

ARAB DISPATCH

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North Africa

#Egypt – GERD tripartite-negotiations reach another stalemate



Source: The Reporter Ethiopia

On the 6th of February Sudan's Water and Irrigation Minister, Yasser Abbas, warned Ethiopia not to proceed with the second filling of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) expected to start next July. Adding that, going ahead with the filling, will undermine national security as well as affect Sudan's Roseires Dam that provides irrigation water for the country's agricultural projects and power generation.

Since almost a decade Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia are stalled in intensive tripartite negotiations over the filling and the operations of the giant dam with Cairo and Khartoum highly concerned and worried about water flows and access to water. The two countries have insisted on signing a binding legal agreement to secure the filling operations, proposal always declined by Ethiopia.

On the 10th of January tripartite talks have been resumed after months of impasse that led Sudan to withdraw from the negotiations. During the new round of talks, Egypt and Sudan blamed Ethiopia for announcing the filling of the GERD reservoir in July adding that Ethiopia did not reach any agreement. The negotiations have once again failed on operational aspects to regulate water supply to downstream countries.

After more than 10 years of inconclusive negotiations there are hopes that the new US administration might help the impasse. With Egypt as a key US ally and Sudan normalising its relations with Israel in exchange of lifting the country from the US black list of state-sponsored terrorism, Biden might show a stronger support to Khartoum and Cairo at the expense of Addis Ababa.

To know more about this topic:

- *The Africa Report*, Egypt and Ethiopia blame Sudan for latest impasse in GERD talks, 13/01/21, available at: <https://www.theafricareport.com/58684/egypt-and-ethiopia-blame-sudan-for-latest-impasse-in-gerd-talks/>
- *Abram Online*, GERD talks to resume on Sunday after on-month halt, 01/02/21, available at: <http://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/1/64/398014/Egypt/Politics-/GERD-talks-to-resume-on-Sunday-after-onemonth-halt.aspx>
- *Egypt Independent*, Sudan calls for UN mediation in GERD crisis, 07/02/21, available at: <https://egyptindependent.com/sudan-calls-for-un-mediation-in-gerd-crisis/>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Sudan Warns against further filling of Ethiopian Nile dam, 07/02/21, available at: <https://theArabweekly.com/sudan-warns-against-further-filling-ethiopian-nile-dam>

Levant

#Lebanon – Prominent Shiite opposition thinker found murdered



Sources: Saudi24news – Lebanese people protesting against the murder of Luqman Salim and blaming Hezbollah

On the 4th of February the Shi'a intellectual and critic of Hezbollah party, Luqman Salim, was found shot dead in the region of Zahrani (Sidone district), an area in the country's South notably controlled by the Iranian-backed Hezbollah party. Many sources have linked the activist's murder to his strong opposition stance against Iranian-backed Shia movements and the parties affiliated to it. In response, Hezbollah has denied any involvement in the murder.

Salim was a well-known journalist, political analyst and outspoken Shia activist, very critic against the Iranian-backed Hezbollah party and its dominance in the Lebanese political scene. For his strong criticism against the party, he has been often targeted and threatened by Hezbollah and its supporters.

The activist was intensively working on documenting war crimes in both Lebanon and Syria and, recently, he was highly critical over the on-going investigations into the explosion at Beirut Port, precisely six months ago. During an interview on Saudi's Al-Hadath TV, he openly accused Damascus and its ally Hezbollah of being involved in the incident and of having a significant role in the port's blast.

Furthermore, despite his secular position, Salim was a Shiite from the same sect of the Hezbollah (Twelver Imami Shiism) living in a Shia neighbourhood, Haret Hreik, representing a “thorn in the side of the group”. He embodied the Lebanese Shia dissent in a country dominated and monopolised by Hezbollah.

His killing highlights the country’s lack of freedom and the increased intolerance towards all forms of opposition, discouraging others to be outspoken against Shia dominance in Lebanon. At the same time the death of the activist shows that the group feels threatened by a rising anti-Hezbollah activism, that since 2019’s protests, aims at overturning the Lebanese sectarian-based political system.

To know more about this topic:

- *Al Jazeera*, Lebanese anti-Hezbollah activist found dead in his car, 04/02/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/4/lebanese-anti-hezbollah-activist-found-dead-in-this-car>
- *Carnegie Middle East Center*, The Lebanese intellectual and activist Luqman Slim has been murdered, 04/02/21, available at: https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/83814?utm_source=rssemail&utm_medium=email&mkt_tok=eyJpIjoiWVRobVI6ZzBNR05tWWpKbCIzInQiOiJLeTIFWXFDN0E2Ylp4SEVKQ09FWUJhSmxtVWlzVmxQU1wvR3ViWmxaNUZJU3FHVHBnUVRqQIE0RFZpbUpKcU90ZkxtbnQzMXdHWHdvMU9mdFF6TU1DcVhXWTFYUnQzaUpPRG9ROEJ4eVJSXC9jbEo4MDVuOVlJMmg5YnE4Z1prQit1In0%3D
- *The Arab Weekly*, Killing of Hezbollah critic draws domestic, international outcry, 05/02/21, available at: <https://theArabweekly.com/killing-hezbollah-critic-draws-domestic-international-outcry>

Gulf

#SaudiArabia – Biden to halt supporting the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen



Source: The Boston Globe – Sana during the Saudi-led coalition attacks

On the 4th of February the US President Joe Biden announced that the country will no longer support the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen that, after five years of bloody fights, turned the country into the world's worst humanitarian crisis.

