

AFTER THE STORM

POST-PANDEMIC TRENDS IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN

edited by **Andrey Kortunov** and **Paolo Magri**



ISPI



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Via Antonio Boselli, 10 – 20136 Milan – Italy
www.ledizioni.it
info@ledizioni.it

AFTER THE STORM: POST-PANDEMIC TRENDS
IN THE SOUTHERN MEDITERRANEAN

Edited by Andrey Kortunov and Paolo Magri
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The Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC) is a non-profit international relations think tank on a mission to provide policy recommendations for all of the Russian organisations involved in external affairs. RIAC engages experts, statesmen, entrepreneurs, and members of civil society in public discussions with the aim of increasing the effectiveness of Russian foreign policy. Along with research and analysis, RIAC is involved in educational activities aimed at creating a solid network of young global affairs and diplomacy experts. RIAC is an active player on the public diplomacy arena, presenting Russia's vision on the key issues of global development on the international stage.

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Introduction

Now more than ever, as the world's nations grow increasingly interconnected, much of their security and prosperity has also become intertwined. This is why, in considering the larger Mediterranean region, it is only to be expected that stability on its northern shores is more and more connected with stability on its southern shores.

As is well known, the Southern Mediterranean has been a region beset by conflict and instability for the best part of a decade. Since the so-called Arab Spring, longstanding disputes (the Arab-Israeli conflict, the challenging political-religious balance in Lebanon, or the fragile Shia-Sunni compromise in Iraq) have been coupled by instability in countries that had been somewhat stable for much longer such as Syria, Libya, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria. Moreover, over the same timespan the Mediterranean region has faced a significant number of challenges that have stemmed from turbulent events taking place on its southern shores: the migration crisis, disruptions of regional value chains, souring regional relations, and foreign power interferences that have severely affected the region as a whole.

As though the region's troubles had not been enough, the spread of Covid-19 across the world in general, and the Southern Mediterranean in particular, has taken a heavy toll. For MENA countries, the global pandemic and its consequences have been a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the virus has exacerbated the unresolved and persistent issues that have unfortunately become a regional leitmotiv: political instability,

the lack of employment opportunities, the lack of social reforms, rising poverty, and underdevelopment in general. It has shined a light on the importance of taking action in solving these matters before it is too late, while also reminding countries that developments in regional neighbours can deeply affect their own. On the other hand, as the international health crisis became the top priority for most governments in the region, it also appears to have overshadowed the importance of responding to the very challenges that had been exposed by the Covid-19 emergency.

This Report brings together experts and scholars in an effort to ponder on possible post-pandemic trends in the Southern Mediterranean. The aim is to help readers navigate the future of the Southern Mediterranean region, by offering new insights and guidance to regional and non-regional governments, civil society, and the public at large.

In the first chapter, Ruslan Mamedov retraces how geopolitical and security competitions have evolved on the Eastern Mediterranean region. Over the last year, the author argues, the area has become increasingly important for global transport routes and its growing energy potential. Recent energy discoveries in the Levant Sea raise the legitimate question: which approach will prevail? Will we see cooperation in conflict resolution and in promoting collective security, based on the joint development of natural gas fields, or is competition destined to further complicate the picture for a region already fraught with conflicts?

Ivan Bocharov addresses the future of radicalism and terrorism in fragile countries – that is, countries struggling with weak legitimacy and deteriorating governance settings. More specifically, the chapter focuses on Libya by providing a comprehensive overview of recent developments within the country. The author argues that while the pandemic may conceivably have stolen the spotlight from the civil war, and shifted the focus of the international community away from the terrorism threat, the latter has certainly not disappeared.

Rather, by fostering radical sentiments, the socio-economic problems resulting from the spread of the virus have created an even more fertile ground for recruitment.

Moving on, Matteo Villa and Elena Corradi examine the impact of the pandemic on migration flows between the two shores of the Mediterranean, and specifically regular and irregular migration from the southern shore towards EU countries. By observing the evolution of migration flows in the Central Mediterranean route particularly, the authors argue that the global health crisis has had the effect of deterring regular migration flows to Europe, while leading to an increase of irregular migration along some Mediterranean Sea routes.

Chiara Lovotti then deals with post-Covid prospects for international cooperation in Lebanon and Syria. Both countries were already in a significantly vulnerable position before the global pandemic hit. On the one hand, having to face a (healthcare) crisis within a (political and social) crisis had severe consequences on the Syrian and Lebanese people. On the other, it also served as a catalyst for cooperation. In light of the urgency of the current situation, the international community has largely opted for solidarity and aid over separation and disagreements. In such a context, avenues for collaboration, although intricate, have multiplied. Convergent economic and political interests have acted as a multiplier for potential partnerships.

In the fifth chapter, Andrey Chuprygin examines the unfolding developments of the conflict in Libya from the perspective of a foreign player: Russia. In a setting similar to that of the Syrian civil war the author makes the argument that, although the pandemic did negatively affect the Libyan population, it was not one of the root causes of the conflict nor did it have a considerable impact on the evolution of the pre-existing crisis. Chuprygin further points out that the primary consequence of the pandemic on Libya's political discourse has been to dramatically stress the humanitarian aspect of civil unrest.

Finally, Inès Abdel Razek puts the spotlight on Israeli-Palestinian relations and highlights the different ways in which regional and international trends have impacted respectively the Palestinian population and the Palestinian national movement. Further, she explores what is at stake in Israeli-Palestinian relations and, in particular, what can be lost or gained by both parties in the current environment. The author also investigates how the current predicament offers an opportunity to review the rules of engagement between the two parties, in order to reach a negotiated solution. Finally, the chapter looks at the way a radical change in the code of conduct of much of the international community with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has enabled de facto annexation and ethno-nationalist policies to thrive.

In conclusion, the pandemic did wreak havoc on the Southern Mediterranean, but the health crisis had somewhat ambiguous effects on the underlying economic, social and political trends of the region. Albeit lucky to have a younger population, shielding a larger portion of its inhabitants from the worst effects of the infection, a war-torn and instability-ravaged region has had to deal with “just another” crisis. The pandemic has exposed and exacerbated much of the previous sources of tension and, at the same time, served to obscure many of them as public attention moved towards facing the public health emergency. It remains to be seen whether the pandemic will spur governments and civil societies into action, or serve as just another smokescreen behind which to hide the region’s longstanding problems.

Andrey Kortunov
General Director, RIAC

Paolo Magri
Executive Vice President, ISPI

1. The Energy Sector, Competition and Security in the Eastern Mediterranean

Ruslan Mamedov

Recently, and particularly in 2019-20, scholars have been increasingly focusing on the Eastern Mediterranean owing to its importance for global transport routes and its growing energy potential. The energy sources in the Levant basin raise the legitimate question: which approach will prevail? Shall we see cooperation in conflict resolution and in promoting collective security, based on joint building and development of the fields, or shall we see competition destined to exacerbate a situation already fraught with conflicts?

Development of the Fields and Plans for Transporting Resources to Global Markets

The Eastern Mediterranean sub-region is at the juncture of Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, which both makes it hostage to old overlapping conflicts and opens up certain opportunities. It is important to remember that gas reserves in the Mediterranean shelf discovered in the XXI century total over 3.8 trillion cubic meters.¹ The key fields are Zohr off the coast of Egypt, Tamar and Leviathan off the coast of Israel, and

¹ Department of the Interior, *Assessment of Undiscovered Oil and Gas Resources of the Levant Basin Province, Eastern Mediterranean*, USGS, Fact Sheet 2010-3014, March 2010.

Aphrodite off the coast of Cyprus, etc. Additionally, the so-called Block 9 is in a part of the field disputed by Lebanon. We can suppose there are large gas reserves off the Syrian coast, as well. By 2020, development had already been launched on several fields but, on the whole, both this process and its implementation are proceeding in fits and starts since matters have to be approved and agreed between unstable governments and oil companies, and also between states themselves, in the absence of demarcated maritime borders.

For decades, most states of the Levant Basin have imported gas and oil. The Egypt-Israel collaboration in the energy sector exhibits a curious dynamic. Currently, these two states have made the greatest progress in developing gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean. In 2015, Italy's Eni discovered the gigantic Zohr field in Egypt, a major Arab state, which allowed Cairo to break the vicious circle of its dependence on imports and to cover its own demand for gas. Egypt now produces about 311 million cubic meters of gas and 700,000 barrels of oil daily (from the deposits in the Western Desert adjacent to Libya).² However, in January 2020, gas production also started on Leviathan, the largest field in the Levant Basin located on Israel's stretch of the shelf, and this marked the start of deliveries of Leviathan-produced gas to Egypt. Noble Energy, which develops Leviathan, contracted to deliver gas to Egypt back in 2018. Noble Energy purchased 10% of Eastern Mediterranean Gas Company, which owns the gas pipeline running from Ashkelon in Israel to El-Arish in Egypt (about 90 km). Even though Egypt has no particular need for gas imports, it is striving to create a gas hub. Egypt is planning to receive gas from neighbouring states, liquefy it at the Egyptian LNG plant (Idku LNG with a capacity of 7.2 m. tonnes a year), and sell it on global markets, sending it by tanker to Europe or Asia.³

² [Дайджест событий мирового нефтегазового рынка](#) (Digest of events on the global oil and gas market) 21-25 September 2020

³ “[Левифан поплыл. На проблемном израильском месторождении началась добыча газа](#)” (“The Leviathan swam. Gas production starts at

Egypt's interests have taken this turn since it has had fewer problems developing and selling its own natural gas, while the situation is somewhat more complicated for Israel. Development of the Tamar and Leviathan gas fields has slowed down owing to the technically challenging gas production process, the high market price of the gas (which makes it difficult to find buyers), and domestic political and regional instability stemming from maritime border demarcation issues.

To settle matters related to the above-mentioned Block 9, Israel engaged in talks with Lebanon on demarcating the maritime border, a historic event in the two states' bilateral relations. Lebanese officials made every effort to emphasize that these talks were purely technical. International companies are certainly interested in the success of these negotiations; the Total-Eni-Novatek consortium has signed a contract for exploration in Block 9. Despite claims that their talks are exclusively technical, both Israel and Lebanon need these negotiations. For Israel, they will mark another success in gaining regional recognition of its rights while, should development of the gas fields prove successful, they will afford Lebanon a special opportunity to attract additional investment. The gas produced could come in handy for both domestic consumption and exports, which together would constitute an important boost to the crisis-stricken Lebanese economy.⁴

Transporting the gas to Europe demanded that Cyprus be involved. This once again raised the predictable issue of Cyprus and prompted a response from Turkey (which we believe to be somewhat belated). In the course of time, Israel succeeded in securing the support of Egypt, Greece and Cyprus. The latter two states need to be involved for two reasons: the Aphrodite deposit was discovered off the coast of Cyprus and there is also the matter of transporting the Levantine natural gas to Europe. This question has produced the principal frictions concerning

problem Israeli field"), *Neftegaz.ru*, 17 January 2020.

⁴ "Gas is the engine of progress Israel and Lebanon begin talks on demarcation of maritime border", *Kommersant*, 14 October 2020.

the Eastern Mediterranean. The plans to build a pipeline to Europe have not been implemented yet; however, on 2 January 2020, Greece, Cyprus and Israel signed a treaty to construct the 1,900-kilometre EastMed gas pipeline. This question is claimed to be of interest to both Europe and the U.S. as mitigating the risks of dependence on Russian gas (see below for further details). Construction of the gas pipeline with a capacity of 10 billion cubic metres a year is expected to take approximately seven years.

Revitalisation of Ankara's foreign policy and regional competition in the Eastern Mediterranean

While other states in the Eastern Mediterranean (Israel, Egypt, Cyprus, Greece and, to some extent, Lebanon) have attempted to form alliances around the energy sector and gas exports, Turkey has remained on the sidelines. Nevertheless, both the regional reconfiguration and the domestic perturbations that affected Turkey in 2016 after the attempted military coup resulted in Ankara taking more active political steps and shaping its own policy in the Eastern Mediterranean. Before 2016, Turkey strove to apply the “strategic depth” concept formulated in the 2000s by the state’s Foreign Minister and Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu. Following his resignation in May 2016, and particularly after the attempted military coup, Ankara began to steer a course toward developing a new strategy and becoming actively involved in its neighbours’ affairs.

As a result, Turkey began to drift away from the “strategic depth” concept and toward a policy that is more independent of its traditional partners and also favours tactically advantageous cooperation and going back to using “hard power” ... Back in 2006, Turkish Admiral Cem Gürdeniz introduced the “Blue Homeland” (*Mavi Vatan*) doctrine as part of Turkey’s maritime strategy; Gürdeniz is considered to be one of the principal architects of Turkey’s current policy in the Mediterranean and of the ideology of demarcating the borders with Libya.⁵

⁵ N. Kulijeva, *From “strategic depth” to “blue homeland”: New Turkish policy in the*

The agreements Turkey and the Libyan government concluded in late 2019 resulted from a bilateral Ankara-Tripoli arrangement achieved with complete disregard for other actors and for the 1982 Convention on the Law of the Sea. Since Turkey is not a signatory to that Convention, Ankara believes it had the right to shape its own bilateral relations, which also implies larger sea spaces for Turkey. Sooner or later, this approach by Turkey will inevitably come up against growing discontent on the part of other states. In this respect, much depends on whether Turkey will make concessions and cut a deal to retain some benefits, or whether it will risk escalating tensions, sanctions and serious economic problems. Turkey's revitalised policy is reaching its limits. In fact, this policy, pursued as part of Turkey's "Blue Homeland" doctrine, stems from Ankara's own missed opportunities. We can expect Turkey's revitalised policy in the "post-Ottoman" space to peak in late 2020 in the face of the discontent of other actors. It is now crucially important for Turkey to reach a regional consensus with the other states of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Eastern Mediterranean sub-region has laid bare rifts in adjacent regions: Europe and the Middle East. As far the European dimension is concerned, we are observing a rapprochement between Italy and Turkey while France is building up its military presence in the sub-region and countering Turkey's objectives. As far as the Middle East is concerned, strife and regional competition are building up between Qatar and Turkey on the one hand, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Saudi Arabia and Egypt on the other. The establishment of relations between the UAE and Israel might also entail additional risks for Eastern Mediterranean stability, since the two states' interests are currently rather convergent and contrary to Ankara's ambitions in the sub-region. Both Israel and the UAE have a high degree of confidence in Washington and their lobbying potential there. This could deliver a powerful blow to U.S.-Turkey relations,

already severely tested in connection with the Syrian Kurds and Fethullah Gülen, the Turkish preacher accused of instigating the 2016 attempted military coup in Turkey.

In these circumstances, the rift within NATO takes on a different hue. So far, truly dangerous developments between France and Turkey, locked in a conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean, have been prevented by NATO having “arbitrators” in the U.S. and Germany. Nevertheless, it appears that joint efforts by NATO’s key members and Russia could create opportunities to develop mechanisms for preventing the situation from deteriorating further and tensions from escalating.

Old resolved conflicts in the sub-region overlap with both revived and new problems. For instance, provided local actors adopt an appropriate approach and external actors focus their attention on the sub-region, the energy sector could form the basis for a future regional security architecture; currently, however, these matters are only exacerbating the regional predicament. As they overlap with the traditional Israeli-Palestinian, Greek-Turkish and Cyprus questions, these developments are encouraging escalation and further competition.

The Global Dimension: The U.S. and Russia in the Eastern Mediterranean

A competitive foundation for international relations is currently solidifying in the Eastern Mediterranean. There are no expectations of a cooperative approach, since one party or another will always have greater ambitions and will attempt to implement exclusion policies. Russia and the U.S. are the key external actors interested in the region’s stability, so it would be expedient for them to work out joint crisis-prevention solutions.

For the U.S., Israel’s security and an Israeli-Palestine settlement, as well as support for NATO’s infrastructure and bodies, remain the key issues in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The latter is particularly important for Americans because they view the Eastern Mediterranean as NATO's naval gateway to the Black Sea. This approach by the U.S. is destructive for other actors globally and for those directly involved in security issues in the Eastern Mediterranean. Given the serious risks and the fact that the situation could get out of hand, the U.S. have therefore been prompted to recognise, at least at expert level, the need to work on technical deconfliction measures in this part of the world. This requires finding a way to untangle the Cyprus, Libya and Syria questions.

As for Russia's policy in the Eastern Mediterranean, we should recall Russia's Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov visited Damascus and Cyprus in 2020. Mr. Lavrov emphasised that escalation was inadmissible and called for peaceful resolution of the contradictions through dialogue. Bilateral and multilateral dialogue, UN mechanisms, and international law should bring the parties to de-escalate tensions. Russia's Foreign Minister also said Moscow was ready to act as a mediator should it be necessary. Russia is particularly concerned about the Syrian and Libyan part of the Eastern Mediterranean since Russia has maintained a military presence in Syria since 2015. By 2020, the world had seen the violence in the Syrian crisis abating but, in 2019-20, both Lebanon and Syria's economic situation deteriorated steadily and man-made disasters and large-scale wildfires occurred. People's lives and the overall humanitarian situation were badly affected by the political elites' inability to settle the crises and by European and American sanctions. Syria and Lebanon's markets and currencies fell when the U.S. Congress adopted the so-called Caesar Act, a set of sanctions against Syria, and individual sanctions against Lebanon. Moscow, Washington and Damascus need to launch a serious political dialogue (not only at the level of the secret services) concerning the situation surrounding Lebanon and Syria. Further deterioration is fraught with new risks, especially for the neighbours of the two countries.

With no “honest broker” available in the Eastern Mediterranean, the risks of new regional clashes and problems increase. Some states practice a “bloc-based” approach to developing the fields and transporting gas; there are long-standing conflicts (the Cyprus question, the Palestinian question); there are no diplomatic contacts between individual regional actors (for instance, between Turkey and Egypt, between Turkey and Syria); all these factors exacerbate mistrust and undermine regional security. The Eastern Mediterranean states are committed to resolving economic interaction issues through dialogue provided there are one or more independent actors capable of taking various interests into account and finding solutions. Such a development would create an avenue for building confidence and could even result in collective security elements. (The European Coal and Steel Community played a role in the emergence of the OSCE, so a gas community in the Eastern Mediterranean could advance sub-regional integration and security). Given the U.S.’ interest in the region and the role it plays there, this issue could be put on the Russia-U.S. bilateral agenda with a view to achieving the most secure, acceptable and inclusive result.

2. The Future of Radicalism and Terrorism in Fragile States

Ivan Bocharov

The Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies, a Doha-based research centre, publishes the Arab Opinion Index annually. In 2020, the new study was published. Researchers at the centre conducted 28,288 interviews with respondents from the whole Arab world, including Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, Iraq, Jordan, Palestine, Lebanon, Egypt, Sudan, Tunisia, Morocco, Algeria, and Mauritania.¹ In 2019-20, the Arab Opinion Index showed the view of ISIS and other similar extremist groups is mostly negative. However, 3% of Arabs have a very positive view of such groups, and 2% have a somewhat positive view of ISIS and other similar organisations (in the 2017-18, it was 2% and 3%). Comparing the results with those of previous years shows the situation has largely remained stable overall. However, according to the study, the percentage of people who have a very positive view of ISIS is the highest since 2014 and the same as in 2015. The portion of Arabs who have a negative attitude towards ISIS increased to 10% (7% in 2017-18), while the percentage of people with an extremely negative view dropped to 78% (85% in 2017-18).² This statistic is quite frightening and leads to the conclusion the problems of radicalisation in society and terrorism need far more attention.

¹ *The 2019-20 Arab Opinion Index: Main Results in Brief*, Arab Center for Research and Political Studies, p. 1.

² *Ibid.*, p. 58.

Not only Mediterranean countries, but the whole world closely followed the growing radical trends in North Africa following the Arab Spring. The Covid-19 pandemic has shifted the focus of the global community towards solving its health problems. At the same time, the terrorist threat in fragile Southern Mediterranean countries has not disappeared or even become frozen. On the contrary, socioeconomic problems have created additional space for the growth of radical sentiment. Below is a brief overview of the status of radicalism and terrorism in North African countries in order to understand the threats that exist in some of these states.

Libyan Terrorist Threat and Its Impact on the Region

The main source of destabilisation in the Southern Mediterranean is Libya, where the war has not stopped since February 2011. After the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, a security vacuum emerged in the country, which was eventually filled by terrorists from the Islamic State, Al-Qaeda, Ansar al-Sharia, and other jihadist groups. Today's chaos in Libya creates ideal conditions for terrorism to flourish. Libya is now divided into 2 large parts, which are controlled by the Government of National Accord (GNA) and the Libyan National Army (LNA), as well as several small areas that are not controlled by either side of the Libyan conflict. There are no unified state structures in the country; there are many weapons and plenty of military equipment. Added to this is Libya's geostrategic position, as well as access to hydrocarbon production, which is also an advantage for terrorists.

