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Aims and Scope

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Table of Contents

Articles

- | | |
|---|----|
| 1. Australia-Saudi Relations
<i>Arthur Tane</i> | 4 |
| 2. Iran's provocation will end badly for Tehran!
<i>Lina Zaidi</i> | 5 |
| 3. The Tehran – Moscow - Beijing Axis
<i>Arthur Herman</i> | 8 |
| 4. Israel's Netanyahu Fails to Win Majority
<i>Peter Rawlings</i> | 10 |
| 5. Outline of Trump's Middle East Peace Plan
<i>Arthur Tane</i> | 14 |
| 6. Islamic State has US\$300 million war chest
<i>Don Gibbons</i> | 16 |
| 7. Putin Reaps Political Gains from OPEC
<i>Bloomberg</i> | 18 |
| 8. Hashtaggers For Hezbollah? How Social Media Fundraising Can Skirt
The Rules
<i>Hector Martinez</i> | 21 |
| 9. The Syriac Christian Renaissance
<i>Sam Sweeney</i> | 30 |
| 10. Erdogan cannot use refugees to further his own agenda
<i>Susan Yao</i> | 36 |
| 11. Saudi Arabia's Reforms and Programs to Empower Women
<i>Lina Zaidi</i> | 38 |
| 12. Preparing Qatar for the 2022 World Cup
<i>Nicholas Newman</i> | 39 |
| 13. Australia Names New Ambassador to Iran
<i>Peter Rawlings</i> | 41 |

Australia-Saudi Relations

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director

On Saudi Arabia's National Day on September 23, extraordinarily, Australia led a coalition of countries condemning Saudi Arabia over a raft of human rights abuses, including arbitrary detention, torture, enforced disappearances and the death of Jamal Khashoggi.

In remarks that were particularly intended to offend the Kingdom, Australia's ambassador to the UN, Sally Mansfield, delivered a statement on behalf of 24 nations to the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. Ms Mansfield excoriating the Saudi kingdom for systematic violence, and human rights abuses, particularly against those who oppose the ruling regime. Other backers of the statement included the UK, Canada, Germany and New Zealand.

Unquestionably the content of the Ambassador's speech would have been approved by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and by the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Senator Marise Payne. Both in her previous portfolio of Defence and now in Foreign Affairs, Ms Payne is regarded as hardworking and diligent, but her low profile style hasn't generated a lot of political kudos for the Morrison government.

The question has to be asked: Was the Morrison government fully aware of the content of Ambassador's Mansfield speech and if so, does this signify a change in Canberra's attitude towards the Kingdom?

On September 24, the Saudi UN Ambassador, Abdulaziz Alwasil, in response launched an extraordinary broadside, targeting Australia and highlighting 'radicalism against Muslims, xenophobia, racism. Saudi Arabia accused the Morrison government of racism and of supporting anti-Islamic terrorists like the alleged Christchurch shooter, in an extraordinary dispute that has erupted at the United Nations.

He said minorities, migrants and Muslims face "horrific violations of human rights ... racist and extremist policies".

While Ambassador's Alwasil's comments were not justified, it has to be quickly added that neither were the remarks of Ambassador Mansfield. I am sure that most Australians would react particularly badly if the Saudi Government had lambasted Australia on the 26th of January. Another day, other than September 23, would have better suited our UN Ambassador's speech – a speech that should have included the significant changes in Saudi society that has occurred in the last twelve months.

This unnecessary feud complicates Australia's relationship with Saudi Arabia. Australia sells weapons to Saudi Arabia, and Australia is a part of the US-led mission patrolling the Strait of Hormuz, a mission aimed at curbing Saudi antagonist Iran's actions in the Gulf. One would hope that the appropriate apologies are made soon and better relations ensue.

Iran's provocations will end badly for Tehran!

By Lina Zaidi
CMER Board Member



During September, at the UN General Assembly summit in New York, it was made clear that the US, Saudi Arabia, the UAE and other Gulf nations do not want war but a diplomatic process that would induce Iran to change its behaviour in return for a progressive adjustment in sanctions.

So far, sources say the Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) see this message as an opportunity to further unshackle their hands by contemplating more attacks against vital installations in Saudi Arabia. In their view, countries seeking to avoid war will not respond while in Washington, the US president has made it clear that his policy is to respond to Iranian escalation solely by stepping up sanctions, unless the IRGC crosses a red line and targets US soldiers. For now, the IRGC will veer clear of this line, given the cost and that its main goal is a show of strength to the Gulf countries and not weakness where Washington is concerned.

It is likely, therefore, that the IRGC will engage in new provocations that could go beyond Saudi Arabia. The sources said IRGC commanders want to provoke a response but also want to be certain it will not be a serious one. In other words, as long as the US refrains from responding militarily, the Iranian leadership feels it can continue its bullying without paying a price.

Regime leaders are viewing Mr Trump's position through the prism of the Carter Doctrine, offering US protection of Arab Gulf countries since the time of former president Jimmy Carter. The current US president is seen by Tehran as not as willing to defend allies from aggression from their neighbours, as former president George Bush did following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. In Tehran's view, Mr Trump's position exposes a structural weakness in the security alliance between the US and Saudi Arabia in particular. Regime leaders think he is unlikely to go to war with Iran to defend Gulf allies.

Betting on continued US reluctance to engage in a military confrontation is precarious and costly.

While Mr Trump has made it clear that he will not be lured into war, it is also true that sanctions remain a powerful weapon and the cornerstone of the US administration's strategy. While economic strangulation has not yet reined in the IRGC and might have initially even prodded it into vengeful strategic recklessness, the consistency of the sanctions will eventually force Tehran to pursue one of two options: either to adjust its behaviour to protect the supreme interests of Iran and her people, or risk self-destruction. Betting on continued US reluctance to engage in a military confrontation is precarious and costly and Mr Trump has proven to be a man of surprises.

The attack on Saudi Aramco oil facilities has produced the opposite of what Iranian diplomacy was seeking to achieve, especially with regards to European powers. For a long period now, Iran has been trying to drive a wedge between Nato member states, hoping EU nations would be able to find a mechanism for Iran to sell its oil and circumvent US sanctions.

Following the attacks on Saudi Aramco, European reactions have caused a real setback for Tehran's grand designs. A statement was issued by France, Britain and Germany last week, blaming Iran for the attacks and urging Tehran to engage in dialogue and refrain from provocation and escalation. The attacks also prompted Britain to break away from the European consensus on maintaining the existing 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, with British Prime Minister Boris Johnson saying the time had come to negotiate a new deal, all but endorsing Mr Trump's position.

What is more, the attacks have invited new US sanctions on Iran's central bank and other entities, making it very difficult to execute any European mechanism to circumvent sanctions through a financial vessel, since no European bank would risk being hit by US sanctions.

The IRGC has effectively shot itself in the foot by deciding to expand its escalation to oil facilities. And if it sustains this path and carries out new major attacks, it will only make matter worse for Iran.

Iran has ended up increasing its isolation and appeared to its Russian and Chinese partners, and its few European friends, as a reckless state, especially after it targeted oil facilities.

There are still those in Tehran who are invested in the Europeans' supposed ability to influence the US to reduce sanctions. Some in Tehran think brinkmanship could force Mr Trump to back down. But the opposite has happened so far. Iran has ended up increasing its isolation and appeared to its Russian and Chinese partners, and its European friends, as a reckless state, especially after it targeted oil facilities. Ultimately, Mr Trump is benefiting because he appears to be the one refusing to take military action as long as his maximum pressure policy is working.

Iran's leaders could benefit from the US self-restraint, which should not be confused for cowardice. Rather, it is a cunning policy that Tehran would be unwise to dismiss, because each escalation will invite further devastating sanctions and bring Europeans ever closer to the US.

Iran's leaders must admit to their people that all talk of preserving the nuclear deal is a fallacy. There is division between European powers about the merits of the deal and now, there is little choice but to negotiate a new agreement with Mr Trump that addresses the flaws in his predecessor Barack Obama's deal with Iran.

Iran's leaders must tell their people frankly that all European efforts and initiatives are dead in the water, with no other options but to engage in new negotiations, which cannot realistically be held under Iran's preconditions of lifting sanctions first. If Iran really wants to avoid war and internal collapse, it has to reconsider its position and be ready for dialogue.

This brings us back to the logic of the regime born in Tehran four decades ago. This regime engaged in regional, sectarian and religious wars and today is in dire need of reform. Iran is the only state in the world that wants the world to respect and accept its founding, funding and training of extraterritorial, irregular armies and proxies in sovereign countries such as Lebanon, Iraq, Yemen and Syria, believing this to be a legitimate right.

To succeed, any collective diplomatic effort seeking to avoid war and step out of the failed nuclear deal must include international and European confrontation of this terrible flaw in the regime's logic, and demand reform to uphold the sovereignty of states as per the UN charter. It is futile to continue turning a blind eye to this problem in the name of realpolitik and the present situation affords an opportunity to end devastating wars and impose much-needed legitimate reform.

The decision is in the hands of both the leaders and the people of Iran. The indications coming from the IRGC are not reassuring, perhaps because reform poses an existential risk to its *raison d'être*. The fear remains that Tehran's leaders, especially the supreme leader and IRGC, think the only way to save their regime from having to reform is war.

The Tehran – Moscow - Beijing Axis

By Arthur Herman



The three powers have different goals, but each extracts advantage when others challenge the U.S.

