Iraq’s political uncertainties persist amid unrest

Tunis suicide attack resolves terrorism shadow, memory of Ben Guerdane’s battle

Attack shows that jihadists are still irked by the memory of security forces winning the battle of Ben Guerdane, four years ago.

Stephen Quillen and Lammine Ghammi

Tunis

In the anniversary of a war-torn battle in the south of the country, suicide bombers struck a police checkpoint near the US Embassy in Tunis, jolting the country into realising that the fight against terrorism is far from over.

The bombing killed a policeman and injured five other people, including a child.

The terrorist incident occurred on the eve of Tunisia marking the fourth anniversary of the battle of Ben Guerdane in southern Tunisia, where heavily armed militias with the help of the local population repelled an attempt by Islamic State-affiliated extremists to establish a foothold on the border between Tunisia and Libya.

A total of 35 extremists were killed in Ben Guerdane and 42 arrested, while 13 security troops and seven civilians died. The battle is commemorated each year by Tunisians as a triumph against terrorism.

“We will be celebrating the anniversary of the Ben Guerdane battle as a victory against terrorism,” minister of the interior Hichem Mechichi told Tunisian television.

The March 6 blast shocked the world, while the memory of Ben Guerdane’s battle is far from over.

Thomas Seisbert

Istanbul

The ceasefire agreement for Idlib, struck March 5 in Moscow, seems to draw the battle lines for the next escalation between Turkey and Russia in Syria.

“I think the agreement is not strong enough and will not hold for a long time,” Mohammad Otman of the Al-Ikhwan Humanitarian Foundation, an NGO active in Syria, said via e-mail a day after the Russian-Turkish deal was struck.

“I think what was produced yesterday is a status quo, where both sides accept a temporary situation as it is, and fighting will resume very soon,” he said.

The agreement between Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in effect cuts Idlib in half. The sector of the embattled Syrian province south of the M4 highway, which crosses Idlib from east to west, is to be controlled by forces loyal to Syrian President Bashar Asad. The area north of the M4 will be under the control of various rebel groups, of which the jihadist Hayat Tahrir al-Sham is the strongest, and of Turkey, which has sent thousands of soldiers into Idlib since early February.

Turkey is likely to try to turn the northern part of the province into a “safe zone” for hundreds of thousands of refugees who fled fighting in other parts of Idlib, the last rebel bastion in Syria after nine years of war.

Syria has seen many ceasefires declared and that broke down later after they were signed, however.

The day after the Moscow agreement, the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a war monitor, said nine rebel fighters and six Syrian government soldiers had been killed in fresh clashes.

Referring to the many jihadist formations that make up a major part of the Turkey-backed Syrian armed opposition, Russia and Syria say “terrorists” in Idlib must be stopped.

The Russian news agency Tass quoted Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova as saying that “as far as efforts to eliminate militants and terrorists go, if they are designated as such, they must be eradicated, first and foremost, by the Syrian Armed Forces and the forces of countries that directly cooperate with the Syrian authorities.”

Charles Lister, director of the Countering Terrorism and Extremism Programme at the Middle East Institute in Washington, said the remark by Zakharova indicated that the new truce might be short-lived.

“In other words, this (Syria) ceasefire is likely to be as meaningless as all those that came before it,” Lister wrote on Twitter.

Some refugees in Idlib also said they were not very hopeful and expressed scepticism about the commitment of Damascus and its Russian backers to the ceasefire.

The main goal of Russia, Assad’s main backer, is to secure a victory by the Syrian Army in Idlib, which would seal Assad’s triumph over his adversaries nine years after the Syrian war began. Success in helping Assad to regain control of the whole country would be a major strategic win for Russia, cementing the country’s new role as a Middle East power broker as the influence of the United States in the region wanes.

The clash between Moscow’s priorities and those of Turkey, which has supported rebel groups fighting Assad, has not gone away with the latest Moscow agreement. As those differences persist, they could become the backdrop for the next escalation in Idlib.

Opposite directions. Russian President Vladimir Putin (L) and his Turkish counterpart Recep Tayyip Erdogan after their talks at the Kremlin in Moscow, March 5.

Fakhfakh released a statement calling on the country to “close ranks and reject any form of violence that could threaten Tunisia’s security and democracy.”

He praised security units that “have shown great courage and promptness in the fight against terrorism.”

As it battles a lingering terrorist threat, Tunisia remains under a state of emergency.

Stephen Quillen and Lammine Ghammi are Arab Weekly correspondents in Tunis.
Putin frustrates Turkey’s military plans in Idlib

**Top news**

**Putin frustrates Turkey’s military plans in Idlib**

**Istanbul**

The new Russian-Turkish agreement for a ceasefire in the embattled Syrian province of Idlib demonstrated that Moscow, as the supreme power in the conflict, considered the fate of the embattled Syrian province of Idlib as a key Turkish demand. Erdogan also failed to get Putin to agree to a no-fly zone in Idlib.

The deal lacked specifics or a known mechanism to enforce the truce, leaving both parties to interpret their own cease-fire agreements for Idlib. All unwrangled within a few months, trig-

- **Masala said about possible cessation in Idlib:**
  - That could mean formal agreements, with the real power in all parts of Syria hasn’t changed.
  - That Maidan, an international affairs expert at Bundeswehr University in Munich, said the Moscow meeting clearly demonstrated Turkey’s dependence on Russia in the Assad’s future. Accordingly, the real power in Syria hasn’t changed.
  - Erdogan, however, said: “At the end of the day, the Syrian government’s attempt to retake territory. This helps preserves Turkey’s positions in northern Syria, which Ankara views as a vital national issue,” Tanchum said via email.
  - “However, Turkey has had to accept the territorial gains made by the Syrian government. The M-4 highway is the new boundary of the Turkish monitored area of Idlib.”
  - Erdogan also said his personal r-

- **Despite the Turkish leader’s upbeat comments, Idlib is clearly unable to do what it wants in Idlib.**
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- Erdogan also said his personal r-

Israel elections fail to break impasse, give Arab parties higher standing

Samir Wahbi

**Paris**

After its third parliamentary election in less than a year, Israel faces continued po-

- The predominantly Arab Joint List coalition, in the balance of political parties formed in Israel by post-1948 Palestinians. 

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- Gantz is very unlikely to try to in-

- The Arab factor, Head of Israel’s predominantly Arab Joint List coalition Ayman Odeh talks to reporters in the city of Haifa, March 3.

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Iraq’s Kata’ib Hezbollah militia engages in sabre-rattling as political vacuum endures

The Arab Weekly staff

Iraq was left with a political vacuum after Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi withdrew as prime minister last January, leaving Iraq in a political logjam and leading to increased pressure from the Iran-backed Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF).

Some are trying to nominate candidates for the prime minister position who are accused of being involved in the US assassination of [Iranian general Qassem Soleimani and PMF commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis].

Iraqis working with US troops. He warned any Iraqis with diplomatic or economic contracts with US forces. He warned what he termed a “final and irreversible” way to cancel their contracts with US forces. He warned any Iraqis with diplomatic or economic ties to US troops to cut off contact.

The term “Iraq’s three presidencies” is believed to be a reference to the president, prime minister and speaker of parliament.

The United Nations called for restraint and the prevention of further escalation in the spike in fighting in Yemen’s Marib, Jazan and Sana’a governorates.

Clashes broke out March 1 in the city of Al Hazm, leading to a massive displacement of civilians. More than 2,000 families had been displaced. Most of Jazan was previously under Houthis control; however, the fall of Al Hazm is only 150km south of the Saudi border.

Jawf said the militia raided and ransacked more than 48 homes in Al Hazm.

The statement claimed the Houthis RAIDED Marib, 10 children from attending schools or the local College of Education and Human Sciences. The militia also allegedly looted Al Hazm Hospital. The groups called on the United Nations and humanitarian organisations to speed delivery of aid.

Iraq-backed Houthis raided and ransacked more than 48 homes in Al Hazm.

The victim’s father was a prominent military commander and had been assassinated in similar circumstances in 2012.

Houthi rebels terrorise Jawf homes, loot hospitals

Mohammed Alkhreiji

London

The Arab Weekly staff

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Rule of fear. Houthi fighters display their weapons during a gathering in Sana’a, February 20.

Iran-backed Houthis took control of Sana’a in September 2014, forcing Hadi to flee the country. In March 2015, a Saudi-led military coalition fighting in support of the Hadi government began a military campaign against the Houthis. The fighting triggered what the United Nations described as the world’s worst humanitarian crisis, with millions displaced and in need of aid.

Mohammed Alkhreiji is the Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.
The United Nations is at fault because, since the start of the conflict, the parties have not been willing to install a stand-ard Western-style political system in Libya that was roughed out under the country’s political traditions and components, the international community because despite promises in Berlin, it balked at taking the tough economic consequences to stop the flow of weapons and mercenaries from abroad. Now, it is the prime cause for the conflict’s continuation. Few days after his resignation, Salameh angrily lashed out at the failure of the international com-munity to extend the promises in Berlin were kept. “Did I get the kind of support needed since then? My answer is no. I need much more sup-port,” he said.

It was not just the absence of mean-ingful power on the sanctions violators, such as Turkey, there was absence of international pressure on Libyan players.

They [international players] made forays into putting peace measures, on those who violate the cease-fire, on those who violate the arms embargo, on those who do not come to Geneva political talks, on those who give or un-derspite the sabotage or political militi-tals,” Salameh said. “They could be doing all this, but why do they do it? How they committed to do it? My answer is no.

