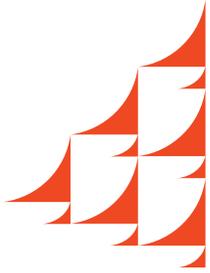


The Arab Gulf States  
Institute in Washington  
Building bridges of understanding



## Regional and Global Power Competition Deepens Fault Lines Across the Southern Mediterranean

Anna L. Jacobs



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Anna L. Jacobs

October 21, 2020

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## About the Author

**Anna L. Jacobs** is a Doha-based political scientist focusing on foreign policy in the Middle East and North Africa. She specializes in the politics of North Africa, global and regional power competition, U.S.-China relations, and U.S. foreign policy. Previously, she was the senior research assistant at the Brookings Doha Center, academic director and lecturer in journalism and new media for SIT Study Abroad in Morocco, and a political risk consultant and editor. Her research and analysis has been published with the Brookings Institution, The Washington Post, Al Jazeera English, The National Interest, Jadaliyya, and others. She received a Master of Philosophy in modern Middle Eastern studies from Oxford University and Bachelor of Arts in government, foreign affairs, and French from the University of Virginia.

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## Executive Summary

North Africa has long been considered a peripheral region in wider Middle East dynamics. Today, however, it has become a site of great power competition among the United States, Russia, and China; the location of one of the region's most protracted violent conflicts; and the scene for regional and Gulf Arab rivalries. Outside the conflicting interests of the global powers inserting themselves into the politics of Libya and across North Africa, there are important divisions within and among the countries of the region itself and a legacy of peripheral fault lines, such as the Western Sahara conflict, the regional rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, the proliferation of armed groups and instability in the Sahel, an unstable political transition in Algeria, divisions over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project, and geopolitical competition in the Horn of Africa.

Therefore, it is essential to examine the Mediterranean conflict lines through a wider scope that encompasses regional dynamics in the Middle East and Africa, and especially the engagement of regional actors like the Gulf Arab states.

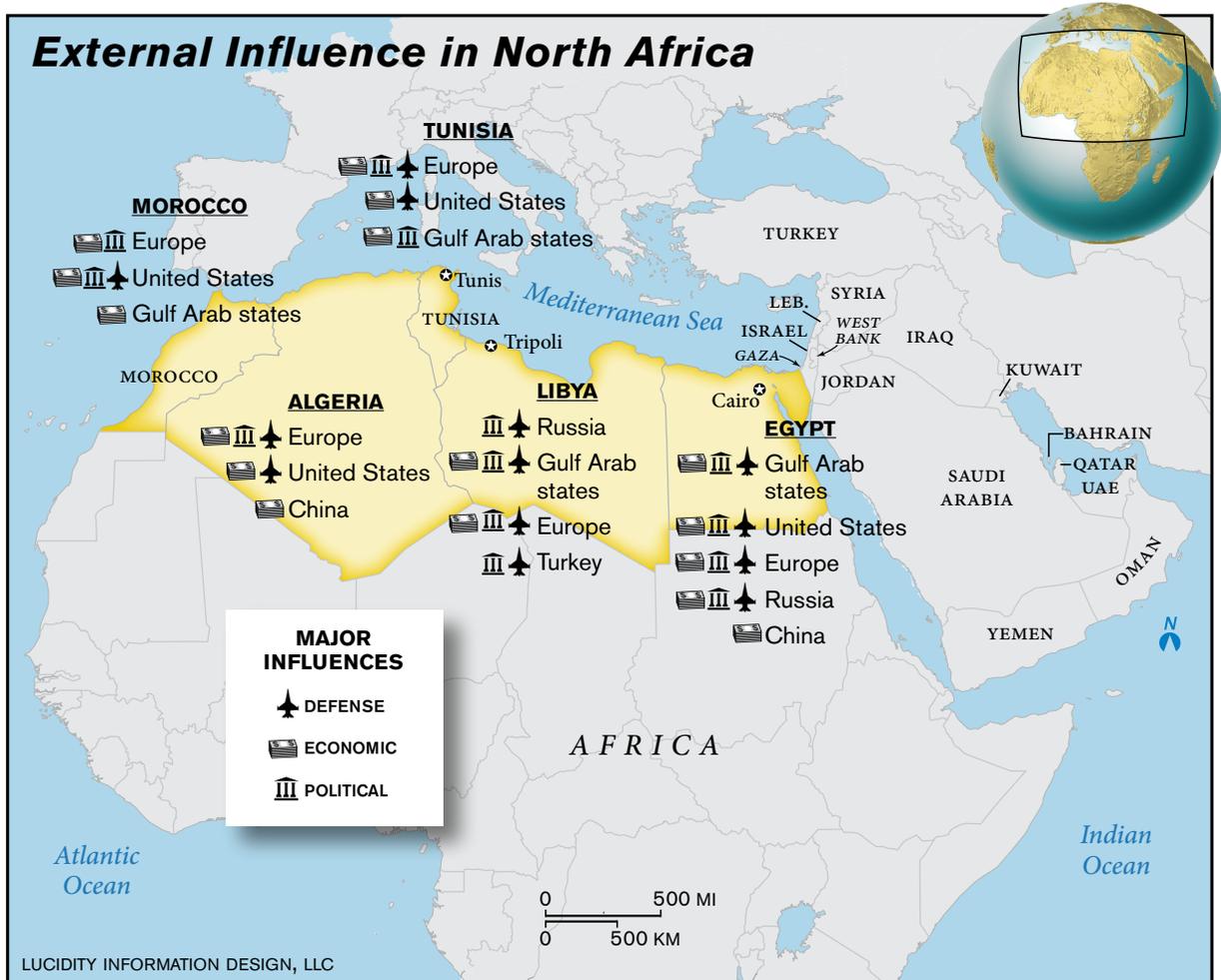
Gulf Arab states exert influence and protect their interests in North Africa primarily through soft power mechanisms, such as economic assistance, diplomatic support, increasingly high levels of foreign investment, migration linkages, joint military and defense cooperation, and growing financial and business ties. Gulf Arab influence has become a point of political contention in the domestic politics of North African countries, and political parties that have come in and out of power have received support from Gulf states. The fault lines in North Africa have intensified following internal Gulf disputes, such as the 2014 rift and especially the 2017 boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt. Maghreb states like Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have remained officially neutral in the Gulf rift, even as various Gulf states attempt to exert political and economic influence to sway these states. Egypt positioned itself solidly in the Saudi-UAE regional axis after the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi, and Libya has become a hotspot for global and regional power struggles.

Gulf Arab states share strategic interests with rival global powers like the United States, Russia, and China. However, the fault lines in North Africa also reveal tensions between Gulf states and traditional allies like the United States, as well as new points of convergence with U.S. rivals like China and Russia. This reflects the broader trend of Middle East and North African states opening up to greater economic and political ties outside of traditional Western partners, what many analysts have called a shift east toward greater engagement with China and Russia. Some Middle East and North African countries are pursuing more aggressive foreign policies and seeking to diversify their strategic alliances as the United States and Europe take a backseat in regional affairs. Yet, aiming to counter an encroaching Russian and Chinese presence in the region, U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper made his first visit to Africa, arriving in Tunisia on September 30.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ryan Browne, "US Defense Secretary Visits Africa for First Time Seeking To Push Back on Russia and China," *CNN*, September 30, 2020.

This paper demonstrates the converging dynamics of geopolitical competition, regional conflicts, and domestic politics in North African states, highlighting the necessity of greater strategic focus and support for conflict resolution in this increasingly unstable theater.



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## Introduction

Post-2011 North African states have become sites of proxy wars and battles for spheres of influence among regional powers with the shift from a unipolar structure and U.S.-centric security architecture in the Middle East to an increasingly multipolar world order. Conflicts have intensified over key regions and waterways, such as the Mediterranean. Various layers of conflict are fomenting tensions in this geostrategic region, where multiple global and rising regional powers maintain essential political, economic, and security interests. Fault lines include acute divisions over Libya, Syria, and Cyprus, which are connected to disagreements over offshore energy and maritime routes in the eastern Mediterranean Sea and rising tensions over Turkey's growing role. These fault lines have been exacerbated by the active engagement in the region of the Gulf Arab states. The growing internationalization of Libya's conflict reflects this most clearly, but it has also been on display to varying degrees across the southern Mediterranean, from Morocco to Egypt, through projection of both soft and hard power.

This paper focuses on the growing battle for influence along the southern shores of the Mediterranean among the Gulf

Arab states and other global powers, including the United States, Russia, China, Turkey, and European states. Some North African states have been able to maintain a degree of neutrality in the face of the current rift among Gulf Cooperation Council states, fluctuating between the Saudi-United Arab Emirates and Qatari spheres of influence throughout the last decade. Other countries, such as Libya, have become sites where Gulf divisions and other regional and global competition have overtly manifested through hard power projection.

