Mounting calls to strip Qatar of 2022 World Cup after ‘black operations’ revelations

Former Football Association Chairman David Triesman said if Qatar was found guilty of breaking rules, FIFA should strip the country of its hosting duties.

Mohammed Alkhereiji

Record heatwave points to looming climate crisis for Maghreb

Lamine Ghanmi

S
outhern Algeria likely regis-
ters Africa’s all-time highest temperature, hitting 53.5 de-
rees Celsius in July 5, dur-
ing a week-long heatwave that has turned several cities into tin-
derboxes.

Tunisia’s capital, Tunis, registered temperatures as residents tried to stay cool, with the road to demand govern-
ment action.

In Tozeur, a Tunisian oasis town on the edge of the Sahara, tempera-
tures reached 49 degrees on July 5 and in Morocco’s south-eastern

Precious commodity. People cool off at a water fountain on a hot
day in Tunis. (Reuters)
Accusations, lawsuits challenge Qatar's multimillion-dollar lobbying, 'damage control' PR

Thomas Frank
Washington

A multimillion-dollar lobbying campaign by the Qatari government drew accusations that it waged a smear campaign against a businessman close to US President Donald Trump who was trying to sway Trump against the Gulf country.

Qatar has hired 35 US lobbying firms and paid them a total of at least $19.5 million since June 2017, records filed by the firms and seen by The Arab Weekly indicate.

The lobbying contacted hundreds of members of the US Congress and dozens of journalists and Trump administration officials while spending millions of dollars on advertising that promotes Qatar as a US ally, records show.

Qatari government drew bying campaign by the US Justice Department state that Qatar hired Avenue Strategies Global, a firm founded by a former Trump campaign manager and including a former chief of staff to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, to "provide research, government relations and strategic consulting services." The contractor said services “may include communications with members of Congress and congressional staff, executive branch officials, the media and other individuals.”

Qatar has rejected Broidy’s claims and asked a judge to dismiss the lawsuit filed in March, saying that US courts have no jurisdiction over foreign governments.

In June, a lobbying firm sued by Broidy said it would stop representing Qatar. The firm, Stonington Strategies, had been paid $1.5 million by Qatar since September 2017 and sought to arrange for members of the US Congress to visit the country.

Qatar began its massive lobbying campaign in June 2017, just after Trump accused Doha of funding "radical ideology." Trump took the side of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and others when they imposed a blockade on Qatar.

Trump said Qatar had financed terrorism and a "great gentelman" and "a friend of mine." Since the April meeting, Qatar has expanded its arsenal of lobbyists.

A second lawsuit by Broidy, filed July 23, claims Qatar carried out "an expansive influence operation" in Washington since 2017 and "a high-sophisticated, orchestrated effort to subvert our democracy by silencing its critics and chiling their free speech." Qatar’s campaign aims to send "a clear warning to future political critics about the dangers to those who dare to cross the tiny, but extraordinarily wealthy, nation," the lawsuit said.

The accusations against Qatar are contained in a lawsuit Broidy filed against a former UN under-secretary general whom Broidy accuses of orchestrating the distribution of his stolen e-mail to US news outlets.

One news story written after the alleged hack of Broidy’s e-mail account revealed that he had paid $1.6 million to a former model for Playboy magazine who said Broidy, who is married, got her pregnant.

The article led Broidy to resign from the Republican National Committee.

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The 2022 World Cup: A disaster for Qatar, whether it hosts it or not

A banner reading “See you in Qatar,” in reference to the Qatar 2022 World Cup, in Moscow, on July 12. (AFP)

Iman Zayat

The 2022 World Cup will clash with the NFL in the United States and set up a choice for American sport fans.

Maybe not. A banner reading “See you in Qatar,” in reference to the Qatar 2022 World Cup, in Moscow, on July 14. (AFP)

#See you in 2022

With the World Cup or without it, Qatar is on an uphill battle to improve its tarnished image.

The streets of small regional towns such as Sarakot, east of Moscow, will stay. This will be a challenge for the tiny Gulf state, especially as its neighbouring countries – the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain – have closed their borders. While Qatar has promised to build into 100,000 hotel rooms by 2022, it is struggling to complete even 45,000.

This has led Doha to float a far-fetched plan that could add another layer of controversy to the tournament. Having Iran take on some of its hosting duties. If such a plan materializes, it would put Qatar further under scrutiny and shed light on the deepening ties between Qatar and Iran.

There is also the question of how Qatar will cope with a surplus of stadiums and hotel rooms the tournament. While South Africa faced a similar problem after hosting the tournament in 2010, it had a large football market to cater to close by, stands were even more. Despite growth in the country’s tourism industry, it would struggle to fill the hotel rooms it builds.

Finally, with Qatar cut off from its natural and cultural environment, fans visiting the Gulf for the first time will find little to see beyond sports. Most of the region’s key historical sites are in Saudi Arabia and some of the world’s greatest museums are in the UAE, so visitors stuck in Qatar will be sorely disappointed with their trip to the Gulf.

With the World Cup without it, Qatar is set to lose an uphill battle to improve its tarnished image. Although unlikely, “insecurity,” corruption, bribery, support for terrorist groups and deals with Iran and Arab-backed militaries, pose a similar challenge, says the Hoithas in Yemen, makes matters worse.

That said, if the Qataris are fine with their government wasting billions of dollars on an already almost completely built and under-equipped stadium, is why more than 80 per cent of the population approved in a 2018 poll.
The main concern of the marja’iyah is to protect itself from corruption allegations in Iraq, was even higher. “The financial experts estimate from 2003 until now more than $228 billion has been spent unaccountably,” Faiq al-Sheikh, a fils of the top Shia cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, said via his representative in a sermon on July 27 at Karbala. “We do support the demonstrations because the situation is very bad,” he said in his televised weekly address.

“The measure, however, may take a long time because of the nature of the files that require thorough checks and inspections,” Thun al-Shamali, an adviser to Abadi, he said. Abadi is reportedly transferring 400 other officials, including ministers and secretaries of ministries, to the Commission of Integrity.

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News & Analysis

Realistic Kurds seeking face-saving surrender in talks with Damascus

Sami Moubayed

Beirut

Senior Kurdish delegation wrapped up a ground-breaking visit to Damascus late July, aimed at gradually restoring the government presence to Kurdish territory east of the Euphrates River.

The delegation was headed by Iham Ahmad, chairman of the executive board at the Syrian Democratic Council, the political wing of the Syrian Democratic Forces. It included Bishrin al-Qahtani, head of the Kurdish Future Party, and representatives from the cities of Manbij, Raqqa, Kobane and Qamishli.

The Syrians are demanding a full return of government agencies to all towns and cities in the north-east, the reopening of government schools and police stations and raising of the Syrian flag. The battle of Idlib is going to happen, the Kurds were told, with or without the Turks.

The talks also focused on restoring government services — such as water and electricity and fixing the Euphrates Dam — to the Kurdish territories and returning the civil registrar of all towns and cities, from birth certificates and marriage documents to death notices, which were shipped off to Damascus seven years ago.

The Kurds are demanding the right to keep their weapons and militiam, marketing themselves as the most effective fighters in the war on terrorism and saying that none of them gets deployed to faraway cities and towns, such as what happened with other fighters since the Russians entered the battlefield in September 2015.

No agreement has been reached but the second round of talks is expected this month. Driven by need and pragmatism, the Kurds are seemingly ready for a negotiated settlement and are trying to reach one with maximal face-saving, seeing that neither their statehood project nor their federal government was going to see the light, obstructed by all stakeholders concerned: the Russians, the Turks, the Kurds themselves and the Armenians.

Still although a senior official of the SDF, many Kurds have started a steady and very conscious shift towards the Russians, despite criticism within the Kurdish community and Russian-Turkish cooperation in Syria. They don’t trust the Russians much, especially after Moscow didn’t lift a finger to prevent a Turkish onslaught on the city of Afrin in February, lying within Russian sphere of influence in Syria.

Many had expected the Russians to protect Afrin from the Turks but argue that Afrin was given to the Turks in exchange for Russian and Syrian victory in Eastern Ghouta.

The Kurds are necessarily facing a headwife as they won’t be fed to the Turks by Damascus and Moscow.

More recently, there has been a talk of a Kurdish offensive targeting Kurdish warriors who fled Afrin to villages north of Aleppo. They fear that a wider offensive will be signed off on by the Kremlin, given recent battlefield agreements between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish leader Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

Interestingly, Damascus is playing along, willing to grant certain concessions to the Kurds, provided they don’t lead either to separation or to autonomy. Kurdish schools are non- negotiable, they were told, and so is the right to use the Kurdish language.

Raising the bar, the Kurds asked for a share of their region’s wealth, given that Kurdish territories produce 70% of the country’s wheat, 75% of its hydrocarbons and oil comes from regions under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces.

The Kurds are also demanding an elected municipality and governor, rather than having both appointed by the central government in Damascus. That, too, has been seemingly on, with the government certain that it can control the vote and infringe any elected Kurdish body.

Confidence building is now being tested between the two negotiating sides, with the Kurds seeking assurances that they won’t be fed to the Turks by Damascus and Moscow — assurances, it seems, that are supposed to be decided in future talks.

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

Viewpoint

In Syria, Israel finds itself dependent on Russian goodwill

Kyle Orton

Some saw Syrian President Bashar Assad’s visit to Damascus and favoured his departure. Some, especially once the uprising militarised and jihadi factions made their appeal both-lose policy, saw the idea of chaos and jihadists and preferred to stick with what they know.

The official Israeli policy in the early months of the protests was to side with the people “demonstrating for freedoms” since “the devil we know in Syria (Assad) is worse than the devil we don’t.”

Since then, Israel has initiated Operation Good Neighbour, supplying humanitarian assistance and medical treatment for thousands of Syrians. Israel has also carried out hundreds of air strikes against Assad and Iran, destroying weapons depots and other security threats. Israel has extended quiet support to rebel groups near the border.

These policies have, tentatively and unevenly, shifted opinion in Israel’s favour among many Syrians but they have also provided fodder for conspiracy theories among those who support the pro-Assad coalition to say what they want. The Syrian opposition revolt is a conspiracy orchestrated from outside by Zionists.

Despite the political difficulties, the rebels’ arrangement with Israel came with mutual benefits. The rebels provided Israel with a buffer against Iran and Israel gave the rebels and opposition-supporting governments around the world a line long after many of their sponsors, including the United States, withdrew support. This arrangement is ending.

The Assad regime has sent an offensive into the Daraa rebel pocket. Pro-Assad forces recaptured Daraa city on July 12 and Israel helped evacuate the White Helmets, the rescue workers in opposition-held areas. United States quickly made clear that it would not, as prior statements had suggested, protect Daraa, an area designated a “de-escalation zone” under an agreement with the Russians. The only potential hardware was in Israel and Moscow convinced the Israelis not to intervene, even though, as was inevitable since Assad’s government is dependent on Tehran, Iranian ground forces were involved in the offensive.

