Facing mounting challenges, Iran mobilises its proxies in Syria

Another key element in Tehran’s thinking, veteran observers of the Middle East’s serpentine affairs say, is that Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has long been convinced that the Americans want to eradicate the clerical regime in Tehran.

The return of Bolton, a former US ambassador to the United Nations, only strengthens that conviction, the sources say.

Recent events in Syria, including the April 14 missile barrage, have fuelled Tehran’s urge to rely even more on its army of diverse Shia groups.

That may have already started and could intensify as the foreign powers in Syria — the United States, Russia, Turkey and regional states — scramble to adjust, each on its own terms, to Trump’s pre-dawn assault on Syria’s ilegal chemical weapons arsenal with 105 cruise missiles fired by the US and naval forces in the Mediterranean and the Arabian Gulf.

Ironically, Russia’s attitude after the strikes has shown it to be less interested than Tehran in a showdown with the United States. Such recent developments are likely to accentuate Tehran’s concern that being left alone is not enough for its regional strategy of expansion.

On April 5, an ostensibly pro-Assad militia calling itself the Popular Resistance in the Eastern Region claimed a rocket attack on US forces. The next day, the Baqir Brigade declared “jihad” on Americans and their allies in Syria.

“Those and other cases indicate that the so-called Shia militias are increasingly marching to [Iran’s] tune, presenting an even greater threat to US and allied interests,” Phillip Smyth of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy observed in an April 12 analysis.

These and other Shia groups that are spurring up are increasingly controlled by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and exposing Ayatollah Khomeini’s ideology of Islamic rule.

There has been friction, ideological and military, between As- sad’s forces and Hezbollah as well as the Lebanese group went to Assad’s support in early 2015. This has grown as Assad’s army fell apart and the Shia had to do most of the fighting.

Smyth noted unmissably, however, that “the forces gaining ascendance in the government-controlled areas are more prone to supporting Tehran’s foreign policy agenda instead of Assad’s.”

That augurs ill for Syria and Assad’s shrinking regime. He is in danger of being badly out-manoeuvred by an expanding enemy that has long bided its time.

Ed Blanche is a regular contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Why Saudis need to lift the veil on heritage treasures

Caline Malek

Despite old-school stereotypes of women in the Middle East and the rule they play in society, young Emirati females are breaking down barriers and fighting alongside men to fend for their regional strategy of expansion.

New generation of Emirati women is breaking down social barriers

Caline Malek

A number of countries in North Africa and the Middle East will be having national and local elections in the period ahead.

On May 6, Lebanon will have its first legislative elections in many years. The same day, Tunisians will vote in their first municipal elections since the fall of the Ben Ali regime.

On May 12, Iraq will elect the members of its council of representatives who will be picking the president and the prime minis- ter.

Elections will not resolve the region’s complex problems but the rate of voter participation and gender representation, as well as the political balance that the polls are likely to yield, will be revealing of the forces at play in each country.

It remains to be seen what extent even transparent elec- tions serve citizens’ long-term freedom of choice. In Turkey, for instance, President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has called for snap elec- tions in June, which could, ironi- cally, enable him to tighten his grip on power until 2028.

Caline Malek is an Arab Weekly contributor in Abu Dhabi.
Syria strikes bring sound and fury but do not signify much

Simon Speakman Cordall

As accusations of evidence tampering in Douma grow, what took place on April 7 may never be confirmed. The only experts to have visited the site have been the Russian inspectors, who entered Douma on April 9 and subsequently claimed to have found no evidence of chemical weapons’ use.

In the West, discussion of the alleged chemical attack shifted from the regime’s use of sarin to chlorine gas. While its effects are horrific, chlorine is in a different classification than sarin because of its commercial applications and has been used by the regime throughout the conflict, without giving cause to Western action.

Chlorine causes significant respiratory problems, particularly in children and the elderly. Fatalities from exposure to it are typically limited. Sarin, however, causes uncontrollable muscle spasms, making breathing impossible and causing the breakdown of other bodily functions, including the discharge of bodily fluids. It is widely regarded as being among the worst of the chemical weapons within Assad’s arsenal.

Simon Speakman Cordall

Tunis

The actual definition of “mission accomplished” was President Donald Trump’s “mission accomplished” tweet about the coordinated US, British and French military operation against targets in Syria was criticised and ridiculed in the United States and abroad but there is some truth in it. A mission is nearly accomplished in Syria but it is that of Iran. The day after the Western strikes on Syria, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei addressed regime officials and envoys of Islamic countries. It was mab’ath, the day the Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation, and Khamenei began by attempting to link the divine revelation of Iran’s military presence in Syria.

The Muslim ummah, he said, needed to believe in “the message of mab’ath, which is mono-theism. When we believe in it, we will not tolerate injustice and we will defend the meek. This is why the Islamic Republic is present wherever there are meek people in need of support.”

Khamenei, however, did not mention Syria’s sneakest people – the civilian casualties of the Assad regime’s use of chemical weapons.

“Defending the meek” is enshrined in Article 154 of the Iranian Constitution and provides the legal foundation of Tehran’s attempts to export its revolution. The actual definition of “defending the meek,” however, is subject to the whims of Iran’s rulers. Khamenei assured his audience that Iran’s obligation to defend the meek did not equal Iranian expansionism.

“Iran’s presence in Syria and in West Asia (is) to assist ‘the resistance’, which was against injustice,” he said. “The front of resistance has, thanks to the assistance provided it and because of the bravery of Syrian forces, managed to prevail in the fight against terrorists created by the United States, the West and their mercenaries such as Saudi [Arabia].”

Going on to denounce the leaders of the United States, the United Kingdom and France as “criminals,” Khamenei spelled out the moral of the story: “Experience teaches us that retreat invites further aggression and resistance forces them to retreat.”

He ended with the hope that “the nations of Iran, Afghanistan, Syria, innocent Palestine, Myanmar and the people of Kashmir will force their enemies to retreat in the not so distant future.”

Iranian President Hassan Rohani made many of the same points as the supreme leader in his public address on the same day. It was hard to escape the notion that both men were perfectly happy with the outcome of the air raids in Syria and why ever not? The strikes were limited, with hardly any casualties and did not challenge the military superiority of the Assad regime and its allies in Tehran and Moscow.

Tehran is closer than ever to achieving its mission in Syria. It has an overland corridor that connects to its allied Lebanese Hezbollah on the shores of the Mediterranean. It has opened a low-intensity front on the Syria/Israel border to deter Israeli air raids.

Trump may try to present himself as the protector of Syria. President Bashar Assad’s defenders are civilians victims but the realities on the ground show it is Iran that may soon be saying “mission accomplished.”

All Alfonelli is a non-resident senior fellow at Rafik Hariri Centre for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council.
Tensions flare in Manbij amid rising confusion

The rapid collapse of Kurdish defences in Afrin, west of the Euphrates River, raised a serious question at the White House.

The SDF captured Manbij from ISIS in 2016, after which it proved a point of contention among members of the global coalition ranged against the terrorist group. Both Turkey and the SDF see control of Manbij as a strategic imperative. The MMC maintains that the city is vital to projecting the strength of the Kurdish federal project, Rojava, in Aleppo province.

Turkey maintains that the MMC and the YPG are agents of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), which is considered a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the European Union and the United States. The PKK has fought a guerrilla war against Turkey for years and is accused of attempting to establish a state in northern Syria from which it could conduct a campaign of terror inside Turkey.

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Strategic decisions can no longer be justified by their anti-ISIS expediency.
Arab summit denounces Iran’s ‘blatant interference’ in the region, refutes Arab Peace Initiative

United stance. Arab League Secretary-General Ahmed Aboul Gheit (L) and Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir attend a press conference at the end of the Arab summit in Dhahran, on April 15.

Mohammed Alkhereiji

London

ran’s “blatant interference” in the region factored heavily in the Arab League summit at a time when tensions between Saudi Arabia and Tehran continued to escalate.

We renew our strong condemnation of Iran’s terrorist acts in the Arab region and reject its blatant interference in the affairs of Arab countries,” Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud said in his opening address at the summit April 15 in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia.

“We condemn its hostile at- tempts aimed at destabilising se- curity and spreading sectarian se- dition, considered a threat to Arab national security and a flagrant violation of the principles of inter- national laws,” King Salman said.

King Salman’s strong condem- nation at the meeting came when Arab relations with Tehran hit an all-time low due to Tehran’s in- volvement in Syria, Lebanon and Yemen.

“We hold the Iran-backed Houthi militias fully responsible for the emergence and continuation of the Yemeni crisis and the human suf- fering that has affected Yemen,” King Salman said.

He stressed that Iran-made mis- siles fired by the Houthis into Saudi Arabia were evidence of “the danger of Iranian behaviour in the region, its violation of the principles of international law, its flagrant violations of the values, ethics and good neighbourliness.”

The summit included 17 leaders from across the Middle East and North Africa.

King Salman also called on the United Nations to take a decisive position on the issue.

“The Arab summit’s final state- ment reiterated King Salman’s rejection of “Iranian interference in the internal affairs of the Arab countries and condemned the aggressive attempts to destabilise the security and fuel sectarian sedition in the Arab countries, including Iran’s support and arming of agents in a number of Arab countries as it violates the principles of good neighbour- hood.”

The summit included 17 leaders from across the Middle East and North Africa. The summit ended after the United States and its allies launched a missile attack on Syria in response to the Assad regime’s suspected use of chemical weap- ons in Douma.

Although reaction to the West’s strikes was absent from the summit’s final communique, the chemical attack was condemned by the Arab League, which called for an international investigation in Syria. Damascus was absent from the summit because its Arab League membership was suspend- ed seven years ago when the war began there.

“We, the leaders, have followed what Western powers did in Syria. As we affirm the importance of coordinating all efforts to reach a political resolution to the Syrian crisis, we utterly condemn the use of chemical weapons by the brotherly Syrian people. We demand an independent interna- tional investigation, including en- forcing international law against anyone who uses chemical weap- ons,” the summit declaration said.

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al- Jubeir, appearing at a news con- ference April 17 in Riyadh with UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), prepared to send troops to Syria as part of a wider US effort to stabilise the war-torn country.

“We are in discussions with the United States and have been since the beginning of the Syrian crisis (in 2011) about sending forces into Syria,” Jubeir said.

Jubeir said that talks were under way about the kind of forces that could be deployed in eastern Syria.

The Wall Street Journal reported that US President Donald Trump wanted to ease the burden on US forces in Iraq by replacing them with an Arab military force based in the country. The United States has also wanted Arab allies to make financial contributions to help stabilise that region.

“In terms of financial contri- butions, Saudi Arabia has al- ways maintained its share of the burden,” Jubeir said without elaborating.

Trump’s recognition of Jerusa- lem as the capital of Israel and US plans to move its embassy from Tel Aviv were heavily criticised at the summit.

“The Palestinian cause is our pri- mary cause and will remain so un- til the Palestinian people receive all their legitimate rights, at the head of which is an independent Pales- tinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital,” King Salman said.

We reiterate our rejection of the US administration’s decision relating to Jerusalem and we hail other nations rejecting it. We affirm that East Jerusalem is part of Palestin- ian territory,” Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, in a speech, called for an international peace summit to “decide on the state of Palestine’s membership in the United Nations and to form a multilateral interna- tional mechanism to sponsor seri- ous negotiations.”

