Iran has sought to inflame the Basra unrest for its own benefit as more Shia voices in Iraq’s south have become critical of Tehran’s meddling in Iraqi affairs.

Mamoon Alabbasi
London

Iran’s influence in neighbouring Iraq was highlighted in the crisis engulfing the southern Iraqi city of Basra, where protesters torched the Iranian consulate and others burnt Iranian flags.

Iran’s Foreign Ministry branded the consul’s storming as a “savage attack” and its Iraqi counterpart said the incident was “an unacceptable act undermining the interests of Iraq and its international relations.”

Thousands of protesters have taken to the streets in Basra, calling for improving living conditions in the oil-rich city. They blame shortfalls of electricity and drinking water in the city, which hosts more than 2 million residents, on corrupt elites.

Provincial government buildings, political party offices and military headquarters were attacked by protesters. At least 50 demonstrators have been killed in clashes with security forces, prompting calls for restraint from rights groups and the United Nations.

The storming of the Iranian consulate on September 7 ended without a ceasefire despite warnings by Ankara, Moscow and Tehran’s counterparts.

Amir, whose bloc was in second place in the election, blamed the attacks on the headquarters of Iran-backed militias in Basra on “an American-Saudi conspiracy” to divide the country. His call for Abadi’s resignation was seen as an attempt by Iran-backed alliance to use the Basra unrest as a pretext to take power.

The bloc backed by influential Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, which ran an anti-corruption campaign, came in first in the election. It is seeking to form a coalition government with Abadi’s bloc, which was second.

Amir, who is allied with the bloc of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, another Iran-backed politician, reiterated his alliance’s bid to form the next government instead of Abadi.

Observers said Iran has sought to inflame the Basra unrest for its own benefit as more Shia voices in Iraq’s south have become critical of Tehran’s meddling in Iraqi affairs. “Iran had sparked the crisis by cutting off its electricity and water supplies to Basra,” said Salam Sarhan, an Iraqi commentator.

Iran is also facing sanctions imposed by the United States, which Abadi said he would abide by.

There are concerns that, if the unrest gets out of control, some of Iraq’s oil production could be affected. “The disruption of Iraq’s oil supply is in Iran’s favour as it would mean that the world, including the United States, cannot afford to have Iranian oil out of the market,” said Sarhan.

Following the attacks on the Iranian consulate and other buildings in Basra, Abadi warned that security forces had orders to “act decisively against the acts of vandalism that accompanied the demonstrations.”

Iraq’s most-revered Shia cleric Ayatollah Ali Sistani said the country’s new government should carry out different policies than the previous ones. “The failings of Iraqi political leaders in recent years have caused the anger of people in Basra,” Sistani said in his sermon on September 7.

“This reality cannot change if the next government is formed according to the same criteria adopted when forming previous governments. Pressure must be exerted for the new government to be different from its predecessors.”

Mamoon Alabbasi is Deputy Managing Editor and Online Editor of The Arab Weekly.

Russian-Iranian-Turkish alliance fractured at Tehran summit

Thomas Seibert
Istanbul

A presidential summit by Russia, Iran and Turkey designed to produce a solution for the last rebel stronghold in Syria has instead fanned the tension among the three powers, throwing their future cooperation into doubt.

An attack by Syrian government troops—with Russian and Iranian backing—is expected in Idlib, a Syrian province on the border with Turkey. That is the last rebel-held area in the country after more than seven years of war that has killed more than 300,000 people.

The tripartite meeting in Tehran on September 7 ended without a concrete outcome to call off the offensive, frustrating a Turkish push for a ceasefire and warning by Ankara of a collapse of the “political process” for Syria.

During the summit, the presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkey, Vladimir Putin, Hassan Rouhani and Recep Tayyip Erdogan, spared

publicly about how to address the situation in Idlib. Syrian President Bashar Assad has sworn to retake the area, which has become a sanctuary for millions of refugees and tens of thousands of rebel fighters.

Turkey was prepared to step in if there is a large-scale attack on Idlib. Erdogan warned, “If the world blindly sides with the killing of tens of thousands of innocent people to further the regime’s interests, we will neither watch from the sidelines nor participate in such a game,” he wrote on Twitter after the separate meeting.

Erdogan earlier surprised Rouhani and Putin by proposing a peace deal for Idlib during televised remarks. “If we declare a ceasefire here today, that will be a victory for this summit,” Erdogan said. Putin swiftly rejected the offer and said the Syrian government had the right to regain control over all the country’s territory.

The summit’s final statement ignored Erdogan’s call, prompting the Turkish leader to blast the communiqué. A news conference with Putin and Rouhani, a highly unusual step.

Turkey, which has taken in more than 3 million Syrian refugees, says it cannot cope with a new influx that could be triggered by a government offensive in Idlib. “If the attack directed against the Idlib region will worsen the situation on the ground and we give up the political process to a breaking point,” Erdogan said.

“Game over. An Iraqi protester holds up an Iraqi flag as another lights it up during protests in Basra, on September 7.”

Magdalena Kirchner, senior analyst at Conias Risk Intelligence

The alliance was never a love match.

Russia, Iran and Turkey are partners in the so-called Astana Process, a platform of Syria talks that runs parallel to UN efforts to end the fighting in Syria. Despite being on opposing sides in the conflict—Russia and Iran are major supporters of Damascus while Turkey has sponsored Sunni rebel groups fighting Assad’s forces—the three countries have been cooperating closely.

The three are united by a deep suspicion of US policies that put the cooperation on a “position of conflict” in the face of US dominance in the region.

While Erdogan warned of a “bloodbath” in Idlib, his two counterparts stressed the need to fight radicals in the province. Putin mentioned a “peaceful stabilisation” in Idlib and said he hoped “terrorist organisations will have enough common sense to stop resistance and lay down their weapons.”

However, the Russian president was not impressed by a Turkish proposal to relocate some rebel groups within Idlib so they could not attack the Russian airbase of Hmesnium with drones. Comment on Twitter, Yury Burmin, a Russian analyst and contributor for the website of the Middle East Institute in Washington, posted: “Russia’s expectation of how Erdogan is planning to handle Idlib will be growing.”

Thomas Seibert is an Arab Weekly correspondent.
The Iraqi government announced the defeat of the Islamic State. The pact, which had been described as the largest bloc in parliament, marked a breakthrough after months of political wrangling and attempts to form a government.

Influential Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose electoral bloc came first in the election, said the Sairoon bloc was referred to the federal court and the provisional speaker vote postponed until September 15. The bloc was suspected to be responsible for clashes with protesters.

The Sairoon bloc was widely seen as a bastion of the Shia community and included the bloc of Vice-President Nuri al-Maliki. Al-Maliki's Dawa Party was included in the bloc, which also had the support of the Sadrists and other Shia factions.

High stakes. Iraqi Vice-President Nuri al-Maliki (3rd-L) attends a parliament meeting in Baghdad, on September 3. (AFP)

The Arab Weekly staff

London

Iraqi authorities are struggling to contain protests over poor public living conditions in the oil-rich southern city of Basra. At least ten demonstrators died in clashes with security forces, with thousands more reportedly hospitalised due to polluted water.

Influenzal Shia cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, whose electoral bloc came first in Iraq's election after a successful anti-corruption campaign, publicly supported the protests. He called for an emergency session of parliament to find “radical and immediate” solutions to the crisis in Basra.

“We will be uncompromising and you have been warned. Be ready,” he said.

Al-Sadr, who is allied with Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, has yet to form a government because rival political blocs are challenging attempts from the ruling bloc to form a government.

Escalating violence. Iraqi protesters demonstrate against a lack of basic services in Basra, on September 6. (AFP)

Power delay formation of new Iraqi government

Manuel Langendorf

London

T he Iraqi parliament convened for the first time since the May elections, the first in forming a new government. But it failed to elect a speaker amid competing claims about who had the right to put together the largest electoral bloc.

The question of the largest bloc was referred to the federal court and the provisional speaker vote postponed until September 15.

A flurry of political manoeuvring preceded the first parliamentary session with two competing blocs announcing they had enough MPs to formally vote for a speaker.

The first claim was from an alliance led by Moqtada al-Sadr and caretaker Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Al-Sadr’s Sairoon bloc won 54 seats in the 329-member parliament, the most of any party. Abadi’s bloc was thwarted with 47 seats.

A bloc led by militia leader Hadi al-Amiri and former Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki said it had persuaded lawmakers from the Sadr-Abadi camp to defect and was now the largest bloc in parliament.

Both camps include leaders from Iraq’s Shia and Sunni communities, Turkmen and others. Abadi and Maliki hail from the Shia Dawa Party but had competed on different electoral platforms. Al-Sadr is seen as the favourite by the United States; Abadi is supported by regional and local forces in Basra.

Maliki’s bloc was referred to the federal court and the provisional speaker vote postponed until September 15. The bloc was suspected to be responsible for clashes with protesters.

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Iraq struggles to quell deadly Basra protests

Manuel Langendorf

Iraqi protesters demonstrated against a lack of basic services in Basra, on September 6.

Some 30,000 people have reportedly been hospitalised due to polluted water in Basra.

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Iranian officials claimed reports that Tehran is providing ballistic missiles to Shia proxies in Iraq lack credibility and attempt to harm the country's relations.

Reuters, citing Iranian, Iraqi and Western sources, reported August 31 that Iran has "given ballistic missiles to Shia proxies in Iraq and is developing the capacity to build more of these to deter attacks on its interests in the Middle East and to give it the means to hit regional foes."

"Iran has transferred short-range ballistic missiles to allies in Iraq over the last few months. Five of the officials said it was helping those groups to start making their own," the report stated.

A Western source said the missile transfers were meant as a warning to the US and Israel, especially after air raids on Iranian troops in Syria.

"The logic was to have a backup plan if Iran was attacked," one senior Iranian official told Reuters. "The number of missiles is not high, just a couple of dozen, but it can be increased if necessary."

Iran's Faleh, Fateh-110 and Zolfaqar missiles have ranges of 200-700km, which would put Riyadh or Tel Aviv within striking distance if the weapons were deployed in southern or western Iraq.

Iran has previously said its ballistic missile activities were defensive in nature and its Foreign Minister said the programme was aimed at fulfilling the country's rights under international law.

Western countries have accused Iran of transferring missiles to Syria and other regions, such as the Moutah rebels in Yemen and Lebanon's Hezbollah. Iran's Sunni Management neighbourhood and Israel have also expressed concerns about Tehran's regional activities.

