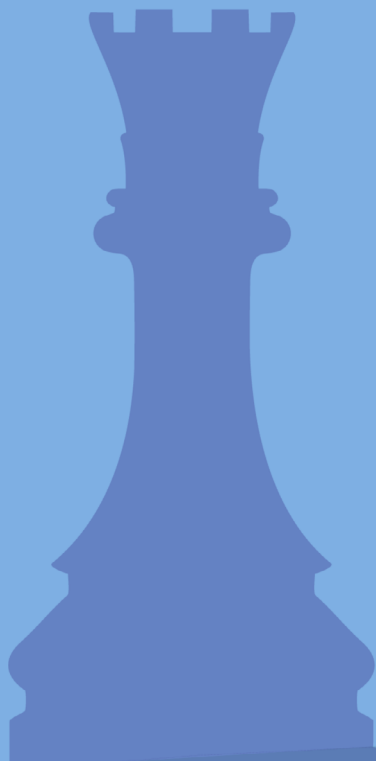


# STRATEGIC *Perspectives*

## *THE COLLAPSE OF CERTAINTY*



# 2024

THE FMES INSTITUTE'S JOURNAL  
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**FMES**  
Fondation Méditerranéenne  
d'Etudes Stratégiques

# SUMMARY

## FMES Institute

The Mediterranean Foundation for Strategic Studies (FMES) is a think tank that analyzes geopolitical and strategic issues, particularly those concerning the southern neighborhood of the European continent: the Mediterranean basin, the Balkans, the Black Sea, the Caucasus, the Middle East, the Indian Ocean, and Africa. The institute also has a maritime department focusing on legal, environmental, economic, security, and military issues specific to seas and oceans. It has developed unique expertise in the field of wargames and professional serious games. Lastly, it supports the defense and dual-use economy, particularly in facilitating the international development of companies from the South Provence-Alpes-Côte d'Azur region.

1. Editorials
2. Monthly Maps
3. Our Articles : Middle East and Mediterranean
4. Our Articles : Africa
5. Our Articles : Maritime

*The opinions expressed are those of the authors alone.*



# PREFACE

## THE COLLAPSE OF CERTAINTY

The year 2024 was marked by a change of era. One rupture follows another and the old world is gradually disappearing, swept away by a dual movement that the FMES has been describing for several years: on the one hand, a fracture between South and North, that separates the ways of thinking, values, and interests, both of states and their populations; and on the other hand, a geopolitical recomposition between East and West that is accelerating due to the polarization brought about by the challenge to Western leadership by the Eurasian powers. This upheaval is taking place in an atmosphere rendered noxious by the threat and uninhibited use of military force and the generalization of a strong resentment, exacerbated by social networks and increasingly sophisticated software.

These East-West and South-North forces fields, which intersect in the Eastern Mediterranean, place Europe in a position of vulnerability that its populations are beginning to perceive. The porosity between external and internal issues is a sign of the times, resulting from population flows, information exchange, and economic interactions. It is also a marker of the information war that is raging and weakening open and democratic societies. It is no surprise that European and French citizens are increasingly feeling the consequences of these fractures. The lack of a clear political strategy fosters epidemic reactions, focused on the consequences rather than the causes, and logically driven by the most radical political parties.

The European and French legislative elections in June and July 2024 bear the stamp of these anxieties. A populist surge continues across the European Union, driven by the fear of uncontrolled migration, which would weaken our societies by importing the resentment of Southern populations. The issue of migration now occupies a central place and polarizes two blocs that are distancing themselves, radicalizing, and gradually absorbing the center of the political spectrum. On the right, there is concern about the risk of importing antagonisms and their consequences into society. On the left, an ideological framework of openness toward the South is being developed, particularly in the interpretation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the archetypal struggle for the emancipation of populations oppressed by the West. Ultimately, this radicalization of European voters, in opposite directions, expresses a shared concern regarding the security deterioration that surrounds them, both in the East and the South.

Four major events marked this year and illustrate in themselves the violence settling in, the unpredictability of events, and their interdependence in a world that has paradoxically shrunk while being marked by centrifugal forces: the Israeli rebound, the brutal fall of Bashar al-Assad, the bloody stabilization of the Ukrainian front, and the election of Donald Trump.

While the Israeli army demonstrated its strength in its response to the Hamas attack on October 7, 2023, its situation until the summer of 2024 was not comfortable, and the feeling of its vulnerability prevailed until September. In the south, Hamas's attack showed that the Hebrew state was not invulnerable; in the north, Hezbollah promised to be a much tougher adversary; in the east, a taboo had been broken with the first strike on its soil by Iranian ballistic missiles in April; and in the west, Tel Aviv's isolation was growing, even including from the United States, which provides essential military support.

In six months, Israel's posture has improved considerably. The decapitation of Hezbollah's leaders in September through a spectacular operation of sabotaging beepers and walkie-talkies, the elimination of Hamas and Hezbollah chiefs a few weeks later, along with lethal strikes in Lebanon and Syria, and the limited but very effective response to Iranian ballistic missile strikes in October, placed the Hebrew state in a far more comfortable position: its military credibility was restored, and its direct adversaries significantly weakened. These successes provoked another major event that would reshuffle the cards of the Middle East.

The brutal fall of Bashar al-Assad in December and the victory of the Islamist rebels of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) is, in fact, both the consequence and amplifier of this movement. Certainly, the economic crisis linked to sanctions is probably the primary cause of the Syrian regime's weakening, which gradually transformed into a narco-state that exploited its own internal supporters.

But Israel's blows to Hezbollah and Iran, which had been militarily supporting the regime, were the final blow, facilitated by the excellent preparation of rebels trained by the Turkish army. Russia's priority on the Ukrainian front forced its abandonment, which will leave lasting marks.

This theatrical turn of events disrupts the geopolitical hierarchy in both the Middle East and Africa. It is a setback for Moscow, which was forced to abandon its protégé and negotiate with the rebels to maintain its two military bases on the Syrian coast, and especially for Iran, which has just lost both its historical allies in Lebanon and Syria and its access to the Mediterranean and Israel. Turkey is the big winner and can now hope to extend its buffer zone along the northern Syrian border, eliminate any Kurdish resistance, and send many Syrian refugees back to their country. This upheaval is a relatively positive development for Israel, which, for a time, will be able to militarily dominate its northern neighbors, but the possibility of the establishment of a radical Sunni caliphate hostile to both Israel and Europe, gaining access to the Mediterranean and potentially expanding into Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon, is a concerning scenario for all.

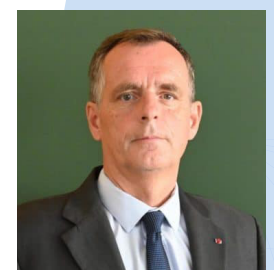
The Ukrainian front played a role, as seen, in the collapse of the Syrian regime. Vladimir Putin went all-in this year in Ukraine to counter the Ukrainian offensive toward Kursk and continue nibbling at the front line. The reinforcement of 10,000 North Korean soldiers illustrates both the difficulty the Kremlin faces in terms of recruitment, Putin's tenacious will, and the slowly developing Eurasian solidarity during this war: Pyongyang thus joins Tehran and Beijing in supporting Moscow in this conflict, further structuring an autocratic geopolitical bloc opposed to the West. To compensate for its slow progress in Ukraine, Russia is fully playing the indirect card to weaken the European camp. First, in its traditional sphere of influence, in Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, and Georgia, where it disrupts electoral processes to distance these countries from its adversary. Then, in Africa, where Kremlin-backed militias are strengthening their position in the southern part of the continent, in Libya, Sudan, Mali, Niger, and now Chad. Finally, in Western Europe, where Russian destabilization attempts on social networks are becoming more frequent. Pressure is building as we await the deal Donald Trump has promised for 2025.

The victory of the Republican candidate on November 5 is probably the most decisive event of 2024, because of the multiple consequences it has already triggered and promises to trigger. His pacifism, transactionalism, unilateralism, obsession with China, and complete absence of ideological, historical, or moral references leave room for radical and unexpected changes. While we can expect at least a partial military disengagement from the region, his unpredictable nature and the awareness that this final term will be crucial in the image he leaves in history open the possibility of completely unforeseen turnarounds. In any case, only the interests of the United States will matter, and both allies and adversaries will be judged and treated according to this.

Elsewhere, the «normal growth of chaos» is at work. The general indifference surrounding the 79th United Nations General Assembly, with a very sparse audience, illustrated the loss of prestige and authority of the UN. Its Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, strangely reinforced a competitor by participating in the BRICS+ summit in October in Kazan at the invitation of Vladimir Putin, despite being pursued by the International Criminal Court. Rigged elections no longer shock anyone, as shown by the indifference toward the re-election of the Algerian and Tunisian presidents in the autumn. Amid this indifference, war rages in Sudan, and insecurity and massacres accumulate in Niger, Mali, and the Great Lakes region.

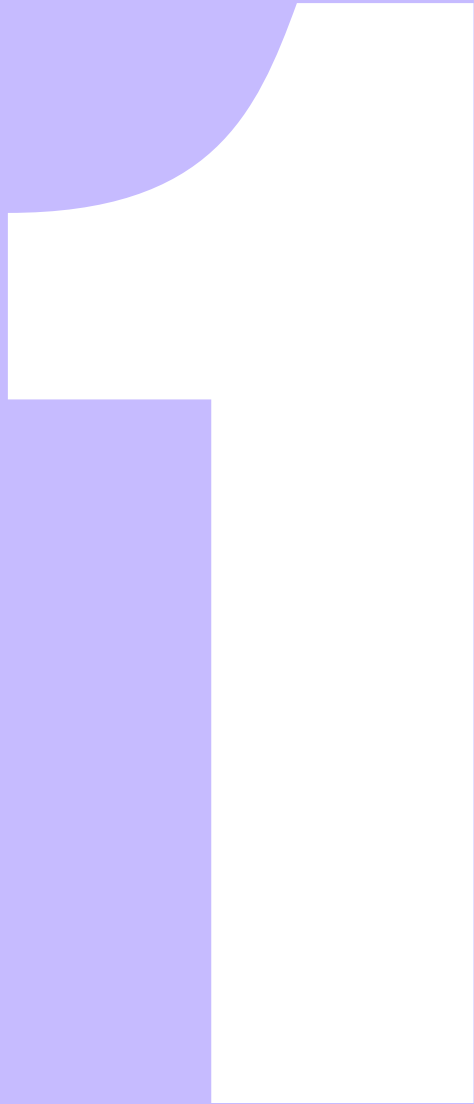
There is no reason why the process of increasing tensions between populations and states should not continue into 2025. Europeans, who are positioned close to these hotspots, are already affected, even if they are not all aware of it. They should prepare to face antagonisms of all kinds, coming from all directions, which are already perceptible and will intensify in the East, South, and now also in the West. The American umbrella is likely to become more expensive, less impermeable, and may even contribute to the storm that is approaching.

In the face of these challenges, we must, as March Bloch identified 80 years ago, not lose the intellectual battle of understanding the world. This is the fight that FMES is proud to participate in, to avoid experiencing a new «strange defeat».



**PASCAL AUSSEUR**

Director General of the FMES Institute



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# JANUARY EDITORIAL

2024

The entire FMES team wishes you a Happy New Year! In our fields of expertise, this year 2024 is already marked by the continuation of several mediated conflicts, in Ukraine, Gaza and the Red Sea, not to mention the strikes between Iran and Pakistan, a first against a nuclear-armed country, while major recompositions continue in Sudan, Yemen and the Sahel-Saharan strip, like the withdrawal of Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso from ECOWAS. This was the theme of our monthly conference delivered by Patricia Allémonière, great war reporter. These conflicts illustrate the growing fragmentation between East and West, but especially between the North and South of our world in full cultural, political and geopolitical recompositions.

To better understand the tectonic forces at work in southern Europe, the FMES has just launched an «Africa» research program, the first realization of which you will find in our article of the month which decrypts the influences of Middle Eastern actors in Africa. Other articles will follow to shed light on the evolution of this continent so close to Europe geographically but which is moving away from it politically, strategically and culturally.

This year 2024 will be marked by elections in Europe and in many countries that suggest political clashes between increasingly polarized currents but also a revival of information manipulation and cyber attacks. If the results of the general elections in Russia, India, or closer to home in Algeria and Tunisia leave little room for surprise, since the leaders in place will most likely be re-elected, the outcome seems much more uncertain in the United States where the presidential election on 5th November will have crucial consequences on strategic balances and geopolitical recompositions. Many elements suggest that a victory of Donald Trump against Joe Biden is very possible.

In this perspective, it seems to us essential to anticipate the consequences of his victory, in Europe of course, but also in the world. Will the United States be paralyzed by an internal crisis? Will Europe be able to take its destiny into its own hands? Will Ukraine survive a possible US disengagement in its war effort? Will not other leaders, especially in the Caucasus, be tempted to follow the path opened by Vladimir Putin?

Would not the current Israeli Prime Minister be tempted by a headlong rush to settle the Palestinian question definitively and weaken Hezbollah? Will the Iranian regime cross the nuclear threshold to convince Donald Trump to talk to him, as the North Korean regime did in its first term? Finally, will China not take the opportunity to increase pressure on Taiwan, or even to try to regain the island by force?

A victory of Donald Trump would open, we see, the field of possibilities and therefore uncertainties. This is why many leaders of countries hostile to the West do not want it. This is the case for example of China, Algeria, Iran and even Turkey who fear uncontrolled escalations.

At the international level and for the third time in a row, the highlight of the FMES will be the organisation of the Mediterranean Strategic Meetings which will take place at the Neptune Palace in Toulon, on 8 and 9 October 2024. You are all cordially invited and you can already register ([link here](#)). And like last year, the FMES will award its 2024 Geopolitical Prize in November. Until then, the high-level training provided by the FMES will continue: Mediterranean sessions of high strategic studies, high maritime studies and high African studies. Training for young students from the PACA region and young people from the 10 Mediterranean countries of the 5 + 5 initiative will also be developed. Registration will soon be open for all these courses and future auditors and candidates can already register on the Institute's website.

In the meantime, you can count on all the FMES research teams to decipher for your benefit the strategic developments in our southern environment as well as in the maritime field.

*THE FMES INSTITUTE'S TEAM*

# FEBRUARY EDITORIAL

2024

February was dominated by the continuation of the war between Israel and Hamas and its humanitarian, security and geopolitical consequences. This is the theme of our article of the month that decrypts the management and instrumentalization of refugees in the Gaza Strip and it was also that of our monthly conference delivered by Jean-Pierre Filiu, expert on the Palestinian issue.

Renouncing the announcement effects and aware of the internal security issues of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the French government is quietly returning to the game by offering an effective framework for negotiations between Israelis, Palestinians, Americans, Qataris and Egyptians. This is good news. A ceasefire agreement lasting a few weeks envisaging the cross-release of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners seems on the verge of success, provided that Benjamin Netanyahu does not torpedo it in extremis, since his strategy is obviously to prolong hostilities, if possible until the US presidential election on 5th November next. The Israeli Prime Minister is clearly campaigning for Donald Trump and hopes that he will let go of him if he were elected. For its part, Hezbollah is cashing in on Israeli strikes, the intensity of which is increasing, by responding in a targeted manner knowing that it has no interest in letting itself in. In the run-up to Ramadan, the Israeli Prime Minister is also putting pressure on the Palestinians of the West Bank, multiplying provocations, in order to push them to revolt and thus open a new front that would strengthen his maintenance at the head of the Hebrew State.

Meanwhile, the consequences of this conflict remain visible at sea. The Houthis, allies of Hamas and Iran, continue their strategy of harassment against maritime traffic and have neutralized several submarine cables near the Bab el-Mandeb Strait - a hypothesis regularly considered by the FMES - seriously disrupting Internet communications in several countries of the Arabian Peninsula. If the first concerned (Egypt, Saudi Arabia in particular) are petrified at the idea of showing themselves in the wrong camp, the Westerners react as proven by the countries participating in the American operation «Guardian of prosperity» and the launch of the European Union escort mission «Aspides» in which two French frigates participate.

This operation, purely defensive, will protect the ships of European shipping companies that dominate the world container transport market (CMA-CGM, Maersk and MSC) who have an interest in the security of this strategic maritime corridor. If these two missions allow some Westerners to affirm their determination to defend their interests, by force if necessary for the Americans and the British, they nevertheless present real risks of stagnation and attrition which must be taken into account. The United States, which has considerable means at its disposal, does not seem to be afraid of this and is systematically responding to Houthi attacks.

Iran appears eager to avoid escalation despite US strikes, particularly those Washington has carried out on Tehran-affiliated forces positioned on the Iraqi-Syrian border in retaliation for the attack on US soldiers in Jordan. There is no need to worry the Iranian population, already on edge, which will vote in a few days for general elections whose results will prefigure that of next year's presidential election.

There is also renewed media interest in the war in Ukraine, sparked by the commemoration of the second anniversary of its outbreak by Russia, but also by President Zelensky's visit to several European countries to conclude bilateral defence agreements. These are likely to partially compensate for the possible withdrawal of US aid, should Donald Trump be elected. For while it is easy to block an alliance that, like NATO, functions by consensus, it is psychologically and politically more delicate to deny a bilateral agreement. In this respect, it is important to underline the importance of Sweden's full membership of NATO (President Orbán's Hungary has just lifted its reservations) which, after that of Finland, offers the Atlantic Alliance real strategic depth in the Baltic. Will Russia not use it as a pretext to push its pawns more firmly towards its Kaliningrad enclave by destabilizing the Baltic States, once Vladimir Putin is re-elected at the end of March? Meanwhile, he has just assassinated Alexei Navalny, his main opponent imprisoned, as well as a Russian pilot who defected, meaning that his opponents, inside and outside, are all condemned.



Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev, who has just been re-elected in a parody of an election, probably also understood the effectiveness of a strike or an action aimed at stunning the opponent. Armenia could soon pay the price again as tensions between Baku and Yerevan continue unabated.

On the African continent, decompositions and recompositions are also at work. The non-compensatory lifting of ECOWAS sanctions against Niger - which had been adopted following the coup d'état of 26 July 2023 - confirms the fear of West African leaders that this organisation, on which the economic and political architecture of West Africa is based, will unravel as a result of the withdrawal announced by Mali, Niger and Burkina Faso for the benefit of the new Alliance of Sahel States (AES). These three countries, just as overwhelmed by jihadist attacks as their French, European, UN or African partners have been before, confirm their strategy of multiplying alternative alliances with Russia, Turkey, Iran or Qatar, in particular. The worsening war in eastern DRC has helped to bring to light the deep crisis between Kinshasa and Kigali faced by the Heads of State and Government of the African Union, meeting in Summit this month as well as the mechanisms of APSA (African Peace and Security Architecture) are proving powerless, just as in the face of the continent's other crises. The resolution of the political crisis in Senegal, where strong counter-powers are mobilizing to defeat the confiscation of the electoral process, is a major challenge for the future of democracy, the rule of law and peace not only in West Africa but more broadly on the continent.

In short, the recompositions at work are not conjunctural and will not stop by themselves. We must therefore prepare for new strategic ruptures and arm ourselves intellectually, economically, militarily and socially to face them.

*THE FMES INSTITUTE'S TEAM*

# MARCH EDITORIAL

2024

The debate on the war in Ukraine was revived this month by the difficulties on the ground of the Ukrainian army, the European tour of President Zelensky and the assurance displayed by Vladimir Putin after his unsurprising re-election (March 17). President Emmanuel Macron took note of this and launched the debate on a military involvement on the ground of the European armed forces, creating a form of frightened cacophony but instilling among the populations the question of a more concrete involvement of Europe in a war that concerns it in the first place.

Sweden's full membership of NATO (7 March), after that of Finland last year, transformed the Baltic Sea into an «Otanian lake,» whereas two years ago it was a maritime space shared with Russia. The Russian Baltic Navy found itself in a defensive position, cornered on its naval bases in Kaliningrad and St. Petersburg. Russia thus finds itself today having to protect the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad located inside the Otanian space, just as NATO had to protect during the Cold War the enclave of West Berlin located inside the space then controlled by the Soviet Union. Just as it opened up Crimea by invading Ukraine two years ago, the Kremlin could be tempted to open up Kaliningrad by force, but also the vassalized territory of Transnistria to the south. It could be for him two points of application of his strategy of amazement of the Europeans, even though the hypothesis of an American disengagement from Ukraine seems more and more credible in case of victory of Donald Trump. This is the theme of our new section «The map of the month». Azerbaijani President Ilham Aliyev also seems to be waiting for the right moment to launch a surprise offensive aimed at opening up Azeri Nakhchivan by forcibly seizing the Zangezur corridor in southern Armenia.

The deadly attack in Moscow on March 22, claimed by the Islamic State in Khorasan (Central Asia), demonstrates in any case that the complex relations with Islam and the «Global South» to use the Kremlin's expression, are not the exclusive prerogative of the West, but affect Russia and probably China just as much. Geopolitical tensions between East and West are accompanied by tensions in terms of representation between South and North that are not limited to anti-Westernism, as the Kremlin

and its relays would have us believe. This attack on the Crocus City Hall is strangely reminiscent of that of the Moscow Doubrovka Theatre (October 2002) which had served as a pretext for Vladimir Putin to intensify his war in Chechnya. Today it is against Ukraine that he tries to direct the anger of the Russians.

In the Middle East, the general elections in Iran (1 March) were marked by the lowest turnout since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Despite the undivided victory of the ultraconservatives, the regime seems to be supported, at best, by only a third of the voters. Reformists and moderate conservatives now seem out of the game and the clergy have just proved that they were still able to hold the Revolutionary Guards high. Current President Ebrahim Raisi therefore has every chance of being allowed to run and win a second presidential term in June 2025.

Meanwhile, the conflict in Gaza is becoming increasingly bogged down in the face of the double intransigence of Hamas «military wing in the city of Rafah and the Israeli prime minister, who is seeking to prolong the conflict in order to survive politically and avoid having to open a new front against Hezbollah in Lebanon too soon. Benjamin Netanyahu seems increasingly isolated on the international scene, as illustrated by Joe Biden's sharp criticism and the United States «abstention - a first - in the UN Security Council vote on Resolution 2728 of 25 March demanding an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. For their part, the Houthis continue their attacks on commercial and military vessels in the southern Red Sea, defying the American («Guardians of Prosperity») and European («Aspides») missions. The frigate Alsace has just destroyed in this context three anti-ship ballistic missiles fired from Yemen, demonstrating the effectiveness of its weapons system. Beyond the States participating in these two missions, it is more generally the African countries that face the rivalries of power in the Red Sea, theme of the article of the month.

In Africa, violence is spreading: the civil war in the Sudan has forced the displacement of more than 8 million people and ethnic massacres that

we cannot see the end of while an armed group from Darfur - the Sudan Liberation Army (SLA), of rebel leader Minni Minawi, also governor of the province - announced that he had joined the army of General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, to fight against the paramilitary forces of General Hemedti. The end of military cooperation between Niger and the United States, announced on 16 March through the brutal demand for the withdrawal of US military forces stationed on Niger's territory made by the military authorities at the head of the country, is part of the agenda of rupture with traditional partners carried out by the Central Sahel States, which affirm their desire for rapprochement with Russia and their aspiration to diversify partnerships. The violence of the attack perpetrated by the Islamic State-Sahel (IS-S) against the Nigerien armed forces in the west of the country testifies to the resistance of radical armed Islamist groups against the states of the region and their international partners. The fighting between Rwandan and Congolese forces in the Democratic Republic of the Congo does not seem to be able to stop despite the involvement of the African Union. The election, finally appeased, of the opponent Bassirou Diomaye Faye as President of Senegal represents a glimmer of hope in this landscape. This victory of Senegalese democracy, which demonstrated the solidity of republican institutions (justice and army in particular), as well as the vitality of civil society and the media, is of major importance for the future of ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), now less threatened by being composed mainly of authoritarian regimes, both civilian and military. The sovereignist, patriotic and socially conservative political program of the new President Bassirou Diomaye Faye augurs major changes in the partnerships forged by Senegal, until now a traditional ally of France and liberal countries. All his questions were addressed by our director of the Africa program, Niagalé Bagayoko, during her conference on the geopolitical recompositions at work in the Sahel and West Africa.

*THE FMES INSTITUTE'S TEAM*

# APRIL EDITORIAL

2024

This month of April 2024 will have been marked by an unprecedented exchange of strikes on the territories of Israel and Iran. These two states, enemies declared since the Iranian Islamic Revolution of 1979, had until then confined themselves to a clandestine war or proxies interposed. The April 1 strike by Israel on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, killing a dozen senior officers including two generals of the Revolutionary Guard Corps, was seen by Tehran as crossing a red line. Iran, after alerting Israel to avoid an uncontrolled escalation, responded on the night of April 13 to 14 with a massive strike, almost all of whose projectiles were intercepted before reaching their targets. Five days later, Israel responded by carrying out a discreet but effective attack aimed at the ground-to-air defense of the Isfahan airbase, which is supposed to protect two facilities of Iran's nuclear program in the heart of Iran. This exchange made it possible to pass «strategic signals»: On the one hand Tehran indicates that the intensification of Tel Aviv's strikes on its proxies must spare its military leaders, on the other Israel recalls that it can strike where it wishes and that Iranian nuclear facilities are therefore not safe. This last message was perfectly received by the mullahs who certainly privately blamed the senior officials of the Pasdarans for their ineffectiveness. Iran's leaders have nevertheless saved face with their people and their followers by minimizing the impact of this very measured response. In short, everyone found their account and the escalation was avoided.

No doubt this episode will have consequences. First, it is certain that it will intensify the clandestine confrontation between Israel and Iran in the form of cyber attacks, bombings, targeted assassinations and sabotage. It will also revive the confrontation via proxies such as Hezbollah, the Houthis and the Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria. Southern Lebanon is once again becoming the focal point of the Israeli operational effort. Everything then indicates that this episode will accelerate the Israeli sequence in the Gaza Strip, since Benjamin Netanyahu communicated on the fact that he would have received the green light from the White House to act on Rafah in exchange for «moderation» with regard to Iran. Finally, it is likely that this sequence will lead Iran to reconsider its global strategy, to accelerate its atomic program in

order to tangent, or even cross, the nuclear threshold, since the Iranian leaders have understood that they could not really count on their conventional means to sanctuarize their territory.

In the United States, the Senate, after long procrastination, adopted on April 24 a \$61 billion aid plan for Ukraine including the delivery of large quantities of weapons and ammunition to Kiev. Will this be enough for the Ukrainian military to contain the surge of the Russian army at a time when they admit to being in difficulty, especially in terms of manpower? Probably at least until the US presidential election next November, because Joe Biden would lose any chance of winning if Ukraine collapses before that deadline. One thing seems certain: material aid, no matter how significant, will not replace the fighters on the front line. The Russian General Staff understood this perfectly well; that is why the Kremlin is intensifying its strategy of wear and attrition.

It is therefore no coincidence that France has decided to place its Carrier Strike Group under NATO command for the first time during an operational deployment in the Mediterranean. This, too, is a signal to Moscow: show the Alliance's solidarity and dissuade Russia from pushing its pawns in this direction. This demonstration makes all the more sense as the United States and the Europeans have regained military credibility. Whether defending Israel from Iranian strikes or countering the Houthis in the Red Sea, everyone has seen that their technology is second to none. A message that Russia, China and Iran, but also the Gulf monarchies that are eyeing Beijing and Moscow, have certainly integrated.

In Africa, relations with these major powers outside the continent have also occupied a large part of the news of the Sahelian space. Indeed, the United States had to resolve to announce that it was working on the timetable for the withdrawal of its troops stationed in Niger following the denunciation by the country's military authorities of the cooperation agreement hitherto in force. The Nigerien authorities also heavily publicized the new



military cooperation agreement with Russia as well as the delivery of anti-aircraft defense and a contingent of the Africa Corps. Rumors of questioning the American presence in Chad have also circulated. The willingness of French diplomacy to remain a major player on the African continent was confirmed by the visit to France of the President of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. (DRC) as well as by the holding in Paris of the International Humanitarian Conference for Sudan, the scene of a war forgotten by all while it causes one of the worst humanitarian disasters, the worst displacement crisis and soon the worst hunger crisis in the world, according to the UN.

### THE FMES INSTITUTE'S TEAM

# MAY EDITORIAL

2024

The accidental disappearance of Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and his foreign minister in a helicopter crash on May 19 raises questions about the future of Iran and the Middle East. Vice President Mohammad Mokhber, an experienced 68-year-old technocrat, will serve as interim president until the presidential election, whose first round has been set for June 28. It is very unlikely that the Iranians, largely demobilized, will take the opportunity to demonstrate in order to destabilize the regime because the Revolutionary Guards and their followers still inspire terror. This disappearance, on the other hand, fuels the power struggles for the succession of the Supreme Guide, old and sick. In view of the four weeks of the electoral campaign, only the candidates well known to the Iranians have a chance of being elected. The clergy having just lost its natural candidate (Ebrahim Raisi) who was to stand in June 2025 for a second term, it will be difficult to find a figure both popular and very conservative, since it rejects the hypothesis of the election of a reformist cleric. The Revolutionary Guards could say that their time has come, especially to accompany the possible crossing of the nuclear threshold, but they have lost credibility after the attacks that hit Iran, but especially after their underperformance in the brief phase of direct military confrontation with Israel last month. It could therefore ultimately be a civilian technocrat who takes advantage of this context to be elected president of the Islamic Republic, like the moderate conservative Ali Laridjani, former president of Parliament, or even interim president Mohammad Mokhber. Both maintain excellent networks within the clergy and within the Legion of the Pasdarans. Both could improve Iran's image on the international stage.

Several Middle Eastern actors could be tempted to take advantage of this window of opportunity during which Iran will focus on its domestic scene. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu seems to be preparing his opinion for a large-scale intervention in southern Lebanon to reduce the threat from Hezbollah, far more powerful than Hamas, and divert attention from the difficulties in Gaza, but also the arrest warrant issued against him by the International Criminal Court and the injunctions of the International Court of Justice to stop the fighting. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is raising the

stakes with Washington by letting a minimum normalization with Israel in exchange for a civilian nuclear program and formal security guarantees endorsed by Congress. The Turkish and Azerbaijani presidents could find the right moment to push their pawns into the South Caucasus.

For its part, Russia launched a major offensive in Ukraine in the direction of Kharkiv just as Vladimir Putin was appointing a new Defense Minister, Andrei Belousov, an industry specialist, thus indicating the importance of the war economy in Russia's strategy, which is clearly long-term. There is no doubt that the Kremlin is seeking symbolic success to discourage Europeans before the European elections and to undermine US support for Ukraine a few months before the November 2024 presidential election. In parallel, the Kremlin has stepped up pressure for the Georgian parliament to adopt a pro-Russian law that stigmatizes any entity more than 20% financed by foreign funds, including the media and NGOs. This law, aimed at challenging Georgia's pro-European orientation, sparked huge demonstrations in Tbilisi. Pro-European Georgian President Salome Zourabichvili vetoed it, deepening the institutional crisis. Georgia is currently living its Mайдan, far from the European cameras focused on Ukraine and Gaza, but also on Brussels since the EU countries are preparing to vote for the European elections. The same international indifference affects Sudan (see map of the month) which is sinking into a civil war that is causing «one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent memory» according to the UN office in charge of humanitarian operations (OCHA).

The French and Europeans must take into account the fact that many of our partners outside Europe, especially in the south, adhere to sovereignist and traditionalist agendas that no longer coincide at all with ours. More than their presumed naivety, the structural disadvantage of Europeans is that they refrain from considering the concepts used against them by their opponents and competitors: the religious phenomenon ( read the article on

this subject ), assumed nationalism ( read more ) and the imposition of a balance of power. It is not a question of praising these concepts, but of noting that they hit the mark in public opinion that turns its back on us one after the other.

### THE FMES INSTITUTE'S TEAM

# JUNE EDITORIAL

## 2024

The month of June highlighted the impact of the tensions that surround us on European and French politics.

Tensions in the East were omnipresent on 6 June, the 80th anniversary of D-Day. The participation of Ukraine and the absence of Russia deliberately highlighted the parallel, eight decades later, between the battles to liberate occupied France and Ukraine. Tensions in the south are also illustrated by the results of the European elections on 9 June. The populist upsurge that is continuing in the European Union is based on the fear of continued uncontrolled migration, which would import into our societies the resentments of the populations of the South. These two types of tension are palpable in the debates carried by the legislative campaign initiated by President Macron's dissolution of the National Assembly on the evening of the European election results. The two main political blocs are building on the tensions that exist in our South: the far right denounces the risk of importing antagonisms and their consequences, while the far left, on the contrary, is developing an ideological frame of reference on the Israeli Palestinian conflict, the archetype of the fight for emancipation.

In Eastern Europe, the war in Ukraine is stalling and the battle is shifting to the diplomatic arena. Anticipating a possible US withdrawal if Donald Trump is elected in November, the Europeans are trying to broaden the international base of support for Kiev. This was the aim of the summit held in Switzerland on 15 and 16 June, which produced mixed results: Although 92 countries were represented (Russia was not invited and China refused to attend) and 84 of them signed the final declaration, it was very light and none of the 'BRICS plus' countries agreed to join it. For his part, Vladimir Putin is strengthening his military partnership with North Korea (he travelled to Pyongyang on 18 and 19 June) and reinforcing his communication strategy regarding the 'world majority' that he opposes to the West (speech on 14 June). In this respect, it is worth noting that the two majority parties in the French legislative elections are calling for appeasement with Russia. This porosity between external and internal issues is a sign of the times, resulting from the flow of people, information and economic interests. It is also the hallmark of the information war that is raging

and undermining open and democratic societies. We'll be talking about this at the next RSMed on 8-9 October.

In the South, the war in Gaza continues, fueled by Hamas's refusal to accept the American truce plan, as well as by Netanyahu's ambition to prolong the conflict for as long as possible in order to delay a commission of inquiry that will threaten them when hostilities end. The IDF has been engaged in an operation to hunt tunnels and Hamas fighters in the Rafah area, particularly on the Egyptian border. This smaller operation could take several months to complete, allowing the Israelis to shift their focus to their northern border. Beyond Hamas, however, Israel must deal with Hezbollah, which is perceived as an even greater threat, and which Israeli planners know they will have to confront sooner or later. Israel also fits within the changing balance of power with Iran that the massive Iranian attack of April 13 demonstrated. Israel's security elites have recognized that Israel can now disappear, which explains their relative indifference to US and European injunctions. This is the theme of our article of the month (read the article). Iran's presidential election on June 28 and July 5 (in the event of a run-off) could hasten this strategic shift if Said Djalili or Mohammed-Baqer Qalibaf, two younger "civilian" conservatives who are more nationalistic and risk-averse than the clergy who have hitherto ruled the region, come to power and decide to press their way. Their election could affect Iran's nuclear program. Given the high turnout that the reformist candidate, Massoud Pezeshkian, an elderly technocrat, seems unlikely to win, even if he is the only candidate on his side.

In Africa, the forgotten war in Sudan continues to rage and now threatens to spill over into the Central African Republic. In the Sahel, jihadist attacks in Burkina Faso may have required Malian soldiers accompanied by Russian mercenaries. Although denied by the Burkinabe president, such an intervention would be the first materialization of the pact of the Alliance of Sahel States (AES). The sovereignty and even the nationalism claimed by the pan-Africanist movement in the Sahel is also borne by the new Senegalese authorities : the virulent speech

towards France made by Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko in May augurs a firm will to redefine the Franco-Senegalese relations that President Bassirou Diomaye Faye certainly echoed during his meeting in Paris with President Macron. Finally, the growing presence of non-Western actors on the continent continues, with the arrival on the continent of the private military company Sadat, close to Turkish President R.T. Ergogan, which could play an increasing role in the future, following the example it played in Libya and Azerbaijan.

Enjoy reading and a beautiful summer.

### THE FMES INSTITUTE'S TEAM

# SUMMER EDITORIAL

JULY - AUGUST 2024

As we suggested in June, the summer has been a bouncy one. On July 13, Donald Trump narrowly escaped an assassination attempt, and Joe Biden, criticized for his ill health, finally dropped out of the race, passing the torch of Democratic candidacy on to Vice President Kamala Harris. It seems to have reversed the electoral dynamic for its own benefit. For the first time since the campaign began, Donald Trump appears hesitant about his chances of winning, knowing that age, an argument he has used extensively against Joe Biden, is now working against him. A victory by Kamala Harris on November 5 would likely result in a continuation of Biden's foreign policy; that would be very bad news for the Kremlin and others in the Middle East and around the world who are hoping for the return of a transactional US administration with little commitment to defending values; indeed, it would be a welcome surprise to Ukraine, to Europeans, to traditional US allies in North Asia (Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan), and, paradoxically, to Iran and China, who are hoping to pursue "constructive" negotiations with Washington.

To the east, Volodymyr Zelensky tried to escape the Russian steamroller that is gnawing at the front line in Donbas by launching a surprise offensive north toward Kursk in early August, with some success, probably to reverse the negative spiral and to take part in negotiations that could be launched after the US election. For, as we emphasized in our latest Strategic Perspective, President Hu Khomeini knows that time is of the essence for his country, even if Kamala Harris wins in November.

China, on the other hand, is taking advantage of the strategic rival's focus on domestic politics and the Middle East to push its pawns in the China Sea against the Philippines, Japan, and Taiwan.

In the Middle East, tensions escalated on July 28 when Israel assassinated Israel's Hamas leader, Ismael Haniyeh, in the heart of Tehran, while he attended the inauguration of the new "reformist" president, Massoud Pezeshkian, who was elected on July 5 to challenge his ultra-conservative rival. Two days later, the Israeli government claimed responsibility for the elimination in Beirut of Fouad Chokr, Hezbollah's chief of operations, as part of an increase in cross-border strikes

throughout August. Such actions, which provide strategic signals between Tel Aviv and Tehran, have confronted Iran with a double dilemma: how to retaliate so as not to lose face without provoking an escalation with Israel and the United States. And how to maintain the credibility of its conventional strike force, which relies on its ballistic missiles and drones, considering that since April, Iranian-origin rocket, missile, and drone fire by Iran and its proxies has been overwhelmingly intercepted by Israel's missile defense. The latest example came on August 25, when Hezbollah, claiming to be fighting back against the removal of its chief of operations, unsuccessfully fired a salvo of 150 rockets and drones at Israeli military targets after most of the projectiles were destroyed in a pre-emptive Israeli military strike.

These developments have encouraged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to torpedo - a mirror image of Hamas - any progress in the negotiations on Gaza, and to do everything possible to eliminate Yaya Sinwar, the Hamas military wing leader who was promoted to head the political wing after the assassination of Ismael Haniyeh. Israeli Minister Itamar Ben Gvir's outrageous provocations about the Temple Mount in Jerusalem are fueling the conflict and further undermining Jordan, the theme of our article of the month.

In this context, the risk of escalation is very real: either Hezbollah, feeling pressured, will use its long-range ballistic missiles against Israeli cities and vital targets; or the Israeli government, sensing that time is running out on it, will reduce the threat posed by Shia militia now. On the Iranian side, the regime, which has seen the difficulty of piercing Israel's defenses with missiles and drones, will probably continue to work to cross the nuclear threshold in order to impose a new strategic deal on Israel and the United States, especially in the event of Donald Trump's election. The Supreme Leader's endorsement on August 27 of a resumption of negotiations with the United States on the nuclear issue is intended to favor the Democratic candidate and is not inconsistent with this strategy.

# SEPTEMBER EDITORIAL

2024

In Africa, talks have begun in Geneva on trying to broker a lasting ceasefire in Sudan between General Al Burhane's regular armed forces and General Hemedti's Rapid Reaction Forces, which seems unlikely to be concluded and has led to only scant progress on humanitarian access. In Mali, fighting between the northern autonomist groups and the Malian armed forces backed by their Russian proxies is intensifying in the border areas of Algeria, while JNIM (the Al Qaeda-affiliated Muslim and Islam Support Group) remains particularly active in the area.

In France, the success of the Olympic Games and the absence of attacks and destabilizing acts intended to weaken the country during this period have overshadowed these events. Their consequences, however, will have to be considered by the next government. In the meantime, the Elysée has taken a major decision by officially siding with Morocco over Algeria on the Western Sahara issue and recognizing Morocco's thesis of autonomy (not independence) for the Saharawi people. This decision does not facilitate relations with Algeria as it prepares to re-elect President Tebboune, but it does have the advantage of making a real choice that clearly strengthens France's position in North and West Africa. That will be the theme of our first conference back in the fall.

## THE FMES INSTITUTE'S TEAM

It was with near-complete indifference that delegations from around the world gathered in New York for the opening of the 79th United Nations General Assembly, speaking to a sparsely attended audience. This is not a neglect of ongoing crises and conflicts, but rather a reflection of the UN's loss of prestige and authority. Instead, conflicts have not abated. On the contrary, great-power rivalries now express themselves outside the forum, as illustrated by our map of the month.

In our region of choice, the second half of September was marked by an escalation of the long-heralded clash between Israel and Hezbollah. A succession of actions within days marked Tel Aviv's resumption of initiative: the simultaneous explosion of thousands of beacons and walkie-talkies belonging to Hezbollah cadres and their Iranian advisers; the destruction of missile stockpiles; the elimination of many senior officials, including the charismatic leader Hassan Nasrallah. Hezbollah, a groggy, is no longer able to respond in a coordinated way. Israel has significantly weakened the primary threat to its borders, but it now faces the ultimate political challenge: just how destructive a Shia militia is to the security of Israel, given that the seeds of Hezbollah's reconstruction are sown by the same bombs that are destroying it? The answer depends on two factors: the ability of Lebanese civil and political societies to use their decline to rebalance power and restore some semblance of state. How the Iranian regime and strategy have evolved depends on whether it has accommodated or hardened. The United States, but also the Gulf States, are concerned about the uncontrolled escalation and are following this radical reorganization, which stems from an unexpected Israeli reaction to violence, paradoxically triggered by the feeling of extreme vulnerability generated by the attacks of 7 October 2023 and 13 April 2024.

The battle for perceptions in the West, especially in the US, is also being fought. On the one hand, Israel is rushing to eliminate Yahya Sinwar, Hamas's leader, quickly so that it can bring about an end to the fighting in Gaza and thereby ease international pressure on him. On the other hand, Iran's president has reacted moderately to the attacks in Lebanon, putting the nuclear issue back on the table in New York to demonstrate his openness.

Ukrainian President Volodimir Zelenski came to beg for more military aid to enable him to strike Russia in depth, as his offensive towards Kursk runs out of steam and the Russian army continues to gobble up his territory. To dissuade the European heads of state from giving more aid to Ukraine, Vladimir Putin did not hesitate to brandish the threat of using nuclear weapons yet again. In North Africa, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune was unsurprisingly re-elected on September 7 after an imbroglio over his performance and the real - very low - turnout, which reinforces the incumbent's loss of legitimacy, as the September speaker pointed out. In the same way and without any suspense, Kais Saïed will be re-elected to the Tunisian presidency on October 6. Everyone in the United States and around the world is watching the November 5 US presidential election because everyone understands that it will have a significant impact on many hot issues.

In Africa, the bloody attacks in Bamako by the Al-Qaeda-affiliated Support Group for Islam and Muslims (GSIM) confirmed the great difficulties that the Malian army and its Russian proxies have in containing the inexorable advance of jihadist groups. The violent attack on Algeria by the representative of Mali at the United Nations General Assembly has also revealed to the world the depth of the reconfigurations in the area, where Morocco now poses as the privileged interlocutor of the Sahelian states. The situation is also complicated in coastal countries, notably in Benin, where one of Talon's relatives and the commander of the Republican Guard were accused of attempted coup d'état. Finally, in Sudan, the forgotten war continues: the national army loyal to General Al Burhan, besieged in El-Fasher, North Darfur, has launched an offensive in the capital, Khartoum, whose "Hemedti Forces" are holding the city center, killing hundreds of thousands. All these topics are on the agenda of our Mediterranean Strategic Meetings, which will take place in a few days in Toulon, during which we will unveil the 2024 edition of our *Mediterranean and Middle East Strategic Atlas*. You can still register. We'll take stock of that next month.



# OCTOBER EDITORIAL

## 2024

Three regions of the global scene came into the spotlight in October, summing up the evolution of our planet: the United States, Kazan and the Middle East.

The world is watching the US election campaign, which will culminate in a sharply polarized presidential election on November 5. That match is uncertain, but it is a credible assumption of a victory by Donald Trump. This would be a major break and, paradoxically, would bring the leading country of the Western world in step with its Eurasian competitors. Donald Trump, a nationalist, indifferent to human rights, insensitive to universalism and in favour of transactional relations with the rest of the world, is in tune with many non-Western leaders, including Xi Jinping, Vladimir Putin, Narendra Modi, and Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This was one of the issues discussed at our Strategic Mediterranean Meetings on 8-9 October, which were very successful in the opinion of the 3 000 enthusiastic participants.

Thirty-five countries, 19 of which were represented by their heads of state, met in Kazan for the BRICS+ summit from 22 to 24 October at the invitation of Vladimir Putin. For Putin, the meeting was first and foremost a demonstration of the failure of his marginalization at the behest of the West. Indeed, the number and nature of participants and candidates for membership (including Turkey, represented by its president) reflect the dynamics in the Global South as it seeks international recognition and recognizes a credible alternative to US-Western influence. Though Putin managed to achieve no concrete policy gains (no enlargement to include new countries, no implementation of an alternative payments system to Swift, no de-dollarization, no support for the war in Ukraine), his willingness to side with the more aggressive policymaker toward the West, reinforced by the presence of United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, shows worrisome momentum for Europe.

While in Kazan to present his candidacy for the next round of BRICS+ expansion, Recep Tayyip Erdogan has learned the good news and bad news: the death of his rival, Fetulah Gülen, in the

United States, which weakens the political opposition to the Turkish president; the attack in Ankara attributed to the PKK, which demonstrates that Kurdish guerrillas remain alive. Not far from home, the two crucial elections in Moldova and Georgia on the future orientation (pro-European or pro-Russian) of these two small Eastern European states are coveted by the Kremlin, which feels it is growing its wings as North Korea sends more than ten thousand additional troops to Ukraine. Both elections underscored the success of Russia's destabilization efforts. Again, Europeans' reactions will be examined carefully to see if they can stand up firmly to Vladimir Putin.

In the Levant, the war between Israel and Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran is escalating, further harming civilians and raising the risk of escalation. While Hamas's military wing appears defeated or on the verge of defeat after the elimination of its leader, Yahya Sinouar (which will be the topic of our conference later this month), Hezbollah's, although decapitated and greatly weakened, is responding again with the likely presence of Iranian Revolutionary Guards, who appear to have replaced the eliminated Lebanese cadres. Israel's rather limited response on October 26 to a massive Iranian ballistic missile strike demonstrates a willingness to avoid direct conflict between the two states. Last year, however, taboo was finally broken on April 13, when Iran launched its first missile strike on Israeli soil, marking the end of decades of proxy conflict between Israel and Iran. Faced with this risk of open conflict, the number of munitions becomes key: effective ballistic missiles on the Iranian side that is on the offensive, anti-missile interceptors in defense on the Israeli side. Tehran is favored in this equation but must be careful: if Tel Aviv found itself in a missile shortage for its protective shield, Israel might be tempted by an offensive, potentially very lethal, leak. Until the US election becomes the key to supplies of munitions, Israel has its meager backers, particularly India.