The objective of this analysis is to give a wider regional lens to current tensions in Libya and the eastern Mediterranean. While more analysis is circulating on the fault lines of Libya's war, it often lacks a focus on North Africa and the nuances of Gulf competition across the southern shores of the Mediterranean. There are many layers especially to Emirati-Qatari tensions, which include divergences on Turkey's expanding regional influence, support for specific domestic actors and institutions in North Africa, and the legacy of the 2011 Arab Spring protests.

Moreover, Gulf interests are beginning to align with other regional players and global powers, as was most recently displayed through the agreements to normalize relations between Israel and two Gulf Arab states, the UAE and Bahrain. There has been a growing alignment of Saudi and UAE interests with those of the administration of President Donald J. Trump and the Israeli government against Iran. This alignment has added fuel to an anti-Turkey bloc of countries, including European, North African, and Gulf Arab states. All of this has further intensified the competition between the Saudi-UAE axis and Qatar over developments in North African states since 2011 – and most overtly in Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia.

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## Gulf Arab States, the Arab Spring, and the New Regional Disorder

North Africa has been a site of growing contestation for Gulf Arab states since the 2011 Arab Spring protests. As has been widely discussed, especially since the 2014 Gulf rift and the 2017 boycott of Qatar, a deepening division between a Saudi-UAE axis and a Qatari axis, the latter supported by Turkey, acutely manifested after protests spread rapidly throughout the Middle East and North Africa. The 2011 protests began a process of transformation across the region that has led to the proliferation and realignment of various conflict lines. This has led to what Marc Lynch describes as a “new Arab order,” which he suggests is fundamentally “disorder.”

Foreign policy is driven by a potent mixture of perceived threats and opportunities. Fears of resurgent domestic uprisings, Iranian power, and U.S. abandonment exist alongside aspirations to take advantage of weakened states and international disarray—a dynamic that draws regional powers into destructive proxy conflicts, which sow chaos throughout the region.<sup>2</sup>

Lynch goes on to argue that Gulf Arab states have benefitted from this new regional disorder and have risen to become more significant security players thanks to a unique combination of soft and hard power capacity. Immense wealth, media networks, transnational networks (such as the Muslim Brotherhood, in Qatar’s case), and international businesses have allowed Gulf Arab states to project soft power across the region. Moreover, despite the UAE’s and Qatar’s size, their defense and security capacities are immense (with impressive arsenals of military defense technology and weapons, disciplined national militaries, and a vast network of mercenaries), thus enabling them to project hard power across the region’s conflict zones, such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya.<sup>3</sup>

Gulf Arab states exert influence and protect their interests in North Africa primarily through soft power

mechanisms, such as economic assistance, diplomatic support, increasingly high levels of foreign investment, migration linkages, joint military and defense cooperation, and growing financial and business ties. They employ other soft power tools, such as news networks associated with the various Gulf Arab states (notably Al Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, and Sky News Arabia) as well as state-organized social media campaigns as regional conflicts become increasingly shaped by the contours of public relations, online propaganda, and, as many studies have shown, outright disinformation campaigns. However, at various points since 2011, they have used hard power tools to protect their interests, such as through diplomatic and military support for the overthrow of Muammar al-Qaddafi in Libya as well as military support for armed groups in Libya and other conflict zones in the region, like Syria.

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*Most Gulf monarchs, especially in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, interpreted the mass protests and overthrow of longtime leaders, such as Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, as a threat to the regional status quo that would lead to destabilization and insecurity across the region.*

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<sup>2</sup> Marc Lynch, “The New Arab Order: Power and Violence in Today’s Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2018.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

Gulf Arab states have diverged over their perceptions of and reactions to the protests across North Africa. Most Gulf monarchs, especially in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, interpreted the mass protests and overthrow of longtime leaders, such as Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in Tunisia and Hosni Mubarak in Egypt, as a threat to the regional status quo that would lead to destabilization and insecurity across the region. They saw electoral wins by Muslim Brotherhood-associated parties and candidates as a threat to regional stability. Qatar expressed more vocal support for some of the protests and welcomed the electoral wins of Muslim Brotherhood-associated leaders and parties in Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt, offering significant financial support to the new regimes in Tunisia and Egypt, especially. In early 2011, the Gulf Arab states were more aligned on taking an active role in the Libyan and Syrian military interventions (as well as in their more unified reaction to uprisings within Gulf states like Bahrain, for example), even while their objectives and interests diverged across North Africa. As Kristian Coates Ulrichsen argues, the Qatari “decision to embrace the direction of change was unique among the states of the region, which resisted the popular pressures unleashed by the Arab Spring, seeing them as inherently threatening.”<sup>4</sup>

States like Tunisia and Egypt, especially, became lightning rods for the trajectory and legacy of the 2011 protests, and, as such, Gulf Arab states began to heavily invest in influencing the political and economic outcomes of this transitional moment across North Africa. This has manifested in what has become known as a perception of divided support for revolutionary forces (in theory, those supporting the Arab Spring protests, democratic transitions, and often Islamist or Brotherhood-linked parties) and counterrevolutionary forces (in theory, those supporting the old regimes, the military, and, often times, anti-Islamist parties) across the region.<sup>5</sup> Saudi Arabia and the UAE are most associated with these so-called counterrevolutionary forces, and much scholarship has been produced on their support for resurging authoritarianism in the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>6</sup> Qatar is often connected with political factions associated with the so-called revolutionary forces, through its financial support and political connections to Muslim Brotherhood-associated groups. In reality, this division does not cut nicely along the often evoked divide over Islamists but rather along lines formulated by power struggles for regional influence in North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the wider Middle East amid the perceived declining U.S. engagement in the region and the creation of power vacuums that other global powers and rising regional powers are seeking to fill.

Gulf Arab states have exerted their influence and pursued their objectives in North Africa through a variety of political and economic tools, and soft and hard power, depending on the national context. One of the most overt moves was in early 2011 when the only North African monarchy, Morocco, was invited (along with Jordan), to apply for Gulf Cooperation Council membership in an effort to shore up support for Sunni monarchs facing protests outside the Gulf region. While neither country accepted this invitation, this attempt to expand GCC

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<sup>4</sup> Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Hurst & Company, 2020), 46.

<sup>5</sup> See Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016); Joe Gill, “2010-2019: The Middle East’s Decade of Revolution,” *Middle East Eye*, December 31, 2019; Ali Anzola, “The Beginning of the End of the Counter-Revolution,” *Middle East Monitor*, January 2, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Frederic Wehry, “The Authoritarian Resurgence: Saudi Arabia’s Anxious Autocrats,” *Journal of Democracy* 26, no. 2 (April 2015): 71-85; Simone van Slooten, “The Strategic Alliance of Saudi Arabia and UAE,” *Sciences Po*, Spring 2019; David Gardner, “The Long March of Autocracy Across the Middle East,” *Financial Times*, July 31, 2019.

membership shed light on the Gulf Arab states' calculations concerning responses to the Arab Spring protests. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have offered significant political and economic support to North African regimes, depending on the parties in power and their alignment on Gulf political interests. Saudi-UAE interests often align, focusing on curbing Iranian, Turkish, and Qatari regional influence, which they view as challenging Saudi and Emirati regional power.

The Gulf divide over influence is often described as translating into support for "Islamist" or "anti-Islamist" political parties across North African states. This is highly misleading for many reasons. For example, in Morocco the monarchy remains the most powerful institution while a co-opted and weak prime minister represents one of the Islamist parties, the Party for Justice and Development. These two sides, often described as "secularist" and "Islamist," are part of the same regime, as is the case in other contexts across the region. In Tunisia,

for example, observers often pitted the Islamist Ennahda party against the "secular" Nidaa Tounes party. In reality, this division was more old regime (Nidaa Tounes members were primarily from the Ben Ali regime) versus new regime

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(the rise of Ennahda from an opposition party to a governing one). For Saudi Arabia and the UAE, support for institutions like the military and military strongmen, such as Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Egypt, General Khalifa Hifter in eastern Libya, and even Ahmed Gaid Salah in Algeria,<sup>7</sup> is necessary to ensure that regional waves of protests similar to that of 2011 do not happen again.

Gulf Arab influence has become a point of significant political contention in the domestic politics of North African countries, and political parties that have come in and out of power have received backing from these three Gulf states. The fault lines in North Africa have intensified following internal Gulf disputes, such as the 2014 rift and especially the 2017 boycott of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt. Maghreb states like Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia have remained officially neutral in the Gulf rift, even as various Gulf states attempt to exert political and economic influence to sway these states. Egypt positioned itself solidly in the Saudi-UAE regional axis after the overthrow of President Mohamed Morsi, and Libya has become a hotspot for global and regional power conflict.

