

# ARAB DISPATCH

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## **North Africa**

**#Libya – PM Dbeibah faces Benghazi’s persisting divide**



*Source: Al Jazeera*

On the 26<sup>th</sup> of April the Prime Minister of Libya’s Government of National Unity, Hamid Dbeibah, was denied to enter the city of Benghazi by an armed group loyal to general Khalifa Haftar, highlighting ongoing frictions between the various factions.

The visit, the first by a Tripoli-based prime minister after years of divisions and rivalries, was meant to be a significant step towards the unification of Libya's warring parties. However, despite the general optimism, fuelled by the recently appointed government, Haftar does not seem to be willing to give up Benghazi, one of his major strongholds, unveiling the country's persisting divide.

The incident confirms indeed that regardless of the GNU's efforts, old frictions between warring sides and most significantly between the east and the west provinces persist.

Haftar continues de facto to operate independently from the legitimate government. Furthermore, according to the Daily Sabah, the warlord is still working with the Wagner group, planning to send 300 Syrian mercenaries to Benghazi, just when the United Nation Security Council is discussing the repatriation of 20.000 foreign fighters from Libya in view of December's elections.

Recently the Turkish President Tayyip Erdogan declared that he will withdraw its troops only if other foreign powers will do it as well, after the Libyan foreign minister Najila al-Manqoush urged Ankara to implement the relevant UNSC resolution. On the other hand, the UAE is apparently still providing support to Haftar's militias, while the Chadian rebel groups operating in Libya in support of the separatist commander, have launched a cross-border incursion that led to the death of Chad's President, a dangerous event for the Sahel region and Libya's south.

Yet it remains highly uncertain when and if the various regional and international actors involved in the conflict will leave the Libyan soil and allow a more credible semblance of sovereignty to appear.

According to the insight published on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of May by The Institute for National Security Studies, only the recent rapprochement between Ankara and Cairo might lead to a stabilisation of the country with deeper implications for the entire region.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *Al Jazeera*, Armed Haftar supporters prevent PM's first meeting in east, 26/04/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/26/haftar-supporters-prevent-the-first-meeting-of-the-dbeibah-govt>
- *The Daily Sabah*, Haftar blocking Dbeibah visit shows ongoing friction: sources, 30/04/21, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/africa/haftar-blocking-dbeibah-visit-shows-ongoing-friction-sources>

- *The Institute for National Security Studies*, A unified government in Libya: potential regional implication, 03/05/21, available at: <https://intpolicydigest.org/facing-up-to-realism-will-egypt-bomb-the-dam/>
- *Al Jazeera*, Libya's top diplomat calls on Turkey to withdraw foreign fighters, 03/05/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/3/libyas-top-diplomat-calls-on-turkey-to-withdraw-foreign-fighters>

## Levant

**#Syria – Anti – aircraft missile lands deep inside Israel near Dimona's nuclear reactor**



*Source: India Global News*

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of April a stray anti-aircraft missile fired from Syria landed near the Israeli southern town of Dimona, where a military nuclear reactor is active. An Israeli military spokesman identified the projectile as a Soviet/Russian SAM-5 surface-to-air missile fired by Syrian forces against Israeli aircraft. He said it overflowed its target to reach a place far from the reactor, exploding some 30 km away.

In response to the Syrian projectile, Israel launched an attack against the Syrian air-defence system, including the battery that fired the missile.

From a political point of view the incident is part of a pattern of attacks by Tel-Aviv in connection with renewed negotiations of the USA to re-enter the JCPOA nuclear agreement with Iran, Hezbollah's military consolidation in Syria and of Tehran's political retaliation threats in response to the aerial and sabotage campaign against conventional and nuclear infrastructure targets in Syria or Iran. The Israeli Defence Force excluded the possibility of an Iranian-sponsored retaliation against the Dimona nuclear reactor.

From an internal political point of view, the incident has raised questions about the very expensive multi-tiered anti-missile defence system set up by Israel. The "Arrow-Khetz" system intercepts long-range ballistic missiles while the "David's Sling-Kela David" (former Magic Wand) is used for medium-range interceptions. The "Iron Dome-Kippa Barzel" system was then developed to hit short-range missiles coming for example from Gaza.

