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# West Asia Watch

## Trends & Analysis

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# EDITORIAL

In the beginning of 2019, West Asia continued to grapple with its old conflicts and problems, both internal and external, while struggling to find some solutions to its serious security and economic challenges through bilateral, regional and international cooperation. Some major changes could be noticed in US policy towards the region. In the backdrop of President Donald Trump's announcement of the US withdrawal from Syria, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman in January 2019. His West Asia tour was an attempt to assure the US' regional partners that firstly, Washington is not giving up its fight against the Islamic State or easing pressure on Tehran. He noted that Iran is to be countered at all costs. Secondly, he reassured Gulf partners to solidify MESA and America's sincere attempts to end the Qatar crisis. Pompeo's visit was followed by the visit of President Donald Trump's senior adviser and son-in-law, Jared Kushner to the region at the end of February, mainly to gather support for the President's 'Deal of the Century' to resolve the complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict. One also noticed some changes in US-Iraq- relations, as the acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan [visited Iraq on February 12](#) in the backdrop of the controversial remark made by President Trump that he wants to leave [American troops in Iraq](#) to "watch" Iran. It is important to note that in the current context, the Iraqis are not keen on facilitating the US-Iran conflict to play out in Iraq, since Baghdad views good relations with Tehran as essential to its stability and prosperity. Iraqi President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi have already expressed their displeasure with Trump's comments. In addition, the widely respected Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has done likewise; the calls in Baghdad to [boot the US military out](#) of the country may grow louder.

Another noticeable development was EU-Arab League cooperation. The first [Arab League-European Union summit](#) was held in Egypt on February 24-25, 2019 to discuss various pressing issues impacting Europe and the region. A second summit will take place in Brussels in 2022. In addition, the EU issued a [joint statement](#) expressing concern over Iran's ballistic missile programme and its involvement in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. These developments clearly indicate that the EU would like to cooperate, but is also concerned about what the future would hold in Iran.

At the regional level, the key issue was the strengthening of the UAE-Saudi alliance. In January, both countries agreed to a [seven-point deal](#) during a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Saudi-Emirati Co-ordination Council, cementing their economic engagement. Furthering their cooperation in Yemen, the Gulf countries pledged US\$ 1.25 billion (Saudi Arabia US\$ 500 million, UAE US\$ 500 million and Kuwait US\$ 250 million) in humanitarian assistance during a UN conference at Geneva. More importantly, the economic outlook of the region witnessed some positive developments. Jordan and Iraq signed a new agreement on free trade and inaugurated a joint industrial area on the border between the neighbouring countries. According to data released by the [National Centre for Statistics and Information \(NCSI\)](#), trade between Oman and Qatar more than

doubled compared to 2017. Non-oil trade export from Oman to Qatar rose by 118.3 per cent. The growth in trade led to a surge in port activity at Duqm, Sohar and Salalah. Ankara's New Economic Programme for the period 2019 to 2021 expects 2.3 per cent GDP growth in GDP for 2019. The programme projects the economy to grow at 3.5 per cent in 2020 and at 5 per cent in 2021. Iran has started a new gasoline unit at its Isfahan refinery, which it previously stated would add an output capacity of 60,000-70,000 barrels per day. The state refinery firm NIORDC claims that Iran's gasoline output hit a [new record](#) of 105 million litres per day (660,000 b/d) in recent weeks.

Coordination and cooperation was also witnessed between Jordan and Syria, especially in parliamentary matters, as Jordan invited the Head of the Syrian People's Assembly to attend the 29th meeting of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, held in Amman. was that of Ankara's willingness to restore normal diplomatic relations with Damascus was an interesting development in what clearly seemed to be an effort to pre-empt any deal between the YPG and the Syrian government. The region also saw the growing role of the Russians to find some common ground of cooperation amongst its new partners in the region, mainly Iran and Turkey. On February 14, President Vladimir Putin hosted a [trilateral summit](#) with his Iranian and Turkish counterparts in the Russian Black Sea city of Sochi. On the sidelines of the summit, the three leaders discussed projects and coordination, in particular, the drafting of Syria's next Constitution.

January-February 2019 witnessed the expanding and strengthening of India-West Asia relations. [C R Chaudhary](#), Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, while addressing a summit on India-Oman relations organised by PHD Chamber of Commerce in New Delhi in January called for expanding India-Oman cooperation to new areas of mutual interest including space, cyber-security and renewable energy. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited India on January 7. During his four-day visit, India and Iran worked towards strengthening their trade and economic engagement including its enhanced cooperation in the Chabahar Port. The other important visit was that of Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) to India on February 19. The visit focused on strengthening the existing strategic partnership between both countries. The Crown Prince announced potential investments worth [US\\$100 billion](#) in the refining, petrochemicals, infrastructure, agriculture, minerals and mining, manufacturing, education and health sectors. He invited Indian companies to invest in the Qiddiya entertainment city venture. In an important development, the Government of India proposed a new emigration bill to replace the existing Emigration Act 1983 and sought public opinion on it. The bill proposes to constitute an overarching authority called the [Emigration Management Authority \(EMA\)](#) by the Central Government to ensure the overall welfare and protection of emigrants.

It is in the backdrop of aforesaid developments that the current issue of *West Asia Watch* reflects on and analyses some of the pressing issues plaguing the region, particularly the elections in Israel, the growing Iran-Syria strategic alliance, the Hodeidah ceasefire agreement raising some hope for peace in Yemen and the unfolding of a completely new political situation after huge public demonstrations demanding the removal of President

Abdelaziz Bouteflika, who has been in office since 1999. In addition, the issue examines India's advancing efforts to build on and re-energise India's partnership with Morocco.

Meena Singh Roy

Editor

# India's Outreach to North Africa: Advancing the India-Morocco Partnership

*Meena Singh Roy*

As part of India's outreach to North Africa, External Affairs Minister (EAM) Sushma Swaraj paid a maiden visit to Morocco on February 17-18, 2019. The visit was an attempt to build and re-energize India's engagement with the Kingdom and consolidate New Delhi's strategic partnership in the changing geo-political milieu in the region. Today, Morocco is playing a key role in bringing new synergy among the African countries to deal with various threats and challenges faced by the African countries. The Kingdom of Morocco is strategically located at the confluence of the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea, which places it in an advantageous position to play a significant role in the region. Labelled as the 'African Lion', Morocco is considered to be a growing market. Its strength lies in its strategic location as a 'gateway to Africa'; a strong banking and finance sector; competitive labour costs; tax incentives; no restrictions to capital formation and ease of repatriation of profits and dividends among other benefits. Morocco was ranked fairly high in the World Bank 2016 Doing Business Report, moving up [5 places from 2015](#).

Morocco has been taking major initiatives to counter radicalization and extremism in the region. More importantly, African countries view the Kingdom as having a significant role to play in the Maghreb region. The Kingdom's role in fighting terrorism and extremism has been acknowledged by none other than Prime Minister Modi.

Earlier in August 2015, when Prime Minister Modi visited the UAE, he spoke about a Delhi-UAE-Morocco trilateral to be the "fulcrum of New Delhi's Act West Policy". With respect to security cooperation to counter terrorism in the region he said, "One Arab country that recognised the currents of Islamic extremism sweeping through the Middle East and North Africa region early is Morocco. As a result, Morocco today is pushing a multi-dimensional strategy to comprehensively combat terrorism." He also pointed out various factors for choosing Morocco as a partner. [He said,](#)

Morocco has stepped up economic cooperation with numerous countries in Africa's Sahara and Sahel regions. Second, it has enhanced security cooperation through numerous bilateral and multilateral forums to actively tackle terrorist groups on the ground. Also, Morocco's efforts at the UN led to the creation of the Group of Friends Against Terrorism to better coordinate UN activities to combat terrorism. India is a part of this group.

The country also propagates modern Islam which can be seen as a counter to the radical version of Islam.