In Africa, while the Sudanese army is making significant progress towards Khartoum, the town of el Fasher is still being bombed by the Rapid Support Forces (RSF). In the Horn of

Africa, the controversial memorandum of understanding between Ethiopia and Somaliland is speeding up the rapprochement between Somalia, Egypt and Turkey. In the Sahel, the partnership between Russian auxiliaries and the Malian armed forces appears to have been weakened by the heavy losses they suffered against rebels in the north, while the attack on the outskirts of Niamey by the al-Qaeda affiliated Support Group for Islam and Muslims (GSIM) raises questions about the resilience of the Niger government, which is now faced with political and military rebellions in the center of the country.

*THE FMES INSTITUTE'S TEAM*



# NOVEMBER EDITORIAL

## 2024

The election of Donald Trump on 5 November was the most significant event of the month in terms of its many consequences. His pacifism, transactionalism, unilateralism, obsession with China and total lack of ideological or historical references leave room for radical and unexpected changes.

In Ukraine, a new period is beginning. The time has come for negotiations, and the fighting should end in 2025. The first question concerns the ceasefire line. Everyone is trying to make as many pledges as possible before the new American president takes office. The authorisation given by Joe Biden to use ATACMS missiles on Russian territory on the one hand and the firing of the Russian Orechnik missile on the other, which is nuclear-capable but has a conventional warhead, illustrate this balance of power, which is set to increase. The second question concerns the security of the 1,000 km of 'border' between the belligerents. It is a question of identifying the countries capable and willing to guarantee the ceasefire for perhaps several decades.

In southern Europe, the consequences seem less predictable for several reasons. First of all, the election of Donald Trump has been welcomed by the autocrats and populist leaders of the region, led by Benjamin Netanyahu. They welcome the arrival in power of an administration that will not lecture them, will not promote Western values and will give them free rein to resolve their domestic conflicts as they see fit. Only the Iranian leaders, the Emir Al Thani of Qatar and King Abdullah II of Jordan deplore this election, because they depend - each in their own way - on their relationship with Washington and they know that it will be more difficult for them to negotiate with a Republican administration.

It is likely that the new US President will reinforce the process of disengagement from this region, a constant movement since Barak Obama. This is particularly true for North Africa, which was not the subject of any statement during the campaign, but also for the Iraq-Syria theatre, which is very unpopular with the American population, particularly in Donald Trump's electoral base. It is therefore possible that the new President will speed up the American

military withdrawal from this area of operations, creating a vacuum that certain regional players will be quick to fill, particularly in the gaps freed up on the Iraqi-Turkish-Syrian border. There is no doubt that Turkey, Russia and Iran will benefit, but perhaps also Daech and al-Qaeda, who have not said their last word and are only waiting for the right moment to regain control of territories where they were firmly entrenched. The big losers will undoubtedly be the Kurds and the Palestinians, but also the Lebanese who showed their powerlessness during the conflict between Israel and Hezbollah and Iran. Syria's evolution in this troubled environment will be the subject of our next lecture, given by Fabrice Balanche, winner of the WFES geopolitics prize, who will decipher the consequences of the surprise conquest of Aleppo by Islamists and Syrian rebels a few days after the ceasefire between Israel and Hezbollah came into force.

Finally, Donald Trump remains unpredictable - indeed, his strength - amoral and deeply transactional, opening the possibility of totally unforeseen twists and turns. Even staunchest supporters like Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Bin Salman, Emirati Mohammed Bin Zayed, and Egypt's Abdel Fatah el-Sisi are suspicious of his thugs and initiatives. They also understood that Donald Trump's declaration of *urbi et orbi* that he wanted to end hostilities in the Middle East was not intended to lead the US into armed conflict in the Middle East, particularly against Iran, though he had appointed some very anti-Iran figures to his government (Marco Rubio). Israeli leaders will have had little taste in the quiet meeting in New York between Musk and Iran's ambassador to the United Nations (November 14). Nor has the resumption of military cooperation and joint military maneuvers between Saudi Arabia and Iran. In this new environment of "coups," Binyamin Netanyahu, hostage to his right-wing extremist ministers who championed colonization, could use the window of opportunity to annex the West Bank altogether, settling the Palestine problem in his own way and securing comfortable reelection. The dismissal of his defense minister, Yoav Gallant, in the midst of the war, strongly opposed to this annexation, supports this hypothesis. It is impossible to anticipate Trump's response today: cheering or letting go - a decision that

will likely depend on how well he does. Iran's leaders, for their part, are divided between enthusiasts of openness around the government and parliament, and hardliners around the national security council and the powerful pro-Russia lobby, with no way of knowing exactly how much the two parties collude. That game is all the more important because it takes place against the backdrop of the passing of a very sick supreme leader whom everyone sees in Iran who is no longer fit to lead the country. The nuclear threshold has not yet been crossed.

In the Middle East, US disengagement on Trump's behalf could lead, in a bad scenario, to the destruction of Gaza, Israel's annexation of the West Bank, the weakening of the Hashemite monarchy after expelling large numbers of Palestinians to Jordan, the collapse of Lebanon, renewed Syrian civil war, and an Iranian atomic bomb that would presumably force the Israelis to break out of the nuclear ambiguity.

More generally, the uncertainty generated by Donald Trump's election will only embolden those who have embraced multi-alignment to pursue a pragmatic approach.

In Africa, as instability rises in the Sahel-Sudan strip and the Great Lakes region, France's position is weakening, while its competitors, particularly Russia and Turkey, are strengthening. The Chadian government's decision to end security and defense agreements with France and President Diomaye Faye's mention of the departure of French troops from Senegal illustrate the ongoing momentum that appears to be generating a ripple effect.

So, Europeans now face their responsibilities: will they finally wake up to assume their security, or will they continue to delude themselves with illusions that will play into the hands of all those who dream of keeping them out of history and hoping to rewrite it for their benefit? Donald Trump's first term had set off alarm bells, with Europeans reeling; Russia's invasion of Ukraine had set off alarm bells; what next? Some are getting ready (articles by Jean Marcou and Aris Marghelis). As President Macron decides to put Bloch's ashes to the Pantheon, the French must make the intellectual effort to understand what is coming to avoid another "strange defeat." The FMES is doing its utmost to play its part.

THE FMES INSTITUTE'S TEAM

# DECEMBER EDITORIAL

2024

The defining event this month was the fall of Syria's Bashar al-Assad and the victory of the Islamist rebels Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTC) in a blitz on the Turkish border. This fall looks all the more paradoxical because the Syrian regime had managed to regain control over the years and isolate the rebels in the Idlib pocket. But the economic crisis that significantly weakened the government's room for maneuver in the role of a narco-state; Israel's blows to Hezbollah and Iran for its military support of the Syrian regime; Russia's prioritization of the Ukrainian front; and the Turkish military's excellent preparation of the rebels and support for them undercut the Syrian army's activism and motivation. The latter has unraveled, failing to arrest associated rebels in their assault on pro-Turkish militias in the Syrian National Army (ANS).

This was a major setback for the Kremlin, which had to release Bashar al-Assad and negotiate with the rebels to keep two of its military bases on Syria's coast. Beyond the operational impact of the possible loss of the Hmeimim and Tartus bases on Russian operations in Africa (they were logistical hubs supplying Benghazi, Bamako, Ouagadougou, and Bangui), Vladimir Putin's brutal release of Bashar al-Assad is a signal that must challenge the dictators concerned: Is Russia reliable?

Above all, it is a dismal failure for Iran, which has now lost its two historic allies in quick succession: Lebanon's Hezbollah, which was severely weakened by Israeli strikes and has now been cut off from its main supply line to Tehran; and Baathist Syria, on which the Iranian regime has invested heavily for the past 45 years. The clear beneficiary of this regional aggiornamento is Turkish President R.T. Erdogan, who can hope to expand his border buffer belt into northern Syria, eliminate Kurdish resistance there, and send back many Syrian refugees, reducing the influence of rivals Russia and Iran in the process. Netanyahu welcomes this development, which has the advantage of breaking the Iranian axis over Israel and the Mediterranean, but also the drawback of establishing an Islamist caliphate on his doorstep that is hostile to Israel. As a result, Israel's military has launched a major air and naval offensive that has allowed it to destroy

almost all of the former Syrian army's offensive potential, in order to ensure that it does not fall into the wrong hands. With the dismantling of Russia's anti-aircraft systems, Israeli warplanes can now attack Iran even more easily. Iran's militarily and politically fragile leaders are well aware of this new situation, and there is much debate between those who advocate maintaining the "axis of resistance" and those who advocate both a change of strategy and a comprehensive negotiation with the US.

Europeans cheer the fall of Syria's dictatorial regime, but they also wonder what it will mean to install a caliphate that claims a radical Islam, embraces the Mediterranean (in contrast to ISIS), and embraces Jordan, Iraq, and Lebanon. In the run-up to Donald Trump's inauguration on January 20, the Moribund Biden administration and Europeans are trying to push their pawns in Eastern Europe against Russia. In Ukraine, the key is to reassure President Zelensky by supplying him with weapons and encouraging him to deal with the Kremlin; the West is seeking to ensure that he has enough cards to bargain with as Russian warplanes increase their strikes on Ukraine's electricity infrastructure. In Moldova, the secret services have demonstrated the involvement of Russian services in influencing the outcome of the referendum on that country's eventual membership in the European Union (validated with just 51% of the vote). In Romania, the Constitutional Court, after demonstrating extensive Kremlin meddling in the electoral process, annulled the first round of presidential elections that threatened to be won by the pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu. In Georgia, President Salome Zurbishvili (whose term expires at the end of December) has denounced the election of the pro-Russian populist football player Mikheil Kavelashvili by a Russian-influenced parliament, as well as many Georgians who are protesting daily in the streets. Backed by European intellectuals and businessmen, she has announced that she will refuse to step down, portending a serious institutional crisis.

In Africa, the ECOWAS Summit postponed for six months the examination of the consequences of the inevitable withdrawal of Burkina Faso, Mali and Niger, whose assertion within the ESA

is becoming increasingly structured. Faced with Russian activism in the field of influence in eastern Europe and Africa, and with the expectation of a tough US administration, Europe should be prepared for a downturn by 2025.

In the meantime, and despite this highly uncertain context on the international scene as well as on the domestic scene in France, the entire WMES team wishes you a happy holiday season.

*THE FMES INSTITUTE'S TEAM*



# MONTHLY MAPS



Every month, the FMES Institute publishes a map analyzing the complex issues of the world's geopolitical news. These thematic maps, developed by our experts and a cartographer, offer a clear and impactful reading of the dynamics in progress. They provide a solid base of information for experts, while democratizing access to information for the general public.

*Some maps couldn't be translated, but the describing text still allows an understanding of the document.*

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# KALININGRAD, THE KREMLIN'S NEXT WAR TO OPEN UP THE REGION

MARCH 2024

Sweden's full membership of NATO on 7 March 2024, following that of Finland (4 April 2023), has transformed the Baltic Sea into a 'NATO lake', whereas two years ago it was a maritime space shared militarily with Russia. The Russian navy in the Baltic now finds itself in a defensive posture, cornered on its naval bases in Kaliningrad and St Petersburg, just as the Russian navy in the Black Sea is cornered in the Sea of Azov by the combined action of drones and Ukrainian missiles. Russia now finds itself managing the logistics of the Russian enclave of Kaliningrad within the NATO area, just as NATO had to manage the logistics of the enclave of West Berlin within the Warsaw Pact during the Cold War.

In February 2022, the Kremlin opened up Crimea by invading Ukraine. Tomorrow, the Russian president could be tempted to open up by force the Russian territory of Kaliningrad in the Baltic, already transformed into a 'nuclearised' bunker and a bubble of denial of access, and why not also the vassalised territory of Transnistria in south-west Ukraine. These two operations, if they were to take place, would be based on a surprise air-land offensive designed to stun Europeans and NATO. This map clearly shows the strategic importance of the Suwalki corridor, only 65 kilometres long, which links Poland to the Baltic States and Russia to Kaliningrad. It also shows NATO's new eastern border, which could quickly become a new Iron Curtain, isolating Moldova and Georgia even further.

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# SUDAN'S FORGOTTEN WAR : AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE GROWING COMPLEXITY OF AFRICAN CONFLICTS

MAY 2024

In 1994, the war in Bosnia, accompanied by the massacre of the civilian population (which culminated in July 1995 in the massacre at Srebrenica), took up all the media space, eclipsing the Rwandan genocide, which led to the massacre of more than 800,000 people in atrocious conditions in the space of a few months.

Are we experiencing the same phenomenon? Obsessed by the wars in Ukraine and Palestine, a form of indifference surrounds events in Sudan. The country is sinking into a civil war that is causing 'one of the worst humanitarian disasters in recent memory', according to the UN Office for Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA).

It is estimated that half of Sudan's 47 million people are in need of humanitarian aid, a third are suffering from malnutrition and a quarter have had to flee their homes, including almost 2 million who have left the country because of the fighting. The death toll is unknown but estimated at several tens of thousands. Hundreds of rapes and abductions of women and girls reduced to slavery have been denounced by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR). When all is said and done, the toll is likely to be terrible.

How did it come to this? This war is first and foremost a rivalry between two military leaders, General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan and General Mohamed Hamdan Dogolo, nicknamed Hemetti, respectively President and Vice-President of the Transitional Sovereignty Council that succeeded the genocidal dictatorship of President Omar el-Bechir. After jointly overthrowing the civilian process in October 2021, Al-Burhan took power and Hemetti wants to take his place. As in the Sahel, this war is also based on a rivalry, exacerbated by desertification, between nomadic herders and richer sedentary farmers, and also on Arab suprematism towards the black populations living in Darfur, in the south of the country. Hemetti's Rapid Support Forces (RSF), part of the Janjawid militia that made its name during the similar conflict that led to genocide in Darfur in 2003 and the secession of South Sudan in 2011, massacre, terrorise and sometimes recruit from these populations.

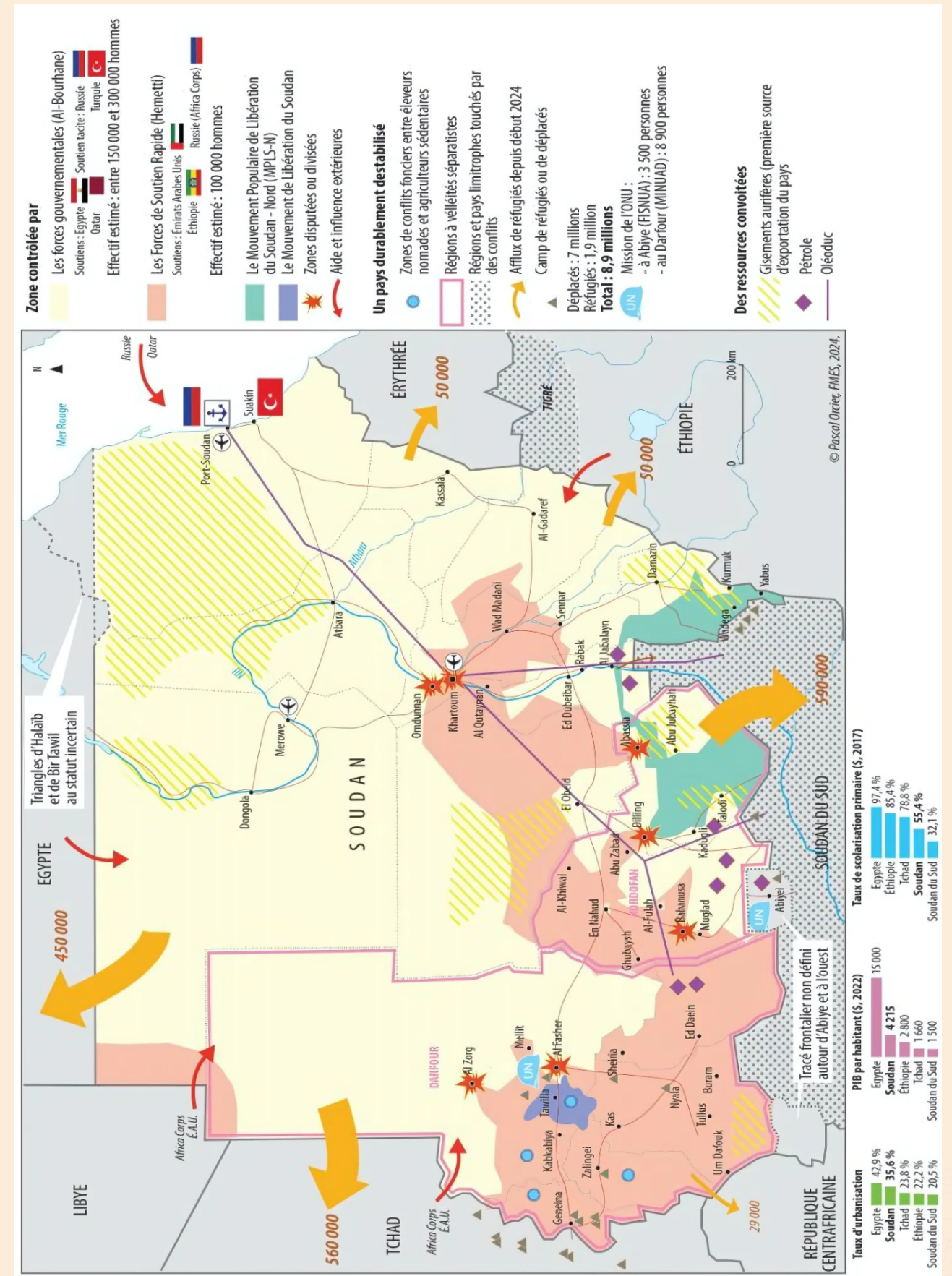
For its part, Al-Burhan and the staff of the regular army claim to be part of a political Islamist movement that follows in the footsteps of Bashir's regime, which enables Hemetti to present himself as fighting against religious extremism.

Another specific feature of this conflict is the involvement of foreign powers. Sudan is rich in resources (gold and oil) and strategically positioned between the Red Sea, the Sahel and Central Africa. Al Burhan is backed by Egypt and the traditional supporters of Bashir's Islamist regime: Iran, Qatar, Turkey and Eritrea. Russia is still negotiating to set up a base in Port Sudan, even though Moscow is playing a double game in the country.

The FSR enjoys the support of the Russian militia Africa Corps (formerly Wagner), which delivers arms, supplies and fuel across the porous borders of Libya, the Central African Republic and South Sudan. Hemetti can also count on military assistance from the United Arab Emirates via Chad and political support from Abu Dhabi, which is fighting political Islam everywhere.

The West has cautiously stayed out of the conflict, supporting international mediations which have all failed. Saudi Arabia, with the support of the United States, Bahrain, the Intergovernmental Authority on African Development (IGAD), Egypt, Chad and France, with the humanitarian conference on 15 April 2024, the many initiatives have all failed, either because the powers did not want to be involved, or because they were too involved, or because the focus was elsewhere.

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# FRANCE'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN NORTH AFRICA AND THE MIDDLE EAST

JUNE 2024

France, a European power on the shores of the Mediterranean, marked by a colonial history in the Maghreb, home to a large Muslim population from the region and with the singularity of also being an Indian Ocean power, has strategic interests in the Mediterranean basin and the Middle East. As a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council, NATO and the European Union, France is seeking to establish itself as a balancing power capable of developing an independent regional strategy aimed at stabilising the region. France is currently faced with the impact of destabilisation in the Sahel-Sudan strip on its southern neighbours. The growing chaos is now materialising in the form of migratory, criminal and terrorist flows, but could also destabilise societies and the powers that be in the future. The consequences of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the risks of it spreading to Lebanon, which has been transformed into a quasi-failed state, are of great concern to the region, especially as it is home to the largest Jewish community in Europe and maintains a large contingent in southern Lebanon as part of UNIFIL II. It also suffers from the instrumentalisation of certain Muslim minorities by regional players such as Algeria, Turkey and Qatar. France has chosen to oppose the Iranian and Syrian regimes and is ambiguous about Morocco's position on the Western Sahara.

To defend its interests (particularly its economic ones) and contribute to the efforts to stabilize the region, France relies on privileged partnerships with Egypt, Jordan, Iraq, the United Arab Emirates and, to a lesser extent, with Saudi Arabia and Morocco, the former privileged partner.

In order to meet its international obligations and defend its interests in the Middle East, France maintains a permanent system of approximately 4,000 military personnel, 30 tanks, 18 fighter jets and 5 frigates. With its well-located bases and strategic depth, the RCAF stands ready to provide reinforcements, and to send its carrier battle group to the scene if necessary. Its professional armed forces, with its real operational experience and excellent knowledge and understanding of the region, are nevertheless suffering from logistical and budgetary constraints and from a

On the maritime fronts of the Mediterranean basin and the Arabian Peninsula, France's goal is to defend freedom of the seas and keep the maritime axis from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean open, thereby projecting power and preventing a blockage of international trade. French naval forces are engaged in several major European operations in the region :

- *Aspides* (1 frigate) : protection of ships in transit against Houthi attacks in the Red Sea, since February 2024.
- *Atalanta* (1 frigate) : combating piracy in the Gulf of Aden since 2008.
- *Irini* (1 frigate) : monitoring the embargo on arms transfers to Libya, since 2021.
- *Agenor* (1 frigate and maritime patrol vessel, occasionally) : monitoring the Strait of Hormuz, since 2019.

Ground forces are deployed in the framework of international cooperation, in particular to fight jihadist armed groups in order to avoid new attacks in Europe :

- *Chammal* : military support to Iraqi forces engaged in the fight against Daesh since 2014
- *FINUL II* : monitoring of the cessation of hostilities in Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah.

If France wants to break out of its isolation in North Africa, regain positions in Africa and improve its visibility in the Middle East, it will have to make choices because the current period does not favor those who favor the status quo.

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# RIVALRIES BETWEEN GREAT POWERS : A DUOPOLY OF THREE, THE FOURTH IN AMBUSH

SEPTEMBER 2024

While all over the world, the middle powers are agitated by regional recompositions, a small group of states engages in a competition of a completely different nature that determines the framework of the world game. The 21st century has become the scene of a rivalry of great powers that surpass others by their attributes and ambition.

Power, that is, «the ability of a political unit to impose its will on other units», can be characterized by a few key characteristics that it is essential to possess at a certain level: economic wealth, the size of its population, the ability to influence and military strength, particularly atomic. Beyond these quantitative criteria, the will to weigh in the overall game is another condition, necessary to be part of this very closed club. Ambition, vision and the desire to dominate remain decisive.

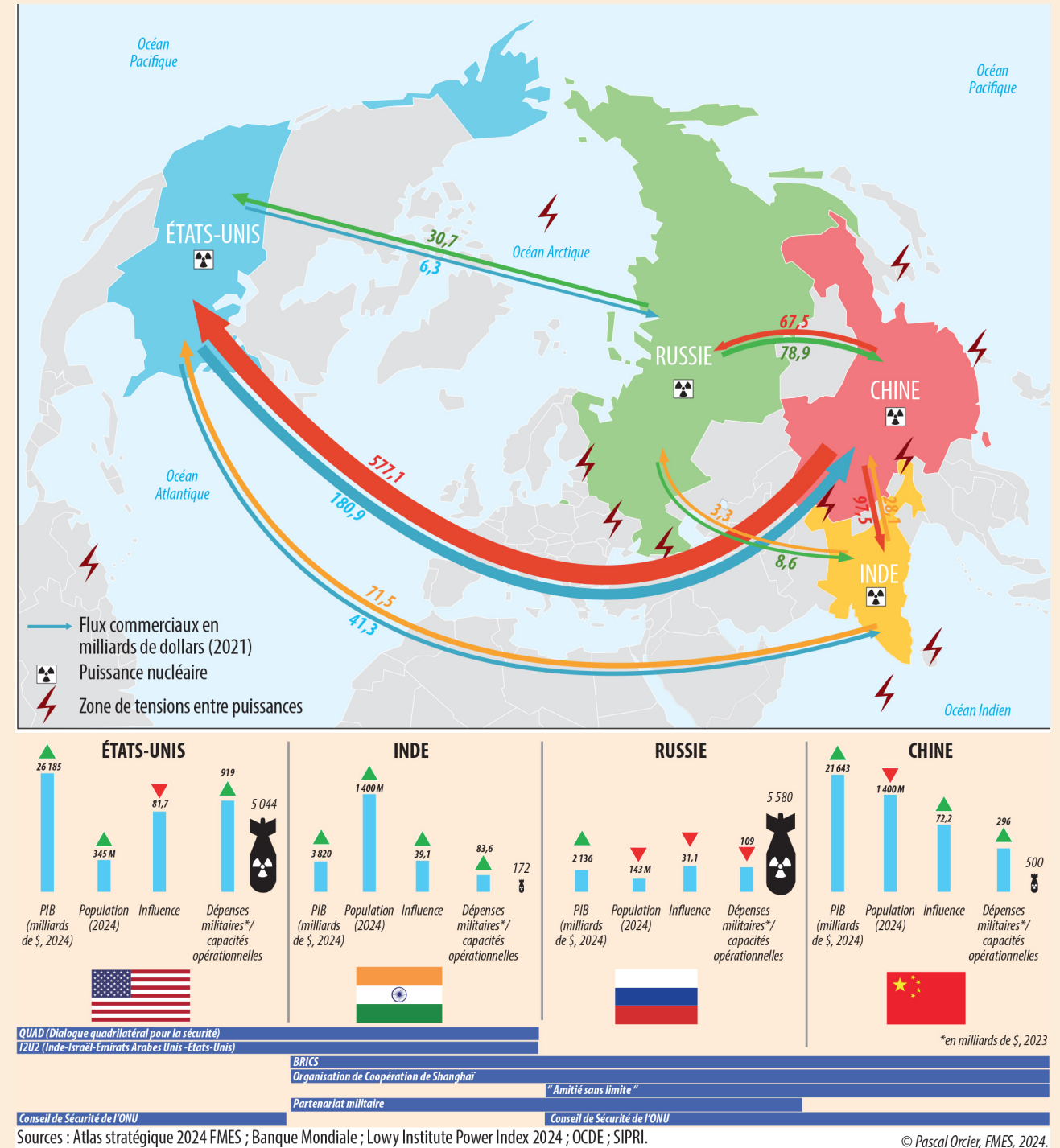
In this light, two states dominate global geopolitical competition: the United States, an established superpower, and China, an expanding superpower driven by a revisionist will. China shows an economic power almost equivalent to that of the United States and its ability to influence is gradually catching up with the long hegemonic soft power of its rival. On the other aspects, the two countries are contradictory and the superiorities are clear and distributed: demographic on one side and military on the other.

A third state, a former superpower in the 20th century, is trying to preserve its place on the podium by leaning on the Chinese dynamic: it is Russia, very weakened by its «defeat on points» in the ideological, economic and political struggle it waged with its American rival during the Cold War. Its only strength today lies in its military ability (weakened however by the war in Ukraine which exhausts it) whose gigantic nuclear arsenal is equivalent to that of the United States.

A long-time challenger, India, which has long backed Russia, now has the potential to enter this competition and get on the podium. Until now his internal difficulties were too great and his desire for power too weak to «get in the ring.» Narendra Modi has decided that it is time for his country to have a global power strategy, if it does not wish to undergo Chinese leadership.

The game is complex: the two great rivals challenge each other, try to weaken each other through a game of alliances and sanctions, but cooperate strongly economically. Russia is playing confrontation, hoping to take advantage of the windfall effects of a possible Sino-American slippage. India prefers to build a position of balance, by multiplying the often contradictory alignments, to make itself indispensable and acquire - finally - the place of permanent member of the UN Security Council that it believes should return to it.

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# FRANCE AT THE FOREFRONT OF POWER RIVALRIES IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

OCTOBER 2024

The Indian Ocean is a complex geopolitical arena, a receptacle for the ambitions and tensions that drive the great powers. More than just a passage route, it is the scene of a rivalry where economic, energy and military issues are intertwined in the midst of criminal flows: drugs, weapons, illegal overfishing, piracy, migrant trafficking. Mastering it is a strategic objective for both global and regional players. The western part of the Indian Ocean that appears on the attached map illustrates all these issues and challenges, against a backdrop of growing tensions between China and the United States, and uninhibited ambitions of India, Russia and Iran in this maritime area essential for maritime traffic. The riparian countries are also impacted by the conflicts in the Middle East that spill over into the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, access routes to the Indian Ocean.

France, the coastal power of the Indian Ocean thanks to Reunion, Mayotte and the Scattered Islands are directly concerned by these developments, especially since with the diversion of maritime traffic to the Cape of Good Hope to avoid the Red Sea, Reunion Island is close to the main flow of ships of all sizes connecting Asia to Europe and the Americas. France must therefore preserve the link to Reunion and to this maritime route, while ensuring the security of its overseas territories and exclusive economic zones, which are areas rich in fisheries resources. France has thus strengthened its military presence in the region and is making diplomatic efforts to forge regional alliances, particularly with India and South Africa, to deter any attempt at a hostile incursion, which does not prevent certain competitors from trying to destabilize certain French territories in the Indian Ocean.

For China, the Indian Ocean represents above all a vital «umbilical energy cord» connecting the rich hydrocarbon resources of the Middle East to its powerful industrial centers. This dependence on sea routes highlights the fragility of its energy supply and explains its policy of increasing influence in this region, materialized by the so-called «pearl necklace» strategy clearly identifiable on this map and which relies on ports and naval bases very well placed.

For the United States, this zone is crucial both for its strategy to contain China and for global energy security. Indeed, to control the Indian Ocean is also to be able to project rapidly towards East Asia and Taiwan; this was the thrust of the expansion of the Pacific theatre of operations to the Indian Ocean to form the new INDOPACOM command. The US bases and forces deployed on the attached map allow the US to pose a constant threat to hydrocarbon shipping routes in order to interrupt, if necessary, China's energy supply. The Indian Ocean is therefore a space where US and Chinese forces could directly clash.

The Indian Ocean represents both India's natural outlet and its first security bulwark. With its economic and military rise, India aspires to play a leading role in the region, positioning itself as a counterweight to China's growing influence. This ambition is reflected in an expansion of its naval capabilities and a network of strategic alliances, particularly with the United States, Japan and Australia in the framework of the Quad, but also with France in a promising bilateral framework.

Iran also aspires to deploy in the Indian Ocean, not only to supply the Houthis in Yemen or to counter Israel, but also to demonstrate the offshore capabilities of its civilian and military fleets, as evidenced by its activism within the Indian Ocean Rim Association. It is also for Tehran to connect to the maritime routes now linking the BRICS + countries that Iran has joined.

Russia needs access to the Indian Ocean via the Eastern Mediterranean and the Red Sea to break its geographical isolation and strengthen its ability to intervene on the international scene.

For now, tensions and rivalries have not crossed the threshold of military confrontation, but this could be the case in the short or medium term in case of worsening crises in Taiwan and the Middle East. Everyone must prepare for it.





# AFRICA IS ALSO LOOKING WEST

NOVEMBER 2024

Within the framework of a strategic vision that is both global and original, Morocco launched the Partnership of Atlantic African States (PEAA), which aims to strengthen its geopolitical position, emancipate itself from Mediterranean tensions, while exploiting the possibilities of cooperation with the African countries bordering the Atlantic. The map entitled «Africa also looks West» illustrates these ambitions, highlighting the scope and objectives of this project, very original in a continent marked by regionalism and continental culture.

The PEAA, which brings together the 21 African states bordering the Atlantic, aims to structure cooperation between its members and to establish «an area of dialogue, consultation and action to promote peace, stability and prosperity in the region.»

Indeed, the Atlantic coast of Africa represents a significant potential, bringing together nearly half of the African population, 55% of the continent's GDP and 57% of intra-African trade. Nevertheless, this part of Africa still faces major challenges: securing the area, marked by piracy, acts of terrorism and maritime crime; the need to modernise transport infrastructure and combat environmental threats to marine ecosystems.

The first ministerial meeting of the Partnership of Atlantic African States (PEAA), held in Rabat in 2022, gave rise to the Rabat Declaration, marking the launch of a new era of cooperation for Atlantic Africa. This declaration laid the foundations for a strengthened partnership in several key areas: trade, maritime security, the fight against crime and terrorism, energy cooperation and environmental protection. The major Moroccan ports including Tangier-Med, the most important of the country, as well as the many maritime routes linking Morocco to the countries of West Africa are key elements of this regional strategy which also has a dimension with regard to the north (Portugal), and the west (United States, Latin America).

At the same time, Morocco has launched major projects that strengthen the PEAA: opening up of the Sahel countries to the Atlantic (which could raise Algerian eyebrows), Nigeria-Morocco

gas pipeline that will cross 16 African countries and will be connected to the Maghreb-Europe gas pipeline and the European gas network, Tarfaya wind farm and White Dunes wind farm Dakhla.

In short, these initiatives illustrate Morocco's ambition to be one of the continent's major players, relying on its dual Atlantic and pro-Western specificity, asserting itself as a strategic crossroads for economic development, security and energy. The country thus seeks to promote enhanced cooperation with its neighbours, while integrating into the Euro-Atlantic area, by strengthening partnerships between Africa, Europe and the Americas.

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## L'Afrique regarde aussi vers l'Ouest





# EUROPE'S DEFENSE AGAINST RUSSIA : LOOK FOR THE FLAW!

DECEMBER 2024

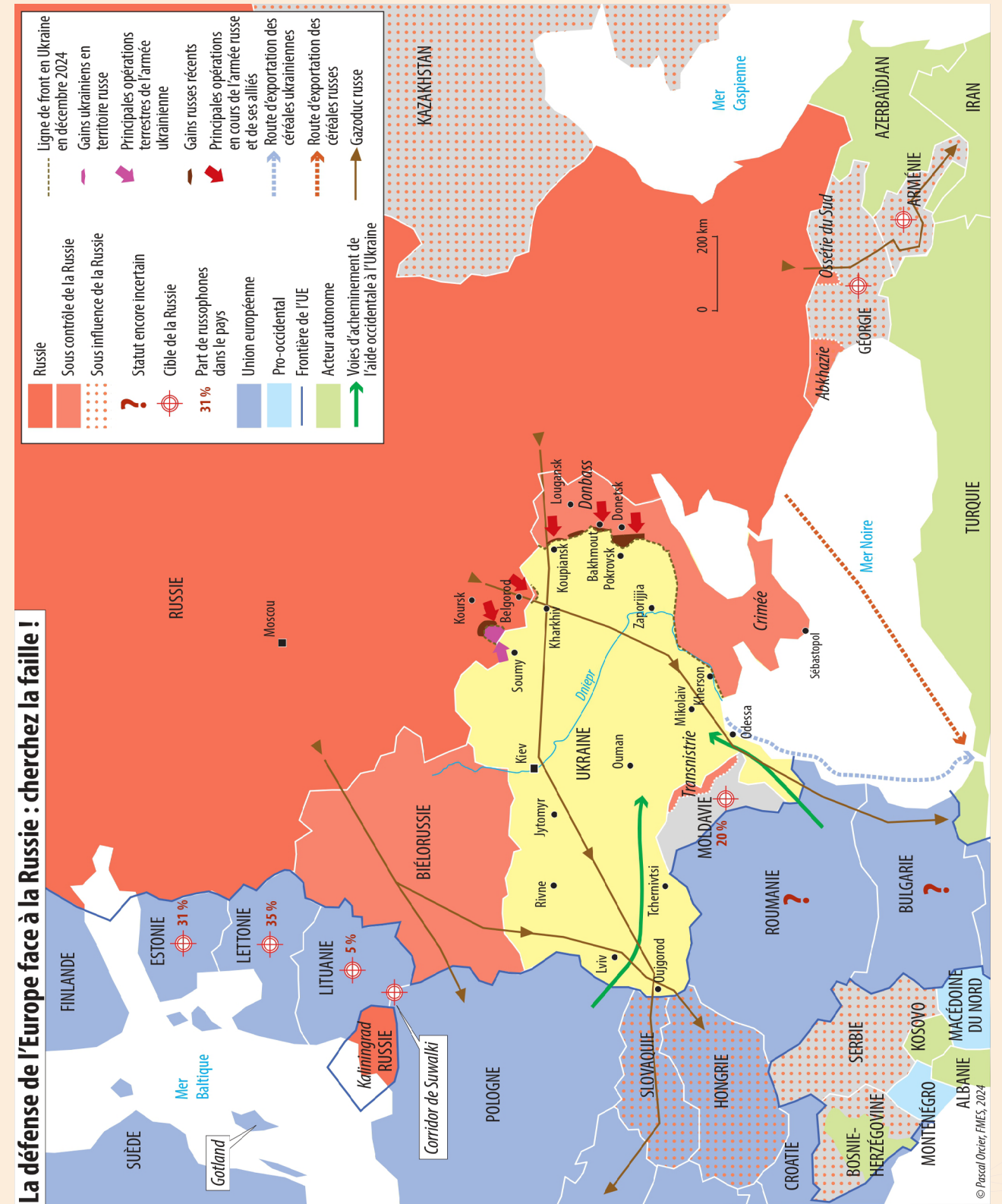
As Donald Trump takes office on January 20, the Europeans and the outgoing Biden administration are trying to oppose Russia's interference in Eastern Europe, while delivering weapons to Ukraine to reassure President Zelensky and encourage him to deal with the Kremlin; Westerners are seeking to ensure that it has enough cards in hand to negotiate with the Kremlin at a time when Russian aviation is increasing strikes against Ukrainian electricity infrastructure.

The Russian president, reassured by the election of Donald Trump he knows favors a cessation of hostilities in Ukraine, pushes his pawns in the Baltic (against the Baltic States, Finland and Sweden) and in Eastern Europe, taking advantage of the uncertainty generated by the arrival in office of a transactional and pacifist American president, but also of the pro-Russian stance of the powers in place in Hungary and Slovakia. These two countries, at the crossroads of the North and South-East flanks of NATO and the European Union, are crucial for the coherence of Europe's defence system, as our map shows.

In Moldova, the secret services demonstrated the involvement of the Russian services to influence the result of the referendum on the eventual accession of this country to the European Union (validated with only 51% of the vote). In Romania, after proving massive Kremlin interference in the electoral process, the Constitutional Court annulled the first round of the presidential election that threatened to be won by the pro-Russian candidate Călin Georgescu. In Bulgaria, Russia also has well-established relays of influence. In Georgia, President Salome Zurbishvili (whose mandate expires at the end of December) denounced the election of the former pro-Russian populist footballer Mikheil Kavelashvili by a parliament under Russian influence, like many Georgians who demonstrate daily in the streets. Supported by intellectuals and pro-European businessmen, she announced that she would refuse to give up her place, suggesting a serious institutional crisis. Faced with Russian activism in the field of influence in the east of the continent and waiting for an American administration that will not spare it, Europe must more than ever prepare to

take its responsibilities to ensure its defense, alone if necessary. If the line of defense running from the Baltic to Poland seems solid, that covering the south-eastern flank of Europe seems much more fragile. This is probably where the Kremlin will focus its efforts.

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# RUSSIA'S WINNING STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

**COLONEL CYRIL IORDANOW, BALTIC DEFENCE COLLEGE, SAINT-CYRIEN  
AND FORMER COMMANDANT OF THE 93RD MOUNTAIN ARTILLERY REGIMENT**

*This article was written as part of the High Command Studies Course 2024 at the Baltic Defence College in Tartu (Estonia).*

*Boosted by Vladimir Putin's ambition, Russian diplomacy in the Middle East is pursuing a particularly successful strategy based on minimum involvement while aiming for maximum benefit (Minimax strategy). Agile, pragmatic and opportunistic, this strategy aims to restore Russia's status as a great power and to challenge Western influence. It combines various tools of soft, sharp and, more rarely, hard power to achieve its objectives in this region, which became crucial for Russia after the large-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. However, because of limited resources, Russia cannot totally challenge American hegemony and must resort to transactional diplomacy. Faced with a Russian strategy that capitalizes on the errors and mistakes of the West, France and the United States should reinvest in the Great Regional Game and respond resolutely to Russia's challenge.*

In November 2016, Mr. Avi Dichter, former director of the Shin Bet, said of Russia that "this new neighbor has not come to rent an apartment but to build a villa" (Baker). The statement by this renowned Israeli expert underlined Russia's resolute return to this region, which is becoming crucial since February 2022 for economic, diplomatic and security reasons.

Based on long-standing historical ties, Russia is pursuing a highly successful Minimax strategy in the Middle East, focusing on its economic, cultural, security and geopolitical interests, all of which should contribute to its strategic goal of restoring its great-power status and challenging the West. This means that Russia maximizes its opportunities with a minimal commitment of resources and military losses, with a few exceptions, such as in Syria since 2015. Drawing on old networks of friendship, shared interests and Western mistakes, this strategy is carried out by effective and skilled professionals in Russian diplomacy and intelligence. It can be described as agile, pragmatic, proactive and opportunistic. It is perfectly suited to a region where alliances and allegiances are fickle.

## RUSSIA'S MAIN INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Russia has three main areas of interest in the Middle East: economy, culture and religion, and security. The sole aim of these three areas is to contribute to the success of Russia's strategy to restore its prestige and power.

### - Economy

Since 2022 and the collapse of its economic ties with Western markets, the Middle East has played a crucial role in the Russian economy. First and foremost, the region is a crossroads linking Russia to Asian markets and facilitating its exports of agricultural and petrochemical products, gas, oil and fertilizers. Russian economic experts advocate a "pivot to the South", due to the necessary reconfiguration of supply chains (Evgeny Y. Vinokurov, 2022). This pivot would be based on the North-South International Transport Corridor (CTINS), a 7,200-kilometer network of railroads, highways and shipping lanes linking Russia and India via Iran and Azerbaijan. By 2030, this corridor could carry up to 25 million tonnes of freight annually (Kasturi). This new route between India and Russia would reduce journey times from 40-60 days to 25-30 days, and cut costs by 30%.

The Middle East is also a key export market for Russian products. Moscow focuses on the areas where it is most competitive: arms, grain, space, petrochemicals, civil nuclear power, oil and gas. From 2022 to 2023, the region was the leading destination for Russian wheat exports (17 million tonnes). Its main customers are Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Iran (Trego, 2023). Rosatom is the main player in the regional nuclear market, with atomic power plants under construction in Iran, Turkey and Egypt, and projects in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Trenin, 2018). These civilian nuclear markets enable long-term alliances to be sealed, as a 40-year agreement is generally signed to supply the fuel needed to operate the plants (Winkler). To facilitate these commercial exchanges with the Middle East and attract Muslim investors, Russia launched a 2-year Islamic finance experiment in Tatarstan, Bashkortostan, Chechnya and Dagestan in September 2023 (Gadzo).

The results of this global economic shift are impressive, particularly in Iran, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates.

In 2022, trade with the United Arab Emirates jumped by 68% to \$9 billion, with Turkey by 100% to \$60 billion (Smagin) and with Iran by 20% to \$5 billion (Ellie Geranmayeh). Russia has become the leading foreign investor in Iran.

Bypassing sanctions plays a major role in these spectacular changes. The United Arab Emirates play a central role in semiconductor exports. It used to account for 50% of Emirati exports to Russia, a figure that will increase 15-fold by 2022 (Avadaliani). Capitalizing on its own experience of 4 decades of international sanctions, Iran has provided its Russian ally with the expertise to evade them. Turkey is key to the export of dual-use goods to Russia (C4ADS), as CNC machine tools for example. Due to the lack of a domestic industry in this area, Russia is 70% dependent on imports. These machine tools and associated software are used by the Russian military-industrial complex to manufacture missile components and aircraft parts (Olena Yurchenko, 2023). Turkish companies are allegedly involved in the import-export of these machine tools, as well as nitrocellulose, the main component of explosives and gunpowder. According to customs data, they sold over 1,800 tons of nitrocellulose in 2023. (Times)

### - Cultural and religious interests

Russia has launched an ambitious cultural offensive in the Middle East. Numerous cultural centers have opened their doors, and the Russia Today (RT) television channel launched its Arabic-language channel in 2007. RT and Sputnik Arabic are very active on social networks, producing far more content on Twitter than BBC Arabic or Al Jazeera (Janadze). And it's a success, as evidenced by the Arab Youth 2022 survey, which found that a majority of young Arabs (aged 18-24) blame the US and NATO, rather than Russia for starting the war in Ukraine (Borshchevskaya). In July 2022, RT Arabic had 22 million page views per month, surpassing Al Arabiya's 19.6 million and Al Jazeera's 19.4 million (Shayan Talabani, 2022). This activity on social networks is perfectly synchronized with the statements of official Russian diplomatic accounts, which play an important role due to their large audience. The Russian Foreign Ministry's Arabic-language Twitter account has over 142,000 followers. Russia also invests in universities and schools, achieving its best results in Syria. The aim is to consolidate an influential network of ambassadors for Russian culture and interests in the Arab world. Some of these links go back a long way, such as Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas who studied history in Moscow in the 1980s.

In line with the neo-Byzantinism propagated by the Russian government and conservative circles,

Russia wishes to recall that it has long been the protector of Christians in the Middle East. The construction of a museum of Russian history in Jericho in 2010 illustrates this statement. In 2019, together with Hungarian Prime Minister Victor Orbán, Vladimir Putin met with leaders of the Eastern churches in Budapest, declaring that the protection of Christians in conflict zones was now an absolute priority for Russia. The main Russian architects of this policy are the Duma Committee for the Defense of Christian Values and the Imperial Orthodox Society of Palestine, founded in 1882, whose leadership is closely linked to the Kremlin (Gerdziunas).

Finally, Russia's strong interest in the Arab world is linked to the presence on its territory of several million Muslims. According to the US State Department (State, 2022), they represent 5% of the population, but 18% according to Russian Muslim authorities. And they could account for 30% by 2030, according to the country's Grand Mufti, due to a high birth rate and massive immigration from Central Asia. Maintaining good relations with Muslim authorities and Middle Eastern leaders such as Saudi Arabia is crucial to domestic stability. Despite previous clashes, such as in Afghanistan in the 80s, and more recently in Syria, Russian and Arab leaders agree in defending traditional values against Western countries perceived as decadent. And Russia, because of its autocratic regime, does not pass moral judgment on local regimes, unlike the United States and European countries concerned with respect for human rights.

### - Restoring prestige

The main objective that Russia wishes to achieve through its Middle East strategy is to restore its prestige and status as a great power. The two areas of interest described above should contribute to this. For Russian leadership, the Middle East should join Greater Eurasia, as defined by influential Moscow thinkers such as Sergey Karaganov (Karaganov, 2018), in order to rebalance the power of Western countries, particularly the United States. Moscow pays particular attention to the stability of the region, as it can help destabilize its near abroad, particularly the North and South Caucasus through a resurgence of Islamist activism. Arms sales, military interventions and bases, as well as diplomacy, support this restoration of its former prestige.

The Middle East was traditionally an important market for the USSR's military industry. After a dramatic decline after 1991, the region became Russia's second-largest market after Asia in the 2010s. Mega-contracts were signed: \$4.2 billion in 2012 with Iraq, \$3 billion in 2013 and \$2 billion in 2015 with Egypt (Borisov, 2018). Since 2022, exports have changed direction, with Iran becoming a key supplier to Russia.



It has supplied valuable drones as part of a deal valued at \$6 billion. More than 300,000 shells were also exported. And Iran could still supply short-range ballistic missiles if it finds an interest. (Ellie Geranmayeh)

## PLAYERS AND LEVERS OF POWER

Russia successfully combines soft, sharp and, more rarely, hard power. It relies on key players and various levers of power.

