

SPORT

ARAB TENNIS HERO ONS JABEUR
VOWS TO BOUNCE BACK

Page 15



OPINION

MULTIPOLARITY
REINFORCES GULF'S
POWERHOUSE
STATUS

By Zaid M. Belbagi
Page 9



SAUDI ARABIA

CHILL OUT RIYADH: FROM WILD WEST
THRILLS TO STARLIT NIGHTS Page 5

& FINALLY

LYNA KHOUDRI
URGES VOTING
AHEAD OF
CESAR
AWARDS

Page 16



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ARAB NEWS

The Voice of a Changing Region

Since 1975



Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan with top diplomats from the Middle East and Europe during Sunday's meetings in Riyadh on Syria. X/@KSAMOFA

'RIYADH MEETINGS ON SYRIA'

Saudi foreign minister calls for Syria sanctions to be lifted

Continuation of global curbs hinders aspirations of Syrians to rebuild their nation, says Prince Faisal

Lama Alhamawi Riyadh

Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan on Sunday called for the lifting of sanctions on Syria, saying the curbs hindered the country's rebuilding and development.

He made the call at a press briefing after high-level meetings on Syria in Riyadh.

"We stressed the importance of lifting unilateral and international sanctions imposed on Syria, as their continuation hinders the aspirations of the Syrian people to

achieve development and reconstruction," Prince Faisal said.

The Riyadh meetings on Syria were attended by representatives of a number of countries from the Middle East and beyond, including Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and Türkiye, as well as the UK and the US. Officials from the GCC, EU and UN also took part.

Recently appointed Foreign Minister Asaad Hassan Al-Shaibani represented Syria's leadership at the meeting.

In his remarks to the press, Prince Faisal said that participants welcomed the positive steps made by the new Syrian administration,

FAST FACT

The meetings in Riyadh were attended by representatives of a number of countries from the Middle East as well as the UK and the US. Officials from the GCC, EU and UN also took part.

such as embracing "joint dialogue and commitment to combat terrorism."

The Saudi foreign minister said the meeting sought to provide support and advice to the new leadership in a way that respects their independence and takes

into account that the future of the country is for the Syrian people.

"We also stressed the importance of continuing humanitarian and economic support in the field of the Syrian state achieving stability, reconstruction, and preparing the appropriate environment for the return of the Syrian refugees," he added.

Officials from the EU and Germany spoke about the state of sanctions imposed on the country.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock called for a "smart approach," saying: "Sanctions against Assad's

henchmen who committed serious crimes must remain in place."

Baerbock announced that Germany will spend €50 million (\$51.3 million) on humanitarian aid for Syria, and added: "The key to a safe Syria lies in the region, but first of all in the hands of all Syrians."

Saudi Arabia also condemned Israel's decision to expand settlements in the occupied Golan Heights and called on the global community to denounce Israeli violations of Syria's territorial integrity, reaffirming that the area is Syrian Arab land under occupation.

MASSIVE FIRE

15 killed in explosion at Yemen gas station

AP Cairo

An explosion at a gas station triggered a massive fire in central Yemen, killing at least 15 people, health officials said on Sunday.

The explosion occurred in the Zaher district in the province of Bayda, the Houthi-run Health Ministry said in a statement.

At least 67 others were injured, including 40 in critical condition.

The ministry said rescue teams were searching for those reported missing.

Footage online showed a massive fire that sent columns of smoke into the sky and left vehicles charred and burning.

FAST FACT

The explosion occurred in the Zaher district in the province of Bayda, the Houthi-run Health Ministry said.

Elsewhere in Bayda, the Houthis attacked and looted Hanaka Al-Masoud village in the Al-Qurayshiya district last week, according to the internationally recognized government.

Information Minister Moammar Al-Eryani said the attack came after a weeklong siege of the village.

"This horrific attack targeted citizens' homes and mosques and resulted in many casualties, including women and children," he said.

Rights activist Riyad Al-Dubai said the Houthis detained dozens of men and looted homes, seizing valuables such as gold, money, daggers, and other possessions.

The Brief

ROHINGYA CAUSE

Civil society groups are mobilizing to save more than 100 Rohingya refugees rescued off Sri Lanka last month. **P8**

INDUSTRIES GAIN

Saudi Arabia is distributing its \$2.66 billion standardized incentive program flexibly across industries to maximize impact, said a senior official. **P12**

BOXING MAGAZINE

Boxing Magazine is set for a new era under the stewardship of Turki Al-Sheikh, head of the General Entertainment Authority. **P15**

COMMITMENT

Islam seeks 'education for all, regardless of gender'

At a forum in Pakistan, MWL chief says women have 'active presence in all spheres of life'

Usama Iqbal Khawaja Islamabad

The head of the Muslim World League has reiterated the organization's commitment to women and girls' education, telling an international forum in Pakistan that "the message of Islam is to enlighten all, regardless of gender."

