New Zealand bloody mosque attacks translate far-right’s anti-migration, anti-Muslim rhetoric

Mahmud el-Shafey

London

I

n what New Zealand Prime Min-
ister Jacinda Ardern called an “unprec-
dented shooting in the Pacific nation that targeted two mosques in Christchurch,” the March 15 attack on the Al-Noor and Linwood mosques in New Zea-
land’s third most populous city was broadcast live on Facebook.

Brenton Tarrant, a 28-year-old Aus-
trian national, has been charged with murder in the shootings. Tar-
rant described himself as an “ethno-
nationalist” in a "manifesto.”

The lengthy document, posted online before the attack and titled “The Great Replacement,” consisted of anti-immigration and anti-Muslim far-right rhetoric.

“Mass immigration will disenfran-
chise us, obliterate our nations, destroy our communities, destroy our ethnic-
ities, destroy our cultures, destroy our people,” Tarrant wrote. “We must crush immigration and deport those invaders living on our soil. It’s not just about prosperity but the very survival of our people.”

Despite being born in Australia, which has had its own migrant crisis, in recent years, Tarrant appears to have taken inspiration from Europe where far-right anti-immigration stances are on the rise and where he is reported to have travelled widely.

“The origins of my language is Eu-
ropean, my culture is European, my political beliefs are European, my philosophical beliefs are European, my identity is European and, most importantly, my blood is European," Tarrant wrote.

Throughout the manifesto, it is clear that Tarrant’s grievances were global, not local. His objectives were also international, demonstrating the rising global influence of far-right anti-immigration views.

After the attack, several countries, including the United States, the Unit-
ed Kingdom and France, announced increased security measures for mosques in their country, apparently feariggovernment attacks.

World leaders rushed to condemn the Christchurch mosque attacks, with many viewing it in light of rising anti-immigration and anti-Muslim sentiment.

“The brutal crime has shocked and hurt the feelings of all Muslims around the world and served as a further warning on the obvious dan-
gers of hate, intolerance and Islamo-
phobia,” Organisation of Islamic Co-
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The perpetrator made use of technology during the attack it-
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In his manifesto, Tarrant claims to have had “broad contact” with Brei-
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After the New Zealand attack, Australian Prime Minister Scott Mor-
rison, an Evangelical Christian and leader of the country’s centre-right Liberal Party who has been outspoken about immigration, confirmed he had been briefed on Tarrant’s dossier.

“It is the work of hate, I’ve got no other way to describe it,” Morrison said. “What’s born of hate is never good.”

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

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Rohani seeks ‘channel’ in Iran to bypass US sanctions

Rohani’s meeting with Iraq’s most senior Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, was likely an attempt to mend fences with Iraqi Shias critical of Tehran’s influence in Iraq. In the past few years, there has been a rising sentiment against Iran – even among Iraq’s Shias dominated south – for its support to allegedly corrupt politicians and militias, which protesters say are responsible for the country’s woes. Experts said even a willing Iran is unable to save Iraq from its eco-

Mamoun Albashabi

London

A

s Iran begins to feel the pinch of sanctions im-
p osed by the United States, Iranian leaders are working to secure stronger com-
t mercial ties with Iraq and dissolve Baghdad’s “at least 90% punitive measures against Tehran.”

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani visited Iraq March 11-13 with a large delegation of businessmen and polit-
icians.

Rohani and Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi signed several memorandums of understanding on trade, including a railway linking Iraq’s southern oil city of Basra to Iran’s bor-
town of Shalamcheh. The two leaders also agreed to make visas for businessmen and investors free of charge.

Iraq was “another channel for Iran to bypass America’s unjust sanctions... this trip will provide Iran to Baghdad from abiding by punitive measures against Tehran,” Rohani told the Financial Times that “Iran wants to pressure Baghdad not to adhere to the [US] sanctions...” Hook told Al-
hura TV.

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The Arab Weekly
Iranian President Hassan Rouhani's visit to Iraq concluded with the two countries from April is intended to benefit Iranians more.

“I welcome Rouhani's visit as the Iraq government had welcomed him, too. It is no more than welcoming any president of a neighbouring country visiting Iraq. But I never agree with establishing a commercial railway (between the two countries) because it will weaken the Iraqi economy and attract more Iraqis and lure them to spend their money in Iran's market,” Ghanim said.

Many Iraqis are unhappy with Iran's cutting water supplies, which has especially affected Basra.

Ala Ewy, a 65-year-old Basran, compared the pollution of Basra's waters to the threat of the Islamic State (ISIS). “That is why the visit has come at such a high level like the president of Iran.”

Azhar Al-Rubaie is a freelance journalist in Iraq.

Iraq needs to reclaim its country, push Iran out

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani made his first official visit to Iraq this week, to seek deeper bilateral ties and economic partnership in the face of sanctions imposed by the United States that have begun to bite into the Iraqi economy.

Before departing Baghdad, Rouhani said modern-Iranian-Iraqi relations were built on how Tehran “rushed to help” any country in the region seeking its aid, including Iraq.

This was, of course, in reference to the immense Iranian military, economic and political support to the Iraqi government during the crisis caused by the Islamic State (ISIS).

What Rouhani failed to mention, however, is that Iran’s theocratic regime has been the primary instigator behind ISIS in the first place.

Speaking of helping one’s neighbours, which would ordi-

narily be admirable, I wonder why Rouhani and the Iranian regime failed to help prevent the US-led invasion of Iraq in 2003. Not only did they do nothing to halt the Saddam Hussein state, the destruction of the national infrastructure and the illegal occupation of a neighbour they profess to care about, the Iraqis actively offered assistance to the then-George W. Bush administration in its plans to invade a sovereign country.

In his book about this time as a senior Bush administration diplo-

mat, Zalmay Khalidzad confirmed that he met with future Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and the Iranian diplomat agreed US warplanes bombing Iraq back to the Stone Age couldSAFETY 

It is up to Iraq’s Arab neighbours to help Iraqis reclaim their country and push Iran’s dangerous influence out once and for all.

Ahmad Al-Musawi

Official welcome cannot hide Iraq’s misgivings about visit

Cover Story

Iraqi critics have denounced the move as an attempt by Iran to use Iraq to bypass US sanctions. The visit reflects concern by Iranian officials over Iraqi trade deals with other neighbouring countries.

“Recent, Iraq has welcomed many Arab and foreign officials in a bid to resume trade ties with other countries,” said Nagham Ta-

jal, an activist from Mosul. “This led Iran to worry as it fears that these visits will affect Iraq-Iran trade relations.

“Iraq has been under Iran’s influence since 2003 and they (Iranian officials) want to keep ruling Iraq. That is why the visit has con-

came at such a high level like the president of Iran.”

Azhar Al-Rubaie is a freelance journalist in Iraq.
The splintering of Iran-backed Badr is no game changer

Naziil Tarzi

seeping in trend with Iraqi political parties, the Badr organisation, headed by Hadi al-Amiri and supported by Iran, has splintered, with its defecting branch calling itself the Patriotic Badr Movement — an attempt to create new political outfits — and the rest of the movement and those remaining branding them “dissidents.”

Amiri’s dismissal as party leader toppled the list of the break-away group’s demands. They accuse Amiri of deviating from party principles and failing to honour the legacy of martyrs and the sacrifices they endured to defeat the Islamic State (ISIS).

Internal divisions in Iraq’s Shia Islamist community are hardened to the latest spat. Before Badr, larger political organisations and parties have been ravaged by similar splits.

Qais al-Khazali, splintered from the Mahdi army to establish Ammar al-Hakim’s Asa’ib Ahl Al Haq, the largest political bloc in parliament. These moves ranged from seeking electoral advantages to institutionalising new political structures. The defections, by and large, have done little to reverse the spoils of patronage. The defecting groups have not displayed a willingness to abandon established party lines and devise their own. Although not entirely meaningless, splits like Badr’s are not earth-shattering.

“This trick is always being played but when it comes to elections, members are as-one party and under one list,” a Baghdad lawmaker said. Some exceptions apply but this is the common trajectory. Sparring has previously been viewed as evidence of a party in decay but, if anything, the establishment of new outfits opens more political doors through which foreign powers, via proxy forces, could sway the legislature.

Following gains that Badr’s paramilitary arm scored on the battlefront against ISIS, Amiri established a coalition that defied the constitution by allowing military men to participate in national elections. Iraq’s Independent High Electoral Commission granted the organisation permission to participate.

A recent attempt to pass legislation that would draw a new timetable for the departure of US troops from Iraq failed to secure the consensus needed. Fatah’s inability to sway legislation reveals an important motivation behind the defection – an attempt to create new channels to lobby parliament for policies that steer Iraq’s foreign policy in a pro-Iran direction.

The other lost battle was Fatah’s failure to apply enough pressure to convince Iraqi Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi to award the Defence Ministry leadership – a vital security position – to a Shia politician against the rules of the post-2003 political order in which the Defence Ministry was traditionally awarded to a Sunni and the Interior Ministry to a Shia.

Close ties to Iran, to which Iraq owes its very existence, are unlikely to change as a result of the newest split. Amiri is likely to strike up new alliances of convenience but will sway policies and moves that unsettle Iran’s interests. The popularity of the new Badr affiliate group – the Patriotic Badr Movement – is in doubt regardless of its narrative rhetoric and promises of “freedom, justice and prosperity.”

The rebranding exercise will struggle to convince large sections of the population that Badr places Iraq’s interest before its patron’s.

Iran’s politicians may be happy with Iran but its people are not

Hamid al-Kaylani

Iranian President Hassan Rohani’s visit to Iraq continues to stir heated debate. People are wondering if the trip’s outcome is going to be all in Iran’s favour at the expense of Iraq, despite the signing of bilateral agreements in agriculture, industry, energy, health and transportation and facilitating the entry of millions of visitors.

The agreements with Iran are open-ended and far-reaching. Their expected effect will be profound because they go beyond US sanctions against Iran and bind Iraq economically, legally and socially.

The trip’s timing indicates Rohani’s visit comes as more than an opportunity to discuss issues of mutual concern, such as the water crisis created by Iran’s damming of rivers flowing into Iraq and the demarcation of the border. In this respect, the Iranian side is more realistic than Iraqi politicians and their media. The Iranians clearly stated that they view Iraq as just another way to avoid sanctions and sanctions are going to be all in Iran’s favor.

To escape US sanctions – and the crisis and internal conflicts – the Iranian regime is rushing to Iraq to find quick fixes for all the items on its agenda. This includes creating a joint bank and a common free zone, as well as having Iran pay Iraq’s external debts in exchange for clearing its debts to Iraq. The Iranian government has tried to import electricity and gas and various goods from Iran. So under the cover of paying its debt to Iran, Iraq will be financing Iranian agencies and media platforms and ensuring the compensa- tion of Iran’s loss of resources. This plan became clear after dozens of satellite channel employees were dismissed and there were long delays in paying arms-bearing personnel. Many of the latter will be integrated into government militias while some will be dismissed under various hollow pretexts.

