



## **EURODEFENSE OBSERVATORY OF THE MEDITERRANEAN BASIN**

### **REPORT OF THE CHAIRMAN TO THE PARIS PRESIDENT'S COUNCIL MEETING**

#### **SUMMARY**

Since our last report, the situation in the wider Mediterranean region has not improved. Regional tensions have increased and the Russian war of aggression against Ukraine is having considerable repercussions for the Northern African countries, especially on the economic front. The sharp increase in the cost of commodities, like wheat, is affecting the prices of basic staples. Public opinion in those countries is sympathetic towards Russia (echoes of the European colonial past), while the governments are trying to keep a difficult political balance between Russia and the West. Most countries in the region abstained in the March 2 voting on the UN General Assembly Resolution condemning Russia for its attack on Ukraine and calling for the unconditional withdrawal of Russian forces.

The most important development during this period refers to the Western Sahara Conflict. The Royal Palace in Rabat issued a statement on March 18, 2022, reproducing parts of a letter of Spain's Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, sent to King Mohamed VI, recognizing the value of the Moroccan initiative of autonomy for the Western Sahara. The political repercussions of this letter have been significant, both at home in Spain and internationally, as Spain is the former colonial power and the letter represents a drastic change in the position maintained by Madrid for several decades, which was based on the UN Resolutions that call for a referendum of self-determination for the Sahraouis. As a result of this change in position, Algeria withdrew its ambassador from Madrid and the Polisario Front cut its relations with the Spanish Government after the letter was made public.

The situation in Libya has also not improved, as the Presidential elections that were planned for December 24, 2021, had to be postponed "sine die", due to the lack of agreement among the different political forces that strive for power.

In Tunisia, President Kaïs Saïd continued his grabbing of all powers of the state, by dissolving the Supreme Judicial Council, which is responsible for appointing judges, as he did with the government and the Parliament in July 2021.

The situation in the Sahel has deteriorated further, after the military coups that took place in Mali (May 24, 2021), and Burkina Faso (January 24, 2022), and French President Emmanuel Macron's announcement on February 17, 2022, of his decision to withdraw French forces from Mali. Russian mercenary forces are becoming active in the area.



The Lebanese economy continues in free fall, having shrunk by almost 60% over the last two-and-a-half years. This is due to the sectarian political system prevalent in the country and the financing by the Lebanese Central Bank, with depositor's money, of the corrupt and wasteful spending of successive Lebanese governments.

The situation in Israel and the Occupied Territories is becoming more violent, with raids by Israeli forces in several towns across the West Bank and Gaza in response to Palestinian attacks that killed fourteen people and fresh launches of rockets from Gaza into Israel. The Islamist party Raam announced its withdrawal from the governing coalition in Israel, which opens the possibility of sending the country to its fifth election in three years.

Turkey, with strong links with both Russia and Ukraine, is trying to play a central role as mediator between the two parties. Erdoğan is returning to pragmatism in foreign policy, by improving relations with the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, which is an attempt to find ways to come out of the deep economic crisis affecting the country.

### **New developments in the Western Sahara Conflict**

The Western Sahara conflict has been going on since November 1975, when Morocco and Mauritania invaded the territory (with the so-called "Green March"), and Spain, the colonial power, withdrew its forces (Morocco became the sole occupier when Mauritania withdrew from the territory in 1979). All diplomatic efforts to find a solution have failed since then. The most promising moment was when former US Secretary of State, James Baker III, at the time UN Secretary General's Special Envoy, presented in 2003 a comprehensive plan as a basis for negotiations. But the unbending positions of the parties frustrated the efforts of the UN, which still is officially responsible for the future of the territory and maintains a mission in the Western Sahara, the MINURSO. In 2006, Morocco presented a plan contemplating a certain autonomy for the territory, but under Moroccan Sovereignty. It was not accepted by the Sahraouis. In November 2020, military confrontation between Moroccan forces and the Polisario Front resumed after almost 20 years of truce. In November 2021 the newly appointed UN Secretary General Special Envoy, Staffan de Mistura, began his mission (his predecessor Horst Kohler left the post in May 2019) at a very difficult moment because Algeria and Morocco had broken diplomatic relations and were engaged in a dangerous arms race.