Speaking at the conference in Islamabad on Saturday, Dr. Mohammed Al-Issa, secretary-general of the MWL, said: "Our Islamic faith has always

celebrated the education of every Muslim, both male and female."

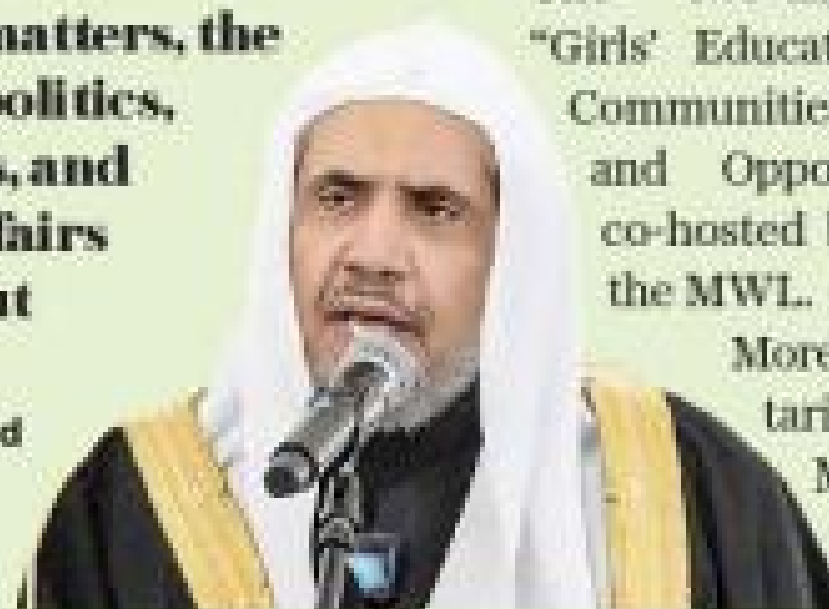
Any reservations about girls' education must be understood as stemming from non-Islamic customs that have no basis in the Muslim faith, he added.

Al-Issa told delegates attending the summit that anyone opposing education for women "deviates from the global Muslim community."

"Muslim women in Islam have had a significant and active presence in all spheres of life — in

Muslim women in Islam have had a significant and active presence in all spheres of life — in religious matters, the sciences, politics, economics, and societal affairs throughout history.

Dr. Mohammed Al-Issa



religious matters, the sciences, politics, economics, and societal affairs throughout history," he said.

The two-day conference, "Girls' Education in Muslim Communities: Challenges and Opportunities," was co-hosted by Pakistan and the MWL.

More than 150 dignitaries from 44 Muslim and other friendly states attended the

forum, which signed a consensus document reaffirming that Islam places no prohibition on women's education.

Detailed report Page 4

2 Riyals • Vol. L
No. 38 • 16 pages



At the Standard Incentives Program for the industrial sector, the Kingdom affirmed its commitment to providing an attractive and globally competitive investment environment that supports innovation.

Khalid Al-Falih

Saudi investment minister



Radar

KSA

today



Riyadh

Cake candle

Resa Perfumer's workshop shows participants how to make a candle in a cake mold and decorate it to look delicious. Held on Jan. 14. Join through experiences.suplift.com.



Jeddah

Ice skating

Enjoy the thrill of gliding on ice at Al-Shallal Theme Park's spacious skating rink, perfect for all skill levels. For booking details and more information, visit alshallal.com.sa.



Riyadh

Mosaic workshop

This two-hour art workshop will stimulate your creativity and add a new experience to your list. "Yalla Mosaic" will be held on Jan. 14. Join through experiences.suplift.com.



AlUla

Arts festival

Visit the AlUla Arts Festival for dynamic exhibitions, performances, workshops, talks, and curated programs at Al-Jadidah Arts District, showcasing renowned international and regional artists. Book through experiencealula.com.

TheRegister

THE PICTURES THAT MARK THE DAY



Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan met with his Egyptian counterpart Badr Abdelatty at the expanded ministerial meeting on Syria in Riyadh on Sunday.

During the meeting, they discussed cooperation and other topics of common interest, the Foreign Ministry wrote on X.

Meanwhile, Riyadh Gov. Prince Faisal bin Bandar received Mohamed Ramadhan Ruwange, ambassador-designate of Kenya to the Kingdom, in Riyadh on Sunday.

What's Trending

Today's hot topics explained by Afshan Aziz



FESTIVAL BUZZ

Rose



Paris is gearing up for an unforgettable musical evening as BTS' J-Hope, BlackPink's Rose, and BigBang's G-Dragon join an extraordinary lineup for the Gala des Pieces Jaunes 2025.

