

ARAB DISPATCH

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North Africa

#Algeria – Despite the lowest ever voter turnout, the constitutional reforms become law



Source: Star Tribune Mag

On the 1st of November, the anniversary of the beginning of the independence war from France, Algerians voted in a referendum on constitutional changes that aims to break with the 20-years-old regime of President Bouteflika, who resigned last April amid popular protests. Encouraged by the President

Abdelmajid Tebboune and the military, the revised constitution is supposed to respond to the demands of last year's protest movement.

The amendments approved will limit the presidential and the parliamentary mandates to a maximum of two terms, as it was before Bouteflika's regime, and will give more power to the Parliament and Judiciary. Following the citizens' demands, the new constitution will also establish the "Authority of Transparency, Prevention and Fight against Corruption". An additional amendment will empower the military to intervene outside the borders in case of tensions with neighbouring countries.

The referendum won the majority and will become law. However, despite the President's efforts to encourage people to vote, it witnessed Algeria's lowest ever turnout. According to the electoral commission's head, Mohammed Charfi, only the 23,7% of the voter population went to the polls. Certainly, the pandemic was one of the factors impacting the turnout but not the only one.

Some political parties and the Hirak movement had indeed decided to boycott the referendum, promoting the people's abstention. The main Islamic parties, the Movement for the Society of Peace (MSP), the Movement for Justice and Development (MJD) and Nahda, encouraged the "no" decriing the amendments as against Islamic values. The Pact for Democratic Alternative (PAD) ~~has~~ also rejected the referendum that was perceived by many as a cosmetical change to give Algerians the illusion of a democratic transition.

Nevertheless, the major opposition to the popular consultation came by the Hirak movement, the same movement that guided last year's protests asking for change and forcing President Bouteflika to resign.

Even if President Tebboune proposed the revised constitution with the official aim to accomplish the protestors' demands, Hirak doubts that few amendments will produce a real change in the country. Highlighting the fact that the military, now empowered by the revised constitution, remains one of the most powerful entities in the country, while some figures representing the "*ancien régime*" continue to hold power.

The amendments, produced with no consultation with the opposition, have been perceived as a "quick fix" or a "façade change" to prevent the movement from launching a new wave of protests. Furthermore, about 90 pro-Hirak activists and journalists have been recently jailed while authorities have prevented opponent groups to campaign against the referendum contradicting President's promises of change towards a democratic transition.

To know more about this topic:

- *Middle East Eye*, Algerian government hopes for constitution change but protest movement boycotts vote, 01/11/20, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/algerian-government-hopes-constitution-change-protest-movement-boycott-vote>
- *Daily Sabah*, Algerians vote on constitution with President Tebboune in German hospital for coronavirus treatment, 01/11/20, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/algerians-vote-on-constitution-with-president-tebboune-in-german-hospital-for-coronavirus-treatment>
- *Atalayar*, The main points of the reform of the Algerian Constitution, 14/09/20, available at: <https://atalayar.com/en/content/main-points-reform-algerian-constitution>
- *France 24*, Algeria says voters approved constitutional changes in referendum, 02/11/20, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/africa/20201102-algeria-says-voters-approved-constitutional-changes-in-referendum>

Levant

#Syria – Regime’s forces intensify military attacks on Idlib



Sources: Al Jazeera – Air strikes by the Syrian regime in the province of Idlib

On the 31st of October, Russia and Turkey hold talks over the escalation of attacks against the city of Idlib by the Syrian Army, in violation of the ceasefire agreed on the 5th of March in Moscow.

Ankara, which is pulling back from many regime-controlled military posts in northwest Syria, seems committed to maintain a ceasefire in Idlib in order to de-escalate the clashes between militant groups and regime forces, and thus a potential new refugee flow across the border.

As reported by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, since last August, forces loyal to Bashar al-Assad have been launching strikes against villages around Idlib and in the western countryside of Aleppo, while opposition brigades operating in the area, mainly grouped under the Al-Fateh al-Mubin (The Great Conquest), are firing back against regime's military spots in al-Malajah and Hazarin (southern Idlib).

With the escalation of attacks perpetuated by the regime, opposition factions are reorganising their forces in order to answer to Syrian and Russian forces.

The opposition brigades plan to restructure the forces and form a unified military council. The Council will be headed by commanders from Faylaq al-Sham, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and Ahrar al-Sham, Islamist militant groups considered as al-Qaeda's branches in Syria. The new opposition group will replace the Al-Fateh Al-Mubin operation room.

