



West Asia Watch

Trends & Analysis



**West Asia
Centre**



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(Prepared by Lakshmi Priya, Nagapushpa Devendra and Jatin Kumar)

EDITORIAL

Continued Instability in West Asia Amidst COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on countries' economy, health sectors and conflicts in the West Asian region continue to draw regional and global attention. Despite COVID-19, the region has not witnessed any de-escalation in civil wars and conflicts. Geopolitical competition has limited the ability of the West Asian countries to take collective action so far. The region is exposed to new threats and problems, complicating the existing fragile conditions in conflict zones. Unrest in Lebanon, Iraq, Iran and Syria has escalated. In a press conference on June 30, the WHO's Head for West Asia warned that the region was facing a "critical threshold" following a surge in cases. The pandemic continues to effect various countries in the WANA region differently. However, the most noticeable impact has been on their economies. The fiscal deficits have soared and currency values have plunged, resulting in higher inflation, thus effecting the capacity of states to mitigate the economic vulnerability of the populace. To manage the economic ill-effects of COVID-19, countries like Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, Kuwait and Bahrain have announced major austerity measures which include pruning their national budgets, scrapping some incentives for their employees, asking firms to replace expatriates with locals, reducing the salaries of their expatriate employees, and increasing value-added tax rate, among others.

For India, the major challenge came in the form of repatriating its citizens from the Gulf countries. To address this problem, India began the Vande Bharat Mission on May 8, 2020 to repatriate Indians stuck in Gulf countries due to the pandemic. The repatriation has been conducted in phases. Three phases have been completed and repatriation is now in its fourth phase.

Against such a backdrop, the current edition of the Newsletter has tried to capture some important developments covering issues like Iran's domestic, regional and external dimensions, and the unfolding crisis in Libya. The issue carries an exclusive interview with H.E Dr. Heba Elmarassi, the Ambassador of Egypt to India and an article in its guest column by Sirous Amerian and Mohsen Solhdoost, analysing Iran's domestic and regional challenges. An important feature of this issue is the study done by MP-IDSA scholars on the COVID-19 pandemic and West Asia.

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April 13, 2020

COMMENTARY

Iran's Strategy to Counter America's 'Maximum Pressure' Policy

Meena Singh Roy and Anant Prabhat Jawla

The 'Maximum Pressure' Policy has been a major plank of the Trump administration's Iran Policy. In essence, the policy seeks to isolate Tehran economically and diplomatically. Simultaneously, policy aims at establishing deterrence and ultimately forcing Tehran to come to the negotiating table. The assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, commander of Quds Force division of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) was seen to be the most visible and direct manifestation of this policy. In response to Washington's tough policy, Tehran has come up with its 'Maximum Resistance' strategy. Broadly, the Iranian strategy is aimed at countering US pressure by increasing Tehran's military actions, building ties with countries who can help Iran in mitigating US sanctions, enhancing its regional involvement and increasing the hold of the hardliners within the country. Examining these elements of Iran's resistance strategy helps in understanding how effective Iran's 'Maximum Resistance' strategy has been to counter the US's 'Maximum Pressure' policy.

Understanding Pressure Versus Resistance Strategy

A quick look at the recent developments in US policy to isolate Iran, bring its oil imports to zero and put extreme pressure through economic sanctions reflects the Trump administration's desire to push Iran for having a new nuclear deal. This policy has been rejected by the present Iranian government as a reflection of its maximum resistance strategy.

In the context of Iran's responses to the JCPOA last year, an argument given by a senior [Iranian official](#) in a Crisis Group report merits attention:

As the government in Tehran sees it, responding on the nuclear front serves three objectives: pushing the JCPOA participants, particularly the Europeans, to step up what have thus far been faltering efforts toward relieving the burden of U.S. sanctions; signalling to Washington that the cost of its sanctions will continue to rise unless it provides Tehran with some economic relief; and satisfying public opinion at home.

This statement brings out two crucial aspects of the Iranian strategy to counter ‘Maximum Pressure’: without any economic relief, the cost of sanctions will continue to rise. Iranian actions to incrementally lower its commitment to JCPOA are not only aimed at increasing pressure on Europeans for Iran’s benefit but also to assuage domestic constituencies.

After General Soleimani’s assassination the regime sought to reinforce its position as a regional power by confronting the US in Iraq. Tehran responded with missile attacks targeting US positions in Iraq. Iranian actions were also indicative of its retaliatory response which was more symbolic than real. Besides, the leadership within Iran, its supreme leader has continuously argued that Iran is a capable power to defend itself and will speak from a position of strength and not weakness. President Rouhani [exclaimed](#), “They thought that with maximum pressure they can take us to the table of negotiation in a position of weakness ... but we will never go to the negotiating table with weakness.”

In June, Iran and the US successfully organised a [prisoner swap](#). Interestingly, both sides were hesitant in calling it a prisoner swap. Soon after the exchange of prisoners, [President Trump](#) tweeted, “Thank you to Iran. Don’t wait until after U.S. Election to make the Big deal. I’m going to win. You’ll make a better deal now!” This statement underscores the

core argument of Washington’s ‘Maximum Pressure’ policy – to bring Iran to the negotiating table and conclude the “Big Deal.” The failure of both countries to agree for a new deal can be attributed to their harsh and inflexible positions. For instance, Mike Pompeo, Secretary of State, has outlined 12 principles as preconditions for negotiations, which are non-starters for any faction within Iran, including the reformist/centrist [Rouhani Administration](#). Moreover, the Trump Administration’s [Iran policy](#) is inextricably linked to other countries in the region, which makes it harder to manoeuvre or reach any conciliatory position.

Additionally, there are various facets and components of the ‘Maximum Pressure’ policy, including the zeroing of Iran’s oil exports, limiting its strategic depth, decreasing Tehran’s [deterrence](#), while at the same time increasing Washington’s. Iranian scholar Kayhan Barzegar is of the view that the [clash](#) between the maximum pressure and maximum resistance has made the region more complex and ultimately enhanced Iran’s “deterrent position in a broader regional security zone.” Eventually, the US’ Iran policy under the Trump Administration has resulted in increasing Iran’s “sense of strategic insecurity.” As the elections in the US draw closer, the Trump administration is “[running out of options](#)” to deal with Iran. In 2016, the key promises of President Trump’s Middle East policy included bringing

Americans back home and not getting involved in any conflict. However, President Trump's Iran policy has worked in the [opposite](#) direction with a growing threat of a war-like situation twice in less than a year. Iran's 'Maximum Resistance' strategy can be examined under three heads – Military posturing, external responses and internal actions.

Military Posturing

In the last six months, given the limited mobility due to coronavirus, Iran projected its military capabilities in multiple ways. Soon after the assassination, the IRGC targeted US military bases, Ayn al Asad in the al-Anbar governorate and another in Erbil, Iraq. As per IRGC's account, more than 30 missiles were launched at the bases that resulted in [80 casualties](#) on the American side. Refuting the Iranian claims, the [Pentagon](#) reported more than a dozen missile hit the bases. President Trump in a briefing informed that there were [zero casualties](#); however, the soldiers sustained injuries. The same week, the Iranian Navy concluded a [bilateral naval exercise](#) with Pakistan in the Indian Ocean. On April 15, the IRGC Navy was engaged in a [skirmish](#) in the Persian Gulf. The US Navy complained of harassment by the IRGC, a move that resulted in a rhetorical exchange between Iran and the US. A week later, the IRGC successfully launched "Noor," a military [satellite](#) (the first by the Iranian armed forces) into space. Calling this a

"strategic achievement," IRGC chief Hossein Salami affirmed that it has promoted "new dimensions of the [Iranian] defense power." Even though the payload was civilian, the optics and successful execution helped the IRGC Aerospace Force to demonstrate its capabilities and attempt remuneration for "mistakenly" shooting down the Ukrainian Airliner. A few experts have expressed concern against this launch, noting it as a crucial focal point in Iranian military capabilities. It has been [argued](#) that the experience and technology will be used for its ballistic missile programme. It comes as no surprise that Washington is going to use this as a base for demanding an extension of the arms embargo on Iran. The consequences of this launch have been [significant](#) for Iran and the IRGC. To quote veteran Iranian diplomat, [Seyyed Hossein Mousavian](#), "The new success on [sic] satellite launch strengthens Iran's standing in the Middle East."

