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Challenges in The Mediterranean region
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Foreword

The Russian attack in Ukraine shook the geopolitical reality in Europe, as well as within the Mediterranean region. This milestone affected all countries in the region—though differently—and will accelerate the next moves of all governments concerned.

From the threat of food shortage in the region to the reactions of several states on the Russian move, including the position of Israel and Turkey as mediators to the unclear future of JCPOA, key measures are needed for states to secure their interests. In the shadow of the war in Ukraine, old rivalries and political structures are shifting. The Mediterranean region’s current situation is shaken by ongoing events, and the dynamics of relations is becoming, more than ever, prone to tensions.
06/02/2022
Tunisian President Kais Saied dissolved Supreme Judicial Council

10/03/2022
Russian and Ukrainian representatives meet for the first high-level meeting since the beginning of the conflict in Antalya

14/03/2022
The U.S. Ambassador and Special Envoy to Libya, Richard Norland, visited Cairo on the 14th of March to discuss Libya’s situation in regard to presidential and parliamentary elections

18/03/2022
Spain published a letter that indicates the switch in the Spain’s Morocco policy

05/03/2022
Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett visited Russia

11/03/2022
Libyan Political Dialogue Forum took place in Geneva

13/03/2022
Tunisians demonstrated against Saied due to an increase in poverty and lack of stable foods, partly affected by the Ukrainian war

15/03/2022
President of Israel, Isaac Herzog, visited Turkey in a historic visit

28/02/2022
Turkey implemented Montreux Convention
“In two-and-a-half-years, which is right around the corner, Iran will be able to develop, install and operate advanced centrifuges. Imagine football stadiums of advanced centrifuges spinning – allowed by this agreement.”
Naftali Bennett, Prime Minister of Israel on the New Iran Nuclear deal February 20th, 2022

A new agreement for the development of Iranian nuclear facilities is on the table and may be reached soon, if not already by the time this article is published (Woodcock 2022). This comes as a dark omen to Israel, harbingering to them the likely Iranian development of nuclear weapons outside the bounds of the deal, thereby emboldening Iranian proxies, sparking a regional nuclear arms race and even a broader conflict in the region (Kaye 2011). This article will cover a brief history of Israeli-Iranian relations with regard to Iranian nuclear ambitions, a summary of the effects of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and its termination, as well as how this new deal may look and Israel's perspective on the matter.

Israel–Iran Brief History

Looking at a geographical or a political map, one could be forgiven for not understanding the animus between Israel and Iran. These countries share no borders nor do they have any overlapping territorial claims. They have no cultural history of antagonism prior to the Iranian Revolution in 1979 and indeed, before then, they enjoyed friendly relations (Kaye 2011). Three main trends, according to the Israeli perspective, soured relations over time to the dismal depths we can observe today: the anti-Jewish rhetoric and sentiment espoused by the Iranian government, the advent of missile technology and the lack of a common enemy in the region – a role most recently played by Saddam Hussein’s Iraq (Kaye 2011). Getting the Israeli policy elite and/or strategic community[1] to fully agree on any subject is a Sisyphean labor, save for the firmly held belief that Iran is the greatest strategic and ideological threat to Israel (Kaye 2011). This shift towards antagonism occurred over the course of the 1980s–1990s and cemented itself with the collapse of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq after the successive American invasions in 1990 and 2001. Israel had aided Iran in the Iran–Iraq war during the 1980’s, as they viewed the Iranian intervention in Iraq as a splintering of Arab opinion and a shift of Arab focus/resources away from Palestine (Parsi 2005). Only a few years after the war ended in 1988, the very same Israeli leaders, Yitzhak Rabin and Shimon Peres, who once touted Iran as a geopolitical ally and had even asked the United States to supply weapons to Iran (see Iran-Contra affair) despite the anti-Israel rhetoric of the Iranian regime (Kaye 2011), shifted their policy 180 degrees in 1992 towards the levels of antagonism we see today. The factors behind this shift include the collapse of the Soviet Union and thereby their decreased footprint in the region (particularly concerning Syria) and the victory of the United States over Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War (Parsi 2005).

When the dust settled, the two remaining players in the region were Israel and Iran, and the latter was believed to be working on nuclear technology and the missile systems capable of delivering them. Suddenly, the anti-Israel rhetoric of the Iranian government, that was once ignored out of strategic convenience, became all the more threatening. An overwhelming Labor victory in the 1992 Israeli elections gave the new government all the political capital that needed to

[1] Term referring to information that comes from interviews with Israeli national security agents collectively understood as "the Israeli strategic community"
reshape policy to match the new strategic era (Kaye 2011). With weakened Arab neighbors and a gutted Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), the official Palestinian political entity against Israeli occupation, policymakers in Tel-Aviv turned their gaze to the periphery - towards Iran (Parsi 2005).

Why do the Israelis distrust Iranian nuclear ambitions?

In a world where bomber ranges and sane logisticians had precluded a conflict between Iran and Israel, new age ballistic missile technologies have brought their borders, in a military sense, closer than ever. This forced a change in Israeli strategic calculations, especially when these missiles are coupled with an ideology that characterizes their country as “the little Satan” at the highest levels of government (Kaye 2011). Israeli analysts consider that, unlike the Soviet Union, Iran could use nuclear weapons less through a lens of pragmatism, shrewd geopolitical calculations or even survival, and more in terms of acting upon their rhetoric and wiping Israel “off the face of the Earth”. Comparisons in the Israeli strategic community of the Iranian regime’s ideology to the horrors of the Holocaust are commonplace (Kaye 2011).

Furthermore, the mere Iranian possession of a nuclear weapon capable of striking Israel shifts the power balance in the region. Iranian proxies, such as Hezbollah, all across the middle east would be empowered to act more aggressively with the threat of Iranian nuclear retaliation hanging over any response deemed too harsh, thus drastically limiting Israeli security options (Kaye 2011). The more radical elements of Arab societies that Iran supports could potentially oust frail and/or moderate Arab governments, turning Israel’s neighborhood into a collection of extremist states/sub state organizations (Parsi 2005) that agree on nothing except that Israel must be destroyed. Equally worth mentioning is that if Iran were to test a nuclear bomb, then Saudi Arabia vows that they would pursue their own nuclear development (BBC 2018), resulting in nuclear proliferation across the region.

It is for these main reasons, among others, that Israel sees Iranian nuclear capabilities as an existential threat to their country.

The JCPOA and its Demise

In August, 2002, the National Council of Iranian Resistance (NCIR), an Iranian opposition group in exile, accused the ruling government of developing nuclear weapons in secret (Gerami 2012). A month later, the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran announced the country’s intentions to further develop their nuclear fuel cycle. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAE) attempted to work with Iran towards returning them to the agreed international standards, and, after some years of back and forth bureaucratic shenanigans, they referred Iran to the United Nations Security Council in early 2006 (Gerami 2012). Iran maintained, and still maintains, that its nuclear research was/is intended for peaceful purposes and that they would not pursue the bomb (Gerami 2012). Israel, by which is meant the elites and the majority (75%) of ordinary citizens (JPost 2013), believes otherwise.

The international community, led by the United States, reacted with increasingly heavy rounds of sanctions in 2006, 2008 and 2010 (Gerami 2012), aimed at bringing Iran to the negotiating table. After 2010, when broad economic sanctions made Iran into a pariah state, the pressure would slowly be eased off as the beginnings of a nuclear deal took shape (Gerami 2012). Israel, sidelined (save for the significant lobby in the U.S) as the United States and Iran negotiated the deal (along with China, France, Germany, Russia, The United Kingdom and the European Union), stood firmly against any deal that would allow Iran any possibility to develop nuclear weapons. In 2015, the JCPOA was agreed upon and put into effect. The overall aim of the complex deal was to lift the sanctions on Iran and give them the ability to develop peaceful nuclear technologies to the point where the international community would have one year to react should they overstep their commitments (Robinson 2021).
The deal began with good intentions, and seemed a promising bid to prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb for up to a decade. Sanctions on Iranian oil were lifted and $100b of assets were unfrozen by European and American financial institutions (Robinson 2021). In 2018, however, the Trump administration withdrew the United States from the deal, citing unspecified evidence presented by Israeli Prime minister at the time, Benjamin Netanyahu (Zurcher 2018).

The following quote comes from U.S President Donald Trump’s speech announcing the U.S withdrawal from the JCPOA: “At the heart of the Iran deal was a giant fiction that a murderous regime desired only a peaceful nuclear energy program. Today, we have definitive proof that this Iranian promise was a lie” (NDTV 2018). This line of thinking directly coincides with that of the Israeli government as spoken by Benjamin Netanyahu before the U.S Congress in 2015: “That deal will not prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons, it will all but guarantee that they will get nuclear weapons” (Myre 2015).

To go beyond mere insinuation that Netanyahu played a key role in convincing the United States to withdraw from the deal, he claimed credit himself on Israeli TV for pushing the U.S President to renege on the Obama era deal (Fulbright 2018). The unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA and the reinstatement of the tight sanctions on the Iranian regime were a foreign policy dream for Israel; and from 2018 to the present, no deal has been reached and the sanctions continue to eviscerate the Iranian economy. To put a number to the economic devastation caused by the sanctions, Iranian GDP in 2017 was valued at $445b and in 2020 a mere $203b (World Bank). That’s a decrease of over 50% of GDP over 3 years. The coronavirus pandemic certainly had some impact in this case, but even in 2018, before the pandemic, Iranian GDP had already slumped to an abysmal $294b (World Bank).

Israel as a Unilateral Actor

This political victory for Israel was not the end of the fight against Iran, however. Israel still occasionally takes unilateral actions where they see fit in order to stall or damage Iranian nuclear research. For example, since 2020, Israel has carried out a number of cyber attacks on Iranian nuclear facilities with the intention of hindering research, damaging dozens of centrifuges and causing 4 explosions in the process (TOI 2021 a). The Mossad even carried out an assassination on top Iranian nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh using an unmanned car and remotely operated machine gun, both of which self destructed afterward (TOI b). While these high profile Mossad actions may be tactically satisfying for Israeli security professionals, the United States has cautioned them that they only steel Iranian resolve to develop nuclear weapons and give them more international support to do so (TOI 2021 a). This warning comes as the U.S claims Iran is dragging its feet in negotiations for a new nuclear deal to buy time to develop their nuclear capabilities (TOI 2021 a).
A New Iran Nuclear Deal?

Exact details of a new agreement are speculation until pen meets paper and the final signatories shake hands. That being said, considering the forces at play can shed some light into an otherwise closed door negotiation. It is important to know that Iranian nuclear development has gone well beyond what was agreed upon in the original JCPOA, considered to be mere weeks away from breakout, reaching the threshold of enriched uranium suitable for an atomic weapon, rather than the one year agreed to in the JCPOA. Also going for Iran is the outbreak of war in Eastern Europe after Russia invaded Ukraine in February, 2022. European countries will now be as desperate as Iran to return Iranian oil exports to the international market, thus strengthening the Iranian hand at the negotiating table in Vienna. The time pressure also cuts in the Iranian’s favor, as U.S officials worry that in the Spring of 2022, Iran will have the capability required to enrich weapons grade uranium within the margin of error of one week (Masterson 2022). Signs point to the deal, if it is reached at all, favoring Iran more than the previous JCPOA, as it should lift the economic sanctions to the relief of the Iranians and the Europeans, and begin nuclear restrictions from a much further developmental point. Israel’s pessimism about the potential new deal is unsurprising, given that they recognize this deal will be more lax than the JCPOA, which they fervently fought against and successfully killed. Israeli Prime minister Naftali Bennet warned that the deal would be weak and the money Iran would make from the export of oil, as well as its unfrozen assets, would “go to terrorism” (Al Jazeera 2022). The Israeli defense chief, Benny Gantz, also states that Iranian aggression has increased in recent times as they approach their nuclear goals and he insists that, regardless of any deal, weekly inspections must continue (Al Jazeera 2022).

Hours before the final agreed upon text could be signed and revealed, Russia made demands that their trade relations with Iran go untouched in the wave of economic sanctions placed upon them over their invasion of Ukraine (Wintour 2022). The talks have been put on indefinite pause in order to deal with these externalities, but it is unclear if or when they will come to any conclusion now. This delay by the Russians gives Iranian nuclear research even more time and will bring them closer to the point where they could theoretically develop enough fissile material for a nuclear weapon within a few given days.

Iranian development of a nuclear weapon now seems inevitable. The question then arises of the second, third or fourth order consequences this development will have on the region and what economic shape Iran will be in at the time. For all of Israel’s efforts to thwart the JCPOA and Iranian nuclear ambitions unilaterally or through the United States or Russia, they will soon have to reconcile with a nuclear Iran capable of striking their homeland with long range ballistic missiles tipped with nuclear warheads. How the Israeli strategic community or the population will deal with this looming reality is yet to be seen, and much will depend on the outcome of this new deal.

