



**Iran Update, March 22, 2023**

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**First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber discussed privatization in ambiguous terms on March 22, likely in response to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei’s demand for concrete action to improve the Iranian economy.** Mokhber stated that the Raisi administration is examining how involved “state and parastatal companies” are in the economy.<sup>1</sup> He added that “the industrial and economic activities of the administration are being relinquished to the private sector.”<sup>2</sup> These remarks are likely a response to Khamenei’s speech on January 30 in which Khamenei described Mokhber as bearing a specific responsibility for the economy as well as to Khamenei’s Nowrouz statement on March 21, which focused primarily on improving Iran’s economy.<sup>3</sup>

**It is unclear whether Mokhber was calling for actual privatization or merely the transfer of government-owned companies, property, and assets to other parastatal organizations that exist outside the formal government.** Iranian presidents and senior officials have historically interpreted the meaning of privatization differently. Former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad pursued a policy of “privatization” between 2005 and 2013, for example, that resulted in many parastatal organizations acquiring state assets.<sup>4</sup> Former President Hassan Rouhani attempted to introduce real privatization in the Iranian economy during his tenure between 2013 and 2021. The Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and other parastatal entities quickly tried to shut down his efforts, however.<sup>5</sup> Mokhber himself was previously the president of Execution of Imam Khomeini’s Order—a parastatal organization directly controlled by the supreme leader.<sup>6</sup> Mokhber may thus be discussing privatization in the sense of handing greater control of Iran’s economy to the parastatal establishment. He may alternatively be discussing privatization in the real sense of the term, in which case he will likely face stark opposition from some hardliners and parastatal organizations—just as Rouhani did during his presidency.

**Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf has called for real privatization and could be a potential political ally to Mokhber.** Ghalibaf emphasized the importance of having a “people’s economy” during an IRGC-affiliated conference on February 22, as CTP previously reported.<sup>7</sup> Ghalibaf separately stated that a significant part of Iran’s economy is “khasoulati,” or dominated by government-controlled organizations, during a parliamentary meeting on February 23.<sup>8</sup> If Ghalibaf and Mokhber are indeed calling for real

privatization, they are correct in recognizing that parastatal organizations' disproportionate control of the Iranian economy is a major obstacle to improving Iran's economic health and efficiency.<sup>9</sup>

### Key Takeaways

- **First Vice President Mohammad Mokhber discussed privatization in ambiguous terms on March 22, likely in response to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's demand for concrete action to improve the Iranian economy.**
- **UK-based outlet *Amwaj Media* reported that Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Political Affairs and chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani met with British, French, and German officials in Oslo, Norway.**

### Internal Security and Protest Activity

**At least one protest occurred in one city across one province on March 22.** CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

#### **Shoush, Khuzestan Province<sup>10</sup>**

- **Size:** Small
- **Demographic:** Retirees



**Law Enforcement Command (LEC) Spokesperson Brigadier General Saeed Montazer al Mahdi announced that the LEC will deploy its special units across Iran during the Nowrouz celebrations.<sup>11</sup> The LEC Special Units are a highly trained, anti-riot force that the regime uses heavily in its protest crackdowns.<sup>12</sup> The LEC spokesperson justified the deployment of special units, saying they are needed to maintain the public peace during the Nowrouz celebrations. These deployments suggest that the regime is**

concerned about the possibility of protests erupting during the holiday and may thus be preparing to confront potential unrest. Many Iranians take time off from work and travel across the country to visit family in their homes during Nowrouz. The LEC separately issued a statement warning women to “observe chastity and the hijab” during Ramadan on March 22.<sup>13</sup> The LEC stated that the owners of commercial units should pay special attention to its message, suggesting that the LEC is placing some responsibility for citizens’ compliance with Islamic customs on these individuals.

### **Economic Affairs**

**The Iranian rial continued selling for around 494,000 to one US dollar on March 22 for the third consecutive day.**<sup>14</sup> The rial has depreciated in recent days, rising from around 471,000 rials to the US dollar on March 17.

### **Nuclear Program**

**UK-based outlet *Amwaj Media* reported that Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Political Affairs and chief nuclear negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani met with British, French, and German officials in Oslo, Norway on March 22.**<sup>15</sup> The article characterized the meeting as “a brainstorming session” intended to demonstrate that “diplomacy is working.” The Iranians might be attempting to placate both the US and European powers to restart the stalled nuclear negotiations.

