

# ARAB DISPATCH

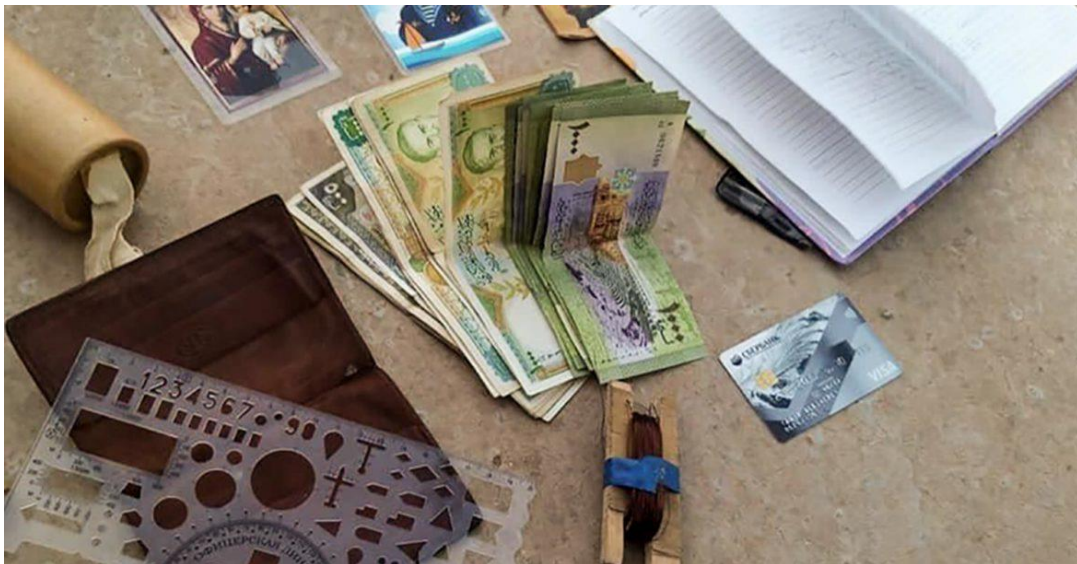
*Arab Dispatch - a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation*

**Issue n. 23**

***1<sup>st</sup> - 8<sup>th</sup> October 2019***

## **North Africa**

**#Libya** - Russian Mercenaries fighting alongside Khalifa Haftar's army



More than 100 mercenaries from the Wagner group, headed by Yevgeny Prigozhin - a Russian businessman with ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin - have been reported to be fighting alongside Khalifa Haftar's forces in an attempt to support Libya's National Army offensive on Tripoli. Western and Libyan officials, under the

guarantee of anonymity, first reported the news to the media. Later, the *Meduza* website - an independent investigative portal - partially confirmed the story. It announced the death of at least 35 Wagner fighters in Libya that were killed last month when an airstrike, carried out by drones – manufactured in Turkey - targeted them. Meduza quoted sources within the Wagner Group and Russian veterans, saying the dead mercenaries mainly came from the Krasnodar, Sverdlovsk, and Murmansk regions.

An official within the LNA declined any presence of foreign troops fighting alongside Haftar's forces, while spokespersons from the Kremlin declared they did not know of the existence of Russian citizens in Libya.

To know more about this topic:

- *The Defense Post*, Did a PMC Wagner employee leave a trail of personal belongings in Libya? 26/09/19, available at: <https://bit.ly/2ALEh7F>
- *Voice of America*, Reports: Up to 35 Russian Mercenaries Killed in Libya, 04/10/19, available at: <https://bit.ly/2oihIVy>
- *Bloomberg*, Putin-Linked Mercenaries Are Fighting on Libya's Front Lines 25/09/19 available at: <https://bloom.bg/2myHNyG>

## Levant

[#Lebanon](#) – Lebanese government declares economic emergency as financial crisis deepens.



The Lebanese central bank said in a communique, last week, that commercial lenders must ensure the credit lines were used exclusively for imports of fuel, wheat, and medicine.

The decision came after Lebanon's Pound - which has been pegged at 1.507 pounds to the dollar for more than twenty years - started rising on the unofficial market. The Lebanese Government declared an economic emergency to try to get its finances under control to repay a 1.5 billion dollar Eurobond maturing in November.

Within a Public debt, amounting to 150% of its GDP, the Government also declared its intention to enact reforms that should reduce spending while favouring capital inflows.

In this context, rating agencies - such as Moody - announced they are waiting to see if the Government could secure financial support from France, the Gulf States, or other countries.

In their words: "Such help would ease immediate liquidity risks and be conducive to a broader growth recovery over the longer term."

