

West Asia Watch

Trends & Analysis



**West Asia
Centre**



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(Prepared by Centre Members)

EDITORIAL

Unpredictable Nature of Geopolitical Developments in West Asia

A series of developments in March and April 2019 underlined the volatile and capricious nature of politics in West Asia. The US' announcement on 22 April of its intentions not to extend the waivers on Iranian oil exports as they end on 2 May, gave an indication of President Donald Trump's uncompromising attitude on Iran. It intensified the debates on the unfolding situation that not only affects Iran but will have implications for the whole world, including India. India, which has strong ties with Iran, and imports nearly 10 per cent of its crude oil from there and will have to find a replacement for Iranian oil to comply with US sanctions or find a way to avoid the sanctions through either a formal or an informal understanding with the US. It will also have to watch for the position taken by important regional and global powers, especially Russia, China and the European Union, to be able to tackle the challenge emanating from the US decision on Iran.

Two important elections – the Knesset Election in Israel and Local Election in Turkey – hold some lessons for the time to come. The Knesset election in Israel held on 9 April threw some surprising results. While the Likud Party led by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu emerged as the largest party with 35 seats, the main opposition, the newly-formed Blue and White Party, too was able to get 35 seats in parliament. While Netanyahu was quick to declare victory, his ability to form the government has been seriously curtailed due to the division within the right-wing organisations on various issues and the reluctance of the Blue and White Party to form a National Unity government. This has been discussed with some insight by Prof. P. R. Kumaraswamy in his guest column. The result of local elections in Turkey were no less surprising and underlined the growing discontent among the people against President Recep Tayyip Erdogan. The highlight of the result was the loss of his Justice and Development Party (AKP) in key mayoral elections, including in the capital Ankara and commercial hub Istanbul as well as in the third largest city, Izmir. Dr. Muddassir Quamar's article discusses the implications of the setback for AKP in the local elections.

In the meanwhile, the ISIS which was declared to be militarily defeated in both Iraq and Syria had shown signs of re-emerging in both countries by mounting attacks on random civilian and military targets. The proto-state might have been demolished but the ideology and its foot soldiers remain a potent threat for global peace and this has been highlighted by Dr. Adil Rasheed in his article.

The issue also has an exclusive interview with Dr. Bijan Khajepour, an Iranian economist based in Austria. The interview reflects on the Iranian economy under

unilateral US sanctions. Dr. Khajepour argues that India should look at Iran through the prism of new opportunities. The fallout of US sanctions on Iran, its internal economic situation and implications on the international oil market remain the most important issues in West Asia in the coming months and to secure its interests vis-à-vis Iran will be a major foreign policy challenge for India.

Turkish Opposition Witnessing a Revival?

Md. Muddassir Quamar

The results of country-wide municipal elections in Turkey held on 31 March 2019 threw a [few surprises](#). Firstly, the People's Alliance of ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and right-wing Nationalist Movement Party (MHP) lost the important positions of mayor in three major cities including Istanbul, Ankara and Izmir. AKP's defeat in these three cities is significant because the ruling party members have been repeatedly elected as mayors in these important cities in the last 25 years. The loss in Istanbul is deemed more vital because President Recep Tayyip Erdogan started his political career from the city when he was elected as its mayor in 1994. It was his four-year term (1994-1998) as the city's mayor that had put him on the national map and helped him eventually become prime minister in 2003 after the then newly-launched AKP under Erdogan's leadership won the 2002 general elections.

The importance of Istanbul for national politics and the [narrow margin of victory](#) of 13,000 votes prompted the AKP and its ally MHP to file a complaint against rejection of some of the votes demanding a recount. However, after recounting and investigation into invalid votes, the Supreme Election Council (YSK) declared the opposition Nation Alliance, comprising Republican People's Party (CHP) and Good Party (Iyi), candidate Ekrem Imamoglu as elected. The AKP and MHP did not give up and filed a fresh application demanding annulment

alleging massive irregularities in recording of the votes. This was seen as a last-ditch effort to not lose control of Turkey's largest city and the economic capital. The bid eventually succeeded as the YSK on 6 May [announced a re-run](#) to be held on 2 June. Nonetheless, the fact that the Imamoglu had defeated the former Prime Minister Binali Yildirim, who was the ruling party candidate, underlined the shifting mood in Turkish politics.

Secondly and more importantly, the opposition Nation Alliance did better than expected as far as the overall results were concerned. The elections were being held for electing mayors and councillors for 30 metropolitan municipalities (30), 921 district municipalities and 397 town municipalities. While the position of 21,750 councillors were being contested by independent candidates, the mayoral elections, especially in the 81 provincial capitals were being fiercely contested by candidates from the two nation-wide alliances. Overall, the opposition National Alliance [won 21 of the provincial capitals](#), an increase of 6 compared to the 2014 municipal elections. On the other hand, the People's Alliance won in 50 provincial capitals, a decrease of 5. Surprisingly, the Kurdish-dominated People's Democratic Party (HDP) members were elected mayors in 8 capital cities while 2 went to independents. Even in terms of the overall percent of votes, the main opposition alliance [polled 36.97 percent](#)

[votes against the AKP-MHP alliance's 49.7 percent](#). Though still a gap of nearly 13 percent compared to the 2014 municipal elections, the opposition vote saw an increase by 10.63 percent while the AKP-MHP voted witnessed a drop of 10.99 percent.

The perceived poor performance of the ruling AKP and its ally MHP and a good show by the main opposition CHP and newly-launched Iyi has prompted a debate within Turkey and outside of a change in political mood in the country. The primary factor behind this is considered to be the continuous economic downturn despite the measures taken by AKP-government. President Erdogan had succeeded in effecting a constitutional reform in 2016 to [change the system](#) of government from parliamentary to presidential. Then and subsequently at the time of [Erdogan's election](#) as the head of the newly introduced presidential form of government in June 2018, the change was hailed by the AKP as the one-step solution of all problems facing the country. It was argued that the parliamentary system was leading to tardiness in decision making and hence not allowing changes necessary for revival of the economy. Despite these rhetoric, the Turkish economy has continued to suffer from serious problems and Turkey for the first time in over a decade is [staring at recession](#) with downward economic growth and devaluation of Lira. On top, troubles in relations with the US and European Union, Turkey's major economic partners, have harmed trade. This has left Ankara look for alternative markets in

Russia, Middle East and Central Asia, and radical economic measures, such as selling of forex and borrowing from the central bank, but success has eluded the country.

