After Astana, rebel clashes threaten Syria peace push

Ed Blanche

Heavy fighting between rebel groups in northern Syria threatens to undercut Russian-led peace talks that Moscow hopes will pave the way to a political settlement to end the bloody conflict in the Middle East.

The clashes between Jabhat Fateh al-Sham (IFS), which is linked to al-Qaeda, and other Islamic factions led by Ahrar al-Sham, erupted as the January 23rd-24th talks in the Kazakh capital Astana, ended, with an agreement between Russia, Iran and Turkey to cement a shaky ceasefire declared on December 29th.

The trio has the muscle and firepower to enforce a cessation of hostilities unlike previous ceasefires that were sponsored primarily by the United Nations.

Tommy Maguire

That possibility is facing an immediate challenge with the intra-rebel fighting. At least six rebel factions have joined Ahrar al-Sham, which has distinct nationalist leanings, against the jihadist extremists under IFS in a showdown that could dramatically change the complex political lineup in Syria.

Still, the ground-breaking committee that represents parties to the ongoing conflict in Syria remains divided over the steps to implement that policy.

It was also the first time the warring parties got together after the war was transformed by Russia’s military intervention.

Ed Blanche

With regards to the Syrian conflict, Trump hinted at a stronger US involvement.

US President Donald Trump speaks at the Central Intelligence Agency in Langley, Virginia, on January 21st.

Trump cut a chaotic and controversial start to his Middle East policy during his first week in office.

In one example, Trump hinted at a possible fresh US intervention in Iraq, telling an audience at CIA headquarters that it had been a mistake not to place Iraq’s oil wealth under US control after the invasion of 2003.

“I don’t want to go into Iraq but I will tell you, when we were in, we got out wrong... So, we should have kept the oil but OK. Maybe we’ll have another chance,” he said.

The remarks came one day after he stated in his inaugural address that the United States no longer sought “to impose our way of life on anyone”.

Trump’s statements confused Iraq’s government, with Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi saying he was at a loss as to what Trump was getting at.

The new president has repeatedly said that fighting Islamic militancy would be one of his top foreign policy priorities but he has provided few details about what action the United States would take to implement that policy.

With regards to the Syrian conflict, Trump did not send a delegation to peace talks in the Kazakh capital Astana but hinted at a potential US involvement.

US envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura arrives to attend the first session of Syria peace talks at Astana’s Astana President Hotel, on January 23rd.

Although many rebel groups, badly mauled by 17 months of relentless hammering by Russian air power, attended the talks, several major factions such as Ahrar al-Sham and IFS were excluded.

The deep divisions between rebel forces and emerging differences between Iran and the strengthening alliance of Russia and Turkey over their strategic objectives in Syria remain serious impediments to meaningful progress in peace efforts that will now move to UN-sponsord talks in Geneva in late February.

Ed Blanche is the analysis editor of The Arab Weekly.
Astana talks expose limits of what Russia, Turkey and Iran can achieve

John Irsh and Andrew Osborn

Peace talks between the Syrian government and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in Turkey, which had been the focus of Western hopes, are set to take place in Istanbul this week. But the talks are likely to be more of a sideshow than a potential breakthrough.

The talks were initially expected to take place in Astana, Kazakhstan, on February 23rd, but were postponed due to the ongoing violence in Idlib, Syria’s last rebel stronghold.

The talks are being hosted by the three countries that back the regime: Russia, Iran and Turkey. But they are unlikely to make any significant progress towards a political solution.

The talks are a sideshow because the real power game is being played by the regional powers: Russia, Iran and Turkey.

Russia, which has been a key player in the Syrian conflict, has been trying to create a de facto Russian-backed regime in the country.

Iran, on the other hand, has been trying to create a Shia-dominated regime in the country.

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Astana talks talk the rules the changes the rules of Syria negotiations

Sami Moubayed
Beirut

ruussian-sponsored Syrian peace talks are entering a new phase, with the Astana talks on January 23rd and 24th.

The benchmark for previous talks had been the Geneva communiqué of 2012, better known as the Geneva I.

The current talks are known colloquially, left for Damascus, or Damascenes, or locals, men along with their families that control significant wealth and influence, the Syrian Army and Iran on behalf of their proxies, the Russians on behalf of their proxies, the American forces, or the Russians on behalf of their proxies.

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News & Analysis

Syria

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Wadi Barada siege shows Damascenes’ contempt for countryside

Stephen Starr

Wadi Barada is a place dwellers of Syria’s capital know well. In winter, Damascenes families would take off every Friday for the mountains beyond the valley to play in the snow and visit its outstanding eateries. In summer, Wadi Barada was an important holiday destination for those wanting to escape the city’s fierce heat and to draw water, free of charge, from the city’s ferocious heat and to draw water, free of charge, from the city’s}
Mosul civilians facing abuse from ISIS, Iraqi forces

The Arab Weekly staff

London

Civilians in Mosul are facing abuses from both the Islamic State (ISIS) and Iraqi forces battling to retake the country's second largest city from the militant extremists.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi ordered an investigation into violations of human rights and other abuses purportedly carried out by government troops and paramilitary forces battling ISIS. Abadi said the probe would examine "cases of kidnapings, mistreatment and so-called 'crimes against civilians'. Abadi blamed such incidents on "groups that falsely use the name of" Iraqi soldiers and Shia and Sunni paramilitaries.

The statement said that the abuses were posted on social media to "spoil the joy of victory and to damage the real image of the brave security forces and their sacrifices to liberate the land and to maintain security."

Abadi's statement came after the United Nations demanded a government investigation into a video purportedly showing brutal treatment and killing of at least three ISIS suspects in a newly taken area of eastern Mosul.

The nearly 3-minute video purportedly showed members of security forces in regular army and police uniforms dragging and beating the suspects before shooting them with at least two army Humvees, a tank and a permite-driven carrier stationed nearby.

Abadi ordered the massive operation in October to retake Mosul, Iraq's second city, in the summer of 2014. The United States is supporting them with air strikes and US soldiers are serving in a support role on the ground.

ISIS has been attacking Iraqi security forces in Mosul, killing civilians, although facts and casualty numbers are hard to verify, said Ravina Shamdasani, a spokeswoman with the UN human rights office. "We are racing against the clock to pave the way for the main offensive, UN officials said. Medics and humanitarian agencies estimate the number of dead and wounded – both civilians and military – at several thousand."

IIS has "continued to attack those fleeing or attempting to flee areas that are controlled by it", Shamdasani said, and was shelling districts retaken by the army.

More than 100,000 Iraqi troops, members of regional Kurdish security forces and Shia and Sunni paramilitaries are participating in the offensive. Iraqi forces estimated the number of militants inside Mosul at 5,000-6,000 at the start of operations three months ago and say 3,300 have been killed in the fighting since.

Military preparations to recapture western Mosul have begun, with Shia militias preparing an operation to pave the way for the main offensive on the western bank of the Tigris, the overall campaign commander, Lieutenant-General Abdul Ameer Yazhari, told Mogulsiya TV. More than 160,000 civilians have been displaced since the start of the offensive, UN officials said. Medical and humanitarian agencies estimate the number of dead and wounded – both civilians and militaries – at several thousand.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies

Ten years after Saddam's death

Fadi Farhat

Viewpoint

It has been ten years since the hanging of Saddam Hussein following months of legal drama and sophistry in a courtroom that, at times, resembled a circus. Saddam remains a divisive figure both in the West and on the Arab street. Despised by many as a vicious and greedy dictator, admired by neighbouring Iraqis for the near-decade-long war that crippled both countries and feared by the Gulf Arab states as a loose cannon following his 1990 invasion of Kuwait, there was much rejoicing at his demise.

Saddam's downfall began in 2003 and culminated in his death December 30, 2006. It should be highlighted as the event that changed the entire Middle East from its old ways. The tenth anniversary of Saddam's death should have made front pages in mainstream media outlets across the West.

In Britain and the United States, there was barely a mention – barely a whisper. Why? Was this not the tenth anniversary when the Middle East received justice for a vile dictator? Was this not the tenth anniversary of the West bringing parliamentary democracy, good governance and stability to the Arab world? Was this not the tenth anniversary of the new Iraq – one that is a safe place to all its people?

With all that progress delivered – and on a silver platter by the Americans to the Iraqi people – one would have thought that such an event would have been celebrated all over Western media. The silence is almost deafening. The fact is that the fall of Saddam Hussein did not bring about any of the above but the complete opposite.

Saddam's downfall was followed by the largest waves of sectarian turmoil, violence and upheaval in Iraq history as well as a complete deskalinisation of the region. On the wider geopolitical stage, a militarily weakened and divided Iraq has left a gaping void in the region that has enabled Iran and Saudi Arabia to embark on its own unique version of the cold war with proxy battlefields elsewhere – in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen.

It was not so glaringly apparent then but Saddam's Iraq acted as a silent secular arbiter to the region's two most powerful theocratic forces. Both Iran and Saudi Arabia could not afford to turn their backs to each other because they had one eye on the novel setting dictator. Internally, the picture is no less bleak. Iraq's economy has been on its knees and its people divided. During the last ten years, there has been an ongoing debate about the possibility of a three-state partition of Iraq along sectarian lines. Such talk would have been unthinkable before the US-led invasion in 2003.

The reality on the ground is not so much damning as the inability of Washington policymakers, even today, to put their finger on what went wrong and how Iraq, by 2014, faced an existential threat with the emergence of the Islamic State (ISIS). Even today, there is no consensus as to the strategy that should have been adopted following regime change. The legacy and outcome of all this is some sort of decision-making paralysis in Western corridors of power. The failures in Iraq and the harrowing fear of their repetition heavily influenced the decisions of former US president Barack Obama and Britain's Westminister not to intervene militarily on the ground in Syria.

Obama's successor, Donald Trump, built his presidential campaign on promises that his administration would never seek regime change or nation building anywhere.

The failures in Iraq must not linger indefinitely so that every call for intervention, particularly on humanitarian grounds, is dismissed. That is the legacy left by the West's Iraqi project and Saddam's downfall.

The failure of a situation in which no intervention was needed in 2003 now serves as a reasoning against intervention even where intervention may be genuinely and legally required. The real tragedy is not political. It is human.

The removal of Saddam from the Middle Eastern chessboard has, rather than bring any real democracy, changed the balance of power to create a plethora of proxy wars and proxy sub-wars involving the United States, France, Britain, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Lebanon and Yemen as well as several non-state actors.

Saddam remains a divisive figure both in the West and on the Arab street.
Will Iraq’s Kurdish protesters turn to violence?

Alaa Latif
Sulaymaniya

Although Iraqi Kurdistan’s power media are not as mythic as natural gas reserves near Chamchamal, the people living in the area do not see many of the benefits of their natural resources. Which is why a group of locals decided to protest the situation.

The evening of the protest – January 22 – unidentified individuals launched rocket-propelled grenades at the gas-fuelled power plant that provides Iraqi Kurdistan with about half of its energy needs. The plant was not damaged.

After the attack, energy supplies for the people of Chamchamal increased. Households there had been getting about two hours of power after midnight. Now there was an uninterrupted supply from 8pm to 8am. Many locals said there was a connection between their new electricity schedule and the rocket attacks.

People made jokes about the incident on social media. “Fire a rocket and get 24 hours of free power,” read one comment. “This offer is valid until the government wakes up again.”

Patience has limits. You don’t know what to expect from angry people.

Iraqi Kurdish politician Riwas Falk

Some people suggested that a local hero of sorts, Abdullah Kwekha Mubarak, was behind the rocket attack. Mubarak lived in Norway for years and annual trade volume between Iraq and Turkey dates way back.

The Bashiqa issue was one of the most contentious issues between the two countries strained in recent years. The trade volume between them dropped from $12 billion to $8 billion. Years ago, the Turkish Army set up a military camp in the Bashiqa region of northern Iraq “at the request of” Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. Turkish Forces, who have been training local Arab and Kurdish forces to fight against the Islamic State (ISIS).

Turkish-Iraqi relations suddenly soured over the camp prior to the launch of the Mosul operation. Abadi urged the swift withdrawal of Turkish troops from Bashiqa, calling the forces “invaders”. Abadi threatened Turkey if the latter were to launch a military campaign on Iraqi soil.

