association Council during its meeting in Luxembourg on June 15, 2010.

The primary objective of these consultations was to postpone the deadline for establishing the Free Trade Area to 2020, rather than 2017, and to provisionally reinstate customs duties on a list of sensitive products, as permitted under the safeguards and exceptional measures clauses of the Association Agreement.

The revision covered extensive modifications to the tariff dismantlement schedules for both industrial and agricultural goods. For Industrial Products,

the review process encompassed 1,058 tariff lines of EU origin that competent national bodies deemed sensitive to domestic production, employment, and investment sectors.

Regarding Agricultural and Food Products (Algeria Customs, 2008):

- Cancellation of 25 tariff-rate quotas on agricultural products granted to the European Union.
- Cancellation of specific tariff preferences for two food products granted to the EU.
- Reopening of 9 preferential tariff-rate quotas on agricultural products granted to the EU.
- Modification of two tariff-rate quotas on agricultural products granted to the EU.

The EU-Algeria Association Agreement also, established the Most-Favoured-Nation (MFN) treatment framework for trade in services under the Association Agreement, it obligated the European Community and its Member States to extend to Algeria the same favourable treatment they were required to grant to any other WTO member under the GATS, this obligation extended to Algerian service suppliers, who were to receive conditions no less favourable than those accorded to like suppliers from any other country, as specified in the EC's existing GATS schedule of commitments.

Algeria sought to create a protective legal architecture to shield its local industries and products from the competitive influx of European goods into its domestic market. This was achieved through the strategic integration of specific safeguard clauses within the Association Agreement. These legally-embedded measures were conceived as temporary buffers to alleviate market pressures and comprised a suite of key instruments, including: (Law n° 05-20, 2005)

- Anti-dumping measures (Article 22);
- Countervailing measures (Article 23);
- Safeguard measures (Article 24);
- Exceptional measures in favor of infant industries or certain sectors

undergoing restructuring (Article 11).

The evolution of Algeria's imports from 2005 to 2010 reflected a direct and substantial correlation with the implementation of the EU-Algeria Association Agreement. Imports grew from \$18.3 billion to \$40.5 billion (Ministry of Commerce and Export Promotion, 2025), representing an increase of over 120% during this period. This pronounced surge, which accelerated after the agreement entered into force in September 2005, corresponded directly to its core mechanism of phased tariff dismantlement. The systematic reduction of Algerian tariffs on European industrial and consumer goods, executed according to the negotiated schedules, facilitated significantly greater market penetration for EU exports.

This trend demonstrated a key structural outcome of the partnership: the agreement effectively spurred a substantial expansion of EU exports to the Algerian market, which contributed to a widening trade imbalance and reinforced Algeria's structural dependence on hydrocarbon revenues to finance its growing import bill. These observable outcomes subsequently validated Algeria's rationale for invoking safeguard clauses and pursuing a renegotiation of the liberalization timeline after 2010.

4 The Subsequent Obstacle: Shift in Foreign Trade Policies

Algeria's turn to protectionist measures was not a direct reaction to the terms of the Partnership Agreement but a strategic response to successive external economic shocks. The 2008 subprime mortgage crisis had a muted impact on the Algerian economy, cushioned by substantial fiscal surpluses and the buffer of the Revenue Regulation Fund (RRF)¹

By committing to a free trade agreement, a country undertakes a phased reduction of tariffs, which consequently diminishes the competitive shelter that local firms once relied upon (Kruse, Martínez-Zarzoso, & Baghdadi, 2021)

However, the 2014 oil price collapse constituted a structural crisis that

¹ The Revenue Regulation Fund is considered as one of the sovereign funds in Algeria. It was established in 2000 after the rise in oil prices in global markets, in order to benefit from the surplus of actual oil collection revenues over the capacity in the annual financial laws.

critically exposed the vulnerabilities of its hydrocarbon-dependent economy. This shock depleted the RRF, created severe fiscal and balance-of-payments pressures, and necessitated a fundamental policy shift. Consequently, Algeria initiated a deliberate protective trade policy, recentralizing import controls through quotas, reference prices, and restrictive licensing.