India- Morocco relations date back to the 14th century. However in recent times, high-level bilateral visits have been exchanged between the two countries such as Vice-President Dr. Zakir Hussain's visit to Morocco in 1967; King Mohammed VI, when he was Crown

Prince, visited India to participate in the Non-Aligned Movement Summit in 1983 and later in 2001 and in 2003, as the King of Morocco. Former Prime Minister Shri Atal Bihari Vajpayee visited Rabat in 1999. The Moroccan Minister for Foreign Affairs and Cooperation, Mr. Taieb Fassi Fihri, visited India in April 2011. What is important to note is a new era of cooperation was initiated in November 2015, when King Mohammed VI visited India and met Prime Minister Modi. The King and the Indian Prime Minister underlined the shared viewpoints by the two countries concerning the strategic place of the African continent and the issues of stability, security and social and economic development. The King and Prime Minister Modi agreed on the need to boost the level of strategic partnership between the Kingdom of Morocco and the Republic of India. Both also agreed to set up a working committee coordinated by the foreign ministers of both countries to discuss joint projects and initiatives to meet this new ambition. On this occasion, [The King invited the Indian PM](#) to pay a working visit to Morocco that would include discussion on all fields of cooperation and build new dynamic relations between the two countries. It is against this background built by the top leaderships of the two countries that Sushma Swaraj's visit needs to be analysed.

With an aim to boost India-Morocco strategic partnership, the EAM held discussions with her counterpart H.E. Nasser Bourita, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation, called on His Majesty King Mohammed VI, King of Morocco, H.E. Mr. Saad Dine El Otmani, Head of Government and

Habib El Maliki, President of Chamber of Representatives, in Parliament. The main highlights of this growing partnership were the signing of [four MoU's](#) for cooperation in the areas of Counter-terrorism, Housing and Human Settlements, Youth Matters and Reciprocal Facilitation of Procedures for Issue of Business Visa. In addition she interacted with the Indian community in Rabat to build the strong cultural connect between the two countries. The centrality of enhanced cooperation to counter extremism and terrorism emerged as key area of engagement during this visit. During her interaction with the Indian community Swaraj acknowledged the efforts of the Kingdom in counter-terrorism and thus India's enhanced engagement in this area. [She noted](#) that "Morocco has been a leader in counter-terrorism efforts and is a pioneer in fighting radicalisation." Both the countries agreed to set up a Joint Working Group on Counter Terrorism with an aim to develop a comprehensive approach to combat terrorism including cross-border terrorism, misuse of the internet including social media by terror entities; terrorist financing, and recruitment of members of terrorist groups.

While cooperation in counter-terrorism remains a key area of cooperation, Morocco offers immense opportunities for engagement in economic sectors as well. India is one of the major markets for Moroccan phosphate and its derivatives. Other main items of export to India are metallic ores and metal scrap, semi-finished products and inorganic chemicals. The main items of India's exports to Morocco are cotton yarn,

synthetic fibre, transport equipment, pharmaceuticals, agricultural implements, chemicals, spices and manufactured metals. The [trade figures](#) between the two countries are modest (US\$1,166.84 million in 2016-17 and US\$1,211.95 million in 2017-2018). However, there are many opportunities for both countries for boosting economic and trade cooperation. Overall growth is projected to go up in Morocco owing to tourism, growth in exports and rising job opportunities in the manufacturing sector. More importantly, the Moroccan government, in the period post 2011 and the elections, has also [undertaken many measures](#) to make the country more investor-friendly with enhanced investor protection and a simple and modest tax code, among other legal reforms. This provides India with enormous trade opportunities. Experts are of the opinion that sectors like IT and aeronautics offer investment opportunities in addition to sectors like energy, textiles, fishing, and agricultural sectors. This aspect of cooperation was highlighted by [HE King Mohammed](#) at the India-Africa Summit where he stated that “prospects for bilateral cooperation, particularly in such sectors as agriculture, the pharmaceutical industry, research in science and technology and the training of managerial staff, making sure we build on that experience to serve African peoples.” With respect to security of the region [he mentioned](#), “Given the mix of development challenges and unprecedented terrorist threats they face, the Member Countries of this Forum should adopt a comprehensive approach rooted in close cooperation with India”. With such potential of cooperation in

trade, security and people-to-people engagement, EAM Swaraj’s visit could be considered as the beginning of a new era of cooperation between the two countries. These diplomatic initiatives are definitely a new beginning for India’s earnest efforts to reach out and build a stronger partnership with the North African region.

*(Dr. Meena Singh Roy is Research Fellow and Coordinator, West Asia Centre, IDSA)*



# The Growing Iran-Syria Strategic Alliance

Lakshmi Priya

In a first since facing an uprising and civil war, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited Tehran on February 25, 2019 and met Iranian Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Hasan Rouhani. Qassem Soleimani, who commands the elite Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), also met the Syrian President. Assad has refrained from making state visits since the crisis began in Syria; except visiting Russia twice (2011 and 2018).

The visit signifies the strengthening of Iran-Syria strategic ties. Ayatollah Khamenei praised Assad for his tough stand against enemies and said “Through the toughness that you showed, you have been turned into a hero in the Arab world, and the resistance movement found more power and reputation by you.” For his part, Assad thanked Iran for its support and compared the Syrian crisis with Saddam Hussein’s eight-year war against Iran. He stated: “The Syrian war was like the imposed eight-year war against Iran.” Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, special adviser to the speaker of parliament on international affairs said that one of the goals of the visit was to mark the 40<sup>th</sup> year of Islamic revolution.

Assad’s Tehran visit stems from the growing confidence of the Syrian regime as its forces exterminate ISIS from most of Syria. The visit came at an appropriate

moment as it took place after the conclusion of Warsaw conference and the Sochi summit that mulled inclusion of Iraq and Lebanon in the Astana peace process and the EU-Arab League meeting in Cairo where Assad was to be invited for the first time since Damascus was suspended from the Arab League in 2011. Eventually, However, Syria was not invited for the summit. The visit was followed by Israeli PM Benjamin Netanyahu’s visit to Russia for a discussion on Iran and Syria. Israel has been demanding removal of Iranian troops from Syria and was also targeting Iranian forces in Syria.

Iran and Syria signed eleven long-term strategic co-operation agreements during a meeting between Syrian Prime Minister Imad Khamis and First Vice-President Es’haq Jahangiri on January 28. Reiterating Iran’s intention to support reconstruction efforts in Syria, Jahangiri said: “We will be by Syria's side in the reconstruction phase as we have been by its side in fighting terrorism.” The cooperation agreements includes areas such as education, housing, public services, railways, and investment among others.

## **Ripples in Domestic Affairs**

Though Assad’s visit has vital significance for the strong bond shared by the two countries, it created ripples in Iran’s domestic affairs. Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif

resigned on February 25 reportedly over his exclusion from the official meetings with the Syrian President. However, President Rouhani refused to accept the resignation and Zarif resumed his duties. Iranian media speculated that one of the factors that led to his resignation was the lack of coordination between Iran's Supreme Leader and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Apparently, Zarif was not informed of Assad's visit and his seat was taken by IRGC Commander Qassem Soleimani which irked the leader.

When the *Entekhab* news agency made an attempt to contact Zarif, they received a message that "After the photos of today's meetings, Zarif no longer has any credibility in the world as the foreign minister!" A day later, about 160 parliamentarians signed a letter demanding reinstatement of Zarif and his resignation was rejected by the Supreme Leader. Soon after, on February 27, Assad sent an invite to Zarif to visit Syria which was duly accepted. In Iran, the Supreme Leader controls the policy dossiers for Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Yemen. Even the key personnel including ambassadors to these countries are determined by Khamenei. Zarif's resignation also underlined the domestic political fault line in Iran between Reformists and Principals. Hardliners in Iran have long opposed Zarif's stand on negotiations with the US and the West and have sharpened their attacks since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018.

Assad's visit underlines bolstering of Iran-Syria ties and the growing strategic alliance. Assad needs Iran to strengthen

his position while Iran needs Syria to maintain its regional influence. The two countries need each other and Assad's visit re-emphasizes their mutual dependence.