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim’s visit to Baghdad in January calmed the storm. In addition to Yildirim’s warm handshake with Abadi, a constructive meeting between the two paved the way to normalisation of ties.

There was a glimpse of hope for a brighter future of Turkish-Iraqi relations when Yildirim and Abadi affirmed at a news conference that the Bashiqa issue would be solved. However, Abadi claimed that the Turkish military would withdraw from the camp and Ankara did not confirm it.

In the following days, Abadi said relations would not move “one step forward” without the withdrawal of Turkish troops from Bashiqa. An official statement regarding the matter from Hisham al-Alawi, Iraqi ambassador to Turkey, asserted that the withdrawal would take place after the Mosul operation.

Sporadic rocket attacks by ISIS fighters, are reacting to what they see as the injustice of the situation. "When the power plant was built, they were promised that they would benefit from it but those promises have not been fulfilled," Faraj said. "The electricity produced in Chamchamal is simply being sold onto other districts and this angers people.

The controversy over the rockets fired at the power station caused a lot of debate in Iraqi Kurdistan. "The electricity produced in Chamchamal is simply being sold onto other districts and this angers people."

The problem is that the Iraqi Kurdish authorities say they want to decentralise power, "added Chamchamal Mayor Amanj Jabari, "but those who are actually in charge have a more centralised mentality. That is why they will not respond to the demands of the people."

The controversy over the rockets fired at the power station caused a lot of debate in Iraqi Kurdistan. "The controversy over the rockets fired at the power station caused a lot of debate in Iraqi Kurdistan."

Early in 2016, Mubarak threatened to cut off the gas pipeline if they were not allowed oil tankers to pass.

"There have been other incidents in Chamchamal. Security cameras for traffic safety were shot out twice. Apparently, this happened because locals were angry that the security cameras cost a lot of money. "Patience has limits," said Riwas Falk, an Iraqi Kurdish politician and member of the local parliament’s Industry, Energy and Natural Resources Committee. "You don’t know what to expect from angry people."

"They may resort to violence; they may not allow tankers to pass. They may stop the gas supply and they might even attack government buildings. If the government does not try and find solutions to the problems that are upsetting people, things could get worse. People may turn to violence and direct confrontation may happen," she said.

Alaa Latif writes for nieghb.org, which originally published this article.

Turkey and Iraq need to wise up and mend ties

Yunus Paksy

Turkey and Iraq share a “thorny border” and the brotherhood between the people of Turkey and Iraq dates way back. Turkish and Iraqi businesses use to benefit greatly from peaceful ties. However, relations between the two countries strained in recent years.

One of the main reasons is the Mosul operation. Based on the current development, the Mosul operation should not further alienate the two countries.

Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim (L) and Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi speak during a meeting at the governmental palace in Baghdad, on January 7th.

The Baghdad issue and the end of the Mosul operation should not further alienate the two countries.

Turkey was looking to have better relations with the region, which is why Ankara showed its goodwill towards Baghdad. However, Duran, the deputy to the Prime Minister, said the two countries will not allow the two countries to speak.

Do Turkey and Iraq have the luxury of freezing their diplomacy and economy until then? The answer is “no.”

Emin Taha, president of the Turkey-Iraq Business council of the Turkish Foreign Economic Relations Board said Iraqis were waiting for Turkish goods.

“Actually, the people of Iraq need Turkish goods but the central government does not let the entry of the goods,” he said, adding that the normalisation of ties would affect economic ties quite positively.

“The MP can not backtrack on his earlier statements due to the domestic pressure on him,” said Turan, a professor of international relations and former rector of Istanbul Bilgi University. He contended that even though the two countries desperately need to better their economic relations, the Baghdad issue will not let them sort out their differences until after the Mosul operation.

The trade volume needs to increase and the people of Turkey and Iraq may want to sort out their differences in order to be comfortable that Ankara and Baghdad will not run at each other with daunting ultimatums.

The Baghdad issue and the end of the Mosul operation should not further alienate the two countries.

Turkey and Iraq need to wise up and mend ties

Yunus Paksy is an Istanbul-based Turkish journalist who covered the wars in Syria and Iraq.

The Baghdad issue and the end of the Mosul operation should not further alienate the two countries.
Israeli settlement policies could endanger regional and global peace

Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s government has approved a plan to build 2,500 settlement homes in the occupied West Bank, barely 48 hours after it had accepted building permits for more than 500 settler homes in occupied East Jerusalem.

The burst of planned building activity came in the first week of Donald Trump’s presidency, which has not condemned Israel’s “flagrant violation” of international law, in the words of December’s UN Security Council resolution on the subject. Netanyahu has exultantly tweeted: “We build and continue to build.”

It was left to a relatively minor player in the grand geopolitical scheme of things, Jerusalem Deputy Mayor Meir Turgeman, to state the obvious. “The rules of the game have changed with Donald Trump’s arrival as president. We no longer have our hands tied as in the time of Barack Obama. Now we can finally build.”

It is hardly surprising that Turgeman was unambiguous. He has previously been horribly candid about the attempt to dehumanise the Palestinians, accusing them of behaving like “animals” after a deadly attack on East Jerusalem in October.

But the Israeli government’s actions were just as unambiguous as Turgeman’s appalling words. There can be no alternative interpretation of settlement expansion other than as a cynical attempt to use Trump’s name to licence do away with the legitimate rights of the Palestinians to nationhood.

The United Nations, European Union and Germany have warned that accelerated construction in occupied Palestinian territory undermines the prospects for a two-state solution. The Jordanian government has said it deals a “tough blow” to efforts to revive the peace process. The American Jewish Committee, a respected advocacy organisation, raised fears that Israel’s “gamble” would further inflame an already difficult situation on the ground and internationally.

Two liberal Jewish organisations in the United States – Americans for Peace Now and J Street – have condemned the settlements surge. The former colourfully suggested that Trump must be careful that the Israeli right wing does not make a freer (Hebrew for “sucker”) out of him.

The outrage at Israeli defiance is exacerbated by fears that Trump as president will honour his regrettable and ill-conceived campaign promise to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Trump is not the first victorious US presidential candidate to have made such a pledge but is the only one who has demonstrated seriousness about it. Not only has he repeated it all too often, Trump’s nominee for ambassador to Israel is considered more right wing than many in the Israeli right about settlements and the Palestinian issue.

That said, the Trump White House has given few details about the embassy’s relocation. Spokesman Sean Spicer vaguely insisted Trump would honour his promise to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. “there’s no decision”, which gives rise to the hope that reason will prevail. Trump will reconsider.

There is hope, also, that moderate Arab leaders can convince Trump to avoid giving any more encouragement to the Netanyahu government’s dangerous propensities regarding the Palestinian issue, including Jerusalem. The implications for regional peace and security are too big to ignore.

Moscow’s message is clear: Russia is in Syria for the long haul

While waiting to see what US President Donald Trump will do, Russia is still interested in the Syrian card. It has recently signed a series of agreements which show the extent to which the Syrian regime has surrendered to Russia. It is squelched only by the regime’s surrender to Iran in the Damascus and its environs, especially in the course of the Syrian desert.

The Russian side can send tax-free all sorts of weapons, ammunition and equipment needed for the security and safety of the base and ship personnel and their families. The Syrian customs and border police cannot inspect and control all personnel arriving at Tartus naval base on war vessels. Finally, the new agreement grants full civil and administrative immunity to Russian personnel.

President Vladimir Putin is attached to past anti-terrorism rhetoric; certainly he is not use the agreement as a cover for unacceptable practices in the region.

Worldwide military bases are useless in the absence of a strong economy. Still, Russian President Vladimir Putin is attached to past practices and is building up Russian presence in the Mediterranean, hence the agreement regarding the base at Tartus.

No one really believes Iran’s anti-terrorism rhetoric; certainly not Mattis. He does not want to throw out the Pyt’i nuclear deal and war with Iran. He simply wishes to have Iran respect its borders and limits, behave like a normal state and certainly not use the agreement as cover for unacceptable practices in the region.

General Mattis knows the Middle East and the Gulf region very well and is fully aware of Iran’s destabilising policies. He says that it is possible to deal with the Russian presence in the region without underestimating its negative impact, but the biggest threat comes from Iran’s destabilising policies.

President Putin and Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu. Then coordinated efforts will likely go a long way in facilitating the eventual US-Russian deal regarding Syria. In this deal, there will be no room for Syrian President Bashar Assad and his tricks once they have served their purpose.

Turkey seems to have read correctly the situation. Turkish Deputy Prime Minister Mehmet Shimpak recently declared: “We have to be pragmatic, realistic. The facts on the ground have changed dramatically. Turkey can no longer insist on a settlement without Assad. It is not possible.”

Such talk reveals that Turkey is preparing for an improved phase in Syria. It remains to be seen how Iran will react to the forthcoming deal.

Khairealla Khairallah is a Lebanese writer.

© Yaser Ahmed for The Arab Weekly
Egyptian society is preparing for the next phase: Democracy

Ahmed Aboul Douh

Egypt is today, torture is common in prisons, the acts that are relied heavily on security forces and power institutions are still being manipulated. Does this spell the failure of the 2011 revolution that ended president Hosni Mubarak’s 30 years in power? It is well-known that any placed in power by a revolution will not rule democratically. If that ruler decides to exercise democracy, he or she will usually fail. If, on the other hand, this ruler happens to belong to the previous regime or to the revolutionaries or is an independent, the result would be the same.

Nobody thinks of democracy when the seat of power is shifting. We have seen it happen in the French revolution, the Russian revolution, the Iranian revolution and many others. Let’s go now to the streets where the revolutionary flame still burns vividly. It is true that these are no demonstrations or confrontations with the security forces. Rather, it looks like the Egyptians have chosen to confine their obediences and observe past traditions and way of life instead. In a revolution, everything is questioned. The revolution touches the political, the economic and social as well as the constitutional reporting. But fewer people were on the streets of Washington for his inauguration than for Barack Obama in 2009. (Obama, in fact, was challenged the well-documented reality that he was way behind Ronald Reagan, who continues to hold the record for inaugural-day crowds.)

Trump also insisted without evidence that millions of votes were illegally cast in the November election, which caused him to lose the popular vote to his Democratic rival Hillary Clinton. The alleged voter fraud was rejected as a facet of narcissistic and petulant ill-disposition by many of his own Republican Party and by election officials, many in Republican-controlled states.

There are serious implications of the White House war on reality, which was described as “alternative facts” by one of Trump’s senior advisers, Kellyanne Conway. First, it discards the US president, his administration, the White House Press Office and any information that it swears to be true. In the future, if there are confused, confusing and contentious reports—about North Korean missiles or anything else from anywhere in the world—we can be sure which source to believe—the Russians, the Chinese or the Americans. Few will automatically turn to the United States, as has been the case for more than half a century, as the one certain provider of truth and facts.

As Jim Scuitto, CNN’s chief national security correspondent, muses on a camera to a listening world: “What if Donald Trump orders troops into battle and they say? Do we trust the White House to speak about that honestly? When real stuff starts happening?”

The second problem is that any American president, no less, is assisting a massive and popular disengagement from the facts. This is disconcerting in a liberal democracy and ultimately it can delegitimize all authority but that of Trump, and seriously weaken the strong-armed tools of control. As Peter Wehner, who was a leading strategist in the George W. Bush White House, recently pointed out: “In the end you really can’t govern if you do not have a common basis for fact.”

Wehner, who is now at the Ethics and Public Policy Center, a conservative Washington-based think tank, is right about thinking for oneself there is more to his criticism than spites.

The Trump administration, of course, seems more concerned to talk about the make-believe paths set by the great man himself, on climate change being a Chinese hoax for instance; on what the United States’ right—say, responsibility—to take Iraq oil as the price for protecting it, and that free trade ultimately equals the enslavement of US workers.

This is dangerously delusional and ultimately harmful to the democratic consensus, which needs a shared basis of objective facts to be exercised with good sense and produce genuine action. But the United States’ 45th president appears to be stoking mistrust and misinformation all the better to control the narrative. If his voters, and others inclined to populism elsewhere, believe nothing other than doom, Trump will have succeeded in the biggest mass manipulation and deforming initiative in history.