Iranian Defeate Minister Amir Abdollahian said that nations could attack Iranian military assets in Iraq, as it has done with air strikes in Syria. "We are certainly monitoring everything that is happening in Iraq and, regarding Iranian threats, we are not limiting ourselves just to our territory. This also needs to be clear," Abdollahian said at a conference September 3 in Jerusalem.

A Western source cited by Reuters said the missile transfers were meant as a warning to the United States and Israel, especially after air raids on Iranian troops in Syria. "It seems Iran has been turning Iraq into its forward missile base," the Western source said.

The Iranian sources and one Iraqi intelligence source told Reuters a decision was made about 18 months ago to use missiles to produce missiles in Iraq but activity had ramped up in the past few weeks, including with the arrival of missile launchers.

"We have bases like that in many places and Iraq is one of them. If America attacks us, our friends will attack America's interests and its allies in the region," said a senior Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps commander.

One Iraqi intelligence official told Reuters that Baghdad was aware of the flow of Iranian missiles to Shia militias to fight Islamic State militants but that shipments had continued after the Sunni militant group was defeated. The Iraqi source added it was difficult for the Iraqi government to regulate the flow of Iranian rockets because similar types are produced in Iraq.

Iranian Defence Minister Brigadier-General Amir Hatami said the missile transfers are "without evidence" but stopped short of issuing a denial.

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Exhausted population in Idlib finds itself lost between governments, armies and militants

**Viewpoint**

**With assault on Idlib imminent, US stays on the sidelines**

Mark Habeeb

Apparantly, any actions by Damascus and its allies short of using chemical weapons will not provoke a US response.

The 7-year Syrian civil war is approaching a crucial moment with the government of Syria and President Bashar Al Assad preparing to move on the rebel-controlled province of Idlib with the assistance of his Russian and Iranian allies.

Idlib is the base for thousands of jihadists and home to several million people. A bloodbath is a distinct possibility and the United Nations is warning of a humanitarian catastrophe.

The presidents of Russia, Iran and Turkey, the guarantors of the so-called Astana process which seeks to manage the Syrian crisis and which has eclipsed the United Nations’ Geneva process, conferred in Tehran on September 7 but apparently did not reach an agreement likely to halt the regime’s offensive.

Meanwhile, the world’s largest economic and military power – the country that not long ago was considered the primary outside actor in the Middle East and whose involvement was indispensable to the resolution of major regional conflicts – is on the sidelines, its capital obsessed by political scandal and its president incapable of a coherent foreign policy.

As the Syrian civil war is reaching a grusome crescendo, the United States has made itself virtually irrelevant.

Russia, which has assumed the role as prime outside actor, sees the United States not as an equal but a potential spoiler. “I hope our Western partners will not give in to (rebels) provocations and will not obstruct an anti-terror strategy,” Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov told Reuters. Russian concerns over US obstruction were fuelled by US President Donald Trump’s warning that Syria should not “recklessly attack” Idlib.

While the president did not define “reckless,” US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said the United States would respond if Damascus used chemical weapons. US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley boasted: “All eyes are on the actions of Assad, Russia and Iran in Idlib.”

Apparently, any actions by Damascus and its allies short of using chemical weapons will not provoke a US response.

Even if Damascus uses chemical weapons, the US response is unlikely to be a game-changer. In April, Washington reacted to evidence of a chemical weapons attack by hitting several Syrian government military targets, a limited show of force that in no way affected the Syrian regime or seriously weakened the Assad regime.

To ensure that Washington does not become a spoiler, Russia amassed a large naval force in the eastern Mediterranean as a warning against a US intervention that goes beyond a slap on the wrist. Kismenin spokesman Dmitry Peskov, reacting to comments from Washington, said: “Just to speak out with some warnings, without taking any significant action, goes beyond a slap on the wrist.”

Peskov makes a valid point: The United States has no “full, comprehensive approach” to Syria and has not for the past seven years.

Jonas Parello-Plesner, a researcher with the Atlantic Council think-tank, noted that “Assad is advancing on the ground, aided by Iran and Russia but not such an agreement likely to halt the regime’s offensive. Meanwhile, the world’s largest economic and military power – the country that not long ago was considered the primary outside actor in the Middle East and whose involvement was indispensable to the resolution of major regional conflicts – is on the sidelines, its capital obsessed by political scandal and its president incapable of a coherent foreign policy.

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Houthi delegation to Beirut: division and controversy
Sami Moubayed
Beirut
A public visit by a Yemeni Houthi delegation to Beirut renewed tensions between the Iran-backed Hezbollah and Gulf-allied Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri, pushing relations between the two near collapse and further complicating efforts to create a cabinet of national unity in Lebanon.

Hezbollah’s relationship with the Yemeni group is not new but it is the first time that both sides featured a high-level visit to Beirut. The Houthis are trying to pursue a rapprochement with their political and ideological rival Hezbollah in Lebanon or across its borders.

The Houthis have a training camp run by Hezbollah in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley. It went unanswered at the Lebanon’s Information Ministry, which operates Masirah and whose director, Ibrahim Abdulsalam, said he met with Nasrallah in Beirut on August 19, posting a photo of the meeting on Twitter. The photo had to have been taken by a Hezbollah photographer because smartphones are not allowed in Nasrallah’s presence. Hezbollah leaked the photo through Al-Masirah, it seems, with multiple objectives. The first was a message to Saudi Arabia that Hariri’s interference in Lebanon’s affairs would continue if economic and political pressure is applied on Beirut. Second, it was a message from Nasrallah making Hariri look weak and irrelevant to his Saudi allies.

“The visits never stopped,” said Lebanon’s information minister, Abdu Al-Masri. “Mohammad Abdul-Salam visited back in October 2015 to pay condolences to Hezbollah. Coordination has always been high, backed by Iran and endorsed by Syria.”

Hezbollah has no intention of severing its relationship with the Houthis even if Hariri mends relations with Damascus.

“The United States and Iran are trying to get Hezbollah and Iran out of Syria. Hezbollah will compensate for this and increase its presence in Syria. If you want to pursue mischief in Syria, we are capable of doing the same in Lebanon.”

There are some in Saudi Arabia who see Hezbollah’s inability to rejoin the Houthis, seeking new Sunni allies in Lebanon, as a sign that Hezbollah’s role in Yemen and Syria. The announcement of the visit given the Saudi’s unresolved sovereignty claims over the Yemeni group is not new but it is the first time that both sides featured a high-level visit to Beirut. The Houthis are trying to pursue a rapprochement with their political and ideological rival Hezbollah in Lebanon or across its borders.

Hezbollah’s role in Yemen and Syria. The Houthis are trying to pursue a rapprochement with their political and ideological rival Hezbollah in Lebanon or across its borders. The Houthis have a training camp run by Hezbollah in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley.

Hezbollah is a state above the state
Adid Nassar
Hezbollah is a state above the state

Hezbollah is a state above the state

Hezbollah has a free hand in bringing in goods and people through Lebanese ports, border crossings and Beirut airport — no taxes paid, no questions asked.

Out into the open. Hezbollah supporters carry flags and a picture of a Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah and leader of Yemen’s Houthi movement Abdelmalek al-Houthi in Beirut. (Hozani)
Opinion

Africa still matters

It's not true that Lebanon's economy can survive unfavourable developments if the country remains without a government for much longer. Lebanon urgently -- and more so than at any time before -- needs a balanced and consensual government.

All Lebanon must become aware that, despite some people have a beef against Saad Hariri and the Future Movement and regardless of the argument that the Future Movement has only 17 out of the 27 Sunni members of parliament, it is time for a new power balance based on the latest election results.

The elections were based on a strange law cooked up by Hezbollah — meaning Iran. The aim of that law is to weaken independent political movements and stack the chances in favour of Hezbollah, which, like most of the seats in parliament. It is no wonder that, right after the May elections, Iran, through its Quds Force commander Major-General Qassem Soleimani, would boast that it controls a majority of seats in the Lebanese parliament, which quite simply must bend to its wishes.

Luckily for Lebanon, there are citizens who are determined to fight Iran's expansionist project, which Tehran implements through armed sectarian militias. We can easily see the ugly face of this imperialistic project in Yemen, Syria, and Iraq and even in Lebanon. Of course, not all of Lebanon's Shia are pro-Iranian but Iran has made significant inroads in the country's Shia community. We cannot deny that a good portion of members of that community have placed themselves in the service of Iran and its useless project. Nothing is going to come out of that project but more disastrous results for Lebanon and all its communities.

Hezbollah's parliament bloc argues that, given the Assad regime's victories and successes in its war on the Syrian people, Lebanon must move quickly to “position itself strategically,” meaning to come under Assad's vassal state. Nothing can be more wrong. It is still too early to speak of a final victory by the Syrian regime. Syria is much divided and Syria is in ruins. The Syrian regime would not have been able to progress in southern Syria and drive Isamic State forces into Druze territory in Sweida and the surrounding villages. The real winner in southern Syria is Israel. Hezbollah's representatives in the Lebanese parliament want Lebanon to align itself with Hezbollah's interests and those of Iran and the “Axis of Refusal” based on that. Here is another Israeli victory that shall remain obscure, just like the mystery behind the withdrawal of the Syrian Army from the Golan in 1981.

This is not the time for a fruitless debate about who won and how it will affect Lebanon. That conflict has moved into a phase in which all the cards are being shuffled once again. We still don't know what the United States is going to do after its decision to maintain its forces east of the Euphrates. We don't know what Turkey will do in case the Syrian regime decides to take Idlib with Russian support, of course, and at the cost of even more humanitarian disasters.

It is best for the Lebanonese to focus on how to protect their own country from the menaced rather than focus on how to retaliate against Hariri and the Christian community who refuse to surrender to Hezbollah's weapons or against members of the Druze community who know what is at stake in the region and behind the calls for a minorities coalition.

It is best for the Lebanonese to heed the reports about their country in international media that say the economic situation in the country calls for people with an acute sense of realism and international contexts. Since the Paris conference on Lebanon in April, there are about 40 billion in easy-term loans and grants waiting for a credible Lebanese government to see the light. The country can't afford to wait much longer to claim them. There is a pressing need for a team of responsible people committed to saving the country rather than dragging it into new adventures based on illusionary victories in Syria.

Lebanon, too, is waiting for a new government credible to the international community. The country needs to move beyond the complex created by Rafik Hariri and his project for a minority coalition. Two types of politicians suffer from that complex. There are those who talk a lot just to hide their incompetence and ignorance and there are those who consider Lebanon the “rightful” vassal of outsiders.