Technically such a stray missile is considered by Israeli specialists a very unpredictable target and hence interceptable only with an adequate preparation and at the limit of the systems available.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *Daily Sabah*, Syrian missile lands near Israeli reactor, triggering retaliation, 22/04/21, available at: <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/mid-east/syrian-missile-lands-near-israeli-reactor-triggering-retaliation>
- *Al Monitor*, Syrian missile exposes Israel's fragility, 23/04/21, available at: <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/04/syrian-missile-exposes-israels-fragility>
- *Al Jazeera*, One killed in Israeli attack on Syria's Latakia, state media says, 05/05/2021, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/5/5/syria-intercepts-israel-attacks-near-latakia-by-the-mediterranean>
- *Reuters*, Syrian missile explodes in area near Israeli nuclear reactor, Israel retaliates, 22/04/2021 <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/sirens-warns-possible-rocket-attack-near-israels-dimona-reactor-2021-04-21/>



## Gulf

[#Iran](#) [#SaudiArabia](#) – Will Riyadh and Tehran overcome their hegemonic rivalry?



*Source: Middle East Eye*

On the 29<sup>th</sup> of April the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Saeed Khatibzadeh declared that Saudi Arabia and Iran are moving towards a new dialogue-oriented approach to “*achieve peace, stability and regional development by overcoming differences*”.

Following positive unprecedented talks, mediated by the Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the two rival countries, competing for religious leadership and engaged in years of proxy war, seem to be committed to overcome their regional rivalry and to discuss diplomatic cooperation in the region.

On its side the crown prince Mohammed bin Salman said that he wants to establish good diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic, adding that the Kingdom is working with local and global partners to find solutions to Iran’s “negative behaviour” referring to its nuclear programme and its support for armed militias involved in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria.

Nevertheless, a possible rapprochement might indeed not only ease diplomatic ties severed after the 2016's attack at the Saudi embassy in Tehran following the kingdom's execution of a Shiite cleric, but also lead to a series of consequences and shifts that will significantly impact the regional geopolitics.

Tehran and Riyadh have taken opposite positions in several conflicts from Syria to Yemen. In Iraq and Syria both countries tried to gain influence by backing rival factions and militias contributing, by doing so, to prolonging devastating civil wars. In Yemen, the Kingdom is losing its battle against the Iranian-backed Houthis, repeatedly attacking Saudi Arabia's infrastructures. With the US no longer militarily supporting its operations, Mohammed bin Salman is keen to trying to find a way out of an unwinnable war. In March the Saudi Crown Prince have proposed a new nationwide ceasefire, never accepted by the Houthis. With very few chances to have the Houthis back at the negotiating table, Riyadh is turning to Iran to find a resolution in Yemen.

Furthermore, the new US administration, less interested in the region and more focussed on establishing a dialogue with Tehran and reviving the nuclear deal, might have pushed Saudi Arabia to adjust its foreign policy and, most significantly, and carry out a diplomatic thaw.

It is unlikely that a Saudi-Iranian dialogue will make the Sunni-Shia divide disappear in the medium term. Certainly, a resumed dialogue between Riyadh and Tehran could be a chance of limiting or resolving ongoing civil wars however, at the same time there is the considerable risk that such a rapprochement might weaken the existing anti-Iranian front, supported by the Gulf monarchies and Israel.

*To know more about this topic:*

- *Middle East Eye*, Can Iran and Saudi Arabia bury the hatchet?, 21/04/21, available at: <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iran-saudi-arabia-bury-hatchet>
- *Haaretz*, Saudi Arabia is talking to Iran: a potent sign of Riyadh's desperation, 21/04/21, available at: [https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-saudi-arabia-is-talking-to-iran-it-s-a-potent-sign-of-riyadh-s-desperation-1.9750935?utm\\_source=mailchimp&utm\\_medium=content&utm\\_campaign=haaretz-news&utm\\_content=ab465cca21](https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/.premium-saudi-arabia-is-talking-to-iran-it-s-a-potent-sign-of-riyadh-s-desperation-1.9750935?utm_source=mailchimp&utm_medium=content&utm_campaign=haaretz-news&utm_content=ab465cca21)

- *Al Jazeera*, Saudi crown prince strikes conciliatory tone towards rival Iran, 28/04/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/28/mbs-us-and-riyadh-strategic-partners-with-few-differences>
- *The Institute for National Security*, Saudi-Iranian dialogue: Toward a strategic change, 05/05/21, available at: [https://www.inss.org.il/publication/iran-saudi-arabia/?utm\\_source=activetrail&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_campaign=INSS%20Insight%20No.%201464](https://www.inss.org.il/publication/iran-saudi-arabia/?utm_source=activetrail&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=INSS%20Insight%20No.%201464)

## #ArabInsight

By Maria Bagnara

**#Egypt** – A Ramadan action-drama sparks controversy in the Arab streets



*Source: Egypt Independent*

A Ramadan action-drama, named Al-Ikhtiyar 2 (The Choice 2), retracing the events of the Muslim Brotherhood sit-in in Rabaa's al-Adawiya Square (Egypt) on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August in 2013 (that ended with 632 Egyptians dead and thousands of wounded), is facing sparking controversy on the web among social media users.



