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New Libyan cabinet formed but divisions remain
Michel Cousins

Tunis

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Led by Prime Minister-designate Faiez al-Sarraj and approved under the UN-sponsored Libya Political Agreement (LPA) signed in December and approved by the UN Security Council, the council made its announcement of the government plan on January 18th, two days after the official deadline.

Arguments over who to appoint and aspects of the LPA led the council to miss that target date. Even then, two participants walked out at the last minute.

By wide agreement among the Libyan politicians and activists choosing the government was the easy part. Pending approval by the House of Representatives (HoR) — the most recent internationally recognised Libyan government — is viewed as more difficult. Establishing the administration in Tripoli also faces massive obstacles.

Even after the deadline passed, there were conflicting views regarding the size of government. Having initially worked on the idea of a 32-member cabinet, with ministers and deputies from across the country, the council considered one with nine “super-ministries”.

It was only when HoR members told the council that this was unacceptable, that the idea was dropped. The council then decided on even more ministries than initially suggested.

As a result, ministers have been chosen in the hope of getting the government approved by the HoR. Ministries were allocated to towns and areas whose representatives in many cases effectively nominated the minister.

Despite a demand by UN Special Envoy Martin Kobler that one-third of governmental position be occupied by women, only one woman was appointed to the cabinet. Anna al-Usta was reportedly drafted directly chosen by Sarraj as Culture minister.

The result is that the government is massive, leading to concerns it will be unmanageable. With the nine members of the Presidency Council, the government will have 105 ministers. In addition to the 32 cabinet ministers there will be 64 deputy ministers and two junior ministers. These were to be selected on the basis of location.

File picture of Libyan Prime Minister-designate Faiez al-Sarraj (L), and EU foreign policy chief Federica Mogherini in Tunis, on January 8th.

Fears for ISIS-besieged Deir ez-Zor
Khalil Hamlo

Damascus

After losing ground in Iraq and Syria in a string of defeats, the Islamic State (ISIS) launched a surprise assault on the eastern Syrian city of Deir ez-Zor, seizing one of four neighbourhoods still in government hands.

In the three neighbourhoods still in Damascus control — Kourouz, Houra and Harakis — residents live in fear of what happened in Al-Baghouz, where ISIS militants killed at least 50 civilians and 50 troops, could spread to their areas.

Some 400 people, mainly relatives of pro-regime fighters, including women and children, were also taken to ISIS strongholds for interrogation.

“Thousands of citizens are threatened with starvation and death.”

Dire conditions for the estimated 200,000 people trapped in the encircled neighbourhoods for more than a year were made worse after the fall of Al-Baghouz where the city’s main water pumping station is located.

Water supplies were cut and the two main bakeries in the area have no fuel. Bread, which is hard to find, is being sold for $2.50 a loaf and vegetables, which used to be supplied from fields on the Euphrates, have become scarce.

“Thousands of citizens are threatened with starvation and death,” a resident said by phone.

ISIS began its assault on Al-Baghouz in the western part of the city with 30 suicide bombers crossing the Euphrates. Syrian Army defences quickly collapsed. Militants seized stores of food, fuel and ammunition plus two military camps in Al-Baghouz. ISIS has reinforced its positions with tanks and fighters, possibly preparing for a major battle.

Abdul Hamid al-Hamad, who fled Al-Baghouz with his family, said the assault started at dawn on January 16th when suicide attackers crossed the river in small boats and were followed by hundreds of militiamen.

“We heard a series of successive explosions, then militants moved quickly capturing the whole neighbourhood, killing more than 100 people, including troops and combatants with the National Defence Forces and civilians. Two of the dead were senior officers,” Hamad said.

Most of Al-Baghouz’s 4,000 residents sought shelter in nearby villages and some crossed into government areas, he said.

“More than 300 people were taken by ISIS to Maadan in Raqqa province in recent months, and others abandoned Al-Baghouz, for interrogation about their relations with the National Defence Forces,” he said.

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

Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia (R) stands next to Chinese President Xi Jinping during a welcoming ceremony in Riyadh January 19th. Xi, who is on his first official visit to the Middle East, arrived in Saudi Arabia for a two-day tour, scheduled to include Egypt and Iran. While in Saudi Arabia, Xi was to meet Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, as well as the chiefs of the Gulf Cooperation Council and the 57-nation Organisation of Islamic Cooperation. According to its official news agency, Xinhua, China hopes to bolster trade with Arab countries. China is the biggest importer of Middle Eastern oil.

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Establishing the administration in Tripoli faces massive obstacles.

Geopolitics plays a further role in the process. Of the three ministers in each ministry, one is to come from each of the country’s traditional provinces of Tripoli, Cyrenaica or Fezzan. Attention is now on the HoR and whether it will support the national unity government. It is scheduled to meet January 25th.

Michel Cousins is the editor-in-chief of the Libya Herald.
More than 250,000 people have been killed and tens of thousands wounded or missing and about 4.3 million Syrians have fled the country.

Syrian opposition sees little hope in Geneva peace talks

Abdulrahman al-Marsi

Ottawa

The Syrian opposition had been expected to meet Syrian President Bashar Assad's representatives in Geneva in January for a new phase of political negotiations, which were expected to focus on reaching a settlement of the Syrian war. That meeting, however, is in doubt as the nations said they would not issue invitations to the talks until major powers pushing the process reach agreement on which rebel representatives should attend.

“At this stage the UN will proceed with issuing invitations when the questions surrounding the ISSG (International Syria Support Group) process come to an understanding on who among the opposition should be invited,” UN spokesperson Farhan Haq said.

The opposition on January 20th announced the names of members of its delegation, including Mohammad Alloush as chief negotiator, for the Geneva talks. Alloush a political coordinator, former Syrian prime minister and senior officials from Britain, China and France.

The US Security Council unanimously approved a resolution on December 18th endorsing an international Syria peace process. It gave UN blessing to a plan negotiated by world powers in Vienna that calls for a ceasefire, talks between the regime and the opposition and a two-year timeline to create a unity government and have elections. Syria is ready to take part in peace talks in Geneva and hopes that the dialogue will help it form a national unity government, Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moallem said in a January 18th statement.

Saudi Arabia hosted a conference in December in an attempt to create an opposition bloc. Meeting participants agreed to set up a permanent body that would select an opposition negotiating team.

“The Syrian civil war was sparked by a government crackdown on dissent for nearly four years. Activists staged peaceful demonstrations in March 2011, which later developed into a bloody civil war. ISIS militants used the chaos to seize territory in Syria and Iraq. More than 250,000 people have been killed and tens of thousands wounded or missing and about 4.3 million Syrians have fled the country.”

Jamal J. Halaby, based in Jordan, is Levant editor for The Arab Weekly and has covered the Middle East and North Africa for nearly three decades.

Syrian opposition sees little hope in Geneva peace talks

Jamal J. Halaby and Khalil Hamlo

DAMASCUS

Despite disparate positions and concerns, issues taken to the negotiating table, the United States, Russia and other major powers are determined to conclude the peace talks in Geneva on January 25th.

If they come to ground, as the major powers insist, the talks would mark the first time that a rebel military group, the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, is formally invited to the talks. The main rebel groups, such as the al-Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham, are not formally part of the negotiations. The opposition’sHourani, on January 13th, in Berlin.

German Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier (R) and the Syrian opposition leader and former prime minister of Syria Riyad Hijab, on January 13th, in Berlin.

“The hopes for Geneva talks, if it is going to be held, are very modest,” said Samir Nashar.

Critics say, however, that any talks would not be much different than previous negotiations, especially because Resolution 2254 is not presented under Chapter VII, which provides the Security Council with legal measures to use force to implement any potential outcomes.

In addition, the United States and Russia vehemently disagree on the desired outcomes for negotiations. The fate of Assad and the preference for post-war Syria remain major points of disagreement.

Peace talks in 2014 failed to produce tangible solutions, largely because the Assad regime’s representatives refused to discuss a transitional government.

Since then, only one issue has been even partially discussed, the implementation of the Syrian opposition. On December 9th, more than 100 members of the Syrian opposition met in Riyadh to create a negotiation team to represent all opposition groups during talks with the regime delegation.

As Russia’s influence in Syria widens, the opposition is uncertain whether any proposed talks would be worth attending. The opposition’s negotiation coordinator, former Syrian prime minister Riad Hijab, said his group would not talk to the government while “foreign forces” are bombing Syria, in reference to Russia’s intervention in support of the Assad regime. Hijab also noted that the United States has “backtracked” on its position that it would “immediately relinquish power, accommodating Russia’s interests in the conflict. “The United States, under President Barack Obama, is working as a mediator between the opposition and the regime and not as a supporter (of the opposition),” said Nashar. Former US ambassador to Syria Robert Ford has expressed doubts that negotiations would end the war in Syria. Ford told a conference on January 12th before the US House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, Ford said the Obama administration’s policy towards Syria is “like a hope. It’s a wish and it’s a wish since 2012.” “I don’t think the process is going to go anywhere,” said Ford, who is known for his work in 2012 for bringing the opposition to the previous two rounds of negotiations. “There hasn’t been enough pressure on the Assad regime to accept major concessions.

Nashar said the opposition’s negotiation coordinator “called on the US to assess its position and participation in Syria have fled the country.”

Jamal J. Halaby, based in Jordan, is Levant editor for The Arab Weekly and has covered the Middle East and North Africa for nearly three decades.

Abdulrahman al-Marsi covers politics and news in the Middle East and Syria in particular. He can be followed on Twitter: @AbdulrahmanMarsi.
Russia plays by ‘Damascs rules’ in Syrian air blitz

Ed Blanche

Beirut

U.S. warplanes bombarded a school in Ain al-Jura in northern Syria’s Aleppo province on Janu-ary 11th, killing 25 peo-ple, including an entire class of 14 stu-dents and their teacher, said the Syrian Human Rights observa-ry. The observa-ry said 29 militan-ts and seven detai-ned by. A girl carrying a baby inspects damage in a site hit by what activists said were air strikes carried out by the Russian Air Force in the town of Duma, Syria, on January 19th.

Moscow dismisses allegations of indiscriminate bombings as "absurd".

Moscow dismisses allegations of indiscriminate bombings as “absurd”. But Philip Luther of Amne-sty International said the Russians have “directly attacked civilians... by striking residential areas with no evident military target and even medical facilities. Such attacks may amount to war crimes.”

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which has an extensive net-work of activists, declared that Russian air raids using no Red Cross symbols had killed more than 35 people. In one of the most stinging criti-cisms of Russia’s air campaign, Brit-ish Foreign Secretary Philip Ham-mond accused Minister Lavrov of being “irresponsible”. Hammond said: “They not only say they’re not doing any-thing to write home about. “So the hospital was accidentally hit,” Lavrov said. “It doesn’t matter, nothing to write home about.”

Ed Blanche is the Analysis editor of The Arab Weekly. He has covered Middle Eastern affairs since 1967 and lives in Beirut.
Mohammed Alkhereiji

London

Saudi Arabia and China, signed 14 agreements during President Xi Jinping’s first visit to the Middle East, including a deal to build a nuclear reactor.

Most of the agreements were economic, including one for strategic cooperation between oil giants Saudi Aramco and China Petroleum and Chemical Corporation (Sinophosphorus). Xi and Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud on January 20th marked the inauguration of a joint-venture oil refinery in Yanbu Industrial City on the Red Sea. The YAS-REEF refinery is 62.5% held by Saudi Aramco and Sinopec holds the balance. The facility is one of five joint-venture refineries for Saudi Arabia. Four areas are overseen, including one in Fujian, China. Aramco has also been in talks to acquire a stake in a China National Petroleum Corporation refinery as well as retail assets. Reuters said, a deal that would help Aramco sell more of its output to China amid growing competition. The deal is estimated to be worth $1 bil- lon-$1.5 billion.

Officials announced on January 19th a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for the construction of a high-temperature, gas-cooled nuclear reactor. Neither the location nor the expected capacity of the plant was disclosed. Another MoU concerned renewable energy. Xi’s visit also had political dimensions, with China giving support for the internationally recognised and Saudi-backed Yemeni government, which is fighting Iran-aligned Houthi rebels.

