



CLOSE-UPS

April 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.

Index

ALGERIA	1
MOROCCO	2
TUNISIA	3
LIBYA	4
EGYPT	5
ISRAEL	7
SAUDI ARABIA	8
QATAR	9
TURKIYE	10
IRAQ	11
SAHEL	12
HORN OF AFRICA	14



Algeria

Algerian diplomacy keeps up its efforts on the Gaza crisis. **Foreign minister Ahmed Attaf discussed the issue with UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres in New York**, on the side lines of a Security Council vote for an Algerian draft resolution that would have granted Palestine full UN membership. Attaf also discussed the proposal – which was vetoed by the US – with the Brazilian and Jordanian foreign ministers, Mauro Vieira and Ayman Safadi. During the extraordinary UN meeting held in New York to address the latest developments in the conflict, **Algeria also announced it will donate 15 million dollars to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)**. By advocating for the Palestinian cause as a non-permanent Security Council member, Algeria can gain political ground in the Middle East against its rival Morocco, which is among the Arab countries that normalised relations with Israel.

Algeria's standing in the Sahel suffers new setbacks. **Attaf expressed Algiers' dissatisfaction with the national reconciliation initiative launched by the Bamako military junta**, arguing the plan would all but exclude Tuareg rebels from the negotiations. Algeria's ties with Mali grew strained at the end of January, when the government of colonel Assimi Goita renounced the Algerian-mediated peace accords of 2015 and spoke against "any foreign interference" in Mali's conflict against the northern Tuareg. Meanwhile, **Niamey's foreign ministry condemned the transfer of migrants from Niger by Algerian police forces**. After overthrowing elected president Mohamed Bazoum last July, Niger's military junta undermined previous agreements by unilaterally reopening its frontiers with Algeria. Moreover, both Mali and Niger joined the Atlantic Initiative put forward by Morocco, who is currently expanding its influence over trade routes in the Sahel to Algeria's detriment.

By contrast, Algeria makes some progress in fostering regional integration. **The Algerian president of the Republic, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, attended the first trilateral consultation with his Libyan and Tunisian counterparts, Mohammed al-Menfi and Kais Saied**. During the meeting, the three heads of State agreed to form joint working groups on agriculture, energy, and regional water management. Tebboune also underscored the need to strengthen regional and border cooperation mechanisms. The Tunis summit is set to be the first of a series of tripartite meetings, held every three months and proposed by Tebboune on the side lines of the Global Gas Exporting Countries Forum, which Algeria hosted between March and April. Algeria's initiative aims to consolidate a North African regional bloc while indirectly countering Morocco's simultaneous overtures in the Sahel.

New developments in the energy sector, where **State-owned company Sonelgaz unveiled the first phase of its 2035, 15.000-megawatt energy plan**. The program aims to diversify a national economy that remains disproportionately dependent on hydrocarbon revenues. Algerian initiatives to this end include the opening of four new solar plants with a cumulative capacity of 650 megawatt as well as the Southern Hydrogen Corridor project in cooperation with Italy and Germany. However, gas keeps playing a crucial role: **Algerian State champion Sonatrach and French company TotalEnergies signed an agreement for the exploration and development of gas resources in the Timimoun basin** in north-eastern Algeria. **TotalEnergies also announced it would extend its supply contract with Sonatrach to 2025**, when the Algerian company should begin to export 2 million tonnes of LNG per year to France.



Morocco

France seeks to bolster its relations with the Alawi kingdom. Across the last month, **Rabat hosted the French ministers of Commerce, Interior and Finance**, while foreign minister Stephane Sejourne welcomed his Moroccan counterpart, Nasser Bourita, in Paris. In the last few weeks, France and Morocco signed a memorandum on agriculture as well as a 134-million-euro agreement on education. **France also greenlit the transfer of 30 2000-9E fighter aircraft from Morocco to the United Arab Emirates.** The deals mirror France's attempt to strengthen ties frayed by colonial legacies as well as by France's parallel outreach to Algeria.

Rabat looks to Europe. **Morocco and Belgium inked a memorandum of understanding on political dialogue, as well as two agreements for cooperation in the fields of energy and justice**, as Belgian prime minister Alexander de Croo met with both king Mohamed VI and prime minister Akhannouch on the sidelines of the Moroccan-Belgian Joint Commission. De Croo also stated Belgium's continued support for the Moroccan autonomy plan on the Western Sahara region and discussed counter-terrorism cooperation with Moroccan minister of the Interior Abdelouafi Laftit. In the same days, **Akhannouch met with Hungarian prime minister Viktor Orbán**, who was attending the Centrist Democrat International convention in Marrakesh: the meeting focused on migration and border security.

