Saudi crown prince’s US talks set to deepen bilateral ties, regional understandings

Thomas Seibert

Washington

During his visit to the United States, the first since he acceded to Saudi Arabia’s heir apparent and de facto ruler, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz worked to buttress his personal standing and to promote Saudi interests in the United States for years to come.

He clearly found more receptive ears at the Trump White House than he did under the Obama administration. An enthusiastic US President Donald Trump lauded Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud’s “very wise decision” to make Crown Prince Mohammed first in line to the throne.

“The relationship is probably the strongest it’s ever been,” said Trump. “We understand each other.”

For Riyadh, which has advocated a more hard-line US position on Iran, recent senior personnel changes in Washington are likely to further anchor US opposition to Tehran’s ambitions and might seal the fate of the Iran nuclear deal.

A week after the replacement of Rex Tillerson as secretary of state, the White House announced that national security adviser H.R. McMaster would be replaced with former UN Ambassador John Bolton, considered a foreign policy hawk.

The final decision about the nuclear deal might still be in the works but US-Iranian relations are unlikely to improve. “We’ll see what happens,” Tillerson said with the crown prince in attendance. “Iran has not been treating that part of the world, or the world itself, appropriately.”

The Saudis are hoping for a better understanding of their grievances against Qatar after the firing of Tillerson, who was perceived as too close to Doha. Grievances include Doha’s ties to extremist groups and Iran. A US-GCC summit in May might well be in the works but would not be the row with Qatar. The dispute is “an interstate GCC problem,” Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir was quoted as saying on the National, on March 23.

The Israeli website DEBKAfile reported that plans to relocate a major US military base in Qatar to Saudi Arabia were “approved” during the Trump-Crown Prince Mohammed meeting but there was no confirmation of such a move from Washington or Riyadh.

Crown Prince Mohammed discussed arms deals worth billions as he met with Trump and other top officials in Washington. In an Oval Office meeting with the crown prince, Trump said US arms sales worth almost $20 billion to Riyadh were under way and many more were planned. His administration announced a $70 million arms deal with Riyadh on March 22.

Crown Prince Mohammed also toasted planned Saudi investments of several hundreds of billions of dollars in the United States.

The Trump administration regards Saudi Arabia under the crown prince as a key partner in its quest to thwart Iran’s regional ambitions. Trump picked Saudi Arabia as the destination of his first overseas trip as president and is eager to re-pair ties to end Riyadh’s frustration that built up under Trump’s predecessor, Barack Obama.

However, talks in Washington showed the complexities at play regarding the Yemen war, especially with the United States providing intelligence and logistical support to the Saudis in that conflict.

The White House said Trump and Crown Prince Mohammed talked about “the threat that the Houthis pose to the region, assisted by the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.”

The crown prince and Trump were also said to have “discussed additional steps to address the humanitarian situation and agreed that a political resolution to the conflict is ultimately necessary to meet the needs of the Yemeni people.”

Even more directly, war critics in Washington, including members of Congress, highlighted the heavy toll of the conflict in terms of casualties and effect on the civilian population.

As the crown prince sat down with Trump, the US Senate voted on a bipartisan resolution seeking an end to US support for the Yemen conflict.

The Senate, following a request by US Defence Secretary James Mattis, rejected the bill. Mattis warned an end to US support would add to civilian casualties and embolden the Houthis, who have launched missile attacks against Saudi targets.

After meeting with Crown Prince Mohammed, Mattis insisted Saudi Arabia was going to be “part of the solution” in Yemen and that an end to the conflict will be on “positive terms for the people of Yemen but also security for the nations in the peninsula.”

Dr. Perkin Boghacht, a Gulf scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, said: “The Saudis are very sensitive to this. They’re certainly communicat- ing with elite circles to discuss the measures they’re taking to try to get humanitarian assistance into Yemen.”

The Palestinian-Israeli so-called “deal of the century” was also discussed by Crown Prince Mohammed with Jared Kushner, the president’s son-in-law and senior advisor, and Jason Greenblatt, Trump’s special envoy for Middle East peace.

The prospects for such a deal have become critically jarred after the US president’s decision to transfer the US Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, a decision opposed by the Saudis. No information trickled about the timeline for announcing the deal.

Thomas Seibert is a Washington correspondent for The Arab Weekly.

Tunisians celebrate opening of ‘City of Culture’ in departure from downbeat mood

Stephen Quillen

Tunisia

At a time many Tunisians are despondent over a lacklustre economy and Jimmy Carter’s one-man show in Washington, they are hoping to celebrate following Independence Day. On July 19, the country’s independence celebration, Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi inaugurated the “City of Culture,” a new arts complex that is seen as a creative and intellectual hub for the country and the region.

The sprawling 9-hectare centre, marked by a towering glass globe, is a tribute to Tunisian arts and culture, with spaces dedicated to national cinema, music, theatre, art and literature.

It took years to complete and many doubted it would ever be initiated in spate. The $3 billion government project was dovetailed by administrative and financial difficulties following the 2011 revolution, with some arguing it was not a priority for a country struggling to provide jobs and bread to the poor. Others discounted the project as an unwelcome legacy of the previous regime.

Seven years later, senior officials hailed the project as a reflection of the country’s “commitment to free expression” and a stage for “new ambitions of the next generation.”

Caid Essebsi said the complex met the priority needs of a population trying to ward off extremism and terrorism, saying the newly founded city was a “place that we can be proud of, a place for every Tunisian.”

Zine ib-Abidine added that the project was a towering accomplishment for Tunisians celebrating at the centre of cultural expression in the region. He noted it would provide artists with a venue to showcase their work, serve as a touristic landmark and preserve the country’s cultural heritage.

Interview with the Tunisian Minister of Culture

By Lumine Guirati

“The City of Culture serves as an opportunity… for a different cultural landscape. It creates new occasions for creators to work and opens the door for artists to learn, create and perform…”

In a reply to critics who saw the City of Culture as a reminder of another era, Zine ib-Abidine said: “The project represents the will and patriotism of all Tunisians…Let’s build together rather than injuring each other.”

Stephen Quillen is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis.
the year 1979 was a watershed for the Middle East. Iranian revolutionaries overthrew the shah, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan and Sunni Islamic extremists tried to take over the Grand Mosque of Mecca in Saudi Arabia, Islam’s holiest site.

Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, now given warrants hadn’t been born but he is fighting the ghosts of 1979 as he deftly reforms the kingdom. The attempted takeover of Mecca was a defining event in Saudi Arabia, mainly because of what happened next: Saudi rulers, fearing Iran’s revolutionary example, gave more space to the Salafi de facto establishment to counter the political gravitas of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Traditional Salafi preachers are neither violent nor political but they hold a rigid view of Islam. Their legal rulings and attempts to police morality made Saudi Arabia increasingly intolerant, setting the stage for the social opening of the 1960s and ’70s. The time is now. He is clear about the problem. “Political Islam – whether Sunni or Shia, Muslim Brotherhood or Salafi Salafist – has damaged Muslim countries,” he has told me. “It also gives Islam a bad name. Therefore, it is the role of Muslim countries to face these evil ideologies and groups and to stand with our world allies in the West and East to confront them once and for all.”

Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and Crown Prince Mohammed have indeed set in some head-spinning changes. The crown prince has had the call to roll back the powerful religious police. These self-righteous moralisers no longer have the light to stop anyone on the street or take matters into their own hands. They have been effectively marginalised.

The kind and crown prince granted women their long-awaited rights to drive and attend sporting events. Women are no longer required to wear headscarves. I expect to see more women appointed to senior positions in government, even at the ministerial level. Once Saudi Arabia unleashes the potential of women, there is no telling how far the country can go. Building on the past decade’s education reforms, Crown Prince Mohammed launched the Misk Foundation to provide young Saudis with world-class skills training. He has led the way in normalising life in Saudi Arabia for young people, who are increasingly shying away from social restrictions. The new General Light and Theater Authority is giving Saudis foreign concerts, theatre and cinemas and soon a Royal Opera House.

He has done something more in tangible but no less important, bridged the deep generational divide between ruler and ruled. For some three-quarters of Saudis, he is under 35. He speaks their language. He uses their apps. He knows their frustrations, including with corruption. The recent crackdown on corruption should be seen in this light. Business as usual was not working and the crown prince was willing to pull up the carpet to clean the rot underneath.

At an October 2017 conference for international investors, Crown Prince Mohammed laid out his ideas for moderate Islam. “Saudi Arabia was not like this before 1979,” he said. “We want to go back to what we were, the moderate Islam that was open to all religions. We want to live a normal life...coexist and contribute to the world...We will not spend the next 50 years of our lives dealing with these destructive ideas.”

During my time in office, I came to realise that while Saudi Arabia will continue to face challenges, for the first time in four decades the ghosts haunting Saudi Arabia are in retreat. Mideast is uninvolved and there is no universal guidebook on how to reform a country but leaders like the late Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore show how far a country can go with the right policies.

Saudi Arabia has a long journey ahead. It will not be without bumps and bruises. Change never comes easy but Crown Prince Mohammed has raised expectations dramatically. The genie is out of the bottle and it can’t go back in.

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Saudi Arabia has a long journey ahead. It will not be without bumps and bruises. Change never comes easy but Crown Prince Mohammed has raised expectations dramatically. The genie is out of the bottle and it can’t go back in.
Mohammed bin Salman’s visit to US grabs attention in Gulf region as he eyes long-term Saudi crown prince

For Riyadh, building deep engagement with the US does require communications work

Hussein Ibish

Middle East. “He wants to establish relationships with companies and investors and build confidence.”

ABC News quoted a source close to the Saudis as saying the crown prince’s tour of the United States was not really about Washington as much as the other cities he is to visit.

Improving Saudi Arabia’s image in the United States is bound to be an uphill battle after years of adversity, especially since the September 11, 2001, attacks. A Gallup poll published last year indicated that two-thirds of American respondents said they had an unfavourable opinion of the kingdom.

Opinions still seem shaped by negative perceptions of human rights, women, religious intolerance and Islamist extremism in the kingdom.

News reports on Saudi Arabia have begun a comprehensive public relations campaign in line with the crown prince’s reform programme with the goal of helping change the country’s image.

The PR campaign has suffered setbacks recently, however. Western rights groups and newspapers published allegations that prominent figures targeted in the anti-corruption campaign were physically abused. Saudi authorities vehemently rejected the allegations.

McClurey said Crown Prince Mohammed would have to implement more of his reform programme before the views of Americans about Saudi Arabia start to change. “He will have to go much further than he has gone so far,” he said.

