



CLOSE-UPS

September 2024



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

With 84,30 % of scrutinized votes cast in his favour, **Abdelmadjid Tebboune has been re-elected president of Algeria**. Anticipated by most analysts, Tebboune's successful bid – welcomed by most political parties despite his status as an independent candidate – reflects the enduring influence of the Algerian armed forces as Tebboune's main supporters. The army first ensured Tebboune's election in 2019, ostensibly responding to the calls for democratisation by the Hirak popular movement. Alleged irregularities have already been denounced regarding both the vote count and attendance rate.

Meanwhile, **the BRICS economic bloc greenlit Algeria's entrance in their New Development Bank (NDB)**. Algeria's membership was officially announced by the Bank's president, Dilma Roussef, on the side-lines of the annual meeting of the Bank's Board of Governors in Cape Town. The country's admission (which partially compensates its exclusion from the enlargement process undertaken by the full-fledged BRICS members in 2023) signals Algeria's continued will to engage with the bloc, whose economies amount to roughly 25% of the world's combined GDP. By strengthening its ties to the BRICS, Algeria seeks to diversify its economic partnerships (mostly in favour of China, who has been investing in Algeria's petrochemical and mineral sectors). Algeria also aims to mitigate reliance on its hydrocarbon exports to France and Spain, whose relations with Algiers have soured after both countries recognised Morocco's primacy over Algerian ambitions in the Western Sahara.

Tensions grow between Algeria and Mali. According to local sources, Algiers' air force detected a Malian TB2 drone flying over southern Algerian territory. The incident, which was denounced by Algeria's representative at the UN Security Council, also highlights Algeria's difficult relations with Russia, whose forces – chiefly former Wagner contractors – have been launching attacks in support of Bamako's army and against the Tuareg rebels in northern Mali. While Algeria fears the conflict might spill over across her southern provinces, Mali's military junta has repeatedly accused Algeria of supporting the Tuareg separatist movement. Last February, Mali unilaterally withdrew from the 2015 peace accords, negotiated by Algeria at the close of the last Malian conflict.

On the economic front, **Algeria launched a tender for preliminary studies aimed at expanding its Djen Djen port**. Located in Jilel, in the country's north-west, Djen Djen – which is considered Algeria's first commercial port – is also set to host a terminal container that will upgrade its capacity to two million containers per year compared to the 53.000 registered in 2023.

Finally, **US majors show further interest in Algerian oil and gas**. The CEO of Algerian State champion Sonatrach, Rachid Hachichi, met at Houston's Gastech Forum with the president of Chevron, Clay Neff, to discuss avenues for cooperation, while representatives from ExxonMobil renewed their interest in the Algerian upstream. Last May, Sonatrach awarded Exxon rights of exploitation over the Ahnet and Gourara hydrocarbon basins, while Algerian Energy minister Mohamed Arkab signed a memorandum of understanding with Chevron. As Hachichi flew to Houston, Arkab also met with the US ambassador to Algiers, Elizabeth Moore Aubin, to address mutual interests in the energy field.



Morocco

Moroccan police arrested 152 individuals in connections to clashes that took place between September 11th and 16th in the town of Fnideq, where **almost 4000 migrants** – mostly Moroccan citizens, with about 500 hailing from Algeria, Tunisia, and sub-Saharan countries – **attempted a mass crossing of State borders towards the nearby Spanish exclave of Ceuta**. Disorders peaked on September 15th, when Moroccan security forces pushed back a 3700-strong attempt that left several migrants wounded. It is not a new occurrence in Ceuta, which – together with its sister town Melilla – marks the only terrestrial State frontier between North Africa and Europe: in 2022, Moroccan and Spanish forces repelled a similar attempt that left over twenty dead and prompted accusations of human right abuses. Clashes at Fnideq highlight persisting socioeconomic issues in the Alawi kingdom and underscore Morocco's status as a country of both departure and transit towards Europe. In 2024 alone, Moroccan border surveillance stopped roughly 50,000 illegal crossings across the Strait of Gibraltar and the Canary Islands.

