Syria enters new post-ISIS phase with massive US, Israeli strikes

Thomas Seibert

Washington

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Most exactly seven years after the start of the Syrian civil war, the country is experiencing a dramatic surge in violence with unprecedented Israeli and US strikes.

As regional and world powers compete for territory, influence and natural resources within the war-torn area, the US and Israeli strikes could complicate the plans of Iran and Turkey in Syria and the rest of the region, as the war on the Islamic State (ISIS) comes to an end.

Israel reacted with air strikes that pummelled Syrian air-defence positions and Iranian targets on February 9, in response to Iranian and pro-Iran forces entering Deir ez-Zor in the Euphrates Valley.

Israel’s raids occurred after its reported interception of an Iranian drone over its territory and the shooting down of an Israeli F-35 fighter jet.

Israeli military spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Conricus called the drone intrusion “the most blatant and severe Iranian violation of Israeli sovereignty in the last years.”

Israel often expressed resentment of the military presence of Iran and its proxies in Syria and Lebanon but this was the first direct confrontation between the two arch-enemies since the start of Syria’s war. Israel confirmed hitting four Iranian military targets during its raids on Syria.

Beyond escalating tensions with Iran, Israel’s strikes will cause rippling effects in Syria and Lebanon, increasing friction with the pro-Iran Hezbollah.

A few days before the Israeli raids, the United States carried out air strikes against pro-government Syrian forces in Deir ez-Zor. Washington seemed to be warning its NATO ally Turkey and other players in the Syrian drama, especially Iran, that it intended to play a major role in shaping the future of the war-torn country. More than 300 of the pro-government Syrian fighters were killed, US officials said.

The United States rejected calls by Turkey to withdraw from Manbi, a strategically vital enclave in northern Syria under the control of US-backed Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), which include Kurdish and Arab militias.

The US raids raised questions about relations with Russia in Syria. The line previously drawn to delineate zones of influence of the United States and Russia showed signs of breaking down following the US air strikes. The United States and Russia last year agreed that the Euphrates valley would be a dividing line between the two countries.

The US administration’s determination to stay engaged in Syria and to keep backing and – if necessary – protecting the SDF is causing fresh tensions with Ankara, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his troops would march towards Manbij next, a city approximately 200 miles east of Afrin, to drive out the People’s Protection Units (YPG) from there as well and has called on the United States to withdraw its military units from the city.

In response, two high-ranking US officials visited in a demonstration of support for the Kurdish fighters there.

A bid to mend the growing rift with Ankara, US national security adviser H.R. McMaster and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson prepared for separate visits to Turkey and Mattis was to meet with his Turkish counterpart, Nurettin Canikli, in Brussels.

As Iraq elections loom, Abadi’s coalition is disintegrating

Tallha Abdulrazaq

As Iraq elections loom, Abadi’s coalition is disintegrating.

Since announcing in January that local and national elections would both be on May 12, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has faced a series of political disasters, leading many to doubt whether he is charismatic and strong enough to hold his newly created list together before the candidates are tested in the polls.

Abadi harmed his credibility as a unifier after forging a political alliance with the sectarian Shia-dominated Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) and spending much of the battle for Mosul assuring Iraqis that no militiamen would field candidates in elections without first disarming. Abadi named his new electoral list the “Victory Alliance,” seeking to capitalise on the perception that he was instrumental in the defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS).

However, less than 48 hours after the announcement, the pro-Iran PMF announced it would be splitting from the Victory Alliance and contesting elections separately under its own “Conquest List” or “Wisdom Alliance.” Essentially, by allying with the PMF, Abadi ensured that the group would have grounds to proceed with fielding its own candidates but failed to capitalise on it with Abadi’s own “Wisdom Alliance” to contest elections against the prime minister, declaring he would try to work with Abadi “for the shared benefit of the country.”

Despite the positive-sounding rhetoric, reports suggest that Hakim threatened to walk out on Abadi soon after the departure of the PMF’s Conquest Bloc. As Abadi was unwilling to guarantee political benefits, criticism has been levelled at the decision to have local and national government elections on the same day, having the polls together means it is likely that the groups that dominate the national vote will control provincial councils.

Abadi’s allies abandoning him in droves, it probably came as some relief to him that his rival and former prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, would probably be sidelined in favour of the incumbent. Reports in Arab media said Tehran and Washington were in agreement that another Maliki premiership would be disastrous for their agendas in Iraq and they would, therefore, throw their weight behind Abadi.

However, Abadi cannot rest on his laurels. He may well win the elections with Iranian and American backing but those same backers will ensure that he never has full control over parliament. After all, both Hakim’s Wisdom Alliance and the PMF’s Conquest list have Iranian proxies, with the latter directly allied, funded and backed by Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

As Abadi is about to find out, with such friends, who needs enemies?
US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson laid out the United States' diplomatic vision for Syria, seeking to limit Russian influence that is seen to the expectations of many, the United States will try to build beyond the collapse of the Islamic State's (ISIS) self-proclaimed caliphate, bolstering the Kurds at bay and establishing an order compatible with US interests.

Crucially, Tillerson—in a sharp break with US President Donald Trump's predecessor—specified that countering Iranian influence within Syria was a central US objective. The problem with the strategy is that it seems to rely on repairing the United States' anti-ISIS Kurdish militiamen allies against the Iranian revolution. The key portions of Tillerson's statement said the United States “desires five key end states” in Syria: an “enduring” Kurdish-majority area of al-Quaidera; a political resolution underlying armed struggle between Bashar Assad’s regime and the population that rose against him, which sees the dictator depart; curtailing Iran’s influence and making sure “Syria’s neighbours are secure from all threats emanating from Syria,” allowing the return of refugees, and the removal of all weapons of mass destruction from Syria.

To avoid large-scale deployments and in a futile attempt to run a counterterrorism war, while avoiding entanglement in Syria’s underlying conflict, the United States has worked “by, with and through” the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). This is a diplomatic construct designed to circumvent the political and legal problems of working with the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK), an organisation classified as terrorists by Turkey and the United States. Though there are many Arab and other units within the SDF, few deny that the PKK controls the group, politically, militarily and strategically.

A mandate over Rojava, as the PKK calls the region it occupies in northern Syria, might allow the United States to keep ISIS at a manageable level, at least as long as the United States stays. It is not clear, however, that a jointly held Kurdish US mandate in eastern Rojava would do much to resolve questions over al-Quaidera’s former branch in the country’s west. Questions among the Arab population over the extent of the SDF/PKK’s legitimacy within Rojava might open space for jihadi infiltration to overwhelm the east. The United States’ doubling down on its alliance with the PKK exacer-

bates itself within NATO, distracting the Turks, who are best placed to tackle Syria’s al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), and refor-
making Ankara’s view that the United States’ presence in Syria is contrary to its own interests. This incentivises Turkey to undermine the US mandate, taking SDF gains and, more seriously, keeping Turkey’s view of Syria aligned with those of the Russian-Iran axis.

Elsewhere, there is little prospect of refugees returning. More Syrian refugees fled Assad than any other in Europe. With its public services, much of its infrastructure and its economy, the Assad regime was pounding the north-western province of Idlib and its military establishment are part of Iran’s security architecture in Syria. The PKK is a diplomatic construct designed to circumvent the political and legal problems of working with the Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK), an organisation classified as terrorists by Turkey and the United States. Despite a “futile attempt to run a counterterrorism war,” the United States seems to have prevented a Russian plan to impose some form of peace settlement on the war-ravaged country before its March 18 elections. Russian forces are engaged against Syria’s Kurds in northern Syria and the US-led coalition carried out more air strikes against Syrian Iran’s influence and perhaps more will be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the region. They are unlikely to be feasible if the intention is to stabilise the area.

The PKK’s connections to Assad, Iran and Russia are old and extensive. From the outset of the war, the PKK has been aligned with the pro-Assad coalition and past confrontations only seem to have driven them closer. In Manbij, the PKK ceded US territory to Assad and Iran to hold off Turkey. In Afrin, the PKK called on the regime to come to its defence against the Turkish onslaught.
Iraq forces began a military op- eration against militants who are threatening an oil route between Iraq and Iran, rukin- ding over the security of the country despite Baghdad’s an- nouncement of victory against the Islamic State (ISIS).

The military operation aims to secure areas between Kirkuk’s oil fields and the Syrian border, and between the Ira- nian border, two Iraqi officials told Reuters on condition of anonymity before the operation started. The officials said six pro-government guards were killed by the militants south of the Hamani Mountains.

With the goal of enforcing se- curity and stability, destroying sleeper cells and continuing clear- ing operations, an operation was launched in the early hours of this morning to search and clear areas south of the Hashim Mountains.

The Iraqi Army, special security units and the predominantly Shia Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) took part in the operation, which had US support and coordina- tion with peshmerga fighters, the Iraqi military said.

As part of its plans to boost oil exports, Iraq announced that it would establish a new pipeline for oil via tanker trucks from Kirkuk to be re-Fig. 2: An Iraqi flag mounted on a military vehicle at an oil field in Dibis area on the outskirts of Kirkuk.ired in Iran. There are reports that an Iraqi-Iranian pipeline will be built to export oil from Kirkuk, replac- ing the old route via Turkey areas controlled by the Kur- dian Regional Government (KRG).

It remains unclear which group threatens the oil route, if the route is aligned with, ISIS or the mysterious al-Rayat al-Bayda. The group’s flag is reported to be the same as the one that heads to Turkey.

Iraqi military said.

After ISIS black flags, Iraq faces ‘White Banners’ threat

The White Banners militants are re-ported. It is an Iraqi writer.

ported.

is the establishment of the quota system of power-sharing left by the infamous Paul Bremer. It was disastrous for Iraq. Let’s not also forget the killing of hundreds of Iraqi civilians and forced exile of thousands of doctors and engi- neers. The country’s intellectual elite was gone and was replaced by illiterate opportunists with fake diplomas from Iran.

It was heart-wrenching to come across scores of talented Iraqi doc- tors practising in British hospitals. They spoke of the pain they felt for being deprived of the honour of serving their country. They’ve become valuable additions to the British health services, so much so that, a few years ago, the British Ministry of Health faced a crisis should those doctors decide to return to Iraq. Iraq Prime Min- ister Haider al-Abadi, who inciden- tally once had British nationality, knows this.

