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## Expert Comment

# Living together in peace: Developing exemplary Euro-African relationships

**Belkacem Iratni (2019)**

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# Living together in peace: Developing exemplary Euro-African relationships

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## **Abstract**

In order to alleviate clashes between civilisations and cultures as well as conflicts between tribes and communities, a campaign calling for living together in peace has been launched under the auspices of the United Nations, officially endorsed by the UN in December 2017, with 16 May was declared the International Day of Living Together in Peace (IDLTP). The day is to be used "as a means of regularly mobilizing the efforts of the international community to promote peace, tolerance, inclusion, understanding and solidarity".

The IDLTP reinforces the idea that states should provide the impetus for this human imperative and suggests, implicitly, its immediate universal implementation and globalisation. However, the contention of this paper is that the process of living together peacefully ought to engage peoples and civil societies not merely through state apparatuses, but it should follow a gradual shift from regions to continents, then to the whole of humanity.

In this context, the relationship between Africa and Europe might be a catalyst to bring peoples and societies together more closely, given their geographic contiguity, historical relationship, and economic interdependence. Once the project of living together becomes effective between African and European societies, it may inspire other regions of the world to follow suite.

Therefore, it may not be too audacious to assert that many ingredients to make the Euro-African relationship an example for living together in peace do not only already exist, but can be reinforced, providing there is the political will. Such features could include further economic integration and the progressive removal of border inflexibility.

## The process of living together is well on track

It is worth stating from the outset that the project of living together was conceived not by a nation-state or by an international or regional organisation, but by a brotherhood, the *Alawiyya zawiya*, which was founded in the early 20th century by the venerable Sheikh Ahmad Ben Mustafa Al Alawi. This particular *zawiya* is located in Mostaganem, a small town not far from Oran, the second largest city in Algeria, which is situated in the west of the country.

The current spiritual leader, Sheikh Khaled Bentounès, is the great grandson of Sheikh Al Alawi and is regarded as a staunch advocate of the traditional Sufi path (*tariqa*). This tradition preaches "an Islam of peace, a culture of fraternity and the sharing of universal values" and Sheikh Bentounès is an ardent defender of rapprochement between Islam and Western culture.<sup>1</sup>

Through the support of his foundation and the consistent diplomatic lobbying of the Algerian government, Sheikh Bentounès succeeded in having 16 May declared an International Day of Living Together in Peace by the United Nations in 2017. In his address to the General Assembly of the United Nations, Sheikh Bentounès poignantly declared,

"Today, after long and careful reflection, we are facing your noble Assembly. I have come to you as the messenger of a great Sufi path that appeals to the generosity of your conscience as decision-makers for the present and the future. It is with your wisdom that we can build a society 'Living Together' and 'Doing Together' so that our children can build their future with each other, and not against each other. Peace is not just the absence of war or conflict. Peace is, first and foremost, a state of being that each of us feels within ourselves, with a desire to share, uniting with all of our fellows, beyond our colour, our religion, our nationality. A human being is initially 'consciousness', and this

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<sup>1</sup> See his latest book, *Islam et Occident: Plaidoyer pour le vivre ensemble*.

increases or decreases according to one's attachment to the values of ethics, justice, solidarity, and peace" (Inandiak, 2018).

The first Day of Living Together was celebrated by the international community on 16 May 2018. It aims to achieve the following:

- Synergise consciences, through which the virtues and qualities of every human being are brought forwards;
- Build bridges through social networks by promoting the transmission of skills and ideas and offer a message of hope to the youth of all countries;
- Organise a platform on ecology based on the shared belief that sustainable development promotes lasting peace by encouraging dialogue with all actors in the economy.
- Promote reconciliation between the cultures and traditions of the human family whilst nourishing the notion of a living spirituality that gives meaning to life.
- Call on musicians and artists all over the world to celebrate this event and unite people through the richness of our creativity and the beauty of our differences.
- Promote gender equality and harmony because feminine energy, which is an essential source of peace, is an instrument through which reconciliation between men and women and their complementarity in unity can be achieved.
- Promote architecture with a human face based on the notion of better living together.

