

ARAB DISPATCH

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North Africa

#Egypt – Are Cairo and Ankara resuming diplomatic relations?



Source: Democraticac.de

On the 12th of March Egypt and Turkey had their first diplomatic contact since 2013, when the military coup led by the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi removed the former President Mohamed Morsi, member of the Muslim Brotherhood, backed by the Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan.

Relations between the two countries worsened significantly in 2011, when Turkey emerged, along with Qatar, as a key supporter of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Since the 2013 military coup, Ankara and Cairo expelled each other's ambassadors, interrupting their diplomatic ties. The two countries had several divergences in the region, including the Libyan civil war, where Turkey has supported the Government of National Accord (GNA) in the fight against the Libyan National Army (LNA) backed by Egypt, and in Eastern Mediterranean, where Turkey tries to expand its influence, threatening Egypt's ambitions to become a regional energy hub after the discovery of the supergiant gas field (Zohr field) in its offshore.

Although the two countries established a diplomatic contact, Ankara and Cairo seem to be far away from a full restoration of diplomatic ties.

According to the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, resuming ties with Ankara will require changes in Turkish diplomacy. Furthermore, experts doubt that the move might lead to an actual resumption of diplomatic relation as Turkey will most likely keep its support for Muslim Brotherhood, considered by Cairo a terrorist organisation, while Egypt still rejects the controversial maritime deal between Turkey and the LNA.

To know more about this topic:

- *Atlantic Council*, For Turkey, the Libyan conflict and the eastern Mediterranean are inextricably linked 28/10/20, available at: <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/for-turkey-the-libyan-conflict-and-the-eastern-mediterranean-are-inextricably-linked/>
- *Al Jazeera*, Turkey says first diplomatic contact held with Egypt since 2013, 12/03/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/12/turkey-says-first-diplomatic-contacts-made-with-egypt-since-2013>
- *Arab News*, Egypt denies resumption of diplomatic ties with Turkey, 13/03/21, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1824606/middle-east>

Levant

#Jordan – Israel’s visit to the UAE cancelled after dispute with Jordan



Source: TV Israel News

On the 11th of March Jordan delayed approving the Israeli Prime Minister’s flight route over the Kingdom, forcing Benjamin Netanyahu to postpone his first official visit, since the Abraham Agreement, to the United Arab Emirates.

The visit scheduled originally in November, was repeatedly postponed due to the pandemic and internal political crises. Netanyahu was eager to make the trip, de facto a celebration of Israel’s normalisation deals and the PM’s diplomatic credentials, before the elections scheduled for the 23rd of March. As reported by Al Jazeera during the official visit, the Israeli Prime Minister was supposed to meet also with Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

According to the Israeli Prime Minister’s Office, the move came in retaliation to the Jordanian crown prince’s denied entrance to the Temple Mount in the old city of Jerusalem by Israeli security guards. On the 10th of March the Crown Prince, Hussein bin Abdullah, was supposed to visit the holy site but his protection forces, more heavily armed than agreed with Israeli authorities, were denied to enter and the visit got cancelled. The Temple Mount, which is a holy site for both Muslims and Hebrews, was occupied by Israel after the 1967 Six Day War; however, the Jordanian appointed council Waqf continues to administrate Muslim holy sites in Jerusalem, including the Temple Mount compound, a contentious issue between the parties.

As highlighted by the former Israeli ambassador to Jordan, Oded Eran, the incident “*reflects a deeper deterioration in relations between the parties in recent years*”. According to the ambassador there is a lack of communication between the King Abdullah and the PM Benjamin Netanyahu, worsened even further by Israel’s plan to annex parts of the occupied West Bank.

To know more about this topic:

- *The Time of Israel*, Jordan crown prince said to cancel Temple Mount visit over security spat, 10/03/21, available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/jordan-crown-prince-said-to-cancel-temple-mount-visit-over-security-spat/>
- *The Time of Israel*, Netanyahu forced to cancel trip to UAE amid dispute with Jordan, 11/03/21, available at: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-said-weighing-canceling-uae-trip-due-to-wifes-illness/>
- *Al Jazeera*, Netanyahu shelves UAE trip following spat with Jordan, 11/03/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/11/netanyahu-cancels-planned-uae-visit-israeli-broadcaster>

Gulf

#SaudiArabia – Escalating Houthis' attacks unsettle the oil market



Source: Middle East Eye

Attacks by the Iran-aligned Shia group Houthis on Saudi Arabia have significantly escalated in recent weeks.