The territory is already prepared. A US study before the November election found that 68% of Trump-supporting television, economic data published by the federal government has been so badly misconstrued that they have been disseminated as mendacious manipulators, thereby making it difficult for people to make informed democratic choices.

The “alternative facts” of Trump’s White House

Rashmee Roshan Lall

T he ‘alternative facts’ of Trump’s White House are exasperating with Egypt and another generation believing none of that. After all, the struggle against terrorism in post-revolution opposed to these elements that the country in the world: “What if Donald Trump’s senior advisers see the truth, and then reject as a feat of narcissistic and petulant ill-disposition. Ammar Elhakim, for example, wants journalist Ahmed al-Khabir sent to jail for daring to publish reliable information and is a venerable institution. In reality, the Egyptian revolution was a popular, not a national one, and at some point, the rest of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt eventually began turning against the regime.

Of course, it is a risky thing to reveal corruption inside the territory. As Jim Sciutto, CNN’s chief national security correspondent, muses on a camera to a listening world: “What if Donald Trump orders troops into battle and they say? Do we trust the White House to speak about that honestly? When real stuff starts happening?”

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Perhaps the answer can be found by reaching back in time— 10th-century Baghdad to be precise. The book of the ‘alternative facts’ of Trump’s White House

Rashmee Roshan Lall is a columnist for The Arab Weekly. Her blog can be found at www.rashmeer.com. Her Twitter handle is on Twitter: @rashmeerl.
Hamas, seeking financial help, pledges anti-ISIS cooperation

Ahmed Megahid
Cairo

Hamas is turning to Cairo for help in obtaining essential supplies for the 1.8 million residents of the Gaza Strip and end its isolation in return for pledges of tightening control on Gaza’s border with Egypt’s Sinai peninsula and cooperation in its fight against the Islamic State (ISIS) and other militants.

A high-level Hamas delegation, headed by deputy leader Ismail Haneyeh, visited Cairo on January 22nd, giving Egyptian intelligence officials a list of demands that included a permanent opening of the Rafah Crossing on the border with Sinai. Hamas also called for reactivating trade channels with Egypt and for Cairo to end a blockade of Gaza, which Hamas controls, said Youssef Rezqa, a senior Hamas official.

“In return, Hamas pledged to tighten control on the border with Sinai,” he added. “Hamas views its relations with Cairo very highly, which is why it will do everything in its power to tighten control on the border and prevent possible infiltrations.”

Egypt boosts navy as part of Red Sea strategy

Amr Emam
Cairo

By establishing a naval presence in the Red Sea, Egypt aims for more than just protecting navigation in the Suez Canal, a vital waterway for international trade, military experts said.

“The force will be the backbone of Egypt’s new Red Sea strategy, former assistant Defence minister Hanyam DowwMill said. “There is a marked surge of unrest in the southern entrance to the Red Sea, which needs an aggressive policy.”

The new force utilises recently acquired naval equipment, including a French-made multifunction helicopter carrier.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi said the new force would help his country protect its coast, Defence Minister Sedki Sobhi said. “The force would help Egypt impose control on its territorial waters in the Red Sea.”

Cash-strapped Egypt spent billions of dollars to upgrade its navy. Analysts in Cairo said Sisi does not squander the limited funds available at the central bank with a purpose. Last April 8th, Sisi ordered Prime Minister Sherif Ismail to sign a maritime border demarcation agreement with Saudi Arabia. The deal includes the handover of two disputed Red Sea islands to Riyadh.

Analysts noted there are no records of the islands. Egypt’s main opponents, Arab States, are known to have no interest in the islands. Egypt’s main opponents, Arab States, are known to have no interest in the islands. Egypt’s main opponents, Arab States, are known to have no interest in the islands.

Egypt wants to turn the banks of the Suez Canal into an investment magnet.

In 2015, Egypt spent almost $8 billion to dig a parallel channel to shorten transit time in the Suez Canal. It also dug tunnels under the canal to deliver water and ease the movement of people and goods to and from Sinai.

These huge investments are only part of Egypt’s vision for the Suez Canal region, one that cannot be implemented without proper security in the Red Sea, experts said.

Egypt wants to turn the banks of the Red Sea into an investment magnet. A 2016 picture shows members of the Hamas’s security forces patrolling an area along the border between the Gaza Strip and Egypt.
No tears shed in GCC over Obama’s exit

Mohammed Alkhreiji

London

A

ter eight years of dispropor-
tionate animosity and
empty rhetoric, Inauguration Day 2017 in the United States could not have come soon enough for Gulf Arab policymakers. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Gulf Arab leaders counseled caution and concern over the end of the Obama administration, a period that has been tense at times in the region as a stale in the back.

Across the Gulf, official agencies have prepared congratulatory messages, highlighting historic ties to the United States, coupled with statements seeking to boost relations. The optimistic diplomatic tone could not mask the reality, however, that relations suffered a significant setback during the six years Barack Obama was in office. Relations turned for the worse after the “Arab spring” protests in 2011, when Gulf Arab leaders viewed the US government’s abdication of responsibility as unprecedented.

On October 31st, residents in the small town of 16,000 see international relief. Despite the obligatory clear deal in exchange for sanctions relief, the US government’s abandonment of the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) has eroded US credibility, and that is why the United States is not in the headlines and not even in the discussion.

In the aftermath, about 750 complaints were received by the London branch of the Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR), said about 100 anti-Muslim hate crimes.

The optimistic assessment continues as Jubeir lavished praise on some of the new US president’s cabinet choices, including Secretary of State nominee Rex Tillerson, Defense Secretary James Mattis and CIA Director Mike Pompeo.

“Those are very, very impressive individuals,” Jubeir said. “They’re highly capable, they’re highly experienced and they have a very realistic and wise view of the world and America’s role in it.”

No tears were shed in the government-frequented GCC media for Obama’s departure; however, the conference with which the new US president meant that many pundits and analysts leaders drawing crowds on campus were transferred to other schools.

“Overall, the international students here do a nice job of integrating into campus and the community, so they know first-hand it is a very welcoming, friendly place,” said Michael Lee, international student adviser at the university’s Office of International Education. “They know the recent tragedy was an anomaly in an otherwise very welcoming community.”

Cullen Osburn, 27, of Minnesota, was burgled. Notes were left on the vehicle for international students, not American students. The scale of ignorance about Islam and Muslims in this country is an anomaly in an otherwise very welcoming community.

“Some of these attacks are directed at religious beliefs; others are directed at people who do not know each other,” said Hussein. “There is no provocation. “All of those things are not a reason to be attacked,” Hussein said. “They (students) are not necessarily having a conversation with someone before an attack. There is nothing that precedes an attack. Hate crimes that occur are committed by people who do not know each other.”

Raba’i Harris, founder of the Muslim Peace Fellowship and member of the advisory council for the Association of Muslim Chaplains, said acts of ignorance should be met with magnanimity.

There is an underlying unease among many Muslim international students of a darkening mood directed at immigrants following the election of Donald Trump as president.

There is an underlying unease among many Muslim international students of a darkening mood directed at immigrants following the election of Donald Trump as president. The Alabama-based Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC), which monitors hate crimes, reported that from November 9th – Election Day through December 12th, an estimated 112 anti-Muslim incidents occurred.

Although communities in many university towns have shown support for international students, not all students in the United States can be treated with magnanimity.

The scale of ignorance about Islam and Muslims in this country is absolutely astonishing and the best pathway that can be opened for knowledge is the establishment of warm human relationships,” Harris said. “Muslims ought to take the initiative in this regard, not merely wait to react.”

Perhaps one of the biggest challenges for CAIR is accurately identifying hate crimes. Hussein said law enforcement agencies are “learning themselves” how to respond and identify such crimes but victims often do not recognise the motive.

Neither Alnahi’s death nor the recent beating of Saudi student Mohammad Zaid al-Fadheel in Mississippi, Kentucky, has been easy to dismiss.

“There certainly is a bias but victims are often clear about who attacked them,” said Hussein, noting that two-thirds of all hate crimes go unreported.

There is an underlying unease among many Muslim international students of a darkening mood directed at immigrants following the election of Trump.

News & Analysis

Saudi Students in US suffer harassment despite community support

Lester Roberts

Jeddah

There are about 500 Saudi students among the 750 international students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, after a Saudi student was killed last October.

In the aftermath, about 250 students attended a dinner prepared by Saudi students to demonstrate solidarity.

It was a spontaneous reaction to the death of Hussain Saeed Alnahdi, who was assaulted and died on October 31st. Residents in the town of 16,000 sea international students integrating well into the community and appreciate the economic benefits they bring. There are about 100 Saudi students among the 750 international students at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie, after a Saudi student was killed last October.

“Overall, the international students here do a nice job of integrating into campus and the community, so they know first-hand it is a very welcoming, friendly place,” said Michael Lee, international student adviser at the university’s Office of International Education. “They know the recent tragedy was an anomaly in an otherwise very welcoming community.”

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Lester Roberts is an Arab Weekly contributor.

Former US president Barack Obama boards Air Force One at King Khalid International Airport in Riyadh, last April, after participating in a GCC summit.

Gulf

No tears shed in GCC over Obama’s exit
Security crackdown cuts terror attacks but dangers still lurk

Nicholas Blanford

Lebanon's recent presidential election, and the formation of a government have brought some stability to the country's fractured political arena but the country remains at war with terror. Raging in neighbouring Syria and security agencies are few and far behind to stay one step ahead of Islamist militants, the Lebanese military determined to carry out attacks.

On January 21st, a joint force of police and the military intelligence wing of the Internal Security Forces (ISF), arrested a would-be suicide bomber outside a popular café in Beirut's bustling Hamra Street. Omar Assi, a nurse at a hospital in Sidon in southern Lebanon, was reportedly carrying a belt packed with 8kg of explosives and metal shrapnel.

Hours earlier, another suspected bomber was killed in the Wadi Khaled region of north Lebanon. At the end of December, a sleeper cell was broken up in the northern city of Tripoli, where three militants were reportedly planning to launch gun and bomb attacks in Beirut on New Year's Eve. A Western diplomat familiar with the case said this was the most serious in years.

Routine may pass without some reports of suspected militants being apprehended, but the scale of recent arrests may be based on suspicions rather than hard evidence, it is clear that Lebanon remains a prime target for groups such as the Islamic State (IS) and the House of Nevada (JFS), linked to al-Qaeda.

The gradual collapse of divisions has led to a more collaborative security relationship.

That there have been so few successful attacks is widely attributed to greater coordination between Lebanon's notoriously fractious security agencies.

The security situation is under control because the Maaloumet (Security Forces) and the ISF's intelligence arm works closely with military Intelligence, which works closely with Hezbollah," said a Western security official.

"So you have a network where if a suicide bombers slips through one net he's caught in the next," he said.

Lebanon suffered a spate of bombings between July 2013 and June 2014, mostly suicide car bombs detonated in Shia-populated areas that are Hezbollah bastions. Most of the attacks were claimed by a group that said it was the Lebanese branch of al-Qaeda affiliated Jihadi al-Alawi, the former name of JFS.

Most of the car bombs were manufactured in the Qalamoun region of Syria adjacent to the Lebanese border. By the summer of 2014, Hezbollah fighters had swept through Qalamoun, restoring the area to the Syrian government.

As a result, the car bomb attacks stopped. Since then, there have been only three attacks of any significance—a string of suicide bombings in Beirut and northern Lebanon between January and November 2015 that killed 57 people and left 300 wounded.

Until recently, the ISF's intelligence wing, known as the Information Branch, was regarded as close to the Western and Saudi-backed March 14th parliamentary coalition. Military intelligence, on the other hand, has seen an allied to the Iraqi and Syrian-supported March 8th coalition.

However, the gradual collapse of the divisions between March 14 and March 8 over the last two years has led to a more collaborative security relationship.

"Counterterrorism makes up about three-quarters of our work these days and we work closely with the other agencies to catch terrorists before they can attack," a senior ISF intelligence officer told The Arab Weekly.