In this context, the debate on the revival of the opposition acquires significance. With Istanbul going for re-election on 2 June, the electorate as well as the political parties remain on the edge. However, one cannot ignore the fact that the AKP has retained most of its support base and it is its ultra-Nationalist ally the MHP which has lost most of its support to its breakaway Iyi or Good Party. The Iyi was launched in 2017 under the dynamic leadership of Meral Aksener and had since then gone from strength-to-strength to emerge as the third largest political force in Turkey. Given the fluid nature of Turkish politics, it would be wrong to write-off AKP and Erdogan who is a shrewd politician and is known for whip up surprises to remain in power. With the change in fortunes of MHP, the political circles in Ankara have already started discussing the chances of the ruling alliance getting rid of the MHP and seek alternative political partners to strengthen its electoral fortunes.

Undoubtedly, the municipal election results underline the changing dynamics of electoral politics and if the results are any indication, Turkish politics is up for some interesting times in coming months.

(Md. Muddassir Quamar is Associate Fellow at West Asia Centre in the IDSA)

Scorched ISIS Rises from the Ashes

Adil Rasheed

It took less than a month after losing its last bastion of Baghouz in Syria on 23 March 2019 for ISIS to hog global spotlight again with its deadly Easter Sunday attacks on 21 April in Sri Lanka, [which killed 253 people and left over 500 injured](#).

Meanwhile, ISIS fighters also regrouped to launch several attacks in Syria and other parts of West Asia immediately after US-led forces wiped out the territorial Caliphate. In the latter half of April, ISIS militants [killed over 50 soldiers](#) of the Syrian military and allied forces in a series of attacks, just as its affiliates in Libya [launched major offensives](#) against Khalifa Haftar's forces in Tripoli and in southern regions of the country. In Riyadh, a day after the attacks in Sri Lanka, ISIS tried to carry out an attack on a state security building but [Saudi forces foiled the attack](#) and arrested all 13 suspects.

Building on its notoriety, ISIS also launched a major public relations offensive by releasing a [video of](#) Abu Bakr Al Baghdadi. Being off the grid for a long time, the sudden appearance of the self-styled 'Caliph' was intended to revive the demoralized ranks and supporters of ISIS and to find new allies and recruits across the globe.

The transnational terror group now seems to be shifting focus to its ISIS

branches, or "provinces," in Africa, Europe and more importantly South Asia. However, conditions in West Asia still remain conducive for a revival of its now defunct Caliphate.

ISIS' foreign women and children

Another troubling dilemma for governments around the world is the fate of thousands of ISIS fighters and families held prisoners in Syria and Iraq. [About 40,000 of these prisoners are foreign fighters and their families](#) who had come to join the Caliphate from as many as 80 nations.

The scale of the crisis is indeed enormous, with most of the prisoners being women and children. [According to Robin Wright](#), distinguished scholar from the United States Institution of Peace, "The final battle for Baghouz began in early 2019. But neither the US-led coalition nor the SDF grasped the numbers of civilians who had ended up in the farming hamlet. Besides the fighters, another 74,000 family members, mainly women and children, surrendered and were transferred to a detainee camp in al-Hol. Of those, 65 percent were under the age of 18; 23 percent were under the age of five. Some of the wives of fighters boasted that they are breeding the next generation of ISIS militants for the next caliphate."

The states of origin of many of these foreign fighters are reluctant to take them back. As there is scant evidence on whether they were involved in criminal activity, most states are wary of even putting these prisoners in their jails for fear they might radicalize the prisoners. In spite of criticism by certain human rights organizations, [Britain and Australia have even scrapped the citizenship](#) of nationals who had left their countries and lived in ISIS territories. Thus, these countries have not only abandoned the ISIS members, but also their children to [permanent statelessness](#) and indefinite detention, which worsens the humanitarian as well as the security hazard in the long run. British home secretary Sajid Javid has said that the passports of more than 150 such people have been cancelled by his ministry.

Even Iraq which has vowed to take back [31,000 of its citizens](#)—ISIS fighters and families—is already struggling to cope with the over 20,000 ISIS members languishing in Iraqi prisons. In fact, the Iraqi government is alleged to be delivering ‘[hasty and unfair justice](#)’ to detained ISIS prisoners including children, sentencing hundreds to death after trials that are often completed within five to ten minutes.

There is also a big debate over the fate of children of ISIS fighters’ families who are dying of malnutrition and sickness in the camps of militias where many currently reside. The local militias running these camps say they cannot feed other countries’ citizens forever. Many women, like British teenager Shamima Begum

have remained unrepentant about their association with ISIS. [Shamima Begum has even justified](#) to the media the 2017 Manchester Arena bombing, in which 22 were killed. Such cases have made accepting ISIS mothers and children for repatriation back to their native countries difficult for fear they may raise a new generation of terrorists.

ISIS’ exodus to South Asia

As the dilemma of squaring human rights with security concerns related to families of ISIS members remains unresolved, thousands of fighters of the erstwhile Islamic State reportedly managed to [escape from Iraq and Syria](#) to fight another day. Many of these fighters are said to have entered Europe, Africa as well as South Asia (particularly Balochistan, Afghanistan, Maldives and Sri Lanka).

Amid these reports, comes the disturbing ISIS’ announcement on 10 May that it has opened its India branch or the so-called ‘[Wilayah Al Hind](#)’ in the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The news comes on the heels of another ISIS claim that it appointed a certain [Abu Muhammed al-Bengali as its new emir in ‘Bengal’](#). The announcement carried with it a direct threat to carry out strikes in India and [Bangladesh](#) “If you think you have silenced the soldiers of the Khilafa in Bengal and Hind and you are certain about that then listen we men are never to be silenced ... and are thirst for revenge is never to be faded away (sic),” an ISIS poster released in Bengali, English and Hindi read.