In Iraq, there is more than one state, so any strategic negotiations automatically mean delivering Iraq’s resources to Iran and its sectarian project in Iraq. This was obvious and confirmed by Rohani’s visit.

From the airport, Rohani and his official delegation headed straight to the Kadhimiya District in Baghdad to perform religious rites, revealing Iran’s strategy to enforce the sectarian dimension in exercising power in Iraq and of the nature of bilateral relations between Iran and Iraq.

Those relations are detrimental to Iraq’s territorial integrity, its independence and whatever is left of its sovereignty. In the meantime, the Iraqi government and media remained silent on Iran’s behaviour, further exploiting the idea of Iraq’s political system and its subservience to the mullahs’ regime. There is no need for additional interpretations based on theories on historical relations and their significance. All one needs to do is look at the welcome given to Rohani to realise how low Iraq has bowed to invaders and colonisers and thus wasted the blood of its martyrs and its dignity.

Iraqi Prime Barham Saleh used the phrase “We are lucky to have Iran as a neighbour” and repeated it with other demeaning statements. He couldn’t have given a better sign of Iraqi politicians’ persistence in defying the people’s will and the history of their suffering under the mullahs’ regime before and after the American occupation.

Tell any fair-minded person about the advantages of having the mullahs’ regime as a friend or neighbour in the service of Iraq and they will likely point to the bloodshed by demonstrators in Baghuz. Not one of Iran’s sons can see any honour in receiving an Iranian official. It must have to do with the collective memory that rejects the results of the US occupation, of the quota system and of involv-
The key lessons of Algeria’s protests

Most Algerians say a very sick man is being cynically manipulated from the confrontation with protesters and their political leaders, entering its fourth week, is not clear. Demonstrations continued in the streets of Algiers and in towns and villages across the vast country and, as has become the custom, were peaceful. Women can be demonstrated together. All generations were present. Some women were veiled, most were not. Ordinary people mingled with artists, societal civil servants with heroines of the revolution like Djamila Bouhired. A cross-section of Algerian society expressed its contempt to the third-term veteran, his family, his cronies and his cronies. 

The lesson is clear, though not always obvious. A former Prime Minister with a distinguished record in foreign affairs and career diplomats saw off what had been a public protest. 

The lesson is clear, though not always obvious. A former Prime Minister with a distinguished record in foreign affairs and career diplomats saw off what had been a public protest. 

A feature that has not gone unnoticed is that the Berber flag is paraded side by side with the Algerian national flag in every demonstration. 

To compare the peaceful demonstrations in Algeria to the bloody mayhem in Syria is to insult the country’s 42 million men and women. Thousands of officers, who are both professional and untainted by corruption, watched some of their comrades fall in battle but respected their commitment to “the unity of victory and destiny between the army and the people.”

The army, which has traditionally played a behind-the-scenes role in breaking up protests, has gradually distanced itself from Bouteflika and stayed in its barracks throughout the crisis. Whatever happens, it is expected to retain significant political influence. 

There were also indications that police forces would be unwilling to use force against demonstrators. In an unprecedented move, one policeman joined protesters in Bejaia, holding a sign saying “I am with the protesters. No to the extension of Bouteflika’s stay in power, no postponement of the elections. We want the regime to go away.” 

Protesters directed some of their ire at French President Emmanuel Macron, who seemed to back Bouteflika’s recent moves. On March 12, Macron welcomed Bouteflika’s promises of reform even if he urged Algerian authorities to organise a “reasonable” transition in ushering in a new leader. 

Demonstrators accused Paris of backing Bouteflika in furthering its own interests in the former colony. “We see to France, 132 years is enough, stop the interference,” read one banner, referring to the era of French rule before independence. “Macron, you are too small for to be President of our country.”

North African experts in Paris said the French government, which was caught off guard by the protests, is trying to keep an increasingly untenable middle ground position regarding Algeria.

Lamine Ghanmi is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis. 
Questions over Russian, US roles in Libyan resurfacce

Michel Cousins

Tunis

British media are reporting that Russia is making a major comeback in Libya by sending special forces to support Libyan eastern-based military commander Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar.

The claim about the Russians first surfaced in the United Kingdom's Sun newspaper in October and reappeared recently in the Daily Telegraph.

The Sun reported that there were Russian military bases in Benghazi and Tobruk, plus Spetsnaz special forces, Russian GRU military intelligence, and Tobruk, plus Spetsnaz special forces, Russian GRU military intelligence, and Russian GRU military intelligence services in Tripoli, on the basis that it had not been approved by the Libyan House of Representatives, if it recognises the Presidential Council, talks to it and has welcomed its head Fayez al-Sarraj and other members to Moscow.

Additionally, unlike the US African Command, which actively supported the Muslim Brotherhood to organises so-called justice camps, the US supported the Muslim Brotherhood in the 2016 battle to regain control of Tripoli and the north. The US has not been completely wiped out in Libya, despite the fact that the Tripoli militias on whom they can get. All the more so, now that the LNA and Saif al-Islam Qaddafi for security services in dealing with terrorist leaders and虛拟 agreement to be exploited by terrorist groups or enemies of Moscow.

Michel Cousins is a contributor to The Arab Weekly on Libyan issues.
Women resisting Tehran’s vigilantes

The Iranian government is intensifying its crackdown on women at home under the pretext of enforcing “public decency” laws. Videos surfaced documenting the peaceful resistance of Iranian women who are rejecting the hijab, the headscarf, as simple as that. Women are protesting the crackdown by posting videos of the assaults on social media and by wearing the hijab in public every Wednesday. Amnesty International said Iranian authorities not only impose the official headscarf on women but also on girls as young as 7 years. The goal is clearly to send a chill through the ranks of women who challenge the despicable rule of the mullahs.

The most outrageous case involves human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh, who was sentenced to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes for wearing a hijab and “disrupting public order.” Iran’s Islamic courts have tried women prosecuted for removing the headscarf, detained and harassed after representing political prisoners, including women prosecuted for the so-called Smith’s interests were above any others. In other words, Abadi placed Iraq’s interests above Iran’s interests so Iran punished him and prevented him from winning another term as prime minister. Then Iran replaced Abadi with Adel Abdul-Mahdi through tremendous pressure exerted on various Iraqi parties by Major-General Qassem Soleimani, leader of Iran’s al-Quds Force. This is how Abadi, a Dawra Party member who never forgot that he is a son of Baghdad, became the symbol of the Iranian Shi’a resistance to Iran. He therefore had to be dismissed.

On this front, Iran formally succeeded but failed in substance. It wants to convince itself that Iraq is a key card in its battle against US sanctions, whose effects are beginning to bite. This is reflected in the words of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who thanked Iraq in Baghdad for its rejection of US assignments on Iran, saying that “no force in the world can drive a wedge between the Iranian and Iraqi peoples.”

Zarif’s words, spoken on the eve of Rohani’s arrival in Baghdad, are nothing but an attempt to peddle more illusions. Zarif was really addressing Iranians, exactly as Rohani had done because they both know what an Iranian failure in Iraq could mean and the effect it could have on the Iranian regime. There is a new reality in Iraq that Iran refuses to recognise. It is true that it has proxy militias there, the so-called Mobilisation Forces that continue to do the job that should have been assigned to official Iraqi forces. However, it is also true that there are real forces in Iraq that stand against Iran’s direct and indirect presence. You have Ammar al-Hakim, Muqtada al-Sadr, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, who are firmly in a different trench than the Iranian trench in Iraq.

The murderous attacks on Muslim worshippers in Christchurch, New Zealand, reverberate in Iran as a cruel violation of human rights. Advocates of hate should be made to understand that their activities are beyond the scope of decency laws. Violations of the law are weapons that support extremism and related forms of terrorism. It wants to convince itself that Iraq is a key card in its battle against US sanctions, whose effects are beginning to bite. This is reflected in the words of Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, who thanked Iraq in Baghdad for its rejection of US assignments on Iran, saying that “no force in the world can drive a wedge between the Iranian and Iraqi peoples.”

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The terrorist slaughter happened in a place that Tehran’s vigilantes declare as one of the countries that its rejection of US sanctions is defended and compensated by expanding its direct and indirect presence. You have Ammar al-Hakim, Muqtada al-Sadr, Adil Abdul-Mahdi, who are firmly in a different trench than the Iranian trench in Iraq.

It is certain that Rohani’s Iraq trip will change anything. What could change things for the better is asking the right questions.

There has been a clear Iraqi failure since 2003. Those who succeeded Saddam Hussein could not bring anything to Iraq or the region. The only thing they succeeded in doing was to prove that Iran still had a character: “We were not chosen for this act of violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone racism, because we are an enclave for extremism,” she said. Violence because we condone raci
After Baghouz, what do you do with ISIS families?

Rashmee Roshan Lall

To simply abandon ISIS-affiliated people in conflict zones, such as Syria, would be a monumental mistake.
UN Security Council works to salvage Hodeidah ceasefire

Mohammed Alkhereiji

London

Qatar's hosting of the 2022 FIFA World Cup is facing additional allegations of corruption that coincided with the possibility of FIFA enlarging the tournament, drawing outcry from human rights groups.

Former FIFA President Sepp Blatter insisted that former UEFA President Michel Platini and his supporters to vote for Qatar's bid.

"These four votes tipped the balance in favour of Qatar and against the USA," Blatter told Agence France-Presse. "This situation sparked attacks from the losing parties on FIFA and me personally from defeated England or Russia for the 2018 World Cup and from the USA, which lost to Qatar."

The revelation came after a report by the UK's Sun, which published leaked documents stating that Doha had secretly offered FIFA $400 million in a last-minute attempt to secure hosting rights.

The documents, the Sunday Times reported, said executives from Qatar's Al Jazeera network, owned by the then Qatar Emir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani, signed a broadcast rights contract making the offer as bidding camps to host the World Cup were closing.

The contract included a clause that FIFA would receive an additional $100 million if Qatar was awarded the 2022 World Cup hosting duties.

The Sunday Times said, since Sheikh Hamad was the driving force behind the bid, the deal represented a conflict of interest for FIFA and a flagrant violation of its rules, which stipulate that bidders who are barred from offering financial incentives to FIFA in connection with the vote for hosting rights.

FIFA investigators later looked at the bidding rights for the 2022 tournament and suggested the possibility of withdrawing hosting rights from Qatar, given irregularities in the bidding process and concerns over whether the country would be able to host the tournament in the summer.

