

ARAB DISPATCH

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North Africa

#Morocco – The Gibraltar tunnel is back



Source: Arab Weekly – The Tanger-Med Port

According to the Arab Weekly the British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, is considering and evaluating the actual completion of an undersea tunnel, in partnership with Morocco, that will link the North-African country with Europe.

The growing relationship between the UK and Morocco was consolidated in October 2019, when the two countries signed a new post-Brexit trade deal, an opportunity for the UK to diversify and strengthen its trade ties with foreign partners to mitigate the economic impact of its withdrawal from the European Union.

Details on the structural plan are still pending, however the negotiations, started in 2018 between UK and Morocco to complete either a tunnel or a bridge, are now moving on.

The British-Moroccan project will replace the Spanish tunnel discussed by the parties for over 40 years with no actual results. The crossroad is expected to link Morocco from the port of Tangiers, the main economic artery in the Mediterranean, and Europe through the Gibraltar Strait which is under the British jurisdiction.

According to the Arab Weekly, after the Brexit, the project could represent an open gate on Europe and an alternative trade road for the UK to import products it used to buy from Spain, Portugal and Italy.

At the same time, if realised the project will be an economic and political opportunity for Morocco that will increase its exports of agricultural products and mineral raw materials, boosting its commercial role in the Mediterranean. Additionally, connecting the North-African country with Europe will facilitate and increase the mobility of not only goods but also tourists and expatriates between the two shores of the Mediterranean.

What is still unpredictable is if Morocco will turn after the implementation of the project into the object of an intense competition between Spain and Britain.

To know more about this topic:

- *The Arab Weekly*, British-Moroccan undersea tunnel would connect Africa to Europe, 09/01/21, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/british-moroccan-undersea-tunnel-would-connect-africa-europe>
- *North Africa Post*, Are Morocco, UK considering construction of a tunnel to link Gibraltar and Tangiers?, 09/01/21, available at: <https://northafricapost.com/46696-are-morocco-uk-considering-construction-of-a-tunnel-to-link-gibraltar-and-tangiers.html>

- *Al Jazeera*, Protesters in Tunisia halt key phosphate production, 25/11/20, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/11/25/protesters-in-tunisia-halt-key-phosphate-production>
- *Asbarq al-Amsat*, Tunisia's Labour Union plans nationwide strikes over unmet demands, 04/01/21, available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2720641/tunisia's-labor-union-plans-nationwide-strikes-over-unmet-demands>

Levant

#Palestine – Israel and Palestinians: vaccinations if and when?



Sources: The New York Times

On the 10th of January the Palestinian Authority announced that the first COVID-19 doses are expected to arrive in March, following a deal with the AstraZeneca pharmaceutical firm, and accused Israel, already distributing vaccines to its citizens becoming a world leader in vaccinations per capita, of denying vaccines to Palestinians living in the occupied territories.

Israel has completed a first round of vaccines, providing with first doses to 1,7 million people out of a population of 9,29 million, the highest vaccination rate in the world. However, the Palestinian Foreign Ministry declared that Israel is failing in providing immunisation to the Palestinians living in the occupied territories.

According to the Israeli newspaper, Haaretz, the Israeli vaccination plan includes Israelis and Palestinians residing in East Jerusalem, while in the West Bank and in the Gaza Strip only Israeli settlers had access to vaccines; Palestinians instead are expected to receive health services from the Palestinian Authority.

It seems that the Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, running for re-election due on March, is pushing a worldwide record massive vaccination campaign to improve his poll numbers. The government, highly criticised for the mismanagement of the health crises with a severe impact on the national economy, is indeed trying to regain credibility with a faster vaccination process and a speedier economy recovery. However, Israel's vaccination programme does not extend to the 5 million Palestinians living in the occupied West Bank and in the Gaza Strip.

Human rights groups and Amnesty International had severely condemned Israel's decision of excluding Palestinians living in the West Bank from the vaccination plan.

According to Amnesty International, while reaching a worldwide record in terms of vaccination rates the *“country's vaccine programme highlights the institutionalised discrimination that defines the Israeli government's policy towards Palestinians”*. Adding that Israeli authorities must ensure that *“vaccines are equally provided to Israelis and Palestinians living under their control”*.

