



Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)



Committee on Trade Policies in the States Members of the Economic
and Social Commission for Western Asia

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Free trade agreements database

Summary

The present document provides an overview of efforts by the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) to collect in one place all free trade agreements implemented by Arab States, and sets out key findings in that regard. It also proposes a way forward to fully encapsulate the entire regional and country landscape of free trade agreements in the Arab Trade Gateway.

The Committee on Trade Policies in the States Members of ESCWA is invited to review the present document and consider the way forward.

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Introduction

1. The Arab region remains the least integrated region worldwide in terms of cross-border trade. In addition to a weak regional trade policy context, information and data related to Arab economic integration are scattered between various regional and international sources, which impedes the work of trade stakeholders, especially during decision-making.
2. To remedy the gap, the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) has developed the Arab Trade Gateway (ATG), which offers access to reliable information and data for an array of trade stakeholders, including government focal points, the private sector, civil society, academia and trade operators. With tools for conducting simulations using verified data, ATG also enables stakeholders to make informed decisions and develop their positions on trade opportunities and challenges. In the long term, ATG aims to enhance regional conversations about trade and its role in regional integration, so as to boost Arab trade performance, achieve economic prosperity, and attain Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets 8.1, 8.2, 8.5 and 8.A.
3. Given that ATG aims to provide its target audiences with useful information on trade in the Arab region, it is important to know what information policymakers or private sector operators need when deciding what countries to target with a product. One key piece of information is whether the country of the policymaker or private sector operator has a free trade agreement (FTA) with the targeted country.
4. ESCWA has collected all FTAs implemented by each Arab State, and visualized the results on a dedicated platform accessible via ATG. In addition to the original text of each FTA, the platform provides a summary of information on FTAs in force at both the regional and national levels, and enables users to see FTAs that each Arab country is implementing and what products qualify for lower duties. The summary also outlines commitments under each pillar of the selected trade agreements, namely trade in goods, trade in services, and competition.

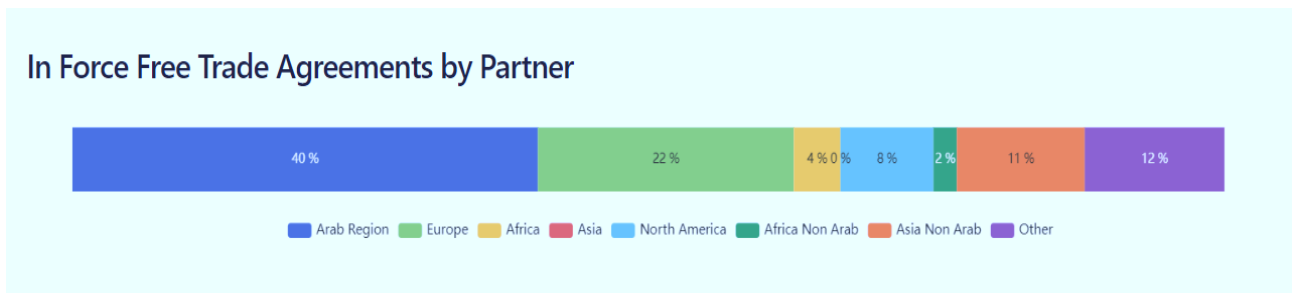
I. Research methodology

5. Through extensive research, ESCWA collected FTAs from various sources, including ministry websites, the World Trade Organization's free trade agreements portal, and the International Trade Conference portal.
6. Subsequently, ESCWA reached out to focal points in each Arab country and was able to acquire verification of the in force Free Trade Agreements from eight countries, namely Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya, Mauritania, Saudi Arabia, the State of Palestine, Qatar, the Sudan and the Syrian Arab Republic. Based on feedback from ESCWA member States, the Arab Trade Agreements Tab was created on ATG, which reflected the verification of member States.

