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CLOSE-UPS

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Close-ups is a Med-Or monthly update. Gathering together the daily work of our situation room, *Close-ups* covers the main events of the Broader Mediterranean countries, offering to a wide audience, not only experts, a close and analytical look at the main issues that affect all the countries that Med-Or oversees on a daily basis. On our interactive map you can click on the single countries and their specific in-depth analyses.

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Algeria

Algerian diplomacy pursues a vocal stance in the Middle East. **Algerian president Abdelmadjid Tebboune discussed the worsening situation in the Gaza Strip in a phone call with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Algerian foreign minister Ahmed Attaf also met with Guterres on the sidelines of the UN Security Council emergency session in New York:** it should be noted that Algeria is set to join the ranks of the Security Council's non-permanent member for its 2024 term, alongside Guyana, Sierra Leone, Slovenia and South Korea. Developments in Gaza also strains ties to Europe: **Algeria has indefinitely postponed the second meeting of the Algerian-EU parliamentary commission.** According to Said Ahmed Temamri, president of the commission on the Algerian side, the decision has been prompted by the Union's "unacceptable double standards" on the Palestinian issue.

Algeria builds up its ties to Turkiye. **Tebboune welcomed in Algiers his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, for the second meeting of the two countries' High Level Cooperation Council.** Algeria trails Egypt as Turkiye's foremost trade partner in North Africa: the country hosts around 1500 Turkish enterprises and provides Ankara with 10% of its gas imports. Twelve agreements were inked during the visit, including a **renegotiation of the Sonatrach-Turkish Petroleum contract for an increase in the supply of Algerian LNG to Turkiye.** The agreement boosts Algerian LNG exports to Turkiye to 5,4 from the previous 4,4 bcm (billion cubic meters) and will remain in force until October 2024.

Algiers' military industry turns to China. **The Chief of Staff of the Algerian armed forces, general Said Chanegriha, undertook a lengthy visit to the People's Republic.** In the course of a week the Algerian army chief met with representatives of CATIC and ELINC – which specialize respectively in aircrafts and electronics – and visited the Chinese naval base in Shanghai. Chanegriha also met with the upper echelons of China Electronics Technology Group Corporation (CETC) and Poly Technologies, specialized in missile defense and among the foremost Chinese exporters of military equipment. Algiers, who depends on Russia for over 75% of its military imports, aims to diversify its suppliers in covering a 2024 defense budget set to reach 21 billion dollars.

Significant developments in the energy sector. Following a meeting on November 7th between Sonatrach CEO Rachid Hachichi and the director general of the Libyan National Oil Company (NOC), Farhat Bengdara, **the Algerian hydrocarbon State champion has announced the resumption of its activities in Libya.** The statement comes after NOC called for the return of international oil and gas companies in the country, leading Sonatrach to officially lift the state of *force majeure* it had declared in 2014. According to Hachichi, moreover, **Sonatrach will aim to reduce domestic consumption of gas to free up additional volumes for export.**

Domestic politics also registers significant changes. **Tebboune officially terminated the functions of his prime minister, Aymene Benabderrahmane.** The premiership falls to Amir Larbaoui, head of the presidential cabinet and former Algerian ambassador to the United Nations, who is known as a trusted collaborator of Tebboune. The shake-up marks the ongoing centralization of executive power in favor of the president, also signaled by the creation of a presidential council tasked with "overseeing economic affairs and governmental, political and institutional activities."



Morocco

King Mohamed VI's traditional address to the nation opened celebrations for the 48th anniversary of the 1975 Green March, which marked the *de facto* annexation of most of Western Sahara to the Alawi kingdom. In one of his rare institutional appearances, the monarch outlined plans for the development of the region, which he considers a centerpiece of Moroccan foreign policy. In his speech, the king announced further economic and commercial initiatives to boost Western Sahara's role as a "window" to both Atlantic and sub-Saharan markets. **Mohamed VI also announced the launch of an institutional platform aimed at coordinating coastal West African states and favor the development of land-locked states in the Sahel.**

The celebrations also mark a particularly tense situation, as they fall on the backdrop of both the anniversary of the Algerian Glorious Revolution and heightened regional tensions. The latter follow **the firing of artillery shots against the West Saharan town of Smara** on October 29th, which resulted in one dead and several wounded. The attack is widely ascribed to the Polisario Front, whose guerrilla against Morocco for control of the region enjoys the financial backing of Algeria.

Morocco improves its troubled relations with France. **The French ambassador to Rabat, Christophe Lecourtier, announced the official lifting of visa restrictions for Moroccan citizens.** The measure stemmed from a 2021 dispute, which saw France halve the quotas destined for the Alawi kingdom after lamenting Morocco's inaction in repatriating irregular migrants. In December 2022, a first thaw in relations had been signaled by French foreign minister Catherine Colonna's state visit to Rabat, which marked the normalization of French-Moroccan diplomatic ties. Encouraging signals also come from the energy sector. **Moroccan group Falcon Capital and French Hdf energy advanced negotiations to build a green hydrogen production center in Dakhla**, capital of Moroccan Western Sahara. The initial investment is set to reach 2 billion dollars.

Germany hosts a new high-level meeting with Morocco. **German chancellor Olaf Scholz met the Moroccan prime minister, Aziz Akhannouch, on the sidelines of the fifth G20 "Compact for Africa" summit.** The talks – which saw the participation of the Moroccan minister of the Economy, Nadia Fettah Alaoui – focused on strengthening trade and economic cooperation. Germany and Morocco are also active in the fields of energy and border security. Interior minister Abdelouafi Laftit had already met his German counterpart Nancy Phaeser on October 29th, to discuss the adoption of new German legislation to enhance frontier control and regulate immigration.

Morocco develops its ties to Azerbaijan. **Moroccan foreign minister Nasser Bourita met in Rabat with his Azeri counterpart, Jeyhun Bayramov**, on the sidelines of second meeting of the Morocco-Azerbaijan Joint Commission and of the Azeri-Moroccan Business Forum. **The two chiefs of diplomacy inked five agreements and MoUs in healthcare, logistics, employment, environmental protection, and energy.** Azerbaijan's abundant gas reserves represent a strategic asset for Morocco, as the kingdom is virtually devoid of hydrocarbon reserves and imports much of its supply from Spain and France. The weakness is compounded by Morocco's quarrel with Algeria, who cut off gas flows to Morocco after severing diplomatic ties in 2021.



Tunisia

New clashes in the south-western town of Gharian see Tunis at the center of discussions to avert a resumption of hostilities in Libya. **The North African capital hosted a multilateral meeting involving representatives of the Libyan 5+5 Joint Military Commission, the United Nations mission in Libya (UNSMIL) and UN Special Representative for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily.** Libya remains a crucial dossier for Tunisia, as regional instability would threaten the containment of irregular migration through the Ras Jedir border crossing (currently defended by a Government of National Unity military brigade) and disrupt trade flows with Tripoli, as well as plans announced last August for a Libyan-Tunisian commercial corridor.

Surprising developments stem from the Gaza crisis. **The Tunisian president of the Republic, Kais Saied, publicly opposed a draft law to criminalize any attempt at normalization with Israel.** Following Saied's intervention, the president of the Tunisian parliament Brahim Bouderbala also withdrew his support for the motion, which set up criminal convictions up to twelve years for any attempt at communication with the "Zionist entity". Deputies from across the political spectrum and within Saied's own party have accused the president – known for his outspoken hostility to Israel – of giving in to US threats of economic sanctions, noting the frequent contacts between Saied and the US ambassador to Tunis, Joey Hood.

Tunisia also looks to China. **Prime minister Ahmed Hachani met in Tunis with the Huawei North Africa president, Terry He.** The meeting saw the participation of Communications minister Nizar Ben Neji and focused on strengthening cooperation in the fields of digital technology and renewable energies. Despite the economic crisis gripping the country, Tunisia boasts one of the most advanced telecommunications networks in North Africa. Tunisia is also among the partner countries to the Medusa 8000-km optic fibre cable project, set to connect eleven countries between Southern Europe and North Africa within 2025.

