



**EURODEFENSE OBSERVATORY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN**  
**REPORT TO THE VIENNA PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL MEETING**

## **SUMMARY**

Since our last report (June 2021), the situation in the Mediterranean region has deteriorated further. The deep political and economic crisis in Lebanon, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's continued authoritarian drift, the ousting in July 2021 by President Kais Saied of Tunisia of the Prime Minister and his government and the suspension of the Parliamentary activity and, above all, the new phase of confrontation among the two most important nations of the Maghreb, Algeria and Morocco within the context of the Western Sahara conflict, show how unstable the political state of affairs in the Southern Mediterranean region currently is. Meanwhile, the new Israeli coalition government does not seem ready to engage in any dialogue with the Palestinians and is adopting policies similar to those of its predecessor regarding settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. The potential for a new explosion of violence clearly exists.

The EU should pay close attention to this situation, as the region has an enormous importance for the security of Europe. Events in our Southern Neighborhood show that the status quo leads to dangerous chronic instability. It is not, therefore, an option for the EU.

## **1. THE WESTERN SAHARA CONFLICT AND THE NEW PHASE OF CONFRONTATION BETWEEN ALGERIA AND MOROCCO**

Tensions between Algeria and Morocco began shortly after Algeria's independence in 1962. The two nations soon became rival powers trying to impose their influence over the Sahel and the Western African regions. From October 1963 until February 1964, they engaged in an armed conflict over the borders drawn by the French colonial power in the 1950s. The breaking point took place in 1976, when Spain withdrew from the Western Sahara (WS) and Morocco occupied the territory claiming its sovereignty over the entire area. When war broke out between Morocco and the Polisario Front (FP), Algeria took the Sahraoui refugees in its territory (Tinduf) and became the main supporter of the Sahraoui Arab Republic (RASD) and of FP's actions on the military and political fronts.

The conflict over the WS has remained unresolved for nearly five decades, although the UN has passed many resolutions including it on the list of “Non-Autonomous Territories” whose decolonization is pending. A cease fire was reached in 1991, but no progress has been made since then towards a solution of the conflict. Meanwhile, Morocco has consolidated its occupation of the territory, where it has sent thousands of Moroccan settlers and invested huge financial resources to develop infrastructure and the local economy. Rabat has made it clear that it will not accept holding a referendum of self-determination by the Sahraoui people, as foreseen in several UN resolutions.

The cease-fire ended in November 2020, when Morocco occupied the demilitarized area south of Guerguerat. After that, military skirmishes resumed, and the FP and Algeria put an end to direct talks with Rabat. The situation became even more tense when, on December 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2020, a “Joint Declaration between Morocco, Israel and the United States” (JD) was signed in Rabat. In the JD the Trump Administration “*recognized Morocco’s sovereignty over the entire territory of the WS*”, and reaffirmed Washington’s support for Rabat’s autonomy proposal “*as the only basis for a just and lasting solution to the dispute over the Western Sahara*”. Although the Biden Administration has not followed-up on this Declaration, Rabat considered that this was a strong endorsement of its position on the matter and adopted a much more assertive position. In August 2021, The Israeli Foreign Minister Yaïr Lapid visited Rabat, confirming the decision to open Embassies in both capitals. Direct flights between Tel Aviv and Casablanca have begun recently. During his visit Lapid attacked Algeria for its links with Iran and its “harmful role in the region”.

The reaction by Algeria has been very tough. In the following weeks it announced that it was breaking diplomatic relations with Morocco, closed the border between both countries and its air space to all Moroccan civil and military flights. Furthermore, it announced that it would not extend the contract over the gas pipeline “Maghreb-Europe” (GME) that brings gas from Algeria to Spain crossing Moroccan territory, after it expires on 31.10.2021,<sup>1</sup>. Algiers also criticized Rabat’s normalization of relations with Israel and the intensification of Morocco’s moves to put an end to negotiations over the WS unless its sovereignty over the territory is recognized by the international community. It also condemned the statement made by the Moroccan Ambassador to the UN, Omar Hilale, defending the independence movement in the Algerian Kabila<sup>2</sup> and the support given by Rabat to two opposition groups that the Algerian government labels as terrorists<sup>3</sup>. On its part, Rabat affirms that Algiers “warmongering” is due to internal political reasons, as the Algerian régime is trying to stir nationalistic and patriotic sentiments on its people to divert attention from other problems.