Relations with Algeria, meanwhile, have sunken to a new low. In the wake of the Fnideq clashes, **Algeria imposed a visa obligation on holders of Moroccan passports in the country**. The measure is meant to ward off “destabilizing actions” from Morocco, whom Algeria accused of facilitating drug and human trafficking as well as Israeli espionage across their shared border. Several Moroccan publications in turn accused Algeria of orchestrating disorders in Fnideq to damage Morocco's reputation in the eyes of the international community, while the Akhannouch government threatened to impose analogous restrictions on Algerian passports. Algeria had already severed diplomatic relations with Morocco in 2021, shortly after the kingdom normalised its ties to Israel through the US-sponsored Abraham Accords.

On the other hand, **Morocco strengthened ties with Kenya**, whose first ambassador to Rabat, Jessica Muthoni Gakinya, officially began her tenure in the North African capital. Announced in late August by Kenyan president William Ruto, the appointment marks a gradual détente between Rabat and Nairobi. Kenyan overtures aim to ensure Morocco's support for the candidacy of Raila Odinga – former presidential rival to Ruto – to the presidency of the Commission of the African Union. Beyond domestic appeasement, Ruto also looks to Morocco's status as the chief African supplier of fertilizers to boost Kenya's struggling agriculture sector and help wean off dependency from Russian wheat imports. Relations with Rabat remain, however, conditioned by the recognition granted by Kenya to the Sahrawi Republic, which contends with Morocco the possession of Western Sahara: in 2022, the newly elected Ruto had announced in a tweet to disavow the authority of the SADR over the region, only to later deny and cancel the communiqué.

Finally, **the Akhannouch government announced new measures to address water scarcity in the kingdom**. In a recent press release, the prime minister stated that he and his executive would “double efforts” to address the water crisis gripping Morocco, which threatens to plunge the country below the “absolute water poverty threshold” of 500 mq per capita. A key role will be played by Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP), the Moroccan phosphates giant, which has just inaugurated a USD 100 million project to build – in partnership with the International Finance Corporation – a 200-kilometre aqueduct to transport desalinated water from the desalinated water from the Atlantic Ocean. In addition, OCP already runs the Safi and Jorf Lasfar desalination plants. **Morocco's water crisis is also a matter of interest to China**, who inked a three-year partnership with the kingdom (2025-27) to build, maintain and run Morocco's water network.



Tunisia

The race for the presidential elections – set for October 6th – **opened on the backdrop of a renewed crackdown on the opposition.** In the latest edition of the Tunisian Official Gazette, only three candidates were announced as eligible to compete for the presidency at the Palais de Carthage: the incumbent Kais Saied, former unionist Zuhair Magzhaoui, and Ayachi Zammel from the Azimoun party. This narrow selection was drawn from approximately seventeen applications, which were excluded by the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) due to procedural irregularities and alleged misconduct. A Tunisian court sentenced Lotfi Mraihi, leader of the Republican Union Party, to eight months in prison for electoral fraud and issued him a lifetime ban from the presidential race. Abir Moussi, head of the Nidaa Tounes party and a former loyalist of Ben Ali, remains in prison following a lawsuit brought by the ISIE concerning accusations she made regarding the lack of transparency in the 2019 elections. In mid-August, three other candidates – Nizar Chaari, Mourad Massoudi, and Adel Dou – were convicted alongside Abdellatif Mekki, President of the Labor and Achievement Party, on charges of vote-buying. Even Zammel, admitted to the race by ISIE, has been placed under preventive detention for the alleged forgery of the signatures required for his candidacy.

The competition for the presidency at the Carthage Palace has also become the stage for the first serious judicial challenge against Kais Saied. The Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE) – whose members are personally appointed by Saied following a decree-law he issued in 2022 – rejected a ruling by the Administrative Court, the body responsible for overseeing the electoral process. The court had ordered the reinstatement of three political figures (former minister Mondher Zenaïdi, Abdellatif Mekki, and Imed Daimi) as candidates for the presidency. ISIE, which had cited irregularities in these candidacies, claimed that it did not receive the necessary documentation from the court in time to comply with the ruling. In late September, in response to this situation, the Tunisian Parliament passed an amendment to the electoral law, which, *inter alia*, removes the Administrative Court's authority over disputes related to candidacies and electoral results, transferring this responsibility to the ordinary judiciary. This institutional conflict has sparked widespread street protests in Tunis.

