UK: Muslim Brotherhood ties are ‘indicator of extremism’

Mahmoud el-Shafey
London

British Prime Minister David Cameron said the findings of a review of Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood support the view that membership in the Islamist organisation or association with it “should be considered as a possible indicator of extremism.”

The study could lead to the Brotherhood being banned in the United Kingdom, the Guardian newspaper reported, although that step was not yet taken.

The long-delayed review into the organisation was commissioned in 2014 to examine whether the group put British national security at risk. Cameron ordered Britain’s intelligence agencies to investigate the philosophy and activities of the Muslim Brotherhood.

“The parts of the Muslim Brotherhood have a highly ambitious relationship with violent extremism,” Cameron said in a statement. “Both as an ideology and as a network it has been a rife passage for some individuals and groups who have gone on to engage in violence and terrorism.”

“The main findings of the review support the conclusion that membership of, association with, or influence by, the Muslim Brotherhood should be considered as a possible indicator of extremism,” Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi cracked down on the Muslim Brotherhood after his Islamist predecessor Muhammad Morsi, a member of the group, was ousted in 2013. Egyptian authorities accused the movement of involvement in attacks on security forces and of maintaining links with Islamic State-affiliated terrorist cells. The Brotherhood has denied involvement in terrorist activities in Egypt and elsewhere.

Egypt, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have banned the Muslim Brotherhood, labelling it a “terrorist” organisation. Cameron did not immediately ban the group but did say members were “possible extremists.”

Cameron said Muslim Brotherhood-associated and influenced groups had sometimes characterised Britain as fundamentally hostile to the Muslim faith and identity and expressed support for attacks conducted by Palestinian terrorist organisations.

A Saudi woman casts her ballot during municipal elections in Riyadh. In a historic milestone, voters elected 21 Saudi women to seven municipal councils, the first election in the kingdom to allow female participation. More than 900 women were among the 6,440 candidates competing for 284 council seats, they of which were contested democratically in the kingdom. In Saudi Arabia women are forbidden from driving and need a male guardian’s written permission to travel or work, which leaves females in the kingdom in a state of perpetual co-dependence. However, more than half of Saudi university graduates are women and since 2010 the number of employed Saudi women jumped 43%, more than twice the rate of the male counterparts.

Ceasefire breaches hinder Yemen talks, Arab coalition blames Houthis

The Arab Weekly correspondent in London

The truce was intended to last seven days and coincide with talks seeking to end the nine-month-old war between the Houthis based in Yemen’s north and Saudi-backed southern and eastern fighters loyal to Yemeni President Abdu Rabbo Mansour Hadi.

Nearly 6,000 people have been killed and millions displaced in the fighting as the country faces a mounting humanitarian crisis.

“The number of violations is around 150 and this does not show honest intentions,” Asasin told Saudi-government-run al-Ekhbarya television.

“We urge the United Nations to clarify to the Houthis that there will be no patience towards these practices and the truce could collapse at any moment,” he said, adding that Saudi Arabia would not tolerate attacks on its border from Yemen.

The closed-door peace talks in Switzerland, which also began December 15th, were suspended, according to sources, after the Houthis rejected demands by the Hadi government to free senior officials, including Defence Minister Mahmoud al-Sabahi and Hadi’s brother, Nasser.

Instead of facilitating direct talks, UN Special Envoy to Yemen Ismail Ould Cheikh Ahmed was shuttling between the two sides trying to bridge differences.

According to the United Nations, Saudi-led air strikes on December 16th and major ground fighting in and around the town of Taiz, southern Yemen, have killed more than 200 civilians. The Houthis and their allies control the capital, Sana’a, and the country’s north and west, while the Saudi-backed government is in control of its south and east.

The Houthis rejected direct talks and instead called for a UN-brokered conference that would include representatives from other political groups and forces from both sides of the conflict. The Houthis did not specify if they would attend such a conference.

The Houthis control most of Yemen’s north and west, including the capital, Sana’a, and have been fighting the government in the south and east since September 2014.

A Saudi-led coalition launched an air campaign against the Houthis on March 26th, 2015, after the Houthis took control of Sana’a and captured the presidential palace. The Houthis have been supported by Iran, which backs the group and has been providing them with military and financial aid.”
A file photo shows Saudi security forces taking part in a military parade in Mecca.

Mohammed Alkhereiji
London
Saudi Arabia has announced the formation of a 34-country military alliance made up of Muslim nations to combat regional terrorism. A statement from Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salmaan Al-Saud said the alliance would be based in Riyadh “to coordinate and support military operations to fight terrorism and to develop the necessary programmes and mechanisms for supporting these efforts.”

Prince Mohammed, who is also Saudi Arabia’s defence minister, said during a December 15th news conference that the alliance would coordinate efforts to fight terrorism in Iraq, Syria, Libya, Egypt and Afghanistan.

“Currently, every Muslim country is fighting terrorism individually... so coordinating efforts is very important,” he said.

“There will be international coordination with major powers and international organisations in terms of operations in Syria and Iraq. We can’t undertake these operations without coordinating with legitimacy in this place and the international community.”

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said in Paris that members could request assistance from the coalition, which would address the requests “on a case-by-case basis.”

If the new Muslim alliance would focus solely on the Islamic State (IS), Prince Mohammed said the coalition would confront “any terrorist organisation that appears in front of us”.

It was not immediately clear what role the United States would play in the newly announced coalition.

The coalition will “tackle the Islamic world’s problem with terrorism and will be a partner in the worldwide fight against this scourge,” Prince Mohammed added.

The announcement came the same day peace talks between the internationally recognised Yemeni government and the Iran-aligned Houthi rebels began in Geneva. A week-long ceasefire in Yemen was also called.

US Senators John McCain, Rand Paul, and Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., while on visit to Iraq in November, said the United States could provide logistical and intelligence support to a proposed regional-strike force from Sunni Arab countries. However, it was not immediately clear what role the United States would play in the newly announced coalition.

US Defense Secretary Ashton Carter said he is looking forward to learning more about what Saudi Arabia has in mind.

“In general, at least, it appears that it’s very much aligned with something that we’ve been urging for quite some time, which is greater involvement in the campaign to combat [ISIS] by Sunni Arab countries,” Carter said during a visit to Incirlik Air Base in Turkey.

The new counterterrorism coalition includes countries with established alliances such as Pakistan, Egypt and Turkey, the only NATO member in the alliance. Other Gulf countries included in the counterterrorism coalition are the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait and Qatar. The alliance does not include Iran, Syria, Iraq or Oman.

Mohammed Alkhereiji is the Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.

Gulf

Riyadh announces counterterrorism coalition

Rob L. Wagner
Jeddah

At least 20 female candidates captured municipal council seats in Saudi Arabia in stunning victories despite restrictive campaign rules and criticism from the religious establishment.

The victories accounted for a fraction of the 2,300 council seats on 284 councils nationwide and were seen by Western critics of the kingdom as modest gains at best.

The religious conservatives are fully aware that the days of having their unlimited say in sustaining the obscurantist nature of their societies are numbered, “said Ehsan Al-Jamali, a renowned expert on Saudi women and public relations specialist in Riyadh.

“The religious conservatives are worrying about what Saudi Arabia has in store for them. They are looking forward to learning more about what Saudi Arabia has in mind.

Mohammed Alkhereiji is the Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.

Saudis women elected in historic vote

Rob L. Wagner
Jeddah

At least 20 female candidates captured municipal council seats.

The involvement of local municipal councils in keeping neighbourhoods maintained vary greatly from neighbourhood to neighbourhood.

The alliance does not include Iran, Syria, Iraq or Oman.

Mohammed Alkhereiji is the Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.

Candidates argued that if women fit anywhere in the decision-making process in Saudi Arabia it’s at the municipal level in their own neighbourhoods where their children play and they shop for the family.

Hefzi said she sees her role as a council member to provide better communication between the council and their constituents.

“We want to create an advocacy council and their constituents. We want them on municipal councils. But a decade has made a difference. Hefzi said her strongest sup-

porters were men. “Most of my votes were from men,” she said.

Municipal council meetings are often held late at night. Committees also use street advertising, door-to-door canvassing, call centres and market-

ing techniques to get out the voice.

Ruma Al-Mukhtar, a social media and public relations specialist in Jeddah, said Hefzi and Saleum have strong reputations in the community.

“Rasha is a big volunteer and she is a good reflection of the community she represents. She is experienced and has worked in the Jeddah Chamber of Com-

merce. She represents our community to important people and organisations.”

Municipal council campaigns are highly regulated, making efforts to spread candidates’ messages difficult. A tent is set up in a council office and candidates have ten days to host events. Candidates also use street advertising, door-to-door canvassing, call centres and mar-

keting techniques to get out the voice.

A Saudi woman voter casts her ballot in a polling station in the coastal city of Jeddah, on December 12th.

A Saudi woman voter casts her ballot in a polling station in the coastal city of Jeddah, on December 12th.
Jordan vet Syrian groups to negotiate with Assad

Raiied T. Shuqum

Amman

Jordan is drawing up a list of “terrorist” and “moderate” opposition groups ahead of negotiations between the Syrian opposition and President Bashar Assad on the future of the war-torn country. Jordan was entrusted with the task during a mid-November meeting that included the United States, the United Nations and Russia. Before that process took off, Saudi Arabia arranged for a three-day gathering in Riyadh of Syrian opposition groups to support the “moderate” opposition that is leading the war against President Bashar Assad in Syria.

Jordan hopes the “moderates” will form a buffer to and replace Assad’s regime in Damascus.

Initially, Amman remained silent on the Saudi meeting, avoiding its largest Arab bankroller, which holds billions of dollars in cash and is deeply involved in the conflict, in the talk about negotiations. This drew widespread speculation that Amman could not cooperate with the Saudi chairman for meetings in the past of which may be considered “moderate”, another Jordanian government official involved in the screening process said, insisting on anonymity because he is not allowed to make press statements. Jordan hopes the “moderates” will form a buffer if and when Assad’s regime in Syria crumbles. The Syrian National Council, the official body representing the Syrian opposition, issued a position paper, saying the Riyadh conference is our last chance before heading towards total chaos that will not only affect the stricken country but that of several Western countries that back Assad’s opposition. The United States, France and the United Arab Emirates all called for Assad to step down after protests broke out against his rule in March 2011.

The reaction from the pro-Assad camp has been predictably hostile. A statement from the Syrian Foreign Ministry said that because the Riyadh meeting excluded groups that are not friendly to Assad’s regime in Damascus crumbles, it would have elections within 18 months. There are more than 800 armed groups operating in Syria and 40% of those may be considered “moderate”, another Jordanian government official involved in the screening process said, insisting on anonymity because he is not allowed to make press statements. Jordan hopes the “moderates” will form a buffer if and when Assad’s regime in Syria crumbles. The Syrian National Council, the official body representing the Syrian opposition, issued a position paper, saying the Riyadh conference is our last chance before heading towards total chaos that will not only affect the stricken country but that of several Western countries that back Assad’s opposition. The United States, France and the United Arab Emirates all called for Assad to step down after protests broke out against his rule in March 2011.

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In Syria, signs of a new and wider war

James Bruce

Beirut

There are disturbing signs that the chaotic and perpetual war in Syria is taking on new dimensions, drawing outside powers over deeper into a conflict that seems to constantly change complexion and threaten to become wider.

At the same time, the Islamic State (ISIS), which is increasingly the target for foreign powers - some of them on opposing sides in a war that sometimes seems bewilderingly unfathomable - has sharply escalated its attacks on a global scale, hitting targets in Washington, France and Israel.

The problem is that Western governments were so reluctant to commit a meaningful portion of their basing, administrative and other costs in support of those who they perceived as theirs to assist. This is why the widespread claim that there is a conflict of two or more sides fighting each other is misleading.

