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## Hot Vienna talks .. Europe condemns and threatens to impose sanctions

White House spokesperson said U.S. and Russian officials will hold security talks on January 10 amid mounting tensions over Ukraine. The high-stakes discussions are expected to address Russia's military buildup on Ukraine's borders, while Moscow will press demands that Nato pledges not to admit Ukraine and roll back the alliance's post-cold war development.. Earlier, US President Joe Biden instructed national security officials to use all possible tools to contain the "imminent Russian

invasion" of Ukraine, according to CNN sources. British Foreign Secretary Liz Truss condemn the Kremlin's aggressive and inflammatory rhetoric against Ukraine and NATO but at the same time, she welcomed Moscow's intention to hold dialogue. "Let there be no doubt. If Russia were to move against Ukraine, the Union will be in a position to take sanctions that could extract a massive cost. We have done our work in that respect," von der Leyen told a news conference following a summit of EU leaders in Brussels.



### Stephanie Williams calls the Libyans to focus on the elections not the interim government



Stephanie Williams

The U.N. secretary general's special adviser on Libya, Stephanie Williams, told Reuters the main focus on ways to move forward with the vote rather than on the fate of the interim government. Asked if she believed the mandate of the Government of National Unity was still valid, Williams said that was up to the parliament, but that "the real focus needs to be on producing elections".

Any changes to the government would have to be made following the rules set by previous political agreements that were internationally recognised, "Everyone should step back for a certain period," she said. The election had been scheduled for Dec. 24 but was delayed after disputes over basic rules including the eligibility of candidates and the judiciary's role in appeals.

### The number of COVID-19 cases in English hospitals is at its highest level since March

The number of people in hospital with COVID-19 in England hits its highest level since March, new figures reveal. The number stood at 8,474 as of 8 am on Monday, according to NHS England. This is up 27% from a week earlier and is the highest number since 5 March, when the country was under tough lockdown restrictions. There were 1,281 COVID-related admissions on Christmas Day - the highest daily number since 16 February. In London, 364 admissions were reported on December 25, up 73% week-on-week but below the 390 admissions reported on December 23. Admissions during the second wave peaked in London at 977 on January 6.



# Iraq turns to the KSA to solve its energy crisis and break free from dependence on Iran

Despite its huge reserves of oil and gas, being the second-largest oil producer in the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Iraq is struggling with a severe energy crisis owing to long wars, corruption, and crumbling infrastructure.

Iraq is trying to resolve its energy crisis following serious damage caused by attacks on power towers and the recent Iranian threat to halt power supplies at a critical time for Iraq.

Iraqi oil minister, Ihsan Ismail said that Baghdad has turned to its neighbour the KSA to resolve the crisis and is holding talks to buy power.

Mr Ismail told journalists that "The talks with the KSA and the Gulf aim at securing and stabilising power generation. The brothers in the GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), especially the KSA, have promptly respond and are actively coordinating with us. They really want to help Iraq."

This was not breaking news. On 19 August 2021 the Iraqi Ministry of Electric Power announced it was having talks with the KSA to connect the overhead power lines between Arar station in the KSA and Yusufiyah station in Iraq, and to connect another line to the Samawa station in

Iraq. "We have gone a long way" the ministry stated.

Technical committees have recently been formed between Baghdad and Riyadh and have reached an advanced stage in connecting Iraqi power system to GCC systems.

In March 2021, the KSA and Iraq announced in a joint statement, following official talks held by Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi at al-Yamamah Palace in Riyadh, the agreement to carry out the electrical interconnection project.

## Gulf Power Interconnection Project

Iraq wants to address part of its need for power through the electricity interconnection project with the GCC. The Ministry of Electric Power recently announced that "Iraq has completed about 81% of the project. There are further talks and negotiations with the GCC Interconnection Authority to establish a 300 km line; 220 km of it will be in Kuwait and the rest will be in Iraq." The project, undoubtedly, deals a severe blow to Iran.

The GCC interconnection project and the construction of the transmission

line between the Al-Faw station in Basra in southern Iraq and the Al-Zour station in Kuwait will provide about 500 MW of electricity to Iraq. The spokesman for the Iraqi Ministry of Electric Power Ahmad Al-Abadi confirmed that Iraq had fully fulfilled the requirements for the connection on its part, suggesting that it would start receiving energy next summer. However, he ruled out the a possible end to importing gas and energy in the coming period because Iraq's current production of electricity is about 21,145 MW; it will import about 500 MW from the GCC, while the local need for electricity is over 35,000 MW.

The new talks with the KSA may provide Iraq with all its electric power needs, which means Iran is set to lose the game. Negotiations are still going on over the price. The Iraqi electric power minister stated that the negotiations are specifically focused on the price: "We were given a price and believe we can bargain." He talked about several criteria for how the price is determined especially "the amount of electricity to be imported, the duration of these imports; if they are over a year or 6 months during the summer and the dead of winter."

Al-Abadi said Iraq currently produces

15,000 MW of electricity, much less than the 30,000 MW it needs to meet its summer peak demands each year. He expects the energy needs will increase in the future since Iraq's population will double in the next 30 years according to the UN estimations.

## Iraq's outstanding debts to Iran

Although Iraq has a large reserve of oil, it relies heavily on Iran for energy. It imports a third of its consumer needs of gas and electric power because due to its run-down infrastructure which is preventing it from achieving energy self-sufficiency. It is yet to build an infrastructure that meets the country's demands.

Tehran is asking Baghdad to pay more than \$6 billion in arrears. These debts are invoices that the Iraqi Ministry of Electric Power owes to Iran but the US sanctions prevent paying any dollar money to Iran. According to some reports that the debt is about \$4 billion. Iraq imports about 1.7 billion cubic feet of gas from Iran daily; unless Iraq starts to generate its own electricity it will keep relying on imports. Iraq's power demands amount to 30 GW, it currently generates more than two-thirds of its needs and imports the rest.

On 10 August, Iran stopped exporting electric power to Iraq claiming it had to priorities meeting its own demands for energy. The academic researcher Dr Muthanna al-Ubaid had previously told Levantnews that: "It is not the first time Iran stops exporting electricity to Iraq when most needed by the Iraqis, especially in the hottest period of summer.

Minister Ismail said that Iraq no longer wants to rely on Iran to meet its power demands, so it signed agreements to establish solar power plants. It is looking forward to signing several deals that will allow it to generate 7,500 MW by 2023, and 12,500 MW in the next phase which is equivalent to more than 25% of the country's electricity demands.