The prolonged oil shock, which began to emerge in the second half of 2014, led to a 43.4% decline in the value of hydrocarbon exports in 2015. Hydrocarbon exports fell from USD 58.46 billion in 2014 to just USD 33.08 billion in 2015 (Bank of Algeria, 2016). This marked a turning point, as European Union countries receded from their role as Algeria's strategic partners, while China emerged as the primary supplier. Despite this shift, EU countries—particularly Italy, France, and Spain—remained Algeria's main customers. (National Statistics Office, 2020).

The objective was not merely to shield specific industries from European competition, as envisioned in the agreement's safeguard clauses, but to enact a broader macroeconomic stabilization strategy aimed at conserving foreign exchange, reducing the import bill, and managing domestic demand amid a severe budgetary crisis. Thus, while the legal framework for protection existed within the Association Agreement, the primary catalyst for its activation was exogenous fiscal necessity, transforming trade policy into a key instrument for managing a rentier state in crisis.

The initial protective measures took the form of a provisional safeguard, consisting of an increase in customs duties on foreign products following a preliminary determination that a sudden surge in imports had caused or threatened to cause serious injury to a domestic industry.

The second measure implemented by Algeria was an administrative instrument known as the import license (Ministry of Commerce and Export Promotion, 2025). This license serves as prior authorization from the competent authorities, required for any importer seeking to bring a specific commodity or product into the country. It primarily targets goods intended for resale in their original state.

The third measure was the imposition of supplementary duties beyond standard customs tariffs. Beginning in 2018, Algeria implemented additional levies on foreign products, the most significant of which was the Provisional Safeguard

Additional Duty. This surcharge ranged from 30% to 200% ad valorem and was applied primarily to luxury goods and products manufactured domestically that faced intense import competition.

5 The Shortcomings of the Current Agreement

The implementation of the EU-Algeria Association Agreement revealed a series of structural shortcomings and unintended consequences that ultimately undermined its perceived utility and prompted Algeria to recalibrate its defense posture.

- **Asymmetry in Benefits and Trade Outcomes:** The agreement failed to deliver balanced reciprocity. While it successfully stimulated a massive increase in EU exports to Algeria (imports grew over 120% from 2005-2010), it did not catalyse a corresponding diversification of Algerian exports. Algeria's export basket remained overwhelmingly dominated by hydrocarbons, with non-hydrocarbon industrial and agricultural products failing to gain meaningful market access. The significant dependence of the Algerian economy on the hydrocarbons sector is not a new phenomenon. Algeria had transformed from a relatively poor agricultural country into a developing economy with a diversified industrial base, heavily reliant on hydrocarbon industries, by 1980. The value added in the hydrocarbons sector increased from 13% of GDP in 1970 to 33% in 1980, while the contribution of other sectors declined correspondingly (Heidarian & Green, 1989). This situation, exacerbated by rising hydrocarbon prices, intensified further at the beginning of the millennium. Algeria relies heavily on the oil and gas sector, with its revenues accounting for approximately 30% of GDP and over 95% of export earnings (Allegret & Benkhodja, 2015; Álvarez, 2010).
- **Inadequate Developmental Impact and Delayed Diversification:** The core mechanisms of the agreement—tariff dismantlement and FDI incentives—proved insufficient to address the deep-seated structural vulnerabilities of the Algerian economy. The anticipated structural transformation and industrial diversification away from hydrocarbon dependency did not materialize. The agreement provided market access but not the capacity-building or complementary policies needed for Algerian industries to compete, leaving the economy exposed to external shocks. The effects of trade liberalization