The influence of the Libyan threat extends to neighbouring countries and contributes to the radicalisation of North Africa. For example, the negative role played by Libyan terrorists in protecting Egypt's national security is obvious. First, weapons and explosives get from Libya to Egypt. In 2015-17, Egyptian troops destroyed more than 1,200 trucks with weapons and

explosives that were en route to Egypt from Libya.³ Secondly, militants can be trained in Libya and then transported to a neighbouring country via the poorly controlled Egyptian-Libyan border. In 2017, the Egyptian air force was even forced to launch airstrikes on the jihadist strongholds in Derna as they were involved in preparing a terrorist attack on Egyptian territory.⁴

Tunisia once faced a similar problem. In March 2016, Islamic State militants, who were training near the Libyan city of Sabratha, invaded Tunisia and battled with Tunisian security forces for several days.⁵ It is also noteworthy that the perpetrators of the major terrorist attacks in Tunisia in 2015 were Tunisians who were trained in Islamic State camps near Sabratha.⁶ The Pentagon, in cooperation with Germany, even had to send financial aid to Tunisia to at least partially secure Tunisia's border with Libya.⁷

Despite calls for a ceasefire, fighting continues in Libya. The global crisis caused by the pandemic has filled the global information space and the Libyan conflict has almost been forgotten. At the same time, in June 2020, there was another exacerbation in the military conflict, when the troops of the GNA tried to counterattack against the LNA.

Notably, the problem of radicalisation in Libyan society and the issue of terrorism in this country cannot be solved without ending the war and creating unified state institutions of power

³ A. Megahid, "Egypt pinning hopes on new reconnaissance satellite to help military with border controls", *The Arab Weekly*, 2 September 2018.

⁴ A.H. Ashraf فنرد على عتار اغل ي ف رصم كراشت اي بيل ("Egypt participates in the raids on Derna"), *Al Arabiya*, 27 May 2017.

⁵ F. Wehrey. مُسرت نأ ةي بيللا ةين مال تاي دحتل فيك: ةو حصرلل ةوع د، سنوت. (Tunisia's Wake-Up Call: How Security Challenges From Libya Are Shaping Defense Reforms), Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. 19 August 2020.

⁶ C. Stephen, "Tunisia gunman trained in Libya at same time as Bardo museum attackers", *The Guardian*, 30 June 2015.

⁷ J. Detsch, "Pentagon partners with Germany on Tunisia border security", *Al-Monitor*, 23 February 2018.

that do not fight each other. It is very difficult to concentrate on the fight against ISIS fighters when the leaders of the GNA and LNA mutually accuse each other of terrorism. Nonetheless, there have still been some successes in the fight against jihadists. For example, in September 2020, in Southern Libya, LNA forces killed the leader of the Islamic State in North Africa.⁸

The conflict persists. Until now, the political ambitions of the opposing sides have prevailed over the desire to protect the population from radicals. Post-pandemic trends in terrorism not only in Libya but also in fragile, neighbouring Southern Mediterranean countries depend directly on the prospects of a political settlement for the war. The establishment of a ceasefire between GNA and LNA, as well as the development of mechanisms for uniting the country together with the establishment of unified institutions of power, could be the first and most important steps in combating the terrorist threat in the region. The relevant parties will be able to unite their efforts in the fight against jihadists, and only in such a scenario will it be appropriate to talk about programmes for the de-radicalisation of militants and about using a combination of hard and soft measures with radicals.

In all likelihood, in an environment where the world community is focused on solving the problems caused by the pandemic, the chances of political peace in Libya are diminishing. This means significant progress in the fight against Libyan terrorists is unlikely. 2020 is not over yet, but it is already possible to surmise the situation with radicalisation and terrorism has worsened. Libya continues to be a fertile ground for militants from across the region and will remain the main terrorist hotbed in the Southern Mediterranean in the medium term.

⁸ Ливийская армия ликвидировала главаря ИГ в Северной Африке (“Libyan army eliminates IS leader in North Africa”), *TASS*, 23 September 2020.

The global community should make every effort to ensure the warring parties reach an agreement as soon as possible on the formation of a unified transitional government and then organise elections. It is extremely important to strictly suppress violations of the embargo (including by Turkey). The more weapons that get into Libya, the longer the terrorist threat will remain.

Egyptian Powder Keg

The problem of terrorism is one of the key security challenges in the Arab Republic of Egypt. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi once even said that Egypt's two main problems are terrorism and rapid population growth.⁹ The post-pandemic trends of radicalism and terrorism in Egypt are the most unpredictable and could have dire consequences.

The most dangerous and powerful terrorist organisation operating in Egypt is the Wilayat Sinai of the Islamic State. Originally known as Ansar Beit al-Maqdis, this Salafi jihadist group began operations in 2011 following the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak. After the removal of the government of Mohammed Morsi in 2013, the group began to actively act against the Egyptian security forces, and in 2014 swore allegiance to the Islamic State.¹⁰ The Islamic State carries out the vast majority of terrorist attacks in Egypt, including blowing up a Russian passenger plane in October 2015.

The Sinai Peninsula is full of Egyptian armed forces, which have been conducting counter-terrorism operations against ISIS over the past few years. Nevertheless, the terrorist group cannot be defeated. The Egyptian military manages to contain the terrorist threat to some extent, but there are no real signs

⁹ E. Krutikov. Высокая рождаемость разоряет Египет (“High fertility ravages Egypt”), *Vzglyad*, 19 October 2017.

¹⁰ *Islamic State - Sinai Province*, The Center for International Security and Cooperation.

of significant changes in this threat. In 2020, the Sinai cell of ISIS committed more than a hundred terrorist attacks, which were aimed, among other things, at armoured military vehicles, military construction vehicles, and a gas pipeline.¹¹

Unfortunately, the Islamic State is not the only group operating in Egypt. Recently, Afnad Misr (“Soldiers of Egypt”), a Salafi terrorist group, has become quite famous. It is now one of the most active jihadist groups in Egypt. It has been operating around Cairo since 2013 and has committed terrible terrorist attacks, including the assassination of Brigadier General Ahmed Zaki in April 2014. A distinctive feature of the group is targeted attacks against state structures. Afnad Misr tries to avoid civilian casualties and treats women very well. The terrorist organisation partially justifies its activities by protecting women from the arbitrary rule of the State, in particular from the brutal suppression of peaceful protests.¹²

The group’s concern about the lives of civilians and the safety of women leads to two compelling assumptions. First, Afnad Misr is a less radical group than Al-Qaeda or the Islamic State. De-radicalisation programmes directed against this Salafi group may be far more successful than those targeting some others. Secondly, the de-radicalisation of its members can occur by adopting a more humane attitude towards the civilian population. Egyptian security forces may choose not to brutally crackdown on peaceful demonstrations, and deal with the disaffected part of society peacefully. It is logical to assume the peaceful existence of the rule of law can win the sympathy of the rank-and-file members of Afnad Misr, which in the long term may contribute to their de-radicalisation.

One of the four postulates that President al-Sisi has set out for the fight against terrorism is “Fight all forms of terror”, that is, “confronting all terrorist organisations without

¹¹ A. McManus, *ISIS in the Sinai: A Persistent Threat for Egypt*, Center for Global Policy, 23 June 2020.

¹² *Afnad Misr*, The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy (TIMEP), 22 July 2014.

discrimination”.¹³ However, there is an increase in repression against civilians, which spins the process of radicalisation.

The Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research (Baseera) conducted opinion polls into how Egyptians viewed the Muslim Brotherhood and the degree of their recognition on the political scene after the 30 June Revolution and the resignation of former President Mohamed Morsi. The survey results showed 69% of Egyptians rejected the continued involvement of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egyptian life, while 6% agreed with it continuing activities, and 13% agreed with it continuing activities, but with reservations (for example, to be a missionary organisation, not a political one).¹⁴ This is a rather large portion of society, whose opinion must be taken into account. And 6% of the population should not be classified as terrorists for their solidarity with the renewed political activity of the Muslim Brotherhood.

However, between July 2013 and May 2014, Egyptian security forces detained, indicted, or sentenced at least 41,000 people, leading to tensions in prisons. Torture was often used against detainees.¹⁵ The current and alleged political opponents of the new Egyptian authorities faced unlawful detentions, disappearances, and murders. In prisons, they were treated extremely cruelly, including physical and sexual torture.¹⁶ Prisoners are subjected to severe psychological pressure due to extremely poor conditions. Prison authorities often send young prisoners to radical cells, where young people are exposed to inmates.¹⁷ This created an environment that generally

¹³ “Egypt and the United States: Collaborating to Fight Terrorism”, Embassy of Egypt.

¹⁴ *تقييم مصري للمجموعة الإسلامية (Egyptian evaluation of the Muslim Brotherhood)*, The Egyptian Center for Public Opinion Research (Baseera), 27 August 2013.

¹⁵ *سيسي سنة من الاضطهاد (Egypt: Year of Abuses Under al-Sisi)*, *Human Rights Watch*, 8 June 2015.

¹⁶ *Regime Repression and Youth Radicalization in Egypt*, Policy Brief Egypt 2 – Radicalization, Heinrich Böll Stiftung, February 2017, p. 3.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 5.

encouraged young people in Egypt to embrace extremist ideas.

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted Egypt's socioeconomic instability and hit the Egyptian economy hard. In the Arab Republic of Egypt, cinemas, theatres and zoos were temporarily closed. Due to the Covid-19 epidemic, the opening of New Cairo, the Grand Egyptian Museum, and other major projects were postponed until 2021. But most importantly, international air traffic was suspended. Resorts soon began to close. All this could not but affect the tourism industry and the economy as a whole. In March 2020, Egypt's foreign exchange reserves were reduced by US\$5 billion.¹⁸ The Egyptian stock market (EGX) collapsed, recording the largest drop of any Arab stock market, and lost 95 billion Egyptian pounds (about US\$5.5 billion).¹⁹

The situation is aggravated by the demographic crisis. In February 2020, it was announced the population of Egypt had crossed the 100 million mark.²⁰ In a matter of decades, the population of Egypt has increased significantly, while the country's opportunities for agricultural development are extremely limited. Given the rapidly growing population of Egypt, it can be assumed the State will soon not have enough water resources, which are so necessary for the functioning of the country's irrigation system.

Thus, a dangerous situation similar to a powder keg arises in Egypt. The state is threatened by a severe economic crisis that will have long-term consequences. And in socioeconomic terms, the situation in Egypt is now more difficult than on the eve of the Arab Spring in 2011. It is common knowledge this led to the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak and the

¹⁸ Валютные резервы Египта сократились на \$5 миллиардов из-за COVID-19 ("Egypt's foreign exchange reserves drop \$ 5 billion due to COVID-19"), РИА Новости, 8 April 2020.

¹⁹ تصريحا بترصلا رسخت 95 رايلم مهنج يف عويسا ("Egyptian Stock Exchange Lost £95bn in a Week"), *Yuum7*, 19 March 2020.

²⁰ 10 نبيلام نونكسي قرهاقلا .. دادعتو رصم 100 نويلم تمسند ("10 million live in Cairo .. Egypt's population has exceeded 100 million"), *Alburra*, 11 February 2020.

coming to power of the Muslim Brotherhood. However, the radicalisation of society now has more weighty reasons, caused by the growth of the terrorist threat from the Sinai cell of ISIS, Ajnad Misr, and other jihadist groups. An important role is also played by the anger of people caused by often baseless repression by the State. This means that, in the short term, an uncontrolled social explosion may occur in Egypt, which may result in a sharp increase in the influence of terrorist groups or even the overthrow of the current government.

In some ways, Egypt is taking effective measures to combat terrorists. For example, the military called on the residents of Sinai, frustrated by the presence of militants, to provide intelligence. Besides, the army formed small militias that could independently resist the jihadists.²¹ In 2019, the Ministry of Awqaf opened an academy to train imams and preachers to counter “extremist narratives”, and Al-Azhar University has presented several new academic books on the relationship between Muslims and Christians and the promotion of equality between the two religions.²²

To keep things under control, it is imperative to be proactive. First, the Egyptian authorities should immediately end the persecution of tens of thousands of Egyptians for political reasons. It should be understood the arrests of innocent people could lead to people falling under the influence of radicals, of whom there are many in prisons. This is the most obvious form of radicalisation in Egyptian society and it is created by the authorities themselves. Secondly, it is necessary to rely more on soft measures for ordinary members of radical organisations, in particular Ajnad Misr. Indeed, not violently suppressing peaceful demonstrations might prove very effective in persuading rank-and-file Ajnad Misr members to abandon the violent struggle and opposition. Thirdly, Egypt today more than ever needs humanitarian assistance and direct financial

²¹ A. McManus (2020).

²² *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Egypt*, U.S. Department of State.

support. In the current difficult conditions, in addition to food, humanitarian aid may contain Covid-19 tests, which Egypt lacks. It is also necessary to develop a mechanism for controlling the demographic situation in the country, that is, to control population growth so as not to cause famine in the country.

In the era of the coronavirus pandemic, global and regional players are focused on solving their problems, and this is natural. But now the world powers should pay more attention to Egypt as a potential new hotbed of activity for jihadists and other radical elements capable of seriously destabilising the situation in the Middle East and North Africa. This could have very negative consequences.

Prospects for Radicalisation of Protests in Tunisia

The future of radicalism and terrorism in Tunisia does not seem as pessimistic as it is in Egypt. Nevertheless, there are certain risks with specific roots. In Tunisia, regional inequality plays a special role. This problem is inherent in many states in the Middle East and North Africa, for example, Egypt or Algeria. However, a unique situation has developed in Tunisia.

The Eastern regions of Tunisia are traditionally poor. Since the 1970s, the Tunisian government has directed money towards the development of coastal areas, developing tourism and industry there. At the same time, remote parts of Tunisia, especially its Eastern regions, were only sources of cheap labour. According to 2014 World Bank data, half of Tunisia's population and 85% of the country's GDP is concentrated near Tunisia, Sfax, and Sousse, the country's three largest cities.²³

High levels of poverty have forced easterners to engage in the smuggling trade with Libya, often the only way to make a living.

²³ H. Meddeb, *دوخ صوة أيوه جلا تاتوافتلا: سنوت يف بضغلا أيفارغج (Tunisia's Geography of Anger: Regional Inequalities and the Rise of Populism)*, Carnegie Middle East Center, 3 March 2020.

At the same time, the Tunisian authorities have taken measures to secure the border with Libya, to strengthen control over it, which made it even more difficult for the smugglers. This has led to an increase in corruption among customs officers and border guards. Besides, the smuggling of alcohol, drugs, and weapons began to flourish.²⁴ The militarisation of the Tunisian-Libyan border has backfired, creating more opportunities for corruption and trafficking in illegal goods instead of curbing crime.

The spread of the coronavirus has not spared Tunisia. The Covid-19 pandemic has disrupted agriculture and agribusiness activities in the Tunisian market. The supply of fruit was also negatively impacted by isolation and social distancing measures. Restrictions on the movement of fruit farmworkers have dramatically reduced the supply of fruit to local markets.²⁵

Among the industry, textiles and clothing and the mechanical and electrical industries have been severely affected. In the industrial sector of Tunisia, business has decreased and the fall in demand for products increased. The pandemic has caused significant economic damage to the tourism industry.²⁶ The transport sector, construction, and several other spheres of the Tunisian economy have also suffered. The volume of foreign trade decreased, primarily with China, France, Germany, and Italy.²⁷

The level of the terrorist threat in Tunisia is relatively low, but another reason might cause the destabilisation of the situation. The uneven economic development of the regions increases the level of social tension. In the interior of the country, sit-ins,

²⁴ A. Boukhars, *The Potential Jihadi Windfall From the Militarization of Tunisia's Border Region With Libya*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 18 March 2020.

²⁵ Z. ElKadhi, D. Elsabbagh, A. Frija, T. Lakoud, M. Wiebelt, and C. Breisinger, *The Impact of COVID-19 on Tunisia's Economy, Agri-food System, and Households*, Regional Program Policy Note 05, International Food Policy Research Institute, May 2020, p. 3.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

road closures, and other attempts by representatives of the provinces to put pressure on the central authorities often take place. The coronavirus pandemic has laid the foundation for a global recession, and there is no reason to believe the slowdown in economic growth will bypass Tunisia. This means that soon, the trend towards the economic differentiation of individual Tunisian regions may increase. This could lead to an increase in protests in Tunisia, especially in the eastern part of the state.

To keep the terrorist threat relatively low and prevent a surge in revolutionary sentiment, the economic development of the Eastern regions of Tunisia has to be tackled seriously. The government should try to evenly distribute economic benefits and expand social programmes for poor people. Foreign powers can make targeted investments in the east of Tunisia. Together, it is necessary to achieve the goal of creating new jobs, so that Tunisians can work legally, and not be involved in smuggling, especially of prohibited items (drugs, arms). Should the economic situation deteriorate further in the Eastern regions, mass protests are possible and could be radical. If smugglers continue to trade in weapons, local markets will very soon become flooded with these. In North Africa, hypothetically, another hotbed of destabilisation may arise.

The Situation in Algeria

It seems Algeria has taken heed of its experience of fighting extremists in the 1990s. Algeria has taken an integrated approach in countering terrorists, combining hard military measures with soft power and economic reforms, and now Salafi groups (Armed Islamic Group (GIA); Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat (GSPC)) have practically no influence in Algeria. The government took measures such as amnesty for jihadists who surrendered their weapons at the end of the civil war in 2006. Large-scale rehabilitation programmes for prisoners were launched. Algeria also closely monitored religious institutions and did not admit radical Islamists.

The Algerian government is actively promoting programmes for the rehabilitation of repentant terrorists and their integration into normal society. Besides, control is exercised to ensure extremist narratives are not disseminated in mosques. In particular, in Algeria, it is prohibited to hold public meetings outside of prayer times.²⁸

However, on the eve of the active phase of the spread of Covid-19 in North Africa, Algeria was going through hard times. The country was gripped by protests as people began to trust the government less. People refused to leave the streets despite demands to maintain safe healthcare distances. Demonstrators believed the authorities' requests to stay at home were motivated not by concerns about the safety of the protesters, but by the fact staying home would cause the protests to subside.²⁹

In March 2020, the failure of the OPEC+ deal caused a sharp drop in oil prices. The oil price reached a historic low of US\$19.46 per barrel. Algeria's foreign exchange reserves are severely depleted.³⁰ Algeria, rich in hydrocarbons, is highly dependent on fluctuations in oil prices. Approximately 95% of Algeria's export revenues come from the sale of hydrocarbons. In the context of new economic development, the Algerian government launched a cost optimisation process, in connection with which the country's budget was reduced, first by 30%, and then by 50%.³¹ Added to this is the negative impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has triggered a new economic crisis, coupled with the oil crash.

Economic growth is expected to slow down at least in the coming months, leading to an increase in the already high unemployment rate. The deterioration of the socioeconomic situation could increase the willingness to protest. The situation

²⁸ *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Algeria*, U.S. Department of State, 2019.

²⁹ D. Ghanem, *Coronavirus in Algeria: Change may have to wait*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 8 April 2020.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ D. Ghanem, *Algeria: Toward an economic collapse?*, Middle East Institute, 26 May 2020.

is especially dangerous because such social tensions were quite high even before the pandemic. A situation may arise when the mood crosses the red line. In theory, this could result in mass demonstrations, including radical ones. At the same time, the situation in Algeria is quite stable compared to Egypt, or even Tunisia. However, in the absence of clear economic success, the situation in Algeria could become destabilised. The government should find new financial opportunities to transform the structure of the Algerian economy.

Positive Experience of Morocco

Morocco is one of the most stable states in the Southern Mediterranean. Over the past several years, security forces have successfully prevented terrorist attacks. The state has focused on strengthening security services and eliminating terrorist cells. The Moroccan armed forces were deployed in places where a terrorist attack could theoretically occur (airports, train stations), and the security services actively cooperated with informants in terrorist cells and concentrated their efforts on intelligence. In total, in the period from 2011 to 2017, 97 cells were liquidated, 44 of which had a direct connection to the Islamic State.³² Morocco now prioritises religious oversight. In particular, a programme was prepared to train imams to oppose radical ideas. Besides, a lot of work is being carried out with young people and specially trained people talk to them on religious and social topics.³³

The coronavirus crisis has hit Morocco's economy hard. More than 100,000 Moroccan companies have stopped working, hundreds of thousands of people have lost their jobs.³⁴ At the

³² "Dealing with Returning Foreign Terrorist Fighters: Insights from the Moroccan Experience", *European Eye on Radicalization*, 25 March 2020.