*(Dr. Lakshmi Priya is Research Analyst, West Asia Centre, IDSA)*

# Israel's Knesset Election, 2019

Jatin Kumar

On April 9, 2019, Israel voted to elect the twenty-first Knesset. The elections were held at a time when Israel is engaged in violent confrontations with the Palestinians on the Gaza Strip and with Iran in Syria. Since March 2018, clashes between Palestinians and IDF troops have increased and took a serious turn in October-November. Amidst the worsening situation, Egypt, Qatar and the UN helped negotiate a ceasefire agreement between Israel and Hamas in November. Unhappy with this development, Israeli Defence Minister Avigdor Lieberman had resigned from his post accusing the Benjamin Netanyahu government of [“surrendering to terror.”](#) The decision significantly weakened the coalition government led by Netanyahu, who was left with only 61 members in 120-seat Knesset. An attack on December 9, outside the Ofra settlement in the West Bank, in which seven Israelis were injured, including a seven-month pregnant woman, landed the government further in a spot. Continued dissatisfaction on several issues, including compulsory conscription for the ultraorthodox Haredi community, weakened the coalition government and the prime minister decided to prepone the elections, which were due in November 2019. Several analysts believed that the decision was based on calculations of the corruption investigations against the prime minister and members of his

family. It has been argued that the government wanted elections [“before the attorney general decides whether to follow police recommendations to indict him.”](#)

## Pre-Election Developments

Israel follows multi-party proportional representational electoral system. The formation and disbanding of new parties is common during election season. Political realignments and formation of new parties began from the day Knesset elections were announced. On December 29, 2018, Naftali Bennett, Ayelet Shaked, and Shuli Mualem made it clear that they will depart from the Jewish Home Party and form a new party called the [New Right](#). Orly Levi, who had resigned from the Yisrael Beiteinu in 2016, announced the formation of a new party Geshet. Former IDF Chief of Staff, Benny Gantz, formed the Israeli Resilience Party on December 27. Similarly, Brigadier General (Retd.) Gal Hirsch launched the Shield of Israel and Gad Haran and Motti Ashkenazi formed the Social Justice Party.

The emergence of these of new parties vying for the votes of a diverse electorate had made it difficult for established parties to maintain their dominance. Netanyahu, who has been the second-longest serving prime minister of Israel after the founding premier David Ben-Gurion was significantly challenged due to the increased appeal of the smaller

parties. The merger between the centrist, Israeli Resilience Party and Yair Lapid's Yesh Atid created a new bloc (Blue and White) that [challenged the Likud's dominance](#). More importantly, corruption cases against Netanyahu and his family emerged as a major talking point. Netanyahu faces charges in three cases and the Israeli Attorney-General has said that he intends to charge Netanyahu with bribery, fraud and breach of trust in all three cases. If convicted, he will be imprisoned for up to 10 years on charges of bribery and up to three years for fraud and breach of trust.

Prior to elections, it seemed that Netanyahu might not find it easy to convince the right-wing conservative parties to support a Likud-led government since they are unhappy with the government for several reasons, including the proposal for compulsory conscription for ultra-orthodox Haredi community. Additionally, the decision of going for a ceasefire with Hamas created distrust among the hard line nationalist electorate. In such a situation, convincing smaller parties which have a significant support-base to join the coalition government, seemed little difficult challenge for Netanyahu.

### **Opinion Poll Predictions**

Since the day the Knesset elections were announced, the popularity of individual candidates had seen ups and downs. Despite corruption charges, monthly surveys project Netanyahu's Likud Party being ahead of others. However, the rapid rise in Gantz's popularity since the formation of the Blue and White bloc, was notable. Many media polls projected that Gantz would emerge as Netanyahu's

key opponent in the elections. Pre-election opinion polls showed that the Blue and White bloc could give a tough fight to Likud by securing 31-33 seats while Likud might remain confined to 28-33 seats. Clearly, the small parties were considered to play a vital role in government formation. Smaller parties, such as the Kulanu, Shas, Meretz, United Torah Judaism, Parties of Joint List and Arab Parties, were seen as likely to emerge as significant players in deciding the next government.

### **Election Results**

The election results were more or less close to the projections made by pre-election surveys. The turnout in the elections was 68.41 per cent. Likud emerged the largest party securing 36 seats, while, the newly formed Blue and White bloc secured 35 seats. Since the two major parties won more than half the seats, many smaller parties saw a drop in their fortunes. Shas and United Torah Judaism secured [8 seats each](#), while Hadash-Ta'al and Labour won 6 seats each, Yisrael Beiteinu and United Right secured 5 seats each and Meretz, Kulanu and Ra'am–Balad won 4 seats each.

Netanyahu needs support of 61 MKs to form government. There are less possibility of unity government, as it has been ruled out by the Blue and White bloc. Under such circumstances, Likud is left with the only option of forming a coalition government with the right and ultra-Orthodox parties. [Avigdor Lieberman](#) (Yisrael Beiteinu), who was a key player in weakening the Netanyahu's previous government, has said that he can join a government led by Netanyahu with some compromises. It is expected

that President Reuven Rivlin will invite Netanyahu to form the next government. Once Rivlin declares his decision, Netanyahu will be having [28 days to form a coalition government](#). Though Netanyahu has won the elections, the looming threat of conviction in corruption charges poses a challenge to retain his pole position in Israeli politics.

*(Jatin Kumar is Research Analyst, West Asia Centre, IDSA)*

# The Hodeidah Ceasefire: Light at the End of Tunnel?

Nagapushpa Devendra

In 2014, Yemen was referred to as one of the success stories of the Arab Spring. But the takeover of the government in January 2015 by the Houthi rebels disproved that judgement. The internal conflict soon assumed a regional dimension with a Saudi-led coalition military intervention in March 2015 and Iran supporting the Houthis. The UAE, a key ally in the Saudi-led coalition has on the other hand pursued an independent policy to gain a strategic foothold in the country by arming and funding secessionist groups such as al-Hirak in Southern Yemen. While the political and institutional fragmentations allowed al-Qaeda and ISIS to expand their presence, the internationalisation of war resulted in the US and EU extending logistical support to the Saudi-led coalition.

In 2018, the situation in Yemen worsened as the Saudi-led coalition with help from the Southern separatist movement launched its largest military assault to recapture Hodeida, a vital port city overseeing the important chokepoint of Bab el-Mandab. Along with the military offensive, the coalition took a host of economic measures aimed at undercutting the Houthi rebels who control northern Yemen.

The battle for Hodeidah contributed to the deteriorating humanitarian situation and the economic collapse of Yemen. As the humanitarian crisis worsened, the

UN, through the Special Envoy Martin Griffiths, held fresh consultations to find a way to ease the humanitarian crisis. As a first step, Griffiths worked on halting the fighting in Hodeidah and bringing the Houthis and the Government of Yemen on the negotiating table. Finally, on November 19, 2018, both the parties announced their intention to freeze military operations and convene for negotiations at Rimbo, Sweden.

After four years of incessant fighting that created one of the worst humanitarian crises in recent times, Yemen is looking towards prospects of extricating out of the civil war. On December 13, 2018, the representatives of the Government of Yemen and Ansar Allah, after days of consultations led by Martin Griffiths, signed a [ceasefire agreement for the port city of Hodeidah](#). The agreement in addition to the ceasefire provides for confidence-building measures including the evacuation of injured Houthi fighters to Oman for medical treatment, prisoner exchange, safe passage for the Houthi delegation to the Yemeni capital of Sanaa for talks, and a statement of understanding on ending the fighting in Taiz. The parties also agreed to support the formation of a deployment committee comprising representatives from both sides to chalk out a detailed plan for withdrawal and the limits of what will effectively be the demilitarised area

surrounding the Bab el-Mandab, including Port Salif and the Ras Issa oil terminal.

On February 18, 2019, the UN announced that both the parties have reached an agreement on [Phase 1 of mutual redeployment](#) of forces. Under the first phase, the Houthis will withdraw from the ports of Hodeidah, Salif and Ras Issa. In turn, the coalition will retreat from the outskirts of Hodeida city, where battles raged before a ceasefire came into effect. This is a highly significant development given that the Hodeidah Port is the gateway for humanitarian aid into the country, where 90 per cent of basic goods and commodities come through imports. The UN can now work without risking the security of its personnel, attempting to relieve the suffering of the Yemeni population.

