Hope after Spanish elections

Support to Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups is a major pillar of Turkey's and Qatar's influence strategies in the region.

Thomas Seibert

A plan by members of the US administration to designate the Muslim Brotherhood an international terrorist organisation is expected to be yet another irritant in troubled relations between Ankara and Washington. The move could also put fresh pressure on ties between Washington and Doha, like Turkey, Qatar and the US, a source of friction in the Middle East. Both Turkish and Qatari strategies in the region could be upended.

The government in Doha, accused by regional rivals of funding Islamist extremists, has not publicly commented on the possible designation of the Brotherhood by the United States.

Writer Josh Hammer

The Muslim Brotherhood is “the international Islamist group whose influence on US policies in the Middle East. It is unclear whether the US move would be ultimately directed against specific branches such as the Egyptian Brotherhood or the movement in general, which has hundreds of thousands of followers in several countries but no currently active terrorist cells.”

Despite the Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated groups’ claim to moderate experts see the wide-reaching Islamist network as the Brotherhood’s so-called Rabia hand sign — four outstretched fingers with the thumb lying on the palm — when greeting crowds at electoral rallies and other functions. Erdogan’s strong support for the Brotherhood is a major source of concern for the US administration.

Supporting the move. National security adviser John Bolton (L), US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo (C) and President Donald Trump attend an event at the White House in Washington, last February.

Supporting the move.

In Cairo, after Ramadan prayers come night-time entertainment

Hassan Abdel Zaher

Egyptian tourism sector shows signs of strength amid a more stable political and security situation.

“Arab tourists prefer to come here, especially this time of the year, because Ramadan in Egypt is always colourful,” a member of the board of the Egyptian Tourism Federation. Egypt has a special allure during Ramadan. It is home to some of the oldest mosques and Ramadans in Egypt is about prayer but it also offers nightly entertainment and culinary delights.

Soon after Muslims break their daily fast, many adults head to mosques, especially the large ones, for prayer.

Nightlife starts after the evening prayers and includes the centuries-old Khan el-Khalili bazaar. It is the most crowded place in Cairo and serves as a meeting place for Egypt’s cultural, artistic and literary celebrities.

Supporting the move.

EGYPT

Supporting the move.

In Fatimah Cairo, which includes Khan el-Khalili bazaar and al-Azhar mosque, a millennium-old Islamic house of prayer that has been overseen by the country’s Muslim scholars for centuries, nightly life is rich, beautiful and memorable.

The district boasts many cafes and restaurants. The famous Fishawi, a 200-year-old café that gained fame as a meeting place for Egypt’s cultural and artistic celebrities.

Apart from the Egyptian water pipe, the cafe offers traditional hot drinks, such as the heart of Hussien Square, where faiths and cultures meet.

Khan el-Khalili is crowded with souvenirs shops and stalls selling Egyptian perfumes, herbs and clothes, all precious gifts visitors can take back to their country.

A visit to Fatimah Cairo feels like a journey in time; everything in the district demonstrates loyalty to its original builders. The homes, the alleys and the economic activities of the district are the same as they were centuries ago.

The centuries-old district is known as “Fatimah Cairo” as it is the centre of nightlife during Ramadan but dozens of other places vie for attention with special programmes.

Outside the old city, Cairo’s five-star hotels and entertainment centres offer a different but similarly enjoyable experience during Ramadan. Most hotels have programmes that include delicious iftares, singing, occasional dancing shows and sufi, the meal before the day’s fasting starts at dawn. Apart from its history, culture, cuisine and spirituality, Egypt has an edge in terms of prices. With the Egyptian pound’s low exchange rate — it is equivalent to 17 pounds — Egypt has become a cheaper and more affordable destination for average budgets.

Ghousien said bookings have poured in from Arab countries, especially Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates. “Most Arab tourists come from those three countries,” Ghousien said. “Nevertheless, we receive bookings from other Arab states.”

Hassan Abdel Zaher is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.
The Maghreb region is experiencing fundamental changes that are likely to be detrimental to political Islam and its allies.

The US move to designate the Brotherhood a terrorist organisation has attracted a lot of spotlight on controversial issues. Ennahda has tried to suppress. Among these is the question of whether Ennahda formed a secret security apparatus that played a role in the assassinations of politicians or journalists. The party has blamed Brahim and helped recruit and send people to jail whenever Islamists held power after 2011.

In addition, hundreds of Islamist charities and proselytising societies, which have been accused of money laundering and supporting terrorism. Should these issues resurface before the 2021 elections, Ennahda's political performance might be affected by a likely decrease in its reservoir of loyal voters.

Such issues could promptEnnahda to lose its hardline positions. In place of a new party law in Tunisia banning parties that promote religion, religious or linguistic groups, plus a second law concerning civil society associations and their funding and activities.

The US move could also give way to the contentious files and consider whether Ennahda's participation and not participating in a government after the 2020 elections.

It could also lead to a new election, which is scheduled to begin in 2021. In such a scenario, the move would likely be a key factor in determining the results. Ennahda, however, is unlikely to be able to achieve its goals.

The Maghreb movement is expecting fundamental changes that are likely to be detrimental to political Islam and its allies. Whether the US decision is adopted or postponed, the current political status in Tunisia, the Arab world and the Maghreb states will fall into a structural, not circumstantial, crisis that will last for decades, not years.

Alaya Allani is an expert on Islamic extremism. She teaches at the University of Manouba in Tunis.
Cover Story

US Move Against Muslim Brotherhood

Brotherhood as foreign devils in the detail

as foreign terrorist organisations, it should unquestionably do so," Simcox added. "If that evidence does not exist, then the hard part really starts. The US will have to work with allies to roll back the Brotherhood's ideology. That has proven a step too far for past US administrations. It would be a pleasant surprise if this one could break that cycle."

The New York Times said "alternative ideas" discussed by the White House included "trying to identify and target a terrorist-linked group with ties to the Brotherhood that has branches active in government or in opposition groups that cooperate with the United States. The move could complicate relations with other states, such as Turkey and Qatar, who have strong ties to the Brotherhood and who host members of the organisation. Domestically, experts said the designation would be problematic for the US States in move practical ways. Andrew Miller, deputy director for policy for the Project on Middle East Democracy in Washington, added that Security Council's Egypt and Israel Minister, told noted, said social media that the move would put pressure on resources. "It is certainly fair to object to the (Muslim Brotherhood's) political philosophy, which is fundamentally on moral issues and attitudes towards others," Miller noted, but then asked, "Do you think that pursuing the (Muslim Brotherhood) is so important that you are willing to risk blacklisting other organisations that have not just the intent and capacity to strike the United States but also a demonstrated track record?"

Kelly Kennedy is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Washington.

Strong rejection. A 2013 file picture shows an Egyptian man in Mansura throwing the logo of the Freedom and Justice party, the political arm of the Muslim Brotherhood, into the fire.

If the designation were to go through, individuals and companies could face travel and business restrictions because of contacts with the Brotherhood-affiliated groups and individuals.

blacklisting the whole movement. Egyptian editor Abdel Monem said Ely has described a distribution of labour between the Brotherhood and terrorist organisations operating in Egypt. He wrote in the Cairo Review, "While organisations such as [The Islamic State] ISIS or al-Qaeda made their terrorist operations in Sinai and the Western Desert, the Muslim Brotherhood concentrated its operations on the Egyptian mainland." Establishing connections between the loose-knit organisation and the jihadist network will not be easy. "There are offshoots, such as the Jerusalem Foundation and al-Qaeda. Obviously, they may have originated in the Muslim Brotherhood but it's a big stretch to say the Muslim Brotherhood is a terrorist organisation," said Imad Bari, director of research and analysis at the Arab Centre Washington DC. The designation would be more "symbolic," US presidential spokesperson said. Barak Barfi, a research fellow at New America and Washington think-tank, "because the Brotherhood does not have assets in the US and has not funded or met with American officials."

"It's like President Obama's narrative that he is fighting terroris ts rather than supporting the vanguard. Such a designation would allow him to tell Egyptians that even the United States understands the evils of the organisation."

However, Barfi said he wondered how the designation might affect policy in Libya, Syria, Tunisia and Yemen, where the Brotherhood has branches active in government or in opposition groups that cooperate with the United States. The move could complicate relations with other states, such as Turkey and Qatar, who have strong ties to the Brotherhood and who host members of the organisation. Domestically, experts said the designation would be problematic for the US States in move practical ways. Andrew Miller, deputy director for policy for the Project on Middle East Democracy in Washington, added that Security Council's Egypt and Israel Minister, told noted, said social media that the move would put pressure on resources. "It is certainly fair to object to the (Muslim Brotherhood's) political philosophy, which is fundamentally on moral issues and attitudes towards others," Miller noted, but then asked, "Do you think that pursuing the (Muslim Brotherhood) is so important that you are willing to risk blacklisting other organisations that have not just the intent and capacity to strike the United States but also a demonstrated track record?"

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Even when proclaiming their adherence to democracy, the followers of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology see politics as subversive to the goal of imposing an Islamic model of a country's society and politics. Where does the current strain of jihadist cadres come from? It is a mixed bag, really. Several in the top echelons of ISIS, for example, emerged from the Armed Forces who served in front-line positions over the years, from the war against Iran to the fight against the US-led coalition and, of course, in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars when they invaded. The current wave, according to Abu Bakr, the trajectory taken by Abu Bakr, was shaped by the Bush administration's decision to invade Iraq. This is when the entire Brotherhood was formed and from where today's jihadist movements in the Middle East originated. Their trajectory was triggered by Abu Bakr's failed attempt to form the Salafist Movement in Egypt. Islamists in Sudan and Libya, "he said. Despite his failure, Abu Bakr focused on the need for jihad to be conducted outside the country. This was the similarity between Islamists and Kharijites.

There are hardly any similarities between Islam and communism. Nevertheless, after the death of George Habash, the founder of the Marxist-Leninist Communist Party in the Liberation of Palestine, many of the Muslim Brotherhood adopted this approach. The Islamic Resistance Movement, established in 1979, is a seemingly implausible transition but it did take place. However, the next transition is that from Muslim Brotherhood creed to Marxist-Leninist ideology. At that juncture, the organisations share a belief in the pursuit of an Islamic society in the Middle East, although the means towards that end are different and the paths followed diverge. Even when proclaiming adherence to democracy and non-violent means, the followers of the Muslim Brotherhood ideology see politics as subversive to the goal of imposing an Islamic model of a country's society and politics. Such a model is destractive for democracy on top of the inhibitive effect it has on progress in the Arab-Muslim world. There will be much debate about whether the Muslim Brotherhood should be designated a "terrorist organisation." Whatever the outcome of the tug of war between the members of the Washington establishment involved in the decision making, the process will shed light on a fact that has been politically incorrect to highlight, that there is a non-violent organisation as the equivalent of the Muslim Brotherhood and its jihadist progeny. That aspect of the debate will happen in the United States community of Middle East experts and political agencies and analysts who advocate for coexistence with the Brotherhood and its ideologically inspired activities. This is where the small nation of Tunisia has contributed to the understanding of the phenomenon. Claude Salhani is a regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.

