US, allies launch strikes in Syria after gas attack

Ed Blanche

Beirut

The United States, Britain and France have carried out limited air strikes against Syria, hitting what were identified as three chemical weapons facilities in retaliation for an alleged chemical weapons attack April 7 on the besieged town of Douma that killed some 40 civilians.

The scale of the coalition’s coordinated missile assault in the early hours of April 14 local time was clearly restricted to avoid triggering a confrontation with Russia or Iran, Syrian President Bashar Assad’s key allies in the complex Syrian war now in its eighth year, while degrading his chemical weapons capabilities.

The US declared “we have a very high confidence that Syria was responsible” for the attack on Douma, but gave no details. “These are crimes of a monster,” US President Donald Trump said.

Damascus denied it was responsible, and Russia accused Russia of staging the attack. The short, sharp Western operation appeared to be intended as a one-off assault, with no further operations planned unless Assad carried out more gas attacks.

Despite the evident calibration of the air strikes, Russia warned darkly that there would be “consequences” for the air and cruise missile raids from US, British and French destroyers and submarines deployed in the eastern Mediterranean.

It remains to be seen what those might be. But it is widely held that Moscow does not want a direct confrontation with the US and its allies in Syria that could endanger Assad and what is left of his regime.

Details of the air strikes were scant, but they appear to have involved a limited number of aircraft. Britain, for instance, provided four Tornado jets operating from the British air base at Akrotiri on Cyprus across the eastern Mediterranean from Syria.

According to Western sources, more than 100 coalition missiles were fired during the raids, which lasted for 90 minutes.

The targets were a scientific research centre at Barzeh on the outskirts of Damascus where Syria conducts tests for chemical and biological warfare and two chemical weapons storage facilities near the central city of Homs.

The new wave of attacks marked the second time Trump has ordered a punitive strike against Syria.

In April 2017, the US mounted a limited precision strike against a Syrian air base from where a gas attack had been launched against the town of Khan Sheikhoun, which killed dozens of civilians.

US naval destroyers in the Mediterranean unleashed a broadside of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at the air base, reportedly destroying more than 20 combat aircraft, or about one-fifth of Assad’s air force strength at that time.

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Before the new salvos were launched, Trump had appeared to be unsure of what punitive action he should take over the attack on Douma, a rebel-held suburb of Damascus, amid fears that any major operation could trigger a significant escalation in the already complex Syrian war, possibly involving Israel as well.

Trump was backed by French President Emmanuel Macron and British Prime Minister Theresa May, who reportedly dispatched British Royal Navy submarines to the eastern Mediterranean to add cruise missile power to the US-led operation.

Moscow, possibly sensing Trump’s hesitancy over the last week, threatened to retaliate against any US intervention, not just against an expected missile broadside but also whenever they were fired from – an unexpectedly new and potentially dangerous twist in the perennial Syrian conflict.

Assad has vowed that he would recapture “every inch of Syria” and has shown little compunction in how he will achieve that. Starving out rebel-held pockets under constant bombing and shelling is one of his key tactics.

Using chemical weapons is another.

With the fall of Douma, besieged since 2013, Assad once more has to control the capital and its environs, a major symbolic victory for the hard-line regime.

An earlier attack using chemical weapons against East Ghouta in 2013 that killed some 1,000 people usually triggered a US-led intervention of Syria. But then-President Barack Obama settled for a chemical weapons disarmament and inspection deal rather than send in the US military.

The world’s chemical weapons watchdog, the Vienna-based Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, oversaw the handover of 1,200 tons of Assad’s chemical weapons stock under Russian supervision.

But Damascus was widely believed to have retained significant quantities of the internationally banned substances, such as sarin gas, and the means to manufacture it.

After the latest Western raids, Trump warned that the US response to the Assad regime’s chemical weapons arsenal was likely to continue. “We are prepared to sustain this response until the Syrian regime stops its use of prohibited chemical agents,” he said in Washington.

Ed Blanche is a regular contributor to The Arab Weekly. He has covered the Middle East for many years.

Right-wing populism in Europe puts Muslim communities on edge

Justin Salhani

Milan

A total of 950 attacks were perpetrated on Muslims and mosques in Germany in 2017, government statistics indicate.

Germany has Europe’s second largest Muslim population – about 4.7 million people, approximately 3 million of whom are Turkish immigrants or their descendants. The German government has been criticised for failing to integrate its Muslim population, though right-wing groups blame immigrants and minorities for not assimilating.

“Surveys show that while Muslims who have lived in Germany longer or were born here fundamentally feel German and have a strong affinity to the country, they still don’t really feel accepted as German, even though many of their families have been here for 40 years,” said Jorg Luyken, the editor of the Local Germany, a digital English language news network.

Luyken noted the management of Muslims in Germany has often been outsourced to Turkey. This has, at times, prevented a coming together of Muslims with native Germans and an understanding of each other.

The issue of Muslim identity in Germany created a political battle between those who say Islam is a part of German society and those who claim it does not belong.

German Interior Minister Horst Seehofer has said Islam was “not part of Germany.” German Chancellor Angela Merkel tried back at Seehofer after meeting with Swedish Prime Minister Stefan Lofven, saying, “These Muslims are part of Germany and their religion, Islam, is just as much a part of Germany.”

The debate is sure to affect Muslims in Germany who say they feel ostracised by local society, especially women.

Anti-Muslim sentiment isn’t exclusive to Germany in Europe. France and the United Kingdom have large Muslim populations whose members face discrimination and alienation.

A flyer recently circulated in the United Kingdom with the words “Punish a Muslim Day” and offered rewards for attacking Muslims or mosques.

In Italy, Muslims struggle to congregate due to politicians blocking approval to build state-sanctioned mosques.

This is unlikely to change soon because far-right party the League, led by nationalist Matteo Salvini, performed better than predicted in Italy’s elections.

Running on an anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim platform, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s right-wing Fidesz party won parliamentary elections on April 8. His success is seemingly encouraging populist nativism elsewhere in Europe.

Right-wing parties and movements in Europe are enjoying their best electoral results since the second world war.

In Germany, however, the police seem to have taken notice. They have heavily monitored far-right groups and are on alert, particularly after reports of groups infiltrating the country’s armed services.

“Germans are generally very sensitive about violence against minority groups and are aware of the threat that right-wing organisations pose,” Luyken said. “There is considerable surveillance of such groups, so I think it’s not necessarily true that the threat has been neglected.”

Justin Salhani is an Arab Weekly contributor in Milan, Italy.
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While the risks are high, for now, they appear to be managed. On April 12, the Kremlin confirmed that the US and Russia were in continuous talks over escalating tensions. However, though both senior British and French officials stated that Russia had been notifed in advance of the strikes, American General Joseph Dunford, chairman of the US Joint Chiefs of Staff denied this was the case. Not long after the strikes, Syria state television broadcast images of citizens celebrating in Damascus’ streets in support of President Bashar Assad. A Twitter account maintained by the office of the president posted a tweet, saying: “The honourable cannot be humiliat ed” shortly after the allied attack.

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Simon Speakman Cordall is Syria/ Lebanon section editor with The Arab Weekly.

**Shadow of Guernica hovering over today’s Syria**

From their second world war-style helmets to their uniforms and from the familiar assault rifle the AK-47 Kalashnikov to ageing T-72 battle tanks, Russian soldiers have an upgrade. They now have better means to fight wars.

At the time, Russia has invested heavily in sophisticated radar and satellite jamming systems, surface-to-air missiles, tanks and armoured personnel carriers. The Russian military has anew, more lethal weapon at its disposal.

The ageing fleet of MiGs and Su-24s is to be replaced with the Su-30 family of fighter planes, which is in development. Western military aviation experts claim. Russia’s newest aircraft can perform as well as anything from the NATO bloc.

Just as effective as US deter rent systems is Russia’s S-400 missile defence system and the newer S-500, which ranks among the world’s most advanced and sophisticated military radar. The S-500 system is under development.

On the ground, the United States, thought to be the world’s most powerful country, can muster up to 5,000 tanks whereas Russia has 15,400. If a ground war were to be fought on the plains of Europe, battle tanks would play a vital role.

Russia is not the only country testing its capabilities in Syria. There are already foreign forces, involving Russia, Turkey and Iran, as well as the United States, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates and various European countries.

The three fronts – Afrin, Idlib, Damascus – have emerged as flashpoints. Each shows various strands of military activity, which add to the expanding conflict. With skirmishes and proxy wars growing exponentially, the possibility of the Syrian conflict becoming a full-fledged world war is amplified every day.

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Claude Salhani is a regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.

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**Western strikes mark further escalation in Syrian conflict**

Simon Speakman Cordall

Tunis

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Simon Speakman Cordall is Syria/ Lebanon section editor with The Arab Weekly.
In times of intractable and cruel wars, the innocent end up sacrificing themselves and their families in order to end their ordeal.

From ‘chemical attack’ to retaliatory strikes

The blood of Syria’s Dourna is not that of the Russian Duma

Hamed al-Kilani

For the variety and efficiency of its arsenal, Russia is believed to have decided on a “surgical” attack, with Tomahawk cruise missiles being among the first options. In fact, in order to prevent an “accidental” attack, Russia has repeatedly warned against the possibility of a “false” attack and has repeatedly called for a ceasefire in Syria.

The Russian warship, the 51st bomb carrier, is among the latest in the Russian fleet. It carries Tomahawk cruise missiles, each of which can be destroyed by a 1,000-pound warhead anywhere within a range of about 1,290 to 2,500 kilometres.

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The Tomahawk cruise missiles, currently in use by France and Britain, are capable of delivering a 1,000-pound warhead anywhere within a range of about 1,290 to 2,500 kilometres. Tomahawks are carried by dozens of British and American warships, including destroyers, and are also used by France and Russia.

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Saudia Arabia and allies hold on to demands in Qatar dispute

Mohammed Alkhereiji

London

Despite the Qatari flag raised in the Eastern Caribbean, it is the Gulf that everyone is talking about. Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, among others, have become embroiled in a spat with Qatar that has consequences far beyond the borders of the tiny Gulf state. The row has sparked an international crisis that has divided the Arab world and left Qatar facing economic sanctions. The crux of the dispute is Qatar’s alleged support for terrorism, but the real issue is Iran’s influence in the region.

Qatar has maintained its commitment to fighting terrorism, and has been a vocal critic of Iran’s influence in the region. However, the Saudi-led coalition has accused Qatar of funding extremism and supporting terrorist groups. The dispute has dragged on for months, with both sides refusing to back down.

The latest round of talks between Qatar and its neighbors has failed to bridge the gap. The Quartet, which includes Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates, has set a list of demands for Qatar to meet, but the country has refused to comply. The Quartet has been unable to reach a consensus on how to resolve the dispute.

Qatar has denied allegations of funding terrorism and has called for a political solution to the crisis. The country has also called for a lifting of the economic sanctions imposed by its neighbors. However, the Saudi-led coalition has shown no indication of backing down.

The dispute has had a significant impact on the region, with Qatar facing economic sanctions and cuts in its oil exports. The country has also faced a diplomatic boycott from its neighbors, with only Turkey and Jordan maintaining diplomatic relations.

The International Court of Justice has ruled in favor of Qatar in a case brought by the United Arab Emirates, but the decision has yet to be enforced. The case is expected to be heard by the International Criminal Court in 2021.

The crisis has also had implications for regional stability, with Qatar’s neighbors becoming more divided in their approach to the conflict. The crisis has also raised concerns about the future of the Gulf Cooperation Council, which has been unable to find a solution to the dispute.

The dispute is likely to continue for some time, with both sides refusing to back down. The Quartet has called for a diplomatic solution, but neither side has shown any indication of willingness to compromise.

Not on the agenda. Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir (L) attends the Arab Foreign meeting in Riyadh, on April 12. (Reuters)

International and Strategic Affairs

In Paris told the Associated Press that the Arab Arab meeting at the summit of the Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Abou Elenein attended the meeting. An official statement said the meeting reviewed the development of the crisis in Iraq and ways of standing up to Tehran’s meddling in the domestic affairs of Arab countries.