Finally, Morocco strengthens its armed forces. According to the US Department of Defense, **Lockheed Martin signed a 33-million-dollar agreement to upgrade and maintain Moroccan F-16s.** The kingdom acquired 25 F-16 Lockheed aircraft in 2021 for 3,8 billion dollars. In November 2023, Morocco also acquired the Viper Shield electronic system from L3 Harris to enhance their performance. In the past few weeks, moreover, the Department approved the potential 260-million-dollar sale of 612 Javelin FGM 148-F and 200 Javelin Lightweight units. Despite the Gaza crisis, the kingdom also pursues military cooperation with Israel, as **BlueBird CEO Ronen Nadir announced the launch of a drone production factory in Morocco.** The Israeli company, which is 50% owned by Israel Aerospace Industries, specializes in producing UAV systems and has already sold Morocco batches of ThunderB, WanderB and SpyX drones. According to Nadir, the facility is already completed and will become operational "in the near future".



Tunisia

Italy strengthened its ties to Tunisia as **the Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni met with the Tunisian president of the Republic, Kais Saied**. Held in Tunis, the meeting focused on reinforcing bilateral cooperation to contain the uptick in migration registered early this month from the Tunisian shores. **Meloni and Saied signed three agreements** on green energy, research, and the opening of a credit line to support Tunisian SMEs. Meloni was accompanied by minister of the Interior Matteo Piantedosi, who met with his Tunisian counterpart Kamel Feki to discuss border security and cooperation. Meloni's visit – which marked her fourth meeting with Saied across the year – was closely followed by minister of Defense Guido Crosetto's, who co-presided the 25th meeting of the Joint Military Commission in Tunis alongside his Tunisian counterpart Imed Memmich. The two discussed industrial cooperation in the aircraft and helicopter sector, shipbuilding, and defense systems. To this end, **the two ministers inked an agreement to enhance coordination between the Italian and Tunisian armed forces**.

Meanwhile, Tunisia pursues military cooperation with the Atlantic Alliance. **The president of the NATO Military Committee, admiral Rob Bauer, discussed defense cooperation with Defense and Foreign ministers Imed Memmich and Nabil Ammar**. Meanwhile, **African Lions kicked off in Tunisia** as the military exercise, organized by the US Command of Africa (AFRICOM) and headquartered in Morocco, celebrated its twentieth anniversary. The exercise will last until May 21st and will involve over 10.000 participants from 20 countries gathering in Morocco, Tunisia, Ghana, and Senegal. Tunisia joins in for the fourth consecutive year.



Libya

UN-brokered negotiations among the main Libyan actors suffered a new setback with the **resignation of UN Special Representative Abdoulaye Bathily**. The Senegalese diplomat, who had taken over the post from Jan Kubis in 2022, relinquished further attempts to reach a compromise between the rival entities of Tripoli and Benghazi-Tobruk to hold free elections. During his last briefing to the UN Security Council, Bathily denounced the “stubborn resistance, unreasonable expectations, and indifference to the interests of the Libyan people” displayed by the Libyan parties. Bathily will be succeeded by Stephanie Khoury, who had been named Deputy Special Representative for Political Affairs just last March.

Meanwhile, **Russia entrenches itself in eastern Libya**. According to Libyan sources, Russian troops took control of the Brak-al-Shabti military base, previously garrisoned by the now-disbanded Wagner Group. The new force is part of the newly created “Africa Corps”, answering directly to the Russian ministry of Defense. The former Wagner mercenaries have reportedly been transferred to Russian bases in the Sahel as the first Russian troops enter Niger. Another changing of the guard occurred in Al-Jufrah, which hosts a key Russian base in central Libya. In the same days, observers reported the arrival in Tobruk of five loads of Russian military equipment. Earlier this month, moreover, a Russian warship from the Syrian base of Tartus lay anchor in Tobruk. Russia’s military support of the eastern-based Government of National Stability (GNS) is mirrored by the **Kremlin’s overtures to House of Representatives speaker Aguila Saleh, who received an official invitation to Moscow**. Saleh, who chairs the Tobruk-based Parliament, was invited by the federal Duma, who had already welcomed him in 2017 and 2020.