Moscow is making a major diplomatic effort in the Middle East. Mikhail Bogdanov has been Vladimir Putin's special representative in the region since 2012. As Deputy Foreign Minister, he has established himself as an expert on the region and a highly experienced diplomat. Russia has maintained diplomatic relations with Israel since 1991. It sees itself as a key mediator in the region, maintaining friendly relations with all countries. They are transactional and never ideological, to avoid creating enemies. Moscow offers several states a counterweight to Washington and Western influence. This enables them to reduce Western pressure for democratization and the protection of human rights. Russia has been a member of the OPEC+ agreement since 2016 and plays an important role in price stability on the oil market, because fluctuations immediately affect the Russian economy.

Keeping prices high is crucial, as oil revenues make a major contribution to the state budget and to funding social programs as well as the war in Ukraine. If oil prices fall below \$40, Moscow will be unable to finance all its budgetary needs (Kozhanov, 2022). Russia offers several countries the opportunity to increase their international stature by playing a role in facilitating prisoner exchanges between Russia and Western states, or by trying to end the war in Ukraine (Dalay, 2023). Regional leaders are the second most important group in Vladimir Putin's eyes, after those of the former post-Soviet space (Rakov, 2024). Russia has strengthened its ties with Egypt and the United Arab Emirates by supporting Libyan general Khalifa Haftar. The war in Gaza enabled Moscow to increase its popularity in the Arab world and in the "Global South", while weakening Washington perceived as an unconditional supporter of Israel. At first, Russia refused to condemn the Hamas atrocities, adopting an aggressive stance on the responsibility of Israel and the United States. Then it gradually moderated its line in a logic of de-escalation.

Domestically, this restoration of Russian prestige has boosted Vladimir Putin's popularity.

The war in Syria, perceived by Russians as a success, has enabled a shift from a focus on domestic problems to fervent patriotism (Issaev, 2022).

### - Soft power

Russian soft power aims to impose a positive narrative on Moscow and discredit Western countries. First and foremost, it relies on Russians who live or vacation in the Middle East. In Israel, around 1 million citizens speak Russian and create a human link through the strong contacts they maintain with Russia. The media, tourists and Orthodox pilgrims reinforce this influence (Trenin, 2018). Since February 2022, hundreds of thousands of Russians have fled their country and settled in the Middle East, notably in the United Arab Emirates and Turkey, which issued 150,000 residence permits to Russian citizens in 2022 (Smagin). Over one million Russians visited the Emirates in 2022 (+60% in one year) (Smagin). Many oligarchs have settled in Dubai and Abu Dhabi to escape financial sanctions and pursue their activities. They benefit from the local "Golden Visa" immigration rule, which requires a minimum investment of \$2.7 million. Following the political pivot of their leaders, Russian citizens have chosen the region as their preferred vacation destination and play a crucial role in local economies.

Turkey received 5.8 million Russian visitors in the first ten months of 2023, representing the country's largest percentage of tourists (Minute). Other favorite destinations for Russian tourists are the United Arab Emirates and Egypt (Tore).

Russia aims to win hearts in the region by presenting itself as the bastion of traditional values, heterosexuality and loyalty to the state. It is using an unorthodox but valuable diplomat to reach the Muslim public: Chechen President Ramzan Kadyrov, who has established close relations with several regional leaders. He has managed to win over a local audience, notably on social networks like TikTok, putting forward his image as a defender of Islam and critic of Israel, perfectly reproduced by the Russian-controlled media and the troll factories operating on social networks. Kadyrov also uses the Akhmat Kadyrov Foundation for social and religious purposes, such as rebuilding mosques in Aleppo. Finally, Kadyrov uses MMA (mixed martial arts) as a powerful soft power tool with his Chechen champions, such as Dubai-based Khamzat Chimaev (Jack Watling, 2024).

### - Hard power

Russia maintains a significant military presence in the region. Syria is its main stronghold. The 2015 military intervention was aimed at preventing the collapse of Bashar Al-Assad's regime and restoring stability to the country, which was attracting many jihadists. Between 3,000 and 5,000 were Russian-speaking, 90% of them from the Caucasus.

They posed a major security threat by enabling the creation of networks between various extremist groups from the "near abroad" in the Caucasus and Central Asia (Kozhanov, 2018). This intervention was a success, especially in comparison with the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It gave Russia the image of a reliable and effective ally, especially as Assad was in a desperate situation. The war provided an opportunity to test some 200 new types of weapons under real combat conditions. Above all, it gave Russia back its lost prestige and a leading diplomatic role. In 2013, Vladimir Putin dealt with the Americans as an equal for the first time when he offered to lead the neutralization of Syria's chemical arsenal. Russia has a naval base at Tartous, with a permanent naval presence of at least ten warships, recreated in 2013 (Jonas Kjellén, 2022).

Since 2017, Russia has operated a permanent air base southeast of the city of Latakia in Hmeimim. Some twenty fighter jets, several electronic warfare and transport aircraft, and ground-air defense systems are stationed there. It is also the hub of Russian operations in Africa (Centre, 2024).

### - Sharp power

Moscow offers local elites the services of its private military companies (PMCs) such as Wagner, renamed Expeditionary Corps, now directly under GRU supervision (Jack Watling, 2024). These fighters are present in Syria and Libya to support General Haftar, a strong ally of Egypt. In Syria, Wagner's troops were coordinated by the GRU and FSB for various tasks. They have played a key role in supporting pro-Al-Assad forces to reconquer whole parts of the country, as in Palmyra in the spring of 2016. In August 2023, it was proposed that fighters from Libyan and Syrian troops be trained in new camps in Tobruk and Palmyra. The idea is to reduce the visibility of Russian mercenaries and, consequently, protect Russia's reputation by preserving a plausible deniability capability, or even recruit some of the trained personnel to fight with Russian PMCs in Africa. The other approach is to integrate Russian advisors into partner forces. This desire to keep Russian support in the region discreet is nothing new. Most Soviet soldiers involved in the Arab-Israeli wars in 1967 and 1974 were camouflaged under a blanket of tourists (Blank, 2018).

Since 2011 and the Arab Spring, the United Arab Emirates and the Russian secret services and their informal intelligence networks have developed close ties, as revealed by the Pentagon Leaks in April 2023 (Borne, 2023). The aim was to counter Western influence perceived by Abu Dhabi as a serious threat (Krieg). In July 2013, the two countries supported Marshal Al-Sissi's counter-revolution in Egypt. And since 2014, they have been steadfast allies in their support for General Haftar in Libya (Borne, 2023) (Krieg).

The region, in particular Turkey and the United Arab Emirates, enables Russia to circumvent sanctions affecting the gold trade through money-laundering operations and concealment of the origins and players in this trade (Hunter, 2022).

A 2018 report by the US Treasury Department reveals the growing alliance between Russia and the Lebanese Shiite terrorist group Hezbollah. These relations have not always been good, as evidenced by the 1985 intervention of KGB Group Alpha special forces in Beirut to firmly and unconventionally free 3 Soviet hostages. Born during the Syrian war, this predominantly military alliance has evolved into a multifaceted and mutually beneficial relationship. Russia is involved in an Iranian oil smuggling network headed by a prominent Hezbollah leader "supported by high-level Russian Federation government officials and state-run economic bodies", according to the US Treasury Department (Levitt). This alliance offers many opportunities for Moscow, in Lebanon, where Russian policy should be read as an extension of its Syrian policy (Tashjian, 2021), in the Middle East, Africa and South America, where Hezbollah has developed its networks among the Shiite diasporas.

## HOW TO REGAIN LOST GROUND ?

Russia's regional successes are partly due to mistakes and a certain lack of interest of the West, which is perceived as incapable of solving the problems of its local partners. Given the global nature of our dispute with Moscow, and the importance of the Middle East, the West - and the USA, France and NATO in particular - must resolutely reinvest in the region to regain lost ground. As Moscow is currently focused on its war in Ukraine, there is a window of opportunity that must not be missed.

Over the past 15 years, the United States has gradually withdrawn from regional affairs. Key examples include its reluctance to support an old ally, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, in 2011 (Trager), or its refusal to bomb Syria in 2013 after the use of chemical weapons against civilians, despite this being an official red line by President Obama. America's local allies realized that the center of gravity of American interests was shifting towards Asia. These countries decided to develop their policies according to their own interests, and created new alliances with Russia, China and other countries (Paul Salem, 2021). Egypt, Iran, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates joined the BRICS in January 2024. However, the United States remains the most powerful player in the region, but it needs to clarify its long-term vision.



They can draw on dozens of military bases and mutual economic interests. Firstly, the United States could officially reaffirm that it will not abandon the Middle East in order to reassure its allies, notably Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, which fear Iran.

On the diplomatic front, the US could become more involved in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict with a more balanced attitude, and in the Iranian nuclear deal, which is a priority for defusing regional tensions. The United States could reinforce its leading role as the world's largest arms supplier, at a favorable time when Russia is facing supply problems from its traditional regional customers due to its own needs for Ukraine, pressure on potential buyers by the United States, and sanctions (Mathews), as evidenced by the 52% drop in its global sales in 2023 (Pieter D. Wezeman, 2024). Finally, the U.S. could reallocate funding to people-oriented investments: health, youth unemployment, refugees, chronic poverty and economic growth (Dalia Dassa Kaye, 2021).

Given the willingness of most of the region's states to diversify their allies, and their current disaffection with the US, France can once again play a leading role in the Middle East. It can draw on centuries-old ties and a network of diplomats, researchers, business people and civil society actors familiar with the region. France could improve its cultural policy by providing more support for French-language programs in universities, student mobility, opening new cultural centers and improving the Arabic programs of French-language international news media. With its embassies and NGOs operating in the region, France could regain its position as the protector of Eastern Christians by expelling Moscow from that role. Moreover, France could strengthen its military cooperation with countries such as Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, where it has a permanent base. The current excellent security relations with Greece could strengthen our position in the Eastern Mediterranean. Economically, France can compete with Russia in arms, space, grain, and nuclear markets. Diplomatically, France can offer a singular and alternative voice as a balancing power, such as in the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Iranian nuclear topic.

NATO must ensure the stability of its southern flank, as outlined in its 2022 Strategic Concept, in a 360-degree approach to deterrence. The alliance must continue to strengthen the resilience of its partners to transnational challenge (terrorism, organized crime, small arms proliferation and irregular migration). This means closer cooperation with regional or global organizations such as the European Union, the Arab League or the United Nations.

It is also important to renew its traditional partnership programs (the Mediterranean Dialogue and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative). Moreover, securing the southern flank requires enhancing the credibility of NATO's maritime presence in the eastern Mediterranean. Finally, there is the question of Turkey's double game, especially given that Turkey lost some of its strategic relevance with the end of the Cold War and the entry of countries bordering the Black Sea into NATO.

To conclude, it is vital to recall that Russia's largest open window to the south is the Black Sea shore and its ports. Thus, the final outcome of the war in Ukraine will be crucial for the future of Russian policy in the Middle East, as well as for the countries bordering the Black Sea.

COLONEL CYRIL IORDANOW

## JORDAN POST-OCTOBER 7

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*Assessing the stability of a Middle Eastern country is always an arduous task. This article, written at the end of a long stay in the country, is not intended to predict the future, but to highlight the various factors that could tip Jordan over the edge, as the resumption of hostilities on its doorstep and the rise in regional tensions since October 2023 raise fears of a collapse of the Kingdom. Despite the war in Gaza and its impact on regional stability, Jordan is trying to maintain a semblance of the status quo. Regional dynamics, as well as the political and security challenges it faces, call into question its strategic positioning and limited room for manoeuvre. Negotiations on the future of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, in which Jordan no longer carries any weight, could push Jordan's interests into the background. The country could therefore be perceived as an adjustment variable by the various parties, and emerge weakened or even destabilized by this umpteenth episode in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.*

### A DETERIORATING INTERNAL SITUATION

Since the Nakba<sup>1</sup>, which forced Jordan to accommodate a large Palestinian population on its resource-limited territory, and even more so since the "Black September" episode in 1970<sup>2</sup>, the Jordanian state has perceived the Palestinian question as a potential source of destabilization. As a result of various waves of displacement (1948, 1967, Intifadas and the Syrian civil war<sup>3</sup>), more than half the population has Palestinian origins. Whether or not they hold Jordanian nationality, Palestinians in the Hashemite kingdom retain strong and intimate links with the other side of the Jordan River, and every political shock in the Palestinian territories has repercussions in Jordan. Since October 7, 2023, Jordanian society has been living to the rhythm of political and geopolitical developments around Gaza.

In addition to the cancellation of numerous celebrations and the consolidation of the "Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions" (BDS) movement targeting Israel in Jordan, weekly demonstrations take place in the city center in support of the Gazan population. Under the supervision of the Jordanian police and with few incidents of violence, these gatherings outside mosques on Fridays bring together activists of all political persuasions (Islamists, nationalists and liberals) and families with young children. Their slogans revolve around Western double standards, denouncing the « war crimes of Benjamin Netanyahu and Joe Biden », and calling for the creation of a Palestinian state "from the river to the sea". These gatherings never go beyond the framework accepted by the authorities, and any form of open criticism of the King's position is outlawed. However, calls to denounce the 1994 Normalization Agreement with Israel, as well as natural gas and trade agreements with Tel Aviv, can be heard in the streets of Amman.

In November 2023, Abu Obeida (spokesman for the Izz al-Din al-Qassam brigades, the military wing of Hamas) called on Jordanians to rise up<sup>4</sup>, but the Jordanian authorities were quick to frame the popular discontent: Queen Rania echoed the Arab street in an interview on CNN, denouncing the "Western double standard". For his part, the King described the Israeli action in Gaza in October as a "war crime".

These display measures, as well as the humanitarian airdrops to Gaza carried out in partnership with France and the setting up of field hospitals, are absolutely necessary in order not to aggravate the current protests in the country and prevent them from undermining the legitimacy of the government, which has been perceived by its own population as an ally of Israel since the Wadi Araba agreements in 1994.

The Jordanian authorities have also had to reinforce security at several points on their territory, such as the Israeli and US embassies, where demonstrators regularly gather, provoking clashes with the Jordanian police deployed to protect the diplomatic buildings. Although several demonstrators have been arrested for anti-regime slogans, the situation has never degenerated.

<sup>1</sup> Arabic term meaning "catastrophe", referring to the 1948 Palestinian exodus following the creation of the State of Israel and the first Arab-Israeli war.

<sup>2</sup> On September 12, 1970, Hussein of Jordan launched military operations against the fedayeen of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), led by Yasser Arafat, to restore the monarchy's authority in the kingdom after several Palestinian coup attempts. The conflict resulted in several thousand deaths. In July 1971, Arafat and the PLO fighters were expelled from Jordan. This episode marked the first break between Jordan and the Palestinian leadership.

<sup>3</sup> The outbreak of civil war in Syria drove not only Syrians to Jordan, but also Palestinians, now twice as many refugees and facing numerous socio-economic difficulties.

<sup>4</sup> Middle East Monitor, 25/10/2023

Demonstrators are also forbidden to go near the border to prevent any risk of escalation ; the area is now tightly controlled thanks to the multiplication of checkpoints. Jordan has also taken advantage of a new cybercrime law, passed in August 2023, to ensure that online criticism by Internet users on its territory does not spark a new wave of uprisings, similar to the Arab Spring<sup>5</sup>. According to Human Rights Watch, Jordanian authorities have arrested hundreds of people on the basis of their pro-Palestinian online activism, and four activists have been brought before a court<sup>6</sup>.

Another risk to the country's internal stability relates to the population's purchasing power. According to World Bank data<sup>7</sup>, the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea led to a 45% drop in the volume of imports and exports passing through the port of Aqaba, Jordan's only access to the sea. The activation of alternative transport routes and the deployment of Western naval operations off the coast of Yemen limited the rise in prices paid by Jordanian consumers. Inflation has remained below the 2% mark since the start of the conflict, and is expected to rise to around 4% by 2022<sup>8</sup>. However, commodity prices have continued to rise, while Jordan's minimum wage has remained unchanged, pushing more and more families into poverty.

This unfavorable economic dynamic has been reinforced by the collapse of tourism in Jordan (-70% of visitors according to the ministry concerned), particularly weakening the Bedouin tribes established in Wadi Rum and around Petra, who were already marginalized.

Israel's questioning of UNRWA has also had a strong impact in Jordan. The UN agency provides services to around 2 million Palestinian refugees in the kingdom<sup>9</sup>. The cancellation of contributions by certain members of the international community has caused great concern in Jordan, as a prolongation of these cuts could plunge thousands of families into poverty by blocking the operation of 169 schools and 25 health centers. Jordan immediately called on its partners to pay their contributions or even increase them, which it succeeded in doing<sup>10</sup>. More generally, however, the conflict diverted the attention of the main NGOs and part of the international aid that Jordan was receiving, thus weakening the most vulnerable populations<sup>11</sup>.

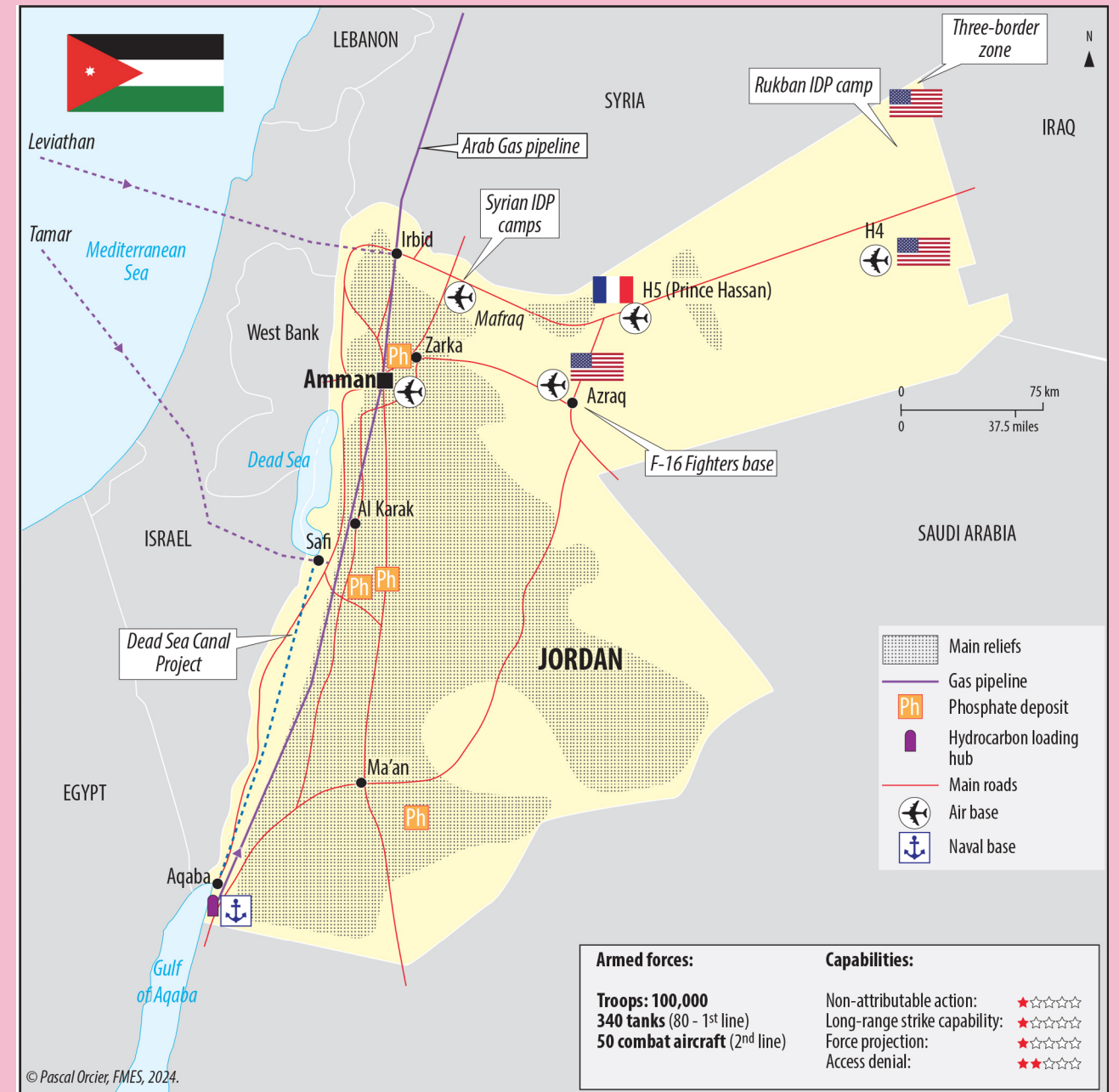
For the time being, Jordan has managed to contain the risks of internal instability. It remains to be seen whether the current situation will have an impact on the legislative elections scheduled for September 10, 2024. Jordan's system of representation is characterized by a high degree of fragmentation, with the majority of representatives

being tribal or community leaders<sup>12</sup>. The only structured group is the Islamic Action Front (IAF), a Muslim Brotherhood offshoot, which won 16 out of 130 seats in 2016, and only 10 in an alliance with another Islamic party in 2020. The IAF maintains ties (complicated despite their ideological proximity) with Hamas, an organization banned by King Abdullah in the country since 1999, but today perceived by a large part of the Jordanian population as the liberator of the Palestinians. The context could also encourage Jordanian voters of Palestinian origin, who tend to abstain, to vote more. The IAF could also take advantage of Hamas' image of resistance, which would push the Jordanian regime to limit its success at the ballot box.

However, a new electoral law passed in 2022, creating a single proportional constituency, now reserves 30% of parliamentary seats for political parties. This should have the effect of limiting tribal logics, but could also favor the FIA. The results of the elections will therefore have to be carefully analyzed, even though the King retains most of the country's power. While Jordanians are well aware of their country's economic, social and democratic difficulties, they have not forgotten the chaos into which many of their neighbors are currently plunged. The younger generation is more concerned with leaving a country with 50% youth unemployment than with revolution, although the student elections at the University of Jordan raised fears of outbursts on the part of the government, which strictly supervised them. While the population's desire for stability is a powerful factor in Jordan's social status quo, it should not conceal the large number of challenges facing the country, illustrated a few years ago by the failed coup d'état of Prince Hamza, the King's half-brother.

Moreover, in the long term, we may wonder about the impact of the war in Gaza on Jordan's younger generation, who were subjected early and daily to images of indescribable violence via social networks, raising fears of a future radicalization of the population on the Israeli-Palestinian question.

5 L'Orient- Le Jour , 02/05/2024  
 6 Human Rights Watch  
 7 World Bank blog, 16/05/2024  
 8 Jordanian Department of Statistics, accessed August 2024.  
 9 Provoked by Israeli accusations about the participation of some of its employees in the October 7 terrorist attacks.  
 10 The Impact of the Gaza War on Jordan's Domestic and International Politics, Curtis R. Ryan, 08/02/2024  
 11 European consulates in Amman recorded a significant rise in asylum applications from December 2023 (although such applications, based solely on economic hardship, are automatically refused).  
 12 Al-Shark al-Awsat 19/07/2024, Anadolu 01/07/2024 et Al-Jazeera 25/04/2024





While a destabilization of the “Arab Spring” type seems to have been averted for the time being, Jordan risks becoming the variable for geopolitical adjustments by its neighbors, in order to resolve the Palestinian question and allow normalization between Israel and Saudi Arabia, once the war in Gaza is over.

## **A TENSE REGIONAL CONTEXT ON WHICH JORDAN NO LONGER HAS ANY INFLUENCE**

In recent months, the region has been marked by rapid strategic recompositions between Israel, Iran and its proxies (notably the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Yemeni Houthis), and Saudi Arabia. Against this backdrop, Jordan is struggling to make an impact, even though it has long been central to negotiations on the Palestinian question. With Hamas losing several of its leaders at the end of July, and Israel playing for time, diplomatic chancelleries are anticipating a regional conflagration.

A conflagration was averted in January 2024 when an American base along Jordan's northern border was targeted for the first time by Iranian-backed Shiite militias, killing three American soldiers. Then, in April 2024, Iran's launch of missiles and drones into Israel closed Jordanian airspace for several hours, forcing Amman, with the help of its Western allies, to intercept Teheran's attacks. Jordan justified its reaction by the need to ensure its own security and protect its sovereignty and the inviolability of its airspace, while the Arab street called it “Israel's best Arab ally”. This episode underlined Jordan's geographically strategic position, which could become a third front in the scenario of an open war between Israel and Iran. Following the renewed escalation of regional tensions in August 2024, Amman this time publicly affirmed that it would remain neutral in the event of a new Iranian attack on Israel, with Iran implying that the country could become a target if it persisted in protecting Israel.

As a corridor between Iran and Israel, Jordan pays particular attention to Tehran's attempts to interfere, so as not to be drawn into a regional escalation. Since 2004, the King has denounced the destabilization caused by the “Shiite crescent” that surrounds him to the west (Hamas), north (Syria and Hezbollah), east (Iraqi militias) and south (Houthis). In May 2024, the Jordanian authorities also denounced Iranian attempts to smuggle weapons into Jordan. While the country's predominantly Sunni character limits Iranian influence in Jordanian society for the time being, it cannot be ruled out that public opinion manipulation campaigns led by Teheran and its

Moscow ally, an expert in the field, may one day provoke the uprising that has not yet taken place. While the international community fears a new escalation following the eliminations carried out at the end of July 2024 in Beirut and Teheran, Jordan seems powerless: situated between a rock and a hard place, its levers for action are limited by its reduced regional weight and, above all, its dependence on Israel, notably for its water supply (while water stress could in future be a factor of social destabilization)<sup>13</sup>. It will therefore be a collateral victim if a regional war breaks out.

## **JORDAN, THE ADJUSTMENT VARIABLE IN A REGIONAL SETTLEMENT ?**

The war in Gaza is unlikely to be resolved before the American presidential election in November 2024. However, it is useful to look at the various solutions currently under consideration and their implications for Jordan.

In the long term, Saudi Arabia will probably be an important player in a political solution, which would also enable it to assert itself even more strongly on the regional scene, by showing itself to be the protector of the Palestinian people while at the same time obtaining normalization with Israel. Riyadh considers Jordan, the buffer zone for its northern border, to be the last island of stability in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia therefore pays particular attention to the neighboring monarchy, which it supports both politically and economically. But in the context of regional recompositions, Jordan could pay the price of an agreement between Riyadh and Washington.

### **Scenario 1 : expulsion of West Bankers to Jordan**

The main risk from the Jordanian point of view is that of a new mass population displacement. While Israel has accelerated its settlement policy in the West Bank in violation of international law and UN resolutions, some Likud and other Israeli right-wing party leaders see Jordan as an alternative homeland for Palestinians. The worst-case scenario for Jordan would therefore be a total annexation of the West Bank by Israel and the expulsion of the Arab population from the other side of the Jordan River. Indeed, Jordan is keeping a close eye on Rafah and Egypt, as it fears a precedent: if Gazans were expelled to Egypt, West Bankers could also be expelled across the Jordan. Jordanian officials have described such a scenario as a “red line”, a “fundamental violation of the peace treaty” signed with Israel in 1994, and “an act of war”.

<sup>13</sup> The impact of water shortages on national security in Jordan, Adrien J. 20/01/2024

The American presidential election in November could, however, lead to such an outcome: Donald Trump, who had the American embassy transferred to Jerusalem, if elected, might want to settle the issue quickly. In keeping with his transactional approach, and in line with his plan to cede Crimea and Donbass to Moscow to end the war in Ukraine, he would be capable of calling into question American financial support for Jordan if it refused to take in new Palestinian refugees. This scenario would be catastrophic for the monarchy, which is totally dependent on external financial support; Washington helps the Kingdom to the tune of \$1.6 billion a year (including \$500 million in military aid).

In short, a resolution of the conflict resulting in the expulsion of Palestinians to Jordan would usher in a period of unprecedented instability, requiring a huge investment by the international community to find a *modus vivendi*. From the Saudi point of view, such a solution would have the disadvantage of weakening the country and allowing an Islamist pole of contestation to flourish on its border.

### **Scenario 2 : Rewriting the maps of the Middle East**

The question of moving beyond the two-state solution has also re-emerged. One option - admittedly unlikely, but already mentioned by Donald Trump during his last term in office - would be the disappearance of the Palestinian Authority and all claims to a Palestinian state, in favor of an “Arab Kingdom” comprising the West Bank and Jordan : this would be a return to the pre-1967 situation, disregarding Israeli colonialism, Palestinian nationalism consolidated since the Nakba and tensions between populations on both sides of the Jordan River since 1970<sup>14</sup>. Jordan has neither the natural, financial nor structural resources to absorb the West Bank. Arab reunification would have unpredictable consequences in terms of the distribution of power between the different components of this new society. From the Saudi point of view, it would represent a gamble. On the one hand, Riyadh could seize the opportunity to reinforce Amman's vassalage towards it through massive financial support, making Jordan even more dependent than it already is; but on the other, it could give greater prominence to the Hashemites, historic rivals of the Saudis, thanks to increased development aid and humanitarian support from wealthy countries. In a third scenario, more worrying for the international community as a whole, the state could collapse, following in the footsteps of Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya.

Another map of the Middle East is also being considered. In the short term, Israel would like to delegate policing of the Gaza Strip to a multinational Arab force : while the United Arab

Emirates, Egypt and Morocco appear to be considering the option, Jordan is strongly opposed, not out of support for Hamas, but to avoid any appearance of collusion with Tel Aviv. In the longer term, however, with a view to rebuilding Gaza, Israel and the Gulf States may want to push Jordan to accept the “Gaza 2035” plan. Proposed by Benjamin Netanyahu, it aims to turn Gaza into a zone at the cutting edge of new technologies (electric cars, solar energy) and a hub for infrastructures linking the Near East to the Persian Gulf, in order to facilitate economic exchanges and the prosperity of the region, in line with the Abraham Accords<sup>15</sup>.

Jordan, as the interface between Israel and the Gulf monarchies, is a key component of this project. However, this project and that of the India/Middle East/Europe Economic Corridor (IMEC) are fuelling criticism from Jordanian society. Should these projects go ahead in the absence of the creation of a Palestinian state, they could destabilize Jordan, despite the positive economic spin-offs for the country.

### **Scenario 3 : the two-state solution or the risk of losing Al-Aqsa**

The most desirable solution for all parties, the creation of a Palestinian state could, however, be synonymous with a loss of soft power for Amman. The Al-Aqsa Mosque and the Dome of the Rock have been under Hashemite trusteeship since 1967. Jordan is responsible for its administration and the payment of civil servants' salaries, giving it a certain prestige in the Muslim world. However, tensions are growing over Islam's third holiest site, whether with Tel Aviv or Ramallah.

Saudi Arabia's ambition is “religious normalization between Mecca and Jerusalem”: it could be tempted to offer to take over the administration of this holy site, in addition to the security guarantees and civilian nuclear program it is already demanding from the United States in exchange for normalization with Israel. Riyadh could justify this change in status quo by citing tensions between the Palestinians and the Jordanian government, and by promising broad financial support for a future Palestinian state under trusteeship. This development would represent a major loss of prestige and influence for Jordan.

There is another option: King Hussein of Jordan had promised to hand over responsibility for East Jerusalem to the Palestinians once a final Israeli-

<sup>14</sup> While Palestinians are fairly well integrated in Jordan, differentiation phenomena persist.

<sup>15</sup> The Jerusalem Post, 03/05/2024

Palestinian agreement on Jerusalem had been reached. In this case, it would be difficult for Jordan to go back on its word. However, the Palestinian state will be weak, at least in its early years: Jewish extremists are unlikely to disappear, and will continue to want to pray on the Temple Mount. Such images could exacerbate instability in the Palestinian territories, Jordan and the region as a whole.

## CONCLUSION

The priority for Jordan is therefore to preserve the current status quo, as all other scenarios threaten Jordan (at least its soft power, at worst its borders and internal stability). In the meantime, the Hashemite kingdom is relying on its long-standing Western support, and on the King's meetings with his American, French and British counterparts, all three of whom are very concerned by Jordan's stability. But these efforts remain insufficient to influence the strategic upheavals underway in the Middle East: Amman will probably remain a spectator in the coming months, hoping not to suffer from a new regional order.

CHLOÉ JAMET

# WHAT KIND OF AMERICAN POLICY FOR MIDDLE EAST IN 2025 ?

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*With the US presidential campaign heating up, the conflict in Gaza and its extension to Lebanon is becoming an extremely polarizing issue on the American domestic political scene. And the two candidates have rather divergent views regarding US foreign policy in the Middle East.*

*The Democrat candidate logically remains in line with the policy pursued by President Biden, with some concessions to the most progressive fringe of the Democrat camp regarding Gaza. If American support for Israel is not questioned, Kamala Harris calls on Israel for an immediate ceasefire, through strong political pressure from Washington if necessary. Vis-à-vis Iran, the Democrat seeks dialogue, the reduction of tensions and a non-confrontation paradigm in order to preserve regional stability and isolate Russia. In its relations with Gulf countries, in particular Saudi Arabia, the Democrat will highlight with its partners the need to respect human rights before deepening bilateral relations, unless China's growing influence in the region puts a sense of realism back into Harris' foreign policy.*

*A second Trump administration would be the logical continuation of the first one. On the Israel/Palestine issue, this new mandate could see three priorities: unconditional support for Israel, particularly in its fight against Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran; support for the full integration of the Jewish state into its Arab environment; disappearance of the «Palestinian national question» from the international agenda. On Iran, a return to the maximum pressure policy is likely. The Saudi-American close link would be seen as the «solution» to the region's problems.*

*In fact, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the only issue that really divides the two candidates. Regarding Iran and the Gulf countries, only a difference in «style» is noticeable, but the vision of American strategic interests remains shared by both candidates. Finally, neither Iraq nor the fight against jihadist terrorism is mentioned in the speeches of the two candidates, as if this «moment of history» was closed or even became «taboo»; acknowledging the gradual withdrawal of American ground forces from the region, to the great fear of the Jordanians and the Lebanese. Israel, the Gulf monarchies, Egypt and Turkey want a victory for Donald Trump, while other regional players, led by Iran, hope for Kamala Harris victory.*

## THE CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL PRIORITIES OF US POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The United States is facing an increasingly competitive strategic environment in the Middle East with opposition from Russia (in Libya, Syria, Sudan, Red Sea, Iran), China (Gulf countries, Horn of Africa, Iran), Turkey (Qatar, Somalia, «Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus»; Syria; Libya) and of course Iran (Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon). China's irruption in the Middle East<sup>1</sup> and the deepening of Russian-Iranian ties in the context of the war in Ukraine<sup>2</sup> represent huge challenges for Washington. In fact, and whatever the identity of the new American administration in January 2025, the United States will absolutely seek stability and calm in the Middle East<sup>3</sup> in order to counter its global competitors (China and Russia). From this point of view, the war in Gaza represents a serious obstacle, explaining the regular calls of the two candidates to stop this conflict as soon as possible.

In this troubled geopolitical environment, Washington's position vis-à-vis Gulf States will be a key issue. Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia are increasingly autonomous, vis-à-vis United States, China, Russia, Iran and Turkey, in an assumed movement of multi-alignment. Saudi Arabia is seen in Washington as a «key state», while Qatar's role as mediator (with Hamas, Iran, the Taliban), its influence on the Arab street and its growing proximity to Turkey (including on the Palestinian issue) make it a major player. And if Trump is seen in Doha as «unpredictable» and therefore represents a «risk», the Democrats are much better perceived, especially due to Kamala Harris' speeches on the Palestinian issue.

<sup>1</sup> Towards a geopolitical realignment in the Middle East, Arnaud Peyronnet, FMES, 29/03/2023.

<sup>2</sup> With a strategic partnership in full development, with Tehran exporting ammunition and missiles to Moscow in exchange for access to sensitive technologies potentially in the nuclear domain.

<sup>3</sup> As shown by the intense negotiations led by the United States in August 2024 to link a potential ceasefire agreement in Gaza to a regional cessation of hostilities.



A Democrat administration could thus choose Qatar to be the leader of a Gaza rebuilding endeavor, even if it means letting the UAE decide fully of the political future of the Palestinian Authority. The Gulf countries are also representing a huge market for the American defense industry, the only provider of combat-proven security, particularly in the field of air defense. The United States also need some adjustments in the Gulf states' oil production policies to weaken Russia economically. An increase of the Gulf production to diminish world prices (and therefore limit Russia's financial revenues from its oil exports) could be then requested by Washington. In this context, the deepening of strategic relations between Washington and its regional allies is seen as a necessity for stabilizing the Middle East against Iran activism (in Yemen, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon) and even against Russia and China. The Abraham Accords concluded in 2020 represent an important milestone in this strategy, which is intended to expand<sup>4</sup> and which is not questioned by the two American parties. The intent to create a regional coalition of the willing in terms of air defense, in order to face the Iranian ballistic and drone threat (as seen with April 13, 2024<sup>5</sup> events), is the military pillar of this strategy.

While support for Israel benefits from a bipartisan consensus, the resilience of countries bordering the Jewish state represents a second major challenge for the next American administration. This is the case of Egypt, weakened by the conflict in Gaza and the economic consequences of the Houthi attacks in the Red Sea. American support for the Egyptian government will probably increase, both politically and financially, eventually through Saudi funds<sup>6</sup>. President Sisi's personal closeness with Trump<sup>7</sup> will give the latter an advantage, even if the Democrat candidate has tried in recent months to praise Cairo's role for peace in the region. Jordan, a key ally of the United States (due to its strategic position for facilitating military operations in Syria and Iraq) sees its internal stability jeopardized by the consequences of the conflict in Gaza. Amman expects then Washington to issue a strong political messaging to Israel regarding Jordan sovereignty and authority over Jerusalem holy sites. However, Amman, despite being an enduring ally in the fight against terrorism, remains the blind spot of American regional policy, mainly because of the gradual American troops withdrawal from the Syrian-Iraqi theater. Lebanon is facing the same challenge, due to the US-Israeli proximity and the disproportionate Israeli response to the 7 October 2023 terrorist attacks. But without a significant strategic commitment of the Americans to these countries, something not envisaged yet by either candidate, the spread of chaos in Lebanon and Jordan remains possible.

The Syrian-Iraqi theatre and the fight against ISIS are no longer a topic of interest in the United States and are not even mentioned in the candidates speeches. The American withdrawal from this area thus seems inevitable and an end-state shared by both political parties, marking finally the end of the long war against Islamic terrorism that began in 2001, even if ISIS still poses a threat to the region<sup>8</sup>. The American and Iraqi governments also agreed at the end of August 2024 to withdraw American and coalition forces<sup>9</sup> from Iraq between September 2025 and the end of 2026<sup>10</sup>, leaving afterwards this country open to the strong influence of other regional actors (Iran, Turkey, Russia).

The US-Turkish relationship represents a third major issue for Washington. Turkey's regional role is growing, a result of its neo-Ottoman policy revitalized by its firm opposition to Israel following the war in Gaza. Turkey has moved closer to Egypt and Iraq while concluding defense agreements with Qatar and Somalia. In addition, Ankara is hosting several vital NATO bases for US forces and has become since 2022 a «useful deal maker» between the United States and Russia, as shown by the exchanges of Russian and American prisoners on Turkish soil on 1 August 2024. However, Turkey is very critical of US pro-Israel leaning policy, which is a source of distrust in an already tense relationship with the Biden administration. The potential return of a Trump administration is thus viewed favorably in Ankara, in order to reset a broken dialogue with Washington. Turkey knows that its strategic position is valuable in negotiations with Trump, something that will undoubtedly be more difficult with Kamala Harris who embodies Joe Biden's continuity<sup>11</sup>.

4 U.S. policy seeks to integrate Saudi Arabia into the Abraham Accords.  
 5 Massive attack on Israel by Iran (300 missiles and drones launched) countered by numerous multinational air defense means, under the aegis of USCENTCOM (US Command for the Middle East and Central Asia).  
 6 Long lasting support for Egypt could be one of the topics of Riyadh/Washington bilateral negotiations.  
 7 A donation made by President Sisi to the Trump campaign is causing controversy. Washington Post, 02/08/2024.  
 8 According to CENTCOM, the number of ISIS attacks in the Syrian-Iraqi theater doubled in 2024 compared to 2023. In addition, the future of the internment camps for jihadists and their sympathizers in northeastern Syria remains uncertain. New York Times, 03/09/2024. At the end of August, a joint raid made by American and Iraqi forces led to the elimination of 15 ISIS terrorists in Iraq.  
 9 The American forces have 2500 personnel in Iraq, 900 in Syria. Middle East Eye, 06/09/2024.  
 10 Middle East Eye, 06/09/2024  
 11 This does not prevent President Erdogan from seeking a bilateral meeting with the Democrat candidate. Türkiye Today, 20/09/2024.



Map from the FMES Strategic Atlas of the Mediterranean and the Middle East for sale on the FMES Institute's website.

## KAMALA HARRIS AND DEMOCRAT'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY

Kamala Harris, who has little experience on international issues, represents the liberal wing of the US Democrat Party, a character further accentuated by the choice of Tim Waltz as her running mate<sup>12</sup>. While her Middle East objectives should be largely Joe Biden policy continuation, some differences in style and with a more «liberal» touch could emerge in order to satisfy her political support base<sup>13</sup>.

Showing support for Israel remains an imperative for the American political class. Kamala Harris is no exception and fits into this bipartisan redline. As senator, she repeatedly supported pro-Israel resolutions<sup>14</sup>, even against Obama administration, and reiterated Israel's right to defend itself. Similarly, she has always been opposed to the idea of an embargo on American weapons transfer to Israel<sup>15</sup>. And she remains close to American Jewish liberal positions. However, she repeatedly mentioned her fierce opposition to Israeli government's way of waging the war in Gaza<sup>16</sup>, distancing herself from Joe Biden's very prudent stance. She did not attend Israeli Prime Minister's speech to Congress on July 25, 2024 and her official meeting with Benjamin Netanyahu was, according to some sources, "tense". She is particularly concerned by the Palestinian population plight in Gaza, calling for an immediate ceasefire by Israel. She is in favor of increased political pressure on the Israeli government in order to end the war and to efficiently deliver humanitarian aid to the Palestinians. But Harris remains a proponent of "balance" in the national and international arenas. She did not take advantage of the Democrat convention in August to propose a fundamental breakthrough on the Gaza issue, the most polarizing topic of American foreign policy since the 2003 Iraq war<sup>17</sup>. In fact, in the event of a new Democrat administration, American rhetoric towards Israel could be harsher than it is today, accentuating the political misalignment between the two countries. A Harris administration could then be similar to the Carter one: US support for Israel but not at the expense of Palestinian rights. New initiatives to promote a two-state solution could be proposed<sup>18</sup>, much to the despair of Netanyahu government or even the Israelis themselves.

Regarding Iran, a Democrat administration will follow Biden legacy, namely the seek for dialogue, limitation of tensions and a desire for non-confrontation in order to preserve regional stability. On Iran's nuclear program, and while this issue could be one of the first challenges for the new administration following the ongoing regional

escalation between Israel and Iran, it is unlikely that Kamala Harris will want to resume negotiations with Iran, unless it demonstrates its willingness to make concessions<sup>19</sup>. The Biden administration did not make any diplomatic progress on this now "frozen" issue. The Democrat candidate remains however in favor of JCPOA<sup>20</sup>, in complete opposition with her Republican opponent. In 2018, she strongly criticized Trump's «reckless» decision to withdraw from JCPOA, which she considered a major success of the Obama administration. She also condemned in 2020 the elimination by the United States of Qassem Soleimani<sup>21</sup>, in order to avoid «escalation and confrontation»<sup>22</sup>. If a diplomatic dialogue is opened by Tehran, particularly in the context of her new presidency, a resumption of negotiations remains theoretically possible. A Harris administration, however, will put greater pressure on Iran (and on other countries) regarding human rights, which will certainly become a political redline for her. Kamala Harris has been widely critical of the Iranian regime's violence against protesters and anti-government movements since 2022<sup>23</sup>.

With Gulf countries, and in particular Saudi Arabia, a new Democrat administration should continue to insist on the human rights issue. When in the Senate, Kamala Harris sharply criticized Saudi Arabia for the conduct of its war in Yemen and for its involvement in the death of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi. She has even been opposed to the sale of weapons to Riyadh<sup>24</sup>. The Democrat candidate regularly spoke in favor of an improved US-Saudi relationship, but only if it

<sup>12</sup> While Tim Waltz supports the Democrats' traditional policy in the Middle East, he seems less interventionist than most and looks with great suspicion Washington's regional allies, particularly their stance on human rights. Al Jazeera, 08/08/2024.

<sup>13</sup> Especially among Arab-Americans voters and the left-wing of the Democrat Party, present in large numbers in Michigan (a swing state). They strongly criticize Biden administration's lack of results in pressuring Israel to stop the war in Gaza.

<sup>14</sup> Al Majalla, 04/08/2024.

<sup>15</sup> BBC, 08/08/2024.

<sup>16</sup> In March 2024, she said «Israel was not doing enough to avert a humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza,» even threatening the Jewish state with «consequences if it launches a ground invasion of Rafah.» Reuters, 22/07/2024.

<sup>17</sup> Al Monitor, 25/08/2024.

<sup>18</sup> Kamala Harris said that «the two-state solution is the only way for a democratic and secure State of Israel and for giving the Palestinians their rights to freedom, security and prosperity» Al-Sarira, 09/08/2024.

<sup>19</sup> Reuters, 22/07/2024.

<sup>20</sup> Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.

<sup>21</sup> Al Qods force commander, Al-Sarira, 09/08/2024.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> The National, 22/07/2024.

<sup>24</sup> Al Majalla, 04/08/2024 et Al Ahram, 30/07/2024.

«corresponds to the values and interests of the United States»<sup>25</sup>. But a dose of «realism» could be imposed on the Democrat administration in its relations with the Gulf countries, especially if A. Blinken, a seasoned secretary of state well aware of the power struggles underway in the Gulf, is maintained. The continuation of American efforts for a trilateral agreement between Washington, Riyadh and Jerusalem, including American security guarantees for the Wahhabi kingdom, seems to have the full support of K. Harris, provided that Israel accepts a path for the constitution of an independent Palestinian state (a Saudi demand that the Democrat candidate can only support). Such a trilateral rapprochement would be a huge US diplomatic victory against China and Russia. The extension of the Abraham Accords to the fields of technology and energy transition would also probably be sought by the new Democrat administration.

## A SECOND TRUMP ADMINISTRATION IN THE WAKE OF THE FIRST ONE

The first Trump administration was behind the September 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and Morocco, but also behind the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 and an aborted peace plan between Israelis and Palestinians. The foundations of this "Trump policy" were twofold: first, a desire to expand United States weight in the Middle East issue when Washington saw an interest or opportunity to do so (concept of «peace through strength»<sup>26</sup>). Second, an openly pro-Israel position<sup>27</sup> excluding the Palestinians from any conflict resolution (seen as Israeli-Arab and not Israeli-Palestinian). It is then very likely that a second Trump administration will be based on the same principles with maybe a desire to accentuate the American military «withdrawal» from the region, ultimately leaving the Iranian issue to its regional allies (Israel and Saudi Arabia) but with American guarantees ("leading from behind"). And this stance represents a major difference with the Democrat administration. Trump could favor Israel a greater freedom of action in order to act against Iran, its regional proxy network (Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen) and its nuclear program. In exchange of an unconditional US political support, the Jewish state could act as a «regional policeman», in its interests and those of the United States, preventing the latter from maintaining exposed ground troops in the region (Iraq, Syria, Jordan). This major breakthrough in the Washington/Tel Aviv strategic relationship would then raise Israel to the rank of a major power, on a par with Turkey, for the management of conflicts in the North of the Middle East (line extending from Gaza to Iraq).

