



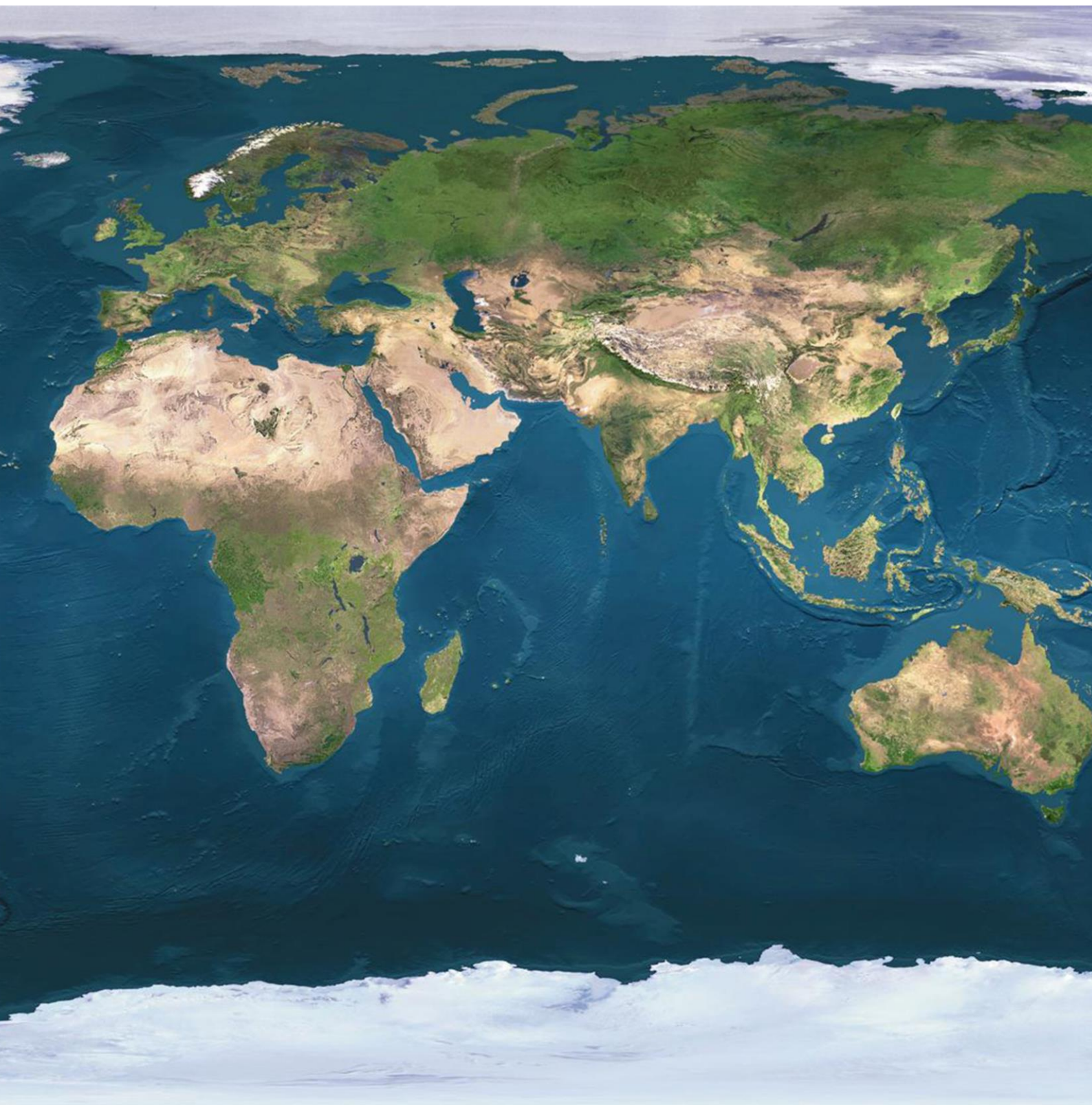
# Osservatorio Strategico

2022

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# **Osservatorio Strategico 2022 Issue 3**



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YEAR XXIV ISSUE 3 - 2022

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## Osservatorio Strategico 2022

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# **Osservatorio Strategico**

## **Part One**



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## **The Re-Conceptualization of the Libyan National Reconciliation Process: Risks and Opportunities**

### **Libya seeking a difficult national reconciliation**

On June 22, the term of the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU) led by Mohammed Dbeibeh formally expired without having completed the main objective of its mandate: to lead Libya to elections. Appointed on March 15, 2021, as part of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF), the GNU was created as an interim government that was supposed to lead the country to their first unified elections since the outbreak of civil war, set for December 24, 2021, as the last and most relevant act in a difficult national reconciliation process. The inability of the different Libyan factions to agree on the organization of legislative and presidential elections has led to a new phase of instability and political polarization in the country. Moreover, the failure to organize the elections and the formal expiration of the GNU's mandate was not followed by an actual termination of the mandate of Dbeibeh, who to this day continues to rule in Tripoli, also thanks to the unaffected international support. In this regard, two pronouncements should be highlighted. On one hand, that of the spokesman of the UN Secretary General, who stated that the UN would consider Dbeibeh's mandate ended only after elections are held (Al Harathy, 2022). On the other, a joint communiqué by Italy, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States issued just hours later, in which the five Western countries took a similar position (MAECI, 2022).

In this context comes a new dynamic of political-institutional fragmentation caused by the decision of the House of Representatives, the Tobruk-based parliament of the eastern part of the country, to appoint a second parallel government as a response to the GNU's failure to call elections. Thus, the new Government of National Stability (GNS) was appointed on February 10, headed by Fathi Bashagha<sup>1</sup>. Since his appointment, and even more forcefully since June 22, Bashagha has attempted to present himself as the only legitimate Libyan government, even though he received little success internationally. Only Russia officially recognizes the GNS. Nevertheless, in addition to distancing the prospect of real national reconciliation, in the medium term the political competition triggered by the co-existence of two executive risks turning into yet another round of military confrontation in the country that plunged into chaos since the ousting of the Qaddafi regime in 2011.

To better understand the causes of the current turbulent phase Libya is experiencing, it is necessary to trace its roots to the national reconciliation process inaugurated with the January 2020 Berlin conference (German Federal Government, 2020)<sup>2</sup>. The one currently underway represents the second peace process launched to resolve the Libyan crisis, following the one experienced with the signing of the 2015 Skhirat Agreements and the subsequent formation of the Government of National Accord (GNA) led by Al-Sarraj. (UNSMIL, 2015). The current reconciliation process began due to the failure of the military campaign of the Libyan National Army (LNA) led by Khalifa Haftar, which as of April 4, 2019 had attempted to oust the GNA by seizing control of Tripoli militarily<sup>3</sup>. The failure of the offensive was followed by the ceasefire signed on August 21, 2020, which became

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<sup>1</sup> Fathi Bashagha is one of Misrata's leading political figures. An historical opponent of the Haftar-led advance towards Tripoli and now apparently on the same side as premier of the government supported by the same Libyan factions in Cyrenaica. Between 2018 and 2021, Bashagha also served as interior minister of the Al Sarraj-led Government of National Accord (GNA). Bashagha is considered a personality close to Turkey, which nevertheless is among the main sponsors, political and military, of the GNU.

<sup>2</sup> This was followed by a second Berlin Conference, held on June 23, 2021 (German Federal Foreign Office, 2021)

<sup>3</sup> It is worth highlighting how, since Haftar's 2019-2020 military campaign, the Libyan civil war has explicitly turned into a *proxy war*, with several countries either supporting the LNA – Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Russia above all – or GNA – Turkey most prominently.

permanent the following October 24. At the Berlin conference, there was not a simple new attempt of initiating a national reconciliation process. Rather, it aimed to shape a real “re-conceptualization” of the peace process, with the goal of building a different negotiation strategy. The heart of this lies in the “unravelling” of the peace process, divided into different parts, which are autonomous from each other: the political, constitutional-institutional and military are the main ones. In addition, there is also an economic track which is more appropriate to analyze separately, as it is a level able to influence the previous three. The “unravelling” into separate dimensions, although within a holistic strategy coordinated from above by the United Nations, is justified by the desire to not block the peace process if obstacles become evident in any of the indicated dimensions.

On the political level, the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum was inaugurated, from which emerged the GNU led by Dbeibeh, tasked with leading the country to elections<sup>4</sup>. On the constitutional-institutional level, Libya’s two parliaments – the Tripoli-based High Council of State and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives – were given the task of amending or, alternatively, presenting a new constitutional draft. Finally, on the military side, a 5+5 Joint Military Committee (JMC) – with five officers appointed by the GNA and five appointed by the LNA – was created with several tasks including: cease-fire monitoring; expulsion of mercenaries from the Libyan soil and demobilization and disarmament of militias. The disarticulation of the peace process into separate tracks is proving to present opportunities but also risks. To understand them, it is useful to proceed to an analysis of each of the dimensions recalled.

### **A three-dimensional process: political, constitutional and military**

It is on the political level that the most worrying backward steps have been taken in recent months. The unity of purpose between the High Council of State and the House of Representatives, which had converged on a single government of national unity, the GNU led by Dbeibeh, broke down on February 10, 2022 (Zaptia, 2022a). On that date, the Cyrenaic parliament unanimously appointed Fathi Bashagha as the new premier, deeming the GNU’s mandate to have expired as early as December 24, 2021, in the face of the impossibility of holding elections. The emergence of the GNS has in fact recreated a scenario of division between two different executives in Libya (Saini Fasanotti, 2022). In this context, it should be noted that the UN, represented by the Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Libya (SASG) Stephanie Williams, has taken a wait-and-see position to avoid further escalation, declaring that the UN is not in the business of recognizing governments but only states. This position did not fully disqualify the GNS, which is viewed as an interlocutor.

On March 1, Fathi Bashagha received the confidence of the House of Representatives and was sworn in on March 13. Faced with this development, the internationally recognized premier Dbeibeh declared that he would not recognize the vote of the Cyrenaic parliament, calling for the dissolution of the GNS. The following months were marked by a crescendo of tension between the two executives. Unable to take office in Tripoli, the GNS met on April 21 in Sebha, capital of Libya’s southern region of Fezzan. There, Bashagha announced the beginning of “a new era in Libya, of reforms and reconstruction, redistribution of wealth and justice” (Reuters, 2022). Although making appeals for the Dbeibeh government’s withdrawal from Tripoli, for several weeks the Bashagha did not attempt to force his hand, avoiding taking office in Tripoli. A shrewd course of action that can be explained as a way to avoid the mistakes made earlier by Haftar’s LNA, which had tried to take over the Libyan capital militarily. The scenario was only reversed on May 17. In the early morning hours, Bashagha attempted to take over Tripoli before being pushed back by militias loyal to the GNU (Zaptia, 2022b). The Cyrenaic premier, who called his attempt a “peaceful” one supported by the people, staged a hybrid operation, entering the capital without firing a shot but trying to buy the trust

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4 Initially, GNU had gained the confidence of the Cyrenaic parliament, the House of Representatives.



of militias loyal to Dbeibeh (Bashagha, 2022). It was on that date that the most delicate moment in the growing political polarization between the two opposing governments occurred, which threatened to erupt into a military confrontation. Faced with blatant failure, Bashagha was forced to take shelter in the city of Sirte, which has been the new provisional headquarters of the GNS since June 1. Over the past month, the GNS has continued to operate as a shadow government, albeit aiming for a more accommodating and diplomatic strategy even regarding international actors. On June 15, the House of Representatives voted favorably on the budget bill submitted by the GNS (Assad, 2022a). A few days later, Bashagha presented a new road map for recovery and stability (Assad, 2022b).

While there have been major setbacks on the political level, there have been more encouraging developments on the constitutional-institutional front. Confirming how the strategy of separate tracks is enabling advances on the constitutional level even in the face of problems on the political one. As of April 13, a joint committee under the auspices of UNSMIL formed by representatives of the High Council of State and the House of Representatives met in Cairo. The goal was to find a compromise on the mechanism on how to proceed with the elections, hopefully by the end of 2022 (there is no formal deadline) and on the constitutional draft. In this case, there were two alternatives: drafting a new provisional constitutional declaration or approving the constitutional draft prepared in 2017 by the Constituent Assembly. However, the latter option would require an additional step, namely a popular referendum with a quorum of 50+1 (Agenzia nova, 2022a). A total of three rounds of negotiations were held (April, May, June) coordinated by SASG Williams that concluded on June 20 with an agreement on a broad constitutional draft (UNSMIL, 2022a; UNSMIL, 2022b; UNSMIL; 2022c). However, disagreements remained at the end of the Cairo talks, particularly on the regulation of the pre-election transitional period. In this regard, the SASG convened a final negotiation in Geneva, restricted to the presidents of the two Libyan parliaments, Khaled Al Mishri (High Council of State) and Aguila Saleh (House of Representatives), which has not yet concluded.

The third dimension to be monitored is military, however, there are no noteworthy new developments on this front. Although increased political fragmentation, the permanent truce reached in October 2021 seems to be holding, despite sporadic clashes and incidents of violence. In early April, for example, there were major clashes between opposing militias in the town of Zawiya, west of Tripoli. A scenario that replayed itself again in early May (Agenzia Nova, 2022b; Agenzia Nova, 2022c). Other major military confrontations occurred in the Janzour area, Tripoli, in mid-May and on the night of June 10-11 in the Libyan capital (UNSMIL, 2022d; UNSMIL; 2022e). In general, looking at this trend the reasons for de-escalation seem to hold up. It should be noted that at this stage most of the regional and extra-regional actors, who had reignited tensions in the past, seem interested in de-escalation in Libya as much as in the broader region, as well. Military and nonmilitary concerns arising from Russian aggression in Ukraine are occupying the international agenda of countries such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey. Cairo, once the top sponsor of Haftar's military campaign, is carving out a relevant mediation role at this stage. For its part, Ankara, Tripoli's main military supporter, has been willing to establish dialogue with the Bashagha government, as evidenced by the visit of the GNS foreign minister to Turkey on May 10. If on the battlefield the truce holds, the biggest obstacles have been evident on the military diplomacy front. Indeed, in April there had been a suspension of JMC meetings due to the withdrawal of the five members appointed by the LNA (Zaptia, 2022c). The move could be interpreted as a way to put pressure on Dbeibeh by backing Bashagha's attempt to establish himself in Tripoli. After some informal meetings on the sidelines of international talks held in Spain, Switzerland, and Morocco, the JMC returned to meet officially in early June, first in Tunisia and then in Cairo, in coordination with meetings of the Joint Constitutional Committee.

### **The economic leverage of oil and the renewed social tension**

Unlike the three tracks just presented, the economic part deserves to be analyzed on its own, since it is a dimension of the negotiations that influences all the others. Moreover, as in the past, it is in the economic, more specifically the energetic area where true motives of come to light. Since April, blockades at several oil sites have again increased, a litmus test of rising tensions in the country. There are two reasons behind the temporary closure of oil fields. Sometimes they are caused by technical reasons: the deterioration of the security situation in the field area, which prevents the smooth running of the extraction cycle, or damage to the site caused by armed clashes. On other occasions it is a political decision by the authority controlling the territory in which the site lies. This was the case of the extensive disruption decided by Haftar in the territories under LNA control during the months of his offensive on Tripoli. More generally, since the outbreak of the civil war, the issue of oil revenues has been one of the most divisive issues. With the return of the two-government scenario, the Libyan energy sector has once again become the main victim of cross vetoes.

Both the GNU and GNS claim that they are entitled to control the oil revenues deposited in the accounts of the National Oil Corporation (NOC), Libya's national oil company. As of April, Bashagha ordered the closure of oil sites under his control to prevent the transfer of revenues to the government in Tripoli (International Crisis Group, 2022). In addition to that, on April 28, Bashagha asked Mustafa Sanallah, head of the NOC, to stop the transfer of money to the GNU. A prolonged interruption of the flow of money into state accounts could be the death blow to Libya's already weak economy since public salaries and subsidies are funded with that money. In recent weeks, moreover, given the volatility of the scenario, the NOC has returned to raising the declaration of force majeure by which it effectively avoids getting sanctioned, where it is forced to temporarily shut down oil fields for the aforementioned reasons.

At this stage, U.S. diplomats are the most active in trying to resolve the impasse. The U.S. proposal still on the table partly traces the mechanism behind the agreement that had resolved the dispute between the Al Sarraj government and Haftar in 2020. The idea is to sign an interim financial agreement between GNU and GNS that could create a system called Mechanism for Short-Term Financial, Economic and Energy Dependability (US Embassy in Libya, 2022). Under this proposal, oil rents would be deposited in NOC accounts. Only the funds needed to cover public salaries and government subsidies would be transferred monthly to the central bank to be usable by the two executives. However, no agreement has yet been reached on this front.

Overall, political-institutional paralysis and the inability to properly operate the energy sector have led to a sudden rise in social tensions in recent weeks. On the night of July 1 these resulted in the largest popular street demonstrations since 2019. On "Friday of Rage", people took to the street to protest in various urban centers, from Tripoli to Misrata from Tobruk to Benghazi (Libya Review, 2022). The fact that the protests occurred in both Tripolitania and Cyrenaica demonstrates the spontaneity of the demonstrations, which were not maneuvered by one of Libya's political actors, and the consequent questioning of the entire Libyan political establishment, which is accused of obstructing national reconciliation for its own personal gains. The most serious events took place in Tobruk, where mobs stormed the House of Representatives building (UNSMIL, 2022).

### **Final assessments**

The re-conceptualization of the Libyan peace process with the consequent division into different tracks should be supported, as it has shown that it can be a workable strategy. In fact, in the face of obstacles that arose mainly on the political level, the constitutional level has demonstrated that it can produce positive outcomes nonetheless. Furthermore, it is important to continue to avoid instability where one can influence the performance of the others. This is the case with the political

and military levels. The “unravelling” in separated tracks seems to have provided a curb so that the return of a dual executive government would not consequently provoke military escalation between the allied militias of the GNU and GNS. It is realistic to think that the survival of the two opposing governments cannot be resolved except through an advancement in the constitutional and electoral fronts. Therefore, it is appropriate at this stage for Western, and especially European, countries to throw their weight on the constitutional track, without wasting political-diplomatic capital to solve the GNS-GNU dispute. In the latter dimension, on the contrary, it is appropriate to maintain a discrete, though not equidistant, dialogue with both contenders with the sole aim of imposing at a stable status quo. The non-exclusionary stance toward the GNS taken by the UN seems in this sense appropriate. A similar argument can apply to the military track. It is advisable to set the bar of objectives at a modest level, without aspiring in the short term to the achievement of the goals set by the JMC’s “charter”. At this stage, the main goal should remain to support the permanent ceasefire. Ultimately, it seems worthwhile if Italy would implement a strategy that follows the division into its own distinct tracks. On the political and military levels, it seems appropriate to undertake a conservative strategy, setting confidence-building measures aimed solely at freezing the situation. It is on the constitutional level that the grand bargain should be sought.

Internationally, the Russian invasion of Ukraine seems paradoxically to have led to a momentum on the diplomatic dialogue in Libya. Key regional and extra-regional actors who have fueled the transformation of the Libyan conflict from a civil war to a proxy war in recent years, seem to be interested in a regional *détente* at this stage. Concerned about the negative consequences of the conflict still ongoing in Europe, countries such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey have no interest in exacerbating hostilities in the Libyan theater. That is why Italy, and its international partners are called upon to exploit this momentum, which is not destined to last *ad infinitum*. Nevertheless, in the medium term, it should not be ruled out that Russia, which is present with the private military company Wagner on Libyan soil, may attempt an interconnection between the Ukrainian and Libyan theaters, undermining the military ceasefire reached in 2021.