In a statement released after Xi’s meeting with King Salman, the two countries affirmed that support for the unity, independence and sovereignty of Yemen, and that all social, religious and political groups in the country should maintain their national solidarity and avoid any decisions that may cause social dis- ruption and chaos.

“Both sides stressed support for the legitimate regime of Yemen,” the statement said. The Chinese statement expressed deep concern over the “grave” situation in Syria and re- newed calls for a political resolu- tion to the fighting. It also stressed the need for humanitarian aid to Syrian refugees to continue, en- couraging the international com- munity to provide greater support.

Saudi Arabia is China’s largest Middle East trading partner, with bilateral trade estimated at more than $71 billion. The visit of China’s president to Saudi Arabia comes at a time when the economies of both countries are in the international spotlight.

China, after posting rapid growth for more than a decade, has seen a significant slowdown in the last two years. In 2015, the Chinese economy grew 6.9%, its slowest growth in 25 years. But some analysts say official government data have been inflated, and that growth is much weaker. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has predicted China’s economy to grow by 6.3% in 2016 and 6% in 2017.

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

Gulf

Major Saudi-Chinese deals during Xi’s visit

Mohammed Alkhereiji

London

Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir said Riyadh, promising to protect re- gional security, was wary of the potential for Iranian “narcotic activities” bankrolled by the economic windfall caused by the removal of international economic sanctions.

“Saudi Arabia will not allow Iran to undermine our security or the security of our allies. We will push back against attempts to do so,” Jubeir wrote in an opinion article published January 19th in the New York Times, giving the first formal Saudi reaction to the end of more than ten years of sanctions against the Islamic Republic following last July’s nuclear deal with world powers.

Jubeir, speaking to Reuters, said how Tehran used the additional funds would be followed closely. “If they flounder go to support the nefarious activities of the Iranian regime, this will be a negative and it will generate a pushback,” he said. “If they go towards improv- ing the living standards of the Ira- nian people then it will be some- thing that would be welcome.”

Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab al- lies expressed worries the nuclear agreement would not stop Iran from building a nuclear arsenal and the lifting of sanctions would enable Tehran to finance Shia mili- tant groups across the Middle East, destabilising Arab countries.

Asked about the likelihood of Saudi Arabia seeking nuclear weaponry of its own, Jubeir told CNN, “Saudi Arabia will do what- ever it takes to protect the nation and people from any harm and I will leave it at that.”

Official reaction to ending Ira- nian sanctions from the other five Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries has been muted but the media joined a chorus of condem- nation. “The White House is now lib- erating the Iranian regime from sanctions, enabling this regime to go on with its sectarian project and hostile practices,” wrote columnist Ayman al-Hammadi in the Saudi pro-government Al-Riyadh newspa- per, describing the removal of sanctions as “ominous.”

Manama analyst Tarq al-Amir, who wrote in Bahrain’s Al-Watan daily, criticised US role in the Ira- nian nuclear negotiations. “This les- son teaches us that the USA is like scorpions; it has no friends,” he said. “When Iran was under san- cctions, it managed to occupy four Arab areas…Why would they think that will it occupy with the flow of bil- lions on its treasury?”

Similar sentiments were in the Qatar press where Muhammad Ayyadi warned, “Contrary to the rosy picture painted by Washing- ton, Iran will emerge more danger- ous to the region in the future.”

Riyadh views Iran as a perpetual threat, because of its support for radical Shia militias, notably in Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon and Syria, where Saudi Arabia and Iran sup- port opposite sides in the lengthy civil war.

The Saudi religious establish- ment also showed deep concern. A petition signed by 142 Saudi clerics, some of them prominent scholars, called on the Saudi gov- ernment to be wary of what they described as Iran’s “record of crim- inality and treachery” and to sup- port regional Sunnis.

Saudi Arabia and its Gulf Arab allies expressed worries the nuclear agreement would not stop Iran.

A file photo shows GCC foreign ministers during a meeting of Gulf foreign ministers on December 7, 2015 in Riyadh.

Saudia King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud (R) and Chinese President Xi Jinping reviewing the honour guard upon the latter’s arrival in Riyadh, on January 19th.

The IMF has meanwhile slashed its forecast for Saudi economic growth for 2016 and 2017 to 1.2% and 2%, respectively, blaming the expected slowdown on the slowing Chinese economy and low oil prices.

Saudi Arabia cut government spending at the end of 2015 after posting a record $48 billion budget deficit for the year. The kingdom also introduced a number of meas- ures regarding subsidies, including an increase in domestic petrol pric- es of more than 50%. Water, elec- tricity, diesel and kerosene prices also went up. The austerity measures are ex- pected to save the kingdom $7 bil- lion annually, according to Riyadh- based Jadwa Investment. The firm said savings from the Saudis’ hike on diesel fuel are estimated at $2.75 billion and petrol levies are expect- ed to save $2.5 billion.

Saudi Arabia is China’s largest Middle East trading partner, with bilateral trade estimated at more than $71 billion for 2014, according to the Saudi Ministry of Finance. Xi was also to visit Iran and Egypt on his current trip.
Getting its message out, saying: “I hope, for their sake, they will be more proactive in engaging with the media to explain why Nimr al-Nimr was put to death even if it means releasing the transcripts of the court proceedings... I think that this is fundamentally sensible.” Nimr was executed along with 46 other Saudis, most of them al-Qa’ida members convicted on terrorism-related charges. Nimr had been found guilty of a number of terrorism-related allegations, including instigating sedition. He was arrested after firing on police. “I think they even ask for good help,” Kawczynski said. “What they need is a proper public relations company to proactively engage on their behalf to the media because at the moment their message is not getting across.” The issue goes beyond UK-Saudi relations to encompass a Middle East that is more chaotic and divided than at any other time in recent years, with Saudi Arabia and Iran in the midst of a region-wide proxy war and the spectre of the Islamic State (ISIS) rising. “I think relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran are the worst they have been in the last 25 years. And they are getting worse,” Kawczynski said. He seemed to tacitly acknowledge that much of the fault lies with Iran, which Saudi Arabia accuses of fomenting unrest in the Middle East East through its support of Houthi rebels in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Assad regime in Syria. The P5+1 nuclear deal with Iran has been roundly praised internationally but Saudi Arabia and Gulf Arab states remain sceptical of Iran’s intentions. Kawczynski concedes that it was ill-advised not to involve the Saudis in the P5+1 talks. “I think that was a big mistake because the discussions with the Iranians focused primarily on the nuclear issue and there were no assurances given, nor sought, to my knowledge, that as part of this agreement to bring Iran in from the cold that they would stop funding terrorist organisations,” he said. “The Saudis have been very good allies to us but at the last minute we just ignored their plea [to participate in the talks] and got this agreement with Iran while they had been extremely crucial in the region in the last few years. That’s wrong.” Using the new UK government’s designation and Arabic acronym of the Houthis, he also stated that the Houthis in which Saudi Arabia and Iran can reportedly come to some sort of understanding, if that is sustainable, this will benefit not just those two countries but the world, he said. “It would be very difficult. The talks would be tortuous and they would have to come to some sort of understanding, if that is sustainable, this will benefit not just those two countries but the world.” London

Khairallah Khairallah

Yemen risks becoming a failed state

Khalairallah Khairallah

Yemen looks set to remain within the regional and international headlines for some time to come. What happened in Yemen in 2015 will likely reverberate throughout 2016 and beyond. Yemen desperately needs a new vision, one that has yet to manifest itself for a number of reasons, not least that the collapse of the regime that was established by Ali Abdullah Saleh was accompanied by the collapse of the entire system in Yemen and marked the end of the central government’s control over all of Yemeni territory, including the capital, Sana’a. So what happens after the collapse of the Yemeni central government and the confirmation that the first president of a unified Yemen – Saleh – would also likely be the last? There has always been conflict in Yemen. During the Saleh era, the conflict in Yemen was managed from Sana’a. There was conflict with the Shia Houthis in the north, the Houthi who would fill the vacuum left by Saleh. During the early parts of the “Arab spring”, in fact, a popular revolution led by Yemen youth but this was ultimately hijacked by the Brotherhood, which sought, and failed, to monopolise power. The Houthis’ takeover of Sana’a also did not stop the conflict; whether in Yemen generally or Sana’a’s and its environs specifically. This is a conflict that will go on and on, not least because it is impossible for a backward rebel group, backed by Iran, to control a city like Sana’a, let alone a country like Yemen. More than this, nobody can imagine the alliance between Saudi Arabia and the Houthis lasting forever. These two parties fought more than six wars with a combined death toll of more than 30,000 during the Saleh era. We are seeing a temporary alliance based on mutual interests. Until recently, Saleh had been known as a pragmatist and based on his alliance with the Iran-backed Houthis and the chaos that it has wrought across the country. There has even been speculation that the ex-president is in no hurry, with Yemeni former prime minister Abdullah Karim al-Makrami suggesting that Saleh has become “head of state” for revenge after he was almost killed in a 2011 bomb-assassination attempt. Using the Houthi takeover, Arab Gulf states’ had no choice but to carry out this military operation to confront Iran’s attempts to take de facto control of Yemen. The fighting is ongoing, despite recent attempts, and the Houthis cannot seem to understand that the Gulf coalition will not withdraw until it achieves victory on the ground and Sana’a is back under government control. But many questions remain. How can the Arab-Gulf forces return the situation in Yemen to the status quo, forcing the Houthis to retreat or be assimilated? From a number of different perspectives, how can they do so? How do they push back in Sana’a, their traditional capital city, that has been taken? How can we find a political solution that involves the Houthis and the willingness to engage with their counterparts. Once they finish in the oilfields, filling the vacuum that they would be prepared to sit at the negotiating table. Let’s put that to the test.”

Mahmud el-Shafei

Arab Weekly correspondent in London.

Will there be a quick resolution or will the unrest last for years and what price will the Yemeni people pay?
Growing international pressure against Israel’s occupation policies should be lauded and encouraged. Israel’s hard-line government needs to realise that, even in these most turbulent times, the world is not looking the other way while it pursues its unjust policies.

The Palestinian issue, though no longer at the top of the agenda in the Middle East and North Africa, remains a source of regional tension and instability.

In a statement issued on January 18th, European Union foreign ministers reiterated their commitment to “achieve a two-state solution that meets Israeli and Palestinian security needs and Palestinian aspirations for statehood and sovereignty” and “ends the occupation that began in 1967”.

They specifically criticised Israeli settlements as “an obstacle to peace [that] threatens to make a two-state solution impossible.” EU ministers reaffirmed their intent to label exports from the settlements as such.

Such an unequivocal stand by the European Union is a necessary response to Israel’s ever-expanding settlements that are making Palestinian statehood and comprehensive peace an increasingly impossible dream to achieve.

With the help of successive Israeli governments, more than 500,000 Jewish settlers now reside in 237 settlements in the West Bank and in eastern Jerusalem.

Referring to the ongoing violence that in the past four months has cost the lives of 146 Palestinians, 25 Israelis and one American, the EU ministers stressed that “security measures alone cannot stop the cycle of violence” and “only the re-establishment of a political horizon and the resumption of dialogue can solve the conflict.”

In a report issued January 9th, Human Rights Watch (HRW) shed new light on the role of the 1,500 or so companies – both Israeli and foreign – operating in the settlements. Businesses in settlements, pointed out HRW, “depend on and contribute to the unlawful confiscation of Palestinian land and resources by financing, developing and marketing settlement homes.”

A surprisingly bold stand came from US Ambassador to Israel Daniel Shapiro, who criticised Israeli authorities' unfair legal practices in the occupied territories. He told an audience in Tel Aviv on January 18th: “Too much vigilantism goes unchecked and at times there seem to be two standards of adherence to the rule of law, one for Israelis and another for Palestinians.”

Two Jewish extremists were indicted in January for carrying out the horrendous West Bank arson attack that killed 18-month-old Ali Dawabsheh and his parents. But unfair practices endure.

According to rights groups, Israelis involved in violent acts against Palestinians are rarely held accountable while Palestinian suspects receive draconian treatment and face periods without charge. Israelis are judged according to civil law while Palestinians living under occupation have to reckon with Israeli military law.

