



Atlantic Council

RAFIK HARIRI CENTER
FOR THE MIDDLE EAST



North Africa's transatlantic relations amid change and continuity

Karim Mezran, Roberto Menotti, Alessia Melcangi,
Emadeddin Badi and Alissa Pavia



Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East

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Cover: Tunisian protesters raise a flags and placards on July 23, 2022, during a demonstration along Habib Bourguiba avenue in the capital Tunis, Tunisia against their president and the upcoming July 25, 2022 constitutional referendum. (Photo by Yassine Mahjoub/Sipa USA) No Use Germany.

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Introduction

— *Karim Mezran*

Political analysts often look with envy at historians due to their ability to analyze events long after they have occurred, with the luxury of distance and hindsight. To analyze human history and the political and economic developments in numerous states or regions over the period of 2011 to mid-2022 would surely benefit from ten or twenty years of distance and hindsight. Yet for those dealing with events occurring in the geographical dimension of the wider Mediterranean there is an overwhelming perception of a continuous, often abrupt and contradictory, but increasingly faster evolution of relations between actors—whether small or big, global or regional. The collapse of the unipolar moment in the post-Cold War condition, with the emergence of China as a new superpower and the return of Russia, is undoubtedly a fact.

Just as important, though, is the hyperactivity of some smaller, regional powers who have taken advantage of the withdrawal, perhaps exaggerated, of US forces (and political will) from the area. This situation, coupled with the contrary perception of an active and dynamic Chinese economic expansionism (with strong political ambitions), and a more lame but constant military reinvolvement of Russia, motivated the leaders of some regional powers to increase their activity in the international arena. The necessary condition for a regional actor to project power is not to have hierarchical relationships that may restrain its margin of maneuvers and thus be free to become an active actor in the international scene. In other words, and for the sake of this discussion, Turkey, for example, was not able to respect traditional US alignments that cast it as an obedient member of NATO, a friend of Egypt and the United Arab Emirate (UAE), and an enemy of Iran and Russia—and at the same time implement a foreign policy that would allow it the expansion of its power and interests. The same can be said of the roles of the UAE, Qatar, and to a certain extent the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Since the 2011 events dubbed the Arab Spring through today, the wide involvement of regional actors in a power-positioning play has confused the mutual understanding of positions and of objectives, thus creating a very dangerous situation prone to the deflagration of conflicts rather than the establishment of peaceful relations.

The purpose of this report is not to analyze this state of affairs in general but to identify a potential role for Italy and its diplomacy to play, in full agreement and collaboration with the United States and the other main European actors, in resolving some of the thorniest crises in the area and

fostering a climate of collaboration around the transatlantic alliance that could help it face the expanding ambitions of rival global powers.

Italy, as a modern state, has been a country constrained by its geographical position, shaped like a boot, immersed in the Mediterranean, pointing south, inevitably and undoubtedly. Even though most of its industrial and productive infrastructure is in the north, the country's elites have understood since the very unification of the country in 1861 that its natural vocation would be the other shore of the sea. In the last few decades, after the ruinous end of World War II, Italy has been conditioned in the conduct of its foreign policy by its status as both a relative economic giant and a political dwarf. This lack of political will and courage to sustain an effective foreign policy that could support the economic projection of its productive sector has more often than not caused Italy the loss of important positions. It is about time to change this position and become a relevant actor itself.

It is clear, nevertheless, that Italy has minimal capabilities to act as a power vis-à-vis almost any other actor in the region—yet has diplomatic and economic capabilities in abundance. While it may have a hard time to play any important role in solving the Western Sahara issue or in diminishing the tensions between Algeria and Morocco, it definitely could play a wider role in Libya, once it has acquired a clear understanding of the evolving situation on the ground and on the diverging interests of various international actors. For example, Italy could play an important role in becoming the neutral and friendly supporter of a rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt. The recent increase in tensions between the two regional powers has been the cause of wide concern for the potential humanitarian consequences of an outright clash between them. In the last few weeks there have been attempts to bring about a rapprochement, but these steps have been too cautious and shy. There is the need for a bolder push and Italy could play its part in this.

The conclusions drawn by the eminent scholars that contributed to this report are the result of an unequivocal and honest reply to the questions of whether Italy has space to play a wider role in the Mediterranean region, and if yes, how? It is hoped that these insights and conclusions will contribute to a more positive assumption of responsibilities by the political class and provide the necessary determination to, at a minimum, open a debate on Italy's interests and role in the region of its immediate concern.

Chapter 1

Italy and the United States Face Mediterranean Challenges: Shared Concerns, New Opportunities

— Roberto Menotti

A combination of international factors and domestic changes in both the United States and Italy have created opportunities for new forms of cooperation, but the multiple challenges facing the two countries are testing their respective abilities to pursue coherent foreign policies.

Relations between Italy and the United States have undergone a profound shift with the transition from the Trump administration to Biden's. The changes in approach, style, and substance from one to the other have been fundamental. This shift also is evident in US attitudes vis-à-vis the nation's main allies and multilateral fora—including in the Mediterranean region. Reinforcing this shift is the nearly simultaneous arrival of the Draghi government in Rome, which has produced an important, albeit less dramatic, rebalancing of Italy's foreign policy toward an openly pro-European Union stance (willing and able to closely cooperate especially with Berlin and Paris) and transatlantic approach.

Given that the Mediterranean basin is still geopolitically fractured and fragmented—most notably, Libya, where outside actors have intervened and civil unrest has delayed elections¹—the strong tethering of Italy's interests to the United States (the richest integrated economic area in the world) and to the transatlantic Alliance (the most powerful alliance in history) is bound to impact its overall foreign policy. Of course, there are several issues that are controversial or even divisive for the EU and NATO, so Italy will have to navigate choppy waters as it seeks to articulate specific national interests, sometimes on its own and sometimes through selective partnerships. The bilateral relationship with the United States is particularly relevant precisely in

areas where disagreements continue to emerge among EU members or where NATO is not the most adequate instrument. Indeed, the Italy-US link is going through a sort of “golden moment,” a real opportunity to be seized.

The Draghi government has gone to great lengths to emphasize on many occasions that Italy considers the combination of NATO and the EU as an effective and rational framework for its overall international projection.² This should not be seen as just a rhetorical choice: it is instead a practical policy approach in the context of significant uncertainties over the future trajectory of both organizations. Realistically, there will be occasions when either NATO or the EU will have primacy in terms of practical commitments by member states, but the point remains that their combined assets and ability to affect the strategic environment are unique and irreplaceable from Italy's perspective. At times, active Italian support could be conducive to a more fruitful cooperation between these two large and complex international organizations—cooperation that Washington will certainly welcome, especially whenever major US interests are at stake.

Rome's muted official reaction to the complicated withdrawal from Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, with virtually no open criticism of US decisions and execution, is a case in point: while supporting in principle an increase in EU autonomous capabilities for similar contingencies in the future, the Italian government refrained from framing this in terms of strategic autonomy as an alternative to NATO.³ One can add that, in light of the rather typically short-lived and largely symbolic nature of such European ambitions and statements of intent, it was a wise course.⁴

- 1 “Joint Statement on the Situation in Libya,” Issued by the Governments of the United States, France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom, US State Department, Office of the Spokesperson (website), March 4, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-situation-in-libya-2/>; Siobhán O'Grady, “Libya Postpones Presidential Election at Last Minute Amid Renewed Threat of Civil Unrest,” *Washington Post*, December 22, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/12/22/libya-presidential-election-delay/>; and Greg Miller et al., “At the Mercy of Foreign Powers,” *Washington Post*, Updated February 27, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2021/libya-civil-war-russia-turkey-fighter-planes/?itid=ik_inline_manual_30.
- 2 Prime Minister Mario Draghi, “2021 NATO Summit,” Transcript of Speech Delivered in Brussels, June 14, 2021, <https://www.governo.it/it/articolo/intervento-del-presidente-draghi-al-vertice-nato/17139>.
- 3 Redazione ANSA, “NATO Seems Less Interested in Europe Says Draghi (English),” Agenzia Nazionale Stampa Associata (Italian wire service), October 6, 2021, https://www.ansa.it/english/news/politics/2021/10/06/nato-seems-less-interested-in-europe-says-draghi_02937769-a435-4adf-a429-1dd1926d749f.html.
- 4 Sven Biscop, “The European Strategic Compass: Entering the Fray,” *Aspenia Online*, October 6, 2021, <https://aspensiaonline.it/the-european-strategic-compass-entering-the-fray/>.



US President Joe Biden and Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi shake hands as they meet ahead of the G20 summit, in Rome, Italy October 29, 2021. REUTERS/Kevin Lamarque

Italy and the United States seem to share a common view of a fundamental trade-off in the Mediterranean region: important interests and values (some of them with truly global implications) are at stake, and yet in pursuit of those interests, direct interventions (certainly through military force, but also through political-economic pressure) have proven to be very costly and unlikely to succeed. In other words, both Italy and the United States, from very different perspectives, geographically and strategically, seem to believe that a better way to exercise influence on the region is by indirect and soft-power instruments, at least in the foreseeable future. The main foreign policy guidelines of the Biden administration explicitly point to long-term and wide-spectrum efforts employing nonmilitary tools, as opposed to hard power and the use of direct threats.⁵ The Middle Eastern tour by Secretary of State Antony Blinken

at the end of March consistently focused on sending such a message.⁶ Italy's military commitments in Libya, despite its proximity and economic relevance, have been very limited and less than enthusiastic since 2011. In contrast, some of the emerging security risks to broad US interests and to regional stability, from the Italian perspective, stem from the direct military involvement of Russia and Turkey, particularly in Libya and Syria.

Geographical and strategic differences between Italy and the United States also are significant and cannot be underestimated: most of all, Italy does not have the luxury of opting out of the Mediterranean basin, given its proximity to North Africa and the Levant. In addition, the Mediterranean Sea is a vital, sensitive passageway for world trade, which creates opportunities as well as challenges and potential

⁵ See, for example, Secretary of State Antony J. Blinken, "The Spirit of Partnership: Implementing the U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability," US State Department, Office of the Spokesperson (website), Press Statement, April 1, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/the-spirit-of-partnership-implementing-the-u-s-strategy-to-prevent-conflict-and-promote-stability/>.

⁶ "Secretary Antony J. Blinken with Khadija Ihsane of Medi 1 TV," State Department Office of the Spokesperson, Press Release of Translated Interview Conducted in Rabat, Morocco, March 29, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-with-khadija-ihsane-of-medi-1-tv/>; and Secretary Antony J. Blinken, Remarks at a Press Availability at the US Embassy Algiers, in Algeria, State Department Office of the Spokesperson, Press Release, March 30, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-at-a-press-availability-17/>.

domino effects from which Italian citizens cannot be totally shielded.

However, recent global trends are probably increasing, rather than reducing, the objective importance of a quite small, semi-enclosed basin such as the Mediterranean for all Western countries: the growing traffic through the Suez Canal, energy discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean, and persistent political instability on the Southern shore that, after the uprisings and events of 2011 and the Syrian civil war, simply cannot be ignored. The region comprises parts of three continents, three strategic straits, two maritime routes plus a land route connecting Europe and Asia, and intense flows (mostly of people) between the vast Sahel region and the North African coast. Against this background, the openly declared intention of the United States to focus on the Indo-Pacific and East Asia—however perfectly understandable and understood by its European allies—has facilitated a growing Russian and Chinese presence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The tools preferred by Russia and China differ markedly, but they both pose a new challenge for the region.

The ongoing transition toward greener energy sources may contribute to a renewed strategic centrality of the Mediterranean. The transition is not going to rapidly eliminate oil and gas from the regional equation, with all that entails in terms of political influence, forms of interdependence, and potential conflicts. In fact, even assuming that the most advanced economies can achieve decarbonization as early as they claim, another transition is underway to supply and distribute in the next decades less polluting (but still fossil) energy sources to most of the countries on the southern shore of the Mediterranean: clearly this is a massively complex process, with social and security repercussions, requiring policy coordination among the more advanced economies as well.

In short, there is great potential in fostering cooperation along the Rome-Washington axis, specifically in the wider context of multilateral formats (both institutionalized and ad hoc).

From Diffuse Interests to Specific Priorities

The Mediterranean region is vital for Italian interests in terms of economic opportunities, wider diplomatic goals, and security concerns. As Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio

summarized in a Parliamentary hearing on March 31, 2021, it can be seen as a “platform” for economic, energy, and infrastructural connectivity between Europe, Africa, and Asia—but also a flashpoint of overlapping risks and threats, some of which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.⁷

The Mediterranean's southern and (to some extent) eastern sectors lack an established security architecture, and are affected by multiple conflicts and factors of chronic instability. It is no accident that over the past decade most military deployments involving Italian troops have taken place in North Africa, the Middle East, the Western Balkans, and increasingly the Sahel. The fact that these commitments have been made in various formats, often with no direct participation of NATO or the EU, complicates the management of partnerships and operational scenarios, making it all the more desirable for Italy to work with the United States, given the long-standing security links between the two countries.

Italy has consistently pushed for EU-NATO cooperation, especially in regard to Europe's southern neighborhood, by emphasizing the synergies and overlap between the two organizations. Yet not all contingencies can be tackled through these highly institutionalized channels, and there also are constraints associated with EU and NATO commitments that may convince political leaders to opt for bilateral or multilateral endeavors. In this sense, each midsize country needs to walk a fine line, and Italy is certainly no exception.

In recent years Italy has made significant efforts to cultivate bilateral relations with several countries that, for one reason or another, are problematic and often at odds with each other: Tunisia is an example, as are Egypt and Turkey. The same can be said for outside actors that exercise significant influence on the region: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Qatar. Such wide-ranging diplomatic activity requires a careful balancing act, and Italian governments have often had limited success, perhaps lacking consistency and perseverance in some cases, or relying on its partners to take the initiative in others. The argument can be made that Italy would be best served by a narrower focus on very few issues where its interests are concentrated: in other words, a more selective sense of priorities. It is a reasoning that would certainly apply first and foremost to Libya, but also to energy networks, relations with Turkey and with Tunisia, counterterrorism activities, and maritime security.

⁷ Prime Minister Mario Draghi, “Hearing on Programmatic Lines,” Transcript of Speech Delivered in Rome, March 31, 2021, https://www.camera.it/leg18/1132?shadow_primapagina=12046.

The Libyan Conundrum in a Wider Regional Context

Indeed, the most conspicuous case of modest results—even a certain aloofness—in the face of major interests at stake is certainly Libya, where Italy has been unable and/or unwilling to play a systematically active role in the wake of the 2011 Arab Spring. The Libyan setting has been characterized by major factions, including a government based in Tripoli that was internationally recognized ahead of proposed December 2021 elections, and an eastern faction.⁸ Each is supported by armed militias and outside actors enabling them to fight and to some extent balance each other. In this context, Italy has been extremely cautious even in its support for the Tripoli government; instead, it has been Turkey's intervention, beginning in 2020, that has been decisive in helping the recognized government.⁹

In early April 2021, the Draghi government signaled that Libya is a priority in Italy's foreign policy by scheduling the prime minister's very first official visit abroad to Tripoli to meet interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh.¹⁰ However, there is obviously a long way ahead if the goal is to stabilize the country under domestic conditions that would be fully acceptable to the international community while realizing at least part of its economic potential. Building on this complicated legacy, two factors should in principle make it obvious for Italy and the United States to closely cooperate on the Libyan dossier in the near future. First, gas supplies from the North African country are of great importance to diversify European imports (thus reducing dependency on Russian supplies). The full utilization of existing infrastructure requires political progress, and even more so the construction of new connections. Second, the role of the Libyan territory as a transit and staging area for migration flows heading north is a shared concern with the United States as well as Italy's EU partners.

Following the postponement of Libya's December 2021 general elections and the emergence of two claims to the Office of the Prime Minister,¹¹ it is becoming clear that no national/unilateral initiative would make a fundamental difference on its own.

In the short term, the tested "P3+2" format (the United States, United Kingdom, and France, who have permanent seats on the UN Security Council, plus Germany and Italy) is important from an Italian perspective, certainly due to its inclusiveness, but also to avoid European misunderstandings that, in the recent past, have vastly complicated the management of an inherently unstable and dangerous situation on the ground. Broadly speaking, Italy is very sensitive to ad hoc formats that would exclude its representatives and thus openly supportive of those that instead place it at the same level as the European permanent members, the UK and France.

To be fair, there is a serious rationale behind this format, as the variation in the number and players can facilitate the separation of humanitarian concerns from the issues likely to provoke fierce opposition from one or more permanent members.¹² This approach seems suited in and around the Mediterranean: the same configuration has been used on multiple occasions to tackle tensions and acute crises in the countries of the former Yugoslavia. It should be noted that Washington's support has always been a key factor in shifting to the wider configuration to involve Germany and Italy.

In the short to medium term, the priority in Libya is to keep the multilateral process on track to facilitate the transition from a civil war to peaceful political competition. It is important that all international actors with a stake in the country remain involved in this process, openly participating at the diplomatic level rather than covertly or unilaterally providing military support to one or more factions. Italy's convening power has been useful in this regard and could be used more vigorously and consistently.¹³

In the longer term, it may even be possible to envisage a multilateral training mission in support of a unified Libyan armed force with Italian participation, and Rome would welcome a US presence or contribution in such a context, especially for intelligence purposes.¹⁴ Local conditions are clearly not ripe for an initiative of this kind, but Italy would have the right incentives and adequate expertise to lead or co-lead such a mission.

8 The eastern faction has been led by General Khalifa Haftar; in March 2022, however, the eastern parliament (one of two rival parliamentary chambers) appointed Fathi Bashagha as prime minister. The interim prime minister, Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, who was to be a candidate in the elections that were postponed, has refused to relinquish his office to Bashagha. See "Libya's Rival Lawmakers Start U.N.-Backed Talks in Egypt," Last Updated April 14, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/libyas-rival-governments-start-un-backed-talks-egypt-2022-04-13/>.