While on the political-diplomatic front, the conflict in Ukraine has opened a greater margin for negotiation in Libya, the effects from the economic-food point of view may be detrimental in the medium term. That is why a multilateral effort is required on this level, which can start from European countries to keep afloat the already precarious economic-social condition of Libya as well as the entire Maghreb. In this regard, on the economic level, an acceleration towards the full operation of the Libyan energy sector is urgent. Therefore, it is recommended that an understanding, or at least a provisional one, be reached among Libyan factions that could defuse the continuous disruptions in domestic oil production. Besides alleviating the Libyan fragile economic condition, such a measure would allow Italy as well as other members of the European Union to exploit Libyan energy sources in their strategy of reduction of the European dependence on Russian supply.

Finally, it is the social dimension that has shown to be the most volatile in recent weeks. After several months, the Libyan people took to the street again to protest against the whole political spectrum, accused of being responsible of its precarious conditions. This development can only make the search for solutions on the different levels, previously described, more urgent.



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## Kenya's presidential election: dynamics, actors, and risks

In a regional landscape characterized by various crises and unresolved matters, the Kenya presidential election on August 9 is central to the area's future stability. Historically, Kenya is a pivotal cog in the Horn of Africa's political balance due to its economic and diplomatic weight. Nairobi's role is even more relevant in the light of regional trends: Ethiopian internal conflict, Sudanese political instability, and violent insurgencies in Somalia. In the past few years, the country has succeeded in limiting the effects of regional instability. However, several warning signs indicate mounting tensions within Kenyan political elites on the eve of the election round. This trend is perilous, considering the ethnic-identity character that political rivalries in Kenya assume during the electoral campaigns. Political leaders are prone to nurture ethnic affiliations to compact their electorate and fragment rival ones. If unchecked, such dynamics can risk escalating into episodes of widespread violence, as in the wake of the 2007 elections. In a context where institutions are still weak, much depends on whether or not the leaders who emerged defeated from the ballot competition will accept the vote's outcome. Domestically, if one of the candidates fails to concede defeat, this would risk stirring up resentment and anger in communities that supported him and would then feel as if they had been betrayed. If this eventuality came true, it would throw entire urban districts and several rural counties into chaos. At the regional level, if the electoral process does not follow a linear course, it could undermine Kenya's ability to play a primary role in the future shape of East Africa.

### 1. The two coalitions

Kenya's presidential elections in August are destined to be one of the African continent's most important political events this year. Over the past two decades, Kenyan ballots have been high-tension events posing challenges to institutions and social cohesion. The country's recent history has been characterized by elections whose results have been much disputed. In some cases, the post-election tensions have escalated into widespread politically and ethnically based violence (Elfvorsson, 2022). The ethnic dimension does not hold centrality in everyday life of Kenyan citizens. However, ethnic-based identities gain increasing relevance in the pre- and post-electoral periods. During the months before the vote, candidates exploit identity politics to mobilize their supporting base and simultaneously try to fragment those of their rivals. However, this practice raises the strain among ethnic groups and individuals who live in the same counties or neighbourhoods in large cities and pits Kenyans against each other. In other words, ethnic tension is prevalent during electoral campaigns in every sphere of society. If uncontrolled, ethnic-based tension can result in outbreaks of violence, as happened in the aftermath of the 2007 elections, when riots left more than 1100 people dead. Ethnically driven violence poses a massive threat to the stability of a country within which more than seventy ethnic groups coexist (Kimani, 2018). The main groups are Kikuyu (21 percent), Luhya (14 percent), Luo (13 percent), and Kalenjin (11 percent) (Faria, 2022). The uncertainty around the upcoming elections is determined by the lack, for the first time, of a kikujo candidate. Therefore, the two political coalitions have been forced to seek new alliances, which are less stable and cross-different ethnic lines. Moreover, the end of current President Uhuru Kenyatta's second term in office makes the upcoming August 9 vote even more hard-fought. The incumbent President, a Kikuyo politician, a few weeks after his 2017 victory, made an unexpected choice that has reshuffled the alliance system of the Kenyan political landscape. Kenyatta, instead of supporting the candidacy of his current deputy William Ruto (Kalenjin), embarked on a path of rapprochement

with his historical rival Raila Odinga (Luo), ratified by a symbolic handshake (2018). Odinga is an old-school political figure who has built a profile as an anti-establishment candidate, representing the most marginalized groups over the decades. Odinga's traditional constituency includes ethnic groups that have been excluded from the country's political and economic power since independence in 1963. The Kikuyo and Kalenjin political elites have de facto ruled Kenya for nearly sixty years. The alliance between the two ethnic groups also determined Kenyatta's two electoral victories (2012 and 2017). Following the handshake with President Kenyatta, which ended the disputes over the 2017 vote that saw them as rivals, the two agreed on a constitutional reform agenda, the so-called Building Bridges Initiative (BBI). The BBI aimed to change the electoral system and enlarge the executive. Prominent in the reform package was overcoming the first-past-the-post system, considered a determinant in the outbreak of post-election protest and violence, in favor of an unclear consociational model (Fabricius, 2021). The passage of the amendments would also increase the number of seats from the current 290 to 360. From the institutional point of view, the BBI provided the establishment of the Prime Minister's office to assist and promote the political direction of the presidency. After a lengthy legal struggle, the Supreme Court blocked the BBI in March (2022). The court declared Kenyatta's actions unlawful, holding that reforms of such impact on the country's political system should be promoted by citizens or their representatives and not by the executive branch. However, the President still maintained the rightness of his actions. According to Kenyatta, implementing the reforms promoted within the BBI framework would have made Kenyan politics more inclusive and plural, reducing conflict nationally and in the most fragmented counties. Conversely, according to his opponents, including Ruto, the reform's purpose was to expand the office market, with seventy new seats that would be used to reward loyal politicians and allow Kenyatta to retain control of political power as Prime Minister (Kiruga, 2020). The mobilization of a segment of civil society has been instrumental to the failure of the BBI. Through a series of denunciations and appeals, several citizens' associations have allowed the issue to become the subject of scrutiny by local courts and the Supreme Court. However, the March court sentence left much dross. Nowadays, Kenya appears even more divided than it was a few months ago. The frictions overlaid an already tense climate, especially between the Kikuyo and Kalenjin. Ties deteriorated following the handshake between Kenyatta and Odinga. The episode highlighted to Ruto's supporters, mostly Kalenjin, that the incumbent President would not honor the power-sharing pact enshrined before the 2012 elections and renewed in 2017. The alliance between the two groups was based on the agreement that in exchange for Kalenjin support for Kenyatta's run for office, the Kikuyo would then support Ruto in the 2022 elections. The breakup of the pact completely changed the Kenyan political landscape and the two political camps. Ruto, officially holding the deputy president position, began campaigning for himself by sharply criticizing executive policies and Kenyatta's tendency to centralize power. In 2021, after leaving President Kenyatta's Jubilee Party (JP), Ruto was invested as the presidential race candidate by the United Democratic Alliance (UDA). In April 2022, he established the Kenya Kwanza (KK), a coalition that includes several Kenyan political movements. The choices made in recent years by the two candidates, Ruto and Odinga, have reshuffled both coalitions and the self-image the two politicians project to their electorate. Despite a long history as a parliament member first and a cabinet minister later, the former seeks to present himself as a sort of outsider. Ruto has created a political platform that aims to be an agent of socio-economic change. The vice president emphasizes solidarity with workers and their problems. On the other side, Odinga leads a broad coalition of twenty-six parties called Azimio la Umoja (ALU). Odinga has built the alliance around his long-standing Orange Democratic Movement (ODM). Among the political movements that support ALU is Kenyatta's JP. Odinga's public image has changed due to his alliance with the outgoing president. The ALU candidate's profile has shifted from a historic anti-establishment politician to a representative of the ruling elites.

## **2. Analysis, evaluation and forecasting**

The electoral contest between Ruto and Odinga will enshrine the victory of the candidate who has managed to mobilize the most coalition support and to win the votes of the Kikuyo population. Traditionally Kenyan politics is not a confrontation between different ideological positions. Instead, the outcome of the vote is determined by how candidates manage to create coalitions. These political coalitions are formed mainly along ethnic lines. The Kenyan electorate, therefore, votes based on ethnic affiliation. As a result, electoral platforms supporting a candidate change from one election to the next. The mechanism is one of the political trade-offs: government posts in exchange for community support. This practice, however, generates rivalries and grudges. For these reasons, elections in Kenya are always associated with fears of interethnic violence and conflict. Ethnicity is a factor that is likely to generate instability, as electoral violence also follows ethnic identity lines. Both candidates and Kenyatta, who is also campaigning for Odinga, extensively use aggressive rhetoric against rivals. In many cases, they also explicitly incite violence. The divisive nature of the elections, coupled with the leaders' incendiary speeches and media campaigns, worry international observers and the National Cohesion & Integration Commission (NCIC). The NCIC was established in 2008 following the post-election violence to promote national identity and cohesion. Its duties also include mitigating ethno-political competition and ethnically motivated violence and acting as an internal oversight body. For a few months, the NCIC has warned Kenyan political components, pointing out that many dynamics similar to those preceding the 2007 elections are in place. Moreover, several underlying causes that generated the violence in 2007 are still present at the structural level. While it is very complicated to distinguish the ethnic identity component from political affiliations, the rift between Kenyatta and Ruto has a purely political and ethnic dimension overlapping. From a political stance, the coalition that facilitated Kenyatta's two electoral victories has been through five years of infighting marked by progressive crumbling. A series of scandals and anti-corruption campaigns promoted by the President affected the coalition and prominent names close to his deputy Ruto. Among the most influential political figures arrested in recent years was Henry Rotich, Minister of Finance and Ruto's trusted man. Rotich, like other executive members, was arrested on charges of attempted fraud, abuse of office, and financial misconduct as part of a broader investigation known as the phantom dams scandal (Niba, 2019). From the perspective of inter-ethnic balances, the novel element compared to the past is the absence of a Kikuyo candidate. As a result, the electoral market now involves primarily the country's largest and historically most powerful ethnic group. The Kalenjin see the President's support for Odinga as a betrayal to Ruto as to themselves, after they supported Kenyatta in the past. There is a concern that many Kalenjin will feel betrayed by the election results and they will refuse to accept them. Thus, , if the Kikuyos follow Kenyatta's voting directions and give their preference to Odinga, there is a risk of violent repercussions, as was the case in 2007. This chance is noticeably higher in areas where communities belonging to either ethnic groups live. Rural counties such as Meru and Laikipia are observed with particular attention as they are considered high-risk locations for interethnic violence. More than in other parts of the country, ethnic tensions are fueled by socioeconomic issues in these areas. The effects of global warming have exacerbated competition for access to resources, triggering disputes between farmers and pastoralists, as in other parts of the African continent. As for the electoral competition, however, it is worth pointing out that the Kikuyos do not constitute a monolithic bloc nor present a shared political stance. Many criticize the outgoing President's choices regarding his political agenda and the decision to ally with Odinga. Furthermore, the Kikuyos' historical hatred for the Luo group renders Odinga a candidate hardly acceptable. Therefore, much will depend on the group's loyalty to Kenyatta. For this reason, Ruto is trying to rally some Kikuyo representatives against Kenyatta. The Vice President stressed that many of the President's choices

have come at the expense of the interests of farmers and small business entrepreneurs, most of whom are ethnic Kikuyo. However, it remains tough that Ruto succeeds in winning the hearts and minds of many Kikuyo, primarily due to his past (Allen et al., 2022). In 2007, following the disputed elections, the current KK candidate had incited his supporters to lash out at the Kikuyos through aggressive rhetoric. The violence perpetrated by the Kalenjin prompted the Hague International Court of Justice to open an investigation that revealed that Ruto planned the violence. Consequently, the Court accused the vice President of crimes against humanity.

Polls show how the vice president is succeeding in winning the preferences of many Kikuyos. President Kenyatta still enjoys great popularity among the wealthier sections of the Kikuyo community, who are concerned about Ruto's rhetoric and other Kenyan communities. However, Odinga needs to get 30 percent of the vote in the Mount Kenya region. The region is highly populated by Kikuyo and is the historic Kenyatta stronghold. To date, therefore, despite Ruto's increasing popularity, Odinga seems favored. The latter will most likely provide continuity to Kenyatta's policies and try to promote a new constitutional reform. Regardless of the vote outcome, the two sharp political facts are the rift within the Kikuyo ethnic group and the widespread dissatisfaction with the political elites. The split of Kikuyo votes between the two candidates is transforming counties populated by the country's majority ethnic community into political battlegrounds where every single vote can prove decisive due to the electoral system. The fluidity of political affiliations, the market for posts, and the familiarity with old-generation political figures have fueled the detachment of the youthful components of the electorate. Distrust of the political class leads young people to be less interested in voting based on ethnic identity and more in the ability of leaders to rule in a good way. However, the effects of this trend will begin to be seen in the next decade. In conclusion, the possibility that the situation will escalate depends on the candidates and their willingness to acknowledge defeat, if any, or, on the contrary, fuel suspicion by risking throwing the country into chaos. Ruto's victory would ensure some discontinuity with the recent past. However, the divisive rhetoric of the current vice president threatens to prove inflammatory by generating a wave of internal instability that will affect the entire region.

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## The impact of sanctions on the Russian economy and society

### Introduction

On February 24<sup>th</sup>, the first heavy vehicles of the Russian Federation with the "Z-Za pobedu" license plate entered Ukraine, giving way to the *spetsoperatsiya*. The previous day, and in the days to follow, the United States and the European Union applied the first sanctions against the country that should not only destabilize it but even bring its economy to its knees so as not to be able to carry on the military campaign. In the following weeks, the value of the ruble plummeted, foreign multinationals began to withdraw and an unprecedented crisis loomed on the horizon. Russian political forces have responded rather quickly, with an increase in exports of non-renewable energy sources to China and India and further measures that have strengthened the value of the ruble.

Indeed, the European Union began to impose the first sanctions against Russia as early as 2014<sup>1</sup>, following the annexation of Crimea, however, the new measures adopted following the special military operation are radically different in structure and scope. This does not mean that the experience of 8 years ago has in a certain sense prepared the political forces as well as the population for further future "adjustments" to possible critical situations.

Ultimately, the literal application of the sanctions led, as happened in the case of the "blockade of Kaliningrad", the Russian exclave overlooking the Baltic and squeezed between Poland and Lithuania, part of the Western Military District and home to the headquarters of the Russian Baltic Fleet (with relative deployment of nuclear warheads), not only to yet another setback to bilateral diplomatic relations (Russian-Lithuanian and Russian-EU) but to the violation of international treaties signed decades ago.

More than four months after the start of the conflict, the question that arises is obviously the effectiveness of these measures on the continuation of the military campaign, which does not seem to be affected, just as, according to the polls, public opinion is not. 3/4 of which support the government's actions.

### Impact of sanctions on the Russian economy and countermeasures

On February 23<sup>rd</sup>, the European Union applied the first package of sanctions to the Russian Federation in response to its recognition, as independent entities, of the Ukrainian regions of Donetsk and Lugansk and the subsequent decision to send troops<sup>2</sup> there. In the following weeks and months, another 5 packages<sup>3</sup> followed, to which, in a short time, we will probably add the seventh, still under development and loudly requested by the Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmitro Kuleba<sup>4</sup> and President Zelensky<sup>5</sup>. At the moment, Russia appears (see fig. 1) to be the most sanctioned country in the world (11,000 individual and collective sanctions)<sup>6</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> The full list of sanctions (2014-february 2022) is available on: *Все санкции США и Евросоюза в отношении России с 2014 года* <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/russia-american-european-sanctions/29449693.html> (last access July 8, 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Report of the European Council meeting, dated February, 23 2022 <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/02/23/russian-recognition-of-the-non-government-controlled-areas-of-the-donetsk-and-luhansk-oblasts-of-ukraine-as-independent-entities-eu-adopts-package-of-sanctions/> (last access July 7, 2022)

<sup>3</sup> The second package was applied on 25 February 2022; the 3<sup>rd</sup> on 28 February (later integrated on 3 March 22); the 4<sup>th</sup> on March 15; the 5<sup>th</sup> on April 8 and the 6<sup>th</sup> on June, 3. Detailed history on <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/history-restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/> (last accessed July 7, 2022)

<sup>4</sup> Кулеба: Наш сигнал ЄС і G7 - сьомий пакет санкцій треба ухвалити якнайшвидше, Укрінформ. Усі права застережені, 8 giugno 2022, <https://www.ukrinform.ua/rubric-politics/3502422-kuleba-nas-signal-es-i-g7-somij-paket-sankcij-treba-uhvaliti-aknajshvidse.html>

<sup>5</sup> Зеленський закликає ЄС прийняти сьомий пакет санкцій проти Росії, "УКРАЇНСЬКА ПРАВДА" June 21, 2022, <https://www.pravda.com.ua/news/2022/06/21/7353919/> (last access July 7, 2022)

<sup>6</sup> *Russia sanctions dashboard*, <https://www.castellum.ai/russia-sanctions-dashboard> (last access July 7, 2022)



As the European Commission has pointed out, the sanctions are aimed at "weakening the Kremlin's ability to finance the war, forcing the Russian political elite to bear the clear economic responsibilities and political costs, and at shrinking the country's economic base.", EU restrictions included personal, economic, media sanctions (blocking of some Russian media), the expulsion of Russian diplomats from EU countries, as well as severe restrictions on economic relations with the territories of the Donetsk and Lugansk regions. Also taken<sup>7</sup> are the removal of several major Russian banks from the SWIFT payment clearing network, the freezing of foreign assets, the restriction of Russian oil imports, the cutting of key exports such as high-tech components and microchips to Russia.

The impact of these measures on the country's economy was obviously not homogeneous, the heaviest being undoubtedly the so-called paralyzing sanctions affecting the financial sector, trade and the energy sector. Therefore, the EU blocked Russia's access to European capital markets, Russian foreign exchange reserves held in the EU, by imposing a ban on investments in projects co-financed by the Russian Fund for Direct Investments, also banning the supply of banknotes in euro to Russia. The sanctions also affect Russia's access to the latest technologies (as well as dual-use goods and technologies), which will potentially reduce the country's ability to modernize.

Although the sanctions caused some immediate damage, these had less serious effects than expected by the EU, in fact the Russian government, mindful of the measures following the annexation of Crimea, was not unprepared and implemented countermeasures in response to the western initiative. Thus, the Central Bank imposed restrictions on foreign investors<sup>8</sup>, in March, the Ministry of Industry and Trade recommended Russian fertilizer producers to stop exports to countries that have adopted anti-Russian sanctions. Personal restrictions have been introduced against European and American companies<sup>9</sup>, and against individuals (European politicians and diplomats). Roskosmos has stopped supplying rocket engines to the United States<sup>10</sup>, and cooperation with Germany for joint experiments on the Russian segment of the International Space Station has been halted<sup>11</sup>. European importers of Russian energy carriers are also offered to pay in rubles and so on.