The turning point took place on December 22, 2020, with the signature in Rabat of the tripartite declaration between Morocco, the United States and Israel, in which the Trump Administration recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the whole territory and confirmed the US support for the Moroccan autonomy proposal *"as the only basis for a just and lasting solution of the dispute over the Western Sahara"*. It was a great diplomatic victory for Morocco that, since then, has been exerting huge pressure on European countries (including Spain) to obtain their support for its autonomy proposal. In November 2021, on the 46th anniversary of the "Green March", King Mohamed VI announced that Morocco would maintain commercial relations only with those countries that recognize the Kingdom's sovereignty over the Western Sahara. In May 2021, after the entry in Spain of the Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali for medical treatment, Morocco withdrew its ambassador



from Madrid and provoked a massive influx of irregular migrants into the Spanish cities of Ceuta and Melilla.

Prime Minister Sanchez's letter to Mohamed VI, which was initially made public in part by the Moroccan Royal Palace on March 18, 2022, states Sanchez's support for the Moroccan autonomy plan: *"Spain considers that the Moroccan initiative of autonomy over the Western Sahara is the most serious, realistic and credible basis for resolving the conflict"*. The language is similar to the text of the Joint Communiqué issued at the end of the visit to Rabat of the US Deputy Secretary of State, Wendy Sherman, on March 8, 2022. After the content of Sanchez's letter was known,

Algeria's Government withdrew its ambassador from Madrid and warned that Spain could not re-export Algerian natural gas to Morocco (the gas pipeline Maghreb-Europe that carried Algerian gas to the Iberian Peninsula crossing Moroccan territory was closed in September 2021). The fact that several Western powers are ready to accept the reality on the ground complicates Staffan de Mistura's job and puts the UN in a difficult position, as the Moroccan autonomy plan is not accepted by one of the parties, the Sahraouis. On the other hand, the regional rivalry between Algiers and Rabat is at its height and the risk of a military confrontation between the Maghreb's two major powers cannot be excluded.

### **Libya, neither war nor peace**

Libya is not an exception within a depressive landscape encompassing the main protagonists of the "Arab Spring", Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, and Yemen. All hopes of a peaceful and orderly evolution of Libya, brokered by the United Nations, have ended in disappointment. The last missed opportunity was the Presidential Elections, which were scheduled for December 24, 2021, but which had to be postponed indefinitely.

The Libyan people are very tired of violence and would support any reasonable arrangement. Unfortunately, Libyan leaders continue to be enmeshed in continuous struggles for power. The two main poles of power, Tripolitania, under the Government of National Unity (GNU), led now by Abdulhamid Dabeiba, and Cyrenaica, with a politico-military organism, the self-proclaimed "Libyan National Army" (LNA), led by "Field Marshall" Khalifa Haftar, continue to oppose each other. The GNU has been officially recognized by the UN since 2015. The LNA was created by Haftar in 2014 with the aim of seizing power in the whole country, but he failed. Both sides have been at the forefront of the violence that has engulfed the country over the last few years. The country is highly divided into clans, tribes, and communities. The LNA exerts greater influence over the third main region, the Fezzan.

Besides Dabeiba and Haftar, there are other politicians that have presidential ambitions. Fathi Bashagha is the former Minister of the Interior in the government of Fayez al Sarraj in Tripoli (2016-2021), and self-proclaimed Prime Minister (without having been elected) last February. He comes from one of the most important economic centers of Libya, the town of Misrata, and has the support of powerful military factions from that area. He has also obtained some popularity in Cyrenaica and Fezzan. He has tried to come to arrangements with Haftar against Dabeiba, with the support of the



Chamber of Representatives (CDR), which seats in Tobruk (Cyrenaica). The CDR opposes another institution, the Council of State (ACE), based in Tripoli. In theory, the ACE works together with the GNU, but there are many internal rivalries and divisions.

Another influential person is Aguila Saleh, Speaker of the CDR. His relationship with Haftar is not good but both coexist in Cyrenaica. Saleh is engaged in political maneuvers to get rid of Dabeiba, using his position as head of the legislative body. He is also trying to obtain some political benefits using the ambitions of Bashagha and Haftar. Bashagha and Saleh have tried three times to seize power in Tripoli, using a powerful propaganda machine and disrupting the plans of the UN to hold elections. They get support from Egypt, which hopes to see one of its proxies in power. But Dabeiba refuses to resign, as he thinks that his popularity is growing, that he can get the support of militias and that he can use his control over the Central Bank of Libya to advance his political ambitions. And finally, another person who is looking for his political opportunity is Saif al Islam Gadafi, son of the ex “Libyan Guide”, Muhamar Gadafi.

