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# CLOSE-UPS

February 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

Algerian diplomacy focuses on Gaza. **The UN Security Council gathered in New York to discuss a proposal for an “immediate ceasefire”, which Algeria put forward in January as the current Arab member of the body.** As anticipated by the United States’ deputy ambassador to the UN, Robert Wood, **Washington vetoed the proposal** as inadequate, announcing it would submit its own resolution proposal for a “temporary ceasefire” in the Gaza Strip. On the backdrop of the meeting, **Algerian foreign minister Ahmed Attaf spoke by phone with both the US secretary of State, Antony Blinken and the Iranian foreign minister, Hossein Amir Abdollahian:** the latter took the occasion to congratulate Algeria on its support for the Palestinian cause.

The Gaza crisis does not prevent Algeria from strengthening its energy ties to Europe. **Algeria’s flagship hydrocarbon company, Sonatrach, inked a deal with VNG to supply Algerian gas to Germany “for the medium term”:** further details have not yet been released. The agreement is the first of its kind between the two countries and follows a **meeting in Algiers between the German deputy chancellor Robert Halbeck and the Algerian Energy minister, Mohamed Arkab. The two also signed a declaration of intent concerning the development, production and supply of green hydrogen,** which envisages the creation of an Algerian-German task force. Algeria and Germany are both involved in the Southern Hydrogen Corridor project, which aims to connect the two countries via Italy. **Sonatrach also signed an agreement with the British group Grain LNG for a ten-year supply of liquefied natural gas to the United Kingdom.** The deal builds upon a pre-existing supply agreement capped at 3 million tons per year.

Meanwhile, Algeria seeks Saudi military cooperation. **The Algerian Chief of Staff, general Said Chengriha, visited the 2024 World Defense Show in Riyadh, where he met his Saudi counterpart, Fayad bin Hamed Al-Ruwaili.** The meeting underscores a growing Algerian interest in diversifying procurers away from Russia, which has so far supplied about 75% of Algerian military imports. Over a week in the Saudi capital, **Chengriha also met with representatives from Saudi Arabian Military Industries (SAMI) to discuss potential acquisitions in the field of cybersecurity, communications and electronics.** In November Chengriha had paid an analogous visit to China, where he had met with high-ranking representatives of the Chinese military industry.

Algeria’s regional outlook is marked by a heated competition against Morocco for control of the Mauritanian trade routes. At Tindouf, in south-western Algeria, **Algerian president Abdelmadjid Tebboune celebrated alongside his Mauritanian counterpart, Mohamed Ould Cheikh El Ghazouani, the renewal and launch of several joint initiatives for border cooperation.** The latter include an 800-kilometers highway between Tindouf and the Mauritanian town of Zouerat and the creation of a new free-trade area between Tindouf and the Mauritanian border. Such undertakings mirror Mauritania’s strategic value as a trade nexus between the Maghreb and West Africa. However, Tebboune’s overtures to Ghazouani also aim to deter Mauritania from adhering to Morocco’s Atlantic Initiative for the creation of a trade corridor between the countries of the Sahel and Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara.



## Morocco

A year after their last High-level meeting, Morocco and Spain seek once again to upgrade bilateral cooperation. **Spanish president Pedro Sanchez paid an official visit to king Mohamed VI alongside his foreign minister, José Manuel Albares.** The visit follows a recent flurry of activity between Spain and the Alawi kingdom: Sanchez had met Moroccan PM Aziz Akhannouch in Rabat last December, while in January the Spanish minister of the Interior, Ferdinando Grande-Marlaska, had flown there to meet with his counterpart Abdelouafi Laftit. Sanchez's last visit to the Moroccan capital dates back to February 2023, less than a year after Madrid had abruptly recognized Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed Western Sahara. This change of track had come to the detriment of Spain's traditional ties to Algeria, which Albares was supposed to visit this month in an attempt to normalize the now-frayed relations. The visit, however, was cancelled at the last minute, sparking renewed tensions with Spain's erstwhile ally.

France also seeks to strengthen its frayed ties with Morocco. **The newly appointed French foreign minister, Stéphane Sejourné, met prime minister Aziz Akhannouch in Rabat alongside his Moroccan counterpart, Nasser Bourita.** Sejourné, who stated that he had been personally tasked by French president Emmanuel Macron to take charge of the Morocco dossier, expressed France's "firm and constant support" for the Moroccan Autonomy Plan concerning the West Sahara, although he did not explicitly endorse it over the claims of Algeria and the Polisario Front, who have repeatedly clashed with Morocco for control of the region. **Sejourné also expressed French interest for a thirty-years' partnership with the Alawi kingdom and announced further visits by, among others, the French ministers of Culture and Finance.**

In the wake of Mauritanian president Ghazouani's visit to Algeria, **Morocco has reportedly resumed works on a road connecting the West Saharan town of Amgala to Mauritania.** Effectively frozen for the last six years, the project aims to strengthen infrastructural connections between Morocco and Mauritania, which in turn constitutes a gateway to West African markets. However, it also reflects a clear mistrust towards the UN mission deployed in West Sahara, as the road is set to cut through the UN-established buffer zone between West Sahara and Mauritania, where MINURSO runs an operation base.

West Sahara is also the keystone of the Atlantic Initiative put forward by king Mohamed last December, as the trade corridor it envisages would connect the land-locked Sahel countries to the Atlantic Ocean by way of Dakhla, a major Moroccan-held port in the disputed region. The subject has likely been broached during the **Rabat meeting between Moroccan prime minister Aziz Akhannouch and his Niger counterpart, Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine.** Like neighboring Mali and Burkina Faso, Niger has joined the Initiative to alleviate the toll of ECOWAS sanctions on the current military junta, which came to power following the April coup against elected president Mohamed Bazoum. Morocco, on the other hand, aims to gain the support of Sahelian countries on the West Sahara dossier and to undermine traditional Algerian influence in the region.

