MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL
ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

DOSSIER
April 2025

The Future of The Mediterranean (dis)Order

Edited By Galip Dalay & Yahia H. Zoubir

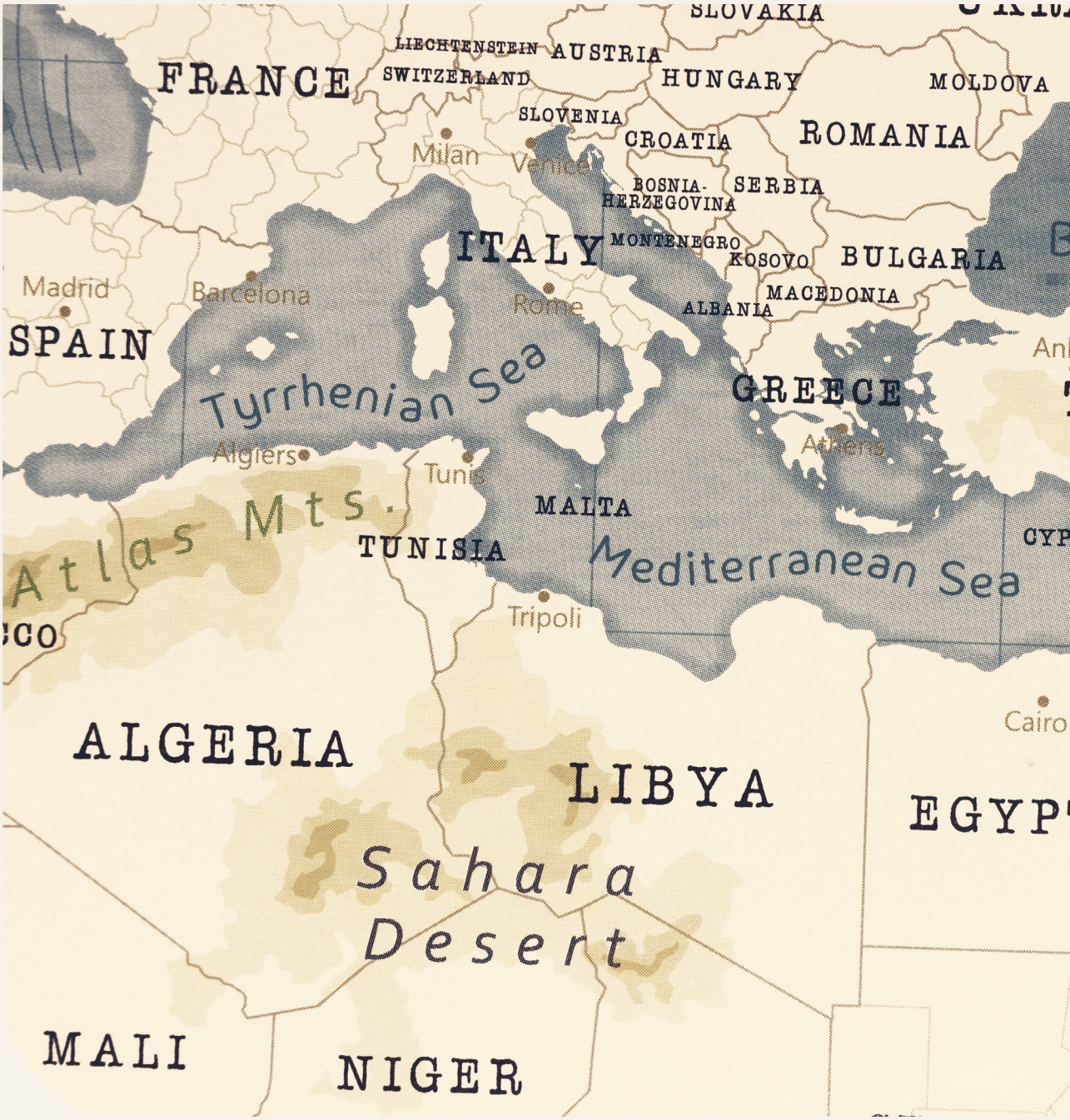


Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Galip Dalay & Yahia H. Zoubir

This is the second dossier of a multi-year project entitled, "the future of the Middle Eastern (dis) order." The first dossier analyzed the ongoing regional reset and emerging multipolarity, assessing their impact on intra-regional dynamics and the strategic recalibrations of regional actors in relation to external powers, as well as their approaches to conflict and crisis zones within the region. The first dossier was hence more thematic in nature.

This dossier, in contrast, is more geographical in its scope and delves into the question of security and order in the Mediterranean Sea. Indeed, the Mediterranean region—together with the Gulf—has come to represent the center of gravity in regional politics. The dossier examines how the international context of Mediterranean geopolitics and security is changing with a particular focus on the evolving nature of the US, EU, Russia and China's policies towards this region.

The Mediterranean is becoming a fiercely contested and highly congested space. It has a multiple geopolitical identity. There is not one Mediterranean, but a Middle Eastern, European, and African Mediterranean. Its security is thus intimately interlinked with the security of these regions. Such multiple geopolitical identities and interconnection with the security of other regions make it a key strategic space for almost all global powers.

The importance of the region for Europe, the United States, NATO, Russia, and China is paramount. For instance, before the fall of the Assad regime in Syria, Russia's regional presence in the Middle East was nowhere as pronounced as it was in the Mediterranean. Moscow was a major player in the Mediterranean's conflict zones such as in Syria and Libya, had a naval presence in the Eastern Mediterranean, and close ties with Algeria, Egypt, and other actors like Morocco. Yet, Assad's downfall has significantly transformed the geopolitical landscape. Not only did Moscow overnight lose its closest Arab partner and deepest strategic footprint in the Arab world, its presence in the Eastern Mediterranean has also considerably weakened as a result of this loss and because the new administration in Damascus has revoked the deal that gave the Tartus naval base to Russia for 49 years. The Mediterranean has also become strategically significant for China because it is at the nexus of the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. It occupies an important place in China's trans-regional connectivity vision, particularly for the Maritime Silk Road and a geopolitical and geoeconomic gate to Europe. The Mediterranean has a similar significance for the US-backed India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC). Likewise, the region is a key arena in the competition between Russia and the West.

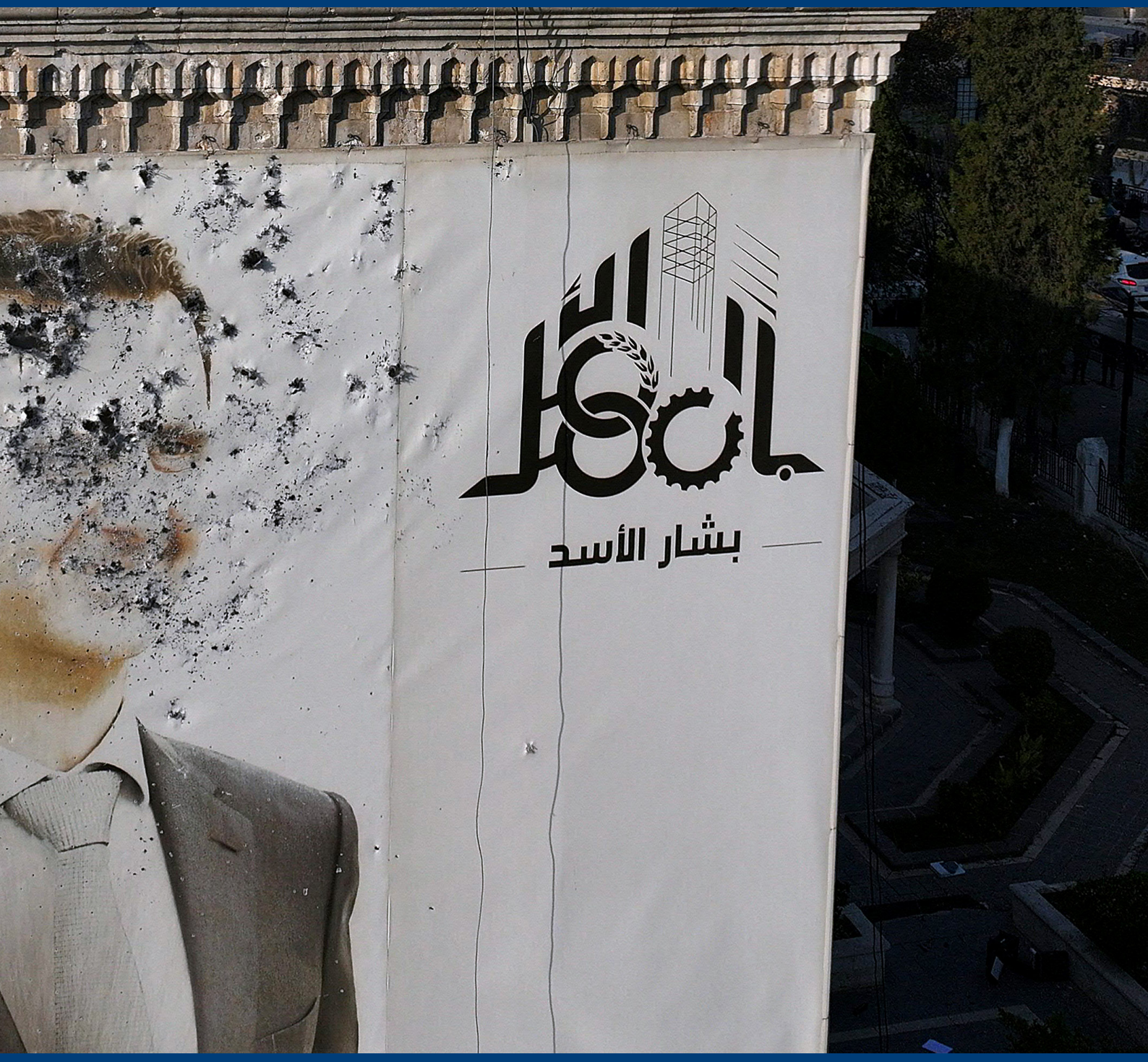
Plus, great power rivalry in the Mediterranean will not only define the international security environment, but it will also boost its strategic importance for all global players. Parameters of regional security in the Mediterranean are undergoing a dramatic change. The Gaza war and its ramifications are redefining regional geopolitics—both in the Eastern Mediterranean and in the broader region. Likewise, there are multiple conflict and crisis zones in the region with no solution in sight. Libya and the Western Sahara are cases in point. In contrast, despite the lack of a resolution in their bilateral disputes, there is a positive climate in Turkish-Greek relations with its spillover effect on the Eastern Mediterranean dispute. Moreover, the cutting of Iran's access to the Eastern Mediterranean as a result of the downfall of the Assad regime in Syria and degradation of Hezbollah in Lebanon is another major development that will bear implications on the regional security dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean.

However, a caveat needs to be mentioned. Instead of regional players, this dossier focuses on how Mediterranean geopolitics are evolving and how major international players are repositioning themselves there. Yet, on many levels, regional actors' share in defining regional security in the Mediterranean is at least on par with that of global actors. We look forward to continuing to explore this in this project's future workshops and publications.

CHAPTER ONE

Russia in The Mediterranean: After Assad's Fall

This aerial picture shows a bullet-riddled portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad adorning Hama's municipality building after it was defaced following the capture of the city by anti-government fighters, on December 6, 2024. (Photo by Omar HAJ KADOUR / AFP)



Russia in the Mediterranean: After Assad's Fall

Andrey Kortunov | Former Director General and Academic Director, the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC)

Andrey Kortunov was the former Director General and Academic Director at the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) based in Moscow from 2011 until 2025. He previously held various positions at the Institute on U.S. and Canada Studies, including Deputy Director. He taught at universities around the world, including the University of California, Berkeley. In addition, he led several public organizations involved in higher education, social sciences, and social development. He is a member of several expert and supervisory committees, as well as on the board of trustees of several Russian and international organizations. His academic interests include contemporary international relations and Russian foreign policy.

Introduction

Had regime change happened in Syria in December 2021, instead of December 2024, it would have probably led to a broad and emotional public discussion about "who lost Syria." Russia's overall engagement in Syria and the wider Middle East region today has been completely overshadowed by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict — which remains not only a priority, but rather the priority of the country's leadership. Therefore, the general Russian public remained mostly indifferent to the fall of Bashar Assad, as far back as 2016, [1] who was often regarded more as a liability to Russia rather than a valuable asset. Russian state media tried hard to stay neutral in their reporting from Syria during the downfall, putting all the blame on the Syrian political and military chiefs, while downplaying the likely negative impact of Syrian developments on Russia's positions in the MENA region, and beyond. Many critically minded experts promptly stated they had predicted long ago a hard landing for the Assad regime and Russia's positions in Syria.[2]

Did Moscow Really Try to Prevent Regime Change in Damascus?

All such post-factum statements notwithstanding, it appears that, like other non-regional actors, Russia was not prepared to witness a rapid, unstoppable, and irreversible collapse of the Bashar Assad regime in Damascus. After all, the Assad family ran the country for half a century, and Bashar Assad demonstrated remarkable political survivability under very challenging circumstances. It remains an open question when Kremlin strategists concluded that Moscow should no longer try to stop the opposition offensive and should instead let the unpopular and inefficient regime fall.

There are reasons to assume that Russia might have decided to accept regime change in Syria at a relatively early stage of the opposition forces' offensive, and even indirectly assist a surprisingly smooth and bloodless political transition. Official Russian military reports imply Russian air support to the Assad regime continued until at least December 7, 2024, inflicting significant damage upon the advancing opposition units in the provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, and Hama.[3] Sergey Lavrov, Russia's Foreign Minister, speaking that same day at the 22nd Doha Forum, confirmed Moscow's support to Bashar Assad and its firm condemnation of the opposition offensive.[4] However, the real scale of Russia's combat and intelligence assistance to Assad and Russian air force commitment to fighting against the opposition in early December remain unclear. Later, according to the New York Times, Iranian Brig. Gen. Behrouz Esbati accused Russia of misleading Iran by saying that Russian jets were bombing Syrian rebels when they were in fact dropping bombs on open fields.[5] He also said that in 2024: "as Israel struck Iranian targets in Syria, Russia had 'turned off radars,' in effect facilitating these attacks."[6]

This account of the alleged Russian reluctance to stand by its long-term ally in late November/early December 2024 was indirectly confirmed by Turkish Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan in his recent interview with TASS news agency, when he said that "there were some escalations after Aleppo was captured, I assume. Russia had the military capability to respond and could have used it – but decided not to. We stayed in close contact on this issue. I will be honest, Russia acted as a calculated player."[7] Fidan added: "Moscow 'did not intervene during the fall of Damascus' and 'the revolutionary forces eventually ensured the secure withdrawal of Russian troops and did not attack their bases.'"[8]

Immediate Implications for Russia's Positions in Syria

Today, Russia has two strategic points of military presence in Syria: the Tartous Naval Base and the Khmeimim Air Base. Tartous is Russia's only naval facility in the Mediterranean. Established in the 1970s, it was significantly expanded and modernized since the beginning of the Russian military engagement in Syria. Khmeimim became operational in 2015 to assist Russia's air operations during the Syrian civil war. These bases are essential for advancing Russia's interests in the Mediterranean and in the broader Middle East, offering Moscow unique power projection capabilities in the region. Moreover, the bases (in particular, the Khmeimim air base) are used as critical transit points, serving Russia's operations in remote places in Africa.[9]

Preserving these two bases has turned out to be one of the main goals of Russia's post-Assad approach to Syria. In January 2025, the Russian Foreign Ministry even proposed that these bases could be converted into "humanitarian hubs" to assist the urgent needs of the Syrian population.[10] It remains to be seen whether Russia is in a position to provide significant amounts of humanitarian assistance to Syria and to efficiently coordinate these efforts with other international donors.

