

# MEI Weekly.



Worshippers perform the circumambulation around the Ka'ba, Islam's holiest shrine at the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia on 22 July 2021, marking the end of this year's Haj. As of Monday, 9 August 2021, the kingdom started taking travel requests from vaccinated foreign visitors to the holy city of Mecca as part of the Umra pilgrimage. Photo: AFP.

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

**CALL FOR PAPERS:** MEI is initiating a Call For Papers for a new series in its journal *Insights*, focusing on Qatari policy in the wake of the Al-Ula summit which signalled the end of the Gulf blockade. This series is aimed at uncovering the various pathways to diversification which Qatar has undertaken during and after the blockade imposed on it by the anti-Qatar quartet (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Egypt and Bahrain) in June 2017. For more details, click [here](#).

**READ:** MEI *Insights* journal's Energy Security volume features experts' views on geopolitical risk and energy security in the Middle East and Asia, against the backdrop of Covid-19 which made 2020 among the most disruptive years in the annals of oil and gas markets. Read it [here](#).

**READ:** MEI Senior Research Fellow Asif Shuja told China Daily that Iran is at a "crucial juncture" — while it has emerged as a predominant regional power, the country faces immense opposition from regional and global adversaries. Read the full article [here](#).

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

### Saudi Arabia to Allow Vaccinated Umra Pilgrims

Saudi Arabia began accepting vaccinated foreign visitors to the holy city of Mecca as part of the Umra pilgrimage on Monday, 9 August 2021. The kingdom closed its borders some 18 months ago because of Covid-19. Last month, only around 60,000 vaccinated residents were allowed to take part in a scaled-down Haj. The Umra pilgrimage can be undertaken at any time of the year and it attracts millions from around the world. Saudi Arabia will initially allow 60,000 people to perform the pilgrimage each month, gradually increasing numbers to reach two million a month, the state Saudi Press Agency says.

### Russia's New Fighter Jet to Rival US – in Air and on the Geopolitical Map

At Russia's premier expo for military aircraft in July, Russian President Vladimir Putin inspected a prototype of the LTS Checkmate – the world's second single-engine fighter plane to incorporate the most sophisticated radar-evasion and command systems. The only other plane in this category, the F-35, manufactured by Lockheed Martin Corporation, is the most advanced plane in the US arsenal. The F-35 is in demand internationally, providing Washington a viable defence export that also helps advance US security and diplomatic aims. Russian officials have said they would like to sell the Checkmate to the UAE, Argentina, India, and Vietnam—countries with US security ties—though none has yet agreed to a deal. Checkmate, as its name suggests, aims to contest US strategic leverage, defence analysts say.



A prototype of Russia's new Sukhoi Checkmate Fighter on display during the presentation at the MAKS 2021 International Aviation and Space Salon in Zhukovskiy, outside Moscow, on 20 July 2021. Photo: Dimitar Dilkoff / AFP.

### US Signals Release of Some Still-Secret Files on Saudi Arabia and 9/11

The Biden administration, under pressure from families of victims of the September 11 attacks, said on Monday that it intended to disclose some long-classified documents that the families think could detail connections between the government of Saudi Arabia and the hijackers involved in the attacks. In a court filing in long-running litigation brought by the victims' families against Saudi Arabia, the justice department said that the FBI "recently" closed a portion of its investigation into the terrorist attacks and was beginning a review of documents that it had previously said must remain secret with an eye towards disclosing more of them.

## CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

### MEI's Bridging the Gulf Series: Session 10

Did you know that Nizwa was the former capital of Oman in the sixth and seventh centuries, well before Muscat? Our upcoming session explores this ancient city in the interior (known as the Pearl of Islam) which houses Falaj Daris, Oman's largest water source and a UNESCO site situated at the crossroads of age-old trade routes. Come join us in a discovery of Nizwa, with fascinating insights by Oman's Ministry of Tourism.



This public talk will be conducted online via Zoom on **Thursday, 19 August 2021, from 2.00pm to 3.00pm (SGT)**. For more details and to register, click [here](#).

## LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

### US Envoy in Qatar to Press Taliban for End to Offensive

A US peace envoy was back in Qatar on Tuesday to warn the Taliban not to pursue a military victory on the ground. The US state department said Zalmay Khalilzad, the US envoy, was in Doha where the Taliban maintain a political office to "help formulate a joint international response to the rapidly deteriorating situation in Afghanistan". The development comes amid a weeklong, relentless Taliban offensive as the US and NATO forces finalise their pullout from war-torn Afghanistan. The Taliban fighters have captured five out of 34 provincial capitals in the country in less than a week.



### Turkey: Kabul Airport Issue to "Take Shape" in Coming Days

Turkey believes it would be beneficial for Kabul airport to remain open and the issue will "take shape" in the coming days, Defence Minister Hulusi Akar said yesterday, as talks continued about Turkey running the airport. He was speaking at the Turkish Embassy in Islamabad as Afghan government forces battled Taliban fighters in and around several cities and after a US defence official said that US intelligence believed the Taliban could take over Kabul within 90 days. Turkey has offered to deploy troops at Kabul airport after NATO withdraws and has held talks with the US for weeks.

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