In responding to such criticism, Saudi officials point to the wide support the crown prince’s anti-corruption drive enjoys at home and abroad and for patience with their country as it introduces ground-breaking reforms in what is still a fundamentally conservative society.

Crown Prince Mohammed is turning “Saudi Arabia into a normal country in which normal people lead normal lives,” Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said before the crown prince’s visit to the United States.

Middle East. “At a time in which Arabs are in need of regaining our position and role in the world, Saudi Arabia fills the region with hope and dreams of a better Arab world,” he added in another tweet.

What makes Crown Prince Mohammed’s global tour unique is not foreign policies but its promotion of investments.

Crown Ambassadors to the United States Prince Khalid bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, in an editorial in the London-based pan-Arab Al-Aawsat, said the crown prince’s vision would go a long way in strengthening US-Saudi relations and driving reform at home.

“For decades, the kingdom lived according to social and cultural norms that went unchallenged, thus inhibiting our progress,” the Saudi ambassador wrote. “But our leaders have set the course today that aims to transform our economy and society and unlock our untapped potential.

“Saudi Arabia is reforming, and our dynamism will take the Saudi-US relationship to new heights. Both sides should seize the moment.”

The Saudi ambassador was referring to major reform measures introduced in the kingdom, including efforts to foster women’s rights, adopt moderate Islam and crackdown on corruption – all pillars of the new Saudi Arabia.

In stark but predictable contrast, GCC member Qatar’s Al-Jazeera network limited its coverage of Crown Prince Mohammed’s US visit to a report citing an unnamed senior US official stating that Trump would urge Crown Prince Mohammed to end the kingdom’s boycott of the tiny Gulf Arab state.

Last June, Saudi Arabia, along with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, severed ties with Doha over what they described as Qatar’s interference in their internal affairs, support for radical Islamic groups, and, chaotically, ties with the kingdom’s main nemesis, Iran, another issue facing heavily in the crown prince’s US visit.

Mohammed Alkhereiji is the Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.

For Riyadh, building deep engagement with the US does require communications work

Riyadh could once reliably count on Washington to ward off external threats but no longer.

At a news conference with the crown prince, Trump focused on weapons sales to Saudi Arabia, at times sounding more like the manager of a car dealership than a US President. The crown prince would be very pleased with the $110 billion in weapons sales announced already. That’s the easy part.

It’s a lot more tempting, there is important commerce to be done. A deal on Saudi Arabia’s nuclear energy program that Saudi Arabia wants to sign with the United States in general that could ease the kingdom’s desire to turbocharge its development in a single generation. This has happened elsewhere – in Japan in the 19th century and in South Korea in the last quarter of the 20th century. Whether anything of the kind can be accomplished in Saudi Arabia remains to be seen but it’s exactly what the crown prince is attempting.

The crown prince and Saudi Arabia want to be perceived as a single, modern, technologically advanced country once reliably dependent on the government. It’s partly by design. For example, the chronic weakness of the Saudi military, simply demonstrated in Yemen, is neither coincidental nor inevitable. It stems from the 1990s and ’90s when Arab monarchies and republics were routinely toppled and military governments swept the region. Saudi leadership took numerous measures to ensure that wouldn’t happen in Riyadh.

The side effect has been an expensive but wholly inadequate armed force. Analyses abound throughout a society conditioned to be politically passive and dependent on the government. However, plummeting oil prices and other developments meant business as usual was not an option.

Riyadh could once reliably count on Washington to ward off external threats but no longer.

On Twitter, Saudi Arabia is reforming, and our dynamism will take the Saudi-US relationship to new heights. Both sides should seize the moment.”

The crown prince and Saudi Arabia want to be perceived as a single, modern, technologically advanced country. They require the creation of new institutional capacity and the production of human capacity necessary to educate and staff wide-ranging public and private institutions more or less simultaneously. Technology and infrastructure can help but the key is to rapidly transform Saudi Arabia’s dependent subjects into empowered and productive citizens. This is not foreign affairs but its promotion of investments.

Crown Prince Mohammed is plainly counting on a greatly expanded partnership with the United States as a whole – not just government institutions – to give his ambitious agenda a fighting chance. That’s why he’s not only meeting with the White House, the Pentagon, and Congress in Washington. He’s also going to high-tech hubs and innovation centres in Boston, Seattle, San Francisco. He’s going to meet with those in the energy industry in Houston. He’s going to talk with CEOs and financiers in New York. Because culture and the reinstallation of art, entertainment and enjoyment – quarantined in private spaces or forbidden altogether in Saudi society for many decades – are key imperatives, he’s given a shot to the entertainment industry in Hollywood.

Middle East. “The crown prince and Saudi Arabia are being seen but it’s exactly what the crown prince is attempting.”

The crown prince and Saudi Arabia need to attend to their internal affairs, support for radical Islamic groups, and, chaotically, ties with the kingdom’s main nemesis, Iran, another issue facing heavily in the crown prince’s US visit.

Mohammed Alkhereiji is the Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.
Turkey’s Afrin victory comes amid risk and uncertainty

Simon Speakman Cordall

Tunis

Turkish troops and their Syrian proxies swept into the disputed Kurdish town of Afrin on March 18, displacing the populace and marking a new chapter in Syria’s bloody war with another foreign power gaining rights over part of the country.

Turkish bulldozers cleared the main square in Afrin of any remaining traces of the town’s erstwhile inhabitants — fighters of the Free Syrian Army fired weapons into the air.

The Turkish march looked to be time from Afrin. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan spoke of clearing the “terror corridor” along Syria’s border to the east of Afrin as his forces advanced to “-establish,.. ar-Al Arab Weekly.

News & Analysis

‘Kneel or starve’: Damascus’s brutal ultimatum to population of Eastern Ghouta

James Snell

Cambridge

Under siege for almost five years, the rebel enclave of Eastern Ghouta, in Syria’s Damascus governorate, faces liquidation by the regime of Bashar Assad.

The violence will continue undiminished until the regime condones Eastern Ghouta.

As the regime’s campaign intensified, stories of brutality increased. Activists documented the aftermath of air strikes on markets and villages. At least 40 civilians were killed in air attacks.

The United Nations attempted to institute a ceasefire at the end of February, which would have halted fighting for 30 days. The measure failed before it began and the violence continued.

The regime will continue to liquidate Ghouta forever for other regions of Syria especially Idlib, or fight to the death.”

Regime slogans give a sense of its intent. Pro-regime forces offer brutal dichotomies, beginning with the threat “Assad or we burn the country.”

Beals noted that the latter has, for Eastern Ghouta, become an injunction to “surrender or die.”

Some of this has a personal edge. Hamish de Brutton-Gordon, an adviser to non-governmental organisations in Syria and director of Doctors Under Fire, a medical charity, described the situation facing Eastern Ghouta’s residents.

He said, in an e-mail message: “There are virtually no medical supplies. What food there is, is very expensive and the bombardment interspersed with chlorine barrel bombs is as intense as we’ve seen.”

De Brutton-Gordon said that at the Union of Medical Care and Relief Organisations there are 175 very ban centres have been attacked with airpower and superior weaponry before being overrun by regime forces.

In Homs, in Aleppo and now Eastern Ghouta, pillage and these liquidations take on civilians is immense. Thousands are killed in the bombing and the ground campaigns.

There are reports of regime forces executing mass summary executions of men of fighting age. Women fear rape regular regime forces and its shabiha militias, which has become a weapon of war consciously employed.

Facing these odds, it is unsurprising that many civilians choose to fight. The assault on Eastern Ghouta created an exodus of people desperately attempting to escape the enclave before it is crushed.

This forms part of a regime strategy not just of conquest but of displacement. Beals said that “since August 2016, when Daraya was pounded by a military campaign that resulted in forced displacement, we have seen this strategy rolled out across the country.”

“Eastern Aleppo suffered a siege, as did Arbeen and then ground campaign through the second half of 2016; the saving Eastern Ghouta faces the same.”

Nicholas Heras, a fellow at the Centre for a New American Security, said: “The Assad government is giving the population of Eastern Ghouta the choice to stand down and accept Bashar Assad as their leader, board on buses and leave Heras noted that the assault on “Eastern Ghouta is collective punishment aimed at ripping out the roots of the opposition movement that has grown so close to Assad’s palace door in Damascus.”

Crushing the area is a way to signal the regime’s increasing dominance and the extent to which it is willing to employ brutal tactics against all opponents.”

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The Shadow of Russia’s Afghan Disaster overshadows Syria

Mona Alami is a French-Lebanese analyst and a fellow at the Rafik Hariri Centre for the Middle East at the London School of Economics. She lives in Beirut.

three months have passed since Russian President Vladimir Putin launched his ‘war’ on Syria. Yet, Moscow remains more concerned about the Syrian quagmire than ever before, when the country’s various government forces battling a mostly Sunni insurgency in the north and south of the country where a myriad of peripheral wars appears to be emerging.

Across Syria the stakes are rising, evidenced not least by Russia’s threat to retaliate in case of a US attack on Syrian government interests.

The further Russia becomes involved within Syria’s war, however, the more vivid the public memories of the Soviet Union’s disastrous intervention into Afghanistan become. Many differences exist between Moscow’s experiences in Syria and that of the Soviet Union’s sorry intervention in Afghanistan. Unlike Afghanistan, where the Soviet Union was fighting several anti-Soviet Islamic forces, united against what they perceived as a foreign aggressor, in Syria Russia is battling different opposition factions with various and competing agendas.

A further comparison is that, unlike in Syria, yet one that plays to Moscow’s advantage, is the similarity between the region’s equally diverse powers. Countries such as Israel and Turkey, often at odds with the region’s apenas, in Syria Russia is battling different opposition factions with various and competing agendas.

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Putin’s gamble appears to be paying off. However, in Afghanistan, several false assumptions could return to dog his feet. In the late 1970s, the Soviet Union did not fully appreciate the complexities of the Afghan culture and society that it was imposing its vision upon.

Likewise, in Syria, Putin believes he can instruct peace by force. That the Sochi peace process has been replaced by brutal force can be seen in the slaughter in Eastern Ghouta. Putin has also likened the majority Sunni opposition as “terrorists” and the Alawite community as the “legitimate Syrian government.” In doing so, Moscow’s policy of ethnic divide-and-rule and of bolstering the authoritarian state risks backfiring if the war continues for much longer.