The new Syrian administration seems to be skeptical of what Moscow can deliver in terms of humanitarian aid or development assistance. On a more general note, it would be hard to assume that Russia can easily win the trust of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) leaders who have been labeled by the Kremlin as international terrorists, close to al-Qaida and other extremist networks. Damascus has already canceled a contract with a Russian company to manage and operate the Tartous port that had been signed under former President Bashar Assad. Riad Joudy, the head of Tartous customs, is claimed to say that the investment contract was annulled after the Russian contractor failed to fulfil the terms of the 2019 deal, which included major investments into the port's infrastructure.[11] There were also media leaks suggesting that the Tartous port has attracted attention from major Turkish developers trying to control the port's modernization. A more compelling reason for revising the old arrangement might have been EU diplomats exercising strong pressure on the new Syrian leaders, including a break with Moscow in their list of preconditions for intensive cooperation between Brussels and Damascus.[12]

However, the recent revision of Syria's arrangement with Russia so far is limited to the civilian part of the Tartous port, and does not directly affect the status of the Tartous Naval Base, which Russia still intends to keep under its control.[13] Syria's transitional government leader Ahmed al-Sharaa stated that the new government had "'strategic interests' with the 'second most powerful country in the world'" and that he "didn't want Russia to exit Syria in a way that undermines its relationship with the country."[14] A high-level Russian delegation visited Damascus in January 2025 to discuss the future of bilateral relations with the new Syrian authorities. In a statement following the negotiations, the Syrian leadership stressed "that restoring relations must address past mistakes, respect the will of the Syrian people and serve their interests."[15] The talks also covered "justice for the victims of the brutal war waged by the Assad regime."[16] In sum, even if some level of Russia's military presence in Syria is maintained, the terms of the presence are likely to change significantly, motivating Moscow to look for possible alternatives.

Likewise, the immediate prospects for Russia-Syria economic cooperation are dim at best. Bilateral trade once amounted to US$ 1 billion, with a major surplus on the Russian side. Moscow has been one of the major suppliers of food-stock to Syria, including wheat, flour and sunflower oil, as well as machinery and medicines.[17] The purchases of Russia's wheat is of particular importance for Syria; Moscow provides almost a half of the overall imports. After the fall of the Assad regime, Russian grain shipments to Syria were disrupted.[18] Furthermore, all imports from Russia were allegedly banned by the new authorities in January 2025, though this decision has not yet been confirmed. One should also note that many Syrian enterprises run on Russian-built equipment; their maintenance and possible modernization will require continuing reliance on Moscow for at least some time into the future.

Regional Repercussions Begin to Reverberate

Moscow's officials have expectedly tried hard to downplay the significance of regime change in Syria and its impact on overall Russian positions in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. As Sergey Naryshkin, Head of the External Intelligence Service, stated: "Russia remains a very influential player in the Middle East and both Arab nations and Türkiye understand that. Therefore, there is no threat to Russia's positions in this region."[19] However, beneath the optimistic rhetoric, there is an intense ongoing search for a recalibrated Russian posture in the region.

Logic and common sense suggest that, after having suffered a major setback in Syria, Moscow should be interested in a continuous balance of external players that would prevent any regional or global actors from acquiring exclusive political influence over Syria's new authorities. As a minority shareholder in the *new Syrian game*, the Kremlin could hope to retain a share of its former influence by delicately balancing other active actors in Syria today. Interestingly, when Russian President Vladimir Putin spoke about Syria at the end of December, he referred to Israel rather than Türkiye as "the main beneficiary" of regime change in Damascus,[20] predicting that the ongoing massive Israeli air and ground operations would have very serious consequences for future relations between Syria and Israel, and regional stability at large.[21] As for Ankara, the official Russian assessment of the Turkish posture in Syria so far has been demonstratively soft and cautious; apparently, in Moscow they still count on Ankara as a responsible player in Syria that is not necessarily interested in reducing Russia's positions in the country to zero.

However, Russian-Turkish relations might be further complicated by the alleged relocation of Russia's military hardware and personnel from Syria to the eastern part of Libya.[22] This redeployment could be regarded as a part of Moscow's strategy to put together the so-called "African Corps" as a successor to the Wagner private military company.[23] The Khalifa Haftar government in Torbuk may have endorsed this move, but it is explicitly opposed by the Ankara-supported Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh in Tripoli. Other disagreements on Libya might complicate any future Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria as well.

One can imagine that the best option for the Kremlin would be to see a kind of international consensus around Syria like the one that emerged around Afghanistan after the Taliban returned to power in Kabul in the late summer of 2021. At the end of the day, nobody around Syria should be interested in seeing it split into several failed states controlled by irresponsible and unaccountable non-state state actors — or becoming a hub for international terrorism. Nor would anybody profit from an unstoppable outflow of arms or migrants from the country.

Responsible actors around Damascus have stakes in avoiding a humanitarian catastrophe, an inclusive and predictable government, and in Syria rejoining the family of Arab nations. Their common aspirations were reflected in the UN Security Council Statement on Syria, passed in December 2024.[24] However, due to geopolitical complications in Ukraine, there have been no notable consultations between the Kremlin, the Biden/Trump Administrations, or major European powers regarding the future of Syria. This inability to communicate with the West is yet another incentive for Moscow to engage closely in dialogue with regional players.

Summing up, the Kremlin is still working on damage-limitation strategies and on defining new approaches to the rapidly changing Mediterranean political and military landscape after the recent regime change in Damascus. At the same time, it is clear that this region, as important as it is, will continue to be upstaged by the ongoing Russian-Ukrainian conflict that supersedes all of Moscow's other foreign policy challenges and priorities.

ENDNOTES

1. "«Левада-центр»: 81% россиян поддерживают вывод российских войск из Сирии [Levada-Center: 81% of Russians Support Military Forces Withdrawal from Syria], *Коммерсант [Kommersant]*," April 4, 2016, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2955310.

2. Ruslan Pukhov, "Уроки Сирии [Lessons from Syria]," *Коммерсант [Kommersant]*, December 8, 2024, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7362241#more.

3. "ВКС РФ и ВВС Сирии уничтожили более 300 террористов и 55 единиц автотехники [Air-Space Forces of Russia and the Syrian Air Force Eliminated more than 300 Terrorists and 55 Vehicles]," *Известия. [Izvestia]*, December 7, 2024, https://iz.ru/1803651/2024-12-07/vks-rf-i-vvs-sirii-unichtozhili-bolee-300-terroristov-i-55-edinitc-avtotekhniki.

4. "Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's Answers to Questions at the 22th Doha Forum," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, December 7, 2024, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1986144/.

5. Farnaz Fassihi, "Iran Was 'Defeated Very Badly' in Syria, a Top General Admits," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2025, https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/08/world/middleeast/iran-general-syria-defeat.html

6. Fassihi, "Iran Was 'Defeated Very Badly.'"

7. "Russia Acts Wisely by Not Interfering in Syria's Transfer of Power — Turkish Top Diplomat," *TASS*, January 10, 2025, https://tass.com/world/1897681?ysclid=m6di5imcud833488205.

8. TASS, "Russia Acts Wisely."

9. Ellie Cook and John Feng, "Map Shows Syria's Critical Role for Russia's Africa Operations," *Newsweek*, December 11, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/syria-critical-role-russia-africa-operations-tartus-khmeimim-1998938.

10. "Foreign Ministry's Answers to Media Questions for Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov's News Conference on the Performance of Russian Diplomacy in 2024," The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, January 14, 2025, https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/1991476/.

11. Reuters, "Sources Say Syria Has Cancelled Port Management Contract with Russia," *Baird Maritime,* January 25, 2025, https://www.bairdmaritime.com/shipping/ports/sources-say-syria-has-cancelled-port-management-contract-with-russia.

12. Associated Press, "EU Demands HTS to Expel Russian and Iranian Influence," *Harici,* December 16, 2024, https://harici.com.tr/en/eu-demands-hts-to-expel-russian-and-iranian-influence/.

13. "В Москве сообщили об установлении контактов с политкомитетом 'Хайат Тахрир аш-Шам' [In Moscow, Reports on the Establishing of Contacts with the Political Committee of 'Hay›at Tahrir al-Sham']," *Интерфакс [Interfax]*, December 12, 2024, https://www.interfax.ru/world/997446.

14. "Syria's New Elections and Draft Constitution: Al-Sharaa Outlines Timeline," *Al Arabiya News*, December 29, 2024, https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2024/12/29/syria-s-new-elections-and-draft-constitution-al-sharaa-outlines-timeline.

15. Agence France Presse (AFP), "Syria's New Leadership Urges Russia to 'Address Past Mistakes' in First Talks Since Assad's Ouster," *The Moscow Times*, January 29, 2025, https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2025/01/29/syrias-new-leadership-urges-russia-to-address-past-mistakes-in-first-talks-since-assads-ouster-a87782.

16. AFP, "Syria's New Leadership."

17. Michael Barantschik, "Syria and Russia: The 2023-24 Trade and Investment Dynamics," *Middle East Briefing*, November 13, 2023, https://www.middleeastbriefing.com/news/syria-and-russia-the-2023-24-trade-and-investment-dynamics/.

18. Masha Belikova, "Grain Shipments to Syria on Hold after Fall of Bashar al-Assad Regime," *Fastmarkets*, December 16, 2024, https://www.fastmarkets.com/insights/grain-shipments-to-syria-on-hold-after-fall-of-bashar-al-assad-regime/.

19. "Нарышкин: никакой утраты позиций России на Ближнем Востоке нет [Naryshkin: There Is No Threat of Russia Losing Its Positions in the Middle East]," *ТАСС [TASS]*, January 24, 2025, https://tass.ru/politika/22962309.

20. "Путин назвал Израиль главным бенефициаром событий в Сирии [Putin Called Israel the Main Beneficiary of Events in Syria]," *Коммерсант [Kommersant]*, December 19, 2024, https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/7384483?ysclid=m6df880sos745330201.

21. Коммерсант, "Путин назвал Израиль главным бенефициаром."

22. Benoit Faucon and Lara Seligman, "Russia Withdraws Air-Defense Systems, Other Advanced Weaponry from Syria to Libya," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 18, 2024, https://www.wsj.com/world/russia-air-defense-bases-syria-libya-25810db0.

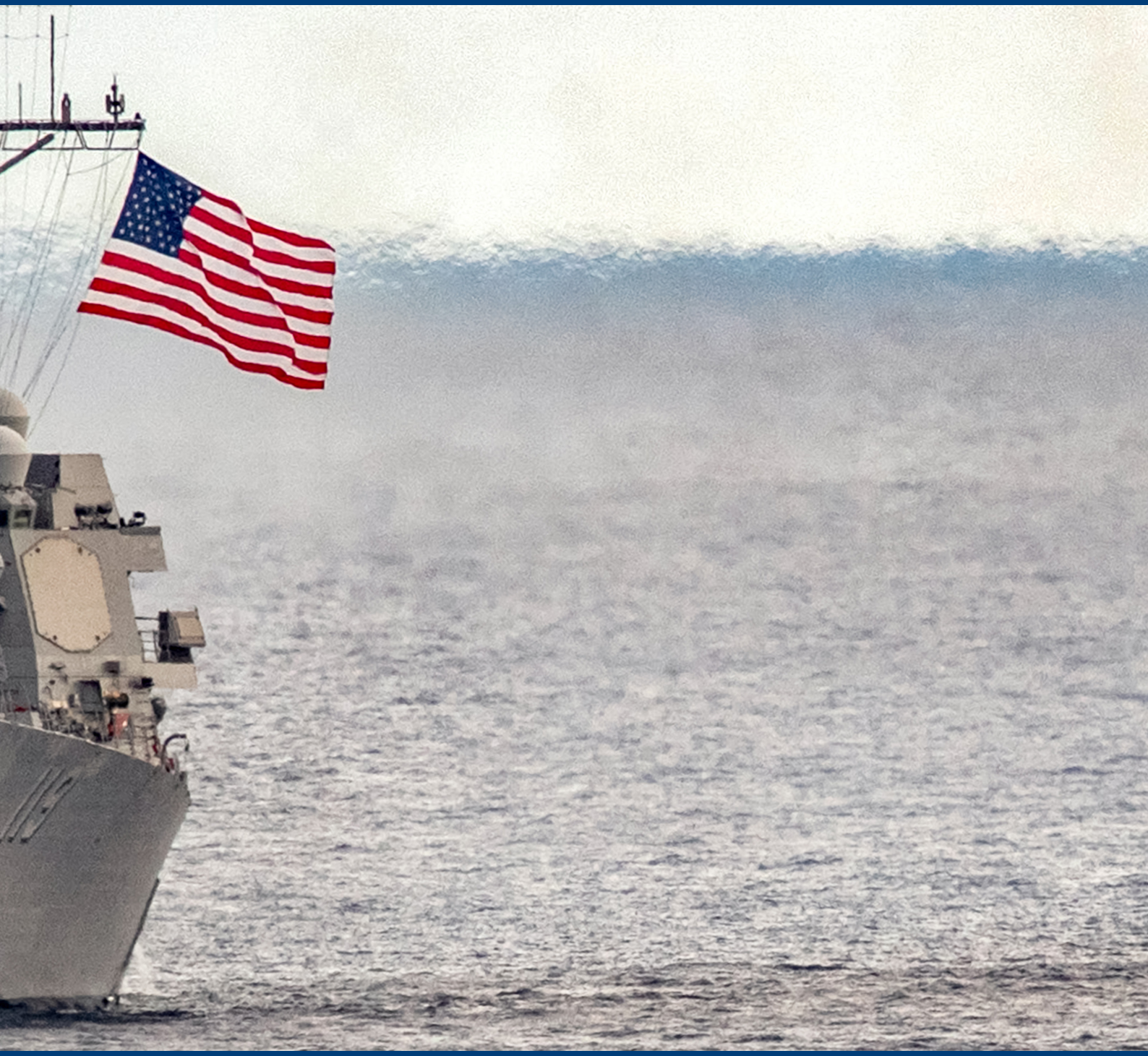
23. "'African Corps' Completes Formation of Contingent in Libya," *African Initiative*, December 22, 2023, https://afrinz.ru/en/2023/12/african-corps-completes-formation-of-contingent-in-libya/.

