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Democracy Support or Authoritarian Enabling? The Impact and Perceptions of Non-EU Actors in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia

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Executive Summary

This report investigates the role of non-EU external actors in shaping democratic and authoritarian trajectories in three countries of the EU Southern Neighbourhood: Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia. The analysis focuses on the discursive and behavioural practices of eight key actors – China, the Council of Europe, Iran, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the League of Arab States, Qatar, the United Nations, and the United States – and examines how these practices have influenced political developments in the three case countries between 2010 and 2024.

Rather than assuming a binary divide between democracy promotion and autocracy support, the report situates non-EU external actors' engagement within a broader regional context marked by conflict, power competition, and the dynamics of democratisation and autocratisation. It also connects these practices to local perceptions, drawing on fieldwork and survey data to assess how external influence is understood and experienced by different communities of practice in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia.

Beyond the Democracy vs Autocracy Dichotomy

One of the central findings of this report is the inadequacy of the democracy/autocracy binary in capturing the complexity of external engagement in the Southern Neighbourhood. While some actors, such as the Council of Europe or the United Nations, are conventionally associated with democracy support, their practices on the ground often fall short of transformative impact. The United States, also commonly associated with democracy support, has in practice not acted accordingly: in Lebanon, its priority has been to counter Hezbollah and ensure Israel's security; in Palestine, it has supported the status quo to protect Israel; and in Tunisia, it has accommodated authoritarianism in line with its strategic and security interests.

Conversely, actors typically seen as authoritarian, such as Iran or China, do not always engage in autocracy support per se, but rather pursue strategic goals that may indirectly reinforce authoritarian structures. In the case of Iran, this often takes the form of authoritarian enabling or authoritarian collaboration, particularly through its support to non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas. These relationships allow Iran to project influence while simultaneously obstructing democratic reform and consolidating elite control. China, for its part, tends to operate through authoritarian accommodation and authoritarian enabling, maintaining a posture of non-interference while deepening economic and technological ties with regimes regardless of their democratic credentials. In Tunisia, this has translated into sustained engagement with both democratic and authoritarian governments, including the consolidation of a strategic partnership after the 2021 power grab, without any democratic conditionality. In Palestine, while Beijing maintains a pro-Palestinian rhetorical stance, it simultaneously expands cooperation with Israel, including in digital surveillance technologies, thereby reinforcing the structures of occupation and contributing to authoritarian practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

This calls for a more nuanced conceptual vocabulary. Terms such as authoritarian enabling, authoritarian accommodation, and selective democracy support offer more precise tools for analysing how external actors operate. These concepts allow us to account for indirect effects, strategic ambiguity, and the role of non-state actors and proxies. They also help distinguish between rhetorical commitments and actual practices, particularly in contexts where sovereignty is fragmented or contested. For instance, Qatar's support for Ennahda in Tunisia

cannot be reduced to democracy support, but neither does it reflect a consistent commitment to democratic pluralism.

Interests, Intentions, and Pragmatism

The report highlights the importance of analysing external actors' interests and intentions. In many cases, support for democratic or authoritarian practices is not ideologically driven but rather shaped by strategic calculations. These include geopolitical rivalries, economic interests, security concerns, and regional alignments.

For example, Saudi Arabia's engagement in Tunisia and Lebanon reflects a broader strategy of countering political Islam and Iranian influence, rather than a normative stance on regime type. The United States, while rhetorically committed to democracy, has prioritised stability and containment, particularly in Palestine and Lebanon. Its support for the Palestinian Authority and the Lebanese Armed Forces has often reinforced elite entrenchment rather than democratic reform. Qatar's engagement, initially framed as support for democratic transitions, has evolved into a more pragmatic posture, particularly following the authoritarian reemergence in Tunisia. China, meanwhile, has maintained a consistent emphasis on sovereignty and non-interference, but its cooperation with Israel and authoritarian regimes in the region suggests a strategic indifference to democratic outcomes.

These patterns highlight the need to move beyond generic labels such as 'democracy supporters' or 'autocracy promoters.' The same actor may support democratic processes in one context and authoritarian regimes in another, depending on the configuration of interests, alliances, and perceived threats.

Conceptual Challenges and Contextual Specificity

The report also identifies several conceptual challenges in applying existing terminology to the cases under study. In Lebanon and Palestine, the political configuration – consociationalism and occupation, respectively – complicates the assessment of external actors' impact. The notion of authoritarian collaboration, for instance, is difficult to apply to relationships between states and armed non-state actors such as Hezbollah or Hamas.

Moreover, the timeline adopted for the study, initially designed to capture post-2011 transitions, proves less adequate for Lebanon and Palestine, where key turning points predate the Arab uprisings. The 2005 Cedar Revolution in Lebanon and the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections are not just historical markers: they are foundational events that continue to shape the behaviour of external actors in both contexts. In Palestine, the rejection of the 2006 electoral outcome and the subsequent international response illustrate how democratic actors themselves contributed to the obstruction of democratisation, favouring stability and strategic alignment over democratic legitimacy. In Lebanon, the post-2005 landscape has evolved into a battleground for regional and international influence, where both democratic and non-democratic actors have entrenched elite fragmentation and sectarian polarisation through selective alliances and strategic sponsorship. Therefore, understanding how external actors operate today requires revisiting earlier turning points which, as seen in Lebanon and Palestine, continue to shape the strategic calculations and patterns of external influence in the region.

In light of these challenges, the report advocates for a context-specific approach that accounts for historical trajectories, the type of political system (such as consociationalism in Lebanon or

occupation in Palestine), and the interplay between domestic and external actors within a broader framework of regional power competition.

Local Perceptions and the Politics of Legitimacy

A key contribution of this report is the integration of local perceptions into the analysis of external engagement. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, and survey data, the study reveals widespread scepticism towards international actors, particularly when their involvement is perceived as instrumental, inconsistent, or complicit in preserving the status quo.

In Lebanon, civil society organisations and protest movements have criticised foreign actors for privileging stability over justice and containment over reform. Expressions such as "crisis diplomacy" and "stability theatre" capture the disillusionment with external engagement that reinforces elite cartels rather than challenging them.

In Palestine, public opinion surveys highlight the disconnect between international rhetoric and lived realities. The rejection of the 2006 election results, the prioritisation of security cooperation with Israel over democratic reform in Palestine, and the lack of pressure on Israel have contributed to a deep erosion of trust. Popular mobilisation, such as the 2021 Unity Intifada, reflects a demand for rights and representation that remains unsupported by external actors.

In Tunisia, civil society actors have increasingly questioned the sincerity of foreign commitments to democratisation, particularly following the authoritarian turn in 2021. The volatility of external support – strong during the transition yet muted during the authoritarian reemergence – has reinforced perceptions of strategic opportunism or pragmatism.

These perceptions matter not only for assessing the legitimacy of external actors but also for understanding the conditions under which democratic development can occur. When external engagement is perceived as aligned with elite interests or geopolitical agendas, it risks undermining local agency, eroding trust in external actors and even legitimising authoritarian rule.

Implications for EU Democracy Support

The findings of this report have important implications for EU democracy support in the Southern Neighbourhood. First, they challenge the assumption that democratic actors are natural allies in promoting democratic norms. As the report shows, democratic states such as the United States or regional organisations like the UN may engage in practices that reinforce authoritarian structures, depending on the context.

Second, the report highlights the need for the EU to adopt a more differentiated approach to external partnerships. Rather than relying on normative alignment, the EU should assess the actual practices and impacts of potential partners and competitors in the Southern Neighbourhood. This includes recognising the role of competing narratives and models – such as China's emphasis on stability and development or Saudi Arabia's resistance to certain forms of political Islam – that may appeal to local elites and publics.

Third, the report underscores the importance of integrating local perceptions into EU policy design. Understanding how external actors are viewed by different communities of practice can help the EU tailor its engagement to support inclusive governance and democratic accountability. It also provides a basis for identifying entry points for coalition-building and norm diffusion.

Finally, the report calls for greater conceptual clarity and analytical precision in assessing external influence. By moving beyond binary categories and incorporating concepts such as authoritarian enabling and selective democracy support, the EU can better understand the dynamics at play and develop more effective responses.

Introduction

This report examines the role of non-EU external actors in three countries of the EU Southern Neighbourhood: Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia. It focuses on how their discursive and behavioural practices shaped and influenced in the processes of democratisation and autocratisation in these three countries. The report forms part of SHAPEDEM-EU's Work Package 6 "Non-EU external actors: Partners, Competitors, or Adversaries?". Building on the project's conceptual foundations, it aims at determining whether the non-EU external actors analysed played a relevant role in the realms of democracy support, democracy resistance, autocracy support, authoritarian enabling and authoritarian collaboration.

The report is structured around eight key external actors –China, the Council of Europe, Iran, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the League of Arab States, Qatar, the United Nations and the United States– whose influence has been most pronounced across the region. Each actor's discursive and behavioural practices are analysed during key moments of political transformation or crisis. The analysis also considers the extent to which these actors complement, contest, or impede EU practices in the field of democracy support[1].

Country of study	Most relevant actors
Lebanon	Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, Iran, United States, Qatar, United Nations
Palestine	United States, Iran, United Nations, Qatar, League of Arab States
Tunisia	China, United States, Qatar, Turkey, Council of Europe, KSA

Table 1: Non-EU external actors analysed in Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia.

This report mainly draws from research carried out under two Work Packages: on one hand, building on SHAPEDEM-EU's Work Package 4 "EU Democracy Support & Democratic Practices in the Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods", it focuses on these actor's practices during historical turning points, which can be defined as path-altering events that allowed a window of opportunity for a democratic opening. The period of study spans from 2010 to 2021, with particular attention paid to critical junctures and historical turning points that have shaped the political trajectories of the three case countries. These critical junctures were collectively identified by the partners involved in this study:

Country of study	Turning points	Turning points before the period of study
Lebanon	2019-2020: Protests	2005: Cedar Revolution

[1] This aspect on the implications for the EU will be addressed at a later stage in a policy paper on potential alliances between the EU and some of these non-EU external actors (Deliverable D6.4).

	2020: Beirut explosion 2022: Parliamentary elections 2023-2024: Israel-Hezbollah War	2006: Israel-Lebanon war 2008: Doha Agreement
Palestine	2014: Gaza war 2014: Fatah–Hamas Agreements 2021: "Unity Intifada" 2023-: Gaza War	2006: Palestinian legislative elections 2007: Blockade of Gaza 2008-9: Operation Cast Lead
Tunisia	2010-11: Tunisian revolution 2014: Tunisian Constitution 2015: State of emergency 2019: Early presidential elections 2021: Kais Saied's power grab	2008: Gafsa Mining Basin revolt

Table 2: Turning points per country of study.

On the other hand, it draws on Work Package 3 "Democratic Practices & Democracy Support in the Southern Neighbourhood", which empirically surveyed the views from Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia's different communities of practices (Achrainer & Pace, 2025) regarding the role played by the EU and other actors in the field of democracy support.

Methodologically, this research combines qualitative and quantitative approaches. It draws on a wide range of sources, including academic literature, policy documents, and grey material. It also integrates local perceptions through interviews and focus groups conducted under WP3, as well as media analysis, public opinion data from Arab Barometer, Pew Research Center, and national surveys. This mixed-methods approach allows for a nuanced understanding of both the practices of external actors and the ways in which they are perceived locally.

By situating the actions of non-EU external actors within a broader regional context marked by conflict, power competition, and the dynamics of democratisation and autocratisation, the report seeks to move beyond the simplistic binary of 'democracy promotion versus autocracy promotion'. Instead, it offers a grounded analysis that connects the discursive and behavioural practices of these actors to how they are perceived at the local level. In doing so, it contributes to a more nuanced and empirically informed understanding of external influence in the EU Southern Neighbourhood.

I. THE ROLES AND PERCEPTIONS OF NON-EU ACTORS IN LEBANON

Lebanon's complex historical and sociopolitical background has both shaped and been shaped by its geopolitical position, making the country a focal point for regional and international actors seeking to influence its internal dynamics. Moreover, the peculiarities of the Lebanese political system, characterised by sectarianism and deeply entrenched ethno-religious alliances, have aggravated the penetrability of its already fragile equilibrium. Between 2011 and 2024 Lebanon has faced an unprecedented series of crises that have dramatically transformed its political and social milieu. The current Lebanese system, based on the Taif Agreement that ended the 1975–1990 civil war, was intended to balance sectarian groups within a consociational framework (Salloukh, 2023).[2] Yet, it has instead institutionalised a structure of limited statehood where the monopoly over violence, policymaking, and service provision is fragmented (Polese and Hanau Santini, 2018).

Before the regional upheavals of 2011, three critical turning points had already begun to erode Lebanon's fragile equilibrium. The first was the 2005 Cedar Revolution, sparked by the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri. Mass protests, supported by a wide array of international actors, converted into a further division of the political spectrum into the March 14 and March 8 alliances—with the former aligned with Saudi Arabia and the United States and the latter with Iran and Syria—ushered in a period of deep political polarisation (Dinu, 2022). The 2006 Israel–Hezbollah war marked a second rupture, highlighting Hezbollah's growing power as both a military actor and political force, with significant backing from Tehran (Meier, 2018). A third pivotal moment came in 2008 with the Doha Agreement, a Qatari-brokered compromise that ended an 18-month political deadlock and violent clashes in Beirut. The deal effectively normalised Hezbollah's autonomous military role and strengthened its veto power within the state, further institutionalising the influence of armed non-state actors in Lebanon's political architecture (Knudsen, 2010). As this issue has remained unsolved, Lebanon's sovereignty has become both contested and externally mediated, with foreign powers maintaining patron-client relationships with key sectarian elites, and non-state actors such as Hezbollah emerging as powerful parallel authorities within the state.

The outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011 was a first major turning point. Hezbollah's open military involvement in support of the Assad regime in Syria further polarised Lebanon's internal political scene. While it entrenched certain segments of the Lebanese society aligned with the Iran-led 'Axis of resistance', it also proved Hezbollah's operative independence in domestic affairs. The war also brought over one million Syrian refugees into Lebanon, placing additional pressure on public services and aggravating already declining economic and social conditions. The years 2011–2013 saw Lebanon's political institutions paralysed by external alignments, culminating in a two-year presidential vacuum (2014–2016). The deadlock ended with a compromise between pro-Iranian and pro-Western blocs, backed by a temporary convergence of US and Iranian interests. This resulted in the election of Michel Aoun to the presidency and

[2] In the literature, Lebanon is deemed a crucial case for the consociational model because it has highlighted the importance of external actors throughout its history. Most of the scholars agree that, in Lebanon, external threats constitute a lasting negative condition for political stability. See Marie-Joelle Zahar, 'Foreign Interventions, Power Sharing and the Dynamics of Conflict and Coexistence in Lebanon,' in Lebanon: After the Cedar Revolution, edited by Are J.Knudsen and Michael Kerr (London: Hurst, 2012).

Saad Hariri's return as prime minister in 2016. However, since 2016, the subsequent deterioration of Saudi Iranian relations, the Trump administration's withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal, and mounting US pressure on Hezbollah disrupted this fragile equilibrium. Hariri's forced resignation from Riyadh in 2017 and the withdrawal of Gulf financial support created changing patterns in Lebanon's external alliances, leaving the country increasingly vulnerable to economic collapse (Malsin and Osseiran, 2021).

By 2019, Lebanon was on the brink of collapse. The economic model—based on unsustainable borrowing, remittances, and financial engineering by the central bank—began to unravel, triggering an extraordinary wave of protests starting on 17 October 2019. For the first time in decades, demonstrators across sectarian lines demanded the fall of the entire political class, denouncing corruption, economic inequality, and the sectarian system itself. Yet, despite its momentum, the movement faced structural limitations. Its spontaneous and decentralised nature made coordination difficult, and it lacked a clear leadership capable of translating street mobilisation into institutional change. The ruling elite, by contrast, supported by external pro-status quo actors, remained unified in its refusal to implement reforms that would threaten its interests (Karkhouti, 2022).

The failure to respond meaningfully to the demands of the October movement was soon followed by the most devastating event in Lebanon's recent history. On 4 August 2020, the Beirut port explosion killed over 200 people and destroyed much of the capital's infrastructure. The blast was widely seen as a direct consequence of state negligence and elite impunity. Although international actors, particularly France, responded with humanitarian aid and renewed calls for reform, Lebanese leaders blocked every attempt to investigate the explosion or hold senior officials accountable. This further eroded public trust in institutions and solidified Lebanon's status as a state where legal and administrative authority is subordinated to informal elite bargains.

The port explosion accelerated Lebanon's financial and social collapse. The COVID-19 pandemic compounded these pressures, as did mass emigration of skilled workers, particularly in the education and medical sectors. Meanwhile, Hezbollah continued to operate with relative autonomy, maintaining external supply lines and a loyal support base, although its social services declined amid Iran's own financial difficulties. Against this backdrop, the May 2022 parliamentary elections were initially seen as an opportunity for change. A small number of independent candidates entered parliament, reflecting the lingering energy of the protest movement. However, the fragmented nature of opposition forces, combined with the structural advantages held by traditional sectarian parties, meant that no significant political shift occurred. Parliament failed to elect a president, and cabinet formation remained blocked, reinforcing Lebanon's chronic state of institutional paralysis.

The most recent turning point emerged with the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023. Hezbollah's renewed confrontation with Israel on the southern border drew Lebanon into a broader regional escalation, placing the country once again at the centre of international diplomacy. The war further delayed political processes, including the presidential election, and exacerbated existing socio-economic pressures, particularly in southern Lebanon. It also highlighted the persistent division of coercive power within Lebanon's borders. While the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) retained a degree of public trust and continued to receive US and international support, they remained politically marginal compared to Hezbollah's influence. Indeed, the Gaza war also deepened internal divisions regarding Lebanon's regional alignment,

with Shia constituencies backing Hezbollah's resistance narrative, while many other groups expressed concern over the country's exposure to conflict.

Year	Turning Points in Lebanon
2005	Cedar Revolution
2006	Israel-Lebanon war
2008	Doha Agreement
2019-2020	Protests
2020	Beirut port explosion
2022	Parliamentary elections
2023-2024	Gaza War

Table 3: Turning Points in Modern Lebanese Politics Analysed in the Framework of SHAPEDEM-EU Project.

As a result of these developments, Lebanon remains trapped in a condition of negotiated crisis. The consociational system has not collapsed, but it has ceased to function effectively. Political elites have absorbed external shocks without ceding control, while international actors have alternated between engagement and disengagement without producing a sustainable roadmap for reform. Despite mass mobilisation, economic collapse, and international pressure, the resilience of the Lebanese ruling class illustrates the limitations of an overall external influence in a system where sovereignty is fragmented, legitimacy contested, and public institutions deeply compromised. Indeed, while Lebanon's patterns of authoritarianisation remain open to debate when compared to other cases, external actors have either accommodated authoritarian practices (in the sense of lack of power sharing) or indirectly supported select actors or societal segments in developing governance practices that operate parallel to, rather than in support of, the central state.[3]

Amid the layered crises that have characterised Lebanon's trajectory since 2011, this section examines the role of five key external actors – Iran, Qatar, United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Nations - in shaping the country's path. It focuses on their influence across key turning points identified in the framework of SHAPEDEM (see Table 3, p. 13) and explores the ways in which they have supported, constrained, or co-opted Lebanon's political system through financial assistance, security engagement, and diplomatic mediation. In addition, a final Annex on 'Local Perceptions of non-EU-external actors in Lebanon' provides an additional mixed methods analysis on how such practices and behaviours are perceived across different segments and actors within Lebanese society.

[3] See, for instance, Fakhoury, T. (2024). How Do Semi-Authoritarian Regimes Defeat Uprisings? Lebanon's 2019 Uprising and the Dramaturgical Performances that the Post-Civil War Regime Plays. Ethnopolitics, 1–18. https://doi.org/10.1080/17449057.2024.2429272

1. Iran: partisanship and influence through a multifaceted modus operandi

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Between 2012 and 2024, Lebanon has been living in a spiral of crises in which internal socioeconomic and political crises have overlapped with the spillovers of external regional shocks. In this tumultuous context, Iran emerged not simply as an influential neighbour in Lebanon's environment, but also as an external actor with a sustained grip on its internal affairs through different means: a) support to the Axis of Resistance – largely through a strategic alliance with Hezbollah – as a regional counterweight to Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Western-aligned influence; b) discursive and rhetorical practices that reinforce sectarianism; and c) the promotion of specific sociopolitical actors and economic networks to influence Lebanese domestic politics.

As such, Tehran's growing entrenchment in Lebanon's political, security, and economic life must be understood as a *modus operandi* that consolidates power vertically through armed proxies, while also horizontally obstructing reformist efforts within Lebanon's shattered polity. However, due to the country's internal fragmentation, Iran's influence is limited to specific actors and segments of the Lebanese sociopolitical spectrum. In other words, its strategy does not shape Lebanese politics as a whole but rather accommodates or facilitates certain governance practices and sociopolitical trends. Indeed, as this report highlights, Iran's influence, strategies, and favourability at the local level have fluctuated between a broader margin of manoeuvre in the early 2010s and a more restricted one since the internal and regional crises from 2018 onwards.

1. Lebanon as the springboard for Iran's growing influence in the 2010s

Historically, Lebanon's strategic position has served as a springboard for Iran's power projection, and its internal sociopolitical plurality has provided Tehran with opportunities for political manoeuvring. Iran's influence over the Lebanese context is undoubtedly linked to its alliance with Hezbollah (Wilson Center, 2023). Yet, looking more closely at the mechanisms at play in such an alliance, a far more complex picture emerges: one in which Iran's role in Lebanon varies in intensity depending on whether regional or domestic dynamics are examined (Nasr, 2018).

Overall, Tehran's relationship with the 'Party of God' can be traced back to the group's foundation in the early 1980s as a means to counter the Israeli invasion and occupation of southern Lebanon. For Iran, Hezbollah's strategic relevance and operational utility stems from three sets of capabilities that can be directly credited to Tehran's guidance, as well as its material and organisational contributions: (1) its missile and aerial vehicle arsenal, (2) its foreign operations activities, and (3) its regional power-projection capacity. The group's reach is also unprecedented for a non-state actor, with its fundraising, propaganda, and operations reaching well beyond the Middle East (IISS, 2020).

Indeed, Hezbollah's role in ending the Israeli occupation in South Lebanon in 2000 and pushing for its withdrawal in 2005 consolidated the former's role in both regional dynamics and Lebanese politics. Reinforced by its role and military success in the 2006 war with Israel, the group has

acquired more visibility and material capabilities. Especially after its relative political gains with the 2008 Qatar-brokered Doha agreement, reached after Hezbollah's armed takeover of Beirut, the group institutionalised its political ascendency as it secured veto power within the Lebanese cabinet, making it Iran's most powerful and successful non-state ally in the region' (Seliktar and Rezaei, 2020: 37). In parallel, the so-called 2005 Cedar Revolution represented another turning point as it led to increased polarisation and the formation of two political blocks, the March 8 coalition (comprised of Hezbollah, Amal and, later, the Free Patriotic Movement), and the March 14 coalition (comprised of the Lebanese Forces, the Future Movement and the Kataeb). As Iran backed the March 8 Alliance, pitting it against the Saudi-backed March 14 coalition, the sectarian divide grew further.

Beyond these events, Hezbollah's political entrenchment throughout the 2010s demonstrates how Iran's broader strategy is implemented in the Lebanese context. Rather than representing a direct form of authoritarian collaboration, Iran's influence resembles more one of reform obstructionism and promotion of a hybrid governance model (Azizi and Barnes-Dacey, 2023: 9). This model operates on dual levels: vertically, via Hezbollah's military capabilities and security dominance, and horizontally, through institutional infiltration and the delivery of public services. These intertwined modes of influence enable Iran to maintain strategic depth without assuming overt responsibility, while Hezbollah positions itself simultaneously as a resistance movement and a political actor, blurring the line between legitimate governance and external proxy rule. The group's increased institutional presence—controlling ministries such as Health and Telecommunications—enabled it to deliver services and expand its influence while maintaining a degree of distance from full accountability. Hezbollah acts as a 'state within the state': engaging in formal politics while operating an independent military and social infrastructure that limits the sovereignty of Lebanese state institutions (Kindt, 2009).

This political power, namely the ability to block decisions in parliament, enables Hezbollah to advance its common interests with Iran. In recent years, this has included obstructing the implementation of UN resolutions calling for the group's disarmament and the demarcation of the border with Israel. It has also deployed its political power to support the Syrian regime and the Palestinian cause' (Azizi and Barnes-Dacey, 2023, 9). Indeed, its intervention in Syria from 2011 showcased Hezbollah's role in supporting Iran's regional ambitions and its 'forward-defence' strategy. As Şimşek (2025: 4) puts it,

> An offensive doctrine based on proxy forces helped Iran expand its influence in the region while simultaneously allowing it to avoid direct confrontation and the costs and risks associated with conducting conventional warfare against conventionally more powerful adversaries

Moreover, Hezbollah's involvement has allowed Iran to effectively counter the nationalistic discourse prevalent in the Arab world that seeks to undermine its relationships with Arabs (IISS, 2020: 67). On its side, Hezbollah justified its involvement by invoking Lebanon's security and its commitment to anti-terrorism, but its deployment alongside Iran's Quds Force and the Assad regime underscored its broader regional role as Iran's strategic extension. This regional engagement, however, had important domestic repercussions. While it enhanced Hezbollah's credibility among pro-resistance constituents, it also alienated broader segments of the Lebanese population who viewed the intervention as dragging Lebanon into a foreign conflict. As a result, Hezbollah's legitimacy became increasingly contested, and its alignment with Iran

appeared to come at the expense of national sovereignty (Juneau, 2020). Furthermore, this shift consolidated sectarian alliances domestically, solidifying ties with the Free Patriotic Movement and Amal, while deepening cleavages with Sunni and Christian factions aligned with the March 14 bloc. This blurred the line between Hezbollah's domestic legitimacy and its regional commitments, exposing the contradictions of a resistance movement that had become a power broker.

Iran's investment is not only ideological and military, but also financial and political. According to its former head, Hassan Nasrallah, 'Hezbollah's budget, livelihood, expenses, food, drink, arms and rockets come from the Islamic Republic of Iran... For as long as Iran has money, we'll have money' (Nasrallah, 2016). During the height of the Syrian war, Iran increased its annual support to Hezbollah to approximately $700 million, a substantial sum that reflected the strategic importance of Hezbollah within Iran's regional plans (Soufan, 2018). Furthermore, with the backing of Iran, Hezbollah was able to create and expand its own illegal financial network through money laundering, drug trafficking and other unlawful activities (Chanbour, 2024).

In addition, Iran plays the card of soft power strategies. In the educational sphere, Teheran leverages institutions like Al-Mustafa International University, with seminaries in Lebanon training clerics aligned with Vilayat-e-Faqih (Stekler, 2018). In the charitable sector, Bonyads such as the Imam Khomeini Relief Committee provide food, healthcare, and vocational training, helping Hezbollah build local loyalty (Majidyar, 2017). Iran's state media—especially Al-Alam and Al-Kawthar TV—promote resistance narratives and Hezbollah's image to Arabic audiences (Pahlavi, 2012). Culturally, Iran uses the Islamic Culture and Communication Organisation and symbolic spaces such as the Mleeta War Museum to shape collective memory and propagate the 'Resistance Axis' ideology (Golshanpazhooh and Esfahani, 2014). These tools embed Iran deeply into Lebanon's socio-political fabric, especially in areas of weak state control. However, cultural and linguistic barriers have limited Iran's appeal beyond Shia communities (Frisch, 2018). Still, Iran's soft power remains a crucial dimension of its hybrid influence strategy in Lebanon.

By 2016, Hezbollah's role in securing the presidency for Michel Aoun marked another significant milestone. Following a prolonged vacuum, Aoun's election realigned the balance of power in favour of the March 8 alliance, consolidating Hezbollah's institutional dominance. The group's successful coordination with the Lebanese Armed Forces during the 2017 Arsal offensive further reinforced its image as a key national security actor, albeit one acting with autonomy from the Lebanese state (Majidyar, 2017). In the 2018 parliamentary elections, Hezbollah and its allies gained considerable electoral strength, not only among Shia constituencies but also across other sectarian lines. The movement was no longer just a militia or a community representative: it had evolved into a 'dominant broker' and 'agenda setter' of Lebanon's fractured political milieu. Its hybrid status enabled it to both shape government policy and deflect responsibility for the state's failures, contributing to Lebanon's slow erosion of state functioning (Khatib, 2021: 4).

2. 2018–2024: From Regional Ascent to Crisis Management and Status-Quo Obstructionism

By 2018, the Iran–Hezbollah axis had begun facing significant structural limitations. As Steinberg (2021) notes, Iran's regional expansion 'peaked in 2018' and then 'hit a wall,' as its proxies—while militarily strong—proved incapable of stabilising governance in countries such as Lebanon

and Iraq. Simultaneously, the Trump administration's 'maximum pressure' campaign on Iran slashed oil revenues and financial flows to Hezbollah, triggering internal budgetary cuts. Reports of salary reductions for Hezbollah fighters and the scaling back of services became widespread (Financial Times, 2019).

In October 2019, a spontaneous nationwide protest movement erupted, marking a watershed moment in Lebanese political history. Sparked by proposed taxes, the protests quickly expanded into a mass indictment of the entire political class. Crucially, Hezbollah was no longer exempt from popular anger, even in its Shia strongholds. Demonstrators in traditionally loyal areas denounced the group's role in preserving the corrupt political system. By explicitly including Hezbollah in their slogans, protesters shattered the image of Hezbollah as an untouchable resistance force. Hezbollah's reaction was to delegitimise the protests, framing them as externally driven and accusing Western and Gulf actors of inciting unrest. This narrative marked a crucial turning point in the group's attempt to preserve its political legitimacy. Following Iran's obstructionist stance, by shifting from a symbol of resistance to a bulwark of the status quo, Hezbollah positioned itself in direct opposition to a popular, cross-sectarian demand for systemic change.

This delegitimisation not only undermined its credibility among previously supportive constituencies but also signalled the erosion of Iran's soft power in Lebanon. Once seen as a source of ideological inspiration and anti-imperialist solidarity, Iran's influence came to be associated with repression, obstruction, and complicity in the failures of the Lebanese political order. This response exposed the group's transformation from an anti-establishment resistance actor into a defender of Lebanon's sectarian divides. It also underscored Iran's diminishing ability to translate ideological narratives into local legitimacy (Ghadar, 2019).

The August 2020 Beirut port explosion further damaged Hezbollah's standing. While the group was not directly responsible, its alignment with the political elite and obstruction of the judicial investigation associated it with the systemic rot. A 2020 poll showed a drop in Hezbollah's popularity even among the Shiite community, which makes up about a third of the population. Polls in the aftermath showed a sharp drop in Hezbollah's popularity, with only 30% of Lebanese expressing trust in the group and less than 10% among Sunnis and Christians (Rebeiz, 2024).

In response to reduced Iranian funding, Hezbollah sought alternative sources of finance and deeper penetration into state structures. Its control of the Health Ministry and influence in the Ministry of Social Affairs allowed it to redirect resources to its constituencies (Khatib, 2021). Simultaneously, the group was reported to be increasingly involved in Syria's illicit Captagon trade, an enterprise worth billion and allegedly supported by pro-Assad networks (Azizi and Barnes-Dacey, 2023). These examples illustrate Iran's horizontal influence in Lebanon: not through formal economic leverage, but via the enabling of patronage networks and shadow economies.

However, rather than exerting rigid control, Tehran often defers to Hezbollah's political judgment in Lebanese affairs, reflecting a nuanced partnership based on mutual trust and aligned interests. This mode of indirect governance enhances Iran's resilience but also exposes it to reputational risks when proxies act in ways that clash with its ideological posture or regional narratives. In 2022, the group endorsed a maritime border agreement with Israel, a pragmatic shift that diverged from Iran's traditional anti-Israel posture. Tehran, rather than publicly

rebuking the move, deferred to Hezbollah's judgment. This episode highlighted the autonomy Hezbollah enjoys in Lebanese politics and the mutual trust in its alliance with Iran. It also revealed the strategic pragmatism of Iran's regional policy: willing to tolerate deviations so long as core interests remain protected.

The 2024 war with Israel is the most recent and dramatic example. Yet, the balance of this war is negative for both Iran and Hezbollah, let alone Lebanon. The war dealt a significant blow to Hezbollah and Iran as the former failed to achieve its primary goal of securing a Gaza ceasefire while suffering heavy military losses, including key commanders and political leaders. Israeli strikes have greatly diminished Hezbollah's military capabilities, infrastructure and supply lines, forcing the group to withdraw from the Israeli border.

On top of this, Iran's sway over Lebanese internal affairs has been severely weakened by the 2024 fall of the Assad regime and the severe depletion of Hezbollah's military capabilities by Israel. Increasing numbers of people have begun calling for Hezbollah to disarm, and by April 2025, reports suggested that most of its military equipment had been relocated from southern Lebanon. This had direct implications for Iran-Lebanon relations. Lebanon's foreign ministry summoned Iran's ambassador to Beirut in April 2025 over comments alleging that plans to disarm Hezbollah were a 'conspiracy'. In 2024, then-prime minister Najib Mikati also issued a rare rebuke of Iran for 'interfering' in internal Lebanese affairs.

However, the political gridlock in Lebanon has come to an end with the 2025 elections, which ended the prolonged power *vacuum* that has paralysed Lebanon's political landscape since former President Michel Aoun's mandate terminated at the end of October 2022. The election of Gen. Joseph Aoun as president, backed by Saudi Arabia and the US, and the naming of a prime minister opposed by Hezbollah indicate the Iran-backed group's diminishing clout. These developments might have compelled Hezbollah's new leadership to prioritise enhancing the group's Lebanese identity and reduce reliance on Iran as the Shia group seeks to restore its image (ISPI, 2025). Nonetheless, Hezbollah is far from being fully defeated (militarily and politically), and it is yet unclear how much power it -and by extension, Iran- will yield in the future.

3. Obstruction over construction

Iran's strategic engagement in Lebanon, orchestrated through Hezbollah, represents a complex swing between *hybrid authoritarian influence and accommodation*, according to the periods. It combines ideological affinity, financial dependency, and strategic delegation, producing a model that is resilient but delicate and limited. Hezbollah, as a hybrid actor, encapsulates this contradiction: powerful yet unaccountable, embedded yet autonomous.

From 2010 to 2018, Iran's margin for influence expanded, riding on Hezbollah's regional assertiveness and local entrenchment. The group's intervention in Syria, consolidation of political alliances, and control over Lebanese institutions seemed to affirm Iran's regional ascendancy. Yet from 2019 onward, Lebanon's descent into economic collapse, the eruption of mass protests, and the visible decline in Hezbollah's popularity have tested the durability of this model.

Iran retains influence, but it is increasingly defined by what it can prevent rather than what it can build—a hallmark of authoritarian accommodation. This pattern reflects Iran's preference for *obstruction* over construction: enabling allied groups like Hezbollah to block reforms, veto investigations, and preserve elite bargains without offering viable policy alternatives. In doing so, Iran contributes to a system that sustains power through institutional capture and strategic paralysis, rather than through democratic responsiveness. This modality underscores the limits of influence predicated on resistance narratives and coercive leverage in the face of popular demands for accountability. Hezbollah remains the most powerful actor in Lebanon, yet it presides over a state sliding deeper into dysfunction. The alliance's capacity to obstruct reform far exceeds its ability to implement alternatives. For Lebanon, this means continued democratic deficits and a lack of reforms, governed by actors who resist accountability and whose power is sustained by external patrons.

As seen in the context of the latest confrontation with Israel, Iran's proxy war strategy aimed at denying its involvement and reducing the risk of direct engagement. However,

> this strategy began to backfire when Israel altered its approach and officially held Iran accountable for the attacks against Israel due to its sponsorship of Hamas. This situation illustrates that Iran's inability to control the behaviour of non-state armed groups could lead to unintended consequences and potentially draw Iran into direct confrontation with its adversaries (Şimşek, 2025: 11).

Ultimately, Iran's presence in Lebanon is defined by authoritarian collaboration, not imposition. Hezbollah's leverage is both enabled and constrained by its hybrid nature, representing Iran's interests while adapting to Lebanon's fragmented politics. In doing so, Hezbollah represents both the extent and the limits of Iran's influence in Lebanon: a proxy that enables projection, a force that preserves paralysis.

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2. Qatar's Balancing Act in Lebanon: Mediation, Stabilisation, or Self-Interest?

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Qatar has steadily emerged as a prominent, albeit understated, player in Lebanon's sociopolitical landscape over the last two decades. Unlike regional powers such as Iran or Saudi Arabia, Doha has cultivated a reputation of neutrality, using its vast financial resources and diplomatic capital to act as a stabiliser and mediator in times of crisis. From its reconstruction efforts in post-2006 war Lebanon to its pivotal mediation in the 2008 Doha Agreement, and its recent support during the country's economic and political collapse, Qatar's approach has emphasised soft power and pragmatic diplomacy over 'hard' geopolitical alignment. However, this balancing act has not been without its contradictions, particularly considering the emirate's privileged relations with certain Lebanese factions and actors, as well as its limited emphasis on democratic reforms.

In this context, this analysis traces Qatar's involvement in Lebanon from 2006 through 2025, evaluating three main elements: 1) its efforts to present and position itself as a mediator; 2) its reliance on financial and economic support; 3) its status as a 'small-state actor with outsized influence' (Elkahlout & Hedaya, 2024). It analyses Qatar's actions in three phases: the foundational period (2006–2018), the period of intensified crisis (2019–2024), and its evolving role in Lebanon's recent political normalisation and regional de-escalation efforts (2024–2025). This includes a detailed assessment of how Qatari soft power has impacted Lebanon's internal political order, including implications for democratic resilience and elite persistence. Although qualitative and quantitative data on Lebanon remains limited, the following analysis draws on a diverse range of different qualitative sources, ranging from academic literature to speeches.

1. 2006–2018: Foundations of Influence through Reconstruction and Mediation

Qatar's role in Lebanon acquired more prominence and visibility during the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The conflict devastated much of southern Lebanon, particularly Hezbollah-controlled areas. While many Arab nations remained cautious, Qatar stood out as one of the first to offer significant humanitarian and reconstruction aid, pledging up to $300 million to rebuild homes, schools, mosques, and infrastructure (Elkahlout and Hedaya, 2024: 1816). This bolstered Qatar's image as a reliable partner and facilitated its penetration and active engagement in Lebanon. In doing so, Qatar aligned itself with other Arab countries in promoting a narrative of solidarity, reinforcing its commitment to post-conflict humanitarianism. While some interpret this stance as being 'rooted in religious and ethical values', others view it as pragmatic strategy to expand regional influence (Facon-Salelles, 2025: 3).

The high point of Qatar's political mediation in Lebanon came in 2008 with the Doha Agreement. Amid an 18-month political stalemate and escalating violence between the Lebanese March 8 and March 14 coalitions, Qatar hosted and brokered a deal that averted civil war. The agreement led to the election of Michel Suleiman as president and the formation of a national unity government. Qatar's successful mediation was widely praised and reinforced its reputation as a

neutral broker capable of engaging with all sides—from Hezbollah and Amal to the Future Movement and the Progressive Socialist Party (Milton et al., 2025: 53).

However, the Doha Agreement was not without consequences. While it temporarily defused tensions, critics argue it indirectly entrenched sectarianism and strengthened Hezbollah's grip on Lebanese politics by granting it veto power within the cabinet (Barakat and Milton, 2020). Thus, Qatar's role was effective in preventing immediate violence but fell short of resolving the structural causes of Lebanon's political instability. Doha's mediation model was elite-centred and technocratic, not fundamentally reform-oriented. As some analysts put it, Doha preferred 'order over transformation,' emphasising conflict management over democratic renewal (Mohammadzadeh, 2017: 20). Indeed, its lack of emphasis on empowering civil society or enforcing governance benchmarks meant that its interventions, while stabilising, often left the roots of dysfunction intact.

Between 2010 and 2018, Qatar maintained a low but steady presence in Lebanon, balancing relations with competing actors. This period reflected Qatar's 'hedging' strategy: engaging with Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Lebanese political factions while avoiding deep entanglements (Mohammadzadeh, 2017, p. 20). Doha's relationships allowed it to remain a respected partner without being perceived as a partisan actor. During this time, Qatar also increased its investments in real estate and tourism infrastructure in Lebanon, notably in areas such as the southern suburbs of Beirut and Sidon, consolidating its soft influence through economic integration. Qatar also funded several cultural initiatives and educational institutions, but these efforts remained confined to elite urban circles and rarely engaged grassroots civil society.

Furthermore, while Qatar maintained its discourse in favour of Lebanese sovereignty and political stability, its policies lacked direct support for democratic reforms or political liberalisation. Unlike the European Union's focus on governance and electoral transparency, Qatar's influence model in this period focused more on regime stability and elite-level dialogue. This not only entrenched the existing confessional power-sharing system but also reduced the pressure for reform, particularly in the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, where Qatar's focus shifted more aggressively to regional balancing and survival (Coates Ulrichsen, 2014).

2. 2019–2024: Crisis Management, Strategic Recalibration, and Deepened Engagement

Lebanon's post-2019 crises—financial collapse, mass protests, the 2020 Beirut port explosion, and the COVID-19 pandemic—prompted many international players to recalibrate their involvement. In its case, Qatar intensified its stance by providing immediate financial and humanitarian relief, including $500 million in bond purchases (Reuters, 2019), $50 million for post-blast reconstruction, and over $70 million more through the Qatar Fund for Development. Qatar also donated an additional $25 million to refurbish Lebanon's damaged National Library. This enabled Doha to reinforce its image as a responsive, non-partisan donor and positioned it as a viable alternative to other regional patrons (Facon-Salelles, 2025: 15).

Qatar's crisis-response diplomacy was especially evident in the aftermath of the 2020 explosion. It rapidly mobilised medical assistance, field hospitals, and infrastructural aid. While the scale of assistance paled in comparison to the magnitude of Lebanon's economic meltdown, it allowed Qatar to maintain an image of solidarity without overtly interfering in domestic politics.