## Gulf Arab States and Global Power Interests

In the context of North Africa and the Mediterranean, Gulf Arab policies and interests have shifted in many ways since 2011. Sometimes their geopolitical and regional interests align and sometimes they counter the interests of global powers and even allies, like the United States. This reflects the declining importance of traditional regional alliances and the increasing significance of what Lynch describes as "power operating through influence peddling and

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<sup>7</sup> Ahmed Gaid Salah passed away on December 23, 2019. Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune named General Said Chengriha as the acting head of the armed forces on the same day.

proxy warfare.”<sup>8</sup> Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are also part of a growing cohort of regional powers that are increasingly projecting power and competing across the Mediterranean, including Israel, Turkey, and Egypt, as well as some European Union member states like France, Greece, Cyprus, and Italy. Furthermore, there are shifts within Gulf regional power dynamics, even within the Saudi-Emirati axis. In many ways, the UAE is no longer Saudi Arabia’s “junior partner,” as Guido Steinberg argues.<sup>9</sup> The UAE is projecting both soft and hard power well outside the Arabian Peninsula, across the Mediterranean and Africa, in ways that Saudi Arabia is not. The UAE has emerged as one of the most active Gulf Arab states in the Mediterranean. The Gulf rivalry in North Africa manifests most visibly through an Emirati-Qatari rivalry, with Saudi Arabia taking a backseat to Emirati diplomatic and economic investments.

## Gulf Arab States and the United States

While strategic U.S. interests in the Middle East have fluctuated over time, they have broadly focused on: energy security, notably securing key waterways, such as the Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz; Israeli security, notably through robust military, financial, and diplomatic support, as well as the Middle East peace process; combatting nuclear proliferation, especially in Iran; counterterrorism efforts, such as the campaign to defeat the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant; and, historically, the promotion of democratic values and human rights (even though these have often times taken more of a backseat).<sup>10</sup>

The United States and Gulf Arab states have many shared interests, particularly in energy security and preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, which both the United States and Gulf Arab states view as a threat to regional and global security. Moreover, economic ties, especially lucrative weapons sales, are also a core element of U.S.-Gulf ties. U.S. arms sales to the Middle East more than doubled in 2019. Of the \$25.5 billion in deals made with the region in 2019, more than half were purchases from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait.<sup>11</sup> Security interests between Gulf Arab states and the United States have broadly aligned, even if points of contention have arisen.

The U.S. interest in supporting Israeli security and the peace process was historically met with resistance by Gulf Arab states, and the wider Middle East region, even as discrete economic and unofficial diplomatic ties between Gulf Arab states and Israel began to gain steam.<sup>12</sup> Over time, for some Gulf Arab states, developing more robust economic and defense ties with Israel ostensibly began to outweigh concerns over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and popular support for the Palestinian cause across the Arab world. Saudi Arabia and the UAE vocally supported the Trump administration’s Middle East peace plan to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian

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<sup>8</sup> Marc Lynch, “The New Arab Order: Power and Violence in Today’s Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Guido Steinberg, “Regional Power United Arab Emirates: Abu Dhabi is No Longer Saudi Arabia’s Junior Partner,” *German Institute for International and Security Affairs*, July 2020.

<sup>10</sup> Karl P. Mueller, Becca Wasser, Jeffrey Martini, and Stephen Watts, “U.S. Strategic Interests in the Middle East and Implications for the Army,” *Rand Corporation*, 2017.

<sup>11</sup> Dominic Dudley, “U.S. Arms Sales to the Middle East Have Soared in Value This Year,” *Forbes*, December 16, 2019.

<sup>12</sup> Omar H. Rahman, “What’s Behind the Relationship Between Israel and Arab Gulf States?” *Brookings Institution*, January 28, 2019.

conflict. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia and the UAE rallied around Trump's "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran, echoing an Israeli foreign policy that pinpointed Iran as the number one cause of regional instability.

Beyond shared economic interests, Israel and Gulf Arab states share concerns regarding Iranian regional influence and, increasingly, rising Turkish influence across the Mediterranean. On August 13, the UAE became the third Arab country (after Egypt and Jordan) to establish formal ties with Israel. Bahrain followed less than a month later. There is now a plethora of analysis on which Middle Eastern and North African countries may come next and when.<sup>13</sup> In short, the signing of the Abraham Accords demonstrates the growing alignment of the strategic interests of the United States, Israel, and some Gulf Arab states.

The United States and Gulf Arab states have worked together in other key theaters. In North Africa, Gulf Arab states aggressively supported the NATO-led intervention in Libya. Across North Africa, Gulf Arab states have bolstered defense ties with militaries across the region, echoing U.S.-led efforts to combat violent extremism, such as U.S. Africa Command's military exercises with African and Western countries.<sup>14</sup> Gulf Arab states have also organized joint military exercises with the United States and North African states. For example, the "Impregnable Guard" drill organized in March by Qatar in preparation for the 2022 World Cup included the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces and the U.S. military, among others.<sup>15</sup>

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Gulf Arab states have often partnered with the United States to support diplomatic efforts to quell regional conflicts. For example, Qatar is playing a pivotal role in facilitating peace talks between the Taliban and the Afghani government and has acted as an intermediary with Hamas in Gaza while providing investment for reconstruction and infrastructure after the 2014 Israeli siege. As David Roberts underlines, "Qatar only worked as an intermediary with the Taliban specifically on behalf of the US government—and with the explicit and practical help of the German government in launching the effort. Similarly, Qatar's relations with Hamas come with the direct blessing of the United States and pragmatic assistance from Israel."<sup>16</sup> Qatar also hosts the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East. Furthermore, other Gulf Arab states act as essential partners to U.S. peace efforts. Perhaps most notably, Oman provided the primary backchannel that led to the Iran nuclear deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of

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<sup>13</sup> David D. Kirkpatrick, "Bahrain Says It's Time To Embrace Israel. The Gulf Hears a Saudi Voice," *The New York Times*, September 11, 2020; Ronen Bergman and Declan Walsh, "Sudan is Focus of US Efforts To Improve Ties With Israel," *The New York Times*, September 27, 2020.

<sup>14</sup> Jim Garamone, "Africom's Exercise Flintlock 2020 Strengthens Partnerships, Security," *U.S. Department of Defense*, March 3, 2020.

<sup>15</sup> "Royal Moroccan Armed Forces To Participate in a Military Exercise Ahead of the 2022 World Cup," *Yabiladi*, March 6, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> David Roberts, April 2019, cited in Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis* (London: Hurst & Company, 2020), 187.

Action.<sup>17</sup> Since the breakdown in relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt in June 2017, Kuwait has attempted to mediate the rift, in partnership with the United States, after Kuwait successfully mediated the 2014 Gulf dispute.<sup>18</sup>

All the Gulf Arab states maintain deep defense, economic, and diplomatic ties with the United States, in spite of fluctuating political tensions over the Yemen war, the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi, concerns over the negative impacts of Gulf Arab interventions in countries like Libya and Syria, and persistent human rights concerns. In theory, the United States shares many strategic interests with Gulf Arab states in North Africa, notably in supporting counterterrorism efforts, defense ties, and economic development. However, the attempts of some Gulf Arab states to influence and intervene in domestic political contexts in North Africa often counteract U.S. and European efforts to ensure stability and, in Libya, it often directly contradicts international conflict-resolution initiatives.

## Gulf Arab States, Russia, and Libya

Gulf Arab states' interests also align, however, with other global powers that are often at odds with the United States. For example, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and, to a lesser extent, Jordan are supporting Hifter's Libyan National Army in its campaign against the United Nations-backed Government of National Accord in Tripoli, which is officially supported by the United States. The UAE has provided military weapons, including drones, to the Libyan National Army, and Saudi Arabia has provided financial support.

The Wagner Group, a private military firm allegedly financed by Yevgeny Prigozhin, a Russian businessman and an ally of President Vladimir Putin, has also sent Russian mercenaries to join Hifter's forces. This means that U.S. allies like the UAE, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and France are supporting the same side as Russia in the Libyan war, which may be seen as hindering U.S. efforts to curb Moscow's influence in North Africa and the Mediterranean. In August, the United States issued sanctions against three individuals and five entities associated with the Wagner Group. In addition to Libya, reports claim that the Wagner Group has been instrumental in supporting Russian military interventions in Ukraine, Sudan, and Syria.<sup>19</sup> U.S. Africa Command commented that, "As Russia continues to fan the flames of the Libyan conflict, regional security in North Africa is a heightened concern," and it announced it may deploy a "Security Force Assistance Brigade" to Tunisia.<sup>20</sup>

Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt's support for Hifter's coalition intensified after Turkey began a direct military intervention in January on behalf of the Government of National Accord. Qatar has also provided diplomatic and financial backing to the Tripoli government while Turkey provides military support. Tensions escalated even further in July after Egypt's Parliament approved troop deployments abroad, and Sisi threatened to intervene militarily in Libya if

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<sup>17</sup> Edwin Tran, "The Rise and Fall of the JCPOA: Oman's Foreign Policy, Part 3," *International Review*, July 5, 2019.