With the end of the territorial Caliphate, ISIS has redoubled its efforts to carry out terrorist attacks across the globe and seems keen on increasing its footprint in populous countries, such as India. With US backtracking from its announcement to withdraw forces from Syria imminently, it is apparent that the strategy of capturing ISIS' territorial

Caliphate, without decimating the organization (its leadership and forces that now wait to fight again), has clearly turned ISIS into a more difficult, desperate and deadlier kettle of fish for international peace and security.

(Dr Adil Rashid is Research Fellow at West Asia Centre in the IDSA)

Indian entrepreneurs should look at Iran through the prism of new opportunities

*Interview with Dr. Bijan Khajepour, Managing Partner,
Eurasian Nexus Partners GmbH, Vienna, Austria*

*In an exclusive interview to West Asia Watch, conducted by **Dr. Meena Singh Roy**, **Dr. Bijan Khajepour** an Iranian economist said that Indian entrepreneurs should look at Iran through the prism of new opportunities where one can combine Iranian capacities and markets to Indian technologies.*

1. What are the key trends in Iranian economy in the present context?

The Iranian economy is severely undermined by external sanctions and mismanagement. In the aftermath of the implementation of the nuclear deal (also known as JCPOA) there were signs of an improvement, not just in terms of economic growth, but also economic reforms, but the re-imposition of secondary US sanctions has further weakened the economy and led to the collapse of the national currency. External sanctions have reduced Iran's oil export earnings enormously and almost made it impossible for Iran to repatriate its hard currency revenues.

The World Bank has forecast that the Iranian economy will contract this year by about 6%. Inflation is above 30% and unemployment around 13%, while youth unemployment is around 26%. All of these trends are bad news for the Iranian society that is losing purchasing power

and also hope in a proper economic development.

2. How do you think Iran can reduce the negative impact of unilateral sanctions?

Iran has a very diverse economy and many options to compensate for the gaps caused by sanctions. Even though the petroleum sector is the main earner of hard currency, it only contributes about 20% to the GDP. When we look at the sectoral contribution to the GDP, we realize that Iran has a service-based economy with 53% of activities related to services. The country also has sizable agricultural and manufacturing sectors. These facts allow for some room to manoeuvre by boosting some of the sectors to compensate for the loss of income in the petroleum industry. For example, Iran can invest in the vast potential of its mining sector or boost productivity by paying more attention to efficiency in agricultural and industrial activities. Tourism offers another platform for new hard currency revenue generation. Furthermore, the country's young population offers a great opportunity in the field of IT start-ups, if the government manages to provide the necessary infrastructure and investment climate.

3. What the strength of Iranian economy?

The key strengths are its diversity and resilience, but also the availability of huge natural and human resources. It is interesting to note that many see the current juncture as an opportunity for the Iranian economy. Not being able to export oil will compel the Iranians to invest in new capacities the prerequisites of which exist in the country. For example, Iran could invest in mini-refineries in order to convert its crude oil into petroleum products which are more easily exported to the regional markets compared to crude oil.

4. How the major importer of Iranian oil, China and India, can manage their business interests with Iran?

China, India and other Asian economies have to consolidate their positions in the Iranian market in the absence of western companies. The current failure of the European Union to promote trade between Iran and the EU provides opportunities for those countries that are engaged in Iran business. Iran-India trade relations need to adapt to the reality that both sides have developed diverse and increasingly international private sectors. Both sides have to move beyond the traditional trade patterns and look at the diversity of opportunities in India and Iran. For China, Iran is already a trading partner in diverse industries and also an important member of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The Indian private sector should look at Iran as the hub of the West Asia region and start engaging Iranian companies. Clearly, US

sanctions are an impediment to developing business links with Iran, but with some creativity and strategic positioning, Indian companies can take advantage of the fact that their western competitors are absent in Iran. Larger companies should also remember that Iran won't remain under sanctions indefinitely and this is the time to establish long term loyalties and relationships.

5. What in your opinion can EU do to save the JCPOA? Iran seems to be quite disappointed with the EU's approach in the present context?

Tehran has rightly expected that the European Union should compensate Iran for the lack of economic dividend from the JCPOA. We should remember that Iran accepted the curbs on its nuclear program in return for the lifting of sanctions and expected economic benefits. Most of those benefits have disappeared as a result of US sanctions and also over-compliance by international companies. The Iranian government cannot justify the current situation and needs to see a significant gesture from the European side. This gesture can either be political, such as an international summit to reiterate the commitment to the JCPOA, or economic, such as an economic package that guarantees that Iran will not be deprived of its expected benefits. The payment mechanism called INSTEX which the Europeans have set up is an important step, but it falls far short of Iranian expectations.

6. How do you see Iran's regional approach? Who are the regional partners for Iran in economic terms to help Tehran in current situation?

Over the past decade, Iran has invested widely in creating a level of economic and energy interdependence with immediate neighbours. Iran is now exporting gas or electricity to a number of its neighbours and there are plans for other connectivity via the electricity or gas grids. So, economic cooperation had already been part of Iran's regional policy.

In the immediate aftermath of the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran had made a strategic choice to focus on its immediate neighbours in its trade and economic development. Iran has 15 direct neighbours including important trading partners such as Turkey and Iraq as well as Russia. Iraq is now Iran's most significant trading partner in non-oil trade and Turkey is an important trading and investment partner. At the same time, Iran has tensions with other neighbours, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Nonetheless, Iran's approach has been and will be to de-escalate these tensions and improve ties with all immediate neighbours. The most recent initiative in Tehran has been to propose non-aggression treaties with all immediate neighbours which would help Iran in promoting security in the West Asia region.

7. What can be possible options for India and Iran to take their economic and energy ties forward?

The Indian business community should initially take a closer look at all sectors that are not sanctioned. It is not just the food and pharmaceutical sectors. As mentioned earlier, Iran is a huge market with immediate access to a number of developing regions. Indian entrepreneurs should look at Iran through the prism of new opportunities where one can combine Iranian capacities and markets to Indian technologies. There are many opportunities that all have one word in common, i.e. efficiency. Iran will be looking for greater energy efficiency, improved agricultural efficiency etc.