Mohammed Alkhereiji is the Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.
Saudi Crown prince ends first foreign tour in France and Spain

Mohammed Alkhereiji

London

Saudia Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz wrapped up his global tour with high-level visits to France and Spain, taking the opportunity to stress his positions on regional issues, including Riyadh's reservations concerning the Iran nuclear deal.

Crown Prince Mohammed concluded a 3-day visit to Paris on April 10. He met with high-ranking officials, including French President Emmanuel Macron, a meeting that observers said was intended to smooth relations over tactical issues mainly tied to the regional security and stability. Crown Prince Mohammed urged the international community to adopt a tougher stance on Iran and compared the 2015 nuclear agreement to appeasement of Nazi Germany prior to the second world war.

The trip to France also had significant cultural dimensions. Riyadh is seeking French expertise to help Saudi Arabia with cultural ventures tied to the Vision 2030 economic diversification programme.

This included an agreement with the Paris Opera to help the kingdom set up its own national orchestra and opera house in Jeddah. A deal was signed to develop al-Ula archaeological site, a region of cultural significance in the Saudi north-west that includes the UNESCO archaeological site Ma'in Saline.

Draft agreements totaling $48 billion were signed during Crown Prince Mohammed’s visit, including a deal between Saudi Aramco and Total to build a large petrochemical refinery in the Eastern province.

Macron hosted a gala dinner for the crown prince at the Elysee Palace, an event attended by Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri. The final stop of the prince’s global tour was longtime ally Spain, where he met with Spanish King Felipe VI, Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy and Defence Minister Maria Dolores de Cospedal. The Spanish government hopes to sell the Saudis five navy ships with a total cost of $4.7 billion. To present a new and modern Saudi Arabia to the international community, Crown Prince Mohammed has been on an ambitious international tour for several weeks. He travelled to the United Kingdom and the United States before his stops in France and Spain.

Strategic partner. French President Emmanuel Macron (R) and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz shake hands following a press conference in Paris, on April 10.

Gulf

Salwa Canal is a warning to Doha

The Arab Weekly staff

London

There is mounting concern in Doha about Saudi Arabia’s plan to dig a giant Salwa Canal along the Saudi-Qatar border between Salwa and Khor al-Adaid.

The crown prince said the launch of the project is a sign of fear and confusion due to geographical isolation.

Macron stressed that France and Saudi Arabia agreed on the need to curtail the Iranian “expansionism”. “This strategic vision means reducing all the projects of expansionist political Islam that could feed other forms of terrorism and destabilise the region,” Macron said.

Macron also expressed support for the Iran nuclear deal, which the French helped broker. The agreement is viewed in Riyadh as a short-term solution with severe long-term ramifications.

France believes we must preserve the structure of the Iranian nuclear deal but it must be complemented by the work that has been done on limiting Iran's ballistic activity and its regional expansionism,” Macron said during a news conference. “On the subject of Iran, we have different tactical views on the deal... but a coherent strategic vision.”

Crown Prince Mohammed urged the international community to adopt a tougher stance on Iran and compared the 2015 nuclear agreement to appeasement of Nazi Germany prior to the second world war. “We do not want to repeat an agreement that happened in 1938 and caused a second world war,” he said.

There are many deconstructive projects in the world and, unfortunately, today that most of these deconstructive projects exist in the Middle East, next to us in Saudi Arabia,” Crown Prince Mohammed said. He added that the regime in Tehran has goals that are purely ideological and does not serve the interests of Iran or its citizens.

The crown prince said the Iranian government used funds released because of the nuclear deal to further its regional agenda rather than investing the money domestically. “The Iranian regime paid to send rockets to Saudi Arabia and support terrorist organisations in many parts of the world,” Crown Prince Mohammed said. “The Iranian regime also supported terrorism, not only in Hezbollah and the Houthis of those organisations, but today we find many of al-Qaed’s leaders are in Iran, including the son of Osama bin Laden, who grew up in Iran and now he is trying to be the next leader of al-Qaed.”

Prince Mohammed said. “The Qatari regime has been in its actions against Doha were self-defence and taken out of concern for regional security and stability.”

The Qatari regime has been involved in a major diplomatic campaign, trying to convince major international powers, especially the United States, to pressure the boycotting countries to negotiate with Qatar. The Trump administration, however, has shown more support for the boycotting quartet, which said its actions against Doha were self-defence and taken out of concern for regional security and stability.

Gulf sources said the timing of the project indicates that Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt, which are boycotting the Qatari regime over its alleged support for Islamist groups and Iran, convinced that Qatar Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani and his government do not intend to reverse their political choices. They have opted to look for solutions to the crisis outside the framework proposed by the boycott, including a maritime route, the creation of new sea crossings.

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Opinion

The danger of hate speech on social media

Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg’s testimony before the US Congress offers important lessons for social media users around the world, not least in the Middle East and North Africa. Zuckerberg made the significant admission that, for all its efforts, Facebook – the world’s largest social network – cannot ensure the prompt and effective removal of hate speech from its pages.

The way things stand, Facebook is in charge of content on the platform but detecting hate speech, as Zuckerberg admitted, remains a reactive process and users need to flag it before it can be deleted. Maybe five to ten years from now, he said, artificial intelligence (AI) would allow Facebook to properly vet linguistic nuances but the technology isn’t ready to deploy.

This is a worrisome summation up of Facebook’s limitations in dealing with hate speech. It has already had dangerous implications for Myanmar’s persecuted Muslim minority. Messages encouraging violence spread for days last year on Facebook in Myanmar.

As for hate speech, so for terrorist content. Facebook says it can remove virtually all such material from particular terror groups, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS), but admits it cannot identify all terrorist implications. AI might help but may not offer definitive solutions, either.

Hate speech and incitement to terrorism are not protected forms of free expression. This is why sections of the international community are trying to suggest regulatory legislation. Vera Jourová, EU commissioner for consumers and justice, said: “I will stand on the position that for terrorism, extremism and images of child abuse we should have a more reliable framework that could introduce sanctions for lack of compliance.”

Germany is leading the way. Since January 1, it has fined social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter as much as 50 million euros — approximately $60 million — if they do not remove hate speech and other socially dangerous content within 24 hours. The MENA region has not moved as far, even as its citizens are protected from abusive and hateful content. Waiting for another five or ten years for appropriate AI to emerge might be too long.

Central Europe and the Arab world after Orban’s win

As expected, Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban’s right-wing Fidesz party scored a landslide victory in a third consecutive parliamentary election in May. It won on an anti-immigrant, anti-Muslim platform that does not allow for a vital relationship between Europe and the Arab world. And it shouldn’t.

Even though Hungary is just one of the European Union’s 28 member-states, it is proving to be something of a role model and an inspiration for the European far-right.

Marine Le Pen of France’s National Front, Geert Wilders of the Dutch Freedom Party, Beatrix von Storch of the Alternative for Germany and Nigel Farage, who formerly led the UK Independence Party, were quick to congratulate Orban on his election victory. They see Hungary as an important example.

With support from some central European leaders, Orban plans to intensify his opposition to refugees and their accommodation in the European Union, while challenging the values set out in the EU Charter. At his final campaign rally, Orban warned: “If the dam bursts, if the borders are opened, if immigration isn’t cut off in Hungary, there will be no going back.”

After his victory, human rights group Amnesty International condemned the Fundamental Law that stokes hostility towards refugees and migrants, but the Orban government has already talked in parliament a fringe of laws that would crack down on migrants and the pro-migrant civil organisations that support them.

The picture conveyed by Hungary today is that the elections are over and Hungary needs political change, not more constructive policies towards the Muslim world and Arab countries. Stronger ties between Europe and the Arab world would be mutually beneficial.

But the elections are over and Hungary needs political change, not more constructive policies towards the Muslim world and Arab countries. Stronger ties between Europe and the Arab world would be mutually beneficial.

Mamdouh al-Masri

Separating religion from politics is a Saudi necessity first and foremost

Saudi Arabia has chosen to cut its ties with political Islam but it knows that other capitals in the region have not done so.

The new Saudi vision pulls the rug from under institutions, charities and organisations specialising in spreading Islamic extremism.

Mohamad Kawas

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The children of Pouma

The children of Pouma

The official Saudi view is that it has not removed hate speech and other socially dangerous content within 24 hours.
Trump's faux war in Syria

Rashmee Roshan Lall

Intermittent bombing by the West escalates tensions with Russia, widening and prolonging the war.

As a no-one’s surprise, the so-called international community, led by the United States, has done nothing of the two things that truly might affect the course of the Syrian conflict.

It has not hit the Assad regime's powerful Russian backers where it might really hurt – Vladimir Putin's international and domestic prestige in hosting the FIFA World Cup. It has not killed off another bout of half-hearted international military intervention. Limited air strikes achieve little more than the self-satisfaction of hawks in the West.

It would be so much easier and more satisfying for the self-satisfaction of hawks in the West to fire a burst of America’s missiles into a minor conflict, but the attacks achieve little more than to increase the threat of nuclear war. Meanwhile, the real threat of nuclear attack arises from another bout of half-hearted military intervention, Limited US strikes, supported by France and the United Kingdom, and apparently cheered on by the Saudis and Qataris, are pretense not a plan. That vision that seemingly convinced Emma Ashford, analyst at the libertarian Cato Institute think-tank in Washington, put it: “For those who want a military response, the question is simple: Can you tell me any practical response short of full-fledged invasion that could prevent this?”

She was referring to further chemical attacks or other atrocious actions by the Assad regime against civilians on the Syrian civilians. The US military strike, she said, could create “a domino effect” and “destabilise the region”.

But as the US military strike against Syria shows, the US view of the world has changed from a highly interventionist foreign policy to a more isolationist stance. America’s military strikes would certainly be the Syrian people.

Rashmee Roshan Lall is a columnist for The Arab Weekly. Her blog can be found at www.theraweb.net and she is on Twitter: @rashmeel.
Arab Labour ministers call for action on unemployment

Hassan Abdel Zaher

Cairo

The 45th Arab Labour Conference called on Arab governments to initiate labour market reforms, rethink social legislation and commence production and investments.

Labour ministers said production and investments in the Arab region could be encouraged through plans that achieve sustainable and comprehensive development in the region.

"Arab labour markets must be prepared to absorb this incessant flow of workers," said Fayez al-Mustar, director-general of the Arab Labour Organisation, which monitors labour conditions. "Slow economic growth in the Arab region is a real challenge that Arab governments need to overcome."

A total of 72 labour ministers and delegations from 20 Arab countries attended the conference, scheduled for April 8-15. The annual event was different this year in that it brought governments, the business sector and labour associations together.

Conference participants discussed challenges facing the Arab labour market, national policies and the complaints of the private sector as well as the problems facing labour associations in the Arab region.

The event took place amid unrest in several Arab countries, which has taken a heavy toll on labour markets across the region. In Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya and the Palestinian territories, unrest has had a devastating effect on labour markets and slowing economic growth at the regional level, official said. Palestinian Labour Minister Mansour AbuShahla pointed to an increasing number of unemployed workers in Jersey and the Gaza Strip as a result of these events.

"We need support to be able to give hope to these unemployed Palestinians," AbuShahla said at the conference.

In Iraq, three years of fighting against the Islamic State, deteriorating economic conditions and huge spending on the military left the country's economy in tatters. Against the Islamic State, detention centres and the labour market in deplorable conditions. Almost 42% of Iraq's workforce is jobless, said Hassan alShamary, a representative of the General Federation of Iraqi Trade Unions.

"The war has brought almost everything in five Iraqi provinces to rubble," Shemary said. "This is making things worse for the country's embattled economy and labour market."

In the Arab region, about 13 million people – almost 10.5% of the workforce of the region – are searching for work, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) said. Unemployment is especially high among women and workers aged 15-24, the ILO said.

"The economies of Arab countries suffered greatly because of the accumulation of crises in the region," said Libyan Minister of Labour and Rehabilitation alMahdi Wardamy. "This has reflected very negatively on the abilities of the labour markets in all states to generate jobs for youth."

There was heartening news, however. Egypt lowered its unemployment rate to 11% this year, down from 31% last year, according to the country's labour minister.