To know more about this topic:

- *Al Jazeera*, Lebanon: Protests over worsening economic crisis 29/09/19, available at: <https://bit.ly/2nIKqOO>
- *Nabarnet*, Central Bank Backs Key Importers amid Fears of Dollar Shortage, 02/10/19, available at: <https://bit.ly/30OhT8x>
- *Reuters*, Who will buy Lebanon's Eurobond? Not us, say foreign fund managers, 04/10/19, available at: <https://reut.rs/30SJfuf>

## Gulf

[#Iraq](#) – Protests against Adil Abdul-Mahdi's government erupted in Iraq last week.



In the last week, at least 90 people have been killed, throughout Iraq, and more than 2000 wounded when Iraqi security forces opened fire to stop the protests that have been mounting against Adil Abdul-Mahdi's government.

The Iraqi leadership shut down the internet, imposed a curfew, deployed security forces aiming to stop the protestors. It was only on Friday that Mr. Mahdi tried to mediate with the protestors offering a list of concessions to them.

The ambiguity with which the Prime Minister handled the situation generated numerous critics, especially from senior Shiite clerics.

The event that triggered the demonstrations was the removal of General Abdul-Wahab Al-Saadi as second in command of the counterterrorism command service (ICTS). The people in the streets started soon to ask for systemic reforms.

The protest shortly centred on the lack of essential services, the high unemployment rates, especially among youths, and the widespread government corruption.

To know more about this topic:

- *New York Times*, Deaths Mount as Protests Catch Iraqi Government off Guard, 05/10/19, available at: <https://nyti.ms/35bcfR7>
- *The Guardian*, Iraq protests: UN demands end to violence as death tolls nears 100, 06/10/19, available at: <https://bit.ly/2OoUw2w>
- *Middle East Eye*, Controversy grips Iraq after removal of top army commander, 28/09/19, available at: <https://bit.ly/2ooqv8D>
- *Debka File*, The hidden hand stirring up unrest in Iraq at cost of 100 lives, 4,000 injured: Sadr at Tehran's behest, 05/10/19, available at: <https://bit.ly/2VjJahJ>

# #ArabInsight

by [Elena Tosti Di Stefano](#)

[#Tunisia](#) – An insight into the uncertain electoral climate



On the 6th of October, Tunisians headed to the polls to elect their parliamentary representatives, in the second such vote since the adoption of the 2014 Constitution following the overthrow of Ben Ali’s regime three years earlier. The legislative vote came three weeks after the first round of the presidential elections that were brought forward due to the death in office in July of the country’s first democratically elected leader, Beji Caïd Essebsi.

The poll saw two “outsider” candidates advance to a runoff vote set for the 13th of October, i.e., the conservative law professor Kais Saïed (18.40% of the vote) and Nabil Karoui (15.58%), a media mogul who is currently detained for accusations on money laundering and tax fraud. This week, we provide an insight into the main issues and latest developments related to the electoral context, taking a cue from two articles published on Asharq al-Awsat and Al Jazeera titled, respectively: [“Parliamentary elections...the ‘Tunisian exception’ faces the most dangerous test”](#) and [“Low turnout in Tunisia’s legislative elections with the majority of voters being elderly people.”](#)

On Sunday, more than 15,000 candidates ran for 217 seats on more than 1,500 lists that – unlike in 2014 – are made up for about one-third of independents. According to national and international analysts and observers, final results are likely to mirror the first round of last month’s presidential election, and therefore drastically change the political landscape.

In the first place, the presidential vote showed discontent with the two main political trends that have governed the country during the past eight years, namely the Islamist party Ennahdha and the secular parties, notably Nidaa Tounes. Indeed, as previously mentioned, voters rejected prominent politicians to send two political newcomers through to a second-round runoff. In this respect, intellectuals and politicians devoted to PM Youssef Chahed

expressed their concerns about people's support to "populist" independent candidates at the expense of established parties, while Ennahda's leader Rashid Ghannouchi stated that not voting for "the candidates loyal to the [Jasmine] revolution" would constitute a "national treason".

Second, the elections' outcomes are expected to end the partnership government between the moderate Islamist movement and its allies from the modernist camp, that was initiated by former President Essebsi and Ghannouchi after the first general elections in 2014. During its time in office, the national unity government coalition has come under severe criticism for having failed to address Tunisia's economic situation, characterised by an unemployment rate hovering above 15% nationally and reaching more than 30% in the marginalised interior regions. In the current context, disillusion and dissatisfaction with the establishment parties are clearly illustrated by the low turnout: as reported by the Independent High Authority for Elections (ISIE), only 45% of registered voters took part in the first round of the presidential poll, down from 64% recorded in 2014; as underlined in the Al Jazeera article, the youngest generations mainly opted for abstention. As a matter of fact, a 2019 survey by the International Republican Institute found that approximately 70% of the Tunisian population distrusted political parties, while 59% somewhat or highly distrusted the Parliament.

Given the large pool of candidates, it is difficult to predict the outcome of the legislative elections, whose official results will be announced on the 17th of November. Yet, both articles highlight that they may not yield a clear winner, thus complicating the process of coalition-building at a crucial juncture for the country's economy.