Italy steps up its cooperation with Libya, as the Musaid-Ras Jedir highway project clears its preparatory phase. According to the Authority overseeing the project, its overall cost has diminished by 30 million to the threshold of 357 million euro. The project, already enshrined in the 2008 Italy-Libya treaty, aims to link the Ras Jedir trade route on the Libyan-Tunisian border with Musaid at the frontiers of Egypt. Meanwhile, **Italian company Danieli inked a deal with the Libyan Iron and Steel Company to produce two million tonnes of iron through a new reduction plant**. The facility will be 51% owned by Danieli and will serve both the domestic Libyan market and foreign importers, especially the industrial heartland of northern Italy.

Worrying news for the country’s precarious stability, meanwhile, as the **Kufra refugee crisis worsens**. GNS prime minister Osama Hammad visited the border town in south-eastern Cyrenaica, which faces a massive influx of migrants fleeing civil strife in Sudan. According to the latest estimates, the refugees may now number fifty thousand, many of whom suffer from serious health issues. **Tensions also persist at the Ras Jedir border crossing** between Tunisia and GNU-controlled western Libya, where Berber militias from the nearby town of Zuwara are protesting Tripoli’s attempts to bring trade flows under government control.

Finally, **the Libyan National Oil Corporation announced the discovery of a large gas deposit in Al-Lahib**, near the Gulf of Sirte, which could reportedly produce up to 470.000 cubic feet of gas and 626 oil barrels per day. The discovery might prove a useful boon to CEO Farhat Bengdara, who took the helm at NOC following troubled negotiations between Tripoli and Benghazi’s rival governments. Libya sits upon the greatest hydrocarbon reserves in Africa and is strategically positioned for access to European markets but has suffered from dwindling exports due to persisting instability and deteriorating infrastructure. Bengdara, who seeks to attract foreign investment back to the sector and recently championed a controversial gas deal with Emirati company ADNOC, is also advantaged by **the firing of Oil minister Mohamed Aoun**, who is currently being investigated for corruption and ranked as a key opposer of Bengdara. Aoun is succeeded by his former deputy Khalifa Abdul Sadiq, who is expected to unfreeze key projects and streamline ties between NOC and the ministry.



Egypt

Egyptian diplomacy pushes for a truce in Gaza. Throughout the month, Cairo hosted talks between Hamas and Israel but despite their efforts, mediators were unable to break the standoff between the parties, which remained entrenched in their positions. The latest rounds of negotiations were overshadowed by the potential Israeli offensive on Rafah and they have seen protesters criticizing the Egyptian government considered too soft towards Israel, resulting in several dozen arrests. Meanwhile, Egypt continued to bolster its humanitarian efforts and infrastructures by establishing new housing for refugees fleeing the Strip.

This month, Cairo found a strong partner in France, with Paris' top officials concerned with containing the effects of the war in Gaza. Following a meeting in Cairo among the foreign ministers of Egypt, Jordan, and France, Egyptian and French Foreign Ministries issued a joint statement calling for an immediate ceasefire and the release of all the Israeli hostages held by Hamas. French Foreign Minister, Stéphane Séjourné also announced Paris' intention to propose a new resolution at the Security Council to resolve the conflict.

The Iranian attack on Israel on April 12 further complicated Egyptian diplomatic efforts. Tehran's raid had an ambivalent effect on Cairo's geopolitical stance. On the one hand, it confirmed Egypt's pivotal role in regional balances, as demonstrated by Cairo's diplomatic efforts to prevent an escalation between Israel and Iran. In the hours following the assault, the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs received a flurry of calls. Sameh Shoukry, Egypt's Foreign Minister, immediately reached out to his Israeli counterpart, Israel Katz, and shortly after, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. Finally, Shoukry engaged with Iranian Foreign Minister Amir-Abdollahian, who defended Iran's right to respond to Israeli attacks. On the other, the Iranian attack also highlighted Cairo's vulnerability to regional instability. Egypt had to suspend flights for about 12 hours, and authorities raised the national alert level to its maximum level. Towards the end of the month, Cairo authorities prepared for an imminent ground offensive on Rafah. Al-Sisi emphasized the risks of renewed Israeli aggression in the Strip after meeting with Bahrain's Emir Hamad bin Isa. This message was reiterated by Shoukry during talks with Turkish counterpart Fidan in Cairo. Both countries reaffirmed their commitment to achieving a ceasefire and delivering humanitarian aid to Gaza and in a joint statement, they have asked the reopening of six border crossings between Gaza and Egypt for humanitarian aid delivery.