9 Jeremy Bowen, "Libya Conflict: Russia and Turkey Risk Syria Repeat," BBC, June 1, 2020.

10 Reuters, "Libya's Rival Lawmakers."

11 Edith M. Lederer, "UN Warns Libya Could Be Divided Again, Urges 2022 Elections," Associated Press via US News, March 16, 2022, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2022-03-16/un-warns-libya-could-be-divided-again-urges-2022-elections>.

12 Scholars have argued, for example, that Australia, Luxembourg, and Jordan, all three elected members of the UN Security Council, were able to "delink" humanitarian issues from "divisive" issues to promote a response to protect a population; see Jason Ralph and Jess Gifkins, "The Purpose of United Nations Security Council Practice: Contesting Competence Claims in the Normative Context Created by the Responsibility to Protect," *European Journal of International Relations* 23, no. 3 (2017): 630–653, DOI: 10.1177/1354066116669652.

13 Author interview with a US State Department official, conducted in confidentiality, February 2022.

14 Author interviews with two Italian Foreign Ministry officials, conducted in confidentiality, December 2021 and February 2022.

In sum, Italy may have no formal mandate to lead European efforts in Libya, but there seem to be reasonable expectations in Washington and Rome that it can and should take on a share of these responsibilities—an assessment that has been informally confirmed by Italian Foreign Ministry officials.¹⁵ A higher profile of this sort would be in Italy's interest.

Energy Networks and the Changing Geopolitics of the Eastern Mediterranean

Italy's energy security and international trade significantly rely on the East Mediterranean. Migration routes are a constant concern, and they happen to partly coincide with key commercial routes. This combination of factors has led to a growing presence of the Italian navy in the area; however, increased patrolling is just part of the answer and a very partial solution at best.

Energy policy is a key priority for the EU and for Italy—thus also for transatlantic relations, given its immediate impact on economic performance and policy options. An Italian viewpoint in the transatlantic discussion can help frame energy choices through a European lens as well. There is indeed a European predicament that the United States sometimes fails to fully appreciate. At the risk of oversimplification, one might say that the nearly obsessive focus on the northern route under the Baltic Sea to link the Russian producer and European buyers—with Washington's partial blessing of North Stream 2 by the Biden administration prior to Russia's further invasion of Ukraine—has been a blow to Southern Europe's ambitions to serve as a comparable continental energy hub. Perhaps it is time to reassess the entire strategic assumption behind this northern choice, especially if the name of the game is diversification. What is sometimes overlooked is the significant increase in the EU's reliance on Russian gas between the Crimean crisis of 2014 and the Ukrainian crisis of 2021-22: growing from slightly less than 30 percent to nearly 40 percent.¹⁶

Since at least 2015, Italy has been working to explore new energy opportunities linked to natural gas discoveries by Italy's leading oil-producing company, ENI, off the Egyptian coast. The East Mediterranean Gas Forum,

created in 2019-20—comprising Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine—and known as EastMed, has recently undergone an overall reassessment and a de facto downgrading as a commercial project, mostly due to market developments and the growing focus on renewable sources, including by the Biden administration. However, EastMed's setup remains politically interesting as a multilateral exercise involving countries with problematic regional relations, for example, among Egypt, Cyprus, and Israel, with quiet US support.¹⁷ Its configuration has been vocally criticized by Turkey,¹⁸ which feels deliberately excluded despite its potential as a major energy hub (it is already the key transit route for the Trans Adriatic Pipeline that connects Azeri gas fields in the Caspian Sea with Italy through Turkish, Greek, and Albanian territory). Due precisely to Ankara's concerns, EastMed has become indirectly embroiled in the Libyan situation, since Turkey has struck a deal with the Tripoli government that this author views as designed to complicate the exploitation of maritime reserves on the basis of contested exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean. Egypt, notably, also is involved in Libya, its neighbor.¹⁹

The more ambitious version of the EastMed infrastructural project is very unlikely to become reality, but a smaller, adapted version could still be feasible, with an emphasis on bringing natural gas to MENA countries, rather than Europe, and possibly on ensuring an adequate "strategic reserve" for European countries in light of the intermittent nature of current renewable sources. Such a revised and adapted concept would fit nicely into the complex energy mix that will probably emerge over the next few years, as countries with different technological capabilities and unique domestic market conditions try to ensure an adequate level of connectivity with new energy networks (including smart grids). In this regard, a redesigned energy framework is an integral part of climate policy and the related transformation of multiple value chains. It is thus a very broad area of possible transatlantic cooperation—all the more so in light of the heightened Ukrainian crisis, which has dramatically highlighted the importance of diversification and a reliable stock of energy reserves. In any case, EastMed's format could be replicated or broadened as another manifestation of Italy's renewed convening power on very practical matters of common interest.

15 Author interviews with two Italian Foreign Ministry officials.

16 "Energy Represented 62% of EU Imports from Russia," European Commission, Eurostat (website), March 7, 2022, <https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/web/products-eurostat-news/-/ddn-20220307-1>. For the most recent developments and existing plans, see "How Europe Can Cut Natural Gas Imports from Russia Significantly within a Year," International Energy Agency, Press Release, March 3, 2020, <https://www.iea.org/news/how-europe-can-cut-natural-gas-imports-from-russia-significantly-within-a-year>.

17 Ian Lesser, "The Med: Hub or Flashpoint?," *Aspenia Online*, November 29, 2018, <https://aspeniaonline.it/the-med-hub-or-flashpoint/>.

18 Faruk Zorlu, "Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum 'Far from Reality,'" *Anadolu Ajansı* (state-run Turkish news agency), January 17, 2020, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/turkey/eastern-mediterranean-gas-forum-far-from-reality-/1705346>. In January 2020, the Turkish Foreign Ministry officially stated: "No initiatives that leave Turkey and Cyprus out of them will succeed in the Eastern Mediterranean. Therefore, this initiative provides new evidence that countries that have left unanswered our calls for dialogue and cooperation are still pursuing vain hope."

19 Reuters, "Libya's Rival Lawmakers."



Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi poses with Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as he arrives for the G20 leaders summit in Rome, Italy October 30, 2021. REUTERS/Guglielmo Mangiapane

The Turkish Factor and Its Untapped Potential

There is a more specific Turkish question to be tackled, with possible repercussions for North African affairs. Geographically, Turkey would be a natural partner for any large-scale development of the Mediterranean's energy grids. Yet there is a wider diplomatic and security rationale for both NATO and Europe to attempt to reintegrate Ankara in cooperative endeavors. In fact, active and at times vocal Turkish opposition to the EastMed project in its current form has been a significant obstacle to this specific project. The Turkish stance fits a general pattern that has characterized President Erdoğan's foreign policy over the past decade. Looking at Turkey's progressive estrangement from the EU (due to disillusionment with the EU application process) and NATO, tensions following the US invasion of Iraq, and its actions in the Syrian crisis, one

can see President Erdoğan taking bold political positions in the region.²⁰ After almost twenty years of gradual deterioration, mending relations with Ankara, at least under certain conditions, would bring various types of benefits in a regional and even global context.

From Italy's viewpoint, commercial and security interests converge when looking at Turkey's potential as a more reliable partner: it is no accident that Rome was consistently among the advocates of Turkish EU accession, at least in principle. Prevailing European attitudes have changed quite significantly in this respect since the early 2000s, but there is still room for much better relations if Ankara's priorities were to deviate from the recent pattern. In such a scenario, close coordination with Washington would almost certainly be helpful.

20 See, for example, Bernard Selwan Khoury, "Turkey's Dangerous Game in Syria, between the Damascus Regime and the Return of ISIS," *Aspenia Online*, October 21, 2019, <https://aspensiaonline.it/turkeys-dangerous-game-in-syria-between-the-damascus-regime-and-the-return-of-isis/>; Dr. Ian O. Lesser, "The Eastern Mediterranean Vortex," *Turkish Policy Quarterly*, June 28, 2016, <http://turkishpolicy.com/article/802/the-eastern-mediterranean-vortex>; and Aybars Görgülü and Gülşah Dark Kahyaoğlu, "Turkey, the EU and the Mediterranean: Perceptions, Policies and Prospects," *Istituto Affari Internazionali*, June 26, 2017, <https://www.iai.it/it/pubblicazioni/turkey-eu-and-mediterranean-perceptions-policies-and-prospects>.



Demonstrators hold flags as they gather during a protest in opposition to a referendum on a new constitution called by President Kais Saied, in Tunis, Tunisia June 18, 2022. REUTERS/Jihed Abidellaoui/File Photo

Tunisia: Small but Not Marginal

Although this small North African country is a secondary regional actor at best and is not located at a major geopolitical crossroads, Tunisia's political fate is at least symbolically important as the only partial success story to come out of the Arab Spring. This very assessment has been put in question by President Kais Saied's decision to assume executive authority in July 2021. Tunisia could potentially turn into a bad headache if this situation further deteriorates, which could have immediate and direct repercussions for Italy, given its geographical proximity: only 145 kilometers separate the southwestern tip of Sicily from the northeastern tip of Tunisia in what is called the Strait of Sicily—a chokepoint in the middle of the Mediterranean. In a scenario of high instability and protracted internal conflict, there would be security implications and an inevitable flow of migrants with a legitimate claim to asylum status. The last thing Europe needs is a new local crisis in the only country that seemed to be moving in a positive direction,

with very limited external interference, after the shock of the Arab Spring.

For Italy, such a scenario highlights the benefits of direct coordination with the United States, including providing a tangible sign that the type of political regime ruling an unstable country on Italy's southern shore is not just an issue of concern to Europeans but to Washington, despite its well-established practice of working with all sorts of governments. For example, the United States has a long-standing policy of providing military aid to Egypt while also criticizing its authorities for systematic human rights violations, and a similar attitude has characterized European relations with this pivotal North African country. This delicate balancing act abruptly fell apart on the occasion of the Arab Spring, but has not been replaced by an alternative policy.

Tunisia is the only country where a degree of real political change has survived the post-2011 phase without

descending into social chaos. Against this background, as Tunisia is currently engaged in complex negotiations with the International Monetary Fund for a critical rescue package, Italy and the United States could coordinate to ensure—conditionally—the needed international support, possibly with the EU as an important complement to the effort.

Counterterrorism and the Sahel Subregion

Terrorism and unconventional (often hybrid) threats remain a core concern for both Italy and the United States when looking at the wider Mediterranean. This threat assessment has decisively contributed to the recent adoption of a more flexible approach by the EU that also incorporates the vast Sahel region. Such an approach is gradually being developed both in European capitals and at a wider European level, and implies a geographically vertical view stretching from Southern Europe to the Sahel, as well as the more traditional horizontal view of the MENA region. In essence, the EU, which adopted a new official strategy for the region in April 2021, now views the Sahel as a highly unstable region characterized by strong interdependence across issues (economic, political, security) and across countries, especially to the north.²¹ The partial change in perspective produces a growing convergence with US interests in the region, which include the established military presence of the United States in the Horn of Africa, where other European countries also deploy troops and Italy has played a somewhat larger role than elsewhere on the continent.

The Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh was created in September 2014 with the goal of degrading and ultimately defeating the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) through military and intelligence operations, financial tools, and media campaigns.²² The grouping constitutes an important channel of cooperation in a very broad context, to be complemented by the recent launching of an Africa Focus Group, initially co-chaired by the United States, Italy, Morocco, and Niger.²³ There is a widely shared perception in Europe and the United States that the regional

security situation is worsening,²⁴ after three military coups in a short span of time (i.e., Mali, Burkina Faso, Guinea), and the generally poor results of French attempts to stabilize Mali—by French admission at this point.²⁵ The European choice to move beyond the largely French-led management of security relations with some key actors in the Sahel is confirmed by the multinational (but non-EU) operation (“Takuba”) launched in Mali in March 2021—involving Belgium, the Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Germany, Greece, the Netherlands, Norway, Portugal, Sweden, the UK, plus the five members of the “G5 Sahel,” (i.e., Mauritania, Mali, Niger, Burkina Faso, Chad). An Italian official (former Deputy Foreign Minister Emanuela Del Re) has been appointed EU Special Envoy to the Sahel. Earlier this year, Takuba was redeployed to neighboring Niger, in light of the worsening security conditions in Mali, and the future of the mission is far from assured.

Yet, the ongoing efforts that would benefit from closer Italy-US cooperation are those in the field of security partnerships with regional countries, all of which show major signs of instability that at the moment cannot be tackled by solely economic measures. However, a few Italian companies are still very keen to explore opportunities in the region, so a holistic approach would likely serve the entire spectrum of Italian interests better than any single-issue initiative. Moreover, it is highly likely that relations with North Africa will be seen increasingly in light of broader developments in the entire MENA region and in the Sahel.

NATO's Unique Role in Maritime Security and Beyond

There is an open debate on whether NATO could and should play an expanded and more systematic role in the MENA region. Beyond specific crisis-management contingencies or ad hoc arrangements, the Alliance has repeatedly attempted, over several years, to better define its goals and operations along its southern flank. The development of a new NATO Strategic Concept, to update the one published in 2010, is another opportunity to elaborate

21 European Parliamentary Research Service, “New EU Strategic Priorities for the Sahel: Addressing Regional Challenges through Better Governance,” European Parliament Briefing, July 2021, [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS_BRI\(2021\)696161_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2021/696161/EPRS_BRI(2021)696161_EN.pdf).

22 “About Us—The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS,” US State Department (website), Accessed April 15, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/about-us-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis/>.

23 US State Department, “Political Directors Small Group Meeting of the Global Coalition to Defeat Daesh/ISIS,” Office of the Spokesperson, Press Release, December 3, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/political-directors-small-group-meeting-of-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-daesh-isis/>.

24 “Secretary Blinken’s G5-Sahel Regional Summit Remarks, 2021,” US Embassy in Chad (website), February 16, 2021, <https://td.usembassy.gov/secretary-blinkens-g5-sahel-regional-summit-remarks-2021/>.

25 “Macron Announces French Troop Withdrawal from Mali,” France 24 (French state-owned news channel), February 17, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/france/20220217-live-macron-holds-conference-on-sahel-engagement-as-france-poised-to-withdraw-troops-from-mali>. While refusing to call the mission a failure, President Macron stated that “We cannot remain militarily engaged alongside de-facto authorities whose strategy and hidden aims we do not share” and “victory against terror is not possible if it’s not supported by the state itself.” Given that one of the goals of the French presence was to stabilize the country, one can hardly call this a success.

a general framework in light of recent and future security trends, as discussed further below.²⁶

Given its geographical location, Italy has invariably made the case for an increased focus on the very diverse Mediterranean area, and the responsibilities of the NATO Command in Naples (i.e., Joint Force Command Naples) are a tangible sign of the country's regional role in the context of the Alliance. JFC Naples also is tasked with managing the Alliance's commitments in Africa: NATO has been providing various forms of support to the African Union, with the twin aims of helping that organization develop its capabilities as a macroregional stabilizer and specifically countering piracy activities around the Horn of Africa.

Of course, Naples also hosts the headquarters of the US Sixth Fleet. US naval assets remain paramount not just to NATO capabilities but to Italy, underlining the importance to Rome of coordinating regional issues with Washington.

In a broader strategic perspective, the recent escalation of tensions with Russia ought to remind all NATO members that there is a close geopolitical connection between the traditional eastern flank and Mediterranean security—not just through the Black Sea but also through the Western Balkans (which happens to be the area of the latest NATO enlargements in 2009, 2017, and 2020). As the presence of Russian forces and interests has grown in the MENA region, and Chinese economic activities have intensified, Italian officials are concerned that the perception of relative US disengagement is contributing to a worsening security condition across the board. Thus, it may be logical for NATO to officially restate its major commitment to the security of Europe against Russian interference and direct or indirect threats (through deterrence and defense), and

yet this very task will have to imply the commitment of at least some resources to the southern flank (through stability projection).

Against this shifting background, the upcoming new NATO Strategic Concept is an opportunity to better frame risks, threats, deterrence, defense, and partnerships. Most likely, the Alliance's tasks and practical options in the North African region will be strongly determined by two factors: first, that ongoing conflicts in the area are not confined to any single country but are instead highly interrelated; second, there is almost invariably a high level of international interference in domestic dynamics.

This combination makes NATO all the more relevant given its value as a tested platform for partnerships and complex integrated operations, as well as for its "over the horizon" capabilities even when it engages in strictly limited missions. From Italy's standpoint, maritime security will continue to be a paramount concern, but one that cannot be wholly separated from other regional developments. At the same time, given the complex nature of today's politics and economics as well as the terms of allied consensus, NATO will only be capable of addressing some of the longer-term risks. Therefore, the EU has a major role to play as a partner in encouraging and supporting constructive transformation: from trade opportunities and the energy transition to legal immigration flows and a more active and resilient civil society. This is where Italy's consistent advocacy for regular and effective NATO-EU cooperation makes eminent strategic sense. Moreover, the renewed US commitment to the Alliance, if coupled with a focus on practical functions and capabilities, can also facilitate a more mature and serious intra-European debate on the EU's security contribution.

26 For a broad and forward-looking assessment (done prior to the Ukraine crisis), see: *NATO 2030: United for a New Era, Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General*, NATO, November 2020, https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf.

Chapter 2

Egypt and Turkey's Geopolitical Relations in a Troubled Middle East: What Can Be Improved and How

— Alessia Melcangii

Introduction: A Historical Background

Historical rivals in different regional geopolitical crises, Turkey and Egypt could today have the chance to open a new chapter in their bilateral relations, as part of a broader normalization process underway in the Middle East. However, different crucial disputes between these two countries remain unsettled. Italy could be a mediator among them, given its historically close relations with the territories and peoples of the larger Mediterranean region, and its intense participation in UN and NATO institution-building and peace-keeping missions. Betting on stronger transatlantic cooperation in the Mediterranean, Italy could become a fundamental bridge between the Mediterranean's southern shore and Italy's US and European allies.

This paper aims first to explore the conflicting geopolitical projections and national interests of both Egypt and Turkey regarding three current main regional disputes, namely the Libyan crisis, the geoenergetic and geopolitical dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). Second, this paper investigates areas of concern as well as strategies to envisage possible convergences or points of mediation. Third and last, this paper aims to underline how Italy, in the frameworks of the US alliance and the European Union, could help defuse tensions and support a rapprochement between these two countries.

