



ARAB DISPATCH

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NORTH AFRICA #Libya

Unsurprisingly presidential election got delayed

Only few days left to the presidential election along with parallel parliamentary elections scheduled for the 24th of December.

A large number of Libyans have already collected their ballot cards and thousands have registered as parliamentary candidates, unveiling a widespread popular participation and popular support to the election.

However, despite the popular enthusiasm for the upcoming elections after decades of dictatorship, civil war and uncertainty, the electoral commission recently stated that it will be impossible to hold elections on the 24th of December as planned.

On the 22nd of December the committee's chairman in a letter to the head of the parliament, suggested to postpone the elections. The chairman did not specify a new date.

International powers and the United Nations pushed for the elections to happen on the 24th of December, fearing that any delay could undermine Libya's democratic transition and the country's fragile security gains after years of sectarian divisions.

However, a compressed electoral calendar and process certainly do not allow Libyans to learn more about the more than 70 candidates and do not give them the means to choose their president. Not to mention that the

electoral campaign was minimal and certainly not sufficient to inform and to guide the voters. There is also the possibility that foreign presences might coerce the voters through intimidation.

As a matter of fact, the absence of a free political debate, necessary in any democratic electoral process, may lead to a result that reflects or even exacerbates the country's prevailing divisions. In these uncertain circumstances the much-needed democratic elections could even cause further violence in the country.

Furthermore, with no political debate and little information available for the voters, the result could also not be accepted and create further instability.

On the other hand, if the long-awaited elections are postponed, there is the risk of a return to war and particularly in Tripoli where armed forces are more diverse and political divisions are stronger.

The United Nation Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) already expressed concerns about Tripoli's security situation, warning that the mobilisation of forces affiliated to different factions creates further tensions and increases the risk of a renewed conflict.



Source: The New York Times

To know more:

- *The Guardian*, Libya: plan for presidential election on 24 December close to collapse, 12/12/21, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/12/libya-plan-for-presidential-election-on-24-december-close-to-collapse>
- *The Jordan Times*, Making Libya's next election count, 15/12/21, available at: <https://www.jordantimes.com/opinion/belabbes->

[benkredda/making-libyas-next-election-count](https://www.benkredda.com/making-libyas-next-election-count)

- *Arab News*, Libyans in the dark over election with seven days to go, 17/12/21 available at: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1988296/middle-east>
- *Voice of America News*, Libyan Committee says impossible to hold elections, 22/12/21, available at: <https://www.voanews.com/a/libyan-committee-says-impossible-to-hold-election-friday-6364658.html>

LEVANT #Lebanon

Lebanon expels members of the Bahraini Shiite opposition group Al-Wefaq

On the 15th of December, the Lebanese Interior Minister, Bassam Mawlawi, ordered the deportation of non-Lebanese members affiliated with the Wefaq National Islamic Society, a Shia opposition group outlawed in Bahrain with the accusation of spreading sectarianism in the country.

This decision followed a press conference, held by the association,

on the 10th of December, during which members of the society accused Bahraini authorities of violating civic rights.

Al-Wefaq, Bahrain's largest Shiite opposition political party was suspended and dissolved in 2016, after its members took the streets to protest against discrimination towards the country's Shia majority and to demand wider political rights.

The protests led to violent clashes between protesters and security forces, leaving at least 30 civilians and five policemen dead.

The suspension of the main opposition party was highly condemned by the then UN Secretary-General [Ban Ki-moon](#).

After Bahrain's decision to ban the association, many of its members left the country and are forced into exile.

During the Association's annual press-conference, held in Beirut, Al-Wefaq stated that, since 2011, more than 20.000 Bahrainis have been detained, including hundreds of arbitrary detentions and missing persons in just 2019 and 2020.

Bahrain's Foreign Minister severely condemned Lebanon for hosting the press conference of the outlawed association and accused the Lebanese authorities of supporting and sponsoring terrorism.

After receiving a phone call from his Bahraini counterpart, Rashid Bin Abdullah Al-Khalifa, during which Mawlawi underlined Lebanon's

efforts to maintain security and stability in the Gulf and the country's rejection of "Lebanon being used as a platform for spreading hostility towards any Arab countries", the Lebanese Interior Minister requested to the General Directorate of General Security the "deportation of non-Lebanese members of Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society", banned in Bahrain since 2016.

