

ARAB DISPATCH

Arab Dispatch - a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

Issue n. 1/2021

31st December – 7th January

North Africa

#Tunisia – A wave of nationwide strikes



Source: Egypt Independent

On the 4th of January the Tunisian General Labour Union (Union Générale Tunisienne du Travail), that played a major role in the 2011 Revolution by addressing the popular discontent, is planning a new round of general strikes in several economic sectors to protest against the government's inability to fight unemployment and to create development opportunities.

According to Asharq al-Awsat, the UGTT, the largest trade union organisation in the country, announced a new strike in Gafsa on the 7th of January and a strike in the region of Sfax on the 12th of January. At the end of the month further strikes will take place in Kasserine and in Tozeur region.

Since 2019 protests have significantly increased in the country's southern marginalised regions along with the discontent of citizens. On the 9th of September 2020 demonstrators organised sit-ins and blocked the production of a key pipeline in Tataouine that transports half of the North African country's oil to denounce the unmet promises to create new job opportunities.

Few months later, on the 25th of November 2020, demonstrators launched sit-ins and halted the state-run Gafsa Phosphate. After the 2011 uprising, the Compagnie des Phosphates de Gafsa, one of the biggest producers of fertilisers in the world, providing the country with the 10% of its exports as well as jobs, witnessed an important cut into production with significant economic losses, affecting severely the national economy. The phosphates output slumped from 8 million tonnes in 2010, to 3,3 million tonnes in 2018, 25% lower than in 2017, and the phosphate industry export share fell to 4% from 10% of 2011.

The UGTT has repeatedly pushed, with no success, the authorities to rescue the company that is now going towards bankruptcy and launched further strikes and sit-ins to pressure the political parties whose credibility has declined among the unemployed young crowd. The government from its side has promised to meet the demands of marginalised regions, but is facing its worst-ever financial crisis with a budget deficit expected to reach 11,4% of GDP. Most significantly, public debt is forecasted to rise from 72,2% of GDP in 2019 to a peak of 86,6% of GDP in 2020, well above the emerging market debt burden benchmark of 70% of GDP.

To know more about this topic:

- *The Arab Weekly*, Oil and gas blockade in Tunisian south highlights country's quandaries, 09/09/20, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/oil-and-gas-blockade-tunisian-south-highlights-countrys-quandaries>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Tunisia's phosphates company at risk of collapse, 12/10/20, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/tunisia-phosphates-company-risk-collapse>
- *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-Awsat*, 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

#Lebanon – A clear and present social and humanitarian catastrophe



Sources: *Al Jazeera*

On the 29th of December the Lebanese caretaker Prime Minister announced that the country can only stretch 2 billion dollars of subsidies for six more months, putting a further pressure on an already exhausted population.

The country is witnessing its worst economic crisis since the 1975-1990 civil war. The past year Lebanon has been hit by a severe economic and financial crisis severely, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

On the 4th of August the tremendous blast that ripped through Beirut's Port has devastated the capital. The incident caused by the negligence of the political class absorbed by internal sectarian rivalries has

killed more than 220 people and left an estimated 300.000 homeless, threatening the country's stability and rising popular anger.

With subsidies left for only six more months and no plans for a structural economic reform, the situation will soon worsen and the country will face a devastating social catastrophe. As reported by Asharq al-Awsat the former Prime Minister declared that Western countries will not support Lebanon due to Iran-backed Hezbollah's role.

According to the World Bank, Lebanon witnessed an economy contraction of 19,2 % in 2020, while the country's debt to GDP ratio is projected to reach 194 % this year. Consequently, more than half of the population is expected to fall into poverty during the next year.

Moreover, the repeated lockdowns imposed by the government to fight the spread of the pandemic are further exacerbating the already dramatic Lebanese economic situation. On the 31st of December a daily record of more than 3.500 new cases led the National COVID-19 task force to announce a possible three-weeks lockdown across the country.

With the current health crisis and the financial crisis prolonged by misgovernment and the lack of necessary policymaking, Lebanon's recession will surely be severe and long.