Biden's administration, which has recently decided to halt arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, both actively involved in the Yemeni civil-cum-proxy war, seems to be indeed committed to promote a diplomatic resolution in the country, implementing a significant reversal in the foreign policy agenda of his predecessors.

US support to the Saudi-led coalition started in 2015 under Barack Obama's administration and intensified under the former President Donald Trump who built strong diplomatic ties with the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Within his first three years of presidency, Donald Trump authorised 27,4 billion dollars in US arms sales to Saudi Arabia and concluded two major deals for

precision-guided bombs, as well as upgrades of its US-supplied F-15 aircraft. Between 2015 and 2019, with a 73% of arms imports from the US, Riyadh became Washington's main importer.

President Biden specified that Washington will continue to support and defend Riyadh from Iranian-backed militias' attacks and to fight any al-Qaida terrorist operation in the Gulf. However, he underlined that any support to offensive operations in Yemen including arms sales, spare parts, munitions and technical assistance, will end. The new administration is also working on reviewing Trump's designation of the Iran-backed Houthis as a terrorist group, move that blocks de facto delivery of humanitarian aid to the country exacerbating even further the humanitarian crisis.

Halting the country's support towards Saudi Arabia, a major shift in the US diplomacy, will surely not end the war in Yemen, but rather, it will deliver a powerful signal to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi. Additionally, Biden's decision might increase pressure on UK to suspend arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

To know more about this topic:

- The Guardian, Biden announces end to US support for Saudi-led offensive in Yemen, 04/02/21, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/04/us-end-support-saudi-led-operations-yemen-humanitarian-crisis>
- BBC News, Yemen war: Joe Biden ends support for operations in foreign policy reset, 05/02/21, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55941588>
- Al Jazeera, US ending aid to Saudi-led forces in Yemen, but questions persist, 07/02/21/ available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/7/us-ending-support-to-saudi-led-war-in-yemen-questions-persist>

#ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

#UAE – Arabs go to Mars



Source: UAE – Space Agency

On the 9th of February Burj Khalifa, the Dubai's iconic tallest building, was fully lighted in red to celebrate the success of United Arab Emirates mission to the Red Planet. The UAE's probe, called Al-Amal (the hope), successfully entered in Mars' orbit.

Launched on the 22nd of November from the Japanese Space Center Tanegashima, the probe is expected to stay in orbit for a Martian year (687days on earth) collecting data on the atmosphere of the Red Planet and weather seasonal changes. The probe will complete a scientific orbit every 55 hours providing scientific data on the atmosphere dynamics.

Straight after the Mars orbit insertion of Al-Amal probe, Shaikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, Founder of the [مركز محمد بن راشد للفضاء](#), tweeted: “[نفخر اليوم بما وصلنا إليه عبر مسيرة انطلقت من الصحراء لتعانق الفضاء في زمن قياسي. وطن يزهر بقيادة أمنوا فيه بالإنسان فصنعوا بذلك كفاءات وطنية وصلت بنا إلى المريخ في مشهد رائع. صفحة جديدة من التاريخ تعيد إلى الأذهان ريادة العرب في صناعة الحضارة الإنسانية في](#) – *Today we reached our destination, we moved from the desert to embrace the space. This is a nation whose leaders believed in the people and by doing so created expertise that led us to Mars. A new page of history that remind us back to the great Arab leadership in building human civilization*”, with a clear mention to the great Islamic achievements too long forgotten in the scientific field.

As reported by [Asharq al-Awsat](#) the mission aims at boosting UAE’s science and technology sector and inspiring youth in the region, too often hit by conflicts and economic crises, to develop a career in the fields of science and engineering. However, the UAE’s biggest ambition is to build a human settlement on Mars within a hundred years and, according to [Al-Hurra](#), to implement further projects including space tourism.

As emphasised by [Al-Ain](#) newspaper “الإمارات تهدف لتجاوز مرحلة ما بعد النفط وتعزيز اقتصادها، والمضي قدما” – *“with the launch of its first mission to Mars, the United Arab Emirates aims at moving beyond the oil-era and at enhancing its economy”*, inspiring what Emirati officials call a “إحياء العلم” – *“science revival”* in the region.

Although the UAE’s space exploration is part of the long-term strategy pursued by many Gulf states to reduce dependence on oil and build a knowledge-based economy, these ambitions cannot be separated from their geopolitical goals. As reported by [Al-Hurra](#) “أشاد الإماراتيون بالرحلة الناجحة للمركبة الفضائية باعتبارها” – *“Emiratis celebrated the successful mission as a major scientific achievement. However, it has also to be considered as a great geopolitical victory”*.

De facto, Al-Amal, is not only the [first Arab and Islamic interplanetary mission](#) to Mars but also the first of this year’s three international missions to the Red Planet. Mars represents the new geopolitical race and, once again, world’s powers are, not unsurprisingly, competing for dominance. China and the US will be projecting their geopolitical rivalry on Mars with Tianwen-1, expected to touch Mars’ orbit on February 10th, eight days before NASA’s Perseverance probe, while the Rosalind Franklin joint European-Russian mission has been postponed to 2022 due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

Although Emirati officials refer to it as a scientific not political mission, yet it will consolidate the UAE’s political prestige in terms of soft power, opening in principle opportunities for space forces and

reconnaissance satellites. Opening a niche job market could help in reducing the frustration of some youth sectors.

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