Donald Trump has a privileged economic and personal link with the Wahhabi kingdom. In 2016, Saudi Arabia was the scene of his first trip abroad as President. He remains highly appreciated by the Gulf States for his firm opposition to Iran, for his pragmatism and his lack of interest in the human rights issue. A deeper security partnership with Washington being ardently sought by these countries<sup>28</sup>, and particularly by Saudi Arabia, new opportunities on broader regional issues (extension of the Abraham Accords for example) could occur under a second Trump administration. A Republican administration could foresee a new framework agreement with Riyadh (a new Quincy-type agreement) to counter China's influence, deter Iran, empower Gulf countries, and ensure Israel's regional integration (and the disappearance of the Palestinian question) in exchange for strong US security guarantees and enhanced energy cooperation. Such an agreement would be consistent with the "transactional approach" of Trump. In any case, a Saudi-American enduring renewed strategic partnership will undoubtedly be a high priority for a second Trump administration and will be seen in Washington as the «solution» to the region's problems.

The «Deal of the Century» proposed by Trump in 2020, seen in the White House as a transactional peace plan between Israelis and Palestinians, recognized the legality of Israeli settlements in the West Bank and thus the Jewish state's claims on Judea and Samaria, in exchange for some Israeli territory bordering Egypt and Gaza that was scheduled to be transferred to Palestinians. Given the current situation and the ongoing conflict in Gaza, this project seems now totally obsolete. The Israeli military operations in Gaza and the occupation of the Palestinian strip by the IDF make the possibility of land swaps illusory. But Trump remains committed to defend Israel and has strongly criticized Biden administration's attempts to freeze US arms deliveries to Tel Aviv. On the other hand, he was embarrassed by the duration of the conflict, seen as damaging Israel's image and therefore United States one. He has repeatedly asked the leaders of the Jewish state to end this war «as soon as possible»<sup>29</sup>.

<sup>25</sup> The National, 22/07/2024.

<sup>26</sup> Washington Post, 31/01/2024.

<sup>27</sup> As seen with the United States' recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2017 and the recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan.

<sup>28</sup> The low military effects of the April 2024 Iranian attack on Israel demonstrated that a US-led regional air defense architecture was desirable by Gulf countries. This does not prevent Gulf countries from regularly sounding out the Chinese and Russians on security issues.

<sup>29</sup> Neue Zürcher Zeitung, 27/05/2024.



He also criticized the Israeli government for its failures during October 7, 2023 attacks<sup>30</sup>. In August 2024, at a campaign rally, he made it clear that if elected president, Israel would receive all the support needed to quickly end the war in Gaza, threatening Hamas with severe retaliation from the United States if American hostages still being held were not released. On the Israel/Palestine issue, a second Trump administration could be based on three principles: unconditional support for Israel, particularly against Hamas, Hezbollah and Iran; support for an integration of the Jewish state into its Arab environment through the extension of the Abraham Accords to Saudi Arabia (in exchange of strong US security guarantees for Riyadh); the termination of the Palestinian “national question” through the inclusion of its population in neighboring countries (through special deals with Washington). A new Trump administration will then not be favorable to the Palestinian cause. The reconstruction of Gaza with American money will be almost impossible, the Israeli religious far-right remaining very close to Trump’s advisers. David Friedman, former US ambassador to Israel during Trump’s first mandate, as well as Jared Kushner, his son-in-law, are talking openly about Israel’s annexation of the West Bank, Gaza shoreline real estate investments and the displacement of populations from the strip to the Negev or other countries, without any right of return<sup>31</sup>.

On Iran, a second Trump administration would probably trigger the return of the maximum pressure policy through increasing sanctions, particularly against Iranian oil exports<sup>32</sup>, and the targeting of senior Pasdaran executives in the region. On the other hand, his new administration will refrain from maintaining a strong US military footprint in the Middle East, in accordance with an isolationist stance linked to the current American «war fatigue» in the region<sup>33</sup> and a much more political interest on the competition with China. The withdrawal of US troops from the Middle East was a promise of Trump before his first term and he constantly tried to do so, even opposing his advisers<sup>34</sup>. This topic will remain relevant during a second Trump administration that could see the complete withdrawal of US forces from Syria and Iraq, and even other countries, delegating the security of the region to its local allies (Israel, Turkey), fueling the fears of Jordan and Lebanon.

ARNAUD PEYRONNET

30 The Guardian, 25/04/2024.

31 Ibid.

32 Economic weapon through cheap oil (via a strong revival of American oil production) would harm Iran, as well as Russia.

33 Like the elimination of Qassem Soleimani in January 2020.

34 In October 2019, he abruptly ordered the withdrawal of many American forces from eastern Syria.

# GREECE FACING THE RECOMPOSITIONS OF ITS SOUTHERN ENVIRONMENT

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*Despite a lull with Turkey that has allowed it to emerge, since 2023, from a situation of political and operational tension that had become almost permanent, Greece is facing a simultaneous fracturing of its entire southern environment. This fracturing threatens to shatter the building built in recent years, on which its regional strategy and security are based: the profitability of its position as the first continental gateway to the EU on the Indo-Pacific route; partnership with Egypt and the management of the Libyan question; partnership with Israel and the momentum created by the Abraham Accords in the Middle East. How does Greece react to the testing of these three pillars ?*

## IN THE RED SEA

The severe disruption of maritime trade induced by Houthi strikes in the Red Sea led Greece, together with France and Italy, to take an active part in the launch. (February 2024) of Operation EUNAVFOR «ASPIDES» (the Greek word for «shields»), whose base of operations is located in Larissa, under the authority of a Greek admiral. In addition, the chance of the bearings makes that, since November, Greece ensures simultaneously the operational command of ASPIDES and IRINI.

From an economic point of view, ships of Greek interest are regularly targeted and, in general, the disruption of traffic threatens the maritime economy, which is very important for the country<sup>1</sup>. This complication comes on top of the limitation of the Greek merchant navy’s access to the juicy Russian market due to sanctions. On the other hand, despite a year that was going to be difficult because of the rerouting of container ships, Piraeus finally seems to pull out of the game to 2024 by continuing to record gains, and by overtaking Hamburg as a maritime hub<sup>2</sup>. This is due in particular to an increase in container traffic destined for Greece, which offsets the fall in transshipments. But also to the diversification of the port’s activities (increase in passenger, automobile and cruise ship traffic) and the presence of a robust ecosystem of maritime services.

Strategically, the operation is part of a broader vision. In particular, it is seen as a means of promoting European defence, a priority for Greece<sup>3</sup>; incidentally, it allowed to test in real situation - and with success - its anti-drone system of national manufacture KENTAVROS («Centaur»)<sup>4</sup>. But ASPIDES is also seen as necessary to supply the Baltic-Aegean energy, military and economic corridor that is emerging from the Ukrainian conflict and whose viability also depends on its connection with the Indo-Pacific.

Thus, compromising maritime traffic of Western interest in the Red Sea makes it possible to disrupt the Baltic-Indo-Pacific arc, for the best interest of Tehran against a backdrop of Turkish ambivalence and strong American suspicions about Russia’s alleged support for the Houthis<sup>5</sup>. This explains, among other things, the choice of the Anglo-Americans to intervene more quickly and dynamically than the Europeans<sup>6</sup>, whose response seems anemic, even though the way in which ASPIDES was conceived and is conducted may have aroused criticism<sup>7</sup>.

1 Union of Greek Shipowners (UGS): «The contribution of shipping to the Greek economy.» 2023; Eurostat: «Water transport employed 297 000 people in 2023.» 25/06/2024.

2 Baltic Exchange: «Xinhua-Baltic International Shipping Center Development Index Report.» 2024, pp.14-16.

3 Greek Ministry of Defence: «Meeting of the Minister of National Defence Nikos Dendias with the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Josep Borrell and Joint Visit to the HQ of Operation» ASPIDES «(OHQ EUNAVFOR ASPIDES) at the 1st Army/EU- O HQ» ACHILLEAS, «» 05/07/2024; Greek Prime Minister: «Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis» interview on CNN with journalist Julia Chatterley, «13/07/2024.

4 «Centaur: The New Combat-Proven C-UAS System By Hellenic Aerospace Industry.» Naval News, 18/07/2024.

5 «Iran utilizes Turkey as a support hub for Yemeni proxy the Houthi rebels.» The Nordic Monitor, 11/01/2024; «Russia, Turkey, Iran Condemn Attack on Yemeni Houthis.» Voice of America, 12/01/2024; «US officials concerned Israeli offensive on Hezbollah could drag in Russia.» Middle East Eye, 28/06/2024; «U.S. Launches Effort to Stop Russia From Arming Houthis With Antiship Missiles.» The Wall Street Journal, 07/19/2024; «Exclusive: US intelligence suggests Russian military is advising Houthis inside Yemen.» Middle East Eye, 02/08/2024; «Russia Provided Targeting Data for Houthi Assault on Global Shipping.» The Wall Street Journal, 24/10/2024;

6 «Who Are the Houthis and Why Did the US and UK Launch Strikes on Them?» Voice of America, 12/01/2024; «US says B-2 bombers attacked Houthi targets in Yemen.» Aljazeera, 17/10/2024; «UK, US carry out air strikes on Yemen, including Sanaa.» Aljazeera, 10/11/2024.

7 For example, interview with Admiral Pascal Ausseur (FMES) to B2: «ASPIDES. A purely defensive operation that solves nothing. Forgotten geopolitical issues, «08/04/2024.



From a navigational point of view, ships continue to prefer the contour of Africa, more expensive, more polluting, but safer. From a political point of view, the weak mobilization at the European level reflects a lack of interest, or even a lack of commitment to strategic issues, if not an aversion to risk<sup>8</sup>. Initially aligned with the operation, Belgium and Germany finally withdrew; it remains to be seen whether the Houthi's «direct threats against German shipowners»<sup>9</sup> will influence Berlin's wait-and-see approach. For its part, Spain immediately renounced a military presence in the Red Sea<sup>10</sup>. This attitude is in line with Madrid's pro-Palestinian stance<sup>11</sup> which, moreover, is traditionally limited to the «trade union minimum» in terms of solidarity with its European partners on East Mediterranean issues. In addition, Spanish ports have seen their activity increase sharply due to the situation in the Red Sea.

This mission has therefore become a Franco-Greek-Italian affair, which limits both its operational scope and its political impact within the EU. Deployed for one year, a more complete assessment can only be made later.

## GREECE FACES THE EGYPT-LIBYA-TURKEY TRIANGLE

The conflict in Gaza and developments on the Libyan issue have confirmed Egypt's pivotal role in the Eastern Mediterranean and the ANMO region. However, this role is evolving in parallel with the weakening of the country.

First, endemic economic fragility, accentuated by an international situation that impacts the trade<sup>12</sup>, energy and food circuits on which Egypt depends. Hence the conclusion of an agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in March 2024<sup>13</sup> and the appointment of a new Finance Minister familiar with the IMF and the World Bank<sup>14</sup>. In parallel, Saudi and Emirati financial support continues<sup>15</sup> but may not be eternal in times of regional and internal recompositions from which the Gulf monarchies are not immune<sup>16</sup>.

By extension, Egypt suffers from a social, and therefore potentially political, fragility. Egypt's young and large population lacks prospects. The experience of the Muslim Brotherhood, circumscribed but not eradicated, as well as Cairo's stance on the conflict in Gaza, which is not in line with the dominant popular sentiment, makes a dynamic of subversion plausible.

Egypt is a vital partner for Greece.

If the Turkish push in the Eastern Mediterranean has so far been contained, it is also thanks to the Hellenic-Egyptian synergy in energy and military matters, which continues<sup>17</sup>. Incidentally, the failure of this Turkish attempt at forcible passage reminds us that the format of a navy, the modernity of its equipment and the audacity of its crews are not enough. They are not combined with a fair assessment of the capabilities of the adversary and regional realities. Nevertheless, the Turkish naval acquisition program<sup>18</sup> suggests that Ankara maintains its strategy of staggering by quantity, even if it means temporarily calming the game to delay.

Egypt is also an «airlock» from Greece to Libya. Despite efforts made since 2020 (media reception of Kh. Haftar in Athens in early 2020; opening of a consulate in Benghazi, reopening of the embassy in Tripoli and visit of K. Mitsotakis in 2021; an unfortunate rescue operation in September 2023 during the floods in Derna<sup>19</sup>), Athens does not manage to weigh in the Libyan equation, yet essential for its interests. Indeed, Turkish entrenchment in Libya is a real strategic «Swiss knife,» hence the fact that it is consensual in a Turkey that is politically polarized, including on issues of foreign policy conduct. It allows Ankara to access the central Mediterranean, ultimately promoting the structuring of cooperation with Italy on Libya, but also a projection to the rear of Greece, against the backdrop of a flourishing

Turkish-Albanian strategic relationship<sup>20</sup> at a time when relations between Athens and Tirana are experiencing disturbances. It is no coincidence that Greece has announced its intention to acquire a fourth IDF Belh@rra and to equip three of its four new ships with naval cruise missiles capable of striking at 1000 km<sup>21</sup>. This would allow it to exercise deterrence over larger areas by avoiding the trap of an overextension that would become untenable in the face of the format of the Turkish naval tool. Finally, a permanent anchor in Libya allows Turkey to open up to the Sahel, and, combined with a growing footprint in the Red Sea, to constrain Egypt's regional projection. And that is precisely what is coming.

In a new crisis over the distribution of oil revenues between rival factions<sup>22</sup>, Turkey is seeking to further consolidate its presence in Libya. First, by trying to establish links with the east of the country. But especially by getting closer to Egypt, including in the Somali theater. Indeed, in 2024 Mogadishu signed security agreements with Turkey<sup>23</sup> and Egypt<sup>24</sup>, allowing Egyptian military equipment to be sent to Somalia after several decades<sup>25</sup>. This is actually part of the Egyptian-Ethiopian dispute, whose water security issue is experienced as existential by Egypt. In the aftermath, 12 years after his last visit, Al-Sisi was received with great pomp in Ankara, where he nevertheless reiterated the need to see the departure of «illegitimate foreign forces and mercenaries» from Libya<sup>26</sup>, to which the Turkish president did not react. If Egypt is not fooled by Ankara's plans - which has not renounced any of its claims in the Eastern Mediterranean and is not letting go of Libya - the Somali-Ethiopian dimension of this rapprochement cannot be underestimated, including the fact that the United States supports Turkish involvement in Somalia<sup>27</sup>. However, a Turkish-Egyptian synergy in Somalia that would allow Cairo to strengthen its position against Addis Ababa could end up impacting the Egyptian posture in the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya in a direction potentially unfavourable to Greece. This is even though the EU does not have a solid common position on the Libyan issue and Turkey continues to refuse the checks carried out as part of Operation IRINI<sup>28</sup>.

From the point of view of illegal immigration, Egypt is also a key country for Greece, due to the turn taken by the conflict in Gaza (and now in southern Lebanon)<sup>29</sup>, and the Libyan situation which is not improving. Crete, whose strategic value has increased considerably in recent years, as well as Gavdos - which is one of the islands that Turkey considers to be of «undetermined status» - have been receiving since the spring 2024 thousands of migrants from Egypt and Libya.

A strong Egypt capable of maintaining a course of events in Libya compatible with Greek concerns is therefore essential ; on the contrary, its collapse

would be a geopolitical earthquake for the whole region and very bad news for the EU, Israel and the United States. Hence a series of initiatives, some of which involve Greece, to try to consolidate the country and maintain its compatibility with the Western strategic device.

At the bilateral level, the establishment of a Greek-Egyptian High Cooperation Council was agreed in March 2024<sup>30</sup>. At the regional level, the Cyprus-Greece-Egypt partnership was reconfirmed the day after Al-Sisi's visit to Ankara<sup>31</sup>. At the European level, Greece has actively promoted the establishment of a strategic and comprehensive Euro-Egyptian partnership<sup>32</sup>.

Financed to the tune of 7.4 billion euros over four years<sup>33</sup>, it was doubled by military assistance of 20 million euros under the European Peace Facility with a view to « (...) strengthen the capabilities

20 «Turkey, Albania upgrade ties to strategic partnership,» Anadolu Agency, 07/01/2021; Albanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs: «Ankara, Minister Xhaçka: Türkiye is a key partner for Albania and the entire region,» 02/11/2022; «Albania signs deal to acquire three Turkish Bayraktar drones,» Reuters, 12/20/2022; «Berisha: Turkey» intervened «in 2009 Greece-Albania maritime deal,» Euractiv, 21/12/2022; «Greece annoyed by Albania-Turkey drone deal,» euractiv, 22/12/2022; «Turkey, Albania agree on defence, environment, media,» SeeNews, 21/02/2024; «Albanian premier: Unforgettable helpful acts by Türkiye cemented its support for Albania, Kosovo,» Anadolu Agency, 20/02/2024; Mission of Albania to the EU: «Minister Hasani meets Hakan Fidan: Let's further strengthen the Albania-Turkey strategic partnership,» 04/07/2024; «Albania to get kamikaze drones from Turkey - PM Rama,» Reuters, 10/10/2024; «President Erdoğan inaugurates largest mosque in Balkans,» Daily Sabah, 10/10/2024.

21 «Greece wants to acquire fourth IDF and naval cruise missiles,» Sea and Marine, 20/09/2024.

22 «Libya's oil output falls more than half due to political standoff,» Reuters, 29/08/2024.

23 «Somalia authorised Turkey to defend its sea waters in» historic «deal,» Middle East Eye, 21/02/2024.

24 «Somalia, Egypt sign defense pact to bolster security cooperation,» Anadolu Agency, 14/08/2024.

25 «Egypt sends arms to Somalia following security deal, sources say,» Reuters, 29/08/2024.

26 Egyptian Presidency: «President El-Sisi's Speech at Joint Press Conference with Turkish President Erdoğan,» 04/09/2024.

27 US State Department: «Joint Statement from the Somalia V,» 03/10/2024.

28 «Libya: Turkey Denies Inspection of Operation Irini for Twelfth Time,» Agenzia Nova, 10/09/2024.

29 «European Mediterranean states discuss Middle East, migration,» France24, 11/10/2024.

30 «Greece and Egypt to deepen ties, forming High-level Cooperation Council,» Athens-Macedonian News Agency (AMNA), 17/03/2024.

31 Egyptian State Information Service: «Egypt discusses with Greece, Cyprus preparations for 10th trilateral summit,» 06/09/2024.

32 «PM Mitsotakis:» The stability and prosperity of Egypt is of critical importance to the EU, «» NAMA, 17/03/2024.

33 European Commission: «Press statement by President von der Leyen with Austrian Chancellor Nehammer, Belgian Prime Minister De Croo, Cypriot President Christodoulidis, Greek Prime Minister Mitsotakis, Italian Prime Minister Meloni and Egyptian President El-Sisi,» 17/03/2024.

8 «German Navy Confirms Its Supersized Frigate Will Avoid The Red Sea,» The War Zone, 04/11/2024.

9 «Houthi Attempting to Intimidate and Threaten German Shipowners,» The Maritime Executive, 18/11/2024.

10 «Spain will not intervene in Red Sea - defence minister,» Reuters, 12/01/2024.

11 «From the river to the sea: «Israel condemns Spain's deputy PM's comments,» Anadolu Agency, 23/05/2024; «Spain-Israel tensions soar as Madrid throws support behind Palestine,» Al Jazeera, 06/06/2024.

12 «Egypt's Suez Canal Revenues Fall Over Regional Tensions,» The Shipping Telegraph, 10/10/2024.

13 «Egypt signs expanded \$8 trillion loan deal with IMF,» Reuters, 06/03/2024; «IMF Sends \$820M to Egypt After Successful 3rd Loan Review,» Egyptian Streets, 30/07/2024.

14 «Egypt overhauls cabinet as economic pressures, power cuts persist,» Reuters, 03/07/2024.

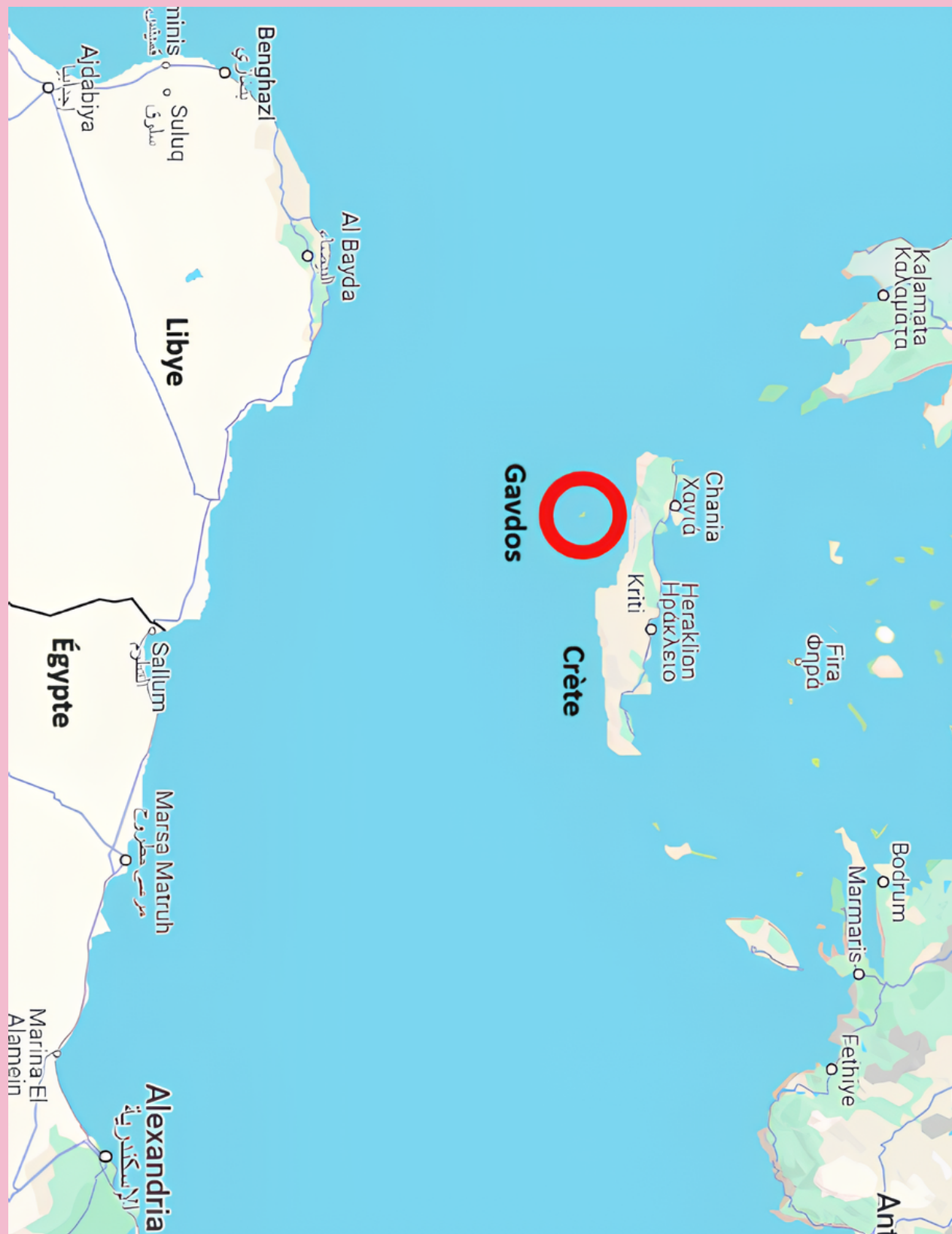
15 «Egypt announces \$35 trillion UAE investment on Mediterranean coast,» Reuters, 23/02/2024; «Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund Set to Invest USD 5 Billion in Egypt,» Egyptian Streets, 17/09/2024.

16 See Pierre Razoux: «Strategic reconfigurations in the Middle East,» Defense, Union-IHEDN, No. 219, March-April-May 2024.

17 General Information Organization of the Egyptian Presidency: «Chief-of-staff of Armed Forces witnesses main phase of MEDUSA-13 in Greece,» 22/10/2024.

18 Turkish Presidency: «We must have a strong and effective navy in order to live in peace on our lands,» 24/08/2024.

19 «Libya: Greek rescuers among those killed in road collision,» BBC, 18/09/2024.



## LOCATION OF CRETE AND GAVDOS

of the Egyptian armed forces in terms of territorial control, thus improving their ability to respond to security threats throughout Egyptian territory, in particular in the western region»<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, it was the former Egyptian ambassador to the EU who replaced Sameh Shoukry in Foreign Affairs, suggesting a desire for Euro-Egyptian rapprochement. Finally, the difficulties facing US diplomacy in the Middle East have forced Washington to disregard its stated principles and unconditionally release \$1.3 billion in military aid<sup>35</sup>, confirming Cairo in its strategic «too big to fail» comfort zone.

## GREECE FACES THE CYPRUS-ISRAEL-TURKEY TRIANGLE AND AS A BACKDROP TO THE AMERICAN GAME

The thaw between Greece and Turkey continues and the two governments maintain a rhetoric towards a resolution of their dispute. The exclusion of a former Greek Prime Minister from the ruling party for accusing the government of succumbing to Turkish pretensions, as well as the resignation of the Director General of the Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs who denounces secret diplomacy and a lack of information by his hierarchy on the content of Greek-Turkish contacts (to the point, in his view, of being put at odds with foreign counterparts seeking information on the process under way), suggest that the current rapprochement could be something more than a temporary (and convenient) appeasement for both sides. And this, even though a few incidents have allowed Ankara to recall that lull is not worth retreating, especially in relation to Greece's desire to create natural parks in the Aegean Sea<sup>36</sup>, to the laying of the Great Sea Interconnector electric cable (funded by the EU) to link Greece to Cyprus and Israel and, in general, to the spatial planning advocated by the EU in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean<sup>37</sup>. At the same time, the integration of Turkish maritime geopolitical doctrine into textbooks<sup>38</sup> confirms the desire for transgenerational acculturation to revisionism, an element considered worrying by Greece, but also by the European Commission<sup>39</sup>. The change of command of the 4th Turkish Army (or «Aegean Sea Army») is also noteworthy.

Posted facing the Greek islands, this formation has the largest landing force in the Mediterranean and is not integrated into NATO, precisely because it targets another member of the Alliance. However, Turkish opposition media in exile have pointed to this development as worrying Greece because of the pedigree of the new commander. Head of military intelligence from 2017 to 2019, General Irfan

IOzert would be one of the anti-Atlanticist officers loyal to R. T. Erdogan and would be specialized in clandestine operations, especially in Libya where he would have orchestrated the transfer of Syrian jihadists<sup>40</sup>. Regarding illegal immigration, Turkish smugglers have increased the level of violence (use of firearms, direct attacks on Greek patrol boats), while extending their activity along the maritime border to force the dispersal of forces. The trap is twofold: either, by increasing the level of violence, hope for a blunder, at a time when the Greek coastguard is in the sights of NGOs, with the support of images provided by Turkish reconnaissance drones; or prevent them from responding proportionally to precisely avoid any blunder and its politico-media consequences. In both cases, the aim is to restrict their ability to stop boats at the limit of the territorial waters where the Turkish authorities are obliged to come and recover them under the agreements. The strategy is obvious and the role of the Turkish authorities in this scheme can be questioned, despite the continuation of consultations between Greek and Turkish coastguards. Indeed, while the «truce» is generally respected in the air, the European Commission reports an increase in violations of Greek territorial waters by Turkey compared to 2023, as well as an increase in 172% of illegal arrivals, particularly by sea, while they are falling 58% in neighboring Italy<sup>41</sup>. Finally, a growing number of violent incidents involving the Turkish mafia in Greece should be noted. This testifies to a porosity that questions, even more, when one knows the long tradition of interpenetration between mafia and nationalist circles in Turkey - which dates back to the Kemalist era - and that members of these groups joined Greece as migrants and requested the right of asylum by presenting themselves as supporters of the PKK or the brotherhood of the late F. Gulen<sup>42</sup>.

34 Council of the European Union: «European Peace Facility: Council adopts assistance measure to support Egyptian armed forces,» 05/11/2024.

35 «US grants Egypt \$1.3 trillion in military aid, overriding rights conditions,» Reuters, 12/09/2024.

36 Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs: «No: 58, 9 April 2024, Regarding Greece's announcement on the creation of a marine park in the Aegean Sea,» 09/04/2024; Greek Ministry of Foreign Affairs: «Communiqué of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs regarding the communiqué issued yesterday by the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs,» 10/04/2024.

37 Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs: «No: 235, 16 November 2024, Regarding Maritime Spatial Planning of the European Union,» 16/11/2024.

38 «Blue Homeland» debuts at Turkish schools, «Kathimerini, 13/09/2024.

39 European Commission: «Turkiye 2024 report,» 30/10/2024, p. 31.

40 «The new commander of Turkey's Aegean Army signals potential trouble for Greece, NATO allies,» Nordic Monitor, 15/08/2024.

41 European Commission: «Turkiye 2024 report,» 30/10/2024, pp. 55 and 39.

42 «Turkish mafia posing hybrid threat,» Kathimerini, 16/09/2024.



To this must be added the impasse on the Cyprus issue. Indeed, the island is each day a little more overwhelmed by its own strategic value, leading to more polarization. Thus, Turkey maintains its position in favor of the recognition of the breakaway republic of the north of the island, which Greece refuses to discuss, as contrary to the resolutions of the Security Council and the framework of negotiations set by the UN, which advocates a model of bizonal and bicomunal federation. At the same time, Cyprus proved useful for Israel, which earned it direct threats from the late H. Nasrallah,<sup>43</sup> but also from Turkey, which warned Greece and Cyprus against their involvement in the Middle East conflict.<sup>44</sup> That said, this involvement is also linked to British sovereign bases on the island, over which Nicosia - which denies any military contribution to the Middle East conflict - has no jurisdiction.

Finally, Cyprus continues its integration into the American strategic framework. Evolving in parallel with uncertainty about Turkey's strategic loyalty to the West<sup>45</sup>, this American-Cypriot cooperation is experiencing a new boom at the end of J. Biden's term, with the signing of a defence agreement<sup>46</sup>, followed by the start of the strategic dialogue between the two states<sup>47</sup> and the visit of the Cypriot President to the White House, the first since 1996<sup>48</sup>. This turn of events naturally displeases Ankara<sup>49</sup>. However, Turkish-American relations have precisely entered an interesting phase.

At the lowest since the advent of J. Biden, they have rebounded since the beginning of 2024. However, this improvement actually confirms the grip of the United States on Turkey, especially via the vector of air power, a pattern in which Greece holds a prominent place.

Indeed, it was the United States that finally had the last word on the question of the sale and modernization of F-16 to Turkey, when it threatened to deliver F-35 to Greece without unblocking the F-16 if Ankara did not lift its veto on Sweden's accession to NATO. In such a configuration, a Greece with 30 Rafales, 83 Viper F-16 and 20 - or even 40 - F-35 by the end of the decade would have had quite a substantial operational advantage for years to come. Turkey therefore first validated Swedish membership, before the White House sent Congress its request for the release of the F-16. A process facilitated by the de facto neutralization - and timely - of Democratic Senator Menendez<sup>50</sup>, emblematic figure of the blocking of the delivery of Turkish F-16 by the Congress. Once this breach of F-16 opened, the circles of the State Department that continue to hope for a Turkey in the Western fold tried to exploit the dynamic by putting the delivery of F-35 back on the table if Ankara renounced Russian S-400<sup>51</sup>.

However, such a scenario would be the very negation of the logic of Turkish strategic autonomy, hence the denial that such negotiations are under way<sup>52</sup>. In addition, the development of the national fighter KAAN and the desire to acquire 40 Eurofighter<sup>53</sup>, and the establishment of a joint squadron with Qatar consisting of Turkish F-16 and Qatari Rafale and Eurofighter<sup>54</sup>, show that Turkey is seeking to loosen the American grip on its air force, but also to counterbalance the advantage provided to the Hellenic Air Force by the acquisition of the Rafale and the F-35, and which may have raised the serious concerns of the Turkish strategic analysis community.

Even more symptomatic of Turkey's difficulty in marking its territory vis-à-vis the Americans, a joint naval exercise in the eastern Mediterranean was concealed by the Turkish Ministry of Defence<sup>55</sup>, probably because it was in complete dissonance with the dominant discourse. Especially since the American ships involved would have anchored in Cyprus and participated in supporting Israel, two red rags for Ankara - at least theoretically. Added to this are rumors that the Kurecik radar base was used to counter the Iranian missile attack on Israel

43 «Hezbollah chief Nasrallah threatens Israel, Cyprus if Gaza war spills over,» France24, 19/06/2024.

44 «Turkey warns Greece and Cyprus to avoid Middle East conflicts,» Kathimerini, 25/06/2024.

45 «US partially lifts three-decade-old arms embargo on Cyprus,» France24, 02/09/2020; «Turkey condemns U.S. decision on Cyprus arms embargo,» Reuters, 17/09/2022; «American Fighter Jets Fly Over Turkish Occupied Cyprus,» Greek Reporter, 26/10/2022; «New Jersey National Guard signs Partnership Agreement with Republic of Cyprus National Guard,» U.S. Embassy in Cyprus, 30/03/2023; «Turkey lashes out at US over warship anchored in Cyprus,» Al-Monitor, 18/05/2023; «2023 U.S.-Republic of Cyprus Defense and Security Cooperation Dialogue,» U.S. Department of Defense, 01/06/2023; «Turkey to raise Cyprus issue at Nato summit,» Cyprus Mail, 19/06/2023; «Lifting of Defense Trade Restrictions on the Republic of Cyprus for Fiscal Year 2024,» U.S. Department of State, 18/08/2023.

46 US Department of Defense: «U.S.-Republic of Cyprus Roadmap for Bilateral Defense Cooperation,» 10/09/2024.

47 «US and Cyprus launch a strategic dialogue to bolster security,» AP News, 23/10/2024.

48 «Christodoulides at the White House - U.S. President Expresses Support for a Solution to the Cyprus Issue,» The National Herald, 10/31/2024.

49 «Turkey condemns US-Cyprus defense deal, urges Washington to reconsider,» Al-Monitor, 11/09/2024.

50 «Sen. Bob Menendez guilty of taking bribes in cash and gold and acting as Egypt's foreign agent,» AP News, 17/07/2024.

51 «US Open to Turkey F-35 Talks If Dispute Over Russian Air Defenses Is Resolved,» Bloomberg, 30/01/2024.

52 «Türkiye rebuffs claims of proposal to keep S-400s in boxes «for F-35s,» Daily Sabah, 29/08/2024.

53 «Germany says Britain taking lead on possible Eurofighters for Turkey,» Reuters, 19/10/2024.

54 «Qatari-Turkish joint squadron to boost interoperability, training and security: Experts,» Breaking Defense, 28/08/2024.

55 «Unraveling the undisclosed US-Türkiye naval exercise,» Yetkin Report, 26/08/2024.

in April, rumors necessarily denied by R.T. Erdogan<sup>56</sup>, even if Iran was never fooled as to the purpose of these facilities<sup>57</sup>.

The accumulation of these contradictions between speeches and actions has not escaped the attention of certain nationalist factions which, warmed up by the rhetorical escalation of the conflict in Gaza, attempted to lynch two American soldiers in the Izmir region<sup>58</sup>.

This picture finally reveals the difficulties inherent in Turkey's posture. Caught up by the realities of its neighbourhood and its economy, and by the limits of its strategic empowerment, it cannot bet on a post-Western world with the same confidence as other actors of the «Global South,» contrary to the orientations advocated by the Turkish Eurasian/South-globalist «circles that have gained influence in recent years. However, the great power discourse she has formulated over the years with her internal audience and a certain extra-Western international clientele forces her to conceal these limits, even if the decision of the BRICS to grant it only observer and not member status suggests that the leaders of the «Global South» are also aware of the nature of the Turkish game. This ambiguity is also reflected in the relationship with Israel where, over time, Turkish rhetorical aggressiveness turns out to be largely a smokescreen.

Indeed, diplomatic relations with Israel continue, despite Israel's characterization as a «terrorist state.» Moreover, it is more B. Netanyahu than Israel that is targeted by R. T. Erdogan, who knows that sooner or later he will have to restore correct relations with the Jewish state. On the one hand for economic reasons, even if, still contrary to the official discourse, Turkish-Israeli trade is not stopped but goes through third states (including Greece) or is camouflaged in trade with the Palestinians. This is evidenced by the multiplication of actions carried out by pro-Palestinian activists in Turkish ports against ships suspected of trading with Israel<sup>59</sup>. On the other hand for strategic reasons: a solid positioning in the Eastern Mediterranean requires for Turkey good relations with Tel Aviv. However, the Israeli choice to engage in a partnership with Greece and Cyprus is paying off and - with nuances - unanimous in the Israeli strategic thinking community. In essence, one side hopes one day to reconnect with Turkey while maintaining the partnership with Greece and Cyprus, which is not seen as opportunistic; another part, more intransigent, even evokes an «alignment» with Greece and Cyprus in a logic of decoupling with Turkey<sup>60</sup>. However, the more this partnership - particularly in its security and operational dimension - deepens, the more difficult it will be for Turkey to unravel it in the future. It is probably no coincidence that the strike on the port of Hodeidah in July 2024, which is a very demanding operation because of

the distances to be covered (about 4000 km round trip), as well as the strikes against Iran in the autumn, which engaged a hundred Israeli planes, were preceded by exercises conducted with the Hellenic Air Force. The latter involved precisely many aircraft (in one case, no less than 56 Greek F-16 were mobilized) and carried out long-range strikes and in-flight refueling<sup>61</sup>. More generally, Israeli pilots say they are satisfied with their training in Greece in recent years, both because of the performance of their Greek colleagues and the morphology of the country - especially the Peloponnese - which evokes that of Iran (mountainous terrain, snow-covered ridges in winter).

Moreover, in an exchange during an online event with the former US ambassador to Turkey, D. Satterfield, he expressed confidence in the resilience of the Abraham Accords, especially in the perspective of seeing Saudi Arabia sign a defense agreement with the United States, one of whose demands will be the normalization of Israeli-Saudi relations. On the other hand, he recognizes that the war in Gaza has increased the price of this normalization, which requires the revival of a two-state solution.

From these elements, it follows that Turkey is still unable to find a role commensurate with its ambitions in the Middle East and can neither dethrone Egypt and the Gulf monarchies in managing the conflict in Gaza, nor exploit the situation to bury the Abraham Accords.

In the end, Ankara is haunted by the unbearable hypothesis of a resumption of American control over Turkish strategy in the eastern Mediterranean. Attempts to engage its neighbors on a bilateral basis are aimed at avoiding U.S. involvement, at least while waiting to see the intentions of the new administration.

56 «Erdogan denies Turkish radars used in effort to down Iranian missiles headed for Israel,» Times of Israel, 26/04/2024.

57 «Iran: NATO radar in Turkey serves to protect Israel,» Ynet, 10/05/2011.

58 «Two US Marines assaulted by Turkish nationalists,» Reuters, 03/09/2024.

59 «Guards fire into the air during protest at port against docking of Israeli ship,» Turkish Minute, 01/11/2024; «Video: Turkish Pro-Palestinian Protestors Stage Sit-In on German Cargo Ship,» The Maritime Executive, 04/11/2024.

60 For example: «As Tensions Escalate in the North, Israel's Hellenic Alignment Becomes Ever More Important,» Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security (JISS), 08/09/2024; «What many Westerners don't get about the Gaza war,» JISS, 16/09/2024.

61 «Air Force stages major drill in Greece practicing potential long-range strike on Iran,» The Times of Israel, 14/09/2023; Hellenic Air Force: «Co-training Between HAF and Israeli Air Force,» 31/05/2024.



However, D. Trump's first term was not easy for R. T. Erdogan, despite the fact that the temperament of the two men and their penchant for transactionalism facilitated their direct communication. It was indeed under D. Trump and M. Pompeo that Turkey was ejected from the F-35 program, whereas harsh sanctions have been imposed on its defence industry<sup>62</sup>, that it has been reframed within NATO for its aggressiveness towards Greece and its collusion with Russia<sup>63</sup>, that the Abraham Accords were signed, and that Congress passed the «East Med Act»<sup>64</sup> and blocked the delivery of Turkish F-16 under the cross-partisan impulse of Senators Menendez (Democratic Party) and Rubio (Republican Party) who also supported the recognition of the Armenian Genocide. And if, despite Greek hopes, Mr. Pompeo (who had been approached for the Department of Defense) was not retained by D. Trump, it was Mr. Rubio who was appointed as the future head of the State Department, while Tulsi Gabbard, who, in the past, spoke warmly towards Greece and frankly against Erdogan's Turkey<sup>65</sup>, was appointed as head of intelligence. If previous positions do not postulate their repetition, the new Trump administration nevertheless reserves many unknowns for Ankara. Indeed, if it applies an even more pronounced pro-Israel policy and revives the strategy of maximum pressure on Iran, the cost of the Turkish posture on the conflict in Gaza - which has remained relatively low in the Turkish-American relationship<sup>66</sup> - could increase. Moreover, in a context of rising tensions on the Kurdish question in Turkey, American choices in Syria will be critical for Ankara, which is not unrelated to the turn that the Russian-American relationship will take. Here too, if D. Trump decides to restore direct contact with V. Putin (which is likely), or even to loosen the grip of sanctions (which is less obvious but not impossible), Turkey will see its dual role as mediator and hub for circumventing sanctions - and therefore part of its geopolitical rent - reduced.

Thus, while Athens - rightly or wrongly - is confident that the Trump administration will not fundamentally change its approach to Greece (given the trans-partisan nature of US support, which it also sought to confirm even before the elections<sup>67</sup>), Turkey faces greater uncertainty.

Perhaps this is one of the explanations for Ankara's choice to maintain the dynamic of détente with Athens in order to avoid an additional imponderable, which, in turn, leads Greece to believe that perhaps this is a rare opportunity to go beyond a mere lull in terms that would be acceptable, the whole being favored by a context of political domination of the ruling party unprecedented since 1974. From this point of view, the way in which the Trump mandate will influence the Turkish position could bring about changes.

## CONCLUSION

In the end, the further development of the relationship with the United States, the search for greater EU involvement in the major strategic and security challenges of Europe's south-eastern flank, the defusing of Turkish pressure, and the pursuit of its military modernization remain for Greece the main tool box to deal with a fragmentation of its southern environment which, in the event of inaction, could have extremely harmful consequences for itself and for the EU.

ARIS MARGHELIS

62 US State Department: «The United States Sanctions Turkey Under CAATSA 231», 14/12/2020.

63 «In Parting Shot, Pompeo Rebukes Turkey at NATO Meeting», Reuters, 12/14/2020.

64 Foreign Relations Committee: «Congress Passes Menendez-Rubio Bill Reshaping U.S. Policy in Eastern Mediterranean», 20/12/2019.

65 See, for example: his 2019 speech to the Greek-American community; «Tulsi Gabbard slams «Islamist megalomaniac» Erdogan over Syrian proxies, «i24, 31/10/2019» Trump's incoming Director of National Intelligence: «Erdogan is not our friend», «Medya News, 11/15/2024.

66 «Turkey is anchored in the West despite split on Gaza, US envoy says», Reuters, 12/06/2024.

67 «Greek PM Mitsotakis Meets with U.S. Senators on Crete», The National Herald, 10/05/2024.

# TURKEY AND TRUMP'S RETURN

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Starting from November 6, 2024, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan openly congratulated «his friend Donald Trump» on X<sup>1</sup> for his victory, referencing the «struggle» Trump had undertaken to be «re-elected.» The language and tone of this reaction immediately echoed the personal closeness the two men had displayed during Trump's first term, reinforcing the idea that a new era was beginning for Turkish-American relations, following the prevailing sense of stagnation during Joe Biden's presidency. However, in recent months, Turkey has adopted a cautious approach to the U.S. elections<sup>2</sup>, stating its readiness to work with whoever emerged victorious. Indeed, Erdoğan was one of the few heads of state to phone the Republican candidate<sup>3</sup> after the first attack Trump suffered during the summer. Yet, as was the case during Trump's previous election, several indicators suggest that Turkey's satisfaction primarily stems from the hope that the new presidency will not be worse than the previous one, rather than a belief that it will be significantly better. This is especially true as Donald Trump's election comes at a time when Turkey is experiencing a period of uncertainty.

Domestically, despite their victory in the 2023 general elections<sup>4</sup>, Erdoğan and the AKP appear increasingly destined for decline. Over the past year and a half, the Turkish economy has been reoriented by traditional measures, notably the central bank's key interest rate, which was abruptly raised from 8% to 50% and has been maintained at this level even more recently<sup>5</sup>, under the guidance of Finance Minister Mehmet Şimşek. Despite slight and recent improvements—such as the stabilisation of inflation and the halt of the depreciation of the national currency—the Turkish economy has not returned to the prosperous years that had long kept the AKP in power, following its early electoral successes at the turn of the millennium.

In March 2024, during the local elections, the ruling party suffered its first true electoral defeat<sup>6</sup>, not only failing to regain the key metropolitan cities of Ankara and Istanbul, which it had lost in 2019, but also being decisively outpaced at the national level by the Kemalist CHP, the leading opposition party. The resulting challenge is not an easy one for the man who has governed Turkey for 22 years, as he now faces the task of halting the inexorable rise of the opposition, while also finding a way to amend the Constitution to allow him to run for

the presidency again in 2028. Given the growing discontent, many believe that early elections could further accelerate this perilous deadline.

On the international stage, after its successes in mediating the Russo-Ukrainian conflict and demonstrating its ability to balance a bold stance between Kyiv and Moscow, Turkey has struggled to find its place in a Middle East shaken by the reactivation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict since October 7, 2023. Marginalised in attempts to resolve this crisis, it has ultimately found itself caught between two sources of tension—on the Black Sea and in the Eastern Mediterranean<sup>7</sup>—that perpetuate a lasting instability, which is hardly conducive to the recovery of its economy.

In this context, Erdoğan's initial optimism following the announcement of the U.S. presidential election results was not enough to bridge the deep sense of perplexity into which the prospect of Trump's return had plunged not only the leaders but also the Turkish political class and society at large. However, the fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime changes the situation and represents, in many ways, a silver lining for Turkey that must be taken into account, even though the consequences of this event remain uncertain<sup>8</sup>. Beginning with an analysis of the diplomatic and political affinities between the Turkish and American leaders, this article focuses on two key issues—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Syrian crisis, and the related Kurdish question—that could generate renewed

1 «Turkish president congratulates Trump on apparent presidential election victory», Anadolu Anjansi, November 6, 2024

2 SOYLU Ragip, «Trump or Harris? Turkey's can't decide which would be best», Middle East Eyes, November 1, 2024

3 MARCOU Jean, «Après sa réélection, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan commence un troisième mandat présidentiel», Blog de Sciences Po Grenoble, June 7, 2022

4 MARCOU Jean, «Après sa réélection, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan commence un troisième mandat présidentiel», Blog de Sciences Po Grenoble, June 7, 2022

5 AKIN Ezgi, «Turkey's Central Bank holds interest rate at 50%», Al-Monitor, November 21, 2024

6 MARCOU Jean, «Défaite de Recep Tayyip Erdoğan et de l'AKP aux élections locales en Turquie : le début d'une nouvelle ère», Blog de Sciences Po Grenoble, April 2, 2024

7 MARCOU Jean, «La mer Noire espace d'expression du potentiel stratégique de la Turquie», Moyen-Orient, N°64, October-December, 2024, p. 34 à 39.