# KSA ambassador to the UN in the UNGA: "Do not believe them! The war in Syria is not over"

In his speech on the human rights situation in Syria, on 17 December, the ambassador of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia to the United Nations Abdallah Al-Mouallimi launched an attack on the Assad regime and demanded the world "not to believe that the war in Syria is over," noting that it has not ended after adding about "2,000 martyrs this year to the list of 350 thousand martyrs."

"Don't believe them," added Al-Mouallimi, wondering about the benefit of victory when their "leader" in reference to Assad was "standing on a pyramid of corpses," he. "How could a victory be declared over the rubble and dead bodies? What victory would this be for a leader over the welfare of his people?" he continued.

"Priority has to be given to healing the broken hearts," he added. "Do not believe them if they say that they are fighting terrorism in the region, and they are the first to open the widest doors to terrorism, when they brought into their country the terrorist Hezbollah, the leader of terrorism in the region, and the sectarian organizations coming from the east."-referring apparently to the Iranian role- he explained.

He also criticized "those who let extremists in and tarnished Arab and Islamic history," and pointed out that UN reports showed that the Syrian government was responsible for human rights violations.

The speech of the KSA's ambassador to the UN dealt a blow to the countries supporting the Syrian regime, especially Iran and its militias in Syria and the Arab region.

## Saudi's firm position

Dr Turki Goblan, head of the Daymouma Centre for Studies told Levantnews: "The lack of a strategic vision in the face of the Syrian regime's tyranny indicates how weak the political will is to criminalize this regime, how worthless the brotherly



Abdallah Al-Mouallimi

Syrian people are seen, how injustice is consolidated and accepted and how justice is denied and fought against. This is what the KSA rejects and was stated by the KSA's ambassador to the UN in the General assembly session on human rights in Syria."

Goblan added that the KSA's position has been firm since the beginning on the Syrian people's uprising and completely denounces the regime's violence against the Syrian people and its legitimate demands. He pointed out that the previous rounds of talks in Geneva 1 and the UNSC resolutions that followed, especially UNSC resolution 2254, were agreed and approved due to Saudi diplomacy efforts.

This is a refusal to return Syria to the Arab League unless the resolutions are implemented, especially the political transition process which Assad will not be a part of. KSA's constant efforts to unify the political opposition and come up with a common vision for all spectrums of the Syrian opposition, are widely recognised. This is a Saudi diplomatic success.

The KSA's position has become firmer following recent attempts to remarket the Syrian regime and bring it back to the international community. KSA has made its position clear when it

condemned the regime's violations and mass killing against its own people and the constant denial or their rights.

The KSA will not cease supporting the Syrian People's demands which will be met when the UNSC resolutions, especially Resolution, 2254 are implemented; foreign military and militias must leave and the displaced people should be able to return safely. Goblan summed up by saying that the regime is worried about the implementation of the UNSC resolutions because it involves removing it from power.

Therefore, the KSA will not change its position and will not stop calling for the Syrian people's demands and legitimate rights.

## Al-Assad's grip on power is not sustainable

The Saudi Foreign Minister, Prince Faisal bin Farhan, told CNBC on 31 October, that there was no intention to deal with Bashar al-Assad, and that a political process in Syria was needed. 'We have also to understand the current situation (Assad staying in power) will not be sustainable. Therefore, I think some countries have adopted a different approach, hoping to move forward with the

political process,' he added.

Saudi researcher in strategic affairs and international security, Essa Alfaya told Levantnews: "The KSA has always emphasized that the practice of international democracy has a moral basis. The KSA's ambassador to the UN echoed this in his speech at the General Assembly on a draft resolution to strengthen the role of the United Nations in the promotion of democratisation."

"The KSA repeated its firm position on the Syrian crisis. It emphasized its support for the Syrian people to achieve security, restore their rights and have a prosperous life. It also stresses its rejection for internal persecution, intimidation, and inhuman foreign interventions. KSA welcomed Syria's return to the Arab League because the KSA has an Arab integrative development project. However, there are conditions, the most important of which is that the Syrian government has to fulfil its duties towards the Syrian people, remove the militias funded by regional foreign powers, hold fair elections, achieve security and enhance development for the Syrian people."

"The lack of morals and humanitarian principles among the great powers that control the decision making process in the international community is the concealed reason behind the aggravation of the humanitarian crisis in Syria. The KSA has always tried to direct the world's compass towards these morals and principles upon which the United Nations was established in 1945. However, those countries are motivated by their own interests rather than human rights," explained Alfaya.

"The great powers' lack of morals and humanitarian principles has created confusion and lead to social fragmentation and erosion of human rights. This is why the KSA has refused to sign human rights articles that go against man's innate nature; the KSA adhere to the source of its legislation," he added.



# ISIS is back again while Iraq's political scene is still strained

Although Iraq announced four years ago the defeat of ISIS and the official end of the war, the following years were full of ISIS attacks and there are now growing fears of ISIS return especially with the withdrawal of the international coalition from Iraq and the announcement of the end of its missions.

ISIS seized two-thirds of Iraq in 2014 before it suffered successive defeats by the Iraqi forces and the Peshmerga which was the first to attack.

Iraq celebrated on December 10 the fourth anniversary of declaring "victory" over ISIS. Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi saluted on Twitter, on December 10, the army forces "which liberated the land and achieved victory."

## Is ISIS over?

Iraq witnessed in December three bloody attacks by ISIS on the Kurdish Peshmerga forces in the north of the country. ISIS had taken control of Lahiban village in the Dibis district of Kirkuk governorate in northern Iraq for some days before the elite forces of the Interior Ministry and Peshmerga fighters liberated it.

The recent rise in attacks raises doubts about the victory over ISIS. Mujahid al-Sumaida'i, a researcher at the European Center for Counter-Terrorism and Intelligence Studies, told Levantnews that there are signs of ISIS returning to life.

"After the liberation operations from ISIS ended in December 2017, the organization was able to gradually reorganize itself again and over time it was able to rebuild new incubators and centres. After four years of liberation, the organization could mount operations in Kirkuk, Diyala, Salah al-Din and Anbar and other high-level operations as well. Recently, the organization reopened the al-Furqan Foundation, its media wing, which gives a clear indication of the organization's revival after four years of its complete elimination," al-Sumaida'i said.

The remnants of ISIS launched hundreds of attacks in the centre and north of the country, sometimes reaching the middle of Baghdad. The organization returned to its old method of disguise and launching short surprise attacks; tactics known to be used in guerrilla warfare. To confront the remnants of the organization, the government has launched dozens of security and military campaigns with the support of the international coalition forces.

Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi met with the Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Region Government, Masrour Barzani, in Erbil on December 8 for the joint military operations against ISIS. The two sides discussed the recent attacks launched by ISIS, the importance of intensifying efforts and increasing coordination between the Peshmerga and the Iraqi army to end ISIS threat.