“We should commit to the resolutions of international legiti- macy and agree on implement- ing agreements within a specified period of time to end the Israeli occupation, which started in 1967, and to establish the independent Palestinian state with East Jerusa- lem as its capital that lives in peace and security alongside the state of Israel,” Abbas added.

King Salman announced that Saudi Arabia would donate $500 million to Jerusalem’s Islamic en- dowment programmes and for maintenance of the Islamic holy sites in Jerusalem.”

Saudi Arabia has been a source of danger in the region, inter- national law and our legislation, amid the Israeli deception that there is no Israeli settlement,” Abbas said.

Israel’s claim the Golan Heights. That means accepting that the Israeli leadership’s sincere wish to know America from the ground up, and that the US president is still strong.

The fact is that the Syrian regime has always been safe from Israeli aggression as long as it does not claim the Golan Heights. That same regime continues today to break up Syria with Israeli backing.

The Dhahran summit had the merit of showing the realism of the new Arab world. It came after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz’s visits to the United Kingdom and the United States. Unlike leaders who have never set foot on American soil, the crown prince illustrated the Saudi leadership’s sincere wish to know America from the inside.

The Dhahran summit confirmed the emergence of a new Saudi Arabia capable of realizing the new Arab world.

King Salman also elaborated on the United Nations to take a decisive position on the issue.

“The Arab summit’s final state- ment reiterated King Salman’s rejection of “Iranian interference in the internal affairs of the Arab countries and condemned the aggressive attempts to destabilise the security and fuel sectarian sedition in the Arab countries, including Iran’s support and arming of agents in a number of Arab countries as it violates the principles of good neighbour- hood.”

The Dhahran summit clarified that Iran’s illegal occupation of Jerusalem and the UAE’s initiative for a peaceful solution to the crisis through di- rect negotiations or by resorting to the International Court of Justice.

The Dhahran summit confirmed the emergence of a new Saudi Arabia capable of realizing the new Arab world.
Gulf

UAE ends military training programme in Somalia

The Arab Weekly staff

London

The United Arab Emirates cancelled its military training programme in Somalia in response to the grounding of a UAE-registered civil aircraft in Mogadishu airport and confiscation of money destined to pay the soldiers, a statement by the UAE Foreign Ministry said.

The holding of the UAE plane was preceded by Somali security officials on April 8 seizing funds — estimated to be close to $10 million — belonging to the UAE at Aden Adde International Airport.

The UAE official news agency WAM reported that the plane was carrying 47 Emirati armed forces personnel, some of whom were said to be held at gunpoint and assaulted by Somali security forces.

“The UAE deplores this violation of international law and norms at a time when the UAE has provided all kinds of political, economic, military and humanitarian support in the darkest conditions to establish security and stability in the Somali Federal Republic,” the UAE Foreign Ministry said.

“The UAE’s entry into Somalia was facilitated by Turkey and was aimed primarily at undermining the growing ties with the UAE, even if it took time,” a Western diplomat said on the condition of anonymity.

Somali opposition politicians from the so-called Qatari-Turkish axis in Mogadishu have been trying to stir public opinion.

The holding of the UAE plane was preceded by Somali security officials seizing funds belonging to the UAE.

“We ask our UAE friends, not only to stay, but to redo their efforts in helping Somalia stand on its feet,” said a statement from the office of the president of Puntland.

The UAE’s action “will only help our enemy, particularly Al-Shabaab and IS-X (the Islamic States),” an unidentified security analyst said.

The loss of UAE support will destabilise the security situation in the country. “The value of the UAE-trained forces was two-fold,” the analyst told Reuters.

Companies from Russia, China and South Korea, as well as the US firm Westinghouse, submitted proposals to Saudi Arabia in late 2017.

Answering questions. US Secretary of State-designate Mike Pompeo (L) talks with Chairman Bob Corker after a break in the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, on April 12.

Will Washington offer Riyadh a ‘flexible’ nuclear deal?

Gregory Aftandilian

Unnecessary tensions. Containers are loaded onto a DP World-run cargo ship at the Port of Berbera in Somaliland, last April.

US Senator Bob Corker, the Tennessee Republican who chairs the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, said during the Pompeo hearing that it would be “very difficult to tell the Arab nations that they cannot enrich (uranium) when the Shias can.” Although Corker may not have intended to make a sectarian point, he was clearly referring to Iran.

What Corker did not say was that there was also an American business interest in the issue. As many observers noted, Trump sees his relationship with the Saudis as a kind of business venture. The closer he gets to the Saudis, the more he believes they will “buy American.”

Saudi Arabia wants to build four nuclear power stations and says it hopes to conclude a deal with a foreign company by the end of 2016. Companies from Russia, China and South Korea, as well as the US firm Westinghouse, submitted similar proposals to Saudi Arabia in late 2017. Westinghouse had hoped to get Saudi Arabia’s money because the United States are split on the issue, as per US law, however, Congress has the ultimate say in the matter and many members are worried about nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, especially after Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz stated in an interview that if Iran develops a nuclear bomb “we will follow suit as soon as possible.”

Aside from indulging the Saudis, who may want to be in a position someday to “go nuclear” with a bomb if they believe Iran is headed in that direction, there is congressional concern that striking a “flexible” deal with Riyadh would cause problems for the United States with already-signed agreements with other countries.

Markley told the Wall Street Journal that it was “crazy to loosen important non-proliferation standards that are intended to ensure an uncertain commercial deal.” Whether he can muster a bipartisan and international coalition against the Trump administration may have little in mind an open question.

Gregory Aftandilian is a lecturer in the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University and a former US State Department Middle East analyst.

April 22, 2018 The Arab Weekly 5
Iran under fire

Following the Western strikes in Syria, Iran has many more reasons for concern. It faces deepening international suspicion and growing regional isolation. Despite protestations to the contrary, Tehran has clearly parted ways with Iran on Syria. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan supported Western strikes against Syrian targets and denounced the suspected use of chemical weapons by Bashar Al-Assad’s regime.

Tehran is bound to be concerned by signs that Moscow is contemplating a more accommodating stance vis-a-vis the West in war and peace in Syria. It is significant that Russia managed to convey a sense of restraint towards the United States both before and after the April 14 strikes.

Tehran might have celebrated too early prospects for a full US exit from Syria. Saudi proposals for more active support to the United States in Syria may indicate that the vacuum Iran wanted to inherit in war-torn Syria might not happening any time soon.

The Iranians are also likely to be worried about Europe’s growing resolve on treaty issues such as Tehran’s ballistic development programme and its role in regional weapons proliferation. After the April 7 suspected chemical weapons attack near Damascus, EU countries seemed increasingly determined to take a harder line on Iran’s activities. The circle of European countries favouring tighter restrictions is about to include not just France, Germany and the United Kingdom but also Spain and Austria. More rigorous sanctions are likely to be the main thrust of the arguments advanced by the French and German leaders when they meet with US President Donald Trump in Washington in the next few days. Both French President Emmanuel Macron and German Chancellor Angela Merkel will try to convince the US president to accept more sanctions against Iran in exchange for preserving the 2015 nuclear deal.

Tehran targets. These developments don’t augur well for a regime that is still, unfortunately, pursuing an aggressive agenda in the Middle East, even as it struggles economically and seems on an increasingly bittie footing at home.

The Iranian regime is cracking down on all possible conduits for dissent at home. On April 18, it banned government-owned newspapers from foreign-developed messaging apps, such as Telegram, even environments subject to drastic pressures. It was certainly the case with Kaveh Madani, the scientist who took a senior position in Iran’s environmental department but resigned within months. “Yes, the accused has escaped from a land in which online ignorance has rejected science, knowledge and expertise,” Madani wrote on Twitter after his resignation. A short message that said a lot about the Iranian regime’s ability to accommodate change.

The Arab Weekly turns 3

The Arab Weekly burned years old last week, another milestone on the journey that began on April 17, 2015, with the purpose of providing a fresh perspective on the Arab world.

Three years on, the newspaper continues to address the world’s information needs about the Arab region’s diverse parts, be they the Middle East, the Gulf countries, the Maghreb or the Levant. It continues to shed light on some of the roots and historical factors that shaped the Arab-Israeli conflict, developments in Iran and Turkey and Western attitudes towards the Middle East and North Africa. It also takes a wide-angle view of business, technology, culture and travel.

It offers analysis and commentary, with a perspective that goes beyond breaking news. It pays special attention to ideas animating the Arab and Muslim communities in the West, with the aim of bridging a gap in cross-cultural understanding.

It has been a busy year leading up to the paper’s third birthday. From Britain, the United Arab Emirates and the United States, The Arab Weekly has worked to earn the readers in a rapidly changing world.

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Looking ahead, the newspaper continues to expand its website offering a more user-friendly, content-rich format optimised for computers, smartphones and tablets. All the publication’s content, including back issues, are available online and available to search.

The Arab Weekly is part of a modern media project focusing on the Arab world. It is published by the Arab Media Group, which was inaugurated in 1977, and has a stable of popular publications, including Al Arab daily, Middle East Online and Al Jaled.

The Arab Weekly and its sister publications hope to continue serving their regional and global readers in a rapidly changing world.

Arab institutions must adapt to new realities

Mohamad Kawas

Arab governments are realising that the fate of the region is no longer in their hands.

There is no mystery behind why Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud chose to call the recent Arab League meeting the “Jerusalem Summit.” Riyadh wanted to remind everybody that the Palestinian cause remains the one cause in the history of the Arab world that garnered an absolute consensus.

By doing so, Riyadh also wanted to end the fruitless controversies and rumours regarding the “deal of the century” that the Trump administration has yet to reveal.

The “Jerusalem Summit,” however, had other dimensions. For Riyadh, a “new Saudi Arabia” needs a new Arab organisation. Reorganising the Arab position about Jerusalem requires putting some order in the Arab camp and agreeing on certain undisputed Palestinian core issues plus side issues where divergence remains possible.

The Arab world is aware of the need for a new internal dynamic capable of ensuring its protection from internal fallout and external storms. There are changes coming on a global scale that will lead to redrawing borders in the Arab region. This Arab awareness does not flow from any simplistic ideological framework like the one that swept the region and some of which gave birth to political regimes selling dreams of unity.

The new Arab awareness is based on realistic considerations that look at Arab institutions from the point of view of Arab interests rather than propaganda tools. Arab governments are realising that the fate of the region is no longer in their hands. Turkey, Iran and Israel, not to mention the major world powers, are pushing their own agendas and affecting the daily lives of Arab citizens.

It is scandalous to see the Arabs absent from all effective international “workshops” seeking to end the Syrian tragedy. They also have no significant role in the Libyan tragedy. Saudi Arabia and the Arab coalition are present in Yemen but that crisis remains essentially a Gulf matter. The Arab League, as the institution federating all Arabs, has no vital role in ending the tragedy of the Yemeni people.

As a political entity, the Arabs have failed to find solutions to the crises of the Arab Umma (“Arab Nation”), perhaps because of the confusion surrounding the term “Umma.” In addition, crises at the local level in this Arab country or the other robbed the regional issues of much-needed focus.

