For Muslims in Arab world, Ramadan is unlike any before

The usually festive spirit of the month is weighed down by wariness about the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in a region already concerned about armed conflict and economic crises.

The Arab Weekly staff

Tunis

The majority-Muslim population of the Arab world would begin observing the rites of the holy month of Ramadán April 24 and 25. But from the empty streets around the region, you would not know it is Ramadán.

The traditionally festive spirit of the month is weighed down by wariness about the spread of the coronavirus in a region already burdened with armed conflict and economic crises.

Fasting during Ramadán is one of the five pillars of Islam and normally means more than just abstention from food and drink from dawn to sunset. It is usually a month of social celebration and communal worship.

But this year, most mosques are closed, social gatherings are banned and family reunions are strongly discouraged. In the days preceding Ramadán, the holy month of Ramadán, in the holy city of Mecca, Saudi Arabia, April 24. (AFP)

Almost every organisation from the World Health Organization (WHO) to the United Nations (UN) has issued directives to confine people to their homes during the month of Ramadán.

For Muslims around the world as excess supply to steady after US crude prices remain under pressure but have begun to absorb a shock of up to $36 billion. Central banks around the Arab Gulf moved quickly and decisively with large support packages to ensure liquidity and capital reserves for banks. Relief measures for lenders as well as corporate and private borrowers demonstrated a focus on preservation and maintaining positive indicators rather than averting any notion of a financial meltdown. Projected spending gaps are already being plugged as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar all make use of the strength of their sovereign credit ratings. Just this month Saudi Arabia’s, the UAE, Kuwait and Qatar raised a combined $2 billion through international bond sales which were more than half of the amount raised by governments across emerging markets.

AlArab raised $7 billion from bond sales which were more than six times oversubscribed, with 90% of its order book comprised of international investors. Such levels of investor demand demonstrate a strong appetite for financing governments with low direct debt levels and attractive debt profiles preferred by many Arab Gulf states.

Riyadh is now gearing up to take on its biggest external financing programme after its government raised the national debt ceiling from 30% to 50% of gross domestic product (GDP) last month. A debt ceiling of 50% of GDP is still one of the world’s lowest but will help Saudi Arabia absorb the budgetary shock triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Constrained against the scale of deficits and borrowing being done by the governments of the US and UK, the world’s two most indebted nations, for example, the resource-rich Arab Gulf largely faces well. The current economic scenario even provides a backdrop to streamlining and accelerate ongoing economic transformation programmes which aim to remove inefficient expenditures and unlock long-term growth for and by the non-oil sectors by harnessing digital innovation, new technologies and local talent more effectively.

The region as a whole remains better placed to navigate the downturn than other regions owing to prudent fiscal planning and risk management policies in recent years. On the upside for the Arab Gulf, its host of sovereign wealth funds (SWFs) – which have grown to more than $2 trillion in recent years – are “mobilising” to acquire assets at knock-down prices, according to the Financial Times.

Investment opportunities are opening up across different asset classes including in firms where business fundamentals remain solid and which are likely to bounce back strongly when a global economic recovery begins.

Sabahat Khan writes on strategic issues related to the Gulf and has a background in defence and strategy consulting. He is a frequent contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Full version of this article at: www.thearabweekly.com
The Arab Weekly staff

Washington

Annexation: Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his rival Benny Gantz have agreed to form a national emergency government.

The agreement will allow them to advance Israeli unilaterally its plans to annex parts of the occupied West Bank.

“Netanyahu and Gantz signed a deal April 20 to form a national emergency government, saying he did not think a fourth Israeli election was in Israel’s interest,” a US official told reporters. “That’s an Israeli decision,” Pompeo told reporters. “There’s an Israeli decision. And we will work closely with them to make sure that our views of this in (a) private setting.”

Pompeo also said he was “happy” with the new government. “And I think that the Palestinians with the basis of a viable political deadlock, sees Netanyahu serving as premier for the first half of elections 18 months later. To Gantz in October next year, with

The premiership would then pass to Gantz in October next year, with

The IRGC announced it planned to launch a military satellite, the first military satellite. The United States charges Iran’s launch of

The report predicted a recovery of remittances to the MENA region by 2022, at a pace of about 1.6%.

Remittances from the euro area are expected to be impacted by the area’s pre-COVID-19 economic slowdown and the depreciation of the euro against the US dollar, the report added.

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First COVID-19 case confirmed in overcrowded Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon

The Arab Weekly staff

Beirut

Prices struck residents of Baalbek region in east Lebanon. As of April 20, the first coronavirus case was confirmed in one of the country’s 12 overcrowded Palestinian refugee camps, which lack proper sanitation and access to clean water.

The patient, a Palestinian refugee from Syria, was transferred by the Lebanese Red Cross from the Wales camp to the state-run Rafik Hariri hospital in Beirut where most COVID-19 patients are being quarantined and treated, the UN agency caring for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) said in a statement on April 21.

“The agency is doing everything necessary to provide the required assistance to the patient’s family to allow them to isolate themselves with all the arrangements required, and to secure the necessary needs,” the statement said.

Medical experts were due to visit the Wales camp in the eastern Bekaa Valley to carry out tests, the agency added.