Egyptian Labour Minister Mohamed Saafan said the unemployment rate drop reflected the Egyptian government's hard work. "We are also promoting the creation of new jobs in new areas and also the allocation of huge investments for infrastructure projects, ones that managed to create jobs for a large number of people," Saafan said.

Reforms in Saudi Arabia are being instigated to involve local labour in economic activities, even at the cost to tens of thousands of foreign workers in the oil-rich country. Apart from demanding reform for social legislation in Arab countries, Arab labour ministers at the concluding session of the conference said increased production would open the door for more demand for labour, which would ultimately affect the number of jobs available for Arab workers.

Mutairi and his colleagues at the Arab Labour Organisation underscored the need for unified labour standards in the region. They called on Arab governments to pay more attention to occupational safety, offer support to professional training strategies and monitor progress on reducing the unemployment rate.

There is also a need to monitor the emancipation of women in Arab labour markets as shown by reports indicating a rise in the number of unemployed women, the Arab Labour Organisation said.

"Unemployment is a fact in the Arab region, one that we must not overlook or forget," Mutairi said. "We must work hard to find solutions to this problem, but nobody can solve this problem alone, which is why we need stronger Arab unity."

Hassan Abdel Zaher is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Rethinking incentives. A worker prepares bobbins of yarn for shipment at a spinning facility on the outskirts of Cairo.

Changing landscape. Workers at the solar plant factory in Uwayma, north of Riyadh.
Iraq points to Syrian border threat as ISIS steps up attacks

Mamoon Alabassi

London

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi vowed to prevent inфиltration by the Islamic State (ISIS) into Iraq from Syria, as a new ISIS stronghold Al Araby was reported to be under attack.

Abadi said he ordered Iraq’s military command “to lay out all possible plans... to protect Iraqi citizens” from ISIS attacks.

The Iraqi prime minister said the new ISIS stronghold in Syria’s Hasakeh province poses a border threat with US President Donald Trump. He reportedly has the approval of the Syrian government to carry out military operations on the border with Syria.

“All our steps are being taken to address this border threat... ISIS has in the past used Syria to threaten Iraq, whether by using it as a base for operations or as a place for fighters to live,” Abadi said.

Abadi said that the decision to attack the Islamic State seeks to prevent the group from extending its influence to Iraq and attack its safe towns and cities, “We have moved from fighting terrorism in Iraq to fighting terrorism in Syria. We have plans in that regard,” said Abadi.

Abadi said that the ISIS-Syrian border area is safer than it has been at any time since 2014, the chaos in Syria will inevitably spill over to Iraq. He added: “It seems accurate to assume that controlling Iraq’s border with Syria will remain a difficult undertaking as long as the security situation remains unstable,” wrote Omar al-Jaffal on Al-Monitor’s website.

Figures released by the UN Assistance Mission for Iraq stated that more than 100,000 civilians and policemen were killed in acts of terrorism, violence and armed conflict in Iraq in 2014, the chaos in Syria.

Abadi said he ordered Iraq’s military to “take all necessary measures if they threaten the security of Iraq.”

The real threat, in all frankness, is the so-called caliphate to establish itself in the western desert bordering Syria, last November.

In an apparent bid to boost morale, ISIS militants restated their pledge of allegiance to the Islamic State of Iraq, which is aligned with al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).

Al-Qaeda is known to resort to bribery or to make deals with its foes, including the Iraqi government.

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The real threat, in all frankness, is the so-called caliphate to establish itself in the western desert bordering Syria, last November.

Algeria

After the war is won, we shall not return to Mosul

Nazli Tarzi

London

Once the door to our problem is opened, it cannot be closed,” Iraqi refugee Majid, 32, told The Arab Weekly by phone from the United Kingdom, who is haunted by the ghost of Mosul’s present yet unable to return.

Majid — the names of family members have been changed to protect their identities — arrived in the United Kingdom to pursue higher education in 2010, three years before Islamic State (ISIS) militants seized and conspired its ancestral land. He was followed by his brother, who upon arriving in the United Kingdom, had his scholarship suspended by Baghdad.

While Majid’s brother was offered no explanation, Majid stood accused of colluding with the National Health Service after Baghdad refused a medical bill it claimed was counterfeited.

The lives of sisters, Isra and Hatia who stayed in Iraq, have remained quiet — denied the independence and freedom to work and marry in these uncertain times. Last one forgets, the decade of neglect that preceded ISIS’s blitzkrieg was the spark that allowed the so-called caliphate to establish itself.

Away from home, near-daily telephone conversations between Majid and his Mosul-bound family are a source of distress for a man whose country has climbed to impossible heights “stunted by the poorest firebreaks in a knock at the door.”

Heart-clenching moments daily — counting those alive and replaying those dead — are a source of distress for a man whose “unrecognizable language fills the city,” Majid said.

“Everyone is a target,” another resident said against the backdrop of enforced displacement.

A witch hunt carried out on local imams and mosque preachers from al-Salah district on March 9 resulted in the killing of Sheikh Yassin Mohammed Younis al Janaibi, the upper half of his body, as images show, sustained repeated and fatal blows. Nineveh operations and intelligence divisions conducted an investigation into his death.

“Is this just the tip of the iceberg of what citizens endure daily?” Majid said.

Refugees, though limited, have commenced in bomb-scared Mosul. It is not so much these problems that caused the displacement and their treatment of locals that made Majid lose his will to return.

The militias navigating Mosul’s urban warfare are the biggest challenge to peace and stability, alongside the titanic tasks of urban reconstruction and preventing the return of terror to the province.

Nazli Tarzi is an independent journalist whose writings and films focus on Iraq’s ancient history and contemporary political scene.
Should Egypt deprive convicted terrorists of their citizenship?

Amr Emam  
Cairo

Egypt’s parliament is debating a bill, publicly supported by many MPs, that would strip convicted terrorists of their citizenship.

The bill, which is expected to soon be referred to parliament for voting, would strip the citizenship of anyone convicted of terrorism offenses, including membership of outlawed groups and national security crimes.

“The bill is very important now that a large number of Egyptian nationals are working against their country’s national security,” said MP Mustafa Bakri, who proposed the bill. “If passed into law, the bill will deter a large number of the terrorists and those who harm this country by denying them a citizenship they do not deserve.”

Egypt has been escalating its fight against terrorist groups nationwide, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, the country has been hit by terrorism incidents since mid-2013 when the army backed a popular uprising against Islamist President Muhammad Morsi.

Since then, Cairo has been fighting terrorist groups with ties to the outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, such as Haam, which has been internationally labelled as a terrorist organization.

Egypt has also been fighting a branch of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Sinai, which has attacked Egyptian Coptic Christian minority, including striking churches in Cairo, Alexandria and the Sinai Peninsula, resulting in hundreds of deaths.

Legal experts warned that the law could do more harm than good to Egypt’s counterterrorism efforts.

Egypt began Operation Sinai, a multi-force effort against suspected terrorists across the country, in February. Hundreds of suspected militants have since been arrested or killed.

Bakri said his legislation would strip the citizenship only of “terrorists” convicted of crimes that endanger national security.

“This means that it will be the courts that will have the final say on whether a person should be denied his citizenship,” Bakri said.

Last September, the Egyptian cabinet submitted a similar bill. That bill was merged with Bakri’s bill, the spokesman Ahmed Abu Zeid said.

The idea of stripping convicted terrorists of citizenship remains controversial but is being discussed more often in various capitals.

The United Kingdom and the United States have discussed stripping terrorists of their citizenship while abroad. Some who are critical of the Egyptian regime and broadcast on TV channels outside Egypt are not indicted in cases of terrorism but could still be targeted should Bakri’s bill become law.

There are fears the law could be used to silence Egypt’s legitimate political opposition, both at home and abroad. Some who are critical of the Egyptian regime and broadcast on TV channels outside Egypt are not indicted in cases of terrorism but could still be targeted should Bakri’s bill become law.

“The belief in parliament is that such a bill would push the fight against terrorism many steps forward,” said MP Abdel Moneim EI-Glaemy, a member of the Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee, which is to debate the bill.

“Many of those planning attacks will think twice before they stage those attacks when they know that they will not only be jailed but also deprived of the right to be Egyptian,” Bakri said.

The bill would effectively bar hundreds of members of the Muslim Brotherhood, which was designated a terrorist group in December 2013, from returning to the country from exile. Many Muslim Brotherhood leaders left Egypt for Turkey, Qatar and Sudan following Morsi’s ouster. Many have been convicted of crimes in absentia.

There are fears the law could be used to silence Egypt’s legitimate political opposition, both at home and abroad. Some who are critical of the Egyptian regime and broadcast on TV channels outside Egypt are not indicted in cases of terrorism but could still be targeted should Bakri’s bill become law.

The failure of the talks, which in- cluded intelligence chiefs and mini- sters of immigration from the three countries, opens the door for many countries, especially in the Sinai Peninsula, to be targeted.

The foreign ministers, intelli- gence chiefs and immigration minis- ters of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan met with the objective of agreeing to Egypt’s proposal to fill the dam reservoir.

Egypt wants the reservoir to be filled over a period of ten years to mitigate the harm to Egypt’s share of Nile waters, especially in areas which are already seriously harmed.

Egypt suggested involving the World Bank in dam negotiations with Ethiopia, a suggestion turned down by Addis Ababa.

Abu Zeid said the United States was ready to mediate an end to the deadlock over the dam.

The United States is keen on se- curity in the Horn of Africa region, which is why it is ready to intervene if it is requested to,” Abu Zeid said.

Ahmed Megahid is an Egyptian reporter in Cairo.

Few options for Egypt after deadlocked Nile dam talks

Ahmed Megahid  
Cairo

Egypt has been left with limited options following the failure of technical talks regarding the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, which Cairo said would greatly hinder the country’s future access to Nile waters.

Following 17 hours of negotia- tions with his Ethiopian and Sudanese counterparts in Khartoum, Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry said the negotiations, which aimed to end the deadlock over the dam, had failed to produce results.

The failure of the talks, which in- cluded intelligence chiefs and min- isters of irrigation from the three countries, opens the door for many possibilities, experts said, particu- larly as the dam means completion.

Egyptian Foreign Ministry spokesman Ahmed Abu Zeid said Egypt would not accept any viola- tion of the legal framework that regulated Nile water sharing with Ethiopia and Sudan.

“Relations between the three states are governed by a legal docu- ment,” Abu Zeid said. “We will not allow any violation of this docu- ment.”

In March 2015, the three coun- tries signed a declaration of prin- ciples that explicitly called for cooperation over Nile waters. The countries agreed to “avoid causing significant damage” to each other in the use of Nile waters and estab- lished a dialogue process.

While more talks are set to take place in May, the mood in Egypt is of anger and disappointment, with analysts saying that Ethiopia has used the talks to move ahead, with the goal of construction of the dam.

“Egypt only wanted to waste time until it reached the point of no-return as far as dam construc- tion was concerned,” said Ramadan Quarani, a specialist in African af- fairs. “Egypt is now up against the wall with almost no options.”

In Egypt’s intellectual and de- cision-making circles, the multi- billion-dollar hydroelectric dam is viewed as a major national security threat. The dam, which will store close to 70 billion cubic metres of water, will deprive water-poor Egypt of a sizable portion of its an- nual water reserves from the Nile.

This could devastate millions of acres of farmland, push Cairo to move forward with building expen- sive water desalination and sewage treatment plants and sabotage as- piring food security schemes drawn up by Egypt’s Agricultural Ministry.

The foreign ministers, intelli- gence chiefs and immigration minis- ters of Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan met with the objective of agreeing to Egypt’s proposal to fill the dam reservoir.

While many believe that Cairo has given up on the issue to the UN Security Council. “This would ensure that Ethiopia would suspend work on the dam until a settlement is reached,” Twadd said.

Egypt has suggested involving the World Bank in dam negotiations with Ethiopia, a suggestion turned down by Addis Ababa.

Abu Zeid said the United States was ready to mediate an end to the deadlock over the dam.

The United States is keen on se- curity in the Horn of Africa region, which is why it is ready to intervene if it is requested to,” Abu Zeid said.