This marks the first time the Houthis have agreed to withdraw from Hodeida, which is their command headquarters and hub for vital military installations. The port is also important for Houthis for tactical reasons. It was from this port town that the Houthi rebels were able to target coalition vessels passing through the Red Sea, as they did in 2017 when they launched missiles on [Saudi](#), [UAE](#) and the [US](#) vessels passing through the Bab el-Mandab.

The Hodeidah ceasefire is a major breakthrough for peace in Yemen. However, in addition to compliance with the agreement, the UN will now have to work with the leaders to expand the scope of the ceasefire and work towards finding a lasting solution in Yemen. For any resolution, it is important that the various factions are impressed upon to

cease use of force. The second step should be to start a process of UN-mediated consultations to address the major sticking points including Houthi control of Sana'a and other major cities in the north. For any lasting political settlement, all parties – especially the President Abdrabbuh Mansur Hadi-led government and Abdul-Malik Badereddin al-Houthi-led Ansar Allah – will have to show flexibility and agree to compromise on some of their key demands.

*(Nagapushpa Devendra is Research Analyst, West Asia Centre, IDSA)*

## GUEST COLUMN

### An Algerian Spring?

K. P. Fabian

On March 26, 2019 the army chief of Algeria, Ahmed Gaid Salah, publicly demanded the removal of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika, in office since 1999. This is a significant development. The country has been witnessing huge demonstrations for more than a month.

The current wave of demonstrations started on February 22, 2019, when young Algerians from practically all walks of life, cutting across the Arab-Berber and other divides, took to the streets peacefully demanding that Bouteflika should not seek a fifth term. Algeria, since independence from France in 1962, never had a democratic set-up or even a fair and free election. The electronic media has been under the control of the government till 2014 and many channels transmitted from outside the country. In comparison, the print media have been less unfree.

When it was announced in February that he would contest in the presidential election due on April 18, 2019, Bouteflika was in Switzerland undergoing treatment. Suffering from a life-threatening brain stroke in 2013, Bouteflika has been in and out of hospital. On the rare occasions he is seen in public, he was on a wheel chair. He hardly did any campaigning for his subsequent re-election in 2014, partly because of his poor state of health, and

even more importantly, because the elections in Algeria have been manipulated brazenly for decades.

The ruling establishment has been facing a dilemma for quite some time: What to do with the ailing President in whose name they have been ruling without any accountability and how to find a replacement when his term ends in April 2019. There is a divide within the establishment.

In December 2018, when a demand was made by MSP (an Islamist party, Muslim Society for Peace), a party that has been supporting Bouteflika, for extending by a year or two Bouteflika's term there was hardly any support for it.

By February 2019, there were clear signals that the ruling establishment had decided to put up Bouteflika for a fifth term. Kamel Daoud, a prominent writer observed that by putting up "a man who is almost dead, *lepouvoir*" as the ruling establishment is known in Algeria, was showing "contempt" for the youth in a country where 30 percent are under 30. The protests started on Friday February 22. Initially it was peaceful, but on March 1, 183 were injured and a man died, reportedly of heart attack. In short, the establishment thought, however tentatively, that by using force the protests could be put down.



On March 10, Bouteflika offered a compromise: The election due on April 18, was canceled; he was not going to seek a fifth term; there was need for national consultations and reform of the political system before the next election; he appointed a new prime minister (Noureddin Bedoui, a close associate); and he (Bouteflika) would continue in office till the next election the date of which was left vague. The next day Bouteflika asked Brahimi, a former Foreign Minister who was UN Secretary General's Special Envoy for Syria, to arrange for national consultations. Brahimi accepted the mission.

If Bouteflika and Brahimi ever thought that the protesters would be satisfied and would withdraw the agitation they were sadly mistaken. The protests continued and the military signaled in a suitably vague statement that it was with the people. Finally, the army chief came out with the statement as mentioned above.

The army chief was supported by others in the ruling establishment the next day. RND (The National Rally for Democracy), a prominent political party in the ruling establishment and UGTU (The General Union of Algerian Workers) hitherto a strong supporter of Bouteflika and the only legally permitted trade union were the first to express support to the army chief.

It does not follow that the army has taken decision against the wishes of the Bouteflika family. It might have consulted Bouteflika's younger brother Said, 61, the secretary general in the presidency without whose permission none can approach Bouteflika. It is believed that reluctantly "le pouvoir"

concluded that the charade of a fifth term was not maintainable.

The army chief invoked article 102 of the constitution which stipulates that if the president is incapable of functioning the Council of State should meet, ascertain the facts, the President of the Council of State (Upper House) should temporarily take over the functions of the presidency, and inform the Lower House. . Fresh election should take place within four months.

The moot question is whether Algeria will take a decisive move towards democracy. To answer this question, we need to look at the "Black Decade" of 1992-2002 when more than 150,000 Algerians were killed as the military and the FLN (National Liberation Front) decided to interrupt an election that in the first phase (1991-92) was won by FIS (Front for Islamic Salvation), a rather hardline Islamist party. Algerians with vivid and painful memories of that decade have been generally averse to protest too strongly against "le pouvoir" and Bouteflika is credited to have put an end to the black decade. That he succeeded in shielding the military responsible for the atrocities is a different matter.

Scholars started talking of "Algerian exception" when the Arab Spring dawned in neighboring Tunisia where President Zein El-Abidine Ben Ali, in power since 1987, fell in January 2011. He was followed by Egypt's Hosni Mubarak who fell in February; the next was Muammar Gaddafi in Libya (August 2011); and the last was President Ali Abdullah Saleh of Yemen in February 2012. All along most IR scholars maintained that Algeria was an "exception". As a matter of fact,

though there were protests in Algeria in early 2011, the government pumped in money and the protests lost momentum.

We shall wait and watch whether the “exception” will hold and for how long. Algeria is staring at a political vacuum, with a non-existent organized opposition though the ruling elite has lost support. It is unlikely that elections will be held in four months. The military-FLN complex will hold on to power and we have seldom come across in world history such a combination willingly promote democracy.

Unless the protesters persist, risking bloodshed, Algeria will remain an “exception”. The latest is that Bouteflika has announced that he would leave office by April 28.

*(K. P. Fabian retired from the Indian Foreign Service in 2000, when he was ambassador to Italy and PR to UN. His book Commonsense on War on Iraq was published in 2003)*

# WEST ASIA NEWS SURVEY

## POLITICS

### 1. Israel must Withdraw from 'Occupied' Golan Heights

JERUSALEM (9 January): The Foreign Minister of Jordan, Ayman Safadi, told the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo at a joint press conference that “the Golan Heights are occupied. Israel must withdraw from it”. The statement can be seen as a response to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s request to the US National Security Adviser John Bolton to [recognize Israel’s claim on the Golan](#). Pompeo arrived in Jordan on January 8, 2019 as part of his Middle East tour in the backdrop of Washington’s surprise decision to withdraw from Syria. The Secretary of State also visited Egypt, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman. - *Jerusalem Post* and *Times of Israel*

### 2. US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visits Egypt

CAIRO (9 January): The US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Egypt and met with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in Cairo. The visit came amidst confusion in the region over a surprise plan by President Donald Trump to pull US troops out of Syria. Pompeo arrived in Egypt after stops in Jordan and Iraq where he assured the leaders that withdrawal from Syria does not mean the US is giving up the fight against the Islamic State or easing pressure on Iran. He met with Sisi at the Ittihadeya Palace

and held talks with Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry before giving a [keynote at the American University](#) in Cairo throwing light on the US Middle East policy. - *Al-Jazeera*

### 3. Pompeo visits the Middle East

ABU DHABI (12 January): US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Jordan, Iraq, Egypt, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Oman in January 2019. His visit to Kuwait was cancelled on account of a family engagement. During the visit Pompeo emphasized that US was redoubling its diplomatic and economic efforts to counter Tehran’s maligning influence in the region. Pompeo focused on withdrawal of US troops from Syria, ending the Qatar crisis, ensuring steps to solidify the strategic alliance of MESA and the disappearance of US-based Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi. Jordan, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia do not have any US ambassador. - *Arab News*, *Khaleej Times*