Chief of the health cluster will visit the wom-

The testing will focus on the wom-

The camp has been placed on lockdown to prevent the spread of the virus in Baalbek region, one of the least infected districts in Lebanon, with fewer than five cases, according to government statistics.

More than 2,000 people live in Wales, according to statistics released by Lebanon’s government after a 2010 census. However, the UN agency says the population of those registred in the camp is much higher.

And groups have warned that hun-

ers of thousands of Palestinian and Syrian refugees living in Lebanon’s overcrowded camps are the most vulnerable and that self-isolating patients in the camps where sanitation is weak would be one of the top challenges.

“The main concern remains... the spread of coronavirus in the over-

crowded Palestine refugee camps where there are very limited posi-

sibilities for home isolation,” a UNRWA spokesman said earlier this month.

More than 174,000 Palestinians live in Lebanon, according to official figures, with most residing in camps ruled by Palestinian factions beyond the reach of Lebanon’s security forces. But unofficial estimates say the Palestinians, whose formlers fled the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, could number as many as 200,000.

And out of the 1.5 million Syrians Lebanon says it hosts since the civil war broke out in the neighbouring country nine years ago, nearly one million are registered with the UN as refugees.

So far just one Palestinian, who lives outside a camp, and three Syrian residents have tested positive in Lebanon for COVID-19, compared with 86,900 infections and 72 deaths across the country.

Egypt expands powers of president amid pandemic

The Arab Weekly staff

Cairo

Egypt’s parliament has approved amendments to emergency laws that could extend the powers of the presidency and the milit-

ary indefinitely as governments try to counter the coronavirus outbreak.

The amendments, approved April 22 by the legislative branch, allow the president and ministers to issue emergency orders and declare states of emergency in any part of the country for an indefinite period.

The state will also be allowed to direct private hospitals and their staff to help with general healthcare for a specific period, and to convert hotels, compa-

nies and other public-owned sites into field hospitals.

Egypt has routinely renewed these three-month intervals a state of emergency imposed in 2017 after two church bombings that left several dozen people dead.

Since it detected its first clus-

ters of coronavirus infection last month, Egypt has shut schools, closed places of worship and im-

posed a nightly curfew.

The government has confirmed 1,092 cases of the new coronavi-

rus, including 294 deaths.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi urged Egyptians to follow public health guidance.

(With news agencies)

Top news

First COVID-19 case confirmed in overcrowded Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon

Near-panic. Palestinian factions, in coordination with Lebanese security forces, impose a lockdown on the Wales camp (also known as the Jalil Camp) for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon’s eastern Bekaa Valley.

The Arab Weekly staff

Beirut

Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) said in a statement on April 21.

Since the outbreak of the corona-

virus, the UNRWA said the medical aid is part of the Gulf humanitarian effort.

The UAE sent a plane loaded with medical supplies in cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO) to Iran in the course of a few days, preceded by a batch on March 21 carrying 7.5 tonnes of medical supplies to cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO).

WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus praised the UAE for its continued support for global efforts to fight the virus.

As of April 23, Mauritania has seven confirmed cases of the COVID-19 coronavirus and one death.

It was the second such flight made by a medical cargo plane from the UAE to Iran in the course of a few days, preceded by a batch on March 21 carrying 7.5 tonnes of medical supplies to cooperation with the World Health Organization (WHO).

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Mauritanian authorities have ex-

acted additional medical equipment from the UAE to fight the COVID-19 spread.

Logistics and protective equipment. "The medical cargo plane from the UAE to Iran was also loaded with boxes of gloves, surgical masks and other protective equipment."

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President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi urged Egyptians to follow public health guidance.

(With news agencies)

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Cairo

The UAE has provided aid to dozens of countries, including in Afghanistan, the Philippines, Somalia, Ukraine, and the United Kingdom.

The UAE authorities have also announced an initiative to support the country’s agriculture, economic, social, and educational levels.

The UAE has also sent aid to other regions, assisting more than 25 countries with more than 266 tonnes of medical supplies – the equivalent of assisting 260,000 health workers globally.

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(With news agencies)

Mauritania receives medical equipment from UAE to fight coronavirus spread

Lamine Ghamni

Tunis

Mauritania received 10 tonnes of medical equip-

ment from the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to benefit 10,000 health-care workers fighting the spread of COVID-19 in the poor desert nation straddling the Maghreb and the Sahel West African region.

This aid is significant as it strengthens the efforts of our country against the advance of the coronavirus,” said Mauritanian Health Minis-

ter Mohamed N’di Hamed Ould Ham as he oversaw the distribution of the medical relief April 20. “The medical supply includes respiratory machines and protective equipment.”

UAE Ambassador to Mauritania Hamid Qasim al Ma tauiy said the medical aid is part of the Gulf Arab states’ first concrete steps to help ease the suffering of brotherly countries.”

Since the outbreak of the coronavi-

rus pandemic in China last December, the UAE has provided aid to dozens of affected countries, including in Af-

rica.

The UAE sent a plane loaded with medical supplies to South Africa, the hardest hit country on the continent, on April 20. UAE authorities have also announced an initiative to support the country’s agriculture, economic, social, and educational levels.

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(With news agencies)
Lahabon is bracing for a more painful and restive post-pandemic period, as social unrest amid deteriorating living conditions and rising prices and a nosediving devaluation of the local currency.

