

# ARAB DISPATCH

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## North Africa

### #Algeria – A disappointing reshuffle



*Source: Al Arabiya*

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of February the Algerian President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, dissolved the National Popular Assembly announcing a government reshuffle. As the country is struggling with a severe health, economic and political crisis, President Tebboune called for early elections and ordered the release of 60 detainees linked to the protest movement Hirak.

The country has been under a severe financial pressure due to the pandemic and the fall in energy earnings, leading the government to cut spending and postpone investment projects.

Upon his election as President, Tebboune, former Prime Minister under Bouteflika's era, pledged reforms to diversify the oil-based economy; however, Algerians are still waiting for their implementation.

On the 16<sup>th</sup> of February, despite the COVID-19 measures that forbid marches, during the second anniversary of the 2019 protests, hundreds of Algerians took the streets in the eastern town of Kherrata to demand reforms and the amnesty of dozens of activists detained since 2019.

On the 21<sup>st</sup> of February, during the third reshuffle of the government of the Prime Minister Abdelaziz Djerad, Algeria named as new Energy Minister Mohammed Arkab, a former Mining Minister, while two prominent figures that belonged to Bouteflika's circle, namely Mohamed Ali Boughazi and Dalila Boujema, came back as Minister of Tourism and Environment Minister.

The disappointing reshuffle, revealing the unwillingness of the government to produce a real change, raised anger among Algerians that returned to streets against the ruling system.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *Al Jazeera*, Algeria: President Tebboune calls for dissolution of Parliament, 18/02/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/18/algeria-calls-early-legislative-elections>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Unconvincing cabinet reshuffle reminds Algeria's Hirak supporters of blocked horizons of change, 23/02/21, available at: <https://the arabweekly.com/unconvincing-cabinet-reshuffle-reminds-algerias-hirak-supporters-blocked-horizons-change>

## Levant

### #Syria – Russia mediates a prisoner swap



*Source: The Times of Israel – Border fence separating the Israeli and Syrian territories of the Golan Heights*

On the 17<sup>th</sup> of February the Syrian News Agency, SANA, reported a Russia-mediated prisoner swap between Israel and Syria. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of February, Syria released an Israeli woman arrested in the Syrian-controlled city of Quneitra after crossing the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights.

The detention of the Israeli woman by the Syrian authorities have prompted the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to ask for Russian mediation to secure her release. The woman was released in exchange for two Syrian shepherds arrested at the Israeli fence of the Golan Heights by Israel, after crossing the so-called “Alpha” armistice line from Syria into Israeli-ruled territory.

After the release of the young woman by Syrian authorities, the two Syrian prisoners were handed over to the Red Cross representatives through the Quneitra crossing.

Russia, closely allied with the Syrian regime has already mediated prisoner swaps between the two countries. In 2019, Moscow helped the return of the body of an Israeli sergeant from Syria, missing since the 1982 conflict between the two countries in Lebanon. In exchange Israel released two Syrian prisoners.



*To know more about this topic:*

- *Reuters*, Russia mediating Israeli-Syrian prisoner swap: Syrian state media, 17/02/21, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-syria-prisoners/russia-mediating-israeli-syrian-prisoner-swap-syrian-state-media-idUSKBN2AH1YJ>
- *The Times of Israel*, Israeli jet departs for Moscow to bring back Israeli woman who crossed to Syria, 18/02/21, available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/prisoner-deal-between-israel-syria-said-likely-to-be-finalized-thursday-night/>
- *Al Jazeera*, Israel and Syria conclude Russia-mediated prisoner swap, 19/02/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/19/israel-and-syria-conclude-russia-mediated-prisoners-swap>

## Gulf

### #GCC – Erdogan exploiting Gulf reconciliation efforts



*Source: Middle East Eye – Saudi King Salman with the Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan*

According to *The Arab Weekly*, Turkey is taking advantage of the climate of reconciliation within the GCC countries to re-establish its position in the Gulf.

Turkey's economy was severely affected by the country's hostility towards Saudi Arabia and by its position aligned with Qatar during the GCC crisis. Erdogan's position against the Kingdom and its support for Qatar, in addition to the country's proximity to the Muslim Brotherhood, led most of Saudi companies to boycott Turkey, with a serious impact on the economy.