Why did Israel stay aside for the fall of Daraa to the pro-Assad coalition?

The short answer is, assuming Israel believes its public statements on Iran’s growing influence in the region, that Israel continues to have faith that Russia (and sometimes, bizarrely, Assad) can or will contain Iran in Syria. This view is shared by former US officials, yet, as I wrote in these pages in June, the overwhelming evidence is that there is no serious Israeli in the “resistance axis” Russia and Assad reinforce and enable Iran’s designs.

The Israelis have tried to negotiate the terms with Russia. Israeli officials have made noisy remarks about eliminating Assad if the Russians failed to constrain Iran. On July 23, during a meeting with Russian officials, Israeli officials, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu rebuffed an offer to keep Iran striped from the Israel-Syria border, insisting that Iran has to withdraw its troops entirely.

The fact is that Israel surrenders its most significant remaining lever and is more dependent than ever in Syria on Russian goodwill, a situation no government should want to find itself in Russia, while positioning itself as a mediator, is allowing Iran to embed itself in Syria, directly violating stated Israeli interests that Tehran leave completely.

Whether Israel was bluffing all along or not — it looks like it was — its leverage is slipping all the time. In recent weeks, Israel has had to deploy its David Sling to defend against ballistic missiles and shot down a Russia-made Syrian jet launched from an Iran-dominated base that penetrated 2km into Israeli territory. Russia was either unable or unwilling to prevent those provocations.

The Israeli response has been that Russia was going along: the freedom of action in Syria against Iran and its appendages such as Hezbollah. Putting aside the fact Russia has stuff directly armed, trained and coordinated with Hezbollah, which it emphatically does not believe to be a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation. The problem with Israel is that it so loudly proclaims that it does not believe to a terrorist organisation.
The continuing threat by Iran-supported Houthis

A confidential report obtained by Agence France-Presse stated that a UN Security Council panel found evidence of the transfer of weapons, including ballistic missiles and internet-enabled unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), from Iran to Yemen's Houthis.

The 125-page report revealed that recent inspection of weapons used by the Houthis shows "characteristics similar to weapons systems known to be produced in the Islamic Republic of Iran."

One of the report’s conclusions is that "despite the targeted arms embargo, the Houthis continue to have access to ballistic missiles and UAVs to continue and possibly intensify their campaigns against targets in KSA (Saudi Arabia)."

The panel saw a "high probability" that the missiles were shipped in parts from the outside and assembled by the Houthis in Yemen. The UN experts also said they suspect Iran of supplying the Houthis with a $30 million monthly donation of fuel.

Agence France-Presse said UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres told the Security Council in June that parts of five missiles fired at Saudi Arabia were manufactured in Iran.

The findings of the Security Council’s panel, as well as the decision by Saudi Arabia to suspend oil shipments through Hodeidah Strait, following missile attacks by Houthis on two Saudi tankers, are not unrelated to the announcement by the Houthis (and indirectly by that of Iranian sponsors) of a two-week ceasefire in the Red Sea. The Houthis’ ceasefire shows the Saudi move has had effect. “Rather than allowing these hostile maneuvers to go unnoticed in the eyes of the world, the Saudi (energy) minister has placed Iran’s subversions of the whole global economy under the spotlight for everyone to see,” energy consultant Sadad al-Husseini told Reuters.

International worry about Iran's regional designs is warranted. Commenting on the Houthis attacks on Saudi oil tankers, US Secretary of Defense James Mattis said on July 27: “Iran has sponsored the whole global rise in oil prices.” Iran is a "bogeyman" that has been "featured in the world’s headlines." The US is "amazed" by Iran’s "constant violations of international standards. They are the exporter of instability across the region."

It seems unlikely, however, that Iran’s direct and indirect provocations in the Red Sea and elsewhere will cease soon. Tehran’s actions show continued involvement in fueling sectarian strife and regional insecurity.

Palestinian disillusionment

Palestinians are more disillusioned than ever about the prospect of an independent Palestinian state and about Western support.

Even before the discriminatory Jewish National Council’s July 19 declaration that the Knesset on July 19, an average of 65% of Palestinian respondents said they were drifting further away from their dream of establishing an independent state, a poll conducted by the Ramallah-based Arab World for Research and Development stated that Palestinian disillusionment has lasted through decades of catastrophic violence and promises of peace deals.

The US administration has yet to unveil its peace plan regarding the Palestinian issue but the Palestinians are not holding much hope. Already, 70% of them said the so-called Deal of the Century (as the expected US plan has come to be known) will “end the dream of achieving an independent Palestinian state.” Only 5% said they share the view that it would lead to a “just resolution of the Palestinian issue.”

About 80% of the Palestinians asked said the decisions of Western donor countries, such as the United States and Australia, in cease aid to the Palestinian Authority and to Palestinian refugees are designed to compel Palestinian leaders to accept the deal.

Half of the poll respondents said such pressures could lead to the “end of the Palestinian Authority and return to chaos.” About 40% said it would lead to an “armed intifada.”

What adds to gloomy prospects regarding a solution to the problem are the deeply divided ranks of the Palestinians. They are evenly split between those who support “the resurrection of peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis” and those who would advocate for the “resurrection of armed conflict.”

Larger percentages of respondents in the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip share confrontationist views. The continuation of the Palestinians’ despair lends itself to exploitation by extremists of all shades. More than ever, a peaceful resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli problem is needed. A peace formula, however, will have to take into consideration the Palestinians’ irreconcilable yearning for statehood and dignity.

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Khairellah Khairellah
The armed sectarian militias in Lebanon and Iraq are trying to force the culture of death on the Lebanese and the Iraqis.

Stealthy aggression by Iran’s agents through the formation of Iraq’s government based on a system of sectarian representation, in Lebanese elections but we also know that a weird election system can be saved. In Lebanon, the situation could be destroyed them. In a country such as Lebanon, the situation could be catastrophic. What the country needs is to take advantage of the outcomes of last April’s Cedre conference in Paris but that is not going to be possible without a balanced and untended government. Lebanon must reject Iran’s dictates even though the latter keeps wav- ing the threat of Hezbollah and its illegal weapons. The Iranian regime is rather amazing. In Lebanon, the regime gives its own reading of the election results but in Iraq, where it has several sectarian militias at its command, it simply rejects the election results. In this situation, who in Iraq is going to form a government? There is no doubt about if it. Militias do not build states or successful institutions.

The militias roaming free in Iraq, regardless of whether they follow Iran or some other foreign state, represent the quickest way to wipe out what is left of Iraq as an independent state. It’s no longer a question of whether there will be a new Iraqi government. The question is what to do with an Iraq in which popular uprisings have demonstrated the alarming and shameful weaknesses of a regime based on a system of sectarian quotas.

Let’s face it, militias of all kinds cannot build states and cannot feed people. What really builds states is respect for state institutions and constitutional rights and processes. In a country where the armed forces are not in the hands of the state, there is no sense for laws or democratic processes. One armed militia here imposes its own understanding of election results and another there simply invalidates them.

What’s going on in Lebanon and Iraq requires a closer examination. The connection between the difficult situations of both countries jumps to the eye. It’s the shameful weaknesses of a regime that will be taking orders from Tehran. The prime minister’s role will be reduced to managing government meetings. What wonder if there are people who understand that the logic of illegitimate sectarian militias does not build states but destroys them. In a country such as Lebanon, the situation could be catastrophic. What the country needs is to take advantage of the outcomes of last April’s Cedre conference in Paris but that is not going to be possible without a

Khairellah Khairellah
is a Lebanese writer.
Ibn al-Zubaydi

iranian officials ignore what is expected of them and, worse, they can’t quite make out the inevitability of things.

Ibrahim Zobeidi

The strategic turning point in the Horn of Africa

The strategic importance of the Horn of Africa contracts sharply with its tragic economic conditions.

The Horn of Africa is not North Korea, it is borrowing a page from Saddam’s book.
Hariressisting pressuresto declare his intention to form a cabinet

Lebanon's Prime Minister Saad Hariri at the presidential palace in Baabda, last June. (AFP)

Lebanon struggles with the sensitive issue of normalising with Damascus

By agreeing to play the game of Russian roulette, Hariri endangers his own standing vis-a-vis the international community.

Viewpoint

Lebanese Sunnis leader's path strewn with uncertainties

By Makram Rabah

Lebanon's Syrian refugees. Named last May by the newly elected parliament to form the next cabinet, Hariri has struggled to put together a lineup that could muster the support of the various political factions. Many assumed that the main points of contention centred on sharing the spoils, and the various players, as each faction vies for lucrative portfolios and allocate funds to bankroll their client networks.

While factional infighting has contributed to the delay, ultimate blame for the length of time taken to form a cabinet lies with Hariri and his government, which refuses to relinquish the one-third quota of seats for the lip service he pledged to give Lebanon's refugees. Hariri's government, which refuses to relinquish the one-third quota of seats for the lip service he pledged to give Lebanon's refugees.

The failure of the Syrian government to ease the way for Hariri's return, and to avoid “misinterpretations” of his statements even though the right to consultant governments, this in addition to normalising relations with Syria by default.

And principally Lebanon, to normalise relations with Syria, Hariri has said he wants a new government that reflects the results of the May elections, which were won by Hezbollah and

Letherlands Prime Minister Michel Aoun (L) meets with Lebanon's Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri at the presidential palace in Baabda, last June. (AFP)

Lebanon's Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri has said he wants a new government that reflects the results of the May elections, which were won by Hezbollah and

Saad Hariri is under pressure. There are reports of Damascus preparing to raise the subject publicly. There are also reports of Beirut seeking to improve conditions for exporting farming products to Syria and the Nasib Border Crossing on the Syrian-Jordanian border. The Syrian government, however, is adamant on receiving official noting from the Lebanon government to that effect before allowing the goods to move. Other sources explain Hariri's refusal to his desire to consider the continued refusal of Western countries to intervene in the Syrian regime, despite Putin's efforts. For his part, the American President Donald Trump in July.

We are long-term relationship with Syria, and the Lebanon and Syria, has seen an equal share of opponents coming together, Lebanon, with its long tradition of conflict, has seen an equal share of opponents coming together, Lebanon, with its long tradition of conflict, has seen an equal share of opponents coming together, Lebanon, with its long tradition of conflict, has seen an equal share of opponents coming together, Lebanon, with its long tradition of conflict, has seen an equal share of opponents coming together, Lebanon, with its long tradition of conflict, has seen an equal share of opponents coming together, Lebanon, with its long tradition of conflict, has seen an equal share of opponents coming together, Lebanon, with its long tradition of conflict, has seen an equal share of opponents coming together, Lebanon, with its long tradition of conflict, has seen an equal share of opponents coming together, Lebanon, with its long tradition of conflict, has seen an equal share of 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Scarcle details are not precluding debate about the ‘deal of the century’

Can a poem be as deadly as a tank?

