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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

Early October saw Algerian diplomatic efforts to end the crisis in Niger suffer a serious setback. According to its foreign ministry, **Algiers will indefinitely postpone mediation talks with Niger officials until it has received “the necessary clarifications”**. At the end of September Algeria had announced that general Omar Tchiani – who seized power in Niamey last July by overthrowing elected president Mohamed Bazoum in an army-backed coup – had agreed to join mediation talks brokered by the north-African country. Tchiani, however, quickly denied accepting Algeria’s proposal, which called for a six-month transition period towards a civilian government. Niger is a keystone of Algiers’ power projection in the Sahel due to joint infrastructural projects – such as an Algeria-Niger-Nigeria gas pipeline and the Niger stretch of the Trans-Saharan Highway – and to the increase in irregular migration from Niger to Algeria’s southern frontiers.

The Israel-Hamas conflict remains at the core of Algerian diplomacy in the Middle East. On October 16th, **Algerian foreign minister Ahmed Attaf met his Tunisian counterpart, Nabil Ammar**, to discuss the worsening security outlook in the Gaza Strip. On October 23rd, **Attaf had telephone conversations with the Iranian and Syrian foreign ministers, Amir Hossein Abdollahian and Faisal Miqdad**. Meanwhile **the Algerian President of the Republic, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, spoke by phone with both its Italian counterpart Sergio Mattarella and the Italian prime minister, Giorgia Meloni**. Tebboune also **spoke to the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**, who is set to visit Algiers next month. On October 24th **Attaf joined the UN Security Council emergency meeting in New York** by the invitation of his Brazilian counterpart, Mauro Vieira: Algeria will join the ranks of the Council’s non-permanent members for 2024-25, together with Guyana, South Korea, Slovenia, and Sierra Leone.

New developments in the energy field. **Eni CEO Claudio Descalzi met in Algiers with the newly nominated head of Sonatrach, Rachid Hachichi**. Together with Algerian Energy minister Mohamed Arkab, the two discussed the development of Eni hydrocarbon concessions in Algeria as well as Algerian gas exports to Italy and Europe. Hachichi became the CEO of Sonatrach in early October, after the destitution of Toufik Hakkar, due to the allegations of financial mismanagement that rattled the Algerian hydrocarbon company across the last few months. It is worth remembering that Eni ranks among the largest Italian investors in Algeria. In April 2022, and during Tebboune’s presidential visit to Rome, the group signed a contract with Sonatrach for a yearly supply of 9 bcm of Algerian natural gas until 2024. The agreement remains crucial for the diversification of the Italian energy mix away from Russian sources. In the last few days **Hachichi also met with TotalEnergies CEO Patrick Pouyanné**.

Algiers also seeks to ease its own dependence on the hydrocarbon sector. On the sidelines of the fifth annual Algeria-EU high-level Energy Dialogue, **Algerian Energy minister Mohamed Arkab announced the launch of a 15-million-euro cooperation program on renewable energy**. Meanwhile, **the Algerian Ministry of Energy and the German Company for International Cooperation (GIZ) signed a contract for bilateral cooperation in the field of green hydrogen and renewable energy**: the 12-million-euro agreement was sealed in Algiers during the fifth Algerian-German Energy Day. On the occasion Bilateral talks also focused on the Southern Hydrogen Corridor. The project – which should involve Snam, Trans Austria Gasleitung – Gas Connect Austria and Bayernets – is set to connect North Africa and continental Europe via Italy.



Morocco

The resurgent Israeli-Palestinian conflict highlights the hurdles of Moroccan foreign policy. As the current chair of the Arab League, on October 10th **Morocco called for an emergency summit of the organization in its Cairo headquarters**. On king Mohamed VI's request, the attending foreign ministers discussed the latest developments in the Palestinian dossier regarding the outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Hamas, following the terror group's incursion into the Jewish State on October 7th and the military operation launched by Israeli forces into the Gaza Strip. The dossier is particularly sensitive for Morocco, who normalized relations with Israel in late 2020 through the Abraham Accords. Israel and the Alawi kingdom subsequently established a standing partnership in trade, technology and security that culminated in Tel Aviv's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara.

The relationship between Israel and Morocco also sparked controversy between the Alawi monarchy and Moroccan public opinion. According to several press sources, **tens of thousands of protesters took to the streets in Rabat to show support for the Palestinian cause**. Meanwhile, as Israel evacuated its Moroccan embassy for safety reasons, **the kingdom temporarily suspended flights between Rabat and Tel Aviv**.

The annual meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund – the first ones held in Africa in the last fifty years – **ended in Marrakech**. The symbolic value of the event was enhanced by the earthquake that struck the provincial capital on September 8th and initially cast doubt over its feasibility as a venue. High-level talks were held on the sidelines: **Moroccan Prime minister Aziz Akhannouch met with IMF president Kristalina Georgieva**, as well as with **US Secretary of the Treasury Janet Yellen** and **BCE president Christine Lagarde**, to discuss cooperation and financial support towards rebuilding areas affected by the quake. According to estimates by the US Geological Survey, the damage wrecked in the Marrakech-Safi region may result in a 2 to 8% contraction of the kingdom's GDP.

Despite combined exogenous shocks, the Moroccan economy shows some signs of recovery. **The Moroccan Central Bank stated that it would keep interest rates stable at 3%**. The announcement comes after three successive hikes (from 1,5 to 3%) aimed at containing inflationary pressures over foodstuffs caused by chronic drought and the disruption of cereal imports in the wake of the Ukraine war. The bank, however, stated it would abstain from further tightening monetary policy in order to encourage the recovery of quake-hit provinces, to which the Moroccan government allocated a 10-billion-dollar aid package. The decision was also prompted by an encouraging drop in inflation rates, which decreased from 6.6% to a 6% average over the course of 2023.



Tunisia

Tunisia is again at odds with the European Union over financial cooperation. **Tunisian president Kais Saied refused 60 million euros of EU financial aid.** According to Saied, the “insignificant” amount – which is part of a 127-million-euro package approved by the European Commission in September – contravened the terms of the Tunisia-EU memorandum of understanding signed last July as well as the conclusions reached at the International Conference on Migration, held in Rome that same month. The memorandum – signed after difficult negotiations between the Tunisian presidency, the EU Commission and Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni, as well as former Dutch PM Mark Rutte – aims to strengthen the tottering Tunisian economy and the joint containment of irregular migration across the Mediterranean. Saied’s refusal follows repeated diplomatic clashes with the Union: in late September the Tunisian president indefinitely postponed the visit of an EU delegation, while a group of European Parliament deputies led by Michael Gahler (European Popular Party) was forbidden entry into Tunis airport after leveraging accusations of human rights abuses against the Tunisian government.

Bilateral cooperation with Rome sees new developments. **The Italian deputy Prime minister and foreign minister, Antonio Tajani, met with Saied and the Tunisian foreign minister, Nabil Ammar, during a State visit to Tunis.** Talks involved perspectives for joint action against irregular migration and the future launch of a “structural partnership” in agriculture and water management. The meeting also focused on the El Med and BlueMed connectivity projects, respectively overseen by Terna and Sparkle, for the realization of an electric undersea cable – which the Commission financed last December with 307 million euros – and a multi-fiber optic cable between Italy and Tunisia. Seeking to enhance mobility between the two countries, **Tajani and Ammar also signed an agreement for the concession of 4000 work permits to qualified Tunisian workers in Italy.**

Meanwhile, the worsening crisis in the Gaza Strip may deteriorate the already fraught relations between the two shores of the Mediterranean. On the backdrop of heightened international tensions, **the Tunisian parliamentary Commission for Civil rights and liberties approved a draft law criminalizing normalization with Israel.** The proposal came a few days after the Iraqi parliament passed a similar bill. During his meeting with Tajani, Ammar harshly criticized Israel’s violations of international and humanitarian law in the Gaza Strip, underscoring the necessity for the international community and the European Union to assume “moral responsibility” for the crisis. In receiving the Italian diplomat, Saied openly recalled the “duplicity” of some unspecified countries concerning the Palestinian dossier.

