

# MEI Weekly.



A United Nations ship seen in the southernmost area of Naqura in Lebanon, by the border with Israel, on Wednesday (14 October). On Thursday (15 October), Lebanon and Israel, still technically at war, began unprecedented talks, sponsored by the United Nations and the United States, to settle a maritime border dispute and clear the way for oil and gas exploration. Photo: Mahmoud Zayyat / AFP.

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

**READ:** How is the imminent energy transition impacting energy politics in the Gulf region? Energy expert Philippe Rose explored the changes in global demand for primary energy and how Gulf states are responding to these circumstances in a previous ME 101 Lecture. Revisit the discussion through the summary [here](#).

**LISTEN & READ:** In the seventh episode of “Boots Off the Ground: Security in Transition in the Middle East and Beyond”, MEI Principle Fellow Alessandro Arduino and Research Fellow Ameer Lutfi interviewed Dr Sorcha MacLeod on the vision of the United Nations Working Group on the use of mercenaries in conflicts and warfare. Listen to the podcast and read the transcript [here](#).

**WATCH, READ & LISTEN:** What are the trends in public opinion in the Middle East towards contentious issues such as Israel, the Palestinians and Iran? Director of Arab Barometer Michael Robbins and Dr David Pollock of The Washington Institute explained how public polling operates within a restricted environment and also stressed its importance in informing policies not only by rulers in the region but also governments such as the United States. Catch the highlights of the webinar [here](#).

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

### Israel and Lebanon Begin Talks on Sea Border

Israel and Lebanon started their first round of negotiations on Wednesday (14 October) to end a long-running dispute over their maritime border in the Mediterranean Sea. These talks, hosted by the United Nations and mediated by the United States, aim to settle 330 square miles in the gas-rich sea claimed by both countries as falling under their exclusive economic zone. A maritime border agreement is especially important for Lebanon since it could stand to benefit from the exploitation of offshore gas and oil that could ameliorate its debts. The next meeting between the delegates is expected to convene on 28 October.

### American Hostages Freed in Yemen

US and Saudi officials said two Americans — humanitarian worker Sandra Loli and businessman Mikael Gidada — who were held hostage by the Iran-backed Houthi militants in Yemen were released on Wednesday (14 October) in a trade that returned more than 200 of the group's loyalists. It is hoped that such exchanges can revive peace talks to end the five-year-old battle against the Iran-backed fighters which has been dubbed the “world's worst humanitarian crisis”. However, Saudi officials warned that the release of some of these specialised Houthi fighters could pose a problem since they could be reintroduced to the current war efforts. With a new wave of fighting breaking out, prospects of any resolution are dampened for the foreseeable future.



Palestinians shouting slogans during a protest in Gaza City against the United Arab Emirates' deal with Israel to normalise relations on 19 August. Photo: Mohammed Abed / AFP.

### New Israeli Initiative Monitors Social Media to Tackle Anti-Israel Public Opinion

A new study by the Israeli Strategic Affairs Ministry conducted between August and September this year reported that 90 per cent of discussions in Arabic on social media were found to have negative sentiments towards the recent normalisation between Israel and the Gulf states of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. This study, part of a new initiative by the ministry to tackle negative public opinion about Israel, also found that the majority of such accounts are associated to Hizballah, Hamas and the Palestinian Authority, along with other Palestinian non-governmental organisations.

## CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

### S R Nathan Distinguished Lecture 2020

Can small states prosper while they are continuously facing threats to their existence? Hear Qatari Assistant Foreign Minister Lolwah R M Al-Khater share how her country thrived despite being illegally blockaded by its neighbours at this year's S R Nathan Annual Distinguished Lecture. She will also explore the similarities between Singapore and Qatar as small states navigating their geopolitical position in this contested era.



Last call to sign up for this public talk conducted on 21 October from 3pm to 4.30pm. The event will be conducted via Zoom this year due to social distancing measures. Check out <https://nus.edu/318qplQ> for more details now!

### ME 101: Religion and Political Islam in the Middle East and Its Impact on Our Region

How have the developments and movements in the Middle East impacted Southeast Asian states such as Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia? In the next ME 101 Lecture, ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute Senior Fellow Noorshahril Saat will be exploring the historical interaction between the Middle East and Southeast Asia, and how regional political Islam adopt and adapt to global and local dynamics.

Join us for this public talk conducted via Zoom on 22 October from 5pm to 6.30pm. Registration is free and all are welcome. Check out <https://nus.edu/3gCwRXO> for more details now!

## LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

### US Treasury Secretary to Visit Middle East

According to undisclosed sources, US Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin plans to tour the Middle East next week to tentatively meet his counterparts in Israel, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates. This trip, made by one of President Donald Trump's influential cabinet minister, comes as the president praises his administration's role in brokering the Abraham Accords which normalised the relationship of the UAE and Bahrain with Israel.



### Lebanon Postpones PM Nomination

Lebanese President Michel Aoun announced on Wednesday (14 October) that the consultations to select the new prime minister to form a new government is postponed to next week. The consultation that was supposed to be held on Thursday (15 October) was supposed to assess the support of Sunni leader Saad Al-Hariri as a potential candidate. However, some Christian leaders have their reservations over Mr Al-Hariri, especially after he resigned as prime minister after a mass protest a year ago and supported the implementation of French President Emmanuel Macron's reform plans. The formation of a new Lebanese government is critical especially after Lebanon plunged into a financial crisis and is facing the Covid-19 pandemic and the aftermath of the Beirut blast.

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