The event, traditionally held at the Accor Arena, will take place on Jan. 23 at the Paris La Defense Arena, Europe's largest indoor venue that has a seating capacity of 35,000.

The music festival will feature a mix of international talent, including Katy Perry, John Legend, Burna Boy, Gims, Lang Lang, Pretty Yende, and Orchestre Lamoureux Orchestra.

Rose is expected to deliver a mesmerizing solo performance. Following the release of her debut studio album, "Rosie," and its chart-topping collaboration with Bruno Mars, "APT," fans are eager to see her shine as a solo artist. Rose's previous Paris performances with BlackPink left fans with high expectations for her return to the city.

HEART OF GOLD

Angelina Jolie



As wildfires continue to wreak havoc across Southern California, Angelina Jolie has opened her doors to friends affected by the destruction.

The 49-year-old actress, known for her contributions to humanitarian causes, is providing refuge to those forced to evacuate their homes in the Los Angeles area.

The fires, which began in the Pacific Palisades on Jan. 7, have caused significant damage, destroying approximately 10,000 structures, including homes and offices, and displacing more than 80,000 residents.

Among those affected are several well-known figures, including Leighton Meester, Adam Brody, Anna Faris, Ricki Lake, Cary Elwes and Cameron Mathison.

A source revealed to

People magazine that Jolie had been deeply affected by the devastation and was doing her bit to help those in need.

"Angie is heartbroken for those who have lost their homes, or are impacted by the fires. She's doing everything she can to help, even opening her home to friends who were forced to evacuate."

Jolie and her son Knox were recently spotted near their Los Feliz home, buying essential supplies. In a video obtained by The Daily Mail, the actress was seen loading groceries and bottled water into her car.

She mentioned hosting evacuees at her home and expressed her commitment to aiding fire relief efforts.

When asked about potential donations, Jolie said: "Yeah, I will, right now I'm taking care of the people close to me and having them at my house."



Today's

Number

16m

According to the General Entertainment Authority, Riyadh Season 2024 recently surpassed 16 million visitors, achieving a new milestone, Saudi Press Agency reported.

Review

Kintan

TAMARA ABOALSAUD

Kintan is a lively Japanese BBQ restaurant perfect for families and friends alike situated in the Al-Wadi neighborhood of Riyadh.

A grill-it-yourself-style restaurant, Kintan brings out the meats for you to sear to your desired degree.

The restaurant is dressed in ambient warm lighting that creates a relaxing atmosphere without being too dark to detract from the fun or the visibility.

Kintan's menu offers a selection of a la carte meats topped with your choice of sauce — miso, sweet soya, spicy garlic, and others — as well as a selection of chicken, lamb, and seafood for those less beef-inclined.



The vegetables are the perfect light pairing to an otherwise meat-heavy meal, and they are grilled and dipped in sauce or butter as well.

The meat is fresh and tender, with a variety of cuts tailored to those who like thick, thin, or fatty strips. It is also highly recommended that you give your strips an additional dip into the provided sauces before or after grilling for extra flavor.

They additionally offer six types of sushi rolls including a California roll, crunchy spicy tempura, ebi roll, and more, as well as some rice and noodle dishes such as beef or vegetable bibimbap and chicken or vegetable garlic noodles.

TheRegion

The Middle East Roundup

Arab News Jeddah

Concept Big Brands Carnival is a shopping destination where more than 300 brands offer discounts of up to 75 percent. It is on at Dubai World Trade Centre from Jan. 13-17. More details on dwtc.com.

Coldplay's grand return to

Abu Dhabi continues. The final concert of the GCC leg of their Music of the Spheres World Tour will take place at Zayed Sports City on Jan. 14. Tickets are available at ticketmaster.ae.

"A way of surviving, a way of life ..." exhibition in Abu Dhabi showcases the film practice of Zineb Sedira spanning the years

2002 to 2022. The exhibition features four significant films from different stages of Sedira's career. Runs until March 8.

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 until Jan. 18.

Prayer Times in Saudi Arabia

Jan. 13	Fajr	Sunrise	Dhuhr	Asr	Maghreb	Isha
Makkah	5:41	7:00	12:30	3:36	5:58	7:28
Madinah	5:45	7:07	12:30	3:32	5:53	7:23
Riyadh	5:17	6:39	12:02	3:04	5:24	6:54
Abha	5:26	6:44	12:19	3:30	5:53	7:23
Dammam	5:08	6:29	11:48	2:47	5:07	6:37

Spotlight



Palestinian statehood is a prerequisite for peace, rather than its by-product.
Prince Faisal bin Farhan
 Minister of Foreign Affairs of Saudi Arabia

PROFILE

A 20-year statehood quest

Could we see a Palestinian state during Mahmoud Abbas' 20th year in office thanks to global coalition efforts?