Cover Story

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The problem with corruption

Stirring unrest, Iraqis hold flags during a protest against corruption at Tahrir Square, last February. (DPA)

Corruption-Fuelled Unrest

Corruption is a bane that is found in many countries around the world, particularly in the Middle East and North Africa. It eats away at the fabric of society, eroding trust in public institutions and leaders. Corruption is a recurring theme in the region, and it is often manifested in various forms, including tax evasion, embezzlement, and bribery. The impact of corruption is far-reaching, affecting not only the economy but also social cohesion and political stability.

The problem with corruption

The problem with corruption lies in its ability to erode public trust. When corruption becomes widespread, it leads to a loss of confidence in the government and its institutions. This loss of trust is particularly acute in countries that are already facing challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and political instability. In such contexts, corruption can become a self-reinforcing cycle, with corrupt practices leading to more corruption, further eroding trust and stability.

The impact of corruption on economies

Corruption has a direct impact on economies, both in the short term and the long term. In the short term, corruption can lead to a decrease in investment and economic growth. Investors are hesitant to invest in countries where corruption is rampant, fearing that their investments will be siphoned off into the pockets of corrupt officials. This can lead to a decrease in foreign investment, which is crucial for economic growth and development.

In the long term, corruption can lead to a decrease in the efficiency of public services. When public resources are misused, the quality of public services can suffer, leading to a decrease in the provision of essential services such as education, healthcare, and infrastructure. This can have a ripple effect on the economy, leading to a decrease in productivity and economic growth.

The role of international institutions

International institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have been vocal in their criticism of corruption in the region. They have called for increased transparency and accountability in public institutions, and have threatened to withhold funding from countries that do not address corruption.

The role of civil society

Civil society plays a crucial role in addressing corruption. Civil society organizations, such as watchdog groups and human rights organizations, can expose acts of corruption and hold government officials accountable. They can also advocate for policies that address corruption, such as strengthening legal frameworks and making it easier to prosecute corrupt officials.

The role of the media

The media plays a vital role in exposing corruption. Media outlets can report on instances of corruption, holding officials accountable and keeping the public informed. The media can also help to build public trust by providing a platform for civil society organizations to voice their concerns.

The role of the individual

Each individual can play a role in addressing corruption. By reporting instances of corruption to the relevant authorities, individuals can help to bring these issues to light. Individuals can also support anti-corruption policies and advocate for transparency and accountability in public institutions.

Conclusion

Corruption is a pervasive problem in the Middle East and North Africa. It erodes trust in public institutions, affects economic growth, and undermines social cohesion. Addressing corruption requires a multi-faceted approach, involving international institutions, civil society, and the media. It also requires the active participation of individuals, who can help to hold officials accountable and advocate for transparency and accountability in public institutions.

Oussama Rondhani
Editor-in-Chief of The Arab Weekly
Burial of Islamist leader in Algeria a bellwether of fading Islamism

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunis

The burial of Algerian Islamist leader Abbassi Madani, whose Islamic Salvation Front dominated the country’s first free elections in the 1990s, drew relatively low attendance, which reflected the tribulations faced by Islamists in Algeria at home and abroad.

Madani’s followers said “hundreds of thousands” of supporters would attend April 25 to pay Madani, who died April 24 in Qatar at the age of 88, tribute before his burial.

However, a crowd of 5,000-20,000 attended the rally in Algiers’ Bouira district, a former stronghold of the Islamic Salvation Front, police said.

While Madani’s supporters wished “God will accept him in paradise,” other Algerians posted comments recalling the bloody path of Madani and his backers caused.

The event came while Algerians have been enjoying their greatest moment of freedom with hundreds of thousands of people marching each Friday since February 22 to press for political reforms.

The prospects showed the societal shift from Islamism, which was a legitimate force for opposition by disgruntled youth.

Protesters, with a noticeable presence of women, have made unprecedented references to Algerian secularism-based nationalism and showed determination to incorporate global values of democracy, governance and tolerance in contrast to “us versus them” ideology and politics long advocated by Islamists in Algeria and the Maghreb.

“All the conditions are met to make the funeral a show of support that remains for the Islamic Salvation Front,” said political writer Nidal Alouci.

“The authorities made no effort to prevent that support from being displayed as they have interest in awakening the Islamist beast.”

Observers said attendance by Islamists was low compared to the numbers of people gathered for the funeral of pro-democracy leader Hocine Aït Ahmed in 2013 and popular artists such as Amal Elzaidi in 2016 and Matoub Lounes in 1999.

“When the death of artists moved more than the passing of Abbassi Madani, that means a big change in the mentalities of the people,” said Alouci.

Sociologist and Algeria university teacher Said Benmerad saw in Madani’s burial the end of political Islam as the dominant political force that lures youth.

“I am sure the political and terrorist Islam has been buried with Abassi Madani. The time of Madani and the time of his party are dead and very dead,” he said.

“Algerian youth are not willing to pay attention to the promises of paradise dangled by the Islamists,” said civic society activist Samir Bouallouk.

While Madani’s supporters wished “God will accept him in paradise,” other Algerians posted comments on social media recalling the bloodshed Madani and his backers caused.

“All those people who asked celestial mercy for Madani could be either idiots or terrorists or maybe both,” said Mourad Boualem.

Myriam Hilal said: “My prayers and thinking go to all the victims of the Islamist terrorism in Algeria and abroad at this moment.

An estimated 200,000 Algerians, most of them civilians, were killed in massacres blamed on Islamists during the 1992-2002 civil war.

Madani was tried in 1996 for founding the Islamic Salvation Army to spearhead jihad before splitting with the Armed Islamic Group, which evolved into a jihadist group that became a brand of al-Qaeda in the Maghreb.

Algeria’s Islamist jihadists pioneered tactics of gruesome killing and fighting, including hijacking planes, that were later used by al-Qaeda in its September 11, 2001, attacks on the United States.

No turning back. Mourners carry a picture of Abbassi Madani, founder of Algeria’s banned Islamic Salvation Front, as they gather outside his home in Algiers, April 27. (AFP)

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The Libyan National Army (LNA), led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, appeared to have retained control of the strategically important town on the road to the LNA bastion of Tarhuna.

There were reports of the LNA sending reinforcements to Gharyan, 80km south of Tripoli — again strategically important, controlling the ground they have interest in defending.

There was also distinct criticism of the battle for Tripoli, which was branded a criminal war.

“The war of words between Paris and Ankara is a contributor to insecurity and bloodshed. We are considering a solution to the Libyan war that respects the legitimate forces on the ground,” said Le Drian.

“I'm sure the political and war situation in Tripoli is a Powder keg. Fighters loyal to the UN-recognized Government of National Accord lead a common during clashes in Tarhuna, south of Tripoli, April 29. (AFP)""
Opinion

Welcoming Ramadan

The re-emergence

Lebanon needs a realistic Shia voice

The re-emergence of Baghdadi

Lebanon needs a realistic Shia voice

Khairellah Khairellah

Lebanon has much to lose if it circumscribes required reforms and pursues a policy based on the fact that Hezbollah is a Lebanese party.
Baghdadi video shows evolving threat from ISIS’s ‘virtual caliphate’

While there is not enough evidence to say ISIS planned or directed the deadly Easter attacks in Sri Lanka, the terrorists in that plot may have been inspired by ISIS propaganda. With large Muslim populations in Western countries, businesses, recently warned of the evolving threat and so the “threat is real. ”

And so, the “opportunity” afforded by businesses, recently told a congressional committee that, despite the loss of its territory and the Islamic State (ISIS) caliphate in Syria, now it’s 100% “we've beaten them badly. ”

"This has to do with his 2016 election campaign pledge to wipe out ISIS and Trump's nervousness that his supposed singular foreign policy success will be diminished if the Americans see that in 2020 consider ISIS a continuing threat to the US homeland. ”

"Trump's foreign policy positions in 2016 were contradictory but seem to resonate with a substantial portion of the American public. ”

Continued threat. of the New York City Police Counterterror Squad guard Times Square in New York City. (AAP)
Syria

Defeat in eastern Syria forces Baghdadi of his hideout

Iman Zayat

Tunis

F or the first time in five years, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared on video, proving he is alive despite the crumbling of his so-called caliphate.

Baghdadi’s media appearance, after the loss of the Islamic State’s (ISIS) caliphate, comes as the group is reportedly shrinking. Intelligence reports suggest Baghdadi loyalists have been at war, with a competing ISIS faction seeking Baghdadi’s outer circle. Last month, the New York Times reported that Baghdadi and two of his brothers were killed in an airstrikes by Russian forces.

It comes as Baghdadi’s grip on the extremist group is reportedly slipping. Intelligence reports suggest Baghdadi loyalists have been at war, with a competing ISIS faction seeking Baghdadi’s outer circle. Last month, the New York Times reported that Baghdadi and two of his brothers were killed in an airstrike by Russian and Syrian forces.

Baghdadi’s appearance on video, current ISIS fighters say, was to prove he is alive and in command.

Baghdadi’s appearance on video, current ISIS fighters say, was to prove he is alive and in command. In a post audio recording, Baghdadi shows that he is up to speed with current events, claiming that the Sri Lanka attacks on April 21 were an act of revenge by former ISIS fighters in Bangladesh. Without a doubt, the group is committed to its battle against the West, with access to the first generation of fighters who spoke one language, came from the same background and knew the terrain on which they were fighting.

At one point, the two men were the most powerful jihadi commanders in the Syrian battlefield but not anymore. Baghdadi is out of fashion and halo has evaporated. He terms were far more capable and dangerous opponent, a Syrian like himself, who has an autumn of his caliphate called Hurras al-Din.

The group was founded in February 2018 by a handful of ISIS sleeper agents who defected from the group. The group is said to have been formed in an effort to create a new, more radical version of ISIS.

Hurras al-Din is active in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan, and is said to have around 1,000 fighters. The group is believed to be led by the group’s founder, a former ISIS fighter named Abu Mohammad al-Julani.

Hurras al-Din’s founder and chief ideologue is Sami Hijazi. Hijazi is a former ISIS fighter who defected from the group in 2014. Hijazi is said to have been involved in planning the group’s attacks.

Hijazi is known for his radical ideology and his calls for a new caliphate in the Middle East. He has been involved in planning a number of attacks, including the 2015 Paris attacks and the 2016 Brussels attacks.

Baghdadi’s appearance on video, current ISIS fighters say, was to prove he is alive and in command. In a post audio recording, Baghdadi shows that he is up to speed with current events, claiming that the Sri Lanka attacks on April 21 were an act of revenge by former ISIS fighters in Bangladesh. Without a doubt, the group is committed to its battle against the West, with access to the first generation of fighters who spoke one language, came from the same background and knew the terrain on which they were fighting.

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Iraqis see Baghdadi’s video as threat of more terror

News & Analysis

Iraq

Baghdad

The release of a video purporting to show Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi sparked concern among Iraqis who say the recording indicates that more terror is to come.

The video shows Baghdadi for the first time since his 2014 appearance at al-Nuri mosque in Mosul, Iraq, when he declared the Islamic State (ISIL) caliphate. Iraqi forces, backed by an international coalition, were able to drive ISIL from Mosul in 2017 and Baghdad has been reported to have been killed on more than one occasion.

The sight of Baghdadi on the video was unwelcome news to Iraqis, particularly those in areas liberated from ISIL control. Some Iraqis refused to comment when asked about Baghdadi, fearing being targeted with revenge attacks by ISIL sleeper cells. Others were more open about their concerns regarding the video.