Importantly, this form of crisis aid avoided conditionalities—offering short-term relief without catalysing long-term change. Yet, such approaches can stabilise the status quo while undermining momentum for reform (Pericoli, 2025; Leitar and Tashjian, 2024).

During this same period, Qatar became Lebanon's second-largest supporter of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), after the US, offering food, fuel, and monthly stipends for soldiers amid a collapsing currency (Qatar Fund for Development, 2023). As of 2023, Qatar's support reached $60 million per year, with an estimated $100 per month disbursed to thousands of soldiers to supplement wages devalued by currency collapse. By 2024, Qatar had also signed long-term agreements to support LAF logistics and procurement. The Qatari ambassador to Lebanon was quoted as saying, "The army is the last standing institution in the face of collapse," a remark that encapsulates Qatar's approach to state support, prioritising stability over change. This investment reflects not only Doha's pragmatic realism but also its desire to avoid a total institutional breakdown in Lebanon.

Qatar also aligned itself with international efforts in crisis management. During the 2022 maritime demarcation talks between Lebanon and Israel, Qatar supported the US-led negotiations and subsequently secured a 30% stake in Block 9 gas exploration alongside Total and ENI, enhancing its energy and geopolitical footprint (Guzansky and Mizrahi, 2024). This investment was not merely economic: it also served as a soft power tool, positioning Qatar as an indispensable stakeholder in Lebanon's future energy deals. It also reflected a broader Qatari strategy of combining mediation with economic insertion to secure long-term influence.

Despite these actions, Qatar's approach revealed tensions. While it publicly called for reforms, Doha did not attach conditionalities to its aid, effectively reinforcing Lebanon's elite-led status quo (Doha News, 2022). Qatar's flexible diplomacy avoids being framed as a model to be exported and that tries to reproduce itself in other contexts (Pericoli, 2025). Yet, by supporting institutions such as the LAF and bypassing civil society engagement, it contributes to what has been termed 'technocratic authoritarianism'—a model in which stability is prioritised at the expense of political pluralism and accountability (Barakat, 2022). While it does not imply direct autocracy promotion, it does not favour the installation of democracy promotion practices either.

Moreover, Qatar's opaque stance toward actors like Hezbollah has continued to spark regional speculation. Doha has maintained backchannels with Hezbollah and avoided direct criticism, enabling it to act as an intermediary in broader regional conflicts. Yet this position has also earned accusations of complicity or tacit support for a party many view as a state-within-a-state. Gulf rivals, particularly Saudi Arabia and the UAE, have framed Qatar's neutrality as ambivalence or worse—tacit endorsement (Cafiero and Siniscalco, 2019).

Within the context of the crisis and then rapprochement between the Gulf monarchies, Qatar's post-blast reconstruction efforts were not only notable for their symbolic breadth but also for Doha's attempt to maintain its image as a non-partisan actor. Projects such as the renovation of Mar Mikhael and the restoration of Armenian schools in Beirut highlighted a shift in Qatari aid narratives—from Shia-aligned outreach to a broader cross-sectarian strategy. Yet, these moves have not translated into long-term support for political reform or democratic consolidation. Qatar's model, as Facon-Salelles (2025) summarises, 'delivers visibility, but not necessarily transformation.'

3. 2024–2025: Renewed mediation and regional risk management

By 2024, Qatar had again positioned itself at the forefront of Lebanon's political stabilisation. After President Michel Aoun's term ended in 2022, the country faced a two-year vacuum. Qatar, leveraging its connections with all major factions and acting as part of the 'Group of Five,' supported the election of General Joseph Aoun—commander of the LAF and Doha's preferred candidate—as president in January 2025 (ISPI, 2025). Qatar played a central behind-the-scenes role, holding quiet talks with Hezbollah, Iran, and Western capitals. In many ways, Joseph Aoun's election signified not just a Lebanese compromise but a Qatari-brokered regional détente, reflecting Doha's capacity to operate across ideological lines. Throughout this process, Qatar emphasised the need for structural reform, framing its intervention as a way to break Lebanon's cycles of sectarian paralysis (Doha News, 2022).

Qatar also acted as a diplomatic buffer amid the 2023–2024 Israel-Gaza-Hezbollah escalations. Responding to US requests, it facilitated backchannel negotiations that led to a temporary Israel-Hezbollah ceasefire in November 2024. The deal focused on implementing UNSCR 1701 and 1559, which call for Hezbollah's disarmament and withdrawal from southern Lebanon. The potential success of this agreement hinges largely on the LAF, which Qatar continues to fund and train.

Qatar's regional risk management also extends beyond diplomacy. Its investment in Lebanon's energy infrastructure and post-blast reconstruction—including the Qatar-funded redevelopment of downtown Beirut and partial financing for the electricity grid—reflects a willingness to underwrite recovery in ways that combine economic opportunity with strategic influence. As of early 2025, Qatar's cumulative direct investments in Lebanon exceeded $1 billion, placing it among the top five Arab investors.

Qatar and the EU share overlapping interests in Lebanon, particularly in stabilising the state and supporting the LAF, yet their approaches diverge significantly. The EU prioritises institutional reforms, democratic governance, and civil society empowerment (Lietar and Tashjian 2024). Qatar, in contrast, employs elite mediation and direct financial assistance. The EU's focus on elections and transparency has been somewhat undermined by Qatar's pragmatic alliances with dominant factions, including Hezbollah.

As some observers in the region argue, Qatar's model is 'less about promoting democratic accountability and more about maintaining geopolitical balance and mitigating collapse to gain its own.'2 In other terms, this seems to mirror Doha's broader approach in the region, which prioritises mediation and development over real long-term institutional change.

Overall, Qatar's engagement in Lebanon between 2006 and 2025 has demonstrated continuity in its strategic pragmatism and evolution in its instruments of influence. From post-conflict reconstruction and elite mediation to energy diplomacy and security support, Qatar has maintained its position as a stabilising actor with wide access across political lines. However, its limited investment in democratic reforms or civil society empowerment highlights the trade-offs inherent in its soft power model. Rather than reshaping Lebanon's political order, Qatar has helped preserve its current configuration—an outcome that may stabilise crisis moments but leaves underlying dysfunctions unaddressed.

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3. The US in Lebanon: Balancing between stabilisation and regional interests

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In the past forty years, the United States' approach to Lebanon has been characterised by long-term priorities: reducing the weight of Hezbollah and its ability to pose threats to Israel; limiting the influence of Syria and Iran; and countering the proliferation of terrorist organisations (Blanchard, 2014). To ensure these priorities, successive US administrations have identified key areas of intervention. As the US Congress on Lebanon reports,

US policy toward Lebanon since the end of the Lebanese civil war has reflected a desire to see the country move toward the vision outlined by Lebanese leaders in 1989 at Taif, Saudi Arabia, where they met to reach a national agreement to end the fighting. Among the goals enshrined in the Taif Agreement were the withdrawal of foreign military forces from Lebanon, the disarming of non-state groups, and the development of strong national security institutions and non-confessional democracy (Blanchard, 2014: 4).

1. A complicated assessment: determining actor or a zero-sum game player?

However, in practice, US policymakers have sought to walk a line between maintaining a neutral posture and marginalising those in Lebanon who are hostile to the United States, its interests, and its allies. Some Lebanese—particularly Hezbollah supporters and others who reject calls for non-state actors to disarm—have decried US policy as self-interested intervention in the zero-sum games of Lebanese and regional politics. Other Lebanese welcome US support, whether as a means of fulfilling shared goals of empowering neutral national institutions or as a means to isolate their domestic political rivals. Some groups' views of US involvement fluctuate with regional circumstances and their personal fortunes. In other words, US diplomacy toward Lebanon oscillates between periods of engagement and neglect (Hale, 2024).

First, politically, the United States has approached Lebanon through the prism of countering Iran's and Hezbollah's influence. In line with that objective, it has endorsed the March 14 alliance formed after the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri in 2005 and denounced any deadlock caused by Hezbollah's March 8th alliance (Zanotti, 2022). This was a consistent defining characteristic of US policy during the Bush and Obama administrations. According to some analysts, Lebanon topped Washington's agenda in the mid-2000s under President Bush, who viewed the country as an early success story for his broader democracy promotion agenda in the region. During this period, there was a surge of optimism and support at multiple levels. Yet, in parallel, US Congressional reports highlight persistent concerns such as corruption, the weakness of democratic institutions, the future of Palestinian refugees, and the presence of Sunni extremist groups. The latter threat was illustrated by the Lebanese Armed Forces' (LAF's) 2007 confrontation with the Sunni extremist group Fatah al Islam, which resulted in the destruction of much of the Nahr al Bared Palestinian refugee camp. During Donald Trump's first term, Washington even considered imposing individual sanctions on members of Hezbollah (Khoury, 2019; Hijazi, 2023).

In the military sphere, since 1978, the United States has provided financial support to the multinational interposition force UNIFIL (Zanotti, 2022). Moreover, it has provided military

assistance to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which Washington considers as the 'sole legitimate defender of Lebanon's sovereignty' (US Department of State, 2025). Annually, the US has provided around $100 million to the LAF, mostly through the Economic Support Fund (ESF) and the Foreign Military Financing (FMF), resulting in a total of $3 billion between 2006 and 2023 (Zanotti, 2023). This objective has been reiterated and reinforced since the outbreak of the Israel-Hamas war in October 2023 and throughout 2024 (US Department of State, 2024).

Institutional capacity building has also been provided through economic aid. The United States' approach has been translated into specific projects focused on several areas, including anti-corruption practices, women and children empowerment, and privatisation reforms. Economic support is not provided directly to the Lebanese government, but through international organisations, NGOs, or private institutions, with the explicit aim of avoiding benefiting Hezbollah. More recently, the grave financial crisis that brought about a state of institutional collapse, showcased by events like the 2019 protests and the 2020 Beirut port explosion and further exacerbated by the post-October 2023 context, has made the reconstruction of Lebanese basic services a core priority for the United States. In FY 2024 alone, the United States has provided $67 million in additional humanitarian support (US Embassy Beirut, 2024). However, as in the case of the 2019 protests, while the United States expressed general sympathy for the protesters, it did not specify what it would do to support and protect them. Until now, the United States has only offered ad hoc support, doing the minimum to keep the country from utter collapse. In a sense, there was no implementation of any checks and balances or conditionality to encourage a very stubborn—and allegedly highly corrupted—ruling class to change its behaviour.

2. Indirect democracy support or status quo accommodation?

This lack of commitment highlighted that "Lebanon [was] not the Biden administration's priority" (Vohra, 2021). Since 2021, the US has mainly sought to indirectly support political reform in Lebanon, focusing on resolving the presidential vacuum and weakening Hezbollah's influence. US pressure intensified after Hezbollah's leadership was decapitated in late 2024, prompting American officials to push for the election of a new president. Washington has favoured Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Gen. Joseph Aoun for the role, viewing him as a stabilising, Western-leaning figure. However, deep political divisions and Hezbollah's insistence on a pro-Iranian candidate have stalled progress. The US has faced pushback from Speaker Nabih Berri and other Hezbollah allies, who insist that no presidential election can happen during active conflict with Israel. While Secretary Blinken has emphasized that Lebanon's future must be determined by the Lebanese themselves, behind-the-scenes American involvement has raised concerns among opposition groups, wary of appearing as proxies in a US-Israel agenda. Despite Hezbollah's military setbacks, efforts to unite the opposition and pressure the group to disarm remain fragmented and ineffective. Analysts argue that US policy underestimates the fragility of Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system and overestimates the willingness or ability of domestic actors to confront Hezbollah without risking civil conflict. Ultimately, US leverage in Lebanon remains constrained by regional dynamics and internal deadlock.

From a broader geopolitical perspective, since the eruption of the civil war in Syria in 2011, Lebanon has gained an even greater role in the United States' strategic aim to prevent the spillover of the war and the reinforcement of informal channels between Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. Border control and refugee management have become two central elements of US

investments, both to provide humanitarian support to refugees and to reduce the presence of Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda-affiliated groups at the borders with Syria (US Department of State, 2022). Yet, the fact that the harsh consequences of October 7 and the fall of the Assad regime coincided with the transition from the Biden administration to Trump's leaves open questions about how effective US policies have been in the last years and how they will develop in the future.

In all these endeavours, Washington's overall objective remains to limit the capacities of other actors—mostly Hezbollah—to replace the state as a provider of basic needs and, by doing so, it has by default contributed to entrenching non-democratic practices. The exclusive anti-Iran prism has further polarised Lebanon's domestic political scene between the March 14th alliance and the March 8th alliance, rendering the former vulnerable to accusations of becoming a pawn of the United States and Europe's influence in the country.

The US approach in Lebanon has been generally in line with the EU priorities (European Commission, 2024). However, the EU has historically taken a more moderated approach towards Hezbollah, by including only its military wing in its terrorist list in 2013 (Council of the European Union, 2014). Moreover, Washington promotes a more explicit political role in leveraging 'US soft power to encourage Lebanon's Western orientation and solidify the United States as the preferred partner among strategic competitors', in line with its general aim to defend Israel and limit Iran and its allies (US Department of State, 2024).

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4. Saudi Arabia's policies in Lebanon. Supporting the friends while curbing the enemies

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Since the civil war (1975–1990), Saudi Arabia has played an active role in Lebanese domestic politics. In the post-Taif context[4], it invested in the Lebanese economic sphere to limit Iran's influence and identified former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and his circle as a loyal conveyer of Saudi interests. When he was killed in 2005, the Saudi authorities provided their full support to the March 14th coalition, supporting both Hariri's Future Party and the Lebanese Armed Forces. The March 14th alliance broadened its base beyond the Sunni community also as a result of Saudi's interest to counter Hezbollah emboldened by the war it fought against Israel in 2006.

Through its political partnerships, Saudi Arabia gained a prominent economic role in the post-2006 reconstruction, especially through central bank deposits (Mason, 2023). However, in the following years, Riyad started to review its approach due to the weakness of its political allies and their tendency to seek compromises with the March 8th coalition, which Saudi Arabia fully opposed in line with its anti-Iran/Hezbollah posture. The aftermath of the 2006 war inaugurated a phase of progressive disengagement of the KSA from Lebanon's political life and an entrenchment of Iran's foothold in the country. Iran coming out of its international isolation and Assad gaining prominence as a reformist leader in the West helped in this process. In this regard, Riyadh performed as an agent-based promoter of non-democratic practices.

This disengagement deepened as Hezbollah increasingly dominated Lebanese institutions, while Saudi's own allies, such as Saad Hariri, either compromised or proved politically ineffective. Compounded by regional setbacks—including the war in Syria and shifting US priorities—Saudi Arabia began recalibrating its Lebanon policy from strategic engagement to selective punitive action and reputational withdrawal.

In 2016, Saudi Arabia again adjusted its approach to Lebanon, in line with its increasingly confrontational approach towards Iran and Hezbollah, which was labelled as a terrorist organisation by the KSA that same year. In January 2016, the Saudi authorities announced the withdrawal of cash deposits to the Central Bank of Lebanon and $4 billion in security assistance after the Lebanese government abstained in an Arab League resolution condemning Iranian attacks against the Saudi Embassy in Tehran (Macaron, 2021). Such a decision deepened the fragile economic situation of ordinary Lebanese already impacted by decades of misgovernance of Lebanese political elites.

This trend intensified in October 2021, when Information Minister George Kordahi's comments—describing the Saudi-led war in Yemen as 'absurd'—ignited a diplomatic crisis. Despite these remarks having been recorded before the government's formation, Riyadh viewed them as symptomatic of Lebanon's Hezbollah-aligned discourse and took swift punitive measures:

[4] The Taif Agreement, signed in 1989 to end the Lebanese civil war, restructured Lebanon's political system by reallocating powers from the Maronite presidency to a more balanced Sunni-Shia-Christian power-sharing arrangement. It also reaffirmed Lebanon's Arab identity and called for the disarmament of all militias—principles that would later be central to Saudi Arabia's engagement.

withdrawing its ambassador, suspending Lebanese imports, and cutting diplomatic ties. Bahrain, Kuwait, and the UAE followed with various degrees of support. These moves served not only as a reaction to Kordahi's remarks but as a broader signal to Washington and Tehran that Riyadh still had cards to play in Lebanon.

The Saudi direct political interference reached its peak in 2017 with the detention of Prime Minister Saad Hariri in Riyadh to pressure him into resignation (Ghaddar, 2023). In 2021, the Saudi authorities pressured the Lebanese foreign minister to resign after having blamed the Gulf monarchies for their role in the expansion of IS (Reuters, 2021). A few months later, the Kingdom cut diplomatic ties due to Prime Minister George Kordahi's critical stance on the war in Yemen. Moreover, the alleged role of Hezbollah in smuggling the Captagon drug to Saudi Arabia through agricultural products led to a ban on Lebanese imports, which further exacerbated Lebanon's financial crisis (Reuters, 2021). In 2023, Saudi Arabia joined Qatar, Egypt, the US and France in trying to influence the end of the political gridlock that was preventing the establishment of a stable government.

This renewed activism reflected not a reversal of disengagement but a shift toward conditional pressure diplomacy. By backing figures such as Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and refusing any overtures to the Hariri bloc, Riyadh recalibrated its influence strategy to support actors uncompromising toward Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia's actions increasingly aimed to steer Lebanon's internal balance through diplomatic isolation and economic coercion.

Despite the announcement of a drastic reduction in Saudi investments since 2016, Riyadh's financial and humanitarian involvement has continued. In 2019, Saudi Arabia provided financial support against the liquidity crisis and offered all kinds of aid after the 2020 Beirut port explosion. Moreover, between 2006 and 2023, the Kingdom claims to have financed 54 humanitarian projects, mainly in the fields of food and health security (King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center, n.d.). In July 2024, Saudi Arabia announced (Houssari, 2024) the provision of an additional $10 million through King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center for the implementation of 28 projects, including support for Syrian and Palestinian refugee families (Arab News, 2024).

In parallel with this humanitarian strategy, Saudi Arabia has increasingly linked any broader economic support to structural political reform. The Kingdom has made clear that further engagement will depend on Beirut aligning with the IMF, implementing the Taif Agreement in full, and resisting any constitutional overhaul that might formalize Hezbollah's dominance. These conditions have become central in the post-2024 regional environment, where Saudi Arabia positions itself as a guarantor of Arab consensus and state sovereignty, in contrast to Iranian-backed militancy.

The Saudi interest in influencing the domestic politics of Lebanon is based on the willingness to prevent any change in the constitution that would give more seats to the Shia community, thus opening the way for more Hezbollah—and Iranian—power. By doing so, Saudi Arabia has acted as an agent of disruption of democratic practices even fuelling sectarian divisions and has hampered cooperation among different coalitions. Despite Saudi Arabia stepping up its commitment to gender equality and technological development domestically with its Vision 2030 project, these sectors were completely disregarded in its support policy towards Lebanon. This also suggests that domestic *democracy diffusion* does not necessarily translate into a similar

pattern when geopolitical interests prevail. This is in direct contrast with the EU approach of enhancing cooperation of all political factions towards the implementation of political and economic reforms (Serra, 2022).

Although this lies beyond the scope of SHAPEDEM-EU project, recent developments seem to confirm KSA's modus operandi and priorities. In early 2025, following two years of political paralysis, Lebanon elected General Joseph Aoun as president, with Saudi Arabia quietly endorsing the process as part of a broader coalition of regional and international actors seeking to stabilize the country. The visit of Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan to Beirut in January 2025 marked a symbolic shift: Saudi Arabia was back, but on its own terms. It reaffirmed its support for Lebanon's recovery, provided that reforms are implemented, the Taif Accord is respected, and Hezbollah's unchecked power is curtailed. During his visit, Prince Faisal met with key Lebanese leaders and emphasized the Kingdom's desire to restore Lebanon's sovereignty, economic viability, and regional standing—conditional on curbing Iranian influence. He praised the new president's inaugural message and stated Saudi Arabia would stand 'step by step' with Lebanon's reformist agenda. However, Riyadh made clear that it would no longer finance the country without accountability. Investment, not charity, is now the Saudi model of engagement.

As regional tensions remain high due to the Gaza war, Saudi Arabia sees Lebanon as a potential tipping point. Its engagement will hinge on Lebanon's ability to present a cohesive, sovereign, and reform-driven political vision. If successful, Saudi involvement could serve as a catalyst for broader Arab support and a rebalanced regional order—but only if Lebanon is willing to meet the moment.

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5. The United Nations' role Lebanon: a delicate balance between assistance and risks of politicisation

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Since 2019, Lebanon's humanitarian situation has worsened significantly due to multiple crises, including the 2020 Beirut explosion and the ongoing Israel-Hamas war. Widespread corruption, rule of law violations, and political paralysis continue to obstruct progress toward democratic reforms (Freedom House, 2024). Although the UN has attempted to address such challenges through technical assistance and capacity building, including electoral aid and reconstruction efforts, these are unlikely to succeed without strong political will from both the Lebanese government and the international community.

In the immediate aftermath of the 2020 Beirut explosion, 37 human rights experts issued a joint statement demanding accountability for those responsible (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2020). Since then, numerous UN bodies have echoed this call, emphasising the need for justice for the victims (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). Yet, four years later, no one has been held accountable. The process was stalled multiple times by the Lebanese government, which routinely interfered in the investigation (Amnesty International, 2023). Notably, Public Prosecutor Ghassan Oweidat attempted to replace the lead investigator and ordered the release of all individuals detained on suspicion of involvement in the explosion, with at least one defendant having since fled the country.

It was arguably not just the Lebanese government that failed its people throughout this process. Lebanese citizens made repeated calls for the Human Rights Council to establish an Independent Commission to address the gaps left by the investigation (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2022). Additionally, the Beirut Bar Association, representing nearly 2,000 families and survivors at the investigation, submitted three separate letters to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres requesting satellite images from UN member states that could have provided crucial evidence about the blast (BBC, 2021). However, these letters remained unanswered, and the Human Rights Council never established an Independent Commission, contributing to a general lack of accountability.

Electoral assistance is another key tool adopted by the UN to foster democratic institutions in Lebanon. Through the Lebanese Electoral Assistance Project (LEAP), initiated in 2016 and funded by the EU, UNDP aimed to promote transparent, inclusive, and fair elections (United Nations Development Programme, 2023). To achieve this objective, it cooperated with a wide range of national stakeholders and relevant civil society organisations. Yet, the 2022 elections were marked by significant shortcomings (European Union Election Observation Mission Lebanon, 2022). The government's reticence to announce whether the elections were going to take place resulted in delayed preparations and inequalities among candidates. The government also significantly underfunded the elections, providing only about €17 million—substantially lower than the €51 million allocated for the 2018 elections (Noe, 2022). Lastly, blatant voter and candidate intimidation, along with widespread vote-buying, defined the period leading up to and including election day (European Union Election Observation Mission Lebanon, 2022). These factors highlight the fundamental limitations of UN technical assistance; even though procedures

are supported through practical trainings, democratic governance and electoral resilience do not ensue.

Through the adoption of multiple resolutions, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has also sought to support democracy in Lebanon, emphasising the need to respect the country's sovereignty. Notably, Resolution 1559, adopted in 2004 when the country was still suffering from the consequences of the Lebanese 15-year civil war, aimed to reinforce Lebanon's sovereignty by calling for free and fair elections without foreign interference and for the withdrawal of all foreign troops (United Nations Security Council, 2004). Similarly, Resolution 1701 sought to reinforce Lebanon's sovereignty by calling on Israel to respect its territorial integrity and urging the Lebanese government to assert control over Hezbollah (United Nations Security Council, 2006). Yet again, the direct impact of these resolutions on democratic development has remained limited. The UNSC's approach has been heavily focused on security dynamics and has faced significant obstacles. Lebanon has been both unwilling and unable to curtail Hezbollah's extensive political influence and military strength, while Israeli violations of Lebanese territory persist (Johnson, 2024).

To further strengthen Lebanon's sovereignty, the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) was deployed across the Blue Line—the UN-designated line separating Lebanon from Israel and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. UNIFIL's mandate includes monitoring hostilities and restoring the country's control over areas such as Southern Lebanon, which remains largely under Hezbollah's influence (Legorano, 2024). However, the mission is widely seen as ineffective. It has struggled to limit Hezbollah's dominance, prevent conflict, or provide adequate intelligence. Both the Lebanese public (Ali, 2024) and the Israeli government (Vincent and Hoorman, 2024) distrust the mission, with critics accusing it of ignoring Hezbollah's growing presence in the area (Davies, 2024). Despite its shortcomings, UNIFIL still plays a role in keeping global attention on the region and acting as a fragile buffer between warring sides (Blanford, 2023).

Yet, recent escalations—including direct Israeli attacks on UNIFIL positions and injuries inflicted by Hezbollah rocket fire—have brought into sharp relief the vulnerability and contested legitimacy of the mission. Since its creation in 1978, UNIFIL has failed to enforce its mandate effectively, whether by stopping Israeli aggressions or preventing Hezbollah's military entrenchment. The 2006 war, in which UNIFIL positions were struck more than 30 times, epitomized the mission's limitations (Ali, 2024). While its presence offers symbolic reassurance, UNIFIL has become largely reactive and risk-averse, with troop-contributing nations unwilling to confront Israeli violations or disarm Hezbollah directly.

Moreover, UNIFIL's relationship with local populations in southern Lebanon is marked by deep ambivalence. In areas heavily affected by Israeli occupation and conflict, Shia communities in particular often view UNIFIL battalions—especially European ones—as intelligence actors serving Western and Israeli interests. The aid provided through 'quick impact projects' (QIPs) is not always received with gratitude; many locals perceive these efforts as conditional, tied to political compliance or surveillance access. Reports of UNIFIL influence over school curricula, entry conditions to public institutions, and even religious messaging during outreach events have further damaged its standing among residents (Ali, 2024). Rather than empowering Lebanese institutions or communities, such practices risk reinforcing perceptions of foreign control and exacerbating sectarian mistrust.

Ultimately, due to the absence of strong political will and a clear peace to maintain, the UN's main contribution in response to the crises in Lebanon has been limited to providing humanitarian aid. For instance, after the Beirut explosion, UNDP focused on short-term recovery efforts such as restoring small businesses and removing debris (United Nations Development Programme, 2020). While these offered vital immediate relief, they did not address the underlying causes of Lebanon's problems or lead to significant democratic progress.

The UN's role in Lebanon embodies the dilemma of peacebuilding without peace. While the organisation has provided essential support—through aid, training, and oversight mechanisms—its initiatives are often undercut by political interference, entrenched local power structures, and inconsistent enforcement. The case of UNIFIL illustrates the dangers of symbolic intervention without robust capacity or local legitimacy. If the UN and its partners hope to have a meaningful impact in Lebanon, they must confront not only the state's internal dysfunction but also the geopolitical constraints that allow impunity and instability to persist. Reforming mandates, ensuring accountability, and placing dignity at the center of intervention may be the only way forward.

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6. Conclusion

Over the last two decades, Lebanon has stood as a case of structural crisis (mis)management rather than a one of clear regime transformation per se. In contrast to Tunisia, whose trajectory moved from a moment of democratic hope to authoritarian reemergence, Lebanon's post-2011 contours have been defined by cycles of negotiated paralysis, institutional erosion, and elite resilience within a delicate consociational framework. Lebanon's political architecture, rooted in the 1989 Taif Agreement, has enabled a mode of governance in which sovereignty is fragmented, the monopoly on coercion is incomplete, and political legitimacy is persistently contested. In such a context, as examined in this SHAPEDEM-EU report, the role of external actors has not been neutral: Iran, Qatar, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and the United Nations have each, in different ways and moments, contributed to shaping Lebanon's trajectory through support for democracy, selective engagement, authoritarian accommodation, or even indirect autocracy support.

Iran's engagement in Lebanon exemplifies a model of authoritarian enabling and, to a certain extent, authoritarian collaboration. Through its strategic partnership with Hezbollah, Tehran has embedded itself in Lebanon's political, security, and socio-economic spheres. Iran's material, ideological, and infrastructural support has enabled Hezbollah to operate as a hybrid actor: both within and beyond the state, participating in formal politics while retaining autonomous coercive capacity. During the 2010s, Iran's influence expanded as Hezbollah consolidated institutional power and intervened militarily in Syria, aligning Lebanon more closely with the Axis of Resistance. Yet from 2019 onward, Iran's model began to show signs of strain. The cross-sectarian protest movement explicitly targeted Hezbollah's complicity in elite corruption, while Iran's financial difficulties and Hezbollah's military losses during the 2023–2024 Gaza conflict weakened its grip. Nevertheless, Tehran's strategy remained obstructionist: aimed less at building a democratic order than at preserving veto power and strategic depth. Iran's influence in Lebanon can thus be characterised as a form of authoritarian accommodation rooted in hybrid governance, deterrence, and elite preservation.

Qatar, in contrast, has made attempts to project itself as a neutral broker and provider of stability. Since its high-profile mediation of the 2008 Doha Agreement, Qatar has engaged Lebanon through humanitarian aid, reconstruction support, and elite-level diplomacy. It refrained from partisan alignment and heavily invested in Lebanon's infrastructure, including after the 2020 port explosion (recovery phase). However, Qatar's emphasis on mediation over transformation, and its reliance on state-to-state and elite-level engagement, limited its contribution to democratic development. Even as Qatar became the second-largest funder of the Lebanese Armed Forces and helped facilitate the 2025 presidential election of General Joseph Aoun, its support lacked conditionality on reforms or accountability. While often framed as non-partisan support, Qatar's engagement is better understood as a form of technocratic, stability-oriented support, and devoid of systemic challenge to Lebanon's entrenched power-sharing order.

The United States has historically approached Lebanon through the lens of strategic containment—mainly aimed at limiting Iran's influence and supporting Israel's security. US support has focused on bolstering the LAF, promoting counterterrorism coordination, and funding civil society projects. While rhetorically committed to the Taif Agreement and non-confessional

governance, US democracy promotion has remained subordinate to broader geopolitical imperatives. During moments of acute crisis, such as the 2019 protests and the 2020 Beirut explosion, US expressions of concern were not matched by effective pressure on Lebanon's ruling elite. Instead, US policy has oscillated between episodic engagement and strategic neglect. By 2024, Washington's support for the presidential candidacy of General Joseph Aoun reflected a security-first approach: privileging stability and continuity over structural change. Despite its long-standing investments, the US role in Lebanon epitomises the limitations of democracy support when it is selectively applied and decoupled from meaningful conditionality.

Saudi Arabia's role in Lebanon has been characterised by a consistent desire to counter Hezbollah and Iran, even as its tactics and engagement levels have shifted. In the post-2005 period, Riyadh supported the March 14 alliance and invested heavily in reconstruction and financial support, including central bank deposits. However, disappointment with its allies' inability to stem Hezbollah's rise led to a gradual disengagement. From 2016 onward, Saudi Arabia adopted a more confrontational stance: cutting aid, withdrawing diplomatic representation, and imposing import bans in response to perceived Hezbollah dominance. While it resumed involvement during the 2023–2025 political deadlock, backing the election of Joseph Aoun and calling for Taif implementation, Riyadh's approach remained focused on curbing Hezbollah's power rather than advancing inclusive governance. Its conditional engagement, tied to IMF reforms and sectarian balance, can be seen as a form of autocracy support—instrumental, security-driven, and indifferent to democratic accountability.

The United Nations, through its various agencies and missions—including UNIFIL and the UNDP—has sought to bolster Lebanese state capacity, provide electoral support, and promote human rights. Yet its efforts have been persistently undermined by Lebanon's political class and the limits of international enforcement. The failure to establish an independent investigation into the 2020 Beirut blast, despite strong calls from civil society and UN rapporteurs, revealed the structural weakness of the UN's normative agenda in the face of local obstruction and geopolitical ambivalence. Similarly, while the UN has promoted transparent elections and inclusive governance through the LEAP program, its impact has been blunted by underfunding, political interference, and voter suppression. The UN's role in Lebanon thus straddles the line between technical democracy support and authoritarian accommodation—offering frameworks and funding but lacking the leverage to compel implementation or protect accountability mechanisms.

Across all actors examined, a broader pattern emerges. Strategic calculations and regional rivalries have consistently outweighed normative commitments to democracy. While some actors—particularly Qatar and the US—initially framed their engagement in terms of reform and civil empowerment, this support proved fragmented and shallow. Iran and Saudi Arabia, by contrast, used Lebanon as a proxy arena for their geopolitical contest, backing opposing factions and exacerbating sectarian polarisation. Qatar's pragmatism and the UN normative ambitions remained constrained by elite resistance and the absence of wider political will. Even when actors converged, as in the 2025 presidential election, their goal was to re-establish functionality, not to necessarily transform the underlying system.

These changes have not gone unnoticed within Lebanon. Civil society organisations, professional syndicates, and protest movements have repeatedly called out the inconsistency and opportunism of foreign involvement. Perceptions of external engagement are increasingly

critical: actors are seen as privileging stability over justice, containment over reform, and sectarian balance over democratic inclusivity (see Annex 1, p. 44). Expressions such as 'crisis diplomacy,' 'securitised aid,' and 'stability theatre' capture the disillusionment of those who view foreign involvement as reinforcing the very elite cartels they claim to challenge. From the October 2019 protests to the stalled port blast investigation, domestic efforts for accountability have often found international partners to be cautious, fragmented, or complicit.

Overall, Lebanon's experience over the past fifteen years reflects a broader regional pattern in which external engagement—far from being neutral—has contributed to democratic erosion when filtered through sectarian elites and clientelist networks. While no formal authoritarian rupture has occurred, the country's political order has become increasingly unresponsive, unaccountable, and incapable of reform. External actors, whether through direct sponsorship, security-centric aid, or non-conditional diplomacy, have played a significant role in maintaining this status quo. Lebanon remains trapped in a state of resilient dysfunction, where governance is sustained not by legitimacy or democratic renewal, but by elite adaptation and international tolerance. Unless future engagement prioritises inclusive reform and democratic accountability, Lebanon will continue to illustrate the limits—and risks—of stabilisation without transformation.

Annex 1. Local Perception of non-EU External Actors in Lebanon (2011-2024)

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In Lebanon, public perceptions of the global and regional order and the role of external powers have shifted alongside the historical turning points analysed. This section examines how Lebanese attitudes toward these external actors have evolved, incorporating cross-time comparisons (2011, 2016, and 2024) and case study perspectives on the United States, the United Nations, Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to provide a comprehensive analysis. These inputs mostly build upon four waves of the Arab Barometer (2011, 2017, 2021-2022 and 2024) and surveys from the Pew Research Center to gather quantitative data on the perception of broader foreign interference and the concrete perceptions of these five actors. In addition, secondary data were collected through analysis, reports, and publications by research institutes.

Even before the Arab uprisings, Lebanon was already experiencing mass protests against the government's instability, Hezbollah's interference in domestic affairs, and the risk of increased sectarianism in its sociopolitical environment. In 2011, Lebanese citizens viewed foreign interference as the major challenge (23.6%) to Lebanon's internal development, economic and governance efficiency. Foreign interference was often linked as the main barrier to solving other issues, such as reform – with 91% agreeing that foreign interference and the Arab-Israeli conflict hindered reform) – and underdevelopment, which31% attributed to external factors) (Atallah, 2011).

By 2016, concerns over economic collapse and security dominated discourse, showing growing pessimism among the Lebanese regarding their country's trajectory in surveys. Internally, Lebanon had been without a president for two years (2014-2016), raising serious concerns about the ability of political elites to govern effectively. Regionally, the outcomes of the Arab uprisings, the spillovers of the Syrian civil war1, the strengthening of the Iranian-led Axis of Resistance and Hezbollah, the United States' 'Pivot to Asia', and the increased presence of Russia and China in the region also shaped public attitudes towards regional and global actors. According to the 2017 Arab Barometer, most Lebanese viewed external powers as hurting the development of democracy in Lebanon, reinforcing the prevailing scepticism toward foreign influence in the country. A substantial majority of Lebanese (85%) agreed that Western interference posed a significant obstacle to political reform in Lebanon. Moreover, 75% of Lebanese perceived neighbouring countries, including Syria and Israel, as having a negative or very negative impact on Lebanon's democratic development (Emre Ceyhun, 2017).

On the economic side, Lebanese views on globalisation were generally positive, with 71% considering increased global interconnectedness beneficial. The European Union was the preferred partner compared to other powers, with 49% of Lebanese supporting stronger economic ties with the EU, followed by 41% who supported closer relations with Russia. Interestingly, a smaller percentage favoured increased economic engagement with Iran (31%), Saudi Arabia (27%), and Turkey (25%), but a significant portion of the population (43%) supported weakening economic ties with these countries, reflecting concerns about their broader influence in Lebanon. Nevertheless, when attributing responsibility for the lack of development in the Arab world,

external interference was still cited as the primary cause by 44% of respondents, and 38% blamed a combination of internal and external factors (Emre Ceyhun, 2017).

Lebanese public opinion between 2020 and 2024 has been shaped by a combination of political paralysis, economic collapse, and the impact of the Gaza war. Distrust of foreign actors had reached new highs, particularly toward the United States, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, with many Lebanese perceiving international powers as self-serving actors and contributors, rather than solvers of Lebanon's problems. Three key factors drove this broad erosion of trust in this period: (1) Lebanon's prolonged crises and foreign actors' inability to provide effective solutions left many disillusioned; (2) the Gaza War and US-Israel relations reinforced anti-American sentiment across sectarian lines; and (3) regional realignments, which saw traditional power brokers losing influence while no single actor emerged as a widely trusted alternative.

By 2021, distrust was widespread toward major global actors, including the US, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Russia, and China, as many Lebanese perceived their involvement as self-serving rather than beneficial. France, however, remained the only country with net-positive trust (51%), likely due to Macron's active role in Lebanese crisis management after the Beirut's port explosion. Three years later, the US, Russia, and China were increasingly seen as adversaries, with 47% of Lebanese considering the US an 'enemy' (Washington Institute, 2023). In November 2022, half of the Lebanese questioned the US and was willing to see China and Russia increasingly as partners. Since 2022, Beijing (72%) and Moscow (58%) have been considered as important relations for the Lebanese people (Washington Institute, 2022). In sum, the combination of external conflicts, economic hardship, and political dysfunction has left Lebanese citizens deeply uncertain about their future, with shifting alliances and growing scepticism toward both domestic and international actors shaping the country's outlook.

1. The United States

Between 2011 and 2024, Lebanese public opinion toward the United States has undergone a marked decline, shaped by shifting regional dynamics, domestic instability, and Washington's evolving foreign policy.

In 2011, attitudes were already polarised, with frustration over US involvement in the Middle East: 45% of Lebanese supported armed operations against the US, while a slight a majority (55%) opposed them. Favourability toward the US as 'a model' remained high at 71%. While the US was seen as a key financial and military backer of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), providing over $3 billion in military aid and another $3 billion in refugee assistance over two decades, it did not translate into broad approval of Washington's actions in the region.

By 2016, negative perceptions deepened, with 62% of Lebanese believing the US hindered Lebanon's democratic development. Economic relations with the US were met with scepticism, as only 36% supported closer economic ties. Indeed, a significant portion of Lebanese (37%) believed the best course of action for the US was non-intervention, while others suggested economic development (26%) or resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict (23%) as more constructive roles. Washington's push for political reform was also divisive, with 54% rejecting external demands for reform, either on principle (21%) or due to sovereignty concerns (33%). Despite increasing distrust in US policies and authorities, 76% of Lebanese still viewed the American people favourably (Emre Ceyhun, 2017).

Public opinion reached an all-time low in 2021. Unlike in other Arab countries where the Biden administration's policies were seen favourably, only 19% of Lebanese saw his policies toward the Middle East as positive, barely surpassing the 18% approval rating of Trump's policies in 2020. Sectarian divides remained evident: 51% of Christians viewing the US favourably in 2020, dropping to 44% in 2021, while only 15% of Muslims expressed support for Washington. Although US aid was acknowledged as beneficial in areas such as civil society and women's rights, Washington's broader posture in the region continued to be perceived as ambiguous and preventing the enhancement of mutual trust (Arab Barometer, 2021).

By 2024, US favourability had dropped further to 27%, largely due to Washington's unwavering support for Israel in its war in Gaza. The US was seen as the primary defender of Israeli interests (72%) while among the least supportive of Palestinian rights (6%). Sectarian divisions in perception remained stark: 49% of Christians held favourable views of the US, compared to 25% of Sunnis and only 5% of Shias (Arab Barometer, 2024). The Lebanese public also grew increasingly disillusioned with Washington's policies toward Lebanon, particularly its emphasis on countering Hezbollah while failing to address the country's economic collapse and political paralysis. While US humanitarian aid was acknowledged, many Lebanese perceived it as insufficient to offset the consequences of broader US policies in the region.

According to the Washington Institute, nearly half (47%) of Lebanese identified the US as an 'enemy of our country' (Cleveland, 2023). This sentiment was not exclusive to Shia respondents—40% of Sunnis and Christians also expressed similar views. However, roughly one-third of Sunnis (34%) and Christians (33%) still considered the US a 'friend,' indicating a complex and divided perspective. Washington's declining favourability was further compounded by Lebanon's firm opposition to Israel.

2. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Between 2011 and 2024, Saudi Arabia's influence in Lebanon has fluctuated, reflecting shifts in Riyadh's engagement and its evolving role in regional politics. Historically a key backer of Lebanon's political factions aligned with its regional interests, particularly the March 14 coalition, Saudi Arabia's standing in Lebanese public opinion has been shaped by its economic investments, diplomatic manoeuvres, and confrontations with Hezbollah.

