



# West Asia Watch

## *Trends & Analysis*



**West Asia  
Centre**



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## EDITORIAL

# *West Asia amidst New Threats and Challenges*

The beginning of year 2020 exposed the West Asian region to a completely new set of threats and challenges. On January 3, a US drone strike near Baghdad International Airport targeted and killed Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The killing of Gen. Soleimani sharply escalated tensions between the US and Iran and stirred up fears of a military conflict in the Persian Gulf with serious consequences for the region and beyond. The Iraqi government reacted by stating that the attack undermined its national sovereignty and breached its bilateral security agreements with the US and was an act of aggression against its officials. On January 5, the Iraqi parliament passed a non-binding resolution to expel all foreign troops from its territory. As a consequence, one witnessed some strain in US-Iraq relations as well. The international community immediately reacted by urging both sides to show restraint and use diplomacy to de-escalate the situation. However, five days later, Iran launched a series of missile attacks on the US forces based in Iraq. Another important development that attracted global attention was the shooting down of the Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 by Iran amidst the escalation.

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic emerged as the single-most significant challenge for nations all around the world. In West Asia, the consequences of this pandemic have been dire, affecting every aspect of human life. The WANA region has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Being fragile and conflict-ridden, the threats for region are amplified. Conflicts, civil wars, failing states and refugee and humanitarian crises, along with instability in the international oil market and the severity of economic stress make the spread of COVID-19 one of the worst challenges for the region.

On January 28, 2020, the much awaited Middle East Peace Plan dubbed as the *Deal of the Century* was unveiled by the US President Donald Trump. Washington's claim to have found a new way to find peace between Israel and the Palestinians was strongly rejected by the Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, calling it the 'slap of the century' and 'Jerusalem is not for sale.' The Arab League also rejected the deal during an emergency meeting of its Foreign Ministers in Cairo. Responses from the region were somewhat divided – Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and the GCC countries supporting it and Iran, Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, rejecting the deal. The parliamentary elections in Iran, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Knesset election in Israel and the formation of a new government in Iraq were three

important political developments in the region. Oman saw a seemingly smooth transition, after the Arab world's longest-ruling monarch, Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said passed away on January 10, 2020 after ruling for fifty years. The Sultan's cousin, Haitham bin Tariq Al Said was chosen as the country's new ruler. In March, the UAE become the first peaceful nuclear energy operator in the Arab world after loading the fuel assembly into the Unit 1 reactor at the Barakah nuclear plant in Abu Dhabi.

India continued to pursue its diplomatic engagement with the countries of the region. In these three months, India worked towards maintaining friendly political ties with Iran and gave a push to its defence ties with Israel. S. Jaishankar, the External Affairs Minister and Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif, the Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi. India reiterated its commitment to developing strong and friendly relations with Iran and thanked the Iranian leadership for the progress in the Chabahar Port project, including its designation as a Special Economic Zone. The Defence Ministry signed a key contract for acquiring more than 16,000 light machine guns from Israel Weapons Industries. A contract worth INR 880 crores was signed between Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL), and Israel Aerospace Industries (IAI), and Dynamatic Technologies Ltd (DTL) signed a memorandum of understanding for a strategic partnership for manufacturing and marketing IAI's unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in India, on February 5, 2020.

Against such a backdrop, the current edition of the newsletter has tried to capture various dimensions and complexities of the geopolitical developments as they continue to unfold with wide-ranging implications for the region. This issue includes four analytical pieces on Israel, Iraq, Iran and the Middle East Peace Plan. A distinctive feature of this edition is the sharing of the report of the International Conference on West Asia. The 4th West Asia Conference on “**Ten Years of Political and Economic Transformation in West Asia: Challenges, Lessons and Future Trends**” was organised by the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses (MP-IDSA) on February 26-27, 2020. This International Conference has now become a major calendar event and attracts a number of eminent experts and practitioners from the West Asian region, Europe, Russia, China and the United States. The summary of the debate and discussion during the Conference can be accessed on the following link:-

[https://idsa.in/system/files/events/wac4\\_rapporteurs-report-min.pdf](https://idsa.in/system/files/events/wac4_rapporteurs-report-min.pdf)

# *‘Deal of the Century’: Responses from West Asia*

*Dr. Lakshmi Priya*

US President Donald Trump presented his much awaited Middle East Peace Plan dubbed as the [Deal of the Century](#) on January 28, 2020. The deal offers twenty per cent land of the West Bank while deducting a small portion of land in the Negev Desert near the Gaza-Egypt border, control over the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and the Jordan Valley, sovereignty over the territorial waters; and the control of security from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea for Israel. The deal promises a “State of Palestine” with land comparable in size to the territory available in Gaza and the West Bank prior to 1967, with the possibility of the Triangle communities becoming an important part if Palestine restrains from inciting terror activities. Further, the deal mentions freedom of access to religious sites, establishment of an international fund for the development of the land swap areas and first rate infrastructure solutions to maximize to and fro movement. It also gives Israel the overriding security responsibility over the State of Palestine while the latter is expected to maintain internal security. Trump claimed to have found a new way to make peace between Israel and the Palestinians – Israel will get the security it needs and the Palestinians will get the

state they desire. The fifty-page document was unveiled in the presence of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but Palestinian representation was absent, thereby drawing criticism of the deal having a pro-Israel bias.

One of the key features of the proposal is that Trump has assured to keep Jerusalem as Israel's undivided capital. The deal was offered three years after the Trump administration recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moved the US embassy to the city from Tel Aviv. The Palestinians severed contacts with the US as Washington ended the bilateral aid for Palestinians and contributions for the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). Following that, the US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said, the US had abandoned its four-decade-old position that Jewish settlements in the West Bank were inconsistent with international law.

The Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas strongly rejected the plan [exclaiming](#), the deal is the ‘slap of the century,’ ‘Jerusalem is not for sale,’ ‘we reject the deal a thousand times,’ and ‘our people will send it to the dustbins of history.’ Palestinian Prime Minister [Mohammad Shtayyeh](#) said that the plan

will ‘finish off the Palestinian cause.’ As the protests and demonstrations opposing the deal continued, the Palestinian Authority called for an emergency meeting of the [Arab League’s Foreign Ministers](#) in Cairo who rejected the deal claiming it does not respect the minimal rights of the Palestinian people and contradicts the source of authority of the United Nations. -Fatah declared a day of rage in the Jordan Valley, a general strike was declared in the Gaza Strip and [Khalil al-Hayya](#), a member of Hamas’ political bureau said that his group is determined to foil Trump’s plan for the Middle East.

### **Support with a Caveat: Egypt, Jordan and Morocco**

Interestingly, the deal did not elicit a similar response throughout the region and the reaction varied from being positive and negative to being neutral. [Egypt](#) welcomed the plan as its Foreign Ministry appreciated the continued efforts of the US to reach comprehensive and just peace for Palestinian cause, and called on Palestinians and Israelis to carefully consider the proposed plan. Likewise, [Jordanian](#) Foreign Minister, Ayman Safadi praised the move saying, ‘Jordan supports every genuine effort aimed at achieving just and comprehensive peace that people will accept,’ but called for direct negotiations that solve all final status issues in a comprehensive solution under established terms of reference, the Arab peace initiative and international law.

Foreign Ministry of [Morocco](#) appreciated the US peace plan and hoped for ‘a constructive peace process’ that will offer ‘a realistic, applicable, equitable and lasting solution,’ while stressing that ‘acceptance by the parties is fundamental to the implementation and sustainability of the plan.’

### **GCC States**

[Qatar](#) welcomed the efforts aiming towards a longstanding and just peace in the occupied Palestinian territories and appreciated the endeavours of the US to find solutions for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict as long as the solutions are consistent with international law and the relevant UN resolutions. The [UAE](#) supported the US move as the Emirati Ambassador to Washington, Yousef Al Otaiba, said that the plan offers an important starting point for a return to negotiations within a US-led international framework. In a supportive gesture, the [Saudi](#) foreign ministry appreciated the US efforts to develop a comprehensive peace plan while calling for the start of ‘direct peace negotiation between the Palestinian and Israeli sides.’ Saudi foreign minister [Adel al-Jubeir](#) noted that there are positive elements in the plan; however, later Riyadh supported the negative collective responses from the Arab and Muslim world including the official stand of the Arab League and the OIC. The [Kuwait](#) foreign ministry issued a statement saying it ‘highly appreciates’ the Trump proposal and stressed that a peace

solution must include an independent Palestinian state, based on borders before Israel gained control of the West Bank in 1967. The Foreign Ministry of [Bahrain](#) affirmed support for ‘all efforts aimed at reaching a just and comprehensive solution to the conflict, which leads to the restoration of all the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people and the establishment of an independent Palestinian state.’ Oman had a muted response to the deal of the century owing to the demise of its ruler Sultan Qaboos. The Ambassadors of Bahrain, Oman and UAE were [present](#) during the unveiling of the Deal of the Century and the Middle East Peace Economic Plan. It is to be noted that though present while the unveiling of the deal of the century, these countries did not officially endorse it, while [Oman](#) had a silent response.

### **Opposition to the Deal**

[Iran's foreign ministry](#) condemned the deal stating, “The shameful peace plan imposed by America on the Palestinians is the treason of the century and doomed to fail.” Another major regional player, [Turkey](#) called the deal ‘a plan to ignore the rights of the Palestinians and legitimize Israel's occupation.’ Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said that Jerusalem is sacred to the Muslims and the plan to give Jerusalem to Israel can never be accepted. [Turkey's foreign ministry](#) described the deal as an ‘annexation plan that aims to kill the two-

state solution and seize Palestinian lands’ and called the deal ‘stillborn.’