Sources


TOI a, & Agencies. (2021, November 22). US warns Israel its attacks on Iran nuclear program are counterproductive – NYT. The Times of Israel. Retrieved March 5, 2022, from https://www.timesofisrael.com/nyt-us-warns-israel-attacks-on-iran-nuclear-program-are-counterproductive/


Women’s rights is suspected to be a universal phenomenon with tenants that are shared by all of humanity. No matter where one lies in the world, having different culture, race, ethnicity or gender, women’s rights are believed to be based on universally agreed upon tenants. Within the Middle Eastern world, in specific, Tunisia is hailed as being the most liberal country in the region, offering women extensive rights (Norbakk, 2016). Ever since the promulgation of its first Personal Status Code in 1956, Tunisia stood out in the Arab world for offering laws that largely resemble Western women’s rights. However, upon further analysis, one sees that the utopian image first brought upon Tunisia is not that simplistic. In order to truly assess whether Tunisia reflects a liberal state with feminist laws, one must analyze the ideological reasoning behind state laws, whether such state laws are even applied in the first place and what are the civilians’ views on women’s rights within Tunisia.

When Tunisia’s first Personal Status Law was promulgated in 1956, it showed relatively “liberal” gender views, comparative to its Arab counterparts (Tchaïcha & Arfaoui, 2012). Arguably, the law and its later changes went against orthodox Islamic religious beliefs. Laws in Tunisia not only came to ban men’s rights to polygamy and repudiation, but also banned women’s right to wear the hijab in public institutions (McMahon, 1999; De Alwis, Mnasri & Ward, 2017). Tunisian law also offered other rights to women, not contradicting Islamic law, such as the right to vote in 1959 and the legalization of contraception and abortion in 1961 and 1973 respectively (McMahon, 1999; Maffi & Affes, 2019). By 1993, Tunisian women were not only allowed to pass their nationality to their children, which was originally only reserved for males, but marriage also became conceived of as a “partnership” whereas joint ownership of marital property was allowed (McMahon, 1999). Lastly, by 1998, Law 75 was promulgated, “allowing children born out of wedlock to be registered under their mothers’ last name” (Hitman, 2018, p.176). It is important to denote that while Tunisian law detracted from orthodox Islamic Sharia, this does not mean that Tunisia is a secular nation; not only does 99% of the Tunisian society follow the Islamic faith, but also the constitution’s preamble stipulates a “commitment to the teachings of Islam” (BBC News, 2017; De Alwis, Mnasri & Ward, 2017, p. 126).

This point helps explain why both Ben Ali and Bourguiba’s regime failed to change inheritance laws, which Islamically provides males twice the inheritance of females, and restricted interfaith marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, which is also against Islamic orthodoxy (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016). Moreover, it explains why Bourguiba utilized Islamic law in his legalization of abortion, which stipulates the legality of abortion as long as 120 days has not elapsed after conception (Maffi & Affes, 2019). Despite these laws, however, it would be a mistake to assume that Tunisian law holistically protected women’s rights. Not only did the Penal Code fail to provide any punishment to spousal rape, but also a legal loophole allowed rapists to marry their victims in order to escape judgement (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016). In fact, the language in the Tunisian constitution itself largely failed to include “women” as a nominal group in their own right (De Alwis, Mnasri & Ward, 2017). The constitution also held some traditional gender role views in which any references made on executive power utilized “masculine language” (De Alwis, Mnasri & Ward, 2017).

Despite having both elements of women empowerment and the lack thereof, Tunisian
Personal Status law remained one of the most liberal among the Arab world. Yet, in order to fully understand the gravity of these laws, one must revisit the reasoning and impetus behind why the Tunisian government came to offer women such rights in the first place. Largely speaking, there are two main perspectives offered by the literature to explain these relatively “liberal” laws in Tunisia. The first perspective claims that the Tunisian code is merely a reflection of true and unadulterated ideological belief by the government in solidifying women’s rights. Evidence of this can be found by Bourguiba’s belief in the development of Tunisia being tied to the development of women’s rights; effectively saying that Tunisia cannot modernize by ignoring the rights of almost half of their population (Mamelouk, 2015). Moreover, President Ben Ali came to claim that the Personal Status Code of Tunisia, in particular, proves his country’s developmental success, as opposed to its Arab counterparts (Mamelouk, 2015). In that same year, Ben Ali introduced the first law against sexual harassment in Tunisia (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016). Lastly, in both regimes, women were highly represented in the parliament, constituting around 25% of seats; they were also offered jobs that are traditionally male-dominated, working in the judiciary as judges, lawyers and law professors (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016).

The second perspective explaining the liberal undertones of the Tunisian code is that of state feminism. State feminism pertains to the state monopolization of feminist ideology in order to both gain external western supporters, effectively using propaganda, and hide authoritarian excesses by silencing opposition (Charrad & Zarrugh, 2014). In other words, instead of a true belief in feminist discourse, the government strategically utilizes feminism in order to achieve favorable political ends; this mechanism is known as “politics from above”, whereas instead of citizens contributing to the formulation of laws and succeeding in shaping policy, it is the government which decrees for society its laws and supplants it “from above” (Charrad & Zarrugh, 2014). Regarding this view, there exists plenty of evidence for such a perspective; for instance, prior to 2011, women’s organizations were harassed by the Tunisian regime, lacked freedom of expression and faced difficulty in media coverage, such as the Association of Tunisian Women for Research and Development (AFTURD) and the Tunisian Association for Democratic Women (AFTD) (Hitman, 2018). This effectively meant that any form of feminism that detracted from the one promulgated by the state faced backlash. Furthermore, despite women holding large portions of seats in parliament, representing the highest number of women in any Arab parliament, their ability to shape governmental policy was marginal. A great indication of this is found by the fact that the first woman to ever hold office in the Tunisian government was only in 1983; this is astonishing considering the fact that women’s political autonomy was legalized since 1959 (Hitman, 2018; McMahon, 1999). This helps show that women held very little decision-making positions. In this regard, one can assume that women’s rights in Tunisia often played cosmetic roles over real emancipatory frameworks. In fact, when Tunisia came to decriminalize abortion, this was not based on an ideological belief in abortion as a woman’s right; rather, abortion was introduced by modernist elites using Malthusian theory, rather than feminists, to promote family planning (Maffi & Affes, 2019).

Lastly, due to gaps in the laws allowing for rapists to marry their victims and lack of stipulations addressing marital rape, a 2010 Study by the National Office of Family and Population revealed that around 47% of Tunisian women were victims of abuse (De Alwis, Mnasri & Ward, 2017). On this basis, the literature often accused the Tunisian government for shaping a liberal personal status code to achieve political ends by creating a false image of democracy, liberalism and progressiveness. Due to the complexity and contradictions arising between religion and
western feminist discourse, Tunisia offers a unique case study on the debate between universalism and cultural relativism when it comes to women's rights. Essentially speaking, universalism, often the preponderant view, pertains that the notion of human rights is based on universally agreed upon tenants, with no general contradictions evident between people of different nations; in other words, human rights are deemed to be objective truths (Debuysere, 2016).

On the other hand, cultural relativism describes how human rights is not objective, but is rather subjective and requires sensitivity to cultural settings; therefore, making human rights not a set of predetermined points, but a corpus subject to change based on time and space (Arfaoui & Moghadam, 2016). In Tunisia, a country with 99% Muslims and having inherited a Muslim–Arab identity, it becomes ironic to see that the laws in place largely come from a secular and Western-liberal background. Due to this apparent contradiction between the nature of the laws and the people, what is found in Tunisia is that despite the fairly liberal and 'empowering' laws for women, society largely rejects them, making the laws lack application on-ground (Maffi & Affes, 2019; Debuysere, 2016).

For instance, despite the legality of abortion in Tunisia, case studies show that medical practitioners have often made it difficult for women to get abortions in public hospitals (Maffi & Affes, 2019). Not only did they hold the view that abortion is not a human right, but they also felt that the act of abortion was morally inhumane (Maffi & Affes, 2019). This makes women suffer from structural barriers in getting abortion, attributing more physical and moral suffering.

In fact, despite a 2010 law reducing the age of majority from 21 to 18, medical practitioners continued to use the older law (Maffi & Affes, 2019). Since Tunisian law criminalizes sexual relations with minors, requiring a criminal investigation identifying the responsible man; utilizing the old law meant more state interference within the process of abortion
In another example, despite having a 2018 law being promulgated decriminalizing inter-faith marriages between Muslim women and non-Muslim men, the practice on ground has shown that notaries regularly refused to marry couples based on personal moral beliefs (The New Indian Express, 2018). For this reason, studies indicate that the introduction of some laws have often reduced, rather than expanded, women’s rights (Maffi & Affes, 2019).

The Tunisian case, thus, comes to show an important phenomena: applying Western-feminist laws, declared as being “universally held norms”, are ineffective if not adjusted to cultural settings. To have a legal framework which seems favorable is a significant accomplishment; but such framework is harmful if lived realities differ from the laws in question.

With these topics in mind, one then begins to question what would truly constitute appropriate, and culturally-sensitive women’s rights laws in Tunisia. In order to fully answer such a question, one must look at the dialogues held within the Tunisian society itself; specifically focusing on those between secular feminists and Islamist feminists. The literature has largely found that the views held by liberal feminists, which played the most impact on Tunisian laws, are allegedly “elitist” and holds onto foreign views on gender relations, mainly derived from French culture (Debuysere, 2016).

Accordingly, their views are not shared by most Tunisian women, who constitute a part of the middle and lower class and are highly embedded in religious tradition (Debuysere, 2016). For this reason, the majority of Tunisian women are not only disenfranchised, but also lack true connection to the laws in place. Furthermore, it was found that secular women organizations were often, themselves, non-inclusive; they tended to include membership for only urban-based members, excluding poorer women who live outside of the capital and hold different views (Charrad & Zarrugh, 2014).

For this reason, Islamist women, part of the moderately conservative Ennahda party, were more relatable to average Tunisian women. In comparison to secular organizations, Islamists were offering more services to women from rural communities, making them more connected to the reality of Tunisian women (Debuysere, 2016). Rather than adopting a strictly secular view, definitively cutting religion from politics, Islamist women utilized their Islamic faith in order to push forward female empowerment. This form of “Islamic feminism” rejected the notion that one needed to abandon faith in order to attain rights (Tchaïcha & Arfaoui, 2012).

Thus, they highlighted a form of feminism which differed from that of the western and was more culturally-appropriate. For instance, while Islamist feminists saw men and women as having differing roles within a family, they believed this didn’t make women inferior to men nor prevented them from participating in the public sphere equal to men (Tchaïcha & Arfaoui, 2012). The leader of Ennahada himself, Rachid Ghannouchi, promised to protect women’s rights (Tchaïcha & Arfaoui, 2012).

In spite of this discourse, secular feminists viewed Islamists with an eye of suspicion due to the Ennahda’s desire to allow polygamy in laws and introduce terminology deeming women “complementary” to men (Debuysere, 2016). For this reason, secular feminists often rejected to engage in any dialogue or compromises with Islamists; it’s believed that this lack of cooperation and dialogue only further alienated women and prevented progress from occurring (Debuysere, 2016). However, despite such attitudes from secularists, Ennahda came to largely drop many of its policy desires; the only law they were able to remove was the ban on the hijab (Hitman, 2018). Ironically, despite the inclusion of Ennahda in post-2011, Tunisia removed all its reservations on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and granted women more seats in parliament, surpassing that of USA, UK and France (Hitman, 2018). This helps to show
an important notion of how Islamist parties may moderate and be willing to compromise in a democratic process.

Despite progressive changes occurring to laws in some nations, it may be asked whether such laws are helpful, considering a disparity exists between the people and the laws. In Tunisia, there is a constant struggle to reconcile both. In 2021, when President Kais Saied appointed the first female prime minister in the Tunisian and Arab world, many wondered whether this change was a repetition of Tunisian state feminism, also known as ‘pinkwashing’, or a true unadulterated belief in women’s rights (Shitrit, Hirsch-Hoefler & Elad-Strenger, 2021). Nevertheless, what can be deciphered from the Tunisian case is the importance of utilizing laws which befit the society in question; thus, showing how cultural relativism may be more effective in securing women’s rights, as opposed to hindering them. This requires individuals holding opposing feminist views to engage in dialogue and consider counter-perspectives in order to effectively portray democratic elements and reach fruitful conclusions; this is a necessary step needed to ensure that lived realities match the state’s legislation required for achieving peace, prosperity and true female emancipation.

Sources


Algeria is going through a critical moment. Peaceful protests against the current system of government have not ceased since 2019. There is a widespread mood calling for a democratic transition and good governance. In the face of this, the system only offers to replace the head of state through elections with no guarantees of freedom and fairness, and without carrying out minimal reforms to satisfy social demands. The struggle between these two positions could intensify as long as there are no channels for dialogue and a search for basic consensus. All this in a context of an economic deterioration accelerated by falling incomes and the paralysis generated by the prolonged political crisis. It is therefore relevant to analyse the political situation in Algeria, since regional stability in the Maghreb and the Western Mediterranean is certainly conditioned by the outcome of the current political conflict in Algeria (Hachemaoui, 2003).

