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THURSDAY, January 9, 2025
Rajab 9, 1446
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ARAB NEWS

The Voice of a Changing Region

Since 1975

FAST
FACT

Since rising to power, Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham and its allies have launched security sweeps in major cities with the stated goal of rooting out 'remnants of Assad's militias.'

Syria's leader Ahmad Al-Sharaa, along with officials, inspects Damascus International Airport. AFP



DIPLOMACY

Now Europe joins US to ease punishing sanctions on Syria

Penalties in place since 2011 obstruct aid and hinder economic recovery

Reuters Paris, Berlin

There was growing momentum on Wednesday behind moves to ease international sanctions on Syria that its new administration says obstruct humanitarian aid and hinder economic recovery.

The EU is expected to lift some sanctions at a meeting of the bloc's 27 foreign ministers in Brussels at the end of January.

"We are actively discussing ways to provide sanctions relief to the Syrian people in certain sectors," one official said.

French Foreign Minister Jean-Noel Barrot said ending political sanctions would depend on how Syria's new leadership handled an inclusive transition.

"But there are other sanctions that could be lifted, obviously depending on the pace at which our expectations for Syria regarding women and security are taken into account," he said.

More significant work in fully addressing sanctions and designations will inevitably be necessary.

Geir Pedersen
UN envoy on Syria

The EU, US, Britain and other governments imposed tough sanctions on Syria when the civil war began in 2011. On Monday, Washington issued a six-month

exemption for transactions with some government bodies to ease the flow of humanitarian assistance and address power shortages.

"Much more significant work in fully addressing sanctions and designations will inevitably be necessary," the UN envoy on Syria, Geir Pedersen, told the Security Council on Wednesday.

European diplomats said the aim was to facilitate financial transactions to allow funds to return, ease air transport and

lift sanctions targeting the energy sector to improve power supplies.

Syria suffers from severe power shortages, with state-supplied electricity available two or three hours a day in most areas. The caretaker government says it aims to provide electricity for up to eight hours a day within two months.

Related report Page 7
Opinion: Dr. Abdel Aziz Aluwaishag & Hassan Al-Mustafa Pages 9, 10

ELECTION TODAY

Army chief Aoun leads race to be Lebanon's president

Najla Houssari Beirut

Army chief Gen. Joseph Aoun is the leading contender to become Lebanon's new president when MPs vote at a special parliamentary session on Thursday.

Aoun emerged as the favorite on Wednesday amid speculation that former minister Suleiman Frangieh, the preferred candidate of Hezbollah and the Amal party, would withdraw from the race.

Analysts estimate that if Aoun secured the support of Hezbollah and Amal he would win 95 votes in the 128-member parliament.

Hezbollah will not stand in the way of the Lebanese people's consensus on the name of a president," the group's parliamentary leader Mohammed Raad said.

Lebanon has not had a president since Michel Aoun's term of office ended in October 2022.

After more than two years of squabbling and wrangling over a consensus candidate, there was widespread optimism on Wednesday that the wait was over.

Prime Minister Najib Mikati said he was feeling "joy for the first time since the presidential vacancy as, God willing, we will have a new president for the republic tomorrow."

The Maronite Archbishops Council called for "a national parliamentary awakening that leads tomorrow to the election of a president."

Spotlight Page 3

The Brief

COLLABORATION

Saudi and Chinese entities have joined hands to enhance a tourism and heritage collab between the two countries. P4

ISRAELI TOURISTS

Sri Lanka will crack down on reported illegal activities carried out by Israeli tourists, said the country's prime minister. P8

TRANSACTIONS UP

Spending by students' parents in Saudi Arabia boosted card transactions between Dec. 29 and Jan. 4, marking a 25.8% increase compared to the previous week. P12

EXCAVATION PAYS OFF

Restoring humanity's heritage, one tiny fragment at a time

Priceless ancient treasures of Nimrud were shattered by Daesh fighters in sweep through Iraq

AFP Nimrud, Iraq

A decade after Daesh fighters ransacked Iraq's famed Nimrud site, archeologists are painstakingly restoring priceless ancient treasures that were shattered into tens of thousands of fragments.

"Every time we find a piece and bring it to its original place, it's like a new discovery," said Abdel Ghani Ghadi, 47, an expert working at the site.

Once the jewel of the Assyrian



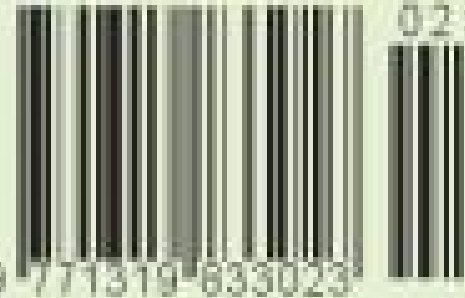
Experts expect it will take 10 more years of hard work before the statues and other marvels of the palace can be seen again, complete. AFP

empire, Nimrud was ravaged by militants who seized large areas of Iraq and Syria in 2014. After Daesh was defeated in 2017 more than 500 artifacts were found shattered at the site about 30 km from Mosul. Meticulous excavation work has already yielded more than 35,000 fragments.

The archeologists have been carefully reassembling bas reliefs, sculptures and decorated slabs depicting mythical creatures that graced the palace of King Ashurnasirpal II in the 9th century B.C.

"These sculptures are the treasures of Mesopotamia," said Ghadi. "Nimrud is the heritage of all of humanity, with a history that goes back 3,000 years."

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“Ambition knows no bounds. 2024 saw the launch of projects that will transform our Kingdom and inspire the world.”
Salman Al-Dosary
Saudi media minister



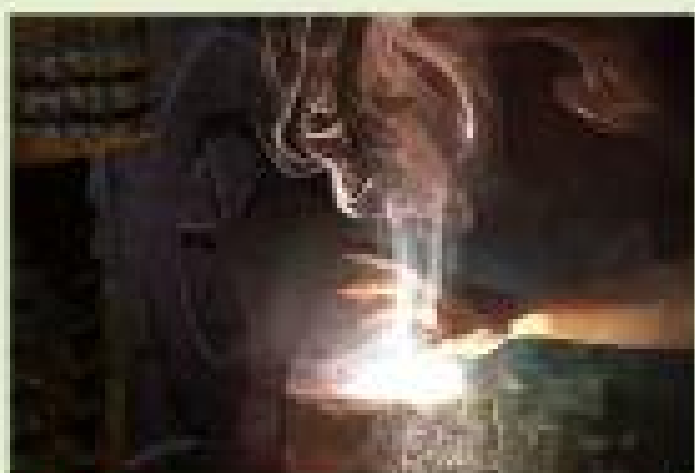
Radar

KSA today



Riyadh Burhan concert

Experience Burhan's soulful melodies at Layali, Vocally, on Jan. 10. Reserve your tickets for the concert through [riyadh.platinumlist.net](#).



AlUla Incense road

Embark on a two-hour journey through AlUla Old Town, where you can immerse yourself in scenes from the past and create your own incense blends. The experience can be enjoyed until April 5. Book through [experiencealula.com](#).



Dhahran Tale and Scene

Passionate readers and aspiring actors now have the platform to perform scenes from their favorite books with the Ithra Center Library's activity, "Tale and Scene." Runs until April 24. Join through the Ithra app.



AlUla Concert

Get ready to be captivated by a one-of-a-kind collaboration featuring renowned Lebanese singer and composer Marwan Khoury and Croatian cellist Hauser on Jan. 10. Tickets are available on [experiencealula.com](#).

TheRegister

THE PICTURES THAT MARK THE DAY



Riyadh Gov. Prince Faisal bin Bandar received Egyptian Ambassador Ahmed Farouk Tawfik in Riyadh on Wednesday. The meeting marked the conclusion of Tawfik's tenure as ambassador to Saudi

Arabia, reported the Saudi Press Agency. Prince Faisal expressed his gratitude for the ambassador's efforts during his service and wished him success in his future endeavors. Meanwhile, Saudi Deputy Minister

for Political Affairs Saud Al-Sati met with Greek Ambassador Alexis Konstantopoulos in Riyadh. The two men discussed bilateral relations and topics of common concern, said the Foreign Ministry on X.

Today's Number

100k

The 18th Jouf International Olive Festival has attracted more than 100,000 visitors over the past five days, including attendees from both within and outside the Kingdom, Saudi Press Agency reported.

Review

Asalat Beirut

WAAD HUSSAIN



For those craving authentic Lebanese flavors, Asalat Beirut in Jeddah offers a wide array of traditional pizzas, manaqeesh and pastries, all baked fresh to order.

The restaurant is known for its simple yet charming setup, catering to locals and visitors. The interior is styled on a homely Lebanese bakery, creating a cozy atmosphere.

One of the highlights of the menu is meat manaqeesh, a dish that has earned high praise for its rich flavor and perfectly baked crust. The meat is seasoned to perfection, blending Lebanese spices with a tender texture that melts in your mouth.

The menu is extensive, offering everything from zaatar and cheese manaqeesh to classic pizzas. While the variety is impressive, some items, such as the labnah manaqeesh, tend to get soggy if not eaten immediately. This makes eating in the car the best way to enjoy the food at its freshest and most flavorful.

The pricing is good with options catering to different budgets, making it a go-to place for quick bites or family meals.

While the food stands out in terms of flavor and variety, the main drawback is the occasional inconsistency in texture if some items sit for too long. However, the vibrant flavors and authentic preparation more than make up for it, especially for those who enjoy freshly baked goods.

What's Trending

Today's hot topics explained by Afshan Aziz



FIT PHYSIQUE Pedro Pascal

GActor Pedro Pascal recently showed off his lean physique after wrapping up filming for his role as Mr. Fantastic in Marvel's upcoming "The Fantastic Four: First Steps."

The 49-year-old, known for "The Last of Us" and "Game of Thrones," was reportedly seen leaving the gym, visibly slimmer and in top shape following the completion of filming for the highly anticipated movie.

In "First Steps," Pascal portrays Reed Richards, a character who gains elastic powers after being exposed to cosmic rays, during a space mission alongside his fellow superheroes Sue Storm, Johnny Storm and Ben Grimm.

'SO INCREDIBLY GRATEFUL'

Lady Gaga

XLady Gaga is starting 2025 on a high note as her duet with Bruno Mars, "Die With A Smile," has reached No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100.

The pop icon, who has had an illustrious career spanning three decades, took to TikTok to share her excitement and gratitude.

Holding up her camera, she spoke directly to her followers: "I am so incredibly grateful that my song 'Die With A Smile' with Bruno Mars, my friend, is No. 1 on the Hot 100."

Reflecting on her impressive career, the 13-time Grammy winner added: "I can't believe I've had two No. 1s in three different decades that I've been releasing my music in this profession."

"I'm so honored to be an artist and to have had your ears for this long. Thank you for listening and dancing and making your art

along with mine."

With the success of this track, Gaga now has six No. 1 songs on the Hot 100.

The song, "Die With A Smile," was released in August 2024, and quickly climbed to the top of the charts, spending eight weeks at No. 1 on the Billboard Global 200 before claiming its current position on the Hot 100.

As Gaga mentioned in her video, this milestone marks her having two chart-toppers in the past three decades, a rare feat previously accomplished by Janet and Michael Jackson.

On other social media platforms, Gaga said: "Thank you to all of the monsters and hooligans for helping make 'Die With A Smile' #1 on the Billboard Hot 100! We love you and are so grateful."

"Having multiple songs of mine hit #1 across three decades feels surreal, and I am overwhelmed by the love and support you have shown me from the beginning."



TheRegion

The Middle East Roundup

Arab News Jeddah

• The Qatar International Falcons and Hunting Festival runs until Feb. 1 at Sabkha Marmi in Sealine. The month-long event is a celebration of the ancient art of hunting with falcons and promises to be a fabulous event for the whole family.

• "A way of surviving, a way of life..." exhibition in Abu Dhabi showcases the film practice of Zineb Sedira spanning from 2002 to 2022. The exhibition features four significant films from different stages of Sedira's career, reflecting her experiences as a woman with a complex cultural heritage. Runs until March 8. More de-

tails at [visitabudhabi.ae](#).

• If you are in the mood for a desert experience in Qatar, explore the Film City and Desert Escape near Our Habitas Ras Abrouq Resort and enjoy wellness activities, dining, music and cultural experiences with your loved ones. The activities run until Jan. 18.

Prayer Times in Saudi Arabia

Jan. 9	Fajr	Sunrise	Dhuhr	Asr	Maghreb	Isha
Makkah	5:39	6:59	12:26	3:31	5:53	7:23
Madinah	5:44	7:06	12:27	3:27	5:47	7:17
Riyadh	5:16	6:38	11:59	2:59	5:19	6:49
Abha	5:24	6:42	12:15	3:25	5:48	7:18
Dammam	5:04	6:28	11:45	2:42	5:01	6:31

 <p>JOSEPH KHALIL AOUN Commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces</p>	 <p>SAMIR GEAGEA Leader of the Lebanese Forces party</p>	 <p>ELIAS BAYSSARI Director general of the Lebanese General Security</p>	 <p>ALFRED RIACHI Secretary-general of the Permanent Conference of the Federation</p>	 <p>FARID HAYKAL KHAZEN, MP Former minister of tourism</p>	 <p>JEAN-LOUIS CARDAHI Former telecommunications minister</p>	 <p>NASSIF HITTI Diplomat, academic, and former minister of foreign affairs</p>
 <p>SLEIMAN FRANGIEH Leader of the Marada party and former interior minister</p>	 <p>JIHAD AZOUR Director at the International Monetary Fund and former minister of finance</p>	 <p>NEEMAT FREM, MP Founder of the national movement Project Watan</p>	 <p>SALAH HONEIN Former member of Parliament</p>	 <p>SAMIR ASSAF International banking expert</p>	 <p>ZIYAD BAROUD Former interior minister</p>	 <p>GEORGES KHOURY Former ambassador to the Vatican and retired brigadier general</p>

LEBANON

All the presidential hopefuls

Whoever wins the presidency faces formidable task in addressing economic crisis and postwar recovery

Sherouk Zakaria Dubai

Wracked by economic crisis and the recent conflict between Israel and the Iran-backed Hezbollah militia, Lebanon faces a historic opportunity this week to break its political paralysis and elect a new president.