During the Ottoman Empire, the histories of Turkey and Egypt were intertwined,²⁷ as the first country represented for centuries the *Sublime Porte* (a figure of speech for the Ottoman Empire's central government), while the second for almost three and a half centuries was one of its most important (and often rebellious) provinces. In the twentieth century, the two countries pursued two extremely different models of modernization: Turkey started a process of Westernization according to the secular project of etatism led by Kemal Atatürk and, after World War II ended, it

became one of NATO's strongest southern bastions against the Soviet Union. Egypt, under the revolutionary President Gamal Abdel Nasser, became the leader of the anti-imperialism movement, calling for the redemption of the Arab world against the West and its "artificial outpost" Israel.

The end of the bipolar epoch signaled a progressive shift in the traditional policies of both countries. In Turkey, the armed forces vainly opposed a growing Islamization of society and political discourse, ending with the rise of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan as an unchallenged leader. In the same period, Egypt went through difficult years of "fury,"²⁸ marked by a dangerous polarization of society, starting in the 1970s and continuing in the thirty-year government of Hosni Mubarak. For a while, the two countries seemed to converge in support of the 2011 waves of protests, the so-called Arab Spring. Erdoğan immediately proposed Turkey as a model of pragmatic political Islam, capable of gaining and maintaining power; in 2012, after a complex transition phase, the Muslim Brotherhood, which is linked to Erdoğan's Justice and Development Party (AKP), won the Egyptian election and Mohamed Morsi became the first civilian Islamist president. This political convergence was dramatically reversed by the rise to power of General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who reoriented Egyptian politics by fiercely fighting against the Muslim Brotherhood, thus bringing Turkish-Egyptian relations to a historical low point.

The Rift of the Arab Spring in 2013 and the Worsening of the Cairo-Ankara Rivalry

After the July 2013 ousting of President Morsi by the armed forces, tension between Turkey and Egypt escalated. Erdoğan immediately described the military's intervention as an interruption of the democratic transition, while the AKP offered political asylum to members of the Muslim Brotherhood and launched a media campaign against the new Egyptian government. The Egyptian military, which in

27 Michael Bishku, "Turkey and Egypt Since the 1950s: Rivals for Influence in the Middle East," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 27, no. 1 (2003): 19-48.

28 Muhammad Hasanayn Heikal, *Autumn of Fury: The Assassination of Sadat* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1983).



Members of the Muslim Brotherhood and supporters of Egypt's President Mohamed Mursi hold his picture as they react after the Egyptian army's statement was read out on state TV, at the Raba El-Adwyia mosque square in Cairo July 3, 2013. Egypt's armed forces overthrew elected Islamist President Mohamed Mursi on Wednesday and announced a political transition with the support of a wide range of political, religious and youth leaders. A statement published in Mursi's name on his official Facebook page after head of Egypt's armed forces General Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's speech said the measures announced amounted to "a full military coup" and were "totally rejected". REUTERS/Khaled Abdullah

December 2013 declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization, interpreted Turkey's firm backing for that group as an inappropriate intervention in its domestic affairs and a violation of diplomatic norms. As a result, the two countries reduced their official diplomatic ties to the level of *chargés d'affaires*.²⁹ This situation deepened the ideological fragmentation within the Sunni *'umma* (i.e., community of believers) through the emergence of two opposing factions: on one side, Turkey and Qatar as supporters of so-called political Islam, and on the other side their opponents, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt. This ideological dispute reflects the increasingly conflicting geopolitical ambitions of the two countries' leaders.

Contrary to the traditional limited involvement in Middle Eastern Affairs, Erdoğan followed a comprehensive foreign-policy strategy that relies on strong regional activism, especially in Syria, the Kurdish region of Iraq, and the greater Mediterranean. Turkey's initiatives in the Mediterranean area appear to be guided by an ambitious legal and geopolitical *Mavi Vatan* (Blue Homeland) doctrine, which offers a specific road map that defines Turkey's axis of geopolitical zones of influence and defense.³⁰

This activism obviously emphasized Turkey's rivalry with a country like Egypt that was struggling to regain its past relevance in the region. Cairo did not accept the idea of being considered a second political line of the Arab power

29 Ziya Meral, "Turkey and Egypt: Misconceptions & Missed Opportunities," Analysis, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (website), May 2, 2014, <http://timep.org/commentary/turkey-egypt-misconceptions-missed-opportunities>.

30 Alexander Murinson, "The Strategic Depth Doctrine of Turkish Foreign Policy," *Middle Eastern Studies* 42 (2006): 945-964.

system. In the recent past, Egypt was forced to give way to new powers like Saudi Arabia and even the UAE, which for years supported the country's crumbling economy, but Cairo had never quit its traditional mediating role in Middle East conflicts. In the current regional competition, Egypt appears committed to redesigning its geopolitical aspirations by following three main priorities: presenting itself to the international community as the real strategic pivot, reaffirming its image over regional adversaries, and defending its national security interests at the regional level.

Currently, the competition between Turkey and Egypt is playing out in three main quadrants: the Libyan quagmire, the geoeconomic dispute of the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Nile basin.

Almost Friends: Ongoing Normalization and Issues to Be Resolved

Nowadays, a deescalation of tensions is underway among the main actors of the region. The Middle East's regional polarization appears to be softened by a new positive development in Saudi-Turkish, Emirates-Turkish, Saudi-Qatari, and Egyptian-Qatari relations.³¹ The rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt represents a fundamental pillar of this broader normalization process, and the resumption of bilateral talks, launched in May 2021 with a two-day meeting of the countries' deputy foreign ministers in Cairo, suggests that there are concrete steps in this direction—especially as both regimes appear under pressure due to regional, international, and domestic developments.

However, several controversies remain unsettled and the path toward reconciliation between Turkey and Egypt appears fraught and uncertain. Another element to consider is the asymmetry of the two countries' power-projection scenarios: while Egypt is mainly playing in the Mediterranean-Levant and the Horn of Africa quadrants, Turkey has a wider heterogeneity of strategic fields, since it is active in Central Asia as well as in the Middle East, and it also has a vocal African policy. In other words, while Egypt is playing all its cards on a table where Ankara is present, Ankara is active in strategic quadrants where Egypt is absent.

The Libyan Geopolitical Game

Key Elements for Analysis

A 2019 attack on Tripoli by General Khalifa Haftar, chief of the eastern-based Libyan National Army's (LNA), gave Turkey the opportunity to enter the "game." In 2020, after signing a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA), which was then backed by the UN, Ankara was able to turn the tide of the civil war. Its intervention in the conflict, specifically by giving the GNA military and logistical assistance, helped avoid the fall of Tripoli and repelled Haftar's forces on the al-Jufra-Sirte line.

Turkey's escalation was largely seen as a reaction to the Egyptian intention to contain Turkey's strategic and economic influence in the Mediterranean through the creation of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum and an "anti-Turkish axis."³²

Egypt's position on Libya has, however, evolved over the last three years. It went from playing a very active spoiler role in the conflict through its support of Haftar's LNA to playing a more moderate and diplomatic one. In February 2021, Egypt declared its support for the Government of National Unity (GNU) led by Prime Minister Abdel Hamid Dbeibeh.³³ In so doing, it presented itself internationally "as the most compromise-seeking actor among the Libyan general's backers,"³⁴ and bet on the UN road map that would have taken the country to the December 2021 elections (which were not held).³⁵ Egypt's recognition of the GNU also aimed to prevent a military escalation that Cairo can hardly afford, due to its ongoing security crises in the Sinai Peninsula and the growing relevance of the GERD dispute.

Egypt sees significant opportunities in having a more secure and stable Libya, for its own economic and security interests. Confident in its grip on eastern Libya, Egypt tried to engage with the West to strengthen economic and diplomatic relations (for example, by signing several MOUs in May 2021 with Tripoli that could increase investment opportunities between the two countries). As long as no one interferes with its strategic framework, and beyond

31 Muriel Asseburg and Sarah Henkel, "Normalisation and Realignment in the Middle East: A New, Conflict-Prone Regional Order Takes Shape," *Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik* (German Institute for International and Security Affairs, known as SWP), *SWP Comment*, no. 45 (July 2021), doi:10.18449/2021C45.

32 David Butter, "Egypt's Energy Ambitions and Its Eastern Mediterranean Policy," in *Eastern Mediterranean in Uncharted Waters: Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities*, ed. M. Tanchum, Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, December 2, 2020, 45-51, https://www.kas.de/documents/283907/10938219/Eastern+Mediterranean+in+Uncharted+Waters_KAS+Turkey.pdf/6f554da1-93ac-bba6-6fd0-3c8738244d4b?version=1.0&t=1607590823989.

33 Reuters Staff, "Egypt's Sisi Offers Support to Libya's New PM," Reuters, February 18, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/egypt-libya-idAFL1N2KO16M>.

34 Alessia Melcangi, "Egypt Recalibrated Its Strategy in Libya Because of Turkey," Atlantic Council, June 1, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/egypt-recalibrated-its-strategy-in-libya-because-of-turkey/>.

35 Other foreign actors involved in the Libyan conflict—such as Russia and the UAE—also were quick to express their support for the GNU and the UN road map; the UAE, for example, views the establishment of close ties with the GNU as an opportunity to have a voice in Libya's post-conflict reconstruction phase.

significant discrepancies over political Islam, Egypt seems committed to maintaining relations with both sides in Libya, betting on the possibility that its historical eastern allies (mainly General Haftar and House of Representatives Speaker Aguila Saleh) will win future elections, securing Egyptian ambitions.

In February 2022, following the failure to hold those elections in December, Libya's House of Representatives appointed Fathi Bashagha, the former interior minister and formally an ally of Turkey, to form a new government supported by the eastern forces and recognized by Egypt. This latest political twist in Libya could create a possible shift in relations between Egypt and Turkey. In particular, the Bashagha-Saleh "agreement" could trigger a revision of Ankara's and Cairo's relations with their proxies, inducing them to reconsider how they perceive their interests and their allies within the complex Libyan political matrix. Obviously, this evolution might influence their bilateral talks.

Main Strategic Considerations

Both Turkey and Egypt consider security sector reform (SSR) in Libya to be extremely important, but there is still no agreement on how to carry it out and what role the LNA should play in it. The following summarizes strategic considerations for each of these countries.

Egypt:

- The Egyptian security paradox: national security and domestic stability represent Cairo's priorities that, in the long-term, could be achieved through "a stable nation-state Libya for feasible border protection and an increase in trade; however, at the same time, Egypt cannot allow the creation of an Islamic-oriented government in Tripoli strictly linked with Turkey."³⁶ As a consequence, the short-term solution for the Egyptian government is to favor some actors in eastern Libya, such as General Haftar, who espouse the same ideology and fight against political Islam.
- Egypt sees the Libyan context primarily through the lens of securitization: any type of SSR process cannot be divorced from the necessary withdrawal of militias and foreign fighters from the country, and making the LNA the core of the new army. Its marginalization, in fact, "could lead to a dangerous strengthening of armed groups aligned with Turkey and a rise in the influence of Tripoli's militias, especially since the current political process is not yet defined."³⁷

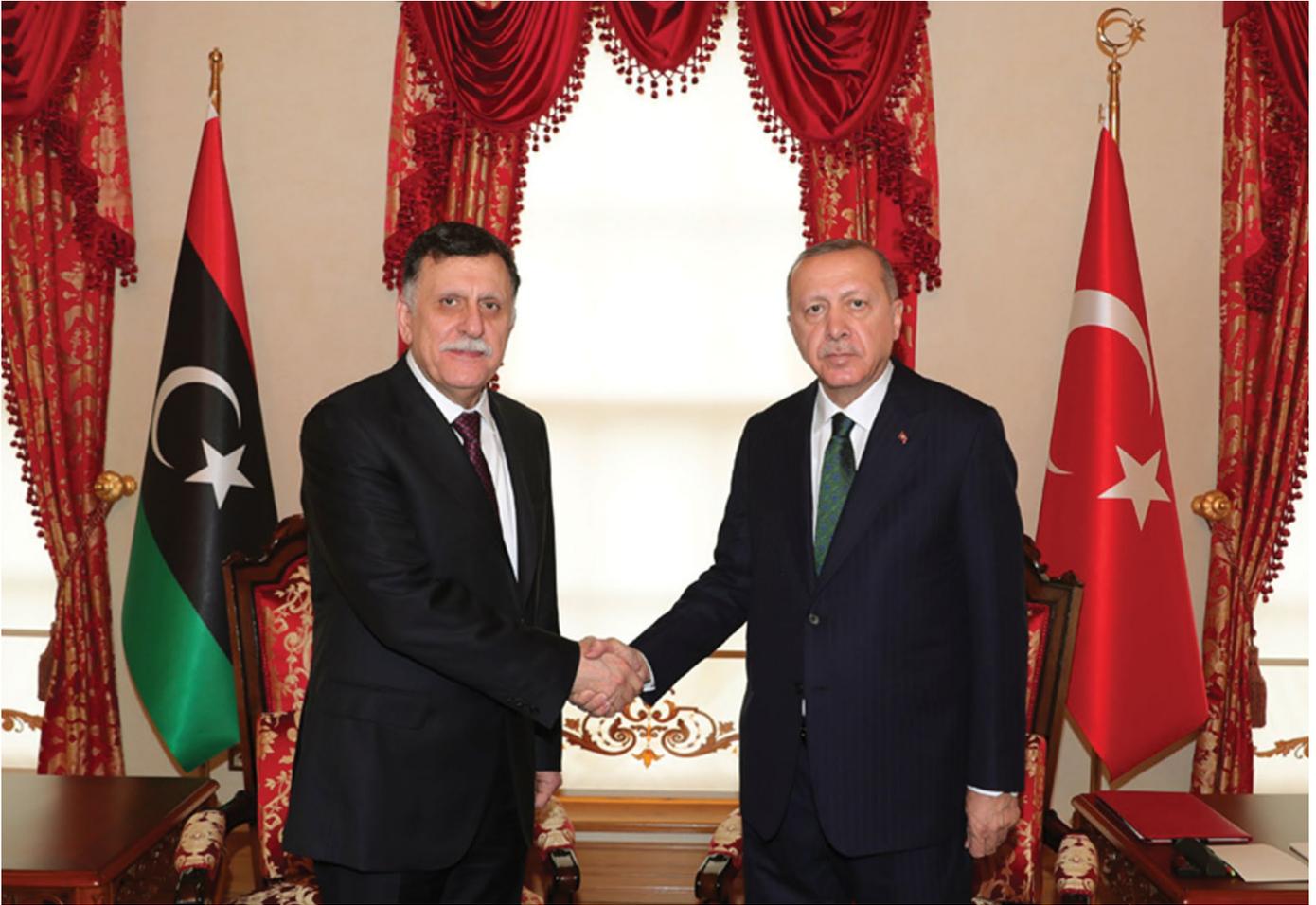
- In this mainly securitarian analytical framework, Egyptian policy toward Libya, and indirectly toward Turkey, is influenced also by a plurality of other intertwined interests:
 - Egypt wants to join the general reconciliation trend, appearing as a supporter of international efforts and not a spoiler. Moreover, Cairo seeks to mitigate US critics of its military regime, in order to obtain more flexibility from Washington on other critical topics.
 - Cairo tried to distance itself from the UAE's more rigid policy toward Libya. This is part of a wider policy to regain political autonomy from the Gulf monarchies and abandon its image as a "junior partner."
 - It wants to be ready to exploit a possible success of the political reconciliation process from an economic point of view through reestablishing historical economic ties.

Turkey:

- The Libyan question for Ankara is just one element of a wider multiregional geopolitical strategy, as noted earlier. As a consequence of the new Biden administration, the awareness of its isolation in the region, and hard domestic economic concerns, Turkey decided on a diplomatic deescalation, and Libya was one of the focal points of this attempt: a normalization process that is being carried out not only *vis-à-vis* Egypt but more widely.
- Therefore, Libya is the place where it is easier for Turkey to reach a compromise. Although Turkey is still formally requesting the electoral process, it appears less insistent for two reasons: to rebalance its relations with the west and the east of Libya; and to contribute to the improvement of relations with the Gulf monarchies (e.g., Turkish President Erdoğan traveled to meet with Saudi Arabia's crown prince in April to "develop" relations, in a first visit in many years, and the Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman went to Turkey in June).
- Turkey may realize that the Tripoli-Misrata camp is becoming too unstable to rely on and, therefore, might be less reluctant to open talks with the eastern faction in the wake of its current realignment with the UAE. Though Egypt might regard such a move as a threat, it could be fundamental for achieving a bilateral agreement—but only if Ankara, at the same time, would

36 Giorgio Cafiero and Emily Milliken, "Egypt Is Concerned About Libya," *International Policy Digest*, February 26, 2022, <https://intpolicydigest.org/egypt-is-concerned-about-libya/>.

37 Melcangi, "Egypt Recalibrated."



Istanbul (dpa) - President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is to visit Germany on Sunday for an international conference on Libya, Turkish state media reports.

decide to reduce its grip on some western groups and militias. This scenario currently seems like an unlikely option for President Erdoğan. On the other hand, appeasement on the Libyan question might also trigger a reopening of the Eastern Mediterranean issue, which represents an existential threat for Ankara.

The Geoenergetic and Geopolitical Dispute in the Eastern Mediterranean

Key Elements for Analysis

In the Eastern Mediterranean, recent gas and oil discoveries contributed to the rise of a geoenergy dispute over exclusive economic zones (EEZs). These discoveries led some Mediterranean countries, such as Egypt, Israel, and Greece, to deepen their cooperation in the energy field.

At the same time, the discoveries aggravated historical tensions among countries—such as between Turkey and Greece regarding the Republic of Cyprus, for their competing claims on maritime boundaries and resource rights.

Egypt has important interests connected with the energy sector. At the beginning of 2019, Egypt achieved natural gas self-sufficiency with the increased production of the Zohr and Noor offshore gas fields and ramped up its production and distribution of liquefied natural gas (LNG), thanks to the relaunch of the Idku and Damietta liquefaction plants in 2021.³⁸

The interest in leveraging Eastern Mediterranean gas reserves led Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, supported by Washington and the EU, to invest in stronger cooperation, signing bilateral and trilateral deals. In January 2019, these countries established the Eastern Mediterranean Gas

³⁸ Reuters Staff, "UPDATE 1-Egypt Announces Settling of Claims Over Restarted Damietta LNG Plant," Reuters, March 10, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/egypt-gas-idAFL8N2L81UP>.