The United Nations’ focus on in-ternationalisation of the Libyan political system in Libya – believing that a ceasefire, an interim government of national unity and elections will solve the crisis and ignoring Libya’s political, cultural and social factors. It is the reason why Salameh’s pre-decessors as UN special envoys were also similarly dismissed at the end.

There were elections in Libya in 2012 and in 2014. Neither brought peace, stability or the country. They, in fact, made matters worse. The refusal by the coalition of Islam-ists and revolutionaries to accept the results of the 2012 elections, which they lost, and to then seize power in Tripoli, forcing the government to flee to east to Beida, was one of the main causes for the current divisions.

Guterres’ hope of a smooth transi-tion and a continuation of UNSMIL’s efforts is unlikely to turn into reality. First, he is likely to have difficulty in finding a quick replacement for Salameh. Many will see why to do it in the way they committed to do it? My answer is no. It is unlikely to turn into reality. First, he is likely to have difficulty in finding a quick replacement for Salameh. Many will see why to do it in the way they committed to do it? My answer is no.

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For that reason, but also because Guterres said at the African Union summit in February that it should play a greater role in finding a Libya solution that may look to a leading African politician. The question re-mains: Who would want to take the job?

For the moment, it is Williams who has left in charge in what may be a lengthy interregnum.

Guterres’ other problem is the view among Libyan players, and perhaps the United States, that a change at the top of UNSMIL would be a helpful gesture. It would not be an easy task al-though such measures cannot be ruled out in Libya. However, if it is to effect such pro-gress in Libya, the United Nations needs to rethink what it can offer. foil elections and a new govern-ment as the answer to the problem of Libya, it is on the wrong track.

The focus must be on bringing Libyans together again. Only then is there any chance that elections and a new government could succeed.
Tunisian Islamist figure resigns from party in widening split in Ennahda's leadership

Lamine Ghamni

Tunis

Abdelmajid Jelassi, a leading figure in Tunisia's Islamist Ennahda Movement, resigned as the party's head in March, according to a source in the party. His resignation comes amid growing splits within Tunisian politics.

The move by Jelassi, who has been acting as president of the party since 2014 following the death of the party's founder Mohamed Ghannouchi, is seen as a step towards resolving the internal differences within the movement.

Ennahda is one of the country's largest political parties and is currently the second-largest party in the parliament.

Jelassi's resignation follows a series of events that have highlighted the party's divisions, including resignations by several senior members, a decline in the party's electoral support, and internal disputes over the party's approach to governance.

The party is planning to hold a congress in May to decide on the party's future, but it appears that the party may face a significant challenge in unifying its ranks.

Jelassi is expected to play a key role in mediating the internal conflict and find a way to bring the party together.

Of note, Jelassi last month called for a series of elections in Tunisia, including the upcoming presidential election, to resolve the crisis, which has been exacerbated by the economic crisis and the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

Ennahda, which is the country's largest Islamist party and a major player in the political landscape, has been grappling with internal disputes over the party's approach to governance, including its stance on democracy and its role in the political system.

Despite the party's deep roots in the political landscape and its support among the country's disenfranchised communities, Ennahda has faced difficulties in recent years, including electoral setbacks and internal divisions.

The party's failure to resolve its internal conflicts has contributed to its declining support among Tunisian voters, who are increasingly dissatisfied with the country's political elite and its failure to address the country's economic and social challenges.

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Celebrating Arab women’s rights

by Yasmin Yousif

In his year, as it is the case every year, the world marks International Women’s Day on March 8.

The commemoration is usually an occasion for celebration of the milestones achieved. In the Arab world, there have been a few such recent milestones that deserve to be highlighted. Women have ascended to senior ministerial posts, including the defence and justice portfolios, in Lebanon and Tunisia. Reforms adopted in Saudi Arabia have allowed women to enjoy unprecedented freedoms. Measures introduced in the UAE and Morocco have enhanced women’s rights in the workplace and in society.

Much of the credit for progress achieved goes to women who have pushed for their rights. Enlightened leaders have also played a big role in resisting the resistance of repressive forces wary of women’s rights. The momentum for reform is boosted by Arab public trends increasingly favourable to gender equality, thanks to education, media and social media.

Such reassuring trends cannot, however, hide lingering gaps in everyday reality. Educational attainment by female students hardly matches the rate of access by women to the labour market. For many reasons, such as legal, social and cultural constraints, that rate remains one of the lowest in the world, leading to a staggering imbalance between the participation of men and women in the labour market.

And that comes with a cost.

Lili Mottaghi, a political activist at the World Bank, said women constitute only 27% of the labour force in the Middle East and North Africa and contribute just 18% of MENA’s GDP.

The economic fallout is naturally huge. Mottaghi estimates that, without the lingering labour force gender gap, “the GDP growth rate in MENA could have doubled or increased by about 3.1 trillion US dollars.”

“Currently, $572 billion in regional income is lost because of gender-based discrimination in laws, social norms and practices that constrain women’s rights and opportunities,” said Bank World Group President Malek Fahmy.

In many parts of the Arab world, female students consistently outperform their male counterparts, but young women graduates have less of a chance to find a job than their male peers. The contradiction that has been made in the Arab region in terms of women’s access to educational opportunities or health services and their rate of participation in the labour market is difficult to reconcile, to say the least.

“Such a disparity is a gathering storm that threatens to engulf a continent.”

Overcoming that requires measures encouraging women’s participation in economic activity, an adjustment of working regulations to accommodate women’s family obligations and, more broadly, a change in mindsets to do away with outdated notions, such as the one according to which women’s employment compounds male joblessness.

Public opinion seems also ahead of politi-
cians as regards Arab women’s current role in government. Public opinion, as illustrated by the Arab Barometer Survey results, indicates that most Arab respondents do not object to women serving as presidents or prime ministers.

It is remarkable how Israeli voters put their trust in Netanyahu again despite corruption charges for which he is to appear in court March 17. This indicates the Israelis are no longer interes-
ted in ethical considerations. All that is important for the or-
dinary Israeli is following a right-
wing policy based on achieving welfare and comfortable living and consecrating the occupation to the West Bank, while ignoring what was called the peace pro-
cess with the Palestinians.

It is not guaranteed that Netanyahu will be able to form a govern-
ment. He needs 61 Knesset votes for that and he only has 58.

While waiting for that drama to unfold, there are other issues worth mentioning to understand the radical transformation in Is-
rael in the past few years, leading to Netanyahu becoming the new “king of Israel.” He won this title because he has held the position of prime minister the longest.

The first issue is that the real winner in today’s Israel is the Israeli assassin of Yitzhak Rabin, chief of staff during the 1967 war and who had symbolised the ability and courage to take the difficult and right decisions to achieve peace with this Arab country or the other.

Rabin’s assassination marked the end of political leaders in Israel associated with specific important historical events since David Ben-Gurion announced the establishment of the state in 1948 or with Israel’s 1956, 1967 and 1973 wars. Only one was left left was Shimon Peres but he turned out to be the king of the leadership quali-
ties that would have enabled him to take tough decisions, as evidenced by his inability to po-
litically survive Rabin. Peres lost the 1996 elections even though most Israelis were sympathetic to his Labour Party at that point.

As for Ariel Sharon, he re-
mained a right-wing politician without vision or scope. His only interest was to keep grasping at Palestinian lands until comes the day when all hope for a viable Palestinian state dies.

Netanyahu represents the Israeli born on the day of Rabin’s assassination. Above all, he rep-
resents the transformation in the Is-
raeli society.

Through suicide bombings in Jerusalem, Tel Aviv and elsewhere in the 1990s and early 2000s, Hamas helped this transformation take place and in order to thwart any peace process.

In 2001, and while the Arab summit in Beirut was ending, a suicide bombing was carried out near the Lebanese border, killing a number of Israeli civilians.

Previously, the aim of that opera-
tion was to nip in the bud the Arab Peace Initiative sponsored by that Arab summit.

Beside the role of Iran-backed Hamas in changing the nature of Israeli society, there were other significant factors. For ex-
ample, it would be naive to ignore the role of the newly found great wealth created by Israeli high-tech companies. Suddenly, the bush and romanticism disappeared in the kibbutz that symbolised Israel’s past and became a distant memory.

Israel has changed tremen-
dously internally. Its relations with the United States in the era of President Donald Trump have changed as well. The region has also changed. The biggest change was improved Russian-Israeli relations. There is clear coordi-
nation in policies and operations between the two sides in Syria, for example. Netan-
yahu and Russian President Vladimir Putin have become great buddies.

What many ignore is that repercussions of the political earthquake that shook Iraq in 2003 reverberate in the region. The American occupation and the non-sustainable regime that replaced it wiped out the Iraq that we have always known.

Syria is also gone and Lebanon is on its way to disintegration. We still do not know how Hez-
bollah, Iran’s sectarian militia in control of Lebanon’s cur-
rent “glory days,” will be able to cope with this collapse. On top of this, most official and popular Arab public opinion seems firmer than ever so far towards the Arabs.

So, whether Netanyahu gets his government is not as impor-
tant as understanding the great changes in the region through what is happening in Israel.

Given this premise, isn’t it strange that the Palestinian National Authority condemns the so-called Deal of the Century and then stands by as a spectator? Isn’t it even stranger that there is a lack of talk about the need to restore the Palestinian national unity in response to this deal, while the reality indicates that the Palestinian internal rift has become more profound than ever?