Finally, Qatar was not stripped of hosting duties a few weeks after Qatar became a candidate offering FIFA a second contract, worth almost $500 million, for broadcast rights to the 2026 and 2030 World Cups.

A feasibility study commissioned by FIFA to expand the 2022 World Cup from 32 to 48 teams was met with calls from rights groups to consider the potential human cost.

One of the most tragic aspects of Qatar's preparation for the World Cup has been the treatment of migrant workers. Both Doha and FIFA have been criticised for conditions under which foreign builders have been constructing new stadiums.

The Sunday Times published leaked documents stating that Doha had secretly offered FIFA $400 million in a last-minute attempt to secure hosting rights.

"We were to hold a minute of silence for every estimated death of a migrant worker due to the constructions of the Qatar World Cup, the first 44 matches of the tournament would be played in silence," Hans-Christian Gabrielisen, head of the Norwegian Confederation of Trade Unions said in 2019.

FIFA's proposal to expand the tournament to 48 teams from 32 would require neighbouring Gulf countries to share hosting duties. Qatar is a member of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), which includes Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Kuwait and Oman.

However, due to Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain severing ties with Doha in June 2017, over what they described as its support of radical Islamic groups and ties to Iran, this makes potential hosting duties possible only in Kuwait and Oman.

The study, which acknowledged the region's geopolitical climate, said stadiums in the region that meet FIFA's requirements are in the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, which leaves Oman out of contention.

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UAE officials stated several times that they would be willing to co-host World Cup matches in 2022, provided the dispute with Doha is resolved.

UN Security Council works to salvage Hodeidah ceasefire

Salem Baidhani

Aden

The international community and the United Nations are scrambling to salvage the Stockholm Agreement as rebel violations of the ceasefire in Hodeidah continue and the Yemeni government threatens to resume military action.

The five permanent members of the UN Security Council implored Yemen's warring factions to implement the Stockholm Agreement reached in December.

In a joint statement, the representatives of the United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia and China said they were "extremely concerned" about the failure to follow through with the Stockholm Agreement.

They pointed out the deployment of forces in ports and Hodeidah, the exchange of prisoners of war and the carrying out of the agreement on Taiz had not occurred.

The message urged "both parties to begin implementation of the proposal in good faith without further delay and without seeking to exploit the redeployments by the other side. We call on all sides to ensure the UN monitoring mission can carry out its work safely and without hindrance." 

The statement came as the situation in Hodeidah significantly deteriorated. Heavy fighting broke out March 5 between forces of Yemen's internationally recognised government and Iran-backed Houthis rebel south of Hodeidah, resulting in several casualties on the Houthi side and a fire that engulfed warehouses in an industrial complex.

Houthi rebels on March 12 shelled a convoy that was transferring Yemeni government officials who are part of the UN-sponsored redeployed kontakt-creation committee.

The Yemeni Information minister, writing on Twitter, said Houthi had violated the Stockholm Agreement, including by shelling with "heavy weapons." He said silence from the UN envoy and monitoring teams was "unjustified.

A day following the shelling of the convoy, Al Arabiya television reported that coalition forces shot down a Houthi drone over a pro-government military camp in Hodeidah.

Yemen's warring factions continued to clash and exchange blame over ceasefire breaches and an agreement on the withdrawal of forces from Hodeidah, signed during UN-sponsored peace talks.

The Houthi militia and the Yemeni government had agreed to a ceasefire in Hodeidah and to exchange prisoners. They were to withdraw their forces from the city and its ports, handing control to UN peace monitors. But dealing with the withdrawal passed without action and both sides accused the other of stall tactics.

The truce was seen as a confidence-building measure aimed at averting a full-scale offensive on the port, which is a key entry point for food, fuel and aid deliveries.

Compounding matters for the Saudi-led coalition was the US Senate vote to end US support for the coalition.

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The Arab Weekly - March 17, 2019

**Egypt**

*News & Analysis*

**Future of Egypt’s parties in doubt even as Wafd celebrates centenary**

Hassan Abdel Zaher

Cairo

Egypt’s Wafd Party, which spans the entire political spectrum from liberal to ultra-conservative, is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year. The party, founded in 1919, was one of the first political parties in Egypt and played a significant role in the country’s political history. However, in recent years, the party has faced challenges and questions about its future, as it struggles to keep up with the changing political landscape.

The party has been facing decreasing support among the Egyptian populace. Analysts say that the party’s decline is due to several factors, including internal divisions, lack of popular support, and the rise of other political parties. Despite its long history and numerous accomplishments, the Wafd Party has failed to adapt to the new political realities.

The party’s current leader, Farida al-Naqqash, has acknowledged the challenges the party faces and has called for a reevaluation of its strategies. However, it remains to be seen whether the party can overcome its challenges and regain its former glory.

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

**Calls for Muslim Brotherhood protests fall flat but fears of violence persist**

Amr Emam

Cairo

Failed calls by the Muslim Brotherhood for protests in Egypt have been met with little response from the public, causing concerns about the group’s influence and its potential for violence. However, the economic crisis and political instability have created fertile ground for the group to gain support and engage in violent activities.

The group’s attempts to organize protests have been thwarted by the Egyptian government, which has deployed security forces to prevent any acts of violence. The government has arrested hundreds of members of the group, causing its leadership to move underground.

Despite the government’s efforts to contain the group, concerns remain about its potential for violence, especially in light of recent attacks by the group on security forces. The government has warned that it will take strong action against any act of violence, but the group has shown no signs of backing down.

Amr Emam is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.
**Syria**

**Daraa protests show that remains outside regime’s orbit**

James Snell

Demonstrations took place in the southern Syrian city of Daraa to protest against the Assad regime’s tightening of its grip on the area. This was the first time that protests had been held in Daraa since 2011, when the city was the epicentre of the Syrian uprising. The regime responded by sending in security forces, leading to clashes and arrests. The protests are seen as a challenge to the regime’s authority and a sign of growing popular discontent.

**Father’s shadow**

A young boy rides his bicycle in the southern Syrian city of Daraa with a gate bearing a picture of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and his late father Hafez al-Assad, last August.

(AFP)

**Viewpoint**

Iran’s mullahs see economic future in Syria

Samir Moubayed

Much of that economic cooperation will be revisited, as Syrian-Iranian relations hit an all-time high — the highest perhaps, since the Islamic Revolution 40 years ago.

Iran’s mullahs seem to have figured out what their future role in Syria will look like. Unlike Russia, they will not be able to maintain a political foothold in Syria, since nobody in the neighbourhood or international community would allow it. At best, this is a shadow of influence — whether direct or indirect — will be confined to the Damascus-Beirut highway, the Qalamoun Mountains and Shia enclaves in Damascus. They will not be able to grab large reaches of land, like Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan did. In fact, they hold no economic clout, nor are they likely to have a strong influence in exchange for giving up their struggle against the states. This was under the auspices and with the support of the Assad regime’s Russian backer.

Analyst Ryan O’Farrell said: “When the regime started its offensive, Russia had already been negotiating with important local figures, in order to secure the peaceful surrender of the towns, which would then be held by [Free Syrian Army] FSA units, thus they had to surrender their heavy weapons.”

The contrast between locations that retained tenuous autonomy and those that did not is striking.

However, this protest took place under the auspices of the “reconciliation” programme, in which former rebel groups were marginalized and their leaders co-opted by the regime. They have been given a series of economic agreements, but the deal went to the Russians, having been on hold since January 2017. At that time, Syria and Iran signed a series of economic agreements, none of which saw the light. One was to provide Iran with fields for agricultural projects. The Iranians demanded terri- tory between the Sayyida Zaynab Shrine and Darya in Western Ghuta, hoping that they could create a “Silia Belt” near Damascus.

Iran has no intention of getting involved in Syria, but it is seeking to strengthen its influence in the country.

Sami Moubayed is a Syrian historian and author of “Under the Black Flag” (IB Tauris, 2015).
Lebanon

Hezbollah on verge of bankruptcy as Iran sanctions bite

Bassem Ajami

Hezbollah's declared objective was to fill the presidential vacuum and to convene the parliament to elect a new president. It came to office “through the barrel of the American and French armies.” From fiction to reality, Hezbollah found its strategic and military occupation of Beirut, Druze areas, and the party's nuclear arsenal at its disposal. The waste of public funds makes Hezbollah no different from the rest of Lebanon's decptive political parties. The militant group did not hesitate to turn its weapons on its rivals. More than 20 leaders and journalists of the March 14 Alliance were killed in the ensuing years. The threat was so intense that the movement’s leaders sought refuge in secure locations or fled the country altogether. This included the leader of the coalition, Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who resigned and was all but evicted from the country. Moreover, the March 14 Alliance soon showed signs of cracks in its foundation.

Iraqi political analysts estimate that Iran’s financial support for Hezbollah grew over the years as the latter took on more duties that transcended Lebanon, making it a regional and international enforcer of Iran’s expansionist project. At an estimated $700 million in direct Iraqi money transfers a year, Hezbollah never found it necessary to forage for funds from the Lebanese clientele network and Lebanese public funds. However, Hezbollah’s dire economic conditions could force it to use the state to pay for its elaborate social provisions, including the medical bills of wounded soldiers in Syria and assistance to their extended families.

Nasrallah’s wishful request, however, will not compensate for Iran’s lost missions but is rather a last-minute message to its base of need to embrace new open-ended austerity measures. Another of Nasrallah’s talking points was a threatening message to his local Lebanese opponents, particularly Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri, leader of the Lebanese Forces political party Samir Geagea and Druze leader Walid Jumblatt. Hezbollah would be demanding its share of the clientelist pie and that any attempt to block it would be perceived as an act of war.

In a direct threat to Jumblatt, who had earlier used Sun Tzu’s river analogy, Nasrallah declared: “Those who have been anxiously waiting by the river for our corpses to float by due to our impoverishment, I assure them they will be greatly disappointed.” Considering the lack of Iranian funds, Hezbollah seriously needs financial help, which it would get from projects earmarked at the CEDRE conference that committed $11 billion in grants and loans to the Lebanese government to overhaul its deteriorating infrastructure and economy.

Yet, Hezbollah’s ambitious plans to compensate for a lack of Iranian funding might hit a brick wall, one which it helped build. Most of the $11 billion from CEDRE are pledges that hinge on the Lebanese state’s ability to enact much needed structural reforms, which needs the full commitment of the various parties involved, including Hezbollah. As it stands, Hezbollah’s attitude and its bullying of the Lebanese state makes reforms impossible. There is no reason for Nasrallah’s fears and perhaps some of his allies to concede defeat and allow for Iran to continue its assault on the West and Gulf Arab states using Lebanese funds, a fact that would convince the Gulf states that their possible investment in Lebanon’s economic salvation is not preserving and counterproductive.

