



Discerning the **Bigger** Picture of International **Crises**

End of the Year Review 2021

As 2021 has proven to be a year of challenges across the international landscape, three BIC analysts have found common denominators to the failure of policymaking, having strategic ramifications that go even further.

CRITICAL INSIGHTS BY YASMINE AKRIMI, BEN LOWINGS & SHADA ISLAM

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS BY AMB. MARC OTTE



**BRUSSELS
INTERNATIONAL
CENTER**

Introductory Remarks

BY MARC OTTE
BIC President

This end of the year review addresses various facets of international crises and the failures of governments and institutions to confront their predicaments. In addition to the excellent analyses by three BIC researchers, I would add the impact of two game changers: climate change and the continuation of the COVID 19 pandemic.

These two not only worsen current crises, but also contribute a lot to accelerate the ongoing international disorder, with major geopolitical ramifications. They affect not only global health but also threaten societies by reinforcing nationalistic mindsets, deepening inequalities, and damaging multilateral cooperation. In this sense, climate change and the pandemic were – and continue to be – one of the main sources of political decay and of challenges to traditional values. The short-sighted “remedies” of the “green policies”, with the absence of an effective and inclusive enforcement mechanism, created additional threats against vulnerable countries and its peoples. They induce a crisis of the economic system almost everywhere. Finally, the disastrous effects of climate change are being largely felt across regions and becoming one of the main sources of migrations directly or indirectly through the conflicts it creates or enhance.

This comes on top of the developing world disorder, in which transactional relations become the rule in a context of rise of autocracies all over the world. The post-Cold War order is melting away and its lead by the West is disappearing. In addition, transatlantic ties are weakening. The US is no longer the superpower it used to be. China and Russia are trying to impose a new narrative and new methods. They are followed by secondary powers such as Turkey or India. Arab countries, among others, are rushing to fill the void of US disengagement. The UN is more and more irrelevant in setting the standards and taking the lead. Finally, non-state actors are reinventing new war games and asymmetric conflicts, with new unconventional strategies and tactics.

As far as Europe and the EU are concerned, policy incoherence and asymmetric partnerships have helped the EU's declined relevance on the global stage. This is not only due to a lack of political resolve. There are conscious efforts to undermine EU's global role from within and from outside. The result is a weakening of social cohesion and loss of belief in the project by Europeans themselves. This loss of trust in the EU's leadership capacity to take care of people's well-being is no longer affecting the neighbourhood, it is hitting Europe too (see the gilets jaunes and the street protests against Covid measures in Belgium, the Netherlands and Germany).

The US society is undergoing a similar phenomenon as in the EU: racist crimes, far-right movements and attempts at upsetting the constitutional order. In addition, youth unemployment and the rise of feminicides are worrying trends in both sides of the Atlantic. All these elements need to be addressed, draw on deep thinking and sharp analyses. Most importantly, solutions to these challenges must be implemented in an inclusive way. This must be pre-requisite for efforts to preach by example and to restore the credibility of the values we supposedly continue to believe in if we really want to encourage ownership of the solutions elsewhere.

Vulnerable Citizenship: Structural Deficiencies in the Maghreb

END OF THE YEAR **REVIEW** – *CRITICAL INSIGHTS*

By Yasmine Akrimi – BIC North Africa Analyst

The year of 2021 has been politically eventful for the Maghreb. Tunisia has witnessed a major political coup in July, while August sounded the death-knell for any possibility of reconciliation between Morocco and Algeria. A decade following the so-called Arab Spring, 2021 confirmed a trend; since the independences, the region appears to be stuck with the same structural problems: failing and/or slow socioeconomic development, decreasing prospects for democratization, and poor regional integration.