Post-colonial power structure

It would be impossible to understand the composition of Algeria’s political structure and the resources that elites control if we do not begin by explaining the nature of Algeria’s post-colonial society and especially of the Algerian post-colonial state (Hachemaoui, 2003). The type of colonisation that took place in Algeria, unlike in other countries such as Tunisia or Morocco, prevented the formation of any local form of social or cultural cohesion, while destroying the power resources of the pre-colonial elites (agriculture and trade) (Hachemaoui, 2003). This had three consequences:

1) In Algeria, at the time of independence, unlike in other countries, the traditional groups, rural aristocracy and commercial bourgeoisie, have practically disappeared from the struggle for power (Warenfels, 2007).

2) All the groups competing for power in Algeria have similar features, whose common origin dates back to the war of independence and are linked to the armed struggle (1954–1962). Other actors that did not opt for the armed route have been marginalised, such as Messali Hay’s Algerian Nationalist Movement, MNA, the Democratic Union of the Algerian Manifesto, UDMA of Ben Jedda and Ferhat Abbas, and to a lesser extent the Association of Ulemas (Werenfels, 2007).

3) The way in which the war of independence developed led to the third consequence: power fell to the only Algerian entity that during the years of the war of independence became an organised collective, the General Staff of the ALN (Army of National Liberation) (Werenfels, 2007).

The Algerian elite is therefore made up of factions that come from a single group, which emerged in the process of Algerian state formation. These factions correspond to what have come to be called the clans of Algerian power (Hachemaoui, 2003). From this Algerian peculiarity derives the equality and at the same time the rivalry between the strongest factions or clans, since they all use the same credentials, the struggle in the war of independence, to occupy the top echelons of power.

As these factions are also very similar in composition and have the same access to essential resources, a dynamic structure is generated within the primary elite. Its different factional components alternate in the privileged position of command, as if it were a power wheel, the movement of which does not alter the essence of the system (Hachemaoui, 2003).
Consolidation of the newly independent state: legitimation of power

The Algerian regime's main problem was, and has been, to find a way to stay in power, i.e. to find a way to become a legitimate authority. This means, on the one hand, that the aforementioned groups had to respond to the collective aspirations of Algerians, to achieve independence and develop the country, and, on the other hand, they had to show that they were the only ones capable of carrying out this task (Werenfels, 2007).

After independence, the loss of validity of the nationalist discourse and the regime's need to create the illusion of unity led to the promotion of a social project that would give independence a concrete content. This project had at its core another collective aspiration - the country's economic development, and, therefore, the modernisation and progress derived from it (Roberts, 2003). These groups consequently became agents of economic development, but the fact that they defined themselves as such meant, on the one hand, that they had to have the necessary financial resources to carry out this process and, above all, that they presented their option not only as the only possible one, but also as one that only they could carry out. In other words, they had to develop a legitimising, coherent and credible discourse that would justify their occupation of power - both in the eyes of the population and in the eyes of their army peers. This discourse could only be economic, as both the political and ideological sides were easily attacked because all competing groups were equally legitimate (Roberts, 2003).

This task was carried out through an "Algerian social pact" whose architect was Huari Bumedian (1962-1978). Having put an end to the instability of the Ben Bella period (1963-1965), Bumedian consolidated his regime through his charisma and his ability to build a stable political community (Roberts, 2003). To this end, two factors were equally crucial. First, the nationalisation of hydrocarbons in 1971, which provided him with the necessary resources to define his strategy without having to rely on other actors in the country; and second, the articulation, perhaps unique in Algerian history, of an economic discourse consistent with his actions. The instrument chosen to put this social pact into practice was SONATRACH (Roberts, 2003).

During the Bumedian years, the Algerian state's economic policy had two basic objectives: to maximise the financial resources from hydrocarbons, and to use them to finance the massive construction of basic industries (Roberts, 2003). The weakness of this economic programme was that its function was more political than economic and that, as a result, results in terms of legitimacy were more important than results in terms of economic development. The nationalisation of 1971 led to the establishment by the state of barriers to entry for foreign companies, with the state itself, as the representative of the Algerian nation, becoming the owner of SONATRACH (Roberts, 2003).

As a result, the volume of state revenue was substantially increased by receiving the profits obtained by this company and collecting the taxation associated with oil activities. National ownership of hydrocarbons made it possible for the state to carry out a major centralised spending or investment policy. SONATRACH was defined as the "instrument of public intervention". In fact, it is the control over the instrument of public intervention, i.e. the exploitation of the hydrocarbon sector, that would confer centrality and autonomy to the primary elite (Roberts, 2003).

The distributive function of the industrial enterprises was linked to the oil revenues, as they remunerated the factors of production, the working and wage-earning population, and distributed, thanks to the import monopoly, goods acquired abroad which the private sector marketed (Roberts, 2003). This allowed for the gradual, but unforeseen, enrichment of the private sector. This situation lasted until the mid-1980s, under the presidency of Chadli Benyedid, when the sharp drop in oil prices hit
the Algerian economy hard, calling into question the social pact and initiating the first rotation in the positions of the primary elites and the displacement of certain factions from the centre to the periphery (Roberts, 2003).

The elites

The uniqueness of the Algerian case is that its most powerful elites emerged with the creation of the independent state, adopting a dynamic primary elite structure. Algeria is not distinguished from other Arab countries by the centrality of the state in its political development (Hachemaoui, 2003). In Algeria, there are practically no elites outside the state, and they are all the more dependent on the state because of the existence of a single source of financial resources, namely hydrocarbon exploitation.

With these considerations in mind, Algeria’s elites can be classified into four main groups:

1) State elites: senior officials of the coercive apparatus (armed forces and secret services), SONATRACH managers, some politicians and senior officials especially from the finance or energy sector (technocrats) and from the diplomatic career. This “great revolutionary family” also includes the parastatal associations of former fighters (Shuhada and Mujahedin) (Werenfels, 2007).

2) Commercial elites, the Tlemcenian and Constantinian bourgeoisie and the “new bourgeoisie” of Algiers and other regions, especially in the import sector, necessarily with ties to the state apparatus (Werenfels, 2007).

3) Elites that emerged from the industrialisation process, industrialists, made up of managers of national societies, leaders of mass organisations, professionals and the intelligentsia (Werenfels, 2007).

4) Local elites, especially from the rural world, walis or governors, rural or urban mafias, armed groups engaged in extortion or smuggling, qaids or tribal notables and some religious authorities, sheikhs of brotherhoods or tariqas (Werenfels, 2007).

The profile of the central primary elites in Algeria showed that until 1990 these elites had one of the following backgrounds: military career, diplomacy or technocracy, especially those specialising in the financial or technical management of hydrocarbons (Bustos, 2004). Indeed, the hard core or central alliance of Algerian elites has traditionally been made up of sectors of the coercive apparatus (army and secret services), technocrats and senior officials with foreign service experience.

Referring to the commercial bourgeoisie, it includes a few business families that historically made a successful transition from the colonial period to independence, and have been integrated into these primary elites (Liabes, 1982). Some had built up considerable businesses under French rule, others were careerists who took advantage of the colonists’ departure to take over their businesses, goods and business infrastructure at knock-down prices. Both had the ability to preserve and legitimise their activities under socialist regimes, thanks in large part to family alliances with military and civilian power circles (Liabes, 1982).

Other secondary elites are industrialist groups and local elites, mainly of a rural nature. Urban or industrialist elites, mainly concentrated in public sector services, which have been growing steadily since independence throughout the Arab world (Ayubi, 1988), are also linked to the state, because of their dependence on distributed resources. This group includes both the “white collars” employed in public services, the working class that emerged in the heat of industrialisation, and professionals in various fields, such as teachers, professors, journalists, doctors, engineers and lawyers. It is important to bear in mind that, in this socialist country, the working and peasant class was never properly represented in the political structures of the state, contrary to what the official discourse proclaimed (Leca and Vatin, 1979). Thus, the UGTA trade union was always dominated by
white collars” and continues to be so today, while the leadership of the FLN never managed to incorporate significant percentages of workers and peasants (Ayubi, 1988).

Finally, among the local elites, we find the figure of the wali, the decentralised link in the state administration, in reality a delegate of the central government in the region with broad executive powers. The wali or governor is appointed by the president and is often a military officer. In addition, there are social authority figures such as the qaid (notable or tribal chief) and the sheikh or head of the local religious brotherhood or tariqa. But these terms can be misleading if they are interpreted as a strict continuation of traditional society (Werenfels, 2007). Such figures have survived with functions and natures totally modified from the original ones, and with an authority exercised over a society transmuted by the cumulative effect of colonisation, socialism and emigration (Werenfels, 2007).

Perhaps the element that has most modified these local power relations in recent years has been the emergence of violence, a long-lasting phenomenon that erupts and affects mainly the rural world. Not only does it affect the distribution of coercive resources in society (creation of Local Defence Groups, LDUs), but it also alters the role of popular or Marabout Islam, privileged by the regime as an ally in its fight against Islamist armed groups (Hamladji, 2002).

This phenomenon of violence, intertwined with the predatory economy, will affect the future elite structure in Algeria. Indeed, the emergence of new armed groups since 1990 or the expansion of the informal economy, economic precariousness and smuggling change the distribution of resources (Hamladji, 2002). In turn, the internal conflict accelerated the privatisation of Algeria’s large public sector, which began with the opening of the hydrocarbon sector to international companies, and was then reinforced by a structural adjustment plan (1994-1999) under the auspices of the International Monetary Fund, whose deregulatory orientations have continued to the present day (Hamladji, 2002).

The Hirak movement

All the abovementioned political structure led to massive discontent among Algerian society. The so-called peaceful Hirak protest movement, which had begun in 2019 to call for radical political change in Algeria, has been active ever since, although protests ceased in March 2019 due to restrictive measures imposed by COVID-19. The authorities used COVID-19 to justify increased arrests of activists, journalists and bloggers for criticising them online, and prosecuted many of those arrested under the Penal Code (Amnesty International, 2022).

A new constitution was approved by referendum in November 2019, although turnout was very low due to controversies over the process. The Constitution improved the way it reflected women’s rights and social and economic rights but retained the death penalty and failed to meet international standards on freedom of expression and assembly and judicial independence (Amnesty International, 2022).

On 20 January 2022, the Algerian Council of State ordered the temporary suspension of the Socialist Workers’ Party, forcing it to cease all activities and close its premises. The decision was based on Law No. 12-04 on Political Parties, which gives the Ministry of the Interior broad powers allowing it to request that the state dissolve political parties that fail to comply with their legal obligations (Amnesty International, 2022).

Since the Hirak movement began, the authorities have arrested, prosecuted and detained hundreds of peaceful protestors and activists expressing their views online and offline. On 13 October 2021, the authorities closed down a well-known civil society organisation, the Youth Action Group, on trumped-up charges of carrying out activities inconsistent with its status (Amnesty International, 2022).

Algeria’s political structure therefore faces a number of challenges in the coming years, including religious violence in rural areas, the country’s poor economic situation given its heavy
dependence on hydrocarbons, the loss of key independence figures such as Bouteflika and thus his legitimacy in power, as well as geopolitical rivalry with Morocco. Only with time will we be able to see how these elites evolve in order to maintain their hold on power.

Sources


The Russian Repercussion: The Ripples of the Russia–Ukraine Conflict in MENA

Zofia Kostrzewa

With the conflict between Russia and Ukraine continuing for over a month and leading to devastating consequences, it has often been described as a harbinger of a ‘third world war’ (Stephens, 2022). This is unsurprising, given the conflict’s propensity to draw in European and international players, who have in turn pulled in political favors, and consequently disrupted the world’s economy and global value chains. Altogether, implications of the conflict are felt globally, but also in the regional neighborhood of the conflict, such as the Middle East. This article precisely aims to explore these implications. More specifically, it aims to examine the political affiliations that have come to the fore as a result of the conflict, as well as the dynamics of energy and food security that played a prominent role.

The Political Seesaw – Between Russia and the West

Without a decisive winner in the Russia-Ukraine conflict, most leaders in the Middle East are not hedging their bets just yet. While some countries have declared themselves to be either pro-Russian or pro-Ukraine, the majority of the countries fall within two other camps, namely, ‘fence-sitters’ and ‘mediators’ (Joja et al, 2022).

Starting with the pro-Russia camp, the only country that has openly expressed its support for the invasion is Syria. This is not surprising, given Russia’s involvement in the Syrian conflict and the tremendous amount of support it offered the Assad regime (Petkova, 2020). Not only did Bashar Al Assad recognize the independence of the two breakaway separatist regions before the invasion, but the Syrian leadership has expressed readiness to join Russia’s fight (Joja et al, 2022). Currently, there is talk of 16,000–40,000 Syrian volunteer fighters being deployed to Ukraine (Faulconbridge, 2022; France24, 2022a).

On the other end of the spectrum are Lebanon and Kuwait, the only two countries in the region that have strongly condemned Russia’s actions. While Lebanon did so through a statement (Reuters, 2022), Kuwait was the only Arab country to co-sponsor a United Nations Security Council (UNSC) resolution condemning Russia’s aggression (Joja et al, 2022). The motivations of the two countries for support of territorial sovereignty also come as no surprise given the two countries’ past experience with invasions by Syria and Israel, and Iraq respectively.