Ahmed Megahid is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Fed up with insecurity. Egyptians walk past a capital building that reads “Terrorism has no religion.”
Tunis

Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz has announced that he will stand down at the end of his second term next year, ending speculation that he would be more interested in moving to scrap presidential term limits and extend his tenure.

Ould Abdel Aziz’s announcement reflects a growing shift towards democ­racy on the African continent, where even longstanding leaders are struggling to stay in power.

In an interview with Jeune Af­rique magazine, Ould Abdel Aziz said he would abide by the Maurit­anian constitution’s two-term limit, but would not set an end to periods of power. Addressing supporters, at least some of whom have expressed concern his absence could lead to a power vacuum, Ould Abdel Aziz said he would stay involved in poli­tics and play a role in his Union for the Repub­lic Party (UPR).

Some government minis­ters, including Justice Minister Brahim Ould Daddah had urged Ould Abdel Aziz to run for office again in 2023. “The nation and the people in general are in confusion and in the current situation is the people who demand that the president seeks a new mandate,” said Ould Daddah.

Government spokesman Mo­hamed Lamine Ould Cheikh said:

“A majority of Mauritans believe the president deserves a third, a fourth and even a fifth mandate.”

Ould Abdel Aziz’s supporters credit him with clamping down on corruption and growing the coun­try’s economy, including increasing electricity output five-fold, bring­ing clean drinking water to remote regions and building thousands of kilometres of roads.

However, the International Mon­etary Fund said the development projects had increased public debt to more than 70% of gross domestic product this year.

Ould Abdel Aziz, who rose to power in 2008 after leading a coup that deposed his predecessor President Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdel­lah, vowed to free Mauritania from the “mudfudines” (the corrupt).

He is accused by the opposition, however, of engaging in corrupt practices himself.

President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz is the only Mauritanian head of state who is interested in build­ing up a fortune and accumulating money,” said Mahfoud Ould Bettah, the head of the opposition Demo­cratic Convergence Party.

Ould Abdel Aziz said he would abide by the Mauritanian constitution’s two-term limit and would not seek to change it.

Mauritanian president to step down after second term expires

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunis

Conflicting reports. Libyan strongman Field-Marshal Khalifa Haftar in La Celle-Saint-Cloud near Paris, last July.

If Haftar is no longer able to carry out his duties, eastern Libya would likely become embroiled in military chaos.

Michel Cousin

Tunis

Developments have not been short of the dra­matic for the crisis-torn Libya. One of the coun­try’s key figures, Abdurahman Sewehli, was voted out as president of the State Council, according to a Muslim Brotherhood hardliner. Then, ru­mours swirled that the strongman Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar had suffered a stroke and was taken to Paris.

The significance of Sewehli’s de­parture was immediately cast aside by the speculation surrounding Haftar. For at least two days, the military in the east vehemently de­nied the reports, insisting that they were lies and that Haftar was well. Without evidence to that effect, however, and a lack of recent pho­tos or video footage of the field marshal, the rumours refused to go away. The rumour mill soon went into overdrive, with claims circu­lating that Haftar was in a coma or even dead.

These reports were squashed by the United Nations Libya UNSMIL, which said that UN envoy Ghassan Salame had spoken to Haftar by phone on April 11. Still, questions about Haftar’s health and conflict­ing reports from Khamis National Army (LNA) officials continued to fuel uncertainty in the east’s capital.

On April 11, the French Foreign Ministry gave the first hint that it was expecting confirmation that Haftar was in France. Asked at a news conference whether the Libyan leader was be­ing treated in France, an official replies: “We invite you to address the homeland soon … after medical treatment.”

Finally, in a move to end the damaging speculation and confu­sion, UN Special Envoy to Libya Ghassan Salame took the unusual step of not merely phoning Haftar, but having a tweet sent out con­firming he had done so. The two “discussed the general situation in Libya and the latest political devel­opments in the country,” the UN­MI​T tweet read.

Eastern military officials also tried to do what they could to end the rumours. LNA Spokesman Ahmed al-Munsi told Reuters: “Marshall Haftar felt ill while in Paris, during a visit to several for­eign states, and he will return to the homeland soon … after medical treatment.”

The flurry of rumours dem­onstrate that the implications of Haftar’s health are of great signifi­cance.

If the military chief is no longer able to carry out his duties, eastern­ern Libya would likely become embroiled in military chaos.

Ould Abdel Aziz has announced that he will step down after two years, and that Haftar was fine. This be­gan to seriously damage the LNA leadership’s credibility. By April 12, Haftar’s relatives and LNA officials privately admitted that he was ill and was being treated in France. His trips to Jordan over the past couple of years, they said, had in fact been to consult with health specialists.

Even then, however, the official line in Benghazi remained that Haftar was fine, although one Libyan official con­firmed the president had suffered a stroke and was taken to Paris, during a visit to several foreign states, and he will return to the homeland soon … after medical treatment.”

The departure of Haftar in the post-­situation would be a disas­ter,” the official said, adding that militaries from the Benghazi Revolu­tionaries Shura Council and the Benghazi Defense Brigades, who were forced out during Operation Dignity, would try to return to the city.

Others asked whether the Egyp­tians would sit idly by if their key ally in Libya was no longer in control.

The main view, though, is that Haftar’s departure from the scene would strengthen his main rival, Presidency Council leader Fayez al-Sarraj. The belief is that Sarraj would reach out to various ele­ments in the LNA, from Nadhuri downtown, giving him – and currently internationally un­derscored.

Some say that, even if Haftar were well enough to return, the knowledge that he is seriously ill could lead to various figures look­ing to their own longer-term inter­ests and armed conflict.

In Benghazi, amid the absence of control over Field Marshal, there was an uneasy calm. “We’re waiting to see what is going to happen,” said one resident.
Cedre conference brings cash with a twist

Mona Alami

Lebanon

Against all odds, Lebanon’s recent Cedre conference netted more than $11 billion in loans and grants for the struggling country. The conference’s surprising positive results showed the international community’s concern for maintaining Lebanon’s stability in a region battered by conflicts and increasing tensions between world powers.

However, despite this demonstration of support, Lebanon still faces challenges linked to rampant corruption and a negative economic and financial outlook.

“The Cedre conference was an incredible success for Lebanon,” an official from one of Lebanon’s top government financial institutions told The Arab Weekly on condition of anonymity. “It could spur growth to 5% or 6% in the next few years.”

However, with much of the country’s debt held by domestic banks (55% of the Central Bank, 32% by commercial banks and 15% by the Social Security Fund), the economy remained relatively stable, Ghobril said.

Lebanon faces many systemic challenges linked to its economic environment.

Nevertheless, the Central Bank’s policy of financial stabilisation will not make up for the absence of structural reforms. Wazni underlined that “the international community has called on Lebanon to implement structural reforms, as opposed to pledges that reduce the deficit in public finances.”

To that end, donors were looking to see significant improvement in Lebanon’s “tax collection, increasing tax revenues, abating electricity subsidies, revising the pricing of its main strategic sectors, the public sector and through sector reforms of electricity, water, transport and waste and the application of transparency in tender management and good governance.”

It remains to be seen whether Lebanon will seriously tackle its responsibilities in the long term or rely on the latest conference to buy itself enough time to avoid major economic collapse in the short term.

Mona Alami is a French-Lebanese analyst and a fellow at the Rafik Hariri Centre for the Middle East of the Atlantic Council.

Power boost. Karadeniz Powership Orhan Bey, an electricity-generating ship from Turkey, docked at the port of Jiyeh in southern Beirut.

Organisational reforms relating especially to the public budget and improving investment opportunities for the private sector. Sectors with particular reference to water and electricity, which cost the government $2 billion a year without providing 24-hour service throughout Lebanon. Improving governance policies that would fight corruption, which has reached unprecedented levels in public administration. The conference yielded some $11.5 billion of pledges, $860 million of which are grants, with the remainder made up of soft loans. The conference was predicated on several occasions gathered states from around the world and international monetary institutions to rally support for its ailing economy. More than 22 countries and donors convened early in April in Paris under the patronage of French President Emmanuel Macron to extend aid to Lebanon. However, on this occasion, the aid came predominantly in the form of loans, with nearly all predicated upon significant internal reform.

The Cedre conference followed three previous conferences — Paris I, II and III. However, commitments made by Lebanon at those gatherings have long since lost much of their meaning, with all founding on the rocks of political differences. Most important, economic reforms promised by the Lebanese government never saw the light.

The timing of the latest confer-
cence, just weeks before Lebanon’s parliamentary elections, also raised questions. Some critics speculated whether the confer-
ence was for the good of Lebanon as much as it was a donor platform for the current government, most of whose members are up for re-
election.

The conference yielded some $11.5 billion of pledges, $860 million of which are grants, with the remainder made up of soft loans.
Palestine-Israel two-state solution is off the rails

by Kamel Hawash

Palestine-Israel two-state solution is off the rails

Three decades of US-backed negotiations have failed to produce a viable two-state solution to the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian territories. While the United States, under the leadership of President Donald Trump, has been actively pursuing a more aggressive policy towards the Palestinians, a growing number of international organizations and experts are calling for a reevaluation of the prospects for a peaceful resolution.

The Palestinian Authority, led by President Mahmoud Abbas, has been increasingly isolated and marginalized by the international community. The European Union, which has traditionally been a key partner of the Palestinian Authority, has also failed to provide meaningful support for the Palestinian people.

Domestically, Israel's actions in the West Bank and Gaza have continued unabated. The Israeli military has been accused of using excessive force and targeting Palestinian civilians, including women and children.

A recent report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) documented the use of live ammunition by Israeli forces against Palestinian protesters, resulting in the deaths of several individuals. HRW called on the international community to take action to hold Israel accountable for its violations of international law.

The international community, including the United Nations, has also failed to provide meaningful support for the Palestinian people. The United Nations Human Rights Council has been criticized for its failure to adequately address the ongoing human rights violations in the West Bank and Gaza.

In the face of continued failures, the international community must take a stronger stance on the Palestinian question. This includes providing meaningful support for the Palestinian people, including the provision of humanitarian aid and economic assistance.

The international community must also work to hold Israel accountable for its violations of international law. This includes the establishment of a truly independent international tribunal to investigate and prosecute those responsible for human rights violations.

In the absence of meaningful progress towards a two-state solution, the international community must consider alternative approaches to achieving peace in the region. This could include the establishment of a regional forum for dialogue and cooperation, with the participation of all relevant parties.

The inability of the international community to provide meaningful support for the Palestinian people and to hold Israel accountable for its violations of international law has led to a situation in which the prospects for a peaceful resolution to the conflict have become increasingly slim.

The international community must therefore take a stronger stance on the Palestinian question, working to ensure that the Palestinian people are treated fairly and that human rights are respected.

Despite the international outcry, the Israeli government appears to be carrying on with its policies.

“Israel is using excessive force and targeting Palestinian civilians, including women and children,” said Eric Goldstein, HRW's Middle East and North Africa director. “There is an urgent need for the international community to take action to hold Israel accountable for its violations of international law.”

The international community must therefore work to ensure that the Palestinian people are treated fairly and that human rights are respected.

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Turkey tries balancing act in Syria but ends up picking sides between US, Russia

News & Analysis

Turkey

Thomas Seibert

Washington

Turkey attempted a political balancing act as it tried to chart a separate course in the Syrian crisis. Tensions rose between the United States and Russia following suspected chemical attacks by the Assad regime on Douma, on April 7.

But the limited US, French and British air strikes on Syrian military positions, on April 14, pushed Turkey to take sides.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan expressed support for Western strikes against Syrian leader Bashar Al-Assad’s regime. “We consider this operation as appropriate,” Erdogan said at a meeting in Istanbul on April 14.

The regime has seen that its mounting attacks in recent days against idi... will not be left unanswered,” Erdogan, a hard critic of Assad, had been presenting himself as a mediator between US and Russian counterparts, holding telephonic conversations with both Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin.

“We are extremely worried that some countries confident of their military power are turning Syria into a scene for arm wrestling,” Erdo... tweeted that the United States was going to take a bigger role in the Syrian conflict.

