

MEI Weekly.



Current Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (left) speaking to former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef during the opening session of the Shura Council in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia on 14 December 2016, less than a year before the latter was deposed. Photo: Bandar al-Jaloud/Saudi Royal Palace/AFP.

CALENDAR: UPCOMING INSTITUTE EVENTS

Suspension of Public Events

All MEI public events for March remain suspended until further notice, in view of the Ministry of Health's advice to cancel or defer all large scale and non-essential events. New event dates will be announced once the situation stabilises.



Please check our website and social media channels for updates.

WHAT'S NEWS: THE BIG HEADLINES THIS WEEK

MBS Makes Waves in Oil and Politics

Last Friday (7 March), Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman detained three members of the royal family, including former Crown Prince Mohammed bin Nayef and Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz, brother and potential heir to King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. A day later, on Saturday (8 March), he broke the Kingdom's tentative alliance with Russia by threatening to flood the market with cheap oil following failed negotiations at the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) meeting in Vienna. The move sent oil prices crashing to their lowest since 2016, igniting an oil price war at a time when the world is already struggling with the coronavirus. These developments demonstrate the crown prince's unrelenting and unpredictable approach to both international and domestic politics.



Mr Benny Gantz, leader of the Blue and White Party, delivering a statement in Ramat Gan, Israel last Saturday (7 March 2020). Photo: Ahmad Gharabli/AFP.

Blue and White Reaches Out to the Joint List

After losing narrowly to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud party in the recent Israeli legislative election held on 2 March, Mr Benny Gantz's Blue and White Party is seeking a coalition with the Joint List, a slate of four Arab-majority parties, to form a new government. The coalition government, if successfully formed, would be based on the parties' common desire to break the political deadlock and oust Mr Netanyahu from power. However, the promising coalition is hindered by long-standing animosity between the Zionist and Arab factions as well as the ongoing Arab-Israeli conflict.

Coronavirus Spreads Across Middle East

Iran's Senior Vice President Eshaq Jahangiri and two other Cabinet members have contracted the coronavirus, reported *The Fars News Agency* on Wednesday (11 March), joining the ranks of hundreds of other ministers, military officers and citizens who have been infected with Covid-19. Bahrain, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia have begun limiting travel to and from their respective countries in an attempt to contain the spread of the virus, while neighbouring Qatar has reported 238 new cases of Covid-19 on Sunday (9 March). Even though it is widely recognised as the epicentre of the thousands of cases in the Middle East, Iran maintains that it has only 7,000 cases, though experts estimate the true figure is more likely in the millions.

LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

Netanyahu's Trial to Begin Next Week

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's trial begins next Tuesday (17 March), as the Jerusalem District Court has denied his request to delay it by 45 days. Despite Mr Netanyahu being charged with bribery, fraud and breach of trust, he is the frontrunner in Israel's third and most recent legislative elections, although Mr Netanyahu now faces a possible deadlock in the Knesset. While Mr Netanyahu's party is pushing for legislative immunity, Mr Benny Gantz, Netanyahu's main rival this election, has accused Netanyahu of "attempting to evade justice".

EU Leaders to Meet at Istanbul Summit

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan will resume talks with the leaders of the European Union (EU) at the Istanbul Summit next Tuesday (17 March) to work out a deal stemming the flow of migrants into the EU after breakdown of negotiations last Monday (9 March). Following the escalation in confrontations with Syrian regime forces in Idlib and the deaths of at least 22 Turkish troops, Turkey lifted travel restrictions for refugees and migrants passing through Turkish soil into the EU. Ankara has purportedly run out of patience and is demanding the EU provide previously promised funds to care for migrants on Turkish soil as well as visa-free travel to the EU for all Turks.



#MUSTREAD: WHAT'S POPULAR ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA

FACEBOOK: Saudi Arabia sealed off its eastern Qatif region last Monday (9 March), the first action of its kind in the Gulf region to combat the spread of Covid-19. This affects the 500,000 people living in the region, which has reported 230 cases of the coronavirus mostly from returning Shia pilgrims from Iran.
<http://bit.ly/3cQXWoG>

In this latest *Insight*, MEI Senior Research Fellow Victor Kattan examines the historical role of custodianship Jordan has had over Muslim holy places in Jerusalem, and calls for Israel to respect Jordan's authority over these sites.
<https://nus.edu/2IGKXXY>



TWITTER: Three months after publication, *Beating The Odds Together: 50 Years of Singapore-Israel Ties* by MEI Adjunct Senior Research Fellow Mattia Tomba remains high on Kinokuniya's Top 10 International Bestsellers list (Non-fiction). Haven't read it yet? Get your copy now:
<http://bit.ly/33hA751>

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