Ahmed Mohammed, a rights ac-
tivist from Basra, said there is fear of an ISIL comeback in Iraq. He said Baghdadi released the video to speak to ISIL militants “in an attempt to give a sign about an ISIS comeback in Iraq. He said Baghdadi intentionally did not mention Iraq, to deflect attention from his real objective, which is trying to activate ISIL sleeper cells in Iraq by all means.”

“He (Baghdadi) wants to resume his activities in Iraq as well as other countries, such as Turkey, Mali and Libya.”

The video’s apparent threat to other countries in the region was not missed.

“The footage shows Baghdadi holding files, one of its covers including the word ‘ISIS’. It is a clear message that ISIL will target Turkey,” said Hamza Tekin, a Turkish journalist.

Iraqis see Baghdadi’s video as threat of more terror

Iraqis see Baghdadi’s video as threat of more terror

Momentum for Kurdish independence stalled but is not finished

Gareth Smyth

momentum for a separate Kurdish state in Iraq's Kurdistan has stalled since the September 2017 independence referendum, but has it disappeared? Relations between the Kurds and Baghdad are improving but fragile. Internally, the two main Kurdish parties – the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) – remain at odds. Despite the UN-endorsed Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), each party controls a separate zone.

The parties’ energies seem to be going largely into internal wrangling. Since September’s parliamentary election in Iraqi Kurdistan, they have been battling over how to choose a KRG president and over how many vice-presidents there should be.

The likelihood is that the KDP’s Nechvan Barzani will be president and his cousin Masoum Barzani will be prime minister.

Nonetheless, the idea of greater Kurdish autonomy and that Kurdish leaders have emerged after the 1990-91 Gulf War, “there’s been a lot of Israeli investment building up their technology and communica-
tions,” he said. “Iraqis see Baghdadi’s video as threat of more terror.”

The conference co-ordinator is Bryan Gibson of Hawaii Pacific University. His 2005 book “Sold Out?” US Foreign Policy, Iraq, the Kurds and the Cold War” focused on Muslim Mustafa Barzani, the Kurdish nationalist leader whose conflict with Baghdad ended with defeat in 1975.

A recent study by the KRG, said he, showed that when he arrived in northern Iraq for the first time in 2016 for another UKH conference, he made “a sort of pilgrimage” to Barzani’s grave in Barzani, the clan’s mountainous homeland near Turkey.

“When you travel around Kurdistan, it’s not what you’d expect for a country torn apart by war,” he said.

Not only is this purely economic development. “Setting in a cafe, I felt I could leave my iPhone, laptop and wallet, walk around the block, come back and they would still be there. I can’t do that in Washington DC, Seattle or Toronto,” Gibson said.

Gibson described decentralised politics in his native Canada could offer Iraq one example, although it would require greater understanding between Kurds and Arabs.

“Apart from the politicians who go down to Baghdad for politics in the Green Zone, they don’t interact,” he said.

The Mosul crisis (caused by the Islamic State in 2014) happened, Arabs were allowed into Kurdistan as a safe haven and given opportunities to set up businesses... “For a lot of those people, it’s the first time they’ve ever actually lived in civility.”

Gibson floated a notion of Iraq as “four decentralised states or provinces: the (predominately Sunni) Kurds, (Arab) Sunnis and (Arab) Shiias would have an ethic territory of their own and then a fourth province would cover Baghdad, which is more diverse.”

Revenue would be raised centrally and distributed per capita to the “states”. The central government would control defence, and each “state” its own police.

Gibson conceded that US actions exacerbated Kurdish-Arab tensions. “It was smart for the Kurds to align themselves with the US before and after the invasion but it’s no question... (this) alienated those who saw the US as a colonial power,” he said.

“From a North American perspec-
tive, colonialism is far removed, they threw off the shackles of British colonialism in the 1760s.”

Gibson said Iraqis see Baghdadi’s video as threat of more terror.

“I don’t think the desire for independence has waned,” Gibson said.

“For a country torn apart by war, the push for independence would not be easy.”

Gibson said he can imagine a future “more plausible government in Iraq” given Iraq’s Kurds access to the sea but noted that Tehran, like Ankara, opposes independ-

ence. Hence, he said, “The only way to the sea is through Baghdad” and that Kurdish leaders have made a “turn south.” They have “leverage,” he said, through controlling river waterways. Potential irrigation and electric-
generation projects require both technological and political cooperation.

“Iranian irrigation techniques... are some of the world’s best,” he said.

“Iran is not the only country that, if applied to Iraq, would be a disaster.”

Many people in Iraq would not want that unless it was “superiorly provided through the Kurds.”

Gareth Smyth is a regular contributor to The Arab Weekly.
Limited influence. Egyptian opposition member and activist Elham Aldroos speaks during a news conference at the headquarters of the Egyptian Social Democratic Party in Cairo, March 27. (Reuters)

Some of those who campaigned against the amendments on the streets were arrested, opposition figure Alaa Al-Awwad said. In a recent video, Al-Awwad referred to a man who was arrested during the referendum for carrying a sign stating his diapvoir of the constitutional amendments.

"We are hoping and feel that nothing will pay off, regardless of the type of campaigning we do," said Farid Zarhan, chairman of the liberal Egyptian Arab Democratic Party. "There is a very limited freedom of the press, while the government acts as if it does not see us.

The constitutional amendments were widely approved despite intense campaigning against them by the opposition.

An opposition lawmaker was belted, screamed and thrust into media and public scrutiny in April for saying he did not like Sisi. Some people called for stripping lawmaker Ahmed al-Tantawi of his Egyptian citizenship.

Such attitudes cause many Egyptian opposition figures to keep silent, rendering the opposition even weaker. However, the weakness cannot be understood without knowing Egypt's recent history.

Opposition political parties complained for years under former President Hosni Mubarak that they had little freedom for action and communication with the public. When Mubarak was ousted, those parties were unable to establish a power base or win public support.

This gave the Islamists, mostly the Muslim Brotherhood, an opportunity to prevail because there were more organised.

"This is why I say the opposition needs to reorganise itself and reintroduce its programmes to the public," said Tarek Fahmy, a political science professor at Cairo University. "This will be more useful than blaming the authorities."

This is also about more than just the failure of the opposition to appeal to the public or introduce itself in a convincing manner. There is also the issue of Sisi's popularity. Sisi became president in mid-2014 when the country faced bankruptcy, civil war and Muslim Brotherhood and Islamic State terrorism. Almost five years of intense campaigning and recovering, the streets are more secure and the Brotherhood and the Islamic State are less of a threat, even though they are far from quashed.

In offering little freedom to his opponents, Sisi seems to have learnt from Mubarak, who allowed political activists to demonstrate years before the 2011 uprising that ended his presidency, a senior official of Mubarak's ruling National Democratic Party said.

Mubarak realised that the same mistake caused the downfall of his regime when the activists mobilised the public against him in January 2011, the official, who requested anonymity, added.

Egyptians also seem to have learnt from the unrest and economic devastation that followed Mubarak's toppling, conditions that were so bad that some people wished he had stayed in power.

This atmosphere leaves the future of the opposition in doubt amid fears that shrinking freedoms will affect Egypt's socio-economic conditions.

"Political freedoms strongly affect economic conditions and social stability in any country," said opposition lawmaker Ahmed al-Sharqawi. "The likelihood of social stability and better living conditions is stronger when there is freedom and a rule of law!"

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


egypt

Signs of closer Egypt-Israel ties in a changing region

Hassan Abdel Zaber

Cairo

A reference by Arvich Adraee, the head of the Arab media division, about thousands of Egyptian Christians marking their Easter Saturday in an Egyptian city spoke volumes of the need for Sisi's administration apparently believes that peace between the two countries is possible and that this peace will solve many of the pending issues between the two countries.

Political and security coordination between the two countries is accompanied by growth in economic cooperation.

In February 2018, US-based Noble Energy and Israeli Delek Drilling announced an $11 billion worth of deals to sell natural gas from Israel's Leviathan and Tamar fields to Egypt over ten years. Commenting on the deals, Sisi said his country scored a goal.

Egypt, which aspires to be a regional energy hub, said it wanted gas from other regional producers for liquefaction and re-export the gas.

"Egypt is also a member of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum, which focuses on strengthening cooperation between gas-producing and consuming countries in the region.

The two capitals of Israel and Egypt cross the border into Egypt each year to spend vacations in Taba and Sharm el-Sheikh.

Parity, relations between Cairo and Tel Aviv are inseparable from relations between Cairo and Washington. Egypt, which faced American wrath following the armed military uprising against Islamist President Muhammad Morsi in 2013, is warming its ties with Washing- ton and Israel is reportedly at the centre of this interaction.

Egypt's daily newspaper Yediot Ahronot recently reported that Netanyahu had apparently convinced US President Donald Trump that Sisi should be the leader representing the Arab side in Trump's yet-to-be-announced peace plan between Israel and the Palestinians, widely known as the "Deal of the Century."

The expected deal, analysts say, could allow closer cooperation with Israel, especially if it restores Palestinians' rights.

"The whole thing depends on the US and the four-state initiative," said Emad Gad, deputy director for research at the Istanbul-based Yediot Ahronot Centre for Political and Strategic Studies. Agreement between the Palestinians and the Israelis can open the door for cooperation, even as differences can persist."

Sisi's administration apparently believes that peace between the Palestinians and Israel is possible and that this peace can solve many problems in the region.

Egypt, in 1979, became the first Arab country to sign a peace treaty with Israel after the Egyptian Army took over Sinai from Israel. That peace treaty was cold for decades because of public opposition to normalisation of relations with Israel.

Egypt celebrated the anniversary of Sinai’s liberation on April 25 but it seems to have already thrown off the legacy of hostility with Israel.

Relations between Cairo and Tel Aviv have taken a new turn. The two capitals are reportedly coordinating on several issues, including security in Sinai and relations with the Palestinian Hamas movement, which rules the Gaza Strip.

Egypt is coordinating with Is- rael in its fight against a branch of the Islamic State (ISIS) in Si- nai, Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has said. In January, Sisi told CBS News that this coordination was the "distinguishing feature between the two coun- tries. He said that Egyptian fighters join Israeli soldiers fighting in Sinai sometimes crossed into Israeli airspace, which required coordination with Tel Aviv.

Sisi publicly has met with Isra- eli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu twice since becoming president in mid-2014. Egypt, which has strong rela- tions with Hamas, also mediates between the Gaza ruling move- ment and Tel Aviv. Egyptian in- telligence officials have been sev- eral flare-ups of Hamas-Israel fighting in recent years, which indicates the leverage Egypt en- joys as a mediator.

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Istanbul

The death of a Palestinian man arrested in Turkey as a suspected spy for the United Arab Emirates has raised tensions between the two countries.

Ties between Turkey and several Gulf countries were already strained over Turkish support for Qatar and statements made by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and Egypt.

Hassan, who hanged himself in a Turkish prison in Silivri, prosecutors said of two Palestinian men arrested on April 30 that the Trump administration was mulling a plan to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, a step that could further sharpen tensions.

Like Qatar, Turkey has supported the Brotherhood, seen as a deadly enemy in Riyadh and elsewhere.

