

From Tectonic Shifts to Winds of Change in North Africa and the Middle East: Europe's Role

by Nathalie Tocci, Riccardo Alcaro, Francesca Caruso, Silvia Colombo, Dario Cristiani, Andrea Dessi, Flavia Fusco and Daniela Huber

ABSTRACT

Winds of change are blowing in North Africa and the Middle East. They originate from Washington, where the new Biden administration is expected to abandon its predecessor's zero-sum, erratic approach and take steps towards supporting regional balances and cooperation. Effects are visible especially in the Gulf, with the US pondering its options to re-activate nuclear diplomacy with Iran and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates grudgingly agreeing to put their feud with Qatar on ice. One way or another, these winds of change are working their way through the Levant, the Eastern Mediterranean and Libya. Admittedly, they are still feeble and can easily fade out like a morning breeze. Were that to happen, Europeans would be amongst the most affected – aside, of course, from regional populations themselves. It is now high time for the EU and its member states to leave the backseat they have (un)comfortably been sitting in for years, seize the opportunity of a cooperative US administration and work to play a more proactive role in North Africa and the Middle East commensurate with their considerable financial, diplomatic and military resources.

North Africa | Middle East | Gulf | US foreign policy | European Union

keywords

From Tectonic Shifts to Winds of Change in North Africa and the Middle East: Europe's Role

by Nathalie Tocci, Riccardo Alcaro, Francesca Caruso,
Silvia Colombo, Dario Cristiani, Andrea Dessi, Flavia Fusco
and Daniela Huber*

Introduction

Since the Arab uprisings, tectonic plates have been shifting in North Africa and the Middle East. As popular mobilisation put pressure on states, cleavages, conflicts and crises have abounded. At the same time, winds of change are blowing across the region now, inspiring and inviting regional players to look for new spaces for dialogue. Those winds in part originate in the United States, reaching and feeding into domestic dynamics. While Joe Biden's administration is yet to show its cards in the Middle East, its sole existence is already bearing fruit. Far from the zero-sum philosophy of the Trump era, the Biden administration, heeding from the Obama period, stands for regional balances and cooperation, enabling the US to channel its finite foreign policy energies towards its key strategic priorities in Asia. However, these winds of change, while bringing about tangible results from the Gulf to Libya, passing through the Eastern Mediterranean, are feeble and could easily be reversed. It is high time for Europeans to emerge from the backseat they so stubbornly sit in, and for the European Union to take a more active role to consolidate and catalyse those seeds of reconciliation hesitantly emerging to its south.

* Nathalie Tocci is Director of the Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI). Riccardo Alcaro is Research Coordinator and Head of the Global Actors Programme. Francesca Caruso is a Researcher within the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme and Policy Officer of the Mediterranean Women Mediators Network (MWMN). Silvia Colombo is Senior Fellow in the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme. Dario Cristiani is the IAI/GMF Senior Fellow at the German Marshall Fund. Andrea Dessi is Head of Italy's Foreign Policy Programme, Senior Fellow within the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme and Editorial Director of IAI's english-language series *IAI Commentaries*. Flavia Fusco is Junior Researcher within the Mediterranean and Middle East and Italian Foreign Policy programmes. Daniela Huber is Head of the Mediterranean and Middle East Programme and Editor of *The International Spectator*.

1. Seeds of reconciliation

In January 2021 Saudi Arabia and Qatar restored diplomatic ties and reopened land, sea and air connections. Back in 2017, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain and Egypt had severed all diplomatic and trade ties with Qatar, on the grounds of its support for Muslim Brotherhood-related groups across the region and willingness to engage Saudi Arabia's rival Iran.¹ They had demanded no fewer than thirteen conditions for the lifting of the embargo, from the shutting down of the Qatari-owned media outlet Al Jazeera, to the downgrading of Doha's diplomatic ties with Tehran and the closure of a Turkish military base in Qatar.² This crisis reverberated across the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the Persian Gulf, as well as the Middle East and North Africa, from Syria to Libya and Sudan.³

While the embargo had important economic and logistic consequences for Qatar, later magnified by the economic downturn triggered by the pandemic, the tiny yet wealthy emirate managed to weather the storm.⁴ In fact, the embargo failed to engender change in Doha's foreign policy orientation.⁵ As the stick failed to deliver, generating political and economic costs for all, Riyadh backtracked, opening the way to a possible new page in intra-Gulf relations with potentially positive spill-over effects on several regional conflicts.⁶ The decision was taken during the final days of Donald Trump's presidency, which had initially openly supported the embargo. The Saudi leadership probably bet that ending the rift with Qatar would buy it goodwill with the upcoming Biden administration,⁷ that during the campaign had consistently criticised Saudi Arabia over the murder of Saudi

¹ Salman Al-Dossary, "Ennahu al-firaq ya Qatar" (It is the differences, Qatar), in *Asharq al-Awsat*, 6 July 2017, <https://aawsat.com/node/967846>. For an overall and in-depth view of the dynamics associated with the crisis, see also: Andreas Krieg (ed.), *Divided Gulf. The Anatomy of a Crisis*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019.