Iran launches drones against Saudi oil installations, sabotages ships in the Persian Gulf and threatens to resume enrichment of uranium for its nuclear program. Russia dispatches troops to beleaguered dictator Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, while China sends logistical support. China resists a trade truce with the U.S. and seeks to drive a wedge between the U.S. and allies like Jordan and Saudi Arabia by selling them armed drones. Russia sends bombers and fighters into Alaska's Air Defense Identification Zone. Iran, Russia and China all work tirelessly to keep Syrian dictator Bashar Assad in power.

In the aftermath of the Iran nuclear deal in August 2015, I warned of a Moscow-Beijing-Tehran axis. Since then, these three authoritarian and revisionist powers have become bolder, more sophisticated and more global. Their effort to diminish and disrupt the influence of the U.S. and its allies extends from Syria and the Strait of Hormuz to North Korea and Latin America, as well as Central Asia and even the South Pacific.

This axis is not a formal military alliance or even a coordinated conspiracy. The three powers have different goals in international affairs. China's is global hegemony; Iran's is to become a regional as well as a nuclear power; Russia is struggling to stay in the superpower game. China's primary focus is on gaining economic power. Russia's is on asserting its geopolitical clout. Iran's agenda is largely ideological—to be the guiding voice of a regional Shiite revolution and of radical Islam.

None are particularly eager to advance the others' ambitions. Iran conflicts with Russia and China on the promotion of radical Islam, and China and Russia have historically competed for influence in Central Asia. But each plans to exploit the others' challenge to the U.S. to extract advantage for itself.

Moscow, Beijing and Tehran do have interests in common. All three aim for an internet under strict state surveillance and control. All three use energy—Russia and Iran their

supply of it, China its demand for it—to bend other countries to their will. China and Russia also use their growing market share of world arms sales—26.2% combined last year, compared with the U.S.’s 36%—to cultivate clients and tributary states and to draw allies like the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Turkey away from the U.S.

All three recognize that the U.S. is a crucial obstacle to their success. While they may not directly coordinate their actions, when one of them distracts the U.S., it creates an opportunity for the other two to gain ground.

Take North Korea, where Russia has taken over from China as host and patron for Kim Jong Un. Experts have noted that Pyongyang’s most recent missile test bears an uncanny resemblance to an advanced Russian design. Or Syria, where Moscow’s military support for the Assad regime has allowed Iran to arm clients like Hezbollah and Hamas. Or Venezuela, where Chinese and Iranian investments under the late Hugo Chávez are protected by Vladimir Putin’s support for Mr. Maduro.

The Trump administration has been right to prioritize the threat from China, the most powerful of the three revisionist powers. But the U.S. needs a broader strategy. The first element is allies. From Europe to the Arabian Peninsula to East Asia, America’s friends are waiting to hear that while the U.S. is more focused than ever about protecting its own national interests, it is also committed to international security—and to preventing the world from coming under the sway of the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran axis.

The second is advanced defence technologies, from drones and autonomous systems to artificial intelligence, quantum, cyber and space. The U.S. should collaborate with key partners, including Japan, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, India and Israel, in building an “arsenal of democracies” that will unleash private-sector innovation to offset the new axis’ surging military resources. China, for example, is moving quickly to dominate the export market for large drones.

The third, and ultimately the most important, is continuing economic growth. Economic power determines geopolitical dominance. The power of capitalist free-market economies to outperform command economies should not be in doubt. The U.S. and its allies now have a national-security stake in making that growth sustained and global. For example, the U.S. can use its clout as the world’s leading exporter of oil and natural gas and innovator in energy technologies to support open markets and political systems and frustrate the designs of the Moscow-Beijing-Tehran axis.

At a Senate Intelligence Committee hearing early this year, Director of National Intelligence Dan Coats warned that “Moscow’s relationship with Beijing is closer than it has been in many decades.” Tehran is the junior partner in this club of revisionist autocracies. Together they seek to chip away at American might. If they succeed the result will be a darker and less free world system. The struggle between the U.S. and the new axis may not be decided on the battlefield, but the stakes could be just as high.

Israel's Netanyahu Fails to Win Majority

By Peter Rawlings
CMER Board Member



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to win a ruling majority in the September 17 election that produced a virtual tie between his right-wing bloc and a center-left grouping that would be led by former military chief Benny Gantz.

The outcome, according to almost complete results, dealt a new blow to Israel's longest-serving leader who was already weakened by the inability to put together an administration after an inconclusive election in April. But with coalition-building again key to forming a government, it could be days or even weeks before it becomes clear whether the politician hailed by supporters as "King Bibi" has been dethroned after a decade in power.

A Likud-led bloc looked poised to control 55 of parliament's 120 seats, with 56 going to a center-left alliance, numbers falling short of a majority government of 61 lawmakers. A Likud spokesman notes the leaders of right-wing factions met Netanyahu at the prime minister's office and pledged to work with him to form the next government.



Avigdor Lieberman, leader of Yisrael Beiteinu party, casts his ballot in Israel's parliamentary election, along with his wife Ella at a polling station in the Israeli settlement of Nokdim in the occupied West Bank on Sept. 17, 2019. (Ammar Awad/File Photo via Reuters)

The ballot's wildcard, former Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman, emerged as a likely kingmaker as head of the secular-nationalist Yisrael Beiteinu party, projected to capture nine seats.

Lieberman has been pushing for a unity government comprised of the biggest parties. He declined to back Netanyahu's bid to form a narrow right-wing and religious coalition after the April election, bringing about Tuesday's unprecedented repeat vote.

Netanyahu, who made his close relationship with U.S. President Donald Trump a main selling point in his campaign, has made no claim of victory or concession of defeat, and he planned to address Likud party legislators later in the day. Some of the party's leaders issued nearly identical statements expressing their allegiance to Netanyahu.

The table below lists the parliamentary factions represented in the 21st Knesset.

Name	Ideology	Primary demographic	Leader		
				Votes (%)	Seats
<u>Likud</u>	<u>National conservatism</u> <u>National liberalism</u>	–	<u>Benjamin Netanyahu</u>	26.46%	35 / 120
<u>Blue and White</u>	<u>Big tent Liberalism</u>	–	<u>Benny Gantz, Yair Lapid</u>	26.13%	35 / 120
<u>Shas</u>	<u>Religious conservatism</u> <u>Populism</u>	<u>Sephardi and Mizrahi Haredim</u>	<u>Aryeh Deri</u>	5.99%	8 / 120
<u>United Torah Judaism</u>	<u>Religious conservatism</u>	<u>Ashkenazi Haredim</u>	<u>Yaakov Litzman</u>	5.78%	8 / 120
<u>Hadash-Ta'al</u>	<u>Communism</u> <u>Arab nationalism</u>	<u>Israeli Arabs</u>	<u>Ayman Odeh</u>	4.49%	6 / 120
<u>Labor</u>	<u>Social democracy</u>	–	<u>Avi Gabbay</u>	4.43%	6 / 120

<u>Yisrael Beiteinu</u>	<u>Nationalism</u> <u>Secularism</u>	<u>Russian-speakers</u>	<u>Avigdor Lieberman</u>	4.01%	5 / 120
<u>Union of Right-Wing Parties</u>	<u>Religious Zionism</u> <u>Religious conservatism</u>	<u>Modern Orthodox</u> and <u>Chardal Jews</u>	<u>Rafi Peretz</u>	3.70%	5 / 120
<u>Meretz</u>	<u>Social democracy</u> <u>Secularism</u>	–	<u>Tamar Zandberg</u>	3.63%	4 / 120
<u>Kulanu</u>	<u>Economic egalitarianism</u>	–	<u>Moshe Kahlon</u>	3.54%	4 / 120
<u>Ra'am–Balad</u>	<u>Islamism</u> <u>Arab nationalism</u>	<u>Israeli Arabs</u>	<u>Mansour Abbas</u>	3.33%	4 / 120

Once the last votes are tallied, Israeli President Reuven Rivlin will consult with leaders of parties that won parliamentary representation about whom to tap to try to form a government. The nominee would then have up to 42 days to do so.

Gantz has not ruled out a unity administration with Likud but has said Blue and White would not join such a government if it included Netanyahu, citing looming corruption charges against the prime minister, who has denied any wrongdoing.



Blue and White party leader Benny Gantz speaks at the party's headquarters following the announcement of exit polls during Israel's parliamentary election in Tel Aviv, Israel on Sept. 18, 2019. (Amir Cohen/Reuters)

In a further complication, Lieberman has rejected any alliance that includes ultra-Orthodox parties—Netanyahu’s traditional partners.

Lieberman, a Jewish settler and immigrant from the former Soviet Union, had focused his campaign on weakening the power rabbis and religious politicians have on everyday life in Israel, such as ultra-Orthodox control of the administration of marriage and divorce.

Campaigns run by Likud and Blue and White pointed to only narrow differences on many important issues: the regional struggle against Iran, the Palestinian conflict, relations with the United States and the economy.

An end to the Netanyahu era would be unlikely to bring about a significant change in policy on hotly disputed issues in the peace process with the Palestinians that collapsed five years ago.

Three corruption investigations and the Israeli attorney general’s announced intention to charge him with fraud and bribery have also chipped away at Netanyahu’s seeming invincibility.