In 2011, 50% of Lebanese held a positive view of Saudi Arabia. This support was largely driven by Saudi investments in Lebanon's financial sector, direct economic aid, and its backing of Sunni political forces, which positioned Riyadh as a counterweight to Iranian influence. However, even at this stage, perceptions of Saudi Arabia were deeply polarised along sectarian lines. While Sunnis (70%) and many Christians (64%) saw Saudi Arabia as a stabilising force and economic benefactor, Shias (95%) overwhelmingly rejected its influence, viewing it as part of the broader Saudi-Iranian regional rivalry (Pew Research Center, 2012). However, Saudi Arabia's image experienced a dramatic drop in only four years: a 31-point decrease since 2007, when 82% of the Lebanese saw Riyadh favourably. This mistrust was also visible when considering Saudi Arabia's influence in Lebanon, 83% of the polled Lebanese agreed that Saudi Arabia had a significant influence in their country. Among them, 48% (mostly Shias and almost half of Christians) viewed this influence negatively, while 43% who saw it as positive (Pew Research Center, 2013).

By 2016, Saudi Arabia's standing in Lebanon begun to erode. Riyadh's decision to withhold $3 billion in military aid to Lebanon in response to Hezbollah's growing dominance within Lebanese politics and institutions (Saudi Press Agency, 2016) was interpreted as an attempt to pressure Beirut into distancing itself from Iran. This move was met with mixed reactions—with some Lebanese, particularly those aligned with Saudi-backed factions, saw it as a necessary stance against Hezbollah. According to the data from the Pew Research Center for 2016, 48% of Lebanese had a positive view of Saudi Arabia in contrast with 41% who preferred Iran – again, in a split mostly explained by sectarian lines (Poushter, 2016). Furthermore, the decision of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, one of Riyadh's key allies in the country, to announce his resignation during a visit to Saudi Arabia in 2017—seen as orchestrated by the Saudi government (Middle East Eye, 2017)—sparked a major political crisis. This unprecedented move led to increased political divisions and scepticism, even among pro-Saudi factions, about Riyadh's approach to Lebanon. This resulted in 43% of Lebanese expressing a desire for weaker economic relations with the kingdom, reflecting growing unease about its role in the country in 2016 (Emre Ceyhun, 2017).

Saudi Arabia's disengagement from Lebanon became more pronounced in the following years. By 2021, only 24% of Lebanese viewed Saudi Arabia favourably, marking a significant decline from a decade earlier. While Sunnis (34%) and Christians (39%) still expressed relative support, trust among Shias and Druze remained virtually non-existent (Arab Barometer, 2021). According to a poll done by the Konrad Adenauer Foundation (KAS, 2021), mistrust towards the KSA reached 62% of the polled Lebanese. This increase was exacerbated by broader regional shifts, including Saudi Arabia's reducing entanglements in Lebanon's complex political scene, especially due to their growing frustration with Hezbollah's influence and Lebanon's inability to implement reforms. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states imposed restrictions in 2021 on Lebanese exports and reduced financial assistance, further weakening Lebanon's already struggling economy (Azhari, 2021).

Riyadh's role in post-war reconstruction and its engagement in diplomatic initiatives—particularly alongside France—were seen as positive steps, but they were not enough to restore widespread trust in Lebanon. Saudi Arabia's involvement in the broader regional realignment, including its rapprochement with Iran in 2023 and efforts to de-escalate tensions across the Middle East, also reshaped its perception in Lebanon.

3. Iran

Iran's influence in Lebanon has been channelled through its financial and military backing of Hezbollah, shaping Lebanese public opinion toward Tehran along deeply sectarian lines. In 2011, Iran's role was highly divisive: 84% of Lebanese Shias viewed Iran positively, while 84% of Sunnis and 72% of Christians saw it as an adversary. Confidence in Ahmadinejad was low – with 63% of Lebanese expressing concerns, especially in sectarian lines (Pew Research Center, 2011). Tehran's support for Hezbollah and its opposition to Western-aligned policies cemented these divisions.

By 2016, Iran's reputation had deteriorated further, with a significant part of Lebanese expressing distrust toward Tehran: according to the Arab Barometer, 43% of respondents preferred reducing their ties with Iran (Erem Ceyhun, 2017). Iran's deep involvement in the Syrian civil war, its financing of Hezbollah's military operations, and its regional confrontations with

Saudi Arabia reinforced the perception that Iran was destabilising Lebanon. Economic reliance on Iran also became a growing concern, as it was seen as increasing Hezbollah's influence over Lebanon's political system. By 2021, around 64% of Lebanese showed deep distrust towards Tehran and 54% towards its foreign policy (Arab Barometer, 2021), a bit lower than the findings from KAS's poll which found distrust by 78% of respondents (KAS, 2021). By 2022, Iran became the least well viewed foreign actor in Lebanon – with only 28% having a positive view towards Tehran (Arab Barometer, 2022).

Iran's standing in Lebanon has also been shaped by broader geopolitical shifts. The restoration of Saudi-Iranian relations in 2023 was viewed positively by 83% of Lebanese, signalling a desire for regional de-escalation. However, this did not translate into improved perceptions of Iran itself. Months before October 2023, around 60% of Lebanese considered Iran as an enemy and, interestingly, around 25% of Shias saw it as a competitor or an enemy in contrast to 56% who considered it as a friend (Cleveland, 2023).

Tehran's role in Lebanon became even more controversial following the outbreak of the war in Gaza in October 2023, which escalated tensions along the Israeli-Lebanese border and led to increased scrutiny of Hezbollah's involvement in regional conflicts. By 2024, Iran's favourability had slightly increased from 28% in 2022 to 36% in 2024, surpassing the United States in Lebanon. However, its favourability was mostly explained by positive views in the Shia community (80%) in comparison with Druze (26%), Christians (15%) and Sunni (15%), which also experienced slight increases in their positive views towards Tehran. Similarly, only 30% of Lebanese expressed trust in Hezbollah, while 55% said they had no trust at all. These increases are mostly explained by the sympathy of Lebanese citizens towards Gaza and the limited support they have received from Iran and Hezbollah since October 7th (Arab Barometer, 2024; Roche and Robbins, 2024).

4. Qatar

Qatar's role in Lebanon has evolved significantly, shaping how it is perceived by the Lebanese public. Qatar has so far managed to maintain a relatively positive image, largely due to its focus on economic aid and diplomatic mediation rather than direct political intervention. Yet, most probably due to its relatively 'new regional activism', there is a lack of polling data about its perception in Lebanon. However, secondary sources are still helpful to infer how its moves have played out in the Lebanese context.

Qatar was already playing a notable role in Lebanon well before 2011, particularly through its diplomatic and financial engagements. It was instrumental in mediating the 2008 Doha Agreement, which helped resolve a major political crisis and prevent civil war. Qatar also gained goodwill by funding the reconstruction of southern Lebanon following the 2006 war with Israel. While it did not rival the influence of regional heavyweights like Saudi Arabia and Iran, these interventions elevated its profile. By 2016, Doha begun to carve out a reputation as a diplomatic mediator and financial benefactor. For instance, it has played a key role in coordinating with France and the US to stabilise Lebanon, particularly amid growing concerns over Hezbollah's entanglement in regional conflicts. Similarly, its efforts to mediate between Israel and Hezbollah following the outbreak of cross-border hostilities in late 2023 further bolstered this image. Domestically, a $60 million Qatari donation to the LAF in 2022 was welcomed by many Lebanese, as the military remains one of the country's few widely respected institutions (Hamadi, 2023).

This aid was seen as a counterbalance to Hezbollah's dominance by some groups and as a means of maintaining some stability amidst Lebanon's ongoing economic and political crises.

By 2024, Qatar was widely viewed as a pragmatic and neutral actor in Lebanon's complex political landscape. This image of Doha as a mediator and non-partisan player was reinforced by its role in facilitating Lebanon's long-stalled presidential election process in 2024 and its financial support to key institutions, most notably the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) (Lebanese Army, 2024). Furthermore, Qatar's backing of Lebanese Army Commander Joseph Aoun as a potential presidential candidate, a consensus figure both domestically and internationally, has been at the centre of Qatari efforts to break Lebanon's political deadlock (Young, 2025).

However, Qatar's growing involvement has not been without scepticism. Qatar's support for Islamist groups, including its ties with the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas, has led to concerns about its long-term objectives in Lebanon. Despite these concerns, Qatar enjoys relatively positive perceptions across Lebanon's sectarian divides compared to other foreign powers and it is often seen as a more pragmatic actor willing to engage with all factions.

5. The United Nations

The United Nations has played a significant role in Lebanon, primarily through the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). However, over the years, public perception of the UN in Lebanon has been deeply divided, influenced by ongoing regional conflicts, the country's internal political landscape, and the evolving role of international actors.

Before 2011, views on the UNFIL in Lebanon were mostly positive: according to a survey conducted by the International Institute of Peace, 80% of Lebanese saw the peacekeeping force in a positive light. Even for those that had a rather negative view of the United Nations and had a stronger support towards Hezbollah, 57% saw the peacekeeping force favourably. At the time, around 83% of Lebanese supported the measures and resolutions taken by the UNSC on Lebanon (IPI, 2008). However, this sentiment began to shift in subsequent years with growing mistrust. Reports from the UN Secretary-General on UNFIL show that since 2017, Lebanese residents in the South have expressed concerns about the impartiality of the force, increasing opposition to the troop presence in Southern Lebanon and hindering their access in specific parts (UNSC, 2020). This has also been evident in the negative perceptions towards European troops, as Lebanese people linked these troops with (a negative view on) their country of origin's foreign policy, their relationship with Israel and their conditionality on aid in a region with significant lack of public resources (Newby, 2017; Ali, 2024). Simultaneously, frustration with the UN's role in broader regional politics increased, as many Lebanese believed the United States, one of the main backers of UN initiatives, was actively harming Lebanon's democratic development. This broader scepticism extended to international governance structures, including the UN (Arab Barometer, 2017).

The outbreak of war in 2024 between Hezbollah and Israel further eroded confidence in the UN, as its inability to prevent hostilities left many Lebanese questioning its role. The perception of UNIFIL as a passive rather than a proactive force only reinforced the sense of disillusionment, especially after the war when many felt the UN failed to prevent or even mitigate the destruction (Ali, 2024).

Despite scepticism regarding its security role, the UN has maintained a vital humanitarian presence in Lebanon, particularly through agencies such as the UNHCR and UNICEF. Before 2010, the United Nations was seen positively by 74% of the Lebanese (IPI, 2008). This positive view, however, decreased more than 10-points in a few years: by 2013, only 59% of Lebanese had a favourable view of the organisation and 40% had strong concerns about it (Pew Research Center, 2013). However, its perception has mostly been stable ever since. In 2019, the Pew Research Center found 60% of Lebanese saw the organisation positively in contrast with 32% who disapprove of it (Fagan and Huang, 2019).

However, as Lebanon's economic crisis deepened after 2019, even these humanitarian initiatives faced growing criticism. The Arab Barometer VII (2021-2022) recorded that 55% of Lebanese have a positive view of the UN, but they considered that its key priority should be the fight against corruption (52%), followed by resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict (Abu-Haltam, 2025). This finding showed a prioritisation of internal issues rather than international security, arguably related to its constant limitations in that area.

By 2024, economic distress continued to dominate concerns, with 80% of Lebanese reporting struggles with food affordability and 92% facing weekly electricity outages—the highest rate among surveyed Arab nations. This dire economic situation further undermined trust in international assistance efforts, including those led by the UN. While humanitarian aid was acknowledged as crucial, many Lebanese felt that the structural problems underpinning their crisis—corruption, political paralysis, and external manipulation—remained unaddressed. The deepening economic collapse also influenced perceptions of governance, with only 47% of Lebanese in 2024 believing that democracy is always preferable, down five points since 2022 (Arab Barometer, 2024).

Ultimately, the perception of the UN in Lebanon UN aligns with a broader trend of scepticism toward international actors. While the organisation has played a crucial role in mitigating humanitarian suffering, its peacekeeping efforts are viewed with mistrust. The Lebanese people have come to see foreign interventions—whether military, economic, or diplomatic—, including those by the UN, as largely ineffective in solving the country's deep-rooted political and security problems.

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Annex 2. Local Perception of non-EU External Actors in Lebanon: Media Analysis

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The United Nations has played a significant role in Lebanon, primarily through the United Nations Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL). However, over the years, public perception of the UN in Lebanon has been deeply divided, influenced by ongoing regional conflicts, the country's internal

This section analyses how local Lebanese media perceives non-EU external actors intervening in Lebanon in one form or another. It takes three key media outlets that represent a spectrum of political views—MTV Lebanon, *Al-Akhbar*, and *An-Nahar*—and examines how each of them represent external actors—primarily Israel, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Iran, and USA—using key political moments: Israel's post-October 7, 2023, war on Gaza; Israel's war on Lebanon; Assassination of Hezbollah and Hamas leaders; diplomatic initiatives; UN Security Resolution 1701; and the 2025 presidential elections and government formation. It is important to note that the focus of this section was on the last two years, starting from the events of October 7, 2023, since so much has changed since that time and the selected events help us understand the current situation albeit framed within a larger historical and political context.

In the first section, we present the three media outlets and describe their political affiliation. In the second section, we discuss how each of these outlets frames four key political moments over the last two years. This provides a representation of how media across the political spectrum in Lebanon view the non-EU external involvements. In particular, it is worth noting that there is a huge split between those in the pro-Resistance/Hezbollah camp and those who are in the pro-West/Gulf one. This split was revealed in all of the key moments, where on the one extreme, the anti-Hezbollah *Murr Television* (MTV) station generally blamed resistance forces in Lebanon and Palestine for the wars, and blamed Hezbollah for lack of Lebanese "sovereignty"; while on the other hand the left-leaning, pro-resistance newspaper *Al-Akhbar* was entirely in support of resistance acts in Gaza and southern Lebanon—as well as Iran's overall support for this—as a way to rid the region of Israeli occupation, wars and overall US-Israeli hegemony. The *Annahar* newspaper was somewhere in between, editorially very much against Hezbollah's role in destabilizing Lebanon but, unlike MTV, more explicitly empathetic to Lebanese and Palestinian civilian suffering and clear that Israel is to blame.

1. Profile and Orientation of Media Covered

a. Murr Television

MTV is a prominent Lebanese TV network with a strong anti-Hezbollah and (what they term) "pro-sovereignty" editorial position, meaning they support a stronger state structure at the expense of what they see as Hizbullah's control over the state apparatus for nearly two decades. MTV was created by the Murr family that was firmly part of the right-leaning Lebanese political establishment for decades until their influence waned after 2008. It has unofficially been aligned with the views of the anti-Syrian/Iran/Hezbollah March 14 political network that is pro-Western and pro-Gulf. MTV's most prominent and influential talk show is "Sar el Waqt"(صار الوقت) hosted by the largely right-wing Lebanese journalist Marcel Ghanem. The channel is in favour of the Lebanese state institutions that had traditionally been associated with the position of Christian parties (e.g. Lebanese Forces). The clear ideological editorial stance of the station is reflected

by the recent coverage of the crises over the last two years. MTV regularly casts the US and its local allies in positive terms, while Iran and its local allies are generally portrayed negatively.

b. Al Akhbar

Al Akhbar is a prominent newspaper established in the aftermath of Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon and that is known to editorially reflect the Resistance in Lebanese media. It has a left-wing and anti-Western stance and is closely linked to Hezbollah/pro-Iranian views. The prominent editor-in-chief Ibrahim al-Amine and many of the columnists strongly support the narratives of Hezbollah, Hamas, and their regional allies, and oppose U.S., Saudi, Israeli allies among the local March 14 coalition. The newspaper sees its position as independent and progressive, championing social justice and the fight against Israeli occupation and US hegemony. Its discourse towards external actors is clear and generally divided into two broad categories: those actors who are supportive of the Resistance (such as Iran, and occasionally Qatar) and those who they condemn as working for US colonial interests (such as Israel, U.S., Saudi). This is clearly represented in *Al-Akhbar's* coverage over the last two years.

c. Annahar

Annahar is one of the oldest and prominent establishment Lebanese daily, launched in 1933, a decade before independence and during the French mandate. It has traditionally had a centrist-liberal, and strongly nationalistic editorial position. It was founded by the Tueni family, and the newspaper has always been a supporter of Lebanon's "sovereignty" and for pluralism. Following the anti-Syrian March 14 movement starting in 2005, the editorial line of the paper took on a more openly pro-Western, pro-Gulf political position. Unlike openly partisan outlets like MTV, *Annahar* sees itself as a professional non-partisan outlet, but in reality the newspaper often reflects the world vision of the March 14 coalition. Like MTV, it is critical of Hezbollah and Iranian influence while favouring ties with the West and Gulf Arab states. However, unlike MTV, it generally avoids inflammatory commentaries designed to provoke their opponents. Prominent contributors (Samir Kassir and Gebran Tueni in the past, and Nassif Hitti or Fares Khashan today) have advocated for liberal democracy and free market policies, and have expressed concern about the emergence of the Iran-led "Axis of Resistance."

2. Media Perception represented through key moments: 2023-2025

a. Framing During the Hamas–Israel War (Oct 7, 2023 - Onward)

In general terms, the news coverage by MTV for Hamas's October 7 attacks heavily stressed on the barbarism of Hamas and the risks of a regional spillover; and it often referred to the statements made by Western officials. For instance, MTV brought up the Israeli and U.S. claims that Iran orchestrated Hezbollah's border skirmishes, thus presenting Hezbollah as an Iranian puppet. The US was pictured as a force that brings stability – MTV news said that the U.S. deployments (like carrier strike groups) were the deterring factors against wider war, generally, without negative comments. Israel was reported in a straightforward manner, with little negative coverage. MTV talked about the devastation in Gaza but did not outright praise or blame anyone, instead, it highlighted that Hezbollah's actions might bring Lebanon into Israel's target area. MTV gave most of its airtime to the Lebanese critics of Hezbollah. For example, Samir Geagea, leader of the right-wing Lebanese Forces political party, was featured arguing that Hezbollah had "unilaterally pulled Lebanon into a new war" and demanded it halts attacks on Israel.

In contrast, *Al Akhbar* described the October 7 Hamas-led attack on Israel with either emotional or even euphoric language. In the early days of the war, the newspaper's articles depicted Hamas and its supporters as more or less heroic figures. For instance, *Al Akhbar* published articles about Hamas' Qassam Brigades, glorifying and depicting them as "dedicated, committed, religious, mentally and physically strong young men". Al Akhbar viewed the war as an Iran-led Axis of Resistance war against the common Zionist enemy.

The newspaper was clear that Israel has always been the aggressor and the one that commits atrocities against civilians. *Al Akhbar's* news pieces from Gaza and South Lebanon focused on how Israeli bombings were able to take the lives of civilians it deemed as 'relentless', and the newspaper accused Israel of purposely expanding the conflict. By the end of October 2023, *Al Akhbar's* narrative suggested that Israel's plan was to draw the whole region into an all-out war through its "expansion of aggression" in Lebanon. The publication blamed the Lebanese civilians' suffering and displacement due to constant Israeli bombings, claiming that Israel's systematic targeting of civilians and infrastructure amounted to ethnic cleansing.

Al Akhbar constantly portrayed the United States as either complicit or absolutely liable for the war's destruction. It claimed the U.S. was the mastermind of Israel's campaign, with the latter being allowed to carry on with their "impunity" to "kill innocent people in front of the whole world". The newspaper frequently positioned U.S. diplomacy as an intentional misdirection toward resupplying Israel or enforcing Arab states' policies. In contrast, Iran - the main "external actor" in the conflict - was lauded. *Al Akhbar's* news and commentary pieces stressed that Iran supports the Palestinian resistance and portrays Tehran as the defender of the regional anti-imperialist movements. Any suggestion of Iran directing Hamas or Hezbollah was refuted, as *Al-Akhbar* editorially insisted these groups had autonomy and operated by themselves as resistance to Israeli aggression. Throughout the war, the newspaper's attitude towards Iran focused on its solidarity with the resistance forces and civilian populations, thus proving to readers that Iran's actions in the region were both positive and principled (as opposed to the portrayal of Iran by MTV or Annahar).

For *Annahar*, its initial coverage emphasized the humanitarian disaster in Gaza and the dangers threatening Lebanon. The newspaper published in-depth articles and analyses concerning the death toll of Palestinian civilians as well as Hezbollah's participation in warfare. However, *Annahar* took care to differentiate clearly between condemning Israel's excessive retorts and giving approval to Hamas. For example, the editorials in *Annahar* blamed Hamas (and by extension, for them, Iran) for the conflict that was likely to draw in Lebanon as a participant. It was implied by the editorial committee that Hamas's operation of October 7, which though based on a just cause, had backfired and thus, could have been guided by Iran's regional agenda. Iran was implicitly blamed: articles were published that speculated whether Iran had green-lighted Hamas' fight to ease the pressure on its nuclear dossier, or to gain leverage for its negotiators. Such pieces depicted Iran as being ready to fight Israel "to the last Palestinian (or Lebanese)" and an op-ed from October 2023 asserted that "Gaza and perhaps Lebanon are being used as Iran's bargaining tools," which directly indicates the scepticism about Iran's real intentions.

At the same time, *Annahar* commended the US for making attempts, during the first few months of the Israeli assault on Gaza, to control the war. The news reports enclosed the U.S. diplomatic shuttle visits, President Biden's statements of caution towards Israel, and thus the U.S. was seen as a voice of restraint and humanitarian pauses (at least publicly). This stands in contrast to the

scepticism of *Al Akhbar*. *Annahar* was more literal in taking the words of U.S. officials and hence, any signal of moderation from Washington was welcomed.

The reaction of Saudi Arabia which mainly lied in the condemnation of Israeli strikes on Gaza and normalisation talks with Israel was positively covered. *Annahar*, which has traditionally friendly coverage of Saudi Arabia, noted the kingdom's condemnation of Israel during the war, while it also mentioned Saudi's firm stance that Lebanon should not be dragged into any conflict. The newspaper granted praise to Saudi Arabia as a responsible regional player through highlighting these statements.

When it comes to Hezbollah's initial border skirmishes, *Annahar's* framing was mild but somewhat critical. The newspaper's commentary focused on the fact that Lebanon could not afford a second front with Israel. *Annahar's* columnists warned that Hezbollah's "adventurism" could lead to national disaster and so urged strict adherence to UN Resolution 1701 that provided for cessation of hostilities following Israel's 2006 war on Lebanon. The newspaper reported about the Lebanese Army, caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati, and other official sources, all of whom insisted for calm at the border. *Annahar* did not accuse Hezbollah explicitly as MTV did but instead expressed the message that it would be them along with Iran who would be blamed if anything were to spread into Lebanon. A late October 2023 article even questioned, "Will Hezbollah make Lebanon the next battlefield at Iran's request?" and that was the newspaper's expression of caution regarding Hezbollah's right causes. Nevertheless, Annahar did admit that there were Israeli provocations like the drone violations and strikes on Lebanese villages, which were reported as unacceptable violations. At the bottom line, however, *Annahar* contextualized these events as manifestations of Lebanon's ongoing vulnerability because of Hezbollah's independent arsenal.

b. Framing after October 7, 2023: Israeli Escalation in Lebanon

When the Israelis started to intensify its attacks across the southern border on October 27, 2023, MTV's framing focused on Lebanese national anxiety and its sovereignty. The channel called it "totally unacceptable" that Hezbollah could provoke a ruinous war without state consent. MTV anchors and guests (almost exclusively from anti-Hezbollah factions) added that Lebanon's disintegrating economy "cannot afford another war", mentioning that the Iran-backed Hezbollah was pursuing its interests, but not Lebanon's. Coverage often cited prominent figures like Kataeb party's Sami Gemayel who urged the deployment of the Lebanese Army to the south in accordance with the UN Resolution 1701; thus implying that Hezbollah's armed presence violated that resolution and blamed it for border instability. By amplifying such opinions, MTV directly put the blame on Hezbollah (and Iran) for the escalation while they implicitly gave credit to the U.S. and France for their efforts to contain the conflict.

Al Akhbar, meanwhile, insisted that Israel was the instigator during this period of escalation, constantly citing Israeli shelling and incursions into Lebanese territory. It noted that Hezbollah was showing "deterred balance" and restraint to protect Lebanon. The prospect of war was not attributed to Hezbollah's conduct but rather to "Israeli threats." Besides, *Al Akhbar* mentioned Hezbollah officials' remarks that they could broaden their activities, if demanded, and that these represent credible warnings out of strength. In the final analysis, cheerful words were directed to Hezbollah for their "readiness," the blame for the unsafe situation was the whole on Israel and its Western backers. This mode of presentation did not shift, though Lebanon was preparing

for an impending war – *Al Akhbar* doubled down that if any war took place, it would be due to Israel (with U.S. approval) attacking Lebanon, not Hezbollah putting a hand in Gaza.

Annahar coverage of this escalation showed great concern for Lebanon's fate. The front-page published reports of Israeli bombardments in the southern parts and of thousands of displaced Lebanese people. However, interspersed with interviews of families that fled and a UN peacekeeping unit that sheltered villagers, alongside human-interest angles, the newspaper's analysis was reiterating that the menace came due to the move of Hezbollah inviting it. Around that time the newspaper's editorial implored the parties not to drag the situation into a wider war, specifically asserting that Israel's threats of "destruction" would not be empty promises. The subtext, however, was Lebanon must not be battlegrounds for the wars of others. *Annahar's* arrangement was sober: it did not cheer for "resistance" nor Israel, rather its coverage resonated with a general public in Lebanon who were worried about Israel's threat. On that point, *Annahar's* position of sympathy with Hezbollah for the pressures to side with people in Gaza, but on the full-blown war's ultimate victory of Israel's and Iran's hardliners at the expense of ordinary Lebanese, was consistent throughout the period.

c. Assassinations of Yahya Sinwar and Hassan Nasrallah

When Israel killed Hamas's Yahya Sinwar in October 2024, MTV, referencing international reports, claimed that it was a crushing blow to a terrorist mastermind and included U.S. officials' positive judgments of the act as a major counterterrorism victory. The claim contained an indirect "congratulation" to the U.S. and Israel for the role they played in the "elimination" of those who were presented as extremists. As for the assassination of Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah in September 2024, MTV reported it with astonishment, yet without mourning. The coverage of this event was about the Israeli success in intelligence and infiltration operations that led to the attack. It also described how U.S. officials and regional enemies of Hezbollah reacted positively to the elimination of Nasrallah. Most importantly, MTV avoided coverage of national mourning for the "big" loss; instead, it pointed out the "great challenge" that the demise of Nasrallah put on Hezbollah. There were even analysts on MTV who discussed Nasrallah's disappearance as a chance for the Lebanese people to "breathe free" of the Iranian dictates. In short, MTV held these leaders accountable for the decisions they made (the same as the belief that going against Iran's agenda causes destruction), while they subtly credit Israel and the U.S. with the weakening of the organizations that kept "Lebanon hostage".

The assassinations of high-ranking officials in the second half of 2024 significantly changed *Al Akhbar's* rhetoric. It declared Yahya Sinwar a martyr who had been a just, heroic leader for the people of Gaza and Palestine. In an editorial article, they described the assassination as a "cowardly crime" executed by Israel and the U.S., reaffirming their conviction that resistance would still go on undeterred. *Al Akhbar* covered Hamas' statements promising vengeance, shedding light on Sinwar's legacy of "steadfastness."

With Nasrallah's assassination, *Al Akhbar* portrayed its mourning with fiery language. The editor ran a heartfelt front-page to the fallen Hezbollah chief, naming him the "second Imam Hussein" and encouraging followers to unite in the struggle. Against this, the editorials raged against Israel and the United States for "crossing all red lines" by carrying out Nasrallah's assassination. *Al Akhbar's* editor-in-chief, Ibrahim al-Amin, claimed Nasrallah's death was part of a plot by the U.S., Israel and the "Arab reactionary" states to bring Lebanon to its knees. He hinted that Saudi Arabia and others of the Gulf states were quietly behind the approval of the attacks; *Al-*

Akhbar's tone towards Saudi Arabia shifted to open hostility. Earlier in the war, *Al Akhbar* had generally kept the royal family in the back stand, but by late 2024, as Riyadh moved closer to the U.S./Israel camp, the outlet began attacking the Saudis for betraying Palestine and Hezbollah. Furthermore, after Nasrallah's passing, *Al Akhbar's* frame depicted Hezbollah as undefeated, but showing patience and power. The aspect of the newspaper was that of the new head of Hezbollah (Sheikh Naim Qassem) carrying the torch on. Overall, *Al Akhbar* praised Nasrallah as a hero and blamed his assassination on a grand conspiracy of external enemies. This episode was decisive for the newspaper which now only viewed external entities like Israel, the U.S., and now also Saudi – as evil forces that proliferate an anti-Shia agenda and thus, more actively bind their readers to Iran and Hezbollah.

Annahar reported the assassination of Yahya Sinwar in a straightforward manner. The newspaper did not praise or condemn the assassination but mentioned that both Israeli and U.S. officials were pleased with it. An analysis piece that accompanied the news item focused on the issue of whether Hamas could stay united in the absence of its leader, thus ridiculously implying that such actions would reduce the duration of the war. It was expressed that Hamas made a terrible bet with leadership, which resulted in such assassination and weakening.

Turning to the assassination of Hassan Nasrallah, *Annahar's* coverage was delicate and revealing, saying that it gave Lebanon a shocking message, citing details of the unprecedented intelligence error that enabled it. The newspaper expressed patriotism; the newspaper stressed the need for a ceasefire in Lebanon to prevent a rise in civil strife, and also for respecting Hezbollah as they arranged the funerals of their leaders. However, in subsequent editorials, *Annahar* stressed the historical implications of Nasrallah's demise. Notably, veteran columnist Fares Khashan wrote a piece titled: "The story of the year: Nasrallah's assassination ended the 'greatness' of Khamenei". This commentary suggested that the killing of Nasrallah not only dealt a major blow to the image of Iran, but also a serious victory for those who were against them. *Annahar*, thus, portrayed Nasrallah's assassination not in the light of grief (as pro-resistance outlets like *Al-Akhbar* did), but rather as the defining point in time that would lead to Lebanon's liberation. Importantly, *Annahar* balanced its satisfaction with the worry of stability in Lebanon: the editorial recommended Israel not to "provoke" further which could drive Hezbollah fighters to act uncontrollably. Thus, *Annahar's* viewpoint was that although Nasrallah's departure is dangerous, it is a pathway to a new political environment in Lebanon that is less affected by Hezbollah.

d. Diplomatic Initiatives (France, Qatar, U.S.)

MTV's narratives were positive with regard the diplomatic efforts by external countries, particularly those of France, Qatar and the US. The channel favourably covered the trip of the French president Macron around the region, depicting him as a friend of Lebanon who is actively engaging in the prevention of a wider war. It also emphasized Qatar's unique role in Gaza hostage-release deals and ceasefires. For example, MTV extensively reported the U.S.-Qatar negotiations which resulted in the Gaza ceasefire - presenting Qatar as a pragmatic mediator rather than criticizing its relations with Hamas. American diplomacy was always presented positively; MTV's news pointed out that the 60-day armed truce was the reason for the end of the Israel-Hezbollah war in Lebanon in late November 2024. By foregrounding the projects of the West and Qatar for peace, MTV praised the external actors for keeping violence in check. This was a continuation of MTV's pro-Western posture, that was accreting progressively throughout the conflict, all of which has vindicated those actors' influence even further.

Al Akhbar questioned most diplomatic activities by Western or Gulf states that were considered to be more self-serving or deceptive rather than genuine and objective mediation. For example, Al Akhbar depicted calls by French President Macron for a ceasefire in Gaza as cynical and commented that France would ultimately adhere to the pro-Israel line of Washington that was biased. Furthermore, the high-profile diplomatic efforts of the US (Secretary of State Blinken's Middle Eastern tour) were seen not as true peace-making activities, but rather as pressure on the resistance forces to surrender. Qatar, as the one exception in *Al Akhbar's* approach, was appreciated for playing the role of the mediator in the exchange of hostages and for temporary truces in Gaza, due to its close relationship with Hamas. *Al Akhbar's* coverage of Qatar mediation was relatively neutral or with slightly positive views - as they acknowledged Doha as a rare Arab player who cooperates with Hamas. Nevertheless, even Qatar was not immune to criticism. In every case, Iranian diplomacy, which was portrayed as honest, was the only mediation *Al Akhbar* accepted at face value. The paper ascribed the visit of a larger war to Tehran, saying they cleverly dissuaded Tel Aviv through backchannels. Simply put, *Al Akhbar* did not provide any noteworthy endorsement for the Western or UN solutions and viewed them as steps to cripple the "Axis of Resistance."

One concrete illustration can be seen with the peace negotiations in Lebanon that occurred between 2024 and 2025. *Al Akhbar* grudgingly acknowledged the U.S.-brokered peace agreement that halted hostilities on Lebanon, yet raising its doubts about the reasons behind it. The ceasefire's conditions (Hezbollah's withdrawal from the border, strengthening of the Lebanese Army as per Resolution 1701) were characterized as American-Israeli imposition enforced through coercion. *Al Akhbar* pointed out that such stipulations would mainly serve Israel's purposes. This is a sharp contrast to the perspective that MTV/*Annahar* constructed about the same accord being positive; rather, *Al Akhbar* depicted it as a conditional ceasefire for humanitarian reasons, which was received by the resistance involuntarily. Throughout the whole diplomatic process, *Al Akhbar's* position was stubbornly adversarial towards U.S. and French roles while cautiously engaging with Qatar's efforts only when they aligned with the resistance's agenda.

Annahar has devoted much attention and expressed mostly positive assessments of the intervention and political efforts of external countries to settle the crisis. The journal has a pro-French history, describing France as "mother of Lebanon" when it is in need. During *Annahar's* war coverage, great emphasis was put on President Macron's visits to Israel and neighbouring countries, as he advocated for the opening of humanitarian corridors and ceasefire. It also quoted Macron's statements, in which he referred to the Israeli bombing as "unacceptable" while urging the protection of civilians - which framed France as a representative of moral values in the West. *Annahar* reported on French-led discussions for the reinforcement of UNIFIL (peacekeepers), which highlighted its perception of international peacekeeping as a possible benefit for Lebanon.

The newspaper also offered an overwhelmingly positive presentation of Qatar, running articles on how the tiny state emerged as a necessary mediator in the making of the Hamas-Israel-U.S. triangle. It exposed the behind-the-curtain role of Qatari diplomacy in achieving the delay of the truce, and hostage exchanges in late November, which in a way lauded Qatar for its unique ties and diplomatic juggling. They acknowledged Qatar's unique position as a country that the American and Israeli sides meet, while unlike other Gulf states, it keeps communication with Hezbollah and Iran; an article pointed out that Doha's neutrality and long-term funding could be

the way forward for Lebanon's reconstruction. Thus, such framing presented Qatar as a mediator who is no longer outside the toolbox. *Annahar's* editorial line also lauded Egypt and Jordan for their roles. Of utmost importance, Annahar recognized the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement (which was mediated by China earlier in 2023) as a development that could bring about Lebanon's help and basing its argument on the war in Gaza. The paper was even more elated to report that the Crown Prince of Saudi spoke to Iran's president in order to prevent regional conflict onboard, highlighting Annahar's belief in dialogue instead of proxy conflict.

Annahar presented the United States with a rather mixed, but generally respectful point of view. On one hand, the paper was critical of the U.S. for some vetoes at the UN (just like its readers, it bemoaned the veto of an early ceasefire measure in Gaza). On the other hand, the newspaper presented America's efforts not to permit the escalation of violence going into Lebanon. It was reported that Biden's direct warning to Israel not to drop bombs on Hezbollah unless attacked was highlighted, where U.S. officials like Secretary Blinken were mentioned numerous times, stating that a second front in Lebanon was not desired. By emphasizing all these points, Annahar connected the U.S. with the restraint of Israel to a degree - a storyline that did not cast the U.S. as an enemy (like *Al Akhbar*) but rather a necessary moderator of Israeli actions. When the 60-day Lebanon ceasefire was reached under Washington’s auspices, this was the headline maker while Annahar described it a U.S.-brokered deal that saved Lebanon from more ruin.

3. Conclusions

The Lebanese media shows how the polarized editorial lines are used to filter the external actors and the political divisions which have been deep-rooted in the nation. MTV, which is in balance with March 14 currents, positions Iran and Hezbollah as disruptive powers that endanger the sovereignty of Lebanon, and Western actors, especially the United States and France as the needed partners in dealing with the crises. Al-Akhbar, in sharp contrast, expresses a discourse of resistance, which represents Iran as an assurer of Lebanese respect and power, and the U.S and Israeli activity as an aggression, which should be stopped by any means possible. An-Nahar is not as partisan but tends to reflect a more liberal point of view emphasizing the institutional ineffectiveness and the danger of over-dependence on foreign powers.

Through these outlets, some parallels are evident, in the sense of how the external actors, be it Iran, the U.S., Saudi Arabia or France, have shaped the direction of Lebanon, and how the Lebanese domestic space cannot be independent of the larger regional and international conflicts. However, those differences are dramatic, and each of the outlets transfers those dynamics into competing discourses of danger, guard, or chance.

The location of the Lebanese media discourse within the larger problematique of this report makes it apparent that the local perceptions of external actors are mediated not as much by the consensus in fact as by the partisan attachments. The media is not only mirroring geopolitical realities but actively create them, playing up the divisions and forming the imaginations of the populace as to who is protecting Lebanon and who is threatening it. This strengthens the finding that any evaluation of external influence in Lebanon will have to deal with a fragmented media that reflect (and frequently intensify) the political divisions in the country.

II. THE ROLES AND PERCEPTIONS OF NON-EU ACTORS IN PALESTINE

Palestine's political trajectory over the past two decades has unfolded under a much longer shadow of occupation, fragmentation, and external manipulation (Boisen, 2024). With no sovereign statehood and under prolonged Israeli military and administrative control, the Palestinian territories have been denied the basic infrastructure and tools needed to develop independent governance (Lefteratos, 2025). Israel retains decisive power over borders, mobility, natural resources, and fiscal mechanisms, while constructing a regime of control that extends beyond physical occupation into bureaucratic domination and territorial fragmentation (Weiss, 2021). Yet, while Israel's role remains structurally determinative, the failings of Palestinian self-rule cannot be understood in isolation from the broader regional and international context (Makdisi et al., 2012). External actors—driven by a range of ideological, strategic, and reputational motives—have consistently intervened in Palestinian affairs, not merely through rhetorical support or humanitarian aid, but also via coercive practices, political conditionality, and securitised patronage systems. These have often reproduced the same conditions of democratic stagnation and elite entrenchment they purported to resolve. These interactions have entrenched what Polese and Hanau Santini (2018) call *limited statehood* and what Krieg (2024) labels a *networked regional order*—a horizontal, fluid system in which state and non-state actors, rather than a single hegemon, continuously renegotiate the rules of engagement.

By the early 2000s, the Palestinian Authority (PA) had already begun to shift from a liberation project into a semi-autonomous administrative body, largely dependent on international aid and Israeli permissions. The 2006 legislative elections, which brought Hamas to power, were initially welcomed by international observers as a rare case of open and competitive polling in the Arab world. However, the electoral outcome—undesirable to Israel and its Western allies—triggered 'punitive responses'. Budgetary support was suspended by the US and EU, Israel froze VAT transfers, and the Quartet imposed a set of conditions that rendered governance nearly impossible without ideological capitulation. In practice, these moves, framed as normative pressure for moderation, contributed to the collapse the short-lived unity government and accelerated the political bifurcation between Gaza and the West Bank. In contrast, actors like Iran and Qatar saw an opportunity to assert themselves by supporting Hamas, each from their own vantage: Tehran viewed Hamas as an extension of its 'Axis of Resistance,' while Doha sought to position itself as a humanitarian broker and regional mediator. The consequence of these asymmetric alignments was a structurally divided Palestinian polity, institutionalised further by the 2007 intra-Palestinian conflict and the onset of Israel's blockade of Gaza (Filiu, 2014; Atallah, 2021).

The years that followed marked a deepening of both humanitarian crisis and political stalemate. Israeli military operations in Gaza—beginning with Operation Cast Lead in 2008–2009, and continuing with similar offensives in 2012, 2014, 2021 and since 2023—devastated infrastructure and civilian life. These wars also exposed the inconsistent and often contradictory roles played by external actors. The United States offered Israel diplomatic cover and military resupply, while simultaneously promoting a narrative of peacebuilding through the two-state solution. The UN, particularly through the UNRWA and OCHA, attempted to mediate short-term humanitarian access. However, it had limited leverage over political developments and Israeli restrictions. Arab League diplomacy was often weakened by internal division, as its members pursued

divergent agendas in relation to Hamas and Fatah, but also regarding the process of normalisation with Israel. Iran deepened its material and symbolic support for Hamas and other non-state groups, positioning itself as a regional pole of confrontation with Israel and the US. China, largely absent in the earlier periods, has more recently emerged as a cautious but opportunistic player, projecting rhetorical solidarity with Palestinians while offering minimal substantive engagement (Voltolini, 2012).

One of the few moments of hope came in 2014, with renewed attempts at reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas. Facilitated by Egypt and endorsed by Qatar's financial guarantees, the agreement briefly raised hopes for administrative unity and a national electoral process. However, Israel responded with punitive measures, including renewed settlement expansion and economic sanctions, and the agreement soon collapsed due to mutual mistrust. The summer war that year, Operation Protective Edge, killed over 2,100 Gazans and further eroded the fragile foundations of governance in the Strip. International donors pledged billions in reconstruction aid at conferences in Cairo and elsewhere, but implementation was blocked by Israeli dual-use restrictions and the politicisation of reconstruction channels. These dynamics reflect a broader pattern where reconstruction is weaponized, not only by Israel but by donors who use funding as a lever to shape Palestinian political behaviour (Lintl, 2018).

