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SUNDAY, May 12, 2024
Dul Qaada 4, 1445
www.arabnews.com

ARAB NEWS

The Voice of a Changing Region

SINCE 1975

MIDDLE EAST WAR

Amid strikes, Israel orders new evacuations in Gaza's last refuge

• Hamas says another hostage dead • US report criticizes Israel but does not block arms

Arab News Jeddah

Israel ordered new evacuations in Gaza's southern city of Rafah on Saturday, forcing tens of thousands more people to move as it prepares to expand its military operation closer to the heavily populated central area, in defiance of growing pressure amid the war from close ally the US and others.

A long-awaited US State Department report said Israel likely violated norms on international law in its use of weapons from the US, but it did not find enough evidence to block arm shipments.

The State Department submitted its report two days after President Joe Biden publicly threatened to withhold certain bombs and artillery shells if Israel goes ahead with an all-out assault on Rafah, where the UN said 1.4 million had been sheltering.

As pro-Palestinian protests continued, Israel's military also said it was moving into an area of devastated northern Gaza where it asserted that the Hamas militant group has regrouped.

Israel has now evacuated the eastern third of Rafah, considered Gaza's last refuge.

Rafah borders Egypt near the main aid entry points, which already are affected. Israeli troops have captured the Gaza side of the Rafah crossing, forcing it to shut down.

Egypt has refused to coordinate with Israel for the delivery of aid through the Rafah crossing point because of "the unacceptable Israeli escalation," Al-Qahera channel reported.

Rafah evacuations are forcing some people to return north where areas are devastated from previous Israeli attacks.

"Do we wait until we all die on top of each other? So we've decided to leave. It's better," said Rafah resident Hanan Al-Satari as people



A woman mourns outside Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital in Deir El-Balah, central Gaza, after a child relative died following Israel's bombardment of their relief camp. AFP

rushed to load mattresses, water tanks and other belongings onto vehicles.

At least 19 people, including eight women and eight children, were killed overnight in central Gaza in strikes that hit the areas of Zawaida, Maghazi and Deir Al-Balah, according to Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital and a journalist who counted the bodies.

Meanwhile, Hamas said that another one of the hostages abducted during its Oct. 7 attack on Israel has died.

Hamas released a video saying that Nadav Popplewell, who was taken hostage from the southern Israeli community of Kibbutz Nir-Im, died after being wounded in an Israeli strike in Gaza.

Earlier on Saturday, Hamas re-

NUMBER

34,971

Palestinians have been killed and 78,641 others wounded in Israel's military offensive on Gaza since Oct. 7.

leased an undated video of the 51-year-old captive in front of a white wall, with a bruise on his right eye, and speaking his name.

Hours later, in the second video, it said Popplewell died of wounds sustained a month ago in an Israeli airstrike.

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• Opinion: Yossi Mekelberg Page 9

POLITICS

Iranian hard-liners tighten grip on parliament

AFP Tehran

Iran's conservatives and ultra-conservatives clinched more seats in a partial rerun of the country's parliamentary elections, official results showed on Saturday, tightening their hold on the chamber.

Voters had been called to cast ballots again on Friday in regions where candidates failed to gain enough votes in the March 1 election, which saw the lowest turnout — 41 percent — since the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Candidates categorized as conservative or ultra-conservative on pre-election lists won the majority of the 45 remaining seats up for grabs in the vote held in 15 of Iran's 31 provinces, reports said.

For the first time in Iran, voting on Friday was a completely electronic process at eight of the 22 constituencies in Tehran and the cities of Tabriz in the northwest and Shiraz in the south, state TV said.

"Usually, the participation in the second round is less than the first round," Interior Minister Ahmad Vahidi said in Tehran, without specifying what the turnout was in the latest round.

"Contrary to some predictions, all the candidates had a relatively acceptable and good number of votes," he added.

Elected members are to choose a speaker for the 290-seat parliament when they begin their work on May 27.

In March, 25 million Iranians took part in the election out of 61 million eligible voters.

The main coalition of reform parties, the Reform Front, had said ahead of the first round that it would not participate in "meaningless, non-competitive and ineffective elections."

The vote was the first since nationwide protests broke out following the September 2022 death in custody of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year-old Iranian Kurd, arrested for allegedly breaching Iran's strict dress code for women.

The Brief

BAD MAYONNAISE

Saudi authorities who have been probing Riyadh food poisoning cases said the bacteria that caused the illness has been found in a mayonnaise sample. P5

SYRIAN SMUGGLERS

A Syrian human trafficker who was shot while trying to stab Lebanese soldiers during an arrest attempt succumbed to his injuries, while some of his companions were detained. P6

KSA LOOKING UP

With an average growth rate of 4 percent over the past seven years and an upward trajectory, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated resilience amid global challenges. P11

CARE

Saudi eye surgeons help 1,000 Sri Lankans regain sight

KSrelief's program to combat blindness started in Kattankudy on island's eastern coast on May 5

Mohammed Rasooldeen Colombo

A Saudi eye surgeon team is helping 1,000 people in Sri Lanka regain sight with interventions facilitated by the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center.

KSrelief's Saudi Noor Volunteer Program to Combat Blindness started in the city of Kattankudy on Sri Lanka's eastern coast on May 5 and will run through next week.

"This is a special program to combat blindness among patients who are suffering from a cataract," M.S.M. Thassim, director general of KSrelief's local partner, the Association of Muslim Youth of Sallan,



told Arab News. "From the total of 1,000 patients, 500 completed surgery and 500 more (surgeries) will be performed by May 16."

Cataracts are the most common

cause of blindness in Sri Lanka. Surgery to remove them is common, but government programs often require years of waiting. At private clinics, the

Doctors from the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center perform eye surgery at the Base Hospital in Kattankudy, Sri Lanka, on Saturday. SPA

cheapest lens replacement procedure costs about \$300 — too expensive for many patients in poorer parts of the country, "Cataracts are becoming a problem among the lower-middle class above the age of 40," Thassim said.

The procedures are free of cost and conducted at the Kattankudy Base Hospital by Sri Lankan medics and six Saudi and Pakistani surgeons from KSrelief's team.

One of the Saudi volunteers is Dr. Ehab Al-Sirhy, an eye surgeon from King Saud University Medical City in Riyadh. "The amount of surgery done is an amazing number in such a short period," he told Arab News,

praising local hospital staff for their "excellent" logistics and support.

"The results are very encouraging, so now everyone brings their friends and relatives," Al-Sirhy said. "The (campaign's) reputation is excellent."

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No. 158 • 16 pages



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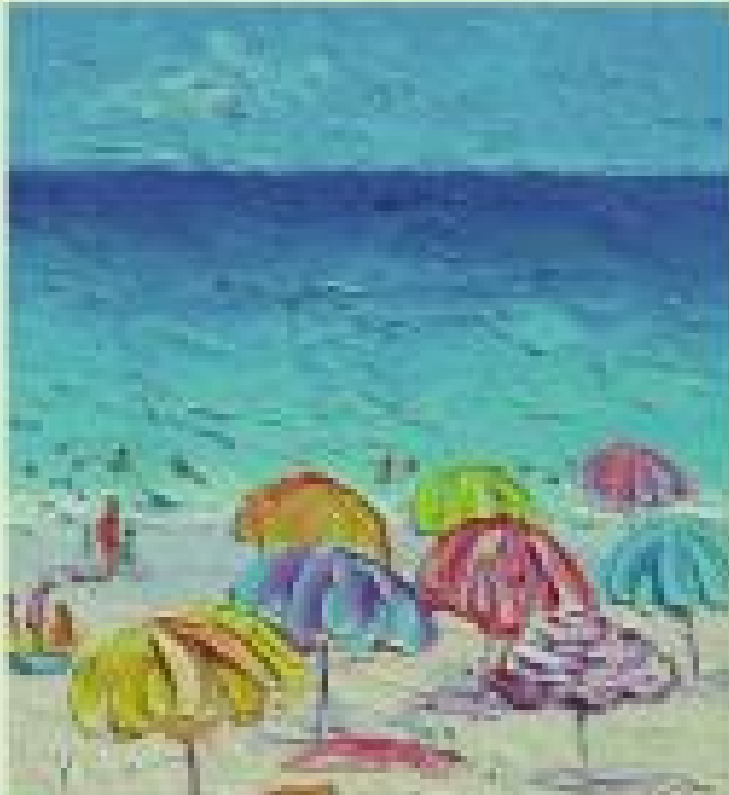
A Saudi delegation and I visited headquarters of various Thai companies and learned about their experiences to benefit from them in medical, industrial, real estate and other sectors.

Majid Al-Qasbi
Saudi commerce minister



Radar

KSA today



Diriyah Art workshop

This workshop will inspire you to embrace the warmer weather of Riyadh and paint something that represents your concept of summer. You can book through [experiences.suplift.com](#).



Dhahran Preparing meals

Join Lamis Al-Tayyar as she conducts a workshop showing how busy people can prepare meals in advance, including how to store the food to keep it fresh. Book through [experiences.suplift.com](#).



AlUla Safari trip

Visit the Sharaan Nature Reserve and witness the breathtaking landscape of the region. If you are lucky, you may even glimpse the rare Arabian ibex. Book through [experiences.alula.com](#).



Jeddah Al-Balad tour

An educational tour of Jeddah's Al-Balad district takes visitors on a journey through history, from the origins of Bayt Nassif to the Al-Sham neighborhood and other historic sites. Book through [experiences.suplift.com](#).

TheRegister

THE PICTURES THAT MARK THE DAY



Saudi Arabia's Minister of Environment, Water, and Agriculture Abdulrahman Al-Fadhli and Ghana's Minister of Food and Agriculture Bryan Acheampong have agreed to strengthen relations and increase investment opportunities in agriculture, food

security, fisheries, and livestock. The agreement came during Al-Fadhli's visit to Ghana, Saudi Press Agency reported on Saturday. The two ministers agreed to work together to ease the process of investing in their respective countries, and to expand the scope of economic partnership.

Al-Fadhli's tour of Africa includes visits to Senegal, Cote d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and Ghana, and is part of efforts to implement the outcomes of the recent Saudi-African Summit. The tour aims to strengthen ties and collaboration between Saudi Arabia and African states.

Today's Number

4m

Saudi Arabia's National Center for Vegetation Cover Development and Combating Desertification has signed a memorandum of understanding with Riyadh Bank for a joint initiative to grow 4 million trees in the Um Al-Shuqoq Reserve and other locations in Thadiq governorate of the Riyadh region, the center's official account reported on X.

Review

La Petite Maison

LAMA ALHAMAWI

La Petite Maison's new business lunch menu features simple yet classic dishes bursting with intricate French Mediterranean flavors.

When Riyadh's LPM opened it became the organization's sixth location, indicative of its popularity.

The new lunch menu is available from Sunday to Thursday from 12:30 p.m. until 3:30 p.m. and has two versions: the small menu, which costs SR180 (\$48) per person and includes a starter and one course; and the larger menu, which costs SR230 and includes a dessert as well.

Similar to other set menus, the lunch begins with a salad and then moves on to starters.

The selection of starters on the set menu include tartare d'espadon (swordfish tartare with sesame chicken dressing); carpaccio de boeuf (cured sirloin with pickle dressing); beignets



de broccolis (tender stem broccoli tempura); and the rules de legumes grilles (grilled vegetable rolls with buffalo mozzarella).

I highly recommend the tartare d'espadon. The fish is freshly diced into cubes with a light and natural flavor, and the dressing is refreshing and does not overpower the raw fish. The beignets de broccolis is another great option.

Four options on the main course include ravioli aux epinards au pistou (a homemade spinach ravioli with pistou); cote de veau grillee (grilled veal chop); poulet marine aux herbes et epinards sautes (herb-marinated chicken with sauteed spinach); and the cabillaud a la provencale (roasted cod with provencal sauce).

Our two recommended dishes for the main course would be the homemade spinach ravioli and the herb-marinated chicken.

What's Trending

Today's hot topics explained by Ameera Abid



'PERFECT CASTING' Neuti Gatwa

Beloved British sci-fi series "Doctor Who," which follows a 2,000-year-old alien Time Lord and his companions, has returned for its 40th season, with its 15th incarnation of The Doctor, played by Rwanda-born Scottish actor Neuti Gatwa.

The Doctor travels through time and space in a ship called the TARDIS, which looks like a British police box — common sights across the UK in the 1960s, when the show first aired.

The Doctor is regularly "regenerated" and, each time that happens, their personality and external appearance change, paving the way for diverse adaptations of the character.

This year, Gatwa becomes the first actor of color to play the role, and Millie Gibson will play his latest companion, Ruby Sunday.

Excitement has been building among the show's huge fanbase for the new season, which began May 10 and sees Russell T Davies returning as showrunner, writer, and executive producer. Davies was the showrunner when "Doctor Who" was revived in 2005 after decades off-air and is widely seen as responsible for the huge success of the show in the ensuing five years.

TV critic Jack Seale, for one, is a fan of the new Doctor. He wrote in The Guardian: "Gatwa establishes himself as a cracking Doctor immediately. What an obviously perfect piece of casting he is: commandingly hench in his colorful costumes, and naturally able to express the dazzling extremes the Doctor has to embody."

DOUBLING DOWN ON JOY

Chris Pine

Although Chris Pine's directorial debut "Poolman" was not received well by critics, the actor insists that he still loves the film.

"Poolman," which Pine co-wrote and also stars in, revolves around a pool cleaner named Darren Barrenman who is approached by a femme fatale to help uncover corruption in a shady business deal.

In his review for The Nerdist, Michael Walsh wrote: "I know it won't get him down to learn I found 'Poolman' to be an incoherent, borderline unwatchable mess."

He added that he rarely knew what was happening in the movie, or why, "and not in a good way, where the chaos and confusion is part of the fun. I mean I didn't know what was happening in a bad way, where I was so lost in the incomprehensible plot I gave up

entirely on trying to follow it."

Pine was a guest on "Happy Sad Confused," a podcast hosted by Josh Horowitz, recently, and said he did not believe that he had made "a complete dud of a movie."

Speaking about the critics' reactions, he added: "With so much joy behind it, to then be met with a fusillade of not-so-joyous stuff ... the cognitive dissonance there was quite something. It's ultimately been the best thing that's ever happened to me.

"It's forced me to double down on joy and really double down on what I love most about my job — which you kind of forget: It's fundamentally about play. You become children for hours a day and make believe. There's an impish quality that I don't want to lose."

"Poolman" stars Pine opposite Annette Bening, DeWanda Wise, Stephen Tobolowsky, Jennifer Jason Leigh, and Danny DeVito.



TheRegion

The Middle East Roundup

Arab News Jeddah

Sharjah Children's Reading Festival is being held until May 12 at Expo Centre Sharjah. The festival is a celebration that goes beyond one age group to enrich the whole family, while instilling a love of reading in the youngest of children. For more details, check [sharjahevents.ae](#).

High-end local and globally admired jewelry brands will display their new designs at the Jewellery and Bride Arabia exhibition in Dubai. The event will connect local and international buyers to brands with sales and discounts on jewelry. The exhibition is at Dubai World Trade Centre until May 13. Check [dwte.com](#) for more details.

"Physics and Honey," a Lebanese play, follows an extraordinary love story that goes beyond the reality we think we are living in, challenging our understanding of time and place. The play will make audiences laugh and cry, feel nostalgic, and will talk to their hearts and minds. Held at Al-Madina Theater, Beirut, the show runs from Thursday to Sunday until May 19.

Prayer Times in Saudi Arabia

May 12	Fajr	Sunrise	Dhuhr	Asr	Maghreb	Isha
Makkah	4:21	5:44	12:18	3:36	6:51	8:21
Madinah	4:14	5:39	12:18	3:44	6:57	8:27
Riyadh	3:45	5:11	11:50	3:16	6:29	7:59
Abha	4:17	5:38	12:07	3:17	6:35	8:06
Dammam	3:27	4:54	11:36	3:06	6:16	7:46

Our children are at risk online if the maximum measures are not implemented against these criminals.

Michel Douaihy
Lebanese MP



Spotlight

RESEARCH & STUDIES
THE MIDDLE EAST, BETTER EXPLAINED

ARAB NEWS



MEDIA

A TikTok gang bust in Lebanon

Alleged abuse of children sparks outrage and calls to ban the social media platform in crisis-plagued country

Nadia Al-Faour Dubai

Less than a year since the rape and murder of six-year-old Leen Talib in a case that shocked Lebanon, the country has again been rocked by a scandal involving the sexual abuse of children, and this time the social media platform TikTok is caught up in the furor.

Lebanese authorities are investigating a group of 28 to 30 individuals who allegedly used the app to groom children into performing sexual acts. The ensuing rapes were reportedly filmed for sale online.