We are speaking of Iran, of course. The only solution is that the country has to reap the fruits of years of investing money, weapons and sectarian strife in Lebanon.

Khairallah Khairallah is a Lebanese writer.
The war of spoils continues in Tripoli at expense of Libyans

Habib Lassoued

The smell of potential spoils in Libya has awakened the greedy monster inside and outside the country.

OPINION

The Arab Weekly

Habib Lassoued

The realpolitik on display as the United States has come down ever more heavily on Israel’s side in the past 20 months has been starting and sobering.

Rashmie Roshan Lall

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Arab states too, like Trump, share blame for Palestinian plight

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We may observe today the poor of the Earth attempting to cultivate a better garden, or invade one, as a consequence of the hand-held computer.

Arab students’ reluctance to return from overseas is in sharp contrast to their Chinese counterparts.

One of the reasons the fundamentali- stes’ September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the United States were so successful is that they maintained the.findViewById("radio_on")
"Let us rename it Dark Cyber.

Many Arab students worry that returning from their countries of study may not be as easy as it was before. They are concerned about the potential for opposition and career progression being major parts of the reasons to stay away from the region but there is more. Many Arab Millen- nials say the personal and professional relationship they have with their homeland.

The main rooms were hung with family portraits, the early ones painted on wood. Most of the males resembled one another. They had round heads, prominent foreheads, but small, dimly lit eyes. They were Gutenberg’s. Our host, the modern-day equivalent of the living family uses a double ‘l’, a tautological construction of his ancestry, looked exactly like his grandfather.

Gutenberg is a direct descendant of the inventor of the printing press. As a scholar, he belonged to put on gloves and open the school’s rare copies in Gutenberg’s Bible.

Printing changed the course of European civilization. Martin Luther translated the Bible from Latin into his native language, and church professionals lost their nearly absolute hold on literacy. The change in this point in the individual’s direct relation to God, one that required the knowledge and supervision of intermediaries, took hold. There are times in history when change is both necessary and not easy. Three centuries of religious, or what we now call sectarian, was followed. As is over

The Volkswagen scandal and that $7 billion fine (and sometimes, though less forcibly, human rights abuses of fewer T-shirts) assembled by years of companies’ efforts. Many arguments about loss of jobs and migration have become inefficient. When I flew to Australia via the Moscow and Tokyo in the 1980s, my air travel control- lor was operating on regulations agreed to by different sovereigns. However, in joining Europe, the British retained a rare and priceless element of national sovereignty. They designated their own currency and control its rates of interest. The most important toll is that Britain is leaving but the Franco- German project of creating a power block to provide high-paying permanent jobs is being done by the governments of the United States is being helped by Britain’s departure.

Many Arab students wish to remain in the European Union. What we are seeing today is a parallel case. People are abandoning the pound. In the 21st century is discover- ing. It needs quickly to invest in its media (in effect, smartphones) to return from their homeland.

There are signs that the Chi- nese project of creating a power block on the scale of China or the German project of creating a power block is being done by the governments of the United States is being helped by Britain’s departure.

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Pakistan's new government under Imran Khan unlikely to overhaul its Gulf policy

Sabaht Khan
Dubai

I\n
man Khan's election victory opens a new era for Pakistan but he is a new political figure in Pakistan.

Pakistan is colour blind in relation to Iran and the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan speaks during an interview at his home in Islamabad. (AFP)

Are Oman's days as a regional mediator ending?

The Arab Weekly staff
London

Governments that observed areset of relations, as happened with Qatar, is slim, because such a move might push Muscat to seek alternative, including deepening its relations with Tehran.

Key points.

The Gulf Arab Gulf might have to pick a side.

Trump administration's hawkishing Iran's regional designs and the Gulf Cooperation Council lauded Pakistan's efforts to prevent an arms race.

Pakistan's energy needs are growing fast.

For Islamabad, the conflict in Afghanistan is a major reason.

Personal relationship-building will be sure to protect its overall sovereignty.

Even if financial assistance is unable to change Pakistan's Gulf policy directly, there are millions of Pakistanis hearts to be won.

With threats from Iranian officials, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi might no longer see Oman's stated impartiality as acceptable.

Abdullah's diplomacy failed to yield results. The Gulf Muscat had hoped for, which was a stark contrast to the Obama administration when Oman enjoyed stronger ties with both Bahrain and Qatar but also Turkey and Qatar.

Khan has more widespread popular appeal than any other political figure in Pakistan but he is a new political figure in Pakistan.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan during an interview at his home in Islamabad.

New era.

Pakistan's Prime Minister Imran Khan speaks during an interview at his home in Islamabad. (AFP)

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Hassan Abdel Zaher
Cairo

The Egyptian parliament is considering legislation that would effectively implement equal inheritance rights for women in the peculiar system of historical figures by threatening to fine lawmakers who speak negatively about them, something critics say is another attempt to prevent open debate.

MP Omar Hamroush, who proposed the Criminalization of Historical Figures bill, said he wants to confronted a campaign distracting young Egyptians with false information about people who played great roles in Egypt and Arab history.

There is a new attempt to smear historical figures by those who claim to be researchers in history every hour," Hamroush said. "Sorry to say, those attempts aim to young Egyptians the authenticity of what they read in the history books about the same figures.

Consideration of the bill comes as Egypt's historians and intellectuals seem to be rethinking both the history of Egypt and Islam.

If enacted, Hamroush's five-article bill would punish people who have been proven to have humiliated historical figures up to five years in prison and a fine of up to 500,000 Egyptian pounds ($72,000).

Historians, writers and thinkers view the measure as an attempt to mute criticism of historical figures to impose an official version of history. Critics of the bill say it seeks to freeze history and prevent debate of official historical narratives.

"History is not static but is in a continual change in the light of the facts, proofs and documents that emerge day after day," said writer Farida al-Naqash, who is a member of the leftist Tagammu Party. "The people proposing this law only want to freeze history and prevent everybody from thinking or viewing things differently."

Consideration of the bill comes as Egypt's historians and intellectuals seem to be rethinking both the history of Egypt and Islam.

Yousef Zidan, an Egyptian scholar who specialises in Arabic and Islamic studies and is director of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina's Manuscript Centre, recently shredded myths about renowned figures in Islamic history. Among them were Saladin, the first sultan of Egypt and Syria and founder of the Ayyubid dynasty, and Amr bin al-As, one of the companions of the Prophet Mohammed and commander of the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 640.

Zidan described Saladin as a "mean" person who burned thousands of books to confront Shia threats. He accused Saladin of a crime against humanity by preventing members of the Fatimid dynasty, which had ruled Egypt for 250 years, from marrying any other than Shia Muslims.

Other intellectuals have cast doubt on official narratives in history books about national and historical figures, such as Amr ibn al-As, Egyptian nationalist and revolutionary behind the Arab Revolt of 1917-18, and Said Zadeh, Egyptian nationalist and former prime minister.

This is the sort of criticism Hamroush, who said he is trying to protect Egyptian history, and his colleagues in parliament want to halt it. "This is not about killing free speech and thinking but about stopping those who want Egyptians to lose affinity with and pride in their history," he said.

The bill is being considered by the Culture Committee and the Security and Stability Committee of the Egyptian parliament. It would next be referred for a final vote by parliament, where, lawmaker Ghada Agamy said, there is "massive" support for it.

"There is a big difference between freedom of speech and the premeditated desire of some people to destroy Egyptian history," Agamy said. "Most legislators agree on this."" Approved, the bill will join laws that critics claim limit Egyptian freedom of expression. The laws include a ban on the criticism of religion and another barring unauthorised street protests.

Zidan said if the measure becomes law it would move to an authority that tolerates free speech. "If that flawed disgraceful law is approved, I will leave the country and never come back. I will seek another nationality," he said in a Facebook post.

Hamroush's bill does not specify what it means by the term "historical figure" and there are fears it could be used to shut down criticism of current public figures. It also does not differentiate between criticism based on newly uncovered facts and research and unsubstantiated slurs.

Naqqash said the bill shows a strong desire in official circles in Egypt to politicise history and prevent competing accounts of events from being debated.

"This is clear in the desire of those drafting the bill to force the public to submit to the official version of history, other than anything else," Naqqash said, "but in doing this, these people increase the public's lack of confidence in the history and the official figures they want to protect."
### Algerian president returns from medical check-up amid speculation about next election

Lamine Ghammi

Tunis

A

gerian President Ab-

delaziz Bouteflika re-

turned from a medical

check-up in Switzerland as

speculation grew over his

potential bid for re-election next year.

Bouteflika, 81, is serving his fourth 5-year term as president. He has been dogged by health prob-

lems in recent years and has rarely been seen in public since suffering a stroke in 2013. No details about the

recent examinations in Switzerland were released.

Despite the president’s condition, his backers have urged him to seek a fifth term in elections next April.

He has not announced whether he will seek a new mandate.

On September 2, the day after Bouteflika returned to Algeria, sup-

porters announced the formation of a “popular front” comprised of 16 political parties supporting his

re-election. Such support is likely to grow to counter the political aims of the Muslim Brotherhood’s

affiliate in Algeria, whose head said he would run in the presidential elections.

Abderazak Makri, leader of the Movement of Social Peace (MSP), a Muslim Brotherhood affiliate in Al-

geria, said he would turn the coun-

dry into “one of the top 20 economic

powers in the world” if elected.

However, analysts say an Islam-

ist candidacy for president would likely benefit Bouteflika since most Algerians distrust political

Islam because of its role in the civil war in the 1990s.

Bouteflika has moved to assert

power and restructure the ranks of government ahead of next year’s vote, including firing Mostefa Lay-

dji, head of the local government in the southern garrison town of Baida, where a recent outbreak of

cholera began.

Thousands of people took to the street to celebrate the sacking of Laydji, who was blamed for mis-

managing the health crisis in which

two died.

“It is a good signal for the future of Baida town and its region,” a lo-

cal resident told El Watan newspaper,

which opposes a fifth mandate for Bouteflika. “Thank you, Mister President for taking this decision,”

the resident said.

Analysts expect Bouteflika to “chop off more heads,” including in the military infrastructure, to pre-

vent resistance among “sceptical people within the ruling elites.”

“With a certainly positive medical check-up, Bouteflika wanted to sig-

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Archer Chil. “His authority strengthened because he doubles as defence min-

ister, the president is likely to sign off on the chopping of the heads of other senior military officers.”