With regards to energy relations, India should not allow US policies to undermine the long term relations between the two countries. The current moment in the Iranian history is a moment of defining new orientations and loyalties. India should find creative ways of continuing its energy links through partnerships in sub-sectors that are less exposed to sanctions and pressure.

GUEST COLUMN

Unable to Form Government, Netanyahu Calls for Second Elections in 2019

P. R. Kumaraswamy

When he called Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi to congratulate on his re-election with a landslide victory, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu could not hide his jealousy. According to an official clip released by his office, Netanyahu lamented: “Well, thank you for your congratulations on my victory, but there’s one difference: You don’t need a coalition, I do, and there’s a big difference.”

This difference became evident on May 29, ironically hours before Prime Minister Modi being sworn in, when Netanyahu endorsed a motion in the Knesset to dissolve itself and pave the way for new election due to his inability to form a government.

On April 9 as the exit polls were hinting at a tight race between the governing Likud and Blue and White led by former general Benny Gantz, Prime Minister Netanyahu rushed to proclaim 'victory' and forged pre-coalition deals with the religious parties. When the results were announced, both parties won an identical number of seats, 35 each with the Likud securing 0.33 percent or less than 15,000 votes more than the other. The support of the religious parties gave the impression that a Netanyahu led right-wing coalition was more comfortably placed with 65 seats in the 120-member Knesset. With only 45 seats, the centrist Blue and White

decided not to venture into an arduous journey. The remaining ten seats were held by Arab parties, whose inclusion into a ruling coalition would have transformed Israel into a true democracy but they would have to wait for another time.

Despite his legendary skills of deal-making, Netanyahu—who on July 16, would become the longest-serving prime minister, overtaking David Ben-Gurion—was unable to convince his former aide and present head of the Yisrael Beiteinu Avigdor Liberman to join the coalition. Catering primarily to secular and Russian voters, the former aide of Netanyahu was in no mood to abandon his prime demand of compulsory military draft for the Haredi population.

Unable to reconcile the two incompatible demands of his potential partners, Netanyahu had no choice but to dissolve the house and as required by law a motion to this effect was endorsed by 74 to 45 votes, with Arab parties supporting the move. And fresh elections will be held on 17 September.

What does the new drama tell us?

One, in its seven-decade history which witnessed 21 elections, this was the first time when the Israeli parliament is being dissolved because a government could not be formed after elections. On two

earlier occasions, 1984 and 1988, the impasse was overcome when Likud and the opposition Labour Party joined hands to form a National Unity Government. This time, neither the Blue and White nor the Labour Party (which had six seats) were prepared to bail the Likud leader out. Such a course would have been suicidal especially in the light of the impending indictment of Netanyahu over corruption charges.

Two, originally the April elections were not due until November this year, but due to coalition crises, Netanyahu dissolved the house and advanced it by seven months. He was hoping to cash on the growing economy, political support from Washington and greater Israeli acceptance in the Middle East. The dissolution of the parliament last December only marginally increased the number of seats won by the Likud but it was still far short of the magic number of 61. As a result, Israel would be having a second election within the same year.

Three, in the broader context of peace, the year will be a washout as no meaningful progress or engagement is possible before a new government is in place in Israel. Given the pattern of Israeli electorates and multiplicity of parties, this will not happen before late October or early November. If media reports in Israel are an indication, there would be greater clarity by then over the timeline for Netanyahu's indictment. Hence, the much talked about deal-of-the-century touted by the Trump Administration will not happen this year.

Predicting the unpredictable is always a challenge in the Middle East and the dissolution of the Knesset is just the latest reminder.

(Professor P. R. Kumaraswamy teaches contemporary Middle East in Jawaharlal Nehru University and is Honorary Director, Middle East Institute, New Delhi.)

WEST ASIA NEWS SURVEY

POLITICS

1. Trump Recognizes Israeli Sovereignty Over Golan Heights

WASHINGTON (21 March): President Donald Trump recognized Israel's sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights, which was captured by Israeli forces in the June 1967 War and annexed in 1981. However, the move was not recognized by the international community. Reacting to the news, a Syrian government statement termed it "[a blatant attack on its \[Syrian\] sovereignty](#)". According to Iran, recognition of Golan was "illegal and unacceptable", while [Russia underlined that](#) the decision of Trump would be a direct violation of UN resolutions and can destabilize the already unstable situation in West Asia. Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, said that Trump's "unfortunate" decision had taken the region "[to the brink of a new crisis and new tensions](#)". *The Guardian and BBC*

2. Israel Frees Prisoner after Syria Returns the Body of Israeli Soldier

TEL AVIV (23 March): Israel decided to release two Syrian prisoners as a "gesture of good will," after Syria returned the body of Israeli [soldier Zechariah Baumel](#). Baumel had been missing since 1982. The return was made possible with Russia help. To thank President Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu travelled to the country. Furthermore, the Israeli attorney general also approved the release of two prisoners, without the cabinet's

approval, as legally required. – *Israel National News*

3. UAE Official Urges Arab Openness to Israel

DUBAI (28 March): Anwar Gargash, UAE's Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, urged Arab openness to Israel and said "[Many, many years ago, when there was an Arab decision not to have contact with Israel, that was a very, very wrong decision, looking back](#)". He laid emphasis on keeping the lines of communication open and predicted increased contacts between Arab countries and Israel owing to bilateral visits, deals and sports activities. He also predicted a strategic shift in Arab-Israel relations within two decades. – *The National*

4. King Salman Rejects Israel's Claim on Golan Heights

TUNIS (31 March): Along with Tunisian President Beji Caid Essebsi and Arab League Secretary General Ahmed Aboul Gheit, King Salman rejected Israel's claim on Golan Heights. He said, "[We reaffirm our absolute rejection of any measures that encroach upon Syrian sovereignty over the Golan](#)". His statement came after US President Donald Trump signed a proclamation recognizing Golan Heights as Israeli territory. He mentioned this at the Arab League summit held in Tunisia, where members addressed the issue of re-admitting Syria within the Arab League. Syria was expelled in 2011 owing to a government crackdown on protestors. Other issues discussed at the summit were Iran's interference in the internal affairs of