Netanyahu can argue at a pre-trial hearing in October against indictment. But an election loss could leave him more at risk of prosecution in the graft cases, without the shield of parliamentary immunity that his current political allies had promised to seek for him.

Outline of Trump's Middle East Peace Plan

By Arthur Tane
CMER Executive Director

An inconclusive ballot in mid-September has thrust Israel back into another period of political deadlock, with no obvious path forward for the implementation of a U.S.-led peace plan. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu failed to secure a clear election victory last month. The incumbent's right-wing Likud Party came second with 32 seats in the 120-member seat Knesset on September 17, while former military chief Benny Gantz's centrist Blue and White party received 33 seats. With neither party able to secure a clear lead, the result has pushed back a long-awaited U.S.-led Israeli-Palestinian peace plan.

The Trump peace plan is an Israeli-Palestinian peace proposal intended to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict being prepared by the Trump Administration. The plan was authored by a team led by Senior Advisor to the President of the United States Jared Kushner. The plan is divided into two parts, an economic portion and a political portion. On 22 June 2019, the Trump administration released the economic portion of the plan, titled "Peace to Prosperity". The political portion is yet to be released.



In December 2017, Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas cut ties with the Trump administration after United States recognition of Jerusalem as capital of Israel. The Trump administration further raised Palestinians' ire when it moved the US embassy to Jerusalem in May 2018, and cut hundreds of millions of dollars in annual aid to the Palestinians, citing the PA's refusal to take part in the administration's peace initiative.

At the US-led "Peace to Prosperity" conference in Manama, Bahrain, held in late June 2019, at which the economic plan was to be unveiled, Palestinian leaders boycotted and condemned the conference. The Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) accused the US of trying to sell a "mirage of economic prosperity" that would in reality "only perpetuate the

Palestinians' captivity." Hamas leader Ismail Haniyeh criticized the Arab leaders attending the conference, saying "The (Palestinian) people, who have been fighting for one hundred years, did not commission anyone to concede or to bargain. Jerusalem is ours, the land is ours, and everything is ours.

Economic portion

The economic portion of the plan, titled "Peace to Prosperity", was published by the Trump administration on June 22, 2019. It was presented by Kushner during the workshop in Manama, Bahrain on 25–26 June. The plan proposes a \$50 billion investment fund for 179 infrastructure and business projects, to be administered by a "multilateral development bank", with investments protected by "accountability, transparency, anti-corruption, and conditionality safeguards". The administration envisions the plan being funded mostly by Arab states and wealthy private investors. Spending is divided into \$26 billion in loans, \$13.5 billion in grants, and \$11 billion in private investment.

The majority of the \$50 billion would be spent in the West Bank and Gaza, with \$9 billion to be spent in Egypt, \$7 billion in Jordan, and \$6.3 billion in Lebanon. The proposal includes a number of specific projects, including construction of a travel corridor that would cross Israel to link the West Bank and Gaza with a highway and possibly a rail line, vast expansion of border crossings, power plant upgrades, infrastructure improvements to boost tourism, career counselling and job placement service, re-building and modernizing Palestinian hospitals and health clinics, upgrading cargo terminals and building special access roads to reduce the time and costs of cross-border trade and travel, creating of a modern database to register land ownership, improving the potable water supply and waste water treatment, and establishing a new Palestinian university in the global top 150.

The plan's stated goals include creating more than a million jobs, more than doubling the Palestinian GDP, and cutting the poverty rate by 50%. It also aims to bring down the unemployment from 31% down to single digits, and to increase Palestinian exports as a percentage of GDP from 17% to 40%. The plan also aims to increase female labor force participation rate from 20% to 35%, reduce infant mortality from 18 to 9 per 1000 births, and increase average life expectancy from 74 to 80 years

Political portion

The political portion of the plan has yet to be released, and is expected to be rolled out no earlier than November 2019.

Kushner said that the peace proposal will not include the phrase "two-state solution", saying "If you say 'two-state', it means one thing to the Israelis, it means one thing to the Palestinians. A top-ranking Saudi diplomat stated that the plan includes a "clear path leading to complete Palestinian independence". It is believed the plan will include a resolution to all of the core issues, including the refugee issue, and will also focus on Israel's security concerns, and that the plan does not call for a confederation model or for a transfer of land from Egypt's Sinai Peninsula to the Palestinians.

Islamic State has US\$300 million war chest

By Don Gibbons
CMER Board Member



UN experts said that Isis leaders were aiming to consolidate and create conditions for an 'eventual resurgence in its Iraqi and Syrian heartlands'. Photo: Reuters

Islamic State has been left with as much as US\$300 million after the loss of its so-called "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria, "with none of the financial demands of controlling territory and population," Secretary-General António Guterres said in a report. The report to the Security Council on the threat posed by Isis warns that the lull in attacks directed by the militant group "may be temporary".

UN experts stated in another report to the council that Isis leaders were aiming to consolidate and create conditions for an "eventual resurgence in its Iraqi and Syrian heartlands". It said the current lull in attacks "may not last long, possibly not even until the end of 2019".

Guterres said in the new report that while the loss of territory ended Islamic State's ability to generate revenue from oilfields and local people, Isis was believed to be capable of directing funds to support "terrorist acts" within Iraq and Syria and abroad. It said informal money transfer businesses known as *hawaladars* were the most common method. He said looted antiquities from Iraq may be another source of revenue for Isis, and returnees from the conflict said there was a special unit responsible for selling such objects. But the secretary general said Isis was also encouraging increased financial self-sufficiency throughout its network of supporters and affiliates elsewhere in the Mideast, Africa and Asia.

Guterres said the evolution of a covert Isis network in Iraq at the provincial level since 2017 was being mirrored in Syria, with attacks increasing in government-controlled areas. Isis personnel, including some senior figures, "are also reported to have taken refuge in governorates where hostilities are ongoing," the UN report said.

Isis insurgency activity in Iraq, including the burning of crops, “is designed to prevent normalisation and reconstruction, in the hope that the local population will ultimately blame the Iraqi authorities,” Guterres said.

“A similar approach is anticipated in the Syrian Arab Republic.”

The report also highlights the continuing concerns posed by returning Isis fighters and their families. It cited estimates by several unnamed countries that an average of 25 per cent of foreign fighters were killed and 15 per cent were unaccounted for.

“Set against an approximate initial figure of 40,000 who joined the ‘caliphate,’ these percentages would suggest that between 24,000 and 30,000 foreign terrorist fighters are alive,” the report said.

UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet said in late June that more than 55,000 suspected IS fighters and their families have been detained in Iraq and Syria. Most are in the custody of the Iraqi government and the U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, and the alleged fighters come from over 50 countries.



Wives of Isis fighters being held in the al-Hol camp in Syria. Photo: AFP

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Putin Reaps Political Gains from OPEC

By Bloomberg



Russia's pact with OPEC has significantly enhanced President Vladimir Putin's presence on the world stage, but as his geopolitical clout keeps growing the economic benefits for his country have lost some potency.

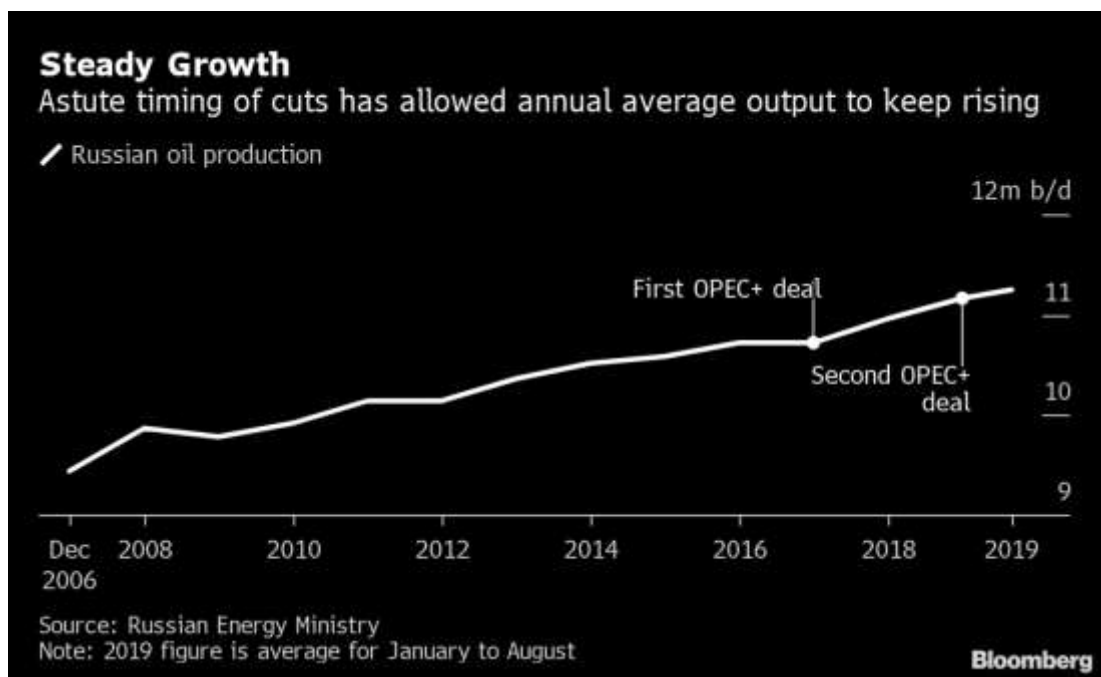
What began in 2016 as a temporary measure to boost oil prices has become an alliance meant to last for "eternity." For a third year, Russian companies are curbing output and scaling back investment in new projects. Yet concerns about how this is starting to weigh on the nation's growth are overshadowed by the benefits to their president's international profile.