The decision to expel Al-Wefaq members from the country is most likely another attempt to ease the current diplomatic crisis between Lebanon and the Gulf countries, including Bahrain, after Lebanon's Information Minister, George Kordahi, criticised in a televised interview Saudi Arabia's involvement in the Yemen's civil war.

After the interview was released many Gulf countries including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait and Bahrain responded with recalling their envoys from Beirut and expelling Lebanese ambassadors. Additionally Saudi Arabia banned all Lebanese imports, while Bahrain and UAE called on their citizens to leave

Lebanon. The dispute between Lebanon and GCC countries, is seriously impacting Lebanon's dire economic crisis, while the Lebanese authorities are working on restoring diplomatic ties with Saudi Arabia. Earlier this month, the Information Minister resigned and President Macron is expected to discuss the dispute during his next diplomatic visit to Saudi Arabia.

Following the Lebanese Interior Minister order to deport Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society members from the country, the Lebanese National Human Rights Institution called on the government to respect the principle of non-refoulement.



Source: BBC

To know more:

- *Middle East Monitor*, Lebanon to deport members of outlawed Bahraini group, 16/12/21, available at:

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20211216-lebanon-to-deport-members-of-outlawed-bahraini-group/>

- *The Times of Israel*, Lebanon to deport outlawed Bahrain opposition party members 15/12/21, available at: https://www.timesofisrael.com/livblog_entry/lebanon-to-deport-outlawed-bahrain-opposition-party-members/
- *Al Jazeera*, Lebanon to deport members of banned Bahraini group Al-Wefaq, 15/12/21, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/12/15/lebanon-set-to-deport->

[non-lebanese-members-of-bahrain-opposition](#)

- *Bahrain Mirror*, After directing to deport Al-Wefaq members, Lebanon's National Human Rights Institution calls on Gov't to respect principle of non-refoulement, 16/12/21, available at: <http://www.bahrainmirror.com/en/news/60734.html>

GULF #Yemen

Amid Houthis' drone boats threat, US Navy tests laser weapons in the Gulf of Aden

On the 15th of December, the USS Portland, a San Antonio-class amphibious transport dock (LPD), of the US Navy, announced to have tested a laser weapon and to have successfully destroyed a floating target in the Gulf of Aden.

The Laser Weapon System, tested by the Navy's Mideast-based 5th Fleet, could be adopted to counter bomb-laden drone boats deployed by Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels.

The Yemen civil war started in 2014 when the Houthis captured the capital Sanaa dragging the country into the world's worst humanitarian catastrophe with an estimated 110.000 people killed. In March 2015 a Saudi-led coalition entered the conflict to support the internationally-recognised government against the Houthis exacerbating even further the conflict.

The conflict has involved also the surrounding waterways, the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb with Houthis deploying drone-boats into the waterways that lead to the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean Sea, threatening international shipping and global energy supplies.

The drone boats can be piloted remotely to attack ships entering the Gulf of Aden. Laden with explosives these boats can in fact move closer to the target and then explode.

The drone boats are suspected of being built and armed by Tehran.

In 2018, UAE Officials showed images of Iranians building components for a Houthi's drone boat as well as weapons captured on the battlefield with Iranian-labelled components.

The weapon tested was a Solid State Laser-Technology Maturation Laser Weapons System Demonstrator (LWSD) that, according to the Navy, is the next-generation version of the Laser Weapon System (LaWS) already tested by the USS Portland while it was operating in the region.

In May 2020 the LWSD was adopted against a flying drone in the Pacific Ocean and it successfully destroyed it.

Following the US Navy's announcement, a member of the Supreme Political Council in Yemen, Muhammad Ali al-Houthi, stated the costs of the laser weapon cannot be covered by Saudi Arabia's budget and it will probably fail as the Patriot System failed to confront the Samad drones. On his Twitter account he wrote: "America's announcement of the success of testing a laser weapon in the Sea of Aden, is a manoeuvre with a seductive offer, that will eliminate the Saudi budget, to confront the Yemeni drone boats," adding: "The question is how much it will cost Saudi Arabia possessing it, and whether it will work or will it fail, just as the Patriot systems failed in the face of the Samad marches and Yemeni missiles? Let's all watch it."