In all the turmoil spare a thought for Syria’s victims.

John Kielian

Michael Young

The West failed in largely adopting the R2P norm in Syria

It has been a few weeks since the disastrous Friday the 13th killings in Paris. Since that time terrorist attacks have taken place in Mali, Bangladesh and Egypt, but none provoked the same global outrage as the attacks in France. In the aftermath of the carnage in Paris, some Lebanese went out on the streets to demand action. They pointed out that a suicide bombing in Beirut only one day earlier, in which dozens of people were killed, was caused by missile attacks from outside the country.

There was something unbecoming about the way Syrian allies and opponents alike were treating each other. People around the world will have noticed that the UN General Assembly met in September to rescue their key Arab leaders.

There was something unbecoming about the way in which Syrian leaders were treating each other. People around the world will have noticed that the UN General Assembly met in September to rescue their key Arab leaders.

The West failed in largely adopting the R2P norm in Syria.

Michael Young is a commentator and analyst based in Lebanon. He is the author of *The Ghosts of Martyrs’ Square: An Eyewitness Account of Lebanon’s Leftist Struggle*. He lives in Beirut.

With Russians and Iranians, as well as the US-led coalition, fighting across Syria, the war can only get more complicated.

Russian officials said November 20th their top-line Su-34 fighters, for the first time, carry air-to-air missiles for self-defence after Turkish F-16s shot down an Su-24 for violating its airspace six days earlier. Russia has also deployed its formidable S-400 air-defence system to protect the Latakia base from possible Turkish or even US, air attack if the crisis deteriorates.

In November, Russia called in its strategic bomber force to send rebel strongholds with bombs and cruise missiles in long range missions from southern Russia, in a sign of its military escalation. These have been augmented by missiles fired from Islamic State warships in the eastern Mediterranean and the Caspian Sea, from where they have launched air strikes against rebel forces.

In recent days, Russians have also taken over and extended a Syrian Air Force base at Shayrat, 40km Homs and Damascus. This indicates Moscow plans to step up air strikes in the central region where ISIS is active. Russian long-range bombers based at Hmeimim, near Latakia, have flown more than twice as many missions as they have in the past. Moscow plans to extend this base and take over the Mediterranean port of Tartus, a key base for rebels fighting the government in Syria, as one senior US official told NBC News on December 2nd.

With Russians and Iranians, as well as the US-led coalition, fighting across Syria, the war can only get more complicated.

The Turkish Navy large landing ship Yamol is escorted by a Turkish Coast Guard boat as it sets sail in the Bosphorus, on its way to the Mediterranean Sea, in Istanbul, on December 9th.

In Syria, the Russians, who conducted an armed intervention in September to rescue their key Arab leadership, has as many as 5,000 military personnel in Syria, more than double its fleet of combat jets and cruise missiles fired from the Kilo class submarine. eastern Mediterranean and the Caspian Sea, from where they have launched air strikes against rebel forces.

As ISIS is active.

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors the conflict, said the Russians have been extending the runway at the military airport at Shaayrat, 40km from where they have launched air strikes against rebel forces.

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Banksy, whose identity has never been confirmed, said in a rare statement to British media that Apple only exists because US authorities allowed it to be named after a young man from Homs, Syria.

The mural homages to a migrant from Homs

Lille, France

British graffiti artist Banksy’s mural of late Apple founder Steve Jobs as a refugee on a wall in the Calais migrant camp and two other Banky works in other parts of the French city will be protected, local authorities said.

Banksy's mural, depicting a life-size Jobs carrying a shoulder bag and an early model Apple computer, was painted on a wall at the entrance of the Calais camp, surrounded by immigrants' tents.

The mural pictures are posted on Banksy’s website, gatecrash.co.uk.

Authorities in Calais said they plan to shield the murals with glass or transparent plastic panels.

“We found out about the presence of this artwork on December 17th and have decided to protect it, so it is not damaged,” a Calais city spokeswoman said.

Calais Mayor Natacha Bouchart told local newspaper Nord Littoral that the artwork is an opportunity for Calais.

“It is very good and it has a message,” she said.

Banksy, who is famous for painting ironic murals in unexpected places.

Some 6,000 migrants fleeing war and poverty in Africa and the Middle East live in a so-called “jungle” of camps in Calais. Some have tried repeatedly to enter Britain by jumping onto lorries, hiding on trains and walking through the tunnel under the English Channel in the search for better lives.

In a second Banksy mural by the Calais beach, a child looks towards Britain through a telescope, with a mural painted on the telescope. A third work in the city, close to the immigration office, reproduces a black-and-white version of The Raft of the Medusa, a famous painting of shipwreck survivors by 18th-century French painter Theodore Gericault. It shows them on a raft desperately waving to catch the attention of what looks like a modern yacht on the horizon.

The Banksy website carries a photo of the mural with the subscription: “We’re not all in the same boat.”

In September, the artist said on his website that timber and fixtures from his temporary Dismaland theme park in western England were to be used to build shelters for migrants in Calais.

Dismaland

A painting of the late Apple guru Steve Jobs by English graffiti artist Banksy on a wall at the entrance of the Calais refugee camp in France.

Migrants can do great things when given a chance.

Editorial

Blessed Mawlid, Merry Christmas and Happy New Year

These are special days for major religious faiths. This year, the calendar has worked so that Muslims and Christians will mark their holidays on almost the same day. Muslims will be celebrating Mawlid al-Nabawi, Prophet Mohammed’s birthday, on December 24th; just one day before Christmas. Jews observed Hanukkah, the eight-day Festival of Lights, December 6th-14th.

On these holidays and with the New Year approaching, humanity is entitled to hope and can pray that 2016 will usher in a year of more peace and less conflict.

For the Middle East and North Africa, 2015 was strenuous with humanitarian disasters, wars, terrorist attacks and the mass tragedy of displacement and migration. After five years and 250,000 casualties, war in Syria still rages. A majority called the Islamic State (ISIS) still wreaks havoc in the Levant and beyond. The Palestinians are no closer to achieving their right to national independence.

But as 2015 comes to a close we can see a few glimmers of hope. A group of civil society activists in an Arab country, Tunisia, received the Nobel Peace Prize; Saudi women voted for the first time and no fewer than 20 of them were elected to public office; Libyan belligerents have signed a peace agreement, bringing hope that peace will return to that North African nation; a cease-fire was declared in Yemen; and the international community is finally searching in earnest for a negotiated settlement in Syria.

More importantly and despite all appearances, the bonds that bind humanity are stronger than those forces that divide its peoples and nations. The world can still rise to the challenge of agreeing on the common good when the stakes are high. The accord on climate change reached by the community of nations is the best expression of that universal hope.

Despite the headline-grabbing violence committed by extremist groups, Arab and Muslim societies remain overwhelmingly opposed to the scourges of terror and extremism. The unfolding drama of Middle East refugees crossing the Mediterranean to Europe has shown the world just to what degree international solidarity is stronger than the forces that advocate for barriers and who use ethnic, cultural and religious differences to divide populations into “us” and “them”.

Such barriers have not dissuaded the young people of Syria, Iraq and Iran from seeking harbour in the West when trying to escape daily despair. The collective yearning for better lives is what drives most young people in the Arab world today, not hostility towards others. The pyrrhic victories of political forces wishing to exploit fear and prejudice to win votes in the West are only short lived.

At the end of 2015, we owe it to ourselves to keep hope alive. North Africa and the Middle East can break the vicious circle of war and prejudice to win votes in the West are only short lived.

The Syrian opposition did well on the shoulders of Assad and taken over by his son Bashar is over. However, does this spell the end of Syria as we know it?

The Syrian people will be victorious over the regime – one way or the other – but could this spell the end of a united Syria? This is the biggest challenge facing Syrian opposition leaders who met in Riyadh in mid-December. They must put forward a united political and military front that can be an acceptable alternative to the regime.

One of the most important developments that we have seen in Syria is the trouble the Assad regime is having replenishing its ranks. Military checkpoints have been set up in government-controlled territory in Damascus and elsewhere not to look for rebels but, rather, to seek young Syrian men who are absent from their military service. Those caught undergo a short training period – perhaps a week or two – before being sent to the front lines, where many are killed.

Even with bombings by Syria’s Russian ally, the Assad regime lacks the raw numbers to push back against the rebel groups and take advantage of its aerial superiority. Assad needs at least 80,000 recruits to bolster his army’s ranks and retake areas that have fallen out of government control but these new recruits are nowhere to be found. Russia’s latest efforts to bolster its Syrian ally will ultimately prove in vain.

Returning to the Riyadh meeting, we must first express thanks to the efforts being undertaken by Saudi Arabia to unify the Syrian opposition ranks. There is cautious optimism that these efforts will bear fruit, bearing in mind the state of fragmentation and division that has historically existed between the different rebel groups. One thing that these various groups can agree on is that Assad and the Islamic State (ISIS) are the enemy.

The Syrian opposition did well in the Riyadh meeting to reconfirm that Assad must leave power with the New Year approaching, humanity is entitled to hope and can pray that 2016 will usher in a year of more peace and less conflict.
**A solution for Libya is urgently needed**

Rashmee Roshan Lall

UN special envoy for Libya Martin Kobler (L), and European Union High Representative for Foreign Affairs Federica Mogherini take part in an international conference on Libya, in Rome, on December 13th.

By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote. By 1998, bin Laden had organised a Muslim Foreign Legion of Talibans, or, indeed, a state sponsor of terrorism, “Innes wrote.
Profile of a would-be suicide-bomber
Religion, poverty, depression and drugs all play a role

Omar Ibrahim

Lebanon

The Arab Weekly

Beirut

Dar al-Fatwa has struggling to save overdue Sunni mosques

Sunni Mufti Sheikh Abdul-Latif Deirany ordered the move to ensure that no Friday prayer leader would instigate against the Iran-backed Shia Hezbollah. Hezbollah has been working to tone down criticism of the Future Movement by clerics it backs.

"But in recent months, the mufti got stricter in the measure, asking clerics under Dar al-Fatwa’s authority to focus on Islam’s tolerant teachings," the source said.

He recalled videos aired on pro-Hezbollah websites about how, in 2011, Dar al-Fatwa’s regurgitated the young man on a motorcycle to check his papers. When he tried to escape, police arrested him and disconnected the explosive belt.

"Ibrahim was not wanted by the authorities and there was no arrest warrant against him. He was reluctant to cooperate with his interrogators and was not fully conscious, probably due to drugs he had taken. But after the attack in Bourj el-Barajneh, the source added.

He recalled videos aired on pro-Hezbollah websites about how, in 2011, Dar al-Fatwa’s, pro-Hezbollah rumour had been circulating on social networks, and authorities feared that other religious groups authorised to run mosques would urge followers to todf any decision in favour of the top authority, a writer on Is- lainic thought close to the Future Movement. The movement, which has always been on good terms with Dar al-Fatwa, says seminars led by the religious authority to disseminate religious tolerance would eventually overcome extremist ideas if not uproot them altogether, the writer said, requesting anonymity. "Lebanon’s Sunnis are generally tolerant and not easily ready to up- hold extremist ideas," he said.

The Islamic Cultural Centre, established by Dar al-Fatwa in 1971, has regular seminars focusing on tolerant aspects of Islam. Centre Chairman Omar Masselah said he has been spreading up the organi- sation’s schedule of lectures and preparing for publication of books and studies about "Islam’s tolerant ideas and tolerant past" in the com- coming year.

Dar al-Fatwa has admonished many clerics for preaching tough stan- ces against Hezbollah, the source at the authority said. "Regarding instructions that ser- mons should denounce extremism, we had a much easier job," he said. "Our clerics have always talked about tolerance and it was easy to have them continue to do so," he said.