Anan Tello,
 Robert Edwards London

As Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas marks 20 years in office, his leadership remains a complex chapter in the Palestinian national story, characterized by division, disillusionment, but also dogged determination.

Having succeeded Yasser Arafat in 2005, Abbas' tenure has been shaped by challenges that have profoundly impacted the Palestinian people, the pursuit of statehood, and the prospects for peace with Israel.

"Ever since taking office, President Abbas has focused all his attention on the realization of an independent Palestinian state using diplomatic and political means," Daoud Kuttub, an award-winning Palestinian journalist and author, told Arab News.

When Abbas assumed the presidency on Jan. 15, 2005, he inherited a fractured political landscape. Arafat's death in November 2004 left a void in Palestinian leadership, particularly given his unique ability to unite diverse factions under the umbrella of the Palestine Liberation Organization.

Abbas, known for his more pragmatic and diplomatic approach, was seen as a leader who could gain international credibility and potentially re-ignite peace talks with Israel. However, Arafat's departure also brought long-simmering divisions among Palestinians to the fore.

"Abbas followed a revolutionary leader in Yasser Arafat and had to confront an Islamic movement that is focused on armed resistance," said Kuttub, referring to the Palestinian militant group Hamas that controls Gaza.

"He attacked Hamas for their rocket attacks on Israel and has been silently disapproving of the Oct. 7, 2023, cross-border Hamas act that has caused huge loss of life as a result of the brutal Israeli revenge response."

The rivalry between Abbas' Fatah and Hamas escalated into a full-blown schism in 2007. Following a short conflict, Hamas seized control of Gaza, leaving the Fatah-dominated PA governing only parts of the West Bank.

This division has not only weakened the Palestinian cause but has also complicated efforts to present a unified front in negotiations with Israel.

Abbas began his presidency with optimism. His platform emphasized nonviolent resistance, institution-building, and a commitment to achieving a two-state solution through negotiations.

His efforts gained initial support from the international community, particularly the US



and the EU. The 2005 Israeli withdrawal from Gaza was seen as a potential breakthrough, despite being unilateral and limited.

However, hopes for progress soon faded. The victory of Hamas in the 2006 legislative elections, coupled with the failure to reach a consensus on governance, exacerbated divisions.

Meanwhile, peace talks with Israel stalled repeatedly over issues such as settlement expansion, security arrangements, and the status of Jerusalem.

The situation worsened after the 2008-09 Gaza war, further entrenching the divide between Hamas and Fatah. For many Palestinians, Abbas' commitment to negotiations began to appear futile, especially as Israel's settlement activity in the West Bank continued unabated.

Critics accused Abbas of

Since the global alliance for the two-state solution, above, was launched amid the Gaza war, bottom right, the push for Palestinian statehood, championed by Mahmoud Abbas, main, has gained momentum. AFP/Anadolu

presiding over a corrupt and ineffective administration, eroding public trust in the PA.

Efforts at reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas have repeatedly faltered, with each side blaming the other for the impasse.

The Oct. 7 attack and the war in Gaza have done little to heal the rift. On Saturday, Fatah issued a rare statement criticizing Hamas for sacrificing Palestinian interests for Iran and causing destruction in Gaza.

Fatah also condemned the Oct. 7 attack, rejecting Hamas' strategy of armed conflict, and accused it of seeking to incite

chaos in the West Bank.

Meanwhile, the future governance of Gaza remains uncertain as Israeli leaders debate involving the PA following the defeat of Hamas.

Despite his long absence from the Palestinian Territories in the UAE, Mohammed Dahlan, a former Gaza security chief who was blamed by some within Fatah for the loss of Gaza, has since been tipped as a potential leader of the enclave.

Fatah voted to expel Dahlan from the party in June 2011 after Abbas accused him of corruption and plotting against him — allegations Dahlan denied.

In spite of this history of division among the Palestinians, Abbas' administration has achieved some notable successes on the international stage, including securing Palestine's recognition as a non-member observer state at the UN.

However, Abbas' prolonged tenure has not been without controversy. Now aged 89, he has faced growing criticism for failing to hold elections since 2006, effectively extending his rule far beyond his original mandate.

Many Palestinians view the

PA as increasingly authoritarian, accusing it of suppressing dissent and prioritizing security coordination with Israel over the needs of its people.

Economic dependency on donor funding has left the PA vulnerable to political pressure, particularly from the US and Israel.



Despite these challenges, Abbas' 20th year in office arrives at a moment of renewed international focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Saudi Arabia's emergence as a regional power broker has brought fresh hope for advancing the two-state solution.

In October 2024, Saudi Arabia announced the formation of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution. The coalition includes key players such as the US, the EU, and Arab states, with a mandate to address core issues including borders, settlements, refugees, and the status of Jerusalem.

Observers believe that the chances of establishing a Palestinian state under President Mahmoud Abbas remain viable.