Meanwhile, **Tunisian security forces arrested more than 80 members of Ennahda**, the Muslim Brotherhood-inspired movement and majority force in the Parliament that Saied forcefully dissolved in 2021. The raid marks the third and greatest purge of the last three years, which also saw the arrest of co-founder and ideologue Rachid Ghannouchi as well as several high-ranking leaders. Saied remarked his refusal to acquiesce to “servile voices” working for the country's enemies.

Saied also turned the screw on his executive, which saw the biggest reshuffle since the president's rise to power. Three undersecretaries and nineteen ministers were sacked, including the holders of Foreign Affairs, Economy, and Defense. Saied had already fired prime minister Ahmed Hachani, who had been in charge less than a year after his predecessor, Najla Bouden, was likewise dismissed. Defense minister Imad Memmich left his post to career diplomat Khaled Shili, while former Secretary of State Mohamed Ali Nafti took up Nabil Ammar's mantle at the ministry of Foreign Affairs. Social Affairs minister Kamel Maddouri became the new prime minister of Tunisia. The reshuffle likely aims to strengthen Saied's popular standing before elections and offer prospects of renewal before the multi-layered crises affecting the country, where cuts to water and electricity have stirred up protests in several provinces. Saied also stated that further changes of the guard may also occur as the electoral race progresses.



Libya

Internal tensions in Libya have reached a new peak. The central issue has been the dismissal of the governor of the Central Bank of Libya (CBL), Sadiq al-Kabir, announced in mid-August by the country's Presidential Council. This body, which functions as the head of state for the rival governments of Tripoli and Sirte, reportedly removed al-Kabir under pressure from the Prime Minister of the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), Abdul Hamid Dbeibah. This decision followed the unilateral approval, in July, of a massive financial budget by the House of Representatives, which acts as the parliament for eastern Libya. The move appears to benefit from the recent rapprochement between al-Kabir and the Sirte-based Government of National Stability (GNS), to the detriment of the financial autonomy of Dbeibah's administration.

The deterioration of relations between Dbeibah and al-Kabir – who has repeatedly accused the Tripoli-based prime minister of mismanagement – coincides with the strengthening of ties between the Central Bank governor and Aguila Saleh, speaker of the House of Representatives and advocate of certain economic reforms. These include the introduction of a 27% exchange rate tax, effectively amounting to a devaluation, a measure to which al-Kabir had been receptive. The alliance between Saleh and al-Kabir – who, since August 2023, presides over a unified Central Bank responsible for distributing oil revenues across the entire country – poses a threat to the financial autonomy of Dbeibah's government. This administration relies on the disbursement of funds and salaries from the Central Bank to sustain its patronage networks and to ensure the payment of militias allied with Tripoli.

After a first attempt to detain him, al-Kabir reportedly fled to Turkey with the access codes to the Bank's financial accounts. In answer, **GNS prime minister Osama Hammad announced an oil and gas embargo** on the eastern fields under control of Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), thus freezing key oil revenues amounting to 60% of Libya's GDP and over 90% of exports. By the end of September and after two rounds of UN-backed consultations, an agreement was reached to jointly appoint the director of the Bank's foreign exchange department, Najib Issa, as the next CBL governor.

A tentative solution coming none too soon, as **the Libyan economy threatens to crumble**. On the backdrop of institutional gridlock, oil exports plummeted to 400,000 barrels per day in September compared to 1,2 million in August. According to the World Food Program, prices rose by 17,8% since January 2024, while the cost of the basic food basket rose by 4,2% in western Libya – with peaks of 9-10% in Zawiya and Zintan – and by 2,5 and 1,3% in Cyrenaica and the Fezzan. The exchange rate spiked as well, mostly driven by the rapid devaluation of the Libyan dinar on parallel markets (up to 8:1 to the US dollar).

As tensions with Tripoli remain high, the GNS strengthens its influence in the Sahel. **Saddam Haftar, son, and heir apparent to LNA chief Khalifa, met in Niamey with the leader of Niger's military junta, Abdourrahmane Tchiani**, for the second time in weeks. According to some sources, Tiani and Saddam are negotiating a strategic project that would involve the supply of fuel and oil to Niger from the Cyrenaican fields under the control of the Libyan National Army (LNA), commanded by the Haftar family. In exchange, Niamey would offer the Haftar family access to the Madama military base, located on Libya's southern borders.