Finally, news for the Moroccan defense sector. According to press sources, **Morocco is installing a new anti-aircraft missile system in the Sidi Yahya a El Gharb military base, to the west of Rabat.** The system operates in a 250-kilometers range and is equipped with four batteries of Chinese FD-2000B missiles, which the Alawi kingdom acquired in December. Negotiations are reportedly underway to supply the system with Israeli Barak and Patriot 8 US missiles. The first air defense installation in Sidi Yahya El Gharb were first detected through satellite imagery in 2022.



# Tunisia

While negotiations with the International Monetary Fund show few signs of progress, Tunisia keeps contact with other major international credit institutions. **The Tunisian president, Kais Saied, met in Tunis with the president of the European Bank for Development and Reconstruction, Odile-Renauld Basso.** During the meeting, Saied underscored the country's interest to partner with the Bank in projects related to renewable energy, healthcare, desalination, infrastructures and digital technologies while respecting the sovereignty of Tunisian people. Renault-Basso had already met with Tunisian prime minister Ahmed Hachani in January, on the backdrop of the annual Davos Forum.

This month, **Hachani also met World Bank deputy president for the Middle East and North Africa, Farid Belhaj, to discuss avenues for cooperation within the scope of the 2023-2027 Country Partnership Framework.** The meeting follows months of tensions in the wake of Saied's controversial March statements concerning the ethnic danger presented by the influx of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia. The ensuing diplomatic crisis had prompted the Bank to temporarily suspend its CPF with Tunisia, which grants Tunisia a yearly funding of 500 million dollars over five years.

Meanwhile, the Tunisian executive strengthens its control over the country's monetary policy. **The Tunisian parliament approved a draft law authorizing the Central Bank to directly finance the treasury by buying State bonds.** Announced by the Tunisian minister of Finance, Sihem Boughdiri Nemsia, the provision stems from difficulties in finding sources of external financing to cover the growing budget deficit. Last month, Tunisia – whose public debt amounts to 80% of its GDP – had also been blacklisted by the International Monetary Fund along with other countries whose IMF negotiations had yielded no result for over eighteen months.

Tunisia strengthens ties with Europe and Italy. **The EU signed several agreements to unlock external subsidies worth 8,7 million euros to support Tunisia's cereal production.** The deal is part of the EU "Adapt Cereals" program implemented by the Italian Agency for Cooperation and Development (Aics) and aims to contain the food crisis engendered by the disruption of Ukrainian wheat and fertilizer supply as well as by climate-change induced droughts. **Italy and Tunisia also announced the launch of the first batch of tenders under the Interreg VI-A Next program for cross-border cooperation.** With 22-million-euro budget, the program promotes cooperation between PMEs, research institutes, NGOS and municipal and regional institutions of five Italian provinces and nine Tunisian governorates.

Saudi Arabia also widens its investment portfolio in the North African country. **The Saudi Fund for Development inked an agreement with Tunis for a 55-million-dollar investment in Tunisia's railways.** The deal includes the upgrading of Tunisia's 190-kilometers railway network for phosphate transport between Sfax, Gabes and Gafsa. The phosphate sector covers about 4% of Tunisia's GDP and 15% of its exports. Last July, Saudi Arabia had announced it would support the battered Tunisian economy with a 500-million-dollar soft loan.

Finally, **Tunisia pursues regional integration by launching a new maritime trade route linking the port of Sfax with Libya, Morocco and Spain.** According to Tunisian authorities, the route should be operational by March. The project is the last of a slew of initiatives aimed at enhancing regional trade, such as the Tunisia-Libya trade corridor and the creation of a joint Algerian-Tunisian commission for cross-border cooperation.



# Libya

**The mediation work of the UN special envoy and head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL), Abdoulaye Bathily, continues.** On 15 February, he held a hearing at the Security Council to take stock of the current situation in the country. Specifically, the UNSMIL head stated that “Libya’s main institutional actors do not seem willing to resolve the outstanding issues”. Despite the 6+6 Joint Committee, composed of members of both the House of Representatives (HoR) and the High Council of State (HCS), finalized in 2023 “the constitutional and legal framework for the elections” none of the five stakeholders – the Presidential Council (PC), the two chambers, the Government of National Unity (GNU) and the Libyan National Army (LNA) – have “made a decisive move from their initial position, with each continuing to articulate pre-conditions for their participation in the dialogue as a way to maintain the status quo”: the speaker of the HoR, Aguila Saleh, conditioned his presence on the formation of a new government, demanding that either the two cabinets – GNU and the Government of National Stability (GNS) – are included or excluded altogether; the HCS president, Mohamed Takala, maintained “his rejection of the electoral laws as published by the HoR, demanding to revert to the draft agreed upon by the 6+6 Joint Committee in Bouznika”; the GNU premier, Abdul Hamid Dbeiba insists that he “will only step down after the holding of elections, meaning that the Government of National Unity that he chairs will supervise the coming electoral process”; the LNA commander, Khalifa Haftar, has conditioned the GNU’s presence on the inclusion of the GNS. Alternatively, Haftar would agree to participate if both governments are excluded; finally, the president of the Presidential Council, Mohammed Menfi, “does not want to be seen as a party but is prepared to act as a facilitator to support” the UN initiative. By also making it clear that there is a delicate security balance between the individual actors in the country, Bathily went on to emphasize the frustration of a large part of civil society over “the inability of their authorities to lead Libya towards peace, stability and progress”, especially because of the “failure to approve a budget for public spending” – which only exacerbates the lack of “transparency with respect to the management of resources and the unequal distribution of the country’s wealth”. Finally, the UN envoy expressed concern about the order issued by the SNG to eleven local offices of the High Electoral Commission, which were allegedly ordered to suspend their activities. In this regard, in the days immediately following the Security Council intervention, **the head of UNSMIL was declared *persona non grata* by the Government of National Stability** – the cabinet based in Sirte and not recognized by the international community. In February, the GNS also issued a directive to foreign organizations operating in the field of migration in Libya, requiring these actors to be accredited to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the government appointed by the House of Representatives (HoR), in order to continue working in the country. The Minister for Irregular Migration, Fathi Al-Tabawi, asked the organizations to submit within 10 days a report on their activities for the year 2023, containing all their projects, programmes and work strategy for the year 2024, stating further that “actors who do not adhere to these instructions risk having their work in Libyan territory suspended”.