Erdogan, however, followed through with planning missile attacks on Syria after tensions rose before the joint US, French and British strikes. Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim accused the United States and Russia of “strategically killing” each other.

After his consultation with Putin, Erdogan said there were signs of a rapprochement in the standoff between Washington and Mos... was, according to a Turkishmino source said Erdogan had expressed his concerns over his threats against Assad, launching air strikes with European allies. Ankara is keen to secure a thaw in its relations with the West.

Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said Erdogan had viewed the operation as an “appropriate response.”

Turkey had been keen on the tension between Washington and Moscow to be reduced. A direct confrontation between the United States and Russia in Syria could force Erdogan to choose sides, which is the last thing he wants. The split between the superpowers is also straining Turkey’s economy, sending the lira to record lows.

Turkey, a member of NATO, provides crucial support for the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State (ISIS) by opening a key airbase near the Syrian border to US-led Western fighter jets. Two years ago, Ankara struck a deal to halt the flow of Syrian refugees to the European Union in exchange for financial support. NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg is to visit Turkey to talk about the situation in Syria.

At the same time, Erdogan has been cooperating closely with Russia, receiving Moscow’s green light for its military intervention into the Syrian region of Afrin earlier in the year. Erdogan, Putin and Iran’s President Hassan Rouhani, meet... in Ankara in early April, agreed on their wish for a US withdrawal from Syria. Turkey has called on the US Administration to end its support for the Syrian Kurdish militia People’s Protection Units and the Syrian Kurdish Democratic Union Party (PYD), seen as terrorist groups by Ankara.

Erdogan has met with Putin about a dozen times since 2016, much more frequently than any Western leader. His closeness to the Russian president and his row with EU leaders over human rights and the rule of law raised concerns in the West that Turkey is turning eastward. Turkey is close to buying a Russian air defence system and has signed contracts with Russian companies to build its first nuclear power plant.

Observers said Ankara is not looking to replace Turkey’s Western ties with an alliance with Russia but is aiming for a third way that would result in Turkey acting on its own. Erdogan said his relations with non-Western countries, such as Russia, Iran and China, were not meant as a substitute for Turkey’s traditional bonds with the West but as a complementary move.

He also directed accusations against both Russia and the United States. “Those who support the regime of murderer Assad are making a mistake. Those who support the PYD terror group are also making a mistake,” Erdogan said.

“Erdogan puts Turkey somehow somewhere near the middle by using the expression ‘both sides,’ as if Turkey is not with one of the parties,” Murat Yerkin, editor of the English-language Hurriyet Daily News, wrote in a column. Critics call Erdogan’s approach a “neo-Ottoman” plan that defines Turkey as an independent regional power in an echo of its imperial past without having the political, economic or military muscle to play on that stage. A Turkish presidential adviser freely admitted recently that the government would not have been able to act in Afrin without Russia’s consent.

The close partnership with Moscow could come as a price for Turkey. Erdogan, it said, “Turkey could come as a price for Turkey’s interests in the future.” Erdogan, it said, “will have to assess the overall situation and the whole picture. The United States isn’t even present.”

It’s not clear, however, whether the need to choose between the United States and Russia entered Erdogan’s calculations. His Syria policy has been described as, as the Afrin invasion showed, run counter to the policies of the anti-Islamic State coalition in Syria.

Erdogan is perceived as Russian President Vladimir Putin’s fellow traveller and as serving Iran’s long-term interests in upholding the regional balance of power.

Erdogan’s visits to Tehran and Moscow are seen as opportunistic rather than serving Turkey’s interests. He has also directed accusations against both Russia and the United States. “Those who support the regime of murderer Assad are making a mistake. Those who support the PYD terror group are also making a mistake,” Erdogan said.

It was an insightful comment. As Konstandaras pointed out in his column, “In today’s impossible complicated game may be superseded by something even more dangerous.”

Developments in and around Syria keep Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in the spotlight. His game, from the outset of the Syrian crisis, was to ensure he had a stake in whatever emerged out of the chaos.

He has pushed Turkey’s Syrian policy during the past seven years, first with the enthusiastic support of former Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu and later on his own, Erdogan hoped the policy would cement his power at home.

Erdogan sees the Syrian president as an archenemy. “It is a bad time to have an ally on the fence,” commented Han... Smith in the Spectator. “The Turkish president has watched the Western powers, which have been involved in determining how to help the armed opposition overthrow Assad, lose heart with the rebels and instead back Kurd... forces to defeat ISIS.”

“Erdogan has been cooperating closely with Russia, receiving Moscow’s green light for its military intervention into Afrin,” Yavuz Baydar writes. Erdogan is perceived as Putin’s fellow traveller and as serving Iran’s long-term interests in upholding the regional balance of power.

Erdogan seeking dividends from Syria’s chaos

Yavuz Baydar
Iran's low-intensity conflict with Israel in Syria

On alert. An Israeli Iron Dome defence system deployed in the Israeli-annexed Golan Heights near the border with Syria. (AFP)

Iran’s Revolutionary Guards get new political commissar but may resist civilian control

The appointment of Haji Sadeghi may be an indication of civilian surrender rather than anything else.

branch of the IRGC and served in very junior positions during the Iran-Iraq war. From 1988, when the war ended, his responsibilities seem to have been limited to research and bureaucratic positions at the IRGC Imam Hossein University. He stayed there until October 8, 2011, when he was appointed the supreme leader’s deputy representative to the IRGC.

Now, Haji Sadeghi is commissioner but this new job comes at a time politically assertive IRGC is openly challenging the supreme leader's authority. It has been rebellious in other ways, too.

In January, Iranian Defence Minister Amir Hatami told the government-owned daily Iran that “Abdollah Haji Khamenei has tasked the General Staff of the Armed Forces with the transfer of [one of] the Iranian Committee for Financial, Trade and Banking Affairs, Mohammad Saleh Jokar. He explained that “we do not consider running of financial institutions as the mission of the armed forces.” It was an obvious reference to “abandon unrelated economic activities.” This was meant, he said, for the IRGC to “abandon unrelated economic activities. It was intended by a further disclaimer by the IRGC’s deputy for parliamentary affairs, Mohammad Saleh Jokar. He told the reformist Behzad Online that he neither knew anything of the supreme leader’s decree nor the defence minister’s statement. For leading IRGC commanders to feign ignorance of Haji Khamenei’s decree strikes at the very core of the IRGC and the parallel banking sector, in particular the Export Bank.

On January 6, 2015, IRGC al-Quds Force officer Mohammad-Alallahdadi was targeted by Israeli jets in the Quneitra area in south-western Syria. He was killed along with several Lebanese Hezbollah fighters.

The latest Israeli attack elicited little official response from Iran. One of the few public reactions was offered by Ali Akbar Velayati, senior foreign policy adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who said during a trip to Syria that “Israel’s attack will not remain unanswered.”

Hassan Shateri, a military analyst close to the IRGC, was even more vague when asked by Sputnik’s Persian service if Iran would retaliate. “Until now, the Islamic Republic has not officially reacted to such attacks and has not issued any statements... but downing of the Israeli F-16 was a warning to Israel. It was a deterrent and this time around it showed that the IRGC would respond with a strong reaction.”

The latest incident was reported in the IRGC weekly Sobh-e Sadeq, he disclosed that he would be appointed a political commissar in the IRGC to civilian control. The appointment of a timid functionary as Haji Sadeghi as the supreme leader’s decree nor the defence minister’s statement. For leading IRGC commanders to feign ignorance of Haji Khamenei’s decree strikes at the very core of the IRGC and the parallel banking sector, in particular the Export Bank.

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Haji Sadeghi joined the Khorramshahr Air and Space unmanned aerial drone force. The base is part of the substantial military infrastructure established by Iran in Syria. Colonel Mehdi Dehqan Yazdeli, the highest-ranking Iranian fatality in Syria, was killed in the Quneitra area in south-western Syria. He was targeted by Israeli jets while transporting Iranian-made weaponry from Syria to Lebanon. The Israeli attack elicited little official response from Iran. One of the few public reactions was offered by Ali Akbar Velayati, senior foreign policy adviser to Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who said during a trip to Syria that “Israel’s attack will not remain unanswered.”

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On February 13, 2013, Commander Hassan Shateri, also known as Hossein Khashnevis, was killed in an Israeli Air Force attack while transporting Iranian-made weaponry from Syria to Lebanon. Shateri was officially the head of the Iranian Committees for the Reconstruction of Lebanon.

In reality, he was the highest-ranking IRGC al-Quds Force officer in Lebanon.

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As hawks take centre stage in Washington, so does Iran's challenge

Thomas Seibert

Washington

The rise of two prominent foreign policy hawks to crucial positions in the Trump administration is likely to put a bright spotlight on Iran as the biggest challenge for the United States in the Middle East. However, early statements from the new national security team indicate a more pragmatic than ideological approach.

John Bolton started work as US President Donald Trump’s national security adviser on April 9, replacing H.R. McMaster. Unlike McMas- ter and Michael Flynn, Trump’s first pick as security adviser who only lasted three weeks, Bolton, 69, is an experienced bureaucrat who knows how to work the political machinery in Washington.

He is also an unapologetic sup-porter of the US-led war against Saddam Hussein in 2003, largely seen as a disaster both for Iraq and the United States. The former US ambassador to the United Nations began his new job as the adminis-tration pondered a missile attack on Syria. Bolton’s position in the deliberations was not immediately known.

Mike Pompeo, 54, the director of the CIA, faced a confirmation hear-ing in the Senate as the secretary of state on April 12. The former US lawm-aker from Kansas is seen as one of the most influential for-eign policy aides in Trump’s team who will play a crucial role in the administration’s decision-making process on Syria. Bolton’s hawkish new security adviser is a highly experienced diplomat who worked closely with President Donald Trump’s national security adviser John Bolton. The pair will advise Trump about whether to pull the Unit-ed States out of the nuclear deal when the next deadline arrives May 12. America’s European allies are asking Trump to save the pact, arguing it is the best way to pre-vent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.

President Donald Trump’s foreign policy hawks to-ward Iran and Russia. The latter is considered a hardliner who wants to withdraw from Syria “very soon.” Pompeo insisted at his Senate hearing that he would not be a “yes” man but would stand up to Trump if he felt it was necessary. He said he had been able to con-vince the president to change his mind in conversations he had with him during his tenure as CIA chief.

Another key test is to vote on Pompeo’s confirmation this month.

Joe Macaron, a fellow at the Arab Centre in Washington, is among those who welcome the hawks’ appointment. He is convinced the US administration will not make a new military adventure in the Middle East but it did not know how to go about it. The pair will advise Trump about whether to pull the United States out of the nuclear deal when the next deadline arrives May 12. America’s European allies are asking Trump to save the deal. He did, however, say that he did not believe a “surgical strike” against the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad would require further congres-sional authorisation.

No questions were asked about the past of the State Department’s human rights, Middle East and counterterrorism staff.

The White House states that Trump’s foreign policy instincts are more pragmatic than ideological. It is a relevant concern among those who speak of a “moderate approach” in the administration.

Mark Habeeb

“It always is a big day in the US Congress when a cabinet officer is summoned to testify before a committee,” said former Senator Richard Lugar last month. If confirmation day is any guide, what he was headed to the White House after the hearing to meet with Trump’s national security council staff.

“Are we trying to stop the mur-der of innocent people? But on a strategic level, it’s how do we keep this from escalating out of control, if you get my drift on that,” Mattis said. He also indicated that no deci-sion would be made on how and when to respond to Syria until after Trump had spoken with British Prime Minister Theresa May and French President Emmanuel Macaron, thus reserving a key issue for a meeting with the United States in the Middle East but it did not know how to go about that, he said.

“Joining the Strategic and Policy Forum, a former member of the White House National Security Council staff, added: “Every day at the forefront of the White House’s concentration is how can we find solutions that achieve the American objective but avoid us having to put a single soldier on the ground.”

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Mark Habeeb

East | West

New dynamics. CIA Director Mike Pompeo takes his seat to testify before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in Washington, on April 12.

Mark Habeeb is East-West Editor of the Arab Weekly and adjunct professor of Global Politics and Security at Georgetown University.
Hungarian strongman Viktor Orban secured a historic fourth term after his anti-immigration, anti-Islam, right-wing populist Fidesz party secured a two-thirds majority in parliament.