³³ *Country Reports on Terrorism 2019: Morocco*, U.S. Department of State, 2019.

³⁴ *أي عادت جال أو أي داصتق ال تا عبتل: بر غملا يف انوروك سوريف* (*Coronavirus in Morocco: Economic and Social Implications*), The Washington Institute, 23 April 2020.

same time, Morocco's economy is not as heavily dependent on tourism (as Egypt) and on energy exports (as Algeria), so the crisis did not plunge the economy into the same state of shock as other North African countries. In general, there is no reason to assume a sharp aggravation or destabilisation caused by a terrorist threat or radicalisation in the short term.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In any state, there is a direct link between socioeconomic development and protest, sometimes even radical sentiments in society. The economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic is bound to increase social tensions in the fragile countries of the Southern Mediterranean. The intrigue is which countries will be able to maintain control over the situation, and in which radical elements will be able to take advantage of how things stand and destabilise the region.

The pandemic did not overshadow ongoing conflicts and political instability, but it did exacerbate existing contradictions. Even if the grave consequences of the coronavirus crisis do not manifest themselves in the next 1 or 2 years, they may appear further down the line. The problems that have arisen in connection with the coronavirus are a time bomb, which might also destabilise the situation in the region in the near future.

Over the past 10 years, the main focus of terrorist destabilisation has been Libya, a situation which negatively affects its neighbours (primarily Egypt and Tunisia). International powers should focus on swiftly finding a settlement for the Libyan conflict, as this could provoke radical trends in Egypt and Tunisia. The situation is especially dangerous and unpredictable in Egypt, which over the past years has been fighting terrorists with varying success, but has not been able to completely solve the problem. The international community should consider the possibility of at least sending large-scale humanitarian aid, primarily food, to Egypt and other fragile countries in the Southern Mediterranean.

Yet, a revival of the Islamic State similar to 2014 is unlikely since there was a political vacuum in Syria and Iraq at that time. It is this vacuum that has been filled by jihadists. The current situation in North Africa is different, but it remains dangerous. In the future, an increase in the number of terrorist attacks and the radicalisation of protest sentiment in fragile states is possible. It is necessary to prepare for these processes. All North African countries should combine forceful measures with soft measures and economic reforms. In many ways, it is economic differentiation and stagnation that are the causes of social discontent, the growth of protest sentiment, and the emergence of radical trends in society. Investments should be directed, among other things, to the development of unstable regions (Sinai, and Eastern regions of Tunisia) so the local population has less motivation to resist the authorities and security forces.

It is necessary to secure the border with Libya as much as possible. It is known that the United States helps Tunisia to control the border with Libya. At the same time, the border with other countries (especially with Egypt) remains poorly protected. Southern Mediterranean states should look to the Moroccan counter-terrorism experience of deploying troops at airports, train stations, and other public places to increase control over jihadist threats. It is necessary to focus on the reconnaissance of impending terrorist attacks and to cooperate with informants actively. The approach should not be to react to the ongoing terrorist attacks, but to act proactively and engage in the prevention of potential attacks.

Expert theologians capable of persuading people and turning them away from radical ideology must be trained, potentially in special educational programmes. In states where repression by the authorities is strong, the pressure on the people must be reduced and not all suspects should be arrested as this may contribute to their radicalisation in the future. It is important to work with arrested extremists, seeking de-radicalisation and integration of former militants into normal society. They must be received in a friendly atmosphere so that they do not have the desire to return to the warpath.

In general, radicalisation and terrorist destabilisation directly depend on both the armed reaction of the authorities, and the economy, social support for the population and de-radicalisation. The international powers should consider providing all possible assistance for as many aspects as possible. The most important thing is to end the war in Libya and to direct all efforts by world powers towards settling conflicts politically. So far, Libya is just one hotbed in North Africa, but it is seriously destabilising the situation throughout the Mediterranean, and one should not wait for the fire of radicalisation to spread to Libya's neighbours.

3. Regular and Irregular Migration Trends in a Post-Pandemic Mediterranean Region

Matteo Villa, Elena Corradi

If you look at a world map, the Mediterranean Sea appears almost like a lake. It is no surprise, then, that migration flows along but especially across the two shores are much higher than in any other maritime region of the world. In addition to regular migration, the relatively short distance between Greece and Turkey (just a few kilometres), between Spain and Morocco/Algeria, and between Italy and Tunisia/Libya facilitates irregular migration as well.

In this chapter, we analyse the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on migration flows between the two shores of the Mediterranean, and specifically regular and irregular migration from the southern shore towards EU countries. We find that, as expected, Covid-19 temporarily froze regular and irregular movements. But in terms of irregular migration it did so less than one would have imagined, and always in interaction with other (mostly economic) driving forces that Covid-19 heavily affected as well. The overall effect of the global pandemic on migration to Europe, then, has been to deter regular migration while leading to a mini-surge in irregular migration along some Mediterranean sea routes.

The Evolution of Migration Flows Across the Mediterranean

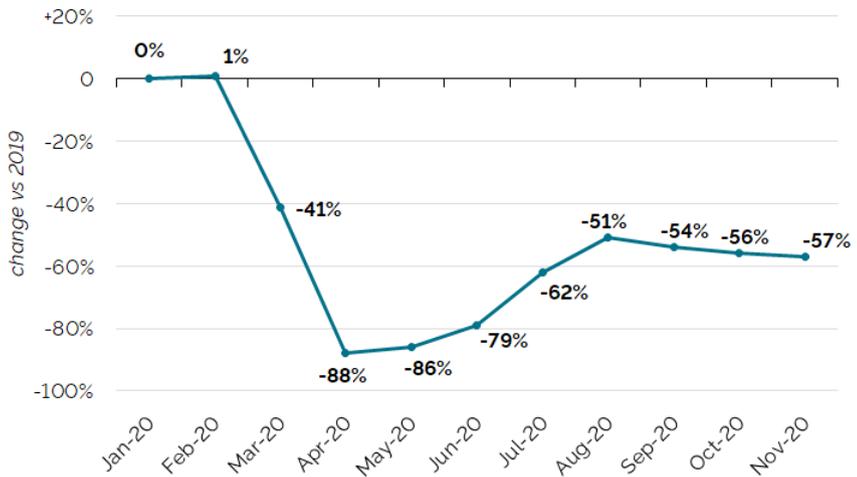
It is unquestionable that the pandemic has had a disruptive effect on regular migration flows. It is still too early to know the exact figures, but we can rely on economic models and recent data to make a rough projection. For starters, any economic downturn has a significant effect on regular migration, deterring movement as recession discourages international migration for work purposes. However, a global recession like the one induced by the pandemic can also have the opposite effect, since diminishing incomes in countries of origin may convince potential migrants to move towards destinations where people are better off despite the recession. Therefore, the economics of regular migration suggest that the expected effect is ambiguous at best.

Irrespective of the economic angle, in practice most developed countries have put in place travel bans for large parts of 2020. Even within the Schengen area, during the first wave of Covid-19 Member States temporarily reintroduced border controls. In spite of a number of exceptions, notably for seasonal workers or cross-border commuters, migration has been hindered or outright prohibited, especially from emerging and developing countries towards advanced economies. While it is still too early to project data over the whole of 2020, there are worrying signs that regular migration has been effectively deterred.

The first way to estimate the drop in regular migration is by looking at air traffic flows in Europe in 2020 as compared to 2019 (Figure 3.1). As the graph indicates, air traffic in Europe all but disappeared in April 2020 (-88%), only to recover slowly over the summer months, but by November it remained subdued (-57%) and was still declining as the second wave of infection gripped the continent.¹

¹ Eurocontrol “COVID-19 Impact on the European Air Traffic Network”, 2020,

FIG. 3.1 - AIR TRAFFIC IN EUROPE IN 2020



Source: Eurocontrol

A second impressive figure comes from recent estimates by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).² Looking at new residence permits issued monthly by OECD countries, in 2019 this figure increased by 25% between January and June, while in the first six months of 2020 new residence permits dropped by 75-80%. This entails a drop of 85% from peak to trough. If we project this trend over nine months for the European Union (including the UK), it would be equivalent to seeing just 1.0 million new residence permits issued in 2020 as compared to 2.8 million in 2018: a drop of around 65%.

The effect of Covid-19 on irregular migration appears to be less straightforward. In the first ten months of 2020, more than 70,000 people reached Spain, Italy, Malta or Greece

accessed on 10 November 2020.

² OECD, *International Migration Outlook 2020*, October 2020.

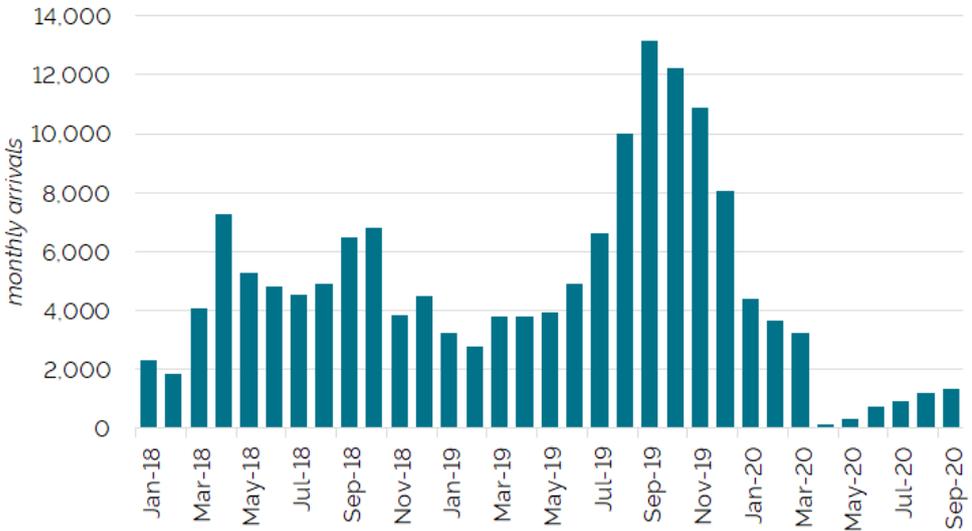
irregularly; a 28% decrease compared to 2019.³ A significant drop, but not the complete halt that was initially expected from the Covid-19 pandemic. Irregular arrivals in Southern Europe were in fact gradually decreasing even before the pandemic, having dropped last year by 13% in comparison to 2018. Not surprisingly, contrary to 2018 and 2019 when the monthly number of irregular arrivals reached its minimum in February due to adverse weather conditions, this year the month with the fewest arrivals was April (-75% compared to 2019), when the spread of coronavirus had evolved into a full-blown pandemic across Europe. By July, however, more than 10,000 people had once again reached Southern Europe irregularly, in line with July 2019. At first glance, the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have had only a minor and relatively temporary impact on irregular migration trends to Spain, Italy, Malta and Greece. It is only by considering the different migration routes across the Mediterranean separately, that the different trends become visible, and one can notice how other forces at play (in interaction with Covid-19) have shaped irregular migration over the last few months.

After the sharp drop in arrivals to Greece due to the 2016 EU-Turkey agreement that essentially blocked what was by far the most trafficked irregular migration route to Europe, the number of people continuing to reach Greece irregularly has remained relatively low. Whilst far from the 2015 peak of more than 200,000 people in the sole month of October, however, irregular arrivals to Greece have been on the rise, especially in the second half of 2019 (Figure 3.2). Reception centres in the Greek islands soon began to reach their maximum capacity and by January social tensions among the islands' residents had become visible. On 27 February, Turkey once again opened up its Western border, blaming Europe for not observing the agreement signed four years earlier, and allowing people to move freely to Greece. Turkey's move, however, did not lead

³ UNHCR data.

to the big increase in arrivals that people had imagined. With the support of Frontex, Greece blocked people from entering the country, and those who managed to cross the border were quickly brought back to Turkey by border authorities. Accusations of unlawful pushbacks surged, leading UNHCR, human rights organisations and the Commissioner Ylva Johansson to urge Frontex and Greece to investigate them. It is against this background that the Covid-19 pandemic hit Greece. The country reported its first case just one day before Turkey's announcement, on 26 February; only a few days later, on 1 March, the Greek government suspended access to asylum seekers for 30 days. In April, the number of irregular arrivals dropped to little more than 100 people. Whilst the pandemic did contribute to this drop in irregular arrivals, tensions with Turkey and the support of the EU also played an important part in curbing migration.

FIG. 3.2 - IRREGULAR ARRIVALS TO GREECE



Source: Frontex

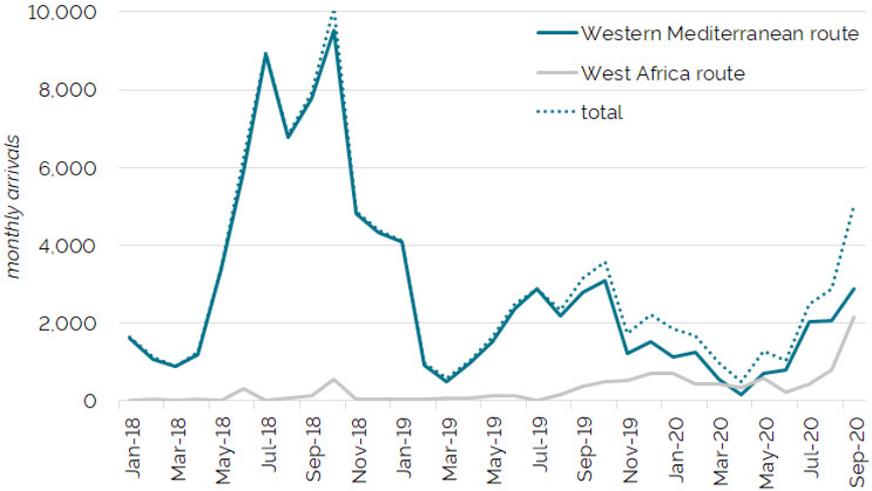
At the western end of the Mediterranean, the picture was quite a different one. As shown in Figure 3.3, irregular arrivals from Morocco to Spain increased sharply in the second half of 2018, but arrivals were still much lower than those recorded by Italy and Greece in 2014-17. Yet, Spain and Morocco were worried that figures would continue growing, and thus advocated EU financial support to Morocco for border management. In 2018, under the Trust Fund for Africa, the European Commission pledged €148 million, to be disbursed to Morocco in the first half of 2019; this figure was later complemented by another €30 million from Spain. In December 2019, the European Commission adopted further programmes worth €389 million.⁴

This effort can be framed within the EU's more general approach since 2015 to make aid and cooperation more and more conditional on African countries of origin and transit complying with international migration governance policies. African countries were asked to accept more returns of irregular migrants, an attempt that largely failed: in 2019, European countries returned 26,535 persons to Africa, just 6% more than the 25,045 persons they returned in 2014, the year before the approval of the European Agenda on Migration.⁵ However, a few "priority" African origin and transit countries, most notably Niger, were asked to help deter irregular migrants from transiting their territory, and did so. Departures slowed down and remained low throughout 2019, reaching similar levels to 2017: approximately 25,000 irregular migrants in total, compared to more than 55,000 in 2018.

⁴ European Commission, "The EU is boosting its support to Morocco with new programmes worth €389 million", Press release, 20 December 2019.

⁵ Eurostat, "Statistical Presentation: Third country nationals returned following an order to leave", *Enforcement of immigration legislation statistics*, July 2020.

FIG. 3.3 - IRREGULAR MIGRATION TO SPAIN



Source: Frontex

Due to an already low number of irregular arrivals in 2020, the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic is visible in relative terms (-52% in April), but in absolute terms the change is not that significant (497 arrivals in April 2020 compared to 1,029 in April 2019). However, over the summer, the number of migrants reaching Spain slowly picked up: in September, more migrants reached Spain than in any month of 2019. But this time round, the situation was completely different from 2018: migrants were not reaching Spain's mainland from Morocco but rather the Canary Islands from West Africa. Whilst the West Africa route comprised only 5% of irregular arrivals to Spain from January to September in 2019, it made up 34% of them in the same period of 2020. It would be wrong to consider this an effect of the pandemic: irregular arrivals to the Canary Islands were already increasing in the second half

of 2019, once the Moroccan borders were secured.⁶ The West Africa route is much more dangerous, as migrants have to cross the Atlantic Ocean. It is not, however, the first time that the Canary Islands have become a migration hotspot: in 2006, approximately 35,000 migrants reached the islands, mainly departing from Mauritania and Senegal. Back then, Spain deterred departures by sending money to those countries for development programmes and border control.

In conclusion, arrivals to Greece and Spain after the pandemic have shown starkly different trends: in the former case arrivals have remained low for longer (albeit slowly picking up), while in the latter case they have quickly trended upwards, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. Missing from this picture is the Central Mediterranean route, an interesting case study we analyse in depth in the following section.

Covid-19 and the Central Mediterranean Route: A Case Study

The Central Mediterranean route offers an interesting case study in evaluating the effects that the Covid-19 pandemic is having on irregular migration. By mid-November, Italy had recorded more than 32,000 migrant arrivals at its shores, a number that is higher than in 2018 as a whole (23,370)⁷, and almost three times that of last year. Two forces appear to have been at work here, acting as an incentive for migrants to depart from both Libya and Tunisia. And while the pandemic has had its effect, it was not the one many expected.

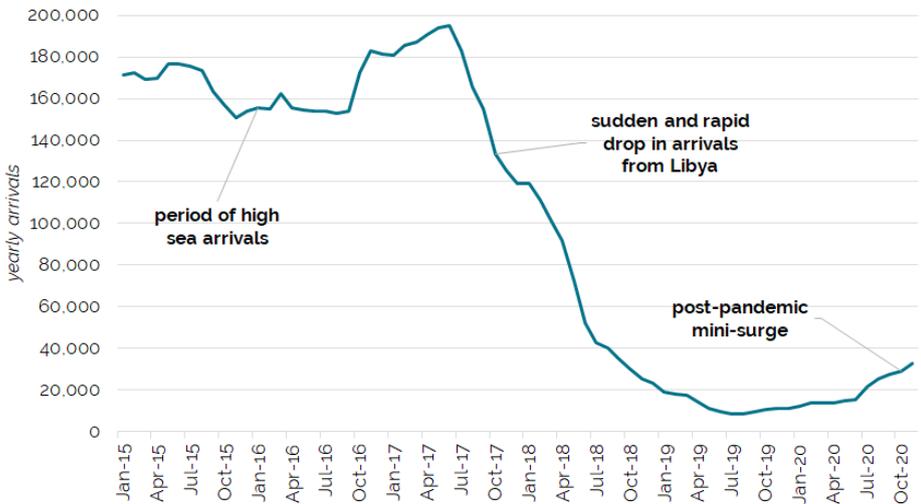
Before proceeding any further, however, it is of paramount importance to view these trends within a wider context. Irregular arrivals to Italy have indeed increased this year and we can expect them to reach approximately 35,000 by year end.

⁶ Frontex data.

⁷ Italian Ministry of the Interior, *Sbarchi e accoglienza dei migranti: tutti i dati*, “Cruscotto statistico giornaliero”, accessed on 10 November 2020.

This figure will be significantly higher than the 19,000 average yearly arrivals recorded between 2002 and 2010, just before the popular revolts in Tunisia and Libya in 2011 brought close to 65,000 migrants to Italy's shores. But 35,000 arrivals annually is still around 80% lower than the approximately 170,000 persons on average who reached Italy irregularly by sea each year between 2014 and 2016 (Figure 3.4).⁸ The bottom line is that, in fact, the period of high irregular arrivals to Italy ended more than three years ago, and what we are doing today is trying to explain an increase in numbers that are significantly much smaller. We might call it a “mini-surge” in irregular arrivals along the Central Mediterranean route.

FIG. 3.4 - IRREGULAR SEA ARRIVALS TO ITALY
(12-MONTH MOVING AVERAGE)



Source: elaborations on Italian Ministry of the Interior data

⁸ Italian Ministry of the Interior data.