Several Brotherhood members have found shelter in Turkey.

New relations could become much more tense, a Turkish opposition lawmaker said. “Incidents like that could increase tensions.” Nazmi Gür, a member of the pro-Kurdish People’s Democratic Party, said by telephone.

Istanbul’s state prosecution said Zaki Yousef Mubarak Hassan, one of two Palestinian men arrested on spying charges in April, was found dead in his cell in the high-security prison in Silivri. Prosecutor said Hassan hanged himself on a bathroom telephone.

The prosecution said it began an investigation into the case and ordered an autopsy. There was no information about the result of the autopsy.

Hassan and the other man, identified as a suspected spy for the UAE, had been charged with “political, military and international espionage.”

Reports said the Turkish National Intelligence Organisation had been following the two suspects for about half a year and determined that the two men were in touch with people in several parts of the country before they were arrested.

Hassan and Shaabaa confessed during interrogation that they had been spying on Arab dissidents in Turkey on behalf of the United Arab Emirates, Turkish officials said.

The media reports said the pair told investigators they had been tasked with building a “new spy net” in Turkey after Saudi Arabia lost its intelligence network in the country due to the Khashoggi killing.

Turkish authorities were also investigating the possibility the spying suspects could have been involved in the Khashoggi killing.

They did not provide evidence supporting that accusation.

Several Turkish experts expressed doubts about the motives and timing of Ankara’s announce-ment of the arrest of Hassan and Shaabaa. They said it could be a “diversionary move” to draw at-tention away from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan’s woes at home after an electoral defeat. They also attributed it to the Turk-ish leader’s desire to exploit the Khashoggi case to his political ad- vantage.

Neither the Turkish leadership nor the UAE government commented on Hassan’s suspected suicide but statements by Turkish nationalists and Hassan’s family pointed to a possible further rise in tensions between the two countries.

Ibrahim Karagul, editor of the pro-government Turkish newspa-per Yeni Safak, said the suspected spies had probably been sent to Turkey as part of a wider conspir-acy by the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Egypt against An-tar's. “Turkey is confronted with these countries’ open hostility,” Karagul wrote.

Hassan’s family accused Turkish authorities of killing Hassan. His son Yusuf told Al Arabiya from his home in Gaza that an international commission should investigate his father’s death.

“My father travelled to Turkey to make a living, to build us a future. We were surprised by his arrest since April 4 and we were more shocked by the false accusations against him,” Yusuf told Al Arabiya. He added that his father was a victim and “a scapegoat in a politi-cal conflict.”

Relations between Turkey and the United Arab Emirates received another jolt by the decision of the UAE Supreme Court-upholding a life sentence against a Turkish citizen convicted of promoting Islam- ist groups in Syria and transferring funds out of the Gulf state. The court in Abu Dhabi con- firmed the sentence against the 49-year-old Turkish citizen for “launching an extensive campaign on a Facebook account named ‘Ali Otrurk Mehmet’ without get-ting an official permit” to promote “the ideologies of the two terrorist groups and sending them funds through money transfer compa-nies in the UAE.”

Court documents cited by the news agency indicate the man was found guilty of “colluding” with former al-Qaeda affiliate Abu Noura Front and Ahrar Al-Sham, two radi-cal groups in Syria. The Turkish na-tional was accused by prosecutors of colluding with terrorist groups in Syria and was found guilty of fundraising activities in the United Arab Emirates for the two groups.
Reckless statements expose Lebanon's precarious defence strategy

Makram Rahab

Lebanon's first generation of political leaders were of a different breed but what those people lacked in education and intellectual acumen, they made up for with dedication to the country and its wellbeing. Emir Majid Arsan, Lebanon's first minister of defence who led the PSP in its early years, the French mandate in 1935, is famous for allegedly identifying himself and addressing a foreign delegate in Arabic: "I am boom-boom, the minister of defence." Arsan's humorous yet sagacious character greatly differs from Lebanon's current Minister of Defence Elias Abou Saab, whose university education and ostensibly cultivated demeanour, as well as the critical nature of the period, require him to be more cautious with statements.

In a recent visit to the Lebanon-Palestinian border to survey the damage from the attacks and the resources of the 5,000 Lebanese troops deployed in the area, Abou Saab stated that the issue of the Shebaa Farms can wait and that "once we are rid of the Israeli dangers, we can look into devising a national defence strategy." Despite Abou Saab's quick retraction, this controversial statement met a wave of criticism and reignited debate about the longstanding Israeli-Syrian border dispute that wishfully aims to reinvigorate Lebanon's political process and to either demobilise the militia or incorporate it into the Lebanese armed forces. Abou Saab's reckless statement at the border was no mere faux pas but rather a political Freudian slip and a window into the mind of his faction, Lebanese President Michel Aoun and the Progressive Socialist Movement, Hezbollah's main Christian ally. Abou Saab's retraction was equally alarming because it reveals how he and his political faction are oblivious or perhaps don't care about repercussions of the continued disregard of this defense strategy on Lebanon's economic future. In a desperate attempt to fix the unfixable, Abou Saab asserted that "once the government budget is set, Lebanon's defence budget will be determined." Abou Saab's statement from the Lebanese defence minister's palace was in line with the government's defense budget. It was unfortunate, and the state at least cosmetically needs to reclaim its sovereignty and above all its dignity and measure that the Lebanese state is a willing hostage of Iran and its local Lebanese sympathizers. Abou Saab's retraction was a national dialogue to agree on a national defence strategy, one more undertaking Aoun failed to accomplish.

As Lebanon stares the US sanctions against Hezbollah in the face, Abou Saab's statement from the border is nothing short of suicidal. It not only exacerbates Lebanon's political pressure. In 2017, the US imposed sanctions on the Shebaa Farms, an area whose sovereignty is complicated. At the time, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri vowed to see this process through and declared that "no one can promise to concede a national dialogue to agree on a national defence strategy." Up until now, the government has underdfunded Lebanon's military, and its assets have been repeatedly sold. Aoun and his Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) are in cahoots with Syria. Aoun and his group, allowed the matter of Shebaa Farms, as it has done with the national defence strategy, to be transformed into petty political rhetoric with the pro-Syrian and Iranian faction accusing Jumblatt of being a lackey of the West and Israel.

Makram Rahab is a lecturer at the American University of Beirut and author of “A Campus at War: Student Politics at the American University of Beirut, 1967-1975.”

Issue of Shebaa Farms stirs heated debate in Lebanon

Rami Rayess

Speculation mounts that Israel could return the Golan Heights to Syria as part of a peace deal, the status of the Israeli-occupied Shebaa Farms on Lebanon's borders is being fiercely debated.

Syriac identity over the Shebaa Farms, an vital sliver of land on the borders of Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian territories, has been a contentious issue in Lebanon for decades. However, a recent statement by Progressive Socialist Party (FSP) leader Walid Jumblatt that Lebanon has no claim to the disputed farmlands' elevated territories.

Jumblatt, reiterating a long-held position, said Lebanon's claims to the territory were based on maps altered by officials, who were in cahoots with Syria. The manipulation of the maps, Jumblatt said, took place after Israel's withdrawal from southern Lebanon in 2000.

Jumblatt implied that Hezbollah, which claims that Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon remains incomplete because of its continuing control of the farmlands, is keeping the controversy alive to justify its role as a self-proclaimed defender of the state. But by distancing itself against an occupying power that could seek to fully annex the territory, the reasoning goes that Hezbollah gives itself a pretext to maintain its weapons stockpile, furthering its own interests and those of its regional sponsors, Damascus and Tehran. Jumblatt's recent statement on the Shebaa Farms ramped up tension between Hezbollah and Hezbollah, which have had a rocky relationship over the years. The two parties' relations were at their worst in 2008 when Hezbollah embarked on occupying Beirut and had dug in as its mountains where its fighters were confronted by inhabitants supported by PSP. Relations improved in the years after but were strained in 2011 when Hezbollah played an active part in the Syrian war. Jumblatt came under increasing political pressure. In 2017, the size of his parliamentary bloc was effectively limited after parliament— with Hezbollah and its FTM support — passed a law that brought in proportional voting. In 2018, Hezbollah was behind a rally outside Jumblatt's headquarters in Beirut in a show of force to prove it could move into Jumblatt's territory and challenge his leadership over the Chouf Mountains, the Druze heartland. Hezbollah put its full weight behind Taal Arsan, a Druze politician and a political rival of Jumblatt's. PSP's and Hezbollah's split views on the Shebaa Farms are furthering the two parties' divide. Jumblatt has been fiercely attacked by Hezbollah and its allies since he reiterated his position. They accuse Jumblatt of treason, saying that, by foregoing Lebanon's claims to the farmlands, he is working on behalf of Israel. A social media campaign was begun in which Jumblatt was accused of having a close aide secretly visit Israel.

Politics aside, the legal status of the Shebaa Farms is complicated. Lebanon's inhabitants there say they have valid property documents but Jumblatt said: "You are different from sovereignty." Historically, the territory has changed hands several times. It was governed by Syria from the early 1950s until the Six-Day War in 1967, when Israel occupied the territory. Syria's position on the issue is unclear. Syrian President Bashar Assad and Foreign Minister Walid Muallem have publicly conceded that Lebanon has a legitimate claim to the farmlands but have not submitted official documentation to Lebanon or the United Nations demanding the territory. In March 2006, Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri convened the country's top officials to address the issue. They unanimously agreed to call on Syria to demarcate the Lebanon-Syria borders and formally request documentation from the neighbouring country backing up Lebanon's claim. This was never followed through on. The dispute remains unsettled and the territory's official legal status undetermined. In the meantime, politicians are leveraging the issue to score points with their constituents. Now and when Lebanon's future will be determined remains to be seen.

Rami Rayess is a Lebanon-based writer. Follow him on Twitter: @RamiRayess.

A winding path. Peacekeepers of the UN Interim Force in Lebanon drive their vehicles on a road near al-Majidiyah in southern Lebanon. (AFP)
Palestinians raise stakes in financial face-off with Israel

Mamoon Alabbasi

Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas (R) chairs a cabinet meeting in Ramallah, April 29.

The spat comes at a critical time financially for Palestinians, who are no longer receiving aid from the United States following the PA's fallout with the Trump administration over the relocation of the US Embassy to Jerusalem.

The PA accused the United States of withholding funds to impose a yet-to-be-unveiled peace deal that does not end the Israeli occupation nor establish an independent Palestinian state.

The standoff will likely threaten the interests of people across the Palestinian territories and Israelis alike.

The PA slashed the salaries of government employees in February, March and April. "Unless they find a solution...it will be a disaster for the Palestinian economy," said Palestinian Economy Minister Khalid al-Assil told Reuters.

Under Secretary-General for Political Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo warned the UN Security Council that the crisis could lead to "a financial collapse of the Palestinian Authority."

The prospect of the collapse of the PA would not be in Israel's interests, observers warned.

"Israel takes it for granted that it has not experienced any major terrorist attack for years now," Avraham Sela, professor emeritus of international relations at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, told Reuters. "Coordination with the PA is invaluable for Israel's security."

While Israeli politicians are ferociously in their rhetoric against the Palestinian leadership, Israeli security officials are more concerned about the potential dismantlement of the PA.

