

NORTH AFRICA REGIONAL REPORT

High-level overview and brief analysis of regional political, economic and security activity, distributed every fortnight.

EGYPT

Egypt has been implementing a vast stabilization strategy to combat inflation, including injecting foreign currency, opening new commercial markets, and increasing exports and overall production. On Wednesday, 1 March, Emirati and Bahraini companies signed an industrial deal worth over USD 2 billion with Egypt. On Saturday, 4 March, Egypt and the Libyan eastern bloc launched a forum to increase trade and investment. Egypt and Israel also discussed strengthening their trade relations in the context of the deepening economic crisis in the North African country and the devaluation of the Egyptian pound against the U.S. dollar. Finally, Egypt wishes to increase its influence within the African market, open new trade routes, and expand its sphere of influence, in response to the construction of hydroelectric dams by Ethiopia, which are threatening the Egyptian Nile. This is why Egypt is trying to accelerate the activation of the African Continental Free Trade Area.

TUNISIA

Tunisia's newly-elected parliament held its first session on 13 March, nearly 20 months since it was dissolved by President Kais Saied in July 2021. The National Salvation Front and other parties announced boycotts of the parliament; declaring it as illegitimate due to the low turnout for its elections. Independent journalists were also prohibited from covering the opening session, and only state-owned media agencies were allowed in the session. Ibrahim Bouderbala, a vocal supporter of President Saied, was elected as the first speaker. In its current form, parliament will be largely ineffective as it is constrained by the constitution that Saied himself drafted, and it will be led by his supporters. The parliament also provides President Saied more political cover for any failures of his policies. In a related development, at the beginning of the session, security forces arrested a member of parliament, after he was sworn in. He was detained on suspicion of forgery, with respect to his sponsorship for the elections. The timing of the arrest suggests that it was intended to be a warning to the new parliament that no one government position was safe. It was also likely a demonstration for the general public of President Saied's commitment to eliminating crime and corruption.

The Region at a Glance



LIBYA

The international community is increasing its efforts to stage elections and unify Libya, as global demand for oil and natural gas increases, illegal migration across the Mediterranean surges, and Russia grows its influence in Africa.

This includes a proposal by the head of the UN Support Mission in Libya Abdoulaye Bathily to establish an election panel that would organize elections by the end of the year. This proposal was met with backlash by the rival governments in Tripoli and Benghazi, both of which criticized it as external interference. These efforts are partially driven by the desire to stabilize oil exports from Libya, which have often come under threat by various militia groups. Some parties within Libya continue to resist calls to hold elections; however, there are indications that the government is taking greater steps to secure oil exports, which would satisfy some of the needs of the international community. Security forces arrested Muhammad Bashir al-Qarj (also known as Mus'ab al-Qarj), the leader of a faction of the western Petroleum Facilities Group, for threatening to shut down oil pumps in Al-Rayana. Al-Qarj halted production in Al-Rayana twice before, in August 2020 and March 2022, but was never detained for those actions. This arrest may indicate that the GNU wants to assert its sovereignty over oil production, to push back against further foreign involvement.

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ILLEGAL MIGRATION ACROSS THE MEDITERRANEAN

Surging illegal migration from Africa to Europe across the Mediterranean Sea has prompted European countries to call for greater measures to control migrant flows, particularly from Tunisia and Libya. Several events in February and March have brought the issue of illegal migration into greater focus for the EU:

- The EU's summit on 9 February ended with a conclusion to intensify cooperation with the migrants' countries of origin and transit, develop "mutually beneficial partnerships" with those countries, and provide additional "substantial" funding for border protection forces.
- Frontex, the EU's Border and Coast Guard Agency, issued a report detailing the number of illegal border crossings across the Central Mediterranean route. The number of crossings detected in January and February 2023 was 11,951; which is 118 percent higher than during the same period in 2022.
- There were also four reported instances of migrant ships sinking, resulting in at least 126 casualties:
 - On 26 February, a ship that set sail from Turkey carrying about 170 migrants broke apart approximately 75km from the coast of Calabria. Eighty were rescued, but at least 79 had died.
 - On 1 March, a boat believed to have set sail from Turkey sank near the Greek island of Kos. Twenty-seven were rescued, but three had died.
 - On 9 March, a boat that set sail from Tunisia carrying nearly 70 migrants sank. At least 14 were killed while 54 were rescued.
 - On 12 March, a ship that set sail from Libya carrying nearly 50 migrants capsized due to bad weather approximately 180km northwest of Benghazi. Seventeen were rescued but at least 30 had died.

On the same day as the latest incident, an Italian member of parliament claimed that Italian intelligence estimated that 685,000 migrants in Libya could potentially attempt to cross if given the opportunity. A spokesperson for the International Organization of Migration (IOM) stated that the claim was inaccurate, as the number most likely represented the total number of migrants in Libya, and not just the ones who intend to cross the sea into Europe. On 13 March, the Italian Minister of Defence and Minister of Foreign Affairs attributed the increase in the number of migrant crossings as part of a strategy by the Wagner Group, as retribution towards EU countries who have supported Ukraine. However, this unlikely to be true.

Regardless of the accuracy of these claims, they reflect the EUs growing concerns about illegal migration. The statements are likely an attempt to achieve two purposes:

- To spur other EU countries to greater action in securing maritime borders – Italy, given its geographical location, bears the burden of most of the illegal crossings via the Mediterranean.
- To deflect blame for migrant deaths and other humanitarian concerns onto other factors – Italy's new right-wing is facing internal criticism from political opponents for the migrant deaths. It has also been criticized by other EU nations for not deploying its coast guard to aid to the migrant ships.

Italy and other EU countries will likely increase engagement with Libya and Tunisia, and the region as a whole, offering incentives for those countries to take greater steps to control migration. This may lead to an increase in human rights abuses towards prospective migrants, such as Tunisia's crackdown on sub-Saharan Africans.

PUBLIC HEALTH UPDATES

- Morocco ends state of health emergency

UPCOMING REGIONAL EVENTS

Country	Event	Date(s)	Remarks
Regionwide	Ramadan	22 or 23 MAR (for 29 or 30 days)	