The 2021 protests, often referred to as the 'Unity Intifada,' marked a rare moment of collective Palestinian mobilisation across the fragmented geographies of Jerusalem, Gaza, the West Bank, and within Israel's 1948 borders. Sparked by the evictions in Sheikh Jarrah and Israeli police incursions into al-Aqsa Mosque, the uprising was largely youth-led and spontaneously coordinated, bypassing traditional leadership structures. Yet despite its symbolic power, the mobilisation failed to produce structural political change. That same year, President Abbas cancelled the first scheduled elections in over fifteen years, citing Israeli obstruction in East Jerusalem. While the decision was controversial in the eyes of many Palestinians, it was met with tacit acceptance by international actors who feared another Hamas victory. This episode underscored the degree to which both internal and external actors had become invested in the status quo, preferring a fragmented but controllable reality over the uncertainties of democratic contestation (Elkahlout, 2024).

Year	Turning Points in Palestine
2006	Elections
2007	Start of the blockade of Gaza
2008-2009	Operation Cast Lead
2014	Gaza war
2014	Fatah–Hamas Agreements
2021	'Unity Intifada'
2023-2024	Gaza War

Table 4: Turning Points in Palestine Analysed in the Framework of SHAPEDEM-EU Project.

The 2023–2024 war in Gaza has thus far represented the most violent and transformative rupture since 2008. Triggered by Hamas's 7 October attacks and Israel's disproportionate military response, the conflict has reshaped not only the landscape of Gaza but also the regional diplomatic geometry. The United States' blanket support for Israel has further eroded its credibility among Arab publics, while Iran has capitalised on the escalation to consolidate its network of armed non-state actors, from Hezbollah to the Houthis. Qatar has positioned itself as the central interlocutor for hostage and ceasefire negotiations, while maintaining its support for Hamas in both rhetorical and financial terms. China and Russia have used the crisis to reinforce their critiques of Western double standards, especially in relation to international law. The UN, constrained by repeated US vetoes and logistical paralysis, has failed to enforce even basic humanitarian corridors. In many ways, this moment crystallises the evolution of a networked regional order, in which no single actor dominates but where multiple power nodes—state and non-state—interact through fragmented authority, informal alignments, and strategic ambiguity (Krieg, 2024).

Across these turning points (see Table 4, p. 54), a clear pattern emerges. While Israel's occupation remains the dominant structural constraint, the behaviour and practices of other actors—whether through coercive diplomacy, instrumental aid, or rhetorical performances—have collectively reinforced a condition of limited statehood. Elections are delayed or cancelled due to Israeli vetoes and the broader apprehension among stakeholders about unpredictable outcomes. Reconciliation agreements are consistently undermined by factional rivalries as well as the geostrategic investments of their respective patrons. Reconstruction becomes a site of securitised control, not developmental planning. In this context, democratic renewal becomes not merely improbable: it is actively obstructed, whether by force, design, or inertia.

In light of these considerations, this section of the report analyses the practices and behaviours of six key external actors—Iran, Qatar, the United States, the United Nations, the League of Arab States, and China—to assess how each has influenced the landscape of Palestinian governance and the prospects for democracy in Palestine. Rather than asking whether these actors promote or obstruct democracy in normative terms, the study examines how their actions, directly or indirectly, have contributed to the erosion, maintenance, or adaptation of Palestinian political institutions. In doing so, it situates the Palestinian case within broader regional dynamics, highlighting the role of external accommodation, authoritarian resilience, and emergent non-hegemonic orders in structuring the limits of self-rule under occupation. Finally, an Annex on 'Local Perceptions of non-EU external actors' provides insights on how such practices and behaviours are perceived at the local level within the different segments and actors of the Palestinian society.

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1. Iran in Palestine: Resistance over Governance

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The Iranian policy toward Palestine has consistently been shaped by its antagonistic relationship with Israel and its active support for groups such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) that prioritise armed struggle over governance. In fact, Iranian support for Palestinian factions serves mainly as a means to project power, counter Israel, enhance its diplomatic standing within the Muslim world, and challenge Saudi Arabia's regional leadership Eslami and Al-Marashi, 2023). By prioritising its strategic interests and supporting armed resistance over diplomatic engagement and governance reforms, Tehran has contributed to political fragmentation and undermined efforts to establish a cohesive and democratic Palestinian governance system. As a result, such a posture not only sustained but also boosted existing autocratic trends in the Palestinian polity.

The Islamic Republic's policy toward Palestine is multifaceted, combining ideological, strategic/security, and geopolitical dimensions. Iranian leaders have historically framed their support for Palestine as part of their broader aim to export the Islamic revolution in opposition to Western imperialism and Zionism. However, Iran's approach to the Palestinian cause displays a different backdrop, where realpolitik considerations have subsequently influenced Tehran's modus operandi over the years. During the period of study (2010-2024), Iran's foreign policy has been defined by a more calculated and nuanced strategy that balances ideology with strategic/security interests.

Indeed, although the core elements of Iran´s official stance and discourse on the Palestinian conflict have largely remained unchanged under the period of study, they are far from static. Teheran does not recognise the existence of Israel, nor does it recognise the 1967 borders drawn after the Six-Day War. As a result, the Islamic Republic has systematically rejected any plans for a two-state solution. Instead, Iran supports the idea of holding a referendum with the participation of all the main native inhabitants of the Palestinian land, including Muslims, Christians, and Jews, who would exercise their right to self-determination and determine their type of political system (Middle East Monitor, 2022). However, the official position is by no means homogeneous, and there are clear internal and external divisions regarding the two-state solution. In November 2023, Iran backed a Jordanian-tabled resolution at the UN General Assembly – albeit with a heavy reservation – that declared a two-state solution was the only way to resolve the Palestinian Israeli conflict. In November 2024, reformist clerics of the Qom Seminary voiced their implicit support for a two-state solution (Wintour, 2024). As such, this shows the dynamic and non-monolithic nature of the Iranian position vis a vis the Palestinian cause in a way that it can shift priorities and modalities according to contingent changes.

1. Iran's relations with Palestinian groups: cooperation, divergence and disruption

Iran has sought, and largely managed, to shape the Palestinian political landscape through ideological, financial and military support to factions such as Hamas and the PIJ. Yet, this has complicated efforts for democratic progress and forging national unity.

Iran's relationships with Hamas and the PIJ has evolved over time, driven by shared strategic (security) interests and ideological differences, often at the expense of Palestinian governance. Both armed groups play a key role in Iran's so-called 'forward defence'. By arming and funding

these groups -thus integrating the Palestinian cause into its broader 'Axis of Resistance'- Iran has extended its strategic depth into Israeli territory, creating a 'second front' in its confrontation with Israel. While Iran views Hamas and PIJ as crucial partners –if not proxies– in its 'Axis of Resistance', these non-state actors retain their own political agency. The relationship with Palestinian groups is thus best understood as a pragmatic and opportunistic alliance, characterised by shared interests and diverging long-term strategic imperatives.

The relationship between Hamas, the PIJ, and Iran during the 2010-2024 period has been characterised by cooperation and divergence. While the groups remain ideologically distinct from Iran's Shia leadership, their shared opposition to Israel cements their alliance. For instance, in the case of Hamas, while Iran's financial and military assistance enables the group to maintain its control over Gaza, the latter has also sought to diversify its support by engaging with other regional actors such as Qatar and Turkey. This proved to be key to overcome Iran's drastic cut in financial, military, and political assistance for Hamas, diverting a portion to the PIJ, when their leadership refused to support the Assad regime in 2011 and sidelined with the opposition. Similarly, the PIJ refusal to endorse the Houthis in 2014 and to denounce Saudi Arabia's military intervention in Yemen, led to a crisis with Iran and a drastic cut in the latter's support (Skare, 2023).

Weapons transfers and military training represent, along with financial aid, the backbone of Iran's influence strategy in the Palestinian arena and a vital operational lifeline for both Hamas and the PIJ amidst a dire economic situation, recurrent conflicts with Israel, and pervasive (international) isolation. Reports indicate that Iranian military advisers have provided extensive support in missile production and tunnel warfare strategies used by Hamas in Gaza (Hinz, 2021). The 2014 and 2023-2024 Gaza wars have demonstrated the extent of Iranian's involvement and support, with Hamas employing sophisticated weaponry and tactics that bear a clear Iranian footprint1 (Wintour, 2023).

Iran has also provided substantial financial support, enabling these groups to sustain governance structures, and social services in Gaza. Estimates suggest that Iran provides Hamas with tens of millions of dollars annually, with reports indicating a peak of over $100 million per year during periods of close relations (US Congressional Research Service, 2024). This financial backing has been critical throughout the 2010-2024 period and especially during times of economic hardship in Gaza, particularly following conflicts such as the 2014 Gaza War, to assist in the reconstruction efforts and replenish weapons stockpiles. Overall, Iran's financial assistance has reinforced the economic and military autonomy of Hamas and the PIJ, strengthening their position within the Palestinian political landscape while complicating efforts for Palestinian unity and regional stability (All Arab News, 2024)2. Indeed, this has resulted in the widening of the rift between Hamas and the PA as the latter seeks diplomatic solutions and cooperation with Western powers, including the EU, and Hamas, with Iranian backing, remains committed to armed resistance, creating friction in Palestinian governance and reconciliation efforts.

As for Iran's relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA) and Fatah, interactions have been marked by tensions, strategic competition, and sporadic attempts at engagement, reflecting Tehran's broader regional ambitions and its stance against Israel and Western influence. Whilst Tehran has criticised the PA's engagement with Israel through diplomatic channels, portraying it as a betrayal of Palestinian resistance, the PA and its President Mahmoud Abbas in particular, has in turn, accused Iran of meddling in Palestinian affairs by arming rival factions and

undermining national reconciliation efforts. However, Iran has also, at times, attempted to engage with the PA and Fatah pragmatically. In 2020, Iranian officials extended overtures to the PA following the Abraham Accords, which normalised relations between Israel and several Arab states. Tehran sought to position itself as an ally to Palestinian rejectionists of normalisation, but these efforts were largely rebuffed by Fatah, which remains wary of Iran's influence over Hamas and other militant groups.

2. Iran's negative impact on Palestinian unity and governance

Tehran's role and discourse regarding efforts toward Palestinian unity have been complex and often contradictory. While publicly endorsing Palestinian unity and self-determination as part of its broader resistance narrative, Iran's direct political, economic and military assistance to Hamas and the PIJ has contributed to deepening intra-Palestinian divisions and obstructing the prospects for Palestinian unity under a representative government – amounting to a form of *democracy prevention*.

A case in point is the 2014 Fatah-Hamas agreements, which were met with scepticism from Iran. Rather than supporting political unity, Tehran continued to prioritise Hamas's military capabilities. This support emboldened Hamas to maintain its autonomous rule over Gaza, further consolidating parallel power structures that hindered broader Palestinian political cohesion.

During the 2021 Unity Intifada, Iran sought to capitalise on the widespread Palestinian unrest, portraying itself as the primary "champion of the resistance cause" (Al Jazeera, 2021). This aimed to counter the influence of Sunni Arab states that had normalised relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords– labelled by Teheran as a "stab in the back of the oppressed Palestinian people" (Al Jazeera, 2020)–. It also contributed to positioning Iran as the steadfast ally of those Palestinian factions characterised by an armed resistance strategy.

Furthermore, since 2022 Iran has allegedly been behind the unprecedented increase in violence destabilising the West Bank: the Iranian Quds Forces[5] have smuggled weapons and funds via Jordan to arm militant cells with Hamas, PIJ, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine encouraging independent armed groups (*kataib*), to carry out attacks against Israel, fuelling unrest and eroding the PA's legitimacy (Yaari, 2023) and public perception as the latter steps up military operations against Jenin Brigades resistance groups. Ultimately, the ongoing war on Gaza has further demonstrated Iran's sustained commitment to Hamas, and the reinforcement of its political and military presence in the Palestinian arena to the detriment of the PA. Iran appears to be engaged in a three-stage process which consisting in (1) weakening Fatah; (2) providing an alternative model for Palestinian action; and (3) pushing Hamas forward as an organisation that can ultimately become the principal representative of the Palestinian people (Young, 2023). This strategy exploits and exacerbates existing trends within the Palestinian polity. Polls conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research in June 2024 show increasing support for armed resistance groups and declining approval for Fatah[6]. However, predicting how public opinion will shift in the aftermath of the war remains difficult.

[5] One of five branches of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

[6] **"**When considering three possible options for Palestinians to break the current deadlock in the political process to end the Israeli occupation, current findings point to an 8-percentage point rise in support for armed struggle to nearly one-third; and a 4-percentage point increase in support for non-violent resistance to nearly half. More than 60% supported the dissolution of the Palestinian Authority, and more

In other words, despite calls for national reconciliation, Iran has continued to use Hamas and PIJ as strategic tools against Israel while sidelining broader Palestinian governance goals. Iran's financial, political and military backing has had a direct impact on the governance structures in the Palestinian territories: by strengthening Hamas' parallel governance in Gaza and further eroding Fatah's already battered legitimacy in the West Bank, Iran has contributed to a fragmented political milieu that weakens Palestinian national institutions and fosters authoritarian tendencies. Hamas, emboldened by Iranian support, has in turn resisted PA-led reconciliation efforts and maintained a security-driven approach to governance. The militarisation of Hamas, boosted by Iranian funding and arms, has also allowed the group to suppress opposition, political and media dissent within Gaza, limiting political freedoms and curbing civic participation, hence strengthening Hamas's authoritarian hold in Gaza.

In that sense, Iran's influence in Palestinian politics stands in contrast to European Union efforts aimed at fostering democratic governance. While the EU has promoted dialogue and institution-building through the PA, Iran has focused on militarisation and resistance strategies working closely with Hamas and the PIJ, effectively sustaining divisions and countering EU initiatives to foster unity and improve democratic governance in the occupied territories. Iran's influence and interference in Palestinian politics have also entrenched both Hamas and the PA in their respective authoritarian mindsets and actions as they fight for primacy in the Palestinian political arena, hindering prospects for political reform.

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2. Qatar's Role in Palestine: Balancing Aid, Mediation, and Political Influence

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Qatar has emerged as a pivotal actor in the Palestinian Israeli conflict, leveraging its diplomatic and soft power assets, substantial financial resources and aid to support the Palestinian cause. The emirate has consistently used its platform at the UN and other international bodies –such as the LAS and the GCC– to champion Palestinian self-determination and reaffirm its longstanding position vis a vis a final solution based on four main pillars: (1) establishing an independent state based on the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital; (2) granting all the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, following relevant Security Council resolutions and the Arab Peace Initiative;(3) condemning Israeli settlement expansion; and (4) highlighting the plight of Palestinian refugees (Qatar MFA, 2021).

Qatar's commitment to the Palestinian cause is deeply rooted in its broader foreign policy objectives, which emphasise regional stability, Arab solidarity, and mediation as a primary tool for conflict prevention and resolution (Aras and Al Ansari, 2024). In general, two characteristics of Qatar's approach have remained unchanged over the years: its discourse in favour of Palestinian self-determination, and its financial and discursive support to Hamas while advocating for Palestinian unity on international platforms (Aras and Al Ansari, 2023).

However, the evolving nature of regional geopolitics since 2011 has forced Qatar to balance its position carefully between its rhetorical position and its strategic needs. Initially, challenges came from revolutionary and counterrevolutionary movements that emerged from the Arab uprisings. Then, the bitter rivalry with Qatar's neighbours over support for political Islam and non-state actors led to a 5-year diplomatic standoff and blockade between 2017 and 2021. More recently, the open-ended process of normalisation of Arab Israeli relations in several Arab Countries through the Abraham Accords was recurrently criticised by Doha (Anadolu Agency, 2021). Nevertheless, all of this has not translated into a decisive alteration of its fundamental pro-Palestinian stance, especially vis-a-vis Hamas.

1. Qatar's financial support

Doha's involvement in Palestinian affairs gained prominence following the Oslo Accords in 1993 when it began contributing to international aid efforts supporting Palestinian institution-building and humanitarian needs. But it was after the 2006 Palestinian elections –which led to Hamas's political ascent and takeover of Gaza in 2007 and subsequent international isolation of the strip, that Qatar stepped up its support emerging as one of Hamas' primary supporters.

Qatar's financial assistance to pay the salaries of civil servants, provide fuel for electricity, and support to impoverished families, has allowed Hamas to maintain governance over Gaza despite economic blockades and political isolation (Barakat and Milton, 2020). According to recent Israeli reports, between 2012 and 2021, Qatar disbursed, with Israel and US consent, over $1.3 billion into Gaza (Maitall, 2023), covering essential services, salaries of civil servants, and humanitarian relief. It has also provided monthly stipends of $30 million to support impoverished families in Gaza, salaries of civil servants, and fuel subsidies to keep Gaza's electricity running.

Doha also pledged $1 billion at the 2014 Cairo conference (Reuters, 2014) for the reconstruction of Gaza following the war, alongside earlier commitments in the wake of previous conflicts.

This aid has served a dual purpose. On the one hand, it has alleviated the suffering of Gazans and prevented further deterioration of living conditions. On the other hand, it has been viewed as a means of stabilising the region by containing Hamas and preventing escalation. Qatar's provision of aid and financial support is not conditional to political or economic reforms, and studies suggest the quality of democratic institutions, political situation and government styles of recipient countries are not determining factors for receiving Qatari aid (Aras and Al Ansari, 2024). While seemingly constructive, this apparent neutrality, lacking any form of conditionality, also contributes to sustain autocratic structures or, at the very least, does not incentivise political and economic reforms necessary for improved governance.

Therefore, while Qatar insists that its aid is purely humanitarian and coordinated with Israel and international actors such as the United Nations, it has faced criticism from the Palestinian Authority (PA) and some Western countries on the basis that such support indirectly strengthens the entrenchment of Hamas -often authoritarian- in Gaza at the expense of Palestinian unity. As such, Qatar's financial support has reinforced parallel governance structures, further undermining the PA's legitimacy and complicating efforts toward intra-Palestinian reconciliation.

2. An all-weathered mediator

Qatar has played a critical role in facilitating talks between conflicting parties, positioning itself as an indispensable mediator in preventing further escalation, by leveraging its longstanding relationship with Hamas leadership as well as its outreach capacity with all major stakeholders (Israel, Lebanon, Iran, the US among others).

Qatar's support through mediation (in close coordination with the US) was crucial during the 2014 Gaza war, facilitating indirect talks that led to temporary ceasefires and humanitarian pauses. In 2014, Qatar also played an instrumental role in brokering the Fatah-Hamas Agreements, which aimed to create a unity government between the two Palestinian rival factions. However, the agreements failed to achieve lasting political reconciliation. Qatar continued to push for Palestinian unity by hosting high-level discussions and offering economic incentives to encourage cooperation, but deep-seated political rivalries and external pressures prevented tangible progress. The failure of these initiatives indicates Doha's influence has not succeeded in fostering democratic consolidation. Instead, Qatar's sustained provision of financial and political backing to Hamas is often viewed with suspicion by the PA as it has indirectly supported the political division between Gaza and the West Bank, limiting prospects for reconciliation and a unified and democratic Palestinian governance structure.

During the 2021 Unity Intifada, Qatar again sought to mediate between Palestinian factions. It advocated for de-escalation and spearheaded diplomatic efforts at the UN to rally Arab and Islamic states to support Palestinians whilst emphasising the need for sustained diplomatic pressure on Israel to halt settlement expansion and respect Palestinian sovereignty.

Finally, Qatar's mediation efforts have been particularly active following the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack against Israel, playing a critical role in the negotiation of humanitarian corridors and prisoner exchanges via close cooperation with the United States and Egypt.

3. Qatar´s close relationship with Hamas and its impact on Palestinian governance

Doha's strategic relationship with Hamas has had significant implications for Palestinian governance, particularly in the context of Hamas's rivalry with the PA. Following the expulsion of Hamas leadership from Jordan in 1999, Qatar provided the group with a vital political haven. Subsequently when the relationship between Hamas and the Assad regime in Syria turned bitter over the 2012 civil war, Khaled Meshaal and other members of the Hamas political leadership, based in Damascus until then, relocated to Doha with US consent. Moreover, in what was perceived as a bold and unprecedented move of public political support for Hamas, former Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani visited Gaza in 2012 (The Guardian 2012).

Though useful, Doha's close ties with Hamas have also raised criticism from friends and foes. So much so that the 5-year diplomatic standoff between Qatar and the Arab Quartet revolved around accusations against the former for its alleged support for extremism (i.e., mainly the Muslim Brotherhood), its relations with Iran, and its sponsorship of the satellite broadcaster Al Jazeera. One of the conditions for the lifting of the embargo was cutting ties with the Muslim Brotherhood, Hamas, and Hezbollah among others (Kinninmont, 2019), although Qatar never complied. Similarly, from early 2024, both Israel and the US demanded Qatar to increase pressure on Hamas to agree to a ceasefire and the release of Israeli hostages.

Although Qatar has sought to mediate between Hamas and the PA, playing an active role in reconciliation efforts – as in the case of the 2012 Doha Agreement – its support for Hamas has, in part, perpetuated the longstanding fragmented Palestinian governance system. Mainly due to providing Hamas with resources to function independently of the PA, this has also reduced pressure on the group to engage in meaningful reconciliation with the latter. Such a modus operandi has contributed to a dual dynamic with profound governance consequences in Palestine: while providing essential services and stability to Gaza, Qatar´s intervention has also reinforced Hamas's control, limiting political pluralism and democratic governance. Concurrently, despite support from Western donors, the PA continues to struggle with internal legitimacy and governance challenges, exacerbated by the absence of elections and Israeli-imposed restrictions. As a result, Qatar's practices have contributed more to the perpetuation of authoritarian structures than to democratic development.

Ultimately, Qatar's political and economic engagement with Hamas reflects its broader foreign policy of leveraging relationships with non-state actors to enhance its regional influence, even as it complicates the prospects for Palestinian political unity and statehood.

Qatar's practices both complement and contest the EU's approach to Palestine. While both actors support Palestinian economic development and humanitarian relief, Doha's direct engagement with Hamas contrasts with Brussels's policy of non-engagement with the group due to its designation as a terrorist organisation. This divergence has occasionally led to tensions in aid coordination efforts. However, Qatar's role as a mediator aligns with the EU's broader objectives of regional stability and conflict resolution, making it a valuable partner despite policy differences.

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3. The Arab League and Palestine: From historical support to internal divisions

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Between 2010 and 2024, the League of Arab States (LAS) maintained its historical foundational support for the Palestinian cause, consistently advocating for an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital. However, the period also witnessed significant shifts in the LAS' narrative, driven by internal divisions, regional normalisation efforts with Israel, and broader geopolitical changes.

As the Palestinian question became a bargaining chip within broader geopolitical contests, the LAS was unable to press for real change both in the resolution of the conflict – first through reconciliation and then through negotiations based on the Arab Peace Initiative (API) – and the much-needed governance reforms in Palestine. This, in turn, contributed to the deepening entrenchment of both Hamas and the Palestinian Authority in their respective authoritarian mindsets and actions. As they fought for primacy in the Palestinian political arena amid escalating regional competition, the prospects for political reform were increasingly hindered as a result.

Therefore, it can be argued that although the LAS has discursively supported the Palestinian cause, calling for reconciliation (WAFA news, 2014) and nominally backing the Palestinian aspirations for self-determination (a principle inherently tied to democratic governance), its inability to translate its discourse into tangible action, including its failure to hold Palestinian leadership accountable for democratic backsliding, human rights violations, and governance failures (see the postponement sine die of elections), has led to authoritarian consolidation in the Palestinian polity. This has been further exacerbated by the League's traditional policy of non-interference that has indirectly supported authoritarian practices through its tacit acceptance of undemocratic governance within Palestinian territories and beyond.

Furthermore, the Arab League has incurred in recurrent contradictions, both in its discourse and its actions. This trend has been exacerbated in the 2010-2024 period, especially following the 2020 Abraham Accords. Although the Arab League advocated for Palestinian self-determination, it also simultaneously supported authoritarian regimes among its member states. This is, in part, rooted in the organisation's traditional prioritisation of state sovereignty over democratic reforms as a principle, especially when such reforms threaten the status quo in member states (Bourekba & Pérez Marginet, 2025). Additionally, while it repeatedly condemned Israeli occupation, its members engaged in normalisation with Israel, with the tacit support of the LAS. These moves undermined collective Arab solidarity and the foundations of the Arab Peace Initiative as a roadmap for the resolution of the conflict. These paradoxes reflect the inherent institutional limitations of the LAS as well as the existing tension between ideological commitments and realpolitik needs. This has favoured the continuation of conflict and the lack of governance reforms in Palestine.

1. The LAS and the Palestinian cause: Support despite the odds

The Arab League's influence is constrained through structural limitations that have a direct impact on its (limited) capacity to shape realities in a meaningful and positive way in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict. The LAS operates based on the principles of consensus and non-interference that often paralyse decision-making processes. Critical resolutions require either unanimity or a two-thirds majority, a threshold rarely met due to the divergent political agendas and rivalries among member states (and more so after the Abraham Accords). This procedural rigidity fosters inertia, as even urgent matters like the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are subjected to protracted diplomatic deadlock. Moreover, the LAS lacks any meaningful enforcement mechanisms to ensure compliance with its resolutions. Unlike the United Nations, which possesses tools such as sanctions or peacekeeping mandates, the Arab League's decisions are largely advisory, relying on the voluntary cooperation of states that frequently prioritise national interests over collective action. The fact that countries like Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have pursued bilateral agendas that sometimes contradict the League's collective declarations, especially those supporting the Palestinians, complicates things further.

Despite all this, the LAS continued to maintain its rhetorical support for the Palestinian cause during the 2010-2024 period, including calls for reconciliation and conflict resolution. Indeed, the League has consistently advocated for Palestinian unity, recognising that internal divisions between major factions, notably Fatah and Hamas, undermined the broader Palestinian national cause. It actively supported reconciliation efforts, facilitating dialogues and endorsing agreements aimed at bridging the rift between the Palestinian actors.

In early September 2010, after multiple rounds of unsuccessful reconciliation talks, Egypt, under the auspices of the LAS, proposed a new document to mediate between Fatah and Hamas. This proposal envisioned general elections in both the Gaza Strip and the West Bank during the first half of 2010, a reform of Palestinian security services under Egyptian supervision, and the release of political prisoners by both factions. On February 7, 2012, under the auspices of Qatar and with LAS endorsement, the Fatah–Hamas Doha Agreement was signed. The latter aimed to form an interim national consensus government composed of independent technocrats, led by President Mahmoud Abbas and to prepare for upcoming elections and oversee reconstruction efforts in the Gaza Strip. Despite such a support, the Palestinian government did not materialise due to subsequent disagreements over its implementation. Throughout this period, the LAS remained vocal about the detrimental effects of Palestinian disunity, emphasising that the pervasive fracture between Fatah and Hamas not only weakened the Palestinian position in negotiations with Israel, but also impeded international support for Palestinian statehood aspirations.

During the 2014 Gaza War (Operation Protective Edge), the Arab League convened emergency meetings, issuing condemnations of Israeli military actions and expressing solidarity with the Palestinian people (Reuters, 2014). However, beyond rhetoric, the League failed to mobilise any substantial diplomatic or economic pressure on Israel, and it was Egypt, again, that played a more prominent role outside the League's framework, mediating a ceasefire (UN News,2014) between Israel and Hamas. This sidelining of the LAS underscored its diminishing relevance in conflict resolution and mediation.

The Arab League also expressed support (LAS, 2014) for the 2014 Fatah Hamas Agreement Palestinian reconciliation but again played a marginal role in the negotiations (primarily facilitated by Egypt and Qatar). The League's lack of direct involvement reflected its broader

institutional weaknesses and the divergent interests of its member states, particularly regarding relations with Hamas (which the KSA and the UAE viewed with suspicion). The failure to implement the agreements effectively resulted in continued political fragmentation within Palestinian territories, with profound implications for governance and democratisation. The absence of a unified Palestinian leadership has not only weakened the Palestinian negotiating position internationally but has also entrenched authoritarian practices in both the West Bank and Gaza. It could be argued that the Arab League's passivity in this process indirectly contributed to this outcome by failing to exert the necessary diplomatic pressure to support genuine reconciliation.

During the 2021 'Unity Intifada', the LAS's response was again tepid and reactive (Lacy, 2021), limited to issuing statements of condemnation without substantive follow-up actions. This lack of meaningful action further eroded the League's credibility among ordinary Palestinians, many of whom increasingly viewed it as an irrelevant actor in their struggle for self-determination.

Finally, the ongoing Gaza War has further exposed the Arab League's institutional incapacity to shape events on the ground. Despite convening emergency summits and issuing strong condemnations of Israeli military actions (Joint Arab Islamic Extraordinary Summit, 2023), even calling for the deployment of UN Peacekeepers (Middle East Eye, 2024), the League has been unable to translate its rhetoric into meaningful political leverage (Bin Othman, 2023). The internal divisions among member states, particularly between those normalising relations with Israel (such as the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco) and those maintaining a hardline stance (like Algeria and Iraq), continue paralysing collective action.

The EU–LAS relationship in the Israel-Palestine conflict is marked by strategic necessity but also by persistent discord. While both advocate a two-state solution, the EU's inconsistent stance—oscillating between engagement and tacit alignment with Israel—often weakens LAS efforts for Arab unity. Mistrust and geopolitical divergences continue to limit meaningful diplomatic coordination (Worrall & Saleh, 2023)

2. The Gulf Crisis and the Abraham Accords: eroding the LAS consensus on the Palestinian cause.

Intra-Arab rivalries have significantly shaped the Arab League's approach to Palestine in the 2010-2024 period. The Gulf Crisis (2017–2021) and the Abraham Accords in 2020 profoundly reshaped the League's stance on the issue, exacerbating its institutional dysfunction and eroding the historical Arab consensus on the Israeli Palestinian conflict. Both events exposed the structural weaknesses of the LAS –such as its consensus-based decision-making process, lack of enforcement mechanisms, and dependence on the political will of dominant member states– which have prevented the articulation of conflict resolution initiatives. They also exposed the fragile foundations of Arab solidarity, revealing how national interests and geopolitical rivalries among member states have increasingly overshadowed the League's traditional collective commitments.

The Gulf Crisis, marked by the blockade of Qatar by Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, destabilised the Arab regional order and further weakened the LAS's capacity to function as a cohesive organisation. The blockade ought to be seen not only as a bilateral dispute but also as a manifestation of deeper ideological and geopolitical rivalries within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and the broader Arab world. Qatar's independent foreign policy, particularly its support for Hamas and close ties with Islamist movements across the region clashed with the

agendas of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, which viewed the rise of political Islam as a destabilising force both at regional and local level. This divergence had direct implications for Palestinian politics, as the blockade exacerbated the fragmentation within the Palestinian national movement. While Qatar continued to provide financial and political support to Hamas in Gaza, Saudi Arabia and the UAE strengthened their ties with the PA in the West Bank, often using their influence to pressure Mahmoud Abbas' government to align with their regional strategies.

The Gulf Crisis indirectly facilitated the conditions for the US-brokered Abraham Accords in 2020 that led to the (partial) normalisation of diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco with Israel. The Accords further reshaped the geopolitical dynamics in the Arab world and exacerbated fractures within the LAS. The shared hostility towards Qatar's regional role and the common threat perception of Iran created the conditions for states aligned with the KSA to articulate a strategic convergence with Israel, paving the way for normalisation. As a consequence, the blockade eroded the long-standing Arab consensus based on the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which had conditioned diplomatic recognition of Israel on the establishment of an independent Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and a just solution for Palestinian refugees. As a matter of fact, member states pursued bilateral deals with Israel outside the framework of collective Arab diplomacy without securing any tangible concessions in exchange.

The PA and Hamas decried the Abraham Accords but failed to push the LAS to condemn the move as the draft resolution proposal made by the Palestinians demanding a formal rejection of the deal was rebuffed. The PA later relinquished the rotating presidency of the LAS in protest (Middle East Political and Economic Institute, 2020). As for the LAS' response to the Abraham Accords, it was tepid at best. In the meeting held on September 9, 2020, the League refrained from condemning the UAE's decision to normalise ties with Israel. Aahmed Aboul Gheit, the Secretary-General of the Arab League, stated that "The goal all our Arab countries seek, without exception, is to end the occupation and establish an independent Palestinian state on the 1967 borders with East Jerusalem as its capital" (Middle East Political and Economic Institute, 2020).

Once again, the League was unable to go beyond symbolic condemnations and calls to adhere to the principles of the API and failed to impose any diplomatic consequences or mobilise collective action against the normalisation trend.

The Abraham Accords exposed deep rifts among member states, with countries such as Algeria, Iraq, and Tunisia opposing normalisation, and others embracing it as part of broader strategic realignments, particularly to counter Iran's influence in the region. This fragmentation severely weakened the League's ability to articulate a unified position on the Palestinian issue, as the very states that once championed Palestinian rights now prioritised economic, technological, and security partnerships with Israel. This geopolitical shift also had also internal repercussions for Palestinian politics, deepening the crisis of legitimacy faced by both the PA and Hamas, as their traditional strategies—anchored in Arab solidarity—appeared increasingly obsolete.

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4. The US policy in Palestine: shaped by securitisation and conditioned by Israel

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The US policy toward Palestine has consistently been shaped by its close alliance with Israel, a dynamic that has significantly influenced the trajectory of democratic development in Palestine. The specificities of the Palestinian context – characterised by Israeli occupation, practices of apartheid and the PA's limited quasi-state authority – complicate the US role in promoting democracy. The PA's reliance on security coordination with Israel, particularly in the West Bank, has meant that Washington supports a political framework that is far from sovereign and where Palestinian people and institutions remain subordinate to Israeli control. As a result, US policy has often mirrored this reality by reinforcing the PA as a security partner rather than as a means for democratic governance (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The broader framework of Israeli occupation – which includes control over bodies, borders, movement and resources – severely undermines the PA's capacity to function as a democratic body (Tartir et al, 2024). Moreover, the PA's dependency on EU, US and Israeli financial and political support, conditions and coordination further limit any genuine prospect for democratisation. Even when democratic processes are initiated, such as the proposed 2021 elections, the occupying power's capacity to obstruct participation – particularly in East Jerusalem – undermines any meaningful exercise of Palestinian self-determination (Online interview with Palestine expert, July 2024).

Against this backdrop, between 2010 and 2024, US policy has oscillated between upholding the status quo, maintaining security initiatives and advocating for limited democratic engagement (Bhungalia et al., 2019). All along, the core of US policies has been the prioritisation of interests and 'stability' over democratic practices and processes (Farsakh, 2016; Bhungalia et al., 2019). This has often translated into maintaining the PA as a governing body that cooperates with Israel on security issues, even at the cost of democratic stagnation and political delegitimisation.

Coupled with Israeli occupation, US policy has contributed to an authoritarian governance structure in the West Bank, where the PA's elite has entrenched itself, and in Hamas-governed Gaza. Abbas has been able to monopolise power, stifling political competition and suppressing critics. This was evident following the 2006 legislative elections, where Hamas won a decisive victory, only for the international community, led by the United States and including the European Union, to reject the result. The isolation that followed impacted the Palestinian polity and society, resulting in the Palestinian division between the West Bank and Gaza, with Fatah controlling the former and Hamas the latter (Rabbani et al. 2016).

This international rejection of the results further nurtured the PA's authoritarian tendencies. The ruling elite within Fatah, bolstered by US support, has increasingly relied on repressive measures to maintain its grip on power. Moreover, the lack of accountability has only deepened the fragmentation within Palestinian society, leading to a growing disconnect between the governing elite and the broader Palestinian population.

Key historical events, such as the 2011 uprisings in the MENA region and shifts in US leadership from Obama to Trump to Biden, have brought some changes in discourse, but little alteration in core US practices (US Department of State, 2022; USAID, 2024). During the Obama

administration, there was an initial emphasis on promoting political reform in MENA countries, but this was quickly superseded by a focus on stability, particularly after the rise of Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, reflecting a broader trend of authoritarian accommodation in US policy (Dessì and Mikhelidze, 2024). In Palestine, this meant continued support for the Palestinian Authority (PA) as a stabilising force, with little real pressure for democratisation. During his first term, Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and cuts to Palestinian aid, including funding for UNRWA, underscored a shift away from any pretence of supporting Palestinian rights and democratic aspirations. The Abraham Accords – aimed at normalising Israel's relations with Arab countries – further shifted the focus away from governance and democracy support of the PA.

The Biden administration marked a shift in narrative rather than practices. Unlike Trump, Biden emphasised support for the two-state solution and support for Palestinian civil society (Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute, 2022; Pressman, 2024). However, the Biden administration remained silent while confronted with the cancellation of the 2021 elections in the Palestinian territories and Israel's accelerated annexation of the West Bank. PA President Mahmoud Abbas's decision to cancel the elections – citing Israel's refusal to allow voting in East Jerusalem – was widely framed as a way to avoid internal challenges, particularly from Hamas, which had gained popularity in the absence of substantial political reform. Despite this, the United States did not exert significant pressure on Abbas to proceed with the elections, revealing a reluctance to promote a political process that might destabilise the fragile status quo favouring Tel Aviv (Online interview with Palestine expert, July 2024). Instead, US support for Mahmoud Abbas and the PA remained steadfast, despite growing dissatisfaction among Palestinians and opposition factions such as Hamas and splinter Fatah groups.

On 7th October 2023, Hamas-led attacks further cornered the Biden administration on Israel's side. Washington called on Israel to cautiously calibrate its attacks on Gaza, keep flowing humanitarian aid as Israel's war raged on, abandon plans for attacks on Rafah. Biden officials also engaged with Arab states over the revival of the PA as an alternative, legitimate counterpart for governing Gaza. Yet, White House and State Department diplomats, invested little effort in the democratic revival of the PA largely delegating it to the backdoor diplomacy of Arab and Gulf states. Ultimately, US's practices of authoritarian accommodation during the period 2010-2024 have contributed to a process of authoritarian consolidation in Palestine, reinforcing a political structure that is increasingly unaccountable to its people.

The EU's approach to Palestine, while distinct from that of the United States, has similarly prioritised 'stability' or status quo over democratic transformation. While framed as support for good governance and state-building, the EU's security practices (such as EUPOL COPPS) have reinforced an unaccountable PA security apparatus, sidelined grassroots political participation, overlooked wider local ownerships and exacerbated Palestinian political fragmentation (Tartir and Ejdus, 2017; Bouris, 2019). In line with US practices of autocratic accommodation, the EU has thereby contributed to a governance model that responds to external interests and standards while undermining non-elitist local democratic practices.

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5. The UN's efforts in Palestine

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The UN's efforts in the declaration and clarification of legal norms significantly have shaped its overarching policies on democracy support, while contributing to the establishment of universal principles on human rights protection and fundamental freedoms. Most notably, the Human Rights Council (HRC), alongside with its predecessor the Human Rights Commission, has served as a principal authority in the articulation and development of legal norms on human rights and democracy (Newman and Rich, 2004).

The question of Palestine remains highly contentious within the HRC and the wider UN system. The UN failed to develop and implement a consistent and clear position on the Palestinian question, highlighting a fundamental mismatch between the UN's rhetoric and actions. In the aftermath of decolonisation, the UN had gradually started to acknowledge Palestine's right to self-determination and its legal status, currently recognized as a non-member observer State (Imseis, 2020). Around the same time, the UN periodically criticised Israel's occupation of Palestine, but over time, its positions have gradually become diluted or legally ambiguous. For instance, between 1977 and 1981, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) explicitly defined the occupation as 'illegal'. Yet, as the issue grew more and more political, the UNGA abandoned this language and resorted to characterizing the occupation as a 'violation of the Charter of the United Nations' (Imseis, 2020).

Due to the recurrent use of vetoes by UNSC members such as the US, the Security Council has adopted a limited number of resolutions aimed at fostering democracy in Palestine. For instance, in 2024, the US blocked a resolution that would have provided UN membership to Palestine. Some UNSC resolutions did recognize the illegality of Israel's actions – notably Resolution 2334 (UNSC, 2016), which affirmed that Israeli settlements constitute a violation of international law. Yet, the UN's acknowledgment of the illegality of Israel's occupation failed to translate into demonstrable actions or policies aimed at ending this regime. Rather than addressing the political and legal dimensions of the issue, the UN equated the Palestine question to a solely humanitarian issue, prioritizing aid delivery via UN agencies and the documentation of international law violations. This approach significantly undermines the UN's credibility and effectiveness as a democracy support actor and key driver in articulating and developing legal norms on human rights and democracy.

The UN has also demonstrated its inability to uphold human rights and preserve the right to life throughout the most recent 2023-2024 Israel-Hamas conflict. As of September 2024, the conflict reached over 40 thousand civilian casualties and was marked by grave war crimes and crimes against humanity (Al Jazeera, 2024b). The UN's structural failures, including its dependency on the support of the UNSC members and lack of political will, have prevented any swift resolution of the conflict. While the UNGA has voted multiple times in favour of a resolution calling for a ceasefire, this was stalled at the UNSC due to the use of veto by certain members, especially the United States (US). Even prior to the Israel-Hamas conflict, the United States had notably used its veto over 30 times to block resolutions critical of Israel (Asrar and Hussein, 2023). When ceasefire resolutions were adopted by the Security Council, their impact was often undermined. For example, Washington abstained from voting on Resolution 2728, which was the first to call for an immediate ceasefire, and deemed it non-binding—despite Article 25 of the UN Charter,

ratified by the United States, which states that such resolutions are legally binding (Al Jazeera, 2024a; United Nations, 2024).

Much like in Lebanon, the UN's primary contribution to Palestine focused on providing humanitarian aid during the conflict, including critical supplies such as medical equipment and food (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, 2024a). However, humanitarian aid efforts in Palestine face significant obstacles. In the aftermath of the October 7 attacks, several countries, including the US and the UK, halted essential funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) – mandated to support Palestinian refugees - due to allegations that some agency members were involved in the attacks (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, 2024b). While most of the funding was re-instated following investigations into UNRWA's neutrality, the agency's ability to provide swift humanitarian relief was significantly impacted. More recently, the Israeli government passed a legislation banning UNRWA; if implemented, this would significantly impede the agency's access to Gaza, East Jerusalem, and the West Bank (United Nations Relief and Works Agency, 2025).

The UN's inability to ensure regular provision of humanitarian aid and enforce international law at a higher level exposes its limitations and highlights its diminished influence over global affairs and especially democracy support.