The ideology of Arab nationalism, which was popular in the 1960s, but much of it when it became a scary excuse for authoritarian regimes in the Arab world. As it disappeared, it paved the way for another notion of Arab “Umma,” but the regional context is changing quickly. Consequently, there is no longer room within the Arab organisation for sensitivities.

Moreover, Iran’s influence in the region is shrinking and probably has no future in Syria. Arab leaders also forgave Turkey’s meddling in Iraq’s affairs.

At Dhahran, Arab leaders addressed the final scenes from the Gulf Shield military exercises with the participation of forces from 24 Arab countries. That was another message to the world: The Arab region is ready to rely on its own military capacities by necessity and for correcting the overall regional context.

The Dhahran summit laid the groundwork for a much-needed and urgent brainwashing in the Arab region. It is true that Arab citizens have become used to witnessing previous summit recommendations die a slow death. This time, however, it looks like there are planning concerns shared by all Arabs that will leave the Dhahran agenda open until Arab organisations harmonise with Arab realities.

Mohamad Kawas is a Lebanese writer.
Iran is particularly concerned by France’s rising role inside the European Union, for that may translate into difficulties for Iran.

France is trying to enhance its role as a leading European country and a major international power, concerned with what goes on in the Middle East. This is reflected in France’s efforts to reduce divergences among European Union members on issues such as possible new sanctions against Iran. France also tries to fill the void created by Britain’s exit from the European Union. At the same time, Germany is keen on involving its own recognition in international and regional crises. That is probably why it didn’t take part in the April 14 strikes against the Syrian regime after the chemical weapons sites even though it supported them. Paris has taken an early start preparing for European Parliament elections in May. It is trying to consolidate its capacity to play a major European role by hammering its “Unified Europe” project. It is closely monitoring France’s international and regional role. Iran is particularly concerned by France’s rising role inside the European Union, for that may translate into difficulties for Iran.

Indeed, France, a major world power, is inching towards becoming a major regional power, rather than to extend and possibly deepen the war. That is a sign he wants to become a regional power and Iran might revive its nuclear programmes. Washington would be undermining its capacity to tackle other nuclear cases, such as North Korea. In any case, Tehran might not welcome Macron’s visit scheduled for this year. Iran seems to have given up on France and on Europe in general siding with it in its showdown with the United States’ court.

France is on Twitter: @rashmeerl.

The “diplomatic energy” appears limited to coordinating military strikes, all as part of a larger snowflake strategy.
Iraq strikes ISIS in Syria in coordination with US, Assad

The Arab Weekly staff

London

Iraq has struck Islamic State (ISIS) positions in Syria with intelligence support from the US-led coalition and after coordinating with the Syrian regime. The raid coincided with an “anti-terrorism” meeting of Iraqi, Iranian, Russian and Syrian military and security officials in Baghdad.

The Iraqi Air Force carried out the April 19 “deadly raid” against ISIS in Syria “because of the danger (ISIS militants) pose to Iraqi territory,” a statement from Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi’s office said.

“Those raids demonstrate the growing capacity of our armed forces to hunt down and liquidate terrorists,” the statement added.

The strikes were carried out after coordination with Syrian President Bashar Assad’s government, an Iraqi military spokesman said.

“Carrying out air strikes on ISIS gangs in Syrian territories is because of the danger posed by said gangs to Iraqi territories and is proof of the improved capabilities of our armed forces,” the Iraqi military said in a statement.

The US-led coalition fighting ISIS said the attack targeted an area of our armed forces, “the Iraqi military excellence was born from the US-led coalition. On the same day the strikes were carried out, Iranian Defence Minister Brigadier-General Amir Hatami visited a joint intelligence centre in Baghdad operated by Iran, Iraq and Syria.

“Cooperation, in intelligence between the four countries for common aims and anti-terrorism missions has been successful in re-storing stability and security and it should form the basis for future cooperation,” Hatami said in a statement.

The coalition had played an “important role” in “the defeat” of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria, he said. Iran’s official IRNA news agency said Hatami met with Iraq’s interior minister and other officials and praised their victory over ISIS.

General Saad al-Alak, head of Iraq’s military intelligence, who met with Hatami, called the four-country alliance a “distinguished example for international relations, especially in the field of military and security cooperation.”

The strikes came as Baghdad faced renewed criticism from Human Rights Watch (HRW), which accused Iraqi security officers of “denying immediate relatives of suspected ISIS members security clearance to recluse homes being occupied or to seek compensation.”

“Security forces have also destroyed or confiscated some property. Such acts, based only on family relationships to ISIS suspects rather than individual security determinations, are a form of collective punishment,” read a statement by HRW.

Lama Fahal, deputy Middle East director at HRW, said the Iraqi measures were discriminatory and counterproductive.

The raid coincided with an “anti-terrorism” meeting of Iraqi, Iranian, Russian and Syrian military and security officials in Baghdad.

“These families deserve the same protections that Iraq courts provide to all citizens,” Fahal said in a statement. “Courts should be the guarantors against discrimination that will only further sectarian divisions in the country and delay needed reconciliation.”

The allegations against the Iraqi Judiciary have been recurring.

“Critics say the perfunctory trials in special counterterrorism courts are sweeping up bystanders and relatives as well as fighters and executing most of them in a process marred with violations than justice,” the New York Times reported.

Iraqi officials denied a miscarriage of justice taking place when trials are held.

“If there is evidence then suspects are prosecuted and if there is no evidence then they are released,” Abdul-Sattar al-Birqdar, an Iraqi judge and Justice Ministry spokesman, told the New York Times.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies.

The myth of Kurdish military efficacy has been shattered

Talha Abdulrazaq

Iraqi Kurdish peshmerga fighters take part in a graduation ceremony at the Zakho military academy, last January.

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The myth of Kurdish military efficacy has been shattered throughout the war against the Islamic State (ISIS), we have heard almost non-stop about how Kurdish factions in Iraq and Syria have been the most collective fighters on the ground against the extremists.

Notable mentions by the media and the Pentagon include the peshmerga in Iraq, as well as the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Syria. This over-exaggerated praise led to the perception that, regionally, the Kurds are a force to be reckoned with.

Arguably, however, and after recent events in Iraq and Syria, this myth has come crashing down, exposing the Kurds’ historical vulnerabilities.

In Syria, the myth of Kurdish military excellence was born in the floss of the battle for the northern Syrian city of Kobane. In September 2014, at the height of ISIS’s power, the Sunni extremists advanced through the country-side and surrounded Kobane. The United Nations estimated that 130,000 civilians fled to Turkey in just four days.

Over the next four months, ISIS would breach the city’s defences, be pushed back in several sectors and Kurdish YPG fighters would be joined by their Iraqi peshmerga allies aided by the US-led coalition to eventually force ISIS to abandon Kobane after suffering heavy losses.

Kobane was a watershed moment in the fight against ISIS, with the militants suffering one of their major first battlefield defeats.

ISIS was again a factor in the forging of the multi-cultural coalition against the Kurds in Iraq. After the Iraqi Army abandoned its positions in Mosul and many other areas of northern Iraq in the face of ISIS’s onslaught, the US-led coalition provided much-needed support to the peshmerga, who secure large amounts of territory that would remain outside of ISIS’s control for the duration of the war.

This included major oil-producing cities such as Kirkuk, which happened to be disputed between the Baghdad federal authorities and the Erbil-based Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). With ISIS having defeated the Iraqi military and forced them back, the KRG was in position to deploy the peshmerga and impose a facto-solution of Kurdish control over disputed towns and cities, such as Kirkuk. This served to boost the Kurds’ international credibility as a force that could not only hold ISIS at bay where other regional allies failed but also utilise its military prowess to achieve political goals.

However, a common denominator for Kurdish successes in Iraq and Syria is the role played by the United States and the international coalition against ISIS. It was arguably US air power across two theatres of war that allowed Kurdish factions to advance as far as they did.

Again, using Iraq as an example, the peshmerga were far from invulnerable to ISIS and, in fact, also turned tail and fled just like the US Army did until the United States showed them up.

Perhaps the most infamous example of ISIS’s brutality was its genocidal campaign against the Yazidis of Sinjar, who were left to their fates after the peshmerga sided in the face of an ISIS offensive in 2014. The peshmerga only made a comeback and provided extensive close air support provided by the Americans.

Once deprived of air support, the Kurds crumbled very rapidly on numerous fronts, even against forces that have made little use of air power against them. For instance, last year the peshmerga collapsed before an advance by the Iraqi Army and allied Shia militias in Tishrin, which some peshmerga had vowed to defend to the death.

Kirkuk was lost in a single day and the peshmerga fighters were simply unable to put up an effective defence without US air power. A similar pattern can be seen in Syria, where a lack of US air support has meant that Tishrin and its allies have been able to capture Afrin.

Without external support from air power, the Kurds are unable to capture and hold territory, which means their ambitions for independence and statehood will probably never materialise without extensive international support.

Talha Abdulrazaq is a researcher at the University of Exeter’s Strategy and Security Institute in England.
Egypt

News & Analysis

Highs and lows in Egypt’s Operation Sinai

Ahmed Megahid

Cairo

Egypt’s battle against ISIS in its Sinai Peninsula has hit several major milestones in recent weeks, with the joint work of Egypt’s armed forces and the police leading to the liquidation of a major terrorist cell in central Sinai. The group of attackers, which carried out coordinated attacks, consisted of 18 men, including two Egyptians, 13 Albanians and three Ukrainians, all members of the ISIS group. The operation was carried out by the Egyptian forces on April 11, 2018, in the area of El Arish, northern Sinai, and resulted in the death of 17 of the attackers and the capture of the remaining one.

The operation was a major blow to ISIS, which has been fighting to establish a caliphate in the region. The group has been日益增强 in recent years, with the number of its fighters numbering in the hundreds and its activities becoming more sophisticated. The operation was carried out by the Egyptian forces on April 11, 2018, in the area of El Arish, northern Sinai, and resulted in the death of 17 of the attackers and the capture of the remaining one.

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Ahmed Megahid is an Egyptian reporter in Cairo.
Maghrebi parties eye resuscitating moribund regional grouping

Tunis

Lamine Ghanmi

M any African countries that border the Maghreb region face dire socio-econom- ical problems, and when not consumed by armed conflicts and jihadist violence, the turmoil south of the Sahara is raising economic and pushing unprecedented waves of migrants to the Maghreb.

This flow of people gives a new role to the Maghreb in terms of migration dynamics and tests with the rest of Africa when it is sacrificed for a national identity ties with the continent.

The Maghreb has been a source of migrants to Europe since the 1940s. However, it is itself being contested by the repatriation operation is “a disaster”, said Hacene Kacimi, a migration official at the Algerian Interior Ministry. “Available statistics show that 250,000 migrant workers are working in Algeria,” Kacimi said. “Today, more than 300,000 Algerian migrants are still working in the country.” Algerians have stated that the repatriation is “a disaster” for the country’s economy and for its citizens. “We are not in a situation of a migration crisis, but we are in a situation of massive population displacements,” Kacimi said. “Which country would accept such a flow of illegal migrants on its soil? What happens at our borders is very worrying.”