"In mid-June, the Iranian Navy carried out a drill – named *Brave Martyrs of Ramadan* – in the Sea of Oman and the Indian Ocean. This was the Navy's third major naval exercise in six months. Earlier, in December 2019, the Islamic Republic [concluded](#) its trilateral naval exercise – dubbed *Maritime Security Belt* – with Russia and China in the Sea of Oman and the Indian Ocean. The June exercises were significant as the Navy tested its ingenious [cruise missiles](#). The Navy tested the land-to-sea and sea-to-sea variants of these missiles with

different ranges. The missiles varied from 80-200 km in range with room for further extension. Furthermore, it was reported that a home-made missile was able to hit a target at 280 km successfully. This can be read in association with IRGC's announcement where it declared the successful test of the [Tabas and Mersad](#) missile systems.

Apart from these high-profile military endeavours, the Armed Forces went on propagating about countries indigenous military production capabilities. In June, while addressing the Parliament, [Brigadier General Hatami](#), Iran's defence minister, emphasised that Iran produces more than 70 per cent of its aircraft and helicopter parts domestically. In the last week of June, IRGC chief Hossein Salami [unveiled](#) four home-grown military products, which included the BTR-50 personnel carrier, the So'ban-1 machine gun, a ground-penetrating radar system and the Me'raj-1 UAV. Speaking about the arms embargo, Salami [stated](#), it is "an opportunity for our scientists to fulfill defense needs using our domestic capability." Even though the specifications of these new products are either less-known or exaggerated, nevertheless, they can be viewed as a result of a clear response by the Iranian military to the US "Maximum Pressure" policy.

Similarly, Iran's push back is perceptible in crucial appointments within its armed forces. For example, a year ago, when the IRGC was declared a terrorist entity by

the Trump administration, Supreme Leader Khamenei [replaced](#) Mohammad Ali Jafari who had been the IRGC chief for more than a decade, with General Hossein Salami, a fiery critic of the US and Israel. Many scholars viewed this appointment as a sign of Iran's willingness to be more assertive in its regional and domestic policy. Similarly, this year, in June, IRGC chief Salami appointed Brigadier General [Hossein Nejat](#) as his deputy commander. With four decades in IRGC, Nejat has a history in counter-intelligence, and he will be in-charge of Sarallah Headquarters, the nerve-centre of the security structure in Tehran. He is known for his critical position against the West and enjoys close relations with Khamenei, as well as Mojtaba, his son. Among other appointments, the selection of the Esmail Ghani as the new Quds Force Chief was not a surprise, but Ghani's engagement in the region, as the Quds Force commander is said to have increased. A report from the Iranian news outlet [Jahan News](#) expands on the Ghani's activities in the region. Even if the report portrays Iranian government position, the fact that such reports are being promoted and circulated indicates Iran's outright act of resistance amidst the U.S. policies.

External Responses

The traditional "Neither East nor West" doctrine of Iran's foreign policy has also adapted amidst the US's 'Maximum Pressure' policy. In the last six months,

the Iranian regime has strategically engaged China, Venezuela and Russia. Apart from its cooperation with Turkey, Lebanon and Syria, Tehran has made inroads into Eurasia with the Free Trade Agreement signed in 2018. On October 27, 2019, the trade links between the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and Iran became operational. In July 2020, the Iranian Ambassador to Moscow [informed](#) that “the volume of Iran’s foreign trade with the EAEU has reached more than two billion and 417 dollars,” since November 2019. Moreover, Iran and Russia have been exploring investment opportunities in Syria. After a hiatus caused by the coronavirus, Iranian Foreign minister Zarif made his first foreign visit, in which he chose to visit Syria. Moreover, the Iranian regime has engaged with Russia and Syria in the Astana Process, to have a more important role in Syria not just militarily, but politically. Some scholars [suggest](#) that the Trump administration’s decision to declare sanctions against the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad under the Cesare Act will be viewed as an opportunity by the Iranian regime in Syria.

In the last few months Iran made full use of the opportunity in Venezuela to push back against the US. Amidst the political instability, pandemic, falling oil prices and general economic run-down, the Venezuelan oil industry has collapsed. Like Iran, the Venezuelan regime of President Nicolás Maduro has been under heavy economic sanctions by the

US, making the two natural allies. Between May and June, as the situation in Venezuela became extremely dire, Iran dispatched five oil [tankers](#) – *Fortune, Forest, Petunia, Faxon and Clavel* – carrying 1.53 million barrels of gasoline and alkylate to Venezuela to meet their impending demands. This was followed by visits of other [cargo](#) ships, carrying food and aid. Such a move was indicative of “maximum resistance” against “maximum pressure.” Both the conservatives and reformists celebrated the successful shipment of containers as defiance to the US’ [hegemony](#) within Iran’s domestic media. As [Alireza Sheikh-Attar](#), former Iranian diplomat noted, “The arrival of tankers proved that a resistance front has been seriously established in the field of the economy.” Furthermore, the regime has described the circumvention of the sanctions as Iranian “economic resistance,” a term coined by Ayatollah Khamenei, to counter the US sanctions and increase import substitution, thus undermining the Trump administration’s claims of success of its “maximum pressure” policy.

On June 21, the Rouhani cabinet passed the [final draft](#) for the agreement with China, dubbed as an “accord” (also known as Sino-Iranian Comprehensive Strategic Partnership). This much-publicised agreement had been under discussion for over four years when Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Tehran and met with Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in 2016. This is in

line with Ayatollah Khamenei's earlier instructions to scholars to "[look east.](#)" Since September 2019, things started taking shape with regard to the agreement. A leaked report by [Petroleum Economist](#) gave out certain details related to the agreement. This US \$ 400 billion agreement for 25 years of cooperation will allow China to receive oil from Iran at a discounted rate for 32 per cent. This also allows Chinese investment in Iran's infrastructure and telecommunication sector.

This increased affinity with Beijing is indicative of clear messaging by Iran to the United States of its balancing act of building stronger ties with a US adversary. The above instances indicate the Iranian strategy to fight back sanctions by creating an intra-economic system within its sphere of influence. The diplomatic isolation that Washington pursued has been met with Iranian insistence to build its own circles of influence – diplomatically and economically. Iran has looked at China and Russia as a safe bet, given their hard power, resources and strained relationship with the US. Since the testing of the satellite, the US has reiterated its insistence in the United Nations to extend the arms embargo, for which Iran is counting on Russia and China. Moreover, China is the second-largest economy, poised to replace the US. Amidst the larger geopolitical shifts in the global power equilibrium; Iran will not find a more comforting strategic ally. As Foreign Minister Mohammad

Javad Zarif recently [stated](#), "The point that has to be taken into consideration in our foreign policy is the shift in global power."

Domestic Dynamics: Empowerment of Hardliners

Domestically, in the past six months, Iran conducted the 11th Parliamentary election that resulted in a landslide victory for the conservatives. Other news that dominated domestic affairs in Iran was the coronavirus. The sanctions added to the Iranian government's difficulties in managing the pandemic. Perhaps the pharmaceutical and the medical sector was most severely hit, as the pandemic limited the supply of medical equipment due to import restrictions.

On the domestic front, the single most crucial impact of "Maximum Pressure" has been the empowerment of [hardliners](#). Consequently, the appointment of Baqer Qalibaf, former IRGC official, as the Speaker of the Majlis (Iranian Parliament) was hardly a surprise. He replaced Ali Larijani (also a former IRGC official) who held the position for 12 years. However, unlike Larijani, who represented the moderate face within conservatives, Qalibaf is an outspoken hardliner. Soon after taking charge, he articulated the conservatives' position against the "Maximum Pressure" policy by declaring talks with Washington as "[fruitless and harmful.](#)" By the [speaker's](#) own admission, as opposed to previous parliaments, the

current Majlis is more vocal, “revolutionary,” and “agile.” The hold of the conservatives within the Legislative Assembly will ensure that the reformist government of Hassan Rouhani does not partake in any negotiation with Washington before the elections. In the present context increased marginalisation of the reformists and centrists is expected. In the past they had convinced the public and the elites, including the Supreme Leader, for a deal that would bring economic gains, However, the deal turned out to be unrewarding. The new Majlis (referred to as the “people’s hope and expectations” by [Ayatollah Khamenei](#)) is going to play a more dominant role in boosting the “Maximum Resistance” policy. Already, the new Parliament is [espousing](#) the “look to the east” policy and diversifying trade partners. This is a clear indication of growing cooperation with China, which has its fair share of conflicts with the Trump administration.