These are mere observations about the changes we see taking place in the Middle East and in the Palestinian reality, itself, where the only con-
tant is change and expansion of the occupation zone, whether Netanyahu forms a government or not.

Khaled Al Khairallah is a Syrian

Khaled Khairallah is a 

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Editorial

Hisham Bintum

Khairallah Khairallah

The first issue is that the real winner in today’s Israel is the Israeli assassin of Yitzhak Rabin in November 1995.

Election results are indicative of changes in Israel and the region

The Arab Weekly | March 8, 2020

的意见
Erdogan saves face in Moscow but remains trapped in his own policies

Francis Ghilés

Turkey has been a very active player in the Syrian conflict since the beginning of 2011. First in an attempt to topple Syrian President Bashar al-Assad and then under the guise of preventing the Kurds from forming their own autonomous region on that side of the border. It is a heavy involvement explaining why Western observers say that Turkey is more than in a proxy war into a direct confrontation between two heavily armed parties and blocs that tried all kinds of fraudulant tricks and false promises to unify the angry multitude — that person would have been thrown out before he even reached parliament for a vote of confidence. The failure and shame of Iraq and the failure of an American government capable of handling its tasks in light of the tremendous challenges facing Iraq is more like searching for a needle in a hay-bale. Turkey’s dilemma can be summed up in one point. It is trying to find a new prime minister from within. It is a hard and a difficult task for the new government.

What is certain, however, is that Salih will never be able to accomplish a thing even if he becomes the president of all the prime ministers of all the prime ministers and all the prime ministers of the Arab League. There are no miracles in these times. The only thing that Salih needs to do is to eliminate the Kurdish power and make it go home safe and sound.

Let Salih have all the powers in the country, he still won’t be able to bring to justice a major figure of corruption such as Nouri al-Maliki or any Hassanin such as Mustafa al-Sadr or any other known Iranian agent. In short, as long as some bodies other than the state are allowed to carry weapons, the corruption will always be stronger than any government and, as long as Iran does what it wants in Iraq, there will be no way out of their predicament for the Iraqi people, barring a miracle, of course, and we know that, unfortunately, there are no miracles in these bad times.

The only thing that Salih will end up realising March 8 is that he has no power and that the parties of the quota system will be the ones who play the rebelious masses and, if the masses reject him, he will inevitably fall.

Salih will only be wasting his time and political capital on trying to be able to do anything significant to cool off the angry protesters and make them go home safe and sound.

Let Salih have all the powers in the country, he still won’t be able to bring to justice a major figure of corruption such as Nouri al-Maliki or any Hassanin such as Mustafa al-Sadr or any other known Iranian agent. In short, as long as some bodies other than the state are allowed to carry weapons, the corruption will always be stronger than any government and, as long as Iran does what it wants in Iraq, there will be no way out of their predicament for the Iraqi people, barring a miracle, of course, and we know that, unfortunately, there are no miracles in these bad times.
Why Turkey can’t afford a confrontation with Russia

Syrian President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accepted a much smaller zone of influence for himself in Idlib than he previously asked for.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Russian President Vladimir Putin bore the hallmarks of two great powers stepping back from the brink of war. As in Libya, Russia and Turkey back opposing sides in Syria’s civil war. In rebel-held Idlib, on Turkey’s border, Ankara backs a number of rebel groups and maintains observation posts. Moscow supports the Syrian government of President Bashar Assad, a continuation of an alliance that predates the fall of the Soviet Union.

Though Turkey may be a significant regional power, trade relations between Russia and Turkey remain firmly tilted in Moscow’s favour.

Russia has committed to supporting Assad in his aim to retake “every inch” of Syrian soil. Erdogan is concerned about the potential of millions of refugees flooding across the Turkish border, as well as the risk of a humanitarian crisis. Turkey has a strong hold on its frontier.

That the hostility of the two countries’ differences increased in recent weeks is beyond dispute. Following the death of 37 Turkish soldiers in an air strike February 28 in Idlib, an incident Ankara was at pains not to blame Moscow for, thousands of Turks crossed the border, as well as the risk of a humanitarian crisis. Erdogan is concerned about the potential of millions of refugees flooding across the Turkish border, as well as the risk of a humanitarian crisis.

Background disagreement

Until recently, the two leaders were at daggers drawn over an interpretation of the Sochi Agreement of September 2018, which tasked Erdogan with cleansing the opposition-held area from Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), al-Qaeda’s branch in Syria. This was something Erdogan demanded as a condition for the deal, which had led to the death of more than 30 Turkish soldiers and “neutralised” – which means killed or incapacitated – 2,093 Syrians. After a nearly 6-hour meeting March 5, the two presidents decided to reinstate a ceasefire in Idlib – the 10th in less than two years – and restart joint patrols and security coordination, which have been frozen since February.

Erdogan concessions in the Idlib talks

The new deal

The new agreement makes no mention of the M5 Highway, the longest in Syria, which was taken in February by Russian and Syrian forces. It will remain in the hands of the Syrian Army and will not be given to the Syrian National Army. The new agreement also provides for a line of communication along the M4 highway, making it unsafe for civilians and soldiers. Erdogan also did not believe them.

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Erdogan’s concessions

As a confidence-building measure, Erdogan will have to evacuate his proxies from the vicinity of the M5, where they hold pockets of resistance that could obstruct travel on the highway, making it unsafe for trade, traffic or military use by the Russian and Syrian armies. However, at the end of the day, Erdogan accepted a much smaller zone of influence for himself in Idlib than he previously asked for. He had a symbolic victory in his pocket, one that would help him demonstrate to the Black Flag” (IB Tauris, 2015).

Sami Moubayed

For as long as its alliance with Assad remains intact, it is likely that any agreement between Erdogan and Putin will mark a post-rencement of further confrontation over Idlib. The two countries have been embroiled in a series of bitter disputes.

“The problem in Idlib is the desire of President Bashar Assad to establish full control of the area and block the border with Turkey, while also having pushed 3 million of the Sunni population, uninitialized to Assad, out onto Turkish soil.”

Vladimir Frolov, a Russian foreign affairs analyst, told the Guardian newspaper.

Simon Speckman Cordell

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Uncertainty looms for leaderless Iraq

Nazi Tarzi

ring of uncertainty closes in on Iraq, one of the world's wealthiest oil nations. Days after Prime Minister designate Mohammad Allawi withdrew his candidacy, Tehran threatens the foreign deck, reinstating caretaker Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi as head of government three months after he left his mantle over the unlawful death of 400 protesters. As the protest movement raises the stakes, can Iraqi President Barham Salih appoint a successor within the closing 45-day window, in accordance with constitutional law? As the opening narrows, the political vacuum widens. Despite maintaining his position as caretaker prime minister, Abdul-Mahdi placed his responsibilities on hold, invoking a "voluntary absence."

That means responsibilities ad- ministered by the prime minister, from leading meetings to talks with dignitaries, will be delegated to deputies. While Oil Minister Thamer al-Ghadban led the first session after Abdul-Mahdi excused himself beneath a leave of absence, experts said that only Salih is quali- fied to stand in place of the prime minister. Political seats remain occu- pied but the Iraqi government is effectively leaderless, as quarrels over shares of the ministerial pie between federal and provincial factions persist. "I express deep regret over our brother, Mohammed Allawi's fail- ure to form the new government," reads a statement by Prime Minister Abdul-Mahdi addressed all branches of government.

Protesters, civil society, student unions and school children are forming their own alliance against the kakistocracy governing Iraq. The statement read as a list of instructions informed by what the constitution prescribes but Iraq appears to be moving in circles, after months of protest confined outflows. The state of impotence was welcomed by dissenting fac- tors of the ruling elite, including Kurdistan Democratic Party President Masoud Barzani. He congratulated Kurdish and Iraqi parties, largely Sunni but also some Shia actors, for boycotting the cabinet lineup, achieving what Barzani called "a historic achievement."

Attempts by opposing Kurdish and Sunni blocs were cited by Allawi as reasons he failed in his mandate. Iraq's 17-year road to recovery has hit countless speed bumps but the most stubborn are the partisan and private interests of political parties. Many will protect their booty no matter the cost, desperate to cling to power. The latest items on Abdul- Mahdi's agenda are not new. He has called for an emergency ses- sion to determine final provisions of a new electoral law and a set date for elections. He proposed early December but no date can be ratified while the government remains leaderless.

The court of Iraqi public opin- ion will reject both should the government revert to its reliance on sectarian quotas that delivered insurgency's victory in leaderless Iraq but will weigh heavily on future policy designs, protesters contend. In his search for an alternative candidate, Salih has met with leaders of Shia parties who at some stage in the past 15 years have governed the country, the National Wisdom Movement's Ammar al-Hakim, Dawa Party's Nuri al-Maliki, Fatah Alliance leader Hadi al-Amiri and head of the Victory Alliance former Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi.

Aiming high. An anti-government protester uses a slingshot to fire a stone at security forces during clashes in Baghdad, March 2.

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Some have likened Salih's role to a delicate balancing act, to win over ruling Shia parties while ex- ercising concessions to help the country overcome the political deadlock. Putting aside the hypothesis of progress, uncertainty clouds the horizon but protesters, civil so- ciety, student unions and school children are forming their own alliance against the kakistocracy governing Iraq. Unlike the dethron- ing elite, protesters have taken decisive steps to call corruption to account while the government in Baghdad stalls. Nazli Tarzi is an Arab Weekly correspondent in London.

