

MEI Weekly.



Labourers working on an empty racetrack after the UAE's decision to postpone upcoming horse racing tournaments in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic in Dubai. Photo: Karim Sahib / AFP.

CALENDAR: UPCOMING INSTITUTE EVENTS

Book Talk: Taming a Chaotic Conflict

Taking a critical but constructive approach in examining the long-standing hostility between Iran and Saudi Arabia, Dr Ibrahim Fraihat makes the unconventional argument that rapprochement between Riyadh and Tehran is possible and sets out a realistic agenda on how to achieve it.



Join us for this public talk, which will be conducted online via Zoom. All are welcome to participate, so check out <https://nus.edu/2VgqEbX> for more details now!

WHAT'S NEWS: THE BIG HEADLINES THIS WEEK

Migrants Hit Hardest by Coronavirus

One of the largest groups in the Middle East, migrant workers also constitute the vast majority of coronavirus cases in the Middle Eastern countries, reported *The New York Times* on Monday (13 April). However, even more deadly than the coronavirus is the threat of starvation for these vulnerable groups, who are often denied their wages despite being the economic backbone of the region, as they are treated as “an expendable underclass”. Living in overcrowded camps with low hygiene standards, migrant workers are especially susceptible to contracting the virus.



A group of Iranian navy vessels taking part in a naval exercise on 30 January 2018. Photo: Tasmin News Agency, shared on Wikimedia Commons.

Iranian Aggression on the Ocean

Eleven small Iranian navy vessels repeatedly approached six American warships in a “dangerous and harassing” manner, according to an article by *The Guardian* published on Wednesday (15 April). This episode comes a day after a Hong Kong-flagged tanker bound for Saudi Arabia was seized and subsequently redirected by Iranian naval forces on Tuesday (April 14). These incidents mark a trend of growing Iranian assertiveness along the Strait of Hormuz, a key oil export route, despite the coronavirus pandemic currently ravaging the country.

Saudi Arabia Makes Big Business Moves

In the wake of the devastating oil price collapse, Saudi Arabia has undertaken several daring investments, with the Saudi Ports Authority Mawani signing a 7 billion Saudi riyal (approximately US\$226 billion) deal with Saudi Global Ports, a joint venture with the Port of Singapore Authority International, on Monday (13 April). The country's sovereign wealth fund is also going forward with a roughly US\$380 million acquisition of UK Premier League soccer Team Newcastle United FC, reported *The Wall Street Journal* on Tuesday (14 April). Both moves seem to be part of Saudi Vision 2030, a national plan to diversify the kingdom's largely oil-dominated economy.

LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

Knesset Tries to Choose a Prime Minister

After failing to meet their midnight deadline to reach a power-sharing deal on Wednesday (15 April), incumbent Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Blue and White Leader Benny Gantz have three weeks to agree on a leader. President Reuven Rivlin, who is overseeing the negotiations, agreed to provide a three-week extension before dissolving the Knesset. In the upcoming days, Mr Netanyahu is expected to try to attract a few legislators from the opposition to catapult his current 59 lawmakers into a parliamentary majority. If no government is formed, the country will be plunged into an unprecedented fourth election.



IFINTEC Conference and Exhibition

The IFINTEC Finance Technologies Conference and Exhibition will be held next Tuesday and Wednesday (21 and 22 April) in Istanbul, Turkey. IFINTEC is one of the biggest and most important conferences in the Europe, Middle East and Africa region with its focus on retail banking, digital banking, core banking, payment systems, banking technologies, banking IT solutions, digital transformation and finance technologies. The conference aims to serve a perfect platform to introduce and demonstrate banking solutions and finance technology solutions including system, hardware, software, consultancy, training and service which are developed for banks and financial institutions.

#MUSTREAD: WHAT'S POPULAR ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA

FACEBOOK: In the first of MEI's new podcast series on the changing Middle East, Dr Sean McFate explains his theory of the world returning to a state of “durable disorder” and how private actors and mercenaries are replacing uniformed soldiers on the ground.

<https://nus.edu/34HesnJ>



Despite the well-documented danger posed by the coronavirus, many Iraqis refuse to seek government because of deeply entrenched social and religious factors, creating problems for government officials and doctors, who are struggling to manage the epidemic while not regressing into the authoritarian regime experienced during Saddam Hussein's era.

<https://nyti.ms/3bfsoYq>

TWITTER: Once insular and hostile to outsiders, the ultra-Orthodox enclave of Bnei Brak in Tel Aviv, Israel has called on the military for help as residents attempt to practise social distancing, a first for the tightly-knit community where communal worship and shared meals are the norm.

<https://nyti.ms/3erY2E4>

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