The clashes created a political watershed. Most Libyans knew that the internationally supported President Council (led by Fayez al-Sarraj) and his Government of National Accord (GNA) were the only way to avert civil war.

**The hope is that the Tarhouna incursion will bring about change and the emergence of a government with real power to run the country.**

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London

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is scrambling to sustain funding for Palestinian refugees after the United States announced it would cut all aid destined to the international body.

UNRWA Commissioner Pierre Kraehenbuehl said the agency needs more than $200 million this year despite pledges from donor countries to increase funding following the US cuts. Additional aid is expected from Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Japan, India and several European countries, including Britain and the European Union.

The Trump administration branded UNRWA as an “irredeemably flawed operation” that is “endlessly and exponentially expanding community of entitled beneficiaries.” The United States, the largest single donor, cut its contribution by $335 million in 2018. The deficit in funding is likely to threaten not only the livelihoods of Palestinian refugees but also the national security of some Arab states.

UNRWA provides education and health services to some 5 million refugees, nearly half of whom live in Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. It also provides employment to many of those people.

Palestinian refugees see an UNRWA education as a passport to dignity and if they lose that, they lose their identity,” said teacher Rita Khalouf. “We love being at school. I want to be a flight engi- neer when I grow up,” said 5-year-old Rami Natour, sitting behind his desk on the first day of school after UNRWA’s re-establishment in Beirut’s Palestinian refugee camp of Mar Elias.

Defying US funding cuts, the agency is planning to continue television, education, health care and emergency assistance to Palestinian refugees, opened normally across Lebanon’s 12 camps catering to some 35,000 students.

“We have started the year with festivities and lots of happiness,” said teacher Rita Khalouf. “We are operating normally. There are fears, decisions are being made that might affect our future but we are not letting all that affect our work.”

It was a day many feared would not come, at least not on time, as UNRWA — formally called the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East — faces some of its toughest pres- sures in its 68-year history. The Trump administration halted $300 million in planned donations de- claring that UNRWA’s main goal is to sustain funding for Palestinian refugees, opened normally in planned donations de-

When we have 27 clinics that serve more than 160,000 people. We have 61,000 refugees living below the poverty line,” said Claudio Cordone, UNRWA director in Lebanon. “There isn’t an alternative to this provision of services to these people.”

Jordan hosts some 2.2 mil- lion Palestinian refugees, which amount to nearly half of the coun- try’s total population.

Struggling to maintain public calm over its worsening economy, Jordan is seeking further interna- tional aid for the Syrian refugees it also hosts. A new hole in its bud- get could constitute a crisis.

“Disruption of UNRWA services will have extremely dangerous hu- manitarian, political and security implications for refugees and for the whole region,” Jordan’s For- eign Minister Ayman Safadi told Reuters.

“We will only consolidate an envi- ronment of despair that would ul- timately create fertile grounds for political instability,” said Gerald Kadi, a Palestinian teacher who worked with the agency.

The deficit in funding is likely to threaten not only the livelihoods of Palestinian refugees but also the national security of some Arab states.

Hard times. A Palestinian woman walks outside an aid distribution centre run by UNRWA in Khan Younis, on September 4.

The US move is widely seen as political, a bid to re- move the remaining $300 mil- lion of funds for UNRWA could come on that relies on its services, as well as the consequences this could have on regional stability,” Alistair Burt, Britain’s minister for foreign affairs, told Agence France-Presse, “but US actions are misguided, dangerous and won’t work… neither Lebanon nor for-

dan can be expected to play along,” Israel, which objects to the Pal- estinian right of return because it fears the move would cause the country to lose Jewish majority, welcomed the US cuts to UNRWA.

Removing the special refugee sta- tus of the Palestinians is a danger- ous matter,” Rifi cautioned.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly

Travel and Society section editor.

Uncertain future. Palestinian refugee student stands outside a classroom at one of the UNRWA schools in Beirut, Lebanon, on September 3.

The US decision on UNRWA is a politically motivated move more than anything else, maintained Ali Rifi, head of the popular commit- tees in Beirut’s Palestinian camps.

Defying US funding cuts, the schools run by the agency, opened normally across Lebanon’s 12 camps catering to some 35,000 students.

“This decision is meant to serve Israeli interests. We will not apply or implement the resolution of UNRWA’s assistant to the UNRWA’s budget,” Rifi said. “They want to eliminate the refugee by destroying the structure that perpetuates that cause. They want us to be considered like any other refugees, from Iraq, Syria, et cetera. The difference is that Iraqis and Syrians were displaced by in- ternal conflicts not because of oc-

Further reading...

- The Trump administration is trying to scrap the right to return from the agenda of any future negotiations. Basically, they are seeking to set aside the core issues that are preventing a settle- ment,” Rifi said.

- In May, the Trump administra- tion moved the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, breaking with decades of US policy by recog- nizing the holy city as the capital of Israel.

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- The US decision on UNRWA is a politically motivated move more than anything else, maintained Ali Rifi, head of the popular commit- tees in Beirut’s Palestinian camps.

- The UNRWA and the US government are engaging in a war of words over the fate of the agency. The US government has cut funding to the agency, and the UNRWA has threatened to halt services.

- The US government’s decision to cut funding to UNRWA is seen as a step towards dismantling the agency, which provides education, health care, and other services to Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.
Attention turns to other public bodies that would be required to follow Labour and adopt the IHRA definition in full.

Kamel Hawwash

Why Palestinians have a problem with the IHRA definition of ‘anti-Semitism’

Israel is brought in, its potential effect stretches beyond Jews in any country and links them all to Israel, when many of them do not identify with it.

Scholars have argued that bringing Israel into the definition would affect the ability of the Palestinians to advocate for their rights. Brian Kuhn, a researcher at St Benet’s Hall, Oxford, argued that the European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia’s – and by implication the IHRA’s – definition “prescribed legitimate criticism of the human rights record of the Israeli government by attempting to bring criticism of Israel into the category of the unacceptable that does not sufficiently distinguish between criticism of Israeli actions and criticism of Zionism as a political ideology on the one hand, and racially based violence towards, discrimination against, or abuse of, Jews.

An opinion by Hugh Tomlinson, QC, concluded that the IHRA definition of anti-Semitism is unclear and confusing and should be used with caution and, in an opinion prepared for the Palestinian Return Centre, Geoffrey Robertson, QC, said the definition of anti-Semitism adopted by the government is “not fit for purpose.”

The United Kingdom’s Conserva- tive government has adopted the full IHRA definition. However, the British Labour Party, which has been engulfed in a controversy over anti-Semitism since Jeremy Corbyn’s election as leader in Sep- tember 2015, decided to develop its own code of conduct to deal with anti-Semitism in the party, based on the IHRA definition but clarifying and contextualising the use of terms related to it.

The conflation of anti-Semitism with anti-Zionism suits Israel. Its supporters have suggested – with- out evidence or justification – that the UK Jewish community would face an existential threat from a Corbyn-led government. The message to the British electorate is not to vote Labour while Corbyn is its leader.

The Labour Party’s adoption of the IHRA definition, including all 11 illustrative examples, was a huge blow to the Palestinians and their supporters. They said they feared it would restrict their abil- ity to describe events leading to the creation of Israel, which they claim is a racial endeavour. This is despite the party’s National Executive Committee, Geoffrey Robertson, QC, said the IHRA definition would be experienced as a “baleful act by many Jews,” he wrote for the Guardian.

“I also stated that the IHRA, if in- terpreted carefully, should not lead to a prejudicial stereotyping of Palestinians.”

Mahmud el-Shafey is an Arab Weekly correspondent in London.
**Turkey**

**News & Analysis**

### War in Syria could help improve ties between Turkey and Germany after years of feud

**Thomas Seilbert**

The war in Syria could boost efforts by Turkey and Germany to improve relations after a rough patch marred by divergent approaches to Russia, Iran, and the repercussions of the Arab Spring.

**Turkey**

There is no reason to believe Ankara has any interest in clearing the Syrian border. It has China's backing for that. Russia and China have large numbers of troops and other assets in Syria. Media reports say many of the jihadists went to Syria via Turkey, only to be pushed into Idlib when faced withdrawing from the Islamic State and al Qaeda strongholds.

In the end, the moderate Islamists in the Astana process may not want a crisis with Russian, Iranian, and Syrian organizations. Turkey's软弱 possívelcould be a trump card for Erdogan when he meets with EU leaders in the coming weeks. In the eyes of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, Erdogan may be the guarantor of efforts to keep Syrian refugees out of Europe.

### Viewpoint

**The Gordian called Idlib challenges Erdogan**

**Yavuz Baydar**

Turkey appears paralysed as it faces a clash of interests with Russia and the jihadists even while at odds with Washington on the Kurds.

Being severely at odds with its long-time ally the United States has not been helping Turkey. Incursions into Kurdish-controlled areas in north-eastern Syria, along the border with Turkey, was one of the main reasons Erdogan terminated the Kurdish peace process at home three years ago. The decision caused a chain reaction, pushing extreme nationalism and giving Russia and Iran more leverage to contain Turkey. Erdogan's soft spot – opposition to Kurdish aspirations for self-rule – had once again become a problem and this time, almost with paralyzing effect.

Turkey appears paralysed as it faces a clash of interests with Russia on the jihadists even while at odds with Washington on the Kurds. Consider the photograph that appeared September 6 of US Army soldiers in Idlib with Funk with Ferhat Abd al Shihab, top commander of the Kurdish People's Protection Units. What happens next? What's in the Offing for Erdogan on Idlib? Its main argument will probably remain that the decolonising zones be respected. For Moscow, the agenda may be to push Turkey for bilateral talks with Assad. Erdogan may not want a crisis with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Idlib will, and should, boil down to one thing. The United Nations said at least 800,000 people will be affected by hostilities. A siege will leave them no place to flee but Turkey. Therefore, it may be time for Ankara to abandon all political and military ambitions over Syria and focus on humanitarian dimensions. Erdogan's dilemma is obvious. Should he mobilize to the potential influx or extend the crisis by militarily intervening in Kurdish-controlled Syrian areas such as Manbij?

Turkey's soft spot to host and feed more than 3 million victims of the Syrian war are commendable, especially compared with the shameful insensitivity of some central European governments. Now, Ankara should be encouraged to open its doors further with the promise of help from international organizations.

Idlib could be a trump card for Erdogan when he meets with EU leaders in the coming weeks. In the eyes of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, for example, Erdogan may be the guarantor of efforts to keep Syrian refugees out of Europe. This would be another watered-down for Turkey's strongman. He could use the looming refugee crisis to open a new chapter with the European Union, normalising relations, which he needs very badly.