Iran's threatening messages to Iraq

Majid al-Samarrai

If the Iranian regime and its Iraqi proxies had control over Iraq, there is still their grasp, they would not threaten to burn it down.

The threat of hellfire against Iraq was if Intelligence Director Mustafa al-Kazemi was chosen prime minister. It was issued by a leader of the Iraqi Hezbollah thugs who issued the threat were the same as those who threatened to kidnap President Barham Salih out of Baghdad if he met with US President Donald Trump. Salih did meet Trump on the sidelines of the Davos conference and our thugs friends could not touch him. Iraqis are confused about these barbaric threats and their con- nection to the world of politics because they are more appropri- ate to the world of mafias. Then again, they are probably more akin to Iran's hollow threats of burning Israel, while it shameless and illegally purchased weapons from Israel during the Iran war or perhaps they were expressions of desperation, just like Saddam Hussein's threats of burning half of Israel.

The divisions among the Shia bloc over Allawi's appointment as prime minister exposed the desperation of the pro-Iran par- ties in Iraq, especially among those who favour weapons as the best option to resolve crises, a choice they practised again and again against the people of Iraq since 2003. However, the callous threats from Iran aimed at imposing the choice to its vassal Shia parties for new prime minister simply reflected the state of des- peration of the Iranian regime over losing control of power in Baghdad after the popular revolt of October 1, 2019. One of the main goals of that revolt was to get rid of the Iranian influence in Baghdad. Whenever circumstances allow, Iran shows its aggressive tendencies. In 1979, the Khomeini regime exploited the sectarian factor to use Iraqi Shiites for its national and political purposes. It ended up, however, betraying their 14-year hospitality. One after it took power in Tehran, it started a war against the Iraqis, a war that lasted eight years. One year after that war, it rejected Saddam's peace initiatives, senate, perhaps, that one day its force would invade Iraq, overwhelm the regime there and replace it with the vali-e-faith.

Next came Ali Khamenei's re- gime, which continued the end- less series of killing Iraqis since the occupation of 2003. And yet, the people of Iraq do not bear any hatred towards the people of neighbouring Iran, since they are also victims of the injustice and tyranny of this regime.

If the Iranian regime and its Iraqi proxies had control over Iraq, they would not threaten to burn it down. One wouldn't burn one's possession when one is benefiting from it. Then again, did not the Sunnis Arab cities of Mosul, Fallujah, Diyalah and Kirkuk out of spite and sec- torian hatred?

These thugs do not possess the slightest notion of civil peace and dialogue. They are armed and dangerous, preparing the ground for the execution of their political leaders' decisions to kill opponents and displace civil- ists.

Majid al-Samarrai is an Iraqi writer.

If the Iranian regime and its Iraqi proxies had control over Iraq, there is still their grasp, they would not threaten to burn it down.
British Foreign Minister Dominic Raab has made his first official visit to the Arab Gulf for security and trade-related discussions in Oman and Saudi Arabia. The United Kingdom is looking to reinforce security and trade ties to the region as it moves into a future outside the European Union. With this in mind, the United Kingdom aims to define a new global role for itself following Brexit, tensions involving Iran and Yemen’s civil war pose serious risks for British interests in the region.

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In 2015, Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei recognised the role of “Ghapa” of the extremely leaders in the region” who had brought a massage from the American president saying he was “willing to resolve the nuclear issue with Iran and lift the sanctions.” Muscat and Tehran have maintained cordial relations for decades. These ties survived the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif attended Sultan Qaboos’s funeral in January. Now that the JCPOA looks doomed under US President Donald Trump’s “maximum pressure” campaign, the United States, which is one of Iran’s most important military officials, Major-General Qassem Soleimani, Oman could again have a crucial role to play. Alliding to the same, prior to Raab’s visit, days earlier US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo also took a short visit to Muscat where he met with bin Al-Awbi.

Muscat has made efforts to bro- der indirect talks between Houthi rebels, who last year pledged alleg- ance to Khamenei, and the Sau- di-led coalition in Yemen for some time. The Yemen conflict remains politically unresolved but when a solution is eventually found, Mus- cat’s role and mediation support could well be recognised as instru- mental ones more.

Oman’s search for the middle ground diplomatically has not always been smooth but it has brought about comparisons with the Swiss approach at times. Oman has been the only Arab country that maintained its embassy in Damascus throughout Syria’s 9-year civil war. Last autumn, Oman hosted a U.S.-Oman bilateral meeting in Muscat.

As the United Kingdom deep- ens engagement with Oman – two years ago it announced a new Brit- ish naval base to be hosted there – both sides will look forward to using their steadily growing influ- ence to ensure the region can move towards accelerated dialogue and diplomacy.

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Egypt

In Egypt’s Sinai, civil servants defy ISIS threat

News & Analysis

Special Correspondent

Amr Emam

Cairo

Egypt’s Salafists welcomed a court ruling ordering Egypt’s Supreme Administrative Court to enforce a law preventing operations at Shia TV channels, urging authorities to take down Shia sites. The verdict, which has been met with protest against attempts by Iran to spread Shia Islam in Egypt.

“Shia channels pose a great danger to Egypt and its people,” said Salafist activist Sameh Abdel Hamid. “Egypt’s Supreme Administrative Court must implement the law, preventing Tibet and China from spreading Shia Islam and blocking them from implanting Shia ideologies in Egypt.”

The case was brought by Egypt’s Supreme Media Authority, which accused the channels of propaganda and incitement to violence, accusing them of spreading Shia Islam to destabilise Egypt.

The court verdict does not name the Shia channels affected. Dozens of Shia channels are broadcast via Egyptian communications satellite network NileSat. They include religious channels and some that have social content.

The court verdict orders the closure of Shia websites, including al-Nafis, which is owned and operated by Shia activist Ahmed Rasem al-Nafis.

Nafis, a medical doctor in his late 40s, has been accused of promoting Shia Islam in Egypt and encouraging ties with Shia clerics in Iraq and Iran. His site is not a religious one but contains articles that often defied Iranian policies in the region. He said the court verdict to take down his site was not shared in freedom of expression and inclusion.

“It is a threat to the existence of Shia Islam in Egypt,” he told the court. “This is why we have to do everything we can to stop this expansion,” Abdul Hamid said.

It is not clear how Egyptian authorities will enforce the court ruling and block Shia channels and take down Shia websites. Egyptian authorities have acted to pressure Shia communities, including closing Shia centres and preventing them from entering important shrines, such as that of Al Hussain, near downtown Cairo.

The Egyptian Ministry of Islamic Endowments welcomed the verdict and said it would be a good step on the road of preventing divisions.

“Do we not want divisions in our country?” said Sheikh Khaled al-Ghoud, a member of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, the executive body of the ministry. “Shia channels do nothing but incite Sunni and their religious symbols.”

Crackdown on Shia TV channels, websites expected in Egypt

Egyption civil servants defy ISIS threats

Harsh conditions. A worker uses a digger on the new road to Saint Catherine, in the Sinai Peninsula, south of Cairo. (Reuters)

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Official figures indicate.

Despite this, people such as Osman are far from secure, being at the front line of the war on terrorism in Sinai. They keep working to make North Sinai a place fit for life.

Osman is known among residents of Sheikh Zuweid as the “Minister of Electricity” because he is always there to repair services after repeat electric blackouts, sometimes putting his life in danger.

“We are prone to death every day but these terrorists will never succeed in intimidating us or making us afraid,” Osman said.

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In 2017, Islamic State terrorists attacked a power grid in the North Sinai town of Sheikh Zuweid with rocket-propelled grenades, which added to the site to spread fires and caused businesses to stop working.

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The court verdict does not name the Shia channels affected. Dozens of Shia channels are broadcast via Egyptian communications satellite network NileSat. They include religious channels and some that have social content.

The court verdict orders the closure of Shia websites, including al-Nafis, which is owned and operated by Shia activist Ahmed Rasem al-Nafis.

Nafis, a medical doctor in his late 40s, has been accused of promoting Shia Islam in Egypt and encouraging ties with Shia clerics in Iraq and Iran. His site is not a religious one but contains articles that often defied Iranian policies in the region. He said the court verdict to take down his site was not shared in freedom of expression and inclusion.

“It is a threat to the existence of Shia Islam in Egypt,” he told the court. “This is why we have to do everything we can to stop this expansion,” Abdul Hamid said.

It is not clear how Egyptian authorities will enforce the court ruling and block Shia channels and take down Shia websites. Egyptian authorities have acted to pressure Shia communities, including closing Shia centres and preventing them from entering important shrines, such as that of Al Hussain, near downtown Cairo.

The Egyptian Ministry of Islamic Endowments welcomed the verdict and said it would be a good step on the road of preventing divisions.

“Do we not want divisions in our country?” said Sheikh Khaled al-Ghoud, a member of the Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs, the executive body of the ministry. “Shia channels do nothing but incite Sunni and their religious symbols.”

Amr Emam is an Arab Weekly contributor in Cairo.
**Algeria**

At a joint press conference for the first time in several years, President Tebboune and ex-President Bouteflika announce that they are forming a fact-finding committee to investigate theمحمد بنسعيد, who visited him out of my convictions as a campaigner for human rights, ” Bouchachi defended the visit, added Benchicou. “That is why the initiative by Bouteflika, which is intended to use the prestige of the Hirak for the benefit of a person who denies democracy, is a despicable act that aims to justify the removal of Islamist leaders and to create a new political landscape.”