Moscow’s policy of ethnic divide-and-rule and of bolstering the authoritarian state risks backfiring if the war continues for much longer.

Stephen Starr is the author of “Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising” and has lived in Syria and Turkey since 2007.

In February, heavy US artillery targeted pro-government forces attempting to capture an oil refinery in the east of the Euphrates valley, resulting in heavy casualties among the Russian mercenaries from the so-called Wagner group supporting the regime forces. This, combined with the dire warning of retaliation in the event of a US strike on its bases in Damascus, provides an indication of how distant total victory is.

Without reverting to a legitimate peace process, with or without Assad, the current situation is untenable. Without the prospects of recapitulating all of Syria, he will be faced with a low-yield emergency of that will do little to advance Russia’s long-term goals.

My sense is after the March 18 Russian election, Moscow is likely to be amending its Syria policies; yet I don’t think it would imply a departrt from Assad’s side.

Sometimes, in the cloud of constant news, events go unnoticed. Fifty dead in Syria last week; 22 killed yesterday; another in Adra near Damascus, on March 30.

The violence will continue unabated, until the regime controls Eastern Ghouta. Thousands are likely to die or face suffering deliberately inflicted, consciously employed. The survivors who do not flee face deportation as the area is diminished until the regime controls and with the prospect of ceasefires employed. The survivors who do not flee face deportation as the area is diminished until the regime controls.

Fearing the current conflict from its Afghan predecessor is the extent of Russia’s deployment. The Moscow discussion group Valdai said that as of 2017 Russia’s military commitment to Syria extended only for as special forces units, its aircraft and helicopters, 30 fighters, air fighters, special troops, 150,000 or so troopers sent to Afghanistan in 100 years is littered with murderous war after war. The reaction of the West to Russian intervention in Syria has been more muted than to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan. In the 1980s, the Afghan war with the United States and Chechnya countries supplied the mujahideen with funding and military hardware. However, in Syria, West- ern and Arab support has decreased significantly over the past two years as priority has been given to the war on the Islamic State (ISIS) and that in Yemen.

Syria’s threat to retaliate in case of a US strike on its bases in Damascus, provides an indication of how distant total victory is. That certainly is a risk that any top decision makers in Russia are aware of and would like to avoid.

Moscow’s policy of ethnic divide-and-rule and of bolstering the authoritarian state risks backfiring if the war continues for much longer.

The mirror of history, however, will show that industrial killing is happening every day – today, tomorrow and surely next month.

The political history of the past 100 years is littered with murderous dictators. Hitler killed millions of Europe’s Jews. Pol Pot massacred 1 million-3 million Cambodians in the 1970s. Saddam Hussein gassed thousands of Kurds in Halabja.

During the years will probably turn out to be the most murderous of all. This year is the 40th anniversary of the Six-Day War, 50th anniversary of the Cambodian genocide, 50th anniversary of the war in Afghanistan, 50th anniversary of the start of the Afghan war.

The past cannot be saved, there is no Cold War, no internal political strife akin to Russia’s perception of the West. There is no Cold War, no internal political strife akin to Russia’s perception of the West. It was imposing its vision upon.

There is one significant difference, however. While the lives destroyed by murderous dictatorships of the past cannot be saved, there is some hope for the people hiding in basements or covering in fear of the Syrian regime. There are thou- sands of people who fled Syria to Syria to find a better life. Can we still, today as in the past, can Syrians may provide a beacon of hope for the people facing humanitarian crises, particularly in the case of the conflict in Afghanistan.
Editorial

Battlefield defeat doesn’t mean ISIS has gone away

It has practically been crushed on the battlefield but the extremist group that grandly called itself Islamic State still poses a grave threat to the region and to the world.

Most of the group’s fighters in Iraq and Syria are on the run or confined to pockets such as Qamishli, the district near Damascus from which they drove out Syrian Army units just days ago. However, from these tiny enclaves, the Islamic State (ISIS) continues to carry out guerrilla attacks.

ISIS is also looking for refuge outside the Levant where it may appear to be lodg

riors, or rhetorical.

in Hungary’s border.

populists exploit the migration issue as much as

precarious by far.

force. The tide of xenophobia sweeping across the issue to voters.

the problem in a particular European country. It continues to beat the drum against “external

slowly evaporate. “

accept migrants, weakening “our cultural identity

European politicians to consolidate and extend Muslims have become a handy tool for populist victory by intensifying their road-tested xeno-

course to win a third consecutive landslide

Fidesz political party appear to be solidly on

nothing.

is a fatalistic sense the verdict will change

opportunity or a sense of injustice — real or

it’s a misconstrued idea of religion, sectarian

sionable young people.

regional peace and security, as well as to impres-

the expeditious death sentences.

is why human rights groups expressed alarm at

fact, stated the view that it would be better if

in Mosul suggested they should “all receive the
died another day. However, from these tiny

which they drove out Syrian Army units just

alliances with other detainees, promoting

Syria and Iraq may not be the best places to try

having left the region. Some of them are trying

development of Damascus is intimately linked to that of Beirut and vice versa. If it weren’t for the

Fighting the group’s lethal pitch is bound to be

The factors that drive youth towards ISIS’s
t has practically been crushed on the

However, in the view of some experts, the

is grossly overcrowded and insufficiently

Baghdad, has about 6,000 jihadist detainees. It

happen again, “ vowed an Iraqi Interior Ministry

Bakr al-Baghdadi worked for five years to recruit

as the birthplace of ISIS. It was there that Abu

prison in which US troops held Iraqi militants

in Iraq and Syria are faced with the

to sneak back into their countries of origin.

days ago. However, from these tiny footholds,

n(prompt) was quite clear: They wanted to

at昆仑山 in Mosul they will insist

took place in the city that the Center of

and organise the leadership and rank and file of

and may enhance the risk of the militants forging

as the anti-ISIS coalition, are faced with the

However, the group’s lethal pitch is bound to be the

the meaning of Saad Hariri’s battle

In the end, only the strong will

the culture of death, every single vote

challenges facing them and will

drive a wedge between the compo-

and many other zones after

al-Msaytbeh, Khandaq al-Ghamiq

neighbourhoods of Mazraa,

other minorities out of West

or be they Christian or Muslim,

culture of death, every single vote

choose life over death. Beirut

inhabitants have to do is respond

What Beirut needs is a team of represen-

tative of Saad Hariri and his collea-

gues on the blue list, people who believe in

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opment in Beirut.

Xenophobia should not determine Hungary’s
election verdict

Hungary has a general election April 8 but there is a
demographic tilt is bound to be the
tirest aspect of the war on ISIS.

The significance of Hariri’s battle for Beirut

Beirut voters need to realise that their vote will be crucial to stopping

Beirut and its importance for

the culture of life and move on

inhabitants will always

What will the people of Beirut do? Will they carry on resisting

In the end, the strong will

Survive and Beirut is a survivor. It

through another test

proved that it is still standing up to

who wished to bring

down on May 7,

then moved on to destroy the

of倩o’s “Republic.” Their

goal was quite clear: They wanted to

take the lead in the government to

drive a wedge between the compo-

ments of Lebanese society and usher

in another era of misery in Lebanon.

In that context, we need to grasp the

meaning of Saad Hariri’s battle

for Beirut and its importance for

Lebanon and the region. It is

the same battle for Lebanon that

started with the civil war of 1975. It

was no accident that Beirut was

left in ruins after that war.

Former Lebanese Prime

Minister Rafik Hariri was assassinated for

his “crimes” of bringing life back to

Beirut and of wanting to build

bridges between different factions of

Lebanese society. Those steps

were unforgivable in the eyes of

the authors and sponsors of

Hariri’s assassination.

At the top of the list of those

traitors and assassins are the

vengeful Syrian regime, whose

hatred for Beirut was beyond

belief, and the Iranian regime,

which specialised in spreading

ignorance and destruction. Just

look at what’s going on in Iraq

and Syrian cit"es and in some Lebanese

and Yemeni regions.

On May 6, during the

Lebanese general election, Beirut will

have another chance to demonstrate its

readiness to defend itself and to

choose life over death. Beirut

voters will prove they know

perfectly well the nature of the

challenges facing them and will

vote for Saad Hariri and his

companions. To beat back the

culture of death, every single vote

is going to be crucial.

The culture of death set foot in

Beirut when, in the 1980s, Hezbollah

militias drove Christians and

other minorities out of West

Beirut. Many people remember

how a large portion of West

Beirut’s Christians fled the

neighbourhoods of Mazraa,

al-Msaytbeh, Khandaq al-Ghamiq

and many other zones after

secular militias kicked out the

French Army in February 1948.

Beirut inhabitants will always

remember how sectarian militias

— be they Christian or Muslim,

or even different groups of

Christians or Palestineans—

conquered the city and systematically

destroyed all aspects of civilised

life. The destructive heresies got

their weapons from one source:

the Syrian regime.

The Syrian regime has

always wanted to see Beirut in ruins and

had ordered bombing operations

carried out by proxy Palestinian

factions. It used the Palestinian

Liberation Army (PLA) to patrol the

Green Line dividing Christian and

Muslim areas in Beirut and the PLA

became the tool used to wipe out

the culture of sharing and of life

from Beirut.

Little did the Syrian regime know

that the economic and social

development of Damascus has

begun to flourish, just as Beirut did.

In fact, all of Syria would have

flourished. However, the Syrian

regime was cursed by Beirut and

will remain so as long as it exists.

Beirut had seen a lot of unfair

and evil brought upon it.

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and evil brought upon it.
Mohammed bin Salman trying to remake Saudi image in the US

Rashmee Roshan Lall

The crown prince offered a vision of the future that most Americans would like. The crown prince appeared on video celebrating the silver anniversary of the Saudi Symphony Orchestra. The show — how could it be anything but, in the final cut. The Assads stick to a script that seems to put the war in the category of a weather phenomenon — unfortunate, but no matter what, always bring your own sunshine.

Essential ally. Members of the US military wait for an honour cordon for Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz at the Pentagon, on March 22.

OPINION

Tom Regan

A Rose in Damascus

■ A film by Marwan el-Hmedi

Jennifer Harooner

The Assads stick to a script that seems to put the war in the category of a weather phenomenon — unfortunate, but no matter what, always bring your own sunshine.

The Assads stick to a script that seems to put the war in the category of a weather phenomenon — unfortunate, but no matter what, always bring your own sunshine. As well as your own videographer.
Egypians head to the polls amid tight security

Amr Emam

Egyptian-Sudanese relations were expected to improve after the country’s interlopers agreed to enhance cooperation and solve past disputes to boost economic progress, Sudanese Ambassador to Cairo Abdel Mahmut Abdel Halim said.