Tunisia, a country that, for the past decade, seemed like the only hope for a genuine democratic experience within the region, has been backpedaling on its democratic promises since the measures undertaken by president Kais Saied to “correct the revolution’s trajectory” on the 25th of July. The initiative, essentially a bloodless coup, is pretty revealing of the difficulties to maintain political reforms within an endemically corrupted socioeconomic environment where democratic institutions constantly fail the test of impartiality and efficiency. Corruption here must be understood in its large meaning, when monopoly on vital economic sectors and difficulties to diversify exports render a country so non-competitive that its citizens are constantly crushed in the global economy. It is the type of corruption that renders citizens so vulnerable

they might lose faith in the legitimacy of the state itself, and resort to other forms of collective organization.

The Tunisian laboratory for democracy is evidence that focusing on building institutions, independent media, transparent elections, and other traditional aspects of democracy-building is simply not enough, unlike many predicted. Practicing democracy takes time, and the economy does not wait. What we tend to forget is that the economies of former colonies have yet to be integrated within capitalism as something other than subcontractors for economic giants. Western counterparts have been insisting on a return to a form of parliamentary democracy, while Tunisians are increasingly divided over supporting or opposing Saied's initiative for a referendum on the political system. The conversation remains principally political, yet the country might have to resort to the Paris Club in the near future, rendering the possibility of an economic collapse imminent.

Prospects are not much brighter for Tunisia's neighbor on the west. The fall in revenues from oil and gas exports, combined with the impact of the pandemic on the 2020 GDP, have plunged the Algerian economy into recession, highlighting its difficulty to diversify its public revenues. Morocco, while undeniably doing better economically than its neighbors, has a major problem of income inequality. In 2013, the share of national income of the richest 10% stood twelve times higher than the share of national income of the poorest 10% of the population. The Maghreb accounts for amongst the highest rate of youth unemployment in the world.

When it comes to basic needs, citizens around the world have since long expressed the same demands: livable wages, reliable and affordable healthcare, quality public education, and a safe environment. Security, in its large sense, is a universal request. Now, imagine how far from feeling secure someone is in order to immolate himself, or throw himself and his family in the treacherous waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Yet, those two extreme forms of protesting are not uncommon amongst Maghrebi citizens. The Arab Spring itself started with the self-immolation of a street vendor in a poor Tunisian governorate and spread like wildfire across the Arab world. Not because there were dark forces agitating public anger, but because grievances were widely shared, and widely known.

DEPENDENT ECONOMIES

By now, arguing for the possibility for the South to catch up with the West's development is wishful thinking. More than two decades following the EU-North Africa trade agreements there has been little convergence with incomes in Europe, and the absolute difference in income levels might be increasing.

This is where the postcolonial Theory of Dependency comes in handy. Its logic is supported by a brief look at goods trade between the Maghreb and the EU for instance; underdevelopment is mainly understood as the result of the peripheral status of former colonies in the world economy. Underdeveloped countries provide cheap labor and raw materials on the world market. These resources are sold to advanced economies, which are able to convert them into finished products. Underdeveloped countries then proceed to purchasing the manufactured goods at high prices, depleting the capital they could have used to improve their own production capacity. The result is a vicious circle that has durably split the world economy between a rich core and a poor periphery. A single culture and export orientation, neglect of food production sectors, widening regional, sectoral, and social gaps, and foreign control of modern sectors constitute what has been qualified as "dependent development", or simply underdevelopment. It should be noted underdevelopment here is not simply a backwardness that can be caught up, nor is it an intermittent stage in the general modernization process, but a structural feature of southern economies.

In this context, it is increasingly hard for ruling powers to maintain legitimacy without resorting to harmful strategies in the long run. While Tunisia has seen a rise in populism in the discourse of President Kais Saied, who is now confronted with the reality of the exercise of power, Algeria and to a lesser extent, Morocco, have relied on marketing the threat of an external enemy, each being the enemy of the other, to distract from internal political dissidence and economic hardship. Perhaps the clearest indicator of how damaging regional disintegration is for Maghrebi citizens is the growing number of irregular migrants arriving at European shores from the Maghreb every month.