All these political rivals are tussling over who is the least illegitimate, while demanding convoluted constitutional processes as a prerequisite for elections. These are just ploys to maintain their hold on power. Stephane Williams, the UN Secretary General’s Special Envoy, claims that the only way to sustain the UN roadmap is to hold elections by next summer. But the various actors keep struggling for time, as they know that whoever is in charge after the process collapses could gain control of the country. Foreign powers should come together to force these ambitious leaders to accept the UN electoral roadmap as the only way to stabilize the country.

### **Tunisia, on the road to greater authoritarianism**

Last February, President Kaïs Saïd announced the dismissal of the Supreme Judicial Council, the highest institution that governs the judiciary system of the country. This movement by the President eliminates one of the few remaining State institutions that could counterbalance his growing dictatorial powers. Both the judges and the Parliament have rejected this action by Saïd. The Council’s head, Youssef Bouzakher, declared that the dismissal was illegal and shows the intention of the President of the Republic to keep the judiciary under his control.

President Saïd relies increasingly on the Army and the security forces to strengthen his grip on power in the country.

### **Explosive situation in the Sahel**

On January 24, 2022, a military coup in Burkina Faso removed from power and arrested President Roch Marc Christian Kaboré, who had been reelected at the end of 2020. The coup in Burkina Faso follows similar recent coups in Mali, Chad (2021), Niger, Sudan, and Guinea. The new leader in Burkina Faso is Lieutenant Colonel Paul-Henry Sandaogo Damiba, who headed the coup. Damiba (who is “Diplômé de l’École de Guerre de Paris”), suspended the Constitution “sine die” and dismissed the government. The coup enjoyed some popular support, due to the failure of the government to defeat Islamic militias, which have grown stronger since 2015. In November 2021 an



attack by Islamic militias in Inata (north of the country) left 53 “gendarmes” dead. People are looking for a higher degree of security. Burkina Faso is a failed state, troubled by authoritarianism and military coups (for 48 of the 61 years since independence, the country has had military governments).

On February 17, 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron announced his decision to withdraw French forces from Mali. These troops formed part of Operation Barkhane, a French anti-jihadist operation encompassing Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger. A linked European special forces unit, Takuba, withdrew as well. This followed an escalation of tensions between Paris and Bamako. What began in 2013 as a clearly defined and locally popular anti-jihadist operation, eventually became a prolonged conflict that cannot be sustained much longer. In fact, the conflict spread from Mali to Niger and Burkina Faso and the local military proved unable to counter the jihadist threat. More than 6,000 people have been killed. One of the reasons for the failure was the sole emphasis on military action, with few political reforms in those countries and the maintenance of repressive régimes, which in turn made the foreign military intervention unpopular.

Perhaps the most disturbing aspect of this sharp deterioration in relations with the West is the clear Malian turn towards Russia and an alleged agreement with the Wagner Group mercenary troop (which is also present in the Central African Republic, Sudan and Syria). The mercenaries have been accused of murdering civilians in summary executions. Mali recently voted against expelling Russia from the UN Human Rights Council.

According to ACNUR, the humanitarian situation in the Sahel region is dramatic, with almost 2.1 million people having been compelled to leave their homes due to continuous violence. ACNUR has called on the international community to act to put an end to armed conflicts and promote stability and development. The instability in Libya affects countries in the region quite deeply and the permanent drought adds to the suffering of the population. The explosive situation in the Sahel should be of great concern to the EU, as instability in that region has profound repercussions for European security (irregular immigration, terrorism).

### **Lebanon’s economy continues its free fall**

Over the last two and a half years, Lebanon’s economy has been in free fall. The lira has lost 90% of its value against the US dollar, GDP shrunk by 60%, and almost 80% of the Lebanese population slipped below the poverty line, along with the 1.5 million Syrian refugees. Hundreds of thousands of people have left the country. UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres calls the economic collapse “something similar to a Ponzi scheme”. The Central Bank used depositor’s money in the banking system to finance corrupt and wasteful spending of successive Lebanese governments. Participants reaped huge benefits until it all came crashing down in 2019.