After the ongoing violations of the ceasefire agreed on Idlib, the President of the Syrian National Coalition of the Revolutionary Forces and Opposition Forces, Nasr al-Hariri, discussed with the Syrian National Army the critical situation in the area and the possibility of coordinating with Ankara and Washington.

To reinforce north-eastern Syria, the US Global Coalition against ISIS has already increased its military points by deploying forces in the area of al-Hasakeh and Deir Ezzor, while Russia is sending new military and logistic equipment to the country.

On the background of the clashes, citizens are fighting against starvation and the spread of coronavirus. Poverty and deprivation have been significantly exacerbated by the global pandemic, as well as by the US sanctions introduced on the 17th of June under the Caesar Syrian Civilian Protection Act.

Aiming to weaken President Bashar al-Assad, the Caesar Act imposed severe economic siege that is devastating the country and starving its people. According to the World Food Program (WFP) the cost of basic goods is 23,5 times what it was before the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011. The price of bread went from 35 Syrian pounds to 100 Syrian pounds per Kilo and citizens found themselves choosing between buying masks or bread to survive. The Syrian currency has depreciated reaching the unprecedented level of [2510.00 SYP to the US Dollar](#).

With Ankara involved in different theaters and pulling back from several military posts, Russia and the Syrian regime will most probably exploit Turkey's internal critical situation and try to gain more control on the border. It is very unlikely that a ceasefire between the several actors involved will stay in place.

To know more about this topic:

- *Asbarq al-Awsat*, Damascus raises price of bread, 31/10/20, available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2596801/damascus-raises-price-bread>
- *Asbarq al-Awsat*, Moscow and Ankara hold talks to maintain Idlib ceasefire, 01/11/20, available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2598646/moscow-ankara-hold-talks-maintain-idlib-ceasefire>
- *Syrian Observatory For Human Rights*, Ceasefire violation. Regime forces and Al-Fateh Al-Mubin operations room trade fire frontlines of Jabal Al-Zawiyah, 25/08/20, available at: <https://www.syriaahr.com/en/181151/>
- *The Independent*, A choice between bread and masks: Syrians face calamity as Trump's new sanctions combine with surging coronavirus, 21/08/20, available at: <https://www.independent.co.uk/voices/trump-syria-coronavirus-sanctions-assad-damascus-price-rises-a9682281.html>

Gulf

#Iraq – Ongoing protests: demonstrators are not leaving the “square”



Source: Middle East Eye – Students' march in Baghdad

On the 1st of November, many Iraqi cities, including Baghdad and Basra, witnessed violent clashes between protesters and security forces.

After more than one year, protesters have returned to the recently-reopened Baghdad's Tahrir Square, the symbol and epicentre of movement, to renew their anger against a government that has not been able yet to provide Iraqis with proper public services and new job opportunities.

Last 25th of October marked the anniversary of the “October revolution” and many protesters pointed out that the 2019 uprising was a *“gate-way in the process of change in Iraq, and that it must continue”*.

The demonstrations spread quickly in many other cities. In Hillah, a city in central Iraq, hundreds of Iraqis marched across the city denouncing the government's crimes against its own people and accusing the authorities of kidnapping and killing activists and journalists. In Kut and Nasiriyah demonstrators torched tyres and raised slogans saying that the revolution is not over yet.

Meanwhile, one year of ongoing protests are threatening Iran and pro-Iranian militias, accused of killing and torturing protesters and supporters during last year's uprising among them, the expert Dr Husham al-Hashimi, the human rights advocate Dr Riham Yacoub and many others.

Iran did not accept the removal of his ally and former Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi in November 2019, and sees PM Mustafa al-Kadhimi as an ally of Saudi Arabia and United States.

It is predictable that pro-Iranian militias and Iran-affiliated politicians will try to exploit the resumed protest movement to overthrow Mustafa al-Kadhimi and replace it with a member of the Shia opposition.

To know more about this topic:

- *Middle East Eye*, Iraqis return to the streets to mark anniversary of anti-government protests, 01/10/20, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iraq-protest-first-anniversary>
- *Al Arabiya*, Iraq protests one year on: Demands, Iran's role, al-Kadhimi and the future, 11/10/20, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/10/11/Iraqi-militias-Iraq-protests-one-year-on-Demands-Iran-s-role-al-Khadimi-and-the-future>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Unrest erupts anew in Iraq's anniversary of protests, 02/11/20, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/unrest-erupts-anew-iraqs-anniversary-protests>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Iran sees Iraq's leaders pro-US, aims to topple them, 02/11/20, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/iran-sees-iraqs-leaders-pro-us-aims-topple-them>

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