24. "Security Council Press Statement on Situation in Syria," United Nations Security Council, December 17, 2024, https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15943.doc.htm.

CHAPTER TWO

The United States of America and Eastern Mediterranean Security

In this photo obtained from the US Department of Defense, the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer, USS Delbert D. Black (DDG 119), sails in the Mediterranean Sea on December 31, 2023. (Photo by Nolan PENNINGTON / US Department of Defense / AFP)



The United States of America and Eastern Mediterranean Security

Robert Mason | Non-Resident Fellow at The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

Robert Mason is a Non-Resident Fellow with The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington. Previously, he was Director and Associate Professor in the Middle East Studies Center at the American University in Cairo. Robert has research expertise in the politics, international relations and foreign policies of the Middle East with an emphasis on the Gulf states. He has provided research and advice for the Instituto per gli studi di politica internationale (ISPI), Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, Dutch Ministry of Defence, Delegation of the European Union to Egypt, and the Government of South Korea, amongst others.

Introduction

The Mediterranean has often been a contested space, affected by the demise of the Ottoman Empire and the end of European empires in North Africa after the Second World War.[1] U.S. interests in the Middle East have fluctuated over time, constituting relatively modest objectives: maintaining energy supplies; countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction, counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation, support for key allies such as Israel—including Camp David compliance; and competing with other great powers. The U.S. had also supported the two-state solution over a period of decades, however President Trump's pick for the role of U.S. ambassador to Israel, Mike Huckabee, has previously endorsed a "one-state solution."[2]

Since Washington's 2017 strategic reorientation towards Russia and China, the war in Ukraine and competition with China have taken on a greater significance in U.S. foreign policy than Eastern Mediterranean security. That was the case until the war in Gaza began on October 7, 2023. The Biden administration has continued to work closely with Prime Minister Netanyahu's coalition government during Israel's military campaigns in Gaza, Lebanon, and beyond, especially in providing additional U.S. military deployments to the region.[3] The Gaza war has fundamentally undermined the Abraham Accords, which rested on further Arab state normalization with Israel. However, a multitude of other trends and issues have impinged on energy projects in the region. For example, the U.S. revoked its initial support for the EastMed pipeline project—transporting gas from Egypt and Israel to Cyprus and Greece and onto the rest of Europe—for economic and commercial reasons (as the pipeline bypasses Türkiye and therefore adds to geostrategic tensions) and for environmental concerns, with green energy projects now being preferred.[4] There may still be potential in the Eastern Mediterranean Energy Forum, since it could lead to cooperation on a wider range of energies, but again, this hinges on resolving the war in Gaza.[5]

This chapter focuses mainly on contemporary U.S. engagement in the Eastern Mediterranean—comprised of Cyprus, Egypt, Greece, Israel, the Palestinian Territories, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Türkiye—where conflict and state fragmentation have facilitated some efforts at de-escalation as well as local invitations or support for alternative external power engagement, including from Russia and China.

Funding and Assistance

U.S. bilateral assistance has tended to concentrate on just two regional states: Israel and Egypt. Between 1946 and 2023, U.S. economic and military aid to Israel amounted to about $300 billion,[6] while U.S. aid to Egypt, in second place, amounted to more than $150 billion.[7] In 1981, one of the first USAID-managed programs in the region was Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC), conceived to encourage scientific cooperation between Egypt and Israel. The Middle East Multilaterals (MEM), part of the Economic Support Fund and the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, focused on building technical cooperation between Arabs and Israelis. MEM continues to support the Middle East Desalination Research Center (MEDRC) in Oman. Founded in 1996, MEDRC is seen by the U.S. as a part of the Middle East peace process as it includes Israelis. The U.S. contribution is marginal, typically amounting to less than $1 million per year.[8] The U.S. is also an observer of the Synchroton-light Experimental Science and Applications in the Middle East (SESAME) which opened in Jordan in 2017.[9] The Middle

East Partnership for Peace (MEPPA) was set up as two concurrent programs in 2021: one USAID program to support Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation, and another, a U.S. international development corporation to strengthen the Palestinian financial sector. The $250 million allocated for 2021-2025 is increasingly being spent on the USAID track.[10]

U.S. policy in the Middle East experienced a step change following 9/11 terror attacks. Washington's neo-conservative elite led a militarized response in the form of the Global War on Terror (GWOT), centering first on Afghanistan (2001) and then Iraq (2003). In contrast to the many smaller State Department and USAID programs, GWOT cost an estimated $9 trillion dollars,[11] a deficit that has arguably reshaped the domestic U.S. political landscape and limited U.S. ambitions abroad, enabling other actors to fill the vacuum.

One of the larger programs aimed at civil society and democratic reform, the Middle East Partnerships Initiative (MEPI), launched in 2002, had modest impacts after 20 years and $1 billion spent.[12] Furthermore, President Trump's 2020 proclamation recognizing Morocco's sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara surpassed MEPI support for Western Saharan civil society capacity building—a move that followed Morocco's normalization with Israel through the Abraham Accords.[13] Middle East Regional (MER) is another USAID-managed project designed to support action on climate change, water and food security, state fragility, democracy and governance, and inclusive economic growth. MER's budget in 2024 was just $8 million, intended to complement rather than replace foreign bilateral assistance.[14]

U.S. Policy, Threats and Challenges

Despite many in the region having become receiving, transit, and (increasingly) sending states for refugees and migrants—escaping war zones, extreme poverty, and state collapse—there has been no holistic U.S. strategy in response.[15] Moreover, there has been a recurrent theme of lost credibility —President Obama's 'leading from behind' on Libya in 2011,[16] or inaction following Bashar Assad crossing a 'red line' by using chemical weapons in Syria in 2015.[17] This emboldened Russia, whose support and involvement secured Assad's patronage alongside military support from Hezbollah and the Iranian Quds Force. President Assad's attempts to generate revenues put Syria at the heart of the regional Captagon trade. This fact, along with attempts to address reconstruction and the return of refugees to Syria, perversely encouraged many regional states and the Arab League—initially breaking off diplomatic relations—only to reinstate them. Assad's overthrow in early December 2024 simply adds more uncertainty to U.S. policy and the regional environment going into the first year of the second Trump presidency.

The Arab Gulf States have continued to secure for themselves a key role in the Mediterranean in recent years, first through the Arab Peace Initiative, which set the conditions for normalization with Israel in 2002. Neither Israel nor the U.S., during the Second Intifada and the GWOT, were ready or willing to incorporate this approach into their own respective policies. This was largely for domestic political reasons. Qatar, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait have continued to play key roles in the political economy of various North African and Levantine states, up to and post-Arab Spring. Their investments have been especially important to Egypt's economic stability, along with UAE mediation over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). The Emirates has also developed close relations with Cyprus and Greece. The U.S. and India are both involved in the I2U2 Group with Israel and the UAE, and through the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC)—designed to shift focus away from China and

progressively integrate the Indo-Pacific with Europe through the Arabian Peninsula. These efforts have so far been undermined by the war in Gaza.

France is also playing a greater role in Gulf affairs, which may lead to more joint initiatives in the Levant, where it has had historic, but now waning, influence. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman briefly detained Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri in Riyadh in 2017 in protest of Hezbollah's role in Lebanese politics.[18] It was French President Macron, not President Trump, who helped secure his release.

U.S. foreign policy often hinges on the U.S. president's political will to act. Where President Trump did act, his "scorched earth" and limited initiatives towards the Palestinians, such as 'Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israel People,' have been roundly rejected by the Palestinian leadership for their bias in favor of Israel.[19] Amid further conflict and absent a viable peace process, pressures associated with the U.S.-led Abraham Accords are creating a series of domestic and regional tensions.[20]

Into Biden's administration in 2021 and policy impact in the Middle East was deliberately limited. The result of a lack of U.S. pressure more broadly can be attributed to outcomes such as disintegration in Libya, democratic backsliding in Tunisia since July 2021, and growing political instability in the Sahel as both the U.S. and EU focused on limited terrorism and migration concerns. Diplomacy with Iran was slow, and absent snapback into the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran has been relatively free to continue to develop its nuclear, missile and drone programs. Although there were some U.S. negotiations with Saudi diplomats on the establishment of a Palestinian state, that effort appears to have peaked on October 6, 2023.[21] The U.S. Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, has spent many months since then attempting to prevent escalation during the Gaza war. Still, his efforts have ultimately failed, and Israeli strikes have continued against targets in Syria, Iran and Lebanon.

U.S. engagement with local partners, such as Türkiye and Egypt, remains piecemeal and strained. There are U.S.-Türkiye tensions over the Kurdish community, policies towards Iran, hosting the Hamas leadership, and Turkish acquisition of Russian missiles and congressional holds an major new arms sales to Ankara. However, Türkiye is an important NATO member and remains vital to several policy briefs, even if U.S.-Türkiye relations remain rather transactional.[22] U.S. relations with Cyprus have been much better, with both countries engaging in a strategic dialogue in 2024.[23]

In a complex security, energy, and terrorism environment. However, U.S. policy has focused on tactical military cooperation and external threats, rather than addressing domestic socioeconomic conditions in many countries. The MENA region has a history of poor infrastructure connectivity, compromised by political tensions and instability, which slows progress further. Energy projects with the Arab Gulf States have driven opportunities, such as the three-way deal between the UAE, Israel, and Jordan, until Jordan cancelled in protest of the Gaza war.[24] Beyond Gaza, the Cyprus issue, Greece-Türkiye maritime border delineation—although a détente has existed since May 2024[25]—and the Libyan civil war will continue to have a bearing.[26] The Egypt-Türkiye rapprochement goes some way to advancing cooperation on Libya, but it will take many years for the damage and chaos in Libya to be reversed.[27]

Meanwhile, China has stepped in with its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in a more meaningful way than the U.S. or IMEC (so far), advancing cooperation across retail, financing, and manufacturing. China is a major trading partner and a growing influence in many of the Gulf states. In addition, there is some analytical coverage of China's prepositioning of dual-use material in ports where it has a presence.[28] However, contrary to many western states, China's arms sales and overall foreign policy impact is minimal.[29] China is growing its regional diplomatic role: having helped broker the Saudi-Iran normalization deal in 2023; bringing representatives from Fatah and Hamas and others to Beijing in July 2024 during the Gaza war; and opposing Israel's violation of Lebanese sovereignty.[30] Since the onset of Israel's war on Gaza, the United States has suffered from severe reputation damage in the Arab world and China is the prime beneficiary.[31] Jordanians, Lebanese, and Mauritanians view China as a more prudent security actor than the U.S., and even in Kuwait—which relied on U.S. ousting Iraqi troops during the 1991 Gulf war—popular opinion is almost evenly split between the U.S. and China.[32]

Conclusion

Robust engagement throughout America's unipolar moment in the 1990s could have yielded a socioeconomic renaissance along the southern shores of the Mediterranean before the Camp David summit in 2000 and long before the Arab Spring crystalized state fragility and prized regime survival. The GWOT clearly squandered U.S. leverage over adversaries such as Iran. Some of the trillions of dollars lost in the GWOT could have supported substantial healthcare, education and industrialization projects throughout the Global South, which when combined, could have generated unprecedented levels of economic development, integration, and good will. U.S. policy has been incredibly narrow, seeking to avoid regional spillover from the U.S./Israel and Iran's so-called "Shadow War"—cyber and economic warfare, military strikes, and assassinations. Such an approach has evidently failed. Instead, adapting and better aligning international, inter-regional, and local interests to address the roots of a series of civil and regional conflicts might re-emphasize to many the value of Pax Americana.

ENDNOTES

1. Ennio Di Nolfo, "The Cold War and the Transformation of the Mediterranean, 1960-1975," in *The Cambridge History of the Cold War*, eds. Melvyn P. Leffler and Odd Arne Westad (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 238–257, https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521837200.013.

2. Adriana Gomez Licon and AP, "What Mike Huckabee, Trump's Pick for Israel Ambassador, Has Said about the Middle East," *Time,* November 13, 2024, https://time.com/7176436/mike-huckabee-trump-israel-ambassador-palestinians-middle-east/.

3. Neri Zilber and Felicia Schwartz, "US Adds to Military Deployments to Protect Israel from Iran Retaliation," *Financial Times,* 3 August 2024, https://www.ft.com/content/d6fd43b9-5e88-4de9-b000-16dcd2fbcf59.

4. Nektaria Stamouli, "EastMed: A Pipeline Project that Ran Afoul of Geopolitics and Green Policies," *Politico*, January 18, 2022, https://www.politico.eu/article/eastmed-a-pipeline-project-that-ran-afoul-of-geopolitics-and-green-policies/.

5. Remarks by Geoffrey R. Pyatt, "Energy and Geopolitics in the Eastern Mediterranean," *Bureau of Energy Resources, U.S. Department of State*, October 15, 2024, https://www.state.gov/energy-and-geopolitics-in-the-eastern-mediterranean/.

6. Jonathan Masters and Will Merrow, "U.S. Aid to Israel in Four Charts," *Council on Foreign Relations*, November 13, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/article/us-aid-israel-four-charts.

7. Masters and Merrow, "U.S. Aid".

8. Jeremy M. Sharp et al., "U.S. Foreign Assistance to the Middle East: Historical, Recent Trends, and the FY2024 Background Request," *Congressional Research Service Report*, August 15, 2023, 11, https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R46344.

9. "What is SESAME?," SESAME,, https://www.sesame.org.jo/about-us/what-is-sesame.

10. Sharp et al., "U.S. Foreign Assistance," 11.

11. Jill Kimball, "Costs of the 20-Year War on Terror: $8 Trillion and 900,000 Deaths," *Brown University*, September 1, 2021, https://www.brown.edu/news/2021-09-01/costsofwar.

12. Amy Hawthorne, "The Middle East Partnership Initiative: Questions Abound," *Sada,* August 26, 2008, https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/2008/08/the-middle-east-partnership-initiative-questions-abound?lang=en.

13. Donald J. Trump, "Proclamation on Recognizing the Sovereignty of the Kingdom of Morocco over the Western Sahara," The Trump White House Archives, December 10, 2020, https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/proclamation-recognizing-sovereignty-kingdom-morocco-western-sahara/.

14. Sharp et al., "U.S. Foreign Assistance," 11.

15. Jon B. Alterman et al., *Restoring the Eastern Mediterranean as a U.S. Strategic Anchor*, (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 22, 2018), https://www.csis.org/analysis/restoring-eastern-mediterranean-us-strategic-anchor.

16. Michael Boyle, "Obama: Leading from Behind' on Libya," *The Guardian,* August 27, 2011, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/aug/27/obama-libya-leadership-nato.

17. Patrice Taddonio, "'The President Blinked': Why Obama Changed Course on the 'Red Line' in Syria," *PBS Frontline*, May 25, 2015, https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/article/the-president-blinked-why-obama-changed-course-on-the-red-line-in-syria/#:~:text=One%20year%20earlier,%20President%20Barack%20Obama%20had%20described.