A critical analysis of Iran’s resistance strategy indicates that it will continue its resistance to US pressure using every means at its disposal. In future, Iran will expand its ties with countries like China and Russia to balance the US pressure. On the regional front, Tehran will

continue to increase its footprints strengthening cooperation with Qatar, Oman, Syria, Turkey, Iraq and Lebanon. Besides, it will reach out to develop relations with countries in Europe, Africa, Asia and Latin America. Internally, hardliners have been empowered and their power is likely to grow in future. For now, despite serious economic problems Tehran has been able to skilfully respond to US pressure. However, in future if President Trump retains power in the next elections, things could get difficult for Iran. A former diplomat [Seyed Hossein Mousavian](#) has very rightly argued that, “The “maximum pressure” strategy employed by the US has created a lose-lose outcome for both the US and Iran, along with the entire Middle East region and the international community.” Engagement and dialogue between Iran and the US is the only resort for managing various conflicts and chaotic situations in West Asia.

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External Responses to the Escalating Violence in Libya

Paulami Sanyal

The conflict in Libya has changed its course in the last few months. At the beginning of this year, the Libyan National Army (LNA) headed by General Khalifa Haftar was at an advantageous position militarily than the United Nations-backed and internationally recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) headed by Prime Minister Fayeze Al Sarraj. But the situation has changed with the GNA reclaiming territories from the forces of Haftar.

GNA's military gains over Haftar

On 26 March, Prime Minister Sarraj announced the launch of '[Operation Peace Storm](#)' with military help from Turkey. Thereafter, the GNA attacked and seized [control](#) of the towns of Sorman and Sabratha, both in western Libya, and re-connected with the Tunisian border on 13 April 2020. By [14 April 2020](#), GNA had recaptured seven western cities stretching from Tripoli to Tunisia's borders. On [18 April](#), GNA forces led a military operation to recapture Tarhouna, another town in western Libya. After setbacks in western Libya, LNA called for a ceasefire during Ramadan [on 29 April](#) which the GNA refused.

From the beginning of May 2020, GNA forces began attacking the Al Watiya Air

Base. On [18 May](#), it recaptured the Al Watiya Air Base. Since Haftar's attack on Tripoli in 2019 this base was used to assemble supplies for Haftar's forces and was a launching point for aircrafts targeting Tripoli, Zawiyah, and other cities to the west and southwest of the capital. On [20 May](#) GNA recaptured two more western towns near the Tunisian border, Bader and Tiji. GNA further increased its control on western Libya by capturing three military bases of LNA on the outskirts of Tripoli, Yarmouk, Al Sawarikh and Hamza on [23 May](#). In the month of June GNA continued to attack different parts of western Libya and managed to capture Tripoli Airport on [3 June](#); and Tarhouna and Bani Walid towns on [5 June](#). These two towns were southeast of Tripoli and acted as a base for Haftar's attack on the capital.

Efforts to Broker Ceasefire

Amidst the continuing violence, there have been several attempts to establish a ceasefire among the parties. On 8 January 2020, a [ceasefire](#) was brokered in Libya with the mediation of Russia and Turkey. Under pressure from Egypt and UAE, both supporters of LNA, General Haftar agreed to a conditional ceasefire starting from 12 January 2020. However, in the next meeting in Moscow on [13](#)

[January](#) he refused to sign the ceasefire agreement. In a [conference in Berlin](#) on 19 January 2020, countries involved in Libya agreed to develop a permanent ceasefire. This conference included leaders and representatives from Germany, Russia, Algeria, Egypt, Turkey, France, Italy, the United Kingdom, the United States, the UAE, China, and the Republic of Congo, along with representatives from the African Union, the European Union and the United Nations. However, the meeting failed to ensure the withdrawal of existing military support by Turkey, the UAE, Russia or any other external players. Eventually, both parties blamed each other for the almost immediate ceasefire violation.

Involvement of External Powers

Conflict in Libya has escalated into geostrategic competition between Egypt, Russia, and the UAE on one side and Qatar and Turkey on the other. The involvement of external forces increased in September 2019 when Russian mercenaries were deployed, supporting Haftar's forces. This initiated the intervention of Turkish ground forces supporting GNA. Russia had further sent [mercenaries](#) belonging to the private security contractor, the Wagner Group in December 2019 and in [May 2020](#), dispatched fighter jets to back up Haftar's forces.

Turkey's interest in Libya is driven by economic interests as well as its support for Islamist ideology. GNA is [supported](#)

by the Muslim Brotherhood of Libya. The Justice and Construction Party (JCP), the political wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, is supportive of the GNA and its members hold influential positions in political, security, and economic sectors in the GNA- ruled parts of Libya. Turkey has been [funding](#) Islamist militia groups fighting with GNA since the beginning of the conflict. For example, Mohamed Ben Dardaf/Babur, a wanted Islamist terrorist who participated in the murder of the US ambassador Chris Stevens in a 2012 attack in Benghazi, was killed in 2019 while fighting for a pro-GNA militia group. This group allegedly boasted to have received Turkish military equipment. A collaborator of Ben Dardaf was the *Al Samoud Brigade* led by Salah Badi who was on the UN sanctions list since 2019 for his involvement in violence in Tripoli. Moreover, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan in [February](#) 2020 confirmed reports of Turkey sending Syrian rebels to fight for GNA forces. Allegedly, these Syrian fighters were formerly connected with the *Al Nusra Front*.

Moreover the conflict in Libya provided Turkey with an opportunity to enhance its influence in the eastern Mediterranean area. In exchange for Turkish military support, the GNA signed an agreement creating an [exclusive economic zone](#) covering key gas fields. This agreement gives Turkey exploration rights in the gas reserves of the eastern Mediterranean which were

discovered in February 2018. Haftar's success might give Egypt an edge on these gas reserves which also has shown interest in this area. Egypt is one of the founding members of [Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum](#) (signed in Cairo on 16 January 2020) along with Cyprus, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan and The Palestinian Authority which created a platform for natural gas cooperation in the eastern Mediterranean region.

Egypt, however, has other reasons to back LNA since 2013. Egypt's concerns over terrorism, its [economic dependence](#) on Saudi Arabia and the UAE; and their support for Haftar against GNA are some of the key reasons for Egyptian involvement in Libya. Moreover, the emergence of a Muslim Brotherhood-led government in Libya could also create a convergence of interests with the Islamist groups that are operating in Egypt's western desert. While the result of the conflict was going in GNA's favour, in [June 2020](#) Egypt called for another ceasefire in Libya. It was welcomed by the UAE, Jordan and Saudi Arabia as part of an initiative that also proposed an elected leadership council. However, the GNA and Turkey both dismissed the ceasefire attempt and called for UN negotiated ceasefire talks. On [20 June](#), Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El Sisi warned that if GNA and its allied forces advanced towards Sirte, Egypt would begin a military intervention.

Among the Gulf countries, the UAE has been providing its [direct military support](#)

to LNA. Since April 2019 the UAE has conducted more than 850 drone attacks in support of LNA. The UAE has also been supplying arms and ammunitions to Haftar. Since January 2020, more than 100 airlifters, suspected of carrying weaponry from the UAE have been received by Libya. Qatar, on the other hand, has backed the groups opposing Khalifa Haftar and has connections with the Islamists.

Among the extra-regional powers, France began to support General Haftar in Benghazi as early as 2015, with a view towards countering terrorism in Libya. Mostly providing political support, France in July 2016 [agreed](#) that its Special Forces were present in Libya and three members of the French Special Forces had died after their helicopter were shot down in an offensive. In [July 2019](#), a US-government investigation informed that France had supplied American anti-tank missiles to Haftar's forces. Both Russia and France have openly supported UN-mediated efforts to resolve the issue and officially denied sending military ammunitions to LNA. In recent times however, Russia is seen to be [supporting](#) Turkish presence in Libya when it rejected the EU's Libya mission to stop Turkey supplying arms to Syrian militia and mercenaries.

Conclusion

The GNA is able to recapture territories with direct military help from external powers. Despite being the internationally-recognized government

in Libya, the GNA still continues to negotiate with LNA for a ceasefire. A clear military victory of the GNA over Haftar's forces seems improbable at present, as the latter is also being backed by a number of regional powers. As the situation stands today, a clear military victory of one group over the other does not look possible as both the factions are being supported by a group of external powers. The involvement of the external powers has only aggravated the situation. The enormity of differences between the two key groups – GNA and LNA – has not

allowed the restoration of peace and stability in the country. Libya, thus, continues to face the dual challenges of unremitting violence from both sides as well as faltering political negotiations and dialogue which have not fetched any concrete results as of now. Libya still awaits a committed and full-fledged ceasefire agreement between the parties and a political roadmap for the future of the country.