Nine suspects have so far been arrested, including TikTok influencer George Moubayyed, who owns a hair salon called Hair Zone in Beirut's Sabtiyah neighborhood, alongside three minors who allegedly used their accounts to lure others.

According to local news media, the gang includes men and women and includes several Syrian and Turkish nationals.

The allegations have provoked outrage across Lebanon and have led to calls for TikTok to be banned in the country.

The Lebanese Internal Security Forces released a statement saying the arrests took place after several children reported being sexually assaulted on camera by members of a predatory gang and being forced to partake in drug use at hotels and seaside chalets.

One teenager, who cannot be named for legal reasons, told Arab News that he was groomed by the gang, but was able to avoid being sexually assaulted.

"A few months after I opened my TikTok account, I was sent a message from an account which, at times, would call itself The Agency," the teenager said. "They explained that they recruit children my age — 15 to 16-year-olds — to publish funny videos that get monetized, and I would receive



Nine suspects have so far been arrested in Lebanon, including TikTok influencer George Moubayyed, who owns a hair salon called Hair Zone in Beirut's Sabtiyah neighborhood. Supplied

any money the videos made. There was no (hint) of anything predatory at first.

"That soon changed, however. I started receiving texts from random accounts of a flirtatious nature. I was approached by an anonymous elderly man whose texts would range from normal to borderline flirtatious.

"He offered to buy me a new phone and give me \$1,500 in cash if I were to meet him. Rather than coming to my neighborhood and meeting at a public place like a restaurant or coffeehouse, the man insisted on sending me a taxi to a private location. I refused. I later (found out) he was friends with one of the men from The Agency gang."

Arab News could not independently corroborate the teenager's allegations.

Judicial authorities and local news media have identified several individuals they believe are linked to the gang, including a lawyer registered with the North

Bar Association in Tripoli called Khalel Merheb; Abdo Keyssou, the owner of Matrix clothing store; dentist Hussein Allaq; Paul Meouchi; Peter Naffah; and Hassan Singer.

While the investigation is still in its preliminary stages, Attorney General Judge Tania Saghibini, the public prosecutor at the Court of Appeal in Mount Lebanon who is presiding over the case, has issued multiple arrest warrants and has requested Interpol's assistance, as some of the suspects reside abroad — Meouchi is a resident of Sweden, while Naffah has reportedly fled Lebanon.

The teenager who spoke to Arab News said that he was asked to go to a shop called Fashion Zone to pick up the money he was owed from the "funny" videos he had filmed.

"The boutique was situated near George Moubayyed's Hair Zone salon. You'd have to collect the money in cash. There was no other way to receive it directly. That's how I came to know Moubayyed.

"Upon meeting me, he suggested that he should cut my hair on camera, saying he'd do it for free and that it would give me more exposure, on account of him

having over 400,000 followers on TikTok. He seemed adamant and pushy about the whole thing, then took my number to schedule a date for the appointment.

"Another time I went, I was introduced to Paul Meouchi. Paul would always try to take me out, often citing that he doesn't live in town, that he resides in Sweden, and that I should really make the most of it while he's around. I came to sense they all had that pushy attitude about them. They do not take no for an answer, always (asking) to meet for dinner and drinks.

"At one point, I received private messages from anonymous accounts claiming they had pornographic videos and photos of me and they said they would release them if I did not (meet them at) a certain location."

According to Singer's testimony, the gang would use the children's own videos to blackmail them into keeping quiet and continuing to be abused by gang members.

Singer alleges he was approached by other minors in his neighborhood who confided in him, and that he was posing as a pedophile in order to gather evidence and try to bring the offenders to justice.

Despite portraying himself as a concerned citizen, several videos have surfaced on social media that reportedly show Singer in questionable settings with minors.

"I was also contacted by Hassan Singer," the teenager told Arab News. "Hassan pretended to be a friend. He would often ask me out for lunch. He said I should be warned of bad men who wish to do harmful things to little boys and that I should steer clear of them. He also said he supports children my age by giving them money, which I found to be a little odd."

In a statement, Judge

IN NUMBERS

4.7m
Internet users in Lebanon at the start of 2024.

3.9m
TikTok users in Lebanon, mostly in 8-24 age group.

1.5bn
Monthly active TikTok users globally as of today.

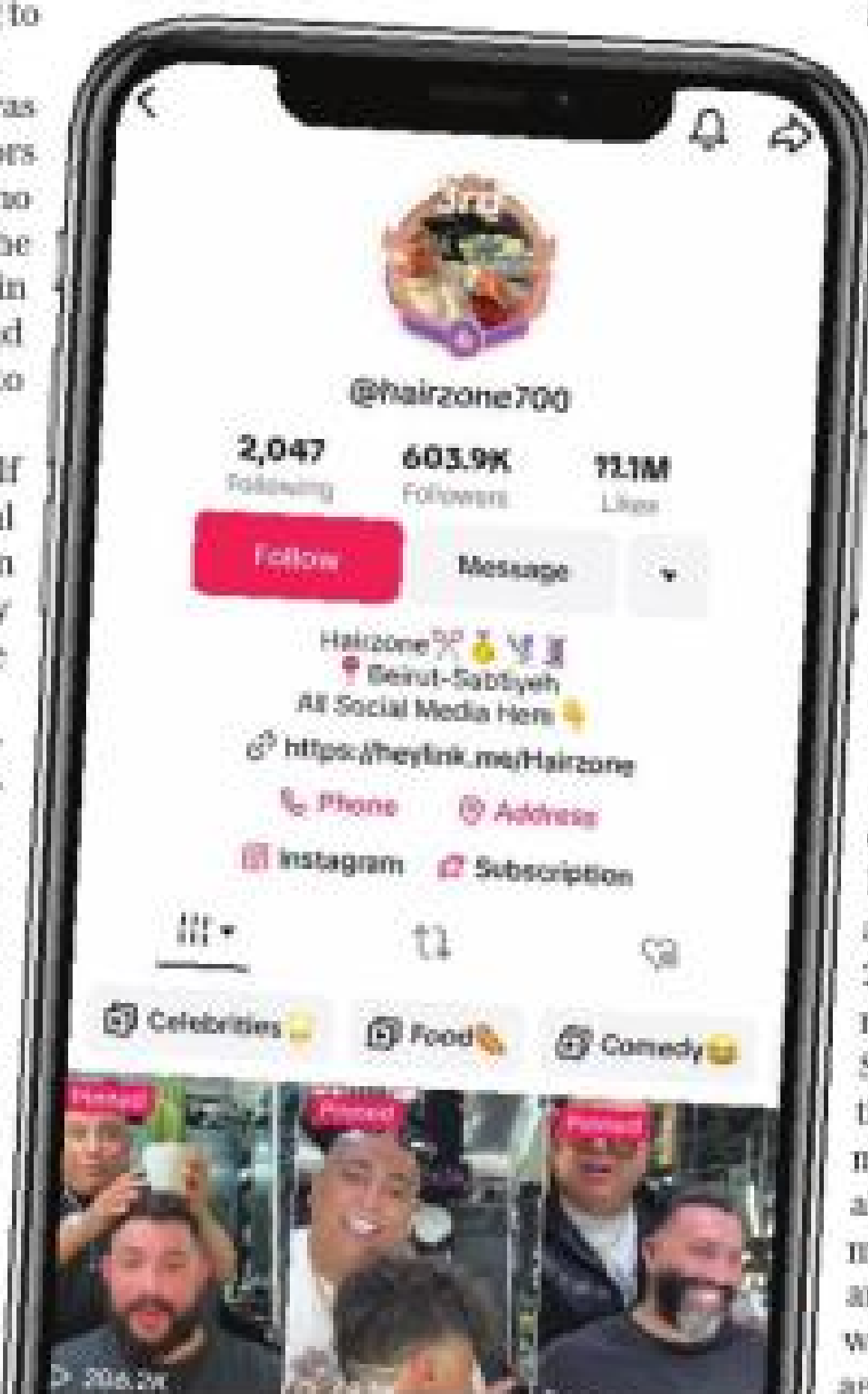
Saghibini said the accused had formed "a criminal network for human trafficking and money laundering" and had "solicited minors, via social media networks, mainly TikTok, for sexual purposes."

He also said members of the network had forced the minors to take drugs before raping them, had taken nude photos of them for the purpose of sale and distribution, and had engaged in "violent and life-threatening practices."

According to Lebanese police, the videos and photos were intended to be sold on the dark web — online content that can only be accessed by specific software and usually requires authorization of some kind. While it is not illegal to access the dark web, some of its websites engage in criminal activity, which, according to the International Monetary Fund, includes "arms trafficking, drug dealing and the sharing of exploitative content."

But what about the clearnet — the publicly accessible online content the majority of people use regularly, and which includes the major social media platforms? Does this latest scandal involving the abuse of such platforms make a case for banning the likes of TikTok?

Popular among the "Gen Z" demographic, TikTok — which is owned by the Chinese company ByteDance — has 1.56 billion monthly active users globally as of 2024, according to market researchers at Demand-Sage. It ranks fifth among the most popular social media platforms, and is almost equally popular with men (52 percent of users) and women (48 percent), with the majority of its users aged 18 to 34.





The graduation ceremony of the first batch took place at the King Salman International Convention Center in Madinah. SPA

EMPOWERMENT

107 Saudis ready to serve in hospitality sector in Kingdom

Red Sea Global and University of Prince Mugrin celebrate first batch of graduates

Arab News Riyadh

Red Sea Global, the developer of "regenerative tourism destinations" The Red Sea and AMAALA, celebrated the graduation of the first batch of international hospitality management students from its scholarship program in partnership with the University of Prince Mugrin in Madinah.

The ceremony took place at the King Salman International Convention Center under the patronage of Prince Mugrin bin Abdulaziz, honorary president of the university; Prince Salman bin Sultan, governor of Madinah; and Prince Faisal bin Mugrin bin Abdulaziz, chairman of the board of directors of Al-Bayan Charitable Society for Education, with students and their families in attendance.

A total of 107 students earned bachelor's degrees in international hospitality management, accredited by Swiss EHL Hospitality

Business School. All were on full scholarships funded by RSG, the Saudi Press Agency reported on Saturday.

Ahmad Darwish, group chief administrative officer at RSG, said: "We are delighted to celebrate the graduation of the first group of students from the Red Sea Global scholarship program. This group consists of 80 male and 27 female

HIGHLIGHT

A total of 107 students earned bachelor's degrees in international hospitality management, accredited by Swiss EHL Hospitality Business School.

students who have specialized in international hospitality management, with accreditation from the prestigious Swiss EHL Business Hospitality School. They will all contribute toward extending a warm welcome to the world in Saudi Arabia."

Darwish added: "The University

of Prince Mugrin is making tremendous efforts to provide world-class educational opportunities in various disciplines through innovative academic and research programs in line with the highest international standards. It is effectively contributing to the economic development of the Kingdom by preparing its graduates to face the dynamic changes in various fields of work."

Bander bin Mohammed Hajar, president of the University of Prince Mugrin, said: "Today, our partnership is reaping the results of that planning with the graduation of 107 students, who will now go directly to working with RSG and its partners after obtaining knowledge, skills and professional certificates in the field of international hospitality and tourism management."

"Their training included 1,200 hours of work experience in major hotels in the Middle East. The university looks forward to taking its partnership with RSG to broader horizons in the future in order to achieve our common goals."

HEALTHCARE

KFSH&RC chief hails hospital's transformation in speech at Harvard

Arab News Riyadh

King Faisal Specialist Hospital and Research Center is providing leading healthcare in the region after undergoing a decades-long transformation plan, its CEO has said. Dr. Majid Ibrahim Al-Fayyadh was speaking at Harvard University's Gulf Creatives Conference in the US.

He highlighted the role of the hospital in providing cutting-edge care in Riyadh, reducing the need for patients in the region to make long journeys for treatment.

The hospital uses advanced methods to treat heart disease, cancer and genetic diseases for patients in the Kingdom and wider Middle East, the Saudi Press Agency reported on Saturday.

The conference at Harvard, organized by The Diwan, a student-run organization at the university in Cambridge, Massachusetts, is being held

from May 10-12. Al-Fayyadh highlighted the transformation of KFSH&RC, which aligns with its strategic vision to lead healthcare innovation globally through excellence and investment in

HIGHLIGHT

At the conference, the KFSH&RC chief also took part in a panel discussion on the future of the health sector and the hospital's transformation in patient care. Al-Fayyadh highlighted the impact of hospital innovation in the Kingdom in supporting the objectives of the Health Sector Transformation Program and Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030.

advanced technology.

"The Saudi leadership has a clear vision for KFSH&RC, which was crowned by royal order to transform it into an independent institution of a private, nonprofit

nature," he said.

The transformation includes enhancing existing services and exploring new medical trends to improve health and well-being, he added. Al-Fayyadh highlighted the hospital's efforts to pioneer efficiency in healthcare spending and adhere to evidence-based practices for optimal patient outcomes. By adopting initiatives that broaden access to quality treatment worldwide, the hospital continues to play a leading role in healthcare innovation, he said.

The facility has recorded significant breakthroughs in the research of T-cell therapy, robotic surgery, organ transplantation and personalized medicine. It seeks to improve its international competitiveness by investing in advanced medical facilities, developing diagnostic and therapeutic techniques, and enhancing human resources services, Al-Fayyadh added.

TheSpace

Saudi budget backs public services, economic growth

TALAT ZAKI HAFIZ



The recent budget report released by the Saudi Ministry of Finance for Q1 2024 has revealed the Saudi government's insistence on supporting the national economy and improving public services.

The figures have also revealed the government's dedication to enhancing non-oil revenues in line with Saudi Vision 2030.

Non-oil revenues amounted to SR111.5 billion (\$29.7 billion), marking a 9 percent increase compared to the same period in 2023, when they amounted to SR102.3 billion.

Oil revenues in Q1 2024 amounted to SR181.9 billion, reflecting a 2 percent increase compared to the first quarter of 2023, when they reached SR178.6 billion.

Total expenses in Q1 2024 amounted to SR305.8 billion, reflecting an 8 percent increase compared to the same period in 2023, when they totaled SR283.9 billion. This increase is attributed to the government's efforts to support public social services for beneficiaries. Additionally, the government continues enhancing public services provided to Saudi nationals and expats living in the Kingdom.

The budget continues to support several projects, strategic initiatives, and programs that bolster economic and financial restructuring, leading to economic prosperity and diversification of the Kingdom's gross domestic product.

Due to the government's insistence on enhancing public services and supporting strategic projects, the budget recorded a deficit of SR12.4 billion in Q1 2024, compared to SR2.9 billion in Q1 2023.

Public debt amounted to SR1,115.8 billion in Q1 2024, compared to an opening balance at

the beginning of the year of SR1,050 billion, representing an increase of 6 percent.

It is noteworthy that SR665 billion constitutes national debt, while SR450.8 billion is external debt. Also, it is worth noting that the public debt is well covered by a good percentage of government reserves, enabling the government to confront any financial and economic shocks.

I believe that despite the financial deficit in Q1 2024, the Saudi government continues to pursue its economic and financial reforms in line with Vision 2030.

Also, the government is focusing its efforts on achieving financial sustainability in both the

medium and long terms, ensuring that the economy is resilient enough to face any global economic risks and challenges.

The Saudi government is insisting on supporting public health and social development programs, including municipal services, because these sectors improve public quality of life.

The Kingdom's fiscal policy will continue to function to achieve a balance between the goals of economic growth, maintaining financial sustainability and developing non-oil revenues.

