

# MEI Weekly.



Fighters loyal to Yemen's Saudi-backed government hold a position against the Houthi rebels in Marib on 16 April 2021. Saudi and Iranian top officials holding direct talks in Baghdad this month might impact the outcome of the six-year long war in Yemen—a proxy war between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Photo: Nabil Alawzari / AFP.

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

**WATCH, READ & LISTEN:** In a co-authored piece for the Italian Institute for International Political Studies (ISPI), MEI Research Fellow Clemens Chay discusses how the timing of Sultan Haitham's ascension during the Covid-19 pandemic provided him with a greater opportunity for reform implementation in Oman—an act that would have been difficult in any other circumstance. Read more [here](#).

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

### Iran and Saudi Arabia Hold Direct Talks

Earlier this month, senior Iranian and Saudi officials met in Baghdad for the first round of direct talks in a bid to repair their diplomatic relations, which have been severed since 2016 over the latter's execution of senior Shi'a cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr. Both countries are involved in the six-year Yemeni civil war, where Saudi Arabia is an ally of the ruling Yemeni government whereas the Houthi rebels are backed by Iran. Saudi Arabia is keen to end the war, particularly since the Biden administration has pledged to reassess relations with the kingdom over its involvement in hostilities across its southern border, but the outcome of the talks remains to be seen.

### Russia Strikes Syrian Islamic State Militants

On Monday, 19 April 2021, as many as 200 Islamic State (IS) militants, who have been assassinating Syrian and Russian military personnel and attacking major highways and oil convoys, were said to have been killed by Russian airstrikes across central Syria. Though they no longer control significant territory in the country, IS militants have made it difficult for President Bashar al-Assad to maintain nominal control over this part of Syria through their presence in desert hideouts. While the US-backed Syrian Democratic Forces were successful in removing IS fighters in north-eastern Syria, the militants have found refuge in the government-held territory near Palmyra, south of the Euphrates, and analysts do not see the insurgency ending any time soon.



Remains of the Temple of Bel in Syria's ancient city of Palmyra, which was desecrated by IS militants back in August 2015. Photo: Louai Beshara / AFP.

### Syrians Seek Refuge in Old Ruins

With Syria's 10-year civil war displacing millions of people, families have sought refuge in ancient village ruins built as early as the 1st century CE. While these important archaeological sites have been marred by bullets and their pillars shattered by airstrikes, they remain in relatively good condition even after 1,000 years, though the continued fighting threatens to destroy them. These ancient villages have also been inscribed as one of Syria's UNESCO World Heritage sites. However, efforts to protect these sites froze in 2011 when the civil war broke out and many armed groups started using them as bases.

## CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

### The China-Iran Deal: Mirage or Game Changer?

Is the hype surrounding the recently concluded US\$400 billion China-Iran deal justified? Is the timing of the deal, which coincides with the JCPOA negotiations, significant? Is Iran leveraging its relations with Beijing to force Washington's hand? MEI will be hosting a panel of experts to tackle these and other questions.

This public talk will be conducted online via Zoom on **Thursday, 29 April 2021**, from **5.00pm to 6.30pm** (SGT). All are welcome to participate. This event is free, however, registration is compulsory. Click [here](#) for more details.

### [Book Talk] Protecting China's Interests Overseas: From the Middle East to Central Asia

Andrea Ghiselli, author of the book *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitisation and Foreign Policy*, will discuss Chinese foreign and security policymaking with Raffaello Pantucci, a researcher at RSIS whose work looks at security dynamics in the Eurasian heartland. Together, they will speak about China's challenges in managing non-traditional security issues across this wide landscape and the gradual development of a Chinese strategic approach to defending its interests overseas.

Join us for this public talk conducted via Zoom on **Wednesday, 5 May 2021**, from **4.00pm to 5.30pm** (SGT). Registration is free and all are welcome. Click [here](#) for more details now!

### Revisiting The Northern-Tier: Syrian Reconstruction Inside-Out

MEI's Arabia-Asia cluster has been working on the concept of the loose two-tiered geopolitical order emerging within the Middle East - 'Southern Tier' (involving the maritime Gulf states, Israel, India and the US) and the 'Northern Tier' (Russia, Iran and Turkey).



This talk will revisit the concept of the 'Northern Tier' through an inside-out view from Syria, a country where one can observe the dynamics between the three key Northern Tier states. Transnational historians and anthropologists will ground the ongoing involvement of these players in a range of border-traversing networks of merchants, tribal diasporas and paramilitary groups. What will these bring? Collaborations or conflicting rivalries?

To find out, join us for this public talk conducted via Zoom on **Thursday, 12 May 2021**, from **5.00pm to 6.30pm** (SGT). Registration is free. Click [here](#) for more details now!

## LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

### Biden to Declare Atrocities Against Armenia Were Genocide

After more than a century since the Ottoman Empire's killing of an estimated 1.5 million Armenian civilians, President Biden is preparing to declare that the atrocities were an act of genocide. This would coincide with the 106th anniversary of the beginning of the systematic death march that the predecessors of modern Turkey started during World War I. Turkey's leaders have resolutely rejected that the killing campaign which began in 1915, amounted to genocide. The action would signal that the American commitment to human rights outweighs the risk of further fraying the US alliance with Turkey at the present moment.



### JCPOA Negotiations Resume Next Week

Officials involved in the current negotiations in Vienna over the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) include Iran, China, Russia, Germany, France and the UK, and they have conducted another week of talks. Noticeably absent is the US, whose domestic politics in Washington have complicated the situation, together with Iran's refusal to meet the country's representatives directly. The US is therefore involved indirectly and it has laid out details of the sanctions relief it is prepared to provide Iran with. Negotiations are set to resume next week.

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