February was a busy month for the Libyan authorities. **PC president Menfi met in Cairo with his Egyptian counterpart, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi.** The focus of the bilateral was the common will to strengthen cooperation in several areas, in particular politics and security. Al-Sisi underlined his country’s full support for the PC president in heading the way to “reach a political solution” leading to “free and fair elections that meet the aspirations of the Libyan people”. Subsequently, Menfi attended the meeting of the **African Union High Level Committee on Libya**, held in Brazzaville, and the **37th ordinary session of the AU Assembly**, held in Addis Ababa. On the sidelines of the meetings, the PC president also held talks with several counterparts, heads of Government and Foreign Ministers from the African continent, with whom were discussed issues of bilateral interest. Also worth mentioning the Libyan mediation’s attempt with regard to the crisis in Sudan: Menfi received Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan in Tripoli together with Dbeiba, after the latter in the same days had a telephone conversation with Mohamed Dagalo “Hemedti”.



Similarly, **GNU Premier and Defence Minister Dbeiba** had a series of important talks with partners in the Middle East. After attending the **second ministerial meeting of the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC)** in Riyadh, the prime minister attended the **2024 World Governments Summit** in Dubai. On that occasion, Dbeiba held talks with **UAE President Mohamed bin Zayed**, who reportedly confirmed the UAE's support for the National Unity Government and readiness to sustain any dialogue aimed at ending the transitional phases through elections. On the sidelines of the event, the GNU premier then met with the **President of Türkiye, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan**, as well as several heads of state and government and top representatives of some international organizations attending the summit. The meeting with Erdoğan discussed the political situation in Libya, the latest developments in the region and ways to strengthen bilateral economic cooperation. The Turkish president reiterated his readiness to support "any dialogue that leads to the stability in Libya and holding elections without new transitional phases", also pointing out that the GNU is "the only legitimate government that the World and Türkiye have to deal with".

It is finally important to highlight **the activities of the Russian Federation in the country**. On 22 February, in Tripoli was held a ceremony for the official reopening of the Russian embassy, and the ambassador, Aydar Aghanin, announced that a consulate general in Benghazi is also due to be opened in 2024. These events are part of Moscow's broader operations in Libya: according to recent rumours, in addition to reinforcing the deployment of the Africa Corps – the Russian mercenary company created following the elimination of the commander of the Wagner Group, Prigožin – the Kremlin has also sent in the country large quantities of heavy military equipment. In particular, the areas under the control of Khalifa Haftar represent a fundamental logistical and strategic asset for Russia's military projection in Africa, especially due to the porosity of its southern borders and its central geographic position for both the Mediterranean and the rest of the African continent. It is no coincidence that, in recent months, Haftar had met several times with the Russian Deputy Defence Minister, Yunus-Bek Yevkurov, with whom was also discussed the creation of a Russian naval military facility in Cyrenaica.



## Egypt

**Egypt continued its diplomatic efforts in the context of the Gaza crisis.** U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Cairo, where he met with President Al-Sisi. The efforts for the release of the hostages held by Hamas were discussed together with other regional issues from Gaza to the Red Sea were addressed by the parties. The United States reiterated its opposition to any solution involving the relocation of Palestinians to Egypt and their support for the creation of a Palestinian state. According to local sources, senior officials of the Egyptian government reportedly threatened to suspend the 1979 Peace Treaty with Israel if Palestinian refugees were relocated to Egyptian territory. The offensive in Rafah further complicates the humanitarian crisis in Gaza. There has been debate over reports in American media regarding a possible agreement between Israel and Egypt for the relocation of civilians from Gaza. Some satellite images purportedly show Egypt constructing a structure to accommodate refugees from the Strip. The news has been denied by the governor of North Sinai, Mohamed Shousha, who stated that the ongoing work is aimed at creating a hub for humanitarian aid management. The month was also marked by Erdogan's visit to Cairo (the first since 2013). The Turkish president expressed the desire to increase bilateral trade volume between the two countries and invited Al-Sisi to visit Ankara in April. The visit was preceded by an interview with Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan, in which Ankara's top diplomat acknowledged that the Turkish government had authorized the sale of Bayraktar drones to Egypt.