The Israeli rights group, Gisha-Maslak, underlined that even if the West Bank is under the administration of the Palestinian Authority, Israel is not exonerated from its responsibilities towards Palestinians. Moreover, according to the NGO, Israeli officials may be conditioning the distribution of vaccines in response to the negotiations with HAMAS for two Israeli soldiers under detention in Gaza, and the return of two bodies of Israeli soldiers killed in 2014, criticizing the fact that the right to access medical treatment and vaccines should not be under any condition.

The World Health Organisation officially requested Israel to allocate vaccines to Palestinians health workers in the occupied territories while Israeli officials responded by saying that they will share vaccines once Israel's needs are met.

To know more about this topic:

- *Haaretz*, Palestinian Authority Expects First Vaccines in March, Accuses Israel of “Ignoring Its Duties”, 10/01/21, available at: <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/palestinians-expect-first-vaccines-in-march-accuse-israel-of-ignoring-its-duties-1.9439482>
- *The Times of Israel*, Palestinians hope for vaccines by March, knock Israel for not providing them, 11/01/21, available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinians-hope-for-vaccines-by-march-knock-israel-for-not-providing-doses/>
- *Amnesty International*, Denying COVID-19 vaccines to Palestinians exposes Israel’s institutionalized discrimination, 06/01/21, available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/01/denying-covid19-vaccines-to-palestinians-exposes-israels-institutionalized-discrimination/>
- *Middle East Monitor*, Israel NGO: Israel is obliged to unconditionally afford COVID-19 vaccine to Gaza, 09/01/21, available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210109-israel-ngo-israel-is-obliged-to-unconditionally-afford-covid-19-vaccine-to-gaza/>
- *Gisha-Legal Center for Freedom of Movement*, Israel’s obligation to Gaza in a pandemic and post-pandemic reality, 06/01/21, available at: <https://gisha.org/updates/12197>

Gulf

#Yemen – The Gulf's reconciliation: will Yemen benefit?



Source: The Daily Sabah – Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani Emir of Qatar with the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Al-Ula (Saudi Arabia)

On 5th of January, with the signing of the Al-Ula Statement the Gulf leaders agreed to reopen diplomatic and commercial relations with Qatar and to lift a more than 3-years blockade imposed in 2017 against Doha, accused of supporting terrorist groups and cooperating with Iran to destabilise neighbouring countries.

The Arab League and the European Union welcomed optimistically the resolution of the dispute, hoping for a positive impact in the region and, most importantly, in the conflicts that see the Gulf countries supporting rival positions.

An initial test to the “fruitful” diplomatic resolution will be surely the on-going Yemen’s civil war, where the Gulf countries, especially the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, have repeatedly shown their rivalries.

In 2017 the Yemeni civil war rifted into a war against each other with regional actors supporting the warring Yemeni parties. After the creation of the Southern Transitional Council, President Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi and its allies entered into an open conflict with the UAE-backed separatist government.

Furthermore, Qatar's role within the Yemen civil war represented a major divide within the GCC, pushing the Gulf countries to exclude Doha from the Arab initiative in support to the legitimate government and, later on, to cut diplomatic ties with the emirate accused of fuelling protests in Yemen and most importantly of supporting terrorist groups. The Saudi-led coalition justified its decision by pointing out Qatar's financial and military support to the Houthis.

As a matter of fact, the Gulf crisis and Qatar's support to Islamist groups and Iranian backed militias, had a significant impact on the Yemen civil war. Now that a reconciliation within the GCC has been reached, Yemeni officials are optimistic towards a normalisation of the Yemeni-Qatari relations and see the possibility of a resolution in the civil war.

However, while the Yemeni internationally recognised government see the Gulf reconciliation as a step forward and hopes that the impact would be felt in the country, the STC remains sceptical. A member of the STC's presidency, Salem Al-Awlaqi, stated that the agreement "*meant little for Yemen, until Qatar ended its support for the Houthis and for the Muslim Brotherhood, undermining the efforts of security and stability in the country*".

To know more about this topic:

- *Middle East Eye*, Gulf reconciliation means little for warring sides, 10/01/21, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/gulf-reconciliation-cant-end-disagreement-yemen>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Yemeni issue likely to sorely test Gulf reconciliation, 06/01/21, available at: <https://theArabweekly.com/yemeni-issue-likely-sorely-test-gulf-reconciliation>
- *Middle East Monitor*, Turkey and the Gulf states, 09/01/21, available at: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210109-turkey-and-the-gulf-states/>

#ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

#Lebanon #Iraq #Palestine – Soleimani as the Middle Eastern Banquo



Source: Markaz al-Iraq – Iranian Propaganda poster depicting general Qassem Soleimani and the Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis

On the 3rd of January thousands of people gathered in Baghdad's Tahrir square to commemorate the top Iranian general Qassem Soleimani and the Iraqi commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, killed one year ago by a US drone at the Baghdad's Airport. Similar commemorations were held in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen where General Soleimani and his Quds Force had strong links.