"No doubt Saudi Arabia is playing a leading role in this coalition, leveraging its regional and international influence as well as its longstanding support for the Palestinian cause," Hani Nasra, an Egyptian writer and political expert, told Arab News.

This diplomatic strategy reflects Saudi Arabia's commitment to balancing regional stability with the aspirations of the Palestinian people.

The question remains whether Abbas' final years in power will witness the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Much depends on the success of Saudi Arabia's initiative and the willingness of all parties to engage in meaningful negotiations.

"Observers believe that the chances of establishing a Palestinian state under President Mahmoud Abbas remain viable, though significant challenges persist," said Nasra.

"These obstacles require internal Palestinian unity and robust Arab and international support — something Saudi Arabia is actively seeking to provide."

For Abbas, the stakes are high. His legacy will ultimately be defined by whether he can translate decades of advocacy for Palestinian statehood into tangible results.

The PA has expressed cautious optimism about the Saudi-led coalition, emphasizing the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses historic injustices and ensures Palestinian sovereignty.

However, significant obstacles persist. Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has shown little appetite for concessions, particularly on settlements and security issues, and has even dismissed the two-state solution out of hand.



MWL chief Dr. Mohammed Al-Issa and Pakistani PM Shehbaz Sharif attend the conference in Islamabad. SPA

TRANSFORMATIVE STEP

Islam ‘places no restrictions’ on girls’ education

Muslim World League, global leaders focus on gender equality at Islamabad conference

Usama Iqbal Khawaja Islamabad
Islam places no restrictions on girls’ education, Dr. Mohammed Al-Issa, secretary-general of the Muslim World League, told an international conference in Pakistan on Saturday focusing on the issue.

The MWL chief added that anyone opposing education for women deviates from the global Muslim community. Pakistan and the MWL co-hosted the two-day conference, “Girls’ Education in Muslim Communities: Challenges and Opportunities,” under the patronage of Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif in Islamabad. Sharif commended the MWL for its dedication to education, saying that ensuring equal access to education for girls remains one of the most pressing challenges of the present time. The initiative aims to raise

awareness in Muslim communities about the importance of girls’ education through various themes, joint programs, and collaborative agreements. “Our Islamic faith has always celebrated the education of every Muslim, both male and female, because the message

HIGHLIGHT

The forum addressed the issue by signing a consensus document, ‘the Islamabad Declaration for Girls’ Education,’ reaffirming that Islam does not prohibit women’s education in any way.

of Islam was to enlighten all, regardless of gender,” Al-Issa told participants. “Therefore, Muslim women in Islam have had a significant and active presence in all spheres of life — in religious matters, the sciences, politics, economics, and societal affairs

throughout history.” The MWL chief said any reservations about girls’ education must be understood as stemming from non-Islamic customs that have no basis in the Muslim faith. He lauded the initiative as a transformative step for advancing girls’ education, emphasizing its practical and results-oriented approach. The MWL leader said that the the Islamabad Declaration for Girls’ Education will serve to solidify and strengthen the initiative. The summit brought together over 150 dignitaries from 44 Muslim and other friendly states, according to Pakistan’s Foreign Office. It was also attended by Hissein Brahim Taha, secretary-general of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation. Taha affirmed the organization’s readiness to support the initiative and contribute to its success for the benefit of girls across the Islamic world.

HUMANITARIAN MISSION

KSrelief supports displaced communities in crisis zones

Arab News Riyadh
Saudi aid agency KSrelief is benefiting thousands of people through its humanitarian efforts in Syria, Yemen, Pakistan and Jordan. In Syria, KSrelief distributed 2,952 food baskets and health kits in Jindires town, Aleppo, and 258 food baskets, winter kits, and personal-care kits in

Talbiseh town, Homs. In Latakia, 998 food baskets and personal-care kits were provided in Beit Yashout. These efforts reflect Saudi Arabia’s commitment to alleviating the suffering of the Syrian people. In Yemen, KSrelief’s artificial limbs and rehabilitation center in Taiz governorate served 434 beneficiaries, providing 1,613 services, including prosthetic

limb fittings, maintenance, and physical therapy. In Pakistan, KSrelief distributed 1,800 food baskets in Layyah and Kot Addu in Punjab province, benefiting 12,500 individuals in flood-affected areas. In Jordan, 375 people from 56 underprivileged families in Mafraq governorate received shopping vouchers for winter clothing.

TheSpace

KSA’s energy future: Advancing localization and global partnerships

BASIL M.K. AL-GHALAYINI



I was recently invited to a forum co-hosted by the Ministry of Industry and Mineral Resources, and the Ministry of Investment to highlight the newly launched incentives program for the industrial sector. The program, with an allocated budget of SR10 billion (\$2.6 billion), aims to enable industrial investments, spur their growth, and achieve sustainable industrial development in the Kingdom while enhancing the global competitiveness of Saudi industry.