"Israeli security officials believe that burning disaster rescue measures, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will step down regardless of whether he quits of his own free will or is forced out by mass protests over the failure of funding-starved institutions to carry out their tasks," wrote columnist Shlomi Eldar in Al-Monitor.

“If the PA goes down, it will be Israel that fills the vacuum. We’ll have a pre-Oslo occupation,” wrote David Rosenberg in an opinion piece in Haaretz.

In risking its own downfall, the PA has apparently hanged some bets by relying on additional aid from Arab countries. On April 21, it secured a pledge of $30 million per month from the Arab League. "The Arabs need to be engaging actively at this critical time," said Abi Abati.

Arab aid is not enough to cover the PA’s needs nor is it sustainable. Abbas is likely to be waiting for Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu to reverse his government's decision on the tax fund deductions. If a compromise is not reached, the consequences could be dire for both leaders.

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

Trump’s peace plan brings more questions than answers

Claude Salhani

The right of return of Palestinians, who are today inside what is considered Israel proper, or the 1948 borders. The figure thrown around by the PA is $4 billion, especially seeing that Kushner’s adviser once explained: “The minimum that the Palestinians will accept is more than what the Israelis are willing to offer and the most the Palestinians are ready to concede is less than what the Israelis are willing to accept.”

These are the points in question:

- Recognition of Israel’s right to exist as a Jewish state and the establishment of full diplomatic relations between the state of Palestine and Israel.
- Resumption of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.
- Release of prisoners, including those convicted of serious crimes.
- Settlement of JCPOA nuclear, security, economic and humanitarian issues.
- Establishment of a Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, and Israeli settlements in the West Bank to be part of Israel.
- Palestinian refugees will return to their homes in Israel, and Israeli citizens can visit their homes in the West Bank.
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Unclear is whether the plan will propose outright the creation of a Palestinian state, the Palestinians’ core demand.

Trump’s plan brings more questions than answers...
The S-400 feud adds to a list of differences between Turkey and the United States. One hot spot is the Syrian conflict, where Turkey cooperates closely with Ankara and is critical of US policies.

To defuse the situation, Erdogan used a telephone call with US President Donald Trump to repeat his proposal to establish a joint committee to look into the Russian system, the Turkish presidency said. The US and Europe are unlikely to accept Ankara’s offers, as the Turkish S-400 is incompatible with NATO’s defence system and could complicate its F-35 fighter jets. Some US officials have called for Turkey to be excluded from the project to build the aircraft.

Erdogan said the project would “collapse completely” without Turkey, which produces parts of the S-400’s propulsion system and US shining on the issue as saying that Turkey’s role could be reduced.

The row over the S-400 and the F-35 has turned into a debate about whether Turkey is a reliable partner for the West. US and European officials warn that Ankara is moving too close to Russia, seen as a hostile power by NATO, while Turkey says it has been treated unfairly by the United States and Europe, he said. Turkey faced the accusation of moving away from the West.

Kalin said Ankara had received no answer from the United States to its proposal to have experts determine whether the S-400 would be a threat to NATO assets, such as the F-35. “Turkey is part of the Western security architecture but it takes two to tango,” Kalin said at the same conference organised by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, a think-tank close to the Christian Democratic Union, the party of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who called on Turkey to do everything and then, when everything fails, put the blame on Turkey.”

Some observers said Turkey could reverse the S-400 decision and buy a Western missile defence system. "I think they are just bluffing”, said one European lawmaker at the conference.

Turkey faces increasing scepticism in the US Congress, where some members have been outspoken about the risks the Turkish S-400 deals pose for the F-35 programme. They say the S-400 could enable Moscow to spy on the F-35, the West’s most advanced jet fighter. So, in Congress some questioned whether Turkey could remain a member of NATO if the S-400 deal goes ahead.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and several senators warned Turkey it would face penalties for buying S-400s under a law that calls for sanctions against countries procuring military equipment from Russia. Turkey said that, as a NATO member, it poses no threat to the United States and the sanctions are without legal basis.

US sanctions against Ankara introduced last year in a spat over the imprisonment of an American pastor in Turkey helped push the value of the Turkish lira to a record low. US measures over the S-400 row could have even bigger consequences for the Turkish economy, which is already in recession.

"Washington threatens to bring its relations with Ankara to the point of collapse,” columnist Yahya Doganbey, editor-in-chief of pro-Erdogan Turkish newspaper Daily Sabah said.

Washington is known to have wanted Ankara to move closer to the West. Istanbul

With the delivery of the first components of a Russian missile def-ence system to NATO member Turkey just weeks away, time is running short to resolve a row over the deal that triggered doubts about Ankara’s commit ment to remain a part of the West.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan angered Europe and the United States by insisting on buy ing two Russian S-400 batteries for about $2.5 billion, despite warnings that the system could put NATO assets at risk and would push Turkey out of the integrated defence network of the alliance. Reports key out of the integrated defence system for the West. US and European officials warned that Ankara is moving too close to Russia, seen as a hostile power by NATO, while Turkey says it has been treated unfairly by the United States and Europe, he said. Turkey faced the accusation of moving away from the West.

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The row over the S-400 and the F-35 has turned into a debate about whether Turkey is a reliable partner for the West. US and European officials warn that Ankara is moving too close to Russia, seen as a hostile power by NATO, while Turkey says it has been treated unfairly by the United States and Europe, he said. Turkey faced the accusation of moving away from the West.

Kalin said Ankara had received no answer from the United States to its proposal to have experts determine whether the S-400 would be a threat to NATO assets, such as the F-35. “Turkey is part of the Western security architecture but it takes two to tango,” Kalin said at the same conference organised by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, a think-tank close to the Christian Democratic Union, the party of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who called on Turkey to do everything and then, when everything fails, put the blame on Turkey.”

Some observers said Turkey could reverse the S-400 decision and buy a Western missile defence system. "I think they are just bluffing”, said one European lawmaker at the conference.

Turkey faces increasing scepticism in the US Congress, where some members have been outspoken about the risks the Turkish S-400 deals pose for the F-35 programme. They say the S-400 could enable Moscow to spy on the F-35, the West’s most advanced jet fighter. So, in Congress some questioned whether Turkey could remain a member of NATO if the S-400 deal goes ahead.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and several senators warned Turkey it would face penalties for buying S-400s under a law that calls for sanctions against countries procuring military equipment from Russia. Turkey said that, as a NATO member, it poses no threat to the United States and the sanctions are without legal basis.

US sanctions against Ankara introduced last year in a spat over the imprisonment of an American pastor in Turkey helped push the value of the Turkish lira to a record low. US measures over the S-400 row could have even bigger consequences for the Turkish economy, which is already in recession.

"Washington threatens to bring its relations with Ankara to the point of collapse,” columnist Yahya Doganbey, editor-in-chief of pro-Erdogan Turkish newspaper Daily Sabah said.

Washington is known to have wanted Ankara to move closer to the West.
Experts disagree about whether US oil sanctions, coupled with targeted sanctions on Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, will cause enough economic pain for Iran to return to the negotiating table. Trump administration officials have been working on a menu of economic duress that could hurt Iran’s economy. At the same time, Iran appears to be preparing for a hard-fought battle in a US-Iran conflict.

The IRGC has been a high profile target of US sanctions. The US Treasury imposed new sanctions on a number of IRGC officials and entities in February, and announced a new sanctions program that aims to deprive Iran of its oil revenues and revenues from other exports. The US has also targeted the IRGC for its role in promoting terrorism, human rights abuses, and weapons proliferation.

Iranian officials have repeatedly denied that Iran is seeking nuclear weapons and have stated that Iran has no intention of developing nuclear weapons. However, it is clear that Iran is seeking to develop its nuclear capabilities, which could have serious implications for US-Iran relations.

The US administration has indicated that it is willing to engage in talks with Iran, but it has also made clear that it will not relax its sanctions regime until Iran complies with its nuclear commitments. The US has also indicated that it is willing to consider lifting some sanctions if Iran renounces its nuclear program.

The US-Iran conflict is likely to continue for some time, and it remains to be seen whether a resolution will be reached. However, it is clear that the US-Iran relationship is in a state of flux, and that a new administration may have a different approach to the issue.

**Viewpoint**

Iran sanctions on Iraq to affect India, most

**Iran**

As US oil sanctions against Iran come into effect, India is likely to be affected by the resulting price increases in oil imports. India is currently the world's fifth largest importer of oil and relies heavily on the Middle East for its crude oil imports. With US sanctions coming into effect, India is likely to face increased prices for its oil imports.

India has been a significant buyer of Iranian oil for many years, and the US sanctions on Iran are likely to have a significant impact on India's oil imports. India is currently the world's fifth largest importer of oil and relies heavily on the Middle East for its crude oil imports. With US sanctions coming into effect, India is likely to face increased prices for its oil imports.

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US Brotherhood designation could throw a spanner in Turkish game in Syria

Sami Moubayed

Beirut

Syrians on both sides of the conflict are waiting to see whether US President Donald Trump will designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a “terrorist organization.” He has been toying with this for more than two years.

Authorities in Damascus would undoubtedly welcome the Trump decision but remain silent, unable to praise the US president after his decision on the Golan Heights. So, is the Syrian opposition but for different reasons.

The Brotherhood is strongly represented on the Turkey-backed Syrian National Coalition, which is positioned to take part in the forthcoming constitutional committee within the context of the UN-managed Geneva peace process.

The Iranians have condemned the Trump decision — much to the displeasure of their allies in Damascus.

If the Brotherhood is sanctioned, it becomes technically difficult for any US official to meet with the Syrian opposition, unless Brotherhood members are expelled. If they are asked to leave the Syrian coalition, that would upset their financial backers in Turkey and Qatar, costing money that they eagerly want to receive.

If the Brotherhood is squeezed out of the Geneva process, its members could try to disrupt it.

Throughout the past eight years, the Brotherhood has been the most well-organised and cohesive political entity in the Syrian opposition, with a clear vision, hierarchy and programme. Few politicians can afford a confrontation with the Brotherhood on one front and with the regime on another.

Although Muḥammad Mursi is on Hayat Taher al-Sham (HTS) in Idlib, the province is basically a hotbed for the Syrian Brotherhood. This is where the group nourished in the 1960s and ’70s, creating underground cells that outlined the Brotherhood’s 1982 exodus from Syria.

The older generation of Idlib does not see the Brotherhood and so are their children and grandchildren, who are carrying arms with HTS or the Nusra Front as a better alternative. With ease, the Brotherhood could make a comeback in Idlib, carrying arms to combat HTS, with full backing from Turkey.

A second option is to cudge up to the Russians, who neither support the Brotherhood nor consider it a terrorist organisation. It agreed to join the Sochi conference of January 2018 and has been supportive of the Russian-Turkish-Iranian talks at Astana.

This would play out nicely for Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who enjoys an excellent working relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin and has long wished to usher the Brotherhood into the regional political process — more so today than ever, after losing his allies in Egypt and Sudan, and being on the verge of losing them in Libya as well.

It can then be slowly injected into the Russian-LED, US-abandoned political process, perhaps after giving it a facelift, with a new name and a new identity, that would require the cooperation of Damascus and amending the group’s own political party law, which prohibits any party from operating within the Syrian framework, even if it is a religious agenda.