² "Arab States Issue 13 Demands to End Qatar-Gulf Crisis", in *Al Jazeera*, 12 July 2017, <https://aje.io/94q5j>.

³ Elisabeth Dickinson, "Exporting the Gulf Crisis", in *War on the Rocks*, 28 May 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/?p=20241>.

⁴ Oxford Business Group, "Qatar's Economy Thrives Despite Blockade", in *The Report: Qatar 2019*, April 2020, <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/node/947139>; Bobby Ghosh, "Qatar Exits Gulf Embargo with a Much Stronger Hand", in *Bloomberg*, 8 January 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-01-08/qatar-comes-out-of-gcc-embargo-with-a-much-stronger-hand>; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen and Theodore Karasik, "How Asian and European Countries Helped Qatar Maintain Sovereignty", in *Gulf State Analytics*, 22 April 2018, <https://gulfstateanalytics.com/?p=1984>; Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "How Qatar Weathered the Gulf Crisis", in *Foreign Affairs*, 11 June 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1122499>; Tim Fox, "Region's Economies Will Benefit from Gulf-Qatar Deal", in *MENASource*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=343556>.

⁵ Benjamin Barthe, "L'Arabie saoudite met fin au blocus contre le Qatar", in *Le Monde*, 6 January 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/01/05/riyad-met-fin-au-blocus-contre-le-qatar_6065241_3210.html.

⁶ Nader Kabbani, "The Blockade on Qatar Helped Strengthen Its Economy, Paving the Way to Stronger Regional Integration", in *Order from Chaos*, 19 January 2021, <https://brook.gs/2Krw6WM>.

⁷ Andrew England, Derek Brower and Simeon Kerr, "Saudi Arabia Seeks to Resolve Qatar Crisis as 'Gift' to Joe Biden", in *Financial Times*, 27 November 2020, <https://on.ft.com/2Jh4Lpo>.

journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the war in Yemen. Once in office, Biden refrained from taking direct measures against Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, even if his responsibilities were revealed in a declassified US intelligence report.⁸ Biden did however limit “offensive” arms sales to the Kingdom that could be used in the war in Yemen.⁹ The new US administration has thus signalled that while avoiding open confrontation with Saudi Arabia, it favours the easing of intra-GCC tensions. This is precisely what is happening: the 41st GCC Summit’s conclusions – also known as the al-Ula statement – refer to the “beginning of a new dialogue” within the bloc.

This said, a full-fledged reconciliation is not in the cards yet. Actually, prospects for intra-GCC cooperation, let alone integration, remain dim, and the GCC countries’ strategic interests, notably vis-à-vis relations with Turkey and Iran, are far from aligned.¹⁰ The UAE in particular reluctantly accepted Riyadh’s will to mend fences with Doha, signalling its readiness to reverse this détente if it fails to deliver concrete benefits in its eyes, both bilaterally and regionally.

Turning to Iran, no sooner did the Biden administration take office than Washington began voicing its intention to re-enter the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the 2015 nuclear agreement between Iran and the US, Europe, Russia and China, that Trump reneged on in 2018. A first reading of the events that unfolded over the last few weeks is rather bleak. In January, Iran announced it would restart uranium enrichment to up to 20 per cent at the underground Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant.¹¹ More worryingly, in February it suspended the Additional Protocol and other transparency measures under the JCPOA, constraining the International Atomic Agency’s (IAEA) access to its nuclear sites and information,¹² triggering negative reactions from the E3 – France, Germany and the United Kingdom (UK) – as well as the US. A temporary understanding between the IAEA and Iran to extend limited inspection access by three months,¹³ while sufficient to ensure the last-minute suspension of an E3-sponsored resolution of censure at the IAEA’s Board of Governors, is yet to flourish into a broader understanding. Tehran also turned down the EU’s offer to mediate talks between itself and Washington, days after the latter launched airstrikes in eastern Syria against Iranian-backed militias.¹⁴

⁸ David E. Sanger, “Biden Won’t Penalize Saudi Crown Prince Over Khashoggi’s Killing, Fearing Relations Breach”, in *The New York Times*, 26 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/us/politics/biden-mbs-khashoggi.html>.

⁹ Patricia Zengerle and Mike Stone, “Exclusive: Biden Team Considering a Halt to ‘Offensive’ Arms Sales for Saudis”, in *Reuters*, 26 February 2021, <https://reut.rs/3aZrH81>.

¹⁰ Asli Aydintaşbaş and Cinzia Bianco, “Useful Enemies: How the Turkey-UAE Rivalry Is Remaking the Middle East”, in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, March 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=69294>.

¹¹ “Iran Resumes Enriching Uranium to 20% Purity at Fordo Facility”, in *BBC News*, 4 January 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55530366>.