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In the coming electoral cycle, all Iraqis should ask themselves — in their homes or on the street? With paramilitary militia roam- ing the streets and an absence of the rule of law, are they safe from kidnapping, random arrests and murder? We will not indulge in a com- parison between pre-2003 Iraq and post-2003 Iraq. In 2003, the Iraqis were relieved of the shackles of the dictatorial regime of Saddam Hus- sein but the Islamist parties of Iraq cannot claim for themselves that achievement. That is credited to the Americans and the Americans. The country’s intellectual elite was gone and was replaced by illiterate opportunists with fake diplomas from Iran.

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For it to go beyond the limits of statecraft as the word “democracy” is likely to continue, albeit not in the same scale as that against ISIS.

The fight against insurgency continues and goes beyond the full-on kinetic phase to address the many enabling structural factors behind Iraq’s insurrections (corrup- tion, illicit money, uneven state capacity, unemployment). Fazir Haddad, a senior research fellow at the National University of Singa- pore, told the National newspaper.

Abadi always put forth his so- called anti-corruption campaign but it is known he wouldn’t dare stand up to his friends, colleagues and influential members of his Dawa Party. He would like to con- vince people to judge him by his achievements post-2014 when he rose to power but just as Ibrahim al-Jasrawi and Nuri al-Maliki, who preceded him as prime minister, were, Abadi is the product of the Dawa Party.

The KRG denies links to the White Banners but central government officials have accused their Kurdish counterparts of not doing enough to fight the militants.

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At gnpoint. An Iraqi flag mounted on a military vehicle at an oil field in Dibis area on the outskirts of Kirkuk.

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Yemeni government-southern separatist truce holds despite accusations

Salem Baidhani

Sana’a

Flights by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to calm tensions between the internationally recognised government of Yemen and the separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) seem to have made progress, despite both sides blaming the other for deadly clashes that broke out in Aden.

High-ranking officials on both sides pledged to de-escalate tensions and asked the coalition supporting the government to investigate the causes of recent fighting, in which at least 29 people died.

STC vice president, Luft Shatara told the pro-Southern Aden Al-Ghad newspaper that the council was committed to “de-escalation” and was acting responsibly.

He said that the STC government reached an agreement with the Southern Transitional Council, including Secretary of the STC, Haitham Al-Mansur, that a ceasefire was declared during the fighting. The STC was prepared to stand by the Southern Transitional Council and the STC is the only movement that is not besieged and will not be involved in the conflict, he said. He added that the STC département was “aware of the obstrucing party in, in reference to the clashes.

The internationally recognised government of President Abdu Rabbu Mansour Hadi pledged to maintain the peace. Prime Minister Ahmed bin Dagher said the “mission today is to bridge the gap, heal all wounds and abandon political escalation.”

“Based on directives from the president, we will work for social reconciliation in Aden and neighboring provinces to pave the way for comprehensive national reconciliation,” bin Dagher said. He also called on Saudi Arabia to investigate the cause of the Aden clashes.

Fighting broke out January 28 after a deadline set by the STC for Hadi to dissolve the government over allegations of corruption and incompetence passed.

Yemeni analysts said the Islahat Al-Islah Party had reached out to different factions to forge new alliances following the Aden talks. Al-Islah, affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood movement, was said to be using a political charm offensive to generate support.

Mohammed Alkhereiji

London

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi and Jordanian King Abdullah II travelled to the United Arab Emirates for official talks with UAE leaders at a time when the Emirates’ regional influence has grown because of its efforts in promoting security and stability, especially with regards to fighting terrorism and extremism.

The official Jordanian Petra news agency said King Abdullah exressed gratitude to the UAE for its “sustained support to the kingdom.”

Last June, Egypt and the UAE, along with Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, severed diplomatic ties with Qatar as well as air, sea and land links to the UAE, over the Qatari government’s support of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt.

"The Emirates and government are very close to Qatar, which has been increasing its diplomatic efforts to improve its relations with other Gulf countries," a senior Emirati official told The National newspaper last month.

On May 17, the UAE government re-established ties with Qatar.

Both the king and the Abu Dhabi crown prince agreed on the importance of creating a framework that would lead to an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital, as proposed by the 2012 Arab Peace Initiative.

In a related development, the World Health Organization (WHO) announced that 20 medical centres in the Gaza Strip would soon fully be operational thanks to a grant from the UAE. After an emergency appeal from the United Nations, the UAE pledged $2 million to help end social unrest in Oman.

More recently, there was considerable neutrality among the governments of the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia when a so-called neutrality was established by the United Nations in Yemen in January 2018.

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Mohammed Alkhereiji is the Gulf section editor of The Arab Weekly.
**International interest in and around the Red Sea is intensifying, bringing increased geopolitical competition.**

To the north, the Suez Canal links the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean and represents a crucial maritime trade route, transporting about 2.5% of global oil shipments, Global Security.org said.

At the other end, the Bab el Mandeb Strait — one of the world’s most important chokepoints, only 29km wide at its narrowest point — commands the southern entrance. It has taken on added geopolitical importance since the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen begun in 2015.

Further south is the Horn of Africa, a hotbed of maritime piracy that prompted navies from around the world to form task forces to fight it.

The Red Sea’s enhanced geopolitical importance is driving unprecedented development and competition. Last year, China boosted its power projection capabilities by inaugurating a nearly $400 million naval base in Djibouti. The newest entrant is Turkey, which recently signed an agreement with Sudan to develop a port at Suakin.

China and Turkey will join the United States, which has operated its only full-fledged expeditionary military base on Africa, Camp Lemonnier, also in Djibouti, since 2002, as well as the French, Italian and Japanese forces.

Saudi Arabia has been running operations with coalition allies out of a base in Asahan, Eritrea. The United Arab Emirates has a military presence in Yemeni Red Sea ports of Aden, Mokha and Mukalla as well as the island of Perim in Asahan, and in Berbera in autonomous Somaliland. Last year, Turkey opened a military base in Somalia to train Somali forces.

The Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen has necessitated Arab Gulf countries locking off maritime supply routes to Houthi rebels and developing a supporting logistics network for operations. The Saudi-led coalition has been wary of providing Houthi rebels space to blockade or disrupt maritime traffic by mining and anti-ship weapons from the Yemeni coast, especially around the Bab el Mandeb.

Such burgeoning international interest in and around the Red Sea is driving an unprecedented development initiative. The Chinese, for example, have been moving in swiftly to safeguard their interests by counteringbalancing competitors. As such the Red Sea is becoming host to a growing number of stakeholders seeking to safeguard their interests by counteringbalancing competitors. As such the Red Sea is becoming host to a growing number of stakeholders seeking to safeguard their interests.

At the global level, the rise of China has been driving international competition. The Chinese want to safeguard freedom of navigation for key maritime trade routes and massive investments into Africa as part of its One Belt, One Road Initiative. The United States wants the regional security landscape preserved favourably, especially with Israel being in close proximity but also against terrorist threats and to counter a rising China and resurgent Russia.

The Saudi-led coalition is seeking to ease the socio-political instability that has been taking hold around Saudi Arabia’s periphery in good part by counteringbalancing the regional footprint of Iran, which supports the Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Finally, there is the north-east African geopolitical competition. Egypt has strained relations with Sudan, which Cairo charges with supporting the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt opposes Sudan-backed Ethiopian plans for the Renaissance Dam under construction since 2011. When finished it will be Africa’s largest hydro-electric power station and generate much-needed electricity for Ethiopia and Sudan but reduce water flows to Egypt’s Nile.

**Yemen**

Egypt, like Ethiopia, has been the subject of investments and support from Qatar. Egypt views a potential emerging pro-Muslim Brotherhood alliance between Turkey, Qatar and Sudan as an incubating threat. Sudan recalled its ambassador to Egypt following reports Egypt had dispatched troops to Eritrea, which borders Sudan, in response to the announcement of Turkey’s Suakin agreement.

Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Sudan, Djibouti, Eritrea and Somalia all border the Red Sea or its entry points but a growing number of extra-regional powers are moving in swiftly to safeguard their interests.

Some analysts say the Red Sea basin was previously overlooked for its strategic value. Being part Middle East and part Africa, it was approached in a segmented way. The absence of a multilateral regional framework to manage affairs or disputes in the Red Sea is probably a key reason why outside powers have been able to formalise their own presence and, ironically, may be making its emergence even less likely.

The Red Sea’s enhanced geopolitical importance is driving unprecedented development and competition.
Caring for the Arab region’s children

Children suffer cruelly, deeply, disproportionately in war zones, which is why it’s a relief to hear the new head of UNICEF, the United Nations’ second largest agency, pledge to put children’s developmental needs first.

In January, soon after she started the UNICEF job, American businesswoman and former USAID administrator Henrietta Holmson Fore spoke about a child development-centred approach in some of the world’s most conflict-scarred areas. It can’t just be about humanitarian objectives in crises such as Yemen and Syria, Fore said, “you can’t forget that there is a development agenda.” She might have added that there is no more powerful sign of a society committed to rebuilding — and a better tomorrow — than the sight of schools reopening and children in uniforms heading to class even amid piles of rubble. That’s what happened in Mosul in January last year.

Unfortunately, enough attention is paid to the long-term consequences of years of war in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region.

When children are meant to be at school, far too many are not, or not just on their own. Too often, the educational infrastructure is part of the collateral damage of war. At times, the region’s governments just do not have sufficient budgets.

Some 26 million children live in conflict-scarred Syria, Lebanon, Libya, the Palestinian territories and Sudan. Their humanitarian needs are obvious — adequate housing, safe water, sanitation, health care, etc. Governments and aid organisations from the region and beyond try to address them as best they can but what of those children’s developmental needs, primarily education, the best start that anyone can have in life.

This question is rarely asked when war sweeps a land and crisis-management takes priority. In fact, it’s not being asked now, when there is a springtime of the toll of children’s lives from MENA conflicts in January. UNICEF said at least 81 children were killed last month in conflicts in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, Libya and the Palestinian territories.

