

ARAB DISPATCH

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North Africa

#Tunisia – Ennahda mobilises popular anger against President Saied



Source: The Arab Weekly

On the 27th of February thousands of supporters of the biggest Tunisian Islamist party, Ennahda, poured into the streets of Tunis calling for “national unity” and demanding solutions to the ongoing political and economic crisis.

The march, one of the biggest popular demonstrations since the Tunisian uprising in 2011, was rallied by the leader of the party, Rached Ghannouchi, amid a dispute between the Tunisian President Kais Saied and the Prime Minister Hichem Mechichi that led to a government's standoff.

On the 26th of January, amid ongoing popular unrests, a government's reshuffle, called by the Prime Minister Mechichi and backed by Ennahda, replaced 11 ministers, known to be Saied's allies, with members of Ennahda and Qalb Tounes. The Tunisian President firmly opposed the cabinet's reshuffle and refused to swear four of them, condemning the absence of women among the new ministers and, most significantly, denouncing the conflicts of interests that the new ministers might represent.

Ennahda, that has recently lost credibility among Tunisians and share of votes, portrayed the protest as a call for democracy and national unity, while observers see the move as an attempt to mobilise popular anger against President Saied opposing this type of cabinet reshuffle.

To know more about this topic:

- *Africanews*, Tunisia president stands firm against cabinet reshuffle, 04/02/21, available at: <https://www.africanews.com/2021/02/04/tunisia-president-stands-firm-against-cabinet-reshuffle//>
- *Middle East Eye*, Tunisia's Ennahda holds large street protest, fuelling government crisis, 27/02/21, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/tunisia-annahda-protest-government-crisis>
- *The Arab News*, Tunisia's main party holds huge rally as government row grows, 27/02/21, available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1816841/middle-east>

Levant

#Lebanon – Lebanese gather in support of Patriarch’s call for neutrality



Source: Middle East Monitor

On the 27th of February more than 15.000 Lebanese gathered at the Maronite Patriarchate in the mountain village of Bkerki, northeast of Beirut, in support of Lebanon’s Maronite Patriarch Boutros al-Rai, calling for an UN-sponsored international conference that could solve the unprecedented political and economic crisis and restore a democratic system untied from foreign regional powers interferences.

During his speech Al-Rai urged Lebanese not to stay silent in front of the complete failure of the political class, incapable of forming a new government and conducting proper investigations into the port’s blast adding that Lebanon needs neutrality *“so that it will no longer be a victim of conflicts, wars and a land of divisions”*.

With a clear reference to the country’s ties to Iran, the Patriarch accused the Lebanese political forces of creating *“multiple states with multiple armies within one land”*, dragging the country into the most severe economic crisis and political impasse.

The comments from the Iran-backed Shia party Hezbollah came straight away. Hassan Nasrallah, head of the party, commented by saying that such a move would open the door to foreign interference and

occupation. Hassan Fadlallah, parliamentary member of the Loyalty to the Resistance Bloc, the political wing of Hezbollah, stated that internationalisation of the crisis would destabilise Lebanon even further as it did in Syria, Libya and Iraq.

Given the historical political role of the Maronite patriarchal authority, shaping the country's history since the establishment of the Lebanese state, the Shia group seems to be concerned about the Patriarch's call to internationalise the political crisis, fearing that this could put international pressure on the party and the Iran-aligned forces in the country.

To know more about this topic:

- *Reuters*, Lebanese rally to back church leader's neutrality calls, 27/02/21, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-crisis-patriarch-int/lebanese-rally-to-back-church-leaders-neutrality-calls-idUSKBN2AR0HI>
- *Al Arabiya*, Lebanon's Patriarch calls for an international conference to push for neutrality, 27/02/21, available at: <https://english.alarabiya.net/News/middle-east/2021/02/27/Lebanon-s-Patriarch-calls-for-an-international-conference-to-push-for-neutrality->
- *Asbarq Al-Awsat*, Lebanon: Shiite Clerics Say Call for Neutrality is 'Treason', 01/03/21, available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/2834281/lebanon-shiite-clerics-say-call-neutrality-treason>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Hezbollah frowns at Rai's call for internationalisation, 02/03/21, available at: <https://the arabweekly.com/hezbollah-frowns-rai-call-internationalisation>

Gulf

#Qatar – Doha to regain its role in Syria



Source: Tebran Times - Qatari Foreign Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim Al Thani

According to The Arab Weekly, Qatar seems to be exploiting the regional climate of reconciliation and the new American administration to regain its role in regional hot spots, most significantly in Syria.

After failing its role as a mediator between the US and Iran and trying with no success to solve Lebanon's devastating economic and political crisis, Qatar is now attempting to regain influence in the Syrian civil war where Doha played a significant role until the 2015, financially supporting the opposition factions.

Qatar's ambitions were confirmed also by the repeated visits to Doha of Nasr al-Hariri, head of the Syrian National Council, the biggest opposition coalition in exile, formed in 2012 and based in Istanbul.

On the 22nd of February, al-Hariri, during his last visit to Doha where the coalition has an Embassy, met the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign affairs Sheikh Mohamed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, to review their bilateral relations and discuss Qatar's commitment to reach a political solution to the Syrian civil war on the basis of the Security Council resolution No. 2254 that aimed at forming a unity government with members of the regime, the opposition and groups from the civil society.