The decline in sea arrivals after mid-July 2017 has one main explanation: fewer migrant departures from Libya. This in turn can be explained by the two-pronged action by the European Union and Italy to deter irregular migration from other African countries towards Libya, and then from Libya onwards towards Italy and Malta across the dangerous sea route. The first part of the strategy consisted in convincing countries of origin and (especially) transit to deter migrant crossings and movement towards Europe in general. For instance, Niger was one of the “priority” African countries of origin and transit that were asked to help deter irregular migrants from transiting their territory, with the financial support of the Trust Fund for Africa – and so it did. The Displacement Tracking Matrix of the International Organization for Migration recorded 333,000 migrants moving from Niger towards Libya or (much less frequently) to Algeria in 2016, but just 69,000 in 2017 – a decline of close to 80%.⁹

The second part of the strategy was more straightforward, and involved cooperation between the EU and Libyan authorities, in particular empowering the Libyan Coast Guard and avoiding the denunciation of smugglers detaining migrants for longer periods rather than sending them by sea. This brought about the largest fall in irregular sea arrivals to Italy ever recorded: starting from mid-July 2017, in the span of a few months, irregular sea arrivals dropped by almost 75%, from a yearly average of 195,000 in June 2017 to around 52,000 in June of the following year.¹⁰

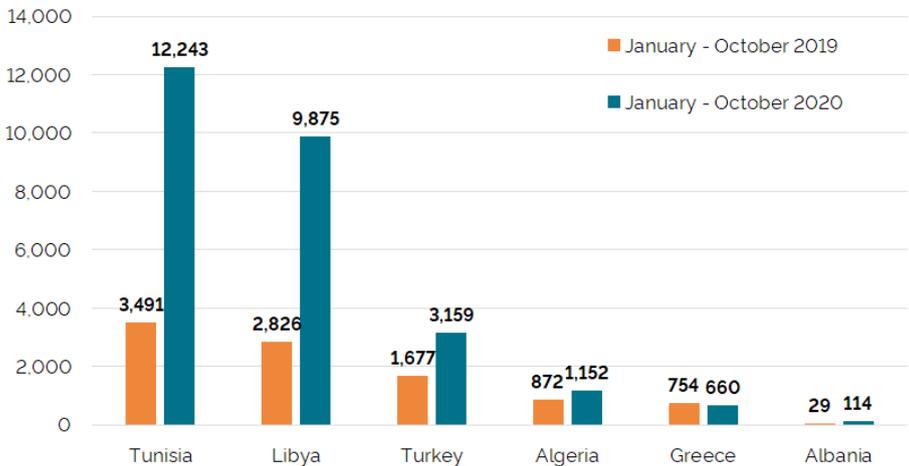
In 2020, two factors contributed to a mini-surge in irregular arrivals, resulting in an increase in the number of refugees and so-called “economic” migrants alike. As regards refugees, the situation had already deteriorated well before this year’s pandemic. In Libya, many had been living in dire conditions, in or around detention centres, or in dilapidated urban dwellings. It is therefore not surprising that last March, at the

⁹ IOM, “Niger - Population Flow Monitoring”, Dashboard 7, Displacement Tracking Matrix (DTM), January 2018.

¹⁰ Italian Ministry of Interior data.

height of the pandemic in Italy, many migrants and asylum seekers in Libya still regarded crossing the Mediterranean as a better option than choosing not to migrate. As Italy went into lockdown and sea arrivals dropped to a trickle (just 241 migrants landed on Italian shores in March – an 80% decline compared to February), almost 1,300 migrants departed from Libya over a 31-day period. And while most of those who left Libya were brought back by the so-called Libyan Coast Guard, the fact that attempts continued almost unabated, despite the coronavirus hitting Italy hard and deterring departures from all other sea routes, speaks volumes about the living conditions of migrants and asylum seekers in the North African country. In the first ten months of this year, sea arrivals to Italy from Libya were more than 3 times higher than in 2019 (Figure 3.5).

FIG. 3.5 - IRREGULAR SEA ARRIVALS TO ITALY,
BY COUNTRY OF EMBARKATION



Source: UNHCR

The second factor concerns the economic and mobility effects of the pandemic in Tunisia. For years, Tunisia has been plagued by chronic unemployment and an unstable social and political

environment. The closure of borders has dealt a terrible blow to a country largely supported by tourism, which accounts for around 8% of the country's GDP and employs 400,000 workers, or 10% of the total workforce¹¹, jeopardizing the slow recovery that followed the terrorist attacks on popular tourist destinations in 2015. Indeed, according to the latest official statistics, tourist arrivals in Tunisia dropped by close to 100% in the months of April through June.¹² At the same time, tens of thousands of Tunisian seasonal migrant workers found themselves stuck in the country, unable to reach Europe to make a living. While likely more short-term than the plight of migrants in Libya, developments in Tunisia have been the main driver of this summer's mini-surge in sea crossings. In July and August, irregular sea arrivals from Tunisia made up around two thirds of total arrivals to Italy. This is a stark reversal compared with the period of high sea arrivals to Italy (2014-16), when around 90% of those who reached Italy's shores had departed from Libya, while Tunisia accounted for just 5% of the total. Furthermore, whereas irregular sea arrivals from Tunisia have always been fairly composite in terms of nationalities, this year Tunisian citizens have made up over 92% of boat passengers.¹³

Conclusion

The global pandemic has had a rapid and deep impact on regular migration flows all over the world, and on those from third countries to Europe in particular. If we consider that this year new residence permits for the European Union could be 65% lower than in 2019 and that this trend could well continue into 2021, over 1.8 million fewer migrants might reach Europe each year.

¹¹ "Economy of Tunisia", *Fanack.com*, 18 June 2020.

¹² UNWTO, "World Tourism Barometer", vol. 18, no. 5, August/September 2020.

¹³ UNHCR, "Italy Sea Arrivals Dashboard", October 2020.

As regular migration routes dry up, irregular migration risks increasing in parallel. The mini-surge in irregular sea arrivals to Italy is an interesting case study that highlights the complexity of the pandemic's impact on migrants' decisions to attempt to reach Europe irregularly. Firstly, it shows that in countries that are sufficiently close to Europe, expectations of "involuntary immobility" have been largely exaggerated. While involuntary immobility appears to be actually happening for those living further away from developed countries, especially in Sub-Saharan Africa, migrants in countries close to Europe in many instances not only have the motivation, but also the means to cross the Mediterranean.

Secondly, the mini-surge shows how hard it continues to be to predict trends in irregular arrivals, as sudden variations can reverse previous trends in a matter of months or even weeks. Had arrivals from Tunisia followed the same seasonal trend as in 2019, we could have foreseen around 15,000 irregular arrivals to Italy by year end – i.e. around 60% fewer than the 35,000 we are expecting now.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the mini-surge shows that the Covid-19 pandemic has had a wealth of different, if not entirely unexpected, effects on short-term migration movements along and across the two shores of the Mediterranean that deserve to be further investigated. However, long-term migration drivers such as demographic trends, economic opportunities, family and social networks abroad will continue to shape willingness to migrate in the post-pandemic world, whether regularly or not.

4. Prospects for International Cooperation in the MENA Crises: The Cases of Lebanon and Syria

Chiara Lovotti

As the end of the turbulent year that was 2020 approaches, it is easy to look back and dwell on all that was lost, damaged, or destroyed by the rapid spread of Covid-19 across the world. While the global pandemic has certainly caused more than its fair share of devastation, however, it has also opened the eyes of the international community to matters that can no longer be ignored and created new opportunities to be and to do better. This chapter seeks to evaluate the impact the virus has had on the two crumbling nations of Syria and Lebanon, and also explores potential new avenues for collaboration between regional and international actors. Adopting a policy-oriented approach, it highlights how a crisis within a crisis has paradoxically increased rather than decreased the number of possibilities for cooperation open to both nations in a post-Covid context.

The virus itself has not dramatically changed the situation in Syria or Lebanon. Rather, the worldwide pandemic has merely accelerated economic collapse and exacerbated the governmental failures that afflicted both countries even before Covid-19 arrived. In the first case, the pandemic has revealed the tragic condition of Syria's crumbling financial and healthcare systems, which other nations now consider likely to persist unless assistance is provided. In the second case, while it should not have taken an explosion in Beirut's port to break the

stalemate in which Lebanon has become stuck, the international resonance of the catastrophe undeniably shone a light on the flagrant incompetence of the government. The immediate aftermath of the blast triggered a tremendous response from around the world, generating solidarity both inside and outside the Middle East region and creating a favourable climate for cooperation between a wide range of countries.

Against this background, this chapter will first provide a brief review of the effects Covid-19 has had on the Syrian civil war and on the Lebanese governmental crisis. It will then assess possibilities for cooperation with Lebanon from a regional perspective and at a European level. The chapter will end by detailing similar opportunities for Syria, both from a local angle and from the Euro-Russian standpoint, in terms of common goals and interests.

Covid-19's Impact on the Syrian Conflict and the Lebanese Political Crisis: An Overview

The ongoing Syrian civil war, which monopolised the headlines for so long after it erupted in 2011, seems to have lost importance now that the world is continually confronted with the coronavirus pandemic. In terms of the socio-economic consequences of Covid-19, Syria represents a disheartening but accurate depiction of many other fragile states battling profound political instability and financial turmoil. Prior to the first outbreak of cases in March 2020, Turkey and Russia reached an agreement which temporarily suspended altercations in Idlib after the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan met with Vladimir Putin in Moscow.¹ A noteworthy element of the ceasefire was the formulation of a 6 km security corridor bordering the north and south extremities of Idlib and including the important M4 motorway that connects the northwest province to the government-controlled

¹ G. Tuysuz and I. Kottasova, “[Turkey and Russia announce ceasefire in northwest Syria](#)”, CNN, 5 March 2020.

cities of Aleppo and Latakia.² While the truce suspended fighting between Syrian opposition forces and those faithful to Assad, it also exposed an extensive humanitarian crisis and could not prevent the already shattered Syrian population from suffering more virus-related deaths.

The sectors that have since been hit hardest are the healthcare and financial systems that were already extremely weak and struggling to recover from nine consecutive years of war. Not only were hospitals at full capacity before the influx of Covid-19 patients, they were simply not prepared or equipped to provide them with adequate resources. A growing area of concern for the country has been the significant number of cases (47%) involving workers *within* health care facilities, which has in turn infected more patients.³ Given the country's history of heavy sanctions and bitter fighting, Syria's economy has for some time suffered from a serious lack of investments. The scale of the economic crisis facing Syria placed it in a position in which it frankly could not afford to shut down or adopt long-term lockdowns like other countries. The initial measures that were adopted, such as closing the borders and imposing a curfew, combined with the pre-existing fragility of the economy, provoked a significant fall in the value of the Syrian pound and a sharp increase in prices. The cost of basic protective equipment in Syria is therefore extremely high. This has created, among other issues, a fundamental testing crisis, with only five centres existing in the whole country.⁴ This is a key problem as over 80% of the Syrian population lives below the world poverty line (surviving on less than a dollar per day) and hence cannot afford face masks, hand sanitisers or any of the essentials needed to prevent infection.⁵ Inevitably, a powerful second wave seems

² Ibid.

³ "Syrian Arab Republic: COVID-19 Response", updated No. 8, *reliefweb*, 4 August 2020.

⁴ OCHA, WHO, Syrian Arab Republic, *Response COVID-19 Update no. 6*, 19 June 2020.

⁵ "UN: More than 80% of Syrians live below poverty line", *Al-Arabiya*, 30 April 2016.

to be hitting Syria as of October 2020; the total number of cases now amounts to over 5,633 and 281 deaths (numbers that seem far too low for a country in such war-torn conditions).⁶ These injustices resonated deeply with locals who lost family members and ultimately resulted in the eruption of civil protests in the capital, a rare occurrence given the power the government holds there. The failing economy and the virus seem to be threatening the Assad regime in a way the civil conflict never has.

Lebanon, Syria's closest neighbour, was also hit by the Covid-19 crisis at a time when Damascus was already experiencing political and economic catastrophe. The country was facing profound economic woes even before the onset of the epidemic. Lebanon had the third highest public debt-to-GDP rate in the world (at 170%), a 25% unemployment rate, and around a third of its population living under the poverty line.⁷ In addition, in October, the Lebanese pound crumbled against the dollar because of a shortage in the nation's foreign currency reserves. Later in the Autumn, people flooded the streets to protest the deficiency of basic government services, power cuts, slow internet and unsafe drinking water, and strongly opposed a series of newly proposed taxes on goods like tobacco, petrol and WhatsApp calls. Ultimately, the protests led to the resignation of Prime Minister Saad Hariri and his government. Interestingly, as in other Middle Eastern states like Iraq, these protests involved people from across sectarian lines, a testament to the widespread dissatisfaction with the results of years of economic mismanagement, corruption, and lack of reform. In March 2020, Prime Minister Hassan Diab announced that Lebanon would default for the first time in history on its US\$1.2 billion Eurobond debt because of the profound financial crisis rocking the country.⁸

⁶ As of 30 October 2020, according to Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, Coronavirus Resource Center, *Syria*.

⁷ "Lebanon: Why the country is in crisis", *BBC*, 5 August 2020.

⁸ "Lebanon to default on debt for first time amid financial crisis", *The Guardian*, 7 March 2020.

In the meantime, prices have soared as the Lebanese pound has collapsed, the government has been unable to fund the import of wheat and medicines, and hospitals have had to lay off staff and cancel surgery because of shortages of electricity. Early solutions appear unlikely as the ruling elites have been sceptical of reforms and unwilling to accept the strings attached to international aid. This immobility was further seen with the 4 August blast at the port of Beirut, which killed 190 people, injured thousands and left 300,000 people homeless. The explosion embodied the stagnation of the Lebanese political scene, and exposed to the world the corruption and inefficiencies of a state apparatus which had essentially left 2,750 tons of deadly ammonium nitrate unsafely stored in the port.⁹ The explosion sparked even more public outrage at the government, and protests followed demanding justice and accountability. The movement forced Prime Minister Diab and his cabinet to resign in August, as the Lebanese parliament enacted a state of emergency granting powers to the military, setting curfews and banning public gatherings.¹⁰

In this context, the Coronavirus pandemic found a severely weakened and fragile state. While numbers have been low compared to other countries in the Middle East, Lebanon has still seen 77,778 people test positive and 610 deceased.¹¹ Furthermore, while cases in the Spring were limited, the country witnessed large increases between July and September, at a time when the political and economic crises were reaching new lows. Large cities like Beirut and Tripoli have so far experienced the highest number of cases and, while gross numbers have not been similar to those in European countries, the state of the Lebanese healthcare system is a source of concern if figures rise.

⁹ “Beirut explosion: What we know so far”, *BBC*, 11 August 2020.

¹⁰ J. Malsin, B. Faucon, and N. Osseiran “Beirut Explosion Likely Sparked by Maintenance at Warehouse, According to U.S. Assessment”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 13 August 2020.

¹¹ As of 30 October 2020, according to Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, Coronavirus Resource Center, *Lebanon*.

The Case of Lebanon

The tragic explosion in Beirut has nonetheless presented Lebanon with an unprecedented opportunity to overcome its structural economic and political issues through increased international cooperation. While it should not have required such a deadly blast to break the impasse, the disaster's global resonance has undoubtedly focused a spotlight on the gross inefficiencies and political *laissez-faire* of Lebanese governance. This in turn has opened several avenues for international cooperation with both regional and extra-regional partners, which could ultimately have a positive fallout and help improve the Lebanese economy and political scene.

Regional level

With regard to regional collaboration between Middle Eastern powers, one key development has been the fostering of deeper relations between Iran and Lebanon. Only a few days prior to the port explosion, Iran's ambassador to Lebanon met with the Lebanese Prime Minister, Hassan Diab, to confirm Tehran's willingness to expand partnerships with Beirut in many areas. On this matter, the Prime Minister further added that, "the development of relations between Iran and Lebanon is on our agenda".¹² Iran stuck to this promise, sending over two different aid shipments after the explosion, each containing considerable food and medical supplies. Tehran also pledged its support for treating the victims, setting up a temporary field hospital and flying over a medical team composed of 37 different specialists to assist in the tragedy.¹³

These steps taken by Iran were not coincidental; they provided a way to secure vital strategic interests in Lebanon that Iran is determined not to lose. Tehran is a vital partner of Hezbollah, who also happen to control the Lebanese Health Ministry.

¹² "Iran, Lebanon to Boost Cooperation", *Iran Press*, 30 July 2020.

¹³ S.Z. Mehdi, *Iran sends aid to Lebanon over explosion at Beirut port*, AA, 6 August 2020.

It was therefore a top priority for the Iranian government to ensure that humanitarian aid was provided and distributed in a manner that would help to reinforce Hezbollah's standing and credibility. By appearing as a protector of Lebanon's population, Iran has ensured that its closest ally – Hezbollah – maintains its predominant political and military position within the country. We are also likely to see increased cooperation between the two powers in the future as they both seek to remove U.S. presence from Lebanese soil once and for all.

European level

The immediate aftermath of the blast saw a massive global response. Among the first European countries to respond was France, which shares a historic links with Lebanon. The biggest aid provider after the event was the European Union itself, which airlifted and shipped a total of 29 tonnes of essential humanitarian supplies and medical equipment and provided an additional €64 million in emergency support.¹⁴ While this response was extremely beneficial for the country in need, the collective efforts were not as well coordinated as they could have been, given that only certain member states decided to contribute (unequally). Other important contributions were made by several countries: Russia sent five aircraft with emergency medical teams, and a significant number of Middle Eastern powers also helped, putting aside economic grudges in favour of humanitarian solidarity. Ultimately, the catastrophe brought the international community together and moved many countries not only to send condolences but also to become involved in the reconstruction of Lebanon, and specifically the port of Beirut.¹⁵ The latter is Lebanon's primary point of access to imports and has often been deemed the

¹⁴ European Commission, "Lebanon: EU delivers additional emergency assistance following the explosion in Beirut".

¹⁵ "The international community turns out to rebuild Lebanon", *Atalayar*, 5 August 2020.

gateway to the Middle East. In light of this, it can be assumed that the dignitary responsible for rebuilding the port will later exercise tight control over it and become a key beneficiary of its future trading activities. Given such a context, while the help proffered has, on one hand, opened the door to opportunities for future cooperation, it has, on the other hand, also created a potential race for geopolitical clout.¹⁶ Contestants include not just France, as mentioned above, but other nations like China and Turkey too. Prior to the August blast, Chinese port merchants were particularly interested in taking over the management of the capital's container terminal, starting in 2020. Given that Chinese firms already hold influence in other regional ports (Egypt, Israel, Greece), ensuring a base in Lebanon would guarantee control over the primary Eastern Mediterranean maritime trade routes.¹⁷ As for Turkey, considering that its only maritime bases are located within the country itself, the port of Beirut constitutes a chance for it to consolidate and expand its power.

It was France that played the most visible role among European countries as a major economic partner of Beirut. The French President conducted two diplomatic visits to Lebanon in less than one month following the explosion. Furthermore, France provided more tangible help by organising an emergency global virtual conference on 9 August.¹⁸ Led by Macron, the event attracted leaders from all over North America, Australia, the European Union, Brazil, the United Kingdom, and the Middle East as well as officials from the Arab League, the IMF, and the Red Cross. In total, US\$300 million were raised and pledged in aid to help relieve the Lebanese *people*, not the government.¹⁹ It is important to make this distinction as

¹⁶ “Rebuilding the Port of Beirut: a competition for geopolitical influence”, *Global Risk Insights*, October 2020.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ C. Foreman, “Donors pledge aid for Lebanon during virtual conference”, Middle East Business Intelligence (MEED), 10 August 2020.

¹⁹ Ibid.

all too often funds donated by the international community to Lebanon have fallen into the wrong hands. Many nations therefore had to overcome a fear of corruption before lending a hand. Lebanon's untrustworthy financial reputation combined with its governmental failures and inability to present a united front have been and continue to be the greatest hindrances to the country's ability to receive rescue packages rather than sanctions. Nonetheless, France's active humanitarian involvement in solving the Lebanon crisis has also shone light on the country's turbulent past and the French colonisation of Lebanon and Syria. In a speech given shortly after the explosion, Macron called for a "new political order" which left many wondering if the primary objective behind his collaboration was not humanitarian but a first step towards regime change. This is particularly interesting given that among the attendees (and donors) at the conference was Israel, a long-time ally of France but a particularly destructive force in Lebanon. There is no doubt that fundamental political reforms must take place in Beirut, but how these will be achieved or initiated remains to be seen. One potential way forward could be a coalition between France and Israel.