Concerning the economy, following the signing of the partnership agreement with the EU in March, Cairo also received support from the International Monetary Fund, which formally approved Egypt's new economic rescue plan. The agreement led to the disbursement of the first tranche of \$820 million. The IMF's approval highlighted the impact of recent geopolitical crises on Egypt's economy, prompting urgent measures to safeguard Cairo's finances and increase aid. Meanwhile, the possibility of a new emergency gas supply program for the coming summer season is becoming increasingly likely. This scenario presents considerable challenges due to Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, complicating gas imports from Gulf countries. There are also new challenges for wheat imports from Russia. Two Egyptian ships were detained in Russia with their cargo for about two weeks due to disagreements between Moscow's Ministry of Agriculture and wheat sellers, who complained about low selling prices and delayed payments since the start of the Ukraine war. The ships were released only after Egyptian government intervention. This is not the first time that disputes between the Russian government and wheat sellers have disrupted supplies to Egypt, prompting Cairo to consider turning to other sellers (primarily India). However, rebalancing Egypt's supply chain is becoming more complex due to current international conditions and Red Sea instability.



Relations between Egypt and Italy continue to strengthen. Following Prime Minister Meloni's visit leading the EU delegation last month, Minister of Enterprises Adolfo Urso visited Egypt for high-level meetings. Urso met with Minister of Communications Amr Talaat, Minister of Trade Ahmed Samir, and Minister of Petroleum Tarek el Molla to discuss new collaboration opportunities between Italian and Egyptian companies in these sectors. Urso also attended a renewable energy initiative where he met with Egypt's Minister of Electricity, Mohamed Shaker. A memorandum of understanding was signed between the Italian Space Agency and the Egyptian Space Agency for cooperation in the digital sector and its development.



Israel

A month of high tensions for Israel, amid stormy relations with the United States and the Iranian attack. For the first time, Iran launched a massive assault from its territory against the Jewish state, in retaliation for the killing, which occurred on April 1st in Damascus, of two Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders, following the bombing of an embassy building in Tehran. During the night between April 13th and 14th, Iran launched over 300 drones and missiles towards Israel, 99% of which were intercepted and destroyed. The United States, United Kingdom, France, and Jordan intervened in defense of the Jewish state. Saudi Arabia, which has no official relations with Israel, and the United Arab Emirates, signatories of the Abraham Accords, provided Tel Aviv with intelligence information on the attack. The strike raised significant concerns in the international community for a potential regional escalation. The United States, critical of its historic ally for months now, congratulated Prime Minister Netanyahu on the "victory," but added that they would not support Israel in the event of a retaliation against Iran. Despite a long period of stern reproaches from Washington towards the Jewish state, the attack on its territory seems to have underscored the danger of the Iranian threat and strengthened the Middle East Air Defense (MEAD), which includes the United States, Israel, and allied Arab countries.

Tel Aviv's retaliation against Tehran was swift, with three missiles launched on April 19th against an Iranian air defense system protecting the Natanz nuclear complex. The attack caused no significant damage and appears to have halted, at least for now, the escalation between the two parties and a dangerous widening of the conflict in the region. Israel's response was deemed "proportionate" by its allies, who expressed "moderate optimism." On April 20th, the day after Israel's counterattack, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a \$17 billion aid package for Israel's defense. Washington has obviously no intention of withdrawing its military support from its ally, particularly in the face of the Iranian threat. However, this decision did not change the U.S. position regarding Israel's actions in Gaza. On the 1st of the month, the killing of seven humanitarian workers by seven Israeli drones, shocked the international community. Israel expressed deep regret for the incident, but the United States reacted strongly. On April 4th, a particularly tense phone call took place between President Biden and Prime Minister Netanyahu. Biden deemed the killing of innocent people unacceptable and declared that U.S. policy towards Israel will depend on efforts to increase aid flow into Gaza and ensure the safety of civilians and humanitarian workers. Washington also continues to strongly oppose the repeatedly announced military operation in Rafah. In two web meetings, described by the press as "particularly difficult," senior officials from both countries, including U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, Israeli Minister for Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer and National Security Advisor Tzachi Hanegbi, held opposing views on the operation; positions that remained unchanged throughout the month.

Meanwhile, negotiations for the release of hostages still held in the Gaza Strip and for the ceasefire continue. Blinken, traveling in the Middle East, advised Hamas to accept Israel's "extraordinarily generous" offer. The Palestinian Islamist movement stated that it is "studying" the proposal. According to several sources, the definition of an agreement appears possible.