Other than tighter coordination between the security branches, Lebanon's small geographical size and tangled sectarian demographics provide little operational space for militant cells to gather, plot and execute attacks.

Nevertheless, it is striking that there have been so few successful plots since the summer of 2014 despite the Islamic militants' strong motivation to strike in Lebanon, given the dominant presence of Hezbollah, the relatively large numbers of Westerners living in Beirut and the deployment of international peacekeepers in south Lebanon.

Lebanon remains on edge with war raging in neighbouring Syria.

While the threat of car bombs and suicide attacks persists, one recent discovery has caused particular alarm among foreign intelligence agencies.

On November 13th, the army arrested an arms dealer in the village of Majdel Anjar in the Bekaa Valley. The arms dealer was suspected of providing weapons to his brother, a top militant in the Abdul al-Aziz Brigades, which has carried out several attacks in Lebanon.

Among the weapons uncovered was a Chinese FN-6 anti-aircraft missile launcher. The shoulder-fired weapon, which can shoot down aircraft flying as high as 3,500 metres, is thought to have come from Syria.

Although some Syrian rebel groups have possessed the FN-6 since 2012, it is the first time that an anti-aircraft missile has been discovered in the hands of extremist Sunni groups in Lebanon.

It is unclear if the terrorists had a specific target in mind but the concern in Beirut is that if more anti-aircraft missiles were smuggled into Lebanon from Syria, they could pose a serious threat to commercial aircraft using Beirut's beachside international airport.

"This is the nightmare scenario that keeps us awake at night," said a Western intelligence officer in Beirut.

Nicholas Blanford is the author of "Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah's Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel" (Random House 2011). He lives in Beirut.

Lebanese demonstrators block a street leading to the parliament building in an attempt to prevent MPs from voting for the law to extend their mandates, in Beirut, on November 15th.

Makram Rabah

Beirut

For many, the 1960s brought about a political and cultural change, culminating in May 1961 with what became known as the 1961 law. The law, Walid Jumblatt, the leader of the Druze community and former prime minister, and his allies, chiefly among them the Maronite president's previously unannounced, Taif agreement. It curtailed the leaders' role in Lebanese politics, which was effectively enshrined in the constitution of 1943, and extended the parity with the adoption of the 1989 Taif agreement, exposed the pretence of many of the supposed champions of the hybrid law. For more than six years, it was upheld by all the Lebanese political classes, which refused on various occasions to discuss it in parliament.

Instead of deifying ways to get around and twist legitimate electoral laws to serve personal narrow gains, Lebanon's political parties are better off practising what they preach by adopting key reforms that are required for any fair election, regardless of its model. Allowing competent women to hold office does not require a sanctioned female quota nor a law; adopting a simple ballot list and stopping vote rigging merely requires a conscious decision from the so-called champions of reform. Adopting a modern law, unlike the 1961 one, might be a solution to one of Lebanon's many problems but the country at the end of the day is essentially a sectarian apartheid state that is still stuck in the 19th century, a reality no election law can hide.

Makram Rabah is a History Department lecturer at the American University of Beirut. He is the author of "A Campus at War: Student Politics at the American University of Beirut, 1967-1975".

That '60s Show: Lebanon struggles to adopt an election law

James Dresch

Beirut

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The antagonistic manner in which many Lebanese factions are trying to push through these changes reveals a different reality. Recent statements by Interior Minister Nohad Machnouk, who is tasked with supervising the election process, exposed the pretence of many of the supposed champions of the hybrid law. For more than six years, it was upheld by all the Lebanese political classes, which refused on various occasions to discuss it in parliament.

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That '60s Show: Lebanon struggles to adopt an election law

James Dresch
Palestine Israel

Arab Israelis angry at house demolitions

Noreen Sadik

Qalansawe

Palestinian citizens of Israel are angry after 11 homes in Qalansawe, an Arab town in central Israel, were demolished.

Abu Khaled, standing on the ruins of one of his son’s houses, complained that, in spite of years of appealing, he was refused a building permit, so he built without one. He was served with demolition orders and the next day, the bulldozers came. A demonstration attended by thousands and a general strike by Palestinians around Israel had no effect.

The government bulldozers arrived again eight days later, this time at Um Al-Hiran. A year-old plan to demolish the Bedouin village was realised when hundreds of police entered the village and destroyed eight homes and seven agricultural buildings.

The predudgment of Um Al-Hiran is unique. In 1995, the government removed the residents from Kibbutz Zuhaleh, where they had lived for generations, and relocated them to Um Al-Hiran. However, the village remained unrecognised without infrastructure, water, electricity or any municipal services.

**The Arab population of Israel is facing a severe housing crisis.**

In 2012, the Israeli Supreme Court ruled that Um Al-Hiran could be demolished so a Jewish village called Hiran could be built on its ruins.

Prior to the demolition, Ya’qoub Abu al-Qiyan, whom witnesses said was killed by Israeli fire, and his house were killed by Israeli police. Accusations by police that he was attempting to attack them were proved false upon examination of a video the police released. It showed that Abu al-Qiyan’s car veered in the direction of the police – killing one – after shots were fired at him.

Not only have the demolitions angered Palestinians but the body of Abu al-Qiyan has been held since his death, further inflaming tensions.

A second demonstration by thousands took place in the Arab village of Arara. Parliamentarian Ayman Odeh, chairman of the Arab Joint List, told those gathered that there were 52,000 illegally built structures without licences because of the country’s planning policies.

Since Israel’s establishment in 1948 no new Arab towns have been established.

“Today the conditions for (such an initiative) are better than ever,” said senior Fatah official Azam al-Abd.

But rather influence it as there is an assumption that Trump would be more open to listening to Moslem than previous US presidents.

Fatah and Hamas representatives have asked for Russia’s help to dissolve Trump from moving the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The officials also expressed dissatisfaction with the Quartet – the United States, Russia, the European Union and United Nations – which is working on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

“Russia can play a substantial role in the region,” said senior Hamas official Mousa Abu Marzook. Recent weeks have been very bleak for the Palestinians.

The Paris conference on peace in the Middle East was a failure, as Israel was unwilling to engage in it. The UN Security Council met to discuss Israel’s latest plan to expand Jewish settlements on Palestinian territories but failed to condemn it.

Not only did the Trump administration decline to criticise Israel’s expansion plans, the US State Department said it was consistent with what had been made by Barack Obama’s administration to release $220 million to the Palestinians.

From the Palestinians’ perspective, things are moving from bad to worse. “We must not have the wrong impression that Obama was somehow good to the Palestinians and vetoed six UNSC [UN Security Council] resolutions because they were critical of Israeli policies towards the Palestinians.”

So it is understandable why the Palestinians would turn to Moscow. However, the real question remains: Are the Russians willing or even able to help?

Mamoon Alabbi

Russia is trying to increase its influence on the region.

The real question remains: Are the Russians willing or even able to help?

The Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov (C) meets with representatives of the Palestinian political parties and movements in Moscow, on January 16th.

**Viewpoint**

Mamoon Alabbi

be main Palestinian factions of Fatah and Hamas, following reconciliation talks brokered by Russia in Moscow, have agreed to form a national unity government. Accusations by the government that it was attempting to attack them were proved false upon examination of a video the police released. It showed that Abu al-Qiyan’s car veered in the direction of the police – killing one – after shots were fired at him.

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Mamoon Alabbi is an Arab

Weekly contributing editor based in London.

**Will Russia succeed in brokering Palestinian unity?**

Will Russia succeed in brokering Palestinian unity?
**Ibrahim al-Zoubeidi**

**Special Focus**

**The Trump Factor and MENA**

What's the worst that can happen under Trump?

Ibrahim al-Zoubeidi

Ibn Braheem Zommen is an Iraqi writer.

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**Danger of lies and manipulation under Trump**

Francis Gihsès

People hold signs as they protest against President Donald Trump's planned ban on Muslim travel in Washington Square Park in New York, on January 25, 2017.

In many Middle East countries, Turkey, Eastern Europe and Aghanistan, the US president's utter contempt for the traditional media is a familiar story. Those who believe in the legitimacy of Muhammad Morsi's regime and heralding the imminent fall of Abdel Fattah al-Sisi's dictatorship and the happy return of the Islamic caliphate, you would not believe it. Strangely enough, an Arab journalist who has been reporting his concerns to the media from Trump's "amistad" to his campaign promises is the same media that has been tripping over each other to report on the man who has had so many insults on its mem.

For the sake of pertinence, let us forget that circus and focus on Trump's policies that relate to our vital concerns. These concerns are: our people's security, our countries' futures and respect for our rights and dignity. Here is the gist of some of Trump's foreign policy plans:

- Trump proposes to "unite the divided world around the dictates of American Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the Earth."
- "Defeating the Islamic State" and other radical Islamic terror groups will be our highest priority.
- He will deport all illegal immigrants.
- He will move the US embassy in Israel.
- He will establish security zones in Syria and the rich Arab Gulf countries will pay for them.
- He will not protect any country from ISIS and other radical Islamic terror groups.
- He will kick 100,000 rich Arabs and 10,000 rich Thais out of the US.
- He will not protect any country from ISIS and other radical Islamic terror groups.
- He will make the case for war but across the world, the US president George W. Bush with former Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and the US embassy. So let us not bury our heads in the sand about the realities.

No matter how arrogantly Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and the United States look at the US administration, they cannot change the reality of the US embassy. So let us not bury our heads in the sand about the realities.

If Obama voted against building new colonies in the Palestinian territories, it was because he had suddenly experienced pangs of remorse. He was willing to sell an old score with Netanyahu. It is very well known that neither Trump's administration, nor any other US administration for that matter, will uphold the UN Security Council resolution. No matter how many such resolutions, its fate will be the same.

Perhaps the only thing we hope for is the outbreak of crises in the Middle East and Russia, the risks of a crisis getting out of hand are huge.

Francis Gihsès is an associate fellow at the Center for International Affairs.
Israel, Egypt emerging as Trump's top allies in the Middle East

Thomas Seibert

Washington

Israel and Egypt are emerging as US President Donald Trump's top allies in the Middle East as the new US administration seeks to improve US ties in the region with a focus on countering Iran's influence and fighting Islamic extremism.

A recent visit by US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson to Egypt, for example, was seen as a signal that the US will continue to support the Egyptian military's fight against terrorism, according to sources in the US administration.

Trump's entourage said that Tillerson's visit to Egypt was aimed at discussing the situation in the Middle East, with a focus on countering Iran's influence and fighting terrorism.

With such a move, the US administration seeks to reaffirm its commitment to Israel's security and stressed that counter-terrorism efforts in the Middle East will be a priority for his administration.

The Egyptian president said he was planning to designate the group on their territory, adding that he would work closely with the US to counter terrorism.

In conversation with Sunni, Trump said he was willing to speak with leaders of other US allies such as Turkey, Jordan or the Gulf countries.

A US official who declined to be identified said that Trump's administration would consider the designation of the group as part of a broader strategy to counter terrorism in the Middle East.

With the US decision to designate the group, the Egyptian president said that he was planning to designate the group on their territory, adding that he would work closely with the US to counter terrorism.

A 2016 file picture shows Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu (R) speaking to the then-Republican US presidential candidate Donald Trump in New York.

A US official who declined to be identified said that Trump's administration would consider the designation of the group as part of a broader strategy to counter terrorism in the Middle East.

Trump administration debates designating Muslim Brotherhood as terrorist group

Mark Hosenball

Washington

A debate is underway in the Trump administration about whether to designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist group.

The US administration has considered the group a terrorist organization in the past, but the new administration is reassessing its position.

The adviser said Flynn's team's discussion about the group included a recommendation to designate it as a terrorist organization.

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Trump's US-Israel-Egypt triangle faces other challenges as well. The new president's foreign policy agenda seems to focus on Israel, the US's closest ally, and Egypt, the US's most important partner in the Middle East.

The US president affirmed his unprec-edented commitment to Israel's security and stressed that counter-terrorism efforts in the Middle East will be a priority for his administration.