This meeting follows recent Iranian diplomatic activities centered around or adjacent to its nuclear program. Iran agreed on March 4 to reinstall International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring equipment at its nuclear sites and grant IAEA inspectors access to three previously undeclared nuclear sites.<sup>16</sup> Iranian state media has furthermore suggested that Iran and the IAEA will announce additional agreements in the coming days.<sup>17</sup> Iran has separately pursued diplomatic rapprochements with several Gulf states and held talks with Ukraine over Iranian military support to Russia in recent weeks.<sup>18</sup> Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian gave an interview with CNN on March 1 likely to convince the US to return to the suspended nuclear negotiations, as CTP previously assessed.<sup>19</sup> The Iranians are likely trying to assuage Western concerns about Tehran’s external and nuclear activities.

The regime could be particularly concerned about a European “snapback” decision in the United Nations Security Council, reopening Iran’s nuclear file and reimposing nuclear-related UN sanctions. The Europeans have strongly condemned both Iran’s unprecedented violations of its safeguards obligations as well as its military support to Russia.<sup>20</sup> The United Kingdom, France, and Germany (the E3) were prepared to introduce a censure resolution against Iran during the recent IAEA Board of Governors meeting in March, an escalatory step that could refer Iran’s nuclear file to the UN Security Council.<sup>21</sup> The Iranian strategy, since the 2002 revelation of their undeclared facilities and the formation of the E3 diplomatic process in 2003, has been to prevent these three European powers from joining calls for a hardline stance on its nuclear program. All the recent diplomatic activity, but especially the Oslo meeting, could be a revival of that effort.

### **Foreign Policy and Diplomacy**

**Senior Iranian officials from the Strategic Foreign Relations Council have concluded their official visit to Syria and traveled to Beirut to meet senior Lebanese officials.** Council Chairman Kamal Kharrazi and Secretary Abbas Araghchi met with Lebanese Foreign Affairs Minister Abdollah Bou Habib and Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri on March 22.<sup>22</sup> Kharrazi emphasized support for forming a Lebanese government quickly and without foreign political interference in his meetings. Kharrazi and Araghchi

previously met Syrian President Bashar al Assad, Foreign Affairs Minister Faisal Mekdad, and Religious Endowments Minister Mohammad Abdul Sattar in Damascus on March 19-21, as CTP previously reported.<sup>23</sup>

**Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian held a phone call with Emirati Foreign Affairs Minister Abdullah bin Zayed al Nahyan on March 21.**<sup>24</sup> The two discussed organizing a meeting of businessmen from both countries and strengthening relations between the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Syria. Bin Zayed invited Amir Abdollahian to visit the UAE. This call follows the normalization of relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia on March 10, Supreme National Security Council Secretary Ali Shamkhani's visit to the UAE on March 16, and a general increase in Iranian diplomatic engagements across the region following the March 10 Iran-Saudi rapprochement, as CTP previously reported.<sup>25</sup> Organizing a meeting of businessmen from both countries could support Iranian efforts to bypass US sanctions. Iran has used businesses in Emirati commercial centers to circumvent US sanctions over the past decade.<sup>26</sup> Central Bank Governor Mohammad Reza Farzin accompanied Shamkhani to the UAE on March 16 likely as part of the same effort, as CTP previously reported.<sup>27</sup>

