

# DYNAMICS

#01 | 2022

WHAT



IT



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ALL



ABOUT

The Abraham Accords

The Drone Attacks in Abu Dhabi

Europe and the Sahel

The Future of GCC-EU Relations

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Dynamics is a special publication on the unfolding relations between Europe, the Arab Gulf and the wider Middle East. Published in both hard- and digital formats, each issue features information papers, commentaries, analyses and interviews of field specialists. Every issue represents a collection of ideas, insights and comments, both exclusive and collected from external sources, with the aim of providing an innovative look towards the Gulf region. Dynamics is completely **free** and collaboration is open to everyone.

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# WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

## A Matter of Subtleties

Author: Arnold Koka

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2022, much like 2020, kicked off with a drone attack. While the final pre-pandemic period was marked by the targeted assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the Iranian Commander of the Quds forces, by a US drone strike. This year, the attack was conducted by the Iran-aligned Yemeni Houthi militia, which targeted Abu Dhabi, the capital of the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The attack targeted the city's airport, resulting in three civilian fatalities. Solidarity with the UAE was expressed by Israel, which promised 'security and intelligence support,' and the attack coincided with the Emirates' signing of a purchase deal for an air and missile defense system from South Korea. Korean-Iranian relations dipped due to sanctions being recently reimpositions by Seoul on Tehran's financial assets.

The underlying dynamics are, of course, much wider, and attention must be also paid to other international files in order to make sense of the region. JCPOA talks continue in Vienna and the Abraham Accords are set to expand.

This issue of Dynamics looks at these key issue and more.

Dubai, United Arab Emirates



## WHY NOW?

# Contextualising the Houthi Attacks on the UAE

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On 17 January 2022, the Ansar Allah (aka the Houthis) in Yemen claimed a missile and drone attack on Abu Dhabi which killed three people. Then, on 24 January, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) intercepted two ballistic missiles fired by the Houthis and retaliated by destroying the missile launcher in Al-Jawf from where they were launched. While the Sanaa-based Houthis have threatened the UAE in the past, these attacks are a clear escalation and their timing is suggestive of a wider pressure campaign serving the interests of Iran, particularly as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) talks rattle along, sanctions remain in place and the Abraham Accords countries (Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco and Israel) continue to enhance their relationship. Battlefield developments in Yemen, such as the routing of Houthi forces in Shabwa province and Marib, may, by themselves, provide the reasoning for the Houthis to retaliate against the UAE. However, that would be too simplistic: the Houthis are an integral part of Iran's so-called Axis of Resistance — which identifies the US and its many regional allies such as Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, the UAE and Israel (etc) as its main adversaries — and therefore plays a part in the larger game of statecraft. Attacks against Saudi Arabia and the UAE

unfold within that context. Deploying proxies to pressure adversaries into making concessions has long been revolutionary Iran's modus operandi. Already in the 1980s, during the Lebanese civil war, Hezbollah and Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) orchestrated the Beirut bombings of the US Embassy and Marine barracks which killed 370 people and Hezbollah took over one hundred hostages, mostly civilians from the US and Western Europe, as both arms-length revenge for supporting the Shah, Israel and the moderate Arab monarchies and as punishment for aiding Iraq in the 1980-1988 war with Iran. Little has changed in the following decades, with similar patterns in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, among others. A key driver for the string of attacks on the UAE is economic by nature. Ratcheting up pressure on the UAE, Yahya Saree (Houthi spokesman), denounced the so-called 'Saudi-UAE-American aggression' and called on foreign companies to leave the UAE, underlining that the country is unsafe and will remain so as long as their forces remain in Yemen. Opponents of the UAE seized the opportunity and amplified that message across various media. The Houthis, it seems, are now following a similar strategy for the UAE as they did with Saudi Arabia—