## Factions rejecting the elections

ISIS comes at a critical time Iraq is going through. Armed Shiite parties have rejected the results of the legislative elections that took place in October and they began to escalate and mobilize their public to go to the streets.

The Sadrist bloc led by Shiite scholar Muqtada al-Sadr won the elections with more than 70 seats, so it can compose the federal government in alliance with the winning political Kurdish and Sunni forces, the thing that angered the Shiite parties opposed to Sadr.

After the results were announced, the Iraqi armed forces said that Iraq's PM Mustafa al-Kadhimi survived an assassination attempt on November 7. A combat drone attacked his house in Baghdad and some security personnel were injured.

Although the investigation committee which investigated the assassination attempt did not charge any person



or entity, sources told Reuters after the assassination attempt that: "The drones and the explosives used in the attack were Iranian-made."

The Iraqi security forces faced a new challenge. The death squads of the armed factions adopted the types of ISIS attacks. It made bloody attacks and bombed wheels to face opponents.

"Yesterday we witnessed an attempt to assassinate an officer in Basra because he was searching for the perpetrators and searching for death squads," said al-Khadhimi.

The Iraqi authorities confirmed that the target of the explosion of the al-Sumoud roundabout in the southern province of Basra was a security officer who was investigating the assassination of journalists Ahmed Abdel Samad and Safaa Ghali in early 2020.

"ISIS usually takes advantage of the political problems in Iraq to organize coordinated attacks against the security services of all kinds," said academic researcher Mujahid Al-Sumaida'i to "Levantnews."

## After the withdrawal of the alliance

US President Joe Biden confirmed last July, after talks he held at the White House with Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi that the USA will end its combat mission in

Iraq by the end of this year but a number of US forces will stay to train the Iraqi army and providing it with military consultations.

Iraq's Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi confirmed on December 11, in his speech at the celebration of the centenary of the Iraqi state in Baghdad, that the withdrawal of the Global Coalition Against Daesh from Iraq will be made within days. "We will not allow the security and stability of Iraqis to be compromised," he added. However, U.S. Marine Corps Gen Frank McKenzie revealed that Washington would keep the current 2,500 troops in the Iraq to

face ISIS.

The withdrawal of the international coalition from Iraq raises fears of ISIS's revival especially with the strained political situation in the country. Academic researcher al-Sumaida'i believes: "The withdrawal of US forces from Iraq will greatly affect the security operations in Iraq and the performance of Iraq's security services because the coalition provides effective air cover for the Iraqi security services including combat drones and combat aircraft to carry out precise operations against ISIS targets, satellite images of the places where ISIS is active in Iraq, logistical support for the Iraqi security services and the ongoing training operations for the Iraqi security services.

"The most important problem of the American withdrawal is the loss of the intelligence effort on which Iraq largely depends in carrying out preemptive operations against ISIS," added al-Sumaida'i. "The withdrawal of the United States from Iraq will have a significant impact on the performance and abilities of the Iraqi security services in fighting ISIS," he noted

Al-Sumaida'i goes even further predicting that after a year or more of the withdrawal, ISIS might take control of entire cities as it happened in 2014.



# When the future overcomes history

## Tension grows between France and Algeria

The French-Algerian relationship severely strained in early October, when French President Emmanuel Macron received a group of French-Algerians to discuss the issue of "peoples' reconciliation". He addressed these young people in particular, because they are the descendants of fighters in the "National Liberation Front" or "Harkis" who cooperated with the French army during the colonial period, or they are the descendants of European centenarians who returned to France after Algeria's independence.

President Macron angered the Algerians when he said in his meeting: "I am not talking about Algerian society in its depths but about the politico-military system which has been built on this memorial rent. The Algerian regime is tired and that Hirak has weakened it". "I personally had a good dialogue with President Tebboune, but I see that he is stuck in a harsh system," he added.

### Algeria calls its Ambassador and closes its airspace

About the history of France in Algeria, Macron said he wants to rewrite the Algerian history in Arabic and Berber to reveal the falsification of facts made by the Turks. "Me, I am surprised by Turkey's ability to make people forget the role it played in Algeria and the domination it exercised," he added. "Was there an Algerian nation before French colonization? That is the question. There were previous colonisations," he asked; the thing angered the Algerian people causing severe tension.

After Macron's statements, Algeria recalls its ambassador from Paris for consultations. The Algerian government has banned French military planes from flying over its airspace to go to Africa's Sahel region for Operation Barkhane. "Macron's remarks are an unacceptable insult to the memory of over 5.63 million martyrs who sacrificed themselves



Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune



French President Emmanuel Macron

with a valiant resistance against French colonialism [between 1830-1962]," said the Algerian presidency office on October 3.

France chose to use diplomacy and not to heighten tension especially because the French president started the whole thing. President Macron said on October 5, that work should continue with Algeria and hoped that diplomatic tensions would ease. "We have to study our history with Algeria with humility and respect."

### Turkey responds to France

The spokesman for the Turkish Justice and Development Party Ömer Çelik found it an opportunity to attack France, especially since the two countries are in conflict over many issues. Çelik said that Macron is attacking Turkey to avoid facing his country's colonial history. "Algeria demands France to face its colonial past but instead Macron is accusing Turkey by referring to the Ottoman Empire," he pointed out.

"Saying the Algerian people and the Algerian state uses a rented memory is disrespectful," he added trying to add fuel to the fire between France and Algeria by inciting Algeria to issue more fiery statements. "The Algerian people have dignity and so does its country. Macron's linking the process of turning Algeria into a state and a nation with French colonialism is a

wrong and very offensive statement," he explained.

### The Algerian conditions to restore relations

President Abdelmadjid Tebboune says the return of the Algerian ambassador to France is conditional on 'total respect for the Algerian state'. "We forget that it [Algeria] was once a French colony ... History should not be falsified," added the president. On October 12, French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian reiterated in front of the French National Assembly France's deep respect for Algerian sovereignty. "It is up to the Algerians alone to decide their fate and determine the frameworks of their choices and political discussions." Le Drian's statements did not convince the Algerian President who told Der Spiegel on November 6 that no Algerian would accept the normalization of relations with France after the dangerous statements of President Macron. "The Algerians' dignity and history must not be insulted," he said. He stresses that statements of his French counterpart are a revival of colonialism and he sided with those who justify French colonialism and that France should acknowledge all its colonial crimes and not what happened in a short period as stated in Benjamin Stora's report.

