

Dynamics of Regional Security in the Mediterranean Basin

*By Gregory T. Papanikos**

This paper examines the Mediterranean Basin as a dynamic regional security complex characterized by deep interconnections across economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental domains. Drawing on Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), it introduces the concept of hyper-regional power to better capture how power relations extend beyond geographically bounded regions. Using recent developments in the Eastern Mediterranean as an illustrative case, the paper demonstrates that conflicts—ranging from military confrontations to energy insecurity, migration, and climate-related shocks—are increasingly interrelated and transnational in their effects. The Mediterranean thus emerges not merely as a geographic space but as a complex system in which local disruptions generate regional and global consequences. The paper concludes that, because such crises transcend regional boundaries, their effective management requires coordinated action at the hyper-regional or global level. The European Union is proposed as one such hyper-regional power capable of playing a leading role in the non-European Mediterranean regions.

Keywords: *Mediterranean Basin, Regional Security Complex Theory, Interdependence, Geopolitics, Energy Security, Migration, Climate Change, Political Instability, Regional Dynamics*

Introduction

Since 2008, the Athens Institute has organized its annual international conference on Mediterranean studies. In 2015, the Institute launched the *Athens Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, a quarterly, open-access, peer-reviewed academic journal. To date, scholars from numerous countries have presented more than one thousand papers at these conferences, with nearly 180 subsequently published in the journal.

The Mediterranean region offers a particularly valuable empirical setting for the study of regional dynamics and aligns with the theoretical foundations of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), as extended here to include hyper-regional effects. This framework emphasizes that geographically proximate states become interconnected through patterns of linkages, shared vulnerabilities, and historically embedded relationships of harmony (manifested in friendships or alliances) and antagonism or rivalry (manifested in conflict and mistrust).

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In such a system, security challenges rarely remain confined to national borders; rather, they spill across political, economic, and societal domains, producing cross-border effects that shape the region and, by extension, the wider world. A clear example, employed in this study, is the recent (2026) and ongoing conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean. As of March 2026, a total of 24 actors are involved—comprising 22 states and two non-state actors—in the ongoing Israel–US–Iran conflict. These actors can be analytically categorized as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Classification of Actors in the Eastern Mediterranean Conflict (2026)*

Category	Actors
Direct Combatants	United States; Israel; Iran
States Directly Targeted (Missile/Drone Attacks)	Bahrain; Saudi Arabia; Kuwait; Qatar; United Arab Emirates; Jordan; Oman
States Affected (Territory, Airspace, Infrastructure)	Türkiye; Iraq; Syria; Azerbaijan; Cyprus
States Providing Military Support / Deployments	United Kingdom; France; Italy; Greece; Netherlands; Spain; Germany
Non-State Actors	Hezbollah (Lebanon); Houthi Movement (Yemen)

Direct combatants include the United States, Israel, and Iran, with the United States and Iran also engaging in naval and missile operations. States directly targeted by missile or drone attacks include Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Oman. States whose territory, airspace, or infrastructure has been affected include Türkiye, Iraq, Syria, and Azerbaijan. States providing military support or deployments include the United Kingdom, France, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, Spain, and Germany, while Cyprus has been affected through attacks on UK military bases located on its territory.

The regional scope of the conflict is further expanded by the involvement of non-state actors, most notably Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi movement in Yemen, both of which have engaged in missile and drone operations linked to broader conflict dynamics. These actors operate in contexts where state authority is uneven; in the terms of Jackson (1990), such environments display elements of quasi-statehood—more prominently in Yemen and, to a lesser extent, in Lebanon. Many other countries have remained effectively silent, including numerous European states, as well as Russia, China, and India. The reasons for their silence, however, constitute a separate question that is not addressed in this paper.

All these states constitute different types of powers, as discussed in the next section of the paper. Before moving on, it is worth noting—particularly in light of the Mediterranean’s long history—that on 1 March 2026, a Persian-made drone struck Cyprus, specifically targeting a UK-based military base on the island, as part of the wider regional tensions. The last time Cyprus and Persia were at war was in the mid-5th century BCE, under the leadership of the Athenian general Kimon, son of Miltiades, the hero of Marathon; Kimon died in that conflict. In a striking historical echo, the modern Greek naval ship dispatched to assist Cyprus, along with France and other European countries, was the frigate *HS Kimon* (F-601), a French-built FDI HN (Belharra-class) frigate of the Hellenic Navy, named after the same ancient commander.