### 4. Hamas starts broadcasting into Israel, with help from Hezbollah

TEL AVIV (13 January): With the help of a powerful broadcasting tower set up along the Israeli-Lebanese border, the Hamas run Al-Aqsa radio has reportedly begun broadcasting into Israel. The tower was installed in cooperation with the

Iran-backed Hezbollah, an Israeli satellite imagery company said. Nissan Cohen, CEO of Sat View, told Army Radio that “three media outlets turned to us and said there was something disrupting [their broadcasts] on frequency 101.6 [FM]. So we went to check. We followed [the broadcasts] north, got to the Lebanese [border and realized it’s coming from there.](#) - *Times of Israel*

### **5. Pope Francis holds historic Papal Mass in Abu Dhabi**

ABU DHABI (16 January): Pope Francis made his maiden visit to the Arabian Peninsula and held a historic Mass for more than 100,000 people at Abu Dhabi. Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed, Minister of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation invited Pope Francis to the UAE to strengthen UAE-Vatican ties. Pope reached Abu Dhabi on February 3, and held the Mass two days later at the Zayed Sports City Stadium. The Pope’s visit celebrates the multicultural vision of the UAE. Nearly 10 per cent of the Emirates resident population is Christian and belongs to the Philippines, India, Africa and the United Kingdom. The Pope said that he was looking forward to experiencing a country ["which strives to be a model for co-existence and human fraternity and a meeting point of different civilisations and cultures."](#) –*The National*

### **6. UAE and Saudi Arabia unveil seven point co-operation plan**

ABU DHABI (19 January): UAE and Saudi Arabia struck a [seven-point deal](#) in during a meeting of the Executive Committee of the Saudi-Emirati Co-ordination Council. Mohammad al-

Gergawi, Minister of Cabinet Affairs (UAE) and Mohammed bin Mazyad al-Twajiri, Minister of Economy and Planning of Saudi Arabia confirmed that the plan focuses on services and financial markets, tourism, aviation, entrepreneurship, customs and security, among others. The seven points of the deal are Saudi-Emirati cryptocurrency pilot, fast-track customs for key firms, procurement opportunities for SMEs, joint supply chain in times of crisis, better access for the disabled at airports, money management for children and a common market for civil aviation. – *The National*

### **7. Jordan invites Syria to attend meeting of Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union**

AMMAN (28 January): The Speaker of Jordanian House of Representative, Atef Tarawneh, announced that Jordan has officially invited Syria to attend the 29th meeting of the Arab Inter-Parliamentary Union, held in Amman in March. “We are aware of the importance of coordination and cooperation between Jordan and Syria, especially in parliamentary matters, so we invited head of Syrian People’s Assembly,” said Tarawneh. The [Kingdom hosts about 1.3 million Syrian refugees.](#) In October 2018, the two countries reopened the main Jaber-Naseeb border crossing, nearly three years after closing it. - *Asharq Al-Awsat*

### **8. Lebanon: new government may trigger US sanctions**

BEIRUT (2 February): Hezbollah’s influence in Lebanon’s new government has triggered a US warning against propping up its agenda. US officials are concerned that Hezbollah may use its

government position to provide state-subsidized healthcare and patronage to its supporters and fighters, helping it endure US sanctions that have made it difficult for the group to offer its usual social services to its Shiite Muslim base. “We call on the new government to ensure the resources and services of these ministries do not provide support to Hezbollah,” said a State Department spokesman, Robert Palladino. - *Gulf News*

### **9. US Defense Secretary visit to Iraq**

BAGDAD (3 **February**): Acting US Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan [visited Iraq on February 12](#) in the backdrop of the controversial remark made by President Donald Trump that he wants to leave [American troops in Iraq](#) to “watch” Iran. The Iraqis are not keen on facilitating the US-Iran conflict to play out in Iraq since Bagdad views good relations with Tehran as essential to its stability and prosperity. Iraqi President Barham Salih and Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi have already expressed their displeasure with Trump’s comments, and now that the widely respected Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani has done likewise, the calls in Bagdad to [boot the US military out](#) of the country may grow louder. Shanahan reassured the Iraqi government that the US is not using their country as a staging ground for its pressure tactics against Iran. - *Arab News* and *Press TV*

### **10. EU concerned over Iran’s ballistic missile programme**

BRUSSELS (4 **February**): The European Union issued a [joint statement](#)

expressing its concern over Iran’s ballistic missile programme and its involvement in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon. According to [Iranian Chief Justice](#) Sadeq Larijani, Britain, France and Germany have attacked stipulations to INSTEX, the “special purpose vehicle” they unveiled in February 2018 to facilitate non-dollar commerce with Iran. One of the stipulations is – that Iran enter into negotiations over its missile programme, while the other has to do with Iranian compliance with the rules of the FATF with regard to money laundering and terror financing. The EU denies Larijani’s charges, especially the suggestions that they have linked INSTEX to Iran’s missile programme. - *Reuters*

### **11. Iraqi government faces challenges to deliver reforms**

BAGDAD (5 **February**): The Iraqi government marked 100 days in office with [reform plans](#). However, the budget has drew criticism for failing to shift resources away from salaries and the security sector towards services, agriculture, industrial development, and the reconstruction of war-torn areas in the country’s north. Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi’s perceived lack of progress in filling his cabinet is gradually eroding public confidence. Many Iraqis on the streets call him “weak” and perceive him as unable to stand his ground in the face of powerful political interests. *Your Middle East*

### **12. Turkey’s frustration over the US reluctance in Syria**

ANKARA (5 **February**): Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan is [outraged](#) over the US arms sale to the Kurdish YPG militia in Syria. When the US undertook to make the YPG, later the Syrian Democratic Forces, its main Syrian proxy, it gave some appropriately vague assurances to Turkey that it would collect any heavy arms shared with the Kurds once its Syrian operations were at an end, which seems unlikely now. In addition, he also expressed his frustration with the slow pace of US efforts to set up a “safe-zone” in northern Syria. Erdogan has been threatening to move forward with Turkish offensives against the Kurdish YPG militia in Manbij and/or northeastern Syria unless the US satisfies his demands for a buffer area along the border. The problem is that there is seemingly no buffer zone option that is both feasible and acceptable to Ankara and the YPG. Turkey will not accept any YPG involvement, the YPG will not accept any Turkish involvement, and so far, the US has struck out in its efforts to find a third party to administer the safe zone. An Arab Syrian rebel leader Ahmad Jarba recently [proposed](#) his own solution – an 8,000-12,000 man peacekeeping force including Syrian Arabs and Kurdish Peshmerga fighters who aren’t affiliated with the YPG – from both Syria and Iraq. This would apparently be acceptable to Turkey. But Jarba may just be [stringing the process along](#) on Turkey’s behalf. Ankara has started [hinting](#) at its willingness to restore normal diplomatic relations with Damascus in what seems clearly to be an effort to pre-empt any deal between the YPG and the Syrian

government. - *Daily Sabha, Asharq Al-Awsat, Al-Monitor, Reuters*

### **13. Iran-Iraq oil trade affected due to US sanctions**

BAGHDAD (7 **February**): Iranian Oil Minister Bijan Zangeneh [complained that the Iraqi government](#) has broken some of its oil agreements with Tehran, presumably in response to US sanctions. In particular, Zangeneh mentioned the Iraq’s failure to invest in development of shared oil fields along the Iran-Iraq border. But those fields aren’t a real priority for the Iraqis, and Zangeneh’s comments aren’t being echoed by anybody else in Iranian leadership. Still, this relationship is going to be tested by the sanctions and any sign of weakness could be significant. – *Al-Monitor*

