

ARAB DISPATCH

Arab Dispatch - a project by the NATO Defense College Foundation

Issue n. 3/2021

14th January –21th January

North Africa

#Tunisia – A bad economy continues to generate unrests



Source: Al Jazeera – Police disperse protesters in Kasserine with tear gas

On the 16th of January riots took place across Tunisia to denounce the deteriorating economic situation in the country. A decade after the “dignity revolution” and the fall of Ben Ali’s kleptocratic government the revolutionary demand for economic justice remains unmet.

Violent protests broke out in Tebourba, 30 kilometres west of Tunis, in Ettadhamen and in the region of Sousse, following a video shared on social media showing a shepherd in Siliana province being publicly humiliated by the local police. The scene evoked among popular masses Mohammed Bouazizi's episode, beaten by a policewoman in December 2010 and tragically ended with his self-immolation.

Protests went on for four days in a row and turned quickly into violent clashes with the police who responded by firing tear gas. The Defense Ministry deployed the army to prevent damages to private and public property.

Given the alarming situation, the Tunisian President Kais Saied visited Ariana, a city near Tunis and urged the citizens to stop sparking violence while the demonstrators answered by asking him to dissolve the parliament.

Although the country has been praised for its peaceful democratic transition, Tunisians keep denouncing unmet demands, a significant lack of job opportunities (with national unemployment rates reaching 15%) and a persistent severe corruption among the political class. The government from his side is currently on the brink of bankruptcy and is struggling to ensure basic services to its citizens.

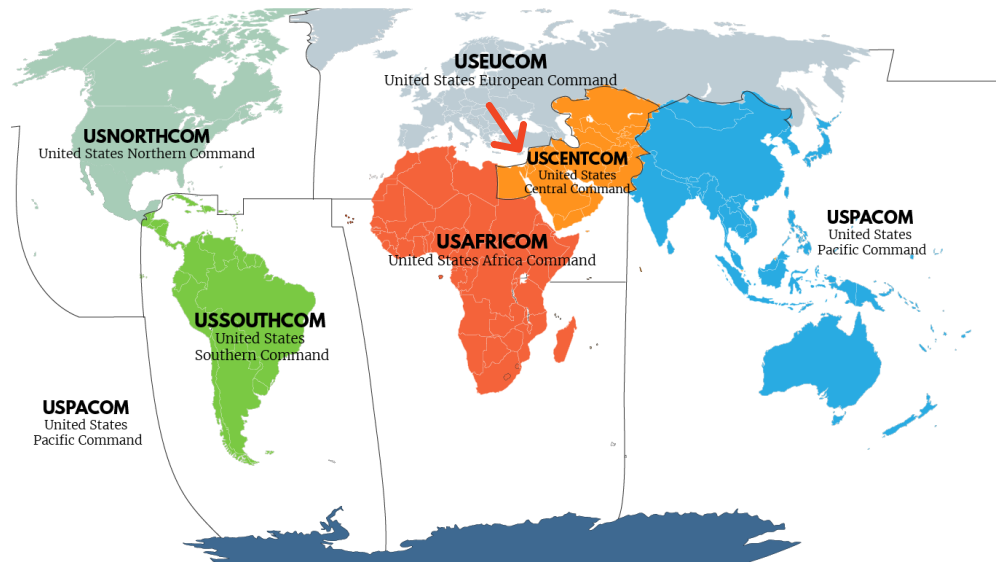
On the 16th of January Tunisia's Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi announced a cabinet reshuffle to tackle more effectively the deteriorating economic crisis. The 12 new ministers, mostly young technocrats, are expected to manage the economic crisis and accelerate the economic recovery and social development.

