

# ARAB DISPATCH

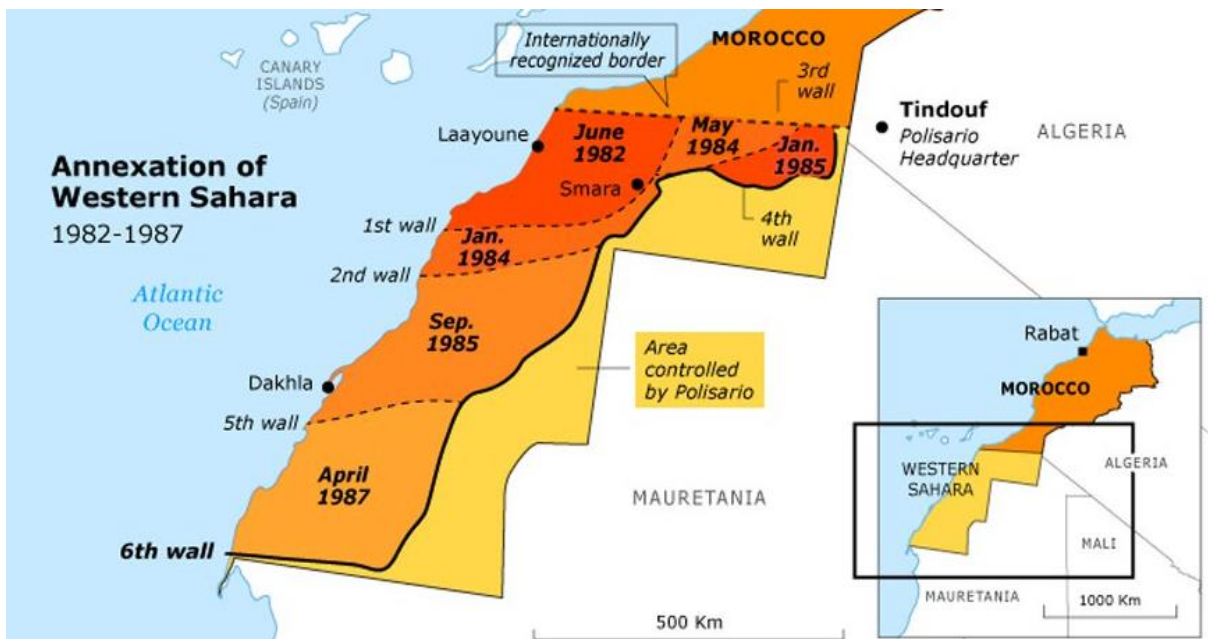
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## North Africa

### #Morocco – Resumed tensions in the disputed territories of Western Sahara



*Source: Premium Times Nigeria*

On the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, Morocco announced its intention to end the blockade of travelling and to resume the commercial traffic between the disputed areas that link the kingdom to Mauritania, and launched a military operation to reopen the road crossing the disputed territories.

The Western Sahara is a disputed desert region on Africa's Atlantic Coast. Rabat controls 80% of it while the Sahrawi liberation movement (the Algeria-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia al-

Hamra and Rio de Oro - Polisario Front - that aims to end the Moroccan sovereignty in the Western Sahara) is confined to the desert interior and to refugee camps in neighbouring Algeria.

The Front has perceived the deployment of Moroccan troops on the border as a violation of the three-decades old ceasefire in the disputed territories of Western Sahara, accusing Rabat of igniting a war.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of November, the Polisario has warned Moroccan authority that the entry of military troops in the UN-controlled buffer zone of Guerguerat, in the Southern Coast of the disputed Western Sahara, will represent an aggression and a declaration of war. The Sahrawi had answered to the move, with blocking the road leading to Mauritania.

According to Riccardo Fabiani from the International Crisis Group, the dispute between the Moroccan authority and the Polisario Front is a “potential breaking point” that might escalate even further. If the issue does not return under control, the United Nations will intervene and mediate between the two sides. The Chief of United Nations, Antonio Guterres has highlighted the dangerousness of the situation in the disputed territories of Western Sahara.

Algeria strongly condemned the violations of the ceasefire between the parties and urged both Morocco and the Polisario Front to end any military operation in Western Sahara border zone, while the Mauritania’s foreign Minister, Ismael Ould Sheikh Ahmed, called all the protagonists to work towards the preservation of the ceasefire.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *Al Jazeera*, Morocco troops launch operation in Western Sahar border zone, 13/11/20, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/13/morocco-launches-operation-in-western-sahara-border-zone>
- *Stratfor*, Morocco, Algeria: Rabat deploys Troops to Western Sahar Border Zone, 13/11/20, available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/situation-report/morocco-algeria-rabat-deploys-troops-western-sahara-border-zone>
- *Arab News*, Moroccan army launches operation in western Sahara border zone, 13/11/20, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1762466/middle-east>

## Levant

### #Jordan – Parliamentary elections reveal a partisan setback



*Sources: Sada el Balad*

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of October, Jordanians expressed their vote for the parliamentary elections. 1.674 candidates have competed for the 130 seats of the House of Representatives including 15 seats allocated to women (5 less compared to the 20 seats of the previous council), 9 to Christians and 3 to Chechens and Circassian.