8 MARCOU Jean, «L'embellie syrienne de la Turquie», interview par CHAIGNE-LOUDIN Anne-Lucie, Les Clés du Moyen-Orient, December 12, 2024

conflict between the two countries. It then examines the future of their recurring disagreements and assesses what might bring Ankara and Washington closer together, should a resolution to the war in Ukraine materialise.

## **TRUMP-ERDOĞAN AFFINITIES : CAN THEY SAVE AN INCONSISTENT BILATERAL RELATIONSHIP ?**

A simple examination of the frequency of presidential meetings during the terms of Donald Trump and Joe Biden offers a clear picture of the nature of the relationship that Turkey's president has been able to establish with them. Erdoğan met with Trump in one-on-one meetings nine times between 2017 and 2020, while since 2021, he has been able to meet Biden only four times, and even then, only on the margins of international summits. In May 2024, a planned visit by the Turkish president to the White House was even canceled<sup>9</sup>, after Erdoğan had hosted Ismail Haniyeh, one of the leaders of Hamas, in Istanbul just two weeks prior. It should be noted that the arrival of Joe Biden in office inevitably reminded Erdoğan of the painful memory of the previous Democratic administration, in which Biden had been vice president. The second term of Barack Obama, which had begun under favorable conditions, had turned into a nightmare for Turkey due to both the Syrian crisis and its Kurdish implications, as well as the U.S. refusal to extradite Fethullah Gülen, whom Ankara considers responsible for the failed coup attempt of July 2016. Given this context, for Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, Donald Trump's presidency could hardly have been worse than the previous one. However, other factors need to be considered to understand the affinities between the two men.

This primarily involves, of course, the personalities and backgrounds of both men<sup>10</sup>. Donald Trump's unexpected victory, his populism, his criticism of elites, his claim to represent the forgotten masses of the ruling circles, his instrumentalisation of religion, his unapologetic bias, and his demonisation of the opponent could not fail to win the sympathy of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, as they reminded him of his own personal experience and some of his own practices. This political brutality, unconcerned with form and appearances, was immediately understood by Erdoğan, who himself is less comfortable with the approach of democratic presidents who attempt to balance ethics and statecraft in their strategic decisions.

This understanding was, in fact, immediately reciprocal. In the spring of 2017, the new American president was among the first leaders

to congratulate the AKP leader<sup>11</sup> on his victory in the constitutional referendum that transformed Turkey into an authoritarian presidential regime, while most European leaders expressed concern about the future of Turkish democracy. However, it later became clear that this political affinity did not prevent disagreements from arising and escalating into a merciless confrontation. Thus, a year later, Donald Trump, seeking to capture the evangelical vote in the midterm elections<sup>12</sup>, did not hesitate to impose severe economic sanctions on Turkey<sup>13</sup> (freezing the assets of two Turkish ministers, increasing tariffs on Turkish products, etc.) to pressure it into releasing the American pastor Andrew Brunson, who had been arrested and sentenced as part of the purges following the 2016 coup attempt due to his alleged ties to the Gülen movement.

## **AN AFFINITY TEMPERED BY THE VOLATILITY OF AMERICAN INCONSISTENCY AND THE CONCERNS OF TURKISH PUBLIC OPINION**

The recognition of the fragility of the personal relationship between the two men leads one to believe that the Turkish leader's alignment with Trumpist positions is also tactical, if not opportunistic. In power since 2002, Erdoğan and the AKP have extensive experience in managing relations with Washington, having navigated through two Republican presidencies and two Democratic ones, each marked by the unpredictable nature of American diplomacy. In September 2024, in New York, on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly, while negotiating the reimbursement of the advance invested in the F-35 production program (from which Turkey had been excluded for purchasing Russian S-400 missiles), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan expressed his disillusionment with the United States<sup>14</sup>: « My hope is that the next presidency will not be worse than the previous one... Both Republicans and Democrats have disappointed us. We will see if this continues in the future ».

9 ZAMAN Amberin, « Turkey postpones Erdogan's White House visit », Al-Monitor, April 24, 2024

10 GRAHAM David A. « What's so bad about Trump calling Erdoğan ? », The Atlantic, April 18, 2017

11 DEWAN Angela, "Trump congratulates Erdoğan for referendum win", CNN, April 18, 2017

12 "Trump using Brunson to rally evangelical votes: report", Anadolu Ajansı, August 18, 2018

13 SHAHEEN Kareem, "Turkey vows response to US sanctions imposed over jailed pastor", The Guardian, August 2, 2018

14 GOCUMLU Burcu Calik « Turkish President Erdoğan hopes for positive post-election relations with US, eyes F-35 reimbursement », Anadolu Ajansı, September 26, 2024

Thus, behind the publicly displayed sympathy toward the American billionaire, there also seems to be a resignation shaped by experience.

Moreover, an overly strong sympathy toward Trump is likely to increase the unpopularity of the Turkish government in a country that, weary of its leaders' illiberal tendencies, longs for a return to the rule of law. Recent opinion polls indeed indicate a fatigue with conservative values (such as a decline in women wearing the veil<sup>15</sup>, the rise of consumerist urban secularism<sup>16</sup> among the youth<sup>17</sup> distancing them from religious practice and even beliefs, and a rejection of the political instrumentalization of Islam<sup>18</sup>). Turkish public skepticism toward Donald Trump is also rooted in a long-standing undercurrent of anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism dating back to the Cold War. However, this does not translate into genuine sympathy for Russia, despite the relations established by Recep Tayyip Erdoğan with Vladimir Putin. In this sea of distrust toward the outside world, a recent survey shows that Europeans remain the most appealing<sup>19</sup> to respondents (particularly the youth), despite their rejection of Ankara's EU accession bid. Indeed, if Trump were able to broker peace in Ukraine, as he has promised, he might win the favor of some Turks, who have always been concerned with prolonged crises and conflicts at their borders. Nonetheless, fundamentally, Trump's return to power could prove very problematic for Turkey, and the close relationship between Trump and Erdoğan will not be enough to overcome their differences in their approach to the geopolitics of the Near East.

## **ERDOĞAN'S TURKEY AND TRUMP'S AMERICA: OPPOSITES ON THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT**

The first issue that comes to mind is, of course, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The crisis of October 7 quickly undermined a growing rapprochement between Turkey and Israel. Since then, although formal diplomatic relations have not been severed, the diplomatic ties between the two countries have effectively ceased, and their concrete connections have significantly deteriorated.

Domestically criticised by the opposition for maintaining an ambiguous relationship with the Israeli state<sup>20</sup> — combining harsh condemnations with the continuation of lucrative trade exchanges — Turkish leaders have sought to challenge the economic ties that had long served as a crutch for the deficient diplomacy between the two countries. In addition, Turkey has been highly active in international forums and networks to condemn

Israel's position. Moreover, Turkey has called on the international community to recognise the State of Palestine and has praised countries that have done so, such as Spain, Ireland, and Norway in May 2024, and even Armenia in June of the same year, despite the lack of official diplomatic relations with that country. Finally, Ankara has joined South Africa in filing a genocide complaint against Israel before the International Court of Justice.

A further deterioration in Turkish-American relations cannot be ruled out if new, dramatic initiatives in favor of Israel are taken by Donald Trump and his inner circle. In this regard, the appointment of Mike Huckabee as U.S. ambassador to Israel caught attention in Turkey<sup>21</sup>. It is noteworthy that this is the first time the position has not been given to a Jewish American; Huckabee, an evangelical Christian, is closely aligned with conservative Israeli circles that are staunchly opposed to the creation of a Palestinian state. During Trump's first term, Ankara had not hesitated to declare his recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel as «unacceptable,» but the Middle Eastern conflict was then much less sensitive and central. Now, Turkey feels directly involved in the latest developments in the region. In the fall of 2024, during his opening speech for the parliamentary session, Erdoğan even wondered whether his country might not become Israel's next target<sup>22</sup>. More realistically, the Turkish government fears that the ongoing Israeli airstrikes and offensives might destabilise its neighbors (particularly Syria, Iraq, and Iran) and do not trigger new migratory flows that would strengthen persistent discontent with it.

15 « La question du port du voile agite la classe politique », France Culture, 31 décembre 2022

16 SOYLU Ragıp, « La jeunesse turque de plus en plus laïque et moderne sous Erdoğan », Middle East Eye, March 21, 2019

17 "What has changed in youth in 10 years (2010-2018)?" Konda Interaktif, April 5-6, 2018

18 "Türkiye'de Kimlikler: Din, Ekonomi ve Siyaset, 2024 Değerler Araştırması », ASBV (Ankara Sosyal Bilimler Vakfı) 2024

19 CLANCY Laura, POUSSHTER Jacob & HERNANDEZ RAMONES Sofia, « How people in Turkey view international affairs », Peer Research Center, October 16, 2024

20 MARCOU Jean, "Turquie-Israël. La persistance d'une relation ambiguë", Orient XXI, March 11, 2024

21 "Trump picks pro-settlement Mike Huckabee as US ambassador to Israel", TRT, November 14, 2024

22 "Israel's next target will be Türkiye, Erdoğan says", Hürriyet Daily News, October 1, 2024



## THE SYRIAN CRISIS AND THE RELATED KURDISH ISSUE: A MAJOR CONCERN FOR TURKEY SINCE DONALD TRUMP'S ELECTION

However, the issue that is by far the most crucial for Turkey before Donald Trump's inauguration<sup>23</sup> is the Syrian crisis and the associated Kurdish question. While Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has expressed optimism about the policy the new American president could pursue, it is likely that he remembers the U.S. special forces' withdrawal from supporting the Kurdish YPG militias, a process that Trump initiated in 2019, and hopes that this will resume in 2025. However, it cannot be forgotten that this situation also led to a serious diplomatic incident between Ankara and Washington. While Erdoğan took advantage of the American disengagement to launch a military offensive against these same militias in Syria, Donald Trump, in a memorable letter<sup>24</sup>, urged him to exercise restraint (literally « not to play tough and not to be an idiot ») and, recalling the Brunson affair, did not hesitate to threaten to « wipe out the Turkish economy ».

In this case, it must also be noted that due to the reactivation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the strategic situation has evolved. In the new geopolitics of the Middle East, the Kurds, particularly the Syrian Kurds, have emerged as an important support point, even true allies, for the Americans. And even though they do not claim any particular ties with Israel, the Israeli state has now openly called on them to establish such links<sup>25</sup>. Additionally, the appointments<sup>26</sup> of Florida Senator Marco Rubio to head U.S. diplomacy and National Guard veteran Mike Waltz as national security adviser have further complicated the situation. Rubio had expressed concern in 2019 about Trump's abandonment of the Kurdish militias, and it was likely him who convinced Trump to dissuade Erdoğan from attempting to exploit the situation. Waltz, for his part, has repeatedly shown his strong support for the Kurdish militias in Syria, prompting the Turkish daily *Hürriyet* to react to his appointment, describing him as a « PKK-YPG fan<sup>27</sup> ». These elements collectively paint the scenario that not only the Turkish government but also the entire Turkish political class has feared since the beginning of the Syrian crisis: the emergence of a shared border stretching from the Qandil Mountains to the Idlib enclave, with the PKK becoming a recognized regional actor and relying on the strongholds it has established (Qandil, Sinjar, Rojava...) in the territory of the failed states of Iraq and Syria.

It is clear that the fall of the Ba'athist regime reshuffles the cards in a very favorable way for Turkey, as it contributes to isolating the Kurds. Of course, this depends entirely on how the new rulers of Damascus approach the Kurdish issue in the new Syria and what their relationship will be with the entities governing Rojava (SDF-PYD-YPG). Already, it is observed that while some factions (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham) have prioritised dialogue, others (the Syrian National Army, closely aligned with Ankara) have not hesitated to forcibly expel the Kurds from the Manbij district, fulfilling a long-standing Turkish ambition dating back to its first military intervention in Syria in 2016<sup>28</sup>. It is worth noting that as it reopens its embassy in Damascus and moves closer to the new Syrian leaders, the Turkish government has resumed the stance it adopted at that time, positioning itself as a hero in the fight against « all terrorists, » whether jihadists (ISIS) or Kurds (SDF-PYD-YPG)<sup>29</sup>, and increasingly reproaching the United States for maintaining its special forces in Rojava.

## THE FUTURE OF RECURRING STALLED ISSUES

Beyond the thorny Syrian issue, one might wonder what will become of several long-standing, unresolved issues. One of the primary concerns is Turkey's renewal of its combat air fleet. Recall that during Trump's presidency, Turkey was excluded from the F-35 production and acquisition program due to its purchase of Russian S-400 air defense missiles. This next-generation aircraft, which Turkey had ordered about 100 of, largely paid for, was intended to provide Turkey with air forces that aligned with its ambitions. Under President Biden, Ankara reluctantly strengthened its fleet with F-16s, managing to secure the possibility of acquiring 40 of these planes and modernising 40 others<sup>30</sup>, albeit after having to agree to Finland and Sweden's NATO membership. However, this compromise only partially meets Turkey's expectations, which has recently turned toward

23 « How Turkey is preparing for Trump 2.0 », *The New Arab*, November 14, 2024

24 "Read Trump's full letter to Turkey's Erdoğan: Don't a tough guy, don't be a fool!", *PBS News*, October 16, 2019

25 « Israel foreign minister calls for ties with Kurds and other minorities in the Middle East », *Middle East Eye*, November 11, 2024

26 BOURCIER Nicolas, « Ankara des prises de position passées de l'entourage de Donald Trump », *Le Monde*, November 16 2024

27 « Diş politikaya şahin atamalar : Trump'a PKK dostu güvenlik danışmanı », *Hürriyet*, November 13, 2024

28 MARCOU Jean, "L'armée turque exclue de la bataille de Mossoul », *OVIPO-IFEA*, October 18, 2016

29 DİNCEL Serdar, « Türkiye acting carefully to ensure Daesh-ISIS, PKK terrorists do not exploit post-regime Syria: Foreign Minister », *Anadolu Ajansı*, December 8, 2024

30 MARCOU Jean, « Les États-Unis acceptent la vente de nouveaux F-16 à la Turquie », *Blog de Sciences Po Grenoble*, February 7, 2024

the Eurofighter<sup>31</sup>, proposing to purchase about 40 units, while awaiting the ability to produce its own aircraft, the Kaan. This option is not finalised, as Germany has recently lifted the veto<sup>32</sup> it had imposed on the sale, but negotiations are still in their early stages. Meanwhile, the S-400s purchased by Turkey have never been activated, raising the question of how Trump will approach this issue, as he had blamed his predecessor for the F-35 debacle. In any case, the matter is far from resolved, with the two countries currently negotiating the repayment of Turkey's advance payment.

The second issue concerns Greek-Turkish relations. Although these relations are currently experiencing an exceptional phase of détente, the underlying problems (implementation of maritime law in the Aegean Sea, the status of the Dodecanese, the Cyprus issue, sharing gas resources, and delineating exclusive economic zones in the Eastern Mediterranean) remain unresolved. In this regard, it is worth remembering that in 2020, the final months of Trump's presidency were marked by heated exchanges between Turkey and the United States<sup>33</sup>, with U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo being accused by Ankara of losing his neutrality as a mediator due to his perceived partiality. Now, it is the future U.S. Secretary of State who worries the Turks<sup>34</sup>. Marco Rubio has previously made his pro-Greece stance clear, notably being one of the key proponents of the EastMed Act, which in 2021 lifted the U.S. arms embargo on Cyprus<sup>35</sup> that had been in place for decades. His nomination has caused alarm not only within the Turkish government but also among the broader political class, especially as Turkey and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus have hardened their stance, now insisting that the Cyprus issue can only be negotiated on the basis of recognizing two states. Devlet Bahçeli<sup>36</sup>, the leader of the far-right MHP, a member of the ruling coalition, and someone who often vocalizes what Erdoğan privately thinks, expressed his concern in November 2024. He declared in front of his parliamentary group that Trump would have to decide « whether he respects international law » or chooses « to ignore Turkey's sovereign rights ».

The final issue concerns the future of the Gülen movement in the United States. The recent death (on October 20, 2024)<sup>37</sup> of Fethullah Gülen, the immensely wealthy imam, once a supporter and then a sworn enemy of Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who voluntarily exiled himself to Pennsylvania in 1999, does not eliminate a potential source of conflict between the two countries, particularly between Erdoğan and Trump. After the AKP came to power, in addition to infiltrating the high ranks of the Turkish administration, which was hostile to the new government, the movement effectively neutralised the influence networks held by the

secular politico-military establishment in the United States. Though weakened by the repression it now faces in Turkey and some of its areas of influence (such as Africa), the movement retains its resources and nearly intact ability to act in the United States. It is highly likely that it will continue to leverage these, especially considering the positions taken by prominent figures within the movement, such as NBA player Enes Kanter Freedom<sup>38</sup>, who appears to have supported Donald Trump in the most recent election.

## HOPES FOR STABILISING THE UKRAINIAN CRISIS

Last but not least, the war in Ukraine appears to be the issue on which Erdoğan and Trump could converge most swiftly and effectively. Certainly, Turkish leaders immediately condemned the Russian « special operation » in Ukraine, calling it a violation of sovereignty and an affront to international law. However, they quickly announced their refusal to apply the sanctions imposed by the West on Russia. Nevertheless, the Ukrainian crisis has allowed Ankara not only to demonstrate its ability to maintain a precarious balancing act between East and West but also to showcase its considerable skills in mediation<sup>39</sup>.

Turkey has thus succeeded in securing Russia's agreement to resume Ukrainian grain exports under its auspices and that of the UN, through a secure corridor in the Black Sea. While this « grain initiative, » launched in July 2022, was denounced by Russia a year later, it continues in practice, as Moscow lacks sufficient operational capabilities in this maritime space to put an end to it.

31 « La Turquie voulait le F-35, elle va maintenant obtenir le chasseur Eurofighter Typhoon », *Turquie News*, October 16, 2024

32 « Germany took a step toward clearing Turkey's Eurofighter jet buy, Turkish official says », *Reuters*, November, 2024

33 SMITH Helena, « Mike Pompeo in Greece amid tensions with Turkey over gas reserves », *The Guardian*, September, 2020

34 KOKKINIDIS Tasos, « Turkey alarmed by Marco Rubio's Pro-Greece and Cyprus Stance », *Greek Reporter*, November 13, 2024

35 KAMPOURIS Nick, « US Congress Ends Decades-Old Arms Embargo on Cyprus », *Greek Reporter*, December, 2019

36 BOURCIER Nicolas, « Ankara s'inquiète des prises de position passées de l'entourage de Donald Trump », *Le Monde*, November 16, 2024

37 JEGO Marie & PIERRE Angèle, « Mort du prédicateur turc Fethullah Gülen, ancien allié du président Erdoğan devenu son pire ennemi », *Le Monde*, October 22, 2024

38 NISE Jake & RASKIN Alex, Enes Kanter Freedom declares support for Donald Trump despite previous bashing of his ally Elon Musk », *MailOnline*, November 15, 2024

39 MARCOU Jean, « L'été chaud de la diplomatie turque », *Blog de Sciences Po Grenoble*, September 13, 2022 (<https://blog.sciencespo-grenoble.fr/index.php/2022/09/13/lete-chaud-de-la-diplomatie-turque/>)



It should also be noted that from September 2022 onwards, Turkey facilitated several successful prisoner exchanges between the two warring parties, and in August 2024, it played a key role in what was described as the « largest prisoner exchange between the West and Russia since the end of the Cold War <sup>40</sup> » with those released passing through Ankara's airport. With these achievements, Erdoğan, who can engage with both parties, believes he possesses significant leverage to play a role in the resolution of the Ukrainian conflict, a process often discussed by the incoming American president.

In this regard, on November 20, 2024, Erdoğan expressed regret that President Biden had decided to authorise Ukrainians to use long-range missiles against Russia <sup>41</sup>. Peace in Ukraine would undoubtedly serve Turkey's economic interests, but it could also impose less favorable trade-offs. One of these could be the prospect of facing a resurgent, superpower Russia in the Black Sea, particularly as the ongoing conflict since 2022 has weakened Moscow in this maritime space, with Turkey having blocked the passage of its warships through the straits. Another challenge might be the need to silence its support for the Crimean Tatars. However, Erdoğan has demonstrated his ability to navigate such compromises, notably by moderating his stance on the Uyghur issue in recent years to win favor with China. Additionally, the fall of the Syrian regime has weakened Russia and removed the threat posed by a regime closely allied with Moscow on Turkey's southern border.

### AS A CONCLUSION ...

On November 12, 2024, while returning from Baku, where he had attended COP29, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan tempered his initial optimism about Donald Trump's return to power, acknowledging that some « messages » from the new presidential team were « concerning. » However, he also stated that it was too early to draw definitive conclusions, continuing to believe that the changes shaping international relations could be beneficial for Ankara. The shift that occurred in Syria at the beginning of December 2024, which ended Bashar al-Assad's regime, proved him right.

At this point, and in the context of Trump's potential return to power, Turkey's perspective can be summarised by two main sentiments. The first is cautiously optimistic, based on the observation that the regional situation cannot get worse. Thus, the current president's desire to end ongoing conflicts (even though his approach remains unclear) deserves consideration, especially

given that the recent developments in Syria provide Ankara with new advantages. However, the second sentiment is characterised by concern, stemming both from Donald Trump's well-known positions on the Middle East and from a series of negative signals, particularly the appointment of presidential advisors who, in the past, have had profound disagreements with Turkey or have shown outright hostility toward it.

**JEAN MARCOU**

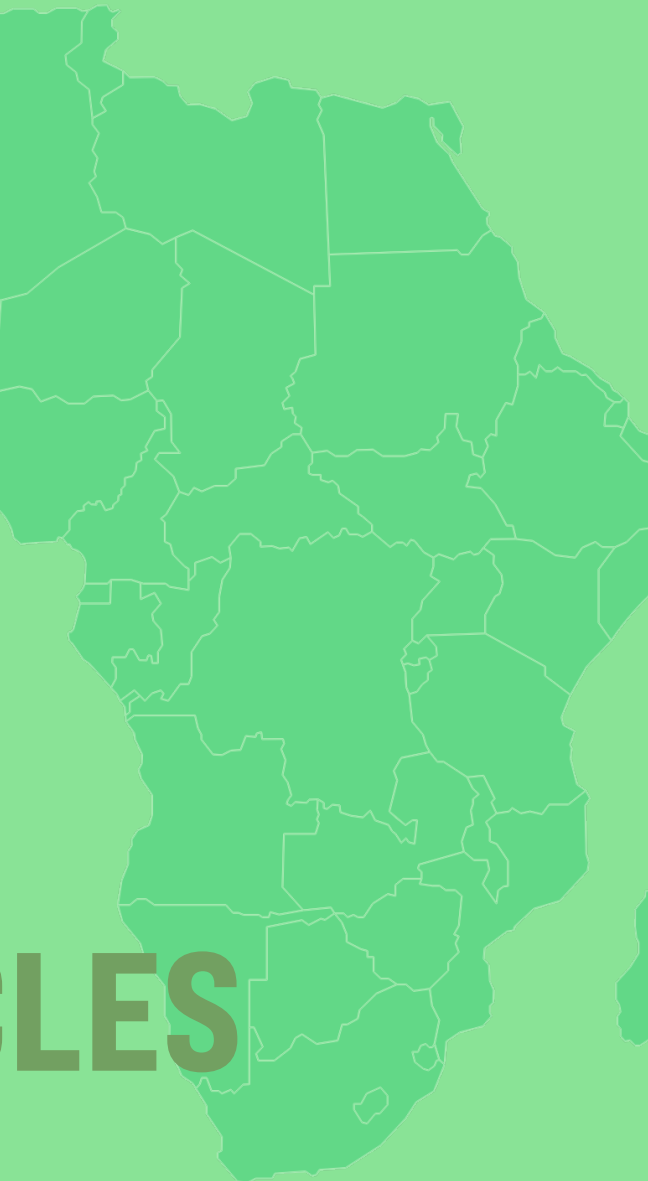


<sup>40</sup> « Erdoğan warns of 'new, bigger war' after US missile decision », Hürriyet Daily News, November 20, 2024 (<https://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/erdogan-warns-of-new-bigger-war-after-us-missile-decision-202826>)

<sup>41</sup> « Türkiye, US to hold key talks on 'new Syrie' », Hürriyet Daily News, December 11, 2024



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# PRESENCE AND INFLUENCE OF THE MIDDLE EASTERN POWERS IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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*Middle Eastern countries' diplomatic efforts in Africa are marked by strong personalization, the activation of religious networks, and proactive policies in areas such as armaments and security cooperation. A common feature of their approaches is the pursuit of greater influence within multilateral forums and an increasing role in mediation processes aimed at resolving conflicts across the continent. These diplomatic initiatives are especially focused on the Horn of Africa, West Africa, and the Sahel. While Saudi Arabia has historically been a significant player in Africa, countries like Turkey, Israel, Qatar, the UAE, and Iran are now making increasingly visible and active efforts to establish a stronger presence on the continent.*

Long marked by the memory and painful legacy of the Eastern slave trade<sup>1</sup>, relations between the African continent and the Middle Eastern powers have been renewed since the turn of the 2000s. Most of the states in the region have sought to expand their presence and influence in Africa.

The policies of Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Iran have a number of common features such as :

- the strong personalization of diplomatic relations, through the investment of the highest authorities themselves ;
- seeking the support of African states in multilateral, UN or regional bodies ;
- a geographical tropism for the Horn of Africa ;
- the search for an expansion and diversification of bilateral relations towards other regions of the continent, in particular the Sahel and West Africa ;
- a growing engagement in conflict mediation across certain African conflicts ;
- the development of defence and security partnerships in the areas of armaments, military assistance and training, including counter-terrorism ;
- the use of influence strategies through funding social, cultural, or religious programs, often through non-state subcontractors.

Beyond these salient features, the African policy of each of the six Middle Eastern powers considered here has its own specificities, which this article aims to highlight.

## TURKEY

The Ottoman Empire has long-established relations with sub-Saharan Africa, notably through its settlements that later became Eritrea, Somalia and Sudan.

After the advent of the Turkish Republic in 1923 and during the Cold War, Turkey tended to align its African foreign policy with that of the United States, without paying particular attention to the continent. It was not until the late 1990s that Ankara showed a real interest in sub-Saharan Africa, which has since grown steadily. When Turkey's EU membership application was rejected in 1997, the country began to view the potential opportunities in Africa in a new light.

In 1998, the Turkish authorities introduced an "Action Plan for an opening to Africa". However, it was with the rise to power of the Justice and Development Party (AKP) under Recep Tayyip Erdogan in 2002 that an ambitious policy of cooperation with African countries was established.

In 2005, the Turkish government organized a "Year of Africa"<sup>2</sup> and Turkey became an observer member of the African Union. In 2008, the First Africa-Turkey Summit was held under the so-called "Strategic Partnership with the African Union". Turkey has also established relations with ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States) and IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development). However, Ankara prioritizes bilateral relations, offering its African partners a 'third way' based on a new form of non-alignment, in contrast to both Western powers and countries like China,

<sup>1</sup> Between the 16th and 19th centuries, several million Africans were deported to the Middle East and India by Arab slavers.

<sup>2</sup> Turkish-African Relations / Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Turkey (mfa.gov.tr)

India, and Russia<sup>3</sup>. Another challenge for Turkey is containing the influence of Sunni Muslim countries it perceives as rivals, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. With more than 40 visits (sometimes two per year), President Erdogan is the non-African leader who has visited the largest number of states on the continent. Seeking to exploit the historical, cultural and religious proximity of Turkey to the continent, in 2021, he described Africans as brothers and sisters of the Turkish people. This interest in Africa has been reflected by the increase in the number of Turkish embassies on the continent, from 10 in 2008 to 37 in 2021, while there are 37 African diplomatic representations in Ankara.

Through the Diyanet, its administration devoted to religious affairs, Turkey has financed the construction or restoration of mosques in Mali and Niger, but also in African states with a majority of non-muslim population such as Ghana. In the 2010s, cooperation between Turkey and Africa, which until now has been mainly focused on economic and humanitarian projects (especially in the construction and air traffic thanks to the very dynamic strategy of Turkish Airlines which provides an increasing number of internal and external routes with Africa), has taken a more political and safe dimension. The sales of Turkish weapons in Africa have thus particularly developed. Although Turkey's share of the African arms market appears insignificant, with only 0.5%, it is well behind Russia, China, the US and France, its growth in arms exports is the largest on the continent. The year 2020-2021 is significant in this respect with an increase of 455%<sup>4</sup>. The particularly competitive price, as well as the speed of delivery and ease of use explain the attractiveness of the TB2 Bayraktar drones in African countries. Among the States that have acquired it are Togo, Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso, Ethiopia and Djibouti.

Turkey also sells armoured vehicles, electro-optical sensor systems and surveillance systems to its African partners<sup>5</sup>. Turkish military equipment transactions with African countries are often accompanied by technology transfers and joint industrial development proposals, based on Turkey's no-strings-attached policy, which imposes no conditions on the use of the equipment, unlike the US or France. In addition to the supply of arms, Turkey has 19 military attachés deployed in Africa and has defence agreements with 30 African states<sup>6</sup> to strengthen bilateral military and technical cooperation. These agreements often involve training local armed forces, with a focus on counterterrorism and crime prevention. The country has provided \$5 million in assistance to the G5-Sahel joint force.

Turkey has been accused by Saudi Arabia and the UAE of supporting local actors close to the Muslim Brotherhood, such as Qatar.

In Libya, Turkey, along with Qatar, supported Fayeze el-Sarraj's regime in 2020 against General Khalifa Haftar's offensive. Turkey also has a military base in Somalia (since 2017), the TURKSOM camp<sup>7</sup>, which is the country's largest infrastructure abroad. Sudan is also of particular interest to Turkey, which failed to complete the Suakin port project after the overthrow of its key partner, Omar al-Bashir<sup>8</sup>. However, Turkey may seek to continue its efforts to expand its presence on the Red Sea by aligning with al-Burhan, with whom it appears to have closer ties than with his rival, General Hemetti, who is supported by the UAE and the Wagner group. Turkey, along with its NATO allies<sup>9</sup>, has long been involved in maritime security around the Horn of Africa. Since 2009, it has been participating in the Combined Task Force 151 off the Somali coast to combat piracy and secure maritime trade routes to the Red Sea.

## ISRAEL

The Jewish state's relations with the African continent have always oscillated between friction and normalization. The immediate post-war period of the Second World War was marked by a short period of cordial relations between some countries on the African continent and Israel, gradually recognized by several states, the first of which was Ghana on the eve of its independence. In the early 1970s, Israel had diplomatic relations with 33 countries on the continent. However, friction with African states increased after the 1967 Six-Day War, which resulted in the occupation of the Sinai Peninsula, and even more so with the Arab-Israeli Yom Kippur War in 1973. Most African states then decided to break off diplomatic ties with Israel, the only countries that maintained official relations being Malawi, Lesotho and Swaziland. The 1970s saw growing solidarity across Africa with Palestine<sup>10</sup>, particularly through the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the precursor to the African Union (AU).

<sup>3</sup> Donelli Federico (2021), Can Turkey-African Relations Withstand Ankara's Currency Crisis ?

<sup>4</sup> Yaşar, Nebahat Tanrıverdi (2022), Unpacking Turkey's Security Footprint in Africa, SWP 2022/C 42

<sup>5</sup> Hairsine, Kate, and Burak Ünveren (2022), Turkey Deepens Its Defense Diplomacy in Africa

<sup>6</sup> Aksoy, Hürcan Aslı et al. (2022), Visualizing Turkey's Activism in Africa, Centre for Applied Turkey Studies

<sup>7</sup> Turkey sets up largest overseas army base in Somalia | News | Al Jazeera

<sup>8</sup> Alhassan, Abubakar (2021). Turkey's Ambitious Plans for Africa. Geopolitical Futures

<sup>9</sup> Turkey's membership in NATO helps to enhance its attractiveness to African states, as it is seen as a guarantee of high standards for training and weapons provided by Ankara.

<sup>10</sup> Onana Jean-Baptiste (2000), « L'Afrique, les Palestiniens et Israël : système à double entente », Outre-Terre, (no 14), p. 393-401.



The OAU chose to sever all diplomatic ties with Israel in solidarity with Egypt, marking one of the few unified foreign policy decisions made by African states. In 2002, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) was granted observer status as a non-member of the African Union (AU).

In the 1990s, relations between Israel and certain African countries improved slightly, as these countries sought to strengthen cooperation. Zaire (1982) and Cameroon (1986)<sup>11</sup> were the first countries to renew relations with the Hebrew state. The Oslo Accords have led most countries on the African continent to re-engage diplomatically with Israel, now recognized by 46 of the 54 countries on the continent.

However, the real rapprochement between Israel and some African countries began with Benjamin Netanyahu's rise to power in 1999 and strengthened further when he returned to office in 2009. During his successive terms (1996-1999 ; 2009-2021 ; 2022-...), particularly the last two, the Israeli Prime Minister has personally invested much in what he called a «return to Africa». After participating in Liberia in 2017 at the 51st ECOWAS Summit, B. Netanyahu even mentioned considering “closing some diplomatic representations [...] abroad to open new ones in Africa”, demonstrating its commitment to strengthening ties with the continent. Netanyahu's strategy also relies on developing personal ties with the leaders of certain states that have maintained relations with Israel since the 1970s, or with others who once supported the PLO. In West Africa, Ghana, Togo and the Ivory Coast are particularly close partners. In East Africa, as demonstrated by Netanyahu's 2016 tour, English-speaking countries with Christian majorities—such as Kenya, Rwanda, Ethiopia, and Uganda—are considered privileged partners. Indeed, Israel also directs its foreign policy towards the growing number of Christian and evangelical communities in Africa<sup>12</sup>.

Rwanda developed close relations with Israel in the wake of the 1994 genocide, although an Israeli embassy was only opened in the country in 2019. Israel was also one of the first countries to recognize South Sudan's independence. Since 1967, Israel had maintained strained relations with Sudan, which had supported Egypt in the Six-Day War and remained hostile until Netanyahu met with General Al Burhan in 2020. In the civil field, the work of MASHAV, the Israeli agency for development cooperation, focuses mainly on capacity building in the areas of agriculture, water and health. While Israel is not directly involved in military operations on the African continent, arms trade – especially in the field of light weapons, missiles, drones and retrofitting of Soviet aircraft and tanks – remains a major element in its security cooperation with Africa.

Key partners include Senegal, Nigeria, Cameroon and Ethiopia.

Israel's military sales to the continent are mostly made by private Israeli companies but they are promoted and coordinated by the Department of International Defence Cooperation (SIBAT) of the Ministry of Defense. Israeli intelligence cooperation in Africa plays a key role, involving Mossad services and increasingly shifting towards privatization and outsourcing, particularly in cybersecurity. Israel has developed close cooperation in this area with Uganda and Ethiopia. Additionally, private military companies, often led by former Israeli soldiers and specializing in security equipment manufacturing or event security services, have recently proliferated to assist in combating terrorism in the Horn of Africa and West Africa. Moreover, the Israeli armed forces have been heavily involved in training the forces of some African states. Historically, the most significant example is that of Cameroon, whose president Paul Biya called on Tel-Aviv's support for the formation of the famous «Rapid Intervention Battalion» (BIR), inspired by the IDF model and whose format has been emulated in many African armies: this elite unit of the Cameroonian army was created in 1999 by Abraham Avi Sivan, a former commander of several units of the Israeli army.

For several decades, Israel has worked to facilitate the immigration of African Jews, particularly the Falashas from Ethiopia. However, in the 1990s, it also developed a policy to limit the influx of non-Jewish African refugees, primarily from Sudan and the Horn of Africa, as their numbers grew. In 2012, the Knesset amended the 1954 Infiltration Prevention Act allowing the expulsion of Palestinians, and to allow for the detention of Eritreans and Sudanese who have arrived illegally in Israel for three years from their arrival. However, this amendment was later revised to limit detention to 20 months following a Supreme Court decision. Besides, in recent years, Israel has sought political agreements with Rwanda and Uganda to repatriate African refugees to both countries, though these efforts were abandoned following international public condemnation.

More generally, over the years, large numbers of African workers have replaced Palestinians in low-skilled jobs in agriculture, construction and catering. Israel has also faced setbacks in its diplomacy with Africa, notably the cancellation of the 2017 Israeli-African summit in Lomé and the failed attempt to join the African Union as an observer member, a move challenged by

<sup>11</sup> Bishku, Michael B (2021), «Israel and the Francophone Central African States of the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Cameroon: The Development of Long-Term Relationships with Autocrats.» *The Maghreb Review*, vol. 46 no. 1, p. 3-22. Project MUSE

<sup>12</sup> The World Christian Database estimates that Pentecostals represent 12% of the African population, or about 177 million out of 400 million Christians.

disagreements among AU member states: while two-thirds of the countries on the continent voted in favor of this status, Israel's rejection as an observer member of the AU was primarily due to Algeria and South Africa. It is interesting to note in this regard that South Africa has always taken a stand against the Jewish state in the political sphere since the end of the apartheid regime, with which Israel had maintained relations of discord<sup>13</sup>. Since the ANC came to power, South Africa has been a strong supporter of the Palestinian cause, as evidenced by its complaint against Israel before the International Court of Justice.

A number of countries traditionally do not recognize Israel: Algeria, Tunisia, Mali, Niger, Mauritania, Djibouti, Somalia, the Comoros. When the UNGA voted on resolution ES-10/L22 in 2017, condemning any action to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, only Togo took a stand against the resolution, thus expressing its full support for Israel. In 2018, only seven countries on the continent (Rwanda, South Sudan, Eritrea, Malawi, Liberia, Lesotho and Cape Verde) voted in favour of the US resolution condemning Hamas as a terrorist group. Similarly, the majority of sub-Saharan African states reacted late and cautiously following the October 7, 2023 attacks by Hamas<sup>14</sup>. Israel's traditional allies strongly condemned the attacks (Kenya, DRC, Togo, Rwanda, Uganda, and Cameroon), while many other countries adopted a neutral stance, calling for de-escalation, and others refrained from commenting. Many have aligned themselves with the position of the African Union, which has not called Hamas' action terrorist but has insisted on a two-state solution to the conflict.

## SAUDI ARABIA

Since the 1970s, and particularly after the 1979 Iranian revolution, Saudi Arabia's diplomatic network has been notably dense in the Muslim-majority countries of West and East Africa. Historically focused on containing the expansion of Shiism in Africa, Saudi Arabia has, in recent years, also been increasingly concerned with countering the growing influence of its Qatari rival.

Saudi Arabia maintains close ties with the African Muslim countries, millions of whose citizens make annual pilgrimages to the holy sites of Islam. Issuing visas for pilgrims has become a powerful tool of foreign policy on the continent. Saudi Arabia also invests in the education of African Muslim scholars by providing them with scholarships to study at the kingdom's leading universities (Islamic University of Medinah, Umm Al-Qura University and Imam Muhammad Ibn Saud Islamic University). Many African Ulema and Imams have been trained in a Wahhabi approach to Islam for more than three decades.

Upon their return, many have held prominent positions, often in mosques built with funds from Riyadh or more widely within state religious institutions. As such, they wield considerable influence in their respective states, both politically and socially.

The loans or grants made by the Saudi Development Fund (SDF) have also benefited Africa, which received an average of 50% of the funds disbursed, for projects mainly focused on road, water, health and school infrastructure. The main beneficiaries of this assistance were Egypt, Djibouti, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somalia, Gabon, Senegal and Mauritania. The Saudi organization “International Islamic Relief Organization” (IIRO), one of the first Islamic charities, has also been very active in Africa.

Multilateral frameworks, including functional ones, have also been used as vectors of influence for Saudi Arabia on the African continent. This is particularly evident with the Islamic Development Bank (IDB) based in Jeddah and the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), which now includes six African members: Algeria, Libya, Nigeria, Congo, Gabon, and Equatorial Guinea<sup>15</sup>. More recently, Saudi Arabia has been increasingly involved in mediating and negotiating the resolution of African conflicts. The signing of the Jeddah peace agreement between Eritrea and Ethiopia in 2018 was a major step forward in its African policy. After more than 20 years of conflict, the signing of this agreement by the leaders of both countries is seen as a great success for Saudi Arabia. The Wahhabi kingdom, like Qatar, has also worked to normalize relations between Djibouti and Eritrea in their conflict over the SAR-Doumeira border. In Libya, Saudi Arabia has essentially confined itself to political support for General Khalifa Haftar, without providing him with equipment unlike the UAE. It also committed to funding the G5 Sahel, which was headquartered in Mauritania, one of Saudi Arabia's main partners in Africa, particularly since its deteriorating relations with Qatar. In 2019, following the protests that ousted Omar El-Bashir, Saudi Arabia focused its efforts on Sudan, in collaboration with its UAE ally. In 2023, Saudi Arabia hosted talks to bring together Generals Al Burhan and Hemmeti. In the area of security and defense, Saudi Arabia has remained relatively uninfluential on the African continent. However, it has made significant efforts to secure military bases in the Horn of Africa. In 2017, Saudi Arabia negotiated an agreement with Djibouti to

<sup>13</sup> Lissoni, Arianna (2011), “Africa's ‘Little Israel’: Bophuthatswana's Not-So-Secret Ties With Israel.” *South African Review of Sociology*, 79-93.

<sup>14</sup> Le Gouriellec Sonia (2023), Israël-Hamas : les pays d'Afrique subsaharienne dans la guerre de Soukhot | *Le Grand Continent*

<sup>15</sup> Angola left the organization in 2023

establish a military base, which is particularly important for its operations in the context of the war in Yemen. Strategically located near the Babel-Mandeb Strait, at the entrance to the Red Sea, this military base has yet to be constructed. While Saudi Arabia's allies in the war against the Yemeni Houthis, the UAE, were given access to the Eritrean port of Assab, which served as a key base for their operations before the Emirati withdrawal, Saudi Arabia's African ambitions were more clearly demonstrated at the first Saudi-Africa summit in 2023.

## QATAR

Qatar's influence in Africa is relatively recent. For a long time, the NGO Qatar Charity remained the main symbol of Qatari presence in many African countries. Historically, Qatar's main partners in sub-Saharan Africa were Mauritania and Sudan, both of which established diplomatic relations when Qatar gained sovereignty in 1971. Qatar also hosts a significant number of nationals from these countries, some of whom hold positions in the emirate's administration in areas such as police and justice. However, the fall of Omar El Béchir in 2019 distanced Sudan from Qatar, particularly halting Qatari projects aimed at rehabilitating the port of Suakin, a project that would have allowed Turkey, a close ally of Qatar, to establish a military base there, much to Egypt's displeasure.

Between 2000 and 2020, Qatar opened embassies in various African countries, and many African embassies were also established in Qatar. Among the African nations that developed special ties with Qatar during this period are Nigeria and South Africa, with agreements particularly in the gas energy sector.

Qatar's increasing influence on the continent is also due to its ideological-religious diplomacy, which has often supported political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood, serving as a counterbalance to Saudi Wahhabism. During the embargo imposed on Qatar from 2017 to 2021, the country focused on asserting itself against its regional rivals, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, both of whom had urged African countries to sever diplomatic ties with Doha. When the crisis erupted, countries like Mauritania, Gabon, Djibouti, the Comoros, Senegal, Chad, and Niger recalled their ambassadors from Qatar or cut off relations. This situation made Qatar realize that the African continent could no longer be ignored. However, Qatar's approach was not to demand exclusive relations. Many West African countries, such as Mali, Nigeria, Burkina Faso, Côte d'Ivoire, Ghana, Guinea, and Senegal,

chose to remain neutral, presenting an opportunity for Qatar to form new alliances. In 2017, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani visited six of these West African countries to express his appreciation for their neutrality or for quickly re-establishing relations with Doha. On the other hand, some African nations, including the Comoros, Eritrea, Mauritania, and Mauritius, clearly sided with Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

However, the stakes are particularly high for Qatar in the Horn of Africa. Doha, which once mediated in the border conflict between Djibouti and Eritrea, withdrew its peacekeeping troops from the border region in 2010 after the two countries chose to align with Saudi Arabia. Following this, the Eritrean army took control of the area, while Saudi diplomacy worked to help normalize relations between Djibouti and Eritrea (see above). The blockade imposed on Qatar has also forced the country to seek new sources of supply, shifting its disputes with the UAE and Saudi Arabia to Somali territory. In its pursuit of strategic points for its operations in Yemen, the UAE reached an agreement in February 2017 with Somaliland to establish a naval base in Berbera, a deal they were unable to secure in Djibouti. Somaliland is staunchly pro-Abu Dhabi, and Puntland also called on the UAE to maintain its presence in its semi-autonomous region. Although Somalia officially remained neutral during the Gulf crisis, it suspended its military cooperation with Abu Dhabi, denouncing what it saw as a violation of its sovereignty. As the UAE was accused of supporting the division of Somalia, Qatar responded by supporting the country's unity and stability, as Somalia appeared to be the only state in the region maintaining a pro-Qatari stance amid the UAE-Saudi alliance. Ethiopia, meanwhile, sought to balance its relations between the two rival blocs.

Over the years, Qatar has also become a key mediator in various African political crises. In addition to its involvement in the Djibouti-Eritrea conflict, Qatar has been actively engaged since 2008 in the mediation of the Darfur conflict in Sudan. Negotiations between the Sudanese government and the main rebel group, the Justice and Equity Movement (JEM), were held in Doha, leading to a «memorandum of understanding.» Qatar's involvement positioned it as a significant and trusted actor in the peace process.

Furthermore, Doha played a crucial role as a mediator in Chad's internal political-military conflict, which resulted in an agreement between the Military Transition Committee (CMT), led by Mahamat Idriss Deby, and various rebel factions, alongside the establishment of a National Dialogue. In other areas, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have often supported opposing sides. In Libya, for example, Qatar was actively involved in the

military campaign to overthrow Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. Qatar, along with Turkey, also supported the Government of National Unity led by Fayeze Al Sarraj, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE backed Marshal Haftar's forces.

Qatar is now seeking to expand its role as a mediator in the Sahel region. For a long time, Algeria and Mali maintained close ties, but in 2023, they experienced deep disagreements, particularly regarding the implementation of the 2015 Algiers Agreement for Peace and Reconciliation in Mali, as well as the resurgence of clashes between Bamako and separatist groups in the north of the country. As Algeria's ally, Doha proposed to mediate the reconciliation process between Mali and Algeria. Qatar also offered to strengthen bilateral relations with Mali.

Additionally, Qatar's news channel, Al Jazeera, has a significantly broader reach across the African continent compared to other regional broadcasters like Sky News Arabia (funded by Abu Dhabi) and Al Arabiya (backed by Riyadh). Through Al Jazeera, Qatar has the ability to directly engage with African civil societies, which are playing an increasingly influential role in the continent's political landscape.

## THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has longstanding ties with the African continent. However, it was only about 15 years ago that a clear UAE strategy for Africa began to take shape. Between 2010 and 2020, nine new UAE embassies were opened across Africa. Initially driven by Dubai and focusing on economic priorities such as infrastructure and agriculture, the UAE's African policy was redefined as part of Abu Dhabi's foreign policy adjustments following the 2011 Arab Spring. Since then, the UAE's policy has also focused on political and military matters.

During the crisis with Qatar between 2017 and 2021, the UAE conditioned its investments and development aid in Africa on the explicit support of African states for its strategic positions. The lack of approval or neutrality was viewed as a tacit endorsement of the Qatari stance.

