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# Arab Media on Bolton, Pompeo, North Korea

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## Brief Analysis

Initial Arab media reaction was mixed after the March 22 announcement that John Bolton would soon replace H. R. McMaster as President Donald Trump's top national security adviser. In the current polarized Arab media discourse, the latest spin tended to follow different national predilections. For example, Saudi Arabia's Al-Arabiya website was headlined "Fears in Iran Over Bolton Appointment." The Saudi-owned pan-Arab paper *Asharq al-Awsat*, published in London, noted Bolton's "bold and controversial" statements about confronting North Korea, Iran, Russia, and even the United Nations. Qatar's Al Jazeera website, by contrast, offered two pieces with a somewhat different slant: "Another Hawk Completes Trump's Hardline Trend" and "Bolton: Fighting Terror Is My Top Priority." Few Arab media outlets focused on Bolton's reported views about Israeli or Palestinian issues; a rare exception was Egypt's semi-independent newspaper Al-Youm7, which quoted Palestinian activist Hanan Ashrawi's very negative appraisal of Bolton's record on that score.

A similar pattern of intra-Arab divisions characterized related news cycles earlier this past month—with Qatar's widely circulated media generally more negative toward U.S. policy and personnel shifts than other Gulf, Egyptian, or Jordanian media. Just a short while earlier, Trump had surprised the world again by announcing the dismissal of Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and his replacement by current CIA director Mike Pompeo—soon after Trump also announced that he would meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. Commentary on this was both extensive and highly partisan—with Qatari and Qatari-funded media taking a sharply negative tone, but most others seeing a victory for the anti-Qatar and anti-Iran Arab camp. Interestingly, once again, very few of these commentaries referenced the recent controversies over Israel, the Palestinians, or Jerusalem.

Some, especially in the "Arab Quartet" boycotting Qatar (i.e., Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt, and Bahrain), applauded Tillerson's replacement; a few others opposed it, though both camps perceived it as a sign of a more "hawkish" American administration. The majority of media outlets underscored the dismissal's impact on Qatar, Iran, or (more surprisingly) Turkey.

[Asharq al-Awsat](#) welcomed the news, citing Tillerson's "deviance" from White House policies toward Arab states, especially regarding Iran. For example, the State Department has so far refrained from supporting the Iranian opposition, while Trump declares his support for it. Meanwhile, the nominee, Mike Pompeo, is said to have more in-depth expertise on world issues as CIA director. In the same paper, prominent Saudi writer and former director of Al-Arabiya, Abdulrahman al-Rashed, voiced his hope that the new secretary of state would deter Qatar from funding terrorist groups and threatening the security of the region. In addition, Emirati political analyst Abdul Khaliq Abdullah claimed that the UAE played a big role in convincing Trump to dismiss Tillerson.

Most other Arab Quartet-affiliated media also portrayed Qatar and Iran as the losers in this decision. The London-based newspaper [Al-Arab](#) maintained that Tillerson's State Department turned a blind eye to Qatar's relations with U.S. terrorist-listed organizations. Commentators also wrote that Tillerson visited the Gulf twice last year and worked to undermine the mediation led by Kuwait's emir Sheikh Sabah al-Ahmed al-Sabah. After his visits, the crisis became more complex as Doha persisted in proclaiming its innocence. The leftist Egyptian newspaper [Soutalomma](#) reported that Tillerson's ouster "made Qatar lose its mind," as attested by Al Jazeera's furious reaction. Tillerson previously presided over ExxonMobil, also known as "the daughter of Qatar." The semiofficial Egyptian newspaper [Al-Ahram](#) described Trump's decision to dismiss Tillerson as one that aligns with most Arab countries' interests—except those of Qatar, which lost a U.S. administration supporter of the "terrorism" of "Tanzim al-Hamdin" (the organization of Qatar's "Father Emir," Hamad bin Khalifa) and opponent of the Arab Quartet blockade against Qatar.

Concerning Iran, the Kuwaiti independent newspaper [Al-Rai](#) commented that Tehran perceived Tillerson's ouster and Pompeo's appointment as a sign that the United States is determined to withdraw from the nuclear agreement. Similarly, Egypt's [Al-Youm7](#) provided a review of how the Iranian media dealt with Trump's decision to dismiss Tillerson. Most of the Iranian media affiliated with both reformists and hardliners believe that the impending termination of the nuclear deal is the key reason for Tillerson's dismissal.