Anti-government protesters have taken to the streets in different parts of Lebanon despite a nationwide lockdown enforced since March 15 to stem the spread of the deadly coronavirus. Police blocked highways and gathered in squares and outside the Central Bank in Beirut in defiance of confinement restrictions. In the Bekaa town of Taalalaya, in east Lebanon, the army used force to disperse demonstrators, causing minor injuries to 40 protesters.

“Of course the IMF support will be helpful, an option strongly opposed by those in the opposition, would want to take that option, which I believe is the only available option,” Mounayar said. The protests on April 23 occurred in mainly Sunni-inhabited areas in the north and east of Lebanon. They coincided with a Central Bank circular requiring banks and money transfer offices to convert foreign currency transfers and cash withdrawals from foreign currency bank accounts to Lebanese pounds, at market rates determined daily by the bank.

But despite the protest, the government is not likely to be toppled, according to Mounayar. “I don’t think any party, including those in the opposition, would want to topple the government because the alternative is chaos.”

The Lebanese have been taking to the streets since October denouncing the ruling class and accusing them of corruption and pushing the country to the verge of bankruptcy. The coronavirus pandemic has only intensified the economic slump. The pandemic was first reported in Lebanon on Feb. 21.

The LNA recently posted videos of Syrian mercenaries it arrested that were sent to the country by Turkey.

Turkey provides assistance to the Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA), which is battling the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA).

Turkish support has so far included the dispatch of thousands of fighters from Syria, unmanned aerial vehicles and armoured vehicles.

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Fighters with Libya’s Government of National Accord (GNA) gather at a position near Sirte, Libya, sending even more equipment and fighters to help the GNA. The LNA also launched a large-scale air offensive, which included shellings over Tripoli and, although increasingly anxious in recent years, has to make up for a number of shortcomings in order to gradually regain the momentum it had deployed. However, we should be aware of the efforts we are making towards this goal. The LNA’s main operations base some 120km south of Sirte, but without the presence of Turkish technicalities, the supply of arms and equipment and, more importantly, a now seemingly limitless supply of drones to give air cover, any offensive would have been unthinkable.

Moreover, reports speak of Ankara sending even more equipment and fighters to help the GNA. The LNA’s main operations base some 120km south of Sirte, but without the presence of Turkish technicalities, the supply of arms and equipment and, more importantly, a now seemingly limitless supply of drones to give air cover, any offensive would have been unthinkable.

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Tunisia

Michel Cousins

Tunisia announces gradual easing of coronavirus lockdown from May 4

Tunisia announced late April a two-week extension of its coronavirus lockdown in order to avoid a resurgence of infections, prompting some experts to believe the shutdown has yielded positive results although some experts are attributing the change in mortality ratios to wider testing in recent weeks.

The government is following the collaboration of local authorities in order to enforce the protective measures,

“We will monitor the operation of gradual re-opening closely. If we notice any risk of sliding, we will go back,” he added.

The government is following the collaboration of local authorities in order to enforce the protective measures,\\n\\n“Businesses with one or two employees will be allowed to resume activity and we count on the collaboration of local authorities to enforce the protective measures,” he said.

“In the framework of a two-week extension of the lockdown, it was reduced from 8pm-7am to 6pm-6am.”

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“Businesses with one or two employees will be allowed to resume activity and we count on the collaboration of local authorities to enforce the protective measures,” he said.

“Tunisia experienced a 24-hour curfew and people were being allowed out for shopping only on foot before noon, it will go to the same 6pm-6am as of April 28. The GNA has also opened the Rao border crossing to allow low food and other imports from Tunisia.

The changes may ease some of the restrictions, but the continuing closures, combined with the outbreak and the lockdown, are making for one of the most diffi- cult Ramadan holidays ever known.

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

Welcoming Ramadan

Ramadan, which started April 24, will be unusually changing this year.

The fasting month is traditionally a season of self-exertion and spiritual reward through physical deprivation but also religious communion and charitable work. Ramadan is usually a joyous season when families and friends get together to celebrate life and mutual understanding.

This year, however, social bonding will cede place to social distancing. Religious worship will be more solitary than congregational. The spirit of the season will be more in the hearts of people than on the festive streets of Arab and Muslim cities.

The overwhelming majority of Arab and Muslim populations have experienced all the stages of the reasons that motivated their countries’ leaders to enforce lockdowns, curfews and other unprecedented restrictions. Heartbreaking news of the mounting toll in the world and in their own region drove home an acute awareness about the need to protect lives by respecting exceptional measures.

Religious authorities have played a crucial role in raising awareness and offering narrative justifying public health restrictions. The decisive points taken by Saudi Arabia’s Grand Mufti, Egypt’s Grand Imam of Al-Azhar and members of the UAE’s Fatwa Council have helped convince people of the rationale for putting collective prayers and umrah on hold. Saudi authorities have announced a nuanced approach to the evening (Taraweeh) prayers, which will be held in the Mecca and Medina mosques but only in the presence of clerics and essential staff. Lay worshippers will not be able to attend, but prayers at home instead of the mosque during the month of Ramadan is the right thing to do.

Religious leaders of Muslims in the West have been punctual in assuming their share of responsibility regarding the safety and welfare of their communities. The UK Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board told The Guardian: “During the epidemic, the desire to perform prayers with a congregation has become the most serious issue. The mosques closure is not acceptable to the religious community. This is a serious issue for the health service as well. Such qualities should help Muslims meet the challenge of the coronavirus pandemic as well.”