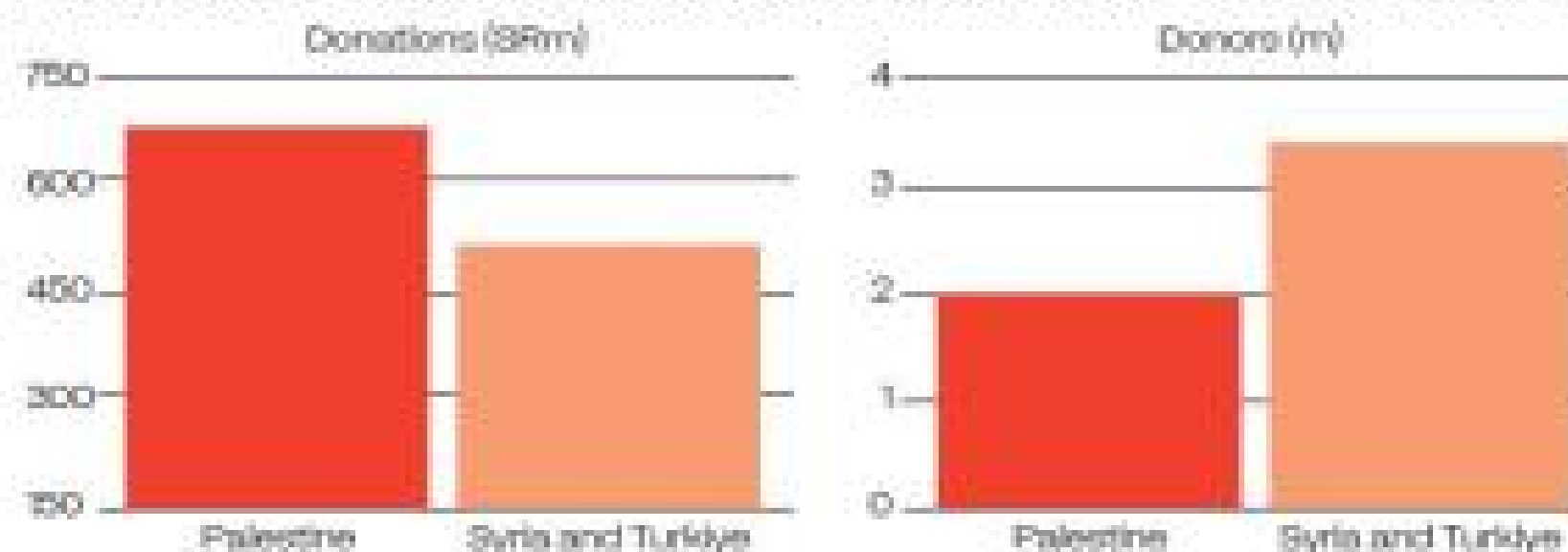
Additionally, it aims to raise the efficiency of spending and increase the participation of the private sector in the economy.

Finally, improvements in tax management and collection procedures have led to a greater increase in non-oil revenues in Q1 2024 compared to the increase in oil revenues, in percentage terms. This proves that the government has raised non-oil revenues at the expense of oil revenues, in line with Vision 2030.

Talat Zaki Hafiz is an economist and financial analyst. X: @TalatHafiz

The Day's FIGURES

SAUDI FUNDRAISING CAMPAIGNS ON KSRELIEF'S SAHEM PLATFORM



Source: sahem.ksrelief.org

Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Haji 2024

Saudi envoy inspects Makkah Route facility in Pakistan

Saudi Arabia's Ambassador to Pakistan Nawaf bin Saeed Al-Malki conducted an inspection of the Makkah Route Initiative facility at Islamabad International Airport on Friday, accompanied by Pakistan's Deputy Minister of Religious Affairs and Interfaith Harmony Zulfikar Haider.

Al-Malki underscored the commitment of the Saudi government to allocate both human and financial resources to serve all visitors to the Kingdom and said that the initiative represents an extension of that commitment.

Al-Malki observed operations at the initiative's facility and reviewed the procedures carried out by Pakistani and Saudi authorities to facilitate and streamline the Hajj journey for the program's beneficiaries.

The Makkah Route Initiative allows for the completion of immigration procedures at the pilgrims' country of departure, making it possible to bypass long immigration and customs checks on reaching Saudi Arabia. **AN Riyadh**

Revelation realm

Hira Cultural District: A diverse legacy of Makkah

Makkah's Hira Cultural District, with its pavilions and cultural history, is serving as a tourist hotspot and a hub for knowledge.

The district's Revelation Exhibition outlines the story of the revelation bestowed upon prophets up to the last Prophet. Within a special pavilion, the story of the Prophet Muhammad's revelation and his biography are presented, along with aspects related to the story of the revelation through Gabriel and the roles of Khadija. It is delivered through a technical presentation.

The project also includes the Holy Qur'an Museum. Through modern technology and unique collections, the museum highlights the greatness and universality of the Qur'an, emphasizing its preservation.

The district boasts restaurants, cafes, and the Saudi Coffee Museum, where visitors can enjoy Saudi coffee while discovering its tools, ingredients, and preparation methods. **AN Riyadh**

Border control

Saudi authorities arrest 19,710 illegals in one week

Saudi authorities arrested 19,710 people in one week for breaching residency, work and border security regulations.

A total of 12,961 people were arrested for violations of residency laws, while 4,177 were held over illegal border crossing attempts, and a further 2,572 for labor-related issues.

The report showed that among the 979 people arrested for trying to enter the Kingdom illegally, 54 percent were Ethiopian, 43 percent Yemeni, and 3 percent were of other nationalities. A further 46 people were caught trying to cross into neighboring countries, and 12 were held for involvement in transporting and harboring violators.

The Saudi Ministry of Interior said that anyone found to be facilitating illegal entry to the Kingdom, including providing transportation and shelter, could face imprisonment for a maximum of 15 years, a fine of up to SR1 million (\$260,000), as well as confiscation of vehicles and property. **AN Riyadh**



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FOOD SAFETY

Botulism outbreak traced to mayonnaise at Riyadh restaurant

Saudi food authority discovers clostridium botulinum in Bon Tum brand product; ministry implements strict measures

Ghadi Joudah Riyadh

The Ministry of Municipal, Rural Affairs and Housing announced on Saturday that a Saudi Food and Drug Authority laboratory test had found clostridium botulinum in a Bon Tum mayonnaise brand used by the Hamburgini food chain.

Since the bacterium was discovered in a Bon Tum factory, the ministry has collaborated with the SFDA and other authorities to enforce additional measures beyond those previously implemented.

These measures include suspending the distribution of the mayonnaise product and withdrawing it from markets and food facilities across all cities in the Kingdom. They also include halting operations at the factory in preparation for implementing statutory procedures.

Any remaining quantities of the product at the factory across all batches and expiration dates have also been withdrawn, and all factory clients, including restaurants and food establishments, have been notified to dispose of any quantities they own.

The ministry has also issued instructions to continue the monitoring, investigation, and inspection campaigns across all cities of the Kingdom by municipalities and relevant authorities, ensuring the safety of food products provided to consumers.

Authorities have emphasized the importance of obtaining information from official sources and not being swayed by rumors and misinformation.

Dr. Nezar Bahabri, infectious diseases consultant at the International Medical Center in Jeddah and the director of the Saudi Society of Medical Microbiology and Infectious Diseases in Jeddah, told Arab News that contracting illness through clostridium botulinum is very rare as it thrives in non-oxygenated (anaerobic) environments and is typically found in improperly preserved foods.

The bacterium produces a toxin that attacks the body's nervous system, resulting in muscle weakness, blurred vision, difficulty speaking and swallowing, and eventually paralysis. Typically, the likelihood of exposure to this bacterium is low with modern food safety practices in place.

Bahabri said: "When this bacterium



The best measure to be taken is eating fresh and cooked food as the heat of cooking will kill the bacteria, and the toxin will become ineffective.

Dr. Nezar Bahabri
Infectious diseases consultant,
International Medical Center



is ingested, and the toxin is released, symptoms will manifest within a few hours up to around two days."

Mohammed Al-Awamy, a gastroenterologist, told Arab News: "Symptoms start in the face and then descend to involve the limbs and trunk. Respiratory failure ensues due to involvement of the respiratory system leading to cardiopulmonary collapse."

The symptoms of botulism, the illness caused by clostridium botulinum, are quite distinct and can be quickly recognized and treated with an antitoxin.

Bahabri explained: "If it was an injury, we will clean the wound and the infected tissue. If it is due to ingestion, we administer antitoxin, IV (intravenous) fluid, and painkillers as needed."

Botulism is a life-threatening neurological disorder resulting in paralysis and death if not treated promptly.

Bahabri said that a patient must be admitted to hospital for observation, adding: "If the patient develops symptoms or weakness in the respiratory or lung muscles, we will transfer them to the ICU

Following the lab results that traced the source of the recent food poisoning outbreak Saudi authorities have implemented additional measures to ensure food safety. Shutterstock/Supplied

HIGHLIGHTS

- The botulism outbreak was first brought to light on April 27 when Riyadh municipality received a report of food poisoning cases linked to the Hamburgini restaurant chain.
- New measures undertaken by authorities include suspending the distribution of the Bon Tum mayonnaise product and withdrawal from markets and food facilities in the Kingdom.
- Any remaining quantities of the product at the factory across all batches and expiration dates have also been withdrawn.
- Authorities have emphasized the importance of obtaining information from official sources and not being swayed by rumors and misinformation.

(intensive care unit) to put them in mechanical ventilation until the antitoxin works."

Bahabri said that with proper treatment, the chance of a patient dying was less than 7 percent, adding: "The best measure to be taken is eating fresh and cooked food as the heat of cooking will kill the bacteria, and the toxin will become ineffective."

The occurrence of clostridium botulinum infections is extremely uncommon due to the precautions taken in food preparation and handling. Therefore, it is important to stay informed about food safety guidelines and to be cautious when consuming canned or preserved foods.

The botulism outbreak was first brought to light on April 27 when Riyadh municipality received a report of food poisoning cases linked to the Hamburgini restaurant chain.

The Ministry of Health

The bacteria that caused a Botulism outbreak was discovered in a Bon Tum factory.



said 75 people were affected in the outbreak, which included one death, and that no new cases had been recorded.

Dr. Mohammed Al-Abd Al-Aly, the Kingdom's Health Ministry spokesperson, said on social media platform X: "The total number of recorded cases stands at 75, including 69 Saudi nationals and six non-Saudis."

He also confirmed at the time that the only source of the contaminated food was from the local Hamburgini fast-food restaurant chain.

In response, health oversight teams promptly initiated an investigation and began monitoring the situation. By 10 p.m. on Thursday, all locations, branches, and the main catering factory of the restaurant chain in Riyadh were ordered to close.

People reacted on social media platforms after the announcement of the lab results.

McDonald's Saudi Arabia wrote on X: "We, at McDonald's Saudi Arabia, assure everyone that we do not use, nor have we ever used, Bon Tum mayonnaise ... No case of poisoning was detected in any of our restaurants, thank God, and none of our branches were closed during this entire period."

"We wish and pray for all those injured to recover quickly. May God protect our country and our honorable people from all harm."

@MohammedLegandry wrote on X: "This mayonnaise is officially the cause of the poisoning cases that occurred. I think it is positive news for the sector as long as the problem is identified, and it limits the messages of weak-minded people, the writing and spreading of circulating rumors, frightening people, and causing panic."

"We are reassured that government agencies are keen on the public health of individuals," posted @Nnashriii.

@Abusayel54 commented on X: "I hope that the factory will be defamed, closed, and fined."

@uxx8 said: "Is the mayonnaise the main cause of poisoning, or poor storage? (by Hamburgini)."

Another user @Hamooooli wrote: "Food quality and safety is the role of the restaurant itself to ensure its products, even if they are sourced externally. Otherwise, what is the point of a specialist and quality controller in their facilities?"

HERITAGE

Pearls of Farasan offer a deep dive into the past

Arab News Riyadh

Farasan Islands' Hareed festival, which concluded recently, marked the start of annual pearl fishing trips, an ancient skill and a major source of the islanders' prosperity.

Ships once carried 30 to 40 islanders in search of pearls, a lucrative source of income in previous centuries.

Sheikh of the Farasan Islands, Mohammed bin Hadi Al-Rajhi, described the stages of preparation

for pearl fishing trips, which began with the shipowner inspecting and preparing his vessel, and providing sailors' homes with supplies and foodstuffs that will suffice their families for the duration of their absence at sea.

He also prepared food for the trip, including red corn or whole wheat, and drinking water stored in clay vessels.

Al-Rajhi, an expert on pearl fishing, added: "The beginning of the month of May witnessed the start of these trips that last for three or four months, which are the summer months when it is easy to obtain pearls, so the fishermen set sail to Al-Maaden (mineral) areas, which abound with oysters containing pearls."

Once the deep dives begin, diving activities were divided over five days, with the first four days' harvest going to the divers and the fifth day's harvest going to the shipowner, he said.

Divers used a weight tied to one foot to help them descend to depths of 12 meters and more to

FASTFACTS

- A pearl merchant, Suleiman Balaous, classified pearls according to size and weight.
- One variety, 'Al-Dana,' meaning round, is distinguished by its large weight, bright luster, and absence of flaws.
- Smaller varieties such as 'Al-Mazouri,' 'Al-Ansar,' and 'Al-Badla,' have irregular shapes.

extract pearls. The diver communicated with an assistant on the deck of the ship using a rope, which was also used to pull him back to the surface.

In return for this assistance, the diver allocated a portion of his harvest — known as "dangeel," a net in which the oysters were collected — to the assistant as payment.

Diving would start following the fajr prayer, with work continuing until noon. Afterward, the crew would rest before beginning the



Ships once carried 30 to 40 islanders in search of pearls, a lucrative source of income in previous centuries. SPA

"fulq" process, which involved opening the oysters, allowing each diver to inspect their daily harvest.

Referring to pearl sorting tools owned by pearl merchants at that time, Al-Rajhi said that merchants had copper sieves of various sizes, to sort large pearls from small varieties.

A pearl merchant, Suleiman Balaous, classified pearls according to size and weight. One variety, "Al-Dana," meaning round, is distinguished by its large weight, bright luster, and absence of flaws. Smaller varieties such as

"Al-Mazouri," "Al-Ansar," and "Al-Badla," have irregular shapes, while pearls harvested from the Farasan Islands are distinct from those in most pearl diving areas in terms of color and clarity, Al-Rajhi said.

The long months of pearl diving were associated with hardship, fatigue, and risk, and fishermen invented the folk songs of Al-Dana for entertainment. It has emerged as one of the oldest folk arts in Farasan, expressing the sailors' longing during long absences

searching for pearls.

The lucrative pearl trade in former centuries contributed to the formation of a wealthy class whose trade led them to market pearls in Gulf Arab countries, Europe, and particularly in India, which was a major pearl market.

Traders saw Eastern arts and inscriptions on buildings, which influenced their cultural and architectural ideas. They introduced these motifs to the Farasan Islands, where they were reflected in several wealthy individuals' homes, particularly the two houses of Al-Rifai, one of which belongs to Ahmed Al-Munawar Al-Rifai and was completed in 1922, and the other belongs to Hussein bin Yahya Al-Rifai.

This also influenced the construction of the Najdi Mosque, which was completed in 1928 by Sheikh Ibrahim Al-Tamimi, popularly known as "Al-Najdi," who worked in the pearl trade and was impressed by Eastern civilization due to his numerous travels to India.

DEEP CONCERN

UN Security Council seeks inquiry into mass graves in Gaza

AFP New York

The UN Security Council has called for an immediate and independent investigation into mass graves allegedly containing hundreds of bodies near hospitals in Gaza.

In a statement, members of the council expressed their "deep concern over reports of the discovery of mass graves, in and around the Nasser and Al-Shifa medical facilities in Gaza, where several hundred bodies, including women, children and older persons, were buried."

The members stressed the need for "accountability" for any violations of international law.

They called on investigators to be given "unimpeded access to all locations of mass graves in Gaza to conduct immediate, independent, thorough, comprehensive, transparent and impartial investigations."

Hospitals in the Gaza Strip have been repeatedly targeted since the beginning of the Israeli military operation in the Palestinian territory following the October 7 attack

on southern Israel by Gaza-based Hamas militants.

The World Health Organization said in April that Al-Shifa, in Gaza City, had been reduced to an "empty shell," with many bodies found in the area.

The Israeli army has said around 200 Palestinians were killed during its military operations there.

FASTFACT

The World Health Organization said in April that Al-Shifa, in Gaza City, had been reduced to an 'empty shell,' with many bodies found in the area.

Bodies have reportedly been found buried in two graves in the hospital's courtyard.

The UN rights office in late April had called for an independent investigation into reports of mass graves at Al-Shifa and the Nasser Medical Complex in Khan Younis.

Gaza officials said at the time that health workers at the Nasser



Palestinians check the rubble of a residential building destroyed in an Israeli strike in Al-Zawayda in the central Gaza Strip on Saturday. AFP

complex had uncovered hundreds of bodies of Palestinians they alleged had been killed and buried by Israeli forces.

Israel's army has dismissed

the claims as "baseless and unfounded."

The statement on Friday from the Security Council did not say who would conduct the investigations.

But it "reaffirmed the importance of allowing families to know the fate and whereabouts of their missing relatives, consistent with international humanitarian law."

Israel's offensive has killed at least 34,943 people in the Gaza Strip, primarily women and children, the Health Ministry in the territory said.

GROWING RISKS

Man killed as Lebanese troops raid people smugglers on Syrian border

Beirut security plan revealed amid fears of illegal weapons, rising crime

Najla Houssari Beirut

Lebanon's Interior Ministry says it will implement a security plan in Beirut in coming days amid fears over the large number of illegal weapons and growing lawlessness in areas of the city and surrounding neighborhoods.

