The many challenges of Arab women

Pages 12-13

Migrants can expect worse times after Italy’s elections

Mohammed Alkhereiji

London

I

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“The meeting agreed a landmark ambition for Prince Mohammed bin Salman to create a joint investment fund of mutual trade and investment opportunities over the coming years, including direct investment in the UK and new Saudi public procurement with UK companies,” the British prime minister’s office said in a statement.

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The Saudi crown prince used the visit to Cairo as a mod erate and tolerant country open to engage in global business.

“Thisstereotypical image of the kingdom islessly accurate,” Crown Prince Mohammed said in an interview with the Daily Telegraph. “People need to be able to move freely and we need toap plythe same standards as the rest of the world.”

The crown prince acknowledged that Saudi Arabia needed to improve its human rights record, however he asked that critics bepatient.

“We are getting better and we have come along in a short time,” he said.

The crown prince was also receptive to feedback from Saudi citizens demanding an end to the war in Yemen.

“Saudi Foreign Minister Adel alf-Jubeir, in an interview with BBC Radio 4’s “Today” programme, said the protesters’ positions were based on misin telligence.

“They criticise us for a war in Yemen that we did not want, that was imposed on us, and they have added that war was supported by international law. Jubeir, speaking at a newsconference with British Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, said the Iran-allied Houthis militant weren’t serious about dialogue. He said there had been more than 70 meetings, but the Houthis had been indifferent to them.

British opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn, known for pro-Iranian views, tried to generate controversy about the crown prince’s visit.

His positions were not unnoticed by Saudi media. “We should not stand idly by while Corbyn leads a campaign against the kingdom,” Saudi Daily Al Okaz Editor-in-Chief Jamel al-Taliby wrote. “He is compromising his country’s stable relations with Saudi Arabia to seek party interests and votes.

Taliby said the Labour leader’s experience did not go bey ond the backbenches of parliament.

The last day of the crown prince’s UK visit focused on secu rity-related issues. There was a meeting with British Defence Min i ster Gavin Williamson, which, local reports said, centred on arms sales, including the poten tial purchase of up to 48 Typhoon fighter jets. Crown Prince Mohammed also served as Saudi defence minister.

Crown Prince Mohammed’s trip dominated Saudi media. Arabic-language publications carried full translations of his interview with the Daily Telegraph in which he stressed security cooperation between the two countries.

On Twitter, some Labour’s preferred mode of expression, Crown Prince Mohammed’s visit received overwhelming support. Many users posted pictures of the crown prince during his visit, as well as photos of billboards welcoming him to the United Kingdom.

“Crown Prince and leader of the vision Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz in London to improve economic ties and achieve Vision 2030,” Saudi user Batar tweeted to his 53,200 followers.

Saudi Twitter user Shaban al-Bana posted a photo of the crown prince with the architect of Canterbury, writing: “Making his tory and creating glorious and prosperous future for his country and its people God willing.”

The crown prince and May inaugurated the UK-Saudi Strategic Partnership Council, which is to foster Saudi economic reforms, efforts and strengthen bilateral cooperation.

The purpose of the tour is to solidify long-standing relations with allies and generate investments to buttress the Saudi Vision 2030 program. The crown prince also had talks with his British counterpart about efforts and strengthening security cooperation. The aim of the tour is to solidify long-standing relations with allies and generate investments to buttress the Saudi Vision 2030 program. The crown prince also had talks with his British counterpart about efforts and strengthening security cooperation.
Migrants in Italy

Populists are the big winners in Italian elections

Justin Salhani

Italy's elections are the big winners in Italian elections

Rightward surge. Supporters of populist Five Star Movement (M5S) party wait for their leader Luigi Di Maio to arrive at a meeting in Acerra, on March 6. (Reuters)

Francis Chilles is an associate fellow at the Barcelona Centre for International Affairs.

The only saving grace for immigrants and minorities in Italy may be that no government will come together with much ease.

Francis Chilles

cover story

Pervasive corruption and the flight of young, educated Indians make for a brittle political climate in which blaming Africans and Arabs is an easy vote-winner.

Cover Story

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n optimist would call the results of Italy's latest legislative election a democratic indemnity for the sick of the political classes that have governed Italy for two decades. A pessimist would call the results a shipwreck.

What is not in doubt is that voters have held politicians responsible for Italy's shortcomings, which include two decades of economic stagnation and waves of illegal migration that have left 650,000 African and Eastern Middle Eastern and Asian men and women stranded in the country since 2016.

Regardless of which coalition ends up ruling Italy, the vote will raise the stakes of the country's fraught efforts to overhaul Europe's asylum system built on the premise that the two groups have little in common apart from wanting to promote "Made in Italy" products and berating establishment political parties. With immigration such a fiery issue, there is a fear that a pair of reactionary parties may target society's most vulnerable.

The Five Star Movement has flip-flopped on immigration. The "Italian third pole", represented by the testamentary succession of its founder, has always expressed a very ambiguous position regarding the migration issue," Borghignoni said. "It is unclear whether Five Star's 31-year-old prime minister, Di Maio, will govern Italy in the months to come, it will be very difficult to implement a coherent governing programme," Borghignoni said.

Rightward surge. Supporters of populist Five Star Movement (M5S) party wait for their leader Luigi Di Maio to arrive at a meeting in Acerra, on March 6. (Reuters)

Cristian Saggini

The only saving grace for immigrants and minorities in Italy may be that no government will come together with much ease.

Pervasive corruption and the flight of young, educated Indians make for a brittle political climate in which blaming Africans and Arabs is an easy vote-winner.

Cristian Saggini

March 11, 2018

The Italian political, bureaucratic and financial establishment was looking forward to playing its part in the long-awaited Franco-German initiative on closer eurozone and EU integration but the humiliating defeat of the Italian centre-right and the rise of populist parties, which basically support the anti-European instincts of certain parties in other states and minorities in Italy, has dashed that hope. Another deep concern in European capitals is that the Five Star Movement has already succeeded in building a network of websites and social media accounts which spread the kind of fake news, conspiracy theories and anti-Semitic slurs associated with right-wing Europeans. For the many illegal immigrants living in refugee camps or working as virtual slave labourers in farms across southern Italy, the vote may have raised the stakes of the country's fraught efforts to overhaul Europe's asylum system.

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History is repeating itself in the cruellest ways in Eastern Ghouta

New rebel coalition brings fresh threat to Syria's sprawling war

Syria

Syria

As the Syrian conflict approaches its seventh anniversary on March 15, all eyes are trained on Eastern Ghouta, the Damascus countryside presently the scene of one of the bloodiest chapters of the Syrian war.

History is repeating itself in the cruellest ways in Eastern Ghouta

Sami Moubayed

Neither the residents of Eastern Ghouta nor those of Damascus imagined that less than 100 years later, the whole Damascus countryside would get torched again.

Residents of the agricultural bulge surrounding Damascus, known as Eastern Ghouta, rose in revolt against French colonial rule 93 years ago, bringing the “Great Syrian Revolt” to the gates of Damascus. They were responding to a call to arms from veteran Druze of the Syrian revolution but the French had used it to lodge arms. No sooner had they entered the area of the Syrian Liberation Front (JTS), a newly formed insurgent Front (JTS), a newly formed insurgent

Syria

Sami Moubayed is a British journalist.

James Snell is a Syrian historian and author of “Under the Black Flag” (IB Tauris, 2015).
Warming Iraqi-Turkish ties could turn up heat on PKK militants

The Arab Weekly staff

A n improvement of relations between Turkey and Iraq is likely to see the two sides take part in joint operations against the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) in the Qandil Mountains of northern Iraq.

Turkey’s Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, during a visit to Vienna, said the joint Iraqi-Turkish operation could start after the May 12 elections in Iraq. Iraqi authorities have yet to officially comment.

The military cooperation would target any Iraqi state (ISIS) militants in northern Iraq. “We are in close contact with the Iraqi government... regarding both eradication (ISIS) from the region completely and wiping out PKK,” Turkish Prime Minister Binali Yildirim said in January.

Turkey maintains that its fight against the PKK is inseparable from its war on ISIS. Simultaneous terror attacks by both groups in 2015-17 left Turkish security forces overstretched.

Iraq and Turkey expressed fear of ISIS fighters slipping into their territories from Syria and Iran in 2015. Both sides have been holding talks on opposing ends when it comes to the Kurdistan Regional Government. Turkey views Syrian President Bashar Assad as the legitimate leader of Syria and Turkey is backing rebels who seek to topple him.

Iraq and Turkey are unlikely to find common ground there.

The Arab Weekly staff and news agencies.

Iraq’s trial of dead caliph is out of this world

Talib Abdurrazzaq is a researcher at the University of Exeter’s Strategy and Security Institute in England.

Sadly, these stunts have become a normal part of Iraqi politics since Iran-backed Shia Islamists rose to power and imported Tehrani-style sectarian politicising.

Iraq’s holy city of Najaf put a formerly powerful caliph on trial for murder and sentencing him to death. This caliph is, of course, not the pretend caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. No, they decided to put on trial Hibam ibn Abd al-Malik, an Umayyad caliph who had been dead for almost 1,300 years.

Imagine the scene: a scourf of some of the legal profession’s sup- posedly most educated men gath- ered witnesses to give testimony against the alleged murder of Zayd ibn Ali, an important figure in Shia Islam, that happened well over a millennium ago.

After much careful deliberation about a man who, in effect, ruled from Damascus and therefore fell outside Iraq’s jurisdiction (Get along modern Iraq’s historical era), the judicial panel decided to sentence Caliph Hibam to death. This can only be described as peak live-action role-playing, or LARPing as it is known among its highly imag- nation role-playing, or LARPing as it is known among its highly imag-

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Editorial

Preventing wars in the Middle East is a global responsibility

A study released by the World Bank and the University of Oxford makes a strong case for conflict prevention. “Pathways for Peace: Preventing Violent Conflict” states that war costs an average of $10 trillion in economic losses every year and that, from 2005 to 2014, the number of deaths caused by armed conflict increased ten-fold.

“By 2020, it is estimated that almost three out-of-four Arabs could be living in counties vulnerable to violent conflict,” the report says. Syria is home to the planet’s worst killing fields, with more than 200,000 dead, 5 million refugees and 6.3 million internally displaced.

“Syria is one of the defining crises of the contemporary era,” the report says. “Syrians and their children have been continuously victimised, thrust into the middle of armed conflicts.” The proportion of children under 15 being recruited by armed groups has increased from 20 to 50 percent since 2015, it notes.

