

ARAB DISPATCH

Arab Dispatch - a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

Issue n. 15/20

1st – 8th October

North Africa

#Algeria – More space to the Islamist party?



Source: Middle East Monitor – The Algerian President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune

On the 2nd of October the Algerian President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune appointed, El Hachemi Djaaboub, a member of the Movement for the Society of Peace (MSP), the main Islamist party, aligned with Muslim Brotherhood, as Minister of Labour, Employment and Social Security, creating tensions within the Algerian political scene and provoking questions about the government's ties with Islamists.

Mr Djaaboub's appointment came with no consultation with the MSP neither by the government nor by the newly appointed minister. Moreover, the move could turn out to be unpopular, since the MSP party was well known for its ties with the previous regime as well as because Minister Djaaboub served under the former Algerian President Bouteflika as Minister of Trade and Industry.

Nevertheless, the appointment of a member of the MSP could restore the relations between the Algerian Authorities and the Muslim Brotherhood. During Bouteflika's presidency, Islamist parties were largely accepted by the Government. In 2004, the MSP, joined an alliance with two secular parties, the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the Democratic National Rally (RND), while in 2012, in the wake of the growing popularity among Islamist parties in Egypt, Tunisia and Morocco, following the so-called Arab Spring, the MSP run, together with other two smallest Islamist parties, Ennahda and Islah, the parliamentary elections. The Algerian Green Alliance was however trounced by the Secular FLN. Since 2012, the Islamists lost progressively popular consensus, while keeping an organic relationship with the authorities.

Thus, on the one hand, the recent appointment of a member of the MSP as Minister of Labour, Employment and Social Security, suggests a possible scenario of a new alliance between the Algerian Government and the Islamists, and, considering Djaaboub's strong ties with the former Algerian president, a possible return to the old regime. On the other hand, as reported by the *Arab Observer*, the president of the MSP, Abderrazak Makri, sees the choice of Mr Tebboune appointing a member of the MPS, with no prior consultation with the party, as an attempt to destabilise internally the party, especially after its decision to reject the new constitution.

To know more about this topic:

- *The Arab Weekly*, Algeria cabinet appointment raises questions about ties to Islamists, 02/10/20, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/algeria-cabinet-appointment-raises-questions-about-ties-islamists>
- *Middle East Monitor*, Algeria president Tebboune appoints leader of Movement of Society for Peace as labour minister, 02/10/20, available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201002-algeria-president-tebboune-appoints-leader-of-movement-of-society-for-peace-as-labour-minister/>

- *The Arab Observer*, Tebboune nomme El Hachemi Djaâboub au poste de ministre du travail et de la sécurité sociale, 02/10/2020, available at: https://www.arabobserver.com/el-hachemi-djaaboub/#pll_switcher

Levant

#Lebanon – A port in troubled waters



Sources: Al Arabiya – French President, Emmanuel Macron, and French Foreign Affairs Minister, Jean Yves Le Drian, visiting the site of the blast

On the 4th of October, dozens of citizens gathered nearby the ruins of Beirut's port to commemorate the victims of the devastating blast that hit the Lebanese capital exactly two months ago. Lebanese authorities rejected any international investigation and decided to carry out their own probe that has not yet announced any result.

Besides, the reconstruction of the main Eastern Mediterranean's seaport represents a huge geopolitical and economic interest for many investors. The port, that was developed under the French administration during the colonial mandate since 1920, became a main transit route in the Mediterranean and is now disputed mainly between China, France, Kuwait, Turkey and also the United Arab Emirates.

Kuwait, straight after the blast, offered to finance the reconstruction of the Grain Silo, in order to maintain its historical economic and cultural link with Lebanon. The Grain Silo was in fact funded by Sheikh Saad al-Sabah (42,8%) and the Lebanese government back in 1969.

Despite the gesture offered by Kuwait, there are other candidates to the reconstruction of the port that have a larger vision and aspire to a bigger clout in the area.