Economically, the International Monetary Fund and Egypt are reportedly close to signing a new agreement to support Cairo's finances. According to early reports, the agreement would involve a \$12 billion loan, with \$7 billion financed by the Fund and \$5 billion by external partners. In this context, the crisis in the Red Sea is putting pressure on revenues from the Suez Canal. Osama Rabie, head of the authority responsible for managing the infrastructure, stated that toll revenues in January had dropped by 50%, resulting in earnings of \$428 million compared to the previous year's \$804 million. There's good news regarding inflation, which has been decreasing for the fourth consecutive month. According to the latest data, the inflation rate in January in urban centers dropped from 33.7% in December to 29.8%, a larger reduction than analysts had anticipated, although the price of food items remains high. Taking advantage of improvements in some fundamentals and the potential IMF agreement, Al-Sisi fulfilled some electoral promises by raising the national minimum wage by 50% starting from March and increasing the salaries of state employees by 1,200 Egyptian pounds. Meanwhile, the government announced negotiations with an unidentified fund from the United Arab Emirates for the concession of the Ras el-Hekma coastline for a \$22 billion deal involving the construction of luxury resorts in exchange for a thirty-year concession for area exploitation. Regarding the energy sector, Eni CEO Claudio De Scalzi denied rumors about payment difficulties from Egyptian government to energy companies. Speaking after Eni's results for the last quarter were published, De Scalzi emphasized that foreign investor payments were still flowing and highlighted that Egyptian authorities had acted to protect foreign investments.





# Israel

February was another complex month for Israel, marked by attempts at mediation with Hamas for the release of hostages and increasing pressure from the United States, and a growing portion of the international community, for a ceasefire in Gaza. The death toll among civilians continues to rise, and the humanitarian situation of the displaced is increasingly concerning. Various plans have been presented to negotiators from the USA, Egypt, and Qatar to mitigate the situation. Hamas has repeatedly demanded, in addition to the release of hundreds of Palestinian prisoners in exchange for a varying number of hostages, the complete withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Strip. Predictably, Israel has always refused to withdraw, calling the conditions proposed by the Islamist movement "insane." Negotiations have continued throughout the month. President Biden, who had hoped for a solution by March 4, expressed hope for a possible agreement before the start of Ramadan on March 10. According to some news leaked and reported by the media, after a meeting held on February 23 in Paris, **a possible plan** would involve **the release, in a first phase, of 40 hostages**, including women, children, female soldiers, the elderly, **and the sick, during a six-week ceasefire**. In exchange for the hostages, **Israel would release 400 Palestinian prisoners**. Meanwhile, fighting has intensified in the south of Gaza and resumed in some areas of the north. It is also largely known that the Israeli government intends to conduct military operations in Rafah to dismantle the last Hamas battalions. Matthew Miller, spokesman for the U.S. State Department, commenting on this plan, reiterated that the United States "will not support any military campaign in Rafah" if Israel does not provide adequate explanations of what will happen to the people currently in the area. Meanwhile, the office of the Israeli Prime Minister announced that the IDF has presented a plan for the evacuation of Palestinian civilians from Rafah and the operational strategy for the attack. The statement does not provide details on how or where the displaced will be transferred.

**Internationally, Tel Aviv has faced numerous criticisms. On February 8, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken visited Israel for the fifth time** since the beginning of the conflict in Gaza. Blinken reaffirmed Israel's right to defend itself and the unwavering support of the USA for its ally but also expressed extreme concern about actions and rhetoric, including by government officials, "that inflame tensions, jeopardize international support" and Israel's own security. Some of his final statements sounded particularly harsh: "Israelis were dehumanized in the most horrific way on October 7. Hostages have been dehumanized since that day. But this does not authorize dehumanizing others." American reprimands continued throughout the month, and **Biden, in the harshest tones ever used with the historical ally, described Israeli operations in Gaza as "over the line."**

The head of European diplomacy, **Josep Borrell, has also intervened several times, concerned about the humanitarian situation in Gaza**. Regarding Biden's comment, he stated that to avoid the death of too many civilians in the Strip, sending fewer weapons to Israel would be enough. In the following days, he announced that 26 of the 27 EU countries are calling for an immediate humanitarian pause "that may lead to a sustainable ceasefire" and must coincide with the unconditional release of hostages and the provision of humanitarian aid. Italy has also taken a more critical stance towards Tel Aviv. Already on the morning of February 13, Foreign Minister Antonio Tajani declared in an interview that "at this point, Israel's reaction is disproportionate, there are too many victims who have nothing to do with Hamas." Then, the Parliament approved a commitment "to support every initiative aimed at calling for an immediate humanitarian ceasefire."



It is difficult to predict the outcome of the mediation for the release of hostages and a ceasefire, as both parties in conflict seem to lack flexibility in negotiations. Yet, a truce is inevitable, especially given the strong pressures Israel is facing, which have increased after the death of 100 Palestinians who had attacked humanitarian aid trucks just arrived in the Strip.

The facts are still to be ascertained, but the IDF is accused of firing at the crowd – an accusation rejected by Israel – and the international community calls for an independent investigation. Meanwhile, U.S. Vice President Kamala Harris has declared that there must be an immediate ceasefire, and Benny Gantz, leader of the National Unity Party and member of the current Israeli war cabinet, is about to travel to Washington for talks with the Biden Administration.



## Saudi Arabia

The geopolitics of energy take center stage in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, with Saudi Aramco announcing the suspension of plans to expand oil production. Earlier this month, the World Defense Show took place in Riyadh, featuring the participation of leading companies in the military sector.

**Saudi Arabia has declared that it will not expand its oil production capacity and is ready to maintain its maximum production capacity at 12 million barrels per day.** This decision contradicts the kingdom's previous statement expressing the intention to increase production to 13 million b/d by 2027. Although no official explanation has been provided by Saudi Aramco, it seems likely that it is reevaluating its estimates regarding future oil demand. Despite repeated production cuts by the OPEC+ cartel at the end of 2022 and in the year 2023, oil prices have remained relatively stable. This stability is attributed to the increased production of non-OPEC countries, especially the United States, the world's largest producer. Consequently, Riyadh appears to be considering the reduced demand for Saudi oil in the coming months and years, particularly considering the growth in production from other countries such as Brazil, Guyana, and Canada.