The Syrian government sees zero reason to accommodate the Brotherhood, unable to forget or forgive the fact that seizing power in the 1960s and in 1982. Extensive Russian lobbying and international efforts are endless.

There are limits as to how far the Russian can talk the Syrians into accepting the Brotherhood, which, by Syrian law, is considered a terrorist organisation. Any contact or membership is a capital offence in the Syrian legal system.

When Erdogan tried to push for the Muslim Brotherhood’s empowerment in 2011, during the final stages of his honeymoon with the Syrians, he got a very cold shoulder in Damascus. Interestingly, the Russians don’t mind dealing with the Brotherhood, nor do the Iranians, who have condemned the Trump decision — much to the displeasure of their allies in Damascus.

A third option would be for the Americans to continue dealing with the Brotherhood members as individuals, not as part of an outlawed organisation, like they did with the Palestine Liberation Organisation at the start of the Madrid Peace Conference in 1991. This is something Erdogan might try to keep, to keep his proxies on the Syrian constitutional committee, when they meet in July.

One month after being inaugurated, Trump raised the issue of sanctioning the Muslim Brotherhood and former US State of Justice Tillerson said the group was affiliated with al-Qaeda.

Some members of the Syrian Brotherhood were, indeed, affiliated with al-Qaeda. Fleeing persecution at home, after failing to seize power in 1982, many headed to Pakistan and later to Afghanistan, where they were recruited by Sheikh Abdullah Azzam, the Palestinian founder of al-Qaeda. They reported to him until his 1996 assassination, then to Osama bin Laden and to current chief Ayman Zawahiri.

After 9/11, Damascus sent piles of intelligence that the Syrians had gathered over the years about Brotherhood members who joined al-Qaeda, which were put at the disposal of the FBI.

One of them, Abu Khaled al-Souri, was a main commander in the Syrian battlefield, until he was assassinated by ISIS in 2014. Another, Abu Musaab al-Souri — the spiritual godfather of HTS (formerly Jund al-Nusra) — was arrested in Pakistan in 2005 and extradited to Syria, where he remains in custody.

The Trump administration is getting to the root of the problem

Sami Moubayed

Beirut

The US administration moves ahead with its initiative to designate the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organisation, as it did with Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps, the move would constitute a major step towards getting to the roots of terrorism.

Indeed, it is the womb of the Brotherhood that all extremist organisations were born, including al-Qaeda and the Islamic State. The infamous terrorist Osama bin Laden was a graduate of the Muslim Brotherhood school.

This does not mean that terrorism would be restricted to Arab Sunni countries, especially when we know that the one party that has made best use of the Muslim Brotherhood’s network is Egypt. The Brotherhood has carved for itself interests and projects in Iraq. Perhaps, the best proof of the Iranian support for the Muslim Brotherhood is that it was able to seize power in 2012 and gave Muḥammad Mursi the presidency.

Who can forget former Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s visit to Cairo and his keenness to go to Al-Azhar University?

The biggest danger of the Brotherhood then and now is that, over a period of many years, this organisation has infiltrated important state institutions in many Arab countries. The Muslim Brotherhood’s activities are wide-ranging and include creating conditions for destabilising entire countries and regions. What it has done in Yemen and the Gaza Strip remains the clearest evidence of the Brotherhood’s destructive lust for power.

In Yemen, the Brotherhood was in the service of Iran, albeit indirectly, and in the Gaza Strip it was in the service of Israel and Iran at the same time.

The Muslim Brotherhood’s role in Yemen was essential in leading the country to its current sorry state. It rode the wave of the popular protests against Yemeni President Ali Abdallah Saleh in 2011 and began the spearheading in overthrowing his government.

In the end, however, we find that the Brothers were acting in the service of the Houthis who became the big beneficiaries of the fragmentation of Yemen.

The Yemeni Brotherhood is playing a malicious role in preventing military change on the ground. All fronts under their control are frozen because it believes that time is on their side and one day it will share Yemen with the Houthis.

In Gaza, the Muslim Brotherhood, represented by the Hamas Movement, demonstrated that it can thwart the Palestinian national project. The Muslim Brothers did their best to create chaos with the weapons in their possession and thus serve the goals of the Israeli extreme right.

It is because of them that the world turned on the Palestinians because of their suicide bombings in the West Bank and inside Israel to bury the Palestinian issue and cause the Gaza Strip to remain in the same situation.

The goal of the Muslim Brotherhood in the Palestinian territories was to change the nature of the Palestinian society from one that was open to the world to one that is encapsulated in that image of the closed-minded, masked youth who want to liberate Palestine from the sea to the river or from the sea to the river to the sea.

The Obama administration played a role in pushing the Muslim Brotherhood to the fore. In that administration, which reduced all the problems of the Middle East to the Iranian nuclear file, there were people who did not want to know anything about the region beyond their own notion that it deserves to be ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood.

Nobody in the Obama administration bothered to ask about the education plans that the Brotherhood sought to impose in Arab countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan.

When the US is aware of the dangers represented by the Muslim Brotherhood’s project is a step in the right direction but it must be pointed out that the beginnings of this project took place in an Arab country.

It was the Egyptian people who first said no to the Brotherhood and toppled the regime that the Brotherhood sought to impose on them through a backward figure, making sure that Tunisia was backed by both Iran and Turkey.

The large popular demonstrations that overthrew the Muslim Brotherhood’s rule in Cairo would not have succeeded if it had not been for Arab aid to counter the attempt to take Egypt else-where. That aid came in the form of immediate and generous aid from Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates.

Nowadays, it can be said that Egypt is going through a crucial stage, regardless of the regime’s political conversion at the internal level. It must be recognised that Egypt is no longer a captive of Gaza, as in the Morsi era. It’s Egypt now that is affecting Gaza, not the other way around.

The change in the US position is the result of a long and determined effort that is likely to succeed in more than one place.

At the core of this effort is an Arab awareness of the dangers posed by the Muslim Brotherhood project to every Arab country.

Saving Egypt from the claws of the Muslim Brotherhood was a turning point. After the Brotherhood’s failure in Sudan, it is important for the Saudis and Algeria not fall into its grip.
Spain's far-right rise highlights re-emergence of identity politics

All Alfoneh

Spain marked International Workers' Day, the country's main labour union holiday, with a victory for Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, a socialist leader in a state of flux after recent national elections in April. The April 28 election also resulted in a victory for Vox, the first far-right party to gain 10% of the national vote in Spain since the 1970s. Sanchez's campaign strategy was predicated on reversing the rise of far-right nationalism, and his ruling coalition government in Madrid, Blanquismo Sanchez's victory on the one-time dominant conservative Popular Party and, more controversially, said: "We told you that we were going to begin re-conquering Spain and that's what we have done."

Vox, on the other hand, vowed to break with the past by vowing to welcome foreign migrants as a percentage of its population than the United States, a country that, a 2017 poll indicated, one-in-five of all migrants would move to if they could. More than one-third of foreign-born nationals living in Spain are from Latin America and Sub-Saharan Africa. Spain's far-right Vox party leader Santiago Abascal delivers a speech during a rally in Madrid after Spanish general elections, April 28.

Welcome tonic. Spanish Prime Minister Pedro Sanchez, of the Socialist Workers' Party, speaks to supporters while celebrating the result in Spain's general election in Madrid, April 28.

Part of the reason Spain has witnessed the re-emergence of anti-immigrant rhetoric is because it’s a remakable achievement, especially when considering that Spain accepted more foreign migrants than any other European country last year. Take, for example, how, when all other Mediterranean countries refused the Aquarius rescue boat, carrying 600 migrants, dock last June, Spain opened its doors. What has stopped Spain from turning the way of Sweden, Germany, or Hungary? What’s its secret?

Regardless of the nature of provocations of the far-right nationalist parties, the minorities must insist on their rights and aspirations as European citizens.

Unsurprising trend. Spanish far-right Vox party leader Santiago Abascal delivers a speech during a rally in Madrid after Spanish general elections, April 28.

Appeal of identity politicians is unsurprising. Lacking grand political ideologies and disenchantment with the political establishment's handling of the financial crisis and influx of immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa and the Middle East, the citizenry increasingly organizes along ethnic and religious lines. This trend increasingly marginalizes minorities — in particular, Muslim communities in Europe — who find it increasingly difficult to belong.

Spanish election shows there's hope yet for Europe

Stephen Starr

The entry of the Vox party into the Spanish Congress following the April 28 election — the first time a right-wing group has done so in Spain since the 1980s — dominated international headlines. Vox garnered 10% of the popular vote, setting off alarms for Spain's centrist politicians and foreign nations but also for pro-immigrant groups around Europe. However, the real talk point of the Spanish election ought to have focused on the victors. At a time when the rise of the right has become a trend across much of Europe, Spanish voters showed their refusal to yield the victory of the Spanish Socialist Workers' Party, a left-wing socialist party, showed that not the entirety of Europe has transformed into a playground for far-right actors.

Spain has persistently and successfully fought off the European-wide slide to the right in three recent national elections over the past four years. Bearing in mind that right-wing sentiment around the continent has been tied to increasing inward immigration, it's a remarkable achievement, especially when considering that Spain accepted more foreign migrants than any other European country last year. Take, for example, how, when all other Mediterranean countries refused the Aquarius rescue boat, carrying 600 migrants, dock last June, Spain opened its doors. What has stopped Spain from turning the way of Sweden, Germany, or Hungary? What’s its secret?

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Dubai

Dubai officials have opened the Centre for Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) in Dubai, the first such facility research centre in the region, in cooperation with the World Economic Forum.

The centre, at AREA 2071 in Emirates Towers, marks another step into the future for Dubai and the Emirates. It is to work closely with the Centre for 4IR. The 4IR project brings together a fast-growing global network of major private sector organisations along with government partners, including Microsoft, Amazon, Huawei and Reliance Industries.

Dubai has reinforced its position globally and is to work closely with the Centre for Fourth Industrial Revolution during the UAE Government Annual Meetings in Abu Dhabi. The centre, at AREA 2071 in Emirates Towers, marks another step into the future for Dubai and the Emirates. The Centre for Fourth Industrial Revolution (4IR) was introduced by the World Economic Forum (WEF) founder Klaus Schwab in Foreign Affairs magazine in December 2015.

Previous industrial revolutions were marked by the introduction of steam power, mass production and digital technology. Schwab said 4IR is fundamentally different because it is characterised by technologies that fuse the physical, digital and biological worlds.

The agreement to establish the centre was signed by Dubai Crown Prince and Prime Minister Sheikh Hamdan bin Mohammed al-Maktoum in January at the WEF in Switzerland. The theme of the WEF meeting dealt with the opportunities and challenges of 4IR, referred to as the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

The WEF identified nine areas that underpin 4IR. The 4IR centre in the United Arab Emirates is to specialise in three of these: artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning; blockchain and distributed ledger technology; and precision medicine.

The other focus areas are: the internet of things; sustainability and smart cities; autonomous and urban mobility; digital work; the seas; the Earth; and data policy.

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Morocco’s public health-care and education sectors facing worst crisis

**Casablanca**

Morocco’s public health-care and education sectors are going through serious crises amid the government’s inability to find a solution to repeated strikes.

Public sector doctors began a 1-week strike on April 29 because of what they said were deteriorating working conditions. Hundreds of doctors clad in black vests took to the streets of Rabat to protest Health Minister Anas Doukkali’s and the government’s ignoring their claims.