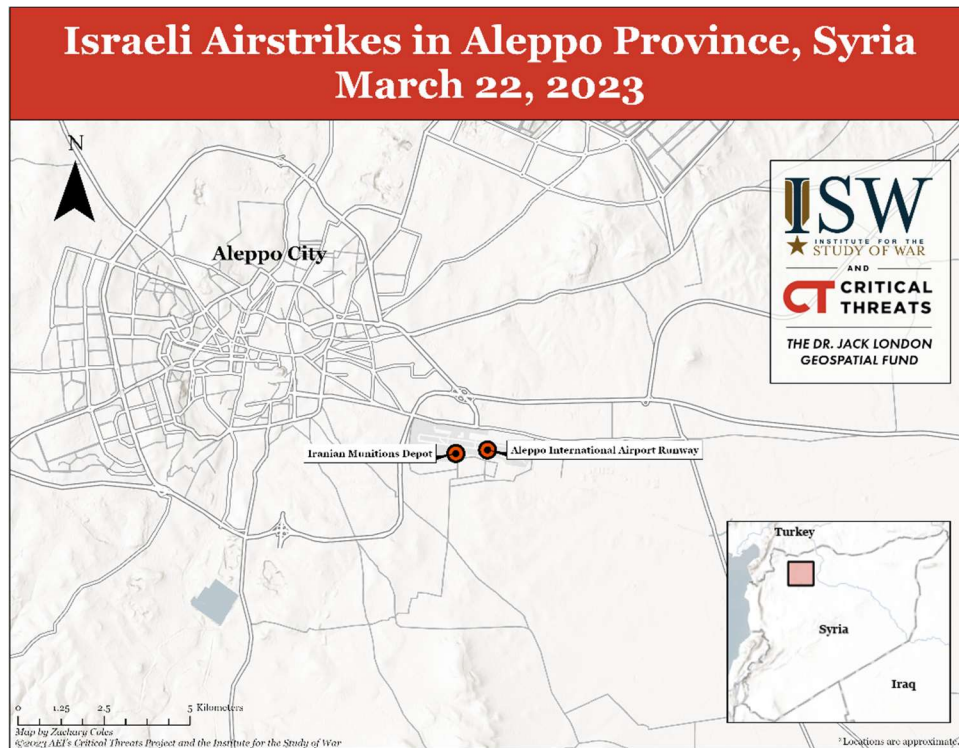
**Foreign Affairs Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian held a telephone call with Kuwaiti Foreign Affairs Minister Salem Abdullah al Jaber al Sabah on March 21.**<sup>28</sup> The two ministers discussed the recent rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia and the beginning of Ramadan.

**Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister for Political Affairs Ali Bagheri Kani met with Armenian Foreign Affairs Minister Ararat Mirzoyan during an official visit to Yerevan, Armenia on March 22.**<sup>29</sup> The two discussed establishing a lasting peace in the Caucasus, focusing on Iran and Armenia's disputes with Azerbaijan. Bagher Kani committed to fostering a "peaceful dialogue" in the region. On the other hand, IRGC-affiliated *Fars News Agency* reported on March 22 that the Azerbaijani army may be planning to invade Syunik Province, Armenia, which borders Iran to its south.<sup>30</sup> CTP cannot verify these claims, but its timing is noteworthy given Bagheri Kani's visit to Armenia.

### **External Security and Military Affairs**

**Iranian and Iranian-backed militia leadership arrived in Deir ez Zor province between March 19 and March 22 likely to discuss operational security.** IRGC Quds Force Commander for Deir ez Zor province Hajj Mehdi and Zainabiyoun Brigade commander reportedly paid local militia members salaries in person at the Shia Crescent Camp, Haidariya area, al Maradeen District, Deir ez Zor province on March 22. Paying the militias directly rather than through intermediaries indicates Iran sought to reinforce the militias loyalty the IRGC Quds Force.<sup>31</sup> An unspecified high-ranking IRGC Quds Force commander and at least five IRGC and Lebanese Hezbollah members also arrived in Deir ez Zor City, Deir ez Zor province from the Iranian embassy in Damascus according to anti-Syrian regime reporting.<sup>32</sup> Their arrival follows events that indicate the militias have struggled to preserve operational security as they expand operations in Syria. An unspecified Iranian-backed militia arrested and replaced at least 46 Syrian militia members suspected of leaking sensitive information on March 14.<sup>33</sup> Leaks from Syrian militia members may have damaged operational security and left Iranian convoys vulnerable to targeted attacks from ISIS or Israeli airstrikes. Anti-Syrian regime media outlet *Qasioun* reported that militants from Asaib Ahl al Haq (AAH) and Kataib Seyyed ol Shehada (KSS) took control of the al Qaim border crossing from Kataib Hezbollah (KH) after several months of clashes.<sup>34</sup> The clashes reportedly forced the border to close multiple times, blocking Iranian convoys from crossing into Syria.

ISIS is also challenging Syrian regime and Iranian efforts in Deir ez Zor to secure ground lines of communication between Aleppo and Albu Kamal. The group is targeting the pro-regime Albu Saraya tribe north of Deir ez Zor city to drive a wedge between the regime and Iran-backed forces and the Albu Saraya.<sup>35</sup> ISIS is likely attempting to take advantage of historically poor relations between the tribe and regime-backed forces by illustrating the regime's inability or unwillingness to protect the tribe.<sup>36</sup> CTP will explore this assessment of ISIS activity further in this week's [Salafi-Jihadi Movement Weekly Update](#).