Perhaps the Israeli government is right and poetry does have a power greater than guns and tanks and the threat of prison sentences.

Viewpoint

Rashmeen Boshah Lall

A mother’s dough not baked
A mud roof that flowered.
Tatro’s anthem of defiance is in line with the call by Mahmoud Darwish, widely regarded as the Palestinian national poet, to make poetry an effective instrument of resistance.

“Comrade poets! We’re in a new world
What’s past is dead, who writes a poem
In the age of the wind and the atom
Creates prophets!”

If only these words were
A ploeg in the hands of a peasant
A skirt, a door, a key
If only these words were!

The “US mistake was [the American] thought one country could pressure the rest to give in but it’s not about pressure. No Arab leader can concede on Jerusalem or Palestine,” one diplomat in Riyadh told Reuters.

The timing of the plan’s release could prove crucial.

“If the politics on both sides are completely hospitable to any kind of engagement,” said Zibler, an advisor fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

“Endless rhetoric can act as an alternative to real Palestinian national demands,” said Zibler, adding that a key question was whether the Trump administration would re-lax a grand plan at all. Zibler said the administration might choose instead to focus on smaller steps, such as the humanitarian situation in Gaza.

US officials told daily Haaretz in June that the administration does not want to “announce an agreement” in present it as a “take-it-or-leave-it” proposal.

“Given the gaps between the parties and the mutual disbelief, the chances of reaching an agreement are not great,” said Ross, cautioning that this should not be seen as the possibility that a credible plan will ever be negotiated.

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Sisi deplores ‘stallment’ of Egypt’s religious reform drive

Amr Emam

Cairo

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has expressed frustration because the country’s religious establishment has not initiated reforms, blaming the lack of change for Egypt’s social and security woes.

There are 9 million parentless children in Egypt, Sisi said on July 29, during the National Youth Conference at Cairo University, and 15 million cases of unreported divorce. “However, when I called for formulating legislation to curb divorce, I was strongly criticized,” Sisi said.

He had more than once asked al-Azhar, the religious authority in Egypt, to lead religious reform, which is said is needed to help the fight against Islamist extremism and social problems caused by the misunderstanding of religion, including an aversion to family planning.

In January 2017, Sisi called for barring Muslim men from verbally divorcing their wives. Divorce, he said, must be recognised by the state only when it has been issued in a written document, giving husbands the chance to reconsider calls for divorce during heated arguments. In Egypt, a marriage can be terminated with just a single word: “I divorce you” three times to his wife.

Sisi’s proposal for instituting written divorce was rejected by the Islamic Research Academy, the decision-making body of al-Azhar. “It is most concerned that al-Azhar, which should be at the forefront of the inspired reformist effort, is resisting,” said Gaber As Foua, a former minister of culture. “Al-Azhar does not want to take the reforms seriously.”

Al-Azhar is the senior-most religious institution in Egypt and has vast influence over the Sunni Islamic world. Experts say that if al-Azhar would back a reformist project on issues such as conflict, extremism and social justice, this could have a strong effect across the Arab world.

At the Youth Conference, Sisi lashed out at Islamist fanaticism and Muslims’ conceptions of peace and war. “Can any nation believe that war is the rule and peace is only an exception?” Sisi asked.

“Can there be such an understanding of religion?” He said more Muslims were becoming atheists because they see the destructive outcome of some of their political and social interactions.

Al-Azhar’s international influence is diminished by its reputation as the oldest university in the world. For years, thousands of students of theology and future imams from around the world study there. Sisi, observers said, was hoping an international appeal could prompt al-Azhar to back his calls for religious reform. However, critics said that al-Azhar itself is badly in need of reform before it can attempt wider societal reform in Egypt.

“This is an institution that is controlled by radicals and fundamentalists,” said Khaled Montaser, a reformist who fell afoul of some Salafist figures for defending Egypt’s Christians. “It is the real problem. The institution that should make such reforms is the country itself, not believe in it.”

The issue of reforming al-Azhar is steeped in controversy. Many fear an outburst of open hostility between al-Azhar and Sisi.

Sisi does not have the power to replace the grand imam, the top official of al-Azhar. The grand imam, selected from among the 50 members of the Islamic Research Academy, can only be replaced if he dies or if members of the academy call for a change.

Al-Azhar has addressed Sisi’s calls for reform with changes in the school curriculum. Analysts, however, say such changes are continuously small and will only result after intense pressure from Sisi and Egyptian liberal intellectuals.

Al-Azhar’s official line is that it is in the process of meeting Sisi’s demands to reform religious discourse, including having conferences in chapters dedicated about Islam and forming a panel of education experts to study what is taught at religious schools.

“We move slowly but surely on the road to reform. This is a mission that needs time to be accomplished,” said Abbas Shoushan, a senior official of al-Azhar. “What creates the problem is not our failure to reform religious discourse but the hostility that is being generated against it. We have to keep appearing on TV to call for reforming this discourse when they are the least qualified to make such calls.”

Amr Emam is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.
Moroccan king sacks minister three days after urging action on social, economic problems

Saad Guerraoui

Tetouan

The dismissal of Moroccan Economy and Finance Minister Mohamed Boussaid by King Mohammed VI three days after the monarch’s speech to mark the 19th anniversary of his accession to the throne was expected, analysts said.

Last year, King Mohammed VI slammed the government for failing to implement a development programme called “Al Hoesma, Manarat Al Mouattasit” (“Al Hoceima, the Lighthouse of the Mediterranean”), which was signed in 2015.

Boussaid is the fourth minister in the current government to be sacked.

The Moroccan monarch’s decision to dismiss Boussaid, which was taken in consultation with Prime Minister Saad Eddine El Othmani, was “part of the implementation of the principle of accountability which His Majesty is keen to apply to all officials, whatever their ranks or affiliations,” the Royal Cabinet said in a statement August 5.

Boussaid is the fourth minister in the current government to be sacked. In a period of tumult, the king fired the ministers of education, planning and housing and health for failing to improve the economic situation in the Rif region, which was shaken by protests in late 2016 and early 2017.

Political tremors. Former Moroccan Minister of Economy and Finance Mohamed Boussaid speaks during an interview in Marrakech.

Rachid Aourraz, a researcher at Policy Analytics, said the Manarat Al Mouattasit programme was probably one of the major reasons behind Boussaid’s dismissal.

Lj60e.ma, a news website considered close to the palace, reported that Boussaid, a member of the co-ruling liberal National Rally of Independents (RNI) party was sacked because of his ministry’s delays in releasing funds provided for the Manarat Al Mouattasit programme.

Aourraz said Boussaid failed to manage the liberalisation of fuel prices, which have soared, prompting consumers to boycott African petrol stations, which are owned by RNI chief and Agriculture Minister Aziz Akhannouch.

“Another reason could be the sale of the insurance firm Saham Assurance owned by Minister of Industry Moulay Hafid Elalamy to South African firm Sanlam, which resulted in a loss of more than [$42 million] of tax revenue to the government,” Aourraz said.

Le 360.ma said Elalamy benefitted from a tax measure, introduced in the latest draft of the 2018 Finance Law and tailored by the Ministry of Economy and Finance in a way that it exempted Saham Assurance from registration fees on the sale of shares.

“The application of this measure to the Saham-Sanlam transaction automatically results in a loss of [42 million dirhams ($4.4 million)] of tax revenue (equivalent to 4% of the overall volume of the transaction),” the news site said.

Aourraz said the king reprimanded all the ministers who were dismissed.

“It is just the beginning of a political liberalisation that will likely hit several public administrations,” warned Aourraz.

Saad Guerraoui is a contributor to The Arab Weekly on Maghreb issues.

Rejected calculations. Abderrazak Makri, the leader of Algeria’s Islamist political party the Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), in Algiers.

The MSP participated in 1997 parliamentary elections, helping legitimise the country’s political transition. It joined the government but was ejected because of a corruption scandal.

Makri said the MSP, after ending talks with political figures, would initiate a campaign that would include rallies across Algeria “to talk about our initiative of national consensus. We will make it an issue of society.”

Algerian Brotherhood affiliate rebuked over call for army to play role in ‘transition’

Lamine Ghenmi

Tunis

Igizia’s military chief and leading political groups dismissed suggestions by the country’s Islamist party to “mobilise” the army to end President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s power.

Abderrazak Makri, leader of the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated Movement of Society for Peace (MSP), unveiled plans to “forge a national consensus on a transition” to “end Algeria’s political and economic crisis” before presidential elections next April.

It is unclear whether Bouteflika, 81 and ailing, would seek a fifth term as president. He’s led the country since April 1999.

Makri called on military chief General Ahmed Gaid Salah to “play a direct role in the settlement of the country’s current crisis” before presiding over a democratic transition for a “transition” involving the army to end President Abdelaziz Bouteflika’s power.

Makri also lobbied six opposition groups, including the main secularist party Socialist Forces Front and Islamist parties, dismissed Makri’s approach. Salah also refused the request, telling a meeting of senior military officials and cadets on July 25 that Algeria’s National Popular Army (ANP) only gets its orders from Bouteflika.

FLN Secretary-General Djamel Ould Abbes said Makri’s “democratic transition” was a bid by Islamists to win power.

“The ANP is an army bound by its national duties within the framework of the constitution and will never get involved in political infighting of political groups and their sterile conflicts,” he said.

Makri quickly walked back his comments, posting on social media that “I never talked about political transition. I just mentioned consensus over the country’s social and economic problems.”

Political tremors. Former Moroccan Minister of Economy and Finance Mohamed Boussaid speaks during an interview in Marrakech.

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The Moroccan monarch’s decision to dismiss Boussaid, which was taken in consultation with Prime Minister Saad Eddine El Othmani, was “part of the implementation of the principle of accountability which His Majesty is keen to apply to all officials, whatever their ranks or affiliations,” the Royal Cabinet said in a statement August 5.

Boussaid is the fourth minister in the current government to be sacked. In a period of tumult, the king fired the ministers of education, planning and housing and health for failing to improve the economic situation in the Rif region, which was shaken by protests in late 2016 and early 2017.

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Iran’s economic woes worsen as US sanctions return

US administration unable to dispel confusion about Iran stance

Thomas Frank

Washington

The Trump administration continues to promote the confusion that surrounds the prospects of its meeting with Iranian leaders, heightening speculation that such talks are not likely to take place soon.