increasing attacks as a coercive tool and boosting their internal and international standing at the same time. Since the UAE is a key trading hub and a popular tourist destination a sustained missile and drone campaign will hit the UAE's tourism sector particularly hard especially if the target area would be expanded to Dubai. The same could be said if targets included trade infrastructure; if the Houthis attacked ports and energy infrastructure — considering the UAE's role as a key trading hub with one of the largest and busiest ports in the world, Jebel Ali, adjacent to Dubai — not only would the UAE suffer but so would global economics. The UAE, for its part, continues to seek-out tools to limit external attacks from the air and, much like Riyadh, it will be forced to increase its spending on security and defence. The UAE currently uses the US Patriot and the THAAD air defence systems, and has been in the market for other partners to upgrade its defence capabilities. In the wake of the Abu Dhabi attacks, Israel's Prime Minister, Naftali Benett, offered 'security and intelligence support' to help protect the UAE and the two are likely to further intensify their security cooperation. Abu Dhabi might consider Israel's famed Iron Dome shield. The Abu Dhabi attacks coincided with a visit of the South Korean President, Moon Jae-in, to the UAE and the signing of a \$3.5 billion (USD) deal to acquire South Korea's Cheongung II air and missile defence system. The timing is noteworthy because of recent tensions between Seoul and Tehran over frozen Iranian funds in Korean banks owing to the reimposition of sanctions. In January 2021, the IRGC

seized a South Korean tanker Hankuk Chemi in the Strait of Hormuz to pressure South Korea to unfreeze the funds. It partially worked. South Korea agreed to unfreeze \$1 billion (USD) of the total \$7 billion in Iranian assets held at South Korean banks. The remaining \$6 billion has not been recovered and timing the Abu Dhabi attacks with President Moon's visit might also serve as a not-so-friendly reminder. The South Korean angle is also interesting considering Iran's strengthening ties with China and the Sino-US tensions in the Indo-Pacific. Two days after the Abu Dhabi attacks, China, Iran and Russia began joint naval exercises in the Indian Ocean, demonstrating their capabilities and their cementing of a trilateral alliance. Iran's President, Ebrahim Raisi, then headed to Moscow for talks with Russia's President, Vladimir Putin. It remains to be seen whether Raisi will still embark on his scheduled visit to the UAE on 7 February. The UAE had been in the process of reducing its direct involvement in Yemen. The Houthis' attacks might just draw them back deeper into the conflict, which would likely thrust the UAE back into European and US lawmakers' radar—both have called for banning arms sales to the country because of its actions in Yemen. Alternatively, the UAE now could have more manoeuvrability to retaliate. Immediately after the 17 January attacks, the UAE called on the US to re-designate the Houthis as a foreign terrorist organisation and the UAE's Director of National Intelligence, Ali Al-Shamsi, arrived in Washington for talks with US officials in the White House and Congress. It was the current Biden Administration

that cancelled the Houthis terrorist designation as soon as it took office and while it is unlikely to reinstate the status due to political considerations, the decision might reenter the public debate for the upcoming US midterm elections. In Brussels, the European Union (EU) was, characteristically, absent from the crisis and only released a short statement condemning the 17 January attacks, urging ‘all parties’ to engage with the UN Special Envoy. Meanwhile, the emboldened Houthis have been rejecting any political solution proposals and have continued their military offensive in the country. The Abu Dhabi attacks came at a delicate time for the EU—just when Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) officials were in Brussels for talks with EU representatives as the two sides seek to restart and boost cooperation. The recent attacks on the UAE and the continued cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia need to be understood within a wider context rather than being treated in isolation. From the above, several recommendations can be drawn:

- 1. Contextualisation**—when forming policies towards the region, contextualising events such as the Abu Dhabi attacks is crucial. Looking at the bigger picture and the less obvious motivations, particularly when it comes to violent non-state actors.
- 2. Solidarity**—openly expressing support for, and solidarity with, regional partners that are under sustained attack would go a long way in building a stake in regional affairs for the EU. The
- 3. Coordination**—in support of the defensive capabilities of key regional actors. Many of the Arab Gulf countries share core interests with Europe in the region and their military efforts should be complemented by the West in a bid to curb terror finance and weapons supplies to the Houthis. Only a comprehensive approach can help support peace efforts in countries overtaken by violent non-state actors.

EU’s reluctance to show outright solidarity to the victims of extremist missiles and drones, which also openly terrorises Yemen’s civilian population, raises questions about Brussels’ commitment to Middle East peace and security.