Hezbollah has planned for this financial doomsday scenario and might have ways to delay its bankruptcy. However, the real challenge the Shia group has failed to understand is moving away from the Lebanese honeypot of public funds.

The waste of public funds makes Hezbollah no different from the rest of Lebanon's decptive political parties. The militant group did not hesitate to turn its weapons on its rivals. More than 20 leaders and journalists of the March 14 Alliance were killed in the ensuing years. The threat was so intense that the movement’s leaders sought refuge in secure locations or fled the country altogether. This included the leader of the coalition, Prime Minister Saad Hariri, who resigned and was all but evicted from the country. Moreover, the March 14 Alliance soon showed signs of cracks in its foundation.

In February 2006, the Christian leader, Michel Aoun, once a fierce opponent of the Syrian and Hezbollah, and a presidential hopeful, changed sides. He left March 14 and signed a pact with Hezbollah. In May 2016, Aoun launched a militia occupation of Beirut, Druze leader Walid Jumblatt also broke ranks with March 14, although he did not join the rival group.

Still, through intimidation and bullying, the party’s influence grew. In 2014, it was so powerful it prevented the election of a new president for more than two years, insisting that its candidate, Aoun, be elected to the office. From exile, Aoun began to plan his comeback. It became evident to him that his return to the country — and the premiership — was contingent on Hezbollah’s consent.

In 2016, after lengthy negotiations that included Hezbollah and Aoun, Hariri struck a deal. He would endorse Aoun as president and he would become prime minister. His real power, however, would be greatly diminished. In other words, he would be under the sway of Aoun and Hezbollah. The deal included Hariri’s consent to a new electoral law that was tailored for Aoun and Hezbollah. Moreover, while Hariri demanded that Hezbollah end its involvement in regional conflicts, the party ignored his plea.

The “presidential deal” all but sealed March 14’s fate.

Hariri’s critics accused him of backtracking the March 14 Alliance for his own political ends. He added that it was necessary to fill the presidential vacuum and reverse the country’s economic deterioration. However, more than two years after the deal was forged, Lebanon’s economic situation has only worsened.

Following the “presidential deal,” Hezbollah’s influence reached all the vital organs of the Lebanese state. Approaching 13 years, government posts became subject to the party’s approval. And when the Lebanese army wanted to hold a parade to commemorate the Hezbollah’s victory in 2006 in downtown Beirut to celebrate its victory over ISIS, Hezbollah objected. The rally was cancelled. Moreover, when Hariri was asked by a French journalist about Hezbollah’s arsenal, he denied that the party used its weapons inside Lebanon. Hezbollah, as well, has been careful not to abate its widening influence in the country. It does not want to be seen as the mover and shaker of Lebanese politics.

A few weeks after the Hariri government was followed by nine months of intense negotiations, Nasrallah urged his audience not to describe it as “Hezbollah’s government.” When a member of Parliament belonging to the party declined in parliament that Aoun came to office “through the barrel of Hezbollah’s gun,” the party took disciplinary action against him.

When it was founded in 1982, Hezbollah wanted to liberate occupied Lebanese areas from Israeli occupation. Today, it is in a position to dominate important issues of political life in the country and define its agenda.

Bassem Ajami is a Lebanese British journalist who lives in Beirut.
T he appointment of Moham- mad Shtayyeh as prime minister of the Palestinian Authority, led by Palestin- ian President Mahmoud Abbas, is likely to bring about major policy changes towards Hamas, Israel or the United States, observers said.

Abbas tasked Shtayyeh on March 10 with forming a new government, granting him three weeks, a dead- line that could extend to five weeks, to do so. Shtayyeh replaces Rami Hamdallah, a technocrat who led a “unity government” in 2017 with the aim of reaching a concilia- tion deal with Hamas.

Hamdallah was asked by Abbas to step down in January after Egypt- ian-sponsored mediation between rivals Fatah and Hamas hit a dead- end.

Unlike Hamdallah, who was viewed as an independent politi- cian, Shtayyeh is a senior Fatah offi- cial who is staunchly loyal to Abbas. Currently serving as an adviser to Abbas and a member of the central Fatah committee, Shtayyeh has had two ministerial posts and was part of the Palestinian negotiating team during peace talks with Israel.

Although the formation of Hamdallah’s governments was in agreement with other parties, it never steered from the directions of Abbas.

Shtayyeh is known for his hawk- ish views towards Hamas, which swiftly rejected his appointment. “Hamas stresses that it does not recognize this separation govern- ment because it was formed with- out national consensus,” Hamas spokesman Fawzi Barhoum said in a statement.

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Tehran's campaign against the opposition raises questions

Ali Alfoneh

All Alifoneh have decided to remove the veil and disclose a few, just a few, secrets; the speaker announces in the prelude to the two-part documentary “End Stations of Lies,” aired March 2-3 by Islamic Republic Voice and Vision. The “secret” revealed in the documentary is about a certain opposition leader: Nima, also known as Nima, who lives under police protection in France, and who turns out to be an unmitigated instrument in the hands of Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence.

The story of the Intelligence Ministry’s manipulation of Zam is far from unique and follows a pattern all too well known: Psychological campaign against the opposition’s exposure and the Iranian public at large.

Born into a conservative clerical family in Tehran in 1973, Zam turned against the regime after the fraudulent election of 2009, which secured Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s second term in office.

It remains a mystery why serious broadcasters of the US government fell for the threadbare tactics of Iran’s Intelligence Ministry.

For a time, Zam, who was imprisoned in the notorious Evin Prison. He was later let into Iran by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei complaining of torture and forced confessions. Alfoneh released from prison, Zam moved to Paris and, in 2015, along with two other political activists, Majid Niknam and Babak Ejjah, established Amad News on the cloud-based instant messaging and voice over IP service Telegram Messenger.

Amad News soon developed into one of the most influential sources shaping public opinion inside and outside of Iran, thanks to Zam’s spectacular “revelations,” according to select members among Iran’s ruling elites and their family members.

In October 2017, Amad News released two judiciary documents, which allegedly proved Zahra Larijani, daughter of then Judiciary Chief Sadegh Larijani, was in the pay of the British secret service and had smuggled top-secret documents to Britain in return for securing British citizenship for herself and her family.

Iran’s Intelligence Ministry dismissed the reports as forgeries but foreign Persian language broadcasters to Iran, in particular, Voice of America’s Persian service, demanded instant answers to the details in an attempt to discredit the regime in Tehran.

Zam’s revelations also came as many were dismayed by prominent figures among the Iranian opposition abroad and the so-called “Cyrus II” project, which allegedly was an Israeli/Saudi plot to overthrow the regime in Tehran. Despite Radio Israel’s Persian service dismissing the story as a conspiracy theory, some opposition figures claimed they were the chosen agents of resurrecting the empire of Cyrus the Great, and Amad News’s followers on Telegram reached more than 1.5 million!

However, on March 2, the dream palace of Zam collapsed when Iranian television aired conversations between the founder of Amad News and his handler at Iran’s Ministry of Intelligence. The videos clearly show the intelligence officer dictating the fake news to Zam.

Zam, also in the video, repeatedly badmouths various opposition figures and TV hosts at Voice of America’s Persian service and other Persian-language broadcasters to Iran, who invite him to communicate directly with baseless and incredulous fabrications of his handler at Iran’s Intelligence Ministry to the Iranian public.

Zam, who in the most generous light must be described an unwitting victim of the manipulations of the Intelligence Ministry, was no longer useful and the documentary aired in Iran’s television service served the purpose of demonstrating how easily it manipulates the Iranian opposition and foreign broadcasters to Iran.

The comedy of Zam also underlines whatever trust Iranians may have had in the opposition to the regime in Iran and in news broadcast to Iran by foreign broadcasters.

Iran’s psychological campaign against the opposition is effective but it remains a mystery why serious broadcasters of the US government fall for the threadbare tactics of Iran’s Intelligence Ministry.

All Alifoneh is a senior fellow at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.

The US sanctions on Iran still have not been enough to weaken Iran’s resolve, and the US has not been able to stop Iran’s nuclear program, which has reached a critical stage. The US sanctions have only served to strengthen Iran’s resolve and have not had the desired effect.

The US government must increase the pressure on Iran and impose more sanctions on its banking and financial sectors. The US must also impose economic sanctions on Iran’s oil exports to deter Iran from selling its oil.

The US government must also work on developing alternative sources of energy to Iran, such as developing renewable energy sources like solar and wind power. This would help reduce the US dependence on Iranian oil and make it less vulnerable to US sanctions.

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Tensions between Turkey and the United States escalated after the US government announced that it would impose sanctions against Turkey because of its support for Venezuela. US officials asked Maduro to step down and allow Juan Guaido, head of Venezuela’s National Assembly, to serve as interim president. The sanctions came after tensions increased over Turkey’s insistence that it would buy Russian S-400 missile defence systems, rather than US-manufactured Patriot missiles. US Army General Curtis Scaparrotti, head of US European Command, recommended that the United States not send Turkey a shipment of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters jets.

“Turkey’s support for the Maduro regime obviously is completely contrary to US policy and utterly unhelpful,” Elliott Abrams, US special representative for Venezuela, said March 12. “We will continue to take a look at the ways in which that support takes place and in the context of sanctions by the Treasury.”

The United States announced that it would withdraw its diplomatic staff from Caracas because it said Venezuela may not provide proper security for the embassy. US officials asked Maduro to step down and allow Juan Guaido, head of Venezuela’s National Assembly, to serve as interim president. The sanctions warned came after tensions increased over Turkey’s insistence that it would buy Russian S-400 missile defence systems, rather than US-manufactured Patriot missiles. US Army General Curtis Scaparrotti, head of US European Command, recommended that the United States not send Turkey a shipment of F-35 Joint Strike Fighters jets.

“It seems like there’s some kind of game of chicken going on here between Turkey and the United States to see who blinks first,” US Representative Lee Zeldin, a Republican from New York, said at a House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing March 12. He said the United States needs to remain resolute.

Turkish state media agency Anadolu reported that Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said Ankara expects the US F-35 to be delivered to Turkey May 15. “Despite some statements, F-35 procurements will continue,” Akar was quoted as saying March 12. “Our pilots will participate in continuous training in the United States.”

He said Turkey plans to honour its commitment to NATO but will continue with the purchase of the F-35s.

Douglas Lute, former US permanent representative to NATO, said the Russian system would “never be integrated” into NATO’s overall missile defence system. “Turkey is essentially spending money on a national-only system that [it] has been told from the outset will never be integrated,” Lute said. “So, it’s a very sort of selfish, nationalist decision, which is short-sighted.”