**Overhaul of Algeria car industry over suspicion of corruption among previous officials**

Lamine Ghammi

**Tunisia**

T he Algerian government repeatedly promised in recent years to expand the domestic car industry and make home-produced car models more competitive by setting lower prices than imported cars. However, the new guidelines for car industry investors introduced by the current government are raising doubts about the former government’s policy of allowing a ploy to enrich business-people close to ousted President Abdelaziz Bouteflika.

“The previous policy dealing with the car industry was a fraud,” said Algerian Industry and Commerce Minister Lahouari Addi. “That is what Ali Aït as he outlined a new strategy to jumpstart the domes- tic car industry. Two former prime ministers, Abdelmalek Sellal and Ahmed Ouyahia, and two former industry ministers, Belhadj Youcef and Mahjoub Bedda, are standing tri- al alongside senior officials and businessmen for alleged corruption in the auto industry. The stated plan was to strip impor- ters, provide jobs and diversify the economy by launching a number of projects to develop the domestic auto industry. The inte- gration of the car industry cannot be done in dispersing and frag- mentation of the industry.”

The new push to develop an auto industry in Algeria would exclude French carmaker Renault.

Under the previous pro- gramme, foreign carmakers, in particular Renault and Peugeot, which require local partners to produce 75,000 vehicles annually in Algeria, would have been invited to invest in Algeria to produce the same number of cars here? That defines an obvious trend that because “It had no vision at the time to develop auto industry, it made a mistake by picking Renault as its first par- tner.”

“Is it logical to select that main partner for such an investment in a neighbouring coun- try? Moreover, why didn’t Morocco offer this partner which produces cars on a par with Renault to invest in Algeria so that it can produce the same number of cars here?”

In 2014, Renault opened a plant in Algeria and its production is supposed to reach 75,000 vehicles annually in Africa. But a recent report by the financial daily, Le So- cialist news (DFS), which noted that the two French carmakers are also present in the country. Auto experts said Algeria must compete against Morocco for the automotive industry, given its geographical position for exports and demand of the automotive econo- my. Morocco’s automotive sector’s exports account for an annual average of 14.5% for the decade, leading to 120,000 to 180,000 vehicles. With sales reaching 75,000 vehicles annually in the country, Morocco is expected to be one of the most prominent destinations for the automotive industry, given its geographical position for exports and demand of the automotive econo- my.

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Confusion and fear hang over Lebanon as debt matures

Samar Kadi

Beirut

A pprehension and confusion thickened as the clock ran down on Lebanon’s looming debt maturities of $1.2 billion Eurobond due March 9. Defaulting or paying the debt is expected to aggravate the acute economic crisis gripping the country.

The Lebanese pound has lost more than 30% of its value on the parallel market since September.

The government has been studying, with the help of international finance experts, the options of orderly and unorderly default and their repercussions and a third option — partial payment and negotiating the remainder.

“Weather they pay or not, the people at large will suffer the most and will be totally helpless,” said Nada Sleiman, an artisan.

“Lebanon needs to have an economic salvation plan even if it devalues because, if we do pay, there will be no more money to buy fuel, wheat, medicines and other basic commodities. Also, the people’s savings will be put at risk. Definitely, the population will bear the brunt of any decision,” Sleiman said.

Some politicians turned their criticism to Lebanon’s banking sector, which continued unscathed from the country’s devastating civil strife (1975-90) and wars with Israel.

Lebanese parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, of the Shia Amal Movement, accused banks of dithering local holdings by selling their Eurobonds to foreign investors, thus weakening Lebanon’s position in talks with foreign bondholders.

The banks, which for years funneled deposits to the state, own well over half of the sovereign debt and have been accused of political partialities over the March repayment.

Bank of America Merrill Lynch, in November, estimated that around 50% of Eurobonds were held by local banks, while Lebanon’s central bank had around 15% and foreign investors owned the remainder. However, those figures may have changed after local banks reportedly sold part of their Eurobond holdings to foreign lenders.

Economists warned that paying the March 9 Eurobond debt on time would eat away at Lebanon’s plummeting foreign currency reserves, while bankers said default would damage the country’s reputation with lenders.

A decision by the financial prosecutor to freeze the assets of 20 Lebanese banks on March 9 was viewed almost immediately by the state prosecutor, who warned that “such a move would send the country, as well as its monetary, financial and economic sectors into chaos.”

The government separately approved a draft law on lifting bank secrecy, which is at the core of the Lebanese financial system. The move was described as “an important achievement” to hold accountable any corrupt person, “including ministers, MPs and public officials.”

Public anger has boiled in recent months at the banks, which severely curbed people’s access to their savings and blocked transfers abroad. The Lebanese pound has lost more than 30% of its value on the parallel market since September, reaching a peak of 2,600 pounds to the US dollar.

Financial strains came to a head last year as capital inflows slowed and protests erupted against a political elite that has dominated Lebanon since the civil war and steered the country “has the option to dominate crippled countries such as Lebanon.”

On the Arab front, Diab has reportedly asked to visit Saudi Arabia, part of a Gulf tour that would also see him travel to Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar and other countries. Riyadh has yet to respond. Qatar has said it would welcome a visit from Diab, regardless.

The new government’s plan promised Qatar Petroleum one out of the three grand Floating Storage Regasification Units to be built in Lebanon.

Another enormous challenge that confronts the cabinet is the $12 billion Eurobond set to mature March 9, with other bonds requiring repayment in April and June. Lebanese Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni, a veteran financial expert, said the country “has the option to choose between the worse and the very worst.”

After the Central Bank announced it would take on the responsibility of the cabinet to deal with this debt, there are fears that abiding by those payments would lead to a sharp decrease in the Central Bank’s foreign currency reserves, something that would exacerbate the liquidity crisis in the country. Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri warned against making the forthcoming payment, saying it would lead to catastrophic results at the social level.

The revolts that started Octo ber 17, 2019, toppled the government headed by Saad Hariri but has lost momentum, with a few exceptions of cutting roads and breaking into ministries and public departments.

The call for early parliamentary elections, though supported by several political forces, seems to be blocked by Hezbollah.

Financial woes. A man walks in front of a bank in Beirut, March 6. (AFP)

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Lebanon

Travel and Society section editor.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society section editor.
Uncertain outcome of Israeli election will affect US vote

Gregory Aroian

Palestine
Israel

Annexation is more than a gift of words

Geoffrey Aronson

Back to square one. An Israeli election monitor wearing gloves holds envelopes as votes are counted following Israel’s national election, in Shoham, Israel, March 4. (REUTERS)
Turkey’s opening of Greek border plays into Assad’s hands

Stephen Starr

Turkey’s opening of the Greek border plays into Assad’s hands in a way that would not use Syria as a launching pad for external operations. How would you allow it to use it for such a purpose. I made clear that we would focus exclusively on our struggle against the Syrian regime and its allies in Syria. While HTS may or may not continue to fight the regime until it is forcibly removed from Idlib, where do its fighters go then? And the ISIS cells? They, potentially, may be heading for the Greek border in hopes of reaching mainland Europe from where they could be expected to plot further carnage.

There is no evidence that extremists have recently attempted to reach Europe through the Turkish-Greek border, there are precedents.

Erdogan’s impulsive weaponising of poor refugees as a show of fierce confrontation with the European Union proves itself to be another huge erratic move.
Iran is sick with its political system not just coronavirus

Viewpoint

Iran will be held responsible for the austerity budget and other unpopular decisions.

Coronavirus tests Iran's limits

Extensive official statements and 98 percent of the Iranian population received the coronavirus.

Any widespread transmission among the IRGC could substantially diminish not only the state's capacity to act but also its ability to contain the virus.

Coronavirus tests Iran's limits

With the spread of COVID-19 in Iran, officials have increased testing to prevent the virus's spread.

The virus has affected the ruling class to an extraordinary extent. People from every class of Iranian society have been infected, including members of the country's political elite.

As the virus spreads, the government's response has been erratic and disorganized, leading to a lack of trust in its ability to manage the situation.

The government has taken unprecedented action to stop the virus spread, including the shutdown of non-essential services and the implementation of social distancing measures.

However, the government's decisions have been met with resistance, particularly regarding the closure of educational institutions and the suspension of public gatherings.

The virus has also affected the economy, with the government implementing measures to mitigate its impact on the people.

The government's response has been met with criticism, and there have been calls for a more transparent and accountable approach.

Despite the challenges, the government's actions have been praised by some, who believe they have helped to contain the spread of the virus.

The virus has also highlighted the need for a more effective and coordinated response to future pandemics, with a focus on preparedness and public health education.

In the future, it is likely that the government will face increased pressure to address the challenges posed by the virus, including the need for better healthcare systems and the protection of vulnerable populations.

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**Spotlight**

**Coronavirus in MENA**

**Egyptian authorities under fire over unrestricted entry of Chinese despite virus risk**

**Ahmed Meghaid**

Cairo

Egyptian authorities have come under fire for allowing unrestricted entry of Chinese despite fears of coronavirus infections. More than 100,000 Chinese tourists are visiting Egypt each year, and the country is feeling the brunt of the virus outbreak. The Egyptian authorities have taken measures to contain the spread of the virus, including the suspension of all international flights and the closure of borders with other countries. However, there are concerns about the lack of transparency and coordination among regional health officials.

**Egyptian authorities have come under fire over unrestricted entry of Chinese despite virus risk**

**Mohammed Alkhereiji**

London

Countries across the Middle East and North Africa have imposed travel restrictions and lockdowns to contain the spread of the coronavirus. The region is especially vulnerable due to its high population density and limited healthcare facilities. However, there are concerns about the effectiveness of the measures and the impact on the economy. The World Health Organization has called for increased testing and contact tracing to prevent the spread of the virus.