Qal'at al-Bahrain



# WHAT IT'S ALL ABOUT

## Three Main Benefits of the Abraham Accords

Author: Omar Al Busaidy

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The Abraham Accords — signed in Washington on 15 September 2020 by Bahrain and the UAE with Israel (joined by Morocco on 22 December 2020) — were seen by many around the world as the beginning of a new era in the Middle East, an opportunity for dialogue and direct engagement in understanding and working with one another whilst seeking solutions to past, present and future challenges. While there are countless long-term benefits in the Abraham Accords, three stand out as being exceptional:

1. **Hope**—it's a small word but has a very deep meaning especially for people in the Middle East that witnessed conflict for far too long and hope to see for themselves a new narrative that will be a positive one. One that could be shared with future generations in order for them to take advantage of the opportunities that will arise from travel, trade and commerce between Israel and its neighbors. The most important issue that many hope to see resolved is the formation of a Palestinian state and while many other attempts in negotiation have failed in the past, the signing of these Accords prove to be the most viable one to possibly seeing the realization

of a state for the Palestinians. Through dialogue and engagement, there could be a possibility to see more compromises made by both Israelis and Palestinians in order to move forward to a better future for both people.

2. **Prosperity**—one of the most challenging issues facing the leaders of the Middle East is the rise of youth unemployment which according to some estimates is at 30%. Since the signing of the Abraham Accords, the value of trade between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain has risen tremendously and this will open many opportunities for the youth to join the workforce. Startups and entrepreneurs have already engaged in brainstorming sessions, hackathons, conferences and virtual events to discuss collaborations on the new opportunities that have unleashed between the countries. Investment funds have since been created to tap into projects that will not only reap healthy financial returns but will also tackle climate change, security, food, and energy.
3. **Peace**—it is without a doubt that Israel is one of the most advanced

nations in the world when it comes to innovation in security and weapons technology. For countries like the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Sudan, Morocco, Egypt and Jordan, cooperating with Israel will help to bolster their security capabilities and defend against the threat posed by Iran and its proxies including Hezbollah, Ansar Allah (the Houthis) and other non-state actors that constantly threaten the stability of the pragmatic states. Since the signing of the Abraham Accords, several countries including Saudi Arabia (who is not a signatory yet) have revised the school textbooks which used to promote content that was antisemitic and the governments have slowly begun to invite and host more Rabbis and Jewish organizations to conferences, meetings as well contribute to writing columns in local publications. In the UAE for instance, there has always been a Jewish community that congregated in secret but today, shabbat lunches and dinners are not only shared on social media but are always attended by many residents of the UAE including non-Jews.

It is impossible to predict the future. However, if there is one thing that is certain it's that peaceful relations between people and countries is always better than the alternative. Anything that will help to reinforce people to people contacts as well as finding mechanisms towards stabilizing one of the most conflict-prone areas in the world is, in fact, a universal good. The Abraham Accords shines a light, a ray

of hope, to remind the world that the Middle East is much more than a battle ground.

## AN OVERVIEW

# Why the Abraham Accords Matter

Author: Piercamillo Falasca

Consigliere for Italy's Minister for Southern Italy and Territorial Cohesion

When, in August 2020, European policy makers and publics, became aware of the shift in the Arab-Israel paradigm — one that would redefine political and economic relations — encapsulated by the Abraham Accords, first reactions were, generally, muted. The lack of European enthusiasm in that historic Washington meeting where the representatives of Israel, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, hosted by (then) President of the United States, Donald Trump, gathered to sign a new chapter, was based on several factors. Some cast the Abraham Accords as Trump's publicity stunt and were loathe to support it. Others thought it was a "betrayal" of the Palestinian cause. But reading new events with historic lens is often a mistake. 18 months since those signatures and the Abraham Accords have begun to reveal their political and commercial impact and are proving to be a salient factor driving peace and prosperity in the Middle East and wider Mediterranean region. With the need for European economies to kickstart after the Covid-19 pandemic, coupled with a pending energy crisis, the European Union's (EU) relationship to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries is, day-on-day becoming ever more important. Strategic choices must be made. When, in recent days, reports emerged as to talks between the