"Clerics who attacked Hez- ballah did so for its political agen- da, not for sectarian reasons. But in general, almost all clerics on both sides are now in favour of the dia- logue" between the group and the Future Movement.
Turkish quarel with Kurds complicates Iraq situation

Harvey Morris

London

These have been tentative signs that Turkey is trying to back away from two potentially conflicts largely of its own making that add dangerous new complications to the already volatile war in Syria.

The first involves a confrontation with Moscow over Turkey’s downsizing of its operation in Afrin in northern Syria since November 24th, while Ankara’s decision to send troops and tanks to a training base near the Iraqi city of Mosul, seized by the Islamic State (ISIS) in June 2014, has provoked a crisis with Baghdad.

The first incident, in which the two-man crew of a Russian Su-24 fighting plane was killed after ignoring warnings that the plane was violating Syrian airspace, is clearly not a minor affair as Putin himself termed “a pilot’s mistake” and apologized for it.

Turkey’s military deployment to the Baybaja base near Mosul, said to be headed by a Turkish general, is a clear signal that Ankara is investigators and potential donors from the Syrian crisis.

Turkey is widely seen as having actively or passively facilitated the rise of ISIS to further its regional ambitions.

The Turkish military has reportedly helped ISIS by pointing out the tunnels to avoid aerial bombing. ISIS by pointing out the tunnels to avoid aerial bombing.

Iraqi demonstrators gathered in the southern city of Basra on December 18th, to demand the withdrawal of Turkish forces from Iraq.

Sinjar rises for the death in doubt

Sameer Yousif

Erbil

Sinjar is divided into two parts, both diurnal with little hope for a better future for its Yazidi minority population, which coexisted on the plains of the northern Iraqi Ninawa province with hundreds of other ethnic groups, including Kurds, Arabs, Assyrians and Turkmens.

One part, estimated by Iraqi Yazidi officials and peshmerga forces, was trapped on Mount Sinjar above the plains of the northern Iraqi Nineveh province. They were such actions, yet they are very few,” said the activist, one of many Yazidis who returned to Sinjar to inspect the remains of the ISIS-controlled city. “Many Yazidis are back to live in Sinjar,” he said. “Most of all houses are destroyed and there are others which ISIS planted with mines.”

Yazidi drivers in vehicles after looting the area of Sinjar, Iraq, in November.

Yazidi activist Shirzad Khalil and other Yazidis said about 40% of the city remains under ISIS control. “The remainder of the city will be liberated when the battle to recapture Mosul starts,” Khalid said, noting that ISIS is based on information from Iraqi officials and peshmerga forces.

Mosul is Iraq’s second largest city to the east, which is linked to Raqqa, ISIS’s stronghold in Syria, to the west through a passage, known as Highway 75, which cuts across Sinjar, had served as a main supply line for ISIS.

Iraqi officials, meanwhile, announced that a handful of mass graves were discovered near Sinjar containing the remains of hundreds of the Yazidi men and women. The officials said the graves were unearthed days after Sinjar was recaptured.

Yazidi fighter Khudr Ali said he saw one of the graves “It was full of bones, most of them belonged to women. They could be the old people who remained behind when ISIS invaded the area in August 2014.”

Another 100 bodies were found in a separate mass grave near Kojo village, where ISIS committed massacres,” Ali said, referring to an area where the militias had purportedly killed tens of people who refused to convert to Islam.

A witness who visited Sinjar recently confirmed that tunnels were discovered under the city. He said it was widely believed there that ISIS had used the tunnels to avoid aerial bombing.

Sinjar had come to define the war for northern Iraq since ISIS seized it and ultimately ruled it for 14 months. The militants killed, enslaved or kidnapped thousands of Yazidis, including women and children.

About 50,000 others fled but were trapped on Mount Sinjar above the city without water or food. In the days until they were rescued by Turkish and Kurdish forces, ISIS considers Yazidis infidels who should convert to Islam or be killed.

Looters said they were getting revenge from Sinnis, whom they accused of collaborating with ISIS by pointing out “Yazidis.”

Sinjar’s fall not only laid bare ISIS’s depravity but also exposed the shortcomings of the Kurdish forces, who had been tasked with protecting the city but retreated as danger neared.

War intensifies: ISIS’s occupation of Sinjar had scattered across the plains of the northern Iraqi Ninawa province in the Mount Sinjar areas minority that had existed since the dawn of civilization. Today, few could clearly bear the thought of living under the invading militias.

Samee Youssif, a pseudonym used for safety reasons, is a contributor for The Arab Weekly from northern Iraq.
Controversy over Coptic pope’s visit to Jerusalem

Hassan Abdel Zhabeer

Cairo

Egypt’s Christians, about 10% of the country’s population, to follow suit. That, nationalists and religious institutions ban re-pilgrimages. Some people say the church should allow visits to the old city, especially if such journeys benefit Palestinian society. "Some people do see the sites of the city – some of them are 1,600 years old – and be there," said Kamal Zakher, a Christian thinker, said. "Copts will not be normalising relations with Israel if they visit Jerusalem." Zakhir is one of several Christians calling for change. He argued that a prisoner – the Palestinians in this analogy – should not be abandoned by his family, only because the relatives do not want to see the man jailed. Palestinians living in Israel have called on fellow Arabs to visit the old city to boost the Palestinian economy, accentuate Arab presence in it and not leave them alone to face the Israeli occupation.

The leader of Egypt’s Coptic Orthodox Church Pope Tawadros II walks outside the Church of Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem, on November 28th. Mahmoud Al-Habib, an adviser to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, said Palestinians badly needed Tawadros’s visit. He said the trip was a form of communication with Palestinian people who continue to suffer under Israeli occupation. Nevertheless, there are fears inside the church of a backlash against the visit. Zakhir says attacks about the visit are based on political, not religious reasons or feelings. Islamists, he said, are behind much of the criticism because Pope Tawadros supported the June 2013 revolution that ousted Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated president Mohamed Morsi.

"So, in criticising and defaming the pope, these people are criticising, and defaming the revolution," he said. "It is not the church that is meant for this criticism, in fact, but the revolution itself." Hassan Abdel Zhabeer is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

International support for Egypt’s war on terror

Gregory Aftandilian

Washington

The US National Security Council unanimously elected Egypt to lead the UN Counterterrorism committee. The selection reflects the fact that Egypt is seen as a victim of and an important fighter against terrorism and that it remains a pivotal country in the region.

Egypt’s accession to head the committee comes two months after it was elected to a seat on the Security Council from January 2015 to December 2017, the fifth time it joined the council since the revolution itself. Egyptian officials hailed these achievements at a time when the news coming out of their country has been negative.

Over the past few months, Egypt has had to cope with the fallout from the bombing of a Russian airliner over the Sinai peninsula that killed 224 people. The incident, which probably was the result of a bomb attack, led to a massive evacuation of Russian, British and other European tourists from the Sharm el-Sheikh area in southern Sinai and was a huge blow to the Egyptian tourism industry.

Egypt has also been criticised by international human rights groups for the detention of journalists and bloggers who have either been critical of the government or have printed stories not to the government’s liking. In addition, the turnout for the presidential elections was low, a reflection of political apathy among many Egyptians and a sense that their votes have little influence in the wake of ongoing terrorist incidents, lacklustre economic growth and the return of old elites to parliament.

President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and Egyptian diplomats have been active shoring up Egypt’s relations with a number of countries. Although Egypt initially denied a terrorist connection to the downing of a Russian airliner, Sisi has come around and asked for international help.

During a November 5th news conference in London, Sisi and British Prime Minister David Cameron talked about their cooperation against terrorism. Cameron said: "We will continue our close security cooperation [with Egypt], including tackling the scourge of violent Islamist extremism... We’re committed to working together... to meet all concerns about the security of the [Sharm el-Sheikh] airport." Sisi said: "We are completely ready to cooperate with all our friends to make sure that the security measures at our airports provide the safety and security needed." People to visit Egypt. Sisi added that: "This is a new world now more than ever to unify peoples and cultures against the ideas and rhetoric of bigotry, extremism, hate, and denial of the other, [as these are] the ingredients of a fertile soil of terrorism, detrimental as it is to the pillars and values of societies." On the sidelines of the international climate conference in Paris, Sisi met with French President Francois Hollande, who praised Egypt’s support for France in the fight against terrorism. Sisi also met with French Defense Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian about increasing cooperation in the fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) and terrorism in Africa.

The Obama administration has assured Egypt of continued US military and security cooperation. On October 29th, US Ambassador to Cairo, Jeffrey Feltman, said the delivery of four F-16 fighters to Egypt “another step forward in US-Egyptian cooperation on fighting terror, bringing stability to the region and strengthening our historic relationship.”

But this international support does not mean that concern over human rights violations has waned. US Senator John McCain, R-Ariz., the chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, said recently: "I worry when [Egyptian authorities] arrest people for no good reason, when they have 40,000 or so people in prison and there’s clearly a lot of arrests not only in the press and others but..."

Sisi is counting on this support not only to help Egypt’s own terrorism problem but also to counter terrorism in the region.

Yet McCain acknowledged Egypt’s cooperation as a reliable ally in a troublesome region. “Their military is good [and] a lot of it has to do with our support.”

Sisi is counting on this support not only to help Egypt’s own terror problem but also to counter terrorism in the region.

The unanimously vote for Egypt as chair of the UN Counterterrorism Committee indicates that it has many friends who want it to succeed and see it as a valuable part of the UN.”

Gregory Aftandilian is an associate of the Middle East Center at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell and is a former US State Department Middle East analyst.
Deteriorating conditions inside police stations and jails are inviting attention, inside and outside the country.

Security experts say Egypt faces the challenge of striking a balance between fighting terrorism and protecting human rights. Egypt has seen a surge in protests, often targeting police, soldiers and judges.

Hundreds of police and troops have been killed by terrorists in the Sinai peninsula, where a home-grown group that has recently sworn allegiance to the Islamic State (ISIS) is active and in provinces where “lone wolf” operatives have attacked security forces.

A column recently accused police of “comprising” to bring Sinai down.

Russia is a very important player in the Security Council, he said. “It can change a lot of things if it teams up with Egypt and other like-minded states.”

But all this does not seem to be more wishful thinking coming out of Cairo.

Egyptian police and emergency personnel carry a body on a stretcher at the site where an explosion of gas caused a fire in a building in Al-Mokattam district in Cairo, November 28th.

A crisis of growing militant activities in Sinai.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has been trying to draw up a new coalition with European states overlooking the Mediterranean, such as France, Italy, Spain and Greece against growing ISIS presence in Libya.

Egypt has also been trying to cancel a previous UN Security Council ban on arms supplies to Libya’s army so that this army can eradicate ISIS. Okasha said Russia, a permanent Security Council member, could help.

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Nine police officers accused of responsibility for man’s death were arrested

December 4th.

“Torture has not stopped for a day inside police stations,” rights advocate noted. “Such torture will not stop in the absence of an independent body.”

In 2010, the death of activist Khalid Okasha in Alexandria triggered a nationwide uproar and a public concern in Egypt over police brutality.

Nine police officers were sentenced to five years in jail by an Egyptian court for torturing a lawyer to death in February. Karim Handly, 27, had been arrested on charges of taking part in anti-government protests organised by the Muslim Brotherhood.

He died two days after his arrest after sustaining fractures to the ribs, bruises and bleeding in the chest and head, the initial forensic report showed.

Deteriorating conditions inside police stations and jails are inviting attention, inside and outside the country.

The father of a woman who recently accused a policeman of torturing her to extract confessions about stolen jewellery, described the police station where his daughter was interrogated as a “slaughterhouse”.

Anti-police brutality websites and internet pages are bursting with photos and videos of citizens who were allegedly tortured at police stations.