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GUEST COLUMN

Iran Faces Critical Domestic and Regional Challenges

Sirous Amerian and Mohsen Solhdoost

Iran is facing severe troubles from both within and outside. Internally, economic difficulty has made it hard for the people to live and maintain their level of comfort, leading to a rise in unhappiness amongst the general populous. In the region, Iran's forces have been hit hard by its adversaries and its shrinking resources.

Economic challenges

The withdrawal of US from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) have had devastating effects on Iran's economy. The level of GDP growth has declined from a positive [12 percent in 2016 to minus nine percent in 2019](#). In the previous fiscal year 2019, [Iran only managed to export around US\\$ 8 billion worth of oil down from around US\\$ 60 billion in 2018](#). Whether it managed to get all that money and bring all of it back is another question. Iran has billions of dollars blocked in foreign bank accounts and cannot access them due to sanctions. The Iranian Rial has been declining and the prices of everyday essentials have also skyrocketed and negatively affected ordinary Iranians' quality of life and buying power. These price hikes were not just limited to open market prices and the increasing price of the dollar but were

also fuelled further when the government decided to raise petrol prices. In 2019 the government decided to implement a huge price hike on petrol, raising prices by 50 per cent for the first 60 litres and 300 per cent after that. A decision that had been delayed a few times fearing a people's revolt; which [did happen at the end](#).

Allegations of corruption and popular discontent

But it has not been a hard year just because of inflation or sanctions, the country has also been experiencing corruption, nepotism, and embezzlement of public funds in the top echelons alongside mismanagement. If one follows Iranian newspapers and websites, one comes across a new case of corruption every month and many more that whistle-blowers talk about on social media.

The discontent within the Iranian society is mainly fuelled by internal issues rather than just external. Sanctions should not affect the battle against corruption, nepotism, and mismanagement, issues that were prevalent long before President Donald Trump came to power. The regime is enforcing compulsory *hijab* or

banning dog walking in public, or women entering stadiums, riding bikes and bicycles. The issue of [agriculture and scarcity of water](#) is not new, and there are many more to name which are unrelated to sanctions and external pressure. These might seem like minor issues, but for a society that is under immense economic pressure, minor issues mean a lot.

The people have [communicated their discontent](#) in various ways, such as low election turnouts and recent protests, but they are never heard, and one hardly sees any modification of policy and there is not much prospect for internal change in the future. President Rouhani is also nearing the end of his term and with the failure of the JCPOA, his plans and future aspirations to become supreme leader one day also look very dim. The reformists have also failed their supporters with their lacklustre performance and corruption; and are gradually losing whatever little they had.

Iran in the region

As regards Iran's external behaviour, the unprecedented economic hardships, which have posed serious challenges to Iran domestically, seem to have little impact on Iran's foreign policy. The Iranian leadership has indeed been more attentive to external issues than domestic matters. To better understand why the regional security paradigm prevails over concerns for internal challenges in Iran, a very significant historical precedent needs to be borne in mind.

The fixity of Iran's regional security imperatives has largely been shaped by the strategic solitude Iran experienced during the eight-year Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s. Once Iraq invaded Iran on September 22, 1980, the West and almost all Arab states immediately threw their full support behind Iraq to counter Iran. Not only was Iran ostracized, but it also was denied equal access to the international arms market to purchase, upgrade, and maintain its conventional military equipment. Thus, the [lessons](#) learned from the Iraqi invasion of Iran in the 1980s effectively turned Iran's alliance with both its only regional state partner, Syria, and a network of non-state partners into an indisputable priority in Iran's behaviour pattern in its neighbouring areas. The Quds Force, which is a special unit created out of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), has been accordingly tasked with managing Iran's relations with its proxies in the region.

As sanctions continued to limit Iran's ability to purchase new equipment even in the post-war period, Iran's outdated conventional military capabilities, which were severely deteriorated during the war, were Iran's only means of survival. Faced with increasing threats from the US and Israel in the aftermath of the 2003 Iraq War, Iran assured that its reliance on asymmetrical military capabilities would compensate for its conventional military weakness and establish the necessary deterrence. To this end, Iran modified its security doctrine by expanding a network of

proxies. Thus, despite facing tough economic [challenges](#) in the past four decades, Iran has continued to expend its limited resources to address wider regional security challenges by supporting militia networks.

The US factor

The US' misperceptions about Iran and frequent miscalculations in its policy towards Iran have counter-intuitively furthered Iran's determination to strengthen its strategic stance through its non-state partners in the region. Iran's resolve to deter both regional adversaries and a hostile US military presence in the region has surfaced particularly after President Trump re-imposed previous sanctions on Iran and adopted new, tighter punitive measures against Tehran following the US' withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018. As it can be seen in the region, Trump's Iran policy, which is also known as the "maximum pressure" policy, has not only failed to force Tehran to change course, it has also pushed Iranian policymakers from both ends of the political spectrum to speak with one voice when it comes to Iran's strategic positioning in the region.

The course of events in the past few months demonstrates how Iran's entrenchment in the region is a direct response to the US' provocative behaviour. As the assassination of Qassem Soleimani took America's maximum pressure campaign to the next level, Iran has reinforced its support to militia groups in Iraq. In less than a week after Soleimani's death, the Iranian

parliament [allocated](#) 200 million euros of additional funds to the Quds Force.

Conclusion

To sum up, Iran's internal situation does not look very promising because of immense economic pressure, corruption, and mismanagement. The pressure from the people due to economic hardship can once again push the country into a second wave of public unrest and greater internal disturbances in the coming years. When it comes to regional issues, Trump's maximum pressure policy hasn't been successful in getting policymakers in Tehran change their regional stance and strategy. They are still maintaining their presence in the region despite high casualties and economic pressure, signalling the ineffectiveness of this policy. Clearly, things need to change within and outside Iran. With other actors in the region taking a page from Iran's book and expanding their regional proxy networks alongside multi-billion dollar spending on conventional military capabilities, one cannot expect Iran to pull back from the region, irrespective of it being wrong or right, as a means of defence and geographic depth.

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Interview with Ambassador Dr. Heba Elmarassi

In an exclusive interview to West Asia Watch, conducted by Dr Meena Singh Roy, H.E Dr. Heba Elmarassi the Ambassador of Egypt to India expressed his views on the key security challenges faced by Egypt, regional issues and Egypt's role, country's relations with major powers and India-Egypt bilateral ties.

“One of the most important areas of cooperation is the field of joint manufacturing through the opening of Indian factories in Egypt and Egyptian factories in India to take advantage of the large markets available in the two countries...”, says Ambassador of Egypt to India.

1. What in your view are the key security challenges faced by Egypt?

Egypt is currently facing multiple security challenges, whether regarding the crisis in Libya in particular and the external interference in the Libyan matter that support armed militias and terrorist groups, or with regard to unstable situations in many countries in the region in general, such as Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, which are hotbeds of terrorist groups and extremist elements, that represent threat to security and stability in all countries of the region. Egypt is working tirelessly with concerned parties and international partners to reach a fair and just settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict based on the two-states solution

with independent sovereign state of Palestine on the borders of June 4, 1967 and East Jerusalem as its capital. The continuation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the eastern borders of Egypt is a serious challenge and a primary source of fuelling instability, violence and extremism in the region and the world. In this regard, I have to mention the great efforts undertaken by the Egyptian armed forces and the civilian police to eliminate terrorist elements in North Sinai. Egypt also faces other vital national security challenges, such as the Renaissance Dam Project in Ethiopia on the Blue Nile, which Egypt is keen to complete in a way that helps the development in Ethiopia, but after reaching an agreement between Egypt, Sudan and Ethiopia in order to take into

account the interests of all three countries. Egypt also faces, as the whole world, the challenge of fighting the spread of COVID-19 which represents a serious threat to health and economic situations in the country.

2. Given the centrality of Egypt in the WANA region, what is the medium and long-term vision of Egypt for stability and security in the region?

Egypt believes that resolving any conflict in the Middle East region and achieving stability and security, whether on the short or long term, will only happen through political solutions that originate from the stakeholders themselves. Military solutions can never lead to any true stability and the external interference cannot help to solve but rather make things more complicated and fuel the conflicts. As examples of the initiatives Egypt is taking to help reaching political solutions in the region: Cairo Declaration on 3 July 2020 to solve the Libyan crisis, as well as the role that Egypt plays to host meetings of Syrian opposition, in coordination with other countries that undertake the same endeavour, while maintaining relations with the Syrian regime through the Egyptian embassy, that works at the level of charge d'affaires.