The economic and financial situation remains difficult. In late October, **the Tunisian Central Bank kept interest rates stable at 8%:** according to the institution, the policy aims to ease inflation in light of relative improvements in the economic outlook by virtue of an active tourism industry. However, it should be noted that the announcement comes only a few days after **the presidency fired the minister of the Economy, Samir Saied,** who remarked the “vital” necessity to unlock a contested 1,9-billion-dollar aid package by reaching an agreement between the Tunisian government and the International Monetary Fund.

Water scarcity increasingly threatens the country. **The Tunisian government has prolonged emergency rationing of water in the agriculture sector,** originally meant to last from March until the end of September. The measure was prompted by chronic drought, obsolete infrastructure and the increasing salination of underground reservoirs due to excessive reliance on water-intensive crops and fertilizers.



Libya

The political-institutional impasse persists in Libya. On 2 October, **the Benghazi-based House of Representatives (HoR) unanimously approved the electoral laws for the national assembly and the election of the head of state**, drafted by the 6+6 Joint Committee. However, **on 4 October, the High Council of State (HCS) based in Tripoli rejected the said laws**, deciding to withdraw its members from the 6+6 Committee and to reaffirm its support for the agreement signed in Morocco in June 2023. Indeed, Mohamed Takala, president of the HCS, declared that “any subsequent amendment is contrary to the Constitutional Declaration and the correct law”.

The special envoy and head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Abdoulaye Bathily, also addressed the subject, stating that the laws are an important “working basis for the holding of elections”. However, as the UN mission’s official communiqué states, “the commitment of all major parties” is required as well as the resolution of contentious issues, “which need to be addressed and resolved through a political settlement”. Such issues would include the provision for a mandatory second round in presidential elections, regardless of the votes obtained by candidates; a link between presidential and parliamentary vote, making the National Assembly ballot contingent on the successful election of the head of state; a unified government to lead the country to elections and close the chapter of interim governments; and the full inclusion of Libyans, including women and all cultural components.

During the UN Security Council meeting on Libya on 16 October, Bathily emphasized that the refusal by the High Council of State (HCS) to approve the amendments made by the 6+6 Committee to the decisions taken in Morocco in June, “constitutes a political option that risks jeopardizing the hard-won gains of the two Chambers and the compromise they have achieved”. The special envoy, therefore, stated that it is desirable for the HCS to renounce its position, and highlighted the possible risk of a violent conflict resulting from the unilateral appointment of a government by any of the rival parties. It should also be noted that, according to the 6+6 Committee, the laws sent to the High National Electoral Commission (HNEC) are to be considered as definitive and, thus, cannot be changed.

In October, **Italy was particularly active in Libya, especially from a diplomatic point of view**. The Italian Ambassador in Tripoli, Gianluca Alberini, met with the Prime Minister of the GNU, Abdul Hamid Dbeiba, the President of the Presidential Council, Mohamed Menfi, the President of the HCS, Mohamed Takala, the Head of the HNEC, Emad al Sayeh, the Minister of Transport, Mohammed Shahoubi, and the Minister of Labour, Ali al Abed. Among the topics discussed: the Libyan political process – with particular reference to the elections –, the fight against human trafficking and illegal migration flows, the resumption of air links between the two countries and the recent events in Gaza. Alberini, by confirming that Italy intends to support joint efforts to rebuild the areas affected by the Storm Daniel, highlighted the importance of further improving economic, labour and professional training cooperation. It was significant, in this regard, the signing of an agreement between the Italian-Libyan Chamber of Commerce, based in Rome, and the Libyan-Italian Chamber of Commerce, based in Tripoli, to develop trade relations between the business communities of the two countries.

Finally, **Turkiye’s activism during the month of October should be noted**. Indeed, the Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, met with the UN Special Envoy, Bathily, and the Prime Minister of the GNU, Dbeiba. The latter was also received by President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, while the Head of HNEC, Emad al Sayeh, met with his Turkish counterpart, Ahmet Yener, and the Deputy Foreign Minister, Ahmet Yildiz. The Libyan electoral dossier, the reconstruction of Derna, and the cooperation in the fields of energy and military training were at the center of the various meetings.



Egypt

The restart of the war between Israel and Hamas put Egypt at the center of regional diplomacy this month. Cairo's active and cautious posture has been characterized by the willingness to avoid losing credibility toward the Arab public opinion without jeopardizing its relations with Israel and the West. So, while Hamas's attack in Israel was ongoing, the first statement released by Egypt's Ministry of Foreign Affairs warned about the risks of escalation. Al-Sisi himself, who had recently announced his presidential candidacy for the next December elections warned against a "perverse cycle of violence" that might undermine the region. As the hours passed, contacts between Cairo and world diplomacies multiplied. Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry spoke with US secretary of state, Antony Blinken, discussing possible initiatives to stop the violence. In the hours in the aftermath of the attack, Italian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Antonio Tajani, flew to Cairo to meet with Shoukry and expressed his support for de-escalation initiatives, as well as Italy's readiness to open humanitarian corridors for the release of Israeli prisoners. Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan was also among the first foreign ministers to arrive in the country for a face-to-face meeting with Shoukry. In a press conference following the bilateral meeting, Fidan reiterated Ankara's stance on the ongoing crisis, emphasizing that Turkey would not approve a solution based on the "deportation" (in his own words) of Palestinians to Egypt.

As the war in Gaza escalated, tensions increased at the Rafah crossing, which became one of the most closely watched places by world diplomacies during the month. Egyptian authorities criticized the Israelis for their handling of the crisis at the shared border, especially after Tel Aviv's airstrikes in the area. Subsequently, the management of the crossing came to a standstill, with both Israelis and Egyptians equally opposed to its opening for humanitarian reasons. Only the bilateral meeting between Blinken and Al-Sisi and the following trip of President Joe Biden to Israel have pushed Egypt to change its approach to the crisis. Italy Defense Minister, Guido Crosetto, had also urged the Egyptians to open the Rafah crossing to facilitate the influx of humanitarian aid. Israel and Egypt agreed on a temporary opening of the passage to ensure a "limited" delivery of humanitarian aid, excluding for the moment any transit of refugees leaving the Strip. As of today, about 74 trucks have reached the Gaza Strip. Egyptian authorities are still worried about the possibility of members of the Muslim Brotherhood arriving from Gaza.

To find a diplomatic solution to the conflict, a high-level international summit was held in Cairo. Delegates from Arab countries, EU members, and the African Union have participated together with those from Russia, China, Japan, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The final statement released by the Egyptian Presidency asked for allowing the access of humanitarian aid to Gaza and invited the conflicting parties to find a "fair and just" solution to the Palestinian issue. However, the meeting also highlighted the divergences between the West and Arab states concerning the condemnation of Hamas and possible solutions to the conflict more broadly. It is also worth mentioning the participation of Prime Minister Madbouly in the third international forum on the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (the first one since Cairo's entry accession to BRICS). According to Chinese state-owned broadcaster CCTV, President Xi Jinping reassured the Egyptian prime minister of Beijing's readiness to work with Egypt to stabilize the Middle East.

If the new Palestinian crisis underlined Egypt's geopolitical relevance, its economic crisis proved its internal criticalities. In an interview with the Emirati newspaper The National, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva stated that Egypt will continue to lose foreign reserves unless it proceeds with a new devaluation of the pound. In this context, Moody's further downgraded Egypt's bond rating from B3 to Caa1, closer to the "junk bonds" threshold. The downgrade was motivated by doubts about debt sustainability, which Cairo had promised to reduce through a privatization process of state-owned companies that remained very circumscribed up to date. The United Arab Emirates has again come to rescue the Egyptian treasury by signing a "currency swap" agreement to alleviate Cairo's currency crisis. According to a joint statement by both countries' central banks, the agreement will allow the exchange of 5 billion Emirati dirhams for 42 billion Egyptian pounds (\$1.36 billion).