The Tunisian ministry of Finance unveiled the 2024 draft finance law. The proposal, which is being evaluated by the parliament, seeks to increase the national budget by 1,9 billion euros – a figure reminiscent of the controversial 1,9 billion dollars loan at the core of negotiations between Tunis and the International Monetary Fund. The budget should also benefit from external loans amounting to 4,8 billion euros, the source of which has not been disclosed. The measures are set on the backdrop of the financial crisis affecting the country, which suffers from inflationary pressure on basic commodities and from the growing erosion of its foreign reserves.

Saied keeps facing domestic opposition. **The National Salvation Front** – the diverse inter-party alliance involving, among others, Islamist movement Ennahda – **announced it will boycott local elections set to take place in December.** Meanwhile, security forces in Sfax arrested four trade unionists including regional secretary general Youssef Aouadni. The news sparked a new confrontation between Saied and the UGTT, Tunisia's foremost trade union and a key political opposer of the establishment.

Meanwhile, water scarcity in the country worsens: according to the Observatoire National de l'Agriculture (ONAGRI), **water levels in Tunisian reservoirs have fallen 30% under maximum capacity** due to both structural obsolescence and the chronic drought threatening the country. To address the situation, **the Tunisian ministry of Agriculture has announced the launch of a strategic plan to contain the effects of climate change upon the country's agricultural output.**



Libya

Efforts to resolve the stalemate on the elections continue. On 8 November, House of Representatives (HoR) Speaker, Aguila Saleh, and High Council of State (HCS) Chairman, Mohamed Takala, held a bilateral summit in Cairo, during which they reviewed the latest domestic political developments. The two senior officials agreed on carrying on with consultations in order to reach a joint solution to the political and institutional impasse, which largely stems from the electoral dossier. However, no official announcements were made regarding the creation of a unified government or the acceptance of the electoral laws by the HCS. These laws were, indeed, drafted by the 6+6 Committee and approved only by the HoR. Meanwhile, the **UN special envoy** and head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Abdoulaye Bathily, **continued his mediation efforts with the country's key political figures.** Throughout the month, Bathily met with Aguila Saleh, the President of the Presidential Council, Mohamed Menfi, the Prime Minister of the Government of National Unity (GNU), Abdul Hamid Dbeiba, the two Vice-Presidents of the Presidential Council, Moussa Al-Koni and Abdallah Al-Lafi, the commander of the Libyan National Army (ENL), Marshal Khalifa Haftar, and had a telephone conversation with Mohamed Takala. The head of UNSMIL also held bilateral talks with the EU ambassador, Nicola Orlando, with the Moroccan Foreign Minister, Nasser Bourita and the Algerian Foreign Minister, Ahmed Attaf. During the meetings, Bathily discussed recent political, economic and security developments and the urgent need to overcome the current impasse through dialogue and compromise between the parties; he reiterated the importance of holding fair and inclusive elections as soon as possible, by emphasizing the role of local leaders in advancing the reconciliation process; lastly, he proposed holding a meeting between all key institutional stakeholders to reach a settlement on the implementation of the electoral process.

The security situation in western Libya worsens. For the all month the area was the scene of **armed clashes** in **Gharyan** and **Al-Aziziya**, and of a significant **increase in tensions**, especially near the **Ras Jedir** border crossing with Tunisia. In the town of Gharyan, located about 80 km south of Tripoli, the worst consequences were recorded, with 8 people killed and 27 injured. Violence erupted when the Joint Security Force (JSF) tried to take control of the town in agreement with Adel Daab – a military leader allied with Haftar, who controlled Gharyan before 2019. The attempted uprising was stopped thanks to the armed intervention, in constant coordination with Tripoli, of the 111th Brigade and the Stabilization Support Department. At the same time, the 444th Brigade, affiliated to the GNU, captured a group of Chadian mercenaries inside Gharyan and seized weapons and equipment in the valleys south of the city, pushing as far as Swhayref territory, which is under Haftar's control. Following these events, the Wagner group militias present in the territory south of Swhayref reportedly ordered the transfer of troops and equipment to the southwest from Al Jufra, in central Libya.

Regarding the **international actors active in Libya**, the **Italian Minister of the Interior**, Matteo Piantedosi, met in Rome with his counterpart from the GNU, Imad Trabelsi, to discuss about the fight against illegal immigration. Meanwhile, Ambassador Gianluca Alberini held a series of talks with Dbeiba and the GNU ministers of Justice, Economy, Industry, Culture and Youth, and participated to the IOM and Ministry of Labour round table on the governance of legal migration. During the month, **France** proved to be quite active in the country. President Emmanuel Macron received Menfi in Paris on 10 November, while the special envoy for Libya, Paul Soler, made a long visit to the North African country, during which he met with Menfi, Dbeiba, Takala, Saleh and Haftar. For both Italy and France, the focal points of the various meetings were the political situation in the country, security of the region and ways to improve coordination and multi-sectoral cooperation with Libyan counterparts.



Egypt

Cairo has played a prominent role in the agreement for the release of Israeli hostages in Gaza. Since the beginning of this month, Egyptian authorities have worked to facilitate a diplomatic solution to the crisis in the Strip by engaging with regional and global actors involved in the crisis. Triangulation with the United States and Qatar has been crucial to achieve the final deal. Mid-month, CIA Director William Burns visited Cairo, where he met with Al-Sisi and Egyptian intelligence chief Abbas Kamel. According to local sources, Burns conveyed a U.S. government proposal for Gaza's stabilization in the aftermath of the invasion, involving Cairo assuming responsibility for the Strip's security until the establishment of Palestinian National Authority led government. This proposal was promptly rejected by Egyptian authorities. Subsequently, a high-level Hamas delegation, led by the organization's political chief Ismail Haniyeh and Khaled Meshaal, current head of the diaspora office, met with Egypt's intelligence chief Kamel to discuss the release of hostages. Successively, Qatari Emir Al-Thani arrived in Cairo to discuss the ongoing crisis in Palestine with Al-Sisi. Following these meetings an agreement was reached for the gradual release of Israeli hostages in exchange for a suspension of military operations in Gaza and the release of Palestinians prisoners as well. Al-Sisi welcomed the agreement, attributing it to the joint mediation of Egypt, the United States, and Qatar, and emphasized Egypt's commitment to ongoing efforts for a just and stable solution of the so-called Palestinian issue. At the same time, Cairo has maintained its red line concerning the eventual relocation of the Palestinians from Gaza to Sinai, an hypothesis Egypt rejects without leaving any room for mediation. Worth to be mentioned also European Commission President Ursula Von der Leyen's trip to Egypt at the end of the month. According to sources close to Brussels institutions, the European Union is seeking to expedite the launch of a new support plan for Egypt, involving around 9 billion euros in investments and closer cooperation on issues of common interest such as energy and migration. Additionally, Turkish President Erdogan, while returning from a state visit to Algeria, claimed that he might soon organize a trip to Egypt to discuss the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Meanwhile, **efforts continued at the Rafah crossing to address the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.** This month Egypt has implemented the progressive evacuation of foreign passports holders and for civilians in need of medical assistance. Egyptian authorities expect to receive at least 7,000 foreign citizens exiting the Strip, while hundreds of injured have already evacuated to Egypt. Deliveries of humanitarian aid have also resumed even if the aid reaching Gaza remains below the threshold of 100 trucks per day needed to provide basic support to civilians, according to the UN estimates. In this context, Turkiye, Egypt, and Israel have started joint health coordination to facilitate healthcare and evacuation for refugees fleeing Gaza. Aid delivery is considerably slowed not only by military operations and diplomatic tensions but also by frequent closures of the crossing. On this last point, Cairo authorities have also complained of obstruction by Israel regarding aid delivery, especially concerning searches conducted at the Nitzana passage.