Forum (EMGF) involving Jordan, Italy, and the Palestinian National Authority, with the aim of coordinating their energy policies and creating a regional gas market. The EMGF was imagined as a non inclusive project with the aim of excluding Turkey and Turkish-controlled Cyprus from taking part in the new natural gas architecture of the region to weaken Ankara's strategic projection in the Mediterranean.³⁹

In 2019, Turkey reacted with a confrontational posture, sending military ships to Cyprus's waters to effectively prevent drilling. By the end of the year, tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, and in particular between Ankara and Cairo, spilled over into the Libyan crisis. In November 2019, Ankara's signing of a MOU with the Libyan GNA created an EEZ that cuts across Greek and Greek Cypriot interests, staking a claim on an area where the EastMed deep-sea pipeline should be built. All the coastal states questioned the validity of this deal.

The East Med Gas Pipeline—with a length of approximately 1,900 kilometers—is supposed to ship 10 billion cubic meters of gas per year from Israel and Cyprus to European markets via Greece and Italy, bypassing Turkey. However, despite the support of both the EU and Italy specifically, it “has faced a number of challenges in terms of feasibility, costs, and funding (even before the drop in energy demand caused by the COVID-19 pandemic),”⁴⁰ which seemed to doom the success of the project.

What could alter the equation are post-pandemic gas price trends and the Ukrainian crisis. Both developments have made European energy diversification more urgent and could relaunch the idea of the EastMed pipeline, especially following the last US endorsement for the project.⁴¹ These same developments offer Egypt an opportunity to increase its LNG sales and Turkey an opening to expand the southern corridor that already brings gas through the Trans Anatolian Natural Gas Pipeline (TANAP) to Europe's Trans Adriatic Pipeline (TAP). The EastMed gas pipeline project might appear to be a more appealing alternative than importing LNG from distant suppliers or increasing the flow of non-Russian gas pipelines; however, transforming an “on-paper” gas pipeline into a real one is extremely costly, technically challenging, and time consuming. Thus, a contingent crisis is not a sufficient trigger; it requires an

analysis of long-term sustainability and strong political willingness (as was the case of the Baku-Ceyhan oil pipeline).⁴²

Main Strategic Considerations

Egypt:

- The Eastern Mediterranean represents a line of strategic intervention for Egypt at both the domestic and the international level, which is based on: the management of Egyptian natural gas resources in the most effective way to serve its domestic energy needs, which are directly linked with rapid population growth, thus countering a possible source of instability; and the need to garner revenues from exporting any surplus gas that it can produce, which could lead the country to become a regional provider for the energy trade.
- The EMGF is a massive gas producer, but it will require years of infrastructure development to become a massive gas exporter. However, the EMGF became a major vehicle for diplomatic energy cooperation in the region. Egypt has used this vehicle to antagonize Turkey, exploiting Ankara's already present animosity toward Greece, Cyprus, and Israel. Now, however, it might be used to increase its instrumental leverage in the negotiations.
- At the moment, including Turkey in the EMGF would still carry too-high political and diplomatic costs, especially due to mistrust of Ankara that the Egyptian security apparatus seems to maintain, given its potential role as a destabilizer and its ongoing support of the Muslim Brotherhood⁴³. To overcome this mistrust, the benefits of engaging Turkey in the EMGF would have to be extremely advantageous.

Turkey:

- Ankara appears to be more committed to an effective deescalation and rapprochement with Egypt, as mentioned earlier.
- Despite all the possible strategic political and diplomatic caveats, entering the EMGF and exploiting offshore gas resources are extremely important for Ankara's strained

39 Nael Shama, “The Geopolitics of a Latent International Conflict in Eastern Mediterranean,” Al Jazeera Centre for Studies, December 23, 2019, 10, https://studies.aljazeera.net/sites/default/files/articles/documents/2020-01/8a79585b90e9471c9d883a2ab5ba4f57_100.pdf.

40 Valeria Talbot, “Turkey's Struggle for Influence in the Eastern Mediterranean,” Italian Institute for International Political Studies, *ISPI Commentary*, July 17, 2020, <https://www.ispionline.it/en/publicazione/turkeys-struggle-influence-eastern-mediterranean-26977>.

41 US Department of State, “Joint Statement on the 3+1 (Republic of Cyprus, Greece, Israel + United States) Foreign Ministerial,” Media Note, Office of the Spokesperson, May 9, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-31-republic-of-cyprus-greece-israel-united-states-foreign-ministerial/>.

42 Mustafa Balat and Gulyeter Ersoy, “Baku-Tbilisi Ceyhan Oil Pipeline (BTC) Project and Turkey: Investments, Future Developments and Environmental Impacts,” *Energy Exploration & Exploitation* 23, no. 1 (2005): 31–39.

43 Interview with an Egyptian official, February 14, 2022. The interview was conducted in confidentiality and the name is withheld by mutual agreement.



Sudanese President Omar Hassan al-Bashir (C) shakes hands with his Egyptian counterpart Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn after signing an Agreement on the Declaration of Principles on the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam Project in Khartoum March 23, 2015. The leaders of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan signed a cooperation deal on Monday over a giant Ethiopian hydroelectric dam on a tributary of the river Nile, in a bid to ease tensions over regional water supplies. The leaders said the “declaration of principles” would pave the way for further diplomatic cooperation on the Grand Renaissance Dam, which has stirred fears of a regional resource conflict. No details of the agreement were immediately released. REUTERS/ Mohamed Nureldin Abdallah

economy and its need to reduce its dependency on external energy providers (as it imports more than 90 percent of the energy it needs). This is a case where the rationality of economic and financial considerations could trigger a strategic and diplomatic moderation.

- According to its *Mavi Vatan* doctrine,⁴⁴ Turkey’s energy policy is primarily focused on maintaining its role as an energy hub between the east-west and north-south corridors. In order to connect hydrocarbon-rich areas with European markets and to diversify energy supplies, Turkey should mediate its own geopolitical ambitions, in other words, balancing its power projections with its economic constraints.
- In fact, for Turkey, the Eastern Mediterranean is not only about energy or gas. It is related to several maritime issues with its Eastern Mediterranean neighbors, including Greece, especially the lack of a political settlement of the Cyprus issue, which has kept UN peacekeeping forces on the island since 1964.⁴⁵
- Turkey is obviously favorable to engaging with the EMGF, but only with certain conditions: a critical one is having Turkish-Cypriots at the table. This will require both flexibility by Greece and Cyprus and a degree of “diplomatic imagination” in order to find a suitable informal accommodation for them.

44 Aurélien Denizeau, “Mavi Vatan, the ‘Blue Homeland’: The Origins, Influences and Limits of an Ambitious Doctrine for Turkey,” *Etudes de l’Ifri*, April 2021, <https://www.ifri.org/en/publications/etudes-de-lifri/mavi-vatan-blue-homeland-origins-influences-and-limits-ambitious>.

45 “UNFICYP Fact Sheet,” United Nations Peacekeeping Force in Cyprus (website), <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/mission/unficyp>.



A view of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Blue Nile in Ethiopia. Ethiopia has started generating electricity from the giant Renaissance Dam, and its Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed congratulated the people on the “birth of a new era” of development.

- The importance of the EMGF regarding the overall economic relations of the two countries should not be overestimated: there is gas, but there is also non energy-related trade, tourism, and Turkish direct investment in Egypt from the private sector.

A Matter of Survival: GERD, Egyptian Interests, and Turkey's Role

The dispute over Ethiopia's mega dam on the Nile represents a strategic threat to Egypt's national security, which is mostly linked to the fact that the river provides more than 90 percent of the North African country's water supply. In February 2022, Ethiopia announced the partial start of electricity production for the first time, which will be followed by a third filling of the dam that will drastically reduce the Nile's flow of water to Egypt and Sudan. The description of this complex scenario is beyond our

purposes. Thus, this topic will be addressed only for what concerns Turkey-Egypt relations.

Cairo knows very well that any interruption of the water-flows of the Nile could represent an existential threat as it could have serious economic and social repercussions “in terms of water supply, farming, food production and the industrial and energy output of the countries downstream.”⁴⁶ In a country with a water-supply level near “absolute scarcity,”⁴⁷ the GERD on the Blue Nile risks undermining Egypt's domestic stability and its status in the region, since a “failure in what Cairo considers an issue of vital national interest could be the most significant foreign policy setback of Sisi's presidency.”⁴⁸

Nevertheless, in this phase any military confrontation would be extremely unwise for Egypt. Cairo, which is aware of the circumstances, has launched a vast international diplomatic campaign to put pressure on Ethiopia by

46 Alessia Melcangi, “Egypt: Between Internal Fragilities and Regional Ambitions,” *European Institute of the Mediterranean, IEMed Mediterranean Yearbook 2021*, 205, <https://www.iemed.org/med-yearbook/iemed-mediterranean-yearbook-2021/>.

47 “International Decade for Action ‘Water for Life’ 2005—2015,” UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (website), <https://www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/scarcity.shtml#:~:text=When%20annual%20water%20supplies%20drop%20below%201%2C000%20m3%20per%20person,cubic%20metres%2022absolute%20scarcity%22.&text=Water%20scarcity%20is%20a%20relative,level%20of%20supply%20or%20demand>.

48 Melcangi, “Egypt: Between Internal Fragilities.”

involving the United States and the UN Security Council, even though the Addis Ababa government has constantly refused such external interference.

In this context, Ankara, supported by Ethiopia, proposed itself as a mediator in the GERD dispute, although it is evident that it has hardly any leverage since its diplomatic dialogue with Cairo is just at the beginning and its ties with Khartoum are not yet strong. This proposal was an unwelcome development for Cairo, and one that increased its concerns about the expansion of Turkey's military and geopolitical influence in Africa through an active sale of drones.⁴⁹

From a larger perspective, a neutral Turkish position on the Nile basin dispute would enhance the possibilities of a stronger Egyptian commitment to the rapprochement attempt. Although Ankara seems much more cautious and restrained here than in its ventures in Libya and Syria, it has important economic, political, and military interests in the Horn of Africa and its disengagement appears unlikely.

Prescriptions: How Italy Could Improve a Worthwhile Realignment between Egypt and Turkey

Any prospect of success for a credible rapprochement between Turkey and Egypt appears still volatile with hardly any tangible sign of further future improvements, especially considering both regional and international dynamics. Despite the persistence of discord between the two countries, it is possible to envisage some key elements for a breakthrough:

- Turkey could appear more flexible at least on the Libyan question, which could become its bargaining chip. Egypt, however, still seems hesitant to put the Libyan issue on a hypothetical negotiation table: Cairo will not abandon its position in Libya to make peace with Turkey while it has other more burning, existential issues at stake (i.e., the GERD dispute with Ethiopia).
- The Eastern Mediterranean energy dispute could become a win-win solution, especially regarding the need for greater (but still hypothetical) EU energy diversification: a rapprochement with Egypt would end Turkey's isolation on issues related to the Eastern Mediterranean.

Meanwhile, any reduction in tensions would create a better environment for Egypt to concentrate its efforts to develop its energy projects and stabilize its uncertain economic situation.

- To move toward a credible outreach with Turkey, President Sisi has to mediate with his security apparatus, which still seems extremely hostile toward Ankara, without paying too high of a political price. Besides this, it is important to consider that the dispute between Egypt and Turkey also has a “personal dimension,” that is to say, a lack of personal affinities between the two heads of state. Any mutual feeling of mistrust should be reversed.

To sum up, it is difficult to assess the importance of each negotiation table for the two countries. Negotiation issues influence each other and there also is a fluidity within the two governments about the level of importance for these matters. Moreover, there is a tendency to accept a compromise on a specific question only within the frame of a more general “grand bargain,” which makes it more difficult to reach specific agreements on single issues.

Within this framework, what can Italy do (within a wider effort involving the United States and EU partners) to facilitate a dialogue between these two countries that would increase confidence and encourage a deescalation in the region? Its own fragile political context limits the extent of an active Italian role for many reasons: in recent years, Italy has sometimes struggled to define a coherent foreign policy and play a credible role in the area due to the presence of different fragile political parties. Another relevant element to consider is national public opinion, due to the Regeni case,⁵⁰ which makes Rome's diplomatic relations with Cairo sensitive in Italy and could reduce the scope for mediation.

However, Italy has some positive aspects to rely on: Italy's colonial past is less problematic than those of other European countries, and Rome also has a historical tradition of mediating in Middle Eastern controversies; the activities of the Italian multinational oil and gas company ENI SpA in the region, based on the vision of its late founder, Enrico Mattei (and his so-called “Mattei formula), has undoubtedly helped Italy to play an important role; and Rome also has often shown an attitude of prudence and openness with Turkey compared to other European countries.

49 Alper Coşkun, “Strengthening Turkish Policy on Drone Exports,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, January 18, 2022, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2022/01/18/strengthening-turkish-policy-on-drone-exports-pub-86183>.

50 Italian doctoral student Giulio Regeni was found dead in Cairo on February 3, 2016. Clear signs of torture were on his body. In 2020, the Italian prosecution charged four members of Egypt's national security agency for the kidnapping, torture, and murder of the student, accusing Egyptian authorities of a lack of cooperation in the investigation. See Angelo Amante, “Italian Parliamentary Panel Accuses Egyptian Security of Regeni Murder,” Reuters, December 2, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/italian-parliamentary-panel-accuses-egyptian-security-regeni-murder-2021-12-01/>.

Thus, there is still a role for Italy to play within the larger international framework by pursuing a coordinated policy approach of outreach and engagement with Egypt and Turkey.

On the Libyan question, Italy has acted and continues to act as one of the countries most committed to ensuring stability in the country. Although different Italian governments have not always been capable of outlining and implementing a proactive policy toward Libya, Rome has shown its willingness to combine its interests with those of the international community and contribute to a phase of stabilization in the country. Thanks to its EU membership and good relations with the United States, Italy might be a credible mediator between Egypt and Turkey on this issue.

The Ukraine war and the related energy crisis might re-launch the EastMed pipeline project, despite the recent lack of EU interest in importing natural gas from the Eastern Mediterranean. Italy, which is an important technological actor in the exploitation of natural gas in the area, should understand the urgency to focus on secure alternative energy sources, as demonstrated by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs missions to Azerbaijan and Algeria. Pursuing a rapprochement between Egypt and Turkey would have direct strategic implications for all of the Mediterranean basin, defusing tensions and paving the way for possible initiatives to promote a more cooperative security architecture and multilateral trans-Mediterranean cooperation. Considering the energy sector as a trigger for regional détente in the Eastern Mediterranean is

something that Italy, with the support of the United States and the EU, should encourage.

In practical terms, this would require Italy to:

- Identify (as much as possible) the political costs at the domestic and international levels that the two regimes would be willing to pay, and the strategic calculations that would bring them to the negotiation table—while also realizing that there is a need for a common vision between those two countries and an increase in reciprocal confidence due to the clear tendency of Turkey and Egypt to accept a compromise on a specific issue only within a more general grand bargain. Something that makes it more difficult to reach specific agreements on single issues.
- Address a structural problem in the regional system of international relations—a decline in multilateral approaches to crises and a marked rise in bilateral relations—by trying to create some space for new multilateral initiatives at the formal official level and at an informal and nonofficial one. Italy, which has a consolidated tradition and reputation as a multilateral actor, could, for instance, promote track 2 (or track 1.5) fora with a problem-solving orientation and step-by-step tension-defusing meetings. Italy could facilitate dialogue on the two countries' main issues of concern; a series of unofficial track 2 meetings focused on specific topics with a clear problem-solving approach might pave the way for a more general official multilateral initiative promoted by Rome with the support of the Washington.⁵¹

51 The United States Institute for Peace (USIP) describes track 1.5 dialogues as “conversations that include a mix of government officials—who participate in an unofficial capacity—and non-governmental experts, all sitting around the same table.” Track 2 diplomacy, USIP’s primer says, “brings together unofficial representatives on both sides, with no government participation.” Such dialogue does not carry the official weight of traditional diplomacy. See Jennifer Staats et al., “A Primer on Multi-track Diplomacy,” USIP, July 31, 2019.

Chapter 3

From Divergence to Convergence — Libya's Transition Hangs in the Balance

— *Emadeddin Badii*

Libya's political transition has taken a familiar turn after the failure to hold elections on the 24th of December 2021. The parallel "Government of National Stability" formed in Eastern Libya — headed by former Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha — is now contesting the legitimacy of the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU). The GNU's endorsement by Libya's House of Representatives in March 2020, was the result of a superficial⁵² national and international consensus in Libya after the failure of Khalifa Haftar's offensive on Tripoli in April of 2019. The UN sought to capitalize on the cessation of hostilities and convened seventy-four Libyans in a "Libyan Political Dialogue Forum" (LPDF) that culminated with the election of a three-member Presidency Council and a new Prime Minister, Abdulhamid Dbeibah. As part of the LPDF roadmap, the UN had tasked Dbeibah to prepare Libya for simultaneous parliamentary and presidential elections on the 24th of December 2021.

After the advent of the GNU, both domestic Libyan players and their sponsors' positions have shifted, a change that manifested as the loss of the face-value progress formerly achieved towards solving the Libyan crisis by the United Nations.⁵³ The roadmap toward elections was sabotaged by Libyan political elites, which either stalled for time or sought to manipulate the roadmap's milestones to their advantage. Chief⁵⁴ amongst these was Agila Saleh, who weaponized his position as Speaker of the House of Representatives to contrive his own roadmap, shaping the elections' sequencing and potential outcomes to his advantage.

Nevertheless, the blinkered⁵⁵ focus of most Western countries on holding a suffrage in December at all costs, making the date the endpoint of their policymaking towards Libya, cemented the likelihood that, whether a vote was held or not, the 25th of December would mark the beginning of a legitimacy crisis. To make matters worse, the endorsement

of a flawed basis for elections furthered the perception that the suffrage was a winner-takes-all contest, leading over eighty candidates to present their presidential bid. Chief amongst these were Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, Khalifa Haftar and Abdelhamid Dbeibah — each of which would have never been able to unify the country, let alone govern it.