Security forces have been told to recruit 800 extra personnel as part of the clampdown, the ministry said.

The security plan was announced as Lebanon's General Security Directorate said it is cracking down on Syrian nationals who remain in the country illegally.

The directorate told Syrian nationals who have violated the country's entry and residence regulations to "regularize their status and leave Lebanese territory" by heading to border departments and centers immediately.

Those who ignore the order will face legal action, the statement warned.



Smoke billows from the site of an Israeli airstrike on the southern Lebanese village of Khiam. AFP

BACKGROUND

The recent killing of Pascal Sleiman, the coordinator of the Lebanese Forces Party, intensified animosity toward the Syrians' presence in Lebanon.

Lebanese Army Command said on Saturday that an army unit, with support from the General Intelligence Directorate, detained several men in an operation targeting people smugglers in Deir Al-Aachayer in the Bekaa region.

A Syrian national who attacked

troops with a spear was shot and later died in hospital from his wounds, the army said.

People traffickers and goods smugglers have long been a problem in the area, which overlaps Syrian territory, according to the army.

Authorities are also cracking down on illegal Syrian-owned institutions and shops, as well as businesses that employ foreign workers in violation of regulations and laws.

Media reports said the General Security Directorate will no longer grant residency permits to Syrian family members sponsored by Lebanese citizens in Lebanon.

Lebanon's caretaker Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi said during a meeting in Beirut that the Syrian presence "plays a fundamental role in putting pressure on security in Lebanon."

He said that after "arduous negotiations," the UN Refugee Agency revealed almost 1.5 million Syrians were in Lebanon "with unclear reasons for their asylum and entry dates."

However, Lebanon estimates there are at least 2.5 million Syrian refugees in the country, most of whom are "economic refugees, not security or political refugees," according to Mawlawi.

He said that Lebanon "cannot tolerate any economic asylum."

Lebanese authorities have urged citizens not to employ, shelter, or provide accommodation for Syrians residing illegally in the country. Violators face administrative and judicial procedures.

The General Security Directorate also warned Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR against engaging in paid work outside their des-

ignated sectors.

In recent months, there has been a sharp rise in the number of murders, kidnappings, and thefts in Lebanon.

Incidents have been particularly prevalent on the road to Beirut Airport and in the border area with Syria, where illegal crossings are common.

According to Interior Ministry statistics, a significant proportion of the perpetrators are Syrian, accounting for nearly 40 percent of the total detainees.

The recent killing of Pascal Sleiman, the coordinator of the Lebanese Forces Party, intensified animosity toward the Syrian presence in Lebanon.

Mawlawi said that Beirut and its suburbs, especially the road to Rafic Hariri International Airport, "will witness a security plan aimed at reassuring the people of Beirut and its residents, and restoring stability."

The Lebanese government has declared that any Syrian who entered Lebanese territory after 2019 is considered to be illegally present in the country.

It plans to send all those who ar-

rived after 2019 back to Syria, except detainees who may be at risk if they return.

Lebanon received a €1 billion aid package early this month from the European Commission to bolster its border controls and help stem refugee flows to Europe.

The financing will be available from the current year until 2027. However, caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati said there was a difference between registered refugees and those who entered Lebanon illegally and are facing deportation.

Mikati held talks in Lebanon in early May with European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides. He pushed for recognition from Europe and the international community that most areas in Syria are now safe, which would facilitate refugees' return home.

Independent MP Ghassan Skaf said the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon has become an "existential threat, and there is now a consensus about the issue."

WAR ON TERRORISM

SDF hands over 2 Daesh members suspected in 2014 mass killing of Iraqi troops

AP Beirut

Syria's US-backed Kurdish-led force has handed over to Baghdad two Daesh militants suspected of involvement in mass killings of Iraqi soldiers in 2014, a war monitor said.

The report by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights came a day after the Iraqi National Intelligence Service said it had brought back to the country three Daesh members from outside Iraq. The intelligence service did not provide more details.

Daesh captured an estimated 1,700 Iraqi soldiers after seizing Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit in 2014. The soldiers were

trying to flee from nearby Camp Speicher, a former US base.

Shortly after taking Tikrit, Daesh posted graphic images of Daesh militants shooting and killing the soldiers.

Farhad Shami, a spokesman for the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, said the US-backed force handed over two Daesh members to Iraq.

It was not immediately clear where Iraqi authorities brought the third suspect from.

The 2014 killings, known as the Speicher massacre, sparked outrage across Iraq and partially fueled the mobilization of militias in the fight against Daesh.

BACKGROUND

Daesh captured an estimated 1,700 Iraqi soldiers after seizing Saddam Hussein's hometown of Tikrit in 2014.

Iraq has, over the past several years, put on trial and later executed dozens of Daesh members over their involvement in the Speicher massacre.

The Observatory said the two Daesh members were among 20 captured recently in a joint operation with the US-led coalition in the northern Syrian city of Raqqa, once the capital of Daesh's



Displaced children peak from inside a classroom at a makeshift school in the village of Haranabush in Syria's northwestern Idlib province on Saturday. AFP

self-declared caliphate.

Despite their defeat in Iraq in 2017 and in Syria in March 2019, the extremist sleeper cells are still active and have been carrying out

deadly attacks against SDF and Syrian government forces.

Shami said a car rigged with explosives and driven by a suicide attacker tried on Friday night to

storm a military checkpoint for the Deir El-Zour Military Council. This Arab majority faction is part of the SDF in the eastern Syrian village of Shuhail.

Shami said that when the guards tried to stop the car, the attacker blew himself up, killing three US-backed fighters.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack, but it was similar to previous explosions carried out by IS militants.

The SDF is holding over 10,000 captured Daesh fighters in around two dozen detention facilities, including 2,000 foreigners whose home countries have refused to repatriate them.

SECURITY

Somalia wants to terminate the UN political mission

Foreign minister says the decision follows 'a thorough consideration of our strategic priorities'

AP New York

Somalia is asking the UN to terminate its political mission in the country, which has been assisting the government in bringing peace and stability in the face of attacks by the Al-Qaeda-linked extremist group Al-Shabab.

In a letter to the UN Security Council and Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, Somali Foreign Minister Ahmed Moalim Fiqi said the decision followed "a thorough consideration of our strategic priorities."

The mission's current mandate, known as UNSOM, expires Oct. 31, and Fiqi asked for "the swift conclusion of the necessary procedures for the termination of the mission by the end of the mandate."

The UN mission has worked closely with African Union peacekeepers, whose current transitional mission, ATMIS, has been scaling

back its presence and is expected to turn over security responsibilities to Somali forces at the end of the year.

In November, the Security Council suspended the AU pullout for three months at Somalia's request because of fighting with Al-Shabab.

Somalia plunged into civil war after feuding clan-based warlords toppled dictator Mohammed Siad Barre in 1991. The Horn of Africa nation established a functioning transitional government in 2012 and has been working to rebuild stability in the face of extremist attacks and growing piracy.

Al-Shabab intensified attacks on Somali military bases last year after it lost control of some territory in rural areas to a military offensive that followed the Somali president's call for "total war" on the extremist group in 2022.

The Security Council established the special political mission, UNSOM, in June 2013 to support peace and reconciliation efforts

BACKGROUND

In mid-February, the US agreed to build up to five military bases for the Somali army in a project that seeks to bolster its capabilities against threats from Al-Shabab.

and provide the Somali government and the AU peacekeeping mission with strategic policy advice on restoring peace and rebuilding a functioning state.

Its mandate also includes promoting human rights

and preventing abuses, empowering women, protecting children, and preventing conflict-related sexual and gender-based violence.

In the letter dated May 5, Somalia's foreign minister thanked UNSOM for its "crucial role in promoting peace, stability and development in our country."

Fiqi said the government believes "it is now appropriate to transition to the next phase of our partnership," stressing its commitment to collaborate with the UN and its partners on the country's long-term development priorities "and beyond."

In a follow-up letter dated May 9, Fiqi said the Somali government is ready to engage with all relevant parties in preparing for "the complex transition process within the

appropriate time frame."

He said Somali President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud spoke to Guterres on April 29 and requested the start of a planning process to transition from a political mission to a UN country team, which usually focuses on development issues.

The process should have distinct stages, and planning should start very soon, Fiqi said.

In mid-February, the US agreed to build up to five military bases for the Somali army in a project that seeks to bolster its capabilities against threats from Al-Shabab.

The new bases will be associated with the Somali military's Danab Brigade, established in 2017 following an agreement between the US and Somalia to recruit, train, equip, and mentor 3,000 men and women from across Somalia to build a strong infantry capability within the Somali army.

The brigade has been pivotal as a quick-reaction force in efforts to repel Al-Shabab extremists.



TRANSITION

Mali national dialogue recommends longer military rule

Reuters Bamako

Participants in Mali's national dialogue have recommended extending the military-led transition to democracy by three years and allowing junta leader Assimi Goita to stand in the eventual election.

The West African country has been under military rule since a coup in 2020, and tensions have risen over the junta's failure to stick to a promised timeline for the return to constitutional rule.

Months-long nationwide consultations, boycotted by many of the opposition, culminated with several recommendations, including extending the transition to five years from two, effectively prolonging the junta's rule to 2027.

The substantial delay is likely to deepen concerns about democratic backsliding in West and Central Africa, where there have been eight coups over the past four years.

On the security front,

BACKGROUND

Mali has been under military rule since a coup in 2020, and tensions have risen over the junta's failure to stick to a promised timeline for the return to constitutional rule.

participants in the consultations advised the authorities to be open to dialogue with Islamist armed groups and engage with all Malian armed movements.

On the Sahara Desert's southern fringe, Mali has been plagued by violence since 2012, when militants hijacked an uprising by the Tuareg groups who complained of government neglect and sought autonomy for the desert region they call Azawad.

Deep insecurity, economic hardships, election delays, and the authorities' recent move to limit political activities have stoked frustration with the junta in some quarters. In April, an alliance of political parties and civil society organizations formed and refused to participate in the national dialogue.

RESCUE WORK

'Miracle' survivor found 5 days after building collapse

AFP Johannesburg

Rescuers and onlookers cheered and applauded on Saturday as a survivor was rescued after 116 hours from underneath the rubble of a collapsed building in South Africa, with the tragedy having killed at least 13.

Provincial premier Alan Winde said on X: "It is a miracle that we have all been hoping for."

An apartment block under construction in the southern city

of George crumbled on Monday afternoon while an 81-person crew was on site.

"When we went down to the side of the slab we had uncovered, we heard somebody inside, and we stopped all the heavy operations," Colin Deiner, head of rescue operations, told reporters.

Rescuers then called out to the survivor, and he spoke back, Deiner said.

"He indicated to us that he's got weight on his legs, and we're very

Rescue workers carry a man on Saturday to an ambulance in George, South Africa. The man was rescued from the rubble five days after a deadly building collapse in South Africa. Reuters



When we went down to the side of the slab we had uncovered, we heard somebody inside, and we stopped all the heavy operations.

concerned about that after such a long period." After several hours, the survivor was extricated and rushed to a hospital.

Rescue teams have been working

against time since the structure came crashing down.

Twenty-nine people were rescued alive, while thirty-nine remained unaccounted for.

Winde said a "difficult" identification process was underway, and police were using fingerprints, DNA testing, and photographs.

The city had approved construction plans for a 42-unit apartment block in July.

The reasons for the collapse are still unknown.

UPROAR

Tunisia probes pundit over comments on TV show

AFP Tunis

A Tunisian court has opened an investigation into a political commentator after she commented on television about the state of the country, lawyers and local media said.

During a Tuesday show on the Carthage Plus TV channel, Sonia Dahmani responded to another pundit's claim that sub-Saharan migrants were seeking to settle in Tunisia.

"What extraordinary country are we talking about?" she asked sarcastically.

Dahmani, also a lawyer, was summoned to court on Friday to explain her comments but refused to appear, her attorney Dalila Msaddek said.

The court then issued a failure to appear warrant, ordering law enforcement to bring her before the investigating judge as soon as possible.

A judicial report on Thursday

FASTFACT

The court issued a warrant for the arrest of Sonia Dahmani, an attorney, for failing to appear before the judge during the investigation.

said Dahmani's comments were in response to a speech by President Kais Saied earlier this week in which he said the country would not become a place for

the resettlement of sub-Saharan migrants prevented from crossing to Europe.

Dahmani was already facing legal action for criticizing the state of Tunisian prisons in November 2023.

Both cases fall under the controversial Decree 54, which outlaws "spreading false news" online or in the media. Journalists and opposition figures argue the law has been used to stifle dissent.

The decree, signed by the

president in September 2022, mandates up to five years in prison for using communications networks to "produce, spread (or) disseminate ... false news" or to "slander others, tarnish their reputation, financially or morally harm them."

According to the National Union of Tunisian Journalists, more than 60 journalists, lawyers, and opposition figures have been prosecuted under the decree since it came into force.



An Afghan man walks near his damaged home. Heavy rains Friday sent roaring rivers of water and mud crashing through villages in Baghlan province in Afghanistan. AFP

CATASTROPHIC FLOODS

More than 300 dead in Afghanistan flash floods

More than 2,000 houses destroyed and 2,800 houses damaged in Northern Baghlan province

AFP Lagayl, Afghanistan

More than 300 people were killed in flash floods that ripped through multiple Afghan provinces, the World Food Programme said on Saturday, as authorities declared a state of emergency and rushed to rescue the injured.

Heavy rains on Friday sent roaring rivers of water and mud crashing through villages and across agricultural land in several provinces.

Survivors on Saturday picked through muddy, debris-littered streets and damaged buildings, an AFP journalist saw, as authorities and nongovernmental groups deployed rescue workers and aid, warning that some areas had been

cut off by the flooding.

Northern Baghlan province was one of the hardest hit, with more than 300 people killed there alone, and thousands of houses destroyed or damaged, according to WFP.

"On current information: In Baghlan province there are 311 fatalities, 2,011 houses destroyed and 2,800 houses damaged," Rana Deraz, a communications officer for the UN agency in Afghanistan, told AFP.

There were disparities between the death tolls provided by the government and humanitarian agencies.

The UN migration agency, the International Organization for Migration, said there were 218 deaths in Baghlan.

Abdul Mateen Qani, spokesman for the Interior Ministry, told AFP that 131 people had been killed in



My house and my whole life was swept away by the flood.

Jan Mohammed Din Mohammed
Resident of Baghlan province

Baghlan, but that the government toll could rise.

"Many people are still missing," he said.

Another 20 people were reported dead in northern Takhar province and two in neighboring Badakhshan, he added.

Government spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid said, "Hundreds of our fellow citizens have succumbed to these calamitous floods," in a statement posted to X earlier on Saturday.

"Moreover, the deluge has

wrought extensive devastation upon residential properties, resulting in significant financial losses," he added.

Rains on Friday caused heavy damage in Baghlan, Takhar and Badakhshan, as well as western Ghor and Herat provinces, officials said, in a country wracked by poverty and heavily dependent on agriculture.

"My house and my whole life was swept away by the flood," said Jan Mohammed Din Mohammed, a resident of Baghlan provincial capital Pol-e-Khomri.

His family had managed to flee to higher ground but when the weather cleared and they returned home, "there was nothing left, all my belongings and my house had been destroyed," he said.

"I don't know where to take my family ... I don't know what to do."

PLAYING FOR POWER

Modi critic joins India's election campaign on bail

Sanjay Kumar New Delhi

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal joined India's ongoing general election — boosting the opposition alliance on Saturday — a day after the Supreme Court ordered his temporary release on bail in a controversial graft case.

A fierce critic of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the leader of the Aam Aadmi Party, Kejriwal was arrested in late March, in connection with corruption allegations related to the excise policy of the Delhi government led by him. He denies the accusations.

On Friday, the top court granted Kejriwal 21-day interim bail to campaign in the seven-phase general vote, which started on April 19. He has to surrender after the last day of voting on June 1.

"I will go around the country in the next 21 days to stop this dictatorship of Modi," Kejriwal said at a conference in Delhi.

"After June 4, there will be no Modi government. In all states, their seats are going down and

they will not get more than 220 to 230 seats."

The results of the world's largest election are set to be announced on June 4. The party or coalition that wins at least 272 of the 543 contested seats in the lower house of parliament will form the government.

Seeking a third straight term in office, Modi has been targeting 400 seats for the National Democratic Alliance led by his Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party, which has been in power since 2014.

He is challenged by an alliance of two dozen opposition parties, the Indian National Developmental Inclusive Alliance, or INDIA, of which Kejriwal's AAP is a part. Kejriwal has accused Modi and his BJP of damaging democracy, and abusing power and the constitution.

Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal



FASTFACTS

• Top court allows Delhi Chief Minister Arvind Kejriwal to leave custody until June 1.

• His release is expected to give a boost to India's opposition alliance in ongoing polls.

"The opposition's morale will get a further boost," said Satish Kumar Singh, a political analyst in Delhi.

"The release of Kejriwal further reinforces the opposition campaign on the need to save democracy and maintain fairness in the electoral process."

Kejriwal's AAP is a challenger to the BJP in Delhi and Punjab, where voting will take place on May 25 and June 1 respectively.

"Kejriwal's release is a boost to the cadres of the AAP and the opposition alliance at this crucial time when the opposition alliance is challenging the dominance of the BJP in the capital city," Andalib Akhtar, a New Delhi-based commentator and editor of The Indian Awaz, told Arab News.

"It's good that the court has taken a decision in favor of democracy and is giving the opposition leader — who was arrested just on the eve of the general elections — an opportunity to be on an equal footing democratically."

Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Bilateral rift

The Philippines accuses China of building island

The Philippines said on Saturday it has deployed ships to a disputed area in the South China Sea, where it accused China of building "an artificial island" in an escalating maritime row.

The coast guard sent a ship "to monitor the supposed illegal activities of China, creating 'an artificial island,'" the office of President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. said in a statement, adding two other vessels were in rotational deployment in the area.

Philippine Coast Guard spokesperson Commodore Jay Tarriela told a forum there had been "small-scale reclamation" of the Sabina Shoal, which Manila calls Escoda, and that China was "the most probable actor."

The Chinese Embassy in Manila did not immediately respond to a request for comment on the Philippine assertions, which could deepen the bilateral rift. **Reuters**

Securing borders

Poland will build fortifications on eastern border

Polish Prime Minister Donald Tusk said on Saturday that Poland is starting work on further strengthening the entire eastern border, as the country faces what he called a growing "hybrid war" in illegal migration from Belarus.

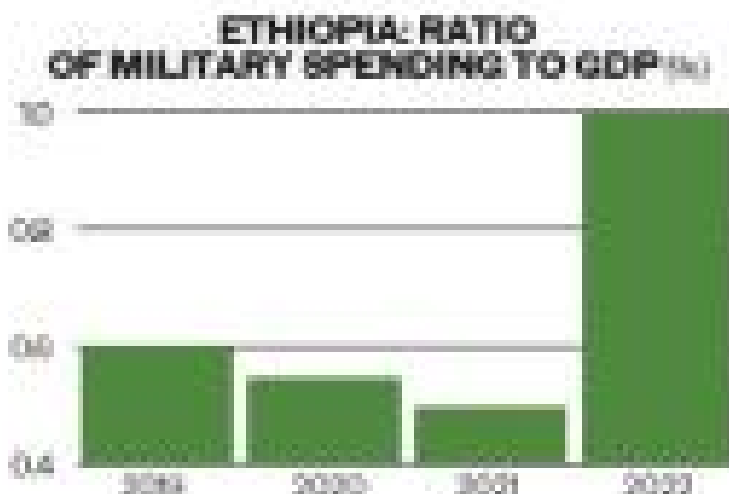
Tusk did not provide details about the planned actions, nor the any funds that would be allocated, but said that when it came to Poland's security there would be "no limits."

"The Polish-Belarusian border is a unique place due to the pressure of illegal immigration. In fact, we are dealing with a progressing hybrid war," the prime minister said as he visited the frontier and met soldiers and guards.

"I want there to be no doubts here — a country with increasingly aggressive intentions towards Poland, such as Belarus, is co-organizing this practice on the Polish border." **Reuters**

The Day's FIGURES

Source: Statista



What We Are Reading Today

FROM AROUND THE WEB & IN PRINT

'The Ant Collective'

ARMIN SHCIEB

Ants share a vibrant and complex communal life and remarkable abilities to communicate with each other. "The Ant Collective" presents the world of ants as you have never seen it before, using hyperrealistic, computer-generated imagery that shows 3D-like views of activities

inside and outside a thriving nest of red wood ants. With chapters on topics ranging from the establishment and construction of the nest to the birth of an ant trail and the relocation of a colony, this one-of-a-kind book brilliantly integrates informative descriptions with the illustrations.



Ground assault

Russian offensive in Ukraine forces 1,700 to evacuate

Russian forces began a renewed ground assault on Ukraine's northeast, killing and injuring several and forcing more than 1,700 civilians to evacuate from the Kharkiv region, local officials said Saturday.

Artillery, mortar, and aerial bombardments hit more than 30 different towns and villages, leaving at least three people dead and five others injured, said Kharkiv governor, Oleh Synchubov.

Ukraine rushed reinforcements to the Kharkiv region on Friday to hold off a Russian attempt to breach local defenses, authorities said.

Russian forces stepped up their bombardment of Kharkiv, Ukraine's second-largest city, in late March. Friday's attack signaled a tactical switch in the war by Moscow that Ukrainian officials had been expecting for weeks.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy confirmed Friday evening that Russian forces were expanding their operations. **AP**

Northern hemisphere

Solar storm hits Earth, producing colorful light shows

An unusually strong solar storm hitting Earth produced stunning displays of color in the skies across the Northern Hemisphere early Saturday, with no immediate reports of disruptions to power and communications.

The US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration issued a rare severe geomagnetic storm warning when a solar outburst reached Earth on Friday afternoon, hours sooner than anticipated. The effects of the Northern Lights, which were prominently on display in Britain, were due to last through the weekend and possibly into next week.

Many in the UK shared phone snaps of the lights on social media early Saturday, with the phenomenon seen as far south as London and southern England. There were sightings "from top to tail across the country," said Chris Snell, a meteorologist at the Met Office, Britain's weather agency. **AP**

والخيرُ يفعلهُ الكريمُ بطبعه
وإذا اللئيمُ سخا فذاك تكلفُ
(طرفة بن العبد)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
*It is natural for the virtuous to be charitable; but
when a villain feigns charity, it is only a pretense.*

Tarafa ibn Al-Abd
(Pre-Islamic Arab poet)

Opinion

Right to protest is sacrosanct but hatred should be discarded

YOSSI MEKELBERG



Yossi Mekelberg is a professor of international relations and an associate fellow of the Middle East and North Africa Program at international affairs think tank Chatham House.
X: @YMekelberg

During my considerable time in academia teaching politics at various universities, including American ones, I have had many wonderful students who cared deeply about their studies and the issues discussed in class.

However, I have also complained to them about their reluctance to become proactive in terms of political activity. Where previous generations took to the streets, they prefer to log on to social media to protest.

It might be the case that individualism has descended upon our societies, making the younger generation less enchanted by the prospect of mass gatherings. Or it may be a perception that politics is beyond repair, especially when true leadership is hard to come by these days. There is also the unbearable ease with which social media can give us an impression of engaging in political activism without leaving our armchairs.

However, the latest round of horrific hostilities between the Israelis and Palestinians has incentivized hundreds of thousands of people to take to the streets and protest. On many college campuses, especially in the US, students have become political activists in large numbers, which is something to be welcomed.

Nevertheless, this development has also highlighted the binary nature of the message behind these protests, and in too many cases

produced ugly manifestations of antisemitism and Islamophobia, which are utterly unacceptable.

In the US, these phenomena are even more accentuated due to the very loose interpretation of the First Amendment. Its almost illogical interpretation of absolute protection for the right of freedom of speech, one can argue, allows and encourages hate speech, and leaves no room for incitement and expressions of hate to be censored, punished or even restrained within the education system.

On the positive side, what we have seen emerge over the past seven months is the fact that young people are desperately looking for a cause to rally around, and this is something society especially needs because the challenges that lie ahead, whether they arise from climate change, wars and conflicts, or the growing inequalities in our societies, are endangering not only our security but also our humanity.

Criticism of Israel for the killings and devastation it is inflicting on Gaza with little care for civilians, from the very young to the elderly, is understandable, because it is impossible to watch the horrific images from the Strip and remain indifferent to them, regardless of the terrible atrocities committed by Hamas on Oct. 7.

Who among us has the moral right to question the legitimacy of the calls for an immediate ceasefire and the release of hostages, and the demand for sufficient

humanitarian aid to reach more than 2 million Gazans, who have been literally trapped for years in the crossfire between an occupying and blockading force and a fundamentalist regime, both of which have deprived them of their most basic needs, rights and dignity?

Israeli authorities, through their self-defeating policies, have "earned" the wrath of ordinary people and states around the world. Moreover, support for the Palestinian cause and calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state is not an antisemitic act, but a call for a solution that would enable both Israelis and Palestinians to live peacefully, side by side.

The White House description of the call for an intifada as "hate speech" was misplaced, because to rise up against an occupation is not necessarily to call for suicide bombings, as was claimed; this was certainly not the case during the First Intifada.

Among some of the protesters there are also clear manifestations of antisemitism, the misrepresentation of Zionism, and a questioning of the right of Israel to exist, as well as incitements against Jews more generally. And this is where a line should be drawn.

There are recorded incidents of antisemitic slurs directed at Jewish students and academic staff, and many of them report that they are afraid, for example, to wear a Star of David necklace for fear of being attacked by pro-Palestinian protesters.

Extremely disturbing has been the support expressed, albeit by a small minority of the

protesters, not only for Hamas as a political movement but for the crimes it committed on Oct. 7.

Universities and academics have the difficult task of providing their students with critical-thinking skills in the face of complex situations and events, and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict presents its fair share of complexities.

What is required is to avoid the type of approach that is more applicable to sporting contests, in which one supports the "either-or," "zero-sum" outcome. Not only is this unsuitable for dealing with war and conflicts, in which the various causes and outcomes are often opaque and entangled, but it causes obvious harm to the discourse surrounding a conflict and its ability to overcome differences on the path to resolving it.

There can be only one silver lining to what has taken place since Oct. 7, and that is the opportunity to internalize the fact that there is an urgent need for a completely new discourse over Israel and Palestine, one that discards prejudices, biases, hatred and, in the case of universities, avoids the artificial paradigms that are at best only partially relevant, and at worst highly damaging.

Instead, it is time for students, and the rest of us, to join forces and support those who want peace, coexistence and reconciliation, and marginalize the haters and those for whom a historical compromise for peace is a curse and not a blessing.

Israeli authorities, through their self-defeating policies, have 'earned' the wrath of ordinary people and states around the world

SOURCE: AMAL MAMOUK/AL-JAWAB



Renewable energy is not just an option but a necessity to enhance the socioeconomic transformations underway in the Gulf

Gulf states on track with renewable energy investments

ZAID M. BELBAGI



Zaid M. Belbagi is a political commentator and an adviser to private clients between London and the Gulf Cooperation Council region.
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The Gulf states that are concerned with economic transformation are beginning to focus on diversification, with the development of robust infrastructure for renewable energy. As urban developments and populations expand across the Gulf region, the demand for electricity is growing rapidly and the region is predicted to need another 100 gigawatts of power over the next decade to meet this demand. Moreover, several avenues of economic diversification, such as artificial intelligence, smart cities and tourist attractions, are electricity-intensive, further adding to the need for sufficient and sustainable energy sources.

At the same time, as the number of residents increases in a region that faces high temperatures for most of the year, the increased demand for air conditioning will also put new pressures on electricity generation. Renewable energy is key to meeting this growing demand and, as per the International Energy Agency, will meet 35 percent of global power generation by 2025.

This region has shown a positive trend in this domain, as the Gulf states have actively established cross-border, regional and international cooperation to develop renewable energy infrastructure. On May 1, for example,

the UAE's state-owned renewable energy company Masdar established a partnership agreement with Bahrain's energy and investment arm Bapco Energies to develop near-shore and offshore wind farms in Bahrain.

In the same week, Oman's green hydrogen company Hydrom signed agreements worth \$11 billion with international companies, including France's state-owned EDF. These will lead to the establishment of two new green hydrogen projects in Dhofar. Simultaneously, the Kuwait Oil Company signed a memorandum of understanding with the Kuwaiti Ministry of Electricity, Water and Renewable Energy to coordinate efforts to generate 1 GW of electricity from solar energy.

With abundant exposure to sunlight and wind and large tracts of unused land, the Gulf states are well positioned to leverage natural resources for sustainable energy. High sunlight exposure allows solar plants to operate for longer durations. It is worth noting that, in the Gulf Cooperation Council, solar photovoltaic power now costs less than 2 cents per kilowatt-hour to generate and is therefore the cheapest option for power generation.

Boosting renewable energy generation is also part of the Gulf states' commitment to reduce carbon emissions and hit their net-zero targets. Through their participation in notable

international environmental summits such as the UN Framework Convention for Climate Change's Conference of the Parties gatherings, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait and the UAE have committed to net-zero emissions by 2050. Further, having ratified the Paris Agreement and acknowledged their heavy reliance on fossil fuels, the Gulf states have actively put in place the necessary infrastructure and plans to reduce emissions.

This commitment is also reflected in the states' national vision statements. As part of its Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia is working toward energy diversification and a circular carbon economy wherein, by 2030, renewable sources will provide 50 percent of the Kingdom's energy needs. Saudi Arabia's total installed renewable energy capacity tripled in 2023 and it continues to make significant investments in solar and wind projects. Similarly, the UAE's Energy Strategy 2050 aims to make the country carbon-neutral by 2050.

Beyond the benefits of energy security and sustainability at home, their commitment to renewable energy has also allowed the Gulf states to boost international relations, as well as attract and provide foreign investment. In the first week of May alone, Saudi Arabia signed renewable energy partnerships with Azerbaijan, Mauritania and Uzbekistan.

Notably, the Kingdom is also in talks with the EU to identify avenues for cooperation on renewable energy and carbon capture. It also hosted the Saudi Arabia Green Energy Week in March, when local and international industry leaders gathered to discuss the opportunities and challenges for the energy value chain.

The region is therefore on track to build a robust and sustainable infrastructure for renewable energy that can not only meet domestic demand but also potentially support international consumption. State-owned companies have been active in providing the necessary financial and regulatory support to this endeavor and, while the private sector has also played a role, there continues to be scope for further private-public partnerships. For instance, as per the UAE's Nationally Determined Contributions under the Paris Agreement, the country needs investments totaling approximately \$36 billion to achieve its climate targets by 2030.

Today, renewable energy is not just an option but a necessity to enhance the socioeconomic transformations underway in the Gulf. It adds sustainability to economic development, allows significant opportunities for employment and skills development and increases international investor confidence in the region.

Opinion

Euro-Chinese relations changed a lot in the 5 years between President Xi's visits

ANDREW HAMMOND



Though 2019 was not so long ago by most reckonings, it must seem like a different political epoch for China's President Xi Jinping, who has just concluded his first visit to Europe in five years.

During those years, the world not only experienced the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, the presumed origins of which in China remain shrouded in some mystery, but also witnessed the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which is tacitly supported by Beijing.

All of this means that much of Europe is in a different political space regarding China than it was in 2019. Aware of this change in mood, Xi chose the destinations for his three-leg European itinerary last week carefully. After a visit to France (China's ties with which he described as a model bilateral relationship) on Monday and Tuesday, he traveled to Hungary and then to non-EU member Serbia, two of China's supporters on the continent.

Xi has described Serbia as an "iron-clad" friend. Bilateral trade and investment ties between the nations have been growing, including a \$2.2 billion Chinese investment in wind and solar power plants and a hydrogen production facility.

Within the 27-member EU itself, however, Xi's strongest ally might be long-standing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban. He favors deeper ties not only with China but also Russia, which makes him highly unusual among his counterparts.

During his visit to Hungary, Xi welcomed

the fact that the nation has become a key production hub in Europe for Chinese automotive suppliers, including makers of electric vehicles. This might help Chinese firms navigate any EU tariffs on such vehicles in the future.

Serbia and Hungary are outliers in contemporary continental opinions on Beijing. A position more reflective of the wider stance at the present time is that of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, with whom Xi met on Monday in France, and who has led the political charge in Brussels toward what she calls a policy of "de-risking" from Beijing.

Certainly, even in France Xi received a respectful and warm welcome during a visit that coincided with the 60th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Paris and Beijing, and met President Emmanuel Macron as well as von der Leyen.

But the underlying political mood music is very different now than it was during his 2019 visit to Europe. Back then, Xi was love-bombed by his Italian hosts, who became the first G7 country to sign up to Beijing's Belt and Road infrastructure scheme. This was a controversial decision in the West, even then. It infuriated the Trump administration in Washington, which called it "legitimacy for China's infrastructure vanity project."

Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni's administration, which came to power in 2022, withdrew from the agreement last year. This is a sign of the undeniable chill in EU-Chinese relations in recent years as a result of a wide-range of

political and economic factors. These include Western assertions of human rights abuses by China in Xinjiang province, and concerns that Beijing is "dumping" key products such as electric vehicles, batteries, wind turbines and solar panels on the European market through the use of extensive state subsidies.