The Mediterranean thus exemplifies a dynamic regional security complex with deep historical roots, in which intra- and inter-state crises rapidly acquire regional

significance, and the distinction between internal and external sources of instability has become increasingly blurred. The ongoing conflict has already expanded beyond this geographic complex, drawing in external powers and transforming it into a hybrid, primarily hyper-regional confrontation. As a rule, wars tend to originate as regional conflicts within a security complex but, depending on factors such as external intervention, alliances, and strategic interests, they can escalate into hyper-regional—and, very rarely, global—confrontations.

Including this introduction, the paper is structured as follows. Section two proposes a new typology of powers in the international relations context, introducing the concept of a *hyper-regional power* alongside internal regional powers, external-to-the-region powers, hyper-regional powers, and superpowers (or monosuperpower). Section three demonstrates the regional interrelationships of these powers in the Mediterranean and examines their interactions through three examples: political, energy, and military. This section builds on my previously published work (Papanikos, 2015, 2017, 2023). Section four emphasizes the uniqueness of the countries that constitute the Mediterranean complex and illustrates, with examples, the types of crises the region has faced in the 21st century. Finally, section five serves as the epilogue of the discussion presented here.

Towards a Typology of Powers: Introducing the Hyper-Regional Concept

Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provides a compelling and dynamic framework for understanding the Mediterranean as a deeply interconnected security environment. According to Buzan and Wæver (2003), geographically proximate states become linked through patterns of harmony, antagonism, and interdependence, creating a system in which security dynamics cannot be meaningfully analyzed in isolation. Security concerns in such complexes rarely remain contained; instead, they diffuse across borders through shared military fears, economic linkages, and sociopolitical networks. This logic applies not only to traditional military threats (e.g., invasions) but also to political governance, energy dependencies, and defense–economic interactions across the Mediterranean Basin. It is not the purpose of this paper to review the theory in detail or its proposed extensions.

The origins of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) can be traced back to the writings of Herodotus and Thucydides. Herodotus was among the first to describe warfare in the Mediterranean Basin, providing one of the earliest systematic accounts of conflict and illustrating how the historical rise of the Persian Empire followed the decline of preceding regional powers. By the end of this process, Persia expanded to the Aegean and confronted the Greek city-states of Asia Minor and mainland Greece. Thucydides, by contrast, analyzed a civil war within the Greek world that, consistent with RSCT, developed its own internal dynamics and complexity, extending to Asia Minor and the Italian peninsula—far beyond the historical geographical boundaries of the two major powers, Athens and Sparta.

Buzan and Wæver (2003) neglect the important historical insights of Herodotus and Thucydides. Ironically, on p. 192, they note that “Westerners tend to forget that the Ottoman Empire, which controlled the Eastern Mediterranean littoral and most of

the Arab world from the sixteenth century to 1918, was regularly at war not only with Europe, but also with the Persian Safavid Empire to its east.” Herodotus, however, shows that Persia engaged in sustained conflict with surrounding regions from very early antiquity, even describing the Greek–Persian war of the early 5th century BCE as a war between continents—a war between Europe and Asia.

Table 2 summarizes the typology of powers in the world today, inspired by Herodotus’ account of the Mediterranean and surrounding regions in the early 5th century BCE. Herodotus illustrates how states become great: small states must first achieve independence and consolidate internal power. Once secure, they typically look to their borders for expansion. Consistent with the logic of Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT), these emerging powers initially extend influence into neighboring regions, through war or the credible threat of war. Over time, some actors expand their strategic influence beyond immediate neighbors, shaping security dynamics across multiple regional systems. Such actors can be conceptualized as *hyper-regional powers*, as defined below.

Regional powers are states whose security involvement, political influence, and economic engagement are primarily concentrated within their own geographic region. These states can shape regional outcomes, mediate conflicts, and project influence over neighboring countries, but they do not possess the global reach or permanent military presence characteristic of hyper-regional or global powers. Regional powers often serve as leading actors within their region and significantly affect regional stability, alliances, and economic integration, yet their influence typically diminishes beyond regional boundaries.

External powers are states whose security, political, and economic influence extends beyond their home region into other regions of the world. External powers can shape events outside their immediate geographic sphere, often through alliances, military deployments, economic leverage, or diplomatic initiatives. Unlike regional powers, their influence is not confined to a single region; however, they do not necessarily maintain permanent global military presence or exercise the comprehensive global dominance characteristic of superpowers or monosuperpower. In RSCT, the category of external power traditionally refers to actors outside a regional complex that can influence its security dynamics. This definition is often too broad, as many states can affect developments in a region without maintaining a sustained presence or demonstrating genuine strategic commitment.