After years of Saudi Arabia calling the shots within the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, Putin has quickly stolen the limelight. At the Group of 20 meeting in June, he demonstrated his new power over the global oil market by announcing an extension of production cuts himself, essentially making the group's mid-year talks in Vienna redundant.

Putin will deliver the keynote speech at the Eastern Economic Forum in Vladivostok, Russia on Thursday, and oil traders will be watching. The president's comments on the market have become "deeper, much better researched and more influential," said Ildar Davletshin, an analyst at Wood & Co.

"Putin managed to strengthen his influence in the Middle East and build up a relationship with Saudi Arabia," said Dmitry Marinchenko, a senior director at Fitch Ratings Ltd. Still, the OPEC+ deal hasn't delivered the promised inflow of investment from Russia's new Middle East allies, he said.

To be sure, the price gains that resulted from the so-called OPEC+ deal have benefited Russia. Putin and his Energy Minister Alexander Novak have also managed their cooperation with the group astutely, bearing a smaller share of the cuts than Saudi Arabia despite having higher production, and timing the curbs in such a way that Russia's average annual has continued its decade-long ascent uninterrupted.



Before the first OPEC+ deal in late 2016, then again ahead of the second round of curbs agreed on in December, Russia hiked oil output to post-Soviet records, setting a generous baseline for its cuts. In both cases, the country was given several months to reduce production in line with its quota, and frequently left it drift above that level, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

The initial OPEC+ deal reached in late 2016 ended a slump in Brent crude prices, which fell as low as \$28 per barrel at the start of the year. By mid-2018, extensions of the deal helped push the prices up to \$80 a barrel, earning Twitter rebukes from U.S. President Donald Trump but helping Russia’s government run the widest budget surplus in a decade.

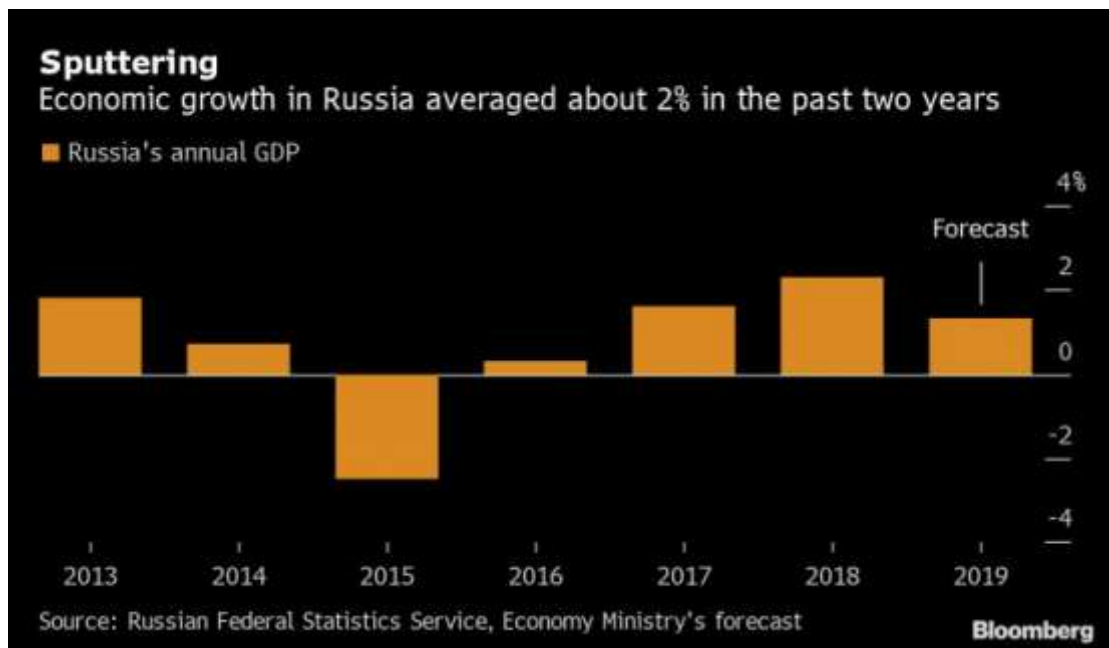
“Back then it made economic sense for OPEC and Russia to agree on production targets, now not so much,” Goldman Sachs economist Clemens Grafe. “Having these extended periods of caps on production do not make much sense, this just gives producers who are not bound by the agreement time to increase their market share.”

The price effects of the more recent deals were more modest, with crude averaging below \$60 on concerns of slowing demand growth due to the U.S.-China trade war. While that limits the benefit of Russia’s cooperation with OPEC, it’s likely that crude would be even lower if producers were to end their agreement and open the taps.

The latest cuts, which run until the end of the first quarter next year, take as much as half a percentage point off Russia’s annual growth, which is a significant impact given that the economy expanded 2% on average in the past two years, said Grafe.

Throughout the OPEC+ agreement, the benefits of higher oil prices to the wider economy has been minimal since the Finance Ministry is stashing away all additional revenue into a wealth fund, Grafe said. Russia imposed a budget rule in 2017 saying all energy revenues

coming from an oil price above \$40 should be saved, boosting the fund to \$123 billion from about \$70 billion in late 2016.



Middle East ties

Russia's oil companies curbed spending on new projects and overall investment in the economy will expand 2% in 2019, half the pace of last year, according to the official state forecast. Still, many of those companies are generating enough cash to pay out handsome dividends, offering higher total returns to shareholders than most of their international peers, according to data compiled by Bloomberg.

Russia's largest oil producer Rosneft PJSC said the nation may lose out to U.S. shale producers if the deal is extended, while Finance Minister Anton Siluanov called for considering all economic consequences of the new agreement. Even so, Putin's drive to strengthen ties with Saudi Arabia and gain geopolitical weight in the Middle East silenced doubts over the viability of OPEC+ cooperation. The president's agreement in June to keep Russia's oil production flat for another nine months met no resistance.

During Soviet times, the Kremlin's aim of spreading communism limited who wanted to do business with it in the Middle East, said Elina Ribakova, deputy chief economist at the Institute of International Finance in Washington. Putin's less ideological, more businesslike approach is winning Russia more partners than ever there, she said.

That new reality will be on show next week, when Novak meets with fellow OPEC+ ministers in Abu Dhabi, underscoring Russia's political and economic importance to the region.

"OPEC is more important for Russia's geopolitics than the economy," said Ribakova. "This is a big club of oil producers and it is important for Russia to be a part of it, and have its say."

Hashtaggers For Hezbollah? How Social Media Fundraising Can Skirt The Rules

By Hector Martinez
Bellingcat Investigation Team

An ostensibly independent activist group has been boosting Hezbollah messaging and fundraising on social media — this is occurring amid increased scrutiny of Hezbollah’s use of Facebook and other platforms.

An April 19, 2019 New York Times article highlighted how Hezbollah is among U.S.-designated terror groups that “learned how to stay a step ahead of the social media giants” by getting “supporters to publish images and videos” propagating the groups’ stances “that do not set off the alarm bells of the social media platforms.”

In addition to this strategy, the report said that Hezbollah, Hamas, and Al-Shabaab post non-violent content such as images of “festive parades and religious celebrations,” which allows the groups to “proliferate largely unchecked on social media.”

The Attansakiyeh group in Lebanon, which operates a news website and maintains accounts on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram and YouTube, often posts media supportive of Hezbollah. This includes post glorifying deceased Hezbollah figures, such as this one dedicated to the group’s former military commander Imad Mughniyeh:



The group’s mission statement says that it aims to counter distortions on social media that target the “Resistance” — a term in Lebanon’s political lexicon that often includes Hezbollah and its allies opposed to Israel. In addition to pro-Hezbollah material, Attansakiyeh has posted media in support of the Lebanese army and Hezbollah’s political allies, including Amal Movement leader and Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, Lebanese President Michel Aoun, and the Syrian Social Nationalist Party.

Attansakiyeh has sought to amplify its messaging with the participation of Hezbollah sympathizers on social media. In February 2016, Attansakiyeh launched the #ResistThroughAPicture hashtag campaign in protest to Facebook temporarily suspending accounts posting pictures of Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah:



The campaign was lauded by Hezbollah's Al-Manar Television, which dubbed it a "Dignity Intifada by Lebanon's youth."

While Attansakiyeh says that it "does not receive support, guidance or supervision from any quarter of Hezbollah or any other party," this collective of social media activists has also stated that it is "[proud] to belong to the Axis of Resistance," referring to the Iran-led alliance of anti-Israel countries and organizations.

Beyond circulating pro-Hezbollah material online, Attansakiyeh's real-world activities indicate ties to Hezbollah.

Hezbollah's Cyber Media Unit chief Hussein Rahhal and MP Ali Fayyad attended Attansakiyeh's inaugural general assembly in September 2015, which was headlined under the theme "From the Virtual World to Reality."

Attansakiyeh partnered with Hezbollah's media apparatus in October 2016 to organize a gathering for Hezbollah MP Hassan Fadlallah. Two months earlier, Attansakiyeh hosted a session with an officer in Hezbollah's military apparatus known only by the nom de-guerre Al-Dahnoun, a further indication of its coordination with Hezbollah.