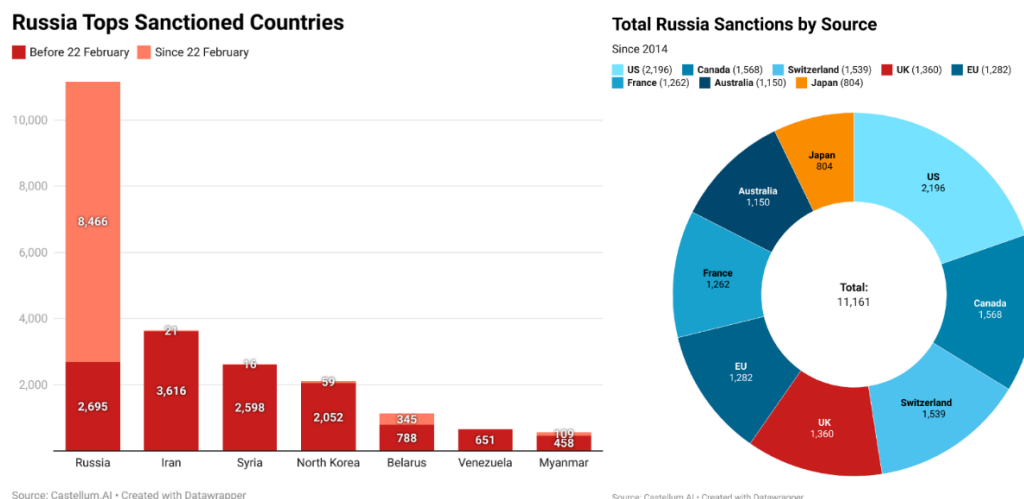


Fig.1 Source Castellum.AI <https://www.castellum.ai/russia-sanctions-dashboard>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/policies/sanctions/restrictive-measures-against-russia-over-ukraine/sanctions-against-russia-explained/> (last access July 7, 2022)

<sup>8</sup> *Россия вводит контрсанкции*, БФМ.РУ, May 4, 2022 <https://www.bfm.ru/news/499189> (last access July 7, 22)

<sup>9</sup> *Постановление Правительства Российской Федерации от 11.05.2022 № 851 "О мерах по реализации Указа Президента Российской Федерации от 3 мая 2022 г. № 252"*, Официальный интернет-портал правовой информации <http://publication.pravo.gov.ru/Document/View/0001202205110017?index=0&rangeSize=1>

<sup>10</sup> *Роскосмос прекратил поставки ракетных двигателей в США*, March 3, 2022, (last access July 7, 22) <https://vz.ru/news/2022/3/3/1146789.html>

<sup>11</sup> *Россия прекращает сотрудничество с Германией по экспериментам на МКС*, March 3, 2022, (last access July 7, 2022) <https://ria.ru/20220303/mks-1776235975.html>

Although Russian presidential spokesman Dmitry Peskov said in an interview with Sky News<sup>12</sup> that the country had begun preparing for the current sanctions "a year before they were announced", in truth the leadership did not expect measures on such a large scale. The Russian political elite assumed that severe economic sanctions would entail significant costs, mainly for the EU itself, which would therefore reduce their scope and extent. Furthermore, past experience has shown that previous sanctions have not led to such severe restrictions as the deactivation of SWIFT.

What is true in Peskov's words is that the country was really prepared or rather, it was "mentally" ready to face any blockages imposed from the outside, the adaptation to the lack of imported products is proof of this (let's talk obviously basic products and not luxury products or DOP / DOC products) and the related reaction that translates into their internal production, necessary to satisfy internal demand and fill those market niches that have remained empty. This process, which began after 2014, could lead the country towards autarchy in key sectors, which will then be difficult to replace in the future, certainly not in the near future, by foreign supply. Thus, if in 2013, for example, Russia imported about half of its food, today it is self-sufficient in basic food supplies and has even become a major exporter of products such as cereals and wheat; While prices were initially high and the quality of many products such as bread, cheese and breakfast cereals varied, over time they normalized, or rather fell. Russian companies are currently able to meet many of the national food needs<sup>13</sup>, as well as other basic supplies such as detergents.

And while Russia is relaunching the versions of some multinationals that have left the country gone, such as McDonald's, replaced by (although at first a purchase from the national fast food chain "Teremok" was more popular)<sup>14</sup> "Vkusno i tochka" (Tasty and that's it)<sup>15</sup>, this is much more difficult for those who relied on imports. French carmaker Renault, for example, had previously produced Lada cars in factories across the country through a partnership with a Russian state-owned manufacturing company. When Renault withdrew, the Russian government decided to nationalize the factories<sup>16</sup> and produce the cars themselves. Not being able to import foreign components, however, the Russian company was forced to build cars without automatic transmission, anti-lock brakes and airbags.

In a long-term perspective, however, things change. At the end of June, for the first time in more than a century, Russia defaulted on the payment of its external debt<sup>17</sup>. Since the country does not have much external debt compared to countries like the United States and sanctions had already prevented it from borrowing money, this may not have an immediate impact, especially as foreign banks themselves have blocked the money of Russian accounts, thus not allowing them to pay off debts. However, the fact remains that the default will remain as a bad rating and that, within a few years, it could represent a problem if Russia finds itself in the situation of rebuilding / modernizing following the old national projects and needs to borrow money from western banks.

From the start of the special operation it was clear that the measures taken by Western countries would not be enough to make the Moscow government give up. Too high is the stakes, the forces (financial, military, media) devoted to the pursuit of the purpose, however, as reported by the recent (updated on 8 June last) polls by the independent statistical research center, the Levada Center<sup>18</sup>, starting since May, the first induced shock of the sanctions has passed and the concern of the Russians

<sup>12</sup> *Песков: Россия начала подготовку к санкциям год назад, 7 aprile 2022* (last access July 9, 2022) <https://www.gazeta.ru/business/news/2022/04/07/17538175.shtml>

<sup>13</sup> *О ситуации с зарубежными компаниями на российском рынке рассказала вице-премьер Виктория Абрамченко, June 20, 2022*, <http://www.admnews.ru/news/2022-06-20/o-situatsii-s-zarubezhnymi-kompaniyami-na-rossiyskom-rynke-rasskazala-vitse-premer-viktoriya-abramchenko/> (last access July 9, 2022)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.kp.ru/daily/27377/4559867/> (last access July 9, 2022)

<sup>15</sup> *Фламанский ресторан "Вкусно — и точка" открылся в Москве, Ria Novosti 12.06.2022* (last access July 9, 2022) <https://ria.ru/20220612/obschestvo-1794880429.html>

<sup>16</sup> *Russian cars drop airbags, anti-lock brakes because of sanctions, June 19, 2022* (last access July 9, 2022) <https://www.autonews.com/manufacturing/russian-cars-drop-airbags-anti-lock-brakes-because-sanctions>

<sup>17</sup> *What's happening with Russia's 1st default on foreign debt in a century, June 27, 2022* (last access July 9, 2022) <https://www.npr.org/2022/06/27/1107750231/russia-default-foreign-debt-payments-explained?t=1657382258787&t=1657382394513>

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.levada.ru/2022/06/08/sanktsii-zapada/>

has diminished. The restrictions of greatest concern were the freezing of Russian assets abroad, the use of Visa and Mastercard (especially for young people) and the abandonment of Western brands. Respondents consider rising prices to be the main consequence of sanctions. At the same time, three-quarters of respondents believe that Russia should continue its current policies rather than making concessions to try to lift sanctions.

Sanctions have impacted ordinary people, despite government price controls on essential goods like food and gas, inflation has caused most goods to become more expensive. This also has an impact on that segment of the low-income population residing in rural areas, which grows some of its own food and does not rely on goods that have been sanctioned, but having to buy others whose cost has definitely risen.

### The Kaliningrad case

The further level of tensions between Russia and the West was reached on June 18, with the closure by Lithuania of the corridor connecting Russia to its Kaliningrad exclave, to transit goods. Furthermore, the timing has very little chance if we consider that the meeting of the European Council took place on June 23-24 last, which had at the top of the agenda the renewed European will to continue to support Kiev by sending weapons. The blockade could therefore also be seen as an act of awakening a heated Russian response, which in fact has arrived, and, consequently, taking useful actions to appease this response.

The initiative would be justified by the need to extend the European sanctions against Russia here too, but in reality it has no legal justification<sup>19</sup> since the traffic of goods towards the Russian province overlooking the Baltic regulated by a bilateral treaty between the Russian Federation and the Lithuania of November 18, 1993<sup>20</sup> and, above all, of the joint European Union - Russian Federation declaration<sup>21</sup> on transit between the Kaliningrad region and the rest of the Federation, signed on November 11, 2002 following the Russia-EU summit.

Königsberg, once one of the main cities of East Prussia, capital of the Teutonic Knights and later of the Duchy of Prussia, became Kaliningrad on 4 July 1946. It inherited its name from the Soviet politician and revolutionary Mikhail Ivanovich Kalinin and became, as a result of the decision of the Potsdam conference (2 August 1945)<sup>22</sup>, part of the Soviet Union. Since, until 1991, Lithuania was also part of the USSR, the connections certainly did not represent a problem but, with the independence of the Baltic republics and the loss of territorial continuity with the exclave, the stipulation of the aforementioned 1993 treaty was necessary (free movement of goods and men through Lithuania and Belarus). With the entry of Lithuania into the EU, the joint declaration of 2002 was signed. In any case, the Vilnius government<sup>23</sup> which, as stated last February by Ingrida Šimonytė, Lithuanian Prime Minister<sup>24</sup>, justifies its decision by specifying that it has only applied the sanctions ("transfers of assets

<sup>19</sup> *Губернатор Калининградской области Алиханов: Литва грубо нарушила нормы международного права*, 22 giugno 2022 <https://rg.ru/2022/06/22/reg-szfo/alihanov-litva-narushila-normy-mezhdunarodnogo-prava.html>

<sup>20</sup> *LITHUANIA and RUSSIAN FEDERATION Agreement concerning international road transport (with protocols). Signed at Vilnius on 18 November 1993* <https://treaties.un.org/doc/Publication/UNTS/Volume%201831/volume-1831-I-31342-English.pdf> (last access July 9, 2022)

<sup>21</sup> *Joint statement of the European Union and the Russian Federation on transit between the Kaliningrad region and the rest of the Russian Federation. EU-RUSSIA SUMMIT, Brussels, 11 November 2002*, (last access July 9, 2022) [https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms\\_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/73188.pdf](https://www.consilium.europa.eu/uedocs/cms_data/docs/pressdata/en/er/73188.pdf)

<sup>22</sup> *The Potsdam Declaration. Tripartite Agreement by the United States, the United Kingdom and Soviet Russia concerning Conquered Countries, August 2, 1945*. <http://www.ibiblio.org/pha/policy/1945/450802a.html> (last access July 9, 2022).

<sup>23</sup> *LRT trumpai. Kodėl dėl Kaliningrado tranzito per Lietuvą sprendžiame ne mes patys, o ES?* March 22, 2022 <https://www.lrt.lt/naujienos/eismas/7/1650863/lrt-trumpai-kodel-del-kaliningrado-tranzito-per-lietuva-sprendziame-ne-mes-patys-o-es> (last access 09.07.2022)

<sup>24</sup> "The Kaliningrad transit is an integral part of European Union law. This is a special agreement between the EU and the Russian Federation. I really wish we didn't go into these things, because this is not Lithuania's solution. We can close the Lithuanian airspace, but the decision on the Kaliningrad transit is already an EU decision," Ingrida Šimonytė said during a Facebook broadcast of the publicist Andrius Tapinas. *Nutraukti tranzito į Karaliaučių nesvarstoma*, February 26, 2022 (last accessed July 9, 2022) <https://www.delfi.lt/news/daily/lithuania/nutraukti-tranzito-i-karaliauciu-nesvarstoma.d?id=89567807>

from one part of the Russian territory, if this contemplates the passage on EU soles ") and that the blocking of transit only concerns rail goods provided for by the EU black list<sup>25</sup> that is, as reported by Anton Alihanov, governor of the Kaliningrad region, about half of the imported goods.

After a first moment in which panic prevailed and the population stormed the shops to grab basic necessities, the assurances arrived: at least two cargo ships left St. Petersburg to guarantee the delivery of goods stopped by the Lithuania and seven more would be in service by the end of the year, in order to be used for this purpose, in the event the situation won't be back to normal in the short run. There are also many goods produced directly in the oblast, which is also important from an energy point of view. In this sense, on 29<sup>th</sup> the Russian Deputy Prime Minister Aleksander Novak visited Governor Anton Alikhanov<sup>26</sup> to discuss, among others, the issue of strengthening energy security in the region<sup>27</sup> and the progress in the implementation of the gasification program, but also possible retaliation to counterbalance the Lithuanian decision. On June 27, in fact, the Russian Deputy Minister of Energy, Yevgeny Grabchak, had announced that the energy system of the exclave was able to operate in isolated mode, this was possible thanks to the activities previously undertaken in the field of plant construction and next generation power grids.

The fact remains that the primary responsibility for the provocative initiative in Vilnius must be attributed to Europe. The Lithuanian foreign minister, Gabrielius Landsbergis, has somehow sent back the question of the freezing of goods to Brussels, clarifying that the decision was taken following "consultations with the European Commission" and "in accordance with its guidelines" related to anti-Russian sanctions. Lithuania, like most post-Soviet governments in which, understandably, a ferocious anti-Russianism and Atlanticism prevails, while hiding behind the European figure, exposes the country to a possible conflict with Russia, creating, at the same time, a diatribe domestic seen 15% of Russians part of the nation.

## **Final remarks**

To date, the sanctions adopted by the EU have not done their job: they have not stopped Russia's special operation in Ukraine, they have only demonstrated growing national support for the incumbent government and the ability to resist where you are sure of your own ideas. On the other hand, history is a teacher and the siege of Leningrad, which lasted 2 years and 5 months (8 September 1941-27 January 1944), should teach school among experts in the sector.

At the same time, the sanctions showed how deeply Russia has been integrated into the global economy and how much has been done in the past few decades in the field of international cooperation.

The country, with great probability, will resist the sanctions by moving towards other markets (China, India, part of Africa but also Turkey), but it will be backward in its economic development and its modernization will face enormous difficulties. The European Union, on the other hand, will not renounce the "principles", the fact remains that, once the critical moment (5-10 years) has passed, it will have to return to dialogue with a hostile country. The only way out of today's impasse is a truce followed by negotiations and a treaty that will have to be strictly observed by the parties.

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<sup>25</sup> Coal, metals of various kinds, high technology products, construction materials, crude oil and petroleum derivatives, etc.

<sup>26</sup> *Новак обсудил с главой Калининградской области региона, June 29, 2022* (last access July 9, 2022) <https://1prime.ru/energy/20220629/837332848.html>

<sup>27</sup> It is important to remind that the exclave brings gas from the territory of Russia proper through the Minsk-Vilnius-Kaunas-Kaliningrad gas pipeline which crosses the territory of Belarus and Lithuania. The daily demand is estimated at around 10 million m<sup>3</sup> (in the winter season), while the pipeline carries just over 9 million m<sup>3</sup> of gas per day. The rest of the demand is met by its own extraction in the region: on land and on drilling platforms in the Baltic Sea.

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## **Saudi Arabia: new generations and Vision 2030**

For Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammad bin Salman, MbS' Vision 2030, the new generations are fundamental and the new technologies and social networks of which they make extensive use<sup>1</sup> are an important tool that is significantly transforming relations both between the state and society and within families<sup>2</sup>.

The main purpose of Vision 2030 is to reduce the heavy dependence on hydrocarbon revenues - 87% of the total – which make the Saudi economy vulnerable<sup>3</sup>, in particular for changes in world demand and for the dangerous fluctuations of the oil price that have occurred since 2014.

The abundance of hydrocarbons has proved to be a double-edged sword: while the export of these resources plays an important role in nominal economic growth, it leads to negative practices in the rentier states such as the scarcity of economic stimuli, an oversized and inefficient bureaucracy with the prevailing role of social safety net and the maintenance of a populist authoritarianism<sup>4</sup>.

The reforms launched more than a decade ago for economic diversification, the strengthening of the private sector and the improvement of the education and training sectors to provide the necessary skills to the new workforce, however, still seem too limited and conservative<sup>5</sup>.

Economic problems are also linked to high public spending. This is due to the hefty spending on subsidies for electricity, gasoline, water and food (Saudi Arabia spent over \$100 billion on energy subsidies in 2015 only); high defense spending (25% of the budget is for military and security purposes) and large salaries, pensions and benefits for civil servants. In addition, during boom times when oil prices were high, government spending was often extravagant - mega-projects that had questionable economic utility to the detriment of savings and investment. During the wave of protests in 2011, the government decided to increase the salaries of the bureaucratic system personnel and to hire thousands more citizens to avoid or minimize the protests and any social or political claims<sup>6</sup>.

Riyadh's oil revenues have allowed for decades the construction of a very generous welfare state that is no longer sustainable. For the youngest in the country - 2/3 of the Saudi population is under 29 years old<sup>7</sup> - finding a job, buying a house and facing the cost of living without state subsidies, guaranteed until a few years ago, is creating problems. The young Saudis who now face a new reality share the reasons of the mass mobilizations that have crossed the Middle East since the end of 2010: unemployment, demands for emancipation and political participation<sup>8</sup>.

MbS has engaged in a series of reforms, educational, economic and bureaucratic for a structural transformation of the Saudi society<sup>9</sup>. Since public employment is no longer able to absorb young people who complete their education, there is a great impetus towards the private sector, but

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<sup>1</sup> J. Hildebrandt, M. El Abbouri, M. Alibraheem, "What Matters Most to Saudi Arabia's Youth?", BCG, 10 June 2014; <https://www.bcg.com/it-it/publications/2014/public-sector-community-economic-development-what-matter-most-saudi-arabias-youth>.

<sup>2</sup> F. Dazi-Héni, "Arabie Saoudite: le pari sur la jeunesse de Mohammed bin Salman", IRSEM, Etude n. 80, Mai 2021.

<sup>3</sup> World Economic Forum, "Which economies are most reliant on oil?", May 10, 2016; <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/05/which-economies-are-most-reliant-on-oil/>.

<sup>4</sup> M. Al-Kassim, "Saudi Crown Prince: 5 Years in Power and Going Strong", The Medialine, 06/20/2022; <https://themedialine.org/by-region/saudi-crown-prince-5-years-in-power-and-going-strong/>.

<sup>5</sup> A. Guzowski, "Rentier state as an obstacle to development in the Middle East", *Politikon: IAPSS Political Science Journal*, Vol. 21, September 2013, pagg. 45-54.

<sup>6</sup> G. Aftandilian, "Youth Unemployment Remains the Main Challenge in the Gulf States", Arab Center Washington DC, July 11, 2017; <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/youth-unemployment-gulf-states/>.

<sup>7</sup> New Security Beat, "Saudi Arabia's Youth and the Kingdom's Future", February 7, 2012; <https://www.newsecuritybeat.org/2012/02/saudi-arabias-youth-and-the-kingdoms-future/>.

<sup>8</sup> B. Winder, "Challenges and Opportunities for the Saudi Economy", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, June 18, 2020; <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/82104>.

<sup>9</sup> Saudi Vision 2030; <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/v2030/overview/>.

for some years, the job opportunities do not seem to be sufficient considering the pressing population growth<sup>10</sup>.

The world's largest crude oil exporter has invested in education and infrastructure and keeps strict quotas regulating the number of Saudis and expatriates holding private sector jobs. Saudi Arabia is home to more than 9 million expatriates whose remittances provide important income for countries such as Yemen, India, Pakistan and the Philippines. Most expats are employed in the private sector, retail and construction, jobs that young Saudi citizens may not want or may not have the skills for, according to the International Monetary Fund<sup>11</sup>.

Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, Public Investment Fund, PIF, is among the largest in the world<sup>12</sup>. Created in 1971 for the purpose of investing funds on behalf of the government of Saudi Arabia, it is controlled by the crown prince<sup>13</sup>. Its composition remains opaque: in 2016, the Wall Street Journal noted that none of the fund's investments are mentioned<sup>14</sup>. The task of the PIF is to stimulate domestic investment, develop new industries, bring the kingdom to access new technologies, create jobs, stimulate the private sector and make Saudi Arabia more interesting by investing in luxury resorts, cinemas and entertainment complexes to attract more visitors from abroad but also the Saudis, in order to keep in the national coffers the share of consumption that for many years had been destined to abroad travelling.