The report looks at 20 conflicts that were prevented between 2010 and 2015, and estimates that the costs of these conflicts are “approximately $20 billion between 2010 and 2015 – approximately four times the 2010 GDP.”

The report highlights the importance of peace in complexity around the world, with Syria again the prime example.

In 2015, there were an average of eight armed groups in a civil war, in 2010 the average had jumped to 14. In 2014, more than 1,000 active armed groups were fighting to end the conflict alone, the report says. It is no surprise that peace or even a ceasefire has been elusive.

The report, however, suffers from a major oversight. It fails to acknowledge the degree to which armed groups serve as proxies for regional powers. “Many of the conflicts do not have a (or little) formal connection to a state and are categorised loosely as non-state armed groups,” the report contends. This statement does not reflect the reality. Regional interests have been involved in many conflicts.

In an unprecedented move, the Saudi crown prince Mohammed bin Salman bin Abdulaziz’s recent visit to Egypt was special by all norms and has set new standards for what future inter-Arabic relations should be like.

It was a meeting between a new Egypt and a new Saudi Arabia; a meeting with a clear regional dimension. It was a meeting between two Arab countries seeking practical ways of complementing each other and not just an opportunity to repeat meaningless slogans.

Strictly speaking, it was a breach of protocol when Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi welcomed the Saudi crown prince at Cairo International Airport in person but the gesture was a sign of the very close cooperation between both countries and an opportunity to undo the endless problems of the past and move towards a brighter future in bilateral relations.

Climate change is another underlying group. This does not mean that the enormous problems facing the entire region. This does not mean that it is possible to speak about important common projects and make it possible to speak about important common projects and without rejecting religious extremism by both societies.

The new Saudi-Egyptian relations are based on Saudi Arabia’s need for Egypt and Egypt’s need for Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is going through profound changes. After having received Lebanon’s Ma’ronta’s patriarch in November 2017, the Saudi kingdom will soon welcome the Coptic pope. Furthermore, Riyadh is going to have its own opera house.

Saudi Arabia is abandoning old practices. Those practices had taken root as a reaction to Iran’s ideological expansionism, which started in 1979. We always come back to 1979, the year marking the beginning of the Islamic republic of Iran and its efforts to export its revolution. Saudi Arabia was a target for that revolution so it responded by closing itself socially and culturally.

The important thing is that both Egypt and Saudi Arabia have decided to learn from their painful past and move on towards a brighter future in bilateral relations. These relations will encompass not just common projects but also a common strategic vision for the entire region.

That strategic vision begins with protecting the Red Sea and, consequently, the Suez Canal and safeguarding future projects like NEOM, for example. There is a need for a common vision on how to deal with the situation in Yemen, with Sudan and the Horn of Africa, including the lawlessness in Somalia.

The entire region is going through a difficult period. A threat to the security of the Red Sea is a threat to the security of the Suez Canal. The region is coveted by Iran and Turkey. For more than half a century, Saudi-Egyptian relations suffered the consequences of useless jockeying for Arab leadership between leading figures such as Gamal Abdel Nasser, Anwar Sadat, Saddam Hussein and Hafez al-Assad. These relations can now flourish under new leaderships in both Egypt and Saudi Arabia. They must flourish for the sake of safeguarding the region from terror and from Iranian expansionism.
Why Hezbollah is anxious about Saudi Arabia's comeback in Lebanon

Mohamad Kawas

Riyadh seems convinced that opposing Iran and its proxy militias must be an international effort.

The Saudi presence will certainly enhance all of Russia's regions of influence. For Hezbollah, a Saudi comeback in Lebanon is a very real threat. Riyadh has thought the crisis created by Hariri's impromptu resignation announcement in November had bumped him from Riyadh's agenda.

The biggest fear in this political game is no doubt Putin. He seems very wary of this sudden Saudi comeback. Hariri has thought the crisis created by Hariri's impromptu resignation announcement in November had bumped him from Riyadh's agenda.

A Saudi comeback coincides with growing international concern about Iran's expansionist tactics simply adds to Hezbollah's anxiety.

The geopolitical map of the region is changing and Moscow has reacted in a manner that has caught Washington by surprise.

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The Arab Weekly
March 11, 2018

It used to be that Western powers were ringing at the State Department and the White House with enough knowledge of the Middle East to make any decisions. Regrettably, Washington has no one at the State Department, where numerous important positions remain unoccupied by qualified diplomats. It must be ready for negotiations that the US Embassy in Israel is practically no one at the White House. The chaotic atmosphere of the previous US administration has not helped American diplomacy.

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Seeing the ‘political crisis’ behind Tunisia’s economic moras

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Tunisia’s local election prospects spark self-searching among activists

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Tunisia
The man who knew too much

Over the years many spies, some of them Lebanese, were exposed and their subsequent stories seem more the stuff of John le Carré than historical fact.

ven before Beirut established its reputation as a capital for Western hostage tak ing, this small Mediterranean city was a scene for spies and their spymasters playing the Cold War's greatest game. In the 1960s, Beirut was home to the famous British double agent Harold "Kim" Philby, who used the various bars and hotels to recruit and collect information before defecting to Moscow. Over the years many spies, some of them Lebanese, were exposed and their subsequent stories seem more the stuff of John le Carré than historical fact. It's also true that, all work of fiction, many of them were fabricated to either serve or discredit their principals, that of the Lebanese actor and journalist Ziad Itani.

Itani was a tall, blonde female Israeli agent who dared challenge Hezbollah's leader, Ziad Itani was a victim of an elaborate scheme orchestrated by Haj. Fidaa Itani accused Haj of fabricating the entire event, Haj has been on trial for his alleged role in the case ever since.

From the moment of his arrest by the General Directorate of Security, many of the media outlets, including the actor was cast as a cunning and dangerous spy, and, importantly, "spun a story of a tall blonde female Israeli agent who seduced Ziad, turning this into a virtual sex show, which apparently the police seemed to like."

Many have presumed the actor had fallen foul of the powerful interests behind the scenes, which is loyal to the mainstream, the intelligence branch of the Sunni-leaning Internal Security Forces (ISF). In reality, the case reads beyond the internal rivalries of Lebanon's security forces and speaks to the president's resurgent Maronite faction's ambition to hold its own, a hold that has been challenged by the Sunnis for the past two decades.

Underlying the immediate po litical and security context of the case are the concerns many as sumed had been dead and buried since the Syrian occupation of 1990-2005. During that time, anyone who thought of even staying from the Syrian line would find themselves accused of any num ber of supposed crimes, ranging from corruption to the more seri ous and fatal charge of collabora tion with Israel.

Even after the Syrian exodus of 2014, this was still the case, and the accu sation of "spying for Israel" or the West at times was both amusing and yet very sinister and effective. Rarely does a case of this nature lack for a hint of a hint of a hint of a hint of a hint. One of those was journalist Fidaa Itani, who had previously questioned the actor's crime and the ISF's own reports, which claimed that Ziad Itani was a victim of an elaborate scheme orchestrated by Haj. Fidaa Itani accused Haj of fabricating the entire event, Haj has been on trial for his alleged role in the case ever since.

The theatrical parliamen tary election, Ziad Itani, who be longs to one of the biggest Sunni families in Beirut, was lucky to benefit from the intervention of Sunni Prime Minister Saad Hariri. While the actor and journalist might soon find himself released from jail, his tacky and fabricated spy tale will live on, an enduring reminder that Lebanon remains a police state that only sporadically masquerades as a functioning democracy.
Lost amidst the headlines, for Syria, ISIS threat remains

Simon Speakman Cordall

As the world's great powers continue to advantage over Syria's battlefields, the Islamic State (ISIS) has receded from the headlines and public consciousness. Though ISIS languishes in isolated pockets throughout much of Syria's desert hinterlands and within the orbit of the Democratic Forces, the philosophy that fuelled its nihilistic ambitions is ingrained in the central tenets of groups such as al-Qaeda-linked Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, and the Jaysh al-Islam and lies, hidden from cameras, within the ditches besieging the Kurdish province of Afrin. A puritanism and a sense of a rapidly metastasising conflict extracts its blood price from the people of Idlib and Eastern Ghouta, the appeal of jihadism's certainties to the young and disenfranchised of Syria remains as strong as ever. However, for ISIS, denied the terrain and territory that established the Islamic State, the humiliation of regime and its allies that ranges within Idlib and Eastern Ghouta may bring only a limited advantage.

There are, though, to 5,000-10,000 active ISIS fighters in Syria. Hundreds are in Atomkraft, the most crowded prisons of the US-allied Kurds. Others, released by the Kurds to pose no imminent threat, returned to their villages. The fate of thousands of freed fighters who are blocked to Syria to wage holy war remains a source of comment and concern.

For the captured international ISIS, in particular, Russia has indicated it may repatriate its fighters but many other countries are refusing.

The legal issues are overwhelming. As the Washington Post reported in January, many countries, including Spain and Benin, are proving reluctant to repatriate ISIS fighters, with little confidence to prosecute them, something intensely difficult to collect during battlefield captures.

Like so much of what remains in ISIS's wake, confusion appears to be the dominant factor and, within Syria, it is this that will help what remains of the group.

"I think Syria's chaos definitely helps ISIS," Colin Clarke, a political scientist at the RAND Corporation, said in an emailed comments. "With so many shifting alliances and groups fighting on the ground, there is little agreement between states and non-state actors that ISIS is the number one priority."

The weakness of the Syrian state plays a role in creating a vacuum where ISIS could possibly recover. "Because the Syrian regime can't project force into all of the areas of its territory, ISIS will seek these places out, rest/sustain/recuperate and seek to persist until they are strong enough to launch further strikes," Clarke said.

ISIS's core attraction was always its state-building activities. Other groups were satisfied in adding the long march to the destined caliphate but ISIS established a caliphate in Syria and Iraq. Denied physical control of the towns, cities and services, ISIS can occupy territory but its ability to inspire is uncertain.

Dealing with captured ISIS members is no easy task for Iraqi authorities

Mamoon Alabbasi

London

After declaring victory against the Islamic State (ISIS) in December, Iraq is facing a dilemma in dealing with captured members of the militant group amid domestic pressures and international expectations.

The legal issues are overwhelming. As the Washington Post reported in January, many countries, including Spain and Benin, are refusing to repatriate ISIS fighters, with little confidence to prosecute them, something intensely difficult to collect during battlefield captures.

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Dealing with captured ISIS members is no easy task for Iraqi authorities. There are no official figures for detained ISIS members in Iraq but experts estimate that 20,000 suspects are being held in government jails and approximately 4,000 others are in prisons run by the Kurdish Regional Government.