Despite the many attempts to contain the crisis, Egypt's economy has continued to slow, with data on the non-oil sector from Standard & Poor's index showing a contraction in supply for the fourth month in a row. Standard & Poor's also downgraded Egypt's rating to B- from B, motivating its choice because of the ongoing currency crisis. The decision puts Cairo's bond on par with nations such as Bolivia, Angola, and Iraq. It is not surprising that rumors are now spreading about a possible request from Egypt for an increase in the loan agreed by the IMF less than a year ago. Egypt is considering requesting an additional \$2 billion loan shifting the aggregate loan to \$5 billion instead of the \$3 billion agreed in 2022. Any potential increase in the loan would remain linked to the technical review process by the IMF, which has asked Cairo for a substantial reduction in public spending as a guarantee. The review has been postponed twice so far, and for the time being, no decision has been made regarding the loan increase.



Israel

September seemed to have paved the way for the normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, brokered by the United States. The process, however, was **interrupted on Oct. 7 by a devastating attack by Hamas against the Jewish state.** The Islamist movement struck from the air, land and sea. Thousands of rockets hit southern and central Israel, reaching as far as Jerusalem and Tel Aviv, while **hundreds of Palestinian militiamen infiltrated the country, slaughtered Israeli citizens and captured 224 hostages**, who were transferred to Gaza. **The attack was completely unexpected** and the civilian and military intelligence services, the IDF, and, somewhat belatedly, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu admitted their failures to prevent the attack. Tal Aviv's reaction was immediate. **Gaza is currently the target of continuous bombardment by Israeli forces**, the purpose of which is not only to "eradicate" Hamas completely from the Strip, but also to free hostages. Although the bombardments are aimed at destroying major sites and killing the most prominent members of the Islamist movement, **Palestinian civilian deaths are inevitable** in a densely built-up territory that has no outlets other than the Mediterranean Sea. Israeli casualties so far are reported to be 1,400, Palestinian casualties nearly 7,000, according to unverifiable figures from the Hamas Ministry of Health.

An agreement was reached on Oct. 11 to form a national emergency government in Israel between Prime Minister Netanyahu and Benny Gantz, leader of the National Unity Party. The two leaders will be part of the war cabinet along with Defense Minister Yoav Gallant. Note that Yair Lapid, leader of Yesh Atid, is not part of the new executive.

In addition to the fate of the hostages, of **great concern are the exchanges of fire between Hezbollah and Israeli forces, and those on the border with Syria. There are also fears of direct intervention in the war by Iran**, which supports both Hamas and the Lebanese Islamist movement. The entire region could catch fire. **Also raising alarm are Palestinian reactions in the West Bank**, where the Israeli Air Force bombed tunnels near the al-Ansari Mosque in Jenin, where Islamic Jihad militiamen were apparently preparing an attack. The Israelis had not intervened in the West Bank from the air since 2000.

Reactions to the war in the international community varied. **Arab countries and Turkey did not condemn Hamas aggression but bitterly blamed Israel's retaliation**, denouncing its violation of human rights in the Strip. **In contrast, Western bloc countries with the United States** in the lead, followed by the European Union and, in particular, Italy, France and Germany, along with the United Kingdom, **condemned the Hamas terrorist attack and recognized Israel's right to defend itself.** The U.S. has also sent the Jewish state ammunition and military equipment, as well as positioned the aircraft carriers USS Ford and USS Eisenhower, in the Eastern Mediterranean to prevent the conflict from spreading. **U.S. President Joe Biden traveled to Israel Oct. 18** to ask PM Netanyahu "tough questions" about Tel Aviv's strategy in Gaza and repeatedly stated that an invasion of the Strip by land would be a "grave mistake," reminding Israel that "democracies follow international laws of war." **The U.S. Administration is also engaged in hostage release talks, along with Egypt and Qatar.** To date, four Hamas prisoners have been freed.

As the situation for civilians in Gaza becomes increasingly desperate, the **momentary reopenings of the Rafah crossing with Egypt allow humanitarian aid to arrive in the Strip**, thanks in part to U.S. and U.N. mediation. Attempts by the sharply divided international community to prevent the tragedy from escalating continue unabated even if, for now, no shared position can be reached. **On October 21, a Peace Summit was held in Cairo, attended by representatives of numerous countries, including Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. However, the summit ended in a deadlock.**



Great stir was caused by the words of the Secretary General, Antonio Guterres, who, during the Security Council session on the situation in the Middle East, held on October 24, while reiterating the explicit condemnation of the aggression against Israel, stated that "it must be recognized that the aggression of Hamas did not occur in a vacuum." Of particular note, however, were the words spoken by President Biden at a press conference in Australia on Oct. 26. **According to Biden, it will not be possible for Israel to return to the previous status quo. It is necessary, even now, to have an idea of what will happen after the war and, according to the U.S., it should be the creation of two states.**



Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia is interested and closely follows the developments of the conflict between Israel and Hamas has been prominent in the news. **Since the beginning of the war, Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) has expressed his sympathy for the Palestinian people**, saying that they deserve “a more dignified life and lasting peace”. Bin Salman went on to emphasize the kingdom's efforts to try to stop the escalation and prevent the conflict from expanding. In this regard, Riyadh called on all its citizens and part of the diplomatic staff residing in Lebanon to leave the country immediately. On Sunday, October 8, the kingdom's Foreign Minister, Faisal bin Farhan, also condemned the killing of numerous civilians in the clash between Israel and Hamas. A statement released by the Saudi Foreign Ministry, asserted the need for the international community to favor a credible peace path leading to a “two-state solution” to achieve regional stability. **On Friday October 13, Riyadh condemned Israel's demand for Gaza Palestinians to leave the Strip, as well as continued Israeli actions against civilians.** “Saudi Arabia declares its categorical rejection of the demands for the forced displacement of the Palestinian people from Gaza and its condemnation of the continued shelling of defenseless civilians.” **It should be noted that the ongoing war in Gaza represent an obstacle to the normalization process of relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia.** Although senior US government officials have reaffirmed their willingness to continue the mediation attempt between the two countries, the spokesman for the US National Security Council, John Kirby, emphasized that “the states involved will decide under what conditions and to what extent to continue this effort”. The possible deal is therefore at a standstill and, in addition, the events in Gaza could bring Saudi Arabia and Iran closer together after the resumption of diplomatic relations last March. The common will to avoid an escalation in the Middle East was confirmed by the foreign ministers of the two countries during a meeting on October 18 on the sidelines of the emergency summit of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC).

At the international level relations with Western countries remain stable. **It is worth mentioning the recent meetings between members of the Italian government and members of the Saudi administration. On Wednesday October 4, the Italian Foreign Minister, Antonio Tajani, visited Riyadh, where he met the Saudi Investment Minister, Khalid Al-Falih.** During the meeting, the two discussed the opportunities for Italian companies in Saudi Arabia, especially in relation to the progress of the Vision 2030 projects. Tajani then underlined Italy's deep commitment to strengthening relations with Riyadh and the other Gulf States, increasingly important players on the geopolitical stage; subsequently, the issue of irregular immigration was addressed, recalling the inauguration of the Rome Process last July involving partners from Africa and the Middle East. “Italy and Saudi Arabia share a common vision on combating human trafficking and criminal organizations,” said Tajani. In this regard, it should also be mentioned the Saudi economic support to Tunisia amounting to, EUR 500 million in soft loans and grants. **On October 17, the Italian Defense Minister, Guido Crosetto, met his Saudi counterpart, Khalid bin Salman, in Riyadh.** The two discussed the need to increase the interoperability of their respective armed forces and defense industries, as well assess the situation in Gaza. “Italy is following the current situation in the Middle East with great attention and equal concern - said Crosetto - a crisis that could cause heavy repercussions on the stability of the region and the Mediterranean”.