Other countries including Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen registered their opposition to the Peace Plan. The [Iraqi](#) Foreign Ministry stated that Iraq stands with its Palestinian brothers in their legitimate rights guaranteed by international legitimacy and argued that Jerusalem and its holy sites were ‘still under occupation.’ It also called for a Palestinian capital in Jerusalem, along with ‘the restoration of all occupied lands to Syria and Lebanon.’ [Syrian](#) President Bashar al Assad said the deal of the century is a stillborn plan and the idea is meaningless, an empty shell. The Syrian [Foreign Ministry](#) rejected the deal, and emphasized that it represents a prescription to surrender to the usurping Israeli occupation. The President of [Lebanon](#) Michel Aoun expressed solidarity with the Palestinian people against Trump's peace plan and stated that Lebanon adheres to the Arab Peace Initiative that was approved at the Beirut Summit in 2002, especially the right of the Palestinians to return to their lands and establish their independent state with Jerusalem as its capital. Lebanon is concerned with the additional number of the [refugees](#) that will enter the country if the plan is implemented. A statement from the Foreign Affairs Ministry said Yemen’s support to Palestine is unchanging.

## Conclusion

The Deal of the Century had a mixed response from the region ranging from opposition and conditional support to that of a soft acceptance. Apart from Egypt and Jordan that had established relations with Israel earlier, a US ally, Morocco supported the deal. However, the most evident shift was in the response of the GCC countries that have been projecting a softened approach to Israel lately. The tempered stance owes to the increased threat perception from

the common enemy Iran, unofficial [million dollar trade](#), potential to work together in agriculture, possibility of technology-sharing and a remote probability of defence cooperation. However, despite the changed scenario and the softened response, there isn't any likelihood for the deal being successful in the near future as evident from the strong opposition voiced at the Arab League and the OIC.

(Lakshmi Priya is a Research Analyst at West Asia Centre, MP-IDSA.)

# *Challenges for the Iraqi Government amid Domestic Political Crisis*

*Nagapushpa Devendra*

Amidst the fierce anti-government protests and crisis posed by the escalation in US-Iran tensions, Iraq elected a [new prime minister](#)-Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi, ending more than two months of political deadlock. The appointment of Allawi was more or less a compromise by the political parties to replace the former Prime Minister Abdel AbdulMahdi who managed to remain in office despite having resigned in November 2019, in the face of widespread public protests demanding his removal. Even as a caretaker Prime Minister, he was sending [mixed](#) signals about potential US military withdrawal from Iraq. On the one hand, he was pledging to implement parliamentary procedures to expel US forces from the country, while on the other, he was trying to find loopholes in order to slow down the process. This caused further turmoil in the political system and exacerbated the anti-government protests in Iraq.

Allawi was not only suffering due to a less-than-enthusiastic reception from the Iraqis, he was also facing a few predictable [challenges](#) as he attempted to form a cabinet that could successfully negotiate a parliamentary vote. At this point, Allawi had the tentative support of the Sairoon Party, the Popular

Mobilization Unit (PMU) and the Fatah Alliance. He was [unable](#) to garner support from many other parties, particularly of Sunni Arabs and the Kurdish parties, as their leaders were hesitant to give up their own dominant positions. Most of them [boycotted](#) the confidence vote to prevent quorum twice, not allowing Allawi to form a government. With parliament facing a deadline, Allawi announced his [withdrawal](#) from the candidacy for the premiership, on March 1, 2020.

The disagreements between the political parties and growing unrest in the country, forced President Barham Salih to [appoint](#) the former governor of Najaf, Adnan al-Zurufi as the Prime Minister. He is close to Washington, and has strong abhorrence towards Iraq's pro-Iranian parties and militias. He [intended](#) to bring the PMU under tighter state control which did not appeal to some political leaders. His candidacy [caused](#) deep divisions within the Shia political bloc. He failed to gain support from Sunni and Kurdish parties as well. Zurufi tried to appease pro-Iranian Iraqi militias and [called](#) for the US to ease sanctions on Tehran amid COVID-19 pandemic. He also [says](#) that he asked the US President Donald Trump to expedite the removal of

all US troops from Iraq – with half of them slated to leave this year and the other half in 2021. His efforts did not elicit reactions from any of the political parties and he was forced to [withdraw](#) his nomination before a confirmation session could be scheduled.

The Iraqi President, next, nominated a [third candidate](#) for the position of Prime Minister – Mustafa Al Kadhimi. He is at present the head of the Iraqi National Intelligence Service. Unlike the other two candidates, he does not have any political background or experience. He shares close relations with both the US as well as Iran.

As Kadhimi does not share any affiliation with Iraqi political parties and is not driven by their ideology, he may not face too much resentment from the population. Most importantly, he is using his diplomatic skills and good relations with the US to [negotiate](#) a new Status of Force agreement (SOFA), which aims to remove several thousand American troops deployed in Iraq. Kadhimi also [met](#) with the Iranian envoy and expressed Iraq's keenness to maintain the best of relations with Iran and serve in the interest of both sides. The Iranian government has [expressed](#) its support to the Kadhimi government. Thus, there is high probability that he would get support from the Shiite and Kurdish political parties.

For Kadhimi, this is just the beginning of a number of formidable challenges he is

going to face. He will have to make compromises and negotiate tactically to continue gaining the support of these political blocs to prove his majority in the Parliament. Even after forming a government, he will have to deal with the accumulated problems that forced Mahdi's administration out of office as well as the crisis that emerged thereafter. Kadhimi will have to be very careful in negotiating the reforms, keeping the interests of the state, political parties and the people in mind. Any miscalculation could lead to his downfall in this precarious situation.

Further, there are also growing indications that the ISIS is re-organising in Iraq, two years after losing the last of its territories in the country. This time they adopted better techniques and better tactics with huge inflow of funds. Their attacks within the country are increasing considerably. There are [reports](#) which suggest that the ISIS is nourished by the current unrest and is exploiting the sense of alienation among the Sunni population in Iraq. Since Kadhimi is trying to balance the relationship between the US and Iran and is likely to reduce the number of American troops which would restrict their role to training and operations against the ISIS, dealing with a re-emerging ISIS would be a challenge for him.

Further, the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic may also prove to be a huge task for him to deal with. Iraq's public

and health sector is in a bad shape as most of the doctors have fled the country and hospitals have been destroyed. The country lacks basic medical supplies to treat patients affected by COVID-19. Economically, Iraq does not have the capacity to provide any financial aid for the marginal sectors that are impacted due to the measures implemented by the government for the prevention of virus. The political impasse in Iraq has impeded the approval of the 2020 budget and has severely affected the economy, especially after the [collateral damage](#) faced by Iraq due to the oil war between Saudi Arabia and Russia. The proposed 2020 budget is US\$ 135 billion, and the deficit of US\$ 40 billion was calculated on the basis of its oil-selling price of US\$56 per barrel. This price has been almost halved and is likely to further reduce in the days ahead. Iraq is already passing through its worst phase given the existing unemployment, inflation and poverty. More than [653,000](#) people are

unemployed. Poverty rates are high, and so is inequality. Availability of water, electricity, household supplies and healthcare is a major problem. The pandemic has worsened the existing crisis.

Iraqis continue to protest till date, demanding a better standard of living. For the new government, the only way to tackle this issue is to address the demands of its people, particularly, improvement of the economic infrastructure, efficient handling of the pandemic and punishment to those responsible for killing the protestors. If Kadhimi fails to provide solutions for these immediate challenges, there remains a chance that the political deadlock will continue pushing the country towards greater political unrest and economic risk.

(Nagapushpa Devendra is a Research Analyst at West Asia Centre, MP-IDSA.)

# *23<sup>RD</sup> Knesset Elections in Israel*

*Jatin Kumar*

To end the year-long political deadlock, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Knesset election was held in Israel on March 2, 2020. Since November 2018, Israel is facing a prolonged political crisis which started with Yisrael Beiteinu's [withdrawal from the Likud](#)-led coalition over its disagreement on a bill focusing on military service for ultra-Orthodox communities and a ceasefire agreement with Hamas. As a result, two consecutive elections in April and September 2019 were held within a year but produced inconclusive results. Given the present political system of proportional representation in Israel, winning an outright majority is extremely difficult for any party. Due to the continued failure of leading political parties, Likud and Blue and White, to form a new government on December 11, 2019, the third Knesset elections were called. The elections were held in the background of the worldwide outbreak of COVID-19, which seems to be solving Israel's seventeen months long political deadlock.

## **The 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> Knesset Elections**

With the departure of Yisrael Beiteinu, one of the vital coalition partners of the Likud-led coalition, in November 2018, Israel agreed to hold immediate elections on April 9, 2019 which was seven months

prior the scheduled date of late 2019. This was mainly due to Netanyahu's haste to have elections prior to his trial in corruption cases pending against him. The elections registered 68.41 per cent voter turnout and Likud and Blue and White bloc emerged as [leading political parties by securing 35 seats each](#).

In comparison to March 2015, the above election registered a significant change in the number of seats won by smaller parties with Shas and United Torah Judaism securing 8 seats each, Hadash-Ta'al and Labour winning 6 seats each, Yisrael Beiteinu and United Right securing 5 seats each and [Meretz, Kulanu and Ra'am-Balad obtaining 4 seats each](#). However, both major parties, Likud and Blue and White were unable to form the government which resulted in another election in September 2019.

On September 17, 2019, the 22<sup>nd</sup> Knesset election was held in Israel. The voter turnout was [around 69 percent and Benny Gantz's](#) Blue and White emerged as the largest party with 33 seats. Netanyahu's Likud secured 32 seats and was a close second. While some smaller parties managed to gain more seats such as Joint List (13), Yamina (7), Shas (9) and Yisrael Beiteinu (8), a few [others lost some such as UTJ \(7\)](#) and Labour-Gesher (6).