<sup>18</sup> Iman Zayat, "Kuwait's Mediation Drive in GCC Dispute Gains Momentum," *The Arab Weekly*, December 13, 2019.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Gabriel Hernandez, "US Slaps Sanctions on 8 Linked to Russia's Wagner Group," *Anadolu Agency*, July 16, 2020.

<sup>20</sup> "U.S. Considers Sending 'Training' Unit to Tunisia Amid North Africa Tensions," *Reuters*, May 30, 2020.

Turkish forces continued moving east, past the flashpoint city of Sirte.<sup>21</sup> In Libya, Saudi-UAE-Egyptian interests have aligned more closely with Russian policy, in opposition to U.S. policy, because of the increasing mobilization around curbing Turkish influence in Libya and the wider Mediterranean.

## The Eastern Mediterranean and the Anti-Turkey Coalition

The eastern Mediterranean is the current focal point for various global, regional, and national-level conflicts entangling the Gulf Arab states and exacerbating instability across North Africa. Competition over offshore gas resources and maritime rights in this region encompasses features of conflicts in Cyprus, Libya, and Syria and has led to the rise of an “anti-Turkey front” and growing military tensions between European powers and Turkey (all members of NATO). This anti-Turkey coalition includes Gulf Arab states like the UAE, North African countries like Egypt, and Middle Eastern actors like Israel.<sup>22</sup>

The root of the deepening rivalries in the eastern Mediterranean stem from conflicting legal claims over maritime rights prompted by recent discoveries of significant gas reserves, mostly off the coast of Cyprus. This created some optimism that an agreement over the reserves could contribute to an easing of tensions between the Turkish and Greek communities in Cyprus. But the find has also fomented tensions between Turkey and Greece over legal rights to offshore drilling. The gas discoveries over the last decade helped lead to the establishment of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in January, based in Cairo, by representatives from Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, and French companies.<sup>23</sup> Turkey was not included in the organization despite its conflicting maritime claims, large economy, and critical geographic location as a transit hub in the region. The forum received support from the United States in spite of this, likely due to growing tensions between Washington and Ankara over Turkey's purchase of Russian-made S-400 air defense systems, as well as aspects of its intervention in northeastern Syria.<sup>24</sup>

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A May European Council on Foreign Relations report highlights how the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum has contributed to an “anti-Turkey” club that includes the UAE:

Greece and Cyprus have sought to leverage the undersea gas reserves and the creation of the EMGF grouping to improve their own political standing – at Turkey's expense. The forum offers both countries a means to strengthen a broader alliance to counter Turkish influence. Israel and Egypt maintain acrimonious relations with Turkish president Recep Tayyip Erdogan, while

<sup>21</sup> “Egypt's Parliament Approves Troop Deployment in Libya,” *DW*, July 20, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> Asli Aydintasbas, Julien Barnes-Dacey, Cinzia Bianco, Hugh Lovatt, Tarek Megerisi, “Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey, and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines,” *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2020.

<sup>23</sup> “7 Countries Launch Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum in Egypt,” *Xinhuanet*, January 16, 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Chase Winter, “Tough Love and Showmanship: US-Turkey Tensions Soar Ahead of Erdogan-Trump Meeting,” *DW*, November 13, 2019.

the forum's anti-Turkey slant has also attracted the UAE, which is engaged in an acute regional rivalry with Turkey. Like Egypt, the UAE takes issue with Turkey's support for Muslim Brotherhood movements across the region.<sup>25</sup>

Tensions between Turkey and the UAE manifest most overtly in Libya, where the two countries support opposing parties in the war. To push back against the growing influence of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, in late 2019, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan made a deal with the Government of National Accord on maritime routes and an economic zone that enters into Greek and Cypriot waters. The deal would also hinder the establishment of a potential EastMed pipeline that was proposed by the forum. Turkey has also applied for drilling licenses with the Tripoli-based government for offshore exploration rights. In exchange for this, Turkey launched a military intervention in Libya in January in support of the Government of National Accord to fight off Hifter's military campaign to capture Tripoli.<sup>26</sup>

Exploratory talks between Turkey and Greece, which have been suspended since 2016, are set to restart soon.<sup>27</sup>

However, Greece and European allies like France have led the charge to impose sanctions against Turkey as a punishment for what they view as an aggressive policy in the eastern Mediterranean. German Chancellor Angela Merkel has been attempting to quell tensions. She has been communicating separately with Erdogan and Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis and is pushing for the two sides to begin an official dialogue.<sup>28</sup> The eastern Mediterranean dispute, which many view as a fundamentally European and NATO conflict, has spilled over into the Middle East and is being exacerbated by regional divisions in conflict areas like Libya and Syria.

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## China's Growing Role in the Southern Mediterranean

Another, often overlooked, angle is China's growing footprint across the Middle East and North Africa, including in strategic maritime theaters like the Mediterranean.<sup>29</sup> China and Gulf Arab states also share core strategic interests. Gulf Arab states play an integral role in meeting China's energy needs. Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, and the UAE supply more than 30% of China's oil imports,<sup>30</sup> and Qatar is one of China's top three suppliers of liquefied natural gas.<sup>31</sup> Chinese interests in promoting energy security, trade, tourism, 5G networks, artificial

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<sup>25</sup> Asli Aydintasbas, Julien Barnes-Dacey, Cinzia Bianco, Hugh Lovatt, Tarek Megerisi, "Deep Sea Rivals: Europe, Turkey, and New Eastern Mediterranean Conflict Lines," *European Council on Foreign Relations*, May 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Laura Pitel and Michael Peel, "Talks on Eastern Mediterranean Tensions To Resume 'Soon', Erdogan Aide Says," *Financial Times*, September 17, 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Asli Aydintasbas and Sinan Ulgen, "A Conflict Could Be Brewing in the Eastern Mediterranean. Here's How To Stop It," *The Washington Post*, September 17, 2020.

<sup>29</sup> See Adel Abdel Ghafar and Anna L. Jacobs, "China in the Mediterranean: Implications of Expanding Sino-North Africa Relations," *Brookings Institution*, July 2020.

<sup>30</sup> Daniel Workman, "Top 15 Crude Oil Suppliers to China," *World's Top Exports*, August 20, 2020.

<sup>31</sup> Jessica Jagnathan, "China Overtakes Japan as World's Top Natural Gas Importer," *Reuters*, November 12, 2018.

intelligence technology, investments, and political stability through President Xi Jinping's flagship Belt and Road Initiative often align with economic and political objectives pursued by Gulf Arab states.

Gulf Arab states have also confronted U.S. pressure about their burgeoning economic ties with China. The use of Chinese technology for the dissemination of 5G networks across the Gulf has become a point of contention as the United States ramps up pressure against the Chinese information and communication technology giant Huawei, which is also expanding across North Africa. A Huawei regional headquarters will be a main feature of the partially Chinese-funded Mohammed VI Tangier Tech City in northern Morocco. Outside of the tech field, Chinese investment in various sectors across the Middle East and North Africa, including highly sensitive energy projects such as an alleged Saudi project to build a nuclear facility with Chinese support, has fueled concerns about China's potentially destabilizing role in the region.<sup>32</sup>

The Gulf countries, to varying extents, increasingly view China as a viable alternative partner to Europe and the United States, leading them to expand their cooperation with Beijing on economic and cultural matters as well as diplomacy and defense issues. Cultural ties are being cultivated through educational programs and tourism. Chinese tourism has expanded across the Gulf region as has the establishment of Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges, and Chinese language learning, particularly in the UAE. One of China's most important bilateral relationships in the Middle East is with the UAE, which supplies more than 28% of the Arab world's non-oil trade for China.<sup>33</sup>