United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE), the first among North African and Middle Eastern (MENA) countries to announce net-zero carbon emissions by 2050, **has labeled 2023 as the Year of Sustainability**. Just ahead of COP28 in Dubai, Abu Dhabi is still juggling its role as a major hydrocarbon producer along with being a climate protection advocate. Indeed, it is not by chance that, on the occasion of the latest edition of the Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition and Conference, the UAE Minister of Energy and Infrastructure, Suhail Mohamed Al Mazrouei, and OPEC Secretary-General Haitham al-Ghais stressed the need for synergic cooperation between consumers and energy producers. Put another way, the oil and gas industries should be considered as part of the solution, rather than being seen as the main obstacle in the fight against climate change.

In this regard, in line with the company's decarbonization goals and sustainable commitments, the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company (ADNOC) has announced the doubling of its CO₂ capture target to 10 million tonnes per annum by 2030. In parallel, it is also investing in developing one of the major Carbon Capture, Utilization, and Storage across the MENA region (CCUS) projects, the Habshan in Abu Dhabi. Contemporarily, and to be framed within ADNOC's broader goal to diversify export markets, the Emirati leading energy company is securing long-term supply agreements with Asia's biggest energy consumer markets. This is showcased by the ADNOC Gas announcement of a 500-700 million dollars long-term agreement in LNG with Japan's JERA Global Markets. This comes on the heels of another LNG deal reached with PetroChina in September, valued at around 450-500 million dollars. Additionally, a 14-year supply agreement was struck with the India Oil Corporation in July.

On the geoeconomics side, the UAE consolidates its position as an international hub through broadening and strengthening economic and financial ties with a vast array of partners. In October, the Emirati agenda was marked by conclusion talks for a Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement with South Korea, as well as the official visits to the UAE of Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of Singapore and the Indian Minister of Commerce and Industry Piyush Goyal. Renewables, low-carbon energy, digital technology investments, and 4.0 Industry are the major fields in which the UAE is striving to bolster prospects for cooperation and new business opportunities. Concurrently, keeping pace with the country's ambitions in positioning as a global hub of connectivity at the crossroads between Europe, Africa, and Asia, Dubai Ports (DP) World is still advancing investments in the maritime transport and logistics sectors.

After the outbreak of the conflict, the UAE has demonstrated a cautious approach to dealing with and addressing the Hamas-Israel war, with diplomacy and humanitarian aid as the main tools to support de-escalation efforts. However, this "balanced approach" has not prevented the country from being threatened by Alwiyat al-Waad al-Haq (AWH), a group with ties to the Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah, of possible attacks on American military bases on UAE soil. On the one hand, the UAE was the only Arab Gulf country to name Hamas in its public statement, labelling the Hamas attacks on Israeli civilians as "a serious and grave escalation", and President Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) was the first and, so far, only Arab leader with which Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu spoke on a phone call. On the other, the UAE strongly condemned the Al-Ahli hospital bombing in Gaza and, on the occasion of the Cairo Peace Summit, MbZ stressed how in the absence of a "clear political horizon" to resolve the Israeli-Palestine question, "the region will remain vulnerable to continuous cycles of violence". However, in the aftermath of Israel's expansion of ground operations in Gaza, the Gulf monarchy condemned the Israeli "military escalation", and expressed its "deep concerns over it. It also called for a humanitarian truce and for the cessation of hostilities, according to the resolution adopted by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly held on 27th of October.



Qatar

In recent years, Qatar has been trying to pursue a balanced policy between different regional Middle Eastern actors; a strategy that was confirmed in October, too. After the start of the conflict in Gaza, **Doha, together with Ankara and Cairo, proposed itself as a mediator for a prisoner exchange between Israel and Hamas.** According to a statement released by the emirate on 9 October, Doha, with US support, tried to reach an agreement with both conflicting parties to secure an exchange between Israeli citizens and militiamen of the Islamist movement detained by Israel, giving priority to women and the elderly. **The talks led by Qatar and the Egyptian leadership were successful,** and they allowed the repatriation of two American women taken hostage by Hamas on 7 October and released for 'humanitarian reasons and precarious health conditions', together with other two Israeli women. The aim of Qatari mediation, moreover, is the sending of humanitarian aid to Gaza.

Although Doha's mediation efforts in such a delicate context, **Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani has been extremely critical of Israel and the West,** which supports Tel Aviv. In a statement released by the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 17 October, Qatar "strongly condemns the attack on the hospital in the Strip and considers the Israeli operation a brutal massacre of innocents". Such statements do not relate to the Palestinian cause only, of which the Emirate has always been a supporter, but also express Doha's concern about a possible escalation in the region, that would destabilize the entire Middle East. Emir al-Thani also called to the international community, asking for a direct intervention by Western powers to end the spiral of violence that is fueling the conflict in Gaza.

Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto travelled to Doha on 18 October, where he met Emir al-Thani. The Minister had previously visited Saudi Arabia to discuss the serious situation with regional partners. "It is necessary to separate Hamas terrorists from the Palestinian people, a people who are often used as a shield by terrorists," Crosetto said at a joint press conference with al-Thani, during which they both expressed their concerns about the possible enlargement of the conflict to northern Israel and neighbouring countries. During the conversation, the minister also thanked the Italian armed forces for their work in the framework of the Italy-Qatar bilateral mission during the 2022 World Cup. This consolidates the partnership between Rome and Doha in the security field.

Qatar's political engagement is also evident in the signing, during the month of several relevant agreements in the energy sector. **QatarEnergy ratified a 27-year contract with ENI for the supply of LNG.** The Italian company signed a deal with QatarEnergy Lng Life - the joint venture between ENI and QatarEnergy for the development of the North Field East project - for the supply of up to 1.5 billion cubic meters per year (bcm) of LNG. The available volumes of LNG will be delivered to the 'Fsru Italia' regasification terminal in Piombino starting in 2026. The LNG volumes produced by the Nfe project will increase Qatar's LNG production by further 45 bcm compared to the current 108 bcm.



Turkiye

As demonstrated by the intense political activism of the Ankara government in October, Turkiye keeps its primary role in the international arena. **Turkiye offered to act as a mediator in the conflict after the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas.** While at first President Erdoğan expressed his solidarity to Israel over the terrorist attack by Hamas, he later condemned Tel Aviv and expressed strong support to the Palestinian cause, furtherly deteriorating the already difficult diplomatic relations with the Jewish state. In October, Erdoğan, and the Turkish Foreign Minister, Hakan Fidan, were among the most active international representatives in the managing the crisis, guaranteeing, among other things, the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gaza. They both condemned Israel's actions - holding the Jewish state responsible for the bombing of the al-Ahli Arab hospital in the Strip - as well as the international community for its 'silence' on Palestinian casualties. The Pope, Russian President Putin and the Qatari leadership also expressed full support to Turkiye in its effort to avoid a dangerous escalation of the conflict, which could spread to neighbouring countries in the Middle East. In this regard, the words of the leader of the Turkish MHP party (former 'Grey Wolves party'), one of the most nationalist in the country, were particularly relevant. On October 24, during a speech to the Turkish parliament, he stated that: 'if there is no security in Gaza and Aleppo, there will be no security for Ankara and Europe'. In this regard, Turkiye demands an immediate cessation of the bombing, the delivery of humanitarian aid, and a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine. **Turkiye also remains one of Iran's main interlocutors since the beginning of the Gaza crisis, with several meetings and phone calls taking place in October between President Erdoğan and his Iranian counterpart Raisi.** During the talks, the Israeli-Palestinian situation and the fate of Nagorno-Karabakh in the South Caucasus were discussed.