The Israeli human rights group Yesh Din says there is an 85% failure rate in Israel’s investigation of “ideologically motivated” crimes committed by Israelis against Palestinians. Over the past decade, the group says that of the 1,124 investigations opened by Israeli police following complaints by Palestinians, only 75 indictments were eventually served.

The Arab world is consumed by war, civil strife and the threat of terrorism. Israel should not be allowed to take advantage of these crises to further its discriminatory and expansionist policies.

Ending Israeli occupation and establishing a Palestinian state remain a top priority. Israel should not be allowed to take advantage of these crises to further its discriminatory and expansionist policies. Ending Israeli occupation and establishing a Palestinian state remain a top priority.

Europe and the rest of the international community must do more to support this end. It is time for the European Union to take the lead on this issue.

Claude Salhani
The dashed hopes of the “Arab spring”

Michael Young

Five years after the start of the uprisings in the Arab world, we may be near to coming full circle in Western attitudes towards the region. The perception in 2011 that a democratic wave was sweeping the region has been replaced by growing anxiety in Europe and the United States that the ensuing chaos threatens Western interests and national security. That’s unfortunate, as the story in the Middle East has not been solely one of anarchy. While an exception more than the rule, Tunisia emerged from the transition away from president Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali with some success. The country still faces problems but the approval of a new constitution in 2014 and the willingness of Ennahda, the main Islamist party, to compromise with its secular opponents showed there are paths open to Arab countries other than conflict. Yet Tunisia is not the example that sticks in the minds of many Western officials. Rather, they look primarily towards Libya and Syria, and even Egypt, and what they see is that the breakdown of the state can breed frightening disorder.

Western ambiguity has not been reassuring. In Egypt, support for the regime of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has not really been questioned, despite the authoritarian streak in his rule. While there was early American reluctance to approve of the coup against president Muhammad Morsi, this has subsided.

Today, Egypt is threatened by a local version of the Islamic State (ISIS) and because of this most Western countries refuse to challenge Sisi’s method of governing. Indeed, the familiar equation that the region offers either democracy or stability has returned to the fore and, increasingly, the latter is regarded as the priority.

The situation in Syria and Libya has imposed different approaches to state breakdown. In both countries the West pushed for the removal of a dictator – in Libya successfully, in Syria somewhat less so. What is worrisome is that in seeking to re-establish stability, democracy may be abandoned.

The removal of Muammar Gaddafi created a void that rival Libyan factions have tried to fill, to disastrous effect. In an environment of all against all, ISIS sought to establish its presence. In response, the Europeans have sponsored an inter-Libyan accord to prop up a government that can defeat ISIS.

Until now, however, the European plan continues to be contested. While Libya is still too divided to allow the return of a centralised authoritarian regime, as peaceful solutions are thwarted the fear is that this may ultimately lead to favouring a strong leader little concerned with democratic governance.

In Syria, too, the West has been of two minds over President Bashar Assad. While virtually all Western governments have called on the Syrian president to leave office, several have conceded that he may be allowed to remain during a transitional period towards a settlement. French politicians have called for cooperating with Syria in the fight against domestic terrorism.

Many countries, above all the United States, have coordinated with Assad’s principal backer, Russia, to facilitate the military campaign against ISIS. That’s not to say the Obama administration is happy with Russian support for the Assad regime but, in its list of priorities, the battle against ISIS takes precedence over democratic rule.

For decades the democracy versus-stability argument was used by Arab leaders to neutralise Western demands for more open government and to be able manipulators of this game, ironing out just enough Islamist opposition to scare Western critics into silence. It’s either us or the Islamists, Arab leaders invariably warned.

Today, the issue may no longer be one of dictators versus Islamists but about what the priority in the region should be: stability or democracy? This has become all the more acute in that instability is now regarded as creating ideal conditions for terrorist organisations, such as ISIS, to thrive.

Better some sort of state, even an authoritarian one, than a vacuum that will attract violent non-state actors.

However, if this leads to an eventual acquiescence of authoritarian regimes, it would be a major mistake. The reason is that the breakdown of states in the Arab world was largely facilitated by the existence of illegitimate regimes that survived through repression. Stability may have been guaranteed for decades but when it disintegrated the consequences were devastating.

The problem is that few Western states are willing to assist in the lengthy process of Arab state reform or revival. Yet patience is required to give states the time and security needed to build institutions bolstering more representative orders. But Western countries, preoccupied with their own domestic challenges, seem reluctant to do so.

That’s not to say that Arabs have no role to play in resurrecting their states. Indeed, the dominant role is theirs. But outside help, particularly from the West, is vital to advancing democracy and providing the economic assistance allowing this.

If the choice is left to one between stability and democracy, democracy may again come a distant second.

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

Opinion

‘Arab winter’s’ choice between stability and democracy

Alaya Allani

The change of views is a measure of the disillusionment over the uprisings.

Eventually, freedom of expression remained the main tangible achievement.

Alaya Allani is an expert on Islamic extremism. He teaches at the University of Manitoba in Turin.

The dashed hopes of the “Arab spring”

Michael Young

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Firefighters try to put out the fire in an oil tank in the port of Es Sider, in Ras Lanuf, Libya, on January 6th.
**Shia attacks on Sunni mosques in Iraq rekindle fears of sectarian strife**

*Jamal J. Halaby and Omar Hejab*  

Baghdad  

A spate of Shia militia attacks on at least 13 Sunni mosques in Iraq kindled fears of renewed sectarian violence. The attacks are the latest stage in a series of retributive acts that have been on the rise in Iraq and in neighbouring Syria since the Shia swing to the Shia sway in those countries.

A spate of Shia militia attacks on at least 13 Sunni mosques in Iraq kindled fears of renewed sectarian violence, reminiscent of the dark days of 2006-07. The attacks on nine mosques in Iraq's eastern province of Diyala and four mosques in Khan Bani Rashid, south of Basra, came almost a year after a wave of bold moves involving a resolve to stand up to Iran.

On January 13th, ISIS rekindled its conflict in Baghdad after a closure of 17 years in protest of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in August 1990 under then Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein. Violence erupted on January 2nd after Saudi Arabia executed Sunni pilot and human rights activist Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr, triggering anti-government protests in Shia-dominated Iraq and Iran and other Shia communities in the region. Saudi Arabia cut ties with Iran after mobs attacked the kingdom's embassy in Tehran. Despite the intensity of the attacks on the Sunni mosques, which claimed the lives of at least 58 people and wounded another 100, Iraqis Shiites and Sunnis added to buildings were burned, smashed and looted, obscured, said observers such as Fadi Abbas, is likely to be short-lived.

"This wave of violence will soon subside as Iraqis are aware of the wider implications, which is another wave of sectarianism that no side has a stomach for at this point," said Ahmed Kaslan, a local community worker and the head of the local Shieh Muqtada Foundation.

Shia leaders inside and outside government called on Iraqis to remain focused on the real problem of the wave, which, according to Iraqi Prime Minister Hader al-Abeed, is the Islamic State (ISIS), which has a stake in instigating sectarian strife to hinder the Iraq Army offensive that has defeated ISIS north of Baghdad and restored its lost lands.

But the jihadist group appears reeling after previous defeats, offering sieges on territory on frontiers. In the days after ISIS fighters were driven out of Ramadi, the group launched a coordinated assault on the western Anbar town of Hadiya, to the west of Ramadi.

On January 11th, ISIS was left with 125,000 people and killed 52 in Muqdadiyah, about 44 km. But the US-led coalition claimed only major attacks, but still 26 people were killed and wounded 52.

Iraqi Shias and Sunnis after building up anger from the attacks on the Sunni mosques, which is a shameful criminal act, the sing of suicidal attacks that have claimed the lives of innocent civilians," said the endowment's new head, Sheikh Abdul-Latif al-Haajody.

"These people follow a wicked agenda aimed at inciting sedition and creating instability in Iraq," he said, recalling how he had no options but to acknowledge tribal rule.

In protest of the attacks, dozens of Sunni leaders and members of tribal councils demanded the government to bring the perpetrators to justice.

In recent months, ISIS and Iraqi Kurdish forces backed by US-led air strikes forced ISIS out of Syria, an area that lies in the autonomous Kurdish north and is the provincial capital of Ramadi, west of Baghdad.

Iraqi tribes keep up their weapons as they gather in the capital Baghdad.

Oumayma Omar  

Baghdad

Iraqi tribes take law and justice into their own hands

Politicians have also been seeking the protection of their tribes after facing threats by tribal rulings. But the jihadist group appears reeling after previous defeats, offering sieges on territory on frontiers. In the days after ISIS fighters were driven out of Ramadi, the group launched a coordinated assault on the western Anbar town of Hadiya, to the west of Ramadi.

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The tribes settle disputes among their members and other clans ranging from commercial to criminal offences.

Political analyst Wathek al-Haishmi predicted an even bigger role for the tribes in settling disputes. “This is because the Iraqi judiciary is going through a serious crisis, suffering mainly from public accusations and distrust, which further undermines its ability to counter tribal rule."

According to the Saker of Iraq, a local human rights non-governmental organisation, some 200 tribal rulings were made in the Baghdad area in May 2015, whereas 1,200 cases were settled in Najaf and 2,545 in Basra during the same period.

“The tribal militias have become a substitute for security forces and the tribes are now equivalent to the judicial authorities,” Hosni remarked.  

Oumayma Omar, based in Baghdad, is a contributor to the culture and society sections of The Arab Weekly.
Iraq threatened by partition

Harvey Morris

London

A t a time when the Islamic State (IS) is facing a growing and sophisticated US-led war, the republics and autonomous regions of the deeply divided federal state of Iraq are facing a crisis that is more serious than even the Sunni insurgency of the 2000s. In January 2016, the Kurds in Iraq’s northern region of Kurdistan (KRG) said they would hold a referendum on the possibility of independence, a move that has profound implications for the survival of the Iraqi state. The Kurds have shown themselves to be an army of forces fighting daesh against IS, despite their internal political divisions. However, they are reluctant to be drawn into a war outside what is historically Kurdish territory.

The former prime minister predicted: “If we do not overcome this crisis, Iraq will be facing a catastrophe and partition.”

Allaveli’s views are perhaps coloured by his irritation at the decision of Iraq’s Prime Minister Haidar al-Abadi, who has said that any such referendum, if held, would be invalid.

“Kurdish politicians are uninterested in a strong, national Iraqi military as their long-term goal is independence,” Allaveli is among those who say that if the present government falls, Iraq’s various components will eventually go their own way. But it would not be a peaceful separation, given the claims and counter-claims of the various communities. The former prime minister warned that such a partition might ignite a prolonged war.

Kurdish politicians are uninterested in a strong, national Iraqi military as their long-term goal is independence.

Barzani is not alone in suggesting, as he did to CNN, that Iraq and its foreign allies need a much more solid strategy to defeat IS rather than merely containing it. However, even if the IS leaders are eventually ousted, there is little anticipation that sectarian and ethnic divisions would someday evaporate.

An Iraqi official has said that the Kurds had regained all the territories seized by IS. They were also helping to rebuild the Iraqi army by securing the Mosul dam, located in “areas in which we are not interested.”

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Harvey Morris has worked in the Middle East for many years and written several books, including "No Friends but the Mountains: The Tragic History of the Kurds" published in 1993.

Interview

Kurdish Iraq faces economic ‘tsunami’

Isabel Coles

Erbil

Iraq’s Kurdish region is in danger of being drowned by an economic ‘tsunami’ as oil prices plunge, its deputy prime minister has warned. Oil could undermine the war effort against IS, he said.

The oil price crash has come on top of the KRG’s economic woes, which started in early 2014 when Baghdad slashed funding to the region to punish it for exporting crude on its own terms in pursuit of economic independence from Iraq.

Then IS overran a third of Iraq, driving more than 1 million people into the region from 5 million. People and scarves from foreign investors. The crisis in Kurdistan ramped up independent oil exports in 2014 to more than 600,000 barrels per day (bpd) but at current prices the region is still left with a monthly deficit of more than $700 million.