A major candidate is certainly China, that is already involved in several projects in the area, including the port of Haifa and Ashkelon in Israel, the Piraeus in Greece and three seaports around Alexandria, throughout the Red-Med project (a 300 kilometres-rail line linking the port of Ashkelon to the Red Sea) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Being involved in the reconstruction of Beirut's port would indeed ensure a greater influence for Beijing in the area. In this regard, Hezbollah, one of the main political parties in Lebanon, has already expressed its support towards Chinese investments, that could eventually limit US pressure on Lebanon and Iran. On the other hand, Lebanese fears a Chinese mass exploitation of the country.

Unsurprisingly, on the 8th of August, only four days after the blast, the Turkish Vice-President Fuat Oktay, expressed Turkey's interests in the reconstructions. Ankara, that has significantly expanded its influence in the Mediterranean, after signing in November 2019 the Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Libyan Government of National Accord (GNA), will gain with this move even further influence.

Nevertheless, France the main mediator now in Lebanon, after the latest military tensions between Turkey and Greece in Eastern Mediterranean, will most likely oppose Ankara together with the United Arab Emirates, as they both do in Libya.

To know more about this topic:

- *The New Arab*, Desires for Eastern Mediterranean clout drive offers to rebuild Beirut's port, 01/09/20, available at: <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/indepth/2020/9/1/the-geopolitical-race-to-rebuild-beirut-port>
- *Haaretz*, Who will rebuild Beirut's port?, 12/08/20, available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-rebuilding-beirut-will-be-complicated-1.9068265>
- *Middle East Eye*, Beirut explosion: Mourners gather to mark two months since devastating blast,

04/10/20, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/beirut-explosion-mourners-gather-mark-two-months-devastating-blast>

Gulf

#Kuwait – A financial and constitutional crisis



Source: Gulf Business – Skyline of Kuwait City

Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Sabah, who succeeded Emir Sheikh Sabah, died on the 29th of September, is expected to face a series of regional and domestic challenges, including managing the difficult relations with the parliament, dissolved several times in recent years, and the economic crises exacerbated by the oil price crash due to the coronavirus pandemic and the OPEC+ agreement to reduce oil production.

In fact, Kuwait, unlike other Gulf countries, has not diversified its economy that is still largely based on oil revenues. With the oil prices crash, the government has not been able to finance government jobs or provide government subsidies. The government's revenues depend for 90% on oil industry and the country struggles to find alternatives to lost incomes. This year Kuwait's budget deficit increased by 69%, consequently, the economic crises pushed the government to cut on public spending and subsidies.

The protracted financial crises have led the Emir to threaten a new suspension of the democratically elected parliament, one of the more powerful institutions in the country, in order to bypass the debt bill that remains blocked in the parliament. According to the constitution the Emir has the capability of dissolving the parliament and suspending the constitution to implement economic and social reforms.

Now that the Sheikh Sabah passed away, his successor will most probably continue his policies, focussing on domestic challenges faced by the Kuwaiti economy. Shaikh Nawaf could also foster a possible solution to the intra-GCC division. The Qatar blockade imposed in 2017 by neighbouring countries has weakened the role of the Council in terms of economic cooperation and social welfare among the Gulf states.

Moreover, is still unclear how the relationship between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and the dispute over neutral zone at the border between the two Gulf states will develop. In 1970 Kuwait and Saudi Arabia agreed to divide an area on the border and to incorporate each half into their respective territories and sharing petroleum wealth of the oil fields of Wafra and Khafji. However, the unsolved issue might flare up again.

To know more about this topic:

- *Middle East Eye*, Kuwait's Sheikh Sabah: The Gulf's great balancer, 29/09/20, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/who-kuwait-emir-sheikh-sabah-gulf-balancer-life>
- *Stratfor*, In Kuwait, a Blocked Debt Law Portends a Dissolved Parliament, 25/09/20, available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/kuwait-blocked-debt-law-portends-dissolved-parliament>
- *Al Jazeera*, How will the death of Kuwait's Sheikh Sabah affect GCC relations?, 04/10/20, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/4/how-will-the-death-of-kuwaits-sheikh-sabah-affect-gcc-relations>

#ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

#Egypt – Seven years after: a stability check



Source: Middle East Monitor – Government's demolition of unlicensed housings

The political instability that was present in year 2011 has been noticeably reduced, especially compared to the 2017-2019 period according to different commercial political risk assessment providers (Willis Tower Watson, Marsh), but the current situation does not allow any complacency.