Conclusion

Overall, the effectiveness of the UN is heavily reliant on the backing of key member states, and its cooperation with the EU is a vital aspect of its operations. For example, the two institutions have collaborated on nearly 200 electoral support projects across more than 50 countries, including within the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods (EC-UNDP JTF). Many UN initiatives in these regions are funded by the EU and closely align with its foreign policy objectives, particularly in promoting democracy. Consequently, the UN's presence not only reinforces the EU's values but actively contributes to achieving them.

As in the case of Lebanon (see the previous section),the UN's interventions in Palestine have produced limited and largely indirect impacts on democratic development. In both cases, the UN provided technical assistance and humanitarian aid, but failed to address root causes, such as entrenched authoritarianism, impunity, or foreign domination, with sufficient political leverage. In Lebanon, despite providing electoral assistance, the 2022 elections were marred by intimidation and vote-buying, undermining any positive impact. Similarly, in Palestine, the UN's efforts to curb violence and human rights abuses have been hindered by the political constraints imposed by its member states – including EU countries.

This reflects the EU's own dilemma in balancing its commitment to humanitarian law while advancing security priorities and strategic alliances, such as its partnership with Israel. Thus, while the UN remains an important player in providing technical assistance and aid in the EU Southern Neighbourhood, its political influence remains constrained by both local governments and the broader international community. This limitation significantly undermines the UN's role as a defender of democracy and human rights.

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6. China in Palestine: supporting Palestinian rights while enabling Israel's authoritarian practices

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Though limited in scope, China's impact in Palestinian political dynamics since 2006 is marked by deep contradictions. On the one hand, while China has continuously advocated for Palestinian statehood, sovereignty and internal reconciliation through discursive support and actions at the United Nations (UN), its role has been limited by the dysfunction of the organisation and the lack of material support to Palestinians. On the other hand, especially in the last decade, Beijing has decoupled its support for the Palestinian cause from its deepening bilateral cooperation with Israel in trade, labour mobility and digital technology sectors. As a result, this has contributed to further entrench Israel's position as an occupying power without any pressure to recognise Palestinian demands, enabling authoritarian practices by Israel. In other words, this pragmatic collaboration, to advance both countries' interests in trade and digital transformation sectors, has contributed to the surveillance, control and securitisation of Palestinians and their territories, reinforcing, in turn, Israel's authoritarian governance practices over Palestine.

1. Chinese (discursive) support for the Palestinians: 2006 elections, intra-Palestinian reconciliation and the right to self-determination

After the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, Chinese authorities recognised Hamas' victory and agreed to provide support to the Palestinians – in contrast to the Quartet's decision to freeze aid to the new government and avoid contact with Hamas (Embassy of the PRC to Lesotho, 2006; Al Jazeera, 2006). Wang Weiguo, Chinese representative in Palestine, became the first diplomat to engage with the Hamas-led government and invited Mahmud al-Zahar, then Palestinian Foreign Minister and senior Hamas leader, to the China-Arab States Cooperation Forum held in Beijing in May 2006 (New York Times, 2006). During the visit, Chinese officials accommodated the new government despite its isolation by the Quartet, stating: "the Palestinian government is legally elected by the people, and it should be respected" (China Daily, 2006). However, after the confrontation between Hamas and Fatah in 2007, China's position shifted to prioritise engagement with the Palestinian Authority (PA) and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) as the sole representatives of the Palestinian people, thereby limiting its contacts with and support to Hamas.

While China considers Hamas a national liberation movement and opposes its designation as a terrorist organisation[7], its relationship with the Islamist group has been characterised by an intermittent diplomatic engagement in moments of reconciliation and conflict among Palestinian factions. For example, in April 2014, after the first 2014 Fatah-Hamas agreement[8], Wang Yi and

[7] According to Xinhua guidelines on reporting which applies to all official Chinese press, Hamas should not be addressed as an extremist or terrorist organization (Gao, 2025). This also follows many Arab States reticence to use the terrorist label or to condemn Hamas' actions.

[8] The Gaza Agreement signed in April 2014 between Fatah and Hamas factions was directed to achieve internal reconciliation and to form a Palestinian Unity Government to be then followed by general elections in six months. A second agreement was signed in September 2014 in Cairo which included a detailed assessment of responsibilities and tasks of the Unity Government. However, the elections never happened. President Abbas ended the agreement in June 2015 by arguing that the formed Unity Government was not able to exercise its power in Gaza.

Wu Sike, then Special Envoy for the Middle East[9], congratulated the parties on their internal reconciliation, arguing that unity between Palestinian factions is the first step for achieving Palestinian statehood and national rights (MFA, 2014a; MFA, 2014b). As the 2014 Operation Protective Edge erupted, Wu met with Israeli, PA and Hamas officials aiming to push towards a ceasefire – but without significant results (Global Times, 2014). Nevertheless, Chinese actors have followed a similar behaviour to their Western counterparts by avoiding the direct financing of institutions in Gaza: Chinese aid assistance for Gaza has been channelled through the UNRWA, local charities, NGOs or the PA (see Table 5, p. 88-89).

This diplomatic flexibility with Hamas aligns with China's broader support for Palestinian unity, perceived as a prerequisite for independence and sovereignty, as well as broader Chinese engagement in the Middle East, marked by non-interference, cautious responses and its 'zero enemies' policy (Sun, 2019). Indeed, China's support for intra-Palestinian reconciliation has been a constant in its discursive practices. In 2013, during a visit of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to Beijing, Chinese President Xi Jinping unveiled a four-point proposal to end the Palestinian Israeli conflict based on the two-state solution, the resumption of peace negotiations based on international consensus, and the need for broad international support. Yet, the Chinese president established preconditions for restarting negotiations: Israel had to "stop settlement activities, end violence against innocent civilians, lift the blockade of the Gaza Strip and properly handle the issue of Palestinian prisoners" while Palestinians needed to achieve a comprehensive internal reconciliation (MFA, 2013). In late 2021, Chinese MFA Wang Yi re-emphasised the importance of a greater unity between Palestinian factions as well as enhancing PA authority to exercise sovereign functions across all Palestinian territories – a defence of the principle of territorial integrity (MFA, 2021b).

Since the 2023 Gaza war, Chinese diplomats have moved beyond discursive support to push for intra-Palestinian reconciliation. In April and July 2024, Beijing hosted Fatah, Hamas and 12 other factions to promote unity in the post-conflict governance of Gaza. The result was the Beijing Declaration, which recognised the PA's authority in all Palestinian territories and committed to holding elections after the formation of an interim national government in post-conflict Gaza (DFLP, 2024). While its implementation remains uncertain, the agreement highlighted Beijing's ability to fill the gaps left by the EU and the United States' refusal to deal with Hamas. This also demonstrated China's role as a facilitator rather than mediator, avoiding meddling in decisions that might involve democratisation in Palestine. This shows Beijing's tendency to rhetorically support and accommodate any internal (democratic) developments, which simply requires symbolic gestures that fit into its non-intervention policy. For instance, China expressed support for the 2021 Palestinian general elections (MFA, 2021a), despite these being postponed. This approach is encapsulated in the principle of "Palestinian-led, Palestinian-owned, and Palestinian-governed" post-war governance (Wang, 2024) as well as explicit respect for Palestinians to choose "the democratic development path and social and political system that suits their national conditions" (MFA, 2023).

Similarly, Chinese officials have long supported 'the righteous cause of the Palestinians to restore their legitimate national rights' (MFA, 2009), namely "Palestinians' right to statehood, right to

[9] The figure of special envoys is a flexible diplomatic figure in the Chinese Foreign Ministry that can be deployed to cover tasks from conflict mediation to sectorial negotiations, engaging with different governments and actors in a given topic. The figure of the Middle East affairs envoy was established in 2002 and takes care of the Palestinian issue. Another figure for the region was established for Syria (2016).

existence and right of return" (Xi, 2023). Ma Xinrun, Director-General of the Department of Treaties and Law of the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, further elaborated on the Chinese government legal view of the issue during a public hearing of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) on the Israeli occupation of Palestinian Territories in March 2024. In this hearing, he identified "Israel's prolonged occupation of Palestinian territory and Israel's long-standing oppression" as the root cause of the conflict. Hence, the official position expresses that:

> [i]n pursuit of the right to self-determination, the Palestinian people's use of force to resist foreign oppression and to complete the establishment of an independent State is an inalienable right well founded in international law...Armed struggle in this context is distinguished from acts of terrorism (ICJ, 2024).

Beyond contextualising the conflict based on occupation and promoting the norm of self-determination for an independent Palestine, China's engagement has further been articulated by diplomatic support and voting behaviour at the UN, a trend that has intensified since October 7th, 2023. Firstly, seeking to strengthen international recognition of Palestine, China established official diplomatic relations in 1988 and upgraded them to a strategic partnership in 2023 (MFA, 2023). At the United Nations, China has consistently voted in favour of Palestinian membership initiatives, supporting both observer state status (achieved in 2012, UNGA, 2012) and the recent bid for full membership in April 2024 (UNSC, 2024a) (see Table 5).

Secondly, Chinese authorities have often -directly and indirectly- criticised and condemned Israeli actions undermining Palestinian sovereignty, such as the construction of the separation wall, the extension of illegal settlements in the occupied territory, violent acts against civilians – including demolishing Palestinian homes and evicting Palestinians –, unilateral changes in the status of Jerusalem, the siege and blockade of Gaza or the forced displacement of Palestinians (UNSC, 2006: 11; UNSC, 2016: 9-10; Zhang , 2021; UNSC, 2023: 12). Wang Yi has also criticised Israel's actions in Gaza after October 7th as a 'collective punishment' and 'beyond the scope of self-defence' (Chen, 2023). Beyond Israel, this criticism has also been directed towards the United States since 2021, blaming – directly or indirectly – their obstruction of the UNSC mandate, the lack of pressure on Israel to stop attacks against civilians and, even, on arms transfers (UNSC, 2024b; UNSC, 2025), evidencing also the on-going US-China competition in this conflict dynamics. Beyond this rhetorical support, Chinese diplomats have voted in favour of UN Resolutions denouncing these issues and urging Israel to cease their actions (see Table 5), but their lack of enforcement has hindered any progress.

Date	Resolution	Content	China's vote	Adopted ?
13/07/2006	S/2006/508	Draft resolution that called for the immediate and unconditional release of an Israeli soldier and all detained Palestinians and to Israel to halt its military operations and for the Palestinian Authority to stop the firing of rockets.	In favour	Vetoed (US)
11/11/2006	S/2006/878	Draft resolution to condemn Israeli military operations, in particular in Beit Hanoun.	In favour	Vetoed (US)
08/01/2009	1860	Resolution for a durable and fully respected ceasefire and the full withdrawal of Israeli forces from the Gaza Strip	In favour	Yes

28/02/2011	S/2011/29	Draft resolution to condemn all Israeli settlement established since 1967 as illegal and a halt to all settlement building	In favour	Vetoed (US)
23/12/2016	2334	Resolution on cessation of Israeli settlements activities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including East Jerusalem	In favour	Yes
28/12/2017	S/2017/1060	Draft resolution against actions aimed at changing the status of Jerusalem	In favour	Vetoed (US)
01/06/2018	S/2018/516	Draft resolution on the condemnation of Israeli violence towards the 2018 March of Return	In favour	Vetoed (US)
16/10/2023	S/2023/772	Resolution on a humanitarian ceasefire in Israel-Palestine crisis, including the release of all hostages.	In favour	Vetoed (US)
18/10/2023	S/2023/773	Resolution on a humanitarian pause in the Israel-Gaza conflict	In favour	Vetoed (US)
25/10/2023	S/2023/773	Resolution on a humanitarian pause in the Gaza Strip, backing the 'inherent right of all states' to 'self-defence' and urging Hamas to release all the hostages.	Against	Vetoed (China, Russia)
25/10/2023	S/2023/795	Resolution on humanitarian ceasefire in Isreal-Palestine crisis, urging Israel to cancel its evacuation order for northern Gaza.	In favour	Vetoed (US)
15/11/2023	2712	Resolution on humanitarian pauses and corridors in Gaza during the conflict.	In favour	Yes
08/12/2023	S72023/970	Draft resolution on humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and the release of all hostages.	In favour	Vetoed (US)
22/12/2023	2720	Resolution on the delivery of humanitarian relief to Gaza and protection of all civilians	In favour	Yes
20/02/2024	S/2024/173	Draft resolution on immediate humanitarian ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and unconditional release of all captives.	In favour	Vetoed (US)
22/03/2024	S/2024/239	Draft resolution on ceasefire in the Gaza Strip and condemnation of terrorist attacks by Hamas.	Against	Vetoed (China, Russia)
25/03/2024	2728	Demands an immediate ceasefire in Gaza during Ramadan to a lasting sustainable ceasefire and unconditional release of all detainees.	In favour	Yes
18/04/2024	S/2024/312	Draft Resolution on Palestine full membership in the UN.	In favour	Vetoed (US)
10/06/2024	2735	Resolution on a three-phase comprehensive ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza	In favour	Yes
20/11/2024	S/2024/835	Draft proposal for the immediate, unconditional and permanent ceasefire and unconditional release of all hostages and UNRWA's mandate.	In favour	Vetoed (US)

04/06/2025	S/2025/353	Draft proposal for an immediate, unconditional and permanent ceasefire in Gaza, lifting of restrictions of humanitarain aid into Gaza	In favour	Vetoed (US)

Table 5. China's voting behaviour for UNSC Resolutions on the Palestine Question (2006-2025).

Source: Author, with data from United Nations Library on UNSC Meetings on the situation of the Middle East, including the Palestine Question.

This strong rhetorical and diplomatic support, however, has not been coupled with substantial, material assistance. While the Chinese government's position is based on the Oslo Accords and has even proposed a new norm on 'peace through development' (MFA, 2017), it has failed to provide substantial material support for Palestinians to achieve national development and state building. For example, despite negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement launched in 2018, trading relations are negligible: in 2023, the total value of exchanges amounted to $166 million – most of it being Chinese exports to Palestine (OEC, 2023b). Similarly, Chinese development assistance and humanitarian aid to Palestine between 2006-2025 only amounted to $66.1 million, in comparison with the $14bn total contribution by the international community for the same period (AidData, 2023; OCHA, 2025). While the PA has been the main beneficiary of Chinese aid in Palestine ($42.44 million, including funding for the Ramallah City Council), it is important to note that Chinese aid has not been channelled to finance the PA's institutional capacity ($8.8 million) nor to support local democracy initiatives. Instead, most help has been directed towards infrastructure projects ($20 million) –including an office building for the Palestinian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, a secondary school and road development in Ramallah–, solar energy projects in the West Bank and Gaza ($8.8 million), health assistance during COVID-19 ($5.42 million) and emergency humanitarian aid, especially after conflicts with Israel ($13.25 million).

Receiving entity	Location	Nº of projects	Amount*
Palestinian National Authority	West Bank / Gaza	20	$24.31 million
Give Palestine Association	Gaza	6	Unknown
Palestinian Red Crescent	Gaza	4	$384.029
Ramallah City Council	West Bank	2	$7.7 million
Al Quds University	East Jerusalem	1	Unknown
Edward Said National Conservatory of Music	West Bank	1	Unknown
Hebron University	West Bank	1	Unknown
Mahmoud Abbas Foundation	West Bank	1	Unknown
UNDP+PNA	West Bank	1	$10.43 million
UNICEF **	Palestinian Territories	1	$2.7 million

UNRWA	Palestinian Territories	-	$17.08 million***
Unknown	Gaza	2	$3.5 million
Total			$66.1 million

Table 6. Chinese aid to Palestine (2006-2025) by receiving partners.

Chinese actors have failed to communicate the total amount of their contribution to many projects in Palestine. As a result, this column only includes the amount disclosed when available and does not reflect the total cost of Chinese projects in Palestine. This sum should be considered as a minimum, and, in all cases, the total amount granted is unknown. ** The donation to UNICEF has been done by Chinese authorities and private citizens to the Palestinian Embassy in China, who then disbursed it to UNICEF. * It includes yearly donations between 2006 and 2024, as well as extra funding and/or donations during conflicts, emergency situations and the COVID-19 pandemic. Sources: Elaborated by author with information from AidData, the PRC office in Palestine, UNRWA and the Chinese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.*

In sum, China's position has consisted of an accommodation of internal political developments in Palestine – including electoral democratic processes –, the facilitation of intra-Palestinian reconciliation and symbolic support for self-determination and sovereignty, the latter being necessary to truly open possibilities of future democratisation in a post-occupation context. However, by prioritising sovereignty support and unity under the PA, China tacitly legitimises and accommodates an increasingly unresponsive PA under the principle of non-interference. Moreover, the symbolic support for sovereignty is further eroded given China's simultaneous cooperation with Israel.

2. Sino-Israeli collaboration as a form of authoritarian enabling

Despite Chinese discursive hostility to Israel's actions in Palestine, their economic relations point out to a different dynamic: one of constant increase in trade, investment and technology collaboration.

Since 2013, China and Israel have aimed to expand cooperation in non-sensitive aspects, which led to the establishment in 2017 of an 'innovative comprehensive partnership' between both countries, especially in the fields of science and technology (Yellinek, 2023; Xinhua, 2017). In 2022, China was Israel's second largest trading partner, just after the United States, with a total trade value of $20.5 bn, and has invested $12.73 bn between 2006-2024 (AEI, 2025). China's demand of Israeli technology is evident, as a large share of its imports are technological and electronic components – especially integrated circuits ($3.83 bn), which amounted to almost half of the total imports ($8.26 bn) (OEC, 2023a).

Sino-Israeli cooperation in technology includes aspects of security and digital transformation despite pressures from the United States which, for instance, discouraged Huawei's participation in Israel 5G deployment and pushes for an investment screening mechanism of Chinese investment in dual use sectors and technologies in 2019 (Shichor, 2025; Habibi, 2021). Three Chinese private companies – DJI, Hikvision and Nuctech – are currently involved in surveillance and population control in Israel and the occupied Palestinian Territories. Israeli military, police and private security companies have often used DJI drones for crowd control and surveillance, including during the 2018 Great March of Return to throw tear gas towards protestors (Li, 2023; WhoProfits, 2025). Nuctech's x-ray inspection systems have been installed in checkpoints in Gaza and the West Bank as part of counterterrorist efforts, some financed by USAID and the European Union (Comodan, n.d.). Out of the three, Hikvision has been collaborating most closely

as a state contractor to the Israeli military, supplying high-resolution CCTV cameras deployed to monitor Palestinians in military infrastructures, checkpoints and cities in the West Bank, such as Hebron (Amnesty International, 2023), in tandem with a larger network with software and AI programs developed for facial recognition and linked to security databases with biometric data of Palestinians (Byler and Ketter, 2024).

Further contradictions have emerged in Chinese economic relations with illegal settlements in the West Bank. More than a dozen enterprises located in Israeli settlements export, invest or have subsidiaries in China, including companies such as Supergum Industries or Hadiklaim Dates, which are considered businesses violating international law and Palestinian rights in the 2023 Report of the UN Office of the High Commissioner on Human Rights (WhoProfits, 2025; OHCHR, 2023). Furthermore, Chinese acquisitions of Israeli agro- and chemical companies, such as Tnuva Food Industries in 2015 as well as Ahava cosmetics and Adama's fertilizers in 2016[10], which exploit natural resources from occupied land, further evidence Chinese economic actors' prioritisation of profits over the resolution of the conflict, against the discursive practices of their government (Shawamreh, 2025a, Who Profits, 2025). Finally, recent reports locate Chinese migrant workers in settlements in Nablus, Ramallah and Hebron which violate the 2017 Sino-Israeli bilateral agreement that prohibited Israeli authorities to destine Chinese migrant labour in settlements (Shawamreh, 2025b). In June 2025, the Chinese Embassy in Israel urged Chinese citizens to refrain from taking jobs in the settlements, as that would constitute a breach of contract and lack of protection of their safety and legal rights, and urged them to comply with UN resolutions (Kutay Gökmen, 2025).

Since the October 7 attacks, some Israeli commentators have pointed out a 'silent boycott' by Chinese actors as a result of the decline in trade in 2023, an increase in barriers and delays of exports of Chinese dual-use technologies and the indefinite suspension of COSCO Shipping's services to Israel since January 2024 (Chen and Bruni, 2025; Reuters, 2024). Moreover, despite Chinese scepticism towards the International Criminal Court (ICC), they welcomed ICC warrants against Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and former Defence Minister Gallant (Wafa, 2024). However, these measures seem largely symbolic rather than a shift towards full substantial support to the Palestinian cause. Chinese Special Envoy to the Middle East, Zhai Jun, recently convened China's willingness "to create favourable conditions for the development of exchanges and cooperation between China and Israel in various fields" after the cessation of the conflict (MFA, 2025), a stance expressed independently of the future of Palestine.

By maintaining a distant stance on the Palestinian issue in bilateral exchanges and depoliticising trade and economic relations with Israel, Beijing has further entrenched Israel's position as the occupying power. Beyond issuing occasional statements, it has exerted no meaningful pressure on Israeli authorities to comply with UN resolutions, sending signals about the tolerance or low cost of Israeli actions against Palestine for their international cooperation. Instead, Chinese companies have profited from collaboration with Israeli counterparts - participating in and enabling the occupation, including through the development of a techno-surveillance systems that undermine Palestinian rights. In sum, despite Chinese discursive support for democratic developments in Palestine, its support for intra-Palestinian reconciliation and for their right to self-determination, China's collaboration with Israel acts as a form of authoritarian enabling

[10] Significantly, all these operations were completed before China's vote in favour on UNSC Resolution 2334 (2016) which demanded Israel's suspension of settlements and condemned them as a 'flagrant violation of international law' (UNSC, 2016).

which reinforces the latter's authoritarian practices of control, surveillance and violence against Palestinians and ultimately hinders Palestinians prospects for sovereignty and democratisation.

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7. Conclusion

The Palestinian case presents a distinct challenge for analysing the role of external actors in shaping democratic possibilities in the MENA region. Unlike Tunisia, where a relatively clear trajectory of democratic transition followed by autocratic regression can be traced through electoral benchmarks and institutional change, Palestine exists in a context of prolonged occupation, statelessness, and systemic fragmentation. The sociopolitical milieu is less a story of linear transformation than of cyclical crisis and institutional stasis, deeply embedded in the realities of prolonged Israeli occupation, internal political fragmentation between Fatah and Hamas, and institutional paralysis – conditions that are further consolidated by the persistent inaction and selective engagement of the so-called international community. In this landscape, external actors have played a fundamental role not just in shaping the conditions for governance, but in reinforcing—whether intentionally or not—authoritarian practices, political division, and democratic obstruction.

Iran's role in Palestine exemplifies a form of strategic authoritarian enabling, in which the Islamic Republic has advanced its geopolitical interests through alignment with Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad. This support, while framed in ideological terms as resistance against Zionism and Western imperialism, has in practice bolstered parallel governance structures in Gaza that undermine the prospects for democratic reunification. Iran's material assistance—ranging from financial support to weapons transfers and training—has strengthened Hamas's autonomy from the PA, enabling it to consolidate power through security-driven governance and suppress political pluralism. While Iranian support has offered Hamas a measure of resilience under siege, it has done so at the cost of national unity, civilian governance, and democratic inclusion. Tehran's influence thus exemplifies how authoritarian enabling can contribute to inhibit the institutional conditions necessary for democratic consolidation.

Qatar's involvement in Palestinian affairs illustrates a more complex blend of selective democracy support. On the one hand, Doha has invested heavily in humanitarian assistance and infrastructure in Gaza, mitigating the humanitarian impact of the Israeli blockade of the Strip and recurrent episodes of war. On the other, its sustained relationship with Hamas—marked by financial aid and political shelter—has contributed to consolidate the group's authority and control over Gaza. While Qatari mediation efforts have occasionally supported reconciliation processes, such as the 2012 and 2014 agreements between Fatah and Hamas, they have rarely translated into tangible outcomes such as democratic reform or elections. Crucially, Qatar's aid lacks conditionality regarding political reform or human rights and thus operates within a framework that privileges stability and influence over democratic governance. As a result, Doha's policies have contributed to a dual dynamic: stabilising Gaza's humanitarian situation while indirectly sustaining authoritarian governance.

The United States, long positioned as a central broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has contributed to authoritarian enabling on both sides of the divide: on one hand, it contributed to strengthen Israel's position as an occupying power through unwavering political, military, and diplomatic support, while simultaneously fostering authoritarian tendencies within Palestinian governance through a securitised approach that prioritises stability and security cooperation between the PA and Israel over democratic development. Therefore, US democracy support has been largely rhetorical and subordinated to strategic imperatives. Its consistent backing of the PA as a security partner has reinforced elite entrenchment in the West Bank, enabling the

persistence of an unaccountable, authoritarian leadership under President Mahmoud Abbas. The cancellation of the 2021 elections—despite clear public demand and mounting frustration—was met with tacit US acceptance, reflecting a preference for predictability over democratic renewal. Furthermore, Washington's support for Israel, including diplomatic protection and military aid during repeated Gaza wars, has rendered it an illegitimate and unreliable interlocutor in the eyes of many Palestinians. Its practices have thus reinforced a bifurcated political order: an authoritarian PA aligned with US and Israeli interests in the West Bank, and a similarly authoritarian Hamas enclave in Gaza supported by rival patrons.

China, meanwhile, exemplifies a form of strategic ambiguity: while it voices rhetorical solidarity with Palestine and supports their right to self-determination, it simultaneously deepens economic and technological cooperation with Israel, including in sectors directly linked to Israeli massive surveillance practices and Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories. This way, Beijing contributes to authoritarian enabling and authoritarian diffusion, ultimately reinforcing the structures of occupation. This collaboration, though not ideologically driven, facilitates the entrenchment of authoritarian practices in the Occupied Palestinian Territories by supplying tools of control and repression. In doing so, China not only depoliticises its economic engagement with Israel while contributing to hinder prospects for democratic developments in Palestine.

With regards to international and regional organisations, the Arab League and the United Nations exemplify the limits of democracy support in Palestine. The LAS, weakened by intra-Arab divisions and the erosion of the Arab Peace Initiative framework, has largely retreated into rhetorical support without meaningful leverage. Similarly, the UN's role remains confined to humanitarian mitigation rather than political transformation. Despite its normative alignment with democratic self-determination, the UN has failed to meaningfully press for accountability or institutional reform, constrained by structural limitations and the political agendas of key member states.

The Palestinian case reveals not only the direct effects of authoritarian support and enabling, but also the indirect consequences of selective democracy support and rhetorical advocacy devoid of meaningful measures. External actors often prioritise stability over political reform, even when publicly advocating democratic principles. This preference for the status quo, often framed as pursuit of stabilities, has created a perverse incentive structure for local elites, both in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, who are rewarded for advancing the interests of their respective allies rather than pursuing national unity and democratisation. In the context of ongoing occupation, maintaining the status quo necessarily reinforces Israeli control, as it prevents political change in Palestine and reinforces a fragmented Palestinian polity.

Local perceptions reflect this dynamic. As documented in the accompanying Annex, Palestinian civil society actors and public opinion surveys express growing cynicism toward both domestic institutions and international engagement. While international aid remains vital, its conditionalities, contradictions, and alignment with external interests have led many Palestinians to view donors as complicit in maintaining the political status quo. Popular mobilisations—such as the 2021 Unity Intifada—highlight the persistent demand for rights and representation across fragmented geographies. Yet these efforts often remain isolated, uncoordinated, and unsupported by institutional frameworks or international backers. This disconnect between grassroots aspiration and systemic constraint underscores the limitations of the current international approach to Palestinian governance under Israeli occupation.

In this sense, the ongoing war on Gaza does not mark a rupture, but rather a dramatic intensification of long-standing patterns in which external actors prioritise security management and regional influence over inclusive, accountable governance, thereby contributing to obstruct any democratic development in Palestine and to reinforce authoritarian practices in both Israel and Palestine.

Annex 2. Local Perception of non-EU External Actors in Palestine (2011-2024)

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The developments that occurred in Palestine over the last decade reflect not only the historical roots of instability and conflicts but also how regional and external influences continue to shape its sociopolitical trajectory. As a territory under Israeli occupation and marked by political division between Fatah and Hamas, Palestine presents a unique case in the MENA region. Unlike fully sovereign states, the Palestinians face direct control by Israel and rely heavily on foreign political, economic, and humanitarian support. This has intensified public scrutiny and interest in the role of international and regional actors. The collapse of attempts to settle a peace process, the ongoing colonisation of the West Bank, recurrent wars in Gaza, and the failure of national reconciliation between Palestinian factions have all deepened pessimism and frustration. Meanwhile, regional realignments, including normalisation agreements between Arab states and Israel, the rise of multipolarity, and shifting donor dynamics have further impacted Palestinian perceptions of actors such as the United States, Iran, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Nations.

This contribution analyses how Palestinian attitudes toward these external actors have evolved, incorporating cross-time comparisons (2011, 2016, and 2024) and case study perspectives on the United States, the United Nations, Iran, Qatar and Saudi Arabia to provide a comprehensive analysis. These inputs mostly build upon five waves of the Arab Barometer (2011, 2017, 2019, 2021-2022 and 2024) and surveys conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research (PSR), the Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD), the Pew Research Center and the Washington Institute for the Near East Policy. These surveys provide quantitative data on perceptions of broader foreign interference and the specific views of these five actors. In addition, secondary data were collected through analysis, reports, and publications by research institutes. Public opinion data from different surveys over the last decade indicate fluctuating trust levels in external actors. While most Palestinians remain steadfast in their opposition to normalisation with Israel, their views of international allies or adversaries are shaped not only by ideological affiliation but also by perceived material benefits, diplomatic stances, and (in)consistency on the Palestinian issue.

1. General trends and contexts in different periodisation

In the months leading to the Arab uprisings, Palestinians remained focused on the challenges of occupation and national liberation. At the same time, external support for the Palestinian cause, particularly from Iran and Turkey, was welcomed, although viewed with some degree of scepticism. According to a survey by the PSR (2010), Turkey (43%), Egypt (13%) and Iran (6%) were perceived as the three regional countries more supportive of the Palestinian cause. Among the reasons explaining such views are Turkey's sharp criticism of Israel at the 2009 Davos forum and its role in the 2010 Gaza flotilla, as well as Iran's strong anti-Israel rhetoric and its support for Palestinian resistance groups. Although there was general support for the Palestinian Authority's statehood bid at the United Nations in 2011, faith in the effectiveness of international diplomacy remained limited. Most Palestinians expressed deep mistrust toward US mediation, division on the Saudi-led Arab Peace Process and questioned the efficacy of the UN in delivering Palestinian rights.

In Palestine, the decade of the Arab uprisings was marked by several significant events, including mass demonstrations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs) to end political division and the Israeli occupation, cyclical violence in Gaza (notably in 2012, 2014), the deepening political split between Hamas and Fatah despite the 2012 Doha Agreements, the increasingly hostile international environment following the Trump administration's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital in 2017, and the 2018-2019 Great March of Return protests along the Gaza border. Similarly, support for the Oslo Agreements, the Arab Peace Initiative and other peace plans, including the Geneva Initiative, was reduced consistently over the years. A prevailing sense of marginalisation permeated in public discourse: in 2016, 76% of Palestinians saw the Arab World as 'too occupied' with dwindling support for Palestine (PSR, 2016).

During the 2014 Gaza War, Palestinians viewed Iran (28%), Turkey (21%) and Qatar (15%) as the key supporters of Palestinian resistance against Israeli attacks, followed by Egypt (9%) (PSR, 2014). Turkey (75%) and China (53%) were seen positively by respondents in the West Bank and 70% and 44% respectively in Gaza during this period, particularly due to their economic role. By 2019, 61% of Palestinians expressed a preference for increased Chinese aid, while over 70% favoured stronger ties with Turkey (Arab Barometer, 2019).

The decade of the 2020s saw critical domestic and regional developments: the Abraham Accords gained traction, marking a major shift as several Arab states formally recognised Israel without a resolution to the Palestinian issue; the Biden administration sought modest recalibrations ofUS policy, restoring humanitarian and development aid to the Palestinians while maintaining strong support for Israel; and a new outbreaks of violence erupted in Gaza, East Jerusalem and the West Bank. Moreover, a brief attempt to hold Palestinian elections in 2021 – which would have been the first to take place since 2006 – was aborted, further deepening frustration. Trust in domestic governance was low, with many Palestinians increasingly indifferent to regime type if economic conditions improved.

In foreign policy, favourability toward Turkey, Qatar, and China remained high. Turkey was seen positively by 65% of Palestinians and Qatar by 61%. China was perceived as a growing global power with fewer imperialist intentions than Western states and was preferred to the US in infrastructure development and regional security, even though both countries were perceived as equally ineffective in addressing the Israeli Palestinian conflict. However, compared to 2022, China's favourability increased by 9 points (43%) (Shikaki, 2024).

The 2023-2024 Gaza war proved a critical moment for Palestinian views on external actors. Israel disproportionate retaliation to the Hamas-led 7th of October attacks, supported by Western governments, led to unprecedented casualties and destruction, with many international observers and organisations labelling it as genocide. Palestinian opinion of the US reached a new low: only 1% expressed satisfaction with American conduct during the war, while 26% favoured China and 22% favoured Russia (PSR, 2023b). China's favourability declined slightly after October 2023, reflecting disappointment in its limited material support during the war, but it remained higher than that of the US or UK – and even saw a slight increased after brokering the Beijing Agreement for reconciliation between Palestinian factions (PSR, 2024c). Turkey's favourability also dropped, though it remained the most desired economic partner (51%) followed by China (44%) and Saudi Arabia (39%) (Shikaki, 2024). Yemen (83%) and Qatar (56%) remained the most positively viewed regional actors, followed by Iran (35%) and Hezbollah (48%), reflecting a shift toward the so-called 'Axis of Resistance.' (PSR, 2024a).

2. United States

Between 2011 and 2024, Palestinian public opinion toward the United States has remained overwhelmingly negative, shaped by perceptions of US alignment with and unconditional support for toward Israel, the failure of American diplomacy, and repeated US vetoes in the United Nations against Palestinian interests. The prevailing sentiment is one of disappointment, mistrust, and disillusionment, especially following major political milestones such as the Trump administration's 2017 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, its promotion of the Abraham Accords that bypassed the Palestinian issue, and the Biden administration's unwavering support for Israel since the outbreak of the ongoing war in Gaza.

In the early 2010s, US favourability among Palestinians was already low. According to a Pew Research Center survey from 2009, 23% of Palestinians expressed positive views of US foreign policy under Obama, and its favourability stood at just 15% (Pew Research Center, 2009). The collapse of the peace process and ongoing settlement expansion –protected by the US veto in the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) against a resolution condemning the settlements in 2011– further hardened Palestinian views of the United States. As the 2011 push for UN recognition of Palestinian statehood was met with a US veto, it confirmed and reinforced earlier perceptions of American obstructionism: 77% of Palestinians believed that the US would use its veto to prevent Palestine membership in the UN (PSR, 2011b). Overall, almost eight out of ten Palestinians believed Washington favoured Israelis (PSR, 2010) and more than two-thirds opposed a larger American role in the peace process (PSR, 2011a). At the end of Obama's second administration, 76% of Palestinians had no trust in the US President helping peace negotiations (Loschky, 2023).

Palestinian sentiment toward the United States reached another low during the first Trump administration (2017–2021). In the early months of Trump's first presidency, 38% of Palestinians believed that the new administration would aggravate tensions between Israelis and Palestinians (PSR, 2017a). Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the subsequent relocation of the US embassy–perceived as a threat to national interests by 91% of Palestinians (PSR, 2017b)– along with the defunding of United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) provoked widespread anger. After the US administration recognised Jerusalem as Israel's capital, two-thirds of Palestinians opposed the resumption of contacts between the PA and Washington for peace negotiations (PSR, 2018a). Indeed, Washington was perceived by nine out of ten Palestinians as biased towards Israel (PSR, 2018a).

In 2019, the Arab Barometer found that just 31% of Palestinians supported stronger economic ties with the US. Despite widespread frustration with US policy, 49% of Palestinians said they would still accept American aid, highlighting a pragmatic approach. Nonetheless, more than 80% believed Western foreign aid was primarily designed to serve donor interests and increase their influence in Palestine. The so-called 'Deal of the Century,' which bypassed core Palestinian demands such as statehood and right of return, was rejected by all major Palestinian factions and viewed by the public as an attempt to normalise occupation (Arab Barometer V, 2019).

Hopes for a policy shift under President Biden were soon dashed as he failed to reverse many of Trump's decisions. By September 2022, 53% of Palestinians were not optimistic about an improvement in economic or internal conditions, nor in Israeli Palestinian relations under the Biden administration (PSR, 2022b). Similarly, Washington was seen favourably only by 15% of

the Palestinians in 2022 (Shikaki, 2024). In the weeks before the October 7th attacks, 84% of Palestinians polled had little or no trust in Biden (Loschky, 2023). More significantly, the US was seen as an enemy for 25% of Gazans and 13% of Palestinians in the West Bank, while only 13% and 3%, respectively, considered it a friend (Washington Institute, 2023).

The outbreak of the 2023 Gaza war proved to be another turning point. Only 1% of Palestinians said they were satisfied with the US role in the conflict in December 2023 and March 2024 (PSR, 2023b; PSR, 2024a). Their position slightly increased by June 2024, when 3% of polled Palestinians were satisfied with the US role in the current Gaza war (PSR, 2024b). In surveys conducted by PSR in late 2023, 26% of the Palestinians blamed the current suffering in the Gaza Strip on the US (PSR, 2024a). According to AWRAD polls conducted in late 2024, the re-election of Donald Trump was seen as positive to reach a ceasefire in Gaza (70%) and reviving negotiations (65%). However, scepticism persisted, with 53% opposing the idea that a just peace could be achieved with his support, (AWRAD, 2024c). Importantly, public attitudes toward the US are deeply entwined with views on the broader international system. US influence over international organisations, especially the UNSC, has eroded Palestinian confidence in multilateral diplomacy.

3. Kingdom of Saudi Arabia

Between 2011 and 2024, Palestinian public opinion toward Saudi Arabia has undergone significant shifts, reflecting broader regional realignments and Riyadh's evolving mediating and diplomatic role in the Israeli Palestinian conflict. While historically viewed as a financial and political supporter of the Palestinian cause, the Kingdom's flirtation with normalisation and perceived drift away from unequivocal backing of Palestinian statehood have generated increasing scepticism.

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2013, 52% of polled Palestinians saw Riyadh favourably, with a higher support in Gaza (58%) than in the West Bank (48%). Similarly, when asked about Saudi influence in Palestinian affairs, 44% believe it had a great or fair deal with 61% seeing it as a good thing (Pew Research Center, 2013b). Riyadh's role in the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, reaffirming the principle of land-for-peace and the establishment of a Palestinian state on the 1967 borders in exchange for full normalisation between Arab states and Israel, still carried weight. Indeed, 56% of Palestinians supported the Saudi-led Arab Peace Initiative by 2011 (PSR, 2011a).

However, by the mid-2010s, support began to erode. Palestinian perceptions of Saudi Arabia became increasingly divided following the rise of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and the emergence of reports that Riyadh was pressuring the Palestinian Authority to accept compromise formulas tied to US-led peace plans (Ball, 2018). By 2017, 82% of Palestinians already distrusted the Saudi role in the peace process, and 71% perceived that there was an Arab Sunni alliance with Israel against Iran (PSR, 2017b). The 2018 remark allegedly made by MBS—that Palestinians should 'accept peace or stop complaining' (Perper, 2018) —provoked widespread backlash across Palestinian society, interpreting the statement as a signal that Saudi Arabia was growing weary of unconditional support for the Palestinian cause.

The release of the Trump administration's Deal of the Century in 2020—reportedly crafted with tacit Saudi consultation—further deepened mistrust. While Riyadh offered no public support, its silence was interpreted by many Palestinians as complicity. The Arab Barometer VII (2021–22) survey showed Saudi Arabia's favourability in Palestine had dropped below 25%, a sharp decline

from a decade earlier. Additionally, 32% of Palestinians considered Saudis' political influence in the region a threat to their national security (Shikaki, 2022).

In 2023, speculation intensified over a possible US-brokered normalisation agreement between Saudi Arabia and Israel, following the 2020 normalisation deals signed by UAE and Bahrain with Israel. Palestinian leaders were invited to Riyadh and Washington to voice their conditions, but the public remained deeply sceptical. While half of Gazans said they might support the end of the conflict and recognition of Israel after a hypothetical Saudi Israeli normalisation, two-thirds of Palestinians in the West Bank opposed any such arrangement (Cleveland and Pollock, 2023). However, a 2023 PSR poll found that 56% thought that Saudi Israeli normalisation would ultimately harm peace between Israels and Palestinians – with higher scepticism in the West Bank than in Gaza (PSR, 2023a). Meanwhile, support for Saudi Arabia as a trustworthy actor on the Palestinian issue stood at 38%, and MBS's foreign policy was seen positively only by 13% of the Palestinian population (Shikaki, 2024).

In the wake of the October 2023 Gaza war, Saudi Arabia's silent response further alienated many Palestinians: by the end of the month, only 3% saw Saudi Arabia positively (AWRAD, 2023). According to a December 2023 survey by PSR, satisfaction with Saudi Arabia's performance during the Gaza war was notably low, with only 5% of Palestinians expressing satisfaction with Saudi Arabia's role: a mere 2% in the West Bank and 11% in Gaza (PSR, 2023b). Despite rhetorical condemnations, the KSA made no concrete moves to sanction Israel or suspend emerging ties. Instead, it focused on de-escalation and reconstruction—an approach seen by many Palestinians as normalising the war. For most Palestinians, Saudi Arabia is no longer seen as a reliable champion of their national aspirations but rather as a power calculating its interests in a new regional order.