Rampant reports about alleged torture are being used against Sisi in the run-up to protests on January 25th, usually Police Day. Anti-Sisi activists called for major protests against, among other things, the abuses by the nation’s police.

When they descended on the streets on January 25, 2011, demonstrators wanted to protest the brutality of the country’s police and deterring human rights conditions.

Egyptian Interior Minister Magdy Abdel Ghaffar denied the presence of systematic torture in police stations.

He said officers who commit violations were usually brought to account and were bound to apologise if violations were confirmed.

A column recently accused police of “comprising” to bring Sinai down.

Here, observers say, exactly where Cairo needs Russia. Egypt’s powerful military, which is new to guerrilla warfare tactics, needs Russian space technology to determine the locations of militants and military activities in Sinai.

“Their (the Saudis and Egyptians) priority was to protect Russian oil tankers”.

Youssef said: “They [police officers] are unrelenting. They are not after a pardon. They are after a deterrent.”

Russia’s Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu was in Cairo on November 28th to deliver the message that Russia was ready for close cooperation with Egypt to fight ISIS in Sinai, describing the country as a “strategic partner.”

But all this does not seem to be more wishful thinking coming out of Cairo.

Russian Defence Minister Sergei Shoigu was in Cairo on November 24th to deliver the message that Moscow was ready for close cooperation with Egypt to fight ISIS in Sinai, describing the country as a “strategic partner.”

About two weeks earlier, Russian President Vladimir Putin said his priority was to protect Russian citizens living abroad, regardless of where they are.

“People who are not in Russia due to various reasons should be firmly sure: We will always protect them,” Putin said at the fifth World Congress of Compatriots in Moscow.

Nine police officers accused of responsibility for the man’s death were arrested December 4th.
**Christmas spirit subdued but alive in Arab world**

**Samar Kadi**

**Beirut**

In a rare coincidence that occurs once in centuries, Muslims and Christians around the world will be marking the birth of the founders of their faiths at the same time. Prophet Muhammad’s birthday, or al-Mawlid al-Nabawi, falls on December 24th, the day before Christmas, which marks Jesus’ birth.

The two occasions coincide while rampant Islamophobia has been sweeping mainly Christian Europe and the United States following bloody terror attacks in Paris and California. It also comes at a time, in the wake of terrorist attacks on churches.

Security at churches is reinforced around Christmas with heavily armed police to abort any breaches by Muslim militants, whose terror plots have included attempted attacks on churches.

Some Amman residents and a few shops put up Christmas trees but there is no street or window decorations as in Arab countries with larger Christian communities.

“Security is a matter of concern,” said Aisha, who is returning from a week in Amman, where she was visiting her family. "But I think we should try to enjoy the beauty of Christmas and put aside our fears and concerns for a day,“ she added.

In Egypt, some shops put on a large display of Christmas-related gifts and goods, including Christmas trees, Santa Claus costumes, stockings and heart pots and mugs. Security at churches is reinforced around Christmas with heavily armed police to abort any breaches by Muslim militants, whose terror plots have included attempted attacks on churches.

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Some Amman residents and a few shops put up Christmas trees but there is no street or window decorations as in Arab countries with larger Christian communities. However, this year there is a significant increase in Christmas-related activities, including the distribution of gifts and balloons by Muslim policemen as a gesture of support to Christians.

In Jordan, where Christians are often broadcast live on national television.

Many people attend church services on Christmas Eve. The Coptic language is used in the rites, which are often broadcast live on national television.

“Security at churches is reinforced around Christmas in Jordan with heavily armed police to abort any breaches by Muslim militants,” said Amr Emam, a Jordanian journalist.

With the spectre of the fundamentalist Muslim Brotherhood dissipated, Egyptian Christians anticipated a joyous season.

“Egypt has returned to its people after the Islamists had gone,” Coptic Bishop Abdel Messiah Basset said. “We feel very safe this year.”

Millions of Egyptians, Muslims and Christians – expressed joy when Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a Sunni Muslim, joined Christmas rites at an eastern Cairo cathedral where Coptic Pope Tawadros II celebrated mass. He was the first Egyptian president to attend the service.

Basset said he expects the president to make a similar gesture in 2015.

Jamal J. Halaby, based in Jordan, Levant editor for The Arab Weekly and Amr Emam, a Cairo-based reporter, contributed to this report.

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**Children pose with a man dressed as Santa Claus in front of a giant Christmas tree outside the Al-Amin mosque in the capital Beirut.**
Islamic's third holiest shrine. A se-
series of stabbings, shootings and car
rammings by extremists has killed 19
Israelis and a US citizen.
In Ramallah, the spirit of the sea-
son is lacking. A 6-metre Christmas
tree, which is traditionally deco-
rated and lit in a festive musical cel-
ebration every year, has been left
in storage in a city square. There
are no decorations. There are no
lights on the tree.
Ramallah's streets were not dec-
orated for Christmas, an expression of solitude with the families who are waiting for the small government to
return to the bodies of their chil-
dren to be buried. Israel is holding the bodies of 100 Palesti-
nians, a move widely seen as pun-
tional.
The city's traditional march, in
which hundreds of thousands of stu-
dents walk Ramallah's streets play-
music, was led by families holding
Palestinian flags and candles. With
scouts playing drums only, they proceeded to the square and lit torches symbolising justice and truth.
In Jerusalem, street marches with Santa Claus and other celebra-
tions in the Old City were cancelled.
In Bethlehem, an ornate Christ-
mas tree was decorated and lit in a
low-key celebration but there were no fireworks. Christmas songs performed by church choirs is as tradition.
The number of Western pilgrims
during the season to the Holy Land
has dwindled because of the threat
of violence. Christians make up about
7% of the Westerners' population, and about 80,000 Chan-
tilian Christians, mostly in kind, which we distribute
Christmas presents to Palestinian children.
"It's important to celebrate the
Christianity of Jesus and the
Church. It is a sad fact for the church
but it's hard for Palestineis to en-
joy these times with many youth
losing their lives because of the Is-
raeli occupation," Hussain said.
He said Palestinians "enjoy close
ties, regardless of their faith.
"Kareem, a 15-year-old Muslim, and his Christian friend Ammar are
a good example of such a solid
style. They grow in Hamas-rulled Gaza where Muslims make up about
1%–1.5% of the Strip's overall population.
There are usually no Christmas
celebrations in Gaza because of
Hamas's hard-line teachings. Some
people adorn Christmas trees in
side their homes but the decora-
tions can barely be seen through
windows.
Kareem, who wanted Christ-
mas to be special for his long-time
friend, arranged for Muslim neigh-
bours – boys and girls – in their
western Gaza neighbourhood of Ramallah to go to Ameer’s house when he
saw a Christmas tree taken on in
December.
"I want to see him happy. It's a
very special night to all of us," Ka-
reem said while hanging an orna-
ment on Ammer’s Christmas tree.
He said the burning tension and
violence in Palestinian areas should not
overshadow the festivities of
Christmas.
Gaza's Christmas community
dropped by more than half in the
last decade, mainly because of
wars, a crippling Israeli siege and
Hamas's 2007 violent takeover of
the Strip from the moderate Pal-
estinian Authority in charge of the
West Bank.
Gaza’s Christians earned respect
when dozens of Muslimrefugees were given refuge at the Orthodox Church in the Old Gaza City after fleeing houses destroyed in Israel's war in July 2014.
"Christian and Muslim Pales-
tinians share the same hopes and
dreams. The Israeli occupation
doesn't differentiate between a
Christian and a Muslim, a church
or a mosque. We're proud of the
unique relationship we have in
Palestine and we hope the world
would learn to accept the other like
we do in Palestine," Hussain said.
Malak Hasan, based in Ramallah,
had covered Palestinian-Israeli
issues for more than five years; Saud Abu Ramadan, based in Gaza,
has been covering the Israeli–
Palestinian conflict for 28 years.

Christian refugees looking hard for joy

Syrian refugee girls hold Christmas gifts in Bar-Elias in the Bekaa valley, on December 24, 2014.

The church has no income from endowments. We are mostly helped by the civil society in Leba-
on, both Christians and Muslims,
mostly in kind, which we distribute
to refugees, including those from
Syria.
Antoun, a Syrian Christian refu-
gee, fled her native Aleppo with her
parents two and a half years ago.
Her father, Yousef, was a well-off
entrepreneur whose business was
totally lost in the raging war.
For two Christmas's "is just another
day.
"How could there be any Christ-
mas joy when we are hardly sur-
viving and all my children are scat-
tered – one in Aleppo, another in
Homs, another in Damascus and
one daughter with her husband and
children in Belgium," he said.
For comparison and co-religionist
Mastouke Shaker, 35, marks the
fourth Christmas she and her handi-
capped sister have been refugees in
Lebanon. "Christmas returns every
year with more tears and pain. It
is a season that will pass without any expectations. We had hoped to see
an improvement in our condi-
tions but alas from bad to worse;" she
said. With one brother killed by
shellsfire and another stuck in
Aleppo, she says, "There will be
Christmas for us.
"I believe there is a systematic at-
tempt to exterminate all Christians
in Syria and the Arab world."
Josephine Sioufi, 35, a Syrian Chris-
tian who fled her native Aleppo
where most Christian refugees from
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my mother succumbed to
grief.

Christmas decorating for Christian refugees from Iraq and Syria

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Palestinian refugees wary of UNRWA’s future

Samar Kasdi

In 2015, UNRWA experienced its worst financial crisis with a budget deficit of $101 million. The agency’s director in Lebanon, Matthias Schmale, acknowledged that UNRWA has a sustainable need to operate but is facing strains that many Palestinians fear would pave the way for a reduction of services and the eventual termination of the agency.

In 2007, UNRWA lost its status for budget realities. For Schmale, donors have started to see that if the stalemate persists, a “big explosion” will follow. “The crossing point reopened in December and it worked for two weeks, allowing in 1,500 Palestinians, including students, patients and others in need to travel abroad. The crossing was opened December 3rd and 4th under a deal between Egypt and the Palestinian Authority (PA), according to a PA statement. The PA is in the recognized leadership of the Palestinians in charge of the West Bank and had ruled Gaza until Hamas violently took over in 2007.

Observers cautioned that if the stalemate persists, a “big explosion” will follow.

As a result, Palestino-Gaza border crossing was reopened for the first time in two months, allowing in 1,500 Palestinians, including students, patients and others in need to travel abroad.

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Palestinian refugees wary of UNRWA’s future

Samar Kasdi

With an annual budget of $680 million, UNRWA runs hundreds of schools and clinics in the five countries of operation, including 152 schools and 27 health centres in Lebanon. The agency’s budget shortfall of $100 million came under further pressure with the influx of 25,000 Palestinian refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria. The negotiations were incorporated in the core services provided by UNRWA, Schmale said, but budget constraints meant that cash assistance early 2007, lost food and rent allowances as well. Another service that will have to adjust to budget realities is health. While primary care continues to be covered by UNRWA clinics, secondary and tertiary care involving surgeries and chronic diseases will be mainly referred to cheaper, though lesser quality, hospitals run by the Palestinian Red Crescent Society and government hospitals. Private care will be a last resort.

Nonetheless, Schmale denies Palestinian renunciation that UNRWA is leaving open assistance. “We are trying to re-direct our services,” he said. “There has been no cut in core services... so far.” Palestinian refugees are wary that UNRWA’s services will dwindle in future, stressing that shelter and food for refugees from Syria and the displaced of Nahr El-Bared camp is “an essential and core service that will not be further reduced or even prohibited”, according to Natour. “Some donors thought that with time the Palestinians would be integrated in host countries and would eventually do without UNRWA’s help but the Palestinians are attached to UNRWA as a symbol of the responsibility of the international community towards them and their Palestinian cause,” he said.