The number of foreign ISIS members in detention is also unknown but there are reports that about 500 women and 800 children are detained for the group in Syria.

Iraq insists that foreign nationals, including women, convicted of membership of ISIS must serve their sentences— including death — in Iraq. Female foreigners who have been convicted solely of illegal entry to Iraq have been allowed to return to France and Russia.

Traffic has not been one way. Iraq extradited Islamist Abu Saffaa al-Din, who was ISIS's minister of religious affairs, from Turkey.

The threat of ISIS, nevertheless, continues in Iraq. Civilians, police and train-backed Shia militias have been killed in recent attacks by the group.

ISIS members are present in various areas in Iraq. They hide in the deserts of predominately Sunni Anbar province. They have sleeper cells in Shia-majority cities. They have formed alliances with predominately Kurdish militants, such as the White Rangers and Asa'ib Ahl al-Mahdi. They have formed alliances with predominately Kurdish militants, such as the White Rangers and Asa'ib Ahl al-Mahdi.

There is a continued threat of ISIS crossing into Iraq from Syria, especially if the Kurds allow the militias to make deals with some of their adversaries in Syria, including the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) as well as the Assad regime and Lebanon's Hezbollah.

A BBC investigation revealed in November that an SDF-ISIS agreement allowed hundreds of ISIS fighters, with around 3,500 of their families members as well as tonnes of weapons and ammunition, to leave Raqa and spread across Syria. Some ISIS members, including foreign fighters, reached the countryside of eastern Syria, near the Iraqi border.

A similar Hezbollah-ISIS deal in August gave an estimated 100 armed ISIS fighters and their families passage from the Lebanon border to the Syrian border with Iraq. Many reportedly crossed into Iraq. With a continued ISIS threat from within Iraq's borders and beyond, Iraq courts appear to be engaged in a sentencing spree of suspected militants. The office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights said Iraq executed more than 100 people last year, most of whom were convicted of terrorism charges.

Iraq's legal system has tough sentences for members of ISIS or those who have helped the militants, even if they were non-combatants. Membership in ISIS could warrant the death penalty. There are concerns that due process may have not been observed.

"Courts continued to admit confessions that were extracted under torture as evidence. Many of those convicted after these unfair and hasty trials were sentenced to death," read a report by Amnesty International.

"Iraq remained one of the world's most prolific users of the death penalty. Scores of people were sentenced to death by courts after unfair trials and executed by hanging. The death penalty continued to be used as a tool of retribution in response to public outrage after attacks claimed by [ISIS]," the report said.

The rights group accused Iraqi authorities of issuing arrest warrants for lawyers defending suspected ISIS members: "These arrests caused concern among other lawyers that they could be arrested simply for defending [ISIS] suspects."

Iraq is also engaged in an ideological war on ISIS. Iraqi state TV airs a weekly programme in which ISIS converts — many of whom have been sentenced to death — confess to crimes and express regret.

In Mosul, Islamic scholars are training volunteers to counter ISIS's ideology with the messages of peace in Islam. The volunteers are tutored on “faith, Islamic jurisprudence and the Hadith (sayings of Prophet Mohammed) to allow them to counter the ideas of [ISIS] and its intellectual terrorism,” Sheikh Saleh al-Obaidi, president of the Ulema Forum of Mosul, told Agence France-Presse.

However, such soft power is likely to be more successful if the government also does not disappoint the messages of justice and tolerance preached in the forum.

Mamoon Alabbasi is Deputy Managing Editor and Online Editor of The Arab Weekly.
Palestinian men walk past closed shops in the West Bank city of Hebron, last December. Worsening toll. Apparent leadership crises add to Mideast peace hurdles

London

Domestic problems faced by top Palestinian, Israeli and American officials are likely to add to the hurdles to restart the Middle East peace process. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has been facing mounting criticism domestically over his security coordination with Israel and his intolerance to dissenting views in the West Bank. He continues to rate poorly in opinion polls. A poll by the Palestinian Centre for Policy and Survey Research indicated that 70% of Palestinians asked said they want Abbas to quit. “(Abbas) is not a charismatic leader. He’s seen as all talk and no action. His threats lack credibility and, as far as the public is concerned, he’s not up to the challenge,” Khalil Shikaki, the centre’s director, told the Financial Times.

Following the announcement by the United States in December to recognise Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, Abbas was placed in a more difficult position as the Palestinian Authority had relied on Washington’s support to counter critics. Nearly 83 years old and in ill health, Abbas has not made any indication of stepping down but there were reports that the Palestinian president planned to install Mahmoud al-Ablad as his vice-president. It is likely that rivalry within Fatah would flare up until such a successor is named by Abbas takes charge.

Abbas, however, does not enjoy the wholehearted support of the region’s leaders, some of whom back his rivals in Fatah and Hamas.

With different regional priorities in mind, many Arab countries are not in the mood to challenge the Trump administration’s support they seek.

Israel’s Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is possibly facing the most difficult period of his political career. He is struggling to fend off corruption investigations and may be forced to call early elections.

If Netanyahu thinks the police, the prosecution and the attorney general are persecuting him, he should resign and do battle with them but so long as he remains the prime minister, his denunciations of them are illegitimate,” stated an editorial in Haaretz. “If no less than the prime minister thinks these charges are baseless, and/or if it’s unfair, what will the ordinary citizen think? How will he trust them?”

Democratic pressures appear to have resulted in Netanyahu moving even further to the right to pander to his anti-Palestinian constituencies and coalition partners. This will likely make any compromise deal — if there were ever one on the table — more difficult.

The Hebron Protocol, signed by the four Jewish neighbourhoods in Hebron, is home to more than 200,000 Palestinians and an embodiment of the settlers, particularly following the May 2017 killing of Abdul Fattah Al-Sharif, who was lying on the infamous killing of Abdul Fattah Al-Sharif, who was lying on the infamous killing of Abdul Fattah Al-Sharif, who was lying on the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Goldstein was an immigrant from New York to Israel who was active in the extremist Kahal politico-cultural movement in the nearby Israeli settlement of Kiryat Arba and he was known to Israeli intelligence. He was found and beaten to death by a crowd soon after the massacre.

Unlike attacks by Palestinians against Israeli settlers, Israel authorities did not demolish the home of the perpetrator. Rather, his grave has become a shrine for the Jewish extremist movement over which he has left his tomb reads: “He gave his life for the people of Israel, its Torah and land.”

The city has never been the same. Following the massacre, the Israeli government enhanced security for settlers across occupied Hebron. In addition, the Ibrahim mosque was divided, with Muslim access reduced to approximately 40% of the site. The other 60% was allocated to Jewish worshipers, who entered the site from a separate entrance. The Palestinians saw this as a reward for Israeli terrorism.

The security measures, which prevail to this day, saw parts of the city near illegal Israeli settlements closed to Palestinian residents.

Hebron is the largest city in the West Bank, which the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics said is home to more than 200,000 Palestinians and some 80,000 Israeli Jewish settlers, which Israel moved into the old quarter of the city after its occupation in 1967. The settlers are protected by an entire military brigade.

The Hebron Protocol, signed by Binyamin Netanyahu in January 1997, during his first term as Israeli prime minister divided the city into two sections; 60% of the city under full Palestinian control; 40%, where four Jewish neighbourhoods reside.

Palestinian residents. Since 2007, Israel has declared various parts of the old city “closed military zones,” forcing Palestinian shops to close. Up to 14 military checkpoints have been set up around the entrance to the mosque and restricted access to Palestinians and visitors to the old quarter.

The security arrangements bring continuous misery to the Palestinian residents who face daily oppression through the need for permits to enter their homes, restrictions on vehicle movement, causing them difficulties in bringing in goods and materials to homes and businesses.

Hebron makes a major contribu- tion to the Palestinian economy, including 40% of its GDP and 60% of its exports, the Palestine Economic Policy Center said. Hebron contributes one-third of animal production in the West Bank. However, Israeli's repeated closures and restrictions on economic activity have restricted the city’s potential to lead Palestine’s economic development and is heavily affected by the occupation.

Its centre has been devastated through the forced closure of businesses, including those on the famous Shuhada Street, the main thoroughfare and commercial hub of Hebron. The shut down of the four Jewish neighbourhoods into these “institutes,” which are open to closed to Palestinian traffic, looks like a scene from the past.

Apart from the economic effects of the occupation, the settlers are convicted of attacking the Palestinians, the settlement leaders make the lives of Palestinians miserable and often violently attack them. Children in the centre of the city often need to be accom-}

March 11, 2018  | The Arab Weekly  | 11

Apparent leadership crises add to Mideast peace hurdles

Palestine | Israel

Worsening toll. Palestinian men walk past closed shops in the West Bank city of Hebron, last December.

Kamel Hawwash is a British-based Palestinian university professor and writer.

Israel’s encroachment on Hebron is devastating to Palestinians

It has been 24 years since Jewish Israeli terrorist Baruch Goldstein killed 29 Muslim worshipers in Al-Aqsa mosques, known to Jews as Cave of the Patriarchs. The attack hap- pened during dawn prayers on the Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Goldstein was an immigrant from New York to Israel who was active in the extremist Kahal politico-cultural movement in the nearby Israeli settlement of Kiryat Arba and he was known to Israeli intelligence. He was found and beaten to death by a crowd soon after the massacre.

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International Women’s Day, a day to reflect on gender rights in the Arab world

The situation is not that dim. Many Arab women are active members of their societies, playing key decision-making roles in the family and enjoying the right to equal pay at the workplace. This while issues of gender inequality in the workplace persist in the United States and Europe, serving as a troubling reminder that Western liberalism has also failed women.

While Arab women have indeed faced many challenges, their achievements have surpassed expectations.

In the United Arab Emirates, a regional pioneer in women’s empowerment, about 70% of school and university students over the past five years have been female, the World Economic Forum’s Global Gender Gap Report 2017 stated. Since its establishment on December 2, 1971, the UAE has enabled women to occupy leadership roles in the state and private sectors. Women have played key roles in the country’s development drive and have held positions in government, from ministers to speaker of the Federal National Congress.

From Tunisia to Saudi Arabia, times are changing in the Arab world and women are gaining more and more rights — a fact much of the world is still ignorant of. While many in the West have a distorted view of women in MENA, they have been busily stirring hard-fought rights. Looking ahead, their struggle should continue with the same urgency. Despite the progress made, there are elements of society — particularly of the Islamic creed — that are determined to roll back women’s rights and muzzle society in Arabia. It was centuries past. It is up to all of us — men and women — to make sure their progress is not sundered. And that women continue to be valued, empowered and respected in all areas of life.