It was therefore unsurprising that, on December 21, Libya's Higher National Electoral Commission announced the dissolution of all polling committees across the country, indefinitely postponing the vote. This marked the beginning of a new phase of political jockeying — as the vacuum left by the suffrage's postponement is now leading Libya towards a new phase of institutional bifurcation, or worse, a relapse into conflict.⁵⁶ Under the guise of a "Libyan-owned" process, a coalition whose figureheads are Fathi Bashagha, Agila Saleh and Khalifa Haftar, has brought together political stakeholders that have vastly differing long-term political agendas, but have been motivated to coalesce to oust the GNU and its Prime Minister.

This chapter aims to provide context to the current reality in Libya, unpacking the problematic foreign policies that galvanized Libyan parties into jettisoning the elections. Relatedly, the chapter will also shed light on the current geopolitical dynamics that underpin the alliances now crystallizing in the country. The analysis is aimed to inform Western policymakers on how to best adapt to the contemporary phase of Libya's transition, with specific recommendations on how to facilitate Libya's path towards democratization.

Intra-European divisions

In retrospect, the UN process in the aftermath of the Libyan Political Dialogue — which outlined several milestones that would theoretically be reached prior to elections, did little

52 Emadeddin Badi, "Libya's Government of National (Dis) Unity: The Misleading Choreography of Conflict Resolution," *Confluences Mediterranee* 118, no. 3 (2021): 23-35.

53 Wolfram Lacher, "The Great Carve-Up: Libya's Internationalised Conflicts After Tripoli." (2020): 4.

54 Tarek Megerisi, "The Man from Misrata: Why Libya Has Two Prime Ministers (Again) — European Council on Foreign Relations", ECFR (blog), February 16 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/article/the-man-from-misrata-why-libya-has-two-prime-ministers-again/>.

55 Karim Mezran, "Libya's Elections Are on December 24. But Should They Be Postponed?", December 16 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/libyas-elections-are-on-december-24-but-should-they-be-postponed/>.

56 Frederic Wehrey and Emadeddin Badi, "Flames on the Horizon?" Accessed March 31 2022, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/86145>.

to dim the influence of warring parties and their foreign sponsors on Libyan constituencies. While European diplomacy — led by Germany who hosted the Berlin conference for Libya in January of 2020 — attempted to outline the contours of a peaceful solution to Libya, Europe and the US faced challenges⁵⁷ in incentivizing or coercing Libyan and international parties into holistically implementing the “Berlin Track” thereafter.

The exacerbation of European disunity towards Libya can partly be traced to the aftermath of the signing of the memorandum of understanding (MoU) on maritime borders between Ankara and Libya's Government of National Accord (GNA) in November 2019. The deal was essentially an attempt to create “facts on the water”, resulting in a legally dubious Exclusive Economic Zone boundary line between Turkey and Libya.⁵⁸ In doing so, Turkey sought to leverage the GNA's isolation and its weakness vis-à-vis an internationally supported Haftar to further its own interests. However, the signing of the MoU antagonized Greece, which viewed the agreement as a direct threat to its maritime interests in the Eastern Mediterranean. Relatedly, it also inflamed Turkish tensions with the Cypriots, a dynamic that led a wider coalition comprising Cyprus, Egypt and Israel to condemn the MoU. The fact that Italy's ENI and France's Total (the two countries' largest oil companies) were both conducting offshore drilling off the South-Western coast of Cyprus meant that they also viewed the Ankara-GNA memorandum with unease.⁵⁹ With several of its individual members failing to compartmentalize the long-standing unresolved Eastern Mediterranean conflict from the escalating Libyan war, the European Union was hamstrung in its ability to capitalize on the Berlin Conference as a platform for mediation in Libya. Instead, the Berlin track's goal of insulating Libya from foreign interventionism was diluted, with several European states trading a multilateral approach to diplomacy in favor of unilaterally condemning Turkey's role in Libya.

Italy — which historically played a central role in Libya since 2011 — did little to leverage Libya's new geopolitical realities after 2019 to recover its waning influence in the country. Despite having significant interests in Libya — including significant stakes in its oil sector, a degree of dependence on Libyan gas exports, and a perceived vulnerability to

migrant arrivals through the Central Mediterranean route — Rome did little by way of sustainably safeguarding these interests. In years prior, Italy had played a leading role in pushing for a multilateral solution to the Libyan legitimacy crisis by diplomatically spearheading — along with the United States — the brokering of the Libyan Political Agreement in 2015.⁶⁰ After that, Rome operated ad-hoc and self-defeating policies that saw Italy's influence wane as it prioritized border externalization through a GNA-militia nexus in Western Libya. Myopically playing into Haftar's hands as he consolidated over Libya's oil crescent, Italy also opted to operate a policy of equidistance⁶¹ between Khalifa Haftar and the Tripoli-based authorities — one which further marginalized Rome from any meaningful role in Libya.

In the aftermath of the internationalized Libyan civil war of 2019, Italy was ideally placed to play the role of lynchpin for cohering a meaningful and constructive transatlantic policy towards Libya — coordinating between a US that was uneasy about Russian (and to a lesser degree, Turkish) expansionism in Libya, and a Germany that uncharacteristically had taken the initiative on a foreign policy file. Such a diplomatic momentum would have allowed a more harmonized European policy towards Libya to take shape and would have also elevated the significance of the Berlin Process as a vehicle that a new Biden Administration could buttress with its own diplomatic weight. Rome endorsing this role would have also bolstered European credibility vis-à-vis Libyan political elites in a post-conflict environment where Europe's influence was at an all-time low — all while safeguarding both Italian interests and the continuity of Libya's transition. This role was however not meaningfully pursued, as Italy defaulted back to its policy of equidistance, a passive approach that allowed Libyan elites and their foreign backers to sidetrack the transition unobstructed.

Yet, Italy missing its opportunity to “shine” was also partly attributable to the intransigence of France. The latter had recurrently sought to leverage its political capital within Europe to influence Western policy to Khalifa Haftar's advantage. This had proven detrimental to the ability of Europe to assert itself as a relevant player in the Libyan scene. Paris' unilateral approach has been a long-running

57 Christopher M. Blanchard, “Libya: Conflict, Transition, and US Policy. Congressional Research Service, 2020.”

58 International Crisis Group, “Turkey Wades into Libya's Troubled Waters”, April 30 2020. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/europe-central-asia/western-europemediterranean/turkey/257-turkey-wades-libyas-troubled-waters>.

59 Emadeddin Badi, “Libya's War of the Many”, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (blog), Accessed March 31, 2022. <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/80628>.

60 Tarek Megerisi, “EU Policy towards Libya,” *Insight Turkey* 22, no. 4 (2020): 29-40.

61 Arturo Varvelli and Tarek Megerisi, “Italy's Chance in Libya — European Council on Foreign Relations”. European Council on Foreign Relation (blog), June 16, 2020. https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_italys_chance_in_libya/.



Head of the Presidential Council of Libya Mohamed al-Manfi, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, French President Emmanuel Macron, Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi and Libyan Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, participate in the press conference at the end of the International Conference on Libya at La Maison de la Chimie in Paris, France, November 12, 2021. Yoan Valat/ Pool via REUTERS

feature of French diplomacy towards Libya⁶², with Macron's centralization of foreign policy — à la “Jupiter”⁶³ - merely catalyzing a French inclination to militarily support rogue general Haftar in Eastern Libya. However, after the failure of Haftar's offensive (which the Elysée militarily supported⁶⁴), French foreign policy never meaningfully shifted course. Instead, Haftar's failure merely made open military support to his Libyan Arab Armed Forces an untenable policy⁶⁵, and French influence declined, overshadowed by Russia. France's failure to shift course has puzzled other European capitals, with policymakers often privately bemoaning the disparity in French outrage over Wagner's encroachments in Mali and the broader Sahel, compared to French complacency towards Russian entrenchment in Eastern and Central Libya.

Moreover, the subsequent establishment of the GNU did little by way of triggering any meaningful self-introspection in the halls of the Elysée, or even to influence France into aligning with its European counterparts. Paris continued to display an inclination to accommodate political ploys that are advantageous to Khalifa Haftar, even after his military defeat. Instead of facilitating his military ascension, France was however now invested in supporting political blueprints that rehabilitated him. This impulse manifested throughout 2021 in Libya, in the lead-up to the elections that the LPDF roadmap stipulated would be held on the 24th of December. Capitalizing on the LPDF's failure to agree on a constitutional basis and a Western blinkered focus on holding elections at all costs, Agila Saleh — with alleged Egyptian support — drafted a legal basis flimsy enough to

62 Karim Mezran and Federica Fasanotti, “France Must Recognize its Role in Libya's Plight”, Atlantic Council, July 21, 2020. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/france-must-recognize-its-role-in-libyas-plight/>.

63 Shashank Bengali, “Emmanuel Macron Wanted to Rule like Jupiter, but Governing France Has Brought Him Quickly down to Earth”, Los Angeles Times, October 3, 2017. <https://www.latimes.com/world/europe/la-fg-france-macron-20171003-story.html>.

64 Agence France-Presse, “Missiles Found at Base of Libyan Warlord Are Ours, France Admits”, the Guardian, July 10, 2019, sec. World news. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/10/missiles-found-at-base-of-libyan-warlord-are-ours-france-admits>.

65 Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), “France's Foreign and Security Policy under President Macron”, Accessed March 31, 2022, <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/frances-foreign-and-security-policy-under-president-macron>.

allow Khalifa Haftar to run. Within Europe, France's firm backing of Agila Saleh's flawed and unilaterally issued laws for elections cemented the view that holding the 24th of December presidential elections on this flawed basis was a pragmatic path of least resistance. In doing so, the LPDF process' integrity was traded for expediency, paving the way for a legitimacy vacuum on the 25th of December.

The Paris Summit on Libya, hosted on the 21st of November 2021, was Paris' diplomatic last-ditch effort to force elections in Libya using Agila Saleh's legal basis. Framed as an attempt to achieve consensus towards elections in Libya, the conference did little but illustrate the extent of domestic and international disagreements — though these occurred mostly behind closed doors.⁶⁶ The conference's communiqué explicitly endorsed an electoral path that would “begin on the 24th of December”, semantics implicitly intended to rubber stamp Agila Saleh's convoluted approach to the electoral path. Emblematic of French diplomacy's impulse to attempt to resolve structural Libyan issues with ad-hoc initiatives, the French summit's output both contravened the LPDF roadmap and thwarted any attempts at pragmatically shifting course given the looming legitimacy crisis endorsing Agila Saleh's legal basis would produce. In so doing, France also traded a policy anchored in European multilateralism — of which Berlin was the proponent - in favor of a unilateral approach which Paris bilaterally coordinated with Egypt, Agila Saleh's main political backer. After the failure to hold elections, Paris has not swayed from this path, preferring to coordinate with Egypt on endorsing Agila Saleh's new fraudulently produced “roadmap”. This plan capitalizes on the legitimacy vacuum produced by the failure to hold elections to replace the GNU, indefinitely delaying elections and complicating the work of UN diplomacy.

Russia-Turkish expansionism

The year 2019 marked a turning point in the proxy dynamics characterizing the Libyan conflict. The legacy of Khalifa Haftar's offensive on Tripoli in 2019 saw an unprecedented foreign military entrenchment in Libya, with Turkey and Russia effectively carving up the country into separate spheres of influence.⁶⁷ Despite the GNU benefitting from a “peaceful transfer of power”, Ankara and Moscow — both of which had opportunistically intervened in Libya over the course of the conflict triggered by Haftar's offensive — have retained their influence over the Libyan political and military landscapes. They unilaterally halted

the Libyan conflict by agreeing to a cessation of hostilities (with Russian-backed Wagner mercenaries pulling out of Western Libya and inducing the collapse of Haftar's offensive), and allowed the LPDF process, under the aegis of the UNSMIL, to move forward without overtly obstructing it. The strategic calculus of both Russia and Turkey was that intra-Libyan divisions, coupled with European disunity, both meant that the political process was not a meaningful threat to their interests in Libya.

This assessment proved correct. Despite ceasefire clauses calling for the repatriation of mercenaries and vacation of airbases by foreign powers, Turkey, Russia — and to a lesser degree, the UAE - still maintain a heavy military presence in Libya and retain control over key Libyan military and aerial airbases. Turkey has focused on establishing full control over Wutiya airbase in Western Libya, and has retained a footprint in Misrata and Mitiga airports, as well as a presence in the port of Khoms. Conversely, Russia has focused on consolidating its presence in central Libya, establishing a significant footprint in Ghardabiya's military airbase in Sirte, consolidating control over the airbase in Jufra, and taking over Al Khadim airbase at the border with Egypt in Eastern Libya — which had previously been run by the UAE. Despite their acquiescence to the LPDF's “political reshuffle” which produced the Government of National Unity, Ankara and Moscow both intended to leverage this military presence to obtain economic concessions from the GNU, as well as translating it into political capital.⁶⁸

The 5+5 Joint Military Commission — the body meant to build on Libya's ceasefire by, inter-alia, demilitarizing Sirte and becoming a vehicle for military unification - did little by way of attempting to coerce Turkey and Russia to repatriate their mercenaries from Libya. Internationally, an implicit conviction over the military reality in Libya also settled in: the Turkish and Russian presences, which counterbalanced one another militarily, were important to maintain in order to preserve a semblance of stability and diminish the prospect of a relapse into conflict. In practice, this translated into policymakers rhetorically mentioning the importance of repatriating foreign troops and mercenaries, but implicitly emphasizing the importance of preserving the Turko-Russian balance of forces through a gradual pullout of forces — if a pullout was ever to occur. All in all, Russia and Turkey were well-ensconced in post-2019 Libya, and they both capitalized on this to project influence beyond Libya itself. For Turkey, their presence in Libya served as a medium to project soft power in the Maghreb as well as select sub-Saharan African theatres. Russia, however, leveraged its control

66 Author telephone interviews with European diplomats, December 2021.

67 Wolfram Lacher, “The Great Carve-Up”.

68 Emadeddin Badi, “Muhasasa, Militias and Meddling Foreign Actors: The Challenges Facing Libya's New Government”, Global Initiative (blog) Accessed March 31, 2022, <https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/libya-new-government/>.



Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu meets with Libyan Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibeh, in Tripoli, Libya, May 3, 2021. Media Office of the Prime Minister/Handout via REUTERS

over military and aerial bases in Libya, using them as both logistical nodes for hard power expansion into Sub-Saharan Africa, but also as “forward bases” for quick deployments of Wagner troops into the Libyan southern region of Fezzan. The nefarious effects of this ability to project hard power towards the Sahel was illustrated by developments in Chad, whose former President Déby was killed during an attack by Libya-based Chadian rebels groups that reportedly received training by Russian Wagner troops in Central Libya prior to launching an incursion southward.⁶⁹ For Moscow, the value added of these airbases was also that they were close to Libyan oil facilities, aside also guaranteeing the Kremlin a semi-permanent presence close to the European Union and NATO’s airbase in Sicily.

Politically, both Turkey and Russia did not significantly push for the holding of the 24th of December elections — though for different reasons. Initially, Turkey perceived the LPDF roadmap-based elections positively as they saw the prospect of long-term legitimacy as stabilizing

and necessary, particularly if it was to secure long-term economic interests in Libya. Moreover, demographics in Western Libya, coupled with the number of displaced communities from Eastern Libya, were statistically conducive to a figure of Western Libyan background that would be amenable to Turkey being elected as President. However, as Agila progressively weaponized the LPDF roadmap, Turkey grew uneasy with the prospect of a political reshuffle. The latter was increasingly viewed as an inconvenience that would alter power dynamics that Ankara was now able to navigate in Libya, particularly since Turkey had, by then, developed good relations with authorities in Tripoli, as well as power centres in Eastern Libya. Russia, on the other hand, endorsed Agila Saleh’s flawed basis for elections, all while publicly signalling the importance of Libyan consensus and representation within the framework of preparations for the suffrage. In doing so, Russia was attempting to position itself as a power broker in elections that it knew were bound to produce a legitimacy crisis it was going to be best placed

69 Emadeddin Badi, “Déby’s Death: A Microcosm of the Flaws of French Foreign Policy in Libya”, April 31, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/debys-death-a-microcosm-of-the-flaws-of-french-foreign-policy-in-libya/>.

to mediate. The candidacy of the ICC-sanctioned son of former dictator Muammar Gaddafi Saif al-Islam⁷⁰, which was politically supported by Russia, made several states question their rush towards presidential on the 24th of December at all costs. This effectively contributed to jettisoning the elections and allowed Russia to capitalize on the blinkered outlook of Western countries to them — all while Moscow prepared for their aftermath.

American naïveté, Egyptian abetment, and geopolitical jockeying

One of the most consequential reasons for the failure of elections in Libya in December 2021 was the impetuous American backing of Agila Saleh's flawed framework for elections — laws produced by the speaker of the House of Representatives in full coordination with Cairo. Italy and Germany were constrained in their ability to speak against the French impulse to sway the EU towards embracing Saleh's Egyptian-manufactured framework, in part owing to the then-ongoing internal European negotiations over new fiscal policies.⁷¹ On the other hand, the United States had far more room to pre-empt elections' failure and rectify Saleh's blatant sabotaging of the LPDF Roadmap. Instead, the US Ambassador and Special Envoy to Libya - Richard Norland - opted to fully embrace a contested legal framework that was bound to produce a legitimacy crisis in the aftermath of the vote. It was by a mere mishap that Egypt's plan, and the US policy of giving it a nod, backfired before the 24th of December date than in the aftermath of the suffrage. Saleh's framework, which virtually had diluted any meaningful vetting criteria to enable Khalifa Haftar to run for elections, allowed both Abdelhamid Dbeibah, the GNU Prime Minister, as well as Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, to postulate as candidates for the presidency. For Egypt, these unexpected candidacies significantly lessened the chances of Khalifa Haftar winning presidential elections. For the US, alarm bells rang within the Biden Administration over a US policy that could now possibly enable an internationally wanted overthrown dictator's son to be catapulted into Libya's presidential seat. With local appeals against Haftar, Dbeibah and Gaddafi's candidacies being dismissed by Libya's judiciary, the US — among others — preferred to see elections postponed rather than risk holding them.

