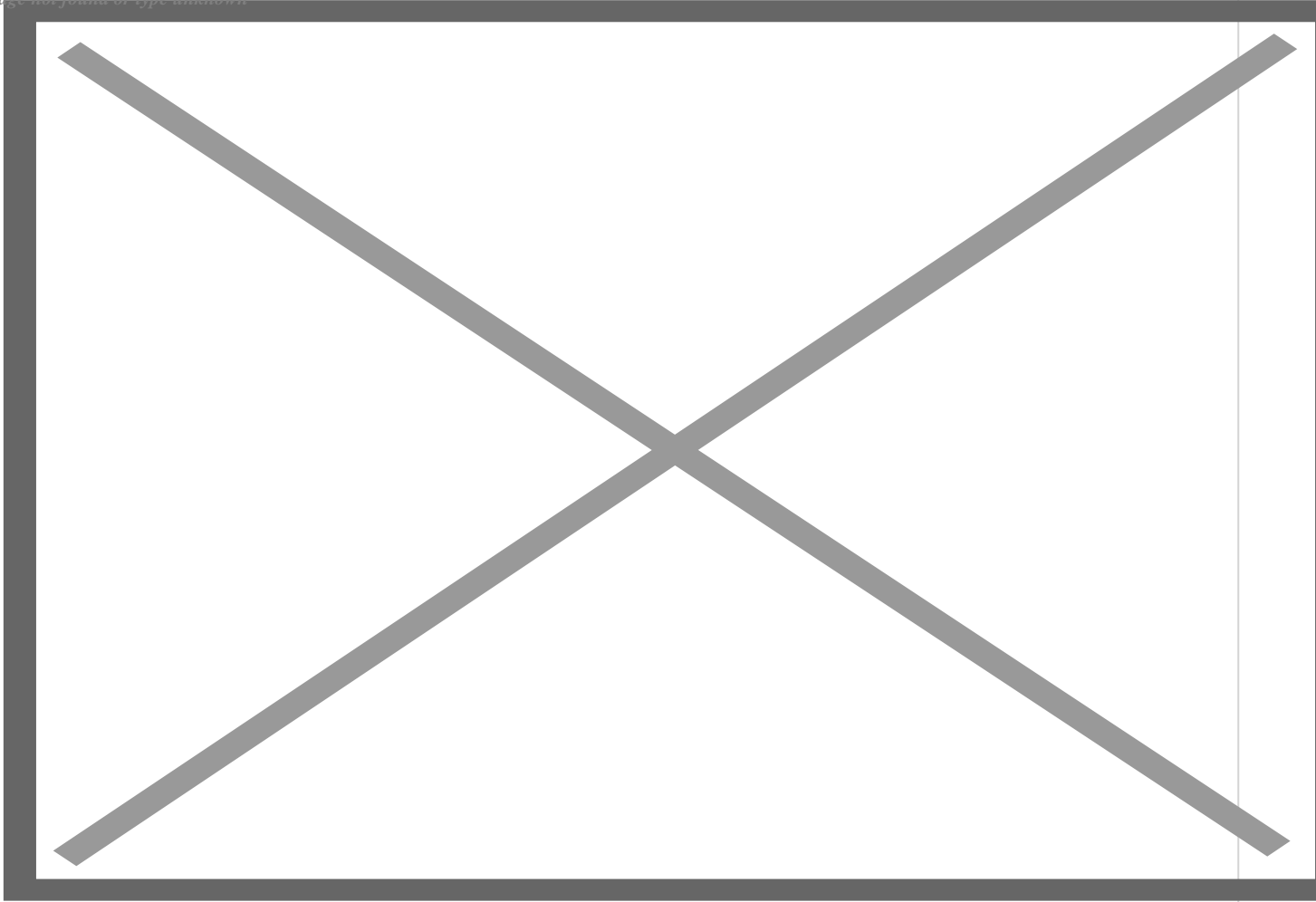


Leaders head to Algeria for first Arab League summit in two years

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Central areas of Algiers, and the highway to the recently built conference centre on the coast where the summit will take place, have been replanted with trees and decked out in Arab flags [Ramzi Boudina/Reuters]

Algiers, November 1 (RHC)-- The first Arab League summit since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic is set to begin in Algeria, but political divisions continue to rankle among the regional organisation's members.

Arab states are split over issues ranging from support for the Palestinian cause, the regional roles of Iran and Turkey and the rehabilitation of Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, while Algeria's own bitter feud with Morocco continues to fester.

In Algeria, largely absent from Arab affairs for several years following the 2019 mass protests that led to the ousting of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, the meeting has been portrayed as a mark of its return to front-line diplomacy. "The summit shows that Algeria is back in international affairs after years of isolation due to Bouteflika's illness, the protest movement, COVID-19 and the financial crisis," a former Algerian government minister and the ambassador said.

Last month, Algiers convened Palestinian factions in an effort to end years of internal discord, and President Abdelmadjid Tebboune has in recent months hosted the leaders of France and Italy. However, Algeria failed earlier this year to persuade other Arab states to end Syria's suspension from membership of the League imposed in late 2011. Damascus said in September it would not attend to avoid "causing dispute."

Some main Arab states including Saudi Arabia and Qatar backed Sunni Muslim rebels fighting al-Assad, a close ally of Iran. Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and the United Arab Emirates leader Mohammed bin Zayed have both confirmed they are not coming to Algiers, as has Morocco's King Mohammed VI.

The presidents of Egypt and Tunisia and the monarchs of Kuwait and Qatar are among about two-thirds of leaders whom the Arab League has said will attend. Central areas of Algiers, and the highway to the recently built conference centre on the coast where the summit will take place, have been replanted with trees and decked out in Arab flags. Models of Arab architecture adorn a central square.

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