Control of this facility would allow the Haftar family to deepen their influence over the trans-Saharan trafficking routes for humans, weapons, and minerals, which are among the primary sources of revenue for the LNA and serve as a tool for geopolitical leverage against Tripoli. It is no coincidence that, just three days after Saddam's visit, Niamey hosted a counter-delegation from the GNU's military leadership, led by Chief of General Staff Mohamed al-Haddad.

Meanwhile, Rome's quest for influence in Libya suffered a setback when **the GNU ministry of Transport rescinded its contract with an Italian consortium for the reconstruction of the Tripoli international airport.** Aeneas – a joint venture between five relatively small Italian holdings – had secured a 79-million-euro contract in 2017 to rebuild the airport's domestic and international terminals, which had been heavily damaged during armed clashes in the capital, within 18 months. The announcement follows an agreement signed in April between the GNU and two other companies – Turkey's Yapi and UK's ARG International – to invest in Tripoli airport.



Egypt

Always keeping an eye on the crisis between Ethiopia and Somalia in the Horn of Africa, the Egyptian government has brought the issue of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) to the attention of the United Nations Security Council. Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdel Atty sent a letter to the UN body, harshly criticizing the statements of Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, who had publicly expressed satisfaction with the completion of the fifth phase of the GERD's filling, which was once again carried out without any consultation with the countries along the Nile River. This is not the first time Egypt has diplomatically protested Ethiopia's unilateral stance on the management of the Nile's water resources, but this time the tone has been particularly firm.

Abdel Atty emphasized that in 13 years of negotiations, Ethiopia has only sought to legitimize its unilateral decisions, avoiding engaging in constructive dialogue with its counterparts. In the final part of the letter, Egypt's chief diplomat warned about the consequences that Ethiopia's "illegal policies" could have for both Egypt and Sudan, stating that Egypt is ready to take all necessary measures, in accordance with the United Nations Charter, to defend its sovereignty.

Regarding the regional mediations led by Cairo, the meeting between Abdel Atty and his Sudanese counterpart, Hussein Awad, was particularly important. They discussed various initiatives to reach a ceasefire in Sudan. This meeting received explicit support from the United States, with Secretary of State Antony Blinken and Special Envoy for Sudan, Tom Perriello, publicly praising the initiative. Washington hopes that Egyptian mediation can overcome the resistance of Sudan's Sovereign Council, led by General Al-Burhan, and convince them to participate in talks with the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). For now, the regular Sudanese army maintains its stance of not participating in negotiations, but Cairo's initiative has at least helped keep the northern and western borders open for the transit of humanitarian aid, which is crucial given the worsening crisis in the country.

On the economic front, the news for Cairo is more positive. After Prime Minister Madbouly's optimistic statements at the end of August, where he announced that Egypt would resume gas exports by the first half of 2025, the new Finance Minister, Ahmed Kouchouk, has announced the launch of new euro-denominated treasury bonds. The announcement was informally communicated to potential investors during a closed-door meeting in London. Kouchouk stated that the government aims to sell approximately \$3 billion in debt in various tranches by June 2024, using a range of bonds, including Islamic Sukuk bonds, some denominated in dollars, and others in euros. No specific details were given regarding the share of debt to be issued through eurobonds. If confirmed, the eurobond issuance (the first since 2021) would mark a milestone for Egypt, signaling the beginning of its recovery from the monetary crisis that has plagued the country over the past three years. The injection of liquidity into the Egyptian economy, such as the concession of Ras El-Hekma to the United Arab Emirates for the development of local tourism, appears to have had the desired effect, helping to stabilize public finances and making national debt sustainable once again. It remains to be seen how investors will react, but for now, they seem to favor the country's economic fundamentals. According to the latest data, Egypt's dollar bonds maturing in 2047 were traded above 80 cents on the dollar, with a total yield of over 30%, three times the average for emerging economies and the best performance among them.



Israel

Two real game changers turned the situation in Israel upside down at the end of September. And not, as one might have expected, on the front of the war in Gaza, but on the border with Lebanon, where, since October 8, increasingly intense exchanges of fire have occurred between the IDF and Hezbollah, resulting in the displacement of about 70,000 Israelis from their homes and making their return to normalcy one of the new objectives of the war, which has now been ongoing for nearly a year against Hamas and the representatives of the Axis of Resistance.