Lina Slaymaker, an Iraqi mother of two teenage daughters, spoke about her experience raising her daughters whose father is Italian-English.

“Over time I decided to ignore what society thought of me and decided to raise my girls the way I saw fit. I found a way to answer people and I think this is where my aggression comes from. I felt I constantly had to justify my actions and decisions. Then I thought, ‘Why do I have to justify myself?’”

Barak said she had to lie that her daughter was married after she learnt her daughter was pregnant out of wedlock. “I only told one friend at work that my daughter fell pregnant out of wedlock,” she said. “I had to tell everyone else I knew that she was married. I don’t think it would be different if I was English, because I was on benefits,” Barok said. “I tried to treat my son and daughter equally but there were certain things I kept for my mind for my daughter such as reputation,” she said. “However, much of my practice is exactly the same. At home, it is not 100% pure English, neither truly pure Arabic or Muslim traditional way of life. “My children were exposed to both cultures and all beliefs. “I tried to treat my son and daughter equally but there were certain things I kept for my mind for my daughter such as reputation,” she said. “However, much of my practice is exactly the same. At home, it is not 100% pure English, neither truly pure Arabic or Muslim traditional way of life.”

While Arab mothers have learnt to accept that it is hard for their mother to change her mentality and resolve culture clashes by coming to a common understanding, “What they have learnt to accept is I need time to accept new ideas. I try to adapt to their way of thinking but it’s hard because I was brought up in a different society,” Slaymaker said. “My daughters say religion was written for a different time but for me, religion applies to every generation. “I don’t want my daughters to be like me because that’s impossible as they are raised in a different society but I want them to understand my culture. If I was married to an Arab, I think my daughters’ understanding will be a lot better. If I was an Arab brought up in England, it would be a lot easier as I would understand the culture better.”

Maha Al-Mufti, an Iraqi mother of a daughter and a son, explained how she raised them when she was 22. “I tried to treat my son and daughter equally but there were certain things I kept for my mind for my daughter such as reputation,” she said. “However, much of my practice is exactly the same. At home, it is not 100% pure English, neither truly pure Arabic or Muslim traditional way of life. “My children were exposed to both cultures and all beliefs. “I tried to treat my son and daughter equally but there were certain things I kept for my mind for my daughter such as reputation,” she said. “However, much of my practice is exactly the same. At home, it is not 100% pure English, neither truly pure Arabic or Muslim traditional way of life.”

That’s why they accepted and understood our culture. The only difference is my son was allowed out late whereas my daughter was not unless it was with a close family friend. “I wanted to protect my daughter and I felt she could be abused. However, in reality, both genders are vulnerable so it is wrong.”

Mufti said she would not have raised them any differently but would have influenced them with...
Call on Egyptian women to remove hijab provokes a heated debate

Hassan Abdel Zaher  
Cairo

A book urging women to stop wearing the Islamic headgear known as the hijab is stirring heated debate in Egypt as the hijab is stirring a gift they should not miss.

Egyptian writer Fasida al-Naqqash said the group specifically sought female university students from the countryside who considered the free headgear a gift they should not refuse.

“This was how they ensured that the largest number of women, and the hijab would wear the hijab,” Naqqash said.

She said she recalled Mohamed Mahmoud, the late head of the Muslim Brotherhood, saying that the group would only prevail when all Egypt’s women wore the hijab.

Choubachy said he saw more women wearing the hijab day after day, bewildered and surprised that, as the society covered up, sexual harassment and unregistered marriages among university students increased.

He specified that his call made him a nemesis of Egypt’s Islamist groups.

“I expected a shocking reaction to this invitation,” he said. “I was considered a disbeliever before, anyway.”

Choubachy said his call addressed only to women who are co-opted by male family members to wear the hijab. In encouraging women to revolt against male dominance he wants them to be free. “My battle against the hijab is one against despotism and suppression,” Choubachy writes. “It is a battle against the coercion of women and turning them into second-class creatures.”

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

Cover of Cherif Choubachy’s “Urgent Message to Egypt’s Women.”

Special Focus

Arab Women

Hassan Abdel Zaher

March 11, 2018 | The Arab Weekly | 13

ribes cross-cultural a child in the...
Ahead of EU-Turkey summit, prospects of normalisation uncertain

Thomas Seibert
Washington

Turkey may have improved prospects for rap-proachment with Europe, with the release of two high profile government critics from detention ahead of a key meeting with EU leaders but further calls by Brussels to widen free speech in Turkey and other sources of friction suggest normalization is uncertain.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is to meet with EU leaders in the Bulgarian Black Sea resort of Varna on March 26 for a summit aimed at resetting EU-Turkey relations.

Critics of Fethullah Gulen, a US-based Islamic cleric and former Erdogan ally who is seen in Ankara as the mastermind behind the 2016 coup attempt, have accused him of supporting Gulen’s group as well as the PKK (the left-extremist Revolutionary People’s Liberation Party-Front (DHKP-C)), organizations which are ideologically opposed to one another. Sik was detained for a year in 2016 for criticizing the Gulen movement when the cleric was Erdogan’s political partner.

As Sik and Sabuncu left court in Istanbul on March 9 ordered the release of Can Dundar, another former editor of Cumhuriyet, and Ankara bureau chief Erdem Gul, seeking to bring up to 29 years in prison for espionage.

Ongoing attacks by the left-extremist Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) and the right-wing Nationalist People’s Party (Vatang) have proven to be a weakness to be used.

While Turkey continues to win votes for the upcoming elections by branding them jihadists, the jihadist threat. The European Commission’s Vice President for External Affairs, Johannes Hahn, said last month a Turkish vessel was rounded up by Interpol and extradited to Turkey in July 2016, Ankara sent out requests for approximately 60,000 Turkish citizens abroad to be rounded up by Interpol and extradited.

The latest report was released in March 2020 and was supported by 43 years in prison if convicted.

Rights activists said charges against 17 defendants, 16 of whom have been freed pending the outcome of the trial, were drummed up to silence Erdogan critics. The report said the two had an extensive network of publishing the Turkish and Kurdish diaspora.

The Cumhuriyet employees are Ankara’s top priorities for the Varna summit but the Turkish leadership is said to have engaged a number of messages with the EU to try to prevent trials against Cumhuriyet journalists and others for spreading “terrorist propaganda” with comments that are critical of the government. The Turkish leadership is said to have engaged a number of messages with the EU to try to prevent trials against Cumhuriyet journalists and others for spreading “terrorist propaganda”.

No doubt, perceived by Ankara as a weakness to be used.

A failed coup attempt in 2016 in Turkey led to a massive wave of ar-rests of suspected Erdogan critics, putting more than 50,000 people in detention and leading to the dis-missal of around 150,000 public sector employees.

A decision that could improve Turkey’s chances of a new beginning with the European Uni-on, a court at a vast prison com-plex in Silivri outside Istanbul on March 9 ordered the release of Ahmet Sik, a prominent reporter of the Cumhuriyet opposition daily, and Murat Sabuncu, the paper’s editor. The two had been in detention for almost 300 days without a verdict.

Akin Atalay, chairman of the newspaper’s executive board, said behind bars at least until the next trial date on March 16, Sik and Sabuncu were freed despite powerful pressure from the government to keep them behind bars, which is rare in cases with high political significance in Turkey.

Howard Eissenstat, associate professor at New York University and non-resident senior fellow at the Project on Mid- dle East Democracy in Washington, said in a note that the release of Sik and Sabuncu could be seen “as a sign that Turkey recognizes the danger that high-profile cases pose for its standing abroad and how they limit its chances of a rap-proachment with Europe.”

The Cumhuriyet employees are accused of supporting the move-ment of Fethullah Gulen, a US- based Islamic cleric and former Erdogan ally who is seen in Ankara as the mastermind behind the 2016 coup attempt. The accused jour-nalists were accused of being part of an organisation which seeks to undermine the 15th of July overhaul or any political change.

The European Commission with Europe's energies and resources in waters off Cyprus. The actions prompted Eu- pean leaders to call the Varna meeting.

The last month a Turkish vessel was rounded up by Interpol and extradited to Turkey in July 2016, Ankara sent out requests for approximately 60,000 Turkish citizens abroad to be rounded up by Interpol and extradited.

The latest report was released in March 2020 and was supported by 43 years in prison if convicted.

The director of Freedom House, James Zogby, said that the arrest “came as a shock to the organisers of the elite international confer-ence, whose name coincidentally included the term “security” and wine and dine a number of VIP-level participants from the major countries of the West.”

Muslim was released but the damage was done. Frankly will probably be abandoned as an op-tion for future meetings of think-tanks, considered a “non-secure” venue. In any case, invited guests will have to think twice about go-ing there should they feel threat-ened. The government and the justice apparatus are aiming to use the conference as a shoo to the organisers of the elite international confer-ence, whose name coincidentally included the term “security” and wine and dine a number of VIP-level participants from the major countries of the West. "

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has been freed pending the outcome of the trial, were drummed up to silence Erdogan critics. The report said the two had an extensive network of publishing the Turkish and Kurdish diaspora.

Freed journalist, Cumhuriyet Turkish daily newspaper's Ahmet Sik, surrounded by colleagues speaks at the newspaper's headquarters in Istanbul, on March 10.

Former head of the newspaper's Istanbul bureau, Erdem Gul, and Can Dundar, another former editor of Cumhuriyet, were freed pending the charges against 17 defendants, 16 of whom have been freed pending the outcome of the trial, were drummed up to silence Erdogan critics. The report said the two had an extensive network of publishing the Turkish and Kurdish diaspora.

Freed journalist, Cumhuriyet Turkish daily newspaper's Ahmet Sik, surrounded by colleagues speaks at the newspaper's headquarters in Istanbul, on March 10.

Sensing danger. Freed journalist,Cumhuriyet Turkish daily newspaper’s Ahmet Sik, surrounded by colleagues speaks at the newspaper’s headquarters in Istanbul, on March 10.
News & Analysis

Soft power did not prevent failure of Le Drian’s mission to Tehran

Tunis

Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, risking his country’s international standing, remained intransigent in his rejection of the accord if the deal is not covered in the 2015 treaty.

The latest failed attempt was by French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian, who visited Tehran on March 5 intending to reaffirm European support for the 2015 nuclear agreement that loosened sanctions on Iran in exchange for scaling back Tehran’s uranium enrichment programme.

His visit coincided with a Tehran exhibit of ancient artefacts loaned by France’s Louvre Museum.

Khamenei did not seem impressed. Speaking after Le Drian’s departure, Khamenei was quoted by his official website as saying: “European countries come (to Tehran) and say we want to negotiate with Iran over its presence in the region. It is none of your business. It is your region. Why are you here?”