Popular discontent toward al-Sisi government continues to grow generating a new wave of protests spreading very quickly in several villages around Egypt's main cities. The similarities with the wave of protests that overthrew Muhammad Hosni Mubarak almost 9 years ago during the so-called 25th January revolution may seem striking.

A first wave of protests started on the 20th of September 2019. The Egyptian contractor and movie actor, Mohammed Ali, revealed financial and political corruption among the Egyptian government, by sharing videos on social media, and urged Egyptians to turn against the corrupt government. The call was then

renewed last 25th of September by the same person, now self-exiled in Spain. The activist called Egyptians to take the streets once again and to participate in the *جمعة الغضب ٢٥ سبتمبر* – *the 25th of September Friday of anger* and protest against human rights violation, massive arrest campaigns, government’s corruption and dire living conditions of Egyptian.

Muhammed Ali’s call seems to [حرك المياه الراكدة في الشارع السياسي المصري بعد تجردها منذ ما يقرب من سبع سنوات](#) – *have finally shaken, after almost seven years of “stagnation”, al-Sisi’s Egyptian swampy waters.*

Like 9 years ago, when the protracted protests in the industrial city of Mahalla al-Kubra, spread all over Egypt, leading to the collapse of Muhammed Hosni Mubarak’s regime, this years’ demonstrations intensified within the last month in agricultural and industrial small cities where citizens are suffering the most due to the lack of services and the hike price of basic goods. Demonstrators took the streets calling for fall of Al-Sisi regime and chanting the slogan *ارحل يا سيسي، وهو يمشي مش هنمشي* – *Go away Al-Sisi! he walks away, while we stay!*

As reported by [Al-Araby](#), protests erupted last month in the Atfih, El-Ayat and El-Saff, industrial villages located in the Giza Governorate. Those villages rely mostly on brick factories that supply construction material used in government project. More than 650 brick factories, that represent 65% of local production and the major source of incomes for locals, have been shut down last March by the government, arousing public anger. After stopping constructions, that will not be restarted until next November, most of the factories went out of work and the government will most likely not rely on them for future construction projects.

When protests erupted in the villages of Atfih, El Ayat and El Saff, the Egyptian police and security services answered shooting on protesters and executing random arrests. As reported by [Al-Araby](#) human rights violations and indiscriminate arrests were also carried out by the government in villages that did not witness any anti-government protest.

Anti-government demonstrations erupted also in Minya and Damietta, after Al-Sisi’s decision to demolish unlicensed houses unless citizens proceed with regularising them on their expenses, a very expensive process for low-income citizens. Government’s house demolition plan did not provide any alternative accommodation, leaving many Egyptians homeless.

As highlighted by [Al-Quds Al-Arabi](#) the number of demonstrations connected to Muhammed Ali’s call has not been witnessed by the Egyptian government over the last six years, seriously worrying the

Egyptian security institutions that conducted arrests of thousands of protesters, activists and journalists of all groups and ages, bringing the country back to the 2011 revolution. Similarities appear to be strong while unfortunately the life of Egyptians has become even worse and unemployment rate has been reduced greatly but is similar to the 2011 one.

The [Arabic Network for Human Rights' Information](#) (الشبكة العربية لمعلومات حقوق الإنسان), monitoring the protests called by Muhammed Ali, reported 19 labour and social protests in the second half of September in Egypt, adding that the government's house demolition continued, despite citizens' opposition. According to the source, the governorate of Cairo witnessed six protests while the Giza governorate follows with four.

**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.*