

# MEI Weekly.



Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif at a conference in Tehran. An audio recording of Mr Zarif commenting about the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran's foreign policy was leaked, causing significant controversy. Photo: Atta Kenare / AFP.

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

**READ:** Are private contractors in the stability operations industry “mercenaries” or can they provide cost-effective services that allow regular military forces to focus on their core missions? Can the militaries of small states like Singapore take advantage of the capabilities and savings they offer? Find out what president emeritus of the International Stability Operations Association, Doug Brooks, has to say about this in MEI's latest Insight. Read his paper [here](#).

**READ:** In an article by Arab News about the leaked audio recording of Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, MEI's Senior Research Fellow Asif Shuja said this could have happened to dissuade Mr Zarif from running for president and discussed the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in Iran's political system. Read his comments [here](#).

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

### Iranian Foreign Minister's Tape Leaked

Brutally frank leaked comments by Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif have led to an uproar in Iran, with critics calling for his resignation. In a taped conversation which was part of an oral history project, Mr Zarif spoke of his difficult position as foreign minister and the place of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in decisions about Iran's security issues and foreign policy. The New York Times reports that Mr Zarif was heard making critical comments about the former commander of the IRGC's Quds Force General Qasim Soleimani, who was killed last year in a US strike but a foreign ministry spokesperson said the recording did not represent the full scope of the minister's comments about his respect and love for the general.

### Qatar Airways Emerges as World's Biggest Long-Haul Carrier

Having spent years in the shadow of its rival Emirates Airline, Qatar Airways has eclipsed Emirates – for now – as the world's biggest long-haul carrier by capacity. In the past 12 months, Qatar Airways has flown more seats than any other airline on cross-border routes. It has flown near-empty planes on global routes to increase its market share and is also taking the opportunity to pursue new landing rights while other airlines have reduced services so as to emerge stronger after the pandemic. Whether Qatar Airways retains this position will partly depend on how quickly other airlines restore their flight schedules and if it will be able to start filling flights when the world resumes travel in earnest.



An Airbus A350 plane of Qatar Airways lands at Berlin airport. Qatar Airways has edged out rival Emirates Airline to become the world's biggest long-haul carrier by capacity—for now. Photo: Odd Andersen / AFP

### Saudi Crown Prince: Peace with Iran Possible

In a wide-ranging interview on state television, Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud said his country is not keen about perpetual hostility with Iran and is open to talks if Iran stops sponsoring regional militias. He also said that Saudi Arabia's interests align with those of US President Joe Biden's administration by more than 90 per cent and described the US as a strategic and historic partner to Saudi Arabia. Additionally, the crown prince described in detail aspects of his country's Vision 2030 programme for economic reform, linking its success to the establishment of pragmatic foreign relations.

## CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

### Protecting China's Interests Overseas: From the Middle East to Central Asia

What challenges does China face in managing risks from terrorism, crime, and other non-traditional security issues across the Middle East and South and Central Asia? Andrea Ghiselli, author of the book *Protecting China's Interests Overseas: Securitisation and Foreign Policy*, alongside Raffaello Pantucci, a researcher at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore, will discuss these issues and the development of a Chinese strategic approach to defending its overseas interests.



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

### 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?

Join us for this free public talk conducted via Zoom on Wednesday, **12 May** from 5pm to 6.30pm. Register [here!](#)

### Making It Count: Statistics and Statecraft in the Early People's Republic of China

One of the biggest challenges facing leaders of the new People's Republic of China back in 1949 was how much they did not know. The government of one of the world's largest nations was committed to fundamentally re-engineering its society and economy via socialist planning while having almost no reliable statistical data of the country. *Making It Count: Statistics and Statecraft in the Early People's Republic of China* is the history of efforts to resolve this “crisis in counting”. Listen to author and historian Arunabh Ghosh, as he takes us through his book.

Join us as for this public talk conducted via Zoom on Wednesday, **19 May** at 7.30pm. Registration is free and all are welcome. Sign up [here!](#)

## LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

### Will Netanyahu Form a Coalition?

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's mandate to form a government expires on 4 May. Despite offers to the leaders of two parties on the Israeli right, Yamina and New Hope, for a rotating prime ministership, it appears unlikely that Mr Netanyahu will succeed. The two parties are also in talks with centrist party Yesh Atid on a coalition that could involve several other ideologically diverse parties on both the right and left as well as Arab party Ra'am.



### The Fight for Marib Intensifies

Multiple Yemini government sources have told AFP that they expect the next two weeks to decide the fate of an offensive by Huthi fighters to seize the northern stronghold of Marib in an oil-rich region. Fierce fighting on multiple frontlines around the strategic city has left many dead. The city is also estimated to hold two million people displaced by a conflict in its 7th year now.

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