¹² Francois Murphy, “Iran Tells IAEA It Plans to Scale Back Cooperation in a Week”, in *Reuters*, 16 February 2021, <https://reut.rs/3ap4PhK>.

¹³ Kelsey Davenport, “Iran, IAEA Reach Monitoring Agreement”, in *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (March 2021), <https://www.armscontrol.org/node/12193>.

¹⁴ Farnaz Fasshi and David E. Sanger, “Iran Rejects Nuclear Deal Talks with U.S. Proposed by Europe”,

The United States and Iran are clearly engaging in a risky game of chicken: the former wants Iran to go back to full compliance with its non-proliferation commitments before lifting the sanctions that Trump re-introduced after leaving the JCPOA, whereas the latter contends that sanctions relief should come first, given that it is Washington, not Tehran, that walked out of the agreement. Both sides have an interest in reviving the nuclear deal, but neither is willing to make the first move and both leaderships are hampered by domestic political pressures and divisions. Were the shared interest in the JCPOA not there though, the Biden administration would not have stated this so often and so clearly before, during and after taking office, and Tehran would not have stuck to the agreement – while progressively reducing compliance with it – despite the US's decision to quit the deal and adopt draconian sanctions. Political will is thus present and it is necessary, but it may not be sufficient. Getting the ball rolling in a technically and politically complex compliance-for-compliance sequencing act is not easy. Ensuring this delivers enough to create lock-in effects before the June presidential elections in Iran, which are likely to usher in a less pragmatic figure than Hassan Rouhani, is even more arduous.

Moving north to the Eastern Mediterranean, regional relations remain tense, but all parties have moved away from the dangerous brinkmanship that marked last summer and fall. There are no Turkish exploration vessels in the contested waters of the Eastern Mediterranean, both Athens and Ankara are refraining from military manoeuvres in the region, whilst having restarted direct exploratory talks.¹⁵ Moreover, recent tentative dialogues between Turkey and Egypt on the one hand and Turkey and Israel on the other also point to a gradual de-escalation of tensions in the area.¹⁶ The EU, for its part, has refrained from imposing meaningful sanctions on Turkey. In Cyprus, after the presidential election of Ersin Tatar as Turkish Cypriot leader,¹⁷ UN-sponsored talks between the parties are set to take place in Geneva in April 2021,¹⁸ after having catastrophically collapsed in Crans Montana back in 2017.¹⁹

Beyond the headlines, prospects for veritable reconciliation in the Eastern Mediterranean are slim however. For any seasoned Cyprus-watcher, optimism is

in *The New York Times*, 28 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/28/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-talks-united-states.html>.

¹⁵ "Greece and Turkey Hold First Crisis Talks since 2016", in *Deutsche Welle*, 25 January 2021, <https://p.dw.com/p/3oOcs>.

¹⁶ "Turkey Says First Diplomatic Contact Held with Egypt since 2013", in *Al Jazeera*, 12 March 2021, <https://aje.io/cpdcs>; "Israel in Talks with Turkey over East Med", in *Daily Sabah*, 12 March 2021, http://sabahdai.ly/_nsu.

¹⁷ "Northern Cyprus: Right-Wing Nationalist Ersin Tatar Elected President", in *BBC News*, 19 October 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-54594702>.

¹⁸ "UN Chief to Host Cyprus Meeting in April", in *Euractiv*, 25 February 2021, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1572568>.

¹⁹ Tom Miles, "Cyprus Reunification Talks Collapse, U.N. Chief 'Very Sorry'", in *Reuters*, 7 July 2017, <http://reut.rs/2tmGyTW>.

a rare commodity. Since the breakdown of the Republic of Cyprus's constitutional order in 1963 and the partition and Turkish occupation of northern Cyprus in 1974, peace has rarely come within reach. While all UN Secretaries General have picked up the intractable dossier, the last real opportunity for peace in the island dates back to 2004, when a week prior to entering the EU, the Greek Cypriot community turned down then UNSG Kofi Annan's Plan, while the Turkish Cypriot community concomitantly accepted it.²⁰ Since then, pressed by the international community, the leaders have gone through the motions, but either one party – notably the Greek Cypriots – or both, have been unwilling to do what it takes to establish a bizonal and bicomunal federation. Nothing suggests this time will be different, as the underlying political opportunity structure of the conflict remains unchanged. However, while there appears to be little space for a comprehensive settlement in Cyprus, greater optimism is warranted for a limited agreement on the sharing of the island's gas resources.²¹

Also in the case of Greek-Turkish relations, the past does not bode well. Direct talks between Athens and Ankara have resumed after a five-year hiatus. Prior to it, the sixty (sic!) rounds of talks launched in the wake of the 1999 "earthquake diplomacy" did not deliver any breakthroughs on the interconnected questions bedeviling the relationship, from the demarcation of maritime borders and airspaces to the sovereignty and demilitarised status of some Aegean islands, all the way to the treatment of minorities. Greek-Turkish direct talks today are equally unlikely to deliver quick wins. Yet, their existence is precious. While the prospects for conflict resolution between Greece and Turkey are dim, the value of conflict management was highlighted by the escalating tensions in the region last year. The absence of open and functioning channels of communication between the two countries played no small part in the escalation. Above all, it deprived the region of the necessary safety net to prevent aggressive posturing from inadvertently slipping into outright violence. Conflict management is not ideal, but while waiting an ideal world to come about, it is the next best pragmatic goal to aim for.