To address this limitation, the concept of a *hyper-regional power* refers to an external actor whose strategic concerns extend beyond its immediate neighbors and who maintains a committed military presence in the region, such as permanent bases, deployments, or operational infrastructure. Hyper-regional powers thus represent a subset of external powers distinguished by sustained engagement and strategic depth. The concept has been applied to states extending influence beyond a single region, exemplified by Türkiye’s foreign policy strategy in the early 21st century (Druzhilovski & Avatkov, 2013). This distinction separates hyper-regional powers from both simple external powers and superpowers, whose strategic interests span multiple continents.

Table 2. *Typology of Powers in the Eastern Mediterranean Security Complex: Illustrative Cases from the 2026 Conflict*

Type of power	Definition in International Relations Context	Examples
Regional powers	State whose security involvement and influence is primarily confined to its own region.	Israel; Iran; Türkiye; Saudi Arabia; United Arab Emirates; Qatar; Bahrain; Kuwait; Oman; Cyprus; Iraq; Syria; Azerbaijan; Jordan; Hezbollah (Lebanon); Houthi Movement (Yemen)
External power	Any actor, small or great, outside the region that may influence it but is relatively weak or unwilling to intervene. Influence can be military, political, economic, cultural, etc., and may be formal or informal.	Germany; Norway; Netherlands; Spain; Italy; China; India
Hyper-regional power	External actor whose strategic security concerns extend beyond its immediate neighbors and who maintains—or can quickly deploy—a sustained military presence in the region.	France; United Kingdom; Russia
Superpower / Monosuperpower	Actor with strategic interests spanning the entire world. Historically, two superpowers can coexist, each with strategic concerns and effective military presence across all continents. If only one exists, it may be termed a monosuperpower.	United States

A *superpower* is an actor with strategic security, economic, and political interests, coupled with the willingness to maintain an effective military presence on every continent. Being a superpower is therefore a matter of choice: a state becomes a superpower because it decides to exercise its global capabilities. In contrast, a *unipolar power* (Krauthammer, 1990/1991; Wohlforth, 1999) is ontological—it occupies the first position in the global hierarchy based on objective criteria such as military strength, economic capacity, and political influence, regardless of whether it chooses to project power globally. Today, the United States is both unipolar and the only global superpower, or *monosuperpower*, because it possesses the leading position and chooses to exercise worldwide reach. A unipolar state that decides to act as a superpower can influence whether other states achieve superpower status through strategic, economic, and military means, thereby consolidating and maintaining its position as the monosuperpower. Other countries may still develop global military capabilities, but only one state can be unipolar, and only one can be a monosuperpower at a time; the existence of a monosuperpower precludes any other state from achieving the same level of permanent global reach. The term *monosuperpower* is rarely used in the literature, although it appears in some documents (United Nations Security Council, 1976; Kokoshin, 2007).

This typology is dynamic. The role of any given country may change depending on the conflict, the strategic context, or the evolving balance of power within the regional system. A state that functions as a regional power in one scenario may act as an external or hyper-regional power in another, reflecting shifts in interests,

capabilities, and alliances over time. This approach is consistent with Herodotus' broader insight that the role of powers is not static but evolves in response to leadership, resources, and even contingency.

A classic illustration of the role of fortune is the story of Croesus, king of Lydia (c. 595–546 BCE), and Cyrus the Great of Persia, who defeated him around 547 BCE. Early in his reign, Croesus invited the Athenian lawmaker Solon to identify the happiest man. Solon famously refused to name Croesus, arguing that true happiness can only be judged at the end of one's life. Despite his wealth and power, Croesus later miscalculated his campaign against Cyrus and suffered a decisive defeat. As recounted by Herodotus, Cyrus' success was not solely the product of superior skill but also of favorable circumstances and timing, illustrating how *tyche* (fortune) can decisively shape the fate of states. This example underscores the importance of understanding power as dynamic and contingent not only on resources and leadership but also on the unpredictable role of fortune—an insight that aligns with the RSCT framework for analyzing contemporary regional and hyper-regional powers in the Mediterranean.

The concept of a *hyper-regional power* proposed here is intended as a first step toward a broader analytical framework and requires further theoretical refinement and systematic empirical testing. In this paper, it is introduced in a deliberately parsimonious form and applied to the contemporary dynamics of the 2026 Eastern Mediterranean conflict. Future research should examine which actors are best positioned to assume the role of hyper-regional power in the Eastern Mediterranean. Individual states such as Germany and the United Kingdom are potential candidates, but the most institutionally significant contender is the European Union acting as a collective entity.