There are similar, albeit nascent, bilateral ties between China and North African countries. Ports and essential waterways, such as Morocco's Tangier Med and Egypt's Suez Canal, are hosting a growing number of Chinese companies and receiving increasing investment. Economic ties include rapidly expanding trade volume, foreign direct investment, and Chinese tourism across North Africa. China has become the number one source of imports for Egypt and Algeria as well as an increasingly important trade partner for Morocco and Tunisia. Cultural ties are similarly being cultivated through the establishment of Chinese cultural centers, Confucius Institutes, educational exchanges, and increasing levels of tourism.<sup>34</sup> Even though the official Belt and Road Initiative map does not include North African states besides Egypt, memorandums of understanding as part of the initiative have been signed between China and all five of the North African states.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> See Yasser Elnaggar, "China's Growing Role in the Middle East," *Middle East Institute*, January 9, 2020; John Calabrese, "The Huawei Wars and the 5G Revolution in the Gulf," *Middle East Institute*, July 30, 2019; Rupert Stones, "US-China Rivalry Comes to Israel," *Middle East Eye*, June 16, 2020; "New Chinese Operated Haifa Port a Game Changer for Israeli Economy," *Belt and Road News*, June 26, 2020; Shira Efron, Karen Schwindt, and Emily Haskel, "Chinese Investment in Israeli Technology and Infrastructure: Security Implications for Israel and the United States," *RAND Corporation*, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Fareed Rahman, "UAE-China Trade To Surge on the Back of Strong Ties Between the Two Nations," *The National*, July 18, 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Adel Abdel Ghafar and Anna L. Jacobs, "China in the Mediterranean: Implications of Expanding Sino-North Africa Relations," *Brookings Institution*, July 2020.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

This reflects the broader trend of Middle East and North African states opening up to greater economic and political ties outside of traditional Western partners – a shift east toward greater engagement with China and Russia.<sup>36</sup> Middle East and North African countries are seeking to diversify their strategic alliances as the United States and Europe take a backseat in regional affairs. Moreover, Chinese trade and investment tend to come with fewer strings attached in terms of regulation. China maintains a foreign policy rooted in noninterference in political affairs, official neutrality, and multilateralism, which is appealing to many of these states. However, China's economic footprint is still in its early phases, and the European Union still remains the most important economic partnership for North African states.

Given the deep ties and shared political and economic objectives between the Gulf Arab states and China, their regional policies will likely increasingly coalesce around shared energy, economic, and security interests in the Mediterranean and North Africa. China benefits from balancing partnerships with countries on different sides of regional divides. For example, China has established comprehensive strategic partnerships with both Saudi Arabia and Iran as well as Algeria and Egypt in North Africa. China and the United States have been locked in tensions over the trade war, the spread of the coronavirus, Huawei, and, more generally, China's economic and political rise on the global stage, and yet China has maintained deep economic ties with major U.S. allies in the Gulf and across North Africa.<sup>37</sup>

## North African States Amid Regional and Geopolitical Turmoil

Politics in North Africa have become increasingly polarized since 2011, as protests have reignited over the years, notably in what some experts dubbed an "Arab Spring 2.0" in 2019.<sup>38</sup> Morocco experienced a second extensive protest movement, known as *Hirak* (movement) in 2016 but has since launched a significant crackdown on activists and journalists to quell dissent. Algeria's own protest movement, also known as *Hirak*, began in February 2019 and triggered the resignation of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika after 20 years in power. The newly elected Algerian president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, is struggling for legitimacy, and the country remains firmly controlled by the military. Tunisia's political scene offers the brightest example of reform post-2011, but the country's politics are still deeply polarized among various political factions that have been supported by opposing Gulf Arab states. Libya has suffered nearly a decade of military conflict that intensified in April 2019 after Hifter launched his Tripoli campaign. The growing internationalization of this conflict has turned it into a focal point for geopolitical competition. In Egypt, a military-led regime has firmly reestablished power since Morsi was removed by a military coup in June 2013. Sisi has since pursued policies that increasingly align with the regional interests of Egypt's Gulf partners, seeking to curb Qatari, Turkish, and Iranian influence.

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<sup>36</sup> Christine Wormuth, "Russia and China in the Middle East: Implications for the United States in an Era of Strategic Competition," *RAND Corporation*, testimony presented before the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Middle East, North Africa and International Terrorism on May 9, 2019.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> See Marwan Muasher, "Is This the Arab Spring 2.0?," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, October 30, 2019; Paul R. Pillar, "Will There Be an Arab Spring 2.0?," *The National Interest*, November 21, 2019.

With the partial exception of Tunisia, these North African states have not fundamentally reformed their political systems, and pre-2011 socioeconomic woes have worsened in most cases, intensifying instability. The coronavirus pandemic has exacerbated many of the region's structural weaknesses, including lack of access to high quality health care, high levels of debt, bloated public sectors and weak private sectors, high youth unemployment, and a lack of robust economic growth. These domestic challenges hinder the ability of many North African states to play a more constructive regional security role. But they each hold their own positions on the fault lines of conflict along the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

While Gulf Arab battlelines have most clearly manifested in Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia, the Gulf states have also supported the regimes in Morocco and Algeria. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar have all increased economic assistance, foreign investment, and diplomatic ties with both Morocco and Algeria at various points since 2011, depending on the domestic political context and the foreign policies pursued by the North African states. Furthermore, the expanding Gulf Arab influence in the Sahel-Sahara region, as well as western and eastern Africa, impacts North Africa's shifting conflict lines.

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*While Gulf Arab battlelines have most clearly manifested in Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia, the Gulf states have also supported the regimes in Morocco and Algeria.*

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## The Maghreb-Sahel-Sahara Region

To varying degrees, the North African states of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt maintain a unique strategic position in Middle Eastern, Mediterranean, and African regional politics. Morocco rejoined the African Union in January 2017 after a long hiatus outside the regional institution. The country is reorienting its foreign policy more toward Africa<sup>39</sup> through a high volume of diplomatic visits, expanding economic and security ties, and notably increasing foreign investment across the continent, and may join other regional institutions like the Economic Community of West African States.<sup>40</sup>

This has intensified regional competition with neighboring Algeria, a longtime major player in African security issues, especially across the Sahel. Algeria, Nigeria, South Africa, and Egypt have long been considered among Africa's major military powers, but Morocco's rise in this political and diplomatic arena presents a new feature of regional power competition in both North Africa and the Mediterranean. Moreover, North African countries are among the

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<sup>39</sup> See Anna Jacobs, "The Battleground for the Morocco-Algeria Rivalry," *Jadaliyya*, October 25, 2017; Said Sadiki, "Morocco's Foreign Policy Treads on the Shifting Sands of Africa," *Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis*, May 13, 2018; Yasmina Abouzzohour, "Progress and Missed Opportunities: Morocco Enters Its Third Decade Under King Mohammed VI," *Brookings Institution*, July 29, 2020; Sarah Feuer and Reda Ayadi, "Twenty Years Under King Mohammed VI (Part 2): Foreign Policy Developments," *The Washington Institute*, July 29, 2019; Anouar Boukhars "Reassessing the Power of Regional Security Providers: The Case of Algeria and Morocco," *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no 2 (2019): 242-60.

<sup>40</sup> Riccardo Fabiani, "Morocco's Difficult Path to ECOWAS Membership," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 28, 2018.

biggest buyers of weapons in Africa,<sup>41</sup> leading to an increasingly militarized region as conflicts intensify. As Anouar Boukhars argues in his analysis of Algeria and Morocco as regional security providers:

More than half a decade after the collapse of the Libyan state and the severe destabilization of Mali, regional policymakers are still seeking the appropriate principles and patterns of management that can foster a modicum of stability in the broader regional security architecture linking the Maghreb and the Sahel. In such processes of constructing management options, the importance of regional powers in affecting regional security becomes salient, as the outcomes of their role and orientations can be determinant in building effective or failed security orders.<sup>42</sup>

On top of the growing regional security competition between Morocco and Algeria, Gulf Arab states are also expanding their political, security, and economic ties across the Sahel and Sahara, East Africa, and the Horn of Africa.<sup>43</sup> Notably, Qatar and the UAE have invested billions of dollars across East Africa and the Horn of Africa, from Sudan to Somalia.<sup>44</sup> Gulf Arab states have a notable interest in the political outcomes in countries experiencing a protracted transition, such as Sudan after the downfall of longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir. For example, after military leaders took over the country following Bashir's ouster, Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged \$3 billion in aid to the country's new military-led regime.<sup>45</sup> After the recent coup in Mali, the UAE and Saudi Arabia may offer financial assistance to shore up support for the military regime and ostensibly support a stable transition. Together the countries pledged around \$150 million to the G-5 Sahel Security forces, from Burkina Faso, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, and Niger, to support the "war against terrorism" in the Sahel-Saharan region, bolstering France's pivotal "counterterrorism" role across the region.<sup>46</sup> In 2018, Qatar sent defense equipment to support G-5 forces in managing the Mali crisis.<sup>47</sup>

## Morocco

Morocco maintains an over 400-year-old monarchy and positioned itself in the Western camp during the Cold War, which has made it a natural ally of the Gulf monarchies. In 2011, Morocco was invited to apply for GCC membership (even though this never came to fruition),

<sup>41</sup> "Most spending was in North Africa, with Algeria accounting for 56% of African arms imports, Morocco for 15% and Nigeria for 4.8%. The four countries in North Africa (Algeria, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia) accounted for 75% of African arms imports. Their arms imports increased by 20% between 2009–13 and 2014–18." See "[African Arms Imports Decreasing](#)," *Defense Web*, March 12, 2019; "[Trends in International Arms Transfers, 2019](#)," *Stockholm International Peace Research Institute*, March 2020.