The situation is dangerous, as both countries are engaged on an arms race. Algeria spends 6.7% of its GDP on defense and Morocco 3.8%, but with an increase of 54% over the last decade.

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<sup>1</sup> The 1,400 kilometers pipeline GME works since 1996 and transports 10,000 million cubic meters of gas a year. Morocco charged a toll of 58 million € annually and kept 700 million cubic meters for its own electricity production.

<sup>2</sup> Movement pour l’Auto-determination de la Kabila (MAK), seeking the independence of a region of 7 million people, on the eastern part of Algeria.

<sup>3</sup> Amar Belani, the Algerian diplomat in charge of the WS affairs, said that his government could take “additional measures” against Rabat. According to the local press, these measures could include the closing of its territorial waters to Moroccan vessels, the imposition of visas and even the expulsion of all Moroccan citizens from its territory (thousands work, mostly irregularly, in the agriculture and construction sectors in Algeria).

**On the Western Sahara's conflict, the most recent developments are the following:**

- The decision adopted by the EU General Court of Justice of 29.09.2021, stating that the new EU accords of association with Morocco (signed in 2018) on Trade (agricultural products) and Fisheries, cannot include the territory or the waters of the WS without the consent of the Sahraoui population. It also recognized the FP as the legitimate representative of the Sahraoui people. The Court gave a grace period of two months to abide by its decision, during which the Commission can appeal to the EUCJ, in which case the agreements would remain in place until the Court takes the final decision.
- The intensification of the humanitarian emergency in the refugee camps of Tinduf and the growing pressure exerted by the younger Sahraoui population on its political leadership to put an end to their plight.
- The interpretation by Rabat that the high degree of participation (66.9%) of the population of the WS in the recent legislative and regional elections (21 September 2021), and the opening of several Consulates (mostly of African and Caribbean nations) in El Aaioun and Dakhla, reinforce its claim of sovereignty over the territory.
- The appointment by the UN Secretary General of a new Special Envoy for the WS, Staffan de Mistura after more than two years of vacancy of the post. De Mistura is very experienced in international mediation (Iraq, Siria, Afghanistan) and knows the WS conflict well, as he is a former head of MINURSO. He has a strong support from the Biden Administration. The EU and its member states should also give their full support to the de Mistura's mission.

## **2. TUNISIA, A PRESIDENTIAL "COUP" AMONGST GROWING DISSATISFACTION OF CITIZENS**

Tunisia, the country that in 2011 initiated the so-called "Arab Spring" with the ousting of dictator Abidine Ben Ali and opened the way towards the establishment of a democratic system (the first one in the Arab world), has been grappling over the last two years with a deep economic crisis, a looming fiscal crunch, and a flailing response to the COVID-19 pandemic. All hopes that democracy would bring good government and economic prosperity have been dashed, as the political class has been unable to deliver. The constant squabbling between President Kais Saied, Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi and Parliament Speaker Rached Gannouchi has paralyzed the government precisely when the economy was sinking, and the effects of the pandemic were more severe.

On July 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021, President Saied, after sending Army troops to the streets, dismissed Prime Minister Mechichi and the Speaker of the Parliament Gannouchi, froze the activity of Parliament and withdrew the legal immunity from MPs. Saied based his actions on a controversial interpretation of article 80 of the 2014 Constitution, which allows the President to take extraordinary measures in case of "imminent danger that threatens the countries' territorial integrity, its independence or its security". But the Constitution says that the President must consult with Parliament before adopting the measures, something Saied did not do as he closed the Assembly. He also attacked the media (including the storming of Al Jazeera's offices in Tunis) and ordered the arrest of several MPs. The international community has expressed its concern over this authoritarian turn taken by the President.

Although, according to polls, Saied's actions enjoyed a certain degree of popular support, as dissatisfaction with the malfunctioning of institutions was widespread, and obtained a qualified support from labor unions and civil society organizations, they were dubbed as "coup" by all opposition parties.

