Mohamed Salah, a footballer with impact beyond stadiums

Erdogan moves to expand arc of influence in North Africa, Sahel

Much like China, Turkey is selling its economic ambitions as beneficial to Africa.

Turkey's ties with the West dimmed over the refusal by the Czech Republic to extradite Salah, Muslim, a leader of a Syrian-Kurdish group that Ankara views as a terrorist organisation. Turkish government spokesman Bekir Bozdag accused the West of ignoring terrorist victims who were victims of "Turks of Muslims."

Turkey also rejected calls by France and the United States to extradite a UN-ordered ceasefire in Syria to Aфina. Anka is at odds with the United States over Washington's support for Syria's Kurds and is facing growing criticism from Europe over Erdogan's crackdown on dissent and a standoff with Cyprus over hydrocarbon rights in the eastern Mediterranean.

"Instead of turning East, Turkey is going it alone," Nicholas Danforth, a senior political analyst at the Bipartisan Policy Centre, a Washington think-tank, wrote in an analysis for War on the Rocks, a website on security matters. "This West is in real danger of losing Tur- key, but this has not resulted from, or been accompanied by, improved relations between Turkey and any of its Eastern neighbours," Danforth added.

Erdogan's action in Afrin shows a Turkish readiness to use military means to achieve his objectives, a fact that is hardly reassuring to the West and regional powers. Only three months ago, Turkey increased its military presence overseas when it reached an agreement with Jordan and with many other Arab players hoping to attract transfer requests to Europe's big clubs.

The World Cup is traditionally a place to showcase talents, with many other Arab players hoping to attract transfer requests to Europe's big clubs.

Salah's effect is felt not just on the pitch but also on the terraces. He has, almost overnight, become one of the most prominent Arab and Muslim representatives in Europe. Although he does most of his talking on the pitch and one would be hard-pressed to find a post-match interview of Salah breaking out of the confines of the stereotypical footballer talking about being "the gaffer" and the importance of securing three points, he is more eloquent with his feet.

Football chants are a staple of the English game. In addition to the old chestnuts about this team being on the road to Wembley or that player running down the wing, there are the more comedic or risque versions that seem to emerge sponta- neously and live long in the memory.

A recent chant by Liverpool fans about Salah – it went viral on social media – belongs in this category and contains perhaps the only posi- tive representation of Islam on football. Singing to the tune of 1990s Britpop band Dodgy’s "Good Enough," the chant contains the lines: "He’s good enough for you/eight good enough for me/He scores another few/Then I’ll be/He’s sitting in the mosque/That’s where I want to be.

Salah is not the only Arab or Muslim Footballer in the Premier League. His teammates Sadio Mane and Mohamed Salah are among the most prominent Arab and Muslim representatives in Europe.
Turkey seeks larger footprint in Africa as tensions with West and region’s countries rise

Lamine Ghanmi

The strange cases of Turkish ships off North Africa

Turkey was not being honest with us.

Abdullah al-Thani, prime minister of the Tobruk-based government

Erdogan in Africa

Lamine Ghanmi is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis,
The city of Manbij in northern Syria is a source of political tension between the United States and Turkey. It might, therefore, be key to normalising relations.

The regime of Bashar Assad, who withdrew from Manbij in July 2017, making it one of the first large cities in Syria freed from the rule of the government in Damascus. Over the next months, the population of Manbij engaged in one of the most notable rebel efforts: an attempt at normalising its relationship with the US.

However, in late 2017, under pressure from the regime’s administration and rebel forces, Manbij was captured by the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and its partner force, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), which had seized Manbij in northern Raqqa province and were at the gates of Manbij.

The US coalition intervened in Syria against ISIS in September 2014. By early 2016 the United States and its partner force, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), had cleared ISIS from northern Raqqa province and were at the gates of Manbij.

Turkey was furious at US support for the YPG, which it regards as a terror organisation that has been fighting against Turkey since 1984. This is the equivalent, as Faysal Rami, a senior fellow at the Atlantic Institute, and Robert Ford, a former US ambassador to Syria, noted, at least not right now, “said Turkey would insist on all of Rojava being dismembered. It was referring to the “de-escalation” zones in Syria, where Russia and Turkey brokered ceasefires to give space to prepare and conduct military operations.

The US-led coalition intervened in Syria against ISIS in September 2014. By early 2016 the United States and its partner force, the Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG), had cleared ISIS from northern Raqqa province and were at the gates of Manbij.

The US attempt to run a narrow counterterrorism war without getting entangled in Syria’s broader war was failed and created a Frankenstein, potentially explosive, situation. All others focused on the post-ISIS order and the United States’ bet on the YPG left it in the untenable position of being opposed by Iran, Russia and Turkey.

To normalise relations with Turkey, the United States would have to resolve conflicts with the YPG, starting with some kind of joint oversight of Manbij, which US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has offered Ankara, as well as support for Turkey controlling the Ayn Arab border, the Washington Post reported.

Will the US follow through and would it rescind relations?

Michael Stephens, a research fellow at the Royal United Services Institute, and Robert Ford, a former US ambassador to Syria, agreed the United States should consider a broader relationship with the YPG to avoid a counterproductive cycle. They added, however, that the US would never abandon its support for the YPG.

The US government considers the YPG to be a member of the broader Syrian Democratic Forces. The YPG was founded in 2012 as a partnership between the US and Kurdish groups as part of the US-led coalition against ISIS.

The YPG is a key player in the Syrian conflict, and its role in the area of Manbij has been a source of tension between the US and Turkey.

The US military has been involved in operations in Manbij since 2014, when the US military took over Manbij. By early 2016, the US-led coalition intervened in Syria against ISIS, and the US military took over Manbij.

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Iraq's chronic water crisis won't be fixed by rain gods

Colored drought conditions left Iraq dealing with a water crisis, which was interrupted by heavy rains in spring. Overjoyed spectators noted that water reserves, blanketed by upstream irrigation schemes and irregular rainfall, had been restored. However, this was merely an illusion of drought relief.

Behind the mirage lurks the recent history of parched earth cracking because of a lack of moisture, particularly for its cultivators, farmers and a population dependent on the replenishment of its twin rivers. The living words of late Iraqi poet Muhammad al-Jawhali: “Aegis of tears, another” — sharpen the contrast.

“The Aegis has resigned in its capacity as one of Iraq’s twin rivers,” wrote Mustafa al-Awadi on Facebook, days before a downpour transformed Iraq into a temporary Venice of the Arab world.

Dry conditions, water abstraction activities, agricultural irrigation schemes, by upstream states — Turkey, Iran and Syria — with which Iraq shares its water, have devastated agricultural and aquatic life and the rural economy, which employs 20% of Iraq’s workforce. The crisis is not new but has grown in the years following the US-led invasion of resources.

Blames have been assigned to numerous actors. Activists charge the rule's elite's demonstrable lack of expertise and mismanagement as one cause. Others accord blame to hydrologic diversions led by Iraq's neighbors. Levels remain low, despite assurances from the Iraqi Minister of Water Resources Habib al-Janabi. In an interview with Al-Baghdadia TV, January of this year, that four consecutive days of heavy rainfall compensated the country for “the depletion of river beds between Turkey and the remedy crop failure. Despite Janabi’s optimism, however, rainfall was sparse.

While fingers of blame criss-cross the Iraqi Twitterverse, explanations appear confused at best. However, no one can deny that the drought wrought a crying blend of political mismanagement and stubborn ecological factors.

Drought episodes in Iraq are recurrent and vary in magnitude from one year to the next. Particularly severe are the drought conditions in Diyala Basin, shared with Iran, during the June-September dry season.

The worst spell struck in 2008, settling “basically over the fertile crescent region.” The US occupation and the US-sponsored Iraqi government, at the time, wrote, destroyed 90% of the crop’s yield and reduced agricultural output. Crop prices increased, and globally, crop exports were disrupted.

The recent torrential rain may have temporarily reversed the drought’s impact. However, the downpour was followed by a crippling drought, bringing the water crisis to a new level.

“Adjustment” ahead. The US Army soldier is seen in rural Asbar, on January 27.

**Iraq**

Turkish, is exacerbat ing water scarcity. Although 15 dams have been built in the country, the effects of Iskub on balloonines, the ancient city of Humaydsh and its 5,700 largely Kirdish inhabitants will be the most significant.

The flow of water has fallen 40%, Janabi told Reuters in December. Hydroelectric dams are but one piece of the puzzle.

The unsanctioned digging of wells by farmers and the Iraqi government added a layer of complexity. It has sucked difficult-to-replenish ground water reserves dry.

Water infrastructure battered in the last decade has strained the operating capacity of facilities and services, resulting in the near total failure of Iraq’s sewage systems.

The situation is complex and the need for a resolution cannot be overstated. Article 100 of the Iraqi Constitution reads: “The federal government shall have exclusive authority in planning policies relating to water sources from outside Iraq.” However, calculated deception by Iraq and its neighbors is not being adequately addressed.

Frustrations have been expressed in articles published by activists aligned with the “Save the Tigris” campaign. One piece argued that “post-enhum Iskub Dam Reser- voir is not a success.” Turkey, they said, “continues to suggest falsely that the dam’s work is being delayed” and that “the Iraqi government is striving for the success of this deception... but continues to mislead” its people.

Scale of the damage and magni- tude of the water crisis works against the vested interests of those in power: Given that 80% of Iraq’s water is at the mercy of upstream neighbors, the risks are known but left to foster as populations remain unaddressed from the dam building sprees of co-riparian states.

Water-deficit inspired disputes among communities that dot vegetated lands are set to rise due to depletion, suction and irresponsible spending persist.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said coalition force num- bers were “very limited” and stressed it was “out of the ques- tion to give them a base on our territory.”

There is no base or airport controlled by foreign forces... No aircraft lands or takes off without our authorisation,” he said at a new conference.

Abadi declared victory over ISIS in December but the militants have reverted to a guerrilla-style insurgency and attacks on select- ed targets. The Iraqi parliament’s demand underscores the balancing act Abadi must conduct between the United States and Iran, his two biggest military allies who are themselves adversaries.

There are no Iraqi regular forces in Iraq but there are iran- backed Shia militias allied with Abadi’s government.

In October, Abadi strongly de- fended the Shia militias, after comments from US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson that foreign fighters and Iranian militias in Iraq should “go home.” Abadi said they were Iraqi volunteer fighters who had played a major role in the military defeat of ISIS. The parliament vote, backed by all but a handful of the 177 law- makers present, was sponsored by lawmakers from the ruling Shia Muslim bloc in parliament.

