

ARAB DISPATCH

Arab Dispatch - a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

Issue n. 11/20

3^d – 10th September

North Africa

#Algeria – Foreign Minister Sabri Boukadoum to broaden political and economic ties with Turkey



Source: Asharq al-Awsat

On the 3rd of September, the Algerian Foreign Minister, Sabri Boukadoum, has visited his Turkish counterpart, Mevlut Cavusoglu, in Ankara to strengthen bilateral relations and, most importantly to stress

the necessity to bring peace and stability in Libya. According to the Arab Weekly the Algerian Foreign Minister “*supports a peaceful solution in a Libya free from foreign interference*”.

The Turkish President, Tayyip Erdogan, already military involved in the Libya civil war, alongside the UN backed Government of National Accord (GNA), is slowly reinforcing his position and consolidating his links in the continent with a special attention to Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria as well as in Somalia, where it has set up a military base (Mogadishu).

Between 2006 and 2020, the Turkish President made four official visits in Algeria, during which bilateral relations and trade agreements have been consolidated. Turkish is present in the construction, steel and textile sectors. Not to mention that Algeria is Turkey’s fourth gas supplier.

To emphasize the role that Turkey intends to play in Algeria, TİKA (Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency - Türk İşbirliği ve Koordinasyon İdaresi Başkanlığı; a government agency under the Prime Minister) undertook the restoration in 2017 of the Ketchaoua mosque, damaged by an earthquake. Originally built in the capital during the 17th century under the Ottoman Empire, it became later on a symbol of the French occupation of Algeria, because it was converted into a cathedral. At the liberation it was reconverted into a mosque.

The growing influence of Turkey in Algeria, is clearly challenging the old French influence in North Africa, a relevant background for the Libyan civil war and the escalation of military deployments between Ankara and Paris in in the Eastern Mediterranean.

To know more about this topic:

- *The African Report*, Turkey’s push to win over the Maghreb: the gate way to Africa, 04/09/20, available at: <https://www.theafricareport.com/40438/turkeys-push-to-win-over-the-maghreb-the-gateway-to-africa/>
- *Atalayar*, Africa, an scenario of France's and Turkey's ambitions, 04/09/20, available at: <https://atalayar.com/en/content/africa-scenario-frances-and-turkeys-ambitions>
- *Arab News*, Turkey’s growing focus on Africa causing concern in rival capitals, 04/09/20, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1729641>

Levant

#Syria – US “Caesar act” sanctions beginning to bite the population



Sources: Middle East Monitor

On the 6th of September, the US Treasury Department and the US State Department announced two new rounds of sanctions under the *Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act*, with a first round that have been already implemented on the 17th of June and a second round on the 29th of July.

Unlike the almost ineffective UN sanctions, vetoed by Russia and China, the Caesar Act aims at sanctioning (regardless of place and jurisdiction) any economic activity regarding the country and any individual who provides support to the Syrian government in order to undermine Assad's war-making capacity and political gains that could help him to stay in power.

However, this attempt of isolating the Syrian government by targeting, not only Syrian government's institutions, businesses and individuals with close ties with the President, but also international and regional actors has had severe consequences on the economy and, most importantly, on civilians.

Some Syrians have welcomed the Caesar Act hoping that, despite the battlefields successes, the new raft of sanctions will finally isolate and undermine Bashar's regime, while some others consider the Caesar Act the main cause for the rapid worsening of the Syrian economic and humanitarian crisis.

The Caesar Act comes indeed during a tremendous humanitarian crisis and with an already precarious economic situation. The Syrian Lira has lost since April 70 % of its value standing now at a unprecedented lows: 1 US dollar against 3.000 Syrian liras.

The rapid depreciation of the Syrian Lira has led to inflation with an important increase in the price of basic goods, fact that spread immediately anger among the Syrian population. In Southern Syria citizens has shown anger for the high inflation and protests recently erupted in Daraa, symbol of the 2011 protests, and Sweida.