Source: Al Monitor

To know more:

- *The Arab Weekly*, With an eye on Houthis, US Navy tests laser weapon in Gulf of Aden, 16/12/21, available at: <https://thearabweekly.com/eye-houthis-us-navy-tests-laser-weapon-gulf-aden>
- *Interesting engineering*, US Navy destroyed floating target with high energy laser weapon in Mideast, 16/12/21, available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3352441/exxonmobil-qatar-sign-cyprus-gas-deal-despite-turkey-opposition>
- *Al Mayadeen*, Al-Houthi: US laser weapon maneuver will obliterate KSA's budget, 16/12/21, available at: <https://english.almayadeen.net/news/politics/al-houthi-the-us-laser-weapon-maneuver-will-destroy-saudi-a>
- *Asharq Al-Awsat*, US Navy fires laser weapon in Mideast amid Houthi drone boat threat, 15/12/21, available at: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3360706/us-navy-fires-laser-weapon-mideast-amid-houthi-drone-boat-threa>

ARAB INSIGHT #ReligiousMinorities

Religious tolerance in Turkey

In the past decade Turkey witnessed a significant rise of political Islam represented by the Justice and Development Party led by the Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, who gave a significant political relevance to Sunni Islam.

The AKP overturned the decades-old restrictions imposed on religion by the founder of modern Turkey Kemal **Atatürk**, putting Islam at the centre of Turkish political life. Last year the conversion of Hagia Sophia into a mosque perfectly embodied the rebirth of political Islamism and the ongoing conflict between the State's secularism and the increasing power of political Islam led by the President.

The weak separation between Islam and State has been widely replaced by an Islam-centred political life and Islam became a tool in the hands of right-wing politicians to manipulate the masses and to impose religion-based restrictions and limit freedoms.

At the beginning of its presidency, Erdoğan's attempts to present himself at home and internationally as the protector of religious minorities by restoring churches and synagogues and by engaging with other religions' leaders were welcomed with enthusiasm by local communities, by western countries and, most importantly, by the European Union.

By depicting himself as the protector of Turkish religious minorities, the president legitimised his role within the international community. Later, as his power consolidated internationally, there was no need for Erdoğan to secure Western countries' support, hence tolerance towards minorities quickly vanished.



Source: Athens Times

Erdoğan and his party seem to aim at progressively [Islamising](#) the country and at imposing Islam as the main character of the Turkish identity. Since the AKP came into power, the Turkish government tried to rewrite the country's history and cultural heritage by restoring cultural and religious sites.

Under Erdoğan's presidency, between 2007 and 2017 nearly 10.000 new mosques were built. The [number of the mosques](#) (88.021) exceeded the real need of the population while the number of employees of the Department of Religious Affairs almost doubled. Although secularism remains a fundamental pillar of the country's constitution, the State controls religious affairs, which means that religious institutions are in the hands of the government.

The increased influence of political Islam under Recep Tayyip Erdoğan severely impacted religious and ethnic minorities that live in Turkey since generations. All religious and ethnic minorities as well as the opposition parties affiliated to any

of those minorities that do not agree with a Sunni Turkish identity are of course perceived as a threat to the stability of the republic, hence often marginalised and [discriminated](#).

Many religious groups face important restriction in Turkey that affect their legal right to open a place of worship, the right to teach a specific religion or belief and the right of a religious group to have its own priests.

The Alevi community, the biggest religious minority in Turkey, has several times denounced the Turkish government of imposing on them Sunni Islam. Christians and Jews minorities were often presented as fifth columns and often accused of taking part to coups to overthrow the President. After the failed coup in 2016, attacks against religious minorities reached shortly an elevated level and religious minorities became quickly Erdoğan's key strategy to maintain his rule.