### **14. Turkey, Russia, Iran meet at Sochi to discuss Syrian conflict**

SOCHI (14 **February**): On February 14, Russia's President Vladimir Putin hosted a [trilateral summit](#) with his Iranian and Turkish counterparts in the Russian Black Sea city of Sochi. On the side lines of the Summit, the three leaders discussed the projects and coordination, in particular the drafting of Syria’s next constitution. Previously, the UN had admitted it was unable to create such a committee as Damascus objected to the list of the proposed members. The leaders reiterated the need to eliminate terrorists from Syria’s Idlib Province together. They also expressed their optimism towards the planned US withdrawal. However, the summit also signalled some tension between Russia and Turkey, when Putin told Erdogan

that it had no right to create a “safe zone” inside Syria unless it sought and received the consent of [President Bashar Assad](#). The efforts to end the conflict have stalled with Turkey pushing for a safe zone in northern Syria. Ankara has accused Syrian Kurdish militias operating near its border of maintaining links with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) of Turkey. - *Daily Sabah*

### **15. Saudi Crown Prince visits Pakistan**

ISLAMABAD (17 February): Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) visited Pakistan, and announced investments worth US\$20 billion in petrochemicals, energy, minerals, sports and other sectors. Pakistan conferred its highest civilian award, [Nishan-e-Pakistan](#), on the Crown Prince and MBS announced immediate release of 2,107 Pakistani prisoners detained in Saudi Arabia. The Saudi Crown Prince lay emphasis on evolving ties between the two countries and said that, ["We believe Pakistan is going to be a very important country in the coming future, and we want to be part of that."](#) The two countries signed agreements on plans to build an oil refinery and a petrochemical complex in the southern port city of Gwadar, the possible acquisition of two liquefied natural gas-powered power plants by Saudi companies, and up to US\$4 billion in alternative energy and mining deals. – *Al-Jazeera*

### **16. US pressuring Gulf to keep Syria isolated**

TEHRAN (19 February): Iranian officials feel that the [US is pressurizing Arab countries](#) to slow down the rehabilitation

in Syria According to them, Washington wants Arab governments to continue isolate Assad unless he agrees to a “political settlement” to end the Syrian civil war, which means until he agrees to step down. Assad is, of course, unlikely to do so; the Gulf Arab capitals, Abu Dhabi in particular, view Assad as preferable to most of the alternatives and believe that over time they could even coax him out of Iran’s orbit. - *Iran Project*

### **17. Gantz, Lapid to run together in upcoming elections**

TEL AVIV (21 February): Leaders of the Israel Resilience Party, Benny Gantz and Yesh Atid, Yair Lapid announced that they have signed a rotation agreement and will run together in the upcoming April 9 elections. Gabi Ashkenazi, former IDF Chief of Staff, [made it clear that he will join the alliance](#). Polls suggest that the new unified centrist party could win around 30 seats in the new Knesset and might succeed in defeating Prime Minister [Benjamin Netanyahu's Likud](#). - *Globe and Ynetnews*

### **18. Protest in Gaza; Call for PA president’s removal**

TEL AVIV (24 February): Thousands of Palestinian protesters participated in a rally in the Gaza Strip and called for dismissal of Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas. The protesters gathered at al-Saraya Square in Gaza city, where many of them showed the posters asking on the 83-year-old PA president to step down. A group called “The Popular Movement for National Salvation” said it organized the rally, but Talal Okal, a Gaza-based expert on Palestinian politics, and Fatah

spokesman Osama Qawasma contended [that it was backed by Hamas](#). Since March 2018, Gaza is registering constant protests against the Israeli government but this time the protests were against the President Mahmoud Abbas. - *Times of Israel*

### **19. Arab League-European Union Summit**

CAIRO (25 February): The first [Arab League-European Union summit](#) was held in Egypt on February 24-25. The summit at the Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh was billed as a starting point for the two regional bodies to enhance cooperation on shared strategic priorities including migration, security and climate change. During the Summit, Arab and European states sought common ground on security threats and regional crises including in Yemen, Syria and Libya. A second summit is due to take place in Brussels in 2022. - *Reuters*

### **20. Kushner tries to win support for Peace Plan in Arab World**

WASHINGTON (2 March): President Donald Trump's senior adviser and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, undertook a tour of the Middle East at the end of February to gather support for Trump's Deal of the Century to resolve the complex Israeli-Palestinian conflict. - *Haaretz*

### **21. Iranian Foreign Minister resigns**

TEHRAN (11 March): Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif announced his [resignation](#) via Instagram. Zarif is a significant figure for negotiating the Iran nuclear deal. However, President Rouhani has [rejected](#) his resignation

saying that it is in contrary to the country's interest. Zarif has built up a good rapport with a number of European countries with whom Iran is trying to strengthen its diplomatic/commercial ties in the wake of US unilateral sanctions. - *Tehran Times*

## **SECURITY**

### **22. IDF declares end of Operation Northern Shield with finding of 6<sup>th</sup> tunnel**

JERUSALEM (13 January): The Israeli Army officially ended Operation Northern Shield to locate and defuse Hezbollah's underground terror constructions after exposing a sixth attack tunnel constructed along the Israel-Lebanon border. The tunnel will be destroyed in the coming days. The operation was started in December 2018 to expose and neutralize Hezbollah tunnels. The IDF noted that the sixth tunnel was most potent due to its size. "The tunnel was 800 meters long on its Lebanese side and infiltrated dozens of meters into Israel. The tunnel is two meters high, one meter in diameter, and approximately 55 meters deep," said the military. "It's equipped with railway tracks, steps carved into the rock, as well as [electric power and lighting system.](#)" - *Ynetnews*

### **23. Israeli Intelligence Minister said Israel in open confrontation with Iran in Syria**

JERUSALEM (21 January): Israeli Intelligence Minister Israel Katz noted in an interview with Army Radio that Israeli policy for attacking targets in Syria has



changed. It was with regard to a missile attack by Iranian forces from Syria into Israeli territory which intended to hit the northern Golan Heights. In response IDF fighter planes targeted Syrian military installations and air defence batteries overnight on January 20 and 21, 2019. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said the air raid had mostly targeted Iranian forces, but also hit Syrians helping them. Katz made it clear, “this was a clear message to the Iranians”. He said “this is an open confrontation with Iran - *Jerusalem Post*

#### **24. UAE announces National Plan for the promotion of space investment**

WASHINGTON (22 January): The UAE Space Agency announced a National Plan for the promotion of space investment as part of a wider initiative to turn the country into a rising space power. The National Plan seeks to encourage foreign as well as domestic investment in the UAE’s emerging space sector. It also aims to promote Emirati vehicles to invest in space programmes outside the country. The plan will include creation of business accelerators, funds and specially designated economic zones. [Mohammed al-Ahbabi](#), director general of the UAE Space Agency said “The UAE Space Agency, as a federal government entity, will actively play the part of an enabler and facilitator to encourage local and foreign investment in the sector, and proactively design a conducive environment which ensures start-ups and investors feel welcome and have access to business in the UAE that can drive their growth potential.” - *Space News*

#### **25. Jordan refused to control al-Tanf base after US withdraws from Syria**

AMMAN (28 January): The Foreign Minister of Jordan, Ayman Safadi, said Jordan will neither take over nor control a US-run military base in southern Syria after American troops withdraw. Speaking in an interview with Russia’s Sputnik news agency, Safadi said that the al-Tanf base lies outside the Jordanian territory, dismissing speculations that the facility would be handed over to Jordan. According to experts Amman hoped, Jordan, Russia and the United States would instead hold trilateral talks to take necessary measures to ensure [security in Syria’s border region with Jordan](#). - *Press TV*

#### **26. Saudi Arabia launched its 16<sup>th</sup> Satellite into Space**

JEDDAH (7 February): Saudi Arabia launched Saudi Geostationary Satellite 1 (SGS-1) into space on February 7, from French Guiana. Ariane 5 rocket launched SGS-1 and Hellas Sat-4 into space. As per the [mission description](#), SGS-1 will provide advanced Ka-band spot beam communications services for the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, including secure communications for the Gulf Cooperative Council region. [Badr al-Suwaidan](#), the satellite’s programme director said, “SGS-1 provides secure satellite communications, stronger internet and television connectivity, on the KA band for the government of Saudi Arabia, it has the coverage of Middle East, North Africa and Europe for the next 15 years.” King Abdulaziz City for Science and Technology developed the satellite in collaboration with the

American aerospace company Lockheed Martin. Saudi Arabia has collaborated with China in December to launch a satellite to land on the far side of the Moon. - *Space.com, The National*