The government-defined youth employment goals come at a time when the issue has never been more urgent<sup>15</sup>. The rise in youth unemployment is worrying, with 536,000 job seekers aged between 15 and 29 as early as September 2017 and continuing to rise to almost 30% in 2019<sup>16</sup>. The government attempts to reorient the economy towards the private sector collide with a well-established tradition: for generations young Saudis have completed tertiary education with the expectation of getting a well-paid government job but, with an effective hiring freeze in the public sector, this option is no longer a guarantee.

Younger generations have shown reluctance to enter a corporate arena associated with long hours, modest economic benefits and a perceived lack of job security. It is perhaps for this reason that many Saudis are opting to become their own bosses, which is driving the growth of start-ups in the kingdom. The government has encouraged this trend in its Vision 2030 strategy and in the National Transformation Program by setting funds for venture capital activities, distributed through a PIF-owned government body that serves as the government's technology investment arm to support start-ups in the initial phase. Start-ups alone, however, will not solve the youth unemployment challenge. The government is working to improve the skills of young Saudis in an attempt to make them more attractive to employers who have so far preferred to seek skills from abroad. The main tool of this campaign is the Hafiz program, which was introduced in 2011<sup>17</sup>: it guarantees financial

<sup>10</sup> VOA, "IMF: Private Sector May Not Keep Pace with Saudi Youth Bulge", July 24, 2013; <https://www.voanews.com/a/saudi-arabia-youth-bulge-private-sector-economy/1709481.html>.

<sup>11</sup> International Monetary Fund, Saudi Arabia 2013, IMF Country Report No. 13/229, 24 June 2013; <https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2013/cr13229.pdf>.

<sup>12</sup> M. Martin, "How Giant Saudi Wealth Fund Is Building a Post-Oil Future: QuickTake", Bloomberg, 18 February 2022; <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-02-18/how-giant-saudi-fund-is-building-a-post-oil-future-quicktake>.

<sup>13</sup> S. Roll, "A Sovereign Wealth Fund for the Prince", German Institute for International and Security Affairs, 8 July 2019; <https://www.swp-berlin.org/en/publication/a-sovereign-wealth-fund-for-the-prince/>.

<sup>14</sup> S. Clark, "Saudi Wealth Fund May Be World's Least Transparent", Wall Street Journal, 1 November 2016; <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-wealth-fund-may-be-worlds-least-transparent-1477997912?mod=ST1>.

<sup>15</sup> Oxford Business Group, "Saudi Arabia supports start-up culture among young people"; <https://oxfordbusinessgroup.com/analysis/starting-young-supporting-nascent-start-culture-among-youth-population>.

<sup>16</sup> Statista, "Saudi Arabia: Youth unemployment rate from 1999 to 2019", February 1, 2022; <https://www.statista.com/statistics/812955/youth-unemployment-rate-in-saudi-arabia/#:~:text=Youth%20unemployment%20rate%20in%20Saudi%20Arabia%20in%202019&text=According%20to%20the%20source%2C%20the,Arabia%20was%20at%2029.63%20percent>.

<sup>17</sup> Hafiz (Searching for Employment Programme); <https://socialprotection.org/discover/programmes/hafiz-searching-employment-programme>.

support to the Saudi unemployed and specialized training, qualification and employment programs for up to one year. Although the initiative is not specific for young people, soon after its formation it identified unemployment among Saudi youth as a priority. In 2016, nearly a quarter of Saudis under the age of 30 were unemployed, and with nearly half of the population under the age of 25, the labour market could double by 2025 if young workers were successfully hired.

The digital revolution is a generational indicator in Gulf societies. MbS cleverly exploits the vast use and dependence of young people of new technologies and social networks - Twitter in particular in the kingdom is very widespread - allowing him to reshape the economy, give himself a modern image to put distance from the generations of rulers that preceded him and earning the loyalty and the following of the country's numerically largest demographic layer.

The populist approach and the use of communication techniques through social media platforms are intended to particularly appeal millennials and young teenagers in order to make this generation his most loyal popular support by securing long-term legitimacy. He has undoubtedly caused a culture and identity shock with a generational rupture within the society. By presenting the Vision 2030 as the tool for forging the foundations of a new Saudi society, MbS has mobilized an exacerbated nationalist and modernist narrative that encounters a generally favourable echo among new generations, but not always.

The same channels are used by young people to express social unease: they have turned to social media to criticize the kingdom for the lack of job opportunities, despite the policies announced in recent years to tackle unemployment. Last year, the hashtag "*Unemployed and we will not remain silent*" spread on Twitter, with users describing their difficulties and frustrations in finding a job, accusing MbS of being indifferent to their situation<sup>18</sup>. Among the unemployed, 61% are under the age of 30 and 54% have a university degree, the unemployment rate is 8% for men and 30% for women. The demographic increase - the population doubled since 1990 - weighs on a labour market that is not able to absorb everyone and wages are lower due also to the introduction of the Value Added Tax in 2018, then tripled to 15%<sup>19</sup> in 2020.

Seniors, on the other hand, are more concerned about the lack of control over new regulatory authorities and the distribution of Vision 2030' key positions of public authorities to personalities close and loyal to MbS. The centralization of public procurement and foreign investment by the PIF, over which public control is not possible, raises the governance issue. The need for reforms and change is undoubted, but inequalities, including generational ones, risk to undermine the reform project.

Establishing himself as the new center around which the administrators (loyal to him) gravitate, MbS co-opts, eliminating everything related to the old regime, by prevailing over other members of the royal family with more experience and preparation<sup>20</sup>. His rise was marked by tensions within the family as it upset the decennial structure for succession rights, in place since King Abdulaziz died at the age of 88 in 1953: traditionally, the younger brother of a monarch would succeed him to the throne. The crown prince bypassed two hereditary princes and marginalized senior leaders<sup>21</sup>. Furthermore, MbS has removed potentially threatening elements to its leadership through various

<sup>18</sup> R. Uddin, "Saudi youth take to social media to complain about unemployment", Middle East Eye, 4 March 2021; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-unemployment-youth-graduates-complain>.

<sup>19</sup> P. Cochrane, "Saudi Arabia's economic crisis, explained in 10 graphics", Middle East Eye, 19 August 2020; <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/saudi-arabia-economic-crisis-oil-coronavirus-debt-vision-2030>.

<sup>20</sup> G. Wood, "Absolute power", The Atlantic, April 2022; <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2022/04/mohammed-bin-salman-saudi-arabia-palace-interview/622822/>.

<sup>21</sup> E. Mekay, "Deep tensions in Saudi Royal Family", International Bar Association, 10 June 2020; <https://www.ibanet.org/article/8EA61FB5-90EF-4414-80EA-138D0033917F>.



anti-corruption operations<sup>22</sup>, accusations of treason and inability to govern<sup>23</sup>. Furthermore, his foreign policy choices have not always proved successful<sup>24</sup>, just as the choices of internal politics are not fully shared.

The conduct of the economic reforms undertaken is reduced to the use of the Saudi sovereign fund PIF as the main instrument of diversification and privatization of the economy that remains strongly controlled by the state and under the direct control of the prince and his inner circle.

This development model - the state-backed private sector such as in China, Singapore and the United Arab Emirates - has proven its effectiveness. However, the Saudi leadership is at a crossroads in a context of transition: the sustainability of Vision 2030 is closely linked to MbS leadership that will necessarily have to keep the promises of reforms<sup>25</sup> made to the younger generations.

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<sup>22</sup> J. Kebbi, "Inside MBS's prison system", *L'Orient-le Jour*, 28 June, 2022 ; <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1304056/inside-mbss-prison-system.html>.

<sup>23</sup> T. Matthiesen, "A Purge in Riyadh", *Foreign Affairs*, November 8, 2017; <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/saudi-arabia/2017-11-08/purge-riyadh>.

<sup>24</sup> AlJazeera, "Mohammed bin Salman: The dark side of Saudi Arabia's crown prince", March 9, 2020; <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/9/mohammed-bin-salman-the-dark-side-of-saudi-arabias-crown-prince>.

<sup>25</sup> International Monetary Fund, "Saudi Arabia: Staff Concluding Statement of the 2022 Article IV Mission", June 22, 2022; <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/06/17/saudi-arabia-staff-concluding-statement-of-the-2022-article-iv-mission>.

### Between regional needs and global ambitions. The new NATO Strategic Concept

#### Introduction

On June 28-29, 2022, the Madrid summit of the Heads of State and Government of the NATO countries officially adopted the new Strategic Concept<sup>1</sup>, the document setting the guidelines for the Atlantic Alliance's action in the coming decade. The adoption of the new Concept has been a long-awaited moment. The previous Strategic Concept was adopted in Lisbon in 2010 on the background of a wholly different – and far more peaceful – international scenario. Since the mid-2010s, many observers have repeatedly pointed out the need to revise its provisions. The decline of the Afghan commitment after 2014 and the withdrawal of NATO troops in 2021; the new Russian assertiveness, culminating in the Ukraine crisis in 2014 and the invasion in 2022, the growing instability of the Wider Mediterranean region and the challenges it poses to NATO's South European allies... All these elements supported the claim. The launch of the #NATO2030 initiative by Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg in June 2020 and the appointment of an *ad hoc* reflection group to provide independent suggestions on a wide range of issues affecting NATO's future were the first public steps on the path toward the new Strategic Concept. The news that the Concept would have been adopted in Madrid circulated during the Brussels summit in 2021, which also marked a clear US/Europe rapprochement after the tensions and troubles that emerged during the Trump presidency. Like the previous ones, the new Strategic Concept mixes important novelties with equally important traits of continuity. Moreover, it challenges the Alliance in the field of adaptation in terms of both the menaces it will face in the future and the structure it should adopt to deal with them.

#### The Strategic Concept: an ever-changing tool

The end of the Cold War led to a radical transformation in the meaning of NATO's Strategic Concept. Born as a classified military document, since the version adopted during the 1991 NATO Rome summit<sup>2</sup>, it assumed an increasingly public nature in terms of both elaboration and circulation. Its nature radically changed, too. «Prepared in open discussion and immediately published, [the post-Cold War Strategic Concepts] are no more military plans but rather analyses of the international situation, its risks and challenges, and NATO's role» (de Leonardis, 2011: 23). In any case, they kept on marking turning points in the evolution of the Atlantic Alliance. The Rome Concept, together with extending NATO «hand of friendship» to the former Warsaw Pact's countries (the Pact had dissolved on July 1), paved NATO the way to operate also beyond the geographic limits set in the North Atlantic Treaty. The Washington Strategic Concept, adopted in April 1999 during the Alliance's fifty-year-summit<sup>3</sup>, elaborating on NATO's experience in the Balkans (which was still going on), placed its emphasis on the so-called «non-article five missions». Finally, in Lisbon, in the age of ISAF, the «projected NATO» and the US/Europe convergence of the early Obama years, the Strategic Concept strengthened the vision of NATO as a global alliance, open to collaboration with a wide range of non-Euro-Atlantic partners (the so-called «partners across the globe») and pivot of variable-

<sup>1</sup> [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/290622-strategic-concept.pdf) (accessed: July 5, 2022). If not otherwise stated, all quotations are from this text.

<sup>2</sup> *The Alliance's New Strategic Concept (1991). Agreed by the Heads of State and Government participating in the Meeting of the North Atlantic Council*, Rome, November 7-8, 1991. Online: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_23847.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_23847.htm) (accessed: July 5, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> *The Alliance's Strategic Concept (1999). Approved by the Heads of State and Government participating in the meeting of the North Atlantic Council in Washington D.C.*, April 24, 1999. Online: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_27433.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_27433.htm) (accessed: July 5, 2022).

geometry coalitions like the one engaged in Afghanistan since 2003. All this without forgetting what remained the NATO “core business”, i.e., defending the member countries from any possible military aggression and deterring any potential threat to their security.

Reaching the targets set in the different Concepts has not always been easy. Instead, growing international complexity made it more and more difficult for the Alliance to be up to the challenges it had to face. To tackle an increasingly complex environment, the Strategic Concept had to widen in terms of tasks and domains. Over the years, new functions in crisis management, energy security, anti-terrorism and cyber and human security added to the “old” NATO military role. This process fuelled tensions among members due to the gradual divergence of their security needs. The Ukraine crisis in spring 2014 starkly highlighted the problem, reviving the fear of the “Russian threat” at a moment when NATO focused its action mainly on the extra-European theatre. These competing security needs made constant balancing and managing activity essential. The outcomes of this activity integrated the different Strategic Concepts’ provisions, acting as bridges among them and allowing NATO to adapt to both its internal transformations and the evolutions of the surrounding security environment. The consequence was the Atlantic Alliance’s partial transformation from a regional defensive agreement into a security organisation, more multidimensional in its approach and having increasingly global ambitions. Another consequence was strengthening the Alliance’s more political dimensions and partially revising its *modus operandi*, which started focusing more on flexible integration forms. Unsurprisingly, partnerships became increasingly important since the mid-1990s, when the Partnership for Peace (PfP) program was established to favour the integration of the Central and Eastern European countries into the Alliance.

The Madrid Strategic Concept marks another step in this direction. Even if the document defines Russia as «the most significant and direct threat to Allies’ security and to peace and stability in the Euro-Atlantic area», its overall approach reaffirms the Alliance’s global ambitions, which emerge, for instance, in the attention placed on both the growth of China’s international role and the development of a network of partnerships stretching from Africa to the Far East. At the same time, the Concept provides a list of challenges that goes far beyond the ones facing a “simple” military alliance and includes, among else, the management of the security implications of climate change, the emerging and disruptive technologies, and the erosion of the arms control, disarmament, and non-proliferation architecture. NATO’s core tasks (the traditional “triad” deterrence and defence, crisis prevention and management, and cooperative security) also remain. From some points of view, the evolution was predictable. The final report of the above-mentioned ad hoc reflection group already stressed the need to enhance NATO’s global profile, especially emphasising the topics of enlargement and partnerships<sup>4</sup>. The Secretary-General himself repeatedly highlighted the importance for NATO – while not losing its inherent Euro-Atlantic nature – to develop «a global approach [...] because we are faced with global threats and challenges»<sup>5</sup>. Finally, such an approach fits well in the “360-degree-NATO” vision that recurs in the Alliance’s most recent documents and is presented as the most effective tool to react to the multidimensional and multifactorial challenges that an ever-changing and deeply unstable security environment poses to the Alliance.

### **Deterrence and defence: back to the core business**

In terms of continuity, the new Strategic Concept relaunches NATO’s role in the deterrence and defence realm, confirming the “vigilant and prepared” posture adopted in 2014. In this field, the

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<sup>4</sup> NATO 2030: *United for a New Era. Analysis and Recommendations of the Reflection Group Appointed by the NATO Secretary General*, November 28, 2020. Online: [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2020/12/pdf/201201-Reflection-Group-Final-Report-Uni.pdf) (accessed: July 5, 2022).

<sup>5</sup> *Opening remarks by NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg at the NATO Youth Summit 2022 followed by Q&A*, April 28, 2022. Online: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions\\_194916.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/opinions_194916.htm) (accessed: July 5, 2022).

document underscores «the need to significantly strengthen our deterrence and defence as the backbone of our Article 5 commitment to defend each other» (Preface). It also marks a sharp fracture with the 2010 approach, which emphasised crisis management among the “triad” three components, in line with what, at that time, was NATO’s most significant engagement. From the same perspective, we can read the Concept’s focus on possessing adequate nuclear capability. Such a capability keeps playing a pivotal role in NATO’s strategy, with the strategic nuclear forces («particularly those of the United States») labelled «the supreme guarantee of the security of the Alliance» (§ 29). On the other hand, the new Strategic Concept frames deterrence and defence in a multi-domain perspective. It especially highlights how NATO, in the coming years, will invest «in our ability to prepare for, deter, and defend against the coercive use of political, economic, energy, information and other hybrid tactics by states and non-state actors» (§ 27). In the same perspective, it highlights how NATO will enhance its ability «to operate effectively in space and cyberspace to prevent, detect, counter and respond to the full spectrum of threats, using all available tools». Significantly raising the Alliance’s standing, in line with its new approach, it finally stresses that in these new domains, as well as in the field of hybrid threats, «[a] single or cumulative set of malicious cyber activities; or hostile operations to, from, or within space; could reach the level of armed attack and could lead the North Atlantic Council to invoke Article 5 of the North Atlantic Treaty» (§§ 25 e 27).

Such a passage vastly expands NATO’s room for intervention and equates the space and cyber domains to the traditional ones. The same attention enjoys the maritime domain, whose security is considered the «key to our peace and prosperity» (§ 23). The underlying logic is «to defend every inch of Allied territory, preserve the sovereignty and territorial integrity of all Allies and prevail against any aggressor» (§ 20). In this case, too, there is a relevant tightening of the traditional deterrence and defence posture (Arnold, 2022), a tightening that the members’ commitment to increase their contribution to NATO’s military instrument confirms. According to the Concept’s provisions, in the coming years, the strength of the NATO Response Force should increase from 40,000 to 300,000 men with higher operational readiness, and the number of battlegroups currently deployed in Central and Eastern Europe should double, passing from four to eight. In quantitative terms, it is a relevant and possibly demanding effort, and failing to reach it could negatively impact the Alliance’s credibility. However, such a tightening of NATO’s deterrence and defence posture is the “natural” reaction to the evolution of the Euro-Atlantic security environment, now no more «at peace» and in which the Atlantic Alliance «cannot discount the possibility of an attack against Allies’ sovereignty and territorial integrity» (§ 6). In this scenario, NATO’s ability to act as a deterrent against the Russian threat in the coming years is strictly connected to its ability to expand its military instrument and develop a coherent set of related capabilities. In a broader perspective, the same element will also impact the evolution of the US/Europe relations, especially if the ups and downs of US political life should revive the burden-sharing issue, as they did under the Trump presidency.

General Christopher Cavoli’s declarations about the need for the European allies to take greater responsibility in the common defence due to the growing US engagement in the Indo-Pacific region seem to anticipate future problems (Eversden, 2022; Battaglia, 2022). Growing US engagement in the Indo-Pacific could lead to tensions with the European countries, first and foremost the ones from Central and Eastern Europe, which are more sensitive to the continental security needs. Within this framework, the new Strategic Concept devotes special (and well-known) attention to China, whose «stated ambitions and coercive policies challenge our interests, security and values». According to the Concept, «[t]he deepening strategic partnership between the People’s Republic of China and the Russian Federation and their mutually reinforcing attempts to undercut the rules-based international order run counter to [NATO’s] values and interests» (§ 13). However, how the Alliance will «address the systemic challenges posed by the PRC to Euro-Atlantic security» and how it will «ensure [its] enduring ability to guarantee the defence and security of Allies» (§ 14)

remains undefined. The Concept itself, while, on the one side, highlights the potential risks stemming from China's increasing role in the international system, on the other underlines the need to develop NATO/China relations based on «constructive engagement [...] including to build reciprocal transparency, with a view to safeguarding the Alliance's security interest». Unsurprisingly, a recent EurActiv poll shows that, although NATO's European members have progressively revised their vision of China in a critical sense, what is seen as the Anglo-Saxon countries' pressure to keep Beijing "in NATO's crosshairs" is a source of scepticism for many of them (Brzozowski et al., 2022).