France kept trying to fix the relationship. French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian said on November 18 that France and Algeria have deep ties driven by the close human relations between Algerians and French people, and rooted in a complex history. "France has a deep respect for the Algerian nation and Algeria's sovereignty," he stressed. He said he felt sorry for the "misunderstanding" that occurred between the two countries and that "this situation does not correspond to the importance we attach to the relations between our two countries." France's attempts paid off on November 27, when Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune said that the tense Algerian-French relations "must return to normal", on the condition that they are based on peer-to-peer between the two countries. Algeria is bigger than to be under France's protection and wing. He also expressed his country's readiness to trade with France and preserve the interests of both countries. "We agree to deal together in order not to stand against the interests of each country but we will not accept anything to be imposed on us," he said.

On December 8 the French Foreign Minister, Jean-Yves Le Drian paid a working visit to Algeria to fix the relationship. The aim of this visit is twofold: to rebuild a trustful relationship between our two countries, a relationship marked by respect for each side's sovereignty, France and Algeria have deep ties driven by the close human relations between Algerian and French people and rooted in a complex history. "I expressed a desire to work on removing the obstacles and misunderstandings," he said. "We would like the dialogue we are launching today to lead to a resumption of political exchanges between our governments in 2022. Beyond the wounds of the past, which we must face up to, beyond the misunderstandings, which it is up to us to overcome" he added.



# How did the Muslim Brotherhood use democracy and human rights against the Middle East?

Biden's democracy summit for human rights and democracy has been lambasted by critics questioning the guest list which contained some Muslim Brotherhood affiliated organisations and other extremist groups, while excluding some democratic countries.

## Contradictory policies

Criticism of the summit for not including relevant countries, bias or giving credit to some dubious organisations has not come from Russia, China, and few other countries alone; it has equally been criticized by some American. Max Boot, from New York Times, tackled the shortcomings of US democracy. 'Shouldn't we get our own house in order before telling others what to do?' he asked Biden. 'Democracy promotion has become unfairly equated with failed military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. Meanwhile, democracy at home has been tarnished by President Donald Trump's refusal to concede the 2020 election and his incitement of a violent mob to storm the U.S. Capitol,' he pointed out.

Biden was criticized for the great support he offered to political Islam organisations and the way he has addressed Middle Eastern issues. Observers believe that his support is a result of the Muslim Brotherhood's influence within the United States and its engagement with the leaders of the Democratic Party and decision-makers, whether through meetings or PR campaigns launched by specialist companies.

## What about US democracy?

The adviser to the project "Developing the Abilities of Civil Society Organizations in Promoting Human Rights" and the head of the Egyptian Youth Council Mohamed Mamdouh says that the idea of dividing the world into white and black zones is completely over and no country can put another country



in a specific category in relation to its commitment to democracy because these standards are relative, linked to changing internal policies and conditions and governed by the general law of each country.

Mamdouh refers to Max Boot's article in the Washington Post as another indication that democracy standards differ from one country to another. He highlighted the good question raised by the journalist, saying: 'America's recent history has left many understandably uncertain whether we have the standing or ability to champion freedom in other countries.'

Mamdouh also refers to issues concerning the guest list. Iraq was the only Arab country that got invited, while the rest were excluded for no obvious reason. This raises many questions the Biden administration must answer, especially when organizations affiliated with extremist groups were invited.

Mamdouh believes the United States should review its policy on human rights in the US, for example, the way the security dealt with protesters who stormed the Congress after Biden's win as well as the clear allegations of fraud in the election results. He pointed out that there have recently been many questions about the

American policies which need to be answered before the US put the Middle East issues on the table.

## The MB could infiltrate

Recent research carried out by TRENDS Research and Advisory revealed how the MB (Muslim Brotherhood) used democracy and human rights to turn the West against the Arab countries, especially after the MB's fall in the Middle East.

The study that was carried out by Dr Ramy Aziz and titled 'The Muslim Brotherhood and the West: The Game of Democracy and Human Rights' explains that the MB is witnessing a definitive failure, decline in many countries of the region and divisions among its leaders worldwide, which has prompted it to try and disperse its crises and target countries of the axis of moderation using human rights.'

The study also says that "for many decades, the Muslim Brotherhood could play on the most important values the West is proud of i.e. democracy and human rights. An obvious manipulation is the dependence of the West on the MB to spread democracy and human rights in the Arab world and its participation in the war on terrorism after 911

being unaware that the Muslim Brotherhood and its extremist ideology were the incubator of most terrorist organizations. The ideology of the Al-Qaeda network and most MB leaders (including the defected ones) is based on Sayyid Qutb's ideology. Therefore, supporting them before and after the Arab Spring to assume power was very stupid.

The research explained that the failure of the West to check the authenticity of the information provided to them about the human rights situation and to reveal the MB bias and goals shows how successful the Muslim Brotherhood was at penetrating Western institutions and influencing decision-making. The MB has managed to build networks of human rights organizations and institutions in parallel with money laundering networks through establishing a large number of institutions to carry out many complex operations and transactions that cannot be traced. This is how the MB has used human rights and democracy leading Western institutions to rely on their reports without being able to check their authenticity. The Muslim Brotherhood in the West could not have managed to achieve that without the legal loopholes which enabled them to exploit Western values.



# New European measures and anti-MB Austrian Chancellor

## An analysis of European measures against the Muslim Brotherhood

Amid measures taken by Europe to counter the terrorist activities of the MB (Muslim Brotherhood), the first week of December witnessed some events that will harm the MB and intensify European efforts to counter terrorism and extremism. These measures come as a part of the 2020 Counter-Terrorism Agenda for the EU approved by the European Union in December 2020.

The most prominent event was appointing Karl Nehammer as new chancellor of Austria's ruling party. Karl is a former interior minister and a high-ranking military officer with a long history of countering terrorism, extremism, and MB infiltration. Other recent events that shocked the MB before Karl's appointment were the UK proscribing Hamas, an MB organisation, and France announcing that it would take stricter measures against the MB.

### Austria's chancellor shocks the MB

In his first press conference, Nehammer shocked the MB when he said he wants to actively shape politics and hold the lines of the ÖVP when it comes to migration and security. "Three basic values are important to him responsibility, solidarity and freedom," he said.

Observers said to Levantnews that they can see the European indirect coordinated measures against the MB which have found in a safe haven in Europe for its economic and political activity over the past years, especially after its failure throughout the Arab world.

### Europe tightens the noose on the extremist organisations

Dr Jassim Mohamed, head of the European Center for Counter-Terrorism and Intelligence Studies, told Levantnews that the

appointment of former Minister of Interior Affairs in Austria, Karl Nehammer, as chancellor dealt a severe blow to political Islam groups and the MB which is proscribed as a terrorist organisation in several countries.

"Austria and wider Europe have recently passed many laws to tackle the MB penetration into European societies. For example, the Austrian parliament passed a motion, last July, to ban symbols of extremist organisations and political Islam " he said.