However, going by his record, Erdogan will doubtless prefer a solution-oriented approach. We shall see.

Yavuz Baydar is a Turkish journalist and regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.
Spotlight

Concern in Egypt as Muslim Brotherhood reveals ‘tactical goal’

Ahmed Megahid
Cairo

Egypt is on high alert after a Muslim Brotherhood figure revealed that the tactical goal of the outlawed Islamist movement, which has a history of killing political leaders, is to “get rid” of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi.

Seif Abdel Fattah, a former adviser of ousted President Mohammed Morsi, told the Muslim Brotherhood channel Mokameleen TV that Sisi had become “dangerous” for Egypt.

“This man’s nature and the regional and international support he is receiving make him dangerous,” Abdel Fattah said. “This is why it is necessary to get rid of him.”

Abdel Fattah, a professor of political science at Cairo University who advised Morsi before his ouster in 2013 and then travelled to Turkey to join other Brotherhood figures in exile, said getting rid of Sisi was a prerequisite for the Brotherhood to return and “rescue” the country.

Abdel Fattah called Mokameleen TV’s broadcast of Morsi’s ouster in 2013 and the formation of Sisi’s administration as a “revolution against the revolution.”

Security agencies are reported to be revising all arrangements around the president following Abdel Fattah’s threat.

“They cannot do this alone—otherwise they could have done it in the past years,” said Munir Adb, a specialist in the affairs of Islamist movements. “Abdel Fattah’s statements should be understood within the context of preparations by the Brotherhood to stop up their violence in the coming days.”

Egyptian officials claimed a foiled attack on a church last month in eastern Cairo on the Brotherhood.

A suicide bomber with links to the Brotherhood tried to enter the historic Virgin Mary Church in Musturad but was stopped by guards. He set off a bomb outside the church.

Sisi is serving his second term as president. The Brotherhood’s threat raises questions about presidential succession in Egypt, with the next elections due in 2022.

“The Brotherhood is well aware that it will be bringing an end to its political presence in Egypt forever if it ventures into assassinating the president,” said Samih Eld, another expert on Islamist and terrorist groups. “Nevertheless, Sisi’s tenure (as president) will come to an end, which means we need to start thinking seriously of who should succeed him.”

Ahmed Megahid is an Egyptian reporter in Cairo.

Viewpoint

Turkish intelligence at the service of political Islam

Said Nasheed

Official news agencies portrayed the chief of Turkey’s National Intelligence Organisation, Hakan Fidan, as the man who engineered the counterattack against the Turkish coup of July 15, 2016. Fidan directed Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to address the Turkish people after the coup attempt, saying: “We will fight them to death but you must go down to the street and stay there with the people.”

Erdogan followed Fidan’s advice and remained “among the people” for several days, doing nothing but giving fiery speeches night and day until he was allowed by the deep state to return to his normal political life.

While everybody’s attention was focused on Erdogan’s speeches and threats, which sometimes bordered on insanity, Fidan was executing the largest political purges conducted inside Turkey since Kemal Ataturk’s own coup. This time, however, the coup was not named after Fidan but was called “resisting the coup.”

In just a few days, Fidan fired more than 100,000 civil servants and arrested thousands, including hundreds of judges, military officers, journalists and university professors. It seemed that the blacklist had already been drawn and Fidan and his services were waiting for the opportunity to lay their hands on these people.

Fidan’s life is shrouded in mystery and protected information. One incident, however, is quite clear. In 2015, just a few months before the coup, Fidan suddenly resigned as head of the intelligence services and sought to be a candidate of Erdogan’s Justice and Development Party in legislative elections. Erdogan was backed by the move.

Less than a month later, Fidan withdrew his resignation and was back on the job. He consolidated his internal and external intelligence services under one centralised agency, which he headed. Many security and military officers were angered by Fidan’s moves. He would, of course, get rid of them in the purge campaign.

Given this background, Fidan is considered the most powerful man in Turkey. He is the shadowy sultan. His public appearances are rare and calculated. Even the satellite channels, which show only what appears on the surface, do not show him. All that is known of his background is that he had graduated from Turkish and American universities, then worked for various international organisations until his appointment as deputy director of Turkish intelligence services under Emre Taner.

When Taner retired following the crisis produced by the disastrous Mavi Marmara incident in 2010 of theelerik’s hosts of the intelligence services, he had the $2 billion budget and the age of 42, the youngest chief in the ranks between the Kadikoy and the Marmara University.

In the past two years, Fidan has been instrumental in wiping out the so-called parallel state in Turkey, referring, of course, to followers of Fethullah Gulen and his religious movement who were accused of terrorising the country with the threat of being behind several attempts to destabilise Turkey, the latest of which was the 2016 coup attempt.

In Turkish history, the character of Fidan is emblematic of the political alliance between Turkey’s military intelligence and political Islam.

In other words, and contrary to popular belief, the military has always been in control of the security of the Turkish state, whether during the Ataturk period and continues to do so under Erdogan. What might change but the product is the same. Perhaps by appointing Field Marshal Abdel Fattah al-Sisi as commander-in-chief of the Egyptian Armed Forces, former Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi wanted to consecrate the fateful alliance between military intelligence and political Islam and replicate Turkey’s experience in Egypt. Sisi had been head of the Egyptian Military Intelligence and Morsi had absolute trust in him until the last hours of his regime.

Even more intriguing is the thought of there being similar attempts elsewhere to reproduce the Turkish experience, with slight modifications, of course.

Said Nasheed is a Moroccan writer.

On alert. Security forces stand guard in Helwan district on the outskirts of Cairo. (Source)
News & Analysis

Mounting scepticism in Washington about future of US-Turkish relations, reliability of Erdogan as a partner

Thomas Frank

Washington

A growing number of US lawmakers and policy experts are saying the decades-long strategic relationship between the United States and Turkey has fallen apart and that Ankara is no longer an effective member of NATO or a reliable US ally. The US-Turkish relationship, strained since the attempted coup in Ankara in 2016, crumbled in recent weeks as US President Donald Trump imposed financial sanctions on two senior Turkish officials to protest Turkey’s refusal to release American pastor Andrew Brunson, who is charged in Turkey with helping plan the coup attempt.

The United States and Turkey also have clashed over the war in Syria. Washington’s refusal to extradite a Turkish cleric alleged to have engineered the coup attempt have cooled ties between the two countries.

At a congressional hearing Sept. 19, senators and former senior diplomats said that, although Turkey cannot be expelled from NATO, the United States should expect no help from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. They warned that the US military might be blocked from the Incirlik Air Base in Turkey.

“Can we accept the reality that Erdogan’s Turkey will not be a partner? Whether they’re formally a member of NATO, I would say put that on the back burner,” said Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations and a former policy director at the US State Department. Haass said the US military should “look very closely at alternatives to dependence on Incirlik” because the base might not be available to the US Air Force during a crisis.

The NATO base is home to 550 US personnel, who have used it as a launching point for air strikes against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq since 2015. The US military has scaled back operations out of Incirlik in recent months as US-Turkey tensions grow.

“We are in a crisis. In a crisis, we cannot know whether Erdogan would make Incirlik available to the United States military, so we have to have alternatives,” Nicholas Burns, a former top State Department official, said at the hearing.

Burns and Haass, two highly respected foreign-policy advisors, were invited by the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to share ideas on NATO and how to preserve the 29-nation alliance in the face of dismissive comments by Trump.

Trump joined NATO in 1955, two years after the group was created, and has been a valuable member because of its large second-largest armed forces. “Turkey is a key relation for the US military,” Burns said.

Erdogan has assumed increasing control over formerly independent government institutions, US lawmakers have wondered about Turkey’s future in NATO.

“Should we be looking at alternatives to the relationship with Turkey? Should we look at ways to limit those ties and I think it probably hurts us,” Burns said.

Haass said the freeze in US-Turkey relations is not permanent and would likely end when Erdogan leaves office. “The goal of the United States and the US European members of NATO ought to be to try to revive the relationship with Turkey at that point,” he said.

Responding to criticism in a letter in the Wall Street Journal, Turkish Ambassador to the United States Serdar Kilic noted his country’s role in helping defeat ISIS and “guarantee NATO’s southern flank and home to the alliance’s second-largest armed forces.”

Thomas Frank is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Washington.

Trump scores big points with the evangelical base on Brunson case

Beginning in April, US President Donald Trump began tweeting about a particular American citizen imprisoned in Turkey since shortly before Trump’s 2016 election victory.

Andrew Brunson is one of several Americans imprisoned after the coup attempt in Turkey, charged with supporting the Islamic State (ISIS) and arrested for his political views.

Trump and Vice-President Mike Pence have invoked Brunson’s case to rally and solidify support among their base ahead of November midterm elections. Many prominent white evangelical leaders have been very vocal and visible in their support of Brunson and the Trump administration’s efforts to free him.

The domestic politics behind Brunson’s rise to cause are quite straightforward. An evangelical pastor who presided over a small congregation in limbo for more than 20 years, his status as a persecuted Christian appeals to the identity of power, white evangelical Christian voting bloc, the president and Vice-President Pence.

The Family Research Council, as prominent evangelicals had hoped for.

For example, few black or Latino supporters of Trump represent the white evangelical community. For example, few black or Latino evangelicals have taken up the cause of Brunson’s case.

The Family Research Council posted a video of Brunson and Perkins’s advocacy on his behalf on YouTube page.

Franklin Graham, evangelical missionary, speaker and son of the late Billy Graham, has been one of the most outspoken and active social media advocates for Brunson, tweeting and posting to his Facebook page about Brunson multiple times.

Robert Jeffress, evangelical pastor and radio personality, appeared on the Fox Business Network to speak about Brunson’s case.

The president and his vociferous support of Brunson may be a deciding factor in handing his party another congressional majority in November.

Claire Sadar is a freelance journalist specializing in Turkey, Muslim Americans, religion and human rights issues. This article was initially published by online. All rights reserved.
Terrorist networks in the Middle East have robust financial networks enabling the groups to remain a threat, and they are inflating their abilities in East Jerusalem and vital assistance to Palestinian communities, "Carroll said. "ANERA is committed to delivering services could lead to economic deprivation and social unrest, both of which are recipes for increased jihadism influence. In the end, everyone's security, including Israel's, could be undermined. Some countries have pledged to raise their contributions to UNRWA to help offset the Trump administration's actions. Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Germany and Russia increased their contributions earlier in the year in anticipation of a cut or reduction in US assistance, something the Trump administration has considered since the UN General Assembly voted last December to condemn Trump's decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem. Carroll, however, said that the United States is the single largest contributor to UNRWA and "it is difficult to envision filling such a large gap." In 2017 the United States contributed $614 million to UNRWA's budget of $851 million. Smardon told a supporter: "The shortsighted decision to cut funding for the foreseeable future seems to represent a politicisation of humanitarian assistance... support for UNRWA's work - or any UN humanitarian agency - should never be politicized." Smardon's organisation is conducting fundraising events and appeals to raise private funds in the United States to support UNRWA's work, but any amount raised is likely to be modestly symbolic.