**Israeli Air Forces (IAF) reportedly conducted an airstrike on Aleppo International Airport on March 21, targeting an Iranian weapons depot.**<sup>37</sup> The airstrike damaged the runway and navigational equipment according to the Syrian Ministry of Transportation.<sup>38</sup> Local intelligence sources claimed the airstrike also targeted an underground Iranian munitions depot at the adjacent Nairab military airport according to a *Reuters* article.<sup>39</sup> Nairab airport was damaged in an Israeli airstrike that targeted a suspected Iranian drone storage facility on March 6.<sup>40</sup>

IRGC Quds Force Commander Brigadier General Esmail Ghaani visited Aleppo on March 17 to inspect earthquake relief shipments according to Iranian-state media outlets, as CTP previously reported.<sup>41</sup> The Iranian regime has reportedly moved weapons shipments into Syria under the guise of humanitarian aid.<sup>42</sup> Russia's United Nations (UN) Vassily Nebenzia requested the UN Security Council discuss Israeli airstrikes in Syria on March 20.<sup>43</sup> An Israeli official claimed Israel had not anticipated Russia's call for the discussion and is concerned that Moscow could promote a resolution against Israel. Israel may be anticipating targeted Russian agenda setting as UN Security Council President starting on April 1.<sup>44</sup>



**At least one protest occurred in one city across one province on March 20.** CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

**Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar Province**

- **Size: Small**
- **Protester Activity: Protesters gathered and chanted against the Coordination Framework-backed election law.**



**At least one protest occurred in one city across one province on March 22.** CTP assesses with high confidence that one protest occurred in the following location:

**Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar Province**

- **Size: Medium**
- **Protester Activity: burned down the local State of Law Coalition political office; set fires in the street; released statement protesting the State of Law Coalition-backed election law.**

**Independent and minority Iraqi political parties submitted an appeal to Iraq’s Federal Supreme Court to reverse election law amendments passed by parliament on March 19.**<sup>45</sup> Iraqi parliament passed five election laws backed by former Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki’s State of Law Coalition and the Shia Coordination Framework – a loose umbrella group of pro-Iranian political parties. Maliki’s State of Law Coalition backed several amendment laws that are expected to reverse election reforms from 2019 and marginalize independent and minority political parties.<sup>46</sup> State of Law Coalition (SOL) member Thaeer Makhaif claimed that the SOL amendments will be voted on and passed April 1 during an interview with the *National Iraqi News Agency (NINA)*.<sup>47</sup> Several members of parliament have called for protests against the State of Law Coalition’s election laws following yesterday’s vote according to an independent Iraqi media outlet *Al Araby*.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>1</sup> [https://www dot tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1402/01/02/2870722/](https://www.dot.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/01/02/2870722/)-مخبر-فعالیت-های-صنعتی-و-اقتصادی-دولت-به-بخش-خصوصی-واگذار-می-شود

<sup>2</sup> [https://www dot tasnimnews dot com/fa/news/1402/01/02/2870722/](https://www.dot.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1402/01/02/2870722/)-مخبر-فعالیت-های-صنعتی-و-اقتصادی-دولت-به-بخش-خصوصی-واگذار-می-شود