The UK Mosques and Imams National Advisory Board said mosques will remain closed during Ramadan until the end of the lockdown. “It would be extremely irresponsible to congregate for prayer nights or hold religious gatherings during this Ramadan in any mosque or houses with people who are not members of households,” said Qari Asim, a Leeds Imam and chair of the board.

“The world is going to change once the pandemic is over. That’s for sure. Many concepts and practices are going to change, including work relations inside the same institution.”

More and more people will be working from home, and many businesses will flourish while others will founder. It is not yet known which sectors will be the hardest hit, but we can already predict that e-commerce and home delivery services will get a tremendous boost. It is indeed difficult to predict the shape of a world that will emerge after the global pandemic that came out of China.

The first remarkable consequence of the pandemic is the plagues it caused in oil prices, as demand fell for full and economic slumber gripped the world. This in itself is going to have tremendous consequences far more serious than the pandemic alone.

We should therefore be expecting a post-COVID-19 world and a post-oil and gas recession world. Sooner or later, a vaccine or drug will be found for COVID-19. But what about the consequences of the horrible, and very likely long-lasting, oil and gas prices? What is for certain is that many countries will find themselves facing serious danger. Among them will be Iran, Iraq and Syria. Syria is not going to find anyone willing to invest in its reconstruction. The cost of Syria’s reconstruction was estimated at between $20 billion and $24 billion, since the war there is still raging and no one has a precise idea of the extent of the damage left by the nine-year war. The whole country was shattered and the fabric of the once mighty Syrian cities and towns have changed. Even in the unlikely event that Syria arrives soon at a settlement, the biggest hurdle will be the huge amounts of donor and businesses willing to invest in the reconstruction of the post-war and post-COVID-19 Syria. From this standpoint, the recent visit to Damascus by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif did not and could not bring anything new. It was just for show, a sort of message to the world that the Islamic Republic is still present in Syria. Present for what? To encircle its war on the Syrian people? Alternatively (?), perhaps it was meant as a sign of support to President Bashar Assad? The second hypothesis is that Iran is present in Syria to have serious doubts about his ability to remain in power. Or it is a way to patch up Zard’s faltering reputation, even if he is not very fond of the Syrian dictator. It must be remembered that Zard was very well-off when As- sad landed in Tehran in February this year without Zard’s knowledge. He submitted his resignation in anger, but then retracted at the request of Iranian President Hassan Rohani. Assad had come to Tehran in the company of Qassem Soleimani, the slain commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force (IRGC).

So now we have to wonder if the recent arrangement of the Syrian regime will be transferred from the Quds Force to the Iranian Foreign Ministry. It’s a legitimate question, but the real question is what can Iran do for Syria in light of the new oil crisis and gas prices, and in light of the US sanctions that have affected the Iranian economy – far more than the Iranian regime is willing to admit.

The least one can say about Iran is that it is not an ordinary state. Half of its population lives below the poverty line and the Islamic Republic still insists on playing the role of a dominant power in the region. Let’s face it, Iran, which is supported by the Syrian people, can offer nothing to Assad in the post-oil crisis world. Even Russia itself is in the process of revising its Syria strategy, if it had one in the first place. It really does not want to see the post-COVID-19 and post-oil crisis world going to be quite different from the one of its heyday in Syria. Iran is it now forced to rethink its strategy in Syria and compromise with Turkey, which is now occupying an important part of northern Syria.

Iran is threatened and Syria is in the same situation. It is the case with Iraq. That country is mired in a real crisis. Since 2003, hundreds of billions of dollars have found their way to the state treasury, but then evaporated into thin air, polluted by a corrupt system based on cronyism and sectarian quotas. Iraq is now penniless. Anything that the Iraqi sectarian parties and their declared and undisclosed allies will not, or could not sawn up in turn bought by Iran. Ninety percent of Iraq’s oil wells are tied up in US sanctions, and the bottom has dropped off oil prices. So, whether or not prime minister-designate Mustafa Ka- dhimi succeeds in forming a govern- ment, it won’t change a thing. Where will it find the necessary funds to pay the wages of about seven million public servants? Iraq has been a failed state since 2003. Each day proves that the Iraqi system is not viable, espe- cially when Iran continues to keep the country under its thumb and the sectarian parties do not want to let go of whatever is left of the poor country. Lebanese’s situation is no better than Iraq’s. With the drop in oil prices, it has no future. Leba- non chose to place itself with the US-called axis of resistance, and it is currently bankrupt or at risk. The latter has nothing to offer the former except sectarian militias and empty slogans. Who will come to Lebanon’s aid now? Certainly not the Arab states from which it estranged itself.

What’s worse is that there is no one in Lebanon with enough courage to tell the Lebanese that they have no other choice but to seek the aid of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The Middle East can expect major upheavals in the post-COVID-19, post-oil crisis world. The Iranians seem to have understood that because they monitor what goes around them. This certainly goes a long way in explaining why and how Bennyamin Netanyahu and his rival Benny Gantz, leader of the Blue and White alliance, suddenly agreed to form what they called an emergency government, after three consecutive general elections within one year.