The Living in Peace Together initiative does not pretend it can single-handedly eradicate hatred, xenophobia, clashes amongst cultures and civilisations, nor bring an end to conflicts between states, civil wars, terrorism, or transnational criminality in the near future. It does, however, have the ambition to promote and disseminate a culture of living together in peace among peoples and nations as a vehicle for the acceptance of the idea that they can build their future with each other, and not against each other. The aim is to demonstrate how to better serve humanity and to harmonise and beautify the world. The process is a long one, but it has the merit to begin.

Sheikh Khaled's immediate objective is to lay the groundwork for the creation of an Academy of Peace. “We have created military academies, but not academies for peace; we teach the art of war but where is peace taught?” he stated regrettably last May (Ali, 2018).

The first celebration of the International Day of Living Together took place on 16 May 2018 and events were organised in Algeria, Indonesia, Namibia, and a host of other countries. It was also celebrated by the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon, while Permanent Delegations to UNESCO celebrated the first version of IDLTP at their headquarters in Paris, attended by its Director-General. Sheikh Khaled Bentounes also received an award for diversity, presented in Montreal by the Médiamosaique Agency at the Ministry of External Relations of Québec.

It is anticipated that the second anniversary of the IDLTP will be widely celebrated by the international community. Alongside the celebrations organised by the United Nations and its member states individually, there should also be a programme of events initiated by NGOs which will touch on other aspects of human activity.

### **Euro-African synergies as an impetus for living together in peace**

All the African countries, with the notable exception of Ethiopia were previously under colonial domination exercised by European countries, whether through direct rule or under the guise of protectorate status. Many links inherited from this legacy still affect African countries, even since the acquisition of independence through various violent struggles. These ties are noticeable in a number of ways.

### **Religion**

As a legacy of colonial experimentation, Christianity (the most historically prevalent religion in Europe) has contributed to diversifying a religious landscape dominated by Islam but also

characterised by African religions and animist practices. Surprisingly, it is Africa, especially its northern, eastern, and southern parts, which boasts relative coexistence between religions, mainly between Muslims and Christians. Inter-religious tensions can be found mostly in Nigeria and between Sudan and South Sudan. Inter-ethnic conflicts and religious animosities that have occurred in Africa have not led to an exodus of Christians abroad, as has happened in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt as a result of confessional wars and crises. Nor has any Muslim exodus occurred due to violent discrimination in African countries where Christians are the majority.

Confessional conflicts in the Middle East have incited more hatred and violence on account of the fact that the region was the nest of the three monotheistic religions, and because of exacerbations of religious-political antagonism through things like foreign interference and the lasting conflict between Palestinians and Israelis.

### **Cultural presence**

Several African countries have maintained the languages of former colonial powers as official or de jure languages, alongside local languages, due to local cultural diversity and the presence of a multiplicity of languages and dialects. Many other countries still use the languages of former colonial powers widely in teaching at schools and universities, administrative affairs, trading, and public affairs. English, French, and Portuguese are used as common languages in the dealings of the Regional Economic Communities (RECs) as it remains difficult for the member states of these regional groupings to use their numerous and diverse national languages as a means of common understanding and negotiation.

The French cultural presence in Africa is still vivid through the policy of the Francophonie and even countries which were not colonised by France have joined l'Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie. Very few countries in Africa have

challenged the cultural presence of former colonial powers or tried to reduce the use of European languages in public life in order to assert their identities in contra-distinction to Western culture and values.

Europe remains the preferred destination for African students, mainly for its geographic proximity, common languages, study facilities, and allowances. Academic programmes like Erasmus+ have considerably increased the mobility of teachers, as well as students, between the two continents. This kind of selective migration by which many European countries receive people certainly contributes towards a draining of the most qualified people from Africa. In return, these groups of migrants reinforce the weight of the African diaspora in the relationships that already exist between the two sides.