Within two days, on the 18th and 19th of the month, Hezbollah was hit not with conventional weapons but through simultaneous cyberattacks across Lebanese territory, which caused thousands of pagers and walkie-talkies belonging to militants and officials of the Shiite movement to explode. In the attacks, the Iranian ambassador to Lebanon was also injured, and some civilians lost their lives. The number one accused is, of course, Israel, which remains silent. According to sources, the perpetrator of the attack managed to insert an explosive device into the communication devices of the members of the Party of God, activating it remotely. As reported by Haaretz, “in cyber warfare circles, this type of operation is referred to as the ‘red button’ and is organized in advance to be activated, catching the enemy completely by surprise.”

What happened demonstrated an extremely weak point of the Party of God and was a bitter humiliation. The Lebanese population fell into panic, fearing new and more violent interventions from Tel Aviv. In fact, from Friday onward, numerous bombings occurred between the IDF and Hezbollah. Hundreds of bombs and rockets were launched by both contenders against their respective territories. Residents of Israeli cities near the border were ordered to stay in shelters, and the IDF warned Lebanese civilians residing in buildings or areas used by Hezbollah for military purposes to evacuate immediately for their safety. On Sunday, in an Israeli airstrike in Beirut, Ibrahim Aqil, the head of military operations of the Lebanese Shiite movement, was eliminated, and in subsequent bombings, other high-ranking officer also lost their lives. Israel’s plan was to continuously intensify attacks to eliminate Hezbollah’s potential. Sources described the exchanges of fire as the most violent since those that occurred during the 2006 Lebanon War.

On the evening of Monday, September 23, at the end of a day marked by particularly intense mutual attacks, the Tel Aviv government announced that the country was in a “special situation on the home front.” This means that the IDF has broader powers and can provide specific instructions to the citizenry, prohibit gatherings, limit the opening of schools, and disseminate “additional instructions for the purpose of saving lives.” Meanwhile, Netanyahu clarified to the Lebanese population that the war is against Hezbollah and not against the citizens of the country. The number of displaced Lebanese has now reached thousands, with hundreds entering Syria to escape the bombings. Meanwhile, the USA and France, to avoid further escalation, proposed a ceasefire with Hezbollah to Netanyahu, which the Israeli Prime Minister seemed to accept but then backtracked. Just hours before Netanyahu’s speech at the United Nations General Assembly, in which he reiterated that attacks against the Party of God would continue, a massive bombardment by the Israeli air forces hit Hezbollah’s headquarters in Beirut, causing, among other things, the collapse of six buildings. After hours of uncertainty, on Saturday, September 29, the death of Hassan Nasrallah, the leader of the Shiite movement for thirty years, the mastermind behind numerous terrorist attacks worldwide, was confirmed.



The Party of God has reached its nadir, has been profoundly humiliated, and can only be prey to the greatest confusion. It has not yet been completely eradicated, just as Hamas has not been in Gaza, but it will take time to reorganize. Israel, however, seems determined to resolve the problem of Iranian proxies once and for all and has also violently bombed the Yemeni port of Hodeidah. According to American sources, movements of IDF troops inside Lebanon then began, followed by clashes between the IDF and Hezbollah. While the international community still appeals for diplomatic avenues, there was an Iranian missile attack against targets in Israeli territory. There are increasing fears of an escalation that directly involves Iran in addition to Lebanon.

Gulf Countries

The United States has declared the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as Major Defense Partner. This new role for Abu Dhabi should further improve military cooperation between the two countries, allowing the UAE to access the most modern technologies for its land and air defense. In particular, the discussion on the UAE's acquisition of fifth-generation F-35 fighter jets and MQ-9 Reaper drones could be reopened. Years ago, following the signing of the Abraham Accords, Washington and Abu Dhabi had agreed on the supply of these fighter jets and drones to the UAE for a value of \$23 billion. However, the agreement was suspended due to the growing Chinese influence in the Gulf and the fear that Beijing could gain access to this Western technology. With the current designation, however, it seems that Abu Dhabi may now access advanced platforms, including missile systems such as Terminal High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD), and upgrade the Patriot system. The strengthening of the US-UAE partnership comes at a time of great tension in the Middle East, with conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, and Sudan; these conflicts require a greater degree of regional and international coordination.