Devrik Chollet, former US assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, said part of the F-35 would be built in Turkey, which presents security concerns for the United States if Turkey works with Russia on its defense system. He said US policy on the F-35 sale has been clear “going back two administrations.”

Both Chollet and Lute spoke at the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations hearing March 12. The European Union had proposed ending Turkey’s bid to join the coalition, citing human rights violations by Turkey in a report released March 12 in the United States.

Kelly Kennedy is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Washington.

Venezuela issue escalates Turkey-US Tensions

Kelly Kennedy

Washington

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Local elections could challenge Erdogan’s supremacy

Stephen Starr

Here are a few heads of state who enjoyed the rollercoaster ride of an election campaign more than Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Rather than musing over economic policy plans or winning and dining with global leaders, Erdogan prefers pressuring countries to cross-out the country for rallies where he can hear the sound of his own voice projected on his followers, his flock.

Ahead of Turkey’s local elections March 31, however, Erdogan, his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and their ultra-nationalist backers, the Nationalist Movement Party (CHP) rival.

When reporting from any of the provinces across Turkey, a common thread that runs through conversations I have had with locals is that, while people may no longer be particularly enflamed with the AKP, which some feel has turned stale, they stand by Erdogan because they feel he is the best person to represent Turkey on the world stage and to keep the country safe from threats real or imagined.

Near year after year, election after election, the AKP’s spin machine and vice-face grip on the media have been powerful tools in tipping the popular vote in its favour. Now, troublingly for the AKP, a party that relies heavily on a large, core support, polls suggest that one-quarter of voters said they were still undecided three weeks from Election Day. This may point to voters looking at the March 31 election as a way to punish the government for the economic difficulties it faces, mostpatently obvious in an inflation rate of more than 20% that’s hobbling the spending power of most Turkish citizens.

Furthermore, if the AKP were to lose the mayoralty of Istanbul or Ankara — the opposition CHP candidate in Ankara is, though facing legal difficulties, leading polls — the decline of urban support for the AKP that emerged during the 2017 constitutional referendum would turn into a full blown crisis. The Turkish opposition has been largely impotent in recent electoral cycles, unable to change its message or take advantage of what’s been a deeply turbulent period for Turkey. This time around, however, it may find that the national mood has shifted.

Stephen Starr is the author of “Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to the Uprising” and has lived in Syria and Turkey since 2007.
Erdogan’s attitude towards the media is out of this era

Claude Salihi

It is difficult to acknowledge that we are living in precarious times. Around the world, men in prime positions of power are adopting policies that do not serve the collective good or the cause of democracy they pretend to represent. Instead of seeking to unite people, these false prophets divide the countries they represent. They stroke their inflated egos, to further encourage them to solidify their seat of power.

Truth has become a casualty because these leaders no shame in lying to the world. They cannot bear to be portrayed negatively, so they attack the media as an “enemy of the people” and stamp any news item deemed unfavourable as “fake news.”

From Ankara to Washington and from Moscow to Pyongyang, regimes adopted viewpointsthat set back the cause of democracy and freedom. With the strokes of a pen and – in cases like Turkey with repressive measures, decades ofenchancing toward democ- racy have been undone. What is frightening is that most people do not see what is happening or suspect that there are taking place, gradually eroding basic values of democracies.

By the time they wake up, it is often too late. Today’s threats to democracy come not only from its traditional enemies but from those who claim to be the West’s own allies. Donald Trump in the United States, Vladimir Putin in Rus-sia, Kim Jong-un in North Korea, Nicolas Maduro of Venezuela and Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey – who do those men have in common, given the diverse political leanings? They have all turned to calling media that dares to criticise them “the enemy of the people” and referring to unfa- vorable articles as “fake news.”

This is not a novelty. Joseph Stalin referred to anyone who opposed him – or was even suspected of opposing him – as an “enemy of the people.”

This focus recently has been on Erdogan, who, after having decimated the Turkish media that stood up to his drive toward targeting international media. Erdogan occasionally cancels foreign journal- ists’ press credentials and sends them packing.

When Erdogan delivered his re-election victory speech, he spoke of “one flag, one state.” He could have taken it a step further and talked about one media and one voice – his. Because that’s the way the election campaign was reported.

The state-owned TV channel TRT reported on the election like any state-run media channel in authoritarian countries would: devoting all coverage to a single candidate, Erdogan, of course. For the month leading up to the election, TRT devoted 67 hours of airtime to Erdogan. His re- tial received less than seven hours of coverage over the same period.

Since rising to power in 2003, Erdogan has orchestrated a re- structuring of the country’s media space. Hundreds of journalists have been jailed and more than 100 media outlets have been shut down, according to Verdict.

In some instances, Erdogan arranged to suspend journalists, such as the Dogan Media Group, once the largest media conglomerate in Turkey, be bought out by the pro-government Demirel family.

For many Turkish voters – especially the lower- and middle-class electorate, who are primar- ily concerned with making ends meet – press freedom remains what is an abstract concept, a topic that matters more to the country’s intellectuals. A free press is the cornerstone of a democracy but Erdogan said shortly after his election that the media and democracy are not compatible.

"You can’t have democracy alongside the media," said Erdogan at an event marking the start of the academic year. "Once the media were running our country, the fourth estate or what have you," the Turkish president said, adding that he would rather take his cues from the public than the media. "A politician can’t implement sound policies if he is in fear of the media," he said. Erdogan was later slammed in Serbia, where he accused of running a mis- formation campaign against his government.

Erdogan’s neo-Ottoman world- view, including his attitude toward media, is more than a spat. It is more than a spat. It is more than a spat.

So, a verbal spat is more than a spat. In the regional context, we may only be in the initial phase of a decisive, major regrouping of powers.

Muffled voices. A Turkish journalist protests media repression at a courthouse in Istanbul.
Many challenges remain for US in Syria

Kelly Kennedy

Washington

As US President Donald Trump proclaims a victory against the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and orders a drawdown of American troops, experts in Washington said the challenges in the region were only beginning. “At first, all we wanted to do was survive ISIS,” said Russell Iskakh, US representative to the Syrian Democratic Council. “The fight against ISIS does not end with a victory.”

Thousands of displaced people will try to return home, those who committed crimes must be held accountable, the infrastructure must be rebuilt, Iran and Russia have invested so much money that flows in to Syria will return to them, and Turkey’s involvement in Syrian politics could leave one-third of Syria’s people feeling disenchanted, said speakers at the Hudson Institute March 1.

The Americans needed to ensure the Syrian Kurds don’t migrate to the Russians or the Iranians.

Trump will need to keep all of this in mind as he works on budget requests. He’ll also need to think this in mind as he works on budget reduction in the sizeable — 23% — Department funding that is rolled into the US Defence Department budget and anti-ISIS operations. The cuts to the International Affairs (IA) and claims Administration budget figures through the appropriations process. Nonetheless, the budget proposal can be read as reflecting an administration’s priorities.

The cuts to the International Affairs (IA) budget for FY 2020 include $5 billion for international humanitarian assistance by the Trump administration, putting $1.3 billion that is designed to counter “counter Iranian malign activities and support partners” in the region. Indicative that the Trump administration is so Iran-focused is the fact that it mentions the “malign influence of Iran” twice in the first short paragraph. Not only that, in the paragraphs describing US military assistance, called Foreign Military Financing (FMF), to the region, it repeats the phrase “counter Iranian malign influence” in addition to ensuring the “enduring defeat” of the Islamic State (ISIL), al-Qaeda and other terrorist groups.

The budget proposal calls for $2.3 billion for Israel and $3.1 billion for Egypt in military aid, representing 96% of the entire $5 billion in military assistance to the region.

Although the budget proposal says that the United States “priorities FMF for Lebanon and Tunisia, which are on the front lines of the fight against ISIS and other terrorist groups,” figures for those two countries are substantially less. The administration is proposing $56 million for Lebanon and $41 million for Tunisia in FMF, which is less than the $358 million and $65 million, respectively, that Congress appropriated for those two countries in FY 2018.

The budget proposal calls for $350 million in FMF for Jordan (down from $425 million appropriated by Congress in FY 2018). Figures for Iraq are difficult to discern because military assistance to that country is no longer part of the FMF account, rather it is rolled into the US Defence Department budget and anti-ISIS operations. This year, there is likely to be even more opposition to the budget proposal. US Representative Elliot Engel, a Democrat from New York and chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, predicted the administration’s “attempt to hollow out our international affairs budget will meet bipartisan rejection in Congress.”

US Senator Patrick Leahy, a Democrat from Vermont and ranking member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, declared the budget “dead on arrival.” Other members pointed to the huge discrepancy between the proposed defence budget of $700 billion compared to the International Affairs Budget of $4 billion.

It seems, that for all the talk by the Trump administration about “partnering” with countries to oppose Iran, counter terrorist groups and stabilise the region, it is relying more on the US military and much less on such traditional diplomatic and foreign assistance programmes.

Gregory Aftandilian is a lecturer at the Furder School of Global Studies at Boston University and a former US representative to the Syrian Democratic Council. He also served as a US foreign aid official.
**US human rights report reflects acceptance of Israeli occupation**

**Kelly Kennedy**

**Washington**

The latest US catalogue of human rights violations leaves out the West Bank and Gaza Strip as Palestinian territories Israel has occupied.

“We have told those who disguise the concept of human dignity they will pay a price, that their abuses will be meticulously documented and the need then publicised,” said US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at a news conference March 13 in Washington to release the 2019 “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.”

“By articulating abuses and pressing non-compliant regimes, we can effect change,” he said.

Pompeo emphasised not drawing conclusions and letting the “facts speak for themselves” in the human rights report.

The report has been constitutionally mandated since the late 1970s and often looks much the same as the previous year’s document but even slight changes in language and descriptions might augur US policy changes. This year, wording in which US diplomats have changed the way the United States identifies settlement areas and Israeli-occupied territories.

The report showed a shift in reporting on Israel’s policies. In 2018, the report referred to the “Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.” This year’s report states “Israel-controlled Golan Heights.”

Michael G. Kozak, a senior official with the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labour in the US State Department, said “occupied territory” has a “legal meaning” to it, and said “controlled” shifted the reporting to a “geographic description.”

“My understanding from the policy bureau on this is that there’s no longer any in our language of policy vis-a-vis the territories and the need for a negotiated settlement there,” Kozak said. “We decided not to use the term in the report because it’s not a legal term and it’s distracting.”

State Department Deputy Spokesman Robert Palladino insisted “the administration is committed to pursuing a comprehensive peace between Israelis and Palestinians” but did not address US concerns about the acceleration of settlement building.