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Iraqi parliament passed a resolution calling for the gov- ernment to draw up a plan for the withdrawal of foreign troops from the country.

“The Iraqi parliament expresses its gratitude to all countries that supported Iraq in its fight against Daesh (the Islamic State) and calls for the government to draw up a timetable for the withdrawal of foreign troops,” it said in a state- ment.

Washington in October 2014 forged a 74-country coalition to assist Iraqi forces in a fightback against ISIS, which had seized large parts of Iraq and posed a military threat to Baghdad.

The coalition announced in Feb- ruary that it was “adjusting” its force levels in Iraq downward as it shifted from combat operations following ISIS’s expulsion from al-Issur urban centers. US Army Brigadier-General Jonathan Irons, the coali- tion’s director of opera- tions, said “an appropriate amount of capabilities” would be kept in Iraq in addition to the forces needed to train, advise and equip the Iraqis.

Such a presence is in line with the agreement reached by leaders of the US and Iran. The withdrawal of US forces from Iraq in August of 2020, if implemented, would mark the end of a 2003 invasion that toppled President Saddam Hussein and then withdrawal in December 2011. Three years later, ISIS seized one-third of Iraq, sweeping aside Iraqi se- curity forces.

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The timing of the vote, right before the election, is a message from pro-Iran parties that they do not want American troops in Iraq forever,” political analyst Ahmed Yousif told Reuters. “They are achieving two things — pressure on Abadi’s government to expel foreign troops, as well as scoring political points before the elec- tion.”

Abadi is seeking a second term in parliamentary elections sched- uled for May. A spokesman for the coalition told Reuters the presence of its troops hinged on Iraqi govern- ment approval.

“Our continued presence in Iraq will be conditions-based, propor- tional to need, in coordination with and in the interest of the government,” said US Army Colonel Ryan Dillon. The coalition said it was switch- ing from focusing on retaining ter- ritory to consolidating gains. It has trained 125,000 members of the Iraqi security forces, including 22,000 Kurdish peshmerga fight- ers who helped retake Iraqi terri- tory from ISIS. The coalition has drawn criti- cism for the number of civil- ian casualties resulting from air strikes. At least 841 civilians had been killed as of January 2018. The coalition said it goes to great lengths to avoid civilian casual- ties.

A report by refugee aid groups accused Iraqi authorities of forc- ing thousands of displaced people to return to their home areas de- spite the risk of death from booby- traps or acts of vigilantism.

The Danish Refugee Council, the International Rescue Commit- tee and the Norwegian Refugee Council said the drive came as Ira- qi officials suggested they would like to see people move back to vote in the May elections be- cause it was not possible to vote in displacement camps.

The report said many of the re- turns “are premature and do not meet international standards of safety, dignity and voluntariness.”

The war in ISIS decimated nearly 6 million people and about 25 million people are still uproot- ed.

The Iraqi government denies forcing internally displaced fami- lies to return against their will. “Though the government policy and main goal is to encourage a quick return of displaced families to their areas of origin, this must be voluntary and not by forc- ing them to do so,” government spokesman Saad al-Udithi told the Associated Press.

Abadi said that some forces re- turns may have taken place but that they were “individual cases” and the result of decisions by specific provincial governors as opposed to federal government policy.
Jordan reshuffles cabinet as it faces economic, security challenges

Jordanians continue to struggle with jihadist threats

Jordan

Mona Alami

The background of contemporary Jordanian jihadists has also changed. Most are believed to be under-employed and hacking into improvised backgrounds, with exceptions including the sons of Jordanian parliamentarians and of army commanders. Abu Haniya noted, nonetheless, that Jordan is witnessing a radicalisation of members of lower-middle class families, a phenomenon that could be partially explained by the worsening economic conditions that have resulted in a change in status of members of that particular social class.

The changes have translated into several terror attacks on Jordanian soil. In March 2015, Jordan witnessed an extended battle in the city of Irbid, following an operation to take down an ISIS cell plotting terror attacks. In June 2015, five Jordanian intelligence officers were shot in another terrorist attack near the Al-Baqaa Palestinian refugee camp, the previous residence of Jordanian terrorist Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi. Also in June 2016, six Jordanian soldiers were killed and several others wounded when a car bomb exploded near the Syrian refugee camp of al-Rukban, an attack claimed by ISIS.

In December 2016, four Jordanian fighters attacked a police patrol and overthrew the Crusader castle in Karak, where several tourists were trapped during the attack, also claimed by ISIS.

In January this year, Jordan said it had foiled a major terror plot and dismantled an ISIS cell terror cell of 17 people. "The cells that have been dismantled recently were not connected to one another," said Abu Haniya, who added that Jordan was not the "ground of confrontation" for jihadist groups but more of "support." Jordan has severely cracked down on people suspected of jihadist inclinations. Jordan forbids returning foreign fighters and more than 300 of those who have returned have been prosecuted and imprisoned. This means those remaining in conflict zones could be significantly deterred from returning. Would this policy yield successful results and a significant drop in attacks, Jordan will continue to struggle with the jihadist threat. Worsening economic conditions, unemployment and frustration all contribute to radicalisation. More importantly, drivers such as community support and exposure are also present in Jordan. A 2015 study by Anne Speckhard, Fares Fakir, Adrian Shifkov and Amer Sabaileh on Jordanian youth stated that 5% of young people in Zarqa said ISIS was close to their personal circle and 2.7% said al-Qaeda represented their personal convictions. In Irbid 1.5% endorsed ISIS and another 1.7% al-Qaeda. Like in other Arab countries, young Jordanians are facing an identity crisis that is corroding a sense of national purpose and a lack of political life. These factors, combined with bad economic conditions and a conducive environment, mean that jihad will continue to appeal to a portion of young Jordanians.

London

Jordan Abdullah II has approved a cabinet reshuffle, replacing ministers in key domestic portfolios such as interior, labour and the economy at a time of continued economic downturn. King Abdullah has signed the final say on key policies but frequent cabinet personnel changes are considered a threat of defying frustration among anti-government protesters over rising prices and unemployment.

Jordanian Prime Minister Hani Mulki, who retained his post, appointed the king’s chief of staff as special deputy for economic affairs in an apparent bid to soothe widespread anger over flagging growth.

Mulki’s reshuffle, the sixth since he became prime minister in May 2016, comes three days after hundreds of protesters in Salt, 30km west of Amman, demanded his resignation and called for King Abdullah to force the government to roll back price increases and end high-level corruption.

King Abdullah issued a royal decree approving the appointment of Major-General Fadel al-Hamoud as the new police chief in a shake-up that two days ago saw the dismissal of Yaseen al-Maleh, a long-time adviser to former prime minister Ali al-Omari.

The government said cash transfers to low-income citizens have mitigated the effect of price rises. Jordanian economic growth has been affected by regional conflicts, which have raised investor sentiment and as such demands generated by Syrian refugees staying in Jordan has increased, the IMF said.

Real GDP growth was revised to 2% in 2017, below the previous year and lower than anticipated at the start of the IMF programme, and was expected to be approximately 3% this year, almost halfway the level it attained a decade ago.

Jordan is struggling with a heavy debt burden and is expected by international lenders to seek an economic reform programme including subsidy cuts.

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Jordanian Prime Minister Hani Mulki, who retained his post, appealed for an end to violence following an operation to take down an ISIS cell plotting terror attacks. In June 2015, five Jordanian intelligence officers were shot in another terrorist attack near the Al-Baqaa Palestinian refugee camp, the previous residence of Jordanian terrorist Abu Muhammad al-Tahawi.

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Reprints that Syrian President Bashar Assad’s regime recently carried out a chlorine attack in the besieged enclave of Eastern Ghouta are cause for serious concern.

If confirmed, this would be at least the ninth instance since December 23, 2012, that the international community has been alerted to alleged chemical weapons use by the Damascus regime.

The world’s chemical weapons watchdog, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW), is said to have opened an investigation into the alleged recent chlorine attack in Eastern Ghouta.

As has happened many times in the past, the Syrian government and its Russian allies vehemently denied chemical weapons use. Even as he described the accusations as “false,” Syrian Ambassador to the United Nations Hossam Khatib rejected the reports of chemical weapons because it “very simply has not been used.”

Under a 2013 deal between the United States and Russia, Assad’s government was supposed to have shipped out of the country its stockpile of chemical weapons. However, the US said it had not include chlorine because of its industrial use.

In September 2014, just weeks after Syria dispatched the last of its chemical weapons overseas, the OPCW confirmed that chlorine gas was being used in Syria.

Four years on, Damascus still claims its innocence. As the government has shifted blame for the alleged chlorine attack on Eastern Ghouta to “terrorist groups,” it’s true that extremist groups fighting in Syria have used chlorine and other chemical weapons and are likely to have been involved in such activities. In December 2015, for instance, an OPCW fact-finding team determined with “the utmost confidence” that people were exposed to sulphur mustard in an attack in Marea, in northern Syria, where the Islamic State (ISIS) was fighting another rebel group.

That said, all evidence of neutral inquiry has found much to dispute in the systematic denials put forth by Damascus and Moscow regarding chemical weapons use by Syrian government troops. An investigation by the United Nations and OPCW concluded in 2016 that Syrian government forces used chlorine gas on several occasions. The investigative report accused Syrian government forces of perpetrating chlorine gas attacks that killed more than 80 people.

Reports recently said the United Nations is examining a report, yet to be released, according to which Syria may have found a source for stockpiling chemical weapons all over again. The New York Times and the Associated Press said the report contains “substantial new evidence” about suspected Syria chlorine attacks in Syria and North Korea on ballistic missile and chemical weapons programs.

Amnesty International said the United Nations should publish the report and report, Lynn Maslouf, Amnesty’s director of research for the Middle East, and and OPCW should publish its report. Lynn Maslouf, Amnesty’s director of research for the Middle East, and North Korea on ballistic missile and chemical weapons programs.

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Three facts on Syria that are best said aloud

Ahmed Abou Douh

There are many ways to respond to a war that brings death to lives on television screens and that one chooses UNICEF to address the continuing plight of Syrian children in Eastern Ghouta in Syria should not be an option. The UN children’s agency refused to describe civilian suffering as the result of the Syrian regime’s bombardment of the Damascus suburb and simply released a blank statement. It was saying it had no words, that the hideous truth lies beyond language. This trick drew some attention but said nothing of what needed to be said and truly said. As Nobel Peace Prize laureate Elie Wiesel said, words can sometimes attain the quality of deeds. Silence is not an acceptable statement. Far better to speak to the facts. For Syria, these are plain and come in the form of a dolorous musical trill of dissonant and discordant notes.