Financially viable. A safe at a cash collection centre that belonged to ISIS in Turmanik Bareh village, in northern Aleppo. (AFP)

Mark Habebe
Washington

The Trump administration's decision to cease funding Palestinian institutions provides vital assistance to Palestinian communities, and that the administration's decision to cut US assistance to the Palestinian Authority (PA). The United States has been the largest donor to the PA and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and the PA. The experts question why the Trump administration took such a draconian and harmful action. One is that doing so reflects the views of hard-line, right-wing Israelis that the Palestinians are not really a people, the refugees are not really refugees and that the PA is effectively a terrorist organisation bent on the destruction of Israel. Many of these Israelis are close to David Friedman, the US ambassador to Israel, who has shared their views.

Noura Erakat, a human rights attorn- ey and professor at George Ma- son University, said: "The decision to terminate financial support to UNRWA is yet another attempt to resolve a final status issue of Pales- tinian refugees by political fiat."

The other theory holds that withdrawing funds for Palestinians in refugee camps reflects US President Donald Trump's negotiating style and is designed to get the Palestin- ians to the negotiating table. Where, presumably, they would accept terms that the United States and Israel impose. By this theory, Pal- estinian refugees - including chil- dren and the elderly - are chips to be used to coerce the PA to accept politically unacceptable terms. In fact, these two theories are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. In a letter to supporters, Abby Smardon, executive director of UNRWA USA, wrote: "It seems the US administration is trying to get away from the number of Palestine refu- gees who exist in an attempt to min- imise and delegitimise the individ- ual and collective experiences of this community. Unbelievable fact re- mains that the US government can- not simply make refugees disappear and, no matter what, Palestine refu- gees have rights - like all refugees do - under international law.

"Chris Carroll, president and CEO of American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA), said: "Funding cuts deep- en the challenges facing Palestinian refugees and women the humani- tarian crisis in countries where both UNRWA and ANERA work. Since 1968, ANERA has worked with the US agency for Interna- tional Development (USDA) conduct- ing and managing projects funded by the US government - funds that now are being cut.

"Both Lebanon and Jordan are strained to support the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees who fled to those countries and who are not recipients of UNRWA assistance. In a worst-case scenario, the reduction in UNRWA's capability to deliver services could lead to economic deprivation and social unrest, both of which are recipes for increased jihadism influence. In the end, everyone's security, including Israel's, could be undermined. Some governments have pledged to raise their contributions to UNRWA to help offset the Trump administra- tion's actions. Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Germany and Russia increased their contributions earlier in the year in anticipation of a cut or reduction in US assistance, something the Trump administration has considered since the UN General Assembly voted last December to condemn Trump's decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem. Carroll, however, said that the United States is the single largest contributor to UNRWA and "it is difficult to envision filling such a large gap."

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US experts see financing at the core of terrorist groups' resilience

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The other theory holds that withdrawing funds for Palestinians in refugee camps reflects US President Donald Trump's negotiating style and is designed to get the Palestin- ians to the negotiating table. Where, presumably, they would accept terms that the United States and Israel impose. By this theory, Pal- estinian refugees - including chil- dren and the elderly - are chips to be used to coerce the PA to accept politically unacceptable terms. In fact, these two theories are mutually reinforcing, not mutually exclusive. In a letter to supporters, Abby Smardon, executive director of UNRWA USA, wrote: "It seems the US administration is trying to get away from the number of Palestine refu- gees who exist in an attempt to min- imise and delegitimise the individ- ual and collective experiences of this community. Unbelievable fact re- mains that the US government can- not simply make refugees disappear and, no matter what, Palestine refu- gees have rights - like all refugees do - under international law.

"Chris Carroll, president and CEO of American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA), said: "Funding cuts deep- en the challenges facing Palestinian refugees and women the humani- tarian crisis in countries where both UNRWA and ANERA work. Since 1968, ANERA has worked with the US agency for Interna- tional Development (USDA) conduct- ing and managing projects funded by the US government - funds that now are being cut.

"Both Lebanon and Jordan are strained to support the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees who fled to those countries and who are not recipients of UNRWA assistance. In a worst-case scenario, the reduction in UNRWA's capability to deliver services could lead to economic deprivation and social unrest, both of which are recipes for increased jihadism influence. In the end, everyone's security, including Israel's, could be undermined. Some governments have pledged to raise their contributions to UNRWA to help offset the Trump administra- tion's actions. Switzerland, Sweden, Norway, Germany and Russia increased their contributions earlier in the year in anticipation of a cut or reduction in US assistance, something the Trump administration has consid- ered since the UN General Assembly voted last December to condemn Trump's decision to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem. Carroll, however, said that the United States is the single largest contributor to UNRWA and "it is difficult to envision filling such a large gap."

In 2017 the United States contributed $614 million to UNRWA's budget of $851 million. Smardon told a supporter: "The shortsighted decision to cut funding for the foreseeable future seems to represent a politicisation of humanitarian assistance... support for UNRWA's work - or any UN humanitarian agency - should never be politicized."

Smardon's organisation is conducting fundraising events and appeals to raise private funds in the United States to support UNRWA's work, but any amount raised is likely to be modestly symbolic.
Egypt’s participation in the 2018 Forum on China-Africa Cooperation (FOCAC) seemed to focus on economic ties with China. Trade relations were also major factors in Cairo’s attendance, with Egypt seeking to cement ties with both China and Africa. “Egypt has learned the lesson of dependences on the West the hard way,” said Saad al-Zant, head of the Strategic Studies Centre, an Egyptian think tank. “It also lost a lot by neglecting other African nations.”

Egypt experienced the risks of dependence on its alliance with Western countries after its army backed a popular uprising against Islamist President Mohamed Morsi in 2013. Many Western countries froze contacts with Cairo, including the United States, which withheld economic and military aid.

Egypt’s generals have found it difficult to convince Washington to restore military cooperation and US aid.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi’s visit to China could seek to cement ties with both China and Africa. “Egypt hopes the Suez Canal region will be a logistical and economic centre that contributes effectively to pushing the international maritime movement forward and boosting the freedom of international trade,” Sisi said. “We also hope that this will open the door for more investments.”

Five years ago, Chinese investments in Egypt had totalled less than $1 billion. Now, they total more than $10 billion with Egypt hoping that China can become one of its largest investors in the coming few years. Egypt’s exports to China amount to about $4 billion.

Chinese companies are involved in the construction of a new administrative capital on the outskirts of Cairo. Chinese companies helped Egypt establish its major fish farms in the Nile Delta and in the Suez Canal region, an important contribution to reducing fish imports.

“Egypt has a good chance to increase exports to China, especially with the Chinese being open to this idea,” Sherif said. “Increasing exports, not only to China, but also to other countries, is very feasible with Egypt working to modernise its industrial sector.”

In addition to the Suez Canal, Egypt is an important gateway for China to Africa, particularly North Africa. A closer alliance with Beijing would give Cairo an opportunity to regain its position as a leader in Africa. Before the “Arab spring,” Cairo played strong leadership and economic roles in Africa but that diminished as Egypt focused on resolving domestic political issues.

This is something that significantly harmed Egypt’s foreign relations with several Arab countries, including the Nile River states, complicating negotiations over Nile water share and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam.

Analysts said closer ties between Cairo and Beijing might help Egypt improve relations with its African neighbours, particularly given close ties between Beijing and many African countries.

“Egypt is actually an important window for China into the continent,” said Neurhan al-Shelhi, a political science professor at Cairo University. “It can become China’s bridge to Africa, which is why the Chinese take it very seriously.”

Amr Emam is a Cairo-based associate editor to The Arab Weekly.
Rabat revises public housing strategy to meet rising demand
Mohamed Alouni

Kuwait acts to resolve energy conflicts with neighbours
Jareer Elass

A piped gas supply contract with Iraq will help Kuwait diversify its gas supplies.

Kuwaiti Oil Minister Bakheet al-Rashidi has insisted that a new wave of development projects have been completed and more are under construction. On average, 45,000 new housing units are delivered every year. During the past seven years, 1.3 million construction contracts were awarded to real estate developers and the number of housing units totaled 1.66 million at the end of last year. The private sector produced 456,000 units.

Rising costs of construction materials, a lack of liquidity among investors and bureaucratic complexities, in obtaining loans for small and medium businesses have hampered the housing sector in Morocco, reports said. It has also become apparent that speculative moves were behind the significant drop in development projects and that has led to the bankruptcy of more than 1,000 businesses in the housing sector.

The government says it is essential to review social housing programmes and protect them from speculators. The regulation of the programmes must be improved so they benefit only their targeted populations.

More than 366,000 housing units have been completed and 212,000 more are under construction.

Moroccan officials said they are confident they are taking the right steps in the crisis. In addition to introducing more initiatives tied to infrastructure and urban renewal, the government has started a “shantytown-free” cities project.

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Society

Life flows back into Tigris waters with launch of river taxi

Oumayma Omar

Baghdad

Baghdad residents are looking forward to the launch of a new public transportation system they hope will alleviate traffic congestion on the city's dilapidated and long-neglected roadways, which are cumbered with checkpoints.

A river taxi service is badly and urgently needed, especially in Baghdad where the population is increasing while public transportation means are practically nonexistent,” said Mohamed al-Rubaisi, head of strategy and planning in Baghdad's provincial council in charge of the project.

“For the past 20 years, not a single project has been executed in the transport sector. In the meantime, many roads and bridges have been damaged. The population is growing fast and the number of private cars increased tremendously causing chronic traffic jams.”

Residents of Baghdad, a city of more than 7 million people, rely on cars, taxis or privately owned minibuses to get around. Congestion is particularly heavy on the city's 13 bridges across the Tigris. Many fishermen on the Tigris use their boats to transport people between the river's banks for extra money.

During a trial period this year, river taxis operated between five stations mostly benefiting students of Baghdad University and Nahrawan University, both on the banks of the Tigris.