3. How is Egypt managing relations with Russia and the US?

Egypt has long-standing diplomatic and political experience, just as India does.

Therefore, it maintains balanced and good relations with all countries of the world including the United States of America and the Russian Federation, whether on the bilateral level or the regional and multilateral issues.

4. How has Egypt responded to Chinese initiative of BRI?

Egypt welcomed the Chinese Road and Belt Initiative (BRI) and already has joined it since Suez Canal represents one of the most important shipping and navigation lanes in the world. Egypt believes that by the sincere and collective work of all members, the initiative can enhance the global movement and transportation and contribute to develop infrastructure, facilitate trade and thus flourish the global economy.

5. How do you view the present status of India-Egypt relations?

The Egyptian-Indian relations have been well established and strong since ancient times. The two countries played a major role in the 50s to establish non-alignment movement, express and defend the interests of developing countries. Relations between the two countries have continued at the same level and the recent period has witnessed remarkable development in various fields, especially after the visit of President Abdel Al-Fattah Al-Sisi to India in 2015 to attend the India-Africa Summit and in 2016 on a state visit. It is expected that Mr. Narendra Modi will

visit Cairo as soon as COVID-19 crisis ends.

6. What are the key challenges facing India-Egypt relations in the present context?

There are common and similar challenges that encourage both of them to work jointly to exchange experiences and best practices to overcome these challenges, such as: enhancing infrastructure, facing population accumulation, eliminate illiteracy, reducing the level of poverty, combating terrorism and extremism ...etc.

7. How can India and Egypt collectively work in fighting the COVID -19 Pandemic?

There are already open channels of communication between health, scientific and research entities in both countries to cooperate and exchange experiences on how to tackle the COVID-19 spread, and there is a possibility for cooperation in the field of production of anti-virus vaccines. Also, both countries are active and coordinating in the framework of the World Health Organization to combat the virus. Honourable Prime Minister of India discussed over the phone with H.E the President of Egypt how to confront the virus and possible cooperation in this field through research, pharmaceutical, medical, human resources requirements and governmental policies. India has gifted two symbolic shipments of hydroxychloroquine and paracetamol

medicines to Egypt to support efforts to combat the virus and the Indian government approved importation deals of Medicines and medical supplies concluded by Egyptian companies and Indian ones.

8. What could be key sectors of cooperation between the two countries in future?

I believe that the prospects for cooperation between the two countries are wide and not limited to specific areas. However, I consider that one of the most important areas of cooperation is the field of joint manufacturing through the opening of Indian factories in Egypt and Egyptian factories in India to take advantage of the large markets available in the two countries, as well as to benefit from the trade agreements that link the two countries with other regional groups, which represents an opportunity for them to gain access to even larger markets. I also believe that this cooperation can include civil as well as military aspects. I also see that there is a mutual desire to enhance cooperation in the fight against terrorism and extremist thought based on the nature of moderation in the two countries, and I would like to point out in this regard the potential to take advantage of the capabilities of Al-Azhar in Egypt. I also see great opportunities for cooperation between the two countries in the cultural and educational fields, given the depth of their cultural and civilizational heritage. Potential important initiatives in these

fields are the opening of a branch of the Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Egypt and organizing an exhibition of pharaonic antiquities in India. The Embassy coordinates with the Egyptian and Indian authorities in order to operate more direct flights between the two countries, especially between the two capitals, in addition to the current flight

between Cairo and Mumbai, which will contribute to enhancing transportation opportunities and facilitate the travel of officials, business people and tourists. In this regard, I would like to mention that Egypt Air as well as Indigo have plans to fly their aircraft between Cairo and New Delhi soon.

WEST ASIA NEWS SURVEY

POLITICAL

Yemen STC seizes Socotra Island; then agrees with the government for ceasefire

Aden (21 June 2020): Yemen's UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council (STC) [seized](#) full control of the island of Socotra deposing the governor of the island on 21 June. The Yemeni government is calling it a coup. On the next day, Yemen government and the STC agreed to a ceasefire and the talks began in Saudi Arabia on implementing a peace deal. The Saudi Ambassador to Yemen [Mohammed Al Jaber said](#) that “The Kingdom and coalition states have made continuous efforts since signing the Riyadh Agreement for its implementation and that faced many challenges that hindered and derailed it.”
– *Al Jazeera, Arab News*

Saudi-led coalition rejects separatist Yemen self-rule declaration

Sanaa (27 April 2020): Yemen's separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC), which is backed by the United Arab Emirates, [declared itself](#) the governing authority in the city of Aden and across southern Yemen, adding another layer to Yemen's overall crisis. The STC ultimately seeks a restoration of the nation of South Yemen, though it has

been fighting in a loose coalition with the Yemeni government against the Houthis. It has also become an Emirati proxy, and as such it has been opposed to the role that the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned Islah Party has played in the Yemeni government. The STC made moves to take over several southern Yemeni cities last year, but that revolt ended when it agreed to a new arrangement with the Yemeni government that was supposed to reduce Islah's role while creating a significant role for the STC. That agreement has never really been implemented, and the STC angrily pulled out of the formal implementation process earlier this year. –*Al Jazeera*

Fighting escalates after ceasefire in Yemen

Sanaa (16 June 2020): The two-week ceasefire that pro-government forces declared in June, has not taken effect. The Saudi-led coalition says it has [documented](#) over 240 Houthi “breaches” over the past 48 hours, though the Houthis never reciprocated the ceasefire in the first place. The Houthis are advancing to the central Yemeni city of Marib and have also been active around Hudaydah, where they actually have agreed to a localized ceasefire. Their intent seems to be to attack Yemeni government forces while avoiding attacks near the Saudi border

and any missile attacks against the Saudis directly. That was apparently their back-channel counter-offer to the Saudi ceasefire, that they would stop attacking Saudi forces while continuing to fight the Yemeni government. - *Middle East Eye*

WHO suspends operation in north Yemen

Sanaa (10 May 2020): The World Health Organization announced that it is suspending operations in northern Yemen in order to force Houthi officials to be more forthcoming about the COVID-19 outbreak in areas under their control. So far they have only confirmed two cases of the coronavirus, but it is very likely there are considerably more. Using the Houthis' own lack of reporting against them, the WHO declared that it was reallocating resources to places with larger COVID-19 outbreaks, like southern Yemen, for example, where authorities have declared the city of Aden "infested" amid a spike in confirmed COVID-19 cases. - *Al Monitor*, *Al Jazeera*

Turkey launches new operation called "Claw-Eagle" in northern Iraq

Bagdad (17 June 2020): Turkish military aircraft bombed Kurdistan Workers' Party positions in northern Iraq again in mid-June. The Turks have begun a new operation called "Claw-Eagle" against the PKK in northern Iraq. This was the second round of strikes in the past few

days. A "senior Turkish official" who did not want to be named told *Reuters* that there are plans to establish additional Turkish military bases in northern Iraq, on top of the ten or so already there. - *Al Jazeera*, *Reuters*

Turkey to minimize troop movements in Syria because of COVID-19

Ankara (06 April 2020): The Turkish government has stated that it has "minimized" the movement of its personnel in northern Syria. The Turkish defence ministry has said it had set up a new unit to deal with the spread of COVID-19. Turkish troops deployed in Syria would now enter and exit operation areas only with the permission of the Army chief so that "the movement of staff and troops is minimized, unless it is mandatory." - *Al Jazeera*

Turkey accuses five nations of forming alliance of evil

Ankara (12 May 2020): The Turkish government declared that Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, and the United Arab Emirates have formed an "Alliance of Evil." Foreign ministers from all five countries met virtually in May and issued a joint statement criticizing Turkey's recent efforts to grant itself exclusive energy rights in the eastern Mediterranean. The statement said that Turkish ships are drilling in Cypriot waters and that Ankara cut a maritime agreement with Libya's Government of National Accord late last year that

divides much of the region between them, ignoring Greek and Cypriot claims and international law.- *Al Monitor*