For decades, Lebanon’s unproductive economy relied on the regular infusion of foreign capital to function. When the inflows slowed because of the deepening political dysfunction and conflict, the Central Bank resorted to “financial engineering” to fund government deficits and maintain the lira artificially overvalued. It paid exorbitant interest rates to banks for dollar deposits and the banks



offered their own generous returns to lure more deposits. The Lebanese political class is deeply connected to the financial élites. For example, Saad Hariri, son of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri, is the main shareholder of one of Lebanon's largest banks. After massive anti-government protests, the banks shut their doors and denied depositors access to their money, while allowing élites to move their money abroad. This provoked a fatal loss of confidence, rendering all banks insolvent. Coronavirus and the huge explosion in Beirut's port in August 2020, added to the economic disaster.

Foreign donors conditioned the bailout needed to stabilize the economy on an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), but political leaders have refused to adopt the necessary reforms. Lebanon is governed by a sectarian system that divides political representation among eighteen officially recognized sects, each with their own political bosses and patrimonial fiefdoms. By dividing the top government positions amongst Sunnis, Shiites and Christians, the system has facilitated the capture of state institutions by élites, enabling them to exploit public resources for private gain and solidify their hold on their sectarian constituencies. Moreover, some corrupt personalities enjoy the support of foreign powers. This is the case of Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh, who is supported by the US because of his cooperation to counter Hezbollah financing, although he opposed a government financial recovery plan that would have been the basis for negotiations with the IMF.

### **Syria, still isolated within the Arab world**

Eleven years after the beginning of the revolt against the Bashar El Assad régime (15.03.2011), which turned into a devastating war with over half a million people dead, the régime in Damascus still stands thanks to the military intervention of Russia. The régime is trying to return to the community of nations, starting with the Arab League, from which it was suspended ten years ago, but the process seems more difficult than expected. The initiative came from the United Arab Emirates (UAE), which is trying to normalize relations with Assad and bring back Syria to the Arab League before the Summit that was scheduled to take place in March this year, but then postponed. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has stopped this process. The League Secretary General, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, said after a meeting of Foreign Ministers that Syria's return to the Arab League was not even discussed.

### **Resumption of violence in Israel and the Occupied Territories**

Over the last few weeks, Israeli forces have raided towns and cities across the West Bank, in response to Palestinian attacks in Israel that together killed fourteen people. A subsequent Israeli crackdown in the occupied West Bank killed at least fifteen Palestinians. Tensions escalated after clashes took place between Israeli police and Palestinian stone-throwers at the Aqsa Mosque compound, which is also a holy site for Jews, known as Temple Mount. This happened when Israeli police temporarily banned access of Muslim worshippers to Aqsa to prevent clashes with orthodox Jews. 2022 has been a special year because Passover, Eastern, and Ramadan coincided, with its potential to intensify religious tensions.





In Gaza, militants have been firing rockets towards Israel and the Israeli air force has responded by striking some military sites in the Strip. Palestinians say that the operation amounts to collective punishment and that it will fuel the cycle of violence and bloodshed. Israel says that it is a critical effort to counter terrorism.

This increase in violence has prompted the small Muslim party Raam, which participated in the coalition of eight parties that governs Israel, to announce its withdrawal from it. The coalition has lost its majority in the Knesset, also because Idit Silman, member of the extreme right party Yamina (the same party as Prime Minister's Naftali Bennett) left her seat in Parliament due to her differences with the Minister of Health, Nitzan Horowitz, over the enforcement of a court decision on the allowance of fermented bread in hospitals during Passover (in reality, Yamina has great differences with other parties of the coalition, like Meretz, on the issue of freezing the construction of new houses in settlements on the West Bank). Silman said that she will try to promote a right-wing government in Israel and will encourage other parties to leave the coalition as well.

Although this movement has no immediate impact on the government, it has the potential to send Israel to its fifth election in three years if Raam chooses to make its withdrawal permanent and other MPs follow Mrs. Silman's example. This move highlights the tightrope that Prime Minister Naftali Bennett must walk to keep his ideologically diverse coalition together. The coalition government could fall in 2023 if it is unable to pass the budget through the Knesset.

### **Turkey. Trying to navigate in troubled waters**

Turkey is trying to navigate in difficult waters, as it has close relations with both Russia and Ukraine and is an important member of NATO. Ankara has consistently supported Ukraine's sovereignty and independence, as well as Moldova's. President Erdoğan met President Zelensky several times in 2021 and his advisors have met with Zelensky's and Putin's advisors since the war began at the end of February. Turkey has sold Bayraktar TB2 drones to Ukraine, some of which have been used against pro-Russian targets in the Donbass since 2014, with great effectiveness (and it is under pressure from NATO to keep supplying drones and other military equipment to Ukrainian Armed Forces). It was also exploring cooperation with Ukraine in order to produce diesel engines for submarines in the Gölçuk shipyards.