With no signs of these conflicts ending, many more children are likely to become casualties of wars that began before many of them were even born.

UNICEF’s MENA Regional Director Geert Cappelaere framed within the larger context spelt out by Fore. “Not enough is done to ensure that millions more children in the Middle East and North Africa region have their childhood stolen, المناولة for life, traumatised, unused, uneducated, perhaps even pre- vented from going to school and from getting the most essential health services even the basic right to play,” Cappelaere said.

It was a pertinent reminder to the global community needs to stay engaged despite disrupted supply chains and donor fatigue. MENA’s children are the region’s future. They must be educated and trained to become the decision-makers and doers of tomorrow.

UNICEF said Tuesday that there is a serious problem but there is no certainty it will. Dropout rates must be reduced, digital literacy and skills for work and vocational training given a sharp new focus.

The world has a responsibility to the children of MENA but mostly the task devolves to Arab governments, regional institutions and civil society.

The time for action is now.

Syria’s humanitarian crisis only worsens

So long as the war continues to mount in Syria and the ultimate tragedy is that the war, soon in its second eight year, shows no signs of ending.

UNICEF reported last month that on February 8 sought a temporary truce between regime and opposition parties in a final resolution of the conflict, a reprieve was the minimum required to provide urgent humanitarian assistance and to evacuate the critically ill.

Even as the Islamic State (ISIS) is nearly defeated, the conflict is becoming ever more dangerous, with multiple players aggressively staking claim to territory and regional influence.

Meanwhile, the Turkish incursion into the Kurdish-controlled enclave of Afrin in Syria continues to push up the civilian toll. The same applies to attacks by Russia-supported Syrian troops.

The regime in Damascus is even suspected of using chemical weapons. Such brutal methods have been internationally denounced but, as French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian recently said, there are many other violators of international law, not least Turkey and Iran.

Le Drian has called for “the withdrawal of all of those who ought not to be in Syria, including Iranian militias, including Hezbollah.” Turkey, he said, “should not add war to war.”

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Self-delusion. A clergyman takes a picture of a pro-government demonstration in the south-western city of Alhavz, last January.

Iran’s tough talk only hides its weaknesses

Iran is still a player in Syria but it is no longer a major player.

Perhaps the militias would be better served by solving the water shortage in Isfahan than by using Jerusalem to score points against the Arabs.

Obama’s nuclear deal with Tehran. The Trump administration wants to prevent Iran from using that deal to score more victories in the region, hence conditioning the deal on Iran’s foreign policies and its ballistic missile programme.

Iran’s vulnerability was exposed when it had to ask for Russia’s help to keep Syrian President Bashar Assad in power. It should not be forgotten that, in September 2015 — before Russia’s involvement in Syria was announced — Hassan Soleimani, leader of Iran’s al-Quds Force and the real commander of the Syrian militias in Syria, was in Moscow. It should also be remembered that Russia is not committing its forces in Syria out of charity or just to please Iran. Moscow has excellent relations with Israel and the latter will do what it can to limit Iran’s regional influence and keep Assad’s regime in place.

To finish with and the Golans Heights once for all, it is crucial for Israel that Assad’s regime survives.

On the regional level, Russia’s direct intervention in Syria was a turning point. That intervention did not occur in a vacuum but was accompanied by an agreement with the United States on the Assad lines guiding the pressure of both superpowers in Syria. The US pressure would cover the rich areas east of the Euphrates. There was also a role conceded to Turkey inside Syria such that there is more than one regional player in the Syrian theatre.

Iran is still a player in Syria but it is no longer a major player. This fact explains the haughty tone of officials in Tehran. The tactic reflects the Iranian regime’s desperate attempts to cover up its own shortcomings in Syria.

To compensate for these failures, the militias’ regime acts tough in Iran or Lebanon or Yemen or now in Bahrain. Perhaps the militias and their dictatorship would be better served by solving the water shortage in Isfahan than by using the question of Jerusalem to score points against the Arabs.
Lebanese Christians shocked by Shia politics but this could be just the beginning

The Shia camp is not only responsible for upsetting the delicate balance of power in Lebanon but is behind upsetting the religious balance.

The party also took advantage of the unbridled arrogance of the Iranian project. The agreement between Hezbollah and the FPM has reaped advantages it reaped from its alliance with the Shia protesters and the expressions of the unified argorance prevailing in the Shia camp. An FPM leader said this uncivilised behaviour is a slap in the face to the Lebanese society and cannot be associated with a parliament speaker.

François Assaf, a candidate for the March 8 alliance it leads, was also alluding to Hezbollah siding with the interests of its allies who are deeply involved in corruption. Bassil also accused Hezbollah of not being friendly with Berri when this choice conflicts with the interests of its allies who are deeply involved in corruption. Bassil also accused Hezbollah of not being friendly with Berri when this choice conflicts with the interests of its allies who are deeply involved in corruption.

The crisis has been defused at the last minute, Cappelaere said. "We collectively continue to be split from hope to despair and back. "I had half a minute to reply before we go to commercial break. "I had half a minute to reply before we go to commercial break."

The Geneva Conventions, which included a boy shot near Ramallah in March, indicated that to happen the antagonists must have greater role in state affairs for the Christian camp was triggered by the agreement between Hezbollah and the FPM to keep its militia. The party also took advantage of the unbridled arrogance of the Iranian project. The agreement between Hezbollah and the FPM has reaped advantages it reaped from its alliance with the Shia protesters and the expressions of the unified argorance prevailing in the Shia camp. An FPM leader said this uncivilised behaviour is a slap in the face to the Lebanese society and cannot be associated with a parliament speaker.

Lebanese Christians are beginning to realise that their role in giving victory to the Iranian project over competing with the Sunni camp in Lebanon did not bring them security. They have seen concrete losses in the case of the aggrieved and the aggrandizement of the Shia protesters and the expressions of the unified argorance prevailing in the Shia camp. An FPM leader said this uncivilised behaviour is a slap in the face to the Lebanese society and cannot be associated with a parliament speaker.

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Lebanon's potential missile plants threaten renewed conflict with Israel

Nicholas Blanford

Beirut

In the late 1990s, when Hezbollah was battling Israel's occupation of southern Lebanon, rumour mills were abuzz with details of a covert project to produce short-range, shoulder-launched rockets, seemingly capable of being smuggled into Lebanon. According to former Lebanese military officials, Hezbollah was producing short-range, shoulder-launched rockets in Lebanon to offset the need to smuggle in Iran-provided rockets from Syria. For this project, it was said that the Hezbollah leadership was employing experienced technicians from Iraq's Al-Quds battalions, who had been active in the region. However, the existence of this project by Hezbollah was never confirmed by any official source.

In 2011, the Israeli navy allegedly attacked a suspected missile plant in Syria's Scientific Research and Development Centre (SRDC) near Hama. Two more Syrian facilities were struck in the following days, and it was alleged that the strike targeted weapons production facilities in Syria and Lebanon. The alleged strikes were carried out by the Israeli military, which had intelligence that the target was an Iranian missile factory. The alleged strikes were a response to the growing threat posed by Iran's missile programme, which was seen as a direct threat to Israel's security.

The alleged strikes were carried out using precision-guided missiles, which are capable of hitting precise targets with a high degree of accuracy. The strikes were said to have destroyed a major Iranian missile production facility in Syria, as well as a smaller one in Lebanon. The alleged strikes were part of a larger campaign by the Israeli military to disrupt Iran's missile programme and prevent it from developing a nuclear weapon.

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Wiretapping allegations cause new embarrassment to Abbas

Mamoon Abbassab
London

The United States, the European Union, the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States have found Israel’s military and security forces guilty of using excessive force in the treatment of Palestinian children in military courts. This finding is based on years of research and documentation by various organizations, including human rights groups, media outlets, and Israeli and Palestinian experts.

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In 2017, DCIP documented 26 cases involving the solitary confinement of Palestinian children in the Israeli detention system. Specifically, during the first 24-48 hours after arrest, children are subjected to some form of physical violence and verbal abuse, humiliation, and intimidation. The DCIP report “No Way to Treat a Child” said.

It cited 15-year-old Tareq from Al-Arroub refugee camp, who was accused of throwing stones by Israeli soldiers: “One of them started beating me in my ears, while another shouted: ‘Are you a man? You’re not a man.’ Tareq was blindfolded and handcuffed and forced to sit on the ground of an observation tower for 30 minutes. He was kicked and insulted. Tareq was transferred to Etzion interrogation and detention centre and denied the right to have a parent or present counsel. He was detained overnight, and food and water was withheld until he requested the report, it said. ‘Interrogation techniques in the Israeli military detention system are generally mentally and physically coercive, frequently incorporating threats, force, violence and physical violence with a clear purpose of obtaining a confession,’ the report stated. Awadallah said that 62% of the cases of young Palestinian children documented in 2017 have suffered verbal abuse and intimidation.

Additionally, 66.4% of children were not provided with the most basic of rights, including the right to remain silent and to consult with an attorney prior to questioning. Children are usually ordered to sign a form printed in Arabic and Hebrew that states they have been informed of their rights. However, children have reported not properly understanding the form or not being allowed time to read the entire form. After they have signed the form, Israeli authorities have denied the children access to the rights described therein.

In 2017, DCIP documented 26 cases involving the solitary confinement of Palestinian children in the Israeli detention system. The average time spent in solitary confinement was 12 days. The use of isolation for Palestinian child detainees is usually for interrogation purposes to obtain a confession and/or gather intelligence on other individuals. Many organizations have documented the continued solitary confinement of Palestinian children throughout 2017. It was found that the child occupation forces detained 6,727 Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

“We’ve seen a huge spike in arrests of children over the past month. There have been 500 arrests since the second President Donald Trump’s declaration on Jerusalem and the current status of children in prison is 370,” said Dawoud Yousef, representative of Addameer, the Prisoner Support and Human Rights Association. The United States, the European Union, the United Nations, the European Union, and the United States have found Israel’s military and security forces guilty of using excessive force in the treatment of Palestinian children in military courts. This finding is based on years of research and documentation by various organizations, including human rights groups, media outlets, and Israeli and Palestinian experts.