The UAE's African policy also reflects the broader international strategy of Mohammed bin Zayed, with a central focus on combating political Islam. Tensions between Abu Dhabi's ruling family and the local Al Islah movement, a branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, have shaped this policy. As a result, Abu Dhabi has supported African partners who oppose political Islam, particularly those challenging groups associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

This has led to strong ties with the armed forces of such countries. For instance, Abu Dhabi has become a key ally of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi and played a significant role in Sudan, where it influenced President Omar al-Bashir's shift from Iran to the Gulf monarchies. After al-Bashir's fall in 2019, the UAE immediately provided support to the Transitional Military Council (TMC), which included Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, who had overseen Sudan's involvement in Yemen, and Mohammed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemetti, whose paramilitary "Rapid Support Forces" (RSF) had also been deployed in Yemen. Since the outbreak of war between the two leaders, the UAE seems to have shifted its support more toward General Hemetti.

In addition to securing its supply routes via the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, establishing anchorages for military deployment, and organizing its operations against Houthi forces in Yemen since 2015, Abu Dhabi has sought to strengthen its partnerships with countries in the Horn of Africa, particularly Eritrea and Somaliland. The UAE's strategy aims to ensure its presence along the Red Sea coasts and throughout the Horn. Leveraging the Emirati giant DP World, the UAE is involved in building ports and naval bases in the region. In response to Djibouti's reluctance to meet its demands, Abu Dhabi turned to Eritrea, securing a 30-year concession for the port of Assab and the construction of a landing strip. The UAE also gained access and construction rights in Somaliland at the Berbera port, with an Emirati diplomatic representative appointed to Hargeisa. This rapprochement with Somaliland has significantly strained relations with Somalia. In 2018, Somalia accused Abu Dhabi of illegally transferring funds to Somaliland's security forces, and in 2021, it alleged the UAE orchestrated a disinformation campaign to undermine the Somali electoral process. In response, the UAE suspended its diplomatic relations and halted financial contributions to Somalia's development.

Beyond its traditional influence in the Horn of Africa, the UAE is also working to position itself as a key mediator in African conflicts. For example, it played a role in the peace process between Ethiopia and Eritrea. Since January 2021, Abu Dhabi has been involved in mediating the dispute between Egypt, Ethiopia, and Sudan over the Nile waters. In Libya, the UAE has been conducting air operations alongside Egypt since 2014 against Islamist groups allegedly supported by Qatar. Later, it provided discreet logistical and air support to Field Marshal Haftar's forces. The UAE has also increasingly positioned itself in West Africa, such as supporting Guinea's President Alpha Condé before his ousting by a military junta. Its involvement is particularly evident in the Sahel region, especially in Mauritania and Chad.



Mauritania, like Sudan, deployed troops to Yemen during the early stages of the war and aligned itself with the Riyadh-Abu Dhabi axis during the 2017 Qatar boycott. Nouakchott had previously accused Doha of funding terrorist groups in Mali as early as 2013. The close ties between the UAE and Mauritania were reaffirmed after General Mohamed Ould Ghazouani came to power.

In addition, Abu Dhabi financed the construction of a military base, Camp Mohammed Bin Zayed, near the Mauritanian capital. This facility houses the Mauritanian staff school and the G5 Sahel Defence College. The UAE quickly expressed its support for the establishment of the G5 Sahel and its joint force, committing to finance it with a contribution of 30 million dollars in 2018. This backing for the G5 Sahel aligns with the Emirati strategy to combat Islamist movements. The UAE also maintains a privileged relationship with Chad, despite the country's ambiguities in the dispute with Qatar. The UAE was swift in supporting the Transitional Military Council, led by Mahamat Idriss Deby, the son of the late President Marshal Idriss Déby, who ascended to power in violation of constitutional provisions. This stance toward Chad fits into the broader context of Emirati involvement in Sudan and Libya. Furthermore, the UAE is now working to strengthen ties with the military elites currently in power in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso.

## IRAN

In the 20th century, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi established a distinct African policy for Iran, including nuclear cooperation with South Africa and the development of an Iranian maritime presence in the Indian Ocean and along the East African coast. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iran has sought to export its revolutionary ideology to Africa, primarily based on anti-imperialist rhetoric, denouncing both US dominance and the existence of Israel. As early as the 1980s, Tehran opened embassies across the continent, particularly to limit the influence of Iraq, with which it was in conflict from 1980 to 1988. More broadly, Iran has been highly active in countering the influence of rival Middle Eastern powers in the Horn of Africa, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia. It has established ties in the region through the Pasdaran (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps). Despite this, Iran's presence has remained relatively modest. President Hashemi Rafsanjani, who led the country from 1989 to 1997, played a key role in strengthening relations with Africa, notably through a rapprochement with Sudan under Omar al-Bashir, who was isolated due to an international embargo.

Closer ties were also established with countries such as Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and the Comoros in East Africa; Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, Niger, and Cameroon in West Africa; and post-apartheid Zimbabwe and South Africa in Southern Africa. During Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency from 2005 to 2013, Iranian organizations like the Organization for Islamic Culture and Relations (ICRO) were reportedly used as fronts for the covert activities of the Al-Quds Force. However, a diplomatic disengagement was observed under President Hassan Rouhani. Iranian diplomacy has often supported educational institutions, cultural centers, humanitarian organizations, and mosque construction across the continent. Iran has also worked to mobilize African states in multilateral forums, seeking to gain votes in its favor at the UN, particularly on resolutions related to its nuclear program. Another key objective has been to counter Saudi and Israeli influence in Africa.

However, the large predominance of Sunni Islam and the limited presence of Shiism on the African continent have restricted Iranian influence. Nigeria, a priority country for Iranian diplomacy, is a notable exception due to its sizable Shiite community, estimated at around 12% of the country's Muslim population. This percentage has grown significantly since the 1980s, when Shiism had a relatively marginal presence. Iran has also leveraged its African policy through networks of Lebanese Shiite communities, some of which are close to Hezbollah, notably in Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire. While the model of the Islamic Revolution may have attracted some Africans, conversions to Shiism have generally been limited and, in some cases, provoked clashes with traditional Sunni groups, particularly in Nigeria and Cameroon. Despite these tensions, Cameroon remains a partner of Iran, which provides security assistance programs. Iran has also been accused of helping circumvent U.S. sanctions by transferring oil products.

Under President Raisi, Iran appears determined to continue expanding its presence and influence on the African continent. The export of its drones to the African market presents another opportunity for Iran, and it has signed a drone agreement with Ethiopia. Iran has also strengthened its ties with the Sahel countries, where military regimes took power in Mali in 2020, Burkina Faso in 2022, and Niger in 2023. These regimes have embraced nationalist rhetoric and denounced Western imperialism. Iran's presence is particularly prominent in Mali, where relations have been bolstered both bilaterally and through civil society engagement. The military regime in Burkina Faso announced the reopening of its embassy in Tehran after over twenty years of closure, and a joint Burkina Faso-Iran cooperation commission was established. Iran has also expressed willingness to cooperate with Niger. In this region, synergies may develop

between Russian forces ( increasingly present since December 2021 ) and Iran, allies on other international fronts, notably in Ukraine and the Levant. President Raisi himself praised the resistance of African countries to colonialism and terrorism, while the Iranian Foreign Minister emphasized the injustice of international sanctions against the Sahelian countries, drawing a barely veiled parallel with the sanctions imposed on Iran.

## CONCLUSION

In recent years, Africa has become the scene of rivalry between Middle Eastern countries, often driven by their respective interpretations of Islam, a powerful influence on a continent where Islam is rapidly growing. These Middle Eastern actors are sometimes motivated by geostrategic interests or by the desire to gain support in the context of conflicts that either oppose them or tear them apart. The Horn of Africa, geographically close to the Gulf, has emerged as the primary region in Africa to which these countries direct their foreign policies. Securing the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and the corridor leading to the Suez Canal across the Red Sea is a critical concern for them. However, these countries have also sought to expand their areas of influence to other parts of the continent.

While these Middle Eastern powers often push for explicit support from African states, they frequently encounter resistance. Most African countries are hesitant to take sides, demonstrating a preference for maintaining their independence in geopolitical matters. While geopolitical alliances have occasionally formed, it appears that African states remain determined to retain control over the geopolitical dynamics of their own continent.

*NIAGALÉ BAGAYOKO*

# SUDAN'S WAR: THE NARROW PATH TO PEACE

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*The chaos in Sudan keeps getting worse and threatens the entire region, but it does not receive the coverage it deserves. Eclipsed by the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza, the war between the national army, the Sudan Armed Forces (SAF), and the Rapid Support Forces (RSF), a paramilitary unit that grew out of the Janjaweed militias has become increasingly brutal and uncontrollable. The war started in the capital city of Khartoum and has spread to fourteen of Sudan's eighteen states, covering an area nearly three times the size of France. A fierce media war accompanies the fighting on the ground. Many people question the causes of this war. The answer may lie in the history of kleptocratic military rule and the recently shattered revolution. Following the fall of Omar Hassan al-Bashir's regime in 2019, Abdelfattah Al-Burhan, Chairman of the Transitional Sovereignty Council and Commander-in-Chief of the SAF, and Mohamed Hamadan Dagalo, known as « Hemedti, » chief of the RSF militia, allied to seize power, undermining the transition to democracy. Now turned enemies, they provide different narratives to justify their war. Al-Burhan claims to be fighting a "dignity war," while Hemedti says he fights to restore democracy—the same values they have wrecked.*

*Both the SAF and the RSF rely on external support for weapons, money, and advisors, which further inflames the conflict. Consequently, Sudan's war may last a long time due to its complexity, invisibility to the international community, and foreign interference.*

## A COMPLEX WAR

Sudan's war isn't a simple two-sided affair between the SAF and RSF. It's a complicated regional, ethnic, and political internal power struggle intertwined with international ramifications. Additionally, the vast geographical extent of the conflict enables the proliferation of all sorts of criminal activities. Sudan covers a large area of 1,861,484 square kilometers. It shares long and porous borders with Egypt, Chad, Libya, the Central African Republic, Ethiopia, Eritrea, and South Sudan. Moreover, the ambiguous roles of the U.S. administration and its allies in the Gulf and Africa, along with the inaction of the UN, further complicate the war.

Since Sudan's independence in 1956, the military has dominated politics, with only ten years governed by civilian elected governments<sup>1</sup>. The army's indoctrination began under Colonel Jaafar Mohamed Nimeiri<sup>2</sup>, who seized power in 1969 and continued under General Omar Hassan al-Bashir<sup>3</sup>, who took power in 1989. This became more evident when al-Bashir turned the SAF into an instrument of his Islamic regime. Moreover, military businesses gave the SAF the upper hand over the country's resources, mostly utilized for the regime's benefit. Throughout Sudan's history, both military and civilian governments have employed regional or tribal paramilitary militias to fight in southern

and western Sudan. However, al-Bashir was the first to institutionalize ethnically based militias when he transformed the Janjaweed in 2013, officially recognizing it as a military force through the Rapid Support Forces Act of 2017. The RSF was attached to the presidency, as required by Hemedti to evade any control by the SAF. This move has sown problematic seeds for the RSF's integration into the SAF, which is a key element of their hostilities today.

Sudan has an awful record of impunity. Previously wanted persons by the ICC (including former President al-Bashir) have never been held accountable for their crimes in Darfur. The Sudanese transitional authority jailed them in 2019, but it failed to hand them over to the ICC. Both Al-Burhan and Hemedti fear prosecution for their past and ongoing war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. Losing power means losing immunity, unless a comfortable deal is worked out for them.

Hemedti and the RSF have a history filled with crimes that date back to 2003.

<sup>1</sup> Sudan holds the record for having the highest number of coups d'état in Africa. The Frequency of Coup Events from 1945 to 2023, by Country.

<sup>2</sup> Nimeiri seized power with the help of socialists and communists, a group that called itself the "Free Officers". They defined their cause as Arab nationalism and revolutionary socialism patterned after the ideology of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser.

<sup>3</sup> Al-Bashir seized power with the help of the National Islamic Front of Hassan al-Turabi.

The SAF is no less encumbered. In the euphoria of the December 2018 revolution, al-Burhan and Hemedti were allowed to escape justice for their past war crimes. Worse, after the massacre of peaceful protesters at the sit-in outside military headquarters in Khartoum on 3 June 2019, the civilian forces went on to sign the power-sharing declaration with the perpetrators without a firm commitment to accountability. Since the war began in April 2023, the RSF has resumed its exceptionally brutal conduct. Civilians were massacred, and Sudan's main cities (Khartoum, el-Geneina, el-Fasher, Nyala, Wad Medani, Sinja, in particular) have been besieged, bombed, and heavily looted. On the other hand, the SAF made fatal airstrikes in Khartoum and Darfur. Today, al-Burhan and Hemedti seek a role in any future deal to protect themselves from prosecution and accountability: war could be that option.

During the thirty years of al-Bashir regime, the political parties experienced serious rifts, including divisions within the Islamic Front itself. However, the divisions that struck the political forces after the December Revolution of 2018 are unprecedented in Sudan's political history<sup>4</sup>. Civilian forces are divided along political, ethnic, regional, and ideological lines. Since the outbreak of war, additional dividing elements have emerged: either supporting or opposing the war and siding with the SAF or the RSF. The Sudanese Coordination of Civil Democratic Forces (Tagadom) is a newly formed coalition that already shows signs of division, particularly regarding its rapprochement with the RSF<sup>5</sup>. Tagadom has not succeeded in uniting all the parties; on the contrary, some of them are even further divided today.

Before the eruption of war, Sudan was already rife with militias and arms. Now, the situation is worsened by the repeated divisions within the militias and rebel movements, the return of Sudanese mercenary militias, and the proliferation of criminals who have been set free from prisons. The RSF has been joined by militias from Darfur, Gazira, and Blue Nile states, as well as by warlords returning from Libya. On the other hand, the SAF has formed military groups and organized popular resistance camps to encourage self-defense against the RSF. Some are led by former Islamist figures, these camps are portrayed as a continuation of the former regime.

## AN INVISIBLE WAR

The response to Sudan's war has been negligible in terms of political, media, and humanitarian donations. The U.S. and the UN have been slow to appoint dedicated special envoys to Sudan. The Personal Envoy of the UN Secretary-General for Sudan, Ramtane Lamamra,

was appointed only at the end of November 2023, while the U.S. envoy, Tom Perriello, was appointed in February 2024. The Peace and Security Council (PSC) of the African Union (AU) could convene a meeting on Sudan at the heads of state and government level only a month after the war began<sup>6</sup>. Despite the brutality of war, the high risk of regional implosion, and the proliferation of militias and jihadists, both internal and external factors could explain such neglect.

Internally, civilians' inability to unite and speak with one voice has weakened their position and visibility, exacerbating the confusion surrounding the causes of the conflict. Is it a war between a general and a warlord? Is it an intra-military conflict? Is it a war waged by elements of the former Muslim Brotherhood regime? Or is it a conflict caused by external meddlers? Another internal factor is the lack of adequate communication. Sudanese and international media have a limited presence on the ground. While some media outlets left Sudan for security reasons, others were asked to leave. In April 2024, the Sudanese authorities suspended three Arab satellite channels for lacking transparency and unprofessional reporting practices<sup>7</sup>. Due to the war, more than forty Sudanese newspapers, radio stations, and television channels ceased operations<sup>8</sup>, allowing social media to become a significant source of news and information.

One of the main external factors is that the conflicts in Ukraine and Gaza have drawn significant global attention. The few resources deployed, the number of high-level political statements, and media reporting reveal how marginal the Sudan war is. Data from The Economist shows that in 2024, news coverage of Sudan averaged 600 monthly stories compared to 100,000 stories for the conflicts in Gaza and Ukraine<sup>9</sup>. Another data provided by Foreign Policy magazine states, "Since the war in Sudan began over a year ago, President Joe Biden has tweeted about Sudan four times—three of which were about the evacuation of the U.S. Embassy in Khartoum right after fighting broke out"<sup>10</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> According to Dr. Alwathiq Kamir, a Sudanese academic and activist. "Unity of the Unionist: unfinished business", Sudan Tribune, 24 September 2022.

<sup>5</sup> Al-Hadi Idris Yahya, Vice President of Tagadom, is also the Head of the Sudanese Revolutionary Front, a Darfuri rebel movement that claims to be neutral but is accused of supporting the RSF in the el-Fasher battle.

<sup>6</sup> The meeting was convened on 27 May 2023.

<sup>7</sup> "Sudan suspends Arab Satellite Channels for lack of transparency and expired licenses", Sudan Tribune, 2 April 2024.

<sup>8</sup> "Hate speech and racism in Sudanese media", Aljazeera media institute, 2 March 2024.

<sup>9</sup> "Sudan: the war the world forgot", The Economist, 24 May 2024.

<sup>10</sup> "Why Is the World Ignoring a Looming Genocide in Sudan?", Foreign Policy, 28 May 2024.



Besides, there is global fatigue regarding African conflicts, and Sudan's war is no exception. Sudan endured the longest civil war in Africa and both the most successful and the failed coups d'état. The current war has triggered fatigue not only among the international community but also within Sudan's diaspora, which was a powerful force in mobilizing international support to topple al-Bashir's regime in 2019.

Out of sight, the belligerents freely expanded the bloodshed, committing horrific crimes. Thousands of civilians have been killed, and millions have been uprooted. Sexual and gender-based violence is widespread yet underreported. Infrastructure is ruined. The scale of economic loss further worsens humanitarian conditions. The industrial and agricultural sectors in conflict areas have been wiped out. Mining and farming, the country's main exports, have plunged significantly. The Sudanese pound has depreciated by 246 percent and continues to fall against the US dollar<sup>11</sup> while the currency's black market thrives<sup>12</sup>. Incomes have declined or vanished, plunging over two million people into poverty, along with rising food insecurity. Another aspect of the invisibility of Sudan's war is that humanitarian donations have become meager. The UN humanitarian appeal for Sudan is struggling to raise the targeted funds. Martin Griffiths, UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs, admits that the UN has failed to protect and aid: "It's very, very difficult to get attention to Sudan"<sup>13</sup>. Six months after the International Humanitarian Conference for Sudan in Paris on 15 April 2024, where thirty-three countries committed to 2.2 billion dollars in aid<sup>14</sup>, the Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan 2024 has received 50% of the required aid so far<sup>15</sup>.

In its 2750 (2024) resolution, the UN Security Council stated that "the situation in Sudan continues to constitute a threat to international peace and security in the region". However, the UN Security Council issued four resolutions in 2024 regarding the situation in Sudan<sup>16</sup>, but none have been respected. Worse, weapons and ammunition flow into Darfur in flagrant violation of the Darfur arms embargo resolution, which was renewed in September 2024. Despite the overwhelming evidence of arms inflow, the UN Council has applied no sanctions against the belligerents or their arms suppliers. The lack of high-profile, coordinated peace initiatives hinders the achievement of at least a cessation of hostilities. Sudan borders seven fragile countries, and the conflict threatens to spill over their borders, fueling regional rivalries and burdening these vulnerable economies with a large flow of refugees. Sudan already has long-standing disputes with Ethiopia over the Al Fashqa triangle, which is fertile farmland, with Egypt over the Halaib triangle, a mineral resource-rich area,

and with South Sudan over the oil-rich Abyei area. On the Red Sea side, Sudan's war may risk depressing the volume of trade passing through the Suez Canal and raising international tensions over this vital waterway.

## A WAR FUELED BY FOREIGN MEDDLERS

Sudan's war is drawing in multiple foreign meddlers, divided between those who claim to be neutral (the U.S. and Saudi Arabia), the SAF supporters (Iran, Turkey, Qatar, Algeria and Egypt), and the RSF backers (mainly the UAE). China is silent, adopting a discreet position. Foreign involvement in Sudan could be motivated by the strategic importance of the Red Sea, economic interests, and power influence. Each country, however, has its own interests and approaches.

The U.S. has sanctioned Sudan's Muslim Brotherhood regime for many years. However, Sudan is not important enough for the U.S. to merit significant efforts, if not for Sudan's rapprochement with Russia and Iran. The U.S. fears the establishment of a Russian or Iranian naval logistics facility on the Red Sea and the presence of the Wagner Group in the country. However, the U.S. counts on the UAE as a Mideast ally for managing the crisis in the region, in addition to its important trade partnership, particularly in the defense industry. This could explain why the U.S. is silent about the UAE's role in Sudan's crisis and why President Biden loosely discussed Sudan while meeting Mohamed Bin Zayed on 23 September 2024<sup>17</sup>. The U.S. has initiated peace negotiations with the Saudis between the SAF and RSF in Jeddah and Geneva, but neither initiative has stopped hostilities.

Russia's involvement in Sudan is ambiguous and duplicitous. Former President al-Bashir initiated

<sup>11</sup> At the beginning of the war, the dollar's price was about 560 Sudanese pounds to reach 1940 on 29 June 2024.

<sup>12</sup> A full floating policy of the exchange rate of the Sudanese pound against the US dollar was adopted in March 2022.

<sup>13</sup> "UN relief chief tells media 'very, very difficult to get attention to Sudan'", OCHA, 7 February 2024.

<sup>14</sup> International Humanitarian Conference for Sudan and its Neighbours in Paris, Financial announcement.

<sup>15</sup> Sudan Humanitarian Response Plan 2024 required 2.7 billion US\$ for humanitarian aid, but only 441.4 million US\$ were received as of 31 May 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Resolution 2750, adopted by the Security Council at its 9721st meeting on 11 September 2024. Resolutions 2736, adopted by the Security Council at its 9655th meeting on 13 June 2024. Resolution 2725, adopted by the Security Council at its 9569th meeting on 8 March 2024. Resolution 2724, adopted by the Security Council at its 9568th meeting on 8 March 2024.

<sup>17</sup> The two countries signed the strategic and defense partnership. "U.S.-UAE Joint Leaders' Statement Dynamic Strategic Partners". The White House, 23 September 2024.

a closer relationship with Russia and the Wagner Group when he invited Vladimir Putin to build a naval base at Port Sudan<sup>18</sup> to protect the country from U.S. aggression<sup>19</sup>. Al-Bashir reopened the country to Russian weapons imports and granted the Wagner Group gold mining concessions. Reportedly, up to 85% of Sudan's gold is thought to be sold off the books to the UAE and Russia<sup>20</sup>. After the fall of al-Bashir's regime, the Wagner Group became increasingly involved alongside the RSF, providing military assistance, political advisors, and social media campaigns. The war has deepened this collaboration as the Wagner Group continues to supply arms to the RSF in return for gold. On the other hand, the Kremlin has approached Sudan's government in Port Sudan by recognizing the Sovereignty Council of Sudan as the representative of the Sudanese people. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov visited Port Sudan on 29 April 2024 and provided military and economic assistance<sup>21</sup>. However, this move is still marred by ambiguity as Russia is the only country that abstained from voting on the UN Security Council resolution calling for the RSF to end its siege on El-Fasher, the capital of North Darfur State<sup>22</sup>. Additionally, Russia is blocking the U.S. proposal to the UN Security Council to sanction two RSF commanders<sup>23</sup>. During Bogdanov's visit, the Russians reportedly revisited the issue of constructing a naval base in Sudan. A naval base on the Red Sea coast would provide Russia with crucial geopolitical positioning in the Horn of Africa and the Middle East. Also, the Russian delegation inquired about the SAF's collaboration with Ukrainian special forces<sup>24</sup>. Ukrainian special forces reportedly operate in Sudan alongside the SAF to combat Wagner mercenaries aligned with the RSF<sup>25</sup>. Other aspects of Russia's rapprochement could include arms sales and aligning Russian policy with Iran's, which supports the SAF.

Iran is also an important player in the Sudanese conflict. In the 1990s, former President al-Bashir nurtured close ties with Iran, a relationship driven by their mutual isolation from the international arena. However, the Sudanese government suspended diplomatic relations with Iran in 2016 and tilted toward Saudi Arabia and the UAE. After an eight-year rift<sup>26</sup>, Sudan and Iran restored diplomatic and military ties in October 2023, and ambassadors were exchanged<sup>27</sup>. Iran has backed the SAF and started to deliver arms (including Mohajer-6 drones) to the SAF in December 2023. Reportedly, an Iranian cargo plane owned by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps has made several trips to Port Sudan<sup>28</sup>. Iran is seeking allies that share its political orientation, in addition to breaking free from diplomatic isolation and trade sanctions. Moreover, it aims to establish a presence on the Red Sea coast to challenge its rivalries. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar compete for influence and aspire to play a broader role beyond the Middle Eastern region.

Although Qatar is a common rival for the Saudis and Emirates, they also have their own rivalries. Before the outbreak of the war, through their financial largesse toward Sudan's transitional government, Saudi Arabia and the UAE succeeded in keeping Qatar, Turkey, and Iran away from Sudan while attempting to diminish the influence of political Islam in the country. However, with the onset of the war, their interests have significantly diverged. The UAE is the main backer of the RSF, providing substantial military support not only since the beginning of the war but also for the last four years. Moreover, the UAE has drawn Sudan's neighboring countries into the conflict to side with the RSF. The UAE's supply of weapons and mercenaries transits through complicit countries: Chad, Libya, South Sudan, Uganda, Kenya, Rwanda, and the Central African Republic, all of which have received substantial development and military aid from the UAE in return. Despite the UAE's denial, U.N. and other documented reports confirm the UAE's arms supply to the RSF<sup>29</sup>. The UAE aims to combat the Muslim Brotherhood, pursue its ambition of controlling numerous seaports, and play a vital role in global trade by becoming involved in Sudan's war. Besides Sudan's strategic position on the Red Sea coast, the UAE has specific interests in the RSF, which has two dimensions: inside Sudan, to secure large agricultural projects

<sup>18</sup> The agreement between Russia and Sudan on establishing a logistics centre for the Russian Navy in Sudan was signed in Khartoum on July 23, 2019, and in Moscow on December 1, 2020.

<sup>19</sup> Al-Bashir during his meeting with Putin in Sochi, November 2017 reported saying « We are thankful to Russia for its position on the international arena, including Russia's position in the protection of Sudan. We need protection from the aggressive acts of the United States».

<sup>20</sup> "Russia is plundering gold in Sudan to boost Putin's war effort in Ukraine", CNN, 29 July 2022.

<sup>21</sup> "Russia offers 'uncapped' military aid to Sudan", Sudan Tribune, 30 April 2024.

<sup>22</sup> Resolution 2736, adopted by the Security Council at its 9655th meeting on 13 June 2024. The resolution, put forward by the United Kingdom, received 14 votes in favor, none against, with Russia abstaining.

<sup>23</sup> On 27 August 2024, the U.S. formally proposed that an international travel ban and asset freeze be imposed on RSF head of operations Osman Mohamed Hamid Mohamed and RSF West Darfur Commander Abdel Rahman Juma Barkalla.

<sup>24</sup> "Ukraine's special services 'likely' behind strikes on Wagner-backed forces in Sudan", CNN, 20 September 2023.

<sup>25</sup> "Ukrainian Special Forces Interrogate Wagner Mercenaries in Sudan", Kyiv Post, 5 February 2024.

<sup>26</sup> Sudan broke ties with Iran in 2016, supposedly in solidarity with Saudi Arabia, but in reality, al-Bashir was seeking financial help from the Saudis.

<sup>27</sup> Iranian ambassador Hassan Shah Hosseini was received in Port Sudan and Sudan ambassador Abdelaziz Hassan Saleh in Tehran.

<sup>28</sup> "Iranian cargo flights arrive in Sudan", Sudan war monitor, 30 January 2024.

<sup>29</sup> "Full Text: UN Panel of Experts Report on Sudan", Sudan War Monitor, 23 January 2024.

that address the UAE's food insecurity and ensure gold procurement, in addition to controlling ports on the Red Sea. Outside Sudan, it aims to keep RSF fighters in Yemen and Libya while ensuring a supply of mercenaries for possible future regional missions.

The Saudis claim to be neutral in Sudan's conflict and present themselves as credible peace mediators. However, their collaboration with the RSF in Yemen continues. Of course, the reestablished relations between Sudan and Iran raise concerns for Riyadh and add to its Gulf rivals. But the Saudis firstly seek stability and security in the region, particularly in the Red Sea, due to its oil exports and the Vision 2030 projects, including the futuristic NEOM megacity project<sup>30</sup>. In Sudan, the Saudis and Emiratis compete for influence, agricultural land, and seaports along the Red Sea coast. The Saudis view the UAE's interests in the Red Sea as a direct encroachment on their backyard. Succeeding in ending the fighting in Sudan would boost the Saudis' image and influence in the Arab and Muslim arenas, giving them a stronger position, that contrasts with the UAE, viewed as supporting the aggressor.

Qatar tacitly voiced its diplomatic support for the SAF while requesting that the international community refrain from interfering in Sudan's internal affairs. Qatar is considered a supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood and a close ally of the former al-Bashir regime. During the Gulf crisis (2017-2021), Sudan was among the few Arab countries that resisted Emirati and Saudi pressure to cut ties with Qatar. A victory for the SAF may allow Qatar to regain an essential ally while pursuing mining and agricultural projects, while a victory for the RSF would compromise its relationship with Sudan.

Egypt is traditionally a supporter of the SAF because a military regime governs Egypt. Besides, there is a close relationship with many Sudanese military officers who graduated from the Egyptian Military Academy. Not only did Cairo not condemn al-Burhan's October 2021 coup, but it was openly supportive, believing that military rule would keep the Muslim Brotherhood at bay and help stabilize the country. However, since the eruption of war, Egypt has adopted a low profile despite Hemedti's accusation that the Egyptian Air Force struck its troops in Sennar State<sup>31</sup>. Egypt has taken timid initiatives to resolve the conflict, even though Egypt holds a military cooperation agreement with Sudan<sup>32</sup> and has received the highest number of refugees. Moreover, Egyptians are highly concerned about the security of the Red Sea and the River Nile, particularly regarding the Renaissance Dam crisis. Reasons may lie behind Egypt's acute economic

crisis and its dependency on Gulf countries for funding<sup>33</sup>.

Supportive of the Muslim Brotherhood, Turkey hosts many influential figures from the former Sudanese regime who fled Sudan after the fall of al-Bashir. In 2017, Sudan and Turkey signed a ninety-nine-year lease to restore Suakin Island and develop a naval dock<sup>34</sup> using Qatari funds. Although the deal was formally intended to restore the old Ottoman buildings, Egypt, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and even Eritrea viewed it as an encroaching move by Turkey in the Red Sea region<sup>35</sup>. Since the eruption of war, it's reported that Turkey has provided the SAF with Bayraktar TB2 drones via Egypt in September 2023<sup>36</sup>, and Amnesty International stated that "shipment-level trade data indicates that hundreds of thousands of blank guns have been exported by Turkish companies to Sudan in recent years, along with millions of blank cartridges"<sup>37</sup>. In supporting the SAF, Turkey may wish to advance the Suakin deal further to pursue its naval port on the Red Sea coast and ensure the return of its Islamist allies.

## CONCLUSION

Several peace initiatives were launched, and meetings were held in Jeddah, Addis Ababa, Paris, Geneva, Nairobi, Cairo, and Djibouti. In addition, workshops and seminars were organized by European and U.S. governments in France, Switzerland, Sweden, Finland, and Kenya. Yet, these peace initiatives gained little traction. Multiple factors paralyze peace initiatives, but what lies behind them is a lack of consensus on the causes of the war. For the RSF and Tagadom, the Muslim brothers (considered to have infiltrated the SAF) fired the first bullet. For the SAF and its supporters, it's a failed coup d'état by the RSF.

<sup>30</sup> NEOM is a futuristic megacity on the Red Sea coast in northwest Saudi Arabia. The Public Investment Fund funds it for 500 billion dollars. It was launched in 2017 as part of Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 plan to diversify the kingdom's economy away from oil and pivot toward tech and innovation. Neom webpage.

<sup>31</sup> "RSF leader accuses Egypt of direct military intervention in Sudan's war", Sudan Tribune, 9 October 2024.

<sup>32</sup> "Egypt, Sudan sign joint military cooperation" Sudan Tribune, 2 March 2021.

<sup>33</sup> Data from the Central Bank of Egypt indicate that the Gulf countries' share in Egypt's external debt amounts to \$46.2 billion.

<sup>34</sup> Renovation project of 650 million dollars aims to turn the island into a tourism and cultural place. The project was launched in January 2018 by Turkey's state-run aid agency, the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA).

<sup>35</sup> During Erdogan's visit to Sudan, Turkish, Sudanese and Qatari Army chiefs met in Khartoum on December 27, 2017.

<sup>36</sup> "The Turkish Bayraktar TB2 drones were delivered to Sudan's military", WSJ, 14 October 2023

<sup>37</sup> "Sudan: Constant flow of arms fuelling relentless civilian suffering in conflict", Amnesty International, 25 July 2024.

The rhetoric about who started the war is critical because it shapes public opinion, co-opts external supporters, and influences the mediators.

Another key factor hindering peace talks is both parties' insistence on a military solution. The failure of the Geneva talks held in August 2024 raises doubts about the seriousness of both parties in reaching a political settlement. In October 2024, the Sudanese army's deputy commander-in-chief, Lieutenant General Ibrahim Jaber, stated that peace talks may continue, but the army will not cease fighting<sup>38</sup>. Another reason is that foreign meddlers do not bear the destructive costs of the war, making them less inclined to pursue peace. On the contrary, they keep pouring large quantities of weapons into the country, which reduces the chances of achieving a peaceful solution. A third reason is the numerous and competing mediation platforms. Peace talk platforms and the UN Security Council make decisions, sign agreements and launch recommendations without any practical steps to implement them.

However, the peace process in Sudan requires three elements: civil forces need to reconcile, as the proliferation of actors is causing confusion. Then, they should be given a role in peace talks to ensure that the settlement is not solely military. The second is to stop the flow of weapons into the country; arms suppliers should be held accountable. The third is to opt for an inclusive peace settlement rather than limiting the discussion to the three areas of humanitarian access, protection of civilians, and cessation of hostilities.

In such a bleak situation, one reason for optimism is the resilience of the Sudanese people. While 2.1 million Sudanese have found refuge in neighboring countries, more than 45 million are still living inside Sudan, facing the hardships of war with strength and dignity every day.

**SELMA EL OBEID**

<sup>38</sup> "Sudan army vows to fight on despite peace efforts", BBC, 3 October 2024.



# THE EVOLUTION OF ITALIAN PRESENCE IN AFRICA : TOWARDS AN INNOVATIVE POLICY APPROACH ?

LUCA GUGLIELMINOTTI ET GIULIA TROMBELLI, AFRICAN SECURITY SECTOR NETWORK (ASSN)

*During the lunch of honor at the Quirinale Palace held on January 28th 2024 to celebrate the Italy-Africa Summit, Italian President Sergio Mattarella concluded his welcome speech by quoting an African proverb: "If you want to go fast, run alone. If you want to go far, go with someone"<sup>1</sup>. These words were meant to capture the spirit in which the Mattei Plan, the new cooperation framework between Italy and African nations proposed by Meloni's government, was presented. After a long period of disengagement, the Plan puts the continent back on the list of Italy's political and geopolitical priorities, by advocating a collaboration model aimed at erasing the causes of migration and addressing the ongoing energy crisis, through a non-predatory and incremental approach based on a strategy of "cooperation as equals".*

Considered by many to be the most ambitious project of the current executive's foreign policy hitherto<sup>2</sup>, the so-called Mattei Plan is founded on the conviction that "Italy can have a relationship with Africa like no other EU country"<sup>3</sup>. For Rome's foreign policy, it is structurally necessary to somehow invoke the Mediterranean as a geopolitical scene where to shape its interests and ambitions. The Italian unique conception of the Mediterranean is sometimes referred to as « wider Mediterranean », namely a geographical vision such that the sea is conceived as a geostrategic and geoeconomic continuum, whose borders do not necessarily coincide with the basin's shores, but instead broaden up to the Atlantic to the West, the Black Sea to the north, the Middle East to the East, the Sahel and the Horn of Africa to the South.

Nonetheless, after the Second World War and the loss of African colonies, Italian foreign policy has been marked by a form of paradoxical neglect for the continent, and the sub-Saharan region in particular, on which Rome's agency has long been carried out mainly by non-state actors, such as NGOs and Catholic missions, or through the participation to multilateral operations and projects. Despite the lack of a sufficiently large diplomatic network and a comprehensive and coherent strategic policy until the last decade, Italy has nonetheless never turned down its natural tendency towards Africa, whether it was by very specific and personalized bilateral partnerships, or the economic and financial bonds created by both private and state companies' business activities.

The necessity for Italy to rethink and renovate its relationship with sub-Saharan Africa became compelling in the early 2010s, mainly following the economic recession and the so-called "migrant crisis," resulting from the Arab spring and the change of interlocutors<sup>4</sup>. The new international and domestic junctures therefore pushed Rome

to engage in a reactive policy shift towards Africa, alongside with many other European countries. Announced by Georgia Meloni during her maiden speech in 2022, the so-called Mattei Plan has been promoted as Italy's most thorough project to claim an autonomous space of action in Africa, as well as its ambition to lead European policy initiatives on the continent. Hence, Italian policy in Africa is characterized by a progressive evolution from atomized and mostly non-state ventures to the intent to adopt a more coherent strategic posture on the continent, in order to both prove the commitment to meet domestic needs and contingent emergencies and pursue new international ambitions. This article aims to analyze whether and to what extent the outcomes of Italian initiatives in Africa before its more consistent and congruent policy shift towards the continent have influenced the way Rome is now conceiving its renovated agenda in Africa.

## LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE PAST RELATIONSHIPS WITH THREE AFRICAN MAJOR PARTNERS

With regard to African policy, Italy has been described as a "relative latecomer"<sup>5</sup>, depicted by a scarce diplomatic and political engagement. Between 1985 and 2014, no Italian Prime Minister traveled to attend bilateral meetings with African

1 ANSA, Mattarella e il detto africano, Ue e Africa insieme lontano, ANSA (29 Jan. 2024).

2 Sassi, Francesco. Energy Cooperation and Africa: Is a Virtuous Model Possible?, in "Italy's Africa Policy: Where Are We?", ISPI (3 Aug. 2023).

3 Agenzia Nova, Piano Mattei, Minniti: "L'Italia può avere con l'Africa un rapporto come nessun altro Paese Ue", NOVA.news (27 Apr. 2024).

4 Carbone, Giovanni. Italy's return to Africa: between external and domestic drivers, in Italian Political Science Review, vol.53 (2023): 310.

5 Ibid., 293.

counterparts and the country's diplomatic network counted just 19 embassies and three cultural institutes in the sub-Saharan region<sup>6</sup>. Therefore, in the postcolonial period, the relationship between Rome and the continent was mainly represented by the activities of non-state actors and initiatives such as those of humanitarian NGOs, the Catholic missions carried out by the Community of Sant'Egidio and the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus, as well as the business assets of multinational companies like ENI (Ente Nazionale Idrocarburi – National Entity for hydrocarbon), ENEL (Ente Nazionale per l'energia elettrica – National Entity for electric power), Fincantieri and Leonardo, the latter two being both industrial groups specialized respectively on shipbuilding and defense and security technology. These actors continue to operate in Africa, contributing, along with the exaggerated rhetoric of « Italians good people, » to portray Italy's agenda on the continent as free from hidden geopolitical interests and mainly driven by humanitarian and development goals. Even though appearing more as isolated cases rather than parts of a coherent policy framework, it is important to stress that Italian politics has nonetheless engaged bilaterally with African States on several occasions.

The historical relationships between Italy and three African countries in particular —Somalia, Mozambique, and Libya— can provide nuanced lessons for contemporary Italian foreign policy. They highlight Italy's ongoing evolution in international relations, demonstrating a shift from post-colonial engagement to strategic partnerships, often mediated by economic interests, geopolitical considerations, and normative power dynamics.

- Under Italian socialist PM Bettino Craxi in the 1980s, the Italy-Somalia partnership serves as a blueprint. Italy invested significantly in Somalia's development, channeling 310 billion lire (700 million dollars) between 1981 and 1984, making Somalia the highest recipient of Italian foreign aid in Africa at the time. Today, the current Italian government seeks to emulate this impactful activism to regain political importance<sup>7</sup>. Craxi's strategy promoted economic development as a stabilizing force, leveraged historical ties for deeper engagement, and maintained strategic interests in the Horn of Africa amidst Cold War tensions. Unlike other Western countries that limited their involvement to short-term humanitarian aid, Italy opted for an integrated approach, strengthening local governance structures for long-term developmental impacts. Despite significant investment, the Italian-Somalia partnership had its failures, providing cautionary lessons for contemporary foreign aid strategies: the close alliance with Siad Barre led to considerable wastage of public funds. This misuse of aid tarnished Italy's credibility<sup>8</sup>.

- In the 1990s, the Community of Sant'Egidio's mediation in Mozambique was a notable chapter in Italy's foreign policy, successfully facilitating the 1992 peace accord between Frelimo and Renamo<sup>9</sup>. This intervention, involving extensive negotiations that began unofficially in 1986, demonstrated the efficacy of quiet diplomacy. The international recognition of Sant'Egidio's success in Mozambique significantly bolstered Italy's global image, portraying it as a proactive peace broker capable of leveraging non-state actors in conflict resolution<sup>10</sup>. The acknowledgment of Sant'Egidio's role by the Italian government and the Vatican highlighted a collaborative model of diplomacy that Italy championed in the post-Cold War era.

- The Italy-Libya partnership, exemplified by the 2010 Friendship Treaty, reflects a strategic dimension of Italy's foreign policy in Africa, emphasizing economic interests and geopolitical stability. This partnership evolved from historical ties and Italy's colonial legacy, transitioning towards a cooperative relationship underpinned by significant economic interdependencies, particularly in the energy sectors. Libya became Italy's foremost oil supplier and a crucial source of natural gas, facilitated by geographical proximity and historical linkages. The partnership aimed to stabilize the region by mitigating migration flows and enhancing maritime security. Economic ties also extended to infrastructure projects, with Italian firms playing significant roles in Libya. However, the relationship exhibited significant vulnerabilities, particularly in the reliance on Gaddafi's authoritarian regime. Gaddafi's downfall during the Arab Spring exposed the risks of Italy's heavy dependence on a single, unstable regime, leading to a temporary disruption in energy supplies and necessitating a rapid realignment of Italy's foreign policy in the region.

In sum, the engagement with Tripoli highlighted the advantages of diversifying energy sources beyond traditional dependencies, while Craxi's alliance with Somali president Siad Barre showed that partnerships that lack accountability and transparency eventually foster skepticism towards Italian intentions. Lastly, the successful case of the Community of Sant'Egidio's role in brokering the 1992 peace agreement in Mozambique stands as a

6 Carbone, Giovanni. Italy's return to Africa: between external and domestic drivers, in Italian Political Science Review, vol.53 (2023): 299.

7 Dissegna, Un decennio di cooperazione tra Italia e Somalia negli anni '80, 47.

8 Carbone, Giovanni. Italy's return to Africa: between external and domestic drivers, in Italian Political Science Review, vol.53 (2023): 106.

9 Frelimo was the political and armed group supported by the eastern bloc throughout the Mozambican civil war (1977-1992) whereas Renamo was its western supported counterpart.

10 Anouilh, Sant'Egidio au Mozambique: de la charité à la fabrique de la paix, 13.

testament to Italy's ability to utilize its normative power effectively, and therefore of its potential not only to play a proactive role in the diplomatic resolution of conflicts, but especially to mediate between African and European nations and institutions. These three case studies demonstrate the potential and challenges of Italy's foreign policy in Africa, informing the current strategy to better align with contemporary geopolitical and economic realities.

### THE MATTEI PLAN

Starting from the mid-2010s, Italy's new activism on the African continent marked the beginning of a transformation of its foreign policy towards the continent. The first attempts to renovate Italy's approach and relationship with the continent, and specifically with sub-Saharan Africa, date back to the early 2010s, when the Arab Spring incentivized Rome to look beyond North Africa to diversify its energy suppliers, expand its market and deal with migration flows<sup>11</sup>. Between 2014 and 2019, Italian governments therefore inaugurated five new embassies, organized seven bilateral state visits to 12 sub-Saharan states as well as two Ministerial Conferences in 2016 and 2018. Italy also developed a military presence on the continent: in 2013, Rome opened a military base in Djibouti, whereas in 2017 Paolo Gentiloni's government deployed a military training mission consisting of 470 soldiers to Niger, which remains now the only western actor in the country with 250 soldiers, after the recent withdrawal of French, American and German forces<sup>12</sup>.

Yet, although Italy gave proof of a greater activism on the continent, the initiatives enacted by the country have long been lacking strategic coherence, partly because of the several changes of government that have marked Italian political scene in the last decades.

Since 2014 however, Italy has increasingly framed its foreign policy through the lens of the « enlarged Mediterranean » with Africa emerging as an essential partner in safeguarding its national strategic interests. The adoption of bilateral relationships with Sahel countries, coupled with a multilateral approach, has allowed Italy to align its objectives with broader European initiatives while carving out an autonomous role for itself on the continent. This strategic shift was epitomized in May 2021 when the Italian Minister of Defence, Lorenzo Guerini, affirmed that Italy's engagement in Africa—specifically in the Sahel, Horn of Africa, Gulf of Guinea, and Libya—was integral to national security. The convergence of bilateral agreements and multilateral collaboration reflects Italy's

broader vision to address both regional instability and its own strategic imperatives.

Italy's involvement in various military missions, such as MISIN (Italian Mission of Support in Niger), MINUSMA (United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali), EUCAP SAHEL NIGER (European Union Capacity Building Mission in Niger), EUCAP SAHEL MALI (European Union Capacity Building Mission in Mali), Takuba (a European military task force under French command and to assist Malian Armed Forces), and others, underscores its growing political, diplomatic, and military activism in the Sahel in particular. Initially aligning its efforts with France, Italy sought cooperation rather than competition, participating in initiatives like the Takuba Task Force<sup>14</sup>. European policy provided Rome with a platform to re-establish ties with key players like France and Germany. However, once embedded in African affairs, Italy gradually pursued a more independent role to advance its own strategic interests, occasionally creating friction with its French ally. The relationship between Italy and France has been complicated by diverging visions and competition for influence in Africa. In 2019, anti-French sentiment was vocalized by Italian leaders, notably Giorgia Meloni, criticizing France's continued economic exploitation of African countries through mechanisms like the CFA franc and the extraction of resources, such as in Niger<sup>15</sup>. The discourse framed France as an opportunistic power in Africa, while Italy positioned itself as a more equitable and respectful partner. The complicated dynamics with France were further exacerbated by historical precedents, such as Berlusconi's opposition to the 2011 NATO intervention in Libya, which highlighted Italy's reluctance to align with French-led foreign policy ventures in Africa<sup>16</sup>.

Italy's contemporary interventionism on the African continent is relatively new in its structured, continent-wide form, marking a shift away from predominantly bilateral relations.

<sup>11</sup> Carbone Giovanni, op.cit.: 299.

<sup>12</sup> Camilli, Annalisa. La camera approva la missione militare in Niger et Audiello, Giorgia, Quello italiano è l'ultimo esercito occidentale rimasto in Niger (e non se ne andrà).

<sup>13</sup> MUR, I principali Paesi target per il Piano Mattei. Camera dei Deputati, Relazione sulle operazioni autorizzate e svolte per il controllo dell'esportazione, importazione e transito dei materiali di armamento, riferita all'anno 2022. Info Mercati Esteri. Osservatorio Economico Africa. Hereafter the top 8 African countries for economic interchange with Italy, in mln of euros (01/2023 - 09/2023): Algeria 12 907; Libya 6 736; Tunisia 5 117; Egypt 4 486; South Africa 3 588; Morocco 3 457; Nigeria 2 178; Angola 1 093.