DISSONANCE OVER DEMOCRACY

Democracy means then, first and foremost, renegotiating the social contract between letdown citizens and a state whose added value is unclear. What do Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco, and other neighboring countries offer to their citizens today? Is it good and

[Vulnerable Citizenship: Structural Deficiencies in the Maghreb](#) | Yasmine Akrimi
Brussels International Center

affordable healthcare? Quality public education? Clean and safe neighborhoods? Reasonable chances to find employment? Decent salaries? All these taken-for-granted rights in most parts of the developed world are painfully lacking for Maghrebi citizens living in the twenty-first century and having access to a myriad of tools to compare their standards of life to others. If the democratic promise does not guarantee a path towards a better livelihood, as it did not in the case of Tunisia, then democracy will remain perceived as an experience supported by international organizations and technocratic funds, which lacks any ties to the everyday life of most citizens.

The failure of the Arab Spring is not without consequences. We observe a growing trend of nostalgia over authoritarian times, or simply citizens who uphold the status quo in fear of losing the few privileges they have. Of course, freedom of speech is important, but it means little when there is no food on the table, or when the size of bread has been shrinking in the past decade. Vulnerability needs reassurance, and what is better than the paternal figure of the providential man to occupy this role. In Tunisia, Kais Saied's rise and increasingly divisive narrative falls under a populist logic. Despite a catastrophic socioeconomic situation, he insists on blaming Tunisians' misery on external and internal "enemies of the nation" without ever confronting the public about the development model's structural deficiencies and the fact there is little to no option left than to undergo drastic budgetary cuts in public spending.

Hence, when assessing the democratic prospects of the Maghreb, one needs to follow the money. It will tell you some families save for months to help their son or daughter reach the other shore of the Mediterranean. It will tell you some others leave not for lack of money, but for lack of a dignified life. It will remind you, in essence, that citizenship needs not to be mere ink on paper and that democracy is not about what political system we chose, but about what prospects and protection any system offers.

A Year of Failure in International Policymaking: Responding Better through Local Empowerment

END OF THE YEAR **REVIEW** – *CRITICAL INSIGHTS*

By Ben Lowings – BIC Political Analyst

As 2021 ends, the year has proven to be a difficult time for the success of various initiatives by the international community to address conflicts throughout the world. In Libya, the implementation of the new Government of National Unity headed by Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah has suffered accusations that the same UN-backed process to elect him was marred with corruption. Moreover, with mere days to the purported Presidential election date on 24 December, political polarization such as an inability to agree on the legality of some candidates, security risks to candidates and voters due to the prevalence of militias throughout the country, as well as other outstanding issues looks set to delay the democratic event yet again. Meanwhile the prospects for the country, now nearly 11 years since the fall of Muammar Gaddafi, remains uncertain.

In the Horn of Africa, there too have been events that have undermined political processes. Ethiopia's Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, a former darling of the international community and recipient of the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize, has dismissed calls for dialogue with rebels in Tigray and continued to wage a war throughout the year at the expense of thousands of suffering civilians. Its neighbor Sudan, who had been following its own internationally backed process to transition to democracy, experienced a coup in October which demonstrated the continual domination of status quo military figures in that political system. Meanwhile scores of pro-

democracy protestors in Khartoum and elsewhere in the country continue to face oppressive crackdowns.

Elsewhere we have seen how a 20-year military operation by the West in Afghanistan, including the investment of millions of dollars in developing a new political system and national military, led to a total collapse of the State within a couple of weeks under the advances of a resurgent Taliban. For their part, the Taliban immediately reversed some of the progressive changes made to protect groups such as professional women and triggered waves of panic and fear for their citizens.

Across all these contexts, the ability of the international community, be it the United Nations, the European Union, or individual nations such as the United States, has been called into question as investments of time, money and, in some cases, lives of military and civilian personnel, have seemingly resulted in minor outcomes. For these reasons, not to mention for the affected local populations, there needs to be answers for how to better respond to other international crises in the future.