Biden Administration and the Qatari government on the later's potential increase of gas supplies to Europe in the event of a gas crisis on the back of worsening tensions between Russia and Ukraine, many European observers "rediscovered" that a special relationship to the GCC is necessary and can help achieve a variety of interests. The need to reduce dependence on Russian gas and the ever stronger commitment to decarbonization inevitably lead to the strengthening of dialogue and collaboration between Europe and the Gulf—between the EU and the GCC. The energy dossier is one of many where Euro-Gulf collaboration is crucial. Others include: the fight against extremism and terrorism, the safety of maritime traffic through the Mediterranean, Red Sea, Gulf and Indian Ocean, mutually beneficial trade relations and facing international challenges (re: Covid-19, climate change, etc). A very common mistake of European governments — articulated in Adel Abdel Ghafar and Silvia Colombo (eds) *The European Union and the Gulf Cooperation Council - Towards a New Path* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) — is to reduce Euro-Gulf relations to the bilateral level where they are open to competition between the EU members, each guided by its own limited priority list. This approach has meant that although

the EU is, by far, the first trading partner of the GCC, it does not play a significant strategic role in the region. The EU is still an economic giant and a political dwarf. The time has come for a unified and comprehensive EU strategy towards the GCC countries. The Abraham Accords offer a unique opportunity to develop a political and institutional framework for the EU to strengthen dialogue and collaboration with Arab countries while assisting Israel better integrate in the region. The stability of the Middle East and the Mediterranean littoral, the promotion of open and competitive markets, the strengthening of the rule of law, breaking down barriers to economic and commercial integration are simultaneously EU interests and enhanced by the Abraham Accords. Disengagement from cycles of conflict and the reinforcement of peaceful relations in the Middle East should come as a welcome shift for the EU long-fearful of conflict contagion in the volatile East Mediterranean. For Italy, a country oriented towards the export of goods and services but a net importer of energy, the success of the Abraham Accords and the intensification of economic and commercial relations between its traditional partner, Israel and its relative new partners in the Gulf is, unquestionably, a positive development. Italy was, as a case in point, the first Western country to be hit by Covid-19 and it bore a high cost in socio-political, healthcare, economic and human terms. By 2021 however, the widespread vaccination campaign and a strict strategy to contain the virus led Italy to regain lost ground: in September 2021, Italian exports had already reached the overall level

reached in the whole 2019. Nonetheless, the pandemic has hit a production and economic fabric that suffering from endemic condition for many years, with very low annual growth rates. For this reason, Italy opted, unlike other EU countries, to grant full access the EU's Next Generation EU plan resources: €191 billion (euros), partly in the form of loans, subsidised and partly non-repayable contributions, with which the government led by (former) ECB President Mario Draghi has embarked on a profound process of modernisation of the Italian economy for post-Covid. Among the main goals of the Plan, are:

1. the adoption of green hydrogen as a driver of the ecological transition,
2. massive railway, port and logistic infrastructural improvements and,
3. a robust investment in innovation and training of human capital.

One of the main objectives for the €191 billion Plan is the development of the traditionally less advanced regions of the country, the South, with the ambition of making it one of the places of greatest interest for European re-industrialisation and re-shoring—a process considered by many as inevitable after the pandemic and the need to reduce production dependence on distant global supply chains. Southern Italy has long been considered as periphery by successive Italian governments and indeed by the EU. Italy is changing its self-orientation and aims to regenerate the South and become a more advanced platform for Europe in the Mediterranean—a gravitational pole for production investments and a privileged entry-point of goods into the European continent. Unsurprisingly, it is around the main ports of Southern Italy that eight special economic zones have been

established, with reduced taxation and bureaucracy, to attract investments and generate innovation. Italy's ambition to restore Mediterranean centrality to the economies of its southern regions makes the relationship with the signatory countries of the Abraham Accords a core element, which can induce both political authorities and Italian business communities to focus on dialogue and collaboration with potential the Abraham Accords countries, to push for that new paradigm to expand to others and generally produce a region of stability and prosperity.



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*The Gulf countries' history is not only deeply fascinating but also crucial for understanding the present and future direction of the countries and the region.*

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# AN EYE ON THE REGION

## The EU-Gulf Monitor / January 2022

Author: Arnold Koka & Veronica Stigliani

The Monitor includes a carefully selected batch of the most important news unfolding in the Gulf countries to help you map the region's trends and the dynamics of its relations with Europe. It is published weekly and is also available in audio format at [www.egic.info](http://www.egic.info)

### Kingdom of Bahrain

Israel's Ambassador to Bahrain, Eitan Na'eh, announced that Tel Aviv began importing aluminum from Manama. Details of the trade were not disclosed. Manama also signed a deal with Japanese Mitsubishi Heavy Industries, seeking to reduce the carbon emissions of Alba (Aluminium Bahrain), one of the world's largest aluminium smelters.