However, aside from the above countries, other nations in the Middle East, such as the majority of the Gulf, have chosen to appear as neutral parties in the context of taking sides in the conflict as a way to please both the Western world and Russia. The current strategy taken by members of the Gulf Cooperation Council has been to lay low and “follow with concern the developments of the current events in Ukraine, and affirm their support for all efforts aimed at resolving the crisis through dialogue and diplomacy” (Joja et al, 2022). Many Gulf countries such as Bahrain, Qatar and Oman were satisfied by this statement, and their involvement has been limited to occasional phone calls with Russia that have called for diplomatic solutions and highlighted the need to provide humanitarian aid to Ukrainian civilians (Ebrahim, 2022; Hamad, 2022; Middle East Eye, 2022).

However, the two big players, namely, Saudi Arabia and UAE, have played a more complicated balancing act. Overall, the two countries are long-standing Western allies. However, the last few years have been marked by a pivot of the United States away from the region, and a subsequent search by Middle Eastern countries for other (new) allies, a
process which included Russia (Cafiero, 2022a). For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, this relationship has been primarily driven by energy and financial interests (Schaer, 2022). However, most recently the conviction that the US can be relied upon as a security defender in the region has also been called into question, as its reaction to the Houthi rebel attack in the UAE was not as strong as Riyad and Abu Dhabi had expected (Schaer, 2022).

This grievance clearly played a role in the UAE’s stance on Russia at the start of the conflict. The UAE, currently a non-permanent member of the UNSC, abstained twice (February 25 and 27) on the resolution condemning Russian aggression, and announced on February 28 that its foreign minister would meet with Russia to “discuss expanding relations between the two countries” (Schaer, 2022). This meeting did indeed take place on March 17th, when the two parties pledged to work together on energy security (Kerr, 2022). Furthermore, the UAE, a major financial hub for Russia has yet to follow the West in imposing banking sanctions, thereby greatly limiting their effect (Schaer, 2022).

Similarly, Saudi Arabia has been reluctant to assuage Western worries over rising oil prices. As the de facto leader of the OPEC+, of which Russia is a member, Riyad has so far been refusing to increase oil production. The 2020 price war with Russia is certainly playing a big factor in this decision, as it showed Saudi Arabia that cooperation with Russia is key to industry stability. However, another crucial facet of this decision is the frosty relationship between the country and the United States ever since President Joe Biden took office. Biden had refused to talk to Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) due to Saudi Arabia’s human rights abuses, particularly the murder of journalist Jamal Khassoggi (Jacinto, 2021). However, now with the tables turned, it is MBS who is refusing to pick up calls from President Biden (GZERO Media, 2022; Holleis and Knipp, 2022). Other leaders like Boris Johnson have also tried their luck at convincing MBS to raise production, however, the Saudi Arabian government has been firm in its decision (Al-Atrush, 2022).

Nevertheless, it seems that in the last couple of weeks both countries have borne increasing pressure from their Western allies, and have been repeatedly called upon to take a stronger stance on Russia. On March 2, all Middle Eastern countries except for Syria voted in favor of a resolution at the UN General Assembly that called for an immediate end to Russia’s military operations in Ukraine (United Nations, 2022; Schaer, 2022).

Though this is merely a political move without any economic implications or changes in policy, it illustrates that the balancing act of many Middle Eastern countries in regard to these two conflicting allies will become increasingly more difficult as the conflict continues. Their decisions are crucial for their continuing relations with Russia and/or the West, as both are closely watching the side taken by their Middle Eastern allies (Cafiero, 2022).

Looking beyond the countries belonging to the Arab league, two other big players with a lot at stake in this conflict are Turkey and Israel. Like their neighbors from the Gulf, they have also tried to maintain a careful balancing act between their allies. However, both Turkey and Israel have decided to take things one step further and offer their services as mediators (Federman, 2022). On the one hand, in their individual reactions, both countries condemned Russia’s actions as a “serious violation of international order” by Israel (Middle East Eye, 2022) and “unacceptable” by Turkey (Mankoff, 2022). On the other hand, Israel declined to co-sponsor the February 25 UNSC resolution condemning Russia’s invasion (Silverstein, 2022), and Turkey abstained from a Council of Europe vote on Russia’s abstention (Gardner, 2022), implemented the Montreux Convention and sent military aid to Ukraine.

[2] Yemen’s Iran-aligned Houthi rebels have launched several drone and missile attacks on the UAE in January 2022 (Aljazeera, 2022).
This compromising nature, combined with the country's ties with both Russia and the West have positioned them well for the role of mediator. For instance, on March 10 Turkey successfully facilitated the first high-level meeting between Russia and Ukraine (Tavsan, 2022). For a while, however, it seemed that Turkey was competing with Israel for the position of the mediator, as Israel was described as a key mediator between Russia and Ukraine in the last two weeks (Federman, 2022; Zilber, 2022). President Bennett of Israel is one of the few leaders who regularly speaks to both sides (Federman, 2002). Despite this, in recent days, Israel has been trying to downplay its involvement (Caspit, 2022), while Turkey's role has been growing (Federman, 2002). Overall, there is no evidence as to the coordination of these mediation efforts (Lipin, 2022).

The reason why these two countries emerged as mediators is perhaps that the perceived stakes for them are higher than for other countries in the region. Turkey has developed close relations with both Ukraine and Russia, and its position as a NATO member conflicts with its economic and security interests with Russia. As a result, having to choose either side carries great implications, and the ideal scenario is a diplomatic solution in which a relationship can be preserved with both sides (Farooq, 2022). For Israel, the conflict touches upon two core tenets of the Israeli state: preserving the ability to hold back Iran (in Syria), and protecting the Jewish community (which is quite large in Ukraine). However, these two fundamental objectives have to also be counterbalanced with Israel's identity as a key ally of the West in the Middle East (Zilber, 2022). This combined with the undeniable parallels of the occupation, have forced Israel to dial down its mediation role (Al-Sharif, 2022).

In this discussion, it is important to note that the effects of the conflict are not just limited to political alliances, as Russian power in the region could in the long run bring considerable implications for general peace and security. Despite not wanting to be involved in the conflict, for some countries it might be an unavoidable decision. For Israel and Jordan, Russia's presence and influence over Syria plays a key role, with Israel particularly depending on Russia's goodwill to be able to “maintain operational freedom over Syria's skies” (Gardner, 2022), and be able to contain Iran's influence there (Schaer, 2022). The political peace processes in the region, such as the Syrian or Libyan talks, also greatly depend on Russian and Western cooperation (Middle East Eye, 2022; Baladi, 2022). The true short and long-term effects of this conflict will only become apparent during the renewed peace talks on Syria in Geneva from March 21 (Middle East Monitor, 2022). Furthermore, some even speculate that Russia may attempt to exert pressure on Europe by manufacturing a refugee crisis in Libya (Holleis and Knipp, 2022), or in Turkey (Keinon, 2022). Such a threat becomes even more credible considering Libya's strong support for Ukraine's territorial sovereignty (Al-Kassim and The Media Line, 2022).

Adding Fuel to the Food Crisis

While some leaders are trying to tread a careful line between Washington and Moscow, others are scurrying to find solutions to the fast approaching food scarcity in their countries. Ukraine, commonly referred to as the "breadbasket of Europe", and Russia are responsible for more than 25% of the global export of wheat, and almost 70% of global sunflower oil production (Sabaghi, 2022; Vesoulis, 2022). This is particularly problematic for MENA countries, as for many, bread constitutes a majority of the calories consumed by the population (Cheeseman, 2022). For instance, Egypt is the biggest wheat importer in the world, with 80% of its imports coming from Ukraine and Russia, with it also importing 73% of its sunflower oil from Russia (Muscella, 2022; Mohammad, 2022). Egypt heavily subsidizes its bread, and the rising prices of food have already cost the budget around 12-15 million (Saied, 2022). Even though Egypt has enough reserves for around 9 months, rising prices are likely to cost the budget more as shortages persist (Mabrouk, 2022). Given this reliance on good relations with Russia on the one hand, and
pressure from its Western allies on the other, Egypt has condemned Russia politically, but then very quickly called Putin to explain its position (Saied, 2022). The Maghreb countries Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia are in a slightly different position. Though their imports do not primarily come from Russia, the global rise in prices combined with the ensuring competition over remaining supplies will also further exacerbate their food insecurity (Serrano, 2022). However, some countries like Morocco, have the opportunity to gain in this crisis. With the largest phosphates reserves in the world (the main ingredient in fertilizer, which is not also in short supply) the country may be critical to food security in the region and worldwide (Klomegah, 2022).

On the other end of the regional spectrum, Lebanon is in a much dire situation. Like Egypt, it imports 90% of its wheat and oil from Ukraine. Unlike Egypt, it only has 1 month of reserves, and with the main grain silos destroyed in the 2020 Beirut port explosion, these reserves are difficult to replenish sustainably (Cheeseman, 2022). As a result, bread rationing has already begun (Muscella, 2022), and other government actions do not call for much optimism: only on 14 March did the government begin a cash transfer to extremely poor households, and fears are mounting over whether the government can continue to subsidize wheat (Human Rights Watch, 2022). It is furthermore important to note that “two million Lebanese, on top of one million Syrian and Palestinian refugees, are already suffering from food shortages” (Muscella, 2022). This fate has also touched Syrians living in Syria, and Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Jordan, where wheat rationing is also taking place (Muscella, 2022; Cheeseman, 2022).

Further on the list is Yemen, where famine-like conditions are returning for the first time in two years (Cheeseman, 2022). In Yemen, the home of the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, already before the Russia-Ukraine conflict more than half of the population faced food insecurity (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The current conflict is likely to exacerbate this issue further, as Yemen
imports almost half of its wheat from the region (which is scrambling to meet its own demands). As a final note, Yemen has also been affected by rising fuel prices, which has worked to worsen the financial status of many already struggling to balance other mounting expenses (Cheeseman, 2022).

Importantly, it is not only wheat and oil that will be in short supply. Ukraine is also a big exporter of corn, barley, poultry and rapeseed oil (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The decrease in grain on the global market can have “secondary impacts on poultry and pig feedstock” (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Furthermore, there is unfortunately also a time clock on the food crisis: if Ukrainian farmers do not plant before July, there may not be much to harvest next season, which will only magnify the issues outlined above (Sabaghi, 2022). As a final point on this issue, it is important to note that food insecurity is a driving factor in social unrest, and its protraction could have further effects on social stability (Ebrahim, 2022).

Another socio-economic impact that is interesting to note in regard to the conflict’s effect on the MENA region regards energy markets. The dynamics of energy politics have already been examined in the previous section. However, this discussion would not be complete without a further -brief- mention of some of the potential effects of these disruptions.

For one, the declared neutrality of Saudi Arabia and other oil-producing states has kept prices of oil at the steep price of $100+ per barrel, prices not seen since the oil crisis of 2014 (Lawati, 2022). This can be a win for the Gulf oil exporters, who can benefit from higher revenues (Joja et al, 2022). However, other countries in the region will suffer as a result. This can be seen particularly clearly in Lebanon and Yemen, where the local currencies are facing a “compounding and severe deterioration to their value” and fuel lines that span for days (Cheeseman, 2022). Though oil may be a problem, gas could provide an opportunity for new countries to become suppliers to Europe. Several options exist in this regard, such as reviving the East-Med pipeline carrying Eastern Mediterranean gas from Israel through Cyprus and Greece to Italy or increasing supplies via the Trans-Mediterranean pipeline that connects Italy to Algeria via Tunisia (Macaron, 2022). However, given that the former would need around 5 years to become operational (Geropoulos, 2022) and that the latter may not have enough supplies (Holleis and Schwikowski, 2022), it remains to be seen how Europe’s energy demand reshapes Mediterranean pipelines.

**Conclusion**

It is clear that the conflict is and will have profound effects on the MENA region in the short- and long-term. The conflict has brought to the fore rising tensions between the West and the Rest and reignited old dynamics of the Cold War where countries declared themselves behind either pole. In the Middle East, the balancing act that is attempted by most countries has highlighted waning Western influence, and the foothold that Russia managed to create for itself there through the last years of its military and economic relations. As this piece has shown, the dynamics of energy and food security have often been front and center in the decision making of MENA leaders. Taken altogether, it is clear that in the long-term the conflict will not only force leaders to declare themselves more decisively on either side, but will also have far-reaching implications on the balance of power within the region.

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The Syrian conflict is not only the world’s bloodiest conflict today, but it is also one of the most complex conflicts in the world. The Syrian conflict is an ongoing multi-sided civil war that began during the Arab spring in 2011, as peaceful demonstrations by the Syrian people started against the country’s president, Bashar-al-Assad. (CNN, n.d.). Since then, it has escalated into violent confrontations between various domestic rebel groups (Free Syrian Army) and foreign allies against Bashar-al-Assad and Assad’s various domestic and foreign allies. The conflict has resulted in the shattering of millions of Syrian lives, destroying their cities, straining global politics, and stimulating diplomatic efforts that are being questioned as the world witnessed the horrors of the ongoing warfare in Syria (BBCa, 2021). Because of the ongoing civil war turned into a proxy war in Syria, the country is deeply divided into four main factions / small groups: Assad’s forces, Assad’s opposition groups (mainly Free Syrian Army, which is considered as a rebel group formed by local protestors and defectors from the military with the sole purpose of ending the Assad’s regime), Islamic State (ISIS), a terrorist organization, and Kurdish forces (BBCb, 2021). In addition to this, many global and regional powers are meddling in the situation and adding fuel to it including the United States, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. They all have their own interests using Syria as a battlefield for their proxies against one another (Saima Gul & Khan, 2020). But Syria becoming a pawn for global powers who hold high the slogan of Responsibility to Protect has made Syria a hub of humanitarian crisis.