Palladino was asked about Israel’s plan to deport Israeli and Palestinian Director at Human Rights Watch in Israel Shahmir Sanni about what the US policy means for people because, according to Sanni, because of Israel’s travel restrictions, of the complaints of torture.

The United States mission to the UN in Geneva has also been reporting on Israel’s annexation of the region of the Golan Heights to the international centre stage.

The escalating abandonment by Washington of the traditional US view of the Golan as an Israeli-occupied territory and recognising the annexation of the region returned the strategic plateau to the centre.

The State Department has signalled the latest change in this direction when it dropped long-standing references to the Golan Heights as “occupied” in favour of the anemic “Israel-controlled.”

US Senator Lindsey Graham, a Republican from South Carolina, is the latest senior US politician to support a more aggressive American policy that recognises the Golan, captured from Syria in June 1987, as sovereign Israeli territory.

The Golan is long been the quietest of Syria’s frontiers, but increasing US support for Israel’s annexing the area has been of particular concern to Israel’s annexation of the region of the Golan has been of particular concern to the international community and the post-war battle over Syria has been a major source of concern for the international community.

US President Donald Trump has demonstrated an interest in breaking the rules of traditional US-Israeli diplomacy, not least with the West Bank Israeli settlement issue.

Before the civil war, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu had engaged with Damascus on the basis of withdrawing from the Golan Heights by June 4, 1967, border. However, once the war began, Damascus viewed the connection to the Assad regime as an opportunity to prevent Washington’s support for the Assad regime as an opportunity to prevent Washington’s support for the Assad regime. Assad’s war and the Golan’s annexation was viewed as a means to achieve the treaty that had been signed.

That’s not to say that the US retreat on the Golan is without consequences.

Washington’s retreat from its recognition of the Golan Heights as part of the heart of the internationally sanctioned system that includes the 1974 Separation of Forces Agreement, which has kept an uneasy peace across the frontier for almost 50 years. US recognition of Israel’s land grab will not go unopposed in Ankara, which is occupying parts of Syria and looks to expand its occupation east of the Golan Heights.

Syria, whose relations with the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, epicentre of the continuing war in Syria, spars its opposition to the US move and moves to reinforce positions in Quneitra.

Undermining the sanctity of the sovereignty over the Golan when comes with support for Syria’s territorial integrity has been reaffirmed at great cost. Informal, sometimes public, and at times expressed, states share the view that the options of those opposing the US initiative as little consequence. The history of the region suggests that Syria has not been immune.

Israel has not been immune.

The report states “Israel-controlled Golan Heights.”

**A shifting view. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo speaks during the release of the 2018 “Country Reports on Human Rights Practices” at the Department of State in Washington, March 13.** (AP)

**Complacency in the face of the dramatic significance of this US move in Israel’s direction is an invitation to conflict.**

**Geoffrey Aronson**

**Senior resident scholar at the Middle East Institute in Washington.**
Egypt to receive final IMF tranche, says reforms near completion

Economy

**Egypt to receive final IMF tranche, says reforms near completion**

Amer Emam

**Cairo**

Egyptian officials said they expect to receive the final tranche of a $12.2 billion International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan in June or July. A final review of structural reforms introduced by Egyptian financial and monetary authorities will be conducted before the disbursement of the instalment of the loan, the government announced.

The tranche of $2 billion will mark the end of the national reform programme that started in November 2016 and included measures that have improved general economic indicators but caused major suffering for millions of Egyptians.

With the structural reforms ending, Egyptian Finance Minister Mohamed Maait said, “Egypt is hoping to see its economy improve, particularly given that Cairo would have more room to manoeuvre and the delivery of the final IMF tranche on time would confirm international financial institutions’ full confidence in Egypt’s economy.”

The disbursement of all loan tranches without any delay reflects the success of the government in implementing all the reforms agreed with the IMF,” said Ali al-Midani, deputy head of the Egyptian Centre for Economic and Strategic Studies. “The reforms are changing economic realities and this will have its effect on everyone in our country in the coming months.”

The IMF Executive Board approved Egypt’s request to borrow the $12.2 billion in November 2016. This opened the door for measures to reduce the budget deficit, restore macroeconomic stability and incentivise sustainable economic growth.

The measures also aimed to fix problems in the foreign exchange market, lower government debt and create jobs. The country also slashed fuel, water and electricity subsidies, floating the Egyptian pound and introducing a value-added tax.

The process of reforming its food subsidy system to improve functionality and ensure subsidies are provided to only the neediest while weaning Egypt’s middle-class off financial support.

The reforms appear to have paid off: Foreign currency reserves at the Central Bank of Egypt have risen steadily, with imports going down and a new investment law bringing in more direct foreign investment. The inflation rate is also lowering; unemployment is dropping and the budget deficit is on the decline. Cairo targets single-digit inflation by 2020.

Egyptian Finance Minister Mohamed Maait said the success of the reforms means the government can move into a new stage and focus on improving living conditions, including financial support to small, medium and education systems.

“If we will retain the bulk of our work in the coming months to improving the living conditions of the public, increasing their income and improving health and education,” he said.

Millions of Egyptians are eager to reap the fruits of the economic reforms, particularly given how the reforms affected their daily lives in recent years. The currency float caused commodity prices to double overnight, while salaries remained stagnant.

To cushion the effects of such pressures, Cairo designed social protection programmes, including a monthly stipend to tens of thousands of families. The programmes included financial support to small project owners with very low income rates.

Nevertheless, to maximise benefits from the reforms, economists said, Egypt must keep the reform drive intact.

“The reforms that have been carried out have brought down the poverty rate down. That means Egypt needs to raise 27% of the population is poor and was growing at 5.3%. Nonetheless, 8.9% in February and the economy will be brought down, the living conditions of the public, including increasing their income and improving health and education,” Egypt needs to do more. The unemployment rate was 4.9% in February and the economy was growing at 5.3%. Nonetheless, the population is poor and a huge effort is needed to bring the poverty down. That means Egypt needs to raise the economic growth rate but to do that Cairo needs to attract investments, increase production, increase exports and reduce local consumption.

“Overcoming these challenges will decide whether the economy will grow at a higher rate in the future,” said Ashraf al-Arabi, a member of parliament’s Economic Affairs Committee. “The government also has to achieve this goal without adding more pressures on the public.”

**Saudi Arabia seals private sector deals worth $3.5 billion**

Saudi Arabia, in the last two years, signed six public-private partnership deals worth approximately $3.5 billion and plans at least 23 more by 2022, the government announced the 150-hectare project in March this year.

The six projects just announced include four water projects, one in the kingdom’s central province of Hail and one in transport. Under such public-private partnerships, the government builds infrastructure and allows private investors to operate for a period before it reverts to the state.

Twenty-three other such deals are planned for the water sector by 2022, among more than 40 public-private partnership deals and privatisations that are in the pipeline.

**Abu Dhabi cuts fees to boost tourism, private sector**

Abu Dhabi reduced tourism-related fees to help boost hospitality sector and attract more tourists. The Department of Culture and Tourism (DCT) reduced hotel and tourism fees from 6% to 3.5%, municipal fees from 6% to 3%, electricity fees from 5% to 3%, and municipality hotel room fees per night from $4 to $2.70.

Abu Dhabi is investing billions of dollars in tourism and hotel development in the UAE. Abu Dhabi, in March, announced a $2 billion tourism project to jumpstart the hospitality sector and attract more tourists.

**Free trade zone to be established on Tunisian-Libyan border**

Tunisia is betting on attracting more foreign investment to such promising projects. The first phase of the project is to begin in April. This would include the construction of logistic facilities, including a power plant, a waste treatment plant, roads and the laying of drainage and sewage canals. The Tunisian government is relying on partnerships between the public and private sectors to benefit the country’s economy. The government also has to achieve this goal without adding more pressures on the public.”

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Can shale ‘revolution’ make US top oil exporter?

Viewpoint

Omid Shokri Kalbkar

UAE becoming a leader in renewable energy

Abu Dhabi is one of the most important examples of a city that is creatively seeking to strengthen its renewable energy sector.

Oil cuts can lead to further reductions in the world's largest crude producer, Saudi Arabia, as the kingdom would be protected in a crisis.

Saudi Arabia, as the world's largest crude exporter, Saudi Arabia's decisions on oil production volumes have influenced crude prices for decades and provided Riyadh with political clout and a comfort level that the Saudi regime would be protected in a crisis.

Oil markets, for example, paid close attention when Saudi Oil Minister Khalid al-Falih announced on March 11 that the kingdom would make further cuts to its crude exports in April in Riyadh's drive with other producers to push oil prices higher, bringing Saudi oil exports to less than 7 million barrels per day (bpd) from 8 million bpd exports highs recorded in late 2018.

Saudi Arabia's reign as the top oil exporter is being threatened by the United States, which used to be the priority market for Saudi crude exports, as its “Oil 2030” report, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said “the second wave of the US shale revolution is coming,” suggesting that the United States could topple Saudi Arabia from the leading export spot by 2024.

In its forecasts, the IEA estimated that US crude production could result in American energy independence as early as next year, the US Department of Energy's Energy Information Administration (EIA) said.

IEA Executive Director Fatih Birol said the expected surge in shale output would “see the United States account for 70% of the rise in global oil production... over the next five years.” He added: “This will shake up international oil and gas trade flows, with profound implications for the geopolitics of energy.”

In 2018, the United States surpassed Russia and Saudi Arabia and became the world’s largest producer, a position it had not held since 1975. US oil production was at a record high of 12.1 million bpd and the IEA said the American crude boom was well on its way to lift overall US crude production capacity to an average of 12.4 million bpd by 2020.

The IEA said growth in output has slashed American dependence on foreign oil, with US crude oil and petroleum product net imports having tumbled from 5.8 million bpd to 2.4 million bpd in 2018. The US energy division said net exports should decline to an average 900,000 bpd in 2019 and that the United States would become a net exporter of crude at an average 1.6 million bpd in 2020.

The US shift towards becoming a net crude exporter began in late 2015, when President Barack Obama lifted a four-decade ban on US oil and gas trade exports. The United States recently reached a record level of US crude exports shipping just more than 3.6 million bpd of crude in February through the week.

While it has some catching up to do with Saudi Arabia in terms of net exports, the United States’ crude production also has an in- credible potential – as much as 16 million bpd by 2025 – which could increase to around 20 million bpd by the next five years – while increases in Saudi crude production capacity is limited.

Saudi Arabia has long served as a swing producer, able to withdraw large volumes from oil markets or to quickly ramp up production to fill a supply gap. Riyadh has insisted that it has a maximum sustainable production capacity of 12 million bpd but there is industry speculation that the kingdom had been forced to sustain pumping at more than 11 million bpd for any lengthy period. In November, Saudi output climbed to 12.2 million bpd briefly before the kingdom helped orchestrate a major supply cut with other producers in a bid to push up international oil prices. In October, Saudi Arabia announced it would increase production to an average 12.4 million bpd this year and 13.2 million bpd in 2020. In addition, booming US oil production could result in American energy independence as early as next year, the US Department of Energy’s Energy Information Administration (EIA) said.