### State of Kuwait

Kuwait received the final war reparation payment from Iraq, through an instalment of €567.7 million, a few days before the anniversary of the beginning of the Gulf War. The disbursement totalling €46.1 billion was established by the United Nations Compensation Committee in 1991 as a result of Iraq's invasion of Kuwait.

### Sultanate of Oman

On 12 January, Oman and the United Kingdom signed a Sovereign Investment Partnership to drive joint strategic investment in areas such as clean energy and technology. The deal is part of the British efforts to expand business ties with the Gulf countries. A week later, Muscat announced a partnership with British Energy Giant, BP PLC, for the development of

renewable energy and green hydrogen in the country by 2030.

### The EU Corner

In mid-January, top EU and GCC officials discussed regional cooperation, especially in the area of trade. On 17 January, the Secretary General of the GCC, Nayef Al-Hajraf, and the GCC Chief Negotiator, Abdulrahman Al-Harbi, visited Brussels, meeting with EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell. Four days later, the Fourth Trade and Investment Dialogue between GCC and the EU was held at the European Commission headquarters in Brussels, further discussing ways to boost economic relations.

### State of Qatar

Qatar and Turkey reached a preliminary agreement on managing security at the International Airport of Kabul, Afghanistan. Internal security will be ensured by the actor operating the airport, while external security will be ran by the Taliban. Further talks are set to be held between Doha, Ankara and the Taliban over financing and operational aspects of the site.

### Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Saudi Aramco signed fifty cooperation deals with international companies to

cooperate in localising energy sector activities as Riyadh aims to localise seventy percent of its energy products in line with the Vision 2030. In the energy area, Riyadh and Baghdad also announced they will link their electricity grids. The deal aims to reduce Baghdad's energy dependence on Iran and ensure the country has emergency reserves in case of power cuts.

### **The United Arab Emirates**

The UAE took up its seat as a non-permanent member of the United Nations Security Council. The country was elected in June 2021 for the 2022-2023 term along with Albania, Brazil, Gabon and Ghana.

### **Key Official Visits**

On 30 January, Israeli President, Isaac Herzog, visited the UAE for the first time. The visit came as a further signal of Tel Aviv's support for the Emirates' security and of its willingness to expand Gulf-Israeli relations. On the matter of security, on 26 January Abu Dhabi also hosted a trilateral meeting between Bahrain, Egypt and the UAE. The meeting gathered Bahrain's King Hamad bin Isa Al-Khalifa, Egypt's President, Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, Abu Dhabi's Crown Prince, Mohamed bin Zayed Al-Nahyan, and Ruler of Dubai and UAE's Prime Minister, Mohammed bin Rashid Al-Maktoum. All sides agreed to cooperate in consolidating regional security.

On 31 January, US President, Joe Biden, received Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani, for their first in-person meeting. They discussed energy security energy supplies to

Europe amid tensions with Russia and developments in Afghanistan. During the visit, President Biden announced the US will designate Doha as a Major non-NATO ally, a group that includes Australia, Bahrain, Kuwait and Israel, among others. It was not mentioned whether the two leaders discussed the Iranian file.

On 27 January, Qatar's Prime Minister and Foreign Minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani, travelled to Tehran for a meeting with his Iranian counterpart, Hossein Amir-Abdollahian. The two officials discussed developments in nuclear talks in Vienna and in Afghanistan.

# EU-GCC Relations What the Future Has in Store

Author: Leone Radioncini

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On 17 January 2022, the Gulf Cooperation Council's (GCC) Secretary General, Nayef Falah Al-Hajraf, and Chief Negotiator, Abdulrahman Al-Harbi, traveled to the European Commission in Brussels—meeting with the Commission's Executive Vice-President, Valdis Dombrovskis (Economy and Financial Affairs, Trade), Commissioner Johannes Hahn (Budget and Administration), Commissioner Ylva Johansson (International Security and Migration) and European Union's (EU) High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice President of the Commission (HR/VP), Josep Borrell. The visit followed-up an invitation extended by HR/VP Borrell during his trip to the Gulf region in October 2021, which signalled EU's renewed interest in expanding relations with the GCC. During their meeting, the delegates dialogued over a wide assortment of shared interests and global challenges, such as: green and digital transition, climate change and counter-terrorism. Apart from the more traditional subject matters, such as trade, conceptualising the green transition appears to be one of the most relevant issues that could help boost the relations between the two regional organisations. GCC countries are indeed facing a critical increase in temperatures and have therefore implemented different