Qatar's repositioning in the region is mainly driven by the new US administration that seems committed to pressure Bashar al-Assad, weakened by a severe financial and political crisis, and to fill the vacuum left by the Trump's administration largely exploited by Russia.

To know more about this topic:

- *Gulf Times*, FM meets President of Syrian National Coalition, 22/02/21, available at: <https://www.gulf-times.com/story/685274/FM-meets-President-of-Syrian-National-Coalition>
- *The Peninsula*, Foreign Minister meets President of Syrian National Coalition, 22/02/21, available at: <https://www.thepeninsulaqatar.com/article/22/02/2021/Foreign-Minister-meets-President-of-Syrian-National-Coalition>
- *The Arab Weekly*, Qatar reactivates role in Syria amid hopes of regional influence, 26/02/21, available at: <https://the arabweekly.com/qatar-reactivates-role-syria-amid-hopes-regional-influence>

#ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

#IslamicWorld – Female clerics are not an option within Islamic circles



Source: The National

On the 18th of March, 2005, Amina Wadud, an Islamic studies Professor at the Virginia Commonwealth University, led a mixed-gender Friday prayer at the Synod House of the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in Manhattan, sparking controversy and sharp criticism within the Islamic community and conservative Muslim circles.

After Dr Wadud became the first American Muslim women to lead a congregational prayer, many other women started to guide the prayer in several countries promoting a more inclusive Islam.

Today, although female imams have been leading the prayer in the United States, Canada, South Africa Europe and China, where the Hui Muslims have a long tradition of female imams, the question of whether Muslim women should lead the prayer in public is still open, adding fuel to the theological debate. Not to mention that, in many Muslim countries, women are still [not allowed to enter and pray in mosques](#), not even in a private room separated by the main prayer hall usually dedicated to men only.

As many other controversial religion-related arguments, the interpretation of the Qur'an and the fact that it is conducted exclusively by male jurists, lies at the heart of the debate.

As pointed out by several scholars the Holy Qur'an states that the "most learned" should lead the prayer without specifying whether a woman can lead or not congregational prayers. On the other hand, many argued that the Prophet allowed women to lead the prayers, however according to some jurists, the permission was restricted to their relatives within their home.

According to Yusuf al-Qaradawi, one the most prominent Islamic scholars and political influencers, well known in the Islamic community for his programme "al-Sharī'a wa al-Ḥayāh" (Sharia and life), broadcast on Al-Jazeera, only men should lead the Salat (the prayer). According to the scholar, in Islam the prayer is not only invocation and supplication like in Christianity, but it includes specific movements (Raka'at), sitting and kneeling behind the Imam thus, it is not appropriate for a woman to pray or to lead the prayer in front of a man because her movements could drag them into temptation. Which is why men and women are required to pray in separate rooms. فتجنبًا لأي فتنة، وسدًا للذريعة: جعل الشرع الإمامة والأذان والإقامة "للرجال. وجعل صفوف النساء خلف صفوف الرجال" – "to avoid any fitnah (fitnah means in Arabic temptation or anything that could divide the Islamic community, also used to indicate "civil war") the Shariah allocates the institution of the imamate and the call to the prayer only to men and makes the women's prayer rows behind the men" stated Al-Qaradawi in an article published on his website al-qaradawi.net.

By contrast, as reported by [Al-Hurrah](#), the Moroccan cleric, Sheikh Abdel Bari Zemzami founder of the International Union of Muslim Scholars and former member of the Moroccan Parliament, stated in several occasions that, although many jurists forbid Muslims to attend a prayer led by a female imam, "لا يوجد أي دليل شرعي يمنع المرأة من الإمامة" – "there is no legal evidence that prohibits women to lead the prayer", adding that even Al-Tabari (893-923 A.D.), one of the most prominent commentators of the Qur'an, well known for his expertise in Qura'nic exegesis, allowed women to lead men during the prayer.

In these regards, Nayla Al-Selini, professor of Islamic history at the University of Sousse, argued that during the first century of Islam both man and women were allowed to pray together in the mosques and, when needed, women would lead the prayer with no restrictions. According to the Professor, the restrictions against women are the result of a misogynistic misinterpretation of the religion conducted by jurists that do not consider women as human beings with equal rights with men.

Rising criticism among the clerics, in 2005, Morocco allowed women to graduate as female clerics, becoming the first country in the Middle East and North African region to provide education for female

religious leaders. However, the initiative, implemented to fight extremism but also to enforce government's control over religion, by training women to become Murshidat (female clerics), was highly criticised because it doesn't give women the same status of men and still doesn't allow them to lead the prayer.

Although many women, mostly living in Western countries have been leading congregational prayers, the theological debate remains unsolved in the Arab world. Permitting women to lead the Friday prayer, a practice that according to the Ahadith (the record of the words, actions and silence of the Prophet) dates back centuries, might indeed undermine the male-dominated clerics' authorities in many conservative Muslim countries, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, encouraging diversity and dispelling stereotypes that could threaten the status quo of those countries.

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