Under the terms of the 2015 agreement, signed by the United States, Russia, Germany, France, Britain, China and the European Union, Iran was to curtail its uranium-enrichment programme for access to international oil and gas markets.

However, the Trump administration has repeatedly expressed misgivings about the treaty and called on Iran to limit ballistic missile production,halt its involvement in regional conflicts, and open its military bases to international inspectors, provisions not covered in the 2015 treaty.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly threatened to withdraw from the accord if the deal is not renewed to his liking.

Iran is thought to have one of the largest missile production programmes in the region, with some of its precision-guided missiles able to strike within the borders of its sworn enemy, Israel, and other countries in the region.

“Those are ballistic programmes of missiles that can reach several thousand kilometres, which are not compatible with UN Security Council resolutions and exceed the sole need of defending Iran’s borders,” Le Drian told the Journal du Dimanche newspaper before leaving for Tehran.

“If it has not tackled head-on, this country risks new sanctions.”

After Le Drian’s visit, a senior commander of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps said Tehran had increased its missile production three-fold, the Fars news agency reported, without giving a time frame for the increase.

Anticipating further sanctions after Le Drian’s departure, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (R) welcomed French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian at the start of their meeting in Tehran, on March 5.

Time for an elegy for the Iranian nuclear deal?

Mission Impossible. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani (R) welcomes French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian at the start of their meeting in Tehran, on March 5.

If not tackled head-on, this country risks new sanctions.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian

EU countries are doing their utmost to come up with solutions that would keep the Trump administration committed to the deal without causing an uproar in Iran.

The Arab Weekly staff

Iran

Soft power did not prevent failure of Le Drian’s mission to Tehran

EU countries are doing their utmost to come up with solutions that would keep the Trump administration committed to the deal without causing an uproar in Iran.

With Donald Trump in the White House, the Iran nuclear deal faces the prospect of falling apart but Iran still hesitates to help the European Union’s efforts to preserve the deal.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves Le Drian’s largely apparently unsuccessful visit March 4 to Tehran is the latest of those efforts.

In the end, Tehran may come to bitterly regret its hesitation.

Trump announced in January he had “not yet withdrawn the United States from the Iran nuclear deal.” He said that would happen, however, unless “the deal’s disastrous flaws” are fixed, which means it should allow for the following:

- Immediate inspections at all sites requested by international inspectors
- Removal of the “sunset” provisions on limits to Iran’s nuclear programme and new restrictions on Iran’s long-range missile programme
- Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif responded on Twitter that the deal was not negotiable and that the US president’s stance “amounts to a desperate attempt to undermine a solid multilateral agreement.”
- More recently, Iranian Deputy Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi told the independent London policy institute Chatham House: “[W]e cannot remain in a deal that has no benefit to us.”
- The comments from both Washington and Tehran must be taken with a grain of salt. After all, candidate Trump often promised to declare the Iran nuclear deal null and void on his first day in office but has now certified that very deal and could do so again and again instead of terminating the agreement.
- The threat held out by Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and Araghchi of leaving the deal is just as unlikely. Their political careers are based on the promise of a negotiated solution to the crisis over Iran’s nuclear programme.

Even so, the Europeans take the possibility the deal might unravel very seriously. EU countries are doing their utmost to come up with solutions that would keep the Trump administration committed to the deal without causing an uproar in Iran.

Tehran, however, does not seem particularly helpful. Its former ambassador to the United Nations, Ali Khormali, on February 26 gave an interesting interview to Fars news agency, which is also available in English, Spanish and Arabic. He complained: “We are indifferent to European efforts and mostly treat them badly.”

“The British foreign minister visits Iran and, not only leaves empty-handed but is hurled with insults” in a reference to Boris Johnson’s unsuccessful visit to Iran in December, aimed at freeing a British-Iranian dual-national imprisoned from Iran.

“What can we expect of the Europeans under such circumstances?” Khormali asked, going on to conclude, “Trump is trying to persuade the Europeans to follow his path… and we have not taken a single positive step forward… We… chased the Europeans into Trump’s arms.”

Fars also had international affairs expert Ali Bigdeli commenting on German and French attempts to keep the Iran nuclear deal alive. “The German foreign minister [Sigmar Gabriel] raised the human rights issue. Next, he raised the issue of Iranian forces [in Syria, Iraq and the like] returning to Iran and third [jointly raised by the French], is the issue of Iran’s missile tests.”

Bigdeli, perhaps over-optimistically, assessed human rights and missile tests as “less problematic” issues. He deemed the return of Iranian forces from Syria, Iraq and elsewhere as more problematic for Tehran.

Then there is the view taken by publications at the other end of the political spectrum. The February 26 edition of Sobh-e Sadeq, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ weekly, condemned the “demeaning photos” of Le Drian and “disastrous” inroads against Iran, “the European troika.” It said its behaviour makes “the European game indistinguishable from the American.”

Alifcheh stressed the “strategic redlines of Iran.” These include the non-negotiable nature of “Iran’s missile capability and its strategic advantage at the cost of the United States’ domestic policy.” It would also not be willing to accept inspections of its military bases, the US-led military alliance, the US government to use Russia and China to counter the threat, especially after the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal.

Tehran may regret turning its back on the European Union’s efforts and its dependence on Moscow and Beijing, which may abandon it in pursuit of its own interests.
US policy on the Middle East just got tougher

US to protect Kurds in eastern Syria despite Turkish threats

Despite US diplomatic efforts to smooth over differences with Turkey, US military commanders are taking the lead on the Turkish-Syrian Kurdish dispute.

The US and the Middle East

I

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu’s visit to the White House deepened uncertainty about the United States’ commitments and leadership on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before Donald Trump took office. In his week-long visit, Trump’s officials pronounced as a “would-be peace plan” the minimalist steps that run counter to the goal of a peace plan.

Trump met with Netanyahu just weeks after announcing he would move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on May 14, the 70th anniversary of the founding of Israel. While Trump’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital fuelled Palestinian frustration with American neutrality, the US president stated it had increased, not diminished, the prospects of a peace agreement.

“Nobody could get past number one, Jerusalem,” Trump said at a news conference with Netanyahu in March. “We’ve taken it off the table. So this gives us a real opportunity to peace. We’ll see how it works out. The Palestinians, I think, are wanting to come back to the table very badly.”

Trump did not explain why the Palestinians would agree to talk when the United States had fulfilled a “wish of the Israelis — recognising Jerusalem as Israel’s capital” with negotiations. He also did not say whether he would travel to Israel for the opening of the embassy.

Trump was equally vague on his administration’s promised Middle East peace plan. He said he had personally told Netanyahu that the two would meet again next week to discuss “critical issues.” The president did not provide details or say when the meeting would take place.

Netanyahu later said Trump had not given him details about the plan and that the two spent 15 minutes of their 2-hour meeting on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before moving on to the Iran issue.

Israel wants Trump to take the United States out of the internationally negotiated agreement with Tehran. The president, who faces a May 21 deadline on the nuclear decision, has said he wants to fix the accord or let it collapse. Netanyahu pushed for a robust stance against Tehran and used a speech at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference in Washington a day after his meeting with Trump to warn against what he described as a growing threat of Iranian expansion in the Middle East.

“Diplomacy is descending on our region. Iran is building an aggressive empire,” Netanyahu said. “I have a message for you today. It’s a very simple one: We must stop Iran. We will stop Iran.”

During the White House meeting, Trump and Netanyahu praised each other as dedicated allies. “The relationship has never been better,” Trump said, adding that he considered it “a great honour” to host Netanyahu. In return, the Israeli prime minister likened Trump to the Persian King Cyrus the Great, who ended the Jews’ Babylonian captivity in the sixth century BC.

To confront Iran, the United States wants to forge an alliance between Israel and Sunni powers. “It is pretty clear that this administration’s foreign policy is focused on Iran,” said Dina Powell, a deputy national security adviser and a key figure in Middle East affairs, left the White House in January.

As in the Saudi-Qatar dispute, the United States is not considered an impartial broker in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians but as a power allied with one side more than the other. Trump has supported Netanyahu, he has cut funding for Palestine, and his “peace plan” is deeply critical of the Palestinian leadership. While Trump has made some vague promises on peace, the Palestinians have rejected his plans.

The US military is deeply involved in the conflict in Syria. Since August 2014, the US has been leading the international military coalition against ISIS in Syria and Iraq.

The Trump administration has been pushing for a new US strategy in Syria that would see the United States work with Turkey to secure a “safe zone” in northern Syria to house Syrian refugees and to create a buffer zone to contain ISIS. The US military has been providing military equipment and training to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), an anti-ISIS coalition composed of Kurdish and Arab fighters, and has established a military base in northern Syria.

Turkey, a key ally of the United States in the fight against ISIS, has been pushing for a “safe zone” along its border with Syria to provide a safe haven for its own Kurdish minority. The US has been reluctant to support Turkey’s efforts, fearing it could lead to a new conflict in Syria.

In response to Turkish threats, during a recent meeting of defence ministers in Rome, Trump expressed his concern about the “military commanders are standing in the way of peace in Syria.”

US military commanders are concerned about the role of the YPG, a Kurdish-led group in Syria that has played a key role in the fight against ISIS. The US military has been providing military equipment and training to the YPG, but the YPG is considered a terrorist group by Turkey and other US allies.

Despite strong Turkish objections to the YPG, the United States has supported the group, seeing it as a key ally in the fight against ISIS.

In a recent interview, US President Donald Trump said: “If we go into Syria, they [the YPG] will be our worst enemies.”

Trump’s comments have been met with criticism from US allies, who have called for a coordinated approach to the fight against ISIS.

The US military is planning to remove a key foreign policy plank from the Trump administration’s proposed budget for fiscal year 2019, which calls for $300 million in funding for the YPG.

Third, US military commanders are concerned about the long-term sustainability of the international coalition against ISIS in Syria and Iraq. The military commanders are worried that the coalition could collapse if the United States does not provide enough support.

Despite US diplomatic efforts to smooth over differences with Turkey, US military commanders are taking the lead on the Turkish-Syrian Kurdish dispute.
China and the Middle East

Ed Blanche

Beirut

China is steadily encroaching into the Middle East and Africa militarily and economically and President Xi Jinping’s apparent drive to make himself president for life is a startling development that could affect the balance of power in the region.

The Middle East, gripped by a chain of interlocking wars and feuding on the cusp of additional conflict, could well be affected by China if it enters the conflict as the United States disengages.