Fidesz won 133 seats in Hungary's 199-member parliament, having run a campaign almost exclusively based on the fear of asylum seekers looking for a second chance on the opposite side of the globe.

At an election rally in March, Orban warned his followers and raised the idea of defending "Christian" Hungary from refugees and migrants.

While Orban is critical of the European Union, nobody expects him to seek to leave the union.

Orban sought to portray the issue of immigration as an existential threat to Hungary and the rest of Europe. It is a message that galvanised supporters and raised alarm already high from the far-right and anti-Islamic discourse across Europe.

In his annual state of the union address, Orban warned that the European Union had "oppressed" Hungary, a Christian culture and... the series. While the narrative of "Safe Harbour" provides new insight into an issue that has long been at the centre of public debate, particularly given that Hungary is reliant on EU funds.

The European Union reacted cautiously to Orban's re-election. European Commission President Jean-Claude Juncker issued a statement stressing the importance of all member states "defending" the values of the European Union, with "no exception.

The European Council President Donald Tusk also implicitly warned Orban to walk the line in his official statement of congratulation. "I count on you to play a constructive role in maintaining our unity in the EU," Tusk said.

It is not clear that Orban, with political capital to spend after his election victory, will toe the EU line. Orban had said that Hungary would not accept the European Union's compulsory redistribution of migrants and indicated that he wants the European Union to change the way it distributes migrants.

"The results may include continuing strains in Hungary's relations with the EU, which has thus far been powerless to stem..." Kalen acknowledged on portfolio.hu.

While Orban is critical of the European Union, nobody expects him to seek to leave the union, particularly given that Hungary is reliant on EU funds.

"There is a big, big rightward move as a reaction to issues in Hungary," said the United Kingdom's leading anti-EU politician Nigel Farage during an interview on his LBC radio show.

"The narrative of "Safe Harbour" navigates a treacherous clash of characters, motivating the political with sentiments that are often mixed. The presence of new insight into an issue that has long been at the centre of public debate, especially in Australia."
Egypt has unveiled an ambitious plan to raise its information and communication technology (IT) exports and increase the national contribution of the sector to the country’s gross domestic product.

The plan, formulated by and to be implemented by the Communications and Information Technology Ministry, seeks to turn the IT sector into a main driver of Egyptian economic growth. It is part of Cairo’s efforts to diversify the country’s economy and end dependence on traditional income earners, such as tourism, agricultural exports and the Suez Canal.

Over the past two years, Egypt’s IT sector has been growing 2.5% annually and the new plan set a goal of a growth rate of more than 7%. “Egypt has what it takes to become a regional hub for data centres,” said Hamdi El-Labidi, head of communications at the IT Chamber of the Egyptian Federation of Industries. “Huge work is being done at the national level to achieve this goal.”

This work includes construction of seven technological zones outside Cairo. The zones are being established, among other places, in the southern province of Asyut, the northern coastal city of Alexandria and the central province of Beni Suef.

Construction of the technological zones is due to be completed this year, with operations beginning soon afterward. Officials said they hope the zones convince tech companies to relocate their businesses to Egypt and will include 20 state-of-the-art training centres to provide a qualified labour force. The new zone at the Communications and Information Technology Ministry includes an aspect to increase locally made inputs in the final products of services produced in Egypt.

Qadi said outsourcing will be crucial to implementing the strategy. “Outsourcing is actually one of several things that can be done with the resources we have,” the minister said. “Other important components of the strategy include the localisation of technological industries, attracting more technological investments, modernising the communications infrastructure and opening new regional and international markets.”

There are hopes that online outsourcing will increase Egypt’s hard currency inflows and ease pressures on the trade and payments balances.

Egyptian policymakers said outsourcing has great potential in a country where more than 800,000 university graduates enter the labour market every year.

Egypt’s economic reform, which has included the flotation of the currency, has led to a severe drop in the exchange rate of the Egyptian pound. This drop has changed local businesses’ calculations and given Egypt an edge as an outsourcing centre for IT industries.

Greater focus on the IT sector as a driver of the economic growth will benefit the economy, reduce pressures on the financial system and help Egypt’s economic policymakers draft long-term plans, economists said.

There is also demand for IT products from emerging markets, especially in the African continent and Egypt can use its proximity to reap greater dividends. “We have a huge pool of skilled labour, infrastructure and a competitive environment to invest,” said Yumna al-Hamam, an economics professor at Cairo University. “All these advantages should give us an edge that compensates our country’s proximity to markets where there is demand for IT products.”

Greater opportunities but entrenched stereotypes for Arab women in data science

Khadija Hamouchi

While infrastructural issues need to be worked out, Arab women are gearing up to play a bigger role.

Oman make up nearly half of the Middle East and North Africa region’s 422 million people, the World Bank says, and the region’s women are finding roles in previously off-limits fields such as computer engineering and data science.

Data science is a sunrise sector. Last year, IBM predicted that the number of data science and analytics jobs worldwide would jump from 364,000 to 2.7 million by 2020.

“The data is the new oil,” said Mariette Awad, associate professor in the Electrical and Computer Engineering Department of the American University of Beirut. “If you have data, you have knowledge and that is powerful for business today.”

Clearly, there are immense opportunities in data science but there are also some inherent gender stereotypes. “There is still that boys’ club mentality in the field,” Awad said. “The higher you get up the pyramid, the thinner it gets.”

Precise numbers for Arab women working in data science are not available but research by New York University Abu Dhabi’s Sanaa Odeh indicates they are keen to study engineering, computer science and other related technologies.

Odeh’s population of Arab female scientists, said women make up 43.4% of the student cohorts in those subjects.

In the Palestinian territories, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Lebanon, women constitute a majority of university students in computer science and engineering courses. The US average for female enrolment in similar courses is 12%.

The interest in tech careers is prompted partly by the perception the data scientist’s office can be anywhere. Arab women data scientists say their jobs are family-friendly because they offer the flexibility to work from home. The data scientist’s job is to develop solutions to problems. For this, they must be involved in the process of problem-solving from start to finish, from data collection to interpretation. This can be done at a computer anywhere.

Awad said data sciences are a good fit for women because “we love to tell stories and are great at thinking about the detail. This is where we can have an impact.”

Indeed, data science allows women to play crucial roles in business. However, data science infrastructure is woefully inadequate in the region. The capacity to store vast amounts of data and financial support for research remains a problem in the Arab world.

Awoff pointed out that even when imparted data in large quantities is generated or super cool algorithms created, “we do not have the storage capacity to save all of this.”

While infrastructural issues need to be worked out, Arab women are gearing up to play a bigger role. In 2012, the Arab Women in Computing (ArabWIC) organisation was set up by Obid and Kaoutar Naafar.

As prominent data scientists, they wanted to support and inspire Arab women in computing. ArabWIC, which has chapters in 27 countries, has linked more than 2,500 Arab female academics, students, entrepreneurs and industry professionals from all over the world through its seminars.

In March, the American University of Beirut organised the second Women in Data Science conference in partnership with the Stanford Institute for Computational and Mathematical Engineering.

It featured Olivia Liau, data manager at Uber, and drew 755 participants to the venue and 368 online attendees.

Event coordinator Mima Mokdashi said it was important to raise awareness about the field among Arab women and “encourage and support women to enter STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) fields and pursue a career path in data science and finally to shed light on female leaders in the domain to further inspire and guide.”

Awoff said such initiatives were crucial as women forge ahead in data sciences. “I do not want to be treated nicely or differently because I am a woman,” she said. “I want to be given opportunities because of my capabilities, competence and knowledge.”

Khadija Hamouchi is a Belgian-Moroccan social entrepreneur and founder of the 500 Startups initiative that supports women entrepreneurs in North Africa, the Middle East and South Asia.
Saudi giant Aramco has agreed to work with energy firms in India to build the country's largest oil refinery.

Aramco announced the signing of a memorandum of understanding with Ratnagiri Refinery and Petrochemicals Ltd., a consortium of state-owned Indian oil companies, to develop and build an integrated refinery and petrochemicals complex at Ratnagiri, in the west coast state of Maharashtra.

The project, which is estimated to cost $44 billion, is the latest deal announced by Aramco. It recently signed a $5 billion deal with France's Total to build a refinery at Ichabal, Saudi Arabia, and a $16 billion agreement with US energy firms, including drilling services companies Baker Hughes and Haliburton.

Aramco has also pledged billions of dollars for deals in Malaysia and Indonesia in the past year.

"Investing in India is a key part of Saudi Aramco's global downstream strategy and another milestone in our growing relationship with India," Aramco President and CEO Amin Nasser said during the signing ceremony.

"The signing marks a significant development in India's oil and gas sector, enabling a strategic joint venture and investment partnership that will serve India's fast-growing demand for transportation fuels and chemical products," Nasser said.

He added that Aramco participating in the project would allow it to go beyond its crude oil supplier role to a fully integrated petrochemicals complex and provide feedstock for the integrated petrochemical complex capable of producing approximately 18 million tonnes per year of petrochemicals.

In addition to the refinery, cracker and downstream petrochemical facilities, project plans include facilities such as a logistics, crude oil and product storage terminals, raw water supply, as well as centralised and shared utilities.

Saudi Arabia is one of the world's top three oil producers, along with Russia and the United States, with Aramco as the centre piece of its operations.

Saudi Aramco has crude oil reserves of 265 billion barrels, more than 15% of all global oil deposits.

The refinery is also to provide feedstock for the integrated petrochemical complex capable of producing approximately 18 million tonnes per year of petrochemicals.

Saudi Aramco is an Iraqi writer.

Economy

Turkey’s lira hits record lows amid economy fears

Turkey’s embattled currency the lira has plunged to record lows against the dollar and the euro, with investors fearing strong growth masked the risks of high inflation and current-account problems.

Turkish authorities in March reported a growth of 7.2% but inflation remained in double figures and the lira has tumbled in value since the beginning of the year, pushing up the current account deficit.

As of April 10, the lira was trading more than four to the dollar and five to the euro for the first time and analysts fear the pressure on the currency is not over.

(Anadolu Agency/Presse)

Egypt plans deep cuts in energy subsidies, increases for food

Egypt plans to cut fuel subsidies by one-quarter and almost halve those for electricity in the financial year 2019/2020 as it regroups its food subsidies slightly, a government official said. It is also planning a series of moves to reduce budget costs by $2.4 billion.

Cutting subsidies to reduce pressure on government spending is one of the country’s main goals as it pushes forward with reforms to revive an economy that has struggled since a 2011 uprising. It is also a condition of a $12 billion deal Egypt signed with the International Monetary Fund in 2016.

(Reuters)

Dubai places billions on mega projects ahead of Expo

Dubai is spending tens of billions of dollars on infrastructure and hospitality projects related to the international trade fair Expo 2020, Dubai's tourism chief said.

The value of Expo related projects under way hit $42.5 billion in March, the Construction Intelligence Report stated.

(Anadolu Agency/Presse)

Lebanese PM says economic deals to be signed with Saudi Arabia

Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri has said he had an "excellent" meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Ab- dulaziz and expected Lebanon to sign economic deals with Saudi Arabia vis-a-vis different sectors of the economy, whether it is industry and tourism or services, and plans during a news conference in Beirut.

"We will see very soon certain agreements that will be signed with Saudi Arabia vis-a-vis different sectors of the economy, whether it is industry and tourism or services," Hariri said during a news conference in Beirut.

(Reuters)

Salam Sarhan
Society

Drama therapy used to help victims of trauma in Baghdad

Oumayma Omar
Baghdad

T

herapy through theatre and music is what Iraqi artist and drama professor Jabbar Khammat is using to treat depression suffered by trauma victims at his theatre clinic in Baghdad.

The cases of Kaseem, Haafar and Ahmad, Khammat said, reflect the difficult psychic condition of a substantial portion of the Iraqi population suffering from decades of war, chemical attacks, deprivation and bad economy.

“They are examples of ex-prisoners, drug and alcohol addicts and victims of non-conventional weapons and war traumas who went into therapy to express their depression with the help of drama therapy,” Khammat said.