18. "Saad Hariri: Saudis Detaining Lebanon PM Says Michel Aoun," *BBC News*, November 15, 2017, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-41995939.

19. Round table with a senior U.S. diplomat, March 2, 2023.

20. Robert Mason, Guy Burton, and Banafsheh Keynoush, *The Abraham Accords: National Security, Regional Order and Popular Representation* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2025).

21. Franklin Foer, "The War that Would Not End," *The Atlantic,* September 25, 2024, https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2024/09/israel-gaza-war-biden-netanyahu-peace-negotiations/679581/.

22. Rich Outzen and Can Kasapoglu, "US-Turkey Relations in an Era of Geopolitical Conflict," *The Defense Journal*, no.3 (June 2024), https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/ac-turkey-defense-journal/us-turkey-relations-in-an-era-of-geopolitical-conflict/.

23. Menelaos Hadjicostis, "US, Cyprus Embark on Strategic Dialogue that Officials Say Demonstrates Closest-Eve Ties," *Associated Press*, June 17, 2024, https://apnews.com/article/cyprus-us-strategic-dialogue-defense-energy-security-visa-waiver-0775383a479e70e8d5e5c5f4a2d4912a.

24. Bruce Riedel and Natan Sachs, "Israel, Jordan, and the UAE's Energy Deal is Good News," *Brookings*. November 23, 2021, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/israel-jordan-and-the-uaes-energy-deal-is-good-news/#:~:text=This%20week%20in%20Dubai,%20Israel,%20Jordan,%20and%20the; "Jordan Refuses to Sign Water, Energy Deal with Israel," *Arab News*, November 17, 2023, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2410471/middle-east.

25. Sinem Cengiz, "Gulf States May Benefit From Turkish – Greek Détente," *Arab News*, May 17, 2024, https://www.arabnews.com/node/2512271.

26. John Calabrese, "How the 'New' Eastern Mediterranean Can Serve as a Bridge between the Gulf and Europe," *Manara Magazine,* June 18, 2024, https://manaramagazine.org/2024/06/how-the-new-eastern-mediterranean-can-serve-as-a-bridge-between-the-gulf-and-europe/.

27. Giorgio Cafiero, "Sisi's Visit Solidifies a New Phase in Egypt and Turkey's Ties," *New Arab*, September 10, 2024, https://www.newarab.com/analysis/sisis-visit-solidifies-new-phase-egypt-and-turkeys-ties.

28. Zongyan Zoe Liu, "Tracking China's Control of Overseas Ports," *Council on Foreign Relations*, August 26, 2024, https://www.cfr.org/tracker/china-overseas-ports.

29. Robert Mason, "China and Regional Stability in the Middle East: Economics, Engagement and Great Power Competition," in *Routledge Companion to China and the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Yahia H. Zoubir (Abingdon: Routledge, 2023), 125–139, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003048404.

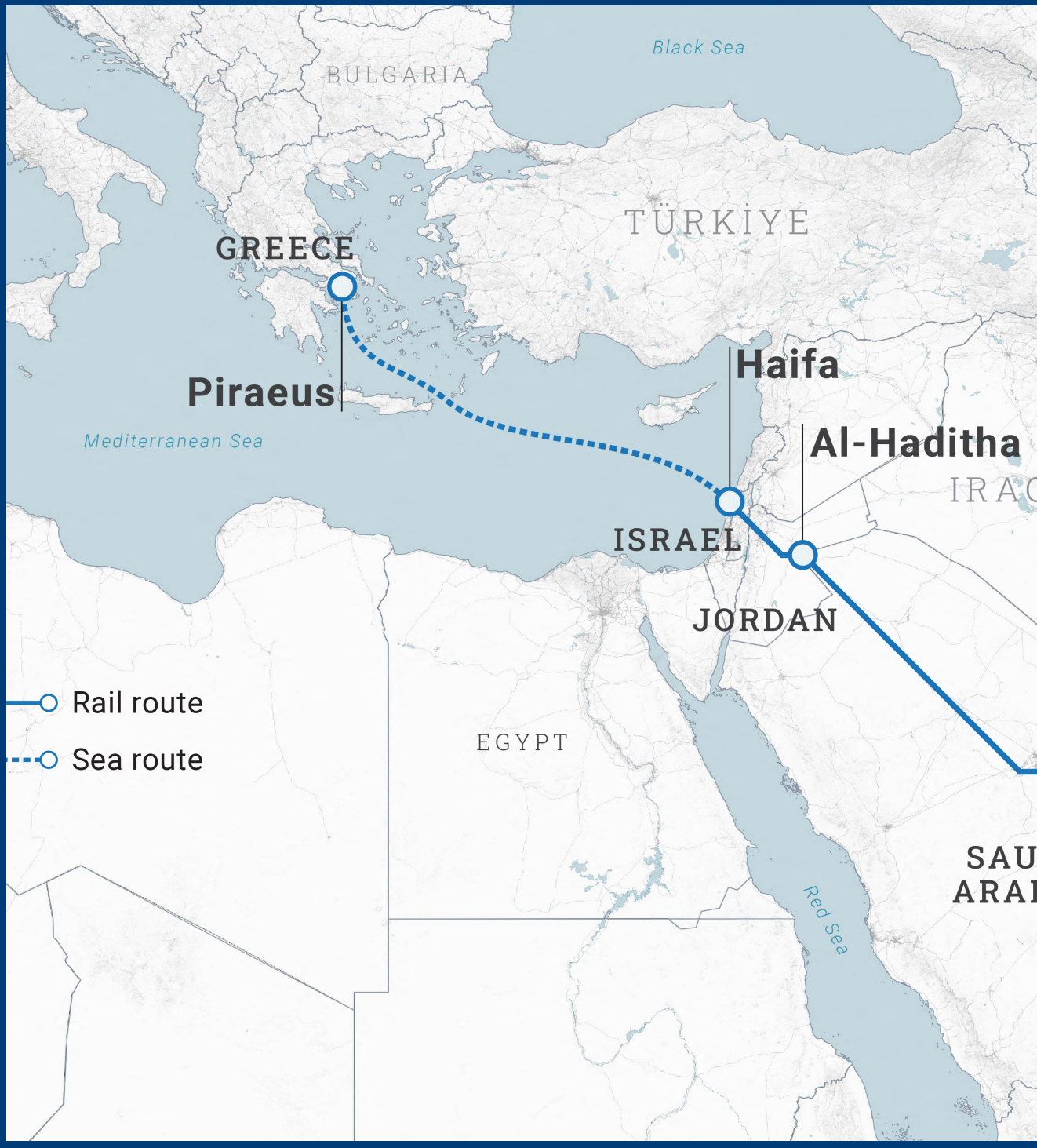
30. "China Says It Opposes Any Violation of Lebanon's Sovereignty," *Reuters*, September 29, 2024, https://shorturl.at/TbJow.

31. Michael Robbins, Amaney A. Jamal, and Mark Tessler, "America Is Losing the Arab World and China Is Reaping the Benefits," *Arab Barometer*, June 11, 2024, https://www.arabbarometer.org/media-news/america-is-losing-the-arab-world-and-china-is-reaping-the-benefits/.

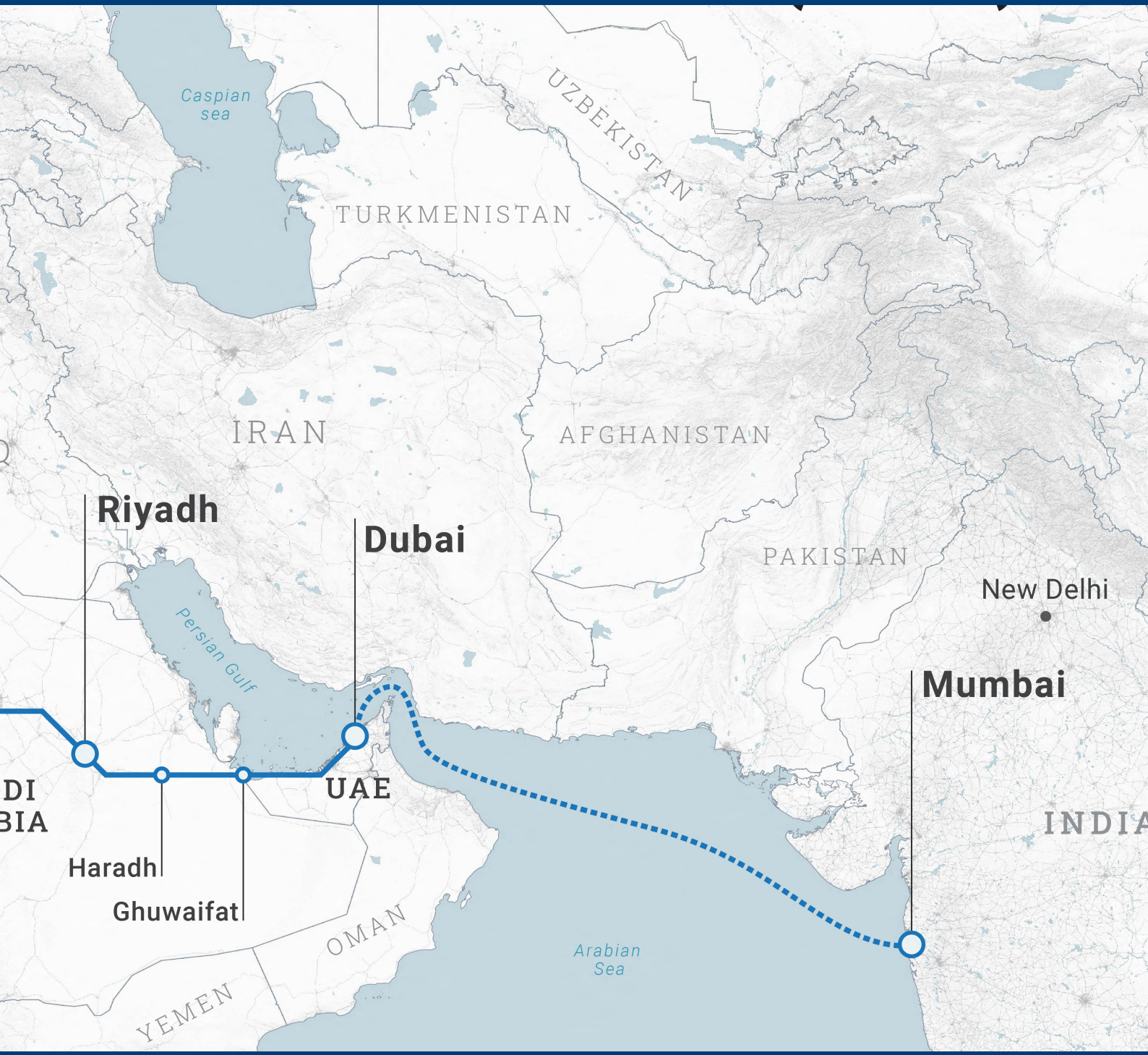
32. Robbins, Jamal, and Tessler, "America Is Losing the Arab World."

CHAPTER THREE

IMEC's Ambitious Gamble: Overcoming Geopolitical Obstacles in a Fractured Mediterranean



An infographic titled "India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)" created in Ankara, Turkiye on September 13, 2023. (Photo by Elmurod Usubaliev / ANADOLU AGENCY / Anadolu via AFP)



IMEC's Ambitious Gamble: Overcoming Geopolitical Obstacles in a Fractured Mediterranean

Dalia Ghanem | Senior Fellow and Director of the Conflict and Security Program at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs.

Dalia Ghanem is a senior fellow and director of the Conflict and Security program at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs. Her research focuses on Middle Eastern and North African politics, including issues of political violence, radicalization, civil-military relations, and gender studies. Previously, Ghanem served as director of the MENA program and senior analyst at the European Institute for Security Studies (EUISS). She is the author of Understanding the Persistence of Competitive Authoritarianism in Algeria (Palgrave Macmillan, 2022), and has contributed to numerous scholarly publications, including "How Border Peripheries are Changing the Nature of Arab States" (2023) and "Russia Rising: Putin's Foreign Policy in the Middle East and North Africa" (2021). Ghanem is a member of the Africa board of GI-TOC Global Initiative. Ghanem's analysis is regularly featured in leading media outlets including Al Jazeera, the Middle East Eye, and Le Monde, among others.

Introduction

The September 2024 India-UAE Virtual Trade Corridor agreement[1] — designed to streamline trade and reduce logistics costs — was met with celebration in Indian media, highlighting India's proactive role in advancing the ambitious India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC).[2] This enthusiasm, however, may be premature. While the Corridor was formally introduced during the 2023 G20 summit in New Delhi — with the EU, the United States, and other countries signing a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) — translating this vision into reality faces formidable challenges.

Envisioned as a multimodal trade route connecting India to Europe via the Middle East, IMEC proposes a ship-to-rail system bypassing the Suez Canal, potentially reducing shipping times by 40%.[3] Beyond transport, IMEC aims to foster digital connectivity, establish a renewable energy grid, and facilitate a green hydrogen pipeline, offering Europe an alternative energy source to natural gas and other hydrocarbons from Russia.[4] However, this necessitates overcoming significant technical and financial obstacles. Constructing the required infrastructure across diverse terrains and jurisdictions demands immense investment and coordination. Securing long-term commitment from stakeholders, particularly in the face of competing priorities and the established presence of China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), poses a further challenge.

Yet, the most formidable hurdle remains the complex geopolitical landscape. Regional tensions create a volatile environment: the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, Israel's tense relations with Iran, the ongoing genocide in Gaza, the war on Lebanon, and conflict in Syria and Yemen. For instance, Yemen presents a significant challenge to Saudi Arabia's security and IMEC, creating volatility along the border — with cross-border attacks and the spread of extremism — diverting resources away from economic development. Furthermore, it could disrupt the Corridor's physical infrastructure, particularly the planned railway line through Saudi Arabia and Jordan. Security concerns, political disputes, or even sabotage could hinder the railway, potentially jeopardizing IMEC's long-term success.

Also, Türkiye, a pivotal player in the Mediterranean, has voiced its strong opposition to IMEC, asserting its strategic importance in the region. Erdogan has explicitly stated, "We say that there is no corridor without Türkiye,"[5] underscoring any viable economic corridor in the region must include Türkiye's participation. This further complicates the project's prospects for success.