Dr Jassim believes that Austria under Karl's administration will take even stricter measures, in tandem with wider measures taken by several other EU countries against the MB. Mohamed thinks that political Islam in Austria, under Karl's administration, will face radical challenges that will see undermine its influence.

### Hidden activities are traced

German politician Hussein Khudder, head of the integration council and a member of the German city council of Hiddenhausen, says that Europe is quietly tackling, MB's and some of its

allies' attempts to extend influence and assume power positions but MB's efforts to be part of the decision-makers in the European community are relentless.

The Egyptian-German politician explains that there are many secret organisations whose members deny any MB connection while working together to achieve the goals of the MB agendas. For example, on 9 November 2020 the Public Prosecutor's Office in Graz investigated the activities of at least 30 suspected MB members as part of Operation Luxor which had been launched by the Austrian authorities several months earlier to identify terrorist organisation cells in Austria and trace their activities and sources of funding. All those under investigation deny they membership of the MB.

Khudder pointed out to a new 280-page report that says the group has set up a secret apparatus across Europe with participants adamantly denying their membership. The report titled "The Muslim Brotherhood's Pan-European Structure", was published by the Documentation Center for Political Islam which was established

by the Austrian government. The report is based on over-two-decade research results and updated information, Arabic sources and interviews with former members.

The report says that there is a hidden structure of the Muslim Brotherhood in Europe with members secretly cooperating with the mother MB organisation to achieve political aims. On the other hand, the MB has established visible national and international organisations. Such Islamic organisations are open to the public and often claim to be the official representation of all Muslims. There are also pan-European organisations, such as FEMYSO which is a European network of Muslim youth and student organisations, and it is said that the Muslim Youth of Austria (MJÖ) is affiliated with FEMYSO. "There is a group of activists and organizations linked to the Muslim Brotherhood in almost every European country. At the same time, there is a pan-European structure that allows a certain degree of coordination and communication. European structures are led by a few hundred highly qualified and interlinked activists."



Karl Nehammer



# Is there a future for the Iranian nuclear talks



Ian Black

Rob Malley, Joe Biden's special envoy for Iran, said on December 21 that the time for a renewal of the 2015 nuclear agreement with Tehran is running out and raising the risk of an "escalating crisis." His message, via CNN, was clear about the US official view of the future of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, agreed by Barack Obama in 2015 and abandoned by Donald Trump three years later.

Malley, a veteran US diplomat and international expert, was speaking just days after another pause in the Vienna talks, the seventh round of negotiations between Iran and the remaining parties to the JCPoA, with little visible movement toward a new agreement. The talks will resume on December 27. An awful lot hangs on these negotiations being a success – not least preventing a potentially catastrophic war in an already volatile region.

But it is hard to be optimistic about their outcome as negative signs have multiplied in recent weeks. Several public messages are helpful in understanding the implications of a failure. Israeli pressure on the US and Iranian hostility to Israel are a toxic combination. As is Israeli determination to signal its readiness to use any means to resist Tehran's acquisition of nuclear weapons and limit its regional activities.

That might well be the reason why a former head of Israel's military intelligence service said recently that Mossad secret service agents had taken part in the assassination of Qassem Soleimani, claimed officially by President Donald Trump. No-one who followed that key event would have been surprised by that revelation as Soleimani was the embodiment of Iranian hostility to the west and its regional allies.

His killing, in January 2020, a year before Biden replaced Trump, symbolized the dangers of a military confrontation between the US and



Iran, with the then Israeli prime minister Binyamin Netanyahu goading the US to take action. In another recent scoop a senior US defence official was quoted as saying that Netanyahu was "willing to fight Iran to the last American soldier," during the fallout of the Quds Force commander's killing.

Other stances are Iran's demand that the sanctions imposed by Trump must be withdrawn in their entirety, part of Washington's "maximum pressure" campaign against Tehran – a position the European counterparts regard as maximalist. Iran also wants a period to verify the lifting of sanctions, and guarantees the US will not renege on the accord again.

The central issue facing negotiators is the Iranian government's insistence that it has no nuclear weapons programme and it is only for civilian use – despite having increasingly high levels of enrichment that are solely for military use. It is clearly using enrichment as a means of pressure. As Malley said: "Iran is nearing the capability to develop a nuclear weapon in the near future. If they continue at their current pace, we have some weeks left but not much more than that, at which point, I think, the conclusion will be that there's no deal to be revived."

Iranian state media quoted Foreign Minister Hossein Amirabdollahian

as saying, presumably in response to Malley: "We do not see the position of some European countries as constructive, specifically that of France. When they say they are concerned about the progress of Iran's nuclear programme, we say out loud: 'If you want to have your concerns addressed, then all sanctions must be lifted.'"

The Vienna talks have made little progress since they resumed in early December after a five-month hiatus following the election of President Ebrahim Raisi. Hardliners like him and Amirabdollahian fear that a renewed JCPoA would increase western pressure to curb Tehran's regional influence (in Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen) and its ballistic missile programme. There was a disturbing reminder of that issue when Iran last week conducted a five-day military exercise, including ballistic missiles, and described it as a warning to threats made by the "Zionist regime".

Iran's domestic politics are another relevant factor too: improved ties with the US and western allies would also improve the chances of Iranian reformers and is therefore predicted to encourage Raisi and his sponsor Ayatollah Khamenei to abandon the JCPoA.

Messaging matters: the US is clearly signalling that its patience is running out. Iran is saying that sanctions have



Rob Malley

to be lifted. The damage done to America's international reputation by the chaotic withdrawal from Afghanistan is another significant factor – as is Washington's receding interest in the Middle East and the enormous distraction of confronting an increasingly assertive China.

Another related one is the risk that Tehran may benefit from increasingly close ties with Beijing and use that relationship to export more oil to China and perhaps give it access to islands on the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman.

The day after Malley gave his CNN interview, Biden's national security adviser Jake Sullivan, visiting Israel, transmitting the same message, said that the Vienna talks with Tehran may be exhausted within weeks. If that happens all bets will be off for a highly sensitive and explosive issue with global implications in the course of 2022.



# Global Britain Finds Its Champion



James Denselow

Whilst the British Government has been mired in the worst weeks of the Johnson administration, there is hope that on the foreign policy front the post-Brexit placeholder concept of 'Global Britain' may have finally found a champion in the new Foreign Secretary Liz Truss.

Politically Truss is in a strong position. Whilst Downing Street haemorrhages support, Truss remains high or top of the regular polling done by Conservative Home of the party's membership. Despite campaigning for remaining the EU, she has since grasped what she sees as the opportunities of leaving for free trade. She's a canny communicator whose use of Instagram has seen a series of memorable photographs follow her time in government, one in particular with her in a tank drawing obvious parallels with the former Conservative Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher.