To know more about this topic:

- *The New Arab*, Riots break out in Tunisian cities amid economic crisis, outrage over police assault video, 17/01/21, available at <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/english/news/2021/1/17/riots-break-out-in-tunisian-cities-amid-economic-crisis>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Mechichi seen consolidating power away from President, 17/01/21, available at <https://thearabweekly.com/mechichi-seen-consolidating-power-away-president>
- *Al Jazeera*, Tunisia President Saied urges protester restraint on 4th day, 19/01/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/19/tunisias-saied-urges-restraint-as-protest-continue-for-4th-day>

Levant

#Israel – Pentagon moves Tel Aviv under the Central Command area of responsibility



Sources: Thirdway.org

On the 15th of January the Defense Department of the United States announced that Israel will be included in the Middle East-focused Central Command Area (CENTCOM) meaning that it will no longer be managed by the European Command (EUCOM).

The CENTCOM's area of responsibility stretches from Northeast Africa across the Middle East to Central and South Asia. The command was created in 1983 to protect US national interests threatened by regional destabilising crises, following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the Iran hostage crisis (1979-81), during which militants supporting the Islamic revolution seized 66 American citizens at the US embassy in Tehran.

Because of its hostile relations with many Arab countries, Israel was assigned to the US European Command, allowing Israel to work closely with NATO's European members, with almost no interaction between the Israeli military forces and Arab forces.

The US-brokered Abraham Agreement and the rapprochement of many Arab countries with Israel, led the Pentagon to take a further step by including Tel Aviv in the military sphere of the CENTCOM, along with other Arab countries.

As stated by the Department of Defense “*the easing of tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors subsequent to the Abraham Accords has provided a strategic opportunity for the United States to align key partners against shared threats in the Middle East*” with reference to Iran, considered by the US, Israel and some Gulf countries, a major security threat.

The decision, taken by the outgoing President Donald Trump, aims indeed at creating a stronger front against Iran and to align Israel with Gulf countries against the common enemy and at creating precedents for the new Biden administration.

As stated by the Israeli Defense Minister, Benny Ganz, “*this shift will further boost cooperation between the Israeli Defense Forces and the US armed forces in confronting regional challenges*” and, at the same time, it will bring closer Israel and Arab military forces.

To know more about this topic:

- *US Department of Defense*, U.S. aligns key partners against shared threats in the Middle East, 15/01/21, available at: <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2474125/us-aligns-key-partners-against-shared-threats-in-the-middle-east/>
- *US Department of Defense*, Changing Middle East situation means changes for Israel, 15/01/21, available at: <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/2474125/changing-middle-east-situation-means-changes-for-israel/>
- *Arab News*, Pentagon includes Israel in Middle East command area, 15/01/21, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1793361/middle-east>
- *The Times of Israel*, Pentagon moves Israel into Central Command to boost cooperation with Arab states, 15/01/21, available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/pentagon-moves-israel-into-central-command-to-boost-cooperation-with-arab-states/>

Gulf

#UAE #Bahrain – Washington designates Abu Dhabi and Manama as “major security partners”



Source: Atalayar – The US President Donald Trump with the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the Bahrain’s Foreign Minister, Abdullatif AL Zayani and the UAE’s Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed

On the 16th of January, the United States designated the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Bahrain as “major security partners”. According to the statement released by the office of the Press Secretary of the White House the designation is a status “unique” to the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Bahrain to further recognise an “exceptional security partnership”. The status was created exceptionally for the two Gulf countries to strengthen their security partnerships and their commitment in countering extremism across the region.

Both countries host US military basis. Bahrain is home to the US Navy’s 5th fleet and 5.000 American troops while the Jebel Ali’s port in Abu Dhabi represents the busiest port of American warships outside the US in addition to the 3.500 troops in Al-Dhafra Air Base, south of Abu Dhabi.

It is worth mentioning that Bahrain together with Kuwait have been previously appointed in 2002 and 2004, respectively, a major non-NATO ally (MNNA), designation that ensures to a non-NATO ally financial and military support.

This absolutely new designation during Donal Trump's final days aims at further consolidating the US military ties with Gulf countries. Both Bahrain and UAE have normalized diplomatic relations with Israel signing the Abraham Agreement and, more recently, have lifted the Saudi-led three years old blockade against Qatar, where the US troops are in the Al-Udeid Air Base.

