

MEI Weekly.



This studio photographic illustration depicts a smartphone featuring the website of Israel's NSO Group, which has come under the spotlight amid reports that its 'Pegasus' spyware has been used for illegal surveillance by various governments around the world. Photo: JOEL SAGET / AFP

WHAT'S HOT: MEI PUBLICATIONS, PODCASTS AND MORE

READ: MEI Research Fellow Clemens Chay co-authored a piece which examines Kuwait's fractured political situation, where the impasse has steadily worsened from March and has now crystallised into personality politics with opposition MPs united in their relentless criticism of the cabinet. Read the full article [here](#).

READ: The withdrawal of American forces from Bagram Airfield early this month meant that the US military mission in Afghanistan — officially set to be concluded by 31 August — was effectively complete. In his latest piece, MEI Senior Research Fellow Asif Shuja examines the rationale behind the US withdrawal from Afghanistan and says that Washington is now free to divert its attention towards other American interests and objectives. Read his article [here](#).

WHAT'S NEWS: THE BIG HEADLINES THIS WEEK

Israeli Spyware Reportedly Used by Governments for Surveillance

An international roster of news organisations has reported that various governments — from Azerbaijan and India to Saudi Arabia and Bahrain — are surveilling journalists, activists and opposition politicians through the use of Pegasus. It is a sophisticated spyware system developed by Israeli cyber-surveillance company NSO Group purportedly for targeting criminals and terrorists. Any phone affected by the Pegasus spyware can allow spies to access its emails, texts, media, locations and cameras. NSO has been linked to a leaked list of around 50,000 mobile numbers from over 50 countries, which journalists say might indicate potential surveillance targets. NSO meanwhile has strongly denied the veracity of the leaked list, as well as any claims that its software is used for illegal surveillance.

Contested Holy Site in Jerusalem Comes Under Scrutiny

A contested holy site in Jerusalem — revered as the Temple Mount by Jews and as the Noble Sanctuary by Muslims — has come under scrutiny due to reports of Jewish groups holding prayers in its courtyards, in apparent violation of a longstanding ban. The reports have raised questions about whether there has been a policy shift by the new Israeli coalition government over the site's status, especially after a recent statement by Israeli Prime Minister Naftali Bennett thanking authorities for “maintaining freedom of worship for Jews on the Mount.” After a protest from Jordan, the custodian of the site, and amid rising tensions within Mr Bennett's fragile and diverse coalition, which includes a small Arab Islamist party, his office issued a clarification saying there had been “no change in the status quo regarding the Temple Mount.”



This picture shows the Dome of the Rock mosque, located within a contested holy site in Jerusalem that also houses the al-Aqsa mosque. The site is under scrutiny amid reports of Jewish groups holding daily prayers there, in contravention of a longstanding ban. Photo: AHMAD GHARABLI / AFP

Violence Escalates in Water-shortage Protests in Iran's Khuzestan

Protests over water shortages in Iran's southwestern Khuzestan province has descended further into violence, with authorities confirming a third civilian death. Videos taken from several Khuzestan counties have featured audible gunshots and the use of tear gas, suggesting that the situation remains dire. While there are fears of further protestor deaths, officials have yet to confirm further civilian casualties and have further accused separatist groups of fuelling the violence. Khuzestan, while oil-rich, has long been plagued by water problems; the region has been particularly hard-hit this year due to frequent heat waves and droughts which have caused blackouts and water shortages.

CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

Transitioning to Non-oil Economies in the Gulf: Successes, Failures, and the Path Forward

Economic diversification strategies to wean Gulf economies away from dependence on hydrocarbon revenues have existed for decades. Ongoing state-led investments in strategic non-oil industries have produced varied results, and proceeds from the oil and gas sector continue to constitute the majority of public sector revenues in Gulf Arab states. Are overlapping initiatives to develop non-oil industries in the region opportunities for co-operation or competition?



To find out, join us for this public talk that will be conducted online via Zoom on **Tuesday, 27 July 2021, from 8.00pm to 9.30pm (SGT)**. For more details and to register, click [here](#).

Oil & Gas Market Scenarios: Prospects for the GCC countries in a “Net Zero by 2050” World

On 18 May 2021, the International Energy Agency (IEA) published a landmark report on a pathway to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. How credible is this and how will it affect the price and volume outlook for oil and gas exports from the GCC? Are the policies promoted by the IEA favourable to the national oil and gas companies (NOCs) in the GCC, regarding their market shares in global oil and gas markets? This webinar aims to explore such key questions and more.

This public talk will be conducted online via Zoom on **Thursday, 29 July 2021, from 7.30pm to 9pm (SGT)**. For more details and to register, click [here](#).

Between Co-operation & Confrontation: Has the US Renounced the Carter Doctrine?

The Biden Administration's troop pullout from Afghanistan has sparked debates on whether the US' Middle East role has fully evolved from a boots-on-the-ground presence to an offshore balancer. Yet, to what extent is the nature of this shift? Are Washington's mixed signals forcing GCC countries to review their strategic alliances, including hedging with other big powers including China?

To find out this and more, join us for this public talk that will be conducted online via Zoom on **Tuesday, 3 August 2021, from 8pm to 9.30pm (SGT)**. For more details and to register, click [here](#).

LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

Iraqi Prime Minister to Visit US

Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi is set to visit the US on Monday, 26 July. A press statement by the White House said that the purpose of the meeting was to deepen bilateral co-operation between the US and Iraq on political, economic and security issues and the Levant (ISIL). The visit also occurs amidst a recent series of attacks — attributed to pro-Iranian armed groups — targeting US military and diplomatic facilities in Iraq.



Japanese Foreign Minister Planning Iran Visit

Japanese Foreign Minister Toshimitsu Motegi is planning to visit Iran to meet his Iranian counterpart and improve relations with the administration of president-elect Ebrahim Raisi. The visit, which could possibly take place in mid-August, is likely to feature discussions on issues related to Iran's nuclear programme. Mr Motegi's Iranian visit will be part of a 10-day trip to the Middle East that is also expected to include stops in Turkey — where he will discuss the anti-coronavirus response and regional stability in the Middle East — as well as Jordan, Iraq and Qatar.

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