Arab countries and Houthis firing of missiles inside Saudi territories. –*Arab News*

5. Recruitment of Child Soldiers in Yemen

DOHA (1 April): Saudi-led coalition forces were [accused of recruiting](#) Yemeni children to fight against the Houthis. Reports suggest that children from destitute southern Yemeni families were being lured with false promises of earning US\$ 800 per month. The conflict has created the world's worst humanitarian crisis, pushing Yemen to the brink of famine and leaving about 80 per cent of its population– 24 million people – in need of humanitarian assistance. However, many children face an even worse reality: being recruited by either of the two warring sides to fight in the conflict. – *Al-Jazeera*

6. AKP Loses Control of Capital in Local Election

ANKARA (1 April): Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) has [lost the Istanbul mayoral election](#) held on March 31. Candidates from the Republican People's Party (CHP) won in Ankara and Istanbul in a major setback for the AKP. AKP plans to appeal the vote count in both cities. If the recount fails, the Turkish government may try another tactic to limit the fallout from their losses. AKP and its Islamist predecessor parties have controlled the mayoralties of Turkey's largest cities for more than a quarter century. Erdogan himself began his high-level politics as Istanbul's mayor in the 1990s. Hence, losing the capital reflects the

weakening of the AKP's hold on the country. – *Ahval News*

7. Iraqi Premier's Visit to Iran

TEHRAN (6 April): Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi paid a [visit to Iran](#) on April 6. He met Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who advised the leader to “make sure that the Americans withdraw their troops from Iraq as soon as possible because expelling them has become difficult whenever they have had a long military presence in a country.” Abdul-Mahdi was in Tehran partly to talk about expanding Iraq's trade with Iran in spite of US sanctions. During the visit, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called for Iran and Iraq to expand their gas and electricity dealings and boost bilateral trade to US\$20 billion. Iranian media reports have put the current level of trade at about US\$12 billion. - *Rudaw*

8. Oman Calls on Palestinians to End Israel's Existential Fears

JORDAN (7 April): Yusuf bin Alawi bin Abdullah, Oman's Minister Responsible for Foreign Affairs, called on Palestinians to end Israel's existential fears, on the sidelines of the World Economic Forum. He stated that the West has empowered Israel through all means, but it fears for its future as a non-Arab country amidst 400 million Arabs. He said that “[Arabs must be able to look into this issue and try to ease those fears that Israel has through initiatives and real deals between us and Israel.](#)” However, the host country Jordan dismissed the claim as Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi said that the issue is about Israeli occupation and the question is about its withdrawal. Interestingly,

Egypt and Jordan are the only Arab countries to have peace treaties with Israel.
–*Al Jazeera*

9. Qatar and Turkey Criticize US Designation of IRGC as Terror Group

JEDDAH (10 April): The Foreign Minister of Turkey Mevlut Cavusoglu, and his Qatari counterpart Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, criticized the US designation of IRGC as terror group in a joint press conference. [Cavusoglu said](#) “We do not support Iran’s Revolutionary Guards in Syria, but no country can declare another country’s armed forces a terrorist organization. We also do not support unilateral decisions.” Such measures “would lead to instability in the region.” He emphasized that, this is a one-sided decision of the US to put pressure on Iran. Thani said that disagreements over behaviour of the Iranian army or of any other army should not be solved by imposing sanctions. - *Arab News*

10. Jordan to Only Accept Independent Palestinian State Solution, PM Says

AMMAN (10 April): Jordan will only accept a solution that favours the creation of an independent Palestinian state, said Prime Minister Omar Razzaz. The Jordanian media quoted him as saying that “We will reject any proposal that does not guarantee an autonomous Palestinian state”. According to him the Arab-Israeli conflict will vanish once a self-governing Palestinian state with East [Jerusalem as its capital is established](#). - *Prensa Latina*

11. Israel has no Sovereignty over Golan, Lebanon's Aoun Tells US Delegation

BEIRUT (12 April): During a meeting with a US congressional delegation at the Presidential Palace in Baabda on Friday, President Michael Aoun, said Beirut's stance regarding the status of Golan is absolute rejection of Israeli “sovereignty” over the territory, especially as part of it includes the Shebaa Farms and Kafrshuba Hills. Earlier, the Lebanese President had condemned US President Donald Trump's recognition of Syria's Golan Heights as “sovereign Israeli territory,” [saying the measure was in blatant violation of international law](#). - *Almasader News*

12. The New Palestinian Prime Minister in West Bank

RAMALLAH (13 April): Muhammad Shtayyeh announced the formation of a new Palestinian Authority government under his premiership. President Mahmoud Abbas had invited Shtayyeh to form a new government on March 10 to replace Rami Hamdallah’s technocratic administration which had the nominal backing of Hamas. Shtayyeh is seen as loyal to Abbas. Hamas called the appointment of the new prime minister a blow to unity efforts. The two groups signed a new reconciliation deal in Cairo in October 2017, but disputes over power-sharing [have blocked the implementation of the agreement](#). - *Euronews*

13. Iran Parliamentary Delegation in Lebanon for Two-Day Visit

BEIRUT (18 April): An Iranian parliamentary delegation met the Speaker

of the Lebanese Parliament Nabih Berri and a number of other Members of Parliament of the country. The four-member delegation was headed by Amir Khojasteh, MP from Hamedan constituency and the head of Iran-Palestine Parliamentary Friendship Group. After their two-day stay in Beirut, the Iranian lawmakers departed for Damascus where they met with Syria's People's Assembly Speaker Hammoudeh Sabbagh and a [number of their counterparts](#). – *IRNA*

14. PA to Transfer Patients to Jordan, Egypt Instead of Israel

RAMALLAH (23 April): At the beginning of a Cabinet session, the new Palestinian Prime Minister, Mohammed Ashtiyeh, said that he has sent delegations to Egypt and Jordan to study the transfer of patients to the Arab countries. This was mainly to reduce the number of Palestinian patients in Israeli hospitals. Israeli hospitals attract the largest number of patients from the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, with an annual bill of up to US\$100 million. In the month of February 2019, the PA decided to stop sending patients to Israel as part of a series of other decisions in response to Israel's deduction of Palestinian tax revenues. The *Ahronoth* newspaper was quoted as saying that there was a concern about a sharp decline in profits of Israeli hospitals as [a result of the Palestinian boycott](#). – *Aawsat News*