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The stakes of Morocco’s diplomatic offensive

Moroccan King Mohammed VI, who toured several African countries last year, is pursuing a bold diplomatic offensive to revalidate Morocco’s place in the African Union (AU) — which morphed into the African Union — quit the pan-African bloc because Morocco was part of a new strategy to support RASD’s place in the African Union. In 1999, Rabat proposed a form of autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty for the Western Sahara, which has fewer than 2.5 million inhabitants. The proposal was rejected by the Sahrawi Front, which insists on the right of the Sahrawi people to self-determination in a UN-monitored vote. Since officially requesting to return to the African Union last September, Morocco has set out on a diplomatic offensive backed with a raft of trade agreements, investments and memoranda, even with countries that back RASD, such as Nigeria, Rwanda and Ethiopia.

Unlike his late father, King Hassan II, whose diplomacy targeted mainly Europe, King Mohammed VI is eying Africa as part of Morocco’s south-south cooperation strategy aimed at both the medium and long terms. He appointed new ambassadors to 39 African countries, reflecting Morocco’s determination to take its ties with them to further levels that will be beneficial for all. This diplomacy should continue if Morocco wants to win hearts and minds of African leaders to support its return to the African Union, which requires the support of at least 30 of the bloc’s members.

King Mohammed VI recently led a ministerial council in Marrakech during which the Constitutive Act of the African Union and its additional protocol were adopted. The Moroccan parliament elected a speaker three months after legislative elections that had left the country without a government. The Moroccan monarch has called on parliament to ratify laws quickly to clear the way for Morocco’s return to the African Union. However, Morocco’s bid to return to the African Union is fraught with obstacles from Algeria and South Africa.

Algeria, which claims neutrality in the Western Sahara conflict, has been engaged in a frenzied diplomatic counteroffensive against Morocco since Rabat’s announcement of its desire to rejoin the African Union. The Algerian government is trying to save RASD’s place in the African Union for fears of seeing the bloc from the Western Sahara is not an integral part of the North African kingdom. Rabat denounced Zuma’s manoeuvre on December 20th for “unjustifiably delaying” the dissemination of its request. Algerian media said Dlamini-Zuma demanded a written commitment by which Morocco explicitly accepts AU values and principles, including respect of the borders inherited from colonialism and the ratification of the Constitutive Act. Dlamini-Zuma, the ex-wife of South African President Jacob Zuma, is aware that she will not get a reply from Morocco, as such a message would amount to acknowledging that Western Sahara is not an integral part of the North African kingdom. Pretoria officially recognised RASD in 2003 when Dlamini-Zuma was South African Foreign minister. However, Dlamini-Zuma seems to have forgotten that Morocco was among South Africa’s supporters — both militarily and politically — in its struggle against apartheid. South African leader Nelson Mandela travelled to Morocco in March 1962 and met Abdelkarim al-Kbat, Moroccan minister of State for African Affairs and a former guerrilla leader, to seek help from Rabat.

In April 1999, Mandela thanked King Hassan II and Khatib for supporting his battle both financially and militarily in a bid to save RASD from the brink. Morocco’s accession is formalised after many African countries expressed support for Rabat. South Africa’s Mohamed Dlamini-Zuma, chairwoman of the AU Commission, sought to delay the sending of Morocco’s request for all membership to the members. Rabat denounced Zuma’s manoeuvre on December 20th for “unjustifiably delaying” the dissemination of its request. Algerian media said Dlamini-Zuma demanded a written commitment by which Morocco explicitly accepts AU values and principles, including respect of the borders inherited from colonialism and the ratification of the Constitutive Act. Dlamini-Zuma, the ex-wife of South African President Jacob Zuma, is aware that she will not get a reply from Morocco, as such a message would amount to acknowledging that Western Sahara is not an integral part of the North African kingdom. Pretoria officially recognised RASD in 2003 when Dlamini-Zuma was South African Foreign minister. However, Dlamini-Zuma seems to have forgotten that Morocco was among South Africa’s supporters — both militarily and politically — in its struggle against apartheid. South African leader Nelson Mandela travelled to Morocco in March 1962 and met Abdelkarim al-Kbat, Moroccan minister of State for African Affairs and a former guerrilla leader, to seek help from Rabat.

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Possible Italy-Libya deal on migration issues

Alessandra Bocchi

**Tunis**

Italy has become the first ma-

Jular to take back thousands more. In

them leaving the country and

agreed to try to stop the number

of people crossing over the Medi-

sea waters warm again and more

people went missing off Libya’s

cost to Italy. About 4,500 people

crossed in central Mediterranean in 2016 from

in Europe, attempted to cross the

route to Italy because they mostly

do not have the capacity to manage the flows and the country is still divided.

Italy closed its embassy in Libya in 2015 as the country was strug-

gling to move forward four years after long-time dictator Muammar

Qaddafi was killed in the 2011 up-

risings. Since then, smugglers have acted with impunity, as lawlessness prevails in the absence of a uni-

fied government.

Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat had said Libya had rejected an original migrant deal proposed by Italy.

“The Italian ambassador is re-

turning to Valletta on 22 days of absence. A great gesture of friend-

ship to the Libyan people. Now more controls on migrant depar-

tures,” Italian Foreign Minister An-

gelino Alfano told The European.

A migration deal between Italy and Libya could come one

reached in 2008, when Italy agreed

to donate more than $4 million to help Libya stop migrants leaving its shores. A Maltese document, discussed January 19th by EU en-

voys in Brussels, proposed moving the migration closer Libyan territorial waters, where Libyan forces could have “strong and lasting EU sup-

port,” reported Reuters.

In an interview with Italian news-

paper La Stampa, Alfano said: “We have to achieve a conclusion and repatriations, and I’m working to conclude agreements that will diminish migrant arrivals by stop-

ping them from leaving their home countries.”

EU officials welcomed Italy’s re-

nursed engagement in Libya because they say migration from the Medi-

terranean is threatening the integrity of the union. Data from the UN High Commissioner for Refugees shows that nearly 500,000 people have attempted the journey by sea into Europe since 2015, with more than 10,000 reported dead or missing.

Maltese Prime Minister Joseph Muscat, who holds the rotating EU presidency, on January 19th said Libya had rejected an original mi-

grant deal proposed by Italy. Mus-

cat stressed how a Turkish-style migrant agreement last March, in which migrants were halted from moving into the European Union by providing billions of dollars in aid and visa-free travel to Europe for Turkish citizens, should be “re-

laid” in the Mediterranean to solve the migrant crisis, the Finan-

cial Times reported.

“There is no doubt that unless the essence of the deal Turkey is replicated in the central Mediter-

nanean basin, Europe will face a major migration crisis,” he told European lawmakers.

EU migration chief Dimitris Avramopoulos rejected the Turk-

ish-style migration proposal, argu-

ing North Africa is too unstable.

“Let me tell you that we cannot duplicate the EU-Turkey state-

ment, the situation is not similar in Libya,” he said in a meeting January 16th with MEPs on the civil liber-

ties committee, the EUsolver reported. Avramopoulos endorsed Italy’s renewed support for the GNA and looked for other solutions in involving cross-border migrant flows of Sub-Saharan Africans into Libya, including working with Lib-

yan authorities.

Italy’s outreach has also faced vo-

cissious opposition, however. Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army, described Italy’s renewed diplomatic mission as a “military operation,” the Lib-

ya Herald reported.

Worries over Russia sending na-

val forces to the eastern shores of Libya in support of Haftar have also surfaced.

“Libya is an incredibly fragile or failed state, and the GNA… is cur-

rently not a credible interlocutor to deal with the migrant crisis,” said Eugenio Cusumano, for several years fessor in international relations at Leiden University, who specialises in international security and has worked in various migrant rescue operations in Italy.

He said migrant centres in Italy were saturated and that some oper-

ations were insufficient to tackle irregular traffic.

Alessandra Bocchi is a Rome-based journalist.

Crisis looms as GE ups gear for new migrant wave

Lorne Cook

Valletta

T
eens of thousands of peo-

ple are expected to try to cross the border un-

worthy boats in war-torn Libya this year in a desperate effort to reach European shores.

Many of the 8,000 people, more economic migrants with little chance of being allowed to stay in Europe, attempted to cross the central Mediterranean in 2016 from Libya, including 2000 people from the Horn of Africa trying to reach Europe.

Hundreds of migrants, bowing winter weather, took to the sea in January. In the latest reminder of the journey’s perils, more than 100 people went missing off Libya’s coast in mid-January after a mi-

grant boat sunk.

Some European leaders are warn-

ing of a fresh migration crisis when sea waters warm again.

The reality of Libya right now is that there is no unified government controlling all parts of the country and no end of groups willing to up-

end things if there is an advantage in it for them,” said Carlo Binda, a Libya expert with Malta-based po-

litical and development consultan-

cy Binda Consulting International. Libya’s neighbour Egypt appears a more viable option. Many people have set out for Europe from Egypt in recent weeks with migrants from the Horn of Africa trying to avoid dangerous Libya and, in-
creasingly, Egyptians themselves, the European Union’s border agen-

cy Frontex said.

Despite some instability, Egyp-

tian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, a former general who led the 2013 military removal of an elected Is-

lamist president, is a man with whom the Europeans say they can do business. Sisi also wields plenty of influence in Libya. Egypt’s econ-

omy has been battered by unrest since the 2011 uprising that toppled longtime autocrat Hosni Mubarak.

“Egypt is the country with which one could come to some sort of agreement,” Maltese Foreign Min-

ister George Vella told. “There is some interest in the fact that they have got their own problem with migration.

If there is one thing the world’s biggest trading bloc does well, it is raise funds to pay for its problems. Time is of the essence. The Euro-

pean Union has for several years tried to cobble together migration policies while people died at sea.

The refugee emergency, Europe’s worst since the second world war, also has raised tensions among EU members. Some have erected anti-
migrant fences or reintroduced border controls amidst deep dis-

agreement over how to manage the challenge.

“Things are getting complicated. I would rather face the music now,” Muscat said.
Turkey parliament adopts bill giving president broad powers

Constance Letsoh
Istanbul

While the world’s attention turned to the inauguration of US President Donald Trump, Turkey’s parliament voted on a change to the constitution that could affect the country for generations — with many fearing a dangerous political shift.

The executive presidency envisaged by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) would constitute a radical political change for Turkey. The effect on the country’s democratic future would likely be dire. The proposed constitutional amendments would pave the way for Erdogan, who has been in power for more than 13 years, first as the country’s prime minister and since 2014 as president, to become the only effective authority.

More than 160 media outlets have been shut down since July 2016.

Proponents of the bill argue that it will bring stability and prosperity to the country, but critics and rights groups have sharply criticised the amendments as a fundamental threat to the country’s democratic future.

The changes to the constitution would abolish the office of prime minister and allow the president, to be elected directly every five years, to rule by decree. The amendments would also give the president power to appoint and dismiss ministers, dissolve and reconstitute parliament and formalise the president’s power over a judiciary that is effectively already under Erdogan’s control.

This new-style presidency would allow the Turkish president to be an executive head of state, having direct control over who his party allows to stand for office. The proposed amendments would also seriously hamper parliament’s oversight of the executive.

“Parliament has committed suicide,” exiled journalist and former editor-in-chief of the opposition daily Cumhuriyet Can Dundar tweeted dryly after the Turkish parliament approved the last of six amendments in the early hours of January 20.

The amendment received more than the necessary two-thirds vote, due to a deal between the AKP and the ultranationalist National Movement Party (MHP). Prime Minister Binali Yildirim thanked MHP leader Devlet Bahceli for the “huge support.”

The main opposition Republican People’s Party (CHP) and the pro-Kurdish People’s Democracy Party (HDP) fiercely protested the bill, arguing it would turn Erdogan into “the sultan of Turkey.”

“A decade ago, Turkey seemed on a path towards greater respect for human rights, democracy and rule of law,” Williamson said in his release. “The plans for an executive presidency will take Turkey in the opposite direction and destroy whatever positive legacy of reform the AKP had left.”

The move comes at a time autoc- racy is on the rise in Turkey. The state of emergency imposed after a failed military coup last July allows the government to bypass parliament and rule by decree.

Following the July 15th coup at tempt, authorities launched a fierce crackdown on alleged coup plotters and sympathisers of Fethullah Gulen, a preacher blamed for the coup, and opponents unconnected to him.