Finally turning west, a fragile peace is consolidating in Libya. A ceasefire was reached on 23 October 2020 after Turkey's military intervention in support of Fayeze al-Sarraj's Government of National Accord (GNA) put an end to Cyrenaica-based strongman Khalifa Haftar's military offensive,²² backed by Egypt, the UAE,

²⁰ David Hannay, *Cyprus: The Search for a Solution*, London/New York, I.B.Tauris, 2005.

²¹ Michaël Tanchum (ed.), *Eastern Mediterranean in Uncharted Waters. Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities*, Ankara, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, December 2020, <https://www.kas.de/de/web/tuerkei/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/eastern-mediterranean-in-uncharted-waters-perspectives-on-emerging-geo-political-realities>; "Cyprus Says Committed to Reunification Talks, But Not at Gunpoint", in *Euractiv*, 25 September 2020, <https://www.euractiv.com/?p=1511038>; Harry Tzimitras, "Eastern Mediterranean Hydrocarbons Prospects: In Need of a Pragmatic Geopolitical Assessment", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 19|18 (March 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10032>.

²² Jason Pack and Wolfgang Pusztai, "Turning the Tide: How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli", in *MEI Policy Papers*, November 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/node/82011>.

Saudi Arabia, Russia, France and Jordan.²³ Like most ceasefires, this both raised the risk of a de facto partition in which Turkey, Russia and the UAE in particular would coexist in an uneasy equilibrium, but also the prospect for a more genuine peace. The former risk remains alive and kicking as external actors and domestic players alike – from Haftar to the various militias in and around Tripoli – are wary of any agreement that could marginalise them. However, hopes for the latter received a new boost with the formation of the first unity government after seven years of conflict.

Haftar's military defeat created the conditions for the emergence of a political solution. The swearing in of Abdul Hamid Dabaiba's interim government is only a first step,²⁴ meant to see the country through to elections scheduled for December this year. The challenges ahead are daunting, ranging from reunifying the divided military and economic institutions to egging regional powers to exit the scene, improving basic service delivery and repairing damaged infrastructure.²⁵ However, this first step should not be belittled: receiving support from rival members of Libya's divided parliament and overseeing the first peaceful transfer of power since the 2012 elections in Libya is a huge step in the right direction.

Further political progress will depend on the ability of Libyan officials to mitigate worsening socio-economic conditions, tackle rampant corruption, tame the ambitions of political rivals and roll back foreign interference, while managing domestic and international expectations alike.²⁶ Over the course of the UN-led Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), Dabaiba voiced high ambitions for a government destined to last nine months and which emerged as a result more of a tactical overlap of interests than a more strategic convergence on goals.²⁷

This raises two interrelated risks for the new Government of National Unity (GNU): being stymied by interlocking vetoes by influential domestic players as happened to the previous GNA, and remaining prey to foreign powers' diktats and preferences. Even though international reactions to the GNU have been positive, countries such as Russia, Turkey and the UAE may subvert the government should they feel their influence to be endangered by a united government that prioritises non-interference.²⁸ Hence, the success of the GNU will also depend on the extent to which key external actors remain committed to the roadmap outlined by the

²³ Dario Cristiani, "A Ceasefire with Feet of Clay: The Potential Spoilers of Peace in Libya", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|86 (November 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12405>.

²⁴ Abdulkader Assad, "Libya's Government of National Unity Sworn In at Tobruk-Based HoR", in *The Libya Observer*, 15 March 2020, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/node/17861>.

²⁵ "Libya Power Brokers Welcome Accord But Challenges Lie Ahead", in *Reuters*, 7 February 2021, <https://reut.rs/39VFEK>.

²⁶ Crisis Group, "Against All Odds, Libya's Peace Process Makes Substantial Progress", in *Crisis Group Libya Updates*, No. 4 (15 February 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/16272>.

²⁷ Emadeddin Badi and Wolfram Lacher, "Agree to Disagree: Libya's New Unity Government", in *Sada*, 8 February 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83839>.

²⁸ *Ibid.*

January 2020 Berlin Conference on Libya.