Algeria is a transit point for migrants to Morocco, where authorities have signed agreements with the European Union to control the movement of migrants. The number of illegal migrants has been on the rise in Tunisia, which has led to a surge in the number of migrants transiting through the country. According to the European Commission, an average of 150,000 migrants arrive in Tunisia each year, of whom 40,000 are极易 workers. The EU has allocated €700 million to the Tunisian government to improve border controls and to support the establishment of asylum seeker centers.

In Tunisia, migrant workers sometimes seek to obtain local identification cards and temporary residence permits in order to work and live legally in the country. However, the process is lengthy and complex, and many migrants are forced to work in the informal sector to earn a living.

The situation in Libya is similar, with the country being a major transit point for migrants heading to Europe. However, the Libyan authorities have been unable to control the flow of migrants, and many migrants are subjected to forced labor and exploitation.

The Maghreb region is facing a major challenge in terms of migration management, and the four countries have been working together to find solutions. However, the lack of coordination and the competition among the countries have hindered the process.

The Maghreb countries have also been working with the European Union to find solutions to the migration crisis. In 2015, the EU and the Maghreb countries signed a cooperation agreement aimed at reducing the flow of migrants to Europe. However, the agreement has been criticized for not addressing the root causes of migration and for not adequately protecting the rights of migrants.

The Maghreb region is characterized by cultural diversity, but immigration and integration policies have often been dominated by political interests. The Maghreb region has a rich history and a diverse culture, but immigration policies have been dominated by political interests. The Maghreb region has a rich history and a diverse culture, but immigration policies have been dominated by political interests.
Palestine | Israel

Hamas, Fatah complicate Egypt’s mediation as they trade accusations

Ahmed Megahid

R elations between Hamas and Fatah are strained as ever, despite a much-touted Egypt-brokered reconciliation deal, with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas accusing Hamas of refusing to cede control of the Gaza Strip. While Hamas initially appeared willing to hand over the territory to Abbas’s Palestinian Authority, the group said it would not give up its arms, a condition that Abbas rejected. Hamas, which has controlled the Gaza Strip since 2007, has appeared to harden its position and analysts warned that a hand-fought reconciliation agreement signed last October in Cairo was on the brink of collapse.

In Egypt, analysts accuse Hamas of seeking to escalate animosities with Israel to hinder Egyptian mediation efforts.

“‘This territory cannot be ruled by anybody from outside,’” said Hussein Hamad, a member of Hamas’s politburo. “Everybody knows that Hamas did everything it could to make the reconciliation a success.”

Relations between Hamas and Abbas deteriorated after an attack on Palestinian Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah and intelligence chief Majid Faraj on March 13. Abbas accused Hamas of being behind the assassination attempt and many fear the possibility of a Palestinian civil war between Hamas and Fatah. Hamas denied involvement in the attack. A few days later, Hamas said two of its members in the attack had been killed.

The attack on Hamdallah’s convoy complicated matters for Egypt, which mediated the October 2017 reconciliation agreement and had asked both sides to ensure its implementation.

Following two rounds of talks in Cairo, Palestinian factions agreed to move towards a national reconciliation, which included preparations for legislative and presidential elections before the end of 2018 and Hamas ceding control of the Gaza Strip to the Palestinian Authority.

Abbas told a meeting of the Central Committee of Fatah April 8 in Ramallah that he had asked members of an Egyptian intelligence delegation to bring him a reply from Hamas on when it would hand over administrative rule of Gaza.

“We talked to our Egyptian brothers on reconciliation and made it clear to them that either our government takes over all Gaza’s files, namely the ministries, security and the army or there will be another talk,” Abbas said.

Speaking April 15 at the Arab League summit, Abbas said Hamdallah’s government cannot meet its responsibilities on the Gaza side without taking control of the Gaza Strip.

The Palestinian Authority has been “pushed to the wall” and it wants to preserve Hamas, including withholding salaries of Gaza Strip civil servants and cutting off funding for Gaza ministries and departments.

“This talk must be fully put pressure on Hamas to hand over the Gaza Strip, which is the government’s authoritative role to the government,” said Azam al-Alam, a member of Fatah’s Central Committee.

Accusing Hamas of intentionally hampering the progress of reconciliation talks, Ahmad confirmed that the Palestinian Authority has insisted that Hamas return to the principles of the Gaza Strip’s 2007 reconciliation agreement.

As for the Gaza Strip, he said, “it is the work of Hamas to manage the security file. ‘Fatah insisted on being responsible for this file, which has nothing to do with the understandings reached in Cairo,’” Badrani said. A Hamas delegation arrived in Cairo for talks with Egyptian intelligence officials on reconciliation with Fatah and violence along the Gaza-Israel border. Egypt was expected to press Hamas to implement agreements reached with Fatah last year and avoid provoking confrontations with Israel. The deterioration of relations between Hamas and Fatah occurred when tens of thousands of Palestinians were protesting along the Gaza-Israel border, Hamas and the Islamic military have exchanged for across the border.

In Egypt, analysts accuse Hamas of seeking to escalate animosities with Israel to hinder Egyptian mediation efforts.

“The movement can actually be killing two birds with one stone,” said Tarji Fahmi, a political science professor at Cairo University.

“No one, the escalation of violence with Israel will do away with the talk about reconciliation with Fatah, for now at least, and, on the other, it will please Iran with whom relations with Hamas have been strengthening for several months now.”

What cannot be scrubbed away in the broader debate is the visibility and alleviated status children are gaining inside the adult world.

Nazli Tarzi

The child speaks like a man, his photograph of 9-year-old Gazan Mohammad Tamimi wearing a self-styled surgical mask out of which an onion shoot is protruding has led to him being celebrated as another revolutionary child icon, who, like many others living under occupation, has been fast-tracked to adulthood.

Adopting an improvised strategy his father learned during the intifadas, Mohammad mocked Israel’s excessive force of arms and words with a simple, facing the camera as they stare at the barrel of an Israeli rifle. It is pointed at them by a uniformed Israeli soldier and a tank is in the near distance. Seven years later, Tamimi is in jail and Jihad has continued its duty-bound mission to document Israeli atrocities. Mohammad Tamimi, Ahed’s 17-year-old cousin, had his skull shattered after a rubber-coated metal bullet was fixed at his head. The Family and Israeli authorities remain embattled in a battle to control the narrative of what happened to Mohammad.

Figures published by B’Tselem, a Jerusalem-based human rights information centre, put the number of Palestinian minors held in Israeli jails at 356. These numbers are difficult to push aside when imagining what the future promises Gaza’s children. In Cairo to form a joint committee to manage the security file, “Fatah insisted on being responsible for this file, which has nothing to do with the understandings reached in Cairo,” Badrani said. A Hamas delegation arrived in Cairo for talks with Egyptian intelligence officials on reconciliation with Fatah and violence along the Gaza-Israel border. Egypt was expected to press Hamas to implement agreements reached with Fatah last year and avoid provoking confrontations with Israel. The deterioration of relations between Hamas and Fatah occurred when tens of thousands of Palestinians were protesting along the Gaza-Israel border, Hamas and the Islamic military have exchanged for across the border.

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Nazli Tarzi is an independent journalist whose writings and films focus on Arab issues and contemporary political scene.
### Beirut

In the nine years since Lebanon’s last general elections, women’s appetite for political power has increased significantly and today there are more than 100 female candidates contesting in the May 6 polls, compared to 12 last time. There are four women members in the outgoing parliament, representing 5.12% of the total of elected members. Will女人 suffer a larger number of female candidates?

Feminist movements and women rights lists have been lobbying for the increase of women’s participation in politics and many of them advocated — successfully — to include quota requirements for women in the election law that was passed last June. This year, it was women running in the elections, the highest ever number of women candidates in Lebanon.

“The fight for a fair representation of women in politics has pushed many political parties to include women on their electoral lists,” said rights activist Hayat Mirshad. “However, the real problem is that many political parties have put women in positions where it is almost impossible for them to make it to parliament.”

 onder the new semi-proportional electoral law, it is more difficult for candidates who are not heads of a list or in top positions to succeed. That has left women running for the end of the electoral lists with less chance of winning.

The number of women candidates is the highest on lists formed by the civil society group Kouchi- na Watani (We are all nationalists) which was founded in 2014. Even though the number of women candidates is the highest in Lebanon to date, it is considered relatively low to a gender-balanced parliament. Instead, the political leverage is viewed as a major obsta- cle preventing women from being politically active.

The electoral law makes it very hard for a politician to be chosen as she has the needed financial means to be visible to voters,” said Paula Ya- coubian, a journalist and candidate for the Armenian Orthodox seat in Beirut district.

“I am a candidate who is funding her own electoral campaign. A lot of women do not have this privilege. With the lack of a real support of political parties, many women were not able to run for the elections,” she said.

“Consequently, while forming the civil society’s Kouchiuna Watani lists, it was difficult to find women who were willing to participate in the elections and who had the finan- cial means to do so,” Nonetheless, in Akkar, North Lebanon, an all-women list, Nissa Akkar, was formed by five candidates who refused to be placed in male-dominated lists on which they were unlikely to succeed. “It is a unique and risky decision we took,” said lawyer Souad Salah, candidate for the Sunni seat in Ak- kar. “Many other candidates tried to intimidate us to push us to withdraw our candidacy. My husband was offered money to pressure me to quit. I come from a very conserva- tive community and many in my own family are not supporting me.”

Salah and the other candidates are finding their own electoral campaigns. In this underprivileged region of Lebanon, Nissa Akkar is determined to try and make a difference.

“I am a lawyer and a school teacher. We, as a list, only have the money to pay for the minimum requirements of the electoral cam- paign. We have no money to be visible on the media or be on bill- boards. We are trying to launch a crowdfunding campaign to collect the money we need to pay for our representatives in polling stations during elections day. We need approx- imately 700 representatives and we only have a handful of vol- unteers,” Salah said.

When they are not supported by political parties or don’t have the fi- nancial means to be visible as power- ful candidates, women are dis- couraged to run for political office.

Mirshad said she expected the number of women who are likely to win in the upcoming elections not to exceed the number of women in the outgoing parliament.

“It is a good thing to look at the number of 111 candidates as a posi- tive number but it is mass impor- tant to look at how many of these candidates will become members of the parliament in May 2021,” she said.

“We have been silenced for a very long time in Lebanon and we need more than 1st candidates to come near a fair representation of women in the political life. It is im- portant that women support each other to reach a fair representation in politics.”

Myra Abdallah is a Lebanese activist on gender issues.

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### Special Focus

#### Will Lebanon have more women MPs after May 6 poll?

**Myra Abdallah**

In the lead-up to Lebanon’s local and regional elections, women’s participation in politics and their representation in parliaments have been heavily scrutinized. Lebanon has faced significant socio-economic challenges, including a debt crisis, economic growth, high inflation and widespread unemployment. As a result, women have been actively participating in the political landscape, running for local and regional elections across the country.

**Lebanon**

Several campaigns have emerged to support women candidates, advocating for increased representation in legislative bodies. Women have been running on various lists, aiming to secure their rights and advocate for progressive policies. This has led to a surge in the number of women candidates, with many running as independent or in joint lists with other political parties.

**Women’s Participation**

Women’s participation in electoral politics is crucial in a context where representation and accountability are often lacking. Increased female participation can help address issues such as gender inequality, women’s empowerment, and the advancement of women’s rights. It is essential to ensure that women have equal opportunities to compete and win in elections, paving the way for more inclusive governance.