But Ankara also has strong links with Moscow. Russia is a key trading partner for Turkey and Russian tourists are crucial to keep Turkey's tourism industry, which suffered much with the big crisis caused by COVID-19, alive. Tourism provides over 25 billion US \$ annually, which helps to cover almost half of the countries' trade deficit. In Syria, it is largely Russia's presence that holds together the fragile ceasefire in the northern part of the country between the Syrian opposition, the Damascus régime, Turkey, and the Syrian Kurds. Russia controls Syrian air space, and it could disrupt the situation in the safe zone established by Turkey around Idlib, sending millions of Syrian refugees towards the Turkish border. (Turkey already hosts around four million Syrian refugees). Russia has supplied S-400 anti-aircraft missile systems and it is building Turkey's first nuclear reactor. Moscow recently built a pipeline underneath the Black Sea, and it supplies the bulk of natural gas consumed by Turkey. Erdogan and Putin have reasonably good personal relations and, even though they back opposite



sides in Syria, Libya, and the South Caucasus, they do so in a way that recognizes each other's expanding sphere of influence. Ankara has not joined economic sanctions imposed on Russia by its NATO allies.

Turkey is trying to mediate between Russia and Ukraine and delegations of both countries have held several meetings in Istanbul and Antalya, the latter with the presence of Foreign Minister Mevlut Çavuşoğlu. Erdoğan is proposing a meeting between Zelensky and Putin in Turkey as soon as possible. The Turkish President has talked recently with Putin in a bid to accelerate evacuations from Mariupol.

Erdoğan has recently visited Saudi Arabia, which is a clear sign of improvement of relations between Ankara and the Gulf Monarchies, in a bid to attract investments and tourism from these countries, at a moment when the Turkish economy is suffering from slow growth and high inflation.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

The war in Ukraine has increased competition between the European Union and its strategic rivals, mainly China and Russia, in the Middle Eastern and North African region. The Russian invasion has sent shock waves through global energy and food markets, which could deepen humanitarian crises at a time when the region is grappling with a deep economic downturn in most of the countries. This could have negative effects on issues that are of great concern to Europe, such as migration and terrorism. The region grows in importance for Europe as it strives to reduce its dependence on Russian oil and gas. Northern African and Middle Eastern states find themselves in stronger positions vis-à-vis Europe and seek to obtain political gains by maintaining good relations with global powers, as we can see from the reluctance of the EAU, Israel, Saudi

Arabia, Morocco, or Turkey to align themselves with the West on Ukraine. The lack of unity within the EU when dealing with issues of significant importance in the region, has often left it unable to shape developments.

In view of US retrenchment from the region, the EU should move ahead and be more active to help deal with conflicts in its southern neighborhood, which is crucial to its security. The blockage in the political transition in Libya, the authoritarian turn in Tunisia (the country that started the "Arab Spring"), the disastrous economic situation in Lebanon, the explosive security situation on the Sahel, or the rekindled tensions over the Western Saharan conflict, prove that the EU needs to function as a real player in this sensitive southern flank. We have seen the US take initiatives -the tripartite Rabat declaration of December 2020 or the withdrawal from the JCPOA deal with Iran- that directly affect Europe's interests without consulting with its European allies. But Europe cannot develop strategic autonomy if member states continue to maintain opposite positions on regional issues in the Mediterranean Basin, the Middle East, and Western Africa.

Russia has increased its influence in the region, deploying mercenaries in Libya and the Sahel, building up security relations with the Gulf Monarchies and Egypt, and acting as a key interlocutor with both Iran and Israel. Moscow has been able to coordinate oil policy with OPEC regional





producers even after it started the new war of aggression against Ukraine. Saudi Arabia has refused so far to increase its oil production and Prince Bin Salman talked to Putin while ignoring Biden's phone call. China is also strengthening relations with countries in the region to guarantee its oil supplies and it is pressing them to accept payments in yuan instead of dollars. It is also trying to become a major player by including the region in its "Belt and Road Initiative" and eventually becoming a weapons supplier.

The EU must strengthen its standing in the region, as this region will be increasingly important in global rivalries that threaten Europe's security and economic interests. It must prove to its southern neighbors that it is a much more reliable economic and political partner than other powers that seek to gain influence in the region.

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