

MEI Weekly



People stand next to the Saudi Vision 2030 pavilion at a consumer electronics exhibition at the Dubai World Trade Centre in Dubai in October 2018. While KSA continues to go ahead with its ambitious drive to transform its economy, many hurdles remain. Photo: KARIM SAHIB / AFP

WHAT'S HOT: MEI PUBLICATIONS, PODCASTS AND MORE

READ: In our latest Insight piece, MEI Principal Research Fellow Alessandro Arduino analyses Beijing's pragmatic approach towards the Taliban as well as its concerns over Afghanistan's continuing instability and the possible spillover effects. Read his article [here](#).

WHAT'S NEWS: THE BIG HEADLINES THIS WEEK

Hurdles in KSA's Economic Transformation

As Saudi Arabia steamrolls ahead with its ambitious Vision 2030 economic reforms to create jobs and diversify away from oil, many hurdles continue to remain. While unemployment has fallen steadily from a pandemic-era high of 15.4%, jobs remain scarce for educated citizens, while foreigners continue to dominate the workforces of many sectors. Would-be investors are concerned about the business climate in the country, especially after the detention of dozens of businessmen for alleged corruption in 2017. Tourism is a vital element of Vision 2030 but the kingdom faces stiff competition from other more established places such as Turkey and Malaysia.

Drone Strike Highlights Militia Threat in Iraq

A recent drone attack on Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhimi's residence highlighted the threat posed by Iran-allied paramilitary groups in the country. The assassination attempt, which US officials say was likely perpetrated by an unspecified Iran-backed Iraqi militia, has since sparked a mediation process with several militia groups agreeing to condemn the strike. A top Iranian general was also sent to Baghdad to de-escalate tensions. Observers say that Iran-allied militias hold considerable influence over Iraqi security and institutions and the defeat of their political parties in last month's parliamentary election have triggered their concerns over their continued role in the country.



Iraqi security forces take position at one of the entrances of the Green Zone in the Iraqi capital on 7 November 2021, following an overnight drone attack on the residence of the country's prime minister inside the zone. The attack underscores the threat of Iran-backed militias in Iraq. Photo: Sabah ARAR / AFP

UAE Foreign Minister Meets Assad

UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdallah bin Zayed met Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in Damascus to discuss the development of bilateral co-operation between the two countries. Sheikh Abdullah is the most senior Emirati official to visit Syria since the start of its civil war in 2011, as well as the first high-profile Arab official to meet with Mr Assad since 2019. The meeting is the strongest signal yet of a normalisation of regional ties with Mr Assad's government, prompting criticism from Western states that remain concerned with human rights abuses by his regime.

CALENDAR: UPCOMING MEI EVENTS

Perfect Imperfection: Socio-cultural and Religious Reforms in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's ambitious Vision 2030 reforms have targeted major social, cultural and religious reforms aimed at boosting the liberalisation drive by softening the nation's austere image. Five years on since that announcement, how substantial are these changes? Has the championing of "moderate Islam" succeeded in reining in the clerical class and resetting the role of religion in the state?

To know more, join us for this public talk which will be conducted online via Zoom on **Wednesday, 17 November 2021, at 5.00 pm (SGT) / 10.00 am (Paris time)**. For more details and to register, click [here](#).

ME 101 Lecture Series 2021: Session 13

Throughout history, the Middle East has been locked in engagements with the West through crusades, wars, colonialism and terrorism. However, there are many lesser-known facets too. This series of lectures will give you a more comprehensive overview of the region and its inevitable impacts locally and worldwide.



Join us for the 12th lecture which looks at the role of Central Asia vis-à-vis the Middle East. This public talk will be conducted online via Zoom on **Thursday, 18 November 2021, at 5.00pm (SGT)**. For more details and to register, click [here](#).

[Book Discussion] Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia

Following the Gulf War in 1991, political elites in Saudi Arabia pursued dual projects of historical commemoration and state formation with greater fervor to enforce their post-war vision for state, nation and economy. The discussion about the book *Archive Wars: The Politics of History in Saudi Arabia*, aims to explore the increasing secularisation of post-war KSA and how it manifested in assembling a national archive and reordering urban spaces in Riyadh and Mecca.

Join us for this public talk conducted via Zoom on **Wednesday, 24 November 2021, at 4.00 pm (SGT)**. For more details, click [here](#).

LOOK AHEAD: WHAT TO KEEP WATCH ON

Iran Seeks Relief from Sanctions

As the resumption of international negotiations over the revival of the Iran nuclear deal looms overhead, Tehran has called for the US to accept responsibility for abandoning the deal and pledge not to leave the accord once again. The next round of the nuclear talks, which have been stalled since June, is set to be held in Vienna on 29 November. A senior Iranian source said that Iran is seeking relief from all sanctions imposed upon it since the Trump administration's exit from the deal.



Major Energy Conference to Discuss COP26 Decisions

At least 32 government ministers are slated to attend the Abu Dhabi International Petroleum Exhibition and Conference to be held from 15 to 18 November 2021. The event, which is the largest and most influential global energy forum, is held under the patronage of President His Highness Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan and hosted by the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company. It also presents the global energy industry with its first opportunity to discuss the impact of key decisions of the 26th UN Climate Change Conference of the Parties (COP26) and define the energy agenda for the next three decades.

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