Worse still, top EU officials have grown increasingly concerned about whether the nature of China's external interventions in Europe represents a divide-and-rule strategy designed to undermine the collective interests of the continent.

EU foreign affairs chief Josep Borrell even asserted that Beijing is a "systemic rival that seeks to promote an alternative model of governance" to that of Europe.

Therefore, EU policies on China are clearly moving in a more hawkish direction. Even on issues in which breakthroughs have been made with Beijing in recent years, such as the Comprehensive Agreement on Investment, the "long grass" in Brussels has prevented ratification of the deal by the European Parliament owing to EU concerns about the behavior of China.

Yet, despite these greater attempts to encourage more European unity, Brussels is still struggling to find common ground on Beijing across all 27 member states. This is what shaped Xi's travel itinerary last week, including the choice of France as his first stop.

While Macron has become increasingly hawkish about Russia since its invasion of Ukraine, China has welcomed a string of recent comments by the French president on wider issues. During a joint visit with von der Leyen to Beijing last year, for example, Macron

deployed the language of economic reciprocity rather than de-risking. He has also moved away from prior French positions on Taiwan.

Whereas von der Leyen asserted during their trip that "stability in the Taiwan Strait is of paramount importance" and that the "threat of use of force to change the status quo is unacceptable," Macron said Taiwan is a "crisis that is not ours" and that Europeans should not be "America's followers."

While the full motivation for Macron's comments remains unclear, his position is certainly out of sync not only with the EU position, but also key G7 statements on Taiwan that France signed up to.

The Franco-China discussions last week were closely watched, therefore, not only in Europe but in the US, about a month before President Joe Biden is expected to make his own state visit to Paris.

Perceptions of a divided Europe have also been publicly highlighted by several

Chinese officials, including the ambassador to the EU, Fu Cong, who cast doubts on whether all 27 member states fully back the agenda of Borrell and von der Leyen. He recently said that "Europe has not formulated a coherent policy toward China" and it felt like "people quarreling with each other."

Taking all of this together, Xi will be hoping his tour last week marks an important reset in ties with Europe, post-pandemic. However, while his visits to France, Serbia and Hungary were very cordial, there is no disguising the fact that broader ties between Europe and China remain chilly and could yet go from bad to worse this year.

Within the 27-member EU itself, Xi's strongest ally might be long-standing Hungarian Prime Minister Viktor Orban

Brussels is still struggling to find common ground on Beijing across all 27 member states

New military coup in Myanmar a growing threat

DR. AZEEM IBRAHIM



As the crisis in Myanmar continues to escalate, with the military losing ground to the People's Defense Force and other insurgent factions, the specter of another military coup looms ominously over the nation. The disquiet among senior military officers, some of whom have defected, regarding the leadership of Prime Minister Senior Gen. Min Aung Hlaing underscores the fragility of the current junta's grip on power. However, what is even more alarming is the prospect that any new coup leader might be even more brutal and repressive than the current regime.

The past year has witnessed a remarkable display of resilience and defiance from the people of Myanmar. In the face of escalating violence and widespread human rights abuses perpetrated by the military regime, they have continued to demand democracy and justice. The emergence of the People's Defense Force, many of whose fighters are civilians and disgruntled military personnel, has further complicated the situation for the junta. With each passing day, the regime finds itself increasingly isolated and on the defensive.

Yet, amid the chaos and uncertainty, the possibility of another military coup cannot be discounted. The fracturing of the military establishment, as evidenced by defections and

dissent among senior officers, has created a fertile ground for internal power struggles. Hlaing's leadership has come under intense scrutiny, with growing disillusionment over his handling of the crisis and his failure to quell the insurgency. This discontent within the ranks of the military could potentially pave the way for a coup orchestrated by disaffected generals seeking to assert control.

However, the prospect of a new military regime coming to power is a chilling one, particularly considering the escalating brutality unleashed upon civilians by the current junta. There is a genuine fear that any new leader emerging from a coup could adopt even harsher measures to suppress dissent and maintain control. The atrocities committed against peaceful protesters, including arbitrary arrests, torture and extrajudicial killings, serve as a stark reminder of the ruthlessness of the military's tactics.

The international community must not underestimate the potential ramifications of another military coup in Myanmar. The crisis has already sparked a humanitarian catastrophe, with millions facing displacement, food insecurity and persecution. A new wave of violence unleashed by a reinvigorated military regime could exacerbate the suffering of the civilian population and plunge the country into further turmoil.

It is imperative that the international

community, and particularly the region, take proactive steps to prepare for such a scenario. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations, as a regional bloc, must play a central role in coordinating a concerted response to the crisis in Myanmar. While efforts to engage with the junta diplomatically have thus far yielded limited results, ASEAN must demonstrate firmness and unity in its approach to the situation.

First and foremost, ASEAN must reaffirm its commitment to the principles of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. The bloc should unequivocally condemn any attempts to subvert the will of the people through military means and call for the restoration of civilian-led governance in Myanmar. ASEAN's credibility as a regional arbiter hinges on its ability to uphold these fundamental values in the face of tyranny and oppression.

Additionally, ASEAN should explore avenues for diplomatic mediation and dialogue to facilitate a peaceful resolution to the crisis. This could involve convening talks between the junta, the civilian opposition and other relevant stakeholders to negotiate a way forward. While the prospects for dialogue may seem bleak at present, sustained diplomatic pressure, coupled with incentives for cooperation, could eventually yield tangible results.

Furthermore, ASEAN must be prepared to deploy humanitarian assistance to mitigate the suffering of the civilian population in the

event of renewed violence. This includes providing essential aid such as food, shelter and medical supplies to those affected by conflict and displacement. ASEAN member states should also be ready to offer refuge to those fleeing persecution in Myanmar, demonstrating solidarity and compassion in the face of adversity.

At the same time, the international community must send a clear message to the military junta that any further escalation of violence will not be tolerated. This may entail imposing targeted sanctions on individuals and entities complicit in human rights abuses, as well as intensifying pressure through multilateral

forums such as the UN. The junta must understand that there are consequences for its actions and that the world is watching closely.

The possibility of another military coup in Myanmar is a stark reality that cannot be ignored. As the junta continues to lose

ground to insurgent forces and faces internal dissent, the risk of a power grab by disaffected military officers looms large. However, the international community, and ASEAN in particular, must be prepared to confront this scenario head-on. By reaffirming its commitment to democracy, human rights and the rule of law, and by actively engaging with all stakeholders to seek a peaceful resolution to the crisis, ASEAN can help avert further bloodshed and suffering in Myanmar. The time to act is now.

This discontent within the ranks of the military could pave the way for a coup orchestrated by disaffected generals

The junta must understand that there are consequences for its actions and that the world is watching closely

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Jamana Rashid Alraheid
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is a daily international newspaper published by the
SAUDI RESEARCH & PUBLISHING COMPANY
Founded in 1975 by
Hisham & Muhammad Ali Hafiz
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One of the main pillars of Vision 2030 is to create a business environment that supports economic growth.

Talat Hafiz
Economist.



Business

VISION 2030

Saudi Arabia woos investors with lucrative business environment

Vision 2030 aims to reduce the nation's dependence on oil, diversify its economy, and build a vibrant society

Miguel Hadochity Riyadh

With an average growth rate of 4 percent over the past seven years and an upward trajectory buoyed by a pro-business environment, Saudi Arabia has demonstrated remarkable resilience amid global economic challenges.

Given its strategic location, robust economy, and ambitious Vision 2030, it's hardly surprising that the Kingdom stands as a beacon of progress and growth in the region.

A key to this has been attracting foreign direct investment, as well as working on agreements with neighboring countries to ensure Saudi Arabia is seen as being open for business.

Economist and policy adviser Mahmoud Khairy told Arab News that the Kingdom has "enhanced trade relations and reduced barriers" in this regard as it seeks to put its Vision 2030 strategy into action.

That plan aims to reduce the nation's dependence on oil, diversify its economy, and build a vibrant society.

Khairy added: "The Kingdom has already started to take serious steps to capitalize on its exceptional location through the establishment of logistics and free trade zones, coupled with efforts to diversify the economy under Vision 2030, attracts foreign investment and fosters trade partnerships."

Khairy emphasized that investments in digital infrastructure and e-commerce platforms have further modernized the Kingdom's trade ecosystem, enhancing its connectivity with global markets.

Furthermore, he said, tremendous efforts have been made to advance the financial ecosystem, with new measures planned to improve the ease of doing business and develop the investment environment further.

Khairy's analysis was echoed by Saudi-based economist Talat Hafiz, who told Arab News: "One of the main pillars of Saudi Vision 2030 is to create a business environment that supports economic growth in the Kingdom and attract FDI as well as diversify the Kingdom's economy. The only way to reach such a goal is through facilitating doing business and trade."

Gateway to global trade

Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, Saudi Arabia boasts a strategic geographical location that makes it a natural hub for international trade, giving it a unique advantage when it comes to Asia-Europe commerce channels and distributing goods through the Arabian Peninsula.

With access to over 424 million consumers within a three-hour flight radius, the nation serves as an efficient gateway to markets spanning three continents.

The Saudi freight and logistics industry, supported by state-led investments in infrastructure, is a vital component of the Kingdom's economic landscape.

Saudi Arabia has undertaken extensive expansion and modernization efforts at its ports, such as the King Abdulaziz Port in Dammam and the King Abdullah Port in Jeddah, incorporating cutting-edge technology for efficient cargo handling.

Khairy said that the development



Situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa, Saudi Arabia boasts a strategic geographical location that makes it a natural hub for international trade, giving it a unique advantage when it comes to Asia-Europe commerce channels. SPA

of such modern ports "increases the country's capacity to handle large volumes of cargo, thereby improving efficiency and reducing transit times for goods entering and leaving the region."

Hafiz added: "With a combined total of 290 berths, Saudi Arabia's ports comprise the Middle East's largest seaport network that not only contributes a great deal to national growth but also showcases the Kingdom's formidable regional and international standing."

He went on to emphasize that the country's ports are capable of accommodating any form of vessel, which is what drove the Saudi Port Authority, also known as Mawani, to provide specialized terminals for various types of loads.

Furthermore, substantial investments are being made in expanding rail and road networks to enhance connectivity and streamline the transportation of goods domestically.

According to Khairy, the expansion and improvement of transportation networks, including roads, railways, and airports, enhance connectivity both domestically and internationally.

"This seamless connectivity facilitates the movement of goods and people, supporting supply chain efficiency and enabling businesses to access global markets more effectively," he added.

Saudi Arabia's well-established logistics infrastructure offers unparalleled opportunities for logistics companies and manufac-



When compared to many Western countries, Saudi Arabia's corporate tax rates are notably lower, with certain industries and regions even benefiting from tax exemptions or reduced rates.

Mahmoud Khairy
Economist and policy adviser

turers looking to capitalize on its strategic advantages.

Business-friendly environment

The Kingdom offers a business-friendly environment characterized by stable economic policies, government incentives, and a youthful, tech-savvy population.

Hafiz noted that Saudi Arabia "jumped significant places in the World Bank's Ease of Doing Business index and IMD, making the Kingdom among the world's top improvers."

Ease of Doing Business index

ranked economies from 1 to 190, with the Kingdom standing at number 62 in the final report issued in 2020.

Saudi Arabia ranked 30 in 2023's IMD World Digital Competitiveness Ranking, which assesses the capacity and readiness of an economy to adopt and explore digital technologies as a key driver for economic transformation in business, government, and wider society.

The government, through Saudi Arabia's General Investment Authority, also known as SAGIA, offers various incentives to attract foreign investors. These incentives comprise low corporate tax rates, streamlined business regulations, and robust infrastructure development.

"When compared to many Western countries, Saudi Arabia's corporate tax rates are notably lower, with certain industries and regions even benefiting from tax exemptions or reduced rates," Khairy pointed out.

He went on to say that "the digitalization of bureaucratic processes makes it easier for investors to navigate the business environment and set up operations in the country."

The incentives play a significant role in investor decisions by enhancing the attractiveness of Saudi Arabia as an investment destination.

Businesses are drawn to markets with favorable tax regimes and simplified regulatory frameworks,

as they contribute to higher profitability and operational efficiency, according to Khairy.

Hafiz added: "These developments, which are aligned with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, will hopefully increase FDI's contribution to the Kingdom's gross domestic product from 3.8 percent in 2016 to 5.7 percent by 2030."

With this, Saudi Arabia presents lucrative opportunities for foreign investors and entrepreneurs seeking to establish their presence in the region.

Furthermore, initiatives such as the establishment of special economic zones and the growth of the venture capital sector underscore the country's commitment to fostering innovation and entrepreneurship.

The VC sector has over 80 active firms, with more entering the market, highlighting the commitment to nurturing innovative startups.

Adding to this, the continuous infrastructure development initiatives like NEOM and Red Sea Global underscore the dedication to establishing top-tier business environments and fostering opportunities across diverse industries.

Over 200 international firms, including Northern Trust, PepsiCo from the US, IHG Hotels and Resorts, PwC, and Deloitte from the UK, have opened their regional headquarters in Riyadh.

The Kingdom had previously announced that it would not award any deals to any foreign company

or commercial entity with a Middle Eastern base outside Saudi Arabia starting from January 1, 2024.

Driving innovation through technology

Embracing the transformative power of artificial intelligence and machine learning, Saudi Arabia is spearheading initiatives to harness these technologies for economic growth.

Under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the nation is investing in AI research, education, and infrastructure to propel its industries into the digital age.

According to Khairy, collaboration between academia, industry, and government can harness AI's potential to enhance productivity and competitiveness across sectors.

AI adoption can lead to new products, services, and business models, optimizing operations and decision-making, he explained.

Generative AI, a cutting-edge technology, holds immense potential for revolutionizing supply chain and procurement operations in Saudi Arabia.

The National Strategy for Data and AI, initiated in 2019, outlines the country's commitment to advancing AI capabilities and data-driven decision-making.

Generative AI, powered by large language models like OpenAI's ChatGPT and Google's BERT, stands out as a transformative technology with the potential to revolutionize supply chain and procurement operations.

Within the context of Vision 2030, generative AI aligns with goals of economic diversification, localization, and sustainability, positioning Saudi Arabia as a key player in international supply chain management.

"The new National Industrial Strategy of the Kingdom not only focuses on raising the number of factories in Saudi Arabia to 36,000 but also improves its technological capabilities," according to Hafiz.

A visionary path forward

As Saudi Arabia continues its journey towards economic diversification and innovation, it remains poised to emerge as a global leader in business and technology.

"I believe that the sky is the limit when it comes to business opportunities in Saudi Arabia, especially in economic sectors that could add value to the Kingdom's economy such as advanced technologies: AI, digital economy, internet of things and other sectors, especially advanced renewable energies," Hafiz said.

Saudi Arabia's youth population, combined with its dedication to education and technological advancement, positions it as a powerhouse of talent and innovation.

In the era of supply chain diversification, Saudi Arabia has emerged as a compelling rival in the global logistics market. The Kingdom presents an attractive proposition for businesses seeking to optimize their supply chains and expand their global footprint.

As Saudi Arabia continues on its path to becoming a global supply chain hub and a leader in AI and machine learning, it is prioritizing programs that equip its youth with the skills and knowledge required for these transformative job opportunities.

HISTORICAL CONNECTIONS

The rise of the Saudi perfume market

Sector mirrors the Kingdom's opulent lifestyle and its people's historical connection to scents

Manal Al-Barakat/ Riyadh

Saudi Arabia, with its rich cultural heritage and burgeoning economy, presents a complex study of contrasts and traditions, particularly in its luxury perfume market.

This sector, deeply ingrained in Saudi society, mirrors the Kingdom's opulent lifestyle and its people's historical connection to scents.

With the market's valuation at \$1.8 billion in 2023 and anticipated growth to \$2.6 billion by 2032, the Kingdom's perfume industry is a testament to the cultural significance of fragrance.

According to data from the Ministry of Commerce, exports amounted to SR416 million (\$110.9 million) for 10 months of 2023, compared to imports, mostly from European countries, amounting to SR1.1 billion during the same period.

The rise of locally produced Saudi perfumes poses an opportunity for investors no longer restricted to international brands.

The number of commercial registrations granted to practice the manufacturing and bottling of perfumes in Saudi Arabia further demonstrates the rising tendency of citizens to invest in the industry.

According to data from the ministry, the number of existing commercial records for perfume manufacturing activity in the Kingdom reached 1,263 by the end of 2023.

Moreover, the push for female empowerment and increased tourism are expected to buoy the market further, making it an appealing sector for investors and entrepreneurs.