The government has effectively muzzled most of the independent and critical media. More than 160 media outlets have been shut down since July 2016 and more than 120 journalists and media workers languish in Turkish jails.

More than 120,000 civil servants have been sacked in massive purges and more than 42,000 people have been arrested pending trial on terrorism charges for alleged involvement or association with either the Gulen movement or the outlawed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK).

Among those jailed are 11 members of parliament from the main pro-Kurdish party, including the party’s co-chair Selahattin Demirtas and Figen Yuksekdag. None of the jailed parliamentarians had the chance to debate or vote on the proposed constitutional changes.

The approved bill will be submitted to public vote, likely to take place in April. It will only require a simple majority of the vote to pass. While the AKP and the MHP have started their “Vote Yes” campaign, the CHP, HDP and dissenters within the MHP have vowed to rally against it. However, as the state of emergency does not allow for demonstrations and public rallies without official permits, much of the opposition’s campaign will need to rely on social media, which is censored and policed by the government.

If the proposed changes are accepted in the April vote, they will go into effect after elections in 2019 but Erdogan will be able to officially rejoin the AKP immediately after the referendum.

Recent opinion polls indicate the country is divided over the bill. Analysts point to the sluggish economy, security crises at home and abroad and the ability of the opposition to unite among other factors that will influence the outcome of the April plebiscite. The atmosphere in Tur- key is sure to remain tense as pro-ponents and opponents of the bill try to garner support.

Constance Letsoh is a contributor to The Arab Weekly in Istanbul.

Turkish educational system: Darwin out, jihad in

Yavuz Baydar

OME of the most alarming figures about recent Turkey depict its dilapidated educational system. An international Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report released in December placed Turkey second from bottom among 35 Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries in mathematics, science and reading scores for 15-year-old students. Turkey slipped an average of seven places in those areas since the 2012 PISA survey.

The report’s findings highlight that, compared to other OECD countries, Turkish teachers have the longest working hours, the highest number of students per class and the lowest starting salaries.

“The Turkish education system is in a coma.” Ceyhun Arig, a deputy of the main-opposition Republican People’s Party

Turkey’s Prime Minister Binali Yildirim (C) accompanied by some of his lawmakers cast their votes following Turkey’s parliament debate proposing amendments to the country’s constitution, in Ankara, on January 20th.

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Yavuz Baydar is a Turkish journalist and occasional contributor to The Arab Weekly.

The AKP crisis has prolonged the amassed state power over a judiciary that is effectively already under Erdogan’s control.

Kemal Ataturk as president and his crucial role in keeping Turkey a secular state in the second world. As his name has been decreased to a minimum.

Turkish Minister of Education and Science Sadi Güntay indicated on social media, which is censored and policed by the government, that “it is a draft to be revisited after reactions.” Yet the mistrust of the government by secular Turks has deepened so much that it is taken for granted objections would be ignored. Insensitiveness and imposition are the pattern of the AKP, which remains under fire for not consulting stakeholders, includ- ing unions and parent-teacher associations. Adding salt to the wound, the emergency decrees following July’s coup attempt led to sackings or suspension of more than 10,000 teachers, many identified as secular, left-leaning or Kurdish. Their replacements have been systematically chosen based on partnership rather than skills, Turkey’s Education and Science Workers’ Union claimed.

Under emergency rule, there is no denying that anti-secular and anti-Kurdish actions dominating the administrative echelons of Turkey are having a field day. Far worse is the fact that the educa- tional system of Turkey was weakened and has lost its identity in the name of security and national interest. The K-12 curriculum has been radically revised, creating a lot of concern among educators.

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“A 2016 photo shows Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan posing with students at a religious school in Istanbul.

The K-12 curriculum has been radically revised, creating a lot of concern among educators.

Names of the founding fathers of the republic have been revised radically in the new curriculum.

Turkey’s Prime Minister Binali Yildirim (C) accompanied by some of his lawmakers cast their votes following Turkey’s parliament debate proposing amendments to the country’s constitution, in Ankara, on January 20th.
Iran’s judiciary gets dragged into the political dogfight

Gareth Smyth
Beirut

Iran’s 1979 constitution proclaimed the judiciary an “independent power” headed by a “just and pious leader” – a “guardian of the Islamic law” – and guaranteed the separation of religion and politics in the Islamic Republic. It set the stage for Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to become the supreme leader, Iran’s judiciary gets dragged into the political dogfight

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With new government in place, Lebanon works on the economy

Lisa Barrington
Beirut

fter years of political deadlock, Lebanon has a new government. Now it needs a new economy. Battered by war in neighboring Syria, neglected by wrangling politicians and caught in rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the pillars of the economy—remittances from overseas workers, tourism and real estate—are not what they were.

Long term, Lebanon is searching for new sources of growth, which fell from 8.9% to less than 2% when Syria’s civil war began in 2011. Beirut is working to start oil and gas exploration, offering support to technology start-ups and urging its vast diaspora to return their expertise and bank accounts home.

Before these plans can be realised, however, the government, which spent two-and-a-half years without a president, has an urgent to-do list.

The fiscal deficit and debt-to-GDP ratio is forecast for this year by the World Bank at 15.5%.

The country’s infrastructure has been awash with revenue since the 1990s. Roads are clogged with cars, beaches are littered with waste, internet links are slow or patchy and costs to power and water supplies are frequent.

Reams of legislation, such as the hydrocarbon industry tax law and the privatisation of the stock market, await completion.

At the top of Lebanon Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s list is a budget, which the country has not had since 2005, and a better environment, which the country has not had since the 1990s.

The absence of political leadership, the central bank has quietly steered policy, using stimulus packages and financial engineering to keep foreign reserves stable and growth ticking. It has also guaranteed housing, energy and business loans, testing the globally accepted principle of central bank distance from political decisions.

“Without one, there will be little chance of tackling Lebanon’s growing fiscal deficit and debt-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio,” forecast this year by the World Bank at 15.5%, the third highest in the world.

The government’s term may be as short as five months if long-overdue parliamentary elections take place on time but Hanaa said it can work on telecoms and the electricity shorts that drive people to look up to expensive private generators.

It also plans to resolve problems with rubbish disposal that spurned anti-government protests in 2016. The cabinet includes an anti-corruption minister for the first time.

The fate of Lebanon’s economy is important not only for the livelihoods of 4 million Lebanon but for avoiding even more chaos in the Middle East. The country is home to more than 1 million Syrian refugees and its own history of instability.

Following its 1975-90 civil war, much of Lebanon’s reconstruction focused on re-establishing its tourism image as the Paris of the Middle East, particularly for wealthy Gulf Arabs.

Beirut’s cooler climate and less restrictive social mores are a big draw for people from conserva- tive Saudi Arabia but bombs of civil strife, assassinations, deadlocked government and regional rivalries have taken their toll.

An executive at a luxury hotel in Beirut last summer lamented the death of wealthy Gulf Arabs and their 80,000-room service bills. Saudi Arabia advised citizens last February against travel to Lebanon, part of a dispute over the powerful role of the Iran-backed Lebanese Shia group Hezbollah.

Lebanese President Michel Aoun, a Christian ally of Hezbollah, said after a force-marching visit to Bi- yadh in January that he was confident Gulf tourists would return.

In the absence of political leadership, the central bank has quietly steered policy, using stimulus packages and financial engineering to keep foreign reserves stable and growth ticking. It has also guaranteed housing, energy and business loans, testing the globally accepted principle of central bank distance from political decisions.

“The first sign of the government’s seriousness if they will just provide a new budget,” Hanaa said. “This is the priority now.” Without one, there will be little chance of tackling Lebanon’s growing fiscal deficit and debt-to-gross domestic product (GDP) ratio,” forecast this year by the World Bank at 15.5%, the third highest in the world.

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Iraq signs $400 million deal with Sudan central bank

Iraq has agreed to deposit $400 million in its Sudanese central bank to help economic development in the African country, state media said.

The latest Iranian economic assistance to Khartoum aims “to enable it to achieve sustainable economic and social development and overcome challenges”, said Mohammed al-Souadah, director-general of the government-owned Abu Dhabi Fund for Development.

Sudan Central Bank Governor Hassan Babdour said the deposit came at an “important time” to “strengthen monetary and fiscal stability and support liquidity and central bank foreign reserves”.

Sudan’s economy has been heavily affected by the loss of nearly 75% of oil earnings following South Su- dan’s secession in 2011, depriving Khartoum of a key source of foreign currency to purchase food and other imports.

Kuwait parliament launches bid to curb austerity steps

Kuwait’s parliament is trying to restrict the cabinet’s ability to impose new fees on citizens and reduce price subsidies, an effort that threatens government plans to strengthen state finances in the face of low oil prices.

Opposition candidates won about 43 of 50 seats in elections last November that were seen by many Kuwaitis as a referendum on austerity measures. That gave the opposition more power to oppose govern- ment initiatives.

Saia al-Hashim, a spokesman for the Movement for a Democratic and Fair Financial and Economic Committee, said the government had used “whispering and cancelling a law, passed by the previous government, that would give it a rise in electricity and water tariffs.

MPs also proposed a measure con- firming the right of the National As- sembly to regulate and approve any new government proposals.

The measures would constrain government efforts to save money by reducing energy subsidies and increasing non-oil revenues.
I n t e r v i e w
Egypt’s Planning minister upbeat about future

**Hassan Abdel Zaher**

Egyptian Planning Minister Ashraf Al-Arabi.

**Central Bank to help Cairo.** The poverty rate is 27.8% after commodity prices shot up and the government slashed electricity, water and energy subsidies. After spending 81% of the budget on the salaries of 18 million civil servants and food subsidies, Cairo only has 9% of the budget for development projects. The tight budget left little room for confidence outside Cairo’s office in the ability of government to implement the strategy. But detractors say a government incapable of cleaning streets, controlling commodity prices and offering decent health services can’t be making Egypt a top economy. “Those who love the vision miss one thing. Things might not have turned out as expected, but they are better when they turn into realities that make the lives of the people better,” he said.

Abadi said he and fellow cabinet members would do everything in their power to make Vision 2030 a reality. “We are confident that the economic reform programme designed within the vision will help our country get over its economic hardships,” he said. “To everybody I say: Trust the abilities of your country. Development is like war. It cannot be won without self-confidence.”

**Hassan Abdel Zaher** is a Cairo-based contributor to The Arab Weekly.

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**Baghdad comes to Cairo’s rescue, but at what cost?**

**Jareer Elais**

Baghdad comes to Cairo’s rescue, but at what cost?

Iraq is throwing the cash-strapped government of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi an economic lifeline by selling oil to Cairo effectively at cost. In return, Baghdad is no longer beholden to the Saudis for foreign currency reserves. Most of the remaining oil belongs to other countries, which deposited them in Egypt’s Central Bank to help Cairo.

**The road to change is always difficult.** Planning Minister Ashraf Al-Arabi.

**With 94 million consumers Egypt is a huge market for investors and producers.**

**Economy**

**Jearie Elais reports on energy issues for The Arab Weekly. He is based in Washington.**

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**EgyptimportedfromIraqbetween1millionand2millionbarrelsofcrudepermonth.**

**Egypt, for its part, has responded fuelled by a desire to maintain and even enhance its financial assistance and has bribe at the expected political subjugation as the cost of the kingdom’s patronage. Part of this frustration for Egypt is its diminished leadership role as a regional Sunni power following the toppling of Hosni Mubarak as president six years ago.**

Saudi Arabia has been one of the biggest financial supporters of the Sisi regime, with Riyadh providing the Egyptian economy with $2 billion a year and oil products supply dual valued at $2 billion during the term of the IMF’s $12 billion loan approved by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in November, the Sisi government introduced a value-added tax and reduced energy subsidies, steps that were mandated by the IMF but are unpopular with the Egyptian people.

The deal signed last spring involved Saudi Arabia’s oil giant Aramco providing Egyptian state oil firm Egyptian General Petroleum Corporation (EGPC) with 700,000 barrels of refined oil products. In October, Aramco abruptly halted the supplies over the increasing diplomatic differences between the two countries, ECPE demanded that the Indian government export crude to Egypt on credit to counter Riyadh’s “blackmail.”