Although the complicated situation in the Middle East did not cause a spike in crude oil prices, Saudi Arabia's decision does not entail a reduction in current output. The news reassured the markets, leading to a drop in prices following the announcement. Energy analysts suggest that Saudi Arabia's move can be interpreted in two ways: first, as a signal to other major producers in the region (particularly the UAE and Kuwait) to increase investments and production; second, as the kingdom's prioritization of investments in projects related to Vision 2030, which involves expanding natural gas fields and renewable energy sources. Supporting the kingdom's decision, the International Energy Agency has stated that oil demand in 2024 is expected to grow at a slower pace than the previous year.

While Riyadh enjoys a significant margin of maneuverability in the energy sector due to its significant oil resources, the kingdom is also striving to play a prominent role in the defense industry. **From February 4 to 8, the World Defense Show was held in Riyadh, bringing together representatives from the most important companies in the sector.** In the second edition of the event, the kingdom's General Authority for Defense Companies signed eleven cooperation agreements with as many leading international companies. Notably, an agreement with Lockheed Martin for the construction of THAAD ballistic missile defense systems stands out, marking the only production line of the system outside the United States. According to Janes, the production site is part of a 2017 contract worth \$15 billion for 44 launchers and 360 missiles, but it will not be operational for another two years. Leonardo, among the participating industries, also signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Ministry of Investments and the General Authority for the Saudi Military Industries. The agreement aims to discuss, develop, and evaluate investments and potential collaborations in the aerospace and defense sectors. Specifically, the focus is on space activities, maintenance, repair, and overhaul of air structures, localization for electronic warfare systems, radar, and helicopter assembly. The agreement also includes a focus on specific areas in both the aerial combat and multi-domain integration sectors.



## United Arab Emirates

The month of February witnessed important security events in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), including the killing of four Emirati soldiers in Somalia and restrictions on the use of military bases in the UAE by the United States. On the economic front, there is notable news of an agreement between Cairo and Abu Dhabi for the development of Ras el-Hekma.

**On Sunday, February 11, four Emirati and one Bahraini military personnel in Somalia were killed in an attack claimed by the terrorist organization al-Shabaab.** The terrorists targeted the General Gordon military base in Mogadishu, describing the UAE as an "enemy of Islam and Sharia" due to its support for the Somali government in the fight against al-Shabaab. In addition to their support to Mogadishu against terrorist activities, The UAE see Somalia as a significant destination for investments, particularly focusing on ports in the Red Sea area and in East Africa in recent years.

In the military sector, **the UAE and Saudi Arabia are restricting the use of their air bases by the U.S. Air Force for attacks against pro-Iranian militias in the region.** These restrictions come amid the tricky context of the Gaza conflict, Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, and actions by Iranian proxies in Syria and Iraq. In this situation, Sunni monarchies attempt to balance the need to contain militias close to Tehran and, on the other hand, not appear too closely aligned with Washington and Tel Aviv. Additionally, the Arab countries have been engaged in a years-long attempt at détente with the Islamic Republic, partly motivating this decision. The news holds particular significance for the United States, facing repeated attacks by Iranian proxies in the region, escalating since October 7. Some weeks after the Hamas attack, the Iraqi militia Kataib Hezbollah had threatened to strike Emirati and Kuwaiti bases hosting American military personnel in retaliation for Washington's support of Israel.

Economically, **there is strengthened Emirati support for Egypt,** grappling with a profound economic and financial crisis exacerbated by conflicts in Sudan and Gaza. A bilateral agreement worth \$35 billion has been reached for the development of the Ras el-Hekma area in the northeast of Egypt. Egyptian Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly announced that Cairo would receive \$15 billion in the coming weeks and the remaining \$20 billion within two months. The partnership between the Egyptian government and the Emirati sovereign wealth fund ADQ includes a 35% share of profits allocated to Cairo, serving the crucial role of reassuring markets and investors about the financial stability of the North African country. According to several Egyptian economists, this agreement strengthens the country's position in negotiations with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for a new \$10 billion loan. The Gulf countries, particularly the UAE, are aware of the importance of restoring Cairo to a path of economic stability, especially given the regional crisis context.



## Qatar

In February, **Doha reaffirms its role as a mediator in the Gaza crisis and a prisoner exchange in Ukraine.** Additionally, Qatar and the United States express their intent to implement the October agreement with Iran. On the economic front, a strengthened partnership with France emerges.

While negotiations for a ceasefire and the release of hostages in Gaza are at a standstill, Doha continues to play a crucial role at achieving a ceasefire. In February, the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, and Prime Minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, held numerous meetings regarding the situation in the Gaza Strip and efforts to secure a truce. On February 12, the President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), Mahmoud Abbas, met with Emir Al-Thani in Doha. The visit confirms the close ties between the emirate and the Palestinian establishment. During the meeting, Abbas highlighted the high danger of a potential Israeli operation in Rafah, where more than one million Palestinians are located. In the following days, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani met with the head of Hamas' political office, Isma'il Haniyeh, in Doha, where they discussed the latest developments in the Gaza Strip and the imminent Israeli operation in Rafah. On Tuesday, February 27, the Emir of Qatar traveled to Paris, where he participated in further negotiations to achieve a ceasefire and a prisoner exchange in Gaza. The meetings also involved high-ranking Israeli, American, and Egyptian officials. The proposal includes a ceasefire lasting at least six weeks and the release of 40 Israeli hostages held by Hamas and 400 Palestinian prisoners from Israeli jails.