After the announcement of the results, Netanyahu had been invited to form a coalition but failed to do so. Similarly Gantz was also unable to form a coalition government. In the past, Israel has seen similar kinds of [deadlock twice in 1984 and 1988](#), though at that time the opposition party, Labour, helped Likud to form a National Unity Government. However, this time due to corruption charges against Netanyahu, neither the Blue and White nor the Labour Party were ready to help him form a government. Government formation could be possible with the support of Yisrael Beiteinu [but Avigdor Lieberman had refused](#) to join either side. Though the Israeli Arab parties had won enough seats to play the coalition game, they remained on the sidelines due to their ideological differences. Under this situation, another election was scheduled on March 2, 2020.

### **23<sup>rd</sup> Election Mandate**

Similar to previous elections, the 23<sup>rd</sup> Knesset election also registered a fractured political mandate but a high voter turnout of 71.52 per cent. The election result indicated Netanyahu's Likud as the largest political party [with 36 seats with Gantz's Blue and white emerging as second largest by securing 33 seats](#). The seats secured by the other parties were as follows: Arab Joint List-15; Shas-9; United Torah Judaism (UTJ)-7; Yisrael Beiteinu-7; [Labour-Gesher-Meretz-7; Yamina-6](#).

The Right-wing coalition comprising [Likud, Shas, UTJ, Yamina got 58 seats](#) and again failed to cross the magical number of 61 seats to form the government. The election results clearly underlined that there was no impact of the corruption case on Netanyahu's performance. In comparison to the September 2019 election, Likud successfully attracted more voters and added three more seats to its basket. Though there was no gain in the seats for Blue and White, it improved its total votes by one [percent by receiving 26.59 percent vote share](#) in comparison to 25.1 per cent in September 2019. Indeed, in all the three elections Blue and White emerged as a credible bloc against Netanyahu.

The latest election also registered a shift in the Left-wing Jewish voters being more favourable to Joint List comprising Ra'am, Balad, Taal and Hadash which [emerged as the third largest party and secured 15 seats](#). The Joint list had significantly improved its performance in the last three elections by securing 10 seats, 13 seats and 15 seats, respectively. It is expected, if a fourth election happens, the Arab List is expected to secure more seats as the citizens are disappointed to see Netanyahu and Gantz together.

### **Post-election Scenario**

On March 15, 2020, Israeli [President Rivlin offered Gantz his first chance](#) to form a government within 28 days. Prior to the election, Gantz declared that his

government [would not include Netanyahu](#). However, amid the outbreak of the COVID-19 in Israel, Gantz overturned his position and announced his willingness to form an emergency coalition with Netanyahu. On March 21, Netanyahu stated that negotiations between Likud and Blue and White were completed for the formation of a National Unity government which will follow a power-sharing rotational premiership. The deal between the two was confirmed with Gantz's appointment as the Speaker of the Knesset with the support of the Right-wing bloc. This event landed the future of the Blue and [White alliance in jeopardy](#), with Yesh Atid, Telem and the Israeli [Resilience Party parting ways on 29 March](#).

The unity government might give Gantz an opportunity to become Prime Minister of Israel but in the long run it will surely adversely impact his political future. It will foment distrust among the Israeli voters as they saw Blue and White as a strong opposition against Netanyahu. It will also give a chance to Israeli Arab and Left parties to enhance their vote bank in the next Knesset election. Furthermore, it will be interesting to see how both the parties compromise their pre-election commitments which will probably clash with each other.

(Jatin Kumar is a Research Analyst at West Asia Centre, MP-IDSA.)

# *Parliamentary Elections in Iran: An Appraisal*

*Meena Singh Roy and Prabhat Jawa*

In February, the Islamic Republic of Iran conducted its general elections for the 11<sup>th</sup> Islamic Consultative Assembly, also known as *Majlis* (Persian for parliament). The elections were marked by the lowest participation by Iranians since 1979. The results indicated a landslide victory for conservatives, also known as principalists, whereas, the coalition of reformists and centrists suffered significant setbacks. The new parliament has to deal with the strict sanctions imposed by the Trump administration, as well as, other contentious bills such as those related to ratifying of Financial Action Task Force (FATF), which are currently on hold with the Guardian Council. Amidst a deteriorating economy, political uncertainty, escalating regional and international tensions and the widespread threat from coronavirus, how the newly-elected parliament sets its future course of action, remains to be seen. What would these parliamentary elections mean for Iran domestically, as well as for Tehran's approach in the region, merits a critical analysis.

## **Understanding Majlis Elections**

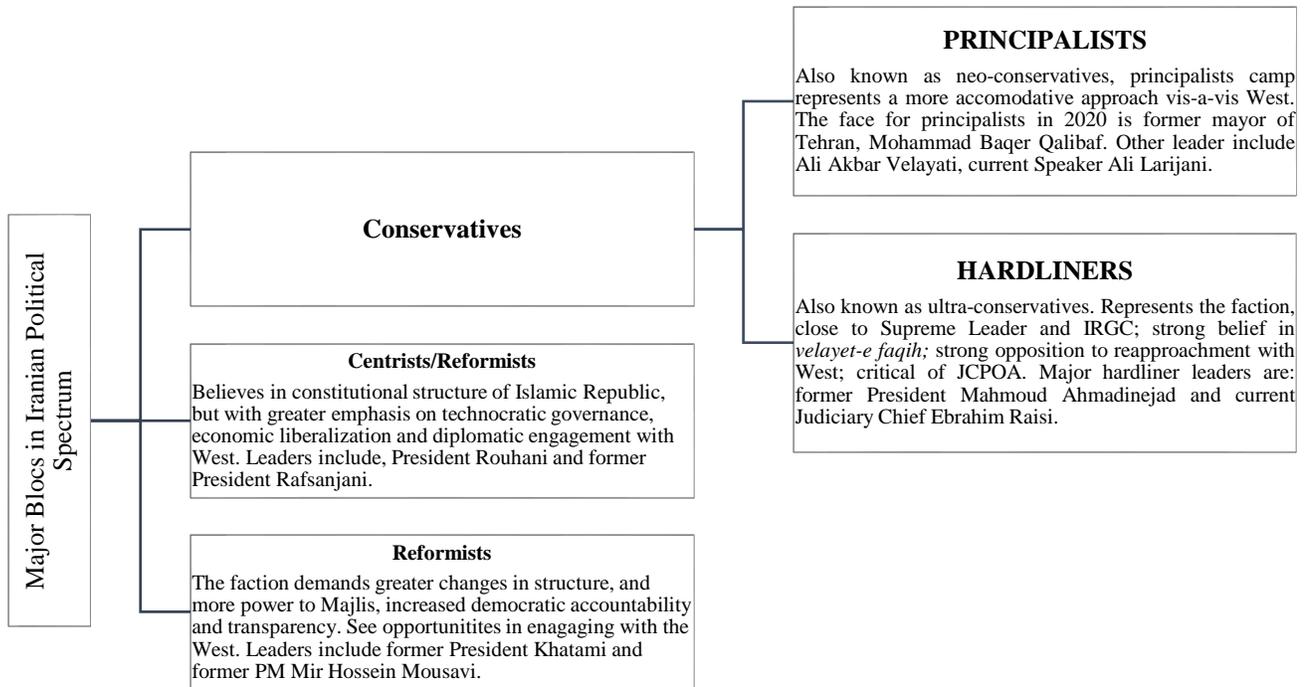
Iran has a unicameral parliament, which is composed of 290 members. On February 21, Iran conducted the first round of parliamentary elections to elect

the 279 members for the 11th Islamic Consultative Assembly (*Majlis*). Under the [Law for the Elections of the Islamic Consultative Parliament](#), five seats are allocated for religious minorities, where “Zoroastrians and Jews each have one representative. Assyrian and Chaldean Christians collectively have one representative. Southern and Northern Armenian Christians each have one representative.” The lawmakers are elected for a 4-year term, with no limits on running for office again. The elections are carried out, usually in two rounds. In the first round, the candidates are required to secure at least one-fourth majority vote, and the inability to secure the standard requirement means elections will proceed to a second round. The successful candidates will assume office on May 27, 2020. Generally, “Iranian candidates often run in loose [coalitions](#) rather than formal parties, mainly because of the difficulty in building name recognition and momentum in a short time.” For understanding the Iranian political system it is important to be familiar with various factions within the system. The complex political system of Iran is compounded by the changing alliances and blocs. Nevertheless, one can categorise the parties and factions, on the basis of their positions on specific issues such as rapprochement with the

West, foreign policy, market preferences, the involvement of the IRGC in the

economic and political life of Iran. These factions are explained in Figure 1.

**Figure 1: Breakdown of Major Blocs in Iranian Political System**



### A Low Turnout

On February 23, Abdulreza Rahmani-Fazli, the Minister of Interior, [declared](#) that the first round of elections witnessed a record low participation of 42.57 per cent since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The undercurrents of low participation could be felt long before the actual polls were conducted through the concerns raised by the members of government and the Supreme Leader himself.

