

# MEI Weekly



US President Donald Trump (left) and Mr Joe Biden, former vice-president and Democratic presidential nominee, speaking during the first presidential debate at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, Ohio, on 29 September. Recent evidence uncovered suggest Russia and Iran are attempting to influence the presidential election as it enters its final two weeks. Photo: Morry Gash / AFP

## WHAT'S HOT: MEI PUBLICATIONS, PODCASTS AND MORE

**READ:** In the latest MEI Insight: MEI Research Affiliate Jean-Loup Samaan dissects the logic of the United Arab Emirates as it shifts from its once neutral stance to a more assertive approach in dealing with regional rivalries and security threats. Read the full article [here](#).

**WATCH & LISTEN:** In last week's ME101 lecture, director of Ibtakar Strategic Consultancy, Dr Alanoud Al-Sharekh, discussed how demographic shifts and political instability will change sociopolitical norms and affect the future of youth and gender politics in the Middle East. Missed the lecture? Watch the video recording or listen to the podcast [here](#).

**WATCH, LISTEN & READ:** Her Excellency Lolwah R M Al-Khater, assistant foreign minister and spokesperson for Qatar's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was the guest speaker at this year's S R Nathan Annual Distinguished Lecture on Wednesday (21 October) where she spoke about how small states can effectively navigate their way through an increasingly multipolar world. Revisit the highlights of the lecture or read the transcript [here](#).

**READ:** Writing for *South China Morning Post*, MEI Principle Research Fellow Alessandro Arduino examines a new development in warfare observed in the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, which is the use of foreign armed drones and mercenaries. Dr Arduino highlights how the presence of Syrian mercenaries reveals the ushering of an era of private military and security firms waging wars on behalf of central governments. Read the full commentary [here](#) or read the Arabic translation of the commentary [here](#).

**READ:** In his comments for Q posts' news analysis of the Nagorno–Karabakh conflict, MEI Principle Research Fellow Alessandro Arduino stresses that while strong Turkish support for Azerbaijan is likely, it will be limited given the possibility of a Turkish-Russian confrontation. He also emphasised that regional mediation and pressure from the expatriate Armenians, in addition to international efforts, could play a significant role in reducing tensions. Read the full analysis in Arabic [here](#).

## WHAT'S NEWS: THE BIG HEADLINES THIS WEEK

### Iran and Russia Seek to Influence US Election

A high-ranking US national security official announced on Wednesday (21 October) that Iran and Russia have both obtained American voter registration data, providing concrete evidence that the two countries are possibly trying to influence the presidential election as it enters its final stages. The Trump administration's announcement that a foreign adversary, Iran, had tried to influence the election by sending intimidating emails was both a "stark warning and a reminder" of how external powers can exploit the vulnerabilities exposed by the Russian interference in 2016. The fact that Iran, which has stepped up its cyber abilities drastically over the past decade, was involved demonstrates how fast other nations have learned from Russia's previous influence operations, highlighting the threats which still loom over the upcoming presidential election.

### Israel & UAE to Allow Citizens Visa-Free Travel

Israel and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) have agreed to allow their citizens reciprocal visa-free travel as direct flights begin, the first such arrangement between Israel and an Arab state aimed at bolstering business and tourism ties. This is a significant move for the UAE, considering that Abu Dhabi does not accord many of its own close allies, such as Egypt and Jordan, the same privilege. Besides the visa waiver, the two countries signed various other agreements that included aviation, science and technology, and investment protection. Along with the US, they also launched a fund that aims to raise US\$3 billion in private investment for development and other projects in the Middle East.



The first direct El-Al flight to the United Arab Emirates arriving at the international airport of Abu Dhabi on 31 August 31, carrying US National Security Agent (NSA) Robert O'Brien, Senior Advisor Jared Kushner and a delegation of Israeli officials headed by Israeli NSA Meir Ben-Shabbat. Recently, Israel and the UAE signed an agreement for reciprocal visa-free travel for their citizens. Photo: US embassy in Jerusalem, as shared on Wikimedia Commons.