In the longer term, the European Union may also be viewed as a potential candidate for broader global influence, possibly evolving toward superpower status if deeper political and military integration were achieved. This perspective echoes earlier geopolitical reflections by Henry Kissinger (1994) and Homer Lea (1912), who both identified a unified Europe—effectively led by Germany—as a potential strategic counterweight to the United States. Recent developments, including the war in Ukraine and tensions in the Eastern Mediterranean, have renewed debate about Europe's role in global security. Many view this as a fortunate opportunity for Europe, while others perceive it as a strategic threat. I tend to align with the first group.

Since 1972, when the European Community launched its Global Mediterranean Policy at the Paris Summit, Europe has sought to construct a unified framework for managing relations with non-European Mediterranean states. This effort evolved through the Renewed Mediterranean Policy (1992–1995), the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (Barcelona Process) launched in 1995, the European Neighborhood Policy introduced in 2004, and the Union for the Mediterranean established in 2008. Despite these successive initiatives, the EU's performance as a coherent Mediterranean actor has remained limited, constrained by member-state divergence, institutional complexity, and a persistent gap between declaratory ambition and operational capability. Whether a more integrated EU could effectively exercise hyper-regional power in the Mediterranean—deploying not only economic leverage but also sustained political and, where necessary, military commitment—remains an open and pressing

question for future research. In Herodotean terms, Europe must first achieve internal coherence before it can become a regional hyper-power. Since 1957, Europe has become increasingly integrated, but it will take time before it can emerge as a true hyper-regional power.

Political, Energy, and Military Interdependence: Empirical Evidence from the Mediterranean

This section is based on my published work on three issues—democracy, energy, and the military (see Papanikos, 2015, 2017, 2023). These studies also provide a comprehensive review of the relevant literature, which is not repeated here. In this sense, they offer empirical support for RSCT, particularly when considered alongside the analysis in the previous section, with emphasis on the role of different types of power. The insights from these studies are also applied to the current war in the Eastern Mediterranean, consistent with the approach of this paper. I also briefly discuss how the European Union has attempted to play the role of what this paper calls a hyper-regional power. Both the role of the EU as a potential hyper-regional power and the implications of the 2026 war for Mediterranean security are touched on here only as illustrative applications of the concept; they merit dedicated treatment in future research.

RSCT emphasizes interconnections, with the political dimension of this interdependence underscored in Papanikos (2023) in *“Whither Democracy in the Mediterranean Basin.”* The study demonstrates that democratic trajectories in the region are influenced by both domestic pressures and cross-border dynamics, including economic interdependence, migration flows, and geopolitical competition. Two widely recognized democracy indices, the EUI and Freedom House, were employed to assess cross-country variations in both the level and the temporal evolution of democracy across the Mediterranean Basin.

From this analysis, two principal conclusions can be drawn. First, significant differences exist among countries and regional groupings within the Mediterranean, largely shaped by geographical factors. Second, the overall evidence indicates a decline in democratic governance throughout the Mediterranean Basin.

The European Union has sought to institutionalize this political interconnection through successive democracy-promotion frameworks, most notably the conditionality provisions of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (1995) and the European Neighbourhood Policy (2004), both of which linked trade and aid to democratic reform in southern and eastern Mediterranean states.

This aligns directly with RSCT's core insight that political developments in the Mediterranean are embedded within a broader regional pattern of interconnected vulnerabilities, an insight that this paper extends to include the role of a hyper-regional actor.

The ongoing 2026 Iran conflict provides a contemporary illustration of this mechanism. The conflict has already triggered regional political pressures, including internal security concerns in Gulf states, heightened geopolitical polarization, and the activation of transnational networks and proxy actors. These developments demonstrate

how political instability and conflict dynamics diffuse across borders, reinforcing the argument that democratic governance and political stability in the Mediterranean cannot be understood independently of wider regional interactions.

Energy interdependence further reinforces this dynamic. In *“Energy Security, the European Energy Union and the Mediterranean Countries”* (Papanikos, 2017), the Mediterranean is identified as central to Europe’s energy architecture, particularly through natural gas corridors, maritime transport routes, and the strategic positioning of North African and Eastern Mediterranean producers. Energy security challenges—such as supply disruptions, maritime insecurity, and competition over offshore resources—therefore reverberate across the region. This aligns with RSCT’s emphasis on how economic and infrastructural linkages bind states together, amplifying the regional impact of crises and positioning energy as a key vector of Mediterranean interconnections.