**Challenges**

Despite these developments, women candidates face various challenges, including financial constraints, lack of support from political parties, and societal barriers. Women often have to navigate these obstacles to make their voices heard and advocate for change.

**Fair Representation**

The Lebanese political system is characterized by a complex voting system that may hinder women’s representation. This is particularly evident in the recent elections, where women candidates have faced significant obstacles. Efforts to ensure fair representation for women include initiatives to support women’s political campaigns, providing resources and training to enhance their chances of winning.

**Conclusion**

Women’s increased participation in Lebanon’s local and regional elections is a positive development, reflecting growing societal awareness and the importance of gender parity in politics. However, significant challenges remain, and continued efforts are needed to ensure that women’s voices are heard and their rights are protected in the political landscape.
Elections in MENA

With snap election, Erdogan moves to consolidate power in 2028

By calling early elections, Erdogan is calculating that he can avoid seeing a possible clash before Turks go to the polls.

The election is to cement a switch from a parliamentary to a presidential system in Turkey that started with a constitutional referendum, narrowly won by Erdogan, last year. The new rules open the way for Erdogan, who has been Turkey's leader for 15 years, to stay in power for another two 5-year terms. The AKP (Justice and Development Party) (AKP) co-leaders who co-led the international coalition, US State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said.

Erdogan critics said the June poll results mean that the AKP will face a new reality. “This is a real election and a coup detat,” Tektin Kumbasar, a member in Istanbul, said in an interview.

Shifting politics. Turkish men are seen in front of poster flags of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of modern Turkey, in Istanbul, on April 19.

“Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey signalised a new willingness to work with Iran in the region. “As, for them to be present in the region, they need Iranian help. They must just come to terms and accept the presence of a powerful Iran,” pro-Tehran political analyst Seyed Hosseini told US public television network PBS last December. In addition to having the support of some Iraqi politicians, Iran has strong influence over many of Iraq’s militias, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the Hashed al-Shaabi, which has a presence in various fields, “believed to have close links with Iran’s al-Quds Force.” However, al-Quds Force’s ability to control the PMF, and therefore major security structures of the Iraqi state, will not be uncontested, particularly from within the Shi’ite community, said Nickolas Parsa, author of the report.

The region. “We try to maintain independenence in [our] movement to prevent any unacceptable outside interference,” Ahmad lashkarin, a senior cleric associated with Iran’s Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, told FBS, the Middle East Media Research Institute, on the think-tank’s website. The election, one day after national elections, was rapidly moving away from EU wide-ranging powers to arrest views. The European Union said it wanted growing authoritarianism and an erosion of the rights of the voter that Erdogan was rapidly moving away from European standards.

There have been several high-profile visits by Iranian officials to Gulf countries and by Gulf officials to Iraq. The climax of the region’s response to the visit saw Kuwait host an international conference for the reconciliation track in Iraq in February. Donors pledged $50 billion to re-build Iraq and the monolithic mass contributions coming from the international community, especially Chinese and Turkish aid to the government in Istanbul on April 19.

There’s been a rising sentiment against Iranian meddling in Iraqi affairs among members of the Shi’a community.

Tayyip Erdogan is rushing the country to early elections in a move de- signed to catch a divided opposition off guard and to benefit from the wave of patriotism following Ankara’s military incursion into Syria. Despite ruling out early elections for months and insisting the vote would be as scheduled in November 2019, Erdogan, on April 18, announced that parliamentary and presidential elections would be on June 24, the situation in neighbouring Iraq and Syria having “made it essential for Turkey to overcome the uncertainties ahead as soon as possible.”

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he upcoming Iraqi parliamentary and local elections are likely to present an opportunity for Iran to curb Iraqi influence, which has dominated the country since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Ahead of the May 12 elections, the Iraqi government and influential political parties have been engaged in negotiations to avoid a repeat of the previous elections, which took place in 2005, and to build on the progress of the Iraqi government under Prime Minister Haider Abadi, who has been in office since 2014. Many analysts expect the Iran-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) to play a significant role in the upcoming elections, which are expected to be held on May 12.

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Erdogan critics said the June poll results mean that the AKP will face a new reality. “This is a real election and a coup detat,” Tektin Kumbasar, a member in Istanbul, said in an interview.

Shifting politics. Turkish men are seen in front of poster flags of Mustafa Kemal Ataturk, founder of modern Turkey, in Istanbul, on April 19.

“Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Turkey signalised a new willingness to work with Iran in the region. “As, for them to be present in the region, they need Iranian help. They must just come to terms and accept the presence of a powerful Iran,” pro-Tehran political analyst Seyed Hosseini told US public television network PBS last December. In addition to having the support of some Iraqi politicians, Iran has strong influence over many of Iraq’s militias, such as the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and the Hashed al-Shaabi, which has a presence in various fields, “believed to have close links with Iran’s al-Quds Force.” However, al-Quds Force’s ability to control the PMF, and therefore major security structures of the Iraqi state, will not be uncontested, particularly from within the Shi’ite community, said Nickolas Parsa, author of the report.

The region. “We try to maintain independenence in [our] movement to prevent any unacceptable outside interference,” Ahmad lashkarin, a senior cleric associated with Iran’s Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani, told FBS, the Middle East Media Research Institute, on the think-tank’s website. The election, one day after national elections, was rapidly moving away from EU wide-ranging powers to arrest views. The European Union said it wanted growing authoritarianism and an erosion of the rights of the voter that Erdogan was rapidly moving away from European standards.

There have been several high-profile visits by Iranian officials to Gulf countries and by Gulf officials to Iraq. The climax of the region’s response to the visit saw Kuwait host an international conference for the reconciliation track in Iraq in February. Donors pledged $50 billion to re-build Iraq and the monolithic mass contributions coming from the international community, especially Chinese and Turkish aid to the government in Istanbul on April 19.

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the upcoming Iraqi parliamentary and local elections are likely to present an opportunity for Iran to curb Iraqi influence, which has dominated the country since the 2003 US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein. Ahead of the May 12 elections, the Iraqi government and influential political parties have been engaged in negotiations to avoid a repeat of the previous elections, which took place in 2005, and to build on the progress of the Iraqi government under Prime Minister Haider Abadi, who has been in office since 2014. Many analysts expect the Iran-backed Iraqi Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) to play a significant role in the upcoming elections, which are expected to be held on May 12.

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New tensions rise between old rivals Turkey and Greece

Thomas Seibert

Istanbul

Tensions are rising between NATO allies Turkey and Greece over territorial claims in the Aegean at a time when Turkish efforts to prevent gas exploration in the eastern Mediterranean are causing alarm, prompting Europe to call Ankara for a change in a “good neighbourhood” relationship.

Greece says Turkish fighter jets were responsible for nearly 2,000 airspace violations, mostly over the Aegean, last year. Some Greek islands are just a few kilometres from the Turkish mainland and border demarcations are not always clear.

The area is the scene of frequent disputes between Turkish and Greek jets. In February, a Turkish Coast Guard ship rammed a Greek Coast Guard vessel in disputed Aegean waters. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan angered authorities in Athens for refusing to extradite Turkish sailors accused by Ankara of involvement in a coup attempt against Erdogan in 2016.

Greek Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras used a visit to the island of Kas on the Turkish coast — on April 17 to warn Turkey that his country would not negotiate over its territory.

“…events of the last days, in which we ourselves, it is true, in troubled times, faced with the unjustifiable behaviours, a provocative stance and an aggressive stance by our neighbours,” Tsipras said. “These days we are experiencing one such period of instability, which is not in line with the principles of good neighbourliness or with the rules of international law.”

Greek news reports said Turkish fighter jets harassed the helicopter carrying Tsipras and Greece’s military chief Evangelos Apostolakis after the visit to Kas.

Turkey also sent navy vessels to disturb gas exploration around the divided island of Cyprus, arguing the search for natural resources under the sovereignty rights of Turkish Cypriots. Bülent Arıkan, Turkey’s chief of general staff, said the search for natural resources in the eastern Mediterranean.”

Turkey complained of provocation by Greece after a Greek frigate was hailed and landed on an uninhabited island in a disputed part of the Aegean.

Greek-Turkish antipathy has deep roots. In Greece, the revolution to shake off Ottoman rule in the 19th century is seen as a central part of the story of the rivalry of the Aegean. A Greek, a Turkish on the other side of the Aegean, a Greek a Turkish, a Greek a Turkish is not in line with the political game is not with -

Given the political consensus on an aggressive nationalism, Greek-Turkish relations are at their most tense in modern times.

Here is little doubt that the looming economic crisis pushed Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to declare snap elections. Before he did so, Erdogan’s political ally had already suggested an early election.

Devlet Bahçeli, leader of the far-right Nationalist Movement Party, said Turkey should go to the polls on August 10, a day after the country set June 24 as the date, making it obvious that he wants to get it over with as soon as possible.

In so doing, he hopes to catch the opposition between the two main parties, which are roughly evenly matched.

Since August 2016, when he was elected president, Erdogan has faced criticism from those who want him to take full control of the government. Structural changes to that effect have been instituted. They appear irreversible given the opposition’s power and the steady muzzling of dissent.

For instance, last July, parliament’s internal rules were amended to reduce the time available for legislators to speak during debate on bills and other discussions.

The high courts have been restructured, allowing Erdogan to tighten his grip on the judiciary. The purchase of the massive, semi-independent Dogan media empire by a sycophantic business family makes it harder to have free and fair journalism. A new internet law is meant to restrict the scope of social media. Turkey’s state of emergency has been extended yet again — the seventh key’s state of emergency has been in place since the failed July 2016 coup.

When the country votes in June, it will be under these conditions.

Erdogan, however, may feel that the conditions are ripe to deliver the key’s state of emergency, which is politics are behind the crisis” despite their rhetoric.

The increasing animosity between Ankara and EU member states has generated a further burden on Turkish-European relations.

Now he is on the home stretch, having realised that nationalist rhetoric is not only a vote-winner but also an approach that squeezes opposition parties such as the Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the newly-established Iyi Party.

Erdogan has already notched up two apparent wins: the invasion of Syria’s Afrin region and his attempt to move to bring the two countries to an agreement on an aggressive nationalism.

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Gareth Smyth

London

I

ran and Israel are engaged in a regional struggle for power but the regime in Tehran is simultaneously wrestling with an opponent more formidable than Israeli: Iranian wrestlers. Iran does not recognise the state of Israel so the regime in Tehran has prohibited Iranian athletes from competing against Israelis internationally. This has caused problems for Iranian athletes, who end up forfeiting medals and career opportunities. All of those are forcibly sacrificed for the sake of the Iranian regime’s ideology. 
This has prompted unexpected innovations on the part of the athletes. In the semifinal of the U23 World Wrestling Championship in Bydgoszcz, Poland, Iranian freestyle wrestler Alireza Karimi deliberately forfeited a match with a Russian competitor to avoid facing Uri Khalakoshin, an Israeli wrestler, on the mat. After the match, video footage emerged in which Karimi’s coach, Hamidreza Jamshidi, ordered the Iranian wrestler: “You must lose, Alireza!” Karimi posted on Instagram: “Silence is the last resort. I tried to remind people about their responsibilities as citizens,” said Karimi. “No matter how good or bad the government is, we citizens must take actions by moving small stones.”