COVID-19 sparks riots in Iranian prison

Tehran (07 April 2020): According to *France 24*, conditions in Iranian prisons are deteriorating rapidly under strain from the coronavirus. Despite the announcement that it has temporarily released more than 100,000 prisoners to stem COVID-19 infections, Iran has seen riots in at least 10 prisons. There are lack of basic hygiene measures like soap and water in the prisons, and anger among inmates is high as they are unable to afford high bail prices. Official state media have reported riots at numerous prisons, noting one death – in Khorramabad in western Lorestan province on March 19 – and a total of 97 escapes.- *France 24*

IRGC extends patrolling in the Gulf

Tehran (19 April 2020): Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has increased its naval patrols in the Persian Gulf. The US Navy said its ships had a run-in with a group of Iranian patrol boats while on manoeuvres in the Gulf on 17 April. The IRGC warned the US to “refrain from any adventurism” and said that it “sees the dangerous actions of foreigners in the region as a threat to national security and its red line and any error in calculation on their part will receive a decisive response.” - *The Arab Weekly*

Battle rages in Syria despite COVID-19 outbreak

Damascus (13 April 2020): Though Idlib province continues to get more attention, *Al-Monitor's* Fehim Taştekin reports that there's been regular fighting between Turkish-backed rebels and the Syrian Defense Forces in northeastern Syria, despite concerns about COVID-19. Most of the clashes have occurred in the area around the border town of Ras AlAyn and the nearby village of Tell Tamer. The pace of fighting has definitely slowed, and inactivity appears to be creating some tension within the Turkish rebel ranks. Some fighters in the “Syrian National Army” – Turkey's rebranding of the rebel Free Syrian Army – are agitating for redeployment to the western side of the Euphrates (i.e., to Idlib, where they can fight government forces). In addition, factions of the SNA are starting to fight one another (violently, in some cases) for control over the financial spoils of war. - *Al Monitor*

US, Saudi Arabia readying substantial aid to Yemen to help fight COVID-19

Sanaa (21 April 2020): A State Department official report suggests that the US has put together a “substantial” COVID-19 aid package for Yemen. Saudi officials held a virtual donors' summit in June in an effort to raise US\$ 2.4 billion that the United Nations says is needed to continue aid work in Yemen. It raised around US\$ 1.35 billion in that donors' conference. The UN's

humanitarian coordinator for Yemen, Lise Grande, had previously warned of “catastrophic cutbacks” unless the fundraising brought in at least US\$ 1.6 billion. Yemen’s anti-pandemic effort may be one area hit hard by the shortfall. - *Arab24, Reuters*

Unrest escalates in Lebanon as currency collapses

Tripoli (28 April 2020): Violence escalated in capital Tripoli as protesters burned down a series of banks and countered volleys of teargas by pelting security forces with stones. The violence followed the funeral of 26-year-old Fawwaz Al Samman who died during clashes with the army. The army released a statement expressing regret for his death, without claiming responsibility, and announced it is opening an investigation into the incident. The protesters have attacked banks and have set them on fire and blocked highways. The army retaliated with tear- gas and rubber bullets.- *The Bagdad Post*

Iraq begins to form government

Baghdad (04 June 2020): The third designated Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi, at last, managed to form a government. The Iraqi parliament finally approved the last seven members of Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi’s cabinet, confirming his ministers of agriculture, culture, foreign affairs, justice, migration and displacement, oil, and trade. Those cabinet posts had been vacant as Baghdad’s political factions

worked on finding consensus choices to fill them. - *Arab News*

Syrians demonstrate amid a currency crash

Damascus (08 June 2020): Protesters in the southern Syrian city of Suwayda have been demonstrating against Bashar Al Assad’s government. The Syrian economy is in tatters, the Syrian pound is rapidly losing its value and by some estimates as much as 80 per cent of the population is now living in poverty. The situation is dire enough that people are taking to the streets again. - *Al Jazeera*

E3 push Iran rebuke at nuclear watchdog over inspection

Tehran (16 June 2020): France, Germany, and the United Kingdom (the “E3”) are circulating a resolution at the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) demanding that Iran comply fully with IAEA requests for site access and with its questions about the “possible military dimensions” (PMD) of past Iranian nuclear research. The IAEA has complained of late that Iranian officials aren’t allowing its inspectors access to two sites and are refusing to answer questions about a third site related to the PMD issue, based on information supposedly gleaned from the alleged “archive” of Iranian nuclear research that the Israeli government has said it has uncovered. The E3 want to force Iran to cooperate with the IAEA, but they are also looking for a way to be tough on Iran under the misguided belief

that it gives them credibility to try to convince the Trump administration not to take any more action that risks destroying the 2015 Iran nuclear deal entirely. There is no reason to believe that anything European countries do with respect to Iran is going to give them any leeway in negotiations with Washington. – *Asharq Al Awsat*

UN mulls proposal to reopen Iraqi crossing for pandemic aid to Syria

Damascus (18 June 2020): Germany and Belgium are circulating a resolution at the United Nations Security Council to reopen a closed humanitarian aid entry point from Iraq into northeastern Syria and leave open two active corridors from Turkey. In January, the Security Council agreed to close the Iraqi crossing and keep the two Turkish crossings open for only six months, with Russia and China threatening to veto any measure that went further than that. This resolution would leave the Turkish crossings, now scheduled to close on July 10, open for 12 months and reopen the Iraqi crossing for six months with the option to renew for another six months. - *Asharq Al Awsat*

GCC countries pardon prisoners

Riyadh (7 April): In an effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, Saudi King Salman called a temporary halt to prison sentences for individuals convicted in private cases involving unpaid debts. He also ordered the immediate and temporary release of prisoners who are serving for debt-related convictions.

Similarly, the Sultan of Oman, Haitham bin Tarik pardoned 599 prisoners including 336 foreign inmates jailed for various offenses; and the Emirati leader Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan pardoned 1,511 prisoners and settled their financial obligations as part of annual pardoning before the Ramadan. The Qatari Emir Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani too pardoned a number of prisoners, on the occasion of the holy month of Ramadan. Further, Bahrain pardoned hundreds of prisoners in an attempt to contain the spread of coronavirus and released the human rights activist Nabil Rajab. In January, Kuwait looked at the possibility of pardoning and deporting foreign prisoners who suffer from infectious diseases such as AIDS. -*Arab News, The Guardian, Khaleej Times, Qatar Tribune, Al Monitor, Gulf Insider*

Bahrain's Gulf Air to repatriate citizens from Iran

Manama (14 April): Bahrain's state-owned Gulf Air has begun to repatriate its citizens stranded in Iran. More than a thousand Bahrainis visited Shia religious sites in Iran and were stuck for more than two months due to the spurt of COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. As per the statement issued by Gulf Air, it has successfully returned Bahraini citizens from the UAE, Oman, Jordan, Egypt and Turkey. There have been no direct flights since January 2016 between Bahrain and Iran. Bahrain struggled to find other airlines willing to fly to Iran and could manage to repatriate only a few hundred

people before Gulf Air began its services. The two countries do not have diplomatic ties. As Bahrain's initial cases of the COVID-19 were among people returning from Iran via third countries, Manama expressed its displeasure to Tehran for not stamping the passports of COVID-19 positive individuals. –*Al Jazeera, Al Arabiya*

Three Gulf countries seek partnership with Israel to defeat COVID-19

Tel Aviv (10 May): Bahrain reached out to the Sheba Medical Center at Tel Hashomer and expressed interest in its response to the pandemic. In addition, the UAE's ambassador to the United Nations Lana Nusseibeh announced that her government would be willing to work with Israel on a vaccine and emphasized that the public health space should be an un-politicized space where collective knowledge of COVID-19 should be pooled to improve the lives of many people around the world. [Rabbi Marc Schneier](#), who has extensive ties in the Persian Gulf as president of the interfaith dialogue organization, Foundation for Ethnic Understanding, said, "There's an opportunity to join forces here. So many issues transcend politics in the Middle East." He added that Bahrain and an unnamed Gulf country ([likely Kuwait](#)) has taken an interest in telemedicine or remote medicine innovations in Israel and in the ways Tel Aviv has responded to the pandemic. Meanwhile, Israel agreed to transfer US\$ 50 million of

[Qatari aid](#) to the Gaza Strip. – *Jerusalem Post, Times of Israel, Ynet News*