Papanikos (2017, p. 351) underscores this point, noting: “Energy may compel the non-European Mediterranean countries to collaborate in other areas of social, political and economic interest. Unfortunately, as things stand now, regional collaborations in the non-European Mediterranean countries cannot be promoted for a number of reasons, including lack of infrastructure, appropriate regulatory framework and, above all, political will.”

The EU has explicitly acknowledged this interdependence through the Energy Union initiative (2015) as discussed in Papanikos (2017), which sought to integrate European and Mediterranean energy markets, diversify supply routes away from Russian gas, and elevate North African and Eastern Mediterranean producers as strategic partners in a common European energy architecture.

The current conflict strongly validates this argument. Disruptions to shipping routes and threats to critical chokepoints such as the Strait of Hormuz have already driven sharp increases in oil prices, destabilized global markets, and created uncertainty in energy supply chains. These developments highlight how energy insecurity originating in the Gulf rapidly transmits economic and political shocks to the Mediterranean and Europe, confirming my earlier claim that energy dependency constitutes a central pillar of regional security dynamics.

The defense-economic dimension adds a third layer of interconnectedness. In *“Military Spending, International Trade and Economic Growth in the Mediterranean Basin”* (Papanikos, 2015), the interaction between military expenditures, trade flows, and economic performance across Mediterranean states is examined. The findings suggest that defense spending is not merely a national policy choice but part of a broader regional pattern shaped by shared security concerns, arms competition, and economic relations. Military spending in one state can influence trade balances, growth trajectories, and security perceptions in others, reinforcing RSCT’s argument that security dynamics in the Mediterranean are mutually constitutive and regionally embedded.

Papanikos (2015) draws three key conclusions, highlighting both differences among countries and regional interconnectedness. First, and most importantly, increases in trade between countries are associated with decreases in military spending. Second, the determinants of military spending differ between European and non-European Mediterranean countries, as well as between eurozone and non-eurozone states, indicating that higher levels of economic integration tend to reduce defense

expenditures. Finally, the study finds that military spending and economic growth are not positively correlated.

The European Union's efforts to translate recognition of these interconnections into collective action are reflected in successive Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) missions in the Mediterranean—most notably Operation Sophia (2015–2020) and its successor, Operation Irini (2020–present)—which exemplify the Union's attempt to project coordinated military and security capacity into the basin, albeit within the constraints of a limited operational mandate. As such, the EU constitutes a significant hyper-regional power in the Mediterranean, particularly with regard to the non-European countries of the region.

The 2026 Iran conflict further exemplifies this dynamic. The rapid escalation of military operations, combined with the deployment of forces and the activation of proxy networks across multiple countries, demonstrates how defense policies in one part of the region reshape security calculations elsewhere. Moreover, the economic consequences—ranging from disrupted trade routes to increased defense expenditures—illustrate the tight coupling between military activity and economic performance that my earlier work identifies. Furthermore, the war prompted the EU to respond with a common statement by the European Commission in support of Cyprus, the first time an EU member state had been attacked by an external force. The naval deployments were part of a wider European defense mobilization around Cyprus after the strike, illustrating how a single attack on a member state can activate collective security responses at the hyper-regional level.

Taken together, these contributions (2015, 2017, 2023) provide empirical support for the RSCT framework, particularly as it has been extended to incorporate the concept of hyper-regional powers. The ongoing 2026 Iran conflict further underscores the central argument that political governance, energy security, and defense-economic dynamics are deeply intertwined across the Mediterranean. The conflict illustrates in real time how crises—whether political, economic, or security-related—propagate throughout the region via dense networks of interconnections, reinforcing the view that the Mediterranean should be understood as a complex regional security system rather than a collection of discrete national cases.

Diversity and Crisis Density in the Mediterranean Security Complex

The analytical importance of the Mediterranean is reinforced by the exceptional diversity of the states that border it. Encompassing more than twenty countries across Europe, the Middle East, and North Africa, the region brings together a wide spectrum of religions, languages, and ethnic identities, including Christian, Muslim, and Jewish communities, as well as Arab, Berber, Greek, Italian, Turkish, and other cultural groups. As Aammari (2018) notes, these cultural encounters have historically shaped a shared Mediterranean identity, while Albayrak (2017) highlights the enduring influence of Greek–Turkish cultural relations in fostering both cooperation and contestation. The region's political landscape spans consolidated democracies, hybrid regimes, and authoritarian systems, creating marked asymmetries in governance capacity and institutional resilience. Yet, despite these profound differences, the

Mediterranean Sea itself constitutes the central connective element of the region—an enduring geographic anchor that binds these societies together, for better or worse. It facilitates trade, cultural exchange, and interdependence, but it also serves as a channel for conflict spillovers, irregular migration, and geopolitical competition. In this sense, the sea is not merely a physical space but a structuring force that shapes the region’s shared opportunities and collective vulnerabilities.