A consistent and persistent flaw, familiar to all contexts, has been both the intentions and solutions favored by policymakers being derived from the desires of international actors and not the local populations. For instance, why has there been little flexibility with the timetable for Libya's elections? Unfortunately, timetabling and hosting elections has been a prize that many international actors have sought for years now, having been seen as a panacea that would fix the polarization and other issues within the North African country. However, Libya's issues are not so simple. Even a functioning government that was considered legitimate by all actors would struggle with the sheer number of weapons in its territory and claims of human rights abuses perpetuated by all sides. Furthermore, the continued presence of foreign fighters, that continue to act in contravention of several international pledges, has been undermining any statements that there is a genuine desire to see the conflict end.

In Sudan, the international community seemed stunned that a coup happened, and that the military authorities had gone against their words to cede power to civilian authorities. But again, this is a denial of reality. As a nation, Sudan has one of the highest numbers of coup d'états in history; unfortunately, this is not an uncommon occurrence. Military authorities had been systematically consolidating their power within the transitional government for months now, in such instances as their participation in the Juba peace talks. Is it so surprising that a coup happened under

these conditions? On the other hand, there are real and genuine demands for democracy from multiple sectors of Sudanese society, which cannot be fixed by token gestures. As a consequence, the reinstatement of Prime Minister Abdalla Hamdok was not sufficient for the protests to stop. More generally and understandable to the protestors, such an act is in itself not a reflection of transformative change where the problem of military power is both deep and pervasive.

In nearby Ethiopia, the world has paid the price for this reverence to messianic political figures. Consider the actions of former international hero Abiy Ahmed. Once praised for his rhetoric of reform and consensus in Ethiopia's highly ethnically and politically diverse nation and his glittering peace deal with Eritrea, he has devolved into a pariah. What the international community seemed to forget was that Ahmed himself was a representative of the same status quo coalition, the Ethiopian People's Revolutionary Democratic Front, that had been in power for over 30 years in Ethiopia, having presided over a time of marginalization and division. Ahmed's actions in Tigray, where government forces have clashed with Tigrayan rebels, has condemned civilian populations to human rights abuses, mass rape, extra-judicial killings, and other atrocities. And what of the international response? The pleas for calm and dialogue have largely been ignored, and the violence has continued unabated.

Perhaps the most obvious case of the ignorance of international policymaking to local dynamics were the scenes in Afghanistan when US soldiers withdrew from the nation after a 20-year military operation, which led to an almost immediate takeover by the Taliban. The international community spent years and millions in supporting a variety of initiatives to transform Afghanistan into a new nation following the original deposition of the Taliban in 2001.

These initiatives, of course, had varying successes, some for instance giving women a chance for both education and professional work, others investing in better health and education provision. Yet two of the key aspects of state-building, the political and security infrastructure, were deeply flawed, including significant allegations of corruption to many government figures. Several Western observers warned that a withdrawal of foreign forces in such a fast and sudden way as what happened in August would lead to a collapse of the new Afghanistan regime, and yet leaders, especially the Joe Biden Administration in the US, pushed on with their plans regardless, prioritizing domestic promises and achieving actions by key milestone

dates. In effect, the West abandoned the people of Afghanistan with an unfinished job. The events of this summer have reinforced that those international interventions so often revert to what the intervener can gain from them, without any regard to those whose country has become occupied.

Should the international community still consider itself able and justified in assisting other countries to address their ongoing political and civil crises, there needs to be a much greater weight placed on the inputs and ownership of local populations. So many of these problems have occurred due to the prevalence of international policy makers to oversimplify contexts and force a one-size-fits-all approach to policy. The fetishization of milestone dates or the importance of specific individuals may make for easy to read and understand headlines and summaries, but all this does is allow for a culture of ignorance that actively ignores the political reality.