First, this is Moscow’s war. When Russian President Vladimir Putin designated a daily 5-hour “humanitarian pause” in Eastern Ghouta to begin February 27, it was a roar of raw power. Putin could lofty undermine UN references for a 30-day cease-fire and set his own conditions. Within days of the supposed halt, a Kremlin spokesman blandly dismiss the reality in Eastern Ghouta – that there has been no cease-fire and no humanitarian pause. Unchallenged, unleashed and unashamed, Moscow could put the blame squarely on the rebels. “Second, the Assad’s aren’t going anywhere. Bashir Assad’s regime is still encircled in Damascus. This has been true since the fall of rebellious Aleppo, Syria’s second city, more than a year ago. Now, the regime appears even more comfortable and unlikely to soon be displaced. In February, it was able even to devote mindspace and military planning to Turkey’s Affron incursion. This context, Washington’s proposed approach to Syria was one of constant ridicule. The approach has been described by some Trump administration officials as “return of the state, not return of the regime.”

Is that even realistic? How does one achieve that? Would the United States really go to war with Russia for the right to bring down the Syrian regime? Third, no one wants another Libya. There is a strong argument for preventing the collapse of the Syrian state. Both Syria and the wider world would not benefit from the creation of a new Libya, where the strongman is hounded out as part of a foreign-supported plan and chaos rules for years afterward. Pulling down the regime, even one so brutal and unrepresentative, would only make sense if there were a viable, progressive alternative acceptable to the Syrian people. So far, that hasn’t been the case.

Those are the three hard facts and they’re better said aloud than any blank statement or even the international lament over Syria’s suffering. The caterwauling would sound a truer note if these are the opening moves to properly examine UN human rights chief Zeid Ra’ad al-Hussein’s recent observation on who is responsible for continuing carnage. Eastern Ghouta, Yemen, areas of Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Myanmar, Hussein said, had become “some of the most prolific slaughter houses of human rights in recent times” because of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. He slammed their “pernicious use of the veto power” and said, they have used the veto power to allow multiple conflicts to continue across the planet, permitting thousands to be murdered and killed. In Syria (and Yemen), the Russians will not allow the world to censure or restrain their allies of convenience, the Assad regime and Iran. With respect to the Palestinian territories, the United States will not allow Israel to be rebuked for its brutality. Hussein is right to press the French initiative, which seeks to prevent the use of veto power in situations in which a mass atrocity has occurred. Britain is on board with that (along with 115 of other UN members) but most of the permanent members of the Security Council – Russia, the United States and China – are not.

That is the shocking reality of the Syrian situation. Rather than blanket statements, it’s better addressed by words that urge action.

A shift to moderate Islam would be Saudi Arabia’s biggest victory

Moderate interpretation. A Saudi man and a child read a copy of the Quran, Islam’s holy book, inside a mosque.

Saudi Arabia will find it hard to achieve the qualitative changes that it seeks without getting rid of religious extremism.

Saifatul groups use religion to control the society at large. They survived and protected themselves by accommodating the mood of local authorities, so much that no Islamic country was free of Salafist strongholds. These strongholds were real ambassadors for Saudi Salafist dogmas. Such was the world’s view of Saudi Arabia. Now, the winds of change are blowing over Saudi Arabia. There is a real determination to face problems rather than sweep them under the rug. Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz was enough to realise the nature of his role and its momentous fatality to take Saudi Arabia out of the culture of the 1970s, when it was founded, and into a different world.

Saudi Arabia of the previous millennium is giving way to Crown Prince Mohammed’s new Saudi Arabia where the role of women looms large. Those revolutionary decisions – to allow women to drive, attend football games, concerts, festivals and religious celebrations – will remain at the embryonic stage unless religious extremists are confronted and called to order. Some Salafist extremists and Muslim Brothers are media stars and are active in mosques and social media. Other remain hidden under the cover of religious extremism.

Changes in the Saudi military were timely. The war in Yemen has become long-drawn out with no sign of a clear victory over the Syrians. In this context, Saudi Arabia will find it hard to achieve the qualitative changes that it seeks without getting rid of religious extremism.

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Pakistan's renewed relevance to Arab Gulf security

Sahabat Khan

Dubai

Pakistan and the Arab Gulf have long enjoyed close relations, underpinned by cultural affinities and a shared destiny as Sunni Muslims. Pakistan remains a largely poor and underdeveloped country but with a population of nearly 220 million, an advanced nuclear arsenal and pelahty, it is a country not easily ignored. The Arab Gulf, on the other hand, has amassed one of the world’s greatest global oil reserves, two of Islam’s most sacred sites and likely the keys to the Middle East’s future.

Pakistan-Arab Gulf ties are largely based on unwritten rules. Strategic pact, where they exist, do not delve into detail. For Pakistan, the Arab Gulf has been the only region of the world where it has not felt forced almost without question and, often, generous financial assistance. In return, Arab Gulf countries have maintained an expectation that Pakistan will lend its weight where and when their core interests are threatened.

Perhaps the most successful Paki-

Arab Gulf effort was, together with Americans, in forcing the Soviet retreat in Afghanistan in the 1980s. Since then, Arab Gulf troops have manned Saudi borders with Iraq and Kuwait and helped quell unrest in Bahrain. Earlier, oil-rich countries have shown an interest in kinds of support to Pakistan’s pur-

suit of nuclear weapons. Pakistani efforts to reduce the region’s income from Saudi Arabia. Remarkably, Pakistan’s Arab Gulf relationship has indeed been served.

Recently, the Pakistan Army announced it would send a 1,000-per
too small to make it visible. In that context, deteriorating ties with India and a broken-again rela-
tionship with the United States pro-
vide no strategic rationale for Paki-

stan to change course. Pakistan will continue pursuing its Middle East interests as an out-
side but continues to try to strategic influence to grow naturally. There has been speculation for many years that China was seeking a naval base on Pakistan’s southern coast to help hedge its ambitions. But according to the Chinese daily, Pakistan’s Arab Gulf interest are likely to be limited to improving trade relations. The regional power focuses on the Middle East, which is more strategic for its interests.

The region’s Arab states are wary of China’s increasing presence in the region. Pakistan is keen on developing economic ties with China and has signed several agreements, including the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which aims to boost economic cooperation between the two countries.

However, Pakistan’s efforts to deepen ties with China have not been without challenges. The Vietnamese government has expressed concerns about Chinese activities in the South China Sea, which is a strategic area for both countries. Additionally, Pakistan is facing economic challenges, including a growing debt burden and a dependence on imported energy.

In conclusion, Pakistan’s Arab Gulf ties are a complex blend of strategic interests, economic cooperation, and historical ties. The region remains a key player in Pakistan’s foreign policy, but the country will need to navigate the challenges of balancing its interests with those of its Arab partners.
News & Analysis

Mounting strife in southern Libya adds to the country’s instability

Michel Cousins

Tunisia has struggled to recover from years of worsening inflation, debt, unemployment and poverty. Its economy was further hit when the European Union, a close partner, blacklisted the country as being at high risk of money laundering and terror financing. Spain has been a consistent, if modest, investor in Tunisia’s economy. There are 67 Spanish companies operating in the North African country, creating approximately 8.3 billion in investment and more than 6,000 jobs. Trade volume between the two countries totalled 8.5 billion last year. Spain is Tunisia’s fifth largest exporter, behind France, Italy, Germany and Algeria.

Samir Majoul, president of the Tunisian Confederation of Industries, Trade, Handicraft, said that, while relations between the two countries are solid, Tunisian and Spanish companies should move their cooperation from “simple operations to a strategic partnership.”

“Although Spain is a major player in the European Union, its imports from Tunisia represent only 3.8% of Tunisia’s exports to the EU.”

Stephen Quillen

Tunisia, battling tough economy, looks to expand ties with Spain

Stephen Quillen

Tunisia pledged to strengthen economic and military ties during a visit by Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy to Tunisia on February 26.

Spanish Prime Minister Mariano Rajoy (L) listens to his Tunisian counterpart Youssef Chahed after their meeting in Tunis, on February 26. (AFP)

The calls for increased security cooperation come at a time when both countries are facing a jihadist threat.

Although Spain is a major player in the European Union, its imports from Tunisia represent only 3.8% of Tunisia’s exports to the EU.

Tunisian Defence Minister Abdelkrim Zbidi praised “excellent cooperation” between the two countries in the areas of “special forces, mine clearance and sharing of expertise” and called for closer collaboration within the “G5+5 Defence” and “G7+6” initiatives.

The calls for increased security cooperation come at a time when both countries are facing a jihadist threat.

Last August, Spain suffered terror attacks in Barcelona, Cambrils and on the eastern Mediterranean island of Lampedusa, killing 15 people and wounding 122. Other locations suspected of being used by jihadists, detaining 3,146 suspects, Interior Minister Lofti Braham said at a parliamentarian hearing. Tunisia’s military partners in the two countries are facing a jihadist threat.

Tunisian forces also work closely with NATO, as well as with Spanish and US forces, conducting joint training missions and knowledge-sharing exercises.

Spain and Tunisia are long-standing allies. Former Tunisian President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali and former Spanish Prime Minister Felipe Gonzalez signed a Bi-lateral Treaty of Friendship, Good Neighbourliness and Cooperation in 1995, leading to a ten-fold increase in bilateral trade.

While there were plans to further expand the two countries’ economic relationship, large-scale trade and investment failed to materialize after the 2011 revolution went through years of political instability and tumult following the toppling of the Ben Ali regime in 2011.

Stephen Quillen is an Arab Weekly correspondent in Tunis.
Egypt’s presidential campaign starts, Sisi’s challenger faces uphill battle

Ahmed Megahid

The Egyptian Army has asked for additional time to complete its offensive against the Islamic State (ISIS) in the Sinai Peninsula amid fears the militant group could retaliate during the country’s presidential elections.

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“Terrorists and their back -

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The Egyptian Army requests more time to complete anti-ISIS offensive

A settled race? Posters of Egypt’s presidential candidates Mustafa Moussa (L) and Abdel Fattah al-Sisi for the upcoming election in Cairo, on March 26.

News & Analysis

Egypt

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News & Analysis

Egypt
The debate between Palestine and Israel continues over the status of Jerusalem, which is considered by the Palestinian authorities to be the capital of the Palestinian state and the Holy Land, and to weaken the Christian presence, "the state minister said.