It's worth questioning why the US ever endorsed Saleh's framework this vehemently. Several policymakers and

diplomats have advanced differing theories in their attempts to rationalize the US' 2021 policy towards Libya. For many, American disinterest in North Africa and the Middle East had warranted less attention towards Libya from the upper echelons of the Biden Administration, leading policy to be centralized and formulated by the Special Envoy and his team. For others, the US' impulse to embrace Saleh's framework stemmed from a diplomatic desire to accommodate Egypt and France, both of which were firmly backing Saleh's political blueprint to rehabilitate Khalifa Haftar. Others also added that US policy was partly informed by an assumption that a new elected president enjoying popular support would be able to leverage the principle of non-intervention, forcing both Russia and Turkey to repatriate their foreign troops and mercenaries from Libya's territory post-suffrage. Regardless of the rationale, it is admittedly both paradoxical and naïve to assume that a framework explicitly designed to enable Khalifa Haftar, whose individual actions have internationalized Libya's conflict more than anyone else's, would insulate Libya from foreign interventionism. That is aside the fact that any new elected leader would have been at a disadvantage vis-à-vis intervening powers, whose support a to-be President would have instead had to rely on to shore up domestic legitimacy considering the contested basis on which he would have been elected.

Nevertheless, this endorsement — and the underlying naïve assumptions informing it — proved not only fatal to the suffrage in December 2021, but also to the entire political process. Most international players, save Egypt, Russia and to a lesser degree, Turkey, had approached December elections as the endpoint of their policymaking. Capitalizing on the vacuum produced by the legitimacy crisis, Cairo, in coordination with HOR's Agila Saleh, opted to weaponize the climate of uncertainty to produce a new roadmap, one marketed as the expression of "Libyan ownership" over the political process. Built on a house of cards of dubious parliamentary procedures, ad-hoc backdoor deals, short-term political alignments and cronyism-based appointments, this new "process" produced the new "Government of National Stability", with Fathi Bashagha as Prime Minister.⁷² Contesting the legitimacy of a GNU it now considers "expired", the new GNS coalition markets its raison d'être as delivering elections, despite the backdoor negotiations that enabled its dubious establishment being predicated on indefinitely delaying the suffrage. Aside from being a misdirect from the UN plan to redirect Libya's transition and focus it on holding elections, the GNS is simply a

70 Heba Saleh, "Prodigal Gaddafi Son Taps into Nostalgia for Stability of Father's Rule in Libya", Financial Times, November 19, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/22222c17-4bb9-4de1-b736-cdeb3f9c0e72>.

71 Financial Times, "Mario Draghi and Emmanuel Macron: The EU's Fiscal Rules Must Be Reformed", December 23, 2021, <https://www.ft.com/content/ecbdd1ad-fcb0-4908-a29a-5a3e14185966>.

72 International Crisis Group, "International Unity is Needed to Prevent a Divided Libya", March 3, 2022. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/north-africa/libya/international-unity-needed-prevent-divided-libya>.

new iteration of repeated attempts to sway Libya's political process into rehabilitating and enabling Khalifa Haftar in the political arena.⁷³ It is a plan whose figurehead may be Fathi Bashagha, but whose architect is Cairo, and whose lynchpins are Agila Saleh and Khalifa Haftar.

Ahead of the GNS' official formation, Cairo had attempted to lobby foreign powers and the UN into accepting the legitimacy of this new government as a *fait accompli*. Russia, whose disinformation networks were already targeting UN's Special Representative Stephanie Williams and Western attempts at refocusing mediation on the holding of a suffrage in the summer of 2022, was quick to endorse the GNS' establishment. Developments in Ukraine, where Russia did not expect a more assertive Western coalition to align against its invasion, are partly behind its knee-jerk recognition of the new GNS. But beyond this, Russia's endorsement comes as no surprise: aside from the instability that the advent of a parallel government would bring about in Libya, a weakened Fathi Bashagha leaning on a Wagner-dependent Haftar would make Russia significantly more influential in the country. On the other hand, France, which was already seeking an alternative policy towards Libya after the December vote failed, simply shifted from endorsing Cairo and Agila's instrumentalization of the LPDF roadmap to assenting to their weaponization of the post-December vacuum.

Conclusion

The three capitals whose position will largely influence Libya's path forward are Ankara, Washington, and to a lesser degree, Brussels.

Turkey, which recognizes the Cairo-Agila play as a new iteration of the weaponization of the LPDF and its roadmap, does not however feel significantly threatened by it. Though Ankara rhetorically backs the GNU, it also enjoys good relationships with both Fathi Bashagha and Abdulhamid Dbeibah — and has built relationships with key individuals and power centers in both Eastern and Western Libya since 2019. Geopolitically, Ankara has also attempted to reset relations with Egypt, a relationship whose recalibration has been underlined by transactionalism between Erdogan and Sissi. Of particular importance to this geopolitical realignment are two files intertwined with Libya's: Cairo's position on the Eastern Mediterranean, and Ankara's position vis-à-vis the Muslim Brotherhood in the region. Even though key members of the Libyan Muslim Brotherhood — which benefit from close relations with Turkey — have voiced their support for the new GNS, this has not translated into a Turkish buy-in into Cairo's plan.

Moreover, Ankara has not bought into the widely marketed idea that endorsing Bashagha's GNS could potentially secure a Libyan legislative ratification of its memorandum of understanding with Libya's GNA. This is unlikely to change in the near future, particularly since the probability of the GNS establishing a footprint in Tripoli has significantly decreased. However, there are also chances that Turkey could undermine Libya's LPDF roadmap and electoral track as it veers towards a more transactional approach centered around bilateral dealings with other regional players — such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

Washington's position — much like last year's — is less predictable. So far, US policy has been as naïve as it has been unconstructive. The US has also broken several times with its Western partners, unilaterally publicizing messaging that has diverted attention from the UN plan on elections, unhelpfully focusing instead on centering a "legitimacy crisis" which it should in fact seek to channel into momentum for a suffrage. There are currently signs that the Ukrainian crisis has reinvigorated US policy — though the likelihood this trickles down to its Libya policy is yet to be seen. If Washington is to play a constructive role in the contemporary legitimacy crisis, it should return to the fundamentals of the Berlin process and seek to leverage its political capital — particularly with regional countries intervening in Libya and undermining its electoral track — to rebuild international consensus. In engaging with Libyan stakeholders, chiefly Abdulhamid Dbeibah and Fathi Bashagha, the US should also emphasize that both should reframe their current competition for international recognition as an electoral race — rather than attempting any attempt at power-sharing that will inevitably lead to institutional bifurcation. Given its influence on Cairo, the US should also prioritize engaging with Egyptian policymakers and communicate red lines around proxy politics and any "parallel tracks" that undermine Libya's LPDF Roadmap. The Ukraine crisis — which has reinvigorated both NATO and the "West" — is also an opportune moment for direct engagement with Ankara. Both Europe and the US should communicate to Ankara that, by virtue of its geographic location and proximity to Europe, safeguarding Libya's electoral track is of paramount importance, and its transition should not be treated as a bargaining chip in negotiations with other regional stakeholders.

Europe has — to date — failed to muster the political will to prioritize coherence over expediency and unilateralism in Libya. The crisis in Ukraine is a testament to the consequences of European disunity and complacency in the face of the progressive erosion of the global rules-based order that the West — particularly Europeans — are meant to champion. Libya is another theatre where

⁷³ Tarek Megerisi, "The Man from Misrata: Why Libya has two Prime Ministers (Again)".

the very notion of rule of law has been recurrently diluted — to the detriment of both Libyans and Europeans. The EU should seek to redress this by engaging in clear, consistent and unified messaging over Libya — centering on the rule of law. This would, first and foremost, entail coordination between Rome and Berlin to engage policymakers in Paris. To date, the latter has been the only European capital to fully voice support for the GNS and its PM — despite this new government's stated goals directly undermining the LPDF Roadmap. Beyond bringing France to the fold, Europe should also seek to broker

consensus on common key goals in coordination with the US, particularly since Russia may seek to abort any meaningful attempt to mediate in Libya at the level of the UN's Security Council. Given Italy's vested interest in Libya's stability, Rome should take a leading role in coordinating and formulating a joint policy between Washington and Brussels. This approach would have the added value of building on the recent transatlantic convergence on policy issues beyond Ukraine, all while ensuring European and US interests are secured in Libya through safeguarding the latter's democratic transition.

Chapter 4

Crisis in the Maghreb

— Alissa Pavia

Introduction

Over the past year and a half, tensions between Algeria and Morocco have taken a new turn for the worse. Algeria broke all diplomatic ties with Morocco on August 24, 2021, and nearly a month later banned Morocco from its airspace.⁷⁴ The pipeline contract enabling Algeria to deliver gas to Portugal and Spain through Morocco—which provides Morocco with 7 percent of its national gas imports⁷⁵—expired on October 31, 2021. Algeria has since refused to sign a new contract, accusing Morocco of fueling tensions and undermining its “national unity.”⁷⁶

Several events have caused the most recent escalation of tensions between the two countries. In November 2020, the Polisario Front, which seeks independence of Western Sahara (which is claimed, and largely controlled by Morocco), declared a resumption of war against Morocco after a nearly thirty-year cease-fire.⁷⁷ The declaration came after Moroccan forces entered the Guerguerat demilitarized zone between Western Sahara and Morocco, a move the Polisario saw as a direct breach of the United Nations brokered cease-fire of 1991. Additionally, in December 2020, Morocco became the fourth country to sign a peace agreement with Israel as part of the Abraham Accords, and the two countries have signed a number of economic and military agreements since then. The Trump administration's December 2020 decision to recognize Morocco's sovereignty over Western Sahara made the United States the first Western country to break away from a UN-led mediation process that has yet to identify a solution for this long-standing conflict. The close timing of the Israeli-Moroccan peace agreement and Trump's decision concerning Western Sahara has prompted many observers

to believe that one could not have happened without the other. Algeria, a longtime ally and supporter of the Polisario Front, harshly criticized⁷⁸ and firmly rejected US recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Though the Biden administration has not adjusted the US stance on sovereignty, the State Department welcomed the appointment of a UN special representative on Western Sahara and pledged to work with all sides.⁷⁹

A little under a year after Trump's decision and the peace agreement between Israel and Morocco, Algeria retaliated by blaming the two countries for the deadly wildfires that struck the country in August 2021. The condemnation came a little less than a month after the *Washington Post* and multiple media partners, led by the Paris-based journalism nonprofit Forbidden Stories, published the results of the Pegasus Project, an investigation of “attempted and successful hacking” of mobile phones using “spyware leased by the Israeli firm NSO Group to governments.” The investigation involved (among other things) a check of lists of phone numbers, one of which had ten thousand numbers “dominated” by Moroccan and Algerian targets including Algerian government officials and citizens. Algiers registered its concern, and Rabat denied spying on journalists and politicians.⁸⁰ Shortly thereafter, Algeria severed all relations with Morocco, including closing its airspace—the sole mode of transport linking the two countries since the border was closed in 1994, leading the international community to grow increasingly worried that this new wave of conflict might bring about serious consequences.

The renewed tensions risk destabilizing North Africa and, as a consequence, pose challenges for Europe and the rest of the African continent. Both Algeria and Morocco

74 “Algeria Cuts Diplomatic Ties with ‘Hostile’ Morocco,” *France 24*, August 25, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210825-algeria-cuts-diplomatic-ties-with-hostile-morocco>; and “Algeria Closes Airspace to Morocco over ‘Provocations and Hostile’ Actions,” *France 24*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20210922-algeria-closes-airspace-to-moroccan-aviation>.

75 Itissar Fakir, “What's Driving the Escalating Tensions between Algeria and Morocco?,” *Middle East Institute*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/whats-driving-escalating-tensions-between-algeria-and-morocco>.

76 “Algeria to Halt Gas Exports to Spain via Morocco,” *Africanews*, December 1, <https://www.africanews.com/2021/11/01/algeria-to-halt-gas-exports-to-spain-via-morocco/>.

77 “Polisario Front Declares War on Morocco Over Western Sahara Region,” *Euronews*, December 17, 2020, <https://www.euronews.com/2020/11/17/sahrawi-arab-democratic-republic-declares-war-on-morocco-over-western-sahara-region>.

78 Pauline Karoum, “Sahara : la contre-offensive des lobbies Algériens à Washington,” *Jeune Afrique*, December 18, 2020, <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1092629/politique/sahara-la-contre-offensive-des-lobbies-algeriens-a-washington/>.

79 Ned Price, US State Department Press Briefing, October 7, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/department-press-briefing-october-7-2021/#post-282425-WESTERNSAHARA>.

80 Washington Post Staff, “Takeaways from the Pegasus Project,” *Washington Post*, August 2, 2021, and updated February 2, 2022, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2021/07/18/takeaways-nso-pegasus-project/>; Craig Timberg et al., “On the List: Ten Prime Ministers, Three Presidents and a King,” *Washington Post*, July 20, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2021/07/20/heads-of-state-pegasus-spyware/>; and “Algeria Concerned Over Morocco's Alleged Use of Pegasus Spyware,” *Middle East Monitor*, July 23, 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210723-algeria-concerned-over-moroccos-alleged-use-of-pegasus-spyware/>.

have important trade relations and economic and security agreements with numerous European countries, all of which contribute to greater stability and prosperity in the wider Mediterranean region. A renewed conflict may hinder Europe's ability to foster good and strong relations with both countries, as members of the European Union may be called to take sides by one or the other Maghrebi country. Spain, for example, has already found itself in the tricky situation of siding with Morocco regarding Western Sahara after it officially endorsed Morocco's autonomy plan in March 2022.⁸¹ The decision came about after Morocco orchestrated the landing of more than eight thousand illegal migrants at once on the shores of Ceuta in Spain, which came after Spain decided to host Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali during his COVID-19 recovery treatment.⁸²

Additionally, Europe's strong reliance on Algerian gas makes it an easy target for blackmail. Spain and Italy, for example, receive about 65 percent of Algeria's total gas exports.⁸³ With the Russian invasion of Ukraine still underway, countries such as Italy will become increasingly dependent on Algerian oil as they attempt to lessen their reliance on Russian gas, leaving Algeria with a serious upper hand in any future negotiations over the region's energy supply.

The broader aim of this chapter is to identify a potential avenue of mediation in the latest crises that have affected North Africa and to explore whether Italy, a longtime neutral country with high stakes in the Mediterranean region, can step up to the role of conflict mediator with the support of a powerful ally, the United States.

Before doing so, it is useful to review the background of the tensions between Algeria and Morocco, whose relations have been strained by numerous events over time, particularly since they became independent in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The 1963 Sand War over disputed borders, the Western Sahara conflict that lasted from 1975 to 1991, and the closing of the borders in 1994 are perhaps the three most notable conflicts to date that have hindered peace between them. Over the years, numerous factors have contributed to rising tensions and the current

state of conflict, namely: differing foreign policy stances; the contested sovereignty over Western Sahara; and, at times, domestic politics. Both nations' economies, among other things, have been hindered by the protracted state of conflict, which only exacerbate the conflict.

Drivers of Conflict

Historical grievances

Historical grievances linked to unresolved border disputes and unkept promises are still a main driver of conflict between Algeria and Morocco. In the mid-1950s, as North Africa underwent partial decolonization from French rule, there was a brief moment when they were ideologically aligned: Morocco supported the Algerian National Liberation Army in its fight against France and welcomed thousands of Algerian refugees.⁸⁴ In 1961, Morocco's King Hassan II and the exiled government of Algeria signed an agreement that reaffirmed both parties' willingness to delay discussion of border disputes—such as in the areas of Tindouf and Béchar bordering Algeria and Morocco, and the Western Sahara, then occupied by Spain—until after the end of Algeria's war of independence.⁸⁵

However, this ideological rapprochement was short-lived. A year after Algeria gained its independence in 1962, the Sand War between Algeria and Morocco broke out over Morocco's claims to the Tindouf and Béchar areas. After Spain announced in 1975 that it would leave Western Sahara, which it did the following year, Algeria supported a referendum in favor of its autonomy rather than support Morocco's sovereignty claims over the region, largely because it viewed them as part of an expansionist plot that would tilt the regional balance of power in Rabat's favor.⁸⁶ Morocco felt betrayed by Algeria, which had agreed to support Morocco's claims over the region in a 1972 agreement in exchange for Morocco's ceding of Tindouf and Béchar as part of Algerian territory (as discussed in more detail below).⁸⁷

Moreover, once it was clear to the decolonized powers that the world was divided between those ideologically close

81 "Spain, Seeking Better Ties with Morocco, Shifts Stance on Western Sahara," *New York Times*, March 19, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/03/19/world/europe/spain-morocco-western-sahara.html>.

82 "Western Sahara Independence Leader Brahim Ghali Back in Algeria," *Al Jazeera*, June 2, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/2/western-sahara-independence-leader-brahim-ghali-back-in-algeria>.

83 Intissar Fakir, "Given Capacity Constraints, Algeria Is No Quick Fix for Europe's Russian Gas Concerns," Middle East Institute, March 8, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/given-capacity-constraints-algeria-no-quick-fix-europes-russian-gas-concerns>.

84 Djallil Lounnas and Nizar Messari, *Algeria-Morocco Relations and Their Impact on the Maghrebi Regional System*, Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture (MENARA) Working Paper No. 20, October 2018, https://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/menara_wp_20.pdf; and William Zartman, "Morocco's Sahara Policy," in *Perspective on Western Sahara*, eds. Anouar Boukhars and Jacques Roussellier (Plymouth: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014), 55-70.