Whoever is chosen by members of the Lebanese parliament to form the next government will have important implications for the nation's recovery and trajectory.

If Thursday's election is successful, it could end the debilitating power vacuum that has prevailed since Michel Aoun's presidential term ended in October 2022, leaving governance in Lebanon in limbo.

Settling on a candidate is now more urgent than ever, as Lebanon faces mounting pressure to stabilize its political and economic landscape ahead of the impending expiration of the ceasefire deal between Israel and Hezbollah.

One possible candidate is General Joseph Aoun, commander of the Lebanese Armed Forces, who local media have tipped as the most likely winner.

Widely regarded as politically neutral, Aoun's military experience and perceived impartiality could bring stability and

credibility, both domestically and internationally.

However, his candidacy faces legal hurdles due to a constitutional requirement that two years must pass between his military role and the presidency.

Another potential contender is Samir Geagea, head of the Lebanese Forces. As a vocal Hezbollah critic with significant support among some Christian communities, Geagea could appeal to anti-Hezbollah factions.

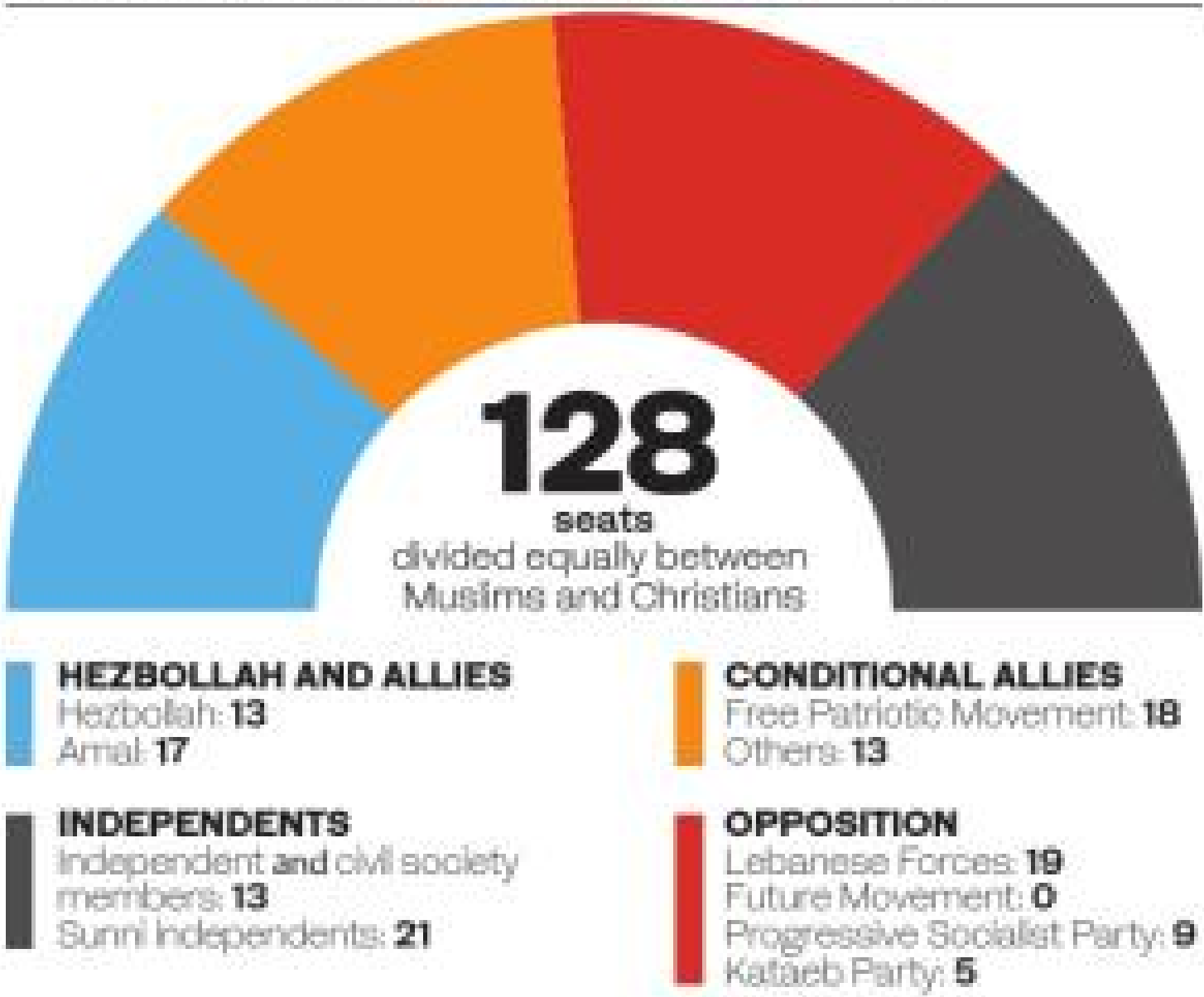
However, his polarizing history from Lebanon's civil war could prove to be a barrier to national unity, raising fears that his candidacy could deepen divisions in Lebanon's already fragmented political system.

Suleiman Frangieh, head of the pro-Hezbollah Marada movement, is another possibility, but risks alienating Christian communities and international allies.

Hailing from a prominent political dynasty, Frangieh is the grandson of a former president and has himself held various government roles. However, being a close ally of Hezbollah and the former Assad regime in Syria makes him a polarizing figure.

Finally, Jihad Azour, a former finance minister and International Monetary Fund official, represents a technocratic option with broad political appeal.

LEBANESE PARLIAMENT COMPOSITION



Azour's economic expertise could help address Lebanon's financial crisis, but some among the opposition view him as a continuation of past administrations.

Securing the presidency in Lebanon requires broad-based political consensus — a challenge in its deeply divided Parliament. Any major faction can block a nomination that does not align with its agenda.

Under Lebanon's constitution, presidential elections require a two-thirds majority in the first round of parliamentary voting (86 out of 128 members) and a simple majority of 65 votes in subsequent rounds.

The Lebanese president's powers, as defined by the constitution, reflect a blend of ceremonial and executive functions

within a confessional system of governance that allocates political roles based on religious representation.

The president's powers are limited by those of the prime minister, the council of ministers and parliament, reflecting Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing system established

Lebanon has been without a head of state since October 2022 after parliament failed to agree on a candidate, bottom right, sparking protests, left. AFP file



by the 1943 National Pact and reaffirmed by the 1989 Taif Agreement.

Lebanese presidents are traditionally drawn from the Maronite Christian community, as stipulated by the confessional system. This role is critical in maintaining the delicate political balance in the country.

Thursday's election comes at a turbulent moment for Lebanon and its neighbors, which could impact the vote's outcome.

Hezbollah has long dominated Lebanon's political landscape, parliamentary dynamics and government composition. However, its devastating war with Israel, which began in October 2023 and ended with a fragile ceasefire in November 2024, gutted its leadership and depleted much of its public support.

Hezbollah's failure to deter Israel's war in Gaza or mount a sufficient defense against Israeli attacks in southern and eastern Lebanon has raised doubts about its remaining political influence in steering the selection of a presidential candidate.

The election also follows the

sudden downfall of the Assad regime in Syria, toppled by armed opposition groups after a 13-year civil war. This shift has profoundly impacted Syria's relationship with Hezbollah and other factions in Lebanon.

Syria's influence over Lebanon historically included backing Maronite militias, interfering in political decisions, maintaining a 29-year military occupation, and facilitating the flow of weapons from Iran to Hezbollah.

Lebanon's next president will also face the daunting task of guiding the country out of its economic mire while leading postwar reconstruction efforts.

Lebanon's economic situation remains dire, with its financial collapse in 2019 described by the World Bank as one of the worst in modern history.

The Lebanese pound has lost more than 98 percent of its value against the US dollar on the black market, leading to hyperinflation and eroding the purchasing power of citizens.

Public services have nearly collapsed and unemployment has soared. More than 80 percent of the population now lives below the poverty line, according to the UN.

Efforts to secure international aid, including talks with the IMF, have stalled due to political gridlock and resistance to reforms. The new president will need regional and international standing to rally support for Lebanon's recovery.

Whoever secures the presidency will face a formidable task. The alternative is continued paralysis.



Both entities will collaborate on conserving historic sites and artifacts in AlUla and western China. SPA photos

BRIDGING CULTURAL HISTORIES

Deal to enhance heritage conservation in AlUla, China

Agreement unites expertise in cultural preservation and tourism growth

Arab News Riyadh

The Royal Commission for AlUla and Dunhuang Academy have signed a strategic partnership to enhance cultural, tourism and heritage collaborations between Saudi Arabia and China.

This partnership marks a key milestone in Saudi Arabia-China relations, combining the academy's 80 years of expertise in heritage research and cultural conservation with the commission's dedication to preserving AlUla's cultural heritage.

The academy manages the Mogao Grottoes, a UNESCO World Heritage Site with 735 Buddhist caves in Gansu province, famous for their murals and sculptures that reflect Silk Road cultural influences.

Both entities will collaborate



The academy manages the Mogao Grottoes, a UNESCO heritage site.

on a conservation program for historic sites and artifacts in AlUla and western China. They will also organize academic exhibitions and exchange programs for staff and scholars.

Silvia Barbone, vice president of strategic partnerships at the commission, said that China and Saudi Arabia share a rich legacy that has connected people and

places across vast distances and centuries. "Today, our work in global heritage is strengthened by successful collaborations with leading institutions and destinations."

The partnership follows the Saudi Travel Expo, organized by the Saudi Tourism Authority, where AlUla was prominently featured. The event, held in Beijing's Tian Tan Garden, highlighted AlUla's natural and cultural heritage.

Su Bomin, director of Dunhuang Academy, said this collaboration was a significant step in "bridging our cultural histories and advancing heritage conservation efforts."

"By sharing our expertise and resources, we aim to foster cultural exchange, deepen mutual understanding, and create innovative programs that will benefit communities in both China and Saudi Arabia."

DEVELOPMENT LOAN

Saudi fund commits \$80m for cancer care expansion in Turkmenistan

Arab News Riyadh

CEO of the Saudi Fund for Development Sultan Al-Marshad signed an \$80 million development loan agreement with Rahimberdi Jepbarov, chairman of the Turkmenistan State Bank for Foreign Economic Affairs.

The financing supports a project to improve tumor treatment services and establish cancer treatment centers in Turkmenistan. Saudi Ambassador to Turkmenistan Said Osman Suwaid attended the event.

HIGHLIGHT

The project will enhance healthcare by building and equipping three specialized cancer treatment centers with up to 500 medical beds in different regions.

The project will enhance healthcare by building and equipping three specialized cancer treatment centers with up to 500 medical beds in different regions. The centers will feature

advanced medical equipment to improve healthcare quality.

The deal reflects the fund's commitment to supporting developing countries overcome obstacles to progress. It underscores the importance of international cooperation in achieving sustainable development.

During his visit to Turkmenistan, Al-Marshad also met with Deputy Chairman of the Cabinet of Ministers and Foreign Minister Rashid Meredov to discuss strengthening development cooperation in various sectors.

TheSpace

Jimmy Carter ... a century of service and conviction

DR. ABDULAZIZ TURKISTANI



Former US President Jimmy Carter, who served as the 39th president of the US from January 1977 to January 1981, passed away on Dec. 29, 2024. Carter died at the remarkable age of 100, having been born on Oct. 1, 1924.

Carter's life offers valuable lessons in public service and political leadership. His career demonstrates that a politician's influence extends far beyond their time in office, as evidenced by his long legacy of public service compared with his four years in the White House. His life exemplifies the importance of thorough preparation for public office.

After graduating from the Naval Academy in 1946, Carter's career took a pivotal turn that would shape his political future. As a naval officer, he witnessed the military's transformation into the nuclear age, serving during the navy's pioneering development of nuclear-powered vessels and missile systems. In 1953, following his father's death, Carter made the decisive choice to resign his commission and return to Georgia, taking the helm of his family's peanut farming business. This return to his southern roots would prove crucial to his political ascent.

His success in Georgia politics stemmed from a powerful combination: building a loyal grassroots following while maintaining the courage to challenge the status quo. During his eight years in the Georgia State Senate (1962-1970), Carter emerged as a progressive voice advocating for the end of racial segregation, which he condemned as

unconstitutional and morally wrong.

Carter's political influence reached new heights with his election as Georgia's governor, serving from 1971 to 1975. He cultivated an image as a Washington outsider, frequently highlighting that he had never met a Democratic president during his governorship.

His successful 1976 presidential campaign resonated with an American public hungry for moral leadership. His promise to restore ethical governance to the White House, reinforced by his visible devotion as a Baptist church deacon, struck a chord with voters who chose him over incumbent Gerald Ford.

In office, Carter transformed human rights advocacy into a diplomatic priority, particularly confronting Communist bloc violations. His administration's support for imprisoned Soviet physicist Andrei Sakharov — creator of the Soviet H-bomb and later dissident — exemplified this new approach.

His domestic achievements included deregulating aviation, establishing the departments

of education and energy, and installing the first solar panels on the White House.