Another feature of the Saudi industrial ecosystem is the localization of content, especially in the energy sector. Saudi Arabia continues to make remarkable strides toward achieving its energy localization target of 75 percent by 2030, supported by innovative foreign direct investments and robust government initiatives.

A Saudi oil and gas business development team is implementing a game-changing business and technology model for localizing pipe manufacturing for OCTG, drilling, hydrogen, and specialty high-end energy pipes. A case in point is Dalipal Holdings, a Hong Kong-listed company with over 26 years of acclaimed technical expertise and unparalleled innovation capabilities in manufacturing oil and gas seamless pipes. The company has gone from strength to strength following its business demerger from PetroChina.

Dalipal received support from the Ministry of Energy, the Ministry of Investment, King Salman Energy Park, and Saudi Aramco’s localization program iktva to establish a state-of-the-art global manufacturing hub at King Salman Energy Park, supported by R&D and global sales departments.

The clean environment and ESG-compliant facilities will be based on intelligent manufacturing and digital management. This project aligns with Saudi Arabia’s energy

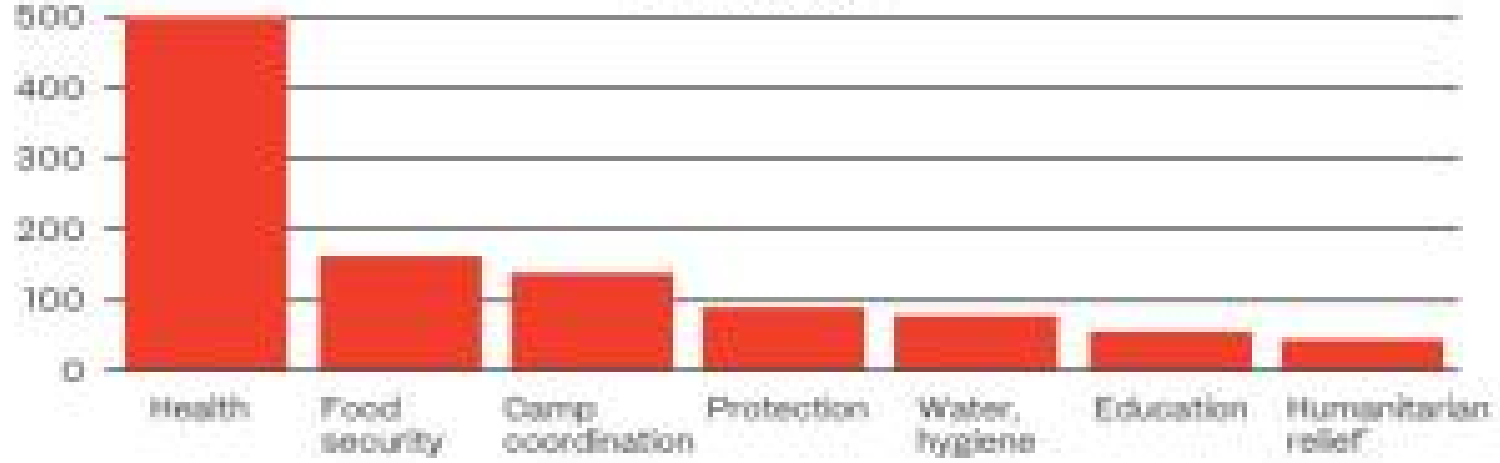
Saudi Arabia continues to make remarkable strides toward achieving its energy localization target of 75 percent by 2030, supported by innovative foreign direct investments and robust government initiatives.

localization target to locally produce energy-related goods and services, contributing to the sustainability of the energy supply chain. Construction is planned to start in September this year. The four-pronged approach will result in the profitable localization of manufacturing and knowledge assets, the acquisition of R&D capabilities and sales skills, and the attraction of local and foreign capital to become part of the Saudi financial and economic fabric. As part of its mandate, BMG Financial Group took Dalipal’s management, headed by its founder and chairman Meng Fanyong, on a weeklong tour across the country to meet government officials and potential partners. Tomorrow, we are traveling to Alkhobar to complete our tour at the iktva annual forum.

Basil M.K. Al-Ghalayini is chairman and CEO of BMG Financial Group.