For some experts, such a prospect is remote considering the mixed signals sent by US President Donald Trump as well as his continued expression of hostility towards Iran, including his threatening of Iran and the country’s car sector. A new nuclear agreement designed to keep Tehran from becoming a “mafia” and promised unspecifically, but which ends in a “big squabble” with Iranian leaders, heightening the regime’s collapse in the near future.

Observers say the situation dictates the need for structural reforms. "We’re in a Full-Bled crisis and it’s not a Full-Bled crisis. No one is talking about bank reform, and with their proxies, they have not made it easy for us,” Trump told a rally in Tampa, Florida, before adding: “And maybe that’s a good thing, but it’s not a good thing.”

The US State Department is allegedly considering the imposition of pressure on the US that would make it difficult for Iran to meet with Iranian leaders.

Declarations by Trump and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo reinforce the impression that the US was working for regime change in Iran. On July 22, Pompeo compared Iran’s leaders to Nazis, saying "the Iranians respond to pressure but there must be a face-saving way to proceed." The对此回应。

Iranian judicial chief ejei, deputy judiciary chief and pro-government mouthpiece, said several of those detained had ties to the government, and that they had been arrested for fraud and corruption.

Ahvaz, to protest inflation caused by Iran’s economic woes, was also unrest over a scarcity of goods and fuel, with prices rising even though the 2015 nuclear deal was supposed to improve the situation by ending sanctions. Rohani appointed a new central bank governor last month and accepted the resignation of the government spokesman on August 1, suggesting that he is conceding a need for re-shuffling his economic team.

Pompeo wrote it was hoped to gauge whether the economic problems would convince the government to introduce major changes or to seek a meeting with Trump, who has said he would sit down with Ro- hani to discuss a new agreement. Senior Iranian officials and military leaders rejected the offer. "The Iranians respond to pressure but there must be a face-saving way to respond," Pompeo wrote. "It is not clear if Trump’s offer to meet us is genuine or a face-saver." The Trump administration critics say Washington’s goal is to topple the Tehran government. A controversial Iranian opposition group that has received support from people close to Trump says only regime change in Tehran can improve the situation.

"Iran’s crumbling economy can be the key to changing the regime," Maryam Rajavi, leader of the People’s Mojahedin Organization of Iran (MEK), wrote on Twitter: “The clerical regime has swarmed Iran’s economy by its missile and nuclear projects, war mongering and terror.”

The MEK was on the US terror list until 2012 but was recently removed by the new US government. giàli recently addressed a meeting in Paris. Thomas Seibert is an Arab Weekly correspondent.

Shaking hands require a certain amount of awkwardness and embarrassment, particularly if they are meant to represent a change in the mood or a commitment to new policies. In this case, however, the handshake was more than just symbolic. It was a crucial step in the process of reconciliation and cooperation between two countries who have often been at odds.

The handshake took place at a meeting in Tehran, where representatives from both sides gathered to discuss potential areas of cooperation and mutual benefit. The atmosphere was tense, but there was a sense of hope and optimism in the air.

A new agreement was signed, which marked a significant turning point in the relationship between the two nations. The agreement covered a range of issues, including trade, investment, and cultural exchange. It was a historic moment, and the handshake reflected the importance of the occasion.

The handshake was not just a physical gesture, but a sign of a new era of cooperation. It symbolized a willingness to move beyond past differences and to work together for the benefit of both countries.

The significance of the handshake was recognized by leaders from around the world. There were calls for the deal to be implemented fully and for further assistance to be provided to the两国.

The handshake was a moment of hope and possibility, a sign that things could change for the better. It was a step forward in the process of reconciliation, and a reminder that even in the most difficult circumstances, there is always the possibility of a better future.
Iran's porous periphery faces armed challenge

**Ali Alfoneh**

While Iran tries to expand its sphere of influence in the Middle East, its peripheries and regions and borders are increasingly challenged by armed groups. These groups generally target Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) border outposts. Sometimes, they try to assassinate Iranian central government representatives and their local allies.

The predominantly Sunni, economically disadvantaged provinces of Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan have experienced the largest number of attacks. The IRGC usually responds by accusing “foreign intelligence services” of “encouraging” or even “masterminding” the attacks. It also pledges revenge. There is no attempt made to address local grievances, such as unemployment, poverty and limited access to education, health care, and, in some cases, to drinking water. This risks extending Iran’s support for the central government.

**Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan are under an unofficial and undeclared state of emergency, with heavy IRGC presence on the streets of towns and villages.**

**Fright with risks.** An Iranian Kurdish man arrives at the Iran-Iraq border crossing of Haji Omran, last January.

Recent attacks in Kurdistan and Sistan-Baluchestan and the regime’s response illustrate the dynamics in Iran’s periphery. On July 21, the public relations bureau of the IRGC’s Hamedan Province issued a statement condemning a “terrorist attack” that targeted an IRGC border outpost in the region. It also condemned a “terrorist attempt made to address local grievances, such as unemployment, poverty, and lack of access to education, health care, and, in some cases, drinking water.” This is a veiled threat to close the Strait of Hormuz.

**An action that closes the Strait of Hormuz would almost certainly lead to a direct military confrontation.**

An action that closes the Strait of Hormuz would almost certainly lead to a direct military confrontation. The International Crisis Group (ICG) issued an analysis that concluded Tehran would be “unlikely to go too far in tangling with the US Navy with its superior capabilities.” More likely, the ICG said, “Iran might choose indirect retaliation against US forces in Iraq and Syria, which are in close proximity to the Gulf.”

Mark Habeeb

The US Navy has been in the Gulf involving an estimated 100 vessels, most of which are involved in potential showdowns with the Iranian navy. Iran has been firing at US ships in the Gulf but there is no indication that IRGC ships are involved in the confrontations, which began August 2.

The Iraqi government’s Central Command issued a statement saying that “we are aware of the increase in Iranian naval operations within the Arabian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Oman. We are monitoring it closely and will continue to work with our partners to ensure freedom of navigation and free flow of commerce in international waterways.”

The statement added that “we also continue to advocate for all maritime forces to conform to international maritime customs, standards and laws.”

Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) maintains its own vessels that periodically harass US ships in the Gulf but there is no indication IRGC ships are involved in the confrontations, which began August 2.

Iranian naval exercises in the Gulf: A calculated provocation?

**Ali Alfoneh**

Attending a graduation ceremony of Iranian Navy cadets in Noshahr.

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

**Threatening words and naval exercises aside, US analysts say it is highly unlikely that Iran would try and choke off the Strait of Hormuz by shipping, a move that would have a devastating effect on global oil prices and supplies.**

An elevated threat level alone could raise insurance rates on shipping through the strait, which could lead to higher prices for oil and natural gas. The US Energy Information Administration calls the Strait of Hormuz “the world’s most important choke point” and any serious attempt by Iran to block the Strait would represent a dangerous escalation in the region. In the past, the US Navy has been closely monitoring and warning the Iranian navy to keep its ships away from the US and Gulf Cooperation Council states.

An action that closes the Strait of Hormuz would almost certainly lead to a direct military confrontation. The ICG issued an analysis that concluded Tehran would be “unlikely to go too far in tangling with the US Navy with its superior capabilities.” More likely, the ICG said, “Iran might choose indirect retaliation against US forces in Iraq and Syria, which are in close proximity to the Gulf.”

Mark Habeeb is a visiting scholar at the Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington.
Turkish-US ties on the brink as Washington imposes sanctions on Erdogan's ministers

Istanbul

Turkish-US relations have been strained by the biggest crisis of their 70-year history. Washington imposed sanctions against two Turkish government officials over their role in the detention of a US pastor in Turkey.

The pressure from Washington to force the release of pastor Andrew Brunson is running a bilateral spat into a more fundamental question of sovereignty in the eyes of the Ankara government, making a solution more difficult. Turkey's currency, the lira, sunk to new lows against the dollar and the euro, increasing concerns about a full-blown economic crisis in Turkey.

A meeting between the Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu and US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at the on the sidelines of an Association of South-East Asian Nations conference August 3 in Singapore failed to solve the crisis. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan did not comment on the sanctions decision.

Brunson was arrested nearly two years ago in the western Turkish city of Izmir on charges of cooperating with coup plotters and terrorist organisations. A local court ordered his transfer from jail to house arrest on August 1. The chaotic spat between Washington and Ankara is not just about Brunson, and US officials said the pastor will not be able to force his release.

After public warnings by US President Donald Trump and Vice-President Mike Pence, the US government on August 1 placed sanctions on Turkey's Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and Interior Minister Suleyman Soylu over their part in Brunson's detention.

The sanctions are symbolic, because the two ministers do not have assets in the United States that could be blocked. However, the political signal of the move for a relationship that is in the doldrums is clear.

Erdogan's key allies have denigrated the United States and have called on the government to re-record Ankara's stance against Brunson. "You will not be able to force us to step on Turkey's independence," Erdogan said in a statement. "You will not be able to force us to make concessions with the help of sanctions," Erdogan said. "It should not be forgotten that the United States will lose Turkey as a strong and serious partner if it doesn't change its mind.

The Brunson crisis has "allowed Erdogan to refocus the debate around an embarrassing and farcical trial as a diplomatic spat about Tur- key's foreign policy", Erdogan said. "It shows how well that the rally-round-theflag effect of anti-terrorism rhetoric would silence the few critical voices in Turkey raising the plight of the pastor.

Turkish officials say Trump's calls for Brunson's release reflect a desire by the US administration to please Christian-fundamentalist voters. "It is out of the question for us to accept threatening language in an Evangel- list and Zionist mentality," Erdogan said on August 1. "We will continue on the path that we believe in without caving in the slightest from our independence."

The pressure from Washington shows no signs of abating. A court in Izmir rejected an appeal by Brunson's lawyer to free the pastor. Calls by the United States to release three local ministers of the consulate staff detained in Turkey under ac- cusations similar to those levied against Brunson have also led to no results.

The cases are additional complications for a relationship beset by deep differences. Washington has angered Ankara with continued sup- port for a Kurdish group in northern Syria that is seen as a terrorist group by Turkey. The US government has failed to convince US authorities to extradite Fethullah Gulen, a Pennsylva- nia-based Muslim cleric who is accused by Ankara of masterminding a coup attempt in Turkey in 2016.

Turkey says a senior minister of a state-owned bank was convicted in a US court because of fabricated evi- dence provided by Gulen supporters.

The United States is criticising Er- dogan's decision to buy the S-400 Russian missile defence system. A bill passed by the US Senate, but awaiting further legislative action, would delay the delivery of 100 US-made F-35 fighter jets to Turkey because of the S-400 deal. Erdogan has sought to build a strong relationship with Russia, a key player in Syria, and has met with Russian President Vladimir Putin a dozen times in two years.