Her accession into one of the 'great

offices of state' as the Foreign Office is known, came as a result of her predecessor, Dominic Raab, carrying the can for the debacle that was the end of the UK presence in Afghanistan earlier in the year. Raab oversaw the merger of the Development Ministry into the Foreign Office and the widely feted 'Integrated Review' which set out the government's vision for foreign and defence policy. Yet he hadn't seen to pin down exactly what this vision meant politically and that is where Truss may be a champion for a clearer sense as to what the UK stands for beyond its borders.

She gave a more in-depth breakdown of her perspectives at Chatham House this month in a speech entitled "Building the Network of Liberty". Despite less than 3-months in the role, the speech didn't hold back from an assertive call for "the free world to fight back" against the forces of mistruth, authoritarianism or other malign ideologies. She quoted JFK as she argued that "complacency" in the post-Cold War era was a serious weakness for like-minded countries.

The "age of introspection" must

be now followed by a UK that uses its trade and economic links in particular to project influence across the globe. Truss's Foreign Office will be "unashamedly commercial" in the battle for economic influence but also to answer foreign policy quandaries, such as the EU's dependence on Russian gas. New economic partnerships will give the UK the ability to project new economic influence. Much has been made of the Chinese "Belt and Road" initiative which has seen trillions of dollars invested across 60 countries as a means of supporting Beijing's growing influence.

Truss didn't directly reference her inspiration from China's playbook, but instead went on to articulate how economic power would be combined with Defence and Technology partnerships, all knitted together by the UK as a convening power. Indeed, her call to action for a "network of liberty" that takes advantage of the UK's unique position as a member of NATO, a member of the permanent five of the UN Security Council and a part of the Commonwealth is an intriguing prospect indeed.

As ever the proof of Truss's vision

to 'step forward' will be tested by events. Most immediately the task of preserving a united front against a Russian incursion into Ukraine. Truss also faces the domestic challenge of politics from within. Since being appointed Foreign Secretary, she has since been given the role of leading the country's continued Brexit negotiations following the resignation of Lord Frost in mid-December and has retained her role as Minister of State for Women and Equalities.

The challenge of bandwidth and prioritisation within this vast brief is a serious challenge that shouldn't be underestimated as much as it speaks to Truss's ambitions being reflected in her status. What is more if the Johnson administration does continue its path to self-ruin, then Truss will have to add another role of organising and running a leadership campaign on top of all the efforts to lead a 'network of liberty' that she described at Chatham House. In short, the limits of the hours in the day may be the biggest Achilles Heel when it comes to Truss's ability to turn her "Global Britain" rhetoric into reality.



Liz Truss



# Libya: Future of Political Solution after Elections Delay



Dalia Ziada

Despite the regional and international disappointment in Libya's failure to hold the presidential elections on scheduled time, the Libyan people should be relieved. Holding the elections in such a legal and security chaos, where the militia are dictating the political decisions, is a recipe for disaster. Elections – of any type – need a stable and secure environment to be able to generate fair and enduring outcomes. Otherwise, the democratic practice will enable the wrong actors to take the lead and cause more damage than good to the people who elected them. Up till this moment, Libya has not been able to secure the right environment for the elections to succeed.

After weeks of confusions and speculations, the High National Elections Commission (HNEC) announced, on December 22nd, its inability to hold the presidential elections on the scheduled date of December 25th. HNEC, which is based in Tripoli, could not make the official decision to postpone the elections, because the governing laws entitles this right to the Parliament, which is based in Benghazi. Therefore, the Head of HNEC had to recite a public statement explaining his institution's inability to hold the elections at the time-being due to a persistent state of "force majeure." Then, he proposed to the Parliament to order postponing the presidential elections date to January 24th until this state of force majeure is cleared. In spite of the many logical reasons that makes holding elections in Libya a suicidal act, the international community has been pressuring hard for the elections to happen, so involved world powers can, eventually, get their hands out of Libya to take care of other priorities; ranging from the pandemic to the rising economic threat of China. In November, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) promised that "those who try to obstruct the elections in Libya will be punished."



Ironically, this statement was made on the same day Jan Kubis abruptly resigned from his positions as the Secretary-General's Special Envoy and head of the UN Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). The vacuum, that Kubis created by his sudden and unjustified quit before only one month from the elections date, added a huge load of stress on the already tense situation in Libya and was one of the factors that led to the obstruction of the elections. Yet, Kubis have not received no punishment from the UNSC, yet.

The obstacles standing in the way of Libya elections, and which created the force majeure that the HNEC referred to, are not only limited to security threats. With a flawed and elastic electoral law that allows any Libyan citizen above forty years-old to run for the presidential seat, we can hardly expect that these elections will be able to achieve the end goal of the political solution process. The tens of registered candidates are either new names with minimum to no qualification to lead a country like Libya, or some known trouble-makers from the current political elite, in Tripoli and Benghazi.

There is no guarantee that either side of the political conflict in Libya will peacefully accept the voting results without initiating a dispute that may quickly escalate into a violent conflict. Iraq is one of the most recent examples

on how the politically-biased militias can turn a democratic practice, like public voting, into an armed conflict. This is a scenario that the exhausted Libya will not be able to handle. The odds of pushing Libya back into the hell of civil war, as a result of disputes over elections results, is more likely in light of extreme internal divisions and external interventions, that rely on heavy-armed militia and foreign mercenaries.

Unifying western and eastern Libya should have been completed before continuing with the preparation for the elections, in December, and should be the top priority now after elections' postponement. The unexpected visit of the Tripoli-based leaders, Ahmed Maiteeq and Fathi Bashagha, to Benghazi, on the morning of postponing the elections is an excellent move in the right direction. Maiteeq and Bashagha are prominent figures in the former Government of National Accord (GNA). Taking the initiative to meet with their worst rival, General Khalifa Haftar of the Libyan National Army (LNA), is a tremendous political shift that deserves applaud.

However, the most important factor in the formula of unifying the conflicting western and eastern of Libya is to unify the military forces that each of the two sides lead. Unfortunately, up till this moment, Haftar is not willing to submit his LNA forces

under the ranks of the Tripoli-based official Armed Forces. The continuity of the military division justifies the continued presence of foreign military troops and mercenaries, and even empowers the local militias.

The important question now is whether the postponement of the elections to January 24th would make any difference in this complicated political and security dilemma of Libya. How we can expect the the interim government of National Unity (GNU) to solve the force majeure and remove the obstacles hindering the elections within the next four weeks, if GNU failed to make that happen in the past nine months.

