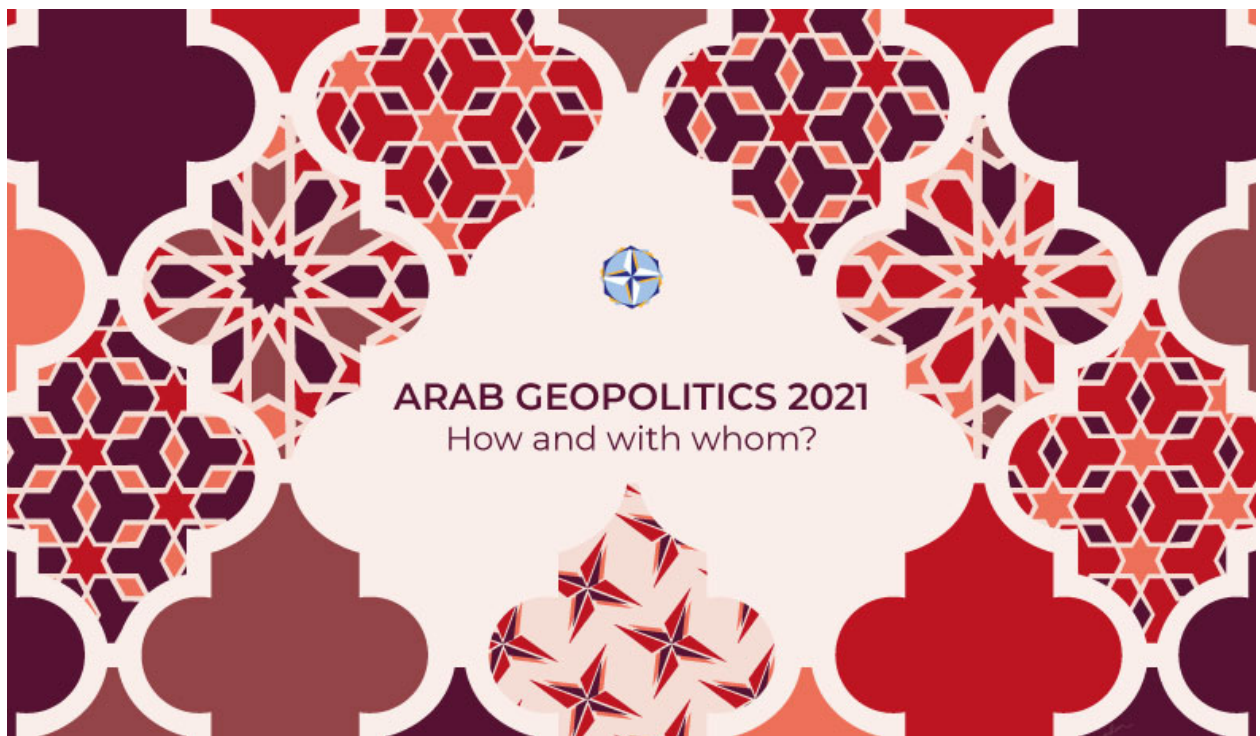




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*Background Policy Paper*

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The end of the Trump years, which were characterised by the resurgence of power politics in the Middle East and North Africa and the adoption of dangerous brinkmanship policies by regional powers and global players, is shedding light on the structural changes and new paradigms that are shaping the new geopolitics of the Arab region. Undoubtedly, the transactional approach associated with the former US President has greatly contributed to this transformation, accelerating pre-existing trends that are gradually coming to the surface.

Highlighting shared interests and converging views between several Gulf States and Israel, the Abraham Accords have inaugurated the age of normalisation. Facilitated by the change of the administration in Washington, diplomacy has gained momentum in the region. Among the most visible symptoms of a turning tide that could potentially bring to an end the decade of chaos that followed the Arab Spring, there are: the al-Ula summit and the end of the Gulf crisis; negotiations in Vienna to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action; exploratory talks between Egypt and Turkey to de-escalate tensions in the East Med and Libya; the push by several Arab states to normalise relations with a Syrian regime ostracised during the brutal civil war; and more recently direct talks between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

Nevertheless, structural factors still undermine any attempt to reach a comprehensive regional settlement. The May 2021 flare up confirmed the resilience of the Israel-Palestine conflict to these changing regional dynamics, which have also gone unnoticed in Yemen. More in general, the US' disengagement from the region, raise questions over Washington's commitment to its regional partners, with inevitable consequences on the renewed great power competition. Using hybrid means or relying on a soft power strategy, China and Russia have already started filling the vacuum, contributing to a wider regional realignment also promoted by endogenous factors.

Indeed, the decline of the Political Islam, suggested by Ennahda's identity crisis in front of President Kais Saied's power consolidation in Tunisia and confirmed by the debacle of the Islamist *Parti de la justice et du développement* (PJD) in the latest elections in Morocco, is paving the way for a new regional divide, this time grounded on the normalisation process. The recent diplomatic row between Algeria

and Morocco is the most visible example of this new trend that has reopened old wounds, returning frozen conflicts such as the dispute over the Western Sahara to the centre stage, but also reverberating on the relations between the northern and the southern shore of the Mediterranean Sea, raising concerns on the gas supply to Europe during an unprecedented energy crisis.

Recent geopolitical shifts have also had an impact in the Deep Maghreb, where the jihadist threat and political instability continue to grow. The case of Mali serves as an example. More in general, the Western-African relationship that stemmed from and stood upon the offer of economic and military support to local governments in return for their commitment to the path of state-building has lost value. The paradigm based on conditionality and value-driven demands pledging a sovereign state is failing almost everywhere outside the West. New hegemonic forces, alternative and opposed to the Western aid model, are rising and gaining ground: China, with its offer of loans and resources in exchange for zero political conditionality; Russia, which is dusting off a neo-imperial activism supporting authoritarian leaders in return for a logistical and political presence in international relations; regional powers (including Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey and the UAE), all competing against each other while backing illiberal governments and promoting Islamic identity and welfare.

However, it is worth noting that authoritarianism-oriented thrusts in the Sahel are first of all endogenous: the latest crisis in Mali, the recent coup in neighbouring Guinea, the growing tensions in Burkina Faso, or the violent change of power in Chad are just some examples. Besides, this looming African populism does not hold out authoritarianism as a fallback or second best, but simply as a solution. Not only it claims its effectiveness precisely in response to the crisis of the state (of which jihadism and war are both symptoms and causes), but it presents itself as a new, more valid counter-insurgency strategy. Once agreed on the endogenous blueprint of this African populist paradigm, it is easily understandable how it is also the one creating the demand for Russian or Turkish interference, and not vice versa.

All is not lost for Europe, though. The West has some cards left to play. If it leaves old colonial reflections behind and invests more in multilateralism and federalism (also considering the

successful case of ECOWAS), it could actually lay the foundation for a new path of partnership with Sub-Saharan African countries. A path that could mould an alternative political identity built upon Europe's soft power, as well as renew the approach to state-building and counterterrorism refocusing the balance between hard and soft power on a regional basis. It is either this, or to end up suffering a hostile presence with increasingly less say, destined to eventually leave the ground for good and out of spite.

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