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Smoking in MENA

Lebanon’s tobacco addiction comes with a medical bill

Samar Kadi
Beirut

It is a nice pastime, especially when we sit with friends in cafes, chatting while having a “smoke,” said Nada Cherif.

Cherif said she was never enticed to smoke cigarettes but she is a regular user of nargile – also known as shisha, hookah or water pipe – which has become an epidemic trend in Lebanon.

Cherif insisted that she is not a tobacco addict. “I have friends who smoke the nargile more than once a day and alternate with cigarettes,” she said.

Lebanon has been ranked among the world’s highest tobacco-consumming countries in recent years. In 2015, a report by the World Health Organisation (WHO) put Lebanon third for the highest cigarette consumption per capita.

“It is no surprise that we have the highest cancer rate in the region,” said Nadine Chatila, director of communications at the American University of Beirut Medical Centre (AUBMC). “The problem is that indoor smoking is allowed in many public places. Shisha is easily accessible and you can even have it delivered to your home at a cheap price.”

AUBMC’s cancer department estimates that 8,000 cases of cancer are reported in Lebanon annually. Dr Nagi Saghir, professor of haematology and oncology at the breast cancer centre at AUBMC, has stated that cases are divided equally between the sexes and that, among the 6,000 cases of cancer in women, 1,760 are breast cancer.

Recent studies indicated that most shisha smokers in Lebanon are women and young. Lebanon are among the heaviest shisha smokers in the world.

Oncoologist Dr Joseph Makdessi noted that cancer prevalence has risen globally, not only in Lebanon, with lung cancer being the most common type of disease.

“Almost 80% of lung cancer cases are related directly to smoking,” Makdessi said. “Among females, cases of breast cancer are the highest, whereas prostate cancer is the most common among men.”

While smoking could be one of the main causes for lung cancer, other factors are relevant for the increase in cancer cases, Makdessi said.

“There is no single cause of cancer,” he said. “The cause is multifactorial. You cannot blame it exclusively on smoking, or pollution, or diet, et cetera. It is a combination of several factors and people with a predisposition to genetic mutations are more likely to be affected.”

“Also, people today have a longer life expectancy and it is natural that in view of the population growth you would have an increase in cancer cases. What is important to assess here is the age of the patient. Is it mostly affecting the elderly or is it increasing among the young?”

The Lebanese Ministry of Health stated that the rate of cancer diagnosis in women increased by 7.5% yearly in 2015 and 2016. And the figure was based on statistics of people who register at the Health Ministry for treatment. Since not all Lebanese seek medical assistance, the real number is probably higher.

With the widespread use of the nargile, in addition to the high consumption of cigarettes, Makdessi said he expected not only cancer but cardiovascular diseases to increase in the next decades.

Epidemiological trend. A Lebanese man smokes shisha in Sidon. (Reuters)

Nargile is a very dangerous trend whose effects will appear in 10 or 15 years,” he said. “The rate will increase alarmingly because the majority of shisha smokers today are the young and they will be prone to develop lung cancer in the future because of their history of smoking nargile.”

Recent studies indicated that most shisha smokers in Lebanon are women and young Lebanese are among the heaviest shisha smokers in the world.

There is also a common misconception that water pipe smoking is less harmful than cigarette smoking because the water filters the smoke. However, the WHO said a nargile smoking session lasts one hour involves inhaling 100-200 times the volume of smoke inhaled with a single cigarette and exposes the smoker to higher amounts of toxic materials than found in cigarettes.

AUBMC has begun a social media campaign to raise awareness about the link between smoking tobacco from a water pipe, also known as “hubbly bubbly,” and cancer. The campaign’s video was shared on Facebook to mark World Cancer Day on February 4. AUBMC offers a smoking cessation programme that costs $166 and includes eight 45-minute sessions of counselling and therapy.

In 2021, Lebanon enacted a law intended to limit cigarette and tobacco consumption. However, Law 174 outlawing smoking in closed public places has been notoriously disregarded, especially in pubs, nightclubs and cafes.

The legislature also introduced the concept of displaying health warnings on cigarette packaging in hopes that the messages would deter people from smoking.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society section editor.
Resilient water sectors needed in arid MENA region

Roufam Nahhas

Dead Sea

Just better place than the sandy shore of the Dead Sea where water-stressed coun-
tries, to host the Global Observatory for Water and Peace.

The international facility aimed at present global efforts to activate efforts to benefit from water for holistic peace in the region as its main-
duty during the Fifth Arab Water Week.

Organised by the Arab Coun-
tries Water Utilities Association (ACWA), the Ministry of Water and Irrigation and the Arab Ministerial Water Council, ACWW focused on sustainable development in water and sanitation in line with the UN Sustainable Development Goals, which call for clean water and sanitation for all by 2030.

Water scarcity is a challenge to security in the mostly and Mid- dle East. Increasing water issues have even become more complex for two reasons, including lessen-
ing rainfall and greater demand for water.

“The Arab region faces a growing water deficit which is expected to reach 130 million cubic metres by 2025,” Soboh said. “It is seeking to reduce administrat-
e and physical losses through rehabilitation of water networks, while continuing programmes to confront water theft.

Unaccountable water losses, such as leakage and theft, account for 50% of total water supplied by Jordanian regional network, Soboh said, quoting USAID figures.

“Water for development is a com-
mon regional challenge with water deficit expected to reach 130 million cubic metres in the Arab world by 2050,” Soboh said. “It necessitates investments at a higher scale espe-
cially in the infrastructure with a price tag of 1.340 billion 1.460 billion to face the deficit. These chal-
dles require extra effort by all countries and major players to find practical solutions.

Despite Jordan’s severe water scarcity, more than 94% of Jordani-
a have access to safe drinking water and 95% have access to im-
proved sanitation. These are some of the highest rates in the MENA region, the Ministry of Water and Irrigation 2018 report stated.

“The participation of a UAE de-
legation in the AWWE reflects the
support and interest of the UAE in leadership in critical issues, a common concern for all countries of the Arab region,” said Shamma al-Makki, an official at Abu Dhabi Water and Electricity Authority.

“We have shared the UAE’s expe-
rience in this sector which is at the core of the development the coun-
try is witnessing and at the same time we learn from others.”

Since 2012, the number of people globally gaining access to improved sanitation has risen from 54% to 66% but 2.3 billion people still do not have toilets or improved latrines, the World Health Organisa-
tion said.

Roufam Nahhas is a journalist based in Jordan.

UAE basks in limelight with nine wetlands on Ramsar list

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Dubai

As it marked the World Wet-
lands Day, the United Arab Emirates also celebrated hosting nine international-
ly recognised wetlands on the Ramsar list.

The Hatta Mountain Reserve in Dubai is the site most recently cho-
sen for the honour. The Ramsar Convention Secretariat announced the list on the eve of World Wetlands Day, February 2.

In addition to the Hatta Mountain Reserve, Dubai has two other sites on the Ramsar List of Wetlands of International Importance: the Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctuary and the Jebel Ali Wildlife Sanctuary. The latter was added last October at the Conference of Contracting Parties to Ramsar Convention on Wetlands in Dubai.

The United Arab Emirates recog-
nised the link between environ-
ment and climate change when it renamed the Ministry of Environ-
ment and Water as the Ministry of Climate Change and Environment three years ago.

Abdul Razzak Al-Zayoudi, UAE Climate Change and Environment Minister, said, “The country’s envi-
ronmental efforts have led to the designation of 43 protected areas that are internationally acclaimed to provide shelter to many of the species considered threatened by the International Union for Conser-
vation of Nature.

Environmentalists lauded the move as a demonstration of the Emirates’ commitment to a green economy and sustainability.

Mohammed Ali Reza Khan, the prin-
cipal wildlife specialist at Dubai Rainforest, said: “It is great news for such a developing industrial and economic region as the UAE.

The four-areas of the UAE are appre-
ciable.”

“The characteristics of the wet-
lands need to be protected at all costs and not compromised for de-
velopmental activities. The UAE has made great progress in protecting most protected areas are divided into zones and the latter, limited economic and recrea-
tional activities can be carried out in line with developmental goals which do not compromise with na-
ture,” he said.

Hatta, about 130km east of Dubai, is a vast mountainous area with a mountainous bor-
dering Oman. The mountains re-
ce over about 30% of the UAE’s total annual rainfall.

Amid the scarcity of freshwater wetlands in the region, the site rep-
resents a rare mountain freshwater

ecosystem, which is home to a number of rare species. It supports 19% of all the plant species in the coun-
try, 29% of its dragonflies, 27% of its

birds, 46% of its mammals and 30% of its reptiles and amphibians, some of which are considered threatened.

The site is one of the few along the mountain range with breeding habitats for water birds, fish and amphibians.

Jebel Ali Wildlife Sanctuary was established in 1998 and spans nearly 23 sq. km. It is recognised by the Convention on Biological Diver-
sity as one of the Ecologically and Biologically Significant Areas in the Arabian Gulf.

With diverse habitats that include coral reefs, mangroves, shallow la-
gos, seagrasses, oyster beds and sandy shorelines, the Jebel Ali Wet-
land Sanctuary provides shelter to about 537 species of marine fauna and flora.

The area supports the survival of two threatened species of ma-
rine reptiles, the green turtle and the hawksbill turtle. Both species use the area as breeding grounds.

The sandy beaches of Jebel Ali are main breeding sites for the critically endangered hawksbill turtle in the UAE and the only one in the UAE.

The UAE became a member of the Ramsar Convention in 2007 and since then has pioneered wetland preservation.

The Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctu-
ary became the first UAE wetland listed by Ramsar as a site of inter-
national importance in 2007. Wadi Wurayah National Park (Fujairah), Al Wathba Wetland Reserve (Abu Dhabi) and the Mangrove Protected Area in Khor Kalba (Sharjah) were later added. The other sites in the UAE are Bu Shujayef Marine Sanctu-
ary (Abu Dhabi), Sir Bu Nair Island (Sharjah) and Al Zorah (Ajman).

Dawood al-Hajji, director-general of Dubai Municipality, said the UAE “has become the country with the highest number of Wetlands of In-
ternational Importance at the level of Arab countries in West Asia and Dubai becomes the emirate with the highest number of wetland sites in these countries.”

With these three sites, Dubai boasts a unique pattern of wet-
lands. Despite its arid climate, it has mangrove trees, marshes and coral reefs and access to fresh water, which is scarce in the environment at the state level, Hajji said.