“First you dwarf UNRWA, then you say we have housing problems and then you have other agencies slowly taking over UNRWA’s tasks,” Natour said.

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Chair of the Nobel Committee, Kaci Kullmann Five (L) hands over the Diploma and medallion to the winners of the 2015 Nobel Prize, Tunisian National Dialogue Quartet during the Nobel Peace Prize award ceremony in Oslo, Norway on December 10th.

**Maghreb**

Tunisian Quartet receives Nobel Peace Prize

Lamine Ghanmi
Tunis

The Quartet includes the Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT), the Tunisian Union for Industry, Trade and Handicrafts (UTICA), the Tunisian Human Rights League (LDH) and the Tunisian Bar Association.

Kaci Kullmann Five praised the group for “its decisive contribution to the building of a pluralistic democracy.”

Fear of jihadist violence loomed large over the banquets and concerts attended by hundreds of political, intellectual and business leaders during the lavish Nobel ceremonies in Oslo and Stockholm.

The Quartet received the Nobel Peace Prize for the crucial role it played in pushing Tunisian political actors on the track of peaceful transition in a region wrestling with violence and upheaval.

**Viewpoint**

Jerry Sorkin

Without incorporating the country’s educated youth the future can be precarious.

What Tunisia’s politicians must hear from the next generation

**December 18, 2015 | The Arab Weekly | 15**
Algeria's power struggle goes public

Rachid Tlemcani

Maghreb

Algeria

Mohamed Mediene, former intelligence chief in Algeria who "retired" in September 2015, entered the country's security debate with a letter exposing the corrupt nature of his former subordinate who was sentenced to prison for disobeying orders.

Mediene led Algeria's Department of National Security (DSS) for 25 years and was seen at the top of the power in the country. Although he left office in September, he stepped up recently with an open letter strongly in support of one of his deputies, Abdelkader Ait-Ouarabi.

Ait-Ouarabi, known as General Hassan in the intelligence community, on November 25th became the first senior intelligence officer convicted in Algeria after he was charged with a "breach of military rules." He was sentenced to five years in prison.

Ait-Ouarabi had headed Scout, the operational coordination and counterterrorism intelligence service, which draws elite troops focused on thwarting terrorist plots and protecting government institutions.

"A group of 19 well-known personalities cast doubt that the purge of the intelligence services occurred with Bouteflika's blessing."

He was a key ally of Mediene, who had been seen as unsuicidal before the country's surprise in September announcement that Algerian President Abdelaziz Bouteflika had accepted a temporary resignation.

Some analysts argue that Ait-Ouarabi's jailing was another slap at Mediene, further showing he no longer had influence in Algeria's power circles.

The removals of Mediene and other senior officers have been viewed as a move to oust Bouteflika's long-stated goal to exert more civilian control over the powerful DSS.

Many say a debate should have been initiated on the role of intelligence services in democratic transition.

The DSS made itself integral to virtually every institution in the country and Mediene was blamed for the security crisis that deter-
rated the political and economic sectors, argued Amor Saidani, secretary-general of the National Liberation Front (FLN). The DSS failed to protect former president Mohamed Bouchaffar, who was killed by a DSS soldier in 1992, and did not anticipate an attempt to assassinate Bouteflika in 2007, Saidani said.

He also alleged terrorist acts in Al-
geria in the 1990s and more recent
ones, such as the al-Qaeda-linked hostage-taking at the Tiguentoun-
tine gas facility near Amenas in January 2013 as points of DSS fail-
ure.

Mediene's open letter, published December 3rd while Bouteflika was in France for a routine medical check-up, could be a move to re-
establish Mediene's power.

He congratulated Ait-Ouarabi for a job well done. "The most urgent thing today is to right the wrong done to an officer who served his country with passion," he wrote. He added that Ait-Ouarabi was not the right officer. "He handled his mission in full respect of normal procedures and gave updates at the appropriate moments." Saidani told supporters that Me-
diene's letter was meant to firing the former intelligence chief's de-
signation. "He was drowning, drown-
ing, drowning," Saidani said.

Algerian Minister of Communica-
tions Hamid Guine said the letter is "extremely violent. I can even talk about hyper-violence." He added that "a senior former officer is required to follow the duty of discretion".

A group of 19 well-known per-
sonalities cast doubt that the purge of the intelligence services oc-
curred with Bouteflika's blessing. The group sent a letter to Boutef-
lika on November 1st requesting a meeting to determine whether the president could adequately man-
age state affairs.

Bouteflika, 79, who suffered a stroke in 2013, has been main-
tained in brief television images or in
speeches on state media since win-
ing a fourth presidential term in 2019.

Questions over Bouteflika's health have left his opponents ask-
ning who replaces him if he cannot govern for his entire term and how that affects political and economic reform in the vast North African country.

Many say a debate should have been initiated on the role of the intelligence services in democratic transition. The success of any emerging democracy in the Arab world relies heavily on security.

Recent developments make clear that the Algerian military, which has been called a "great monument" for its ability to keep the power struggle within the regime under wraps, is no longer willing to do so.

Rachid Tlemcani teaches international and comparative politics in Algiers.

Lamine Ghanni

Tunisia

The Islamic State (ISIS) is only one of the jihadist organisations jeopardis-
ing the security of Libya, UN experts and the North African country's neighbours warned.

ISIS's core leadership picked up Libya into which it could expand from Syria and Iraq, disrupting loyalists of its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, to supervise the groundwork of its franchise in the violence-torn North African coun-
try.

A statement from Libya's six neighbouring countries and a UN report suggested that ISIS's scheme to establish a fallokbk territory in Libya, however, did not go beyond recycling local extremist gangs and returning Libyan fighters.

Territorial control by ISIS has not spread outside Sirte, the hometown of late Libyan strongman Muammar Qaddafi.

The UN report quoted an un-
named member as saying that at least 12 of the 28 individuals in-
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Mouaqaoune Biddam in January 2013, had been trained during the summer of 2012 in camps run by Ansar al-Shita in Benghazi.

In addition, Ansar al-Shita in Benghazi and Dema took part on the September 11, 2012, attack on a Tunisian security post in the town of Ben Guerir in Bensharta.

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"We deem the worsening of the situation in Libya will permit the development of terrorism and deepening instability in Libya. That is where we say it is "contagious" with neighbour-
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Vast support for drive to ban Trump from entering UK

More than 550,000 endorse petition, the most signed in British history

Mahmud el-Shafey

London

More than 550,000 people signed a petition calling for Republican presidential front runner Donald Trump to be banned from entering the United Kingdom after he said he would ban all Muslims from entering the country.

Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne speaks at the House of Commons, in London, on December 4th. Osborne told lawmakers that Trump’s views were “nonsense”, but said it would be wrong to “ban presidential candidates.”

Trump’s campaign has been dogged by racially motivated controversy since he launched his campaign on June 16th. The nature of Trump’s comments have been widely condemned by other presidential candidates and by officials in Europe and the United States.

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

In a short space of time, two electoral campaigns have been driven by ignorance.

In France, the National Front did well in the first round of regional elections and in the United States, Republican candidate Donald Trump made a highly divisive proposal for a ban on all Muslims travelling to the country.

What was apparent in both situations was the fact that those in favour of Trump and Marine Le Pen, the leader of the National Front, were motivated by fear to an extent that did not fully understand. Indeed, both politicians have played on this ignorance to render their populist messages more dramatic.

Trump, for instance, declared: “We need a total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States while we figure out what is going on. We’re out of control.”

This recourse to unfamiliarity, including the candidate’s own, was remarkable. Usually politicians say they’re there to bring solutions. Trump admitted he was as lost as anyone and that the ban was an effort to buy time for answers. That did not make it any less dramatic, but it did allow Trump to show that he and his electorate are one in their bewilderment with Islam.

Le Pen is a different matter. The National Front has been a force in French politics since the 1970s, but the rise of the Front National under Marine Le Pen has been a dramatic development in the party’s history. The party has grown from a fringe group to a major player in French politics.

But the second most signed petition was on Trump’s positions on immigration. Britain’s anti-immigration party has been the most signed petition on Trump’s controversial comments.

The UK government is legally bound to respond to any petition that garners more than 100,000 signatures. Responding to earlier petition, which was issued in September and echoes Trump’s anti-immigration policy, the UK government said it had no intention of closing Britain’s borders. “This would create more problems than it would solve,” the government said.

Lord Mayor Boris Johnson described the Republican front runner’s claim as “ill-informed.”

British Prime Minister David Cameron described Trump’s call for a ban on Muslims entering the United States as “divisive, unhelpful and quite simply wrong” in a statement issued by Downing Street but the government has yet to formally respond to the petition to ban Trump. Commenting on Trump’s claims regarding “radicalised” parts of London being no-go areas for the police, London Mayor Boris Johnson said the Republican front runner’s claim as “ill-informed” and “complete and utter nonsense.”

“As a city where more than 300 languages are spoken, London has a proud history of tolerance and diversity and to suggest there are areas where police officers cannot go because of radicalisation is simply ridiculous,” Johnson said.

But he appeared not to endorse the petition calling for Trump to be banned from the United Kingdom. He would welcome the opportunity to show Mr Trump first-hand some of the excellent work our police officers do every day in local neighbourhoods throughout our city. Crime has been falling steadily both in London and in New York – the only reason I wouldn’t go to some parts of New York is the real risk of meeting Donald Trump,” the mayor said.

London’s Metropolitan Police issued a statement addressing Trump’s comments. “We would not normally dignify such comments with a response,” however, on this occasion, this is important to state to Londoners that Mr Trump could not be more wrong.

“My party and I will oppose the endeavours of the right of the United States of America to welcome all with an open hand,” Trump said.

In what was a predictable move, Republican immigration policy expert Donald Trump has refused to be drawn into a war of words with other Republican candidates in the race for the nomination.

Trump used the same format to respond to the United Kingdom as “trying hard to disguise their massive Muslim problem. Everybody is wise to what is happening, very sad! Be honest.”

Michael Young

Both politicians have played on this ignorance to render their populist messages more dramatic.

Overcoming fear. A demonstration in support of religious coexistence in Webster, Texas, on December 4th.

Over 3.5 million people have become refugees fleeing ISIS in the Middle East. But their date with destiny is neither their own nor that of the countries which have chosen to turn their backs.

In the Middle East, the argument goes, ISIS has taken advantage of the conflict between rich and poor to spread its ideology. In Europe, the argument goes, ISIS has taken advantage of the lax immigration policies.

But while ISIS is a threat to all, it is also a threat to those who support it. The problem is not simply how to stop ISIS but how to stop those who support it.

The paradox of Trump is that he is a leader who has been able to turn immigration into a winning issue.

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Michael Young

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Egypt’s Sisi declares war on price hikes

Amr El-Enany
Cairo

A plan by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to bring down runaway commodity prices is seen by a wide section of the public as a last attempt to help the poor put food on the table but some economists fear it could scare investors away.

Sisi said Cairo would intervene to prevent commodity prices rising even more in the local markets, vowing to bring the prices down quickly.

The government will sell basic commodities at more than 4,000 state-run supermarkets below market prices. It also has coordinated campaigns by the Interior Ministry and the Ministry of Supply to crank down on traders who increase prices.

Most importantly, the army, which acts as an autonomous agricultural and industrial production entity, producing everything from macaroons to cooking machines, will sell vegetables, cooking oils, meat, chicken and butter at reduced prices.

In the past two years, most commodities in Egyptian markets rose 30-60%.

The plan has been warmly welcomed by the public but economists fear it could scare investors away and introduce unprincipled competition into the market.

Shereen al-Shawarbi, an economics professor at Cairo University, said Egypt needs to attract investment.