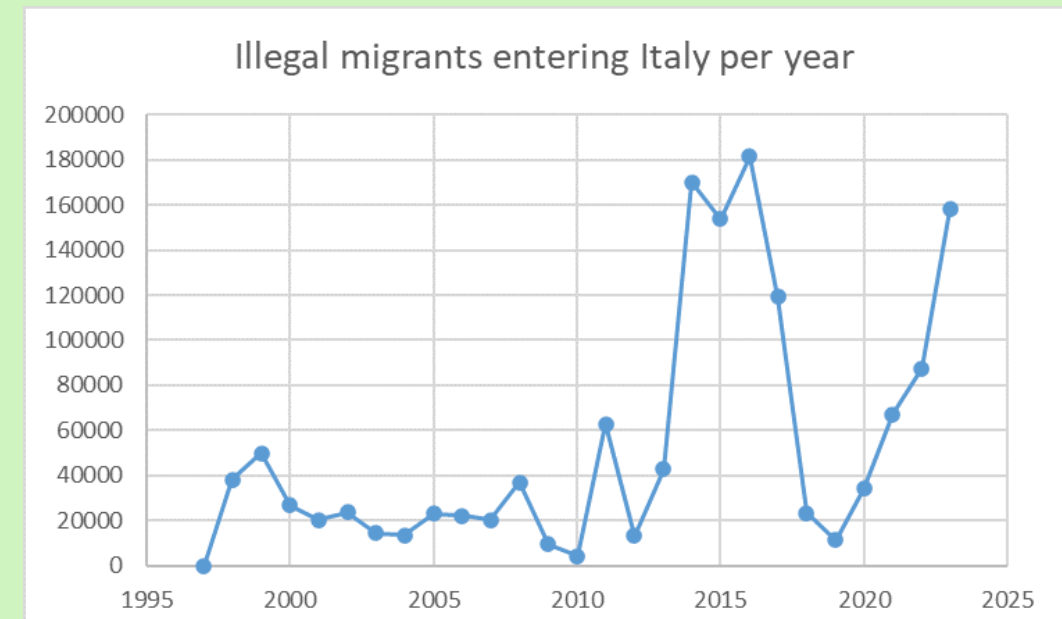
<sup>14</sup> De Castanedo, Inigo. Task Force Takuba: European Special Forces in the Sahel.

<sup>15</sup> Beraud, Benjamin. Accusation de Giorgia Meloni contre la France : le franc CFA à l'origine des migrations ?

<sup>16</sup> Sarra, Chiara. Libia, il retroscena di Berlusconi: "Napolitano chiese l'intervento."



A map of countries with Italian Mattei Plan pilot projects in Africa (2024)<sup>13</sup>



Graphs done by the authors using source from the Italian ministry of interior.



This transformation has been accompanied by a rhetoric that emphasizes respect, disinterest in geopolitical dominance, and a values-driven approach. Italy has sought to present itself as a more trusted ally, capitalizing on its late entry into the colonial race and lack of historical unity to project an image of being less threatening compared to other European powers, especially France. This narrative aligns with Italy's engagements, particularly through military contributions that are often integrated into multilateral missions where Italy has not taken command, seeking to reinforce perceptions of its non-predatory intentions.

A crucial element in Italy's contemporary African policy is the Mattei Plan, which promises a new, non-exploitative model of cooperation. Rooted in the legacy of Enrico Mattei, founder of the Italian energy company ENI, the plan emphasizes a «win-win» strategy that contrasts with traditional European exploitation of African resources. Italy's approach, historically more humanitarian and less interventionist, is presented as less threatening both to competitors and African partners.

Since her arrival to Chigi Palace in 2022, Giorgia Meloni focused her executive's foreign policy on the African sector of the "wider Mediterranean", turning her attention especially to the Sahelian region and the Horn of Africa, as well as traveling multiple times to Algeria, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt, often accompanied by the Chief executive of ENI, Claudio Descalzi<sup>17</sup>. Building on the legacy of Draghi's government, Algeria has become the first supplier of gas to Italy from 22% to 40% of the total gas imports to Italy<sup>18</sup>. In Libya, ENI has signed an historic contract for 8 billion euros to exploit two off-shore gas deposit<sup>19</sup>. In Tunisia the activism of Georgia Meloni is witnessed by her four visits, with the last one consisting in 100 million euros to Tunisian authorities to block immigration departures<sup>20</sup>. Finally in Egypt, her visit resulted in a joint EU 7.4 billion euros with a focus on migration management and the designation of Egypt as a safe country to repatriate migrants<sup>21</sup>. It is in such a context that the formulation of Italian new strategy for Africa takes place, presented in January 2024 in Rome under the tutelary figure of Enrico Mattei, founder of ENI and known for his anticolonial and antifascist positions.

Inaugurated in Rome on the 28th of January under the theme "A bridge for common growth", the two-day Italy-Africa Summit 2024 is the first meeting between Italian and African representatives not held at ministerial level. The attendance of 21 African Heads of State and Government, in addition to Foreign Ministers and top representatives of international organizations such the European Union, the United Nations, the World Bank, IMF and

OECD, is to be considered one of the determining factors of the summit's political success. In a geopolitical scenario in which the Western presence is increasingly discredited in Africa, Meloni's government has managed to bolster its international posture not only by displaying its ability to bring together important stakeholders from the continent, but also by presenting the Mattei Plan, further proving Italy's ambition to lead European policy tools and initiatives thanks to the adoption of a new approach to the relations with African governments. Prime Minister Meloni has been clear about it during both her welcome and closing speeches: enough with the narrative about Africa being a poor continent and the logic of strategic interests pursued behind the cover of development and humanitarian aid. Rome has concrete domestic and international reasons for seeking solid relations with Africa, presented as rich in business and investment opportunities. This is why the new cooperation model aims at being built on an equal, non-predatory basis so that it can be the beginning of a long-term partnership. With a starting fund of (just) "5.5 billion euros in grants, credits or guarantees"<sup>22</sup>, the Mattei Plan is therefore aimed mainly at controlling migratory flows and finding alternative energy suppliers through what it is portrayed as a win-win collaboration in the framework of the continent's industrial, infrastructural and technological development. Therefore, the project overall does not deviate drastically from the two traditional directives that have guided Italian foreign policy to date, the "diplomacy of growth" and the rhetoric of "help them at their home". What seems to be changing is rather the approach with which the ventures will be implemented, based on joint planning of targets and the synergy with the activities of other international actors, such as the EU, the US, Turkey and the Gulf States.

Italian politics has fluctuated between welcoming and securitarian positions regarding African migration, with most parties linking migration to security concerns. Before 2011, migration numbers were relatively low, and Berlusconi's government, despite passing the Bossi-Fini law in 2002—which criminalized illegal immigration—projected Italy as a Catholic, welcoming country. However, the rise in migration post-2011 shifted the narrative.

17 Pavia, Alissa. Italy's Mediterranean pivot: What's driving Meloni's ambitious plan with Africa, *New Atlanticist* (5 Feb. 2024).

18 Carboni, Kevin. L'Algeria conta sempre di più per le forniture di gas all'Italia.

19 ANSA. Meloni a Tripoli, patto sul gas e trattativa sui migranti.

20 Affari Internazionale. Che cosa prevede l'accordo tra Unione Europea e Tunisia.

21 De La Feld, Simone. Cosa prevede l'accordo da 7,4 miliardi con l'Egitto, il più sostanzioso mai siglato dall'UE.

22 Fattibene, Daniele, Manservisi, Stefano. The Mattei Plan for Africa: A Turning Point for Italy's Development Cooperation Policy?, *Istituto Affari Internazionali* (10 Mar. 2024).

Matteo Salvini's Lega capitalized on anti-immigration rhetoric, pushing for stronger borders, while Giorgia Meloni proposed extreme measures like a naval blockade off Libya. The center-left Democratic Party also adopted a securitarian stance in 2017 when Interior Minister Minniti brokered an agreement with Libya, providing funds and patrol boats to stem migrant flows. This reduced arrivals from 180,000 in 2016 to 120,000 in 2017. When Salvini became Interior Minister in 2018, he pursued harsher measures, reducing landings to under 20,000 by 2019, largely by criminalizing NGOs rescuing migrants in international waters. His 2019 security decree imposed severe fines on these NGOs and allowed ship seizures, even blocking them from disembarking in Italy—a move that has led to ongoing legal proceedings against him. Under Giorgia Meloni's leadership, the approach became more pragmatic. Her government opted to prolong the process of NGO landings by assigning northern Italian ports to delay disembarkation. However, this tactic did little to curb the significant resurgence in migrant arrivals. That is the reason why Mrs Meloni is touting a transalpine 'model', having signed an agreement with Tirana at the end of 2023 to outsource asylum applications. Two detention centers have been built in Albania, at Italy's expense, with a capacity of 3,000 people. Migrants rescued by Italian military vessels in international waters will be held there. Furthermore, while tackling illegal immigration, Giorgia Meloni's government has reopened the flow of legal labor immigration after a twelve-year hiatus: the so-called 'flow decree' provides for the regular entry of some 452,000 workers between 2023 and 2025, being the first real reopening of the borders to regular workers since 2011.

Nonetheless, the Mattei Plan and the genuine intentions behind it leave more than one question hanging. To assess the credibility of the Mattei Plan and, consequently, Rome's reliance as the new European leading country for the relationship with the continent, it is indeed necessary to consider to what extent Italy's displayed interests towards an equal and lasting partnership with African nations can coincide with the instruments currently available for the implementation of the Plan and with other Italian interests that have nothing or very little to do with those of its African partners. In other words, what some analysts fear along with some African representatives is that in the short-term the Italy-Africa Summit will turn out to benefit the political interest of Italy in the framework of the then upcoming European elections. Giving proof to Italian voters of active commitment in tackling irregular immigration, as well as in diversifying energy sources, is key for Meloni's government as it is for her party. This kind of consideration further strengthens the criticisms of lack of transparency directed towards the Mattei Plan. During the summit, the Chair of the African Union Commission, Moussa Faki, lamented the lack

of input from African leadership in the project's formulation and stressed not only the need to implement the intentions displayed by the Italian executive in Rome in a thorough and consistent manner, but also the autonomy of the African Union in deciding its international partners, therefore highlighting the non-exclusiveness of African relations with the Western "block"<sup>24</sup>. The Mattei Plan, in fact, is still vague: it has more the shape of a method than of a strategic plan of action, and it is not adequately funded yet. On the one hand, this approach does not rush African leaders and leaves more room for their participation in the planification of the projects to enact; on the other, an integration of the Plan will be needed "as the initial pool of resources are not enough to develop a continent-wide strategy"<sup>25</sup>. Moreover, considering the limited involvement of Italian and African civil societies during the summit, the project's approach seems to focus primarily on leaders-to-leaders relations, therefore not including in the design and implementation phases a great number of actors that could prove essential to the renovation of Italy-Africa non-patronizing relationship. Lastly, the choice to focus on fossil energy to boost investments on the continent is a "somewhat dated vision"<sup>26</sup>, not aligned to Europe's Green Deal objectives aiming for climate neutrality by 2050.

## CONCLUSION

Meloni's government project seeks to introduce a real shift in the Italian approach to the African continent and more broadly to Rome's foreign policy and international stand. After a long period of disengagement and neglect for Africa, Rome has been demonstrating the ambition to adapt its foreign policy to the Italian unique geoeconomic and geostrategic conception of the "wider Mediterranean", which conceives the continent as a natural priority of Italy's external projection. Apparently again aware of its strategic geographic position and historical relationships with African nations, Italy is now trying to deepen its efforts towards the continent to both respond to specific domestic political needs and strengthen its position within the European Union with regards to Africa-oriented policy initiatives. Nonetheless, Meloni's government must now deepen its efforts towards forward-looking perspectives of partnership.

24 Simonelli, Filippo, Fantappiè, Maria Luisa, Goretti, Leo. The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?, *Istituto Affari Internazionali* (11 Mar. 2024): 3.

25 Simonelli, Filippo, Fantappiè, Maria Luisa, Goretti, Leo. The Italy-Africa Summit 2024 and the Mattei Plan: Towards Cooperation between Equals?, *Istituto Affari Internazionali* (11 Mar. 2024): 3.

26 Quartapelle, Lia. Oltre il piano Mattei: la ricerca di una politica italiana per l'Africa, *European Council on Foreign Relations* (22 Jan. 2024).



At the bottom line, the Mattei Plan is an ambitious project with the potential to give Italy the role of a key player in European-African relations. However, as it moves from conception to implementation, a central question remains: will Italy's image on the continent shift, and if so, will it evolve into a perception of Italy as a genuine, equal partner in Africa? This remains to be seen, particularly as the Plan confronts the challenge of balancing Italy's strategic interests with its rhetorical commitment to ethical partnership.

*LUCA GUGLIELMINOTTI ET GIULIA TROMBELLI*





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# FRANCE'S NAVY EXPOSED TO THE RETURN OF HIGH INTENSITY

CHIRINE RIAZ, « MARINE 2040 » OBSERVATORY'S RESEARCHER AND  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR AT THE FMES INSTITUTE

*The most recent conflicts show increased willingness to resort to violence and the multiplication of actors and forms of confrontation involving states. With Russia's Black Sea Fleet undergoing slow but real attrition, and the world's shipping giants shunning the Red Sea at times because of Iran's growing threat from armed Houthi rebels, the naval dimension of these conflicts is in the spotlight. Naval rearmament, rapid development and proliferation of anti-ship weapons, at a time of rising tensions between the major powers, pose a growing threat to the world's seas.*

*In this context, the "Marine 2040" observatory led by the Mediterranean Foundation for Strategic Studies (FMES) questioned the return of high-intensity combat at sea and the risk that the French Navy will face it in the next 20 years. This risk is real.*

## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MARITIME ENVIRONMENT FAVORABLE TO HIGH INTENSITY COMBAT

The risk of high-intensity combat for naval forces is of course associated with the characteristics of the maritime environment and the missions they conduct there.

The sea and oceans are inherently complex spaces, where the threat can emerge from all directions and all three dimensions, above the surface or from the depths. As soon as it leaves port, a naval force must therefore deal with various levels and forms of aggression that could impede the accomplishment of its many missions: protection of sea routes, resources, projection and support of land operations, disruption of strategic supplies of adversaries... Its missions can quickly place our ships in a situation of confrontation in increasingly accessible and coveted spaces, therefore increasingly contested.

Moreover, strikes at sea are politically less risky and therefore tempting: the opponent is not hit at home and the risk of escalation is better controlled there, especially as the media and social networks are absent or very controlled at sea; in spite of the violence, the casualties are more modest than a land strike and the risks of collateral damage are less severe. The context thus favors the attacking party even though technological change gives the sword over the armor the advantage now and for a while.

## NAVAL REARMAMENT WITNESSES HEIGHTENED STATE-TO-STATE COMPETITION

In geopolitical terms, France's main strategic competitors are continuing an already-begun shift toward maritime power politics. Russia and China have already been joined by other credible challengers, such as Turkey and India. The list of potential competitors is expected to grow as the proliferation of disruptive weapons and the rise of second-tier navies in a global naval re-armament movement.

As such, the war in Ukraine is instructive and a harbinger of future naval conflicts. Russian naval forces have been called upon in every field of service provided by a modern navy: deploying 6 SNLEs, threatening Ukrainian exports, or using naval platforms to fire cruise missiles. However, they have suffered setbacks at the Ukrainian side, which has used denial-of-access weapons, armed drones and mines. This lesson is likely to have been learned by Russia, which is waking up to its weaknesses. Over time, and within its means, it will likely prioritize nuclear deterrence, disruptive technologies, robotization, and the equipping of its ships with long-range cruise missiles.

China's focus on controlling global maritime trade routes and the Belt and Road Initiative has led to a push by the People's Liberation Army-Marine (PLA-M) to modernize China's armed forces. China's new maritime strategy calls for it to be able to intervene globally by 2050. Originally a coastal force in 1950, the PLA-M now has more ships than the United States Navy.

But it is not just the world's major powers that can implement maritime strategies that will bring conflict in the future. Turkey, for example, has undergone a major strategic shift, moving from its former "sea-based" doctrine to the "land-based" and "Asia-Minor" pan-Turkism." The exponential growth of such navies, the increasing capability to act anti-ships from land, and a technological race to the benefit not only of industrially less advanced states, but also of non-state actors (the Houthis in the Red Sea are a case in point), will progressively reduce the capability superiority of the major Western navies.

## TECHNOLOGICAL INNOVATIONS THAT PROMOTE THE USE OF LETHAL WEAPONS

Indeed, this quantitative rearmament, which is easy to see, will also be qualitative.

By the end of 20 years, most countries will have improved the capabilities of their navies with multi-purpose units incorporating new technologies and increased their activities at sea. The risk to ocean navies will not come solely from the sea, with denial of access to ever-larger maritime spaces operable from land. Complex weapons will have proliferated, and many technologically advanced countries, if threatened or ideologically driven, may pose a serious threat far from their shores. Recent events in the Red Sea are already a case in point. Increasing arms autonomy will make it possible to carry out unjustifiable actions more widely than in the past, in all the seas of the Globe. This reduces the risk of retaliation and thus encourages the use of violence. The absence of a crew will also lower the level of risk and therefore the threshold of engagement: reduced risk of loss of life for the attacker using a drone; high risk of escalation for the attacked vessel having to consider retaliatory strikes on land that present a risk of uncontrolled escalation.

But many other technology-driven factors will also drive the use of weapons: the low financial and logistical cost of directed-energy weapons, which will emerge and then spread to the naval sector; easier identification of potential targets, with long-range surveillance systems or, possibly, quantum sensors that can more easily detect submarines; and high velocity, which poses a real challenge to defense systems or swarms of drones that could saturate them.

The increase in conflict will also come from the technological conquest of new areas: the seabed is a new area of confrontation between states, of which the Baltic Sea provides many examples.

The proliferation of submarine systems, combined with developments in artificial intelligence, sensor performance, and endurance of vectors able to operate from or on the seabed, is a growing threat to naval forces and underwater infrastructure and resources.

Hybrid modes of action will precede or complement violent action: in the cyber space, where data becomes essential as a factor of operational effectiveness every year; by engaging third parties, including proxies whose nature and scale of actions are as uncertain as they are unpredictable.

## NEW GEOPOLITICAL RISKS FROM CLIMATE CHANGE CONSEQUENCES

Global warming causes sea temperatures to rise, causing ice to melt and, more important, causing sea levels to rise by expansion. Their physico-chemical characteristics also change, with salinity and acidity increasing. These four phenomena will, in the coming decades, bring about major strategic changes and changes in the conditions of use of naval systems.

The melting ice is already opening up the Arctic space linking the Atlantic to Asia by providing a much shorter alternative to the Mediterranean and Indian Ocean straits. China, which calls itself a "near-Arctic state" and has observer status in the Arctic Council, is expanding its activities in the region. The "Polar Silk Road" connects China to Europe. It is strengthening its maritime capabilities in the region, including building new icebreakers to service Arctic shipping routes. Russia, meanwhile, is investing more heavily in the Far North, taking advantage of climate change. It considers this region to be vital for its security and economic development. It has established a new Joint Strategic Command of the North, modernized and expanded its military capabilities in the Arctic, invested in equipment capable of withstanding extreme temperatures, and expanded its military activities in the region. This makes it easier for China to shift its hydrocarbon exports to Asia.

The rise in sea levels, estimated in some scenarios to be 30 cm by 2050, will lead to more frequent and sometimes permanent submersions, with the result that migratory phenomena will increase and the baselines used to delimit maritime areas will be called into question. Migratory phenomena will also be favored by the disappearance of drinking water on many islands, and by the migration of fish species essential to the life of coastal populations. The struggle for these resources will be heightened.



Extreme weather events will lead to an increase in the number of people-assistance operations carried out by maritime forces, which will mechanically mobilize more resources.

## THE FRENCH NAVY ON THE FRONT LINE

These global perspectives are of course of interest to all navies. But France's unique position means that its navy will likely be particularly exposed to high-intensity risk, probably more so than its EU partner navies.

## A PROACTIVE FOREIGN POLICY AND NUMEROUS INTERNATIONAL COMMITMENTS

First, France has an active foreign policy. Claiming to act on international crises while seeking to promote peace and stability, it sometimes alienates stakeholders at the risk of becoming a high-profile target. France faces resentment in some former colonies, fueled by major competitor countries, and by a growing global North-South divide.

France is also involved in numerous international agreements and alliances, which can drag it into conflict. As a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the European Union (EU), it may have to provide assistance to another member country if it is attacked. So it will be involved in any direct confrontation with Russia; it is already in contact with Russian forces in the Mediterranean, as it was during the Cold War over many seas and oceans. It also maintains military and strategic partnerships with other countries, which can put it on the front lines to defend the interests of its allies, especially vis-à-vis China and Turkey. In naval operations, the strategic partnership with Greece, or the defense arrangement with the United Arab Emirates, would probably entail significant naval commitments were they to be activated.

## ATTRITION WORSENER BY EVOLVING TERRORISM AND HYBRID THREATS

In addition to the "historic" terrorist threat that will remain and grow more dangerous with access to higher-tech weapons, shifts in global conflict have increased the risk of proxies, criminal gangs, and failed states being used in hybrid strategies. But these hybrid strategies do not mean the absence of violent confrontations, such as the threat posed by the Iran-backed Houthis to parts of the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden.

Several theaters of operation in which the Navy is present or will have to engage are subject to this risk, against which defensive arrangements will be necessary. These are of the same order as those required to deal with high intensity military actions.

## A FRENCH SINGULARITY: DROM-COM: FRENCH OVERSEAS DEPARTMENTS AND TERRITORIES

Lastly, French territory covers five 'overseas departments and regions' (Martinique, Guadeloupe, French Guiana, Réunion and Mayotte), five 'overseas communities' (Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, Saint-Martin, Saint Barthélemy and Saint-Pierre and Miquelon), plus two specific communities (New Caledonia and the French Southern and Antarctic Lands) and finally the island of Clipperton administered directly by the government. France is therefore present on all oceans except the Arctic Ocean. Much of the world's current and future conflict can affect sovereignty and cause it, beyond its international responsibilities, to become involved in pursuing its own interests. Poor in fossil-fuel resources, limited in their food-production capacity, and dependent on (now fragile and limited) connectivity to global data via submarine cables, DROM-COM's common feature is a heavy strategic dependence on supplies by sea. This dependency requires the continued flow of supplies. In the event of tension, these areas, as well as their immense maritime spaces and the roads linking them to the metropolis, which are up to 16,000 kilometers long, will have to be protected from threats that can lead to high-intensity fighting. It will be tempting for an adversary to force France to blackmail, retaliate, blockade, appropriate EEZ resources, or to pledge territory to it. Moreover, the means to protect the 10 million square kilometers are so far woefully inadequate.

## CONCLUSION

There is an old saying that history is unpredictable, but the French Navy should be preparing for several types of realistic scenarios for future interventions, in addition to standing missions that include, not least, nuclear deterrence. Faced with major competitors, it must be prepared to fight alongside its main allies in its priority areas of action and interest, some of which are very far from the mainland. But, to advance its own national interests, it will also have to be able to confront foes on its own, and none of them should be neglected.

# WHAT TECHNOLOGIES ARE NEEDED TO DEAL WITH THE NEW FORMS AND THREATS OF NAVAL COMBAT ?

JEAN-FRANÇOIS PELLIARD, CONSULTANT FOR THE FMES

*In response to emerging forms of naval combat, the French Navy, constrained by real budgetary limits, must make drastic choices on technologies that allow it to adapt in the short and medium term in order to achieve the best operational gain. These choices will have to be accompanied by measures to enable new capabilities to be rapidly integrated into a fleet that is largely renewed, but whose vessels are not very scalable. The human, technical and industrial challenge is therefore significant.*

*The recent interception and destruction of drones and missiles by French multi-mission frigates launched by the Houthis in the Red Sea, using Aster 15 missiles, illustrates the problems raised by the evolution and proliferation of military technologies. While the effectiveness of a missile valued at more than EUR 1 million against a drone of a few thousand or tens of thousands of euros is not currently being questioned, this mode of action does not constitute a viable long-term response: in tactical time, the consumption of these extremely high-performance munitions to eliminate low-value attacking motives deprives the ships that use them of a potential higher-level threat later on. It is an expression of the danger of saturation: missiles are like a revolver with six or eight strokes, when the magazine is empty, the wearer of the weapon is exposed to new attacks. At a longer time scale, the cost of these missiles and the time and constraints of their manufacture make it impossible to stand up in the long term against an adversary who uses munitions - particularly drones - that are inexpensive and easy to manufacture.*

*What resources and technologies should be favored to deal with these new threats, which are widely available to "small countries" (even mafia-type or terrorist organizations), while protecting against more advanced threats, such as the hypersonic systems now reserved for major adversaries? For the French Navy, which has seen a massive fleet renewal and faces potential adversaries from all over the world's oceans, the question is crucial.*

## A NECESSARY BUT CONSTRAINED ADAPTATION

The French Navy is built around nuclear deterrence and the carrier battle group, itself a part of the deterrence function. Budgetary constraints limit resources allocated to functions beyond deterrence, and the permanence of the carrier battle group would only be assured with a second aircraft carrier. This constrained format of the navy places a strain on force generation for its operational commitments. In a coalition, it mobilizes the available means, without it being possible to guarantee entirely the coherence with the desired political commitment; outside a coalition, the means tend to impose the limits of the mission. In both cases, the return of high intensity requires a possible attrition must be factored in the course of the mission, without however being able to call into question the protection of the means of deterrence.

This situation is confirmed by the military programming law with a particular effort to modernize deterrence and a general logic that wants to "win the war before the war", with consequences on the means necessary for a

massive engagement to which the armies are nevertheless preparing. Maintaining a comprehensive military model also limits the scale of each capability. No significant changes are foreseen for the Navy: the recent fleet renewal is complemented with efforts to reinforce overseas assets, but no additional frigates are envisaged, nor any capacity building of existing vessels.

Yet, despite their remarkable technical prowess, these ships, including the operational and defense frigates that will be commissioned in the coming years, were not designed to address the full spectrum of emerging threats. In the next 15-20 years, the hotspots and hybrid conflicts will have multiplied exponentially.

For the French Navy, it is a matter of making the best choices from the point of view of technological and budgetary prospects in order, on the one hand, to adapt the capabilities of its recent ships to current threats and, on the other hand, to anticipate the capabilities of the ships which, at the dawn of the 2040s, will replace the air defense frigates and then once again initiate a new modernization of the fleet. Several axes may be favored.

## SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY OF NAVAL DRONES

While many navies, including the main allied navies, rely on sea drones, the French Navy is still in retreat, with the exception of the area of mine warfare. Yet all players agree on the disruptive potential of naval drones, although the direction of the efforts to be made to obtain the best operational gains remains uncertain.

Drones can be used to perform dangerous or uncomfortable tasks for humans (or for ships in naval combat), to perform repetitive tasks, and to lighten the cognitive load of crews. They are also used as effect multipliers or as scouts on the front of a force. They are diverse and can be operated continuously by humans, be programmed for a pre-established mission, or have an autonomous decision-making capability. In naval combat, they operate in three dimensions, above and below the surface. Smaller vessels can augment a frigate's capabilities, while ocean drones (up to the size of corvettes) can replace them on some missions, saving valuable potential while minimizing the risk of crew exposure to unnecessarily 'gray areas'.

So the question today is no longer whether, how, for what missions, and with what integration to future and existing capabilities, it is worthwhile to "drone" a navy. The Western navies, particularly the US Navy, which has set up a task force, are conducting numerous experiments in this area. By 2040, technology will enable drones to perform a wide range of relatively simple missions, with decision-making and energy autonomy far greater than today.

It would seem desirable for the French Navy to draw up a roadmap for the progressive integration of drones of the fleet, which could multiply the effects and preserve the limited potential of manned vessels. This would make it possible to plan the means to exit the experimental stage more quickly, to quickly take ownership of these new tools and to benefit from the first operational inputs without waiting for the "perfect drone". This should reduce the risk of missile a critical shift. The conditions for physical and tactical integration into the fleet are a key issue to be taken into account in this roadmap, as well as actions to inform post-LPM choices, including the development of a drone carrier or drone reception devices on board combat vessels.

## STRENGTHENING AND DIVERSIFYING SHIP SELF-DEFENSE

In the face of diversity and the multiplication of new threats, the French fleet's self-defense capabilities appear very limited.

In addition to the drone threat illustrated in the air environment by the events in the Red Sea, the French Navy must, like its allied counterparts, be able to deal with extremely effective weapons. Hypersonic systems in particular raise critical questions. The combination of high speed and high speed maneuverability, which makes their trajectory unpredictable, gives them a very high penetration capacity, all the more so since it imposes on the opponent very limited reaction times. Despite this, defense capabilities do exist. However, they remain difficult to implement and their effectiveness is uncertain. For a naval force or a ship, this means avoiding primary sensing (the US option) by, say, blinding the other's satellites, but getting more satellites will make it increasingly difficult. Against a maneuverable warhead missile, the only effective way to defend against it is to destroy it in space or to trick it into position. Gliders, another category of hypersonic weapons, can be intercepted only when they begin penetrating at altitudes above the capabilities of today's interceptor missiles, or in the later, highly uncertain part of their path. Effective defense against these systems requires theater-level integration of joint and combined assets. As regards the current ships, the only reasonable prospects in the short and medium term are the activation of precautionary measures to increase the number of siloed missiles (Aster missiles) and the improvement of the performance, in particular the range, of the current missiles. Destruction by laser could be envisaged in the long term, but only with high powers given the thermal protection devices imposed by high speed.

Directed-energy weapons, on the other hand, can have faster applications against other threats, with lower powers. Using lasers or microwaves to damage or destroy their targets, they are indeed conducive to barrier-free spaces such as airborne spaces. For a variety of reasons, only laser weapons appear to have a future at sea. Many projects exist in Europe and elsewhere. These weapons are therefore expected to emerge in the naval sector in the next 5 to 6 years. The cost of firing a laser shot is minuscule, and the absence of ammunition greatly simplifies logistics. Once their power is under control, the effects on the target are variable, ranging from the destruction of a small drone to the damage to ship equipment, from blindness to the destruction of the sensors of an observation satellite.

However, the rate of fire today remains very modest and is not sufficient to deal with overwhelming attacks without a combination with other weapons systems.

Lasers represent an accessible and cost-effective means of diversifying self-defense capabilities to counter evolving threats, both for reasons of cost and to avoid, as mentioned in the introduction, consuming a valuable potential on targets with little impact and at the risk of being deprived of the most advanced weapons.

Rapid integration of existing short- or very short-range systems, such as missiles or high-speed guns, can also be a solution. But there are other, more innovative ideas that could be explored, such as the development of deception techniques using artificial intelligence to reduce the effectiveness of the sensors and weapons that oppose them.

In the longer term, in future weapons programs, the electromagnetic gun offers very interesting prospects. Despite integration constraints close to those of the laser for delivering a large amount of energy in a very short time, it has the advantage of being able to launch projectiles at very high speed, at distances of several hundred kilometers. This very high speed makes it potentially an anti-ship weapon with a very high kinetic impact, but also a weapon against the ground by firing a large explosive charge. The likely very low cost and simplicity of munitions are not the least of these weapons' interests. The Franco-German THEMA (TecTechnology for ElectroMagnetic Artillery) project is planning a demonstrator before 2030. This technology could be available to the successors of the Forbin and Knight Paul air defense frigates.

## SPACE AND COLLABORATIVE COMBAT FOR INFORMATION SUPERIORITY

But the best weaponry is not enough if informational superiority does not allow an adversary to be located, to know his intentions, and to deny him the same capabilities in order to ultimately act before him and defeat him. In modern naval warfare, the speed of action, the speed of arms and their stealth give this superiority, but also the time factor, a determining weight.

In this context, space is an indispensable but weakening environment. New Space has improved both the performance and resilience of the services it provides, which are central to several functions critical to military operations: telecommunications, navigation and positioning, intelligence, surveillance, and warning.

This will continue in the coming years, with growing risks from space congestion and satellite-directed weaponry. The cyber threat, which is the only one capable of simultaneously targeting all capabilities and thus of countering the necessary logic of redundancy combining commercial and specifically military services, will no doubt remain the most serious for global space capabilities. Despite these risks, given technology and lower launch costs, space will allow those who continue to prioritize it in the coming years to continuously monitor a theater. This is a direction that the French armies must maintain if they are to benefit from a new reality: the transparency of the battlefield.

There is not enough space to achieve informational superiority. While elements of a maritime force have historically collaborated at sea, digital technologies open up another dimension to this collaboration, even as the ranges and speeds of weapons threatening naval forces reduce response times and require greater anticipation. Thus, collaborative combat tends to transform the naval force, a collection of ships, into an «information whole» whose sensors and effectors are distributed over various platforms. With weapons thousands of miles in range, this "whole" must extend beyond the navy. Collaborative combat requires the development of a virtual military cloud that allows for seamless communication between land, sea, air, space, and cyberspace. The US lead with JADC2 raises several key questions for its Western partners: how to maintain interoperability with US militaries without being trapped by their system and technological choices? What standardization of data to safeguard the operational and industrial interests of US allies? In this, it is unfortunate that the military planning law did not provide for a national military cloud. Data standardization within NATO can be a way to assert French - or even European - industrial and operational interests that need to be identified first. These questions will be all the more important because the US's strategic distance will become clearer if Donald Trump is elected.

## EXPLORING NEW APPLICATION AREAS FOR ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

In the military field, AI is already a reality in surveillance, monitoring and many sensors. But the broad spectrum of its potential applications remains unexplored. Before another major disruption occurs, the main axis of progress is to identify uses that can benefit from existing technologies: many processes can be improved using available data and up-to-date algorithms, subject to adaptation.



The classification of mobiles from an optronic image is a good example, optronics being generally a promising field of application. Lowering the extraction threshold, resulting in an increase in the range of radars, is another. Underwater warfare also offers a wide range of applications, both to better identify a submarine on a sonar image and to optimize the positioning and use of numerous detection means.

What is also at stake is data sharing. This line of progress may seem limited, but it is likely to allow the rapid emergence of new capabilities and to significantly improve existing ones. It should be a priority for the French Navy.

## BENEFITING FROM THE QUANTUM SENSOR REVOLUTION

Finally, the Navy must prepare for the quantum revolution. Among them, sensors open the most interesting perspectives in the medium term. The skills of French manufacturers and laboratories are an opportunity to seize. The foreseeable operational gain is such that we should not be outmatched by our adversaries.

Quantum sensors have the potential to dramatically improve system performance. They make it possible to envisage navigation that is both accurate and independent of an external signal. While positioning system signals are routinely jammed, they will be a safety factor for all ships and aircraft, civil or military, equipped with systems incorporating them. But they will also make weapons more precise and effective, because they, too, will be resistant to jamming and navigation, making it easier for them to cross opposing defenses.

In the underwater domain, quantum sensors have two major interests. While the propagation of electromagnetic waves underwater remains a barrier to underwater telecommunications, quantum sensors make it possible to envisage small-sized low-frequency antennas that can be integrated on underwater mobiles. These antennas would allow a submarine to be more closely integrated into a naval force through near-constant communications, which is a real revolution. The same antennas also open up opportunities for the coordinated use of underwater drones that can be exchanged with each other or with surface installations. The second interest is related to quantum magnetometers. Whereas underwater detection today relies mainly on the propagation of sound waves, with their own limits, these

magnetometers could considerably widen the ranges of detection based on the variation of the magnetic field linked to the presence of the large metal masses that are submarines. Their areas of undetectability would be reduced accordingly.

At the forefront of underwater detection, the French Navy must invest in these fields, which are essential to the first component of its deterrence. But to quickly improve the operational efficiency of its ships, regardless of the technologies chosen, the Navy, and the Ministry of Defense more broadly, must redouble their efforts so that innovation can be incorporated on board much more quickly. While progress has been made in identifying technological bricks that may be of operational interest and conducting experiments, their deployment still faces budgetary and sometimes industrial challenges in acquiring new unprogrammed equipment and integrating it into existing systems. There is therefore a step between experimentation and the deployment of innovation, with the need for acceleration covering the entire chain leading to robust use of new technologies in operational situations.

This issue must be taken into account in the capacity of future ships to accommodate innovations in a short loop: technical and financial modularity cannot be a simple option in future naval programs. How to achieve this raises many industrial and political questions, all the more complex because they will be difficult to address at the national level.

JEAN-FRANÇOIS PELLIARD

# FRENCH OVERSEAS : GEOPOLITICAL AND MARITIME ISSUES

THIERRY DUCHESNE, DIRECTOR OF THE MARITIME DEPARTMENT OF THE FMES

*France is often referred to as a maritime power because it has jurisdiction over the world's second largest EEZ with 10.2 million km<sup>2</sup>. Above all, this presentation shows a poor understanding of the maritime dimension. For what makes power at sea is not the possession of "vast acres of sea," but the ability of a state to move, trade, exploit, protect, and fight in it. This requires fleets, technologies, ports and...seafarers.*

*Among France's maritime assets is, of course, the existence of territories all around the globe that provide it with a global presence that no other nation in the world has. Thanks to these French lands, our country has real potential in terms of influence, permanence, development and power. But the quid pro quo must be our ability to protect and defend these territories that will be increasingly coveted.*

## THE DISRUPTION TO THE STRATEGIC LANDSCAPE IN THE INDO-PACIFIC REGION FACING FRANCE'S OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

The new geopolitical context presents both opportunities and challenges for the Overseas Territories.

The good news is that our world is "getting married" more and more. In this context, the ultramarine territories have interesting opportunities for development and trade. They are becoming more strategic every day.

The bad news is that new powers, most notably China, are developing conquest strategies that extend to the sea. Our overseas territories are on the front line. Isolation is no longer a safeguard. The defense of these territories is becoming an ardent necessity.

90% of France's territory lies in the Indo-Pacific region, where the world's center of gravity has shifted. Here is where China is patiently weaving its webs, and taking one position at a time that could secure its supremacy in the future. Its dream of great power «depends on the maritime economy that forms the backbone of its economy<sup>1</sup>» So, in keeping with its Go culture, it expands its maritime power by acting on each of the factors with determination. China now accounts for 59% of the world's shipbuilding, has 15 of the world's top 20 ports, the world's largest merchant fleet (250 million tons of gross tonnage), and the world's second largest military fleet.

On the oceans, China has adopted a constrictor strategy, piling on small actions that will not

provoke casus belli, but will lead to major strategic change. It has developed a military and commercial presence in ports such as Djibouti, Gwadar in Pakistan, and Kyaukpyu in Burma, close to major international straits. Currently, it is deploying towards the Pacific Islands where it is continuing its implementation work. This is also the case in the Solomon Islands where, in 2024, it has just signed major security agreements that could lead to the establishment of a military base soon.

The other major emerging maritime power is India. Fearing China's maritime activism in the Indian Ocean, India is also pursuing a policy of expanding its fleet and establishing naval bases. But, unlike China, this policy is conducted in cooperation with Western powers. For example, the US has provided ports of call to India at its large naval base in Diego Garcia and to France in Réunion. After establishing naval bases on its Andaman and Nicobar islands at the outlet of the Strait of Malacca, India on March 6, 2024, inaugurated a second naval military base in the Laquedives archipelago of Minicoy on a sensitive sea route.

## FRANCE'S NEW OVERSEAS GEOPOLITICAL CHALLENGES

As a result, France's ultramarine territories in the Indo-Pacific (90% of DROM-COMs) are now on a global fault line. In a few years, they have become geostrategic interfaces in coveted Oceans, allowing France to be as close as possible to areas of tension.

<sup>1</sup> Hugues Eudeline, «Objectifs politiques de la Chine et stratégie maritime (2/2) (T 1262)», RDN, April 2, 2021

For France's Pacific territories, the stakes are now linked to China's own agenda, which has adopted a very proactive policy of influence. With a multidimensional approach covering various sectors such as security, the economy, culture, international relations and the environment, this strategy of influence aims to bring island states into its sphere of influence.

China also knows how to take advantage of states that are in crisis or destabilized, as the Solomon Islands or Vanuatu show us. It is undeniable that the current crisis in New Caledonia is a powerful destabilizing factor for France in this area of the Pacific playing in China's favor.

And the French Indian Ocean territories are regaining the strategic position they lost with the inauguration of the Suez Canal in the late nineteenth century. Indeed, Houthi rebels' actions in the Red Sea against commercial vessels have had an effect by halving the number of vessels in the Suez Canal in the first half of 2024.

Faced with threats in the Red Sea's coastal waters, merchant fleets are increasingly diverting to the high seas. This is what has already started, as 7.6 million tons of goods now pass through the Cape of Good Hope, compared to 1.8 million tons in the Suez Canal. In these circumstances, islands such as Mayotte or Reunion are of major strategic importance and could become even more important in the future if the passage through Suez were to constitute an unacceptable risk for maritime carriers.

These territories are also important for preventing another danger to maritime traffic, piracy. This threat, if currently contained in the Indian Ocean, is not expected to disappear and will remain permanent. It may even gain momentum with the advent of new technologies that will make it easier to attack commercial ships. Considering the known range of action of Somali pirates, the naval bases of Reunion and Mayotte will remain very important to contribute to the security of maritime transport.

## THE MARITIME CHALLENGES OF THE FRENCH OVERSEAS TERRITORIES

With the exception of French Guiana, all French overseas territories are islands whose paradox is that, although they depend very heavily on the sea, they have difficulty in transforming this constraint into an asset. Yet real potential exists that could be based on a dynamic and resilient blue economy and their strategic dimension.

## THE CHALLENGE OF MARITIME TRANSPORT

Given their high dependence on imports, the first of the maritime challenges of overseas territories is the maintenance of maritime supply routes.

This is the case first of all for food supplies, which range from 67% for French Guiana to 87% for Martinique, and even 98% for Saint-Pierre and Miquelon. High population density, scarcity of agricultural land and increasing urbanization will aggravate this situation in the future, with the exception, however, of Guyana.

The other vital overseas dependency concerns energy. With the exception of Reunion, which produces 10% of renewable energy, all DROM-COMs are totally dependent on fuel oil, gas or coal for their electrical production and the needs of industry and the population.

In the current context of widespread questioning of the world order and naval rearmament, the very high dependence of these territories on external supplies is a real fragility. The threats that could lead to an interruption of logistical flows are not on paper. For this reason, we must take very seriously the prevention of this type of crisis, which requires three major measures.

Firstly, to have strategic food reserves in the DROM-COMs which could either rely on the private sector or on crisis stocks in ports<sup>2</sup>. Moreover, France needs to be able to rely on a strategic commercial fleet. It already exists, but, as recommended by MP Yannick Chenevard in his recent report on the Strategic Fleet<sup>3</sup>, it needs to be accompanied by more proactive and more...strategic measures. Finally, maintaining logistical links requires the ability of French and allied navies to protect traffic destined for overseas territories.

## THE CHALLENGE OF EXPLOITING FISHERIES RESOURCES

Among the sectors of the blue economy, fisheries and aquaculture appear to be obvious resources in the French overseas territories. Their vast EEZs contain large and well-managed stocks of high value-added species such as tuna, toothfish, shrimp and lobster. However, the sector is often in a loss-making position, despite the considerable resources deployed by the State to finance the

<sup>2</sup> 2022 Annual Report of the Court of Auditors, Part 6, «La sécurité des approvisionnements alimentaires».

<sup>3</sup> Report from the government mission on the reassessment of the strategic fleet arrangement by MP Yannick Chenboulevard, July 17, 2023.

sector and preserve its resources. Overseas fishing is in a mixed situation. Artisanal and inshore fishing is aging and failing to meet the needs of the population. The paradox is that these areas, which are endowed with fish resources, must import considerable quantities of fish.

Offshore fishing has improved and thrived in recent years. It is a sector with undeniable growth potential. For example, fishing for toothfish in the waters of the French Southern and Antarctic Territories (TAAF) by longliners from Reunion alone generates 8% of the total French value added with only 1% of the quantities fished. It is a fishery that is very well organized and well controlled by the TAAF administration.

In Polynesia, deep-sea fishing is also in the midst of a revival. It has increased by 30% in five years to 80 units, representing an additional 42% tonnage. Polynesia wants to triple its fleet in the next few years, with significant fish stocks in its waters.

In all cases, these fishing fleets can rely on well-controlled maritime areas, in particular by the means of the Navy as part of the action of the State at sea. The major police operations in the early 2000s in the TAAF, the permanent patrols in the Pacific EEZs, have made it possible to improve the situation and to push illegal fishing fleets out of the limits of the EEZs. There remains a sensitive area, Guyana, where incursions by fishermen from neighboring Brazil or Suriname are permanent and often require the use of armed force to intercept offending vessels.

## THE END OF THE MIRAGE OF THE DEEP SEABED ?

In its offshore EEZs, France could also have significant mineral resources that are still far from being fully investigated. Since the early 1970s, France, under the auspices of IFREMER, has maintained cutting-edge research in the field of deep-sea exploration and exploitation and in their access technologies. Still with this prospect of exploitation, France has systematically requested extensions of its continental shelf, increasing it to make it the first in the world with 11 million km<sup>2</sup>. But doubts about the environmental consequences of exploitation began to arise in the context of climate change. In November 2022, the President of the Republic set a new position for France, that of a moratorium on exploitation, pending environmental assessments.

At present, during the negotiations on the future mining code within the framework of the International Seabed Authority, twenty-seven states have joined France's proposal for a moratorium.

This position constitutes a complete reversal of the French position. It will make sense if the international community follows our lead, but it is far from certain. For, at the same time, states like Norway, China, and Nauru are driving the fires to begin exploitation.

## COMBATING ILLICIT ACTIVITIES AT SEA

The twenty-first century has been marked by profound geopolitical upheavals, but above all by an unprecedented level of crime. With the commodification of technologies and the globalization of trade, mafia networks are able to take advantage of this situation to transport their illicit cargoes from one continent to another.

The Caribbean has become an important base for combating trafficking at sea with the establishment of an OFAST antenna on site and, at sea, interception assets belonging to the Navy and Customs. For naval units operating out of the West Indies, the fight against drug trafficking has become the primary mission, and all state sensors are geared toward intercepting potential drug traffickers. This combat is also regional because the coordination of combat operations can also be carried out by the US-led Joint Interagency Task Force South (JIATF-S) based in Florida, which brings together some twenty countries in the area.