"Khartoum has a keen desire to improve relations with Egypt," Abdel Halim said. "This is why it is open to all suggestions on achieving this goal."

Sudanese President Omar Al-Bashir visited Cairo on March 19 for talks with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi on bilateral cooperation. The meetings came two weeks after the reinstatement of Sudan’s ambassador to Cairo following his recall to Khartoum in January.

"The visit of the Sudanese president to Cairo reflects the positive spirit that prevails between our two states," Sisi said at a briefing after his meetings with Al-Bashir. He cited the importance of non-interference in the affairs of other countries and increasing cooperation.

Al-Bashir acknowledged that cooperation on regional and international issues is vital for both Sudan and Egypt. "There is a strong political will in both our countries for cooperation," Al-bashir said. "There is a need for more consultations and as well." Al-Bashir’s visit to Cairo came one week after Egypt’s acting interior minister, General Mohamed Nagi, visited Khartoum for talks with the Sudanese authorities. Khartoum is on track.

Sisi assured Al-Bashir that elections will take place in a turnover of only 47.5%. "We have confidence that the election a success, regardless of the vote in a turnout of only 47.5%," Nagi said. "We have confidence that the election will take place in a turnover of only 47.5%." Al-Bashir thanked the General Mohamed Nagi for his role in the election. This may explain the way both countries are moving forward.

Tension between the two countries had escalated by escalating their verbal attacks against each other. Sisi announced deployment of tens of thousands of army troops and policemen against each other. Sisi said he was in talks with Ethiopian President Abiy Ahmed on ways to push the differences aside for the election to take place in a turnover of only 47.5%.

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Tunisia's leader calls for electoral reform, acknowledges reasons for disappointment with government performance

Lamine Ghammi

Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi gives a speech during a ceremony marking the 62nd anniversary of Tunisia’s independence at the Carthage Palace, on March 20.

Gamement. Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi gives a speech during a ceremony marking the 62nd anniversary of Tunisia’s independence at the Carthage Palace, on March 20.

Lamine Ghammi is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis.

Libya’s mayors attempt to move into the driver’s seat

Michel Cousins

Faced with a political crisis at the national level, Libya’s mayors and other municipal leaders have taken it upon themselves to try to break the stalemate.

At a summit in Tripoli, representatives from 120 municipalities and towns took the unprecedented move of issuing an ultimatum to the House of Representatives (HoR) and the State Council (SC) to pass a law for elections for a new HoR and a president and the establishment of an interim government.

There are questions about the response of the militias, particularly the all-powerful ones in Tripoli.

They said that if no action was taken by April 7th, they would call on the Supreme Judicial Council to set aside the HoR and the SC, take over the legislative authority, issue an elections law and appoint a caretaker administration.

The creation of a local government system, with some 100 municipalities, elected councilors and mayors, is seen as Libya's only hope to break the paralysis of the country since the 2011 uprising that overthrew President Muammar Gaddafi.

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The local elections, which traditionally are held after national elections, were set to take place in 2019, not the municipal vote scheduled for May 6.

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Sami Moubayed
Beirut

Lebanon is bracing itself for parliamentary elections May 6, the streets of the capital Beirut have been transformed into a picturesque gallery of posters and placards as veteran and aspiring candidates vie for office. Almost all candidates are offering a picture of a government that is changing, and several are promising to stand as more neutral players that can help the country’s first parliament in 1990.

The 1990s system necessitates the use of pre-proportional voting system and the administration of managing the elections. Under the current system, this is not an option. Each voter must cast a preferential vote, one that will probably go to the candidate belonging to that voter's sect. Yet the real challenge for the electoral officials is that the voting process is far from being representative of the entire electorate.

A number of voters in Baalbek-Hermel (one Maronite and one Catholic), parliamentary seats: two Christian, two Sunni and two Shia seats. The number of voters in Baalbek-Hermel: 43,000 Christians, 43,000 Sunnis and 230,000 Shia, makes Hariri the plan ambitious and very difficult to achieve, since the share of Shia votes will go to candidates running with Hezbollah and Amal. The numbers in the district will make or break any upcoming parliamentary majority.

The难点 is that Hariri’s allies who will share of Shia votes will go to candidates running with Hezbollah and Amal. As a friend and ally of Hariri, Hezbollah has a strategic interest in ensuring that the quota is filled.

The elections’ meagre 82,900 registered voters casting their ballots on April 27 and 29, one week before the parliamentary elections. Lebanon’s democracy is like ice cream, as appetising and unimportant as it seems, but a reality that puts the system on its head and hope to reap what they deserve. The elections have been represented in every chamber since the 1990s.

Among those is former Prime Minister Tammam Salam, an economist and the son of a ranking political family who was famously accused and arrested over the Hariri assassination in 2005. He was released in 2009. A Shia officer with strong ties to Iran and Syria, Salam is excepted, close to Hezbollah. Additionaly, there is plenty of bad blood between Aoun’s son-in-law Gebran Bassil and Hariri because of a recent political feud that will make cooperation between Amal and the Aounists difficult.

Another is General Jamil al-Sayed, the former head of Lebanon’s General Security, who has famously accused and arrested over the Hariri assassination in 2005. He was released in 2009. A Shia officer with strong ties to Iran and Syria, Saad will greatly influence dynamics in the new chamber, according to Gebara, because one is a staunch ally of the Saudis and the other of Syria and Iran.

Sami Moubayed is a Syrian historian and author of “Under the Black Flag” (IB Tauris, 2013).

News & Analysis

Lebanon

Out with the old, in with the new: Lebanon’s elections promise changing of the guard

March 25, 2018

10

Shifting foundations. Electoral billboards for the upcoming 2018 parliamentary elections were released in 2016, a year before Shia Amal movement with a tagline running in Arabic “Your vote is a hope (Amal) for the borders.”

Lebanon gears up for parliamentary elections May 6, the streets of the capital Beirut have been transformed into a picturesque gallery of posters and placards as veteran and aspiring politicians seek office. Around these colourful ads, a popular campaign to be the one that uses a single-flavour ice cream cone to illustrate the mechanism of the presidential vote, demonstrating how all the voters’ choices have been included within a single list with no possibility of adding or removing a candidate’s name. A number of voters in Baalbek-Hermel (one Maronite and one Catholic), parliamentary seats: two Christian, two Sunni and two Shia seats. The number of voters in Baalbek-Hermel: 43,000 Christians, 43,000 Sunnis and 230,000 Shia, makes Hariri the plan ambitious and very difficult to achieve, since the share of Shia votes will go to candidates running with Hezbollah and Amal. The numbers in the district will make or break any upcoming parliamentary majority.

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Turkey ratcheting up tensions with West over incursions

Erdogan plunges ahead as free media fades to black

Washington

Erdogan's Troubles at Home, Abroad

The sale of Dogan gives the government complete control of the media ahead of general elections in 2019.

Erdogan ratchets up tensions with West over incursions

Long-term plans. Turkey-backed Syrian rebel fighters hold a Turkish national flag (R) and a Free Syrian Army flag at a checkpoint in Azaz on a road leading to Afrin, on February 22, 2018.

The Afrin operation has provided Erdogan with the golden opportunity to claim that he will resettle Turkey's Syrian refugees in these regions.

Aykhan Erdemir, a former Turkish lawyer

Turkey says it has every right to claim that he has the golden opportunity to fuel conspiracy theories, as he continues to portray himself as the protector of the Turkish nation.

Turkey's Syrian refugees in these regions will be too much. If I were to broadcast here and write ‘Paylan TV’ in the corner, I would have to go to one of the known platforms and get a licence. ‘Paylan added: ‘If tomorrow we become a country in which Netflix and YouTube are banned, it will have fallen into a league with the US state of North Korea.

There is little doubt that Turkey is in a new era in which the free media risks fading to black.

The Afrin operation was voiced by Turkey's NATO allies will present Erdogan opportunities to fuel conspiracy theories, as he continues to portray developments in northern Syria as yet another proof of the West's sinister plans to divide and weaken Turkey,' he wrote.

Erdogan plunges ahead as free media fades to black

Angela Merkel told parliament on March 21 that Turkey's legitimate opponents are being denied the right to take part in politics, and that events in Afrin were "unaccepta
ble" because "thousands and thousands of civilians are being persec
uted, dying or forced to flee."

Merkel's criticism came shortly before EU leaders were to meet with Erdogan in the Black Sea resort of Varna. The summit was designed to bring Turkish-European relations back on track after years of differences but Erdogan's belligerent policies prompted some EU officials to wonder whether the meeting should be called off.

Erdemir said Erdogan was trying to turn the push back from the West into an asset domestically.

"The criticism of the Afrin op
eration voiced by Turkey's NATO allies will present Erdogan opportunities to fuel conspiracy theo
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Iran boasts tripling missile output, raising concerns.

Ed Blanche

Beirut

Iran claims it has tripled its missile production in the face of strenuous efforts by the US and the EU to undermine its capabilities. Tehran decided to abandon what it sees as a non-proliferation measure in its nuclear programme. It deems its missile programme to be the pillar of national security.

Iran warned that any move by its adversaries to curtail its ambitious ballistic programme — the most advanced in the Middle East — would be met by force if need be.

Iran’s defiance of these efforts, which had redoubled since the July 2015 signing of an agreement with US-led global powers to rein in its contentious nuclear programme — which they claim is aimed at acquiring nuclear weapons — will undoubtedly intensify the issue of Iran’s efforts to build up its military capabilities.

The latest outburst from Tehran has rattled the US administration of President Donald Trump, a vociferous critic of the clerical regime in Iran and whose administration has tried to force the Iranians to abandon their high-profile military posture.

The Americans and their friends see Iran’s constant arms build-up as a direct threat regional — and further afield as its technology improvement process which keeps the Middle East, already beset by conflict, constantly on-edge.

The same conjuncture to Iran came about after French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian visited Tehran on March 5 and urged the hard-line regime to abide by the US, European and Russian involved in diplomacy on negotiating under any circumstances.

Tehran views the landmark deal concluded by the Barack Obama administration and other parties as soft. The Arab countries — the potential targets of Iran’s missiles — see it as sell-out by the Americans. The United States imposed new unilateral sanctions aimed at curtiling Iran’s missile development. Iran doggedly refused to discuss its missile programme during the long months of sanctions removal worded by the nuclear issue, leaving the United States and its fellow negotiators little choice but to acquiesce to Iran’s terms.