On the 7th of March a barrage of drones, targeting the oil storage yard at Yas Tanura, the world's biggest offshore oil-loading facility, and the compound in Dhahran, used by the state-controlled oil giant Saudi Aramco, were intercepted by Saudi Arabia. A week later, on the 15th of March, Houthi military spokesperson, Yahya Sarea, stated that the group launched armed drones on the military sites of Abha Airport and King Khalid air base in the southern town of Khamis Mushait. On the same day two ballistic missiles hit an uninhabited border area in southern Saudi Arabia.

The attacks, that come when the US administration decided to significantly downgrade its support for the crown prince Mohamed bin Salman, halting its arms sales to the Kingdom, have severely impacted the oil market.

The recent escalation of Houthis attacks on Saudi's oil facilities, drove the Brent crude price to its highest in the last 14 months. On the 8th of March its price rose to 71,38 US Dollars per barrel to pull back on the same day to 68,77 US Dollars.

While the attacks did not cause any loss of , they have created a short spike in the oil market and oil prices continue to be volatile.

To know more about this topic:

- *Reuters*, U.S. “alarmed” by frequency of attacks on Saudi after Houthis target oil heartland, 08/03/21, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-saudi/u-s-alarmed-by-frequency-of-attacks-on-saudi-after-houthis-target-oil-heartland-idUSKBN2B01CM>
- *Financial Times*, Oil price rises above \$70 after attacks on Saudi oil facilities, 08/03/21, available at: <https://www.ft.com/content/3a094943-5663-477f-96d9-13f230880b7b>
- *Al Jazeera*, Houthi ballistic missiles target Saudi Arabia, says coalition, 16/03/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/3/16/houthis-fire-ballistic-missiles-at-saudi-arabia-coalition-says>

#ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

#GCC – The slow path of women’s empowerment in the Gulf



Source: Americans for Democracy & Human Rights in Bahrain

Within the last decade, women’s empowerment and the promotion of their rights became a top priority in Gulf countries’ agenda, forcing the leaderships to take major steps towards a social transformation, sparking controversy among Islamic conservative circles. Gulf states have been taking remarkable steps towards their female citizens, however deep-rooted cultural norms are far away from being altered or removed.

The first female movements emerged in Bahrain with the Young Ladies Association established in 1955 followed by the Women Cultural Association established in Kuwait in 1963. From these very first movements a women’s rights discourse started to be a sensitive topic among the Gulf countries.

As stated by [Fatima al-Salem](#), Assistant Professor at the Kuwait University, women in Kuwait made major steps in gaining their rights starting from the 1950s, when students who have studied abroad returned back and raised their voice calling for a more female-inclusive society. Unfortunately, after 60

years, women are still incapable to fully access the job market and the political field. “فهنالك عدم إيمان كاف” بالمرأة، خصوصاً في الشأن السياسي. وإذا نظرنا إلى الانتخابات الأخيرة التي أجريت في ديسمبر (كانون الأول) الماضي، نجد أنه *“There is a consistent lack of trust towards women, especially in politics. If we examine the last elections held in December, we will notice that despite the high number of female candidates, women did not win any parliament’s seat”* said Dr Salem, adding that Kuwait’s legislation has been fair to women, however the main issue is how the society views them.

In these regards, [Al-Anoud Al-Sharekh](#), the director of the Ibtikar Consultancy, stated to Assharq al-Awsat: “المسألة الأهم هي استمرار ضعف التمثيل السياسي للمرأة بعد 15 عاماً من دخولها هذا المعترك. وفي رأيي، أن عدم فوز أي امرأة بكرسي في مجلس الأمة الكويتي هو مؤشر مقلق، خصوصاً أنه لا وجود لدينا لنظام الكوتا أو المحاصصة للتأكد من إشراكها بطرق أخرى في مراكز صنع القرار، وهذا ما يعطل عجلة التقدم السياسي والاجتماعي. وأتوقع أن تضع الدولة حلولاً جذرية لهذا *“The main problem is that after 15 years, since we embraced this battle, the political representation of women is still very weak. In my opinion, the complete absence of women winning seats at the Kuwaiti parliament is dangerous indicator that significantly affects the country’s social and political progress. I personally expect that the state will soon implement radical reform to address this issue like the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia did.”*

Slightly different is the situation witnessed in Saudi Arabia, where King Abdallah bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, ratified in 2000 the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, and, in 2011, allowed women to take part to the Kingdom’s political life through the Majlis Ashurah (Consultive Council). More significant reforms were then implemented by the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman after announcing in 2016 the Saudi Vision 2030.