Turkish nationalists say the crisis has been turned into a test of statesmanship in a watershed moment. "The strate- gic partnership between Turkey and the United States is finished," wrote Ibrahim Karagul, editor of the pro- government West Taraf newspaper. "The United States has become the biggest threat facing Turkey."

No Turkish government official has advocated taking the country out of NATO or other institutions in which Turkey and the United States work together but Soner Cagaptay, director of the Turkish Program at the Washington Institute, said the rift could have long-term consequences. "A potential rupture between Turkey and the US could result in the unmooring of Turkey from the West," Cagaptay wrote on Twitter.

In a sign that the United States has lost its position as a central factor in Turkey's foreign policy, Erdogan excluded the Trump administration from the list of invitees for a meet- ing on Syria, scheduled to take place September 7 in Istanbul. The Turk- ish leader said Russia, Germany and France had been invited to the con- ference.

Arm-wrestling or not, Turkey's spat with the West leaves a mark

The political elite in the West and Turkey understand that they need each other and no one must cross the line that could lead to a diplomatic shutdown.

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Erdogan fiddles with glee as Turkish lira goes down in flames

Yavuz Baydar

With the Brunson case and US sanctions, Erdogan may have found the perfect way to divert the blame.

Stephen Starr

Erdogan's party seeks power for a generation

Endorsements

Debate

turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his advisers are nothing if not blessed with foresight. After Erdogan emerged victorious in last year’s closely fought referendum to enact an executive presidency, data emerged that worried him and his party: economic insecurity.

Erdogan has been rewarded for the outcome. In last month’s election, several parliamentary seats went to young, tech-savvy AKP members. By adjusting the law to directly address young voters, the AKP is setting in motion a project that could see it control the country for a generation. More than 1.5 million first-time voters were eligible to vote in June’s presidential and parliamentary elections. They are part of a new generation, one that has not lived through the 1980s or 1990s, a time when stores were filled with only the most basic goods. The 1980s and 1990s were also a time that services such as electricity and waste disposal were patchy at best. Back then, political stability was almost always out of reach for military coups and minority government coalitions resulted in greater political and economic stagnation.

Today’s 18- to 20-year-olds make up a cohort that has only lived with Erdogan in power. During Erdogan’s rule, Turkey has been physically and economically transformed and national pride has been restored. Young people, of course, have been told by their parents and grandparents how much better life has been under Erdogan in power. Erdogan has defeated all comers and overcome all challenges during his 11 years in power, be it a regional or a financial crisis. If Brunson is released, politicians are sure to argue for a wide-angle view of the benefits of Erdogan’s presidency. If Brunson is not released, politicians are sure to argue for a narrow-view of the benefits of Erdogan’s presidency.

For Erdogan to get through the coming period of economic instability, he needs to have young people on his side.
How will UK Foreign Secretary Jeremy Hunt deal with the Middle East?

Malcolm Shafey

London

ew British Foreign Secre-

tary Jeremy Hunt is facing a tough challenge to outline and promote British policies in a Middle East that is more divided than ever but many say he will prove more solid and steady presence than his predecessor.

Even while serving as health sec-

detary for six years, Hunt showed an interest in foreign policy and particularly the Middle East, in-

cluding taking strong stances on the Palestinians’ situation and Hezbollah.

Hunt is known to support a stronger line on Hezbollah than current UK policies. He has explic-

tly called for an outright ban on the group to be considered rather than the current position, which differentiates between Hezbollah’s political activities and its military wings. While it is unclear whether Hunt intends to overturn Foreign Office policy on Hezbollah, his appointment is a sign to those who support stronger British action against the group.

“Hizbollah’s beliefs are outra-

geous, disgusting and should be condemned at every opportunity,” I deplore the group in its entirety,” Hunt said in a statement carried by his constituency website. “The UK government has long held the

view that elements of Hezbollah are considered to be a terrorist organisation and supporting it is illegal describing Assad’s campaign in Syria as ‘brutal’ and

criticising President Bashar Assad, includ-

ing taking strong stances on the Palestinians and Jerusalem. He has also spo-

ken out against the pro-Palestinian Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions

(BDS) movement.

Another issue on which Hunt’s position appears ambivalent is Syria.

He has spoken out against Syri-

an President Bashar Assad, includ-

ing his alleged use of chemical weapons, and he has called for the removal of Assad’s campaign to take control of Eastern Ghouta as “brutal” and condemned it.

On a visit to Syria in 2007 courtesy of


Viewpoint

Fear of migrants unites right-wing populists in US, Europe

Mark Bajbub

US and European versions of right-wing populism have much in common: A call for a return to tradition and hostility to globalisation, multilateralism and multiculturalism. The refugee crisis is headed by Assad’s father-in-law

President Bashar al-Assad, who has been on the ascendance. Pop-

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Italy trumps France in Libya: UN also stands to lose

Michel Cousins

Tunis

mid the barely disguised Thanksgiving speech on Novem-
ber 10, US President Donald Trump was in Paris to
spread the Good News about American–French
cooperation. His two-day visit included visits with
President Emmanuel Macron as well as the Italian
Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte. The latter was the
natural partner for the US president during his
visit, as France has been trying to ensure the referen-
tum on the HoR to deliver any refer-
dendum law is likely to subside.

A Rome conference, which would be difficult
to organise before the end of
September, is likely to make the
September deadline impossible.

However, the Italian government
went on the offensive at the end of
July, dismissing Macron’s election
plans as shortsighted. Libya needs
stability and reconciliation first,
the government said, and therefore
it was not willing to get involved
in the HoR’s project.

The White House has not con-
firmed this but there have been no
tweets from Trump denouncing Con-
te’s claims. Nor can there be any
doubt about a new American alli-
ance with Italy. The Italian govern-
ment is Trump’s new best friend in
Europe. Both the US president
and the Italian prime minister
have a leading role.

A Rome conference, which would
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September deadline impossible.

The conference is not only a shot
across the bow of French policy in
Libya. It is likely to seriously un-
dermine UN efforts at a settlement.

With a Rome conference — organ-
ised by an Italy backed by Washing-
ton that says elections need to be
postponed — on the horizon to try
to solve the Libyan crisis the pres-
sident of the HoR to deliver any ref-
dendum law is likely to subside.

In his report to the UN Security Council on July 16, Salame warned that, because of the complexity of the
Libya crisis, the international community had to work as one and back his Libya action plan. “If even
a single member state chooses to
act alone, ... the process will go no-
where,” he said.

He probably was not thinking of
Italy at the time but Conte’s in-
tervention and Trump’s support
for him have turned the tables on
France and are likely to unravel UN-
SMIL’s efforts to ensure an election
timetable.

Michel Cousins is a contributor to
The Arab Weekly on Libyan issues.

Most of the 5,000 Chinese private
security companies cannot operate in
highly volatile areas and the ones in
Iraq are exceptions.
Planning minister says Egypt is on the right track

**Viewpoint**

Saudia Aramco may take controlling stake in SABIC, delaying IPO

**Jareer Elbasr**

An interesting wrinkle is unfolding in the two-and-a-half-year-long saga of whether the Saudi government will sell a stake in its crown jewel — state oil and gas conglomerate Saudi Aramco — through an initial public offering (IPO). The development is significant as it involves one state industrial power becoming a majority shareholder in another state industrial giant to plug up the kingdom’s sovereign wealth fund and help foster economic development in the kingdom. Such a purchase raises questions of whether a large cash infusion into Saudi Aramco’s sovereign wealth fund, the Public Investment Fund (PIF), eliminates the need for the Saudi Aramco IPO or straitens the way for foreign investors to get a lock into Saudi Arabia’s corporate profile ahead of a limited sale, which is now unlikely to take place until at least 2020.

The government of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud is looking to raise cash through domestically issued sukuk and international bond issuance and tap into bank loans to purchase most of all the Saudi government’s control ling stake in state petrochemical firm Saudi Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC). The Saudi government’s 70% stake in SABIC is technically owned by the PIF, which has become the investment vehicle for revamping the kingdom, don’t exactly earn as part of Saudi Vision 2030.

Saudi Aramco said it is in early stage discussions with the PIF to acquire a stake in SABIC via a private transaction and to list no plans to buy publicly held shares. The PIF’s stake is valued at about $70 billion. SABIC, the world’s fourth-largest petrochemical firm, has a market capitalisation of $101 billion with 30% of the company listed on the Saudi stock exchange.

Riyadh has faced numerous setbacks since it announced in January 2016 that it planned to sell up to 5% of Saudi Aramco’s shares. The initiative was scaled back to IPO in the latter half of 2018 but slipped into 2019 as Riyadh encountered serious concerns, including questions of transparency in conservative production and economic data that foreign buyers and investors would demand, as well as legal risks from listing internationally and the government’s desire for higher oil prices to support a greater valuation for the state company. Saudi Aramco CEO Amin Nasser indicated in a July 20 interview with Saudi state channels and Aramco television that purchasing shares in SABIC would make Saudi Aramco less vulnerable to price volatility, but that the sale process would affect the timing of the Saudi Aramco IPO.

"The deal is linked with relevant regulations taken into account," Nasser said, "it will definitely affect the time frame for the partial IPO of Saudi Aramco."

There is doubt about whether the Saudi Aramco IPO will happen even though it is the cornerstone of Vision 2030. Saudi government officials, including Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, have said that proceeds from the IPO could generate as much as $100 billion for the PIF to use for investing at home and abroad. The delay in the IPO has put political and fiscal pressure on the Saudi government, which may explain the proposal to effectively transfer state assets to provide income for the PIF to spur investment in the domestic economy, including job creation. Raising cash for the PIF through Saudi Aramco’s purchase of SABIC shares would help the government counter criticism that little has materialised from the ambitious Vision 2030 programme and put off difficult decisions regarding the Saudi Aramco IPO. The Saudi leadership may feel that a cash injection of $50 billion-$70 billion from the Saudi Aramco-SABIC deal is close enough to the promised $100 billion revenue from the IPO that there is no need to sell a stake in the prized state oil and gas firm.

Saudi Aramco has reportedly hired JPMorgan Chase and Morgan Stanley to advise it on the SABIC acquisition. To raise funds for the PIF, the world’s biggest sovereign wealth fund is expected to issue a $2 billion tranche of Islamic debt in the form of sukuk, which would be followed by a substantially larger international bond issue. Ironically, Saudi Arabia may have to be as transparent to potential bond investors about key oil and gas reserves and financial data as it would to IPO investors. Merging Saudi Aramco’s considerable petrochemicals business with SABIC’s expansive petrochemicals empire would dramatically boost its downstream portfolio domestically and internationally, whether or not the Saudi government ultimately launches the Saudi Aramco IPO. It is telling, though, to look at comments made two years ago on Washington’s energy issues for The Arab Weekly.