On September 18, talks for Israeli-Saudi normalization stalled again. Saudi Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) stated that Riyadh will not recognize the State of Israel without the creation of a Palestinian state. "I reiterate the Kingdom's opposition and firm condemnation of the crimes committed by the Israeli occupying authorities against the Palestinian people. We will continue our commitment to establishing a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital", MbS said. The Saudi prince's statements freeze, for now, the possibility of normalization between Saudi Arabia and Israel, despite US mediation. Following the October 7 attack and the outbreak of war between Israel and Hamas, Riyadh suspended talks for a possible agreement that had seemed close in the preceding weeks and months. The deal would have involved the supply of modern American weapons to the kingdom and the signing of a mutual defense treaty like those in place between Washington and its Asian allies (South Korea and Japan).



Turkiye

On September 4, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi visited Turkiye for the first time in 12 years. Welcomed at Ankara airport by his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, al-Sisi stated that the visit marks a new phase in bilateral economic and trade relations. Erdogan, in turn, emphasized that, with a win-win approach, relations between the two countries will progress on many fronts. During the meeting, 18 Memorandums of Understanding were signed between the two countries in various sectors, such as energy, defense, and financial markets. Relations between the two nations had suffered a significant setback in 2013 when al-Sisi came to power, replacing former President Mohammed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood and an ally of Ankara. In 2020, bilateral relations began to improve in the context of Turkiye's normalization of relations with key Middle Eastern countries, such as Saudi Arabia and the Emirates. The easing of relations with Gulf countries and Egypt coincided with Turkiye's deepening economic and financial crisis. Last year, Ankara and Cairo resumed diplomatic relations, with the Turkish president visiting Egypt for the first time in 2012. During the joint press conference, Erdogan expressed his intention to increase bilateral trade from the current \$5 billion to \$15 billion. Additionally, the Turkish president added that one of Turkiye's priorities is to increase cooperation in the energy sector, particularly regarding natural gas and nuclear energy.

In this regard, Turkiye's effort to diversify energy supplies should be noted. On September 18, the Turkish energy company Botas and the French company Total signed a ten-year contract for the supply of 1.1 million cubic meters of liquefied natural gas per year. Purchases will begin in 2027, aiming to reduce dependency on hydrocarbons (especially natural gas) from Russia and Iran. This agreement is part of a broader framework of energy agreements, given the numerous contracts already signed with Western companies in 2024.

Sahel

The month was marked by the aftermath of the offensive by the Malian Armed Forces (FAMA) and the Wagner Group/Africa Corps in the northern part of the country, mainly targeting the town of Tinzaouaten on the Algerian border. This operation, planned with specific goals and limited scope, had significant international repercussions. The bombings that targeted the area after Wagner's defeat at the end of July led to increased tensions with Algeria, which has long been critical of the Bamako government following the de facto abolition of agreements with northern armed groups.

The Algerian Air Force carried out deterrent actions against the Malian Armed Forces, with an SU-30 fighter jet taking off from Tamanrasset base after a TB2 drone from the Malian Air Force breached Algerian airspace. This incident also had diplomatic fallout, with the Algerian ambassador to the UN Security Council, Amar Bendjama, calling for sanctions against Mali. Bendjama also denounced the presence of Russian operatives at the border between the two countries, accusing them of several incursions.

Despite the pressure from FAMA and the Africa Corps, northern rebels continue to maintain operational capacity and are able to host diplomatic meetings near Tinzaouaten. In this context, a delegation from the Nigerien rebel group Patriotic Liberation Front (FPL) met with representatives of the insurgents from the Permanent Strategic Framework (CSP) to strengthen ties between the two factions. The news was confirmed by the press offices of both groups. During the meeting, they discussed matters of common interest and evaluated the possibility of signing a mutual assistance pact in the near future in case of attacks by the Alliance of Sahel States (Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger). The groups also emphasized the need to organize and defend their territories against what they describe as "ethnic cleansing" carried out by their respective governments.

In the weeks following the meeting, the FPL claimed responsibility for several attacks near Niamey, opening a second front for the military in power in Niger, who are now simultaneously facing the insurgency of the Islamic State and an internal rebellion composed of armed groups (in Niger, the Popular Front for Justice, led by the Tuareg Rhissa Ag Boula, is also active; he recently obtained a humanitarian visa from France).