While potentially benefiting Lebanon, France's proactive approach has also raised questions about the need for a coordinated EU response. In a recent conference on the matter hosted by the Center for European Policy Studies (CEPS), specific concern was raised regarding the substantial role that member states (foreign interventions) can play in solving Lebanon's fundamental problems.²⁰ In other words, how much of the burden falls (or should fall) on individual EU member states rather than on the EU acting as an institution. Currently, there is a distinct discrepancy between the latter's role in Lebanon and the policies of individual countries (France, Italy, Germany, etc.). This has ultimately resulted in France pursuing

²⁰ "After Beirut's blast: a coordinated EU response for Lebanon?", webinar, CEPS, 15 September 2020.

a distinct foreign policy aimed at securing benefits for itself rather than for the EU.²¹ If the institution wishes to avoid another mishap like Libya, it needs to stand up to member-states and come up with an all-around solution. It is no secret that the powerful partnership between the EU and Lebanon is of strategic importance, and that the country's long-term reconstruction is a priority. Nonetheless, Europe must carefully ensure that its external interventions do not override the desire and push for change coming from within Lebanon.

The Case of Syria

The dynamics of the Syrian conflict have hindered to a great extent the ability of both international and regional actors to come up with a united and effective response to the pandemic. One recent development stems from a potential avenue for cooperation deriving from Russia's active role in rebuilding the country and its economy. In September 2020, a Russian delegation, led by Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov and Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, visited Syria's capital for the first time since 2012. The trip to Damascus was to discuss an economic pact with the Assad government due to be signed during the delegation's next visit in December. The deal outlines a large number of new projects revolving around the energy sector and the rebuilding of power stations, all with the goal of increasing trade and deepening economic ties between the two countries.²² Undeniably, from a political standpoint, one of the primary incentives for Russia to strengthen relations with Syria is the hope of bypassing U.S. sanctions. Furthermore, reconstruction represents a key opportunity for Moscow to establish long-term strategic interests and ensure political

²¹ S. Hamdi, "On Libya, the EU Must Stand Up to France", *InsideArabia*, 31 July 2020.

²² A. Aji, "Russian delegation in Syria to expand trade, economic ties", *abcNews*, 7 September 2020.

stability both in the country itself and in the overall region. This tenet is also shared by the EU, likely the most important donor in humanitarian and economic aid to Syria. Although it has a fundamentally different approach than Russia, the EU also shares the aims of combatting terrorism and restoring post-conflict Syria as a unified state in order to guarantee greater security. As such, the situation in Syria presents an additional prospect for “selective” cooperation between Russia and the EU, who could work together to rebuild the country while introducing themselves as key players in any future war settlement. Certainly, these routes for collaboration will not be easy and will demand close monitoring. On one hand, in most cases, Russian aid has not gone directly to the Syrians but rather to militiamen; on the other hand, Syria is in no way able to meet the EU’s strict criteria for access to relief.

Regional level

The prospects for regional cooperation within the Syrian conflict in a post-Covid context are limited given the severe economic effects the pandemic has had on the Middle East, resulting in decreased availability of resources. Specifically, the sudden fall in the price of oil has been hard on many of the Gulf states. Nevertheless, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) stepped up and pledged to help the suffering country. Abu Dhabi’s Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Zayed, as reported on Twitter, met the Syrian President in March and “assured him of the support of the UAE and its willingness to help the Syrian people” because “solidarity during trying times supersedes all matters”. This occurrence is particularly relevant given that it is the first time since 2011, when Syria was suspended from the Arab League, that an Arab leader has publicly acknowledged meeting Bashar al-Assad. The UAE’s move was most likely politically motivated by the hope that the Assad regime will, in time, increase military pressure on the UAE’s regional opponent, Turkey, by resuming

operations in Idlib.²³ Increased cooperation between Arab League countries and Syria was further witnessed in September 2020, when Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Jordan met with the support of Egypt to promote unity against Turkish forces.²⁴ Such a rare instance of solidarity highlights the softening stance of various Middle Eastern powers towards the Syrian regime, as many seem to realise that they can benefit from cooperating with Assad's government, by profiting both from post-war reconstruction business opportunities and from developments on the Libyan front. As an ally of Turkey, the emergence of Libya as a potential independent and oil-rich nation is a situation that would be problematic for the UAE-Egypt duo and is therefore something both nations are trying to prevent. In a similar fashion, Turkey, with important strategic interests to maintain within Syria also has reasons to cooperate with Damascus. One of Ankara's main concerns at the moment relates to the almost 1 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the Northwest province of Syria, within close proximity to Turkey's borders. Although the Turkish government has expressed the need to create buffer zones for IDPs, accomplishing such a goal would require enlisting the aid of stronger EU powers and perhaps the United States. Given the difficult economic situation Turkey finds itself in, it also needs to obtain international funds which ultimately may compel it to consider America's position more closely.

Additional prospects for stabilisation and power balance come from the Astana process signed by Russia, Turkey, and Iran in 2017 as an agreement to work collectively to resolve the Syrian civil war. While the approach initially had some successful results, Turkey and Russia have since bypassed Iran in negotiating deals for interventions in Idlib. Bilateral arrangements such as the one cut in March of 2020 are presumably not going to

²³ G.Cafiero, *Why the Uae Is Helping Syria and Iran to Cope With Covid-19*, ISPI Commentary, ISPI, 25 May 2020.

²⁴ "Why are Arab states uniting to support the Syrian regime against Turkey?", *TRTWorld*, 5 October 2020.

please Tehran. Although Iran's focus has shifted to Iraq since the killing of Qasem Soleimani, the country still has strong military ties with Syrian forces through the Syria-Iran Military Pact signed in 2018 to increase defence cooperation. What the death of the Iranian Major General actually accomplished was the reinforcement of Iran's determination to end the U.S. military presence in Syria, a goal it shares with the Assad government and Russia. In the foreseeable future, such an opportunity could bring Iran and Russia (Syria's closest Middle Eastern allies) closer together against Turkey and the U.S.

European-Russian level

Ever since the so-called "Arab Spring" movements emerged throughout the MENA region, European-Russian collaboration within this environment has been fluctuating. This has been typified by the attempts at regime change in both Syria and Libya, which have often caused discord between the two parties, given the different motives and approaches of each. Whereas the EU has been very much in favour of the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) proposing foreign military interventions as a way to secure regime change, Moscow has always vigorously opposed this and shows no intention of approving such an initiative. This disagreement was again apparent in July 2015, when Russia's participation in the efforts of the EU 3+3 talks on Iran's nuclear file initially raised hopes for further cooperation on other MENA dossiers (regardless of the unfolding Ukrainian crisis). Such hopes rapidly crumbled when Russia launched its Syrian military campaign shortly afterwards. Moscow's unconditional support for the Assad regime, along with disinformation campaigns it runs within and outside of the country, are among the primary causes of the severely strained relations between European powers and Russia. However, complexity does not mean impossibility. On the contrary, the Syrian case stands out as perhaps the most obvious opportunity for powerful actors like Europe and Russia to cooperate, despite fluctuating relations and obstacles.

In order to outline a framework for potential European-Russia cooperation, it is first and foremost essential to understand the causes of animosity. To date, a European-Russian compromise over Syria has been hampered mainly by the two actors holding significantly different views over the origins of the Syrian crisis itself. Since the very beginning of the Syrian civil war in March 2011, both have attributed the eruption of unrest in the country to different factors, and this has caused them to move along parallel lines in seeking a solution. On the one hand, Europe has for the most part argued that the conflict originated in a legitimate, popular uprising against an authoritarian regime deemed incapable of guaranteeing the social contract. Before the crisis was exploited by jihadist groups seeking to increase their influence in Syria, the West had hoped for the downfall of the Assad regime and the creation of a democratic government that would be inclusive and representative of all Syrian opposition parties. At the centre of European criticism was and still is the very nature of the government in power, as well as the international support it relies on. On the other hand, the Russians saw the 2011 uprising as an existential threat to the Assad regime, perceived by Moscow as the sole feasible guarantor of security and the only force able to resist religious fundamentalism (confidence, however, which appears to be weakening lately). Basically, Russia believes that EU countries have misinterpreted the situation in Syria, and that instead, Assad's defeat would allow for the establishment of a radical Sunni-led regime like Islamic State that would undermine the geostrategic interests of both Russians and Europeans. Overall, throughout the duration of the conflict, Moscow has opposed every Syrian force perceived as a threat to the regime, and, broadly speaking, the West's "democratisation agenda" for the MENA region. In Russian eyes, the ceaseless goal of regime change pursued by the U.S. is what has been responsible for wrecking countries like Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya.

Accordingly, such conflicting conclusions are reflected in opposing policies regarding Syria. While the EU has harshly

condemned the Assad regime since the beginning of the war, Russia has shielded it and allowed President Assad to stay in power, in some ways “winning” the war for him. These stances have translated into vastly different actions towards the country. Whereas the majority of EU member states – with the exception of France and the UK – have disengaged from the conflict while continuing to provide significant humanitarian aid, Russia has opted for an interventionist approach and led a military campaign. The Europeans have supplied more than €17 billion in aid to Syrians living inside and outside the country over the course of the conflict.²⁵ On the contrary, Russia’s intervention in the war since 2015 has centred on helping the Assad regime regain (and now maintain) power. The result of this prolonged situation is that today, the EU, its member states, and Russia all enjoy very different degrees of power and influence within Syria. Moscow, by emerging as power-broker in the conflict, has achieved greater leverage over Assad and a right to dialogue with key stakeholders in the crisis. Such a position has seemingly overshadowed the European nations and prevented them from playing any significant political role in the conflict. Governmental interactions between the EU and Syria are therefore extremely limited. The EU still applies sanctions to the war-torn country and only a few member states are open to dialogue with Damascus.

The current situation, however, urgently calls for both Europeans and Russians to review and overcome their differences. On the one hand, if the Europeans continue to shun dialogue with Russia, they risk remaining frozen out from the Syrian crisis and post-conflict reconstruction. This is without mentioning the consequences that further European isolation may have in relation to powers such as China, who are determined to gain a foothold within Syria. On the other hand, if Russia does not contribute to creating the conditions necessary for improved communication with the EU and its member

²⁵ European Council, “[Syria: Council response to the crisis](#)”.

states, it also faces significant risks. Moscow could potentially become the victim of the “Russian Pax” it has created if Syria continues to suffer interference from countries like Turkey, Iran, the Gulf monarchies, and Israel while being ruled by a dictator who enjoys neither European or international support.

While these circumstances might be regarded as an impasse, they also represent an opportunity (though with many difficulties attached) to explore paths for EU-Russian cooperation. The deep-rooted differences described above need not invalidate the interests and goals that Europeans and Russians *do* share. Among these are, first and foremost, a desire for stability and political arrangement, a possible return of refugees, and a desire for the post-war reconstruction of Syria. Each of these objectives will be examined in greater detail below.

Stability and political arrangement

The notion of “stability” evidently holds different meanings for the EU and Russia. While the former believes that stabilising Syria requires a genuine revolution and thus regime change, the latter sees stability being accomplished through the status quo rather than revolutionary change. Regardless of their divergence, ultimately, both actors share the overarching goal of ending the Syrian conflict and establishing a successful political arrangement encompassing the drafting of a new constitution. In this regard, both actors might find it useful to take a step back from their respective original positions. On the one hand, while the removal of Assad has long been non-negotiable for the Europeans, it is now obvious that no political transition will occur any time soon without him. This is not solely because Russia is unwilling to give up on Assad, but rather because, to put it simply, there is no other alternative to his government in Syria at present. On the other hand, what used to be a non-negotiable component for Russia, that the president maintain full control over the country, is slowly changing. Moscow seems to have grasped that something has to be done to pressurise Assad into making concessions. Hence, the EU and Russia

could potentially be driven to work towards a compromise political transition: a transition in which perhaps Assad does not give up his role, but instead relinquishes political and economic concessions to the Syrian opposition and international forces.

The return of refugees

Another interest common to Europeans and Russians concerns the return of refugees, both from Europe and from within the MENA region. Of particular relevance are the refugee camps located in the latter, as they are deemed more vulnerable to radicalisation. On this subject, the disadvantage faced by Brussels and other European governments – much more seriously affected by the consequences of the conflict than Russia – of having reduced influence in Syria may force them to ask Russia for more tangible progress on the ground. As the EU and its member states are primarily interested in guaranteeing safe conditions for the return of refugees, many of whom have found shelter in Europe, these requests would presumably involve the implementation of UNHCR regulations. Given that Russia has also claimed that their return is a priority and essential for Syria's recovery, it could perhaps allow implementation of the necessary procedures. Seeing that the EU has subordinated its engagement to forcing concessions from Damascus through sanctions and political actions, Russia may well be in a better position to enforce these compromises.

Reconstruction

The post-war reconstruction of Syria is possibly the objective that has the greatest potential to push Europe to work with Russia. That is because both positions on this matter are much closer than on other dossiers, as there are clear business incentives for engagement in rebuilding the country. However, involvement of the two parties is motivated by different intentions. Whereas the EU is extremely reluctant to engage in rebuilding Assad's Syria, Moscow has no means to offer further economic aid to Damascus. Yet the post-conflict reconstruction offers other

possibilities for cooperation: if Russia is financially unable to rebuild, it should then evaluate *whom* it wants to empower in the process. Opening to Europe could in this case be extremely beneficial.

Overall, since Syria remains the greatest crisis to affect the Southern regions of Europe and Russia, finding new paths for cooperation in the country is in the interest of both actors. Nevertheless, a “no illusion approach” needs to be adopted with respect to any future EU-Russian collaboration. In order to avoid over-optimistic expectations, both actors must bear in mind the nature of their partnership, which will likely be unbalanced in terms of concrete limitations and outcomes, given that they both play very different roles in the country. Most importantly, EU-Russian cooperation on the Syrian crisis should not be developed on a “*crisis resolution*” basis, but rather on a “*crisis management*” one. Lessening apprehensions and hopes on both sides might actually increase the chances of commonly defining realistic, achievable targets that could bring about more tangible results for the good of the Syrian people.

5. Libya in the Covid-19 Era: Between Local Chaos and Foreign Interferences

Andrey Chuprygin

While the Libyan crisis has been on and off the frontpages of the international agenda, it is often linked to Russia every time it hits the headlines. Whether the issue rotates around political toing and froing or military tales of the frontline variety, Russia is bound to be somewhere in the heart of the discussion. Of late, a few new dimensions have been added to the Libyan file, of which Turkey and Covid-19 are the most pressing. What exactly does Russia do in the complicated Libyan environment? How does this correlate with the Turkish attempt to gain a foothold in this North African and Mediterranean country? Such questions, and the related commitments and developments on these matters, are the focus of this piece.

The Russian connection to the Libyan case has been voluntarily or otherwise the virtual cornerstone of any political activity even remotely connected to this North African country. Whenever and whoever starts discussing Libya, regardless of the topic or subject, one can practically guarantee Russia is going to be mentioned. For some, Russian involvement is a blessing, for others it is a curse. Nothing in between. It is somehow flattering on one hand and bewildering on the other. Flattering in that, against the odds, Russia has become an important player in the Mediterranean, thus to a certain extent fulfilling the historical

legacy of the Eastern Policy of Katherine the Great,¹ and bewildering in that it is very difficult to pinpoint how exactly Russia is influencing the Libyan conundrum and what, if any, the consequences of this influence are.

Then there is Turkey, of course, coming through with the grand imperial idea of the Neo-Uthmanic narrative, the “Mavi Vatan”² strategic doctrine and the ethereal thirst for new energy resources which, coupled with the dream of the “Great Resurrection”, defines the current Turkish Mediterranean Paradigm and plunges the North Atlantic military and political construct into a turmoil of epic proportions. It really is a source of real wonder and curiosity how one Southern Mediterranean country (Libya), coupled with the one military political misstep in 2011,³ has defined major shifts in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern constructs during the first quarter of the XXI century.

And, of course there is Covid-19, the Plague of the Century that needs serious consideration. However, this issue is not really going to be covered here. The argument underscoring this work is that Covid-19 might have exacerbated circumstances, played it has played little if any role in the development of the Libyan crisis and it is being artificially introduced into the political discourse in order to underscore the humanitarian aspect of civil unrest in Libya.

Since the time of Qaddafi, Libyan leadership was very non-Soviet, if I may put it that way. There were never brotherly

¹ See, for example: E. Smilyanskaya, *Russian Warriors in the Land of Miltiades and Themistocles: The Colonial Ambitions of Catherine the Great in the Mediterranean*, Higher School of Economics Research Paper No. WP BRP 55/HUM/2014, 13 May 13, 2014.

² The Turkish doctrine, known as “The Blue Homeland Doctrine” (Mavi Vatan), was formulated by Admiral Cem Gurdeniz in 2006. It is aimed at ensuring Turkey’s control in the three seas surrounding it, strengthening its regional and international influence and obtaining energy resources, to support its economic and demographic growth without dependence on third countries.

³ NATO interference in the Libyan domestic affairs which ended in the overthrow and demise of the then Libyan leader Col. Qaddafi.

relations and no love lost between Tripoli and Moscow.⁴ Qaddafi, if anything, longed to be recognised as an equal by the West, especially the U.S., and used his Soviet card as a counterbalance in his relations with American interlocutors (the same could be said about his idol Gamal Abdel Naser of Egypt and several other Mideastern leaders).

Not much has changed since February 2011. Of all the political figures who have come and gone, hardly one was even remotely pro-Russian. So, it is impossible to consciously say there were highly positioned Russian agents of influence in Libya then, as there are none now. On top of this, Russia's lack of action on the Security Council in 2011 left a bad aftertaste in the Libyan political milieu. Add to this a long period of practical disinterest in Libyan affairs, and one has the stage upon which Russian engagement in the Libyan drama started unfolding.

For 5-6 years Russia played the role of a disinterested observer in line with the overall Mideastern approach,⁵ until the engagement in Syria changed the Russian position in the Middle East, bringing a proactive approach. Still in Libya, Moscow adopted a very cautious position. It seems there was an understanding of the importance of the Libyan situation in the context of Mediterranean politics, a temptation to fill the void left by the United States after Washington distanced itself from the volatile high-risk-no-gain situation in Libya, and the attractive idea of reversing negative European relations by dealing with the migration issue and security concerns. But instead of plunging headfirst into the marshland of Libyan civil war, Moscow decided to hedge possible risks by talking to all parties concerned, whatever that might mean at that specific time.

Two problems came up immediately:

1. Which parties specifically should it to talk to? Numerous divisions existed and tendencies were unclear at the best of times.

⁴ G.W. Breslauer, *Soviet Strategy in the Middle East*, Boston, 1990, p. 164.

⁵ M. Belenkaya, *In Libya's War, Russia Is Directionless - and Falling Behind*, Carnegie Papers, 2020.

2. The so-called partners in the West, both Europe and the US, immediately started searching for ulterior motives in Russian positions.

Regardless of the above, one has to acknowledge that for a period of time Moscow played well in Libya, effectively becoming a side to turn to both for Tobruk and Tripoli,⁶ at times when Europe displayed indifference.

This was the case until April 2019 when the Haftar offensive on Tripoli became the game-changer. Not only did the internal political and military situation in Libya immediately become more dangerous and unpredictable, but the whole international approach to the Libyan crisis underwent a drastic change. The talk shifted from the “no substitute for a political solution” to the “Russia interfering in Libyan affairs” narrative. It was educational to watch the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Egypt and Saudi Arabia flagrantly violating the UN Security Council embargo, providing the Libyan East (meaning Haftar) with weapons, ammunitions and military material to which Brussels turned a blind eye, while the main rhetoric was about Russia supporting Haftar, worded precisely as “Russia meddling in Libyan affairs”.

On the other hand, the use of “Russian involvement”, and not “Russia involvement”, here is deliberate. The whole narrative is based on a single fact of the so-called Private Military Company (PMC) Wagner working the frontlines with Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA). But to be fair, this started in September 2019. And before that the main topic was Haftar’s visits to Moscow, which occasionally were transcribed as clear evidence of Moscow colluding with the Libyan East. But to be fair, one has to mention Maiteeq⁷ and other political figures from the Libyan West, Tripoli and Misrata. The number of their visits was twice the number of visits of their Eastern counterparts.

⁶ House of Representatives in Tobruk and Government of National Accord in Tripoli.

⁷ Ahmed Maiteeq, Vice Chairman of the Presidential Council of Libya, Tripoli.

The same is true for the arms and military equipment deliveries. It is a documented fact that the main supplier of Haftar and his LNA should be sought in Cairo and Abu Dhabi. And, at the end of the day – it is highly unlikely that Khalifa Haftar, an American citizen and one-time CIA asset, embraced Russia with all his might. The question of who brought him back to Libya in the first place and financed his first steps should be answered before we enter the world of highly speculative supposition.

In October, reports of Russian PMCs taking part in military activities with Haftar's forces⁸ became the focus of attention overnight, obscuring the main problems of the rivalries in Libya. As a result, in European political circles the nature of debates about solutions in Libya shifted once again from the meaningful to the construed. The search for solutions was once again replaced by a seek-and-blame mode.