Anger and discontent appeared also among the military which explains Assad's reshuffle within the Syrian military. The President has in fact recently appointed new Alawite officers while dismissing many senior officers. Move that unveils Bashar al-Assad's fear of a military coup against him.

In the meantime actors like Russia and Iran could particularly profit from emerging opportunities in the mineral extraction sector, precisely due to the sanctions.

To know more about this topic:

- *Brookings*, The Caesar Act and a pathway out of conflict in Syria, 19/06/20, available at: <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/06/19/the-caesar-act-and-a-pathway-out-of-conflict-in-syria/>
- *The Washington Institute*, The Syrian people, caught between the Caesar Act and the Assad Regime, 06/09/20, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/syria-caesar-act-sanctions-assad>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Assad seeks Russian help in face of US sanctions, 07/09/20, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/assad-seeks-russian-help-face-us-sanctions>
- *Haaretz*, Russian FM in Syria, Meets Assad in First Visit Since 2012, 07/09/20, available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/syria/russia-s-lavrov-lands-in-syria-for-talks-with-assad-1.9134985>
- *Al Arabiya*, Sergei Lavrov visits Syria for first time since 2012, 07/09/20, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2020/09/07/Russian-FM-Sergei-Lavrov-visits-Syria-for-first-time-since-2012>

Gulf

#Iraq – Rockets attacks targeting US-led coalition troops continue to hit the country



Source: The Baghdad Post

On the 6th of September, three Katyusha rockets hit the Baghdad International airport, hosting a US military base, and the Baghdad Diplomatic Support Center a branch of the US Embassy in Iraq.

Tensions between Washington and Teheran have sharply increased since the Iranian commander of the Al Quds force of the IRGC (Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps - Sepâh-e Pâsdârân-e Enghelâb-e Eslâmi), general Qassem Suleimani, was killed by a US drone last January near the Baghdad International Airport. Suleimani was not only responsible for international special operations, but a key political and diplomatic figure in the region. Since then, the attacks from Iranian-backed militias, such as Kata'ib Hezbollah, against the US presence in Iraq have been multiplying, leading the Iraqi parliament to vote for the withdrawal of foreign troops from the Iraqi soil.

On the 20th of August the US President Donald Trump has reaffirmed to the Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi the withdrawal of all the 5.000 US troops deployed in Iraq to fight ISIS and training Iraqi forces.

However, despite Washington's commitment in the withdrawal plan, Iranian backed militias fear a continuous influence on the region and a persistent pressure by the US throughout its strong ties with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the official ruling body of Kurdistan of Northern Iraq.

According to the Washington Institute, by strengthening its ties with the KRG, the US will be able to reduce its presence, giving only a perception of a weak US in Iraq. A military presence in Kurdistan will indeed empower the United State to remain in the region and to keep pressuring Iran and Iranian militias until a more comprehensive nuclear agreement is achieved.

To know more about this topic:

- *Washington Institute*, Pivoting to the KRG: Restructuring the U.S. Military Presence in Iraq, 03/02/20, available at: <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fkraforum/view/pivoting-to-the-krg-restructuring-the-u.s.-military-presence-in-iraq>
- *Arab News*, Three missiles target Baghdad airport, 06/09/20, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1730446/middle-east>
- *Menafn*, Three Katyusha rockets land in Baghdad airport grounds, 06/09/20, available at: <https://menafn.com/1100756127/Three-Katyusha-rockets-land-in-Baghdad-airport-grounds>

#ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

#Saudi Arabia – Imam's sermon at the Mecca's Grand Mosque unveils a prelude to normalization



Source: Middle East Eye

On the 4th of September, Abdul Rahman al-Sudais, the imam of the Grand Mosque of Mecca and President of the General Presidency for the affairs of the Two Holy Mosques, delivered a controversial *khutba* (sermon), perceived by many Muslims as a signal of a possible diplomatic normalisation between Israel and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

During his sermon, imam al-Sudais, recognized by the Muslim community as a spiritual leader, stressed the imperative for Muslims of establishing inter-religious dialogue and the importance for good Muslim

to show tolerance to non-Muslims. However, his sermon as encountered criticism due to his specific references to the Jewish community and to the importance of establishing a dialogue with Jewish believers.