long-term strategies to face the potentially dramatic consequences of climate change in the medium and long terms. At the same time, the EU is implementing the European Green Deal, a plan for green transition that could meet the needs and interests of the Gulf countries and help them in the attempt of diversification of their socio-economic structure. The improvement in relations between the two regional organisations appears to be even more relevant, considering the forthcoming 26th EU-GCC Joint Council and Ministerial Meeting, which will be held on 21 February 2022, the first such meeting in six years. Since then both the leadership in the EU and the political situation in the Gulf have critically changed and the Joint Council offers a great opportunity for both sides to define the fields and means through which cooperation can be boosted. The Foreign Affairs Council of the European Union, held on 18 October 2021, represented a starting point for discussions meant to be held on the 26th EU-GCC Joint Council. During the discussions, the EU Foreign Ministers acknowledged the relevance of the Gulf and discussed ways to strengthen the European position in the area. The discussions held during the Foreign Affairs Council represented a fundamental moment for the definition of the European Commission strategy

in the Gulf and for the preparation of a Joint Communication on a “Partnership with the Gulf”. This partnership is due to be approved by the Commission between the first and the second quarter of 2022 and will define the development of EU-GCC relations in the short and medium term. All this considered, the forthcoming Joint Council has great potential and could represent a milestone in the improvement of EU-GCC relations. On this subject the following policy recommendations can be made:

- 1. Make the Joint Council a more frequent format:** having regular, yearly meetings of the EU-GCC Joint Council could help promote good relations, mutual understanding and check the status of EU-GCC cooperation. This will become even more relevant with the probable increase in fields of cooperation and common projects.
- 2. Define a common strategy to promote regional safety and security:** the willingness of GCC countries to dialogue with EU institutions represents a crucial starting point for promoting dialogue in the region. Peace and stability in the Gulf and, generally, in the Middle East are vital interests for both organisations.
- 3. Supporting the socio-economic and green transition in GCC countries:** with the European Green Deal, EU institutions have defined the medium and long term priorities for the Member States. However, Europe cannot combat climate change alone and the GCC countries are promoting plans that could greatly benefit from

European support and expertise and offer business opportunities for European companies. Therefore, strengthening cooperation on these socio-economic and green transition plans would be in the interest of both parties.

## EXTRACT

# Europe and the Rapidly Deteriorating Security Situation in the Sahel

Author: Jonathan Clayton  
Journalist

In the 1980s, each Friday the narrow streets around Al-Sunnah Mosque in the down at heel Bab El Oued district of Algiers were thronged with young men. In their hundreds they flocked to hear firebrand imam Ali Belhadj denounce the government of the National Liberation Front (FLN), which has led Algeria since independence from France in 1962. He lambasted leftists, liberal reforms, politicians, France and the West, 'the impious' in general. Only Islam escaped denunciation. Loudspeakers carried his words to hundreds of tightly packed believers praying in unison in the rabbit warren of narrow streets outside. There, among the angry and unemployed, his tirades fell on fertile ground. He roundly rejected calls for Western-style democratic reforms, distancing the Islamists from other opponents of the regime, who had been urging then President Chadli Bendjedid to loosen the iron grip of the government on all aspects of life and hold 'free and fair' elections. Ali Belhadj, born in Tunis to parents of Mauritanian origin, was having none of it. 'Democracy is a stranger in the House of God. Guard yourself against those who say that the notion of democracy exists in Islam. There is no democracy in Islam. There exists only the shura

(consultation) with its rules and constraints. ... We are not a nation that thinks in terms of majority-minority. The majority does not express the truth.' 'Allahu Akbar' (God is greater) chants echoed through the neighbourhood. Who needs political parties when Islam has all the answers, preached Ali Belhadj, who took inspiration from Hassan Al-Banna and Sayyid Qutb, the founders of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood. 'Multi-partyism is not tolerated unless it agrees with the single framework of Islam ... If people vote against the Law of God ... this is nothing other than blasphemy. The ulama [religious scholars] will order the death of the offenders who have substituted their authority for that of God.' In 1966, Qutb was convicted of plotting against Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser and executed by hanging. Hassan Al-Banna was killed by the Egyptian secret police in 1949. Their deaths gave rise to Salafi jihadism, the religio-political doctrine that underpins the ideological roots of global jihadist groups like Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria/Levant (ISIS/L). As a young journalist with Reuters news agency, I along with other reporters would often go to Al-Sunnah and mingle with the faithful, hoping to gain some insight into the growing