85 Lounnas and Messari, *Algeria-Morocco Relations*.

86 Lounnas and Messari, *Algeria-Morocco Relations*.

87 Lounnas and Messari, *Algeria-Morocco Relations*.

to the United States and those close to the Soviet Union, the two countries chose opposite sides. Morocco stood with the United States and Saudi Arabia, while Algeria seemingly sided with the Soviet Union and Iran. (Algeria was, however, a leading member of the non-aligned movement).⁸⁸

Regional Power Competition and a Protracted Arms Race

Regional power competition has long been a driver of tension between Morocco and Algeria. The main factors in this competition are the absence of fully demarcated land borders, the pursuit for geopolitical balance, and a competing arms race.

Competition between the two countries began soon after they gained independence from France. Sovereignty over the provinces of Tindouf and Béchar and over Western Sahara remained unresolved even after the French left. The two countries went to war in 1963 over Tindouf and Béchar, which led to the signing of a border treaty in 1972. Morocco agreed to hand over the border provinces, while, according to Morocco, Algeria agreed to support Morocco's claims over Western Sahara, which at the time was still governed by Spain.⁸⁹ Morocco waited for more than ten years to ratify the agreement.

Additionally, the two countries have long been engaged in an arms race with one another.⁹⁰ To date, Algeria remains the largest arms investor in both North Africa and the larger African continent.⁹¹ Algeria has historically been a militaristic power, basing much of its national identity and ideology on the strength and power of its military.⁹² This militaristic ideology is best understood as a consequence of its anticolonial struggles,⁹³ which entailed a brutal war of decolonization against the French army. These values are still portrayed in Algerian foreign policy, much of which

is directed at containing Morocco.⁹⁴ In 2020, Algeria's defense budget amounted to \$9.7 billion,⁹⁵ with 70 percent of its equipment deriving from Russia.⁹⁶

In contrast, Morocco's defense budget is significantly smaller, amounting to \$4.8 billion in 2020.⁹⁷ However, Morocco is reportedly undergoing a major revamp of its military forces. In 2022, some speculate that Morocco could surpass Algeria's military expenditure by reaching \$12.8 billion.⁹⁸ Morocco's recent peace agreement with Israel has led the two countries to sign a number of military agreements, the latest of which would see an investment by the Israelis of about \$500 million in Morocco's missile and air defense system.⁹⁹ Although Algeria has held a strategic supremacy over Morocco and in the region, given its large military expenditure, more recent events suggest that Morocco may be gaining ground and be able to surpass Algeria in the coming years.

Israel

According to some, the recent escalation of tensions between Algeria and Morocco can be explained by the normalization agreement signed between Morocco and Israel in December 2020 as part of the Abraham Accords. The accords are a series of peace agreements signed between Israel and four Arab or Muslim-majority countries (the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco) under the auspices of the Trump administration. Signed between August and October 2021, the Abraham Accords marked a significant shift in the historical enmity between Israel and its Arab (or Muslim-majority) neighbors.

Morocco and Algeria have historically held differing positions on the Palestinian cause. One way to understand Morocco's historic closeness to Israel is through the lens of its close relationship with its Moroccan Jewish community, the largest in the Arab world.¹⁰⁰ However, even though this

88 Lounnas and Messari, *Algeria-Morocco Relations*.

89 Zartman, "Morocco's Sahara Policy."

90 Yasmine Akrimi, "Algeria-Morocco Tensions: A Costly Conflict," Analysis, Rethinking Security in the 2020s (Series), Brussels International Center, December 2021, https://www.bic-rhr.com/sites/default/files/inline-files/BIC%20Analysis%20December%20Yasmine%20Akrimi_.pdf.

91 Diego Lopes da Silva et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure, 2020," Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, April 2021, <https://doi.org/10.55163/JTFI7245>.

92 Laurence Aïda Ammour, "The Algerian Foreign Policy on Western Sahara," in *Perspective on Western Sahara*, 91.

93 Ammour, "The Algerian Foreign Policy on Western Sahara."

94 Ammour, "The Algerian Foreign Policy on Western Sahara."

95 Lopes da Silva et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure."

96 Lopes da Silva et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure."

97 Lopes da Silva et al., "Trends in World Military Expenditure."

98 "Le risque en 2022 d'une guerre entre l'Algérie et le Maroc," *Le Monde*, December 26, 2021, <https://www.lemonde.fr/blog/filiu/2021/12/26/le-risque-en-2022-dun-conflit-entre-lalgerie-et-le-maroc/>.

99 "Israel Inks \$500m Air Defense Deal with Morocco, Reports Say," *Haaretz*, February 15, 2022, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-inks-500m-air-defense-deal-with-morocco-reports-say-1.10612838>.

100 Karim Mezran and Alissa Pavia, "Morocco and Israel Are Friendlier Than Ever Thanks to the Abraham Accords. But What Does This Mean for the Rest of North Africa?," *MENASource* (blog), Atlantic Council, October 7, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/morocco-and-israel-are-friendlier-than-ever-thanks-to-the-abraham-accords-but-what-does-this-mean-for-the-rest-of-north-africa/>.



Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita speak as they meet in Rabat, Morocco August 11, 2021. REUTERS/Youssef Boudlal

modern rapprochement bares strong historic ties, Algeria still views the nations' newly found friendship as an attack on itself. This perspective has been evident in subsequent events including Algeria's accusation that Israel, along with Morocco, orchestrated the devastating wildfires of August 2021,¹⁰¹ an announcement that Algeria would host a meeting between Palestinian factions,¹⁰² and Algerian footballers raising the Palestinian flag after a match victory over Morocco during the Arab Cup.

China and Russia

Over the last several years China and Russia have become the biggest challenges to US and European interests. As

such, observers define growing Chinese and Russian influence over the world order and their ensuing competition with the United States as a great power competition,¹⁰³ in which both China and Russia seek to become global leaders by exerting power and influence over other countries.¹⁰⁴ In the post-Cold War era, today's competition between the West, on one side, and China and Russia, on the other, can be viewed to an extent as a new form of a bipolar world order. In this framework, North Africa is becoming a region of contention for the two superpowers who are competing to gain an upper hand in both economic as well as military terms. (Morocco still stands firmly with its Western allies and views Russian influence in the region as a menace to its territorial integrity). In fact, Morocco is designated by the

101 "Algeria Blames Groups It Links to Morocco, Israel for Wildfires," *Al Jazeera*, August 19, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/19/algeria-review-relations-morocco-israel-wildfires>.
102 "Algeria Plans to Host Meeting For Palestinian Factions," Anadolu Agency (state-run Turkish news agency), December 12, 2021, <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/algeria-plans-to-host-meeting-for-palestinian-factions/2440343>.
103 "Renewed Great Power Competition: Implications for Defense—Issues for Congress," Congressional Research Service, March 10, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R43838.pdf>.
104 See Matthew Kroenig, "The Return of Great Power Rivalry: Democracy versus Autocracy from the Ancient World to the U.S. and China," (Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2020).

US government as a “Major Non-NATO Ally,”¹⁰⁵ whereas Algeria is not, and can thus receive military and fiscal benefits that other countries cannot.

Russia provides almost 70 percent of Algeria's military equipment,¹⁰⁶ and has thus been a major player in fueling the arms race between Algeria and Morocco. In parallel, Algeria has been developing strong economic ties with China since the early 2000s. Almost 18 percent of Algeria's imported goods comes from China, while exports to China amount to almost 5 percent of total exports. China is an important infrastructure partner for Algeria; between 2005 and 2020, China invested almost \$24 billion in infrastructure including highways and mosques, within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative.¹⁰⁷ Algeria became part of the initiative after signing a memorandum of understanding with China in 2018,¹⁰⁸ thus enabling China to substantially increase its economic footprint in the country.

It is important to note, however, that Algeria has at times shown reluctance to allow either China or Russia to become too influential or to interfere with Algerian sovereignty. Algeria (alongside Morocco) is a member of NATO's Mediterranean Dialogue initiative since 2000.¹⁰⁹ Last year, Algeria struck military agreements with both Italy and Germany in an effort to maintain some level of autonomy from Russia.¹¹⁰ In a recent United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) vote on a resolution to condemn Russia's 2022 offensive in Ukraine, Algeria abstained.¹¹¹ However, Algeria later voted against a UNGA resolution to suspend Russia from the UN Human Rights Council,¹¹² declining to take an active role in isolating Russia.

Compared with Algeria, Morocco does not have as close of a relationship with Russia or China. Morocco's relationship with China can be defined as “pragmatic,”¹¹³ with relatively modest economic and political ties, comparatively. Morocco's relationship with Russia hinges primarily on economic and trade relations, with Russia exporting large quantities of essential goods to the country such as wheat, coal, and petroleum. Politically, the two countries have cordial ties, though the Western Sahara conflict has at times created tensions. In the recent UNGA resolution condemning Russia's war on Ukraine, Morocco did not place a vote in an effort to stem the potential for an unfavorable vote by Russia in future UN resolutions on Morocco's claim over Western Sahara. While Russia usually has abstained on the issue, recent comments by Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in favor of a referendum in Western Sahara do not bode well for Morocco.¹¹⁴ In the past, Russia has hosted members of the Polisario Front in Moscow on multiple occasions, signaling its continued support of both the Polisario and Algeria.¹¹⁵

Western Sahara

Morocco and Algeria have long been in conflict over the territory known as Western Sahara, a chunk of land the size of the United Kingdom that is located on the northwest coast of the African continent bordering Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania. Rabat's official stance over Western Sahara is that the territory is integral to the kingdom.¹¹⁶ However, Western Sahara is considered by most as a disputed territory. The Saharawi people, an ethnic group populating 20 percent of the land closest to Mauritania, are governed by the Polisario, which has been seeking independence since 1975, when it declared Western Sahara the independent

105 Department of State, International Traffic in Arms Regulations, Purpose and Definitions, Major Non-NATO-Ally, 22 CFR § 120.32 (2016), <https://www.govinfo.gov/app/details/CFR-2016-title22-vol1/CFR-2016-title22-vol1-sec120-32>.

106 Anthony Dworkin, “North African Standoff: How The Western Sahara Conflict Is Fuelling New Tensions Between Morocco And Algeria,” European Council on Foreign Relations, April 8, 2022, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/north-african-standoff-how-the-western-sahara-conflict-is-fuelling-new-tensions-between-morocco-and-algeria/>.

107 Adel Hamaizia, “Rebalancing Algeria's Economic Relations with China,” Chatham House, December 3, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/12/rebalancing-algerias-economic-relations-china>.

108 “Algeria to Boost Cooperation with China Under BRI Framework,” XinhuaNet (China's official state press agency), July 20, 2021, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2021-07/20/c_1310071418.htm.

109 “Mediterranean Dialogue,” NATO E-library, December 6, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_52927.htm.

110 Dworkin, “North African Standoff.”

111 Dworkin, “North African Standoff.”

112 “UN Suspends Russia from Human Rights Body: How Your Country Voted,” *Al Jazeera*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/4/8/russia-suspended-from-un-human-rights-body-how-countries-voted>.

113 Yahia H. Zoubir, “Expanding Sino—Maghreb Relations,” Chatham House, February 26, 2020, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2020/02/expanding-sino-maghreb-relations/3-morocco-and-china-pragmatic-relationship>.

114 “The Impact of Russia's Invasion of Ukraine in the Middle East and North Africa,” International Crisis Group, April 14, 2022, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/impact-russias-invasion-ukraine-middle-east-and-north-africa>.

115 “Tensions Rise with Morocco as Russia Receives Polisario Delegation,” *Arab Weekly*, October 23, 2021, <https://thearabweekly.com/tensions-rise-morocco-russia-receives-polisario-delegation>; and “How Polisario Front Hopes to Partner with Russia in Western Sahara,” *Al-Monitor*, April 5, 2017, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/04/western-sahara-polisario-sell-russia-moscow-visit.html>.

116 “What Is Western Sahara and Why Does Morocco Claim Sovereignty Over It?,” *Middle East Eye*, December 10, 2020, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/morocco-western-sahara-battle-sovereignty>.



A general view of a part of the refugee camp of Boudjdour in Tindouf, southern Algeria March 3, 2016. The UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is scheduled to visit the Sahrawi refugees in south-west Algeria's Tindouf region. REUTERS/Zohra Bensemra

Saharawi Arab Democratic Republic.¹¹⁷ Morocco seized control once the Spanish left, leading the Polisario to engage in guerilla warfare against Morocco to drive them out of the territory. In 1991 the parties reached a cease-fire, but on November 14, 2021, the Polisario declared a resumption of conflict.

Since the Polisario's creation, Algeria has been its main supporter, providing arms and military equipment as well as safe haven for its political leaders.¹¹⁸ To a large extent, Algeria's decision to back the Polisario can be viewed through the prism of Algeria's quest to achieve territorial hegemony in the region,¹¹⁹ greater influence over a land rich with hydrocarbons, and access to the Atlantic Ocean. On the other hand, one could argue that Morocco's stance in Western Sahara was aggressive and driven by an

expansionist ideology,¹²⁰ which led Algeria to feel threatened and retaliate by aiding the Polisario.

Experts see the Western Sahara conflict as a major driver behind the recent tensions between Morocco and Algeria. Anthony Dworkin argues that the most recent escalation of tensions stems primarily from the resumption of hostilities and the crisis in Western Sahara.¹²¹ Trump's move to recognize Moroccan authority over Western Sahara was, Dworkin adds, a decisive factor in refueling tensions between Algeria and Morocco. The resumption of hostilities in Western Sahara also sparked a so-called "war of words"¹²² between the two sides, often with daily finger-pointing and name-calling. In fact, Morocco has come out recently in support of the right to self-determination by the people of Kabylie, a region east of Algiers, sparking outrage and disdain in Algeria's

117 Zartman, "Morocco's Sahara Policy."

118 Dworkin, "North African Standoff."

119 Ammour, "The Algerian Foreign Policy."

120 Zartman, "Morocco's Sahara Policy"; and Hugh Lovatt and Jacob Mundi, "Free to Choose: A New Plan for Peace in Western Sahara," European Council on Foreign Relations, May 26, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/free-to-choose-a-new-plan-for-peace-in-western-sahara/>.

121 Dworkin, "North African Standoff."

122 "Algeria: Envoy Trades Barbed Comments with Moroccan Diplomat," *Middle East Monitor*, May 18, 2022, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20220518-algeria-envoy-trades-barbed-comments-with-moroccan-diplomat/>.

capital. In May 2021, Algeria declared the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylie (MAK) a terrorist entity.¹²³

Other experts suggest that the Western Sahara conflict not only fuels tensions but also hinders economic development for both Algeria and Morocco, citing the humanitarian consequences of the protracted conflict. Numerous studies suggest that the UN and in some cases the European Union emerge as the responsible actor(s) for the protracted Western Sahara conflict—as well as the most suitable actor(s) to oversee a mediated solution. Houda Chograni argues that the UN's inability to implement a referendum led to the failure of the nearly thirty-year cease-fire between the Polisario and Morocco.¹²⁴ Morocco played a major role in jeopardizing the referendum by strategically resettling Moroccans in the region throughout the early 1990s, tilting the number of registered voters in its favor, according to Hugh Lovatt and Jacob Mundi. The need for greater EU investment in both political and economic terms, they argue, is essential to finding a solution to the lengthy conflict.¹²⁵

Domestic Politics

Last but not least, domestic issues such as social unrest and economic hardships due to the COVID-19 pandemic have all contributed to the worsening of diplomatic tensions between Algeria and Morocco. Particularly on the Algerian side, experts say, the government has used Morocco as a scapegoat for its own domestic problems. Over the past year and a half, Algeria claimed that Morocco was fomenting unrest in Algeria by backing Islamist movements and causing the wildfires that devastated the country in August 2021.¹²⁶

Algeria's recent finger-pointing is heating up its conflict between Morocco, experts say.¹²⁷ They also contend that its support for the Polisario Front is not merely ideological: Algeria has much to gain from the Front's independence, given Western Sahara's access to important fishing routes

and its phosphate-rich terrain. Other experts suggest that the pandemic and the lack of public confidence that Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune is facing are all contributing factors to Algeria's recent escalatory actions against Morocco.¹²⁸

The Economic, Commercial, and Security Effects of the Conflict

The effects of the Algerian-Moroccan standoff have been severe for both countries. Economically, the two countries could have witnessed larger economic growth to the point of becoming among the largest economies in the Middle East.¹²⁹ Greater commercial ties could help the import and export of oil and gas, which Morocco needs and which Algeria has in great quantities. Tourism could be booming; instead, tourists have not been allowed to cross the land border for decades, which in turn has created an incentive for smugglers to create flourishing underground economies.

Economy

Historically, economic ties between Algeria and Morocco have been modest at best. In 2020, trade relations amounted to only \$1 billion per year,¹³⁰ which, given the size of the economies, is remarkably low. Algeria and Morocco came close to strengthening their ties only once in 1989 when Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Mauritania created the Arab Maghreb Union in Rabat. The union would lay the foundations of a single market, largely based on the EU's common market with the free movement of people, goods, and a unified currency. However, the union's fate was short-lived. There has not been another meeting since 2008, and the union has failed to achieve any tangible results. Analysts purport that Algerian-Moroccan tensions are the main cause for its demise.¹³¹

Economic relations have also been affected by the closing of borders and by the 2021 closing of Algerian airspace to

123 "Algeria Arrests Members of MAK Separatist Group after Attacks," Reuters, September 6, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/algeria-arrests-members-mak-separatist-group-after-attacks-2021-09-06/>.

124 ⁴⁵ Houda Chograni, "The Polisario Front, Morocco, and the Western Sahara Conflict," Arab Center Washington DC, June 21, 2022, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/the-polisario-front-morocco-and-the-western-sahara-conflict>.

125 Hugh Lovatt and Jacob Mundi, "Free to Choose: A New Plan for Peace in Western Sahara," European Council on Foreign Relations, May 26, 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/publication/free-to-choose-a-new-plan-for-peace-in-western-sahara/>.

126 "Things Are Heating Up in Western Sahara," *Economist*, November 6, 2021, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2021/11/06/things-are-heating-up-in-western-sahara>.

127 "Things Are Heating Up in Western Sahara," *Economist*.