The Kurds have shown themselves to be an army of forces fighting daesh against IS, despite their internal political divisions. However, they are reluctant to be drawn into a war outside what is historically Kurdish territory.

Col. Hadi Allaveli, former chief of staff of the Iraqi army, said in January 14th interview: “I think this is something that the coalition against ISIS really do need to focus on and do what it can.”

Kurdish Iraq faces economic ‘tsunami’

Peshmergas have emerged as a key component of the US-led coalition’s strategy to “degrade and destroy” the radical Sunni militants, driving them back in northern Iraq with the help of allied airstrikes.

But Talabani said the economic threat may slow down progress in the war to degrade and ultimately destroy IS.

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Fighting ISIS

Horrors recounted by survivors of ISIS prisons

Gregory Aftandilian

The war against ISIS is not just one of territory but also of ideas and the only way to counter an idea effectively is to discredit it from credible and believable sources.

A May 2015 file picture shows a member of the Islamic State group’s vice police known as “Hisba,” right, producing a veiled woman handed down by an Islamic court sentencing many they accused of adultery at lashing, in Raqqa, Syria. (AP Photo/Constatino Constantinescu)
Egypt's reformists shocked by thinker's detention

Hassan Abdel Zaher

Cairo

The recent jailing of researcher Islam Behery, who called for ridding Islamic heritage books of writings that have become — for some Muslims — as important as the religious heritage books of the Quran and hadiths — as important as the religious heritage books of the Quran and hadiths, indicates that extremism is on the rise, religious reform a hopeless case and religious reformers are far weaker than radicals, observers say.

Behery, a researcher in his late 30s, questioned cherished books on Islam and writers who have been idolised by millions for hundreds of years.

He is only the last episode in a long series of thinkers bullied to stop thinking.

He took on important figures such as Muhammad bin I mam al-Bukhari, a ninth-century imam who collected the sayings of Prophet Mohammed, and produced a book that remains a reference today.

Behery said some of Bukhari’s writings and those of other esteemed Islamic figures provided the foundations for the modern state, such as the Islamic State (ISIS), al-Qaeda and Boko Haram.

The slaughter of innocent women and children during leading battles to the administration of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who said he was trying to prove that Islam and its prophet had nothing to do with the actions of terrorist groups.

"Behery only tried to use his mind and think," said Hafez Abu Saeda, a rights advocate. "He was only expressing his views on books that have become — for some Muslims — as important as the religious texts themselves."

In June 2014, Behery was sentenced to five years in prison after a lawsuit was filed accusing him of offending Islam. He appealed the sentence, which in December was commuted to one year.

Mamdouh Abdel Gawad, who filed the initial lawsuit, described Behery as a "dissident" and wrote on his Facebook page that the verdict would give him a lesson and the chance to rethink his ideas and deter other “infidels.”

Egypt’s former culture minister Gaber Asfour accused al-Azhar University, said al-Azhar has nothing to do with Behery’s jailing by advising Abdul Gawad to file the lawsuit.

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This was apparently why al-Azhar suspended Behery’s show in April 2015.

The clerics of al-Azhar “were taught by rabbis, teach by rabbis and feel afraid to think because they know that they will fail if they use their minds,” scholar Rafai al-Said said. “But this is not a problem of the present — the history of Islam is full of examples of people who were condemned only because they tried to think.”

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has called on al-Azhar leaders to start a religious revolution, one that opens the door for renewing religious discourse. His calls come at a time when the region faces a surge in radical and takfiri ideologies that brand non-Muslims and Muslim political opponents as “infidels.”

Observers say reforming al-Azhar, the highest seat of learning in Sunni Islam, where tens of thousands of students from all Islamic and non-Islamic countries study every year, would ripple across the world and cut off support for radical Islamists.

Mohammed Abu Asi, the dean of the Islamic Studies at al-Azhar University, said al-Azhar has nothing to do with Behery’s jailing.

“Nevertheless, Behery used to comment on the figures in a way that demeant them,” Abu Asi said. “Behery used to criticise objective criticism — and a large number of people reject this.”

Hassan Abdel Zaher is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.
Souk al-Safafir, a fading Baghdad landmark

Oumayma Omar

Baghdad

The noise of hammering beating against metal has almost disappeared and tables and shelves in the shops no longer overflow with shining copperware as Baghdad’s centuries-old Souk al-Safafir — the coppersmiths’ marketplace — is feared to be fading away.

The once lively street market where copper is beaten into shape using traditional methods has been losing its identity as more than a decade of turmoil has driven away tourists, forcing many shops to close.

Branching off the Baghdad’s oldest street, al-Rasheed, the 500-metre-long souk rubs shoulders with Madrasa al-Mustansiriya, a school built on the banks of the Tigris river in the golden age of the Abbasid empire. It was named “al-Safafir” after the colour of copper — “saffra” in Arabic.

Now the rhythm of the coppersmiths’ souk is quieter and the clamour of its crowds much more subdued.

Twenty years ago, the market was a bustling and productive place where ornate copperware for household or decorative uses was abundant across the souk, which stretched from the banks of the Tigris river to the palace of King Faisal, where I learned how to beat on copper at the age of six and since then I cannot give up that profession, which I inherited from my father who taught me to make copperware in the souk,” said 80-year-old Abdul Khaled Ezzazi, as he sat outside his shop waiting for clients, who have become increasingly rare.

“I left school at an early age driven by my passion to learn the secrets of the profession, which had brought us a lot of income and fame at the time,” Ezzazi said, adding that the souk has been losing its allure since the country has been gripped by turmoil and economic crises. Many craftsmen have been forced to turn to other professions or leave.

“I used to enjoy the sounds coming from every single shop where more than one worker was beating copper into pitches and pots of all sizes and shapes. The merchant did not last as long as it was very popular among tourists and locals alike,” Ezzazi said.

But matters deteriorated dramatically after the 2003 US-led invasion, which toppled Iraqi president Saddam Hussein, Ezzazi said, while vowing to stay on. “I will not leave the souk and I will not be tempted by fabric traders who have taken over most of the coppersmiths’ shops. This is a fact that everybody knows, including my sons who will inherit the outlet after my death,” he said.

The grey-haired man recalls when former French president Jacques Chirac visited the souk on his last official visit to Iraq before the invasion in 2005. “I was busy working on one of the pieces engraved with the famous lion of Babylon, and I noticed that he was watching me. So I offered him the piece as a souvenir and appreciation of his visit,” Ezzazi said.

Haidar Amir, 25, is among the few younger members of his family attracted to a profession that has been involved in for more than 200 years. “We are a big family with the majority practicing the craft inherited from our forefathers,” he said. Although I have completed university education, I was keen on learning the profession of my ancestors, which I mastered very well.

Amir and other younger craftsmen have been striving to preserve the country’s coppersmith tradition.

“We have urged municipality officials and Baghdad’s governor to ensure support to the souk and ensures its sustainability as a cultural landmark,” he said.

But household copperware is facing tough competition from cheaper imported items flooding the market in the absence of any policies to protect local production.

“Souk al-Safafir — the coppersmiths’ marketplace — is feared to be fading away.

“Cheaper Chinese merchandise is increasingly attracting Iraqis, who are buying less handmade copperware, which is more expensive,” noted shop owner Kamil Sadat. He blamed the government for allowing the “extinction” of the souk, “which should be preserved as a popular Iraqi heritage”.

An official in Baghdad’s governorate, Altawaf al-Awami, acknowledged that copper craftsmanship was being undermined by competition from imported wares.

“The absence of a clear economic policy in addition to [government] failure to collect fees on imported merchandise has adversely affected local production,” Altawani said.

Mehdi Mohammad, a member of the parliament committee on Culture and Information, held the ministries of Culture and Tourism responsible for the fading away of the souk and other historical sites across the country.

“Parliament committees stand helpless on many issues because of the lack of ownership and the system of quotas affecting the practical work,” Mehdi said. “Monitoring government performance and holding the ministers accountable for their deeds is the task of the parliament, unfortunately this task has been undermined by regional blocs which prevent the questioning of officials they support.”

The traditional Souk al-Safafir in Baghdad is part of Iraq’s fading cultural heritage.

In old Damascus, war takes toll on Syrian handicrafts

Damascus

I

n his cramped workshop in Damascus, Mohammad Abdallah deliberately etches wood panels inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a craft he worked at for more than a decade before the outbreak of Syria’s war. An 80-year-old man says he fears his craft — the intricate process of tying carved wooden decorative pieces with shells, bone or ivory — could be forced into “extinction” by the conflict raging across his country.

“I worry for the fate of the Damascene mother-of-pearl craft because of the lack of labour and the difficulty in acquiring and transporting raw materials,” the 83-year-old artisan said.

Like many craftsmen, Abdallah had to abandon his spacious warehouse on the outskirts of Damascus when fighting broke out.

“My heartache became the mother-of-pearl workshops in Damascus, which have dropped from 30 to only four or five workshops,” he said.

His own workplace “has faded in recent years because the labourers have fled or have been forced to flee” Syria altogether.

Local purchases, stung by the devaluation of the Syrian pound, can no longer afford the stunning designs, he says. Since Syria’s conflict erupted in 2011, more than 25,000 people have been killed and millions have fled their homes. The war has also taken a toll on the country’s renowned textile industry, from ornate wooden furniture to the rich, golden stitching of its famed brocade fabrics.

The artisanal designs were popular among tourists, who operated about 12% of Syria’s pre-war gross domestic product (GDP). With tourism virtually non-existent and domestic production, “the coppersmiths’ souk is quieter and the clamour of its crowds much more subdued. Many shops have been replaced by fabric stalls.

“Many shops have been forced to turn to other professions or leave. We haven’t produced a single product in 2014. We’ve been working with whatever we have left in the warehouse, “ he says. “I will sell what we have left in store and after that I may be forced to change my trade, which I grew up on.

Baha al-Takhti, who weaves the richly embroidered aghabani cloth, often used as tablecloths, says his “weekly production has dropped from 60 covers to six — and sometimes only three”.

“Out of six people that knew how to set the designs, only two are left,” Takhti said.

As it nears a sixth year, Syria’s conflict has also diminished the production of Damascus brocade, handwoven silk fabric ornately decorated with brightly coloured thread. Brocade became famous when former Syrian president Hafez al-Assad gifted a slot of the fabric in 1947 to the future Queen Elizabeth II, who used it as part of her wedding gown.

However, few foreigners now travel to Damascus to purchase the lavish cloth, and Syrian buyers can no longer afford it.

Ibrahim al-Ayubi, who has produced brocade in the Syrian capital for decades, says good-quality silk is hard to come by and the price has risen “enormously”.

“At a cost of 30,000 unregistered, Fayyad said. By the end of 2013, 57% of his left the trade, many emigrating after the destruction of their workshops around Damascus and the northern city of Aleppo, according to Fayyad.

Fabric specialist Samer al-Nuqui contemplates the contours of a large wooden loom stands in the corner of Ahmad Ibrahim al-Ayubi, who has produced brocade in the Syrian capital for decades, says good-quality silk is hard to come by and the price has risen “enormously”.

Traditional cultural products in Syria, from songs and poetry to beautiful handicrafts “have been completely damaged by the crisis”.

“The crisis has had a really big effect on us because of the lack of tourists, which made up about 35% of our customers,” Ayubi says. And in the corner of Ahmad Shakakeh’s brocade shop in Damascus, a large wooden loom stands next to a small stool made of coloured bamboo. Narrow shelves display the elegant brocade fabric that Shakakeh painstakingly produces.

“Our craft is essentially dependent on our sales returns, which in turn depend on tourists. Our situation is tough now, and we’re working with whatever we have,” he said. “The war has made the new generation reluctant to learn the trade. I am worried that this will soon stop working.”

(Agence France-Press)
Arab handicrafts in jeopardy

Tunisian handicrafts facing existential crisis

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunisian handicrafts have, for decades, faced mounting challenges as new generations opt for modern sports and industrial products.

Foreign tourists used to provide artisans in the old quarters of Tunisian cities with a steady source of income but the handicraft trade suffered greatly after the 2011 terror attacks shattered the tourist industry.