Hajji said the Jebel Ali Wetland Sanctuary had “unique ecological features and supports several en-
dangered and threatened species, making it ideal to gain mention on the Ramsar List.”

N.P. Krishna Kumar is a journalist in Dubai.

Looking for solutions. Secretary General of the Arab Countries Water Utilities Association Khaldon Khashman speaks at the opening of the Fifth Arab Water Week in the Dead Sea.

(Acwa)

Ras Al Khor Wildlife Sanctu-
arium (Dubai Municipality)
**Why translation matters for the Arab world**

Khadija Hamouchi

It’s not easy to know which ideas motivate young people to think more because humans are different. We want to translate and create a diverse set of ideas.

We can prove such a theory of change through the personal story of one of our translators, Yasmeen Mohamed. She grew up in a fundamentalist household and had an arranged marriage to a member of her own community. When she was exposed to lectures of comparative religion and books, it completely changed her world view and now she is an advocate and a public speaker for women’s rights in the Arab and Muslim world.

**TAW:** Are there any translation demands for particular fields of knowledge?

**FSM:** The demand is for knowledge for the subjects that are now neglected and suppressed, such as economics, psychology, evolutionary science, analysis of religion, knowledge about pluralism, human rights, civil and women’s right movements. Many of these topics are banned in some Arab countries.

**TAW:** There is an Arabic proverb that says forbidden fruit is sweet. Censorship produces counter effects whereby Arab youth resist being told what to see and what to think and they want to see the banned books even more.

**FSM:** We regularly run surveys to our 65,000 followers on Facebook asking them how they want to see translated and act accordingly.

**TAW:** In the Bayt Al-Hekma 2.0 project, we have focused so far on translating Wikipedia articles into Arabic. Our readers come from search engines because these tend to show Wikipedia results at the beginning of the search page. We have added more than 750 articles in the Arabic Wikipedia including translated 12 books.

**TAW:** Our articles are the most visited in the Arabic Wikipedia because they focus on very important topics. Articles that debunk conspiracy theories were well received by many citizens in the Arab world.

**FSM:** “Controversial” and “provocative” are subjective terms. Some of our content regarding secularism, religion, women and minorities’ rights have generated some controversy from some segments of our audience.

“Are we not a political anti-volunteer organisation but we embrace some of these controversial books and content because we believe Arab youth should be allowed to make up their own minds about how they want to live their lives.”

“I am focused on empowering the youth with hope and education and preventing extremism before it takes root. If there would be any political implications, it would be for people to reject the censorship and binary thinking of extremists and authoritarian regimes after people have been exposed to a different set of ideas.”

“Considering that we are still a new organisation, I expect us to get negative feedback but we welcome all forms of constructive criticism. However, from what I am reading and hearing, the response has been overwhelmingly positive so far.”

**TAW:** If digital Arabic content has grown exponentially over the past two years, what about us concrete examples of such growth?

**FSM:** “I founded the organisation in mid-2017. We have translated more than 1.5 million words, whether in articles or books. The demand has grown so much that about 200 articles per month are translated in Arabic. We lifted the ranking of the Arabic language to the 17th language in Wikipedia from the 99th.”

**TAW:** We are focusing on bringing diverse ideas outside the education systems but we potentially plan to work on designing a curriculum that advances diversity of ideas and critical thinking.

“Today, we are a partner of the Wikimedia Foundation in the Levant. We are also a partner of WordPress.org, which is designing the SEJAAL, an initiative that is building an app for young people.

“Perhaps another conversation we need to have is on how the Arab youth see themselves, how they want to stimulate their minds and encourage them for thinking for themselves and make their own decisions about their future.”

Khadija Hamouchi is a Belgian-Moroccan social entrepreneur and founder of SEJAAL, an initiative that is building an app for young people.

Eye of the Storm

Yassine Halilah

**Arabofolies festival celebrates Arab art in Paris**

Tunis

The Arab World Institute in Paris has created a festival honouring Arab art and culture that is planned to take place three times a year. Developed under the title “Arabofolies” (Arab Follies), the first edition of the festival took place in early March at the institute’s grounds along the Seine.

Faisal Saeed-al Mutar, the founder of Ideas Beyond Borders, a US-based translation initiative, was at the institute on Saturday to discuss the power of the Arabic language. The Arab Weekly (TAW), which is what is actually at stake with Arabic content, honours the translation effort.

**Faisal Saeed-al Mutar (FSM):** “It’s not easy to know which ideas motivate young people to think more because humans are different. We want to translate and create a diverse set of ideas.”

“I am focused on empowering the youth with hope and education and preventing extremism before it takes root. If there would be any political implications, it would be for people to reject the censorship and binary thinking of extremists and authoritarian regimes after people have been exposed to a different set of ideas.”

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**FSM:** “Advancing our scientific and spiritual vocabulary is one of the issues that we face when we translate science content. That’s because many of the words and scientific terminologies do not exist yet in Arabic due to lack of scientific research. The same applies when translating texts from eastern religions such as Buddhism and Taoism. While many words have an equivalent in English or French, Arab linguists need to create these words and popularise them.”

“Perhaps another conversation we need to have is on how the Arab youth see themselves, how they want to stimulate their minds and encourage them for thinking for themselves and make their own decisions about their future.”

Yassine Halilah is an Arab Weekly contributor in Tunis.

**Arabofolies festival celebrates Arab art in Paris**

Yassine Halilah

**Faisal Saeed-al Mutar, founder of Ideas Beyond Borders, a US-based translation initiative.**

(Courtesy of Faisal Saeed al-Mutar)

**Arabofolies festival celebrates Arab art in Paris**

**Yassine Halilah**

**Celebrating art.** Kurdish singer and musician Aymur Dogan performs during the Arabofolies festival. (The Arab World Institute in Paris)
Advocating for children's book publishing

Mohammed Jamal Amro, chairman of the Children’s Literature Committee of the Jordanian Writers Association, said there were developments that stimulated the publication of children’s literature in the Arab world. This change, however, has yet to rise to the required level.

The Jordanian writer explained that among the factors that have incentivised the publishing of children’s literature was reading competitions, such as the Arab Reading Challenge initiative begun by Dubai Ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum. It has prompted significant reading dynamics in Arab countries and created the need for more children’s books.

“Yet the Arab children’s books published so far have remained images in terms of form, content and quantity,” Amro said.

He also said electronic publishing has taken up a bit of market usually allowed for paper publishing. Each day, more internet sites dedicated to children’s literature spring up, which has improved the attention paid to its form and content.

Amro has written approximately 25 children’s books, including poems and stories. His books have been published in Jordan, Egypt, and the United Arab Emirates. He has won several awards, including the King Abdullah II Prize for Creativity in 2012, Anjal Hazza Bin Zayed Award in 2001 and Abdul Hamed Shoman Award in 2007.

Hajaj Salama is an Egyptian writer.
Jordan's Mount Nebo: a religious site and major tourist attraction

Roufan Nahhas

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abandoned and neglected for centuries, Mount Nebo is one of Jordan's most revered and visited sites, attracting international tourists and Christian pilgrims to the area where, the Bible claims, Moses died and was buried.

Rising majestically more than 700 metres above the Jordan Valley, Mount Nebo was restored by the Franciscans in 1953. The site gained special significance following Pope John Paul II's visit during his pilgrimage to the region in 2000.

Located some 10km west of the Roman Byzantine town of Madaba, Mount Nebo is one of the richest sites historically and the most popular attractions in Jordan. Some 444,000 visitors this past year were drawn to the site, up to Mount Nebo because this site

Tourists who arrive here first go up to Mount Nebo because this site is among Jordan's most visited places in Jordan. For many it is an emotional experience. "Visitors can enjoy the Old Baptistery with its ancient mosaic, a large square divided into four strips of scenes of men and animals, surrounded by a chain-style border that dates to 531AD. "Today, Mount Nebo is one of the most visited places in Jordan due to its religious and historical significance. It hosts the Moses Memorial Church, which was built around the fourth century, as well as some of the most wonderful mosaics and the Franciscan Archaeological Institute, in addition to the staff of Moses sculpture," said Lina Khaled, executive director of Jordan Inbound Tour Operators.

Italian artist Giovanni Fantoni, is credited with designing metal decorations, of mosaics at Nebo as well as the serpentine cross and Jesus' words in the Bible's Gospel according to John: "As Moses lifted the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up." The church is the home of a masterpiece mosaic that depicts a hunting and barding scene interspersed with an assortment of African wildlife, including a zebu, lions, tigers, bears, zebras, boars, an ostrich on a leash and a camel-shaped giraffe. This piece of art, which dates around 530-6AD, is a feast to the eye," Khaled said.

Mount Nebo brought popularity to the region, including Madaba, also known as the "City of Mosaics." In 1966, Madaba won the World Crafts City title for mosaics, in a competition organised by the World Crafts City, a non-profit NGO that promotes crafts as a vital part of cultural and economic life.

"Definitely, Mount Nebo helped in placing Madaba and the mosaic art on Jordan's tourism map," said travel journalist Majdi El-Tell. "Visitors flood Mount Nebo because they can feel the tranquillity of the surroundings and watch with their own eyes the Dome of the Rock and the towers of the churches in Jerusalem. For many it is an emotional experience."

Visiting Mount Nebo, which was designated by the Vatican as a Millennium 2000 pilgrimage site, is an ultimate historical experience, Tell said. "We are talking about the days when Moses was shown the Promised Land before he died," Tell said. "The whole site is a treasure-trove leading to the discovery of ancient mosaic floors."

Visitors can also enjoy the Old Baptistery with its ancient mosaic, a large square divided into four strips of scenes of men and animals, surrounded by a chain-style border that dates to 531AD. Greek inscriptions reveal the names of the three workers who created it.

Reaching the highest point of the site is a highlight, which holds the remains of a church and a monastery. "This is truly very exciting! The church which was discovered in 1972 dates to the fourth century to mark the location of Moses' death. Beneath the mosaic-covered floor of this magnificent church, six tombs were found," Tell said.

The site hosts the St George Museum, which offers insight into the history of the region through animated statues and models that represent various historical periods and portray aspects of ancient life in Jordan. The museum has a section for training on the traditional handcrafts for which Madaba is well-known, such as mosaics, decorating seashells, wood sculpting and embroidery.

Firas Abu Hakam, owner of a mosaic shop near Mount Nebo, said the site has played a big role in promoting tourism in Madaba. "Tourists who arrive here first go up to Mount Nebo because this site has so many things to offer. For us, the more tourists come to Nebo, the better it is for business. We are happy with the results," he said.

A view inside the Moses Memorial Church.

Visitors at the Moses Memorial Church.