When Madani was detained in February, the regime was immediately reaction on social media. He had also the continuing support of Isfandiyar Vaqefar, vice-president and DOL chief, who had headhunted Madani and wanted him to stay. However, principled social media users were attacking Madani as a “water-torturer” involved in dark conspiracies. There was even the suggestion that his “network” was responsible for an apparent drainage such as Urumia though he was op- posed to “hydraulic solutions.”

However, photographs showing Madani’s dancing were released, possi- bly as a pretext for his arrest, just as Madani was due back from Thai- land. He had been representing Iran at UN meetings, unexpectedly was removed and, once he heard about the photographs, decided not to return but resigned instead. His departure was immediately welcomed by many exiled Iranians who said he was naïve to believe he could change Iran. Others ex- pressed disappointment. “Kaveh was a symbol of hope but look at what has happened,” a professor told The Arab Weekly. “For a small group in Iran, you are an enemy no matter what objective you are. It’s very sad.”

In his interview with The Arab Weekly, Madani was optimistic. “To fix the environment, we have to change many things in our de- velopment model and, like most countries in the world, we’re not there yet,” he said. “In Iran, everyone now knows we have made many mistakes in water development plans. I feel proud that some of my studies are now public knowledge and that tragedies like the drying up of Lake Urmia have helped the public and government understand that environment must not be neglect- ed. This may help prevent similar tragedies in the future.”

Gareth Smyth is a regular contributor to The Arab Weekly. He has reported from the Middle East since 1992.
Trump-Macron summit to focus on Iran nuclear deal, Syria conflict

Mark Habeeb
Washington

It is yet to be seen whether Trump’s fondness for Macron can mean the French president can change the US president’s mind on Iran or other issues.

However, Lightfoot said: “At the end of the day, the French are somewhat pessimistic that any concessions will be enough, because they recognise that Trump alone will make the decision, that his new set of advisers are more hawkish and that Trump is known for whimsical, unpredictable decision making.”

Boyer was also optimistic. “Getting the United States to stick with the Iran nuclear accord will be Macron’s top priority during his visit to Washington but the prospects for a major breakthrough are unclear,” he said.

“It’s helpful that Macron and President Trump have personal chemistry, which was seen by all during Trump’s trip to France last summer, but Macron’s decision to team up with US and UK in striking Syrian chemical weapon facilities recently demonstrated solidified alliances and the administration’s stated policy signalled it would keep and defend the Iran deal but not impose sanctions on European businesses looking to invest in Iran as long as they don’t put the burden on the Iranians as to how they would want to respond,” he said.

The New York Times reported that Macron, along with Russia’s president, a key ally, Russian President Vladimir Putin, has been more open than others to a diplomatic solution that results in some sort of political transition without insisting on an Assad departure as a condition.

One Middle East issue that is unlikely to come up in the Trump-Macron summit is the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. “The two presidents might discuss the decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem but, with tough issues regarding Iran, Syria, North Korea, Russia and Trump’s moves on global trade like soybean tariffs, I doubt that the peace process will be a priority today,” Boyer said.

Lightfoot concurred, saying: “It wouldn’t expect Macron to use political capital on it.”

Mark Habeeb is East-West Editor of The Arab Weekly and adjunct professor of Global Politics and International Relations at the University of Washington.

Can Macron steer Trump?

The reason to keep US troops in Syria is that they help protect the 10,000 US troops in Iraq. However, the administration’s stated policy provoked Turkey, a NATO ally at war with Kurdish insurgents within its own borders in northern western Syria. It was eyed on by Russia, which controls western Syrian airspace.

Macron was blamed by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan when Syrian opposition leaders and Macron had met in Paris last November, when the Saudis have failed states such as Syria. Times and maps have changed but Macron seems to “steer” Trump will face a crucial acid test.

The French and the British are mindful that, if the Americans leave Syria quickly, there would be a search in the region for a new equilibrium of power. It is widely observed, ethnic and national conflicts featuring not only Islamists but also Russian mercenar- ies, Iranian militias and Marxists Kurds. Macron seems to say that Trump’s only hardline is that he wants Europe to be more active on the diplomatic front in Syria, Lightfoot said, with the goal of finding a diplomatic solution that results in some sort of political transition without insisting on an Assad departure as a condition.

Syrian President Bashar Assad, who is the too-tight suit of a PR man. Critics of May in the Conservative Party scoff at her as a three-rate Margaret Thatcher impersonator. It would be ironic if those two European leaders should encourage Trump to allow the situation in Syria to slide to the edge of a cliff. A French president has a long history in foreign affairs unless disaster strikes. The risk of draw- ing Europe, with a very reluctant Germany, into a regional war on the world of sorts and at the worst of times is very real.

Last November, when the Saudi-led coalition of defence views of Republicans such as his former confidant Steve Bannon.

In France, Macron has been criti- cised by the left and the left as a would-be Napoleon whose uniform is the too-tight suit of a PR man.

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Chemistry under test. French President Emmanuel Macron (L) and US President Donald Trump walk in the courtyard of the Invalides in Paris, last July.

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Canada must carefully re-evaluate its Iraq mission post-ISIS

Risky options. Canadian special forces look over a Peshmerga observation post in northern Iraq.

Abdulrahman al-Masri

Ottawa must realign its military commitment with its foreign policy approach, which promotes democracy in a stable, unified Iraq.

Gregory Aftandilian

Growing anti-war sentiment in the US Congress could spell trouble for Trump

Congress is becoming more reluctant about supporting wars in the Middle East and is trying to exert more power over the deployment of troops to conflict areas.

Debate
Kuwait edges closer to introducing remittance tax

The Arab Weekly staff

London

E xpatriates in Kuwait could soon be facing a new reality after the Gulf country’s Finance Minister and the Central Bank of Kuwait (CBK) agreed to introduce a remittance tax. The move comes after months of talks between the government and the CBK, which indicated that the measure could lead to an exodus of skilled workers. “This could prove disastrous at a time when Kuwait strives to transform itself as a knowledge-based economy and has a large scale need for highly skilled professionals,” the report stated.

The report said the tax rate suggested by the CBK, which starts at 5% for remittances less than 99 Kuwaiti dinars ($330) and increases to 7% for remittances beyond 500 dinars ($1,661), Remittance outflow from Kuwait in 2016 totalled 6.5 billion dinars ($14.5 billion). Nearly 27% of that was sent to India, 18% to Egypt, 7% to Bangladesh, and 6.7% to Pakistan and the Philippines. The Marmore report was critical of the bill’s lack of clarity, saying it does not clearly define the category of people to be paying the taxes.

“The bill, in its current form, also failed to describe what would occur if someone’s remittance would include income or even loans availed from banks that is being sent abroad. Lack of clarity and proper definition could hinder the upcoming debate in the parliament,” the report stated.

The Economist newspaper said a remittance tax would be a source of sizeable income for the Gulf country but would “probably come at a significant cost.” “Kuwait is reliant on foreign labour, which makes up more than 80% of the country’s workforce and around 70% of its population,” the Economist said. “With neighbouring Gulf countries similarly dependent on expatriates, Kuwait would probably compromise its ability to attract skilled foreign workers, who would search for opportunities elsewhere.”

Kuwait is not the only GCC country introducing measures to deal with economic realities due to the state of the energy sector. In January, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates introduced value-added taxes and the rest of the GCC is expected to follow suit.

Positive signs. The headquarters of Egypt’s Central Bank in Cairo

Up for debate. Kuwaiti MPs at work during a parliament session at Kuwait’s National Assembly. (AFP)

Egyp'ts Eurobond succeeds but risks remain

Amr Elmas

Cairo

nternational investors’ enthusiasm for Egypt’s latest Eurobond issuance is a positive indication of the health of Egypt’s economy and signals confidence in the country’s prospects, economists said.

However, economists warned that Egypt’s monetary policymakers’ strategy to borrow to either prop up foreign currency reserves at the central bank or to repay interim debts carries inherent risks.

A drop in the exchange rate of the Egyptian pound has given Egyptian goods a strong edge in international markets.

“The national borrowing craze is dangerous because it increases pressures on the general budget and deprives basic sectors of the economy of important investments for years,” said Amr El Mahdi, an economics professor at Cairo University.

“Negative consequences follow for the economy, the monetary authorities will have to finance available funds for debt services.”

Cairo confirmed that it raised 2.5 billion euros ($2.8 billion) in a dual-tranche, euro-denominated bond sale. The bonds were issued with maturities of 8 and 12 years at interest rates of 4.75% and 5.625%, respectively.

International investors’ interest created an oversubscription of 7.5 billion euros ($8.9 billion) in orders, reflecting confidence in the ability of Cairo to repay debts and the promising prospects of the economy.

The investor interest can be traced to November 2016 when the Ministry of Finance initiated reforms that included the flotation of the Egyptian pound, the slashing of fuel, water and electricity subsidies and the introduction of major tax and customs changes.

Although the reforms took a huge toll on commodity prices in the local market, which caused suffering for millions of Egyptians, officials said they were paying off and responsible for the latest positive indicators.

The unemployment rate in Egypt is less than 12% for the first time since 2011. In the first half of the 2017-18 fiscal year, the economic growth rate was 5.2%, compared to 3.7% in the corresponding half of the previous fiscal year.

A drop in the exchange rate of the Egyptian pound, a direct result of the 2016 currency flotation, has given Egyptian goods a strong edge in international markets, leading to a marked increase in exports. Imports, on the other hand, are being reduced, an important development in both the tourism sector, which has seen a major improvement in foreign currency reserves at the Central Bank of Egypt.

The reserves totalled $42.6 billion at the end of March, the highest in two decades. The Finance Ministry said it would use money raised in the Eurobond sale to support foreign currency reserves.

Ismael Hassan, a former governor of the Central Bank of Egypt, confirmed that an increase in Egypt’s foreign currency reserve has boosted the country’s financial standing and economic rating and increased investor confidence.

“The flow of investments into the national treasury boosts our ability to honour our financial commitments,” Hassan said. “Egypt had never failed in honouring any of these commitments in the past.”

All these positives, however, come with a corresponding rise in foreign debts. Egypt’s debts reached $80.8 billion by the end of the first quarter of the 2017 fiscal year. Egypt used to specify one-third of its budget for debt services, an issue raised by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi every time he talks about the country’s budget and spending.

“That when this happens, we will fall short of the required amounts of investments to important sectors, such as the health and education sectors,” Mahdi said.

The $2.5 billion raised in the Eurobond issuance raises the amount of money Egypt received from bond sales in international markets in less than two months to more than $8 billion. Egypt raised $4 billion by selling dollar-denominated bonds in February.

Financial authorities hope that a gradual decline in interest rates will stimulate investments and production, which would reflect Egypt’s overall financial and economic conditions. The Central Bank of Egypt cut interest rates 100 basis points in March, the second reduction in two months.

Fakhri al-Qa’q, a former adviser to the International Monetary Fund, said, instead of over-borrowing, Egypt’s economic planners should focus on investments. One of the things Egypt should do, he said, is to invest loans and official funding in production projects that add value to the economy and improve economic conditions.

“We should not be borrowing in the first place,” Qa’q said. “Instead of borrowing, we should focus on the attraction of investments that add value to the economy.”
Agrigento's main commercial harbour for importing and exporting goods in Algiers.