Why even talk about a Middle East the post-COVID-19 and post-oil crisis world? Will there really be anyone still interested in stability in that region? In a world of effective state institutions in Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and light of the absence of funds in particular, these and many other questions will force themselves upon us.

Khairellah Khairellah is a Lebanese writer.
Launch of Iran's military satellite raises questions about IRGC space programme

Ali Alfoneh

The Soviet Union collapsed in spite of its space programme, intercontinental ballistic missiles and nuclear arsenal.

Finding propaganda value. A handout photo provided by Iran's IRGC shows Iran's General Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the head of the IRGC's aerospace division, posing during the launch of a military satellite, April 22 (AFP)

Trump's immigration plan is troubling but not as much as his fulminations on mosques

Rashmee Roshan Lall

Pitching mosques into the febrile atmosphere of a world shut down by a pandemic merely feeds grievance politics, possibly taking it to dangerous heights.

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Pitching mosques into the febrile atmosphere of a world shut down by a pandemic merely feeds grievance politics, possibly taking it to dangerous heights.
Spotlight: Ramadan amid Pandemic

Woes compounded by virus, unrest, economic crisis in war-plagued Syria as holy month begins

By Sami Moubayed

Beirut

Ramadan could not have come at a worse time for the war-torn country. Syria’s war-torn country is already cash-strapped, amidst almost a decade of crippling international sanctions, coronavirus, and other things, in major shortages of heating fuel and electricity, leading to long and cold winters.

Six months ago, the Syrian currency was at its highest value in history, only to crash against the US dollar this year. Those who had already completed their work have been unable to sell them to Arab satellite channels because of a lack of advertisers and commercial sponsors.

Daily labourers

No official statistics have yet been released as to how many people have been laid off throughout Syria due to coronavirus, but the number is thought to be high and it includes thousands of labourers such as workers, construction workers, bus drivers and shisha attendants who rely on daily wages to provide for their families.

The Syrian government briefly toyed with the idea of compensating each of the workers with 100,000 Syrian pounds ($35) but that idea never got past the drawing board – due to a lack of surplus cash in the Syrian treasury. There is no sign that normal life will return in Syria any time soon; public bus services remain cancelled, construction work is on hold and all hotels, restaurants, cinemas and cafes remain closed.

A vicious cycle

But it is not only the daily labourers who are complaining. Those who are able to perform the taraweeh prayer, a long night vigil, are facing problems in the Muslim world. This year, however, mosques will remain closed throughout the month of Ramadan and families will not be able to perform the prayer at 2.30am, which is 50-70% lower than last year’s prices. As a result, in the long run, this will make it illegal to go out during Ramadan. The traditional Ramadan can-tor, which is not a priority this year for the authorities, has all been suspended. Meanwhile, the prices of some basic goods have also increased. Those with full-time jobs in both the public and private sector are those with full-time jobs in both the public and private sector. State employees rarely relied on their salaries to make a living, waiting instead for over-time, bonuses and rewards which have all been suspended. Meanwhile, those who are employed are being given a one-time bonus ahead of Ramadan, in order for them to buy necessary food and items needed for the holy month.

That becomes all the more problematic with soaring prices, due to a sharp demand ahead of Ramadan. Producers cite a variety of reasons for the price hikes, such as the crippling shortage of American dollars and frequent power cuts. A pack of 1kg eggs has increased in price from 950 SP ($3.50) just six months ago to a whopping 2,300 SP this Ramadan ($4.70). The price of one kilo of lemon, vital for making salads and nearly all meals in the Syrian cuisine, has gone from 500 SP ($2) to 1,000 SP ($4.13) in September to 1,500 SP ($6.20) this Ramadan ($8.13). To appreciate what this means for Syrian salaries, we must keep in mind that the majority of public sector employees live on a minimium wage of 48,000 SP per month ($17).

Soap opera, a highlight of Syrian television for six decades, will not be broadcast this year because of filming restrictions. Syrian producers were banned from completing the filming of their productions from mid-March as a precaution against the spread of the virus. Those who had already completed their work have been unable to sell them to Arab satellite channels because of a lack of advertisers and commercial sponsors.

Not the happiest of times.

Syrian artist Aziz al-Asmar and his assistant Bachar Hamdoun paint a mural giving their rendition of the situation in the month of Ramadan after the city of Bubniyah in Syria’s north-western Idlib province, April 23.

The Syrian supply chain is stunted, even without a large-scale pandemic,” said Karim Tabbah, a Dubai-based Syrian business expert.

Ramadan will be more morose than ever as mosques will remain closed and families will not be able to gather due to a strict 7.30pm curfew, which makes it illegal to go out during or after the iftar dinner.

Speaking to The Arab Weekly, Tabbah explained: “Any business that wants to import products into the local market has to overcome various challenges related to payments and shipments. Syrian businesses have now also to consider new challenges related to the disruption of the global supply chains. They need to compete with companies from all over the world to secure products that have recently become scarce. They need to absorb the global increase in prices, which has affected many food commodities.”

This won’t be easy, nor will it be quick. Long queues are expected this Ramadan and so are lines at the supermarkets, where social distancing and COVID-19 pre-vention methods will rule the day.

Ahmed Megahid is an Egyptian reporter based in Cairo.