In this respect, there is cause for cautious optimism. Progress in Libya is not taking place in a regional vacuum. Eight years after Turkey severed diplomatic ties with Egypt, following the 2013 military coup that ousted Mohammed Morsi, Ankara and Cairo are resuming diplomatic talks.²⁹ Rumours suggest that contacts are ongoing also between Ankara and Abu Dhabi as well as Riyadh and Tel Aviv. None of these players have changed their positions or modified their objectives, meaning that substantive agreements are hard to envision. To take the question of maritime demarcation as a case in point, Ankara's hopes lit when Cairo published its new exploration bid, featuring a map that included the disputed area between Greece and Turkey, in a manner that did not contradict the latter's position over the continental shelf.³⁰ Hours later those hopes were dashed, as Egypt clarified that it stood by its maritime demarcation agreement with Greece, which stands at loggerheads with Turkey's equivalent with Libya.³¹ The parties remain far from a meaningful convergence, be it on energy, borders or the role of political Islam. Yet, something is changing: after years of grandstanding and brinkmanship, talks are taking place, signalling a mutual willingness to find common ground.

2. The Biden factor

So far, none of the conflicts that either emerged or exacerbated over the last decade are on the way towards resolution. Be it the decades-old Cyprus conflict or the intertwined set of Greece-Turkey disputes, the more recent energy conundrum, not to speak of tensions within the Gulf, between Turkey and the Gulf, and between Iran and the West, all regional and global players are sticking to their positions and objectives. Yet, their strategies are subtly changing.

This is happening in a global context in which the foreign policy philosophy and orientation of the United States has been turned on its head. Trump's Middle East policy was premised on confrontation, zero-sum approaches, winner-takes-it-all mentalities and a tangible sympathy for authoritarian strongmen. Above all, it was largely inconsistent. In addition, the increasingly visible differences between the White House and other federal institutions – the State Department, the Pentagon, the National Security Council and Congress among others – undermined Washington's capacity to facilitate conflict resolution even between its allies, as in the case of the intra-Gulf spat. While Trump was outspoken in his support for Saudi

²⁹ "Turkey and Egypt Make First Diplomatic Contact since 2013", in *Al-Monitor*, 12 March 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/29809>.

³⁰ Ali Bakir, "Turkey-Egypt Relations: What's Behind Their New Diplomatic Push?", in *Middle East Eye*, 12 March 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/203396>; Fehim Tastekin, "Is Turkey-Egypt Maritime Agreement Dead in the Water?", in *Al-Monitor*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/29793>.

³¹ "Egypt and Greece Sign Agreement on Exclusive Economic Zone", in *Reuters*, 6 August 2020, <https://reut.rs/2XxorJW>.

Arabia and the UAE, other parts of the administration reiterated Washington's pledge to designate Qatar as a major non-NATO ally.³² Trump's lack of interest in diplomatic mediation and reconciliation created incentives in the region that pushed regional actors to seek confrontation and consolidate rival alliances, while also engendering a sense of impunity concerning violations of rights and law.

With the notable exception of the Iran nuclear file, the Biden administration is unlikely to engage deeply in the region. In Israel/Palestine it has so far stuck to the same policies the Trump administration had pursued – the US embassy move to Jerusalem, the Abraham accords and hostility towards the International Criminal Court investigation –, continuing business as usual without pursuing alternative courses of action. The foreign policy bandwidth of the US administration is limited, with a domestic plateful to deal with from pandemic response and economic recovery, to climate change and democratic resilience. Furthermore, even when it comes to foreign policy, North Africa and the Middle East do not make it in Washington's top priorities, lagging behind the Indo-Pacific, Europe and Latin America.³³

However, the United States will not disappear from the region and, perhaps more importantly, the very existence of the Biden administration – what it stands for, the limited actions it is expected to take as well as all those it will likely refrain from – is hugely consequential. While direct causality is impossible to prove, the cautious regional realignments described above are probably in part a consequence of Washington's different tune. Regional leaders now know it will be harder for them to act in total impunity as much as they know that Washington is unlikely to favour the outright victory of any one side over another. And while they also know that the United States is not the only global power and that its regional presence is set to diminish, they are cognisant of the fact that it still remains the most influential player in town.

All this generates a significant potential for regional cooperation and reconciliation, albeit one which is far from certain to materialise. Regional players – ranging from Turkey, Qatar and Iran to Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia – do not seem willing or able to articulate inclusive, actionable and sustainable plans for regional security. Most are engaged in a slow-motion reassessment of their own regional postures in the context of liquid alliances (Turkey, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Israel, Morocco) or in a strategic pause that might last for quite some time (UAE). The signing of the normalisation agreements between Israel and a number of Arab countries is part of this equation, which is more likely to fuel divisions and militarisation rather than stability and reconciliation. One only needs to think of the conflict between Morocco and Western Sahara. Following Rabat's normalisation with Israel, the

³² "U.S. Hopes to Name Qatar as Major Non-NATO Ally, Official Says", in *Reuters*, 17 September 2020, <https://reut.rs/2EaPvIh>.

³³ James Traub, "Under Biden, the Middle East Would Be Just Another Region", in *Foreign Policy*, 9 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3bJ9V7O>.