15. Russian Siege Chokes Syrian Camp in Shadow of US Base

AMMAN (28 April): The displaced persons camp at Rukban in southern Syria is beginning to [empty out](#) due to lack of food. The camp has been neglected by the United

States, whose nearby military base at Tanf is the reason many Syrians decided to locate there in order to escape the Syrian government. The camp has been effectively besieged by Damascus (with Russian help), which has been preventing humanitarian aid from reaching the camp. Conditions have finally reached the point where people cannot remain in the camp and are returning to their homes in government-controlled areas. – *Kyiv Post*

SECURITY

16. Saudi Crown Prince lays the Foundation Stone for Air War Centre

RIYADH (1 April): Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman laid the foundation for [Air War Centre](#) to develop and modernize combat plans against potential threats. The Centre will develop and evaluate air force capabilities, carry out friendly joint exercises and provide training in advanced electronic warfare. The Crown Prince also launched the first [Hawk Jet Training Aircraft](#) which was partly locally manufactured. The aircraft is one of the 22 to be assembled by trained Saudi youth as part of the Saudi-British Defence Cooperation Programme. Seventy per cent of the youth engaged in the programme are of Saudi origin. The project is part of the Crown Prince's effort to modernize Saudi Arabia and promote scientific temper. – *Arab News, Gulf News*

17. Turkey's Foreign Minister backs S-400 deal at NATO Summit

ANKARA (3 April): Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu on April 3, 2019, attended [NATO's 70th anniversary](#)

[summit](#) in Washington. He spent the day trying to convince the US government and the rest of the NATO allies that Turkey's S-400 deal with Russia does not compromise on Turkey's NATO commitments. Turkey insists that Ankara needs the air defence system to thwart potential attacks from the world-renowned Kurdish Air Force. NATO members are concerned because the S-400 cannot be integrated into the rest of the alliance's military system which leads to concern that Turkey will compromise on the secrecy of the F-35s if the US goes ahead with selling it to Turkey. Turkey has proposed forming "[a technical working group to make sure that this system will not be a threat](#)" to either NATO or US interests.
- *Daily Sabah*

18. Government Forces in Syria Shell Rebel-held Northwest

DAMASCUS (7 April): The government forces in Syria have launched an offensive against rebel-held [north western](#) Syria. The attacks killed seven people in a rebel-held part of Aleppo province and three people in Idlib province. On the other hand, rebel shelling killed five people in the government-held part of Hama province. Exchanges like this are becoming alarmingly frequent around the rebel-controlled region in north western Syria, where an estimated three million people (many displaced from other parts of the country) are now living. - *The Daily Star*

19. US Imposes Sanctions on Hezbollah Affiliates

BEIRUT (11 April): The United States has [sanctions](#) on six people and seven businesses affiliated with Hezbollah's financial network. The new sanctions apply

to five Lebanese nationals and one Iraqi, most of whom have links to Al-Inmaa Engineering and Contracting, a company run by Hezbollah financier Adham Tabaja. The US Treasury Department also sanctioned Lebanese national [Kassem Chams](#) and designated his Money Laundering Organization as Specially Designated Narcotics Traffickers (SDNT) in accordance with the Foreign Narcotics Kingpin Designation Act (Kingpin Act). OFAC also designated Chams Exchange, a money service business located in Chtaura, Lebanon. According to [Mike Pompeo](#), "the US is inclined to sanction political individuals linked to Hezbollah to curtail the group's military and political growth and in effect the influence of its patron, Iran in the region".
- *Deutsche Welle, US Department of Treasury, Al-Jazeera*

20. ISIS and al-Qaeda Rivalry Takes Roots in Yemen

SANAA (14 April): While the Houthis and the Yemeni government continue to violate their ceasefire in Hodeidah, [ISIS and al-Qaeda](#) are reportedly engaged in a little conflict of their own in central Yemen. Clashes are occurring regularly in central Al Bayda Province between Yemeni tribal forces aligned with the two extremist groups. Meanwhile, an online propaganda war of videos, images and even poems is taking place in social media forums and Internet chat rooms as both sides seek to gain more followers and sympathizers. ISIS suicide bombings and al-Qaeda retaliation in the form of surprise attacks on ISIS bases have become frequent. For the most part this fight involves local factions aligned with either group but with ISIS

looking for a new home, that could change, and even if it doesn't this is still one of the conflicts that will make it difficult for Yemen to return to normalcy if and when the main war finally ends. - *The Washington Post*

21. F-35A's First Combat Deployment to West Asia

WASHINGTON (15 April): The US Air Force has sent F-35A Joint Strike Fighters on their first-ever operational [deployment to West Asia](#). The arrival of stealth fighter jets to the region comes after the service decided to pull its F-22 Raptor stealth fighters from the region for the first time in years. It also follows a successful first combat outing for Marine F-35Bs, which were involved in strikes against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, as well as sorties in [Afghanistan against the Taliban](#). According to experts the deployment is made because of growing tension between the US and Iran. – *The Drive* and *Jerusalem Post*

22. US Designates IRGC as Terror Organization

TEHRAN (15 April): The US administration formally designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, (IRGC) as “[Foreign Terror Organization \(FTO\)](#)” under section 201 of the Immigration and Nationality act. According to the Trump administration, Iran is the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism, and the Iranian regimes uses proxy groups like Hamas, Hezbollah and Houthis to conduct terrorist act on Iran's behalf. The IRGC and its branch – Qods Force directly support these groups to fulfil Iranian motives in the region. While Israel, Saudi Arabia and Bahrain praised the

move, countries like Iraq, Turkey, Russia, China, Lebanon and a few EU members voiced concern against it as they feared further escalation between the US and Iran. On the other side, the Iranian government passed a motion to put [United States Central Command \(CENTCOM\)](#) forces in West Asia on the list of terrorist groups of the Islamic Republic of Iran. - US gov.in, *Tehran Times*