Saudi Arabia

In April, Saudi officials have been closely monitoring tensions between Israel and Iran. On, April 2nd, Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan condemned the attack on an Iranian consulate building in Damascus. A statement from the Riyadh Foreign Ministry read: "The Foreign Ministry expresses Saudi condemnation of the attack on the Iranian consulate in the Syrian capital, Damascus. The ministry expresses firm rejection of attacks on diplomatic facilities, a violation of international diplomatic law and diplomatic immunity rules." **Following the Iranian attack on Israel on April 13th, intense discussions took place between senior Saudi officials and their respective regional and international counterparts.** US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin III had a phone conversation with Saudi Defense Minister Khalid bin Salman to discuss the attack. Austin indicated that while Washington does not see escalation as likely, it will continue to defend American and Israeli interests in the area and rely on synergy with Saudi Arabia. On April 16th, it was reported that the Saudi army's anti-aircraft defense had participated in the downing of Iranian drones alongside American, Jordanian, British, and French batteries. However, the next day, the news was denied, citing Saudi sources stating that "there is no official information confirming the kingdom's participation in intercepting Iranian drones or missiles." According to reports in the American press, however, some Arab countries, including Saudi Arabia and the UAE, had provided intelligence assistance to the United States and Israel in the days leading up to the Tehran attack. Specifically, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi reportedly shared information with Tel Aviv to prevent the attack, as confirmed by American, Saudi, and Egyptian officials. Thanks to this support, Israel and its Western allies were able to intercept 99% of drones and missiles from Iran. While Riyadh and the Gulf monarchies provided support to Washington and Tel Aviv in countering the Iranian attack, they took a more cautious approach than other regional actors—such as Jordan—due to fears of retaliation from Tehran or its allies.

Relations between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan are strengthening. On April 7th, Shehbaz Sharif, the Prime Minister of Pakistan, visited Saudi Arabia, where he held talks with Saudi Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman. On the sidelines of the meeting, MbS stated that the purpose of the meeting was to work together to ease tensions between Pakistan and India, a historical regional adversary of Islamabad. Riyadh had previously attempted to play the role of mediator between the parties. It is also noted that Pakistan and India may resume trade relations, as indicated by recent statements from Islamabad's finance minister; a way to address the difficult economic and financial situation facing the Pakistani economy. In this regard, on Tuesday, April 16th, the Saudi Foreign Minister visited Pakistan, where he met with Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif and President Asif Ali Zardari. Bin Farhan was accompanied by a large delegation of businessmen from the water, agriculture, energy, and mining sectors. Riyadh confirmed its commitment to invest \$5 billion in the Pakistani economy; last year, the Saudi kingdom deposited \$2 billion with the central bank of Islamabad to support the country's meager foreign currency reserves.



Qatar

Tensions are observed in the relations between Qatar and the state of Israel. On Monday, April 1st, the parliament of Tel Aviv approved a law granting temporary powers to the government to suspend the activity of foreign networks in Israel. The so-called "Al-Jazeera law" was passed by the Knesset with 71 favorable votes and provides for the suspension of channels that pose a threat to national security for a period (renewable) of 45 days; shortly after the approval, Israeli Communications Minister Shlomo Karhi declared that Al-Jazeera in Israel would be closed in the coming days. "There will be no freedom of expression for Hamas spokespeople in this country," he added. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu also supported the minister's position. This is not the first time the prime minister of the Jewish state has threatened to close the Qatari network. Already in 2017, Netanyahu attempted to stop Al-Jazeera's activities in Jerusalem for reasons of national security. The Israeli move was described as "worrying" by White House spokesperson Karine Jean-Pierre, who stated that Washington supports the work of the press worldwide, including those reporting on events in the ongoing war in Gaza.

At the same time, **Qatar's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani stated that the emirate is reviewing its role as a mediator between the state of Israel and Hamas;** according to Al Thani, the motivation lies in the abuse of Qatar's mediator role by the parties involved in the negotiations. "There are limits to the results we can achieve," **the prime minister indicated during a meeting in Doha with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan.** On that occasion, the two discussed bilateral relations, tensions between Israel and Iran, and the war in Gaza. In this regard, according to reports from Turkish media, Fidan's visit aimed to keep the attention of regional powers on the war between Israel and Hamas. On the same day, **Fidan met with Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh.** The latter discussed with the Turkish minister the situation in the Strip, emphasizing the need to increase the amount of humanitarian aid distributed to civilians. Fidan, for his part, indicated to Haniyeh the need to achieve a ceasefire.