Both State Department and Defense Department have to specify what this denomination means. As mentioned in the statement this decision "demonstrates a new level of partnership" between the United States, the UAE and Bahrein and represents an enduring commitment to economic and security cooperation. The statement closes up by celebrating the "extraordinary courage of both countries in entering the Abraham Accords".

To know more about this topic:

- *The White House*, Statement from the Press Secretary regarding the designation of the UAE and the Kingdom of Bahrain as Major Security Partners of the United States, 15/01/21, available at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-press-secretary-regarding-designations-uae-kingdom-bahrain-major-strategic-partners-united-states/>
- *The National*, US confers UAE and Bahrain with status of "major security partners", 16/01/21, available at: <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/us-confers-uae-and-bahrain-with-status-of-major-security-partners-1.1146962>
- *Arab News*, US designates Bahrain, UAE "major security partners", 17/01/21, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1793896/middle-east>

#ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

#ArabWorld – Arabs' scepticism over Joe Biden's presidential election victory



Source: Al Arabiya – President-elect Joe Biden with Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud

When the democrat Barack Obama with Kenyan origins and Hussein as second name was elected in 2008 as the President of the United States, there was a lot of hope in the Middle East. Twelve years later the election of Obama's former vice president Joe Biden does not elicit the same reactions. There are hardly expectations and hopes of a possible change of diplomacy.

Although [many Arab leaders welcomed with enthusiasm his election](#), with the Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah al-Sissi being the first to congratulate, ordinary people are far from being thrilled about it. In their eyes, Biden's administration will most probably not produce a radical shift and surely will not be able to reverse the drastic diplomatic steps taken during Trump's administration.

As highlighted by [Asharq al-Awsat](#), the Middle East does not even represent a major priority in Biden's administration since it will have to deal immediately with internal issues. The US foreign policy will mainly focus on fighting the COVID-19 pandemic, returning to the climate agreements and dealing with his two rival great powers: China and Russia.

The major change in Biden's foreign policy could be limited to Iran, that he describes as a "destabilising" power in the region. Since the beginning of his electoral campaign the President announced a possible return of the USA to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) nuclear agreement, arguing that Trump's approach toward Iran was a complete failure, and that his withdrawal from the 2015's nuclear deal did not prevent Iran from developing its nuclear programme. Furthermore, if Iran strictly complies with the agreement, sanctions might be lifted or softened. If this will be the case, the negotiations with Tehran will have a significant impact on the region and, most importantly, on the Iran-backed militias, notably the Houthis, Popular Mobilisation Forces and Hezbollah.

The former Lebanese ambassador to the United States of America, [Abdullah Bouhabib](#), pointed out that since Joe Biden was the Vice president during Barack Obama administration and the members of his current team were also part of Obama's team, his policy towards the Middle East might reflect Obama's foreign policy with the difference that under the Trump's administration the regional dynamics have deeply changed.

While he made it clear that Trump's "maximum pressure" on Iran is about to end, according to the [Egyptian Center for Strategic Studies](#), his foreign policy towards the Middle East remains ambiguous.

As reported by the ECSS, Biden announced his intension to preserve Israel's security encouraging the country to solve internal conflicts. In several circumstances he condemned Trump's unilateral approach towards Israel that made the two-state solution almost impossible to reach.

On the other hand, while supporting the two-state solution, the incoming president had welcomed the Abraham Accords and called on Arab countries to normalize relations with Israel, strongly criticizing the boycott movement launched by many Arab countries against Israel to exert economic pressure.

Although, according to [Al-Balad](#), Biden is expected to maintain diplomatic relations with Gulf countries based on interests they have in common, the President has strongly criticised Saudi Arabia announcing his intention to reassess the US support to the Kingdom and to stop arms sales. After decades of strong diplomatic relations between Riyadh and Washington, Saudi Arabia might lose his partner and start looking for new allies.

There is a lot of scepticism and cynicism on Joe Biden's victory and many analysts doubt that the US foreign policy will produce a radical change in the Middle East. However, there is still hope that, with the

end of Trump's administration, the US diplomacy will return to be more traditional and less disruptive and unilateral.

**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.*