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2024, the Real Annus Horribilis of the Southern Mediterranean?

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From a micro perspective, the 2020s were encouraging for the regimes of the Arab Middle East and North Africa (MENA) compared to the previous decade. There were no transformative revolutions or regime change on the scale of 2011 Egypt or Libya, for instance. Instead, a climate of peace prevailed, and cooperation was the norm.

But from a macro perspective, this occurred during a time of unprecedented turbulence. In the southern shores of the MENA region, between Ethiopia and Sudan and across the Sahel, intermittent shock waves are created by climate change, terrorism, civil wars, and military coups. Iran has been consolidating its power on the eastern shore by building a strong network of allies in the Gulf and the Levant. It views its Gulf neighbors and their Western allies with suspicion, considering them potential enemies. Meanwhile, far-right populist parties in Europe are gaining ground in elections, centering their focus on the perceived threat from the south (MENA and sub-Saharan). Economic indicators are deteriorating outside of the Gulf States and Algeria, and many young Arabs aspire to leave and settle elsewhere, particularly in Europe or North America. Climate issues continue to be a major concern and are only minimally addressed, despite the fact that the region hosted the last two COPs (Egypt in 2022, followed by the United Arab Emirates in 2023). Then came October 7th, 2023, when the peace that seemed to be triumphant was suddenly shattered. In fact, the Hamas attack tore down a facade of progress and calm, opened a Pandora's box, and plunged the region once again into an atmosphere of violence and uncertainty. The year 2024 thus begins as a true annus horribilis, and only a few optimists dare to rejoice (but they [exist](#)).

The most unpredictable and worrying challenge is that of climate and, more generally, the recurrence of **natural disasters and other natural phenomena**. They are becoming more frequent and the countries of the southern Mediterranean are ill-equipped to deal with them. As the earthquakes in Turkey, Syria, and Morocco and the floods in Libya have shown, the Mediterranean region is not immune. These phenomena killed around 70,000 people in the four countries in 2023 (and close to 100,000 according to some estimates). Since they are largely unpredictable, no one can guess whether they will occur again in 2024. Weak and impoverished states, like Syria and Libya, cannot cope with such major disasters. But neither do strong centralized states, such as Turkey and Morocco, who had difficulties to manage the disasters. Unlike Japan, for example, where buildings are earthquake-proof, in the MENA region they are not. And nature can have more than one trick up its sleeve; the memory of COVID is still fresh. At this

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year's World Economic Forum, the head of the World Health Organization warned that [Disease X](#) could strike at any time. The Southern Mediterranean, with its struggling economies and mounting political problems, would be as surprised by Disease X as it was by COVID four years ago.

The other big, new, and unpredictable issue is that of **cyber, along with Artificial Intelligence (AI)**. Over the past decade, cyber has fully entered international politics, with notable episodes of [attacks and counter attacks](#) between the US and Russia, the US and China, or Iran and Israel. The effects of these attacks have been less devastating than some [anticipated](#), but the online world continues to evolve, becoming more and more weaponized, with artificial intelligence reaching its peak in the 2020s. A cyber war in 2024 cannot be ruled out due to the fierce competition between Israel and the United States on the one hand, and Iran and its allies on the other. So far, their hostilities have materialized on the military and the economic front but, curiously, less so on the online front. This could change in 2024, and the Mediterranean, where all these powers have interests, could be a prime theatre for their games. Russians and Chinese may use AI-generated disinformation to discredit the US and the EU in the Southern Mediterranean countries, where populations have turned against the West after the Gaza War. Iranians may continue to target Israeli facilities and reach the nuclear sites, or the distant Kingdom of Morocco where Israel has a growing presence. And now that Egypt is inaugurating a Russian nuclear facility, Americans may want to strike a target there. Then there are the non-state cyber capabilities that non-state actors may use in light of ongoing conflicts, or that smaller groups or individuals may try out for criminal or venal purposes.

Moving into the realm of predictability, it is becoming certain that the **economic recovery** many hoped for after Covid will not reach the Southern Mediterranean this year. Military movements continue to erupt from time to time on every continent, increasing the spectrum of global instability. The year 2024 is being called the year of democracy because of the record number of elections, but that also means political instability and violence, which in turn affects the global economy. Apart from Algeria and Libya, which will continue to benefit from the global demand for oil and gas, the other North African countries will suffer. [Egypt](#) more than others: it is the most populous Arab country and faces wars on its eastern, southern, and western borders. Tourism could be threatened by the ongoing unrest in the Red Sea and the possible resurgence of terrorism. Revenues from the Suez Canal are declining because of the Gaza War. The country's food insecurity is increasing due to climate change, the war in Ukraine, and the Ethiopian GERD dam. [Tunisia](#) will also continue to face negative headwinds. [Morocco](#) is in a relatively better position, but is also feeling the effects of natural disasters and the increase in insecurity in the Sahel region.