On 29.09.2021, three months after assuming all powers, President Saied appointed a new Prime Minister, Najila Bouden Romdhane, a civil servant from the Ministry of Education. Romdhane is the first woman to occupy this responsibility in Tunisia. She was given the task of forming a new government "as soon as possible". The new government has taken office on mid-October.

### **3. LEBANON, WIDESPREAD SUFFERING IN A "FAILED STATE"**

Lebanon faces one of the world's worst economic crises, pushing millions into poverty. People have no longer access to basic services, while items such as essential staples have become unaffordable, due to the removal of public subsidies and the scarcity of supplies. An illegal market has developed for generators, petrol, and medicines, which is dominated by mafias who band together with part of the political class and the bureaucracy. Hospitals across the country have great difficulty to function due to the lack of fuel for their generators, medicines, equipment and personnel. With frequent cuts of electricity supply, people cannot use their computers and lose access to internet. Explosions, shootings, and fights break out frequently in Lebanese cities, often at petrol stations where people spend hours to refuel. On October 15, more than six people were killed by snipers during a demonstration to protest the slow judicial investigation of the deadly blast in Beirut harbour that took place last year. The demonstration had been organized by Hezbollah, who believes that the investigations are tricked and has requested the removal of the examining judge. Hezbollah blames the Christian faction of the Lebanese military forces for this sniper attack. The growing influence of Hezbollah on the state structures is worrisome and the increase in violence brings back memories of the bloody civil war (1975-1990).

The Lebanese pound, whose official rate is 1,500 to the US dollar, is worth 20,000 in the street (July 2021) and circulates parallel to the dollar. The cost of a basic basket is equivalent to five times the minimum wage.

This disastrous situation has been brought about by a political system riddled with sectarianism, corruption, and a dysfunctional institutional system. The 2019 popular uprising was worthless, and the situation nosedived after the huge explosion in Beirut's harbour in August 2020 that killed more than 200 people and destroyed a large part of the city. The functioning of the harbour is crucial, as a good part of food imports is managed through it. A new government has been formed recently, the first in 13 months, but the problems it faces are too big for it to handle. Lebanon has become a failed state, the Lebanese population is demoralized and exhausted, and many are only hoping to get a visa and leave the country.

More recently, a big spat between Lebanon's new government and Saudi Arabia broke out when Information Minister George Khordai -who enjoys the support of Iran-backed Hezbollah- criticised on TV the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen<sup>4</sup>. After that, the Saudis broke relations with Lebanon, recalled their ambassador from Beirut and expelled the Lebanese envoy from Riad. They also banned all imports of Lebanese products. Other Gulf countries (Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE) followed suit. But Kordahi stepping

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<sup>4</sup> Khordai said that the Houthis are "defending themselves...against an external aggression".

down would have knock-on effects that could threaten Prime Minister Najib Mikati's coalition government, tasked with addressing the country's economic crisis. This crisis adds to the economic woes in Lebanon at a time Beirut would have needed financial support from the Gulf states.

#### **4. LIBYA, ON THE ROAD TO DECEMBER 2021 ELECTIONS**

Emas al-Sahah, head of the High Electoral Committee, has recently said that registration of candidates for the December 24<sup>th</sup>, 2021, Presidential Elections will start in mid-November. This election will be the first round, while the second round, together with parliamentary elections, will be held in 2022. Libya's Interim Prime Minister and several foreign powers (including foreign ministers of Spain, Italy, and France), meeting at the Libya Stabilization Conference held in Tripoli on October 21, 2021, insisted that elections should be held as scheduled. It was the first conference held in the Libyan capital since the ousting of Col. Muhammad el-Gaddafi in 2011. French Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian, said that a meeting will take place in Paris in November 2021 to give a final push to the December elections and ensure the departure of foreign forces. In December 2020, the UN estimated that about 20,000 foreign forces were present in Libya<sup>5</sup>. The Libyan interim government is producing a plan to expel these foreign fighters before the elections and hopes that the international community will support it on this crucial matter, but the start is very modest.