The church was reopened after Israeli efforts to tax church property and buy land from Christians in Jerusalem, who are major landowners in the city. The church was reopened after Israeli efforts to tax church property and buy land from Christians in Jerusalem, who are major landowners in the city. The church was reopened after Israeli efforts to tax church property and buy land from Christians in Jerusalem, who are major landowners in the city. The church was reopened after Israeli efforts to tax church property and buy land from Christians in Jerusalem, who are major landowners in the city. The church was reopened after Israeli efforts to tax church property and buy land from Christians in Jerusalem, who are major landowners in the city. The church was reopened after Israeli efforts to tax church property and buy land from Christians in Jerusalem, who are major landowners in the city.
London

A n open letter from EU
Parliament’s MPs calling for
the European Union to
Designate Hezbollah as a ter-
rorist group is a “first
step” in a broader process, one of
the letter’s initiators said.

Sixty members of the European Parliament signed the letter to EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogher-
ini.

“For us, this is certainly a
first step. The letter underlines
that there is a growing recogni-
tion in Europe that Hezbollah and
their Iranian masters pose a serious
threat,” MEP Lars Adaktusson said.

The letter outlined the threat
the writers said is represented by
Hezbollah, including its role as an
“accomplice” to Syrian President
Bashar Assad’s alleged crimes, as
well as in international drug smug-
gling and money laundering.

The European Union designated Hezbollah’s military wing as a ter-
rorist group in 2013 following an
attack on an Israeli tour bus in Bul-
garia in July 2012.

“We believe that making a dis-
tinction between Hezbollah’s ‘mili-
tary’ and ‘political’ wings is illogical
as it is a notion Hezbollah’s senior leadership themselves consistently
and publicly reject,” the letter said.

Moreover, removing the distinc-
tion would put the EU more in line with
international consensus as the
United States, the Netherlands,
Canada, Israel, the Gulf Cooper-
ation Council and the Arab League
all have proscribed Hezbollah in its entirety.

The letter was signed by 60 mem-
ers from across the European Par-
lament political divide. Adaktus-
son, who represents Sweden’s Christian Democrats, hailed the letter’s
cross-party support.

“I believe that it is high time to
acknowledge that Islamist-inspired
terrorism is not only a threat to
the Middle East but is also the top
threat to Europe’s security,” Visti-

sen said. Adaktusson said the letter’s sig-
natories were awaiting a response from Mogherini.

“It’s too early to gauge the letter’s impact. We are expecting High Rep-
resentative Mogherini to respond to
our initiative and start a serious dis-
table an on-the-record question on
the issue.

Given the increasing threat repre-
sented by Hezbollah, particularly in
Europe, many observers clamoured
for a change in the European Un-
ion’s policy towards the group.

“If the letter spills out, there
are close to 500 Hezbollah mem-
bers alone in Germany and Ger-
man police have raided the
homes of Iranian spies prepar-
ing potential terror attacks on
Israelis and Jewish sites,” Adaktus-
son said. “So the dangerous Iran-
Hezbollah nexus is no longer ‘just
a problem for the peoples of the
Middle East but for us in Europe as
well.’”

Vistisen said he would continue
campaigning against Hezbollah. “I
will follow the cross-party initia-
tive by sustaining pressure during
committee meetings and bilateral
meetings with relevant stakehold-
ers,” he said.

Incoherent views hamper clear US policy on Hezbollah

Two schools of thought prevail in Washington: One recommends tougher sanctions on Beirut and another does not want to see Lebanon fail.

in recent visits to Lebanon, US State Department of
ficials have reiterated sup-
port for Lebanese political
and military institutions,
outside Washington’s wider __escalation in its conflict with
Iran. Appointments at the
State Department could, none-
theless, account for a bolder
American stance on Iran’s Leba-
nese proxy, Hezbollah.

US Secretary of State Rex Till-
erose’s visit contained a double
message for Lebanon. While
strengthening that Washington re-
mained committed to supporting
the Lebanese Army and internal
security forces, Tillerson warned that
“Hezbollah is not just a con-
cern for the United States. The
people of Lebanon should also be
concerned about how Hezbollah’s
actions and its growing arsenal
are a threat to Lebanon and
independence,” Tillerson
warned.

The Trump administration has been escalating its tone on Iran and its regional proxies. In Febru-
ary, the US Treasury Department targeted six people and seven
businesses in Lebanon, Iraq and
West Africa, with sanctions be-
lieved to be the first in a series of actions targeting Hezbollah’s
licit and illicit financial networks.

The US administration’s target-
ing of Hezbollah is focused on
its financing. There were
reports that Iran was financing
Syria via Lebanese banks that operate in Iraq and
Syria. There will be more pres-
sure to curb such activity. In
addition, geographical driven
sanctions targeting Hezbollah
areas are also under discussion,”
former Syrian diplomat Hassan
Barabandi said.

He criticises the move to lend a hand
Majid Marzouk, a fellow at the Middle
East Institute-think tank in Wash-
ington, who noted that “There is a
lot of focus on isolating Hezbol-
lah in Lebanon.”

The letter’s initiators noted legisla-
tion that was introduced by
two Republican members of
the US Congress requiring a
residential determination on
Hezbollah that could designate it
as a Foreign Narcotics Trafficker or a
transnational criminal organisa-
tion.

The US is concerned that
Hezbollah has been limited, however, by the
White House’s incoherent Mid-
dle East policy. Hussein Bush, a
senior resident scholar at the
Arab Gulf States Institute in
Washington, said Trump’s policy
is based on several key principles,
including keeping the United
States out of avoidable conflicts
and restricting the use of force to
instances when it is necessary.
When force is deemed necessary,
Trump has resolved to use over-
whelming power.

“This means that, in fact,
Trump’s Middle East policy looks
surprisingly similar to that of
former President Barack Obama,”
Bush said.

Obama’s critics said his diseng-
gagement in the Middle East led
to a resurgence of al-Qaeda in
Iraq along with the Islamic State
(ISIS) and that his controversial
foreign policy, specifically on
Syria and foreign military fight-
ing in Syria — such as Hezbollah
— allowed for the return of
Islamist influence in the region
and created a power vacuum that
benefited Iran.

Obscuring the issue is the
division of power within the
US system and even within the
executive branch of the White
House, the State Department and
the Department of Defense. “This
is complicating the emergence of
a coherent foreign policy, espe-
cially for the Trump administra-
tion,” said Bush.

Another challenge, Najib Kadari-
ya said, is the two schools of
thought that prevail in Washing-
on: One recommends tougher
sanctions on Beirut and another does not want to see Lebanon fail.

“Acting Assistant Secretary of State David Satterfield was
known for adopting more leni-
ent positions on Lebanon. He
intervened personally during the
November crisis triggered by the
resignation of Prime Minister
Hariri as it is primarily
concerned with Lebanon’s stabil-
ity,” said Barabandi.

New appointments at the State
Department could translate into
an aggressive policy on Iran and
Hezbollah. David Schenker, a
fellow at the Hudson Institu-
tion for Near East Policy who is
widely believed to be Trump’s
nominee to replace Satterfield as
assistant secretary of state, takes
a harder line on Hezbollah.

Barabandi pointed out that most
applicants in key State De-
partment positions responsible for
the Levant file are known for their
more hawkish positions on Iran
and, consequently, on Hezbollah.

Whether or not their views translate into policies hinges on the
multiple power centres in
Washington and the Trump
dadministration agreeing on a uni-
ified vision.
Europe's human rights court will slam Turkey – about time too

In the case of Altan, the ECHR’s opinion has shamefully come too late. Ankara can claim it is null and void because Altan is no longer a detainee. Since mid-February, he has been a convict, condemned to a lifetime in prison with no chance of parole.

In the case of Alpay, however, there may be a flicker of hope. His trial continues, with the next court hearing scheduled for April 5. This means there is a chance of securing his release. That’s quixotic international opinion and concerned friends of Turkey’s peaceful fighters for democracy and rule of law mobilise. They need to put pressure on hypocriti- cal EU governments to seriously talk the language of law with Ankara.

Anyone with even the most minimal understanding of the rule of law is aware of the situation in Turkey.

Mark N. Katz

is a professor of government and politics at George Mason University in the United States and a Fulbright Scholar at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

In the opening of the Valdai Club conference in Moscow and Tehran, however, are reported to be apprehensive about Turkey’s intervention in Syria. There have been reports that Russian forces in Syria helped transport Kurdish fighters opposing the Turkish incursion to the battlefield. However, if Moscow and Tehran share Damascus’s anxiety about Turkey policy, even if not to the same degree, why would Lavrov and Zarif downplay their differences with Ankara?

One possibility is that, whatever their discomfort with Turkey’s military action in Afrin, Moscow and Tehran may see the opportun- ity to promote a wider rift between Turkey and the United States as too tempting to forego.

Export dialogue. Director of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences Vitaly Naumkin (L) and Chairman of the Board of the Foundation for Development and Support of the Valdai Discussion Club Andrey Bystritsky attend the Valdai Club conference on Russia in the Middle East.

Yavuz Baydar

is a Turkish journalist and regular columnist for The Arab Weekly.

In Turkey, Turkey is not alone in its dismal plight. Across Europe, defiant EU governments have ignored critical in- stitutions, including the ECHR and the Council of Europe. It is high time we took a stance, in support of such bodies as well as the right of people to disagree with hard- line regimes.

High time, too, to speak bluntly to Turkey’s AKP government. Ap- preasement only emboldens it.

Anyone with even the most minimal understanding of the rule of law is aware of the situation in Turkey.

Divergences over Turkish incursion reflected at conference in Moscow

Moscow and Tehran may see the opportunity to promote a wider rift between Turkey and the United States as too tempting to forego.

Blank words. A Turkish woman poses with a blank copy of the opposition Sozcu newspaper in protest against detentions, last May.

Ankara fears that the more powerful the Syrian Kurds grow, the more powerful separatist Kurds in Turkey will become. Zarif described Turkey’s anxiety about US support for Syrian Kurdish forces as “under- standable.”

Moscow and Tehran, however, are reported to be apprehensive about Turkey’s interventions in Syria. There have been reports that Russian forces in Syria helped transport Kurdish fighters opposing the Turkish incursion to the battlefield. However, if Moscow and Tehran share Damascus’s anxiety about Turkey policy, even if not to the same degree, why would Lavrov and Zarif downplay their differences with Ankara?

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European human rights court will slam Turkey – about time too

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High time, too, to speak bluntly to Turkey’s AKP government. Appreasement only emboldens it.
Iran sold its soul to the devil, not just America

Talha Abdulrazzaq

A casual look behind the curtain of Iranian propaganda reveals the ugly hypocrisy lurking in the shadows.

Violence against Sufis reflects intolerance of Islamic Republic

Ali Alfoneh

Why does the regime provoke conflict peacefully and largely apolitical Sufi order? Why doesn't it tolerate them instead? Why radicalise a group of believers?