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The “Stay at Home” campaign requested that voters remain at home during the March 26-28 vote and participate in a nationwide strike. The CDM described Sisi’s comments as an attempt “to spread fear among Egyptians voters... [and] un- derscore the integrity of the electoral competition.”

“Charging the political space of candidates in the name of preserving security is unconstitutional and does not promote security,” the CDM statement added.

Many well-known political figures have backed the campaign, including former presidential hopefuls Khalid Ali, a human rights lawyer, and former MP Mohamed Amir Sadat. Only one candidate will be running against Sisi, Moussa Mostafa Moussa, the chairman of the centrist El-Ghad Party, was a Sisi supporter before deciding to run for president.

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The call for boycotting the vote came a day after the deadline passed for submitting applications to file as a candidate in the presidential election. Many criticised the boycott campaign, arguing that it was difficult to meet the requirements to register. Presidential candidates must file the endorsements of at least 20 MPs and state governors, with at least 1,000 endorsements from each governorate.

“Some political forces, both inside and outside of the country, are seeking to destroy this country,” said Tarek Fahim, a political science professor at Cairo University, who is a member of Sisi’s presidential campaign team. “This is why the president says he would seek public approval to take measures to prevent this,” Fahim said.

In July 2013, Sisi, then minister of defence, asked for a “popular mandate” to take measures against what he described as “potential terrorists.” Millions of Egyptians took to the streets, resulting in the ouster of Islamist President Mohammed Morsi. Sisi’s comments that he could seek “another mandate” were viewed as a reference to those events.

“We have hopes that the measures the president talks about do not lead to a higher level of repression,” Dawoud said.

A CDM statement declared: “We affirm that states are not run by mandates and the mobilisation of supporters in orchestrated gatherings but rather by Constitutions and respect for freedoms.”

Sisi explicitly called for high voter turnout in the election to countearrivals of voter apathy. The CDM’s boycott call, which could result in historic low voter turnout in a post-January 25 revolution, has urged some members of parliament to act.

MP Mohamed Abd El-Azim said the boycott calls could cause international embarrassment for Egypt.

This triggered the June 30, 2013, revolt against Muslim Brotherhood rule. It was perhaps the first time in modern history that an Islamist regime was ousted by means of massive organised protests.

Both uprisings took their toll on Egypt’s economy and tourism, and stock market and other sectors suffered losses conservatively estimated by Egyptian economists of at least $30 billion. These losses were huge for a country struggling before June 2013 to push a development agenda. Egypt’s international debt is double that of 2010 and the country looks likely to rise because of the $25 billion nuclear power deal with Russia.

The Egyptian currency is at one-third of its 2011 value. Prices are nearly four times what they were before the revolt, and at least 11 Egyptian labour under the twin burdens of record inflation rates and lack of opportunities.

The inflation rate, which soared to more than 30% in 2017, dropped to 22.3% by year-end but that’s still extremely high. Egyptian news portal Masrawy reported that the government is expected to raise the price of electricity, gas and fuel this year with knock-on effects on foodstuffs and other commodities.

Higher utility prices are the result of the deal struck between the Egyptian government and the International Monetary Fund as part of its economic reform plan. Egyptians, however, are feeling the effects of inflation. Subsidies on bread and other basics go only so far.

Unsurprisingly, the fear is that political change could lead to higher inflation rates and fewer certainties. Sisi wins on those counts, if no other.

That said, all is not doom and gloom. The Egyptian president has adopted effective energy policies, and Egypt is moving towards energy self-sufficiency. The government has promised two expensive ventures—a new administrative capital and Suez Canal development. Also, the tourism sector is gradually improving, with 10.7 million tourists visiting the country in 2016 compared to 8.3 million tourists visiting in 2015. One tourism official told Reuters: “We have hopes that the marches and protests, which will be held on Saturday and Sunday, will end.”

Expecting a win. A supporter of Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi holds a poster with his image in front of the National Election Authority in Cairo, on January 29.

For most Egyptians, security and economic growth issues trump other considerations.

Hany Ghoraba is an Egyptian political and counterterrorism analyst and author of “Egypt’s Arab Spring and the Long and Winding Road to Democracy.”

If Sisi is the safest bet for 2018, what of 2022, when his second term as president would end? It may seem a rather long way off but the response to poll results for 2022 is telling. Egyptians seem to believe a lot less in more change leading to better things. They seem largely inclined to regard faith in the military rather than in politicians. Unless the situation changes drastically in the next four years, Egyptians are likely to favour a leader with a proven record as long as he promises the same thing they’ve come to expect. Clearly, in a decade of up and changes, Egyptians have come to fear change. The next great revolution for Egypt would be for the freedom from fear.
Lamine Ghanni

Tunis

Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed submitted a proposal to the Central Bank of Tunisia Governor Cheffy Arai.

Tunisian financial expert Ezzed- din Chaline said the EU action would have “serious repercussions” for Tunisia’s economy.

“Euro-financed eyeing investment in Tunisia would be subject to its home country of suspensions of money laundering and the motives of its investments will be ques- tioned,” Chaline said.

On the security front, Tunisia has been on the offensive against jihadist since early 2016, when officials dismantled a serious extremist cells across the country.

On January 20, a Tunisian special operations unit killed two commanders of Okba Ibn Nafaa, al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb’s (AQIM) Tunisian branch, outside Sbeitla, near the Algerian border.

“We are achieving great pro- gress in the fight against extremist groups,” Interior Ministry spokes- woman Khadija Chabbi said.

Welcome news. UK Minister of State for Security Ben Wallace (L) speaks with Tunisian Foreign Minister Khaisnoti in Tunis, on February 2.

Interior Minister Lotfi Brahim told parliament that security forces carried out 122,000 raids on safe houses and after locations sus- pected of links to jihadists in 2017, detaining 1,474 suspects.

Tunisia has strengthened coop- eration with Algeria on counterter- rorism matters to shield the Sahel from spillover from the conflict in north Libya.

Algerian special forces killed six “Islamist elements” on September 27 in an operation in the mountainous eastern region of Khenchela.

The late January opera- tion came after Tunisian and Alger- ian security services shared intel- ligence and monitoring capabilities, security officials said.

Lamine Ghanni is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunisia.

News & Analysis

Maghreb

British tourists returning to Tunisia after security improvements

On March 27, 2016, the GIA broke into the monastery and kidnapped seven of the nine monks.

The monks – Dom Christian de Chege, Brother Luc (born Paul Dohier), Father Phaluthe (Keb- reton), Brother Michel (Feury), Father Bruno (born Christian Lemarchand), Father Gélocin (Ringardeau) and Brother Paul (Freuze) – lived in a Trappist monastery in the Tibhirine mountains, about 100km south- east of Algiers.

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“It was one of the few remaining in a monastery abandoned by the state in the 1970s,” explained Deltour of the Tibhirine monks killed in Algeria more than 20 years ago.

“Honouring a massacre more than 20 years after the massacre of Algeria’s bloody civil war

Tunisia earned around $2 billion in foreign currency in 2017, making it the fifth most rapidly ex- panding tourism on the planet, government figures showed.

Tourism is historically been a major driver of Tunisia’s economy, bringing in needed foreign currency and employing thousands. In 2014, Tunisia earned around $2.7 billion in tourism revenue.

That changed in June 2015 when an Islamic State gunman killed 38 people – mostly British tourists – in the resort town of Sousse. That attack, along with one in March on the Barlo National Museum in Tunisia that claimed 22 lives that year, prompted London to advise against “all but essential travel” to the country, resulting in a marked decline in the number of British and European tourists.

In the first quarter of 2016, the number of tourists to Tunisia dropped 23.1% compared to the same period the year before. British arrivals fell even more dramatically, down to 8,000 in the first three months of 2016 versus 190,000 dur- ing the same period the year before.

The British government lifted its travel advisory in Tunisia in March of 2017, and Thomas Cook, a leading tour operator, announced it would fly British tourists to Tunisia as of mid-February.

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“It was one of the few remaining in a monastery abandoned by the state in the 1970s,” explained Deltour of the Tibhirine monks killed in Algeria more than 20 years ago.

“Honouring a massacre more than 20 years after the massacre of Algeria’s bloody civil war

Tunisia earned around $2 billion in foreign currency in 2017, making it the fifth most rapidly ex- panding tourism on the planet, government figures showed.

Tourism is historically been a major driver of Tunisia’s economy, bringing in needed foreign currency and employing thousands. In 2014, Tunisia earned around $2.7 billion in tourism revenue.

That changed in June 2015 when an Islamic State gunman killed 38 people – mostly British tourists – in the resort town of Sousse. That attack, along with one in March on the Barlo National Museum in Tunisia that claimed 22 lives that year, prompted London to advise against “all but essential travel” to the country, resulting in a marked decline in the number of British and European tourists.

In the first quarter of 2016, the number of tourists to Tunisia dropped 23.1% compared to the same period the year before. British arrivals fell even more dramatically, down to 8,000 in the first three months of 2016 versus 190,000 dur- ing the same period the year before.

The British government lifted its travel advisory in Tunisia in March of 2017, and Thomas Cook, a leading tour operator, announced it would fly British tourists to Tunisia as of mid-February.

The Tunisian Prime Minister Youssef Chahed submitted a proposal to the Central Bank of Tunisia Governor Cheffy Arai.

Tunisian financial expert Ezzed- din Chaline said the EU action would have “serious repercussions” for Tunisia’s economy.

“Euro-financed eyeing investment in Tunisia would be subject to its home country of suspensions of money laundering and the motives of its investments will be ques- tioned,” Chaline said.

On the security front, Tunisia has been on the offensive against jihadist since early 2016, when officials dismantled a serious extremist cells across the country.

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Lamine Ghanni is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunisia.
As tensions between the United States and Turkey rise ahead of visits by top US officials to Ankara and Istanbul, Turkish leaders are pointing out their close cooperation with Russia.

The pro-government Turkish media said the United States has become an "enemy" as Ankara's troops push into the Afrin region of northwest Syria to drive Kurdish rebels allied with Washington. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan accused the Americans of lying to their NATO partner and prepared for another summit on Syria with the presidents of Russia and Iran after an initial trilateral meeting last November.