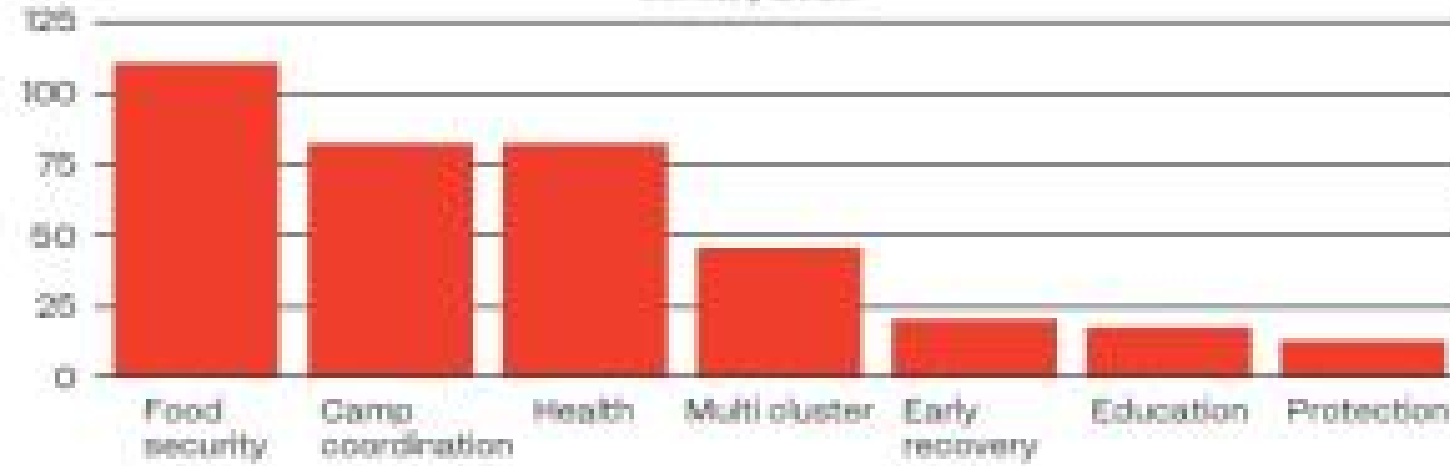
Carter's most enduring impact lies in his ambitious foreign policy agenda. Before taking office, his administration began with a bold vision, gathering at the Smithsonian Institution to chart a course for a new world order. These early idealistic ambitions, however, soon collided with the harsh realities of global politics.

Dr. Abdulaziz Turkistani is the former Saudi envoy to Japan. For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/thespace

The Day's FIGURES

KSRELIEF PROJECTS IN SYRIA

January 2025



Source: ksrelief.org

Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Community education Deal to protect Saudi Arabia's national heritage

Saudi Arabia's Public Prosecution and the Heritage Commission have signed a memorandum of understanding to strengthen their collaborative efforts when it comes to protecting and preserving the Kingdom's identity.

The MoU includes exchanging information on protecting national heritage and combating violations of archeological sites.

It also involves organizing awareness programs to educate the community about the importance of heritage preservation and the penalties for related offenses. SPA Riyadh

Environmental impact Saudi authority expands effort to track food waste

The General Food Security Authority has launched a second field survey to measure food loss and waste rates in Saudi Arabia.

The new survey aims to analyze food loss and waste at all stages of the food supply chain, including production, importation, transportation, storage, distribution and consumption.

The authority will use the findings to develop solutions to improve food security, reduce environmental and economic impacts, and align the Kingdom's practices with global standards. SPA Riyadh

Wildlife conservation Endangered species find home at Saudi reserve

The Imam Turki bin Abdullah Royal Nature Reserve Development Authority, in partnership with the National Center for Wildlife, has reintroduced endangered species by releasing 30 Arabian oryx, 10 Arabian gazelles, 50 sand gazelles, and five red-necked ostriches into their natural habitats.

The initiative aims to promote environmental sustainability, restore ecological balance within the reserve, enhance the role of these species in their ecosystems, and raise awareness about protecting wildlife. SPA Riyadh

News Saudi Arabia

CULTURAL RENAISSANCE

Riyadh's literary havens: where coffee meets the love of books

Book cafes in the Kingdom's capital offer serene spaces for quiet reflection

Waad Hussain Riyadh

Riyadh's cultural landscape is undergoing a quiet transformation, where the love of coffee meets the timeless allure of literature.

Book cafes are carving out a niche as spaces where readers, thinkers, and coffee enthusiasts converge. These havens of creativity and reflection offer retreats for the mind and soul, providing a sense of community in an increasingly fast-paced world.

The Book Club: where stories find their home
Nestled in the Al-Yasmin district, The Book Club is a tranquil retreat for bibliophiles, particularly those passionate about Arabic literature.

Its shelves brim with carefully curated Arabic titles, from classics to contemporary gems, complemented by a modest selection of English books. The minimalist interior, adorned with soft lighting and intimate reading nooks, creates an atmosphere conducive to focus and relaxation.

What sets The Book Club apart is its browsing policy. Visitors are welcome to skim books for three minutes before deciding to purchase, with additional purchases granting extended reading time.

During Arab News' visit, the cafe hosted a stimulating talk with Saad Al-Bazai, titled, "Historical Fiction: Why Do They Believe in the Imagined?" Al-Bazai told Arab News: "These gatherings bring together a diverse audience and provide them with the opportunity to meet researchers."

"This undoubtedly supports cultural life as it creates a platform for dialogue that differs from social media platforms — it is vibrant, direct, and involves personal presence."



There's a certain magic in time spent in the company of good books, with a perfectly brewed coffee.

Sara Al-Ebraheem
Wathbah Coffee and Book patron

Nestled in the Al-Yasmin district, The Book Club is a tranquil retreat for bibliophiles, particularly those passionate about Arabic literature.
AN photo by Waad Hussain / Supplied

into a botanical retreat. Though its library is modest, the curated selection of books is perfectly aligned with the cafe's serene ambiance. Patrons often find themselves lost in thought or pages, surrounded by the aroma of ethically sourced, expertly brewed coffee. Whether it's the tranquil environment or the commitment to sustainability, Coffee Trees is a favorite escape for those seeking a moment of calm in the city.

Wathbah Coffee and Book: where timeless charm meets literature
In Al-Narjis district, Wathbah Coffee and Book exudes intellectual allure. Its floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, vintage-inspired decor, and intimate corners create a haven for readers and thinkers alike. The carefully selected collection spans genres and eras, ensuring there's something for everyone.

Wathbah's ambiance is perfect for quiet reading, reflective conversations, or simply soaking in its aesthetic beauty. As Sara Al-Ebraheem, a loyal patron, said: "There's a certain magic in time spent in the company of good books, with a perfectly brewed coffee."

Ons Coffee Roasters: where simplicity meets serenity
Ons Coffee Roasters offers a minimalist haven for those who crave peace and simplicity. Its clean design, complemented by tasteful art and cozy seating, creates a calm environment perfect for unwinding. While its library may be small, the books displayed are thoughtfully chosen to inspire reflection and curiosity.

Ons Coffee Roasters is as much about quality as it is about serenity. Its expertly brewed coffee elevates the experience, making it an ideal retreat for anyone seeking a quiet corner in Riyadh.

HIGHLIGHTS

● In Riyadh's Al-Narjis district, Wathbah Coffee and Book's floor-to-ceiling bookshelves, vintage-inspired decor, and intimate corners create a haven for readers and thinkers alike.

● Coffee Trees, tucked away in the Al-Rayan district, offers a sanctuary that blends greenery with literary charm.

Sophia: a library, a cafe, and a place to connect
Sophia has become a cornerstone of Riyadh's literary scene, acting as a hub for knowledge, creativity, and meaningful connections. Its towering wooden shelves are filled with a rich collection

of Arabic and English books, carefully curated to cater to a diverse audience. Beyond being a library, Sophia also serves as a publishing house, amplifying the voices of local and regional authors, bringing their stories to the forefront. What sets Sophia apart is its dedication to fostering intellectual growth and cultural exchange. The space regularly hosts book launches, discussion panels, and thought-provoking dialogue sessions that bring together writers, readers, and thinkers from various backgrounds. The inviting ambiance, complete with warm lighting and cozy seating, creates the perfect backdrop for these events, making each visit an enriching experience. Aminah Al-Hassani, a loyal



visitor, captured the essence of Sophia. She said: "The place is calm and serene, and it has never let me down with a bad book. "Every book I've read here has been better than the last. Their selections are beautiful, and the events they organize are always beneficial and enjoyable."

Coffee Trees: a green sanctuary
Coffee Trees, tucked away in the Al-Rayan district, offers a sanctuary that blends greenery with literary charm. The cafe's lush decor, accentuated by vibrant plants and natural elements, transforms the space

NATURE'S BOUNTY

Citrus festival shows agricultural diversity, economic potential in Najran

Arab News Riyadh

The 14th Najran National Citrus Festival highlights the region's agricultural investment and marketing diversity, which offers economic returns for farmers and investors alike, the Saudi Press Agency reported. The festival at King Abdulaziz Park walkway in Najran is organized by the Ministry of Environment, Water and Agriculture in the region. Participants including farmers, agricultural experts and investors showed innovative solutions and highlighted the region's robust citrus production.



Hamad Al-Dakman, the director of the agricultural prevention and guidance department at the National Center for Sustainable Agriculture Research and Development, Estidamah, in an interview with

The 14th Najran Citrus Festival is a vibrant platform for displaying Najran's agricultural potential. SPA

SPA emphasized the center's role in promoting sustainable agricultural practices. By selecting optimal plant seeds and trees, the center aims to enhance citrus production efficiency while advancing water and energy conservation technologies, Al-Dakman said. He noted the importance of knowledge transfer and partnerships in supporting the agricultural sector, aligning with the Kingdom's food-security goals. Similarly, Najran Association Green's chairman, Raf'an



Al-Amer underscored the association's efforts to expand vegetation cover, having planted more than 60,000 trees in the past four years. Plans are underway to plant an additional 500,000 trees by 2027 in collaboration with government and private entities, contributing to the Kingdom's Green Vision, Al-Amer said. Farmers and investors were enthusiastic about the festival. Farmer Ibrahim Saleh Al-Sinan praised the event for addressing farmers' needs, marketing their products, and

allowing visitors to sample and purchase citrus fruits directly. Agricultural investor Abdullah Fahd Al-Waili highlighted the region's favorable conditions for citrus farming, including fertile soil, a suitable climate and water availability. Al-Waili, whose farm in Khbash covers 4 million sq. meters with more than 50,000 citrus trees, noted the economic viability of agricultural investment in the region. The festival is a vibrant platform for displaying Najran's agricultural potential, supporting farmers, and driving sustainable agricultural development.



People carry the bodies of Palestinians killed in an Israeli drone strike in Tammun, near Tubas, Israeli-occupied West Bank, on Wednesday. Reuters

WOMEN, CHILDREN SLAIN

Blinken says Gaza deal ‘very close’ as Israeli killing spree continues

Military recovers body of hostage in Gaza and is examining identity of a second one

AFF, AP Paris, Jerusalem

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said on Wednesday that a Gaza ceasefire remained close, but reiterated that it may not happen before President Joe Biden hands over to Donald Trump.

“In the Middle East, we’re very close to a ceasefire and hostage deal,” he told reporters in Paris.

US President-elect Donald Trump is dispatching his incoming special envoy to the Middle East, Steve Witkoff, to Qatar this week for talks aimed at the ceasefire in Gaza and the release of Israeli hostages.

Trump speaking at a news conference at his Mar-a-Lago resort reiterated his threat that there will be “hell to pay” in the Middle East if the hostages are

not released prior to his Jan. 20 inauguration.

Witkoff did not detail who he’d be meeting with during his latest visit to the region. Witkoff added that progress is being made on landing a deal, something he said is happening because of the pressure Trump is creating.

Israeli airstrikes in southern Gaza killed at least 17 people, nearly all of them women or children, the territory’s Health Ministry and hospital officials said.

Five kids were killed as they sheltered together in the same tent, said Ahmed Al-Farra, director of the children’s ward at nearby Nasser Hospital in Khan Younis. Their bodies were among the eight children and five women brought to the hospital after strikes on tents, homes and a vehicle. Two bodies were unidentifiable.

Some Palestinians in the Gaza Strip still have hope the war will end soon. Issam Saqr, a displaced man from Khan Younis, said he hopes the ceasefire “will happen today — before tomorrow!” Separately, Palestinian officials said two children

killing a 23-year-old man and two children, aged eight and 10, all from the same family.

The Palestinian Foreign Ministry in Ramallah condemned the deadly strike, accusing Israel of harming civilians “under the pretext” of fighting militants.

The governor identified the dead as Adam Bsharat, 23, Hamza Bsharat, 10, and Reda Bsharat, eight. He said they were killed in front of their house.

Relative Jalal Bsharat said they had been at home when “the Israeli occupation army targeted them.”

He said the strike showed Palestinians are not safe, even in their own homes.

Meanwhile, the Israeli military said that troops have recovered the body of a hostage held in Gaza and were examining whether another body recovered

was also that of a captive.

Earlier, Israel’s defense minister said that troops recovered the bodies of two hostages.

The military said the body of Yusef Al-Zaydani was brought to Israel on Tuesday after being discovered in an underground tunnel near the southern Gaza city of Rafah. It said troops uncovered information about Al Zaydani’s son Hamzah that “raised serious concerns for his life.”

Military spokesman Col. Nadav Shoshani said the military was looking into the identity of a second set of remains recovered.

Al Zaydani and his son were taken captive during Hamas’ attack on Oct. 7, 2023, among 250 hostages snatched by the militant group during its cross-border raid.

Israel believes a third of the remaining 100 hostages are dead.

NUMBER

45,936

Palestinians have been killed in Israel’s Gaza onslaught.

were among three people killed in an Israeli airstrike on the occupied West Bank on Wednesday.

Ahmad Asaad, governor of the northern West Bank city of Tubas, said that the strike hit nearby Tammun village,

LONG BATTLE

Ireland joins ICJ genocide case against Israel

Arab News London

Ireland has joined the South African genocide case against Israel at the International Court of Justice, the New York Times reported. The filing comes months after Ireland said it would intervene in the case. South Africa brought its case to the UN’s highest judicial body in December 2023, accusing Israel of committing genocide in Gaza.

A court statement on Tuesday said: “Ireland, invoking Article 63 of the Statute of the Court, filed in the Registry of the Court a declaration of intervention in the case concerning Application of the Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide in the Gaza Strip.”

A first ruling in January last year saw the ICJ order Israel to restrain its attacks in Gaza. In May, the court ordered Israel to immediately cease its offensive in Rafah.