A mixed picture concerning Egyptian economy this month. On the one hand, the energy crisis that affected the country after the outbreak of the Gaza war seems to be solved. Following the resumption of hostilities in Palestine, operating company Chevron had temporarily closed the Tamar field, fearing that ongoing fighting in Gaza could impact extraction activities. This crisis raised concerns in Europe, where Egypt exports its gas surplus. However, imports resumed in the second half of the month, reassuring consumers and markets on both sides of the Mediterranean. According to the latest available data, gas supplies from Israel have reached 60% of the pre-war period. Furthermore, rating agency Fitch, lowered its evaluation of Egyptian bonds to B-, with analysts mainly concerned about the contraction of the non-oil sector of the economy for the fifth month in a row and the ongoing currency crisis. In this context, the Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Kristalina Georgieva, stated that the institution is considering an increase in the loan to Egypt to help Cairo to cope with shocks related to the Gaza conflict.



Concerning privatizations, the Emirati holding company Global Investment announced the acquisition of 30% of Eastern Tobacco Company shares for 16.4 billion Egyptian pounds (\$531 million). This deal is part of the privatization process agreed with the IMF for access to credit lines. Meanwhile, Qatar, through the head of its trade authority Yahya El-Wathiq Billah, announced a \$1 billion investment in the Egyptian industrial sector next year. This would be the second injection of liquidity into Cairo's economy by Qatar in two years. Encouraging signs are also seen regarding inflation. According to data released by Cairo's financial authorities, the cost of living calculated for urban areas decreased to 35.8% in October from September's 38%, while core inflation dropped from September's 39.7% to October's 38.1%.



Israel

In the month of November, the war between Israel and Hamas continued, escalating further after the IDF's ground intervention. At the onset of this new phase of the conflict, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu reiterated clear objectives: to destroy the military and governmental capabilities of Hamas and bring the hostages home. National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi added that it would be a challenging campaign with inevitable suffering.

In the initial weeks following the ground intervention, **the humanitarian situation in Gaza deteriorated day by day.** Food, water, and medicine entered sporadically through the Rafah crossing with Egypt, and fuel shortages became alarming, hindering the operation of essential activities, including hospitals. For several weeks, Israel refused to supply fuel, stating that Hamas had diverted large quantities for military purposes and would do the same with new supplies. **The month progressed amid relentless bombardments in the northern Gaza Strip and increasingly targeted ground actions.**

The bombing of the Jabaliya refugee camp in Gaza stirred negative reactions, causing numerous civilian casualties. Among the critics of the operation was the European Union's foreign policy chief, Josep Borrell, who declared to be "shocked" by the death toll. Israel explained that the attack targeted Hamas terrorists and their leaders, as do all other IDF operations. **Israel's intervention in the al-Shifa hospital, the largest in Gaza City, also sparked international outrage.** Israel consistently claimed that the hospital was one of Hamas's operational centers and that some hostages may have been held there. The discovery of a tunnel network, along with images of two foreign hostages crossing them under the control of Islamist militants, seems to support Tel Aviv's statements.

On November 13, the IDF occupied the Gaza City parliament, subsequently destroying it, and Defense Minister Yoav Gallant declared that Hamas had lost control of the Strip. The high number of civilian casualties led to strong condemnation of Israel by numerous Arab and Muslim states and the United Nations. The UN repeatedly called for an immediate ceasefire, which Tel Aviv rejected, seeing it as a victory for Hamas. The humanitarian tragedy in the Strip, however, and the growing, albeit veiled, criticism even from Israel's allies, led to **IDF granting humanitarian pauses to allow the transfer of the Palestinian population from the now fully Israeli-controlled north of Gaza to the south.** The issue of fate of the displaced remains acute, as finding refuge amid a prolonged conflict proves challenging.

As weeks passed, tensions increased between Israel and its Western supporters, who, while recognizing Tel Aviv's right to defend itself after the fierce October 7 attack, viewed the situation in Gaza with growing concern. **The United States, in particular, reminded its longstanding ally that democracies must respect international laws of war.** Furthermore, after Netanyahu's statement that Israel would assume responsibility for security within the Gaza Strip "indefinitely" after the war, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken promptly clarified his Administration's position on the post-war situation: **no forced transfer of Palestinians from Gaza, neither now nor later; no reoccupation of the Strip; no reduction of its territory.**

The situation in the West Bank is also a cause for concern, as Israeli forces continue targeted raids against Hamas figures. Meanwhile, **settler attacks on Palestinian civilians increase, with some being killed.** The Israeli internal intelligence agency, Shin Bet, warned the government that such acts could cause an escalation of violence in the entire area. **President Biden and senior officials in his administration criticized the Israeli government for not adequately addressing the problem.**



Meanwhile, relatives of the hostages, supported by the rest of the population, organized protest marches to urge the government to act for the release of their loved ones. Finally, **after intense days of mediation conducted by Qatar and Egypt, with the unyielding contribution of the United States, on November 22, the Israeli government approved an agreement with Hamas for the release of some hostages.** The agreement involves the release of 50 Israeli citizens or those with dual citizenship, all women and children, in groups of 12 or 13 per day. In return, Israel will grant a ceasefire of at least four days and release 150 Palestinian detainees, including women and adolescents. Additionally, Israel will cease air activities in the south of Gaza, while in the northern Strip, they will cease for 6 hours a day, from 10 am to 4 pm. Prime Minister Netanyahu, Defense Minister Yoav Gallant, and Defense Cabinet member Benny Gantz are authorized to extend the ceasefire in case of releasing new hostages, but for no more than ten days. The agreement also includes the entry of 300 trucks with humanitarian aid into Gaza. **On Friday, November 24, the ceasefire began, and the first 13 hostages returned to Israel. The release, albeit with some delay, continued until November 30, leading to the extension of the ceasefire.** On the 30th, only eight hostages were released, and Hamas did not provide the customary list of releases for the following day. On the same day, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Israel to attempt a further extension of the truce. Blinken once again warned Israel that, in the event of a resumption of hostilities, it must act in a way that does not cause a high number of civilian casualties. However, the Israeli side responded that the IDF adheres to the laws of war, and the entire population supports interventions to eradicate Hamas from the Gaza Strip.

In the early hours of **December 1, rockets were launched from the Strip, and the Israeli aviation responded with a series of attacks**, killing six people, according to Hamas sources. Prime Minister Netanyahu's office released a statement accusing the Islamist movement of violating the truce and announcing the resumption of hostilities. **According to American and Qatari sources, however, ongoing mediation attempts are still underway to extend the pause in hostilities. As of November 30, 80 Israeli citizens and 29 foreigners have been released.**



Saudi Arabia

In November, the Kingdom's posture on the international stage emerged: about the ongoing war in Gaza, Saudi Arabia has undertaken a diplomatic effort with the Arab and Muslim states; in the economic field, Riyadh maintains increasingly strong relations with Beijing; on the security level, it cooperates closely with Washington.

A ministerial committee consisting of the representatives of numerous Arab and Muslim countries, and led by the Foreign Minister of Saudi Arabia, travelled to China, Russia, Great Britain and France; the aim of the delegation was to promote the achievement of a truce in Gaza and the protection of civilians. During the meeting with the Chinese foreign minister on the 20th of November, Faisal bin Farhan said: “we are here to send a clear signal: we must immediately stop the hostilities and the killing of civilians; we must allow humanitarian aid to enter the Strip. We want to cooperate with China and other countries that understand the gravity of the situation”. On the Chinese side, Wang Yi said that “Beijing stands by its brothers in the Arab and Muslim countries. We have always supported the Palestinian cause”. Since the beginning of the war between Israel and Hamas, China has avoided condemning Hamas and has repeatedly supported the two-state solution. Afterwards, the ministerial committee travelled to Moscow, where it met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov; the latter praised the Arab countries' efforts to achieve the temporary four-day truce, and then condemned Israeli actions in Gaza.