"They are talking about things that can be measured here," Saeed said. "We must walk the road to the end like we promised each other." Sisi said in late July in a National Youth Conference speech. Saeed said the government was confident that the coming months would see two important economic outcomes for Egyptians.

Egypt President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has expressed concern that some people did not want his administration to maintain the reform drive.

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Algeria reduces unemployment, inflation with ‘easy money’ policy

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunisian

The Algerian government has reduced unemployment and the inflation rate through an “easy money” policy, according to analysts, who said the policy would hamper long-term success of a diversified economy.

The Bank of Algeria has brought back the inflation rate through a policy that could enable the government to gain some currency reserves for the year — to cover $190 billion — double the 2017 and 2018 budget deficits and keep the economy afloat.

The policy, known as quantitative easing, is similar to expansive monetary policies used by the US Federal Reserve and the European Union to jump-start the global economy during the 2008 financial crisis. In Algeria, the result has been impressive: Algeria’s jobless rate dropped from 9.5% to 1.1% year on year during the first quarter of this year. The economy grew 1.3% during the same period and inflation slowed to 5.5% for the year. The government announced these figures about inflation, growth and unemployment to show that it had made the right choices, said Touati.

“The rising oil prices, the Algerian economy will not be in the stagnation many experts had predicted,” said Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia pointed to the lower unemployment rate as evidence of the policy’s success. Economists said since the plan produced gains, the government policy will be unlikely to change before 2019 presidential elections. “More than 200,000 fewer unemployed Algerians in less than one year. That is the result of the government policy to stimulate the economic activities by high spending,” said economist Hassan Hadjoudha, adding that it is “a good reason for the government to stick to this policy”.

However, the IMF in its July review of the Algerian economy warned that “the government may need to resort to monetary financing in subsequent years, which risks plunging the economy into an inflationary spiral.”

“The environment may become less conducive to reforms and private sector development,” said the IMF. “Importantly, the new policies are likely to sacrifice economy’s resilience to shocks, externally from lower oil prices or domestically from higher-than-planned fiscal spending or contingent liabilities.”

Some economists said the results should be considered part of the government’s efforts to preserve the stability of the regime, not necessarily to ensure a diversified economy that will succeed in the long term.

Economist Ali Toubi, who teaches at Algiers University, said planned spending for this year rose to $19.4 billion against $8.1 billion in 2017. The government’s appropriated funds for development programmes for 2018 totalled $32.1 billion, compared to $18.5 billion in 2017.

“For all that investment, the economy’s chances are slim,” said a Tunisian writer.

In their eyes, Algeria would be contaminated by the Venezuelan scenario. Inflation in Algeria was 5.6% in January, the lowest level in five years. The number was expected to decrease to 4.5% to 5.6% or year on year during the second quarter of this year. The IMF predicts that inflation will reach 7.5% for the year. The government announced these figures about inflation, growth and unemployment to show that it had made the right choices.

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However, the IMF in its July review of the Algerian economy warned that “the government may need to resort to monetary financing in subsequent years, which risks plunging the economy into an inflationary spiral.”

“The environment may become less conducive to reforms and private sector development,” said the IMF. “Importantly, the new policies are likely to sacrifice economy’s resilience to shocks, externally from lower oil prices or domestically from higher-than-planned fiscal spending or contingent liabilities.”

Some economists said the results should be considered part of the government’s efforts to preserve the stability of the regime, not necessarily to ensure a diversified economy that will succeed in the long term.

Economist Ali Toubi, who teaches at Algiers University, said planned spending for this year rose to $19.4 billion against $8.1 billion in 2017. The government’s appropriated funds for development programmes for 2018 totalled $32.1 billion, compared to $18.5 billion in 2017.

“For all that investment, the economy’s chances are slim,” said a Tunisian writer. “With the rising oil prices, the Algerian economy will not be in the stagnation many experts had predicted,” said Algerian Prime Minister Ahmed Ouyahia pointed to the lower unemployment rate as evidence of the policy’s success. Economists said since the plan produced gains, the government policy will be unlikely to change before 2019 presidential elections. “More than 200,000 fewer unemployed Algerians in less than one year. That is the result of the government policy to stimulate the economic activities by high spending,” said economist Hassan Hadjoudha, adding that it is “a good reason for the government to stick to this policy.”

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T he results of exams at elite science and technol- ogy secondary schools in Egypt were catastrophic. The failure rate was 48%, a result that shocked education circles and revealed potential shortcomings of the education reforms that are still to be instituted in September.

Testing was done through computers or tablets at elite schools. Students received questions directly from the national test cen- tre and the exams were scored automatically, without human in- tervention. It is this same system that the Egyptian Ministry of Edu- cation intends to introduce to all secondary schools in the coming school year.

Opponents of the new system argue that the technology and internet infrastructures in Egyptian schools are weak.

Elite schools in Egypt are open- only to students who achieve scores above 95% at the end of their junior high school education and after passing an intelligence test. The idea is to provide an appro- priate learning environment for talented and creative learners who excel in science and math. The sci- entific and technological curricula at the schools are very advanced and technology-based education is prioritized.

Egyptian Minister of Educa- tion Tarek Shawky had already announced that curricula and testing methodology used at elite schools would be used at all sec- ondary schools. The project strives to change students’ habits and move them from rote learning to research, creativity and critical thinking through digital technol- ogy.

However, with public anger at the low success rates at elite schools, the Ministry of Education decided to review the exams man- nerfully. Observers pointed out that the ministry’s backing down on digital testing and scoring could be a prelude to not implement educa- tional reforms based on that technol- ogy. Since the ministry cannot assure the proper implementation of the new system, more voices are opposing it.

The plans were to be started in September state that first-year secondary school students would receive a tablet containing the entire syllabus and they would be tested electronically four times during the school year. The same testing application would be used to score the tests.

The educational reforms would eliminate the generalised textbook in favour of a curriculum based on research and innovation. Teachers would become facilitators rather than sources of knowledge and students would develop innovative and critical thinking skills.

Egyptian parents are becoming increasingly wary of the ministry’s plans. There are no more than 11 elite schools in Egypt but more than 2,500 secondary schools. A survey revealed that, if the ministry is failing to implement the digital learning platform, at least in just a school, how can it hope to effectively do this in thousands.

Opponents of the new system argue that the technology and in- ternet infrastructures in Egyptian schools are weak. Work on a dedi- cated intranet serving 600,000 stu- dents a year is yet to be completed. It seems that those working on the digital education sys- tems at elite schools are very advanced compared to those in secondary schools, where they are yet to be used.

Samia Lounes, a psychiatrist at a private institution in Cairo, said with the stigma serving as “a narrative matters. Mental illness is stigmatised in the region, she said.

“Those who can speak with a therapist she could afford,” said Lounes, “I don’t have to choose myself how they got into that posi- tion,” she said.

Ahmed Hafiz, an Egyptian writer.

Changning times. An illustration shows a USB device being plugged into a laptop computer. (Reuters)
London

Navigating the maze of narrow alleys in the old city of Mosul are volunteers from the Wasel Tasel charity, distributing food hampers. Unlike others coordinating relief programmes in cities bearing the scars of war on the Islamic State (ISIS), Wasel Tasel is not accompanied by a media-savvy team that publicises its story.

The charity was established after the liberation of Ramadi in December 2015, attending to the financial and health needs of displaced families, orphaned children and widows. Like the communities it helps, Wasel Tasel is led by young Iraqis displaced from their home cities during the lightning ascension of ISIS. Fallout from the battles that raged over the past three years since the charity formed, compelled it to expand its volunteer network.

It operates across seven Iraqi provinces and its teams’ ability to reach those in need is largely decided by capital it can attract from local and regional funders. The aim is to improve the quality and scale of its humanitarian relief for as long as its services are needed.

Among the longest-serving volunteers is Muhammad Dylan, who spoke over WhatsApp about the utilisation of Facebook as an important platform, he added, has a track record of recruiting by Iraqi oud player Nasser Shamma. “Organisations, including Al Amal charity, distributing food hampers. The aim is to improve the quality and scale of its humanitarian relief for as long as its services are needed. The platform, he added, has proven instrumental for recruiting volunteers in provinces that were targeted in battles waged by the government forces and their allies in north-eastern Iraq.

“We have toured close to 35 camps where internally displaced communities reside. We also launched ‘Salam’ an outreach programme in which we have assisted 50 families for up to 12 months, funding their meals, shelter, electricity and health care,” he said.

“The list of our accomplishments,” Dylan said, “is endless but if had to name one it has to be the opening of the first school in Mosul’s historic city centres” where nearby 300 people will resume their education after years of absence. The $10,000 needed to relaunch Al Masih school was raised by the local Wasel Tasel team, encouraging the return of more families. Dylan said more is required “to address the post-war realities that communities have no choice but to live with.”

Dylan said he noticed an uptick in humanitarian relief initiatives since Ramadi began, filling the absence of an operational state service to assist them respondability over public and health services, nutrition and housing in liberated territories.

“Doing nothing was never an option for Dylan, and the Mount team headed by Abdullah Fathah, as young men and women who witnessed the destruction of their homes in the war.

“We all have skills. Volunteers are graduates or students are bringing with them talents from their parents that have incorporated into relief operations,” Dylan said.

The changes communities felt are only incremental, with only a trickle of the funds for reconstruction finding its way to families living in most dire conditions.

Dylan said he is apprehensive and ambivalent towards the future and service accessibility is not all that haunts him but rather the “inexplicable sight and repugnant smell of cutting corpses.”

Since Mosul’s liberation was announced last October, reconstruction funds have not resulted in much. Fist the bodies must be recovered and buried. In these recent days, 760 corpses were taken out by the rubble from the Israeli Civil Defence, Lieutenant-Colonel Rabbi Ben Shalom told Agence France-Presse.

Many of the bodies that have been recovered may never be publicly identified and some commentators have mischaracterised the city as the graveyard of ISIS. The sight serves to remind residents how the protection of heavily populated civilian buildings that displaced families can rent for as little as $50 a month, Dylan said.

Under fire. Miss Iraq Sarah Idan (R) and Miss Israel Adar Gandelsman (L) pose for a selfie during preparations for the Miss Universe 2017 beauty pageant in Las Vegas, last November.

A glimmer of hope. An Iraqi volunteer with the charity Wasel Tasel distributes food to displaced Iraqis in Mosul.

(Reuters)

Iraqi charity takes on mammoth task of rehabilitating Mosul

Nazli Tarazi

Iraq

Miss Iraq discovers her political voice in Israel

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Whether unaware or feigning ignorance, the biases captured by Idan’s speech discredited global observers and betrayed the promise of spreading peace.

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(Reuters)
The exhibition ‘Art into the Night’: a show of night-time inspiration and torment

Samar Kadi

Beirut

The night, which has been a major source of inspiration for poets and artists in the Orient since the ‘Thou-sand and One Nights’ folk tales, is the theme of a main cultural event in Lebanon, including an art exhibition, film screening, music concerts and opera.

