

ARAB DISPATCH

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North Africa

#Morocco – The US deal with Rabat: Western Sahara for Abraham Accord



Source: Middle East Eye – From left to right: the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the US President Donald Trump and the Moroccan King Mohammed VI

On the 10th of December the US President Donald Trump recognised Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara. The US ambassador to Rabat, David Fischer, during a ceremony has officially adopted

a new map of the kingdom that includes the disputed territories. The announcement came just after the announcement that Morocco will normalise in a near future its relations with Israel.

According to the Middle East Eye, the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has reportedly pushed the United States to recognise Moroccan sovereignty over the disputed territories of Western Sahara in exchange of an official normalising deal with Israel. Worth mentioning that, Morocco, like other Arab countries – notably Tunisia and Sudan - had already low level, discreet relations with Israel. In 1950 Morocco's King Hassan II who did not share Gamal Abd al-Nasser's Pan-Arab vision started an unofficial cooperation with Tel Aviv including the trainings by Israelis of Moroccan intelligence agents.

The Algerian-backed Polisario Movement (the Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia al-Hamra and Rìo de Oro that aims at ending the Moroccan presence in the Western Sahara) strongly condemned the move accusing Trump of attributing to Morocco something which does not belong to the country. Moreover, the movement dismissed the announcement and vowed to fight on until Moroccan forces withdraw from all of Western Sahara. Abdelaziz Djerad the Prime Minister of Algeria the main backer of the Polisario movement said that the move will destabilise the country adding that Israel wants to come closer to North African countries.

To know more about this topic:

- *Middle East Eye*, Israel lobbied US to recognise Moroccan control of Western Sahara, 04/02/20, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-lobbied-us-recognise-morocco-western-sahara>
- *Middle East Eye*, Israel and Morocco to normalise ties as US recognise Rabat's claim to western Sahara, 10/12/20, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/israel-morocco-normalisation-us-western-sahara-recognises>
- *Haaretz*, Peace for Peace? Israel-Morocco deal is occupation in Exchange for Occupation, 11/12/20, available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-peace-for-peace-israel-morocco-deal-is-occupation-in-exchange-for-occupation-1.9364413>

Levant

#Lebanon – Banks impose arbitrary fees on clients' deposits



Sources: Financial Times – Citizens protesting outside Lebanon's central bank in Beirut

To tackle the state's financial collapse Lebanese local banks in desperate need for cash have recently imposed arbitrary fees. After blocking withdrawals and transfer from personal accounts, and after limiting monthly withdrawals and freezing deposits, local banks applied additional extra fees on their customers' dollar deposits. As reported by Al Arabiya Lebanese citizens have been charged a fee between 1 and 5% on direct transfers from Europe.

Local currency has lost 80% of its value and despite's the state's financial collapse the government rejected to amend any capital control law and decided only to apply regulations to limit cash withdrawal and transfers. As an alternative, local banks, imposed illegal and haphazard regulations on their clients' deposits trying to recuperate losses caused by the severe dip of the Lebanese currency against the dollar.

Local banks are operating independently without reporting to the Ministry of Finance and to the Central Bank acting like a cartel, making it impossible for customers to change bank. Banks, the Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank apparently are colluding damaging local depositors.

Earlier, in January, Lebanese banks illegally restricted and limited cash withdrawal, despite many protests and judicial actions. In these conditions, citizens cannot cope with rampant inflation and repeated pandemic shutdowns. Moreover, the blast that hit Beirut's port on the 4th of August have destroyed thousands of homes and businesses, and made 300.000 people homeless leaving Lebanese people hopeless and in extreme need to access their savings to survive.