During the vigils, mourners marched to the bombing site carrying the images of the General and waving the Iranian-backed Kata'ib Hezbollah flags while chanting anti-American slogans.

The death by a US drone of the top General of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and commander of the Quds Force, on the 3rd of January 2020, had significantly raised tensions within the region, bringing Iran and the United States dangerously to the brink of a war. Iraq and Hezbollah immediately called for the expulsion of the US troops from the region and threatened to retaliate the assassination of the commanders.

The reaction upon the killing of such a charismatic figure and the commemorations held in the region one year after have highlighted once more that killing a leading figure like general Qassem Soleimani might turn into the creation of a new national hero and idol. De facto, by killing the head of the Quds Force, the US have dangerously elevated him to a martyrdom.

After his death the images hanging obsequiously in Iraq and Lebanon, representing General Soleimani as the national hero that protected the country from the threats of the Islamic State, were quickly replaced by Shia iconography-style images depicting him like a martyr alongside Imam Hussein also killed in Iraq by his enemies.

The Iranian cultural advisor in Lebanon, Abbas Khome Yar, in an article titled “كلنا سليمانيون”- *“We are all Soleimani”*, published on the pan-Arabist Beirut-based satellite television, [Al-Mayadeen](#), wrote: “اليوم، القائد سليماني هو البطل الأممي الذي دافع عن الأعراس. يعتبره النساء والأطفال أباً لهم، ويتخذونه المجاهدون مثلاً يُحتذى به يجسد عناوين البطولة والشجاعة والحماسة” – *“Today General Soleimani is the hero of the Ummah (Islamic community) who defended our land from the enemies. Women and children refer to him as their father. The mujahedeen (those engaged in Jihad) take him as an example of heroism, courage and enthusiasm”*.

After his death, streets and squares in Iraq and Lebanon were renamed in his honour.

As reported by [Al-Manar](#), the Lebanese television station owned and operated by the Iranian-backed political party Hezbollah, on the occasion of the first anniversary of the death of General Soleimani, the main streets of the Gaza Strip were adorned with banners and images of the commander, renamed by Palestinians “الشهيد القائد سليماني الذي امضى حياته من اجل دعم المقاومة... هو” – *“the martyr of Jerusalem”*. “شهيّد القدس” – *“The martyr commander Soleimani, who spent his life supporting the resistance. He is the martyr of Jerusalem”* says a giant banner hanging along the main street of Gaza.

Posters and banners bear the “heroic deeds” of the commander against the occupant power and celebrate the military improvements of the resistance achieved under General Soleimani as “لا يوجد في فلسطين وبشهادة” – *“there is not even a missile or a gun in Palestine without Soleimani’s fingerprints”*.

More worryingly, as reported by the independent online newspaper [Al-Modon](#), six month after the death of the General, the National Iranian Radio and Television, announced the launch of a TV series entitled “قائد السلام” – *“The Peace Leader”*, entirely dedicated to his life while, a first-person action video-game,

showing him fighting against ISIS, will be soon released by the Islamic Revolution Center for Digital Products and Publications (MATNA).

On the other hand, while thousands of mourners were marching commemorating the first anniversary of the death of the General, a bronze bust of Qassem Soleimani erected on the 5th of January, located in a roundabout on a street named after the Iranian general, in the Shia suburb of Beirut, sparked indignation among many Lebanese, frustrated by the Hezbollah increasing attempts to align with Iran.

According to [Al-Arabi Al-Giadid](#), after the statue was unveiled, many Lebanese strongly criticized the celebrations for the leader and the growing Iranian influence in Lebanon. Demonstrators expressed their resentment by burning the images of the General hanging all over the city while many activists and politicians took part to a Twitter storm under the hashtag: “[بيروت حرة إيران برا](#)” – “Free_Beirut_Iran_Out”, strongly condemning the “Iranian mandate” in Lebanon.

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