To better understand these challenges, it's important to consider IMEC's geographic scope. IMEC envisions a multimodal network originating in India, traversing the UAE, and utilizing a rail system across Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel (Haifa Port) before reaching European ports — Piraeus in Greece, largely operated by Chinese Cosco — via the Mediterranean Sea. This raises concerns about the feasibility of constructing infrastructure and securing long-term commitments. Besides, bypassing the Suez Canal raises questions about the implications for Egypt's economy and national security. The Suez Canal is a major global trade artery, generating substantial revenues for Egypt. In 2023, the Canal's annual revenues reached a record of $9.4 billion.[6]

The ongoing conflicts in Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria could make investors and stakeholders hesitant to commit to IMEC, given the risks associated with operating in such volatile environments. Ultimately, the lack of sustainable peace and de-escalation between Israel and Hamas threatens the very existence of IMEC, potentially derailing the entire project before it truly takes shape.[7]

The Saudi-Iranian Fault Line: Implications for IMEC

The success of IMEC hinges on regional stability and cooperation, yet the reality on the ground presents significant challenges. Despite some progress in relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, lasting trust remains elusive. This is partly due to their opposing views on Iran's continued support for the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, and various Shia militias in Iraq and Syria. Without a more stable foundation in this crucial relationship, long-term planning and investment in IMEC may prove challenging.

Ongoing proxy conflicts between the two regional powers, fueled by years of mistrust, cast a shadow over the IMEC project. While the 2023 China-brokered rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran offered a glimmer of hope, this reconciliation remains fragile, particularly considering recent events.[8]

In Yemen, the agreement initially curbed Houthi aggression towards Saudi Arabia, prompting Riyadh to engage in direct negotiations with the Houthis. However, the recent Gaza war has disrupted these efforts. The Houthis, in solidarity with Palestine, engaged in attacks on international commercial vessels in the Red Sea, disrupting vital trade routes and escalating regional tensions. This renewed instability jeopardizes and undermines prospects for Saudi-Houthi talks towards a final roadmap.

Meanwhile, Yemen remains a devastated battleground in the broader Saudi-Iranian rivalry. With 4.5 million people displaced, 17.6 million facing hunger, and 80% living in poverty, the country is witnessing "one of the worst ongoing humanitarian crises in the world."[9]

IMEC: Navigating the Israeli Factor

The ongoing genocidal campaign in Gaza[10] and the fragile ceasefire with Lebanon, coupled with the potential for escalating tensions with Iran, cast a shadow of instability over the entire region and significantly diminish its attractiveness for trade — businesses and investors naturally seek stability and predictability.

Israel and its allies partly drive the IMEC project, aimed at fostering normalized relations with Arab states. This goal faces significant challenges. IMEC's collaboration with Israel could negatively impact the image of participating governments and potentially lead to internal instability.[11] Even before October 7, 2023, public support for normalization with Israel was already very low in the region, as evidenced by Arab Barometer.[12] The events of October 7 further shifted the landscape, resulting in substantial reputational damage and a loss of global credibility for Israel and its allies,[13] further complicating normalization efforts.

Israel's genocidal campaign in Gaza after Hamas's Al Aqsa Flood reverberated throughout the region, triggering a cascade of responses and a worsening security environment. First, in Lebanon, in response to Hezbollah's attacks on northern Israel, Israel launched a brutal campaign that devastated southern Lebanon, including the assassination of Hezbollah's leader.[14] Israeli attacks have inflicted a heavy toll on Lebanese civilians, with the Health

Minister reporting 1,640 fatalities and 8,408 injuries.[15] Israel's relentless bombing has triggered a mass exodus of civilians, forcing an estimated 1 million people — a staggering 20% of the population — to flee their homes.[16]

Second, already weakened by protracted civil war, Syria faces further destabilization from frequent Israeli airstrikes targeting Iranian and Hezbollah positions within its borders. As Syria embarks on its post-Assad chapter, Israel is planning further settlement of the occupied Golan Heights, aggravating regional tensions.

Third, following the Israeli bombing of its embassy in Damascus in April, Iran retaliated with missile strikes, resulting in a relentless tit-for-tat cycle, with each side responding in kind, further escalating hostilities.

Israel's internal political instability, exacerbated by the ongoing wars in Gaza and Lebanon, has placed a significant, considerable strain on the country's finances. This raises serious questions about its capacity to commit to an ambitious project like IMEC.

The conflict has forced a shift in priorities, diverting substantial resources towards military spending and incurring the costs of sustained displacement for border-area residents. As Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich acknowledged, "Israel's economy bears the burden of the longest and most expensive war in the country's history."[17] The economic repercussions are already being felt, with Israel's credit rating downgraded twice, and further downgrades anticipated.[18]

Additionally, the logistical viability of IMEC is in question, particularly given the challenges facing key infrastructure like Haifa port. The port, once envisioned as a critical hub for the Corridor, is now grappling with security issues that threaten to disrupt operations, increase costs, and undermine investor confidence. The recent Hezbollah attacks shattered its image as a safe and reliable hub and cast a shadow over its intended role in IMEC. Specifically, maritime security and industry groups have elevated their risk assessments for the port, acknowledging the potential for disruption, delays, and increased costs.[19] Despite assurances from the Israeli government, security measures have been heightened at the port and along the entire IMEC route — potentially derailing the project compared to established alternative trade routes.

The Appeal of Alternatives

While India has shown enthusiasm for IMEC and France has demonstrated commitment by appointing a special envoy, IMEC still faces significant headwinds, including logistical and financial hurdles, and the challenge of garnering widespread regional support.[20] Several factors contribute to this lukewarm reception, raising questions about the Corridor's long-term viability.

First, the exclusion of key regional players such as Qatar, Egypt, Türkiye, and Iran, raises questions about the Corridor's inclusivity and long-term viability. Second, the non-binding nature of the current MoU, coupled with the absence of signatures from key players like Israel and Jordan — noted as transit points for IMEC — casts a shadow on IMEC's future.

Third, aligning with IMEC, a project closely associated with the United States, Israel, and its European allies, carries potential risks for regional states. Regional public opinion is increasingly critical of Western complicity in Israel's actions in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria,

and any perceived association with those policies could generate domestic backlash. This sentiment is reflected in recent surveys, such as the Arab Index, which found overwhelmingly negative views of the U.S. role in the Gaza war. A staggering 94% of respondents held a negative view, with 82% rating it as "very bad." This disapproval extends to key European allies as well, with France, the UK, and Germany viewed negatively by 79%, 78%, and 75%, respectively. These findings underscore the potential political costs associated with any perceived alignment with Western powers, even on economic initiatives like IMEC.[21]

Fourth, the project is perceived as undeveloped and potentially unfeasible, particularly given the lack of a clear alternative to China's BRI. The absence of a viable alternative to BRI stems from several factors. BRI is deeply entrenched in the region, with many countries having existing investments and projects linked to it. Besides, BRI offers a comprehensive package of infrastructure development, financing, and trade opportunities that are attractive to many countries in the region. Also, China's continued dominance as the largest consumer of Gulf hydrocarbon exports further complicates matters. While the UAE's emergence as a major investor in connectivity infrastructure — especially in Africa — offers a potential alternative to China's BRI, it is not yet on the same scale. Therefore, the potential costs of jeopardizing these relationships with China, without a guaranteed and immediate alternative, outweigh the uncertain benefits of aligning with IMEC.

Finally, the rise of multipolarity in the international system has empowered regional states to assert their strategic autonomy. Perceptions of a U.S. pivot towards Asia fueled anxieties among Gulf countries, prompting them to diversify their partnerships and pursue a more independent foreign policy. Saudi Arabia exemplifies this by exploring Chinese support for its civilian nuclear program to develop uranium mining, milling, and enrichment capabilities. This is a strategic move aimed at enhancing its negotiating leverage with the United States. This evolving geopolitical landscape underscores the growing assertiveness of regional powers. The announcement of the Development Road project — a homegrown corridor initiative involving Türkiye, Iraq, Qatar, and the UAE — exemplifies this trend. The participation of Qatar and the UAE in this project signals their commitment to regional cooperation and their ambition to exercise growing influence as middle powers.

The Development Road presents a compelling alternative to the troubled IMEC. Unburdened by the political baggage that plagues IMEC, the Development Road's prospects for success appear brighter, especially that it is believed to be more cost-effective than IMEC.[22]. Its alignment with Türkiye's Middle Corridor within BRI offers access to a wider market, potentially eclipsing IMEC's reach. For now, the Turkish route seems poised to dominate the race to establish a viable trade corridor.

In conclusion, IMEC faces a complex web of challenges, from logistical hurdles and financial constraints to geopolitical risks and regional uncertainties. However, amidst these challenges lies opportunity. Rather than rely on external powers to dictate terms, it is time for countries to forge their own paths, leverage their strategic location, economic resources, and diplomatic influence to create a more interconnected and prosperous region, to take the lead in shaping their future.

ENDNOTES

1. "India, UAE Launches Virtual Trade Corridor to Enhance Ease of Doing Business," *Times of India*, September 11, 2024, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/business/india-business/india-uae-launches-virtual-trade-corridor-to-enhance-ease-of-doing-business/articleshow/113256441.cms.

2. "India Readies Its Ports to Power the Ambitious IMEC Corridor," *Business Today*, September 11, 2024, https://www.businesstoday.in/latest/economy/story/india-readies-its-ports-to-power-the-ambitious-imec-corridor-445481-2024-09-11.

3. "The India-Middle East-Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC)," *HSBC Business Go*, accessed October 31, 2024, https://www.businessgo.hsbc.com/en/article/imec-economic-corridor.

4. The immense cost and logistical complexities of developing a hydrogen economy raise concerns about its feasibility. Furthermore, the efficiency and viability of hydrogen for widespread commercial use, especially in transportation and heating, remain unproven. Adam Tooze, "Hydrogen Is the Future—or a Complete Mirage," *Foreign Policy*, July 14, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/07/14/hydrogen-is-the-future-or-a-complete-mirage/.

5. Ragip Soylu, "Turkey's Erdogan Opposes India-Middle East Transport Project," *Middle East Eye*, September 11, 2023, https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/turkey-erdogan-opposes-india-middle-east-corridor.

6. "Suez Canal Annual Revenue Hits Record $9.4 Billion, Chairman Says," *Reuters*, June 21, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/world/africa/suez-canal-annual-revenue-hits-record-94-bln-chairman-2023-06-21/.

7. EU Diplomate, interview by author, Doha, October 2024.

8. International Crisis Group, *Great Expectations: The Future of Iranian-Saudi Détente*, Middle East Briefing no. 92, (Tehran/Riyadh/Washington/Brussels: International Crisis Group, June 13, 2024), https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran-saudi-arabia/b92-great-expectations-future.

9. "Yemen: Justice Remains Elusive and Millions Still Suffering Nine Years since Armed Conflict Began," *Amnesty International*, March 25, 2024, https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2024/03/yemen-justice-remains-elusive-and-millions-still-suffering-nine-years-since-armed-conflict-began/.

10. The Israeli genocidal campaign in Gaza has resulted in a staggering loss of life, with at least 42,924 people killed, including nearly 16,765 children, over 100,833 injured, and more than 10,000 remain missing.

11. Anna Gordon, "New Poll Shows How Much Global Support Israel Has Lost," *Time*, January 17, 2024, https://time.com/6559293/morning-consult-israel-global-opinion/.

12. Michael Robbins, "How Do MENA Citizens View Normalization with Israel?," *Arab Barometer* (blog), September 21, 2022, https://www.arabbarometer.org/2022/09/how-do-mena-citizens-view-normalization-with-israel/.

13. Yasmeen Serhan, "How Israel and Its Allies Lost Global Credibility," *Time*, April 4, 2024, https://time.com/6963032/israel-netanyahu-allies-global-standing/.

14. Maya Gebeily and Milan Pavicic, "Israeli Campaign Leaves Lebanese Border Towns in Ruins, Satellite Images Show," Reuters, October 29, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-campaign-leaves-lebanese-border-towns-ruins-satellite-images-show-2024-10-28/.

15. "Lebanese Health Minister Reports 1,640 Dead, 8,408 Injured from Israeli Attacks since October 8," *Qatar News Agency*, September 28, 2024, https://www.qna.org.qa/en/News-Area/News/2024-09/28/0024-lebanese-health-minister-reports-1,640-dead,-8,408-injured-from-israeli-attacks-since-october-8.

16. Olivia Giovetti, "The Crisis in Lebanon, Explained," *Concern Worldwide US*, October 2, 2024, https://concernusa.org/news/lebanon-crisis-explained/.

17. Hanna Ziady, "Israel's Economy Could Be the Next Casualty of War with Hamas," *CNN*, October 4, 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/2024/10/04/economy/israel-economy-war-impact/index.html.

18. Steven Scheer, "More Ratings Cuts Feared After Moody's Downgrades Israel Two Notches," Reuters, October 1, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/more-ratings-cuts-feared-after-moodys-downgrades-israel-two-notches-2024-10-01/.

19. Jonathan Saul, "Maritime Industry Raises Threat Level for Israeli Ports," Reuters, September 28, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/maritime-industry-raises-threat-level-israeli-ports-2024-09-27/.

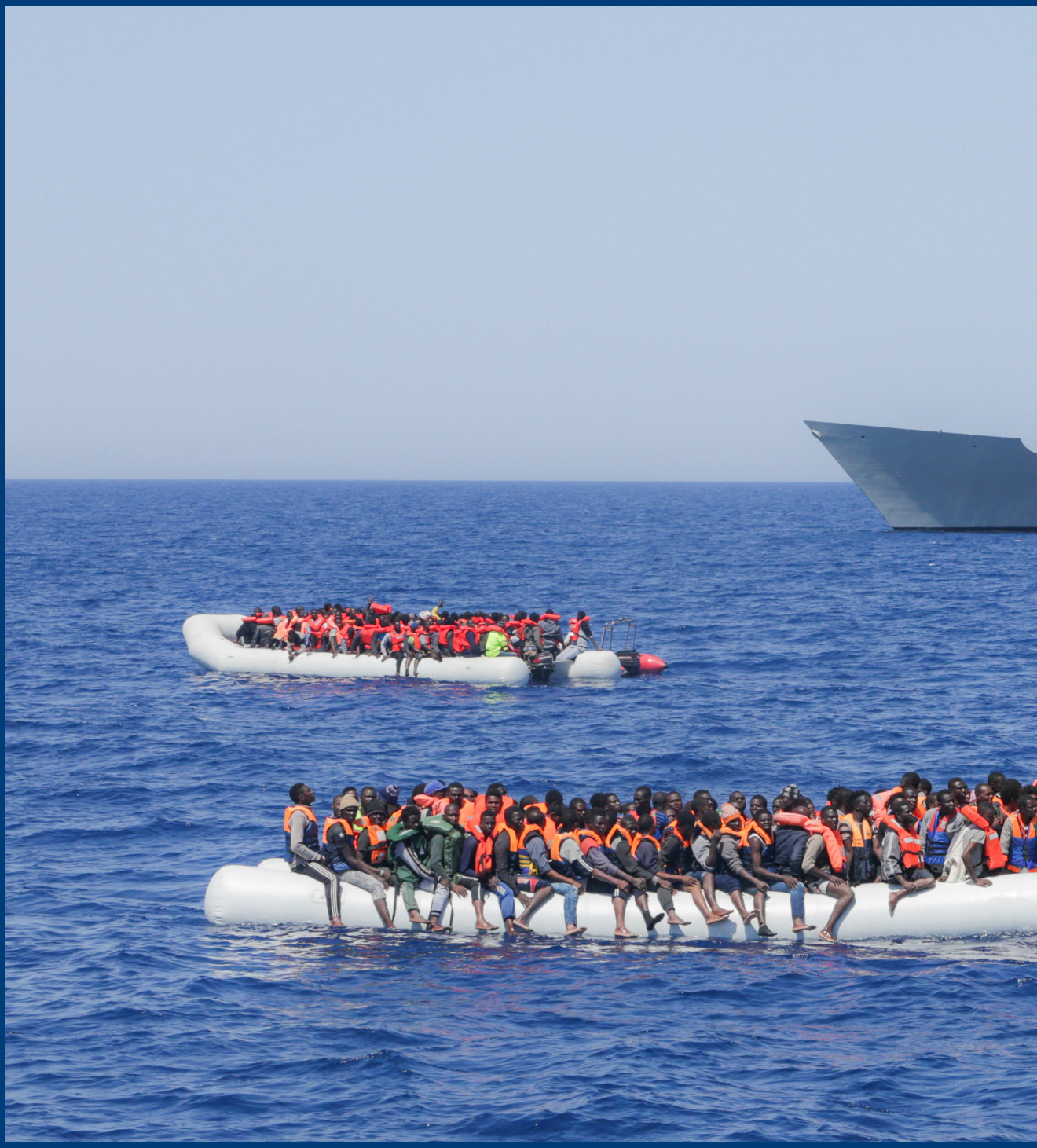
20. Retired Indian diplomate, interview by author, Doha, October 2024.

21. Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, "Arab Public Opinion about the Israeli War on Gaza," *Doha Institute*, January 10, 2024, https://arabindex.dohainstitute.org/EN/Pages/APOIsWarOnGaza.aspx#.

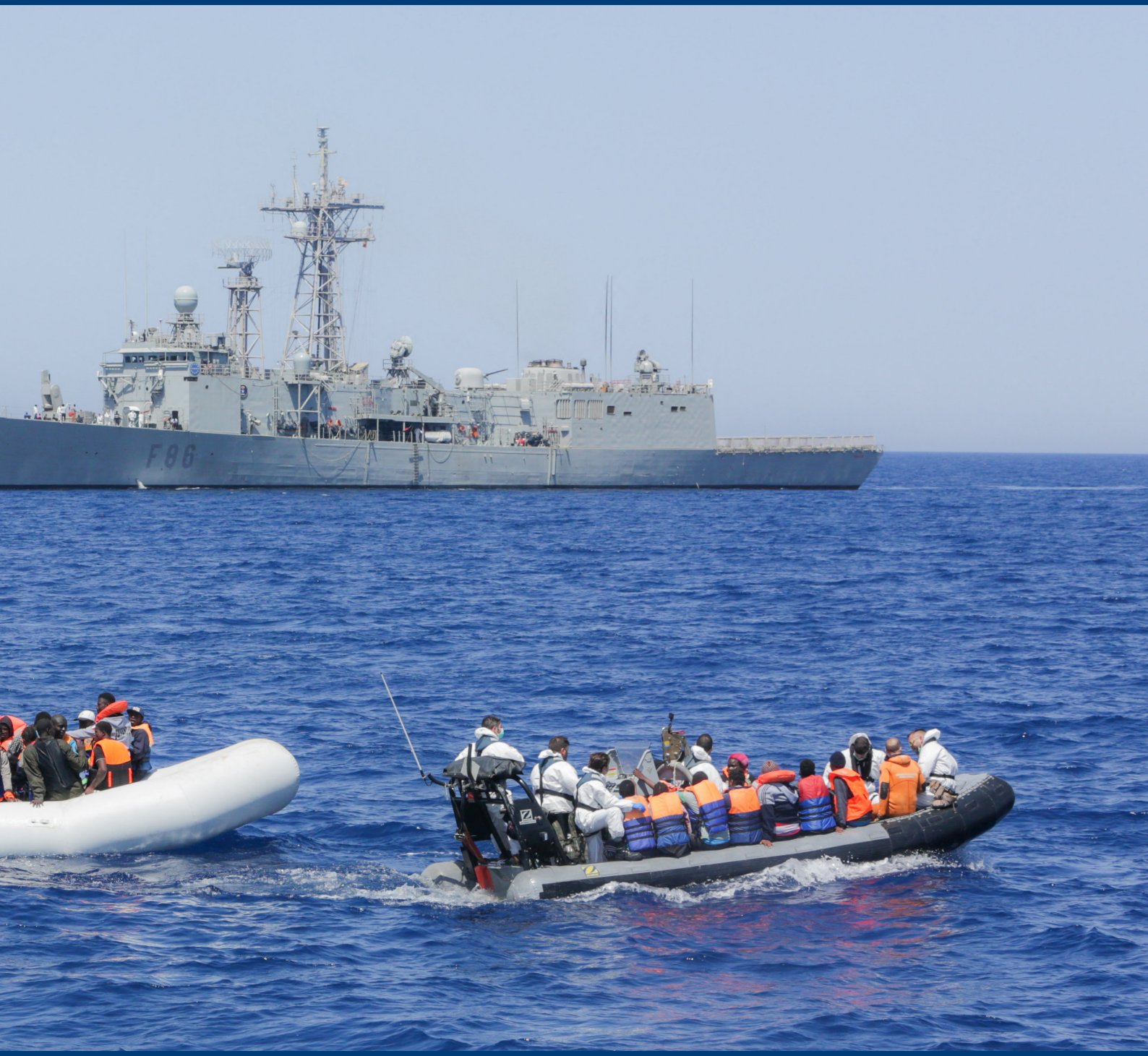
22. "Choosing Paths: Development Road or IMEC, which Benefits Trade more?," *Fibre 2 Fashion*, April 30, 2024, https://www.fibre2fashion.com/news/textiles-logistics-news/choosing-paths-development-road-or-imec-which-benefits-trade-more--294895-newsdetails.htm.

CHAPTER FOUR:

"Our Sea": Europe's Role in Mediterranean Security



Refugees and migrants are seen floating in an overcrowded rubber boat in front of a European war ship as they wait to be assisted by Italian Cost Guard on May 19, 2017, in international waters off the coast of Libya. (Photo by Christian Marquardt / NurPhoto / NurPhoto via AFP)



“Our Sea”: Europe’s Role in Mediterranean Security

Tarek Megerisi | Senior policy fellow at the Middle East and North Africa program at the European Council on Foreign Relations.

Tarek Megerisi is a senior policy fellow at the Middle East and North Africa program at the European Council on Foreign Relations. His work mainly addresses how European policymaking towards the Maghreb and Mediterranean regions can become more strategic, harmonious, and incisive – with a long-term focus on Libya. For more than a decade, Megerisi has worked with various regional, European, and multilateral authorities on providing reform and stabilization assistance to transitional states in the Middle East and North Africa. He has been involved in a range of projects, including post-conflict stabilization, development and democratization, Libya’s domestic and international political processes, economic reform in Tunisia, and the eastern Mediterranean disputes. His articles have featured in publications such as Foreign Policy magazine and the Guardian newspaper, and he has contributed to think-tank programming across the United States, Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa.

Introduction

"Mare Nostrum,"[1] 2013's Italian operation to rescue migrants, is a fitting analogy for European perspectives on Mediterranean security. Resurrecting the Roman name for the Mediterranean, Our Sea was a unilateral mission to confront illicit migration in-line with European values by focusing on search and rescue (SAR). It came at great cost and with little support from Europe's administrative heart, the European Commission (EC), receiving just 1.8 million euros.[2] Due to political pressure and financial constraints, Mare Nostrum was succeeded just a year later by the European Union's (EU) Operation Triton, managed by the EU's border agency Frontex. Operation Triton shifted focus from SAR, following highly political yet thoroughly unevidenced charges that SAR creates a pull factor for further migration.[3] Over the years, the mission continued evolving alongside the European threat-perception from their sea. In 2015, Operation Sophia was born, a fully-fledged European Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) targeting people-smugglers. In 2020, as war waged across Europe's sea in Libya, it evolved once more into Operation Irini with additional responsibilities to enforce a UN arms embargo on Libya while removing any last vestiges of SAR.

The tale of Europe's evolving Mediterranean missions is instructive regarding European perceptions of Mediterranean security. As a block, the EU represents the Mediterranean's largest economic and military power. Historically, member states managed their own security, largely limited to targeted threats from transnational organized crime. However, migration represented something new, a perceived collective and existential threat. European political dynamics conjured a perception that demanded securitized solutions over common-sense ones.[4]

In 2020, Europe's threat perception evolved again, following heightened tensions with Türkiye over energy rights in the eastern Mediterranean.[5] This different kind of threat—towards European dominance over their sea—melded with the ever-growing migration crisis to create Operation Irini. These two cases: Europe's migration management, and Europe's attempt to contain Türkiye; demonstrate fundamental European self-perceptions of its security role over their sea, its manifestations, and its implications for the region going forwards.

Mediterranean Migration Management

Compared to neighboring waterways like the Black Sea or Red Sea, the Mediterranean is comparatively bereft of significant security threats. Moreover, defense policy remains the preserve of EU member-states. Until recently, no threat warranted a collective response.

Unsurprisingly, the issue of migration broke the old paradigm. For decades, right-wing political parties were constructing the concept of "fortress Europe," stirring up cultural and socio-political fears of the other to promote restrictive migration policies without limiting actual socio-economic demands for migrants.[6] Illicit migration gradually grew, expedited and exacerbated by the destabilizing counter-revolution to the Arab Spring. In October 2013, this devolving dynamic resulted in over 300 people dying when a rickety migrant vessel sank off the coast of Lampedusa.[7] It was a tragedy that shocked Italy, and led to Mare Nostrum, the well-resourced Italian mission that, unlike the EU's Operation Triton, aimed at protecting migrants' right-to-life, dignity, and asylum.

Mare Nostrum demonstrated Europe's dominance of the Mediterranean in terms of setting policy and operational freedom. This was a unilateral mission that, aside from its purportedly good intentions, often sent Italian naval vessels into North African waters to pursue its goals. Italy's good intentions, however, also triggered a mini political crisis throughout Europe that would lead to collective European security missions into the Mediterranean.

Other major European states wouldn't fund or support Italy's mission, leaving Italy feeling abandoned and incapable of preventing thousands of migrants from relocating elsewhere throughout the continent.[8] Political pressures and costs led Italy to handover to Operation Triton—removing SAR from the mandate—for a new naval mission that policed European borders rather than the central Mediterranean as a whole.[9] It represented a triumph of Europe's right-wing over migration policy, and by extension a critical part of Mediterranean security, that would only worsen over time.

The 2015 migration crisis further radicalized European securitization of migration and subsequent externalization policies. Operation Triton became Operation Sophia. Again, Europe unilaterally reached across the Mediterranean, pursuing perceived interests aimed at disrupting people-smuggling networks in Libya. Over the subsequent five years, despite being fully aware, the EU was only making migrant crossings more dangerous.[10] Operation Sophia continued expanding securitized strategies until the EU mission blended with Italian operations,[11] cultivating a coastguard and counter-smuggling force out of Libyan militias. Here, the EU directly intervened to undermine the central government of a fragile transitional state it claimed to support by empowering militias outside governmental control.[12]

While attempts to combat migration focused on the central Mediterranean, the EU set the tone for eastern and western member states like Greece or Spain whose arrivals surged following every brutal clampdown on the central Mediterranean route. Greece and Bulgaria tried to surreptitiously push back migrants; an innocuous sounding phrase that usually translates to sinking overpopulated boats, or violently driving people back across borders. Spain represented the other side of Europe's migration policy paradigm, striking externalization deals with Morocco; however, this merely made Spain vulnerable to migration-based blackmail whenever Madrid upset Rabat.

Europe vs Türkiye

Underscoring European migration policies in the Mediterranean is a belief in European supremacy over the region. This enables the EU to project a perception of security priorities and to set a broader policy agenda regardless of efficacy or impact.

European dominance was never meaningfully challenged until Türkiye clashed with Greece and Cyprus over eastern Mediterranean gas fields. It was a long-coming, deeply rooted, dispute catalyzed by the lure of lucrative energy supplies. Ostensibly, this clash was about economic rights in the Mediterranean. Greece follows the UN Convention of the Law of the Sea, which conveniently gives islands the same maritime economic rights as the mainland, effectively making most of the eastern Mediterranean Greece's exclusive economic zone. Türkiye, along with other Mediterranean nations like Egypt and Libya, or superpowers like the United States don't follow this convention. Ankara feared losing a potential energy reservoir. Greece attempted to geopolitically subjugate Türkiye through creating the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which used economics as a gateway for deeper defense partnerships.[13] The dispute snowballed as both sides attempted to claim gas fields, and out-maneuver rivals.

Greece and Cyprus' vulnerability before the significantly more powerful Türkiye triggered an avalanche of European support, including sanctions against Türkiye and French military assets deployed to the eastern Mediterranean.[14]

The East Med became a destabilizing whirlpool, sucking in broader rivalries and other conflicts. Türkiye intervened in Libya's civil war alongside the internationally recognized government, in exchange for a maritime deal that strengthened their claims. Meanwhile, the UAE, allied with France on the opposing side of Libya's civil war, joined military exercises in the East Med.

East Mediterranean animosity towards Türkiye blended with ever-rising migration hysteria to further evolve Operation Sophia. Given German attempts to resolve Libya's worsening war through the Berlin process,[15] the EU tried to leverage its CSDP mission to better obstruct the many nations driving Libya's conflict. However, Greece, Cyprus, and France's desire to defeat Türkiye's challenge to European supremacy over the mediterranean—along with Austria, Hungary, and others obsessed with migration—defined the newly created Operation Irini,[16] which pushed Europe further away from Mare Nostrum. Its attempts to enforce a UN arms embargo on Libya conspicuously focused on Türkiye's weapons shipments, conveniently ignoring the thousands of tons of munitions flown to those assaulting Libya's internationally recognized government.

European attempts to show strength in the eastern Mediterranean neither restored European supremacy, nor prevented its new competitors from making the sea more multipolar. Despite numerous attempts to diplomatically resolve the Turkish-Greek dispute, it eventually drifted into a mutually hurting stalemate where nobody benefitted from the available natural gas reserves. Meanwhile, other competitors like the UAE rode a wave of anti-Turkish sentiment, entrenching it regionally. Other antagonistic EU rivals, like Russia, benefitted from the chaos in Libya.

Looking Ahead

Given that Europe will continue to collectively be the region's strongest economic, military, and diplomatic actor, its hegemonic status over the Mediterranean and its sense of supremacy are unlikely to change anytime soon. However, recent experiences with the sea's two major security issues—the 'cold war' in the eastern Mediterranean and Europe's securitization of migration—have established trends that will continue to destabilize the Mediterranean and Europe's role as a security provider.

