

ARAB DISPATCH

Arab Dispatch - a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

Issue n. 19

10th - 17th July 2019

North Africa

[#Algeria](#) – Islamist leader elected new speaker of Algeria’s parliament



On the 11th of July, Algerian lawmakers elected Slimane Chenine, a member of the Movement of the National Construction party (*El Bina'a al-Watani*), as speaker of Algeria’s parliament. Chenine, who took over for Mouad Bouchareb of the National Liberation Front (FLN), is the leader of a parliamentary alliance of three Islamist parties, i.e. Ennahda, El Adala, and El Bina’a. The move came amid persistent demands from protesters to remove Bouteflika-era officials and establish independent institutions ahead of eventual elections; indeed, Bouchareb resigned two weeks ago under pressure

from demonstrators who had been calling for his departure since the two-decade ruler stepped down in early April. Chenine was appointed with support from the FLN and the Democratic National Rally (RND) party, which together hold a majority of seats in the lower house. “Due to the current situation in our country, we prefer Algeria over our interests”, declared FLN MP Abdelhamid Si Afif. This event marks the first in the history of the Algerian *Assemblée Populaire Nationale* that a deputy of an opposition party has been elected as parliament speaker.

To know more about this topic:

- Reuters Africa, “Algeria parliament elects opposition figure as chairman after protesters demand change”, 07/11/19, available at: bit.ly/2NZhxL9.
- *Jeune Afrique*, “Algérie : l’islamiste Slimane Chenine élu nouveau président de l’Assemblée populaire nationale”, 07/11/19, available at: bit.ly/2Y8myET.

Levant

[#Lebanon](#) – King Salman vows to support Beirut in a meeting with ex-Lebanese PMs



On the 15th of July, Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz and three former Lebanese Prime Ministers – Najib Mikati, Fouad Siniora, and Tammam Salam – met in Jeddah to discuss “the latest developments in the Lebanese political scene and the importance of preserving Lebanon within its Arab environment”. During the gathering, the political figures stressed the “brotherly relations” between

Riyadh and Beirut, as well as the importance of implementing the Ta'if agreement, reached with a Saudi Arabian mediation in 1989 and aimed at ending the civil war and returning to political normalcy. Monday's talks also focussed on resuming Saudi backing. In fact, longstanding ties have been strained in recent years as the Shi'ite organisation Hezbollah – supported by Riyadh's regional enemy Teheran – has grown in influence, being now part of the coalition government. Moreover, in light of Lebanon's deteriorating economic situation, Mikati said King Salman showed his willingness to support the country through twenty agreements which the two sides would soon ratify.

To know more about this topic:

- *Gulf Business* “Saudi Arabia to support indebted Lebanon, say ex-PMs after meeting king”, 07/15/19, available at: bit.ly/2GerMoz.
- *Arab News*, “King Salman and Lebanese ex-PMs hold ‘positive and excellent’ talks over stalemate”, 07/15/19, available at: bit.ly/32EQzf4.
- *L'Orient-Le Jour*, “L'Arabie saoudite se mobilise pour la défense de Taëf et de l'arabité du Liban”, 07/16/19, available at: bit.ly/2YYv1rq.

Gulf

[#YemenWar](#) – Saudi Arabia to secure Yemen ports after UAE drawdown



Last week, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) announced its intention to start reducing the number of its troops throughout war-torn Yemen for “strategic and tactical reasons”, while reiterating its support for the Saudi-led coalition fighting against the Houthi rebels. Indeed, according to official sources, Abu

Dhabi discussed extensively its troop redeployment with Riyadh. During the past few days, as the UAE pulled out a substantial number of soldiers, Saudi Arabia's military moved in to secure the Bab al-Mandeb Strait and two strategic Red Sea ports – al-Mokha and al-Khokha – which Emirates' forces had used to back their campaign in nearby Hodeidah and to monitor the coastline. In this context, UAE officials recently affirmed that Abu Dhabi is not leaving a vacuum in Yemen, as it trained about 90.000 local fighters.

To know more about this topic:

- *Al Jazeera*, “Saudi Arabia moves to secure Yemen ports after UAE drawdown”, 07/11/19, available at: bit.ly/2Ln9G7V.
- *YemenOnline*, “Arab Coalition moves to secure Yemen Red Sea ports after UAE drawdown”, 07/12/19, available at: bit.ly/2LUxzmJ.
- *Middle East Eye*, “Emirati pullout: A new chapter of the war in western Yemen?”, 07/14/19, available at: bit.ly/2Loav0m.