with European Union countries can be analyzed by examining key figures from 2005 to 2024. With a 42% increase in hydrocarbon prices and a 5.7% rise in export volumes, the value of hydrocarbon exports reached USD 45.59 billion in 2005, compared to USD 31.55 billion in 2004 and USD 23.99 billion in 2003. In contrast, non-hydrocarbon exports amounted to just USD 0.79 billion in 2005. Imports consisted primarily of industrial equipment, semi-finished products, food products, and consumer goods, with France and Italy being the main partners, accounting for 27% of total imports (Bank of Algeria, 2006). There were no clear changes in the contribution of non-oil exports, which remained low at USD 0.98 billion in 2007 (Bank of Algeria, 2008). However, China began to emerge as a new trading partner. In 2024, the contribution of non-hydrocarbon exports remained marginal, totaling USD 3.838 billion, or 7.82% of total exports, with semi-finished products accounting for the majority of these exports (Bank of Algeria, 2025).

- **Triggering Defensive Renegotiation and Protectionism:** The perceived negative outcomes—manifested in the surging import bill and lack of export diversification—led Algeria to reassess the agreement. This culminated in the 2010 renegotiation, which postponed the Free Trade Area deadline to 2020 and reinstated tariffs on sensitive products. Consequently, the linear liberalization process was halted, and a defensive, managed-trade approach replaced the agreement's forward momentum.
- **Catalyst for Unilateral Protective Measures:** Beyond renegotiation, the agreement's pressures, combined with exogenous fiscal crises (notably the 2014 oil price crash), acted as a catalyst for a broader shift toward protectionism. Algeria increasingly deployed unilateral trade defence instruments outside the agreement's spirit, such as import licenses, provisional safeguards, and ultimately, prohibitive supplementary duties (30-200%). These measures signified a move towards a state-controlled trade regime aimed at macroeconomic stabilization (conserving foreign exchange, controlling imports) rather than cooperative integration.
- **Highlighting Fundamental Strategic Misalignment:** The sequence of events—delayed accession, limited gains, renegotiation, and unilateral protection—underscores a fundamental misalignment between the EU's integrationist agenda and Algeria's economic sovereignty and stability priorities. As noted by analysts like Darbouche, Algeria has been resistant

to alignment with EU frameworks, viewing the agreement less as a partnership for shared prosperity and more as a potential threat to its vulnerable domestic industries and fiscal sovereignty, especially in times of crisis.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

Algeria's experience with the Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement reveals a stark contradiction between the theoretical promises of trade liberalization and the practical outcomes on the ground. While international economics literature, represented by the Trade Liberalization Hypothesis of Bhagwati (1978) and McKinnon (1979), asserts that the removal of customs barriers stimulates investment, expands exports, and diversifies them, the Algerian results indicate a completely different trajectory.

The Euro-Mediterranean Association Agreement was not merely a trade agreement; it was a genuine test of the Euro-Mediterranean model's capacity to achieve shared development and overcome the imbalances of economic dependency. Nearly two decades after its signing, this study's findings demonstrate that the test was not successful for Algeria.

The agreement proved to be an effective instrument for liberalizing European imports into Algeria. However, it failed to serve as a locomotive for liberalizing and diversifying Algerian exports, as Darbouche (2010) discussed. The result was a deepening dependency on oil rents, a widening trade deficit, and an economic fragility exposed by the 2014 oil shock. The Algerian response was logical in its context: the state resorted to activating defensive protectionist policies to preserve its foreign currency reserves and domestic industries, effectively freezing the liberalization path and returning the relationship to a cycle of mistrust and uncertainty.

In the absence of integrated industrial policies, the capacity to attract productive investment, and effective technology transfer programs, opening markets can produce counterproductive results, this finding consistently reported by (Darbouche, 2008) and (Zardo, Loschi, 2022), Algeria demonstrates that genuine partnership cannot be built on unilaterally beneficial liberalization, but rather on a delicate balance between the imperatives of regional integration and the necessities of economic stability and structural diversification.

Therefore, a radical reassessment of this agreement, transitioning it from the logic of a "free trade area" to the logic of an "integrated developmental partnership," is no longer an option but an imperative necessity to salvage what remains of the Barcelona spirit on the southern shore of the Mediterranean.

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