Tunis

Tunisia’s ‘Start-up Act’ provides incentives for entrepreneurship, youth empowerment

Stephen Quillen

A new “Start-up Act” approved in April is providing a “springboard of hope” for entrepreneurs.

The legislation will provide grants, special investment incentives to businesses that qualify, and special tax breaks. It is encouraging young people to pursue innovative business ventures and drive growth in the science and technology sector.

“This is a huge opportunity to modernise our economic laws and promote our country as a springboard of hope towards the continent and the region,” said Nadeem Moustafa, deputy chairman of the govern-

ment’s National Council, slammed the European Union’s “contradict-

ory” response to the country’s im-

migration crisis.

“I do not understand this kind of rhetoric that against European rec-

onds.” Mekedche said, adding that the trade agreement only works if it helps improve the Algerian economy.

“Since 2014, Algeria has been promoting a new model of eco-

nomic development,” said Ouled Ali. “We are expanding the role of the private sec-

or and developing further human resources and this demands that our young people be qualified as start-ups. The aim is to have a country of young people that will also benefit the enterprises,” he said.

“Once we have a country of young people that will also benefit the enterprises, this will benefit the country of young people that we are trying to create,” said Ouled Ali.

“Our duty is to encourage the industrial development that also benefits their development that also benefits their entrepreneurs,” said Ouled Ali.

We are in a process of industrial development that the European Union must encourage and help in-

stead of attempting to deter it,” said Mekedche, whose council’s views reflect the government’s positions on economic issues.

In a rare joint statement by the General Union of Algerian Workers (UGC), Algeria’s main trade union, and the leading employers’ group Forum of Enterprises (FEE), the two organisations assailed critics of Algeria’s import cuts.

“Import cuts have a positive impact on our exports to Algeria. "We are exchanging letters with them," she added.

Spanish Trade Minister Maria Luisa Poncela called the issue of imports with Algerian demands during a recent visit to Algiers and Marrano. Rajoy’s visit to Algiers in early April.

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Can Arab satellite TV catch up with social media?

**Debate**

**Haitham El-Zobaidi**

In our Arab world, there are plenty of people who do not realise how much the world has changed.

It was possible because of centuries-old traditions of respect for individual freedoms as long as they didn’t conflict with security and stability. Still, many Western users could not foresee the tremendous changes brought about by social platforms and smartphones, changes that surpass the effect of the printing press five centuries ago. Being used to primitive mass media and their very static style of presenting ideas and information, users in the Arab world are usually happy with generalities and a bit of exaggeration. Social media and SMS technology have replaced traditional mouth-to-ear channels for spreading rumours. The form of the rumour may have changed to a Photoshopped picture or a chat snippet in bad Arabic but it is still a rumour. Still, the effect of the new communication technologies in the Arab world was tremendous. For proof, witness the positive and negative changes in the Arab world. Modem communication technologies have made it easy for extremist ideologies to impose their own worldviews and feed the chaos in the Arab world. At the same time, the response to this intellectual invasion was, in broad terms, focusing on the effect of political Islam in its Muslim Brotherhood, Salafist and Khomeinist versions. The effect of the technological revolution on Arab countries was profound and divisive because they were not prepared for it. Western countries, by comparison, were sort of immune to this effect, until today.

Communication technologies have played an enormous role in determining the outcomes of the Brexit vote in Britain and the 2016 presidential election in the United States. On both occasions, popular and populist communication channels were heavily used but with a twist. Custom-tailored messages targeted individual users. The campaign messages are no longer addressing societal concerns and enhancing community experiences but individualised, targeting specific concerns and reactions. In Britain, frustrated job seekers went on Twitter, where parties and religious sects were sort of immune to this effect. In our Arab world, there are plenty of people who do not realine how much the world has changed.

Dr Haitham El-Zobaidi is an Iraqi writer based in London. He is the Executive Editor of Al Arab Publishing Group.

**Taher Alwan**

TV channels and stations must keep up with fast-developing technological innovations if they want to better interact with their audience.

It was easy for users in Western countries to have virtual meetings and conferences or organise huge campaigns and demonstrations. It has become common that social media platforms, which provide an informal poll but is nevertheless real and deserves attention from TV audiences in the Arab world.

As soon as a TV show or programme is over, reactions start pouring in on Twitter and Facebook. The platform allows viewers to comment on an informal poll but is nevertheless real and deserves attention from TV channels. It has become common for TV channels to glean audience reactions from social media platforms.

Taher Alwan is an Iraqi writer.
Roufan Nahhas
Amman

The cyber-crime unit in Jordan’s Security Department (PSD) has sounded the alarm over an unprecedented increase in e-crimes, calling on parents to connect their children’s devices to the internet but to guard against exploitation, inightening children of the dangers of selling their old mobiles to any shop. The PSD has often advised people not to sell their old devices because there is something compromising photos or videos if she refused to pay him money. The victim paid the blackmailers $1,400 but he kept asking for more money until he was caught by the PSD.

The study said refugees have no confidence in so-called safe or designated areas, for instance, by people who have several fake accounts online that they use to blackmail others.” Internet penetration in Jordan increased from 27,790 in 2000 to 6.3 million in 2017 and there are 4.8 million Jordanians on Facebook, internetworldstats.com data indicates. Smart phone penetration in Jordan is 87%.

Second-hand mobile market in Jordan is considered very big and profitable but people are not aware of the danger of selling their old mobiles to any shop. The PSD has often advised people not to sell their old devices because there is something that could lead to keep the old devices or just destroy them, “Mbaideen said.

Major Raed Rawashdeh, head of the investigation and security fol- low-up at the PSD, recently said his unit was focused mainly on curbing crimes dealing with sexual abuse of children, electronic recruitment for terrorist organisations and hate speech.

Rawashdeh warned that social media were being increasingly used to spread hate speech and said par- ents should keep a close eye on their children’s online activities. However, blackmailing through social media is spreading in Jordan. “There were many incidents in which people threatened others and asked for money to not publish compromising photos online,” Mbaideen said. “One of the famous cases is that of an Arab woman who was blackmailed and abused by a suspect who convinced her that he can cure her using magic and threatened to share her pictures and videos if she refused to pay him money.”

The victim paid the blackmailers $1,400 but he kept asking for more money until he was caught by the PSD.

The PSD said approximately 80% of e-crime victims are females and the most common theme is blackmail.

Approximately 80% of e-crime victims are females and the most common theme is blackmail.

“Usually it is done to gain money, easy money but sometimes it might get complicated such as seeking fame, disseminating religion and political issues, sexual abuse in ad- dition to the love for power,” Mbaideen said.

Since the beginning of the year, 1,158 e-crimes have been registered: 365 cases of criminal impersona- tion, 310 blackmailing and defama- tion, 120 electronic fraud, 150 per- sonal data theft and the rest under website hacking and applications crimes.

“The law is very clear in such cas- es as Article 11 of the cyber-crime law of 2015 stipulates that violators will be imprisoned for not less than three months with fines of $1,400 to $6,000 and it gets tougher depend- ing on the crime,” Mbaideen added.

The risk of having to live in a digital world would be a bigger risk of being recruited by terrorist organisations, sexually abused and blackmailed.

“Our children are always online through their mobiles, tab- lets or computers and, to be honest, it scares me a lot a parents who are doing our part in protecting them,” said Rawan Qandah, a moth- er of three in her 30s.

“Basically, parents should be very open and transparent with their children because it is important to keep their confidence so that they would tell you what happens with them in the digital world where you as a parent cannot control much,” Roufan Nahhas is a journalist based in Jordan.


Syrian refugees are not going home anytime soon

Samar Kadi
Beirut

The Asad regime continues to exert control over much of Syria, calling on refugees to go home. However, a study by Carnegie’s Middle East Centre (MEC) stated that despite the increasing number of refugees who face, most Syrian refugees are unwilling to return to their home country unless cer- tain conditions are fulfilled. Guar- antees of safety and security, the right to return to their hometowns, access to justice and employment opportunities.

The study said refugees have no confidence in the new situation in their home countries, notably Lebanon and Jor- dan, for refugees to go home.

“The (peace process) in Syria is not yet at an end,” said Maha Yahya, director of Beirut-based Carnegie MEC and one of the study’s authors. “Creating an environment that refugees would feel safe returning to is very important. They want to accommodate their properties and return to their areas of origin, it is not about going back to any place in Syria.” Yahya said efforts to end the seven-year-old conflict in Syria, whether through the UN-led Geneva process or the Astana talks, being conducted by Russia, Iran and Turkey, were failing to deliver on the rights of refugees and the stability of the region. She said the fact that the war is being sustained on the front lines of the rebellion and the government are not ready to negotiate on the future of the country, is a huge concern for Syrian refugees.

It is highly unlikely that refugees will return home. The majority of them have left in the past two years and have little or no desire to return even if conditions improve.


Not home. A pregnant Syrian woman carries her child at a housing complex for Syrian refugees in Sidoon in southern Lebanon.

The Turkish government has granted citizenship to 50,000 Syr- ian refugees to integrate skilled workers, Erdogan said, noting that more than 300,000 Syrian babies had been born in Turkey since 2011. “These babies have neither Syrian citizenship nor Turkish citizenship, which makes it even more problem- atic for them to ‘go back,’ he said. “Even if the war ends and Assad is dead, it will not change too much, especially for refugees from the remaining areas. Many will stay. That’s a reality.”

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society section editor.
**Tunis book fair puts spotlight on women's writing**

Roushdi Al-Khifhi

A

mid concerns on the future of the print industry, the Tunis International Book Fair celebrated its 34th edition to Tunisian women, with panels focusing on the history of women's rights in Tunisia as well as issues pertaining to challenges facing female writers in the Arab world.

The fair kept the same slogan — "We read to live twice" — as last year to underscore literature's promise of living other lives through books. It was a nod to last year's fair, which marked the much-awaited return of the event after issues stemming from the political unrest in Tunisia.

Hasan Abdel Zaher

Cairo

GEBO was founded in 1952 and has offices in several Egyptian cities, with headquarters in Cairo overlooking the Nile. The organisation has an annual budget of $5.8 million, which comes directly from the government. However, almost 75% of the budget goes towards salaries of the staff, echoing Egypt's bloated state bureaucracy.

"This means that we have to make do with the remaining part of the budget," Hajj said. "We have to use this remaining part only in publishing the texts we receive into books and organizing book fairs all year round."

More than half the texts the organisation receives and approves are waiting for funding to be published, GEBO uses specialised panels whose members decide whether the limited resources of the organisation should be used to publish a book.

"These panels have approved a lot of texts but only a fraction of these texts has been published due to lack of funding," Hajj said.

The rise in the price of paper and printing costs poses a problem, he said.

Nonetheless, there are rays of hope for Hajj and GEBO.

The latest Cairo International Book Fair, the organisation's most important cultural event, which took place January 27-February 10, attracted an unprecedented number of publishers.

More than 800 publishers from every part of the world, Hajj said, participated in the event. The organisation also posed record sales of $124,000, he added.

Hajj acknowledged, that while the sales cannot be compared with those made by private publishers, GEBO's mission is not to make profit but ensure that "writings and scheduling activities that put in..." at the more than a hundred book fairs that GEBO organise every year, including the Cairo International Book Fair, "The Tunisian book fair puts spotlight on women's writing..."