UAE Ambassador warns Israeli citizens against West Bank annexation

Jerusalem (17 June): The UAE's ambassador to the US Yousef Al Otaiba called upon Israel to retract from its annexation plan in an op-ed at the Israeli *Yedioth Ahronoth* newspaper. He said that the annexation would destroy hopes of further rapprochement between Israel and the Arab world. Yousef Al Otaiba emphasized on the Emirati efforts at reaching out to Israel and mentioned the invitation to participate in Dubai's World Expo planned for next year. Furthermore, he cited the presence of Israeli diplomats in Abu Dhabi at the headquarters of the United Nations International Renewable Energy Agency. In his support, the UAE Foreign Ministry's Director of Strategic Communications [Hend Al Otaiba](#) tweeted, "We face too many shared dangers and see the huge potential for better relations. In the UAE and in much of the Arab world, we would like to believe that Israel is an opportunity, not an enemy." Also Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince [Faisal bin Farhan](#), said the annexation plans were a "dangerous escalation" that threatened the peace process. –*Al-Monitor, Arab News*

Kuwait to reduce the number of foreign workers

Kuwait (10 June): Kuwaiti parliament member [Badr Al Mulla](#) proposed a draft law that would reduce the number of foreign workers in order to preserve the demographics of the country. As per the law, Kuwait is setting the percentage of people allowed according to their nationalities. The new law limits Indian expatriate workers to 15 per cent as compared to their 37.3 per cent prior share. Similarly, it limits Egypt, Philippines and Sri Lanka, each to constitute only 10 per cent of the Kuwaiti citizens, while Bangladesh, Vietnam, Nepal and Pakistan are allowed five per cent each. All the remaining nationalities are to constitute not more than three per cent of the Kuwaiti population. The law prohibits government agencies from renewing the residence of foreign workers, along with preventing the change of residence permits from domestic to private or converting visiting permit to work residency. The draft law exempts “citizens of the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council, the spouse and children of a Kuwaiti citizen, domestic workers and workers recruited from government contracts, heads and members of diplomatic missions dispatched to Kuwait and their spouses and children under the condition of reciprocity, heads of state and members of their families, and members of military missions of countries with which Kuwait has security agreements.” – *Al Monitor*

Netanyahu thanks India for delivering Hydroxychloroquine to Israel

New Delhi (10 April): Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu thanked his Indian counterpart Narendra Modi [for sending a five-tonnes](#) cargo of medicines, comprising the anti-malarial drug Hydroxychloroquine, which is seen as a potential antidote for COVID-19. The Indian consignment reached Israel within days after Netanyahu requested India to supply Hydroxychloroquine on 3 April. – *The Hindu*

After Year of political deadlock, Israel swears in a new government

Jerusalem (17 May): After having three consecutive elections, the 35th government of Israel was sworn in on 17 May 2020. The parliament approved a new unity government with a power-sharing agreement between Benjamin Netanyahu and Benny Gantz. The swearing-in ceremony took place in the Knesset and marked a fifth term for Netanyahu. He also made history by becoming the first Israeli prime minister to be indicted in criminal charges and [formally leading the country](#). Netanyahu will serve as prime minister of Israel for 18 months and after completion of his term, Benny Gantz will become prime minister and Netanyahu will take charge of the Ministry of Defence. The unity government “with 36 ministers and 16 deputy ministers, is the [biggest in Israel's history](#)”. – *Haaretz and Washington Post*

Jordan receives medical aid from UAE

Amman (16 June): As a part of the joint efforts to curb the COVID-19 pandemic, the UAE has dispatched 12.4 tonnes of medical supplies, comprising COVID-19 test kits and other equipment to Jordan. The handing-over ceremony of medical aid was held on 16 June 2020 at Queen Alia International Airport and was attended by Royal Court Secretary-General Mohammed Al Karaki and Charge d'Affaires of the UAE Embassy in Amman Fahed Otaibi. During the ceremony, Amjad Adaileh, Minister of State for Media Affairs, thanked the UAE for medical assistance, noting that “the aid will contribute in increasing the number of daily COVID-19 tests and [halting the spread of the virus](#)”. – *Jordan Times*

Hamas calls for united 'resistance' against West Bank annexation

Gaza (16 June): To confront the Israeli plan to annex a part of the West Bank, Hamas called for unity among Palestinians. A senior Hamas leader Salah Al Bardawil said that the call for the annexation project [should] be confronted with [resistance in all forms](#). He urged Palestinians to turn “hardship into opportunity” to revive the Palestinian issue. He said: “It is the duty of each free Palestinian citizen to rise against this flagrant aggression on our land.” – *Al Araby and Al Jazeera*

Jordanian King warns US lawmakers that annexation would strengthen Hamas

Tel Aviv (19 June): Jordan's King Abdullah II warned the US congressional leaders that Israel's plan to annex parts of the West Bank would significantly damage its ability to have normalized relations with the Arab world and will strengthen Hamas. The *Times of Israel* citing an American source wrote “He urged members to understand that annexation would affect the daily lives of Palestinians and that he feared that it would radicalize Palestinians and empower violent [extremists](#). [Hamas would benefit from annexation](#)”. Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi, who made an unannounced visit to Ramallah on 19 June, also shared similar concerns on Israel's annexation plan and warned about the “unprecedented danger” which could spark a “long and violent” conflict in the region. – *Times of Israel and Arab News*

Second UAE Flight Lands in Israel

Tel Aviv (19 May): A UAE-based Etihad Airways aircraft landed at Tel Aviv Airport on 16 May 2020 with the alleged goal of supplying aid to Palestinians. It was the second time when an Emirati plane landed at David Ben-Gurion Airport in less than a month. In May, the UAE had sent the first aid cargo which was rejected by the Palestinian Authority by saying that “it had to be sent in coordination with the

Palestinian [leadership, not Israel](#)". The development has been seen as a fresh warming-up sign in the relations between Israel and the UAE because both the countries have no formal diplomatic ties. However, Israel's covert relations with the Gulf countries (the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Oman) have significantly improved in the last few years. –*Telesur*

Palestinian Premier submits 'counter-proposal' to Trump plan

Ramallah (9 June): The Palestinian Prime Minister Mohammed Shtayyeh said that Palestinians have submitted a counter-proposal to top mediators, including the United Nations. "We submitted a counter-proposal to the Quartet a few days ago," he said, referring to the group mediating in the conflict, made up of the United Nations, United States, Russia and the European Union. It proposed the establishment of a "sovereign Palestinian state, independent and demilitarized", Shtayyeh said, with "[minor modifications of borders where necessary](#)". He also noted that the text of the proposal foresees possible land swaps between the two-future entities on a like-for-like basis. After the Israeli declaration of annexation of a part of the West Bank, relations between Israel and Palestine have turned from bad to worse. – *Jordan Times*

ECONOMIC

Saudi ARAMCO offers option to defer crude payments

Riyadh (15 April): Saudi ARAMCO has offered the option to defer payments for crude cargo deliveries by up to 90 days for the Asian and European oil refineries. The oil plants are struggling with shrinking demand owing to COVID-19. The move is seen as part of Saudi Arabia's efforts to increase its market share and the credit will be offered through unidentified Saudi banks. The proposed term could potentially alleviate the short-term financial burden for at least four refiners in Asia and Europe. However, the move will lead to overall higher costs due to more expensive financing terms, and according to [sources](#) from the refineries at least three have rejected the terms. Also, ARAMCO bagged a [US\\$ 10 billion](#) one-year loan provided by a group of 10 banks and ARAMCO is aiming to take the loan out in the bond market by the fourth quarter of this year. –*Reuters*

Crude output to be cut down in response to COVID-19

London (9 April): Members of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries ([OPEC](#)) and allies including Russia signed a historic oil production cut of up to 10 MMbpd so as to lift the market from a pandemic-driven collapse.

[Saudi Arabia](#) has announced its official crude pricing (OSP) for May and agreed to export oil at a lesser price to Asia after the refiners called on Riyadh to slash its crude OSPs for a third straight month. Riyadh kept the prices flat for Europe and raised them for the United States. Meanwhile, [UAE's](#) Minister of Energy and Industry Suhail bin Mohammed Al Mazrouei said in a tweet that the Emirate is committed to reducing oil production from its current level of 4.1 million barrels per day. While [Oman](#) announced that it will cut its oil output by 200,000 barrels per day, [Kuwait's](#) oil minister said that it would be cutting more than 1 million barrels per day in actual oil supply. However, there are reservations about the effectiveness of the deal as it constitutes only a fraction of the demand loss that stands at 35 million bpd. – *World Oil, Reuters, Khaleej Times, Oman Observer*

The US pledges US\$ 8 million in aid to Jordan's COVID-19 fight

Amman (24 April): The US government has pledged an US\$ 8 million in aid to Jordan to fight the COVID-19. The aid includes US\$ 6.5 million from the State Department's Migration and Refugee Assistance to support refugees in the country, including providing them with health assistance, electricity, education and [short-term cash dole-out](#)". Another US\$ 1.5 million was donated by the US Agency for International Development for the improvement of [a large-scale](#)

[testing campaign in the country](#). – *Arab News*

Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Oman cut major capital expenditure

Riyadh (13 May): As part of austerity measures, Saudi Arabia cut US\$ [8 Billion](#) from programmes and mega-projects under the Kingdom's plan to end its reliance on oil. The Kingdom cut allocations for a number of its [Vision 2030](#) reforms with a total value of 100 billion Riyals (US\$ 26.6 billion) and plans to triple its value-added tax rate while suspending a cost of living allowance for state employees. The measures seek to improve finances hit by low oil prices and the slowdown induced by the pandemic.

