

# ARAB DISPATCH

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## **North Africa**

**#Morocco – Bahrain to open a consulate in Western Sahara**



*Source: Middle East Eye – From the left, the Moroccan King Mohammed VI and King Hamad bin Isa al-Khalifa of Bahrain*

On the 27<sup>th</sup> of November Morocco's Royal palace announced Bahrain's intention to open a consulate in Laayoune, the biggest city in the Morocco-controlled Western Sahara.

The decision comes in support to Rabat after last month's resumed dispute between the Polisario (the Algeria-backed Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia al-Hamra and Rio de Oro that aims to end the Moroccan Sovereignty in the Western Sahara) and Morocco over the buffer zone of Guerguerat. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of November, in fact, the Moroccan armed forces lifted a three-weeks blockade imposed by the independent movement and launched a military operation to reopen the road, linking Morocco to Mauritania, crossing the disputed territories.

Bahrain is not the only Arab country to show its support to the Moroccan sovereignty in Western Sahara and, implicitly, to recognise the Moroccan stance.

On the 4<sup>th</sup> of November the United Arab Emirates became the first Arab country to open a diplomatic mission in the Moroccan-controlled area, followed by the Kingdom of Jordan that, on the 20<sup>th</sup> of November expressed officially its support to King Mohammed VI to the reopening of the passage of people and goods between the Kingdom of Morocco and Sub-Saharan Africa.

Commenting on UAE's decision to open its consulate in the Western Sahara, the Moroccan Foreign Minister, Nasser Bourita, stated that the decision represented a very significant legal and diplomatic signal

Since 2019, 15 African countries have already opened diplomatic missions in Western Sahara while Algeria that supports Polisario, independent movement remains the only African-Arab country not recognising Morocco's sovereignty in the disputed territories and has strongly condemned the reopening of the cross road.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *Arab News*, UAE opens consulate in Morocco-controlled Western Sahara, 04/11/20, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1758551/middle-east>
- *Al Arabiya*, Jordan to open consulate in Western Sahara amid dispute, 20/11/20, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2020/11/20/Jordan-to-open-consulate-in-Western-Sahara-amid-dispute>
- *Middle East Monitor*, Bahrain to open consulate in Western Sahara, Morocco says, 27/11/20, available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20201127-bahrain-to-open-consulate-in-western-sahara-morocco-says/>

## Levant

### #Jordan – King Abdullah fears the Saudis’ take over al-Aqsa custodianship



*Sources: Middle East Monitor – Muslims performing Friday’s prayer in front in the Al-Aqsa complex*

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of November the spokesman of the Jordanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement denouncing attempts of altering the legal status quo of the al-Aqsa mosque. The spokesman, Daifallah al-Fayez stated that: *“The kingdom will continue its efforts to protect and care for the mosque, and preserve the rights of all Muslims to it in compliance with the Hashemite custodianship of Jerusalem’s Muslim and Christian holy sites”*.

The statement, followed by a phone call by the incoming US president-elect, Joe Biden, came after the Israeli Prime Minister secretly met on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of November with the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman and the US secretary of State Mike Pompeo. The visit, so far denied by Riyadh, marked the first meeting between the two leaders, suggesting a possible new normalisation deal.

Warming relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel have been a serious concern over the Hashemite kingdom of Jordan that fears to lose the custodianship of Jerusalem’s holy sites, which legitimates de facto the ruling dynasty since almost a century. The Hashemite dynasty (the Banu Hashem, direct

descendants of the Prophet's dynasty, the Quarays) serves as custodian of the Haram al-Sharif, the noble sanctuary in the old city of Jerusalem, including the holy sites of the al-Aqsa mosque and the Qubbat al-Sakhrah (the dome of the rock).

The tutelage dates back to 1924, prior to the creation of the Kingdom, when Hussein bin Ali al-Hashimi, King of the Hijaz and leader of the Arab revolt against the Ottoman Empire, was appointed as custodian of Haram al-Sharif. The Hashemite custodianship of the holy sites, maintained also after the 1967 Israeli occupation, represents a very sensitive issue for the Kingdom. Historically, in fact, the Banu Hashim were expelled from the Hijaz in 1921 to the benefit of the Al-Saud family, appointed as custodians of Mecca and Medina. In exchange they received the tutelage of the Haram al-Sharif complex.

The Jordanian authorities fear that the US in accordance with Israel would negotiate the custodianship and offer the sites to Saudi Arabia in exchange of a new normalisation deal, given Riyadh's reluctance in joining the Abraham accords already signed by UAE and Bahrein.

The transfer of the custodianship from the Banu Hashim to the Banu Sa'ud will surely change the traditional role of Jordan and isolate even further the kingdom.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *The Guardian*, Jordan scrambles to affirm its custodianship of al-Aqsa mosque, 26/11/20, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/nov/26/jordan-scrambles-affirm-custodianship-al-aqsa-mosque>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Jordan worried about erosion of their role after normalisation steps, 28/11/20, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/jordan-worried-about-erosion-their-role-after-normalisation-steps>

## Gulf

### #OPEC – 180<sup>th</sup> meeting of the organization to discuss oil quotas



*Source: Iran Press*

On the 30<sup>th</sup> of November, the 180<sup>th</sup> meeting of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) took place in Vienna with the OPEC+1 meeting being held the day after.