### **The challenge: keep old and new together**

The same problematic mix of old and new can be found in several other central aspects of the new Strategic Concept. Against the background of the Ukraine crisis, it reaffirms the "open door" principle. It also reaffirms that decisions on membership are taken only by NATO Allies, and no third party has a say in this process (§ 40; the same principle is in the 1995 *Study on NATO Enlargement*<sup>6</sup>). As already said, the Concept devotes special attention to partnerships (§§ 41-45) and – among them – to the collaboration with the European Union, whose role, compared to NATO, is «complementary, coherent and mutually reinforcing [...] in supporting international peace and security» (§ 43). The list of the possible fields of collaboration is long and includes military mobility, resilience, the impact of climate change on security, emerging and disruptive technologies, human security, the Women, Peace and Security agenda, as well as countering cyber and hybrid threats and addressing the systemic challenges posed by the PRC to Euro-Atlantic security. However, although NATO «recognises the value of a stronger and more capable European defence that contributes positively to transatlantic and global security and is complementary to, and interoperable with NATO», the reference remains the "three Ds" (*no decoupling, no duplication, no discrimination*) that then-State Secretary Madeleine Albright presented in 1998 as a reply to the Anglo-French Saint-Malo declaration (Rutten, 2001: 8-12). Non-discrimination seems to attract special attention. In this field, the Concept states that it is «essential» «[f]or the development of the strategic partnership» between the two subjects «non- EU Allies' fullest involvement in EU defence efforts».

The relationship between NATO, European defence and the non-discrimination principle gain further relevance in the context of the two organisations' enlargement strategies. In Madrid, Sweden and Finland started their admission process to NATO by signing the trilateral memorandum with Turkey. A few days later, on July 5, the two countries signed their accession protocols in Brussels. In the meantime, on June 23, the EU conceded to Ukraine and Moldova the candidate country status. These competing decisions open a scenario where, after a first convergence, the two memberships will start diverging again, especially in the sensitive Black Sea area. The presence of Turkey in this area makes the problem more sensitive. On NATO enlargement, the Strategic Concept explicitly reaffirms the decisions taken in Bucharest in 2008 «and all subsequent decisions with respect to Georgia and Ukraine» (§ 41). However, the issue of Kyiv's admission remains unsolved. Moreover, the ongoing war, the ensuing tensions in the energy markets, and the economic troubles that these tensions stir could put several legislative bodies under pressure and divert their attention from international to domestic issues (Leicester and Keyton, 2022; Desiderio and McLeary, 2022). Thus, beyond today's consensus on the need to meet Moscow's military initiative with a compact Western front, the process of NATO and EU enlargement could prove more troublesome than expected and negatively impact, in the medium-to-long run, NATO's cohesion and credibility. Something similar can be said about the NATO/EU relationship and the dynamics that should emerge, in the coming years, between the Alliance and the future European military identity.

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<sup>6</sup> *Study on NATO Enlargement*, September 3, 1995. Online: [https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official\\_texts\\_24733.htm](https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/official_texts_24733.htm) (accessed: July 5, 2022).

Once again, the challenge is filling the gap between words and deeds, i.e., between the Concept's provisions and their implementation. More than the previous ones, the current Strategic Concept looks at NATO's future, not at NATO's past, although – quite paradoxically – the result has been a revival of the Alliance's original mission: deterring a possible Russian armed attack and defending the member states if deterrence should fail. However, the document also puts relevant political, economic, and military burdens on the allies' shoulders. In financial terms, these burdens risk overcoming the "ceiling" of the Celtic Manor commitments. Although many countries have already increased their military spending during the first half of 2022, the most recent NATO figures highlight that several European allies still face problems reaching those targets, mainly the 2.0% defence expenditure/GDP ratio<sup>7</sup>. Fully implementing the Concept's provisions risks worsening the situation and possibly fuelling new US/Europe tensions. With the Biden administration in the White House and facing the pressing needs of the Ukraine war, the burden-sharing issue seems to have lost much of its relevance. However, it could revive any time at the end of the current emergency, especially if, in the coming years, as it seems probable, a less amenable administration should take power in Washington. It is not a little matter since the fulfilment of the Strategic Concept's ambitious provisions is not only a product of the evolution of the international context but also of the domestic situation in the different member countries and the possibility to find – in the document as well as in the Alliance's general posture – a tool to cope effectively with their security needs.

## **Conclusions**

In this field, too, ambiguities exist. Focusing on the Russian threat and the Indo-Pacific region, the Strategic Concept pushes some other important theatres to the background, such as the ones revolving around the Wider Mediterranean basin. Again: it is not an absolute novelty. For instance, the 2016 NATO Warsaw summit already aimed at rebalancing a posture that seemed to some allies to pay too little care to the Alliance's vulnerable southern flank. However, despite the efforts, the Mediterranean and its adjoining areas remain mostly at the margin of NATO's attention. Aside from some references to the Middle East, North Africa, and the Sahel (defined as «regions of strategic interest to the Alliance» in § 45), the Madrid document does not really tackle the problem. Such an attitude, together with the shift of the Alliance's geographic pivot north-eastward due to the admission of Sweden and Finland, could be a reason for concern among some Southern European countries. These kinds of problems have cyclically emerged in the Atlantic Alliance's history, but its traditional "clearing house" function has usually allowed it to absorb the most dangerous tensions. On the other hand, the working of this mechanism rests on the presence of two elements that cannot be taken for granted: a general will to accept its political and economic costs and a leader that mediates among the parties and guarantees them a "fair" partition of the costs. Both these elements are present today, but the future is uncertain. Especially if a long-lasting war in Ukraine and its adverse political and economic effects should jeopardise the cohesion of NATO's European pillar and put the existing convergence between US and European interests under further stress.

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<sup>7</sup> *Defence Expenditure of NATO Countries (2014-2022)*, PR/CP(2022)105, June 27, 2022. Online: [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static\\_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220627-def-exp-2022-en.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static_fl2014/assets/pdf/2022/6/pdf/220627-def-exp-2022-en.pdf) (accessed: July 5, 2022).

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## Iranian energy ambitions in the new geopolitical context: from sanctions to gradual involvement?

### Iran's energy potential: the impact of sanctions and the illegal exports

Despite a huge energy potential - in terms of hydrocarbon reserves - and a position of geographical centrality as a potential hub between the Middle East and Europe, Iran is on the edge of the international energy scenario, due to the sanctions reintroduced by the Trump administration in the 2019.

Concerning oil, Iran holds the third largest reserves in the world (after Venezuela and Saudi Arabia), estimated at 209 billion barrels, which accounts for 12% of total reserves in the world and for 25% of oil reserves in the Middle East (US EIA 2020). Iran is an important member of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), holding the third largest reserves among the involved countries (OPEC 2021). Nearly 70% of the national oil reserves are located onshore, while the amount of reserves in the Iranian offshore section of the Caspian basin is unknown, due to the lack of exploration activities. Indeed, the difficulties of reaching an agreement with Azerbaijan on disputed oil and gas fields have hampered offshore explorations, pending the finalization of the agreement on the legal status of the Caspian – reached in 2018 between the five coastal nations - to develop hydrocarbon potential according to a common and shared discipline.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Iran also holds the second largest natural gas reserves in the world, estimated at 33.9 trillion cubic meters, which accounts for 16% of the world total reserves and over half of the gas reserves of OPEC member states (US EIA 2020).

The US decision to withdraw from the 2015 nuclear deal - known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)<sup>2</sup> – and the adoption of sanctions against Tehran heavily influenced the production capacity of the Iranian energy sector, also triggering a significant collapse of exports, amounting to over 90%. In fact, oil production in 2015-2018 reached 4.6 million barrels of oil per day (mbpd): following the imposition of sanctions, oil production drastically dropped (about 2.6 mbpd in the first months of 2019) to then rise to 3.6 mbpd in 2021 (BP 2022). At the same time, oil exports collapsed from 2.6 mbpd in 2016-2017 to 250,000 bpd in 2019 (US EIA 2020).

Oil field	Estimated reserves (million barrels)
Ahvaz	65.000
Khuzestan (discovered in 2019)	53.000
Gachsaran	52.000
Marun	46.000

Tab.1 Iran largest oil fields (Source: Iran Oil and Gas Network)

<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Iran shares several onshore and offshore fields with Arab neighbor countries such as Iraq, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.

<sup>2</sup> The JCPOA was signed in Vienna in 2015 between Iran and 5+1 group – composed by the five permanent members of the UN Security Council (China, France, Russia, United Kingdom, United States) plus Germany, in addition to the European Union. It implied the halt of international sanctions against Tehran in exchange for Iran's commitment to renounce the nuclear program (mainly to stop uranium enrichment beyond a certain threshold) and to accept International Atomic Energy Agency's inspections to verify compliance with the deal (European Council 2022)



Natural gas fields	Estimated reserves (billion cubic metres, bcm)
South Pars	12-14.000
North Pars	1.300-1.400
Kish	1.300
Tabnak	850
Kangan Nar	670

Tab.2 Iran largest natural gas fields (Source: Tagliapietra 2014)

These were the results of the "maximum pressure" campaign backed by the former US President Trump, aimed at totally reset Iranian exports. It substantially confirms the US approach to exclude the Persian nation from the energy and transport corridors that could connect the Middle East to Europe, Washington claims that Tehran has to abandon anti-Americanism rhetoric in its foreign policy as a condition to negotiate (Vatanka 2022). At the end of 2020, when Biden Administration expressed a favourable orientation to resume the negotiations on the nuclear deal, Iranian oil production began to grow again, as did exports. In fact, since April 2021 the 5 + 1 group (United Kingdom, China, France, Germany and Russia) has restarted a direct dialogue with Iran, while Tehran and Washington negotiate indirectly.

More recently, the current global energy crisis triggered by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict and the Europe and the United States' intention to ban Russia's hydrocarbon imports have potentially created the conditions for a gradual return of Iran as an energy supplier - given its huge reserves - able to carry oil and natural gas on the world's major economies. Iran's involvement in the global energy market would lead to a consequent increase and availability of oil and natural supply, aimed at reducing the level of hydrocarbon prices, which grew exponentially following the instability linked to the Russian invasion of Ukraine (Shokri 2022a). In addition to the Biden Administration's availability to a cautious diplomatic opening towards Teheran, we should also take into consideration that it could be dangerous to exclude both Russia and Iran from the global energy scenario. In fact, Moscow holds the world's largest gas reserves, as well as being the second largest gas producer after the United States and the third largest oil producer in the world), while Iran has the second largest gas reserves in the world and third in oil.

Simultaneously with the start of the Russia-Ukraine war, Iranian exports increased significantly (908,000 barrels per day in March, over 800,000 barrels per day in April), reaching the peak during the first 3 weeks of June with an average of 961,000 barrels - data confirmed by the Iranian energy minister (IRNA 2022b; Kennedy 2022). On the other hand, there was a significant contraction in exports (400,000 barrels per day) in May, because Russia began selling oil at discounted prices on Asian markets, practising a discount of 30 dollars per barrel 10 dollars more than the discount made by Tehran to place its exports on the markets (Reuters 2022).

This situation highlights how Iran has illegally exported oil to international markets despite the sanctions, with the purpose to obtain economic revenues in order to strengthen the state budget hard hit by the US embargo. According to an accurate investigation realized by the Wall Street Journal (2022), in April Tehran exported 600,000 barrels of oil to China and 100,000 barrels to Syria: overall, since 2021 the value of Iranian crude illegally transported on oil tankers and sold to China it would be around 22 billion dollars. Given the impossibility of (legally) exporting oil to the markets, Iran has stored its crude oil production into onshore deposits and especially in oil tankers. Even if the estimates diverge, according to experts, there would be between 85 and 103 million barrels of oil stored in oil tankers, which could be easily and quickly placed on the markets in case of a reduction of sanctions. (Middle East Eye 2022). This orientation in the Iran's energy strategy is confirmed by Reuters (2022), regarding the presence of 20 oil tankers - which delivered 40 million barrels of Iranian crude oil - awaiting buyers in the waters surrounding Singapore, in coincidence

with the month (May) in which Beijing decided to buy more Russian oil thanks to the Moscow's discounts. One of the most used practices to evade controls and sanctions is the transport of Iranian oil to some ports in Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, where it is refined and subsequently reintroduced to the markets as oil "generically" produced in Middle East. For example, in February 2021 the US Navy imposed the seizure of the oil tanker *Achilleas*, carrying about 2 million barrels of oil, which was offloaded from another ship near the Emirate port of Fujairah (strategically located beyond the Strait of Hormuz), trying to hide the provenance of oil and claiming it was produced in Iraq. According to the United States, another practice used by Tehran is to exploit the southern oil region shared with Iraq and separated by the Arvand River (where are located refineries, deposits, export terminals which allow Baghdad to export over 2.5 mbpd), to conceal the origin of the oil and escape sanctions (Sudetic and Shokri 2021).

### **Iranian ambitions and the embargo's effects on the Oil & Gas sector**

In relation to the new energy context, Iran has expressed its availability to give a contribution to the rebalancing of the markets, guaranteeing its support to resolve the current energy crisis: according to the Director of the National Iranian Oil Company NIOC, the country has the capacity to double its exports in the short term, meeting global demand (Al Arabiya 2022). Furthermore, thanks to the aforementioned oil potential stored in oil tankers, Iran would be able to deliver additional 500,000 barrels of oil per day to the international markets in the short term (two months), and to quickly reach additional 1 million of barrel of oil per day, so stabilizing the markets (Shokri 2022a). Tehran's resilience was already evident in 2015 when analysts envisaged that Iran was able to increase its production capacity of additional 500,000 barrels per day within a year, while Tehran took only 4 months to achieve this target.

In May, Iranian Deputy Minister for Energy Majid Chegeni said that the nation would be considering the possibility of exporting gas to European markets, even if a potential agreement still appears complicated (Euractiv 2022). Despite the optimism and ambitions of the Iranian authorities, there are factors that risk complicating Tehran's energy plans: among them, the lack of investment needed to modernize the energy sector and make new exploration, the lack of infrastructure to export gas to markets, the high domestic demand of electricity.

International sanctions have heavily hit the Iranian energy sector, freezing or delaying important projects and the economic exploitation of the huge existing reserves. In fact, one of the main problems is that most of the existent oil fields are mature and largely depleted - about 80% of the reserves were discovered before 1965. Thus, investments are necessary to support exploration and prospecting activities to find new ones, but also technological support to rationalize production in the more mature fields (Indeo 2017).

This kind of embargo has prevented Iran from benefiting from the fundamental contribution and investments of the IOCs (International Oil Companies), forced to abandon their promising projects and losing their investments in the Iranian energy sector. For instance, sanctions prevented the development of Yadavaran huge oil field (with reserves estimated at 31 billion barrels of oil) - assigned to the Chinese company Sinopec since 2008, which was supposed to produce 300,000 bpd by 2020 - and halted exports from the North Azadegan field - in concession to the CNPC (China National Petroleum Company) - which since 2016 exported 3 million barrels of oil per year to Chinese markets. Furthermore, the sanctions stopped exploration activities on the hydrocarbon potential of South Azadegan and Yadavaran oil fields, on the border with Iraq, and of the Kish gas field (which holds the third largest national gas reserves), which were previously granted to the British company Shell in 2016 (NIOC 2016). Iranian oil minister Javad Owji openly declared that to strengthen production, mining and transport capacity will be necessary to invest 160 billion dollars in the next 8 years: in the meantime, the Minister announced a deal with banks, domestic companies and the

National Development Fund of Iran to invest 7 billion dollars in the development of the Azadegan field (Shana 2022).

As for the exploitation plans of natural gas reserves, US sanctions forced the French company Total and the Chinese CNPC - two of the largest IOCs in the world - to abandon the 4.8 billion dollar project to develop the phase 11 of the huge South Pars field (Oil & Gas Journal 2018). The lack of international support to develop South Pars - which has been elaborated by the Iranian company Petropas since 2020 – represented a severe blow to Tehran's ambitions, substantially undermining the ability to increase national gas production, aimed to boost an energy strategy focused on exports.

South Pars was discovered in 1990, and it represents the spearhead of Iranian natural gas reserves: this huge offshore field holds 40% of the estimated national reserves, which are equivalent to a potential of 12-14 trillion cubic meters of natural gas. South Pars constitutes the geological extension in the Iranian territorial waters of North Dome, a huge offshore field shared with Qatar: North Dome is the world's largest gas field containing almost all of Qatari reserves. Overall, the combined reserves of this field would exceed 50 trillion cubic meters (Indeo 2017). Unlike Iran, Qatar (third country in the world for natural gas reserves, 24 trillion cubic meters) has extensively exploited its field, increasing production and becoming the second largest exporter of liquefied natural gas (LNG) in the world, after Australia (106 bcm in 2021). Although 70% of Iranian gas production (over 150 bcm) comes from South Pars, it will be necessary to massively invest (2.5 billion dollars) to the further development of this field, otherwise production will start to decline by 10 bcm per year (Shokri 2022b). The incomplete exploitation of South Pars also accentuates the vulnerability of the national energy system, as almost all gas production (256.7 bcm in 2021) is allocated to satisfy domestic consumption (241.1 bcm in 2021) – both for the electricity production and for re-injection activity in oil fields to recover additional volumes of oil. Consequently, Iran does not have sufficient volumes of gas to export, despite its abundant reserves (BP 2022).

Currently Iran exports 17 bcm of natural gas to the regional markets of Turkey and Iraq via pipelines, while from December 2021 a swap deal allows the transit of Turkmen gas in its territory, which is then re-exported to bordering Azerbaijan. While the failure to increase production prevents the capacity to allocate additional volumes of gas for export, on the other hand Iran does not even have export corridors to deliver natural gas to European and Asian markets. The Tabriz-Ankara pipeline would be the best solution, as it is already operational, but its capacity cannot be further expanded to improve exports.

Over the past twenty years, the US opposition and the civil war in Syria have frozen the Iran-Pakistan gas pipeline (with an expected capacity of 22 bcm of gas per year) and the Iran-Lebanon gas pipeline project ("the Friendship Pipeline", with a capacity of 40 bcm) through Iraq and Syria, which could be a potential alternative corridor (thanks to the geographical proximity to the Mediterranean and European markets) to strengthen the EU energy security through a diversification of imports (Frappi 2013). The lack of investments and technological expertise also prevent Iran from having a liquefaction export terminal, in the attempt to replicate the success of neighbouring Qatar. Considering the long time required for the possible construction of LNG terminals (not before 2030), the Iranian authorities have preferred to resume the discussion on the project to create a land pipeline up to the coast of Oman, using the Omani terminal of Qalhat to deliver gas exports to the international markets (IRNA 2022a).

## **Conclusions**

Despite the availability of abundant hydrocarbon reserves, the possibility that Iran could aspire to become a global energy supplier in the coming months appears strongly conditioned by the resumption of the nuclear dialogue, regardless of real needs of energy markets and the urgency to increase the global supply of oil and natural gas. However, there are still some crucial issues to be solved, such as Tehran's requests to remove the Revolutionary Guard from the US list of Foreign

Terrorist Organizations and, above all, the need to reach an agreement with a long-term validity, aimed to survive even in the case of a new administration following the 2024 US presidential election (Bloomberg 2022).

The oil sector appears to be able to meet growing global demand, although it will be necessary to invest to maximize mining activities. In terms of diversification, Tehran has achieved a significant success building a domestic pipeline, which connects the Goreh fields with the port of Jask. This solution allows to move 1 mbpd in the Arabian Sea without crossing the Strait of Hormuz, where 90% of the Iranian crude oil exports pass via the Kharg terminal.

Concerning natural gas, it seems hard to foresee in the short term an increase in Iranian exports to international markets, as well as it seems unrealistic that Tehran could offer a substantial contribution to the European energy security supplying additional volumes of natural gas to compensate for the lack of imports from Russia. Pending massive investments to develop existing reserves, an improve in exports to Turkey is a logical solution, also given the Turkish desire to find alternative sources of supply to natural gas from Russia and Azerbaijan. The scenario could change following the impact of the Chinese investments envisaged in the twenty-five-year cooperation agreement signed in 2021 - between 15 and 20 billion euros – which should be destined for the development of South Pars and the construction of LNG terminals in order to intensify exports towards Chinese and East Asian markets.