**Qatar's mediation also comes into play concerning the war in Ukraine.** On Monday, February 19, eleven Ukrainian children aged between two and sixteen were released by the Russians. After being hosted at the Qatari embassy in Moscow, they transited through Belarus and later returned to Ukraine. Russian sources claim that, through similar procedures, 59 children have been released by Moscow and repatriated to Ukraine.

In a phone call between the Qatari Prime Minister and the Iranian Foreign Minister, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, the former confirmed Doha and Washington's commitment to implementing the agreement reached in October with the Islamic Republic. The agreement led to the exchange of five prisoners between Iran and the United States and includes the unfreezing of six billion dollars in Iranian funds subject to sanctions. Despite Doha's reassurances, in November, Washington blocked Iranian access to the funds with a resolution passed by the House of Representatives in response to Iran's alleged role in the October 7 attacks. It is essential to note that, although the funds were supposed to be used by Tehran for food supplies for its population, there is no effective way to verify their use.

Finally, **relations between France and Qatar are strengthened on the economic front.** During Al-Thani's visit to France, the two countries signed a strategic partnership, with Doha committing to invest €10 billion in French start-ups and investment funds between 2024 and 2030. Qatari investments will focus on renewable energy, semiconductors, aerospace, artificial intelligence, healthcare, and culture. On the sidelines of the meeting, Qatari Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani inaugurated the bilateral economic forum, an instrument used to enhance commercial exchange by facilitating dialogue between businesses from both countries.



## Turkiye

In February, Türkiye was one of the most active countries in the Eastern Mediterranean. After Erdoğan's reconfirmation as president last May, Ankara is looking for a new strategy in economic, domestic, and foreign policy. In this regard, **on February 14 the Turkish president was received in Cairo by his Egyptian counterpart, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi**. The international press described the meeting as "historic", marking a moment of easing tensions between the two countries. Relations between Ankara and Cairo had worsened in 2013 when al-Sisi, through a coup, ousted Erdoğan's ally, Mohamed Morsi. Since then, the two countries have often found themselves supporting opposing factions in various regional conflicts, such as the one in Libya. Since October 7, however, Türkiye and Egypt reopened an official communication channel to support the population of Gaza and the Palestinian cause. This diplomatic effort culminated in the meeting, on February 14, during which Erdoğan referred to al-Sisi as his "esteemed brother." During the meeting, the two leaders discussed the dispatch of humanitarian aid to Gaza and the possibility of relocating civilians to Rafah. Erdoğan and al-Sisi's project is to increase diplomatic and military cooperation, emphasizing the reconstruction of Gaza as a priority on their political agendas. At the end of the visit, the two presidents signed a joint statement to reinstate the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Council and inked a series of agreements in the energy and defense sectors. The reconciliation between Ankara and Cairo represents a significant component for the regional stability of the Mediterranean.

The \$23-billion **sale of F-16 jets by the US to Türkiye is also a sign of Ankara's new stance in foreign policy and was** finalized after Sweden's to NATO. The agreement includes the 40 F-16 jets, together with ammunition and military equipment for the modernization of the Turkish armed forces. Both the U.S. Ambassador to Ankara, Jeff Flake, and Erdoğan expressed satisfaction with the decision, stating that "the sale of F-16s is crucial for NATO forces and will ensure greater interoperability among allies." At the end of the meeting, the creation of a Turkish-American joint venture in the defense sector in Texas was announced.

In the meantime, Türkiye is facing several challenges on the domestic front. **On February 2, the governor of the Central Bank of Türkiye, Hafize Gaye Erkan, resigned.** Just 7 months into her term, Erkan resigned following a family scandal brought to light by the opposition. With the governor's resignation, **the Turkish lira weakened, losing 0.6%** and depreciating to an exchange rate of 30 TRY = 1 USD, a historic low. Erdoğan accepted the resignation and, at the recommendation of Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek, appointed Fatih Karahan, one of the three deputy directors of the Central Bank, as her replacement. The new governor is a highly credible figure for the international markets and, probably, he will continue the work started by Erkan. Erkan's resignation came at a delicate time for Turkish politics, just a few weeks before local elections. According to some polls, **at end of February, the opposition candidate Ekrem İmamoğlu is leading over his AKP opponent, Murat Kurum, in Istanbul.** The president has nominated Kurum, a former Minister of Environment, to regain one of the major Turkish cities lost in 2019 to the opposition (CHP). According to data released by ORC Research, İmamoğlu, the current mayor of Istanbul, is leading with 43.8% approval and Kurum's with 38.2%. İmamoğlu is considered Erdoğan's most powerful political rival and faces imprisonment for insulting the Electoral Council in 2019. The ongoing trial could potentially lead to İmamoğlu's removal from political life just days before the elections.



## Iraq

February has been a month of intense foreign policy activism for Iraq. **On February 2, the US armed forces targeted a number of sensitive objectives in the Iraqi and Syrian Kurdistan.** The American airstrikes were a response to a drone attack by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) on US facilities in the region. Since October, approximately 150 strikes have hit various American air bases operating within the international coalition against Daesh, as well as US consulates and embassies, leading to the withdrawal of non-essential diplomatic personnel from the affected areas. President Biden commented the incident stating that "Washington's military response will continue at predetermined times and locations." The White House later added that the United States is not seeking a conflict in the Middle East but that any aggression against American bases will be represent a violation of the safeguarding of American citizens abroad, and therefore, Washington will respond. The Iraqi government released a statement indicating that American forces targeted Hezbollah sites in the Anbar governorate – in western Iraq – and in the Al-Qaim district on the Iraqi Syrian border, where structures of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), a group linked to Tehran, where positioned. Despite the good relations between Baghdad and Washington, the American attacks have triggered a strong reaction from the Iraqi government, which has the intention to withdraw from the mission of the US-led international coalition against Daesh. Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia' al-Sudani and Kurdistan Prime Minister Masrour Barzani have expressed deep concern about the clashes between American and Iranian forces in Kurdistan. On February 11, al-Sudani proposed a change in the approach to cooperation with the United States. The new agreement will be based on specific bilateral agreements rather than a permanent presence of American troops on Iraqi soil. **In February, a series of talks began between the two countries to discuss the evolution of the permanent mission** and enable a gradual reduction of the US military presence. The American troops in Iraqi Kurdistan hold significant strategic value for the United States as they allow the White House to patrol the border area with Syria, where several prisons detain Daesh fighters.