Read riots, hijab protests and now Sufi skirmishes. Indi- viduals, like all humans, don't threaten Iran's leaders but, occurring in consecu- tive waves, they appear to erode the foundations of the country. Iran comes across as either unwilling or incapable of providing broad, personal or spir- itual freedom to its citizens. The latest round of unrest in Tehran began February 19 when uniformed officers of the Law Enforcement Forces (NAVI) sur- rounded the house of Nour-Ali Tabandeh, 95, the Qudt — spiritual leader — of the Sufis of the Gon- abadi order. It is the largest Sufi order in Iran and the Qudt’s devout followers from all over the coun- try rushed to the rescue of their leader, who they feared could be arrested by police.

In the ensuing skirmishes, the police allegedly indiscriminately attacked people near Tabandeh’s residence. Hectic video footage of hospital- ised men and women of all ages circulated in the Persian-language blogosphere. Tabandeh remains in his house but 300 of his follow- ers were arrested by the police and remain incarcerated at Evin, Fasham, Char iran and Qarchak prisons. Three riot police were killed when a hajj convoy rammed into their ranks. A member of the Basij, which is one of the five forces of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, was run over by a car. An- other was stabbed.

This accelerated the government propaganda machinery’s virulent attacks against the Sufis. The Islamic Republic of Iran Broad- casting, which previously referred to the Sufis as “a deviant sect” is us- ing the derogatory term “Darvish-e Daoeh” — “Islamic State Sufis.” Kayhan, a conservative newspaper in Tehran, calls them “Satanist” and various other authorities ac- cuse the Sufis of criminal acts as diverse as “car theft” and “raping women” to “freemasonry” and “acting as the lackeys of foreign enemies.”

One of the few government of- ficials deviating from the hateful choruses against the Sufis is Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli. In support of the Sufis, he said: “We consider the dervish currents in the country as a wise, rational and balanced current.” Iran is a tumultuous history in dealing with the Sufis, suppress- ing them with various degrees of violence, which peaked during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. In January 2006, authorities bulldozed the hussainiyas congrega- tion hall of the Gonabadi order in Qom, provoking large protests. More than 1,000 Sufis were ar- rested and 200 people, including the Qudt’s deputy and police chief, were wounded in the skirmishes. Grand Ayatollah Ahmad Al-Motarra, then one of the country’s most sen- sible clerics, who was under house arrest in Qom, and Meldi Karoubi, at the time chairman of the Na- tional Trust Party, declared support for the Sufis but in vain.

In case anyone wanted to argue that Iran is acting pragmatically and making necessary and tempo- rary alliances of convenience in a vaguely complicated and stra- tegic environment, this is not the first time since Khomeini’s republic was founded that it has worked with Washington and its allies. In its infancy and years during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, Tehran cut deals with not only the United States but with a country that it has incessantly reminded us needs to be wiped off the face of the Earth — Israel. In the infamous IranGate scandal that rocked the Reagan ad- ministration, Iran received weap- ons from Israel while the United States resupplied the Israelis and received payments from them. All of this is quite apart from Iran’s active assistance in the United States’ global war on terror and the dual disastrous invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. A casual look behind the curtain of Iranian propaganda reveals the ugly hy- pocrisy lurking in the shadows.

Iran is in no position to take Saudi Arabia and its allies to task over working with Washington when Tehran itself has a storied history of collaborating with a country it makes a song and dance about opposing but spends its time trying to ingratiate itself to. Soleimani had better take a long, hard look in the mirror before blazing his regal opponents.

Iran’s 39th anniversary of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomei- ni’s revolution, which installed the region’s most brutal Islamist regime into power, its most notorious general, Qassem Soleimani, decided to do more to further the cause of conflict rather than peace.

Soleimani said Saudi Arabia and its allies had “sold everything they have to America,” suggesting Arab regimes had sold their souls to the United States. Surely those who live in glass houses ought to not throw rocks.

Look at Iran’s record collaborating with Western powers and sowing suffering and misery across the Middle East.

Soleimani, the commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ al-Quds Force, claimed the regime he serves had achieved vic- tory in the region, saying Tehran “uprooted the Ba’ath [in Iraq]… and defeated the Islamic State [ISIS].”

Ironic, then, that it is Iran that is popping up the Syrian Ba’ath regime of Bashar Assad, which is openly using chemical weapons and making necessary and tempo- rary alliances of convenience in a vaguely complicated and stra- tegic environment, this is not the first time since Khomeini’s republic was founded that it has worked with Washington and its allies. In its infancy and years during the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq war, Tehran cut deals with not only the United States but with a country that it has incessantly reminded us needs to be wiped off the face of the Earth — Israel. In the infamous IranGate scandal that rocked the Reagan ad- ministration, Iran received weap- ons from Israel while the United States resupplied the Israelis and received payments from them. All of this is quite apart from Iran’s active assistance in the United States’ global war on terror and the dual disastrous invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. A casual look behind the curtain of Iranian propaganda reveals the ugly hy- pocrisy lurking in the shadows.

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Many faces of the problem. Iraqis hold portraits of Houthi rebels’ leader Abdulmalik al-Houthi (R) and Commander of Iran’s al-Quds Force Qassem Soleimani during a rally in Baghdad.

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Ongoing struggle. A Palestinian demonstrator reacts as tear gas is fired by Israeli troops during a protest against Jewish settlements near Tubas in the occupied West Bank, February 25.

Trump may be a good thing for Palestinians

Mark Habaeb
East-West Weekly and adjunct professor of Global Politics and Security at Georgetown University in Washington

Israeli and Palestinians. He then appointed a negotiating team that consisted of his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and two lawyers who had worked for his campaign, one of whom he believed to be US ambassador to Israel.

The men shared three things: a history of supporting the Israeli settler movement, no diplomatic experience and deep personal devo- tion to Trump.

Trump met with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. The US president was said by all and Trump announced that his crack negotiating team had started work on a comprehensive peace proposal. In December, Trump announced that he was moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem and recognising the city as Israel’s capital. Jerusalem, he said, was “off the table” and no longer an item for negotiation. Palestinians responded with justified outrage and said Washington was going to be a reliable and impartial mediator. Abbas desperately tried to secure support for the moment, no diplomat. Kushner had been working closely with the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Ab- dusalam, who is to visit Washington on March 19. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called for an international conference to jump-start the Mid- dle East peace process on a multilat- eral level, to effectively and end the United States’ role as a peace broker. Abbas says negotia- tions could only begin if the United States freezes its Jerusalem deci- sion and if Israel stops Jewish set- tlement programmes in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem.

Given Palestinians’ deep distrust of the Trump administration, there is little chance for a breakthrough.

Domestic US politics is another factor behind the plan to move the embassy this spring. The step is a way to put the issue in front of evangelical Christian voters, for whom the Jerusalem question is an important issue, before con- gressional elections in November. “It helps him with his base,” Arbell said about the president. Trump, who has been charged with bribery, fraud and other wrongdoings and declared that the Trump presidency would be investigated. Kushner is under a cloud of wrongdoing and his security clearance was downgraded by the US Department of State. What’s more, he is a friend of Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been working on a Middle East peace plan for months, can be in covering the issue from now on. The outlines of Kushner’s plan to end the long-running Israeli-Pales- tinian conflict are unknown. Re- ports say the blueprint stays true to the long sought after two-state solution in that it offers a separate state to the Palestinians to exist side by side with Israel. That state, however, would have limited sov- ereignty and would remain with- out East Jerusalem as its capital and without a right of Palestinian return.

Kushner has been working close- ly with the Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Ab- dusalam, who is to visit Washington on March 19. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas called for an international conference to jump-start the Mid- dle East peace process on a multi- lateral level, to effectively and end the United States’ role as a peace broker. Abbas says negotia- tions could only begin if the United States freezes its Jerusalem deci- sion and if Israel stops Jewish set- tlement programmes in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem.

Given Palestinians’ deep distrust of the Trump administration, there is little chance for a breakthrough. Even if there is a plan, it’s dead on arrival,” Arbell said. Amr said: “It is highly unlikely that Trump would offer a proposal that even partially meets minimal- ist Palestinian needs, so any pro- posed plan is even less likely to succeed than the past.”

Trump and Netanyahu are ex- pected to talk about the situation in Syria, where risks of a direct confrontation between Israel and Iran have been rising, and about the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, which has been rejected by both leaders. Trump says he will com- promise sanctions on Iran by May if a serious offer, an agreement hasn’t been addressed.

The affection is mutual. “The White House is signalling: Bibi is our man,” Arbell said about the president. The White House is signal- ling: Bibi is our man. “Bibi” is a nickname for Netanyahu. Arbell said the decision to move the embassy this spring. The step is a way to put the issue in front of evangelical Christian voters, for whom the Jerusalem question is an important issue, before con- gressional elections in November. “It helps him with his base,” Arbell said about the president. Trump, who has been charged with bribery, fraud and other wrongdoings and declared that the Trump presidency would be investigated. Kushner is under a cloud of wrongdoing and his security clearance was downgraded by the US Department of State. What’s more, he is a friend of Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been working on a Middle East peace plan for months, can be in covering the issue from now on. The outlines of Kushner’s plan to end the long-running Israeli-Pales- tinian conflict are unknown. Re- ports say the blueprint stays true to the long sought after two-state solution in that it offers a separate state to the Palestinians to exist side by side with Israel. That state, however, would have limited sov- ereignty and would remain with- out East Jerusalem as its capital and without a right of Palestinian return.

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Washington

White House meeting between US President Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is expected to be a US-Israeli “love fest” celebrating the close bond between the two countries and giving a boost to the embattled Israeli leader. However, expecta- tions of any progress to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are low.

Netanyahu, in Washington to attend the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), a pro-Israel lobby group, was to have his fifth meeting with the US president since Trump took office in January 2017. It is the second face-to-face get-together of the two leaders since Trump formally recognised Jerusalem as Israel’s capital in De- cember.

The Israeli prime minister has praised the Trump administra- tion’s decision to move the US Emb-assy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem as May 14, the 70th anniversary of Israel’s independence. Israeli news reports say it is likely that Netan- yahu will invite Trump to visit Is- rael for the occasion. Speaking at a cabinet meeting before flying to Washington, Netanyahu called Trump “a great friend of the state of Israel.”

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Trump administration weighs considerations in nuclear power agreement with Saudi Arabia

Jareer Elass

Washington

A s Saudi Arabia enters a nuclear energy era, the Trump administration is hoping to secure a cooperative nuclear reactor contract from Riyadh to help resuscitate an American firm and win US nuclear industry. However, a civilian nuclear cooperation pact between the United States and Saudi Arabia could create volatility in the Gulf region if Washington conceives its demands for national sovereignty.