The [Bahraini cabinet](#) issued a statement to reschedule some construction and consulting projects so as to keep the expenditure within this year's budget and accommodate other spending needs that emerge as a result of the spread of COVID-19. Similarly, the finance ministry of [Oman](#) issued thirteen circulars and directives to derive spending cuts from the 2020 budget. The emphasis is on the implementation of a 5 per cent reduction in allocations approved for the civil, military and security departments, along with a 10 per cent cut of approved liquidity for the developmental budget. In addition, [Muscat](#) also announced that it will not renew contracts of around 70 per cent of the foreign consultants; and advised retirement for employees with more than

30 years of experience along with introducing 5 per cent cut in the budget of government bodies and armed forces. –*Gulf Business, Reuters, NASDAQ, MEED, Oman Online*

Lebanese Protest Local Currency Devaluation in Beirut

Beirut (10 June) – The anti-government protests resurfaced in Lebanon as the country's currency nosedived due to high cost of the dollar. Demonstrators gathered outside the Lebanese central bank in Beirut and protested against the rising price of the dollar. Protesters demanded urgent economic reforms in the country and early parliamentary elections. On 13 June 2020, [the protest turned violent](#) when hundreds of protesters targeted the parliament with stones and smashed the windows of various shops. In response, troops were deployed to the streets to disperse the crowd which [turned into clashes between protesters and security forces](#). Lebanon has been witnessing a wave of protests since October 2019, due to worsening economic situation. –*Sputnik and CNN*

Saudi Arabia quarantines cash to prevent spread of COVID-19

Riyadh (22 May): Saudi Arabia will isolate [coins and banknotes](#) from local and foreign sources for up to 20 days in sealed containers to prevent the further spread of COVID-19. The Saudi Arabia Monetary Authority (SAMA) said, “We have taken precautionary measures to isolate and sterilize both paper and metal

currencies, whether coming from inside or outside the kingdom, by isolating them for a period of 14 days and up to 20 days, depending on where it has come from.” The authority emphasized that after the isolation period the currency will be sorted by machines and returned in circulation while coins and paper bills deemed unclean or still contaminated will be destroyed. Earlier, South Korea and China decontaminated their currency using UV light and heat. [SAMA stated](#) that it has directed financial institutions to take the necessary precautionary measures to ensure currencies are sanitized. Economist and financial analyst [Talat Zaki Hafiz](#) insisted that the sanitization measures will not affect cash flow in local money markets. He said, “The monetary authority, with its decades of experience, acts in accordance with its very precise calculations...there is a careful balance between the isolation period for the banknotes, the amount of isolated cash and the amount the local monetary system and markets need, also taking into consideration the cash availability in its treasury.”-*Al Monitor, Al Arabiya, Arab News*

DEFENCE and SECURITY

Israeli Air Force targets Iranian troops and arms depots in Syria

Damascus (10 June): Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) reported that the Israeli Air Force has targeted military installations in northern-western Hama province. Syrian news reports suggested

that the Syrian army's air defences had foiled the missile attack on Misyaf city in Hama province. However, the UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), said that at least nine people were killed of whom at least four were Syrian nationals, working with Iranians at the site. [The attacks were neither accepted nor denied by Israel Defence Forces.](#) -*Syrianhr.com*

Israel ups stockpile of nuclear warheads from 80 to 90

Jerusalem (16 June): The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) speculated that Israel possesses between 80 and 90 nuclear warheads. It also said that the accurate number [of Israeli nuclear weapons remains a closely guarded secret.](#) SIPRI's reports said that Israel follow a "policy of ambiguity regarding its nuclear programme". According to the report the number of nuclear warheads in Israel rose to 90, up from 80 warheads in 2019. -*TRT World*

Iraqi forces team-up anti-ISIS operation

Bagdad (04 June 2020): *Al Monitor reports* that the Iraqi government has begun a new operation to clear the Islamic State out of Kirkuk province. There's been a recent upsurge in ISIS activity, primarily in a band extending from Saladin province through Kirkuk and into Diyala province in eastern Iraq, so this operation is meant to blunt that resurgence. If it succeeds it will continue into Saladin province as well. But it may

also be a political move by the new Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa Al Kadhimi. He has decided to use a mix of military, Interior Ministry, and paramilitary Popular Mobilization Unit forces to carry out this operation, which may be intended to create a semblance of unity among Iraq's security forces and may be establish some government control over the still mostly autonomous PMU. - *Al Monitor*

Abbas ends security agreement with Israel and the US

Ramallah (20 May): The Palestinian leader, Mahmoud Abbas, announced an end to security [cooperation with Israel and the US](#), citing the looming danger of the new Israeli unity government's plan for annexing a part of the West Bank. The Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) voted for termination of security cooperation with Israel and the US in 2018. But the decision of when to implement it was left to Abbas. Since then, he has threatened many times to end the security cooperation; but it was unclear what his declaration would mean in practice. However, there were [reports that the Palestinian](#) security officials had been ordered not to talk to their Israeli counterparts. The end of security cooperation may again start the bloody fights between Israelis and Palestinians as well as significantly impact Israeli security strategy in the West Bank - *The Guardian and Kan.org*

US-Saudi Arabia reaffirm strong defence partnership

Riyadh (9 May): US President Donald Trump and King Salman of Saudi Arabia reaffirmed their countries' strong defence partnership and agreed on the importance of stability in global energy markets. The leaders spoke on the phone after [Trump threatened](#) Riyadh that if OPEC did not cut oil production, he would not be able to prevent Congress from passing a law to remove troops from Saudi Arabia. A day prior to the telephonic conversation, [U.S. pulled out](#) four of its powerful Patriot missile systems from Saudi Arabia, after determining that the threat from Iran that sparked an arms buildup in the region last year had waned. US Secretary of State [Mike Pompeo](#) said that the Patriot batteries had been in place for some time and the troops needed to get back. Nevertheless the US is trying to sell thousands of [precision-guided bombs](#) to Saudi Arabia despite an ongoing investigation into the US\$ 8 billion emergency arms sale to Saudi Arabia and the UAE – *Al Monitor, The Hindu, Al Jazeera, Defence News*

The US considers withholding aid to Jordan to force extradition of Palestinian terrorist

Tel Aviv (9 June): The US administration vows to 'explore all options' to bring Ahlam Tamimi to justice, who was convicted for the 2001 terror bombing in Israel that killed 15 people. To create more pressure on the

Jordanian government, the US is considering withholding aid to Jordan in a bid to secure the extradition of Ahlam Tamimi. This is very much possible under the US "Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2020," which was signed on 20 December 2019 and provides legal grounds for economic consequences for Jordan. A family member of a US citizen killed in the attack has been leading a campaign to extradite Tamimi to [the US after Israel imprisoned and then freed her.](#) –*Times of Israel*

INDIA and the REGION

Vande Bharat Mission repatriates Indians from the Gulf region

New Delhi (7 May): India began the Vande Bharat Mission to repatriate workers stuck in Gulf countries owing to the pandemic. The first two flights were from Dubai to Kozhikode and from Abu Dhabi to Kochi. The passenger list was finalized by the Embassy on the basis of prior registration. Priority was given to the workers in distress, the elderly, those with medical urgency, pregnant women, short-term visa holders, laid off workers and students who faced death in family. The cost of tickets and 14-day quarantine after reaching India is borne by the passenger. The passengers are also brought home by ships after medical screening and registration of the mandatory Aarogya Setu app. The repatriation is being conducted in phases and recently repatriation entered the [third phase](#). Travelers are required to

provide SoPs for a mandatory 14-day quarantine after landing. Also, 88 medics from India went to UAE to assist in the war against the COVID-19 pandemic.–
MEA

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