In this context, the al-Qaeda-affiliated jihadist group JNIM has resumed attacks in Bamako. At dawn on Tuesday, September 17, an armed attack targeted the Malian gendarmerie school in the Faladié district and several structures at Air Base 101 near Modibo-Keita Airport, that house Russian mercenaries from the Africa Corps (formerly Wagner Group). The attack by the al-Qaeda-linked group is further proof of the local branch's ability to strike in the capital and the weaknesses that afflict Mali's transitional government. The estimated toll of the attack is 100 dead and 60 wounded.

On the diplomatic front, the meeting between the Iranian ambassador to Burkina Faso, Mojtaba Faghihi, and the Burkinabé Minister of Economy, Aboubacar Nacanabo, stands out. The bilateral meeting aimed to explore potential areas of cooperation, with Iran expressing its intention to deepen relations in various sectors, from healthcare to security. This meeting is part of Iran's new African policy, launched during Raisi's presidency, which also envisions greater involvement in the Sahel by capitalizing on the tensions between the region's states, the U.S., and European partners. Last summer, rumors circulated about ongoing negotiations between the Iranian regime and Niger's transitional government for the sale of uranium, while Mali has already been the focus of intense diplomatic activity by Tehran, leading to the signing of MoUs in the mining, security, and defense sectors.

Horn of Africa

Regional diplomatic efforts continue to avoid a conflict between Ethiopia and Somalia over the Red Sea dispute. The Djibouti government has proposed to Ethiopia the direct management of the Tadjourah port, located in the north of the country and already used by Addis Ababa for the import of certain raw materials. As stated by Djibouti's Foreign Minister, Mahmoud Ali Youssouf, this proposal also includes control of a recently constructed road corridor. The offer is currently under review by the Ethiopian government, which, however, seems more focused on developments within Somalia.

Meanwhile, Cairo has sent the first two planes loaded with ammunition and heavy weapons as part of the defense agreement signed between Egypt and Somalia on August 14, in response to tensions with Ethiopia. According to local sources, Egypt and Somalia are also negotiating the deployment of an Egyptian military contingent, which could reach up to 10,000 troops. The Somali government has escalated the rhetoric, even suggesting the possibility of supporting Oromo and Amhara rebels against the Ethiopian government. In an interview with the Somali broadcaster Universal TV, Somalia's Foreign Minister Ahmed Moalim Fiqi stated that the country might consider establishing contacts and providing support to Ethiopian rebel groups if Addis Ababa decides to implement the agreement signed with Somaliland. "The option of having contacts with armed rebels in Ethiopia is open for us", Fiqi said, while emphasizing that no such initiative has yet been undertaken by Mogadishu. On the same occasion, Fiqi did not rule out the possibility of establishing contacts with the TPLF, the Tigray party that fought Addis Ababa in 2021. These statements were condemned by Ethiopia, as expressed by Nebiyu Tedla, Ethiopia's Deputy Permanent Representative to the African Union and the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, who wrote on X that such attitudes only lead Somalia towards the abyss.

Amid growing tensions with Somalia, the insurgency in Ethiopia's Amhara region has reached new heights with the FANO rebel group launching an offensive on the city of Gondar. The rebels attacked the towns of Debarq and Dabat, north of Gondar, before moving towards the city itself, where they were repelled only using artillery by the Ethiopian army. The attack resulted in about 100 deaths and 30 injuries, with approximately 40 members of Gondar's police forces reportedly kidnapped by the insurgents, according to FANO's high command, which also denied initiating negotiations with the Ethiopian government, contradicting statements made by Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed a month ago. After withdrawing from the city, the rebels reportedly established a strategic position ten kilometers away from the urban center. This attack marks an escalation, considering that at the start of the revolt in 2023, the armed group had decided to abandon the city, believing they lacked the manpower and resources to hold it at the time. The latest developments could signal increased confidence among the rebels in sustaining a battle in Gondar.

Significant geopolitical movements are also occurring in the context of the Sudan crisis. While negotiations between the RSF militias and the regular army remain stalled, South Sudan is leveraging its oil resources to navigate the turbulence caused by the generals' war. The South Sudanese government has begun negotiations during the recent Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) in Beijing for the construction of a new pipeline that would connect South Sudan to the port of Djibouti, passing through Ethiopia. South Sudanese President Salva Kiir reiterated the need for an alternative pipeline due to the suspension of oil flows caused by the ongoing conflict in Sudan, which has already damaged parts of the energy infrastructure. In this context, the Sudan Sovereign Council is taking action. After a meeting between Kiir and al-Burhan on the sidelines of the FOCAC, South Sudan temporarily suspended fuel sales to Sudan to prevent crude oil from being intercepted by the RSF. Subsequently, al-Burhan and Kiir signed a joint plan in Juba to secure oil infrastructure.