On the other hand, the London-based, pro-Qatar newspaper [Al-Quds](#) held that removing Tillerson and appointing Pompeo, known for his extreme stances toward Iran and North Korea, means that the Trump administration is escalating its radical posture. The Qatari [Al-Jazeera](#) argued that this reflects chronic confusion in Trump's administration, and the U.S. president's desire to remove the last of the "wise men" from his administration and empower hawks with military backgrounds to drive a real shift in foreign policy. One of the key reasons behind Tillerson's dismissal, according to Al-Jazeera, was his conciliatory approach to the Gulf crisis and refusal to support the UAE-led blockade campaign against Qatar—adding that the UAE played a key role in pressuring Trump to oust Tillerson through Elliott Broidy, an American businessman and senior fundraiser for Trump's campaign. But the Qatari state-owned newspaper [Al-Raya](#) emphasized that the decision will have no impact on U.S. policy toward Qatar. While supporters of the anti-Qatar Arab Quartet declared their "joy" after Tillerson's dismissal, other analysts derided this reaction as political "naivete."

One area of surprising consensus in several comments from both Arab camps is the allegation that Turkey will now lose some U.S. support. [Al-Arab](#) newspaper asserted that Tillerson's departure will disappoint Turkey, since Tillerson "understood" President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's tendency to neutralize state institutions, while Pompeo opposes Erdogan's neutralization of the Turkish army, which weakens Ankara's commitment to NATO. In that context, the paper cited Turkish foreign minister Mevlut Cavusoglu's remark that his country intends to continue its relationship with Washington based on understanding with the new secretary of state, but he should learn to

"respect Ankara." Similarly, according to the Qatari independent newspaper [Al-Watan](#), Ankara is aware that Pompeo believes in tougher policies toward Turkey, particularly its ongoing cross-border military operation in Syria's Afrin province.

In another recent surprise, Trump abruptly announced last month that he would meet North Korean leader Kim Jong-un. The majority of Arab media circulated the news without additional commentary. Arab officials also remained silent. The few Arab media outlets that commented on the decision focused on the summit's impact on the Iranian nuclear program, warned against spoilers, and urged Arab leaders to draw lessons from the initiative.

For example, the independent Jordanian newspaper [Al-Dustour](#) said Tehran recognizes that the North Korean model only partially applies to Iran. From Washington's perspective, there are at least two factors differentiating Iran from North Korea's nuclear situation. First, North Korea is a current nuclear power with atomic bombs, hydrogen bombs, and long-range missiles in its possession. Despite Iran's developing ballistic missile program, it has not produced such a weapon, and its possession is supposedly prohibited according to the Islamic Republic's religious propaganda. Second, North Korea is isolated from Israel and holds no anti-Israel agenda, but Iran's military capabilities are pivotal to Israeli security. So although North Korea threatened the American homeland, the United States will supposedly maintain even tougher measures against Iran to safeguard Israel's security.

Egypt's [Al-Youm7](#) considered the move an important lesson for Arab leaders: there is no permanent enmity or friendship. The newspaper predicts that Kim will not abandon his current nuclear and missile arsenal, since it led him to negotiations with the world's largest power and helped mobilize the people of North Korea and maintain their cohesion. Yet Washington might offer economic assistance and lifting of sanctions in return for a halt in Pyongyang's nuclear and missile tests, starting a new page in the U.S.-North Korea relationship. In this context, Qatar's [Al-Watan](#) considered the upcoming summit in compliance with the rules of politics, following the historical trend that there is no solution to conflict without dialogue; wars are only a stage for negotiations.

The Emirati newspaper [Al-Bayan](#) perceived the summit as a good step but warned that the "powers of evil" might spoil the initiative. These allegedly include large financial institutions that facilitate arms trafficking. If North Korea halted its nuclear program, East Asian and Pacific countries would stop acquiring some defense systems. Similarly, if Iran were tamed, its neighbors would stop engaging in new arms deals.

Other Arab media outlets believed that the summit might fail since Kim will not give up his nuclear power that easily. [Asharq al-Awsat](#) advised President Trump to learn from former secretary of state Madeleine Albright's failed trip to Pyongyang in 2000; Kim Jong-un does not intend to renounce his nuclear arsenal, he is simply buying time. Instead, the United States should fight for human rights and democracy in North Korea. If the summit fails, the Qatari paper [Al-Raya](#) argued that Trump would be criticized for negotiating with a "rogue" state and legitimizing it in the international community. Conversely, if Washington manages to convince Kim to freeze his nuclear program, as was the case with Iran, his success would be considered a strategic accomplishment. But this scenario seems naively optimistic. Even more pessimistically, the Jordanian paper [Al-Rai](#) claimed that the summit represents a great victory for North Korea—despite a long period of confrontation with Washington, during which the United States imposed heavy sanctions, Pyongyang has never capitulated to American pressure. ❖



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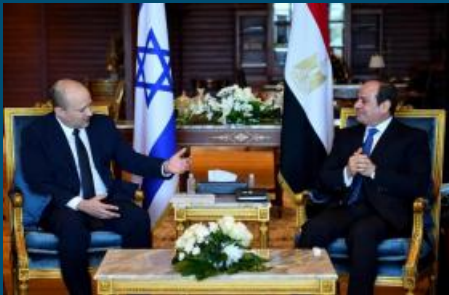


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