Counterterrorism remains a priority for the Ankara government, both for internal security and for the defence of its national borders, a key-point of the presidential election campaign in May 2023; for this reason, the suicide attack on 30 September has led to serious concerns. **A PKK militant blew himself up in front of the Ankara Interior Ministry,** injuring two police officers. The Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) claimed responsibility for the attack and released a statement saying that "the place and the day on which the attack took place have a very specific meaning" adding that the PKK intended to give a 'warning' to the Turkish government". The Kurdish Party-defined by Turkiye, the EU and the US a terrorist organization- launched the attack just a few hours before the reopening of the legislative year of the Turkish parliament. At the session, the members of parliament were going to debate on Sweden's entry into NATO and the increase of Turkish military operations in Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan. In different occasions, President Erdoğan emphasized that Stockholm's entry into the Atlantic Alliance was closely linked to the fight against Kurdish terrorism by the international community. **After the attack, President Erdoğan and minister Fidan released a statement announcing a violent recovery of military operations in Kurdistan.** In particular, the Turkish armed forces targeted not only PKK and YPG compounds, but also Kurdish critical infrastructure such as power plants and oil facilities. Moreover, it is worth to note on **5 October, a US F-16 hit two Turkish Bayraktar drones** while they were flying near a US military base in Al-Hasakah, north-east Syria, where 900 American soldiers, as part of the international anti-Daesh Coalition, are currently deployed. The Turkish government decided not to make any statements about what happened, so to reassure the American ally. It seems, however, that the diplomatic balancing act between the West, NATO, Russia, and Arab countries, which has characterized Turkish foreign policy over the past two years, has exposed the country to the risk of violent action in its territory.



Meanwhile, despite Turkiye's complex relationship with the US, due to Ankara's proximity to Moscow and the 'lack of effectiveness' of anti-Kurdish measures taken by the White House, **on 23 October President Erdoğan signed the Sweden's NATO accession protocol**. After a meeting on 13 October with US President Joe Biden, Erdoğan signed the act and forwarded it to the Turkish parliament, which will decide on its ratification in November. The US State Department spokesman, Matthew Miller, expressed his satisfaction with Turkiye's decision, saying that "he welcomes Ankara's decision, and he hopes that the Turkish parliament will ratify Sweden's entry into the Atlantic Alliance as soon as possible". However, the matter of the sale of American F-16s to Turkiye, which has delayed the signing of the memorandum of understanding between Ankara and NATO, is still pending.



Iraq

Iraq confirms its efforts for political stability. with, on the one hand the complex relations with the US, Turkey, Iran, and Russia and, on the other, and the those between the central government in Baghdad and the Autonomous Region of Kurdistan (KRG). Moreover, recent events in Gaza add to the existing problems. Following the terrorist attack by Hamas against Israel on 7 October, **the Shia Sadrist leader, Muqtada al-Sadr, expressed his party's full availability to contribute to Hamas' cause.** In a statement issued on 8 October, al-Sadr announced his support to the Palestinian Islamist movement and the delivery of humanitarian aid to Gazans people via Syria or Egypt. The Sadrist leader was very harsh in criticizing Israel. In a press conference, he first accused the 'Zionist tyranny' of being responsible for Hamas's actions, and then he made a plea to the members of his movement to carry out terrorist actions against the Jewish state and the West, which is considered as a partner of Tel Aviv in the "the occupation of the Palestinian territories". The harshest tones of the Iraqi extremist groups are addressed to the United States, considered by the Sadrist movement, and the Iraqi Hezbollah brigades, as 'occupiers' of Iraqi territory as well.

Following al-Sadr's call, **the Aqsa Flood Operations Support group, close to Hamas, carried out three drone attacks against a US base in Iraqi Kurdistan on 19 October.** In an official KRG statement, the regional government's Counter-Terrorism Unit explained that the weapon-laden drones crashed in the Harir village in Erbil. The White House confirmed the news, expressing concern about the growing tensions in Iraq and Kurdistan against US armed forces operating as part of the international anti-Daesh Coalition. The Aqsa Flood Operations Support group is mainly composed of members of the Islamic Resistance in Iraq, an Iranian-backed militia network close to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards. The group claimed responsibility for the attack and reiterated its support for the Palestinian cause. An intervention by Iranian and Iraqi groups in support of Gaza shows the risks of an escalation of the conflict, which could spread to neighboring areas such as to Iraq and to the KRG. **The secretary of the Hezbollah Iraqi faction, Abu Hussein al-Hamidawi, also agreed with al-Sadr's statement** and he said that if the US intervened in support of Israel, **his militia would target US military bases, embassies, and consulates in Iraq.** Al-Hamidawi's and other statements by Iraqi extremist leaders pushed Washington to withdraw non-essential diplomatic staff from Iraq and to raise the alert level for possible attacks, kidnappings, and violent actions against Western citizens in Baghdad and Erbil.

Faced with these chances **Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani had a telephone conversation with US President, Joe Biden, on 16 October.** The two leaders discussed the situation in the Strip and the risk for the conflict to spread to other Middle Eastern countries, such as Iraq. Biden expressed concern after calls by Iraqi Iranian groups urging all Muslims to carry out terrorist attacks as a sign of solidarity with Hamas. A fear also shared by PM al-Sudani for the internal stability of the country.

Lebanon, Jordan e Syria

In the current escalation of violence, **the Lebanese-Israeli border is caught again in the crossfire between Hezbollah and the Israeli forces**, with significant losses on both sides and among Lebanese civilians. Despite the increasing tensions along the Blue Line in southern Lebanon, where UNIFIL is deployed, Hezbollah and the Israeli government do not seem keen to be engulfed in a 2006 like-war scenario. Hezbollah's hesitation would primarily stem from the risk of reputational damage within the Lebanese public. Indeed, with a three-digit annual inflation rate, an unprecedented lira depreciation, and a gradual decrease in foreign exchange reserves, Lebanon is already a battered economy. The banking sector's collapse and public sector erosion and infrastructure deterioration, coupled with a high unemployment rate and the increase in social inequalities, clearly illustrate the Lebanese financial and economic crisis. Against this backdrop, if Hezbollah gets involved in the conflict, the evident economic damages associated with the war would be compounded by the risks to Lebanon's security and territorial integrity. It is not by chance that since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war, the Lebanese caretaker government led by Najib Mikati, and major political parties have been stressing to their regional and international partners the need for Lebanon to stay out of the conflict and strengthen its state institutions.

Yet, in the cost-benefit analysis of the prospects for Hezbollah's involvement, some factors including the ongoing siege of Gaza, Israeli ground invasion of the Strip, and Hamas' capabilities for a prolonged confrontation with Israel need to be counted. These scenarios, along with the risk of a new wave of forced and permanent displacement of Palestinians from their land, could potentially change the *status quo*, turning South Lebanon from a zone of military confrontation to a full war zone. In this regard, afterward his meeting with Hezbollah's Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian publicly declared to be informed by Nasrallah about the party of God's red lines and its readiness to assess "all the scenarios". Amir-Abdollahian statements would be further corroborated by the meeting, held in Beirut, between Nasrallah, Palestine Islamic Jihad leader Ziad Nakhla, and Hamas's number-two Saleh Al Arouri.

If the Israel-Hamas war spirals into a wider regional conflict, a conflagration of the Israeli-Lebanese border would also risk mobilizing ever more Iran-affiliated groups located in Syria. As showcased by rockets launched by Palestinian factions with links to Hezbollah against occupied Israeli Golan Heights, as well as the attacks against US military bases by the Iranian "rearguard" in eastern Deir Ez-Zor and Al-Hasakah and Homs governorates, these Iran-backed militias are exerting great influence on Syrian soil. Additionally, according to local sources, Ismail Qaani, the commander of the Quds Force of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), would have recently visited Syria to establish an operative zone close to the Golan Heights and bolster coordination among Iranian proxies operating there. Since the outbreak of the war, Israeli aviation has been striking military sites of pro-Iranian factions located in the eastern countryside of Quneitra and the western countryside of Daraa and it has positioned armored vehicles in occupied Israeli Golan Heights opposite to Quneitra governorate. The Israeli Air Force also repeatedly conducted simultaneous strikes against Aleppo and Damascus airports, allegedly to slow down (air) transport of weapons and military supplies sent by Teheran.