The project previewed the construction of 13 stations to connect the city's northern suburb of Tha' alia to al-Mada’in in the south by next February. Rubaie said 40% of the project has been completed.

“The service will be operating partially until it is hopefully completed by next year. Unfortunately, bureaucratic procedures and the lack of coordination between concerned ministries are slowing down the project. The easy and inexpensive part was purchasing the boats. The hard part is establishing the infrastructure for them to work properly that requires government approvals,” he said.

With efforts among the country’s political leaders to form a new government in Iraq stalling, decisions on budgets for projects such as the river taxi must wait.

When complete, 22 boats of various sizes — taking between six to 44 customers at a time — will transport people between the banks of the Tigris, as well as up and down the river.

River boat captain Kassem Nasri said the service was being used by thousands of students at the cost of 500 dinars ($0.42) for a single journey.

“It is cheap and practical,” Nasri said. “It takes half an hour to cross from one station to another, while the same ride by car from al-Azamiya to al-Kadhimiya, for instance, would take no less than one and a half hour and would cost up to 17,000 dinars ($13) for a round trip.”

During a trial period this year, river taxis operated between five stations mostly benefiting students of Baghdad University and Nahrawan University.

Nasri said he cannot wait for the project to be fully operational but he fears declining water levels of the Tigris might cause further delay.

“I am now serving five stops but I hope to cover all the remaining stations that are awaiting construction soon. There are still a few obstacles in the way, particularly from the security authorities who opposed the project in the beginning, fearing that the boats could be exploited by ‘muddled spirits’ (terrorists),” Nasri said.

Hajj Othman Ghanem, a 70-year-old Baghdad, strolls regularly along the Tigris promenade in Azamiyya, a habit, he said, he has maintained since moving to Baghdad from Mosul when he was a child.

“In the past, the balm (wooden rowing boat) was the only available means to cross the river. It was such a great trip by boat with seagulls flying over. The river was larger, clean and full of life back then,” Ghanem said with nostalgic eyes.

He says he welcomes the idea of the river taxi, which he hopes will alleviate road congestion and “maintain the interaction between the people and the river, which has been neglected and misused.”

Ghanem said he hopes the river taxi project will soon bring life back to the Tigris.

“The Tigris was the throbbing heart of Baghdad. We want this heart to beat again,” he said.

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

Egypt considering community service instead of jail terms

Amr Emam

Cairo

The Egyptian parliament is considering replacing jail sentences for some minor offenses with community service orders to help deal with prison overcrowding.

“This will revolutionise the justice system as a whole and prevent incarceration for minor offenses, which will benefit both society and the offenders,” said MP Elizabeth Shaker. “There is strong support for the bill inside parliament.”

Egypt has enjoyed lower prison complexes in the last four years, giving the country’s 54 facilities the ability to accommodate the country’s prison population totals 50,000 people, the Interior Ministry’s committee in parliament said but non-governmental groups estimate the number of prisoners in Egypt to be much higher.

Shaker warned that Egypt’s jails are “bursting at the seams.” “The number of prisoners is also very costly for the state budget,” she said.

The construction of new prisons coincided with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sissi seeking to restore security to Egypt following unrest set off by the 2011 revolution. One of the consequences of the anti-Mubarak uprising was the collapse of Egypt’s security system.

Thousands of inmates broke out of jails, including Mohamed Morsi, the Muslim Brotherhood leader who became Egypt’s president after elections in mid-2012.

The bill proposes to have judges direct small defaulters work in factories and production facilities to repay their debts and possibly earn a living.

Additional prisons were needed after Egypt began a crackdown on Islamist terrorists and following the designation of the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization in December 2013.

Last year, the budget of the Prisons Authority, the Interior Ministry's authority responsible for Egypt's prisons, stood at $77 million, a fraction of what administrators said they need to adequately oversee the system.

The crime legislation bill is backed by Sameh Abdel Hakam, the head of the Appeals Court, who has warned about the state of Egypt’s prisons. He said the cost of maintaining Egypt’s jails had risen approximately 75% since 2015 with the Prisons Authority needing $200 for each inmate every month, up from $151 in 2015.

The idea of lesser penalties for minor crimes, particularly first-time offenders, has been a major demand of civil society groups. They noted that tens of thousands of poor Egyptians are sentenced to prison because they failed to repay loans, many of which were to finance dowries. Local authorities raise funds to pay the debts of small defaulters to free them from jail sentences. Last year, a group of policemen donated part of their salaries to pay the debts of some defaulters.

Gamal Eid, the head of NGO Arabic Network for Human Rights Information, estimated the number of small defaulters in Egypt’s jails at 20,000, most of them women.

Shaker said she expected the bill to soon be voted on in parliament and then quickly enacted. The measure, she said, would help people in prison for committing minor crimes that, she said, should not be punished with jail sentences.

The bill proposes to have judges direct small defaulters work in factories and production facilities to repay their debts and possibly earn a living.

Opponents of the measure say, apart from violating equality as a constitutional principle, the proposed bill could encourage people to break certain laws without fear of punishment.

“The Penal Code addresses all offences, regardless of their intensity,” said Salah Fawzi, a law professor at Mansoura University. “By absolving offenders in minor crimes from punishment, the courts will encourage law-breaking.”

Numbers up, costs up. Egyptian security stand guard outside one of the entrances of Tora prison in Cairo. (AP)
Iraqi Christians and families not returning to Nineveh, more interested in migration

Oumayma Omar

Baghdad

Under the cover of darkness three years ago, Tobia and his family left their town of Hamdaniya in the Nineveh Plain near Mosul as Islamic State militants were advancing, spreading death and destruction as they passed. Today, a year after the extremist group was defeated, Eishou and many other Christian families refuse to return to their homes.

“It was a terrifying journey of survival,” Eishou said. “We moved from one camp to another in Libya, then lived for a while in a church and finally ended up in Baghdad where we stayed in a Christian school first and then here in the Virgin Mary camp. Although it is no easy life, it is better than returning to the village.”

Few residents have returned to Hamdaniya, one of many Christian towns in Nineveh. Eishou said the Islamic State (ISIS) systematically destroyed the towns, going from home to home, dousing them with chemicals and setting them on fire.

“The place looks like ghost towns. People feel insecure and unstable there even after ISIS exit. That is why the majority prefer to stay in the camp until they get the opportunity to leave Iraq,” he said.

“We have deprived Christians of their equal rights like other communities. It is a situation that many cannot cope with any longer,” Eishou added.

Nabla Khodr, also a refugee at the Virgin Mary camp, which is run by the Assyrian Democratic Movement party, visited her hometown of Gutana, 30 minutes away, and discovered that her house has been razed.

“It is all from the Christ who knew and also I will live and die in Iraq even if my whole family wants to leave and I am alone,” Tobia said.

A recent report by the Iraq Human Rights Society said Iraqi minorities were among the 8% of Yazidis and Shabaks, are victims of a “slow genocide,” which is shaping those ancient communities to the point of their disappearance.

The report said that 83% of Iraq’s Christians have disappeared from Iraq and 48% of Yazidis have left the country or been killed. Another human rights organization, Human Rights Watch, said Baghdad had 600,000 Christians in the recent past; today there are 150,000.

What is the future of Syria’s Christians after the war?

Hozan Khaddaj is a Syrian writer.

Society

Iraqi Christian families not returning to Nineveh, more interested in migration

Oumayma Omar

Baghdad

What is the future of Syria’s Christians after the war?

Hozan Khaddaj

One cannot really end the migration of Syrian Christians just by calling to come to their aid and encouraging them to return to their homes.

In addition to their political intractability, the brutality of the Syrian war has taken a toll on religious and sectarian dimensions that exposed structural imbalances in Syrian society and taxed ethnic, religious and sectarian segments and poisoned their lives with a climate of anxiety and mistrust.

Syrian Christians have had their fair share of the war’s toll, which must have reckoned memories of the humanitarian disasters and massacres suffered by Oriental Christians. Such memories perhaps made them feel they were targets for annihilation and that migration was their only chance to survive.

The size of the Christian community in Syria has fluctuated with the political conditions in the country since independence. Until 1963, Christians constituted 7% of the population in Syria, a country considered by Christians as the cradle of Christianity and the site of many sacred spaces, from churches and monasteries to shrines. Damascus hosts both the Syrian Catholic Patriarchate and Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Antioch and the Orient, as well as the Melkite Greek Catholic Patriarchate of Antioch, Alexandria and Jerusalem.

After independence, however, the Christian population of Syria started shrinking. In 2005, a census estimated that Christians made up 10% of the population. As the Syrian civil war raged, the trickle of individual Christian migrants changed into mass exodus. Christians in Syria are now estimated at 8% of the population. UN data from 2016 stated that of the 5.5 million Syrian refugees, 825,000 were Christians. That represents a more than 40% of the 2 million Syrian Christians listed by the 2005 census.

Although the migration of Syrian Christians occurred under pressure of political, economic, social and religious circumstances – namely the rise of extremism and fundamentalism – as well as in response to all oriental churches, the plight of the Syrian Christians was the focus of the meeting in July convened by Roman Catholic Pope Francis. The meeting was the first ecumenical event since the Council of Ephesus of 431 in which Roman Catholic bishops called for prayer with all the patriarchs and leaders of Catholic and Orthodox eastern churches.

The catastrophic decline in the presence of Christians in Syria troubled the shepherd of the church, who said the expected end of military operations in most of Syria and the victory of the Assad regime is an opportunity for the return of Christian refugees. Syrian and Lebanese patriarchs asked Pope Francis for help by urging European countries to repatriate the 150,000 Syrian Christian refugees to Syria irked many Christian refugees.

The group said the patriarchs, under the pretext of being concerned by further flight of Christian migrants, “do not realise the dangers and disadvantages entailed by their positions and pit Syrian Christians against all their fellow compatriots from other backgrounds.”

The reasons behind the flight of Christians from Syria were reduced to the issues of insecurity and persecution by armed groups in some areas. The church leaders did not mention the more pertinent root causes – poor economic conditions, corruption, the marginalisation of Christians and other groups in political and economic decision-making and the absence of civil rights and the rule of law, conditions that affect everybody in Syria.

To the long list of Syrian Christian grievances, we can add recent fears that their sons would be subject to forced conscription, as well as the dissolution of communal modes of living brought about by societal transformations. There is a lack of initiatives that would restore trust between communities. It is not enough that government officials participate in the social and religious events of Christians and reiterate the catchphrases of ecumenicalism, while the patriarchs always insist on reassure Christians.