A primordial issue driving insecurity in the Mediterranean and European fragmentation has been the rise of Europe's right-wing and their associated politics of fear. This dynamic is best captured by migration policy's continuing growth to define Mediterranean security, while destabilizing the region and enabling competitors to better challenge Europe. European externalization policies are predicated on closing Europe's borders, without removing the driving forces for migration, which means illicit migration will continue growing. So, Europe is effectively driving the growth of the people-smuggling industry, putting more money into the hands of transnational criminal gangs and other destabilizing actors. This will solicit ever bigger, and more expensive European responses, whilst southern Mediterranean countries and non-state actors will adopt counter-migration language to receive EU financing and support. Moreover, as the problem inevitably continues to worsen, fractures between European states widen, hurting the EU's capacity to mount cohesive policy responses to other security issues, as seen with Libya.

European supremacism also carries a strong strain of European exceptionalism that sets destabilizing precedents and weakens Europe's value-proposition to other southern neighborhood states at a time of intensifying competition. Although some European actors tried to mediate, collective EU support for Greek attempts to strong-arm Türkiye catalyzed the antagonistic politics of domination over diplomacy in the region. Europe's myopic focus also blinded them to the damage caused to other interests, such as in Libya. This supremacism coupled with the politics of fear fosters a new unwritten doctrine of strongman politics for Europe in the Mediterranean. Europe is supporting authoritarians like Libya's Haftar,[17] contrary to values at the heart of the EU's foundational treaties. This helps denigrate the global rules-based order and Europe's reputation while weakening its proposition as an ally in the face of rivals like Russia, Türkiye, or the UAE who are much more effective at being transactional. This dynamic culminated with Europe's blind support to Israel's genocide in Gaza, and egregious destruction of Lebanon, whilst using the "global rules-based order" to solicit global support against Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine.

Given dynamics instituted by Europe this past decade, Mediterranean security is headed towards destructive contestation. The next ten years will be defined by the ripples from the annihilation of Gaza, the worsening migration crisis, and the aggressive growth of a new Emirati-Russian coalition across Africa. Unless Europe adopts a more cohesive, forward-looking, pragmatic, and inclusive approach to Mediterranean security, it will not only lose its dominance, but the Mediterranean will lose its position of relative stability too.

ENDNOTES

1. This Latin term translates to "Our Sea."

2. "Frontex Joint Operation 'Triton' – Concerted Efforts to Manage Migration in the Central Mediterranean," *European Commission*, October 7, 2014, ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/memo_14_566.

3. Alejandra Rodríguez Sánchez et al., "Search-and-Rescue in the Central Mediterranean Route Does Not Induce Migration: Predictive Modeling to Answer Causal Queries in Migration Research," *Scientific Reports* 13 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-38119-4.

4. Mattia Toaldo, *Don't Close Borders, Manage Them: How to Improve EU Policy on Migration through Libya*, Policy Analysis, (Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, June 15, 2017), https://ecfr.eu/publication/dont_close_borders_manage_them_7297/.

5. Asli Aydintasbas et al., "Overview: Fear and Loathing in the Eastern Mediterranean," *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) MENA Team*, May 2020, https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern_med/.

6. Lorena Martini and Tarek Megerisi, *Road to Nowhere: Why Europe's Border Externalisation is a Dead End*, Policy Brief, (Berlin: European Council on Foreign Relations, December 14, 2023), https://ecfr.eu/publication/road-to-nowhere-why-europes-border-externalisation-is-a-dead-end/#building-fortress-europe.

7. "Italy Boat Sinking: Hundreds Feared Dead Off Lampedusa," *BBC*, October 3, 2013, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-24380247.

8. Adam Taylor, "Italy Ran an Operation that Saved Thousands of Migrants from Drowning in the Mediterranean. Why Did It Stop?," *Washington Post*, April 20, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2015/04/20/italy-ran-an-operation-that-save-thousands-of-migrants-from-drowning-in-the-mediterranean-why-did-it-stop/.

9. Duncan Robinson, "Alarm at Plan to End Italy's Mare Nostrum Rescue Operation," *Financial Times*, October 12, 2014, https://www.ft.com/content/ec9edf84-508e-11e4-8645-00144feab7de.

10. Zach Campbell, "Europe's Deadly Migration Strategy," *Politico*, February 28, 2019, https://www.politico.eu/article/europe-deadly-migration-strategy-leaked-documents/.

11. James Reynolds, "Marco Minniti: The Man who Cut the Migrant Flow to Italy," *BBC*, September 20, 2018, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-45575763.

12. Lorena Martini and Tarek Megerisi, *Road to Nowhere*.

13. Asli Aydintasbas, "Turkey: A Deal Is Possible," *European Council on Foreign Relations (ECFR) MENA Programme*, May 2020, https://ecfr.eu/special/eastern_med/turkey.

14. "France Stokes Turkey Tensions by Sending Naval Vessels to Waters Off Cyprus," *Financial Times*, August 13, 2020, https://www.ft.com/content/465ba697-451f-4601-b1a7-02eca6680edc.

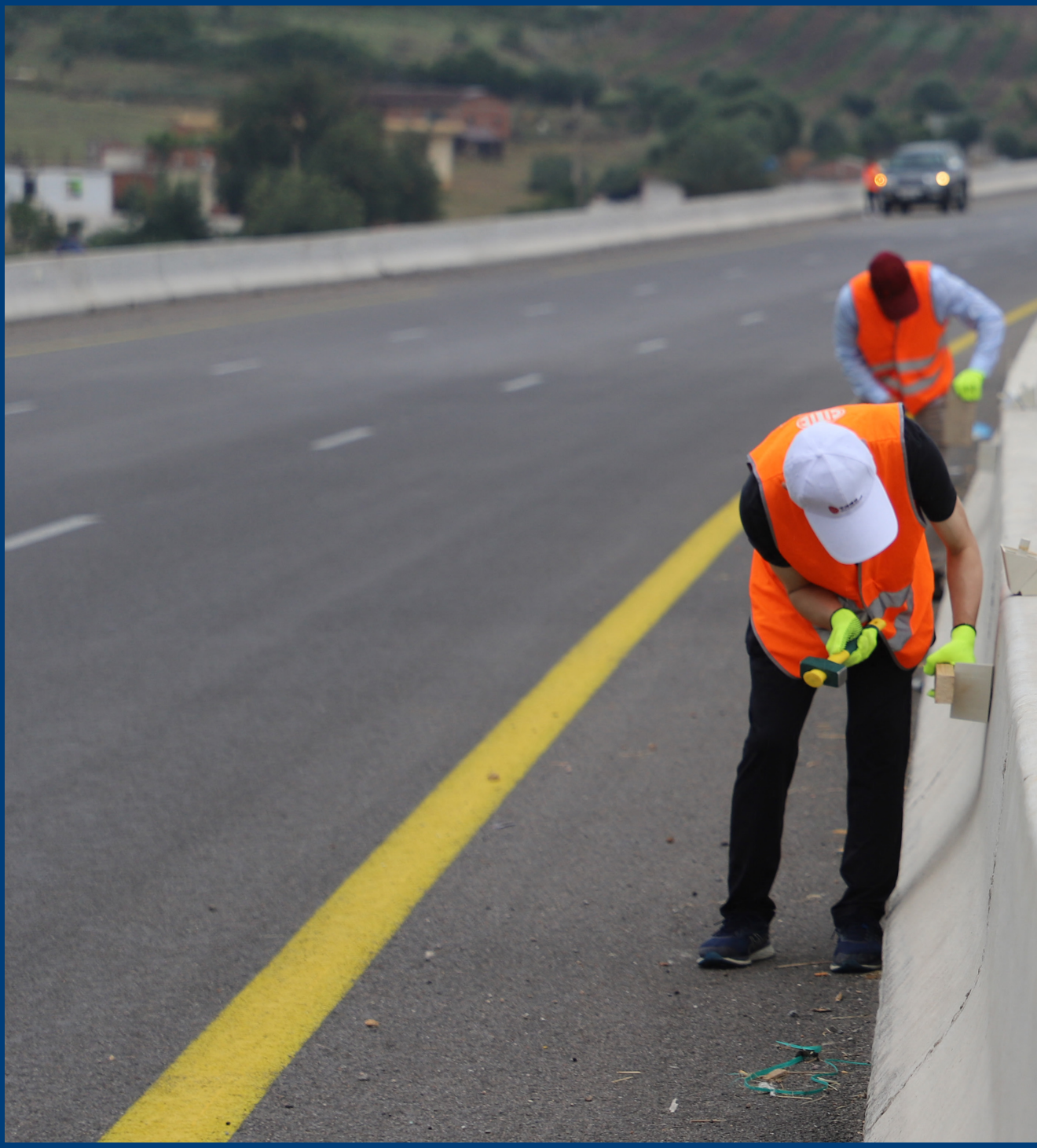
15. "Berlin International Conference on Libya – 19 January 2020: Conference Outcomes,", United Nations Support Mission in Libya, January 19, 2020, https://unsmil.unmissions.org/berlin-international-conference-libya-19-january-2020

16. Tarek Megerisi, "The EU's 'Irini' Libya Mission: Europe's Operation Cassandra," European Council on Foreign Relations, April 3, 2020, https://ecfr.eu/article/commentary_the_eus_irini_libya_mission_europes_operation_cassandra/.

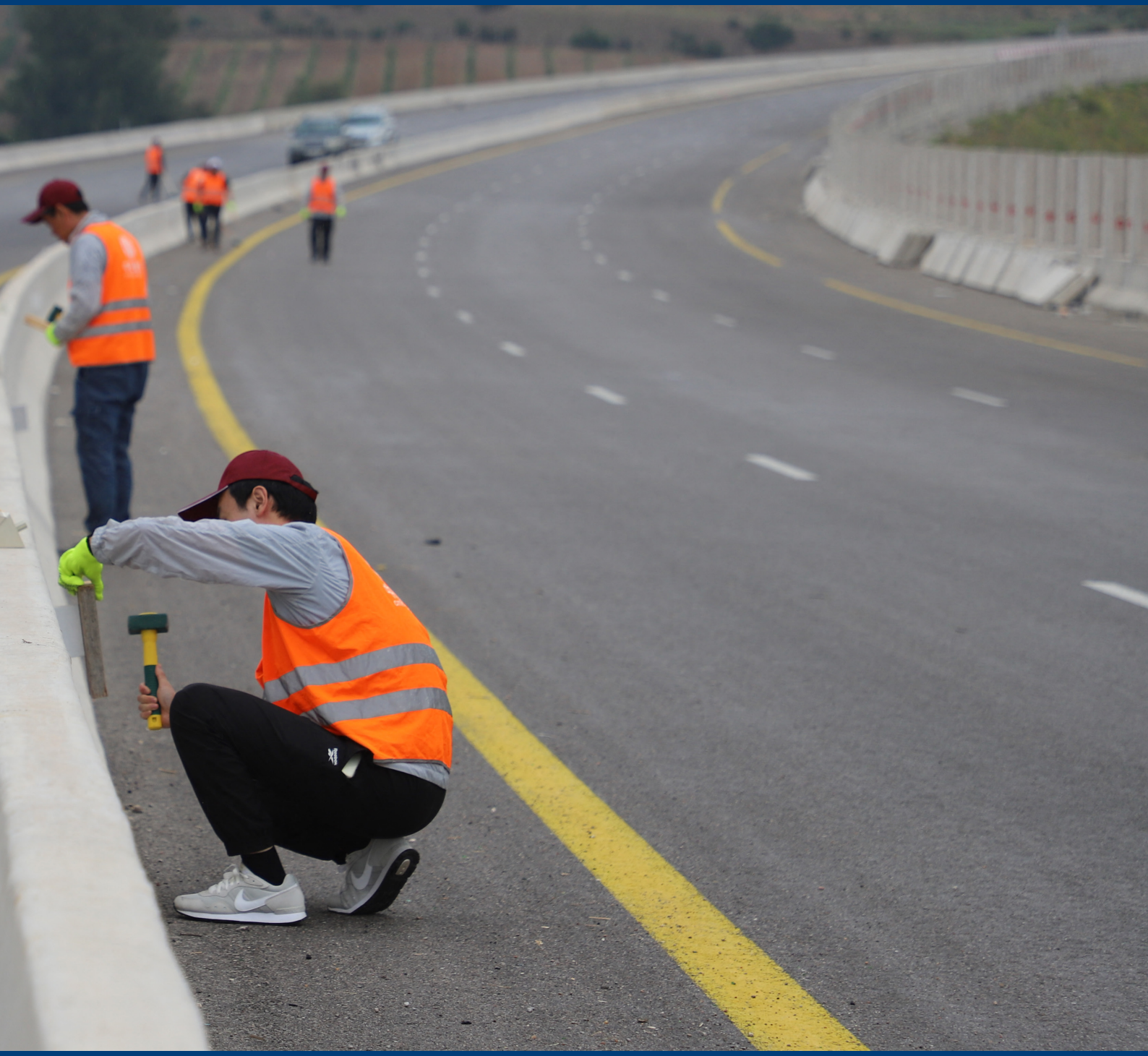
17. Karim Mezran and Aldo Liga, "After anti-migration efforts shrank its influence, Rome needs a new Libya policy," *Atlantic Council*, 30 July 2024, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/after-anti-migration-efforts-shrank-its-influence-rome-needs-a-new-libya-policy/

CHAPTER FIVE:

Three Ways that China Engages with the Mediterranean



Workers make final preparations for the traffic opening of the 84-km eastern section of the East-West Highway in El Tarf Province, Algeria, on July 1, 2023. (Photo by CITIC Construction Algeria / XINHUA / Xinhua via AFP)



Three Ways that China Engages with the Mediterranean

Jin Liangxiang | Non-Resident Senior Fellow with the Middle East Council on Global Affairs and Senior Research Fellow of Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS).

Jin Liangxiang is a nonresident senior fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs. He is also a senior research fellow at the Shanghai Institutes for International Studies (SIIS). Liangxiang specializes in Middle Eastern-international relations, with a particular focus on Iran's foreign policy and domestic politics. He also conducts research on China's relations with neighboring regions. Liangxiang is the author of the book On the Domestic Sources of Iran's Foreign Policy (2015). In addition, he has published many academic papers on Middle Eastern studies, with a majority focusing on Iran. He also writes frequently for Tehran Times, China.org.cn, and China-US Focus, among others. His analysis has been featured on CCTV, Dragon TV, and other mainstream Chinese medias.

Introduction

China and the Mediterranean have seen a long history of engagements. The ancient Silk Road, Marco Polo, and Ibn Battuta all serve as historical and cultural symbols of the connections between the two regions.

Relations between China and North Africa have grown since the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, boosted by mutual political support for their struggle for independence such as mutual supports between China and Algeria and between China and Egypt. Economic relations between China and the northern side of the Mediterranean have also grown robustly since China's reform and opening-up policy in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Today, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) defines engagements between China and those two Mediterranean subregions more than anything else.[1]

As China has become a power with global influence, its relations with the Mediterranean region will expectedly grow considerably. China's interests in the Mediterranean will also grow. However, unlike other external actors, China does not have an integrated engagement strategy. In China's vision, the Mediterranean is actually a combination of some parts of South Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. China publishes its foreign policy objectives in Europe,[2] Africa,[3] and Arab countries,[4] respectively, but never about the Mediterranean as a whole.