4. Qatar

Qatar has maintained a consistently favourable position in Palestinian public opinion between 2011 and 2024, emerging as one of the few regional actors seen as a reliable supporter of the Palestinian cause. The only exception was at the beginning of the 2017 Qatar crisis, where 59% of Palestinians did not trust the Qatari role in the peace process, even if that trust was higher than towards other Gulf countries (PSR, 2017b). Following Hamas's break with Damascus amid the Syrian civil war, Qatar assumed a greater political and financial role, which helped bolster its standing among Palestinians. Its humanitarian aid to Gaza, financial support to key institutions, and balanced diplomatic engagements have contributed to this perception. Indeed, 69% of Palestinians welcomed Qatar's role in national reconciliation efforts following the 2012 Doha Agreements (PSR, 2012) and more than three quarters supported the Qatari efforts in Gaza, including the payment of salaries to Hamas government employees (PSR, 2018b). In the years after, unlike other Gulf states, Qatar was seen as an actor that preserved its commitment to Palestinian national rights—particularly through its close ties with Hamas and its refusal to sign the Abraham Accords.

Qatar's favourability among Palestinians reflected its consistent engagement with the Palestinian cause. In the Arab Barometer VIII (Shikaki, 2024), Qatar ranked second among all regional and international countries in terms of favourability (just after Turkey), with 61% of Palestinians holding a positive view. In a December 2023 PSR's poll, satisfaction with Qatar's performance during the Gaza war was the second highest among all international and regional actors at 56% —surpassed only by Yemen and exceeding that of Iran and Turkey. Importantly,

this approval was shared across both the West Bank and Gaza, suggesting broad-based trust in Qatar's role, which remained stable until June 2024 (PSR, 2024b). In 2025, a survey conducted by AWRAD in the Gaza Strip found that 82% of respondents continued to saw positively the role of Qatar in supporting Palestinians during the war (AWRAD, 2025). While questions persist about the long-term political implications of its support for Gaza, Qatar remains one of the few countries that Palestinians perceive as both sympathetic and effective in supporting their national aspirations.

5. Iran

Between 2011 and 2024, Palestinian public opinion toward Iran has been characterised by sharp polarisation, shaped by Tehran's material support for Palestinian resistance movements such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, its regional ambitions, and broader sectarian and geopolitical tensions. While Tehran consistently articulates strong opposition to Israel and presents itself as a defender of the Palestinian cause, Palestinian views of Iran remain ambivalent, alternating between appreciation for its material backing and scepticism over its broader regional role and strategic goals. The divide in perception is also deeply regional: in Gaza, Iran retains relatively stronger approval, while in the West Bank, public opinion is more critical towards the Islamic Republic.

In the early 2010s, Iran's popularity among Palestinians, especially in Gaza, was relatively high. According to a 2015 survey by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 57% of Gazans and 55% of West Bank residents held favourable views of Iran's policies (Pollock and al-Omari, 2015). Among Palestinians from Gaza, the support stemmed largely from Iran's financial and military assistance to Hamas and other groups and individuals. For many Palestinians living under Israeli blockade and occupation, this support increased Iran's credibility.

However, this perception began to shift as Iran became increasingly involved in regional conflicts. By 2017, the Arab Opinion Index poll showed that 57% of Palestinians viewed Iranian foreign policy in the Arab region negatively, reflecting growing disillusionment with Iran's broader regional conduct while citing sectarian motives and destabilising behaviour. However, views on Iran's policies towards Palestine were split: 45% of respondents saw it negatively, against 43% who considered it positive. While negative views increased slightly by 2019 (55%), Iran's symbolic gestures and material backing of resistance groups allowed it to retain a residual level of support (Kamrava and Dorzadeh, 2020).

In the Arab Barometer VIII survey (Shikaki, 2024), favourability toward Iran stood at 28% among Palestinians, but the Washington Institute (2023) also found that 51% of Palestinians from the West Bank and 65% of Palestinians from Gaza considered their relations with Iran as significantly important. Satisfaction with Iran's performance during the 2023 Gaza war rose to 35% in a December PSR poll and to 49% by June 2024—making it one of the few countries to see improved perceptions during the conflict, probably as a result of its direct missile attack towards Israel in April 2024 (PSR, 2024b). That said, even among those with favourable views, there was considerable scepticism about Iran's reliability. For example, as Tehran retaliated against Israel in October 2024, 47% of Palestinians expressed concerns on the potential negative impact on their cause (AWRAD, 2024b). This view was reflected in growing support for the idea that Iran was more interested in projecting influence than truly defending Palestinians.

Despite these complexities, Iran's position remains more favourable than that of the US, Saudi Arabia, or the United Nations among Palestinians. However, Iran's nuclear program (58%) and

political ambitions (47%) are cited by nearly half of Palestinians as a regional security threat—second only to Israeli occupation (Shikaki, 2024). In sum, while its support for armed resistance grants it legitimacy in Gaza and among rejectionist factions, its regional behaviour and perceived instrumentalisation of the Palestinian cause temper broader enthusiasm.

6. The United Nations

Palestinian public opinion toward the United Nations (UN) has historically oscillated between cautious support and deep frustration, shaped by the organisation's dual role as a provider of humanitarian assistance and as a diplomatic forum often perceived as ineffectual in confronting Israeli occupation. From 2011 to 2024, this ambivalence deepened, especially in the context of repeated outbreak of violence in Gaza, stalled peace negotiations, and the perceived failure of the international system to secure meaningful progress toward Palestinian self-determination.

Throughout the early 2010s, the UN did not enjoy positive perceptions among Palestinians, despite its humanitarian operations, particularly through the UNRWA. According to research by the Pew Research Center (2013), only 25% of Palestinians saw positively the UN in contrast to 69% who saw it unfavourably. Interestingly, UN solutions to peace negotiations were seen highly positive during those years, but with significant distrust and showing strong contradictions in different siloes of the organisation's work. According to a 2013 poll by the Arab World for Research and Development (AWRAD), 57% of Palestinians in the West Bank and 56% of those in Gaza supported requesting support from the UN if negotiations failed, including drafting a resolution in the UNSC to establish a plan to end the Israeli occupation (AWRAD, 2015). In parallel, during Palestine's quest for UN membership bid in 2011, 83% of Palestinians supported joining the organisation (PSR, 2011b). Nevertheless, 63% of Palestinians considered the UN as an actor not seriously committed to peace negotiations (AWRAD, 2014) and less than half of Palestinians thought that the UN support vote for Palestine in 2012 would improve their situation (PSR, 2012b).

Trust in the broader UN system began to erode over the years due to its inability—or unwillingness, as many Palestinians saw it—to enforce international law in the face of Israeli actions in the occupied territories. Successive wars in Gaza (2008–2009, 2012, 2014, and 2021) resulted in massive civilian casualties and infrastructure destruction, yet no concrete action was taken by the UNSC, often due to US vetoes. The situation worsened during the Trump administration (2017–2021), when the United States cut a significant portion of its funding to UNRWA. These actions were widely interpreted as attempts to delegitimise the right of return and weaken the institutional infrastructure supporting Palestinian claims: 45% of Palestinians thought that the end of US' financial contributions to UNRWA would weaken the rights of Palestinian refugees and was perceived as an effort to end any responsibility toward refugees (52%) (PSR, 2018a). In response, confidence in the UN as a neutral actor declined, even though the agency continued to deliver critical services and concerns about the agency's sustainability and its funding gap (Tahmaz, 2018; BADIL, 2024).

In the Arab Barometer Wave VII (2021–2022), just 19% of Palestinians listed the UN as the actor best suited to mediate a fair political resolution to the Israeli Palestinian conflict. After the 2021 Gaza War, the UN's response was rated as negative by 70% of Palestinians in the West Bank, in contrast with only 3% considered as positive. This was slightly better than its response to the eviction of the residents of the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood in Jerusalem, which was deemed as negative by 79% of Palestinian respondents (AWRAD, 2021). Still, the UN remained more trusted

than the United States, which only 15% viewed as capable of mediating fairly (Shikaki, 2022). These results underscored the UN's shifting status: no longer seen as a reliable defender of Palestinian rights, but still preferable to overtly biased powers.

During the October 2023 war, UNRWA once again emerged as a critical source of aid for displaced and besieged Palestinians in Gaza. However, in a December 2023 PSR poll, only 13% of Palestinians expressed satisfaction with the UN's performance during the Gaza war. The UN's inability to halt the war or prevent the killing of civilians reinforced the narrative that it lacked both the will and the power to constrain Israeli aggression. These developments severely impacted UN credibility. A February 2024 poll of PSR found only 7% of Palestinians were satisfied with the UN role in the current war (slightly higher in Gaza, 11%, compared to the West Bank at 4%). While some still saw the UN as a necessary institutional forum for Palestinian diplomacy—particularly at the General Assembly—most no longer believed it could meaningfully pressure Israel or advance statehood.

Nevertheless, dependence on the UN coexists with disillusionment. As the gap between the UN's humanitarian assistance and its political ineffectiveness widens, many Palestinians view the organisation as a stopgap solution rather than a path to liberation. Despite this, views on its aid distribution were uneven: AWRAD (2024a) found that the UN was still more trusted than local actors to deliver and manage humanitarian assistance to Gaza, and 63% of respondents still saw the UN more positively in contrast to of Arab states or Palestinian local authorities to lead recovery efforts after the war. By 2025, 66% of respondents rated the UN role as positive (AWRAD, 2025). However, PSR (2024a) found that 70% of respondents saw UNRWA aid distribution as discriminatory compared to other international organisations or the government. The UN, like many other international actors, is caught between its principles and its political constraints, leaving the Palestinian public increasingly reliant on it yet disillusioned with what it can deliver.

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Annex 3. Local Perception of Non-EU External Actors in Palestine: Media Analysis

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This section takes two influential local Palestinian media outlets—the Quds News Network (QNN) and Shehab News Agency—and examines their perceptions of relevant non-EU external actors in the aftermath of Israel's genocide in Gaza. The first section establishes QNN's overall profile as an independent youth agency supportive of Palestinian freedom, which led to US pressure to block its presence on social media. It looks at some key events, including the Israeli war in Gaza and diplomatic/UN efforts to reach a ceasefire, and analyses how these are portrayed. The second section does the same for the Shehab News Agency, a more explicitly Hamas-affiliated media formed in Gaza in 2007.

1. Quds News Network (QNN)

a. General Profile and Orientation

Quds News Network (QNN) is a Palestinian youth news agency established in 2011, presenting itself as an independent, volunteer-based agency. On its site, it focuses on such goals as freedom, dignity and unity without foreign patronage. By the mid-2010s, QNN had gained millions of social media followers and even became as popular as *Al Jazeera* to Palestinians. Practically, though, some analysts label it as pro-resistance. The U.S authorities have acted upon it: Twitter in 2019 blocked the accounts of QNN, citing claims of links to extremist organisations, and Western media have accused it of being a propaganda platform run by Hamas. Nevertheless, QNN has had a significant influence within the Palestinian media, particularly on young readers, and it serves as a quick update on events that occur during war.

QNN has consistently maintained a strongly pro-Palestinian stance, reflecting a spirit of resistance. It represents Israeli armed forces as occupying armies and the Palestinians as resistors and martyrs. As an example, Hamas leaders such as Yahya Sinwar are described as heroes who have devoted their lives to Palestine and were martyred in the defence of Gaza. QNN also frames the war against Israel in terms of Islamic and anti-colonial orientation. It brings out the statements of Iran and Qatar in favour of Gaza: its July 2024 analysis of the assassination of Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh reported Hamas and Iran denouncing his killing as a 'treacherous Zionist operation.' A May 2025 QNN post about Qatar also featured Qatar's foreign minister criticising Netanyahu for the latter's characterisation of the Israeli genocide in Gaza as a defence of 'civilisation,' an old colonial trope. QNN describes U.S. normalisation practices, intending to link Israel with the Gulf countries in negative terms. The U.S. interventions are portrayed to be colluding with Israel; a QNN article about the UN votes on ceasefire quoted analysts that the U.S. was a co-perpetrator of a genocide since it vetoed the Gaza ceasefires multiple times. QNN's coverage of Saudi Arabia's coverage is also negative, as QNN leaked that Saudi Arabia would abandon its claim to Palestinian statehood in exchange for terminating the Gaza genocide, meaning Palestinian interests would be sacrificed. Accentuating the ethical foreign policy of Qatar and condemning the programs funded by the U.S./Saudi axis, QNN identifies itself with Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran and opposes Israel, America, and Israel-friendly governmental regimes in the Gulf.

b. Israeli war in Gaza

When reporting about the Israeli offensive, QNN spends its efforts continually to portray Israel as the aggressor and Gaza civilians as the victims. After a ceasefire broke on Dec.1, 2023, QNN led the indictment that 'Israel's military continued its aggression on the Gaza Strip,' even before listing several 'massacres' during which civilians were killed. The report has cited the leaders of Hamas accusing Israel, as well as the U.S., of authorising the renewed attack. QNN also featured threatening Israeli strategies of Leaflets directing Gazans to go south, and reports that they supported suspicions of complete ethnic cleansing. In continuing coverage, QNN is regularly quoting Palestinian sources and UN statistics to highlight casualties and starvation, stating that the Israeli campaign is a genocide. As an example, a June 2025 article described dozens of Gazans being shot as they attempted to gain food in U.S.-administered aid stations, referencing a Palestinian front that described the action as a genocide with international and American collaboration. Altogether, QNN sums up each Gaza airstrike/raid as war crimes: Israeli actions are brutal, their intentions are genocidal, and their western supporters are equally guilty.

c. Arab and International Peace Initiatives in Gaza

QNN's reporting on the mediation efforts has been presented through a pro-Hamas filter. It has provided ample coverage of comments by Qatar and U.S.-mediated negotiations, but insists that Israel is actually the responsible party. As an example, QNN included the harsh response of Qatar to the remarks of Netanyahu and quoted the Qatari FM, who stated that the idea presented by Netanyahu that the war was conducted to protect civilisation was a part of a morally bankrupt slogan. It indicated that Qatar (the same as Egypt and the U.S) had assisted in preparing ceasefire suggestions, and it displayed Qatar demanding expanded help and a judicial framework for Gaza. Regarding the U.S. initiatives, QNN did not hear of any progress but rationalised it ironically. A June 2025 article was headlined that Hamas had accepted a U.S.-mediated ceasefire and prisoner exchange, detailing the 70-day ceasefire and exchanges. But QNN promptly pointed out that Israel back then only slowed and twisted, providing humanitarian assistance that had been promised, putting the Trump administration in a bind. That is, on the one hand, QNN gives credit to U.S envoys and Qatar for moving towards peace, but criticises them as being naive and criticises Israel for backing out. Other Arab positions are also suspicious: QNN reported suspiciously that Saudi Arabia would normalise relations if Gaza were to end suffering, suggesting that Saudi Arabia was willing to concede Palestinian status demands: finger-pointing again at the Israel-Saudi axis at the expense of Hamas.

d. UN Resolutions and Ceasefire Proposals

Similarly, QNN treats the issue of international diplomacy favourably to the Palestinian side. It keeps a close eye on developments in accordance with UN votes, as well as UN statements on Gaza. Interestingly, QNN published an accusing feature by the name of 'Neutral Mediator', Trump Just Vetoed Peace in Gaza (Again), when America vetoed a UN ceasefire resolution. It cited human rights specialists, who pointed out that the U.S., by repeatedly vetoing, was essentially a co-perpetrator; in fact, it was a co-perpetrator of a genocidaire. Other UN voices are also aired in QNN (e.g. the UN rapporteur saying the U.S. was the greatest threat to international peace and security because it had vetoed Gaza). In instances of the development of ceasefire plans (including the initiatives of American emissary Steven Witkoff), QNN would record the receptiveness of Hamas and the opposition of the Israelis. To illustrate, QNN explained that Hamas agreed with a 60- or 70-day ceasefire with negotiated terms of prisoner releases. It proceeded to compare that to Netanyahu refusing a full swap and adding that an ICC warrant wants him and must have reoccupation. To conclude, QNN presents UN involvement

and the attempts of the diplomats through the prism of Hamas grievances: QNN celebrates decisions or agreements that should bring the war to an end and declares U.S./Israel hypocritical or faithless when they do not.

2. Shehab News Agency

a. General Profile and Orientation

Shehab News Agency (وكالة شهاب للأنباء) is a Palestinian news agency founded in January 2007 in Gaza, a member of the Al-Aqsa Media Network. Founded as a Facebook-based news page, it has become an active hub for news from Palestine, the Arab world, and the international arena at all times. The mission, as stated by Shehab, is to uphold the rights of Palestinians and the trouble their people are in due to Israeli invasion. Shehab, in practice, is a pro-Hamas media voice, which is frequently referred to as the roaring voice of the resistance in its own writing. It offers news services and media creation, where it poses as a thorn in the flesh of the Israeli occupation, reporting Israeli activities to the world. Shehab releases most of its content on its official website and social media platforms (especially on X/Twitter and Telegram), in Arabic, to share its story with a broad audience in Palestine. However, the Israeli government has tried numerous times to close its accounts.

Shehab News Agency is the central media outlet in the Palestinian resistance. Since its establishment in the year 2007 in Gaza, Shehab has unwaveringly claimed that it is a voice of liberation, resistance against Israeli occupation and an eye into the crimes of the Zionists. It lies deep in the resistance structure, both politically, religiously, and nationally, where the never-ending struggle is man against the oppressor, colonised against the coloniser, and truth against propaganda. Shehab calls Israel the Zionist enemy or the occupation and commemorates every Palestinian who dies in battle as a martyr (*shaheed*), a source of dignity, sacrifice and perseverance. Since the direct Israeli warplane bombings of the Hamas headquarters inside Gaza in October 2023, Shehab continued to persist in the cause by announcing that its news coverage on the Hamas-led operation called 'Al-Aqsa Flood' is not a form of journalism, but that it is an act of resistance. In its own book, Shehab characterised itself as the roaring voice of the resistance, the unadulterated face of truth, and the most treasured pillar in revealing the ugly face of the enemy. The agency promised not to be silenced either by a missile or by censorship, as it promised that the media battle is as crucial as a battlefield.

The content of Shehab is based on clarity, conviction, and no compromise on the Palestinian case. It does not aim to give equal weight to both sides, nor does it dilute its language to meet international standards. Instead, it opts to work within its mandate: to highlight the voices of the resistance, to document the atrocities of the occupation, and to promote the movement of liberation. Al-Aqsa Flood Battle, Zionist aggression, and martyrdom are not names given as a style but the reality in which the Palestinians live and battle.

b. October 7, 2023, Hamas Attack

The report of October 7, 2023, by Shehab was celebratory and in support of Hamas. Even before the surprise attack began, the agency chose to name it after 'عملية طوفان الأقصى' ('Operation Al-Aqsa Flood'), a name that reflected that adopted by Hamas. Shehab did not describe it as an attack on Israel; instead, a battle or a raid against military targets was defined, thus stressing the issue of the so-called legitimacy of the operation. As an example, Shehab created an infographic video which analysed how Israeli defences broke down in the face of the assault,

entitled ‘The Great Failure That Overbilled the Occupation on the Morning of the Al-Aqsa Flood, 7 October 2023’. This context-setting implies that he presented the battle as a legitimate military action and a moment of historic triumph of the resistance in the case of Shehab.

In keeping with Hamas ideology, Shehab emphasised that the strike had been on Israeli military targets and toned down or denied any intention to cause damage to civilians. Subsequently, when international media accusations of atrocities in events such as the music festival rose, Shehab, with Hamas, described such events either as having been informally done or orchestrated by Israeli and Western quarters. It disputed US and other Western representations of Hamas or the resistance forces in general as ‘terrorists’. Instead, it focused on the colonial origins of the US and Western-supported siege and occupation of Gaza.

c. Israeli war in Gaza

When Israel retaliated with its major military assault in Gaza, Shehab adopted an outrageous tone of condemnation and reporting on innocent victims, though continuing to glorify armed struggle. The Israeli airstrikes and ground incursions into Gaza, which the agency covered, were regularly reported on Israel as an aggressor perpetrating atrocities. Each Israeli bombardment was put in context, as well as labelled as a massacre or war crime, and the casualties on the Palestinian side were reported to the last detail in blood and tears. As an illustration, during the first night of the war, Shehab already noted the growing number of Palestinian martyrs because of the continued aggression of the occupation, stressing that civilians, women, and children were among them. The media coverage of Gaza had repeatedly mentioned words such as genocide and collective punishment. Included in the attacks shed light by Shehab was the bombing of hospitals, refugee camps and places where aid was being dispersed. Among the most notable is its reporting on a protest by displaced aid-seekers in Rafah that Shehab (along with other Palestinian sources) termed in some form of its initial description/reportage as كمائن الموت or mass death traps, where Israel (with the complicity of the U.S.) aimed at striking the civilians in humanitarian queues and killing them deliberately.

According to Shehab, Gazans could be only innocent victims and intrepid resisters, whereas Israeli forces were depicted as brutal invaders. The agency repeatedly relayed the statistics given by Gaza health officials and UN agencies to make a point about the magnitude of what it called genocide. Simultaneously, Shehab gave greater weight to the warnings and threats which the Israeli army gave, including orders to evacuate and turn southwards, as part of a greater scheme to depopulate (and so clear ethnically) Gaza. The reports were commonly accompanied by remarks that such strategies showed the will of Israel to undertake the concept of mass expulsion.

d. Arab and International Peace

Shehab was cautiously sceptical in his approach to ceasefire efforts and diplomacy, but partisan, coming at it by documenting the efforts at mediation, but always in a pro-Hamas/anti-Israel context. Overall, Shehab did not lack coverage of international and regional diplomatic activities (sometimes, arguably, more than a militant-affiliated media might have wanted to devote). However, its reporting always came down to the interpretation that any peace was possible if Israel were not in the way, and Hamas was ready to negotiate the path to peace in a manner that would be as honourable as possible.

To illustrate, Shehab has significantly addressed the mediation of Qatar and Qatari statements. Shehab echoed all positive quotes by the Prime Minister or largely the Foreign Minister of Qatar when they criticised Israel's reasons behind the war. Another theme was countering the Israeli narrative of the war: Shehab pointed to how Qatar rejected the Israeli rhetoric, including the Qatari PM dismissing Netanyahu when he stated that it was fighting to defend civilisation, terming it a morally bankrupt slogan. Shehab framed Qatar (and on some occasions Egypt) as goodwill mediators with their initiatives alienated by Israeli recalcitrance. It stated, as an example, that Hamas had in principle agreed to a U.S.-brokered ceasefire-prisoner exchange agreement —a proposal by the U.S. facilitator, Steven Witkoff —and described the conditions of the 60-70-day truce. In the same breath, Shehab (similarly with QNN) would add that Israel has resisted, torqued and dragged even its humanitarian measures promised and thereby fault Israel (and by extension its Western supporters) of failing to grind a peaceful breakthrough.

Shehab's attitude was indicative, especially regarding American involvement. On the one hand, it put Hamas in a positive light by reporting that it had spoken to American envoys (a headline carried by pro-Hamas media, "Hamas agrees to Trump envoy's plan") and even timidly lauded the American mediators for floating plans. Conversely, Shehab was ready and willing to criticise the U.S. whenever efforts at diplomacy failed. As an example, when the U.S. had repeatedly vetoed resolutions at the UN Security Council to establish a ceasefire, Shehab posted a bitter analysis that the U.S. was actually involved in the killings. It cited the views of the experts who described the U.S as a co-perpetrator of genocide because it protects Israel in the UN. In an article titled, 'Neutral Mediator, Trump has just vetoed peace in Gaza (again)', the act of the U.S. being a peace mediator and at the same time vetoing a call to cease-fire was a sarcastic piece of writing.

Shehab approached the element of state power differently in Northern Arab states than in other Arab states. It complemented nations, such as Qatar (and in some cases Turkey), which openly took the side of the Palestinians. Conversely, it gazed warily on the news of possible normalisation, where Palestinian demands were relegated or peace proposals that downgraded the Palestinian demands. The reporting after news broke (later in 2024) that Saudi Arabia was considering normalization with Israel, and withdrawing Palestine statehood prerequisites, was accompanied by alarmism on the Shehab site, and indeed an accusation that Saudi would be in effect betraying Palestine to end the Gaza genocide It involved use of this framing such that, any Arab action which was not in alignment with Palestinian resistance objectives was considered suspect or a sell-out.

e. UN resolutions and ceasefire proposals

Shehab closely tracked the progress of the United Nations and international law, which she used and captured to support the Palestinian narrative. It was in support of UN statements that were sympathetic to Palestine and critical of actions (particularly those of the U.S.) that were supportive of international intervention. As stated, U.S. vetoes were a trending topic. Shehab leads and social networks criticised Washington's Gaza ceasefire veto in the Security Council in harsh language. It presented statements of UN officials, such as the UN human rights rapporteur, who stated that the move to use a U.S. veto had turned it into 'the worst threat to international peace and security' since it had made it possible to destroy Gaza. By quoting the same, Shehab

referred to international legal denunciation of its own position on the war in Gaza as an unlawful aggression.

Shehab was also praising the pro-Palestine resolutions. As an example, when the UN General Assembly passed a humanitarian truce in Gaza by a wide margin, Shehab rejoiced, declaring it a moral victory and a sign of global solidarity towards Palestine. The fact that many governments fail to take any action against oppression, the international community showed compassion over what the Palestinians were going through, which is what made Shehab go so close to a triumphant tone in reporting these stories. Meanwhile, any opposition by the West to such resolutions was attributed to a desire to bandwagon around the aspect of hypocrisy. Shehab was not afraid of naming and shaming countries: e.g. it would make it clear that the US, along with Israel, opposed the call of the world to stop the killing. This black and white image supported the siege mentality and the image that Palestinians live alone, with only a few voices of morality at the UN.

Another fact was that Shehab was interested in international legal mechanisms. It covered the reports about the International Criminal Court and war crimes investigations. When Israel was accused of war crimes by a UN commission or rights organisation, Shehab made it with a bang. An illuminating example is the manner in which Shehab covered a feature that accused President Trump (when he vetoed UN action) of effectively vetoing peace and promoting war. That way, Shehab was making use of the language of international law, words such as genocidaire, ethnic cleansing and crimes against humanity not as neutral legal terms, but as charged moral judgements against Israel and its supporters.

3. Conclusions

The case of Palestinian media space is an expression of how divided, yet highly politicized perceptions of external actors can be. Media outlets like Quds News Network assume a uniformly pro-resistance narrative, whereby Iran and its allies are viewed as very necessary allies, whereas the United States is viewed as both a complicit partner in Israeli aggression as well as a hypocritical peace agent. In comparison, Shehab News Agency takes a step further in integrating journalistic reporting with ideological positioning, introducing the Al-Aqsa Flood and the events that followed as a war front and as a narrative conflict, one in which the opposition is not just an imperative response, but also a moral obligation.

The two outlets see their ways meeting even though their styles differ, with the common thread being to declare the illegitimacy of the Western intervention, in particular, U.S. foreign policy, and to raise local players, including Qatar, as more legitimate mediators. This is indicative of a more general distrust of international mechanisms that are perceived to be structurally discriminatory towards Palestinians. Simultaneously, the analysis of the media reveals that there is a critical divergence: when QNN is journalistic in its framing, Shehab embraces the role of mobilization more openly and does not make a distinction between the role of a reporter and the role of resistance.

Collectively, these trends highlight the issue statement of the report: a local understanding of external actors is not homogenous and stable, but rather it is mediated by partisan media regimes. In Palestinian case, the media are not just observers of the conflict, but also become a part of it, which contributes to the intensification of the degree to which the validity of external intervention is challenged on the ground.

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III. THE ROLES AND PERCEPTIONS OF NON-EU ACTORS IN TUNISIA

Since the ousting of President Ben Ali in 2011, Tunisia has embarked on a post-revolutionary trajectory often described as the most promising democratic experiment to emerge from the 2010-2011 Arab uprisings. The decade that followed was marked by a new constitutional framework, regular electoral processes, and the development of pluralist political institutions. Indeed, Tunisian civil society and political actors engaged in a democratic transition marked by key achievements, such as the election of a Constituent Assembly charged with drafting a new constitution, which led to the adoption of the 27 January 2014 Constitution (Ouamara, 2020).

This was followed by legislative, presidential, and municipal elections, signalling a genuine opening of the political space. For the first time since independence, a range of rights and freedoms became tangible realities: freedom of expression expanded through the liberalisation of media and press[11], political pluralism gained recognition[12], and citizens benefited from increased access to information[13] and freedom of association[14]. In addition to that, the process of transitional justice[15] played a significant role in Tunisia's democratisation efforts. Driven by civil society activism and cooperation between associations and state institutions, this process led to the creation of the independent Truth and Dignity Commission (Hteit, 2023),

However, Tunisia's democratic transition remained deeply fragile, undermined by socio-economic challenges, institutional instability, and political deadlock. Despite notable democratic advancements, widespread protests erupted across the country, often met with harsh and sometimes violent repression by authorities, underscoring persistent economic hardships and popular frustration with the slow pace of reform (Human Rights Watch, 2013). In this context, the political landscape was sharply polarised, with the Islamist Ennahdha party – emerging from decades of repression – winning Tunisia's first free and fair elections and controlling significant legislative and local powers. Ennahdha's success intensified a fierce struggle for influence between Islamist and secular forces, fracturing society along ideological lines.

The security situation further complicated Tunisia's democratic transition and deepened polarisation. Tensions culminated in high-profile attacks and political assassinations: the 2012 attack on the American Embassy, and the assassinations of two prominent leftist leaders in 2013, Chokri Belaid and Mohamed Brahmi, which further inflamed political divisions, with accusations against Ennahdha deepening mistrust and polarisation (Human Rights Watch, 2013). Meanwhile, Tunisia contended with external pressures including the spillover from the Libyan conflict, which triggered a refugee influx and complicated domestic security (Amnesty International, 2011). In addition to that, Tunisia has been the target of deadly attacks by the Islamic State since 2015, which led to a prolonged state of emergency (Bayar, 2022; BBC, 2015).

[11] Decree Law No. 115 of 2011 on Press, Printing, and Publishing and Decree Law No. 116 of 2011 on the Freedom of Audiovisual Communication and the Creation of an Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication.
[12] Decree Law No. 87 of 2011 on the Regulation of Political Parties.
[13] Organic Law No. 22 of 2016 on Access to Information.
[14] Decree Law No. 88 of 2011 on the Regulation of Associations.
[15] Organic Law No. 53 of 2013 Establishing and Organising Transitional Justice.

Tunisia also faced severe economic regression, with rising debt, stagnant growth, and inflation at historic levels, exacerbating poverty and unemployment (Memo, 2022; Ouamara 2022). Tunisian society has also been plagued by a profound cultural divide between secular and Islamist factions (Lakhal 2023), with both sides accusing each other of undermining national identity, fuelling polarisation and violence and weakening social cohesion (HRW,2020). Ennahdha's survival depended on alliances with secularists, especially after the election of Beji Caid Essebsi, a figure who embodied Tunisia's older secular political tradition (Grewal and Hamid, 2020).

Despite these challenges, Tunisia maintained a functioning democracy, with independent judiciary and electoral processes. However, the death of President Essebsi in 2019 marked a significant moment for the nation, closing a chapter of cautious democratic progress amid ongoing instability (Meddeb, 2019). The organisation of early presidential elections in September 2019 resulted in the victory of Kais Saied, a political outsider with no prior experience. From 2019 to 2021, his policies remained cautious, and his support base began to wane. Sharp confrontations emerged between Carthage (the presidential palace), Kasbah (the prime minister's office), and Bardo (the Parliament), with a coalition of government and parliament seeking to sideline Saied due to his inflexible stance (Dermach, 2021). Initially seen by Ennahda as a harmless and docile candidate, Saied's refusal to ratify key legislation quickly altered that perception. This prompted Ennahda to attempt passing a politicised law establishing the Constitutional Court, aiming to curtail his influence.

On 25 July 2021, Saied effectively staged a coup by suspending parliament and assuming legislative powers via presidential decree (International Federation for Human Rights, 2021). He subsequently dissolved parliament, dismissed the parliamentary speaker, and disbanded the Supreme Judicial Council. His authoritarianism escalated rapidly (Nafti, 2024), shutting down democratic institutions and destabilising intermediary bodies including labour unions, lawyers, and civil society. Saied annulled the 2014 constitution and unilaterally replaced it with a new one on 25 July 2022 that grants him considerable powers, consolidating his control over Tunisia's political and legal systems. Meanwhile, the migration issue took a sharp turn, with the rise of hegemonic discourse targeting sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia (Amnesty International, 2023). The transitional justice process was halted, and jurisdiction over electoral disputes was stripped from the Administrative Court (Anadolu Agency, 2024), further subordinating the judiciary to the president's authority.

Amid the fervour that has characterised Tunisia over the past decade, from the emergence of a nascent democracy to authoritarianism reemergence, this section examines the role of non-EU external actors in shaping the country's political trajectory since 2011. More specifically, it focuses on one or several of the following key turning points in Tunisia's recent history (see Table 7, p. 120). It assesses how six key actors – China, the Council of Europe, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United States of America – have contributed to either supporting democratic development or facilitating autocratic consolidation, whether through political engagement, financial support, or discursive influence.

In parallel, a final *Annex* on 'Local Perceptions' provides an additional mixed methods analysis on how such practices and behaviours are perceived at the local level within the different segments and actors of the society.

Year	Turning Points in Tunisia
2002	Tunisian constitutional referendum made the presidential term unlimited and without any restrictions
2008	Gafsa Mining Basin revolt
2010-11	Tunisian revolution
2014	Tunisian constitution
2015	Terrorist attacks in Bardo and Sousse and the start of the state of emergency
2019	Early elections after the sudden death of Beji Caid Essebsi
2021	President Kais Saied's power grab

Table 7: Turning Points in Modern Tunisian Politics

1. China's Engagement in Tunisia

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China's interests and presence in Tunisia remain limited compared to other external actors such as the European Union, the United States, and Gulf countries. Until the 2011 Tunisian revolution, Tunis' traditional pro-Western alignment hindered cooperation with Beijing. By contrast, during the period under study (2011-2022), China's influence has increased in Tunisia, with bilateral ties strengthening after Kais Saied's self-coup in 2021, culminating with the signing of a strategic partnership[16] in July 2024. Over the past decade, China's position regarding the political developments in the country has shifted from democratic accommodation to authoritarian accommodation and, ultimately, to discursive authoritarian support and collaboration. However, this shift is explained because of internal political developments in Tunisia rather than a dramatic change in the Chinese approach beyond adapting its discursive support to any regime in place.

1. From democratic to authoritarian accommodation

When the Tunisian popular protests erupted, Chinese elites adopted a wait-and-see approach, fearing the loss of a friendly regime in the region (Zoubir, 2021). However, just two months after President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali was toppled, Beijing began to accommodate the democratic transition: Vice Foreign Minister Zhai Jun visited Tunis in March 2011 to express support and respect for 'the choice of the Tunisian people' (MFA, 2011). During the early years of Tunisia's democratic transition, Chinese discursive support to Tunisia's democratisation remained consistent. For instance, the Chinese government congratulated President Beji Caid Essebsi after his victory in the 2014 presidential election, highlighting the "smooth presidential election ... and its political transition process that is coming to a successful end" (AllAfrica, 2014).

By contrast, the Chinese authorities remained silent after Tunisian President Kais Saied, elected in 2019, decided to suspend Parliament, dismiss the Prime Minister, and assume executive authority on July 25, 2021. In response to this move, which signalled clear democratic backsliding, Chinese officials and media remained silent, with no mention or coverage of the self-coup. Moreover, as the country gradually returned to authoritarianism –with Saied issuing Decree 117 on September 22, 2021, granting himself the power to legislate by decree–, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met his Tunisian counterpart Othman Jerandi in the sidelines of the 9th Forum of China-Africa Cooperation. During the meeting, Wang Yi argued that 'democracy is a common value of mankind and the legitimate right of all countries', and consistent with China's foreign policy principle of no-interference, further emphasised that "[t]he judgement of whether a country is democratic or not should be made by its people, not by the handful of foreign countries" (Wang, 2021). Such discursive practices suggest an acknowledgement of the political reality in Tunisia and reflects a contestation of the universality of the (Western) liberal concept

[16] Despite the language, China's partnership diplomacy serves – or served, at least – to know about the importance given by Beijing to a bilateral relation. A strategic partnership indicates a willingness to coordinate more closely on regional and international affairs, but especially in economic aspects (Fulton, 2024). Nevertheless, as Strüver (2017) argues, these are not driven by ideological motives, but rather Beijing's potential economic gains. In recent years, China has been establishing this type of partnership with most of the Arab League member states – and given Chinese modest economic presence and interests in Tunisia, it should be read as part of this broader effort.

of democracy, emphasising instead a pluralistic understanding that recognises diverse paths based on national contexts. However, these declarations should also be contextualised in relation to the timing of the meeting, just days before the US-led Summit for Democracy – to which neither country was invited. The Biden administration efforts to frame the US-China competition in ideological terms around democracy and authoritarianism prompted Beijing to launch a campaign to discredit that notion[17] in late 2021.Thus, Wang's speech should be read as part of their broader geopolitical competition with Washington rather than simply directed towards Tunisia's political trajectory. Nevertheless, it indirectly contributed to shield both governments from criticism and acted as a form of discursive authoritarian collaboration.

China's stance on the ongoing political developments in the country was further evidenced during President Xi Jinping's meeting with Saied on December 9, 2022, during which he expressed China's support for 'Tunisia in pursuing a development path suited to its national conditions, oppos[ing] interference by external forces' (Xi, 2022). Such a statement, consistent with similar remarks made by Chinese authorities in the past during Tunisia's democratisation process (MFA, 2018), indicates a form of (authoritarian) accommodation of Saied's Tunisia, framed by the principle of non-interference but also as a result of internal changes in Tunisia rather than a shift in China's discursive practices.

However, more recently, China has rhetorically provided the international legitimacy Saied has been seeking since the 2021 coup. This is clearly expressed in the Strategic Partnership Agreement signed between China and Tunisia in July 2024. On the one hand, the first article of the agreement mentions Chinese support for 'Tunisia's reform measures and efforts *to safeguard sovereignty since July 25, 2021* [emphasis added] ... as well as the development plans and reforms chosen by the Tunisian people based on their national conditions' (MFA, 2024). Such a statement illustrates a form of authoritarian support to Tunisia, insofar as it frames Saied-led coup as an act of national self-determination rather than the dismantling of Tunisia's democratic institutions. On the other hand, in line with China's contestation of Western conceptions of democracy, the agreement's reference to the promotion of 'common values of ... democracy and freedom for all humanity', combined with both countries' opposition to 'interference in other countries' internal affairs under any pretext' (MFA, 2024), can be understood as a form of authoritarian collaboration aimed at countering any external pressure on Tunisia's leadership. Arguably, this framing served to justify Saied's crackdown on Tunisian civil society two months before while denouncing Western criticism.

2. Relevant policy areas for China

Sino-Tunisian relations have been mostly driven by economic interests. Since 2018, two waves of the Arab Barometer have shown that 63% of Tunisians want stronger economic cooperation with China, nine percentage points more than those favouring cooperation with the United States (Robbins, 2022). Tunis joined the Belt and Road Initiative in 2018 and the Asian Investment Development Bank in 2019 in its quest for greater Chinese economic support, which has so far remained elusive and often overestimated. Trade relations have grown but remain highly unbalanced: while China is Tunisia's third largest supplier – behind Italy and France – with

[17] Days after Wang's meeting with Tunisian Foreign Affairs Minister Jerandi and during the 2021 US-led Summit for Democracy, China published its White paper on 'Whole-Process Democracy', invocating a different set of parameters to define democracy and framing its political system as democratic (SCIO, 2021) and a criticism piece of the US' democracy situation.

exports amounting to $2.38 billion, Tunisian exports to China totalled only $132 million in 2022 (OEC, 2025), revealing a significant trade imbalance. Similarly, China is the 32nd largest investor in Tunisia, with its FDI accounting for only 0.09% of the country's FDI stock in 2022 (FIPA-Tunisia, 2022).

In the international cooperation field, Beijing's engagement in Tunisia mostly revolves around infrastructure development through grant-making and aid directed to improve social conditions. According to AidData (2025), China has destined $117 million in grants between 2011 and 2021, with health services being the primary sector ($63 million), followed by projects in education – including the 2024 inauguration of the Tunisian diplomatic academy ($23 million) and youth centres in Ben Arous and El Menzeh. However, these numbers are pale in comparison to aid flows from the EU and Gulf countries.

One key reason for China's limited economic presence in Tunisia is the country's ongoing domestic instability, which is aggravated by political disagreements and competition between Tunisian actors (Zhang, 2020; Dispatch Risk, 2023). Additional barriers –such as bureaucratic obstacles and restrictions on foreign labour– have frequently delayed or even led to the abandonment of infrastructure projects (Selmi, 2022), further contributing to Chinese limited presence. In fact, Chinese entities have avoided becoming creditors to the country, instead encouraging Tunis to negotiate and accept the $1.9 bn deal from the IMF –a proposal that Saied has firmly rejected, denouncing it as an example of the 'Western diktats' imposed on Tunisia (TAP, 2023; Aliriza, 2023).

In the field of security cooperation, Chinese presence remains negligible. China has offered limited aid and military supplies to Tunisia, including an $8 million grant in 2013 for counterterrorism and border control equipment, as well as the donation of transport equipment – motorbikes and ambulances – for the Tunisian army and police in 2023 (CASCF, 2023). For instance, the United States have provided over $1 billion in security assistance to Tunisia since 2011 (Middle East Monitor, 2025).

By contrast, Chinese actors have been active in the digital transformation sector. Huawei is an active player in Tunisia's deployment of broadband networks although it does not develop 5G technology in the country; largely due to significant pressures from the US Embassy over national security and data privacy concerns (Blome, 2020). Despite these constraints, Huawei's *Seeds for the Future* project has trained ICT engineers from across the Arab region, including to 135 Tunisian students since 2015 (El-Kadi, 2024; Dagdoug, 2023). This trend of cooperation has intensified since 2023, with the signing of a MoU between the Chinese and Tunisian governments to cooperate in the field of digital governance, digital economy and infrastructure, and joint research and training in science and technology (TAP, 2023b). While the initiative holds potential to strengthen Tunisia's digital authoritarian practices – currently underpinned by Western technologies (Camps-Febrer et al., 2024) – its actual impact remains uncertain, as no concrete projects have yet been implemented under this new cooperation framework.