In Afrin, Turkish Army units are fighting members of the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG), a Syrian Kurdish militia seen as a terrorist group by Ankara, and the US-led coalition fighting ISIS by Washington.

Concerned about the widening Turkish-US rift, the Trump administration is sending two top officials to Turkey. US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, going to Ankara, and national security adviser H.R. McMaster, headed for Istanbul, are to be in the country within a few days of each other.

Analysts said Tillerson and McMaster could be behind the reported tour of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to the US capital.

In a survey by the Optimar polling institute, almost 72% of Turkish respondents described themselves as "anti-U.S." The poll also found that 28.7% said they were "partially anti-U.S." The political analyst Aykan Erdemir said they favored closer ties between Ankara and Washington.

"The US president has taken a more forcefully than before. It can keep his country in a "state of war" and the intentions of the other actors are most disturbing," said the former Chief of General Staff Ilker Basbug, writing for Ahval online.

"The situation of Erdogan's re-election strategy in March is transparent — survival — but he needs Russia's permission for its personnel will stay where they are," Erdogan said during the visit, New York Times reported.

US Army Lieutenant-General Paul Funk, commander of the US-led coalition against ISIS, issued a thinly veiled warning to Turkey: "You tell us, you will respond aggressively. We will defend ourselves." The pro-government newspaper Yeni Safak said Funk had "threatened" Turkey and the English-language Daily Sabah commented that US generals were "turning into warlords in Syria." 

As Tillerson and McMaster prepared to face their Turkish colleagues, a debate about the origin of a YPG missile showed the extent of Turkey's distrust towards the United States. The missile in question destroyed a Turkish tank in northern Syria and killed five Turkish soldiers February 3. Erdogan said it is too early to say something about the type and source of the missile. Turkish media reported the missile was a Russia-type Konkurs but that did not stop the Russian government from pinning the blame for the death of the soldiers on the United States.

Yeni Safak reported that the Konkurs missiles were part of US weapons supplies for the YPG, adding that the Northern Rebellion Front used to down a Russian fighter jet over Syria's Idlib province. On February 3 also came from the United States. Washington denied supplying these weapons to Syria by fighter jets of a US-led international coalition.

"The YPG has repeatedly used US-made anti-tank missile (AT4) against the Turkish targets in Afrin," Erdogan wrote via e-mail. "Turkey's pro-government media, however, [have] been quick to put the blame on the US and made repeated calls during the Incirlik Airbases in retaliation, conveniently covering up the Russian connection. This shows that the Turkish government's priority is maintaining cordial relations with Moscow even if it requires smear- ing its NATO ally Washington." 

Incirlik Airbase in southern Turkey is used for US-led international coalition forces against ISIS targets in Syria by fighter jets of a US-led international coalition.

Following the downing of the Russian jet in Idlib, Turkey has tried to tie its ties to Islamic rebels in the region to return the remains of the Russian pilot, Major Roman Filipov, to Russia. Filipov reportedly killed himself with a hand grenade to avoid being captured. Moscow said it is willing to return Filipov's body "in cooperation with Ankara".

US-Pakistan ties have been dragged into the Turkish pronouncements against the US-led coalition against ISIS, which is considered an important player in addressing human rights abuses or corruption.

Turkey-US rupture ever more likely

Although its Syria policy is at best wobbly, the Pentagon seems to be weighing in more forcefully than before.

Turkey-US-Rupture ever more likely

In a survey by the Optimar polling institute, almost 72% of Turkish respondents described themselves as "anti-US." 

A coup attempt on August 15, 2016, led to the country's election calendar, Erdogan said. Washington is a "devastating blow to Turkey's credibility in the region," the head of the US Congress's Armenian Caucus, Democrat Eliot Engel, said.

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This hardened trench warfare in the Bipartisan Policy Centre's report that spoke about US support for the Magnitsky Act, a 2012 measure that imposed sanctions on officials that is considered an important development in addressing human rights abuses or corruption.

The Bipartisan Policy Centre's report noted that "the Trump administration and the United States consist-ently view Pakistan as an anti-American player in the region, and with the risk of direct US-Turkey confrontation in Manbij, doing nothing should no longer be an option."

A rupture seems more likely than ever before.
Erdogan tries to boost Islamic credentials by meeting with Pope Francis in Jerusalem

Thomas Seibert
Washington

T urkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has teamed up with an unusual partner as he pursues his campaign to condemn the UN decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and boost his image as the unchallenged leader of the Muslim world.

Erdogan drew attention to Turkey's proposi-
tion of the Organisation of Islamic Co-operation (OIC), a group of 57 Muslim countries, to the pope's meeting with the head of the World Islamic Chamber of Commerce and Industry. "This is tantamount to a declaration of war," said Yelis Adizade, a member of Erdogan's parliament.

However, the latest controversy over sovereignty in the eastern Mediterranean is more than an ideological difference of opinion, with analysts warning it could lead to war over vital resources.

"This is also about Turkey's attempt to create new realities in the region," said Saad al-Zam, the head of Egypt's Political and Strategic Studies Centre. "An analysis of the latest Turkish moves in the region clearly shows this."

Erdogan expressed concerns to heads of state as it perceives a threat to its increase by Syria and influence in the region, particularly in neighboring Turkey's territorial waters.

Cyprus has been divided between Greek and Turkish Cypriots since 1974. Turkey does not recognize the Cypriot government, which is backed by Greece, which instead recognizes the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus.

Kosovo signed the deal in 2013, allowing Cyprus and Egypt to export gas to other countries in the region, particularly in neighboring Turkey's territorial waters.

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Reconstruction in Syria

### Spotlight

**War of words over who rebuilds Syria, how and how much**

By Sharmila Devi

The universe of possible donors and investors is not limited to the West or Arab Gulf countries. However, none of the regime’s key patrons can provide significant levels of funding for reconstruction. The regime has structured its economic and regulatory environment to absorb and distribute reconstruction contracts on its terms, giving priority to investors from countries that stood by Damascus.

**For potential Western donors, reconstruction funds are viewed as the only remaining tool of leverage on the Assad regime.**

**Who’s going to pay? Syrian men work on reconstructing a damaged building in the northern Syrian city of Raqa, on January 16.**

The scope of destruction at the Salaheddin neighbourhood in eastern Syria is seen as an opportunity to implement a “dual-purpose-project.” It is about rebuilding the country, particularly rebuilding the economic system but it is also about reasserting the legitimacy and authority over the entire territory of pre-war Syria,” he said.

“It is a strategy with the EU, the UN and, to a certain extent, the US,” said Heydemann.

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Iran faces tough challenge dealing with population's economic expectations.

Since the 1980s, Iranian women have engaged in a silent protest of sorts against the regime's policy on the hijab.

The poll results showed strong support among Iranians for the missile programme.

The government released a poll in which half of Iranian women respondents expressed opposition to compulsory wearing of the hijab.

Movahed's protest is the latest in a series of anti-hijab protests in Iran.

In 2003-07, the Financial Times ran a series on the hijab.

Gareth Smyth is a non-resident senior fellow at Rafidain Centre for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council.

Debate

Ali Alfoneh is a regular contributor to The Arab Weekly. He was chief correspondent in Iran for The Financial Times in 2003-07.

evolutions give birth to their own leaders," a Russian saying goes and it is just as true in Iran as in Persia.

The latest revolutionary leader in Iran is Vida Movahed better known as "the girl of Enqelab Revolution." As she swept through Iran in late December, Movahed stood on a utility box, removed her hijab and waved the makeshift flag at a public rally.

Video recordings of the incident were widely shared on social media as evidence of Iranian women's struggle against the compulsory hijab. Movahed was arrested and held until January 28 but her act had triggered a movement.

All over Iran, girls and women of all ages took off their white headscarves in a public place and attached the political message to images on social media. Police said 29 women were arrested in Tehran in recent weeks and charged with being unstable in public.

The government released a poll in which 58% of Iranians said it was "bad" and 50% said it was getting worse. Fifty per cent of those said the government was "bad" and 59% said it was getting worse. Also, 63% in the recent poll said domestic oc findings were management and corruption have done more damage to the Iranian economy than international sanctions.

No clear political message emerged from the poll. While the approval rating of Iranian President Hassan Rouhani slipped from 75.4% in May 2017, just before his re-election, it is still fairly high at 65.8%.

While there was widespread sympathy for the protesters' demands, there was also strong backing for the police response. The poll indicated that 55% of respondents said the government was doing enough to help, while 96% said it should do more against corruption and 63% affirmed their view police had used an "appropriate amount of force."

Only 14% of those said police had used too much force and 13% said they used too little.

Support is clearly ending for the JCPOA, according to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). A positive poll rating of 75.6% in August 2017, which was down to 67.6% in June 2018, fell to 55.3% the data from January indicated.

Even more strikingly, 93.2% of Iranians said relations with the United States have not improved or have worsened because of the agreement. up from 67.6% in May 2017.

Further evidence of Iranians reacting negatively to US President Donald Trump's decline in America's favourability rating from 26.5% in June 2016 to 18.4% in the most recent poll. This compares to Germany at 67.6%, Russia at 58.5% and the United Kingdom at 38.4%.

This suggests that Iranians are growing frustrated to see many economic sanctions after his April deadline for JCPOA to be rebranded. Trump has demanded, among other things, a ban on missile tests, the Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. The US government has imposed sanctions on a wide list of Iranian officials and entities.

Domestically, Rouhani's programme has developed into a cat-and-mouse game with the Iranian police, enforcing the Islamic Republic's hijab code in the public sphere.

Movahed and other critics of compulsory wearing of the hijab, have been arrested in recent weeks. Movahed was arrested in Tehran in recent weeks and charged with being unstable in public.

Since the 1980s, Iranian women have engaged in silent protest of sorts against the regime's policy on the hijab.

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While many polls in Iran have proved unreliable, IranPoll has gained many successes. In 2017, three days before the presidential election, its findings were 2 percentage points off of the official results.