Turkiye

On Sunday, March 31, local elections were held in Türkiye, resulting in the defeat of Erdogan's AKP. With a voter turnout of 78.7%, the main opposition party, the CHP, secured 37.77% of the votes, particularly in the cities of Istanbul and Ankara, strongholds of the opposition since 2019, when Ekrem İmamoğlu was elected mayor of Istanbul. The president's party, on the other hand, garnered 35.49% of the vote, mainly concentrated in central Anatolia, marking one of the lowest results in its political history. The Islamist YRP party and the progressive and pro-Kurdish HEDEP (formerly HDP) party also performed well, receiving 6.19% and 5.70% of the votes, respectively, in the eastern provinces of the country, mostly Kurdish-majority areas affected by the devastating earthquake of February 6 last year. Interestingly, following the earthquake, Kurdish voters had favored the AKP in the political elections, allowing Erdogan to remain in power. Finally, the government ally MHP (formerly Gray Wolves) secured 4.99% of the vote, while the leader of the opposition party İYİ, Meral Akşener, received 3.77%. Despite differences within the opposition between İYİ, which proposes İmamoğlu's candidacy for the presidency, and the CHP, which does not share this choice, the latter confirms itself as a new political force at the expense of the AKP. After the elections, Erdogan commented on the result by stating that his party is ready to acknowledge its responsibilities and reiterated its cooperation with the newly elected mayors; the president then described the surge in support for the CHP as "a turning point" for the AKP, which will have to try to reconnect with its electorate.

On the diplomatic front, Ankara urges Iran and Israel to avoid an escalation of violence in the region. The appeal from the Turkish presidency comes after the attack on Saturday, April 13, by Iranian armed forces against Israel, which has raised concerns among regional and global powers. Türkiye has called on all parties to exercise restraint and has emphasized the concrete risk of increased tensions in the region. Immediately after the attack, Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan had a telephone conversation with his Iranian counterpart Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. The government reiterated that Türkiye absolutely wants to avoid a new escalation. For his part, Amir-Abdollahian told the Turkish minister that the Iranian initiative was part of a "righteous response operation" to Israel following the bombing of the Iranian diplomatic building in Damascus. According to Turkish diplomatic sources, CIA chief William Burns asked his Turkish counterpart, Ibrahim Kalın, to mediate with Tehran. In parallel, **Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh in Istanbul.** It was the first official meeting between Erdogan and Hamas leaders since the attack on Israel on October 7 and followed the visit of Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan to Doha, where he met Haniyeh himself. On the sidelines of the approximately three-hour meeting, Erdogan stated that the unity of the Palestinian people is crucial and is the strongest response that can be given to Israel in the context of the war in Gaza. Also central to the visit was the need to increase humanitarian aid to Gaza.



Iraq

The month of April was characterized by the week-long visit of an Iraqi delegation to Washington, attended by Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia Al-Sudani, Deputy Prime Minister Mohammed Ali Tamim, as well as the Ministers of Oil, Finance, Trade, and Electricity, along with the Central Bank President. This was the Iraqi Prime Minister's first visit to the United States since taking office in 2020. His first meeting was with President Joe Biden. The two leaders discussed expanding the collaboration between Iraq and the U.S. beyond the existing military alliance and emphasized the significance of dialogue during such a critical time for the region. Al-Sudani noted that the fight against ISIS has been crucial in strengthening the partnership between the two countries, despite Baghdad's recent request to withdraw from the international coalition against Daesh. The leaders discussed ways to revive economic and energy cooperation, specifically focusing on Iraq's efforts towards energy independence, resuming oil exports to Turkey, and developing the Development Road project with Gulf countries. The Iraqi Prime Minister also met with U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken. During their discussion, Al-Sudani reiterated that the strategic agreement with Washington serves as a roadmap for the future of relations between the two countries. Finally, the Prime Minister met with U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, who announced the launch of the Higher Coordination Committee (HCC), an Iraqi-American partnership to assess Iraq's military readiness and the risks posed by ISIS in the region. Blinken also met with the Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister. He emphasized that the U.S. do not seek escalation in the Middle East and urged Iraq not to fuel hostilities with Tehran. However, Blinken also reaffirmed Washington's commitment to ensuring the security of its personnel in the region and its support for Israel's defense.

