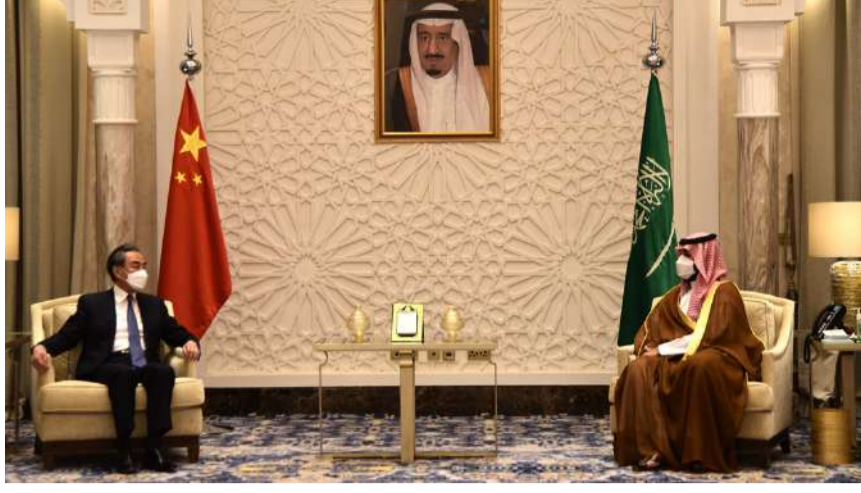


# MEI Weekly



In the first leg of his week-long tour to the Middle East, which began on Wednesday, 24 March, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi met with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. Photo: Chinese Foreign Ministry.

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

**READ:** MEI Principal Research Fellow Alessandro Arduino said the role of foreign powers in the Syrian conflict has sparked the rapid growth and fluidity of the number of armed groups. This, he said in an interview with the China Daily, has resulted in prolonged conflict and dimmed hopes of a diplomatic resolution. Read the full article [here](#).

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

### China's Foreign Minister Visits the Middle East

Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi began his week-long tour of the Middle East on Wednesday, 24 March. He will visit Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, the UAE, Bahrain and Oman. The visit follows calls he made to the foreign ministers of Iraq and Jordan on 13 March. China's ties to the region, previously focused almost entirely on energy, have been greatly expanded recently to include financial cooperation and vaccine diplomacy. During his trip, Mr Wang is expected to focus on further upgrading ties with the region.

### Houthis Reject Saudi Ceasefire Plan for Yemen

Saudi Arabia presented a new initiative to end the war in Yemen on Monday, 22 March 2021. The plan, announced by Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud, includes a ceasefire and re-opening Sanaa airport and Hodeidah port – both controlled by the Iran-aligned Houthis. While the Yemeni government said it is welcoming the offer, the Houthis said there was nothing new in the plan, adding that it fell short of their demands to completely lift the port and airport blockade.



Forces loyal to Yemen's Houthi rebels shouting slogans during a mass funeral for fighters killed in battles with Saudi-backed government troops in the Marib region of Sanaa on Tuesday, 23 March 2021. Photo: Mohammed Huwais / AFP.

### Suez Canal Traffic Jam Will Hit Global Trade

One of the world's largest container ships, the 400m-long Ever Given, ran aground in the Suez Canal on Tuesday, 23 March 2021, causing a pile-up of traffic seeking to transit the waterway. At least 100 vessels are now caught in a traffic jam that will affect global trade if the vessel cannot be floated soon. Singapore Transport Minister Ong Ye Kung said a prolonged traffic jam will affect supplies to Asia. The blockage adds woe to the global shipping industry, which is already struggling to cope with a surge of orders due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

## CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

### 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. Beijing hopes it can avoid being enmeshed in the region's conflicts but its mushrooming interests in the region – while it is engaged in a strategic rivalry with the United States – will make this a tough ask. This MEI event will feature a panel of experts who will explore China's options.

This public talk will be conducted online via Zoom on **Tuesday, 30 March 2021**, from **4.00pm to 5.30pm** (SGT). All are welcome to participate. This event is free, but registration is compulsory. Click [here](#) for more details!

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

In the last six months, a number of Arab states, including the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, have established diplomatic relations with Israel. While trade and other ties have boomed, the "honeymoon period" for the Abraham Accords is coming to an end. MEI has put together a panel to examine ties going forward, as well as the chances of expanding the accords to include other countries in the Gulf and beyond.

This public talk will be conducted online via Zoom on **Thursday, 1 April 2021**, from **4.00pm to 5.30pm** (SGT). All are welcome to participate. This event is free, but registration is compulsory. Click [here](#) for more details!

### GCC Economies – A Strategic Overview

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) economies still depend heavily on oil and gas for their income, budgets and social cohesion, though all have embarked on a journey of economic diversification. This talk, organised in collaboration with the Trends Research & Advisory Center in Abu Dhabi, will identify key sectors and opportunities ahead for the GCC and countries that trade with it, including Singapore.

This collaborative effort is part of MEI's drive to bring a diverse range of viewpoints to its audience by working with other research institutes, particularly within the Middle East. Stay tuned for more such events!

This public talk will be conducted online via Zoom on **Wednesday, 7 April 2021**, from **4.00pm to 5.30pm** (SGT). All are welcome to participate. This event is free, but registration is compulsory. Click [here](#) for more details!

## LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

### Amazon is Hiring in Saudi Arabia

Amazon said it is hiring 1,500 people in Saudi Arabia this year, becoming the latest tech giant to beef up operations as pandemic-fed demand for online services rises in the Arab world's largest economy. The hiring is a small move for a company with over a million permanent employees around the world, but the move is notable as it comes after a feud between Amazon founder Jeff Bezos and Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman spilled into public view in recent years.



### China Eyes Trade Deals in the Gulf

As his six-nation swing through the region continues, Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi said he will seek a Free Trade Agreement (FTA) with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. If successful, the FTA would be a major boost for the region, with the Gulf currently accounting for about two-thirds of China's trade with the Arab world.

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