The ‘Art into the Night’ exhibition features works by 18 contemporary Arab and foreign artists, including painting, sculpture, photography, graphic art, video, installations and ceramics. It forms part of the all-encompassing ‘3000 Nights, 3000 Works’ event curated by art gallery owner Alice Mogabgab.

‘I am fascinated by the night and I have been collecting works linked to the night theme for many years because I believe that the night is a rich and complex subject. The night is not only a moment in time but a place of solitude, tranquillity, heartache, dreaming, inspiration and creativity,’ Mogabgab said about her choice of the theme.

‘The night-time theme has fed the imagination of many artists over the centuries, notably since the eighth century in the Orient and increasingly in Western art in the centuries to come. Out of the darkness emerges artwork glorifying the night,’ she said.

A black half-open curtain designates the entrance to the billiard room, where visitors are swept by constellations and starry heavens.

The exhibition has been given an added dimension by its symbolic setting in Faqra Club’s La Boite, the iconic discotheque dating to the years of the civil war in Lebanon (1975-90).

I was a regular frequenter of this nightclub. Lebanese people from all regions and walks of life gathered there to forget the violent fighting and to celebrate love, mu-sic and life itself. It closed after the war and is now reopening its doors to art and contemporary creative freedom,’ Mogabgab said.

Lebanese artist Hanibal Smouli’s painting ‘Aurora’ at the entrance of the exhibition introduces the night theme: ‘It represents the night that seems to be never ending,’ in Lebanon,’ Mogabgab said. ‘At the same time, it carries a mes-sage of hope through its mists tis-tle because it reflects the artist’s identity.’

While visitors are surrounded by words for the dawn that he fears might not arrive.

The show continues through paintings, drawings, photography, night-time landscape paintings by French artist Gilles Marney, which support Vincent van Gogh’s declara-tion that the night is more richly and more beautiful than the day.

Syrian calligraphist artist Zina el Dibbi’s work reflected the night theme in a passage of an Arab poet, ‘May the night carry your dreams beyond dawn.’

‘The night is an eminent theme in Arab poetry,’ Mogabgab said. ‘The Orient has been charmed and enchanted by the night for a long time. The night has inspired Scheherzade who had to create a new story every night to survive.’

While for many artists the night is a soothing and friendly compan-ion, for Syrian graphic artist Azza Abo Rebieh, who spent months in a prison in Damascus, night-time was an endless dark tunnel and moments of torture reflected in 12 artworks adorning two large black walls.

‘I was detained at the security intelligence prison, which is like a dark hole. Once you enter it nobody knows anything about you. It is an obscure place. It had the myster-y and obscenity of the night,’ Abo Rebieh said.

‘The night was a time of pain. The questioning was taking place at night and I could not sleep. I just wanted to end it and hope-fully the day would bring the order for my release.’

Abo Rebieh’s black-and-white drawings reflect the harsh experi-ence she has been through. ‘At one point I was contemplating suicide and then I said to myself: No, I have a duty to tell my story,”’ she said.

One piece depicts ‘The Missing;’ these are people with no fo-unders, that faces are vague but what is obvious are the stripes of their clothes showing that they are in prison but nobody knows any-thing about them and may never know.

The exhibition features works by 18 contemporary Arab and foreign artists, including painting, sculpture, photography, graphic art, video, installations and ceramics.

La Boite’s vestibule, which was transformed into a gallery of stars, leads to the dance floor lit by the glittering ‘Discoworld’ of Beirut and the glittering ‘Discoworld’ of Beirut.

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La Boite’s vestibule, which was transformed into a gallery of stars, leads to the dance floor lit by the glittering ‘Discoworld’ of Bel- eit and the glittering ‘Discoworld’ of Beirut. The imposing night tree of Italian sculptor Luciano Zanoni takes cen-tre stage.

‘The tree is called the ‘One Thousand and One Tree’. It was chiselled in wrought iron and is the second biggest tree created by Zanoni during his long career. The other one is sitting in the private collection of Bill Gates in Seattle,’ Mogabgab said.

A black half-open curtain designates the entrance to the billiard room, where visitors are swept by constellations and starry heavens.

Lebanese photographer Nancy Debs Hadad’s images ‘Constella-tions’ are inspired by computer motherboards. ‘When you look at the photos you would think they are photos of the space at night whereas in fact they are photos of the details that exist on the moth-erboard of computers. Tiny details that one would not notice with the naked eye,’ Hadad said.

The show at La Boite, Faqra Club, runs through August 36

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

Loaded messages. Graffiti on display at the Mashrabia Gallery of Contemporary Art in Cairo.

Muhamad Abdul Hadi

Cairo

If a room no larger than 20 square metres, graffiti loses its impact and becomes a mere art for fit to see in bright sunlight and becomes prisoner of private show-rooms, seen only by patrons under artificial lighting.

The first graffiti to make the trip from the street to an art gallery was a mural commemorating the fourth anniversary of the drowning of the Revolutionaries of the Faculty of Art. It was exhibited in July at the Mashrabia Gallery of Contemporary Art in Cairo as part of an exhibition titled ‘Trader of Simplicity.’

The mural was meant to be a trib-ute to the disappeared by Rezk’s friends but it seems their brushes were taken out of control and tackled po-litical and social aspects.

Rezk belonged to the first gen-eration of young street artists in Egypt, the self-proclaimed Revolu-tionaries Artists Union. Rezk created an independent group and pre-sented several black humour street shows, beginning with the ‘Art is a Street’ initiative in Cairo’s Abdeen Square. The artist’s goal was to bring a smile to the average peo-ple,’ hence the nickname ‘Trader of Simplicity’ given to him by his comrades.

Wild graffiti became extremely popular in Egypt seven years ago. It was a mixture of plastic arts, car-caricatures and cartoons, each with a political, artistic and political back-grounds.

The exhibition at Mashrabia Gallery included previous works by Rezk and his friends, which were all eclipsed by the giant mu-ral. There were also blank pieces, a commentary on the licence of free-dom.

Twenty artists from different artistic and political backgrounds participated in the exhibition. They were united by their commit-ment to freedom of expression. There were no preconditions on their par-ticipation in the mural and each contributed freely. The result was a six piece that oozed candour and spontaneity.

As usual, the contributing artists did not sign the mural. They wanted to commemorate Rezk with an un-signed piece. On his Facebook page however, they published this quote by Rezk: ‘I will stay long-haired, chabby and wearing old shoes to lose all those who care only about my appearance and keep only those who care about my essence.’

Unlike most murals during the golden age of graffiti art in Egypt (2010-13), the commemorative mu-ral did not bear political slogans. At first glance, it looked like a com-position of different paintings and photographs dealing with a diversi-ty of topics. On closer examination, many hidden political messages popped up.

Representations of animals were prominent. All of them had dark and unpleasant symbolisms in pop-u-lar culture. There were peasants with their rakes and scythes; a police dog ready to attack and an army of ants crawling with-out a sense of direction or purpose, an allusion to Egyptian youth.

At the centre of the mural, two gi-gant hands held a machine gun and a revolver. More messages could be found in selected Quranic verses re-produced in the mural.

Artists at the exhibition refused to say if Rezk’s friends considered their work a collective effort. They were acting as a support to the art galleries, which is like using new means of expression.

Art students are often exploited to produce these murals or to paint the walls of some institutions for free. Of course, the paint compa-nies that donated the paint don’t miss the opportunities for free publicity by placing their names on the masterpieces.

Throughout Egypt’s post-revolu-tionary phase, graffiti developed a humorous and satirical quality and played a prominent role in politi-cal and social movements. However, many report graffiti art-ists as ‘a community of teenagers’ who vandalise and deface walls and scribble offensive tags. Graffiti is far from being seen as a legitimate expression against the regime, it is still criminalised as li-bel and defamation.

Mohammed Mahmoud Street, facing the famous entrance of the Ministry of Interior, was the largest space for graffiti artwork de-manding the restoration of civilian control in the post-revolutionary clima-te as propitious for new murals.

The district has cleared away all street art in the neighbourhood, in cluding Rezk’s last piece, as well as a mural painted in his memory by Arab and American artists at the American University in Cairo.

The Minister of Interior’s exhibi-tion said they see the socio-political context while Egyptian mural art-murals. The problem is the shrinking space for graffiti expression. Some said they hoped they would be able to return to the streets; oth-ers said they wanted to stay in gal-leries and hoped they wouldn’t be banned from those spaces as well.

In reaction to political interpre-tations of their work, the artists smile. ‘It’s an open piece of work. Everyone has a right to read it as they see it and form their own in-terpretation,’ they said.

Muhamad Abdul Hadi is an Egyptian writer.
Sharjah, Architecture Triennial sets stage for discussion on GCC urban policy directions

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Sharjah

Sharjah Architecture Triennial, scheduled for November 2019, is expected to contribute to urban development by highlighting contemporary currents of thought and discussion relevant to MENA and South Asian architecture and its social, economic, environmental and cultural contexts.

Khalid bin Butti al-Muhairi, chairman of Sharjah Institute of Planning and Survey, has stressed the need to provide housing for a rising population in a city such as Sharjah.

“Scarcity of housing, especially in Sharjah, is a result of the rise in cost throughout the country,” said Muhairi.

Then the emirate has kept pace with growth, the demand for housing is rising at a faster rate in Sharjah with urbanisation being driven by the growing service-based economy and the resulting influx of expatriates.

“The limited land available and suitable for housing (residential) sector in Sharjah city is one of the key challenges,” Muhairi said.

He pointed out that “in keeping with its historic policy of incorporating people in all its planning projects, Sharjah will in future seek to incorporate participatory planning by encouraging the public to play a crucial role in the policy process.”

The need to provide housing is the most evident and perhaps most crucial shared factor between Gulf cities, said Bahraini architect Ali Karimi.

“Social housing makes up the lion’s share of the urbanised area of these cities,” he said.

Karimi said that, although there were differences between the countries in how they have dealt with the issue, the result of low-density, single-family detached units is the common denominator.

“In Bahrain, we are still reproducing the 1960’s model of housing delivery, continuing the trend of designing dormitory towns made up of single-family units, except that today they are on reclaimed land along the country’s coastline.”

Karimi said.

Recent developments have been driven by a 60,000-request backlog at the Ministry of Housing, of which 40,000 units are expected to be delivered by 2020 in new towns around Bahrain.

Karimi calls it “high-speed city making” and points out the implications in terms of the tremendous ecological price and the detrimental effect it will have in achieving a stable real estate housing market.

What is perhaps most worrying is that the speed does not allow for iteration, invention or experimentation.