Bringing Together Pro-Hezbollah Media Professionals

An analysis of Attansakiyeh's media, news articles about the group, and publicly accessible social media accounts reveals the group consists of young Lebanese professionals, including journalists sympathetic to Hezbollah.

Attansakiyeh's website reports on the group's activities, publishing a number of pictures offering clues to its membership. However, Attansakiyeh's site has identified only one of the group's activists by name, its manager Ali Basha, who says on Facebook that he works in advertising.

Attansakiyeh's pictures often feature Hamza al-Khansa among the group's delegations, including one that met in May 2018 with Hezbollah's representative in the Mount Lebanon region of the country, Sheikh Hussein Zeaier:



Al-Khansa is a journalist who has written for Alahed, a Lebanese daily that firmly supports Hezbollah, and Al-Akhbar, a pro-Resistance Axis newspaper based in Beirut. Vice Arabic interviewed al-Khansa in March 2019 about the Campaign to Boycott U.S. Goods, for which he serves as a spokesperson.



The initiative, which media reports say was formed by a group of Lebanese activists, aims to combine social media activism with on-the-ground efforts to create a “smart boycott” of U.S.-manufactured goods in Lebanon. Attansakiyeh’s social media routinely re-posts material by the Campaign to Boycott US Goods. The Vice Arabic report on the Campaign to Boycott U.S. Goods provided a photo of one of the group’s meetings, which was at the Attansakiyeh offices.

Another pro-Hezbollah journalist affiliated with Attansakiyeh, Vida Wardeh, writes about Attansakiyeh on her Facebook account. This includes an August 5, 2018, post encouraging members to attend an upcoming Attansakiyeh meeting. Wardeh has expressed her pride on Facebook for receiving awards from Hezbollah’s fundraising body, the Islamic Resistance Support Association, and Iraq’s Popular Mobilization Forces in September 2016.

Vida K Wardeh
September 25, 2018 · 🌐

من يعرفني عن قرب يعرف ان التكريمات والندوة "آخر همي" وليس امر أسعى له.. وليست عانيت ان
النشر مثل هذه الامور و "انفخرف" بها..
لكن في مثل هذا اليوم ومنذ عامين في النجف الشريف وتحديدا مهرجان الخدير قدمت لي هذه الندوة إحداهما
من هيئة دعم المقاومة محفور عليها توقيع السيد حسن نصرالله الناطق بالحق والأخرى من اعلام الحشد
الشعبى... هيئة اعلام قدمت الدماء من اجل نقل كلمة الحق...
امن لا اعتبره تكريما ابدا قدر ما اعتبر انه يزيدني شرفا واعتز به دوما وأبدا..
دامت كلمة الحق ودام أصحابها الشرفاء..
Vida Warde

See Translation

107 49 Comments

Wardeh is the editor-in-chief of The Saudi Reality, a news website for the Dignity Movement, a little-known Saudi opposition group based out of Beirut that says it supports “the resistance movements in Lebanon, especially Hezbollah.” An Attansakiyeh delegation visited the leader of the Dignity Movement in January 2018.

Boosting Hezbollah’s Fundraising With Social Media

In recent months, Attansakiyeh has conducted and promoted fundraising campaigns that at first glance might seem innocuous, but upon closer inspection raised money on behalf of Hezbollah apparatuses.

On April 1, 2019, Attansakiyeh held the Return The Favor: Your Support for Resistance charity event in south Beirut, which it advertised on its Facebook, Twitter and Instagram accounts. The event, which featured poetry readings, was co-hosted by the Islamic Resistance Support Association, Hezbollah’s fundraising body:



Attansakiyeh’s fundraiser came on the heels of Hezbollah Secretary General Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah’s March 8 call for the party’s supporters to contribute to the Islamic Resistance Support Association to offset the effects of U.S. sanctions. Nasrallah’s speech motivated Attansakiyeh to hold the April 1 event, the activist group’s manager, Ali Basha, told Alahed newspaper.

An April 2 Tweet by Attansakiyeh solicited funds for the similarly-themed “Popular Campaign to Support Resistance and Confront the U.S. Siege.” The tweet instructs donors to donate funds to account number 8142401 at the Al-Qard al-Hassan microfinance institution, which was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2007 for its financial support of Hezbollah:



The same account (8142401) is used by Hezbollah’s Islamic Resistance Support Association according to a commercial for Hezbollah’s annual “Equip a Mujahid” fundraising drive to raise money for the organization’s military apparatus:



On April 8, Attansakiyeh’s Twitter, Instagram and Facebook accounts solicited donations under the slogan “From Lebanon of Resistance to Iran of Revolution, With Love,” in response to the devastating floods that hit Iran in the preceding weeks. These fundraising appeals called for donations to be made to account number 8142601 at Al-Qard al-Hassan.

The fundraising drive was launched by the Lebanese branch of the Imdad Committee for Islamic Charity, according to a segment by Hezbollah’s Al-Manar television, which said the charity was soliciting donations to its account number 8142601:



Imdad Committee for Islamic Charity’s Lebanon branch was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2010 for being owned/controlled by Hezbollah. Imdad serves as a Hezbollah social service organization and is run by Hezbollah cadre, the U.S. said at the time.

Other Social Media Campaigns of Note

On November 23, 2018, Attansikyeh boosted the “For Yemen’s Children” fundraising drive, posting a banner by Al-Qard al-Hassan calling for donations to account number 8142301:



Hezbollah’s Al-Nour Radio launched the campaign on November 20, specifying donors to donate money to account 8142301 at Al-Qard al-Hassan. Al-Nour Radio was sanctioned by the U.S. in 2006 as a Hezbollah media arm that has supported fundraising efforts on behalf of the Lebanese organization.

Al-Qard al-Hassan appears to rely on physical donations, with its website and Facebook page listing branch locations, but not providing any information for any sort of bank or other electronic transfer. A March 9, 2019, Al-Manar report shows a donation of teachers’ salaries in an envelope being made to Hezbollah’s Islamic Resistance Support Association at an Al-Qard al-Hassan branch in the southern Lebanese village of Al-Adeisseh:



Not all of Attansakiyeh’s fundraising efforts are on behalf of Hezbollah. Following the devastating floods in Iran in the spring of 2019, Attansakiyeh sponsored the Ahl Alwafaa Relief Campaign to gather donations for the people of Iran. Iranian diplomat Ahmad Hosseini hailed the initiative and blasted the U.S., saying Washington’s sanctions were preventing the Iranian Red Crescent from receiving aid.

Earlier, in August 2018, Attansakiyeh organized a campaign to raise funds for surgery for a young child in Lebanon. In another example of its non-political efforts, Attansakiyeh also boosted a blood-drive in September 2018.

Meanwhile, a hashtag campaign launched by a Twitter user loosely affiliated with Attansakiyeh demonstrates how social media can generally be leveraged to boost physical donations to Hezbollah. On April 23, 2019, Mohammad Samaha (@MhmdSmeha2) started the #ResistanceChallenge (جني لاشت_ةمواقم ل_معد) hashtag campaign with a tweet showing him placing money into an Islamic Resistance Support Association collection box and tagging five friends to do the same:



Samaha posted Attansakiyeh promotional material on Facebook several times in 2016 and attended an Iftar banquet held by the group in June 2018.

Al-Mayadeen television journalist Ali Mortada responded to Samaha's tweet with his own video showing him placing money in a donation box for Imdad Committee for Islamic Charity's Lebanon branch. The video, in which Mortada stated he was financing Hezbollah, was viewed over 18,000 times.

The hashtag quickly took off, with over 200 mentions in the following two days, including a number of tweets showing videos and pictures of donations to Islamic Resistance Support Association and Imdad Committee collection boxes.





Conclusion

Attansakiyeh's activities highlight the challenges faced by social media companies aiming to comply with U.S. sanctions on Hezbollah and curtail the group's activities on their platforms. Facebook, Twitter and others in past years have already faced difficulties countering Hezbollah's official media, playing a game of whack-a-mole as they shut down the group's accounts only for new ones to be created.

In the case of Attansakiyeh, the group is not an official media organ of Hezbollah — it proclaims its independence while at the same time subtly spreading propaganda and supporting fundraising efforts beneficial for Hezbollah. Attansakiyeh's activities extend beyond support for Hezbollah to include meetings with the Lebanese party's officials.

Yet as a self-proclaimed organization, one outside Hezbollah's sprawling network of official media and social support entities, Attansakiyeh easily falls through the cracks of social media companies' sanctions compliance efforts. Attansakiyeh is not blacklisted by the U.S. government, nor do its social media accounts often explicitly mention Hezbollah by text. For example, a search of Attansakiyeh's Tweets for the term Hezbollah yielded only seven results.

Hezbollah's official apparatuses, as well sympathetic collectives such as Attansakiyeh, don't exist in a social media vacuum. They act as messaging amplifiers aimed at Hezbollah's large base of supporters, reflecting the organization's role as a major political party and part of Lebanon's social fabric. Hezbollah has long championed its philosophy of Resistance Society, the organization's goal of building a social environment backing its comprehensive military, political and social goals. As such, it's no surprise that this Resistance Society has also gone virtual.