To know more about this topic:

- *Al Arabiya*, Lebanon banks impose additional fees on dollar depositors, 14/12/20, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/features/2020/12/14/Lebanon-economy-Lebanon-s-banks-impose-additional-fees-on-dollar-depositors->

Gulf

#SaudiArabia – GCC blockade against Qatar to be softened



Source: Al Jazeera - GCC leaders during the Gulf Cooperation Council's Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (2019)

According to Gulf News on the 5th of January the annual Summit of the Gulf Cooperation Countries (GCC) will be held in Riyadh. Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman and Qatar will be meeting to discuss a feasible solution to end the land, sea and air blockade launched in 2017 by the “Saudi-led Quartet” against Qatar, accused of supporting political Islam.

Earlier this month, during the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) Manama Dialogue 2020 (4-6th December), the Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan declared that the Kingdom is committed to enhance a diplomatic resolution to end regional tensions, announcing a possible reconciliation in the Gulf to end the three years old dispute. The Emir of Kuwait that, since 2017 has been leading the mediation between the countries, announced, after the meeting, that “fruitful” steps towards a resolution has been successfully taken. Already on the 1st of December, the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman met with the US senior advisor Jared Kushner at the megacity of Neom to discuss the three-years Gulf dispute and a possible normalising deal between the kingdom and Israel.

Washington is in fact expected to review its diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia especially with regards to the Saudi role in the Yemeni civil war, pushing Riyadh to soften its blockade against Qatar, seat of an important US military base, in order to improve its diplomatic relations with the incoming US President-elect Joe Biden.

On the other hand, attempts to end the blockade against Qatar could potentially undermine Abu Dhabi’s regional interest and relations with Saudi Arabia. Abu Dhabi and Riyadh have been sharing the same approach to the Yemen civil war, in the fight against Iran’s growing influence and against Qatar’s support to political Islam, notably the Muslim Brotherhood. While Qatar’s support to Muslim Brotherhood remains Abu Dhabi’s major threat, Riyadh seems to be more focussed on its anti-Houthi and anti-Iran goals. Saudi’s decision of weakening its blockade against Qatar might affect the Saudi-Emirati Cooperation in the in the region and especially in Yemen, where the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council is trying to claim territory from the Saudi-backed Yemeni government.

To know more about this topic:

- *Stratfor*, To get on Biden’s good side Saudi Arabia may stand down in Qatar, 30/11/20, available at: <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/get-biden-s-good-side-saudi-arabia-may-stand-down-qatar>

- *The Arab News*, Emir of Kuwait thanks King Salman for efforts to resolve Gulf dispute, 05/12/20, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1772796/saudi-arabia>
- *The Arab Weekly*, UAE sees “seeds of progress” in Gulf row but remains cautious, 10/12/20, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/uae-sees-seeds-progress-gulf-row-remains-cautious>
- *Gulf News*, Saudi Arabia to host GCC summit on January 5, 12/12/20, available at: <https://gulfnews.com/world/gulf/report-saudi-arabia-to-host-gcc-summit-on-january-5-1.75854416>

#ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

Tunisia – Ten years after the Dignity Revolution (*Thawrat al-Karaamah*)



Source: Al Jazeera

On the 17th of December 2010, a young street vendor, Mohamed Bouzizi, set himself on fire in front of the governor's office in the Tunisian city of Sidi Bouzid, denouncing years of police oppression that hampered him in exercising his profession and supporting his family.

Mohammed Bouzizi's extreme gesture was not the first self-immolation in the region or in Tunisia, but it sparked a rage never seen before and took to the streets the frustration of millions of Tunisians living below the poverty threshold with no chance to access the labour market.

Few days later protests erupted across the country and, after 28 days of civil resistance, President Ben Ali was forced to flee in exile in Saudi Arabia. After 23 years of undiscussed mandates, Tunisians removed the kleptocratic government. The intensive 28-days campaign was later called by Tunisians the *ثورة الكرامة (Thawrat al-Karāmah)-The Dignity Revolution*.

Within few weeks popular movements demanding for democracy broke out in Egypt, Libya, Yemen and Syria. The unprecedented wave of pro-democracy protests erupted across the region was too soon and too enthusiastically called the *Al-Rabi' al-'Arabi* (the Arab Spring). Many political slogans have been chanted by the citizens taking part to the protest movements but one in particular echoed across the entire Arab region: *الشعب يريد إسقاط النظام (Ash-sha' b yurid isqat an-nizām) – The people want the fall of the regime*.