In this context, the Iraqi Ministry of Defense announced an agreement with the United States to purchase 41 combat aircraft. According to a statement from the ministry, payment for the jets will be made through a 'flexible plan' over the coming years. Following the agreement, an Iraqi delegation visited General Dynamics, one of the leading U.S. companies in military hardware production. Despite ongoing tensions, particularly related to the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq, Prime Minister Al-Sudani's visit appears to signal Baghdad's intention to embark on a new phase of relations with Washington, covering sectors beyond security.

Sahel

With the world's eyes turned to Gaza and the war in Ukraine, **April witnessed significant developments in the Sahel region on the military front.** US authorities have informally announced their intention to withdraw from Niger. This announcement follows weeks of intense negotiations between the transitional government in Niamey and American top officials. The United States has clarified that withdrawing its contingent will not result in the cessation of diplomatic relations or economic cooperation with Niger. Initial reports of the American withdrawal from Niger coincided with the arrival of Russian soldiers in the country. Russian operators were filmed by the national television (RTN) on the tarmac of Diori Hamani Airport, stating, "We are here to train the Nigerien army and establish military cooperation between Russia and Niger." While the nature of this cooperation remains unclear, the uniforms and equipment worn by Russian personnel suggest the presence of regular army troops rather than members of the Africa Corps (heirs to the Wagner Group). The Tchiani-led junta justified the US departure and the arrival of Russian personnel based on inadequate intelligence cooperation between the armies of both countries.

Despite the withdrawal of American troops, **Italian institutions have managed to maintain dialogue with Niger's new leadership,** as demonstrated by the visit of AISE Director, General Giovanni Caravelli, leading a high-level delegation received by Tchiani in person. During the summit, Tchiani commended the training activities conducted by the Italian contingent in the country. It is worth noting that following the withdrawal of American troops, Italy and Germany are the only Western countries to maintain a military presence in the Sahelian nation. Lastly, there was a meeting between Prime Minister Lamine Zeine and a delegation from the Chinese oil company CNPC, in the presence of Beijing's ambassador to Niger, Chiang Feng. During the meeting, the parties signed a \$400 million MoU, details of which were not provided by the Nigerien government. According to local sources, the new agreement is part of the junta's efforts to secure new liquidity to cope with the pressure on Niger's finances resulting from the suspension of humanitarian cooperation.

As Niger adjusts its international posture, Burkina Faso is rearming to confront internal insurgency. The Ouagadougou government signed an agreement with the Turkish company Baykar Defense for military supplies worth 124 billion CFA francs. This agreement is part of a new procurement scheme aimed at reducing corruption and increasing economic savings. In the context of this agreement, President Ibrahim Traoré personally announced the delivery of 12 new Turkish drones, TB2 and Akinci models. These new agreements have made Turkey the second-largest arms supplier to Burkina Faso after Russia. However, despite government claims, the situation on the ground continues to reflect the incapacity of Burkinabé security forces to address the insurgency effectively. In April, relations worsened with the government of Côte d'Ivoire following another incursion by Burkinabé troops across the border. The action culminated in 15 hours of gunfire involving Ivorian military helicopters. There is a growing concern that the Burkinabé government might not only succumb to insurgent advances but that the country as a whole can become a destabilizing element for neighboring countries increasing pressure on the West African coast. Lastly, the Burkinabé government expelled three French accused of "subversive activities.". This latest anti-French move is aimed at rallying internal support amid a growing food crisis.

The government of Mali has tightened control against internal dissent. Pressured by energy and security crises, the transitional executive has indefinitely suspended all political party activities and imposed a ban on local media covering political initiatives. This marks a further step towards establishing a totalitarian government, as implicitly reaffirmed by Prime Minister Choguel Maïga's statements nullifying transition timelines agreed upon with ECOWAS. This move exacerbates the rift between the executive and civil society, exemplified by influential Imam Mahmoud Dicko's statements, who, following the "suspension" of political parties, vowed absolute disobedience to the government's orders and described junta members as "young people seduced by power." Towards the end of the month, relations between Mali and Mauritania became more strained following yet another accusation of Russian mercenaries crossing into Mauritanian territory and allegations of harassment by some citizens. Despite visits by Malian foreign and defense ministers (Diop and Camara), received by President Ghazouani, at the end of the month, the Malian ambassador to Mauritania was summoned by Nouakchott's Ministry of Foreign Affairs to reaffirm the government's firmness regarding the actions of Malian security forces and their allies.