So far, five candidates have announced their presidential bid for the vote: Ibrahim Dabbashi, the former UN ambassador, Hatem Al-Kour, a Libyan comedian, Fathi bin Shatwan, a former Minister of Industry, Aref Al-Nayed, former Libyan ambassador to the UAE and Fathi Basghagha, former Minister of Interior. Saif Al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of Muammar Gaddafi has also announced he is running for the election, but not on the list for the time being.

The security situation in the western part of Libya, including Tripoli, continues to suffer from the control of militias with violent armed clashes and assassination attempts against military commanders. There are political parties and individuals who are objecting to holding elections.

The main outstanding question on this electoral process is who will be able to run for president and what powers he will have. The High Council of State, based in Tripoli, passed an electoral law that establishes conditions that would bar "Marshall" (and Eastern Libya strongman) Khalifa Haftar from running for President. On its part, the legislative body in Tobruk passed a text that would allow Haftar to run. This will be the most complicated issue to deal with. Another problem on the list of Libya's woes is the integration and unification of the country's armed forces under a single command, forces that as recently as last year were fighting each other.

The international community must also deal with the issue of migrants and refugees present in Libya. More than 5,000 people (including women and children) have been put into indefinite detention within

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<sup>5</sup> They range from Russians sent by the shadowy Kremlin-linked "Wagner group" to African and Syrian mercenaries, and Turkish soldiers deployed under a deal with a previous unity government at the height of the last round of east-west fighting. The "Wagner group", which supports Haftar, is directed by Yevgheni Prigozhin, a close friend of President Putin, and is supported by the GRU (Russian military intelligence). It is also active in the Central African Republic, Syria, Sudan, and Mali. Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro has also requested assistance from this group of mercenaries for his personal security.

the last month. Many of them had already spent years between government-associated detention centres and smugglers and have undergone torture and other abuses. Smugglers are currently charging \$1,500 to \$2,000 per person for an attempt to reach Italy or Malta via the Mediterranean Sea.

## **5. TURKEY. ERDOGAN CONTINUES HIS AUTHORITARIAN DRIFT**

On October 23, 2021, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan instructed Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavusoglu, to declare “persona non grata” the ambassadors of ten Western countries (the US, France, Canada, Finland, the Netherlands, Denmark, Germany, Norway, New Zealand, and Sweden) because they had signed a public statement requesting the release of human rights activist Osman Kavala, who is in prison since 2017 accused of conspiracy to topple the government. The European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) has ruled that Kavala is suffering “an arbitrary detention”. The statement of the foreign envoys said that “they were taking note of the ECHR’s ruling”. David Sassoli, Speaker of the European Parliament, has characterized the action taken against the ambassadors as “a sign of the authoritarian drift of the Turkish régime”. Erdogan finally cancelled the order, and the ambassadors were allowed to stay in Turkey.

The office of the Public Prosecutor has ordered the arrest of 158 military and prosecutors, accusing them of links with exiled religious leader Fetullah Gülen.

President Erdogan is nervous because the economy is deteriorating rapidly. The inflation rate last September reached 20% year-on-year, five times the target of 4% set by the Central Bank. The Turkish lira has fallen by more than 320% against the US dollar in the last decade. The continuous interference on the activity of the Central Bank by President Erdogan has accelerated the depreciation of the currency. The President has ousted three of the Bank’s governors within the last year because they did not abide by his orders to cut interest rates.

Consultative talks took place in Ankara, on October 6, between Turkey and Greece amid recent tensions between the two countries regarding hydrocarbon exploration activities in eastern Mediterranean waters near Cyprus and Crete. Turkey also criticises the Greece-France’s defense and security deal which threatens to harm the NATO alliance.