128 Carmine de Vito, "Marocco vs Algeria: una competizione oltre il Sahara Occidentale" (Morocco vs Algeria: A Competition beyond Western Sahara), Centro Studi Internazionali (CeSI), January 30, 2022, <https://www.cesi-italia.org/en/articles/marocco-vs-algeria-una-compedizione-oltre-il-sahara-occidentale>.

129 "Things Are Heating Up in Western Sahara," *Economist*.

130 Lounnas and Messari, *Algeria-Morocco Relations*; and "Maroc-Algérie: échange économiques dérisoires, pas d'impact significatif de la rupture des relations," *Medias 24*, August 25, 2021, <https://medias24.com/2021/08/25/maroc-algerie-echanges-economiques-derisoires-pas-dimpact-significatif-de-la-rupture-des-relations/>.

131 Lounnas and Messari, *Algeria-Morocco Relations*.

Morocco—the most important mode of transport given the absence of maritime links connecting the two countries.¹³² Although the two countries are neighbors and share the same language, culture, and religion, they have been unable to benefit from each other's resources. Morocco exports to Algeria a mere 0.48 percent of its total exports, compared with 2.9 percent in exports from Algeria.¹³³ Had the two countries put their differences aside, the World Bank estimates, they could have witnessed an economic growth twice as large as what has been realized.¹³⁴

Gas and Oil

Oil and gas are a large component in each country's economy. While Algeria is an oil and gas producer and exporter, Morocco is highly reliant on oil and gas imports. Oil and gas represent 95 percent of Algeria's exports,¹³⁵ and Italy, France, and Spain are three major buyers.¹³⁶ Until recently, Morocco imported 31.6 percent of its liquified petroleum gas from Algeria through the Maghreb-Europe gas pipeline.¹³⁷

Recent setbacks in Algerian-Moroccan relations have, however, impeded their oil trade. When Algeria announced in 2021 that it would not renew its pipeline contract with Morocco, the government cited hostile acts by Morocco including attempts to jeopardize Algeria's national "unity and integrity."¹³⁸ In February, Spain announced it would come to Morocco's aid by allowing the country to use the pipeline in reverse to help secure the country's energy needs.¹³⁹ In May, Algeria retaliated by announcing that Spain's actions would represent a "breach of contract" that could result in Algeria cutting off Spain from its oil and gas supplies.¹⁴⁰

Energy flows between Morocco and Algeria now represent a source of conflict. While the gas pipeline was for many years open and did not represent a clear obstacle to friendly relations, this is no longer the case. Algeria's control of the pipeline and Morocco's need for natural gas is fueling enmity that may have enduring consequences for both countries.

Tourism

Tourism is an important source of economic growth for both countries. In 2020, income from tourism in Morocco amounted to approximately \$7 billion and in Algeria almost \$4.7 billion,¹⁴¹ representing an important source of job creation and contributing to social and economic development. Despite their proximity and shared language, tourism between the countries is subpar. Between 2019 and 2020, less than 2 percent of tourists visiting Morocco came from Algeria.¹⁴² In 2020, only 3 percent of outbound tourists departing from Morocco visited Algeria.¹⁴³

It is safe to assume that the conflict and border closures are significant factors. Travelers, whether Algerian, Moroccan, or from elsewhere, relied on air travel as the sole legal mode of transport linking the two nations. Algeria's recent decision to close its air space to Morocco will likely have a deteriorating and lasting impact.

Illicit trades

Illicit trade of commodities, people, and oil is an enduring problem with severe effects for economic growth in Morocco and Algeria. Border closures have enabled

132 "The AU and AFCFTA Secretariat Should Facilitate Talks on Economic Cooperation between the Two North African Countries," Institute for Security Studies, September 29, 2021, <https://issafrica.org/iss-today/algeria-morocco-rift-another-blow-to-africas-free-trade-aspirations>.

133 "The AU And AFCFTA Secretariat Should Facilitate Talks"; and "Algeria Country Report," Observatory of Economic Complexity (an online data visualization and distribution platform), 2020, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/dza#:~:text=In%202020%2C%20Algeria%20exported%20a,to%20%2418.8B%20in%202020>. The acronyms stand for the African Union and African Continental Free Trade Area.

134 "Morocco and Algeria Keep Building More Barriers," *Economist*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2017/07/27/morocco-and-algeria-keep-building-more-barriers>.

135 Francis Ghilès, "Escalating Rivalry between Algeria and Morocco Closes the Maghreb-Europe Pipeline," Barcelona Center for International Affairs (CIDOB), *Notes Internacionals* 260, November 2021, https://www.cidob.org/es/publicaciones/serie_de_publicacion/notes_internacionals_cidob/260/escalating_rivalry_between_algeria_and_morocco_closes_the_maghreb_europe_pipeline.

136 "Algeria Country Report."

137 "Morocco Country Report," Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2020, <https://oec.world/en/profile/country/mar>.

138 "Why the Closure of Algeria's Gas Pipeline to Morocco Will Prove Costly for All," *New Arab*, December 1, 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/analysis/why-algerias-gas-pipeline-closure-will-prove-costly-all>.

139 "Algeria Threatens to Scrap Gas Contract with Spain Amid Tensions with Morocco," *France 24*, July 28, 2022, <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20220428-algeria-threatens-to-scrap-gas-contract-with-spain-amid-tensions-with-morocco>.

140 "Algeria Threatens to Scrap Gas Contract."

141 "Contribution of Travel and Tourism to Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Morocco in 2019 and 2020," Statista (German data company), February 1, 2022, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1278534/contribution-of-tourism-to-gdp-in-morocco/>; and "Contribution Value of the Travel and Tourism Industry to the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in Algeria from 2019 to 2020," Statista, November 19, 2021, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1278534/contribution-of-tourism-to-gdp-in-morocco/>.

142 "Distribution of International Tourist Arrivals in Morocco in 2019 and 2020, by Nationality," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1245783/distribution-of-tourist-arrivals-in-morocco-by-nationality/>.

143 "Distribution of Outbound Tourist Departures from Morocco in 2020, by Country of Destination," Statista, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1278271/distribution-of-outbound-tourist-departures-from-morocco-by-country-of-destination/#:~:text=Main%20countries%20of%20destination%20of%20Moroccan%20tourists%202020&text=As%20of%202020%2C%20France%20was,percent%20and%2010%20percent%2C%20respectively>.

smuggling for decades. Between the 1980s and early 2000s, fuel, agricultural products, tobacco, and alcohol were routinely smuggled across these borders, allowing border areas to widely benefit from the illegal activities as smuggling created jobs and revitalized towns. Given these unintended benefits, neither Algeria nor Morocco saw any reason to disrupt this illegal smuggling.

After the 2011 protests and uprisings referred to as the Arab Spring, things started to change as both countries feared there would be an increase in the smuggling of weapons and humans and a potential of growing terrorism threats. Algeria was also losing \$1.3 billion in petrol smuggling. Morocco and Algeria both decided to tighten their security methods by building walls and investing in national security measures, to the detriment of the border towns that had thrived through illicit trading for decades.

Today, smuggling is still a cause for concern in Morocco and Algeria because of the agility with which the smugglers were able to adapt. Global Financial Integrity, a Washington think tank, has estimated that Algeria and Morocco have lost roughly \$3.5 billion and \$2.7 billion, respectively, in recent years to illicit financial inflows; and \$4.1 billion and \$3.4 billion, respectively, to illicit financial outflows.¹⁴⁴ Narcotics from South America remain a big source of revenue for smugglers in both Algeria and Morocco; however, given the lack of collaboration, local security forces remain ill-equipped to counter them.

Italy's Prospects in Mediating Peace

Of all North African countries, Morocco and Algeria represent particularly strategic partners to Italy given their important trade, economic, and security agreements with that EU member. Algeria alone exports 26.6 percent of Italy's total gas imports.¹⁴⁵ These numbers are bound to increase after Italy signed a major gas agreement with Algeria in April 2022 to lessen its dependence on Russian gas exports.¹⁴⁶ Italy's close relationship with Algeria is long-standing, according to Andrew Farrand, who notes Algeria's appreciation for the fact that Italy never closed its embassy during the "black decade" of 1990s, when Algeria was "abandoned" by all other Western powers.

In recent months, Italy's relationship with Algeria has grown stronger still. Italian government officials, including Foreign Minister Luigi di Maio, Prime Minister Mario Draghi, and senior management from Italian oil company ENI have made multiple visits to Algeria in recent months.¹⁴⁷ Italian President Sergio Mattarella, in his state visit to the country in November 2021, remarked that "Algerian-Italian relations are solid, old and strategic, and we are working to strengthen and consolidate them further."¹⁴⁸ Algerian President Tebboune made his own visit to Italy in May 2022, and the countries will hold a bilateral summit in Algiers in July, with the promise of yet more new trade and investment agreements.

Italy also has important and strategic relations with Morocco. Italy perceives Morocco as the "access door to the rest of Africa,"¹⁴⁹ a gateway which, if leveraged correctly, could provide important entry points to trade and economic partnerships with the rest of the continent. More than eighty Italian enterprises have a local presence in Morocco, including notable Italian banks. Tourism also provides strong economic gains to both countries, with Morocco receiving more than 85,000 Italian tourists in 2019 alone. Italy, meanwhile, is home to a large Moroccan community of about 450,000 people—the third biggest community of expatriates in the country—rendering Moroccan tourism to Italy an important source of revenue. In 2019, the Strategic Cooperation Agreement that the two countries struck provided a strengthened framework to bolster economic, commercial, and financial cooperation.

Morocco is a vital partner to Italy in the fight against terrorism and transnational crime, particularly when dealing with the Sahel. Since the fall of Libya's Muammar al-Qaddafi in 2011, the region of the Sahel that neighbors Morocco has become a place of major instability. It is now home to widespread illegal arms and drug trade, terrorism, and clandestine immigration and human trafficking, all factors that could destabilize North Africa and Southern Europe. Italy is increasingly worried about security and stability in the Sahel, and views Morocco as a strategic partner to help fight and block illegal activity from permeating through the region. In recent decades and current times, the two countries have signed multiple agreements since 1987 to counter terrorism and drug smuggling. According to the

144 R. A. Price, "Illicit Financial Flows in North Africa (Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia)," K4D Helpdesk Report 630, Institute of Development Studies, June 25, 2019, https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5e3c51e3ed915d093cbe4f15/630_Illicit_Finance_in_North_Africa.pdf.

145 "Italy Country Report," Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2020, [https://oec.world/en/profile/country/ita#:~:text=Imports%20The%20top%20imports%20of,and%20Spain%20\(%2422.8B\)](https://oec.world/en/profile/country/ita#:~:text=Imports%20The%20top%20imports%20of,and%20Spain%20(%2422.8B)).

146 "Italy Clinches Gas Deal with Algeria to Temper Russian Reliance," Reuters, April 11, 2022, <https://www.reuters.com/business/energy/italy-signs-deal-with-algeria-increase-gas-imports-2022-04-11/>.

147 Author interview with Andrew G. Farrand, June 14, 2021.

148 "Le gaz et le commerce cimentent le lien entre Rome et Alger," *Middle East Eye*, April 20, 2022, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/fr/actu-et-enquetes/algerie-italie-draghi-tebboune-gaz-ukraine-espagne-crise>.

149 "I Rapporti Bilaterali," Italian Embassy in Rabat (website), accessed May 2022, https://ambrabat.esteri.it/ambasciata_rabat/it/i_rapporti_bilaterali/.



Italian Prime Minister Mario Draghi is welcomed by Algerian Prime Minister Aymen Benabderrahmane, in Algiers, Algeria, July 18, 2022. Filippo Attili/Palazzo Chigi Press Office/Handout via REUTERS.

Italian ambassador to Morocco, Armando Barucco, the 1991 Italy-Morocco Friendship and Cooperation Treaty paved the way for a strategic partnership between the two countries,¹⁵⁰ laying a foundation for future security agreements.

Morocco also is an important partner in the renewable energy sector. At the onset of January 2022, Morocco has pledged to the United Nations its use of 80 percent renewable energy by 2050.¹⁵¹ Morocco's green energy goals render the country a natural partner and ally in this field as Italy attempts to diversify its energy consumption. In the renewable energy field, Italy holds important ties with Algeria as well: the nations' oil companies signed a new agreement this year to explore alternative sources of energy.¹⁵²

Conclusion

Morocco and Algeria have been at odds with one another since they gained independence from France. A number of factors have contributed to the recent wave of tensions, many of which are rooted in historical differences, such as the ideological positions the two countries held at the onset of and throughout the Cold War. Other differences are even more deeply rooted and amount to differing beliefs over disputed land borders that emerged in the decolonization period. The two countries also have long engaged in an arms race to gain the upper hand in regional competition over territory, much of which was fueled by the decolonization period in which both countries

150 Armando Barucco, "Italia e Marocco: un partenariato strategico per il Mediterraneo allargato e l'Africa," Med-Or Leonardo Foundation, July 30, 2021, <https://www.med-or.org/news/italia-e-marocco-un-partenariato-strategico-per-il-mediterraneo-allargato-e-lafrica>.

151 "Italian Ambassador: Morocco Is a Priority Partner in Renewable Energy," *Morocco World News*, March 30, 2022, <https://www.morocroworldnews.com/2022/03/348008/italian-ambassador-morocco-is-a-priority-partner-in-renewable-energy>.

152 "Eni and Sonatrach Agree to Increase Gas Supplies from Algeria through Transmed," ENI Press Release, April 11, 2022, <https://www.eni.com/en-IT/media/press-release/2022/04/eni-and-sonatrach-agree-to-increase-gas-supplies-from-algeria-through-transmed.html>.

felt they were owed different chunks of land. Of these, Western Sahara still represents an important source of tension given each country's viewpoint on the legitimate sovereignty over the region. Domestic politics, at times, have also played an important role in stoking tensions. Consequently, both country's economies have suffered greatly from the crisis because of low levels of economic and trade activity between the two. The World Bank estimates that over the last decade, the economies of Algeria and Morocco could have doubled in size, but have instead grown only by 33 percent and 37 percent, respectively.¹⁵³

Italy, along with the United States, has a chance to temper the ongoing crisis in the following ways:

- Italy should ensure it maintains a strategic and good relationship with Algeria. Striking economic and trade deals with the country as well as fostering regular diplomatic activities through bilateral meetings will help Algeria feel less isolated internationally and more appreciated by European countries in the wake of US recognition of Moroccan control of Western Sahara. Such developments would also help highlight Algerian foreign policy successes at home, where President Tebboune's popular support is shaky.
- Italy should also push Algeria to reopen its airspace to Morocco in order to bolster tourism activities in both countries, help create more jobs, and fight rising levels of unemployment, which in Algeria has reached a staggering 12.83 percent, the highest level since 2007.
- Italy also is strategically positioned to help Morocco and Algeria join forces to combat illicit financial flows (IFF). Italy is on the forefront of fighting IFFs as it has signed all UN conventions against corruption and transnational organized crime; it is part of the Financial Action Task Force, Global Forum on Asset Recovery, and the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development's Multilateral Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters and its Base Erosion and Profit Shifting project. Through capacity-building programs and technical assistance, Italy can help Morocco and Algeria find common ground in the fight against corruption and illegal cross-border activities.
- On the Western Sahara issue, Italy should continue to give its full weight and support to the UN-mediated process and back the recently appointed personal envoy of the UN secretary-general for the Western Sahara, Staffan de Mistura of Italy. Additionally, Italy should advocate a peace process involving direct talks between Algeria and Morocco over Western Sahara. Although Algeria has repeatedly said it will not do so, its long-standing and direct involvement in the conflict renders Algeria's involvement crucial to settling tensions in Western Sahara as well as in the Maghreb.
- Lastly, Italy should join forces with the United States to help promote "regional security and stability, economic cooperation, and advancing human rights and fundamental freedoms,"¹⁵⁴ as was discussed by US Secretary of State Antony Blinken on his most recent visit to Algiers in March 2022. Given its strong relations with both Algeria and Morocco, Italy has the potential to serve in bridging gaps that exist between the Maghreb and Italy's allies in Europe and the United States. This could be done through the strengthening of cultural ties and exchanges by, for example, creating joint research hubs in important universities of each respective country, or promoting the creation of musical projects with musicians from Morocco and Algeria under the aegis of Italian and US musical directors.

153 "Things Are Heating Up in Western Sahara," *Economist*.

154 "Secretary Antony J. Blinken Remarks to Mission Algeria," US Department of State, Press Release, March 30, 2022, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-antony-j-blinken-remarks-to-mission-algeria/>.

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Some relevant publications: “Chaos in the heart of the Mediterranean: the Libyan crisis from the fall of al-Qadhafi’s Jamāhīriyya to the present war (2011-2020)”, in F.M. Corrao, R. Redaelli (eds), *States, Actors and Geopolitical Drivers in the Mediterranean*, Palgrave Macmillan, Londra 2021; (with Karim Mezran) *Truly a Proxy War? Militias, Institutions and External Actors in Libya between Limited Statehood and Rentier State*, The International Spectator, 2022; (with Riccardo Redaelli) “The Re-Sectarization of the Middle East: Minorities, Communities and Identity Politics within the Current Geopolitical Confrontation”, in Ida Caracciolo, Umberto Montuoro (eds), *Protection of Cultural and Religious Minorities Leadership for International Peace and Security*, Giappichelli Editore, Torino 2019.



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He is also the author of a book in English on the identity crisis in the Middle East and North Africa, entitled *Negotiation and Construction of National Identities* (Martinus Nijhoff Publishers 2007). His analyses on the Middle East and North Africa also have been widely published in Italian- and other-language journals and publications. From 2002 to 2012, Dr. Mezran was the director of the Center for American Studies in Rome. Additionally, he has taught courses on the history and politics of North Africa as an adjunct professor of Middle East studies at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS). Dr. Mezran holds a PhD in international relations from SAIS at Johns Hopkins University; a JD in comparative law from the University of Rome (La Sapienza); an LLM in comparative law from The George Washington University; an MA in Arab studies from Georgetown University; and a BA in management from Hiram College.



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issues of shared concern. The emergence of a new era of great power competition between the United States, Russia, and China is making its way into the Middle East and North Africa, and a robust transatlantic partnership is needed now more than ever to help counter Russia and China's growing influence in the region.



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