Root Causes of the Syrian Conflict

The roots of the initial civil war in Syria lie in the lack of political freedoms and an inhumane crackdown on the protestors at the hands of the monarchic government of Assad. In addition to this, even global warming is said to have played a significant role (Al Jazeera, 2018). Severe drought plagued Syria from 2007–to 2010, causing as many as 1.5 million people to migrate to cities, exacerbating the poverty and worsening social unrest, which is said to have played a role in sparking the 2011 uprisings that find their origins in Arab Spring (Al Jazeera, 2018). Arab Spring is a series of pro-democracy uprisings that enveloped several Muslim countries starting from Tunisia followed by Egypt, Morocco, Syria, Libya, and Bahrain (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). These uprisings ultimately resulted in a change of regime in some of the countries including Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, showing the way forward for the rest of the countries (Council on Foreign Relations, 2020). The political and social impacts of these popular uprisings remain significant today, years after many of them ended.

From Protests to Civil War to a Proxy War: Politicisation of the Conflict

These successful uprisings of 2011 gave hope to the Syrian pro-democracy activists who raised their voice against the oppressive regime so as to protect their interests. By the 15th of March 2011, peaceful protests erupted in Syria after 15 students were detained and tortured for painting revolutionary slogans on the wall of a school in favor of the Arab Spring (Laub, 2021). One of the boys, a 13-year-old, was tortured to death, which sparked riots throughout the country with the sole purpose of putting an end to the oppressive regime (Laub, 2021). The Syrian government, led by president Bashar-al-Assad, responded to the riots by ordering security forces to open fire on the protestors, resulting in the deaths of hundreds and the imprisonment of many more (Laub, 2021). Bashar-al-Assad was afraid that
this could change and end his regime, so in order to sustain his power and to continue his rule, he used force against his own people.

In response to these brutal and oppressive actions by the government; along with protestors, some of the defectors from the military announced the formation of the Free Syrian Army, a rebel group aspiring to stop the government oppression and overthrow the regime. This was the time when Syria slid into full-scale civil war. Opposition groups were forced to take up arms against the government’s oppressive regime, firstly, to defend themselves and later to expel the forces from the cities to take control of the cities, towns, and countryside to provide them with a safe haven. Fighting reached the capital Damascus and the second city of Aleppo by 2012. (BBCc, 2016) In 2011, the Syrian conflict was all about a civil war between the pro-democracy activists and the Assad regime. The conflict now is not just a battle between those for or against Assad, having acquired sectarian overtones, pitting the country’s Sunni majority against the President belonging to the Shia Alawite sect (CFR, n.d.). Consequently, Syria has for more than a decade been a pawn in the hands of regional and world powers. The rise of jihadist groups Islamic State (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda have furthered the complexity of the conflict and its repercussions particularly in the form of humanitarian crises (BBCd, 2016).

Humanitarian Interventions

Ironically, the parties of the conflict which transformed the Syrian revolution into a proxy war and caused the humanitarian catastrophe equally support amending the damage caused to humanity. For instance, the United States of America, one of the key opponents of Assad, has provided more than 11.3 billion dollars since 2012. But since then the aid has been politicized because the Biden government recently issued a report stating how 600 million dollars of assistance is being hampered through visa and administrative restrictions. Similarly, Russia has also used the platform of humanitarian support to pursue a political agenda by often using its
veto power to shut the United Nations supply corridor to Syria. At the same time, it is noteworthy that several sub-branches working under the United Nations, UNHCR, UNDP have worked vigorously to assist the displaced Syrians. A prominent example is Zaatari Camp, the second-largest refugee camp. Currently, the Zaatari Camp accommodates 80,000 Syrians, with 32 schools, 8 medical clinics, and 58 community centers (Operational Data Portal, 2021). Nonetheless, these humanitarian efforts have not been able to ease the perils of Syrians to a greater extent.

Contemporary Humanitarian Crisis

An epic depiction of the humanitarian crises was photographed by a Turk, Mehmet Aslan, showing a glimpse of human loss and suffering when Munzir El Nezzel who lost his leg due to a bomb attack in Syria was clicked holding his limbless son, Mustafa (BBC, 2022). Mustafa was born without limbs because his mother took medicine to neutralize the effects of nerve gas – something common in Syria for a decade now (BBC, 2022). Although the family is lucky enough to start a new life in Italy after a long struggle, not every Syrian is lucky enough. There are several untold stories of Syrian refugees hoping to survive the horrors; 6.6 million fled to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and even across the continent (UNHCR, 2021a). Among all the states accommodating refugees, Turkey has the largest, approximately more than 3 million (UNHCR, 2021b). At the same time, one cannot forget the misery of the internally displaced Syrians who were forced to flee; according to the United Nations Refugee Agency, 6.7 million individuals are internally displaced (UNHCRc, 2021).

Furthermore, 13 million Syrians are in need of humanitarian assistance, while half of the 13 million require urgent care (UNHCR, n.d.). Along with this, 80% of the Syrian population lives below the poverty line and struggles to get access to basic human needs with less than $1.90 per day (World Vision, 2021). Similarly, the plight of living children is another consequence of the Syrian war, the internationalized Syrian conflict has caused 2.4 million children to drop out of school; and 1.6 million are on the verge of dropping out (UNHCR, n.d.). Moreover, children are driven into a number of threats ranging from malnutrition, child labor, child marriage, and abuse to no access to education. The entire basic routine required for a normal individual has been disrupted by the proxy wars played on Syrian terrain; schools, hospitals, utilities, water and electricity hubs, markets, and even historic places are all debris now. Adding to the already deteriorating situation, the Covid-19 pandemic has increased the suffering by bringing a minimum of 1.1 IDPs (internally displaced persons) and refugees abroad into poverty (World Bank, 2021).

Conclusively, Syria has been a playground for big powers for 11 years and is suffering from a grave humanitarian situation. This evolution from protests for freedom and democracy to Assad’s use of chemical weapons and the recent rise to power by the Islamic State evident through its prison attacks in northern Syria and the statistics mentioned above – all indicate a further rise in humanitarian crisis.

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In order to fulfill their commitment to the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, countries were encouraged by the council to develop their own Women, Peace and Security National Action Plans (NAPs) to ensure that the 1325 resolution is being implemented nationally and that women are taking advantage of its entitlements at every possible level. In this sense, the importance of the 1325 resolution lies in the fact that this resolution was the first of its kind to link women to the peace and security agenda, as it acknowledges that women are disproportionately affected by conflict, and it calls for women’s active participation at all levels of decision-making in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peace processes, post-conflict peacebuilding and governance. It also calls for effective protection of women from sexual and gender-based violence in conflict settings, the mainstreaming of gender perspectives in all aspects of peace operations, and the promotion of women’s rights and gender equality (UNSC, 2000). That is why it seems very important for each country to create its own NAP.

A NAP is a national-level strategy document that outlines the government’s approach and course of action for localizing action on the Women, Peace and Security Agenda (Peace Woman, 2022). Moreover, it shows how states prioritise different aspects of the WPS agenda and provide information on how the WPS activities are governed, funded, and monitored (LSE Women, peace and security centre, 2019). A NAP is not the only opportunity for engagement in this context, it comes among many other options, such as shadow reports, consultations, workshops, etc. However, this brief will focus exclusively on exploring the status of WPS NAPs across the Mediterranean region, the area of interest in this publication, in terms of their actual progress. Collected data has shown that different Mediterranean countries involved in such international commitment can be classified into three categories: countries that possess well-developed NAPs, countries still in the process of developing or implementing NAPs, and countries with no action plans at all.

Section One: Countries that Possess Well-Developed NAPs

**Jordan** (PeaceWomen, 2022)
- The NAP was developed by the Jordanian National Commission for Women and the National Coalition on UNSCR 1325, which was composed of over 60 representatives from government ministries, civil society organisations, the security sector and international partners.
- The NAP grounds the WPS agenda in the context of the country, emphasizing the importance of a gender-sensitive approach to humanitarian response, while acknowledging the varying needs of women in humanitarian crises, and emphasizing women’s agency in the prevention of violent extremism and radicalisation.
- Jordan has reported on the implementation of its NAP, as well as its WPS commitments, in its national reporting for Beijing+25 and in preparation for CSW64 (2020). Among the most important updates were the development of a communication strategy to raise awareness and advocacy for the Women, Peace and Security Agenda for the years 2018-2021.

**Italy** (Peace Woman, 2022)
- Italy adopted its fourth National Action Plan (NAP) in 2020 for the period 2020-2024.
The NAP was developed by the Open-Ended Working Group on Women, Peace and Security of the Inter-Ministerial Committee for Human Rights (CIDU) with the input of a variety of stakeholders, including civil society.

Previous NAPs were adopted in 2010, 2014, and 2016, and were implemented for the 2010-2013, 2014-2016, and 2016-2019 time periods, respectively. Among the primary goals of the first three Italian NAPs were the following: increasing the number of women in the military, promoting a gender perspective in peace operations, including training on Resolution 1325, protecting the rights of women, children, and vulnerable groups in conflict and post-conflict zones, strengthening the role of women in peace processes, and increasing civil society participation in implementing Resolution 1325.

The NAPs approach the implementation of the WPS agenda both domestically and internationally, by preventing human trafficking and protecting refugees and asylum seekers as major areas of concern.

France (Peace women, 2022)
- France adopted its third National Action Plan (NAP) for the period 2021-2025.
- This NAP approaches the implementation of the agenda both domestically and internationally, and has five overarching pillars that focus on participation: protection, fighting impunity, prevention, and promoting the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda. Each pillar has corresponding objectives, actions, and indicators, but the NAP does not have an allocated budget.

Spain (Peace women, 2022)
- The NAP was developed by an Inter-ministerial Working Group with the overarching goal to "contribute to ensuring the protection of the human rights of women and girls, and their substantive participation in conflict prevention, as well as achieving and consolidating peace”.

The NAP approaches WPS Agenda implementation from both a national and international perspective, with a particular emphasis on addressing commitments holistically and promoting the interlinkages between gender equality reforms during implementation. Furthermore, the NAP promotes an integrated agenda by demonstrating the links between the WPS Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with a focus on SDGs five and 16 on gender equality and peace and justice, respectively. Nonetheless, the NAP lacks a substantive monitoring and evaluation framework as well as an allocated budget.

- The first NAP was adopted in 2007, with six overarching goals focusing on strengthening gender-sensitive peacebuilding: protecting the human rights of women and girls in conflict and post-conflict states, increasing women in disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR) effort, and encouraging the participation of Spanish civil society in the implementation of Resolution 1325.
- Globally, Spain is also a contributor to the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, and a partner of the Call to Action on Protection from Gender-Based Violence in Emergencies.

Lebanon (Peace women, 2022)
- The NAP was developed by a steering committee, spearheaded by the National Commission for Lebanese Women (NCLW), which was composed of six government ministries, three civil society organizations, and six UN agencies serving as a technical advisory board.

The NAP highlights a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach for implementing the identified objectives. The objectives of the NAP reflect the pillars of UNSCR 1325, with a specific focus on increasing women’s full participation in decision-making processes in the political, diplomatic, and economic domains as well as in the security and defence sectors.
Palestine (Peace Women, 2022)
- Palestine adopted its first National Action Plan (NAP) for the period 2017-2019, while the second NAP was done for the period 2020-2024.
- It was done by the Ministry of Women’s Affairs (MoWA), in close consultation with members of the National Committee for the Implementation of UNSCR 1325.
- The second NAP focuses on four pillars: prevention and protection, accountability, participation, and relief and recovery, echoing the first NAP in protecting women and girls from the effects of occupation and conflict, holding the Israeli occupation accountable, and increasing Palestinian women’s participation in local and international decision-making processes.
- Palestine reported on the implementation of its NAP, as well as WPS commitments, in its national reporting for Beijing+25 and in preparation for CSW64 (Commission on the Status of Women). The most recent updates were: ensuring that its commitments to the WPS agenda have been integrated into frameworks of policies, planning and monitoring at a national level and inter-ministerial levels. Also, The Council of Ministers approved the National Strategic Framework for Resolution 1325. To integrate the commitments of women, peace and security into policy and planning frameworks, the Council of Ministers issued clear instructions to all Government institutions to integrate the activities of the Executive Plan of Resolution 1325 into the programmes of the relevant ministries.

Tunisia (Peace Women, 2022)
- Tunisia reported on the implementation of its NAP, as well as WPS commitments, in its national reporting for Beijing+25 and in preparation for CSW64 (2020). The report stated that the NAP focuses on “empowering women and girls; promoting their participation in building sustainable peace and stability; contributing to the elimination of all forms of gender-based discrimination and working to immunize society against the dangers of conflict, extremism and terrorism”.