The solid Sino-Saudi cooperation continues on the economic level as well. The Saudi Central Bank and its Chinese counterpart signed a three-year agreement for a currency swap worth USD 6.93 billion. Thus, Riyadh and Beijing will have easier access to the counterpart's currency. China, the world's largest oil importer, would like to price crude oil imports in yuan instead of dollars. The attempt to de-dollarize the global economy involves several countries, such as Iran and Russia, although it seems to be still in an early stage. Financial analysts believe that Beijing has developed the world's largest network of currency exchange agreements, with at least 40 countries. However, the Central Bank of China would seem to use this instrument as a line of credit, instead only in crisis phases.

On the other hand, security relations between the US and Saudi Arabia have continued. Saudi Defence Minister Khalid bin Salman met with US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan in Washington. The two discussed the “strategic” relations between the two countries, focusing on the latest developments in Gaza and the region. Khalid bin Salman reaffirmed the Saudi position on the importance of the creation of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. Sullivan, on his part, stated that the US intends to work to support US partners in the Middle East against threats from state actors and non-state actors, including those supported by Iran. In relation to regional developments, the attention of Saudi and American leaderships is focused on Yemen and the recent actions of the Houthis; the latter have claimed ballistic missile and drone attacks intercepted by the US and Israel and threatened further action against Tel Aviv. Regarding the conflict in Yemen, Sullivan welcomed the de-escalation over the past year and a half. On the sidelines of the meeting, White House Strategic Coordinator John Kirby stated that Riyadh would still like to normalize relations with Tel Aviv.

Cooperation between Washington and Riyadh also continues in connection with the Sudanese crisis. After months of deadlock, talks have resumed between the parties to the conflict, the regular Sudanese army and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). In a joint statement issued by the United States, Saudi Arabia and the Intergovernmental Authority for Development, the Intergovernmental Political and Trade Organization of the countries of the Horn of Africa, states that, with the participation of the African Union, the Sudanese army and the RSF have come together to promote a ceasefire for humanitarian purposes. In line with the Jeddah Declaration of 11 May 2023, the renewed dialogues are aimed at facilitating the distribution of humanitarian aid to the Sudanese population and promoting a permanent ceasefire. Subsequently, the parties to the conflict agreed to commit to facilitate the entry of humanitarian aid into the country and to implement confidence-building measures.



United Arab Emirates

The ongoing war between Israel and Hamas did not prevent the United Arab Emirates (UAE) from fully committing to its economic and financial agenda and international events hosted in November.

Indeed, **UAE hosted the Dubai Airshow**, which, compared to previous editions, showed a wide selection of Chinese aerospace products, including fighter jets and drones. The largest aerospace and defence event in the Middle East region was also marked by the absence of Israel, with SIBAT - the Directorate of International Defence Cooperation that deals with armament transfers on behalf of the Israeli Ministry of Defence - which cancelled its participation. Furthermore, EDGE Group, the leading Emirates defence conglomerate, presented 11 new drones and missiles and the setting up of a test facility - the first of its kind in the region - for unmanned systems. The Italian presence at the event was also relevant, both industrially and politically. Indeed, **the Italian Minister of Defence, Guido Crosetto, attended the Airshow**. He took the opportunity to **discuss with the Emirati Minister of State for Defence, Mohammed Ahmed Al Bowardi**, about security issues and the role played by the Emirates in ensuring stability in the region, as well as possible opportunities for collaboration in the defence sector.

With the opening ceremony of COP28 at the end of November, the UAE aims to highlight its commitment to the energy transition process. In this regard, during the Emirates Energy Forum, the UAE had already announced the new 2022/2023 UAE State of Energy report and officially launched the National Hydrogen Strategy. It is worth mentioning that hydrogen production represents a frontier towards which the UAE is investing considerable resources in order to place itself as a competitive exporter of hydrogen on a global scale. Climate change, renewable energy and a truly sustainable energy transition for the Global South countries were the main topics of UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed's speech at the virtual summit of G20 leaders.

Regarding the UAE's position vis-à-vis the unfolding war in Gaza, the Gulf country has shown its alignment with Arab-Islamic partners, thus, reiterating its call for a permanent ceasefire, the release of Hamas' hostages, and the urgent need to open humanitarian corridors to the Gaza Strip. Indeed, against the backdrop of the catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza, the UAE is at the forefront with regional partners in providing humanitarian assistance to Palestinians in the Strip. Additionally, as stated on several occasions at the United Nations and regional summits - including the coordination meeting of Arab foreign ministers in Amman attended by Abdullah bin Zayed on Nov. 4, as well as the extraordinary Arab-Islamic summit in Riyadh on Nov. 11 joined by the UAE vice-president Mansour bin Zayed - the UAE has been demanding the international community to kick off a comprehensive and sustainable political process based on the two-state solution. Yet, according to some regional and international sources, the UAE has been reportedly among those influential states that blocked the adoption of some decisive measures against Israel in the final joint statement of the Riyadh summit, including severing all diplomatic and economic ties with Tel Aviv. Noteworthy, the UAE normalized relations with Israel within the framework of the Abraham Accords in 2020.

As part of the UAE's efforts to strengthen economic ties and trade relations with Southeast Asian countries, Abu Dhabi hosted the first session of the UAE-Indonesia Joint Commission - a meeting jointly chaired by the Emirati Minister of Foreign Affairs, Abdullah bin Zayed, and his Indonesian counterpart. Within the framework of the Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement signed by the two countries in July 2022, non-oil bilateral trade has considerably increased over the past year, reaching over 4 billion dollars. As showcased by the UAE's expanding portfolio of interest by entering in Indonesian geothermal energy sector, trade, investments, energy, and renewables are, indeed, the main fields where Abu Dhabi and Jakarta are bolstering bilateral cooperation.



Qatar

In November, Qatar confirmed its intense foreign policy activism to end the escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip. **One of the most significant meetings during the month took place in Doha on November 9, involving the head of Mossad, David Barnea, CIA Director William Burns, and Qatari Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al-Thani.** The discussion focused on parameters for reaching an agreement between Israel and Hamas, which involved the release of hostages and a ceasefire to facilitate the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza. The meeting had a positive outcome, as demonstrated by the White House statement affirming that Israel had agreed to temporary humanitarian pauses. The summit among Barnea, Burns, and Abdulrahman Al-Thani marked a crucial step in Qatar's mediation process, signaling the beginning of a temporary de-escalation in Gaza.

Indeed, thanks to joint efforts with Egypt and the United States, **the emirate mediated an agreement between Hamas and Israel for the release of hostages, both Israeli and Palestinian.** The agreement involved the release of 50 Israeli hostages by Hamas in exchange for around 150 Palestinian prisoners and a 4-day ceasefire — starting on November 24 and ending on the 27th — to ensure the delivery of humanitarian aid and fuel to Gaza, crucial stuff for maintaining hospitals and other civilian structures. According to the agreement, during the ceasefire days, the Israeli armed forces had to abstain from flying over the southern part of Gaza, and reconnaissance operations in the northern part of the Strip were to be limited to six hours a day.

U.S. President Joe Biden thanked Doha for playing a crucial role in facilitating the hostage exchange in Gaza, an agreement made possible through joint mediation efforts with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, with whom Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani had numerous phone conversations. The achievement of this internationally significant agreement was the result of substantial diplomatic efforts by the Qatari leadership, further enhancing Qatar's role as a prominent regional actor.