An inclination toward luxury and tradition

In the heart of Saudi Arabia's scent market lies a preference for luxury and tradition. Premium products dominate the scene, reflecting a societal penchant for high-quality ingredients and prestigious brand associations.

Chandra Mohan, the assistant vice president at research firm P&S Intelligence, told Arab News that the demand for premium fragrances is increasing due to rising personal disposable income and surging consumer awareness about the benefits of using extravagant perfumes.

Data gathered by his firm revealed that the luxury category held the larger share of the Kingdom's scent market in 2022, accounting for almost the entirety of the sector at 90.9 percent.

"Premium perfumes are made up of high-quality ingredients, which differentiate them from other cheap products. These are also concentrated and long-lasting and are designed to evolve and offer more sophisticated and refined experience," Mohan explained.

"Nowadays, people are also becoming more conscious about brands and shifting toward quality and premium products, as they have high spending power. Thus, the growing usage of premium products is contributing to the growth of the market in the country," he added.

The inherent quality and luxury of the Saudi perfume market, driven by the cultural significance of scents such as oud and musk, have contributed to the industry's success.

With their complex profiles and



Nowadays, people are also becoming more conscious about brands and shifting toward quality and premium products, as they have high spending power.

Chandra Mohan
Assistant VP at
P&S Intelligence

The rise of locally produced Saudi perfumes poses an opportunity for investors no longer restricted to international brands.

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traditional ingredients, Arabic perfumes command a significant market share.

Their popularity is a nod to the region's cultural heritage, where these fragrances are more than just scents: They are a bridge to the past and a celebration of Arab identity.

Demonstrating this, oriental perfumes accounted for the largest revenue share of the Saudi perfume market, accounting for 65.77 percent in 2022, according to a report by P&S Intelligence.

The report further noted that this category is expected to grow by 6 percent from 2023 to 2030.

The craftsmanship behind these fragrances, often passed down through generations, adds layers of

FAST FACTS

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• The number of commercial registrations granted to practice the manufacturing and bottling of perfumes in Saudi Arabia further demonstrates the rising tendency of citizens to invest in the industry.

depth and sophistication, making them highly sought after locally and internationally.

The inclination toward premium fragrances connects back to deep-rooted cultural practices where perfumes served as an extension of personal identity and social standing, the owner of Saudi perfume brand "Nabdh," Zaynah Al-Hamza, told Arab News.

The digital age and celebrity branding

The digital landscape has transformed how perfumes are marketed and sold in Saudi Arabia.

E-commerce, bolstered by the pandemic, has become a critical channel for reaching consumers, with many brands expanding their online presence.

"In recent times, developments in information and communication technologies, particularly social media, have revolutionized the way marketing activities take



place. Social media has surfaced as a cost-effective and efficient information exchange platform for all," Mohan said.

"Celebrities are also promoting several brands on social media and people are increasingly buying those products because of celebrity influence," he added.

In March 2023, Portuguese influencer Georgina Rodriguez starred in social media adverts for Saudi fragrance brand Laverne, which later collaborated with global supermodel Taylor Hill.

Perfume companies partner with celebrities to increase brand awareness and drive website traffic and sales, the P&S global report said, adding that this tactic also aids in generating engagement, creating a community, and serving as a channel for customers.

The push for female empowerment and increased tourism are expected to buoy the market further.

Supplied

This shift has made the Saudi luxury perfume market more accessible and has opened up new avenues for brands to engage with their audience through social media and online marketing.

The interplay between tradition and modernity and embracing digital methods sets the stage for a dynamic future in the Saudi fragrance industry.

The unisex phenomenon

Unisex fragrances, capturing the largest market share, indicate a progressive shift in consumer behavior. This trend underscores a growing acceptance of products that transcend traditional boundaries, with scents like oud, musk, and amber being used for scents that appeal to all customers.

"Another key trend observed in the market is the rising demand for unisex perfumes. This is because people have different tastes and a large number of individuals are looking for an aroma that is not only feminine but also masculine," the P&S analyst said.

"Moreover, anyone can wear them, and it allows sharing and swapping collections among different genders. Furthermore, unisex perfumes are neutral in odor and millennial consumers are mostly choosing products with inimitable fragrances in order to build up their personality and individuality," he added.

These preferences highlight the changing landscape of the Saudi market, which, despite its traditional foundations, is receptive to modern influences.



With their complex profiles and traditional ingredients, Arabic perfumes command a significant market share.

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Business News



AlUla's emergence as an expansive archaeological, cultural, and tourism hub is a significant milestone in Saudi Arabia's economic diversification efforts. SPA

VISION 2030

AlUla's rise drives economic growth and job creation

AlUla on track to achieve 2 million visitors annually by 2035

Reem Walid Riyadh

Increasing visitor numbers to the cultural and tourism hub of AlUla is already delivering a boost to Saudi Arabia's economy in line with Vision 2030 ambitions, experts have told Arab News.

Situated in the northwest of Saudi Arabia and covering around 22,000 sq. km, the Kingdom's historic city also boasts a thriving agricultural sector that plays a pivotal role in its economic development.

Built upon social, economic, and ecological principles, the Royal Commission for AlUla has outlined a strategic roadmap for the comprehensive development of the area, with the primary objective of assisting the Kingdom in diversifying beyond oil and contributing to the national gross domestic product.

This strategy encompasses three main pillars: tourism, heritage, and nature; local community; and economic diversification.

Phillip Jones, chief tourism officer at RCU, told Arab News: "AlUla is an integral part of the tourism objectives driven by Saudi Vision 2030. With AlUla's regional economy primarily driven by tourism, by 2035, AlUla will contribute a cumulative SR120 billion (\$31 billion) to the Kingdom's GDP."

He said the RCU is following a "light-touch" tourism model to ensure the continued conservation of AlUla's natural and cultural heritage.

Jones also highlighted that AlUla hosted over 260,000 visitors last year, marking a 43 percent increase from the previous year, and projected that it would welcome more than 290,000 visitors in 2024.

"We are also on track to achieve 2 million visitors annually by 2035."

Tourism infrastructure Across the Kingdom, the transformative economic impact of tourism is in full swing.

In 2024, AlUla is poised to welcome two new hotels: Dar Tanora in the second quarter of the year and Hegra Boutique Hotel in the final quarter.

These new additions will join Habitas and Banyan Tree, core hotels that opened in 2021 and 2022 respectively.

Additionally, in the coming years, AlUla will also welcome AZULIK AlUla Resort, Sharaan Resort, and the International Summit Centre, among others.

"AlUla's emergence as an expansive archaeological, cultural, and tourism hub, equivalent in size to Belgium, is a significant milestone in Saudi Arabia's economic diversification and global outreach enhancement efforts," Ali Haider, regional director for Middle East and Africa at Nomadic, a subsidiary of Fragomen, told Arab News.

"As AlUla continues to develop, it is poised to attract a diverse range of visitors, both locally and internationally, in line with Saudi Arabia's aim of attracting 150 million visitors by 2030 and having the tourism sector contribute \$200 billion to the economy," Haider added.

This development comes as RCU recently launched its first global brand campaign - "Forever Revisiting" - which Jones described as the embodiment of their vision for AlUla.

This showcases the commission's commitment to not just preserving AlUla's historical essence but also enhancing the region's eternal appeal, according to the executive.

"We will continue to see the economic benefits of smart, sustainable development as we welcome more international visitors with new international flights, new luxury accommodations, and our year-round activities and attractions," RCU's Jones reiterated.

Haider emphasized how a surge in tourism will also lead to increased demand for ancillary services such as accommodation, transportation, tour guides, and dining establishments.

"By investing in destinations such as AlUla, the Kingdom aims to reduce its dependency on oil revenue and create new, sustainable sources of economic growth as well as preserve and promote its cultural heritage," the Nomadic executive highlighted.

Workforce and talent acquisition

As the region undergoes development, there will likely be tangible improvements to the Kingdom's broader talent acquisition and retention metrics across various sectors.

"While increasing demand for tourism to destinations like AlUla will create jobs locally within the tourism sector and other supporting sectors, visitors to AlUla may also leverage their stay to visit other parts of the Kingdom, or even the broader region, and thereby broaden the economic impact of their visit," Haider explained.

He continued by stating that this could foster the development of lesser-known tourism destinations. Additionally, he mentioned that the global uptake of "bleisure travel"

FASTFACT

The Royal Commission for AlUla has outlined a strategic roadmap for the comprehensive development of the area, with the primary objective of assisting the Kingdom in diversifying beyond oil and contributing to the national gross domestic product.

might result in visitors staying in the Kingdom for longer periods and potentially exploring the local business landscape.

He emphasized that due to several recent enhancements, this was more attractive than ever.

Bleisure travel refers to the blending of business and leisure activities within a single trip.

"Furthermore, AlUla's potential to attract international talent will facilitate knowledge exchange and collaboration, leading to the transfer of skills and expertise to the local workforce," Haider underlined.

He pointed out that the Kingdom's ambitious target of creating over 1 million jobs within the tourism industry by 2030 reflects its commitment to leveraging both local and global talent to drive economic growth in multiple ways.

Additionally, he explained that creating those jobs "hinges on effective implementation strategies and sustained investment in infrastructure and human capital development."

Saudi Arabia also has one of the youngest populations globally, with 63 percent of Saudis under the age of 30.

"The youth represent a significant advantage for the country's diversification ambitions, offering a skilled, innovative, and cost-effective workforce. Additionally, it fosters entrepreneurship and accelerates technology adoption over the long term," he emphasized.

Haider also highlighted how the fresh perspectives and digital proficiency of this demographic have the potential to propel the growth and competitiveness of Saudi Arabia's economy on a global scale.

"Considering the Kingdom's proactive approach to tapping into international talent pools - as evidenced by the recently enhanced Premium Residency Permit scheme - as well as its broader commitment to economic diversification coupled with AlUla's strategic significance as a tourism destination, there is optimism that this initiative will contribute significantly to job creation," he explained.

From RCU's perspective, the people of AlUla are at the center of their strategy, and they are among the primary beneficiaries of the diversified economy.

"In the process, we expect to create around 40,000 new jobs by 2035, which will be filled mainly by talent from AlUla and across Saudi Arabia," Chief Strategy and Digital Officer at RCU, Waleed Al-Dayel, told Arab News.

He added that RCU has already created "thousands of new jobs, trained thousands of Saudis in critical job skills to match the requirements of the new positions, provided language training and scholarships, and reduced the local jobless rate by more than half."

Sustainable destination

There is no doubt that AlUla also plays a vital role in sustainability.

Al-Dayel explained that RCU's development of the city into a world-class sustainable destination for tourism and investment was guided by the 12 principles of the AlUla Sustainability Charter, aligning with the goals of Saudi Vision 2030 and the Saudi Green Initiative.

The executive further elaborated on the increasing number of initiatives registered with the Saudi Ministry of Energy and Ministry of Environment, Water, and Agriculture. These are specifically focused on key sustainable growth initiative objectives.

BizBriefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Deflationary run

China consumer prices rise at faster rate in April

China's inflation rate quickened last month, official data showed Saturday, as the government works to boost spending in the world's second-largest economy.

The consumer price index rose by 0.3 percent year-on-year in April, staying in positive territory for the third straight month, according to the National Bureau of Statistics.

The figure was higher than the 0.2 percent rise forecast by Bloomberg analysts and up from a 0.1 percent increase last month. However, factory gate prices remained mired in a deflationary run that has persisted since the end of 2022. The producer price index sank by 2.5 percent year-on-year.

Chinese policymakers have repeatedly tried to get consumers to open their wallets but the results have so far been mixed. AFP

Tech stocks

SoftBank seen returning to loss in fourth quarter

Japanese technology investor SoftBank Group is expected to slip back into the red despite technology stocks including Arm Holding, its core asset, performing well over the quarter.

Analysts and investors are also eagerly awaiting clues about new growth investments as SoftBank has ample liquidity and can monetise its huge holding in Arm.

The share price of Britain-based Arm, in which SoftBank has a 90 percent stake, roughly doubled in February after strong earnings results stoked investor excitement over Arm's anticipated gains, but Arm's share price does not feed into SoftBank's profit as it is a subsidiary.

The performance of SoftBank's other listed assets were mixed over the quarter - shares in Coupang and DoorDash rose but Didi Global and Grab Holdings fell. Reuters

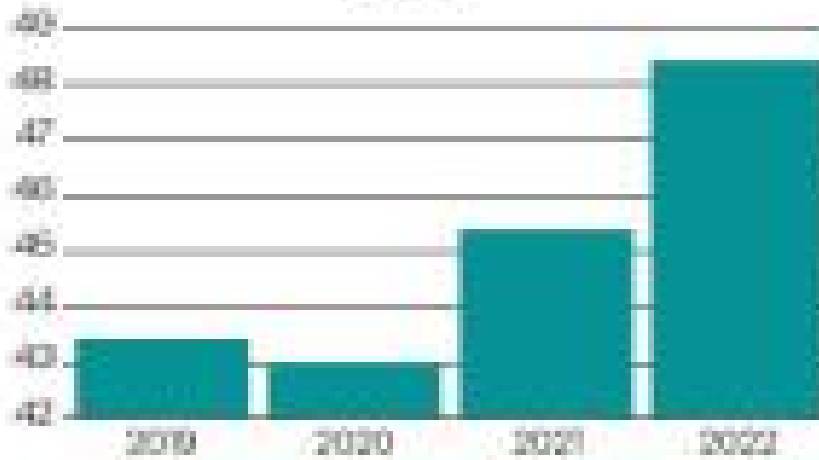
Chart of THE DAY

Gross domestic product per capita in Finland amounted to €48,345 in 2022.

Source: Statista

GDP PER CAPITA IN FINLAND

(Euro)



What We're Reading

FOR THE TRAIN OR ON THE PLANE

Muse of Fire

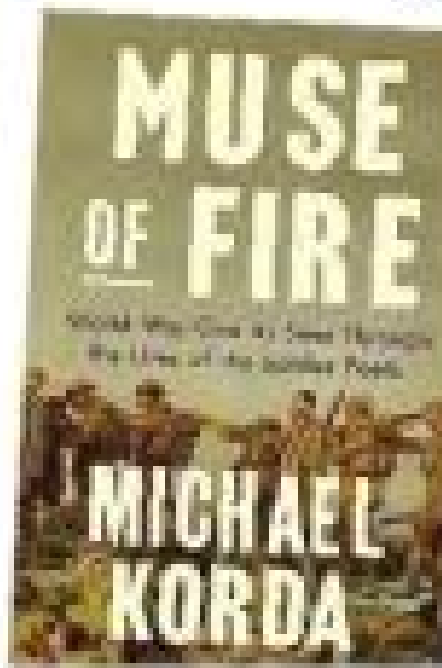
MICHAEL KORDA

Michael Korda's "Muse of Fire" takes a novel approach to World War I by telling its history through the lives of the soldier-poets whose verses memorialize the war's unimaginable horrors.

In a sweeping narrative, Korda recounts these four years of a

civilization destroying itself and portrays the lives and anguished deaths of the young men who unforgettably illuminated it.

As the images of brutal trench warfare in today's Ukraine demonstrate, contemporary interest in "the war to end war" remains high.



Expansion

Musk says Tesla charger network will grow

Tesla boss Elon Musk said Friday the electric vehicle manufacturer would invest over \$500 million this year to install new superchargers, just days after a report of massive layoffs in this branch of the company.

"Tesla will spend well over \$500M expanding our Supercharger network to create thousands of NEW chargers this year," Elon said on X.

According to tech news outlet The Information, Tesla was moving to disband its supercharger department, laying off most of its 500 workers as well as its senior director.

The revelation raised questions about the future development of Tesla's network of over 50,000 fast chargers - the most extensive in the world, according to Tesla - which can add 200 miles (320 kilometers) of range in a quarter of an hour. AFP

Review

US to raise tariffs on Chinese electric vehicles

The US is planning to increase tariffs on Chinese clean energy goods, news reports said Friday, with levies on electric vehicles expected to roughly quadruple.

The move, reported by the Wall Street Journal, comes at the end of a long-awaited review of tariffs that were imposed during a trade war between Washington and Beijing.

Then-president Donald Trump imposed tariffs on some \$300 billion in goods from China.

Officials have since initiated a review of the actions, with the US Trade Representative required to look into the impact of the levies - first introduced in 2018 - after four years.

A decision, expected on the coming Tuesday according to news reports, would come as President Joe Biden gears up for a rematch with Trump in November's presidential election. AFP

We are thrilled to deliver the first four of six new A321neo aircraft to Frontier Airlines.