**GCC countries introduce additional coronavirus measures**

**Roufan Nahhas**

Amman

As Jordan confirmed its first coronavirus case – a Kordi- sian who had recently visited Italy – the country is feeling the brunt of the virus outbreak. Measures have been put in place to contain the spread of the virus, including the closure of schools and restrictions on large gatherings. The government has also advised citizens to practice social distancing and to avoid unnecessary travel.

**Jordan tourism suffers huge blow from coronavirus**

**Tawfiq Tahhan**

Petra, the head of the Petra Hotels Owners Society, noted that bookings for the first few weeks of the year had dropped by 90% and that the industry was facing a severe crisis. However, there are hopes that tourism will pick up once the lockdown is lifted and travel restrictions are eased.

Data from the Central Bank of Jordan showed that hotel revenues from tourism during January reached 690 million, an increase of 11.8% over January 2019. However, that was before the virus outbreak expanded out of China. Tourism officials in Jordan said that they were confident that the country would bounce back once the virus is under control.

**Unprecedented procedure. Egyptian Quarantine Authority employs 3D scan body temperature of incoming travellers at Cairo International Airport, February 1. (AFP)**

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Economy

**Dubai government to buy back shares in DP World**

The Dubai government has decided to buy back shares in DP World, the world's fourth-largest port operator, in a move to return the company to private ownership and help refinance its debt. The government announced its intention to purchase a 19.5% stake in DP World from the Dubai World Group, in a deal worth $5.15 billion. The plan also includes the potential for an initial public offering (IPO) of shares to raise additional funds.

**The impending delisting of DP World from Nasdaq Dubai is not the company’s first exit from a stock exchange.**

The move comes after DP World was delisted from Nasdaq Dubai in 2012. Since then, the company has faced financial challenges, including a serious blow to its business from the locusts. The recent decision to delist from Nasdaq Dubai is part of a broader strategy to consolidate ownership and control of the company.

**Locust invasion threatens MENA crops**

Locust swarms are threatening crops in the Middle East, with fears that the plague could spread to other regions. The United Arab Emirates has declared a state of emergency to combat the locusts, which have already been spotted in several countries, including Sudan and Ethiopia.

**Saudi central bank cuts key rates by 50 basis points**

The Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA) has reduced its key interest rate by 50 basis points to 2.5%, in a move to support the kingdom's economy during the coronavirus pandemic. The decision comes after a similar cut by the central bank in the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

**Egypt plans to sell $500 million Banque du Caire stake**

Egypt aims to sell a minority stake in the state-owned Banque du Caire, to raise between $500 million and $750 million for the government. The bank, which is one of the largest in Africa, has been facing challenges in recent years. The disposition of the stake is part of the government's strategy to diversify its sources of revenue and reduce its reliance on oil.
Six decades after independence, Middle East still looking for growth model

Rashmee Roshan Lall

I’ve been 75 years since World War II ended and the idea of decolonising the Middle East and North Africa began to gain ground but, while formal colonisation ended about six decades ago, the region seems unable to find a clear path to growth. Rather than an “Arab spring,” what may be needed is a temperate autumn, a season of mellow fruitfulness to tackle the region’s biggest problems. These include finding a way to turn the demographic bulge to advantage, reducing inequality of opportunity and outcome and boosting local opportunity. Here are some of the region’s key issues:

Youth ‘explosion’

The MENA region’s population grew from around 100 million in 1950 to approximately 380 million in 2000, the Population Reference Bureau said. It is now about 420 million and half that population lives in four countries — Egypt, Sudan, Iraq and Yemen. The 2016 Arab Human Development Report, which focused on youth, said most of the region’s population is under the age of 25. The youth bulge is the result of declining mortality rates in the past 40 years as well as an average annual population growth rate of 2.4%, compared with 1% globally. The absolute number of young people is predicted to increase from 46 million in 2010 to 58 million in 2035.

Though a large youthful population would normally be regarded as an economic blessing, it’s become the bane of the MENA region. The demographic transition means the region needs to create more than 300 million jobs by 2030, the World Bank said.

Ahmad Aaroq, International Monetary Fund (IMF) director for the Middle East and Central Asia, said in 2015 that “youth growth rate is lower that what is required to tackle the generational bulge.” The IMF said the region must “take advantage of the demographic dividend,” reducing inequality of opportunity and outcome and boosting local opportunity.

Poverty and inequality

More Arab youth are poor than their elders and as well as their peers in countries at similar stages of development.

Last year’s Arab Youth Survey stated that 43% of young Arab respondents said they regard joblessness as one of the region’s main challenges, well ahead of the Syrian war (23%) and the threat of terrorism (26%).

The region’s population is expected to nearly double by 2030 and the IMF estimated that 27 million young Arabs will enter the labour market the next five years. 

Poverty and inequality

More Arab youth do not live in oil-rich countries. Data from the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) states that 16 million people across ten Arab countries (41% of the total population) are poor and another 25% were vulnerable to poverty. This translates to an estimated 350 million people who may be poor or vulnerable out of a population of 400 million.

The MENA region is also regarded as the most unequal in the world, with the top 10% of its people accounting for 64% of wealth, although the average masks enormous differences from one country to another. The region’s average in non-oil producing Arab countries has shrunk from 47% to 27% of the population, ESCWA economists said. In a report for the Carnegie Corporation last year, Palestinian-American author Ramzi G. Khoury described what he called “poverty’s new agony,” the fact that a poor family in the Middle East will remain poor for several generations.

Egypt is a case in point. In 2018, Cairo vowed to halve poverty by 2022 and eliminate it by 2030. However, Egypt’s national statistics agency released a report on household finances last year that said that 37% of Egypt’s 93 million people were classified as poor, up from 28% in 2015. The World Bank subsequently nearly doubled that figure, saying 60% of Egyptians were “either poor or vulnerable.”

Wealth gaps between countries are greater in the region than in others because it has some of the world’s richest economies as well as some of the poorest, such as Yemen.

Inequality is not the only problem in the region. Former World Bank economist Branko Milanovic said the uneven picture means that last year’s protests in Lebanon, Algeria, Sudan and Iran cannot be explained by “a blanket story of inequality.” Indeed, Algeria, a relatively egalitarian country, was rocked by protests, first against a long-serving president and then against the wider political system.

French economist Thomas Piketty, who wrote the bestselling book on income inequality, “Capital in the Twenty-First Century” said Arab countries must come up with a way to share the region’s vast and unequally distributed wealth.

Dramatic changes

The state is the largest employer in many Arab countries and over-regulation of the private sector left it underdeveloped and unable to overcome the significant barriers to trade and economic cooperation across regional borders. Meanwhile, inflexible labour laws stifled job creation and constrain allowed insufficiency to stay unchallenged. In 2018, the average rank of Arab countries on the World Bank’s Doing Business survey was 129th out of 190 countries.

Along with structural factors, conflict has had a debilitating effect on economic growth. Three years ago, the World Bank noted that the Syrian war had killed approximately 500,000 people, displaced half the population — more than 10 million people — and reduced more than two-thirds of Syrians to poverty. By 2017, conflict in Yemen and Libya had displaced more than 55% and 50% of their respective populations of 4 million and 6 million. Taken together, the Syrian, Yemen and Libyan civil wars have affected more than 60 million people, about one-fifth of the MENA population.

Infrastructural damage runs into the billions of dollars but it is the loss — or outright collapse, as in Yemen — of economic activity that has affected real GDP growth. Countries in the region affected by conflict lost $64.4 billion cumulatively in GDP from 2010-15 — 6% of the regional GDP, ESCWA’s 2018 report on institutional development in post-conflict settings stated.

New thinking needed

This is the year when, for the first time, an Arab country holds the chairmanship of the Group of 20 of the world’s largest economies. It could be an opportunity to consider existing trends within the region, what needs to be changed and how.

In the words of Oxford Development macroeconomist Aedel Malik, “the Arab developmental model... seems to have passed its expiration date.” In a 2014 paper for the Journal of International Affairs, Malik said “failure of the Arab state to deliver social justice is ultimately rooted in the failure of a development model based on heavy state intervention in the economy and increasingly unsustainable bailouts of local populations through generous welfare entitlements.”

It’s a good point, for the region’s wealthiest countries just as much as its poorest. Oil-rich states are affected by dramatic changes in oil prices and the increasingly urgent suggestion that the world is at “peak oil.” An IMF report warned that, by 2034, declining oil demand could erode the $2 trillion in financial wealth amassed by Gulf Cooperations Council members. The IMF said “faster progress with economic diversification and private sector development will be critical to ensure sustainable growth.”

Creativity and courage will be needed if the Arab world is to meet the expectations of its youthful population and the challenges posed by its increasing inequality.

Rashmee Roshan Lall is a columnist for The Arab Weekly. Her blog can be found at www.rashmee.com and she is on Twitter: @rashmeeurl.
Lebanese women to press for equal personal status rights on International Women’s Day

Samar Kadi

Beirut

A lthough a record of six female ministers sit in Lebanon’s cabinet, Lebanese women struggle to obtain equal gender rights in a country where discrimination against them is facilitated by 15 religion-based personal status laws.

Equal rights in a civil state are among the demands of anti-government demonstrators who have been protesting since October against a ruling class accused of corruption.