Fel of pandemic wears down Ramadan’s spirit in Egypt

Ahmed Megahid

Cairo

Every year during the Islamic month of Ramadan, children would decorate the streets with lights,明星s while elders would bring out lights to make the nights as bright as the days. Food vendors, especially sellers of nuts and dried fruit, would display their goods outside their shops and the broadcast would be loud enough to be heard all the way to the stores to buy their share of seasonal goods.

There would be a large lantern at the middle of each street and all across the city of Cairo, the Egyptian capital. Farmer lantern sellers would display their bright, beautiful wares in their shelves, ready for customers. The scarlet cries of vendors, a traditional Middle Eastern pastry, would set up tents across the city.

The festivities ended with the start of Ramadan amid the Pandemic. From the empty streets of Cairo to the Egyptian provinces, there were very few festivities. The government that month asked the Islamic month of Ramadan to begin on April 24.

Egypt’s hard-hit economy, and coronavirus has taken its toll on this period. The war-torn country, including its celebration of Ramadan, the holiest of all months in the Islamic calendar.

While Mecca in Saudi Arabia is the birthplace of Prophet Moham- med, the site of Islam’s holiest shrine and the centre of the Islamic world, Egypt is nonetheless an im-portant religious and cultural centre of Islam with thousands of mosques, some of them dating back to the dawn of Islam.

The celebration of Ramadan has caused au-thorities to shut down the doors of all mosques, including the Al-Azhar mosque, one of the most important seats of learning for Sunni Muslims. The closure of the mosques means that Egypt’s Muslims will not be able to experience the special Ramadan evening prayers, known as taraweeh, for the first time in Egypt’s modern history.

The authorities have also banned charity banquet gatherings where the poor usually break their fast on the streets of Cairo and other Egyptian cities.

The government started loosening some of its coronavirus restric-tions on April 24, including the lifting of a nationwide ban on com-mercial activities on Fridays and Saturdays. It also reduced the night-time curfew by two hours to 10pm from the previous 7pm start. The current daily curfew is from 6am to 5pm.

Contrary to expectations, few Egyptians are stockpiling food or other Ramadan necessities, jeopard-izing the business prospects of dried fruit and nut traders and throwing a shadow over the industry. “Clients are making themselves scarce, even as the prices are more than 20% lower than last year’s prices,” said Amani El-hachim, one of Egypt’s most prominent dried fruit and nut traders. “The traders will lose their investments if things remain as they are.”

Outside al-Attar’s shop, near the crowded Attaba Market in the centre of Cairo, few people are showing any interest in the bags of nuts and dried fruit on display.

Almonds, cashews, dates, raisins, walnuts, apricots, prunes, pistachios and hazelnuts cry for attention, but there are no takers.

Attaba Market itself, famous for cheap clothing and kitchenware, is closed down along with hun-dreds of other markets around Egypt to prevent overcrowding and to curb the spread of coronavirus.

Last year, Egypt spent 840 mil-lion on the import of nuts and dried fruit, according to the Cairo Cham-ber of Commerce and Industry.

This year, the imports may ex-ceed 660 million, with most of them having entered the country in Janu-ary and February before the emer-gence of any coronavirus infections.

Buying Ramadan-related food is not a priority this year for the av-erage Egyptian, as citizens shelter from the disease.

“Everybody is sticking to the basics,” said Karim Ahmed, a Dubai-based taxi driver. “This means that I buy the food and the medicines my family needs every day only.”

Ahmed, 43, had to return to Cairo from the Red Sea resort of Hurgha-da, where he worked for the past five years, in mid-March when au-thorities froze the tourism sector and later suspended flights to and from Egypt.

He now works for one of the na-tion’s top-sharing services, but the whole business has been hit hard by measures the authorities have implemented to stamp out the coro-navirus, especially the nationwide night-time curfew, effective since March 25.

Other Egyptians are negatively affected by the same measures, in-cluding millions of self-employed craftpeople and private sector workers. Some private employers have slashed the salaries of their workers while others have had to lay off their staff.

“Those conditions are affect-ing people’s attitudes and chang-ing their priorities,” said Haled al-Shaft, the head of local think-tank Capital Centre for Economic Studies and Research. “They are also killing the spirit of the holy month.”
Turkey’s response to coronavirus has been complete shambles

Stephen Starr

Despite claims from government officials on April 15 that the "previous public health threat" was "under control," Turkey’s response has been little short of a disaster. First off, the first positive case wasn’t diagnosed until March 11. On the same date, Germany, whose population is similar to Turkey’s, recorded 1,884. While that number was diagnosed until March 11. For its part, the German government issued a circular and banned them, even those who went out onto the streets on March 11. What’s more, the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) government appears incapable of offering help to the people in need for provisioning. The Turkish authorities have thought it necessary to arrest hundreds of hospitality business owners in order to enforce the country’s lockdown. The AKP government is likely to put a nail in the coffin of the two-state solution in Israel at the West Bank will most likely proceed in July as part of this deal.

Analysts have argued that Turkey now finds itself in the worst position of any emerging market. “Revolt in Syria: Eye-Witness to an Arms Race,” by Gregory Aftandilian, a lecturer at the Pardee School of Global Studies at Boston University and a former US State Department Middle East analyst. He is a regular contributor to The Arab Weekly.

Now the diplomatic impasse. Israelis walk past an election campaign billboard for Blue and White candidate Benny Gantz (L) and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, last February in Ramat Gan, Israel.