Analysis of China's role in the Mediterranean is available within China's overall foreign policy principles and structures. Despite the multi-faceted nature of China's policy in the region, the following three principles are particularly worth mentioning: adhering to the friendship legacy of the shared fight against colonialism; promoting reconciliation; and advancing unity through BRI as an economic engagement approach.

The Case of Adhering to Friendship Legacy

The mid-19th century British statesman, Lord Palmerston, once said: "There are no permanent friends or enemies in geopolitics, only permanent interests."

Though widely enshrined, China never took this approach as a principle to handle its relations with other countries. On the contrary, China purports to adhere to its friendship legacy by developing relations with these countries. While meeting with African leaders, Chinese leaders would always bring up the history of mutual support in the anticolonial fight for independence from the 1950s through to the 1970s. For instance, while meeting with Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune on July 18, 2023, President Xi Jinping said: "The two countries have been true friends and natural partners in the pursuit of common development and national rejuvenation."[5]

China's efforts to maintain its relations with Algeria serve as a typical example in this regard. The 1950s and 1960s saw Algerians enter into one of the most arduous wars for independence against colonialism in the history of humankind. China had resolutely supported the struggle of Algerians by providing political, economic, and military assistance. When France withdrew its personnel and staff from Algerian medical facilities in the late 1950s, China filled the gap for Algerians with medical teams. This later became China's regular practice in its relations with newly independent African countries.[6]

Support and assistance are always mutual. Algeria had also lent a hand to China in its major international agenda. In 1971, Algeria, together with Albania, proposed a resolution to the United Nations General Assembly endorsing China's resumption of its seat at the UN, which was one of the most consequential events in UN history.

This friendship, borne out of mutual support, has withstood the test of time. In 2014, China and Algeria formally announced their Comprehensive Strategic Partnership,[7] one of the first between China and Arab countries. In addition to persistent dispatches of medical teams for more than 60 years, China had supported Algeria with various large projects, for instance, the construction of Algeria's East-West highway, which was finally completed in 2023.[8] Strategic factors could be one of the considerations, but friendship always served as a pillar between the two.

Algeria is not the only North African country with whom China demonstrates its principle of valuing friendship. Egypt, among others, is another example. China has contributed greatly to Egypt's economic and infrastructure development. The Suez Economic Zone (SEZ) and the New Capital Project are two such development projects where China invested tremendous economic resources.[9] The SEZ attracted more than 6 billion U.S. dollars in the year 2023-2024, 40 percent of which were coming from China.[10]

The Case of Promoting Unity

The colonial strategy of *divide and rule* has been applied in the practice of global governance. The Mediterranean region and the Middle East are two regions that have been seriously affected by this approach. China, conversely, has promoted unity and reconciliation as part of its traditional philosophy in statecraft.

Despite persistent turbulence in the region and its reverberations across the world, China regards development as its top priority[11] by maintaining peace and stability as a way to safeguard the needed environment for development. China believes that so long as it can persist in its development agenda, it will be able to solve most of the problems it faces today.

Most recently, China has invested tremendous political and economic resources, promoting reconciliation and unity throughout the region. In early March 2023, China hosted negotiations between Iran and Saudi Arabia, which led to reconciliation between the two major conflicting parties of the Gulf.[12] On July 23, 2024, the fourteen Palestinian factions reached a settlement in Beijing,[13] paving the way for the future political reconstruction of Palestine.

Despite the instability caused by the atrocities perpetrated in Gaza, other adjacent regions like the Gulf have remained largely stable. China's consistent efforts in promoting the reconciliation between Iran and Saudi Arabia is arguably among the main reasons for this continued stability. This needed stability across the Gulf has served the interests of the region, China, and those of the world as well.

The above-mentioned two cases are widely reported, but China's efforts go far beyond. Though less noticed and reported, China has long adopted the principle of developing relations with Arab countries as a whole. The China-Arab Cooperation Forum is a multilateral mechanism, manifesting China's efforts in promoting Arab unity instead of a divide and rule approach.

The Case of Promoting BRI

In the absence of an integrated policy toward the region, the Mediterranean is a natural part of China's efforts to push the BRI forward. Both the geographical and cultural nature of Silk Road's history necessitates China to invest its efforts in the Mediterranean region.

Greece should be a typical example of BRI partnership. At the end of 2000s, Greece was struggling with financial crisis, and the Piraeus port — an essential part of Greece's economy — was in serious depression. It was against this background that cooperation with the Chinese side began. Since then, the Piraeus port has seen dramatic growth in container throughput. In 2010, the port was struggling with container throughput of 0.88 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEUs), but has reached over five million TEUs in recent years.[14]

According to reports, Greece stands out among other countries for its sharp growth in the real value of the stock market, which rose by 43.8% from 2022 to 2023.[15] Investment grew by about 15.1% in 2024, more than double compared with the year before. In 2023, Greece led The Economist's annual ranking of rich-world economies.[16] All these positive changes have constituted a sharp comparison to the general picture of economic problems across southern Europe. Greece's success story in overcoming the financial crisis could be attributed to various reasons, one of which should be BRI cooperation.

Greece is just one example in BRI cooperation, which also features other countries in the region, such as Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, and Italy — all of which enjoyed success. Although, geopolitical obstacles are growing, for instance, Italy withdrew from BRI out of pressure from the United States. China will persistently move forward with BRI for the benefit of China and the region.

Conclusion

The Mediterranean is integral to China's vision of the world, despite the lack of a uniform policy toward it.

Relations between China and North Africa, through the passage of time, are defined by the friendship legacy of the joint struggle against western colonialism. The future will see China accommodate this friendship with its new policy initiatives and agendas.

China perceives the west of Middle East as a region of turbulence as a result of divide and rule used by some hegemonic powers. China will continue to play a role in promoting unity and reconciliation both for its sense of responsibility as a major leading actor and its economic interests that prefer a stable regional environment.

The shared efforts to foster BRI will define China's engagements with all three parts of the Mediterranean — West Asia, North Africa, and southern Europe. South European countries serving as a logistic juncture, linking to other parts of Europe, will play a particularly significant role as partners with China in this regard.

Though disproportionate with its economic and political status in the world, China's role in the Mediterranean will grow, and hopefully will have positive long-term implications.

ENDNOTES

1. See the State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China, Xinhua News Agency, "The Belt and Road Initiative: A Key Pillar of the Global Community of Shared Future," *China Global Television Network (CGTN)*, October 10, 2023, https://news.cgtn.com/news/2023-10-10/Full-text-China-releases-white-paper-on-Belt-and-Road-cooperation-1nMwG1FHWLu/index.html.

2. "China's Policy Paper on the European Union," *China Daily*, December 18, 2018, https://europe.chinadaily.com.cn/a/201812/18/WS5c1897a0a3107d4c3a001758.html.

3. "China's Second Africa Policy Paper," *China Daily*, December 5, 2015, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/world/XiattendsParisclimateconference/2015-12/05/content_22632874.htm.

4. The State Council, "China's Arab Policy Paper," *The People's Republic of China*, January 13, 2016, https://english.www.gov.cn/archive/publications/2016/01/13/content_281475271412746.htm.

5. Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "President Xi Jinping holds talks with Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune," *The People's Republic of China*, July 18, 2023, https://www.mfa.gov.cn/mfa_eng/xw/zyxw/202405/t20240530_11332136.html.

6. Shan Jie and Gao Yang, "Six Decades On, Chinese Medical Teams Weave Heartfelt Melody of Friendship between China and Africa: The Healing Touch," *Global Times*, January 11, 2024, https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202401/1305224.shtml.

7. Yahia Zoubir, "China's Relations with Algeria: From Revolutionary Friendship to Comprehensive Strategic Partnership," in *China and North Africa: Between Economics, Politics, and Security*, ed. Adel Abdel Ghafar, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2022) 125-166.

8. Zhou Jin, "Highway Crosses Country, Bridges Nations", *China Daily*, October 3, 2023, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202310/03/WS651b6fd9a310d2dce4bb8d3f_2.html.

9. "BRI Cooperation with Egypt Hailed as 'Fruitful,'" *China Daily Global*, February 29, 2024, https://epaper.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202402/29/WS65dfe2a4a310df4030f4fbd5.html.

10. "(FOCAC) Interview: Promising future for Egyptian economic zone as Chinese investors grow: official," Belt and Road Portal, August 30, 2024, https://eng.yidaiyilu.gov.cn/p/08S78V23.html.

11. Development is always at the top of China's policymaking agenda. See "Communique of the Third Plenary Session of the 20th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China", *China Daily*, July 18, 2024, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202407/18/WS6698f75aa31095c51c50ec9d.html.

12. See Zhang Yunbi and Jan Yumul, "China Praised over Saudi-Iran Deal Role", *China Daily*, March 20, 2023, https://www.chinadailyhk.com/hk/article/321330.

13. See Zhou Jin, "Palestinian Factions Sign Declaration in Beijing on Bolstering Unity", *China Daily*, July 24, 2024, https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202407/24/WS66a037faa31095c51c50f87a.html.

14. "Greece's Piraeus Port Exemplifies Win-Win Cooperation," *China Daily Global*, April 22, 2023, https://global.chinadaily.com.cn/a/202304/22/WS644320ada310b6054facf18e.html.

15. See Greta Ruffino, "Greece Hailed Again as Global Economic 'Country of the Year,'" *Euronews*, January 3, 2024, https://www.euronews.com/business/2024/01/03/greece-hailed-again-as-global-economic-country-of-the-year.

16. Ruffino, "Greece Hailed Again."

Conclusion

Galip Dalay & Yahia H. Zoubir

Conclusion

As this dossier illustrated, internal and external dynamics of regional security in the Mediterranean are undergoing a dramatic shift.

Internally, despite a reduction in tension and improving Turkish-Greek relations, the Eastern Mediterranean crisis is far from being resolved. The evolution of this crisis will redefine the nature of intra-regional rivalries and the place of extra-regional powers within the region.

In his chapter, Tarek Megerisi depicts how, for Europe, regional security, migration and politics of fear are intertwined in Mediterranean. The Mediterranean question for Europe is thus a multilayered one, which ties the domestic and identity politics with foreign policy at the same time.

Meanwhile, the war on Gaza is reshaping the regional security landscape as well as the future of many regional initiatives that involve Israel and Arab Gulf states, including Eastern Mediterranean Energy Forum and the India-Middle East-Europe Corridor (IMEC). Given the burgeoning political and image cost of cooperation with Israel for Arab states, non-cooperation with Israel might emerge as the lowest common denominator of the Arab response to Israel. As Robert Mason notes, the IMEC (and by extension, the I2U2, which involves Israel, India, the UAE and the US) has been undermined by the Gaza war.

Similarly, the recent developments in Syria are also restructuring the Eastern Mediterranean security landscape. The downfall of the Assad regime is set to have a major impact on the regional security and order in the Mediterranean. The Assad regime's overthrow has already cut Iran's direct access to the East Mediterranean and cast a thick shadow over the future of Russia's role and presence in Syria and the Eastern Mediterranean. Syria has been the lynchpin of the Russian power and presence in the region. Hence, the nature and future of post-Assad Russian-Syrian relations will be pivotal.

Shedding light on the critical importance of the Tartus naval base and Khmeimim air base in Syria, Andrey Kortunov argues that "these bases are essential for advancing Russia's interests in the Mediterranean and in the broader Middle East by offering Moscow unique power projection capabilities in the region." Kortunov also stresses that the Khmeimim air base is a "critical transit point serving Russia's operations in remote places in Africa."

Setting aside the post-conflict discussion, the Mediterranean is also an important focal point of many different connectivity projects and regional strategic initiatives. From this perspective, this region has become a microcosm of contending visions of regional order, not only in the Mediterranean, but also in the broader Middle East. China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the US and EU-backed IMEC and Türkiye-backed Iraq Development Road project all have important Mediterranean dimensions. For instance, Jin Liangxiang contends that "the Mediterranean is integral to China's vision of the world, despite the lack of a uniform policy toward it." Plus, he further argues that "today, the engagements between China and the Mediterranean are more defined by the BRI than anything else."

All these initiatives rest on different ideas of regional and global order. For instance, at the regional level, IMEC is another manifestation of the US-idea of a regional order that is premised on closer cooperation between Arab Gulf states and Israel (buttressed by US support). The global logic of IMEC as a project is that it will compete with China's BRI and downsize Beijing's regional footprint. However, the geopolitical logic of this project overrides its economic nature, and it now faces the 'reality check' of Middle Eastern geopolitics. As Dalia Ghanem aptly argues, the "success of IMEC hinges on regional stability and cooperation, yet the reality on the ground presents significant challenges, not least, the lack of sustainable peace and de-escalation between Israel and Hamas threatens the very existence of IMEC, potentially derailing the entire project before it truly takes shape."

In short, the Mediterranean, like the Gulf, represents a centre of gravity in the broader regional politics, which intertwines the Middle East, North Africa and Europe. Regional restructuring that is underway there can be seen as microcosm of the larger transformations that are taking place on the global level.

ABOUT

THE MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS

The Middle East Council on Global Affairs (ME Council) is an independent, non-profit policy research institution based in Doha, Qatar. The ME Council produces policy-relevant research, convenes meetings and dialogues, and engages policy actors on geopolitical and socioeconomic issues facing the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region. The ME Council serves as a bridge between the MENA region and the rest of the world, providing a regional perspective on global policy issues and establishing partnerships with other leading research centers and development organizations across the MENA region and the world.

The editors would like to thank all the authors (Andrey, Robert, Dalia, Tarek, and Jin) for their original and timely contributions to this dossier. We also extend our gratitude to Mohammad Abu Hawash for his excellent management of the editorial and publication process - without him this dossier would not have been possible.

THE EDITORS

Yahia Zoubir is a nonresident senior fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs. He is also a professor of international studies and geopolitics at various universities and business schools in several countries across the world including in France, the United States, China, Europe, and the Middle East and North Africa region. In 2020, Zoubir was a visiting fellow at the Brookings Doha Center. He specializes in the politics of North Africa, Maghreb-Sahel security, and foreign policies of the great powers in North Africa, among other areas.

Galip Dalay is a nonresident senior fellow at the Middle East Council on Global Affairs, an associate fellow at Chatham House, and doctoral researcher in the Faculty of History at the University of Oxford. His current research focuses on the question of regionalism, regional order and governance in the Middle East, Turkish politics and foreign policy, and the history of post-colonial and post-imperial forms of internationalism.

MIDDLE EAST COUNCIL ON GLOBAL AFFAIRS
Burj Al Mana 3rd floor, Street 850, Zone 60, Doha, Qatar
www.mecouncil.org