The government allocated $2.9 billion in the 2018-19 budget to the health-care sector, including $72 million for construction and equipment at the University Hospital Centres of Rabat, Tanger, Agadir, Marrakech and Oujda as well as the creation of 4,000 budgetary positions.

Moulay Abdellah El-Montador Aloui, secretary-general of the Independent Union of Public Sector Doctors, said nearly 1,000 doctors from across Morocco had resigned, pending a public opinion poll.

“It’s a week of trying against the government for its indifference towards our legitimate rights and demands,” said Aloui. “We are simply asking the government to fulfill our demands to improve the degrading health-care sector but it is turning a deaf ear.”

Doctors have two main claims, a union statement said, including application of salary index 59% in the calculation of their wages and its equivalence to the state doctor. The second is to improve working conditions with additional medical equipment in public hospitals.

Doukkali told the National Radio that the ministry would increase the number of positions assigned to doctors and paramedics to alleviate congestion at hospitals and health care centers.

“This year was marked by reductions in terms of doctors recruited,” said Doukkali, adding that the number of resident and internal medical positions had been revised upward.

Last year, 298 out of 500 candidates showed up but they refused to be assigned to the various hospitals of the country in response to the ministry’s failure to respond positively to the doctors’ demands. Aloui said about 50 doctors answered the ministry’s call. The rest withdrew because of unfavourable working conditions, particularly in southern Morocco.

The Health Ministry said it was committed to investing $1.7 billion in 80 projects, including new hospitals.

However, the government faces a prospect of perhaps 1.5 million in the public sector. Bringing doctors from other countries will not solve the problem because they also want favourable working conditions, said Aloui.

The public education sector is also going through a major crisis. Contracted teachers suspended a nationwide strike in response to appeals from several parties in Morocco after seven weeks of tension with the Education Ministry.

Teachers have been waging protests and strikes to end renewal contracts in favour of permanent jobs that offer social benefits, including a better pension. They wore black armbands as a sign of mourning for teachers’ dignity, a statement by the national coordination of teachers’ unions stated.

Education Minister Said Amzazi threatened to dismiss teachers unless they ended the strike, which has affected 7% of Morocco’s 7 million students.

Some 25,000 teachers out of a total of 245,000 have been hired on renewable contracts by regional education deans since 2016 to address overcrowding in rural classrooms.

The Education Ministry announced April 13 the suspension of all the administrative and legal measures against senior teachers of the Regional Academies of Education and Training, adding that their salaries would also be paid.

Teachers insist on the need to respect commitments and speed up the organisation of the second round of dialogues.

Some opposition members of parliament called on the government to end the stalemate, which is likely to linger unless teachers’ demands are met.

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

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**Government employees might like the idea of banks taking a slice of austerity but those holding deposits might vitally include their money would be better placed elsewhere.**

Gareth Smyth

Lebanon facing fiscal crunch

Serious grievances. Doctors take part in a strike in Rabat.

Economy

Government employees might like the idea of banks taking a slice of austerity but those holding deposits might vitally include their money would be better placed elsewhere.

Recently cabinet meetings focused on cutting spending on government employment, an area of rampant waste. Saad Hariri, who has followed his father both “with commitment to make all debt and servicing and reducing interest rates”...

Saad Guerraoui

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Viewpoint

**May 5, 2019 | The Arab Weekly | 19**
Egypt's Ramadan fare: Fewer television series, less politics

Mohamed Abdelahi
Cairo

In past years, the names of top TV and cinema stars have been seen in the headlines of the Ramadan television season. Production companies were competing with each other by paying high prices to celebrities because the mere mention of their names guaranteed high ratings and revenues for advertisers and viewers, regardless of the type and quality of the programmes in which they appeared.

That equation is changing with the upcoming Ramadan's fare of television dramas and series. This year, the top stars of the small screen will be absent.

Most of the usual faces, such as Adel Imam, Yahiya al-Fakharya, Yousif Elhalawey, Meira Elbeydi, Ghada Abu Zayd and Merwan al-Atwa, have been out of the running this Ramadan for financial and marketing reasons, and, reportedly, because of the lack of quality roles in proposed scripts, almost all of which focus on youthful matters that make for roles for older actors marginal.

Imam, who was to be part of the series “Valentino,” is not appearing this year. Either he was convinced or he was put off by conflicting reasons. Not all Egyptian soap operas are being marketed for Ramadan. That is due to the daunting prices and restrictions set by some production companies for new productions. Budgets were capped at $4 million and celebrity names would attract a wide audience.

Companies sought to sign big names this season after the series was postponed because of the lack of quality roles in programmes. Most of the dramas use tried-and-true formulas found on big-screen productions. In the series “Lams Akhtar,” Yasser Golf plays a boxer chased by gangs. It was announced after he advertised his decision to report the worst of the world’s crimes. In “Hogan,” Mohammed Langren, an Arab hero who can pull cars with his hands, bend metal coins with his fingers and eat glass.

With scenarios like those, screenwriters are trying to grab young audiences, such as teenagers and young adults obsessed with body building. Directors had their leading actors train in the martial arts and lift weights to make their bodies fit the roles.

TV critic Magda Morris said this coming Ramadan TV season will be marked by the absence of many production companies known for the dramatic and artistic qualities of their productions and for their reliance on famous actors because of the dominance of Synergy Productions.

Morris said Synergy’s monopoly is disturbing and frustrating the Egyptian drama production. Many actors and actors are looking for Arab companies outside Egypt to boost their careers.

Some big names in TV dramas have lost some of their lustre after the success of new names. The recent series “Abu Arous” (“Father of the Bride”), starring Sayed Ragab, not considered a top-name actor, has become popular thanks essentially to the quality of its scenario.

The show struck a realistic chord with audiences because it revolves around family problems resulting from the generation gap between parents and children.

Critc Ahmed Saad said this year’s Ramadan productions are half the number of last year’s mainly because, for many programmes, production began in February which leaves little time to be ready for the 30 days viewing for purely commercial objectives.

He pointed out that the fewer number of series may turn out to be a blessing because viewers can no longer follow all the series being offered during Ramadan. Also, because of the large number of series usually offered, some productions may be stuck on less favourable time slots and some very basic work, whose main ideas could be told in a relatively brief time, get stretched to last 23 hours to fill the 30 days viewing for purely commercial objectives.

Mohamed Abdelahi is an Egyptian writer.

Syrian TV series shows ‘safe distance’ in post-war chaos to be fake

Nidhal Qusha
Damascus

I n “Masafat Aman,” Syrian director Aliha Hajjo went deep into the Syrian crisis and created a story that is neither about war nor about the dire consequences of social relations that distorted and perturbed all relationships and isolated society.

The story is written by Imen al-Saeed al-Katheer, gives a broad canvas of social and personal burdens resulting from the crisis, experienced by Arab societies in general and Syrian society in particular who have been affected by the events.

“Masafat Aman” (“A Safe Distance”) brought together talented Syrian actors such as Karim Badshah, Sulafa Mass, Abdulmonem Amiri, Qays Sheikh Najib, Nadine Tahsini Bek, Karim Jawhar and Haya Marzachi.

The Arab Weekly was on the set during filming of the series and talked with Hajjo about his work and his other issues.

“In any society that has suffered the twists of war, everything becomes dangerous and even more dangerous than the war itself because of the tangled and distorted relations it has produced,” Hajjo said about his latest work’s title.

“In our entire Arab society change and becomes chaotic in terms of love relations, work and life in general,” he continued. “This change is dangerous and with mistakes. We become surrounded by a minefield because of the war.”

“This does not mean that we are finished as a society. There is always some hope left and it is hoped that we all seek and which drives us forward. We bring us face-to-face with tough and crucial choices. Either we move forward or we are and we go on living in chaos and crisis or we get out of it and seek safety.”

“In this work, we are building a specific end that is reflected in the ideas in the scenario. I try my best to engage a visual dialogue with the audience by reflecting my dramatic entertainment, especially in the context of the presence of parallel visual competition in parallel works.”

Hajjo’s previous cinematic style appears in some of his works and plays in others. There are traces of it in his documentary “Nawalheed Al-Roudh” (“Windows of the Soul”) and more recently in a short film based on a scenario by writer Rami Roussa titled “Al-Habl Al-Serti” (“The Umbrellal Cord”).

“When I made the TV series ‘Alam al-Gharam’ and some scenes of the show ‘Spotlight,’ some of my friends and fans often commented that these works had cinematic qualities,” he said. “So I was tempted to give my TV works a cinematic dimension and became obsessed with the idea of directing a film. It did finally happen with my latest film ‘The Umbrellal Cord.’ I liked to central idea and its production conditions and time. I completed the work and it was successful with the audience. I’m not a big fan of festivals as much as I’m a fan of cinema itself because it is a beautiful world in which I have big dreams.”

Nidhal Qusha is a Syrian writer.

A distinctive style. A scene from “Masafat Aman” shows actor Abdelmonem Amiri. (Al Arab)
Egypt made its international racing map, Egypt borrowed through Arab Gulf states, notably the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, that have established camel racing records. With a focus on boosting tourism, Egyptians hope camel racing will attract tourists from across the world.

The first race at Sharm el-Sheikh coincided with preparations for the African Cup of Nations June 21-July 19, further evidence of using sporting events as strong magnets for tourists.

This will, of course, stimulate the economy in Sinai and bring Egypt closer to excellence when it comes to camel racing," he said.

"We all have people dear to our heart and naming the tree after that person makes it special. Sponsors name the trees after their fathers or mothers, especially if they have passed away," said Ahmad Jawadi, a student of agriculture and a main activist in the Produce of Neighbouring Countries on International Markets.

"We have been able to produce date-based Iraqi sweets that we are selling at home but hope to export soon to Arab markets," Jawadi said.

Three decades ago, Iraq had more than 30 million palm trees but there are currently and only about 6 million palm trees. Forestry expert Taiseen Moussawi said.

"Corruption, neglect and erroneous planning and urbanisation have led to a systematic massacre of the trees, threatening Iraq's wealth and identity, which should be complemented with the produce of neighbouring countries on international markets," Moussawi said.

"The only way to save this wealth is by supporting farmers and palm growers financially and logisti-

"We cannot afford to lose such an important source of income. Palm trees are found in private gardens, in farmlands and public showed great response and support to the initiative, which I hope would encourage palm planting," Sultani said.

"The campaign was disseminated through emotional letters titled ‘A Message from a Palm’ in which we exposed the plight of the tree and its degradation due to neglect and cutting," Sultani said. "There was a viral spreading of the message. The public showed great response and support to the initiative, which I hope would encourage palm planting.

Under the initiative, palm owners can offer their trees for adoption in return for releasing the crop. Depending on the size and type of the palm, sponsors pay an annual fee of $50-$77 for maintenance.

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An Iraqi poet’s view of the merits of literature

Sharmila Devi

Iraqi poet Muhsin al-Ramli.

Interview

22 May 5, 2019

Culture

An Iraqi poet’s view of the merits of literature

Muhsin al-Ramli, the Iraqi poet, says he has received thousands of messages of thanks from relatives of victims in Iraq and that makes him feel that he has helped the many who are suffering to raise their voices further, something that allows them to be supported and heard.