A spokesperson for the Irish Foreign Ministry said on Tuesday: “It is important for the court, in

BACKGROUND

Ireland’s deputy prime minister has accused Israel of ‘collective punishment of the Palestinian people.’

its consideration of any multilateral convention, to understand how other parties to that convention interpret and apply it.”

Micheal Martin, Ireland’s deputy prime minister and foreign minister, last month said: “There has been a collective punishment of the Palestinian people through the intent and impact of military actions of Israel in Gaza, leaving 44,000 dead and millions of civilians displaced.”

Ireland would request the court to broaden its interpretation of genocide by a state, he said, adding: “We are concerned that a very narrow interpretation of what constitutes genocide leads to a culture of impunity in which the protection of civilians is minimized.”

Experts believe that the court will not rule on the genocide charge for several years. Last month, Israel said it was closing its embassy in Dublin, citing “the extreme anti-Israel policies of the Irish government.”

DATE WITH HISTORY

Egypt unveils ancient rock-cut tombs and burial shafts in Luxor

AP Cairo

Egypt unveiled several discoveries near the famed city of Luxor on Wednesday, including ancient rock-cut tombs and burial shafts dating back 3,600 years.

They were unearthed at the causeway of Queen Hatshepsut’s funerary temple at Deir Al-Bahri on the Nile’s West Bank, according to a statement released by Zahi Hawass Foundation for Antiquities & Heritage. It said it worked in tandem with the Supreme Council of Antiquities on the site since September 2022.



Archeologists carry out restoration work on the newly discovered artefacts, near the Queen Hatshepsut Valley Temple’s in Deir El-Bahari on the Nile’s west bank in Luxor on Wednesday. Reuters

Artifacts found at the tombs included bronze coins with the image of Alexander the Great dating to the Time of Ptolemy I (367-283), children’s toys made of clay, cartonnage and funerary masks that covered mummies, winged scarabs, beads and funerary amulets.

Hawass told reporters that the discoveries could “reconstruct history” and offer an understanding of the type of programs ancient Egyptians designed inside a temple.

The Archeologists also found the remains of Queen Hatshepsut’s Valley Temple, rock-cut tombs dating back to the Middle

Kingdom (1938 B.C. — 1630 B.C.), burial shafts from the 17th dynasty, the tomb of Djehuti-Mes and part of the Assassif Ptolemaic Necropolis.

The rock-cut tombs had been previously robbed during the Ptolemaic period and later. Still, the Egyptian teams uncovered some artifacts such as pottery tables that were used to offer bread, wine and meat.

Inside the burial shafts dating back to 1580 B.C. — 1550 B.C., anthropoid wooden coffins were found, including one that belonged to a young child. It remained intact since its burial some 3,600 years ago.

VIGILANCE

‘Protect our people’: Armed Syrian volunteers watch over Damascus

New authorities have backed their initiative, providing light arms and training

AFP Damascus

Every night, Damascus residents stand guard outside shops and homes armed with light weapons often supplied by Syria's new rulers, eager to fill the security vacuum that followed the recent takeover.

After rebels ousted former President Bashar Assad in early December, thousands of soldiers, policemen and other security officials deserted their posts, leaving the door open to petty theft, looting and other crimes.

The new Syrian authorities now face the mammoth challenge of rebuilding state institutions shaped by the Assad family's five-decade rule, including the army and security apparatuses that have all but collapsed.

In the meantime, Damascenes have jumped into action.

In the Old City, Fadi Raslan, 42, was among dozens of people cautiously watching the streets, his finger on the trigger of his gun.

"We have women and elderly people at home. We are trying to protect our people with this volunteer-based initiative," he told AFP.

"Syria needs us right now, we must stand together."

Local committees have taken over some of the deserted checkpoints, with the authorities' approval.

Hussam Yahya, 49, and his friends have been taking turns guarding their neighborhood, Shughur, inspecting vehicles.

"We came out to protect our neighborhoods, shops and public property as volunteers, without any compensation," he said.

He said the new authorities, led by the Hayat Tahrir Al-Sham group, have backed their initiative, providing light arms and training.

Authorities also provided them with special "local committee" cards, valid for a year.

Police chief Ahmad Lattouf said the committees had been set up to patrol neighborhoods to prevent



Armed locals stand guard to protect their area by the old city walls of Damascus in the Bab Touma district. AFP

crime until the police could take over.

"There aren't enough police officers at the moment, but training is ongoing to increase our numbers," he said.

The Damascus committees begin their neighborhood watches at 22:00 p.m. every night and end them at 06:00 am, the next morning.

Further north, in the cities of Aleppo and Homs, ordinary residents have also taken up weapons to guard their districts with support from authorities, residents told AFP.

The official page of the Damascus countryside area has published photos on Telegram showing young men it said were "volunteering" to protect their town and villages "under the supervision of the Military Operations Department and in coordination with General Security."

It also said others were volunteering as traffic police.

A handful of police officers affiliated with the Salvation Government of the Idlib region, the rebel bastion controlled by HTS before Assad's fall, have also been deployed in Damascus.

Traffic policemen have been called from Idlib to help, while HTS gunmen are everywhere in the capital, especially in front of

BACKGROUND

After rebels ousted former President Bashar Assad in early December, thousands of soldiers, policemen and other security officials deserted their posts, leaving the door open to petty theft, looting and other crimes.

government buildings including the presidential palace and police headquarters.

The authorities have also begun allowing Syrians to apply to the police academy to fill its depleted ranks.

Syria's new rulers have called on conscripts and soldiers to surrender their weapons at

dedicated centers.

Since rising to power, HTS and its allies have launched security sweeps in major cities including Homs and Aleppo with the stated goal of rooting out "remnants of Assad's militias."

In the capital's busy Bab Touma neighborhood, four local watchmen were checking people's IDs and inspecting cars entering the district.

Fuad Farha said he founded the local committee that he now heads after offering his help to "establish security" alongside the HTS-affiliated security forces.

"We underwent a quick training, mainly teaching us how to assemble weapons and take them apart and to use rifles," he said.

PRAYERS FOR PEACE

Ethiopians celebrate Christmas as natural calamities and conflict take their toll

AP Addis Ababa

Ethiopia's Orthodox Christians are celebrating Christmas with prayers for peace in the Horn of Africa nation that has faced persistent conflict in recent years.

Ethiopians follow the Julian calendar, which runs 13 days later than the Gregorian calendar, used by Catholic and Protestant churches. They traditionally celebrate by slaughtering animals and joining family members to break the fast after midnight.

The patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, Abune Mathias, in his televised Christmas Eve message called for reconciliation and peace in a nation where conflict has been often fueled by ethnic strife. Different parts of Ethiopia recently have also faced natural

BACKGROUND

The patriarch of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church called for reconciliation and peace in a nation where conflict has been often fueled by ethnic strife.

calamities, including mudslides. Earthquakes last week in the remote regions of Afar, Amhara and Oromia have displaced thousands.

Despite the signing of a peace agreement to end the armed conflict in the northern region of Tigray in 2022, recurring conflicts in Amhara, Oromia and elsewhere have caused widespread suffering and forced 9 million children to drop out of school, according to UNICEF.

Almaz Zewdie, who was among thousands of Orthodox Christians attending ceremonies in Addis Ababa's Medhanyalem Church, said she was praying for peace.

Worshippers gather for the eve of Ethiopian Orthodox Christmas celebrations at a church in Addis Ababa on Monday. AFP



UNITY MOVE

Libya's eastern parliament approves transitional justice law

Reuters Tripoli

Libya's eastern-based parliament has approved a national reconciliation and transitional justice law, three lawmakers said, a measure aimed at reunifying the oil-producing country after over a decade of factional conflict.

The House of Representatives spokesperson, Abdullah Belaihaq, said on the X platform that the legislation was passed on Tuesday by a majority of the session's attendees in Libya's largest second city Benghazi.

However, implementing the law could be challenging as



Security forces deploy as protesters gather outside the residence of the Tripoli-based Libyan Government of National Unity Prime Minister Abdulhamid Dbeibah early on Tuesday. AFP

Libya has been divided since a 2014 civil war that spawned two rival administrations vying for power in east and west following the NATO-backed uprising that toppled

Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

"I hope that it (the law) will be in effect all over the country and will not face any difficulty," House member Abdulmenam Alorafi told

Reuters by phone on Wednesday.

The UN mission to Libya has repeatedly called for an inclusive, rights-based transitional justice and reconciliation process in the North African country.

A political process to end years of institutional division and outright warfare has been stalled since an election scheduled for December 2021 collapsed amid disputes over the eligibility of the main candidates.

In Tripoli, there is the Government of National Unity under Prime Minister Abdulhamid Al-Dbeibah that was installed

FASTFACT

The UN mission to Libya has repeatedly called for an inclusive, rights-based transitional justice and reconciliation process in the country.

through a UN-backed process in 2021, but the parliament no longer recognizes its legitimacy. Dbeibah has vowed not to cede power to a new government without national elections.

There are two competing legislative bodies — the HoR that was

elected in 2014 as the national parliament with a four-year mandate to oversee a political transition, and the High Council of State in Tripoli formed as part of a 2015 political agreement and drawn from a parliament first elected in 2012.

The Tripoli-based Presidential Council, which came to power with GNU, has been working on a reconciliation project and holding "a comprehensive conference" with the support of the UN and African Union. But it has been unable to bring all rival groups together because of their continuing differences.

VIOLATION OF LAW

Sri Lanka vows crackdown on illegal activities by Israeli tourists

Government reacts to complaints over emergence of Israeli-run businesses and place of worship in Arugam Bay

Mohammed Rasooldeen Colombo

Sri Lanka will crack down on reported illegal activities carried out by Israeli tourists, its prime minister said on Wednesday, following a series of complaints since last year regarding their arrivals in the country.

A total of 25,514 Israelis visited Sri Lanka in 2024, according to government data. One of their favorite destinations is Arugam Bay, a small town on the south-eastern coast, which is widely recognized as one of the world's best surfing spots.

The predominantly Muslim region made international

headlines in October last year, when US and Israeli authorities warned visitors of what they said was a "terrorist threat" focused on tourist areas and beaches. The alleged threat followed a series of altercations between Israelis and local residents.

Social media posts by visitors to Arugam Bay and complaints by locals themselves indicate that many of the arriving Israelis come for vacations after taking part in the ongoing deadly onslaught on Palestinians in Gaza.

Residents have also complained over the emergence of Israeli businesses in the area and the establishment of a Chabad house — a Jewish

community center and place of worship.

Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya said during Wednesday's parliament session that Sri Lankan authorities have not

FASTFACT

Last month, Sri Lankan civil groups demanded screenings of Israeli visitors to keep out potential war criminals.

granted "any permission for Israeli citizens to build religious places of worship or related buildings" and "the government will take prompt action to stop it."

Responding to questions raised by opposition lawmaker

Mujibur Rahman, she also addressed reports regarding Israelis running businesses in the area.

"We have identified this as a problem. Action will be taken against this, and steps will be taken to hold talks regarding it and stop such business activities," Amarasuriya said.

"The government has not issued any visa for Israelis to engage in business activities in Sri Lanka, especially under tourist visas. They are engaging in such activities by violating our laws."

The government's reaction follows last month's protests in Sri Lanka's capital and a petition by civil society groups demanding special screenings of Israelis arriving in the country.

Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Rescue efforts

Body of British hiker found in Italian alps

Rescue crews found the body of a British hiker buried in the snow of the Italian alps and were continuing to search for his friend who had also been missing since Jan. 1, Italy's rescue services said Wednesday. Italy's Alpine rescue service said it only received an alert about the men on Jan. 6, five days after the men set out in the Adamello range near Trento, after they failed to make a scheduled flight home and relatives contacted authorities.

After the first two days of searches were hampered by snowfall, fog and avalanche warnings, rescue crews managed to get a helicopter in the air Wednesday. **AP**

Pre-travel permit

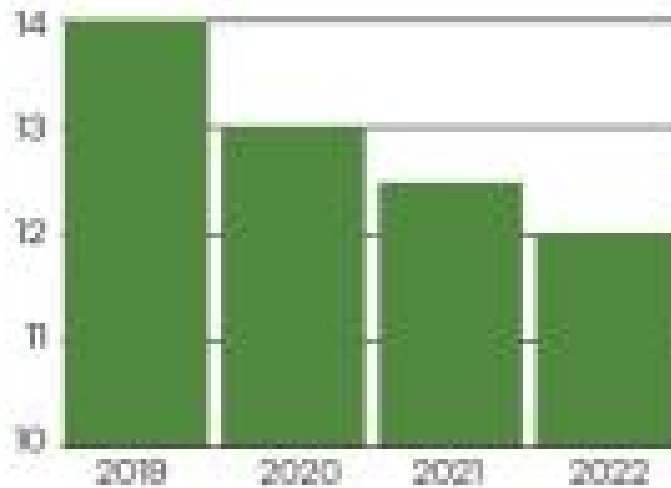
Visitors from dozens of countries to pay UK entry fee

Visitors to the UK from dozens of countries, including the United States, Canada and Australia, must now pay to enter Britain after a new visa-waiver entry system took effect on Wednesday.

The Electronic Travel Authorization scheme requires visitors who do not need a visa to enter Britain to acquire pre-travel authorization. Costing £10 (\$12.50) and allowing stays of up to six months at a time over two years, it first launched in 2023, with Qatar, before being extended last year to five regional Gulf neighbors. Now, it has been expanded to include citizens of around 50 more countries and territories. **AFP**

The Day's FIGURES

UZBEKISTAN: INFANT MORTALITY RATE



Source: Statista

What We're Reading

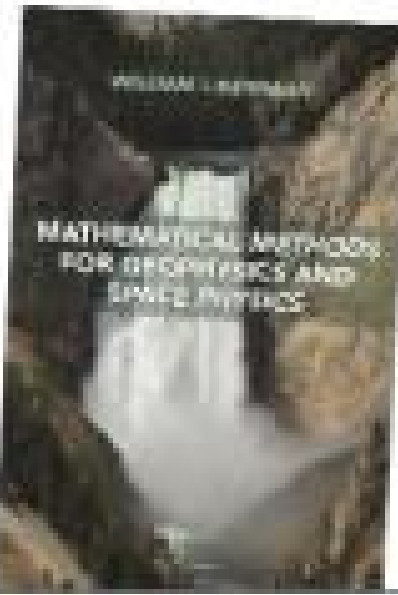
FOR THE TRAIN OR ON THE PLANE

'Mathematical Methods for Geophysics and Space Physics'

WILLIAM I. NEWMAN

Graduate students in the natural sciences—including not only geophysics and space physics but also atmospheric and planetary physics, ocean sciences, and astronomy—need a broad-based

mathematical toolbox to facilitate their research. In addition, they need to survey a wider array of mathematical methods that, while outside their particular areas of expertise, are important in related ones.