IranPoll's latest poll suggested that with GDP growth returning, the Economist Intelligence Unit estimates 2.2 percentage points in 2017-2018 and 2.1% in 2018-2019. It is the Rohani government has room to relax fiscal management. The poll showed marked concern over unemployment, at 11.3% of respondents as the most important problem facing the country.

Rohani's office raised eyebrows when it released a 3-year-old government poll indicating that 49.8% of respondents said wearing the hijab is a private matter and should not be legally required. It involves an avalanche of hypocrisy, in a contentious issue with the judici and constraints to avoid disappointing the women's group, which makes sense for women are 57.2% in Iran.

The poll found a further volatility. It is said that 42.6% of Iranians said they use internet and social media, but 47.6% of Iranians said they get news of domestic and interna affairs.

This figure compared to the 35.6% who said the same of domestic television channels, which the authorities supervise. The political battles for dominance of cyberspace are sure to heat up.

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Italian elections could hinge on contentious migration debate as far-right banks on backlash

Rashmee Roshan Lall

It was not long ago that Italian immigrants to the US were subjected to the same treatment being meted out to African, Muslim and other arrivals to Italy.

And with Italy’s general election scheduled for March 4, the migration debate is set to be among the most pressing of the campaign. A surge of migrants has created fertile ground for this election.

With more than 600,000 uninvited people have arrived in Italy in the past four years, sparking a backlash that fuels the rise of Italy’s centre-right government that has allowed hundreds of thousands of illegal migrants to come to Italy with limited legal aid. Forza Italia was listed at 36% and the Northern League at 24%, suggesting the overall right-wing coalition would win the largest share of the vote. The anti-establishment Five Star Movement, which also promotes hard-line immigration policies, is expected to become the largest single party in parliament and the official opposition. However, Five Star Movement policy has always ruled out forming a coalition with traditional parties, meaning it is unlikely the popular movement would ever enter government in Italy’s tricky political system based on coalition building.

Loaded issue. Migrants rest in the waiting hall of the train station in Italy’s Bardonecchia, on January 13. 

A right-wing coalition is banking strongly on an anti-migrant policy to return dividends at the March 4 polls.

It is easy to bash this rise of hateful commentary in Europe.

Made hurling slurs serving as policy prescriptions.

This would be deplorable at any time, but it’s particularly menacing in 2018 when migrant arrivals by boat in Italy have dropped sharply because of a controversial EU-supported deal executed by Italy’s Interior Minister Marco Minniti with Libya.

Meanwhile, with the demotion was so pro-

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Europe

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It is easy to bash this rise of hateful commentary in Europe.

Made hurling slurs serving as policy prescriptions.

This would be deplorable at any time, but it’s particularly menacing in 2018 when migrant arrivals by boat in Italy have dropped sharply because of a controversial EU-supported deal executed by Italy’s Interior Minister Marco Minniti with Libya.

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Canada is training Jordanian forces to secure border with Syria

Abdulrahman al-Masri

Ottawa

Canadian military teams are training Jordanian forces to secure border with Syria.

In his most recent visit to Canada on February 11, 2018, US President Donald Trump recently warned countries that his policies that his country would no longer give them financial aid. That, he suggested, would go only to “Friends.”

Many experts say Trump’s remarks were primarily meant for the Palestinian Authority (PA). Palestinians and their leaders are outraged at the US president’s grand peace plans for the Middle East, on terms that are extraordinarily favourable to the Israelis. In December, Trump announced that the United States would move its embassy to Jerusalem, which it regarded as Israel’s capital.

Trump seemingly believes he has all the cards. The United States is the largest donor to the Palestinian Authority. It gives about $400 million a year to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, of which $153 million goes directly to US Agency for International Development projects; $106 million is for the PA’s security forces.

Depends on the galaxy

This brings us back to the question of the $66 million given to PA security forces. Part of the reason the PA gets this money is for its forces to work with their Israeli counterparts to lower the security threat emanating from the West Bank. Unsurprisingly, there is a PA security forces might not longer be able to help Israel keep an eye on the West Bank. Security would worsen for Israeli citizens. If Israel established more of a security preses in the West Bank, it would further undermine its world image. If Trump decides to reduce funding for UNRWA projects but keeps the security assistance intact, it’s hard to see Palestinians opposing that.

The real winner of Trump’s funding cuts is Hamas. Cutting funding to the PA would reduce its effectiveness and importance in the eyes of Palestinians, prompting them to turn to Hamas, especially in the West Bank. Reducing the numbers and scope of the PA security forces could embolden Hamas to attack Israel.

US aid cuts to the Palestinian Authority would primarily benefit radical Hamas
The reconstruction of Iraq is seen as an economic opportunity for Egyptian construction companies, which have been seeking to diversify their regional presence. Egyptian firms have a solid track record in the international construction sector, whichqualifies them for specialist reconstruction jobs in war-ravaged countries such as Iraq and Libya.

"Iraq, in particular, will offer a good opportunity for Egyptian construction workers because the Iraqis are thirsty for Iraqi presence," said Waad al Mahmud, an economics professor at Cairo University. "Egyptian participa-
tion comes at a time when the economy is growing and needs investment." 

Mahlab was given a warm official welcome in Iraq, which Egyptian analysts took as a positive sign of Iraqi interest in Cairo's involve-
ment in reconstruction operations. Abadi told Mahlab that Baghdad would give priority to Egyptian construction companies in reconstruction deals, Egyptian media reported.

"Cairo has prioritised an export-
oriented strategy, especially in relation to services, agricultural production and construction ma-
terials," Egypt, which is working to bring down an unemployment rate of 11.9%, is also hoping to raise re-
mittance flows from workers abroad by opening foreign markets to local firms.

Iraq's labour market has been hit by a lack of demand in Arab Gulf countries, with some introducing austerity measures or favouring their own nationals.

Egyptian workers in other coun-
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Work ahead. An Iraqi man works on a damaged house in Mosul's Old City, on January 8

"Nonetheless, it is necessary to remember that Iran is steeped in Iraq and some other Arab capi-
tals," said Hassan Nafaa, a political scientist at the University of Montpellier. "This is why I think bringing Iran back into the Arab fold, at best, or containing it, at worst, will take a long time and require a collective Arab strategy. This is something that can be difficult to form while intra-Arab rifts are at their highest."
Tunisia trims contentious trade deficit with Turkey by taxing imports

Lamine Ghanmi
Tunisia

Tunisia slightly reduced its trade deficit in January after imposing new duties on Turkish products for the first time in seven years.

The move was justified by Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi despite opposition from the Islamist Ennahda party, a partner in the country's coalition government that has been at odds with Turkey ruling Justice and Development Party.

Tunisia's trade deficit with Turkey is its third largest, behind China and Italy. In 2017, the imbalance accounted for 12% of Tunisia's trade gap. The mounting deficit became controversial as secularist groups blamed Islamist influence since 2011 for a bumper crop of imports from Turkey.

Essebsi signed off on the request from Justice and Development Party leaders to protect Tunisian textile firms from losses incurred because of shrink and factories to shut down.

They are often described by trad-ecucers as unfairly discriminatory against Turkey. Tunisian officials have been accused of ignoring the country's economic partnerships with large firms and SMEs that would attract investors, financing and markets, "he said.

"Two years of local and parlia-
mentary elections have taken their toll on many VSE/SMEs, which owe outstanding payments to the national social security fund, to companies that it said were facing financial difficulties," he said.

"We warned Othmani that 2017 would be a critical year for VSEs and called for a 2-year fiscal amnesty to allow them to participate in tenders," he said.  

Tax authorities in January an-
ounced the total or partial can-
celation of penalties, fines, sur-
charges and recovery costs related to duties and taxes assessed before January 1, 2016, and which re-
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Those concerns may benefit from a 35% reduction, provided they pay the remaining 55% by De-

cember 31, 2018.

Fergus has made many recom-
mandations to Morocco Prime Minister Saad Eddine El Othmani to overhaul the sector and boost VSE/SMEs.  

"The government still has not on large projects in the aeronaut-
ic and automotive sectors, among others, lure big multinational companies and parts suppliers. That policy left behind the VSE/
SMEs, the backbone of the North African country's economy."

In 2013, Elamry set out an in-
dustrial acceleration strategy to
create a new relationship between large firms and SMEs that would give the latter "security, sustain-
ability and perspective," he said.

"The main challenge is to instil in SMEs an approach of innovation and improvement of quality by of-
ferring these companies access to investors, financing and markets," he said at the time.

Fergus said VSE/SMEs did not benefit from the large projects "be-
cause multinational companies have their own suppliers.

"The government has still not done anything for VSE/SMEs to in-
tegrate them within this industrial development despite the launch of a strategy for VSEs in 2013," he said. "The industrial acceleration strategy has so far benefited only the big firms."  

Saad Guerraoui

Jordan approves construction of Iraqi oil pipeline

Jordan has given the green light for the construction of a pipeline to move oil from southern Iraq to its port of Aqaba, a government spokes-
man said.

In 2013, the neighbouring coun-
tries agreed on the idea of the 1,700km pipeline to run from Bara to the Red Sea port at a cost of $18 billion.

Jordan approves construction of Iraqi oil pipeline

Saad Guerraoui
More than 8,000
Moroccan companies declared bankruptcy in 2017.

The 5-month political deadlock in Morocco after elections in Oc-
tober 2016 postponed the approval of the 2017 budget, a delay that af-
fected the country's economy.

Fergus said the government should reform the labor code, which he said was not adapted to VSE/SMEs.  

"Many companies are being sued by workers who have been victimised, hence the need to overhaul the labor code," he said.

"Morocco is not doing enough to support VSE/SMEs compared to other neighbouring countries, such as Spain. These firms repre-
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Saad Guerraoui is a contributor to The Arab Weekly on Maghreb issues.

Economy

UNICEF appeals for $17 million to rebuild Iraqi health facilities

The UN Children's Fund appealed for $17 million to help rebuild Iraq's health facilities, ahead of an interna-
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The UN agency said as many as 80,000 children lack access to health services in the region of Mo-
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Controversy endures over interpretation of the Quran from a gender perspective

By Myra Abdallah

Beirut

The status of women in the Quran has always been a topic of critical discussion. Many scholars considered that the Quran clearly equated that men and women were not equal but others have tried to give the Quranic verses a different interpretation.