Secularism is disregarded in the constitution, which mandates that the president of the republic is Muslim and considers Islamic law as the main source of legislation. Secularism is routed when authorities promote religious movements, such as the all-female Qahyayat al-Abd al-Shabab al-Dini or support religious institutions and converted historic and religious mosques, which do not encourage peaceable coexistence, as is well-known. Such actions do not reassure Syrian Christians or other religious minorities who live in place in Syria are safe.

Pope Francis’s legitimate concerns about the future of Christian minorities in the Middle East are real because the issue is one of the greatest threats to the region. Middle Eastern Christians have an important cultural role in that they have acted as a bridge between Arab civilisation and Western civilisation. Their presence served to temper negative Western views of the Orient, which are seen as a source of terrorism, and they have played a role in tempering extremist ideologies in both camps. Many Islamist ideologies have been oblivious to this role.

One cannot really end the migration of Syrian Christians just by calling to come to their aid and encouraging them to return to their homes in Syria. Their return must be prepared on the basis that returning to one’s homeland and one’s home is a basic human right and must have equal rights to do so with other political considerations. Similarily, it is important that the current refugee process should not be contingent on any alliance or scheme for balancing the proportions of various religious communities in the society.

Hozan Khaddaj is a Syrian writer.
Ahmed Saadawi on being an artist in today’s chaotic boiler room

Sharmila Devi

London

Ahmed Saadawi is an Iraqi novelist, poet, screenwriter and documentary film-maker. In 2010, he was selected for the 37th annual of the 37 best Arab authors aged under 40. In 2011, he was the first Iraqi to win the International Prize for Arabic Fiction for his novel “Frankenstein in Baghdad,” which was shortlisted for the Femina Exandrina in Egypt, expressed a high degree of literary culture in the region.

The uphill battle of reopening the Ashurbanipal Library in Mosul

Salaam al-Shamaa

Baghdad

I t does not seem that the 3,000-year-old Royal Library of Ashurbanipal in Mosul will re-open any time soon, even though international organisations and universities pledge to donate hundreds of titles to the project. This library was one of the victims of the war and the fighting between the Islamic State and the Iraqi forces and Popular Mobilisation Forces. The library stopped operating in 2014. When the library began in 2001, two years before the US-led coalition started its reconstruction project, the library was hit by the invasion. It resumed in 2004 thanks to a initiative by the State University of New York at Stony Brook, which donated more than 3,000 books and periodicals.

The library was one of the victims of the war and the fighting between the Islamic State and the Iraqi forces and Popular Mobilisation Forces. The library also received books from the British Institute for the Study of Iraq and other archeological institutes but was generally neglected and probably remained closed until 2006. The library building in the central governorate. In 2010, he was selected for the 37th annual of the 37 best Arab authors aged under 40. In 2011, he was the first Iraqi to win the International Prize for Arabic Fiction for his novel “Frankenstein in Baghdad,” which was shortlisted for the Femina Exandrina in Egypt, expressed a high degree of literary culture in the region.

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Rap music rebels against Egyptian society

Angie Samir
Cairo

A

mmed Mekky’s song “Akher Cha’awa” has been a big hit, racking up more than 10 mil

lion views on YouTube and high praise from critics for being a unique musical phenom-

enon that is rap and its ability to stir up social issues.

Rap music is a full-fledged art-

form that has appeared in many deca-

ades in imposing itself globally and in gaining widespread popularity. Its strength lies in the subversive re-

bellious elements, which do not re-

quire great skills but can express hu-

man or political conditions in a way

other musical genres cannot.

Mekky said rap was an expres-

sion of the street of the and social life. This musical genre is extremely

popular in the Arab world, not just

because it was a novelty but, Mekky

said, because it has a unique style

ductive to fostering dissident ide-

as and vocabulary in reaction to pre-

vailing socio-economic conditions.

The success of Mekky’s “Akher Cha’awa” demonstrates that rap songs can express the reality of youth more so than other musical styles.

A rap singer does not need any particular vocal talent. Rap songs rely essentially on strong words and clever rhymes, which enable many entertainers to dabble in the genre. In Egypt, rap gained popularity when artist Ahmad el-Fутاши tried his hand at it. Soon, many other young people got into it.

Some of the most prominent rap artists are Essam Karika, Zap Tharat and MTM. Tharat specializes in socially oriented songs, dealing with issues such as sexual harassment. His song “Nour” features Amina Khalil. MTM’s hit “Omni Meofra” represented a turning point in the genre in Egypt.

Some may say the irrelevance of vocal abilities in rap renders the genre easy to perform. This can’t be further from the truth. All art forms, unlike songs that highlight romance and drama. This is what brings audi-

ences to rap music.

Taki, a member of MRT rap crew, agreed. He said the power of rap lies in its words and its ability to educate listeners in an entertaining and po-

litically interesting way. He pointed out that “what appeals the most to youth in rap are the lyrics because they address real life and events, unlike songs that highlight romance and drama. What is this brings audi-

ences to rap music.”

Taki said rap can focus on one specific issue or deliver a specific message. He composed it to “paint-

ing with a message.” Each singer can convey a personal, social or political message.

The lingering problem that rap-

pers face is that most lack a beau-

tiful singing voice that would give

them a chance to perform in con-

certs and directly interact with fans.

Rap music continues to be contro-

versial among music critics in Egypt. Some of them consider it a “non-
genuine” art form, “an American im-
p" that just imitates a foreign cul-
ture. These critics have overlooked

the depth of changes in societies and the ability of young people to appreciate and keep up with global musical trends.

Yasmine Farraj, a teacher at the Academy of Arts, said rap was a kind of art that carried political purposes. “It started in the United States and spread among black people as a mode of protest against discrimina-
tion and racism,” she said.

Farraj pointed out that political censorship is heavy in Egypt. When rap songs criticise social practices, they “indirectly criticise the politi-
cal order” because the ruling regime represents the society’s “sad” and shapes it through education, media, culture and art.

She gave the example of Mekky’s “Wakaf Nasiyat Zaman,” which fo-
cused on the death of morality and gallantry in society due to the dis-
integration of the family and harsh economic conditions. Such issues can very easily be tied to govern-
mental policies and connotes politi-
cal messages.

Angie Samir is an Egyptian writer.
Al Bait Sharjah: Combining authentic Emirati heritage with modernity

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Sharjah

Situated in the heart of the country’s bustling commerce, the five-star Al Bait Sharjah hotel offers guests a taste of Emirati heritage.

Developed by General Hotel Management (GHM) in partnership with the Sharjah Investment and Development Authority (Shurooq), the $27 million Al Bait Sharjah is part of the region’s biggest restoration project, known as Heart of Sharjah, scheduled for completion in 2025. It aims to restore the central neighbourhood to resemble its 1950s appearance.

The Heart of Sharjah will feature commercial, cultural and residential facilities. Construction includes new and reconstructed buildings and renovated historical ones.

Al Bait is adjacent to Corniche Road running along Sharjah Creek and Al Hais Street. Guests can imbibe in an authentic part of Sharjah’s history as well as experience the very best of the United Arab Emirates’ commercial and cultural hub infused with the spirit of cosmopolitanism.

Much of the emirate’s mercantile history, as well as its modern commerce, were born in and around the area. Guests at Al Bait Sharjah can experience the traditional souks, including Souk Al Shanasiyah, one of the most ancient markets in the Gulf region.

The thriving modern art scene is centered on the nearby Sharjah Art Museum and the many galleries of the Sharjah Art Foundation, home of the renowned Sharjah Biennial.

Al Bait, meaning “home” in Arabic, was carefully remodelled and constructed from the restored foundations of four vintage homes that once belonged to noted Emirati families. The names of its original owners are posted and rooms have been retained to highlight the environment and lifestyle of locals who originally resided in the houses.

The four houses are part of the development with 53 luxury suites spread across six buildings.

One of the houses, which belonged to Ibrahim Mohamed Al Midfa, who was influential in what is now the UAE’s cultural life and issued its first newspaper, has the only round barjeel (wind tower) in the UAE. It is where the coffee shop will be.

“The opening of Al Bait will be another major achievement in our scheduled development phases of the Heart of Sharjah project,” Heart of Sharjah Manager Khaled Dowsa said in a release. “Our partnership with GHM reflects on our mission and vision to strengthen Sharjah’s position as a leading cultural tourism destination, delivering a rich mix of traditional and modern luxury Emirati experiences to visitors and tourists.”

“GHM, with their bespoke hotel management portfolio of the best-known hospitality project names from around the world, will play a key role in supporting our overall objectives in developing Heart of Sharjah into a high-level landscape project catering to a significant number of tourists in the UAE and the Gulf region,” Dowsa added.

Patrick Moukarzel, the resort’s general manager, said: “GHM has taken the lead in pioneering luxury hospitality in the Emirate, while connecting the modern traveller to Sharjah’s rich storied past. We eagerly look forward to welcoming guests to Al Bait for an experience comparable to no other.”

Agnieszka Kurzawa, marketing and communications manager of Al Bait Sharjah, said: “Our resort brings the look and feel of a real Emirati home to life. From the set up on the resort to the maidis to the room decor, cuisine and service, Al Bait focuses on the authenticity and unforgettable experience of its guests.”

A view of the guestroom at Al Bait Sharjah.

The Heart of Sharjah will feature international and local jazz artists. Over four days, visitors can enjoy free street performances, free dance courses and jazz concerts. This year’s festival will host performers Flo Bauer, Michael Lauren, Matthieu Bore and United Colors of Mediterranean.

El Gouna: September 20-28

El Gouna, on the Egyptian Red Sea coast, will host the second El Gouna Film Festival. A diverse selection of films is scheduled. The programme includes documentary, narrative and short film competitions in addition to the Audience Award.

Amman: September 26-October 6

The 18th Amman International Book Fair welcomes 900 printing houses from various countries. Egypt will be the guest of honour for this year’s fair.

Cairo: September 27-29

CairoComix Festival, produced at the American University in Cairo’s Tahrir Square Campus, brings together artists, publishers, speakers and fans of comics from around the world for an extensive programme of exhibitions, talks and workshops about the comics industry.

Dubai: October 1-2

Dubai Opera will host Latin singer Julio Iglesias for two concerts as part of his 50th anniversary world tour.

Alu Dhabi: October 5

Caribbean Beach Festival is the premium music, food and dance festival celebrating Caribbean, African, American and Latino cultures through music, food and dances. The event at Yas Beach features an array of food trucks, stilt walkers and games.

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