In late December, Molla, at an Organisation of Arab Oil Exporting Countries (OAPEC) meeting in Cairo, said that while Egypt already purchased Iraqi oil through international markets, “we hope to have a direct government-to-government agreement.”

The minister indicated that the volumes Egypt would import from Iraq could range between 1 million and 2 million barrels of crude per month and that the two governments hoped to have an arrangement finalised during the first quarter of 2017. In an interview January 11th, Ambassador to Egypt Habbii al-Sadr said an agreement to supply Cairo with 1 million barrels per month of Basra Light crude with facilitated payment terms would go in effect within days. One of the defining moments in the souring Saudi-Egyptian relationship came in October when Egypt backed a Russian-sponsored UN Security Council draft resolution on Syria that called for a ceasefire but specifically did not address ending air or even restriction of a no-fly zone, both aspects included in a Russian-sponsored resolution meant to respond to the escalating humanitAry crisis in Aleppo.

In addition to Cairo’s warmer ties with Moscow, the Sisi regime was unhappy with Egypt’s unwillingness to send ground troops to Yemen to support Riyadh’s fight against Iran-backed Houthi rebels as well as Cairo’s continued poor economic performance. “The ongoing economic hardships,” he said, “plans are always good when they are ink on paper but they are better when they turn into realities that make the lives of the people better.”

However, Abadi said he and fellow cabinet members would do everything in their power to make Vision 2030 a reality. “We are confident that the economic reform programme designed within the vision will help our country get over its economic hardships,” he said. “To everybody I say: Trust the abilities of your country. Development is like war. It cannot be won without self-confidence.”

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**A 2016 picture shows Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi (R) meeting with his Iraqi counterpart Fuad Masum in Cairo.**

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Harvard University opens research office in Tunis

Stephen Quillen

Tunis

Harvard University’s Centre of Middle Eastern Studies (CMES) has opened its first international research office in Tunisia. This office, which aims to serve as “a base for in-depth research and analysis” in the Middle East and North Africa, was formally inaugurated on January 17th, 2020. Officials at Harvard and Tunisian businessmen and Harvard alumnus Hazem Ben-Gacem, who said he hoped to see the number of Harvard students in Tunisia reach 100 in the coming years.

The move by one of the United States’ top-ranked universities is likely to draw elite academics from around the world to Tunisia and provide unique educational opportunities for Harvard and Tunisian scholars.

Harvard’s presence in Tunisia promises to foster foreign interest in the country.

“From the beginning, the hope has been to establish an outpost where Harvard faculty and students would come to discover Tunisia – its history, its culture, its people – and integrate this experience into their education,” said Ben-Gacem to the Harvard Gazette, the official online publication of Harvard University. “I am very excited by this first step towards a substantial presence in Tunisia.”

The university’s website said the office, inaugurated January 17th, plans to host academic seminars, conferences and workshops and provide “assistance to Tunisian students pursuing studies at Harvard University and elsewhere.”

With CMES launching several programmes in connection with the Tunis office, the move has been met with enthusiasm by Harvard students and Tunisian academics.

“Shared values of promoting freedom and the rule of law, together with Harvard’s long history, rich civilisation and its exceptionalism, that has made our country the natural choice for Harvard CMES,” Khalil Amiri, co-founder and secretary-general of the Arab Governance Institute (AGI) and dean of the Mediterranean Institute of Technology in Tunis, wrote to Harvorf for their opening ceremony for Harvard’s office.

Harvard’s office is challenging other academic institutions to step up their engagement with Tunisia. Columbia University, said to be in the process of expanding its presence in the country, is offering a 3-week summer programme based in Tunis this year. The programme, which groups Columbia participants with students in the region, focuses on democratic transitions and constitutional engineering in the Middle East.

Last year, lawyers and engineering professors from Columbia University and Tunisia participated in academic exchange trips related to the educational process. Often described as a bridge between Africa, Europe, and the Middle East, Tunisia is well situated to function as a hub for academics and researchers. The country’s unique post-revolutionary trajectory, as well as its relationship to Africa and the Middle East, attracts a wide range of scholarly interests, including Arabic language, Islamic studies and democracy and economic development.

Harvard’s presence in Tunisia promises to foster foreign interest in the country, one of the main goals of November’s international investment conference, Tunisia 2020. Ben-Gacem was also a major participant in Tunisia 2020. Appointed as co-commissioner of the conference by Tunisia’s Prime Minister Youssef Chahed, Ben-Gacem was responsible for discussing investment with various shareholders and managing funding of national projects.

From the Tunisian town of Béni Khalid, Ben-Gacem graduated from Harvard in 1992 with a degree in economics. He works as managing director of corporate investment for the European division of Inventcorp, a Bahrain-based private equity firm. Ben-Gacem said Harvard’s presence in Tunisia promises to foster foreign interest in the country, one of the main goals of November’s international investment conference, Tunisia 2020. Ben-Gacem was also a major participant in Tunisia 2020.

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Restrictions, intimidation dent freedom of speech in Iraq

Oumayma Omar

Baghdad

In the name of religion… a cover for thieves,” activist Ali Sattar shouted during protests denouncing ram raids, violent lootings and extrajudicial killings in Baghdad. Protesters ate in the name of religion… a cover for thieves,” activist Ali Sattar shouted during protests denouncing ram raids, violent lootings and extrajudicial killings in Baghdad. Protesters denounce ram raids and other forms of violence against civilians.

“Freedom of speech is available in different forms and red lines have been crossed in many instances against religious and political figures, and there are tremendous constraints and limits, especially in accessing information… The margin of freedom might be very narrow. However, acquiring it is not impossible,” Aljidi contended.

Sattar said, “The battle will be long and strenuous. It will be a struggle against corruption and the forces of destruction.”

He argues that lawlessness, the weakness of legal institutions and the proliferation of arms in the hands of private militias “encouraged many to encroach on people’s freedoms and rights, especially press people and activists.”

Sattar said the “only gain” achieved after the toppling of Saddam Hussein’s dictatorship in 2003 was the conception of public freedoms in the Iraqi constitution. “The idea was that in order to ensure our rights by rejecting all forms of mistreatment and attempts to suppress our rights, we have to work towards ensuring that our freedoms and rights are protected.”

Oumayma Omar, based in Baghdad, is a contributor to The Arab Weekly and the Culture and Society sections of The Arab Weekly.

Image 375x145 to 677x545

Image 375x853 to 836x1143

A protestor holds a portrait of Iraqi journalist Alaa al-Sawqi during a demonstration calling for her release, last December in Basra, southern Iraq. (AFP)
Women at wheel of ‘Pink Taxis’ challenge Jordan norms

Kamal Taha

Amman

Nisrin Akoubeh checks the oil and water before getting into her taxi and pulling into Amman’s heavy traffic for another day of shuttling other women across the Jordanian capital.

The red-haired mother of three is among those who want to turn taxi driving into an acceptable profession for women, challenges to Jordan’s social norms. The 31-year-old widow and former nurse drives one of the service of Pink Taxis, which are driven by women for women passengers. Many of their customers are nurses on late shifts, university students or mothers who shuttle children to and from nursery or school. Wearing a pink shirt and blue tie as she navigates Amman’s congested roads, Akoubeh said she often picks up visiting Saudis whose husbands do not allow them to ride unaccompanied with male drivers.

“I thank God that I have lots of well-behaved customers,” she said.

Ghena al-Asmar, a 19-year-old nurse who drives one of the fleet of Pink Taxis, said she feels safer riding in the women-only cars.

“When I finish my studies at university in the evening or when I leave the house at night, I prefer to take these taxis because it is a woman-an taking a woman somewhere,” she said.

“I don’t think there’s any shame in a woman working as a taxi driver. It’s a proof of me taking any other job.”

Approximately 500,000 women in Jordan have driver’s licenses, about 20% of the country’s drivers, the national traffic department said.

Akoubeh said some people give her encouragement but “there is always someone to remind me that this is men’s work and you should be in the home.”

A woman who often uses the service, said: “We are seeking the complete elimination of Article 522 but women’s nationality right is a complicated issue, many women are against it because it pertains to the country’s demographic structure. Christians consider this subject an existential matter. It will create discrepancies in the professional balance,” the minister noted.

Officials agree that such a right would allow Palestinian refugees as well as Syrian, who are Sunni Muslims, to gain Lebanese nationality if they marry Lebanese women, thus upsetting the delicate sectarian balance.

“We will raise the voice and carry women’s cause at home and abroad. Political leaders are becoming more receptive to women’s issues. It is my cause now, so let’s hope for the better,” Ogasapian said.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society section editor.

“Women’s issues are not a concern for women only, but for the whole society.”

Minister Jean Ogasapian

Society

Interview

The man in charge of Lebanese women’s affairs speaks out

Samar Kadi

Beirut

T he appointment of a man to head Lebanon’s Ministry of Women’s Affairs has been greeted with concern and criticism, but the measure was welcomed by Pearson Acam, minister Jean Ogasapian said women’s rights were as much a matter for men.

“Women’s issues are not a concern for women only; they are a concern for the whole society. It is important to include men in achieving equal gender rights. Men should get involved in the struggle for equitable gender rights as much as women,” Ogasapian said The Arab Weekly in an interview.

Ogasapian, from Prime Minister Saad Hariri’s centre-right Future Movement party, is still new to his job. His big office was mostly empty, except for the main desk and a seating area to the side. Boxes and files were stacked in one corner under a photo of Lebanese President Michel Aoun, next to a large national flag.

He explained that improving women’s status in the Arab world, especially in times of conflicts and refugee crises, is a tool for fighting terrorism.

“Educating women, improving their conditions and giving them an effective role in society helps in combating poverty and ignorance and consequently in combating extremism that could eventually lead to terrorism,” he said.

Ogasapian said Lebanon needs a ministry to look after women’s issues for a transitional period, until the patriarchal mentality of the society starts to change.

“In Lebanon, women’s associations are old and have a long history in the struggle to achieve equality, but we need to accomplish equality not only in the texts but also in the minds.”

Lebanon generally fares well in terms of human rights protection and women enjoy greater autonomy than in many nearby countries, but they are still only partially represented in politics. Notably, there are only four women serving in Lebanon’s 128-member parliament — meaning less than 4% of elected seats go to women, a low figure even in the Middle East. One only member of the new cabinet is a woman: Inaya Ezzeddine, state minister for Administrative Development Affairs.

“Women’s issues are against it because it pertains to the country’s demographic structure. Christians consider this subject an existential matter. It will create discrepancies in the professional balance,” the minister noted.

Syria is mentioned in Lebanese law, although the country is becoming increasingly liberal. For instance, marriage and divorce laws in Lebanon heavily favour men.

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Syria is mentioned in Lebanese law, although the country is becoming increasingly liberal. For instance, marriage and divorce laws in Lebanon heavily favour men.

“Our women have big capacities, education and skills and have succeeded in improving themselves in the private sector and in different professions, including the judiciary, medical, business and even information technology. Their potentials are big. Nonetheless, they are not able to reach leading public and political positions,” Ogasapian noted.

“The problem is in the culture and in the patriarchal mentality of the society.”

Hearing’s government is expected to implement an electoral law before parliamentary elections scheduled for May that may include a quota for women.

“We are aiming for a 30% female quota and hope in any case to have no less than 20% of parliament seats. However, it should be a provision and not a law,” Ogasapian said.

Drawing a comparison between gender equality in Lebanon and Tunisia, which enshrined women’s legal rights as early as the 1950s, Ogasapian said: “In Tunisia, the laws gave women a significant role, whereas in Lebanon and because of the social structure, women have advanced and now play an important role in society, especially at the professional level.”

Challenges awaiting Ogasapian are big and the list of issues under assessment by international organisations, including the United Nations, International Monetary Fund, World Bank and other donors in women’s empowerment are among key reasons for creating the new portfolio.

The prime minister also reckoned that there should be a ministry to follow up on women’s affairs because it is a matter in which he is keen on having a positive input,” Ogasapian said.

“We want to break the culture of shame and prove to Arabs and the Arab world that women are strong and are able to work in any area that could be monopolised by men,” she said.