“If the government offers these commodities at these low prices, the private sector could run away because it will not be able to stand the competition,” Shawarbi said.

Other economists counter that the government should protect the poor.

Rising commodity prices are threatening to translate into political unrest.

“The government has the right to take measures to protect the poor in society,” economist Bassant Fahmi said. “These measures will, at the end of the day, coerce greedy traders to reduce their profit margins because they will not stand competition with the government, which has strong economic means to tame uncontrollable prices.”

In the past two years, most commodities in Egyptian markets rose 30-60%, according to economists. A kilogram of tomatoes rose from about 7 US cents two years ago to around 33 cents now. A kilogram of beef rose from $7.30 in 2013 to more than $10 now. Most commodities had similar price increases.

Egypt’s annual inflation rate was 9% in September. While that was 2% lower than the September 2014 rate, the drop was not felt by the majority of Egyptians.

Rising commodity prices are threatening to translate into political unrest with activists, including those at the forefront of the 2011 uprising, calling for another revolution in January 2016. Observers have linked Sisi’s initiative to lower commodity prices to those movements.

The success of the president’s campaign is not certain. One of the challenges is for the government to have its cheap commodities programme reach areas where most of the poor live.

State-run supermarkets and army vehicles carrying vegetables and meat and selling them at reduced prices can be found in urban centres but it is not known whether the same opportunities are found in the countryside and Egypt’s slums.

How long the state can offer commodities at reduced prices to the public is another question given that Egypt has another active plan by Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi to bring down the price of commodities and fuel subsidies in a desperate bid to bridge a growing budget deficit.

Yumn al-Hamady, an economics professor from Cairo University, said Sisi’s plan could succeed in lowering commodity prices if the government can deliver cheap commodities to all poorer Egyptians, including those living in the countryside and city slums.

“This is the real challenge,” Hamadi said. “If the government fails in making these cheap commodities available to the poor everywhere, we will then be talking about a second wave of protests that is present in the media while the majority of the public will continue to suffer.”

GCC investment funds to shift assets to US market

Vita Bekker
New York

The Qatar Investment Authority (QIA) and other energy-generated Gulf sovereign wealth funds may increase acquisitions in the United States to benefit from its relatively strong economy and relatively steady assets, observers in New York’s financial community said.

The QIA announced October 28th that it was taking a 44% stake in a Manhattan property project that could be worth $8.6 billion by the end of the year. It also said another plan to sell a stake in French construction company Vinci.

Hamady, who works closely with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) financial sector, said the QIA and other Gulf wealth funds may expand beyond Manhattan real estate purchases and invest in medium-sized US companies.

The growth in the United States is part of an attempt by the QIA and the other funds to seek steadier returns to counter the loss in income from drop in oil prices over the past 18 months and with prospects for global economic growth uncertain.

Lower crude revenues and slower global growth will decrease the assets of wealth funds and central banks by $2 trillion – almost 7% by the end of the year, Swiss bank UBS said.

The fall in sovereign assets will likely continue in 2016, partly triggered by a fall in investment returns, UBS said.

As part of an apparent shift away from Europe, whose economy is weaker than that of the United States, the QIA has been selling assets.

In October, it sold its 19% stake in German builder Hochtief for about $5.6 billion.

It also announced plans to sell a stake in French construction company Vinci.

The Doha-based fund has suffered as much as $12 billion in losses from stakes in German carmaker Volkswagen, Swiss commodities trader Glencore and the Agricultural Bank of China, the Financial Times reported in September.

The newspaper cited its own calculations of the losses for QIA from derivatives, regulatory filings. The oil price drop is driving other Gulf sovereign funds to restructure their European operations. The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority, the world’s second-largest wealth fund, said recently it was planning to close its office in London. The fund said, however, the move won’t affect their investments and commitments in the United Kingdom.

For Hamady, the United States is a favourable target market for wealth funds given that it is outperforming other regions economically and offering a wider choice of investment opportunities across multiple asset classes. “Anecdotally, speaking, our chamber is seeing more direct investment in the USA by Arab governments and individuals than at any time in memory,” he added.

For QIA, an interest in Manhattan is understandable in light of rising property prices.

Douglas Elliman, a major US real estate broker, said in October that the average price of a square foot of real estate in Manhattan hit a record $1,483, the highest quarter of 2015.

That was helped by insufficient inventory, especially for houses priced at less than $1 million, which is bolstering competition for homes and raising the number of all-cash commitments from buyers.

QIA said on October 28th that it is taking a 44% stake in a project called Manhattan West from a subsidiary of investment firm Brookfield Property Partners.

The project is a 560,000-square metre development that will include two office towers, stores, rooftop gardens and restaurants. It will also have an upscale 62-story residential building equipped with a basketball court, climbing wall and roof deck with grills. It is slated for completion in 2018.

QIA has repeatedly indicated in correspondence its interest in the US market. In the statement announc the purchase of a part of Man hattan West, Sheikh Abdullah bin Mohammed al-Thani, chief executive officer of the QIA, said the acquisition is “a further demonstration of QIA’s long-term confidence in the US market”.

Vita Bekker is a New York correspondent for The Arab Weekly.
**Economy**

**Briefs**

**Saudi king orders $8 billion in Egyptian investments**

Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud ordered the kingdom to invest $8 billion and help meet Egypt's petroleum requirements in the next five years.

Saudis, Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz announced the news following a meeting in Cairo with Egyptian Prime Minister Sherif Ismail. A statement released on January 7th, the Saudi state news agency SPA said.

Gulf Arab allies pledged $32 billion at an investment conference last March after a plea from Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. About $8 billion has been deposited in the Central Bank of Egypt to reulfill dwindling foreign currency reserves.

The rest was to come as investments, much of it still being negotiated.

**EU to appeal annulment of Morocco trade deal**

The European Union will challenge a decision by the bloc's top court to annul a farm trade deal with Morocco because it involved a disputed region of Western Sahara.

Voting to appeal the European Court of Justice's decision, EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini said the European Union's international agreements should be respected.

The court annulled the trade deal signed in March 2012 between Morocco and the European Union because it failed to verify if it referred to Western Sahara, leaving open the possibility that the accord would apply to the disputed region.

The case was taken to the Luxembourg-based court by the Polisario Front, a movement in Western Sahara that has been campaigning for independence with the backing of Morocco's arch-rival Algeria.

Morocco took control of most of the territory in November 1975 after the end of Spanish colonisation, unleashing a war for independence that has lasted until this day.

(Anoncne France-Press)

**Qatar gas tanker helps vary Poland's energy supplies**

The first gas carrier from Qatar arrived in Poland to help the EU member diversify its energy supplies and reduce dependence on Russia.

The Al Nuaman vessel carried 210,000 cubic metres of gas from the Polish port of Swinoujscie.

“For the first time ever, Poland will be able to import gas from any place in the world,” said Deputy Finance Minister Henryk Baranowski. "As soon as the (Swinoujscie) terminal is launched, Poland will be able to import liquefied natural gas practically from anywhere in the world."

Sea Industry and Navigation Minister Marek Gróbarczyk said the new supply route would facilitate talks with Russian gas giant Gazprom.

(Anoncne France-Press)

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**Domaine de Bargylus vineyard in Latakia**

**Domaine de Bargylus: From war zones to posh restaurants abroad**

**Samar Kadi**

Beirut

It is a high-quality Levantine wine enjoyed by diners at the finest restaurants in Europe and other parts of the world.

Domaine de Bargylus, Syria’s unique commercial wine, makes a perilous journey from the war-torn country, surmounting formidable challenges, before arriving at the tables of Michelin-starred eateries, including LeRelais de Joll Robuchon, the Mandarin Oriental and Restaurant Gordon Ramsay in London.

It is a high-quality Levantine wine produced in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Domaine de Bargylus vineyard in Latakia

**Bargylus wine is produced “with the same criteria” as the best Bordeaux wines and vineyards.**

“It is an achievement by itself not only to produce wine but one of the highest quality in a war zone,” said Sandro Saade, who has been running the winery in the Syrian province of Latakia by “remote control” with his brother, Karim.

The Beirut-based Saades, a Christian Orthodox family, hail from Latakia in northern Syria, heartland of Syrian President Bashar Assad’s Alawite community. The 12-hectare winery is located at 900 metres on the slopes of the coastal mountain range of Jebel al-Ansariye, known as Mount Bargylus in ancient Roman times.

Sandro Saade explained that their father, Johnny, wanted to buy a vineyard in Bordeaux, France, but ironically, he opted for Syria because he did not want to produce wine from a distance.

However, Bargylus wine is produced “with the same criteria” as the best Bordeaux wines and vineyards, which makes the “adventure” even more challenging.

Despite the raging war and occasional fighting near the winery, production continued uninterrupted since 2010, when the first Bargylus bottles from the 2006 vintage were released.

“Every year [after 2011] harvesting is a challenge,” Saade said. “It is always a time of stress because we are never sure that we will be able to do the picking on time and it is something that we have to do fast and with a lot of caution.”

Logistics remain the biggest nightmares for the producers of the world’s most perilous wine.

“It is a hell of a problem both for us,” said Saade, “and other parts of the world.”

The samples are placed in ice buckets and sent by taxi to Beirut, before diversifying its energy supplies and reducing dependence on Russia.

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Climate pact called ‘historic’ but change could take decades

James Bruce

The historical agreement signed in Paris on December 12th was agreed by the leaders of nearly 200 countries to work together to curb global warming. It is one of the most important international pacts ever made and took decades of bitter wrangling to achieve. The agreement, reached after intense backroom lobbying amid what is expected to be the hottest year on record, spells a sharp downturn for the oil industry as the world moves away from fossil fuels, which lie at the root of climate change, a move that will hit the Middle East hard and change its economic base and the region’s future.

The process, one that has occurred several times as mankind adapted to new resources and technologies, could take decades as new carbon-free resources and more energy-efficient technologies are developed.

The legally binding Paris agreement will take effect in 2020.

‘Regardless of which resource rises to the top, oil will not disappear entirely, just as coal did not vanish before it,’ the US-based global security consultancy, IHS, observed in December 14th analysis. ‘It’s important to turn the history books, as will the status of those that produce it.’

Environmental groups saw the agreement as a turning point. The pact, declared Greenpeace International Executive Director Kumi Naidoo, ‘will confirm high levels of strategic rivalry over the years.

‘The oil age began about a century ago in the south-west of what was then Persia, where an adventurous English businessman, William D’Arcy, struck oil on May 26, 1908, at a remote spot called Masjid-e-Suleimani. Discoveries were also made in Mesopotamia and the Arabian Gulf over the following two-decades. These transformed the global economic system and seemed the rise of the fabulously wealthy Arab and Persian dynasties and a strategic energy programme that kept the Middle East seething in turmoil ever since. Now, perhaps, the legally binding Paris agreement, hammering out in consensus in 13 days of negotiations and heavily supported by the United States and China, the two leading carbon-burning powers, will take effect in 2020.

It is aimed at curbing, as quickly as possible, carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels such as oil and coal, to limit global warming to 2°C above pre-industrial levels in 2100. It is aimed at curbing, as quickly as possible, carbon dioxide emissions from burning fossil fuels such as oil and coal, to limit global warming to ‘well below’ 2 degrees Celsius and, if possible, under 1.5 degrees, and intensifying their efforts every five years to eliminate greenhouse gas emissions by 2100.

The world is already 0.75 degrees warmer than before the industrial revolution in the 1800s.

The Paris agreement, to have legal force, has to be ratified by at least 55% of the 195 countries that adopted it without objection on December 12th. This multi-trillion-dollar undertaking is considered essential for the survival of the planet and on everyone on it by averting a global calamity that will turn Earth into a furnace, with sea levels rising to flood low-lying regions that contain many of the world’s major cities, industrial centres and farmlands, and drying up water resources.

