

MEI Weekly



After a three-and-a-half-year long blockade on Qatar, families across borders within the Gulf region are finally able to reunite—a cautious but promising sign that greater regional cooperation among the member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) are to resume. Photo: Flags of the GCC countries on the West Bay in Doha, Qatar, by vobios / Flickr.

WHAT'S HOT: MEI PUBLICATIONS, PODCASTS AND MORE

READ: In our latest Insight, MEI Senior Research Fellow Dr James M Dorsey assesses whether China views the Middle East as a region of strategic importance for diplomacy and investments, and what the outlook for Chinese foreign policy in the region might look like. Read the full article [here](#).

WHAT'S NEWS: THE BIG HEADLINES THIS WEEK

Gulf Families Across Borders Reunited Since Qatar Blockade

After a reconciliation pact was signed between member states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) at the 41st Summit in Al-Ula, Saudi Arabia, last week (Tuesday, 5 January 2021), flight connections between Qatar and two of the blockading countries, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), have resumed, bringing much respite to families who have been separated for three and a half years. With tribal affiliations existing long before any modern-day nation-state boundaries were drawn, many GCC citizens have close blood and kinship ties across borders. While greater regional cooperation will recommence, the process is likely to be slow and it will take some time before old wounds between the estranged political leaders of the GCC will heal, given that divisions that led to the blockade in the first place have remained unresolved. These include allegations that Doha continues to support Islamist movements across the region and that it retains a strong alliance with Turkey and Iran.

Iran Manufactures Equipment Capable of Producing Nuclear Weapons

According to a confidential report by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) of the United Nations released on Wednesday (13 January 2021), Iran has informed the watchdog that it has begun an assembly line to manufacture uranium metal at a site in Isfahan in the coming months—a core ingredient in the construction of nuclear weapons. It remains unclear whether this latest development is part of the country's nuclear operations for civilian use, such as harvesting nuclear energy for power and electricity, or a step in nuclear weapons-manufacturing, with Tehran having denied any involvement in the latter. Nevertheless, the construction of equipment capable of producing uranium powder will take four to five months, says Iranian authorities.

Deadliest Israeli Airstrikes in Syria Kills 57

The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said on Wednesday (13 January 2021) that Israel has killed 57 Syrian regime and allied Iran-backed fighters in its latest airstrikes in eastern Syria—the highest number of casualties since the start of the conflict. A spokesperson for the Israeli Defence Forces has declined to comment on the incident, but the Observatory has noted that a consignment of Iranian-manufactured weapons had been transported by the Fatimid Brigade from neighbouring Iraq in the area just days prior to the strikes. These airstrikes are carried out by Israel on Syrian soil periodically to prevent any build-up of enemy troops near its disputed northern border in the occupied Golan Heights.



The northeastern border that Israel shares with Syria, a disputed area known as the Golan Heights and occupied by Israel since the 1967 Six Day war, is dotted with numerous ruins of Syrian villages. Photo: Wiki Commons.

CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

[MEI Salon Series] Resistance, Rebellion & Revolution | A Libyan Artist in Exile – Hasan 'Alsatoor' Dhaimish (1955–2016)

Coinciding with the Libyan revolution's 10th anniversary, this event is a reflection on the life and works of a Libyan satirist in exile in the UK, Hasan 'Alsatoor' (The Cleaver) Dhaimish (1955–2016), and an exploration of contemporary Libyan culture and history. Through satire and art spanning from the 1980s to 2016, attendees will experience Libya's transition from autocracy to liberation and civil war through Alastoor's work. Hosted by the artist's son, Mr Sherif Dhaimish, the talk will be aired from the London exhibition, "Resistance, Rebellion & Revolution — A Libyan Artist in Exile", at P21 Gallery, and will feature some of the show's video installations and artworks. Mr Dhaimish will delve into his father's life in exile and his eclectic body of work — from depictions of pre-Qaddafi Libya to satirical cartoons, and paintings inspired by blues and jazz — while offering an insight into Libya's modern history.



This public talk will be conducted online via Zoom on **17 February 2021** (Wednesday), from **6.00pm to 7.30pm** (SGT). All are welcome to participate. Click [here](#) for more details now!

LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

US Action on Iran in Trump's Last Days as President

Contradictory statements have emerged from US officials over whether Iran has become the new base of operations for Al-Qaeda, with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo affirming the claim last Tuesday (12 January 2021). Other current and former officials, however, have dismissed the claim, stating that there is little new intelligence to suggest Iran's involvement as a hub for Al-Qaeda leaders. Statements on Iran are likely to continue over the coming days, as the leaders of the outgoing Trump administration attempt a last-ditch effort to further instigate Iran as one of the world's greatest terrorism threats.



Unclear Relations between Erdogan and Biden

US president-elect Joe Biden has yet to respond to Turkish President Erdogan's offer for a phone call, which was made a month ago. The president-elect has publicly spoken out in favouring a different approach towards Turkey in his remarks last year to the New York Times and the Turkish leader was also one of the last world leaders to congratulate Biden for his election victory. Relations between the two leaders remain unclear for now but Turkish officials in Ankara have stated that they are willing to start anew to establish a fruitful relationship with the new administration.

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