Cruel cold

Tents arrive for Tibet quake hit survivors

Rescuers in the freezing, high-altitude Tibet region in western China searched a second day for any remaining victims of a deadly earthquake that struck near a holy city for Tibetan Buddhists, before shifting their focus to resettling the survivors. More tents, quilts, stoves and other relief items were being delivered Wednesday to people whose homes were uninhabitable or unsafe.

Temperatures fall well below freezing overnight in an area with an average altitude of about 4,200 meters. **AP**

Cambodian ex-leader

Thai police issue warrant for politician shooter

Thai police on Wednesday issued an arrest warrant for a gunman suspected of shooting dead a Cambodian opposition politician in a brazen attack in downtown Bangkok. Exiled Cambodian opposition figurehead Sam Rainsy accused the country's powerful former leader Hun Sen of ordering the killing of Lim Kimya on Tuesday. Lim Kimya was shot dead by a gunman on a motorbike as he arrived in the Thai capital from the Cambodian city of Siem Reap by bus, accompanied by his French wife. **AFP**



A firefighter walks by a home in flames from the Palisades Fire during a powerful windstorm Wednesday. Investigation of fires are ongoing. **AFP**

HELL ON EARTH

Thousands flee as wildfires burn out of control in and around Los Angeles

AP Los Angeles

California firefighters battled wind-whipped wildfires that tore across the Los Angeles area, destroying homes, clogging roadways as tens of thousands fled and straining resources as the fires burned uncontained early Wednesday.

The flames from a fire that broke out Tuesday evening near a nature preserve in the inland

foothills northeast of LA spread so rapidly that staff at a senior living center had to push dozens of residents in wheelchairs and hospital beds down the street to a parking lot. The residents — one as old as 102 — waited there in their bedclothes as the night sky glowed red from flames and embers fell around them until ambulances, buses and even construction vans arrived to take them to safety.

FASTFACT

The causes of all three fires were under investigation.

Another blaze that started hours earlier ripped through the city's Pacific Palisades neighborhood, a hillside area along the coast dotted with celebrity residences and memorialized by the Beach Boys in their 1960s

hit "Surfer" USA." In the frantic haste to get to safety, roadways became impassable when scores of people abandoned their vehicles and fled on foot, some toting suitcases. A third wildfire started around 10:30 p.m. and quickly prompted evacuations in Sylmar, a San Fernando Valley community that is the northernmost neighborhood in Los Angeles. The causes of all three fires were under investigation.

مَنْ يَنْتَظِرُ أَنْ تُنْزَعَ لَهُ وَغَةُ الْأَسْفَادِ
قَدْ بَقِيَ مُكَيَّلًا مَدَى الْقَمَرِ
(العلامة السيد علي الأمين)

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB

He who waits for others to unshackle him may remain chained for life.

Sayyid Ali Al-Amin
(Contemporary Lebanese cleric)

Opinion

The GCC's 10 priorities in Syria

DR. ABDEL AZIZ ALUWAISHEG

The Gulf Cooperation Council has been among the first to respond positively to the changing conditions in Syria. Held just days after the first major incursion by the rebels into areas controlled by the Assad regime, the GCC's annual summit witnessed extensive discussions on the developments. The summit's Dec. 1 communique spelled out some of its concerns at the time.

Over the past several weeks, the GCC has articulated several priorities in Syria.

First is the need for all to respect Syria's sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity. In practice, this means ending outside interference in its internal affairs and allowing the Syrian people to sort out their differences. Israel has to refrain from attacking Syria, Iran has to stop meddling, Russia has to respect the wishes of the new rulers and Turkiye and the US have to defer to Damascus on settling the Kurdish issue in northeastern Syria.

Second, the GCC will support an

inclusive transition, away from the Assad era's divisive and sectarian politics. Syria should celebrate its rich cultural diversity, while avoiding the confessional or ethnicity-based power-sharing systems that have plagued some of its neighbors for decades, allowing fair and meaningful merit-based participation for all.

Third, the GCC supports Syria's decision to dissolve all militias and armed groups, ensuring that only government forces are allowed to bear arms, while upholding the rule of law and providing protection for all.

Fourth, the Gulf bloc believes that Syria's security is integral to regional security and hence has welcomed statements by the new rulers that the country will no longer pose a threat to its Arab neighbors and will instead contribute positively to regional peace and security.

Fifth, the GCC applauded statements that Damascus would engage positively with the international community and with the Arab world, thus reversing Bashar Assad's disregard for the UN and the Arab League.

Sixth, the GCC is ready to work with international partners to support



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stabilization and early recovery, which needs to be done urgently. The war in Syria has wreaked havoc on its economy and people's livelihoods: gross domestic product declined from \$68 billion when the war started in 2011 to \$9 billion 10 years later — an 87 percent drop. Much of Syria's infrastructure lies in ruins, including roads, electricity, schools, hospitals and homes.

Gulf states have rushed relief supplies to Syria, but that only goes so far. The GCC is calling for an international conference to mobilize resources to provide humanitarian and development aid. Equally important, the conference should provide technical assistance to rebuild state institutions.

Seventh, the GCC recognizes the need for the safe, voluntary and orderly return of refugees and internally displaced persons to their homes. Next to the killings and injury of hundreds of thousands, displacement has been the cruelest feature of the war. In total, more than 12 million people have been made homeless, about 52 percent of Syria's population of 23 million.

The pace of their return will depend on how fast security and basic services are restored and infrastructure is repaired.

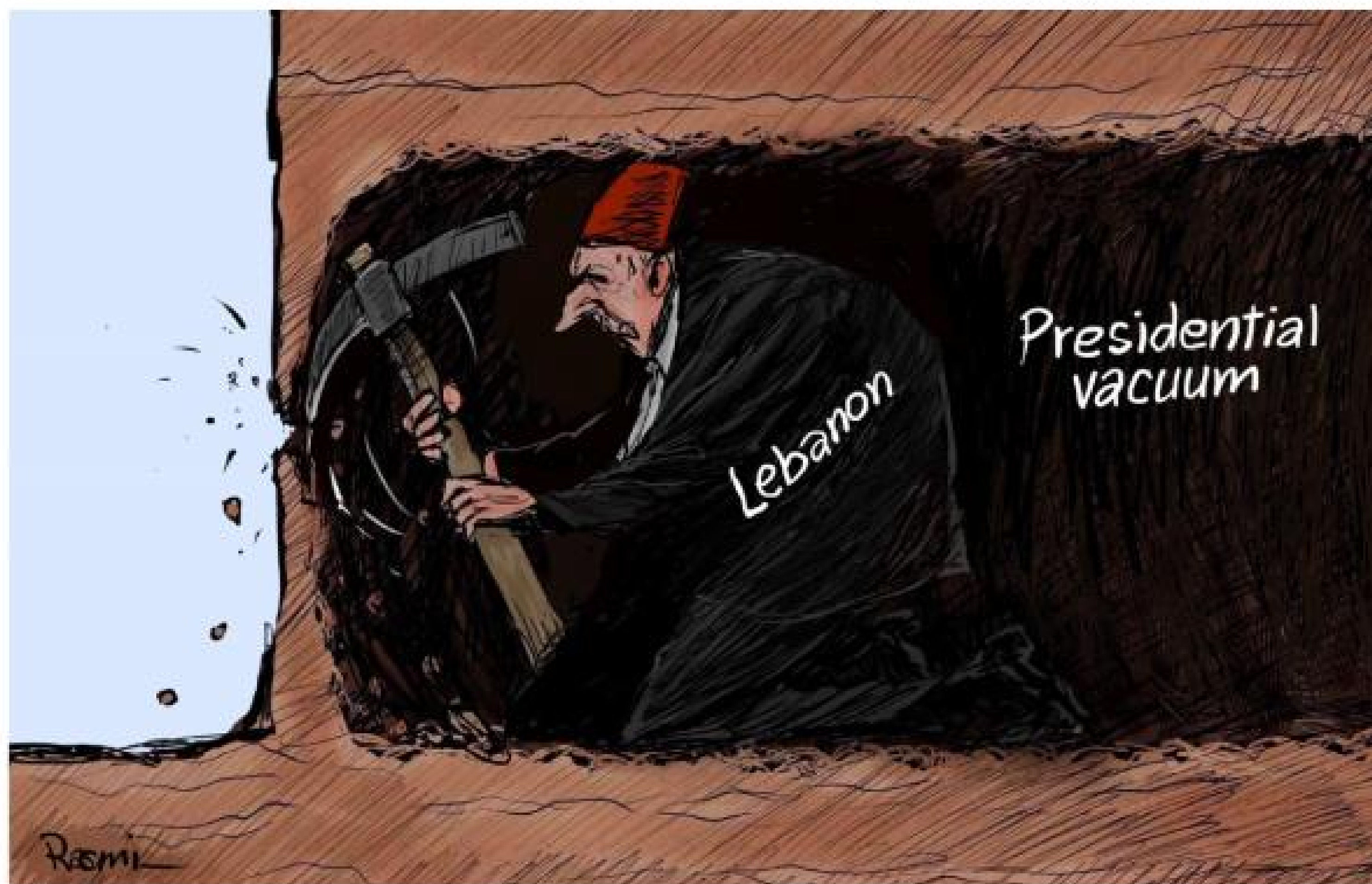
Eighth, the GCC expressed support for the UN secretary-general's call for a new mission to assist Syria in transitioning to normality after the devastation of the 13-year war. This process can be more productive by being Syrian-led.

Ninth, the GCC has called on the international community to do its bit to help Syria open a new page and prevent a return to the chaos of the civil war. This includes lifting sanctions and providing substantial funds for stabilization, early recovery and for encouraging the private sector to resume its indispensable economic role. The global community should work with the new authorities to combat terrorism and prevent a resurgence of Daesh.

Finally, the GCC supports the regional reintegration of Syria, so that it can play a constructive role in restoring peace and security, instead of being an agent for destabilization and mischief during decades of self-induced estrangement from its neighbors.

First is the need for all to respect Syria's sovereignty, political independence and territorial integrity

COURTESY: AHMAD RASHID/ASHARQ AL-AWSAT



Israel is revealing its real intention. It never wanted a two-state solution. It wants to maintain the status quo forever

Is a one-state solution the way to peace?

DR. DANIA KOLEILAT KHATIB

It has been reported this week that Israel has objected to the nomination of former Finnish Foreign Minister Pekka Haavisto as the UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East. Its objection came for two reasons. The first is his proximity to Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, who Tel Aviv considers to be anti-Israel, and the second is because he advocates a two-state solution.

For decades, Israel has been claiming it seeks a two-state solution, but it always found reasons not to pursue one. Now, Israel is revealing its real intention. It never wanted a two-state solution. It wants to maintain the status quo forever. In the meantime, it continues its land grab. Now that it is vocal in its real intentions, it is time to push for a one-state solution.

The issue of Palestine has been lingering for 80 years. Israel has refused all solutions offered, while accusing Arabs and Palestinians of being rejectionists. Now it is

bluntly saying that it does not want a two-state solution. It is time to impose a long-term solution that will bring dignity and freedom for everyone from the river to the sea.

Today, a Palestinian state is impossible to realize, given that settlements are scattered all over the West Bank. A Palestinian state would mean a set of Bantustans inside the West Bank. It would not be a viable state that offered dignity to its citizens.

A one-state solution is more feasible than a two-state solution. Israel has created a new reality on the ground where a two-state solution is impossible. However, the status quo is also impossible to maintain, especially after Israel's war on Gaza, which amounts to genocide.

The solution is forming a single state, thereby allowing for the free movement of goods and people from Palestine and giving them political representation.

For the Trump administration, this



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would cater to the US evangelicals, who are the core base of the president-elect. For ideological reasons, the evangelicals want Israel to have full sovereignty over all of historic Palestine.

In return, Palestinians would become citizens of Israel and enjoy the same rights as Israelis. The name of the new state can be agreed upon later.

The Palestinians are under Israeli military rule today and do not have any rights. They are occupied by Israel, while Israelis live under civilian rule. A one-state solution would allow Palestinians to have their rights and to have political representation within the state of Israel, similar to the 2 million Palestinians who already have Israeli citizenship.

The Israelis have long opposed a Palestinian state because of the potential security risk it would entail. In the Israeli psyche, living on their own, the Palestinians would organize violent attacks

against Israel. Hence the security complex they have. However, when the state becomes theirs as well, there would be no reason to fight it.

Israel might very well reject this solution the same way it rejected the previous initiatives. This solution would provide them with security; however, it would also dilute the so-called Jewishness of the state. Israel's chauvinists would not want to one day see a Palestinian prime minister of Israel.

However, Israel needs to be pressured to make a choice. In this respect, it should be offered an alternative. The one-state solution is a viable alternative to the two-state solution. Five million Palestinians cannot remain stateless. The Israelis need to understand that they either give the Palestinians a viable state of their own or they integrate them within their state. If the Israelis refuse, they will show the world that they are the rejectionists.

Inflation should continue falling in 2025 and allow the US Federal Reserve to further reduce interest rates.
Christopher Waller
US Federal Reserve board governor



Business

INVESTMENT

KSA grants 36k investment permits, exceeds Vision 2030 target

Wholesale and retail trade sectors lead surge in new licenses

Nirmal Narayanan Riyadh

Saudi Arabia has now issued more than 36,000 investment licenses, a five-fold rise compared to the overall active permits before the launch of Vision 2030.