Due to geographic proximity and its large Palestinian population, **Jordan is deeply concerned about the repercussions of the Israeli-Hamas war for its security and stability and those of the whole region.** It is not by chance that Amman has asked the United States to deploy Patriot air defense systems on its soil to enhance security against ballistic missile threats. Concerns over the potential threat to Jordan airspace rose after Yemen's Houthi rebels launched missiles targeting Israel.

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Reportedly, one of the Houthi's missiles fell in the Al-Mudawwara area, in Jordan's southeast Ma'an governorate. Concurrently, and similarly to Lebanon, pro-Palestinian protests, alternating with pro-Hamas slogans, have taken to the streets in Jordan, escalating significantly in the aftermath of Israel's shelling of Al-Ahli hospital in Gaza. Against this backdrop, authorities have adopted preventive measures, such as banning demonstrations and gatherings in the Jordan Valley and border areas, to ensure and maintain security therein.

This goes hand-in-hand with government-intensive diplomatic efforts to stop conflict in Gaza, promote immediate humanitarian truce in the Strip, and prevent any spillover of the crisis into the West Bank. This is in line with the draft resolution submitted by the Permanent Mission of the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan on behalf of the Arab countries to the United Nations and adopted by the UN General Assembly on Oct. 27. On the occasion of the European tour in the United Kingdom, Italy, and Germany and during the meetings with both regional and international partners – including the President of the Palestinian National Authority, Mahmud Abbas, and the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, – Abdullah II stressed that the region will never be secure or stable without the achievement of a just and comprehensive peace on the basis of the two-state solution. On various occasions, including at the Cairo Peace Summit, the King also reiterated the need to cease collective punishment of the entire civilian population in Gaza, calling any attempt to forcefully displace Palestinians from their land a “war crime” and a red line that cannot be crossed. In Cairo, Abdullah II denounced the “international apathy and inaction” – what he called the “global silence” – on indiscriminate Israel's attacks on Gaza and the use of a double-standard narrative in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Sahel

A month characterized by the maneuvers of military regimes in the region, which, despite their rhetoric, are starting to show significant weaknesses. In Burkina Faso, the government announced that it had thwarted a coup attempt on the night between Thursday, September 26, and Friday, September 27 thanks to its internal intelligence. Army judiciary claimed that four officers belonging to the national gendarmerie whose names and ranks are unknown are being investigated for their involvement in the coup attempt. A significant reshuffle of military roles in the national army took place after the coup. The most important change occurred at the helm of the national gendarmerie, where the Chief of Staff, Evrard Somda, was removed following Traoré's personal decision, and Lieutenant Colonel Natama Kouagri, the former head of the special forces of the gendarmerie, was appointed in his place. On September 29, a month after his last public appearance, the head of the transitional government addressed the nation on national television. Traoré claimed that elections are not a priority for Burkina Faso, compared to the security crisis and assessed how they will only be held after a constitutional reform. The goal of the reform according to Traoré is to make the Constitution "more representative of the masses." In the meantime, the government has presented a reform project for the Superior Council of Communication, which aims to facilitate the allocation and, above all, the withdrawal of radio and television frequencies by national authorities. At the same time, the relations with Russia continue to strengthen, with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding with the Rosatom agency for the construction of a nuclear power plant. According to Burkina Faso's Minister of Mines, Simon-Pierre Boussim, Ouagadougou aims to build its first nuclear power plant by 2030 to meet the country's increased energy needs.

In Niger, the transitional government continues its hardline stance against the international community. The junta has expelled the UN country coordinator, Louise Aubin, following UN Secretary-General's decision to prevent the Nigerien delegation appointed after the July coup from participating to the latest General Assembly. In this context, **the United States government has officially recognized the removal of Mohamed Bazoum as a coup.** As a result, under existing laws, the US has indefinitely suspended all forms of military cooperation with the country. Diplomatic sources in Washington, explained that it has become clear to Washington that the government led by General Tiani has no intention of following constitutional norms and also that representatives of the new government are drafting a new Constitution that does not guarantee the return of power to a civilian government. In this context, **a raid reportedly attempted to free the deposed president, Mohamed Bazoum.** Transitional authorities in Niamey announced this through a statement broadcast on national television. According to the Nigerien junta, some members of the security forces loyal to the former president allegedly tried to free Bazoum and take him to safety in Nigeria. The liberation attempt was reportedly thwarted by the security forces who arrested some of the individuals involved. Local sources report mass arrests in the hours following the attempted liberation and that the president and his family – who are allegedly in good health – members were moved to a new detention location within the Presidential Palace. Bazoum and his family are said to be in good health. The junta's statements are disputed by other sources, asserting that the liberation attempt never took place and it was used as an excuse for the subsequent mass arrests.

While Niamey continues to distance itself from its former partners, there is an increase in relations with other juntas in the region. More specifically Niger's appointed prime minister, Lamine Zeine met with his Malian counterpart, Choguel Maïga, in Bamako where they held a joint working session accompanied by their defense ministers and agreed to provide mutual assistance to tackle the multidimensional crises affecting both countries.

Zeine and Maïga emphasized the need to diversify their partnerships in the defense sector, with a not-so-subtle allusion to a possible further strengthening of cooperation with Moscow. Despite the rhetoric, Niamey is starting to feel the pressure of isolation and sanctions. The government has cut 40% of its public spending since the last budget law, following the reduction in humanitarian aid from international organizations and allied countries. The state budget has dropped from 3.29 trillion CFA francs to 1.98 trillion CFA francs. To address these issues, Niger's government has established a national solidarity fund, financed through extraordinary withdrawals from the accounts of national service companies.

The month in Mali was marked by armed clashes in the north. The Coordination of Azawad Movements (CMA) announced that they have captured an army base in Bamba, Gao region. This military installation is considered a strategic outpost for the control of the region, and for the moment, the Malian Ministry of Defense reports intense fighting in the area without, however, denying the CMA's claims. Bamba is the fourth military installation attacked since the beginning of the clashes with the northern armed groups at the end of August. The Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) have started moving toward the city of Kidal to regain its control following the withdrawal of the UN peacekeeping mission (MINUSMA). Kidal also has a strategic role as a hotspot for controlling trade and migratory flows towards the Algerian border. Clashes have occurred in the village of Anefis, 11 kilometers south of the city. The FAMA claimed to have gained control of the city, while the rebel groups labeled these statements as propaganda. Another contingent of the Malian army, supported by Wagner Group members, clashed with CSP forces in Tarkint, where the rebels allegedly shot down an aircraft from Bamako's air force. New allegations of violence by the Malian armed forces and the Wagner Group have emerged during the offensive. According to local sources, both actors are accused of committing various acts of violence against civilians. In Anefis, FAMA and Wagner have clashed against CSP militias and executed seventeen civilians in the aftermath of the fighting. Subsequently, in Ersane (Gao region), about ten civilians were beheaded after the arrival of government troops and Russian mercenaries - a kind of event that has occurred in the past in other countries where the Wagner Group was deployed. Despite the Malian government's appeals for national unity, the war in the north has not calmed public anger towards the transitional authorities especially in the aftermath of the postponement of national elections. Among the critical voices is that of the M5-RFP movement, historically pro-Russian and anti-French, from which the current Prime Minister, Choguel Maïga, hails. In an official statement, the group's spokespeople have urged the transitional government to "keep the commitments made." The transitional government has not responded to the statements, and the presidential spokesperson has merely stated that the new election date "will be announced in due course." Among the critics is also Imam Dicko, one of the most influential religious leaders in the country.