## **6. MILITARY COUP IN SUDAN**

On 25.10.2021, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan dissolved the transitional government and the Sovereign Council -the country’s top ruling body- declared the state of emergency and soldiers arrested several senior officials, including Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok. The coup derailed Sudan’s fragile transition towards democracy following the removal of longtime ruler Omar al-Bashir in April 2019 in a popular uprising. Al-Burhan said that the Army had no choice but to sideline politicians who were inciting people against the armed forces. “The dangers we witnessed last week could have led the country into civil war,” said al-Burhan. Despite the declaration of a state of emergency, tens of thousands of protesters poured into the streets of Khartoum and Omdurman. They were met with gunfire by the security forces, with at least seven people killed and dozens more wounded. The coup shows the willingness of Sudan’s military to cling on to power to preserve their interests. A huge demonstration is to take place on 31.10.2021 to

show to the international community the rejection of the majority of the Sudanese people towards this assault on the most serious attempt to move towards democracy in the country's history.

The African Union has suspended Sudan from its activities until the restoration of the country's civilian-led transitional government, the World Bank froze aid and the United States paused \$700m in emergency assistance. Under pressure from the UN and the international community, Burhan says that Hamdok can return to form a new government and promises elections in July 2023.

## **7. THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT SEEMS NEGLECTED, AND A NEW PHASE OF VIOLENCE COULD EXPLODE ANYTIME**

Officials in Israel and Washington may believe that the so-called "Abraham Accords" and the formation of a new Israeli coalition government have provided a certain degree of stability as Israel establishes diplomatic relations and engages in cooperation with some Arab states. But experts believe that the status quo is unsustainable and that the warning lights of a new explosion of violence loom in the horizon.

The new Israeli left-right coalition government's policies do not seem to be different from those of its predecessor under Benjamin Netanyahu. It does not want to hear the word "peace process" that would put the creation of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza back on the table. But as former Assistant Secretary Martin Indyk writes in "Foreign Affairs"<sup>6</sup>, the warning signs are there: *"The Palestinian Authority is near collapse, Mahmoud Abbas has lost all credibility among the Palestinian people, while Hamas, with its doctrine of violent resistance is gaining popularity. The Taliban victory on Afghanistan will boost Hamas's argument that its strategy is the only way to liberate the Palestinian territory"*. Many young Palestinians are fed up with the paralysis of the Abbas Administration and are ready to embrace a more active resistance to the occupation. As Indyk says, *"Palestinian deaths from confrontations with the Israeli Army are rising at an alarming rate, and for the first time the Israeli government is permitting Jewish prayer in what is known as Temple Mount to Jews and Haram al-Sharif to Muslims, a highly inflammatory move"*.

Quite recently, Israel's government has approved the construction of about 3,000 new settlement homes in the occupied West Bank, in what is the latest boost to Israel's 50-year-old settlement activity on occupied lands, making the "two-state solution" increasingly unfeasible. This is contrary to the government's pledge to reduce tensions with the Palestinians and comes in defiance of international law and of strong criticism by the Biden Administration of such projects. Only a day before the announcement, Secretary of State Blinken had protested the plan in a phone-call with Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz, and State Department Spokesman, Ned Price, declared that the US strongly opposed the expansion of settlements. The Palestinian Authority has rejected Israel's decision and called upon the international community to take a decisive stance on the matter. Meanwhile, Arabs living in Israel are denied construction permits and treated as second-class citizens. Thousands are left without legal status in the occupied territories. Israeli settlers frequently attack Palestinian farmers' olive trees, damaging harvests.

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<sup>6</sup> See "Order before peace. Kissinger's Middle East Diplomacy and its lessons for today". Foreign Affairs, November/December 2021. Volume 100 number 6.

## CONCLUSION

The regrettable way with which the Western powers have withdrawn from Afghanistan show how little appetite there is to continue involvement in some of the long-standing and complex North African and Middle Eastern conflicts. And yet, Europe's (and the West's) interests in the region are extremely important and, therefore, we cannot afford to ignore the region's problems. The growing influence in the region of foreign powers, such as China or Russia, present scarcities in gas supplies and the fast increase in oil prices, migratory pressures, jihadist activity, armed confrontations, human rights violations, show how concerned Europe should be on political events in the region, especially as the US is pulling back from it.

It is true that transatlantic relations are not at a positive stage and that Europe's influence in Washington is not strong. But the stakes are too high, and efforts should be made to convince the Biden Administration that it is time to join forces to prevent the situation in the region from deteriorating further. And first, EU member states should overcome their differences and define a common policy towards the region. It has become urgent.

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