Meanwhile, Iraq has affirmed its commitment to the energy sector. **The Minister of Oil, Hayyan Abdul Ghani, reiterated Iraq's dedication to compensating for production increases within the OPEC+ framework.** In a statement from the Ministry, it is mentioned that during the last OPEC meeting in November 2023, Iraq and other producing countries committed to ensuring stability and balance in global oil markets by implementing voluntary measures starting from February 2024. In parallel with the oil sector, **the spokesperson for the Minister of Oil, Assem Jihad, has released details of the government's investment plan in the gas sector.** The report anticipates an increase in LNG production volume for the current year, thanks to the contract between the Iraqi Ministry of Oil and the French company TotalEnergies. The agreement includes a package of four deals for the development and modernization of existing gas and oil extraction facilities in the country. By the first half of 2024, Iraq aims to implement the initial phase of the agreement, which involves an increase in extraction capacity and the utilization of associated gas emitted during the oil combustion phase.

## Sahel

### **ECOWAS has lifted the sanctions imposed on Niger following the coup on July 26th.**

The decision came at the end of the extraordinary summit in Abuja on February 24th, called to discuss the withdrawal of the Sahel Alliance member countries (Niger, Mali, and Burkina Faso) from the organization. Borders between Niamey and other members have been reopened, and the freeze on assets of Nigerien government officials has been lifted. Niger has been readmitted to ECOWAS institutions. In the official statement released at the end of the summit, ECOWAS nevertheless reminded member countries to comply with the obligations of the Cotonou Treaty, which regulates the exit procedure from the organization and urged AES countries to reconsider their decisions. The decision follows a series of openings by ECOWAS to Sahel countries. The West African bloc had reiterated its willingness to engage in dialogue aimed at reconciliation with AES countries and initiated the urgent procedure to activate standby forces to support the armies of Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso in the fight against terrorism.

**Niger strengthens its ties with Turkey.** Nigerien Prime Minister Ali Mahaman Lamine Zeine was received by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, accompanied by Minister of Foreign Affairs, Hakan Fidan and Defense Minister Yasar Guler. The parties discussed expanding cooperation in security and economic dominions. Meanwhile, the government continues its tough stance towards Europe. Several members of the European mission EUCAP Sahel stationed in Niamey, including mission head Katja Dominik, have been expelled. According to Nigerien authorities, EUCAP personnel entered the country without prior notification to local authorities; European authorities have labeled the incident as "another hostile and unjustified act against our personnel in recent months." Tightening measures also extend to the civil aviation sector. A statement released by the civil aviation authority, ASECNA, informs that all commercial flights to and from Nigeria are suspended until further notice. However, Nigerian airspace remains open to all domestic and international commercial flights, as well as overflights without landing. ASECNA's decision may be a response to measures issued by Abuja authorities on January 29, suspending civilian flights to and from Niger. The Nigerien government has also imposed a ban on French citizens entering its territory by air transport. Several airlines, including Air Burkina, have already declared readiness to comply with the new directives, while others like Royal Air Maroc have stated they will allow French citizens to board their direct flights to Niger only with special authorizations. Meanwhile, Tiani has endorsed the creation of a common currency with Mali and Burkina Faso in a televised address, stating that establishing a new currency would represent "a step towards breaking free from colonization." However, this decision comes amid a complicated situation, as the Central Bank of the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA) has expressed concerns about the sustainability of Niamey's debt. According to estimates from the institution, Niger's public debt could reach 314.5 billion CFA francs (516 million dollars) in interest and capital debt, a figure hardly sustainable considering the sanctions imposed on the country following the coup last July.

### **Burkina Faso has sought to reassure economic actors and civil society regarding its withdrawal from ECOWAS.**

Prime Minister De Tambela stated that while supporting the reasons behind the decision to leave the West African bloc, it will not be without consequences for the economies of the three countries. He urged fellow citizens to support the transitional authorities and the sister countries of the Sahel States Alliance. De Tambela also met with Burkina Faso industrialists' president and major union representatives to reassure them about the future of the national economy after leaving ECOWAS. "Exiting ECOWAS will allow us to reorganize in line with our interests and to sign bilateral agreements with interested parties in various fields based on mutual interests without interference from any power," the premier said. Additionally, Economy Minister Aboubakar Nacanabo stated that the country will remain within the UEMOA even after abandoning the trade bloc. "We have made it clear that our exit from ECOWAS is due to the abandonment of the founding ideals and the fact that it is often manipulated by foreign powers. As far as we are concerned, we have no similar complaints about UEMOA." Meanwhile, the path towards



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nuclear energy continues with a meeting between Foreign Minister Jean Marie Traore and the Deputy Director General of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Mikhail Chudakov. At the end of the meeting, Chudakov stated, "We want to assist Burkina Faso in its desire to build a nuclear power plant that will provide green, clean, and safe energy." In recent months, the Ouagadougou government has signed an MoU with the Russian Rosatom for the creation of a nuclear facility in the country.