Horn of Africa

Ethiopia was at the center of regional diplomacy this month. U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken had a phone conversation with Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, where he reiterated the need to find a peaceful solution to interethnic tensions in the country, expressing concern over the ongoing conflicts in the Amhara and Oromia regions. During the call, Blinken and Abiy also discussed possible ways to restore humanitarian aid to the country which has resumed one week later. Italy has also started a healthcare humanitarian project by donating 7.6 million euros to Addis Abeba. The initiative involves multidimensional support for healthcare in the Afar and SSNP regions and it will benefit 62,000 people, including 2,000 children in the Chifra and Hamer woredas. Abiy Ahmed has then traveled to Beijing for the third international Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) forum, where he met with his Chinese counterpart, Li Qiang, and President Xi Jinping. At the end of the meeting with Xi, the Chinese head of state officially elevated the level of bilateral relations between Ethiopia and China, now classified as a "strategic cooperation partnership." Abiy Ahmed, in turn, described China as Addis Ababa's most important and trusted ally and expressed the desire to strengthen multidimensional cooperation between the two countries through initiatives like the BRI. In addition to cooperation with superpowers, **Ethiopia has been at the center of diplomatic tensions regarding the issue of access to Red Sea ports.** In a speech to Ethiopian MPs, Abiy Ahmed referred to the issue of access to the sea as existential, emphasizing that "a population of 150 million people cannot live in a geographical prison." In the same speech, Abiy Ahmed stated his intention to engage in "frank discussions" with the coastal countries of the Horn of Africa to address this situation. Djibouti, Somalia, and Eritrea responded with a unified stance, labeling the prime minister's statements as excessive and counterproductive.

New developments also concerning the war in Sudan. The U.S. has imposed new sanctions on the warring parties by freezing all assets owned by Sudan's former Foreign Minister Ali Karti including two companies, the GSK Advance Company and Aviatrade LLC, with registered offices in Russia. According to the US State Department, both companies have been involved in financing and supporting the military efforts of General Hemedti's Rapid Support Forces (RSF). These new sanctions come in the aftermath of those targeting RSF commanders Abdelrahim Hamdan Dagalo (brother of Hemedti) and Abdul Rahman Juma, the commander of operations in Western Darfur. Moreover, an American journalistic inquiry accuses Egypt of supplying Turkish drones (Bayraktar TB2) to the regular army led by General Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan. The foreign ministries of Egypt and Sudan have not responded to the investigation's claims, but if this were to be confirmed, it would be further evidence of how the Sudanese generals' war is dangerously shifting toward a proxy war dynamic, especially after reports that the United Arab Emirates might also be arming the RSF. In this context, it is worth signaling the restart of diplomatic initiatives to resolve the conflict. In Addis Ababa, the leaders of civil parties, under the leadership of former Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok, met to co-opt the SPLM-N led by Abdel Aziz al-Hilu and the Sudan Liberation Movement led by Abdel Wahid Nur. Simultaneously, the Vice Chief of the Sudanese regular forces, Shams al-Din al-Kabashi, traveled to Jeddah for talks with the RSF rivals under the auspices of Saudi Arabia. Kabashi announced that the talks in Jeddah would also address the humanitarian situation in the country alongside political and military issues. Talks were also held in Juba, hosted by South Sudan, with major armed groups to discuss possible solutions for the conflict between the RSF and the Sudanese Armed Forces (SAF). The aim of the meeting is also a partial and shared review of the 2020 Juba agreements, but so far, the multilateral meeting has not yielded significant agreements. The South Sudanese government publicly stated that President Kiir is seeking support from Gulf states in his mediation efforts.

It is worth mentioning how South Sudan's president, Kiir visited Moscow this month where he met with Russia's Vladimir Putin. The heads of state discussed how to enhance bilateral cooperation in the fields of security, healthcare, and economic development. Kiir's visit took place at a particularly complex time for South Sudan diplomatically.

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He has not met with US President Joe Biden during the United Nations General Assembly week and at the same time, he was strongly criticized by the United Nations for his decision to hold presidential elections next year, and the Security Council has decided to maintain the weapons embargo on South Sudan. At the end of the bilateral meeting with Putin, Kiir claimed that he sees the Russian president as "a strong friend whom we need." In the meantime, the United Nations has released a new report accusing South Sudan's security services of systematic and repeated human rights violations.

Somalia continues to fight al-Shabaab. Mogadishu has secured a temporary pause in the withdrawal of the African Union Mission in Somalia (ATMIS), which will resume at the end of December. Somalia had formally requested the United Nations Security Council to suspend the withdrawal to avoid jeopardizing the gains made so far in countering the terrorist group. In the meantime, the Somali military claims to have eliminated dozens of al-Qaeda fighters as part of an offensive in the Shabelow forest, and the Ministry of Defense reports the outbreak of an internal power struggle among the organization's leaders. According to the ministry, pressure from the Mogadishu government and its allies, along with internal disagreements, has led to a feud between the followers of the al-Qaeda group's leader, Abu Ubaida, and one of the prominent figures in the leadership, Abdirahman Mohamed Warsame. According to authorities in Mogadishu, these two groups have already clashed in the cities of Jilib and the village of Yareu in the Middle Juba region.

In this context, the United States placed new bounties on the capture of the group's leaders. American authorities are offering a \$5 million reward for information leading to the arrest of Abubakar Ali Adan, one of the organization's key military leaders. On the diplomatic front, Somalia's President Hassan Sheikh traveled to Eritrea. Eritrea's Minister of Information, Yemane G Meskel, claimed that President Hassan Sheikh expressed gratitude to Afwerki for Asmara's support in training Somali security forces.

Western Balkans

Despite the EU's mediation efforts, **the dialogue to advance relations between Serbia and Kosovo has effectively halted.** Pristina accused Belgrade of direct involvement in the September 24 attack near the village of Banjska in the north of the country by dozens of Kosovar Serbs using war weapons and fears new infiltration of people and firearms across the approximately 380-kilometer border. Thus, **the role of the NATO-led KFOR mission,** whose command was handed over on October 10 from Italian Lieutenant-General Angelo Michele Ristuccia to Turkish Major General Özkan Ulutaş, **appears increasingly important.** In recent weeks, the mission has been supplemented by an additional 200 British and 130 Romanian military personnel, bringing the total number of personnel to around 4.800 coming from 27 countries (including 852 Italians).

On October 3, **Serbian police arrested Milan Radoičić, former deputy president of the northern Kosovo-based Srpska Lista party** ("Serbian List"), funded by Belgrade, who had admitted to taking part in the Banjska clashes to "encourage the Serbian people to resist the Kurti regime's terrorist attack" before fleeing to Serbia. Radoičić, a businessman suspected of having ties to organized crime, was charged by Serbian prosecutors with criminal conspiracy, illegal production, possession, trafficking and carrying of firearms and explosive substances, as well as serious offences against general security. On October 4, the Belgrade court ordered his release along with a requirement to report to the police every 15 days. The situation in northern Kosovo was **addressed by the European Parliament during its plenary session on October 3 in Strasbourg,** where a number of members of Parliament called on Serbia and Kosovo for a de-escalation while others suggested freezing the funding Serbia receives from the EU. Janez Lenarčič, the European Commissioner for Humanitarian Aid and Crisis Management, called on the parties to refrain from any further action that could worsen the situation and reminded that "further escalation of tensions will have a very negative impact on their European pathways as well as the stability and security of the Western Balkans region." At a press conference held in North Mitrovica on October 13, Goran Rakić, the head of the main reference party for Kosovo Serbs, declared that **the "Serbian List" would be ready to take part in new municipal elections in northern Kosovo:** his boycott of last April's vote had led to the election of ethnic Albanian mayors with a turnout of less than 4 percent in the municipalities of North Mitrovica, Zvečan, Zubin Potok, and Leposavić, leading to a sharp escalation of the crisis in the area and to a stalemate in the process of normalizing relations between Pristina and Belgrade. According to the Kosovo government, which has pledged to rearrange the elections, this requires going through **a complicated process of dismissing mayors required by at least 20 percent of voters** and then approved by a majority of voters, while - according to the Serbian side - simple mayoral resignations would suffice.