The leadership of the country including the elected government of President Hassan Rouhani, alongside the clergy and Supreme Leader, repeatedly urged the Iranians to cast their ballots. In fact, within a matter of one week, Khamenei discussed the aspect of elections twice, noting it as a crucial responsibility for Iranians. In a speech on February 5, he urged people to come out and vote. He [stated](#), “Anyone who loves the security of the country, who loves to see the

problems of the country resolved, who loves to see a proper cyclical change of elites in the country, should participate in the elections. Everyone should participate.” Later that week, during another public address, he spoke about how a strong Iran can frustrate its enemy. The strong Majlis is manifestation of countries strength. This would be possible only through greater participation by people. He further emphasised that voting is, in fact, a [“religious duty.”](#)

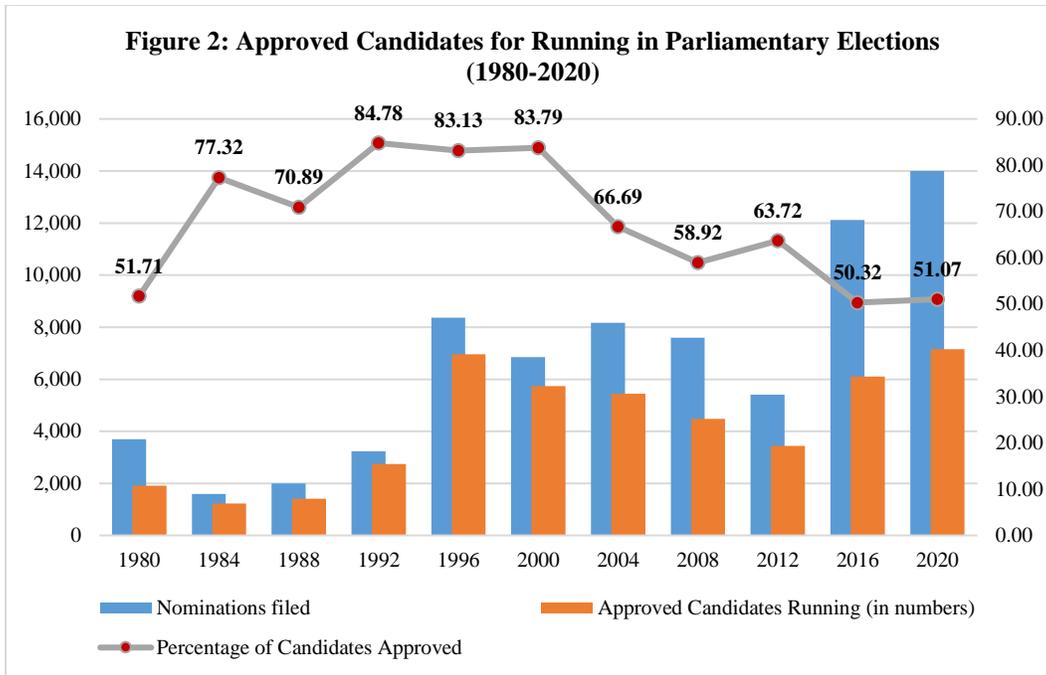
The low voter turnout was defended by all branches of the government alike. Khamenei surmised the low-turnout as “negative propaganda began a few months ago and increased as the elections were approaching. In the last two days, the pretext of an illness and virus was used.” At the same time he [thanked](#) “the Iranian people for their excellent participation in the elections, which was a big trial. Because this rendered the opportunism and widespread propaganda of their enemies ineffective.” Abdulreza Rahmani-Fazli, characterised the turnout as [“completely acceptable”](#) holding the fear surrounding the coronavirus responsible of the low turnout.

### **A comparative Analysis: Majlis 2020 Against Majlis 2016**

A comparative analysis of the Majlis elections of February 21 with that of the 10<sup>th</sup> Majlis of 2016 brings out some patterns and trends. The tenth

parliament saw around 12,123 nominations for the 290 seats, of which 6,100 (about 50 per cent) members were allowed to contest. In 2020, there were around 2,000 additional candidates who had filed nominations for the February elections. Finally, the total number of candidates who were allowed to contest were 7,150 (about 51 per cent) out of the total nominations filed. This shows a nominal increase in the percentage of approved candidates who contested the 2020 elections.

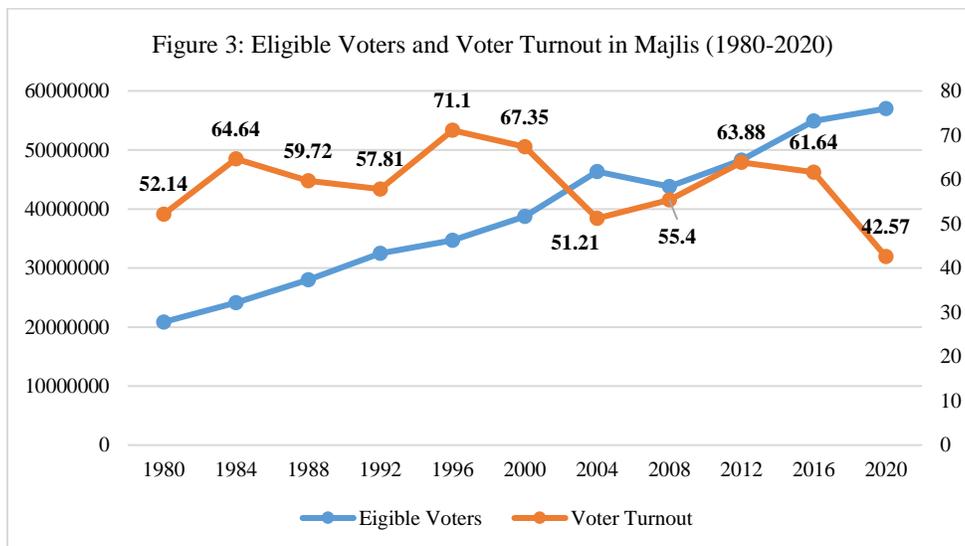
The 2020 elections have witnessed the highest number of disqualifications, since 1979. However, the individuals [qualified](#) as a percentage of the total who filed nominations, was around 51 per cent, a marginal increase from the last parliamentary elections. In light of mass disqualifications, there were reports of the elections being boycotted by various reformists. Initially, the Guardian Council – a panel of twelve Islamic jurists and scholars, half of which are nominated by the Supreme Leader – disqualified more than 9,000 candidates out of the 14,000 nominations. These disqualified candidates included over 90 incumbent lawmakers. The disqualified candidates were granted five days to appeal against the disqualification. Later, the Guardian Council [approved](#) an additional 2,000 candidates to contest the elections, bringing the total candidates to around 7,000 (moving the approval percentage to around 51 per cent), as indicated in the graph below.



Source: The data presented above has been compiled from various sources including *Iran Data Portal* (by Syracuse University); Reuters, and Iran Primer.

**Note :** There can be marginal difference in figures that can be attributed to discrepancies in availability of data. The above data display discrepancy of  $\pm 0.39$ .

The 10<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections witnessed a strong voting percentage of 61.64 per cent. In February, despite a record 58 million eligible voters, the [voter turnout](#) was just 42.57 per cent.



Source: The data presented above has been compiled from various sources including *Iran Data Portal* (by Syracuse University); Reuters, and Iran Primer.

In terms of results also, one witnessed stark differences between the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> parliamentary elections. The previous parliament saw a dominance of a coalition of reformists and centrists, who obtained 41 per cent of the seats, whereas, the conservative bloc was able to secure around 29 per cent. The independents secured an overwhelming

86 seats. In contrast, the 2020 poll results indicate the conservative coalition securing around 221 seats, marking a landslide victory for them. The reformists and centrists' bloc secured just 20 seats in coalition. The Table below indicates the election results between the two parliamentary elections.

	<b>2016</b>	<b>2020</b>
Conservatives/Principalists Bloc	83 (28.6 percent)	219-221 (75-76 percent)
Reformists and Centrists Bloc	121 (41.7 percent)	20 (6.8 percent)
Independent and Other(s)	86 (29 percent)	35 (13.1 percent)

Source: The data presented above has been compiled from various sources including *Iran Data Portal* (by Syracuse University); Reuters, Mehr News Agency, Al Jazeera and Iran Primer.

In Tehran, the conservatives secured all the [30 seats](#). Former mayor of Tehran, [Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf](#) topped the list of candidates who secured the most votes in the capital, with 1,265,287 votes. Qalibaf is a former commander of IRGC Aerospace Force (1997-2000), a former Chief of Iran Police (2000-05), who unsuccessfully ran for the office of President in 2005, 2013 and in 2017, he [withdrew](#) in favour of Ebrahim Raisi.

### **Prognosis**

The sanctions regime and public health emergency caused by coronavirus impacted the parliamentary elections in different ways. The disqualification by the Guardian Council did restrict several reformists/centrists from contesting the elections. However, the percentage of candidates who were qualified for 2020 elections was marginally higher than the

parliamentary elections in 2016. Despite having a large young population, Iran – a theocratic democracy – witnessed a disappointing low voter turnout, which has benefited conservatives and raises the question whether it point toward the weakening of theocratic democracy in Iran or was this due to the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In fact, the low voter turnout is a reflection of dissatisfaction expressed by the Iranian people. This could be due to the growing economic hardships faced by them and the government's failure to deliver the expected results to its people.

Undoubtedly, in the short-term, conservatives and more particularly, the hardliners will have command over the agenda in the next Majlis, poised to begin operations in the last week of May. The new parliament is likely to weaken

President Rouhani and strengthen the hands of the Revolutionary Guards. However, in the medium to long term, the road is not going to be easy for the hardliners. The stability for hardliners would depend on their ability to handle the economic problems – high levels of inflation, increasing unemployment, declining production and export of crude oil due to sanctions. Under the current administration in the White House, the severity of US sanctions will continue to grow. Under the new variable of coronavirus, which has affected a large number of lawmakers and government officials, one can expect more uncertainty surrounding the Islamic Republic. The failing health of Ayatollah Khamenei would provide an opportunity as well as a challenge to hardliners, who now have firm control in the Assembly of Experts, the body responsible for the

election of the Supreme Leader. The contest for power among the hardliners and principalists would be worth monitoring. The conservatives more than ever will dictate the terms and would continue to influence both the internal and external agenda of the country. Equally important would be to see how public opinion shapes. If the hardliners succeed in managing the present health and economic crisis, its position will get strengthened; on the other hand, internal challenges would further complicate the situation for the government.