The election of the GNU, in January, thanks to the miraculous efforts of Stephanie Williams, then chief of UNSMIL and now UN General Secretary Special Advisor on Libya, created hope that the political solution for Libya might really work. This was the first time, the Libyans came to an agreement, after six years of a brutal civil war (2014-2019) that claimed the lives of thousands of innocent civilians, and created a tribal chaos that empowered ideological terrorists, local militia, and interventions by foreign powers. Let's hope that the extremely smart and determined, Stephanie Williams, will be able to bring the political solution process back on track, before January 24th.



# Refugees Are Used as a Bargaining Chip Between Countries



Jwan Dibo

Day by day, it becomes clear that there is no morality in politics at all, particularly in international relations. This conclusion might be somewhat axiomatic, but what is shocking is the new manifestations of the eternal dissonance between politics and morals.

One of these new manifestations is how various countries involved have exploited the international refugee crisis to serve their own agendas and interests. Of course, all this is at the expense of ignoring humanitarian and ethical dimensions of this exacerbating predicament.

The exploitation of the refugee crisis by different governments as a bargaining chip against each other is blatant evidence of the immorality of international politics.

The manipulation of the refugee card was accompanied by a disregard for their safety and lives. In addition to the harsh treatment, they have received from some transit countries while heading to Western Europe. The last chapter in this vivid tragedy was the

death of 27 migrants who drowned in the English Channel while trying to reach Britain coming from France.

In recent years, several states have openly used the refugee card as a bargaining chip and blackmail against each other. Turkey is taking advantage of the Syrian refugee crisis against the EU. Belarus, at Russia's behest, uses refugees to harass and blackmail the EU. France bothers Britain when turns a blind eye to the activities of smugglers who send refugees on death boats to Britain. Britain, in turn, complicates asylum laws so that no one thinks of taking the risk to reaching British lands and applying for asylum. Poland deals brutally with refugees stranded in Belarus and prevents them from entering its territory as a transit station to Western Europe. Turkey, Russia, Belarus, and Poland are signatories to the 1951 Special Convention on Refugees and the 1967 Protocol, but in practice they are not bound by and violate the provisions of the convention.

Last month, Poland deployed about 20,000 soldiers on its border with Belarus to prevent trapped refugees from crossing into its territory to reach Western Europe. Soldiers used water cannons and tear gas to thwart

refugees and migrants from reaching their destination. Journalists were also prohibited from arriving at the scene to cover the events. The UN described the harsh Polish dealing with migrants as a violation of humanitarian laws and the right to asylum, which seems to be little by little turning into mere ink on paper.

Although Poland is a member of the EU, but it does not abide by the laws of the EU and infringes them in terms of closing its borders to refugees and treating them harshly. Major EU countries such as Germany and France do not object to the actions of the Polish government. This means that those countries are somewhat satisfied with this inhumane behaviour towards immigrants.

The EU is the first to use refugees as a bargaining chip in foreign policies between countries. In 2016, the EU succumbed to Turkish blackmail regarding sending tens of thousands of Syrian refugees to Greek islands and then to Western Europe. The EU overlooked Turkey's poor human rights record in exchange for the latter's prevention of refugees from going to Greek islands.

The EU adopted similar policies towards refugees stuck in Libya, as

it provided support to the Libyan Coast Guard to prevent refugees from reaching Italy via the Mediterranean. Note that the EU is fully aware of the horrific violations committed by Tripoli militias against migrants in detention centres that lack the most basic humanitarian elements.

Turning refugees into a bargaining chip between many governments and endangering their lives is evidence of the moral bankruptcy of international politics in this field. But what is shocking is the contribution of some old European democracies such as France, Germany and Britain to this tragedy that does not seem to end soon.

The 1951 Refugee Convention and the 1967 Protocol seem to no longer have any effect. Therefore, we might witness a repudiation of this Agreement in the future. Moreover, we may see the adoption of new treaties in this regard in line with the actual policies pursued by the concerned countries.

Nobody wants to leave their home, their family, their country and become a refugee in diaspora. But it is oppression, poverty, civil wars, and the hope of finding a better life that drive millions to take this adventure.



Refugees at the Polish Borders



# The Office of the Grand Mufti of Syria



Sami Moubayed

The position of Grand Mufti has just been abolished in Syria, stirring plenty of debate and much controversy. Supporters of the move argue that this post is new to Islam, introduced by Ottoman Sultan Selim, and did not exist neither during the times of the Prophet nor any of his immediate successors, known as the Four Righteous Caliphs. The last mufti, Ahmad Hassoun, was appointed to the job in 2005, succeeding Syria's long-serving Mufti Ahmad Kaftaro, who held the post for four solid decades, from 4 November 1965 until his death on 1 September 2004. Hailing from Aleppo in the Syrian north, Hassoun was the first non-Damascene to assume the job since the republic was created in 1932, explaining why the clerical community of Damascus lobbied continuously for his removal. Ahmad Hassoun was Syria's sixth, and last Mufti.

## History of the Muftis

Six years before he was forced to abdicate the Ottoman throne, Sultan Abdulhamid II had appointed Abu al-Kheir Abidin (1852-1925) as mufti of Damascus. He held the job throughout the years of World War I until the collapse of Ottoman rule in Syria in September 1918. Abidin had raised the ire of Arab nationalists for refusing to condemn the execution of 21 Arab journalists and MPs, who were hanged in Marjeh Square in central Damascus by the Ottoman military governor of Syria, Djemal Pasha, on 6 May 1916. They had been accused of high treason against the Ottoman Empire. He also refused to support the Arab Revolt that was launched against the Ottomans from the Hejaz in June 1916, led by Sharif Hussein, the emir of Mecca. When Ottoman rule came to an end, an Arab kingdom was set up in Damascus, ruled by Emir Faisal Ibn al-Hussein, the son of Sharif Hussein, who had

Abidin dismissed due to his Ottoman loyalties on 11 May 1919.

## Under French rule (1920-1946-)

Succeeding him was Sheikh Atallah al-Kassem (1844-1938), who hailed from a prominent and wealthy Damascene family. His history was opposite to that of Mufti Abidin, having lobbied on behalf of the Arab nationalists who were executed by Djemal Pasha in 1916. Before becoming mufti he had been preacher at the Umayyad Mosque and instructor at the prestigious Maktab Anbar School. He stood by Faisal's side when he was crowned king of Syria on 8 March 1920 and famously called on Muslims to take up arms against the invading French Army. After Syrian and French troops clashed at the Battle of Maysaloun on 24 July 1920, Faisal was dethroned and the French Mandate was imposed on Syria. Mufti Kassem remained at his job until his death in 1938. Six years before his death, Syria was officially proclaimed a republic and he became the first Grand Mufti of the Syrian Republic in June 1932. In the 1980s, his son Abdul Raouf al-Kassem became prime minister of Syria.