<sup>42</sup> Anouar Boukhars, "Reassessing the Power of Regional Security Providers: The Case of Algeria and Morocco," *Middle Eastern Studies* 55, no 2 (2019): 242-60.

<sup>43</sup> For analysis of global power competition and Gulf rivalry in the Red Sea and the Horn of Africa, see Zach Vertin, "Red Sea Geopolitics: Six Plotlines To Watch," *Brookings Institution*, December 15, 2019; Will Todman, "The Gulf Scramble for Africa: GCC States' Foreign Policy Laboratory," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, November 20, 2018; Robert Mason and Simon Mabon, "The Gulf States in East Africa: Security, Economic and Strategic Partnerships?," *Gulf Research Center*, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Dominic Dudley, "East Africa Becomes a Testing Ground for UAE and Qatar as They Battle for Influence and Opportunity," *Forbes*, April 4, 2018.

<sup>45</sup> "Arab States Support Sudan Transition, Want Stability: UAE Minister," *Reuters*, May 1, 2019,

<sup>46</sup> "S. Arabia Pledges \$100 Million and UAE \$30 Million for Sahel Anti-Terror Forces," *France 24*, December 13, 2017.

<sup>47</sup> "Qatar Sends 24 Armoured Vehicles to Mali," *Reuters*, December 26, 2018,

revealing the extent to which Gulf Arab monarchies were seeking to mobilize allies across the region against the wave of Arab Spring protests.<sup>48</sup> Morocco's closeness with Saudi Arabia and the UAE stems from family ties, as well as a long history of robust economic, military, and diplomatic ties. Moroccan troops have been stationed in the UAE since the 1980s, and Morocco sent 1,200 troops to Saudi Arabia during the 1991 Gulf War. Morocco also joined Gulf states in providing military support for the U.S.-led coalition in Syria to counter the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, Morocco joined the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen in 2015, providing political, logistical, and military support to counter the Houthis and perceived encroaching Iranian influence in the Arabian Peninsula.

These long-standing economic and diplomatic ties were shaken when Morocco remained officially neutral in the 2017 Gulf dispute. The kingdom, along with Iran and Turkey, even sent food shipments to Qatar after the land, sea, and air blockade led to food shortages.<sup>50</sup> Overt tensions ensued even after Morocco attempted to gain favor with the Trump administration, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE by breaking diplomatic ties with Iran in May 2018.<sup>51</sup> In spite of this, one month later, Saudi Arabia allegedly lobbied various countries to vote for the North American bid to host the 2026 World Cup, in direct opposition to Morocco's bid. In the end, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq voted against Morocco's bid.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, in February 2019, there were reports of diplomatic tensions between Saudi and Moroccan diplomats after Saudi-owned Al Arabiya broadcast a documentary challenging Morocco's claim to the disputed Western Sahara territory. Gaining international support for its sovereignty over Western Sahara is Morocco's number one foreign policy concern, and the documentary ostensibly pushed Rabat to recall its ambassador from Riyadh.<sup>53</sup>

These reports of diplomatic tensions came after Morocco decided to withdraw from the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. Questions also surfaced about why Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman did not visit Morocco during his tour of Arab countries in late 2018.<sup>54</sup> The spat illustrated Rabat's concern about the crown prince's increasingly aggressive policies across the region (notably in the aftermath of the killing of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi Consulate in Istanbul), allegations of war crimes in Yemen, and the boycott of Qatar. It also showed Morocco's desire to assert some independence and maintain strong relations with as

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<sup>48</sup> Sara Hamdan, "Gulf Council Reaches Out to Morocco and Jordan," *The New York Times*, May 25, 2011.

<sup>49</sup> Haim Malka, "Maghreb Neutrality: Maghreb-Gulf Arab Ties Since the GCC Split," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 11, 2018.

<sup>50</sup> "Morocco Says Will Send Food to Qatar After Gulf States Cut Ties," *Reuters*, June 13, 2017.

<sup>51</sup> See Anna Jacobs, "Why Did Morocco Cut Its Diplomatic Ties With Iran?," *Moroccan Institute for Policy Analysis*, May 30, 2019.

<sup>52</sup> Saad Guerraoui, "Morocco's Loss in 2026 World Cup Bid Highlights Arab Divide," *The Arab Weekly*, June 14, 2018; See a full list of the votes: "World Cup 2026: How Each Country Voted," *The New York Times*, June 13, 2018.

<sup>53</sup> Adel Abdel Ghafar and Anna L. Jacobs, "Morocco-Saudi Relations: Trouble Amongst Royals?," *Brookings Institution*, March 1, 2019.

<sup>54</sup> "Morocco Suspends Participation in Saudi-Led War in Yemen," *Al Jazeera*, February 8, 2019.

many actors as possible as it seeks to curry further international support for its sovereignty over Western Sahara. This has pushed the Moroccan regime to stay out of the Gulf rift and take a backseat in other regional divisions manifesting in flashpoints like Libya.<sup>55</sup>

Gulf Arab states do not attempt to influence domestic political outcomes in Morocco the way they do in other North African countries. The monarchy easily survived the 2011 protests, maintaining a status quo that ensured political and economic stability, even though the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Justice and Development Party won a plurality of votes in subsequent parliamentary elections and has led the government since 2011. While the Justice and Development Party historically played a moderate opposition role in Moroccan politics, it maintains a strong alliance with the palace. It does not express any substantive opposition to policies emanating from the ruling family and presents no threat to the monarchy or political status quo. As the Moroccan political scientist Mohammed Masbah argues, "The Moroccan monarchy has used political parties, including the PJD, to legitimize the country's authoritarian political process and structure."<sup>56</sup>

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*Morocco maintains strong economic ties with parties on both sides of the Gulf dispute.*

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Morocco maintains strong economic ties with parties on both sides of the Gulf dispute. The UAE leads the way in terms of foreign direct investment flows from Gulf countries to Morocco, but both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have sent billions of dollars of assistance over the decades to shore up the Moroccan military and support economic development.<sup>57</sup> Qatar-Morocco ties and bilateral diplomatic visits have also strengthened since the Gulf dispute, especially concerning security and defense.<sup>58</sup> Morocco participated in the "Impregnable Guard 2020" military exercise in Qatar in March, which included military forces from NATO, the United States, Turkey, Jordan, Oman, Pakistan, and other regional allies.<sup>59</sup>

Smaller powers like Morocco are struggling to figure out how to align themselves amid this regional reshuffling. The kingdom hosted Libya peace talks in Skhirat in 2015, which led to the formation of the Government of National Accord, but it was not invited to the Berlin conference in January. The only regional powers that were invited were Egypt and Tunisia. The lack of inclusion of more of Libya's neighbors in the Berlin process caused a diplomatic uproar. The last-minute invite for Tunisia was rejected by newly elected President Kais Saied.<sup>60</sup> Since 2015, Morocco has been sidelined in efforts to end the war in Libya, a worrying trend as the conflict is moving toward potential military confrontation between Turkey and Egypt, with spillover effects for regional neighbors like Algeria and Tunisia.

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<sup>55</sup> Adel Abdel Ghafar and Anna L. Jacobs, "Morocco-Saudi Relations: Trouble Amongst Royals?," *Brookings Institution*, March 1, 2019.

<sup>56</sup> Mohammed Masbah, "Morocco: Can the PJD Still Absorb Popular Anger?," *Arab Reform Initiative*, March 30, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> Haim Malka, "Maghreb Neutrality: Maghreb-Gulf Arab Ties Since the GCC Split," *Center for Strategic and International Studies*, June 11, 2018.

<sup>58</sup> "Qatar, Morocco Vow To Promote Strategic Ties," *The Peninsula*, March 13, 2018.

<sup>59</sup> "Impregnable Guard 2020' Drill Begins," *The Peninsula*, March 9, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> "Germany Downplays Flap Over Tunisia Invite to Libya Summit," *Associated Press*, January 20, 2020.