The Day’s FIGURES

KSRELIEF PROJECTS IN YEMEN January 2025



Source: ksrelief.org

Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Sustainability
Saudi royal reserve promotes biodiversity

The King Salman bin Abdulaziz Royal Reserve Development Authority hosted an event to raise environmental awareness and display the reserve’s biodiversity and achievements, especially to sports enthusiasts. The initiative includes protecting endangered species, promoting vegetation growth, and fostering environmental sustainability. An awareness booth was set up during the Al-Orobah vs. Al-Hilal match in the Saudi Pro League competition in Jouf, featuring videos about the natural and archaeological treasures. Plant seedlings were also distributed to fans to encourage environmental conservation. **SPA Riyadh**

Storm warning
Rainfall sparks weather alerts across Kingdom

Rain fell on parts of Saudi Arabia early on Sunday, with officials forecasting thunderstorms, hail, and strong winds. Overcast skies dominated in the capital Riyadh, which recorded moderate rainfall throughout the day. The National Center of Meteorology warned of potential near-zero visibility and flooding in some areas. In the southern Jazan region, heavy rain was reported earlier in the day, affecting the city as well as the governorates of Ad-Darb, Beesh, and the Farasan Islands. The center issued alerts for Jazan, warning of thunderstorms, high waves, and strong winds in the region. **AN Riyadh**

Winter celebration
Flower carpet dazzles visitors at Baha festival

The Baha Winter Festival in Al-Makhwah governorate features a 360-square-meter flower carpet that has captivated visitors. Attendees have enjoyed the vibrant display, taking photos and admiring the colorful blooms. Comprising 50,000 flower seedlings, the carpet includes portraits of King Salman, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, and the Baha governor at its center. The design incorporates traditional geometric patterns, marble stones, and simple lighting, reflecting the local terrain and climate. The festival offers 280 events across tourist sites, parks, and public gardens in the Tihama region. **SPA Riyadh**

News Saudi Arabia

WINTER ESCAPES

Chill out Riyadh: from Wild West thrills to starlit nights

These winter destinations reflect the capital's evolving cultural, recreational landscape

Waad Hussain Riyadh

Riyadh, the beating heart of Saudi Arabia, takes on a magical quality as the cooler months arrive, transforming into a playground of vibrant winter destinations.

Whether you are looking for an immersive Wild West experience, serene luxury surrounded by nature, or retro charm under the stars, the capital offers a diverse tapestry of escapes.

Locals and tourists alike are drawn to Southwest Village, The Groves, Dakkah Winter, and the retro-styled Ammariyah Motel, each providing a distinct blend of entertainment, relaxation, and culture.

On the outskirts of Riyadh lies Southwest Village, a meticulously designed attraction that brings the American Wild West to life. Wooden storefronts reminiscent of 19th-century frontier towns line the streets, while horse-drawn carriages and cowboy-clad performers transport visitors back in time.

From families with children to history buffs, the village has something for everyone. The centerpiece of the village is its 6D Cowboy Theater, where interactive shows captivate audiences of all ages.

Guests find themselves immersed in the drama and adventure of the Wild West, with state-of-the-art effects that bring every scene to life. "It's like being part of a movie," says Salem Al-Qahtani, a frequent visitor. "The energy, the performances, and the attention to detail are outstanding."

By night, the village comes alive with the glow of warm lights illuminating its bustling Route 66-inspired street. Visitors can explore food stalls serving hearty barbecue dishes, shop for souvenirs in rustic boutiques, or simply take in the atmosphere.

Children can run through haystack play areas while their parents enjoy an evening of live performances and



It's like being part of a movie. The energy, the performances, and the attention to detail are outstanding.

Salem Al-Qahtani
Southwest Village visitor

On the outskirts of Riyadh lies Southwest Village, a meticulously designed attraction that brings the American Wild West to life. Supplied

cowboy-themed music.

For those seeking a more sophisticated escape, The Groves in Al-Rafiah offers a tranquil yet luxurious retreat. Nestled among lush greenery and centered around the serene Groves Lake, this destination combines fine dining, boutique shopping, and carefully curated entertainment to create a memorable experience.

At the heart of The Groves is its iconic bridge, leading visitors to a 360-degree stage that regularly hosts live performances. The soft glow of lights reflected on the lake adds a touch of romance, making it a favorite among couples and families alike.

"We came for the performances, but it's the atmosphere that keeps us here," said Rania Banaser, who visited with her family. "Every corner feels like it's been designed for relaxation and beauty."



Above: The Groves hosts live performances.

Right: Seating options under the starry skies or private tents make Dakkah Winter a perfect spot for cozy gatherings. AN photo by Waad Hussain



Culinary offerings at The Groves are varied; from Vida Vera's fusion of Italian and Japanese flavors to Hawanem's Middle Eastern-inspired dishes, every meal is an experience in itself.

For pet owners, the Luca Park dog area provides a safe space for the animals to play. "It's rare to find a place that caters to everyone, including pets," said Banaser.

Dakkah Winter has quickly become a favorite among families looking for a relaxing yet engaging destination. With its softly lit palm trees, boutique shops, and cozy food stalls, the atmosphere is warm and welcoming.