under-swell of protest movements sweeping across the region. Little did we appreciate that we were among those who a few years later would have happily slit our throats. We journalists were not completely correct in assessments of what was going on underneath the surface of such societies, but we were much more in tune with developments than most. Diplomats, regional experts, independent analysts rarely visited such places and totally misrepresented the situation. The Islamists were dismissed as a minority, religious zealots on the fringes of mainstream society. Events on the ground told another story. Lawyers, teachers, nurses were all in the movement. They were all virulently opposed to corrupt and incompetent cabals that ran the government and hated security services. Above all, they shared a vision of a better future — grounded in a belief in good governance, moral rectitude, respect for traditions. The deeply unpopular Marxist-influenced government was an ally of the Soviet Union, Afghanistan's oppressors. The United States Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) unleashed the Islamist genie from the bottle to defeat the Soviet Union. Much later, it was therefore no surprise when the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS), created by Ali Belhadj and fellow firebrand imam Abbassi Madani to fight promised elections — despite the distaste for democracy — went on to win Algeria's first and to date only free and fair elections in 1991, having already swept the board in local polls two years earlier. The Algerian government panicked. The decision to annul those elections,

institute military rule and ban the FIS triggered a decade of violent civil war. Those misguided decisions are directly linked to the current insurgency in the Sahel, the greatest security threat facing Western Europe today and are in danger of being repeated again. Those signing up for the Afghan resistance were not all fighters. Some would work as volunteers — primarily teachers and social workers — in the sprawling Afghan refugee camps near Peshawar, the elegant border town in northwest Pakistan at the opposite end of the desolate Khyber Pass leading to Afghanistan. Their salaries were often paid by Islamic relief organisations flush with cash from US ally, Saudi Arabia. There, the idealists mingled with other activists of political Islam from Egypt, Syria, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Yemen, Kurdistan and Bosnia. For the first time, the countries of North Africa were linked to the Muslim countries of Southeast Asia in what has been described as a great "Open University" of radical Islam. 'Afghanistan was like a university which introduced a new ideology and school of thought. The ideology of Jihad resistance. It was a gathering point for all the armed resistance. The Islamic movement was going through a renaissance, and all the Islamic schools met each other for the first time and made it like a university, an open room for discussion. For nearly ten years,' said a former fighter who was there. One notion which was very quickly rejected was that of "democratic Islam." The Arab fighters found they could triumph with force. They beat the Soviets, who finally withdrew from Afghanistan in February

1989. Pure unadulterated Islam had triumphed—the lesson was clear. Others, who did not fight, gained experience with computers and communications equipment, and even absorbed lessons from translated Western manuals on how to combat terrorism, building up a reservoir of skills, which would later hugely benefit Islamist terrorist groups. The repressiveness and total incompetence of most of the governments of the Muslim world provided sufficient political motivation for Arab Islamist movements, but the evolution of the Afghan war into a jihad for Muslims across the Islamic world moulded them into a global network. And, for the first time ever, the major non-Islamic powers were not — at least initially — in opposition. Without Soviet support, Kabul fell to the Mujahideen in 1992. The United States decided it was time to reduce, if not eliminate, the Arab presence. Under pressure, Pakistani and Afghan security services began to make mass arrests, aided by the intelligence services of Arab countries keen not to see these dangerous nationals return. Many fighters drifted away — especially when the Afghans turned on each other. Once again, it was in Algeria where the return of the Arab Afghans was most pronounced. Seasoned veterans, such as Tayeb Al-Afghani, Jaafar Al-Afghani, Abdelhak Layada, Abu Abdallah Ahmed moved quickly into top political and military positions in the FIS and dominated the Armed Islamic Group (GIA), its hardline military offshoot set up after the 1991 election results were annulled. GIA was led by a succession of emirs (commanders), who were killed or

arrested one after another. Unlike the other main armed groups, the Armed Islamic Group (MIA) and later the Islamic Salvation Army (AIS), the GIA sought not to pressure the government into concessions but to destabilise and overthrow it and to ‘purge the land of the ungodly’ — the lesson of Afghanistan had been well learned.

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*The full article is available at  
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