According to the government-backed Invest Saudi platform, the Kingdom witnessed an 118 percent growth in entrepreneurial license issuance in 2024 compared to the previous year, while permits in the wholesale and retail trade sector increased by 123 percent during the same period.

The Kingdom launched the Invest Saudi initiative to attract foreign direct investment by offering incentives, streamlining regulatory processes, and facilitating partnerships.

As part of this, the Kingdom updated its investment law in August to ensure enhanced protections for international investors, including adherence to the rule of law, fair treatment, and property rights, while ensuring robust safeguards for intellectual property and facilitating smooth fund transfers.

"Saudi Arabia is growing steadily in achieving remarkable milestones and attracting investments, exceeding the targets of Saudi Vision 2030 with exceptional results in license issuance and the growth of promising sectors," said Invest Saudi on X.

It added that the most licensed sectors since the launch of Vision 2030 are manufacturing, construction, professional and scientific, as well as wholesale and retail trade, and information and



The Kingdom launched the Invest Saudi initiative to attract foreign direct investment by offering incentives. File

communication technology.

Invest Saudi further said that the Kingdom has surpassed its regional headquarters target outlined in the Vision 2030 program, as more than 500 international firms have established their Middle Eastern base in the country.

The Kingdom's regional headquarters program provides benefits for international firms,

FASTFACTS

- The Kingdom witnessed an 118 percent growth in entrepreneurial license issuance in 2024 compared to the previous year.
- More than 500 international firms have established their Middle Eastern base in Saudi Arabia.

including a 30-year exemption from corporate income tax and withholding tax on headquarters activities for companies, as well as discounts and support services.

Some of the major companies that have launched their regional headquarters in Saudi Arabia include US-based multinational investment banks Morgan Stanley and Citi Group, as well as

BlackRock Inc., Northern Trust, Bechtel, and PepsiCo.

Invest Saudi is supporting the Kingdom's National Investment Strategy, which is aiming to increase FDI by more than 20x from SR17 billion (\$4.5 billion) in 2019 to SR388 billion in 2030.

It is also targeting increasing investment from 22 percent of GDP in 2019 to 30 percent by the end of the decade.

FINANCES

PIF invests \$200m in State Street's Saudi ETF

Miguel Hadchity Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund has invested \$200 million in the newly launched SPDR J.P. Morgan Saudi Arabia Aggregate Bond UCITS exchange-traded fund.

In a press release issued on Wednesday, State Street Global Advisers, the US-based asset manager behind the ETF, called it the first fixed-income UCITS ETF focused on the Kingdom to launch in Europe.

The ETF launch further underscores PIF's strategy to enhance international access to Saudi Arabia's diversified market and attract foreign investment.

"PIF's investment into the

FASTFACT

This index provides exposure to the Kingdom's financial instruments, including liquid dollar- and SR-denominated government and quasi-government bonds, as well as sukuk bonds.

first internationally listed fixed-income Saudi ETF further deepens the Saudi market, while attracting investors and strengthening cross-geography partnerships, increasing international investment in Saudi Arabia," said Yazeed Al-Humied, deputy governor and head of Middle East and North Africa Investments at PIF.

Listed on the London Stock Exchange and Deutsche Borse's Xetra in Frankfurt, the new fund tracks the J.P. Morgan Saudi Arabia Aggregate Index. This index provides exposure to the Kingdom's financial instruments.

VISION 2030

Saudi Arabia's M&A approvals surge 17.4% to reach record high

Reem Walid Riyadh

Saudi Arabia saw a 17.4 percent surge in mergers and acquisitions approvals in 2024, reflecting the Kingdom's efforts to strengthen its competitive business environment.

The General Authority for Competition approved 202 economic concentration requests — the highest number in its history — with 10 additional applications still under review, according to its annual report.

Economic concentration approvals are required for mergers and acquisitions to ensure they do not create monopolies or disrupt

market competition.

The surge in approvals aligns with GAC's goal of implementing competition-enhancing policies, combating illegal monopolistic practices, and improving market performance to boost consumer and business confidence, attract investment, and promote sustainable development.

Saudi Arabia's surging mergers and acquisitions market comes against a global backdrop of decline in the industry, with a GlobalData report released in December showing worldwide deal volume dropped 8.7 percent year on year in the first 11 months of 2024 — with the Middle East and

Africa region seeing a relatively modest 5 percent decline.

Acquisition deals dominated approvals in the Kingdom at 81 percent, followed by joint ventures at 15 percent, and mergers at just 2 percent, the report showed.

The manufacturing sector led in activity, accounting for 67 of the approved requests, followed by the information and communications sector with 39, and wholesale and retail trade, along with motor vehicle and motorcycle repairs, with 22.

Foreign companies also showed significant interest in the manufacturing sector, which

HIGHLIGHTS

- Acquisition deals dominated approvals in the Kingdom at 81 percent, followed by joint ventures at 15 percent, and mergers at just 2 percent.
- The manufacturing sector led in activity, accounting for 67 of the approved requests, followed by the information and communications sector with 39.
- Foreign companies also showed significant interest in the manufacturing sector, which claimed 28 percent of their concentration requests.

claimed 28 percent of their concentration requests, followed by information and communications at 17 percent, and wholesale and retail trade at 15 percent.

GAC noted a growing diversity in market activity, with requests received in emerging sectors like off-road tires, nicotine replacement therapy manufacturing, and industrial protective coatings.

The Kingdom led the Middle East in mergers and acquisitions in the chemicals sector during the first quarter of 2024, closing deals worth \$500 million.

Additionally, the authority approved four new car agency registrations during the year and

analyzed 53 percent of concentration requests based on horizontal relationships between entities operating within the same sector. Vertical and cluster relationships accounted for 16 percent and 31 percent of reviews, respectively.

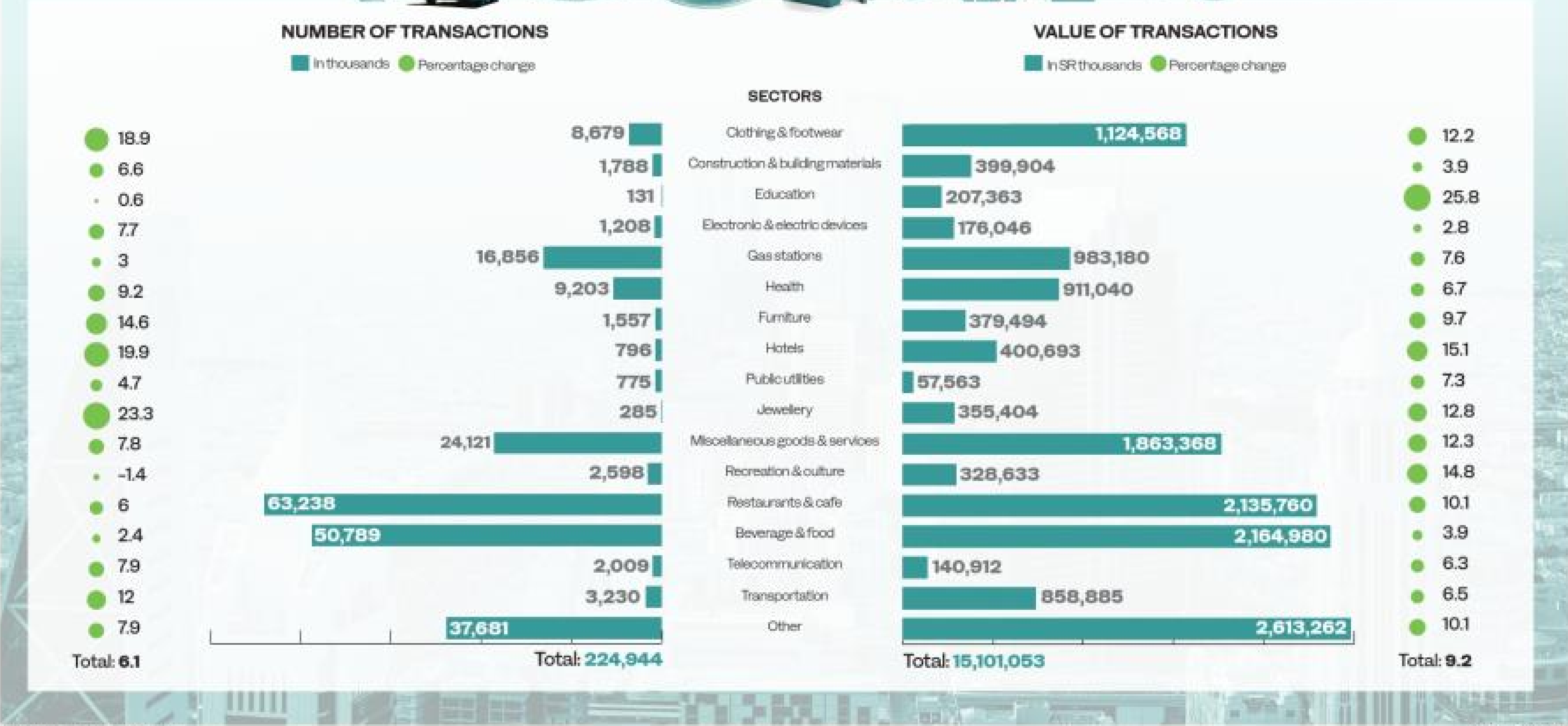
The surge in approvals aligns with Vision 2030, which aims to create a business-friendly environment that attracts foreign investment and supports sectoral growth.

As Saudi Arabia strengthens its regulatory and economic frameworks, the surge in merger approvals reflects its ambition to establish itself as a regional hub for business and investment.

Business Saudi Arabia

Transaction trends: A weekly snapshot of Saudi Arabia's point-of-sale activity

WEEK ENDING ON JAN. 4, 2025



Source: Saudi Central Bank

ARAB NEWS

SAMA DATA

Saudi education spending jumps 25%, pushing digital transactions to \$4bn

Hotel sector saw the second-largest gain at 15.1 percent to SR400.6 million

Miguel Hadchity Riyadh

Spending by parents of schoolchildren in Saudi Arabia boosted card transactions to SR207.3 million (\$55.2 million) between Dec. 29 and Jan. 4, marking a 25.8 percent increase compared to the previous week.

The surge came as students prepare to return to schools following the mid-year break, which ends on Jan. 12.

According to the weekly point-of-sale transactions bulletin, this sector recorded the largest positive change over the seven-day period. It also witnessed growth in terms of the number of transactions, edging up by 0.6 percent to reach 131,000.

Overall, Saudi Arabia's POS spending registered a weekly increase of 9.2 percent, reaching SR15.1 billion, up from SR13.8 billion the week before. Figures from the Kingdom's central bank showed that the hotel sector saw the second-largest gain at 15.1 percent to SR400.6 million.

Spending on recreation and culture followed, recording a 14.8 percent uptick to SR328.6 million.

Transactions on jewelry recorded an increase of 12.8 percent to reach SR355.4 million,



The Saudi education sector also witnessed growth in terms of number of transactions, surging by 0.6 percent to reach 131,000. AFP/File

and expenditure on construction and building materials surged by 3.9 percent to SR399.9 million.

Similarly, spending on food and beverages also grew 3.9 percent to SR2.16 billion, claiming the biggest share of the total POS value.

Expenditure in restaurants and cafes followed, recording a 10.1

percent increase to SR2.13 billion.

Spending on miscellaneous goods and services accounted for the third biggest POS share, with a 12.3 percent uptick, reaching SR1.8 billion.

Transactions in the leading three categories accounted for approximately 40.8 percent or SR6.1 billion of the week's total

value.

At 2.8 percent, the smallest increase occurred in spending on gas electronics, leading total payments to reach SR176 million.

Expenditures on transportation increased by 6.5 percent to SR140 million, while spending on public utilities surged by 7.3 percent to reach SR57.5 million.

Geographically, Riyadh dominated POS sales, representing around 33.8 percent of the total, with expenses in the capital reaching SR5.1 billion — a 7 percent decrease from the previous week.

Jeddah followed with a 13.1 percent surge to SR2.1 billion, and Dammam came in third at SR755

million, up 8.5 percent.

Buraidah experienced the most significant surge in spending, increasing 13.5 percent to SR358.7 million.

Tabuk and Abha recorded increases of 5.5 percent and 9.4 percent, reaching SR285.3 million and SR170.5 million, respectively.

Makkah and Jeddah saw the largest increases in terms of number of transactions, surging 11 percent and 8.5 percent, respectively, to 9.6 million and 27.4 million transactions.

SAMA's Mada scheme aims to promote digital payments in the country, particularly in supporting e-commerce, point-of-sale, and ATM growth. Connected directly to the cardholder's bank account, Mada enables real-time, secure, and reliable transactions for various purposes such as purchasing, cash withdrawals, and electronic payments.

This initiative is part of Vision 2030, which strives to develop Saudi Arabia's digital payment infrastructure to encourage a cashless economy, expand financial inclusion, and drive sector innovation. The electronic retail industry in Saudi Arabia is rapidly growing, driven by technological advancements, high mobile and internet penetration rates, and a young, tech-savvy population.



Mordor Intelligence forecasts that Oman's residential real estate sector will grow at a compound annual rate of 9.19 percent. AFP/File

REAL ESTATE

Oman's property market grows 28% to reach \$8.13bn

Government reforms, foreign investment drive sector's expansion

Nirmal Narayanan Riyadh

Oman's real estate market continued its upward momentum in 2024, with transaction values surging by 28.1 percent year on year, reaching 3.13 billion Omani rials (\$8.13 billion) by November, according to official data.

Figures from the National Center for Statistics and Information revealed that sales contracts in the sector increased by 3.1 percent annually, totaling 1.1 billion rials for the same period.

The number of transactions also rose by 1.9 percent, reaching 61,552 deals, as reported by Oman News Agency.

This strong performance

reflects growing optimism in Oman's property market. Market intelligence firm Mordor Intelligence forecasts that the residential real estate sector will grow at a compound annual rate of 9.19 percent, expanding from \$4.38 billion in 2024 to \$6.8 billion by 2029.