“A Ahmad’s case, for instance, sums up most of the psychological conditions. His depression stood as an obstacle between him and his family and he sunk into complete stupor and isolation and became addicted to drugs and alcohols as a means of escaping from his painful past and harsh present.”

Ahmad suffered from the loss of his sweetheart killed in an explosion at the age of 17, and, although he later married and had children, his trauma persisted and depression compounded with difficult living conditions almost killed him.

“Ahmad became a different person after he was able to disclose his problems and express his feelings on stage to an audience, the majority of whom are patients at the clinic. By doing so, he succeeded in liberating himself from the perception phase of the treatment called “the platform of disclosure” offer patients “the space or context to tell their stories, set goals, solve problem, release feelings or achieve catharsis.”

At this stage, they are trained in drama performance, including vocal exercises and some find solace in playing music. Through drama, they can actually explore the depth and scope of their experience and eventually enhance interpersonal relationships.

“This meant that they have to concentrate on something other than their addictions or past trauma and look instead towards the future. Drama therapy helps them gain more confidence, concentrate and relax,” Khammat said.

Drama therapy is relatively new to Iraq, Khammat introduced the approach at the juvenile penitentiary of al-Jurf in 2010 as part of a reformist project. Young people in the prison were asked to channel their energy into theatre by writing and performing a play in which they reflected their stories, sufferings and hopes. Afterwards, they could interact with the audience.

“The Journal of a Forgotten Citizen” is a play written and performed by patients at Ibn Rushd Psychiatric Hospital, where Khammat tests his alternative therapy.

The play focused on corruption with three characters representing different parts of Iraqi society.

Another project was put on for survivors of chemical weapons attacks in Iraq in 1988 in Halabja, in northern Iraq. At least 5,000 people died and an estimated 7,000 were injured in a long-term illness.

“Many of those involved had breathing difficulties and sometimes found it difficult to express how hard that had been almost 39 years after the attacks.”

“Psycho-drama experience has helped many trauma victims to come out of their stupor by giving them the chance to take part in writing plays through which they illustrate their stories and embody aspirations and hopes, such as being a good person, especially in the case of drug addicts. The therapy helps them train and move into the future, a practice that would eventually change their approach to life and their behaviour,” Khammat said.

“Traditional treatment consists of digging into the past only but drama therapy offers patients an innovative way of expressing their suppressed emotions and reactions that are triggered by what happened to them, the patient can then think through at present or what they apprehend might happen to them in the future,” Khammat said.

“Unlike traditional therapy, drama therapy looks at the targets as outcasts instead of patients,” Khammat added.

Dr. Oussama al-Saidi, director of Ibn Rushd Psychiatric Hospital, said: “Drama therapy is a new therapy in Iraq and it could be used as part of a rehabilitation process at the hospital. Medical personnel will get the chance to gain expertise in drama therapy, which proved to be effective with certain patients while they were still in the hospital. However, their response was temporary. Some relapsed into their depression and addictions after being discharged.”

“That is why this type of therapy needs close follow up, in addition to being sustained with medication.”

Khammat said he hopes to take the drama therapy practice to places in Iraq which have suffered the most trauma. He said he anticipated playing in different parts of the country “to assist hundreds of people, especially from traumatized victims and those who need modern techniques to take them out of their desperate conditions.”

However, the teacher-turned-therapist noted that it is not an easy task to convince Iraqis of the merit of drama therapy. There are other challenges, too, such as a lack of funding and dealing with fact that women from conservative families will not show up on stage in Iraq and the lack of sites to work regularly.

Oumayma Omar, based in Baghdad, is a contributor to the Culture and Society section of The Arab Weekly.

Ahmed Megahid
Cairo

T

he United Arab Emirates is the happiest Arab country and the 25th happiest nation in the world, according to the “World Happiness Report 2018”.

The report, a UN annual ranking that assesses a country’s average well-being by looking at income, life expectancy, social support, freedom and trust and generosity, ranked Egypt 122nd out of 156 countries.

Now, a UAE initiative is working to transfer the Arab Gulf country’s happiness experience to Egypt through a partnership with an Egyptian NGO.

Alif Yaa Saada —meaning “Happy from A to Z”—signed a cooperation protocol with Egyptian NGO Arab Achievers and Egyptian training company Skyline.

The company will provide high-quality training, using advanced tools in making people happy.

Implementation of the initiative is to start in July. Egyptians will be allowed to attend seminars and courses within the initiative for free. Arab Yaa Saada, Lufti said, makes the project free to encourage individuals and institutions to participate.

Egyptian training company Skyline is to assist the UAE initiative and the Egyptian NGO in designing consultancy and design programmes in capacity-building and upgrading business institutions.

The company will provide logistical support, choosing a venue it should target and where for effective implementation.

Egypt stands to learn a lot from the implementation of the Alif Yaa Saada initiative, given the experience of the UAE in this field, the company said.

“The UAE also stands to benefit from a cooperative initiative in Egypt by giving its trainers the chance of playing a role in happiness-making,” said Ghada Abdel Razik, the head of training at Skyline. “So, this is a win-win situation. It must be said that turning happiness into a science is the UAE’s gift to the Arab world.”

Spreading happiness. The signing of a cooperation protocol between Alif Yaa Saada, Egyptian NGO Arab Achievers and Egyptian training company Skyline.
In for a change. Former director of the Centre for Women's Studies and Research in Islam Asma Lamrabet.

For better or worse. A Jordanian couple greet their guests at their wedding party at a hotel in downtown Amman.

Roufan Nahhas

Amman

I n a move to lower divorce rates, Jordan has implemented a comprehensive programme to prepare couples for a long married life by focusing on four key aspects of their future. The pre-nuptial programme has been hailed as a positive move. There is an average of 80,000 marriage contracts sealed in Jordan annually but nearly 21,000 cases of divorce are registered each year.

“There is a decrease in the number of marriages in Jordan and this is unhealthy. The main reasons for the trend are the lack of financial means and fear of assuming the responsibility of raising a family,” said Hussen Khanz, a professor of sociology at Jordan University.

“The lack of knowledge of the true meaning of marriage among young people makes the idea of getting married a problem and not a solution.”

The pre-nuptial programme includes lectures and seminars covering marriage-related rights and duties.

The number of marriages dropped from 77,700 in 2017 to 81,143 in 2016, Irbid governorate in northern Jordan registered the highest number with 28% and Karak governorate in the south the lowest with 1.4%, statistics from the Supreme Judge Department indicate.

An estimated 45% of Jordanians are unmarried, Khuzai said.

“There are some 150,000 men over 30 and 100,000 women over 27 who are not married,” he said. “Men carry a lot of burdens and are under pressure to provide necessary marriage requirements, including a high dowry demanded by the girl’s family.”

The pre-marital counselling programme offered by the Chief Islamic Justice Department is optional. It includes lectures and seminars covering marriage-related rights and duties, laws governing family matters, such as health aspects of spousal relations, children’s education and personal communication and managing household finances.

The marriage certificate given by the Chief Islamic Justice Department is an excellent and positive means for preparing couples who are in the process of getting married. It increases awareness about all aspects of married life, which, in my opinion, is what we need,” said Ala Saed, a single Jordanian woman.

“I have many friends who got married but soon they faced many issues. If they had the chance to go to such seminars about marriage, I believe most of the problems would have been solved.”

Others say lack of knowledge about responsibilities and duties that come with being married is the obstacle that is stopping young people from getting married.

“We are living in the knowledge age and information about marriage is accessible everywhere but I think the most important issue is that couples face financial insecurity,” said Ayman Horani, who owns a car washing business.

“How can a young person get married and provide a secure life for his family when his monthly income is not sufficient to sustain himself? The man should provide a house, furniture, food, pay bills and school tuitions and this does not come cheap.”

Horani said the increase in the cost of getting married was leading many Jordanian men to marry foreigners.

“Foreign women don’t ask for dowry or an expensive house and a car, and today one can easily find a bride online, travel to meet her and get married,” he said.

The Supreme Judge Department statistics show that, in 2017, approximately 3,432 Jordanian men married non-Jordanian Arab women and 467 married foreigners, while 3,582 Jordanian women married Arab nationals and 332 married non-Arabs.

The marriage-related rights seminar covers issues such as inheritance, marriage and divorce. “It is a one-day programme that increases awareness about the issue of equality between men and women within the religious frame of reference,” said Lamrabet in her statement.

Lamrabet claims to have always advocated a progressive, reformist and democratized reading towards the issue of women in Islam. She said: “It is the action that I have always taken, and it is my job to lead the discussion on the issue of women in Islam. I do not wish to set the pace of debate, but I think the most important is the awareness that I want to increase.”

Lamrabet insisted that her voluntary work within the Rabita had no other ambition than to serve her country and was aimed at fostering “a peaceful Islam, contextualised and in tune with universal humanistic values compatible with our cultural values.”

“The equal inheritance issue has long been a taboo in my country, despite its reputation for a respectful view of Islam.”

Many NGOs and celebrities, in addition to some religious figures, have openly called for “Tashub” – an independent interpretation – on the issue of equality between men and women. Feminists reject even debates on the issue, arguing that Quranic texts cannot be changed. Last year, Tunisia became the first Arab country and Fourth Muslim nation to suggest amending equal inheritance laws when President Beji Caid Essebsi issued a motion to reform the country’s inheritance law, which currently allows men double the amount of their female counterparts, according to Islamic jurisprudence. A special commission created to study the issue is expected to present its findings in June.

In Morocco and most Muslims countries, a woman receives half as much as a man in inheritance and cannot collect the bequests without the participation of at least one male relative.

Saida Idriess, president of the Democratic Association of Moroc- can Women, said Morocco’s 2011 constitution stipulates gender equality in all fields including eco- nomic rights that “enclose inherit- ance.”

“Given that inheritance is a very important economic issue, men do not want to share this wealth to which women have contributed,” Idriess said last August.

Hundreds of Moroccans last month called for the annulment of Ta’sib, a rule that gives the rights to the men closest to the family of the deceased or distant relatives, even unknown and never having any links with the family, to share the inheritance with female orphans who do not have a brother.

Lamrabet, author Leila Slimani, former Health Minister Housnia Louardi and Rachid Bentamine, an Islamist and researcher, were among the signatories that call for the change in the online petition re- leased March 20.

“Ta’ib no longer corresponds to the functioning of the Moroccan family and the current social con- text,” the statement from the sig- natories read. “It makes the poorest women more precarious, it forces many parents to give up their prop- erty, while alive, to their daughters, and finally, it is a pure product of the Fiqh (jurisprudence) and does not obey any divine command.”

“Why maintain a rule that not only has no social justification but that, moreover, is jurisprudence and has no basis in the Quran? On the contrary, in the Quran, the Ta’ib goes against the principles of justice and fairness,” Lamrabet wrote.

Achraf Omari, spokesman for the chief Islamic judge, encouraged couples planning to get married to follow the counselling programme. “It is very flexible and does not delay or complicate any planned mar- riage,” he said.

“It is a one-day programme that covers key issues in married life and it is free for now. It is limited to Amman for the time being but we need to take it to locations all over the kingdom. The programme targets those who are over 18 but also, in special cases, those who are underage,” Omari told local media.

The programme has been intro- duced to refugees at Zaatari, Jor- dan’s first official Syrian refugee camp and home for nearly 80,000 people. Early marriages and becom- ing increasingly common among Syrian refugees.

Roufan Nahhas is a journalist based in Jordan.

Debate on equal inheritance heats up in Morocco

Saad Guerraoui

Casablanca

A sma Lamrabet resigned from Morocco’s Islamic league of theologians after she defended equal inheritance and caused a uproar among conservatives.

Lamrabet, in a statement, said she expressed “strictly personal” views during a university confer- ence on inheritance. Her com- ments led to controversy at the Academic Council of the “Rabita Mohammadia” – the Islamic league of theologians – in which she was director of the Centre for Women’s Studies and Research in Islam.

“Faced with such pressure, I was forced to submit my resignation because of the divergences on the approach of equality between men and women within the religious frame of reference,” said Lamrabet in her statement.