TAW: Is the killing of your brother still something that motivates you to write and in what way?

MAR: Yes, but very little up to now because this vacuum is too deep. There’s a general ignorance in the West about Arab culture, literature, people’s complex situation, history and modern reality.

TAW: Do you feel the translation into English, Spanish and other languages of your novels and those of other contemporary Arabic writers is helping to bridge Western ignorance of the Middle East and in what way?

MAR: Yes...but very little up to now because this vacuum is too deep. There’s a general ignorance in the West about Arab culture, literature, people’s complex situation, history and modern reality.

TAW: The press, which both manipulates and is manipulated, is not enough, nor is it the best medium for knowledge. For example, the press talks of victims in terms of numbers, while literature focuses on the human and on every victim, his circumstances, his thoughts, feelings and dreams.

TAW: How do you get other cultures better, among them the West and Latin America, more through literature than the press.

MAR: It’s time for other people from other cultures to read us and know us better through our literature.

Hopes and concerns. Iraqi poet Muhsin al-Ramli.

(Courtesy of Muhsin al-Ramli)

Beirut exhibition where art serves philanthropy

Samar Kadi

“Out of the Blue”, a collective exhibition of Lebanese and foreign artists culled with an auction of artworks is an example of how an art can be invested to serve humanitarian work. The exhibition and auction are meant to help children in war-stricken countries, such as Iraq and Syria.

The idea of the exhibition/auction came about when a young emerging artist from Beirut, who supervised the exhibition, saw the need to give back.

The exhibition is a collaboration between the Beirut-based student association known as NASS, a Lebanese student group, the Arab Youth Cultural Organization (AYCO), and the Lebanese American University (LAU).

The art was bought by private collectors, some of whom have bought more than one piece to support the cause.

When the art...
Syria's lost heritage stands out in Aleppo's shell-beaten domes

Angus McDowall

Aleppo

The pencil mine of the Ottoman Adilayh mosque in Aleppo lists to one side and is scored by an ugly gash down its flank, the result of bombing in the war. The sorry state of Aleppo's Old City, a labyrinthine World Heritage site and a habitat for some of the Middle East's historic behemoths, is obvious from a glance across the skyline and its shell-beaten domes. They look down on an area that suffered massive damage in a conflict that brought down the medieval covered souk, smashed mosque domes and burned churches.

UNESCO in December said 80% of Aleppo's historic buildings had been destroyed and more than half the buildings they assessed showed severe to moderate damage. Restoration work in Syria is controversial, however. Except for the Islamic State, which deliberately targeted ancient ruins, all sides in the war portrayed themselves as guardians of historical sites and their enemies as vandals.

A huge image of Syrian President Bashar Assad dangles from the monumental gateway of the ancient citadel in central Aleppo.

Western countries that have imposed sanctions on Assad's government oppose any reconstruction work until there is a political solution to the conflict, arguing it would reward him for war crimes they say he committed but which he denies. That has cut off most funding from the countries that are normally top donors for cultural work, prompting state museums to accede, timidly, to complicity in destroying Syria's art.

A few of the most famous monuments are slowly being restored. At the Umayyad Mosque, bullet-scarred walls are being repaired and broken pieces of stone and the stones of the fallen mosque are held under a yellow crane, ready to be reinstalled.

One of the tallest, most beautiful stretches of the souk has been restored, its collapsed domes rising high again. The original floor using original materials and techniques. However, these site represent only a fraction of the Old City's myriad historical streets and buildings and, without fresh funding, the others risk falling into yet another ruin.

"If there are funds I am optimistic that it will all be restored. We only need the money," said Bassil al-Zahar, an engineer who is restoring part of the souk.

At the Halawiya Madrasa, part of the dome has already caved in. It was once a Byzantine cathedral, built on the site of a Roman temple, and was converted to a mosque by a Muslim ruler during the Christian Crusades. With more rain, the rest of the dome will fall, an engineer said.

From the roof of the restored Saqatiyeh section of the souk, damaged minarets can be seen punctuating the Old City's skyline. The 12th-century Kamelehy mosque, the Mamluk-era Adilayh mosque and the 14th-century Tawashi mosque all suffered considerable damage.

Viewed close up, it is hard to see how the 7th century mosque's minaret is still standing. But a stone minaret's stain is dwarfed when spiraling wound spiral staircasing inside are visible through a transparent shroud hole on its west side.

"The best solution is to rebuild it because it is not intact. Even if there's a small earthquake, it would collapse," said Zahar. Work on mosques is the domain of the Ministry of Awqaf or Islamic endowments and it lacks the money for major repairs. At the medieval Mehmidar Mosque, the minaret above the door is now a stump. The mosque's dome is shattered, with only a corner left.

In the courtyard two men, the imam and a friend, hauled large stones to one side to clear the floor. They have spent three months cleaning and sorting the stones and said they have no idea when the minaret will be rebuilt. Each covered stone in the Old City seems to harbour a dozen al- lows, and each afternoon, the sound of small stone courtyards rang by mosques or shrines, with olives and lemon trees growing in the centre. Overhead, a green, under a high, vaulted ceiling, most shops were empty; their floors covered with debris, dust and debris and covered with debris. A man sat at a table in one, singing Quranic verses, his hands propping up his chin.

A local mosque pricked in this area for local and tourists to rest of the old souk and nearby buildings, including two large, protruding behemoths. The UN Development Programme is also at work, providing traders with aid to clear shops and buy fittings and stock.

Ahmed Sabagh's pitstop shop has been in his family for generations, but it, too, has just reopened its stall's doors. Metal shutters hang down and the streets are quiet.

"We have a humanitarian cri-

sis," Boladian said. "It's the cul-
tural institutions that inspire people to come together." Those institutions teach co-ex-
istence, unity and co-ex-
istence, and they can provide a safe space for people to talk about issues, explore ideas and learn about people whose backgrounds are different from their own.

However, countries can lose the tools necessary for such in-
stitutions, the experts said. The Middle East Institute plans to open a Middle East art gallery this year to promote cross-cultural understanding between the Mid-

East and the West. "We're at a critical point in our arts because the pieces that the (Lebanese) Ministry of Culture has loaned to us are a mess," Boladian said.

The pieces have been in and out of storage and they have been in unconditioned buildings. Mice have damaged centuries-old paintings and mould has been noted on others.

"If we don't restore it right now, if we don't save it right now, it's totally going to disintegrate," Boladian said.

The timing may be right for those pieces to come together. Cultural centres have shifted since the "Arab spring" and, as money has moved in the Middle East, so have museums.

"There is a fairly substantial shifting that's occurring in tradition-
al centres of culture," said Glenn Lowry, director of the Museum of Modern Art in New York, adding that history museums in Egypt, Israel and Turkey have been joined by museums in Abu Dhabi and, soon, Lebanon.

The panelists said for the new museums to work — to justify the huge sums of money spent in their creation by drawing tour-
ists and show they are true cul-
tural centres by attracting locals — people must feel as if they are represented. They must be given an opportunity to learn to be-museum-going cultures and feel that the museums provide a space to express opinions, whether through giving personal histories, using the spaces to cre-
ate art or seeing how their chil-
dren learn in the museums.

"Tourism was big for the econ-
ymy," said Peggy Loar, president of International Museum Plan-
ing Consultants. "The cost of the building was meant for tour-
ism. At the same time, if it didn't include what's important to lo-
cals, then it's failure." For BeMA, "We're thinking of the museum as a culture media-
tor, rather than a culture authori-
y," Boladian said. "We don't have a museum-frequency society." In Lebanon, students don't go to museums on field trips as they do in the West, she said.

Without the programmes, safe space and dialogue with the com-

munity, the centres won't have an audience, Boladian added. Those programmes include students learning to make art and art resi-
dency programmes. One of the main goals is to spread awareness of Lebanese art.

Social change has encouraged salons in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia where artists gather with their peers to look at socio-political issues.

Through the BeMA collection, she said museum and galleries can use pieces to tie together different communities, not just Lebanon. They can host exhi-
bitions or they can have people attend art, as was recently done when BeMA created an exchange with the University of Stuttgart to work on restoration and teach Lebanon students how to repair artworks.

Not all museums are expensive behemoths. Social change has encouraged salons in the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia where artists gather with their peers to look at socio-political issues and human rights and the future and they can talk about them and present new ideas.

"What I have seen [in Saudi Arabia] is a real grass-roots at-
tempt to start their own salons," Lowry said, adding that citizens need a place to talk and meet and work out ideas.

In Saudi Arabia, artists must apply for a licence for each ex-
hbit and they must get approval for each piece to be displayed, he said.

"The artists are taking matters into their own hands and they op-
erate below the radar," he said. He is also seeing that trend in Algiers, Abu Dhabi, Dubai and Sharjah.

"How long can it endure?" Loary asked. "I don't know but golden moments never endure for as long as we think they did."
Dubai's Quranic Park on mission to build cross-cultural bridges

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Dubai Municipality recently opened Quranic Park, Al Khawaneej, known as Dubai's agricultural heartland, skimmed from the Dubai Airport. The attractive design of the park entrance, enclosed by an unobtrusive low wall, reveals the major features inside, bestowing a welcoming atmosphere.

Dubai Municipality Director-General Dawood al-Hajri said the park, opened during the United Arab Emirates' Year of Tolerance, is aimed "to promote the Islamic cultural and civilisational roles. The park contains diverse low wall, reveals the major features inside, bestowing a welcoming atmosphere.

"The Quranic Park will be an important attraction for citizens, residents and tourists alike," Hajri said. "In addition to its Islamic cultural and civilisational roles, the park contains cultural elements that bring closer the interaction between different cultures."

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The Park is a mixed-use recreational site that features stories from the holy book of Christians and Muslims. The stories of Isa, Ibrahim and Suliman and their miracles are shown on the walls inside the cave and many other shared stories from the holy books of Christians and Jews. It's a way to explore the importance of the Quran in the daily life of Muslims and a way to unite people through similar stories and important figures.

"This attraction has opened during the UAE's Year of Tolerance in the hopes that it will attract visitors to enjoy this recreational space while promoting tolerance, peace and understanding of Islam and Muslims worldwide," Kareem said. Between the Cave of Miracles and the Glass House is a split lake symbolising Moses's parting of the Red Sea.

The Glass House, which functions as a greenhouse, is at the highest point of the park and features a distinctive architectural design allowing visitors to see trees and plants that grow in certain temperatures and environmental conditions. The display includes descriptions of each plant and its scientific name, uses in food and medicine and the Quran verses that mentioned them.

Entry to the park is free of charge with fees limited to the Cave of Miracles and the Glass House at $5 UAE dinars ($1.36) each. Visitors can download the smart guide application, available in eight languages, to learn about the park's facilities and plants in detail.

Dubai Municipality said Quranic Park attracted 10,000 visitors in the first week after it opened March 30, showing that it has added to Dubai's reputation as a family-friendly destination.

The cost of the Quranic Park project has been estimated at around $45 million. Dubai Municipality announced several investment opportunities in the emirate's public parks and the allocation of different areas for restaurants and small shops in each park.

N.P. Krishna Kumar is a Dubai-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Exterior view of the Cave of Miracles.

Interior view of the Cave of Miracles.

A view of the Glass House.

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