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# WEST ASIA NEWS SURVEY

## POLITICAL

### **Qatari Emir appoints a new Prime Minister**

DOHA (15 January): Qatari Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani appointed Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdelaziz Al Thani as the Prime Minister of Qatar after Sheikh Abdullah bin Nasser Al Thani, who was also Qatar's interior minister, submitted his resignation. The new appointee had been the head of the Amiri Diwan and will also take on the post of interior minister. - *Peninsula Qatar*

### **UAE becomes first Arab nuclear power nation**

ABU DHABI (3 March): The UAE has become the first peaceful nuclear energy operator in the Arab world after loading the fuel assembly into the Unit 1 reactor at the Barakah nuclear plant in Abu Dhabi. Following this, the systems of Unit 1 will be gradually tested to move into full electricity production through [power ascension testing \(PAT\)](#). The [Emirates Nuclear Energy Corporation \(ENEC\)](#) announced that the UAE is the 33<sup>rd</sup> nation to have joined the limited group of countries worldwide that have the capacity for safe use of nuclear energy. The fuel load team had 90 per cent participation of Emirati experts who were previously trained in APR-1400

technology in South Korea. The overall construction of the four units is more than [93 per cent](#) complete. The next step is to make the Nawah plant operational, as a team led by the Korea Electric Power Corporation (KEPCO) is at the helm of affairs. -*Khaleej Times, Gulf News, Zawya*

### **UAE introduces multi-entry visa scheme**

DUBAI (6 January): The UAE has introduced a multi-entry visa scheme for five years for all nationalities and focusing on turning the country into a tourism destination. To that end, Dubai is to host Expo 2020, a big-budget global trade fair in October. The government of Dubai Media Office announced that the UAE Prime Minister and ruler of Dubai, [Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum](#) has approved a new amendment for tourist visas in the Emirate. The UAE currently has a footfall of 21 million tourists every year. The terms and conditions for obtaining the new visa will remain the same as earlier. Holders of the new five-year multiple-entry tourist visa might be allowed to stay for [six months in continuity](#). However, it is not clear if there will be a [fee for visa application](#) and further details are awaited. Sheikh Mohammed has said the visa is part of wider plans to prepare the country for the next fifty years of

development. He added, “The year 2020 will be different because it is the year of preparation for the next 50, the year in which we design the future of the Emirates.” –*Arab News, Gulf News, The National*

### **Oman’s Sultan Qaboos passed away at 79**

MUSCAT (11 January): Oman's Sultan Qaboos bin Said Al Said, the Arab world's longest-ruling monarch passed away after ruling for fifty years. The [state announced](#) that Qaboos died after "a wise and triumphant march rich with generosity that embraced Oman and extended to the Arab, Muslim and entire world, and achieved a balanced policy that the whole world respected" and declared a three-day period of mourning. His cousin Haitham bin Tariq Al Said was chosen as the country's new ruler in a seemingly smooth transition. Thousands of people gathered in the streets to pay respects to the departed Sultan by participating in his funeral procession leading up to the Sultan Qaboos Grand Mosque. In his first address to the nation, Sultan Haitham promised to continue his predecessor's foreign policy which made Oman an important regional mediator. - *Al Jazeera*,

### **Shinzo Abe visits Saudi Arabia, UAE and Oman**

TOKYO (10 January): Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a five-day trip to West Asia and visited Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Oman. He said, “Japan will

continue to make every diplomatic effort to ease the situation in the Middle East and achieve stability in the region.” He added that in each of the countries, Japan plans to seek cooperation in ensuring a stable energy supply and the safety of vessels. The visit comes prior to the Tokyo’s dispatch of Self-Defense Forces (SDF) personnel and assets to the region to help secure the safe passage of shipping by enhancing intelligence-gathering capabilities. The SDF will operate in the Gulf of Oman and part of the Arabian Sea. The dispatch is separate from a US-led maritime initiative near the Strait of Hormuz. -*Arab News, Japan Times*

### **Saudi Arabia and UAE condemn Houthi terrorist attack in Yemen**

RIYADH (20 January): Saudi Arabia and the UAE condemned an attack by Houthi militia on a mosque in the Marib province in Yemen that killed more than 100 people. The Houthis attacked a mosque during evening prayers in a military camp in the central province of Marib which is about 120 km from the capital Sanaa. The Saudi foreign ministry issued a statement condemning the attack which stated, “Saudi Arabia strongly condemns the terrorist attack carried out by the Houthi militia... and the assault reflects this terrorist militia's disregard for sacred places and ... for Yemeni blood.” The UAE condemned it as a "criminal" attack, and said it “rejects all forms of violence that target security and stability.” The UAE Ministry of

Foreign Affairs called on the international community to come together to address terrorism irrespective of its source, as it undermines the chances of peace, stability and security.-*Al Jazeera, Gulf News*

### **Saudi Arabia to stop funding mosques in foreign countries**

RIYADH (25 January): Former Saudi minister of justice, [Mohammed Bin Abdul-Karim Issa](#), announced that the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia will stop funding mosques in foreign countries. Riyadh will establish local administrative councils for each mosque so as to hand over these mosques to “secure hands”. Abdul Karim Issa added that, “The time has come to hand over the Geneva Mosque to a Swiss administrative council that represents Muslims in the area. It should have an elected cleric.” He also mentioned that the Kingdom will take the same measures for the mosques everywhere owing to “security reasons”. [He stated](#), “We should ensure that the mosques end up in safe hands. Then we will no longer intervene.” This move will signify a big break from Saudi Arabia's foreign policy, as the country has been spending multi-million dollars in spreading the puritanical version of Wahhabi Islam since the 1960s as part of its soft power; and by 2007, it had spent close to US\$ 2 billion annually on promoting this ideology. This move could be one of the measures towards modernization efforts by the Crown

Prince Mohammed Bin Salman. –*Le Matin Dimanche, Middle East Monitor, WION*

### **Kuwait summons Iran over killing of Qassem Soleimani**

KUWAIT CITY (24 January): Kuwait summoned Iran's ambassador to protest against a claim that it was involved in an attack that killed top Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Iraq in January. Kuwaiti Deputy Foreign Minister Khaled Al Jarallah met Iranian Ambassador Mohammad Irani and conveyed Kuwait's [astonishment](#) at remarks made by the commander of the Revolutionary Guard's air force. Brig.-General [Amirali Hajjizadeh](#), stated, “MQ-9 UAVs (drones) were flying in the region (at the time of the attack) that had mostly taken off from Kuwait's Ali Al-Salem” base. Al-Jarallah told Ambassador Irani that Kuwait had already denied any role in the deadly attack in Baghdad and such a claim “risks damaging relations” between Kuwait and Iran. He also [urged](#) that statements which harm relations between the two countries, should not be repeated. -*Gulf News, Arab News, Asharq Al Awsat*

### **Syrian and Turkish intelligence chiefs meet in Moscow**

DAMASCUS (18 January): The head of Syria's National Security Bureau, Ali Mamlouk, met with the head of Turkey's National Intelligence Organization, Hakan Fidan in Russia. This was the first high-level [contact](#) between the Turkish

and Syrian governments since 2011. Ostensibly they got together to talk over the situation in Idlib and the end of Turkey's military presence in Syria. The meeting also touched on their mutual need for "a joint strategy against the YPG." With the US remaining in Syria, it would appear the Kurdish militias have not been willing to make the concessions Damascus wants, which could lead to a shift in alliances in northeastern Syria. – *Al Monitor*

### **Idlib ceasefire fails again, offensive resumed**

DAMASCUS (15 January 2020): Residents of Syria's Idlib province reported that Russian aircrafts have resumed their bombing campaign a scant two days after a Russian-Turkish negotiated ceasefire went into effect. After days of advances the Syrian military captured the city of Maarrat al-Numan in southern Idlib province. Pro-government forces attacked from the north, south, and east, after months of aerial bombardment that weakened rebel defenses and drove almost all of the city's civilian population to flee north to escape the fighting. On January 30, Russian aircrafts launched airstrikes on the towns of Arihah and Saraqib. If the Syrian forces took both Arihah and Saraqib they could advance on Idlib, the last major population centre in rebel control, from two directions simultaneously. But it's also unclear whether the remaining rebels in Idlib province have the capacity

to defend those targets anymore. –*Reuters, Al Jazeera*

### **Putin and Erdogan agreed to coordinate in Syria**

DAMASCUS (05 February 2020): Russian President Vladimir Putin and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan agreed to try to de-escalate tensions in northwestern Syria in line with previous agreements they had made. Those previous agreements went out the window, when Syrian forces killed several Turkish soldiers in an artillery bombardment and the Turks responded with a counter-strike in which they claimed to have "neutralized" more than 70 pro-government fighters. In their competing readouts on the call, the Russians said that Erdoğan pledged to be more active in rooting out extremist groups in Idlib province while the Turks said that Erdoğan made it clear that Turkish forces will defend themselves from any further attacks. –*Ahval*

### **Turkey and Russia joint-patrol in Syria**

DAMASCUS (18 February 2020): The Turkish and Russian militaries have begun conducting joint patrols in northwestern Syria again after a two-week pause amid a heavy Syrian government offensive to capture the M5 highway. The ostensible reason for the suspension of patrols was "bad weather," but it is clear that the Turks stopped participating due to anger over the offensive. And while the resumption of

these patrols might signal that things are calming down, a Turkish team sent to Moscow to discuss the situation in northwestern Syria reportedly told the Russians that Ankara is prepared to drive the Syrian government back “to previous borders” militarily. It is inconceivable that the Syrians would agree to give up the gains they have won over the past couple of weeks, no matter how many threats Turkey makes. Indeed, while the situation on the ground seems to have been fairly calm, after the Syrian army made substantial gains in Aleppo province the day before, the Russian-Syrian air campaign in the region shows no sign of stopping or even slowing down. –*Reuters*