To support the sector's growth, the Omani government has introduced various initiatives, such as relaxing property ownership regulations for foreign investors and providing tax incentives for real estate developers.

Oman's population reached 5.27 million in January 2025, with expatriates comprising over 43 percent of the total, or 2.28 million people. This significant expatriate presence has been crucial in driving demand for both residential and commercial properties,

HIGHLIGHTS

• Sales contracts in the sector increased by 3.1 percent annually, totaling 1.1 billion rials.

• Data indicated a 44.8 percent year-on-year increase in the value of mortgage contracts.

• Swap contracts also saw growth, with 1,223 deals by the end of November.

particularly in urban centers.

Oman Vision 2040, the country's long-term development strategy, emphasizes the importance of sustainability and innovation in shaping the future of the real estate market.

Further data from NCSI indicated a 44.8 percent

year-on-year increase in the value of mortgage contracts, which reached 2.1 billion rials in the first 11 months of 2024.

However, the number of mortgage contracts decreased by 12.2 percent, falling from 21,461 to 18,846 in the same period. Swap contracts also saw significant growth, with 1,223 deals valued at 12.4 million rials by the end of November, marking an 18.1 percent increase compared to 2023.

Meanwhile, the total number of property issuances stood at 210,483 by November 2024, reflecting a slight 3.4 percent decline compared to the same period in the previous year. Notably, properties issued to citizens of the Gulf Cooperation Council countries saw a 6.8 percent annual increase, reaching 1,325 units.

EXPANSION

ADNOC L&S acquires 80% of Navig8 for \$1.04bn

Nour El-Shaeri Riyadh

UAE's ADNOC Logistics and Services boosts its global position with the \$1.04 billion acquisition of an 80 percent stake in Navig8 TopCo Holdings Inc., strengthening its status as a prominent player in energy maritime

transportation.

The transaction also includes a contractual commitment to acquire the remaining 20 percent by mid-2027, positioning ADNOC L&S for expanded global operations and increased shareholder value.

Navig8, a prominent international shipping pool operator and commercial management company, brings a modern-owned fleet of 32 tankers and an established presence in 15 cities across five continents.

"The completion of this landmark acquisition is a significant milestone in our transformational growth strategy," said Abdulkareem Al-Masabli, CEO of ADNOC L&S.

"By integrating Navig8's extensive fleet and global presence, we can enhance our service offerings,

generating substantial value for customers and shareholders. This strategic move unlocks new opportunities for commercial growth and expansion into new markets, reinforcing our position as a leading global energy maritime logistics company," he added. The remaining 20 percent will be acquired in 2027 for deferred consideration ranging from \$335 million to \$450 million, depending on earnings before

This strategic move unlocks new opportunities for commercial growth and expansion into new markets.

Abdulkareem Al-Masabli
ADNOC L&S CEO



The acquisition is expected to deliver immediate financial benefits, with ADNOC L&S projecting a 20 percent increase in earnings per share by 2025 compared to 2024.

interest, taxes, depreciation, and amortization performance during the interim.

Nicolas Busch, CEO of Navig8, expressed enthusiasm for the deal, stating, "We are excited to join forces with ADNOC L&S and the wider ADNOC Group. This achievement highlights the exceptional efforts of the Navig8 team over the past two decades, setting the stage for this next phase."

BizBriefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Household sector

China expands consumer trade-in scheme

China added more home appliances to the list of products that can be used in its consumer trade-in scheme and will offer subsidies for additional digital goods this year.

Microwave ovens, water purifiers, dishwashing machines and rice cookers will be included in the trade-in scheme for home appliances this year, according to a document issued by the top state planner and the Finance Ministry on Wednesday. Cellphones, tablet computers, smart watches and bracelets under 6,000 yuan could get 15 percent subsidies. **Reuters**

Investment

UK investors add \$34bn to stocks in 2024

UK investors added a record £27.2 billion (\$34 billion) to their stock holdings in 2024, funds network Calastone said on Wednesday, as a surge in investments in index-tracker funds dominated.

The net inflows into equities topped the previous highest mark of £19.8 billion set in 2021, with surging inflows into passive products behind the jump, up from £8 billion of inflows in 2023.

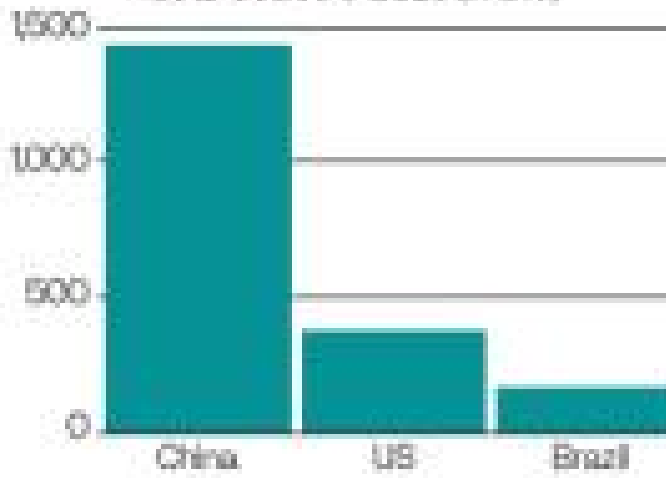
The popularity of index-tracking products offered by the likes of US investment giants BlackRock and Vanguard has been reshaping the investment industry **Reuters**

Chart of THE DAY

In 2023, China recorded the highest installed renewable energy capacity globally.

Source: Statista

RENEWABLE ENERGY CAPACITY 2023 (in GW)



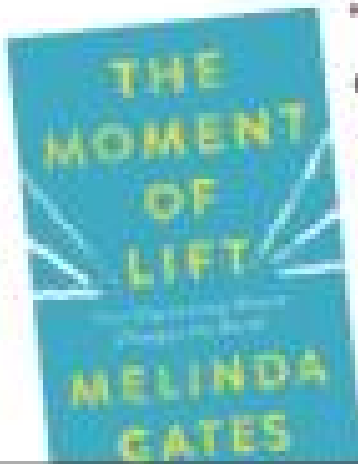
What We're Reading

FOR THE TRAIN OR ON THE PLANE

The Moment of Lift

MELINDA FRENCH GATES

In this candid and inspiring book, Melinda Gates traces her awakening to the link between women's empowerment and the health of societies, says a review published on goodreads.com.



She shows some of the tremendous opportunities that exist right now to "turbo-charge" change. And she provides simple and effective ways each one of us can make a difference.

Economy

German industrial orders, retail sales drop

German industrial orders and retail sales unexpectedly fell in November, reigniting recession fears after the eurozone's largest economy barely grew in the third quarter.

Industrial orders declined 5.4 percent from the previous month on a seasonally and calendar adjusted basis, the federal statistics office said on Wednesday.

Analysts polled by Reuters had forecast no change. Carsten Brzeski, global head of macro at ING, said weak order books and still-high inventories did not bode well for industrial production over the coming months. **Reuters**

Bullion

Gold up as focus shifts to US jobs report

Gold prices edged up on Wednesday, as focus shifted to a key US jobs report due later this week that could influence the Federal Reserve's rate path.

Spot gold rose 0.1 percent at \$2,653.04 per ounce, as of 0844 GMT. US gold futures remained unchanged at \$2,666.70.

Keeping gains in check, the US dollar stood tall on Wednesday after strong US data drove a spike in yields and pared some bets on Federal Reserve rate cuts.

US job openings rose to 8.098 million in November, surpassing forecasts. **Reuters**

We are proud to support the Kingdom's Vision 2030 and to contribute to the development of a more robust mental health ecosystem.

Abdallah Hamed
GM and Head of Human Pharma
SAGEA at Boehringer Ingelheim



Corporate

PRESS RELEASES FROM THE WORLD OF BUSINESS AND COMMERCE

VIBRANT DESTINATION

Radisson offers gateway to Antananarivo's charm

Antananarivo, the capital of Madagascar, blends rich history, cultural diversity, and modernization. Known for its hills adorned with traditional Malagasy houses and colorful market stalls, the city's charm is captivating. Among its most dynamic areas is the Tana Waterfront District, a centerpiece of the city's evolution, combining commerce, entertainment and luxury living along the serene Lake Masay.

In this vibrant district stand the Radisson Blu and Radisson Tamboho Hotel Antananarivo Waterfront. Owned by local stakeholders Feride and Eric Hassanaly of Tals Group and



The Radisson Blu Hotel Antananarivo Waterfront epitomizes modern sophistication and Malagasy hospitality, and offers a gateway to explore the city.

managed under the prestigious Radisson brand, these hotels epitomize modern sophistication and Malagasy hospitality. They offer a gateway to explore both

the cultural richness of Antananarivo and the cosmopolitan vibrancy of the Tana

Waterfront, making them ideal for explorers and business travelers alike.

Located near the Ankorondrano business district, Radisson Blu Antananarivo Waterfront is a serene retreat for professionals and leisure travelers. Combining contemporary design with comfort, it offers stylish rooms and thoughtful amenities,

ensuring productivity and relaxation. The hotel features a range of accommodations, from standard rooms to the opulent

presidential suite, each thoughtfully decorated with modern sophistication. Guests enjoy seamless service, making the Radisson Blu a perfect blend of luxury and practicality.

Beyond its rooms, the hotel offers inviting spaces for work and connection, excellent dining options, and attentive service, creating an environment where guests can recharge, connect, and thrive. The signature restaurant Firelake is a grill house and seafood haven that invites diners on a captivating sensory journey. Located on the eighth floor, it offers stunning views and a warm, vibrant atmosphere.



EMPOWERING LOCAL FARMERS

'Sip of Excellence Competition' to recognize Saudi's best brews

The Saudi Coffee Company, wholly owned by the Public Investment Fund, has launched its second annual Saudi Sip of Excellence Competition, where Saudi coffee farmers will compete for a grand total prize pool of SR240,000 (\$63,910).

Held in partnership with the global nonprofit Alliance for Coffee Excellence, the competition is designed to educate, empower, and reward coffee farmers from Saudi Arabia's southern region. This year, entrants from Jazan, Baha, Muhayil Asir and Rijal Almaa will get a platform to showcase their finest green coffee and brews, to a panel of international judges from Alliance for Coffee Excellence, whose experts hail from leading markets like Brazil, Nicaragua, the UK and US, Canada, Belgium, Australia, and Japan.

Through careful inspection and evaluation of a 25-kg sample from each contender over a one-month period, the jury will select 12 winners from the participating cities. The prizes for the top three positions in each city are: SR25,000 for first place, SR15,000 for second place and SR10,000 for third place. The competition will also award cash prizes to the fourth- and fifth-place



This year, entrants from Jazan, Baha, Muhayil Asir and Rijal Almaa will get a platform to showcase their finest green coffee and brews.

winners from each city, encouraging meaningful widespread participation.

In addition to monetary rewards, the competition connects winners with larger

markets through new networks to importers, exporters, auctions, showcases, and outlets.

"This year marks a significant expansion for the competition," said Khalid N. Abu Theeb, CEO

of Saudi Coffee Company. "With the involvement of more cities, more farmers, and a greater focus on every aspect of production, we hope events like this will help elevate quality Saudi coffee on the global stage while empowering our local farmers."

By helping Saudi farmers reach global industry standards for high quality coffee, the competition supports Saudi Coffee Company's efforts to empower the wider sector.

After careful examination of their crop, farmers can engage with industry experts to receive constructive feedback on factors such as soil and water quality, implementing the right fertilizer, picking and pruning practices, securing tools and infrastructure, obtaining commercial records and licenses, and building out their websites, marketing, packaging, and branding.

With its focus on improving the quality of Arabica green coffee in the southern region, the competition is keen to identify the next great specialty Saudi coffees. Farmers wishing to participate should submit entry forms and 1-kg coffee samples — the last date of submission being Jan. 9. Selected farmers will be asked to submit a 25-kg sample by Jan. 18.

STRATEGIC COLLABORATION

Boehringer Ingelheim, SHC join forces to enhance mental health services in KSA

Boehringer Ingelheim, one of the world's leading pharmaceutical companies, signed a memorandum of understanding with the Saudi Health Council to reassess mental health policies and enhance related services in the Kingdom. The MoU was signed on Dec. 12, 2024 by Dr. Mushabab Al-Assiri, acting director general of health economics and policies at SHC, and Abdallah Hamed, general manager and head of

human pharma Saudi Arabia, Gulf and East Africa at Boehringer Ingelheim, during an official ceremony.

The strategic partnership serves as a platform for the exchange of global expertise to foster innovation and bring the latest research and mental health treatment models to the forefront of Saudi Arabia's mental health strategy. The agreement is a testament to the commitment of the

HIGHLIGHT

The partnership highlights the importance of collaboration between public and private sector entities to achieve common goals and advance national agendas.

SHC and the Saudi government to prioritize mental health in line with Vision 2030, which aims to improve healthcare services for the citizens and residents of the Kingdom.

Hamed said: "At Boehringer Ingelheim, we continuously look to strengthen our collaborative efforts with the public sector to create science-based solutions that support patients, their families and healthcare systems

in the communities we serve. Our most recent collaboration with the Saudi Health Council underscores our commitment to advancing mental health awareness, education, and treatment options in Saudi Arabia. We are proud to support the Kingdom's Vision 2030 and to contribute to the development of a more robust mental health ecosystem that addresses the needs of the community."

Corporate Briefs

THE BEST OF THE BEST

Annual Event AppGallery Gamers Cup concludes in Doha

AppGallery Gamers Cup delivered an unforgettable gaming spectacle as gaming enthusiasts from across the region gathered for the first time at the Dusit Doha Hotel for an exciting tournament. With a prize pool of \$20,000, the event was a landmark celebration of gaming talent, strategy, and community.

The AGC — Top Battle Royale tournament, held under the guidance of Qatar Esports Federation, brought together top-tier players and passionate fans, offering an immersive experience that showcased AppGallery's commitment to fostering gaming excellence in the Middle East. The venue buzzed with energy as players competed for their share of the prize pool and the championship title.