The Trump administration is pressing the government of Saudi Arabia to resuscitate an American firm and win contracts from Riyadh to help its South Korean partners.

The Saudis are weighing submissions from five bidders from the United States, France, South Korea, Russia, and China 

The 123 Agreements vary depending on the country, with the United Arab Emirates having accepted the toughest restrictions, including forgoing nuclear enrichment or reprocessing. The agreement between Washington and Abu Dhabi, signed in 2005, is considered the gold standard for future 123 Agreements to be signed in the region.

The United Arab Emirates, which is testing operations at the first of four nuclear reactors under construction, plans to buy uranium from the United States and ship its spent fuel to the United Kingdom for reprocessing. The UAE agreement enables it to negotiate terms that should Washington make a less binding deal with another country in the region.

Riyadh has insisted that its pursuit of nuclear power is strictly for meeting domestic electricity demand and freeing up more crude for export. Its plan is to construct as many as 16 nuclear reactors by 2032 to produce 16 GW at a cost of $80 billion. However, Riyadh has not ruled out enriching its own uranium for "self-sufficiency" purposes. Faith has said that the kingdom's uranium resources were being explored and were proving promising.

Riyadh objects to accepting a gold standard 123 Agreement and argues that uranium enrichment is an issue of national sovereignty. In December, former Saudi Intelligence Chief Prince Turki al-Faisal said: "The world community that supports the nuclear deal between the P5+1 and Iran told Iran you can enrich, although the NPT [global Non-Proliferation Treaty] tells us all we can enrich... So the kingdom from that point of view will have the same right as the other members of the NPT, including Iran."

The 2015 agreement between world powers and Iran partially lifted economic sanctions on Tehran and allowed Iran to enrich a limited amount of uranium for commercial use while subject to intrusive inspections.

Just how much the Trump administration is willing to bend in reaching a 123 Agreement with Saudi Arabia that balances proliferation concerns with political and economic ties with a key regional ally remains to be seen. The administration hopes that the Saudi reactor project will help turn around the fortunes of Westinghouse, which is in bankruptcy, and in the process of being sold by its parent company Toshiba to Canada's Brookfield Business Partners.

Whatever terms are reached between the administration and Riyadh must be approved by the US Congress, which has 90 days to weigh in after the agreement is signed.

US Senator Ed Markey, a Massachusetts Democrat has sent a letter to Perry and US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson saying: "Congress remains in the dark about what exactly is considered, why we may be re-evaluating our non-proliferation objectives and standards and how and when this information is being conveyed to Saudi Arabia and other countries around the world."

Jareer Elass reports from Washington on energy issues for The Arab Weekly.
Jordan lures foreign investors with citizenship offer

Amman

About two dozen applications from foreign investors have been submitted to a Jordanian program that would grant them citizenship or permanent residency. The move won raves from investors but received objections from members of parliament who want Israeli investors excluded. During a February 19 press conference, Jordanian State Minister for Media Affairs and Government Spokesperson Mohammad at Moman announced the programme, which allows several ways for investors to be granted citizenship.

The options include “a zero-interest, 1-year, $1.5 million deposit at the Central Bank of Jordan (CBJ),” “buying treasury bonds valued at $3.5 million at an interest rate to be decided by CBI and for a period not less than ten years,” “buying securities, at $1.5 million, from an active investment portfolio, while investors can invest $1 million in SMEs (small and medium-sized enterprises) for five years,” or “$2 million investment in any location in the country or $3.5 million investment in any government other than Amman.

Businesses that foreign investors in must create at least 20 jobs and stay in for at least three years. To be eligible for permanent residence, foreign investors must invest in a property worth no less than $320,000 for ten years without selling.

An investor’s spouse, single, widowed or divorced dependent children, children under the age of 18 or 21 when the dependant is not a Jordanian, are also eligible.

Amman Chamber of Commerce President Issa Murad said there are many foreign investors who are seeking Jordanian residency and to settle in the kingdom due to its stability and security at a time when turmoil is inflicting neighbouring countries.

“Encouraging investors to come and stay in Jordan will have a positive effect on all sectors such as industrial and real estate and will double the investment projects,” Murad said.

Investors would have to go through a security clearance and financial viability check. If they are found to have violated any conditions, their capital could be revoked and their residency status cancelled.

Approximately 9.5 million people — 4.6 million Jordanians — live in Jordan. About 1.2 million are Syrian, including refugees, followed by Egyptians, totaling 936,720. There are 634,182 Palestinians who do not have Jordanian national ID numbers.

Many Iraqi investors consider Jordan to be the perfect location for investments because of its security, geographic proximity and infrastructure. The Iraqi Business Council in Jordan said there is approximately $77 billion in Iraqi investments in Jordan covering tourism, banking, agriculture and industry.

“Lebanon needs drastic structural reforms,” said Michael Young, a fellow at the Institute for the National Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University. “The banks’ support for the army in 2006 [the Israeli-Hezbollah war], they transferred $1 billion to the Lebanese Central Bank [to maintain confidence] but over the past decade this has been repaid in full. Today there are zero hard deposits at the Central Bank.”

Mohanad Choueiri of the International Monetary Fund said the domestic banking system was “on the verge of a doomsday scenario, where the banking system as we know it would collapse.”

“Lebanon’s banks are real reason for country’s resilience

Gareth Smyth is a regular contributor to The Arab World weekly. He was correspondent in Riyadh for the Financial Times in 2005-07.

The politicians assume the banks will forever rescue them, bankers say, thereby threatening not just the country’s banks but its entire economy.

lebanon’s resilience is famous. Since the civil war ended in 1990, Lebanon has survived Israeli onslaughts in 1996 and 2006, as well as the 2005 assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri. Since 2010, Lebanon’s population has absorbed more than 1 million Syrian refugees.

Some attribute such resilience to a political system based on compromises between sects, even when politicians are allied to rival regional powers. Others say Lebanon has survived due to its banking system.

In a country with intermittent electricity and rampant nepotism, Lebanon’s banking sector excels. The regulatory framework imposed by the Central Bank, led since 1991 by Riad Salameh, showed its resilience in 2009. The world financial crisis barely curtailed Lebanon’s banks.

At the end of 2017, the banks’ assets in the domestic market were $210 billion. The six banks listed on the Beirut Stock Exchange have assets, including foreign operations, of $25 billion. The banks’ overall assets represent approximately four times Lebanon’s gross domestic product.

The banks’ importance is twofold. First, their earnings and receipt of remittances from Lebanon abroad mitigate a balance of trade deficit of $20.3 billion in 2017. Along with tourism receipts and foreign direct investment (FDI), this has resulted in a balance of payments deficit of just $4.6 billion. This represents a deterioration in 2017 to just $2.1 billion surplus but it is better news than it might have been.

Second, the banks have financed government borrowing that took public debt to $78.15 billion in September 2017, up 4.6% year-on-year and 145% of GDP. Borrowing has financed a bloated public sector. From 2000-16, the International Monetary Fund said, 34.7% of public spending was due to servicing debt. In the past three years, the government has appointed 36,000 new staff. Bankers want reform. Some detect positive signs. A recent government circular called for a 25% reduction in non-salary spending. Ahead of April’s elections, there is newfound government efficiency in planning cabinet ratification of the 2018 budget.

“Lebanon needs drastic structural adjustment, such as fighting fiscal evasion, which is $4.2 billion a year in a country with a $45.2 billion deficit,” said Marwan Barakat, chief economist at Banque Audi. “This deficit has to be reduced to ensure a soft landing.”

The politicians assume the banks will forever rescue them, bankers say, thereby threatening not just the country’s banks but its entire economy.

“The banking sector faces challenges,” said Nabiha Ghobrial, chief economist at Byblos Bank. “The first is the decline in lending opportunities for the public sector. Second, there are two major contributing factors to the growing needs of the government. While the banking system – the Central Bank and the commercial banks – finances the deficit, we see no political will to reduce the fiscal deficit and implement reforms.”

Lebanon and political risk are long-term partners but regional tensions are growing and there is speculation of new Israeli attacks targeting not just Hezbollah’s military capacity but Lebanon’s infrastructure. After playing a supportive role since the 1990s, Saudi Arabia’s new assertive foreign policy means Riyadh’s support is not automatic.

Riyadh is alarmed by Hezbollah, the Shia group closely allied to Iran and active in Syria. Along with other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries, the Saudis have discouraged their nationals from visiting Lebanon, affecting not just tourism but real estate.

“In 2008-10, Gulf visitors were the biggest spenders and the largest share of Arab tourists in the country but the numbers have declined since 2013. Investments have also fallen,” said Ghobrial. “They have been selling personal real estate holdings, land, apartments, villas.” Riyadh’s worry over Hezbollah is not entirely new. "In 2013, Saudi Arabia imposed the Lebanese Army and security $4 billion in assistance, only to suspend payment in 2018 because of Hezbollah’s influence,” said Michael Young, a fellow at the Institute for the National Strategic Studies at Bar-Ilan University.

Young said cutting military aid also being discussed in Washington – is self-defeating. “The Saudi Arabian monarch may have disturbed the army but did absolutely nothing to Hezbollah,” he said. "A cut in US military assistance would do much the same – harm the army and leave Hezbollah intact.”

Barakat said the importance of Saudi support for Lebanon should not be exaggerated. “In 2006 [the Israeli-Hezbollah war], they transferred $1 billion to the Lebanese Central Bank (to maintain confidence) but over the past decade this has been repaid in full. Today there are zero hard deposits at the Central Bank.”

Private deposits are relatively low, said Barakat: “GCC deposits in banks are $4 billion-$5 billion. $1.5 billion are Saudis, out of a deposit base of $70 billion. FDI from the Gulf is almost negligible.”

In a crisis, Lebanon’s greatest vulnerability would be its remittances, with 20% (4.5 billion a year) coming from Saudi Arabia, said Barakat. He said he did not believe in “a doomsday scenario, where the Saudis lay off the 300,000 Lebanese workers there. Perhaps they would send a political message laying off, in the worst case, hundreds.”
There have been increases in the prices of various goods amid growing concerns over the trade deficit between Cairo and Ankara. The government and media initiatives began in recent weeks asking Egyptian consumers to boycott Turkish goods.

"Turkey acts against Egypt’s political interests everywhere," said Hisham Bakr, a legal expert who, with friends, initiated a boycott campaign against Turkish goods. "This is why Egyptians have a national obligation to stop buying its products."