The Syriac Christian Renaissance

By Sam Sweeney



In Syria's northeast, in Qamishli, al-Hasakah, and other cities and their surrounding villages, a renaissance is under way in the area's beleaguered Syriac Christian community, which is attempting to revive the Syriac language and culture after decades of neglect and oppression. Syria's Christian community as a whole has suffered immensely during the ongoing eight-year conflict, and the country's Syriac minority is no exception. The conflict has, however, also brought about social changes that previously would have been thought impossible, particularly in areas under control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Escalating its threat to invade the area despite the presence of American, British, and French troops, Turkey could reverse these changes and even jeopardize the continued existence of the Christian community there.

Syria's northeast, beyond the Euphrates River, falls into al-Jazira, a region that extends into Turkey and Iraq. Historically, this was Upper Mesopotamia, a patchwork of ethnicities and religions. The various groups here have preserved their unique languages and cultures in the face of decades of Arabization. Kurdish, Syriac, Armenian, Turkish, and other languages, as well as Arabic, are spoken in their respective communities, making the area distinct from other parts of Syria, where Arabic is spoken almost exclusively. Arabic as the country's official language is imposed nationwide in schools, the government, and the media.

Fast-forward to 2011 and the beginning of the Arab Spring, when Syrians in the northeast region, like those elsewhere, began speaking out for freedom and democracy. Peaceful protests gave way to an armed insurgency, and the government in Damascus eventually withdrew from most of Syria's northeast, leaving the area to the Kurdish YPG (People's Protection Units) and allied groups, including the Christian-led Syriac Military Council. Chaos engulfed the country as ISIS and other radical groups made advances on areas that the government had abandoned. In 2015, also in the northeast, the Assyrian Christian villages of the Khabur River valley were overrun by ISIS, which kidnapped over 200 people and held them for a year, until millions of dollars raised by the Assyrian community were paid as ransom to ISIS; the exact amount was never disclosed. Three were killed before the

ransom was paid, and one girl never returned. She is believed to have been married off to an ISIS member.

Similar events, including ISIS's siege of Kobani, a Kurdish-majority city in northern Syria, and of the Yazidi-majority area of Sinjar, Iraq, prompted the formation of a U.S.-led coalition to defeat ISIS, which includes the United Kingdom, France, and other U.S. allies. In Syria, the Kurdish-led YPJ (Women's Defense Units) and YPG and the Christian-led Syriac Military Council joined with other groups to form the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Together, the SDF and the coalition, the former on the ground and the latter in the air, moved to retake territory that ISIS had captured throughout northern Syria.

The SDF succeeded in retaking territory from ISIS, but it then had the responsibility of governing. To that end, local leaders formed the Autonomous Administration, which governs the areas of Syria under the SDF's control. The government of Syria does not recognize the region as autonomous.

One of the most notable changes brought about by the Autonomous Administration has been recognition of the rights of the non-Arab peoples of north-eastern Syria. Whereas before Arabic was the language used exclusively in almost all public spaces there, now Kurdish and Syriac, as well as Arabic, and sometimes Turkish, are used on local official signage and in documents. To an outsider this may seem insignificant, but it is a serious challenge to the underlying ideology that has governed Syria since its independence in 1946. For the Syriac-speaking Christians of northeast Syria, this could be the key to the community's survival and revival, its proponents say.

Before the Christian era, the dominant language of the Middle East was Aramaic, a Semitic language related to Hebrew and Arabic. The lingua franca of vast swathes of present-day Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq, Aramaic was spoken by Jesus himself in first-century Galilee and Judea. As the region adopted Christianity, the dialect of Aramaic spoken in Edessa (Sanliurfa in present-day Turkey) came to be known as "Syriac" and became the standard written language throughout the region. While Greek dominated early Christian scholarship farther west, Syriac was the language of learning, culture, and religion to the east. With the advent of Islam, however, Syriac lost its place to Arabic even among many Christians and survived as a spoken language in just a few small pockets of the Middle East. Genocide in Turkey against the Syriac, Armenian, and Greek communities in 1915 and 1916 reduced the Syriac presence in the region even further, and many Christians who spoke the language fled to Syria.

By the 1960s, Syrian political leadership had turned against the presence of non-Arab traditions and histories. While Syriac Christians continued to speak their language among themselves, it was not allowed as a secular language of instruction, and its place in the public sphere was limited to religious services. Few people could read it well, as school was taught entirely in Arabic, save for religion class, in which rudimentary Syriac was taught. The language was in peril of extinction. In 2011, in the spirit of the Arab Spring, many Syriac Christians saw an opportunity to revive their language.

Building on the principle that an all-encompassing movement is needed to preserve the community, Syriac organizations centred around the Syriac Union Party have emerged, dedicated to culture, education, women, humanitarian aid, and security. Not all Christians in the northeast back this movement, and many, probably most, have continued to side with the Syrian government, which still controls parts of Qamishli and al-Hasakah. But the movement is far from insignificant. It is tied to the ascendant power in the area, the Kurdish-led SDF, and even many of its Syriac Christian critics can sympathize with the desire to revive Syriac culture and identity. On a trip to northeast Syria in early April, I met many Christians who back the movement. They face significant challenges, not least of which is that many in their own community see them as the token Christian face of a Kurdish nationalist movement, puppets used to gain international support.

Those who publicly support the movement make themselves enemies of the state and risk retribution if the Syrian government ever takes back control of the area, which seemed likely after President Trump announced America's withdrawal. That decision, since reversed, likely would have forced the SDF to allow the government back into the northeast to fend off a Turkish invasion, and the Syrian government does not take kindly to those who publicly oppose it. Right now the only sure protection is that American, British, and French troops prevent the Syrian government, and Russia, from invading the area and taking it back, which is President Bashar al-Assad's stated intention. In a televised speech in February, Assad said, in reference to American troops in Syria, that "every inch of Syria will be liberated, and any intruder is an enemy." In response to Turkey's renewed threats to invade the area, the Trump administration has worked to assuage Ankara's concerns over border security and, at the same, to maintain good relations between the United States and the SDF, our primary ally in defeating ISIS in Syria.

Contention has surrounded the question of which curriculum to use in private Christian schools operating in areas under the control of the Autonomous Administration. Rejecting the Arab chauvinism and Baathist propaganda of the official Syrian curriculum, officials in Syria's northeast have replaced it with one geared toward teaching students in their native language, be it Kurdish, Syriac, or Arabic, and teaching them the history of their different ethnicities.

Last fall, in Qamishli and elsewhere, protests broke out against the imposition of the new curriculum. Critics, including church officials and other area Christians, contended that, because the curriculum is not recognized outside this part of Syria, it will hinder students from being able to study at universities in Syria or abroad. In a statement released on August 18, 2018, "Church leaders and priests in the al-Jazira and the Euphrates" refused "any attempts to impose permits or curricula on schools belonging to the churches, since they are legitimate and legal schools." The statement came out of a meeting held that day at the Syriac Orthodox bishop's office in Qamishli, but no names were attached to the statement, leading supporters of the Autonomous Administration to say that their critics were attempting to speak in the name of all clergy in the area.

Critics miss the point, say the curriculum's supporters, including Jilanos Eissa of the organization Olaf Taw, which developed the Syriac version of the curriculum. Syriac identity is at risk, he points out. For there to be another Mar Ephrem, a prominent Syriac

polymath of the fourth century, Syriac children need to learn their own language and be capable of expressing themselves in it. Students would still be taught Arabic, along with Kurdish. Olaf Taw is training teachers in the hope of creating a new generation of Syriac speakers. And interest in the language extends beyond the Syriac community: Four Arabs and three Kurds training to be Syriac teachers recently completed their program with Olaf Taw.

Following the protests and the ensuing international media attention, a compromise was reached to maintain the Arabic-language Syrian-government curriculum in private Christian schools but add two subjects in Syriac, in grade one and in grade two. While the new curriculum was portrayed as anti-Christian in the media, it was actually developed by and for Christians. In the final compromise, only Christian institutions have been allowed to keep the Syrian-government curriculum; all other schools under the control of the Autonomous Administration must use the new curriculum. That many Syriac Christians oppose this change is a source of frustration to its proponents. It is not only Christians, however, who have opposed the new curriculum, and many Kurdish and Arab parents in the area have left their children in the government-run schools in Qamishli and al-Hasakah out of similar concerns.

Like Olaf Taw, the Syriac Cultural Association in Syria works to promote Syriac culture and strengthen cultural ties in the region through lectures, conferences, and poetry readings involving the Kurdish and Arab communities. Hanna Hanna, who leads the organization's branch in the city of Qamishli, wants Syriacs to celebrate their ancient history and its achievements once again and to use it in the creation of new music, art, and literature. In its heyday, before the advent of Islam, the Syriac community ran more than 50 schools across Mesopotamia. Their rounded curricula included theology. Hanna sees the Syriac community as distinguished by the importance it has given to education.

The Syriac Military Council and others who have fought against extremists, including ISIS, since 2011 feel that they have won their own freedom with no help from the government. No matter what outcome the war brings, they will not accept a return to the status quo ante bellum. In the town of Tell Tamer, I spoke with Aram Hanna and Abgar Daoud of the Syriac Military Council about the future of the area. In 2015, the Khabur River formed a frontline with ISIS, and an ISIS suicide bomber attempted to break through the lines of the Syriac Military Council at the bridge leading into the town. The Council and its Kurdish allies were able to prevent ISIS from taking the town. Both men left their university studies to defend their people, Aram Hanna tells me. He was studying English literature; Daoud, agricultural engineering. Because they have joined an organization that the Syrian government considers illegal, they are unlikely ever to study again at a university in Syria.