Genuine transformative change is not performative; it is holistic and inclusive, addressing all relevant sectors and groups in society, it is critical and proactive, it does not take any systems or existing structure for granted and instead asks how these can be improved, and it is both gradual and persistent, there are no timescales or arbitrary conditions for change as real change should be a continual process. International policy makers should rethink what it means to support the establishment of institutions; for instance, how can we create a new judiciary system able to prosecute historical war crimes without sufficient technical and logistical support? Financial support will continue to be necessary, but again money alone is insufficient. Balancing these needs will remain a challenge, however more clarity can be gained through more, and better, engagement with local populations. Policymakers should ask themselves “who are we engaging with”, “how do we engage with more key groups”, and “what are the right questions we should ask them?” Hopefully such better engagement will in turn yield better, lasting results, thus avoiding the trap of cyclical conflict and violence that we have so often fallen into.

Tough Migration and Refugee Policies are a Blight on the EU's Geopolitical Ambitions

END OF THE YEAR **REVIEW** – *CRITICAL INSIGHTS*

By Shada Islam – BIC Senior Commentator on Geopolitics

European Union leaders make no secret of their geopolitical ambitions. Yet their hostile refugee and migration policies are undermining EU influence and authority across the Middle East, Asia and Africa.

Discussions on “strategic autonomy” and plans for a new “strategic compass” highlight EU aspirations of contributing to international peace and security. As his country takes over the EU presidency in the first half of 2022, French President Emmanuel Macron has promised to create “a Europe that is powerful in the world, fully sovereign, free in its choices and master of its destiny.” Meanwhile in Berlin, after 16 years following a fairly stable foreign policy agenda under Chancellor Angela Merkel, the new German government is engaged in reassessing Berlin’s role in a rapidly changing world.

The EU rhetoric is impressive. Change is good and adapting to new external security challenges is urgently needed if Europe is to stay relevant in an increasingly complex world. A beefed-up security footprint and autonomous defense initiatives will undoubtedly help increase the EU’s geopolitical clout. But soldiers and guns - and more money and arms for Frontex border control forces - can only do so much.

The focus on building the EU’s military muscle might (one day) impress Russia and China. Increasingly aggressive pushbacks by Frontex may deter some desperate

people from seeking asylum in Europe. But neither a “Europe of Defence” nor Fortress Europe can help the EU in its search for a global leadership role on climate change, digital governance, global health, trade, and connectivity – as well as efforts to salvage a deeply fragilized multilateral system. Shaping responses to these and other challenges depends on Europe’s much-touted regulatory clout and powers of persuasion. These, in turn, are conditional on the EU’s respect for the principles and values which it claims to stand for and seeks to project and promote across the world.

The stakes are high: Unless the EU stops being tough with the weak and starts respecting its own standards as well as the international conventions it helped draft and implement, it can expect a dwindling of its global imprint. Given the nationalities of most of the refugees and migrant seeking EU entry, it can also expect Eurocentric mindsets embedded in EU migration policies as well as the increase in Islamophobic discourses across Europe to impact especially negatively on plans for enhanced interaction with Africa, Asia, and the Middle East.

Declaratory flourishes and well-crafted speeches which wax lyrical about the much-touted “European Way of Life” are meaningless if not backed up by more – much more – determined action to stop the EU-wide erosion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law. Without consistency between its external and internal policies and actions, a stronger stand-alone security profile will not succeed in transforming the EU into an effective global power.

BUILDING A UNION OF EQUALITY

EU policymakers must start connecting the dots between the internal and the external. This requires achieving real progress in creating a Union of Equality. It also means recognising that years of impressive hard work on building the EU’s normative power and establishing respected pro-democracy outreach initiatives are being squandered by hardline EU policies which justify the inhumane treatment of refugees and asylum seekers, spark greater fears of migrants and quasi-codify racism and Islamophobia – and are also often in clear breach of international commitments.

Racism, discrimination, and the EU’s colonial history are significant obstacles to the EU’s efforts to open a new chapter in relations with Africa. EU appeals to Myanmar’s military junta to allow in desperately needed humanitarian aid for displaced and discriminated groups like the Rohingya are easily disregarded when EU states

themselves are in breach of international refugee conventions. The EU's criminalization of non-governmental organisations working with refugees and migrants means it is powerless to stop other countries from taking similar action.