The country is reproducing a 19-year-old model at an unprecedented scale with unprecended speed without taking the opportunity to assess what is going on until it is done, he said.

Karimi called for typological and urban innovations in Gulf cities, including changing the role of the Ministry of Housing from a developer to a regulator of the housing environment.

“We need to completely reorient our funding mechanisms as well as create platforms for meaningful open discourse on these cities and their issues. This cannot be completely top-down or bottom-up but requires us to produce more flexible institutions that regulate cities and activate multiple scales rather than sit back and reproduce existing models as state-owned developers,” Karimi said.

Looking back over the urban transformations in Gulf cities over five decades, Kuwaiti architect Hamad Bukhamseen said the dominant phenomena has been that of suburban development.

“Cities across the region have wholeheartedly embraced the single-detached family home as the only acceptable manner of housing offered to them by planning authorities leading to cityscapes that are characterised by massive sprawl,” he said.

"This method of suburbanisation has pushed for massive infra-structure to sustain and continuously provide for cities that are straining limited resources, be it financial, or geographical.”

Scheduled for November 2019, the event is expected to contribute to urban development by highlighting contemporary currents of thought.

Bukhamseen said authorities were beginning to comprehend the ecological and financial effects of such urbanization practices and were seeking alternatives in developing cities.

Regarding the strategies that Gulf cities should opt for in the postmodern age, Bukhamseen argued that the primary focus should be “inclusivity and innovation.”

“We are noticing in our countries across the region is the existence of hyper-segmented ‘fixed experiences’ between various communities and strata of society,” he said.

Bukhamseen asked whether authorities can use currently available tools to create inclusive environments that allow for communal engagement.

“Authorities need to actively seek the dissolution of isolation and it is ultimately through innovation in the provision of housing stock, multi-use zoning and the creation of variant public spaces that we can begin to foster these moments of interaction among local communities,” he said.

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

International award honours legacy of slain Arab archaeologist

Irfan Rasheed

Rome

In preparation for its 21st edition in November, the Mediterranean Exchange for Archaeological Tourism announced a list of the five most important archaeological sites discovered in 2017.

They will compete for the fourth International Archaeological Discovery Award “Khaled al-Asaad” as the most valuable discovery of the year. Three of the sites are in Arab countries and the others are in Italy and France.

Each year, five major European archaeology journals and magazines nominate new archaeological discoveries for the award.

The award was named in honour of Professor Khaled al-Asaad, dean of Arab archaeologists, who was assassinated three years ago in Palmyra, Syria, by Islamic State militants.

Asaad, 83, was the resident archaeologist of the Palmyra site and had spent the better part of his life researching the area and protecting it as historical proof of how people and civilizations can come together and coexist peacefully. His assassins had no respect for the mark’s age or scientific weight. They killed Asaad in front of his family and fellow villagers.

The International Archaeological Discovery Award is the first global honour named after an archaeologist killed trying to protect his country’s heritage. It was established in collaboration with several international archaeological figures.

Each year, five major European archaeology journals and magazines nominate new archaeological discoveries for the award. The winning site is decided by the editors of the magazines and a jury.

A special award is bestowed on the archaeological discovery that claims the most “Likes” by visitors to the Mediterranean Exchange of Archaeological Tourism’s Facebook page. That vote will continue through October 18.

The sites in competition for the award are the Hellenic Gymnasion in al-Fayoum, Egypt; a small Pompeii in Vienne, France; the oldest commercial port of a Somalian city at Abu Tewrah in Diz Qaf province, Iraq; the Cistern House Ancient Rome near the Metro C excavations in Rome, Italy; and the submerged Roman villa in the Gulf of Hammamet in Tunisia.

Khaled al-Asaad award was the idea of Ugo Panizzani, director of the exchange, and Andreas Steiner, editor of Archéo magazine, out of the conviction that “today, civilisations and cultures of the past and their relations with the surrounding environment are more and more important to rediscover the identities, in a global society which is dispersing its values.”

The award is meant to promote scholarly and professional exchanges regarding the nominated sites and turn them into tools of intercultural dialogue. The award is to be presented November 16 during the 21st edition of the exchange in Paestum, Italy. Syrian archaeologist Feisal al-Asaad, daughter of Khaled al-Asaad, is to present the award on behalf of her family.

Irfan Rasheed is an Iraqi writer.
Mahdia: A serene Tunisian fishing town full of character and history

Roua Khlifi

Mahdia

A hidden paradise of the Mediterranean, the town of Mahdia rests peacefully on the central-eastern coast of Tunisia, offering visitors a retreat from the bustling world. With mesmerising sun-kissed beaches, a magnificent sea line and a beautiful old section, the quiet fishing village is the perfect destination for those seeking serenity and calm.

Despite being a low-key destination, Mahdia, 200km south of Tunis, is steeped in history. In 920, it was the capital of Fatimid-ruled Tunisia, from where the founder of the Fatimid Caliphate Abdullah al-Mahdi Billah ruled the Maghreb. The legacy of the Fatimid era lives on and can be seen in the intricate Islamic architecture of the old town. Mahdia's charming alleys are full of life, with market stalls showcasing a tapestry of colours of traditional clothing and pottery. To enter the old town, visitors must pass through a magnificent 30-metre-tall gate, Skifa Kahla (“black gate”). Dating to 921, that gate was part of the fortress surrounding the Fatimid town, making it an important architectural monument.

“Of the ways in which the town of Mahdia is different from other Islamic town is that the old town is hosted in the same location of the Fatimid town with the principal gate still standing till today testimony to the important role the town played during the Fatimid rule,” said Mohamed Houaï, the curator of the museum of Mahdia. “The founder of the Fatimid Caliphate, Abdullah al-Mahdi Billah built the Mahgreb. The legacy of the Fatimid era lives on and can be seen in the intricate Islamic architecture of the old town. Mahdia’s charming alleys are full of life, with market stalls showcasing a tapestry of colours of traditional clothing and pottery. To enter the old town, visitors must pass through a magnificent 30-metre-tall gate, Skifa Kahla (“black gate”). Dating to 921, that gate was part of the fortress surrounding the Fatimid town, making it an important architectural monument.

“The founder of the Fatimid Caliphate, Abdullah al-Mahdi, wanted to build a military town from which he could launch his conquests to the east as he was bringing the Shi'a sect to the rest of the Arab world. He found in Mahdia's strategic location a suitable site to build his town, especially that the town had an already present port dating to the Punic times. Mahdia was the place where the Fatimid rule started, which gives it a unique historical value.”

The landmark gate is a must-see monument in Mahdia and it is connected to the town’s museum.

“The museum has a significant value in the town of Mahdia as it displays a rich collection of both the historical and cultural heritage of the town,” said Houaï. “The town is known for diverse cultural heritage and unique traditional outfits as well as a history that dates back to the Punic times.”

He added: “In addition to the Islamic civilisation present throughout the Fatimid heritage, fibres and artefacts dating to Punic and Roman times as well as mosaics. All of this shows the richness of the town of Mahdia and the region surrounding it.”

The great mosque of Mahdia is a testament to the renowned architecture of the Fatimid Era, which, in contrast to other religious sites, served as a refuge for Shia Muslims as well. Dating to 921, the mosque was attacked and damaged but was restored in accord with the original model.

“The mosque is unique. It was meant to be like the temples of the Roman Empire being a place of worship and meeting of people,” said Houaï. “Unlike the Sunni mosques, which use floral decorations, this mosque displays decorations that are abstract and geometric to resemble the architecture of Roman temples.”

The founder of the Fatimid caliphate wanted to have a mosque that could also host all the people of the town and create a mosque that given value and glory to the town. It is one of those communal places that displays the grandeur of the architecture and also bestows a social value.

Around the Medina, the fortress of Baj El Kebir (“the big tower”) is visible along the seafront side from the bustle of the world. With a suitable site to build his town, especially that the town had an already present port dating to the Punic times. Mahdia was the place where the Fatimid rule started, which gives it a unique historical value.”

Despite being a low-key destination, Mahdia, 200km south of Tunis, is steeped in history.

Along the coast, visitors can explore a fascinating underwater archaeological site: the Mahdia shipwreck. Discovered by Greek sponge fishermen in 1997, the shipwreck, which dates to 380BC, contained sculptures and artefacts that are displayed at Tunisia’s Bardo National Museum. Whether one is strolling the alleys of the Medina, climbing stairs to the tower, enjoying the sea or watching the port, Mahdia is full of charm, serenity and history.

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

El Jem:
Through August 21
El Jem Roman Amphitheatre, 45km south of Tunis, hosts classical musicians from all over the world for the International Festival of Symphonic Music of El Kem. In its 32nd year, the festival programme includes symphonic and orchestral music from Spain, Russia, Italy, Austria, South Korea and Tunisia.

Baalbeck:
Through August 18
Set in the Roman ruins in eastern Lebanon, the Baalbeck International Festival includes opera, classical music, pop and jazz concerts, modern and classical dance by international and local performers. This year’s edition includes Matthias Chedid, Nahla Wehbe and Ben Harper.

Hammamet:
Through August 26
Hammamet, a Tunisian town on the northern shore of the Gulf of Hammamet, is the site of the 54th Hammamet International Festival. Concerts and plays are scheduled for more than a month.

Byblos:
September 5-10
The Lebanon Latin Festival takes place every year in Edde with artists from around the world. Daytime activities are scheduled in Salia, Bachata, Kizomba, cha cha, hip-hop, Samba, Lambada, Oriental, Dabke and Afro-Cubano, in addition to shows and performances.

Dubai:
September 6-8
Written by French composer Georges Bizet, and first staged in 1875, the opera ‘Carmen’ will be performed at the Dubai Opera by the Armenian National Academy of Theatre Opera and Orchestra.

Tangier:
September 20-23
The 19th Tangier’s Jazz Festival will feature international and local jazz artists. Over four days, visitors can enjoy free performances, free dance courses and jazz workshop. The festival will host performers Flo Rusotto, Craig Taborn, Matthieu Chedid and the band Atherian of Lebanon.

Hammamet:
September 20-28
El Gouna, on the Egyptian Red Sea coast, will host the second El Gouna Film Festival. A diverse selection of films is scheduled. The programme includes documentary, narrative and short film competitions in addition to the Audience Award.

Amman:
September 26-October 6
The 34th Amman International Book Fair welcomes 500 printing houses from various countries. Egypt will be the guest of honour for this year’s fair.

Cairo:
October 11-13
The Cairo Jazz Festival brings local and international musicians to perform. Most performances are at the venue halls of the Egyptian Opera, the Egyptian Jazz Club and the Alexandria Opera.

El Gouna:
September 23-October 1
The 54th El Gouna International Film Festival welcomes 500 printing houses from various countries. Egypt will be the guest of honour for this year’s fair.

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

Please send tips to: editors@thearabweekly.com