"Discrimination is also inherent in the personal status laws of all sects and religions. It is a matter that harms both genders because it consigns them to their sect and places them at the mercy of the clerical matters of marriage, divorce, inheritance, etc. et cetera.

"Definitely women are doubly harmed because religious laws do not grant them the same rights as men when it comes to inheritance or children custody or even the right to divorce in the Shia community," Fayyad added.

"We have many clerics who back us and they are part of the campaign because they consider our demands are rightful and can be achieved since it does not go against religion," Ibrahim said, noting that all other sects have amended the custody regulations except the Shia.

"Of course, we hope there is a common equitable civic law for personal status affairs that applies to all religions and sects. Besides personal status issues, many discriminate laws need to be amended to become fairer to women and fulfil their rights," Ibrahim added.

Prominent Shia cleric Sheikh Ahmad Taleb called for reforms in religious courts. He said he supports raising the age of custody and that immediate reforms should be made within the courts, Ibrahim noted.

A report by Human Rights Watch, called "Unequal and Unprotected" listing forms of discrimination facing women in Lebanon, said, across all confessions, women faced legal and other obstacles when terminating unhappy or abusive marriages; limitations on their pecuniary rights; and the risk of losing their children if they remarry or when the so-called maternal custody period ends.

"Gender inequality in Lebanon is among the worst in the world," Fayyad said. "There is no equality between people (the haves and have-nots) in general and no equality between male and female citizens especially under the authority of the clergy. What we need is hands-off from the clergy over personal status laws."

Equal rights in a civil state are among the demands of anti-government demonstrators who have been protesting since October against a ruling class accused of corruption and mismanagement that pushed Lebanon to the brink of economic collapse.

Meanwhile, events dedicated to women’s rights were set for International Women’s Day under the theme “I am Generation Equality: Realising Women’s Rights."

Those included a female march on March 8, panel discussions of women’s role in the protest movement and a 2-day event — “Women in the spotlight” — that includes talks, discussions, stand-up comedy, yoga workshops, garage sales and live music. The activities were organised by women architects, artists and activists who started local initiatives that are environmentally sensitive.

One event was designed to honour pioneering Lebanese women athletes who defied social stigmas and thrived through determination and perseverance and a public talk on how to “build resilience in a time of crisis” will provide tips to deal with the socio-economic crisis gripping Lebanon; mentally, financially and physically.

Gender bias in the workplace is a daily struggle for women

I once was invited on a Skype call by the male founder of a promising, well-funded startup for quick knowledge exchange. I gladly accepted the invitation. Never mind that the individual in question did not show up to a previous appointment without the decency of an on-call notice or an advance message. I grabbed the opportunity to learn more from a fellow entrepreneur.

During the very first minutes, the tone was set. I was sharply ordered to keep my mouth shut and ask my questions at the end of the conversation. You guessed right. I never asked questions and was left to my own discretion of such violence.

You may be willing to reassure me that this was a one-off event and that I may not have been thick-skinned enough. I wish. A year ago, on a call with a different organisation, a male entrepreneur, in front of his female colleague while she joyfully shared their work. There was no apparent reason for the interruption than the man believing my words were more important than hers.

Just like me, she instantly silenced herself. I watched in bewilderment and, frankly, pain. Interestingly, when I spoke with other female entrepreneurs about these experiences, they shared similar ones of intimidation, aggressiveness, mansplaining and other “delicacies.”

In the spectrum of gender-based violence and female oppression in Arabic societies, colleagues and I might have been the luckiest after all. For, no one, at least in my professional interactions and of my presence in the public sphere, ever reprimanded me for my silent resistance. Through repetitive experiences, I mastered how to sharply address and resolve those behaviours live — call that crisis management, if you will. It came as the sad conclusion that men with fully grown prefrontal cortex do not need another gender advocacy campaign to cognitively accept and respect the presence of a millenarian female human.

I learnt my power was regained and rebalanced in imposing boundaries to men who have the healthy cognitive capacity to understand.

Mind you, such facing required much exercising and disrupting of my Pavlovian brain, which had somehow — until my first anecdote — been going along with ingrained patriarchy and the unparalleled sense of male self-entitlement. For much of his discomfort, my fellow male entrepreneur was the first to receive my plain call-out, to which he responded with silence, then embarrassment and finally an apology.

Sure enough, when we have taken our power in random daily events, then we will be more strongly equipped to demand and receive the right to our personal space. The right to our identity, the right to pass on nationality to our children, full right to divorce, fair involvement in politics, rights to own our bodies, reap the full fruits of our work and equal parenting emotional responsibilities.

Until then, regaining our power is priority. Our silence not only endangers the traumas of such experiences but fuels such toxic experiences but fuels such toxic behaviour. We must speak up for ourselves, so our daughters will never be silenced.

Khadija Hammouchi, an award-winning technology entrepreneur and researcher, is the co-founder and CEO of Jawla Inc, an online publishing tool for rights-to-left languages, including Arabic in particular. She conveys stories of change and homogenised intellectual thinking in the Middle East and North Africa.
Arab Women Today

The Arab Weekly staff

London

With International Women's Day celebra ted on March 8, efforts to improve the lives of women in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries yield positive results.

In the 39th session of the Arab Women's Com mittee, the GCC adopted the Arab Declaration to Empower Women: Developing Society. Byad was declared the capital of Arab Women 2020.

Several countries hosted the UN-endorsed Women's Day events. The reports underline that the progress of the kingdom in the Arab World, as well as the recent initiatives to improve the exposure of women, has been positive.

UAE reforms include provisions against discrimination based on gender, introducing penalties for harassment and lifting restrictions on women's work at night in certain industries.

"Women, Business and the Law" in six out of eight areas measured including women's mobility, access to credit, inheritance, retirement age and economic activity. The index, which ranks 181 countries in 17 areas, shows that the kingdom has made significant progress.

"Saudi Arabia made the biggest improvements globally, enacting reforms in six out of eight areas measured including women's mobility, access to credit, inheritance, retirement age and economic activity," said the report. "This is something that completely create real change for Saudi women," she added.

The World Bank highlighted what it described as groundbreaking Saudi reforms, which ranged from laws that protect women from discrimination in employment to the criminalisation of sexual harassment in public and private sector employment, as well as ending forced marriage for women by requiring women's entrepreneurship by prohibiting gender-based discrimination in accessing financial services.

The United Arab Emirates, which has a progressive record in support of its female population and counts women serving in the government's cabinet, was also lauded for its reforms.

"Over the last several years, Emirati reforms have shown a commitment to removing legal barriers to women's work," the World Bank report said.

UAE reforms include prohibiting discrimination based on gender in employment, introducing penalties for sexual harassment and lifting restrictions on women's work at night in certain industries.

Bahrain also reportedly made progress with its Supreme Council for Women recently adopting a second National Plan for the Advancement of Bahraini Women for 2023-27, which focuses on supporting women's entrepreneurship and enhancing their physical and psychological wellbeing and protection from domestic violence.

Additionally, Bahrain adopted provisions regarding sexual harassment in employment, including criminal penalties for perpetrators.

Saudi Arabia's Minister of Labor and Social Development, Prince Ali bin Abdullah bin Farhan, said the new laws were in line with international standards.

"This is shocking for Yemeni society because it's one thing to demand certain behaviour and what people are wearing and it's another thing to go and abuse these women like Houthis are doing," Dawsari said.

"It goes against our tribal values; it goes against our Islamic values. The difference now is that Houthis can force it down the throats of people living under their control," the Houthis' representative said.

The Houthis campaigner said, "This week, the mountains in the southern Yemeni province of Saada have been hounded by Iran, taught not only how to use military equipment, but also trained by Iran, taught how to use military equipment, and taught not only how to use military equipment, but also how to use military equipment."

Another cafe owner in Sana'a said, "Young fighters go through young people are being beaten in the street for failing to comply with the new notions of acceptable dress.

Unlike the days before the conflict, when people were free to celebrate with chocolates and flowers, one young man had his red shirt torn off by assailants who saw it as a symbol of an event that runs counter to Yemeni values.

In January, men's hair salons were told fashionable styles were not acceptable. "We are completely opposed to these abusive measures and the restrictions being imposed on people in the capital," he said.

Houthi women have been targeted in schools and on college campuses against young people being "improperly dressed," said Houthi woman and human rights activist who lives in self-exile. At Sana'a University, Houthis formed squads that "patrol the corridors to prevent any contact between students of different sexes," he said.

"Young fighters go through two months of training in the mountains, taught not only how to use weapons but also indoctrinated in a radical version of Shia Islam," Dawsari said.

"If you want to understand why Houthis behave in certain ways, you have to look at Iran. They've been trained by Iran, taught how to use disinformation, how to subjugate women. They're developing a police state akin to Iran."
Priceless. An Egyptian archaeologist restores the throne of King Tutankhamun at the conservation centre in the Grand Egyptian Museum.

Kuwaiti producer talks about new generation of Arab film-makers

Khadija Hamouch

Adia Ahmad is a renowned Arab actress and film personality. The Kuwaiti actress, journalist and former MBC talk show co-host describes herself as an art and social activist. It has been a long road for a woman who wrote her first play at age 16. Adia has appeared on stages in Kuwait, Beirut and New York, winning acclaim from theatre stalwarts and critics.

As a producer and director, Adia has developed major musical theatre productions in association with the National Council of Arts and Culture and the Amiri Diwan in Kuwait.

