

ARAB DISPATCH

Arab Dispatch - a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

Issue n. 27

1st – 8th November

North Africa

#Libya – Russian Mercenaries in Libya are changing the dynamics of the conflict



According to Libyan military commanders and Western officials, hundreds of Russian mercenaries, many highly trained and well-equipped, are fighting alongside Khalifa Haftar's forces.

Foreigners fighting for Haftar's Libyan National Army are introducing new tactics and firepower on the battlefield, threatening to escalate the conflict. They include snipers and artillery experts who are now being sent to the front lines where modern Russian-made weapons have been discovered.

It is worth noting that the presence of highly trained units might change the dynamics of the conflict. Indeed, compared to Libyan fighters, the Russians are better tactically skilled and move in smaller groups, attacking from side positions, mostly at night or in the early morning hours.

Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov in commenting the news affirmed that he: “[categorically reject such speculation.](#)”

Find more about Russian Mercenaries in Libya in our Arab Dispatch [n°23](#).

To know more about this topic:

- *The New York Times*, Russian Snipers, Missiles and Warplanes Try to Tilt Libyan War. 7/10/19, nyti.ms/2WShdi2
- *The Moscow Times*, Russia Denies Military Presence in Libya. 7/10/19, bit.ly/2CqIHSI
- *TRT World News*, Which way is the Libyan civil war headed? 7/10/19, bit.ly/34GIZ4J
- *Middle East Eye*, Militias and mercenaries: Haftar's army in Libya. 7/10/19, bit.ly/2Q5YDkS

Levant

#Jordan – New Ministers are Sworn in Following Cabinet Reshuffle



On Thursday, November 7, a statement from the Jordanian Royal Court said that eleven ministers were sworn in before King Abdullah II. This is the fourth cabinet reshuffle in the last two years.

Mohammad Al-Ississ, a Harvard-educated economist and former palace advisor, was brought in as Finance Minister. He will be responsible for overseeing an International Monetary Fund (IMF)

programme agreed in 2016, which Jordan has so far been slow in implementing. One of the reasons behind the delay lies in last year's mass protests, spread around the country right after the IMF pushed tax hikes.

Prime Minister Razzaz has defended the IMF-backed structural reforms and will seek to gradually cut public debt, now at 94 percent of GDP (approximately \$40 billion). The main issue in this regard is a bloated public sector whose salaries eat up \$13 billion.

Western allies consider Jordan's stability crucial in fighting Islamic extremism in the Middle East. The fact that the country has taken in hundreds of thousands of refugees from neighbouring Syria puts a further strain on the kingdom's limited economic resources.

To know more about this topic:

- *Reuters*, In major reshuffle, Jordan PM moves to push IMF-led economic reforms. 7/10/19, [reut.rs/2K06nBq](https://www.reuters.com/article/jordan-cabinet/2K06nBq)
- *The New Arab*, Jordan enacts major cabinet reshuffle to address economic woes. 7/10/19 bit.ly/2CsC55S
- *The Jordan Times*, Royal Decree approves reshuffle as Cabinet sees nine new ministers. 8/10/19 bit.ly/2K0mq1U

Gulf

#Bahrain – US-led Naval Coalition Starts Operation Sentinel to Protect Gulf Waters



On Thursday, November 7, a US-led naval coalition officially launched operations in Bahrain to protect naval commercial routes and oil supplies in the waters of the Persian Gulf. The move came after a string of attacks that Washington and its allies blamed on Iran.

Bahrain, which hosts the US Navy's Fifth Fleet, joined the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) in August. Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates followed suit in September.

Among Western countries which have agreed to send warships to escort Gulf shipping are Australia and Britain, while most of European governments refused to join the mission. Their participation could in fact undermine the efforts in saving the Iranian nuclear deal (JCPOA).

Iran, on its side, has refused to participate in Operation Sentinel and has put forward its own proposals for boosting Gulf security with the aim of excluding outside powers.