This particular strain was found by studying analytical reports from several think tanks furthering the idea of Russia threatening US and European interests in the Mediterranean. This is a Freudian slip if there was one. The majority of the reports in question centre on the Big Game between international players, pushing the interests of the Libyan people to the margins of the discussion. There are distinct, realistic voices, but they are hardly heard over the white noise of the "Libyan experts" peddling "international interests". But to be honest, neither Russian nor American interests should occupy such a prominent place in the debate. This place should be reserved solely for Libyan interests. But, of course, this is a naïve statement.

One might assume the main reason for the Libyanesque confrontations or lack thereof between major international parties is that even with the contradictory positioning in Libya, Moscow is the only player who consistently kept the doors of

⁸ K. Marten, "Russia's use of semi-state security forces: the case of the Wagner Group", *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 35, no. 3, 2019, pp. 197-98.

negotiation open with everyone, acknowledged the existence of multi-layered problems and positioned itself as a valid middleman. Which, from the point of view of Washington, is a problem that needs to be solved somehow. Especially against the backdrop of inconsistent and contradictory announcements by President Trump. And the constant fighting for supremacy between France and Italy, who support different sides of the conflict. Which is all very confusing. However the solution of isolating Moscow from the Libyan case, which seems to be favoured by the US and NATO, is difficult to achieve, because, for a significant period of time, Moscow appeared to be the only foreign party who, while being inactive, did not shy away from the Libyan crisis, and was not implicated directly in the 2011 bombing campaign. And this contributes to shape a more positive image of Russia on the ground compared to others.

But there is, suddenly, a positive side to the situation. Precisely because of the multi-layered Russian involvement in Libya, the US decided to take a more active part in the crisis, if not to remedy the NATO-manufactured disaster of 2011, then at least to spoil Russian advancement. For better or for worse remains to be seen. There is already a tendency for the United States to go its own way, outside of the Berlin framework and concentrating specifically on the Oil Crescent. In this, one could say, they are in tune with Turkey. Will this help solve the situation? It certainly adds to the confusion, especially with Egypt's sabre-rattling and the UAE's attempts at salvaging the Haftar Project. In any case, it is a positive sign as direct American engagement should add to the peace effort in Libya.

Especially in the wake of the Turkish "Mediterranean coming-out", which added a refreshing new factor to an old problem, it looks like we are once again witnessing a change of scene. Direct Turkish involvement in the Libyan civil war has led to a change in the whole Mediterranean ambiance. There is definitely a dramatic increase in international involvement, with several players rushing in at once to make sure they were not left behind. Libya suddenly became the "apple of

discord” in the Mediterranean Basin, amidst the failing NATO methodology, as became painfully clear through the French/Turkish fallout and Greece desperately searching for NATO’s reluctant assistance. At the same time, Washington has been trying to placate everyone with meaningless statements, while there is an educated consensus the United States, if push came to shove, would ally itself with Turkey. This knowledge makes everyone anxious to timely assert their “rightful” place in the resulting structure of the emerging Mediterranean. The shift from the Eurocentric Med to the Mediterranean subjected to the influence of the Middle East is new and disturbing for the traditional Southern European heavyweights France and Italy. And the role of Turkey, which is the closest U.S. ally in the Middle East, but maintains working relations with Russia, contributes to the confusion. And, however one looks at it, Russia becomes a de facto point of convergence for practically all the players involved. And this might as well be instrumental in generating positive movement.

The Covid-19 pandemic was touched on at the beginning of this piece. Debate is already underway as to how the pandemic is going to reshape the face of our civilisation. The argument here is that Covid-19 as an existential factor is only relevant to Western societies. In the Eastern world, in general and in Libya as part of the Eastern and Islamic world, Covid-19 has no significant impact. While definitely being an issue for health services, due to the lack of testing and medical facilities, it does not hold a major place in the country’s social psyche. Against the backdrop of the fallout from the civil war, the lack of basic amenities, the unresolved security issues, the power void and the Islamic tradition of Prophetic hadith,⁹ the Covid-19 pandemic is not at the forefront of the country’s problems and does not constitute a factor in the future of the nation.

⁹ For example, see Al-Hafidz Ibnu Hajar Al-Asqolani, *Kitab Badʿlu al-Maʿun Fi Fadhli al-Thaʿun* (in Arabic).

Here, one might be advised to take a closer look at the “non-pandemic” factors in the Libyan domestic scene. Since 2011, many research and political papers have been produced exploring the ways and means of resolving the political crisis that followed the February revolution, as it has been called. The focus has often been divided between the domestic and international players, and their roles in a possible, or probable solution. The prevailing view wants us to believe the real problem on the road to the reconstruction and development in this North African country lies with the lack of consensus between the major regional and international players involved in the Libyan charade, as each one is pursuing its own interests. This may be so; however, the view in this chapter is that the main obstacle to the desired resolution hides not outside but inside the country. It is not Turkey, trying to use the Libyan theatre to further its own ambitions in the Mediterranean and the Middle East. It is not France, trying to sabotage Turkish efforts. It is not Egypt, looking at its neighbour through the biased lens of its own national security. It is not Russia or the United States, engaged in a big shuffle dance over perceived national interests. The main handicap is that Libya has no developed civil society to provide a framework to mobilise the populace to political activity. And without such a framework one cannot realistically expect a political process, with party activism, elections, consensus etc.

Historically, Libya never had a chance to form such a framework, which we take for granted. From the Ottomans to the Italians, to the Brits, to the artificial kingdom, to the cartoonish revolution, and to the decades of paternalistic authoritarianism in an all-encompassing one-man show, there never was a real chance for the country and its people to create a unique national independence model with an articulated national sense capable of evolving into a civil society platform, with its own heroic ethos and enshrined leaders. Through all these decades the country remained regionally fractured, with cities and tribes pursuing their own egoistic goals and

occasionally filling the shoes of the clients for the leader who happened to be in power at the time.

To expect the country, between 2011 and now – overnight, in a historical sense – to develop into a sufficiently sophisticated environment to be able to reach a political consensus is naïve. And we are witnessing this every day. Recently, after the purported success of the 5x5 negotiations in the form of a permanent ceasefire, we see Haftar meeting with Eastern delegates and stressing his resolve to fight till the victorious end and calling on Tuareg tribes to join him in this noble enterprise. And there are the Tripoli militias, which quite expectedly refuse to disarm and dissolve, thus hampering the plan formulated by the Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha in the spirit of de-escalation and compromise.

All observers agree the municipalities have become a powerful new factor, as they have been in the process of ascertaining positions of influence in Libya. Local executive bodies, which provide the population with daily amenities, thus working outside the political minefield, have gained uncontested authority and trust among locals. In the chaos of the civil war and the destruction of the economy and security, municipal committees provide what amounts to the basis of existence for the people. And they have a good chance to become the nucleus of the new emerging civil society in Libya.

Let us now return to the question of foreign players, which is no doubt very important to resolving the Libyan issue, it seems logical for influential countries, hosting conferences and negotiations between the two easily accessible parties to the conflict, namely the Government of National Accord (GNA) of Tripoli and the Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF) of Haftar, to turn their attention to the parties previously ignored by the “big shots” as being too small and too obscure. Noticeably, when international NGOs aim to achieve something they turn to municipal authorities, not the central powers. This is a clear indication that local committees are in fact the real power on the ground, capable of mobilising and negotiating.

Unfortunately, working through municipal authorities requires a different level of involvement from international players, but they are not prepared to commit to this. The inability to work creatively and to think out of the box impedes all efforts by the international community. And while Europe scratches its collective head trying to figure what to do next, and while conferences are piling up on themselves and consultations multiply, proactive regional entrepreneurial elites are moulding Libya to their own ends, changing the balance in the whole of the Mediterranean.

To reverse negative developments in Libya, there is a need for the concerted efforts of all parties concerned, built on the overall understanding the struggle for peace in Libya is in fact a struggle for peace in the Mediterranean. Unfortunately, experiences last year showed that frontline European Mediterranean countries are incapable of reaching a consensus with Mideastern and North African countries, as well as with each other. On top of this, countries like France are practically incapable of imaginative policies in the face of new challenges from the East. The new era of Mideastern Tigers ascertaining their position and probing the waters of the Big Blue Homeland calls for a reassessment in political approaches. The only obstacle left to overcome is to acknowledge that countries like Turkey and Russia also have their own interests and are not going, under any conditions, to be left on the margins of the political process. And of course, there are people in Libya, and therefore their interests must be at the forefront of each and every development in and around this North African country. This is simply called *realpolitik*.

6. Palestine and Israel in the Post-Covid World

Inès Abdel Razek

In the eyes of many Palestinians, the pandemic has brought to the world a taste of their experience, one of uncertainty, anxiety, invisibility, and being cheated by political actors that deny your rights. A world where you are constantly told to be resilient despite your environment closing in around you. Many Gazans living under full closure for 13 years took to social media to ask the world in self-derision: “Dear world, how is the lockdown? Gaza”.¹

The current health crisis has sadly developed in parallel with the release of the Trump administration’s so-called “peace plan”, which emboldened both the U.S. and Israel to more displays of power and unilateral steps, such as advancing de facto annexation and the signing of normalisation agreements with like-minded regimes. The dispossession of Palestinians and the denial of their rights has been accompanied by investment on the part of the U.S., Israeli and allies in mainstreaming such moves as “peace”.

There is a very loud cognitive dissonance between the ongoing political and diplomatic developments that are being depicted as peace and stability and the reality at play on the ground in the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River (Israel-Palestine), where the imbalance of power between the colonised and the coloniser and a reality of apartheid are increasingly entrenched with every passing day.

¹ N. al-Mughrabi, “Blocked Gaza looks wryly on as world isolates itself”, *Reuters*, 18 March 2020.

Such dissonance has grown against the backdrop of an international order promoted by neo-authoritarian leaders and championed by Israel as a role model; these leaders include Donald Trump, Benjamin Netanyahu, Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (MBZ), Mohammad bin Salman Al Sa'ud (MBS) and European far-right allies, all aiming to advance nationalist agendas at the expense of the rule of law and human rights.

In such a context, the Palestinian leadership, the European leadership and the UN, more paralysed than ever, know that everything is going in the wrong direction for building a better future for both Israelis and Palestinians. And yet, yet supporting alternative frameworks and resisting the neo-authoritarian world order feels more painful than the downward trajectory labelled as “status quo”. Unfortunately, the Covid-19 pandemic has only exacerbated structural and man-made inequalities at play in Israel-Palestine, whether with regards to the healthcare system, freedom of movement, policing and securitisation, decision-making ability and more. Meanwhile, it has also weakened international will to lower the cognitive dissonance at play.

This chapter will try to shed light on how international and regional trends are affecting Palestinians, the Palestinian national movement and the future of what is at stake in Israel-Palestine. It will also analyse how these trends offer an opportunity to reconcile the discourse with the dire reality on the ground, and in that regard, radically change the international community's rules of engagement in Israel-Palestine, which so far have enabled de facto annexation and ethno-nationalist policies to thrive.

The Leap Forward of Neo-Authoritarian World Politics

Bilateral security and military diplomacy

The so-called “Abraham Accords” signed on 15 September 2020 at the White House represent the culmination of steadily growing relations between the Gulf countries and Israel over

the past several years,² and advance significantly a world order where state security and economic interests are advanced through the lens of ethno-nationalism and essentialist visions of combating Islamic terrorism, at the expense of multilateralism and people's rights at home and abroad.

The neo-authoritarian leaders behind this regional balance of power (MBZ, Trump, Netanyahu, MBS on the one side, Erdogan on the other side) aim first and foremost to consolidate their national defence apparatus through solid bilateral alliances.

In that regard, Israel turned the occupation of millions of Palestinian into a geopolitical asset, exporting a model "tested" on Palestinians. It aims to place itself at the centre of a regional security map where the road to Washington passes through Tel Aviv. Being tied to Israel ensures the United Arab Emirates (UAE) access to higher quality weapons and closer relations with the U.S., regardless of the presidential administration in place.³ The pandemic added an additional opportunity for Israel to export its spyware and military technologies, which are endangering people's rights domestically and internationally.⁴ In July 2020, the Israeli government-affiliated aerospace industry company Rafael (a prominent world arms manufacturer) signed an agreement with G42, a private group linked to Emirati intelligence with the stated goal of "defeating Covid 19".⁵ The Mossad is at the heart of engineering such a strategic regional approach and has replaced official diplomacy in countries with whom Israel does not have official relations.⁶

This open consolidated alliance could escalate an arms race in the region and would not only have consequences for

² A. Entous, "Donald Trump's New World Order", *The New Yorker*, 11 June 2018.

³ O. Ajjoub and R. Aldoughli "What does "peace" even mean for the peoples of the Middle East?", *Al-Jumhuriya*, 7 October 2020.

⁴ A. Kharpal, "Use of surveillance to fight coronavirus raises concerns about government power after pandemic ends", *CNBC*, 26 March 2020.

⁵ "Israeli defence companies sign 'historic' deal with UAE artificial intelligence firm", *Middle East Eye*, 3 July 2020.

⁶ H. Rettig Gur, "Our new spymaster and the demise of Israeli politics", *The Time of Israel*, 6 January 2016.

Israel-Palestine but also for Yemen⁷ and other ongoing conflicts in the region. Israel will want to prove its influence over Washington for its Arab allies' security interests, while keeping its military superiority, doubling down on the "Qualitative military edge" doctrine. Given U.S. interest in selling F-35s to the UAE (and Qatar), Israel is already seeking additional military aid⁸ on top of the US\$38 billion it receives every year within the framework of the 10-year security assistance MoU renewed under the Obama administration.⁹

Instrumentalising religion:
continuing the "war on terror"

These agreements are sealing a realignment between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain and the Saudis to counter Iran's influence in the region, as well as that of Erdogan's Turkey, with the logic that the enemy of my enemy is my friend. Israeli diplomacy has, for years, tried with some degree of success to place the international agenda's focus exclusively on Iran, an approach shared with its Gulf allies. By doing so, Israel has constantly pushed the Palestine question aside and whitewashed its policies and practices by pointing the finger at Iran (and its support to Hezbollah, Houthis etc.) as the greatest danger to the world's security. Aligning with that trend, the UAE and its allies are portraying themselves as a beacon of "tolerant Islam"¹⁰ and moderation, a bulwark of "stability" against "disruption" and terrorism, which they depict as being embodied by the Muslim brotherhood, Iran and their proxies. These countries are anchoring a binary vision boosting chauvinism and justifying both domestic repressive policies and

⁷ I. Jalal, *UAE-Israel normalization gives rise to new risks for Yemen and the region*, Middle East Institute, 14 September 2020.

⁸ A. Egozi, "Israel Seeks \$8B Arms Deal At White House: F-35s, V-22s, KC-46s", *BreakingDefense*, 15 September 2020.

⁹ M. Spetalnik, "U.S., Israel sign \$38 billion military aid package", *Reuters*, 14 September 2016.

¹⁰ E. Fakhro, *An Open Affair: As the UAE and Israel Normalize Ties, Gulf Actors Respond*, International Crisis Group, 20 August 2020.

militarism abroad, as a continuation of the post 9/11 “war on terror”.¹¹ This all points to a region that is ultimately more, not less, unstable and could continue to create much damage from Xinjian to Libya in the name of “freedom”.

Packaging a dangerous “paradigm shift” for Israel-Palestine

One should not underestimate the political danger and potential mainstreaming of the “paradigm shift” such a world order proposes for the Palestine-Israel issue. Israelis describe it as “peace for peace” replacing “land for peace”;¹² in other words, Israel can advance its diplomatic relations and the normalisation of its regime, regardless of Palestinians.

In this approach, Palestinians are portrayed in a patronising way, as perpetual rejectionists of peace offers¹³ leading to “fatigue” for the Palestinian cause. This has been mainstreamed in the Gulf for a few years already and in 2018, MBS was reported to say that “in the last several decades ... the Palestinian leadership has missed one opportunity after the other and rejected all the peace proposals it was given. It is about time the Palestinians take the proposals and agree to come to the negotiations table or shut up and stop complaining”. This discourse is a distortion of historical facts regarding negotiation and compromises made by the Palestinians¹⁴ and collectively discredits them while allowing Israel to pursue colonisation.

¹¹ M. Duss, “U.S. Foreign Policy Never Recovered From the War on Terror”, *Foreign Affairs*, 22 October 2020.

¹² J. Sinkinson, “‘Land for peace’ is dead, long live ‘peace for peace’”, *jns Jewish News Syndicate*, 13 November 2020.

¹³ An example in this recent interview of former head of Saudi intelligence services. “Full transcript: Prince Bandar bin Sultan’s interview on Israel-Palestine conflict”, *Al-Arabiya*, 5 October 2020.

¹⁴ A. Gresh, “Les Palestiniens n’ont jamais raté une occasion de rater une occasion?”, *orientXXI*, 16 March 2020.

In the West, neo-conservatives¹⁵ who have long held in contempt multilateralism, the UN, the International Criminal Court and people's rights are supporting such a paradigm, asserting that human rights are conditional to the advancements of security – defined as “fighting terrorism” – and supported by Trump's so-called “Deal of the Century” as a legitimate roadmap¹⁶ despite its disregard for Palestinian rights and international law.¹⁷

Meanwhile, Israel's war to silence critical voices who challenge such a narrative and the policies and practices behind it risks further shrinking the space available to civil society, human rights defenders and journalists to speak up. For the past few years, the Israeli government, notably through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Strategic Affairs, and with the support of a network of Government-organised NGOs (GONGOs)¹⁸ and lobbies active in the U.S., Brussels¹⁹ and across Europe²⁰ has been investing millions²¹ in trying to smear and criminalise efforts of civil society actors, activists and human rights defenders. There are two main strategies used at the international level: the first is redefining anti-Semitism²² and hate speech to include any calls

¹⁵ See op-ed by Stephen Harper, former Canadian conservative FM, sponsor of the JNF and close to the Israeli nationalists, “Stephen J. Harper and Shuvloy Majumdar: Why we should celebrate the Abraham Accords”, *National Post*, 5 October 2020.

¹⁶ See for example American Jewish Committee (AJC) statement, “AJC Welcomes U.S. Effort to Advance Israeli-Palestinian Peace, Urges Return to Talks”, CISION, 29 January 2020.

¹⁷ See statement by 47 UN independent experts, “Israeli annexation of parts of the Palestinian West Bank would break international law – UN experts call on the international community to ensure accountability”, United Nations Human Rights.

¹⁸ Y. Gurvitz and N. Rotem, “What is NGO Monitor's connection to the Israeli government?”, *+972magazine*, 29 April 2014.

¹⁹ G. Mauzé, “Israeli Networks of Influence in Brussels: Behind the Scenes”, *orientXXI*, 31 January 2019.

²⁰ “The Lobby Part 1: Young Friends of Israel”, *Al Jazeera*, 10 January 2017.

²¹ M. Jaffe-Hoffman, “Strategic Affairs Ministry to form anti-BDS legal network”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 20 December 2018.

²² *Backgrounder on Efforts to Redefine Antisemitism as a Means of Censoring Criticism of*

to boycott the state of Israel or to define it an “apartheid state”.²³ Not only is it silencing Palestinian rights defenders but it is counter-productive to fighting hate, including anti-Semitism; indeed, some governments have used their support for Israel to reject accusations of anti-Semitism or sympathy towards white supremacy, as Trump and Orban have done.

A second tactic is to accuse Palestinian and Israeli NGOs and human rights defenders, particularly those working on the ground against settler organisations in Jerusalem or Area C, of sympathising with terrorism.²⁴ Sophisticated tactics involve lawfare,²⁵ harassment and cyberbullying,²⁶ intimidation²⁷ and de-platforming²⁸ (e.g. closing of bank accounts). Such virulent attacks have direct political consequences and directly support the narrative and foreign policies described above.

In the backdrop to these international and regional developments characterised by pageantry and the promotion of doublethink,²⁹ the reality of injustice at play in Palestine-Israel provides a compelling explanation of why current political frameworks must radically shift in order to reject a “fait accompli” and the end of international norms. On the other hand, worldwide resistance against international trends undermining justice and equity has brought about new opportunities for Palestinians and allies to completely shift strategy in challenging structural oppression.

Israel, Palestine Legal, 20 January 2020.

²³ Recent case: L. Friedman, “Israel-Advocacy Groups Urge Facebook to Label Criticism of Israel as Hate Speech”, Analysis, *Jewish Current*, 19 August 2020.

²⁴ “The Clampdown On Palestine Civic Space Continues As Israel Steps Up Smear Campaign Against Csos”, *Monitor*, 21 August 2019

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ *Al-Haq submits a joint urgent appeal to the United Nations Special Procedures on the ongoing Israeli smear campaign against Al-Haq*, Al Haq Defending Human Rights, 24 August 2019.