The voter turnout did not exceed the 29,9%, showing a very low popular participation, compared to the 36% of the 2016's parliamentary elections.

The results highlighted an Islah block setback as only 17 of the candidates proposed by the parties running the elections obtained a seat in the parliament.

The Islah bloc (Reform bloc), representing the Islamic Action Front (IAF), the political branch of the banned Muslim Brotherhood, and the Ma'an Party (Together Party), the country's civil list, have both received few votes against the tribal representatives and the new independent candidates that gained the majority.

Although, 100 out of 130 parliamentary seats have been assigned to candidates that will be part of the House of Representatives for the first time, giving new hope to the voters, Jordan's tribalism appeared to be a very strong component capable to control the electoral scene, while showing the weakness of the

political parties and the civil society. According to the turnout, voters still express their preference based on tribal links and affiliations with a high risk of bringing back old regional divides and clientelism.

Furthermore, it is worth mentioning, that, according to Asharq al-Awsat, the National Center for Human Rights documented a number of violations and financial irregularities during the electoral process, namely buying votes in Ar-Ramtha, Amman and Madaba.

With very low resources, and most importantly, with a debt estimated now at more than 100% of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the newly elected House of Representatives will have to restore the country's economy, severely affected from the high number of both Syrian and Palestinians refugees and exacerbated by the COVID 19 Pandemic.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *Al Jazeera*, Jordan to elect new parliament amid deepening economic crisis, 08/11/20, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/8/jordan-to-elect-new-parliament-amid-deepening-economic-crisis>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Jordanian vote highlights tribal factor, political parties' weakness, 12/11/20, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/jordanian-vote-highlights-tribal-factor-political-parties-weaknesses>
- *Asharq al-Awsat*, Early results show new candidates taking over Jordan's Parliament, 12/11/20, available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2621086/early-results-show-new-candidates-taking-over-jordan's-parliament>

## Gulf

[#UnitedArabEmirates](#) – Washington and Abu Dhabi reach a new arms deal



*Source: Al Jazeera – a F35 warplane flying during an aerial demonstration*

On the 10<sup>th</sup> of November, the administration of the US President Donald Trump, has announced to the congress its intentions to deepen Washington's ties with Abu Dhabi by selling to the United Arab Emirates 50 F-35 warplanes, 18 sophisticated armed MQ-9 Reaper drones and air-to-air and air-to-ground missiles.

With Joe Biden set to take the Presidency of the United States, the implementation of the arms deal announced remains uncertain. Biden, who is in fact sceptical about selling arms to the Gulf states, is unlikely to foster the deal, move that could open the way to Russian and Chinese arms selling in the region. Despite a first rejection by Israel, with whom Washington usually consults prior specific arms sales, the US administration is considering selling the fighter jets, not solely to the UAE but also to Qatar, fearing jets offers from Russia and China. With the UAE, dealing directly with Russia and China, Washington risks to lose its closest ally in the region and its largest purchaser of arms in the Middle East.

However, as a matter of fact, Abu Dhabi, has since diversified since 2011 its security ties and broadened its foreign policy, as widely demonstrated by its involvement in regional conflicts, side by side with global actors against what it perceives as its most dangerous threat: the Muslim Brotherhood, sponsored in the area by Turkey and Qatar. This approach, has, in fact, led the small state to move closer to Russia's position in Syria as well as in Libya. Not to mention that, the UAE is also China's second largest trading partner in the Middle East and that Abu Dhabi views the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as an opportunity to expand its international trade.

Lastly, the Abraham accords brokered by Washington, has crowned UAE's plan to diversify and expand its economic and security ties. With the normalising deal, Abu Dhabi, aims not solely at obtaining further security and intelligence deals with Tel Aviv, but also at extracting key military concessions from the United States, including the F-35 jets, one of the most advanced warplanes, already requested by Qatar.

It is still uncertain how the new US administration will proceed however, it will surely try to keep a footprint in the region, probably by negotiating military concessions with the UAE.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *Eurasian Times*, After UAE, has Israel removed its objection to sell F-35 Stealth jets to Qatar?, 26/10/20, available at: <https://eurasianimes.com/after-uae-has-israel-removed-its-objection-to-sell-f-35-stealth-jets-to-qatar/>
- *War On The Rocks*, What the Abraham accords reveal about the United Arab Emirates, 30/10/20, available at: <https://warontherocks.com/2020/10/what-the-abraham-accords-reveal-about-the-united-arab-emirates/>
- *Middle East Eye*, Trump administration set to advance \$2.9bn drone sale to UAE, 06/11/20, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-uae-trump-drone-sale-advanced>
- *Stratfor*, The US and UAE deepen their defense ties, 12/11/20, available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/us-and-uae-deepen-their-defense-ties>

## #ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

### # UnitedArabEmirates – Abu Dhabi announces significant reforms to amend the Islamic law



*Source: Middle East Eye – Dubai's skyline with the traditional local sailing vessel (Dhow) crossing the bay*

On the 7<sup>th</sup> of November, the government of the United Arab Emirates has announced one of the most significant legal and juridical reforms in its history, introducing amendments to the *Shari'ah*, the almost-untouchable Islamic law, derived from the *Qur'an*, that controls and regulates not only religion's rituals but also Muslims' daily private and public life.