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## Conspiracy theories and security risks

### Conspiracy theories

Although the concept of «conspiracy theory» appears intuitive in some respects, there is not one recognized definition. Here it can be argued that this expression, of English origin, means a narrative that aims to explain a fact or a situation on the basis of an alleged conspiracy organized and managed in secret by a powerful group or organization with malicious intentions (usually of a political nature). In this regard, some scholars have noted that the expression «theory» is equivocal, because it is misleadingly reminiscent of scientific theories, and prefer other expressions such as «conspiracy narratives» or «conspiracy fantasies» (for example, Di Cesare 2021).

According to US political scientist Michael Barkun (2003), conspiracy theories are based on three core principles: 1) nothing happens by accident; 2) nothing is as it seems; 3) everything is connected. In general, as also indicated by the second of these principles, it is the very nature of conspiracy theories that makes them hardly permeable to debunking.

Scholars and experts have pointed out that conspiracy theories are typically associated with at least three «cognitive biases» (e.g., Brotherton 2015):

- 1) «intentionality bias», the tendency to assume that the behavior of others takes place because it is intentional rather than for accidental reasons;
- 2) «confirmation bias», the tendency to selectively focus on information confirming acquired beliefs and to ignore information leading in the opposite direction;
- 3) «proportionality bias», the tendency to assume that the scope of an event must correspond to a similar scope of its cause (to believe, in other words, that major events must necessarily have major causes).

### The historical evolution of conspiracy theories

Conspiracy theories have always existed. For example, it can be recalled that in *The Peloponnesian War* Greek historian Thucydides (V century BC) already recounted that the Athenians attributed the plague that had struck their city in 430 BC to the poisoning of water tanks at the port of Piraeus by their enemies.

In modern times, at least three recurring enemies in the history of conspiracy theories can be mentioned: the Jews, «foreigners» par excellence in the West, at least since the medieval «Blood Accusation» to the idea that the Jews would secretly be intent on taking over the world; the Jesuits, with accusations that already emerged in the sixteenth century and reached their peak in the nineteenth century; the Freemasons, from the end of the eighteenth century. Not infrequently, these enemies have combined, as in the case of the stories on the «Judeo-Masonic» conspiracy, also recounted in the infamous *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* (this text, first published in 1903 in Russia, while notoriously false, is still influential in our days).

Many scholars and experts have argued that the phenomenon of conspiracy theories has grown considerably in recent decades; some observers have even described the twenty-first century as a sort of «golden age» of conspiracy mentality. The causes of the apparent fortune of conspiracy theories in our times are presumably manifold. In short, on the one hand, some scholars have pointed out that conspiracy mindset can be interpreted as a reaction to the (increasing) complexity of the world, in a changing and unstable context, in which what surrounds us may seem difficult to decipher; conspiracy mindset, with its Manichean logic, offers a simple and in some ways reassuring reading of the complex and often opaque processes of our times. On the other hand, the quantitative



explosion of communication flows, especially on the Web, largely free from the filters and constraints of traditional public opinion, can encourage the spread of conspiracy theories.

Certainly, in today's Western societies, it is quite difficult to find an area or a relevant fact that is not associated with conspiracy theories: diseases and vaccinations, wars, migration, climatic conditions, food, etc. (e.g., Pannofino and Pellegrino 2021; Bianchi 2021).

The various conspiracy theories circulating in the contemporary era are not necessarily linked to a particular political ideology (cf. Cassam 2019). Nevertheless, the importance of conspiracy narratives linked to right-wing extremism is evident (e.g., among others, Farinelli 2021), not only in recent decades (suffice to think, of course, of Nazi antisemitism) (Evans 2020), especially against migrants and / or against Jews. Nowadays, among the most relevant conspiracy theories typically linked to right-wing extremism, even with potential consequences for security, we can mention the narratives of the «Great Replacement» and Qanon, and also some recent theories related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **The «Great Replacement» conspiracy theory**

One of the most influential contemporary conspiracy theories, typically linked to the anti-democratic far right (and sometimes even to the democratic radical right), is the narrative of the so-called «Great Replacement», popularized by French thinker and activist Renaud Camus, with a book of the same name (*Le Grand Remplacement*) published in 2011.

According to Camus, a deliberate process of ethnic replacement by non-white migrants, mainly African or Middle Eastern people, is underway to the detriment of the native French, also on the basis of different fertility rates; this process would have the consequence of leading to the destruction of French civilization. Such a «white genocide» would be intentionally promoted by «globalist» elites, for their own selfish interests. In a climate of high social polarization, also due to the impact of jihadist attacks in the West (see also Marone 2022d), this narrative echoes ideas and suggestions already circulating in France and in the West (they can be found, for example, in the influential dystopian novel *Le Camp des Saints* by Jean Raspail, published in 1973).

The «Great Replacement» conspiracy theory can also be associated with the promotion of violence against other people or even with its actual application. In extreme cases, this controversial narrative has favored the use of terrorism. In particular, the perpetrator of the attack on a synagogue in Pittsburgh, USA, on October 27, 2018 (11 dead) was influenced by these beliefs, in an antisemitic key. Even more serious was the massacre perpetrated at two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, on 15 March 2019 (51 dead); before hitting, the person responsible for the attacks published an extremist manifesto in English, entitled precisely *The Great Replacement* (Marone and Olimpio 2019). Similarly, the extremist manifesto written by the perpetrator of the attack against Hispanic people in El Paso, USA, on August 3, 2019 (23 dead) advocated this conspiracy theory. Finally, the person responsible for the mass shooting at a supermarket frequented by the African American community in Buffalo, United States, on May 14, 2022 (10 dead) also referred to this conspiracy narrative, taking the author of the Christchurch massacre as a model.

### **The QAnon conspiracy theory**

One of the most influential and striking conspiracy theories of our time is represented by Qanon. Taking up previous fantasies and suggestions, QAnon appeared in October 2017 on 4chan, an online platform that was already known for hosting even very controversial and extreme positions; on that site, an anonymous profile, simply named Q, claimed to be a high-level exponent of the US state apparatus, ready to disseminate classified information, in his opinion for good. Based on these supposedly privileged position, that has never been verified, Q shaped a representation that then-US President Donald J. Trump would be secretly engaged in fighting a battle against a perverse global elite, made up of political leaders (such as members of the Clinton family and the Obama

family), businessmen (such as George Soros), government officials, journalists, and even actors of progressive tendencies.

According to Q, this small circle of people, who would in fact also control the nerve centers of the state (the so-called «deep state»), would also be dedicated to satanic ritual abuses: thousands of children would be clandestinely kidnapped, hidden in underground places, sexually abused and would also suffer the extraction of adrenochrome, an organic compound that would produce psychedelic effects. In this Manichean vision, the battle to defeat this «Cabal» of supposed powerful Satanist pedophiles would successfully end in a final «Storm».

Qanon clearly takes up and amalgamates a variety of long-standing conspiracy narratives: the detail of the adrenochrome, for example, is reminiscent of the historical «Blood Accusation» against the Jews. On the other hand, an element of novelty is the highly interactive and participatory nature of this broad conspiracy theory: taking advantage of modern media such as social media, QAnon supporters have been encouraged to comment and interpret the almost five thousand messages that Q has so far disseminated, often cryptically, on the internet (the so-called «Q-drops») and the discussions that have derived from it (Marone 2022b). After Joe Biden's victory in the Presidential election on 3 November 2020, Q's messages stopped on 8 December 2020; it is therefore interesting to note that, after a break of more than 500 days, Q showed up again on 24 June 2022, on the 8kun platform.

In the United States, QAnon has been associated with a variety of illegal and even violent actions (Jensen and Kane 2021). In addition, in May 2019, for the first time, in an internal document the FBI identified conspiracy theories as a source of domestic terrorist threats, expressly mentioning QAnon (Winter 2019).

This conspiracy theory also constituted a driving force behind the US Capitol siege (for example, Marone 2022b). Among other things, the most well-known face among the 6 January 2021 rioters, the so-called «Shaman» (Jake Angeli, pseudonym of Jacob Anthony Angeli Chansley), belonged to the QAnon movement; he was subsequently sentenced to 41 months in prison for his role in the siege.

## 5G conspiracy theories

Another conspiracy theory, also linked to the COVID-19 pandemic (see also Marone 2022a), argues that 5G (the latest generation of the fifth-generation technology standard for broadband cellular networks) is dangerous for human beings; for example, it would cause or at least exacerbate COVID-19 infection. According to variants of this conspiracy theory, the development and expansion of this technology would conceal the unspeakable goal of controlling the population and/or even eliminating a part of it.

Some observers have noted that this sort of conspiracy narrative actually takes to the extreme and distorts real general fears about modern technologies, linked to low levels of knowledge and transparency about rapid processes of technological advancement on a large scale, at least for those who do not have high specialist skills.

The 5G conspiracy theory has been employed by right-wing extremists (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Crawford 2020), as has been the case with the aforementioned narratives about the «Great Replacement» and QAnon. Nevertheless, it has also attracted the attention of left-wing and anarchist extremists.

Hostility towards 5G has even led to acts of violence, usually against things. On the other hand, this conspiracy narrative can also be associated with high-profile attacks, dangerous even for people. In particular, it can be remembered that, at dawn on Christmas Day 2020, a 63-year-old US citizen, after alerting the population with a loudspeaker, blew himself up inside a camper in the center of Nashville, capital of Tennessee, in front of a building of a major telecommunications company. This suicide attack (cf. Marone 2013) injured eight people and caused extensive material damage,

especially to the telecommunications sector in the area; fortunately, it did not lead to fatalities. According to the US authorities, among the factors at the origin of this striking action, that was planned and carried out without the assistance of any accomplice, there would have been the belief in «several eccentric conspiracy theories» (FBI 2021; cf. Farrell 2022).

### **Conspiracy theories about the pandemic and its consequences**

Like other epidemics and pandemics of the past (at least from the aforementioned Plague of Athens to HIV, passing through the Black Death in the fourteenth century), the COVID-19 pandemic has fueled a large amount of conspiracy theories, in addition to fake news and deliberate disinformation initiatives (Bianchi 2021; Marone 2022a).

Some unsubstantiated conspiracy theories, for example, have claimed that the coronavirus was intentionally created in laboratories, usually identified in those of the Institute of Virology that is based in the Chinese city of Wuhan, as a sort of «biological weapon».

In addition, an influential conspiracy theory linked to the COVID-19 pandemic is what usually goes by the name of «Great Reset». Also taking up a simulation carried out in 2019 in New York regarding a potential pandemic («Event 201»), in May 2020, the World Economic Forum<sup>1</sup> officially launched a plan, called «Great Reset», which outlined a path to sustainably rebuild States' economies after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Unfounded interpretations of this initiative in Davos have fueled a conspiracy theory, often linked to right-wing extremism: in this view, «globalist» financial elites and political leaders intentionally planned the spread of the coronavirus in order to take control of politics and the economy and even to establish a totalitarian global regime, a «New World Order» (NWO), usually imagined as communist-inspired.

This conspiracy theory has also helped encourage violent actions. On 2 July 2020, a Canadian citizen, a consumer of conspiracy theories such as the «Great Reset», stormed the official residence of the Governor General of Canada (the representative of the British Monarchy in the country), not far from the Prime Minister's residence, in Ottawa, without causing casualties (Marone 2022a).

### **Conspiracy theories about vaccinations**

As is well known, numerous conspiracy theories have concerned vaccines and vaccinations, especially during the current COVID-19 pandemic: according to these narratives, malicious elites would deliberately use vaccines to subjugate and control the population (for example, Bianchi 2021).

These conspiracy narratives have also been promoted and used by extremist (minority) fringes of the broad and diverse movement against vaccines and against the restrictions imposed by governments on vaccinations, helping to offer attractive narratives to a movement that appears to lack a real systematic ideology of reference.

In extreme cases, extremist fringes of this heterogeneous movement have even been responsible for episodes of violence. There was, for example, the use of violence in large street demonstrations, such as the attempted raid on the *Reichstag* building in Berlin on 29 August 2020 and the assault on the CGIL national headquarters in Rome on 9 October 2021. In addition, there were real premeditated attack plans, often of a selective nature; in particular, against people or facilities related to health service (such as the attack on a vaccination center in Brescia, Italy, on the night between 2 and 3 April 2021) or related to politics (such as the alleged seizure plans of the Minister-President of Saxony in Germany in 2021 and of the Governor of Michigan in the United States in 2020) (see Marone 2022a; 2002c).

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<sup>1</sup> The World Economic Forum (WEF) is a non-governmental organization, established in 1971. It is well known, in particular, for the promotion of a high-level meeting, with the participation of leading representatives of politics and the economy, that takes place every winter in the alpine town of Davos, in Switzerland (the so-called Davos Forum).

## **Conclusions**

Conspiracy theories are a phenomenon of great importance in our time, even for security reasons. Although some conspiracy narratives tend to be harmless, others may pose serious challenges to Western democratic societies, undermining the relationship of trust of a part of the citizenry towards public institutions and authorities and, in extreme cases, even going so far as to encourage and justify the use of violence by extremist groups or individuals.

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# **Osservatorio Strategico**

## **Part Two**

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## **Towards an Escalation of the Algerian-Moroccan Diplomatic Crisis?**

### **The outbreak of the diplomatic crisis between Algeria and Morocco**

In August 2021, Algeria recalled its ambassador to Rabat, officially severing diplomatic relations with Morocco. This decision is a turning point that comes many months after the beginning of tensions between the two countries (Rachidi, 2022). The main dossier on which the crisis has been triggered is the Western Sahara. In fact, Algerian grievances began in December 2020, when the Trump administration changed U.S. policy on this dossier, recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over this portion of disputed territory, once part of Spanish colonial possessions (U.S. Embassy in Morocco, 2020). Algiers has historically been the main supporter of the self-determination claims of the Sahrawi people, represented politically by the Polisario Front. The American move represented the bargaining chip required by Rabat for the normalization of diplomatic relations with Israel. In this sense, Morocco's entry into the Abrahamic Accords can be read as a transactional move (Profazio, 2022). Thus, the second driver of contention between Rabat and Algiers is precisely the normalization of the Israeli-Moroccan relations. Algiers fears that an increased Israeli activism in the Maghreb, especially in the defense field, could shake the military balance between the two North African countries in Rabat's favor. It should be highlighted how in the region both Morocco and Algeria represent two relevant military powers. The former as a major non-NATO ally of the United States, and thus one of the pillars of Washington's political-military presence in the region. The second as Russia's main military partner in the Maghreb.

Other minor issues have further exacerbated the situation. In August 2021, Algeria accused Morocco and Israel of supporting the movement for the self-determination of Kabylia, seen by Algiers as a threat to the country's sovereignty and territorial integrity. Moroccan King Mohammed VI's attempt to offer reconciliation to Algerian President Tebboune, who never responded to his call for a confrontation, was not successful. On the contrary, not only did Algiers close its embassy in Rabat, but as of September 22, 2021, it closed its airspace to Moroccan civilian and military aircraft (Reuters, 2021). Another critical event was the killing of three truck drivers on November 1, 2021, who were covering the route between Mauritania's capital Nouakchott and the Algerian city of Ouargla. Algiers accused Morocco of deliberately bombing Algerian convoys (France 24, 2021).

Finally, Algeria took the decision not to renew the contract to transport gas to Spain via the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline, due to expire at the end of October 2021. This decision causes Rabat to lose the revenues from the contract of transit of the Algerian gas to Europe. In this context, Spain plays as the third relevant factor in this intricate crisis. In a surprising move, the Spanish government of Sanchez as of March 2022 reversed its policy on Western Sahara along the lines of the U.S. decision, in order to re-establish relations with Rabat. In fact, in the previous June, a diplomatic crisis had broken out between Madrid and Rabat caused by the Spanish decision to grant access to medical treatment to Polisario Front leader, Brahim Ghali. The migration driver was the main ground on which the tensions took place, with Morocco "weaponizing" the migration flow to the Spanish enclaves in Africa of Ceuta and Melilla for several weeks. Overall, the diplomatic rift between Algeria and Morocco is played out over three main dossiers: Western Sahara, Israel, and the Spanish-Moroccan rapprochement linked to the migration dossier.

### **A multidimensional crisis: the main drivers of the rift**

As anticipated, the main issue of contention between Morocco and Algeria remains the Western Sahara dossier (Dworkin, 2022). Western Sahara represents one of the world's oldest



conflicts. It began in 1975 after Spain withdrew from this colonial outpost, handing over control to Morocco and Mauritania. With the exit of Spanish forces, Algeria began providing diplomatic and military support to the Polisario Front, which opposed ceding sovereignty to the two neighboring states and aspired to the creation of an independent state. To this day, many Sahrawi leaders have found political refuge in Algeria. After a long low-intensity conflict, in 1991 a ceasefire was signed, followed by UN peacekeeping intervention with the MINURSO mission. The mission's goal, yet unreached, is to organize a popular referendum which can allow the Sahrawi people to decide their political fate: either political integration into Morocco or independence. A scenario, however, opposed by Rabat, which claims sovereignty over the entire Western Sahara. In November 2020, Polisario announced the termination of the ceasefire after Moroccan armed forces drove Sahrawi protesters out of the town of Guerguerat, on the border with Mauritania. This event was merely the *casus belli* in a far more complex situation that saw Algeria opposing the American decision to recognize Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. It should also be noted how the American move was preceded, in late October 2020, by the UAE's decision to open a consulate in Laayoune, the largest city of Western Sahara (Moroccan MFA, 2020). More than a year later, Spain has also broken with its traditional policy of equidistance. Faced with the need to resolve its diplomatic crisis with Rabat, in fact, in March 2022, the Spanish government supported the Moroccan autonomy project for Western Sahara for the first time (Kasraoui, 2022).

A second driver of the Algerian-Moroccan crisis is the normalization process inaugurated in 2020 between Morocco and Israel. Rabat's entry into the Abrahamic Accords is perceived by Algiers as a factor that can turn the military balance between the two countries in Morocco's favor. Indeed, a substantial part of Israeli-Moroccan cooperation is in the security sector. For example, in July 2021 Israel and Morocco signed a cooperation agreement in the cyber field between their respective cybersecurity agencies. An understanding that provides for collaboration in research and development but especially in the operational level and information sharing (Solomon, 2021). The following November, during the Israeli defense minister's visit to Morocco, the two countries signed a comprehensive defense agreement, based mainly on the sale of weapon systems (Ravid, 2021). On this dimension, other agreements involving major Israeli defense companies have been signed. For example, in February 2022 Israel Aerospace Industries signed a contract worth \$500 million to supply the Moroccan armed forces with Barak MX air and missile defense systems. A month later, the same Israeli company signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Moroccan government through which cooperation in air defense technology research and development was initiated (Israel Aerospace Industries, 2022). This was compounded by Algeria's accusation that Morocco used Israeli company NSO Group's Pegasus spyware to spy on senior Algerian officials and politicians. It is worth noting the participation for the first time of the Israel Defense Forces in joint military drills in Morocco. Begun on June 30, the "African Lion" exercise was coordinated by US Africa Command (Fabian, 2022). For its part, Algerian authorities have increased their pro-Palestinian narrative in recent months. On the occasion of the celebration for the 60th anniversary of Algerian independence on July 5, a double Palestinian delegation, from the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, attended the military parade in Algiers. Interesting how on the sidelines of the celebration, thanks to the diplomatic efforts of President Tebboune, there was a rare meeting between Palestinian President Abu Mazen and Hamas political bureau chief Ismail Haniyeh (France 24, 2022).