This can only be achieved if much deeper cuts in emissions than most countries have been planning, or which most developing countries can afford, are achieved. The question of who will pay for all this has divided the rich and poor states for 20 years.

Some scientists question whether the major contributors to global warming, the industrial nations, will be able to achieve the 1.5-degree goal to remove huge quantities of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere in time to do any good because the technologies required to do so have not been developed.

But despite the doomsayers, the consensus achieved in Paris is remarkable and points to the most determined effort yet to arrest global warming and the violent climatic changes it is already bringing about, as well as the prospect of conflicts around the globe as people struggle to access to dwindling resources like water and farmland.

Morocco is to host the upcoming UN Conference of Parties to the Convention on Climate Change (COP22) next year.

‘Morocco will be an epicenter of innovation in adaptation to and mitigation of climate change effects,’ said Morocco’s Minister Delegate for Environment Bakima El Haite at a plenary session of COP21 in Paris.

Saad Guerraoui

Morocco set to launch the world’s largest solar farm

Casablanca

Morocco is about to launch its first solar power plant at the end of December as part of a massive clean energy programme aimed at reducing energy imports.

The 95 billion Noor project, located in the Moroccan town of Ouarzazate, is expected to produce 580 megawatts (MW) once all phases are complete, supplying electricity to 1 million homes.

Launched by King Mohammed VI in 2013, the first phase will generate 160 MW. Noor 2 and Noor 3, which are to be operational in 2016 and 2017, respectively, will each generate 160 MW. Noor 4 is designed to produce 70 MW through photovoltaic technology.

The project, which will be the world’s largest solar energy farm, has put the North African country on the world map for clean energy.

It is part of the country’s energy strategy to meet 42% of its total power needs by 2020 through renewable energy and reduce its heavy dependency on fuel oil by 35%.

Morocco is the biggest energy importer in the Middle East and North Africa.

Speaking at the ministerial meeting of the International Energy Agency (IEA), Moroccan Energy Minister, Abdelkader Amara said that investment of $35 billion was needed for the electricity sector and renewable energy projects.

‘Morocco has initiated the implementation of major programmes in renewable energy between 2015 and 2017, with the aim to achieve an additional capacity of 6,700 MW… 3,120 MW is solar, 2,740 MW is wind and 900 MW is hydroelectric,’ Amara said.

The Noor plant is expected to help Morocco reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 250,000 tonnes per year initially and by 522,000 tonnes when phases two and three are in operation, the Energy Ministry said.

Morocco seeks to reduce its greenhouse gas emissions by 25% by 2030. It has also decided to abolish the production of plastic bags from July 1, 2018.

Morocco started producing electricity at Africa’s largest wind farm in its southwestern coastal region of Tarfaya in 2014.

‘Things have been going well so far. We will probably go beyond 2,000 MW by 2020 in the area of wind power,’ said Amara.

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‘Marrafech COP22 will be an edition of innovation in adaptation to and mitigation of climate change effects,’ said Morocco’s Minister Delegate for Environment Bakima El Haite at a plenary session of COP21 in Paris.

Saad Guerraoui is a frequent contributor to The Arab Weekly on Maghreb issues.
War takes toll on weddings in Syria

Khalil Hamlo

Damascus

Wedding parties have become much more discreet, without any eccentricity and restricted to the families and close relatives.

The war did not stop Syrians from marrying, although it has become more expensive and has largely undermined weddings in pre-war conditions.

Zeina, a newlywed from the town south of Damascus, has been sharing a small apartment with her in-law's. Her privacy with her husband is restricted to a 12-square-metre bedroom. "All my family and relatives insisted on my going to the wedding ceremony," she said. "My 'dream house' is now a small unfurnished apartment of my dreams in having a well-furnished place, "

She said bitterly. "Nonetheless, I should not complain, there are many Syrians who cannot afford a roof to sleep under. Many of my friends have fled and are living in refugee camps in Lebanon and Turkey.

Some Syrians insist on making their wedding a special day, though it is a part of a pre-war ceremonies. Wedding parties have become much more discreet, without any eccentricity and restricted to the families and close relatives of the bride and the groom.

In pre-conflict Syria, not every- one could afford a wedding ceremony in a public hall or a hotel. For couples with limited income, the celebration took place in the street just outside their new home, an- nounced with special wedding bands.

"In Jaramana, streets and public squares were common places to celebrate weddings but such mani- festations have been banned since the beginning of the war, out of fear from shellings or bomb explo- sions targeting crowds," said Hala- hamad Ibrahim, who lives in the town south of Damascus.

Also those who could afford to have a proper wedding ceremony before the war are no longer capa- ble of meeting the cost amid soar- ing prices of food and cloth. Cele- brations that used to last for a week or more are now limited to a few hours or cancelled altogether. Money is saved for more important matters, such as the engagement ring, a roof and furniture.

"Economic conditions play a role in the failure of these ceremonies" said Sherif El- khashab, an Egyptian reporter based in Cairo.

"In the past six years, the price of basic commodities such as food, clothing, and other necessities, have increased, leading to a significant decrease in the prices of many goods," said El- khashab.

"The failure of these ceremonies means that the government is not able to produce enough of these goods for the people," he added.

In 2013, total marriages dropped 1.4% across Egypt while divorces rose 4.7%, according to CAP- MAS. The agency says that 359,350 marriages were registered in 2013 compared with 352,425 marriages in 2012. It notes that a total of 46,283 divorces were registered in 2013 compared with 47,572 divorces in 2012.

Despite the devastating conflict and financial hardships, many cou- ples insist on making their wedding a special day, though it is much more discreet than during peacetime, showing resilience and a resolve to go on with their lives normally as much as possible.

Khalil Hamlo is a Damascus-based journalist and regular contributor to The Arab Weekly. He has been covering Syria since 1995.

Economic conditions discourage marriages in Egypt

Mohamed Zain

Cairo

In recent years, however, unem- ployment started to have political dimensions, especially after the 2011 uprising. Rampant instability and insecurity after the revolution scared in- vestors away and slowed down the tourism and service sectors, main employers in Egypt.

When he proposed to the girl he loved four years ago, Mustafa was unemployed. He now sells comput- ers at a major store in downtown Cairo. The money he earns, how- ever, is barely enough for him to buy the flat or other items needed for marriage.

"Housing and furniture prices are on a continual rise," he said. "Sup- pose I save money enough to buy a flat, I can put food on the table for my family after marriage!"

In the past six years, the price of housing more than doubled, ac- cording to economists. The same in- creases affected the prices of many commodities.

Economists Professor Mukhtar al- Sherif suggested a more vibrant gov- ernment policy be implemented to attract foreign investments to create jobs and also increase production, which can bring prices down. "An increase in investments and production will eventually raise citi- zens' income," Sherif said. "These can be good solutions for the prob- lem in fact."

Sherif added that current eco- nomic conditions make it difficult for youths to get married and when they do get to get married the mar- riage because of increasing financial pressures. In 2013, total marriages dropped 1.4% across Egypt while di- vorses rose 4.7%, according to CAP- MAS.

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Khalil Hamlo warns against leaving the nation's unmarried men and women to fend for themselves in their pursuit of marriage.

"The failure of these men and women to get married opens the door for an endless list of social ills," Khashab said. "The government must intervene by subsidizing hous- ing and marriage requirements to help all these people tie the knot."

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Anti-trafficking activists say that trafficking in persons in Egypt will take more than the introduction of a "new law". Egypt has long been the destination of large numbers of migrants escaping conflicts, famine and tough economic times. The trafficking in Persons Report to be published by the US government this year, describes Egypt as a "source, transit and destination country for trafficking". Some Sinai traffickers were reportedly offered a store but were not intimidated. Beate Uhse, according to media reports, said he has his work cut out for him. He and his partners are keen to include lingerie and perhaps condoms, which is Dunes' signature product. "Egypt has long been the destination of large numbers of migrants escaping conflicts," anti-trafficking activists say. The law introduces a specific definition of terms such as "human trafficking", "traffickers" and "trafficking in persons" for the first time. "If trafficking is committed by a group of people, carried out with the aim of staging terrorist attacks or results in the death of trafficked persons, traffickers could be sentenced to prison and fined 200,000-500,000 Egyptian pounds ($6,250-$25,000) for traffickers. A fine of $5,250-$25,000 is expected to reach $7.5 billion in 2018, according to analyst Euroconsult. El Asira, which has no employees other than Aouragh, remains a minor player among the multinational companies that have more than 20 products. An estimated 70% of the 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide are under the age of 25, making young women particularly vulnerable to the largest consumer of El Asira's Halal cosmetics and personal care products, namely Saudi Arabia, a trade news-letter correspondent in the Middle East, Muslim consumer spending is expected to hit $2.5 trillion by 2020, a significant increase from $1.8 trillion in 2014. To develop a strong customer base, Aouragh is focusing on Islamic branding that targets the untapped Muslim market and appealing to Muslims that adhere to sharia principles. Halal products are free of pork by-products and alcohol in makeup, shampoos, lotions, oils and creams. The Halal Industry Development Corporation reported that Halal-certified beauty product sales have reached $5 billion annually. Multi-national companies such as Aven and Colgate-Palmolive are making forays into Muslim countries in Saudi Arabia, the body care market is expected to reach $7.5 billion in 2018, according to Euroconsult. Two companies must provide a line of products up to 300 items. El Asira has about 20 products. Aouragh has solved that problem by working with Beate Uhse AG, a German company that specializes in eroticism with a focus on women's fashion and style. Aouragh said that he has the logistical support of Beate Uhse's 700 member staff. El Asira's newcomer status has not intimidated Aouragh. He sees Dunes, the United Kingdom-based ckbox company that produces a range of body products, as his direct competitor. Admittingly, Aouragh says he has his work cut out for him. But he is already keen to be more than just a minor player. "Egypt has long been the destination of large numbers of migrants escaping conflicts," anti-trafficking activists say. "There are enormous benefits for Egyptians working abroad," said M. Khalid, a non-Muslim Egyptian from Luxor. "We are interested and we have the ambition to open a shop in Mecca or another Saudi city," Aouragh said. With the religious community's blessing, Aouragh thinks he would be identified as a purveyor of pharma- and personal care products. But Western news reports, based on both fact and a profound misunderstanding of marketing female luxury products, pushed Aouragh to educate his customers on the distinction between sex and sensuality. Aouragh is the founder of Am- bari, a Saudi company that specializes in body care products. The company uses its own anti-human trafficking department. The department advised the government on strategies to fight trafficking and prevent Egyptian youths from falling victim to local or international traffickers. "The department was closed down years ago and the council has not tried to revive it," Abdel Nour said. "No government really serious about fighting trafficking now, it should investigate why it stopped fighting it in the past."
Al-Saqi: Not your average London bookstore

Atef Bseiso

London

A teatrical bookshop is housed in a conspicuously inconspicuous building on London’s Bayswater district. With a signboard featuring a blue water line and a water-pitcher topped by a staring busts, its architectural style is quite distinct from other bookshops across Europe, North Africa and the Middle East. Al-Saqi’s glass door hangs a yellow sign with a blue emblem, depicting a hunched figure passing water to thirsty children: al-saqi — “the water seller” — a historic symbol of Arab desert societies.

It is an appropriate home for a company that has been a hub for cultural exchange since its inception more than three decades ago. Over the years the Saqi team faced censorship, war, death and Israeli missile attacks — as well as the inevitable hardships of independent book-selling.

It is an impressive tale of survival and success, but a humble one; owner Salwa Gaspard notes most pride is reserved for those who visit, the small shop “still feels like home”.