The Turkish President's choice to break with Turkey's Kemalist past and to re-impose Islam at the centre of Turkey's political life to cater the feelings of the Muslim population, in order to consolidate its political position, led many observers to make parallelism with the Ottoman Empire and to hypothesize that Erdoğan's main goal is to resurrect an Ottoman state.

Yet it is true that Erdoğan political propaganda is significantly enriched with reference to Turkey's glorious past and the dynasty of the Ottoman Sultans however, this might also be another attempt by the Turkish president to shore up his declining popularity by exerting leverage on people's sentiments and deep-seated feelings towards their glorious Ottoman past, that even Atatürk was never able to remove.

And if Turkey's current foreign policy and internal rift to political Islam suggest a return to the Ottoman Empire, this begs some questions if we examine the living conditions of religious and ethnic minorities during the early Ottoman Empire and compare them with today.

It is well known that during the early Ottoman empire non-Muslims were allowed to practice their own religion, to exercise their rights, to guide their communities and, most importantly, to be part of the diwan.

During the Ottoman period there was a significant Muslim population living under the rule of a Muslim Sultan. In the 19th century one third of the population was non-Muslim and, according to many historians, the reason for the Ottoman Empire to rule for such a long period was due to its policies that gave no importance to ethnic roots and practiced tolerance towards religious minorities. The Ottoman sultans aimed at expanding to other countries and this could not have been achieved without tolerance because often rebellions happened to protect one's own religion and culture. By embracing religious tolerance, the empire negotiated easily with other foreign subjects or powers on matters related to cooperation and security.

Furthermore, this allowed a relative political stability even in the regions far-away from the direct control of the Sultan and the Sublime Porte, in a way very similar to the one of the Roman Empire.

In a very opportunistic manner, diversity was considered an added value for the fast-growing empire and hence Christians, Jewish, Armenian and Slavs were co-opted in its various structures, from administration to the military.

Religious minorities were organised in *Millet*. The *Millet* system was organised based on religious belonging. Every *Millet* belonging to a religious group different from Islam was recognized by the state and, through this system, every religious group was allowed to maintain its religious and juridical structure and was autonomous in many areas. Nonetheless, the Sublime Porte formulated a number of policies aimed at regulating the behaviour of religious organizations.

In accordance with Islam, religious diversity was maintained for the stability of the empire and, most importantly, it represented a significant source of income.

Non-Muslims were taxed (and often more lightly than in other empires) and the administrators of each religious group were responsible to collect taxes.

Christians and Jews were allowed to exist freely, as long as they accepted that Islam was the supreme religion.

Between the 14th and 15th century while Catholic states were forcing their population to convert to Catholicism and Spain ordered many Jews to either convert or leave, those who did not accept a forced conversion decided to move to Istanbul, Smyrna and Thessaloniki where different religious groups were allowed to practice their own religion.

Ethnic and religious groups elsewhere exposed to discrimination, were openly welcomed by the Sultan and found a shelter in the Ottoman Empire. All minorities that recognised the sovereignty of the empire were in return protected by it. A similar policy was adopted by the prince-electors of Brandenburg in welcoming the French Huguenots expelled from France.

Furthermore, it is important to consider that many Christians, Jews, Slavs and Armenians under the Ottoman Empire were given the possibility to build a career and to fill the highest offices. In fact, through the practice of the *Devshirme* (Blood tax), the Sultan had a compulsory recruitment of future soldiers and bureaucrats among children of the rural Christians areas of the Balkan and Caucasus. Once converted to Islam, the children were enrolled and educated to become bureaucrats or to join the elite Janissary corps; many of them became high-ranking officers in the military or even *Pashas*, *Viziers* and *Grand-Viziers*.

Through the *Devshirme*, children coming originally from poor rural regions of the Empire, were given the possibility to build a glorious career. As a matter of fact, most of the empire's bureaucrats were originally Christians, as well as the Janissaries, which means that when western empires were opening war against

the Muslim Ottoman Empire, considered a significant threat for Christianity, they were fighting against former Christian brethren, renegades.

While today people are competing to become EU or US citizens, just one century and half ago being an Ottoman was likewise desired. For those who were marginalised and discriminated, the Ottoman empire represented a shelter and being an Ottoman was indeed a safe-conduct.

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