II. Regional summary

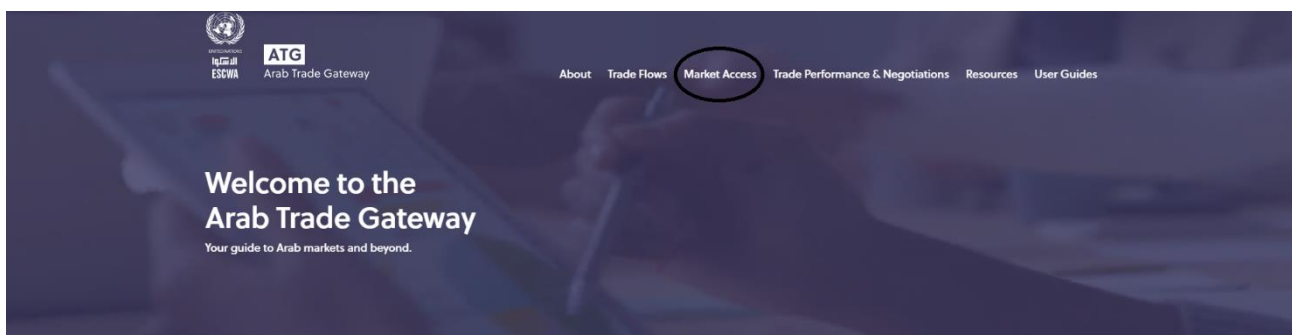
7. The research shows that Arab countries are party to 69 free trade agreements, including 13 countries that are members of the World Trade Organization. Of these 69 agreements, 28 are bilateral and 28 are regional. These agreements are mainly between the Arab region, Europe and non-Arab Asian countries. This conclusion is subject to update based on feedback from all ESCWA member States, in addition to the Comoros and Djibouti.
8. As shown in figure 1, and based on collected FTAs that have been implemented, the research reveals that Arab countries are each other's primary trade partners. Europe is their second trading partner, followed by Africa, Asia, North America and non-Arab Asian countries.

Figure 1. In-force FTAs by partner



III. Navigation and structure of the Tab

9. The Arab Trade Agreements Tab is located in the Market Access segment of the ATG website, and can also be directly accessed at <https://ata.unescwa.org/#>.

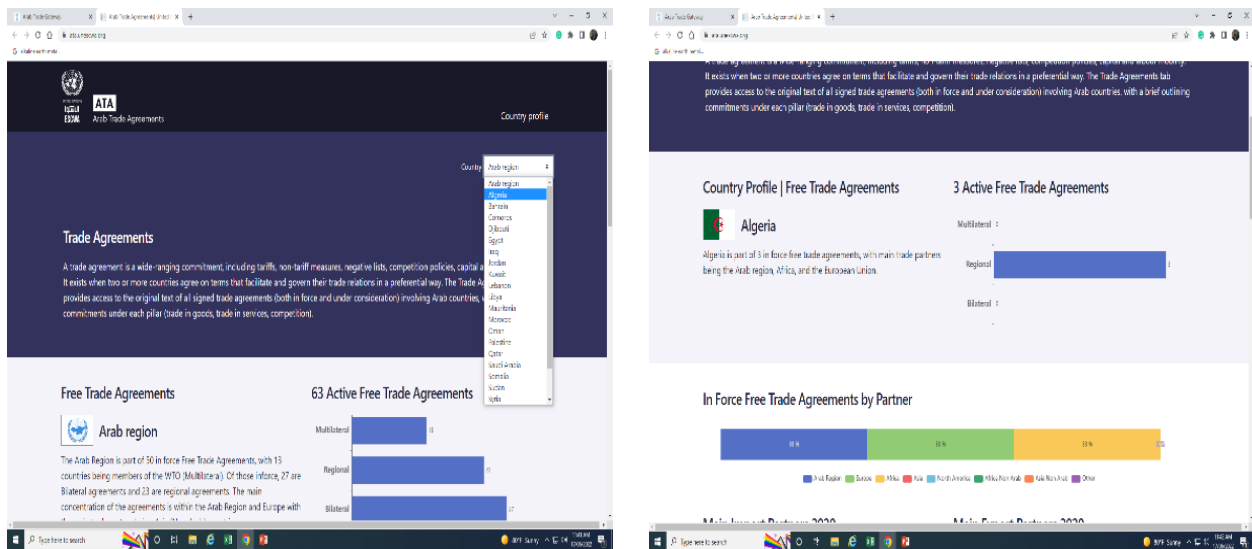


10. The Tab is divided into the following sections: regional overview, in-force FTAs by partner, and agreement briefs. This information is displayed once a user accesses the Tab and scrolls down to view the showcased data.

11. A user can select the button labelled “Country profile” to select a country in the Arab region to examine its in-force FTAs.