In 2024, an ongoing conflict between **Israel and the Palestinians** continues. Since October 7th, the Israeli military campaign in Gaza has destroyed large parts of the enclave and displaced millions of Palestinians to temporary camps. With more than 30000 deaths on the Palestinian side and close to 1500 deaths on Israel's, and hundreds of thousands of injured, mostly [Palestinians](#), the war will have far-reaching consequences, as the escalation between Hezbollah and Israel in Lebanon shows. In Gaza, there is a risk of a greater humanitarian catastrophe and a collapse of the authority that the world needs to cope with in the upcoming months. The situation in Gaza may have implications for the West Bank, where [frictions](#) between Israelis and Palestinians are escalating. It is possible that there could be a Palestinian uprising against both Israel and the Palestinian Authority. Additionally, the lack of credible Palestinian leaders due to death or imprisonment could make it challenging to restore order after any potential breakdown of the political system. The conflict in Gaza is also causing increased radicalization among Arab youth towards Israel, the West, and their own governments. As the conflict continues, there may be larger demonstrations in Arab capitals, potential terrorist attacks, and even calls for regime change in the more embattled Arab states. This is because the Palestinian question is often intertwined with socio-economic grievances. Rabat, which has normalized relations with Israel, and Cairo, which has closed the border with Gaza, may be concerned about what is to come.

Related to the Gaza War, **Iran's** regional role is significant. In recent years, Tehran has strengthened its position along its borders, exerting influence in neighboring countries such as Yemen, Iraq, Palestine, and Lebanon. Iran has access to the Mediterranean through Lebanon and Palestine. But more recently, Morocco [accused](#) Iran of supporting the Polisario guerilla in conjunction with Algeria, although this news was widely disregarded at the time. Then, in late 2023, the Iranians made a surprising [threat](#): to shut the Mediterranean by either closing Gibraltar, between Morocco and Spain, or blocking the Strait of Sicily, between Tunisia and Italy -the nature of the threat was not clear. However, no major Iranian activity has been reported in either North African country. Despite this, Iran's recent activity in the Red Sea and its soft diplomacy among Arab populations is making Western diplomats nervous. In 2023, Iranian military technology was tested in the Red Sea. Will the Mediterranean Sea be next?

Some refer to 2024 as the [Year of Democracy](#) due to the numerous **elections** scheduled until December. In the Southern Mediterranean region alone, there are three presidential elections: Egypt (December 2023), Tunisia (October 2024), and Algeria (December 2024). However, it is important to note that these events are merely to be recorded and not expected to bring significant change. In these three countries, politics have become obsolete due to the strengthening of repressive methods. Abdulfattah el-Sisi was [re-elected](#) with 89.6% of the votes in Egypt. High scores are also expected for Algeria's Abdelmajid Tebboune and Tunisia's Kais Saied. Despite facing widespread popular discontent, mainly due to the stagnant or worsening economic situation, these regimes will most likely survive 2024, consolidating authoritarianism during the Year of Democracy.

In 2023, Europeans expressed concern about an increase in the number of informal **migrants** arriving from North Africa. Tensions between locals and migrants in [Tunisia](#), [Algeria](#), and [Libya have been reported](#); many migrants originate from Sub-Saharan Africa. Unfortunately, their countries of origin are experiencing increasing instability. In the Sahel, the number of terrorist attacks has reached unprecedented [levels](#), and military coups are contributing to regional instability. In Sudan, a country with a population of approximately 50 million people, civil war is deeply rooted, and multiple external factors complicate its resolution. Additionally, climate change exacerbates the situation by destroying pastures and other agricultural lands and depleting water sources. This suggests that, in 2024, more migrants will move north, either to settle in northern Africa where similar problems to those witnessed in Tunisia and Algeria in 2023 are expected to occur again, or to go to Europe. Summer 2024 is expected to see a record-breaking number of migrant arrivals.

Finally, let's turn our attention to the external players who are not directly involved. **China** has been increasing its presence in northern Africa for several years. **Russia** later joined in, beginning with direct involvement in Egypt and Libya in the 2010s, and has since accelerated its advances since the War on Ukraine. Now, the two countries consider this a crucial moment, as Arab [public opinion](#) has turned against the West following the Gaza War, while regional governments have increased their criticism of Western double standards. This opinion is reinforced by the West's focus on Ukraine and countering Russia in Europe, which distracts Washington and European capitals from the region. It is expected that there will be more opportunities coming from China and Russia to the MENA in 2024, primarily on an economic level, but potentially also in political and military cooperation.

The upcoming [US election](#) in November 2024, while happening far away from the shores of the Mediterranean, will have a direct impact on its countries. Regardless of whether Republican candidate Donald Trump wins or loses, those who fear that his victory could jeopardize their plans will likely accelerate them in the months leading up to the vote. Meanwhile, those who believe he would neglect the region will likely solidify their positions to be prepared for his potential election. The US elections have created global uncertainty, which may lead to increased conflict and instability in the Southern Mediterranean.

The Southern Mediterranean is facing a challenging year due to the unpredictability of natural causes and cyber developments, as well as the more predictable metrics of economics, migration, and regional wars, and the direct and indirect external influences. Europe, which is an island of stability nearby, may

be called upon to provide assistance; otherwise, it risks being dragged into the whirlpool. Local elites and civil society may also play a role in alleviating the burden and formulating solutions, provided they are not suppressed by the region's increasingly repressive political machines. It is also essential for global powers such as the US, China, and Russia to find common ground, and for democratic leaders from the Global South, in countries such as Brazil and South Africa, to step forward and contribute to mediation efforts and solution-making.

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