Over the past twenty-five years, the Mediterranean has become one of the most crisis-dense regions in the international system, shaped by the convergence of geopolitical conflict, structural political fragility, climate-driven disasters, and large-scale human mobility (examples are provided in Table 3). Wars and armed conflicts—from the Second Intifada and the Iraq War to the Syrian and Libyan civil wars—have redrawn political boundaries, destabilized state institutions, and generated unprecedented displacement flows. The rise of ISIS and recurrent Gaza conflicts have further entrenched cycles of violence, while the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine added new layers of geopolitical tension, disrupting energy markets, food supply chains, and maritime security dynamics that directly impact Mediterranean economies.

Table 3. *Wars and Armed Conflicts*

Year	Incident	Countries Affected
2001	Second Intifada	Israel, Palestine
2003	Iraq War	Iraq; Italy, Spain (coalition)
2006	Second Lebanon War	Israel, Lebanon
2008	Gaza War — Operation Cast Lead	Israel, Palestine (Gaza)
2011	Libyan Civil War (First)	Libya; France, Italy, UK, Spain
2011	Syrian Civil War begins	Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan
2014	Rise of ISIS	Syria, Iraq, Libya
2014	Gaza War — Protective Edge	Israel, Palestine (Gaza)
2014	Libyan Civil War (Second phase)	Libya
2020	Greece–Turkey naval standoff	Greece, Turkey
2021	Gaza escalation — Guardian of the Walls	Israel, Palestine (Gaza)
2022	Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine	Ukraine; Mediterranean energy shock
2023	Hamas attack & Gaza War	Israel, Palestine (Gaza), Lebanon
2024	Israel–Lebanon War	Israel, Lebanon
2025	Gaza War expands	Israel, Palestine (Gaza), Lebanon, Iran, Yemen
2026	US–Israel–Iran War	Iran, Israel, Cyprus; France naval presence

Political crises have unfolded in parallel, revealing deep structural vulnerabilities within Mediterranean governance systems (see Table 4). The Arab Spring uprisings, as analyzed by Abdel Hadi (2016) and applied to Jordan, exposed long-standing grievances related to corruption, inequality, and authoritarianism, producing divergent outcomes across the region.

Southern Europe faced its own economic and political systemic shocks, most notably the Greek sovereign debt crisis, which strained the cohesion of the European Union and reshaped economic policy (Tables 4 & 5).

Table 4. Political Crises

Year	Incident	Countries Affected
2005	Beirut assassination & Cedar Revolution	Lebanon
2009	Greek sovereign debt crisis	Greece; Italy, Spain, Portugal
2010	Arab Spring begins	Tunisia
2011	Egyptian Revolution	Egypt
2013	Egyptian coup	Egypt
2016	Turkey coup attempt	Turkey
2019	Eastern Mediterranean gas rivalry	Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Egypt, Israel, Libya
2020	Beirut port explosion	Lebanon
2021	Tunisia self-coup	Tunisia
2024	Fall of Assad	Syria

Papanikos (2024) and Arroyo Fernández et al. (2024) demonstrate how the Great Recession and subsequent austerity measures exacerbated unemployment and social discontent in Greece and Spain. Similarly, Aimar (2015) highlights economic vulnerabilities in Algeria, underscoring the broader regional pattern of structural fragility. Episodes such as the Beirut port explosion, Turkey's attempted coup, and Tunisia's constitutional crisis further illustrate how institutional weaknesses can rapidly escalate into national emergencies with regional implications.

These political disruptions have interacted with transnational threats, including terrorism (examples are given in Table 5), which manifested in high-profile attacks in Madrid, Paris, and Brussels, reinforcing the securitization of borders and migration policies across Europe. As Afailal and Fernandez (2018) argue, the European Union's externalization of border controls has reshaped migration governance in the Mediterranean, often at the expense of human rights and regional cooperation.