3. Conclusion and implications for the European Union

Sino-Tunisian ties remain underdeveloped, which helps explain why China's impact on Tunisia has so far been relatively limited. Beijing appears unwilling to become entangled in the fragile economic situation of Tunisia and has refrained from any involvement in political issues, citing

its strict adherence to the principles of state sovereignty and non-interference. Over the period under study, China has accommodated and supported successive regimes in Tunisia, regardless of their democratic or authoritarian nature. In this regard, the 2024 China-Tunisia strategic partnership, first negotiated when Tunisia was still formally on a democratic path, may indicate a reassessment of bilateral ties. Yet, it remains unclear whether this agreement will translate into substantive authoritarian collaboration beyond China's discursive support for President Saied.

Tunisia's return to authoritarianism has also provided Beijing with an opportunity to advance its global contestation of liberal democracy, especially as democratic discourse has increasingly become a point of ideological confrontation between China and the United States under the Biden administration. This has been evident in China's discursive emphasis on alternative developmental models and a concept of democracy that can be adapted to national characteristics.

From the European Union's perspective, this entails three key considerations. First, the EU should not overreact or exaggerate the Chinese potential role and (negative) impact as European and Gulf actors continue to represent the key partners to Tunis. Second, despite competition in the economic domain, China may contribute to some common objectives to appease social discontent in Tunisia through education and health services, even with its negligible role. Third, while China's accommodation and discursive support of Kais Saied regime is another source of legitimacy for a non-democratic government, Brussels also needs to come to terms with its own contradictory actions. Indeed, cases like the migration deals and the pragmatism guiding the interest of state members like France and Italy, has also reaffirmed and legitimised Tunisia's authoritarian turn against the EU's democracy support practices.

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2. The Council of Europe's Rule of Law Promotion in Tunisia: Assessing the Impact on Tunisian Democracy

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Since the ousting of the Ben Ali regime in 2011, Tunisia has undergone a process of constitutional reconstruction and reorganisation, culminating, for the present, in a re-autocratisation under the Kais Saied regime. Many of these constitutional shifts had also been accompanied by lengthy cooperation with the institutions and expertise of the Council of Europe (CoE) alongside Tunisian lawyers, judges, and lawmakers alike. The basis of their efforts is grounded in the experience and expertise accumulated throughout the organisation's collaboration with post-dictatorships in Southern Europe or post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. While Tunisia is not formally a member of the Strasbourg-based body, barred from full membership due to its location outside of the geographical boundaries of Europe, the two have maintained and expanded consistent formats for cooperation since 2012. Tunisa and the CoE pursued an ambitious agenda, especially during the period until 2021. However, whereas the European Court of Human Rights and the CoE's Committee of Ministers' bodies play a major role in enforcing CoE standards in CoE member countries, their enforcement for Tunisia remains solely the responsibility of domestic institutions. Against this background, the focus of this report is to assess the impact of the CoE's practices on Tunisian democracy.

Much of the Tunisia-CoE cooperation's framework and its instruments are not directly dedicated to democracy support. Instead, many of their interactions over the last 15 years are most explicitly concentrated around establishing rule of law mechanisms in the post-Revolution Tunisian governance landscape as part of the CoE's larger ambition to build a 'common legal area' between Europe and the Southern Mediterranean Region.[18] Nevertheless, the scope of the CoE's activities in the Southern Mediterranean more broadly and in Tunisia in particular has undeniably been to introduce democracy components into the new mode of governance. In addition to the intersection between the rule of law and democracy support as crucial within SHAPEDEM-EU's framework, this report also looks at how the cross-cutting challenges of gender and digital transformations have been included in their activities. After introducing the instrumental framework for cooperation between the Council of Europe and non-member states, this section of the report lays out the concrete steps in the interactions between Tunisia and the CoE followed by a section assessing the impact of the CoE instruments.

1. The Council of Europe in Tunisia

Tunisia's path to democracy over the last two decades was a gradual unfolding, unwinding the past decades of an entrenched autocratic system. At the end of the 2000s, a succession of labour riots and social movements toppled the preexisting regime and ushered in a new era in Tunisian politics in the ensuing decade.

[18] Office of the Directorate General of Programmes 2021, p. 7.

As a reaction to the events of the so-called the 'Arab spring'[19], the CoE established its 'Istanbul parameters' in 2011 to determine how its bodies can cooperate with countries in the Middle East and North Africa. The guidelines detail three main objectives including facilitating democratic political transitions, the promotion of good governance in line with CoE standards, and reinforcing and enlarging 'the Council of Europe regional action in combating trans-border and global threats such as trafficking in human beings, cybercrime, organised crime, terrorism, etc.' (Secretary General 4/19/2011). The key frameworks and instruments of co-operation between the CoE and the Southern Neighbourhood are legal advisement and expert-to-expert collaboration, election observation, partnerships for democracy, participation in certain CoE structures, and accession to CoE Conventions.

At the time of its introduction in 2011, the Istanbul parameters encompassed a bilateral structure for 'Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities' introduced for Jordan, Morrocco and Tunisia. Later editions were renamed 'Neighbourhood Partnerships'.

Partnership Document	Period
Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities with Tunisia	**2012 – 2014**
Neighbourhood Partnership with Tunisia	**2015 - 2017**
Neighbourhood Partnership with Tunisia	**2018 - 2021**
Neighbourhood Partnership with Tunisia	**2022 - 2025**

Table 8: CoE and Tunisia Frameworks[20]

The partnership documents outline key priority areas for cooperation, detailing extensive plans for joint work on reforming Tunisia's democracy, rule of law foundations and protections for human rights. The plans detail projects and programmes tailored to Tunisian needs but also refer to larger regional efforts with the other countries of the Southern Neighbourhood. Table 1, located in the Annex due to the extent of the information contained, reproduces the programmes implemented under the sub-header 'Democracy' along with their key objective.

The key turning points in Tunisian politics as identified are mentioned in the programmatic documents. In certain iterations, direct references are made, with the constitutional and election reforms coming into focus. Others, such as the 2015 state of emergency, are not explicitly mentioned, while Kais Saied's power grab is only referred to afterwards in the most recent Partnership document. Hence, while the Council of Europe demonstrated a keenness to align with

[19] While some institutions, such as the Council of Europe (CoE), use the term 'Arab Spring' to describe the 2010–2011 popular uprisings across the MENA region, this report instead uses 'Arab uprisings' or 'Arab revolutions.' The term 'Arab Spring,' though widely adopted in Western media and policy circles, has been critiqued for its Orientalising overtones, suggesting a passive 'awakening' of Arab societies. In contrast, 'uprisings' or 'revolutions' foreground the political agency of the actors involved and better reflect the structural causes that drove the protests. *See*: Bayat, Asef. *Revolution Without Revolutionaries: Making Sense of the Arab Spring*. Stanford University Press, 2017.

[20] All Programmatic documents can be found at the Council of Europe's Directorate of Programme Co-ordination: https://www.coe.int/en/web/programmes/documents (last access 24th of April 2025).

Tunisia's ambitious embarkment on a pro-democratic turn, it proved less responsive to potential trend reversals. It should also, however, be noted that these documents are drafted together with Tunisian officials, implying that the lack of responsiveness may be attributed to Tunis' unwillingness to have Strasbourg react.

The CoE' s Practices in Tunisia

The documentation on the Council of Europe's partnerships with Tunisia reveal an ambitious start to cooperation, ushered in at the onset of the Arab uprisings. The table 1 located in the Annex outlines the key priority areas. Evident in the scope of activities are a blanket of projects and programmes to introduce democracy reforms in multi-institutional arrangements at every level of government and society.

Firstly, several arrangements at the international level indicate an eagerness for both the CoE and Tunisia to collaborate on issues directly related to democracy. A co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe was inaugurated to familiarise Tunisian representatives with European parliamentary practices, as members of the Tunisian parliament were first invited to PACE sessions beginning in 2012 as well as to certain PACE committee meetings. While the ambition to formalise a 'Partner for Democracy' status was outlined in the first Neighbourhood Co-Operation Priorities 2012-2014[21] and reiterated in the Partnership documentation 2015-2017, the Neighbourhood Partnership for 2018-2021 indicated that the Tunisian Assembly of the Representatives of the People had 'no plans to apply'[22] for the same status that as exists between PACE and Palestine, Morocco and Jordan. Later, by 2022, Kais Saied's coup led to a freezing of all interactions with PACE.

A similar eagerness to work with internationally oriented bodies was also apparent for Tunisia's regard for the European Commission for Democracy through Law, also known as the Venice Commission, which Tunisia formally joined in 2010. The full list of opinions issued by the Venice Commission is located in table 2 in the Annex. While the Venice Commission's opinions are not legally binding, the expertise on rule of law matters that it provides nevertheless make it an essential resource for its member states (Hoffmann-Riem 2014). Importantly, the Venice Commission offers its opinions at the request of members, which the table also notes. A recent development in the institution is that members can request opinions from the Vencie Commission on developments or proposals in another. Tunisia here represents an insight case.

The opinions issued by the Venice Commission on Tunisian matters demonstrates a shift over time, in particular as regards the requesting actors listed in table 4.2. As Tunisian representatives were redrafting the constitution leading up to the 2014 constitutional change, the CoE's Venice Commission delivered two key opinions in 2013. The first was requested in conjunction with the OSCE's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, the second on behalf of the Speaker of the Tunisian National Constituent Assembly. Representatives and ministers continued requesting opinions on reforms and proposals through June 2019. By 2022, however, the tide had turned with the EU's External Action Service submitting an urgent request for an opinion on

[21] Council of Europe Secretariat 2014, p. 20; Congress of Local and Regional Authorities 2025

[22] Office of the Directorate General of Programmes 2018, p. 23. Despite the reluctance for this relationship with PACE, an agreement was signed in 2014 to adopt a 'Partner for local democracy' status was agreed with the CoE's Congress of Local and Regional Authorities, which sends a delegation of 4 representatives and 4 substitutes to the Congress' sessions (Congress of Local and Regional Authorities 2025).

Saied's constitutional referendum, rather than Tunisia itself making the request. This was met with harsh criticism from the Tunisian president, who threatened to end Tunisia's membership over perceived 'blatant interference' (Amara 2022). Although the Minister of State Domains and Land Affairs of Tunisia, Mohamed Rekik, requested an opinion of the Venice Commission a few months later, this was merely related to a draft code on property laws, hence it did not affect crucial issues of democracy at all.

Secondly, Tunisian representatives met the eagerness of the Council of Europe to elaborate cooperation frameworks at the regional and local levels. The Neighbourhood Partnerships of the first half of the decade indicates a number of programmes and projects to address elections, good governance and public administration. While these formats have persisted throughout the 15 years of the CoE's interactions with Tunisian officials, their size and scope have been abbreviated to streamline the implementation of the CoE's project management (Council of Europe 2025). Despite the narrowing of the focus of these programmes, their ambition and scope are also dramatically reduced in the process. For example, elections appear as a key area of cooperation in the first Neighbourhood Co-Operation Priorities in 2012, however, these are relegated to local and regional democracy issues by the latest Neighbourhood Partnership in 2022.

Furthermore, the first Neighbourhood Cooperation Partnership document identifies training public, civil society leaders and women leaders as well as managers and diplomatic staff as an important objective. This, in addition to establishing a school of political studies for future public leaders. These measures indicate broad range of democracy support-related leadership trainings with a potential to transform parts of Tunisian society. By 2022, however, the Neighbourhood Partnership only refers to leadership training through the impact of the Tunisian School of Politics. Of course, this reduction can be seen as an effort to streamline their programmatic cooperation, however, the ambition to reach out to different manners of societal leaders is comparatively lower. This represents a broader trend amongst CoE projects with Neighbourhood countries, including those in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus (Arco and Bourekba, 2024).

Thirdly, and perhaps most substantially, the Council of Europe and Tunisia inaugurated many programmes at the societal level from 2012. These frameworks have targeted issue areas such as education, youth, sports and culture. Many of these projects have also been adopted at the regional level in concert with projects across the MENA region. On the one hand, these projects have aimed at training lawyers and jurists. On the other hand, they have sought broad objectives, encouraging political participation, democratic citizenship and public awareness alongside efforts to combat hate speech. Over time, these objectives have not been diluted or reduced in size.

When taking stock of the Council of Europe's activities in Tunisia, a worrisome trend becomes clear. Whereas the joint actions initially were very ambitious, these tapered especially after Kais Saied's coup. The wide net cast over society and governance in Strasbourg's approach to Tunisian democracy was reduced in size. In part, this can be attributed to general tendencies within the CoE's programmes to streamline their objectives to ensure efficiency. However, the Tunisian government's interest to agree to lofty goals also fell as Kais Saied reshaped the government. The outcome is that in many ways the ambitions of the post- revolutionary period could not be sustained.

2. Gender Equality

Alongside the Council of Europe's programmes to support Tunisian democracy, the CoE has several treaties to which non-member states can accede that bear relevance to SHAPEDEM-EU's understanding of democratic practices. Admittedly, the scope and applicability of CoE treaties in Tunisian governance are rather limited given that the interpretation and enforcement of their terms is reserved for the Tunisian court system. In the case of member countries, it would be the European Court of Human Rights and the executive bodies of the Committee of Ministers who would closely monitor their implementation. Nevertheless, it bears some merit to inspect these issues more closely.

In the area of gender equality, the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence is the leading example for working against gender-based violence. The Istanbul Convention, however, has not been signed by Tunisia, though it was invited to do so. Alongside this convention, two others are relevant to improve gender equality: firstly, the Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings and the other on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse. Although their relevance to the intersection between gender equality and democracy support is not explicit, these three conventions taken as a whole represent important indicators in Tunisia's level of commitment to equality and protections for society's most vulnerable individuals. In this case, commitments to sign treaties protecting victims of human trafficking and women have been made verbally, although legally this bears little weight. The commitment to protect children took a considerable amount of time to pass into law and predated the Saied coup in 2021. At the time of writing, the Tunisian government has not ratified any additional CoE treaties and has only signed a convention against counterfeiting medical products.

Convention	Date of Tunisia's Accession
Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings (CETS No. 197)	**16/05/2005**
Council of Europe Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse (CETS No. 201)	**25/10/2007** **Rat: 15/10/2019** **Entry: 01/02/2020**
Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women and Domestic Violence (CETS No. 210)	**Tunisia has been invited to sign and indicated it will not**

Table 9: Tunisia's Accession to CoE Treaties related to gender equality[2324]

[23] For a full list of treaties which Tunisia has signed or ratified as of 26th of July 2021, see Treaty Office 2021.

3. Assessing the Impact of 15 Years of Cooperation between Tunisia and the CoE

Several international organisations and countries have attempted to improve the governance situation in Tunisia in the last 15 years. To attribute major advances in Tunisia's democratic governance to the Council of Europe and the programmes it enacted there would be a massive overstatement. This would overstep the central role played by Tunisians authorities and civil society. Nevertheless, viewing the CoE's objectives there as well as their responsiveness appears to mirror the country's own trajectory over the last five years.

Firstly, although the Council of Europe was very quick to respond to positive developments in Tunisia during the first half of the 2010s – for instance, by opening a school of politics, where people from civil society could learn about transition proceedings (Council of Europe 2013), it could not proceed as ambitiously in the latter half. Many of the projects implemented were directly tailored to the needs of the growing democracy. At a time when the country could make use of Strasbourg's constitutional and electoral expertise, the Council of Europe was ready to work with Tunisians. However, as Kais Saied slowly upended the country's constitutional order following his election in 2019, the CoE's impact has seemingly been rolled back, as Tunisian democracy has been dismantled. Instead, continuing the Saied administration's access to many of the formats of the CoE granted it the opportunity to window dress its own rule of law credentials.

Secondly, the CoE granting access to its programs proved to be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Strasbourg was able to lend its expertise and experience to a burgeoning democracy. This proved vital as the new constitution was drafted and elections were held. However, now that the Saied government has withdrawn from past commitments to ratify CoE treaties and deepen partnerships, the remaining fields of cooperation may perhaps be less impactful for the functioning of Tunisian democracy.

Finally, and perhaps more optimistically, the projects enacted by the Council of Europe at the society level proved crucial. Since 2012, particularly projects such as the Council of Europe's North-South Centre or judicial training programmes were an aid to Tunisian democracy as they assisted the community of NGO activists and lawyers who now form the resistance to increasing authoritarianisation and stand in the crosshairs of the regime (Human Rights Watch 2023; United Nations 5/31/2024).

4. Conclusion

Reflecting on the Council of Europe's actions in Tunisia in 2025 is prone to sentimentality over the so-called Arab uprisings at large. In many ways, Tunisia represents one of the most dynamic examples of the CoE's cooperation with a non-member country. The Council of Europe was ready to expand its frameworks beyond its own members during a time when the Ben Ali regime was toppled in 2011. Moreover, it was eager to impart many of the lessons the organisation had learned internally from within due to over a decade of experience through working with its post-Soviet member countries.

Still, much of the early excitement has dwindled. Whereas the first period of cooperation was marked by a comprehensive approach, the appetite for reforms and cooperation has diminished. At the same time, the present government seems less than enthused for opinions of Strasbourg

institutions to be shared or for its culture of legalism to remain pervasive in Tunisian society. Presently, it is likely that much of what had previously expanded will be further scaled down.

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5. Annex

Co-operation Priorities and Neighbourhood Partnerships with Tunisia 2012 - 2025

Partnership Document	Programme Period	Democracy-related Components
Neighbourhood Co-operation Priorities	2012 - 2014	**Co-operation with the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe** Overall objective: familiarising the Tunisian authorities with European parliamentary and political practices, and contributing to strengthening democratic processes.
		Democratic governance at local and regional level in co-operation with the Congress of Local and Regional Authorities Overall objective: to contribute to the establishment of the institutional framework for local democracy in Tunisia.
		Elections Overall objective: to improve the functioning of democratic processes and institutions, including those relating to political parties.
		Training in democratic standards of good governance Overall objective: contribute on human rights, the rule of law and democratic citizenship in Tunisia. To motivate future political leaders and young managers who will in turn encourage reform and promote human rights. To build the foundations for good governance within institutions and Tunisian society through a range of CoE tools available. This activity would have a regional dimension aimed at promoting co-operation between neighbouring countries.
		Training of future leaders in democratic standards of good governance: School of Political Studies Expected result:[25] Launch of the School of Political Studies and training of 40 participants per year among the new generation of public leaders. Negotiations on the establishment of the school are well advanced and the school should be launched in the next few months.
		Participation in training of future managers in public administrations, and of parliamentary and diplomatic staff, on human rights and democratic standards of good governance Expected results[26]: inclusion of specific modules in existing training programmes; strengthening capacities through training, and training of trainers, in these fields; organisation of practical courses and study visits, notably for diplomatic students.

[25] No overall objective listed.
[26] No overall objective listed.

		Training of civil society leaders Overall objective: to train civil society leaders in a code of good practice in order to participate in decision-making processes within civil society
		Democratic governance through education Overall objective: to strengthen democratic culture through the development of education policies and practices
		Democratic governance through culture Overall objective: to contribute to efficient, transparent governance in the cultural field, drawing on CoE conventions, especially the European Cultural Convention
		Sustainable democratic societies *Investing in young people* Overall objective: To support the Government in its youth policy-making through the evaluation and design of youth policies and strategies, promoting youth-led organisations, promoting European democratic values amongst young people, and developing networks of youth initiatives. *Co-operation with the North-South Centre* Overall objective: to offer a platform of structured co-operation at governmental, parliamentary, local and regional authorities and civil society levels between the CoE and Tunisia, International Organisation of La Francophonie. *Sport and ethics* Overall objective: To contribute to enhanced public order by strengthening the policy framework and operational capacities in the field of spectator safety and security at sports events and football matches in particular, based on European standards and good practices in the field of sports policies and the sports community
Neighbourhood Partnership	**2015-2017**	**Interparliamentary co-operation** Overall objective: To help to strengthen the role and capacities of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People of Tunisia
		Democratic governance at local and regional level Overall objective: To assist the local and regional reform currently taking place and help to strengthen local and regional democracy and associations of local and regional authorities
		Strengthening of participatory democracy and of civil society stakeholders Overall objective: to strengthen the role of civil society in the preparation, implementation and evaluation of the decisions and projects of elected institutions and the public authorities and in raising public awareness of the importance of citizen participation in the democratic transition
		Training in democratic governance and human rights education Overall objective: To enable target audiences (young professionals, youth organisations) to further develop and/or acquire knowledge in the field of human rights, the rule of law and good governance.

Neighbourhood Partnership	**2018 - 2021**	**Strengthening democratic governance and fostering innovation** *Parliamentary Assembly* **O**verall objective: to facilitate the adoption of new legislative frameworks in accordance with European standards by strengthening the role, capacities and awareness of MPs and parliamentary officials *Local and Regional Democracy* Overall objective: to support the decentralisation process in accordance with European standards, the strengthening of the involvement of local authorities and the development of mechanisms to encourage citizen participation at local and regional levels
		Promoting Participation and Diversity *Support for the Tunisian School of Politics* *Education for Democracy – North-South Centre* *Mediterranean University on Youth and Global Citizenship* *No Hate Speech Movement* *Network of Intercultural Cities* Overall objective: to promote the participation of civil society and young people
Neighbourhood Partnership	**2022 - 2025**	**Local and Regional Democracy** Overall objective: to support the decentralisation process, increased involvement of local and, where appropriate, regional authorities, and the development of mechanisms for citizen participation at local and regional levels
		Democratic Governance *Co-operation with the parliament* Overall objective: to strengthen the co-operation of the Venice Commission and the PACE with the parliament
		Democratic participation *Education for democracy* Overall objective: to promote education for democratic citizenship and human rights education *Global Interdependence and Solidarity (North-South Centre)* *School of Politics, youth* Overall objective: to promote human rights education and the participation of civil society stakeholders, in particular young people and women, in public and political life

Opinion	Year	Requesting Actor
Joint Opinion on the Law no. 2008-37 of 16 June 2008 relating to the Higher Committee for Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms of the Republic of Tunisia, by the Venice Commission and the OSCE/ODIHR, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 95th Plenary Session (Venice, 14-15 June 2013)	2013	Advisor of the Minister of Human Rights and Transitional Justice in Tunisia, request for joint opinion from OSCE/ODIHR
Opinion on the Final Draft Constitution of the Republic of Tunisia, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 96th Plenary Session (Venice, 11-12 October 2013)	2013	Speaker of the National Constituent Assembly of Tunisia, Mustapha Ben Jaafe
Opinion on the draft institutional law on the Constitutional Court of Tunisia, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 104th Plenary Session (Venice, 23-24 October 2015)	2015	Tunisian Foreign Ministry
Tunisia - Opinion on the draft institutional law on the organisation of political parties and their funding, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 116th Plenary Session (Venice, 19-20 October 2018)	2018	Minister for Relations with Constitutional Bodies, Civil Society and Human Rights of Tunisia, Mehdi Ben Gharbi
Tunisia - Opinion on the Draft Organic Law on the Authority for Sustainable Development and the Rights of Future Generations, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 119th Plenary Session (Venice, 21-22 June 2019)	2019	Minister assigned to the Head of Government with responsibility for relations with independent institutions and civil society and human rights, Mohamed Fadhel Mahfoudh, and the Chairperson of the parliamentary committee on industry, energy, natural resources, infrastructure and the environment, Amayeur Laarayedh
Tunisia - Urgent Opinion on the constitutional and legislative framework on the referendum and elections announcements by the president of the Republic, and in particular on the decree-law n°22 of 21 April 2022 amending and completing the organic law on the independent high authority for elections (ISIE), issued on 27 May 2022 pursuant to Article 14a of the Venice Commission's Rules of Procedure, endorsed by the Venice Commission at its 131st Plenary Session (Venice, 17- 18 June 2022)	2022	EEAS

Tunisia - Opinion on the draft State Property Code, adopted by the Venice Commission at its 131st Plenary Session (Venice, 17-18 June 2022)	**2022**	M. Mohamed Rekik, Minister of State Domains and Land Affairs of Tunisia

3. Democracy Resistance and Ideological Opposition: Saudi Arabia's Role in Tunisia

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In the aftermath of the Arab uprisings, Saudi Arabia emerged as a staunch supporter of counter-revolutionary and reactionary forces across the MENA region. This stance was driven by the Kingdom's imperative to maintain regime legitimacy and safeguard the interests of the ruling Al Saud family (Wright, 2011; Al-Rasheed, 2010; Gause, 2010). In Tunisia, although to a lesser extent than in other countries where KSA's interests are more pronounced –such as Egypt, Libya, Siria, Bahrain, and Yemen–, Riyadh aimed to suppress revolutionary movements that threatened the prevailing autocratic order. In this context, Saudi foreign policy toward Tunisia can be understood as a form of democracy resistance – a deliberate strategy by authoritarian regimes to undermine democratisation processes (Nodia, 2014). This posture remained consistent throughout the period under study (2011–2021).

1. Countering democracy and political Islam in Tunisia

In the aftermath of Tunisia's 2011 revolution, Saudi Arabia showed limited strategic engagement with the country, particularly when contrasted with its strong and sustained support for Egypt's counterrevolutionary efforts. Riyadh's support was largely symbolic, exemplified by its decision to grant asylum to former President Ben Ali – a personal friend of King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz and strategic ally in the fight against political Islam – under the explicit condition that he refrain from any political activity while residing in the Kingdom (Santini, 2017).

The ascent of the reformist Islamist party Ennahda after the 2011 Constituent Assembly elections intensified Saudi concerns. Viewing Ennahda as an ideological cousin of Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood – a movement perceived as an existential threat to monarchical rule (Lacroix, 2014)– Saudi Arabia actively sought to promote democracy resistance, working to limit the influence of the reformist Islamist party. From Riyadh's perspective, the new administration's close ties to Turkey and Qatar – regional rivals of Saudi Arabia – were cause for concern, especially given the substantial financial and political support these actors provided to Tunisia throughout 2012 and 2013 (Khayrullin, and Korotayev, 2023).

A shift occurred with the 2014 parliamentary and presidential elections, which were won by the secular-leaning Nidaa Tounes and its leader, Beji Caid Essebsi. The Essebsi administration placed a strategic emphasis on restoring ties with Saudi Arabia, with the president's personal commitment to deepening bilateral relations playing a pivotal role in advancing diplomatic and security cooperation between the two countries.

This realignment intersected with Riyadh's shifting approach to Islamist parties across the region, which began to soften from mid-2015 under the leadership of King Salman (Gresh, 2015). His administration adopted a more pragmatic stance, increasingly viewing certain Islamist movements as potential strategic partners in efforts to counterbalance Iran's expanding regional influence (Gresh, 2015). These overlapping changes paved the way for a notable rapprochement between the two countries. Tunisia's inclusion in Saudi Arabia's 34-nation Islamic military coalition against ISIS in December 2015 marked a turning point (Santini, 2017). This development followed Tunisia's announcement of its participation in the US-led anti-ISIS coalition, underscoring the government's growing commitment to international counterterrorism

cooperation and its efforts to position Tunisia as a reliable security partner in the global fight against extremism (Santini, 2017). That same month, President Essebsi visited Riyadh, resulting in the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on bilateral cooperation in security and defense (AlArabiya, 2016). The agreement institutionalized cooperation through the creation of an annual joint military commission, designed to facilitate structured exchanges on training and civil protection. Importantly, this rapprochement would not have been possible without a parallel transformation within Ennahda. From late 2013 and increasingly in 2014, Ennahda leadership recalibrated its position toward Saudi Arabia, adopting a more conciliatory stance. Aware of Saudi Arabia's staunch support for the Egyptian military and its broader opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, Ennahda recognized the risks of continued alignment with Qatar and Turkey.

In an effort to recalibrate its regional posture and avoid isolation, Ennahda adopted a more conciliatory tone toward Riyadh, signaling its non-interference in regional dynamics and abandoning any ambition to 'export' the Tunisian model (Yildirim, 2017). Relations between Ennahda and Saudi Arabia grew increasingly strained following Tunisia's 2019 legislative elections, in which Ennahda secured 52 seats in the 217-member parliament, reaffirming its central role in the political landscape (Al-Jazeera, 2019). This renewed electoral momentum reignited Riyadh's longstanding concerns over the rise of political Islam in the region. Tensions escalated further when Ennahda's leader, Rached Ghannouchi, expressed support for the UN-backed Government of National Accord (GNA) in Libya, which directly opposed General Haftar—a figure backed by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Kahlaoui, 2020). Ghannouchi's subsequent visit to Ankara, another prominent actor opposing the Emirati-Saudi axis in the Libyan conflict, further deepened the diplomatic rift, reinforcing Saudi perceptions of Ennahda as aligned with rival regional powers and ideologically incompatible with its counter-Islamist agenda (Brumberg, 2021).

2. Riyadh's Support for Kais Saied: Embracing Authoritarian Stability

As Ennahda remained a significant political contender, this pattern persisted under President Kais Saied, who was elected in 2019. Therefore, it was unsurprising that the KSA welcomed President Saied's dismissal of parliament, and the subsequent authoritarian turn in July 2021. Saudi Foreign Minister Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud expressed respect for Tunisia's sovereignty while emphasising the KSA's commitment to supporting Tunisia's economy, which had been weakened by the COVID-19 crisis (Xinhuanet, 2021). Given that Saudi Arabia's modus operandi in Tunisia has historically aimed to limit the influence of Islamist parties like Ennahda, Saied's authoritarian grip on the state and his prevention of leadership changes may align with Riyadh's political interests. As Tunisia reverts to a pre-Arab Spring status, this shift suggests that the country's reformist political orientation – perceived as a potential challenge to Saudi Arabia's vision – will not take root.

Given that Saudi Arabia's long-standing strategy in Tunisia has focused on limiting the influence of Islamist parties like Ennahda, Saied's authoritarian grip on the state and prevention of leadership changes align with Riyadh's political interests. As Tunisia increasingly reverted to authoritarianism, this shift suggests that the country's earlier reformist and democratic momentum — perceived by Saudi Arabia as a potential threat — will be contained. In this light, Saied is widely viewed in Riyadh as a reliable partner in maintaining regional stability (Sons, 2013).

This pragmatic approach also included efforts to strengthen economic ties between the two countries, particularly by expanding KSA's non-oil exports to Tunisia in key sectors such as agriculture, water resources, and industry (Arabnews, 2023). However, trade volumes remain low, with imports from Saudi Arabia accounting for approximately 2.46% of Tunisia's total imports, while Tunisian exports to Saudi Arabia represent only 0.30% of total exports (World Bank, 2022). Saudi interest in Tunisia appears to be evolving, notably through the financing of 32 cooperation projects via the Saudi Fund for Development (SFD), with a total value of $1.32 billion (The Arab Weekly, 2024). To date, however, there has been no significant Saudi engagement in Tunisia in areas such as security, migration, energy, gender, or digital transformation.

3. Conclusions and Implications for the European Union

To conclude, Saudi Arabia's engagement in Tunisia post-2011 reflects its broader regional policy of countering revolutionary movements and Islamist political ascendancy. Its policy is characterised by a consistent prioritisation of regime stability and firm opposition to the spread of political Islam. In Tunisia, initially focused on supporting counter-revolutionary forces and democracy resistance, Riyadh adapted pragmatically to the changing political landscape by embracing Kais Saied's authoritarian turn as a safeguard against Ennahda's resurgence. While Saudi economic interests remain modest in Tunisia, Riyadh's involvement remains largely driven by strategic calculations to maintain regional stability and curb the influence of political Islam across the region.

Although the EU and Saudi Arabia formally maintain divergent positions on democracy support in Tunisia, recent patterns of cooperation between the EU and President Saied's government reveal a de facto European endorsement of his leadership, despite ongoing democratic backsliding. This shift reflects a broader trend toward interest-driven engagement, where priorities such as regional stability and migration control increasingly outweigh normative commitments to democratic governance. The Memorandum of Understanding signed in July 2023 by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, and Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte underscores this pragmatic turn in EU external action (European Commission, 2023). Overall, Saudi Arabia's approach to Tunisia blends cautious strategic calculation with selective economic investment, aimed at limiting Islamist influence and preserving regional order. Riyadh's support for President Saied – mirrored by the EU's own pragmatic shift – illustrates a broader convergence around authoritarian stabilisation.

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4. Qatar in Tunisia: From Selective Democracy Support to Authoritarian Accommodation

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Qatar's involvement in Tunisia can be understood through three interconnected lenses: 1) regional security interests, particularly in relation to post-revolution instability and conflict in neighbouring Libya; 2) ideological alignment through support for political Islam, notably parties and movements inspired by or affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood; and 3) a broader strategy of international influence and regime self-preservation amidst intensifying rivalries within the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries (Dandashly, 2025). Rather than acting as a neutral donor, Qatar positioned itself as an active political actor, leveraging aid, investment, and media influence to shape Tunisia's post-revolutionary trajectory in line with its geopolitical priorities.

Throughout the period analysed (2010-2024), Qatar's foreign policy in Tunisia evolved from that a partisan engagement with democratic change to a more pragmatic acceptance of authoritarian consolidation. In the initial phase (2011-2019), Doha sought to open Tunisia's political and media space, challenge the old autocratic status quo, and support the Ennahda Party, while leveraging Al Jazeera as a key media platform to amplify pro-democracy narratives. However, since 2019, as Tunisia has gradually reverted to authoritarian governance, Qatar has demonstrated a growing willingness to accommodate the new authoritarian regime led by President Kais Saied.

1. Backing regime change: Doha's political, economic and media leverage in post-2011 Tunisia

Doha was quick to embrace the 2010-2011 Tunisian revolution, providing active support for the democratic transition as a means to advance both its regional interests and those of its ideologically allies such as Ennahda. As the revolution gained traction, Doha mobilised its economic resources and soft power to support the regime change. This strategy was partly intended to present Qatar as a progressive, modern, and pro-democracy actor. At the same time, it sought to strengthen Qatar's position and that of Islamist movements across the region, particularly in the context of growing competition among GCC countries in North Africa. This marked a break from Qatar's traditionally neutral foreign policy. Qatar's support for Tunisia's democratic transition relied on three primary dimensions: economic assistance, political backing for Islamist actors, and the use of digital technologies to facilitate the political changes unfolding since 2011.

First, economic support – delivered through loans and aid, financial and infrastructure investment – proved pivotal, not only in consolidating Qatari influence in post-revolution Tunisia, but also in underpinning the country's democratic transformation. In 2012, Doha pledged over $1.5 billion in loans, including the purchase of $500 million in five-year Tunisian treasury bonds at 2.5% interest, as well as employment opportunities for 20,000 Tunisian graduates (Gulf Business, 2012). The Qatari government also committed $1.25 billion in economic aid over five years at the 'Tunisia 2020' investment conference held in Tunis in November 2016 (Qatar Tribune,

2016; S. Khatri, 2016). According to Qatari officials, the country invested nearly $1 billion in Tunisia between 2014 and 2017 (Middle East Monitor, 2017). Through these efforts, Doha secured a strong position in the country, becoming Tunisia's leading Arab investor (African Manager, 2015).

Beyond state-level initiatives, Qatar channelled considerable funding towards social resilience initiatives through institutions such as the Qatar Friendship Fund, the Qatar Fund for Development, the Education Above All Foundation, and the Silatech Foundation (Jacobs, 2020). These efforts focused on reducing youth unemployment, supporting job creation, expanding educational opportunities, and providing financial and technical assistance to Tunisian start-ups and microfinance enterprises.

In addition to its economic engagement, Doha provided substantial political backing to Ennahda party, a key actor in Tunisian post-revolutionary politics which led a coalition government from October 2011 to January 2014. Qatar's support was rooted in its broader regional strategy of promoting Islamist movements that share its interpretation of political Islam as a source, particularly in the wake of the Arab uprisings (Ulrichsen, 2014; Lacroix, 2022). However, ideological affinity alone does not fully explain this support. In the words of Di Dio (2025): 'its interest lies in the strategic and diplomatic leverage that ties with Islamist groups provide... these alliances serve a dual purpose: they advance Qatar's geopolitical interests while also reinforcing an ideological connection with both its domestic population and the broader Arab world'.

This approach made Ennahda, a 'Tunisian religious party that emerged from the Muslim Brotherhood school of Islamism' (Marks, 2015: 1), a natural ally for Doha, which viewed the party as a vehicle to project influence in North Africa while countering rival GCC powers backing pro-status quo actors. Since 2011, the Qatari government a has provided Ennahda with strong political endorsement, notably through diplomatic engagement, symbolic recognition, and media amplification. Al Jazeera, widely seen as a platform that is instrumental for Qatari foreign policy, granted extensive and sympathetic coverage to Ennahda and its leadership, helping shape public discourse in Tunisia and abroad (Cherif, 2014). In fact, Rached Ghannouchi, Ennahda's leader, openly credited Qatar and Al Jazeera with encouraging the revolution and subsequent democratic transition, stating that:

Qatar has been incredibly generous and supportive, and a partner in our revolution through the support we have got from Al Jazeera for the democratic transition in Tunisia. Al Jazeera introduced our cause, revolution and its figures to the world (Osma, 2016).

Besides, Qatari officials frequently met with members of the Ennhada-led transitional government between 2011 and 2014 and maintained regular contact throughout the transition period, reinforcing the perception of political alignment (Cherif, 2014). Such a partisan support was highly unusual for Qatar, whose foreign policy prior to the Arab uprisings was largely characterised by neutrality and mediation (Ulrichsen, 2014). Its decision to actively support Ennahda marked a significant shift in Doha's regional posture – one that reflected not only ideological sympathy, but also strategic calculus in a context marked by intensifying Gulf rivalries and shifting regional dynamics (Dandashly, 2025).

While Qatar's political and financial support was instrumental in strengthening Ennahda's position during Tunisia's initial democratic transition, this alignment has also sparked controversy and suspicion. Allegations that Doha provided up to $150 million to Ennahda for its 2011 electoral campaign (Tuniscope, 2018), although consistently denied by the party, have circulated widely in media and political discourse. More controversially, Qatar has faced accusations, largely unsubstantiated but politically resonant, of using its influence in Tunisia to support Salafist groups in neighbouring Libya, allegedly with tacit backing from Ennahda, thus raising questions about its long-term commitment to regional stability. For instance, in 2017, the spokesperson for Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army accused Qatar of financing terrorist groups in Libya via a Tunisian bank, suggesting involvement during the period when Ennahda was part of Tunisia's ruling coalition (Cherif, 2018). However, hard evidence remains scarce given the opaque nature of political financing and limited institutional accountability in Tunisia during this period (Kaush, 2013). Moreover, most of these accusations have been propagated by regional rivals and certain media outlets, often lacking concrete evidence (Cherif, 2018; Grira, 2020).

Despite the material contributions from Doha, successive Tunisian governments and political actors have sought to maintain a cautious distance, with key players such as Ennahda and Nida Tounes refraining from overt alignment with either Qatar or its Saudi and Emirati regional rivals (Malka, 2018; Jacobs, 2010). This strategic ambiguity allowed Tunisia to avoid overdependence on any single Gulf actor and retain the political flexibility needed to navigate a volatile post-revolutionary landscape. The formation of a coalition government in 2014 between Ennahda and the secular Nidaa Tounes – i.e., two ideologically opposed parties – is illustrative of this effort to safeguard domestic political autonomy despite external pressures.

The third dimension of Qatar's influence in Tunisia's post-2011 transition lies in the realm of digital media and information technology, particularly through the deployment of its state-owned broadcaster, Al Jazeera. The Qatari platform played a pivotal role in shaping the narratives of protesters, opposition figures and intellectuals during the Tunisian revolution (Laub, 2017; Ulrichsen, 2014). Furthermore, by integrating citizen journalism, including amateur footage and social media content, Al Jazeera enabled the real-time broadcasting of the popular protests, bypassing the state-controlled media apparatus and helping to shape both domestic and international perceptions of the uprisings, while also mobilising Arab support across the region.

Whilst Al Jazeera's popularity was evident at the early stages of the revolution (within and beyond Tunisia), its role has not been without controversy. Although its initial coverage was lauded for supporting democratic movements, critics argue that the network later exhibited bias by favouring Islamist parties, particularly Ennahda, in its reporting. This perceived partiality has led to accusations that Al Jazeera, and by extension Qatar, were promoting a specific political agenda under the guise of supporting democracy (Steinberg, 2023). A case in point illustrating these accusations was Al Jazeera's limited coverage of the Bahraini protests, likely influenced by Doha's support for the Saudi-led military intervention to suppress the Bahraini uprisings and its alignment with GCC priorities at the time.

These accusations, however, should also be understood within the context of intra-GCC rivalries and the broader regional dynamics. Since 2011, Qatar has backed Islamist parties as pivotal agents of regime change not only in Tunisia but also in Egypt, Syria and Libya – an approach that clashed with the views of other Gulf monarchies, which largely perceived such movements

as threats to regional stability. Doha's alignment with Islamist actors fuelled tensions within the GCC, eventually leading Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt to impose a diplomatic and economic embargo on Qatar in 2017. Within this context, Al Jazeera's extensive coverage of the Tunisian uprising – alongside its reporting on protests in Egypt, Libya, Syria and Yemen – played a key role in broadcasting and amplifying pro-democracy narratives. This visibility was perceived by several Gulf states, especially after the 2011 Bahraini uprising, as a catalyst for unrest at home and undermining regime legitimacy (Laub, 2017).