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**Turkey’s response to coronavirus has been complete shambles**

**The April 20 deal is likely to put a nail in the coffin of a two-state solution as Israeli annexation of settlements in the West Bank will most likely proceed in July as part of this deal.**

**Significantly, the unity deal allows — to be brought up during the first six months of the unity government outside of coronavirus-related legislation.**

Gantz has been sharply criticized by his former allies as well as the Israeli peace camp for “being played” by Netanyahu. Although Gantz was able to secure prominent cabinet positions for his faction and himself, his deal with Netanyahu not only gives the Israeli leader another chance to remain prime minister and possibly try to seek an immunity with a corruption trial hanging over his head but also makes a two-state solution virtually impossible, as annexation of settlements could encompass about 30% of the West Bank.

Netanyahu and his right-wing allies want to seize this moment because the agreement, which may suggest the virus was late getting into Turkey, the more likely scenario is that a complete absence of testing meant that it was spreading rampantly among the population at large. The result is, in fact, confirmed coronavirus cases.

The country’s trajectory over the coming weeks is, according to observers, very worrying.

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Then there’s the fact that Turkish authorities have thought it necessary to arrest hundreds of hospitality business owners in order to enforce the country’s lockdown. The AKP government is likely to put a nail in the coffin of the two-state solution in Israel at the West Bank will most likely proceed in July as part of this deal.

In a surprise move, Gantz, head of the Blue and White party, re- oassed on April 14 that, given the context, it was the right time to act by providing a visit to the scenes in this incident, whose population has increased a lot, “we are facing a new reality, and therefore we need to act.”

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Is Israeli unity government likely to proceed with annexation in months to come

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Strategic repositioning of troops preserves Washington's place in Iraq but for how long?

Nasiri Tarai

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Strategic repositioning preserves Washington's place in Iraq but for how long?
Iraq reduces by 75% its imports of Iranian gas and electricity

The Arab Weekly staff

Baghdad

In a surprise move, the Iraqi Ministry of Electricity revealed it had reduced its imports of electricity and natural gas from Iran by 75% and that it was approaching self-sufficiency in generating electricity.

Analysts say this move indicates Baghdad’s determination to reduce its dependence on Iran from the sanctions imposed on Tehran in 2010. Currently, Baghdad is producing electricity using around 12% of its power generation capacity.

The US administration has been automatically renewing every three months a waiver allowed to Baghdad to import 350 MW of natural gas from Iran, and by January last year, the Ministry of Oil had doubled its investments in the sector. However, there were no official statements from the government.

Electricity in Iraq is currently produced by the Ministry of Electricity using around 12% of its generating capacity in the provinces of Maysan and Al-Dair. Baghdad has already turned to the Akka well in the province of Basra last year, and this is in addition to the Ministry of Oil being close to adding a good part of it.

The Electricity Ministry’s spokesman, Ahmad al-Abadi, said that the electricity produced by the country’s power plants is sufficient to cover the local needs continuously, except for Saladin and Nineveh provinces, where electric power is available at the rate of 20 hours per day.

Iraq’s decision to stop relying on Iranian electricity and gas supplies secures Baghdad in light of the divisions among political parties and loyalty of large parts of them to Tehran.

Abadi was quoted in a report published by the government newspaper Al-Sabah as saying that “the increase in the supply is due to lower loads and the operation of new generating units, in addition to element temperatures.”

The current volume of electricity production in Iraq is estimated at 13500 MW, and based on this data, the Ministry of Electricity has deliberately reduced the volume of electricity imported via land lines from the Iranian side, as well as the import of gas used to power the generating plants, he added.

He pointed out that the Iranian side was providing Iraq with approximately 4500 MW of electricity through a mixture of direct electricity supply plus with a capacity of 1250 MW and gas to power production plants that contribute approximately 3500 MW to the country’s grid.

He explained that the Ministry of Electricity is currently holding on to one supply line from Iran to supply about 370 MW of electricity to Diyala Province. The ministry used to import up to 1250 MW from Iran through four supply lines.

Abadi also revealed that the ministry has considerably reduced its imports of Iranian natural gas and that it has stopped the supply of Iranian gas to the power plants in southern Iraq.

One gas pipeline from Iran used to supply the power plants at Bassamia, Munsifiah, Al-Qods and Al-Ahef. The Iraqi Ministry of Oil is now in charge of providing the needed supply of gas.

Iraq’s decision to stop relying on Iranian electricity and gas supplies seems surprising in light of the reigning divisions among the political parties and the loyalty of many of them to Tehran.

Iraqi Oil Minister Thamer al-Ghadban revealed last week that the Ministry of Oil is close to concluding a deal to sell a billion standard cubic feet of associated gas from the oil fields of Haditha in the provinces of Maysan and Anbar to the province of Basra last year. The minister also pointed out that the government and the Ministry of Oil are seriously committed to achieving self-sufficiency in gas and dispensing with its import. The ministry is currently working on developing the extraction of free gas in the Akka field in Al-Bashir and Mansourieh in Diyala, which would show up the country’s gas production capabilities.

Ghadban had previously insisted that it still badly needed Iranian gas supplies to feed its electricity sector, especially in the summer when temperatures soar to more than 50°C. And by March last year, according to the American embassy in Baghdad, had ruled out stopping gas imports from Iran to supply its electricity power plants.