“An economic crisis that dampened purchasing power of the middle-class, it’s a worry of a sector that has had to cope with dwindling interest of younger generations who have sought jobs elsewhere.,” said Jamal, a 28-year old Tunisian artist who thronged Habib Bourguiba Avenue in Tunis when he saw on television three of his art pieces among the political leaders wearing Tunisian traditional dresses when acting. No television announcers, eh!” he said.

Stambouli added: “I could not believe it. I was shocked to see no one wearing Tunisian traditional costumes as the political leaders who thronged Habib Bourguiba Avenue to mark the fifth anniversary of the revolution.”

Lamine Ghanmi is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis. He has covered North Africa for decades.

Once-popular Egyptian crafts are dying out

Brass tray engraving, wood engravings into fabric and clay pottery throwing are but few of the crafts disappearing across Egypt.

Jamal has done so, only to find his occupation may not have much of a future as fashion changed. “When I first came here 20 years ago, I used to see a lot of people coming to this factory and ordering the red hats,” Jamal said. “Now, however, very few people are interested in the same hats and the number of those people keeps decreasing day after day.”

At Tarabishi factory, where Jamal works, is one of six facilities in Egypt producing the truncated-cone-shaped red hats with tassels attached to the tops.

Fees were mandated by decree for males in Egypt in the 13th century by Ottoman ruler Mohammed Ali Pasha. This allowed al-Tarabishi factory to thrive.

Brass tray engraving is totally disappearing as a craft in Egypt.

“Brass engraving, word engraving into fabric and clay pottery throwing are but few of the crafts disappearing across Egypt. “We are talking here about scores of crafts that are being wiped out in real life,” Jamal said. “Brass engraving, word engraving onto fabric and clay pottery throwing are but few of the crafts disappearing across Europe.”

“Brass engraving by hand was practiced by a sizeable number of craftsmen in Fattah Cairo, where scores of shops of brass tray engravers were ubiquitous sights. None of the shops remain. Engravers have sought other professions as electrically engraved objects from countries such as China invade the Egyptian market.”

Jamal says he has learnt no other profession. The factory where he worked was once the Mecca of the Egyptian pashas, major land owners, businessmen and government officials.

But the factory’s business is a mere fraction of what it was in the past as fees rise and allow as the singular headgear of Egyptian men. Few wear them, aside from students and sheikhs. They are ubiquitous sights. None of these clients give me confidence that I am doing something useful,” Jamal said. “But how long will they keep coming?”

Amr Emam is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.
Morocco-Sweden ties change course

Saad Guerraoui

A year ago, Sweden announced it would end diplomatic ties with Morocco. Its raison d'être was to protest Rabat’s alleged role in curb immigration and security issues. The North African kingdom gave France intelligence about the whereabouts of Abdelbasset Ali al-Megrahi, the convicted architect of the November 1988 Lockerbie attacks that left 270 people dead.

The renunciation announced on January 15th by Swedish Foreign Minister Margot Wallstrom put an end to a bitter diplomatic crisis.

This position is in line with the international law and consistent with Morocco's position taken within the UN framework with a view to achieving a just and lasting solution that will end the occupation of Western Sahara.

Majda El Mezouari

Morocco applauded the decision of Sweden’s government after similar campaigns in Sweden and other Nordic countries. The Polisario Front decided to renounce the “conformity permit”. However, Sweden’s plan to recognise SADR was unlikely to influence the Moroccan authorities’ decision.

The Libyan Embassy in Cairo contacted迦aid’s opponents to Italian officials and asked to press their demands. The government called on the European Union to provide humanitarian aid and resettle migrants in Mauritania.

“Many Libyans were having the same dream, the dream of being part of the rebuilding of their country and their families,” said El Mezouari. And Abdel Kafi had said, “We are working on a peaceful resolution of the conflict.”

In Egypt, the parliament is expected to vote on a bill that would recognize the SADR. The study also revealed that AQIM and other extremist groups are using the islands of Tripoli and Misrata as bases for their operations. Egypt, Libya, and Sudan are all facing economic pressures. The study also noted that the SADR has beenunder pressure from neighboring countries to abandon its claim to the Western Sahara.

The Libyan government is expected to announce new measures to combat the smuggling of migrants and goods. The study also noted that the SADR has been under pressure from neighboring countries to abandon its claim to the Western Sahara.

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Libyans in Egypt losing hope of returning home

Amr Elment

Cairo

When Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi’s regime fell, in 2011 after months of bloody fighting with the opposition, Abdel Kafi, a former Libyan Air Force pilot, was anxious to return home.

Abdel Kafi had been in Egypt since 2011 when he decided to defect. Instead of flying his military jet to strike targets in Chad, as per instructions from Libyan commanders, he flew to Egypt. His decision had been there since.

He was hoping that Qaddafi’s downfall would give him a chance to return to Libya and participate in rebuilding his country, in which the Qaddafi regime’s heavy-handed repressive policies had taken their toll.

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Turkey-Gulf Arab relations are now at the eye of the storm as the Syrian civil war provides impetus for both sides to re-examine possibilities for a strategic partnership.

Regional shifts impact Ankara-Cairo relations

Hassan Abdel Zaher

Pressures on Turkey by Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, may result in better relations between Ankara and Cairo, two Sunni powers that differ apart against the background of political developments in Egypt.

Saudi Arabia is trying to build a Sunni coalition to counter what Riyadh describes as Shia Iran’s “regional ambitions” and “interventions” in the region but analysts say the coalition cannot gel while Cairo and Ankara remain diplomatically at odds.

Turkish-Iranian relations are more likely to be framed by competitive rivalry and engagement than confrontation.

Turkey is working to develop closer ties with the Arab Gulf. In late 2015, during Erdogan’s third visit of the year to Riyadh a “strategic cooperation council” to strengthen bilateral military and economic cooperation was set up. Since then, Turkey has supported Saudi efforts at unifying the moderate Syrian opposition and confirmed participation in the 34-country counter-terrorism coalition announced by Riyadh.

Turkish-Iranian relations are more likely to be framed by competitive rivalry and engagement than confrontation.

Turkey is also establishing a military base in Qatar, which will see Turkish military personnel deploy into the Gulf for the first time since the fall of the Ottoman empire. The base is designed to confront “common enemies”, according to the Turkish ambassador to Qatar, and will station 2,000 personnel in air, naval and special operations units.

Qatar already hosts the largest US air base in the region and the Turkish announcement comes at a time of perceived US disengagement from the Middle East and improving relations with Iran.

Although Turkey is in no position to assume the security guarantor role traditionally performed by the United States, recent developments in Turkey-Gulf Arab relations are significant. Turkey is, however, reluctant to speak up and so heavily in a post-Assad Syria, Erdogan has been cautious about suggesting that he harbours Sunni sympathies against Shia and generally prefers to appeal to the wider Islamic audience.

Beyond the Syrian civil war, Turkey is unlikely to have an interest in playing the sectarian card and will take a balanced approach with Iran given wider strategic interests in the region.

Erdogan was seen to side with Saudi Arabia when he had a recent visit. Erdogan has closed on itself and the Arab Gulf Arab relations are far from over.

Saudi Arabia’s Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir (L), and his Turkish counterpart Feridun Sinirlioglu speak to the media after talks in Ankara, last October.

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Iran deal implemented, new sanctions imposed

Mark Habeeb
Washington

I
n a rare Sunday morning tel-

evision address, President Barack Obama on January 17th hailed the progress his admin-

istration had made in reducing tensions with Iran. The day be-

fore, the International Atomic En-

ergy Agency (IAEA) declared that Iran had taken the required steps under the deal negotiated with world powers over its nuclear pro-

gramme. As a result, a multitude of economic sanctions the interna-

tional community had imposed on Iran were lifted.

Obama also announced the re-

lease of five Americans who, he said, were “unjustly” held in Iran. In exchange, Washington released six Iranian-Americans and one Iranian national being held and awaiting trial in the United States.

Not surprisingly, but also happily with the new

sanctions

Finally, the president announced that the two countries had reached an understanding. The US had lifted the claim that the Revolutionary Guard’s naval force had paid the United States for the seizure of Iranian sailors in 2007.

Farideh Farhi, a lecturer at the

Assembly election without undue

interference. The United States is to

repay the funds, with interest.

“I am a good day,” Obama said as he stepped up to the podium to begin his address, trusting these diplomatic accomplishments.

Farhi left one additional bit of

news for the end of his 15-minute speech: The United States will be imposing new sanctions on Iran in response to a ballistic missile test the Islamic Republic conducted in October that breached a UN resolu-

tion prohibiting it from developing missiles that could potentially de-
liver nuclear warheads.

The new sanctions target 11 indi-

viduals and entities the Obama ad-

ministration claims are involved in procurement on behalf of Iran’s ballistic missile programme. Many in Washington had expected the sanctions to be imposed on the admin-

istration sources say that they were delayed to ensure that the nuclear agreement and prisoner exchange took place.

One of the sanctioned entities is UAE-based Mabrooka Trading Com-

pany, according to the US Treasury Department’s Office of Foreign Asset Control (OFAC) — the government office that imposes and monitors compliance with economic san-

ctions — named the company because Mabrooka “and its China- and UAE-based network that have been involved in procuring goods for Iran’s ballistic missile programme.” According to OFAC, “This network obstructed the last users of sensitive goods for missile proliferation by us-

ing front companies in third coun-

tries to deceive foreign suppliers.” Another UAE-based company, Candid General Trading, as well as a Hong Kong-based firm, Ashi Land Group, were also sanctioned. Both were suppliers to Mabrooka Trading Company. OFAC addi-

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ka Chief Executive Officer Hossein Pourmoghaddas and on one Chi-

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In announcing the sanctions, Adam J. Szubin, acting undersec-

tary for terrorism and financial intelligence, said: “Iran’s ballistic missile programme poses a signifi-

cant threat to regional and global security and it will continue to be subject to international sanctions.” Szubin added that the nuclear agreement does not bring an end to US scrutiny of Iranian behavior: “We have consistently made clear that the United States will vigi-

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Not surprisingly, Iran was not happy with the new sanctions. The Iranian Foreign Ministry issued a statement saying, “The Islamic Revo-


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Iranian former President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani registering for the upcoming Assembly of Experts elections.

February elections will be conservative

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Footnotes

February’s elections will be important ‘marker’ for Iran

Gareth Smyth
Beirut

If a national election this spring is to be

be voting of candidates by Iran’s constitu-

tional watchdog ahead of the February 26th elections for parliament and the Assembly of Experts will be a guide to what made up of those institutions that could shape the future of the Islamic Republic, a leading Iran expert told The Arab Weekly in an interview.

The vote for the Experts Assembly is particularly significant, said Faribeh Farhi, a lecturer at the University of Hawaii. This is not just because the 88 clerics elected may during their eight-year term exercise the assembly’s sole real function and choose a successor to 76-year-old Ayatollah Ali Khamenei as supreme leader.

The conduct of the election is equally important, she said, because it will shape the Future of the post of rubber (“leader”) and of the leader’s office, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who is expected to be face-off between power that he departs than by what he has done as leader,” she said. “The extent to which the vast institution he has days of Khomenei, vast ex-

teaching "institution builder" who has transformed the post of leader from a sacred to a secular, expanding its reach in politics and society.

“Ayatollah Khamenei’s longevity, like that of his predecessors, is tied to his status of leader — is tied to his person isn’t yet clear,” she said. “It’s too closely tied to him then his paring will be destabilising and so will not reflect positively on his legacy. His office constitutionally stands at the core of the Islamic Republic and its primary role is to assure the sustenance and stability of the Islamic Republic even at the time of transition.”

Hence Farhi says that an Experts Assembly election without unique vetting of candidates by the Guardian Council could create a more representative, respected body better placed to “negotiate the transition to a new leader or perhaps even call for a leadership council”.

Given his sway over the 12-man Guardian Council, half of whose members he appoints and whose decisions he has sometimes overruled, Khamenei could help. “If this happens,” said Farhi, “then the path is paved for the eventual selection of a new leader who is personally less powerful but heads an institution that is more secure in the long run.”