Regarding relations with Italy, the Italian Minister of Defense, Guido Crosetto, hosted in Rome the Chief of Staff of the Qatari Armed Forces, Salem Bin Hamad Al-Nabit, who later met with his Italian counterpart, Adm. Giuseppe Cavo Dragone, and the Deputy Commander of COVI, Gen. Nicola Lanza de Cristoforis. The meeting focused on topics of mutual interest in the defense sector and ways to expand military cooperation between the two countries, also considering the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.



Turkiye

In November, Ankara's political agenda focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, highlighting the activism of the Erdoğan government. **On October 28, the Turkish president participated in a large rally in support of Palestine held in Istanbul.** Thousands attended the "Great Rally for Palestine," with slogans in support of Gaza and the Palestinian population. Erdoğan's words were harsh; during his speech, he stated that "Israel is a pawn in the Middle East that will be sacrificed at the right time", and he accused Tel Aviv of being responsible for war crimes, questioning the legitimacy of the State of Israel itself. The situation escalated further after Erdoğan's strong statements. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rejected Erdoğan's accusations and described the ground operation in Gaza as "Israel's second war of liberation", requesting tangible support from Ankara. Following Erdoğan's remarks, Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen announced that "diplomatic relations between Türkiye and Israel will be reviewed" and withdrew Israeli diplomatic personnel. Relations between the two countries became more strained after Türkiye offered refuge to the Hamas leader following the October 7 terrorist attack by the Palestinian militia.

Despite Ankara's mediation attempt, Türkiye continues to show strong support for the Palestinian cause, evident from **the meeting in Ankara on November 6 between U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan.** Blinken concluded his Middle East tour in the Anatolian country, and the meeting held significant importance in Turkish-American relations. The differences of opinion between Ankara and Washington regarding the Gaza crisis led to a noticeable coolness from President Erdoğan towards Blinken. Despite the scheduled meeting, Erdoğan did not cancel his institutional commitments in the Black Sea to meet with the U.S. counterpart. The meeting focused on sending humanitarian aid to Gaza, requesting a ceasefire, and the risk of escalation in other regional countries, such as Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Erdoğan aimed to send a strong signal to the White House, criticizing its support for Netanyahu and the deployment of the aircraft carrier Gerald Ford in the Eastern Mediterranean to support Israel. Türkiye's stance was also evident in pro-Palestinian demonstrations that took place in the country upon Blinken's arrival. Hundreds of protesters staged a sit-in outside the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Ankara, urging the government to take a clear position against the United States, accused of supporting Israel.

It seems, from the meetings that took place in November, that Türkiye is shifting its priorities from West countries to Middle Eastern and African ones. In this regard, it's important **the meeting on November 17 between Erdoğan and German Chancellor Olaf Scholz in Berlin.** This marked the first meeting in three years, emphasizing that Turkish-German relations are a priority not only for the Ankara government but also for the European political agenda. During the meeting, they addressed fundamental issues for European interests, such as the migration issue, inflation in the Eurozone, the Gaza crisis, and the sale of defense equipment to Türkiye by European industrial consortium. The two leaders discussed the potential acquisition of 40 Eurofighter Typhoon jets by Ankara, a sale now blocked by Germany due to Türkiye's balancing policy towards Russia. However, while the tone between the Turkish president and the German chancellor during the meeting was diplomatic, Erdoğan expressed strong criticism of German policy in supporting Tel Aviv and referred to Israel's military operation in Gaza as "genocide" during his return journey. In support of revitalizing agreements with North African countries, **on November 21, President Erdoğan visited Algiers to meet with his counterpart, Abdelmadjid Tebboune.** During the talks, 12 memoranda of understanding were signed, particularly in the energy sector, involving the Turkish company BOTAŞ and the Algerian company Sonatrach. These agreements include the extension of LNG (liquefied natural gas) supply to Türkiye for another three years. With the conclusion of these contracts, the trade volume between the two countries is expected to increase from 5.3 to 6 billion dollars by the end of the year.



Iraq

In November, the visit of U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken to Baghdad on Sunday, November 5, marked a significant event. During Blinken's tour of the Middle East, he engaged with various regional partners to discuss the current situation in Gaza. The Iraqi leg of the journey was particularly noteworthy, considering the recent attacks on American air bases in Iraqi Kurdistan by pro-Iranian Iraqi militias. Upon arrival, Blinken first met with Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani and later visited the U.S. embassy in Baghdad to assess the security level of sensitive U.S. facilities. During the meeting, Washington cautioned the Iraqi leadership about the potential involvement of other militias, supported by Tehran, in the conflict between Israel and Hamas. Prime Minister Al-Sudani also emphasized the country's need for political stability to ensure the implementation of necessary structural reforms, making Iraq a reliable economic and trade partner for the West. **However, following Blinken's visit, on Monday, November 6, some pro-Iranian Iraqi Shiite militias attacked four U.S. military bases in Iraq and Syria using Iranian drones.** The attacks were claimed by the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, a coordination organization that includes several Iraqi paramilitary groups funded by Iran. The American bases, operating within the framework of the international coalition against Daesh, are mostly located near Erbil, Harir, and Al-Tanf, respectively in Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan. After the bombings on November 6, the Pentagon issued a statement indicating that since October 17, American bases have undergone 38 attacks by pro-Iranian groups, resulting in 45 military personnel injuries and the withdrawal of accredited diplomatic personnel from Iraq. With the escalation of violence in the Gaza Strip and the call from Iraqi leader Al-Sadr for all Muslims to 'carry out acts of terrorism against Israel and the United States that support them', Washington has raised the alert level near its embassies, consulates, and military bases in Iraq. In this regard, even the President of Kurdistan, Nechirvan Barzani, has defined the attacks against U.S. compounds as 'extremely dangerous' due to the potential escalation of hostilities in Iraq and the entire region.

The internal stability of Iraq in November faced a potential compromise with the **decision of the Federal Supreme Court to remove the President of the Baghdad Parliament, Mohammed Al-Halbusi, from his office.** The verdict, issued on November 15, followed a series of corruption accusations for unspecified incidents — a move considered 'blatantly unconstitutional' by the Sunni politician. Al-Halbusi is a prominent Sunni figure in Iraq and was first elected in 2018 due to his connections with both the United States and Iran. Tensions between Al-Halbusi and the Shiite Coordinating Framework increased last year after the appointment, supported by Shiites, of Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' Al-Sudani. So, the Supreme Court's decision could be interpreted as a signal, from Tehran, of support for the Sadrist leader and Shiite parties openly endorsing the Palestinian cause, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and Hamas in Gaza.

Despite the complex relations with the United States and Iran, Baghdad reaffirmed itself as a strategic partner for Rome in November as well. **On the anniversary of the new Iraqi government, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni had a phone conversation with Prime Minister Al-Sudani.** During the call, Meloni congratulated her counterpart on the political path taken by the Iraqi government in the past year and for ensuring stability in the country. The Italian Prime Minister then reiterated Italy's willingness to support Iraq and ensure peace among Middle Eastern actors to prevent the potential expansion of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to neighboring countries.

Lebanon and Jordan

Jordan stays at the forefront of regional efforts to stop the war in Gaza. In addition to providing continuous humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, the Hashemite Kingdom has been keeping a high-profile position, favoring consultations with regional partners, with the goal of creating a united Arab-Islamic front, as well as with key international interlocutors.

On November 4, **Amman hosted a coordination meeting to discuss the catastrophic situation in Gaza chaired by the Jordanian Minister of Foreign Affairs Ayman Al-Safadi.** The event was joined by the Secretary General of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization and the Foreign Ministers of the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, and it was followed by a round of consultations between the Arab leaders and the United States Secretary of State Antony Blinken. On that occasion, divergences in approaching the unfolding conflict came up – with the Arab group calling for an “immediate ceasefire” on one side and Washington suggesting “localized and temporary humanitarian pauses” on the other. In this regard, on the stage of the latest edition of the Manama Dialogue (Bahrein, Nov. 17-19), Al Safadi also emphasized the fact that humanitarian pauses cannot be linked to the release of Hamas’ hostages alone.