Maria Dakake, an associate professor of religious studies at George Mason University in Virginia, has researched Islamic intellectual history, with a particular interest in the development of the interpretation of Quranic verses, mainly open-ended.

In the 1990s, there was an increase in the number of female scholars in Muslim communities who tried to reshape the understanding of gender in Islam. These included Pakistani-American Ralph Hassan, African-American Amina Wadud and Lebanese-American philosopher Azizah Al-Hibri.

“They found that they were not to go back to the Quran itself and use it as a main source to find true messages related to gender equality,” said Dakake at a conference on “Gender in the Quran.” It was organized by the Institute for Women’s Studies at the Lebanese American University in Beirut.

“They published interesting interpretations that confirm gender equality in the Quran,” such as general widespread concern for issues of justice, fairness and kindness, in addition to statements of gender equality from a spiritual and moral point of view that highlight the quality of men and women respectively.

Women scholars, such as Has- san and Wadud, based their interpretations of Quranic verses on the idea of justice to invoke the bigger principles, taking into consideration that Quranic verses are ambiguous, controversial and mainly open-ended.

In Arab countries, women scholars are less popular due to the historical prevalence of men as religious authorities and references.

To refute the theory that the Quran explicitly states that women are to be on a subordinate level, Dakake cited Hibri’s interpretation of the most controversial verses. “Hibri confirms that, from a historical and logical context, these verses especially the verse stating that ‘men are the upholders and maintainers of women’s from the financial perspective, following the section that regulates the division of inheritance. In her opinion, the Quran rests on more than women on condition that they spend on their women. If they don’t, all their privileges fail,” Dakake said.

Muslim cleric Sheikh Mohamad Kojok, a researcher in education, anthropology and religious studies at the Lebanese University and doctoral student in jurisprudence at Qom Hawza, says that the Quran does not necessarily support patriarchy, it only reflects the society at the times when it was written.

Religion plays a very important role in the lives of people in this country, which is why action by men of religion will necessarily have a negative impact on women, said Ali Gomaa, the deputy health minister for population affairs, who is also the nation’s general of the National Council for Human Rights. “This has been incited by the Koranic verse.”

Kojok said, “The solution will be for parents to stop circumcising their daughters and this will only happen when there is a change of culture.”

Female circumcision is rampant in the Egyptian countryside where it is considered a cultural norm. The women are then subjected to all the medical consequences of FGM, including bleeding, shock, urinary and fecal fistulas, infections, infertility and death. Women are also subjected to psychological consequences, including depression and anxiety.

“Although the physical pain connected with the operation goes away after a short while, the psychological pain stays forever,” Dakake said.

A national agency that defends the rights of children is working on a campaign to educate women on the dangers of FGM. The ministry offers training courses to health workers on the dangers of female circumcision.

The Arab Weekly. [216x52]
Blue Whale game claims Arab teens’ lives

Roufan Nahhas

Amman

The sometime deadly Blue Whale Challenge, one of the latest crazes in virtual world gaming, has reached Jordanian teens. Schools in Karak governorate, south-west of Amman, reported students inflicting injuries on themselves as part of the 50-day, self-harm challenge.

“The Blue Whale Challenge targets teenagers under 15 who are active on social media networks or who possess smartphones, which are largely available among students,” said Hayan Qadoumi, a teacher in Amman.

The online challenge, which began in 2016, reportedly consists of 50 daily tasks assigned by an administrator. Many of the tasks involve different forms of self-harm (carving phrases on one's arm, cutting one's lip, making oneself sick, etc.) The final challenge requires the participant to commit suicide.

“The incident in Karak was a close call and that is why we need to have more supervision over our students and their online habits,” Qadoumi said. “The supervision should be conducted at home and school but teachers cannot watch everyone all the time and that is why parents should be stricter regarding their children using the internet and their smart devices.”

The spread of the internet and smart devices has come with increased risks for younger children and teenagers.

“Parents should watch closely every step taken by their children on their smart devices. We need to spread awareness about the dangers of online games that are based on violence because they affect children’s behaviour at home and in school,” Farhan added.

The Blue Whale Challenge has reportedly contributed to teenagers’ death in North Africa, as well. Earlier this year in northern Tunisia, a 16-year-old died after from the roof of her home. Her friends reportedly testified she had been playing the online game but her father was adamant that her death was an accident.

In 2017, seven Algerian children reportedly killed themselves while following instructions from the Blue Whale Challenge. The game is also said to have led to one teenager’s death in Morocco.

The Public Security Department said Jordan recorded 120 cases of suicide for reasons not related to the Blue Whale Challenge in 2016 and 104 during the first nine months of 2017.

Figures show that suicide cases are more common among people between the ages 18 and 27. Amman recorded the country’s highest number of suicides and suicide attempts, followed by Irbid and Karak.

Suicides committed by non-Jordanians, many by Syrian refugees, are increasing. In 2015, 10 suicide cases were recorded in the first nine months of 2015.

Roufan Nahhas is a journalist based in Jordan.
Dr Haitham El-Zobaidi is an Iraqi writer based in Lebanon. He is the Executive Editor of Al Arab Group.

What should intellectuals expect from ministries of culture in the Arab world?

Another major role of the ministry of culture is that of shielding society from the endless flood of extremist ideas.

Timo Nasseris show, an imaginative quest for the infinite

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Sharjah

Timo Nasseris first UAIK solo exhibition, “All the Letters in All the Stars,” presented at the Maraya Art Centre in collaboration with the Sharjah Islamic Arts Festival.

The Berlin-based German-Iranian artist is not unknown in the United Arab Emirates, having been one of the winners of the Arapfajt calligraphy competition called “Gon,” a shiny lattice of steel rods, in a nod to Islamic geometrical forms and architecture.

It took Nasseris a long time to have a solo exhibition in the UAE because he was looking for “the right institution” where an exhibition of this scale could be accommodated, he said. He was represented through the Stier-Sehlem Gallery in Beirut so “did not feel absent from the region,” Nasseris added.

Having begun his artistic career as a photographer, the switch to sculpture in 2004 and later to Islamic calligraphic forms proved to be “a difficult transition initially.”

“For me, it started with a certain kind of curiosity about certain aspects of Islamic architecture and especially about the construction of the minarets, a form of ornamented vaulting in Islamic architecture,” Nasseris said.

“It was then that I realised that mathematics is the theme that holds it all together and the geometry that was used for it was based on a combination of these triangles,” Nasseris said in this research in 2009-10. Once you figure out how these geometric forms work, you can use it and it becomes like a toolbox to explore Islamic geometrical forms.

Born and brought up in Berlin and with no knowledge of Arabic, Nasseris applied a very logical, Western methodology with the imaginative curiosity of an artist to his subject. In 2006, during his transition to sculpture, Nasseris “always felt the need to get closer to his subject to show its structure.”

Nasseris came upon noted Arab calligrapher Ali Al Sayed’s “Unknown Letter I” and “Unknown Letter II” and the last letter was created in 2015 and the last letter was created for the present exhibition.

Consistently, the exhibition, which includes four sculptures of the resulting forms – made of wooden staves – as well as drawing and wood pieces outlining the process as a result of the artist’s in-depth research and investigation of this method, it shows his disciplined practice of Arabic lettering in the method of Ibn Muqla and applying it to a recreated star chart from Baghdad in 934.

“All the Letters in All the Stars” has won over viewers and critics. Laura Murillo, UAIK Arts Curator, said the exhibition has been “a beautiful and fragmented journey that is a kind of two segments – some older and some newer work – in dialogue here,” Metzler said.

“The show is a dialogue between two different worlds and the incapacity in these two veins to fully understand each other is a kind of two segments – some older and some newer work – in dialogue here,” Metzler said.

A library is a must in a modern culture in an Arab country, especially in one with limited means, is an exacting job. Nobody knows exactly what a minister of culture is doing.

Everywhere in the world, government ministries as public service institutions whose role is to respond to the population. How does this logic apply to the ministry of culture? Should artists and intellectuals expect the ministry of culture to provide them with an income?

To fulfill its role, the ministry of culture needs the services of men and women of culture. They are its means for providing cultural services. A library is a must in a modern culture where a writer enlightens the population by writing and an artist entertains.

A library is a must in a modern society where cinema allows exceptional freedom for the eye and the mind. Our daily life is taken up by work, reading and watching television. Except for the news, anything shown on TV, even a cooking show, counts as culture.

Another major role of the ministry of culture is that of shielding society from the endless flood of extremist ideas. The ministry can cooperate and coordinate with citizens and intellectuals alike to turn its programmes into engines for raising awareness and re-examining social norms and values.

Societies immersed through culture can safely withstand the onslaught of ideological or religious intolerance. When the cultural fibre becomes weak in a society, it was very easy for that osious idea to gain the upper hand in a gullible environment. All we have to do in the Arab world is look around to realise the total absence of ministries of culture and of intellectuals.

The cultural renaissance of the 1970s through the 1990s is history and yet it was thanks to the dynamics of culture that the Arab world extricated itself from the Middle Ages and ushered in the age of modernity. That same world is back in the Middle Ages with an added dimension of violence and savagery unimpeached before and coming from the availability of new weapons and technologies. This descent to the depths of hell was made possible by eclipsing over long stretches of time the role of culture in society.

Intellectuals in the Arab world have a long list of complaints about ministries of culture in their countries. Most of those complaints are justified but the real problem eminates from the lack of clarity about the role of the ministries.

Ministries of culture have never been employment offices. They are there to support cultural activities for the benefit of the society as a whole, not for the material benefit of only intellectuals and artists.

Allocating subsidies and financial awards to artists and intellectuals cannot be seen as an obligation for the state. These are forms of generosity from the state and society.

A source of income and Shakespearian has his festival.

Nasseris searched for where the calligrapher could have found the letters, deducting they were hidden in the constellations. In artistic terms, it was indeed they kept in the imagination and brought together many strands of Nasseris’s recent exploration.

So being fascinated by Ibn Muqla’s missing letters, I started to research and then I started this fantasy about where these letters are,” he said. “This was actually the starting point for this exhibition, ‘All the Letters in All the Stars.’”