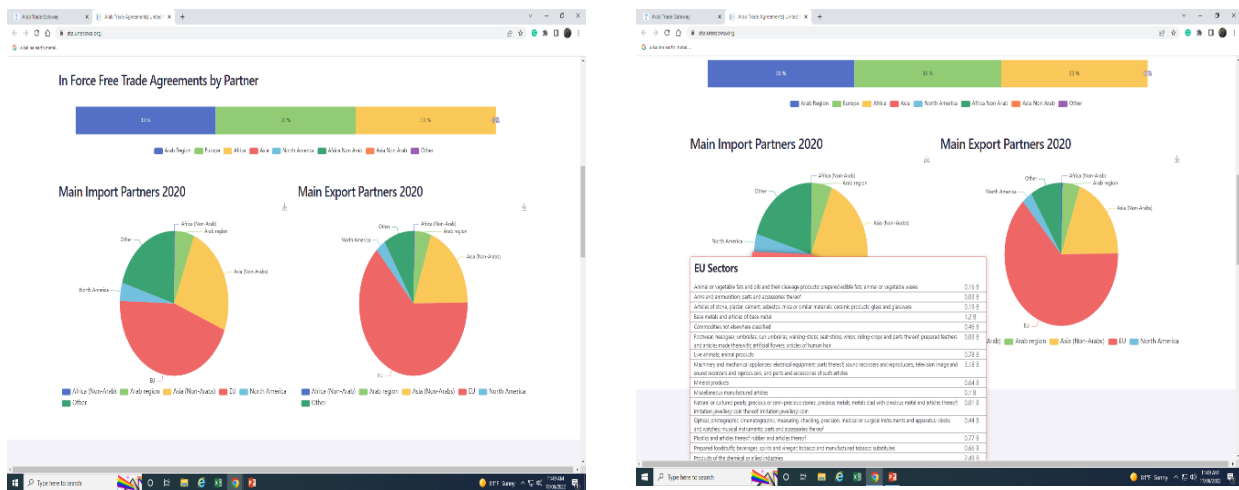
12. Once a country has been selected, a country profile is displayed alongside the listed information mentioned earlier. For example, when selecting Algeria, the user is shown information on the country’s FTAs categorized bilaterally, regionally and multilaterally. This feature is most relevant for countries that have many in-force FTAs. FTAs are also showcased in this manner for the Arab region.

Figure 2. Platform interface design



13. As shown in figure 3, scrolling down provides a general overview of the main regions targeted by FTAs, in addition to the main export and import partners of a given country, in accordance with ESCWA trade flow data. The pie charts are also interactive, where top commodities can be portrayed by hovering over them. This data is reflected from the ATG trade flows platform, covering all imports and exports of a given country beyond the scope of implemented FTAs.

Figure 3. Regions targeted by FTAs of a selected country



14. A list of in-force FTAs is then provided at the end of the page which, when selected, expands into a summary table, as shown in figure 4.

Figure 4. Summary of a selected FTA

Agreements		General Info	
FTA, EC-Algeria		Name of agreement	FTA, EC-Algeria
EC-Algeria Interim Agreement of 1976		Partner country(ies)	European Economic community and Algeria
FTA, EU-Algeria		Major objectives	To promote overall cooperation between the contracting parties with a view to contributing to the economic and social development of Algeria and helping to strengthen relations between the parties.
African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)		Implementation timeline	Inactive since 2005-09-01.
Regional group, League Of Arab States		Provisions by area	
Organization of the Islamic Conferences (OIC)		Component	Availability
Regional group, UMA		Trade in goods - Industrial products - Agricultural products	yes title 2
		Rules of origins	yes null
		Customs matters, trade facilitation, and technical barriers to trade	yes title 2

15. Users can also access the original text of FTAs to review their provisions.

IV. Way forward

16. The aim of the free trade agreements platform is to provide the Arab public, especially the private sector, with continual updated access to reliable information on FTAs, thus enabling a better understanding of the trade landscape when targeting a country with a product. The knowledge contained in this platform is useful to traders who are seeking to access a market facilitated by reduced or eliminated tariffs, intellectual property protection, and elimination of non-tariff barriers, among other provisions. This knowledge also promotes FTA markets to traders who want to give their product or service a competitive advantage over products from other countries.

17. Compiling all FTAs and making them accessible on a single platform facilitates regional monitoring and evaluation of the efficiency of existing FTAs in reducing barriers to exports, and protecting the economic and social interests of member States at the national and regional levels. The platform also provides a regional and country overview of the main export and import partners, in addition to main trade areas.

18. The added value of the Tab would be further enhanced if users could undertake specific word searches to navigate trade agreements. This option is not yet available but could be with further information technology investment in the platform. Through artificial intelligence and other technologies, the Tab has the potential to enable users to make word searches without going through the entire text of an FTA by using optical character recognition (OCR), making it easier to access and read.

19. Since trade flows cover all trade agreements, a repository of all types of trade agreements other than FTAs would also be useful to ensure consistency. Products traded would thus be displayed under the scope of a relevant trade agreement.

20. The compilation of all FTAs in one repository will facilitate more regional analysis in relation on the cost benefit of each agreement at both national and regional levels.

21. The Committee on Trade Policies in the States Members of ESCWA is invited to review the present document and the Arab Trade Gateway, and consider the way forward.