Trump has branded the agreement as a waste of time because, in the final analysis, Iran will likely acquire nuclear weapons and in the meantime develop long-range missiles capable of carrying nuclear warheads.

In a major policy shift in October, he threatened to pull out of the treaty, but the Europeans, eager to do business with Iran now that the sanctions have been lifted and its economy opened to outside investment, scrambled to salvage the 2015 deal, much to Trump’s chagrin.

The Iranians’ March claim to have tripled missile production did not specify what types of weapons were involved but it was widely interpreted as including medium- and long-range ballistic missiles.

While it remains unclear what current production amounts to, Western missile specialists say the Iranians have two- to three-ballistic missiles operational at launch sites across the country, including some deep inside mountains. Given the accelerated production of Iranian missiles, the total number of deployed missiles is probably far greater.

The operational weapons are believed to consist mainly of Shahab-1 and Shahab-2 short-range ballistic missiles derived from the former Soviet-era Scud-B and Scud-C.

A longer-range variant, the Shahab-3, capable of hitting all of Iraq, Afghanistan and western Saudi Arabia from permanent bases in the Iranian interior, is modelled on North Korea’s Rodong weapon. These missile systems are road-mobile, which makes it almost impossible for US surveillance satellites to determine launch sites that could be the targets of pre-emptive attacks.

On October 19, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) declared in a statement: “Iran’s ballistic missile programme will expand and it will continue with more speed in reaction to Trump’s hostile approach towards this revolutionary organisation.”

Brigadier-General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the IRGC’s aerospace forces, voiced Iran’s misgivings about US efforts to drastically curtail Iran’s missile programme.

“In the past, we had to explain our actions to various bodies but not anymore,” Hajizadeh boasted, but gave no time reference or other details.

Iran has apparently speeded up its ballistic missile drive because it is possibly anticipating US intervention of some kind by a peaved Trump.

Recent developments indicate that Iran has reached out to another pariah state, North Korea, which is also in Trump’s black book and with which Tehran is widely believed to have cooperated on missile programmes.

Pyongyang is engaged in developing a nuclear weapon and is a non-resident senior fellow at the Atlantic Council.

Ahmadinejad, Iran’s Robin Hood who never gave to the poor

Half a million dollars is hardly a small sum but it is dwarfed by the hundreds of millions, if not billions, of dollars of public funds that disappeared during Ahmadinejad’s presidency.

The scandal associated with the former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his associates, who seem to have been inspired by the first part of the legend but not necessarily the second.

This much is apparent from the stream of indictments against Ahmadinejad and his circle but the legal and political battle is having an extraordinary impact on al-Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), which Ahmadinejad is trying to drag down with him.

The scandalous affair began last November when the Justice Administration’s prosecution on embezzlement charges of Hamid Baghaei, Ahmadinejad’s vice-president, Baghaei was not in court, having sought refuge at the Hazrat-e Abd al-Azim shrine in Rey, south of Tehran, but he was sentenced for 15 years in prison and fined 100 billion rials. He was arrested the same day.

Ahmadinejad came to the rescue of his old friend, accusing the judiciary of being corrupt. More remarkably, Ahmadinejad published an open letter addressed to al-Quds Force commander Major-General Qassem Soleimani. Urging Soleimani not to “be guilty of injustice”, Ahmadinejad threatened to disclose prior correspondence with Soleimani.

Even as Ahmadinejad’s threats appeared on a friendly website, doLATonline.com, security forces arrested Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaei’s former vice-president and a close confidante of Ahmadinejad, who remains under investigation.

Ahmadinejad reacted to Mashaei’s arrest by disclosing that the judiciary had handed him over to the IRGC Intelligence Organisation. He subsequently wrote a few open letters to Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei complaining of the “lack of freedom in Iran for the past 40 years.”

All this happened after Ahmadinejad disclosed Baghaei’s letter to Soleimani after prosecution charges had been brought against him.

The letter, dated February 6, dwelt on money. Baghaei wrote: “Mr Hossinei Taeb, IRGC Intelligence Organisation chief, claims al-Quds Force, on August 5, 2013, paid me ($43 million) to distribute as a gift among certain Afghan heads of state…of which $750,000 was allegedly embezzled by me.”

This is a lie. But Ahmadinejad’s threats appeared on a friendly website, doLATonline.com, security forces arrested Esfandiar Rahim-Mashaei’s former vice-president and a close confidante of Ahmadinejad, who remains under investigation.

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The money disappeared into a complex web of charitable foundations, operating under Ahmadinejad’s watch, the result of his being deposed by the Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolutionaries.

Seen in this way, Ahmadinejad and his associates may win some public sympathy for stealing from the rich despite not giving to the poor.

A P: (402)
Iran boasts tripling missile output, raising concerns about North Korean factor

Armed and dangerous. They’ve 3 air defence missiles on display at an undisclosed location in Iran, last July.

The false notes of Khamenei’s New Year’s address

Ed Blanche

Beirut

Iran’s focus on building a powerful ballistic missile arsenal, which the Americans, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and US allies, among others, see as a major threat, has its origins in the 1980-88 war with Iraq in which major cities were hit by both aerial and missile strikes in which thousands of civilians were killed or wounded. The scale of the damage and the involvement of five periods of systematic and intense bombardments with missiles, aircraft and even long-range artillery from March 1984, when Saddam Hussein ordered indiscriminate attacks on all Iranian cities, through February 1987. In the first cluster of raids, at least 8,000 Iranian civilians were killed. All told, there were 13,000 Iranian casualties from those exchanges.

The objective was to inflict large civilian casualties to demoralize the infant Islamic Republic but the Iranians had already proved, became more determined to exact revenge and so was born the ballistic missile industry that would service the Americans so much.

The Iranians had few weapons with which to retaliate with the same intensity as the periodic raids mounted by the Iraqis, who had been aided by the United States. Eventually they acquired a handful of Soviet-era Scud-B short-range ballistic missiles (BM) from North Korea, Syria and Libya and began blasting Baghdad and Iranian cities.

They began developing their own Scud production but never established an entire industry from scratch, an enterprise that has become a predominant element in Tehran’s dealings with the West.

“The wartime need for ballistic missiles, as well as Iran’s historical animosity with Iraq, led Iran to develop its own missile industry,” observed Kyle Muskat, a US defense expert. “The lack of accuracy of Iran’s missiles makes the easiest targets and both Iranian and Iraqi civilians bore the brunt of the crude missile campaign.”

The Iranians never forgot their sense of humiliation sustained by Saddam’s military machine and these sustained, limited-range attacks on Iraqi cities.

“If the threat was militarily insignificant due to its poor accuracy, Tehran perceived the missile as a strategic success given that it enabled Iran to strike deep inside Iraq’s heartland and by the USNuclear Threat Initiative stated.

How Saddam’s ‘War of the Cities’ spawned Iran’s missile drive

Ed Blanche

The supreme leader’s crush on the world’s most powerful and profligate regime may not have seemed unreasonable on a day when all over the world, are protesting against the intervention of the Americans in the affairs of Iraq, Syria and the like... Well, that is none of your business... Our present is dictated by the governments and nations of the region... We asked for your assistance and we helped them.”

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Despite declaring victory against the Islamic State (ISIS) in December, Iraq continues to suffer from terror attacks by the group, leading to fears that the militants are attempting to regroup.

Civilian deaths in acts of violence have reportedly been lower in the past three months than on average since 2012 but the casualty figures are still concerning. ISIS is supposed to have been crushed. Figurines published by the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI) stated that 2,109 civilians died in acts of terrorism, violence and armed conflict in February. The most affected governorates were Baghdad (49 killed), Anbar (44) and Diyala (42).

UNAMI said the figures must be considered as the absolute minimum of civilian casualties.

The numbers do not include members of the army, government-sanctioned militias and the police killed on duty. Last month, 27 Shia militiamen died in an attack in Kirkuk province. Attacks against civilians and the military continued in March.

Civilian fatalities reported by UNAMI in December (69) and January (159) were a far cry from the 1,771 peak in June 2014 when ISIS captured Mosul.

Observers, however, said they were witnessing an attempt by ISIS militants to regroup.

“The fact that [ISIS] still has the ability and opportunity to launch attacks is worrying, especially after the overwhelming defeat they have suffered during the past few years, they have clearly adapted to their new ability and opportunity to launch attacks is worrying, especially after the Alabasi

militants were trying to get into Anbar province through Syria, where the group also appears to be trying to re-emerge.

After entering Iraq through Syria, they are likely to continue amid security concerns over ISIS fighters in Syria. In February, a small number of ISIS fighters escaped from a prison run by the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF).

“The fact that escape is possible has underscored the security worries. There have been urgent and growing concerns inside the US military and intelligence community about the security arrangements for hundreds of foreign ISIS fighters being held by the Syrian Democratic Forces,” CNN reported.

An additional worry is whether the SDF would strike another deal with ISIS, such as the one in which Kurdish-led forces allowed hundreds of ISIS fighters, with tonnes of weapons and ammunition, to leave Raqqa and spread across Syria. Some ISIS members reached eastern Syria near the Iraqi border.

There are fears that the Iraqi prison conditions of thousands of detainees accused of having links to ISIS could lead to radicalisation, especially as the jails do not segregate suspected terrorists and other convicts.

At least 19,000 people are in prisons for terrorism-linked offences. More than 3,000 have been sentenced to death, by an Associated Press (AP) stated. About 200 people were hanged last year.

“The mass incarceration and speed of guilty verdicts raise concerns over potential miscarriages of justice — and worries that jailed militants are recruiting within the general prison population to build new extremist networks,” AP reported.

Some trials reportedly took less than 30 minutes. “The Americans fixed their captives’ feet from 2003 to 2015 and deployed them to Syria,” said UNAMI.

Iraqi military officials said ISIS militants were trying to get into Anbar province through Syria, where the group also appears to be trying to re-emerge.

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Abbas’s outbursts highlight diplomatic dead ends

The Arab Weekly staff

London

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Palestine

US Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt issued a statement calling Abbas’s comment “highly inappropriate.” He said the Palestinian leader needed “to choose between hateful rhetoric and concrete, practical efforts to improve the quality of life of his people.”

State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said: “The US is concerned our comments were outrageous and unhelpful. We urge our Palestinian counterparts to focus its efforts on improving the lives of the Palestinian people and advancing the cause of peace.”

Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu reportedly said the US administration’s decisions on Jerusalem were outrageous and unhelpful. Observers said Abbas has run out of diplomatic options and turned to insults and accusations out of desperation.

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Why did Israel own up to its Syria 2007 air raid?

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Why did Israel own up to its Syria 2007 air raid?
When Bannon visits his far-right friends in Europe

Justin Salhani

March 25, 2018

Shortly after the Italian election, a former adviser to US President Donald Trump and head of the far-right news outlet Breitbart, visited Rome to level praise on Italy’s far-right candidate for prime minister, Matteo Salvini.

Bannon’s trip included stops in France and Germany. He addressed France’s nationalist Front National party, saying “let them call you racist” and “wear it as a badge of honour.” He praised Hungary’s Islamophobic leader Viktor Orban as a “real patriot” and a hero.

Bannon’s trip brings attention to the connections that have been forming between racist, xenophobic and anti-Muslim parties and figures in Europe and beyond.

Anti-EU parties have often coalesced around shared platforms. One of the prime locations they have done so in is the European Parliament.

This is the platform Salvini and his party, the League, used to attack European values. Salvini’s success in Italy’s March election in Italy, where his party received 18% of the vote and surpassed Silvio Berlusconi’s Forza Italia to become the lead party in the centre-right coalition, is largely due to what many have nearly mirrored that of Bannon’s former boss Trump during the US elections in 2016.

Salvini ran a platform of “Italy first” and party of white supremacists is expected to claim electoral success in Amsterdam, a feat that the right wing, the Trump-friendly party of Geert Wilders never even attempted.

Bannon’s warm受欢迎 in those European circles shows a coalescing around anti-Muslim and nativist sentiments over other sort of sentiments. Bannon, however, also is recovering from a rather rough few months. After being jettisoned from the White House he returned to Breitbart, the platform for the alt-right, before being told he was not needed there, too.

“It seems that Bannon is mainly touring to support himself rather than the European far right,” said Cas Mudde, a scholar at the University of Georgia who focuses on political extremism and populism in Europe and the United States.

“The more of the marginalised European far right will embrace him as he is in a political vacuum as it is in the US,” he said.

The trip brings attention to the connections that have been forming between racist, xenophobic and anti-Muslim parties and figures in Europe and beyond.

What’s ahead in the Middle East with six more years under Putin?

Although the result was never in doubt, Vladimir Putin was re-elected to another 6-year term as president of Russia.

This may only be possible if the Middle East does not move to new conflict areas. The Middle Eastern governments are still too expensive for their economies and expelling immigrants. Putin sees himself as a warlord against the “Islamic invasion” of Europe. In 2017, he visited and vowed to shut down a small Bangladeshi community centre in Milan.

The League’s is the most dangerous, anti-immigrant force in Italy right now and naturally well placed to be riding this anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim wave that’s anywhere but on the alt-right in Europe.

Bannon is capitalising on the League’s historic hatred of ‘others’ and racist ideologies of Northern Superpower. Those ‘others’ used to be Southerners and now they are the immigrants whom he accuses of being responsible of crime in Italy.

During the US election in which Bannon and Trump pushed the xenophobia and anti-Muslim narrative, he accused Mexican immigrants of being rapists and claimed, “I think it is probably the best story we have...”

He praised Hungary’s Islamophobic prime minister as a “true leader” and “a man of the people.”

“Particularly in countries where anti-Muslim parties and figures in Europe have been coalescing around anti-Muslim and nativist sentiments, it’s a message that can be expected to claim electoral success in Amsterdam, a feat that the right wing, the Trump-friendly party of Geert Wilders never even attempted.”

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Weaponised influence? A Russian soldier stands near a poster of Russian President Vladimir Putin at Wafflecamps in Damascus, Syria, on March 2, 2018.
Sarkozy allegations point to dark side of transactional politics

Sarkozy's investigation over campaign financing linked to Qaddafi's revenge from the grave

Mark Habeeb
East-West Editor of The Arab Weekly and adjunct professor of Global Politics and Security at Georgetown University in Washington.

Sarkozy allegations point to dark side of transactional politics

ost democracies have been shaken since Russian President Vladimir Putin won re-election in their elections and political processes. Washington, two congressional committees and a special prosecutor are investigating allegations of subversive-Russian involvement in the 2016 US presidential race. Across Europe charges have been made concerning Russian ties with and financing of nativist political parties.

However, if French investigators prove correct, Moscow's activities will seem downright amateurish compared to the help that Libya's late dictator Muammar Qaddafi purportedly provided former French President Nicolas Sarkozy. Sarkozy spent two days in police custody being questioned over claims he received as much as $60 million from the Qaddafi regime during his presidential campaign in 2007. He won the election and served as France's president until 2012. At the time, the legal campaign financing limit in France was $25 million and foreign funding of campaigns was illegal.

The allegations were made in 2012 by Mediapart, a French investigative website, and denied by Sarkozy. The investigation was reopened when Ziad Takieddine, a French-Lebanese businessman, told Mediapart in 2016 that he received suitcases stuffed with cash from Qaddafi's intelligence chief that he personally delivered to Sarkozy in 2007. If the allegations are proven true, it is unclear what Qaddafi received in exchange for the money. Soon after his election, Sarkozy invited Qaddafi to Paris for a state visit with the accompanying pomp — perhaps this gesture of legitimacy is what Qaddafi craved after years of being a pariah. To the dismay of Western democracies, “this clown gives me legitimacy,” Sarkozy said. It would take a brave politician to take part. Big questions — if the charges are true, then does this, it is called “democracy building.” In the final analysis, the desired outcome is the same: A sympathetic if not compliant government with which it is easy and profitable to work.

The Sarkozy allegations point to the possible dark side of transactional politics. They may be, however, a mere drop in the bucket — we never know how many instances are never uncovered. In any case, they may lead to closer scrutiny and vigilance.

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Egypt, UAE agree to forge strong economic ties

Cairo

Egypt and the United Arab Emirates have agreed to forge stronger economic, trade and investment partnership following a meeting of UAE Economy Minister Sultan bin Saeed al-Mansoori’s visit to Cairo. The pledge for greater Egyptian-UAE cooperation comes in a broad or move to greater Arab economic integration.

“Egypt is well-placed to play a role in formulating a comprehensive strategy for economic cooperation among Arab states,” Mansoori said. “At the bilateral level, Cairo and Abu Dhabi need to locate industrial capacities on the ground to move ahead with satisfying the needs of their peoples.”

Manoussos was in Cairo for a March 17 meeting of the Joint Egyptian-UAE Economic Committee, in which the Egyptian and UAE governments reflected on bilateral economic cooperation and plan for future cooperation. It was also a chance for the private sector of both countries to explore further business opportunities.

Trade and investment relations between Egypt and the UAE made unprecedented strides in the past three years, including a 20% increase in trade, Egyptian Trade and Industry Minister Tarek Khalifa said.

The UAE became the world’s largest importer of Egyptian goods in 2017, buying $5.5 billion worth of its products. The UAE also invested $6.2 billion in Egypt in 2017. There are nearly 900 UAE companies operating in Egypt and UAE nationals provide vital investment in several Egyptian sectors, notably real estate.

Egyptians invested $826 million in the UAE and many Egyptians work in the UAE.

During the economic committee meetings, Khalifa called for removing obstacles to economic cooperation with the UAE. He said Cairo has taken measures to encourage UAE businessmen to invest in Egypt, including facilitating industrial licensing measures and establishing an industrial investment map of 4,800 potential industrial projects for investment.

Cairo and Abu Dhabi are seeking to forge stronger economic and security cooperation. They view their relations from a strategic point, not only on economic interests, said Ahmed al-Wakil, the head of the Federation of Egyptian Chambers of Commerce, which organise a meeting of Egyptian and UAE businessmen.

“Arab countries can only survive if they join hands economically,” Wakil said. “The presence of the two states at the door for unlimited cooperation opportunities.”

This political will was highlighted by UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed during a news conference with Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry.

He confirmed that the two countries were facing the same challenges and aggression from Iran and Turkey and asserted Egyptian support for the UAE in the face of Iranian aggression.

Wakil said. “The presence of will and the UAE cooperation comes in a broad regional coalition.”

The UAE, together with Saudi Arabia, offered billions of dollars in aid to Egypt following former President Muhammad Morsi’s ouster in 2013. Apart from economic support, Abu Dhabi also offered unlimited political support to Cairo.

Both countries agreed to enhance trade and investment cooperation, including simplifying administrative procedures and facilitating investment.

“Egypt’s current position is conducive to the transition of a new phase of cooperation and partnership with other Arab countries, realising our future aspirations for prosperity,” Manoussos said.

There were talks on how Egyptian-UAE cooperation could activate greater Arab economic cooperation across the region.

“The two countries also have major objectives to work on in doing business in other Arab countries, where administrative barriers and war-torn areas need reconstruction,” said Egyptian economist Faikir al-Fiqqi. “This will ensure that cooperation between Egypt and the UAE will morph into a regional activity.”

However, success in securing greater regional economic cooperation will depend on how Egypt and the UAE, including major oil producers, counter the potential for divisive political gains across Arab countries, realising our future aspirations for prosperity.”

Opportunities

UAE companies operate in Egypt and UAE nationals provide vital investment in several Egyptian sectors, notably real estate.

Iraq’s un Betting economy of remittances

The potential for remittance- induced growth is eroded by perpetual warfare, political chess games, emigration and the blanket of corruption smothering growth.

The potential for remittance-induced growth is eroded by perpetual warfare, political chess games, emigration and the blanket of corruption smothering growth.

The former US military intelligence officer, now an independent journalist with a column focusing on Iraq’s ancient history and contemporary political scene, Nazi Tarzi, has written a piece on Iraq’s economy and remittances, and the role they play.

In his latest article, Tarzi explores the impact of remittances on the Iraqi economy, highlighting their importance as a source of income for individuals and families, especially in rural areas.

Remittances, he argues, are a vital source of income for Iraqis living abroad, providing a lifeline for their families back home.

However, the impact of remittances is not without challenges.

Tarzi points out that in recent years, the Iraqi economy has faced significant challenges, including a lack of political stability, corruption, and a lack of investment in infrastructure.

Despite these challenges, remittances remain a crucial source of income for many Iraqis, particularly those in rural areas where there is limited employment opportunities.

Remittances have allowed families to maintain their living standards and support their families, especially during periods of economic hardship.

However, Tarzi also points out that remittances are not a substitute for structural economic reform, and that they cannot be relied upon to drive sustainable economic growth.

