

ARAB DISPATCH

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North Africa

#Libya – Parliament approves the interim unity government



Source: Al-Monitor – Libyan parliament approving the proposed cabinet

On the 5th of March the interim Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, elected last month by the UN-sponsored Libyan Political Dialogue, to lead the country to the next elections scheduled for the 24th of December, has submitted his cabinet to the parliament for approval.

The fact that the ministers' names were not public, raised criticism within the political circles, creating a climate of tension that risked to obstacle the formation of the future national government. Political

leaders criticised the size of the cabinet, composed by 33 ministers and two deputy prime ministers, decision justified by the interim PM to create a balanced government that could represents all the Libyan people and three main provinces.

Additionally, legislators working on the proposed cabinet, further underlined the fact that the Parliament was meeting in the city of Sirte, still under the control of pro-Haftar forces including foreign combatants and mercenaries.

On the 10th of March, after days of intense debate, the parliament approved Dbeibah's cabinet by 121 votes out of 132 deputies. The new transitional unity government will replace the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) and the House of Representatives in the eastern city of Tobruk. The interim three-member presidency council selected, along with the interim PM, to represent the three Libyan main regions, will head the new unity Government until December's elections. A lot of political good will and coordination is necessary to avoid premature splits, crises or political paralysis.

To know more about this topic:

- *Al Jazeera*, Libyan parliament meets for key vote on endorsing interim government, 08/03/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/8/libyan-parliament-meets-after-decade-of-war-to-debate-new-govt>
- *France 24*, Libya parliament to vote on interim PM's new cabinet, 08/03/21, available at: <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210308-libya-parliament-to-vote-on-interim-pm-s-new-cabinet>
- *Middle East Eye*, Libya: Parliament approves interim government, 10/03/21, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/libya-parliament-approves-interim-government>

Levant

#Jordan – King Abdullah renews calls for political reforms



Source: The National - Jordan's King Abdullah II and Crown Prince Hussein

According to Al-Monitor, King Abdullah II of Jordan called to reform the laws regulating elections, political parties and local administration in a long-awaited move within the Kingdom.

Calls to review the election law and the political parties' law, delayed for almost a decade, increased after November's legislative elections that witnessed a scarce voter turnout, barely the 30%, underlining Jordanians' low trust in the country's political institutions and political establishment.

The parliamentary election held on the 10th of November, during which the majority of the seats went to independent candidates, relying on their tribal bases, further highlighted the need to reform an election process that has so far only cemented individualism.

During an [interview](#) published by the Jordanian News Agency, Petra, on the 10th of January, King Abdullah stressed the need to reform elections laws to enhance youth and women's participation in the political discourse.

The Secretary General of the HASHD (Jordanian People's Democratic Party) and former member of the Parliament, Abla Abu Elbah, stated in an interview with [The New Arab](#) that electoral reforms represent the cornerstone to revive political life and political pluralism. She added that the election law and its variants during the past years, were the reason of repeated failures embodied by political stagnation and the widespread financial corruption.

Although King Abdullah seems to be committed to revisit political reforms in Jordan and to include all parts of the society in the decision-making process, a large segment of the society remains pessimistic about it. Since the Jordanian Arab uprising in 2011, ruling forces have been calling for a political reform with no success, underling the fact that influential forces in the political scene have indeed no interest in changing the status quo and in building strong democratic institutions.

Despite widespread scepticism, the Head of the Center for the Freedom of Journalists in Amman, Nidal Mansour, believes that political reforms may witness a concrete revival in connection with the new US administration.

To know more about this topic:

- *The New Arab*, Jordan revisits the laws governing political life, 03/02/21, available at: <https://www.alaraby.co.uk/politics/الأردن-يعيد-النظر-بالقوانين-الناظمة-للحياة-السياسية>
- *Al-Ghad*, Political reforms risk to go unheeded, 06/02/21, available at: <https://alghad.com/المطلوب-حتى-لا-يذهب-الحديث-عن-الإصلاح/>
- *Al-Monitor*, King's call to revisit political reforms triggers cautious optimism in Jordan, 10/03/21, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2021/02/jordan-reform-abdallah-king-biden-politics-change.html#ixzz6okYKMqnJ>

Gulf

#Qatar – Doha to restore diplomatic ties with Sana'a



Source: Kuwait News Agency (KUNA) – Qatari Deputy prime Minister and Foreign Minister meets his Yemeni counterpart

On the 7th of March the Yemeni Foreign Minister, Ahmed Awad bin Mubarak, met his Qatari counterpart, Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, in Doha to review diplomatic ties between the two states, after four years of boycott.

During the meeting the two parties agreed on coordinating efforts regarding regional and international issues. Furthermore, the Qatari FM, stressed the need of ending the six-year civil war in Yemen. Although the parties seem to be committed in restoring diplomatic ties and to put an end to the on-going humanitarian catastrophe in Yemen, the meeting and Qatar's position in the region remain ambiguous.

Qatar, which was part of the Saudi-led coalition, fighting the Iran-backed Houthi group during the Decisive Storm Operation, was excluded from the military alliance in 2017, after the “Arab quartet” (Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt) imposed on Doha an air, land and sea blockade, accusing the small state of supporting Islamist groups, including Houthis and Muslim Brotherhood, and of having ties with Iran. Qatar, blamed for aborting the Gulf initiative in Yemen and preventing the Houthis' defeat, after the 2017 crisis, started to play an overt role supporting financially, politically and mediately the Shia group.