The OPEC meeting tackled the oil market's reaction to the possible surplus oil output expected in January.

Since the COVID 19 pandemic, due to the drastically diminished demand, oil prices plunged to unforeseen levels (40 dollars per barrel), pushing the organisation and its members to reduce the production quotas.

The oil market partially recovered after the first pandemic wave, only to plunge with the second one. In addition, the recent UN mediation in Libya, leading to an increased oil output, risks to further destabilise markets.

As pointed out by the President of the OPEC Conference and Algeria's Minister of Energy, Abdelmadjid Attar, *"the global economy is still in deep recession with growth pegged at minus 4,3% for 2020. Global oil demand for*

*2020 is expected to decline by around 9,8 mb/d as the second wave of the pandemic and related lockdowns put a damper on demand”.*

The President highlighted that the global economy is expected to register a 4,4% growth with a significant increase in oil demand, expected to reach the 6,1 mb/d.

The meeting ended with most of the OPEC and OPEC+ members agreeing on a continued reduction of the oil quotas to avoid surplus. Iraq, Sudan and the United Arab Emirates expressed concerns on keeping a reduced production.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *Stratfor*, OPEC production cuts meet another COVID 19 reality check, 25/11/20, available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/opec-production-cuts-meet-another-covid-19-reality-check>
- *The Foreign Brief*, 180<sup>th</sup> meeting of the OPEC Conference to be held, 30/11/20, available at: <https://www.foreignbrief.com/daily-news/180th-meeting-of-the-opec-conference-to-be-held/>

## #ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

### # Iraq – Newly established Iran-backed Shiite group spreads panic in Baghdad



Source: Nabd – Followers of the Rab' Allah storming into the Shilan massage Centre

As reported by [Al-Istiqlal Journal](#), “ظهرت مؤخرا على الساحة مجموعة جديدة تطلق على نفسها تسمية ربيع الله – (جماعة الله)، تتحرك بحرية كبيرة وتنتشر الذعر في العاصمة بغداد أمام مرأى ومسمع من أجهزة الدولة – “a new group, called Raba’a Allah (Allah’s crowd), has recently emerged spreading panic and acting unhindered in the Iraqi capital Baghdad with no reaction from the State’s authorities and security forces”.

The Raba’a Allah is a newly established Iraqi Shiite militia. The majority of its members comes from other Shiite groups emerged on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of January after the killing of General Qassem Soleimani, Commander of the Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, Secretary-General of the Kata’ib Hezbollah, by a US drone strike. The group claims to be independent although it has multiple links with Kata’ib Hezbollah group.

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of November dozens of militants belonging to the Iran-backed Shia Raba’a Allah (God’s crowd) stormed with an extreme violence in a massage center, located in Baghdad’s Mount Beirut Hotel, in the Karrada neighbourhood, a residential area allocated mostly to office buildings hosting foreign

companies. The attack, shared on web, was soon claimed by the group. Videos posted and re-posted on social media show a group of masked people dressed in black with written on their t-shirts “Raba’a Allah” breaking in and beating girls while chanting sectarian slogans.

The group’s first appearance dates back to the 31<sup>st</sup> of August, when militants belonging to the Raba’a Allah set on fire the Iraqi Dijlah TV’s offices for broadcasting music during the night of the Ashura, the Mourning of Muharram, a festivity observed primarily by Shia Muslims. According to [Al Arabiya](#), after this episode, the *Mabkame* (court) of Al-Rusafa district in Baghdad ordered the arrest of the chief of the channel “تعمد الإساءة إلى شعائر إحدى الطوائف الدينية في العراق” – *“for deliberately offending one of the main religious branches in Iraq”*. The Al-Istiqlal journal, attributes to the same militia also another arson, happened earlier in May, at the MBC Channel offices for releasing a statement depicting Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis as a terrorist and accusing him of bombing the Iraqi Embassy in Beirut in 1981.

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of October the group carried out a further attack showing a very similar plot. Members of the group broke into the Kurdistan Democratic Party’s headquarter and set the building on fire in response to the statements released by the former Minister of Foreign Affairs and leading figure of the Kurdistan Democratic Party, Hoshiyar Zebari, for condemning the Shiite militias and urging their removal from the Green Zone.

The group’s violent actions against civilians in the name of Islam and the Shariah have alarmed Iraqis, bringing them back to the horrendous memories of the Islamic State. According to local media, the group is also responsible for attacking alcohol shops and non-Shariah compliant businesses destroying the shops’ entrance and burning the vehicles nearby. In fact, according to an article published by [Al-Hurrah](#), titled “غضب من ”دواعش الشيعة“ بعد فيديو اقتحام مركز ”مساج“ ببغداد” – *“Anger over the Shiite Da’ish after a video showing the group storming into the massage center”* many activists from the civil society commented on social media the action referring to the group as a “دواعش الشيعة” – *“Da’ishised” Shiite group*”.

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