“Women have been able to drive normal cars for a long time, so why shouldn’t they drive taxis?”

Akoubeh said these women are not a minority but for the whole society.

“Every glass ceiling can be broken and we have succeeded in imposing big capacities, education and skills favour men.

“We are seeking the complete elimination of Article 522 but women’s nationality right is a complicated issue, many women are against it because it pertains to the country’s demographic structure. Christians consider this subject an existential matter. It will create discrepancies in the professional balance,” the minister noted.

Official agree that such a right would allow Palestinian refugees as well as Syrian, who are Sunni Muslims, to gain Lebanese nationality if they marry Lebanese women, thus upsetting the delicate sectarian balance.

“We will raise the voice and carry women’s cause at home and abroad. Political leaders are becoming more receptive to women’s issues. It is my cause now, so let’s hope for the better,” Ogasapian said.

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Lebanon’s Ministry of Women’s Affairs Jean Ogasapian.

“Improving women’s status in the Arab world is a tool for combating terrorism.”

Minister Jean Ogasapian

I want to break the culture of shame and prove to Arabs and the Arab world that women are strong,” said Abou al-Haj.

“Women are more careful and considerate drivers,” said Eid Abu al-Haj.

I get to know new people every day,” said the head of an investment group.

Driving in Amman is not easy. Home to 4 million people and 1.4 million vehicles, including more than 11,000 taxis, the city is prone to choking congestion.

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Driving in Amman is not easy. Home to 4 million people and 1.4 million vehicles, including more than 11,000 taxis, the city is prone to choking congestion.

Jordanian taxi driver Nisrin Akoubeh

―It takes a lot of concentration and care, especially during rush hours,“ said Abou al-Haj.

However, she said she enjoys the work. “I get to know new people every day,” she said. “I enjoy my conversations with them and hearing their stories and experiences.”

(Agence France-Presse)
Jewelled Tales of Libya displayed in London

Karen Dabrowska

London

The Jewelled Tales of Libya exhibition in London’s Arab-British Centre was an amazing joint venture between traditional jeweller Najla El-Ageli, another jeweller collector Hala Ghellali and contemporary Libyan photographer Sassi Harth.

Forty-five pieces of authentic Libyan Jewellery — some of the bulky necklaces, with 最后的 four decades — were in a glass case and visitors to the exhibition could try on the large rings.

Ageli said the jewellery reflects the richness of Libyan history. “At the moment we are not really aware of their heritage or they have forgotten about it,” she said. “If you tell a Westerner that you are from Libya, they are surprised that it is an ancient country and that it is facing a crisis.”

Ageli said the early photos were not of Libyans, “I knew that they were not Libyan because the traditional dress was not Libyan. The Orientalist trend was to send photographs home to the fiancé or to the wife. I noticed that many of the photos (purporting to be of Libyans) were not Libyans. They were Tunisians posing as Libyans. “Ghallali, a Libya-born academic translator from California, has been collecting vintage photographs from colonial and post-colonial Libya taken by Italian photographers who established studios in Libya during the European colonisation and contributed to the Orientalist strand of photography. “Many of the early photos were not of Libyans,” Ghellali said. “I know that they were not Libyan because the traditional dress was not Libyan. The Orientalist trend was to send photographs home to the fiancé or to the wife. I noticed that many of the photos (purporting to be of Libyans) were not Libyans. They were Tunisians posing as Libyans.”

Ghallali described the exhibition as a celebration of Libya’s culture, history and heritage. “The first thing that catches your eye is the richness of Libyan heritage. It is a beautiful story.”

Ageli took Harth’s photographs to London after a recent visit to Libya. “It is very difficult for him to travel to London,” she explained. “This is the first time he has ventured to Europe. His unique work captures the beauty of Libyan women, especially women from the south of Libya in Fezzan, Ghadames and the Nafusa mountains and the beautiful colours of Libya.”

Commenting on the vintage photos she said: “They picture the majority of women all across Libya – Tripoli, Benghazi, Tobruk and the Tuareg and Tuatu tribes – in the early 20th century. They tell quite an interesting story. “The first thing that catches your eye is the faces: the Arabic, African and Amazigh faces of the different ladies but when you look closely you see a lot of the silver that they wear united them. That is what caught my attention. I want to celebrate Libyan women. They seem to be forgotten but they are a major part of the country and we have to tell their story. “Ageli, co-founder of Noon Arts, which strives to bring the best of Libyan art to the world stage, also observed that “the layers of cultural influences that have formed Libya’s identity – from the ancient Greek and Roman civilizations to the African, Amazigh, Bedouin, Mzaar, Jewish, Ottoman and Arab peoples who have come and gone over the millennia, without making any judgment and without hiding any truth.”

Ghallali described the Jewelled Tales of Libya Exhibition as a political statement, saying: “We want to celebrate Libya’s culture, its history, its beauty and its heritage.”

Karen Dabrowska is a London-based contributor to the Culture and Society section of The Arab Weekly.

Egyptian film Mawlana tackles issue of religion and state

Mohamed Zakzaky

Cairo

An Egyptian box office hit that highlights the troubled relationship between Islam and state has provoked a backlash from Sunni Muslim clerics, with some calling for the film to be banned.

Adapted from a novel by prominent journalist Ibrahim Elwafi, Mawlana – The Preacher – tells the story of a popular television preacher who struggles to reconcile his religious demands with state power. The film lays bare the complex and troubling interplay between the state, religious establishment, mass media and sectarian extremism in Egypt.

The film, which has been panned by critics, sparked a wave of protests following a recent visit to the film by the Muslim Brotherhood government. The film has been banned by the state and is not available for public screening in Egypt.

The film has been hailed by some as a breakthrough in Egyptian cinema, but it has also been criticized for its portrayal of Islam in Egypt.

The film has been banned by the state and is not available for public screening in Egypt.

Egyptians walk past an advertisement featuring the Egyptian film Mawlana at a cinema in Cairo, on January 23rd.

In the film’s dramatic climax, a young man blows up a church. Life imitated art the day after its premiere with the suicide bomb attack on Cairo’s Saint Mark’s Cathedral, the seat of the Coptic patriarch.

“Religion, with power, with money, is a killer tribe,” Elwafi, who helped adapt the script for cinema, said. “This triangle is responsible for all the intellectual, political and social decline we are in.”

This is the perfect time for the film.

Film director Magdy Ahmed Ali

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Reuters

Karen Dabrowska

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Aleppo’s landmark mosque bears scars of Syria’s war

Bassem Mroue

Aleppo

The Great Mosque of Aleppo, a 13th-century treasure, is today a grim testament to the ravages of Syria’s war. The doors have been blasted away, the walls have been shred ed, the minaret and minarets have been chopped and the minaret where the Muslim call to prayer sounded for 900 years has been toppled and shattered. The wooden pulpit, along with ancient manuscripts from a nearby library, has been carted off by looters.

Sarah el-Deeb

Beirut

Islamic State (ISIS) militants have destroyed parts of the second-century Roman amphitheatre and an iconic monument known as the Tetrapylon in Syria’s historic town of Palmyra, the government and experts say.

Abdulkarim said only two of the 16 columns of the Tetrapylon remain standing.

Abdulkarim said the damage to the theatre was caused by intentional destruction.

UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said the recent destruction amounted to a war crime.

"The Tetrapylon was an architectural symbol of the spirit of the encounter and openness of Palmyra and this is also one of the reasons why it has been destroyed," she said in a statement.

Abdulkarim said only two of the 16 columns of the Tetrapylon remain standing.

The Palmyra Tetrapylon, characterised by its four plinths that are not connected overhead, had only one original ancient column, said Abdulkarim. The 15 other columns were modelled after the ancient one and installed by Palmyra’s 81-year-old distinguished antiquities scholar Khalid al-Asaad, who was killed by ISIS militants when they were controlling the town in the last time. The militants hung his body from a Roman column.

It was not clear if the original column survived the destruction, Abdulkarim said.

During its first occupation of Palmyra, ISIS destroyed ancient tombs, including the Temple of Bel, which dated 3AD, and the Temple of Baalshamin, a structure of stone blocks several storeys high and crowned by six towering columns. The group also used the theatre for public killings and posted chilling videos of the slayings.

The militants also blew up the Arch of Triumph, built 193-211AD. Dmitry Peskov, a spokesman for the Russian government, said Syrian troops were continuing their efforts to take back Palmyra.

"This is called the new destruction ‘barbaric’," said he, "and that Russia should punish the people who did that.

Syria’s state news agency reported that government forces and allied troopst recently clashed with ISIS militants south of Palmyra, part of a new offensive to reclaim the city.

Abdulkarim said he fears for what remains of the city’s ancient relics.

"While Palmyra fell for the second time, we shed tears because we expected this terror," he said. "Now we are destined to see more terror if ISIS control of Palmyra continues to remain.

Most Palmyra residents did not return after it was retaken by the government. Activists estimate the city is now home to a few hundred families. Many residents tried to flee as ISIS recaptured the city in April last year.

Reports emerged January 19th that ISIS killed 12 captives in Palmyra, some of them beheaded in the Roman theatre.

(The Associated Press)
Batroun, Lebanon’s ancient coastal city waiting to be unearthed

Samar Kadi

Batroun

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t has Phoenician ruins, Roman artefacts, a medieval castle, Byzantine-style churches and arcaded Ottoman souks; however, its heritage is still waiting to be uncovered. The origins of Batroun, one of Lebanon’s ancient coastal cities, is still not known but is believed to date to before the time of the Phoenicians who ruled much of the eastern Mediterranean from 1,500BC to 300BC.

“There is a controversy over Batroun’s origins. Some say it is Phoenician; others say it is Roman, and others say it dates from the time of the Crusaders. The truth is we don’t know. There is a civilization under the surface that we have not discovered yet,” said Georges Mubarak, an excavator and former Guinness world-record holder from Batroun.

“Under the old castle, there are vestiges and structures that I personally visited. If we don’t uncover this heritage, we cannot say that Batroun has a civilization and, without civilization, the city has no international value.” Mubarak added, noting that of all ancient cities on the Lebanese shores, Batroun is not listed by the UN cultural agency, UNESCO.

Mubarak said he has tried for many years to engage Lebanon’s Directorate of Antiquities and the Ministry of Culture to excavate beneath the seawater medieval castle, which was heavily damaged by an earthquake. A lack of funds has prevented archaeological excavation.

“This entire region is an archaeological area,” Mubarak said. “We are sitting on huge treasures. You name it: Pottery, jade artefacts, glass… There is a lot, I mean, retrieved several times.

Nonetheless, Batroun’s seafront, which was heavily damaged by the 2020 Beirut explosion, has been renovated and restored. It is the only stretch of Lebanese coastline in the early 19th century. Today, most investments are in services and entertainment, and some turned into motels — and floored, red-tiled old houses — into gardens and parks.

“Batroun’s beaches are popular for their crystal-clear waters. It has been tested. It is the only stretch of coast in Lebanon that has zero pollution and is protected from storms and invaders. People go there to build temples, houses and churches. Only 225 metres remain from the original wall, which was more than 1km long, about 5 metres tall and 1 metre wide. Typical of any coastal city, the sea has traditionally contributed to Batroun’s wealth. Since ancient times, merchandise was imported and exported through its port. The sea produced fish, salt and high-quality sponge and its warships stored imported food items.

Batroun and its surroundings prospered from agriculture, including mulberry trees — whose leaves provided the staple food of silkworms — olive trees, vines, almond trees, wheat and barley. However, none of these activities has survived.

“We had the best quality of sponge in Batroun’s sea. I used to dive 15 to 30 metres to fish for sponge when I was a boy. Sponge was exported to the United States for use in medical industries. Unfortunately, the sponge animals are extinct now because of random fishing, pollution and dynamite used in fishing (during the 1975-90 civil war),” said Mubarak, who said he was keen on reviving Phoenician heritage by building replica ships of Phoenician ships that departed from Batroun and other cities on the Lebanese coast to cross the Mediterranean for trade.

The church of Mar Estefan in Lebanon’s ancient coastal city of Batroun was built from the sandstone of an old Phoenician wall like all other old constructions in the city. (Samar Kadi)