Table 5. Terrorism

Year	Incident	Countries Affected
2002	Ghriba Synagogue Bombing	Tunisia
2003	Casablanca Bombings	Morocco
2003	Istanbul Bombings	Türkiye
2003	Palestinian terrorists bomb a US Embassy motorcade, killing three diplomatic security contractors	Gaza
2004	Madrid train bombings	Spain
2005	Former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri is assassinated by car bomb in Beirut; UN investigation in October finds Syria responsible	Lebanon; Syria
2007	Fatah al-Islam extremists clash with military and security forces in Nahr al-Bared refugee camp; 150 killed.	Lebanon
2008	Bomb attack on police station in Naciria kills four, wounds more than 20; al-Qa'ida in the Lands of the Islamic Maghreb claims responsibility	Algeria

2009	Twelve civilians wounded in attack on Palestinian community in Bayt Safafa; no claim of responsibility but Israeli settlers believed responsible	West Bank
2010	Four settlers killed by gunfire in Qiryat Arba'; spokesman for HAMAS's military wing, Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades, claims responsibility	Israel
2011	Attack on Coptic church in Alexandria kills 23, wounds almost 100; Army of Islam blamed but group denies responsibility	Egypt
2011	Family of five settlers in West Bank stabbed to death while in bed; no claim of responsibility	Israel
2011	Bomb kills 15 in Marrakech café frequented by Westerners in first major attack in country since May 2003; government blames AQIM but group denies responsibility	Morocco
2012	US diplomatic facilities in Benghazi attacked; Amb. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans killed	Libya
2013	Suicide bomber attacks US Embassy in Ankara, killing himself and a guard; DHKP/C claims responsibility	Turkiye
2015	Attack on <i>Charlie Hebdo</i> magazine office kills 12 in Paris; AQAP claims responsibility on 14 January	France
2015	Bardo Museum Attack	Tunisia
2015	Sousse Beach Attack	Tunisia
2016	March Istanbul Bombing	Turkiye
2016	Suicide bombing	Syria
2016	Vehicular Assault	France
2017	Car bombing, suicide bombing	Syria
2017	Vehicular attacks, Stabbings, Bombings, Attempted massive truck bombing	Spain
2018	A bomb exploded in a mosque	Libya
2018	Suicide bombings, shootings, hostage taking	Syria
2023	Hamas attack	Israel

Note: A comprehensive global list of terrorist attacks is provided by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI) and is available at: <https://www.dni.gov/nctc/timeline.html> and Wikipedia.

Environmental and humanitarian crises (Tables 6 & 7) have intensified regional instability, highlighting the Mediterranean's acute vulnerability to climate change and ecological degradation. Extreme weather events—such as the 2003 heat wave, the 2023 Kahramanmaraş earthquakes and Morocco earthquake, and the catastrophic floods in Libya—have caused mass casualties and exposed deficiencies in disaster preparedness and infrastructure resilience. Ghanem (2023) emphasizes that countries such as Egypt face mounting risks from rising sea levels and water scarcity, threatening both livelihoods and national security. The COVID-19 pandemic added an additional layer of systemic stress, affecting all Mediterranean states simultaneously and exacerbating existing socioeconomic inequalities.

Table 6. *Natural Disasters*

Year	Incident	Countries Affected
2003	European heat wave	France, Italy, Spain, Portugal, Greece
2012	Costa Concordia shipwreck	Italy
2020	COVID-19 pandemic	All Mediterranean countries
2023	Kahramanmaraş earthquakes	Turkey, Syria
2023	Morocco earthquake	Morocco
2023	Storm Daniel floods	Libya, Greece, Bulgaria, Turkey

A closer reading of Tables 6 and 7 reveals several important patterns. First, the frequency and clustering of major disasters—particularly in recent years—suggest an acceleration of high-impact events rather than isolated occurrences. Second, many crises exhibit clear transnational spillovers, affecting multiple countries simultaneously (as in the case of Storm Daniel or the COVID-19 pandemic), highlighting the deeply interconnected nature of the Mediterranean security environment. Third, the geographical distribution of these events points to a shared basin-wide vulnerability, albeit with uneven impacts: southern and eastern Mediterranean states often face more severe consequences due to comparatively weaker institutional capacity and infrastructure resilience.

Moreover, the tables illustrate the growing convergence of different types of risks—natural, technological, and biological—blurring the boundaries between environmental and human security. The inclusion of incidents such as the Costa Concordia disaster alongside large-scale natural hazards underscores how systemic fragility can manifest across sectors. This multidimensional risk landscape reinforces the argument that security in the Mediterranean cannot be understood solely in military or political terms, but must incorporate environmental stressors and humanitarian pressures as core components.

At the same time, the Mediterranean Sea has become one of the world's deadliest migration routes, with tragedies such as the Lampedusa shipwreck symbolizing the human cost of geopolitical fragmentation and economic precarity. Taken together, these overlapping crises reveal a region defined not by isolated shocks but by deeply interconnected disruptions, in which political, environmental, economic, and security dynamics continuously reinforce one another.