Hence Farhi says the conduct of the election is as important as the results and as any debate over the qualifications supposedly required in a leader — something recently raised by Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, the influential former president — and reflecting the talk of the leadership, the requirement for the leader to be a pre-eminent cleric.

Farhi further says that February’s elections may be a marker — in one direction or another — in Iran’s uneven and often haphazard moves towards representative governance since the revolution of 1979-87.

Doubling as the work of Iran’s electoral system increased with the disputed 2009 presidential vote, when two candidates, Mir Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, denounced the results and thousands joined street protests. “At the most basic level,” said Farhi, “February’s two elections are important if they end up confirming that competitive
electoral politics — within the confines of the Islamic Republic — have become critical in defining the policy direction of the country as well as reshaping its balance of power.”

The 2009 protests were followed by a 2012 parliamentary vote when no turnout figures were announced that showed anything but a vast decline in participation in urban areas, devastated by the violence that ensued, simply stayed home assuming predetermined results”, she said.

But Farhi regards the 2013 presidential and five Assembly elections as a turning point in that a 73% turnout showed Iranians again believing voting could make a difference. The victory of Hassan Rohani, she quickly wrote in an article Why Rohani? for the London Review of Books, came because “hope overcame cynicism”.

This sets the scene for February, she said: “A relatively high participation rate in large cities will confirm the perceived relevance of elections and, in effect, suggest that 2009 was an aberration and not the norm in the gradual institutionalisation of the electoral process as broker in Iran’s competitive and factionalised politics.”

Farhi left Iran in 1972 to study in the United States but has returned often, even during the 1980-88 war with Iraq. She spent most of the 1990s in posts in Iranian universities and has visited frequently since, recently making a steep ascent to the top of Iran’s political establishment. She is also a devout Muslim, and her political acumen have made her not just a perceptive analyst of Iran’s complex politics but one of the few who maintains an open mind. The weeks leading up to February 26th may determine how open it remains.

Gareth Smyth has covered Middle Eastern affairs for 20 years and was chief correspondent for the Financial Times in Iran from 2007-09.

February’s elections will be conservative ‘marker’ for Iran
The encroachment of Iran's velayat-e faqih raises tensions

Imad Salamey

Beirut

nce the 1975 Islamic revolution in Iran, Arab states have become ill at ease with Iran's clerical regime's proclamation of "velayat-e faqih," a theological doctrine requiring the submission of Shias worldwide to the religious and political guidance of Iran's supreme religious leader. A formulation that has come to closely resemble many euro- pean populist, velayat-e faqih has furnished Iran with an aggressive foreign policy that seeks to expand and exploit the fact that the Arab society is a sectarian mix, and the fear that Shias' allegiance to velayat-e faqih could undermine national cohesion and political fabric of many Arab states.

During the past 35 years, Arab-Iranian relations have been fraught with tension. The toll of strained relations has been devastating. The political and economic sanctions levied by the United States and the West have fuelled the drive among many Arab states to ensure that the Arab society is a sectarian mix, and the fear that Shias allegiance to velayat-e faqih could undermine national cohesion and political fabric of many Arab states. The past five years, more than 250,000 Syrians have been killed or wounded due to the escalations.

The promiscuity of such protests among pro-Iranian hostage groups in Arab states further reflects the political and economic sanctions against Iran. The heterogeneity of Arab states have helped Iran in this endeavour. At the same time, the shift in allegiance of Arab Shia towards velayat-e faqih has been augmented through the expansion of Iran's influence in the Middle East, which is conveniently brought about by the weakening of Arab political and military alliances with Iran.

Countering Pan-Syrian, Sunni radical-ism has gained momentum and a support base in the Middle East, culminating in the rise of the so-called Islamic State (ISIL).

This emergent regional paradigm has placed the fate of many Arab republics in jeopardy: Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have become battlegrounds between sectarian rivals, while in Lebanon, the state has been paralysed as a result of a sectarian stalemate.

Iranians opposed against the execu- tion in Saudi Arabia of Saudi Shia cleric Nimr al-Nimr at Nimesh illustrate the potential for the doctrine of velayat-e faqih to undermine the authority of nation states in the Middle East.

Velayat-e faqih has furnished Iran with an aggressive foreign policy that seeks to export and expand Iranian influence.

And we haven't heard from the supreme leader since, probably because he realised it was a mistake very fast," said Vatanka.

Nonetheless, the row may have left Rohani with his hands tied domestically because he cannot be seen as soft on the Saudis, whom Vatanka suggests may be the "next boogeyman" that Khamenei is looking to create given the thaw in relations with the United States and the West.

Iranian politics have long been divided into two lines of thought, though they usually converge on pragmatic grounds. The more Western-oriented political leadership says economic recovery requires pivoting towards Western economies, which was Tehran's main incentive in negotiating the nuclear deal.

And despite the supreme leader's aversion to the West, Vatanka says that Khamenei and the hardline Islamic Revolution- ary Guards Corps (IRGC) got it right. They recognise that the country's economic recovery comes through rapprochement with the West, which is why they gradually allowed negotiations to move forward.

But during the years that Iran has endured economic sanctions, the IRGC has become the country's economic engine, invest- ing in projects in partnership with China and Russia. This economic empire may become threatened with an opening to the West and a changing economic terrain.

"Look at the Ahmadinejad-era riyal when the (IRGC) got involved in the Iranian economy like never before, starting to make money. And now they fear that Rohani will give some of these projects to Western companies. The (IRGC) has better relations with China and Russia," said Vatanka.

For their part, China and Russia want to maintain relations with Iran regardless of domestic and regional dynamics. China expert John Garver of Georgia Tech University in Atlanta said Beijing had its eyes on Middle East oil, which represents 60% of global production. A nuclear-armed Iran may have led to a regional war, something that would have threatened China's oil imports.

"So China dangled a carrot to Iran. If you settle the nuclear issue, we'll do big business with you. If you can't, then we can't help you," Garver said at the MEI forum. He noted that China worked in tandem with the United States on the deal and is one of its signatories.

Russia and Iran have for decades weathered between ten- sion and tolerance but the latest turmoil in the region appears to have cemented a sort of pragmatic bond between the two countries. Moscow likes to think of itself as a great Middle East power just as the Soviet Union was, and to achieve this it needs a partner and Iran is a natural fit because its powerful militias are inherently anti-Western.

Vatanka said the embassy attack "has not happened without blackmail from Iran's Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei."

Tehran to react to a regional nuclear deal because Moscow feared that if Iran became a nuclear power, it would lead to a war that would result in American domination of the Gulf. For Russia, a non-nuclear, non-Western Iran is the best outcome. "You need to see it in terms of Moscow's point of view," Russia expert Stephen Blank of the American Foreign Policy Council told the MEI forum. "For all the bad history that exists between the two coun- tries, it is still the closest partner for anti-US country in the region and therefore most likely to respond to Russia." An alliance with Iran also sup- ports Russia's economic interests. Russian energy exports to Eu- rope, for example, could displace Russian energy exports. It thus behoves Moscow to invest in Iran's energy sector to gain influence on energy deals abroad. And Moscow already finds itself unequivocally on Iran's side in the ongoing turmoil in the region, especially in Syria, where Russian forces actively support the government along with Iran and its Lebanese protégé, Hezbollah.

"Moscow is opposed to people power so they'll keep supporting Assad. And they want to stick it to Washington and create an abiding ally in the Middle East, which is how they view Iran," said "Russia is the only great power that has a permanent interest in the stability in the Middle East."
Pro-Palestinian voices complain of censorship on US campuses

Naoli Habeeb
Boston

A recent report by Palestine Legal and the Center for Constitutional Rights (CCR) said there were 557 reported Islamophobic hate crimes in the British capital over the past two years. There were 357 Islamophobic hate crimes reported in England between 2015 and 2016, and 191 as of November 2015, statistics from the Metropolitan Police Service revealed. Islamophobia is a rising trend, and while there are no clear reasons for the increase, the police have seen a link between terrorist attacks and Islamophobic incidents. “There is a rising trend of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim hatred and this is, we believe, partly driven by the media, social media, extremist and conspiracists...and we have seen that each time there is a major terrorist attack there is a very large spike in anti-Muslim prejudice or hatred will continue,” said Tali Mella, founder of Jewish Voice for Peace.


Islamophobia on the rise in Britain

Mahmud el-Shafey
London

Following a slew of global Islamic terrorist attacks in 2015, Islamophobia is on the rise in Britain. In contrast to statistics from London’s police force confirming that reported Islamophobic hate crimes in the British capital have nearly doubled over the past two years. There were 537 Islamophobic hate crimes reported in England in 2015 and 191 as of November 2015, statistics from the Metropolitan Police Service revealed, with direct cause and effect between terrorist attacks and islamophobic incidents. In October, a total of 3,254 religiously motivated hate crimes were recorded in England and Wales in 2014-15, of which 952 involved Islam, and 80% of the victims of hate crime were Muslims. These statistics are contrary to general perceptions about the rise in Islamophobia and Islamophobic hate crimes.

The report, published in October, conducted in-depth interviews with victims and uncovered “worrying levels of fear and intimidation experienced by many Muslims, compounded by a lack of support from the wider public when facing physical threats and abuse, and an absence of tough action from social media platforms at the abuse people are receiving online.”

London mayor, Sadiq Khan, a Muslim, said he would do more to tackle Islamophobia if he becomes mayor. Just as anti-Semitism is wrong, so anti-Muslim prejudice is also wrong. No-one should be targeted because of their identity. “Work in schools is key and this is why training to teachers and educators is fundamental,” he added. “This is something that civil society can do and more groups need to step forward and undertake this work. It is all well and good talking about Islamophobia, the key is about tackling such prejudice whilst ensuring that it is done in partnership with other groups.”

The Palestine Legal and CCR describe a variety of tactics used by universities and other institutions to silence pro-Palestinian voices ranging from “false accusations of anti-Semitism” to attempting to suppress speech to the success of pro-Palestinian movements. “They don’t want to have the debate whatsoever because they think the debate is always, for them, a losing proposition,” he said. “We are working in schools to encourage young people to understand the now-trademarked name of Hillel and the principles of Hillel the Elder and we chose the principles.”

As for how best to deal with the rise in islamophobic sentiment, Mughal said: “Education, education, education,” warning that each new generation will have broader education on the principles of academic freedom and the importance of institutional and systematic suppression. “Movements like Open Hillel and the principles of Hillel opposed the events, organised by the Open Hillel Movement, due to the pro-BDS sentiments of some speakers involved.”

Noted student activist Steven Salaita, a professor of American studies at the University of Illinois in the US, was one of the speakers accused of breaking the guidelines and a police statement said. “I also knew, unfortunately, that I wouldn’t be having the debate is always, for them, a losing proposition,” he said. “I knew at the moment of suppression of student activity” Salaita said.

The police were immediately sent to investigate. They pulled out not well-known members, students like myself, but instead younger, newer members with Arab and Muslim names,” Northeastern graduate Sarah Wahl said. “Islamophobia pervades the institutional response to Palestinian solidarity.”

While student organisations such as JVP, SJP and the Open Hillel movement face opposition from anti- and off-campus advocacy groups, Salaita said the student activism offers great potential to Palestinian advocacy. “Movements like Open Hillel and Jewish Voice for Peace — to me they offer tremendous hope,” said Salaita.

Noah Habeeb is a Boston-based graduate student, commentator, and activist.

80% of the incidents perceived to be punishments of students or scholars.

Hilll opposed the events, organised by the Open Hillel Movement, due to the pro-BDS sentiments of some speakers involved.

“Sadly, as long as there is extremism, and terrorism, and with some inflammatory media headlines and articles, the ‘background noise’ of anti-Muslim prejudice or hatred will continue.”

A total of 3,254 religiously motivated hate crimes were recorded in England and Wales in 2014-15, of which 525 hate crimes, a 48% increase on the previous year. The large majority of these crimes were against Muslims. “That figure could be much higher,” a recent report by criminologists Imran Anwar of Birmingham City University and Irene Kemp of Nottingham Trent University revealed that many Muslims do not report incidents of islamophobic abuse.