### **27. Lebanese PM says Hezbollah can keep arms, as new government convenes**

TEL AVIV (12 February): Prime Minister of Lebanon, Saad Hariri, indicated that his government would allow Hezbollah to remain armed. The statement said that Lebanese citizens have the right to “resist Israeli occupation and repel its aggression.” - *Times of Israel*

### **28. Jaish al-Adl attack on Iranian IRGC in Sistan-Baluchistan province**

TEHRAN (13 February): Insurgents attacked a [Basij militia](#) base in Sistan-Baluchistan province in Iran, killing one IRGC soldier while wounding five others. Jaish al-Adl, a Sunni extremist group that’s active in southeastern Iran and across the border in Pakistan, claimed responsibility. The same group claimed a [suicide attack that stuck a bus carrying IRGC personnel](#) in February 2018, killing at least 27 people. The Iranian authorities blamed Pakistan for not taking necessary action to stop the group. It also accused Saudi Arabia, Israel and the US of involvement in the attack. Saudi officials refuted the accusation. Meanwhile Pakistan’s Foreign Minister Shah Mahmood Qureshi affirmed that the government is undertaking investigation. - *Pars Today and Press TV*

### **29. US Congress votes to withdraw its troops from Yemen**

WASHINGTON (14 February): The House of Representatives voted 246-177 to suspend the US’ involvement in the Yemen under [War Power Act](#). Shortly before the vote, the House partially undermined the resolution by adding an amendment that would exempt intelligence sharing. The resolution will now go to the Senate. If it passes the Senate, it will then move to the White House. President Donald Trump has already warned to veto the resolution. - *Daily Sabah*

### **30. Trump urges Europe to take back their ISIS prisoners**

BAGHOUZ (14 February): The US is asking Britain, France, Germany and other European allies to take over [800 ISIS](#) fighters that they captured in Syria and put them on trial. The US plans to withdraw from eastern Syria and ISIS fighters under SDF custody could go free unless they are repatriated. The SDF says that they will not intentionally release the captives but warns that they could “escape”. But the idea of repatriating them officially is proving to be extremely unpopular among the European citizens, hence the dilemma. The French government says it will consider repatriation on a “case by case” basis. Germany, on the other side says, extradition is only possible if the suspects have consular access, a condition that the government cannot guarantee due to the armed conflict in Syria. France and the UK have been resistant to accepting ISIS members. - *Arab News*

### **31. IDF conducts drill to ‘simulate conditions of war with Hezbollah’**

TEL AVIV (15 February): The [IDF conducted a drill](#) designed to train soldiers for combat operation in topographical conditions similar to those in Lebanon. The exercise was the largest carried out by the 401st Brigade of the Armored Corps in recent years. The soldiers carried out drills in coordination with the Israeli Air Force, as well as the engineer and intelligence corps. Dozens of tanks, armoured personnel carriers and helicopters were deployed in the training zone in Jordan Valley. - *Times of Israel*

### **32. Rift among radical group in Idlib province**

DAMASCUS (17 February): The tension between Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Turkey is causing [divisions](#) among the group. Although HTS leaders did not oppose Ankara implementing observation post around Idlib, they were uneasy with the Turkey-backed opposition groups adopting anti-Kurdish agenda. HTS leader Abu Mohammad [al-Golani](#), after installing the Syrian Salvation Government in their occupied-territory, extended an olive branch to Turkey's military plans to advance east of [Euphrates River](#). He then began a purge of the radical wing of his organization that caused a split with other members including Abu Yaqzan al-Masri. He also banned issuing of [fatwas](#) (religious decrees) by any source other than the group's general council. Abu Yaqzan had come to Syria in 2013 and joined Ahrar al-Sham, later transferring to Jabhat al-Nusra, the forerunner of HTS. He is known for his anti-Turkish [fatwas](#) and opposed the Turkish operation slated for the east of the Euphrates,

saying Islam has no place in a war between a secular army (the Turkish Armed Forces, TSK) and an [atheist party](#) (the Kurdish People's Protection Units, YPG). There could soon be other splits within HTS. Abu Malik al-Tali, a Lebanese commander of Jabhat al-Nusra/HTS at the [Qalamoun front](#) is named among those likely to leave. - *Al-Monitor, Asharq Al-Awsat*

### **33. Yemen government and Houthis agreed to withdraw from Hodeida**

SANAA (18 February): The Yemeni government and Houthi rebels have reportedly agreed on the [first-phase](#) withdrawal of their forces from Hodeida. This would be a major step towards salvaging and implementing the ceasefire agreement signed in December 2018. The agreement also talks about confidence-building measures such as prisoner swap, but the effort to finalize the list of people to be freed has hit a rough patch. The two sides met in Jordan to fasten the process but the Houthis say that the negotiations could go for months because the government and its coalition are refusing to acknowledge the number of prisoners in their hold. - *Saba News*

## **ECONOMY**

### **34. Saudi Arabia to create a global hub of renewable energy capability**

ABU DHABI (15 January): Saudi Energy Minister [Khalid Al-Falih](#) outlined ambitious plans for solar and wind power in Saudi Arabia while speaking at the Abu Dhabi Sustainability Week (ADSW).

Saudi Arabia intends to generate 59 GW of electricity from solar and wind energy by 2030 and produce more than 200 GW of energy from renewable sources. Falih mentioned that Riyadh would tender dozens of renewable energy projects every year and at least 12 such deals will be announced in 2019. A week prior to the ADSW, Saudi Arabia's National Industrial Clusters Development Programme (NICDP) and the Kingdom's diversified manufacturing company SABIC struck a deal with China's Longi and South Korea's OCI. ADSW delegates said that it is a golden opportunity for those interested in investing in Saudi Arabia's renewable energy sector. - *Arab News*

### **35. Government to provide incentives for private sector to hire Saudis**

JEDDAH (15 January): [Ahmad al-Rajhi](#), Saudi Minister of Labour and Social Development announced that the Saudi government will contribute to the wages of Saudis employed in the private sector. The minimum monthly wage to be supported is SR 4,000 and the maximum is SR 10,000. He mentioned that, government has made this move to incentivize the private sector hiring Saudi nationals and improving skills of Kingdom's population for the future. The Saudi *Vision 2030* reform plan aims to cut unemployment from 11.6 per cent to seven per cent and increase women's participation in the workforce from 22 per cent to 30 per cent. - *Arab News*

### **36. Lebanon restricts dollar trade**

BEIRUT (19 January): Banque du Liban (BdL), Lebanon's central bank, issued [a circular](#) this week calling for all money transfer offices (such as Western Union) to only pay out cash in Lebanese Pounds (LBP) rather than US dollars, even if the transfer was made in the US currency. This is the latest, and to date most worrying, sign of Lebanon's deteriorating currency situation. The Lebanese currency's long-standing peg to the US dollar (LBP 1,507 = \$1) is under threat. BdL Governor Riad Salameh seldom misses an opportunity to try to assure investors that the peg isn't under threat, but the financial engineering needed to maintain it is increasingly obvious. Details on how exactly BdL will enforce the ruling are sparse, but presumably the dollars will be used to bolster the government forex holdings that are crucial to propping up the peg. - *Middle East Economic Survey*

### **37. Oman relaxes residency rules to woo investors**

MUSCAT (21 January): [Royal Oman Police](#) confirmed that Oman has relaxed residency rules to woo investors. As per the new law adult children (above 21 years) of overseas investors who live in Oman can stay with them as long as they continue to invest or are in the country. The new rule aims to achieve social stability for the investor and the investor now can bring his family or siblings, irrespective of their age, under his responsibility. A senior police official explained that earlier, "children who were below 21 years of age could not stay in the country. In an aim to bring more investment into the country and encourage and set up attractive

opportunities for investors, ROP has decided to relax the rules for foreign investors.” – *Times of Oman*