On October 19, **the European Parliament adopted a "Resolution on recent developments in the Serbia-Kosovo dialogue, including the situation in Kosovo's northern municipalities,"** which strongly condemns the attack and urges Serbia to fully cooperate with the investigation and bring to justice those responsible for the assault who currently reside in Serbia. The resolution calls on the Commission and the Council to freeze funding provided to Serbia under the Instrument for Pre-Accession Assistance if investigations reveal that the Serbian state was directly involved in the Banjska terrorist attack or the violent attacks in northern Kosovo in May 2023, or if the Serbian authorities are unwilling to fully cooperate. On October 23, the scheduled **semi-annual meeting of the UN Security Council on the situation in Kosovo** took place. The meeting began with the presentation by the head of the *United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo* (UNMIK), Caroline Ziadeh from Lebanon, of the mission report issued on October 5 that covered the developments from March 19 to September 18. The meeting also saw the attendance - by invitation - of Serbia Prime Minister Ana Brnabić and Kosovo President Vjosa Osmani (as a "person considered competent in the matter under consideration," as Kosovo is not a member of the United Nations). In particular, the report notes that despite EU-sponsored bilateral and trilateral meetings, a consensus could not be reached regarding the order in which mutual obligations should be implemented.

Kosovo's president spoke of "terrorist organizations" financed and trained by Serbia and of Russian activities aimed to destabilize the region. According to Serbia's prime minister, conversely, in Kosovo "a campaign of silent ethnic cleansing" is underway and the events in Banjska are "the logical consequence of the reign of fear and terror that Pristina has decided to establish." Particularly harsh was the remark of the Russian Federation Permanent Representative, Vasily Nebenzya, who said that "the desire of the so-called Kosovo authorities is to establish full control over the northern part of the province, which is populated by Serbs." Nebenzya spoke of "acts of intimidation, arrests of Serbs and attacks on people and their property" on a nearly daily basis and, after accusing "the West" of spreading false information about the September 24 attack, he expressed his conviction that "if this arbitrariness is not halted, the consequences could be extremely serious, up to the resumption of armed conflict." For the Russian Federation, which is adamantly opposed to the recognition of Kosovo's sovereignty, UNMIK's activities must continue, while for the United States, the United Kingdom and Albania, UNMIK has fulfilled its original purpose and should no longer play any role in Kosovo's government. Relations between Pristina and Belgrade were also among the topics on the agenda of the **European Council meeting on October 26**: the EU insists on calling for administrative elections in the area at the earliest possible and for the formation of the Serb-majority Association of Municipalities. It also warns that **without an easing of tensions, both Kosovo and Serbia will miss out on important opportunities on the road to European integration.**

Appearing before a Bosnia and Herzegovina court for a preliminary hearing on October 16, the President of **Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, defined the trial initiated against him illegal and the editor of the organization's Official Gazette a criminal.** They are accused of having, respectively, signed and published in July an unconstitutional law under which the decisions made by the Constitutional Court of Bosnia and Herzegovina and the International High Representative, Christian Schmidt, should not be enforced within the Republika Srpska territory. Dodik and Lukić might face a prison sentence ranging from six months to five years, as well as the termination of their official functions. Dodik went on stating that the prosecution would be based on Schmidt's "criminal" acts, the legitimacy of which he has always refused to acknowledge, adding that he believed the case constituted **"an opportunity for the Republika Srpska to free itself from Sarajevo and Bosnia and Herzegovina."**

Serbia is intensifying cooperation with the People's Republic of China, particularly in the defense industry. On October 17, Serbian Trade Minister Tomislav Momirović and Chinese Trade Minister Wang Wentao signed a free trade agreement on the sidelines of the third Forum on International Cooperation of the Belt and Road Initiative in Beijing, which also saw the presence of Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić. On that occasion, **Chinese President Xi Jinping called for increased strategic coordination with Serbia** and pledged to support the country in defending its sovereignty and territorial integrity – alluding to the PRC's continued opposition within the Security Council, alongside Russia, to Kosovo's UN admission. In an interview published on October 21 in the Chinese newspaper "Global Times," Serbian Defense Minister Miloš Vučević said that the FK-3 medium-range anti-aircraft missile system and the Chinese-made CH-95 and CH-92 drones are among the most significant defense systems acquired by Serbia in recent years. Meanwhile, the Serbian Ministry of Construction, Transport and Infrastructure announced that it has signed three trade agreements with Chinese enterprises for infrastructure projects worth almost four billion euros.

On October 16, **the ninth summit of the Berlin Process took place in Tirana.** The summit was launched back in 2014 at the behest of then-German Chancellor Angela Merkel between the Western Balkans and several EU countries, to foster political dialogue, reconciliation, and regional cooperation. The summit covered both the goal of the region's full integration into the EU and short-term objectives to facilitate trade, transportation, labor mobility and unification of Wi-Fi coverage.

However, **while all the countries in the region are officially applying to join the EU, membership is still a long way off** - this excludes Kosovo, whose independence has not been recognized by Serbia nor by five EU member states (Cyprus, Greece, Romania, Slovakia and Spain). The candidates are still not making enough progress to align themselves with the Commission's recommendations and with the admission criteria. Albanian Prime Minister, Edi Rama, also criticized **the slowness of the EU's loan procedures** and drew attention to the organization's delay in the implementation of infrastructure that should be funded by the EU. The President of the EU Commission recalled that, in the past nine years, 16 billion of the 30 billion euros have been used in the region to spur economic growth and promote convergence with the EU and stated that the goal should be to **"double the size" of local economies in the next decade.**

On October 13, **Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić confirmed that early parliamentary elections will take place on December 17**, along with the already planned local elections in the capital city of Belgrade and in the Vojvodina province.

On October 30, **European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen began a tour to five capitals in the region to present the four pillars of the new Growth Plan for the Western Balkans:** integration into the EU's Single Market key dimensions, completion of the Common Regional Market, fundamental reforms on the rule of law and on the economy, and a funding of 6 billion euros (of which 2 billion in grants and 4 billion in loans) as part of the EU budget's midterm review. On October 30 in Skopje von der Leyen mentioned a window of opportunity that is opening, but reminded that the process is "not rigid, but based on "merit" and that "the better the reform process, the faster the possibility of accession." **Though in line with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy, North Macedonia finds it challenging to amend its constitution** to include the recognition of a Bulgarian minority, demanded by Bulgaria as a condition for not impeding the admission. The reform is supported by the government and favored by the EU and the United States, but it requires approval by two-thirds of members of Parliament, while the government coalition only has 64 out of the 80 votes required. It would, therefore, need to secure the consent of part of the opposition. While visiting Pristina, where she met with Kosovar counterpart, Vjosa Osmani, the President of the European Commission said that Kosovo should accept the creation of the Association of Serb-majority Municipalities and that Serbia should somehow recognize Kosovo *de facto*, a statement she repeated when she met with Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić in Belgrade on October 31. In Podgorica, during a joint press conference with von der Leyen, Montenegrin President, Jakov Milatović, stated Montenegro was closer to EU integration than the other Western Balkan states, recalling that his country has been a NATO member since 2017, uses the euro and is "fully aligned with the EU's Common Foreign and Security Policy." However, after June's elections, Montenegro still lacks a new government; the current one has only overseen day-to-day operations after a no-confidence vote in August 2022. If the prime minister-designated Mилојко Spajić (president of the "Europe Now" movement) fails to establish a coalition capable of securing the necessary parliamentary majority of 41 votes, new early elections will be held.