The TV series, the second edition of al-Ikhtiyar 1, broadcasted during last year's Ramadan is produced by the "[Synergy](#)" company, part of the state intelligence-owned Egyptian United Media Services Group, repeatedly criticised for its contents aligned with the state's propaganda.

The first edition of the drama, premiered in Ramadan 2020, revolved around the martyrdom of the Egyptian hero of the Armed Forces, Colonel Ahmed al-Mansi, killed during the violent terrorist attack of July 2017 done by militias affiliated to DAESH on an ambush in the North Sinai's al-Barth village. Al-Ikhtiyar 1 was a success in the Egyptian and Arab streets and, counting on the same positive popular reaction, the producers decided to go for a second edition covering, this time around, the violent dispersal of the Muslim Brotherhood sit-in in Rabaa al-Adawiya Square and the clashes that took place on the 14<sup>th</sup> of August 2013 between Egypt's Security Forces and Muslim Brothers in support of the former President Mohammed Morsi.

However, if for the first edition of Al-Ikhtiyar it was easy and natural to gain the approval and the sympathy of Egyptians, the depiction of the Rabaa massacre from the security forces' point of view had a different and divisive reception, especially since millions of Egyptians have personally witnessed these tragic events.

According to the [E3lam](#) news company, many Egyptians described the TV series as an historic and nationalist drama that writes a tragic part of the Egyptian history by refuting Muslim Brotherhood's lies over the events and blowing up the Brotherhood's narrative.

Many others underlined how the episodes, that combine dramatic scenes with real videos filmed at the time, reveal the violence perpetrated by Muslim Brotherhood members against security forces, a violence often exploited by the group to play the role of the victim. Some even asked the producers to broadcast the main episodes without commercial breaks, so that the viewer can focus more on the events and have the entire scenario of the massacre.

After watching the episodes many social media users praised the TV drama and stressed the need to uncover the "falsehood" of Muslim Brothers and to confront and fight any extremist ideology. In this context, deconstructing Muslim Brotherhood through entertaining dramas, an important part of the Egyptian and Arab daily life, could represent a significant tool in the fight against extremist ideologies. According to the newspaper, art and creative works become in this sense a necessary tool to defeat violent ideologies.

On the other hand, the [Arabi21](#) newspaper reported very different reactions over the launch of Al-Ikhtiyar 2. According to the newspaper, some Egyptians were highly disappointed from the second edition of the action-drama and stated that, while the previous one was retracing the real events that led to the tragic death of Colonel Ahmed al-Mansi, Al-Ikhtiyar 2 has falsified the history and the events, occurred almost 8 years ago, to glorify security forces. Many activists who witnessed the 2013's events described the series as a "farce" accusing the producing company of covering up the largest massacre in the Egyptian contemporary history carried out by the army and of depicting the victims of the massacre as the perpetrators. Some also alluded to the producing company's links with the Egyptian intelligence calling the series an "Intelligence Drama".

[Qutb al-Arabi](#), a journalist that witnessed the dispersal of the sit-in, stated to Arabi 21 that many events reported by the TV drama were not true but falsified to cover up the police's aggressive reaction against the protesters. He added that the episodes tried to depict the protesters as desperate people from the lower categories of the society, while the sit-in brought together all classes of the Egyptian society without exception.

In line with the Arabi21, [AlJazeera](#) reported the words of many intellectuals accusing the government of attempting to distort the history of what will always be remembered as the worst massacre of Egyptian contemporary history.

[Haytham Abokhalil](#), and Egyptian human rights activist, stated on his Twitter account that the active participation of the army and security forces in the massacre has been completely covered up to portray the perpetrators positively and called for an urgent report on the unacceptable omission of the army's actions against Egyptians.

Another Twitter user, [Dr Hamza Zawaba](#), highly criticised the action-drama and stated on his account that the army takes pride of killing innocents, adding that billions of dollars were spent on this drama only to change the history and to divert popular consciousness.

Despite the controversy created by the action drama, the different reactions over the depictions of the tragic events of Rabaa al-Adawiya well describe the societal division around the massacre that remains a serious problem in the Egyptian contemporary history and the power of the entertainment industry in orienting popular opinion. TV Series broadcasted all day long during Ramadan are indeed an important tool in the hands of the leadership. Egypt's President, along with many other Arab leaders, have been highly criticised for their tight control of the entertainment industry, even stronger on Ramadan's TV

series. In this context it is not surprising that President al-Sisi, straight after coming into power, warned TV stars that they would be held accountable if their work did not reflect the state's narrative.

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