"These four or five years that we've lived through, whether our resistance in Raqqa, our resistance in Kobani, our resistance in Ras al-Ayn," Aram Hanna says, "all that effort — I can't allow it to all be for nothing. . . . We're not saying that the solution is a military one. We're not saying that today the only solution with the regime is war. Our arms are open [to the regime]. But for the region to go back to what it was in 2008, 2007: absolutely not."

Looking up at photos of those killed fighting for the Syriac Military Council, Aram Hanna continues: "If you look up at those, you're embarrassed with yourself. . . . That alone gives you an incentive to continue, to defend yourself and defend your cause." He says that any of those whose pictures hang on the wall would, if he were alive today, support this new project. "The regime accuses us of being separatists, but our goal is not to create a state within a state. The idea is to let each area govern itself."

As for the future of Syria, Aram Hanna says, "I am a Syriac Syrian, not an Arab Syrian. I have no problem with my Syrianness. My problem is with the Arabism that was forced upon us. I am not Arab. There are Kurds, Turkmen, Armenians, Syriacs, etc. Why don't we give these people a place? I'm not against my Syrianness. . . . Syria is for all of us and doesn't belong just to Assad. . . . Kurds didn't even have Syrian IDs. They weren't allowed to speak Kurdish." In 1962, the Syrian government passed a law that stripped many Kurds of their Syrian citizenship, and they have lived as stateless residents of Syria since. In 2011, President Assad restored citizenship to many Kurds, but most felt it was 50 years too late.

The Autonomous Administration has drawn sharp criticism, particularly from Christians who say that the Syriacs are pawns in a Kurdish-nationalist project. But Daoud sees the Autonomous Administration as larger than any one nationalism. He says:

Today we are working on a project. The project is bigger than just providing security for the area and protecting it. We are working on building a new Syria. There are people who benefit from the old project. There are people who are ignorant of politics as a result of what we went through before. And they use this ignorance. Anyone I talk to about the general idea of the Autonomous Administration, democracy, or pluralism finds the idea convincing. But how can [opponents] change that conviction? They say this is a Kurdish project, this is Kurdistan. And someone who is not Kurdish will say, "Why would I work for Kurdistan? Were we not living in Arabistan before, where everything is Arab? Why would I trade that for Kurdistan? At least the thing I was living [in] before, I know it, I know how to operate in it." This argument is the only thing that can stop the idea [of a multinational Autonomous Administration] from spreading.

Inevitably, this project seeking to upend 50 years of Arab-nationalist domination is not without problems between communities. The curriculum issue has been one of the most visible, but other issues exist as well. Last Christmas the Syriac Orthodox bishop for northeastern Syria, Maurice Amseeh, accused the SDF of digging a tunnel underneath the Christian cemetery in Qamishli. Regarding these and other difficulties, Daoud says, "We're not saying there aren't problems. It's a new system being set up. It's natural for there to be problems and mistakes. But this understanding exists, that we are more than one people. There's not just one people in the area, whether they're Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Armenians, or Syriacs. Each people in the area deserves its rights." Aram Hanna adds that people in other parts of Syria are under the false impression that the area is ruled by a Kurdish authority.

And even if those on the outside see the Autonomous Administration as a Kurdish project, those inside it say that the Syriac Christian community has a say in its political future for

the first time in modern history. Syriac Christians will teach their children their ancestral language, the native tongue of Jerusalem, where the church was born.

Will the project last? The answer to that, in the short term at least, probably depends on decisions made thousands of miles away, in Washington. As long as U.S. and allied troops remain in the area, the Autonomous Administration will continue to govern the areas of Syria east of the Euphrates. And if the United States were to withdraw? No one knows. The Syrian government wants to reassert its authority in the region, by force if necessary, and Turkey says it wants to eliminate the Kurdish "terrorists" who are the backbone of this project. When President Trump on December 19 of last year announced that the United States would withdraw from Syria, many predicted the end of the Autonomous Administration. But now that decision has been reversed, and Syriac Christians who are tired of war have reason to hope that the United States will not abandon those with whom it defeated ISIS in northeast Syria. A Turkish invasion, as threatened by that country's president, could put the faith that they have put in the United States to the test.

Erdogan cannot use refugees to further his own agenda

By Susan Yao
CMER Board Member



When three-year-old Alan Kurdi's body was washed ashore on Turkey's coastline exactly four years ago this month, a poignant symbol of the cost of the Syrian war, the world reeled in collective shock and revulsion at the scale of human tragedy inflicted in the course of the conflict.

There were plenty of murmurs at the time of how this should never happen again and how the distressing image of a toddler's lifeless body would jolt the international community into action. It didn't, and it has happened again, countless times over.

In that, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan was right when he declared to an audience of world leaders at the United Nations General Assembly in New York: "This did not happen a long time ago but it has been forgotten already". Yet the fact he used a photo of little Alan to suit his own manipulative purposes is unacceptable.

Mr Erdogan did not necessarily have Syrians' best interests at heart when he reminded those convened at the General Assembly of the victims of war. Instead, he was trying to bolster support for his own grand scheme in relocating up to three million Syrian refugees to a safe zone on the border with Turkey. The proposed zone would be 18 kilometres deep and nearly 500km long. His speech at UNGA was part of a pitch to corral millions in donations to fund the enterprise, including from Jordan and Lebanon, countries with stricken economies that are struggling to cope with the cost of supporting refugees within their own borders.

The Turkish president's proposed safe zone is mostly inhabited by Kurds, with significant parts of the region under the control of the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, a coalition of militant factions dominated by the People's Protection Units, or YPG.

However, Ankara considers the YPG to be an offshoot of the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), which has led an insurgency against the Turkish government for decades and is considered a terrorist organisation. In this, Ankara plans to kill two birds with one stone.

By creating a safe zone that it will oversee, it will not only deal with its Kurdish problem but offload the refugees it no longer wants within its own borders. Further, significantly changing the demographic make-up of the region could seriously alter the character and culture of the region, something the Kurds fear.

Since the onset of the civil war, the nation has become the world's foremost place of refuge for displaced Syrians, with an estimated 3.6 million escaping to Turkey.

At first, the decision to take in refugees played to Mr Erdogan's conservative base as it was done in the name of solidarity and compassion for fellow Muslims.

But Mr Erdogan has had no qualms about trading off his responsibility and using refugees as a bargaining chip for his own gain. In March 2016 the president struck a lucrative agreement with the EU and agreed to take in refugees who landed in Greece and impose tighter controls on its borders with Europe in exchange for aid worth Dh24 billion.

Among the concessions he won in return were smoother visa procedures for Turkish people going to Europe.

As the Turkish lira has plunged in value, the tide has now clearly turned and the compassion has dried up. And as his party's popularity dips and anti-refugee sentiment rises, Mr Erdogan is once again playing to the crowd, using the suffering of Syrians to suit his own agenda.

The future and protection of Syrian refugees is a collective responsibility carried by the international community – not a problem to be disposed of when it no longer serves a purpose.

Saudi Arabia's Reforms and Programs to Empower Women

By Lina Zaidi
CMER Board Member



Slowly but surely, step by step, Saudi Arabia is treading the path laid out in its Vision 2030 plan. The end of guardianship, which means women over 21 will no longer require the permission of a male family member to travel or obtain a passport, is the latest in a series of reforms bestowing equal rights, freedoms and opportunities upon women. Husbands and wives are now also recognised as joint heads of the family, and labour laws have been changed to end discriminatory practices against women. It is hoped these changes will soon be followed by parity of pay, pledged by the Ministry for Labour and Social Development in January, becoming a nationwide reality.

It is just over a year since Saudi Arabia issued driving licences to women, granting them a previously unimaginable degree of independence. At the same time, rules requiring a guardian's permission to study or hold a job were scrapped. Since then, a series of transformative reforms have been instigated. The whole of Saudi society stands to benefit from the latest changes, which go much further than merely allowing women to enjoy independent travel and tourism. More than half of all university graduates in Saudi Arabia are women. The end of guardianship will allow the country to make the best use of this largely untapped well of talent as it works to realise Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's Vision 2030 plan to accelerate economic development. As Dr Anwar Gargash, the UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, says, the reforms show "confident steps towards development and modernisation".

Rooted in the oldest traditions of Islam, the nation is to be congratulated for a determination to bring about change in a considered manner that will not alienate traditionalists, whose views carry weight in the deeply religious country. But as Reema Bandar Al Saud, the Kingdom's ambassador to Washington, points out, we are witnessing history in the making, heralding positive changes that will have an impact for years to come.