To know more about this topic:

- *The World Bank*, Tunisia remains a country of contrasts: while important progress has been made on political transition toward an open, democratic system of governance, economic transition has not kept pace, 01/10/2020, available at: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tunisia/overview>
- Al Jazeera, 'Deliberate depression': World Bank's dire warning on Lebanon, 01/12/20, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/12/1/deliberate-depression-world-banks-dire-warning-on-lebanon>
- *Abram Online*, Lebanon can stretch reserves for subsidies another six months, PM says, 29/12/20, available at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/397802/World/Region/Lebanon-can-stretch-reserves-for-subsidies-another.aspx>

- *Asbarq al-Awsat*, PM: Lebanon can stretch reserves for subsidies another six months, 29/12/20, available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2711436/pm-lebanon-can-stretch-reserves-subsidies-another-six-months>
- *Asbarq al-Awsat*, Medics Warn of COVID-19 'Catastrophe' in Lebanon, 02/01/21, available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2717126/medics-warn-covid-19-catastrophe-lebanon>

Gulf

#Yemen – Houthis attacks against the newly formed power-sharing government



Source: The New York Times

On the 30th of December a blast damaged the airport of Aden just after the plane of the newly formed power-sharing government sworn in on the 18th of December by the Yemeni President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi, had landed.

Few hours later a second explosion occurred near by the Aden's Maasheq presidential palace, where the cabinet members were about to meet. Due to the explosions 26 people died and more than 50 were wounded.

The cabinet formed following the Saudi-backed power-sharing deal between Hadi and the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC), with the aim of creating a united front against Houthi militias, has returned to Aden from Riyadh where the Yemeni leaders, including president Hadi, have been residing.

The Yemeni Information Minister, Moammar Al-Eryani, accused the Iran-backed militias of trying to undermine a possible stability, after years of bloody fighting between the internationally recognized government and the STC.

Following the explosions, Yemen's Prime Minister, Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed, declared that the attacks in Aden were meant "to eliminate" the country's new government, as it arrived in the key port city, and blamed on the Houthi militias. He added that, despite Houthi's attempt of destabilising the new power-sharing government, the cabinet will remain in the city and keep pace with the government's general policies that aim at restoring institutions and recovering the national economy.

Also, the Yemeni President, Hadi, stressed the importance of having national institutions back into the country stating that "*there will no longer be a minister who does his work from outside the capital (Aden)*". He added that the cabinet is already working on reviving the national economy, upgrading the quality of services for the citizens and reinforcing the welfare.

While the move was aimed at alleviating fighting and fears, citizens remain sceptical about the return of the government into the city, fearing new fragmentations and new attacks from foreign militias.

To know more about this topic:

- *Al Jazeera*, Blasts hit Yemen's Aden airport as new unity government arrives, 30/12/20, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/uae-sees-seeds-progress-gulf-row-remains-cautious>
- *Middle east Eye*, Aden's terrified residents fear more attacks after return of Yemeni government, 31/12/20, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/aden-residents-fear-attacks-government-returns-yemen>
- *The Arab Weekly*, New Yemeni Government starts its work from Aden, 04/01/21, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/new-yemeni-government-starts-its-work-aden>

#ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

GCC – Why lifting of the blockade against Qatar?



Source: The Arab Weekly – GCC leaders in front of the Maraya Concert Hall in Al-Ula

On the 5th of January the leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council, during the 41st GCC Summit, held at the Maraya Concert Hall in Al Ula (Saudi Arabia), signed a “reconciliation agreement” with the aim to put an end to the diplomatic dispute with Qatar, started in 2017 when Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt imposed a naval, air and land blockade on the small Emirate.

The Summit, named “the Summit of Sultan Qaboos and Sheikh Sabah” in appreciation of their efforts, stressed the importance of restoring cohesion within the Arab Gulf. During the Summit Saudi Arabia and its three Arab allies decided to lift the blockade and to restore full diplomatic and trade ties with Qatar. The Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman announced that borders and airspace will soon reopen to Doha.

