

MEI Weekly.



Iranian foreign ministry spokesman Saeed Khatibzadeh speaks in a press conference in Tehran on 22 February 2021. Iran reached a temporary agreement with UN inspectors in a deal that effectively bought time as the US and Tehran attempt to salvage the 2015 nuclear agreement. Photo: Atta Kenare / AFP.

WHAT'S HOT: MEI PUBLICATIONS, PODCASTS AND MORE

WATCH: Join MEI's Principal Research Fellow, Dr Alessandro Arduino, as he talks about relations between China and the Middle East in 2021 and beyond, alongside other experts. This talk, titled "China's Middle East Policy: What Next?" is organised by Cambridge Middle East and North Africa Forum (MENAF). Tune into the Cambridge MENAF Facebook page on Saturday, 27 February 2021, from 1.00am onwards (SGT) to see and listen to the live streaming of this discussion. [Click here for more details.](#)

WHAT'S NEWS: THE BIG HEADLINES THIS WEEK

Iran Considering Direct Talks with US

Iran said on Tuesday, 23 February 2021, that it was considering participating in talks with delegates from the Biden administration in an informal meeting proposed by European officials. If the meeting goes ahead, it will be Tehran's first formal engagement with American negotiators since the US withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2018. Since then, Iran has refused direct negotiations with the US, citing Washington's refusal to lift the sanctions imposed by the Trump administration as a reason. Tehran has also recently undertaken moves that have further violated terms set by the JCPOA, including barring UN inspectors from access to its nuclear facilities.

Syria Experiencing Dire Economic Crisis

After a decade of war, Syria now finds itself mired in an economic crisis, with 60 percent of Syrians — or 12.4 million people — at risk of going hungry, the highest number ever recorded. The manifold causes of the crisis, which pose an immediate threat to President Bashar al-Assad's leadership, include the destructive impact of a decade-long war, sanctions imposed by the West, a banking collapse in neighbouring Lebanon and imposed lockdowns to combat the Covid-19 pandemic. Much of Syria's oil fields and agricultural land also lie in territories controlled by US-backed Kurdish rebels, while Russia and Iran — the Syrian regime's closest allies — can offer little in the way of economic or humanitarian aid.



Syrians walk in old Damascus in front of a portrait of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. The ongoing economic crisis has led to severe food and power shortages that pose an immediate threat to Bashar al-Assad's presidency in Syria. Photo: Louai Beshara / AFP

Women Allowed to Enlist in Saudi Arabia's Military Force

Women can now enlist in Saudi Arabia's military, thanks to a ruling by the Saudi Ministry of Defence. The move, part of crown prince Muhammad Bin Salman's reformist plans to incorporate more women in the workforce, heralds a further expansion of jobs and rights for women in the kingdom. While both genders must fulfil admission criteria, female enlistees have extra requirements. These include being between the age of 21 and 40 years and the minimum attainment of a high school education. The decision drew mixed reactions with some seeing a military role as unsuited for women, while others lauded the decision as providing a more active and visible role for women in the society.

CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

MEI Film Festival: A Son

A family holiday to southern Tunisia ends in disaster for Fares, Meriem and their 10-year-old son, Aziz, when he is accidentally shot in a terrorist ambush. His injury changes their lives as Aziz needs a liver transplant, which leads to the discovery of a long-buried secret. Will Aziz and the couple's relationship survive?

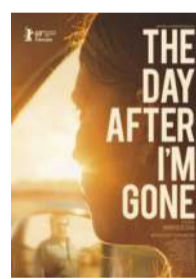
Last call to register for an exclusive virtual session happening today, Friday, 26 February at 8pm (SGT), to meet with the director and hear everything he has to say about this movie! [Click here for more information and to sign up now!](#)



MEI Film Festival: The Day After I'm Gone

Yoram, a 50-year-old veterinarian living in Tel Aviv, is forced to re-examine his relationship with his teenage daughter after she attempts to take her own life. He decides to take her on a journey to visit her mother's family, setting off a process of self and mutual discovery for both.

Don't miss an exclusive virtual meet this Sunday, 28 February 2021 at 8pm (SGT), with the director of this movie to get inside his head! [Click here for more information and to sign up now!](#)



LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

US to Release Report on Khashoggi Murder

The US is set to release a declassified intelligence report that is expected to implicate Saudi Arabia's crown prince Muhammad bin Salman's role in the 2018 murder of dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi. The release of the report is seen as part of the Biden administration's attempt to make good on his campaign promises to recalibrate relations with Saudi Arabia and take a tougher stance on the kingdom's human rights violations. The White House also said on Wednesday, 24 February, that Mr Biden is due to call Saudi Arabia's king Salman 'soon'. Officials say that the call is meant to warn the king regarding the report's impending publication. The White House also said on Wednesday that Mr Biden is due to call Saudi's King Salman 'soon'. Officials say that the call is meant to warn the king regarding the report's impending publication.



OPEC+ to Discuss Oil Cuts in March Meeting

OPEC+ is set to meet on Thursday, 4 March 2021, with key members Saudi Arabia and Russia at odds over providing more crude oil to the market in April. While Saudi Arabia has indicated its preference for the group to maintain the current level of output even as demand for oil recovers, Russia wants to increase supply. To rejuvenate oil prices and clear surplus inventories amid the Covid-19 pandemic's disruptive impact, OPEC+ is still withholding 7 million barrels a day from the market. Saudi Arabia has also been voluntarily curbing production by an extra 1 million barrels a day — a fact that it can use as leverage in arguing for its position. A cease of Saudi Arabia's voluntary production cuts could lead to a decline in oil prices.

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