NA: “There is a reappropriating of new genres that have not been explored. We have seen the revival of old Kuwaiti women’s traditional tales. We have seen fantasy as a genre and the theatre movies and smaller ones are slowly disappearing. We have had Studio Image Nation in Abu Dhabi showing real interest.”

Harvey Morris

London

T he plundering of Egypt’s archaeological treasures is as old as the pharaohs. Ancient grave robbers gave way to colonial-era explorers, who dispatched their finds to Europe’s greatest museums and a legal trade thrived on international markets until 1983.

In that year, the Egyptian parliament enacted a stringent law, backed by the threat of prison terms, that declared antiquities national territory to be the property of the state. However, in the years of unrest and political uncertainty following the “Arab spring,” a decline in security and efforts to repatriate illegal contraband from archaeological sites saw a resurgence of looting and the smuggling of artefacts.

The moves to safeguard Egypt’s archaeological heritage come as exhibits at the Egyptian Museum are disappearing into packing cases to be transferred to a new Grand Egyptian Museum near the pyramids at Giza.

As the almost 9 million tourists who visited Egypt in 2019 can testify, security and a surge in illegal contraband from archaeological sites has the largest collection of ancient Egyptian artefacts outside Egypt, last year took part on the role of leading an international task force to monitor the trade in Egyptian and Nubian antiquities. Experts in London, using a sophisticated database, worked with colleagues in Cairo and Khartoum to identify looted or stolen items. Looted items might never have been reported missing and others might have been sold decades ago with fake provenances. Part of the team’s task is to alert police and customs authorities if they identify suspicious items on offer at auction houses, galleries or websites such as eBay.

The moves to safeguard Egypt’s archaeological heritage come as exhibits at the Egyptian Museum, an iconic rose-red building in Tahrir Square, are disappearing into packing cases to be transferred to a new Grand Egyptian Museum near the pyramids at Giza.

Authorities are taking a more aggressive approach to recovering what they claim are stolen artefacts that have appeared on the international antiquities market.

Government officials last year said they planned to sue the London auction house Christie’s after it went ahead, despite Egypt’s protests, with the $6 million sale of a disputed bust of King Tutankhamun.

The Egyptians say the bust, from a private collection, was stolen from one of the temples at Luxor. A ban on trade in looted artefacts predates restrictions introduced in 1983.

The law is also getting tougher. Domestic transporters and Cairo Criminal Court recently sentenced Boutros Rached Boutros Ghali, brother of a former finance minister, to 30 years in prison plus a $6 million fine (€5.8 million) for dealing in stolen artefacts.

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The new museum will house more than 100,000 objects, including 30,000 that have never been exhibited. Highlights will include King Tutankhamun’s 5,000-piece funerary collection, on display for the first time in one space.

The old Tahrir Square museum is a splendid reminder of a bygone age. Opened in 1902, it had become somewhat rundown in recent years, with priceless treasures kept in rickety display cases as old as the museum itself.

In the old Tahrir Square days, when trading in national treasures was relatively unpoliced by law, the museum had its own shop for the sale of genuine artefacts. These days visitors to the museum and to its successor at Giza can buy real works of art, reproductions as they exit through the gift shop.

Harvey Morris has written several books on the Middle East, including “No Friends but the Mountains: The Tragic History of the Kurds.”
Egyptian writer Yacoub el-Sharouni.

Yacoub el-Sharouni, born in 1931, has not been found by the General Authority of the Planet's Earth.

Sharouni said children's literature stimulates thought and is a tool for changing reality.

Sharouni is a prolific writer with approximately 400 works to his credit. His career spans decades and is known for his good literature always finds interested readers. The writer is not afraid of trying new things and remains open to international experiences in this era of the global village. He said he adapted his writing style to suit the tastes of today's reader and enhanced his stories with bright and coloured attractive illustrations and sharing his experiences in technological developments. Additionally, he has adapted his writing style and approaches because that offers audiovisual tools that attract children.

His book “Ships of Forbidden Things,” for example, told of children who steal their father’s space- ship and go on an intergalactic expedition. The fantasy world and events of the story fit well with the technology and events with technology.

The residents there face the consequences of the blockage of a groundwater well. They had to manage their water reserves, which were sufficient for only three days. In the end, the problem was solved with the help of the children.

“A Miracle in the Desert” was ranked among the 50 best Arab works in children’s literature. It was reprinted 17 times and won the Sheikh Zayed Prize for Children’s Literature in the Arab world in 2004. The book’s popularity among young readers has not diminished.

Sharouni often addresses issues that concern children, such as the role of women in development or the problem of shams around major cities. He has also written about war victims, people with disabilities and street children.

He said he regretted there is no integrated system for translating Arabic books to other languages so they can serve as intercultural communication bridges.

Sharouni’s ability to write books in a style that appeals to children everywhere enabled him to win several international awards.

A special bond with children’s literature. Egyptian writer Yacoub el-Sharouni.

Saudite: a special bond with children's literature. "A living and vibrant society" will not be affected by negative alliances. He used as an example when Iraq occupied Kuwait and

the political decision was to form a “military alliance of brothers and friends” and Kuwait returned to its people and the liberating forces left at the end of their mission.

So far, nothing can really be said about the future of the national literature. The secret of Sharouni’s longevity as a writer of children’s literature lies in the fact that he focuses on issues and problems related to the future. In “The Treasure of the Island of the Mermaids” he criti- cized authoritarian education and revealed its effects on children’s creativity abilities. He was the first in the Arab world to raise this issue.

Sharouni said children’s literature stimulates thought and is a tool for changing reality by presenting works that combine the worlds of literature, insight and reality.
West End musical celebrates Arab diva Umm Kulthum

Zainab Mehdi

London

Known as Egypt’s Fourth Pyramid and “The Star of the Orient,” Arab diva Umm Kulthum was celebrated in a special musical based on her life at a London West End theatre.

“Umm Kulthum and the Golden Era” brought alive the music legacy of the Egyptian singer who carved Arab history and moved women’s voices into the consciousness of Arab world.

Performing alongside talented West End dancers and singers, Syrian soprano Lubana Al Quntar played the role of the Arab diva.

One of Umm Kulthum’s aspirations was to go London after her legendary 1967 performance in Paris at the Olympia. “It is my gift to bring her to the stage in London,” said Mona Khashoggi, the musical’s Saudi writer and producer.

Mursi, a London events company promoting underground, alternative and indie Arab music and culture, helped promote the event.

The compelling concert covered Umm Kulthum’s most recognised and admired works from the 1920s through to the 1970s, which marked the beginning of her Golden Age.

Umm Kulthum’s best-known works, formulated by Egyptian musical figures including Mohamed Abdel Wahab, Riayad El Sunbati, Sayed Mekawy, Mohamed el-Qasab, and Baligh Hamdi, were performed by an orchestra conducted by Louai Almenwi.

Umm Kulthum’s rise to fame was not a straightforward one. Determined for people to hear her remarkable and moving voice, Umm Kulthum’s father dressed the young girl in boys’ clothing to have her sing in public. Given that Umm Kulthum was born to a poor family, it wasn’t usual in Egyptian peasant tradition for women or girls to sing in front of strangers.

In 1926, Umm Kulthum signed her first contract with Gramophone Records, which paid her a yearly salary and royalties for every record sold. As her career advanced, Umm Kulthum replaced her male outfits for conservative yet stylish women’s dresses and was accompanied by a cast of talented musicians.

By combining poetry with music, Umm Kulthum made fine literature available to the masses, many of whom were unable to read and write.

Performing alongside talented West End dancers and singers, Syrian soprano Lubana Al Quntar played the role of the Arab diva. Umm Kulthum’s granddaughter, Sanaa Nabil, was on stage as a guest performer.

“Singing the right way, which in this case would be singing like Umm Kulthum is a challenge and will always be a challenge. However, I am doing the best that I can,” Quntar said.

Quntar said singers from the era of classical Arabic music had a huge role to play throughout her singing career.

“Growing up, I’d always listen to Asmahan, whom I am related to. Notable singers such as Umm Kulthum, Suad Mohamed, Fairid al-Atrash, Mohamed Abdel Wahab were and still are an inspiration to me. I will always be amazed by Umm Kulthum’s singing techniques. Singing Umm Kulthum’s songs makes everything feel unique and that’s exactly what her voice was. It was unique. She had an amazing strong voice that captured the souls of millions of people,” Quntar said.

She said she hoped the musical would help connect the public with Umm Kulthum’s songs and her life.

“Behind this great singer, there was a girl from a village who struggled for many years disguised as a boy. I hope that people will get a closer insight on Umm Kulthum’s journey, including her success,” Quntar said.

“For me, it’s very emotional to see how her character developed from being a child trapped in a very closed, religious and protective circle, then came out of this environment to become one of the most successful Arab singers of all times. It’s just amazing.”

Quntar said she hoped the musical would also be performed elsewhere in Europe, the United States and the Middle East.

“It is the perfect time to create and remember the great singer. We hope that people around the world will be a part of this exciting tribute and celebration. The concert is distinctive because it is the first time an Arab figure has been represented in this way, especially in a Western country,” she said.

“It’s time to remember and pay tribute to exceptional Arab performers such as Asmahan, Farid al-Atrash, Mohamed Abdel Wahab and Abdel Halim Hafez,” Quntar added.

Khashoggi said she was working on a musical focusing on Asmahan, a Syrian-born singer whose voice has been compared with Umm Kulthum’s.

Zainab Mehdi is an Arab Weekly intern.

From Umm Kulthum’s West End musical in London.