Xi Jinping may step up China’s effort to open to international interaction westward, including the recent agreement to develop infrastructure such as pipelines and ports that Xi was effectively taking in 2016. He was the first world leader to visit Beijing after the 2015 agreement was signed. During his regional swing, he ascended a new “Arab policy.”

The move came as China inaugurated a military base in the tiny Horn of Africa state of Djibouti, reclaiming the important shipping lanes of the Gulf of Aden and some

4,000km of coastline. Beijing also recently acquired the deepwater port of Hambantota in Sri Lanka under a 99-year, $1.1 billion lease.

India, which has long dominated the vital shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean, is engaged in a contest with China to acquire naval facilities, particularly the Bab al Mandeb Strait, which links the Red Sea with the Indian Ocean, and the Strait of Malacca, the chokepoint between Malaysia and Indonesia that joins the Indian Ocean with the South China Sea.

As China steps up projecting its power westward, including the recent visit by its submarine to Sri Lankan ports, Middle Eastern countries are growing alarmed about the balance of power.

“The Horn risks violent conflict in what has become a high-stakes chess game for both Middle Eastern and African adversaries,” James M. Dorsey, a senior fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, wrote in the South China Morning Post.

“It’s a game China inevitably will have to play a hand in, despite the risk of being sucked into the region’s expanding battles.”

The anxieties being expressed about China’s intentions follow two years of intense propaganda by Beijing’s Xi resulting in success.

This has given added weight to concerns that Xi is seeking to abandon the collective leadership introduced in the 1980s to avoid repeating the calamitous cult of Mao and one-man rule.

These anxieties have validity. Observers say that Xi, 64, has been chipping away at China’s constitution since he was elected president in 2012 and has, in recent years, overseen a draconian round-up of those who fear a takeover.

China’s military announced that it “fully approves” with the ruling party’s controversial measures that would allow Xi to remain president for life and will “resolutely support the constitutional amendment proposal.”

The fallout from all this could heavily affect the Middle East, as China’s ambitious plan to build a multitracked modern Silk Road trade route to the rest of Asia, Europe and the Middle East, moves forward

Oil supplies are crucial for China, so it will not want to do anything that might jeopardise that flow — pegged at 52% of China’s imports in 2014 by the US Energy Information Administration.

However, China may find itself drawn ever deeper into the region’s conflicts, especially the Sunni-Shia rift between Riyadh and Tehran, both of which have a dialogue with Beijing.

Bear in mind that China was among the world powers with which the United States shaped the landmark 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran.

China has deployed troops to its first foreign military base in Djibouti, where its facilities are check by check with a strategic US facility by jowl with a strategic US facility.

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There is political turbulence too in the Seychelles, Djibouti, and Ethiopia, which bodes ill for the Red Sea region, as the India-China confrontation gathers momentum.

While on the face of it, Xi’s “Arab policy” is designed to leverage China’s economic sphere of influence through which China can deploy its naval forces but it also gives China an advantageous position to exploit its goods into India’s economic sphere,” Australian security analyst Malcolm Davis told CNN. “So it’s achieved a number of strategic successes in that regard.”

Ed Blanche is a regular contributor to The Arab Weekly. He has reported on the Middle East since 1967.

China rushes troops to its first overseas naval base

Military bases in Djibouti

China sends troops to its first overseas naval base

Beirut

Ed Blanche

Beirut

China will depend on the Middle East oil supplies and to build up and advance the new Silk Road project.

Beijing’s five-billion multitrack plan is intended to champion globalization, a system that once-reclusive China has embraced in recent years as it emerged from behind the Bamboo Curtain to put it on the road to being a major trading power.

Work has already begun on some elements of the plan, unveiled in 2013, known as the Belt and Road Initiative.

It envisages that China, long a global backwater with a population of 7.5 billion, would contaminate the world’s most populous country, build new trade routes, and launch its $900 billion, multitrack plan is intended to champion globalization, a system that once-reclusive China has embraced in recent years as it emerged from behind the Bamboo Curtain to put it on the road to being a major trading power.

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It will do this via high-speed rail links from Beijing to Brussels, a network of super-highways spanning a score of countries and a maritime sector that would open the rich waters of Central Asia, long cut off from the West by Soviet paranoia and ready to make itself part of a new and freer era.

The energy-rich Arab world, lying between Europe and Asia, is expected to play a major role in bringing East and West together.

“For this reason, China needs to develop infrastructure such as bridges, roads, railways and ports across Central Asia and the Middle East to facilitate trade in both directions,” observed Cesare Castiglia of the independent Institute for Security and Development Policy in Stockholm.

The Chinese initiative might help Iran’s fractious relations with the West, and create a new Silk Road in Europe, which is more inclined to do business with what many regard as a rogue state.

Iran, in particular, is a linchpin of such plans,” Castiglia stressed.

March 11, 2018

The Arab Weekly | 17
The government needs $5 billion to cover the deficit of 2017 and $13 billion to finance the expected budget gap this year.

The European Central Bank called on Algeria to reduce the use of quantitative easing, arguing that it was not the right tool for the country’s situation. The bank recommended that Algeria adopt structural reforms to address the country’s economic challenges, including reducing public spending, improving the investment climate, and encouraging private sector development.

Algeria’s debt crisis continues to be a major concern for the international community. The country’s foreign debt is estimated at over $250 billion, with a large portion of it owed to foreign banks and international institutions. The government has been relying heavily on external financing to finance its budget deficits, but this is becoming increasingly difficult due to the global economic slowdown and rising oil prices.

The government has been implementing structural reforms to address the country’s economic challenges, including reducing public spending and improving the investment climate. However, these efforts have been hampered by a lack of implementation and a lack of political will.

The government has been under pressure to reduce its reliance on external financing and to adopt more sustainable policies. However, the government has been slow to implement the necessary reforms, and this has led to increasing concerns about the country’s economic future.

The government needs to take urgent action to address the country’s economic challenges and to reduce its reliance on external financing. This will require a commitment to structural reforms and a willingness to work with the international community to find a sustainable solution for Algeria's debt crisis.
Adapting to water shortages, Egypt reduces rice cultivation

Hassan Abdel Zaher

Cairo

Egypt is reducing cultivation of water-consuming crops, including rice, raising the alarm among experts over the deterioration of the quality of the country’s most fertile farmland and fears of increasing food prices and shortages.

"By suspending the growing of some crops, we are risking the loss of massive farmland," warned Nader Nourreddine, a professor of agriculture at Cairo University. "This will affect the salinity of the soil in some farmland, which will be harmful to the agriculture sector.

According to a 2018 report from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, 1.4 million hectares of water are used in the production of every kilogram of rice. Egypt used to cultivate 4,400,000 hectares of farmland with rice, producing about 4.4 million tonnes yearly. This satisfies local demand, 9.8 million tonnes, and leaves the rest for export. Cairo imposed an intermittent rice export ban since 2008 to preserve stocks for domestic markets.

Egypt’s rice cultivation required about 1.8 billion litres of water in evaporation, transpiration and irrigation every year.

This year, however, agricultural authorities have suspended irrigation of farmland for rice cultivation. The suspension caused concern among farmers who grow rice in areas not supplied with water from the Nile, and Egypt’s Supply Ministry has kept in place an intermittent ban on the rice export.

The Ministry of Irrigation said the drop in rice cultivation space in Egypt was necessary to ensure that it has sufficient water to cultivate other crops such as vegetables and citrus and meet the requirements for domestic use.

"The main impact of the reduction is that the rice consumers will feel the impact today," said Qaim Mahmood, who heads the Irrigation Department at the Ministry of Irrigation and Water Resources.

"Egypt’s rice cultivation required about 1.8 billion litres of water in evaporation, transpiration and irrigation every year.

Suspending the cultivation of water-consuming crops is only one of a series of measures Egypt is taking. Cairo is spending billions of dollars on building seawater desalination projects and establishing seawater treatment plants.

The government of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has a plan to establish 100,000 greenhouses to grow major vegetables that will produce yields utilising comparatively small amounts of water.

Rice is a staple food in Egypt, which has enough water to cultivate 445,000 hectares of rice to meet domestic needs, according to experts, and Egypt could produce 55 million by 2050.

"Suspending the cultivation of rice will destroy large swaths of farmland in the Nile Delta, the most fertile in this country," said Nourreddine.

"Inadequate rainfall will mean that the farmland will be destroyed forever and in an irreversible way."
14-year-old Jordanian violinist with a big heart makes a difference
Roufan Nahhas
Amman

T he simplest acts of kindness are by far more powerful than a thousand hours bowing in prayer.” The saying by Mahatma Gandhi has inspired two Jordanian brothers to bring hope to underprivileged children through music and spread awareness about the role of music in the community.

“Music for Charity” is the idea of 14-year-old violinist, composer and pianist Fadi Kidess and his brother George, 18, who saw an opportunity to help others by sharing their music. “I have this strong passion for music and at the same time bringing joy to others,” Fadi said. “In 2013, I saw, with my brother George, that we need to play and share the good vibes of music with others. We thought that is better than organising musical events and allowing their proceeds to helping underprivileged children.”

It was a simple decision but realising it was not easy. However, to our surprise, we received all the support we needed and this encouraged us to plan bigger events,” added Fadi, who said he started to play violin at the age of 4.

Three concerts have been organised under the Music for Charity initiative with more planned this year.

“Proceeds from the first concert went to the Islamic Centre and the Jesus Heart Society. The second concert’s proceeds went to the Domestic Violence Department at the Social Development Ministry and the third to Al-Rahmah Restaurant, which provides daily meals to the poor,” Fadi said.

“This year, we will volunteer and play music for patients of King Hussein Cancer Centre for a whole month and visit the elderly homes on Mother’s Day (March 21) to play a couple of pieces;” Fadi said he misses George, who is studying in the United States.

“We stay in touch on daily basis and continue to discuss how to make better music and expand. We have so many ideas to share,” he said.

Composing original music is another talent that Fadi developed through his passion and practice. “I have composed three pieces and one song. ‘Oh Brother’ is dedicated to my brother George who has been my role model and guide. The song can relate to anyone who loves his brother and had to be separated from him,” he said.

Challenges are part of doing good things. For Fadi, the main one is to keep this initiative alive. “That requires the involvement of other parties. As they say, the more the merrier and I like to see the society involved in such events because there are many people who need help,” he said.

Fadi’s father and colleagues support him in organising concerts, which, he said “is part of sharing responsibility towards our society and mainly underprivileged children.”

Rana Rizqallah, the administrative manager at the National Music Conservatory (NMC), described Fadi as “a brilliant musician with a big heart.” “He has the right talent and has always been an ‘A’ student at our conservatory. His composition shows how big heart he has despite his young age. At the NMC we strongly support his initiative for Fadi,” Rizqallah said.