As a **member of the ministerial committee in charge of the Arab-Islamic Extraordinary Summit** held in Riyadh on November 11 and during the recent tour touching Beijing, Moscow, London, Paris and Barcelona, Jordan’s Foreign Minister reiterated the urgency to stop Israeli military operations in Gaza and ensure the entrance of humanitarian aid in the Strip. The goal is to guarantee the Palestinians’ right to self-determination and launch an effective peace process based on the two-state solutions, namely the creation of a Palestine state according to the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital. **In Barcelona, where he co-chaired with the European Union’s top diplomat, Josep Borrell, the 8th Regional Forum of the Union for the Mediterranean (Nov. 26-27),** Al Safadi called for real collective action, stressing the crucial role of the United States and the European Union in putting an end to the conflict. With the aim of gaining consensus among his international partners, **Jordan’s King, Abdullah II, visited Brussels in early November for bilateral meetings with the highest EU officials as well as NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg.** Abdullah II’s visit to the EU capital was also an important opportunity to warn European interlocutors of the risk of a new wave of violence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem due to the increase in Israeli settlers’ violence.

Preventing a conflagration of the conflict still ranks as the main priority on Lebanon’s political agenda. During his official visit to Turkiye to meet Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Lebanese caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati stressed the precariousness of the border with Israel, reiterating the country’s interest in not being dragged into the conflict. On the prospects for Hezbollah’s full-scale military involvement, the Party of God has been deliberately maintaining a strategic ambiguity, declaring on several occasions that “all the options are on the table”. Therefore, because of the escalating tensions recorded this month along the border, **the Lebanese government granted a fund of 11 million dollars to the Ministry of Health** in order to “cover the costs of care for the wounded in case of war”. **The latest developments in Gaza were also at the core of bilateral consultations that Mikati held in Amman with Abdullah II and Antony Blinken on November 9. In Beirut, the Lebanese Prime Minister also held talks with US Special Envoy for Global Infrastructures and Energy Security Amos Hochstein** – who traveled to the Lebanese capital for further consultations with the Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, Joseph Aoun, and other high-level government figures, including the caretaker Foreign Minister Abdallah Bou Habib and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri.

In his two public addresses since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war, Hezbollah's Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah resorted to his anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist rhetoric and, in keeping with what was previously declared by the Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, he asserted that Al-Aqsa Flood Operation was entirely Palestinian. Therefore, **it seems that the Party of God – like its main sponsor Iran – is still not interested in fueling a regionalization of the war.** It is not by chance that, in both speeches, **Nasrallah stressed Hezbollah's role as a "supporting front" for Hamas, also acknowledging the military engagement of Yemen's Houthis and the Islamic Resistance in Iraq.** It is noteworthy that the Islamic Resistance in Iraq targeted US military bases across Iraq and Syria for the entire month. On Syrian soils, retaliatory US strikes against Iranian facilities, mainly in the Bukamal and Mayadin areas, were also recorded.

Though neither Hezbollah nor the Israel Defence Forces seem keen to engage in a fully-fledged war, unprecedented cross-border fighting on both sides have led to a sharp escalation of violence. Indeed, in November, clashes intensified in the north of Israel and along Lebanon's southern border, causing the death of Lebanese civilians. Hassan Nasrallah celebrated quantitative and qualitative improvements made in Hezbollah's military operations, with a focus on the type of more sophisticated weapons used by the group.

Sahel

Malian armed force and Russian mercenaries from the former Wagner Group, have reconquered the city of Kidal. The takeover follows the withdrawal of UN peacekeepers from the country, marked by controversies on the lack of authorization for disengagement from the Bamako government. This has caused tensions especially with the government of Chad. Due to Malian obstructionism, N'Djamena's soldiers proceeded with an early withdrawal, speculating on tensions between the government and armed groups in the north. After the occupation of a MINUSMA base by the CSP alliance in Kidal, following the withdrawal of the peacekeepers, the Bamako government bombed the city, while Wagner Group mercenaries and the regular army gathered in Gao, preparing for the final offensive on Kidal. On November 14, the President of the Malian transitional government, Assimi Goïta, announced the retake of the city, a news confirmed by spokespeople of the CSP, who reported leaving the northern city "for strategic reasons" after inflicting losses on the army positions. The capture of Kidal represents a significant success for the transitional government reclaiming control of the city 11 years after the outbreak of the 2012 civil war. Congratulations to the Mali government were expressed by Burkina Faso's, Ibrahim Traoré, who emphasized that the conquest of Kidal is a good omen for the nascent Sahel States Alliance. Thousands of people gathered in the streets of Bamako to celebrate the victory. The Ministry of Sports held a ceremony at the central stadium of Bamako, attended by the national football team. In the meantime, the Malian Armed Forces announce the discovery of a mass grave in the city, without providing further information on the circumstances of the find or the identity of the bodies. In the context of the city's reoccupation, there has been a notable increase in disinformation campaigns, with some Twitter accounts posting false images of tunnels allegedly built under the city of Kidal by rebels in cooperation with French forces. Meanwhile, jihadist attacks continued in central Mali, where 40 Dogon ethnic people were abducted by an unidentified armed group that attacked a bus traveling between the cities of Koro and Bankass in the Mopti region.

Diplomatic and economic isolation of Niger continues after the coup of July 26. The Niamey junta has opened to cooperation with ECOWAS on security and defense. This was announced by the Minister of the Interior of the transitional government, General Mohamed Toumba, who spoke at the first Forum for Peace and Security in Lomé, Togo. The minister acknowledged that sanctions are affecting the Nigerien economy, and when asked about the possibility of reopening relations with ECOWAS, Toumba stated: "We are men of dialogue. We would prefer to have the solidarity of ECOWAS and have it come to help us fight these terrorists." Meanwhile, Nigerien authorities reported an attempt to free the ousted president of Niger, Mohamed Bazoum. According to Prosecutor General Salissou Chaibou, targeted searches have revealed materials indicating the involvement of 23 individuals preparing a raid to free Bazoum, but authorities have not disclosed names and qualifications of those detained. In this context, pro-Bazoum demonstrations have taken place in Niamey, where protesters called for the release of the ousted president, the removal of General Tiani, and the return to constitutional order. According to local sources, the members of the ruling junta are divided on the fate of the ousted president and the future of the transition. To break the isolation, the transitional government has asked Togo's President, Faure Gnassingbé, to mediate between Niamey and the international community, aiming at least for the cessation of sanctions imposed by ECOWAS. Niger's Defense Minister, Salifou Mody, made this request public during a press conference. On the economic front, Niger's isolation is beginning to pose problems for the junta. The government failed to pay \$305 million in interest on its debt within the specified timeframe. In this context, transitional authorities continue the construction of the Niger-Benin pipeline, financed by China, which will carry Niger's oil to international markets from the port of Seme.

Russia and Burkina Faso strengthen their relations furtherly. Burkinabe Defense Minister, Kassoum Coulibaly, met with Russian Defense Minister, Sergei Shoigu in Moscow to discuss on cooperation in military matters at the economic, logistical, technological, and training levels.

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Military cooperation between Russia and Burkina Faso appears to be deeper than officially stated. Following the meeting between Colibaly and Shoigu, local sources reported the deployment of Russian military personnel in Burkina Faso to serve as bodyguards for President Ibrahim Traoré. Russian military aircrafts reportedly landed at Ouagadougou a few days after the ministers' meeting, bringing Russian operatives in the country. Burkinabe government announced thwarting a coup at the end of September and subsequently carried out a substantial reshuffling of the top leadership of the military and intelligence agencies, indicating mutual suspicion between the incumbent head of state and the security forces. Meanwhile, under a new decree signed by Traoré, seven new Rapid Intervention Battalions were established to escort supply convoys for the army, which have been repeatedly attacked by insurgents over the past year. It is not yet clear whether the formation of the new battalions will be conducted by Russian armed forces as part of the new partnership with Burkina Faso.