23. Turkish Soldiers Clash with PKK in the Southeast

ANKARA (20 April): A [Clash](#) between the Turkish military and the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) insurgents in south eastern Turkey's Hakkâri province on April 20, left four Turkish soldiers and twenty militants dead. The PKK fighters apparently attacked a Turkish military base, and the Turks responded by calling in airstrikes. During the funeral service for one of those four soldiers in Ankara on Sunday, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu, the leader of the opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), was [attacked](#) by a mob. – *Ahval News*, *Turkeypurge*

24. Syria to Lease Tartous Port to Russia

DAMASCUS (26 April): Damascus is set to lease [Tartous seaport](#) on the Mediterranean to Russia for 49 years for “economic uses”. The Russian Deputy Prime Minister Yuri Borisov told that the move would result in a positive dynamic in mutual trade and that “primarily, it will become advantageous for the Syrian economy” staring down an estimated US\$400 billion reconstruction of his country with little cash. On the other hand, Assad is likely continue to grant generous

concessions to Russia and Iran in return for reconstruction help. Moscow beat out Iran last year for a lucrative hold on Syria's valuable phosphate industry, and there is little reason to think oil and gas would not fall into the same trend. Russia's Soyuzneftegaz is currently carrying out offshore 3D seismic work. –*Almasdar News*

25. Iran to quit nuclear deal, NPT over US sanctions

Tehran (28 April): Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif [suggested](#) via state media that not only could Iran quit the 2015 nuclear deal but can also go as far as to quit the Non-Proliferation Treaty, to which it has been party since the treaty's inception in 1970, due to US sanctions. For Iran, quitting the NPT would be an extremely provocative move that would be gleefully welcomed by pro-war forces in Washington. Moreover, Iranian parliament speaker Ali Larijani told reporters that, Iran would continue [enriching uranium](#) regardless of new US efforts to make that programme more difficult to manage. It would also cause a major political upheaval inside Iran, because it would contradict everything Iran's religious leaders have said for decades about the immorality and un-Islamic nature of nuclear weapons. That's a lot to risk on a step that gains Iran nothing but a war with a much more powerful country—a war in which it's not very likely that Iranian allies like Russia and China would support Tehran, because it would put them in the position of defending nuclear proliferation. - *The Baghdad Post, Kayhanlife*

ECONOMY

26. Syria Doubles Energy Spending

Damascus (22 March): The Syrian government has released [2019 budget](#) that intends to focus on energy, gas and water. As compared to the previous year, the government has doubled its spending to US\$230 million from US\$440 million for 2018. Since the beginning of the war, Syria's energy prospects have been affected by the US and EU [sanctions](#). In addition, the US sanctions on Iran have severely affected the oil supply. Throughout the civil war, Iran's oil export to Syria was an estimated 30,000-60,000b/d. In this light, the current budget is certainly a step towards improving energy and water supply sectors. However, it is yet to be seen if Damascus manages to come anywhere near its budgeted target. This is largely down to unaccounted spending on debt repayment, energy and flour subsidies, and underspending on investment. - *MEES*

27. Kuwait Inks Financial Agreement to Aid Bahrain

DUBAI (2 April): Kuwait's Finance Ministry signed the fiscal balance programme with the Ministry of Finance and National Economy (MOFNE) in Bahrain. The Arab Monetary Fund and the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development were observers at the signing of the agreement. Kuwait inked the financial agreement to aid the year-old fiscal reforms of Bahrain. Last year, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and the UAE pledged [US\\$10 billion](#) in financial aid to Bahrain to rescue it from a potential debt crisis. Subsequently, Bahrain announced a programme to regulate the financial

conditions of the country as oil prices were plummeting and there was imbalance between revenue and expenditure. – *Asharq Al-Awsat*

28. Gazprom Increases Oil Output in Garmiyan with Third Well

ERBIL (4 April): Russian oil and gas giant [Gazprom](#) announced a 25 per cent increase in oil production at its Sarqala oil field in Kurdistan Region's Garmiyan area. A third well, Sarqala-3, has brought production in the field up to 35,000 barrels a day. "The Middle East remains an area of strategic interest to Gazprom Neft, being a region with a rich resource base, and a demonstrable willingness to allow access to investors", Deputy CEO Vadim Yakovlev said. Gazprom Neft shares ownership of the field with Western Zagros and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG). It also has majority ownership of the Region's Shakal block. The KRG has said they are keen to **expand** their relationship with Gazprom, which also has operations in southern Iraq. – *MEES*

29. Iran Accuses US Sanctions of Blocking Aid Amid Flood

TEHRAN (4 April): [Devastating floods](#) have hit 400 villages and cities in 15 provinces across Iran. Provinces of Lorestan, Kermanshah, Chaharmahal and Bakhtiari, and Khuzestan were hit hard by floods. At least 78 roads linking cities and 2,199 roads connecting villages were blocked and some 84 bridges have been destroyed in the flood-hit areas. Iranian expatriates and other international donors are struggling to send aid to the country. The US has frozen the accounts of the Iranian Red Crescent Society as part of its

sanctions against Tehran, thus preventing other countries from sending humanitarian aid to people affected by floods. The Iranian government, meanwhile, is blaming US sanctions for its failure to respond adequately to recent flooding. Former Iranian spokesperson Bahram Qassemi [stated](#) that such measures expose the American officials' hostile approach towards the Iranian nation and counters all their "ridiculous" claims that the sanctions do not target the people of Iran. - *Tehran Times*

30. People of Lebanon Protest Ahead of Budget

BEIRUT (16 April): Lebanese citizens staged a protest against the upcoming budget fearing that the government may announce "difficult and painful" reforms. The protest is a pre-emptive warning to the government against any reduction in pensions that might be part of its effort to reduce one of the [world's heaviest public debt burdens](#). Though, the budget is yet to be finalized but assumption is that it will comprise cuts to the massive public wage bill, Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil hinted. In 2018, during the Paris conference, Lebanon had promised to cut its budget deficit by 1 per cent of its gross domestic product a year over five years. But it is expected that this year the bigger cut may be introduced because last year's deficit was bigger than expected at 10-11 per cent of GDP instead of a projected 8.2 per cent. – *Voanews*