²⁷ An example here: <https://twitter.com/GPOIsrael/status/1260562730257448961>

²⁸ See example of Shurat Hadin and A. Kane, “Israel’s Scheme ‘To Defund the BDS Movement’”, *INTHESETIMES*, 11 November 2019.

²⁹ As per the concept well articulated by Georges Orwell in his famous novel *1984*.

A One-State Reality of Apartheid

The combined factors of the Trump administration legitimising Israel's annexation and the signing of the normalisation agreements has emboldened Israel to accelerate its dispossession of more land and resources and its choking of the Palestinian people. It is important to note that decades of U.S. bipartisan consensus on supporting Israeli colonisation have paved the way for the latest moves to support the erasure of Palestinian national rights, such as defunding and attacking The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (and opposing the right of return) and moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem.

The Covid-19 pandemic has distracted the world's attention and provided convenient cover to accelerate settler colonial plans and the dispossession of Palestinians. During this period, Israel has increased demolitions and confiscation of Palestinian infrastructure,³⁰ as well as approvals for building more settlements.³¹ Plans are advancing for the permanent displacement of Palestinian communities, particularly in Area C³² as well as in Jerusalem. At the same time, settler violence has spiked in total impunity.³³ Israel's regime also negatively affected Palestinian ability to respond to the health crisis.³⁴

But this merely accelerates decades-old practices. Since the start of the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza in 1967, Israel has used and abused the law of occupation under international

³⁰ OCHA United Nations for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, "Unlawful demolitions in the West Bank spike during COVID-19", Statement by Humanitarian Coordinator Jamie McGoldrick, 10 September 2020.

³¹ "Israel approves first West Bank settler homes since Gulf deals", *Al Jazeera*, 14 October 2020.

³² B. White, "How Israel is waging war on Palestinians in Area C", *Middle East Eye*, 20 September 2020.

³³ *Violence and impunity in the West Bank during the COVID-19 pandemic*, Briefing Note, OXFAM, May 2020.

³⁴ Y. Hawari, *COVID-19 in Palestine: A Pandemic in the Face of "Settler Colonial Erasure"*, IAI Commentaries 20 | 62, IAI, September 2020.

humanitarian law (IHL) at will to ramp up annexation and create permanent occupation without raising international outrage. Occupation is a temporary situation where the occupying power assumes the role of administering in good faith a territory until conditions allow for its return. By contrast, annexation of occupied territory implies permanent transfer of sovereignty, and is illegal under international law. Israel never recognised the West Bank and Gaza as “occupied” territory – calling it instead “Judea and Samaria” and “disputed territory” – and never planned to transfer sovereignty to Palestinians. A Human Rights Watch study released last year pointed out that in the West Bank, “sweeping restrictions are unjustified and unlawful after five decades”.³⁵ The unilateral withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 also provided Israel with an excuse to dodge its responsibilities as the occupying power, while actually entrenching its military and administrative authority over the strip.³⁶ Whenever convenient, successive Israeli governments have nonetheless used the supposedly temporary character of the occupation under international law to protect themselves from diplomatic outrage and the consequences that annexation would entail, while *de facto* advancing it.

Since 1948, in the territory between the Mediterranean River and the Jordan river, Israel has slowly built a sophisticated multi-tiered institutional and legal regime for Palestinians, based on racial discrimination. These policies and practices have been dispossessing Palestinians of their civil and collective rights while deliberately fragmenting their population, with differentiated regimes for the Palestinians in the West Bank, in Gaza or East Jerusalem³⁷ and for the Palestinian citizens of Israel.³⁸

In the occupied territories these policies have been enacted by systematic spatial (the Wall, check-points, roads), technological

³⁵ “Israel/West Bank: Grant Palestinians Equal Rights”, *Human Rights Watch*, 17 December 2019

³⁶ “Occupation under international law?”, Facts, *diakonia*, 2014.

³⁷ *Revocation of Residency in East Jerusalem*, Norwegian Refugee Council, January 2017.

³⁸ “Israel: Discriminatory Land Policies Hem in Palestinians”, *Human Rights Watch*, 12 May 2020.

(surveillance) and bureaucratic (permits) measures with control, dependence and segregation as the primary aim, and not security as claimed by Israel.³⁹ This regime has created a “complex articulation of the spaces of life” between Israeli and Palestinian societies,⁴⁰ giving the illusion that there are two distinct national and territorial entities, and redefining the power relationship and control of Israelis over Palestinians.⁴¹

Military orders have been used and abused to repress Palestinians’ ability to organise,⁴² including through the systemic use of incarceration to crush dissent in the long-term. These orders have also been regularly used to expropriate more Palestinian-owned land in the name of “security”. It must be noted that Palestinian citizens of Israel lived under a similar military ruling from 1948 to the end of 1966.⁴³

While Gaza is often set aside in the discourse around Israel’s annexation and colonial plans, “the isolation of Gaza has been implemented over the years through Israel’s control over movement, and has served Israel in advancing West Bank annexation, at the expense of Palestinian human rights”, as the Israeli human rights organisation Gisha explained in a recent paper.⁴⁴

The epitome of this system is the prominent role played by the Israeli military body in charge of the occupied territories (the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories, COGAT). Referred to as a “civil administration”, this institution under the Ministry of Defence is responsible for managing Israel’s control over the occupied territories. It is the main administration controlling the permit regime, check-points

³⁹ Interview with Yael Barda, specialist of this question: E. Konrad, “Israel’s permit regime isn’t about security, it’s about segregation”, *+972magazine*, 9 January 2019.

⁴⁰ C. Parizot, *Viscous Spatialities: The Spaces of the Israeli Permit Regime of Access and Movement*, HAL archives-ouvertes.fr, 29 May 2017.

⁴¹ S. Abdallah and C. Parizot, *De la séparation aux mobilités*, 22 June 2017.

⁴² “Israel/West Bank: Grant Palestinians Equal Rights”..., cit.

⁴³ “Palestinians Under Military Rule in Israel”, *Palestinians Journey*.

⁴⁴ “Area G: From Separation to Annexation”, Globe – Legal Center for Freedom of Movement, June 2020.

policies and the blockade in Gaza, and approves or rejects trade, mobility, and construction proposals, basically denying Palestinian's rights in the name of "security". The paradox here is that COGAT has been ramping up its communication and public relations efforts, presenting itself as a caretaker providing services to the Palestinians rather than a colonial ruler that has enforced dependency on its decisions. One recent example is the olive harvest that takes place annually in the month of October. While COGAT is presenting itself as supporting farmers,⁴⁵ over the years the Israeli military has increased its permanent restrictions of access and expropriations of these farmers.⁴⁶ COGAT regularly briefs diplomats and donors⁴⁷ to legitimise their policies and present itself as an interlocutor of reference to discuss matters that concern Palestinian lives.⁴⁸

De jure annexation would therefore validate in Israeli civil law what is already Israel's de facto sovereignty over approximately 14 million people.⁴⁹ In that regard, there is a growing recognition that these systemic policies and practices are in fact a regime of apartheid, defined as the "systematic oppression and domination" of one group over another in the territory "with the intention of maintaining that regime". This is a reality that many Palestinians have long recognised⁵⁰ and reported on at the United Nations,⁵¹ now joined by Israeli human rights NGOs and lawyers.⁵²

⁴⁵ <https://twitter.com/cogatonline/status/1305832016102002691>

⁴⁶ *The road to olive farming*, OXFAM, p. 19

⁴⁷ *European Diplomats on a Strategic Tour at Israel's Border with Gaza*, ELNET, 29 September 2020.

⁴⁸ <https://twitter.com/cogatonline/status/1217542090806255619>

⁴⁹ S. Cypel and R. Malley, "Palestine. 'Formal annexation won't change anything on the ground'", orientXXI, 30 June 2020.

⁵⁰ A. Iraqi, "Palestinians are tired of proving Israeli apartheid exists", +972Magazine, 17 June 2020.

⁵¹ *Palestinian, regional, and international groups submit report on Israeli apartheid to UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination*, Al-Haq Defending Human Rights, 12 November 2019.

⁵² A. Iraqi, "'An illegitimate regime': How a top rights group shed Israeli myths to

In September 2020, 200 international and Palestinian civil society organisations called on the UN General Assembly to “launch international investigations into Israel’s apartheid regime over the Palestinian people as a whole, as well as associated State and individual criminal responsibility, including by reconstituting the UN Special Committee against Apartheid and the UN Centre Against Apartheid to end apartheid in the XXI century”.⁵³

This reality began to be politically acknowledged by the West, notably by the Obama Administration. In 2015, Secretary of State John Kerry brought to the White House a stack of maps of the West Bank that were prepared by the State Department and vetted by U.S. intelligence agencies. As an Obama adviser put it: “No matter what metric you’re using – existing blocs, new settlements, illegal outposts – you’re confronting the end of the two-state solution”.⁵⁴

Will We Finally Stop Pretending That There Is a MEPP?

The comfort of a process to avoid hard choices

The international community jumped feet first in presenting the Abraham Accords and normalisation as an opportunity to re-launch negotiations,⁵⁵ just as it welcomed the Trump administration’s “efforts”⁵⁶ with its so-called “deal of the century”. These reactions are an example of the loud cognitive

recognize apartheid”, *+972Magazine*, 9 July 2020.

⁵³ *Global Response to Israeli apartheid: A call to the UNGA from Palestinian and international Civil Society Organizations*, Al-Haq Defending Human Rights, 22 September 2020.

⁵⁴ A. Entous, “Donald Trump’s New World Order”, *The New Yorker*, 18 June 2018.

⁵⁵ European Union, External Action, “Israel: High Representative/Vice-President Borrell speaks to Foreign Minister Ashkenazi”, 18 September 2020.

⁵⁶ Ref French reaction.

dissonance between what the Middle East Peace Process (MEPP) stands for and what actual peace underpinned by rights and justice means.

There is an ever-fading illusion from the Palestinian establishment and the EU that the Oslo-configured MEPP of direct negotiations can be revived. Yet, as Daniel Levy stated in his briefing to the UN Security Council in July 2020.

The peace process, as currently framed and pursued, offers a place of refuge from hard choices, a comfort zone where the law of diminishing returns has a lock hold. It has brought us to the brink of annexation and the precipice of PA financial collapse. It is not a question of trying harder, of resuming negotiations. More of the same guarantees further deterioration, it is a failure of learning, politics, and imagination.

Much ink has been spilled over the years on the imminent death of the Oslo Accords and the MEPP. Yet, the PLO/PA (Palestine Liberation Organisation/Palestinian Authority) has been incapable of shifting strategy, trapped in being the collaborator in its own domination.

Western powers' support for the "Development for Peace" agenda has contributed to paving the way to the economy of permanent occupation we are in today, where the Palestinian question is transformed from a political one into a humanitarian and security issue to be managed.⁵⁷ International development institutions have continued supporting a system that inflates limited Palestinian self-rule and that increasingly fails to acknowledge the occupation and settler-colonialism as the primary context of their intervention and as the main factors driving Palestinian vulnerability.⁵⁸ As the sociologist Sbeih Sbeih has been

⁵⁷ Read notably Twafic Hadad's work: *Palestine Ltd.: Neoliberalism and Nationalism in the Occupied Territory*, London, I.B. Tauris and Center for Palestine Studies, London Middle East Institute, 2016.

⁵⁸ [Donor Aid Effectiveness and Do No Harm in the Occupied Palestinian Territories An Oral and Document Analysis of Western Donor perceptions of development and peacebuilding in their Palestinian aid programming](#), Academia,

pointing out for years, this discourse “presents development in the Occupied Territories, just like in other countries, as a ‘universal’ humanitarian project, based on a set of technical measures, including economic, and implicitly located “outside the political debate”. Such a neoliberal representation of the social world conceives the political sphere as serving the market economy. As a result, the role of technocrats is idealised unlike any national political reading or claim to struggle for liberation”.⁵⁹

From the European side, a series of factors have worried Brussels⁶⁰ and explain why the EU and liberal European countries keep mouthing the same refrain, putting human rights and people’s aspirations as lower priorities than short-term “security” and “stability” in the MENA region, including Palestine: the failures of EU policies to support popular aspirations following the 2011 “Arab Spring” and the ensuing crises; the alignment with American policies post 9/11, particularly the “war on terror” and how this affects its relations with Hamas-ruled Gaza; and the repercussions of regional turmoil inside the EU, such as the arrival of migrants and asylum seekers, and terrorist attacks. These factors also contributed to the rise of the populist nationalist right and far-right, which is largely antagonistic to Palestinians, further dividing EU foreign policymaking and blocking any effort to hold Israel accountable.

A process based on false premises
that are increasing diplomatic cognitive dissonance

All fundamental considerations which must underpin a just and peaceful future – freedom, equal rights and justice – have been subordinate to the advancement of a “process” that has been based on inherently flawed assumptions.

J. Wildeman, “Donor Aid Effectiveness and Do No Harm in the Occupied Palestinian Territories”, 2018.

⁵⁹ Collective development projects in Palestine: Propagation of the neoliberal vulgate and normalisation of domination, Academia.

⁶⁰ J. Dempsey, *Judy Asks: Is the EU Putting Stabilization Before Human Rights?*, Judy Dempsey’s Strategic Europe, Carnegie Europe, 10 January 2018.

First, the Oslo narrative has mainstreamed the ideas that this is a “conflict” between two parties on equal footing, two competing national narratives that can reach compromise through negotiations. Second, that Israel is in “good faith” in striving towards a two-state solution and that the two-state solution is the “only solution agreed by both parties”. On the first assumption, in a political process born out of a dire asymmetry of power between Israel and the PLO, the absence of pressure on Israel to make concessions, the lack of conditionalities on its diplomatic relations, and impunity for its colonial enterprise renders any perspective of meaningful negotiations chimeric. This bitter conclusion was already expressed almost 10 years ago by a Palestinian negotiator who leaked negotiation papers in the latest round of negotiations calling them “a deceptive farce, whereby biased terms were unilaterally imposed by Israel and systematically endorsed by the U.S. and EU capitals”.⁶¹

Regarding the second assumption, there isn’t in fact any written document where Israel ever recognised the right of Palestinians to self-determination, or to a state of their own. In the Oslo Agreements,⁶² the PLO recognised Israel while Israel only recognised the PLO as the “legitimate representative of the Palestinian people”.

From the Allon Plan (1967), Drobles Plan (1978)⁶³ to Yitzhak Rabin, who is still commonly seen as the leader who could have made it happen, Israeli leaders have long envisaged a limited Palestinian autonomy and not a two-state solution based on the 4 June 1967 borders⁶⁴ that would enable an independent

⁶¹ Z. Clot, “Palestine Papers: Why I blew the whistle”, *Al Jazeera*, 14 May 2011.

⁶² Yasser Arafat Foundation, *PLO-Israel mutual Recognition – Israel letter (1993)*, 9 September 1993.

⁶³ Y. Shaul, “Trump’s Middle East Peace Plan Isn’t New. It Plagiarized a 40-Year-Old Israeli Initiative”, *Foreign Policy*, 11 February 2020.

⁶⁴ A. Iraqi, “The myth of Rabin the peacemaker”, *+972 Magazine*, 27 September 2020.

Palestinian sovereign state. Rabin's last speech to the Knesset⁶⁵ to ratify the Oslo II agreement is clear in that regard, envisioning "less than a state" for Palestinians, consolidating settlements and annexing Jerusalem.

Israeli leaders have continuously paid lip service to the two-state solution and peace process for the sake of diplomacy, while successive plans and decisions have belied them. For that, they have repeatedly used a tactic of "crying wolf", announcing policies and plans that put the international community on high alert, prompting warnings and condemnations, only so Israel can then announce the freezing of such plans, appearing to make concessions and "preserving the status quo" while continuing to create facts on the grounds and entrench an apartheid reality at no cost. This was the case with the signing of the Oslo Accords, the unilateral withdrawal from Gaza, and the latest debate on annexation.⁶⁶ Such a strategy has increased successive Israeli governments' contempt for the international community's involvement and rhetoric.

Today, European and liberal countries in general are facing this cognitive dissonance head on: For them, giving up on the current paradigm without a solid and easily-identifiable alternative for "conflict resolution" could make room for the dangerous paradigm shift of "peace for peace" and normalisation of apartheid promoted by Israel and its allies, one where human rights and international law are not part of the equation at all.

On the other hand, they seem afraid of being left out of a diplomatic momentum, thus increasing their geopolitical irrelevance. The welcoming and positive attitude towards the accords, the meeting of Israeli and Emirati Foreign Ministers in Berlin⁶⁷ and the calls to reinstate the EU-Israeli Association Council⁶⁸ are all disturbing signals in this regard. Exiting such

⁶⁵ Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *PM Rabin in Knesset- Ratification of Interim Agreement*, 5 October 1995.

⁶⁶ H. El-Ad, "Waiting for Annexation", *The American Prospect*, 16 July 2020.

⁶⁷ Federal Foreign Office, *A historic meeting in Berlin*, 6 October 2020.

⁶⁸ N. Landau, "With Annexation Suspended, EU States Propose Reinstating

a dilemma requires political confrontation that no Western country is currently interested in prioritising, while failing to do so will continue encouraging further erosion of international norms and the rise of ethno-nationalist supremacy.

The Palestinian Establishment Trapped on All Sides

The democratic deficit

The current Palestinian establishment, the Palestinian Authority and PLO, in addition to Hamas in Gaza, has continued to be dramatically weakened by the Covid-19 crisis and related Israeli policies and geopolitical developments. The Palestinian national movement and its representatives is more than ever divided, corrupt and disconnected from the people.

The PA is perceived as largely corrupt and repressive;⁶⁹ more than through the mismanagement of funds, through the inherent neo-patrimonialism of the PA's structure. Most people do not trust the leadership, don't identify with the existing factions (mainly Hamas and Fatah) and would like to see the President resign.⁷⁰ The PA and Hamas in Gaza have never been accountable to the Palestinian people, but rather to international donors and Israel, and are seen by many Palestinians as complicit in perpetuating the current reality.⁷¹ The Covid-19 has further eroded what little public trust remained in the PA and Hamas to manage civil affairs in the limited territory they control, notably because of the economic consequences and the deepening financial crisis.

Israel Association Council After Eight Years", *Haaretz*, 28 August 2020.

⁶⁹ "Neopatrimonialism, Corruption, and the Palestinian Authority: Pathways to Real Reform", Al-Shabaka, 20 December 2018.

⁷⁰ Latest opinion polls on [Public Opinion Poll No. 77](#), 9-12 September 2020, Policy and Survey Research.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

The security apparatus in both the West Bank and Gaza has built up a record of human rights violations and exacerbated endemic corruption – absorbing more of the PA’s budget than the education, health, and agriculture sectors combined.⁷² On its end, Hamas in Gaza will have difficulties in extracting itself from the international political Islam and Islamism terrorism it is associated with, despite taking its distance from the Muslim Brotherhood and reiterating that it is a national movement.

Israel is carefully engineering a fragile equilibrium for the current reality of permanent occupation and apartheid to remain stable: undermining the PA’s ability to make decisions, while still ensuring it remains afloat. On the one hand, Israel needs the PA to continue managing the Palestinian people under occupation on its behalf, and to pursue a security coordination that is fundamental to Israel’s policy of separation. For example, the Israeli government has lobbied Washington so that funding for the security sector would not be affected by the so-called ATCA (Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act) legislation in the U.S. that has led to cutting all funds to the Palestinian Authority.⁷³ On the other hand, it is continuously weakening and discrediting the PA by maintaining it under strict control, opening and closing the tap as political leverage, notably through withholding tax transfers⁷⁴ or electricity.⁷⁵

In the current international context, Hamas and Fatah have no choice but to work more seriously on unity and to show they are willing to hold elections. The two factions monopolising power met and agreed in September 2020 on a series of steps towards elections in the next six months.⁷⁶ There is still

⁷² F. Quran and T. Mustafa “Palestine and COVID-19: Lessons for Leadership During Times of Crisis”, Al-Shabaka, 10 September 2020.

⁷³ B. Ravid, “Israel asks U.S. to amend law that would cut aid to Palestinian security forces”, *Axios*, 23 January 2017.

⁷⁴ “Israel to withhold millions of dollars in Palestinian funds”, *Al Jazeera*, 17 February 2019.

⁷⁵ “Israeli electric company ends power cuts to West Bank after Palestinians pay debt”, *Reuters*, 22 February 2020.