**Mali has also adjusted its stance regarding its withdrawal from ECOWAS.** Foreign Minister Abdoulaye Diop declares that the country will not exit the West African Economic and Monetary Union (UEMOA), thus continuing to use the CFA Franc. The statement comes in the context of Moody's initial assessments, which stated that leaving UEMOA would be almost entirely detrimental to the exiting countries. Departure from the West African bloc fuels opposition grievances. In a joint statement signed by the M5-RFP and Yelema (both parties supporting the transitional government), the two movements deemed the decision to leave ECOWAS as "serious" and "inopportune." In the same statement, the two movements urge the government to adopt a more inclusive approach in managing relations with communities in the northern part of the country after the breakdown of the Algiers agreements. Regarding the conflict with the northern provinces, Tuareg separatists have announced the removal of checkpoints in the north of the country. In an official statement, the CSP announces that all checkpoints established last December between Gao, Timbuktu, and the border with Algeria have been removed without providing further details regarding the nature of the decision. Meanwhile, the first information is arriving from the city of Menaka in the center of the country following the encirclement of the inhabited area by various armed groups active in the area, including IS local branch. Local sources confirm that fuel and food shortages are beginning in the inhabited area, a situation exacerbated after the conquest of Tidermène by armed groups in April last year. Finally, the Wagner Group has extended its control over gold mines in Mali. Local sources report that Russian mercenaries have taken possession of the N'Tillit mine, near Intahaka in the Gao region. The informal mining site was under the control of armed groups signatory to the Algiers agreements and has now come under the custody of Russian operatives.

## Horn of Africa

**Tensions between Somalia and Ethiopia persist due to the MoU signed with Somaliland.** Speaking before the parliamentary assembly, Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed stated that "Ethiopia does not intend to cause any harm to its friend, Somalia." These statements come after a unified response from the international community in support of Somalia, with the US, China, and the European Union expressing their support for Mogadishu. Despite Addis Ababa's attempt to ease tensions, relations between the parties remain strained, as demonstrated during the African Union General Assembly on February 17th and 18th. The Somali Ministry of Foreign Affairs has accused Ethiopian security forces of attempting to prevent President Hassan Sheikh from participating in the Assembly's proceedings. This accusation was rejected by the Addis Ababa government, which claimed that the Mogadishu delegation had tried to enter the AU headquarters armed. Hassan Sheikh, who participated in the proceedings as usual, stated that his delegation had been subjected to intimidating behavior due to his government's denunciation of the MoU with Somaliland for access to the port of Berbera. The latest twist in the matter was the Somali parliament's rejection of the agreement's ratification. The Hargeisa parliament rejected the deal, labeling it "illegal" and calling it a "threat to the unity of the people of Somaliland," urging the executive to withdraw the MoU and halt the ratification process. Meanwhile, internal tensions in the country show no signs of abating. The Ethiopian parliament extended the state of emergency in the Amhara region, and the crisis in Tigray has worsened. The Tigrayan population denounces livestock theft and kidnappings conducted by the Eritrean army. The federal government has met with the Tigray regional executive in the context of the humanitarian crisis affecting the northern region. The Tigrayan delegation, led by interim president Getachew Reda, accused Addis Ababa of deliberately ignoring the famine affecting the region, accusations rejected by Addis Ababa, which states that the deaths in Tigray cannot be attributed to a humanitarian crisis.

**The war in Sudan shows no signs of abating.** According to reports from the RSF and SAF commands, high-ranking officials from both factions allegedly met in Bahrain three times during January in the presence of representatives from the United States and Saudi Arabia. Details regarding the progress and the subject matter of these meetings have not been disclosed. Meanwhile, the US has imposed new sanctions against the belligerent entities. The US Department of the Treasury has announced sanctions on Alkhaleej Bank and Al-Fakher Advanced Works, both owned by RSF's Hemedti, and Zadna International, associated with the Sudanese regular army. The conflict also continues on the propaganda front. The head of the RSF, General Hemedti, declared that his forces are ready to militarily resolve the conflict in a matter of weeks in an audio message addressed to army generals: "We do not seek war, but as long as it is your choice, you must be prepared." In this context, the de facto leader of the Sudanese government, General Al-Burhan, has blocked humanitarian aid access to areas controlled by the RSF, warning that deliveries will not resume until the RSF is defeated. The month concluded with reports from the SAF on the advancement of their forces in the strategic center of Omdurman, which were denied by the RSF.

**Kenya continues to grapple with its financial crisis.** President Ruto has announced plans to repurchase a portion of treasury bonds during the February-March period, and then seek coverage for the remaining portion of public debt from private partners in the markets. The government's privatization process is also progressing, with the announcement of the sale of seven state-owned enterprises, including the Development Bank of Kenya. The rest of the companies being put on the market are all in the hospitality sector. Positive data has also emerged regarding the revenues of the Port of Mombasa, which have increased by 6.23% annually, demonstrating how the infrastructure can withstand competition from the Port of Dar Es Salaam in Tanzania. Meanwhile, Kenyan Secretary of Defense Aden Dualey, during a visit to Washington, declared that Nairobi will continue to stand by the United States in the mission to secure maritime traffic in the Red Sea. Nairobi's decision is influenced not only by its privileged relationship with the USA but



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also by the risks stemming from the economic implications on maritime transportation costs following Houthi attacks. President William Ruto has been invited by President Biden to the White House to discuss the strengthening of bilateral relations in May, coinciding with the sixtieth anniversary of diplomatic relations between the two countries.