Trade between Egypt and Turkey reached $5 billion last year, however, the balance of trade tilted dramatically in Turkey’s favour. Egypt imports a range of goods from Turkey, mostly metal, iron and steel and transport vehicles.

Egypt has used legal channels to prevent Turkish goods from overstimulating local markets and causing unfair competition with domestic products. Cairo, for example, applied temporary restrictions on measures against Turkish construction steel, citing unfair competition with locally manufactured steel.

The government, economists said, cannot do more because of international trade regulations. However, this does not prohibit social campaigns asking Egyptians to boycott Turkish goods. Bakr is using social media to publicize his campaign. He published a list of Turkish brands and the outlets that sell them on his Facebook page. The post received 12,000 likes.

"There is huge interaction with the campaign and I am sure it will translate into wonderful figures," Bakr said. "There will be a massive boycott of Turkish goods."

Relations between Cairo and Ankara became strained after the Egyptian Army backed a popular uprising against Egypt’s President Muhammad Morsi in 2013. Turkey’s backing of Morsi’s Muslim Brotherhood, which was outlawed in Egypt in 2013, led Cairo to accuse Turkey of intervening in its affairs.

Tensions between Cairo and Ankara have been on the rise, particularly for Egyptians in the trade sector, including the spare parts division.

"Boycotting Turkish goods because of the way of economic development pursued by mid-March," said Atilla Ataseven, president of the Turkish-Egyptian Business Association. "This is why Egyptian econo-

The total value of imports in January fell 6.8% to $3.8 billion compared to the same month a year ago.

"The market has experienced a shortage in the supply of goods and the rise of prices as well as disruption in the activities of businesses, but we have no choice but to purchase the required items," he added.

Bakr blamed "the import barons in the private sector who control import businesses worth $5 billion" for causing market disruptions to derail government efforts to reduce imports.

The total value of exports made its economy not diversified enough to be able to quickly offer local substitutes for imported goods to supply businesses and satisfy the needs of 41 million people.

More than 80% of the turnover of the industries are imports," Trade Minister Mohammed Hussein said. "There is public anger against the actions of the Turkish government but we should not let this anger to cause losses to the national economy," he said.

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Tunis

authorities are raising the alarm about an online self-harm game that continues to claim victims in the Maghreb. Known as the Blue Whale Challenge, the game consists of a series of tasks that children must complete during a 50-day period, with the final task being to commit suicide. The game has been linked to more than ten cases of suicide among children and teenagers. In Setif, Algeria, a 14-year-old boy committed suicide while following the game's instructions, while in Tunisia, a 12-year-old boy from Zaghouan committed suicide on April 9 after completing more than ten cases of suicide among children and teenagers. In Kairouan, in central Tunisia, a girl told police that after attempting suicide. One of the girls' mothers told Tunisian media that her daughter tried to kill herself after completing 25 of the game's 50 steps.

In Tunisia more than ten cases of suicide among children and teenagers have been reported, the latest on February 26.

"I wanted my children to learn about the world around and use technology but I didn't know the game was in the phone," said Samoud, referring to the Blue Whale Challenge. "I didn't think this game would make her kill herself. She was a bright child." "My son told me she was scared that they would kill her and her mother if she didn't do the tasks they asked. I call on every parent to protect their children from all this and for the government to restrict these dangers so I can protect my other children. I won't allow my children to use the internet or any phone," he added.

In Kairouan, in central Tunisia, two girls were admitted to hospital after attempting suicide. One of the girls' mothers told Tunisian media that her daughter tried to kill herself after completing 25 of the game's 50 steps. Sabri Bhahab, delegate for the protection of children in Kairouan, said an awareness campaign on the dangers of internet use was under way in schools across the country. "As an immediate response, regional committees of psychologists, doctors, and educators were called on authorities to ban the game and experts warn the effort could be far-reaching.

"The mind of a teenager can be totally under the control of his online tutor," said Algerian clinical psychologist Hamid Maarouk. "He follows orders until the ultimate challenge: his suicide." In December, two schoolboys, 15 and 16, from the small town of Sidi Aich, eastern Algeria, committed suicide while following the game's instructions, while five others were rescued.

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Ahmed Megahid

Cairo

Illusions of Egyptians are eagerly watching the progress of a parliamentary bill that, if enacted, could help them overcome the challenges of discrimination that often stand in the way of marriage.

The bill would give newly married couples interest-free loans, something that would help more Egyptians get married in a culture where, in addition to the celebrations, a groom is expected to pay for housing, furniture, appliances and gifts of gold to the bride.

The loan, the legislators proposing the bill said, would be repaid over 12.5 years after the marriage.

“We believe this will end financial problems facing marriage for millions of people,” said MP Mohamed Atta Selim, the author of the bill. “The loan will make marriage a lot easier.”

Egypt’s Central Agency for Public Mobilisation and Statistics said marriage rates have decreased and many observers attributed that to financial pressures.

“Marriage costs are becoming so high with the rise in the prices of commodities, said Samia Khedr, a sociology professor at Ain Shams University. “Together with the presence of many men and women who are not employed, these costs are a major impediment to getting married.”

The national unemployment rate dropped from about 13% a year ago but issues such as rising housing costs and inflation mean that many Egyptians are finding it difficult to get married.

Mohamed Hassan, 42, said he has been incapable of meeting the financial requirements to marry. “I really want to get married but this is almost impossible,” Hassan said.

A civil servant with a salary of $42 per month, Hassan can just about afford to pay for transportation, food and clothes for himself. Buying an apartment or furniture is far outside of his budget.

To make marriage easier, some villages, especially in the Egyptian countryside, are requesting to change traditional marriage customs, particularly in relation to the shabqa, the giving of dowry to the bride.

Some village elders are abolishing potential amounts of participation jewelry. Others are requiring the bridals’ families to give equal amounts towards the couple’s furniture and electrical appliances, even though a fatwa from al-Azhar, the leading Sunni institution of higher learning, ruled that the bride is not obligated to contribute any marriage costs.

If approved by parliament, the bill would offer men and women who want to get married $3,400 in loans free of interest. Those who take out the loan would be required to pay $22.70 a month for 12.5 years.

If both the bride and groom apply for the loan, that cost is doubled.

“Repealing the loan will not be a big problem for newlyweds,” Selim said.

Parliament’s Youth and Sports Committee has approved the bill and referred it to a legislative revision committee before it would go to the general session for final approval.

Selim said he is confident the bill will be enacted. “He said everybody in the legislature agrees on the need for state institutions to play a role in helping men and women get married, especially considering rising housing prices and marriage-related financial pressures.

While the interest-free loans are welcome, they will not solve the wider problem, sociologists warned.

“Unemployment and low salaries are the main problems,” said Nadia Radwan, a sociology professor at Port Said University. “How will unemployed couples repay the loans?”

A dearth of jobs means that many women have limited access to work. They made up 23.1% of the employed workforce in 2019, according to a World Bank report. For the average Egyptian couple, $46 per month is a major outlay. For many Egyptians, it is beyond their means.

Low salaries are also a major problem and this problem only gets worse when compared to rising commodity prices.

“Those who do not have jobs cannot repay the loans they will get to get married,” Radwan said. “Those working will also find it difficult to repay the loans because of their low salaries, which is why we need another approach for solving the problem.”

Dunia El-Zobaidi

London

After decades of Arab Americans pushing for a “Middle Eastern or North African” category, the US Census will not, after all, have such an option for 2020. But how important is it for Arab-Americans to have their own category?

It matters a lot, said Samer Khalaf, the author of the bill. “It’s easier to say we are all Americans or North Americans, or a ‘Middle Eastern or North African’ category. But the problem is we are not all treated the same.”

It’s like a millionaire telling a poor person, “What’s the matter? You can’t afford this or that?” It’s easy for them to say because they already have the money.

“If we look back in history, people always identified themselves as Irish Americans or Italian Americans. All of a sudden, when people of colour are doing that, they are being criticized.”

Raed al-Dubbagh, a managing director of the Arab American Civil Council, also speaking via telephone, said he was shocked that the census category has not become a reality.

“We all thought this would happen in 2020,” he said. “We all saw it going in that direction. In 2010, the bureau hired Arab Americans to reach out to their communities. That wasn’t there in the 2000 census. Perhaps if we had a different president it would have happened in 2020 but I think it’s a matter of time. I am confident it will happen for us in the next decade.”

Sections of the Arab-American community have been pushing for a separate census category for about 30 years.

“We are the majority of the world,” Khalaf said. “It’s only with the new administration that this was put to a stop. The government spent millions of dollars studying this issue.”

In January, the Census Bureau said there had not been enough research and testing to consider MENA listed as a separate ethnic category, are seeking to change the political climate. Nothing really shocks me anymore after the presidential election.

Some Arab Americans said they were wary of the “Middle Eastern or North African” category because it might help the government surveil the community.

“There have been instances in which our community was targeted,” said Sebak. “The New York Police Department was surveilling the Arab-American and Muslim communities. We didn’t have undercover police officers. However, the benefits of having our category are more than the risks.”

Dunia El-Zobaidi is a regular Arab Weekly contributor in London.
Kuwaiti photographer Farah Salem has spent five years roaming the backstreets of Kuwait City to document“the rawness of the backstreets,” she said.

“Through my artwork, I question the societal gendered trauma, particularly rooted within my experience as a Kuwaiti woman, and the ways in which different cultural dynamics are symbiotically linked to it,” she added.

Salem made her photography debut at the Alliance Francaise de Dubai’s “Gulf Weekly” exhibition in 2017. Since then, she has exhibited her work at La Galerie at the Alliance Francaise de Dubai, A photo by Kuwaiti photographer Farah Salem on display at La Galerie at the Alliance Francaise de Dubai. (Farah Salem)

In 2018, she was awarded the Dubai International Women of Achievement Award for photojournalism. The same year, she participated in the “Women Empowerment through Photography” exhibition in Kuwait.

“My work combines aspects of visual documentation and human interaction,” she said. “Every photograph is an opportunity to connect with people and to share their stories.”

Salem said her work is a way to empower women and girls in Kuwait, where women are often not expected to be roaming alone on the streets. “Creating platforms that can act as safe spaces, finding new ways to empower our own choices and engage all members of society in a way that is meaningful and meaningful today,” she added.

Salem’s work invites viewers to a “dynamic meditative experience” and the video-and-sound installation offers an experience similar to a visual walking tour around the streets between the skylines of the city.

“I aim to allow people to see that there is more to Kuwait City’s urban life than the dazzling modern and luxurious buildings that somehow feel lifeless. Behind them are the most scenic streets and passages that tell a far more powerful story,” Salem said.