He argues that to truly tap into the potential of remittances, Iraq needs to address the root causes of economic challenges and implement policies that promote long-term development and stability.

Iraq needs a strong, inclusive government that can implement policies that attract investment and create jobs.

The government also needs to invest in education and healthcare, as these sectors are crucial to the long-term development of the country.

Tarzi emphasizes the importance of addressing corruption, which erodes public trust and hampers economic development.

He calls for greater transparency and accountability in government decision-making, as well as the implementation of policies that promote good governance.

In conclusion, Tarzi argues that while remittances are an important source of income for many Iraqis, they cannot be relied upon to drive sustainable economic growth.

To truly tap into the potential of remittances, Iraq needs to address the root causes of economic challenges and implement policies that promote long-term development and stability.

The government needs to work with international partners to address the root causes of economic challenges and implement policies that promote long-term development and stability.
Growing demand. An employee grasps a handful of phosphate pebbles at a storage facility. (Reuter)

Algeria ramps up phosphate production giving Maghreb dominant role in industry

Lamine Ghanmi
Tunis

Algeria is looking to increase its phosphate production from 2 million tonnes per year to 14 million tonnes per year by 2020 and position itself as one of the world's premier phosphate exporters.

The plan, which includes a $6 billion plant under construction in partnership with China, is expected to help meeting global demand for phosphate, which is expected to rise to 40 million tonnes by the end of this decade, data from the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) and US Geological Survey stated.

If Algeria meets target outputs, the Maghreb would have the potential to supply the world more than 3 million tonnes of phosphate per year by 2020.

More than 80% of the world's rock phosphate reserves are in the Maghreb, with an estimated 35 million tonnes in Morocco, including more than 5 million tonnes in the province of the southern Sahara territory. Morocco's annual phosphate production capacity is 12 million tonnes and Tunisia produces up to 8 million tonnes annually.

Scientists say rock phosphate is uniquely capable of processing fertiliser and replacement is expected in the near future. Phosphate – an early element of rock phosphate – is needed by animals and humans to maintain a healthy metabolism, the FAO said.

Experts said demand for fertilisers would grow at least 2% per year as the world's populationrose and to addressustainable land declined.

Algerian officials said they are optimistic they can expand their share of the growing market with the new plant.

"Apart from providing thousands of jobs, the plant will bring Algeria export earnings of between $1 billion and $1.5 billion per year," said Abdelmennouf Ould Kaddour, chairman and chief executive officer of Algeria's oil and gas state company Sonatrach.

Ould Kaddour said the phosphoric acid complex, being built in the eastern province of Souk Ahras, would be open at the end of 2019 and will be fed from the Blid el Hadifa phosphate mine in Tébessa province. The mine has approximately 2 billion tonnes of reserves, the Algerian Ministry of Energy and Mines said.

The ministry said Algeria planned to increase phosphate production to 15 million tonnes per year in 2020 by exploiting the reserves of El Hadfa of 2 billion tonnes and other mines.

"With this mine of 2 billion tonnes of reserves, Algeria can be the supplier to the phosphorus and phosphate industry in Africa," Industry and Mines Minister Youssef Yousfi said.

Other phosphate mines with significant reserves are Betteja, Djebli Ouk and Djejmoun. Some phosphate companies already have partnerships.

"I think we are open to being helped by everyone to develop our fertiliser industry, which will permit Algeria to end its dependency on oil and gas," said Ould Kaddour after touring the project's building site.

Oil and gas account for more than 90% of Algeria's exports and approximately 60% of state revenues.

Algeria's reliance on hydrocarbon and the state's command economy prevented Algeria from exploiting and benefiting from its large range of minerals, gold and zinc.

Algeria's priorities discussed at Crans Montana Forum in Dakhla

Saad Guerraoui
Casablanca

Africa's priorities discussed at the main agenda items of the fourth Crans Montana Forum (CMF) in the southern Moroccan city of Dakhla and Casablanca.

More than 1,000 participants from 100 countries, including former ministers, leaders of parliaments, policymakers, parliamentarians and international experts, attended the forum.

This year's theme focused on issues such as the future of Africa, sustainable development, the continent's challenges in globalisation and cooperation among African countries.

Moroccan King Mohammed VI sent a message to the CMF via Yتجا Khatatt, president of the Dakhla- Oued Ed-Dahab region, in which he described Africa as "a land of opportunities" that should be maximised for the continent's development.

"Africa is at a crossroads. The profound changes under way in the continent are multidimensional. They point to a rapidly changing Africa – a continent increasingly removed from the stereotypes and negative cliches it has been labelled with," the king's message said.

"To achieve progress, however, Africa needs to muster all its energy and build on innovative, win-win partnerships.

"The need for all kinds of support to ECOWAS is proving increasingly urgent.

The need for all kinds of support to ECOWAS is proving increasingly urgent.

"The need for all kinds of support to ECOWAS is proving increasingly urgent. That said, the problems faced by this regional organisation in the integration process are numerous," he warned, emphasising the political instability and bad governance that have marked the history of many countries in the subregion."

ECOWAS includes 15 West African countries, none of which shares a border with Morocco. Rabat, however, is an ECOWAS "privileged strategic partner."

The results of a study of Morocco's potential membership were favourable for the North African country.

The companies will be added to a US Commerce Department list but South Sudanese officials are expected to challenge the US decision if they believe they are unfairly targetted.

The US restrictions trade with South Sudanese oil firms

The United States imposed restrictions on exports of US technical support for South Sudanese oil industry, warning that it is fuelling the conflict in the country.

US State Department spokeswoman said said exporters would need a licence to export, re-export or transfer US technology to South Sudanese oil-related entities.

The companies will be added to a US Commerce Department list but South Sudanese officials are expected to challenge the US decision if they believe they are unfairly targetted.
Saudi Arabia vows to eradicate Muslim Brotherhood’s influence on education

Hassan Abdel Zaher

Cairo

Life in the southern Cairo area of Tal al-Aqarib— Arabic for “Scorpions’ Hill” — will never be the same. Beautiful modern homes are being constructed to replace the corrugated metal shacks people who lived in the 2.5 hectares slum used as housing for decades. Nearly 4,000 people lived in the area before they were removed, provided with alternative temporary housing and the shum razed to make way for the new homes. These residences are turning the area into a compound that will include almost everything the time residents will need when they return next May.

Tal al-Aqarib is one of dozens of slums that have either been demolished or upgraded as the government seeks to clear all such blighted areas nationwide. The Egyptian government has approximately $1 billion in its coffers, fund Executive Director Alayli’s fund has spent $17 million on new home construction to replace makeshift shelters. There will also be commercial shops, parks and other facilities. The residents of the slum agreed with the fund to change the area’s name. One of the suggested names is “Sayeda Zeinab Garden.” Sayeda Zeinab is the historical district where the slum is located.

“The project is not with its detractors, including some who would rather remain in the slums than be relocated far away. “I have to spend more money now to get to and from work every day,” said Ali Abuliash, a 35-year-old Cairo restaurant worker who was recently moved from Manshiet Nasser to Al-Azhar, a new urban community kilometers away. “This, of course, costs me more money.” The Slum Development Fund has approximately $1 billion in its coffers, fund Executive Director Khalid Sadek said.

We can see an end to the presence of the slums very soon,” he said.

Some reports said that goal could never be reached by the end of this year, although many say that timeframe is unrealistic.

Slums formed in Egyptian cities over the last four decades with massive migration from rural areas, especially the southern provinces to Cairo and the coastal cities. Many of those who migrated from undeveloped areas found it hard to keep up with the high cost of housing in the cities, which was why they lived in makeshift homes.

“This is why it is necessary to address the root causes of the disease, not its symptoms,” Alayli said. “The slums are only the expression of a bigger problem that is the lack of development in some parts of Egypt.”

Egypt’s economic plan has focused on the equal distribution of development among the nation’s provinces. Development projects, especially industrial ones, have been constructed in southern Egypt, seeking to catch up with decades’ worth of development concentrated in Cairo and the coastal cities. “These projects will encourage workers in these provinces to stay because there are opportunities there,” Alayli said.

One of the results of fair distribution of development is that migrants leaving Cairo and coastal cities for developing areas in southern Egypt and the Nile Delta. This is helping lower the price of housing in Egypt’s big cities, with the hope that slum-dwellers will be able to afford better living conditions as a result.

Some estimates put the number of slum dwellers nationwide at 18 million.

In Tal al-Aqarib, thousands of people have benefited from the fund. Alayli’s fund has spent $71 million on new home construction to replace makeshift shelters. There will also be commercial shops, parks and other facilities. The residents of the slum agreed with the fund to change the area’s name. One of the suggested names is “Sayeda Zeinab Garden.” Sayeda Zeinab is the historical district where the slum is located.

“This is not merely a new life for the households, says Sayed al-Assuiti, a 40-year-old construction worker who arrived in the area recently. “This is not merely a new life for the slum-dwellers nationwide,” Alayli said.

Apart from offering marginalised citizens safe and clean housing, the slum eradication project gives work to residents, especially contractors. Most of the money spent on the project comes from ordinary Egyptians who contribute to the national “Long Live Egypt Fund,” which was begun by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi in 2014.
Making Jordan accessible for wheelchair users

Nadzi Tarzi

London

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Tondaf team won first prize at the

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Organisers explained that hacka

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Use to spot free parking spaces

The group devised an application

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Tunis Culture City

Tunisia inaugurates mega-centre for culture

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunis

A new arts complex in Tunis is set to restore Tunisia’s place as a leading cultural player in North Africa and the Arab world. Tunisian Culture Minister Mohamed Zine el-Abidine said:

“Every Tunisian should be proud of this project,” said Tunisian Prime Minister Beji Caid Essebsi at the March 21 opening ceremony. “Culture is the main tool with which we will fight terrorism. Tunisians have to dream and have confidence in themselves.”

I do not hesitate to say that this ministry is the guarantor of freedom of expression, the right to the culture and all that helps culture bloom and thrive.

Tunisian Minister of Culture Mohamed Zine el-Abidine

Zine el-Abidine, in an interview with The Arab Weekly, said the project aimed to promote the values of culture and free expression enshrined in the constitution.

“We are trying to reconcile and combine two fundamental concepts of cultural policies: citizenship rights to culture and the principle of cultural democratization,” Zine el-Abidine said. “They are two principles that are not always easy to fit together.”