According to [Assharq al-Awsat](#), since the announcement of Saudi Vision 2030, women witnessed historic changes that allowed them to take part in various private and public sectors as well as in gender-mixed contexts. The goal of Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 to diversify the Kingdom’s oil-based economy and to produce socio-economic prosperity, pushed the de-facto ruler, to take major steps towards the Kingdom’s female population, raising social awareness on the importance of the woman in the society and in the job market.

Since Saudi women were allowed to drive in 2018, more reforms ensuring women’s rights and easing the myriad of restrictions imposed on them have been implemented. Among the radical changes were the lift of travel restrictions, the right to leave the house without a legal permission and the right to choose her residency.

Women are now allowed to participate in municipal elections and take part to the Saudi Arabia's Shura Council. They can hold positions in international organisations like the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation, the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council. Many of them have been teaching in international universities and have been holding important positions at the United Nations.

As stated by [Amal Yahya Al Moallimi](#), the Saudi Ambassador to Norway, since 2013 the number of women working in Saudi diplomacy increased by 150%, with three female ambassadors being appointed.

As highlighted by Saudi journalist [Mohammed Al-Shaikh](#), although the reforms introduced were welcomed nationally and internationally, conservative Islamic circles, highly criticised the move condemning MBS of “westernizing” the country.

Commenting on the Islamists' ostracism the journalist stated: “ والسؤال الذي لا بد من مواجهته، وعدم الخوف من ” الإجابة عليه: قد خالفنا تعاليم الإسلام، وتحديداً الإسلام الوسطي؟ .. لا وفي الوقت نفسه نعم، لا لأننا واكبنا بكل ما تعنيه الكلمة (الإسلام الوسطي)، الذي يتناغم مع الحياة العصرية، ونعم إذا كان الإسلام الذي نريد هو إسلام داعش وطالبان، ومن يقرأ أمهات الكتب التراثية سيجد أن المرأة في زمن الرسالة وتآلق الحضارة الإسلامية كانت جزءاً أصيلاً من ذلك المجتمع، كانت تتاجر في الأسواق، وكانت تعمل في كل حقل من حقول الحياة، بل وتشارك في الحروب والمعارك، مثلها مثل أي فرد آخر من أفراد المجتمع. لكن عندما سيطر الجمود على المجتمعات الإسلامية، وتفشى الجهل، وانتشر التكلس والتخلف، والقول الواحد الذي يلغي الاختلاف، في هذه العصور *The question we should not be afraid to answer is: are we running against Islamic rules?... No and at the same time, yes. No as we have been following what we consider “Moderate Islam” which invites Muslims to conduct their life in harmony with contemporaneity, and yes if the Islam we want is the Islam followed by Daesh and the Taliban. Anyone who read the Quran and the Sunnah of the Prophet will find out that women back then, during the most flourishing period of the Islamic civilization, were fundamental to the society, running trading activities, working in any field and taking part to wars and battles like all the other members of the society. However, when cultural stagnation dominated Islam and a profound ignorance spread throughout Islamic societies, civilization fell and the women fell along with it.*”

However, although many GCC countries have been recently recognised by the World Bank's Women, Business and Law Report as examples of nations enhancing women's inclusion in the economic and political life (with Saudi Arabia ranked as top Reformer and improver in [2020](#), followed by the United Arab Emirates in [2021](#)), rising controversy on social media, many observers remain sceptical over the empowering women's novel promoted by the GCC countries, claiming human rights abuses and a persistent discrimination against female citizens, especially in Saudi Arabia.

As a matter of fact, today women can apply for a driving license and drive their own car (with limitations) but they still need a permission from their legal guardian to get married or divorced. Not to mention the several female activists that faced and continue to face prosecution and detention for expressing themselves in the kingdom.

Furthermore, according to Professor Madawi Al-Rasheed, the reforms implemented by Saudi Arabia hide a more complex scenario; the Kingdom have indeed exploited the Saudi women's struggle as a counter-current against Islamists. By promoting the Kingdom as the women's saviour, the Islamists become, on an international level, the enemies of women.

Never the less, Saudi women's activism increased significantly after the 2011's Arab Risings, closely followed by the international community. Saudi women's marginalisation could no longer be ignored and the political establishment choose shrewdly to co-opt their struggle, to gain time on the problem. The Kingdom has indeed reinforced its legitimacy locally, while changing internationally western countries' perception towards the Kingdom's radicalism. And as a result, Mohamed bin Salman bolstered its diplomatic credentials and diverted the attention from wider civil and human rights issues, for the time being.

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