Preparing Qatar for the 2022 World Cup

By Nicholas Newman

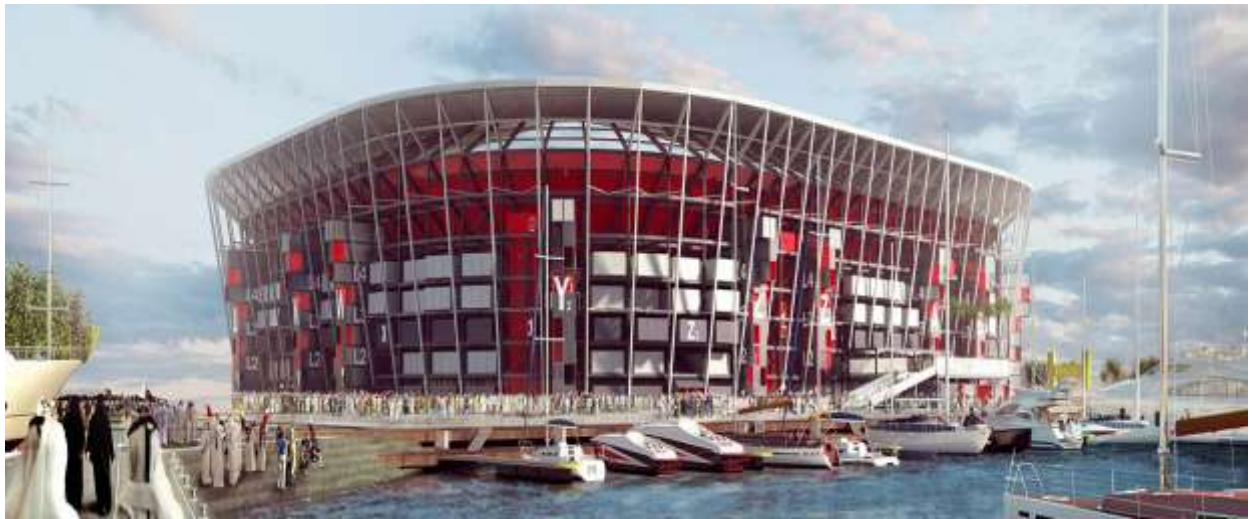
In 2022, Qatar is set to host the 22nd FIFA World Cup, one of the biggest sporting events on the planet. With a worldwide audience of billions watching on tablets, television and listening on radio, the 32 national football teams which will compete in at least eight stadiums watched. To avoid summer-time temperatures of up to 40°C in this Middle Eastern Gulf state, FIFA has agreed to reschedule the month-long event to start on 21 November and end on 18 December, Qatar's National Day. Even in the winter months, the temperature will be around 30°C and so play will be confined to the evenings."

For the World Cup 2022 organizers, ensuring that everything is ready for the football fans is a huge logistical challenge, especially the need to keep everyone cool, given the high temperatures of the region. One key issue is to ensure that there is enough power to meet the massive demand in electricity to supply hotels, stadiums, media centres, communications and accompanying IT as well as the near 50 percent temporary increase in population. Therefore, this event will require a large investment in both permanent and temporary power generation, using a mix of oil, gas and renewables. Furthermore, this World Cup is likely to be the first fully-integrated Smart Grid and Internet-of-Things managed event.

Solar power developments

Five of the eight FIFA 2022 World Cup stadiums are expected to employ pioneering solar-powered cooling technology. With average daily sunshine of around 9.5 hours, horizontal irradiance of 2,140 kWh per m² per year, low-cloud cover conditions and plentiful space, Qatar could well meet its target of meeting 20 percent of its energy needs from solar in the not-too-distant future. On an industrial scale Qatar Solar Technologies relies on a 1.1 MW ground and roof mounted solar farm to generate power for its polysilicon processor, which produces the silicon used in solar cells. Last summer, construction began on a 200-MW solar power plant and there are plans to expand its capacity to 500 MW in the future. Small scale roof top solar projects exist in Mshereib Downtown Doha, as a sustainable downtown regeneration project and an integrated energy hub are being built between Lusail City and the capital."

Among the challenges facing further usage of solar power in the region, is the high amounts of dust in the air and extreme desert heat. Such conditions can severely impair the energy efficiency of such installations. Therefore, large scale solar development will depend on finding the means to operate PVs in extreme heat and the ability to keep solar panels free from dust. Researchers at the Qatar Environment & Energy Research Institute (QEERI), which is funded by the Qatar Foundation, a public and private-supported non-profit, are looking into these challenges. If a solution can be found, then solar power usage in desert conditions can be greatly expanded.



In addition, World Cup 2022 labourers in Qatar have been given solar powered “cooling” hard hats which reduce their body temperature as they build football stadiums in the extreme desert heat.”

Qatar’s World Cup promoters are doing everything to ensure that their stadium designs meet the Gulf region’s Global Sustainability Assessment System (GSAS) green buildings and infrastructure certification framework. For instance, the Ras Abu About Stadium designed by Fenwick Iribarren Architects (FI-A), uses a modular design embracing modified shipping containers. Fundamental stadium elements can be quickly assembled and disassembled at various locations as, and when, required. This design requires fewer materials, is less wasteful and reduces the carbon footprint of construction and at the same time reduces the build time to as little as three years. At the Lusail Iconic Stadium, designed by Foster + Partners, the roof can be completely covered to protect people inside from the heat, but operable louvres will allow the pitch to be exposed. Finally there will be at least three stadiums equipped with solar panels on roofs and shaded car parking and even in pavements.

Qatar and its partners are working hard to ensure that fans have an enjoyable and memorable time at World Cup 2022.”

Australia Names New Ambassador to Iran

Peter Rawlings
CMER Board Member



An experienced diplomat has been named as Australia's next ambassador to Iran, amid a backlash from the Middle Eastern nation for joining an international military effort to protect shipping in the Strait of Hormuz.

Lyndall Sachs was named on Aug. 28 to replace Ian Biggs in Tehran after earlier stints as ambassador to Lebanon and to Iraq.

Australia has sought to rebuild its ties with Iran in recent years, reopening the Australian Trade Commission in Tehran in 2016, resuming talks on human rights issues and signing a consular memorandum of understanding in 2017. However, it has made waves over a decision to send troops, a surveillance plane and a navy frigate to help guard oil tanker attacks which Tehran denies it is responsible for. Kamal Dehghani Firouzabadi, the deputy chair of Iran's foreign relations parliamentary committee, has warned Australia is taking a risk by joining the action. He said he was surprised Australia joined the US-led coalition, accusing Washington of making repeated mistakes including pulling out of a nuclear agreement.

Prime Minister Scott Morrison has warned against conflating the two issues, stressing that Australia's involvement in the coalition is purely about protecting shipping movements. He is keen to divorce that from Australia's steadfast opposition to Iran obtaining nuclear weapons.

The warship will be redirected from an anti-piracy operation in the Middle East, while the Australian troops will be based in the headquarters that are coordinating the US-led maritime security mission.

Sachs is a senior career officer with the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, most recently holding the role of chief of protocol. She served as ambassador to Lebanon from 2006 to 2009 and Iraq from 2011 to 2015.

OPEN LETTER TO THE UN SECRETARY GENERAL

STOP ERDOĞAN'S SUPPORT FOR ISIS AND OTHER VIOLATIONS OF INTERNATIONAL LAW

**Dear Secretary-General Guterres:
We view Turkey's President Erdoğan's visit to the United Nations as an opportunity to point out the violations of international law caused by his government's actions:**

- 1** Article 2(4) of the UN Charter by supporting terrorist groups which pose threats to territorial integrity of other member states.
- 2** Article 2(i) of the International Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism by financing terrorist groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, and al-Shabab.
- 3** Article 7 (crimes against humanity) of the Rome Statute by committing widespread and systematic crimes directed against Kurds and the members of the Gülen movement.
- 4** Articles 2 and 4 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) by promoting racial hatred and ethnic discrimination towards Kurds, Armenians, Jews and Syrian refugees, Article 27 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (CCPR) by denying the rights of non-Muslim minorities which include Christians, Jews, Assyrians and Yazidis.
- 5** Articles 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), a milestone document in the history of human rights, and the Articles 9, 10, 14, 15, 17, 26 of CCPR by putting over half a million innocent people in detention facilities in the last three years alone on dubious terrorism charges, Article 21 of UDHR by purging some nearly 140,000 civil servants without any effective judicial or administrative investigation, Article 19 of CCPR by jailing 318 Turkish journalists and dozens of foreign reporters, shutting down 195 media outlets, and seizing their assets.
- 6** Articles 4 and 5 of CCPR by abusing state of emergency measures to instigate an unprecedented crackdown on civil society, unions, the free press and opposition political parties.
- 7** Articles 2, 4 and 5 of the Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment (CAT), the Articles 6 and 7 of CCPR and the Article 5 of UDHR by conducting a systematic and deliberate campaign of torture and ill treatment of detainees and prisoners. Since 2016, at least 75 cases of suspicious deaths and suicides took place either in detention centres and prisons or outside the jails, with the involvement of, or under pressure from, Turkish government officials.
- 8** Articles 6 and 16 of CAT and Article 19 of CCPR by allowing suspicious murders of foreign journalists.
- 9** Articles 1, 5 and 17 of the International Convention for the Protection of All Persons from Enforced Disappearance by abducting dozens of people as part of systematic and widespread intimidation campaign targeting critics and opponents of Erdogan's policies.
- 10** Article 12 of CCPR by cancelling the passports of 181,500 Turkish nationals including the family members of those investigated with no legitimate justification in order to restrict their right to free movement.
- 11** Articles 2 and 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and Article 24 of CCPR by locking up 864 children under 7 years of age in Turkish prisons.
- 12** Articles 12, 13, 14 and 15 of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities by imprisoning hundreds of disabled people based on fabricated terrorism charges.

The UN and the international community should undertake a thorough investigation and hold Erdoğan and Turkey responsible for these crimes.