### **38. Iraq, Jordan sign free-trade agreement**

AMMAN (29 January): Jordan and Iraq have signed a new agreement on free trade. Addressing a joint press conference with Iraqi Finance Minister Fuad Hussein in Baghdad, Jordan’s Deputy Prime Minister Rajai Muasher said: “We signed and initiated a free trade agreement outlining recommendations for the mutual preservation of local-product competitiveness, to serve the economic interest of both countries.” Though, the Jordanian official did not give any further details on the terms of the free trade agreement, but said the prime ministers of both countries meet on February 2 to finalise deals in various fields. “The agreement to implement the Basra-Aqaba oil pipeline was also signed, and is currently under [review by the Iraqi cabinet](#). We are optimistic that implementation will begin soon,” Muasher added. The kingdom hopes the pipeline will help it meet its energy needs and to export the rest through the port of Aqaba. - *Middle East Monitor*

### **39. Iraq and Jordan reopen border crossing, boosting relations**

BAGHDAD (2 February): Iraq and Jordan have inaugurated a joint industrial area on the border between the neighbouring countries. The ceremony was attended by Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi and his Jordanian counterpart Omar Razzaz. The border crossing was formally reopened on February 2, 2019. As part of the

agreement in late December, oil-rich Iraq will supply Jordan with 10,000 barrels a day at a lower price. Abdul-Mahdi’s office said Iraqi officials were handed 1,300 pieces of antiquities that Jordanian [authorities confiscated from smugglers](#). - *Associated Press*

### **40. Oman-Qatar trade increased by more than 100 per cent**

MUSCAT (2 February): As per data released by [National Centre for Statistics and Information \(NCSI\)](#), trade between Oman and Qatar increased by more than 100 per cent as compared to 2017. Non-oil trade export from Oman to Qatar rose by 118.3 per cent. At end of September 2018, the non-oil export from Oman to Qatar was US\$736 million (OMR 283.6 million) whereas at the end of September 2017 it was US\$337 million (OMR129.9 million). For the same period import from Qatar to Oman saw a rise by 440 per cent and reached US\$641 million (OMR246.8 million). The growth in trade led to a surge in Port activity at Duqm, Sohar and Salalah. - *Times of Oman*

### **41. 2019 bodes well for Turkish economy, presents numerous opportunities**

ANKARA (7 February): For Turkey 2019 offers many [economic opportunities](#). Ankara’s New Economic Programme for the period 2019 to 2021 expects 2.3 per cent GDP growth in 2019. The programme projects the economy to grow 3.5 per cent in 2020 and 5 per cent in 2021. The Treasury and Finance Ministry issued bonds denominated in Euros and Dollars in order to attract foreign investor. It also devised a borrowing strategy, which is geared

towards reducing costs, interest rates and correcting the use of liquidity. The Treasury also announced plan to borrow in Chinese Yuan with Panda Bonds and Samurai Bonds denominated in Japanese Yen. In addition, the Treasury has adopted few measures to fight inflations. These includes a 10 per cent cut in prices of certain retail products and consumer loans, tax reduction in real estate, automotive, furniture and home appliance sectors. –*Daily Sabah*

#### **42. Iran claims gasoline production rise**

TEHRAN (18 February): Iran has started up a new gasoline unit at Isfahan refinery, which it previously stated would add 60,000-70,000 b/d output capacity of the fuel. The state refining firm NIORDC claims that Iran's gasoline output hit a [new record](#) of 105 million litres/day (660,000 b/d) in recent weeks. Iran's gasoline production averaged 540,000 b/d for January-July 2018 according to the [latest data submitted to Jodi](#), so this represents a 120,000 b/d (22 per cent) increase. This hike cannot be attributed solely to the start-up of the third 120,000 b/d condensate splitter at the Persian Gulf Star (PGS) plant near the port of Bandar Abbas, which would add 77,000 b/d. The previous Gulf Star phases were brought online in April 2017 and February 2018. These gains may be sufficient to enable the halting of gasoline imports, which averaged 55,000 b/d over the first half of 2018. –*OilPrice, Middle East Economic Survey*

#### **43. Saudi Arabia, UAE and Kuwait pledge US\$1.25 billion for Yemen**

DUBAI (26 February): Saudi Arabia (US\$500 million), UAE (US\$500 million) and Kuwait (US\$250 million) pledge US\$1.25 billion in humanitarian assistance for Yemen during a UN money raising conference at Geneva. Last year United Nations' ["Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen"](#) raised US\$ 2.6 billion and this year it aims to raise US\$4 billion. Four-fifth of the Yemeni population or 24 million people are in need of aid and protection. 40 pledges totalling US\$2.6 billion were received during the day-long conference. Britain, the US Agency for International Development (USAID) and Malaysia pledged aid worth US\$264 million, US\$24 million and US\$100,000 respectively. - *Arab News*

## **INDIA AND THE REGION**

#### **44. Government of India proposes new Emigration Bill**

NEW DELHI (16 January): Government of India proposed a new emigration bill to replace the existing Emigration Act 1983 and has sought public opinion on it. The bill proposes to constitute an overarching authority called [Emigration Management Authority \(EMA\)](#) by the Central Government to ensure the overall welfare and protection of emigrants. EMA will be led by Secretary-level Officer in the Ministry of External Affairs, and will have representation from the Ministry of Home Affairs and the Ministry of Human Resource Development. It will also have rotational representation from state governments and the recruitment industry. The EMA will meet periodically and will have

powers to co-opt additional members and set up committees on need basis for effective discharge of its responsibilities. There has been a paradigm shift in the nature, pattern, directions and volume of migration over the last 35 years and the bill intends to fully align with the contemporary realities and be in harmony with relevant international conventions. – MEA, India

#### **45. Union Minister calls for expanding India-Oman ties**

NEW DELHI (22 January): [C R Chaudhary](#), Minister of State for Commerce and Industry, has called for expanding India-Oman cooperation to new areas of mutual interest including space, cyber-security and renewable energy. Chaudhary addressed a summit organized by PHD Chamber of Commerce and said: "Considering the expanding economies of India and Oman there is scope for substantial increase in the bilateral flow of trade and investments and diversifying the trade basket." He also mentioned that Indian companies can also use the Duqm special economic zone in Oman as a gateway to reach out to the rest of the Middle East and North Africa. – *Times of India*

#### **46. Iranian FM visit to India**

NEW DELHI (7 February): Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif visited India on January 7, accompanied by a large delegation of executives, including Chairman of the Iran Chamber of Commerce, Industries, Mines and Agriculture (ICCIMA) Gholam Hossein Shafi. As part of the 4-day visit, India-Iran held discussions with private sector entrepreneurs at a bilateral business

forum organized by the CII. They signed a [memorandum of cooperation](#) and vowed to establish a joint Iranian-Indian Chamber. Zarif also met Indian Minister of External Affairs [Sushma Swaraj](#) and Minister of Transport [Nitin Gadkari](#) to identify and eliminate the obstacles in trade, especially in banking, transportation and customs spheres, on signing preferential trade agreement between Iran and India, and on joint investments in the Chabahar Port. In a joint statement, Gadkari and Zarif stated their intentions to establish a branch of Iran's Pasargad bank in Mumbai. In addition, Zarif also discussed the Afghanistan situation, in the light of Trump's unofficial announcement of US troops' withdrawal from the country. He stressed for deeper security cooperation in Kabul. – Ministry of External Affairs, India

#### **47. Sushma Swaraj's Tehran stopover to boost counterterrorism partnership**

TEHRAN (19 February): In the light of terror attack in Iran's Sistan-Baluchistan province and Pulwama in Kashmir, External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj made a stopover in Tehran on her way to Bulgaria. She met Deputy Foreign Minister Seyed Abbas Araghchi and discussed bilateral issues and agreed on [close cooperation to combat terrorism](#) in the region. – *Tehran Times*

#### **48. Saudi Crown Prince's visit to India**

NEW DELHI (20 February): Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman (MBS) made a state visit to India on February 19 and received a warm

welcome. The visit focused on strengthening the existing strategic ties between India and Saudi Arabia. The Crown Prince announced potential investments worth [US\\$100 billion](#) in refining, petrochemicals, infrastructure, agriculture, minerals and mining, manufacturing, education and health. He invited Indian companies to invest in the Qiddiya entertainment city venture. The two countries signed five MoUs related to investment, tourism, housing, and information and broadcasting. – MEA, India

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