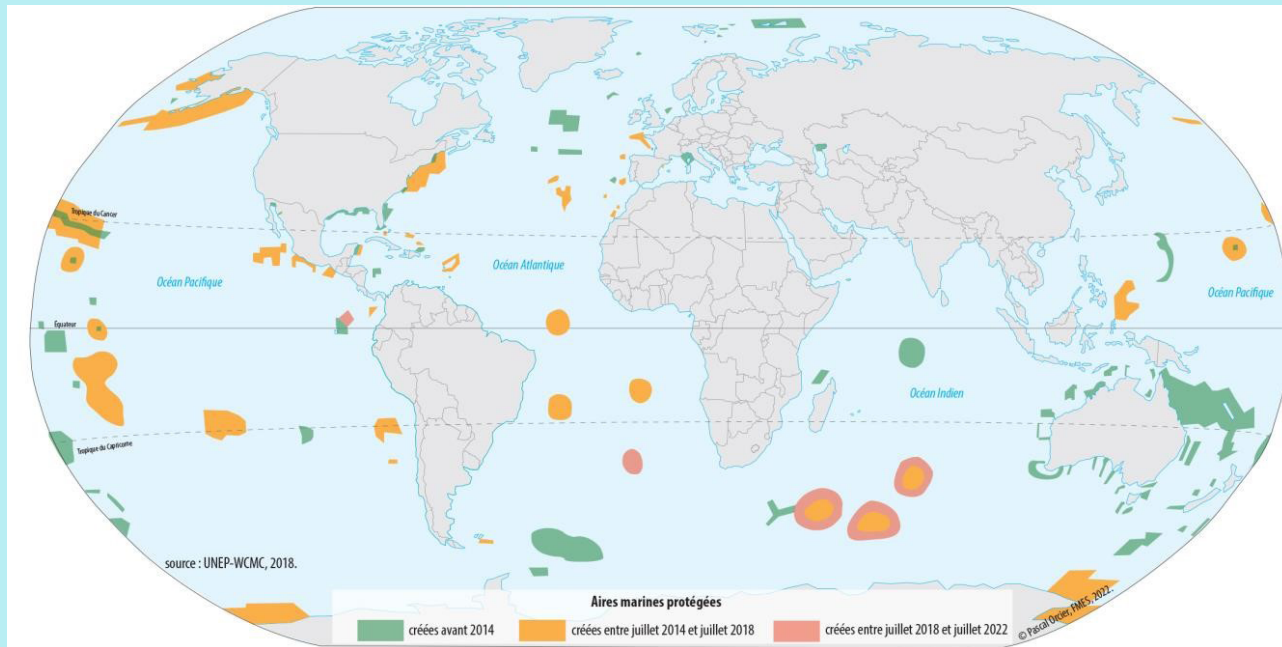
This struggle also involves Reunion, but to a lesser degree. Indeed, one of the sea routes for heroin smuggling from Iran runs through the northern Indian Ocean to East African countries and then onward to other destinations, including Europe.

Thanks to this pre-positioning of assets in the French overseas territories, the French Navy is the one in Europe that carries out the largest seizures. In 2021, it intercepted 44.8 tons of drugs across all oceans, worth €2 billion (33 tons in 2023). This result makes France one of the leading global players in the fight against this scourge at sea.

## THE NEW CHALLENGE OF PROTECTING THE ENVIRONMENT AT SEA

Protecting the environment at sea has become a sensitive issue for an ocean nation like France. This includes the creation of marine protected areas (MPAs), the concept of which was born in 1992. Many states, because of their international commitments, have established marine protected areas. 28 million km<sup>2</sup> are now under this status, or 7.7% of maritime areas.





Map of marine protected area extensions – FMES 2022

France has an offensive policy in this area. In its National Strategy for Protected Areas, it has already endorsed the Convention on Biological Biodiversity's 30X30<sup>4</sup> target by declaring 34.9% of its marine areas protected areas. With 3.5 million km<sup>2</sup> of marine areas in MPAs, France is the world leader, ahead of the USA (3.3 million km<sup>2</sup>).

97% of these MPAs are in French ultra-marine waters, which contain 80% of France's biodiversity. This is where France has created the second largest area in the world, the French Southern Lands, with an area of 1.6 million km<sup>2</sup>. The other major MPAs are those of Polynesia, the Coral Sea Nature Park in New Caledonia (1.3 million km<sup>2</sup>) and marine nature parks covering all the EEZs of Mayotte, Glorieux and Martinique.

Of course, many NGOs are outraged that the level of protection in these areas is not high enough and that we are dealing with 'paper' marine areas. This accusation can sometimes be made for highly coastal marine protected areas where surveillance and interception are more complex. However, this is much less true for our large marine areas, given their remoteness, which does not favor the discretion of potential vessels in violation of the detection and intervention means put in place.

These new projection capabilities will be complemented by next-generation maritime surveillance and response aircraft and drones.

But, as can be seen, this effort is really just catching up with a renewal of resources that has been constantly postponed. It is not up to the challenges of the new international environment. There is still time to mitigate emerging threats. In the new world, two territories should be subject to a special effort to avoid any possibility of escalation. These are New Caledonia and Mayotte/Reunion, where France's destabilization operations have begun. It is in these areas that we should concentrate our forces. But to do so, there is no mystery: we must now consent to this "war effort," which should not be a mere slogan, by returning to the financial volumes we had prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. The reality of our "war effort" has an indicator that doesn't lie. It's the percentage of GDP that we spend on defense. At 2%, France is still far from meeting the growing threats. Otherwise, we will be doomed to endure the new world order that is coming... and of which the French overseas territories are on the front line.

THIERRY DUCHESNE

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### CONCLUSION

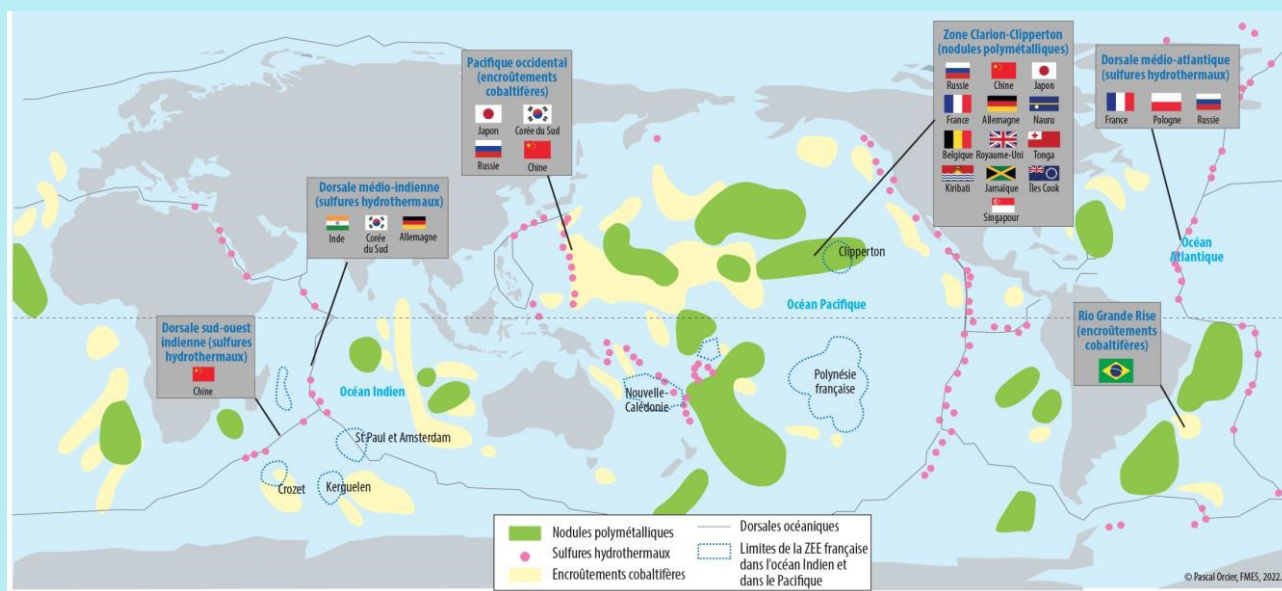
The future of France's overseas territories will be closely tied to maritime activities, given their economic and environmental reliance on the ocean.

But France, like China, must also develop a "Mahanite" vision of the sea, drawing on its powerful navy and overseas territories. These territories will have to be protected but also valued as strategic points of support. As Pierre Nerville wrote in his book on the late nineteenth-century American naval strategist Admiral Mahan: "For Mahan, the elements of sea control are trade in rising production, necessary trade, control of sea lanes, and possession of nearby or distant port bases in case of tension and war."<sup>5</sup>

Since the early 1990's, in order to capture the "peace dividend," the military posture in these territories has weakened considerably. The Military Programming Law 2024 / 2030 states that the armed forces will be strengthened overseas. For the Navy, this will mean the delivery of six new maritime patrol vessels and the first corvette to replace the surveillance frigates. With more autonomy, these units will be better able to monitor and respond to EEZs.

<sup>4</sup> Target 30X30 is defined by Target 3 of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF). By 2030, states will be required to place 30% of land, inland waters and oceans in protected areas and other effective area-based conservation measures.

<sup>5</sup> Mahan and the Master of the Seas, Pierre Nerville, Strategies, Bibliothèque Berger-Levrault, 1981.



Map of deep mineral resources – FMES 2022

# ORCAS VERSUS PIRANHAS

## TEN LESSONS FROM NAVAL WARFARE IN THE BLACK SEA AND RED SEA

CAPTAIN (NAVY) THIBAUT LAVERNE AND COMMANDER FRANÇOIS-OLIVIER CORMAN,  
RESEARCHER ASSOCIATE AT THE FMES INSTITUTE

*Attempting to draw lessons from the ongoing naval conflicts in the Black Sea and off the coast of Yemen is unavoidable: these heated clashes are fought over communication, which often yields to sensationalism, even romanticism. In addition, the particularities of these two theaters prompt precautions to be taken before any generalization. In the Black Sea, two riparian states clash for sea control. Ukraine aims to secure trade routes, while Russia seeks territorial gains, all within a relatively small and enclosed sea. In the Red Sea, we see an “all-out” continental disrupter descending toward the sea in a banning posture tinged with geopolitical blackmail. So, in our quest for lessons, let us not draw hasty parallels between the two theaters, and let us be cautious about extrapolating to war at sea. And, equally important, without denying the obvious changes taking place in the Black Sea and the Red Sea, we must be careful not to see what is new where it does not exist.*

*But we have no choice: with conflicts at sea historically rare, it would be guilty of missing an opportunity to draw key lessons from them. Thus, while attempting to avoid the pitfalls of interpretation that have marked military history, we propose here a provisional decalogue of the current naval conflict.*

### FIRST LESSON : THE INNERMOST NATURE OF NAVAL COMBAT REMAINS STABLE

Before looking for an inflection, let's begin by highlighting a few tactical constants that have not taken a turn. In particular, the clashes in these two key maritime conflict zones show that naval combat is inherently destructive, swift, and decisive.

First, it is destructive. Since 2022, the Black Sea has become a new “Ironbottom”<sup>1</sup>: wrecks litter the shores of Ukraine and Crimea, and attrition against the Russian fleet trapped in the Black Sea is Ukraine's top priority. It does so by skillfully combining a rain of cruise missiles with a horde of naval or air drones, and possibly soon submarines, whose numbers and lethality are steadily increasing, as evidenced by the gaping holes in the hulls of Russian ships<sup>2</sup>. In the Red Sea, the destruction of ships linked to Israeli interests, which is also the objective of the Houthis forces, has extended by extension to the US and British naval forces which have struck Yemen, while the Houthis are not left out in the race for lethality<sup>3</sup>. While Western naval vessels have so far been spared, the Houthis have already managed to damage well-protected vessels, such as Saudi Arabia's Al Madinah frigate in 2017. In both the Black and Red Seas, decision-making at sea is carried not by conventional deterrence, influence, cyber attack, or sheer force, but by the volume of wreckage sent to the seabed.

Second, it is rapid. Naval actions remain fleeting: surprised by the strike of two anti-ship missiles in April 2022, the cruiser Moskva took on water in a few minutes before sinking a little later, while the Russian ships surprised by drones were all quickly distraught. The fate of the ships docked is even more expeditious. In the Red Sea, the reaction time to ballistic missile strikes is seconds and minutes when compared to One-Way Attack (OWA) drones. While naval operations are long-term, combat actions always bear the stamp of fulgurance.

Lastly, it is decisive. Tactically, we have to note that the first blow received whistles the end of the game. This is the case for the cruiser Moskva, despite its size and natural resilience, but also for smaller Russian vessels struck by Unmanned Surface Vessels (USVs). Unprepared berthing strikes are also indisputable: the sailing of an affected ship will not take place for a long time, if ever again. Strategically, the decisive aspect of naval casualties is even sharper. The Ukrainian navy's fate was thus decided in the early days of the conflict, with its disappearance and its place in the hands of the Ukrainian intelligence and secret services, which are using the support of both the Western

<sup>1</sup> Ironbottom Sound is the name given by the U.S. Navy to the area at the eastern end of the New Georgia Strait between Guadalcanal, Savo Island and the Solomons, due to the many ships sunk during the Battle of Savo Island during the Pacific War.

<sup>2</sup> As of July 7, 2024, Ukraine had damaged or destroyed 27 Russian vessels, according to Ukrainian Vice Admiral Oleksiy Neizhpapa, 36 percent of the 74 vessels of all sizes available to the Russian Black Sea Fleet at the start of the conflict.

<sup>3</sup> The Tutor attack on June 12, 2024, involved a surface drone loaded with 400kg of explosives, far more than an air drone or ballistic missile can carry.

“land mass” and “enablers” to regain a capacity to act at sea. On the Russian side, the consequences are immediate once the Black Sea is closed to outside reinforcements: behind closed doors in the pontiff basin, Russia's naval mass shrinks inexorably, despite a great deal of structural and digital resilience. In short, today, as yesterday, taking shots at sea is a sustainable swing on the wrong side. Orcas and piranhas understood this.

Moreover, the conflicts in the Black Sea and Red Sea confirm the primacy of offense and initiative: a purely defensive or even passive stance is risky at the tactical level. The Russian Navy has offered countless examples in the Black Sea, from Mosul to the many instances of ships struck in the immediate vicinity of Crimea, at anchor or on coastal patrol, thinking they were protected from the shadow of land defenses. In the Red Sea, the primacy of the offensive lies beneath the differences in approach between the purely defensive European Operation Aspides<sup>4</sup> and the more offensive Anglo-Saxon posture. More broadly, there is a marked advantage of “free” structures over the more hierarchically “constrained” structures, which stifle initiative and restrict the use of force, whether by culture (Russian Navy in the Black Sea) or to avoid collateral damage (Western navies in the Red Sea). Thus, piranhas win against orcas primarily because they can do pretty much anything they want, and thus take advantage of opportunities as they arise.

### SECOND LESSON : DEFENDING ONESELF AT SEA IS EXPENSIVE

Commitments in the Black Sea and Red Sea remind us, first of all, that there is no immunization in principle in an environment where the threat can come from any direction, with an ever-changing degree of sophistication: any player in naval combat, indiscriminately, from minesweeper to cruiser, is vulnerable at sea.

The Clausewitzian demonstration of the superiority of the defensive over the offensive cannot be transposed into the fluid space that is the sea, which is inherently unfavorable to the defensive. Survival comes at a high price. For example, in the Black Sea, a ship needs effective surveillance and self-defense systems to combat even a rudimentary USV threat<sup>5</sup>. In the Red Sea, sophisticated combat systems, coupled with modern and expensive missiles<sup>6</sup> such as the Aster or the Missile Standard, are needed to intercept even rudimentary ballistic or anti-ship missiles. In both theaters, there is also a need to escort civilian commercial vessels with several combat vessels<sup>7</sup>, whether they are Russian vessels protecting the Syrian Express<sup>8</sup> in the Black

Sea between Novorossiysk and the Dardanelles<sup>9</sup>, or Western vessels in the Red Sea. A few “rudimentary disruptors” of the piranha breed can thus put on the teeth, by their very existence, a large volume of naval means of the killer whale breed.

What is true at sea is also true on the coast: defending a naval base is very expensive for the Russians, as can be seen from the devices deployed to protect the military port of Sevastopol (light artillery pieces, radars, lookouts, protective nets, attack helicopters on alert, etc.) or the pillars of the Crimean bridge, also targeted by an attack by Ukrainian naval drones a few months ago (permanent protection ships, powerful smoke bombs to mask them from the optical guidance systems of Ukrainian drones, etc).

In addition to robust defense systems, these engagements confirm a crucial and costly need for naval resilience. Tactical resilience, on the one hand, to take a hit : this was what was lacking at the cruiser Moskva, which had a low level of resilience due to a highly interlinked system<sup>10</sup>, defects in safety components and likely poor training. Systemic resilience, on the other hand, in terms of logistics and maintenance : Russia's industrial fabric is thus put to the test in the Black Sea, as links with better-equipped ports are made tricky. Moreover, the threat of Ukrainian strikes on Sevastopol obliges Russia to maintain a permanent emergency-gear capacity, impeding maintenance and de facto causing machine-potential wear and tear.

<sup>4</sup> See an analysis of European posture in the Red Sea in AUSSEUR Pascal, “ASPIDES. Une opération purement défensive qui ne règle rien. Des enjeux géopolitiques oubliés» interview by the blog Brussels2, April 10, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that the Ukrainian USVs strike primarily the “weak”, that is, logistic units, amphibious units, and small, poorly armed warships.

<sup>6</sup> Whose “cost-effectiveness” ratio was widely debated during the first engagements of rudimentary drones of class 20 k€ by missiles of class 1 M€.

<sup>7</sup> The operations launched in the years 2010-2020 in the Strait of Hormuz (e.g. Agenor for the European Union) were not of the same standard: they were more concerned with accompanying civilian vessels through remote surveillance than with escorting them to defend them against threats of direct attacks. The requirement in terms of defense is not at the same level.

<sup>8</sup> This term refers to the maritime logistics link, based on oil tankers and bulk carriers, set up between the Russian ports in the Black Sea and the Syrian ports of Baniyas and Tartous since mid-2010.

<sup>9</sup> In October 2023, in response to the Ukrainian USV threat, a few Syrian Express ships “stuck” a Russian frigate and two corvettes, accompanied by a maritime patrol aircraft, for their transit in the Black Sea, using two different routes.

<sup>10</sup> It can be noted that civilian vessels struck in the Red Sea, which are “filled with voids”, do not sink despite the blows to the goal. This is a comparative disadvantage of modern naval vessels: they are better defended, but when they strike, they are paradoxically more vulnerable.



Let us remember, then, that defensive operations at sea require a double “ticket of entry” to bear fruit: on the one hand, we accept that they are expensive and, on the other hand, that they are well thought out. But let us not forget either that an excessive focus on the vulnerability of certain naval platforms can prove misleading: the US Navy lost 11 aircraft carriers during the Second World War, an outcome that did not prevent this type of unit from establishing itself as the new capital ship, because of its unparalleled offensive value... and the defensive effort that was deployed to ensure its protection.

Just because defense is difficult at sea, one should not think it is unattainable; only if one believes it to be unattainable, defense against piranhas becomes impossible.

### THIRD LESSON : THE SEA – EVEN WHEN SMALL – IS NOT YET TRANSPARENT

The war in Ukraine gives the undeniable impression that the aero-land battlefield has become transparent (satellite images accessible to the general public, permanent surveillance by drones, immediate detection of the slightest mobile phone in transmission, etc.), and that this impression also applies to the Black Sea: satellite images of Russian ships in port are updated almost continuously, while small Ukrainian surface drones easily “find” their targets after long journeys of several hundred nautical boats.

But the players in naval combat in the Black Sea do not actually have the same tactical omniscience as the players in aero-land combat who play each other's survival with each other every time they «step out» of their hiding places on the front lines. For example, despite criss-crossing the land front with unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), Russia suffers from a lack of maritime surveillance capabilities, which deprives the Black Sea Fleet of advance warning of attackers. After recalling old Be-12 seaplanes designed in the 1950's, the effectiveness of which is visibly lacking, Russia has established helicopter patrols that are proving more effective, but with limited coverage. Russia's A-50 radar became a prime target for Ukrainian ground-to-air defense. All of this creates the potential for temporary “pockets of opacity” into which Ukrainians rush to strike Russian capabilities, while seeking to extend that opacity. The Ukrainian operation to take over Vichki Boika's oil and gas rigs in September 2023 was designed to destroy Russian radar and stockpiles of ammunition and helicopter fuel.

The attack on the MSP-17 platform in August 2024 was aimed at destroying a Russian GPS jammer. Conversely, on the Ukrainian side, despite Western support, most USV attacks have occurred near the coast, where targets are easily detectable visually, but much less on the high seas, where temporary dilution is still possible.

It should be noted here that the natural mobility of naval forces remains a major asset, as it complicates the targeting cycle (find, fix, track, target, engage, assess) by delaying each of these steps. While not a guarantee of full immunity, the Black Sea strike figures show that mobility remains a good initial protection<sup>11</sup>: the majority of Russian casualties from Ukrainian strikes were on targets at berth, at anchorage or in routine and predictable transit in the immediate vicinity of the coast.

In the Red Sea, Houthi land strikes, which are sometimes highly precise, can also give the impression of reading openness in the maritime approaches to the Bab al-Mandeb Strait. However, this information comes primarily from the passivity of the targets (AIS emission, use of known navigation rails, use of VHF radio, etc.) and from the assistance of other actors (e.g. Iranians). Conversely, military units that are more discreet and exhibit more unpredictable behavior are less easily targeted. Finally, let's not forget that many UAVs of the OWA type miss their targets simply because they are on the move.

In the end, while modern technology makes concentration of forces more complex and reduces the opacity of the environment, this opacity is not yet dissipated, while the multiplicity of sensors at the same time increases the opportunities for disappointment. Orcas and piranhas therefore still have good opportunities to surprise each other in the future.

### FOURTH LESSON : THE SEA IS A BIDIRECTIONAL AMPLIFIER OF LAND COMBAT

« The real importance of sea power is its influence on land operations », Corbett (1854-1922) emphasized. This maxim is harsh, and clashes in the Black and Red Seas confirm that the sea, before it is an end, is an especially powerful means of influencing the course of events ashore. In the Black Sea, Russia's actions in the early months of the war demonstrated how the advantage - albeit relative - in the maritime environment can produce gains on land, from threatening to disembark in

in Odessa (and thereby station a portion of Ukrainian troops there at the early stages of the invasion), to using the amphibious maneuver to disembark troops across the Dnieper whose bridges had been severed, to contributing to the air defense of the Crimean peninsula, to strike the land with cruise missiles with impunity, to blockade major ports civilians such as Mariupol, Berdiansk, Melitopol, Kherson and Odessa. The sea amplifies the earth's maneuver, becoming “the multiplier or divider of the earth's power, reinforcing or reducing the decisive effort which is ultimately that of the armies, the one which saves or conquers the territories.”<sup>12</sup>

Conversely, the land mass has a decisive influence on naval action: this phenomenon, which Admiral Castex (1878-1968) called “the reaction of the land on the sea”, increases with technical progress on the one hand, and takes on a particular scale in the landlocked maritime areas on the other<sup>13</sup>. This is evident off the coast of Yemen, where the Houthis, although without a combat navy, create a major degree of disorder on a good part of world maritime traffic by acting exclusively from the land. In the Black Sea, despite the early suppression of their navy, Ukrainians quickly leaned back to their ground base to strike Russians at sea, as when they attacked the cruiser Moskva (hit by two Neptun missiles fired from a coast battery), battled around Snake Island (where Ukrainian drones taking off from the mainland repeatedly hit Russian Raptor patrol boats), or hit USVs (remotely operated from the island of Snakes and return to the Crimea, have learned the catchphrase “a ship is a fool to fight a fort.” To a lesser extent, this adage also applies to Westerners in the Red Sea, while dozens of US and British strikes have failed to seriously undermine the Houthis' potential to harm them<sup>14</sup>.

More generally, the events off the coasts of Yemen and Ukraine remind us that the orca approaching an enemy coast where piranhas proliferate has a clear disadvantage there, which is worsening in the long term: subjected to leveling means such as mines or implemented from the ground such as aircraft, missiles or drones, it must deploy maximum efforts from the early stages of the conflict ... but it must also have the necessary political will<sup>15</sup>.

Ultimately, the sea can be decisive, but it is no panacea, as Castex warned about the Black Sea: “The master of the sea...can achieve serious results in the Black Sea theater of operations...only if he has at his disposal powerful land-based assets, fully comparable to those of his adversary. The naval force is the multiplier of the armed forces' effort, the only decisive force [...]. But if the coefficient multiplies zero, the product is also equal to zero.”<sup>16</sup>

## FIFTH LESSON : NAVAL COMBAT IS INCREASINGLY INTERTWINED WITH MARITIME CHALLENGES

Two seemingly antagonistic phenomena are at work. On the one hand, maritime challenges are becoming globalized, and thus are moving, in theory, away from sovereign protection by military actors whose vocation is to remain the guardians of their immediate national interests. But, on the other hand, the consideration of these same issues by the navies is inescapable, because the impacts of a disruption of the existing order are more numerous, more interlinked and more publicized than before. Yet it is the latter trend that dominates. Observations of the Black and Red Seas suggest that the historical nexus between trade and naval power, at the heart of Mahan's Seapower theories (1840-1914), is more relevant than ever.

In the Black Sea, the conflict began in what became known as a race war, in which a number of civilian ships were struck by missiles or mines before being replaced a few months later by a grain corridor. From an early age, maritime infrastructure became naval targets, such as in Odessa or Mykolaev, but also the Kerch Bridge, its ferry terminal<sup>17</sup>, the oil and gas platforms of the Gulf of Odessa<sup>18</sup>, and even the Nord Stream 2 pipeline in the Baltic Sea. Conversely, some of Ukraine's recreational infrastructure was used as a departure area for USV. As a result of the threat of USVs<sup>19</sup>, the Russian Navy had to mobilize naval assets to protect its logistical flow to Syria before redirecting this logistical flow, which now comes

<sup>12</sup> CASTEX Raoul (amiral), *Théories stratégiques*, tome V, Economica, Paris, 1997, p. 170.

<sup>13</sup> CASTEX Raoul (amiral), *Théories stratégiques*, tome III, Economica, Paris, 1997, p. 157.

<sup>14</sup> Soullignons cependant que pour certains analystes, ces frappes étaient volontairement mesurées, le signalement stratégique vers les observateurs du conflit en mer Rouge ayant davantage de valeur que l'effet militaire direct.

<sup>15</sup> HOLMES James, “Houthi Rebels Cry Havoc! And Let Slip the Drones of War”, *Proceedings*, Février 2024.

<sup>16</sup> CASTEX Raoul (amiral), *Théories stratégiques*, tome V, Economica, Paris, 1997, p. 519.

<sup>17</sup> Ukrainians attacked the Slavyanin civilian ferry in the port of Kavkaz by air drone on July 23, 2024, potentially as the last ship capable of carrying freight cars in the region, and as such was an important part of the Russian ammunition supply chain for the occupied Crimean peninsula.

<sup>18</sup> That have a dual purpose in supporting maritime surveillance radars.

<sup>19</sup> The Ukrainians struck the TM Sig on 05/08/23 at anchor, the Sparta IV on 17/08/23 at sea, the Yaz on 14/09/23 at sea and the Ursa Major on 14/09/23 at sea.

<sup>11</sup> LAVERNHE Thibault, “De l'inconvénient d'être fixe, et de l'avantage d'être mobile” *Le Marin*, November 13, 2023.

comes from the Baltic Sea and reaches Tartus via Gibraltar<sup>20</sup>. Finally, navies had to re-engage with river-based solutions to find workarounds for the closure of Turkish straits to naval vessels.

In the Red Sea, as the Houthis' targeting of commercial interests in countries with ties to Israel has increased, the challenge of protecting commercial traffic has brought back escorted convoys at a level not seen since the Persian Gulf tanker war of the 1980's. On the other hand, rumors of the deliberate targeting of submarine cables have not been confirmed, as the incidents may have been caused by anchors from commercial ships. If this had been the case, a new type of seabed surveillance mission would probably have emerged, bringing in its wake close cooperation between naval power instruments and those involved in the submarine cable business<sup>21</sup>.

And tomorrow, the issue of clearing landmines in the Black and Red Seas will open a new chapter in this community of interest.

Apart from strategic consequences which have been widely discussed (reorganization of sea lanes, impact on world trade, etc.), this intertwining also entails tactical consequences: more and more, the actors of naval combat must know how to operate in the middle of many actors with sometimes divergent interests, but which occupy, or even compete, the same global space. In the Red Sea, Western ships operating in the protection of merchant vessels have to manage "clandestine vessels" that sometimes latch onto convoys at the last moment, regularly sailing close to Iranian merchant vessels and dhows that are hard to confirm serve as point-of-reference vessels to the Houthis, while in the sky drones from a large number of nations swarm<sup>22</sup>. In the Black Sea, Ukraine used a civilian commercial ship to deliver four French-built patrol boats to Romania in December 2023. This entanglement requires a high level of knowledge and intelligence at the lowest tactical level in order to distinguish between orcas and piranhas in the midst of a vast fauna of turbid water fish.

## SIXTH LESSON : TACTICAL MASTERY OF THE SEA IS NEVER ABSOLUTE

Corbett's famous strategic principle is repeatedly confirmed at the tactical level: sea control is always relative, in time and in space. Failure to understand this risks deep disillusionment. In the Black Sea, no warring party can credibly claim control of maritime space. On the one hand, after initial domination in the Gulf

of Odessa, Russian naval forces retreated eastward, and Ukrainians managed to carry iron into Russian-held maritime approaches<sup>23</sup>, in the Sea of Azov or south of the Black Sea, using aerial or surface drones. The attack on the Russian ship Ivan Khurs by naval drones at more than 200 water vessels in Odessa is a testament to this. On the other hand, the Russians never really stopped their regular forays into the western Black Sea, and they, too, have relied on "weak" tactics to strike in the denial zone, such as when surface drones hit the Zatoka Bridge near Odessa in February 2023. In fact, Ukrainians never locked the Gulf of Odessa. This is a far cry from the "freeze" on Ukraine's land front at sea.

To the south of the Red Sea, the Houthis' freedom of air and sea action has not been fully curtailed, despite the deployment of substantial Western military assets coupled with ground strikes.

Control of the sea is still incomplete and relative, and is likely to remain so for a long time. Even the Royal Navy, which had overwhelming naval superiority during the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), had only partial control in a few key areas. At sea, and especially near shore, there is no impregnable "stronghold" secured by barbed wire: even the weakest piranha can always try something, provided he never resigns himself to a purely wait-and-see defensive posture.

## SEVENTH LESSON : THE INTERPENETRATION OF ENVIRONMENTS AND FIELDS IS A TACTICAL REALITY THAT BRINGS INSTABILITY TO ALL LEVELS OF WAR

In an age of intersecting environments and fields, even tenuous advantages in outer space, information fields, or electromagnetic fields can be decisive for success on land or at sea. The party that is most agile and best able to take advantage of the novelty in these areas receives immediate dividends.

20 In February-March 2024, the oil tanker Sig and the RoRo Sparta-IV and Ursa Major were thus redirected to St Petersburg instead of their usual destination, which is Novorossiysk in the Black Sea, from Russian bases in Syria. This "hook" extends the lead time for supplying Russian forces by two weeks.

21 See, for France, the Ministerial Strategy for Seabed Control - February 2022.

22 In late February 2024, a German frigate operating in the Red Sea mistakenly targeted a US MQ-9 Reaper drone with its weapons systems.

23 PCG Ivanovets struck on 01/02/24 off the coast of Crimea in front of Lake Donuzlav, LST Kunikov struck on 14/02/24 in the immediate vicinity of the Russian coast, FSG Sergei Kotov struck on 04/03/24 off Cape Takil (southwestern tip of the Kerch Strait).

Ukraine's naval war thus attests to the power of narrative and communication. Still, Ukraine's struggles on the ground have led to symbolic naval victories: the reopening of Snake Island and President Zelensky's visit to celebrate the 500th day of the war; helping out with oil rigs; routine drone strikes (of which the only images published are, of course, those that succeed); multiple attacks on the Kerch Bridge; and even, in September 2023, striking at the Black Sea Fleet Headquarters, the mastermind of Russian naval operations. And so much if the military effect is small while improving Ukrainian morale, such as the remarkable attack on the Russian S400 ground-to-air system in Crimea by a missile fired from a launch in the Gulf of Odessa in August 2023 or the daring jet-ski raid in Crimea in early October 2023. When the land front is frozen, the flowing ocean space continues to offer opportunities for action and thus for displays of force that Ukrainians have made the most of in the information field. The sea can also be used to convey strategic messages, as evidenced in August 2023 by the staging of warning shots and the control of the cargo ship Sukru Okan, days after the end of the agreement that allowed Ukrainian grain to leave southern ports. In the Red Sea, the dramatic images of the hijacking of the Galaxy Leader in November 2023 or the destruction of the Tutor in June 2024 had a major impact, both in the trading floors and in the civilian maritime community. This is even though, in practice, the ratio of "number of successful Houthi attacks/number of Houthi attacks launched" has only decreased since the beginning of the events in the Red Sea<sup>24</sup>.

Some analysts are even correctly contemplating a paradigm shift: belligerents become capable of mounting operations whose sole purpose is to support their narratives. Of course, the ability to take human risks to "score points" in the cognitive field, despite trivial tactical gains, is not entirely new, but it does demonstrate the importance of increasing interpenetration of environments and fields, and the resulting instability.

In the electromagnetic field, the lever of asymmetry, it seems, was seized mostly by the Russians. Both in terms of listening and blurring, the US has a head start with its competitors in the Black Sea, although this aspect of naval conflict is not well documented in open sources.

Finally, in the space environment, it is Ukrainians who benefit from Archimedes' leverage of the constellations of low-earth-orbit communication satellites, which makes possible the coordination of Ukrainian assets<sup>25</sup>, the development of certain applications (for land warfare in this case)<sup>26</sup>, and above all, the implementation of USVs that are doing so much harm to Russians. Ultra-redundant and secure, shielded from Russian hacking and

and bombing attempts, the Starlink constellation, however miles from the naval battlefield, acts like David's slingshot in Ukrainians' hands.

All these interdependencies between environments and fields contribute to the instability of naval combat action.

## EIGHTH LESSON : TECHNOLOGICAL PROGRESS AT SEA AND ON LAND IS RELENTLESSLY REVERSING ITSELF

The naval wars in the Black and Red Seas show that the dialectic of will is at its maximum in the technological field, and that no weapon can reign supreme in a context of permanent adaptation. As Joseph Henrotin explains, "the technological advantage is inherently transitory because, under the law of constant tactical factor, it follows a dialectical logic."<sup>27</sup>

This is true in all confrontational environments: Ukraine's TB2 drones have been losing initial effectiveness to Russian ground-to-air systems, with an in-flight lifetime of around 30 minutes today. Likewise, the overall effectiveness of ground-to-air defense against cruise missiles from both sides increased by 20-30% in March-April 2022, reaching 50-60% in June 2022. Moreover, jamming tactics have been adapted to drones, resulting in the monthly downing of 10,000 Ukrainian drones, 50% of which are jammed. This was in response to an upsurge in anti-jammer kinetic strikes. And so on.

In the Black Sea, the Russian fleet's initial technological superiority has been circumvented through the combined use of Western intelligence, Neptun missiles, and ever-expanding and sophisticated surface drones. And, in contrast, the effectiveness of Ukraine's surface drones has been tempered by the use of Russian Lancet-style helicopters and remotely operated munitions in FPV mode.

24 As of June 2024, out of 110 reported Houthi attacks, 22 had been successful

25 According to Mykhailo Fedorov, Ukraine's Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Digital Transformation, "Starlink is the blood of [their] entire communications infrastructure today." More than 30,000 Starlink terminals were delivered to Ukraine in the first 15 months of the war.

26 BOUNAT Ulrich, "Les différentes facettes de l'innovation de l'armée ukrainienne" Revue Défense Nationale, February 2023, pp. 30-36.

27 HENROTIN Joseph, "Mon game changer est plus gros que le tien - Retour sur le renouveau d'une mythologie technologique" DSI special edition 87, December 2022-January 2023.



In addition, some Russian drones are now reportedly also equipped with the Starlink system, thus nullifying this advantage hitherto reserved for Ukrainians<sup>28</sup>.

In the Red Sea, in response to the Western response, the Houthis are progressively firing increasingly precise shots, including at great distances, diversifying their vectors (surface drones, anti-ship missiles, guided or unguided ballistic missiles, OWA aerial drones) and adapting their slots and flight patterns so as not to be seen by fighter aircraft and to saturate the surface-to-air defenses of the Western frigates. The West responds with jamming and adaptation of its self-defense systems...until a new Houthi breakthrough.

War at sea is a relentless technological race, in which even the best runner always ends up being overtaken by a competitor.

## **NINTH LESSON : GAME CHANGERS, IF THEY EXIST AT ALL, ARE NOT ALWAYS THE KIND ONE IMAGINES**

The use of drones in Ukraine and the Red Sea has reinforced a popular notion that game-changers have revolutionized naval warfare: the prophecies of “rules of war” retold with each new technological breakthrough thus saturate the mainstream media. Let us try to go further, as this view is, fortunately, not unanimous<sup>29</sup>.

Firstly, the innovation strategy<sup>30</sup> aimed at reversing the balance of power through technological breakthroughs has limitations. Historically, innovation as a weapon of weakness has not always been successful. Witness, for example, the Confederates’ innovative drive during the Civil War: the battleship Merrimack neutralized the northern wing, the passes were protected by submerged torpedoes, and the Davids attacked opposing ships by detonating explosives against their hulls while fastened to the end of a spar. But the South’s ships were never more than expedient, shielded with rolled rail: limited resources and a lack of shipbuilding industry prevented the South from scaling sufficiently to weigh in<sup>31</sup>. Will Ukrainian piranhas do better with Western aid? This remains to be confirmed over time.

Moreover, the term game-changer is not always based on solid motives. In the case of Ukraine’s surface drones, for example, the miniaturization and democratization of satellite positioning and communication systems, such as Starlink, has been the game-changer, allowing machines that were

not particularly new to fly long distances, and that were heavily inspired by the Houthi drones that attacked the Saudi frigate Al Madinah in 2017. A parallel could be drawn with the German tanks of 1940, which were less technically advanced than the French tanks, but which doctrine and radio allowed to use much more efficiently.

Moreover, game changers are not always what you would expect. While drones have been popularized for their novelty (despite their almost centuries-old existence), less visible ones have had a similarly significant impact, starting with mines. Less visible, less technically advanced, and less publicized because they are less “new” and more questionable because of their indiscriminate nature, they probably acted as a strong deterrent to Russia’s attacks on Odessa by sea at the start of the conflict, and still play a decisive role today in keeping Russian ships off the Ukrainian coast.

Finally, we are far from recognizing the true potential of what we now call game-changers. For example, with regard to drones, let us acknowledge that the potential for surprise linked to the mass (use in swarms) and the introduction of a high degree of autonomy (robots) has not been fully exploited so far in Ukraine, at least not in the naval aspect of the conflict: at most ten USVs (as in the case of the Ivanovets patrol craft in February 2024) or twenty UAVs (attack of 9 January 2024 with 18 UAVs) have been used simultaneously, which is nothing compared to the future swarms that the robotic era promises tick. Moreover, what we are witnessing in Ukraine and the Red Sea is a simple “deportation” of human-operated prostheses, which act in a juxtaposed manner, with no autonomy to detect, classify, and target. The drones we see at work are highly “monovalent”: they often perform only one task: reconnaissance or strike, but not both.

<sup>28</sup> The Russian USV Murena 300S unveiled in August 2024 is said to have a potential Starlink antenna, according to the analysis outlet Covert Shores.

<sup>29</sup> In particular, the French Director of Military Intelligence said, “There is no game changer. It is often claimed that the weaponry supplied to Ukraine or produced by Russia will change the course of war. I have no faith in that. ...an operational capability is the product of a combination of many factors. “There is no magic weapon, no game changer, no silver bullet that can turn the tide of war overnight.” Closed hearing of Lieutenant-General Jacques Langlade de de Montgros, Director of Military Intelligence, on the military situation in Ukraine, 12 July 2023.

<sup>30</sup> The term «innovation» is itself debatable. See in particular the illuminating typology proposed by Olivier Schmitt to characterize the levels of military change (adjustment - adaptation - innovation - rupture). Much of the “innovation” in the Black and Red Seas is really about adjustment and adaptation. SCHMITT Olivier, *Préparer la Guerre – Stratégie, innovation et puissance militaire à l’époque contemporaine*, PUF, Paris, 2024, 460 pp.

<sup>31</sup> BERNERON-COUVENHES Marie-Françoise, « Les révolutions technologiques des XIXe et XXe siècles et la puissance sur mer » in *La puissance maritime*, Presses de l’Université Paris-Sorbonne, Paris, 2004, p. 268.

The highest degree of sophistication consists in having drones that “wait” on predetermined patterns to hit opportunity targets. But we are not there yet...and powerful antidotes may have emerged in the meantime, reversing some of the “disruptive” effects that others have been clamoring for.

Without diminishing their usefulness, let us therefore acknowledge that drones remain, for the time being, a means of compensating for a lack of heavier capabilities, and that they shine especially in coastal warfare. They therefore represent both a tremendous opportunity and a limit for concealing the difficulties in designing more sophisticated platforms<sup>32</sup>. Only their capacity to deploy in numbers, offshore and in a resilient and coordinated manner can make them decisive actors in the control of the sea.

In the end, there is no single deterministic system of superiority at sea. Victory results from a combination of forces and a combination of effects depending on the nature of the confrontation and the objectives to be achieved. Indeed, this is what makes a “full” navy capable of intervening across the full spectrum of naval action, without the capability “deadlock” that it faces, both necessary and relevant.

## **TENTH LESSON : PARADOXICALLY, HUMANS REMAIN MORE THAN EVER AT THE HEART OF NAVAL COMBAT**

The events in the East and the South are prima facie evidence of a tendency to avoid exposing the increasingly valuable human resource. For Ukraine, which is handicapped by the demographic equation vis-à-vis Russia, the USVs are replacing men who are not wanted to be exposed and who make it possible to use these deported means of warfare. In the Red Sea, efforts are underway to protect crews of commercial vessels whose loss would jump insurance rates. This dynamic is consistent with the tendency to lose more machines and fewer men in combat.

But with fewer seafarers at sea, gradually surrounded by swarms of robots and assisted by artificial intelligence, paradoxically everything indicates that they remain crucial in order to implement an ever-increasing number of sensors and effectors, manage the extra complexity not supported by the automata, mitigate the limitations and failures of the machines, and intelligently prepare for the next steps that will probably see their place shrink even further. For the time being, it should be remembered that it is still

the aircrews who set the limits of acceptable endurance in a combat zone, as suggested by the public testimony of recently committed commanders in the Red Sea<sup>33</sup> (there are no Black Sea sources in this area).

Moreover, a decisive factor of superiority emerges from the confrontations between orcas and piranhas: creativity, which remains, for the time being, a quality of human essence. In the Black Sea, each warring party will likely brainstorm to prevail against a backdrop of technological neutralization: Ukrainians have invented jet-ski raids on the Crimean coast and imagined submarine drones, while the Russians have deployed helicopter gunships to destroy rival drones and are deploying armed watchmen to the rear of their ships. In the Red Sea, the Houthis, far from being referred to as “sandal warriors” (which is sometimes wrongly attributed to them), have made remarkable use of available resources, demonstrating, for example, their impressive ability to appropriate and adapt Iranian technology. The constant adaptation of their modes of action is the hallmark of human creativity. One example among others: on June 12, 2024, when the Tutor was attacked, it was first struck by an aerial projectile, causing it to stand still, which allowed the Houthis to launch a USV attack (which would have been more difficult against a maneuvering ship...) in the form of a remotely operated skiff<sup>34</sup> with mannequins on board to disturb the defense by making it hesitate to open fire against a manned target. A fine example of human ingenuity behind a machine fight.

Finally, recent naval engagements demonstrate that organizations remain reflective of the people who drive them. Ukraine has bold and resourceful teams, which are learning quickly from their mistakes and led by a highly responsive leadership. Confronted with it, the Russian Navy seems visibly slower to adapt, less innovative, and probably more rigid. This is reflected in the relatively low state of preparedness of the first Russian ships to be hit by drones or missiles, which is probably not unrelated to recent changes in Russia’s naval hierarchy. As for Yemen, the attacks in the Red Sea show that determined men with nothing to lose can make a decisive impact on world trade despite limited resources.

When equipment fails, fails, or runs out, all that is left is people to make a difference.

<sup>32</sup> The Ukrainian USV based on a Yamaha jet-ski, which was found washed up on a Turkish beach in July 2024, is as much evidence of inventiveness as it is a regression to expedients.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, the testimony of the Commanding Officer of HMS Diamond, recently engaged in the Red Sea. “On board HMS Diamond as it faces Houthi attacks,” BBC News, March 25, 2024.

<sup>34</sup> Traditional wooden boat widely spread in the Red Sea.



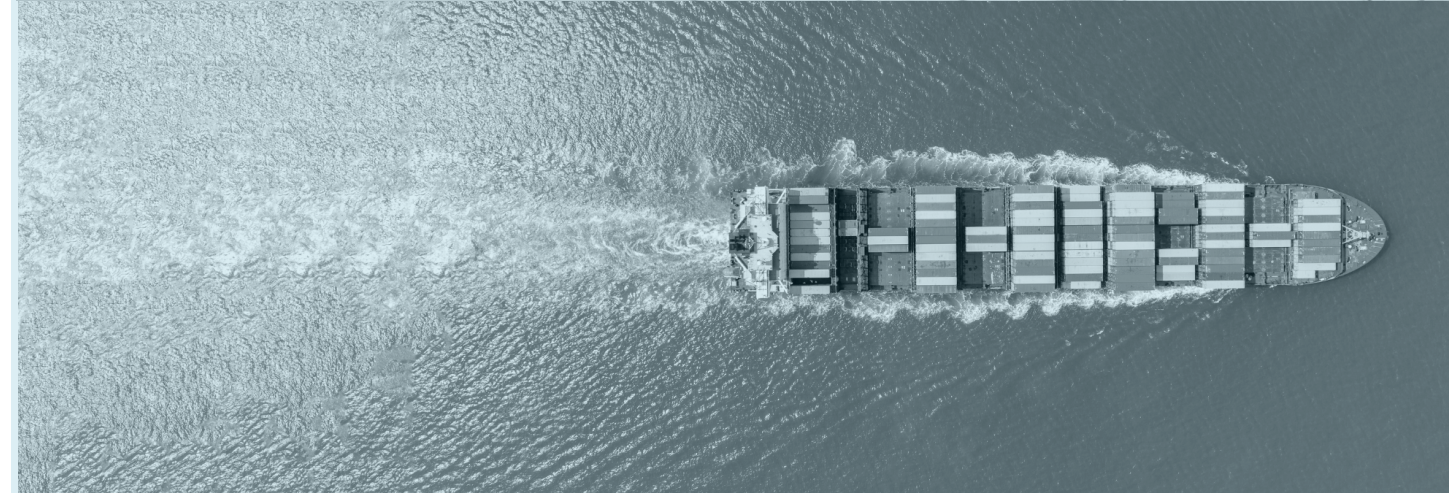
These ten lessons are likely to be amendable and incomplete, and only history will judge their relevance and reliability over time.

While imperfect, may they remind us that there is no inevitability at sea, and that the combination of will to win, ingenuity, and effective external support can defeat or seriously erode a high-ranking navy's capabilities. From ancient burns to Italian combat swimmers during World War II, from the attack on the destroyer USS Cole in 2000 to a Houthi drone attack on the Saudi frigate Al Madinah in 2017, inferiority never stopped piranhas from hitting killer whales hard at sea. Moreover, orcas, when programmed to face other orcas, are never as disturbed as when they face piranhas... David wins because he is David, not because he is trying to turn into a miniature Goliath<sup>35</sup>.

And make no mistake: today, we read these lessons from the perspective of an orca navy confronting potential piranha assailants in France. But beware, the fish comparisons could be reversed: in the Pacific, a large Asian country could play the role of the orca, and we could play the role of piranhas...

*THIBAUT LAVERNHE ET FRANÇOIS-OLIVIER CORMAN*

<sup>35</sup> This is why David refuses the sword and the breastplate offered to him by King Saul (First Book of Samuel, Chapter 17, verses 38 and 39). On the errors of the temptation of "symmetric imitation," see SANDOR Fabian, "The Illusion of Conventional War: Europe Is Learning the Wrong Lessons from the Conflict in Ukraine," Modern War Institute, April 23, 2024.





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