After the reconciliation agreement, signed on the 5th of January by GCC members states and dubbed the Al-Ula Statement, Doha seems to be exploiting a wider margin of manoeuvre, coming along with the lift of the ban, and to present itself as a neutral mediator in the region.

To know more about this topic:

- *The Arab Weekly*, Qatar postures as ‘neutral mediator’ in Yemen crisis, back channel for US-Houthi contacts, 18/02/21, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/qatar-postures-neutral-mediator-yemen-crisis-back-channel-us-houthi-contacts>
- *Al Arabiya*, Yemeni government restores ties with Qatar after four years of boycott, 07/03/21, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/gulf/2021/03/07/GCC-dispute-Yemeni-government-restores-ties-with-Qatar-after-four-years-of-boycott>
- *Arab News*, Yemeni government says restores ties with Qatar, 08/03/21, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1821581/middle-east>

#ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

#Iraq – Pope Francis encourages an unprecedented inter-religious dialogue



Source: Kurdistan 24 - Pope Francis speaks with Iraqi religious figures

On the 5th of March Pope Francis started a four-day trip to Iraq, the first-ever papal visit to the country and the first international trip since the start of the pandemic. During this historic trip the Pontiff visited cities once held by the Islamic State and made a significant appeal for religious co-existence in a country torn by sectarianism and violence.

The visit to the birthplace of the Eastern Churches, where thousands of Christians were forced to flee or killed first by Al-Qaeda and then by the Islamic State, established in 2014 in Mosul, was highly symbolic. Moreover, the Pope met Iraqi Muslim authorities and the Christian communities of Baghdad, Qaraqosh (Iraq's largest Christian city in the Nineveh region) and Mosul, still recovering from the destruction caused by the self-styled Caliphate. Spreading a message of peace, religious tolerance and brotherhood among different religious sects, the pope held prayers in the iconic and ancient churches of Iraq destroyed by IS.

The Papal trip included also a stop in Erbil where the Pontiff met the Kurdish authorities and the 150.000 Christian refugees, forced to leave central Iraq.

On the 6th of March, after meeting the clerics from the Catholic branches in Baghdad, the Pope headed to Najaf, widely considered the third holy city in Shia Islam (after Mecca and Medina), the spiritual capital of Shiism and the center of Shiite political power in Iraq.

On this occasion, Pope Francis held an unprecedented meeting with the 90 years-old Shia Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, one of the most important Shi'ite figures. During the meeting, the two religious leaders denounced religious extremism and stressed the importance of encouraging inter-religious dialogue among all the components of the society in a country that has been experiencing conflicts for almost forty years, including a bloody civil war between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

According to a statement issued by [Ali Al-Sistani's official website](#), during the meeting the Ayatollah underlined the role that religious and spiritual leaders should play to contain and impede inter-religious fighting and called on the great powers “ على تغليب جانب العقل والحكمة ونبذ لغة الحرب وعدم التوسع في رعاية مصالحهم الذاتية على حساب حقوق الشعوب في العيش بحرية وكرامة، كما أكد على أهمية تضافر الجهود لتثبيت قيم التآلف والتعايش السلمية والتضامن الانساني في كل المجتمعات ” - *“to prioritize reason and wisdom and to reject the language of war, and not to promote their self-interest over the rights of the people to live in freedom and dignity, and stressing the importance of concerted efforts to consolidate the values of harmony, peaceful coexistence and human solidarity in all societies”*.

The historic meeting between the two religious leaders was welcomed positively locally and internationally.

As highlighted by the [Masrawy](#) newspaper the emblematic visit to the holy city of Najaf followed by the Meeting with Ali Al-Sistani, comes two years after the Pontiff and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Sunni world's top religious institutions, Ahmed El Tayeb, signed a [joint declaration on human fraternity](#) (وثيقة Uathiqah al-Akhuah al-Insaniyah - الأخوة الإنسانية) during the inter-religious meeting held in Abu Dhabi (UAE), giving hopes that the Pope's visit to Najaf will enhance cultural openness towards Shiism and give a different international dimension to the city of Najaf and Shia Muslims, that represent roughly the 10% of all Muslims and whose minorities in some countries are persecuted.

Citizens in Najaf warmly welcomed the visit and images of the Pope Francis and Ayatollah al-Sistani with written on it “اللقاء التاريخي” – *“the historic meeting”* were affixed along the streets all over the city. The Shiite

cleric Mohammed Ali Bahr al-'Ulum commented on the visit by saying that it represents a source of pride for the citizens and the Shia community, adding that [نتمن هذه الزيارة التي بلا شك سوف تعطي بعداً آخر للنجف](#) - ["الأشرف"](#) - *"the meeting will surely give another dimension to the city of Najaf"*.

[Hakim al-Zamili](#), an Iraqi politician from the Sadrist movement affirmed that the Pope's meeting with the Ayatollah in the holy city of Najaf, captured by international media, was a meaningful step that will definitely affect positively the country's image but also its critical internal situation.

After meeting with Ali al-Sistani, undoubtedly the most emblematic visit during the Papal trip, Pope Francis travelled to [the ancient city of Ur](#), believed to be the birthplace of Prophet Abraham, the founder of the three monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity and Islam), to reinforce his inter-religious tolerance message at the presence of religious representatives of the Christian, Muslim, Yazidi, Zoroastrian and Mandaean communities.

Although the Pontiff's visit has been widely hailed by all parties in Iraq as a symbol of the country opening a new page, some observers doubt that this will have a significant impact on the complex reality on the ground. The critical internal situation in Iraq is unlikely to change with the current government's mismanagement combined with widespread corruption and declining oil prices.

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