### **The weight of African communities residing in Europe and Europeans living in Africa**

The number of people of African heritage in Europe is significant. Modern migration from Africa to Europe grew in the early 20th century with the movement of workers who came mainly from the French colonies of North Africa. It increased through the mobilisation of troops from the Maghreb and Sub-Saharan regions as part of the French efforts in World War Two and further expanded due to the need for workers from the colonies to contribute in the post-war reconstruction of France, among other European countries. The ageing of the European population and the industrial boom witnessed by Europe in the second half of the 20th century explained the growing need for labour from North Africa and Sub-Saharan Africa. In recent years, migration to Europe has intensified through the influx of illegal migrants.

Whether considered a burden on local markets or a safety valve for European countries, migrants from Africa play a substantial role in Europe, whether it be in the political, economic, social, or cultural spheres.



Members of European communities living in Europe who were born in former African colonies or whose parents were natives of former colonies play a key role in maintaining cultural links between African communities on both continents. Europeans that live in African countries also contribute to the economic welfare and cultural life of these countries, albeit through their often elevated social status and privileges.

### **Economic interdependence**

African countries are structurally linked to the European Union through economic fundamentals, whether as raw material suppliers, through trade, or as tourist destinations.

A few facts highlight this interdependence:

- 35.9% of Africa's trade takes place with the EU (European Commission, 2017). Africa's main exports to Europe are fuels (oil and gas), mining products (gold, diamonds, iron-ore, uranium, and platinum), machinery, transport equipment, food products, and textiles (Daoui, n. d.).
- Nigeria, Angola, Libya, and Algeria account for more than 20% of EU oil demand (Kiernan, 2015).
- Algeria is the EU's third biggest supplier of natural gas (12% of the Union's overall gas imports).
- Africa imports most of its food products, heavy equipment, and machinery from the EU.
- In 2015, European companies invested 31 billion euros in African economies and under the provisions of the EU External Investment Plan, the EU will help to attract private investment of up to 44 billion euros for sustainable development across Africa. The total stock of EU direct investment in the continent amounts to 294 billion euros (European Commission, 2017).
- By 2016, African countries were collectively receiving more than 50 million international visitors annually, a large portion of whom came from Europe (UNWTO, 2017).

## **European assistance for African security**

The EU has contributed to 14 Peace Support Operations in 18 different countries in Africa, while its missions have trained 30,000 personnel across the military, police, and judiciary. Between 2013 and 2014, 192,120 people benefited directly from EU-supported programmes for civilian post-conflict peacebuilding and conflict prevention (European Commission, 2017).

These economic parameters show that the EU is Africa's most important partner, even though China has become Africa's single largest bilateral source of infrastructure finance (Ip, 2018). In contrast, the United States has continued its economic withdrawal from Africa since the era of President Bill Clinton, aiming for strategic reorientation towards the Asia-Pacific region. Both Japan, India, and other BRICS countries like Brazil do not have the political credit, economic potential, or cultural connections to challenge the European presence in Africa.

## **Conclusion**

The International Day of Living Together in Peace has come a long way from its origins in civil society – i.e., the foundation set up by Sheikh Bentounes – to the point that it reached the headquarters of the United Nations. The idea blossomed thanks to intense diplomatic effort from Algeria.

It was striking that the resolution approving the day was endorsed unanimously by the General Assembly of the United Nations. No vote against the resolution was cast. Indeed, who would dare to vote or publicly stand against the desire to live together in peace?

Humanity has evolved thanks to utopian ideas. Here again is an idea which seemed hard to achieve in the face of human selfishness and stupidity and the world's shared history of hatred, wars, conflicts, and tensions. However, peoples all around the world can learn how to live together and what's more, how to live together in peace. The ingredients to help

this utopia evolve into a reality can already be found in the multiple dimensions of the Europe-Africa relationship.

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