Finally, a third driver of the crisis is the migration dossier, which indirectly involves Spain as well. In March 2022, in an unexpected move, Spanish Prime Minister Sanchez sent a letter to Moroccan King Mohammed VI to end the diplomatic crisis that began in May 2021, when Madrid had hosted the Polisario leader for medical treatment. On that occasion, Rabat had responded by facilitating a mass influx of migrants to the borders with Ceuta and Melilla, creating quite a few

problems for the Iberian country<sup>1</sup>. To the surprise of many, including political forces supporting the Spanish government, Sanchez proposed to the Moroccan king, in order to resolve the crisis, a reset of diplomatic relations based on reversing Spanish policy on Western Sahara. In fact, Madrid said it would be ready to accept, as a negotiating basis for resolving the dispute, the Moroccan autonomy proposal submitted in 2007 (La Moncloa, 2022a). While resolving the crisis with Morocco, with this move Spain ended up being drawn into the tensions between Rabat and Algiers. Indeed, the end of Spain's traditional equidistance on this dossier triggered a critical reaction from Algeria, which, in early June, recalled its ambassador to Madrid and suspended the 2002 Spanish-Algerian friendship treaty (Agencia Nova, 2022a). A measure followed, a few days later, by the termination of trade relations (Al Jazeera, 2022). Paradoxically, Algiers seems to want to make Madrid pay the highest price on the migration dossier, adopting the same coercive tactics used the previous year by its Moroccan adversary. While Algiers was suspending the friendship treaty, 113 migrants who had departed from Algerian shores, landed on the shores of the island of Mallorca. The sea route was joined by the far more serious Melilla crisis of late June. In the early morning hours of June 24, thousands of migrants attempted to cross Africa's only European land border. The harsh response by Spanish and Moroccan security forces resulted in the death of dozens of people. The Moroccan embassy in Madrid accused Algeria of being behind what it called an «organized attack» in Melilla (Agenzia Nova, 2022b). According to Moroccan sources, in fact, the mostly Sudanese migrants came from the porous border with Algeria, led by armed militiamen who facilitated their crossing. For his part, Prime Minister Sanchez did not accuse Algeria directly but acknowledged the organized and criminal nature of that action, accusing unspecified «trafficking mafias» of being behind the migration flow (La Moncloa, 2022b).

### **Final assessments**

While the scenario of a military escalation between Algeria and Morocco is remote at the moment, it is far more likely that the diplomatic clash could continue to affect indirect battlegrounds, as already happened to some extent. The main one is the migration dossier, a field of confrontation in which Algeria seems to want to drag Spain in as well. Not to be ruled out, moreover, that in the triangle between these three countries the natural gas dossier could also assume greater relevance. Algiers could in fact decide to further reduce gas supplies to Madrid, at a time when the war in Ukraine is making diversification of energy sources increasingly valuable. Hypothesis that would go along with the Algerian decision not to renew its natural gas transit contracts in the Maghreb-Europe Gas Pipeline. Second, but with a smaller probability, we could see a more pronounced escalation in Western Sahara where, despite Polisario's denunciation of the ceasefire, there has yet to be a major increase in clashes.

Overall, it is appropriate at this stage for Italy to work together with its European partners to calm tensions. In addition to the need to maintain regional stability for Rome, it would be dangerous to alienate cooperation with either of the two North African players, who are also engaged in another crucial dossier for Rome such as Libya. Another relevant dossier for Italy in which it is necessary to keep calm is the migration issue, already strained by the food crisis in North African and sub-Saharan African countries. Algiers is also increasing its weight as a supplier of natural gas to Italy, as part of the European strategy to reduce dependence from Russian supply. Therefore, on this front, too, it is appropriate to work toward a short-term freezing of the crisis, although it is currently difficult to imagine a final solution to the rift between the two North African countries.

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<sup>1</sup> This move was compounded by Morocco's alleged hacking with Pegasus spyware into the cell phones of several Spanish officials and politicians, including the prime minister, foreign minister and defense minister (Carrión, 2022).

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## **The ethnic dimension of violence threatens the Ethiopian ethnic federalism**

Ethiopia has undergone a phase of high internal conflict for several weeks now. All the regional states of the Federal Republic are experiencing ethnic-based tensions and clashes. The backlash from the war launched by the Addis Ababa central government against the Tigray regional state political authorities, referable to as the Tigray People's Liberation Front (TPLF) party, triggered the spiral of violence. Beyond the Tigrayan issue, the roots of the disputes among the different ethnic communities lie in long-standing grievances that ethnic federalism had only partially mitigated. The old rivalries overlap with the new logic of political alliance that has emerged with Abiy Ahmed's rise to power. The wave of violence in multiple areas of Ethiopia threatens Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed's political future and risks further destabilizing the country after nearly two years of internal warfare. Beyond the border, other issues persist: low-intensity fighting in the provinces surrounding the northern region of Tigray, growing tension with Sudan over the al-Fashaqa dispute, and concerns that the start of the third phase of filling of the Nile Dam basin, scheduled for late July, may lead Egypt to some form of direct or indirect intervention.

Last March, the truce proclaimed by the Addis Ababa government to allow access to humanitarian aid for Tigray and to open channels of talks with Tigrinya authorities appeared to have inaugurated a phase of general détente in Africa's second-most populous country. However, it became apparent how the internal conflict had triggered a multiplicity of ethnic-based rivalry dynamics that had been dormant for many years. The seventeen months of military clashes, the general mobilization that involved most of Ethiopia's population, and the violence against entire communities have ignited a series of inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic disputes that now threaten Balkanize the country. There are currently a multiplicity of low-intensity conflicts involving all regional states in the country. The crumbling of political-institutional structures that began before the Tigray conflict has increased tensions. Following the collapse of the Derg socialist regime, the institution-building process led by the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front (EPRDF) opted to avert the danger of future ethnically based conflicts by implementing an ethnically based federal system. The Ethiopian political system resumed the structures of federal systems with the difference that regional units or states were defined along the lines of ethnic identification. Soon, however, it became evident that Ethiopian ethnic federalism had failed. Instead of being inclusive of the country's diverse ethnic components, the system promoted exclusive management by a single power group consisting of the Tigrayan elites, at the top of which was Prime Minister Meles Zenawi. For over two decades, such a political power structure has exacerbated the sense of exclusion and marginality of other ethnic components, including the two majoritarian groups, Oromo and Amhara. Since 2017, newly elected Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed of the Oromo ethnic group has promoted a series of reforms to rebalance relations among the different ethnic communities. After overcoming the EPRDF through establishing a new political platform, the Prosperity Party (PP), Abiy Ahmed has launched an agenda to promote a new supra-ethnic identity. The political project is known as *medemer*, literally "synergy" or "reunion", which promotes an ideal pan-Ethiopian nationalism that recalls the ancient reign of Negus. In other words, at least formally, the policies promoted by Abiy Ahmed aim to overcome distinctions based on ethnicity. However, in practice, the Prime Minister has reconfigured the posts within state institutions by drastically reducing the presence of Tigrayan in favor of Oromo and Amhara components. In the fall of 2020, the political alliance between the Amhara and Oromo

took on a military dimension in the conflict against the Tigray authorities (TPLF) and their armed branch Tigray Defense Forces (TDF). The conflict between the Addis Ababa government and the TPLF triggered a situation that had become explosive in the previous months. Despite the original intent, the pan-Ethiopian project promoted by Abiy Ahmed had not deprived ethnic identities of relevance. Instead, it accelerated the collapse of the institutional structure on which ethnic federalism was built. As a result, the outcome of the *medemer* agenda implementation was the opposite of what the Prime Minister wished and expected. Ethnically based identification has reacquired centrality in Ethiopian political life and fostered the resurgence of violent and exclusive forms of nationalism.

These dynamics have overlapped with the growing rift within the political majority. The PP-led executive, within which the backbone is constituted by the country's two majority ethnic groups, has suffered from differing positions about the course of the conflict in Tigray. Throughout the months of conflict, the Prime Minister had enjoyed broad support from Amhara political elites, represented by the National Movement of Amhara (NaMa). The official and unofficial military apparatus of the Amhara regional state, including the paramilitary group known as Fano, had also been a major ally against the TPLF. Abiy Ahmed's decision to declare a cease-fire by arresting the coalition advance toward Mekelle has raised discontent among Amhara nationalists who claim sovereignty over the Western Tigray territories. The conflict in Tigray had fueled Amhara irredentism, which, by invoking the memory of their historical nation, has aimed at expanding the borders of the regional state. As a result, several politicians and prominent figures within the Amhara security apparatus have challenged Abiy Ahmed's actions by refusing to participate in any talks with the TPLF. Amhara's political components have thus split. The moderate movements inside NaMa have confirmed loyalty to the Prime Minister and his political project. Nationalist groups, on the other hand, have begun to oppose Addis Ababa's political and military operations actively. In the face of several violent outbreaks by Fano militias, the federal government, in cooperation with Amhara regional state authorities, launched an arrest campaign. The crackdown has mainly involved members of Amhara nationalism, such as politicians, journalists, and intellectuals who are considered a threat to the domestic stability of the regional state. At the same time, ethnic-based violence has increased between Oromo and Amhara communities in the border areas between the two regional states. Notably, in the Horo Guduru Welega district, several assaults against the civilian population have been reported. The attacks were carried out by Fano militias targeting the Oromo people and the Oromo Liberation Army (OLA) group against Amhara. The most severe episode in recent weeks occurred in Tole (Gibi district), where more than two hundred ethnic Amhara civilians died. The Oromo regional government and Addis Ababa have accused the OLA group of carrying out the massacre. However, many doubts remain surrounding the event. The OLA militia spokesperson denied involvement, pointing the finger at the federal Ethiopian National Defense Force (ENDF) and some local paramilitary groups. The ambiguities about what happened have further worsened political relations between Amhara nationalists and the Prime Minister. Some of the NaMa delegates boycotted Parliament sessions because the House of Peoples Representative Speaker Tagesse Dallo, a PP member, had refused to schedule a debate on the Tole massacre. The government wants to avoid publicly addressing the issue because doing it would mean bringing to light the weakness of federal authorities in several districts in the Oromo regional state that have been under the control of the OLA group. Although the ENDF has launched a large-scale operation since March, the OLA, led by commander Jaal Marroo-registered Kumsa Diriba (Hanspal, 2021), continues to operate in several regional Ethiopian states thanks to a dense support network built up during the conflict in Tigray. In mid-June, the OLA conducted a coordinated attack against three ENDF military bases. The leading action took place in the regional state of Gambella, where OLA militias enjoyed logistical support from another rebel movement, the Gambella Liberation Front (GLF). The biggest worries of Ethiopian security forces, however, concern the operational capabilities acquired by

Marroo's group in Benishangul-Gumuz regional state, not far from the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). In the area, for the past several weeks, the Ethiopian federal army has extensively used drones, mainly Iranian-made Mohajer-6s, stationed at Asosa Air Base.

The consequences of the truce between the Addis Ababa government and the Tigrayan authorities have created a political rift between the Prime Minister and some political components that support the executive. The internal tensions within the majority have been overlaid by the problems that Abiy Ahmed has long faced within his ethnic group, the Oromo. Recent events have also intensified the rivalry between the majority ethnic communities, Amhara and Oromo, resulting in several episodes of violent confrontation. The cycle of violence affecting a multiplicity of regional states throughout the country denotes the effects of the gradual crumbling of ethnic federalism. The clashes have a marked ethnic nature that, if not handled promptly and effectively, threatens to trigger a balkanization process in Ethiopia.

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## **Pakistan' multiple crises**

In April 2022, Imran Khan became the first Pakistani head of government that lost the parliament' confidence. When he was elected in 2018, he seemed to have built a charismatic figure that broke up with the dictatorships and dynasties of the past that dominated Pakistani politics for decades<sup>1</sup>.

Pakistan has a long history of military dictatorships: General Ayyub Khan in the 1960s, General Zia-ul-Haq in the 1980s and in 1999 General Musharraf took power – the Prime Minister was then Nawaz Sharif – with a coup holding both the office of President and Prime Minister for some time. In 2007, the leader of the opposition party Benazir Bhutto – daughter of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto who was Minister, President and Prime Minister in the 1960s-1970s – was killed in an attack and Musharraf (convicted in *absentia* for her murder) resigned. In 2008 Ali Zardari, widower of Bhutto, was elected President, until 2013 when he was succeeded by businessman Mamnoon Hussain whose political career - he had been governor of Sindh since June 1999 – had been interrupted after 4 months by Musharraf's coup.

Khan was succeeded in April 2022 by opposition leader Shahbaz Sharif, brother of former Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif – 3 times Prime Minister – who had been ousted in 1999.

When he was elected, Khan enjoyed the support of the population, the army and the secret services that are the backbone of the state. The economic crisis worsened and, fearing the consequences of the *débâcle*, the military abandoned him. The opposition had accused the Prime Minister of bad governance and inability to manage the economy: in an attempt to block the vote, the prime minister intended to dissolve the Parliament but the Supreme Court ruled that this action was unconstitutional.

The new prime minister leads a coalition government that will have to face a serious economic and financial crisis: the inflation rate is over 21%<sup>2</sup>, food prices have risen<sup>3</sup>, the public debt grows<sup>4</sup>, exceeding 80% of the Gross Domestic Product, as well as the unemployment rate<sup>5</sup>, imports<sup>6</sup> (oil, machinery, raw materials, chemicals, antibiotics and vaccines) and the trade deficit reached a record \$35 billion<sup>7</sup>, despite the government's ban on non-essential luxury goods.

In recent years, Khan has failed to keep his electoral promises<sup>8</sup>: to create 10 million jobs, to make 5 million homes available, providing good administration, stimulating economic growth and promoting tax reforms. The former prime minister has become a victim of his own rhetoric<sup>9</sup>, as well

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<sup>1</sup> S. Kermani, "Imran Khan: What led to charismatic Pakistan PM's downfall", BBC, 9 April 2022; <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-61047736>.

<sup>2</sup> Trading Economics, Pakistan Inflation Rate; <https://tradingeconomics.com/pakistan/inflation-cpi>.

<sup>3</sup> Reliefweb, "Pakistan Market Monitor Report - June 2022", 5 July 2022; <https://reliefweb.int/report/pakistan/pakistan-market-monitor-report-june-2022>.

<sup>4</sup> The Express Tribune, "Pakistan's debt mounts to Rs53.5tr", May 21, 2022; <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2357583/pakistans-debt-mounts-to-rs535tr>.

<sup>5</sup> Macrotrends, "Pakistan Unemployment Rate 1991-2022",

<sup>6</sup> The Pakistan Business Council, "Pakistan: Rising Imports, Declining Exports & Premature Deindustrialization", 2022; [https://www.pbc.org.pk/research/selected-trade-and-manufacturing-data-for-pakistan-a-brief\\_analysis-2/](https://www.pbc.org.pk/research/selected-trade-and-manufacturing-data-for-pakistan-a-brief_analysis-2/).

<sup>7</sup> Business Standard, "Pakistan's trade deficit hits record-high of \$48.66 bn as imports soar", July 4, 2022; [https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/pakistan-s-trade-deficit-hits-record-high-of-48-66-bn-as-imports-soar-122070300465\\_1.html#:~:text=Cash%2Dstrapped%20Pakistan%27s%20trade%20deficit,significant%2057%20per%20cent%20jump&text=Pakistan%27s%20import%20bill%20increased%2043.45,billion%2C%20just%20a%20year%20ago](https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/pakistan-s-trade-deficit-hits-record-high-of-48-66-bn-as-imports-soar-122070300465_1.html#:~:text=Cash%2Dstrapped%20Pakistan%27s%20trade%20deficit,significant%2057%20per%20cent%20jump&text=Pakistan%27s%20import%20bill%20increased%2043.45,billion%2C%20just%20a%20year%20ago.).

<sup>8</sup> FM Shakil, "Pakistan's new PM inherits an economic nightmare", Asia Times, April 11, 2022; <https://asiatimes.com/2022/04/pakistans-new-pm-inherits-an-economic-nightmare/>.

<sup>9</sup> Reuters, "Promises, promises, Imran Khan raises Pakistani hopes sky high", August 19, 2018; <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-politics-imrankhan-analysis-idUSKBN1L403J>.



as being accused of failing to fight corruption and cronyism<sup>10</sup> that, according to him, were the main problem of the country for which he presented himself as the only possible solution. Since the end of his government, he has been calling for early elections: he challenges the legitimacy of the government, leads the street protests and accuses Washington of conspiring against him<sup>11</sup>.

So far, China and the United Arab Emirates have saved the country<sup>12</sup> with large loans, in addition to the expected \$6 billion intervention from the International Monetary Fund<sup>13</sup>.

The consequences of this crisis fall for the most part on the weaker social strata of the population, threatening the social stability of the country.

The military establishment, which first supported and then disassociated itself from Khan (who paid for irreconcilable differences over the appointment of the chief of intelligence and the foreign policy), remains a key element in the control of the country. Khan's greatest strength, the seemingly unconditional support of the military, has become his weak point despite the former prime minister hailing from the urban middle class, like many members of the Pakistani army and the bureaucracy. The military establishment assumed that civil-military harmony would put Pakistan back on a development path, but although military support is essential to maintaining power, it is not a sufficient condition. Eventually, the opposition blamed the military-Khan alliance for plunging the country into economic, financial and social chaos<sup>14</sup>.

The current Sharif government and the political class will need the support of the military<sup>15</sup> and, to some extent, will depend on their consent in a country where full democratic transition is not yet achieved<sup>16</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> Dawn, "The promise of Imran Khan", April 10, 2022; <https://www.dawn.com/news/1684309>.

<sup>11</sup> M. Afzal, "What is happening in Pakistan's continuing crisis?", Brookings Institution, May 20, 2022; [https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/05/20/what-is-happening-in-pakistans-continuing-crisis/?utm\\_campaign=Foreign%20Policy&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_content=213815314&utm\\_source=hs\\_email](https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2022/05/20/what-is-happening-in-pakistans-continuing-crisis/?utm_campaign=Foreign%20Policy&utm_medium=email&utm_content=213815314&utm_source=hs_email).

<sup>12</sup> The Indian Express, "Explained: How China, UAE are helping Pakistan tide over its economic crisis", June 30, 2022; <https://indianexpress.com/article/explained/explained-how-china-uae-are-helping-pakistan-tide-over-its-economic-crisis-8001019/>.

<sup>13</sup> International Monetary Fund, "IMF Staff Concludes Visit to Pakistan", May 25, 2022; <https://www.imf.org/en/News/Articles/2022/05/25/pr22170-pakistan-imf-staff-concludes-visit-to-pakistan>.

<sup>14</sup> A. Basit, "Pakistan's Military Ends Its Experiment With Hybrid Democracy", Foreign Policy, April 25, 2022; <https://foreignpolicy.com/2022/04/25/pakistan-military-imran-khan-hybrid-democracy/>.

<sup>15</sup> International Crisis Group, "Watch List 2022 – Spring Update", 24 May 2022; <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/watch-list-2022-spring-update#ukraine>.

<sup>16</sup> The Economist, "Pakistan's generals should let politicians run the country for once", April 13, 2022; <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2022/04/13/pakistans-generals-should-let-politicians-run-the-country-for-once>.

### **Boris Johnson's resignation and its possible impact on UK's international role**

The announcement of Boris Johnson's resignation as Conservative Party's leader following the resignation of several cabinet members opens a problematic scenario, with potentially unpredictable outcomes, in a very sensitive period of British political life. His resignation as Party leader de facto ends his experience as Prime Minister, even if Johnson has already declared he will remain in office until his successor is appointed: considering the approaching summer break, no earlier than next autumn. The premier's decision not to leave power triggered harsh reactions in a deeply divided Party. In early June, the internal opposition already challenged the premier in a confidence vote. On that occasion, Johnson won 59% support among the Tory MPs, and the Prime Minister labelled it an «extremely good, positive, conclusive, decisive result». However, some sources remarked on the depth of the rift and the size of the opposition (e.g., R. Mason, 2022). Beyond the scandals that dotted his stay in Downing Street, the main reason for Johnson's resignation has been the growing loss of popularity and a constant decline in the electorate's favour since mid-2021. On June 30, 2022, according to a yougov.co.uk poll, only 23% of the sample replied «well» to the question «How well is Boris Johnson doing as Prime Minister?». According to the same poll, «badly» was at 71% and «don't know» at 7%. When the cabinet was sworn in, in July 2019, both «well» and «badly» were at 32% and «don't know» – significantly – at 37%, while at the top of Johnson's popularity, in April 2020, the Prime Minister's enjoyed a 40-percentage-points-edge in popular favour, with «well» at 66%, «badly» at 26% and «don't know» at 7%<sup>1</sup>.