According to the official statement ([بيان العُلا – Bayan al-‘Ula](#)) the Member States of the GCC will be committed “بتحقيق التعاون والترابط والتكامل بين دول المجلس في جميع المجالات، وصولاً إلى وحدتها، وتعزيز دورها الإقليمي”

“to – والدولي، والعمل كمجموعة اقتصادية وسياسية واحدة للمساهمة في تحقيق الأمن والسلام والاستقرار والرخاء في المنطقة achieve cooperation, cohesion and integration within the Council in all fields, in order to reach unity and to strengthen their regional and international role. By working as a united economic and political aggregation the council aims to achieve security, peace, stability and development in the region”.

Welcomed by the United States, the European Union and the Arab League, the meeting has been chaired by the Saudi Crown Prince, Mohammed bin Salman, and attended by the leaders and representatives of the member nations including the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Kuwait, Oman and Bahrain.

Egypt, that also took part to the Saudi-led blockade against Qatar, blessed the reconciliation Summit that he described as “a significant step to strengthen diplomatic ties and relations based on common interests without interfering in Arab countries’ internal affairs”.

During the opening session the Saudi Prince declared that the Al-Ula Statement “يشدد على والاستقرار [aims] to strengthen solidarity and stability within the Gulf, the Arab world and the Islamic community, while reinforcing fraternity and the friendship between our people and our countries. At the security level he added: “توحيد جهودنا للنهوض بمنطقةنا ومواجهة التحديات التي تحيط بنا، خاصة التهديدات التي يمثلها البرنامج النووي للنظام الإيراني وبرنامج الصواريخ الباليستية ومشروعاته only by bringing together our efforts we will be able to develop the region and to address the challenges that surround us, especially the threats represented by the Iranian nuclear program, the ballistic missile program and its destructive plans often adopted by its vicars for terrorist and sectarian activities with the aim of destabilising the region”.

The encouraging words have been welcomed by the attendees with a lot of optimism.

As reported by [Asharq al-Awsat](#), the Emir of Kuwait and Commander of the country’s military forces, Sheikh Nawaf al-Ahmad al-Jaber al-Sabah, described the statement as a “historic resolution” adding that “سيعزيز الصف الخليجي والعربي” – “it will strength the Arab and Gulf armies”.

Despite an initial scepticism about a possible rapprochement with Qatar, given the country’s relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood, also the ruler of Dubai, Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, expressed his optimism towards the successful steps taken by the GCC countries. Along with Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid, the UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs, Anwar Gargash, wrote on [Twitter](#): “نحن أمام قمة تاريخية بامتياز في العلا نعيد من خلالها اللحمة الخليجية ونحرص عبرها أن يكون أمن واستقرار وازدهار دولنا وشعوبنا الأولوية الأولى، أمانا in Al-Ula we are witnessing a historical Summit that will restore cohesion

within the Gulf. We are eager to ensure stability, security and development in our countries and to our people, our first priority. There is still a lot of work to do but, surely, we are on the right path.”

The Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has also commented the reconciliation between the Arab-quartet and Qatar. As reported by the Egyptian news agency [Essahra](#), the Minister “*expressed his congratulations to Qatar for its courageous resistance despite the pressure and the blockade imposed by Arab countries*” adding that Arab neighbours “*should recognise that Iran is not the enemy*” making a clear reference to the United States.

However, despite the enthusiasm and optimism expressed by the leaders of the GCC Member States and by many other Arab countries like Morocco and Jordan, observers believe the Gulf Summit’s path does not guarantee a permanent and comprehensive solution to the dispute. Furthermore, the silence that accompanied the summit on Qatar’s support to Muslim Brotherhood and on the pending demands of the boycotting countries, might suggest that Saudi Arabia have accepted a vague settlement allowing Qatar to come out of the Summit without offering any guarantees.

The timing of the Saudi move might also suggest the Kingdom’s aspirations to build warm ties with the incoming US president-elect Joe Biden.

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