### **Syria reports its first COVID-19 case**

DAMASCUS (29 March 2020): The Syrian government reported the country’s first COVID-19 fatality amid fears that the outbreak within Syria is much worse than the country’s medical system has acknowledged (or can acknowledge, given its serious limitations on testing). The Syrian military has also reportedly ended both conscription and the calling up of reserves, despite a perpetual shortage of manpower, and is limiting interactions with foreign militia fighters in an effort to limit the virus’s spread within its ranks. –*Reuters*

### **Trump administration warns Iraqi government**

BAGHDAD (10 January 2020): The Trump administration is continuing to warn of retaliation if the Iraqi government moves to expel US forces from the country. It is reported the administration warned Baghdad it could freeze the Iraqi central bank’s access to the Federal Reserve Bank of New York, a step that could decimate the already weak Iraqi economy by preventing it from accessing oil revenues. –*Wall Street Journal*

### **Iraqi President calls for restraint after meeting Trump in Davos**

BAGHDAD (23 January 2020): The US President Donald Trump met with two of Iraq’s most prominent Kurdish leaders – Iraqi President Barham Salih and Kurdistan Regional Government President Nechirvan Barzani – in Davos. Salih urged Trump not to let Iraq become the battleground for the US-Iran conflict, while Trump dodged uncomfortable questions about the US troop presence in Iraq. In a couple of days, the Iraqi military announced that its forces have resumed joint anti-Islamic State operations with the United States. Those operations were suspended after the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani in Baghdad.

They also say that Iraq plans to work with US forces in “the time that remains for the international coalition before the new relationship is set up.” The US government insists that it is not going anywhere and is asking Iraqi [permission](#) to bring Patriot anti-aircraft batteries into the country to defend against any future Iranian missile strikes. –*Al Monitor, Reuters*

### **Iraq elects a new Prime Minister**

BAGHDAD (01 February 2020): Iraq has a [new prime minister](#), but his mandate doesn’t seem to extend much beyond arranging a new parliamentary election. The new Prime Minister is Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi, who previously served as communications minister from 2010 to 2012. The appointment of an aging (75 years old) former mid-level cabinet minister indeed seems to be that this was a last-ditch compromise between the leading Shi’a parties to appoint a stop-gap Prime Minister in order to forestall a threat by Iraqi President Barham Salih to appoint a replacement for the outgoing Adel Abdul Mahdi on his own initiative. Allawi’s nomination has not been well-received by Iraqi anti-government protesters, many of whom [turned out](#) in Baghdad, Basra, and several other cities to express their disapproval. Muqtada Al Sadr has [ordered his militia](#) to clear roads and city squares of demonstrators and to create the impression that Allawi actually has popular support. –*Arab News, Times of Israel, Reuters*

### **Lebanese Primer makes progress in assembling cabinet**

BEIRUT (16 January 2020): Prime Minister-designate Hassan Diab and President Michel Aoun announced that Diab has formed a new cabinet. Amid calls from protesters for a “non-political” or “technocratic” government, this cabinet on first glance manages to be both more and less partisan than previous governments. Diab has filled some important positions with people who are less political than their predecessors. His new foreign minister, for example, is a career diplomat named Nassif Hitti, who is easily less political than the previous foreign minister Gebran Bassil. However, this also draws its support mostly (or maybe exclusively) from parties in the March 8 Alliance, in contrast with previous “national unity” approaches. Even some of its technocrats, like new finance minister Ghazi Wazni, have links to powerful March 8 interests (in Wazni’s case, parliament speaker Nabih Berri). It’s unclear how protesters will receive it. –*Reuters*

### **Anti-government protests resume in Lebanon**

BEIRUT (14 January 2020): Protesters in Lebanon [returned](#) to the streets after a brief pause amid the Qassem Soleimani assassination and its aftermath. Demonstrators blocked major highways around Beirut while others protested in the capital as well as in several other cities across the country. On January 16,

protests in Beirut turned [violent](#) as police used force on the demonstrators who threw stones at them. The violence was an echo and an intensification of the police violence meted out to protesters the night before. Lebanese security forces have defended their actions, arguing that some 100 police officers have been injured by protesters over the two days since protests resumed. Of particular concern is the deliberate targeting of journalists, some 15 of whom were attacked by police. – *Arab News, Al Jazeera*

### **Aid to Houthi-controlled Yemen to be cut back over risk it can be diverted**

SANA (06 February 2020): The United Nations' World Food Programme is [threatening](#) to restrict the distribution of food aid in Houthi-controlled parts of Yemen. The WFP has raised this threat in the past, claiming that Houthi authorities are obstructing and redirecting aid. Some 80 per cent of the estimated 12 million Yemenis who depend on WFP aid live in those Houthi-controlled areas, so the ramifications of a step like this could be catastrophic. - *Reuters*

### **Defendants in Gezi Park trial acquitted but new arrest warrant issued for Osman Kavala**

ANKARA (19 February 2020): A Turkish court [acquitted](#) nine of the 16 activists who were arrested on terror charges related to the 2013 protests over government plans to destroy Istanbul's

Gezi Park. The other seven activists have not yet gone on trial. The court ordered the release of Osman Kavala, the only one of the nine who had been held in pre-trial detention. The Turkish government later [issued](#) a new warrant for Kavala's re-arrest. – *Qantara, Reuters*

### **Iran announces low poll turnout, blames Coronavirus 'propaganda'**

TEHRAN (23 February 2020): Iranian authorities acknowledged that turnout in the legislative election held in February was dismal – 42.5 per cent, substantially less than the 62 per cent of the previous election. According to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, it was “negative propaganda” about the virus, spread by Iran's enemies that kept people home. However, Iran later acknowledged the seriousness of the virus, and has taken drastic measures to prevent its continued spread. –*Al Jazeera, Arab News, Al Monitor*

### **E3 countries supply humanitarian goods to Iran**

TEHRAN (31 March 2020): France, Germany, and the UK exported medical supplies to Iran in a test run of their Instrument In Support Of Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), which is supposed to shield commerce with Iran from US sanctions but is only being used for humanitarian goods that shouldn't be subject to those sanctions. The transaction appears to have gone through without causing an international incident, which could pave the way for

additional transactions to come. Meanwhile, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo offered the first sliver of a suggestion that the Trump administration might ease sanctions on Iran in light of the pandemic. But all he told reporters was that it's conceivable the administration could rethink its sanctions policy—implying that it thought about them in the first place. – *France24, Reuters*

### **European states trigger dispute mechanism in Iran nuclear deal**

TEHRAN (14 January 2020): The major Iran-related story of the day is that the “E3”—France, Germany, and the UK—have triggered the 2015 nuclear deal's dispute resolution mechanism, which despite European protestations to the contrary likely spells the final end of the accord. This is their response to several Iranian moves to reduce compliance with the deal, which in turn was Iran's response to the US decision in 2018 to withdraw from the deal entirely and wreck its entire framework on the way out of the door. The Europeans say that they want to prod Iran back into full compliance with the deal. Even though the United States has wrecked the deal, and even though the E3 have done nothing to try to preserve its benefits for Iran, their expectation is that the Iranians will keep their end of the bargain regardless. – *Gulf News*

### **Iran triples stockpile of enriched uranium breaching nuclear deal**

TEHRAN (03 March 2020): The International Atomic Energy Agency issued two reports on the state of Iran's nuclear programme. Iran is now stockpiling 1021 kilograms of low-enriched uranium, which is over three times the 300 kilogram limit laid out in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA) and close to the roughly 1050 kilograms of LEU Iran would need to produce enough weapons-grade uranium for a single nuclear weapon. Of potentially greater concern is the IAEA's claim that Iran has interfered with its inspections process. The agency claims that the Iranians have refused to answer IAEA questions about past nuclear-related work at three sites and have prevented the agency from inspecting two of them. Iran has heretofore complied with IAEA inspectors and Iranian officials have promised to continue doing so even as they've pulled back from other parts of the JCPOA. It's unclear why they haven't complied in these cases. – *Energy Central, Iran Watch*

### **Jaishankar and Zarif meet in New Delhi**

NEW DELHI (16 January 2020): Dr. S. Jaishankar, External Affairs Minister and Dr. Mohammad Javad Zarif, Foreign Minister of the Islamic Republic of Iran held a bilateral meeting on the sidelines of the Raisina Dialogue in New Delhi.

Both the leaders recalled positive outcomes of Jaishankar's recent visit to Tehran for the 19<sup>th</sup> Joint Commission Meeting, especially for strengthening bilateral trade and promoting connectivity initiative through Chabahar Port. Both sides have agreed to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Bilateral Treaty of Friendship in 2020. The two sides also exchanged views on regional and global issues of mutual interest, including the recent developments in the West Asian region and the JCPOA. The EAM reiterated Indian interests in the region and support for efforts to maintain peace, security and stability in the region. India reiterated its commitment to developing her strong and friendly relations with Iran. He thanked Iranian leadership for the progress in Chabahar project, including through designating it as Special Economic Zone. –MEA

### **Trump Reveals Israeli-Palestinian Peace Plan**

TEL AVIV (28 January): US President Donald Trump uncovered his long overdue Middle East [Peace Plan on January 28, 2020](#). The declaration was made public in the presence of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and opposition leader Benny Gantz, but no Palestinian leader was invited for the press conference at the White House. The plan is based on the two-state solution and attempts to find a solution to the age-old Israel-Palestine conflict.