Trump administration recognised Morocco's sovereignty over the Western Sahara. This happened one month after the outbreak of low intensity clashes between Morocco and the Algeria-backed Polisario Front, that put an end to a 30-year ceasefire. The US's recognition is unlikely to be reversed now, while at the same time the European and UN stances are unlikely to change.³⁴ Amidst rising instability, the confusion this has created as well as the incentives it has generated in Algiers to turn towards Ankara and Moscow,³⁵ constitute but one example of the negative ripple effects of the normalisation agreements.

In short, positive potential notwithstanding, some conflicts simmer, while the resolution of others remains far from sight.

3. Where is Europe?

Europeans have for the most part been passive bystanders to the regional convulsions over the last years. Disoriented both by the United States' relative retrenchment and animosity over the last years, as well as its own internal dramas, the EU has watched regional dynamics being shaped by Russia, Turkey, the Arab Gulf states, Iran and Israel in ways that have generally contradicted its interests, let alone values.

The often-cited reason for Europe's inaction is the internal divisions among member states. This is as true as it is trivial. Member states normally have different foreign policy interests, strategic cultures and sensitivities. This is certainly true also in North Africa and the Middle East. To take two prominent examples, France has played into regional cleavages, often acting unilaterally and militarily, be it the Eastern Mediterranean, Lebanon, the Gulf or Libya. Germany has been active too, mostly through diplomacy, be it by sponsoring the Berlin conference and ensuing process on Libya or working to diffuse tensions between Greece and Turkey. Different member state positions and policies however need not translate into European deadlock and inaction, as policy towards Iran or even Russia or China demonstrate. A far deeper reason for the EU's inaction, rather than internal divergence, is the convergent view between member states to take the back seat: Europeans are often united in their passivity and nowhere is this clearer than in North Africa and the Middle East. At times, the lack of common policy interests among member states is frontloaded as a self-serving excuse not to come up with a clear and actionable set of policy goals towards the region, beyond the usual declaratory statements in favour of peace, cooperation and reconciliation.

³⁴ Yasmina Abouzzohour, "Morocco's Partial Normalization with Israel Comes with Risks and Gains", in *Order from Chaos*, 14 December 2020, <https://brook.gs/34e05YW>.

³⁵ Michaël Tanchum, "The Post-COVID-19 Trajectory for Algeria, Morocco and the Western Sahara", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 21|03 (January 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12643>; Intissar Fakir, "What's Next for the Western Sahara?", in *Lawfare*, 18 December 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/node/20339>.

Overcoming paralysing divergences and catalysing a shared willingness to act is needed now more than ever. The progressive marginalisation of the EU in Syria, Libya and Israel/Palestine, for which it bears direct responsibility, has its costs: others – from Russia to Turkey, the Gulf countries, Israel and Iran – have been shaping events on the ground with direct and negative repercussions for Europe's interests.

Today not only is there a negative incentive for Europe to act, but a positive potential too. As we stand at a crossroads between renewed potential for cooperation and reconciliation and a default setback into crisis and confrontation, the EU has the opportunity to stop talking the talk and finally start walking the walk of its professed strategic autonomy.³⁶ To realise this, the EU or a group of member states need to present and act upon concrete proposals for each of the conflict complexes embedded in a human security perspective that accounts for bottom-up demands. Simply reverting to the age-old approach of waiting for Washington's cues will not do the trick, not least because these are unlikely to come as loud and as clear as they have in past decades.

On Iran, the E3 and the EU, whose staunch support for the JCPOA was decisive in preventing Iran from quitting the deal altogether after the US pull-out, have refrained from taking action that may force the Biden administration to adopt positions it is not prepared to take yet. While frustrating, the approach is consistent with the strategic rationale of Europe's almost twenty-year long involvement in Iran's nuclear issue, namely that facilitating US-Iranian nuclear diplomacy is the best way to promote non-proliferation and regional stability.³⁷ That said, time is of the essence and greater European proactivity is now necessary, not least given that normalised economic relations with the EU are coveted in Tehran as a way to improve Iran's financial predicament, break its international isolation and reduce dependence on China and Russia.

In the Eastern Mediterranean, room for manoeuvre is more limited, given the EU's structural bias in light of its membership, featuring Greece and Cyprus, while excluding Turkey. However, some member states, notably Germany, have been playing a constructive diplomatic role, which could be strengthened were it to translate into a European contact group for the region. Working towards making existing regional formats more inclusive is a constructive way forward. Nowhere is this clearer than in the East Med Gas Forum: member states that sit in the forum but have no direct stake in the Greece-Cyprus-Turkey conflict should push for making it a platform to engage Turkey and not to exclude it.

³⁶ Nathalie Tocci, *European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It*, Rome, IAI, February 2021, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12819>.

³⁷ Riccardo Alcaro, "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal: Less than a Success, More than a Failure", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (March 2021), p. 55-72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1876861>.