In other words, while most Gulf monarchies backed authoritarian rulers such as Tunisia's Ben Ali and Egypt's Mubarak, to preserve status quo and regime continuity, Qatar pursued a different approach by cultivating ties with opposition groups, especially Islamist movements. Doha viewed the uprisings as an opportunity to expand its regional influence, whereas it Gulf rivals interpreted them as existential threats. As such, Doha's support to Islamist parties and Al Jazeera's favourable coverage of the uprisings and Islamist actors became central grievances cited by Qatar's neighbours, who accused it of supporting 'terrorist organisations' (primarily understood to mean the Muslim Brotherhood) and demanded the shutdown of Al Jazeera as a condition for lifting the 2017 blockade.

2. Qatar's Strategic Recalibration in Tunisia: From Partisan Backing to Authoritarian Accommodation

By the end of the 2010s, Doha appeared to recalibrate its foreign policy, shifting from overt partisan backing, particularly for Islamist actors like Ennhada, towards a more cautious approach primarily focused on cooperation and humanitarian assistance. This recalibration was driven by several interrelated factors, including Tunisia's worsening economic conditions, persistent corruption, the lack of structural reforms, plummeting tourism revenues, a growing fragmented and polarised political landscape all of which contributed to the election of President Kaïs Saied in 2019 (Brumberg, 2019). At the same time, regional dynamics had shifted following the failure of democratic transitions elsewhere in the Arab world, the reassertion of authoritarian regimes, and the resolution of the four-year Gulf crisis in early 2021.

Such a shift in approach became evident following Saied's self-coup on July 25, 2021. Doha's response was measured at best: it issued a general call for dialogue and restraint, emphasising 'the importance of fixing foundations of the state institutions and establishing the rule of law in Tunisia' (Reuters, 2021). Qatar did not publicly condemn Saied's subsequent moves, such as his imposition of a state of emergency or the adoption of a new constitution in September 2021, which dismantled the semi-parliamentary system and concentrated executive power in the presidency with minimal institutional checks. Similarly, Doha refrained from explicit criticism during the 2023–2024 crackdown on opposition figures and critical voices. This wave of repression included arbitrary arrests, travel bans, and politically motivated prosecutions. Among those targeted was Ennahda leader Ghannouchi, who was first charged with plotting against state security, and later accused of accepting illegal foreign funding. In July 2021, Al Jazeera's Tunis bureau was also shuttered by authorities without clear legal grounds, a move met with only muted international protest, including from Doha (RSF, 2021).

Compared to Qatar's activist role during the early 2010s, these developments reflect a broader de-escalation of partisan engagement and a shift towards authoritarian accommodation. This transformation suggests not so much an ideological break with Islamist movements as a

pragmatic adjustment to preserve Qatar's influence, align with regional power dynamics, and reduce tensions with neighbouring Gulf monarchies. Indeed, Doha has opted to normalise its relations with Tunisia's increasingly authoritarian leadership, which can be considered as authoritarian accommodation. Against the backdrop of widespread autocratic restoration in the region, Qatar's repositioning mirrors that of other international and regional actors, prioritising strategic and economic interests over support for democratic governance.

3. Conclusion

To conclude, Qatar's role in Tunisia's post-2011 transition was marked by an initially partisan approach, offering political, financial, and media support primarily to Ennahda. This selective backing, rooted more in strategic calculation and ideological affinity than in a broader commitment to democracy, contributed to deepening political polarisation. However, as Tunisia's authoritarianism rose after 2021, Qatar's influence waned and its response to Saied's increasing authoritarian became muted. This shift reflected a pragmatic turn towards authoritarian accommodation, as Doha refrained from challenging the closure of democratic space it had once selectively supported.

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5. The US in Tunisia: Prioritising Security over Democracy

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In the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), the United States has long grappled with a delicate balance between its professed commitment to democratic principles and the realities of navigating a complex geopolitical reality. In principle, democracy, human rights, and political freedoms remain a core component of US foreign policy. Indeed, the US continues to invest substantial financial and diplomatic resources in promoting democracy across the MENA region. However, this type of engagement is conditioned and constrained by complex and changing geopolitical dynamics in a context of global power competition (Boduszyński 2019). Over the past two decades in particular, US democracy promotion in the MENA region has been increasingly overshadowed by counterterrorism priorities. In the context of the 'Global War on Terror', the fight against terrorism has taken precedence, redirecting resources and political attention toward stabilisation and cooperation with authoritarian regimes, thus raising doubts about US commitment to democracy in the region. The United States approach in Tunisia exemplify this inherent duality.

During the Tunisian revolution and subsequent transitional period, the United States aimed at fostering democratic outcomes. By promoting liberal democratic norms and competitive political processes, US support played a role in strengthening the transitional elite's capacity to navigate the complex challenges of democratisation (March 2020). In the aftermath of the revolution, US–Tunisia bilateral relations deepened significantly, with Washington providing targeted support to Tunisia's nascent democratic institutions while simultaneously enhancing security cooperation aimed at countering terrorism and promoting regional stability (Schraeder, P. J., 2012). Against this background, support for democratic governance has progressively been deprioritized in favour of a more assertive and security-driven partnership. This shift has been driven by the activity of armed groups operating within Tunisia, Libya, and along the Algerian Tunisian border, but also by the number of Tunisian foreign fighters who joined ISIS in Syria and Iraq—particularly during the peak period of 2014–2015 (Ajala, 2019). Under the Obama administration, US–Tunisia relations were elevated with the establishment of a Bilateral Strategic Dialogue and Tunisia's designation as a Major Non-NATO Ally in 2015 (Al-Jazeera, 2015). This cooperation deepened further in 2017 with the adoption of a five-year Bilateral Country Action Plan aimed at enhancing defence collaboration (Yousif E., 2020). By 2020, the partnership had expanded into a decade-long military cooperation framework, formalised through agreements between Tunis and the US Department of Defense (Shah, H., and Dalton, M., 2020).

However, Tunisia's strategic relevance within the broader security architecture has led Washington to adopt a more restrained approach toward supporting the country's democratic trajectory, driven by concerns that deeper engagement in this sphere could compromise the stability and continuity of security cooperation. As a matter of fact, the pressing need to support Tunisia's security, both domestically and regionally, has led Washington to opt for a more cautious stance on the country's democratisation process. This tendency became particularly evident following President Kais Saied's authoritarian turn in July 2021. Initial statements from the US administration appeared overly optimistic and did not fully address Saied's moves to dismantle Tunisia's democratic institutions (Do Céu Pinto Arena, 2024). Indeed, a message from President Joe Biden delivered to Saied in the aftermath of Tunisia's democratic backsliding was limited to reaffirming Biden's personal support for Saied, along with '[...] that of the Biden-Harris

Administration for the Tunisian people, while urging a swift return to the path of parliamentary democracy' (White House, 2021).

The United States has also enacted significant cuts to financial assistance, effectively functioning as a form of economic pressure on Tunisia (Al Jazeera, 2023a). Biden administration has implemented a drastic cut on the aid destined to Tunisia from 191 million dollars in 2021 to 68,3 million in 2024 with military budget dropping from 106,4 million in 2021 to 53,8 in 2024 (Cole and Binder, 2023). However, when assessed alongside the substantial 82.9% reduction in funding for the Economic Support Fund and democracy assistance (from $85 million to $14.5 million), the 49% cut in military assistance signals a continued strategic preference for security cooperation over governance support in US policy towards Tunisia (Cole & Binder, 2023). The US State Department's December 2024 approval of a $107.7 million sale of 184 Javelin missiles to Tunisia (ESD, 2024) underscores Washington's continued prioritisation of security cooperation, reaffirming a strategic approach that places counterterrorism and regional stability above democratic conditionality.

These figures also demonstrate that, while most US resources remain concentrated on security and counterterrorism, support for civil society and gender-related initiatives continues, albeit in a limited capacity. Between December 2020 and May 2022, USAID and the Municipality of Tunis launched the 'Women of the City' (Femmedina) initiative, supported by a $500,000 grant from USAID. The 18-month project aimed to redesign public spaces in the historic city of Tunis to make them more inclusive for women. It focused on gender-sensitive urban planning and enhancing participatory governance to better address women's needs. Tunisia is not among the low- and middle-income countries receiving the highest volumes of Official Development Assistance (ODA) from USAID; its share accounts for only 6% of total US ODA, amounting to $93 million (Mitchell and Hughes, 2025). Nevertheless, the cuts imposed by the Trump administration on USAID may still impact the project's outcomes.

Instead, funding for security issues has remained nearly unchanged, reflecting Washington's enduring regional priority: the fight against terrorism. Military aid accounts for approximately 60% of US spending in Tunisia, underscoring the continued focus on security cooperation (Al Jazeera, 2023). While some budget proposals have suggested cuts to military assistance (Al-Monitor, 2022), actual allocations have maintained or even increased support for Tunisian security forces (Jeune Afrique, 2023). This sustained emphasis on counterterrorism persists despite growing evidence that, since 2015 – and particularly under President Kais Saied – Tunisia's anti-terrorism laws have been instrumentalized to suppress political dissent and restrict opposition activities, accelerating democratic backsliding (Emig and Schumacher, 2024). Moreover, the absence of direct sanctions or punitive measures against individuals responsible for human rights violations or the repression of political opponents highlights the limitations of the United States' commitment to democracy promotion in Tunisia.

In conclusion, while the United States has sought to exert economic pressure on President Saied to encourage a return to democratic governance, its enduring strategic prioritisation of security interests in the region continues to constrain its leverage. This imbalance ultimately undermines the effectiveness of US efforts to counter democratic backsliding in Tunisia. This has occurred despite the fact that since 2015—and particularly under Kais Saied—anti-terrorism laws have been weaponised to restrict the political activities of opposition figures, further eroding Tunisian democracy (Emig and Schumacher, 2024). Furthermore, the absence of direct sanctions against those responsible for human rights abuses or the suppression of opposition reveals the United

States' limited commitment to supporting democracy. The United States and the EU have committed to addressing Tunisia's democratic decline, recognising its importance for regional stability. However, their level of engagement varies depending on their respective geopolitical interests and internal priorities.

US policy toward Tunisia illustrates a broader strategic reorientation—from a post-2011 focus on democratisation to a model rooted in counterterrorism cooperation and selective economic pressure. Amid shifting global dynamics, Western democracies have increasingly prioritized stability over democratic norms, concentrating on threats like terrorism and migration. Tunisia exemplifies this trend: its role as a key counterterrorism partner has led Washington to tolerate President Saied's authoritarian drift in exchange for continued strategic cooperation. While rhetorical support for democracy persists, it is increasingly outweighed by security imperatives. This trade-off has reduced US leverage in confronting democratic backsliding and has entrenched a pattern of authoritarian accommodation that undermines long-term governance goals.

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6. Conclusion

Over the course of a decade, Tunisia moved from being depicted as the only success story of the Arab uprisings to yet another case of authoritarian reemergence. This trajectory was neither linear nor insulated from external influences. The non-EU actors examined in this report – China, the Council of Europe, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United States – each engaged with Tunisia in ways that primarily reflected their geopolitical interests and, in some cases, ideological affinities. In most cases, their influence cannot be seen as neutral: each actor, actively or passively, exerted influence over Tunisia's political trajectory either by supporting the democratisation process, resisting it, or facilitating authoritarian consolidation.

The period of study for the analysis of non-EU external actors impacts on Tunisia can be divided into two main phases: on one hand, a process of democratisation (2011-2019) and, on the other, a phase of democratic backsliding (2021-) and return to authoritarianism since Saied's self-coup. While the post-revolutionary moment initially saw a convergence of international support around the democratic experiment, with the notable exception of some Arab autocracies fearing democratic diffusion, this convergence quickly gave way to a wide array of approaches. The divergence of approaches, often driven by geopolitical interests, became particularly visible at critical turning points: in 2011, actors such as the United States, Qatar, and the Council of Europe largely welcomed Tunisia's democratic opening, albeit with varying levels of commitment. Conversely, Saudi Arabia adopted a posture of active resistance to the democratic experiment, while China maintained a cautious wait-and-see approach, both wary of the precedent Tunisia's transition might set for their own political orders. In 2021, the rupture triggered by President Saied's self-coup revealed a second moment of divergence: while Western actors expressed concern but offered little pushback, Gulf monarchies were quick to embrace the authoritarian shift. China, as before, remained indifferent to the regime type, while pursuing its engagement to deepen economic ties.

The United States and the Council of Europe stood out for their early investments in democratic infrastructure, support for civil society, and discursive support to Tunisia's democratic transition. Yet, US engagement remained ambivalent, gradually subordinated to counterterrorism imperatives and regional stabilisation priorities, especially in the aftermath of the 2015 terrorist attacks. Since 2021, its reaction to Tunisia's authoritarian turn has remained mostly confined to expressions of concern, with no substantial pressure or conditionality. This sheds light on the limits of the US commitment to democracy in Tunisia, which has become secondary to its security agenda.

Qatar, for its part, emerged as a key player during the foundational years of the transition, offering political, financial, and media support to Ennahda and, by extension, to the revolutionary process. In contrast to actors adopting a more institutionalist approach, Qatar opted for a partisan mode of engagement, mobilising financial resources, diplomatic support, and influential media platforms such as Al Jazeera to promote a particular vision of post-authoritarian governance in Tunisia. However this support, often framed as support for democratisation by Doha, was never extended to other factions than Ennadha. As a result, it can be considered a selective form of democracy support, based on ideological affinities rather than commitment to democracy as such. As a matter of fact, this form of backing also exacerbated polarisation within Tunisia's political sphere, reinforcing perceptions – both among secular elites

and parts of civil society – that Qatar's involvement aimed less at fostering inclusive governance than at reshaping Tunisia's political field along ideological lines.

The contrasting approaches of Qatar and other GCC countries (such as Saudi Arabia) must also be understood through the prism of intra-Gulf rivalries. For Qatar, support for Ennahda aligned with a broader regional strategy of backing Islamist actors perceived as legitimate political forces. For Riyadh, by contrast, political Islam represented an existential threat to authoritarian rule. Tunisia thus became a proxy arena for competing Gulf visions of post-revolutionary order: one centred on support to political Islam in a context of democratisation, the other on authoritarian restoration.

As Tunisia's transition developed and the revolutionary momentum gave way to growing polarisation, Qatar's influence began to shift. While remaining a key ally of Ennahda, its capacity to shape outcomes waned. This was particularly visible when President Kais Saied launched his power grab in July 2021: Qatar's reaction was remarkably muted, avoiding overt criticism. This silence signalled a pragmatic recalibration in a regional context marked by authoritarian reemergence, which has shown the limits of its prior strategy. The post-2021 phase thus marked a moment of authoritarian accommodation, in which Qatar appeared unwilling to challenge the closure of the democratic space it had once, albeit selectively, helped to open.

In contrast to actors engaged in (selective) democracy support, China accommodated and supported successive governments during the period of study, regardless of their democratic or authoritarian nature. It extended economic cooperation and diplomatic support to both the emerging democratic regime and the authoritarian one since Saied's self-coup. Furthermore, Tunisia's return to authoritarian rule has not altered this stance; rather, it has created additional space for Beijing to advance its discursive challenge to liberal democratic norms. China's emphasis on alternative models of governance and its criticism of Western conditionality have found greater resonance in post-2021 Tunisia. While Sino-Tunisian ties have remained relatively underdeveloped, the 2024 strategic partnership – initially negotiated during a more democratic phase – may signal Beijing's intention to consolidate its presence in this country despite of the ongoing process of autocratisation. Under this perspective, Beijing's engagement with Tunisia, framed by a strict adherence to the principles of sovereignty and non-interference, translates into a form of authoritarian accommodation. Yet, it remains unclear whether this will evolve into deeper forms of authoritarian collaboration or remain within the bounds of pragmatic, non-political engagement.

Saudi Arabia's engagement in Tunisia since 2011 has reflected a broader regional strategy aimed at countering revolutionary dynamics and containing the rise of political Islam. Firmly opposed to the Islamist experiment, Riyadh positioned itself in favour of a return to status quo, authoritarian if necessary. While its economic footprint in Tunisia has remained modest, its political posture was unambiguous: regime stability prevailed over democratic aspirations. Initially supportive of counter-revolutionary forces, Saudi Arabia benefitted from the growing polarisation that led to Saied's victory in the 2019 presidential election. It embraced President Saied's authoritarian turn as a strategic bulwark against Ennahda's resurgence. In this regard, Riyadh's engagement, rooted in state-to-state relations and devoid of any interaction with civil society or democratic institutions, aligns with a logic of authoritarian collaboration and even autocracy support. Tunisia's trajectory since 2021 has further reinforced this alignment, offering Saudi Arabia an opportunity to advance a regional order hostile to both political Islam and democratisation processes.

Across all cases examined, geopolitical calculations often outweighed normative commitments to democratisation. While some actors initially rallied behind Tunisia's transition, this support proved volatile, and even waning as soon as democracy appeared to empower political forces perceived as a threat to their regional or ideological interests. Security imperatives, intra-Gulf rivalries, and anxieties about political Islam gradually took precedence over commitment to democracy. These shifts did not go unnoticed within Tunisia: civil society actors increasingly questioned the sincerity of foreign commitments to democratic development, particularly as international support grew more selective, more conditional, or altogether disappeared after2021. Tunisia's experience thus reflects a broader pattern, in which external engagement – far from being ideologically neutral – has shaped, constrained, or, at times, undermined domestic efforts toward democratic consolidation.

Annex. Local Perception of non-EU External Actors in Tunisia (2011-2024)

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Since the Jasmine Revolution of 2011, Tunisia has stood as the symbolic torchbearer of democratic possibility in the Arab world. Yet, more than a decade later, the promise of political transformation remains entangled in persistent structural challenges—economic stagnation, institutional distrust, and widespread political disillusionment. While successive waves of the Arab Barometer have tracked fluctuating attitudes towards key foreign actors—such as the United States, China, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—these perceptions cannot be fully understood without reference to Tunisia's evolving political trajectory and the expectations of its citizenry.

Tunisians have consistently voiced strong support for democracy, even as they have grown increasingly aware of its limitations. The early post-revolutionary optimism has given way to a more sober realism: democracy is no longer seen as a panacea but rather as a fragile, imperfect system whose survival hinges on delivering tangible improvements in daily life. Arab Barometer data show that 86% of Tunisians still regard democracy as the best form of government (Robbins 2016), even as majorities associate it with weak economic performance and political indecision. Notably, Tunisians often equate democracy with '*karama*' (dignity), prioritising equality, justice, and freedom from corruption over procedural elements such as elections alone.

This enduring aspiration is tested by widespread dissatisfaction with governance. Confidence in public institutions has steadily eroded, particularly among younger Tunisians, who are more likely to mistrust the government and consider emigration. While hopes were momentarily revived with President Kaïs Saïed's election in 2019 and subsequent power consolidation in 2021, recent data suggest that optimism is fading amid deepening economic hardship, rising food insecurity, and continued corruption. Still, trust in the presidency remains comparatively high, revealing both a vacuum of alternative political legitimacy and the appeal of a 'strong ruler' model—echoed by the 80% who believe the country needs a leader who can bypass legal constraints if necessary (Arab Barometer, 2022).

Within this precarious domestic landscape, perceptions of foreign actors are shaped less by ideological affinity and more by instrumental needs. Whether viewed through the lens of economic aid, security cooperation, or pandemic relief, foreign countries are assessed according to their perceived contributions to Tunisia's pressing developmental and institutional challenges. The desire for stronger economic ties with external powers—including the EU, US, China, and Gulf countries—has been a consistent trend, often correlating with temporary upticks in favourability. Yet, as demonstrated by the sharp deterioration in US image after the October 2023 Gaza war, geopolitical events remain capable of swiftly reshaping Tunisian public opinion, often eclipsing prior goodwill.

This analysis examines local Tunisian attitudes towards four prominent foreign actors—the United States, China, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia—from 2011 through 2024. Drawing on longitudinal data from Arab Barometer and Afrobarometer surveys, it contextualises how public perceptions have shifted across time, particularly in response to domestic needs and regional developments. Each case highlights the multifaceted ways in which foreign engagement—economic, political, cultural, or humanitarian—is filtered through Tunisia's volatile and complex post-revolutionary experience.

1. United States

In spring 2011, 45% of Tunisians expressed a favourable view of the United States amid revolutionary fervour and hopes for democracy. By February 2013, this figure had fallen to 37% judging America's role as positive or neutral in Tunisia's democratic transition, compared with 54% for the European Union, a decline reflecting growing distrust of a US 'stability syndrome' perceived as overly security focused. Between March and April 2016, following the Bardo Museum and Sousse attacks, 54% of Tunisians (a 17-point increase since 2013) viewed the US involvement as positive or neutral, thanks in part to American backing for national dialogue led by the Quartet (the Tunisian General Labour Union, the Tunisian League for Human Rights, the Bar Association, and the Tunisian Union of Industry, Commerce and Crafts) and support for security institutions. Nearly two-thirds (64%) sought stronger economic ties with the United States, albeit still trailing the EU's 77% (Robbins 2016).

Between June 2018 and April 2019, while 38% wanted deeper US economic engagement—the lowest among key partners—under the Biden administration, optimism rebounded to 52% and 54% respectively, buoyed by US medical aid during the COVID-19 pandemic. Even so, 43% continued to view Washington's assistance primarily as a means to gain influence rather than to promote development or aid citizens. Ultimately, 32% regarded the United States as a very or somewhat important diplomatic partner, while 62% believed US aid strengthened education, 63% saw it as advancing women's rights, and 51% as supporting civil society. In addition, the soft-power appeal remained significant, with 47% affirming that American culture had a positive influence on Tunisian society.

Overall, favourability collapsed from 40% down to 10% following the outbreak of war in Gaza, underscoring how regional geopolitics can swiftly erode US credibility in Tunisia's fragile democratic milieu (Arab Barometer, 2024). In 2023, this sharp decline in overall US favourability was mirrored in Tunisians' assessments of America's role in supporting their democracy. While in 2018–19 nearly half (49%) felt US aid 'strengthens Tunisia's democratic institutions' (with 38% seeing only limited impact), by 2023, this confidence had eroded significantly. Fewer than four in ten Tunisians now believe US assistance meaningfully bolsters democratic structures (a drop of roughly 10 to 15 points since 2019).

All in all, the post–October 7 downturn in overall favourability intensified doubts: many respondents explicitly linked US support to geopolitical self-interest rather than genuine democratisation efforts. This decline disproportionately affected perceptions of aid to electoral processes and judicial independence, two pillars of Tunisia's democratic transition that had been cited as among the most positively viewed facets of US engagement in earlier waves. Moreover, Afrobarometer (2024) reveals that 43.5% of Tunisians now describe US economic involvement as 'very negative,' with only 6.7% crediting the US for pandemic assistance.

2. China

Tunisians consistently view China first and foremost as an economic and infrastructural partner, with 63% expressing in 2018–19 a desire to strengthen economic ties—more than for any non-EU country—and roughly half rating China as a 'very' or 'somewhat important' diplomatic partner. By 2021, 59% held an overall favourable opinion of China, slightly up from 54% in mid-2020, while only 41% approved of Premier Xi Jinping's regional policies, indicating that China's vaccine diplomacy and economic aid during the pandemic did not markedly deepen political

trust. Likewise, just 21% saw China's economic rise in MENA as a threat versus 43% for the United States.

In late 2023, preliminary data show 71% of Tunisians maintain a positive view of China, which they rate on average as 6.52 out of 10 in terms of democratic governance—second only to Turkey and ahead of the United States at 5.82—even as regional events have dented US standing (Arab Barometer, 2024). Afrobarometer (2024) supports this interpretation: 38.8% say China's economic activities influence Tunisia 'a lot,' and 33.9% identify China as the country that helped Tunisia the most during the pandemic. The absence of any data tying Chinese engagement to human rights or democratic institution-building underscores Tunisia's perception of China as a transactional partner focused on trade and infrastructure rather than political reform.

3. Saudi Arabia

Tunisians' economic affinity for Saudi Arabia has fluctuated over the past decade, rising from 47% in 2012–14 to 57% in 2016–17, dipping to 39% in 2018–19, and then climbing back to 67% by 2023. Security cooperation perceptions have been sharply divided: around 30% feel it has strengthened since 2011, while 43% believe it has grown more fragile, a view largely driven by Saudi Arabia's decision to grant refuge to President Ben Ali and his family after his flight in 2011. Desire for stronger overall ties similarly increased only modestly, from 39% in 2011 to 44% in 2013, before declining by 18 points from its 2016 high; as of 2021, just 36% of Tunisians viewed Saudi Arabia positively.

Yet economic outlook rebounded regionally: by 2022, half of Tunisians held favourable views of France and Turkey, and 47% felt positively towards Saudi Arabia, with a majority (61%) now wanting deeper economic relations—up 22 points since 2018 (Arab Barometer, 2022). The Gaza war in late 2023 further reshaped perceptions: whereas 40% had supported the US before October 7, only 10% did so three weeks later, and both France and Saudi Arabia saw 14-point drops in favourability. Interestingly, the policies of Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei were viewed as favourably as those of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and more so than those of UAE President Mohammed bin Zayed, while attitudes toward China and Russia remained largely stable. When asked about positive views of foreign countries, 66% of Tunisians cited Saudi Arabia (Arab Barometer, 2024).

4. Qatar

In 2018–19, 44% of Tunisians held a favourable view of Qatar, second only to Turkey at 57%. By 2023–24, that figure had risen to 66%, putting Qatar on a par with Saudi Arabia and just behind China (71%) and Turkey (69%) (Arab Barometer, 2024). This improvement reflects Qatar's growing economic role in Tunisia: Qatari investors represent around 16% of the country's foreign direct investment, making Qatar its second-largest global investor, and in 2016 Doha pledged $1.25 billion in bilateral aid to support Tunisia's economy. Such sustained financial engagement helps explain why Qatar's public image has strengthened.

No surveys have yet assessed Qatar's influence on rights or democratic development. However, Afrobarometer (2024) confirms the relative appeal of China over the US among Tunisians: 29.1% describe China's economic and political influence as positive, compared with significantly lower assessments for the United States. This gap was further illustrated during the pandemic: while 33.9% of Tunisians named China as the country that helped them most, just 6.7% cited the US, suggesting a shifting axis of public trust based on practical benefit rather than traditional alliances.

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IV. GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

This report set out to analyse the impact of non-EU external actors' discursive and behavioural practices on democratic and authoritarian trajectories in three countries of the EU Southern Neighbourhood – Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia – between 2010 and 2024. It aimed to answer the overarching research question:

> *What practices did the selected non-EU external actors perform during this period and how did these practices influence processes of democratisation or authoritarian consolidation in the countries studied?*

To address this question, each case study explored a set of interrelated dimensions, including: the nature and evolution of external actors' discursive and behavioural practices; their responses to key political turning points; their impact on democratic or authoritarian developments; their influence across the SHAPEDEM-EU policy areas (energy, migration, security, and trade); the role of cross-cutting issues such as gender equality and digital transformation; the internal contradictions or paradoxes within their approaches; and their interaction with EU democracy support efforts in the region. These analytical dimensions were further enriched by desk and field research, which qualitatively and quantitatively assess how these dynamics are perceived at the local level by different segments of the Lebanese, Palestinian and Tunisian societies, in order to better understand the implications for various *communities of practices* (Achrainer & Pace, 2025).

The ultimate goal of this research is to distinguish between non-EU external actors which may be included in SHAPEDEM-EU's Democracy Learning Loop and those who could constitute an obstacle to it. Building on prior analysis of these actors' priorities, policies, and instruments across the broader EU Southern Neighbourhood, and drawing on empirical findings from SHAPEDEM-EU Work Package 3, this report assesses both the identifiable effects of these actors' engagement and the local perceptions of their influence in the countries under study.

In this view, the general conclusions from this report aim at providing a critical take on some of the assumptions which guided the SHAPEDEM-EU Project with regards to the *who* (agents), *what* (policies and instruments), *when* (turning points) and *why* (interests and intentionality). The broader picture that emerges from the case studies allows us to move beyond the binary focus on democracy versus autocracy support. It helps explain why and how non-EU external actors may support democratic change in certain contexts while, at the same time, seeking to preserve the status quo (i.e., persistence of authoritarianism) in others. This section sheds light on the main conceptual challenges arising from our findings before assessing the similarities and differences across the three cases analysed.

Bridging concepts and practices

First of all, the timeline adopted for this study (aligned with the broader SHAPEDEM-EU framework) was initially designed to focus on the main political developments following the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings. While this timeline is appropriate for analysing countries that experienced political transitions (such as Tunisia and Egypt), constitutional reform (Jordan, Morocco), or conflict (Syria, Libya, Yemen), it proves less adequate for two of the three countries under study: Lebanon and Palestine. While the 2010-2011 Tunisian uprisings and subsequent political transition marked evident turning points in Tunisia's trajectory and the way external actors acted, dynamics characterising Lebanon and Palestine seem to be rooted on longer-

standing engagement of regional and external actors. For instance, in the cases of Lebanon and Palestine, the influence of non-EU external actors must be understood in light of major developments prior to 2010, such as the 2005 Cedar Revolution in Lebanon and the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. Finally, the period of study had to be extended to include major recent developments, particularly the ongoing war in Gaza, the Israel–Hezbollah war in Lebanon, as well as the ongoing process of authoritarian restoration in Tunisia.

A second consideration relates to the applicability of the terminology used within the framework of this study. In line with previous research on the role of non-EU external actors in the EU's Eastern and Southern Neighbourhoods (Arco Escriche & Bourekba, 2024), we found that certain concepts present limitations when used to assess the impact of these actors in the countries under study. This was particularly the case for Lebanon and Palestine, where the very political configuration of these countries – consociationalism in Lebanon, and Israeli occupation in Palestine – makes the assessment of external actors' impact especially complex. Besides, it is challenging to apply the concept of *authoritarian collaboration* when describing the ties between an authoritarian regime (Iran) and an armed group that also functions as a political party (Hezbollah and Hamas). In other words, policies that may undermine democratic transformation cannot always be labelled as autocracy support/promotion.

On the other hand, while concepts related to autocracy support or promotion may appear more suitable for analysing authoritarian actors, this study also demonstrates that they can equally apply to democratic actors who, in practice, seek to preserve the status quo. As we shall see in the next section, the rejection of the democratic outcome of the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections, alongside diplomatic, economic, and military backing of Israel as the occupying power, has also contributed to the persistence of authoritarian practices within the Palestinian political landscape. This stress the need to introduce conceptual nuances such as *authoritarian enabling*, *authoritarian accommodation*, *authoritarian diffusion*, as well as to account for the *indirect effects* of external actors policies.

In this regard, the analysis of the *interests*, *motivations*, and *intentions* of non-EU external actors has proven crucial to introducing nuance into the (simplistic) democracy support vs autocracy support dichotomy. For instance, Qatar's support of Hamas in Palestine does not automatically imply direct support for non-democratic practices at all levels, as Doha also provided funds and investments to Palestine's segments not linked to that specific group. Conversely, Qatar's selective democracy support in Tunisia – concentrated on Ennadha – appears to be driven not only by an interesting in having an ideologically aligned elite lead the transitional process, but also by intra-Gulf rivalries. On the other hand, and perhaps counterintuitively, what is commonly intended as support for democratic practices by institutions such as the CoE and the UN does not always and directly translate into effective measures on the ground. This is often due to malpractices or partisan stances that are subsequently reproduced within the local context.

This point is also connected to the issue of agency. While the states and institutions are certainly the actors with more capabilities and resources to shape political, security, and societal conditions, they also operate through other agents. Whether these are "proxies" or pawns on the ground, their involvement shows how the influence of external actors can either be facilitated or constrained not only by their access to specific segments of a state's political elite, but also by their reach into "lower politics" actors. This is in line with SHAPEDEM's distinction between *changing elite strategies* (demonstration effects, purposive and collaborative actions; external pressure) and *changing elite capabilities* through different strategies. Moreover, states and local

actors might sometimes diverge when coping with issues that they perceive differently, such as the case of Iran's cautious and Hezbollah's more vocal reaction to the 2019 protests in Lebanon.

As a result, the use of generic labels such as "democracy supporters" or "autocracy supporters" often fails to capture the complexity and inconsistency of external actors in Lebanon, Palestine and Tunisia. The same actor may support democratic processes in one case and authoritarian regimes/practices in another; sometimes for ideological reasons (i.e., ideological affinities), but more often driven by strategic, economic, or geopolitical interests. In other words, external actors cannot always be seen as pursuing clear, consistent goals. Instead, their actions often depend on the specific country context and the presence of other external actors. For example, while the Arab uprisings were seen by some, such as Qatar, as an opportunity to shape Tunisia's political trajectory, others like Saudi Arabia adopted a stance of democracy resistance due to fears of "democratic contagion" across the MENA region. Similarly, while political fragmentation in Lebanon serves Iran's interests, the status quo is also being preserved by democratic actors such as the United States, who prioritise countering Hezbollah's influence and ensuring Israel's security over potential democratic change.

Similarities and differences across case studies

While the first two sections have explored the conceptual and strategic ground of external engagement in the EU's Southern Neighbourhood, this final section connects these reflections with the concrete dynamics in Lebanon, Palestine, and Tunisia. In each case, non-EU external actors have influenced domestic politics through a wide range of means, including diplomatic, economic, military, and even technological instruments. In most, if not all, cases, their policies are driven more by geopolitical interests than by ideological commitments to either democracy or autocracy. What emerges is a complex pattern of support, obstruction, and selective engagement with democratic and authoritarian practices. The following case studies illustrate how such interventions have exerted an influence over (non)democratic governance and political balances, often diverging from the EU's stated goals of democratic support.

Lebanon: External Influence, State Fragmentation, and the Politics of Containment

In a highly polarised context such as Lebanon's, framing the support of authoritarian actors to Lebanese state and non-state actors requires a careful use of analytical concepts, especially those of authoritarian collaboration, authoritarian enabling, autocracy support, and authoritarian accommodation. Such support has had a profound impact on Lebanon's political equilibrium, especially when considering the country's confessional system, and the historical role played by several regional (Iran, KSA, Israel) and international (US, EU) actors. In this context, Lebanon's polarisation and sectarianisation has been further exacerbated by competing attempts by external actors to counterbalance one another's influence, not necessarily through institutional reinforcement, but often through selective elite alliances or military aid. The result is a political environment shaped by competing external agendas, which ultimately undermines the prospects for a stable and cohesive democratic regime.

Lebanon's case is emblematic of a hybrid model of external intervention, where support to non-state actors, confessional alliances, and elite-based politics coexist with sporadic and often inconsistent efforts to uphold state institutions. Whether by design or as an unintended consequence, such interventions have contributed to the promotion of certain practices. For instance, the United States and Saudi Arabia have both played decisive roles in attempting to contain Hezbollah's influence, aligning with the March 14 alliance and supporting institutions

such as the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF). While these efforts aimed at reinforcing state sovereignty, they simultaneously reinforced Lebanon's political polarisation, exacerbating sectarian divides rather than enabling inclusive governance. Despite offering aid aimed at civil society and institutional reform, their overarching focus on security and geopolitical containment, especially vis-à-vis Iran, has meant their contributions to democratic consolidation have been incidental at best.

Iran, meanwhile, has cultivated a long-standing and complex relationship with Hezbollah, often acting as a strategic partner in military and regional affairs, while allowing the group a certain degree of autonomy in Lebanese domestic politics. This partnership illustrates a form of authoritarian collaboration which, in practice, obstructs democratic reforms and reinforces elite capture. As a result, Iran's influence is increasingly defined by its capacity to block systemic reform rather than to propose transformative policies, a hallmark of authoritarian enabling.

Qatar's approach, by contrast, has sought to avoid open alignment in the Iran–Saudi rivalry, focusing instead on mediation and financial assistance. However, its soft-power diplomacy, while stabilising in crisis moments, has done little to challenge Lebanon's entrenched political dysfunctions. Its limited engagement with civil society or institutional reform highlights the trade-offs of its pragmatic, non-confrontational strategy.

Finally, the United Nations, though engaged in Lebanon through technical and humanitarian efforts, including electoral support and peacekeeping (UNIFIL), has had limited political impact, resulting in a posture that appears as a careful balance to avoid politicisation.

To summarise, Lebanon illustrates how external actors, regardless of their nature and discursive practices, often consolidate rather than alleviate authoritarian and fragmented governance structures.

Palestine: Fragmentation, Security Logics, and the Erosion of Democratic Spaces

Even more than in Lebanon, assessing external support to specific actors and groups in Palestine requires careful attention to the nuances between *authoritarian collaboration* and *authoritarian enabling*, especially when such support affects the legitimacy of both external and domestic actors involved. In this context, backing one side not only risks exacerbating the intra-Palestinian divide, but also further impedes the development of democratic institutions. Moreover, the case of Palestine cannot be understood without considering how each actors' relations with Israel conditions their approach.

In this regard, a key challenge in analysing Palestine lies in the persistent impact of Israeli occupation, which severely limits the Palestinian Authority's (PA) capacity to develop as a genuine democratic entity, let alone as a sovereign state. The enduring Israeli occupation, territorial fragmentation, and the deep divide between Hamas and the Palestinian Authority (PA) have severely curtailed the possibility of democratic development. This fragmentation has created space for external actors to exert influence not necessarily in pursuit of governance reform, but rather in service of stability, strategic alliances, or resistance politics. As a result, over time, the PA has evolved more into a security partner for Israel and foreign actors, than a representative democratic governance body. This trend is reinforced by a broader tendency among democratic actors to prioritise stability and Israeli security over transformative democratic processes. Thus, external support, whether from allies or rivals, often serves to strengthen authoritarian practices rather than dismantle them.

As a matter of fact, the United States and EU have largely converged in considering the PA primarily as a security partner, particularly in maintaining a "modus vivendi" with Israel. Despite rhetorical support for a two-state solution, both actors have given priority to stability and containment over democratic transformation. This has reinforced authoritarian tendencies within the PA, reducing it to a managerial body rather than a sovereign political actor. Key turning points, such as the 2006 elections and the subsequent Western response, reflect this trend: rather than supporting electoral outcomes, the international community responded with sanctions and isolation, reinforcing the split between Hamas and Fatah and undermining democratic legitimacy for almost two decades.

Iran and Qatar, in contrast, have built relationships with Hamas based on a strategic calculus rather than democratic aspiration. Iran's support has prioritised armed resistance over governance, contributing to deeper political fragmentation and encouraging authoritarian practices, especially regarding Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Similarly, Qatar's diplomatic, economic and political backing, while crucial for humanitarian relief, has indirectly entrenched authoritarian structures by enabling Hamas to bypass reconciliation and institutional reform.

China's dual-track diplomacy –discursively supporting Palestinian statehood while enhancing ties with Israel– reflects a form of authoritarian accommodation, where economic and geopolitical interests override any consistent stance on governance reform. By depoliticising trade with Israel and maintaining a distant position on the Palestinian issue in bilateral exchanges, Beijing has helped entrench Israel's role as the occupying power. Beyond occasional statements, it has exerted no meaningful pressure on Israeli authorities to comply with UN resolutions. Meanwhile, Chinese companies have profited from cooperation with Israeli firms, including in surveillance technologies that undermine Palestinian rights. Thus, despite rhetorical support for Palestinian self-determination and reconciliation, China's actions amount to *authoritarian enabling* as long as they reinforce Israel's occupation of Palestinian territories, which ultimately hinders any prospect for democracy in Palestine.

Regarding regional and international organisations, their engagement in Palestine has been marked by limited effectiveness. The League of Arab States, while nominally supporting Palestinian reconciliation and statehood, has become largely ineffective due to internal fragmentation and shifting regional priorities. It has failed to push for meaningful governance reform or a united Palestinian front, often treating the issue as a geopolitical bargaining chip. The UN, much like in Lebanon, remains essential in humanitarian assistance but politically constrained. Its efforts are often undermined by the structural limitations imposed by member states, some of whom prioritise strategic relationships with Israel over democratic development in Palestine.

Tunisia: From Democratic Hope to Strategic Realism

Over the course of a decade, Tunisia transitioned from a hopeful experiment in democratisation to a case of authoritarian reemergence. From 2011 to 2019, Tunisia's democratic opening received a wide support. The United States, Qatar, and the Council of Europe welcomed the transition, investing in democratic infrastructure and civil society, albeit with varying levels of commitment. In contrast, Saudi Arabia adopted a posture of *democracy resistance*, fearing democratic contagion, while China maintained an initially cautious stance before engaging with the new ruling elite.

Qatar played a particularly prominent role during the foundational years, offering political, financial, and media support to Ennahda. This backing, framed by Doha as support for democratisation, was in fact highly selective; anchored in ideological affinity rather than a broader commitment to inclusive governance. While it helped sustain the transition in its early stages, it also exacerbated domestic polarisation, fuelling perceptions that Qatar sought to reshape Tunisia's political field along partisan lines. In this context, by contrast with the first years of Tunisia's democratic transition, Doha has largely muted its stance following Saied's authoritarian turn. This shift reflects a broader regional recalibration in a context marked by successful counter-revolution across the Arab world. In other words, Qatar moved from ideological partisanship to strategic pragmatism.

The United States initially supported democratisation in Tunisia, but Washington's engagement gradually became subordinated to counterterrorism and regional stability, especially after the surge of jihadist groups across the Middle East and North Africa. This shift became more pronounced after 2021, when Saied's self-coup seemed to halt the country's democratic experience. Washington responded with cautious criticism, gradually reducing economic and military assistance.

Other actors such as Saudi Arabia adapted, an even encouraged, Tunisia's authoritarian turn. Saudi Arabia, which had long opposed the rise of political Islam in Tunisia and across the region, embraced authoritarian reemergence in Tunisia, backing Saied as a bulwark against political Islam.

China's role has shifted from passive economic cooperation to more overt political alignment. While maintaining its rhetoric of non-interference, Beijing deepened its engagement in infrastructure and digital sectors, offering an alternative to Western models without democratic conditionality. The 2024 strategic partnership, initially negotiated during a more democratic phase, may signal Beijing's intent to consolidate its presence despite Tunisia's ongoing authoritarian restoration. In other words, China's engagement in Tunisia can be considered a case of authoritarian accommodation and even authoritarian collaboration.

Thus, Tunisia shows how external actors, whether actively or passively, have adapted to authoritarian consolidation rather than challenging it.