The month in Chad was marked by the return of opposition leader Succés Masra. After weeks of negotiations, the leader of the Les Transformateurs and government authorities signed an agreement in Kinshasa to ensure Masra's return to the country after a year of exile. Although the details of the agreement have not been disclosed, this constitutes a step forward in relations between the government and the opposition. The "Les Transformateurs" movement has been severely affected by the repression of government authorities, with hundreds of members arrested and tens reportedly killed according to estimates from NGOs in Chad. Upon his return to the country, Masra encouraged the dialogue with the authorities as part of the transitional process that is expected to culminate in a referendum for the approval of the new constitution.

Horn of Africa

Abiy Ahmed reviewed his statements on the issue of access to the Red Sea. Following last month's claims, the Prime Minister declared that Addis Ababa will not use force to secure access to the sea during a speech on Armed Forces Day. "There are fears that Ethiopia may invade neighboring countries after our requests for access to the sea. I want to assure that we will not pursue our interests through war. We are committed to pursuing common interests through dialogue and negotiation," the prime minister said. Meanwhile, clashes continued in the Amhara region. The federal army has regained control of the city of Labilela, previously occupied by the Amhara self-defense group FANO. Despite the recapture of the UNESCO-protected town, the humanitarian situation in the region continues to worsen due also to a malaria epidemic affecting the area. The death toll is particularly severe: according to the UN Human Rights Office, Ethiopian armed forces' bombings have led to the deaths of around 20 civilians in the last month. UN officials in the country reported that the attacks have also targeted civilian sites such as a bus stop and a school. In the meantime, the government has resumed negotiations with the Oromo Liberation Army in Dar-Es-Salaam, Tanzania. Despite expectations, even this second round of talks ended inconclusively, with both parties citing significant divergences among parties. In this context, the USA has resumed the delivery of humanitarian aid to Ethiopia. USAid announced the decision, citing the reforms implemented by the Addis Ababa government to prevent the misappropriation of aid. The resumption of aid comes at a particularly delicate time for the country which negotiated a suspension of public debt payments last week.

Negotiations supported by Saudi Arabia on the Sudan conflict have resumed. Representatives of the regular army (SAF) and the RSF have met again in Jeddah to discuss conflict resolution and the humanitarian situation in the country. US diplomatic representatives also participated in the summit. However, this new round of talks failed to reach an agreement between the parties for a cessation of hostilities. The talks concluded with general commitments regarding the safe passage of humanitarian aid, maintaining communication between RSF and SAF, and the commitment to arrest escapees from prisons. On the ground, Hemedti's RSF declared they had taken control of the army's headquarters in El-Geneina, the capital of Western Darfur. If confirmed, the militias would control three-quarters of the Darfur region. In this context, Sovereign Council President Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan continued his shuttle diplomacy in the region. Al-Burhan attended the Saudi Arabia - Africa summit in Riyadh, where he had a meeting with Mohammed Bin Salman, renewing his commitment to the progress of the Jeddah process for a ceasefire. On the sidelines of the same summit, Al-Burhan met with the South Sudan's President, Salva Kiir. Finally, Al-Burhan visited Nairobi, where he met Kenyan President William Ruto. After the bilateral meeting, Ruto announced that he would work for the convening of an emergency IGAD summit to expedite the Jeddah process for a cessation of hostilities. Subsequently, Al-Burhan met Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed and African Union President Moussa Faki Mohammed in Addis Ababa. The Sovereign Council President informed his counterparts of the government's efforts in the war against the RSF and reiterated his openness to collaborate with major regional authorities for a conflict resolution.

South Sudan is working to reach a diplomatic solution to the ongoing war in Sudan. Juba hosted representatives of civil parties for a series of "consultative" talks on the crisis in preparation for the peace conference, the date of which is yet to be determined. Presidential Adviser Tut Gatluak Manime made the announcement in an interview with the Sudan Tribune, emphasizing that President Kiir is managing the negotiations based on his vision to bridge the gap between RSF and SAF. Subsequently, Salva Kiir met with Ethiopian Foreign Minister and Deputy Prime Minister Demeke Mekonnen in Juba, discussing diplomatic efforts for the resolution of the war in Sudan. Later, Kiir visited Cairo for a two-day visit during which he met with President Al-Sisi. The ongoing war in Sudan was at the center of the summit, with both parties emphasizing their commitment to finding a diplomatic solution involving all neighboring countries of Khartoum.

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Meanwhile, the conflict has reopened in the Abyei region contested between Sudan and South Sudan. According to local sources, 32 people, including a UN peacekeeper, have died after armed groups and individuals wearing the uniforms of the South Sudanese army reportedly attacked the region twice. The Abyei region, rich in oil, has been contended between the two countries since South Sudan's independence in 2011.

Kenya financial crisis continued to worsen. Finance Minister Njuguna Ndung'u stated that the combination of high-interest rates and the depreciation of the Kenyan shilling has put the country's finances in a critical situation, considering that Nairobi will have to pay its public debt soon. Concerning the cost of living crisis, the finance minister stated that the inflation increase is related to supply chain issues and not to the government's management. In this context, the IMF has announced a "staff-level" agreement with Nairobi to unlock a tranche of \$682 million in aid needed to pay its Eurobond due in June. According to the agreement, delegations have also agreed to increase the credit line for the African country by \$980 million. This month, the World Bank announced that Nairobi's debt had reached \$9 billion, while, according to the Central Bank of Kenya, loans from multilateral institutions exceeded \$10 billion.

Finally, Somalia secures a new loan from the IMF. Recognizing the work done by Mogadishu authorities in improving tax collection and traceability, as well as opening the national economy to private investment, IMF has granted an additional loan of \$100 million. The announcement comes at a particularly significant time for Mogadishu, whose state budget will exceed a billion dollars in expenditure for the first time since the beginning of the civil war in 1992.

Western Balkans

In its annual report on the progress of European Union integration of candidate countries, presented on November 8, **the European Commission recommended starting membership negotiations with Bosnia and Herzegovina** (which has been granted candidate status until December 2022), **but only “once the necessary level of conformity to the membership criteria has been achieved.”** The report observes that while there has been some progress in the legal sector, no progress in the fight against corruption has been made, and there has been a regression in the fight against organized crime, terrorism, and money laundering. The Commission, moreover, expresses concern over the unconstitutional laws approved by the Republika Srpska - the entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina with an ethnic Serb majority- which hinders adaptation to the Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). The Commission will continue to update member states on the country’s progress by March 2024.

The Report also includes the four Balkan countries that have already opened membership negotiations (Montenegro in 2012, Serbia in 2014, Albania and North Macedonia in 2022), as well as Kosovo - whose independence has yet to be recognized by five EU member states - that has submitted a membership request in December 2022. Aside from the delays in the reforms identified by the Commission as necessary, the main obstacles to Serbia’s integration are the slow progress in the normalization process with Kosovo and the lack of alignment with the CFSP, particularly in relation to Russian sanctions, while North Macedonia must overcome some differences with Bulgaria. **For all four countries, the report indicates a lack of progress in judicial reforms.** Furthermore, in Kosovo, “it is necessary to do more on the rule of law” (particularly in the north of the country, which has a majority of Serbs and is unstable due to ongoing tensions); in Serbia a “strong political will is needed to effectively address corruption problems”, while “proactive criminal investigations and systematic monitoring of money flows are not yet a common practice, especially in case of unexplained wealth”; Montenegro and North Macedonia must rigorously fight corruption, even at the highest levels; Albania has achieved positive results with its specialized structure against corruption and organized crime, which has dealt with numerous high-profile cases involving ministers, parliamentarians, mayors, and senior officials. The Commission also expressed concern about freedom of expression in numerous regional countries.