"What is special about this edition is..." at the more than a hundred book fairs that GEBO organise every year, including the Cairo International Book Fair, "Haitham al-Hajj, head of the General Egyptian Book Organisation..."

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The four sites on UNESCO’s World Heritage List are only the tip of the iceberg, however. The veil has yet to be lifted on many of the kingdom’s archaeological gems and there are numerous exploration projects under way.

In February, the kingdom announced that exploration teams were searching for ancient artefacts around the country. “As many as 35 joint archaeological missions are being brought together Saudi archaeologists and others from around the world to search for undiscovered historical treasures,” Saudi Prince Sultan bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, chairman of the National Commission for Tourism and National Heritage, said. “Each time, more archaeological discoveries are made in Saudi Arabia, it grabs global attention.”

The latest discovery was a series of life-sized camel sculptures in the desert of the northern province of Al Jawf. Researchers estimated that the sculptures date back 2,000 years.

Intangible heritage in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has rich traditions that are rooted in Islamic teachings and are celebrated and preserved in poetry as well as music and dance, the ballbearmaks of Bedouins, nomadic Arab people who historically inhabited desert regions of the Arabian Peninsula. Saudi music varies from one region to another. In the Hijaz region, for instance, al-nuba folk music com- bines Arab poetry and Andalusian tunes. Folk music in Mecca and Medina incorporates local traditions as well as those of other Islamic countries.

While music draws on elements of various cultures, the national dance in Saudi Arabia, Arda, is typically Saudi. It is an ancient tra- dition, originating in the central area known as Najd, performed as a dance with swords across the heads.

The dance is a central part of Saudi Arabia’s most famous cultural event, the annual Al-Imadiyah heritage and cultural festival. Organised by the National Guard, the 2-week-long event highlights the kingdom’s commitment to preserving and displaying its rich, tradi- tional culture and crafts. While dance and music are cel- ebrated and preserved, poetry is the kingdom’s most prized form of artistic expression. First passed down orally as an oral tradition by Bedouins, poe- etry evolved into a written literary form used to preserve people’s his- tory, collective memory and social values. For ages, people gathered around poets telling tales of love, bravery, chivalry, war and history. This tradition has remained popu- lar among Saudis, with it being cel- ebrated and promoted at festivals and on national occasions.

The kingdom boasts a variety of popular heritage sports and activi- ties that are centuries old, such as horse/camel racing and falconry. Beyond recreational, these activi- ties are essential aspects of Saudi heritage and Bedouin culture and are passed on from generation to generation.

Iman Zayat is the Managing Editor of The Arab Weekly.

Recent Saudi efforts to highlight the kingdom’s long-elaps ed history and heritage are welcome and should be encouraged.

Preserving Saudi heritage sites is a key part of the plan. This would help protect the environment, create vibrant communities and sustain local economies, as well as contribute to Saudi Arabia’s cultural and heritage identity.

As a regional heavy weight that has played a major role in defining the balance of power in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia needs to take part in regional and international politics but also to show how important the preservation of its culture and heritage is. One way the kingdom can do this is by supporting and promot- ing existing festivals and museums in the kingdom and reaching out to regional and international media, further develop its online market- ing strategy and encourage people from outside Saudi Arabia to take part in its cultural activities.

Rich traditions. Saudi men perform a traditional dance during the annual Al-Imadiyah heritage and cultural festival, last February.

What is not known about Saudi history and heritage

Iman Zayat

Tunis

From archaeological treasures to historic cities, to traditional markets and ancient villages, Saudi Arabia has a lot to offer visitors. The kingdom boasts architectural treasures that are a lifeline to the historical past and a gateway of tradition and culture.

Al Dir’iya, the Rock Art of the Hail region and the Jeddah historic area. Al Dir’iya, the Rock Art of the Hail region is a unesco world heritage listed site. The area is one of the most important cultural sites around the world. It is a unique site in terms of its rich cultural and historical heritage. The area is known for its beautifully carved rock structures, which date back to pre-Islamic times. The site is an important destination for tourists and locals alike. The area is also known for its beautiful natural landscapes, making it a popular destination for outdoor activities such as hiking and camping.

Why Saudi Arabia needs to lift the veil on heritage treasures

The reasons are manifold:

- **Tourism Potential**: Saudi Arabia is rich in cultural and historical sites that are yet to be fully explored and marketed. With the right strategy, these sites can attract tourists and contribute to the country’s economic growth.

- **Cultural Preservation**: The country’s rich cultural and historical heritage is at risk of being lost due to neglect and lack of proper conservation efforts. Lifting the veil on heritage treasures can help preserve and protect these sites for future generations.

- **Global Recognition**: By showcasing its heritage, Saudi Arabia can gain international recognition and boost its global image. This can be particularly important in efforts to attract foreign investment and tourism.

- **Community Engagement**: The tourism industry can also help engage local communities in the stewardship and protection of their cultural and historical heritage. This can lead to increased awareness and support for heritage preservation efforts.

One place to start is Al-Imadiyah, a Saudi cultural festival which is renowned throughout the Gulf region and Arab World. Now it is time to promote this festival to an international audience, who are familiar with Saudi Arabia’s unique culture and traditions.

People around the world are largely unaware of the kingdom’s ancient history and its rich cultural heritage. Notably the Hejaz Railway Museum in Medina, the Huamne Heritage Museum and the National Museum of Saudi Arabia in Riyadh and the Shadda Palace in Abha.

Times are changing.

One way the kingdom can boost its cultural tourism is by supporting and promoting existing festivals and museums in the kingdom. This is evident from the kingdom’s tourism strategy, which includes initiatives that aim to attract foreign investment and tourism.

On March 5, the Saudi Commission for Arts and Heritage issued a licence of cultural tourism to the National Museum of Science and Technology in Jeddah. The museum is to be the first specialist institu- tion for the history of science and technology in Saudi Arabia. It will display historical and modern artefacts from around the world, including those related to science, culture, heritage and history.

In April, the kingdom announced plans to set up a national centre for information archives, which would include radio, TV, print material, information archives, which would include radio, TV, print material, and equipment and is expected to be the first specialised institu- tion for the history of science and technology in Saudi Arabia. It will display historical and modern artefacts that reflect the kingdom’s culture throughout the ages.

One place to start is Al-Imadiyah, a Saudi cultural festival which is renowned throughout the Gulf region and Arab World. Now it is time to promote this festival to an international audience, who are familiar with Saudi Arabia’s unique culture and traditions.

One way the kingdom can start is by supporting and promoting existing festivals and museums in the kingdom, such as Al-Imadiyah, which is one of the most important cultural sites in the kingdom. The festival has been held annually since 2016 and attracts visitors from around the world. By promoting the festival to an international audience, the kingdom can showcase its rich cultural and historical heritage.

One way the kingdom can do this is by supporting and promoting existing festivals and museums in the kingdom. This can help attract tourists and boost the country’s economy. By promoting its rich cultural and historical heritage, Saudi Arabia can also help promote regional and international understanding and cooperation.

Recent Saudi efforts to highlight the kingdom’s long-elaps ed history and heritage are welcome and should be encouraged.

Preserving Saudi heritage sites is a key part of the plan. This would help protect the environment, create vibrant communities and sustain local economies. The country’s wake-up call is the discovery and the recognition of the importance of its cultural heritage.

Recent Saudi efforts to highlight the kingdom’s long-elaps ed history and heritage are welcome and should be encouraged. However, much work remains to be done to show the world who the Saudi people really are and what their contributions have been throughout history.

The kingdom’s rich history and heritage have been and still are a key part of Arab culture. This culture has been shaped by the deplorable acts of extremists, who have tried to wipe out the unique and bright aspects of Arab culture. To revive this culture, Saudi Arabia needs the support of all friends and neighbours who share its vi- sion. Only then will it restore its unique heritage and distinguished history.
Sale: Morocco’s discrete tourism attraction on the Atlantic coast

Sale

Sale, the long-forgotten neighbour of Morocco’s capital, Rabat, is a dormant tourist city with an impressive diversity of historic treasures. Separated from Rabat by the Bou Regreg River, the historic city of Sale is awash with monuments and shrines.

The enclosure of Sale’s ancient medina is formed by fortified walls, ramparts and bastions that were classified historical monuments in 1914. One of the medina’s main gates is Bab Lamrissa, also known as Bab Mellah, which leads to the quarter in which Moroccan Jews used to live. Very few Jews still live in the medina like in all mellahs of Morocco’s ancient cities.

The medina sounded quiet with the number of decaying houses that desperately needed restoration. However, as soon as I approached Safita Street, I stumbled upon the traditional character of its old shops and souks as the olives of fresh fruit and vegetables, drapes and spices adorned the bustling street.

The smell of freshly baked Moroccan pancakes, also called msemcen, was so irresistible that I stopped for a quick bite before visiting the city’s famous souls.

Souk Lakbir, which used to be a market of Christian slaves, is specialised in the sale of traditional fabrics and clothes, such as slippers and dyed fabrics. Souk Al Ghalat is the largest square in the city. It is an auction market where people sell used clothes and trade coloured wool.

Sale is famous for its iconic Great Mosque, the third largest mosque in Morocco after Hassan II mosque in Casablanca and Al Qarawiyyine in Fez, and the second oldest mosques, after Al Qarawiyyine.

I felt the architectural grandeur of the Almohads when I entered the 11th-century mosque. The symmetrical white arches fill the prayer hall with bronze chandeliers lighting its high ceiling.

Among Sale’s most important mausoleums is Sidi Abdullah Ben Hassoun. Female worshippers sitting by the saint’s grave were praying for God to alleviate their worries and problems.

**The enclosure of Sale’s ancient medina is formed by fortified walls, ramparts and bastions that were classified historical monuments in 1914.**

Modernes des Merinides is a stone’s throw from the Great Mosque. Its Kufic and ceramic polychrome writings besides carvings on the cedar wooden ceiling make it one of the wonders of the country’s priceless history.

I had the bastion for myself for 15 minutes before a German couple turned up for a quick visit for 10 dirhams each (about $1). The bastion offers a beautiful view over the ancient Medina of Rabat.

A prison, built under the bastion by Frenchmen, was purposed to be filled with slaves who were sold in North African markets. It reminds us of a city that was renowned for being an international hub of piracy, looting and slavery for centuries.

I headed to Souk El Oulja, almost a 10-minute drive from Bab Mrixra. Surprisingly, very few tourists were roaming the complex, which is famous for Morocco’s finest handicrafts, including pottery and wrought iron.

Mosaic garden tables and chairs, vases, jewellery, plates and palm leaf bags are on display. Visitors are spoiled for choice in the dozen shops. They also can watch blacksmiths and potters craft original works. However, some shops clearly display “No photography” signs.

Unfortunately, tourism seems to be dead in Sale, which is full of cultural and architectural assets and historical monuments. Hopefully, the Rabat-Sale Marina and the construction of Africa’s tallest skyscraper on the banks of the Bou Regreg will boost tourism in the neglected city.

**We welcome submissions of calendar items related to cultural events of interest to travellers in the Middle East and North Africa.**

Please send tips to: editor@thearabweekly.com