According to the peace plan, Jerusalem will remain the undivided capital of Israel. It also proposes a future Palestine State with a capital on the outskirts of East Jerusalem, outside the Israeli security barrier– Kafr Akab, Abu Dis and half of Shuafat, while the security of the borders will be in Israeli hands. Israel will also retain the Jordan Valley and [Israeli settlements in the West Bank](#). The plan was harshly criticized by the Palestinian leadership and many other countries; [around 50 European figures](#) which comprise former prime ministers and senior ministers, also urged to oppose the plan, while, [the UAE](#) and [Bahrain](#) appreciated the US-led initiative to bringing peace in the region – *DW. com, Arab News, Middle East Monitor and Jerusalem Post*

### **Khamenei: Iran will back Palestinian armed groups as much as it can**

TEHRAN (February 5): The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said that his country will support Palestinian armed groups in all possible ways and urged Palestinians to oppose the US-led deal of the century. In a statement on his official website, Khamenei said: “We believe that Palestinian armed organisations will stand and continue resistance and the Islamic Republic sees supporting [Palestinian groups as its duty](#)”. He targeted some of the Arab countries by calling them as traitors among their people for their support to

the Deal of the Century. The peace plan is already rejected by [the Palestinians](#). – *Middle East Monitor and Reuters*

## **DEFENCE AND SECURITY**

### **HAL, Israel Aerospace Industries and DTL form Strategic Collaboration for Manufacturing Drones**

NEW DELHI (5 February): Hindustan Aeronautics Ltd (HAL), [Israel Aerospace Industries \(IAI\)](#) and Dynamatic Technologies Ltd (DTL) signed a strategic partnership memorandum of understanding for manufacturing and marketing of IAI's unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) to Indian customers, on February 5, 2020. Earlier, during the Defence Expo in Lucknow, IAI emphasized that the country is one its main partners. While commenting on the partnership, Chairman and Managing Director R Madhavan said “the collaboration will provide an excellent opportunity to HAL to expand its product offerings to defence customers, absorb critical technologies and strengthen the aerospace ecosystem in the country, especially for UAVs”. The partnership will allow the implementation of optimal solutions for the needs of the local customers based on their specific technologies and needs. - *Economic Times and IAI*

### **Several Hezbollah members killed in Turkish strike in Syria**

ANKARA (29 February): Turkish strike in Syria's Idlib killed at least 10 Hezbollah fighters. According to London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, 10 Hezbollah fighters were killed in the clashes in the vicinity of Saraqeb in northern Syria. *Reuters*, citing a senior officer of pro-Assad forces, said that “nine fighters were killed and 30 other wounded in a Turkish strike at a Hezbollah HQ near Saraqeb”. According to reports, Turkey used predator drones and missiles to target positions in Idlib. The strikes were a response to an earlier strike by the Syrian regime which left 33 Turkish soldiers dead. - *i24 and Reuters*

### **Defence Ministry signs contract for 16,479 Light Machine Guns with Israel**

NEW DELHI (26 March): The Defence Ministry signed a key contract for acquiring more than 16,000 light machine guns from Israel Weapons Industries. A contract worth INR 880 crores was signed by the Acquisition Wing of Ministry of Defence for the light machine guns for frontline troops. According to Defence Ministry noted that “the Indian Armed Forces' longstanding requirement of a modern state-of-the-art Light Machine Gun (LMG) has finally fructified. The Acquisition Wing of Ministry of Defence has signed the capital acquisition contract with Israel Weapons Industries for procurement of 16,479 LMGs at a cost of INR 880 crores

with the approval of Defence Minister Rajnath Singh". The guns are being procured under the Fast Track Procedure (FTP), which underlines the urgency of procurement for the regular and special forces. –*Economic Times*

### **Damascus says Israeli airstrikes target bases near Homs, southern Syria**

TEL AVIV (5 March): The Syrian news agency SANA reported that "our air defence confronted an Israeli missile attack in the southwest of Quneitra province" in the south and also an area in the centre of the country. SANA quoted a senior military source as saying that on March 5, "our air defence observed Israeli warplane movement...several missiles were fired towards the central region. The hostile missiles were immediately dealt with, and were successfully confronted, none was able to reach its target". The credibility of reports is uncertain as no statement was made by Israeli Defence Forces. – *Times of Israel*

### **Yemen separatists, government troops pull back from Zinjibar**

SANA (16 January 2020): In a step toward fully implementing their Saudi-negotiated truce, southern Yemeni separatists and government forces have begun withdrawing from the city of Zinjibar, which is the capital of Yemen's Abyan province. At the same time they've reportedly been exchanging prisoners and beginning to organize mutual

withdrawals from several other cities in southern Yemen. Earlier this month there were signs that the truce agreement might be collapsing, but these steps suggest it's on track. – *66ocitynews, Al Arabiya*

### **Houthis capture city of Hazm**

SANA (01 March 2020): Yemeni Houthi rebels captured the city of Hazm, the capital of Jawf province. The Houthis and pro-government forces have been battling it out around Hazm for several weeks, so this is a significant breakthrough. It not only helps the Houthis secure Jawf, which can alleviate pressure on the city of Sanaa, but it also opens up a northern front by which the Houthis can attack Marib province, which has been the main pro-government stronghold from which to launch attacks against Houthi-held northern Yemen. – *Al Jazeera*

### **Syrian rebels launch new offensive in Aleppo**

DAMASCUS (01 February 2020): Syrian rebels launched a couple of new offensives around the city of Aleppo, perhaps in an effort to draw the Syrian military's focus away from Idlib province. Multiple Hayat Tahrir Al Sham car bombings and rockets targeted Syrian forces to the west of Aleppo, while Free Syrian Army forces attacked government positions near the city of Al-Bab a short distance northeast of Aleppo. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, at least, the Syrian government

and its allies have secured control over the entire M5 highway for the first time since 2012. The strategically vital M5, which connects Aleppo with the city of Hama and from there on to Homs and then Damascus, has been the main target in the government's ongoing offensive in northwestern Syria. –*Al Arabaya, Nasqad*

### **Israel hits Iran-backed posts in Syria, casualties reported**

CAIRO (6 February): The Syrian state media reported that the Israeli combat aircrafts launched airstrikes near Damascus, injuring 8-12 soldiers. *SANA* reported that most of the missiles were neutralized by Syrian air defence in the suburbs of the capital before hitting the targets. According to a report in *Egypt Independent*, “the Israeli warplanes fired the missiles while flying over the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights and neighbouring Lebanon”. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, the missiles launched by Israeli aircraft successfully targeted positions of the Syrian army and “Iranian-backed militia west and south of the capital, as well as the Mazzeh military airbase in Damascus”. The strikes have again heightened the possibility of escalation between the two countries – *SANA, Egypt Independent*

### **US and UAE launch major exercise Native Fury**

UAE (23 March): US Marines and the Emirati forces conducted a major

military exercise called “Native Fury” and the troops raced over the dunes of the Al Hamra Military Base to take the model city. This is a biennial exercise that shows the close relations between the two countries. Brig. Gen. Thomas Savage of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, the ranking US commander at the event emphasized that the US is in favour of stability in the region and Iran should not be provoked by the normal exercise. The exercise had participation of four thousand US troops from the Army, Marines and Navy positioned armoured vehicles and other equipment from Kuwait and the island of Diego Garcia in al-Hamra using a portable pier system. “Native Fury” is designed to train marines and sailors in maritime prepositioning force operations and aims to expand levels of cooperation between the United Arab Emirates and the United States. The director of “Native Fury”, Brig Tariq Al Zaabi said, “The exercise demonstrated the combat readiness and professionalism of both forces in applying the concept of command and control, to jointly hit their targets with accuracy and effectiveness.”-*Defense News, US Central Command (CENTCOM), The National*

### **Iraqi militias fired missiles near US embassy in Baghdad**

BAGHDAD (16 February 2020): Iraqi militia fired multiple rockets into Baghdad's Green Zone for the second time, targeting the headquarters of the foreign military coalition in Iraq and

possibly the US embassy. In January, Iraqi militia fired rockets near the US embassy. The attacks came hours after the Harakat Hezbollah Al Nujaba (the Movement of the Nobles of the Party of God), led by Akram Al Kaabi, had announced a “countdown” to the expulsion of US troops from Iraq. In January, the movement’s official spokesman, Nasr Al Shammari, warned American soldiers in Iraq, saying: “Do not close your eyes, for the revenge of the martyr Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis is inevitably coming at the hands of the Iraqis, until the last American soldier is expelled.” In February 2019, the US had designated the Al Nujaba a terrorist organization. On January 5, the Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdulmahdi asked Parliament to vote to expel US troops from Iraq, and the country’s legislature did so vote by a majority.—*Al Jazeera, Anadolu Agency, Juancole,*

### **Turkey and Syria engage in deadly clash**

DAMASCUS (1 March 2020): The Turkish military launched a new major offensive in northwestern Syria called “Operation Spring Shield.” The incursion is a continuation and escalation of Turkish activity in the area that’s been underway since at least 33 of Ankara’s soldiers were killed in Idlib province. Turkish strikes in Idlib province killed at least 70+ pro-government fighters in Idlib province in two days, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights. Turkish forces have bombed an

airport in the town of Nayrab in Aleppo province. The Turks have undertaken multiple drone strikes against Syrian forces and reportedly shot down two Syrian aircraft over Idlib. Syrian forces have shot down three Turkish drones and Damascus says it has closed the airspace over Idlib province, though at this point pro-Damascus forces are clearly on the defensive. The Russian military has deployed military police units to the town, both to secure it and to make it clear to the Turks that if they attempt to take the town again they’ll be risking a direct conflict with Russia. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan asked the Russians to back off and let him deal with the Syrians. — *Al Arabiya, Al Jazeera, Reuters*