31. Jordan's Investments in Egypt Hit \$600 Million

AMMAN (20 April): The Egyptian Investment and International Cooperation

Minister Sahar Nasr said that around 1,945 Jordanian firms are operating in Egypt with total investments of around US\$600 million. On the other hand, Egyptian investments in Jordan amounted to US\$1 billion through 499 firms. This came on the sidelines of a meeting presided over by Nasr and Jordan's industry and trade minister Tariq Al-Hamory in the presence of Egyptian trade and petroleum ministers [Tarek El-Molla and Amr Nassar](#). – *Mubasher*

32. US Not to Renew Waivers for Iranian Oil Purchasers

WASHINGTON (22 April): The Trump administration has announced that it will [not renew](#) sanction waivers for the eight countries when they expire on May 2. Since the reimplementing of sanctions in the aftermath of JCPOA withdrawal, five of the eight countries – Italy, Greece, [Japan](#), [South Korea](#) and Taiwan have stopped importing oil from Iran. The other three, especially, India and Turkey, have lobbied and are continuing to do so for their waivers to be extended. [China](#), on the other hand, is set to defy US sanctions on Iran. The US move will likely raise oil prices, though if the Saudis increase production, the increase could be offset. - *Energy Economics, Oil Price*

33. Jordanian Lawmakers Urge Cancelling \$10 Billion Natural Gas Deal with Israel

AMMAN (23 April): The Lower House of Jordan on March 26 declared its “utter rejection” to the gas deal between Jordan's National Electric Power Company (NEPCO) and Israel. Around 16 deputies signed a memorandum, requesting a vote

of no confidence in Prime Minister Omar Razzaz's government for signing the gas deal with the “Zionist entity”. In September 2016, NEPCO inked a 15-year deal with Noble Energy, a Houston-based company that holds the largest share in the Israeli Leviathan Gas Field, to purchase [US\\$10 billion worth of natural gas](#). The London-based newspaper *Asharq Al Awsat* reported that Jordan's King Abdullah II had ordered a review of his country's US\$10 billion agreement to import Israeli natural gas. Meanwhile, dozens of citizens protested in front of the Parliament for the termination of the gas deal with Israel. During the parliamentary session, lawmakers insisted that Jordan can [seek alternative sources](#) from other Arab states. - *Jordan Times and Haaretz*

34. Jordan Bans Imports of 194 Syrian Goods

AMMAN (25 April): A local Jordanian newspaper *Addustour*, reported that Minister of Industry, Trade, and Supply, Tariq Al-Hammouri, has banned the import of 194 goods from Syria. The decision was a response to the recent decision of the Syrian government which blocked the entry of a number of Jordanian goods under the pretext of being “self-sufficient.” [The list of banned imports comprised a variety](#) of products, including a number of fizzy drinks, mineral water, animal and vegetable oils, poultry, meat and fish, coffee and tea, cucumber and tomatoes, and other types of vegetables and fruits. The minister noted that the ban was an outcome of “a decision issued on 12 December 2018 by the country's Council of Ministers, under which the kingdom's trade minister would take the necessary

[measures in regards to trading with Syria](#)” - *Middle East Monitor*

35. Saudi Arabia Willing to Replace Iranian Oil as Waivers End

MOSCOW (30 April): [Khalid al-Falih](#), Saudi Arabia’s Minister for Energy, Industry and Mineral Resources, said that the Kingdom is willing to replace Iranian oil as waivers end in May. However, it is not going to voluntarily exceed the output levels set by the global oil cartel. He said, “I confirm our commitment to meet all these requests. But at the same time, we will do this remaining part of the OPEC+ deal, we will stick to it. We do not need to voluntarily exceed the limits set.” Meanwhile, the oil producers will meet on June 25-26 to decide whether to extend the pact or adjust supply targets. – *Arab News*

INDIA AND THE REGION

36. Sushma Swaraj Attends OIC Meet

ABU DHABI (1 March): External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj represented India at the plenary of the [46th session of the Council of Foreign Ministers](#) of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) held in Abu Dhabi on March 1. India was invited by the UAE, the host country, to participate in the session as the guest of honour country. In her address to the OIC meeting, Swaraj raised the issue of terrorism and said that the menace is caused by the “distortion of religion” and “misguided belief”. She also mentioned that India’s appreciation for diversity and co-existence ensured that very few Muslims in India have fallen prey to the

poisonous propaganda of radical and extremist ideologies. The [Indian participation was significant](#) for the long history of India’s relations with the OIC and the diplomatic success India has achieved over the past five years on strengthening relations with the OIC countries. *The Times of India*

37. Saudi Foreign Minister Visits India

NEW DELHI (11 March): In the context of the tensions between India and Pakistan after the Pulwama attack, Saudi Minister of State for Foreign Affairs Adel al-Jubeir, visited India on March 11, on the heels of the two-day official visit of Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman on February 19-20. The minister conveyed the position of the Saudi King and Crown Prince on the need for [irreversible, verifiable and credible](#) steps against all terrorists without any discrimination by all countries. Jubeir called on Prime Minister Narendra Modi and held discussions with External Affairs Minister Sushma Swaraj, where she reiterated that immediate irreversible and verifiable action to dismantle terror infrastructure is essential to fight the menace of terror. – *Ministry of External Affairs*

38. India Approves 'Emergency Purchase' of Israeli-made Spike Missiles

TEL AVIV (20 April): India has approved the “emergency purchase” of 240 Spike anti-tank guided missiles (ATGMs) made by Israel’s Rafael Advanced Defence System, for its army to meet urgent operational requirements. The deal followed an emergency provision that

allows the Indian Army's Vice Chief of Staff to purchase goods and material worth up to US\$72 million without having to get prior approval from the defence ministry. According to reports, the decision to procure the 240 ATGMs and 12 launchers was reportedly made during the five-day biannual Army Commanders' Conference in [New Delhi that ended on April 13, 2019](#).
– *Jerusalem Post*

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