

MEI Weekly



US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo testifying before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on “Evaluating the Trump Administration’s Policies on Iran, Iraq and the Use of Force” in the Rayburn House Office Building on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC, on 28 February as protestors hold up signs. Photo: Mandel Ngan/AFP.

CALENDAR: UPCOMING INSTITUTE EVENTS

MEI Events Back Online from April

Can’t attend events in person due to social distancing measures? No problem! MEI is resuming its public events — virtually — from April. Simply register on the respective event page and a Zoom link will be sent to you. Our first virtual public event will be held on 22 April from 4–6pm. Dr John Sfakianakis will examine the impact of the Russia–Saudi Arabia oil price war in his public talk titled “The Oil Price Collapse and Its Implications on the Gulf Economies”. Registration opens next week.



Do visit our MEI website regularly as we update our calendar with more upcoming virtual public events in the coming days.

WHAT’S NEWS: THE BIG HEADLINES THIS WEEK

US–Iran Tensions Continue to Mount

In yet another development in the series of escalating attacks between the United States and Iran, *The Wall Street Journal* reported on Wednesday (1 April) that the US has received intelligence suggesting that Iran, or its proxies, has been plotting a potentially deadly attack against American forces in Iraq. This comes as the Trump administration has once again refused to temporarily suspend sanctions on Iran on humanitarian grounds in the wake of the coronavirus epidemic which has ravaged the country. Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif has accused the US of “economic terrorism”. Key actors around the world, including China, Russia, the European Union and the United Nations, have echoed Iran’s plea since America’s secondary sanctions on financial institutions have largely prevented the acquisition of medical equipment by Iran. The US, however, maintains that Iranian authorities are merely capitalising on the pandemic to lift sanctions for their own benefit.



An Iraqi Civil Defence member disinfecting a stall in a market in Baghdad’s Sadr City suburb in an attempt to stop the spread of the coronavirus. Photo: Ahmad Al-Rubaye/AFP.

Iraq Beggars for Aid as Oil Prices Plummet

With 90 per cent of Iraq’s revenue coming from oil, collapsing oil prices coupled with existing sociopolitical instability have made the impoverished country increasingly desperate as it tries to weather the coronavirus crisis. More than 500 cases have been confirmed in the country, though the real figure is likely many times higher due to limited testing and an overwhelmed healthcare system. *The New York Times* reported on Sunday (29 March) that the government has created a fund for donations in a bid to generate the US\$150 million that Health Minister Jaafar Sadiq Allawi says the country needed. But, it managed to collect less than US\$50 million in pledges as of 29 March (Sunday) as most Iraqis themselves are struggling to survive amid a complete economic standstill.

KSA Suspected of Mass Phone Spying

On Sunday (29 March), *The Guardian* reported that a whistleblower has come forth with millions of secret tracking requests allegedly from the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), claiming that the kingdom has been undertaking a mass surveillance campaign on Saudi citizens in the US since November 2019. Telecommunications experts have confirmed that it is likely that the country has been exploiting weaknesses in the global mobile telecommunications network, such as the decades-old global messaging system known as SS7, to track its citizens as they travel around the US. This accusation comes after the discovery that Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos’ phone was being hacked in January 2020, and hints at a larger campaign to target dissidents and critics of Saudi Arabia’s Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

Muted Religious Celebrations due to Virus

Major religious festivals such as Passover and Easter will occur next week (8 April and 12 April respectively). However, celebrations and rituals will likely be more muted than usual due to the global coronavirus pandemic. Many events commemorating these festivals such as the traditional Easter masses which tend to draw huge crowds have been cancelled or will be taken online by religious authorities. Jewish pilgrims making their way back to Israel for the week-long Passover holiday may also be effectively barred from entry as Israel grapples with containing the Covid-19 outbreak. Even for those continuing with their celebrations across the globe, strict social distancing and public health measures have been put in place for congregants by many governments in a bid to contain the pandemic.



Offshore Arabia Conference 2020

The Offshore Arabia 2020 Conference & Exhibition will be held in Dubai from 8–9 April. The event is organised by the Oil & Gas Safety Council under the patronage of Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, prime minister of the United Arab Emirates. Bringing together experts to focus on topics like the global outlook of the oil industry and other developments within the industry, the main issue will likely be the ongoing oil price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia, which is driving oil prices down to their lowest in decades.

#MUSTREAD: WHAT’S POPULAR ON OUR SOCIAL MEDIA

FACEBOOK: For a country that still lags behind many others when it comes to giving women equal access to opportunity, Egypt has a lion taming industry that is surprisingly dominated by fierce female trainers.

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



In this article for *Foreign Policy*, a Singaporean author uncovers how Mahan Air, a private Iranian airline with ties to terror groups like the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, had a Iranian spreading the coronavirus in the Middle East and likely lied about it to escape the consequences.

<https://bit.ly/2R3T725>

TWITTER: Despite numerous warnings and reminders, ultra-Orthodox Jews in Israel have remained stubborn by not observing the government’s public health measures to combat the coronavirus pandemic and continuing to participate in social gatherings. Their intransigence has prompted Israeli authorities to consider locking down entire neighbourhoods in a bid to ensure proper social distancing and pandemic containment.

<https://bit.ly/3aC9bj7>

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