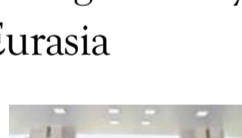
### Kuwait Passes Law to Trim Its Expat Population

Kuwait's parliament unanimously approved a law giving the government a year to set in motion plans to redress the uneven ratio between foreign residents and citizens. This is motivated by Kuwait's plan not to be an expat-majority nation anymore. In June, Kuwaiti Prime Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khalid Al-Sabah said in the percentage of expatriates in the country should be reduced by more than half to 30 per cent of the population. While Kuwait has, for years, been slowly replacing public-sector expatriates with nationals, the coronavirus pandemic and a slump in oil prices, which has put its economy under intense strain, has accelerated its efforts.

## CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

### SCO: An Important Factor in Ensuring Stability and Sustainable Development in Eurasia

In this lecture under our Prominent Speaker Series, His Excellency Vladimir Imamovich Norov, the secretary-general of the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), will talk about the crucial role it plays in ensuring political and economic stability as well as sustainable development in the Eurasia region.



Sign up for this public talk conducted on **27 October** from **4pm** to **5.30pm**. The event will be conducted via Zoom this year due to social distancing measures. Check out <https://nus.edu/3kjcF8M> for more details now!

### ME 101 Closing Session: Central Asia

In the last instalment of the ME101 series for the year, MEI Principal Research Fellow Alessandro Arduino will look at the importance of the Central Asian region, in which many countries are aiming to return to a place of historic relevance as a trading hub, a position held firmly during the time of the ancient Silk Road. Recent important advances in Central Asian regional cooperation mechanisms and economic growth have attracted the interest of a new wave of international investors, bringing with it not only opportunities but also possible security risks. Dr Arduino will break down the complex dynamic of Central Asia's development, as well as its implications on the Middle East.

Join us for this public lecture conducted via Zoom on **29 October** from **5pm** to **6.30pm**. Registration is free and all are welcome. Check out <https://nus.edu/3gCwRXO> for more details now!

### [MEI Salon Series] Stories of Hope from Iraq

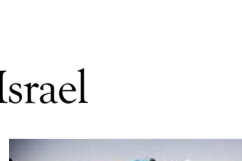
In the latest addition to the MEI Salon Series, Ms Charlene Winfred, who spent a year in Kurdistan, the autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq, will share her experiences working for a small non-governmental organisation helping refugees to rebuild their lives in the long shadow of war. Listening to the stories of many refugees, she was struck not only by how unimaginable these stories were to someone like her, but unexpectedly, also by how much they resonated. These are stories most of us can identify with, no matter who we are, and where or how we live, she said.

Join us for this public talk conducted via Zoom on **30 October** from **3.30pm** to **5pm**. Registration is free and all are welcome. Check out <https://nus.edu/3mbvFNk> for more details now!

## LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

### Sudan Set to Normalise Ties with Israel

After months of deliberations and under US mediation, Sudan is set to normalise ties with Israel. The announcement may come as early as this weekend. A rare direct flight departed from Israel for Khartoum on Wednesday (21 October), carrying a high-level Israeli delegation of Israeli Prime Minister's Office and Mossad intelligence agency officials. They met with their Sudanese counterparts in the transitional government.



### UAE Announces Public Holiday to Celebrate Prophet Mohammed's birthday

The UAE has announced on Wednesday that next Thursday (29 October) will be a public sector holiday to mark the birthday of the Prophet Mohammed. Referred to in Arabic to as Eid Al Mawlid Al Nabawi, this holiday is observed rather than celebrated. Muslims are encouraged to spend the day connecting with God spiritually, by either fasting or reading the Quran. The day is significant in the Islamic calendar, and is one celebrated by around 1.8 billion Muslims around the world.

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## CAN'T MAKE IT TO OUR EVENTS? LISTEN AT YOUR OWN TIME!