“Mohammed Othman, our director, has been with Fadi for a long time as his teacher and mentor. He gave him a lot of support and even stood beside him in several concerts together. We hope to see more students doing the same under the name of charity.”

Fadi’s friends and colleagues stood beside him in several concerts playing together. We hope to see more students doing the same under the name of charity.”

Three concerts have been organised under the Music for Charity initiative with more planned this year.

Fadi’s father, Ghassan, who played a key role in developing his son’s talents, said Fadi’s passion for music and the compassion of the two brothers made it happen. “The making of a musician these days requires a lot of commitment and dedication. A huge challenge for the kids to leave smartphone apps and PlayStation and dedicate time to music. If it wasn’t for passion, it would have never happened,” Ghassan Kidess said.

“Parents must support their children as much as they can. I hope there are more opportunities for the kids in Jordan such as music competitions, etc. Unfortunately, we don’t have a philharmonic orchestra and this was a big disappointment for Fadi. It’s all about support for music and musicians.” Behind his big glasses, Fadi’s eyes shine when he speaks about his father who shouldered him all the way and taught him that the secret to feeling good is giving. “I owe everything to my father who stood beside me even when I was 1. I love him for doing enough or not having enough courage to go on and play. His advice and logic made me continue working for this initiative because I believe that music is good for the soul and the body too,” he said.

That encourages violence among or directed towards children. An example of this, said a research participant working at Oxfam Jordan as well as the Jordan River Foundation, is encouraging young boys to use violence. Rather than reporting incidents of bullying, which is often viewed as cowardly, boys are encouraged to use violence against those attempting to intimidate them.

Key concepts that must be relayed to children in the region, particularly due to changing contexts and detrimental cultural teachings, should be done by skilled youth protection officers, teachers, parents and other relevant stakeholders.

Children must feel they are surrounded by caring and supportive adults who will listen should they report abuse. They must learn that it is their right to say “no” to something that instinctively makes them feel at risk. These are a few in many strides that must be taken to protect the children of this region.

Finally, to better inform international agencies working to improve living conditions of Syrian children, access to accurate information is imperative. Only then will we be able to provide the safety and security a child needs to flourish in a difficult environment.

V iewpoint

Nadine Sayegh

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Child protection is crucial in times of crisis

Amman

issues of child protection are important in any context. However, there are extreme variations between contexts in the West and in the Arab world.

Faced with inflation, tax hikes and a refugee influx, the social dynamics of countries such as Jordan and Lebanon are different. The number of child labourers has roughly doubled in Jordan since 2007, with around 44,000 engaged in hazardous work.

As part of our research on issues of child protection in Jordan, a number of findings have been made. With a combination of rising taxes and a heavy refugee influx, low-income households have seen a rise in the number of individuals sharing a home. For example, large number families will share a room and often the parents will have intimate relations in the same room where their child is sleeping. This is problematic as the child does not know or understand that this is a private engagement and the act is normalised.

This makes the child think that this action is “safe” and ensures their defences against sexual predators. This is but one of several phenomena occurring due to the changing social dynamics and compounded by domestic issues.

Children in increased danger?

For example, large number families will share a room and often the parents will have intimate relations in the same room where their child is sleeping. This is problematic as the child does not know or understand that this is a private engagement and the act is normalised. This makes the child think that this action is “safe” and ensures their defences against sexual predators. This is but one of several phenomena occurring due to the changing social dynamics and compounded by domestic issues.

Needing protection.

That encourages violence among or directed towards children. An example of this, said a research participant working at Oxfam Jordan as well as the Jordan River Foundation, is encouraging young boys to use violence. Rather than reporting incidents of bullying, which is often viewed as cowardly, boys are encouraged to use violence against those attempting to intimidate them.

Key concepts that must be relayed to children in the region, particularly due to changing contexts and detrimental cultural teachings, should be done by skilled youth protection officers, teachers, parents and other relevant stakeholders.

Children must feel they are surrounded by caring and supportive adults who will listen should they report abuse. They must learn that it is their right to say “no” to something that instinctively makes them feel at risk. These are a few in many strides that must be taken to protect the children of this region.

Finally, to better inform international agencies working to improve living conditions of Syrian children, access to accurate information is imperative. Only then will we be able to provide the safety and security a child needs to flourish in a difficult environment.

Child protection is crucial in times of crisis

Amman

issues of child protection are important in any context. However, there are extreme variations between contexts in the West and in the Arab world.

Faced with inflation, tax hikes and a refugee influx, the social dynamics of countries such as Jordan and Lebanon are different. The number of child labourers has roughly doubled in Jordan since 2007, with around 44,000 engaged in hazardous work.

As part of our research on issues of child protection in Jordan, a number of findings have been made. With a combination of rising taxes and a heavy refugee influx, low-income households have seen a rise in the number of individuals sharing a home. For example, large number families will share a room and often the parents will have intimate relations in the same room where their child is sleeping. This is problematic as the child does not know or understand that this is a private engagement and the act is normalised. This makes the child think that this action is “safe” and ensures their defences against sexual predators. This is but one of several phenomena occurring due to the changing social dynamics and compounded by domestic issues.

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Church licensing still a prickly issue in Egypt

Brahim Ouf

Cairo

Egyptian Prime Minister Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has legalised 53 churches did little to impress Egypt's Sufi Muslims. One of the reasons is that they are not part of their states' islamic preconceptions. Sufism has been attacking Egypt's Christian minority, this is a major source of concern.

"The Christians are afraid to pray at their churches, even though they do not have any alterative, because they know that the prayers will incite the radicals and cause bloodshed," said Hami Sabri Labib, a Christian lawyer campaigning for church licensing.

"There is total frustration among Christians because of the failure of the government to legalise the churches.

Church construction and licensing have been major issues for Egypt's Christian community in recent decades.

Although the population of the Christian minority is estimated at 9 million, almost 10% of Egypt's population, there are only 150 churches in the country. Many Christians say travel distances to reach a church.

About 150 villages in southern Egypt do not have access to a church at all and most of Egypt's churches are concentrated in Cairo, Giza province and Alexandria.

Many churches in Egypt need immediate restoration but Christians say they are unable to begin restoration without the necessary bureaucratic processes. Church construction is similarly curtailed, meaning hundreds of churches built in recent years have technically been constructed illegally and require licensing.

Amr Emam

Cairo

Sufism has witnessed something of a renaissance during this presidency, particularly following the outlawing of the Muslim Brotherhood, the government has an ambivalent attitude towards Sufism. However, terror attacks targeting Sufis increased fears of Salafist jihadist groups as well as the Muslim Brotherhood.

"Both groups consider the mystical Sufis a bunch of heretics who deserve to be killed, at worst; marginalised, at best," said Sameh Eid, a researcher in Islamic movements. "This is why the Sufis always have a strong aversion to the Brotherhood and the Salafist jihadist.

When the 2011 uprising erupted, caused an unprecedented secular vacuum, hundreds of Sufi mosques were destroyed by radicals.

Muslim Brotherhood followers and Salafist jihadists targeted mausoleums and graves of celebrated Sufis, considering their presence to be heresy. Sufis often construct elaborate burial sites and shrines for revered imams and sheikhs.

The presence of a burial chamber inside Sufi mosques, radicals believe, contravenes the notion of the oneness of God," Eid said.

During the 1-year rule of Muslim Brotherhood President Muhammad Morsi, Egypt's Sufis saw their religious practices banned, their religious freedoms curtailed. That is why when the ar -my-backed uprising against Morsi erupted in 2013, the Sufis were at the forefront calling for the downfall of the Islamist president.

Before the uprising, the Sufis had found their own political parties and networks beyond the traditional political classes. The Egyptian Liberation Party, for example, bills itself explicitly as a Sufi party.

There are several Sufi members of parliament, including Qasabi, who has been campaigning for greater protection for Egypt's Sufis.

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Turkish soap operas a casualty of regional politics

The Arab Weekly staff

London

It appears that the Gulf Cooperation Council, a regional alliance with Turkish soap operas has come to a screeching halt, a casualty of frosty relations with Ankara.

Saudi-owned MBC broadcaster pulled Turkish-produced serial melodramas off the air in what the network described as a drive to promote and nurture indigenous content.

“We will try to replace Turkish soaps with premium-quality Arabic dramas that embody the values and traditions of the region,” MBC spokesman Mazen Hayek told Agence France-Presse.

He said production of Arabic drama costs $40,000-$100,000 an hour compared to $250,000 an hour for the Turkish equivalent. Turkish soap operas were being shown for six hours a day on MBC.

Turkish soap operas dubbed in the Arabic language have been a phenomenon across the Middle East, leading to a spike in Turkish tourism and bringing in rating numbers very few Hollywood counterparts achieved. Turkish TV series were jumped from $1.1 million in 2007 to $11 million in 2012, the Broadcasting World said.

MBC was a catalyst for the broadcasting of Turkish soap operas in the Middle East. It was not known if other regional broadcasters would try to take its place.

The Turkish-friendly, Qatari-owned Al Jazeera network, which is banned in most Gulf Cooperation Council countries, is unlikely to step into the breach, making any deal with Turkish producers unlikely.

The only option for Turkish networks to reach such a high volume of viewers is to put content on independent streaming services such as Netflix, which has many Turkish soap operas in its repertoire.

Regional viewers both praised and blasted the cancellation of the Turkish-produced television series. The hashtag “cancellation of Turkish series” trended across the Middle East and North Africa, with more than 27,000 mentions in Saudi Arabia alone on March 6.

Many Saudi viewers called the ban long overdue. Others said the content was inappropriate for local consumption.

"Turkish series are completely lacking in modesty, a son betrays his father with his [father’s] wife, a girl becomes pregnant before marriage, a mother with her daughter’s husband," Saudi Twitter user @jbaraazoor3 said.

Despite originating from a country whose government is aligned with the Muslim Brotherhood, the series’ programming often featured female-driven plots that included adulterous affairs and alcoholic consumption. The programming’s popularity gave Ankara both soft power and capital.

In Egypt, relations with Ankara are also strained, TV talk show host Amir Adn, known for his anti-Muslim Brotherhood views, lauded the move by MBC and said he hoped Egypt would follow suit. "Airing such series via Arab TV's promotes Turkey and pumps money into its interests," he said.

Saudi Arabia and its allies, including the United Arab Emirates and Egypt, do not agree with Turkey on many issues, especially its support for the Muslim Brotherhood movement, which is outlawed in all three countries.