At the international level, Boris Johnson identified his image with Brexit and – after the outbreak of the Ukraine war – with unshakable support of Kyiv's government, with whom London started military collaboration in 2014 when David Cameron was Prime Minister (in office: 2010-16). Since entering Downing Street, Johnson also relished Great Britain's international role in giving birth to a “Global Britain”, reviving the country's past greatness. During his premiership, such an ambition fuelled a constant increase in military spending and a more prominent international profile, which led, among else, to sign the trilateral security pact in the Indo-Pacific with Australia and the United States (AUKUS, September 15, 2021). The “Global Britain” project was heavily criticized, primarily due to its supposed anti-European character. Another source of criticism was Johnson's “permanent Brexit” policy (Shapiro and Witney, 2021), i.e., his using arguments against the EU's institutions to consolidate consensus at home. According to some observers, this strategy was one of the reasons for the decline in his favour (Henley, 2021). It is also still unclear whether they have proved effective in the economic realm. In the past weeks, an important cabinet member such as the former Chancellor of the Exchequer, Rishi Sunak, admitted that Brexit could have harmed British foreign trade's recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic (Lambert, 2022). Sunak was also one of the first cabinet members to resign in early July, noting in his resignation letter that «it has become clear to me that our [the Prime Minister's and mine] approaches [to the economic issues] are fundamentally too different» to continue the political collaboration<sup>2</sup>.

Given these premises, it is understandable that the European institutions looked with favour at Johnson's resignation and the possibility of a new cabinet. Even lacking official declarations by the Commission or other EU bodies, comments from Brussels have been almost unanimously positive,

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<sup>1</sup> <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/trackers/boris-johnson-approval-rating> (accessed: July 8, 2022).

<sup>2</sup> Rishi Sunak's and Sajid Javid's resignation letters in full, *BBC*, July 6, 2022. Online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-62058236> (accessed: July 8, 2022).

especially among the figures involved in the complex Brexit negotiations. Among else, the EU chief Brexit negotiator, Michel Barnier, wished that the Prime Minister's departure could open «a new page in relations» between the EU and the UK, «more constructive, more respectful of commitments made [...] and more friendly»<sup>3</sup>. However, a drastic change in London's course seems hardly probable. While some observers remark that Johnson's resignation could be the «beginning of end for Brexit», at least as a political idea (Larsen, 2022), the possibility that Britain re-enters the European Union is so remote that it is not even part of the Labour agenda (C. Mason, 2022). The outcome of the coming power struggle in the Conservative Party to replace the former Prime Minister will play a relevant role. An equally relevant role will play the new Prime Minister's decision whether to hold political elections or not after his/her instalment. However, in this event, too, it seems impossible that a new government or even a new parliamentary majority could reverse the current trend. The most probable effect will be a softer language and a more collaborative attitude towards the EU in the fields of common interest. In this sense, a more relaxed posture on the special protocol entered into force in 2021 to regulate the UK-Ireland relations, which the Johnson cabinet wanted to amend unilaterally, would be a relevant step toward a better understanding.

### **Final remarks**

Johnson's resignation would probably leave unaffected also the other major international issues. Even before the official announcement, the US administration issued a statement to confirm the strength of the UK/US relationship (Chalfant, 2022). Moreover, some observers pointed out that – with the end of the sometimes bumpy dialogue between President Biden and the former Prime Minister – relations between the two Anglo-Saxon powers could improve in the future (Toosi, 2022). The Ukraine war remains the great testbed. Kyiv's government understandably regretted Johnson's resignation. Until now, London has been the second leading supplier of military assistance to Ukraine after the US. However, this state of things seems not about to change. British Defence Secretary Ben Wallace (one of Johnson's possible successors) already underlined the bipartisan favour that Kyiv enjoys in British political circles. In his resignation speech, Johnson himself reassured Ukraine's public that «we in the UK will continue to back your fight for freedom for as long as it takes» (Ridgwell, 2022). The Russian reactions (positive about the resignation but hardly convinced that it would lead to a renewed dialogue and the arrival in Downing Street of «more professional people»<sup>4</sup>) somehow confirm that no real change is imminent. In this perspective, continuity seems the most likely trend regardless of who Boris Johnson's successor will actually be. On the other hand, the question is whether it will be possible to develop, in the coming years, some form of “Johnsonless Johnsonism”. The question is also whether this “Johnsonless Johnsonism” will be able to balance the demands that supported Brexit in 2016 with the ambitions and challenges that London is facing in the current, radically different international environment.

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<sup>3</sup> Boris Johnson: World reacts as UK PM resigns, *BBC*, July 7, 2022. Online: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-62077691> (accessed: July 8, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Kremlin Says Has Little Hope for 'More Professional' U.K. Leader as Johnson Resigns, *The Moscow Times*, July 7, 2022. Online: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/07/07/kremlin-says-has-little-hope-for-more-professional-uk-leader-as-johnson-resigns-a78235> (accessed: July 8, 2022).

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### **The sixth summit on the Caspian Sea: lights and shadows in the development of regional energy cooperation**

On June 29, the presidents of the five coastal nations bordering the Caspian basin (Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan) gathered in the Turkmen capital Ashgabat for the sixth Caspian summit. This meeting was particularly important as it took place four years after the historic fifth summit – held in the Kazakh port city of Aktau, in August 2018-. – During the fifth summit, after decades of discussions and opposing positions, the agreement for the definition on the legal status of the Caspian was finally signed: this deal allows the full development of the hydrocarbon reserves existing in the basin. It also would permit, above all, the construction of transport infrastructures (natural gas and oil underwater pipelines) in order to link the two shores of the Caspian Sea, offering the concrete possibility for Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to carry on their exports to western markets via the South Caucasus and Turkey.

The problem of defining the legal status of the Caspian Sea arose since 1991 when, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan became independent republics and claimed the right to exploit the Caspian basin, which from a kind of Soviet-Iranian lake, it became a shared and disputed basin between the five littoral states. According to the Energy Information Administration (2013), the Caspian should contain reserves of 48 billion barrels of oil and over 8 trillion cubic meters of gas. Basing on the Convention signed in 2018, the Caspian was declared a “closed sea” (and not an “international lake”, a solution that would have involved a division of offshore reserves in equal parts). Thus, the share due to each state (in terms of exploitation rights of offshore hydrocarbon reserves) is linked to the length of the coastline (Liakopoulou and Indeo 2021).

Although various issues were discussed during this last summit, including the reaffirmed joint commitment to maintain peace and security in the region, the energy issue assumed an undisputed key role, especially considering the impact of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. On the one hand, the EU seeks to further promote the implementation of the Southern Energy Corridor – involving Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan in order to increase their exports of natural gas and oil – to compensate for the reduction in hydrocarbon imports from Russia. On the other hand the trans-Caspian energy route would guarantee these Central Asian nations the possibility of diversifying export markets.

During his speech at the summit, Russian President Putin described the need to develop energy resources, underlining how the littoral countries have already promoted several agreements for the joint exploration of the offshore fields, but pointing out, at the same time, its real concern about the ecological-environmental problems and the need to safeguard the Caspian ecosystem (Teslova 2022). Essentially, Putin has instrumentally used once again the ecological-environmental issue to slow down and hinder the realization of trans-Caspian energy interconnections. As well as for reasons of geopolitical influence on the post-Soviet space and on the EU (its energy dependence on Russian energy imports), Moscow's opposition appears motivated also by economic considerations, as Gazprom's high revenues linked to the sale of hydrocarbons on European markets would be reduced in the case of the project's realization. Before the adoption of the Convention, Russia (and Iran) used the right of veto – namely the need to have the consent of all five littoral nations for the construction of pipelines across the Caspian – to express their opposition to projects with an alleged environmental impact capable of threatening the fragile Caspian ecosystem.

The Convention has instead introduced a different approach: the article 14 recognizes the right to build an underwater gas pipeline if there is an agreement between the countries involved in the route (a position that Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan jointly supported for years), but these projects have to be in the condition of accordance with internationally-recognized ecological requirements and standards. It means that the implementation of this project could be influenced in the case of potential and almost obvious negative observations on this matter from the Russian and Iranian side (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russian Federation 2018; Garibov 2019).

Despite the European Commission's growing commitment to increase the capacity of the Southern Energy Corridor (currently only Azerbaijan exports natural gas to European markets) through partnerships with producing countries, in this historical moment in which the strategic priority of this energy route has raised, Russia's possibility to oppose the construction of the submarine section effectively undermines this option, even if the involved parties continue to negotiate. A few days after the Ashgabat summit, Turkish Vice President Oktay said that the Ankara government is examining the possibility of transporting Turkmen gas to Turkey via Azerbaijan, using the Trans-Anatolian TANAP pipeline, an essential component of the Southern Energy Corridor. The current considered option is focused on a project presented last year by a US company, in order to realize a gas pipeline (with a capacity 10-12 bcm) from the Turkmen offshore field of Magtymguly to the Azerbaijani Azeri-Chirag-Gunashli field, and volumes of natural gas which would then be carried onshore and delivered through the TANAP pipeline (O'Byrne 2022).

Following the decision of a Russian court on 6 July to suspend for one month operations in the Russian Black Sea port of Novorossiysk - terminal of the Caspian Pipeline Consortium, through which Kazakhstan places 2/3 of its exports on the markets - Kazakh President Tokayev openly reiterated the need to strengthen exports through the Caspian route, as a tool for energy diversification. In fact, two of the four oil export routes of this Central Asian republic transit Russian territory, in addition to the oil pipeline with China and multimodal exports (oil tankers and pipelines) across the Caspian. Since 2006 Kazakhstan has started to export oil (2.1 million tons in 2021) through the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) oil pipeline, carried on by tankers along the Caspian from the port of Aqtau to the Azerbaijani port of Baku and then delivered through the BTC pipeline. Given the capacity of the infrastructure and of its export terminals (5 million tons, which can however reach 12 million with upgrading works), Kazakhstan has a great interest in developing the Trans-Caspian route. In 2006, parallel to the launch of the BTC, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan signed an agreement for the creation of a Trans-Caspian Oil Transport System (TCOTS) – initially supported by the European Union. A system consisting of a land pipeline from Eskene to Kuryk, near Aktau, from which an underwater oil pipeline would be connected with the port of Baku (Putz 2022). The need to strengthen its energy security preserving the possibility to regularly supply the markets is pushing Kazakhstan to seriously consider increasing its exports through the Caspian Sea. In fact, since the beginning of the conflict, the CPC pipeline has been interrupted for three times. This factor seems to be a kind of Moscow's indirect pressure on its ally (Kazakhstan is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union and of the security-military block called the Collective Security Treaty Organization), which pursues a neutral policy regarding the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, refusing to recognize the independence of the self-proclaimed republics of Donetsk and Lugansk.

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## Private military companies: the special case of the Wagner Group

### The Wagner Group and its origins

The Wagner Group is usually described as an unregistered private military company (PMC) based in Russia, but active only outside its borders (Marten 2019). Overall, the information currently available about this organization is quite limited. According to some experts, the Wagner Group would be a network of groups rather than as a single compactly structured organization (for example, Mackinnon 2021). The actual size of its personnel is unknown; according to some estimates, it could currently have around 8,000 members, mainly of Russian nationality (cf. Weiss et al. 2021).

According to the available information, the Wagner Group was founded in 2014 by Dmitry Valerievich Utkin. This Russian citizen (born in 1970 in Asbest, Siberia) was an officer of the special forces of the GRU, the Russian military intelligence, where he rose to the rank of lieutenant colonel. In 2013 Utkin had left his career in the regular armed forces, to join private military companies; in the same year, with one of these private organizations he had also been active in the Syrian civil war, for a few months, in support of pro-Russian President Bashar Hafez al-Assad.

Few months after his return to Moscow in October 2013, Utkin set up the Wagner Group. The name of this enigmatic organization would be a tribute to the famous German composer, much loved by Adolf Hitler too, and would be a confirmation of Utkin's neo-Nazi sympathies. In fact, although the Wagner Group is not openly committed to promoting any ideological orientation, it is well known that some of its members, including its alleged founder himself, have extreme right-wing orientations.

Utkin has faced sanctions by both the United States, in June 2017, due to his role in the conflict in Ukraine, and restrictive measures by the European Union, in December 2021, for serious human rights violations and abuses. Even if Utkin is considered the founder and the best-known member of the Wagner Group, there is no full evidence that he actually exercises the role of commander of the organization.

Unlike simple mercenaries, understood as modern «soldiers of fortune», the members of the Wagner Group are part of a stable organizational structure and, above all, are not interested in fighting for any actor that may offer them material remuneration; on the contrary, they clearly operate in line with the interests and objectives of the government of the Russian Federation and its allies (Marten 2019).

### The deployment of the Wagner Group: from Ukraine in 2014 to Ukraine in 2022

The Wagner Group gained notoriety during the 2014 Ukrainian crisis. On that occasion, the organization reportedly was active, since February, in Crimea, unilaterally annexed to the Russian Federation on 18 March, and, since May, provided assistance to the militias of the self-proclaimed People's Republics of Donetsk and of Luhansk, in the context of the armed conflict that broke out in the Donbas region. In eastern Ukraine, the Wagner Group was also allegedly involved in the capture and even in the assassination of separatist leaders who would have not been sufficiently loyal to Moscow's plans (Karagiannis 2021).

In 2015, Utkin and his colleagues would have moved to Russia, to proceed then with the deployment in Syria, immediately after the start of the Russian military intervention in favor of Syrian President al-Assad (the Russian intervention started, with air strikes, on September 30). The Wagner Group participated directly in the hostilities on the battlefield and was also used to guard oilfields.

In addition, the Wagner Group has been active in several other armed conflicts, especially in Africa (Libya, Central African Republic, Sudan, Mozambique, Mali, etc.) (among others, Ramani 2020; Lovotti and Varvelli 2021; Bressan 2022).

Most recently, the Wagner Group was employed in the war in Ukraine which broke out on 24 February 2022. According to Western news reports, 400 members of the organization arrived in Kyiv from the Central African Republic as early as January 2022 with the aim of assassinating President Volodymyr O. Zelenskyy and other Ukrainian public figures and preparing the ground for the Russian occupation of the country (Rana 2022). Even after the invasion launched by Moscow, the Wagner Group, also operating under other denominations, actively participated in the war in Ukraine, probably with over 1,000 members: they are active on the battlefield, but they reportedly are also committed to training Russian recruits who have just arrived at the front.

As is well known, the Wagner Group has been repeatedly accused of war crimes and serious human rights violations in the various areas where it has been deployed (e.g., Doxsee and Thompson 2022). According to sources attributed to Germany's foreign intelligence agency (the BND), the organization played a leading role in the massacre of civilians in the town of Bucha, near Kyiv, in March 2022 (Amann et al. 2022).

### **The nature of the Wagner Group's relations with the Russian Federation**

There is little doubt that the Wagner Group has worked to support Russian interests abroad (for example, Marten 2019). In addition, according to some indications, it would carry out training activities in facilities of the Russian Ministry of Defence and would receive services and goods, such as health services and weapons, directly from the Moscow Government. Furthermore, it is known that on 9 December 2016 Utkin was photographed at a reception in the Kremlin, which was attended by President Vladimir V. Putin himself, organized to celebrate Russian citizens who received the state decoration of the «Order of Courage».

For these reasons, Western state authorities and numerous independent experts consider the Wagner Group to be an organization directly in the service of the Russian Ministry of Defense. For its part, the Russian Federation has never confirmed its relations with this private organization, which does not officially exist - nor could it exist, since in Russia the establishment of private military companies is formally not allowed (Marten 2019; Mackinnon 2021).

According to several reports and also according to the United States (for example, US Department of State 2022), the Wagner Group would be funded and/or managed by Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, a Russian businessman, with no military background, well known for his close ties to President Putin. Prigozhin, who has been the subject to sanctions by both the United States and the European Union for a few years, has denied any link with the organization.

On the basis of the available information and in the light of the literature on the subject, it is possible to assume that the government of the Russian Federation can use the Wagner Group for at least three reasons: to avoid direct responsibility abroad (plausible deniability), especially in the case of incidents, embarrassing episodes, etc.; to show a lower number of official human losses in armed conflicts, especially in the face of Russian public opinion; to aim to contain the financial costs of such military interventions, using methods of action and organization that are typical of private companies.

### **Conclusions**

The Wagner Group appears to be an important element of the broader strategy of «hybrid warfare» employed by the Russian Federation, based on a combination of conventional and non-conventional measures, especially at a time when Moscow has decided to intervene in Ukraine and, with dynamics often regarded as in contrast to those adopted by Washington in the same period, it has actively engaged in expanding its political influence in the Middle East and in Africa.

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## Acronyms list

5G:	Fifth Generation
ALU:	Azimio la Umoja
BBI:	Building Bridges Initiative
BND:	<i>Bundesnachrichtendienst</i>
CGIL:	<i>Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro</i>
COVID-19:	Coronavirus Disease 19
CNPC:	China National Petroleum Company
ENDF:	Ethiopian National Defense Force
EPRDF:	Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front
EU:	European Union
FBI:	Federal Bureau of Investigation
GERD:	Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam
GDP:	Gross Domestic Product
GLF:	Gambella Liberation Front
GRU:	<i>Glavnoe razvedyvatel'noe upravlenie</i>
IOC:	International Oil Companies
ISAF:	International Security Assistance Force
JCPOA:	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
JP:	Jubilee Party
KK:	Kenya Kwanza
LNG:	Liquefied Natural Gas
mbpd:	million barrels of oil per day
NaMa:	National Movement of Amhara
NATO:	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NCIC:	National Cohesion & Integration Commission
NIOC:	National Iranian Oil Company
NWO:	New World Order
ODA:	Orange Democratic Movement
OLA:	Oromo Liberation Army
QAnon:	Q Anonymous
PMC:	Private Military Company
PP:	Prosperity Party
PRC:	People's Republic of China
TDF:	Tigray Defense Forces
TPLF:	Tigray People's Liberation Front
UDA:	United Democratic Alliance
USA:	United States of America
WEF:	World Economic Forum

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## **Defense Research and Analysis Institute**

Within the Ministry of Defense, the Defense Research and Analysis Institute (IRAD) is responsible for carrying out and coordinating research, advanced training and strategic analysis on various issues of political, economic, social, cultural and military nature and on the effects of the introduction of new technologies that determine significant changes in the defense and security scenario. IRAD contributes to the development of culture and knowledge for the general public and the national interest.

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- ensure participation in examination boards;
- supervise the reception and orientation of students through interviews and supplementary activities.

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The “Osservatorio Strategico” is a survey that collects, analyses and reports developed by the Defense Research and Analysis Institute (IRAD), carried out by specialized researchers.

The areas of interest monitored in 2022 are:

- The Balkans and the Black Sea;
- Mashreq, Gran Maghreb, Egypt and Israel;
- Sahel, Gulf of Guinea, sub-Saharan Africa and Horn of Africa;
- China, Southern and Eastern Asia and Pacific;
- Sahel and sub-Saharan Africa;
- Persian Gulf;
- Euro/Atlantic (USA-NATO-Partners);
- Energy policies: interests, challenges and opportunities;
- Unconventional Challenges and threats.

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