With the deadlines of the American waiver running out at the end of the month, and as it nears the summer season when electricity consumption soars, Iraq will be facing a tough test if Washington requires it to commit to observing US sanctions on Iran.

The Iraqi government does not provide accurate annual estimates of the volumes of electricity and gas it imports from Iran, which confirms that the matter is less related to Baghdad’s need and more dependent on Tehran’s ability to provide what is required.

Iraq has repeatedly threatened to impose a $1 billion fine on Saudi Arabia if it further reduces its oil supplies to Iraq. In these circumstances, Baghdad has decided to reduce its imports of Iranian gas and electricity by 75%.

Saudi Aramco navigates uncharted waters amid global oil rout

Jareer Elaas

Saudi Aramco is navigat- ing uncharted waters as it faces a possible lengthy recovery period for both its gas and crude prices.

The unprecedented agreement by OPEC members and independent producers to take a historic: amount of oil off the mar- ket beginning next month means that even as the Saudi state oil and gas giant is slashing its crude production, it is aggressively working to secure market share at least one priority market through pricing, volume and deferred payment incentives.

Aramco leader Saudi Arabia was a principal player in the historic mid-April agreement by a collective of major oil producers to reduce global oil supplies by at least 9 million barrels a day (bpd) beginning May 1 in response to the crushing impact of the coronavirus pandemic on global demand.

In helping negotiate the pact, the kingdom ended a month-long price war with Russia involving elevated oil offers that contributed to a steep decline in oil prices and added to the global oil glut. Concerns over whether the drastic actions taken by the oil-producing countries will be enough to match the 20% plunge in worldwide oil demand, as global storage facili- ties fill up with unwanted crude, are growing.

With the May cuts, Aramco’s current offer of 4.5 million bpd is lower than the company’s peak output of 12.4 million barrels a day (bpd). The OPEC leader had increased its daily output to 12.5 million bpd by July 2019 from 8.5 million bpd by June 2019, down from the company’s peak output of 12.5 million bpd by June 2019, down from the company’s peak output of 12.5 million bpd by June 2019. The capacity is down from its peak of 12.5 million bpd.

Given the current market turmoil, the Saudi oil and gas conglom- erate is rejecting some of the speculation regarding its marketing moves in key markets. In response to a media report saying that Saudi Aramco was offering some steeply reduced official selling prices (OSP) for its crude grades to Asian clients, the state-owned giant has dismissed reports that it would be supplying domestic and foreign customers with 8.5 million bpd.

Aramco was offering some steeply reduced official selling prices (OSP) for its crude grades to Asian clients. In 2019, the kingdom’s largest crude supplier, exporting 16.7 million bpd to Asia’s largest oil-consuming nation, compared with Moscow’s 15.5 million bpd.

Saudi Aramco is reportedly supply- ing its Asian customers with 4 million bpd of its crude exports in May, down approximately 2 million bpd from pre-pandemic levels. The Saudi company has informed some of its Asia clients that they will be receiving their full contractual volumes for May, although it is adjusting the ratio of its supplies to boost its more profitable Arab Light sales at the expense of Aramco Heavy supplies.

Saudi Aramco is making sure there is no erosion in its largest customer base – the Asian market – because of lower demand and strong competition from other producers that also target that region, particularly Russia.

The Saudi state energy firm in recent years has dedicated nearly three-quarters of its crude exports to Asian clients. In 2019, the kingdo m’s largest crude supplier, exporting 16.7 million bpd to Asia’s largest oil-consuming nation, compared with Moscow’s 15.5 million bpd.

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In the face of pandemic, a blossoming of Arab creative initiatives

Imen Boudali

In spite of its immeasurable negative effects, the coronavirus pandemic has inspired people in the Arab world to come together and help each other. Countless initiatives have emerged in Arab countries, highlighting both creative genius and compassion.

From the production of 3D masks to disinfection operations and financial donations to help the most underprivileged, Arab citizens have been setting an example of empathy for the country and countrymen.

Several countries, such as Oman, are focusing on citizens’ mental health given the difficulty and uncertainty of the unprecedented situation. Muscat’s Al Masar Hospital launched an awareness initiative titled “Let us agree” to raise morale and highlight the stories of those recovering from the virus in a positive way.

The service is provided through social media, audiovisual or by phone and it aims to provide psychological support to everyone.

Arab expats are also participating and launching initiatives abroad. A group of Syrians have been the focus of German media attention for their act of compassion.

Aged between 14 and 23, six young people living in the city of Luxemburg have been offering assistance to the sick and elderly. They have also given out their phone numbers so that anyone can call and ask for help if they need it.

“This initiative is not only a reciprocated gesture towards Germany, which welcomed the Syrians, but a part of their deep-rooted habits,” said the local newspaper Landeszeitung.

An inspiring example also comes from Wuhan, China, where Moroccan student Bahaeddine El Mounifi and his friend conducted several hunger strikes in the city where the coronavirus outbreak was first reported.

“I was one of the students who volunteered to manage the crisis with the university administration, helping to get food and supplies to the campus,” he proudly told local media.

Tunisian designer Myriam Riza adjusts an embellished protective mask, part of her haute couture Miss Anais brand, which donates masks daily to staff at hospitals that care for COVID-19 patients.

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