“I-east coaches. ‘We believe the increase in Islamophobia if he becomes mayor. “Just as anti-Semitism is wrong, so anti-Muslim prejudice is also wrong. No-one should be targeted because of their identity.”’

“We work in schools to ensure that young people understand that anti-Muslim prejudice is unacceptable.”

However, “We are working in schools to encourage young people to understand the now-trademarked name of Hillel and the principles of Hillel the Elder and we chose the principles.”

What we must do to challenge Islamophobia. As mayor of London, I’ll make tackling hate crimes... a top priority for the Metropolitan police and ensure they get the resources they need to make a real difference,” he said.

As for how best to deal with the rise in islamophobic sentiment, Mughal said: “Education, education, education,” warning that each new generation will have broader education on the principles of Academic Freedom.
Canada welcomes Syrian refugees to their new home

Abdulrahman al-Masri

Ottawa

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was joined by several other officials in greeting Syrian refugees upon their arrival in Toronto and Montreal in December. Trudeau welcomed individuals and families to their new home, where they have been re-settled as part of a plan to relocate 25,000 Syrian refugees to Canada. As governments in Europe and the United States become increasingly conservative in refugee resettlement programmes, the Canadian government remains welcoming and supportive.

“The nature of this [Canadian] society is very welcoming... It’s a multicultural society,” said Fadi Hayek, a native of Damascus, who arrived with his family in Ottawa as government-sponsored refugees on November 7th. “We don’t even feel like refugees.”

As of January 13th, 10,299 Syrian refugees have arrived in Canada since November 4th, with more arriving each day.

After the Liberal Party won the October 2015 elections, Trudeau assembles a task force to implement a campaign promise to help 25,000 Syrian refugees relocate to Canada by the end of 2016.

Trudeau’s plan for Syrian refugee resettlement programmes received widespread support from the public.

The government is using Canadian aeroplanes for direct flights for Syrian refugees and has designated terminals at Toronto Pearson International Airport and Montreal Airport to process Syrian refugees for permanent residence, health coverage and social insurance numbers upon arrival.

“We were refugees on the aeroplane. Once we arrived, we are Canadians,” said Hayek.

“There is an environment for us to be productive and to contribute to the community,” he added. “This makes us feel that we belong.”

Local governments across Canada have initiated resettlement projects that aim to assist refugees at their final destinations. These initiatives offer support with housing, language training and social services.

Though the resettlement process is moving steadily, the federal government missed its initial deadlines and modified the plan multiple times. Still, the government remains firm in its commitment. As of January 13th, 10,299 Syrians had arrived in Canada since November 4th, with more arriving each day.

James Milner, an expert on refugee policy and an associate professor at Carleton University in Ottawa, said Canada was considering measures to collaborate with refugee-hosting countries, such as Jordan and Egypt. He said those steps would benefit Syrian refugees in the region on issues such as the right to work.

According to Milner, Canada has a vision to do more than resettle refugees, provide aid and move on from the issue of refugee crisis. “If Canada really wants to be fully engaged as part of the global refugee regime, it then becomes the question of how do you build from the contributions you’ve made, to be part of the conversation of what a more comprehensive solution would look like?” he added.

The Canadian government is focused on creating humanitarian aid to the region. It announced in November an additional $31 million in support to UNHCR in Jordan, in addition to $65 million in funding to support families in Canada. Since the start of the conflict in Syria, the government said that Canada has provided nearly $1 billion in aid.

In addition to government-sponsored refugee programmes, Canadian citizens and permanent residents have the right to sponsor refugees privately at their own expense. Many groups have formed to help support Syrian families and individuals’ efforts to move to Canada.

Since the government made the commitment to relocate more Syrian refugees, private sponsorship groups have seen a dramatic improvement in application processing times. In some cases, private sponsorship applications have been processed in three months, compared with an average processing time of one year in previous years.

Amer Adas, a Syrian-Canadian activist, is working on applications to privately sponsor his two uncles and their families, who are refugees in Turkey.

“If we still had the previous Conservative government, we wouldn’t have the opportunity to help refugees in the same way that we are doing it now,” he said. “We would probably be hearing all of this fear mongering about refugees and the negative effects they would bring to Canada.”

While the Liberals remain firm on reaching the goal of welcoming 25,000 refugees by the end of February, Minister of Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship John McCallum said that Canada hopes to take in up to 75,000 refugees by the end of 2016.

“My family and I are grateful that the government has demonstrated that it will continue with its efforts in bringing refugees to Canada, despite the incidents that occurred worldwide,” Adas said.

Europe’s tepid welcome to refugees

Rashmee Roshan Lall

Five months on from the German channel- ler’s compassionate welcome to refugees — “We can do it” — Angela Merkel told her country it was time to tackle the prospect of taking in hundreds of thousands of Syrians – the European crisis may be hitting a wall. There is no higher barrier that European governments can erect than the following psychological measures: threatening each other or their constituent parts with lawsuits, charges that are too opaque; suggesting that they pay a special continent-wide “refugee tax”; and legislating people pay a special continent-wide “refugee tax” and modified the plan multiple times.

Each of these new steps will make it harder for Europe to accept refugees and for refugees to accept Europe.

And yet, so long as the war continues in Syria, the flow outward of desperate and dispossessed peoples will continue. Where can they go? Where will they go? Europe’s new barriers — some still only in the form of mind-bending proposals — will undoubtedly serve as a deterrent. The Danish government, for instance, has lost no time in advertising its new asset-seizure legislation in the Lebanese media. It’s part of a public information campaign that Danish Immigration Minister Inger Støjberg sees as crucial in making her country “significantly less attractive for asylum-seekers.”

Ditto for Germany, with its newly emerging deep divisions over the post-World War II Kulturkampf, that failed welcoming culture towards migrants.

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Each of these new steps will make it harder for Europe to accept refugees and for refugees to accept Europe.

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Economy

Recent rain eases farmers’ concerns in the Maghreb

Lamine Ghanmi

Tunisia

Farmers here are being encouraged to plant crops due to recent rainfall in the country, a sign that the region is moving away from the drought it experienced last year.

The dry period in Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco was seen as an omen portent of severe drought. Unseasonably sunny weather stretched well into January, leaving parts of the three countries without rain for several weeks. Dry conditions were prevalent across the Maghreb – from the western seaboard, where farmers and their livestock are accustomed to drought, to the green zones of the Sahara Desert, the rainy season is down to celebrity chefs such as Alain Ducasse, Yannick Le Men, Vidal from Germany, and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, was awash with optimism about the crop season.

But dams can satisfy only 15% of farmers’ needs. Nearly three-quarters of the farmers are small-scale producers who depend on their own wells for irrigation water. The rain boosted reservoirs behind dams, but it also caused water shortages. The NCMT said that rainfall levels were 50% lower than the 800mm average for winter in the Maghreb. Tunisia was estimated to have around 20% higher than the 3 million tonnes of the past few decades. Rainfall levels were 50% lower than the 800mm average for winter in the Maghreb. Tunisia was estimated to have around 20% higher than the 3 million tonnes of the past few decades. Rainfall levels were 50% lower than the 800mm average for winter in the Maghreb. Tunisia was estimated to have around 20% higher than the 3 million tonnes of the past few decades.

Lebanon’s olive oil on a slippery slope

Gareth Smyth

Beirut

Most of the 1.5 million visitors to Lebanon in 2015 enjoyed the country’s many res- taurants. They might have been surprised to learn that the olive oil pressed over their mezze was almost certainly imported and probably smuggled from Turkey or Syria to avoid import duties. Lebanese themselves buy cheap- er oils for cooking but they cherish small supplies of olive oil acquired from friends or relatives, often from their home village, which they keep for mezze and salads. Lebanon is probably where olive oil originated. In her book Green Gold. The Story of Lebanese Olive Oil, Salima Mardouf wrote that olives were cultivated in the Levant before the Phoenicians took the tree to the Greek islands around 1600BC and later to the Greek mainland, Italy, France, Spain and North Africa.

Millennia later, while olive oil was very popular across Europe – its status as the best-selling oil in Brit- ain is known to celebrity chefs such as Jamie Oliver – Lebanon’s pro- duction remains small scale using traditional methods.

Agriculture has not been a priority in recent years, this seems a lost op- portunity. A decade later, of the 298.8 tonnes of olive oil imported by the United States in 2015, 88.5% came from Italy, 19.7% from Spain, 11.9% from Tunisia and 2.3% from Greece.

Tunisians praying for rain at a mosque in the capital Tunis, on January 17th.

It has become an exporter of olive oil – with a very low acidity – comes from the first press of the olives and is the traditional grinding that, for connoisseurs, gives the oil its authen- tic flavour. About a decade ago, Lebanon was awash with optimism about olive oil. The Stanford Research Institute produced an export plan, funded by the US Agency for Int’l Development (USAID), that highlighted growing international demand for olive oil in international markets, especially as awareness grows among high-income customers of its taste and health benefits. Like so much else in Lebanon of recent times, this seems a lost op- portunity. A decade later, of the 298.8 tonnes of olive oil imported by the United States in 2015, 88.5% came from Italy, 19.7% from Spain, 11.9% from Tunisia and 2.3% from Greece.

Those traditional ways of making oil is time-consuming. The best

olives, of all sizes, that become green oil, are ground slowly by a large, vertical traditional grind- stone around a millstone, mainly traditional grinding that, for connoisseurs, gives the oil its authentic flavour. About a decade ago, Lebanon was awash with optimism about olive oil. The Stanford Research Institute produced an export plan, funded by the US Agency for Int’l Development (USAID), that highlighted growing international demand for olive oil in international markets, especially as awareness grows among high-income customers of its taste and health benefits. Like so much else in Lebanon of recent times, this seems a lost op- portunity. A decade later, of the 298.8 tonnes of olive oil imported by the United States in 2015, 88.5% came from Italy, 19.7% from Spain, 11.9% from Tunisia and 2.3% from Greece.

Lebanon’s share was bracketed in the 1.2% of “others” behind both Argentina and Chile.

Under a 2002 agreement, Lebanon is looking to produce high-quality oil for home and abroad and would give greater confidence to con- sumers, he has not been prepared to wait.

“Tunis, such things are just too slow,” he said.
The significance of new Saudi economic measures

Jareer Ellass
Washington

Facing a $87 billion budget deficit for 2015 and a projected 2016 deficit of $87 billion, Saudi Arabia announced cuts in energy subsidies. The year-old government of King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud also shocked the global financial community and oil markets by suggesting that Saudi Aramco could be opened to limited foreign investment.

Raising domestic energy prices and privatizing state firms are part of reforms that the Saudi government had promised would be announced early in 2016. The kingdom’s oil policy has led to producers pumping oil at record levels amid weak demand and prices that have plummeted to less than $30 a barrel. Saudi Aramco and its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) allies within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) have resisted efforts by other OPEC members to rein in output so prices would rise.

Raising domestic energy prices and privatizing state firms are part of reforms that the Saudi government had promised.

The prospect of making Saudi Aramco shares publicly available was raised by Saudi Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz in an interview with the Economist last year. The kingdom has been under pressure from the Saudi Development and Investment Bureau and the Saudi Development and Investment Bureau, who are also defense minister and chairman of the Economic and Development Affairs Council, to raise domestic energy prices and privatize state companies. The government has been under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to raise domestic energy prices and privatize state companies. The government has been under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to raise domestic energy prices and privatize state companies.

The IMF was given a mandate by the Saudi government to raise domestic energy prices and advance privatization. The IMF predicted that the Saudi government would be able to raise domestic energy prices and privatize state companies.

The government has been under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to raise domestic energy prices and privatize state companies.

Iraqi oil production of 500,000 bpd oil production increase

Iraq has ordered a new Saudi economic measures

Iran orders 500,000 bpd oil production increase

Iraq has ordered an increase in its oil production of 500,000 barrels per day (bpd) following the lifting of sanctions under its nuclear deal with world powers.

Tehran previously announced plans to increase daily production by half a million barrels after the U.S. and other members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) lifted sanctions in January 2016.

Iran’s share, “he said. Iran currently produces 2.8 million bpd and exports just more than 2 million bpd.