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- <sup>5</sup> <https://www.iranintl.com/en/202201127681>  
<https://iranwire.com/en/features/64684/>
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- <sup>9</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-23-2023>
- <sup>10</sup> <https://twitter.com/iranworkers/status/1638490532547633155?s=20> ;  
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[https://twitter.com/hra\\_news/status/1638473588415033344?cxt=HHwWgMCztYbDg70tAAAA](https://twitter.com/hra_news/status/1638473588415033344?cxt=HHwWgMCztYbDg70tAAAA) ;  
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- <sup>11</sup> [https://www\(dot\)farsnews\(dot\)ir/news/14020102000386/](https://www(dot)farsnews(dot)ir/news/14020102000386/) گشتی-امنیت-سایه-E2%80%8Cمردم-آرامش-افزایش-برای-پلیس-ویژه-یگان-های
- <sup>12</sup> <https://www.understandingwar.org/background/iran-crisis-update-january-31-2023>
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- <sup>14</sup> <https://bonbast dot com/>
- <sup>15</sup> <https://amwaj dot media/article/scoop-iranian-european-diplomats-meet-in-norway-for-brainstorming>; <https://www.irna dot ir/news/85063615/%D8%A8%D8%A7%D9%82%D8%B1%DB%8C-%D9%88-%D8%AF%DB%8C%D9%BE%D9%84%D9%85%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%87%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%88%D9%BE%D8%A7%DB%8C%DB%8C-%D8%A8%D8%B1%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%A7%D8%AD%DB%8C%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%82-%D9%87%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%87-%D8%A7%DB%8C-%D8%AF%D8%B1-%D9%86%D8%B1%D9%88%DA%98>
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- <sup>17</sup> <https://twitter.com/nournewsen/status/1637884553845940230?cxt=HHwWjC8dzU97otAAAA> ; <https://www.isna dot ir/news/1402010100029/%D9%85%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%B8%D8%B1-%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%B1-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%A7%D9%81%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%A8%D9%84-%D8%AA%D9%88%D8%AC%D9%87-%D9%85%DB%8C%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%A7%DB%8C%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%88-%D8%A2%DA%98%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%B3-%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B4%DB%8C%D8%AF>
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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-16-2023>  
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<https://eyeofeuphrates dot com/index.php/ar/news/2023/03/19/8012>  
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<sup>34</sup> <https://www.qasioun-news dot com/ar/articles/261256>  
<sup>35</sup> <https://twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1634282575748386818?s=20> ;  
<https://twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1632421292942008322?s=20> ;  
<https://twitter.com/GregoryPWaters/status/1637861302381994004?s=20>  
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<sup>39</sup> <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/israeli-air-strike-targets-syrias-aleppo-airport-statement-2023-03-22/>  
<sup>40</sup> <https://apnews.com/article/syria-israel-strikes-aleppo-airport-139ba8dc57b3023c4d9d31cf935a4507>  
<sup>41</sup> <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-march-20-2023>  
<sup>42</sup> [https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-17-2023?mkt\\_tok=NDc1LVBCUS05NzEAAAGKAQHqY0qa7Zg21LutUBBEjkWIGVD\\_tynqX1r4-yIGrhkW5eDY98wUrBpeG\\_10yipbbyHVkGuRiirMFQBs8I4cdYGOuZrCdM6zrJfSvYpiDHomcBm4J](https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/iran-update-february-17-2023?mkt_tok=NDc1LVBCUS05NzEAAAGKAQHqY0qa7Zg21LutUBBEjkWIGVD_tynqX1r4-yIGrhkW5eDY98wUrBpeG_10yipbbyHVkGuRiirMFQBs8I4cdYGOuZrCdM6zrJfSvYpiDHomcBm4J)  
<sup>43</sup> <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russian-offensive-campaign-assessment-march-20-2023>  
<sup>44</sup> <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/presidency>  
<sup>45</sup> <https://shafaq dot com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D9%88%D8%AB%D8%A7-%D9%82-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%A8-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AA%D9%82%D9%84%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%8A%D8%B7%D8%B9%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A8%D8%AC%D9%84%D8%B3%D8%A9-%D8%AA%D8%B9%D8%AF%D9%8A%D9%84-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%85%D8%AC%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%85%D8%AD%D8%A7%D9%81%D8%B8%D8%A7%D8%AA> ;  
<sup>46</sup> <https://shafaq dot com/ar/%D8%B3%DB%8C%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%B9%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%88%D9%8A-%D9%8A%D8%B1%D8%A7%D8%B3%D9%84-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%8A-%D9%88%D8%B5%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%89-%D8%B7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%82-%D9%8A%D9%83%D8%A7%D8%AF-%D9%8A%D9%83%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%85%D8%B3%D8%AF%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A7>  
<sup>47</sup> <https://www.ninanews dot com/Website/News/Details?Key=1042011> ;

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<sup>48</sup> [https://www.alaraby dot co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA](https://www.alarabydot.co.uk/politics/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D8%B1%D8%A7%D9%82-%D8%AF%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%A7%D8%AA-%D9%84%D9%84%D8%A7%D8%AD%D8%AA%D8%AC%D8%A7%D8%AC-%D8%B6%D8%AF-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AA%D8%B5%D9%88%D9%8A%D8%AA-%D8%B9%D9%84%D9%89-%D9%82%D8%A7%D9%86%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A7%D9%86%D8%AA%D8%AE%D8%A7%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%AA)