Horn of Africa

The agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland for access to the port of Berbera remains the most destabilizing issue for regional geopolitics. Relations between Addis Ababa and Mogadishu have reached a new critical point this month with the expulsion of the Ethiopian ambassador to Somalia, Muktar Mohamed Ware, and the closure of Ethiopian consulates in the Puntland and Somaliland regions. The statement from the Somali presidency announcing these measures leaves no room for ambiguity: "The decision was made following actions by the Federal Republic of Ethiopia that violate Somalia's territorial sovereignty," the document reads. The closure of consular missions is significant as it is part of tensions between the Somali federal government and regional governments in Puntland and Somaliland. The Puntland government has announced its self-suspension from the Somali federation to protest constitutional reforms proposed by Hassan Sheikh Mohamud earlier this month, which, according to the Garowe government, would concentrate too much power in the hands of the president. Amidst the new tensions, Somali President Hassan Sheikh flew to Saudi Arabia where he met with Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman to strengthen ties with Riyadh, while the Somaliland government sent a high-level delegation to the United Arab Emirates. In this context, a new Kenyan mediation attempt has also ended without success. Nairobi authorities had announced an agreement with the Somali government regarding the dispute through IGAD negotiations, which was promptly rejected by the Mogadishu executive reiterating its red line: no Ethiopian military base in Somaliland; only bilateral agreements to facilitate Addis Ababa's access to the Red Sea for commercial purposes would be conceded. At the end of the month, the G7 foreign ministers also expressed concern over the dispute at the Capri summit. Support for Somali territorial integrity and encouragement for dialogue are the key concepts reiterated by the heads of diplomacies of the G7 countries.

Meanwhile, emboldened by recent victories, **Sudan's Sovereign Council cracks down on internal dissent.** The judiciary is investigating former civilian Prime Minister Abdullah Hamdok and 15 Tagadum coalition leaders on charges of incitement to war, undermining constitutional order, and crimes against humanity, all crimes punishable by death. The intention to punish the meeting between the former prime minister and RSF commander "Hemedti" in early January, which helped internationalize the leader of the paramilitaries, is clear. Additionally, loyalists have banned Sky News Arabia, Al Arabiya, and Al Hadat broadcasters due to their "lack of transparency and professionalism." **As the belligerents grew more distant, the Sudan Donors Conference was held in Paris.** Organized by the governments of France and Germany along with the European Union, the summit aimed to raise funds to address the humanitarian crisis in the country and keep international attention on the ongoing conflict in Sudan. Financially, the forum achieved its goal by raising €2.1 billion, but diplomatically, Paris aimed for more significant outcomes. Indeed, the French summit highlighted France's leadership in European diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis and direct engagement with key international actors. In this context, French President Macron personally appealed to external actors to refrain from funding the war between SAF and RSF. A week after the summit, President Macron spoke with UAE leader Mohamed Bin Zayed to discuss the conflict. Following the call, both parties issued an appeal for a ceasefire and achieving peace that meets the expectations of the Sudanese people. It is not unlikely that this diplomatic tandem will launch new initiatives to resolve the war in the coming months. At the Paris conference, the UAE pledged €100 million to address the humanitarian crisis in the country.

Public finance and internal tensions are the key issues of Ethiopia's politics this month, with mixed results in both areas. The Paris Club renewed the suspension of Ethiopia's public debt payments, staving off a worsening financial crisis for the time being. However, group representatives tied payment suspension to an agreement (to be reached by the end of June) with the International Monetary Fund, whose experts conducted their first mission in Ethiopia. Internal IMF sources confirm disagreements between the institution and the Ethiopian government, especially regarding the devaluation of the *birr*, an essential step according to the Fund for implementing an aid program. Meanwhile, the Ethiopian stock exchange completed its planned capital increase, raising \$11 million. Relations with the Oromo worsened after the killing of Oromo Liberation Front Leader Bate Urgessa. Urgessa's disappearance prompted a formal request from the US Senate for a credible and impartial investigation into the incident. The OLF accuses the Ethiopian government of the political leader's assassination. For now, Addis Ababa authorities have arrested 13 individuals, including Urgessa's brother and sister. Amidst these escalating tensions, the Ethiopia Donors Conference was held in Geneva, sponsored by the British government and the United Nations, to raise funds to address the humanitarian and climate crisis in the country. The conference raised \$600 million mainly due to donations from the USA and EU, and the British government hopes to involve other donors soon.