Morocco is focused on maintaining important political, economic, and security ties with all of the Gulf Arab states and seeks greater international support for its claims of sovereignty over Western Sahara. The Western Sahara conflict concerns another major regional question that is often overlooked in conversations about conflict and security in the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Sahel: the Morocco-Algeria rivalry.<sup>61</sup> Many of Morocco's foreign policy decisions are rooted in countering Algerian influence in North Africa and the Sahel, given Algeria's support for the Western Sahara independence movement, the Polisario. However, tensions between Morocco and Algeria (whose borders have been closed since 1994) go beyond the question of Western Sahara and represent another theater of growing regional competition over political and security domination along the southern shores of the Mediterranean.

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*Morocco and Algeria compete for favor with the Gulf Arab monarchies, and yet at the same time seek to remain neutral in the Gulf divide.*

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Morocco-Algeria regional competition plays a role in each country's relationship with the Gulf Arab states as well. For example, the visit of Algeria's recently elected president, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, to Saudi Arabia in February pushed Morocco's king to immediately send his most important political advisor, Fouad Ali El Himma, for talks with Mohammed bin Salman on February 26.<sup>62</sup> Morocco and Algeria compete for favor with the Gulf Arab monarchies, and yet at the same time seek to remain neutral in the Gulf divide.

## Algeria

While the Algerian military regime, formerly led by civilian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, did not experience a significant threat during the 2011 Arab Spring, the mass Hirak protest movement mobilized in February 2019 in opposition to Bouteflika running for a fifth term in office. Hirak successfully pressured the regime to force Bouteflika's resignation after 20 years in power. The demonstrators then began to focus their attention on Algeria's military leaders, who control the country behind a facade of a civilian and allegedly democratically elected government. The object of Hirak's scorn, after Bouteflika and the array of corrupt officials close to his administration, was the army chief, Ahmed Gaid Salah, who became Algeria's de-facto leader after Bouteflika's resignation. Salah was criticized for his role in Algeria's corrupt political system, and protesters also rejected his perceived security ties with Gulf Arab states. As the protest movement began to increasingly target the Algerian military, it also began targeting its perceived foreign backers – notably France and the UAE.

In *Le Monde Afrique*, Nicolas Beau argues that, "Thanks to the close ties they forged both with the Bouteflika clan but also with the Chief of Staff, Gaïd Salah, the Emiratis play a particularly troubling but also decisive role in the crisis that Algeria is going through today."<sup>63</sup> The members of Algeria's protest movement were concerned that these ties reflected the potential for Gulf Arab states like the UAE to interfere in Algerian domestic affairs by throwing extra support

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<sup>61</sup> Anna Jacobs, "The Battleground for the Morocco-Algeria Rivalry," *Jadaliyya*, October 25, 2017.

<sup>62</sup> Aziz Chahir, "Why Morocco's King is Moving Closer to Saudi Arabia's MBS," *Middle East Eye*, April 3, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Nicolas Beau, "Les Emirats arabes unis, le coffre fort du pouvoir algerien," [The United Arab Emirates, the Stronghold of Algerian Power], *Mondafrique*, March 22, 2019.

behind the Algerian military at the expense of the protest movement and their demands for democratic reform. Many Algerians brought up the example of Gulf support for other military strongmen like Hifter in Libya and Sisi in Egypt.<sup>64</sup>

Algeria's foreign policy is notorious for its hostility to foreign intervention and influence. The country is much more immune to foreign influence due to its hydrocarbon wealth and significant foreign reserves. Even amid its increasing economic paralysis and the growing imperative for economic diversification and fiscal reform, the country refuses to borrow from the International Monetary Fund.<sup>65</sup> This policy of independence makes Algeria's relationship with the Gulf Arab states and their soft power projection very different from Gulf ties with Algeria's neighbors like Morocco and Tunisia.

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However, over the last couple decades, Algeria has begun slowly building stronger commercial ties with Gulf Arab states. For example, in 2008 Dubai Ports World reached an agreement with the Algerian government to take over the operations of the ports of Algiers and Djen Djen.<sup>66</sup> As the Algerian economy continues to struggle in the face of low oil and gas prices and lackluster diversification efforts, the government is looking to attract greater Gulf investment. This year, Tebboune hosted foreign ministers from both the UAE and Saudi Arabia to discuss ways to improve bilateral economic cooperation (as well as to discuss the Libya conflict). In February, Qatari Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani visited Algiers to discuss increasing foreign investment and trade with the Algerian president. Immediately after the Qatari emir's visit, Tebboune flew to Saudi Arabia for his first official state visit, demonstrating burgeoning Gulf Arab competition over ties with the new Algerian government.<sup>67</sup>

After winning independence from France in 1962, the largely military-led regime has maintained a fiercely independent foreign policy. Under the presidencies of Ahmed Ben Bella and Houari Boumediene, Algeria pursued solidarity with and leadership of the developing world, as well as a strong anti-imperialist agenda. Algeria's push against foreign interference solidified during the Cold War, as an essential country in the Non-Aligned Movement, even though it had a long history of defense ties and arms trade with the former Soviet Union.<sup>68</sup>

Algeria is a major security player in North Africa, the Sahel region, and Africa. It maintains the largest defense budget of African countries, spending nearly \$10 billion on defense in 2018. This is more than double the spending of other African military powers, such as Egypt and South Africa. Algeria is a huge weapons buyer, mostly from European countries, Russia, and

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<sup>64</sup> Nicolas Beau, "Les Emirats arabes unis, le coffre fort du pouvoir algerien," [The United Arab Emirates, the Stronghold of Algerian Power], *Mondafrique*, March 22, 2019.

<sup>65</sup> "Algeria Won't Seek IMF Loan To Ease Financial Woes, President Says," *AFP*, May 2, 2020,

<sup>66</sup> Abdul Basit, "DP World Takes Operational Control Over Port of Algiers," *Khaleej Times*, March 21, 2009.

<sup>67</sup> "Qatari Emir Visits Algeria To Confirm Broadening Ties," *The Economist Intelligence Unit*, February 28, 2020.

<sup>68</sup> May Barth, "The Algeria-Russia Strategic Partnership: An Assertive Geopolitical Move?," *Brussels International Center*, March 22, 2019.

China. It has marketed itself to Western allies as a strategic counterterrorism ally, especially after the military successfully defeated a violent insurgency that killed thousands of people during the 1990s.

Algeria focuses much of its foreign policy on Africa, particularly security issues in North Africa and the Sahel, and it does this through regional institutions like the African Union. It has served as a mediator in conflicts in Mali and Libya and is highly invested in maintaining regional stability. As the U.N. secretary general began his search for a new Libyan envoy after the resignation of Ghassan Salame, well-known Algerian diplomat and former Foreign Minister Ramtane Lamamra was a favorite for the post. However, according to some sources, his appointment was accepted by all members of the security council except the United States.<sup>69</sup> Sources told AFP that the United States considered Algeria too close to Russia and thus was concerned that this would bias the process in favor of Hifter's alliance. In June, Tebboune again offered Algerian mediation to help broker a Libyan cease-fire and expressed resistance to military intervention in the conflict from all parties.

Algeria is gravely concerned about the intensifying proxy war in neighboring Libya, as well as the potential for direct military confrontation between Turkey and Egypt and the impact this would

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*Algeria is gravely concerned about the intensifying proxy war in neighboring Libya, as well as the potential for direct military confrontation between Turkey and Egypt and the impact this would have on growing instability across the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Sahel.*

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have on growing instability across the Mediterranean, North Africa, and the Sahel. Breaking with decades of foreign policy, Tebboune proposed constitutional amendments that would allow Algeria to deploy military forces abroad. This is a stark signal of the unprecedented instability that North Africa is currently facing, given Algeria's historical resistance to foreign interventions, fierce devotion to the protection of national sovereignty, and preference for serving as a mediator in regional conflicts. However, given the presence of foreign weapons, militaries, and mercenaries in its immediate neighborhood, Algeria may not have the option to remain on the sidelines. Given Tebboune's proposals for a revised constitution, for which a referendum is set to take place on November 1, Algeria is almost surely contemplating a shift in its foreign policy to better adapt to the increasingly unstable security environment.

## Tunisia

Tunisia has become a strategic site for Gulf battles over influence, given its symbolic importance as the springboard for the 2011 protests. The UAE and Qatar have supported divergent parties over the years, but because Tunisia has built a consensus government, it has refrained from positioning itself solidly in either camp. The continued influence of Ennahda, and its intellectual leader Rachid Ghannouchi, as well as rapidly expanding economic ties and investment with Qatar, suggest Tunisia is moving closer to Qatar than Saudi Arabia and the

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<sup>69</sup> Abdulkader Assad, "US Rejects Algerian Diplomat as New UN Envoy to Libya," *The Libya Observer*, April 9, 2020.