The foreign ministers of the EU and the Western Balkans met in Brussels on November 13 at a meeting chaired by Josep Borrell, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy. On such occasion, Antonio Tajani, Deputy Prime Minister of Italy and Minister of Foreign Affairs, stated that Italy “strongly supports the Balkans’ European integration pathway” and that it is “vital now to accelerate this process while also aiming at tighter collaboration on key dossiers such as economic growth, security, and the fight against irregular immigration.” The EU ministers from the “Friends of the Western Balkans” group—which includes Austria, Croatia, Greece, Italy, the Czech Republic, Slovakia, and Slovenia—met with their regional counterparts prior to the meeting. The informal final document produced asks the Union’s institutions to “present a clear agenda for gradual and accelerated integration with concrete implementation measures until 2024 and beyond,” as well as to deal more effectively with external pressures, including illegal migration, disinformation, and hybrid threats. According to the seven EU ministers, “establishing a more regular and structured dialogue with partners” is vital.

The priorities of Montenegro’s new government, as outlined by Prime Minister Milojko Spaji, economist and president of the “Europe Now” movement, will not be ethnic or religious issues, but rather “full membership to the EU,” an active and credible participation in NATO of which Montenegro is a member, an improvement of relations with countries in the region and greater engagement in multilateral organizations, while its economic policies will attempt to raise living standards and implement reforms that will result in “higher tax revenues, investments, and a better business environment.”

Having secured only a relative majority in last June's elections, to gain parliamentary trust Spajić also had to count on the votes of the deputies of Andrija Mandić's "For the future of Montenegro" movement. This arrangement allowed him to be elected President of the Parliament despite his well-known affiliations with pro-Russian, pro-Serbian nationalism, and anti-NATO sentiments. **Spajić will have a difficult time keeping the majority united**, despite Mandić's declaration that he is prepared to bridge the differences. The coalition of the new administration, in addition to the centrist "Europe Now," includes "Democratic Montenegro", the pro-Serbian Socialist People's Party, the pro-European liberal party "Civis", and two coalitions of smaller parties made up of Albanian citizens.

On November 2, the UN Security Council examined the biannual report by Christian Schmidt, the High Representative for Bosnia and Herzegovina in the international community, and **unanimously adopted a resolution extending the mandate of the peacekeeping and security mission EUFOR Althea by one year**, a mission launched in 2004 and made up of approximately 1,100 soldiers from 20 countries. The report mentions "unprecedented attacks on the Dayton Peace Agreement and the constitutional order of Bosnia and Herzegovina", mainly due to the "secessionist objectives" repeatedly highlighted by the pro-Russian president of Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik. Moreover, he has repeatedly declared his intention to disregard the decisions made by High Representative Schmidt and the country's Constitutional Court. While the United States, the United Kingdom, and other EU members have all confirmed their full support for Schmidt, China and the Russian Federation refuse to acknowledge him as their High Representative, claiming that he has not been adequately validated by the Security Council. The Russian Federation claims that the High Representative's office "is obsolete and should be closed as soon as possible."

Controlling the Balkan route remains a very challenging task in terms of migration flows. On November 2, the Serbian police reported on having arrested 738 migrants in total throughout multiple operations launched the week before. Human traffickers appear to be using this route more frequently to smuggle people from several Asian nations into the European Union - many of whom, like Chinese citizens, regularly enter Serbia or Bosnia and Herzegovina where a visa is not required before turning to criminal organizations. According to an intelligence report titled "National security aspects of illegal migration in the Serbian-Hungarian border area" published on the website of the Hungarian Parliament on November 2, agents of the Taliban regime have allegedly taken direct control of the Afghan human trafficking groups operating in the Serbian territory of Vojvodina, near the border with Hungary; additionally, the war between Israel and Hamas could increase the risk that the Balkan route will be used by terrorist networks to plan attacks in Western Europe.

On November 6, Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni met with Albanian Prime Minister Edi Rama at Chigi Palace and **announced a Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Albania on the management of flows**, which envisions the establishment of migrant centers in Albania that can house up to 3,000 people and welcome a total of around 39,000 people per year. The agreement only applies to migrants rescued by Italian ships in the Mediterranean and excludes minors, pregnant women, and other vulnerable groups. Italy in particular should handle disembarkation procedures and identification procedures in the port of Shëngjin, and establish a Return Detention Center in Gjadër, in northwestern Albania; Italian jurisdiction would apply in both structures, together with Italian police forces and Asylum Commissions.

On November 6 and 7, the EU Special Envoy for the Kosovo-Serbia Dialogue, Miroslav Lajčák, met with Prime Minister Albin Kurti, First Deputy Prime Minister Besnik Bislimi, and opposition political representatives in Pristina to discuss the **draft statute of the Association of Municipalities with a Serbian majority proposed by the EU** on October 21, as well as other issues. After rejecting previous proposals that were deemed incompatible with Kosovo's Constitution, Kurti is now willing to accept the draft statute of the Association, but Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić is adamant about not signing any document that could imply *de facto* recognition of Kosovo.

The two governments accepted the EU's invitation to resume talks in Brussels on November 16, where Petković was supposed to discuss the text of the statute with Besnik Bislimi, Deputy Prime Minister of Kosovo; however, no progress has been made in this regard.

From 19 to 22 November, **NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg visited several countries in the Western Balkans.** In Sarajevo, Stoltenberg met with the members of Bosnia and Herzegovina's tripartite presidency, Prime Minister Borjana Krišto and the international High Representative Christian Schmidt. According to Krišto, who thanked NATO for the aid package of around 50 million euros for defense and security projects, cooperation in peacekeeping missions strengthens the capabilities of the armed forces and improves preparedness to respond to the challenges of organized crime and terrorism; however, **Bosnia and Herzegovina requires "an internal political consensus to be reached through dialogue" for full membership in NATO,** while the authorities of Republika Srpska are definitely against it. Following a visit to NATO forces at the Camp Butmir base near Sarajevo, the Secretary General arrived in Kosovo, where he met with President Vjosa Osmani and Prime Minister Albin Kurti, stating that **the Alliance is evaluating the possibility of permanently increasing its presence in the KFOR mission,** which was decided following the outbreak of violence in the north of the country in September. In Belgrade, Stoltenberg met with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić and Prime Minister Ana Brnabić. **Serbia, remaining neutral, could resume participation in joint military exercises with NATO countries,** which were halted following the Russian Federation's large-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. Vučić stated that Serbia welcomes the increased presence of KFOR in Kosovo, but that its participation is only necessary to counter attacks on Serbs perpetrated by the authorities of what Belgrade still believes to be its own province. In Skopje, Stoltenberg noted that **North Macedonia is a positive example of peaceful coexistence between different ethnic and religious groups** and stated that its membership in the EU would further improve democracy, the rule of law, and social justice, while Prime Minister Dimitar Kovačevski highlighted the importance for his country and for NATO of countering Russian influence in the region. Defense Minister Slavjanka Petrovska said that North Macedonia has successfully completed the training of a first group of Ukrainian soldiers (without providing details) and that training will continue throughout 2024 and as long as there is a need. Again in Skopje, on November 22, Secretary General Stoltenberg attended a meeting with the heads of government of NATO members Albania, Croatia, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Slovenia.

After being sanctioned by the US Treasury Department in July for corruption, abuse of public office, and involvement in transnational organized crime, including "providing Russia with a platform to strengthen its influence in the region," **Aleksandar Vulin resigned from the post of Director of the Serbian Security Intelligence Agency (BIA)** on November 3. On November 16, **the US Treasury Department announced sanctions on eight more individuals and six businesses in the region,** accusing them of "perpetuating corruption and facilitating Russian malign influence."