⁷⁶ “Fatah, Hamas say deal reached on Palestinian elections”, *Al Jazeera*, 24

widespread scepticism about whether these will effectively materialise. More importantly, particularly in an institutional context where power is enacted by presidential decrees, PA or PLO elections alone, would not renew the democratic process, but would instead “prop up a system that does not allow for democratic space and that does not seek to produce a democratic and representative leadership”.⁷⁷

The absence of international strategy of the PLO and Hamas

Today the PLO/PA establishment (including Hamas) is trapped in the Oslo Paradigm and does not have an international strategy anymore. By strengthening the PA against the PLO through state-building, the PA has been wrongly perceived – and perceives itself – as a sovereign State on a level playing field with other nation-states. But the PA lacks all of the attributes of a state necessary to engage in *realpolitik*, and is effectively a colonised administration: no borders, no army, no resources, no leverage and no incentives to offer.

The PA has notably been clinging to the League of Arab States, and a long-eroded Arab position, and has reacted to the latest accords – a logical development of existing informal relations – as if it had been “stabbed in the back”.⁷⁸ Palestinian leaders took old alliances for granted, and Mahmoud Abbas never invested in building the strategic relations that Yasser Arafat built with the help of a handful of advisors. In desperate attempts to find allies, and applying the *realpolitik* logic of neo-authoritarian state rivalry, both Fatah and Hamas pursued rapprochement with Erdogan’s Turkey and Qatar, while also making appeals to Vladimir Putin, but without much to offer in that power game except being tokenised by these major countries.

September 2020.

⁷⁷ Y. Hawari, “Democracy in the West Bank and Gaza: More than Elections”, Al-Shabaka, 19 February 2020.

⁷⁸ “At the leadership meeting, President Abbas says Palestinian issue is not only about annexation”, *Palestine News & Info Agency*, 18 August 2020.

It has also been using the UN as an end and not a mean, but with U.S. veto power at the Security Council this strategy has had a positive but limited impact. Illustrating how low the bar has been set, the UN envoy for the Middle East Peace process has recently stated that he is not even trying to hold Israel accountable, but simply mitigating the effects of the Israeli-dominated reality on the ground, including by giving up on asking Israel to remove the blockade and instead limit itself to avoiding escalations.⁷⁹

The cognitive dissonance between this reality and the rhetoric by the international community and Palestinian leadership to resume negotiations and save the two-state solution has only been made louder by the consequences of the pandemic.

The Israeli Government and Society, Always Further to the Right

Not surprisingly, and given the political parties and leaders Israeli Jews vote for, political trends within Israeli society point to a society drifting further towards ethno-nationalist views⁸⁰ that mirror the paradigms offered by Netanyahu vis-à-vis the Palestinians. The near-absence of violence from the Palestinian side and policies of spatial separation described above has made the status quo comfortable for Israelis, who don't have to acknowledge the structural racism.

The settler movement and the religious nationalist movements, once marginal actors, have taken centre stage in Israeli politics and dominate them together with their powerful allies in Washington, starting with Jared Kushner and David Friedman.

⁷⁹ T. Lazaroff, "Mladenov: UN focus now on avoiding war, less on Israeli-Palestinian talks", *The Jerusalem Post*, 24 September 2020.

⁸⁰ D. Scheindlin, "The right keeps winning in Israel because Israelis are right wing", *+972Magazine*, 19 November 2018.

In a recent poll, half of Israelis supported annexation of the West Bank, while the other half saw annexation as a risk to Israel's diplomacy and relations, as well as a drift towards a "one-state solution" narrative,⁸¹ a risk not worth taking given the comfortable position of the status quo for the Israelis. It was not centred at all on Palestinians, their rights and the apartheid reality. One example was the rhetoric used by the "Commander for Israel" to oppose annexation.⁸²

The state of Israel has been founded on denying Palestinians their national rights, from slogans like "land without a people for a people without a land" to famous statements that hit a nerve, such as former Prime Minister Golda Meir's "there is no such thing as Palestinians". Israel has worked towards creating and maintaining a Jewish majority in the territory it controls with the "demographic equation" at the heart of Israel's policies.⁸³ Through the years, Israel has carefully avoided putting an end to the conflict between giving up control over the land or losing a Jewish demographic majority; the inevitable alternative has been the entrenching of an apartheid regime.

The international developments described above also fortify Israel long-held colonial doctrine where "peace" is understood as breaking the ability of Palestinians to resist Israel's military domination, following the "iron wall" doctrine laid out by the Zionist Ze'ev Jabotinsky as far back as 1923.⁸⁴

Meanwhile, the so-called "peace camp" that had engaged in active dialogue with Palestinians in the 1990s to advance the idea of two separate states has slowly disappeared. The Labour party barely has any seats in the Knesset and cannot be considered "left-wing" anymore. Its leadership has signed off on

⁸¹ Jewish philosophy place, *Annexation Polls (Dablia Scheindlin)*, 4 July 2020.

⁸² H. El-Ad, "What's the Real Purpose of Israel's Annexation Plan?", *Haaretz*, 16 May 2020.

⁸³ Y Shaul, "Annexation aims to cut Palestinians out of Israel's demographic equation", *+972Magazine*, 28 July 2020.

⁸⁴ *The Iron Wall*, Original in Russian, Razsviet, 4.11.1923, Colonisation of Palestine, Agreement with Arabs Impossible at present, Zionism Must Go Forward.

West Bank annexation. The few remaining voices advocating for two-states are represented within the not-less shrinking and divided party Meretz.

Netanyahu is facing opposition, with continuous demonstrations over the last several months, from left-leaning groups to settlers who are taking to the streets to protest his policies, his corruption and mismanagement of the Covid-19 pandemic that has strangled the country's economy.⁸⁵ However, these demonstrations are not questioning the current regime of control over millions of Palestinians, and not many Palestinian citizens of Israel are engaged. Should Netanyahu be compelled to resign – although unlikely – he would be replaced by a coalition even further to the right, with a “centre” that has diverging views on some social and family topics concerning Jewish Israelis but with very similar views with regards to Palestinians.

A New Era for a Palestinian Strategy Towards Self-Determination

Trends for revamping a national movement

Against the backdrop of the international and regional trends described above, a new wave of people-led social movements is rising around the world, framed around the values underpinning freedom, justice and equality and rejecting the normalisation of violence and dispossession.

Whether indigenous people struggle for justice and recognition, or fight for democracy and against authoritarianism, people in Sudan, Algeria, Hong Kong, Kashmir, Belarus and the U.S. are proposing radical change and are increasingly realising the convergence of their struggles.

⁸⁵ “Hundreds of anti-Netanyahu protesters march in Tel Aviv despite virus lockdown”, *The Times of Israel*, 9 October 2020.

There is widespread consensus in Palestinian society on the urgent need to completely revamp the national movement and, like these other movements around the world, to centre it around a value-based discourse focusing on justice, dignity and equal rights. Palestinian resistance and mobilisation efforts outside of the PLO-PA realm (e.g. the BDS – Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions – movement) reflect the desire of younger Palestinian generations to unapologetically re-appropriate their identity and narrative, free from the paradigms imposed by Israel and the international community of nation-states and the false equivalences they have created.

Accepting the idea of partition – behind UN resolution 181 of 1947 – and centring liberation around statehood, has driven political rhetoric towards two competing national narratives instead of ending the colonial structures of power. Although the idea of a separate Palestinian nation-state still seems the most attainable solution for many given that “statehood has been the dominant prism through which liberation is imagined”,⁸⁶ 1948 remains the central node that unites all Palestinian experiences in one way or another and that has been at the heart of Palestinian collective political imagination. This explains the growing attention towards the idea of a single democratic binational state as a natural option for ending apartheid. The idea of one democratic state is not new and has been understood quite differently since the early XX century by Zionists, Israelis and Palestinians.⁸⁷ A statehood-centric solution still bears the risk of being abused and redefined if it is not based on the necessary values of equal collective and individual rights – just like Trump has been trying to re-define the two-state solution as one accommodating apartheid.

However, a new direction can only be achieved with efficient consensus-building and renewed political agency and space, which is not being captured by the PLO/PA and main factions.

⁸⁶ Y. Hawari, “Beyond Failed Frameworks: A Re-Imagined Collective Future”, Al-Shabaka, 23 July 2020.

⁸⁷ PhD Itxaso Dominguez.

Calls to reclaim the PLO⁸⁸ are multiplying, particularly from Palestinians in exile⁸⁹ who have been completely disfranchised from the national project by the Oslo Accords. The role of the Palestinians in exile (the diaspora), particularly younger generations, is very important in reclaiming the political imagination of Palestinians as a whole.

In the U.S., the Palestinian rights movement, increasingly led by Palestinian-Americans, has had a growing ability to influence the debate over U.S.-Israel relations. While the movement cannot yet claim a significant weight in the power balance, it has been able to start breaking the long bipartisan consensus on Israel.⁹⁰

The Covid-19 crisis has also shown that leadership can still emerge within Palestine from local communities organising when people can't rely on the PA. Palestinian capacity for steadfastness (*sumood* in Arabic) is alive, despite the depletion of resources and fragmentation as a result of the Israeli regime.⁹¹ This was the case for example in East Jerusalem, which while neglected by the Israeli municipality of Jerusalem and where the PA is not allowed to intervene,⁹² has been able to build nostalgia of the late 1980's, when the Palestinian political fabric successfully experienced grassroots social organising, strengthening the legitimacy to the PLO.⁹³

Yet such needed movements and initiatives still lack organisation and convergence. Palestinians are fragmented and need to acquire political agency and a conducive political space.

⁸⁸ N. Ali, M. Fatafta, D. El Kurd, F. Quran, and B. Shobaki, "Reclaiming The PLO, Re-Engaging Youth", Al-Shabaka, 13 August 2020.

⁸⁹ K. Hawwash, "Why we need elections to the Palestinian National Council", *Middle East Eye*, 23 June 2020.

⁹⁰ "As AOC cancels Rabin event, Palestine movement finds new clout in Washington", *+972Magazine*, 26 September 2020.

⁹¹ F. Quran and T. Mustafa, "Palestine and COVID-19: Lessons for Leadership During Times of Crisis", Al-Shabaka, 10 September 2020.

⁹² D. Kuttab, "Jerusalem alliance fills gap in coronavirus awareness", *Al-Monitor*, 18 March 2020.

⁹³ L. Tabar, *People's Power: Lessons from the First Intifada*, Center for Development Studies and Birzeit University, April 2013.

Palestinians have grown suspicious of all political projects, which are often perceived as co-opted by Israel or Western countries, and have difficulties in trusting the idea of political representation, in light of the strategic failures of the past century and the toxic political culture entrenched by the Oslo accords. The heightening of the PA's neo-authoritarian features and the neo-liberal Oslo infrastructure described above remain important obstacles to enabling political renewal. Hence the urgency to engage differently.

Jewish-Palestinian co-resistance against the system

A noteworthy evolution comes from the growing rallying of Jewish groups in co-resisting oppression alongside Palestinians, by centring Palestinian freedom as the core to a brighter future for both peoples. Such co-resistance is also based on values and rights before political framings of separation and "peacebuilding". They are interacting, yet taking a different approach and calling for more radical change than the groups more traditionally associated with "peace" inherited from Oslo, which are defending "people-to-people" programmes and an agenda confined within the Oslo-MEPP paradigm.

In Israel, human rights organisations like B'Tselem, Gisha, Breaking the Silence and a few others have been at the forefront of this evolution, but remain marginal in the political landscape. They are often considered "traitors" within Israeli society – and indeed the government has helped propagate this smear, while passing laws to limit their room to manoeuvre.⁹⁴ Even more significant is the political evolution of the Jewish diaspora in the United States, which has been openly questioning Israel's policies and reframing a solution beyond the Oslo Paradigm, all in a context of growing attacks by anti-human rights pro-Israel lobby groups against certain Democratic candidates.⁹⁵

⁹⁴ A. Jamal, *The Rise of "Bad Civil Society" in Israel*, SWP Comment, SWP German Institute for International and Security Affairs, January 2018.

⁹⁵ D. Marans, "[Israel Hawks Are Spending Big To Unseat Minnesota Rep. Ilhan](#)

This is the case of groups such as Jewish Voices for Peace and If Not Now. In this regard, it is worth noting that in the lead-up to the U.S. presidential election polls show that a majority of Israelis would prefer a Trump presidency⁹⁶ while American Jewish citizens are more likely to support Biden.⁹⁷

The other related significant trend in Israeli politics is the organising of Palestinian citizens of Israel who have won between 13 to 15 seats at the Knesset in recent elections. The parties forming the “Joint List” unapologetically defend Palestinian-Arab national rights within the state of Israel and are now the only ones in the Knesset advocating for the idea of a fully democratic state with equal rights within the current borders of Israel. These political actors – including Ayman Odeh and Ahmad Tibi – have regular contacts and interactions with Palestinians in the West Bank and will be a growing force in redefining the Palestinian polity beyond the currently imposed institutional frameworks.

Conclusion - The Way Forward

What we see taking place in the territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River is a microcosm of international trends where structural violence is trivialised, the smearing and targeting journalists or human rights defenders is accelerating, where social repression at home, commoditisation of peoples’ data and ethno-nationalist policies are justified in the name of security and peace.

In the world order, currently advanced by the U.S., Israel and their neo-authoritarian allies, international law and human rights are no longer the reference points for the rules of

Omar”, *HuffPost*, 21 July 2020.

⁹⁶ C. Levine, “Majority of Israelis prefer Donald Trump over Joe Biden – poll”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 October 2020.

⁹⁷ S.Chemla, “70% of Jewish Americans support Joe Biden - new poll”, *The Jerusalem Post*, 14 October 2020.

engagement and the Palestinian cause is intentionally relegated to a marginal political agenda.

The one-state reality of an apartheid regime in the territory between the Mediterranean sea and the Jordan river will be entrenched, and will continue to increase the interdependence of both Israelis and Palestinians in spaces marked by structural and institutionalised discrimination and domination. Instead of further separating Jewish-Israelis and Palestinians, it is increasing their interdependence, creating a fault line where the only two options are supporting apartheid or ending it. A growing number of younger Palestinians already realise the need to build a new national project based on ending settler colonialism and apartheid rather than focusing on statehood to achieve self-determination.

The resurgence of anti-racist social justice movements and indigenous people's struggles around the world is unnerving many of the countries headed by authoritarian and neo-authoritarians leaders. Such movements create opportunities to disrupt domestic repression, while new forms of solidarity and political influence emerge from people's collectives.

The international community has been anticipating tipping points in a wait-and-see approach as if it were Waiting for Godot: the next peace conference, a settlement freeze, the nuclear deal with Iran, the announcement of Trump's "deal of the Century", the next Israeli elections, the halt of *de jure* annexation... None of these moments have shifted Israel's trajectory. It is likely that a Biden administration in the U.S. will not significantly reverse the course of events, and at best abandon some of the worst Trump's policies.

For European and democratic states around the world who hold significant leverage – be it financial or diplomatic – in Israel-Palestine, there is an urgent need to end the cognitive dissonance between the empty rhetoric of the Oslo-configured MEPP – including its peace-building and state-building frameworks – and the dire reality of injustice and dispossession on the ground. Such dissonance has only encouraged cost-free colonisation.

Such a shift requires diplomatic courage to introduce confrontation and enable true accountability; failing to do so will lead to effectively normalising violence and apartheid. Countries must be open to revisiting the whole contemporary idea of partition, by first and foremost centring justice, freedom and equal rights for both Israelis and Palestinians as a base for supporting any viable political path.

I want to end with this powerful thought written recently by Arundathi Roy:

As we pass through this portal into another kind of world, we will have to ask ourselves what we want to take with us and what we will leave behind. We may not always have a choice – but not thinking about it will not be an option. And in order to think about it, we need an even deeper understanding of the world gone by, of the devastation we have caused to our planet and the deep injustice between fellow human beings that we have come to accept.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ A. Roy, “[What Lies Ahead?](#)”, *The Paris Review*, 15 September 2020.

About the Authors

Inès Abdel Razek is the Advocacy Director of the Palestine Institute for Public Diplomacy, a Palestinian independent organisation based in Ramallah. Prior to joining the PIPD in 2019, she has held advisory positions to high-level diplomats and officials of the Union for the Mediterranean in Barcelona, the UN Environment Programme in Nairobi and the Palestinian Prime Minister's Office in Ramallah, mainly working on multilateral governance and development cooperation policies. She is also a policy member at the think-tank Al-Shabaka and an Advisory board member of the social enterprise BuildPalestine. Inès Abdel Razek holds a Master's degree in Public Affairs from Sciences-Po, Paris.

Ivan Bocharov is Referent at the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). He studies at Lomonosov Moscow State University (LMSU), Faculty of History. Besides, he lectures at the School of the Young Historian at LMSU. Ivan Bocharov is the author of articles on political and economic processes in the Middle East and North Africa, especially on the situation in Egypt and Libyan conflict. The last book he took part in is *Economic Growth in the East: Trends, Unevenness, Inequality in Social Development*, devoted to the problems of socio-economic development in the Eastern countries.

Andrey Chuprygin is a Senior Lecturer at the Faculty of World Economy and International Affairs, School of Asian Studies at National Research University Higher School of Economics in Moscow, where he has taught since 2012. He is also an expert with the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC), and a Senior Fellow with the Center for Civilizational Studies of Eastern Countries. After graduating in 1974 from the Military Institute for Foreign Languages in Moscow, he spent nearly 17 years in the Middle East with tours of duty in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and several other countries. He has also worked in the private sector as a risk consultant for Gazprom in the Central Asian and Middle Eastern regions.

Elena Corradi is a research assistant at ISPI for the Migration Programme. Her research focuses on migration from Africa to Europe, in particular on today's flows and their projections in the medium-run, European migration governance and integration policies. Furthermore, she was data co-supervisor for the 2019 and 2020 ISPI/Treccani Geopolitical Atlas.

Andrey Kortunov is director general of the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). He holds a PhD in History, and he completed internships at the Soviet embassies in London and Washington, and at the Permanent Delegation of the USSR to the UN. In 1982-1995, He held various positions in the Institute for U.S. and Canada Studies, including Deputy Director. He taught at universities around the world, including the University of California, Berkeley. In addition, he led several public organisations involved in higher education, social sciences and social development. Since 2011, Dr Kortunov has been the Director General of RIAC. He is a member of expert and supervisory committees and boards of trustees of several Russian and international organisations. His academic interests include contemporary international relations and Russian foreign policy.

Chiara Lovotti is an Associate Research Fellow at the Middle East and North Africa Centre at ISPI. She previously was a Research Assistant at the Catholic University of Louvain-la-Neuve. Her research interests include socio-political transformations in the Middle East, relations between Middle-Eastern countries and Russia, and Russian foreign policy toward the area. She is also a PhD candidate at the faculty of History at the Alma Mater Studiorum University of Bologna and a Scholar of the Europaeum Programme run by the University of Oxford. She holds a Master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies at the Postgraduate School of Economics and International Relations, Milan, and has been a visiting student at the Lomonosov Moscow State University, and the Ahlan School of Arabic in Amman. She recently co-edited a Routledge book titled *Russia in the Middle East and North Africa. Continuity and Change*.

Paolo Magri is Executive Vice President of ISPI and Professor of International Relations at Bocconi University. He is member of the Strategic Committee of the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, member of the Europe Policy Group of the World Economic Forum (Davos) and member of the Board of Directors of the Italy-China Foundation. He is also member of the Scientific Committees of the Elcano Royal Institute, the Center of Excellence for Stability Police Units (CoESPU) and of the Military Center for Strategic Studies (Ce.Mi.S.S.). Prof. Magri is a regular speaker, writer and commentator to various media outlets on global issues, U.S. foreign policy, Iran and the Middle East. His latest books include *Il marketing del terrore* (with Monica Maggioni, 2016); *Il mondo di Obama. 2008-2016* (2016); *Il mondo secondo Trump* (2017); *Post-vote Iran. Giving Engagement a Chance* (with Annalisa Perteghella, 2017); and *Four Years of Trump. The US and the World* (with M. Del Pero, 2020).

Ruslan Mamedov holds a position of MENA Program Manager at the Russian International Affairs Council (RIAC). His scientific interests are: Russian foreign policy in the MENA region; regional security system; internal political process in Iraq. He is a participant and speaker at a number of international conferences and workshops and regularly comments for the Russian and international media. Ruslan Mamedov holds a Master's degree in Regional Studies.

Matteo Villa is a research fellow at ISPI and coordinates the Migration Programme. He holds a PhD in Comparative Politics from the University of Milan and specialises in quantitative analysis. For ISPI, he has recently edited the monograph *The Future of Migration to Europe* (2019).