Lamrabet claims to have always advocated a progressive, reformist and democratized reading towards the issue of women in Islam.

“Irrespective of the debates and discussions, law, which currently allot men double the amount of their female counterparts, according to Islamic jurisprudence. A special commis- sion created to study the issue is expected to present its findings in June.

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Reliving the Agadir quake in London’s Barbican Centre

Karen Dabrowska

London

A devastating earthquake in February 1960, which induced most of the Modernist town of Agadir to rubble, was the catalyst for "Agadir," an amazing multimedia exhibition in London’s Barbican, which explores the earthquake as a blank page and installation piece, an exercise in relations, hospitality and the art of printing and tracing, Barrada said.

One wall of the gallery is dedicated to white-blackboard-like sketches of buildings in Agadir before and after the earthquake. The buildings float in a void as solo objects without relationship to one another. "It is an exercise in cinema and a chalet garden in the industrial environment," according to the artist.

"A children’s technique of drawing when your pencil or crayon on the ground surface was used," curator Lotte Johnson said. "You cover a piece of paper with wax crayons and then put a layer of ema and a chalet garden in the industrial environment. It forces the characters and the environment to live and mingle among the drawings and dance among the drawings and mingle with the audience. The wall serves as a blank page and enables visitors to contemplate the environment while they listen to sound recordings of readings from "Agadir," the print novel/play by Mohammed Khaim-El Fifone who was commissioned by the Moroccan government to write a report about the earthquake. Instead, he came up with a surreal novel. The book has been translated into English so passages could be read and acted out in the exhibition.

Visitors feel energised as they walk into the gallery and hear characters engage in a fierce debate over how to best the world and govern their lives. The earthquake seems to reflect the daily struggles of society facing the daily chaos of urban environments. It forces the characters to think about the political and religious power and social relationships.

"Our country takes on a new historic dawn," one man says. "We are liberated by a catastrophe." Another comments that the king will not want to pay for a country at a discount and a woman pleads with a prophet to make her a passport so she can leave for France. On selected Saturdays actors from London’s Guildhall speak, walk and dance among the drawings and paintings enabling visitors to contemplate the environment while they listen to sound recordings of readings from "Agadir." It is an exercise in cinema and a chalet garden in the industrial environment.

Karen Dabrowska is an Arab Weekly contributor in London.

Art Dubai 2018 reaffirms role as top venue for dialogue and partnerships

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Dubai

Described as the “most crowded fair on the planet,” the 12th Art Dubai was attended by 26,000 visitors thronging gallery halls across the venue in Madinat Jumeirah.

Organisers reported an 18% increase in footfall over last year. Representations by 106 international museums, institutions and galleries displayed works from regional and international art scenes across a variety of contemporary and Residents sections.

The Art Dubai Modern section showcased 78 galleries from 42 countries, including pioneering participation by galleries from Iceland, Ghana and Kazakhstan.

The Art Dubai Modern section featured 16 galleries from 14 countries, including prominent participation by artists from South America, Azerbaijan and South Africa, whose work was inspired by the environment.

Pioneering this year was a section called Residents, which featured 11 artists whose exhibitions were produced during residences of four to eight weeks in the United Arab Emirates. The artists engaged with the local community, worked on one another and participated in talks and meetings.

Art Dubai Director Myrna Ayad said the fair “reflects the multicultural and diverse nature of Dubai itself and our platform is the only one representing the Middle East, North Africa and South Asia.”

"Art Dubai is where initiatives and projects launched onto the international stage with art institutions from Saudi Arabia, among others. As part of its partnership with Misk, the fair presented a museum-quality exhibition titled ‘That Feel-Verlo Leap into the Fierceness of Life,’ featuring rarely seen modern works in Dubai on long-term loan, to be displayed there from the opening of the centre on November 11.”

As part of Art Dubai’s educational programme, the 12th Global Art Forum discussed artificial intelligence and automation, titled "I AM NOT A ROBOT." One of the issues discussed was how automation would affect creativity.

"The Abraaj Group Art Prize (2009-18) announced that its full collection of works commissioned through the ten years of the prize will move to the Jameel Arts Centre in Dubai on long-term loan, to be displayed there from the opening of the centre on November 11. As part of Art Dubai’s educational programme, the 12th Global Art Forum discussed artificial intelligence and automation, titled “I AM NOT A ROBOT.” One of the issues discussed was how automation would affect creativity.

Karen Dabrowska is an Arab Weekly contributor in London.

The exhibition has universal appeal and significance. Wicker chairs in front of the drawings enable visitors to contemplate the artwork while they listen to sound recordings of readings from “Agadir,” the print novel/play by Mohammed Khaim-El Fifone who was commissioned by the Moroccan government to write a report about the earthquake. Instead, he came up with a surreal novel. The book has been translated into English so passages could be read and acted out in the exhibition.

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Karen Dabrowska is an Arab Weekly contributor in London.

The Barbican Curve is as scary as the wicker light shades are sus- pended from the ceiling and cast a ghostly shadow on the walls. The mural starts to fragment and leads to a surreal dimension.

The exhibition has universal appeal and significance. We are constantly dealing with the idea of reinvention after disasters by the natural disasters, climate change or cities ravaged by war, which continues to happen in much of the world,” Johnson said.

Barrada lives and works in New York. She is the founder of Cinematheque de Tangier, North Africa’s premier cinema cultural centre and film archive. Her work has been exhibited internationally at Tate Modern in London, the Museum of Modern Art in New York and other institutions.

“Agadir,” runs through May 2 at the Curve Gallery, Barbican Centre in London.

Karen Dabrowska is an Arab Weekly contributor in London.

The Modern Symposium promotes art institutions from Saudi Arabia as Misk Art Institute and Art Jameel, among others. As part of its partnership with Misk, the fair presented a museum-quality exhibition titled “That Feel-Verlo Leap into the Fierceness of Life,” featuring rarely seen modern works in Dubai on long-term loan, to be displayed there from the opening of the centre on November 11. As part of Art Dubai’s educational programme, the 12th Global Art Forum discussed artificial intelligence and automation, titled “I AM NOT A ROBOT.” One of the issues discussed was how automation would affect creativity.

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Dubai

A visitor in Dubai is diverse.

al-Baqsami

Kuwaiti ar

February 6.

Barbican

the “Agadir” (Getty Images)

aims to revive all forms of the plastic arts. This shows how poet al-Baqsami was aware of the importance of preserving cultural heritage. His poetry, like the work of many other poets, seeks to revive the memory of Iraq’s rich cultural history.

Another of the festival’s goals was to focus on the role of poetry as an aspect of modern-day poetry. As Rackham said: “We work on plastic arts that feature poetry or how to embody poetry in plastic arts.” She added: “Poetry is meant to express the beautiful soul of the poet so we wanted to learn more about poetry. We need to focus on the role of poetry as an aspect of a multidisciplinary culture. After all, poetry is a beautiful adventure. Beyond promoting the role of poetry, the festival also showed how the genre can interact with other artistic disciplines.”

The question of “what successive events generated what meaning” they might read from the art work of Rackham is something that many fear is losing ground due to the rise of plastic arts as a form of literature that is meant to disturb the bittersweet past. The festival attracted a large audience, especially young people. “Students participated in great numbers, which was amazing,” said Mejri. “Also, we dedicated an evening for street poetry, an initiative by a group of young Tunisians.”

The emphasis that the youth showed, she said, proves that “poetry is still relevant today” and that “it may be even more than ever.” Poetry is mysterious. It is about borrowing, imagery and expression. “Some young people might find it difficult to approach poetry but this is an opportunity for them to learn more about poetry. We need to focus on the role of poetry as an aspect of a multidisciplinary culture. After all, poetry is a beautiful adventure. Beyond promoting the role of poetry, the festival also showed how the genre can interact with other artistic disciplines.”

The idea was to have a workshop to work on the fusion of poetry and plastic arts;” said Rym Zayat, a workshop coordinator. “We wanted to work on plastic arts that feature poetry or how to embody poetry in plastic arts.”

She added: “We worked on portraits of many poets. Many people know the poetry but don’t know the face of the poet so we wanted to commemorate that. We also worked on graffiti art so that it combines both poetry and images.”

The festival concluded with prizes for “Best Young Poet” awarded to Palestinian Ali Arabiy; the Tantawi Prize for Poetry, given to Tunisians Youssef Rzouga and Moncef Ouabi; and the Best First Poetry Collection given to Tunisian Akrin Abdi.

Roua Khlif

Tunis

The festival invited visitors to daily workshops, conferences and evening poetry readings with renowned poets from the region.

Globally diverse. A visitor checks artwork at the Art Dubai Contemporary section.

Tunisian poet Shirin Adawi recites a poem at the closing ceremony of the Tunis Poetry Festival.

The theme is to celebrate to celebrate life, which is meant to send a message. It is an opportunity to celebrate poetry. The festival attracted a large audience, especially young people. “Students participated in great numbers, which was amazing,” said Mejri. “Also, we dedicated an evening for street poetry, an initiative by a group of young Tunisians.”

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Roua Khlif is a regular Travel and Culture contributor to The Arab Weekly.

A recent workshop by2021

The Iraqi lamassu bull takes up residence in London’s Trafalgar Square

Cultural dimension. A view of the interior of a lamp shop at the “Agadir” exhibition at the Curve Barbican Centre in London, on February 6.

Nazi Tarzi

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Dubai

A visitor in Dubai is diverse.

al-Baqsami

Kuwaiti ar

February 6.

Barbican

the “Agadir” (Getty Images)

aims to revive all forms of the plastic arts. This shows how poet al-Baqsami was aware of the importance of preserving cultural heritage. His poetry, like the work of many other poets, seeks to revive the memory of Iraq’s rich cultural history.

Another of the festival’s goals was to focus on the role of poetry as an aspect of modern-day poetry. As Rackham said: “We work on plastic arts that feature poetry or how to embody poetry in plastic arts.” She added: “Poetry is meant to express the beautiful soul of the poet so we wanted to learn more about poetry. We need to focus on the role of poetry as an aspect of a multidisciplinary culture. After all, poetry is a beautiful adventure. Beyond promoting the role of poetry, the festival also showed how the genre can interact with other artistic disciplines.”

The idea was to have a workshop to work on the fusion of poetry and plastic arts;” said Rym Zayat, a workshop coordinator. “We wanted to work on plastic arts that feature poetry or how to embody poetry in plastic arts.”

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**Travel**

**Lebanon’s ‘Lamartine Valley’, a source of poetic inspiration**

**Samar Kadi**

**Hammana**

It inspired French poet Alphonse de Lamartine two centuries ago and is still one of the most preserved and panoramic areas of Mount Lebanon. Hammana and its pine-covered valley known as “Valle de Lamartine” is a typical Lebanese village with orchards, red-tiled stone houses, an old souk and historic palaces. It has resisted the blanket urbanisation that has defaced much of Lebanon’s countryside.

Given that Hammana has a river that runs through one of the deepest valleys of Lebanon, it offers an ideal environment for outdoor activities.

“It is almost the only village in the area that has preserved its architectural cachet and heritage,” said Hammana Mayor Bachir Farhat. “We have very strict zoning rules and a set of construction standards that have defaced much of Lebanon’s countryside.

Nestled in the heart of Lamartine Valley at 1,200 metres above sea level, Hammana was historically the economic centre of the Upper Metn District of Mount Lebanon. It is one of the country’s most popular mountain resorts, only a 30-minute drive from Beirut.

“It has been inhabited for centuries because it is very rich in water. At one point it had some 70 springs. People used to settle near water sources to cultivate and irrigate their land,” Farhat said.

A walk through the streets of Hammana is a beauty storehouse. Cute little shops arecently opened the doors of a three-storey building, was opened less than a year ago as a space available to young Lebanese artists to work, create, and meet.

Given that Hammana has a river that runs through one of the deepest valleys of Lebanon, it offers an ideal environment for outdoor activities. The Lamartine Valley and villages will be the focus of the first pavilion at the Cairo Biennale of Architecture under the theme “The Place that Remains.” It involves a reflection on the built environment versus the unbuilt land and visions for the future of Lebanese landscape.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society section editor.