Section Two: Countries Still in the Process of Developing or Implementing NAPs

Cyprus (PeaceWomen, 2022)
Cyprus announced in 2020 that it will be releasing its first WPS NAP, which will be implemented during the period from 2021 to 2025. According to the official press releases, the plan was prepared by the Office of the Commissioner for Gender Equality, in cooperation with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and in coordination with other relevant Ministries. The plan consists of four main pillars: Participation and Empowerment, Protection, Prevention and Promotion, Information for the Resolution.

Egypt
In 2019, Egypt’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs has officially announced the country’s development of its first National Action Plan (NAP) on the implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda (CCCPA, 2019). Egypt’s NAP is still under-development till now.

Libya
In June 2021, Libya’s Ministry of Women’s Affairs and UN Women agreed to collaborate on a National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security. The support from the Governments of Finland and Norway, UN Women will be providing technical expertise to the Ministry of Women’s Affairs of the Libyan Government of National Unity to prepare a roadmap for a National Action Plan to implement the United Nations Security Council resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace and Security (UN Women, 2021). Libya is considered to be the most recent in terms of developing a WPS NAP compared to other Mediterranean countries. Libya is facing huge challenges in this regard due to the ongoing national instability and unrest.

Section Three: Countries with No Action Plans at all
It appears clear from this review of the progress being made in regard to WPS NAPs in the Mediterranean that northern Mediterranean countries are performing well as compared to their peers on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. This situation seems to be reasonable if we take into consideration the fact that the progress in this file is context-dependent, and is subject to many factors, such as education levels, cultural, social norms and economic conditions. In this case, it is apparent that these factors are quite different between the northern and southern shore.

Some countries on the southern shore are making a great effort to localise the WPS agenda and implement their own national action plans such as Jordan and Palestine, however, they still face a myriad of challenges such as cultural barriers, hard economic conditions and low education levels (Shiv Bakrania, 2010; UNICEF, 2021).

COVID-19 has also cast a negative shadow on the status of women worldwide and in the Mediterranean region in particular (Olivia Iannelli, 2019).

More efforts need to be done by activists and civil society organisations to ensure that WPS NAPs are taken seriously by the governments, especially the ones on the southern shore of the Mediterranean since they are vital for helping women to improve their position in either peace and security dynamics or in their societies in general.

### Sources


There is still time to stop and to return to the negotiation table and to resolve differences peacefully with world powers’ mediation. Israel has long-running, deep and good relations both with Russia and Ukraine. There are tens of thousands of Israelis in both countries, there are hundreds of thousands of Jews in both countries; keeping them safe is our top priority.” - Yair Lapid, Foreign Minister of Israel February 24th, 2022.

After the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many countries, particularly NATO allies and allies of the United States, voted to condemn the Russian violation of Ukrainian sovereignty and placed rounds of economic sanctions on the Russian Federation. Israel, however, had to be pushed to vote in step with the United States in the United Nations Security Council, and has not followed suit in economic sanctions. The Israeli Foreign Ministry referred to the invasion on its opening day as “steps taken in East Ukraine” (Avishai 2022) - a soft condemnation that could be confusing when considering the close ties Israel has with the many countries who have denounced the invasion with more certainty. They have since come out with a stronger tone more in line with other countries, but there does exist a method to the madness and a political goal hidden underneath. This article will explore the underlying reasons behind Israel’s apparent soft touch in relation to the newest developments of the Russo-Ukrainian war.

On Saturday March 5th, 2022, Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett boarded a plane headed for Moscow; an act which goes totally against his Orthodox beliefs (and by extension his political interests), which forbids travel outside the city/town one spends Shabbat (the Sabbath), save for an exception where lives are at stake (Zilber 2022). He made this journey in an effort to position Israel as a mediator in the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, perhaps threading the proverbial needle and negotiating a truce between them (Zilber 2022). Peace, unfortunately, is not the main concern of the hopeful mediator, but instead the two forces behind this move seem to be Israeli national security interests and the popularity (or lack thereof) of Bennett’s political coalition.

Israel shares a number of national security interests when it comes to their relationship with Russia. Syria, the country that borders Israel to the north, has seen a decade of civil war and turmoil which has spawned everything from international refugee crises to the rise and fall of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). Russia has played an important role in salvaging the Bashar al-Assad government’s control over Syria and propping it up to this day (Zilber 2022). What is even more crucial for Israel is that the Russians allow them to carry out strikes on Syrian territory which target mutual foes - mainly Islamist militia groups ostensibly supported by Iran (Goldenberg 2022). Furthermore, Russia is a party to the Iran nuclear talks, which Israel wholeheartedly opposes; and in the past and in recent days, Israel has voiced their interests against the deal to Russia (Goldenberg 2022). It suits Israel then, that the talks were paused after a wave of Russian demands concerning Ukraine just days, or even hours, before the deal came to a conclusion (Sly 2022).

On the domestic front, the fragile coalition led by Bennett sees domestic issues pulling tightly at the threads of its waning popularity (Goldenberg 2022), so they have turned their attention abroad in an attempt to re-brand themselves and reap the political capital from playing peacemaker on the international stage. To this end, Bennett has invited the 200,000 Ukrainians...
with Jewish ancestry to Israel, as is their right under the “Law of Return”, which allows for any person of Jewish ancestry to claim Israeli citizenship (McKernan 2022). 100 tons of humanitarian aid were also sent, but Kiev’s request for weapons fell on deaf ears. The refusal to send military aid acknowledges the crucial balancing act Israel must play if they are to be a mediator in this conflict, a role Bennett seems to feel could lend legitimacy to his precarious position.

This path is not without risk; and as the war escalates, Western pressure could mount on Israel to take a more pro-Ukrainian tack (ToI 2022), making the balancing act all the more difficult. Allies will push them to send weapons, to apply sanctions or to be more vocal in their condemnation of the invasion as a whole, any one of which could upset their position in relation to Russia at the mediation table. From the other side, some fear that Israel lacks the political leverage over Russia to keep them at the table in the first place, let alone if they cave in to any Western demands (ToI 2022).

In conclusion, if Bennett has any tricks up his sleeve or rabbits in his hat, he will need to pull them here in this gambit. Israel must walk a fine line between maintaining their security interests with regard to Russia in Syria and in the Iranian Nuclear Deal, as well as gain domestic support through international good will and prominence as a peacemaker/mediator.

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On 18 March, the Morocco Ministry of Foreign Affairs issued a statement in which it published a letter sent by the President of Spain, Pedro Sánchez, to the King of Morocco, Mohamed IV. In this letter, the government of Spain “considers the Moroccan autonomous initiative, presented in 2007, as the most serious, credible and realistic base towards the resolution of the [Western Sahara] dispute” (Kingdom of Morocco, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, African Cooperation and Moroccans Residing Abroad 2022). Later that day, in a public appearance, the Spanish Minister of Foreign Affairs, José Manuel Albares, confirmed the letter and stated that “this new phase will develop [...] in a roadmap clear and ambitious, and all of that to guarantee the stability, sovereignty, territorial integrity and prosperity of our countries” (El País 2022, La Moncloa 2022). This is a 180-degree change of the policy followed by all Spanish governments since 1978 toward Western Sahara.

Background

Western Sahara was a Spanish colony until 1975 when most of the territory was occupied by Morocco. Since then, Morocco has claimed sovereignty over the territory, which it already de facto rules most of, while the UN considers it a non-self-governing territory, a territory whose people have not yet attained a full measure of self-government.

The Moroccan sovereignty claim has been previously rejected by the ICJ in its Western Sahara Advisory Opinion, in which the Court stated that “the materials and information presented to it do not establish any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco [...]. Thus the Court has not found legal ties of such a nature as might affect the application of resolution 1514 (XV) in the decolonization of Western Sahara and, in particular, of the principle of self-determination through the free and genuine expression of the will of the peoples of the Territory” (Advisory Opinion 1975).

This line has been subsequently and repeatedly followed by the UN, including with the establishment of a peacekeeping mission in 1991, MINURSO, whose objective is organising and supervising a referendum of self-determination (United Nations Security Council, Resolution 690
Spain has long followed the UN approach to call for an agreement and a referendum of self-determination for the resolution of the dispute over the sovereignty of Western Sahara.

Current context

The new change in the Spanish policy and the publication of the letter ends a 10-month long diplomatic dispute between Morocco and Spain. This dispute started with the decision of Spain to provide medical assistance to Brahim Ghali, leader of the Polisario Front (Cagnassola 05/19/21). However, the overall context lies in the externalisation of the migration control of the Spanish-Moroccan frontier.

In this sense, Ceuta and Melilla are the only land border of the EU with Africa, and since the 2015 migration crisis, the EU has externalised its control over the migration flows. It pays third States to prevent migrants from reaching EU borders, the best example being Turkey (European Council 2016). This situation has been repeatedly weaponised by Morocco to reach diplomatic concessions from Spain (Dávila 2021), most recently used on 1–3 March (Varo & Martín 2022).

The settlement of the dispute is important to Spain in respect to three issues: control of the flow of migrants between the borders, ending the Moroccan claim of sovereignty over the cities of Ceuta and Melilla and strengthening economic ties.

However, the publication of the letter by Morocco needs to be put in the context of the Russian invasion of Ukraine. With this aggression, the EU has started to prepare a plan to stop relying on Russian natural gas (von der Leyen 2022). To do so, prior to transitioning to green energies, it needs to diversify its providers. And here is where the change of policy is remarkable. Algeria is Spain’s main provider of natural gas and a necessary ally to reduce the EU dependency on Russian natural gas. And, at the same time, Algeria is the main supporter of the Polisario Front and a regional rival to Morocco. The Spanish support of the Moroccan plan for Western Sahara comes at what may be the worst time, a moment when the EU and Spain need to improve their ties with Algeria.

Consequences

The consequences are only starting to emerge, but need to be divided into two levels – internally and externally. Internally, the sudden change of policy has created a governmental crisis. The Spanish government is currently a minority coalition between two parties, PSOE and UP (minority in the sense that between the two parties they hold less than half of the parliament seats). UP, the junior partner of the coalition, has always supported the Sahrawi people and the call for their self-determination but was not informed of the change of policy.

After the publication of the statement by the Moroccan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Vice-President Yolanda Díaz (UP) declared that "I reaffirm my compromise with the defence of the Sahrawi people and with the UN Security Council resolutions. Any solution of the conflict shall take place through the dialogue and the respect of the democratic will of the Sahrawi people. I will keep working on that" (Díaz 2022).

However, it is doubtful that this crisis will lead to a break of the coalition or even to early elections. The latest polls show that both parties would lose seats in the parliament if elections were to be today (Electrocracia.com 2022). In addition, Pablo Iglesias, former Vice-President, former leader and a sort of moral guide of UP, called for rejecting this possibility in an article published on 19 March (Iglesias 2022). Externally, there has not been much response from Algeria so far. An Algerian diplomatic source has referred to the change of policy as the “second historic treason” of Spain towards the Sahrawi people and on 19 March, the Algerian government has summoned its ambassador from Madrid (La Vanguardia 2022). While at the time of writing this article, 20 March, there have not been consequences yet,
we should expect some sort of diplomatic retaliation by Algeria. However, its reach remains unknown.

Lastly, it should be noted that the Spanish switch is not a formal recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. It may be better considered as a sort of initial framework toward an eventual recognition. However, a formal recognition should not be expected without an explicit agreement with the Polisario Front as the representatives of the Sahrawi people. In this sense, José Manuel Albares has stated on 21 March that “I met the Personal Envoy of SG @UN for Western Sahara, Staffan de Mistura. I conveyed Spain’s support for his mission in order to reach a mutually agreed solution in the framework of the United Nations” (Albares 2022).

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Tunisia has often been defined as the only success story of the Arab Spring, bringing a democratic transition and a fruitful constitutional text; one which earned a Nobel Peace Prize in 2015 (Bremmer, 2021; Maaouia, 2021). However, when critically evaluating the newly accounted events in Tunisia, one is not only forced to rethink the viability of the democracy that was once certain, but also realize the significant relationship between economics and politics. The Tunisian case reveals that without ascertained economic goals, the belief in the viability and desirability of democracy becomes eroded.

Though Tunisia is hailed as achieving political progress by attaining a successful democratic transition following the Arab Spring, the 11 governments which served in the decade afterwards have been unable to effectively reform the country, allowing it to gain prosperity (Luck, 2021). Research has found that not only were the developmental strategies utilized ineffective, but also exacerbated inequality (Dridi, 2021). The great disparity between rural areas and major cities is accounted for by observing investment levels, poverty rates and unemployment rates between the two regions (Dridi, 2021). For instance, unemployment levels usually hover around 18% in all of Tunisia but reach over 30% in rural areas (Fox, 2022). When observing merely youth unemployment, figures show that over 40% of Tunisians under the age of 34 are unemployed, creating a problem of joblessness (Luck, 2022). For this reason, it is unexpected to find that Tunisia constituted the number one nation crossing the Mediterranean in order to reach Europe (Gbadamosi, 2022). In fact, research conducted by the International Alert Tunisia revealed that 51% of Tunisians, aged 18 to 29, think of migrating (Gbadamosi, 2022).