The Al-Ula statement that marked the end of the Saudi-led blockade against Qatar, was welcomed positively by the Turkish President, Tayyip Erdogan, who described the agreement reached as "very beneficial" hoping to restore its position within the GCC, with a significant shift from his country's hostile diplomatic campaign against Saudi Arabia and UAE. The rapprochement was followed by Doha's offer to mediate between Ankara and Riyadh.

Erdogan's decision to restore diplomatic relations with Gulf countries is indeed a pragmatic move that aims at revitalizing the Turkish economy.

On the other hand, Saudi Arabia doesn't seem to be willing to restore ties with Turkey which is why Turkish Foreign Minister's tour did not include Saudi Arabia. However, with President Joe Biden announcing to revise US-Saudi diplomatic relations, Riyadh may seek to cool tensions with Ankara to have more options in the region. If this will be, Ankara will have to review its position towards the Muslim Brotherhood, seen by many Gulf countries as a terrorist organisation.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *The Arab Weekly*, Turkey takes advantage of the climate of reconciliation to promote economic interests in the Gulf, 11/02/21, available at: <https://theArabweekly.com/turkey-takes-advantage-climate-reconciliation-promote-economic-interests-gulf>
- *Al Jazeera*, Turkey, Saudi Arabia eye improved ties after Gulf crisis ends, 25/01/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/1/25/turkey-and-saudi-arabia-on-the-verge-of-a-return-to-cordiality>
- *Al Sharq Strategic Research*, What does the breakthrough in the GCC crisis mean for Turkey?, 05/02/21, available at: <https://research.sharqforum.org/2021/02/05/what-does-the-breakthrough-in-the-gcc-crisis-mean-for-turkey/>

## #ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

### # SaudiArabia – Biden bypasses the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman



*Source: CNBC – The Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman*

As reported by [Al Quds](#) newspaper, the new US administration is re-assessing its stance towards Saudi Arabia, aiming at marginalising the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman through a completely different approach from Donald Trump’s diplomacy.

Since his early days as the new President of the United States, Joe Biden, sent a clear message that the current US administration will no longer support the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. The days when the de facto ruler, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, had direct contact with the White House, seem to be gone, as shown by Biden’s decision to reduce military support to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen and to halt arms sales to Saudi Arabia.

As clarified by the presidential spokeswoman, Jen Psaki, the new US administration will take a different approach in dealing with Riyadh, adding that [Biden’s interlocutor will no longer be the Crown Prince](#) but his counterpart King Salman. As reported by [Al-Hurrah](#) the White House announced that there are no

plans to hold calls with the crown Prince, and President Joe Biden will hold conversations with King Salman at the appropriate time.

According to [Al-Arab](#), the reason behind this drastic diplomacy shift is indeed Mohammed bin Salman's close relations with the former US President Donald Trump and his son-in-law Jared Kushner, in addition to the Crown Prince's unyielding position on Iran, definitely not in line with Biden's strategy. According to Biden's foreign policy agenda, Washington will soon return to the JCPOA nuclear deal, abandoned by his predecessor, and gradually lift sanctions against Tehran.

The decision to marginalise Mohammed bin Salman and to review its position towards the Kingdom, comes when Washington announced its intention to release an unclassified report on the murder of the Washington Post columnist, Jamal Khashoggi. In 2018 Trump blocked his team from complying with the law and making it public. The release of the report that accused Mohammed bin Salman of being directly involved in Khashoggi's killing will depict the "reformer" and "modernizer Prince" in a different way, severely undermining his ascension to the throne.

Furthermore, as pointed out by [Al-Alam TV](#), the administration is minimising its diplomatic ties with the Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, intending to change the succession line.

According to [Al-Estiqlal](#) newspaper Mohammed bin Salman is facing international pressure that might threaten his position as Crown Prince especially after the Brookings Institute published a report calling on the international community to pressure for the release of the former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef, seen by many as an appropriate alternative.

As reported by the newspaper, ibn Nayef, accused by Mohammed bin Salman of attempting a coup against him, was unjustly detained because he was the main candidate to succeed the eighty-years-old King Salman.

Most significantly, ibn Nayef was a good US interlocutor and a CIA close partner contributing with his efforts to the defeat of Al-Qaeda in Saudi Arabia, during the group's terror campaign between 2003 and 2006 against foreign compounds and against Al-Saud royal family hosting them.

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