Finally, in Libya, it is high time France, Germany and Italy start playing a more united and prominent role, based on the shared recognition that there is far more that unites them than what they have been prepared to acknowledge so far, notably their shared interest in not allowing regional powers to call the shots alone. The joint visit to Libya by the foreign ministers of France, Germany and Italy in March 2021 is a first step in this direction. However, such shared recognition should translate into action not only through diplomacy but in security terms too. There is much Europeans could do, from designing demilitarisation protocols, to help build shared security institutions, integrating and demobilising militias and monitoring the implementation of reforms. Standing up to their own responsibility in a volatile and highly insecure environment inevitably entails preparedness to take risk. It is this, rather than just capabilities, that constitutes the missing link that often prevents Europeans from punching their weight in North Africa and the Middle East.

Updated 25 March 2021

References

Yasmina Abouzzohour, "Morocco's Partial Normalization with Israel Comes with Risks and Gains", in *Order from Chaos*, 14 December 2020, <https://brook.gs/34e05YW>

Riccardo Alcaro, "Europe's Defence of the Iran Nuclear Deal: Less than a Success, More than a Failure", in *The International Spectator*, Vol. 56, No. 1 (March 2021), p. 55-72, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03932729.2021.1876861>

Salman Al-Dossary, "Ennahu al-firaq ya Qatar" (It is the differences, Qatar), in *Asharq al-Awsat*, 6 July 2017, <https://aawsat.com/node/967846>

Abdulkader Assad, "Libya's Government of National Unity Sworn In at Tobruk-Based HoR", in *The Libya Observer*, 15 March 2020, <https://www.libyaobserver.ly/node/17861>

Asli Aydintaşbaş and Cinzia Bianco, "Useful Enemies: How the Turkey-UAE Rivalry Is Remaking the Middle East", in *ECFR Policy Briefs*, March 2021, <https://ecfr.eu/?p=69294>

Emadeddin Badi and Wolfram Lacher, "Agree to Disagree: Libya's New Unity Government", in *Sada*, 8 February 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/83839>

Ali Bakir, "Turkey-Egypt Relations: What's Behind Their New Diplomatic Push?", in *Middle East Eye*, 12 March 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/node/203396>

Benjamin Barthe, "L'Arabie saoudite met fin au blocus contre le Qatar", in *Le Monde*, 6 January 2021, https://www.lemonde.fr/international/article/2021/01/05/riyad-met-fin-au-blocus-contre-le-qatar_6065241_3210.html

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "How Qatar Weathered the Gulf Crisis", in *Foreign Affairs*, 11 June 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/node/1122499>

Kristian Coates Ulrichsen and Theodore Karasik, "How Asian and European Countries Helped Qatar Maintain Sovereignty", in *Gulf State Analytics*, 22 April 2018, <https://gulfstateanalytics.com/?p=1984>

Crisis Group, "Against All Odds, Libya's Peace Process Makes Substantial Progress", in *Crisis Group Libya Updates*, No. 4 (15 February 2021), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/node/16272>

Dario Cristiani, "A Ceasefire with Feet of Clay: The Potential Spoilers of Peace in Libya", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 20|86 (November 2020), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12405>

Kelsey Davenport, "Iran, IAEA Reach Monitoring Agreement", in *Arms Control Today*, Vol. 51, No. 2 (March 2021), <https://www.armscontrol.org/node/12193>

Elisabeth Dickinson, "Exporting the Gulf Crisis", in *War on the Rocks*, 28 May 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/?p=20241>

Andrew England, Derek Brower and Simeon Kerr, "Saudi Arabia Seeks to Resolve Qatar Crisis as 'Gift' to Joe Biden", in *Financial Times*, 27 November 2020, <https://on.ft.com/2Jh4Lpo>

Intissar Fakir, "What's Next for the Western Sahara?", in *Lawfare*, 18 December 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/node/20339>

Farnaz Fassihi and David E. Sanger, "Iran Rejects Nuclear Deal Talks with U.S. Proposed by Europe", in *The New York Times*, 28 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/28/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-talks-united-states.html>

Tim Fox, "Region's Economies Will Benefit from Gulf-Qatar Deal", in *MENASource*, 25 January 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/?p=343556>

Bobby Ghosh, "Qatar Exits Gulf Embargo with a Much Stronger Hand", in *Bloomberg*, 8 January 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-01-08/qatar-comes-out-of-gcc-embargo-with-a-much-stronger-hand>

David Hannay, *Cyprus: The Search for a Solution*, London/New York, I.B.Tauris, 2005

Nader Kabbani, "The Blockade on Qatar Helped Strengthen Its Economy, Paving the Way to Stronger Regional Integration", in *Order from Chaos*, 19 January 2021, <https://brook.gs/2Krw6WM>

Andreas Krieg (ed.), *Divided Gulf. The Anatomy of a Crisis*, Singapore, Palgrave Macmillan, 2019