As pointed out by [Al-Khalij Al-Jadid](#) (The New Khalij) observers in the Arab region often refer to Tunisia as the exception to the turmoil caused by the Arab uprising that hit the region over the past decade. As we all know the originally-peaceful protests erupted in Syria, Libya and Yemen led to devastating civil wars and humanitarian catastrophes that called large-scale foreign interventions and interferences. In Egypt the army suffocated, before it started, a nascent democratic experiment, while in the Gulf, a Saudi-led campaign immediately repressed a threatening attempt of popular uprising in Bahrein.

The country's lack of fuel and its non-strategic location have certainly favoured a more successful democratic transition; however, it must be taken into consideration that Tunisia, compared to other Arab countries features a long-standing modern political system, established by its first President Habib Bourguiba called by Tunisians the *“المحارب الأعلى”- “supreme fighter”*.

Influenced by the secularisation and “Turkification” of the obsolete Ottoman Empire, carried out by Mustapha Kemal Atatürk, Bourguiba, since the country's independence achieved in 1956, transformed the country into a modern secular state. As soon as he assumed the presidency, he banned polygamy (still in use in many Arab countries), replaced repudiation with divorce, prohibited hijabs in Government offices and schools and codified a civil code not subjected to the Shari'ah. Schools and

universities, that before were under the stifling control of Islamic institutions, passed under the administration of the Ministry of Education.

The reforms adopted were extremely modern, not only compared to other Arab countries but also to European countries, leading to the creation of a solid modern vibrant well-educated civil society almost absent in any other Arab country. Given the country's unprecedented achievements in terms of civil rights and personal freedoms, it is understandable that when Ben Ali revised the constitution in 2002 in order to maintain the presidency for unlimited terms, Tunisians felt threatened by this authoritarian regime and stood up to protect their secular modern state. After Ben Ali's era, a further attempt to change the secular path of the country was carried out in 2014 by the Islamic party affiliated to the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood: Ennahda. Unsurprisingly the vigilant secular civil society pushed back the party's attempt to steer the country toward a more Islamic-conservative orientation.

On the other hand, although Tunisia has been perceived by many observers as the only success of the so-called Arab Spring, many civil society's demands have yet to be achieved. The country has carried out free elections and achieved an [unprecedented freedom of expression](#); however, structural economic reforms and rights are still lagging behind.

As highlighted in an article titled “التحول الديمقراطي في تونس... ثورة لم تكتمل” – “*The unfinished Tunisian Democratic transformation published*” on the 15th of December by [Al Masrawy](#) wire service, a patronage-driven economy, persisting since colonial times, continues to stifle economy and society to the benefit of few powerful families.

In addition to this, the country has a serious defence and security sector reform issue. The defence sector after the 2011 uprisings has been significantly reformed preventing the country from the threat represented by the Islamic State that followed the Arab Springs. For decades the Tunisian army has been intentionally kept weak to avoid any risk of military coup while in the last decade it has received an important support in foreign military aid and trainings. However, although a reformed army has been crucial to protect the country from the threat of Islamic terrorism and the spread of Salafi jihadism through the Tunisian border, some police units that were formed after the fall of the regime became tools of political pressure with strong power for instance in the courts to prevent any prosecutions against security forces accused of committing tortures on detainees. The defense sector and its ability to benefit from foreign assistance has been clearly limited to dynamics that belong to the old regime. Reforming the police and judiciary sectors that were largely exploited to serve the interests of the ousted regime and that have deep ties with the government, need a significant political effort.

Although many citizens' demands have been achieved there is still a "nostalgia" for the old Regime and many clientelist practices and habits are still in place. According to Al-Masrawy the country's level of corruption have significantly increased after the fall of Ben Ali. Surprisingly, between 2010 and 2017, Tunisia lost 15 places in the ranking of Transparency International.

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