“Salem’s work was unwellcome in the kingdom, and it was justified — wrongly — on religious grounds,” she added. “The far-reaching project has already begun. Saudi Arabia has announced they would open cinemas in the country by 2030.”

The kingdom is also to have 5,000 entertainment events this year, including Cirque du Soleil, community festivals and performances registered to organise entertainment events in one year. Faisal Bafarat, CEO of the GEA, added that 2016 entertainment programmes would create 224,000 jobs, including 114,000 direct and 110,000 indirect jobs in the sector by 2020.

“Families, young people and children will be able to enjoy live music performances, theatre shows, musicals, circus performances, community festivals and much more across the kingdom,” Bafarat said.

These statements send a clear message to investors that opportunities are available in Saudi entertainment and that the government is willing to support investors who expand their business. The development of this emerging sector will produce many jobs in the long term, as well as create an indirect economic return by expanding investment opportunities and encouraging spending on local entertainment products.

The $64 billion that is projected to be earned in the Saudi entertainment industry may sound astronomical to some but it is a small sum in the global entertainment market. Professional service firm PricewaterhouseCoopers’ “Global Entertainment and Media Outlook 2015-2019” report stated that global spending on entertainment and media was expected to grow from $1.74 trillion in 2015 to $2.23 trillion in 2019. In the Middle East, spending on entertainment and media market, excluding Saudi Arabia, was expected to reach $568 billion in 2014, most of which is likely to be reinvested in infrastructure for the industry, is a small fraction of this number – 0.4% of global expenditure.

Recent developments show that the Saudi Arabia of 2017 is not the Saudi Arabia of 30 years ago. Indeed, the kingdom’s changing and, little by little, progress will be made in harmony with existing traditions. Such changes should include increased opportunities for regional and western and eastern partners and efforts to strengthen cross-cultural dialogue to further develop various sectors of the kingdom.

Unfortunately, however, developments in Saudi Arabia have been largely overshadowed by the many conflicts in the wider region, including those involving terrorist and non-state groups such as the Islamic State, al-Qaeda and the Houthi militia in Yemen.

For Saudi Arabia, the best way to counter such threats is to serve as a counter-narrative and model a peaceful society in which freedom and dignity are respected. To this end, Saudi Arabia should reject false interpretations of religion that can be used by extremists to jeopardise the kingdom’s agenda and they should continue on the path of progress, innovation and cultural expression – values that will help ensure the kingdom’s success long down the road.

Promoting Saudi art and culture is central to modernisation drive

Circus art is central to cultural expression in Saudi Arabia. Local artists are working towards a more open and liberal society, which is expected to bring about changes in the Saudi entertainment and media market.

Mohammad bin Salman bin Abdulaziz, the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, said in December last year that Saudi Arabia is on the path to modernisation and its economic diversification strategy can lead to the Saudi Arabia of 2030 to be as different from the Saudi Arabia of 2017 as the Saudi Arabia of 2017 is from the Saudi Arabia of 30 years ago. He said the kingdom was following a national development strategy to transform the economy. Its goal is to free the kingdom with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s Vision 2030, a daring national agenda aimed at modernising the kingdom and diversifying the economy. Its goal is to free the kingdom from dependence on oil exports and build a prosperous and sustainable economic future.

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‘We are the generation/Who has grown old too soon’: The children of Syria speak

Gareth Smyth

“Y es, we are children, but we bear the burden of grown men.” The words of Aisha al-Mohamad, 13, from Raqqa, Syria, translated from Arabic, encapsulate “Haneen,” a new bilingual book-cum-exhibition from UNICEF Lebanon.

“Haneen,” which means “yearning” or “nostalgia,” brings together 39 artists to interpret poems and stories by Syrian refugee children in the camps of Lebanon.

“We are the generation/whose laughter you took away and sowed oppression,” writes Waad al-Zouhouri.

forms a figure of defiance. The “longing” of Haneen is a

The “longing” of Haneen is a nostalgia never associated with children. Some of the art depicts violence. For instance, Debs’ children. Some of the art depicts war like I suffer from being a refugee. Did my doll grow up too early, too soon. “The words of Aisha al-Mohamad.

“We are the generation/Who has grown old too soon.”

The link between the two jasmines centred the project. “From the beginning, with the words of Syrian children, we wanted the artwork to be Syrian and Lebanese,” said Boustan.

“Many of the Lebanese artists – not all of them, there are 25 – had lived the war in Lebanon.” Each artist was sent the poems or texts and asked to pick one. Once the book and accompanying postcards were printed, the exhibition opened on February 20 in Beirut. The building that separated largely Muslim western Beirut from Christian eastern sectors.

UNICEF will take the exhibition on international tour, which is why it has purposely used light materials.

Lost childhood. Noura Badran, watercolour, based on the poem “Childhood” by Aisha al-Mohamad.

Accompanying Waad’s Arabic text is a painting by 24-year-old Lebanese Ivan Debs, depicting a dead or dying child whose blood forms a figure of defiance.

In another poem, Waad remembers a doll she left behind when broken by her father and told they were leaving immediately. She asks: “Is my doll suffering from war like I suffer from being a refugee? Did my doll grow up too early, too fast?”

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“We are the generation/Who has grown old too soon.”

Many poems depict daily struggles in camps. Maryam al-Mohamad, 12, from Raqqa, describes a life “where the tent’s ceiling nearly touches your hair, we live inside nylon bags and wooden frames, we are packaged goods with a missing ‘MADE IN’ label.”

Mohammad Omran, born in Damascus in 1979, paints the uncle in his underwear with his “cotton candy bicycle.” The book’s text says Abdelwakil’s greatest fear is “dying in Lebanon and not getting a proper burial place.”

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Boustani said UNICEF has been overwhelmed by the response to the exhibition. “I’ve seen many people crying. Usually, artists produce a painting or sculpture of their own perception. Here the children are in the artwork, this is what’s so strong.”

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Meanwhile, Mohammad Nouri Ali, 12, dreams of going home to Aleppo, where he has left his football, bicycle, a garden of roses and “morning.”

ABDELWAKIL AL-IBRAHIM, 11, from Aleppo, writes a poem of his uncle, killed when he was knocked down by a car as he pushed his bicycle selling cotton candy to children. He found no grave because of crowds whose “sharp tongues and insults were harsher than death.”

Mohammad Omran, born in Damascus in 1979, paints the uncle in his underwear with his “cotton candy bicycle.” The book’s text says Abdelwakil’s greatest fear is “dying in Lebanon and not getting a proper burial place.”

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Meanwhile, Mohammad Nouri Ali, 12, dreams of going home to Aleppo, where he has left his football, bicycle, a garden of roses and “morning.”

“Our morning never dies. One day, we will return to play. Our morning will be waiting for me. And I will run towards it and kiss both its cheeks.”

Lost childhood. Noura Badran, watercolour, based on the poem “Childhood” by Aisha al-Mohamad.
Dubai Safari: an immersive wildlife experience for all ages

Dubai

Dubai Safari is the latest, crowd-gathering attraction in the emirate. A staff of 250 caters to the daily flow of 10,000 visitors to the 192-hectare site, which opened in December. Safari-goers have been spending 3-4 hours on average exploring the park and enjoying the immersive experiences and interactive activities.

“Dubai Municipality expects to welcome 3 million to 5 million visitors at Dubai Safari by the end of 2018,” said Hussain Nasser Lootah, director-general of Dubai Municipality. “It is a world-class wildlife park that is home to the most diverse array of animals in the UAE with more than 2,500 animals representing more than 270 species from around the world. The park offers a range of wildlife experiences and enhance ment activities tailored for visitors of all ages.”

Featured are a wide range of exhibits across Arabian, African, Asian and Safari villages, where visitors come face to face with ungulates, carnivores, birds, reptiles, primates and small mammals.

Dubai Safari is home to the United Arab Emirates’ largest group of baboons, the largest drive-through lion exhibit, the country’s only drive-through hippo and tiger exhibits and the world’s first drive-through crocodile exhibit. The park’s walk-through aviary has birds from all around the world. Visitors can view and learn about a wide variety of poisonous, non-poisonous and endangered snakes, lizards, vipers and pythons.

Dubai Safari’s key attraction is the safari village drive-thru that takes visitors on a bus ride of up to 2 hours to explore the diverse wildlife of Africa and Asia. The trip allows visitors to enjoy close glimpses at francolins, spring boks, cape buffalos, giraffes, zebras, crocodiles, impalas, striped hyenas and more,” Lootah said.

For most visitors, the Dubai Safari experience starts at the Arabian Village with a 20-minute guided tour through the Arabian desert, encountering animals native to the Middle East such as oryx, gazelles, ibex, Arabian wolves, ostriches, saiga antelopes and mouflons.

The African Village enables visitors to spot carnivores, including cape hunting dogs, spotted hyenas, cheetahs and meerkats, primates such as lemurs, monkeys, chimpanzees and gorillas and ungulates such as the pygmy hippo, the bongo and antelopes. The African Village is also home to the park’s reptile house and the aviary.

“Another highlight of the park is the Asian Village featuring a diverse group of animals native to the continent, including the orangutan, silvery and sumatran gibbons, crocodiles, snapping turtles, alligators, gorillas and more,” Lootah said.

Dubai Safari has incorporated many environmentally friendly features that allow it to operate using minimum resources and leverages renewable energy.

“One, it is built on a former construction waste landfill, which was leveled and reclaimed to provide a suitable site for wildlife,” Lootah said. “Inside the park premises, electric trams, cable cars, bicycles and e-vehicle offer eco-friendly means of transport and all of the park’s parking lots and the internal lighting are solar-powered.”

Dubai Safari offers interactive programs to learn more about animal behaviour and physiology. “A range of interactive displays allow children to listen to various speeds of animal heartbeats and animal sounds through pushing buttons on interactive exhibits or actively milk a cow or a goat,” said Lootah.

“Two, visitors encounter and learn about a vast variety of birds including the predatory red-legged seriemas, the colourful blue-and-gold macaw, crosses, owls, the world’s tallest bird – the sarus crane, the rare hornbills, Moluccan cockatoos, which are native to Indonesia, and turacos, which are among the most popular birds in the world.”

Entry at Dubai Safari is affordable. An all-access package costs 30 dinhams ($8.16) for children and 50 dinhams ($13.50) for adults. Children under 3, those older than 65 and people of determination (the disabled) enjoy free access to the park.

Tickets can be purchased at the main entrance, online at www.dubaisafari.ae or through the Dubai Safari mobile application.

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