Al-Saqi was founded in 1975 by the late author and artist Mal Ghaith and her childhood friend, publisher Andre Gaspard. Salwa Gaspard and her husband, Atef Bseiso, the former youth both were members of Marxist organisations but upon the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war in 1975 their efforts shifted towards humanitarianism and helping to establish medical dispensaries in quarter near their shop, the Saqi Bookshop.

The water mark continued until Ghaith was injured in 1977, while driving a wounded Pales- tinian to hospital; a brave act in a sectarian conflict as she was born a Maronite Christian.

After moving to London for treat- ment on her wounded eye, Gaspard said: “Mal and I realised that there were no books in many Arab cities, from Lebanon, the Emirates, Egypt — from all over the Arab world, and nowhere to buy books in Arabic. When our shop opened we were the first ones.”

The Saqi Bookshop was located downtown with elbow grease and funding provided by acquaintances. “Mal and I decided who to sell to the catalogues too,” Gaspard said. “She ended up opening a phone bank and picking out names that sounded Arabic or slightly ex-otic.

What Saqi truly succeeds is at interpreting people through an internationalist perspective.

The store expanded to include books in English on Middle East- en culture and politics and began publishing under its own literary imprint (now today by Salwa and Andre’s daughters, Lynn Gaspard). It became known for vibrant readings, and parties, lauded in publications from the Financial Times to the Guardian and frequently by the New York Times. It became a landmark for Arabs in London as well as intellectuals within the diaspora, praised by such towering figures as Edward Said or Brian Whitaker.

The Saqi ethos leans to the left, perhaps instinctively, and its name grew in stature thanks to a reputation for selling contentious literature. People continue to “look for books that have been banned. Have to ask them which government it has censored, and we don’t have a banned books section,” Gaspard said in a tone that gives the impression of a running joke.

If Saqi owes any of its fame to its politics, it is to its cultural exchange since its inception. “Most of the time, you can’t know which books will become controversial,” said Gaspard, citing as an example a seemingly innocuous biography of King Faisal bin Abdulaziz that was banned by the Saudi Arabian govern- ment in 2013.

Notable Saqi titles on the store’s bookshelves — Arabic books line one wall of the shop, English books another — include Brian Whitaker’s Unreasonable Love: Gay and Lesbian Life in the Middle East, biblical scholar Reza Aslan’s Zealot: The Life and Times of Jesus of Nazareth and Abdul Bari Atwan’s Islamic State. Saqi clearly does not shy from sex, religion or politics, the natu- ral focus of any censorship regime. This has occasionally demanded a price. “We had our front windows smashed,” Gaspard said. “Since then, we’re careful of what we put in the window display.”

Upon receiving threatening mes- sages after the follow-up against Salman Rushdie was issued, “The police asked us if we couldn’t just sell The Satanic Verses under the table, and we said, ‘no’,” she said.

During the 2006 war in Lebanon, the bookstore of Al-Saqi’s sister publishing house in Beirut, founded in 1978 and run by Andre Gaspard, was bombed by an Israeli warplane.

From its birth, the Saqi enterprise has been inexorably tied to worlds of conflict. Recent publications in- clude Lebanon, Lebanese, writings and drawings in support of Leba- nese children traumatised by war, and Syria Speaks, a collection of artistic responses by Syrians to the violence in their homeland which won an English PEN award.

Saqi’s dedication to a culture of translation has remained strong. As Gaspard says, “The more the Middle East is in the news, the more peo- ple will tend to gravitate towards topics but we try to offer as wide a variety of perspectives as possible. It’s not all politics and re- ligion. We offer books on food, drink, art,” she said.

What Saqi truly succeeds at is bringing people through an internationalist perspective, which has led its Middle Eastern focus to widen over time. Saqi’s fiction im- print, Telegram, features authors translated from several languages. The Saqi family understands the value of whether a good avenue to cul- tural exploration; poetry, of course, will always be its special place on an Arab bookshelf.

Atef Bseiso is an Arab Weekly contributor in London.

Egyptian bookseller ALEF opens store in London

Mahmud el-Shafey

London

J ust a few doors down from 221b Baker Street, the home of fictional British detective Sherlock Holmes, a new Egyptian bookstore has opened in London, seamlessly join- ing the cultural fabric of the British capital.

Wide-known Egyptian bookseller ALEF has opened its first interna- tional branch in London, catering to the city’s large Arab expat com- munity, as well as other Londoners who want to learn more about the Middle East, or buy a Sherlock Hol- mes book.

“We have had a very positive re- action to the [London] store with people visiting and following us on social media through Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. It is all very early days yet,” store manager Fa- rah Taylor said.

“It would be great to see more of the Arab community visit the store. We have a wide selection of books available in Arabic, including children’s books, as well as a great collec- tion of Arabic literature translated into English,” she added.

The London store, bright and well-lit, has tables of books show- casing English-language volumes on the Middle East, from English lan- guage translations of well-known Arabic novels to literature from other Arab countries. The shop also boasts a small section for Arabic-language novels and non-fiction.

ALEF was founded in 2009 as a unique upscale bookstore for Egypt’s urban elite, competing with the more-established Diwan Book- store. Within its first year, ALEF underwent rapid expansion, open- ing six branches across the coun- try. ALEF now has 35 stores across Egypt, in addition to its new Lon- don shop.

The chain master social media to attract new customers and keep them interested. It also launched the Knowledge Tour project in 2009 to much critical ac- claim, training a number of Cairo’s taxis into mobile libraries.

ALEF’s London branch opens at a time when the UK bookseller industry is going through a transition period with the number of in- dependent bookshops in decline and stiff competition among major chains due to the rise of Amazon and ebooks. But as we have a trick or two up our sleeve and we don’t seek to just be a book store, it is an informal hub for London’s Arab commu- nity, a space to connect with fellow Arab expats, author Taylor said.

“We aim to host book sign- ings, talks and children’s story-time sessions and maybe even an Arabic Book Club from early next year. I want to carve out an events programme that is a little different to your average high street book- shop. An events programme that celebrates our Middle East herit- age with a variety of events in both English and Arabic,” Taylor said.

“There are such amazing Arabic writers out there and I would like to introduce everyone in London to them. We want our bookshop to provide a good mix of British and Arab culture and hopefully appeals to everyone looking for a place to buy great books.”

London has another major Ara- bic bookshop — Al Saqi Bookshop — which has been serving London’s expat Arab community since 1978.

“ALEF Books’ first international store outside of Egypt and hopefully the first of many across Europe.”

“We have a wide selection of Ara- bic fiction in stock. And we also sell a few Saqi publications. Speaking to customers, many of our Middle East customers are keen to encour- age their children to pick up Arabic books, hopefully we can help par- ents with that by offering a good se- lection of books in a warm and in- viting place. This is not something that has previously been available to the Arab community in London.”

According to its mission state- ment, ALEF aims “to create high- ly knowledgeable, intellectual and well-versed Arab people throughout the world”.

As for ALEF, it will expand beyond London to cater to Arab expats in France, Germany or else- where, Taylor said. “This is ALEF Bookstores’ first international store outside of Egypt and hopefully the first of many across Europe.”
Roufan Nahhas

Southern Shuneh

The eastern bank of the Jordan river lies a site where John the Baptist is believed to have baptised Jesus. For decades, al-Maghtas, Arabic for the “baptism” site, was thought to lie on the eastern side of the biblical river in the West Bank and under Israeli military rule.

However, Arab Christian theologians, aided by historians and archaeologists, determined in the late 1990s that the baptismal site was inscribed on the Jordanian side in a biblical area called “Bethany”.

Other biblical references had it as “Bethany Beyond the Jordan”, pointing to the eastern bank of the Jordan River.

Indeed, Bethany existed all those years in modern-day Jordan, commonly known by its Arabic name Beit Enya on the banks of the Jordan. Excavations in the area unearthed remains of what is believed to have been an ancient church, a water system for irrigation and drinking and even a shelter said to be where Prophet Elijah lived. Churches and rest houses have since been built on the site.

Christians hold a mass at Jordan’s baptism site where tradition has it that Jesus was baptised by John the Baptist.

Tourists walking towards a church in the baptism site on the eastern banks of the biblical Jordan river.

Roufan Nahhas

Travel

Jordan baptism site magnet to tourists

December 18, 2015

The Greek Orthodox tourist, who is set for Qatar’s National Day festivities, said tourists travelled to the baptism site has been decreasing because of tensions and wars in the region. Official figures show that 3.7 million tourists visited Jordan between January and September, compared with 5.3 million in all of 2011 and 6.4 million before the “Arab spring” revolutions in 2010.

The baptism site is less than an hour drive west of Amman. However, disputes arose with Israel over the exact location of the site. Both countries, bound by diplomatic ties and close security cooperation under a peace treaty, compete for tourism on the river.

The controversy swelled in 2000, when the Vatican announced the site as part of Christian pilgrimage areas. That year, Pope John Paul II visited, making the Vatican’s recognition of the site official. His two successors have visited since – Pope Benedict XVI in 2009 and Pope Francis in 2014.

In July, the UN cultural agency UNESCO officially designated the baptism site on the Jordanian side part of World Heritage list.

Scholars insist it is difficult to ascertain where Jesus was baptised.

“We don’t have any sites with evidence or archaeological remains that are continuously venerated from the first century,” said Jodi Magness, an archaeologist at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

But tourists seem content to be in an area Jesus once strolled. “I’m in the Jordan river, in Bethany, where Jesus was and this is all that matters to me,” said Jean Zdziarski, a tourist from San Diego, California.

The Greek Orthodox tourist, who travelled to Jordan with friends recently to be baptised again, said the “area is so holy.” “It’s simply breathtaking,” she said.

The Bible’s New Testament, in Matthew Chapter 3, says when Jesus left the river after being baptised, the heavens opened and the Spirit of God descended as a dove and alighted upon him. A voice from the heavens said: “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased.”

The baptism site is less than an hour drive west of Amman. It is near the mouth of the Dead Sea, the lowest point on Earth.

The overall area is rich with history. A nearby mountain, overlooking the baptism site and the Dead Sea, is Mount Nebo, where tradition says Moses saw the Promised Land, a reference to the biblical Jedia and Samaritans.

Other areas could be where the ancient kingdoms of Sodom and Gomorrah lie under water.

The Jordan baptism site draws pilgrims, mostly Christian, from across the world. That includes Russian President Vladimir Putin, who inaugurated a house for pilgrims that belongs to the Orthodox Church on June 27, 2002.

However, the number of visitors to the baptism site has been decreasing because of tensions and wars in the region. Official figures show that 3.7 million tourists visited Jordan between January and September, compared with 5.3 million in all of 2011 and 6.4 million before the “Arab spring” revolutions in 2010.

Dia Madani, director of the Baptism Commission, an independent board of trustees, said 10,500 visitors travelled to the baptism site from January through May of 2014, compared with 7,300 in the same period in 2013. He said visitors were mostly from Europe and North and South America.

“The 41% decline in the visitor numbers is due to the political situation surrounding us,” Madani said.

From a biblical perspective, the site Saphsapha, which is portrayed on a sixth-century mosaic of the Holy Land is the same site of Wadi al-Kharrar, near a monastic complex, pilgrims could climb Jabal Mar Elias, the hill where the Prophet Elijah is said to have ascended into heaven. The site includes a sanctuary, which attracted Christian pilgrims.

Abbot Daniel, a Russian pilgrim who visited in 1664, wrote: “Not far away from the river, at a distance of two arrow throws, is the place where the Prophet Elijah was taken into Heaven in a chariot of fire. There is also the grotto of St John the Baptist. A beautiful strong fast stream full of water flows over the stones. The water is very cold, has a very good taste and is the water that John drank.”

Roufan Nahhas, based in Jordan, has been covering cultural issues for more than two decades.