

MEI Weekly



Syrians gathered on the roofs of buildings in the rebel-held city of Idlib on 15 March 2021, as they marked ten years since the nationwide anti-government protests that sparked the country's devastating civil war. Photo: Omar Haj Kadour / AFP.

WHAT'S HOT: MEI PUBLICATIONS, PODCASTS AND MORE

READ: In the latest article of our Insights series, Dr Fabio Indeo discusses how China's need to protect its own strategic goals in the Gulf, especially its projects under the Belt and Road Initiative, might push the country to take a more proactive role in the region's security arena. Read all about it [here](#).

WHAT'S NEWS: THE BIG HEADLINES THIS WEEK

Syrians Observe 10th Anniversary of Civil War

On Monday, 15 March 2021, hundreds of Syrians gathered in Freedom Square, Idlib, one of the last few key rebel areas holding out against the Damascus government, to mark 10 years since their civil war began. The city, which has been under ceasefire protection since March 2020, bore witness to the gathering of artists, activists and protestors, who continue to hope that the country will one day be free of the Assad regime and can move towards building a more just, civil and democratic political system in its place. Freshly painted murals depicting the most important events of Syria's history and the continued struggle for freedom were created for the occasion, with protestors waving the three-starred opposition flag in the city's streets.

Caveats Added to Saudi Expat Labour Reforms

Saudi Arabia's foreign worker labour reforms, designed to make expatriate working and living in the kingdom more attractive, were first announced in November last year. The implementation happened last Sunday, 14 March 2021, but with some new conditions added. Envisioned as a significant departure from the previously controversial "kafala" or sponsorship system, the new package promised non-Saudis the ability to change jobs, travel abroad or leave the country permanently without their Saudi employer's permission. However, a recent guide published by the Ministry of Human Resource and Social Development has suggested otherwise. It remains to be seen how these new reforms might actually impact future arrangements for non-citizens. The new caveats will likely not incentivise foreigners working in Singapore or Dubai to relocate to the kingdom anytime soon.



An Asian expat living in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, surfs down a sand dune in the 'Saad' desert area, 110 kilometres east of Riyadh. Photo: Fayez Nureldine / AFP.

New Dead Sea Scrolls Discovered

The Israeli Antiquities Authority has announced the recent discovery of new biblical text fragments, otherwise known as the Dead Sea Scrolls, on Tuesday, 16 March 2021, after the first were found over 60 years ago in 1946 by Bedouin shepherds in Qumran, the West Bank. These recent fragments have been dated to the 2nd century C.E., and are believed to have been stashed in what is now infamously called the Cave of Horror, where 40 human skeletons were found in the 1960s. Among other discoveries were a cache of millennia-old rare coins, a 6,000-year-old mummified skeleton of a child and a large basket dating back 10,500 years, believed to be the world's oldest. The national archaeological project, which supports this excavation, was created to prevent antiquities from being looted in the area.

CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

Egypt and Myanmar: How the Military's Economic Interests Complicates Political Transition

Join Dr Yezid Sayigh and Dr Htwe Htwe Thein as they discuss different case studies - Egypt, Turkey and Myanmar, in a broad conversation to understand how the military elite's vested economic interests can severely affect and challenge any success in political transition in these nations.



This public talk is conducted online via Zoom on **Wednesday, 24 March 2021 at 3pm (SGT)**. Click [here](#) to sign up for free!

China's Political Entanglements in the Middle East: Escaping Inevitability?

Beyond significantly enhancing its economic footprint, China has forged comprehensive strategic partnerships with key Middle Eastern states including Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Iran and Egypt. China hopes its economic clout and efforts to be the region's technological juggernaut as part of its Belt and Road Initiative and Digital Silk Road will shield it from being consumed by the myriad of conflicts in the Middle East. However, whether this is sufficient to protect China from its mushrooming interests in the region at a time of strategic rivalry with the United States - which is seeking to reconfigure its commitments in the Middle East - is yet to be known. MEI (NUS) will be hosting a panel of experts to explore China's options.

This public talk will be conducted online via Zoom on **Tuesday, 30 March 2021, at 4pm (SGT)**. Click [here](#) to register for free!

The Gulf and Beyond: Assessing Israel's Expanding Arab Relations

In the last six months, a flurry of Arab states, including the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, established diplomatic relations with Israel or announced their intention to do so. The "honeymoon period" for Israel, the UAE and Bahrain is coming to an end. Sudan and Morocco have yet to finalise details of their recognition of the Jewish state. Israeli and Emiratis basked in the warmth of the receptions that they received in each other's countries and the prospects of a blossoming security, commercial and trade relationship.

Yet, despite a series of business deals and cooperation agreements in areas such as aviation, technology, agriculture and education, not all went according to expectations. In this webinar, a panel of prominent experts will assess the current state of affairs, as well as the prospects of more states – not limited to the Gulf region – in recognising the Jewish state.

This public talk will be conducted online via Zoom on **Thursday, 1 April 2021, at 4pm (SGT)**. Click [here](#) to register for free!

LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

Millions to Celebrate Nowruz this Weekend

300 million people will celebrate Nowruz, the Persian New Year, this Sunday, 21 March 2021, across the nation-states of Iran, Azerbaijan and Afghanistan, among others, as well as the numerous diasporic communities across the world. While it is now a secular holiday, it is believed to have roots in Zoroastrianism and is recognised by UNESCO as an 'Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity'. The festival commemorates the coming of spring and the season of renewal and rebirth – something most look forward to in these difficult times of the Covid-19 pandemic.



Israelis to Go to Polls for the Fourth Time

This coming Tuesday, 23 March 2021, Israelis will vote for the fourth time in two years, in an attempt to break the political deadlock of the multiparty system. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who has been under investigation for corruption since 2017 and has refused to resign, pulled together a disparate group of parties in his coalition. This includes the ultranationalist party led by Itamar Ben Gvir, who wishes to expel Arab citizens not loyal to Israel and supported the Jewish extremist massacre of 29 Palestinians in Hebron in 1994. Choosing to vie for some Arab votes this time round, most analysts predict that a fifth election is likely to be in store as the Israeli society becomes increasingly polarised along the lines of those who support Netanyahu and those who do not.

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