Edward O'Byrne
CEO, Av Lease



Corporate

PRESS RELEASES FROM THE WORLD OF BUSINESS AND COMMERCE

BESPOKE LIVING SOLUTIONS

Kerten Hospitality doubles Q1 growth on back of Saudi expansion

Kerten Hospitality, a global leader in bespoke hospitality and integrated living solutions, has announced it has doubled year-on-year growth in the first quarter of 2024. The hospitality company now boasts more than 57 projects across key global markets, including Rome, South of France, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

In a strategic display of its expanding portfolio, Kerten Hospitality participated prominently at the Future Hospitality Summit held in Riyadh, featuring a booth that highlighted several of Kerten Hospitality's hotels in Saudi Arabia, and showcased the brand's synergy with the Saudi Ministry of Tourism and Aseer Investment Company.

The House Urban Eco Resort in Riyadh city center, a standout project highlighted by Kerten Hospitality in partnership with developers RIKAZ and RAFAL and supported by the Ministry of Tourism, garnered significant attention. The resort is poised to redefine urban eco-living. It seamlessly integrates leisure, wellness, and business within a sustainable and luxurious environment, showcasing a new standard in urban development.

The summit also served as a platform to highlight Kerten Hospitality's strategic partnerships, notably with Aseer Investment Company, aiming to unlock substantial opportunities in the Aseer region's hospitality and heritage sectors.

Moreover, Kerten Hospitality and Baheej Tourism Development Company announced their partnership, facilitated by ASFAR, poised to elevate integrated living on Yanbu's waterfront. The agreement, which was signed at the summit in Riyadh, will see Kerten Hospitality managing Baheej's hotel in Yanbu under the premium Cloud 7 brand, an innovative hotel



Kerten Hospitality and Baheej Tourism Development Company announced their partnership, facilitated by ASFAR, at the Future Hospitality Summit in Riyadh.

and residence lifestyle brand known for its vibrant designs, dynamic check-in lobbies, healthy food options, a beach club, and curated retail boutiques.

"Kerten Hospitality is set on a trajectory of innovation and growth. Our significant expansion in the first quarter is not just about scale, but also about deepening our engagement with

local cultures and communities," said Marloes Knippenberg, CEO of Kerten Hospitality. "Each project is a reflection of our commitment to creating spaces where bespoke meets local."

Notably, the FHS booth featured a recreation of the Dar Tantara The House Hotel, an emblem of AlUla's cultural heritage, and displayed classic cars at the entrance, symbolizing the unique character of the hotel. The 30-key hotel was restored using the same ancient materials and architectural techniques as the traditional mud brick buildings of the area.

At the forefront of Kerten Hospitality's Saudi expansion is "The Collective by Kerten Hospitality," an initiative designed to group a network of 23 culturally rooted, yet innovative hospitality ventures. This initiative not only emphasizes the aesthetic appeal of its properties but also focuses on the strategic alignment of business goals with local cultural values, which has proven essential for the sustainable growth of the global portfolio.

Kerten Hospitality's Nakhati brand, a culinary initiative, was also featured at the summit. Kerten Hospitality has announced

an ambitious plan to empower 50 Saudi female entrepreneurs through strategic partnerships to provide the opportunity for a single-family office to franchise 30 kiosks and 20 carts.

Nakhati also announced a unique collaboration with gigaproject Diriyah Gate, where it will produce an exclusive Diriyah flavor available at Bujairi Terrace, to celebrate the region's rich heritage and flavors.

This quarter also marked the initiation of a significant partnership with Kayali, a perfume brand led by entrepreneur Mona Kattan.

GLOBAL BEST PRACTICES

Aqualia spotlights sustainability initiatives at Saudi Water Forum

Aqualia, a global leader in water management, has once again emerged as a key participant at the Saudi Water Forum — the Saudi water sector's premier event. The forum, hosted from April 29 to May 1, in Riyadh, was held under the patronage of Saudi Minister of Environment, Water and Agriculture Abdulrahman Al-Fadhli.

This year's event showcased the largest gathering of major public bodies and private enterprises involved in water services in the Kingdom. Aqualia took part in the event, delivering a technical presentation on water security and sustainability, and exhibiting its latest regional projects.

Javier Diaz, Aqualia's country manager in Saudi Arabia, also delivered a presentation on April 30 during the forum's key session "Enhancing Operational Asset Efficiency and Sustainability." Moderated by Raed Al-Rashed, executive vice president of privatization at the National Water Company, Diaz discussed Aqualia's successful strategies and best practices in managing water services to ensure sustainability in urban areas.

He also highlighted Aqualia's significant role in managing water resources for more than 8 million residents through its recent contracts for the south and north clusters. These contracts encompass comprehensive

management of water treatment facilities, tanks, pumping and filling stations, as well as supply and sewage networks across several regions, including Asir, Al-Baha, Najran, Jazan, Al-Qassim, Hail, Al-Jouf, and the northern border, for a period of seven years.

"As one of the largest water management companies in the world, we are well aware of the importance of safeguarding water quality and security," Diaz said. "Leveraging our resources and expertise in the Kingdom, we aim to contribute to the achievement of Vision 2030, empowering the people, communities, and partners we serve with greater access to timely and all-important innovations. As ever, the Saudi Water Forum served as the perfect platform for us to shine a light on our ongoing work, with the event providing an opportunity for us to showcase the value of asset condition management and the role it plays in improving our understanding of the impact of challenges such as climate change and urbanization."

The Saudi Water Forum serves as a crucial platform for discussing ongoing and future strategies to manage and secure water resources effectively in the region, reflecting Saudi Arabia's commitment to sustainable water management practices.

AviLease, the rising global aircraft lessor wholly owned by PIF, Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, has successfully delivered four Airbus A321neo aircraft on lease to Colorado-based low-cost operator Frontier Airlines. These are the first of six next-generation aircraft that will be delivered in 2024.

The Airbus A321neo is one of the most fuel-efficient, sustainable, and technologically advanced narrow-body aircraft in the market. These deliveries have set the tempo for AviLease, which is seeking to build a diverse portfolio of the most advanced, latest-generation narrow- and wide-body aircraft available, and an ever-increasing client portfolio.

Edward O'Byrne, chief executive officer, AviLease, said: "We are thrilled to deliver the first four of six new A321neo aircraft to Frontier Airlines. Our partnership with Frontier continues to strengthen and we are proud to support their fleet modernization with the A321neo, one of the most in-demand aircraft in the world. We wish the Frontier team continued success with their commitment to provide affordable and reliable air travel."

AviLease fulfills PIF's mandate to unlock the capabilities of priority sectors that can support the diversification of Saudi Arabia's

GLOBAL EXPANSION

AviLease delivers four A321neo aircraft to Frontier Airlines



The Airbus A321neo is one of the most fuel-efficient, sustainable, and technologically advanced narrow-body aircraft in the market.

HIGHLIGHTS

• The delivery is part of a larger order of six Airbus A321neo aircraft to be delivered to Frontier in 2024.

• AviLease's rapid global expansion supports PIF's mandate to unlock the capabilities of the Kingdom's aviation sector to support economic diversification.

economy and contribute to non-oil GDP growth. In addition, the company supports a thriving aviation sector and drives financial sustainability within the aviation ecosystem, in line with Vision 2030. AviLease will continue to provide local economic opportunities and create direct and indirect jobs for the Saudi community in the aviation and financial sectors.

The latest delivery reaffirms the rapid global expansion of AviLease, which has a mandate to supply sustainable, efficient leasing and financing services to airlines across the world and is already playing a major role in the expansion of the Kingdom's aviation ecosystem.

Corporate Briefs

THE BEST OF THE BEST

Strategic Leadership

Mastercard's Adam Jones to head West Arabia division

Mastercard has announced strategic enhancements to its leadership roles in the MENA region. The move is part of the company's efforts to strengthen its regional leadership with a focus on fast-tracking growth, deepening stakeholder engagement and enhancing focus on its multi-rail capabilities in key markets.

The former MENA Central cluster will now make up the West Arabia division, while the MENA East cluster will form the East Arabia division.

Mastercard has appointed Adam Jones to the new post of executive vice president and division president for West Arabia.

"By establishing the West Arabia Division, the business has taken a monumental step forward based on the dedication, resilience, and exceptional achievements of the MENA Central team," said Jones.

Jones has more than 15 years of experience in the payments industry. He has been at Mastercard for more than eight years, serving in various leadership positions in the UK, Middle East, and Africa, including country manager for East Africa, global commercial travel and expense lead and more recently, country general manager for MENA Central.

Air Mobility

Khalifa University, Manta Aircraft sign partnership

Khalifa University of Science and Technology and Manta Aircraft, an original equipment manufacturer of long-range hybrid-electric advanced air mobility vehicles, have announced that a contractual agreement has been finalized to develop innovative flight systems for the electric vertical and short take-off and landing platform named Manta-ANN.

The agreement represents the first step of a multi-year program aiming to co-develop a new family of aircraft for urban and regional air mobility, and part of the portfolio of the Center for Flight Systems Research and Training Center, FALCON, Khalifa University's Intelligent Aerospace Systems Group. The agreement was signed by Professor Sir John O'Reilly, president, Khalifa University, and Lucas Marchesini, CEO, Manta Aircraft.

Electronic Trading

ASE to modernize operations with Extreme Networks

Extreme Networks, a provider of cloud networking solutions, announced that it will deploy a new fabric-enabled wired and wireless network for the Amman Stock Exchange, so that it can continue to meet growing demands for network bandwidth as well as modernize and expand its operations throughout the region.

The ASE is a vital financial institution in Jordan, offering a secure and regulated environment for trading securities. It requires a reliable, flexible network that can support continuous daily operations, including electronic trading systems that facilitate efficient and transparent trading while ensuring security for a large amount of sensitive data. With Extreme Fabric Connect, Universal 7000 and 5000 Series switches and high-speed Wi-Fi, the ASE can improve network performance and security to accommodate the growing number of connected devices and applications across the network.

Taylor Swift kicked off the European leg of her record-breaking Eras tour in France wearing a midnight-blue embroidered Zuhair Murad bodysuit adorned with side cut-outs.



Finally

TheSix

Celebrity brands

From models to DJs and actresses, these famous faces have taken a step further and launched their own brands.



Guest in Residence

Supermodel Gigi Hadid's cashmere brand has been flaunted by many of her famous friends, including actor Ryan Reynolds.



Orabella

In May, Bella Hadid unveiled her "skin perfumes," the inaugural products of her new brand, Orabella. The trio of fragrances are named "Salted Muse," "Blooming Fire" and "Window2Soul."



Bex Beauty

Yemeni Emirati singer Balqees Fatih launched her makeup brand Bex Beauty in October 2020. Her line features a range of lipsticks, highlighters and blush colors, as well as beauty tools and more.



Simi and Haze

The US Palestinian twins brought their beauty brand, SimiHaze Beauty, to the Middle East for the first time in April. The brand's popular Velvet Blur Matte Lipstick is now available at Sephora outlets in the GCC.



Nadine Nassib Njeim

The Lebanese actress launched her eponymous beauty brand in April and kicked things off with the aptly named Glow Collection, featuring cream blushes, liquid highlighters and more.



Bassma Bousel

The Moroccan singer is an entrepreneur at heart and has launched multiple brands, including skincare offering Mereqelle and Bassma Bousel Cosmetics.

CLOSE UP

Elyanna makes her TV debut on 'The Late Show'



Elyanna dropped her first album in April. Getty Images

Left: The hitmaker was adorned in a white lace dress. Instagram



Arab News Dubai

Chilean Palestinian singer Elyanna made her television debut this week on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert."

The 22-year-old music sensation delivered a medley of hits from her debut album "Woledto," including "Callin' U (Tamally Maak)" and "Mama Eh," the first song performed entirely in Arabic on the show.

Her performance featured an ensemble of oud, tabla, riq and dancers.

"I had so much fun performing on this iconic stage," she wrote to her 1.2 million followers after her show.

The hitmaker was adorned in a white lace dress featuring two thigh-high slits. She complemented the attire with coin-belt accessories, draping them over her shoulders and fastening them around her calves to add a Middle Eastern touch to her look.

In one of the pictures she shared with her fans, she proudly wore the Palestinian keffiyeh around her head as she posed in front of "The Late Show" desk.

Elyanna dropped her album

in April. It features nine songs: "Woledto," "Ganemi," "Calling U," "Al Sham," "Mama Eh," "Kon Nafak," "Lei Ya Lei," "Yabn El Eh" and "Sad in Pali."

Before releasing the album, she wrote to her Instagram followers: "This album is the embodiment of pride to be an Arab woman, to be from Nazareth, to be from the Middle East."

"This is the closest I've been to where I come from," she added. "The only feature on my album is my grandfather."

The Los Angeles-based singer's music is a mix of Arabic and Western beats, which she attributes to her multicultural upbringing.

Elyanna has been normalizing Arabic lyrics in the Western world throughout her career, taking inspiration from artists including Lana Del Ray and Beyonce, as well as Middle Eastern legend Fayrouz.

In 2023, Elyanna became the first artist to perform a full set in Arabic at California's Coachella music festival.

She embarked on a North American Tour this year, gracing stages in Dallas, Houston, Toronto, Montreal, Washington, New York, Chicago, Detroit, San Francisco and Santa Ana.



'Bedroom in Arles,' Vincent van Gogh.

ON DISPLAY

Louvre Abu Dhabi to exhibit Van Gogh artwork

Arab News Dubai

Louvre Abu Dhabi is set to display an artwork by Dutch painter Vincent van Gogh at the "Post-Impressionism: Beyond Appearances" exhibition running from Oct. 16 to Feb. 9 next year. The work, "Bedroom in Arles," depicts van Gogh's bedroom in his yellow house in Arles, where he set up his studio and lived from September 1888.

The exhibition will be curated by Jean-Remi Touzet, conservator for paintings at the Musee d'Orsay, and Jerome Farigoule, chief curator at Louvre Abu Dhabi, with the support of Aisha Alahmadi, curatorial assistant at Louvre Abu Dhabi.

It will delve into the period known as post-impressionism, focusing specifically on the years between 1886 and 1905.

COURT CASE

Diddy seeks dismissal of rape claim

AP New York

Sean "Diddy" Combs this week asked a federal judge to dismiss a lawsuit alleging that he and two co-defendants raped a 17-year-old girl in a New York recording studio in 2003, saying it was a "false and hideous claim" that was filed too late under the law.

The legal move is the latest piece of pushback from the 54-year-old hip-hop mogul and his legal team after he was subjected to several similar lawsuits and a subsequent criminal sex-trafficking investigation.

"Mr. Combs and his companies categorically deny the plaintiff's decades-old tale against them, which has caused incalculable damage to their reputations and business standing before any evidence has been presented," says the filing, which also names Combs-owned corporations as defendants. "The plaintiff cannot allege what day or time of year the alleged incident occurred, but miraculously remembers other salacious details, despite her alleged incapacitated condition."

The lawsuit was filed in December and amended in March by the woman, who now lives in Canada and whose name is undisclosed in the court filing.

REVIEW

'Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes' a worthy addition to successful franchise

Shyama Krishna Kumar Dubai

When soulless, cookie-cutter franchises were but the norm, the "Planet of the Apes" reboot trilogy — starring Andy Serkis's commanding Caesar — cut through the noise to offer a textured, resonant story that not only did well with the critics but also broke box office records.

Coming seven years after the final installment of that trilogy, "Kingdom of the Planet of the Apes" continues the legacy with a visually rich and emotionally layered story. It takes its inspiration from the



original 1968 film, "Planet of the Apes," which was in itself an adaptation of French author Pierre Boulle's 1963 novel "La Planete des singes." Director Wes Ball ("The Maze

Runner" trilogy) continues his run of dystopian features, but this time explores it in a lush, Garden of Eden-adjacent setting. "Kingdom of the Planet of the

'Witcher' star Freya Allan plays Mae. Supplied

Apes" is set generations after Caesar's time, when the world has been taken over by intelligent apes. The same virus that evolved them has regressed humans into an echo of their former selves, rendering them primitive and without language.

A coming-of-age story, our protagonist is the young simian Noa (a poignant and scene-stealing Owen Teague). When his clan is murdered by a rival group of bloodthirsty apes, Noa goes on the adventure of his life as he sets out to save those he can from the tyrannical rule of Proximus Caesar (Kevin Durand).

On his journey, he teams up with a human girl May ("The Witcher" star Freya Allan) and a wise orangutan named Raka (Peter Macn), who still live by the words of the original Caesar.

While the premise itself lacks the depth of the previous trilogy, Ball compensates through extensive character work. He poses thought-provoking questions about whether humanity deserves a second chance, whether the apes will continue to make the same mistakes humans did, and whether apes and humans can imagine a future of peaceful coexistence.