Tom Miles, "Cyprus Reunification Talks Collapse, U.N. Chief 'Very Sorry'", in *Reuters*, 7 July 2017, <http://reut.rs/2tmGyTW>

Francois Murphy, "Iran Tells IAEA It Plans to Scale Back Cooperation in a Week", in *Reuters*, 16 February 2021, <https://reut.rs/3ap4PhK>

Oxford Business Group, "Qatar's Economy Thrives Despite Blockade", in *The Report: Qatar 2019*, April 2020, <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/node/947139>

Jason Pack and Wolfgang Puzstai, "Turning the Tide: How Turkey Won the War for Tripoli", in *MEI Policy Papers*, November 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/node/82011>

David E. Sanger, "Biden Won't Penalize Saudi Crown Prince Over Khashoggi's Killing, Fearing Relations Breach", in *The New York Times*, 26 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/26/us/politics/biden-mbs-khashoggi.html>

Michaël Tanchum, "The Post-COVID-19 Trajectory for Algeria, Morocco and the Western Sahara", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 21|03 (January 2021), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12643>

Michaël Tanchum (ed.), *Eastern Mediterranean in Uncharted Waters. Perspectives on Emerging Geopolitical Realities*, Ankara, Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, December 2020, <https://www.kas.de/de/web/tuerkei/laenderberichte/detail/-/content/eastern-mediterranean-in-uncharted-waters-perspectives-on-emerging-geo-political-realities>

Fehim Tastekin, "Is Turkey-Egypt Maritime Agreement Dead in the Water?", in *Al-Monitor*, 11 March 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/node/29793>

Nathalie Tocci, *European Strategic Autonomy: What It Is, Why We Need It, How to Achieve It*, Rome, IAI, February 2021, <https://www.iai.it/en/node/12819>

James Traub, "Under Biden, the Middle East Would Be Just Another Region", in *Foreign Policy*, 9 September 2020, <https://bit.ly/3bJ9V7O>

Harry Tzimitras, "Eastern Mediterranean Hydrocarbons Prospects: In Need of a Pragmatic Geopolitical Assessment", in *IAI Commentaries*, No. 19|18 (March 2019), <https://www.iai.it/en/node/10032>

Patricia Zengerle and Mike Stone, "Exclusive: Biden Team Considering a Halt to 'Offensive' Arms Sales for Saudis", in *Reuters*, 26 February 2021, <https://reut.rs/3aZrH81>

Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI)

The Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI) is a private, independent non-profit think tank, founded in 1965 on the initiative of Altiero Spinelli. IAI seeks to promote awareness of international politics and to contribute to the advancement of European integration and multilateral cooperation. Its focus embraces topics of strategic relevance such as European integration, security and defence, international economics and global governance, energy, climate and Italian foreign policy; as well as the dynamics of cooperation and conflict in key geographical regions such as the Mediterranean and Middle East, Asia, Eurasia, Africa and the Americas. IAI publishes an English-language quarterly (*The International Spectator*), an online webzine (*Affarinternazionali*), three book series (*Global Politics and Security*, *Quaderni IAI* and *IAI Research Studies*) and some papers' series related to IAI research projects (*Documenti IAI*, *IAI Papers*, etc.).

Via dei Montecatini, 17 - I-00186 Rome, Italy

T +39 06 6976831

iai@iai.it

www.iai.it

Latest IAI PAPERS

Director: Riccardo Alcaro (r.alcaro@iai.it)

- 21 | 12 Nathalie Tocci et al., *From Tectonic Shifts to Winds of Change in North Africa and the Middle East: Europe's Role*
- 21 | 11 Carolina Polito, *La governance globale dei dati e la sovranità digitale europea*
- 21 | 10 Bernardo Venturi and Luca Barana, *Lake Chad: Another Protracted Crisis in the Sahel or a Regional Exception?*
- 21 | 09 Bruce Byiers and Luckystar Miyandazi, *Balancing Power and Consensus: Opportunities and Challenges for Increased African Integration*
- 21 | 08 Tsion Tadesse Abebe and Otilia Anna Maunganidze, *Implications of COVID-19 on East Africa–EU Partnership on Migration and Forced Displacement*
- 21 | 07 Nicoletta Pirozzi, Luca Argenta and Paweł Tokarski, *The EU One Year after the Covid-19 Outbreak: An Italian-German Perspective*
- 21 | 06 Adel Abdel Ghafar, *Between Geopolitics and Geoeconomics: The Growing Role of Gulf States in the Eastern Mediterranean*
- 21 | 05 Alessandro Marrone and Ester Sabatino, *Cyber Defence in NATO Countries: Comparing Models*
- 21 | 04 Katarzyna Kubiak, *Reviewing NATO's Non-proliferation and Disarmament Policy*
- 21 | 03 Mehdi Lahlou, *EU–Africa Partnership on Migration and Mobility in Light of COVID-19: Perspectives from North Africa*