Since the 2011 revolution, its GDP has grown, on average, at around 1.8% yearly (Bremmer, 2021). Furthermore, since 2011, not only has the dinar’s value been halved, but the prices of basic goods have also significantly increased (Lall, 2021). Comparing public debt levels, in 2010 Tunisia's debt levels stood at only 39% of its GDP, compared to around 90% of its GDP by 2020 (Lall, 2021; Luck, 2022). After terrorist attacks, Tunisia’s tourism, which signifies a vital source of income to the country, has dropped by 8.8% in 2020 (Maaouia, 2021; Bremmer, 2021). Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic drove Tunisia to have one of the highest infection rates in the world and one of the worst mortality rates per capita in both Africa and the Middle East (Luck, 2021; Maaouia, 2021). For this reason, a poll conducted in Tunisia showed that the majority of civilians believed that their nation is headed in the wrong direction (Lall, 2021).

Tunisians took to the streets on July 25th 2021, calling for the government to stand down (Maaouia, 2021). According to Tunisians, the failure of their economic situation is directly linked to the political elites, targeting the Ennahda party (Rennick, 2021; Cordall, 2021). Despite holding the largest number of seats in parliament, many Tunisians believe their leaders are not only corrupt but also failing to reform Tunisia’s economic problems (Maaouia, 2021; Rennick, 2021).

The belief that parliamentarians, politicians and judges utilize their position to enrich themselves at the expense of the public is a common view (Luck, 2021). Furthermore, the parliament’s concern with democracy and institutional problems has left them unable to address Tunisia’s core economic issues (Luck, 2022). For this reason, Kais Saied, the current president of Tunisia, created a self-coup; he dissolved parliament, dismissed parliamentary immunity,
removed the prime minister and defense minister, seized emergency power and began to behave as the sole "public prosecutor" (Hursh, 2022; Luck, 2021). According to the president, he acted on the basis of Article 80 of the constitution. However, this clause is wrongfully used, since it states that the president may only take extraordinary measures in response to an 'imminent danger' after consultation of the parliament and for parliament to be in continuous sessions (Maouia, 2021). In spite of the fact that Saied's actions are both unconstitutional and reflect authoritarian tendencies, a recent poll showed that 84% of Tunisians approved of Saied's actions (Bremmer, 2021). According to the president, his actions have been the response to the people's demands and the need to deal with a "political paralysis" that has left his country stuck developmentally (Picheta & Reuters, 2021).

As expected, backlash from certain segments of society ensued. Mainly coming from the Ennahda party, which Saied targets in his arrests, journalists and political activists (Rogin, 2022). According to Amnesty International, the Tunisian military not only oppresses dissident opinions but also tries such actors in military courts (Rogin, 2022). When the previous Tunisian president, Mocef Marzouki, who currently resides in Paris, denounced Saied's actions, the president declared him as an enemy of the state, revoked his diplomatic passport, issued an international warrant to arrest him and sentenced him to four years in prison in absentia (Hursh, 2022).

Despite these claims, the president, as recently as February 2022, reaffirmed that Tunisia continues to maintain its freedoms, rejects violence and establishes equality before the law. Claims were announced around the same time analysts found the level of violence endured by the state, including alleged kidnappings, has been unmatched since the fall of Ben Ali (Africanews, 2022; Fox, 2022). It has been found that Saied has been widely supported by Tunisians, believing that his actions are purging the country from its long-term state of corruption. Saied is often portrayed as someone bringing Tunisians back their revolution (Luck, 2022). When Saeid recently dissolved the Supreme Judicial Council, which is responsible for upholding judicial autonomy, the action was met by support from civilians (Amara & McDowall, 2022). Both the president and the people believed that the judges, some of whom served since Ben Ali, are corrupt and self-serving elites, purposefully hiding investigations on politically sensitive assassinations of oppositional figures since 2013 (Amara & McDowall, 2022). Ennahda is also held to be connected to these cases, despite the Islamic State group claiming responsibility for the killings (FRANCE 24, 2022).

In this regard, the Tunisian case shows a unique situation in which authoritarian action is welcomed due to the lack of belief in the viability of democratic processes; 51% of Tunisians saw democracy as indecisive, 42% as leading to instability and 39% claim it creates weak economic outcomes (Lall, 2021). The popularity of Saied recently fell due to economic fears, rather than political ones. A recent poll conducted in December 2021 showed that the presidents' approval rates fell from 87% to 55%. Despite this fact, Saeid was deemed to be the most popular figure in Tunisian politics (Hursh, 2022; Luck, 2022). In response to the fall in popularity, Saeid claims that he must first deal with political problems before dealing with economic issues (Luck, 2022). Yet, it seems that for the Tunisian people, their patience is wearing thin.

On 13th March of 2022, Tunisians took the streets once again demonstrating against Saeid as a result of an increase in poverty and lack of stable foods, partly affected by the Ukrainian war (Africanews, 2022). It is noteworthy that the protests are closer connected with economics than politics in a time when the Tunisian government seeks to place restrictions on the activity of civil societies (Arab Reform Initiative, 2022). So far, the Tunisian president is seeking an IMF rescue package he hopes to attain by April (Amara & Mcdowall, 2022). Furthermore, the
recent approval of the EU and the Biden administration to Saied’s political “roadmap” holds promising views over Tunisia’s ability to gain financial help in the future and end its economic paralysis (Price, 2021; Crisis Group, 2022). As of now, Tunisians must wait for the opportunity to vote on a constitutional reform, scheduled in July 2022, and parliamentary elections in December 2022 (Hursh, 2022; Schaar & Guizani, 2022).

Sources


The conflict between Russia and Ukraine has shaken the world, but perhaps for no other country in the Middle East does this conflict combine in equal parts a headache and an opportunity - Turkey has so far continued its long balancing act between the two countries, but the act becomes more complicated with each passing day.

Since the beginning of the conflict, Turkey has condemned Russia’s actions and described them as ‘unacceptable’ (Mankoff, 2022), and reiterated its long-standing commitment to Ukraine’s sovereignty and territorial integrity (Daily Sabah, 2022). Furthermore, as the conflict progressed, on March 6th Turkey called on President Putin to open humanitarian corridors and work towards finding a diplomatic solution (Mankoff, 2022). Turkey’s condemnation went beyond statements of support - throughout the conflict Turkey has continued to provide humanitarian and military aid to Ukraine (Mankoff, 2022). Perhaps its most sincere offer of support was the activation of Article 19 of the Montreux Convention on February 28, which allows it to regulate the passage of warships through the Bosphorus and Dardanelles strait (Mankoff, 2022; Konrad, 2022). Though this was requested by Ukraine and lauded by the United States, analysts have since questioned the true beneficiary of this decision, as in the long-term it also prevents NATO countries’ ships from giving aid to Ukraine via the sea and protecting shipping routes in the area (Konrad, 2022).

These supportive actions toward Ukraine have managed to re-pivot Turkey in the eyes of NATO and even the EU. In recent years, Turkey’s commitment to NATO has been in doubt, most recently due to the Turkish purchase of the S-400 missiles from Russia (Kirişci 2022). However, after the implementation of the Montreux Convention the Secretary General of NATO has underlined the importance of Turkey’s contributions to NATO (NATO, 2022). Even EU High Representative Josep Borrell said that cooperation with Turkey should be strengthened (Hurriyat Daily News, 2022a). In fact, Turkey has already been trying to use its new influence by urging Joe Biden to lift “all ‘unjust’ sanctions on Turkey’s defense industry” which have been put in place since Turkey’s purchase of the Russian S-400 missile defense systems (Middle East Eye, 2022).

In the long run, Turkey benefits from an independent Ukraine as it is an important partner economically and militarily. Just a month before the invasion, Turkey and Ukraine signed a dozen agreements, including a free trade agreement and an agreement to boost production of the Bayraktar TB2 drone in Ukraine (Reuters, 2022; Bekdil, 2022). A Russian victory would undermine these agreements and have an adverse impact on Turkish military ambitions (Iddon, 2022).

Furthermore, a stronger Russia with access to the Black sea presents an unwanted potential risk. Though a respectful friendship has flourished between Erdogan and Putin, Russia remains a geopolitical rival (Mankoff, 2022). Clashes between the two countries and their proxies take place in Libya and South Caucasus, and Syria. As such, Turkey is not enthusiastic about the prospect of greater Russian presence at the Black Sea.

At the same time, Turkey remains strongly dependent on Russia economically - it relies on Russia for tourism, trade, and energy. Over 45% of Turkey’s natural gas imports come from Russia, and 17% of its oil (Jovanovsk, 2022; Daily Sabah, 2022). With the Turkish economic crisis looming due to increasing inflation, cutting off
ties with Russia ahead of an upcoming election next year is not a gamble Ankara is willing to take.

Therefore, despite generally supportive actions towards Ukraine, Turkey has not gone as far as it could have, both in condemnation and in action against Russia. Not only were its statements said to be lacking the ‘moral clarity,’ of its Western allies (Mankoff, 2022), but Turkey has also refrained from imposing sanctions on Russia. Most recently, it has also abstained from voting at the Council of Europe for the Russian suspension (Gardner, 2022). Instead, Turkey has continued to call for diplomatic solutions, even offering itself in the role of mediator (Caspit, 2022). Its efforts were not entirely unsuccessful, as they brought together the foreign ministers of Russia and Ukraine in Antalya, Turkey on March 10. This was the first high level meeting since the invasion, but it unfortunately did not result in a cease-fire agreement (Tavsan, 2022).

The conflict between Russia and Ukraine not only had a direct effect on Turkey’s relationship with the two countries, but it also created arguably positive ripple effects for its relations with Israel and Greece. The frosty relations of the past decade between Israel and Turkey began to slowly thaw already in the summer of 2021 (Caspit, 2022). However, it was the visit of the President of Israel, Isaac Herzog, on March 9th in Ankara that was considered a “historic visit that will be a turning point in relations” (Lipin, 2022). It is because the conflict between their neighbors may provide the necessary push for the two countries to collaborate on a natural gas pipeline, or eventually even shared security concerns such as Iran (Jovanovsk, 2022). Further recognizing the benefits of mutual cooperation in the face of security issues is Greece. On March 13th, Turkish President Erdoğan and Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis agreed to improve ties despite their long-running disagreements (Euractiv, 2022).

Though the focus in the last couple of weeks has been on Russia, Turkey has not rested on its laurels in regards to its other interests. First of all, Ankara has been deepening its security connections all over the African continent.

At the end of February, President Erdoğan traveled to the Democratic Republic of Congo, Senegal, and Guinea-Bissau where various agreements on military and defense cooperation as well as financial aid were signed (RFI, 2022), further cementing Ankara’s interests on the continent (Kostrzewa, 2021). In mid-February, the Turkish parliament also received the security agreement signed with Cameroon in 2014 on extensive cooperation against terrorism, joint police operations and intelligence sharing. This type of agreement has in the past allowed the Turkish government to “suppress opponents living in exile and critics outside the country” (Kenez, 2022).

President Erdogan has also been looking towards Asia, where in early January Turkey signed a memorandum of understanding on security cooperation, counterterrorism, and countering drug trafficking with Bangladesh. This is in line with Turkey’s Asia Anew Initiative launched in 2019 which aims to diversify its diplomatic relations with Asian countries. This is a key agreement for Turkey, as Bangladesh is its fourth-largest weapon buyer with an ever increasing demand (Islam, 2022).

Closer to its borders, Turkey has also been strengthening its ties with Azerbaijan, with whom it will from now on hold regular “national security” meetings (Hurriyet Daily News, 2022b) and mending its relations with Armenia with whom productive talks were held on March 12th (Aljazeera, 2022). The two countries discussed establishing “diplomatic relations ‘without conditions’” that might lead to a re-establishment of their shared border (Radio Free Europe, 2022).

However, although Turkey’s expanding influence may be seen positively in other sides of the world, recently this has not been so apparent in its Arab neighborhood. On March 9th, the Arab League passed a resolution condemning “Turkey for allegedly interfering in the internal affairs of Arab countries, calling on Ankara to stop acts ‘threatening the stability and security in the
Middle East” in particular in Libya, Iraq and Syria (Daily Sabah with Agencies, 2022). Turkey responded that these allegations were “unfounded” (Daily Sabah with Agencies, 2022). However, in early February it continued its coordinated counterterrorism operations, with over 60 Turkish fighter jets attacking training camps, shelters and ammunition storage facilities used by the PKK and its affiliates in northern Iraq and Syria (Mandıracı, 2022), which were soon followed by Operation Eren Winter-25, where over 555 security personnel and 37 operational teams took part (Daily Sabah with AA, 2022).

With its hands in so many pots, it remains to be seen how Turkey can continue its balancing acts, and how effective it will be as an aspiring regional and global power.