They also oppose the Turkish government’s backing of Qatar, which the Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Egypt severed ties with last June over what they described as Doha’s interference in their countries’ internal affairs and support for radical groups, such as Hamas, the Taliban and the Muslim Brotherhood.

In an interview with Egyptian media, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman told Abulaziz said Turkey, Iran and radical Islamic groups formed a “triangle of evil” and that Ankara was trying to re-establish a system of government built on the Islamic caliphate, which collapsed with the fall of the Ottomans over a century ago.

News of the Turkish series’ cancellation was not received well in Ankara. "Turkish programmes are a contradiction," Human Kurtulmus said “necessary initiatives” would be taken by the Foreign Ministry.

Exhibited legacy of Lebanese cartoonist rings true today

Samar Kadi

Beirut

Visitors to Beirut’s Souranne Museum were thrust back decades, watching Lebanon’s recent history marred by war, Israeli occupation and political instability displayed at “Picturing History,” an exhibition of the work of Lebanese political cartoonist Pierre Sadek.

The exhibition, the first since Sadek’s death in 2013, features 720 drawings that commented on the events of Lebanon and the region over five decades of political and violent turmoil.

“What you see here is only 2% of Pierre’s Sadek’s archives, which include some 30,000 caricatures,” said Charles Ghada Sadek, the artist’s daughter. Chronologically, the works recount the history of Lebanon since the late 1950s until his death. They also cover major events that took place in the Arab world and internationally.

“Each of his caricatures tackled a timely issue. Pierre Sadek left an entire archive, a legacy that we are seeking to conserve and transmit to the young generation,” Abela said.

Sadek’s main cartoon character was Touma, who personified the average Lebanese citizen, a respectable working-class person, honest, subject to suffering of war, injustice, failed politics and daily mishaps.

“When Pierre hid behind the pen-name Touma, he could laugh, be sarcastic, angry and critical poking at wounds without making them bleed anew,” Abela said.

Sadek’s images recorded history but sometimes also helped to make it. He was a man of few words but the shorthand language he devised spoke directly to the conscience and unsettled the course of nations.

“Pierre’s cartoons sometimes shook governments and sped their downfall. We, as his family, often felt threatened from retaliation to his drawings,” Abela said.

Sadek contributed to several Lebanese and Arabic dailies and local television broadcasts, mainly the leading An-Nahar newspaper, where he spent more than 20 years – LBC TV and Future TV. He was published internationally by various magazines, newspapers and news agencies such as the Associated Press, United Press International, Time magazine, Le Matin, France-Soir and the Washington Post.

“Pierre Sadek pioneered televised animated caricatures following nightly newscasts on LBC and PTY. When he worked in An-Nahar, newspapers and bookshops sometimes displayed the newspaper’s back page rather than its front page, because his caricature was so popular and attracted readers,” Abela said.

During his career, Sadek experienced threats, efforts at intimidation, warnings and muzzling.

In the 1960s when a caricature was a small drawing occupying the inner pages of newspapers, Sadek’s drawings covered eight columns on the top of the back page of An-Nahar as they were as informative and analytical as the lead front-page story.

Sadek’s drawings captured most political phases in Lebanon and the region. These included the heavy-handed control of the Second Bureau or Army intelligence, under Presidents Fouad Chehab and Charles Helou, the Palestinian guerrilla presence, which became so entrenched in Lebanon that Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat would brag about controlling the country, the period of Syrian military hegemony over Lebanon, which ended in 2005 with the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri; the suffering of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation and the 1967 Arab defeat at Israeli hands, among others.

One drawing from 1970 depicting a 1965 caricature about Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser’s presidential candidacy referendum getting 99.99% support from voters.

Sadek’s drawings were censored or never made it to print.

“In 1968, Pierre was tried in a military court for one of his infamous caricatures that appeared in An-Nahar mocking the authentic- ity of the elections that were tak- en in a similar referendum under President Charles Helou,” Abela recalled. “However, the sentence was not implemented as he was later pardoned by the president.”

The Pierre Sadek Foundation was established a year after his death to safeguard his legacy and share it with future generations. “We have already published a book compil- ing 55 of his main drawings and we seek to pioneer his work through exhibitions,” Abela said.

The foundation organises the annual La Plume de Pierre Sadek (Pierre’s Pencil) award, for arts university annual La Plume de Pierre Sadek (Pierre’s Pencil) award, for arts university annual. Laurenche

Sadek was honoured by Lebanese President Michel Aoun in 1991. He received several awards, including the Dubai Press Club Award (2000), the Lions Award (2000), the Liberty Lions Award (2000) and a Recognition Award from the Tunis Festival of Art (2013).
Hassan Abdel Zaber

**Cairo**

Egypt has begun a bid to protect its antiquities from theft amid allegations that tens of thousands of priceless ones have disappeared.

The Egyptian parliament is debating legislation that would increase penalties – possibly to life in prison – for those convicted of illegally removing or smuggling ancient artefacts.

"There are cases in which we have to protect our heritage," said Nader Mustafa, a member of Egypt’s Culture, Media and Antiquities parliamentary committee, which is debating the legislation. "We cannot leave our antiquities to be easy prey for thieves like this."

If enacted, the artefacts bill would replace a law that allows individuals to maintain possession of antiquities they obtained through inheritance.

Egyptian law states that anyone found guilty of smuggling artefacts out of the country could be sentenced to 15 years in prison and fined 1 million Egyptian pounds ($55,600). The maximum penalty for stealing an artefact, including the illegal removal of newly unearthed antiquities, is 10 years in prison.

Critics calling for harsher sentences say the law is too lenient and that more needs to be done to protect the country's antiquities.

"Antiquity theft has been on the rise in Egypt, with security at Egyptian museum warehouses said to be inadequate. Last August, a senior official at the Antiquities Ministry estimated that 37,600 artefacts had been stolen from ministry warehouse nationwide."

Ayman Ashmawy, who heads the Egyptian Antiquities Authority, told Reuters that the ministry had made inroads in protecting the antiquities and securing them away. "You cannot prevent stealing and smuggling in the country but we have worked on it." He said the ministry had made inroads in protecting the antiquities and securing them away. "You cannot prevent stealing and smuggling in the country but we have worked on it."

Last August, the government signed a deal with the United Nations and the International Council of Museums (ICOM) to create a database of Egyptian antiquities, which it hopes will help protect the country's rich cultural heritage.

The government has also tried to stem the flow of antiquities out of the country by increasing penalties for those caught smuggling them, and by working with international organizations to improve security at museum warehouses.

"We have to work hard to keep our antiquities in the country," Ashmawy said. "We're working with different countries to help protect our heritage."

In March, the government signed a deal with the United States to share information on stolen artefacts, as part of a broader effort to combat the illegal trade in antiquities.

"We are doing everything we can to protect our heritage," Ashmawy said. "We have to work hard to keep our antiquities in the country."
Sinai’s ‘Blue Desert,’ a work of art attracting tourists and pilgrims

Ahmed Megahid

South Sinai

When he dyed in blue the rocks and boulders of the desert in South Sinai in 1986, Belgian artist Jean Verame could not have expected the area to turn into one of the wonders of Egyptian desert life.

Verame painted the rocks of this part of the desert, a few kilometres from the Red Sea resort of Dahab and the St Catherine Monastery, to celebrate the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, the first between an Arab country and the Jewish state.

The innovative artist used tones of blue—the colour of peace—paint donated by the United Nations. He spent days dyeing the rocks and stones of the area, once a battle-ground in the 1967 war between Egypt and Israel.

Now known as the Blue Desert, the area remains a wonder carrying the marks of man and nature in the heart of Egypt’s desert.

The area is a work of art that combines the beauty of nature and the artistry of man, “ said tourism specialist Hassan al-Dali. “The idea of creating it by the Belgian artist was untraditional at first but the motivation behind this work was really great, namely to highlight the importance of peace and coexistence,” Dali said.

Verame’s selection of blue complements Sinai’s deep blue sky and matches the arid desert, creating a rare mix with the yellow sands and the brown of rocks and boulders.

In Egypt, some deserts derive their names from their natural colours, such as the White Desert and the Black Desert in the western part of the country. The Blue Desert is most known to tourists and pilgrims visiting Mount Sinai and St Catherine Monastery, the site where God is believed by many to have appeared to Moses.

The monastery, the oldest continually inhabited, was built in the seventh century and receives thousands of foreign and local visitors every month. It contains the relics of St Catherine and its well-preserved church displays Greek and Roman heritage.

Not far from the Blue Desert, the Dahab resort on the Red Sea is a major attraction for beach tourism. The resort has hotels suiting all types of budgets and boasts some of the Red Sea’s most eye-catching beaches. An outing into the Blue Desert from any of the nearby sites can be rewarding, especially for the eyes and the senses.

“The Blue Desert is very easy to reach from any of these places,” said Mohamed Sedki, a computer engineer in his mid-40’s who said he never visits Dahab without an outing into the Blue Desert. “The place is more than wonderful especially for those who want to spend times in the serene atmosphere the desert provides.”

Visitors sit between two giant blue rocks in South Sinai.

The Blue Desert is most known to tourists and pilgrims visiting Mount Sinai and the St Catherine Monastery.

The Blue Desert is most visited during the Christmas season. At night, the blue-dyed objects look like stars denting the vast desert. Some painted stones are more than 30 metres tall. At times they appear to be giant balloons or great chewing gum bobbles.

Karim Mohamed, a tour guide from the area, said he offers a full list of activities for visitors of the desert, including camping, mountain-climbing and cycling.

“This is a place that is full of fun. It is very simple, very austere. Yet it has an amount of charm that makes it unforgettable for visitors,” Mohamed said.

The Blue Desert provides a unique experience, eating, and a world of adventure. Days and nights at the Blue Desert are spent exploring the area’s beauty and history, while camping in the midst of the magnificent desert.

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Visitors can enjoy more than 50 rides and 25 restaurants offering food from around the world.

Duba: Through April 25

The Almond Blossom Festival, celebrated every year in Morocco, sees villagers mark the almond harvest with Berber dancing, singing and almond tastings. International musicians and actors mingle with local performers for live events based on Moroccan folklore.

Beirut: March 12-18

Beirut International Women Film Festival (BWFF) is an annual event in the city. Gathering film-makers and cinema lovers from all over the world, BWFF includes films about women or produced by women.

Tunisia: March 19-22

The second Zammour Fest takes place in a Berber village in the Tunisian Sahara. Over four days and three nights, visitors camp in Bedouin tents, trek or bike in the village, visit mountains, attend folklore parties and enjoy traditional food.

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