To know more about this topic:

- *The Defense Post*, New US-led coalition launches Operation Sentinel to protect Persian Gulf shipping. 7/10/19, bit.ly/33ukKWl
- *Al Arabiya English*, US-led naval coalition opens command centre in Bahrain to protect oil tankers. 7/10/19, bit.ly/2PYS1Vy
- *Times of Israel*, US-led coalition launches operation to protect Gulf waters. 7/10/19, bit.ly/2Q2Ws1B

#ArabInsight

By [Elena Tosti Di Stefano](#)

#IraqLebanonProtests – The crumbling of the “Shia crescent”? The Arab press’ analysis of Iran’s reaction to the Iraqi and Lebanese protests



“The ‘resistance front’ is one of the biggest achievements of the Iranian regime, and the Iraqi and Lebanese protests are aimed at igniting it”. With these words, the Deputy Commander of the special units of the Iranian police, Habibullah Jan Nathari, expressed Iran’s rejection of the unfolding demonstrations. In recent days, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei accused the United States of stoking unrest in the two Arab countries “with the financial backing of reactionary states in the region”. Against this background, several Arab newspapers agree that the huge waves of popular protests are challenging Iran’s entrenched influence in both Lebanon and Iraq, which has relentlessly risen since Teheran formed the militant group Hezbollah in Lebanon (1982) and since Saddam Hussein was toppled in 2003.

In the first place, Arab analysts and commentators widely acknowledge the similarities between the ‘autumn uprisings’, noting that “the demonstrations are directed against two ruling institutions with common denominators: financial and moral corruption involving the ruling elites [as well as] a considerable deterioration in the quality of life in recent years” – as wrote Hisham Melhem on [Al-Hurra](#). Moreover, the upheavals “crossed the sectarian lines that plagued these countries for a long time”,

revealing a rising “national consciousness” – affirmed Shamlan Yousef Al-Essa on the UAE’s newspaper [Al-Ittihad](#). Most notably, both articles argue that protesters are revolting against Iranian interference in sovereign affairs in Baghdad and Beirut through its proxies and domestic agents. Some of the largest demonstrations against the Iraqi government have taken place in southern Shiite-dominated towns; in Karbala, Shia activists assaulted the Iranian consulate and tore down national flags; furthermore, significant Shiite voices have been demanding that the Iraqi regimes emerge from under Teheran’s shadow. As for Lebanon, anti-government protests broke out also in the Shiite cities of Nabatieh and Baalbek.

“The current situation in Iraq and Lebanon will affect Iran’s ambition to spread its influence in the region”, said analyst Faleh al-Hamrani to the Iraqi [Almada](#), adding that “Teheran’s expansionist plans are vanishing”. Sayyed Fouad, Professor at Abu Dhabi University, emphasised on [Masrawy](#) that “Iran’s traditional methodology was to stand against the U.S., Israel, and the Gulf countries [...] but over this recent period, mass demonstrations in Iraq and Lebanon proved to be even more dangerous for Iranian national security”. [On the same information platform](#), the head of the Arab Forum for the Analysis of Iranian Policies, Mohamed Abou El-Nour, remarked that “what worries Teheran is not only the failure to exploit the influence it has been building for decades in Arab countries, but also the very places where such protests erupted”. Indeed, the Iranian leadership has invested a great deal in building up several Shiite factions in Iraq – e.g. the Da’wa Party – and Hezbollah in Lebanon. On this last point, if the Party of God loses credibility among its members and supporters, Iran will likely lose much of its influence in Lebanon, which it considers crucial both for confronting Israel and for providing support to Assad’s regime in Syria. Last but not least, Iranian authorities are wary of the common grievances that Iraqi and Lebanese people share with ordinary Iranians, especially since the country was hit by nationwide protests against corruption and financial waste in 2017.

In light of these observations, journalist Mohammed Mubarak, writing on the Bahraini [Akhbar al-Khaleej](#), paints the regime as facing a “big dilemma” concerning the tactics for countering the protests. According to the pan-Arab daily [Al-Quds-Al-Arabi](#), in Lebanon, Teheran aims to divide the movement and distance the two dominant Shiite political and militant groups – Hezbollah and Amal – from the calls to overhaul the political system. Iraq represents a more complicated challenge, not least because protesters have been more openly critical towards Iran. During the past days, security forces have shot demonstrators and Maj. Gen. Qasem Soleimani, commander of the expeditionary arm of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, flew to Baghdad to help the government manage the uprising, stressing the need to respond as harshly as the Iranian leadership did in suppressing the 2009 revolts in Iran.

In conclusion, Arab commentators underline that much will depend on the future trajectory and organisational discipline of protests movements in the two countries. Given their spontaneous and leaderless nature, their ability to provide a viable and coherent alternative to government structures remains to be seen.

To know more about the protests in Iraq and Lebanon, check Arab Dispatch [n°25](#) and [n°26](#).

As a general disclaimer, the articles do not necessarily reflect the view of the NATO Defense College Foundation