Zine el-Abidine, who holds three doctorates from Paris’s Pantheon-Sorbonne University and previously served as the director of the Higher Institute of Music of Tunis and Sousse and the director of the 2010 International Carthage Festival, said part of the centre’s aim was to provide cultural opportunities to all citizens.

To do so, the City of Culture and its branches are creating programmes with civil society groups to empower artists to develop and showcase their talent, he said.

“Through our policies, we are trying to express the idea that culture is the confirmation of artists’ rights to express their singularities and uniqueness through what they produce,” he said.

“Tunisia inaugurates mega-centre for culture

Inside Tunisia’s City of Culture

Stephen Quillen

Tunis

From cinemas to art galleries to an opera-ballet, Tunisia’s newly inaugurated City of Culture boasts a range of independent cultural and artistic spaces.

One of the first to open its doors was the Tunisian Cinematheque, an audiovisual library dedicated to preserving Tunisian cinema. Inaugurated March 21, featuring Italian-Tunisian actress Claudia Cardinale as the guest of honour, the centre stores an extensive database of audiovisual references.

“It is very important to have such a library for the history of the country and the national record,” said Tunisian Minister of Culture Mohamed Zine el-Abidine at a news conference. “Culture should bring back the positive image of Tunisia.”

Also on display during the attraction’s opening week was the exhibition “A Tunisian Modernity 1875-1975,” a retrospective on Tunisia’s cultural and intellectual contributions during the period. Among the items showcased was the founding text of the abolition of slavery, written by Ahmed I Bey on January 22, 1846.

Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi, who toured the exhibit following the inaugural ceremony, emphasised the role of the “City of Culture” in promoting freedom of expression.

“There is no creativity without freedom and one of the achievements of the revolution is freedom of expression and creation,” said Essebsi.

Zine el-Abidine said the media played no small part in safeguarding that tradition.

“Media [are] the foundation of cultural expression...We want to have a constructive relationship with the press,” he said, adding that a press club would be set up on the complex.

Also in the City of Culture is the National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, which hosts a permanent exhibition of plastic arts. In partnership with the Ministry of Education and other institutions, the museum aims to “establish interactions with the connoisseur and layman public of all ages through adapted teaching tools,” with a special focus on Tunisia’s young.

The mega-centre will host the House of Poetry, House of the Novel and the Tunis Institute of Translation, each acting as a resource for authors, creators, researchers and readers.

Zine el-Abidine said the literary centres would put Tunisia on track to “become a leader of culture in North Africa.”

Music and dance have prominent places in the City of Culture, with a choir and Opera Orchestra of Tunisia to “bring together a core of the best instrumentalists and choristers of the country,” and the Tunis Opera Ballet, the National Troupe of Popular Arts and the Choreographic Centre to be established.

Zine el-Abidine said the groups represented “an important achievement for the local Tunisian music scene” and Tunisia’s broader goal of becoming a cultural hub.

“It’s not enough that we create an opera house... We also want to create cultural reference points,” he said.
Emerging artists in UAE offer different takes on language

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Dubai

In Arabic, “Ishara,” denotes “sign,” the most basic form of communication and the language of the linguistic, gestures and indications, and as commonly used sign to communicate language. It is also the theme of the exhibition at Concrete in Dubai’s Alserkal Avenue: “Ishara: Signs, Symbols and Shared Languages.”

Curated by Katrin Sultan with Laura Merlo, curator of Marraya Art Centre, the show is part of the UAE Unlimited exhibition annual program and which rotated between Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah.

In his announcement, ten UAE-based artists – Anna Dubbagh, Chaobh, Mohsen Hamdy, Maria Khourdi, Farah al Qasimi, Flounder Lee, Nasir Nassif, Saheb Qurshah, Salem al Mansouri and Shukria al Kerbi – created works that are thematically informed by the understanding of the meaning and use of language.

Challenging, and at the same time, local innovators running digital experiments that look at how language functions in social media and through the internet.

“Finnish writing” was launched as emerging artists,” Sultan said. “The UAE Unlimited platform, for which I am the guest curator for the 2018 edition, primarily focuses on emerging artists. So mainly this exhibition is for the young and even those who more are experienced are new to the scene or are developing their practice.”

“There is no language but a very broad basis,” he said. “I selected this theme because language is kind of an essential feature of the landscape here in the UAE. And because of the fact that the three major cities – Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah – are port cities with people from all over the world. “Each artist thinks of language in a very different way and how it comes together to enfold semiotic spaces and meaning.”

The artists responded to the theme through diverse practices and approaches, from drawing and printmaking to immersive video works and responsive installations.

Dubbagh selected ten poems from the pre-Islamic era called the “Al Maqamah” for an interactive installation titled “The Hanging Odes.” The verses were recited orally in Mecca and suspended in the holy city. Dubbagh used machine embroidery on men’s clothing fabric and assembled them to “basically make them unreadable as language and render them more as scripture,” Sultan said.

Being mostly concealed due to the form of the installation, the words of the poems are read in a different way that creates new meaning and will be forgotton after a while.

Qurshah’s 100 small technical drawings titled “Land Marks” deals with in-between places such as borders and no-man’s lands but this could also be described as an exhibition between languages.

Nassif’s “Going Inside,” in “The Dictionary” and “Body Language” is not based on texts by Hassan Sharif, Abbas Kiarostami, and Hassan Madan, respectively, in addition to an important contribution to the art scene here. He asked the artist to use created 3D objects. As the words, as the texts, to read out and the data converted into an algorithm to produce a new interpretation of the contents. The work reverts to the audience, seemingly communicating about the visitor’s intuition.

N.P. Krishna Kumar is an Arab Weekly contributor in Dubai.

BOOK REVIEW

Rediscovering Ibn Khaldun, a pioneering Arab medieval mind

Francis Ghilics

Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis in 1332 and lost his parents, as well as his community, while fighting, at the age of 17 to the Black Death which claimed tens of thousands of lives in North Africa. “It was a disaster of such proportion,” said the historian who history of his book as chief judge of the Maliki rite of Islam.

The first question Ibn Khaldun asks is who historians make mistakes? “Three things lead to error in writing history. First, partisanship. Second, gullibility. Third, partiality.” Albert Irwin explains that he supplied a history to address since earlier chroniclers had not given serious consideration to the general laws that govern the formation and dissolution of human societies.

The most famous concept he developed was that of “asaba’ya” (social solidarity) among nomads, what Ibn Khaldun observed were the tribal place in history. He argued that, after a newly triumphant ruler and his tribal following had installed themselves in a city, an inevitable decay would set in over three or four generations, as the regime came to indulge in luxury and extravagance. As the bonds created by tribal solidarity and nomadic austerity weakened, the ruler came to rely on mercenaries and, to pay his troops, imposed taxes that were not sanctioned by Islam. The loosening of Ibn Khaldun has a moral and historical dimension, not a political, basis. Irwin argues that Ibn Khaldun’s irrelevance to our present times, as well as his importance, is his understanding of language. He is looking at language but on a very broad basis, he said. “I selected this theme because language is kind of an essential feature of the landscape here in the UAE. And because of the fact that the three major cities – Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah – are port cities with people from all over the world.”

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N.P. Krishna Kumar is an Arab Weekly contributor in Dubai.
Oualidia, Morocco’s unusual seaside village for the laid-back travellers

Saad Guerraoui

Looking for peace and quiet and breathtaking views? Morocco’s coastal Western village of Oualidia is the place to be.

Forget about monuments and the hassle of souvenir and handicraft vendors in Morocco’s imperial cities. Forget about the stressful urban life that drains energy. The clock in Oualidia ticks slowly.

The El Jadida-Safi motorway has eased access to Oualidia. For those who choose to use public transport from Casablanca, there are a few coaches that serve this itinerary. However, they make many stops, which means it might take four hours to reach Oualidia, instead of a 3-hour journey via the motorway.

There are plenty of outdoor activities in Oualidia, including surfing, bird watching and quad bike riding on the beach.

Nevertheless, the journey is worth it. Because Oualidia is not a usual coastal resort. Some celebrities choose to spend time in the village of more than 15,000 inhabitants and famous for its protegated lagoon and oysters.

Canadian actress and model Shay Mitchell stayed last May at Oualidia’s kasbah-like La Sultana Hotel, which was a mouth-watering venue for leftovers thrown to them by tourists while seagulls desperately waited for them. “No photos!” Ghassou explained that the fisherman was not allowed to catch fish with the net in the lagoon but he said with a sigh: “This is their only bread and butter. How do you want them to survive?”

Oualidia inhabitants live mostly on fishing and agriculture. Tourism is seasonal in the village, which doubles in population in the summer as mainly local tourists enjoy its golden sandy beaches.

After we reached shore, I decided to try one of the fancy restaurants overlooking the beach but Ghassou proposed a walk down the beach to the fishing village. The 10-minute walk was well worth it. The smell of fresh fish on the grill filled the air while seagulls desperately waited for leftovers thrown to them by tourists.

A young fisherman politely asked if we were going to have lunch. He took me to the barbecue next to which were a mouth-watering variety of fresh fish, including lobster and king prawns.

We had a tomato-and-onion salad, four shellfish, one peradour, one lobster and half a king prawn for 250 dirhams ($27) with a sea view, a price that could have been more than triple in a restaurant. While having lunch, a man in his 60s approached politely with a small basket holding sea urchins and razor clams. “It’s 2 dirhams per piece. Why don’t you take all of them?” asked Lhaj Lfatmi, whose mark, which had earned it the title of “oyster capital,” a reference to the major role shellfish harvesting plays in the local economy.

Freshly made mint tea was a must to digest the fish (the teapot cost $2.20 for two people) while watching waves crashing against the rocks.

Next to us were tables filled with 60-something tourists who drove from Europe with their caravans that filled the campground a few metres from the beach. As we walked to downtown, oyster vendors on motorbikes roamed Oualidia’s domaine streets.

Most of the houses are painted in blue and white, which gave the impression of being in a northern seaside resort. Oualidia is the perfect place for those seeking a laid-back break. There are plenty of outdoor activities, including surfing, bird watching and quad bike riding on the beach (a quad bike can be rented for $22 an hour).

A general view of the southern side of the lagoon.

A young fisherman cooks and grills fresh fish in Morocco’s coastal village of Oualidia

A tourist throws fish leftovers to birds.

Tourists on a boat in Morocco’s coastal village of Oualidia.

Forget about monuments and the hassle of souvenir and handicraft vendors in Morocco’s imperial cities. Forget about the stressful urban life that drains energy. The clock in Oualidia ticks slowly.

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