India

September saw several high-profile diplomatic meetings and visits for India. Earlier in the month, Prime Minister Narendra Modi paid official visits to Brunei and Singapore. In Brunei, Modi met the Sultan and other members of the royal family to strengthen existing cooperation between the two countries, including defence, trade and investment, energy, space technology, health cooperation, capacity building, culture and people-to-people exchanges. Defence cooperation remains a cornerstone of the relationship, with regular exchanges, training, and joint exercises.

In Singapore, Modi met political leaders and members of Singapore's vibrant business community. Singapore is India's largest trading partner in ASEAN. It is also the largest source of foreign direct investment (FDI) to India. The two countries have a long history of cooperation in various fields, including technology, with the link between India's UPI and Singapore's PayNow launched in February 2023. Defence cooperation remains strong, with recent activities including the Defence Policy Dialogue in New Delhi in October 2023, the participation of the Indian Air Force's Sarang Helicopter Display Team at the Singapore Air Show 2024, and the 30th SIMBEX naval exercise in Singapore in September 2023.

"Both countries are important partners in our *Act East Policy* and *Indo-Pacific Vision*. I am confident that my visits will further strengthen our partnership with Brunei, Singapore, and the broader ASEAN region", Modi said.

Later this month, Khaled bin Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan paid an official visit to India, where he held bilateral talks with the Prime Minister. The two leaders expressed satisfaction at the substantial progress made in recent years in the India-UAE Comprehensive Strategic Partnership and discussed ways to broaden and deepen the partnership in all areas of bilateral cooperation. They recognised that the success of the *Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (CEPA)* and the recent entry into force of the *Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT)* will provide further impetus to the strong economic and commercial partnership between the two countries. They also emphasised the need to explore new areas, particularly in nuclear energy, critical minerals, green hydrogen, artificial intelligence, and advanced technologies. Several memoranda of understanding/agreements were signed during the visit, laying the groundwork for enhanced cooperation.

In Saudi Arabia, Indian Foreign Minister Jaishankar participated in the India-Gulf Cooperation Council Joint Ministerial Meeting on Strategic Dialogue on 9 September. The meeting resulted in a Joint Action Plan 2024-2028 to undertake joint activities in various fields including health, trade, security, agriculture and food security, transport, energy, and culture. Jaishankar held separate bilateral meetings with his counterparts from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and Bahrain on the sidelines of the India-GCC ministerial meeting.

In late September, Prime Minister Modi's visit to the US to attend the Sixth QUAD Summit hosted by President Joe Biden in Delaware was significant. Modi and Biden were joined by Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese and Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida. Among the goals announced were the launch of a Naval Observer Mission in 2025 to enhance interoperability and maritime security, a pilot project for a logistics network for Quad countries to share airlift capacity to support disaster response in the region, the expansion of maritime surveillance, and a project to combat cervical cancer. In New York, Modi interacted with technology leaders at a panel discussion organised by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) on artificial intelligence and quantum, biotechnology and life sciences, computing and communications, and semiconductor technologies. On the sidelines of the 79th session of the UN General Assembly, Modi participated in the *'Summit for the Future'*. In his speech, he outlined India's vision for creating a sustainable world for future generations and emphasised that he was attending the Summit on behalf of one-sixth of humanity who seek global peace, development, and prosperity.

Modi highlighted India's success in advancing sustainable development initiatives and lifting 250 million people out of poverty in the last decade. Expressing solidarity with the countries of the Global South, he said India was privileged to share its development experience with them. Calling for balanced regulation to promote safe and responsible use of technology, he stressed that India is open to sharing its public digital infrastructure for the greater public good. He also underlined India's commitment to 'One Earth, One Family, One Future' as a guiding principle.

On the domestic front, elections have begun in Kashmir, which will be held in three phases and conclude in early October. These are the first elections after the Modi government's 2019 move to revoke the autonomy of India's only Muslim-majority state. Elections in Kashmir have long been controversial, often boycotted by residents and separatist leaders who see the process as an attempt by Delhi to legitimise its control. But for the first time in decades, separatist leaders are contesting several seats.