#ArabInsight

#YemenWar – Investigating the reasons behind the UAE's partial withdrawn from Yemen: a look into the Arab press perspective(s)



During the past few weeks, Arab newspapers and news media platforms have been extensively focussing on the UAE's decision to reduce the number of its troops throughout Yemen, allegedly

adopted for “strategic and tactical reasons” and aimed at moving from a “military-first” to a “peace-first strategy”. For the time being, the country is said to have completely evacuated Al Khawkhah camp south of the key port of Hodeidah, handed it over to Yemeni forces, and withdrawn part of its heavy weaponry from the area. According to Emirates’ official sources, Abu Dhabi would remain in the Saudi-led coalition that intervened in March 2015 in an effort to restore Yemen’s internationally recognised government – headed by Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi – ousted from power by the Iran-backed Houthi militias. This week, we provide an insight into the apparent causes that led to the UAE drawdown from war-torn Yemen, by taking the perspective of different articles published in the Arab press.

In investigating the factors that contributed to Abu Dhabi’s policy shift towards more indirect power projection, most commentators point to the rising unpopularity of UAE’s military presence in southern Yemen. Such issue is analysed in detail in a piece released on the 11th of July by the Arab world digital news and opinion website *Rai al-Youm*, titled “[The reduction of the number of troops in Yemen is part of an attempt to protect UAE’s image abroad](#)”. Indeed, The Emirates are perceived increasingly unfavourably by both the international community and Yemeni civilian population, particularly in Aden and in the oil-rich Shabwah region, where large anti-UAE protests erupted in mid-June. The country’s credibility as a mediator has been further damaged by its involvement in human rights abuses; for instance, in spite of Donald Trump’s close relationship with Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, the US Department of Defense has recently exerted pressure on the UAE to open an investigation into the abuse of detainees in Yemen. Moreover, it is noteworthy that the withdrawal announcement followed a visit of UN Special Envoy to Yemen, Martin Griffiths, to Abu Dhabi, where the two parties discussed the implementation of the Stockholm peace deal. In sum, as the United Arab Emirates’ geopolitical vision much depends on blending soft and hard power, the partial drawdown from Yemen is seemingly intended to repair its tarnished reputation.

Various observers stressed that a conflict of interest and different objectives between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi is among the factors explaining the UAE’s decision. Although the country declared it was reached by common agreement with Saudi Arabia, numerous international and Arab newspapers reported that the kingdom’s officials sought to discourage the move. [Interviewed by Al Jazeera Arabic](#), political analyst Kamel Abdullah highlighted the tensions between Hadi’s government – backed by the coalition – and Abu Dhabi, which is accused by Yemeni authorities of having divergent interests from the alliance. Abdullah referred to sharp discrepancies related to the methods of operations management since the early days, as well as to the UAE’s idea to divide the Gulf country between North and South in order to give southern Yemen greater autonomy and prolong its influence over this strategically

relevant region. Far from being a coalition with coherent and consistent goals, the alliance “lacks a clear vision about the end of the war” – said Jordanian military expert Qased Mahmoud. Similarly, Egyptian analyst Sawfat al-Zayat went on to affirm that the sudden withdrawal “is an expression of the realisation of the futility of the military solution in Yemen”.

Thirdly, the troops’ drawdown comes amid a standoff between the US and Iran after heightened tensions in recent weeks. Soon after the announcement, Emirati officials justified this redeployment by claiming that the UAE forces needed now to be moved to the home front should such situation further escalate. In this regard, Arab newspapers widely agree that frictions with Teheran have contributed to the move, yet they are often not seen as the impetus for the withdrawal.

Overall, the major costs of Yemen’s war are considered by political and military experts as the main reason behind Abu Dhabi’s decision, which would constitute one of the elements of a comprehensive review of its foreign policy, in view of a strategic regional re-positioning. In this sense, many expect a gradual contraction of the UAE’s expansionist policy in the coming period, notably in Libya and Sudan. However, in [an op-ed recently appeared on *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*](#), Abdullah Kamel excluded Emirates’ intention to withdraw from Libya, linking instead the pull-out from Yemen to the UAE’s willingness to devote its attention and resources to support Libyan commander Khalifa Haftar in his offensive against Tripoli’s Government of National Accord. As he put it: “Libya is a priority for the UAE at the moment [and] an easy playground through which to achieve goals without costs and to test a military-political strategy of regional influence”. This viewpoint might be consistent with a [recent leak reported by *Al-Araby Al-Jadeed*](#), according to which there has been a mobilisation of Sudanese fighters across the Libyan southern borders as a result of an agreement between Abu Dhabi and Sudan’s Transitional Military Council, aimed to assist Haftar’s campaign to seize the capital.

Concerning the future consequences of the UAE’s move, observers’ opinions vary. Some consider that the troops’ reduction may negatively affect ties with Riyadh, however it will unlikely undermine their strategic regional alliance in a phase of intense tensions with Iran. Others believe the partial withdrawal will further deepen the crisis within the Gulf Cooperation Council.

Elena Tosti di Stefano

As a general disclaimer, the article does not necessarily reflect the view of the NATO Defense College Foundation