Although many Islamic countries revised their constitutions by adopting western-oriented legal systems, the *Shari'ah* remains one of the major references of their jurisprudence, controlling the personal status of its citizens and residents. The central role of the *Shari'ah* in the constitutions of the majority of the Islamic countries and the application of Islamic norms in matters that concern mainly family laws, represents a very controversial topic in Muslim societies.

In the United Arab Emirates, the *Shari'ah* is one of the main sources of the country's jurisprudence, raising concerns on the limitations to personal freedoms that come with its application. Considering that the country is home to several different nationalities and non-Muslim expatriates, who make up the 90% of the population, this decision comes with the aim of providing a legislative environment compatible with the country's multiculturalism.

The UAE, that is diversifying its economy, trying not to rely entirely on oil revenues, but to become a Western destination for tourists and companies, has thus decided to reform its Islamic law due to the several lawsuits and sentences pronounced against foreign residents or tourists, creating critical scenarios and legal misunderstandings, involving the countries of origin. Worth mentioning that, after signing the Abraham Agreement with Israel, the country is expecting to receive further foreign investments and a significant new tourist flow coming from Israel.

As reported by the official [Emirates News Agency](#): *في إطار الجهود لتطوير البيئة التشريعية والاستثمارية في الدولة وترسيخ مبادئ التسامح: رئيس الدولة يعتمد تعديل بعض أحكام قانون الأحوال الشخصية والمعاملات المدنية والعقوبات وقانون الإجراءات الجزائية* – *“Within a framework of efforts to develop the juridical and investment environment, His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed al-Nahyan, ruler of the states issued a series of decrees amending provisions of the Personal Status Law, Penal Code and Procedure Law”*.

Expats residing in the United Arab Emirates will no longer be subjected to the *Shari'ah* in matters concerning their Personal Status.

According to the Emirates News Agency, *تفصيلاً تتيح التعديلات على قانون الأحوال الشخصية وقانون المعاملات المدنية المجال لغير المواطنين لاختيار القوانين التي تطبق على تصرفاتهم في شؤون الميراث والتركات، وذلك لتحقيق استقرار المصالح المالية للمستثمرين الأجانب في الدولة. في حين تعمل التعديلات على قانون العقوبات وقانون الإجراءات الجزائية على تعزيز ضمان الحريات الشخصية ودعم منظومة الأمن المجتمعي* – *“the amendments allow non-locals to choose the law to be applied in matters that concern divorce and inheritance, in order to achieve stability in the financial interests of foreign investors in the country. Whereas, amendments to the Penal Code and the Criminal Procedures Law enhance also to guarantee personal freedoms and rights, while ensuring the community security system”*.

As per the announced amendments, expatriates (including Muslim), will be not prosecuted either for cohabitating without being married or for drinking without the license, usually distributed to non-Muslim residents in order to buy alcoholic beverages. However, the amendments do not concern solely drinking alcohol in public or cohabitating in one of the most conservative Islamic countries, but go deeper touching matters concerning divorce, inheritance and even suicide, that is highly forbidden in Islam and legally prosecuted.



As highlighted by [Al-Ekhbariya](#), an interesting legal reform adopted by the country concerns “*قوانين الطلاق والانفصال بين الأزواج*” - “*the laws that regulate the divorce and the separation of the spouses*”. According to the amendments, in fact, the spouses married in their countries of origins can now separate in the Emirates following their juridical system. Considering that in Islam, *الطلاق* – “(Talaq) the divorce”, can only be requested by the man and, that the separation of properties and child custody follow very specific laws that usually do not favour the woman, lifting the *Shari‘ah* from matters concerning divorce is indeed a big step for the legal system and most importantly for women’s rights.

Further reforms, approved by Sheikh Nahyan, concerned changes to laws and sentences related to crimes targeting women, confirming the “*تأكيدا على التزام الدولة بحماية حقوق المرأة وتعزيزا لمبدأ سيادة القانون*” – “*the state’s commitment in protecting women’s rights and promoting law above anything else*”.

Havier penalties will be, in fact, stipulated in cases of harassment and rape and, most importantly, the reduced sentence for the so-called “*جرائم الشرف*” - “*honor crimes*”, the killing of a women seen as having brought dishonour to the family, has been removed.

As reported by [Al-Hurrah](#) and many other news agencies “*تم إلغاء المادة التي تمنح العذر المخفف فيما يسمى بجرائم الشرف، بحيث تعامل جرائم القتل وفقا للنصوص المعمول بها في قانون العقوبات*” – “*the article that guarantees a lighter sentence to the so called honour crimes has been cancelled so that murders are sentenced according to existing penal code*”.

The expansion of personal freedoms reflects the changing picture of a country that is determined to become a Western destination for tourists and companies despite its strict Islamic law.

Lifting the *Shari‘ah* in matters that concern the personal status, means that the Islamic laws will be barely applied especially when it comes to expatriates.

*\*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.*