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The Middle East, especially Iraq and Syria, have been engulfed by terrorist organizations since the early 21st Century soon after the US ambitions of invasion of Iraq became evident. The first prime terrorist organization to surface was Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and later its affiliate and off-shoot, the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, which was initially led by Abu-Musab Al-Zarqawi (Wilson Centre, 2019). After Al-Zarqawi was killed in an American raid, his successor in leadership, Abu-Bakar Al-Baghdadi took charge, but has since committed suicided during another American raid in 2019 (Al Jazeera, 2019). The reigns of ISIS were in the hands of Abu Ibrahim al-Qurayshi (Wilson Centre, 2022). Abu Ibrahim, holder of Iraq’s nationality born as Amir Muhammad Said Abdal-Rahman al Mawla, also known as Abdullah Qardash, was part of the top tier leadership of ISIS since the beginning and took the highest position in October 2019, a week after the death of Al-Baghdadi (The Crisis Group, 2022). Abdullah Qardash saw the rise and fall of the organization from various leadership positions: leading the genocide of the Yazidi population of Sinjar, Iraq during 2014-2015, later became the head of the group when it was on its to decline after 2019 until 2022 (The Crisis Group, 2022).

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The journey of Abdullah Qardash’s atrocities exploiting the religion of Islam came to an end when during yet another American raid, similar to his predecessors he blew himself up along with his family (BBC, 2022). On 3rd February 2022, the USA sent around 24 commandos by helicopter to attack a three-story house located in a town, Atmeh, Northern Idlib, near the border Turkish-Syrian border where Qardash, his family on the third floor, his deputy on the second floor, and other civilians resided. Qardash, using an explosive device, blasted himself and his family – leading to his death during the raid (Wilson Centre, 2022). Forces later engaged for approximately two hours with Qardash’s deputy. President Joe Biden expressed the triumph of the United States of America over this encounter in the following words: “removed a major terrorist threat to the world” (The Washington Post, 2022). ISIS has already lost its former glory, strength and influence; and this attack on its global leader may hamper it further, but simultaneously this blow may shake the organization to revive its might, particularly in its Khorasan province.

Another important reason for understanding the role of Abdullah Qardash and the implications of his death is his involvement in the Yazidi Genocide (Davison, 2022). Yazidis are a mostly Kurd-speaking group of people mainly residing in Sinjar and Mosul in Iraq (BBC, 2014). Yazidis follow an unfamiliar religion that is the amalgamation of chunks taken from Islam, Zoroastrianism, and ancient Persian religions (ASHER-SCHAPIRO, 2014). The antagonism between the Muslims and the Yazidis dates back to the 16th Century mainly due to their worship of a specific angel, who Muslims consider as someone who defied God (Maisel, 2014). According to the United Nations, almost 5000 Yazidi men were executed, and along with these mass killings, ISIS used other genocidal tactics (Zoonen & Wirya, 2017). Other genocidal methods employed by ISIS include forced conversions, abductions of children and women, taking 7000 females for sex enslavement as estimated by the United Nations. (Zoonen & Wirya, 2017) Nonetheless, the horrors of ISIS haunt Iraq and Syria to the present day while questions remain whether the new leader of ISIS, the successor of Abdullah Qardash, Abu Hassan al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi will be able to revive ISIS or not (Ajjoub, 2022).
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The February–March geopolitical scene was impacted by several events of great magnitude. In the Mediterranean region, Egypt, through its geographical position and influence, has been impacted in various ways by the current news. From its neighbours’ situation to the impact of the Russian invasion, multiple events have led to a paradoxical state, as Egypt has an opportunity to increase its status and power while being on the cusp of a crisis.

Libyan–Egyptian relations are still marked by Libya's political context. After the uprising against the regime of Colonel Muammar Gaddafi and the NATO intervention, Libya became a battleground for armed militias competing for power in the region. The conflicts turned Libya into an arena of regional conflict and proxy wars. Aside from its geographical proximity, Egypt had been involved in the conflict, as a supporter of the Government of National Accord, but also in the peacebuilding events such as the November 2021 Paris United Nations conference (Declaration of the Paris International Conference for Libya 12/11/2021). More recently, the U.S. Ambassador and Special Envoy to Libya, Richard Norland, visited Cairo on the 14th of March to discuss Libya's situation in regard to presidential and parliamentary elections (The Libya Update 14/03/2022). The Egyptian government's involvement in the current peace efforts extends to international conferences, such as the 19th March Economic Working Group’s meeting with other Co-chair representatives, as well as Central Bank Governor, Saddek ElKaber, and a representative of the CBL eastern branch (Egypt Today 19/03/2022). Interestingly, the Egyptian government had had, prior to these events, to denounce statements made by an Egyptian media journalist who called on his country to invade Libya, as Russia has done in Ukraine (Middle East Monitor 28/02/2022).

The ongoing Russian–Ukrainian conflict has had other impacts on the Egyptian government: Ukraine’s invasion by Russia led to a disruption of wheat trades. For Egypt, it is a crucial matter, since half of its wheat importations originating from Russia and Ukraine. In order to support its demographic growth, the Egyptian state is the world's largest importer of wheat (Abay, Breisinger, Debucquet, Glauber & Abdelfattah 17/03/2022). While there are no threats of upcoming shortages, thanks to the country’s inventory, the Egyptian administration is looking for alternative partners for its imports – in the list are the US, Argentina, Canada, and Paraguay (Ibid, Ahram Online 21/03/2022). However, the issues affecting wheat exportations are far from being solved. The conflict led to increased prices, due to the loss of Ukraine’s production, higher oil prices as well as the changes in usual trade roads (Abay, Breisinger, Debucquet, Glauber & Abdelfattah 17/03/2022). As an example, wheat prices hit a 10–year high at US $523 per ton on the 7th of March (Ibid).

On the other hand, Egypt stands to gain from the situation; as Europe and Russia’s relations are strained, the former’s dependence on Russian gas provides a window of opportunity to other hydrocarbons exporters. Not only does Egypt already possess 75.5 trillion cubic feet of proven gas reserves as of the end of 2020 (Bp 2021), its exports to Europe amounted to 15% in 2021 (Saied 17/03/2022). On the 8th of March, the Russian Deputy Prime Minister Alexander Novak’s threatened to cut off natural gas supplies to Europe in reaction to the ban on Russian energy exports show that having working infrastructures and a strategic geographic position in trading goods to Europe gives Egypt a step ahead. A move that is not spurred only by current events, as the latter is also part of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum intergovernmental
Aside from its international trade agreements, Egypt has secured itself strong regional alliances. Prime Minister Naftali Bennett’s visit to Sharm el-Sheikh to meet with President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan on the 21st of March, highlighted “shared security interests, of which there are quite a few, in all their aspects”. Part of the topics discussed was the US’ move toward removing Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps from its list of foreign terrorist organizations and the Iran nuclear deal’s renewal, which is opposed by the United Arab Emirates and Israel (See Carlos Benítez 31/03/2022, Harkov & Jerusalem Post 21/03/2022). The upcoming months will be crucial for Egypt, as the current issues it faces will determine its regional position, and secure its influence on historic matters.

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The North African country has been embroiled in fratricidal struggles ever since the opposition to Muammar al-Gaddafi rose up against years of dictatorship in the context of the Arab Spring. Elections that were supposed to take place in December have again been postponed, this time to June 2022.

Since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011, when the opposition was supported by an international coalition led by NATO, the Libyan opposition has tried to initiate a democratic transition. However, disagreements between the various factions opposed to Gaddafi and the heirs of the former regime led to a new civil war that has been going on since 2014 (Megerisi, 2020).

The country is currently divided in two: on the one hand, Marshal Khalifa Haftar, who controls a large part of the territory and, despite launching several offensives, has not managed to take control of the capital, Tripoli. On the other side is the UN-backed Government of National Unity, created in March 2021, whose power is limited to the capital and its surroundings. It has Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dabeiba as interim prime minister.

In 2021, the parties agreed to hold elections and begin a new transitional phase, but in the end, the Electoral Commission was forced to suspend the elections. The main stumbling block was the impossibility of announcing the candidates, as there were legal doubts about the conditions required to run (Hammady, 2022).

The run-up to the country’s first-ever presidential election has been overshadowed by angry disputes over its legality and the candidacies of several controversial figures, including Gadhafi’s son, Seif al-Islam Gadhafi. One point of contention was a presidential elections law controversially passed by Parliament Speaker Aguila Saleh, which critics say bypassed due process and favoured his ally, Haftar. The law was strongly opposed by factions in western Libya, where Haftar had waged a yearlong battle to seize Tripoli (Hammady, 2022).

Ethnic diversity in Libya

The ethnic groups and various armed groups have been and are the real threads and strands of power in Libya. It is the history of the historical rivalries and quarrels of these ethnic groups, and the resulting balances of power, that explain every historical moment in that country (Harchaoui & Lazib, 2019).

Libya should be understood as an ethnic mix of more than 90% Arab/Berber population (forming the vast majority of the tribes, such as the Warfalla, Qadafa, etc), Tuareg population (south and west), non-Arabised Amazigh Berber (small segments in the west) and Tebus (black population in the south and east), as well as three regions: Tripolitania, Cyrenaica and Fezzan (Harchaoui & Lazib, 2019).

After the end of the Ottoman occupation and the subsequent Italian colonisation, an attempt was made to establish a federal monarchy under the leadership of Idris Senussi. However, in a context of increasing strength of pan-Arabism, a military coup d’état put an end to the monarchy and was the beginning of Gaddafí’s power (Kása, 2021). Despite the socialist and secular background that brought him to power, the balances of power Gaddafí had to use to retain power relied on ethnic groups, based on ethnic empowerment and patronage, in order to maintain a more direct grip on power (Kása, 2021).
In 1975, Misrata officials attempted a coup d'état against Gaddafi, which led, in reaction, to the formation of the main ethnic alliances on which the Libyan dictator's regime was based. From 1975, Gaddafi strengthened ties with the Warfalla, especially the sub-group of the Beni Walid, marginalising those of Misrata. In addition to the Warfalla and Qadafa, from which Gaddafi came, the regime allied itself with the Magarira, spread across the south of the country in the Fezzan region. As a group of little importance, Gaddafi secured their loyalty by promoting them to the pinnacle of power (Harchaoui & Lazib, 2019).

Given that Gaddafi's regime was based on ethnic balances of power, the Warfalla of Beni Walid attempted a coup d'état to overthrow him in 1993, in a context of international isolation, showing that the levers of power on which Gaddafi had relied were breaking down (Harchaoui & Lazib, 2019). All of the above indicated that the foundations of Gaddafi's regime were falling apart, so that by 2011, when revolts broke out across the Arab world, he was too weakened to continue to hold on to power. One can see the pattern of the 2011 rebellion, which was formed by sectors of Libya that were
relegated after the overthrow of Idris Senussi, the division between Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, favoured Tripolitania during Qadhafi’s regime, and ethnic groups in Tripolitania that were no longer sympathetic to Qadhafi, such as Warfalla (Harchaoui & Lazib, 2019).

In the post-Gaddafi era, the divide between Libya’s east and west became more pronounced, especially with the Islamisation of the GNC government in Tripoli by imposing Sharia law throughout the country. This ran counter to the more secular east. Hence Hafter’s attempt in 2014 to execute Operation Dignity, to overthrow the GNC Islamists (Zoubir, 2020).

During the 2014 war, the pattern was that of Cyrenaica and now restive ethnic groups such as the al-Bayda tried to safeguard secularity and seize power in Tripoli (Zoubir, 2020). History and tribal dynamics in Libya, therefore, have a strong recurrence and explain much of the course of events in this civil war (Zoubir, 2020).

Power struggle in Libya

Libya is going through a power struggle. There are several actors who do not see themselves participating in elections without winning a victory that does not put them in control, and in this sense, there are candidates who bear a great deal of responsibility for this deadlock. Experts agree that the process has been too hasty (Oxford Analytica, 2022). In March 2021, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum meeting in Geneva under the auspices of the UN tasked Dabeiba with reunifying state institutions and guaranteeing security until the national elections scheduled for last December. From March to December is a short time. It has been a very accelerated process and we have had problems with constitutional conditions. We forget that Libya comes from a tradition of dictatorship, of authoritarianism, and there is a fear of falling back into another dictatorship (Oxford Analytica, 2022).

Among the most controversial names are Saif al-Islam, the son of former dictator Gaddafi, who is being sought by the International Criminal Court on charges of crimes against humanity, an accusation that also extends to Marshal Khalifa Hafter, the former head of the self-styled Libyan National Army (LNA) (Megerisi, 2020). Another controversial candidate is the interim prime minister, Dabeiba, whose mandate was supposed to be limited to preparing the electoral process. By running, he is in breach of one of the main requirements of the transitional government: to leave office three months before the referendum. With this move, he wants to take advantage of his popularity gained through his financial measures, his 2021 run and his image as a person of consensus to participate in these elections (Oxford Analytica, 2022).

All three candidates are likely to be held accountable for having had some responsibility for committing crimes against humanity (Amnesty International, 2022): “It is very serious to think that these individuals could, on the basis of this electoral process, achieve leadership in the Republic of Libya”. But there are more names on this list of candidates that raise doubts, such as a former interior minister, the current speaker of parliament and the president of the Supreme State Council. Therefore, if there is one thing that is clear about the upcoming elections, it is that the struggle for power and violence will most likely continue in Libya in the coming years.
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