UAE. However, Youssef Cherif describes how Tunisia is seeking to improve relations with all the Gulf Arab states to secure higher volumes of economic assistance as its economy continues to struggle. He explains that:

Tunisia hopes to move away from being dependent on Qatar alone and has been courting the UAE in order to balance out this relationship. Given the uncertainty of future U.S. and E.U. support, Tunisia is looking to strengthen its ties across the Gulf. Tunisia hopes that scaling back ties with Qatar will also calm its internal political tensions—calculating that perhaps greater Emirati support for leading secular parties could counterbalance Qatari support for Ennahda.<sup>70</sup>

Tunisia suffers from acute polarization in domestic politics, and Gulf influence has intensified divisions in the past. The country is dealing with an uptick in coronavirus cases, the resignation of Prime Minister Elyes Fakhfakh in July after Ennahda withdrew its support from the government, and political struggles with the new president, Saied, and Ghannouchi as parliamentary speaker. Tunisia's prime minister-designate, Hichem Mechichi, has announced the formation of a technocratic government to tackle the country's growing economic crisis, with the coronavirus pandemic and its impact on global supply chains, energy prices, and foreign investment.<sup>71</sup> For Tunisia, and many countries, the priority is addressing public health and the economic damage from the pandemic. This will make financial support from Gulf states (if they can still commit to it given their own economic woes) even more crucial.

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*The status of Libya's tenuous cease-fire and any sort of peace process very much depends on the actions taken by external powers and the pressures they apply to Libya's political and armed factions.*

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## Libya

Libya has been experiencing violent conflict for nearly a decade, while also suffering from a Qaddafi legacy that crippled a centralized public sector, private enterprise, and a very weak health care system. There have been food, water, and fuel shortages and frequent disruptions to electricity. The oil embargo has also greatly limited the primary source of revenue for the country. These issues are especially problematic as the coronavirus is spreading rapidly among the Libyan population, especially vulnerable groups, including migrants, refugees, and the internally displaced.

In August, there was a rare occasion for optimism when the Government of National Accord and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives announced a cease-fire. Hifter agreed to honor the truce.<sup>72</sup> However, this was violated by Hifter's forces in early September.<sup>73</sup> The status of Libya's tenuous cease-fire and any sort of peace process very much depends on the actions taken by external powers and the pressures they apply to Libya's political and armed factions. In the meantime, dire conditions in the country have sparked widespread protests. In Tripoli, protesters were violently dispersed, and the Government of National Accord instituted

<sup>70</sup> Youssef Cherif, "Tunisia's Fledgling Gulf Relations," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, January 17, 2017.

<sup>71</sup> "Tunisia's Prime Minister-designate Announces Technocratic Government," *France 24*, August 25, 2020.

<sup>72</sup> "Libya's Tripoli-Based Government Declares Ceasefire – Statement," *Reuters*, August 21, 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Hamdi Yildiz, "Haftar Continues To Violate Libyan Ceasefire," *Anadolu Agency*, September 8, 2020.

a 4-day curfew.<sup>74</sup> Demonstrations also erupted in Benghazi, in eastern Libya. Protesters across Libya were calling out corruption; fuel, food, and water shortages; and electricity cuts. This wave of popular protests has led to a reshuffle within the Government of National Accord and the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, and Prime Minister Fayeze al-Serraj has promised to resign.<sup>75</sup>

Qatar and the UAE supported different anti-Qaddafi forces in 2011. After Qaddafi's death, the divisions within the anti-Qaddafi coalition came to the surface, and both countries began more aggressively backing opposing groups financially and militarily.<sup>76</sup> The UAE's focus on stemming the influence of Muslim Brotherhood-associated groups, as well as its predilection for military strongmen promising to restore stability and fight Islamists, drove the Emiratis to provide overt military support for Hifter. Saudi Arabia has also increased financial support for Hifter,<sup>77</sup> while Qatar has stepped up financial support to the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord. In August, Turkey, Qatar, and the Government of National Accord signed a tripartite agreement to establish a military training and coordination center.

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*The Libyan conflict is drawing Egypt and Turkey toward a direct military confrontation.*

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Turkey and Egypt are both major allies to opposing sides of the Gulf dispute, further galvanizing the mobilization of coalitions around one axis or the other. Libya's conflict is coalescing around the potential of direct military confrontation between Egypt and Turkey while the United States is focusing on countering the Russian presence. France, Germany, and Italy are pursuing sanctions for violations of the United Nations arms embargo, echoing proposals from the Berlin process, but the humanitarian situation in Libya continues to deteriorate as cease-fire violations and weapons continue to flow into the country. Worsening this situation is Libya's weak health-care infrastructure and the rapid spread of the coronavirus.

## Egypt

Egypt is increasingly concerned by events in its immediate neighborhood. The Libyan conflict is drawing Egypt and Turkey toward a direct military confrontation. Egypt is solidly rooted in the Saudi-Emirati security axis and supports the curbing of Qatari and Turkish influence, as well as the "maximum pressure" campaign against Iran. Egypt is increasingly preoccupied by negotiations with Ethiopia and Sudan over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, due to concerns over its water supply from the Nile.<sup>78</sup> The suspension of negotiations in August and Ethiopia's progress on unilaterally filling the reservoir is deepening regional tensions in East Africa.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Wofram Lacher (@W\_Lacher), "The increase in COVID cases notwithstanding ...," Twitter, August 26, 2020.

<sup>75</sup> Jonathan Fenton Harvey, "What Does Fayeze al-Serraj's Resignation Mean for Libya?," *The New Arab*, September 23, 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Frederic Wehry, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018), 53.

<sup>77</sup> Samuel Ramani, "Saudi Arabia Steps Up Role in Libya," *Al-Monitor*, February 24, 2020.

<sup>78</sup> "Nile Dam Talks: A Short Window To Embrace Compromise," *International Crisis Group*, June 17, 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Ayah Aman, "Addis Ababa Rejoices Over GERD Progress as Talks Drag On," *Al-Monitor*, August 5, 2020.

Furthermore, the economies of North African states, like so many others, are entering into recession. Countries that rely heavily on remittances from the Gulf, like Egypt, will be hit especially hard after many workers have lost their jobs and been forced to return home. Moreover, Karen Young argues that Gulf investment has been essential to the Egyptian economy:

Gulf states are consistent sources of both capital and job creation in Egypt, competing with the largest economies and investment sources globally. GCC states and their capital investments — from state and private entities — were responsible for more job creation in Egypt between 2003 and 2020 than both China and combined capital investment efforts from the United States, the United Kingdom and the EU.<sup>80</sup>

Egypt will face more urgent economic woes due to the economic slowdown in the Gulf, decreased remittances, and the overall economic and health consequences of the pandemic. As regional tensions and outright warfare expand in Egypt's immediate neighborhood, it may also find its military pulled into Libya's proxy war next door. The Egyptian Parliament's approval of sending troops abroad was an unprecedented move that has escalated the Libyan conflict and the regional stakes involved. It is also one of the main actors in current eastern Mediterranean tensions over maritime rights and gas reserves. There are tensions between the regional role that Sisi is looking to play and Egypt's domestic woes, sparking protests. In fall 2019, there were vast anti-Sisi protests across the country, and, more recently, smaller scale protests in rural and low-income areas have erupted.<sup>81</sup>

## Conclusion

With the converging dynamics of geopolitical competition, regional conflicts, and the domestic political dynamics of North African states, there is a need for a greater strategic focus on and support for conflict resolution in this increasingly unstable theater. The region's significance for U.S. policymakers was especially apparent when U.S. Secretary of Defense Mark Esper made his first visit to Africa, arriving in Tunisia September 30 and visiting Algeria October 1, with the aim of countering the threat of encroaching Russian and Chinese presence in the region.

North Africa has long been considered a peripheral region in wider Middle East dynamics. Today, however, it has become a site of great power competition among the United States, Russia, and China; the location of one of the region's most protracted violent conflicts; and the scene for regional and Gulf Arab rivalries. Outside the conflicting interests of the global powers, there are important divisions within and among the countries of the region itself and a legacy of peripheral fault lines, such as the Western Sahara conflict, the regional rivalry between Morocco and Algeria, the proliferation of armed groups and instability in the Sahel, unstable political transitions in Algeria, divisions over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project, and geopolitical competition in the Horn of Africa. With these complexities, it is essential to

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<sup>80</sup> Karen Young, "Gulf Investment Woes, COVID Economic Crisis Converge in Egypt," *Al-Monitor*, August 7, 2020.

<sup>81</sup> "Egypt's El-Sisi Warns of Instability After Protest Calls," *Al Jazeera*, September 27, 2020.

examine the Mediterranean conflict lines through a wider scope that encompasses regional dynamics in the Middle East and Africa, and especially the engagement of regional actors like the Gulf Arab states.