In his speech al-Sudais specifically mentioned few *abadith* (sayings attribute to the Prophet) of Prophet Mohammed while dealing with Jewish tribes to emphasise his good behaviour towards polytheists and Jewish people.

To quote [Imam al-Sudais](#): “وقد توضحاً صلى الله عليه وسلم من مزادة مشرقة ومات ودرعه مرهونة عند يهودي وعامل يهود” [Prophet Mohammed] may God’s prayers and peace be upon him, did his ablutions using a bottle given to him by a polytheistic woman additionally, he handed his shield over two Jewish farmers of Khyber in exchange of the production of their harvest. The Prophet treated his Jewish neighbors in such a kind behavior that eventually they converted to Islam.”

His call for establishing a interreligious dialogue with Jewish people, comes only one month after the so-called Abraham Agreement to normalise diplomatic relations between Israel and the United Arab Emirates and few days after Jared Kushner, senior adviser to the US President pressured Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman to normalise relations with Israel following the United Arab Emirates. As a result, al-Sudais’ sermon has been perceived by many in the Kingdom as a prelude of a future normalisation with Israel, creating a vibrant debate on the web.

Many Twitter users have criticised him for exploiting the *minbar* (pulpit) of the noble sanctuary of the Mecca to deliver a strong political message and to promote a possible normalisation with Israel.

A Saudi Twitter user, very active on the platform in regard of the normalisation between Israel and the UAE wrote on his [Twitter page](#), few hours after the sermon: “دائماً يُرتد آل سعود - ابعثوا الحج والحرمين عن ” – *“The Saud royal family has repeated frequently to keep politics out of the Haj site and out of the two Holy Mosques, but it is clear that when they need the minbar (pulpit) to send a political message they use it”*. Recalling on that, another user twitted on his [page](#): “استغلال منبر الحرم الشريف على أن مستقبل الإسلام في خطر إذا استمر الحرمان الشريفان بيد ”لتسويق التطبيع، والدعوة إلى طاعة الحكام القتلة، دليل جديد – *“Exploiting the Holy Mosque’s minbar to promote normalisation and obedience to criminal governments proves that Islam will be in real danger as long as the two Holy Mosques will be in the hands of miscreant governments”*, underlining the concept of “طاعة” – “obedience” that Muslims owe to their leadership even though they are not capable to guide them, concept carefully used by al-Sudais during his speech.

Waseem al-Sghiuri, a Moroccan student specialized in human rights, quoted on his [Twitter page](#) the Syrian writer and Pan-Arab supporter, Abd al-Rahman al-Kawakibi: “ عليه مراجعة كتاب الكواكبي: طبائع الاستبداد ومصارع الاستعباد، الذي كتب فيه فصلا بعنوان: "الاستبداد والدين" يبين من خلاله كيف سطا المستبدون على الدين واتخذوه وسيلة لتفريق الكلمة وتقسيم الأمة شيعا، وجعلوه آلهة لأهوائهم السياسية [Al-Sudais] should review the book of al-Kawakibi: -The nature of despotism - where he wrote a chapter titled : “Despotism and Religion”, in which the author explains how tyranny compromises religion and how despots transform the religion into a tool to divide the nation e to promote their politics”.

These critiques, even if having no direct short-term political or security consequence, risk to jeopardise an official narrative on the relationship between kingdom and faith, that is already under stress due to necessary economic and social reforms.

**As a general disclaimer, the articles do not necessarily reflect the view of the NATO Defense College Foundation or any institution of or associated with NATO.*