The outbreak of World War II in 1939 left the post of Grand Mufti vacant, as colonial France was too busy combating the Nazi threat in Europe. It was only filled in September 1941 by Syria's new president, Taj al-Din al-Hasani, who had been appointed to the job by General Charles de Gaulle. Hasani, himself a turbaned cleric-turned politician, was the son of Sheikh Badr al-Din al-Hasani, one of Muslim World's foremost Islamic scholars. Hasani's choice for mufti was Sheikh Mohammad Shukri al-Ustwani (1873-1955), a ranking scholar from the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam. Ustwani used his religious authority to declare a holy war twice (jihad), first in May 1945, during the French bombardment of Damascus, and then in May 1948, during the first Palesitne War. Mufti Ustwani was at his job when Syria got its independence from the French Mandate in April 1946 and managed

to keep it despite the series of coups and counter-coups that rocked the young republic, starting with that of Colonel Husni al-Za'im in March 1949, onto that of Colonel Sami al-Hinnawi in August 1949, and finally with Colonel Adib al-Shishakli, first in December 1949 and then against in November 1951. Ustwani died in 1955 and was replaced by Sheikh Abu al-Yisr Abidin (1889-1981), the son of former mufti, Abu al-Kheir Abidin.

## Sheikh Abu al-Yisr Abidin

Sheikh Abidin came to power during a period of relative calm and stability, and was the first mufti to hold a second job in addition to his religious duties. A doctor by training, he continued to attend to patients at his clinic in Damascus, while teaching at the Faculties of Medicine and Sharia at Damascus University. He supported the ill-fated Syrian-Egyptian Union of February 1958 only to quarrel with its president, Gamal Abdul Nasser, after Egyptian authorities imposed a socialist economy on Syria. He first spoke out against the Agrarian Reform Law that was passed by Nasser in September 1958, limiting private ownership throughout Syria and destroying its landed notability. He criticized him again in July 1961, when Nasser issued his infamous nationalization laws, confiscating private banks and factories. Mufti Abidin's audacity led to his dismissal from office in 16 August 1961, one month before a coup toppled the United Arab Republic on 28 September 1961. He hailed the coup that toppled the union republic, and was restored to office by presidential decree, signed by Syria's newly elected president, Nazem al-Qudsi, in December 1961. Abidin stayed at his job until the Baath Party came to power on 8 March 1963, pledging to restore the Syrian-Egyptian Union. The Revolutionary Command Council (RCC) had him dismissed for supporting what they called the "crime of the secession." He spent the remainder of his years divided between his private clinic in Damascus while preaching at

the Al-Ward Mosque in the ancient neighborhood of Souq Saruja. Abidin died at the ripe old age of 92 in May 1981.

## The Mufti since 1963

During the early months of Baath rule, Sheikh Abdul Razzaq al-Homsi (1900-1969) was appointed Acting Mufti from March 1963 until November 1964. Historians usually overlook his brief tenure because he really had no say on government policy, took no bold decisions, and was unable to thwart the second wave of nationalization, which was initiated by then-President Amin al-Hafez. His successor, Sheikh Ahmad Kaftaro (1915-2004) was far more powerful and well-connected in the upper echelons of power, having previously served as mufti of Damascus since 1951. Hailing from a prominent Kurdish family, his father, Amin, had been a ranking scholar who enjoyed high influence among Damascene Kurds and the ulema. Ahmad Kaftaro was also famous among ordinary Syrians, with a popular program aimed at spreading religious awareness aired on Damascus Radio in the 1950s. He supported President Amin al-Hafez, then shifted sides to Syria's strongman Salah Jadid after the 23 February 1966 coup, and finally, stood by President Hafez al-Assad, who came to power in November 1970. Kaftaro was appointed deputy in the Syrian Parliament, and he rose to extra fame after establishing the Abu al-Nour Complex in his native Rukn al-Din, providing education for students from elementary school to post-graduate studies, including PhDs in Islamic Sharia. The complex, which he presided over until his death, also had a mosque, an orphanage, and a library, becoming the most powerful religious institution in Syria. Kaftaro promoted inter-faith dialogue, which took him to all four corners of the globe, and in May 2001, played host to Pope John Paul II during his visit to the Grand Umayyad Mosque of Damascus.



# Doha Conference: Hijab to lead a new opposition body with Qatar-Turkey's support



Zara Saleh

As the so-called, the "Arab spring" has begun across the Arab world, Qatar and Turkey have emerged as driving forces to different Islamic rebels such as the Muslim Brotherhood. In the Syrian conflict, for example, Doha has had a significant influence on the Syrian opposition and armed groups by pouring millions of dollars. Such influence has been reached with Turkey's support as the main ally of backing the Muslim Brotherhood and other extremists like the Al-Nusra front and even the so-called Islamic State. As a result, Qatar and Turkey were seized control over the Syrian opposition, mainly the Syrian National Coalition, aiming to protect their political interests and agendas first but not the Syrian.

Recently, Qatar and Turkey are working on a plan to establish a new political body for the Syrian opposition that is affiliated with both countries. The new project will be led by Riyadh Hijab, the former Syrian Prime Minister and Baath party member, who was serving the dictator regime of Bashar Al-Assad until 2012. Then he was selected as the head of the Higher Negotiation Committee for Geneva



Riyadh Hijab

talks in 2015. The plan has been undertaken after the recent meeting between Turkey and Qatar in Doha to restructure the Syrian opposition based on their political agendas, to hold a conference for the different Syrian opposition groups. It has been clear that the expected conference will be held in February 2022 in the Qatari capital Doha, and such as new opposition body, eventually, will replace

the expired opposition body of the Syrian National Coalition that based in Istanbul and became the main Turkish tool in the Syrian conflict.

Pushing Hijab again on the top of the new political body is the Doha-Ankara plan to avoid any weaknesses of their influence in the Syrian conflict due to the Russian and the US expected strategic plan about the future of Syria. Consequently, Riyadh Hijab's new political body will be based on the idea of abandon the call for overthrowing the Assad regime as the essential step for the Syrian talks. The former Assad's prime minister Hijab is now ready to serve his previous President or to implement Turkey and Qatar's agendas. Based on the fact that the Hijab's project is backed by Turkey and Qatar, consequently, will not be in the interests of the Syrian people. Turkey, for instance, now is occupying part of the Syrian territories with the financial support of Qatar. On the other hand, having Turkey's presence in the Hijab project will immediately mean excluding other Syrian components such as Kurds and other political parties which not affiliated with Turkey or Qatar. That means the Hijab's new political body will not be different from the current Syrian National Coalition and eventually will be another card for Erdogan's agendas in Syria after his domestic economic and political crisis.

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