Threat Protection Combating AI cyberthreats a priority: study

As concerns about the use of AI in cyberattacks increase, companies worldwide are racing to bolster their cybersecurity strategies, according to a Kaspersky survey.

In a new study, the cybersecurity company revealed that 93 percent of IT and information security professionals in Saudi Arabia expect the use of AI by malicious actors to escalate over the next two years. This growing threat is prompting organizations to prioritize cyber defense expertise, with many turning to cybersecurity vendors for specialized support and training.

Talent Development Egypt to equip youth with freelancing skills

Egypt's Information Technology Industry Development Agency has launched ITIDA Gigs, a new initiative designed to enhance the freelancing skills of young Egyptians. The program targets training and equipping 20,000 university students and fresh graduates, empowering them to succeed in the freelance market by improving their capabilities and increasing their chances of securing freelance opportunities.

The initiative comes in partnership with EYouth, an Egyptian edtech startup with a strong footprint across the Middle East and Africa.

Raphinha says Barcelona are determined to repay local fans for their support by winning the Supercopa de Espana in Jeddah.



Sport News

CRICKET

Fakhar Zaman eyes international return

Hundred percent, I will play for Pakistan again, says 34-year-old top-order powerhouse

Arab News Dubai

Pakistan top-order powerhouse Fakhar Zaman is getting ready for the DP World ILT20 with the Desert Vipers, but he believes he still has plenty to offer Pakistan.

The 34-year-old has not played for his country since the ICC T20 World Cup in June of 2024, but he told the Vipers Voices podcast he has not turned the page on his international career.

"Hundred percent I will play for Pakistan (again)," he said. "Actually, many people do not know about that, but after the T20 World Cup I got sick and because of the medical condition I was not fit, so I was not a part of the team.

"But now I recovered a 100 percent, and you will see me in the next international series which Pakistan plays."

The next major white-ball tournament for Pakistan is the ICC Champions Trophy 2025, hosted by Pakistan, and it is an event that in 2017 saw Zaman announce himself on the world stage, with a match-winning 100

against India in the final at The Oval in London.

"My plan has been around the Champions Trophy (in 2025)," he said. "I did not play in the Australia tour or in the South Africa tour, so my whole plan was just to play in the Champions Trophy to make myself available and to be fully fit for the tournament.

"That was in the back of my mind, and I am thankful, and I am lucky to be fit right now. I started from the Champions Trophy 2017 and that went really well for me and now I am very excited for the next edition also."

Incumbent Pakistan opener Saim Ayub was recently injured during Pakistan's tour to South Africa, potentially opening up a spot for Zaman. But the Pakistani batter said he expected to stay with the Desert Vipers for the whole tournament while wishing for Ayub's speedy recovery.

"I hope and I believe that he will recover quickly, and I was thinking yesterday to call Saim just to talk to him about this injury," he said. "Believe me, he is such a great player that if he continues to play for the next four to five years, he will be at the top and he will be amongst the top

FASTFACT

The 34-year-old has not played for his country since the ICC T20 World Cup in June of 2024, but he told the Vipers Voices podcast he has not turned the page on his international career.

three players in the world."

Zaman was a top target for the Desert Vipers' Director of Cricket Tom Moody for this year's tournament in the UAE, with the Australia ICC Cricket World Cup winner calling the left-hander "a true match-winner."

From Zaman's perspective, the opportunity to link up with the Desert Vipers required little thought.

"There are many Pakistani players who have played for the Desert Vipers including Shadab Khan, Shaheen Shah Afridi, Azam Khan and Mohammad Amir. And they talk really

Fakhar Zaman of the Desert Vipers has not given up on an international return with Pakistan. Supplied

highly about this team, the environment, the management, the way they play the cricket and the way their mindset is," he said.

"So, when I got the offer, without any discussion with anyone, I said 'yes, I would love to play for this team.'"

"I was really

excited and, to be honest, I was supporting this team even before

I was a part of this, so I am really excited to be here and I am very happy."

Zaman has more than 5,000 international runs and over 7,000 runs in Twenty20 cricket, but although he is best known as an opener, he has batted from one to six for Pakistan in the shortest international format.

And although he wants to open, he is willing to slot in anywhere. "Of course, my preference is always to open for any team, like if I play in the T20 matches or 50-over games, but you know it also depends on the team requirement," he said.

"In Pakistan we have three of the best players in the world in Babar Azam, Mohammad Rizwan and Saim Ayub, so sometimes I feel lucky to be in the team even if I am not able to make my place in the team as an opener.

"If the team has faith in me and they want me to bat at number four or five, so that totally makes sense, because for me the team is always first and I play wherever the team wants me to play, but I always prefer to open."

Looking ahead to the DP World ILT20, Zaman said that while he was relishing playing with every single member of the Vipers squad, there was one player in particular that he could not wait to line up alongside.

"I know he does not know about it, but I am very excited to play with Sherfane Rutherford because he is one of the best cricketers in the T20 format and I really enjoy seeing him batting," he said.

"I am very excited to be part of this team, and I want to share the crease with him. He is one of the best players, so I am very excited to play with that guy."

And as for the prospects for the team in the upcoming tournament, Zaman said he was confident the group would be successful.

"If you see our team, the team is very balanced," he said. "We have a good mix of young players and experienced players."





تقرير واشنطن

WASHINGTON REPORT

مع رنا أبتير



ترمب وتركة بايدن

يوم السبت | 8:00pm KSA

نضع النقاط

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Asharq News

"When I did "Midsommar," I definitely felt like I abused myself in the places that I got myself to go," Florence Pugh said of the psychological toll of the horror film during a recent interview on the 'Reign with Josh Smith' podcast.



& Finally

CLOSE UP

TheSix

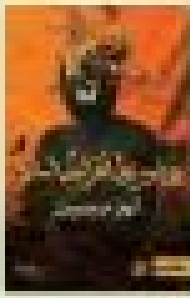
IPAF award

The 2025 International Prize for Arabic Fiction long list features 16 novels vying for the \$50,000 award.



'The Stolen Novel'

This novel is by Egyptian author and sports doctor Hasan Kamal writer who is known for his award-winning short stories like "Koshary Mistr" and "Traces on Glass."



'The Valley of the Butterflies'

The novel is by Iraqi writer Azher Jirjees. Renowned for his satirical style, he gained acclaim with his 2015 short story collection "Above the Land of Black."



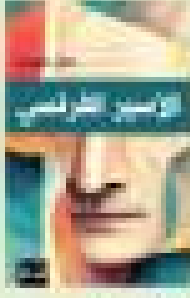
'Happy Dreams'

In addition to his book "Happy Dreams," Ahmed Al-Malawany, an award-winning Egyptian author, is known for "Zeus Must Die" and "The Fabrica."



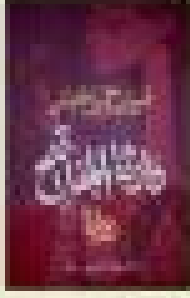
'My Life Has Just Begun'

Sumar Shihada, writer of this novel, is a Syrian author who won the Tayeb Salih Award for "Cornfields" (2016) and the Naguib Mahfouz Award for "Abandonment" (2021).



'The French Prisoner'

Jan Dost, author of "The French Prisoner," is a Syrian Kurdish poet and writer, known for novels in Kurmanji and Arabic, many of which explore the Syrian civil war.



'Heiress of the Keys'

This book is by Sausan Jamil Hasan, who is a Syrian novelist and doctor. She also authored "Silk of Darkness" and "The Scavengers."

Model Roz spotted on Netflix reality show

Arab News Dubai

Los Angeles-based Saudi Influencer Model Roz made a surprise appearance in season three of Netflix's gossip-filled drama show "Dubai Bling," which premiered on Jan.8.

The model, who goes by her online moniker and boasts 15.2 million Instagram followers, shared a short clip of her cameo on social media.

In the video, Mahira Abdel Aziz, the Emirati Egyptian newcomer to the show, introduced Roz to the cast, saying, "Ladies and gentlemen, all the way from LA ... Roz. We are happy to have her here in Dubai." Roz responded by bowing gracefully and thanking the cast for their warm welcome.

"Welcome to Dubai," added Zeina Khoury, a real estate agent and founder of the fashion brand I Am The Company. "It's my first time in Dubai, so all of you need to show me around," Roz replied with a smile.

The scene then shifted to Roz sitting with Loujain Adada as they had their makeup touched up.

Roz seized the moment to ask, "What happened the other day in the fitting? I heard your voices and sensed some stress." Adada brushed off the question, saying: "Stress? Nothing happened. I don't think it concerns you in any way, so don't worry."

Roz responded quickly, "Yes, I stay away from these things."

"I'm telling you now, don't be a gossip. I really hate that kind of stuff," Adada cautioned.

Roz clarified: "It's not my thing. I just wanted to make sure everything is okay."

The program has been praised by critics for its ability to attract a multicultural audience due to its diverse cast, as well as merging English and Arabic



dialogue, often in the same sentence.

Season three of "Dubai Bling" features a mix of returning cast members, new faces and notable departures. Familiar faces such as Adada, Khoury, Mona Kattan, Ebraheem Al-Samadi, Safa and Fahad Siddiqui, Farhana Bodi, Marwan Al-Awadhi (DJ Bliss), and Danya Mohammed return to share their glamorous lives.

Joining the cast are media personality Abdel Aziz and Iraqi singer and actress Jwana Karim.

Saudi TV presenter Lojain Omran, along with radio host Kris Fade and his wife Brianna Fade, have exited the show. Roz shot to fame in 2019 when she modeled for a Victoria's Secret's Pink campaign.

The model's Instagram feed is littered with photographs of her various advertising campaigns, as well as visits to many a product launch party — from NYX Cosmetics events to TikTok gatherings.



Model Roz, pictured at a previous event on the left, made a surprise appearance in season three of "Dubai Bling." File/ Getty Images and Instagram

LAVERNE

Georgina Rodriguez promotes Saudi collaboration

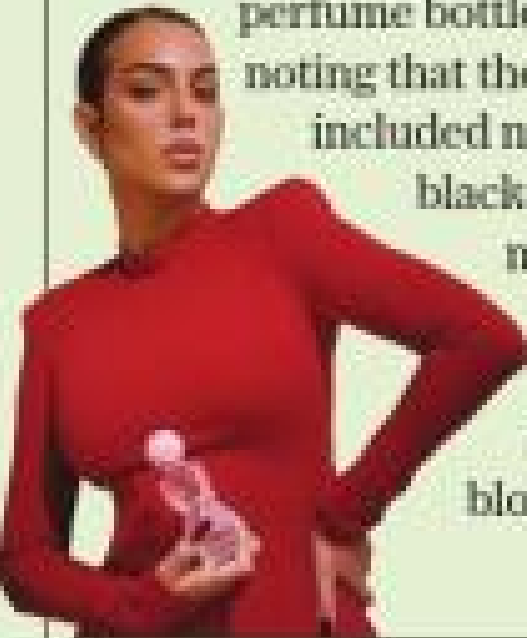
Arab News Dubai

Argentinian model and reality TV star Georgina Rodriguez took to Instagram to announce that her debut fragrance collaboration with Saudi perfume label Laverne is back in stock.

"SENSE my new perfume with Laverne is back in stock," she posted, alongside a photo of herself — dressed in an eye-catching red dress while holding the fragrance bottle.

On the official website, the label describes Sense as the result of a collaboration between Dalia Eiseem and Rodriguez that lasted more than a year and included the creation of more than 740 samples.

"Finally, Georgina chose the perfect combination that embodies all her feelings in a perfume bottle," it said, noting that the fragrance included notes of blackcurrant, mandarin, jasmine, cashmere and orange blossom.



RIISING STAR

Elyanna hypes up Coldplay show in Abu Dhabi

Arab News Dubai

Palestinian Chilean singer Elyanna is excited to open for British rockers Coldplay as they get ready to take to the stage in Abu Dhabi, on Jan. 9, 11, 12 and 14 at Zayed Sports City Stadium.

"Still can't believe I'm opening for @coldplay's Music of The Spheres tour. Abu Dhabi," she posted on Instagram.

"Yanna Merch coming your way soon," she added, crediting artists Nadine Ghannoum and Faidose.

Elyanna's formal introduction to Coldplay took place when she was invited to collaborate on their track, "We Pray."

INTERVIEW

Zuma Riyadh 'feels like a homecoming,' says Azumi Group CEO

Dalal Awlenat Dubai

Born in London, coveted Japanese restaurant Zuma opened its doors in Riyadh's King Abdullah Financial District mere weeks ago, with Azumi Group CEO Sven Koch telling Arab News that Saudi Arabia's capital city was chosen "because of its cultural importance to the Kingdom."

With 15 locations across the world, this marks Zuma's first outpost in the Kingdom — but

Saudi foodies are familiar with the luxury brand, Koch said.

"Since its inception in London in 2002, guests from Saudi Arabia have been one of the most loyal Zuma demographics from around the world. Bringing the Zuma experience to the Kingdom feels like a homecoming," he said.

With interactive sushi and robata counters offering a front-row view of the artistry and precision of Zuma's chefs, the Izakaya-style restaurant serves



A dish served up at Zuma Riyadh.

traditional Japanese dishes with a modern twist.

There are a few Riyadh-exclusive items on the menu. The Ajwa Date and Miso Toffee

Cake dessert comes with ginger crumble, poached pears, and sweet corn mochi ice cream.

Koch described the interior of Zuma Riyadh, saying it was "designed by renowned architect Noriyoshi Muramatsu.

"The space is a blend of Middle Eastern influences and Japanese design, creating an ambiance that is both locally inspired and globally sophisticated," he added.

In 2025, Riyadh will have several new glittering international restaurants including Latin

hotspot Amazonico, Japanese Peruvian eatery Chotto Matte and Italian dessert cafe Cipriani Dolci.

"This transformation has focused on fostering a more vibrant lifestyle, creating a bigger demand for world-class dining and flavors ... Zuma Riyadh's debut in the Kingdom is a testament to the growing demand for exceptional dining experiences while also catering to a clientele that values both tradition and innovation," said Koch.