KEYS TO FORTRESS EUROPE

Also, by underlining their panic over possible "uncontrolled large-scale illegal migration movements" and the emergence of "new security threats for EU citizens" following the Taliban take-over of Kabul in August, EU leaders once again handed the keys to Fortress Europe to an unscrupulous strongman.

Following the example set by Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdogan, now a skilled manipulator of the EU's obsession with refugees, this time it was Alexander Lukashenko of Belarus who lost no time in using refugees as geopolitical pawns. Similarly, earlier in the year, Morocco "engineered" a surge of 8,000 migrants into the Spanish enclave of Ceuta, apparently in retribution for Madrid's decision to allow a separatist leader in Western Sahara to come to Spain for medical treatment.

Europe's global reputation is not helped either by its inability to stop violations to the rule of law, attacks on the judiciary and erosion of media freedoms in Hungary and Poland or by the fact that racism, bias and discrimination are also being spread by many of the EU's liberal democratic leaders, not just by bigots, populists and far-right groups.

Policies which reinforce exclusion and prejudice are prevalent and remain largely unchecked in many Western EU states, adding to fears that even without chalking up any major electoral victories (so far), Europe's far-right parties have succeeded in mainstreaming their corrosive anti-migrant narratives across the EU's political landscape. And since the populists' message is largely Islamophobic, it has also clear repercussions on how Muslim-majority countries view Europe.

RISING ISLAMOPHOBIA

As France gears up for presidential elections in April 22, French politicians have embraced Islamophobia as an electoral strategy, thereby ensuring that Muslim-bashing is no longer the preserve of the traditionally Islamophobic far-right candidate Marine Le Pen. Eric Zemmour has now joined the fray while president Emmanuel

Macron's government is busy enforcing a spate of anti-Muslim policies, including an "anti-separatism bill" and the shutting down of the Collective Against Islamophobia (CCIF) which documents anti-Muslim hate crimes.

EU officials looked the other way as former Austrian Chancellor Sebastian Kurz stepped up his fight against an undefined "political Islam" including through the launch of a much-criticised Islam Map website which showed the locations of more than 600 mosques and Muslim associations across the country and led to incidents of violence against Muslims.

France, Austria and Denmark also recently launched the "Vienna Forum on Countering Segregation and Extremism in the Context of Integration", an annual conference which they hope will intensify cooperation in the fight against "political Islam", alleging that even Muslims who present themselves as democrats are in fact using the law to subvert European nation states.

THE INTERNAL IS EXTERNAL

The EU's focus on external challenges to democracy and human rights can no longer be separated from developments within Europe. By militarizing migration, implementing restrictive refugee regimes, and allowing Islamophobia to flourish, the EU has created a template for others to follow, encouraging a reverse or negative version of its much publicised "Brussels Effect".

The EU's migration-panic and anti-Muslim policies are allowing autocrats and authoritarian governments to exploit its weaknesses. Worse still, they are providing many governments with ammunition to shrug off EU human rights interventions as an example of hypocrisy and double standards. They are also eroding respect for the EU and decreasing its ability to tackle important global challenges.

Building a more powerful geopolitical Europe requires being able to deal with old and new security threats. But to walk tall on the world stage, the EU will have to practice at home what it preaches abroad.

About the BIC

The BIC is an independent, non-profit, think-and-do tank based in the capital of Europe that is committed to developing solutions to address the cyclical drivers of insecurity, economic fragility, and conflict the Middle East and North Africa. Our goal is to bring added value to the highest levels of political discourse by bringing systemic issues to the forefront of the conversation.



Authors

Yasmine Akrimi, Ben Lowings & Shada Islam



 @BICBrussels  @bicrhr  BIC

 www.bic-rhr.com  info@bic-rhr.com

 Avenue Louise, 89 1050, Brussels, Belgium  Tel:+32 027258466