Table 7. Humanitarian Crises

Year	Incident	Countries Affected
2001	Multiple fatal small-boat sinkings during early irregular migration from North Africa (no single mass event recorded)	Morocco, Spain
2002	Dozens drown off Sicily as smuggling routes expand	Tunisia, Italy
2003	Fatal sinking near Lampedusa marks rising Central Mediterranean danger	Libya, Italy
2004	Major shipwreck off Tunisia kills over 60 migrants	Tunisia, Italy
2005	Western Mediterranean deaths spike as crossings toward Spain increase	Morocco, Spain
2006	<i>Crisis year</i> : Thousands attempt Canary Islands route; >1,000 deaths	Mauritania, Senegal, Spain
2007	Large-scale capsizing off Malta kills ~200	Libya, Malta
2008	70+ migrants drown off Libya in worsening Central Mediterranean conditions	Libya, Italy
2009	200+ die in multiple shipwrecks near Libya	Libya, Italy
2010	Deadly shipwreck near Lampedusa signals pre-Arab Spring instability	Libya, Italy
2011	<i>Arab Spring exodus</i> : Hundreds die fleeing Libya; one boat with ~600 missing	Libya, Italy
2012	Dozens drown off Turkey–Greece route as Syrian war drives displacement	Turkey, Greece
2013	Lampedusa disaster: 366 confirmed dead	Italy
2014	Deliberate ramming near Malta kills ~500 — one of the worst pre-2015 events	Egypt, Malta
2015	April 2015 shipwreck (~800–900 dead) — deadliest in Mediterranean history	Libya, Italy
2016	Record year: 5,136 deaths recorded across Mediterranean routes	Libya, Italy, Greece, Spain
2017	3,139 deaths; major Libya–Italy shipwrecks continue	Libya, Italy
2018	2,337 deaths; Central Mediterranean becomes extremely lethal	Libya, Italy
2019	1,885 deaths; high mortality despite fewer crossings	Libya, Tunisia, Italy
2020	COVID-19 restrictions worsen risks; 1,450 deaths	Libya, Tunisia, Italy, Malta
2021	2,048 deaths; major incidents off Libya and Tunisia	Libya, Tunisia, Italy
2022	2,411 deaths; multiple mass drownings	Libya, Tunisia, Italy, Greece
2023	Pylos shipwreck (Greece): hundreds feared dead — one of the worst in Greek history	Greece, Libya
2024	2,573 deaths; continued high-risk Central Mediterranean crossings	Libya, Tunisia, Italy
2025	2,185 deaths; persistent shipwrecks near Libya and Lampedusa	Libya, Italy
2026	Ongoing fatal incidents; latest recorded March 2026	Libya, Tunisia, Italy, Spain

Epilogue

The Mediterranean has always been more than a sea; it is a mirror in which humanity contemplates its oldest tensions—between openness and closure, cooperation and conflict, memory and forgetting. Yet for some, this mirror has proven catastrophic: like Narcissus, entire civilizations have gazed upon the Mediterranean “lake” with such intensity that they were consumed by it, swallowed by the very waters that once defined them—the Phoenicians, the Carthaginians, and the Hittites among those whose greatness ultimately dissolved into history. Others, however, have endured across the millennia: the Greeks, the Jews, and the Egyptians remain living civilizations today, their identities stubbornly intact despite conquest, dispersion, and catastrophe.

And yet the myth is not only a lesson of the past — there are states today that stand at the shores of this ancient sea, admiring their own power and beauty with the same fatal confidence of Narcissus; let them be warned that the Mediterranean has swallowed greater civilizations than theirs, and its waters are patient.

As we gather here in Athens — itself a testament to that capacity for endurance — we must ask what it is that allows some societies to survive the mirror while others drown in it, and whether scholarship such as ours can help illuminate that difference.

One answer, at least, is suggested by the evidence assembled in this paper. The conflicts that define the contemporary Mediterranean do not stop at the water’s edge, nor at any border drawn on a map; they travel along the same networks of dependence that bind the region together. If that is so, then the logic of their mitigation must follow the same path. Responses conceived and applied at the regional level alone are structurally insufficient — not for lack of will, but because the scale of the problem has already exceeded the scale of the remedy. What the Mediterranean’s crises demand, and what its history consistently demonstrates, is intervention at the hyper-regional or global level: coordinated, sustained, and grounded in a recognition that in a deeply interdependent world, no region’s instability remains its own.

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