He thought that if the letters could be and being always a mystery and always a puzzle, I tried to imagine that Ibn Muqla must have looked up at the night sky in Baghdad and found the patterns for those missing letters up there.”

With this in mind, the exhibition includes three sculptures, “Unknown Letter I” and “Un-known Letter II” – the second and third missing letters – were done in 2015 and the last letter was created for the present exhibition.

Consequently, the exhibition, which includes four sculptures of the resulting forms – made of wooden staves – as well as draw-ings and wood pieces outlining the process as a result of the artist’s in-depth research and investigation of this method, it shows his disciplined practice of Arabic lettering in the method of Ibn Muqla and applying it to a recreated star chart from Baghdad in 934.

“All the Letters in All the Stars” has won over viewers and critics. Laura Murillo, UAIK Arts Curator, said the exhibition has been “a beautiful and fragmented journey that is a kind of two segments – some older and some newer work – in dialogue here,” Metzler said.

“The show is a dialogue between two different worlds and the incapacity in these two veins to fully understand each other is a kind of two segments – some older and some newer work – in dialogue here,” Metzler said.

I was fascinated that he (Ibn Muqla) called ‘ Alif’ in 2009. ”

About three years ago, Nasseris said he found four letters that were missing from the Arabic language. He did not reveal the letters, despite immense pressure, including physical mutilation and incarceration, and his notes on their discovery are missing.

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When it comes to finding donors, artists and intellectuals can continue to work and produce without worrying about their next meal. Wealthy people deliberately pay premium prices for works of art and compete in sponsoring cultural events with each other. When it comes to finding donors, churches must be quite jealous of their funds. In the end it is the state that is there to just keep an eye on the original idea and prevent corruption.

In this system, the main role of the minister of culture is to find the right balance between the cultural needs of society, the state’s resources and the productive capacities of artists and intellectuals. To succeed in that role, should the minister of culture come from the world of art and culture or should he be a shrewd politician? This is a question that remains unanswered in the Arab world because its governments have yet to determine what they expect from culture.

 Artists and intellectuals in the Arab world need to look objectively at their demands from the state. They can turn their backs on the government but they need to stop complaining and start thinking about the vital role which national culture should play.

Grasping the infinite. Timo Nasseris’s “Unknown Letter I.”

The exhibition shows Nasseris’s disciplined practice of Arabic lettering in the method of Ibn Muqla.

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Film Bans in Lebanon

Lebanon gripped by film-banning frenzy

Samar Kadi
Beirut

Lebanon, long viewed as the freest country in the Arab world, is witnessing a string of bans on Hollywood movies that spotlight condemnation about the deterioration of public freedom.

Two films — “The Post” and “Fauda” — were banned in Lebanon last month in compliance with a boycott of Israeli-made movies. The ban on “The Post,” whose director Steven Spielberg is blacklisted from entering Israel, came two weeks after the film was shown in cinemas. Reactions to the bans were divided.

Many support the boycott of Israel, a country with which Lebanon is technically at war and which is widely viewed for military aggression. Others say censorship is arbitrary and randomly enforced. Activist Samer Issa, a co-founder of the Campaign to Boycott Supporters of Israel in Lebanon, said banning films was justified and in line with the boycott of Israel, which Lebanon passed in 1995.

The problem is that the law may be outdated and, in many instances, it had been overlooked. This time the government has assumed its responsibility and it should be applauded and praised for it (not criticized), Issa said.

“It is the (Lebanese) censorship board’s responsibility to make sure that no works involving links with Israel and Israelis are cleared or can pass through,” Issa said.

In the case of “The Post,” Issa argued, “the director is pro-Israeli, a lot of people are pro-Israeli and the executive producer is pro-israeli. Moreover, any of those three support the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement in Gaza. Spielberg donated $1 million to Israel in 2017 after the Israeli occupation of Lebanon was lifted.”

Spielberg’s previous two films, “The BFG” and “Bridge of Spies,” were allowed in Lebanese cinemas.

The ambiguity and arbitrary implementation of the anti-Israel boycott in Lebanon is causing confusion and dismay in the industry. “Who’s in, who’s out? It is something that we face at every edition of the Lebanese Film Festival,” said actress and the festival’s director Wafa Halawi.

“The criteria for censorship and the political agenda behind it have not been clear in many aspects, even artistically. In other words, we cannot predict what will be censored or not,” Halawi said.

This puts artists and anyone in the film industry in an ambiguous position.

Several branches of government are involved in deciding on which films are banned in Lebanon. The country’s censorship board, which includes representatives from the foreign, information, education, economy and social affairs ministries, submits its recommendation to the Interior Ministry, which is represented on the board by a member of the General Security.

Halawi said arbitrary censorship is increasing and becoming stricter, especially regarding political and religious content.

“Mainly anything that could trigger any controversy or misunderstanding about religion or politics is being avoided,” she said.

“Obviously, it becomes more complicated in a country like Lebanon where anything that could be misconstrued can develop into something much bigger. However, the most dangerous aspect of censorship is when artists start unconsciously to self-censor themselves. They don’t know what is allowed or not, how to talk about a theme and whether it will be crossed or not.”

Film critics blasted the bans on grounds that they harm Lebanon’s reputation as a bastion of freedom. For them, the boycott of cultural products should be a personal choice, not a state-enforced measure.

Idriss, however, insisted that the state has a role to fulfil in guiding itself and its citizens and preventing “cultural normalisation” with Israel.

“Do you think the Americans would allow the screening of a movie funded by Iran or one that praises (Osama) bin Laden for example?” he asked. “There are tens of books and films banned in countries of the so-called free world because they touch on national security and the safety of citizens.”

“The freedom of speech is different from the freedom of normalising relations with the enemy. We have to make a distinction between censorship and the preservation of national sovereignty, dignity and resistance against Israel,” he added.

Another controversy is simmering over the American film “Fauda,” about a CIA operative kidnapped in the Lebanese capital at the height of the civil war in 1982. There are calls to ban the fictional movie, which was criticised for tarnishing Lebanon’s image and rewriting its history without Lebanese insight. The film is to open in US theatres April 13, the anniversary of the US embassy attack.

The renewed focus on the boycott law coincides with a wider clampdown on free speech. In early January, an arrest warrant was issued for television presenter Maria Maalouf after she criticised Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on television talk-show host Marcel Ghanem is being prosecuted for criticising the leader.

The issue is gaining momentum and is likely to be among the major issues that will decide their future. The question of cultural freedom is likely to be among the major issues that will decide their future.

The film, “The Post,” was banned in Lebanon. Doueihi was subjected to a ruthless campaign by Hezbollah’s media wing when another of his films, “The Insult,” made it to the short list of the Academy Awards’ nominations for foreign language movies. It was the first Lebanese film to be so honoured.

Interestingly, the campaign to impose censorship is limited to political issues while it is tolerant towards sexually explicit material as well as issues regarding homosexuality.

Accusations of treachery are made against anyone who defies the call for the return to censorship. Doueihi’s critics claim his film on the “Incident” was banned because he depicted Hezbollah leader’s broken promise and denounced Palestinian resistance to the Israeli occupation of the occupied territories.

Doueihi denies such accusations. During the 1990s and 1990s, literally, any material that questioned Israel was subject to censorship.

Any foreign media that featured articles about Israel was censored. That ceased during the 1991-93 civil war when many government functions broke down.

The issue is how to accommodate a return to censorship with the rapid advances in the means of communication. Advocates of the film boycott suggest a strange compromise: They would permit the sale of pirated copies of prohibited movies to the public while banning the films from movie theatres. The compromise makes no mention of written material. Such a concession shows the virtual impossibility of a return to the boycott that existed before the civil war.

The issue is gaining momentum as parliamentary elections, which are scheduled for May, approach. The question of cultural freedom is likely to be among the major issues that will decide their outcome.
World-class infrastructure makes Dubai’s airport busiest in the world

N.P. Krishna Kumar

Dubai

Dubai International Airport has, for the fourth consecutive year, achieved the coveted status of being the world’s busiest for international passengers with 88.2 million travelers in 2017, a figure that is expected to grow to 90.3 million in 2018.

In its nearly six decades of existence, Dubai International Airport (DXB) has witnessed average percentage growth in the double digits. Under the DXB Plus programme, the airport aims to raise its annual capacity to 118 million travelers by 2023.

This achievement is primarily a result of the United Arab Emirates’ vision, which recognised aviation as one of the core sectors and key drivers of the economy. Dubai’s location, which puts the city within a 4-hour flight of one-third of the world’s population, world-class infrastructure and successful flag-carriers, such as Emirates and flydubai, with constantly expanding global networks create an aviation hub favoured by travelers globally.

Dubai airport is a hub for 90 international airlines connected to some 240 destinations across six continents. It has a capacity of 90 million passengers yearly and needs to expand to accommodate growth. The DXB Plus programme will focus on using process improvements and technology, along with data management, to boost capacity and service when there is no room to expand the airport physically.

The first initiative under the programme was the introduction last year of a facility that enabled the use of Emirates’ Al Safeer smart gates, reducing immigration time to a few seconds for many travelers.

Another DXB Plus initiative was a sophisticated motion sensor system that tracks queues across all touch points in real time, allowing staff members to identify bottlenecks and deploy resources quickly.

The second traffic figures do not come as a surprise for Premjit Bangara, general manager for travel at Dubai-based Sharaf Travel Services. “Dubai has one of the most modern airports in the world and they have wisely invested in developing infrastructure aligned to their year-on-year growth,” Bangara said.

“The addition of new terminals and cutting-edge airport technology has been a resultant of meticulous planning to cater to their growth. In addition to this, the government of Dubai has created a support system to promote tourism with massive investments in hotels and resorts along with theme parks and various other attractions that make Dubai a top-notch destination,” said Ahmad.

Ahmad cited the “excellent connectivity on both eastbound and westbound destinations” of Dubai-based Emirates and flydubai that have contributed to the dominance of Dubai with the large fleet of Airbuses, 777 jets. “All their passengers can avail of free stopovers in Dubai with access to a range of quality hotels,” he said.

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