### **ISIS founding member confirmed by spies as group's new leader**

BAGHDAD (20 January): Amir Mohammed Abdul Rahman al-Mawli al-Salbi has been named as the ISIS’s new chief. Salbi is considered to be one of the most influential ideologues among the now depleted ranks of Isis. Born into an Iraqi Turkmen family in the town of Tal Afar, he is one of the few non-Arabs among the leadership. He is also known by the nom de guerre Haji Abdullah, and in some circles as Abdullah Qardash – although Iraqi officials suggest the latter was a separate Isis figure who died two years ago. —*The Guardian.*

## **Pentagon orders evacuation of US troops in Syria**

BAGHDAD (27 March 2020): US forces evacuated a second Iraqi military base, the Qayyarah airfield near Mosul. US forces have already withdrawn from a base in western Iraq's Qaim region as part of a plan to consolidate American personnel. The US-led coalition in Iraq withdrew from a third Iraqi military base on, the K1 airbase in Kirkuk province, and it is planning to withdraw from two more bases in northern and western Iraq "in the coming days." The US military says it is standing down because Iraqi security forces are able to handle the counter-Islamic State mission on their own, but in reality these redeployments are in response to a series of attacks on foreign personnel, and threats of attacks, by Iran-supported militia. Source: *AP News*

## **Hezbollah calls for retaliation for Soleimani's assassination**

BEIRUT (12 January 2020): Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hassan Nasrallah called on Iranian allies to retaliate for the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani by helping to drive US military forces out of West Asia. Iran has already undertaken its own retaliatory strike against two Iraqi military bases, but its leaders have also said that their ultimate response will be focused on seeing the US leave the region. – *Al Arabiya*

## **ECONOMY**

### **Jordan ranks 13<sup>th</sup> among Arab Countries for expected GDP growth in 2020**

AMMAN (24 February) Jordan ranked 13<sup>th</sup> among 20 Arab economies in terms of expected GDP growth for the year 2020 in a report issued by the Arab Investment and Export Credit Guarantee Corporation. According to the report, Jordan's growth rate is likely to reach 2.4 per cent in 2020. The report indicated that the gross domestic product continued to rise during 2019 to US\$ 2.7 trillion in 20 Arab countries, with an increase of US\$ 26 billion from last year. According to the report, six countries, namely, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Iraq, Qatar and Algeria, constitute a large share of the Arab region's total GDP, whose combined GDP for 2019 reached \$2.1 trillion. - *Jordan Times*

### **Egypt's net foreign reserves rise to US\$ 45.457 billion in January 2020**

CAIRO (7 February): Egypt's net foreign reserves rose to US\$ 45.457 billion in January 2020 from US\$ 45.420 billion in December 2019, *Egypt Independent* reported, citing the Central Bank of Egypt. According to the news report, net foreign reserves in the Central Bank of Egypt at the end of November stood at about US\$ 45.354 billion. The country's Foreign exchange reserves saw increases after the "flotation of the Egyptian pound in 2016, when Egypt

devalued its currency by 48 percent, freely, to meet a key demand by the IMF and secure a three-year US\$ 12 billion loan from the fund". - *Egypt Independent*

### **State of Emergency declared in Jordan**

AMMAN (19 March): Jordan declared a state of emergency as part of a series of measures to limit the spread of COVID-19. On March 17, 2020, Jordan's King Abdullah II issued a royal decree that gives the Prime Minister extensive powers to restrict basic rights. However, Prime Minister Omar Razzaz vowed to carry it out to the "narrowest extent" and stated that it would not invade political rights, freedom of expression, or private property. Jordan registered 69 COVID-19 cases by March 19, therefore, government took a series of pre-emptive decisions to curb the spread of the virus.- *Human Rights Watch*

### **Lebanon defaults on its debts for the first time in history**

BEIRUT (12 March): The first time in the history of Lebanon, it did not repay a US\$ 1.2 billion Eurobond on March 9, 2020. The country was due to repay a US\$ 1.2 billion Eurobond this month, but requested to restructure its debts amid a spiraling financial crisis. Commenting over the issue, the Prime Minister Hassan Diab, said: "How can we pay the creditors while there are people in the streets without the money to buy a loaf of bread?" The economic situation of

Lebanon has constantly deteriorated over time. The worsening economic situation has created discontent among the people who feel that it was an outcome of corruption in the political system. As a result, since October 2019, it is facing nationwide anti-government protests. - *The Guardian*

### **Lebanon begins 'historic' offshore oil drilling amid crisis**

BEIRUT (27 February 2020): Lebanese President Michel Aoun inaugurated the country's first offshore drilling rig. Beirut is counting heavily on gas and oil deposits under its segment of the Mediterranean to reboot the perennially weak Lebanese economy. The only problem is that it is probably going to take a while to begin extracting those resources and getting them to market, and in the meantime the Lebanese economy is on the brink of a total collapse. - *Times of Israel*

### **Lebanon, grappling with economic crisis enters into Lockdown**

BEIRUT (26 March): Like many other countries, Lebanon has entered lockdown to contain the Covid-19, closing stores and public venues while severely curtailing travel. Unlike most other countries, it is taking these economy-shrinking measures having just defaulted on payment of its foreign debt. The Lebanese government failed to pay a US\$ 1.2 billion Eurobond that matured on March 9, and it will presumably also be unable to make the roughly US\$ 1.3

billion in debt payments it is due to make between now and June. Lebanese Prime Minister Hassan Diab has said his government wants to restructure the country's sovereign debt but it is unclear how flexible lenders are going to be given the economic constraints that now face everybody due to the pandemic. The Lebanese cabinet voted to approve a financial bailout package intended to get its national finances in order. It will now be sent to parliament as a confidence vote in Prime Minister Hassan Diab's new government. –*Jerusalem Post, France24*

### **Saudi Delegates attend World Economic Forum at Davos**

DAVOS (22 January): Fifty delegates from Saudi Arabia attended the annual World Economic Forum (WEF) at Davos while the total representation from the Middle East was 210 including 75 from the UAE, nine from Egypt and nine from Bahrain. Altogether 3000 people participated this year in the annual meeting of the WEF, themed "Stakeholders for a cohesive and Sustainable World." Titled "Globalization 4.0", the Forum hosted 350 sessions and dealt with issues including climate change, digitalization and technology that affect the world's economies. Leaders from the US, the UK and France were absent whereas the meeting was attended by the Prime ministers of Egypt, Libya, Palestine and Tunisia along with the foreign minister and finance minister of Saudi Arabia. Relations between Saudi Arabia and the

WEF have grown stronger due to the Kingdom's Vision 2030, and later this year, Riyadh will play host to a meeting of the WEF under the aegis of the Centre for the Fourth Industrial Revolution. Greta Thunberg, the young environmental campaigner, also took part in one of the sessions. –*Arab News, Saudi Gazette*

### **Kuwait and Saudi Arabia resume oil production from Khafji and Wafra**

KUWAIT CITY (3 February): Kuwait and Saudi Arabia began preparing for the resumption of production from the Khafji oilfield which is jointly operated by the two countries. In December 2019, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia decided to end a five-year dispute over the area known as the Neutral Zone, which includes the Al-Khafji and Wafra oilfields. Trial output from Wafra will begin from 10,000 bpd and will reach around 80,000 bpd within six months. After a year the output is expected to reach 175,000 bpd from the Al-Khafji and 145,000 bpd from the Wafra field. Khafji is operated by Al-Khafji Joint Operations Company, a joint venture between Kuwait Gulf Oil Company and Aramco Gulf Operations Company (AGOC) while Wafra is operated by the US conglomerate Chevron on behalf of the Saudi government. Saudi Arabia as well as Kuwait are OPEC members and closed the fields in 2014-15 for environmental reasons. Remarkably, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait have been reducing oil supply as

part of an agreement between OPEC, Russia and other producers. – *Middle East Monitor, Reuters*

### **Qatar announces US\$ 150 million aid to Gaza**

DUBAI (23 March): The Qatari Committee to Rebuild Gaza said that the country has announced US\$ 150 million in aid to the Gaza Strip. The objective is to support the United Nations humanitarian programmes in the Palestinian territory while sustaining efforts to contain the COVID-19 outbreak. The aid announced by the Qatari monarch, Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, will be delivered to the Gaza Strip over a period of six months. Recently, Qatar has poured hundreds of millions of dollars into Gaza for its power plant, monetary assistance for the impoverished families and the UN temporary employment programmes. However, the amount allocated for containing COVID-19 was not mentioned, even though nine positive cases were reported in Gaza by March 26. – *Reuters, Times of Israel, Al Jazeera*

### **UAE sends aid to Iran**

ABU DHABI (16 March): The UAE sent 32 tons of medical supplies including gloves, surgical masks, protective gear and relief equipment to support Iran's ongoing efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19. The Minister of State for International Cooperation Affairs, Reem Bint Ibrahim Al Hashemi said that, "The UAE's support to Iran reflects the

humanitarian principles on which our country was founded. Providing assistance to save the lives of those in distress is essential to serve the common human interest." Further, she emphasized that the emerging crisis of the COVID-19 highlighted the effectiveness of the Emirati aid approach and the UAE stands side by side with other countries during difficult times. This is the second time that the UAE has sent aid for Iran. On March 3, the UAE sent an aircraft carrying 7.5 tons of medical supplies in collaboration with the WHO. Meanwhile, Kuwait and Qatar also reached out with humanitarian assistance to COVID-19 struck Iran. - *Gulf News, Al Monitor, Al Monitor*

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