“arounds or in its oil production, neighbouring countries may in the next six to 12 months increase their production and take up that gap,” he added.

The IMF was given a mandate by the Saudi government to raise domestic energy prices and advance privatization. The IMF predicted that the Saudi government would be able to raise domestic energy prices and privatize state companies.

The government has been under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to raise domestic energy prices and privatize state companies.

Iraqi oil production of 500,000 bpd oil production increase

Economy

Briefs

IMF cuts Saudi growth forecast on oil slide

The government has been under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to raise domestic energy prices and privatize state companies.

The government has been under pressure from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to raise domestic energy prices and privatize state companies.

IEA says oil market may ‘drown in oversupply’

Unseasonably warm weather and rising supply will keep the crude oil market oversupplied until at least late 2015 and could push the price below $12-year-low, the International Energy Agency (IEA) said. The addition of Iranian supply to a market, where production looks set to outpace consumption for a third consecutive year, could come at a worse time for crude oil exporters.

Brent future futures have fallen to their lowest level since late 2002, tumbling to less than $30 a barrel.

“While we do not formally forecast (Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) OPEC oil production, in a scenario whereby Iran runs an additional 500,000 barrels a day (bpd) to the market by mid-year and other members maintain current output, global oil supply could exceed demand by 1.5 million bpd in the first half of 2016, the agency said.

Warm winter weather around the world cut global oil demand growth to 1.1 million bpd in the first quarter of 2015, down from 2.1 million bpd in the third quarter.

Saudia Basic Industries Corporation (SABIC) headquarters in Riyadh.
Malak Hasan

Jerusalem

After having amassed unpaid bills of about $150,000, the Palestinian National Theatre, known as El-Hakawati, was saved when the Palestinian Authority (PA) lent it money to stop Israel from shutting down East Jerusalem’s leading cultural institution and only theatre.

Arabic for “the storyteller,” El-Hakawati faced closure on November 1984 in predominantly Arab East Jerusalem. The theatre’s building will be seized and shut down in 48 hours.

The debt was owed to City Hall, the national insurance fund and the local Israeli electricity company. Two weeks before the phone call, ECA seized El-Hakawati’s bank account. To many, this may sound a standard procedure, in which the state rightly collects overdue debt, but analysts and activists accuse Israel of using a covert war against Palestinian cultural institutions by levying hefty taxes and depriving them of services and fiscal support.

Saved by the PA. Amer Khalil, director of the Palestinian National Theatre, known as El-Hakawati (The Storyteller) holds a court order outside the theatre in East Jerusalem, last November.

Khalil wondered when Palestinian institutions in Jerusalem would have a safer environment where they can function without fear of being targeted.

“We do not claim that the PA is not intervening to help, but if we are not offered steady financial support, culture in Jerusalem will disappear sooner or later,” Khalil said.

“We can hardly live like this. We need financial support every month to keep our doors open. The PA has to continue giving us money,” Khalil said.

“El-Hakawati must stay open. This place is our home and we won’t give it up even if we have to work for free,” Khalil said.

Aristocrat Abu Khoby said the theatre faced Israeli closures more than 35 times since its establishment in 1984 in predominantly Arab East Jerusalem, signaling “a systematic attempt to obstruct” Palestinian culture.

East Jerusalem is disputed territory that Israel seized from Jordan in the 1967 war, annexed it and declared it part of the indivisible and eternal capital of the Jewish state. However, no other country recognizes Israel’s sovereignty there and Israel expects its status to be determined in negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis.

Jerusalem houses some of Islam’s holiest shrines, which makes the area highly sensitive to the world’s 1.6 billion Muslims and a flashpoint that spurred Palestinian violence against Israel, the latest bout of which started on October 2nd over a Muslim shrine Palestinians suspect Israel wants to annex.

There is our home and we won’t give it up. “When I first received a phone call that the theatre was at risk of being closed, I took a decision to provide the sum needed to stop the Israeli authorities closing the theatre,” he said.

El-Hakawati began as a small troupe. It has hosted scores of Palestinian satirical plays, orchestras and dancing shows over the years.

When the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) signed a framework of a peace deal with Israel known as Oslo Accords, donor countries invested billions of dollars in Jerusalem and its Palestinian cultural sector, including the theatre.

The prosperity continued until 2000 when the second intifada broke out and the political situation deteriorated, most notably with the establishment of the separation wall that effectively separated Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank.

Since then, donor support has gradually dropped due to political instability.

Jerusalem Affairs Minister Adnan Al-Husseini said the PA paid 1 million shekels — $254,207 — to the theatre in 2015.

When the PA first received a phone call that the theatre was at risk of being closed, I took a decision to provide the sum needed to stop the Israeli authorities closing the theatre,” he said.

Husseini confirmed that Palestinian Prime Minister Abbas is working on a comprehensive plan for 2016 to help the theatre pay the entire debt and avoid financial crises.

Lack of financial support was a significant issue for El-Hakawati.

The Palestinian cultural scene has been shattered by decades of Israeli occupation and isolation by Arab countries who refuse to mix with Israelis living among Palestinians. Israel is seen as using all means to toughen living conditions for Palestinians in Jerusalem to motivate them to leave.

“While the Palestinian Authority (PA) signed a framework agreement of peace and coexistence with Israel known as Oslo Accords, donor countries invested billions of dollars in Jerusalem and its Palestinian cultural sector, including the theatre. The prosperity continued until 2000 when the second intifada broke out and the political situation deteriorated, most notably with the establishment of the separation wall that effectively separated East Jerusalem from the rest of the West Bank,” he said.

The importance of these programs is that they shed light on these chronic problems and these flawed laws,” Zohairy added. She said public pressure that the report generated prompted the PA to issue the Arabic hashtag Presidential pardon for Ratiba on social media, eventually leading to her receiving a presidential pardon.

“Media’s main concern is what is happening in Egypt. Even when it covers international issues, it does this through an Egyptian lens,” Mohamed said.

Zohairy recalled a recent episode which focused on people who have long-term leases on home appliances and end up paying much more than the appliance is worth and accumulated huge debts. The report featured a woman, Ratiba, who was imprisoned for more than ten years after being unable to pay her debts.

Recent social reports carried by Al Sharaa Al-Masry include an investigation into car thefts, a look at the state of Egypt’s cafés post-revolution, flaws in the construction industry and other socio-political issues, seeking to shed light issues affecting ordinary people.

There is a symbiotic relationship between social media and Egypt’s talk shows. One of the Cairo University media students, graduate Amina Mohamed agreed: “Yes, we rely on social media but it is linked. The talk shows often find their issues from what is trending on social media and use it to engage in conversation. Shows are increasingly focusing on local issues – whether social or political – and often allow for phone-ins and live tweeting to maximise audience participation.

Zohairy hosts the two-hour Al Sharaa Al-Masry (Egyptian Streets) programme for the Al Arabiya Al Hadath channel. The programme is split between a first hour focusing on important news and developments in Egypt and a second hour that contains a field report. She described it as a “socio-political programme”.

“Unfortunately in Egypt, talk shows are important and very influential. Each category in society follows the talk show presenter who represents his or her views and who is closest to his or her social level,” Zohairy said.

“When something major happens politically, Egyptians turn to pan-Arab news channels. Viewers may not know that the local media are full of views, more than news. Foreign policy comes at the end of people’s interests. People follow whatever they feel will affect their bread and butter directly – it could be political or social.”

On social media, Egyptians don’t call in for help with their problems but they want to hear other people’s problems and they like knowing that there is someone out there doing something to help ordinary people,” Mohamed said.

Egypt’s TV talk shows are local

Mahmoud El-Shafey

London

In a country where an estimated one-quarter of the population is illiterate, television in Egypt, and particularly television talk shows, hold an oversized grip and particularly television talk shows.

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Doha al-Zohairy, host of Al Sharaa Al-Masry (Egyptian Streets).
Egypt: Faith After the Pharaohs recalls religious coexistence

Karen Dabrowska

London

The upheavals in the Mid-19th to the 21st century, including the Palestine ter-

compilation of articles by scholars

and activists from both sexes said

that the government crackdown on

of patriarchal control of the female

the female body. She asked:

activists were arrested, the torture

violence, Arab Spring and Sudanese

in the female body, the strong and

in context with the "femocrats"

of Christianity and Islam...
Majestic Roman amphitheatre stands out in Tunisia’s El Djem

The Arab Weekly

January 22, 2016

Inside view of El Djem Amphitheatre.

El Djem, Tunisia

As visitors approach El Djem, or Physis, as it was known in Roman times, the remains of an amphitheatre tower above the village. Columns and arches of stone appear on the horizon over the landscape. The rest of the village sits peacefully around the majestic Roman amphitheatre that once hosted the combat games of gladiators.

El Djem invites visitors to stroll in its most important sites, namely the amphitheatre and the museum of El Djem, both testifying to the richness of the history of the town. Over centuries, El Djem has transformed itself from a setting of battles to a venue of concerts and the prestigious International Festival of Symphonic Music. Walls that once echoed the screams of dying men, the roars of wild animals and the cheers and cries of despair of crowds now resonate with the sounds of violins, pianos and the applause of the audience.

About 210km south of Tunis, El Djem is the home to the largest building in Roman Africa. The amphitheatre represented a symbol of the power and prosperity of the Roman Empire. In 1979, the amphitheatre was placed on the list of UNESCO World Heritage sites. The amphitheatre is one of the oldest and biggest ruins in North Africa. In Egypt we have the pharaonic pyramids but the biggest and most impressive one of all amphitheatres in North African region is that of El Djem. It is also one of the largest amphitheatres in the Roman empire after that of Rome,” said Nejib Ben Lazreg, a Tunisian archaeologist.

The Amphitheatre of El Djem is a monument built entirely of stone blocks without foundations. It is believed to be modelled after the colosseum in Rome with much of its original structure preserved. The El Djem amphitheatre is distinguished from the other Roman amphitheatres in that it was constructed in stone block; other amphitheatres were built using bricks or pieces of stones. Another characteristic feature is that it was able to host more than 30,000 spectators.

“The El Djem amphitheatre was built around the middle of the third century. It was believed to be constructed as a gift from the emperor to the town’s population,” Ben Lazreg said.

El Djem is the home to the largest building in Roman Africa.

Over the centuries, the amphitheatre was subject to many changes and played a role in several battles. During the Islamic conquest of North Africa, Berber queen Kahina took refuge in the amphitheatre using it as a fortress. In 1995, villagers revolted against ruler Bey Mohammed II and also found a temporary home in the amphitheatre.

“We know that up till the sixth century, the amphitheatre kept its stairs intact according to the writings of Arab historian al-Bakri, who described the stairs in their original structure. It wasn’t until the year 1659 that the western wall was destroyed,” Ben Lazreg said.

“The amphitheatre had a history of being used as a fortress. In the 19th century, revolutionary Ali Ben Ghedhahem took refuge in the amphitheatre; Berber queen Kahina also used it for the same purpose—“Romans knew that they needed to keep people distracted to keep them away from politics. They invested money and effort to pay for these shows whose amphitheatres were used for combat shows. The shows were held every couple of days as was the custom of following the capital. The shows would last a day under the patronage of a local governor or magistrate,” Ben Lazreg added.

“In the morning, the start was with fights between savage animals, then they would showcase the prey of hunters. During the midday break, they exposed the outdoors to wild animals that were starving. As for the afternoon, it consisted of battles between the gladiators. If a gladiator survived five to six shows, he could obtain his freedom.”

Built on the site of a Roman villa, the museum imitates the layout of the villa with a central courtyard leading to rooms displaying sculptures and mosaics. It features mosaic pavements that are considered to be among the finest of Roman ruins. The House of Africa is considered an aristocratic dwelling built around 200AD and only discovered in the 1990s. The dwelling contains a series of mosaics, one of which is believed to be the only known representation of its kind of the African continent.

The town of El Djem offers visitors a thrilling journey through the history of its rich cultural legacy. The El Djem International Festival of Symphonic Music, featuring renowned orchestras, adds to the lure by offering a memorable night of music in the cradle of a rich history.

Roua Khlifi is a regular Travel and Culture contributor for The Arab Weekly. She is based in Tunis.