One of the most praised aspects of Dakkah Winter is the thoughtfully designed seating arrangements. Guests can choose between open-air settings under the starry skies or private tents surrounded by the warmth of fire pits, making it a perfect spot for intimate gatherings.

Families often gather around the crackling firewood, enjoying the serene environment and the crisp winter air.

"I think this place is really nice. I don't think I've ever seen a place like this," said Malak Hassan. "The price range is really good because it's not a typical spot where you can hang out. You can come with family and friends and it's such an enjoyable place."

Parents can unwind over a cup of steaming Arabic coffee while children enjoy the supervised play area, designed to keep them entertained for hours.

Sabah Al-Qahtani, one of the visitors, said: "I was surprised by the location. I liked the entrance and the sitting area and everything is amazing and I will definitely come again."

For a dose of nostalgia mixed with adventure, Ammariyah Motel is the place to go. With its vibrant orange and red hues and 1950s-inspired decor, the motel offers visitors an engaging escape from the ordinary.

Upon arrival, guests are greeted by retro signage and colorful seating areas, setting the stage for an evening of fun. The activities at Ammariyah Motel cater to both the adventurous and the more relaxed.

Guests can test their skills at paddle tennis, or simply sit back under the stars. Dining is a highlight, with the pizza bar serving freshly baked pizzas and the outdoor grill offering gourmet burgers that draw praise from visitors.

LOCAL TREASURES

Revving up history: Hail festival spotlights classic cars, cultural charm

Arab News Riyadh

A display of vintage and classic automobiles, some made more than 60 years ago, was a major draw for visitors at the Handicrafts Festival in Hail.

Visitors and car enthusiasts from the Kingdom and abroad gathered to admire the eye-catching vehicles, Saudi Press Agency reported.

The meticulously maintained cars, including several GMC and Chevrolet models, are their owners' prized possessions, and



Meticulously maintained classic cars, including several GMC and Chevrolet models, offer a glimpse into the past. SPA

offer a glimpse into the past.

Naif Amim Al-Janfawi, a collector of vintage cars, said: "The festival provided a wonderful opportunity to

showcase these treasures."

The festival also immersed visitors in the rich heritage of the Hail region, showcasing traditional food, clothing, and

customs, while also featuring a variety of cultural performances and folk arts from within and beyond the area.

A pavilion housing wooden

doors and gypsum carvings proved to be a popular attraction that showcased the craftsmanship involved in creating the traditional works.

Inspired by Saudi Vision 2030 and the designation of 2025 as the "Year of Handicrafts," the festival celebrated traditional skills, and highlighted their cultural and economic significance.

Craftsman Abdullah Al-Khazam said that creating wooden doors and carvings, including those of old Hail houses made from

tamarisk and other timbers, demanded exceptional skill and attention to detail.

The pavilion also featured Islamic plaster engravings inspired by the local environment, a hallmark of Najdi architecture used to adorn buildings, entrances, and majlis, or council rooms.

Also on display were drawings and engravings from ancient clay houses, including Qur'anic verses, sayings, decorative patterns, and depictions of trees and plants.

I was injured by shrapnel, and because I am diabetic, things got worse for me, and we had to amputate my leg.
Khaled Al-Saidani
Pediatrician

Mourners pray for victims killed by Israeli bombardment at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs hospital in Deir Al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip Sunday, AFP



STRUGGLE

Gaza doctor treats war victims after losing leg

Vast areas around Al-Aqsa Hospital have seen heavy fighting since Israeli offensive began

Deir Al-Balah
Palestinian pediatrician Khaled Al-Saidani moves through his Gaza hospital with determination, using a prosthetic leg and an aluminum walker as he cares for children also injured in the war.

With a stethoscope over his shoulders, he carefully examines his patients at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, offering warm smiles and handshakes to the children as he moves from one to the next. He knows all too well the devastating impact of wounds sustained during the war, having lost his right leg after an Israeli

air strike on his house last year. "I was injured by shrapnel, and because I am diabetic, things got worse for me, and we had to amputate my leg," Al-Saidani said at the hospital in central Gaza. The prosthetic "is tiring and has several downsides, but I'm able to move and walk," he said as he examined a patient. A child with bandaged fingers and an IV tube watched as Al-Saidani conducted an examination. Al-Aqsa Hospital, particularly its general ward, is crowded with patients and their relatives, many receiving treatment for injuries from Israeli bombardment. The medical facility is located in Deir Al-Balah, where Israeli

forces have frequently clashed with Hamas militants. Vast areas around Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital have seen heavy fighting since the war began. In recent months, this has intensified as the military expanded its offensive, which was initially focused on the northern parts of the Palestinian territory. The war in Gaza has taken a devastating toll on healthcare workers as well as medical facilities since it broke out on Oct. 7, 2023, following a devastating attack on Israel by militants. A recent report by UN experts, quoting figures provided by the territory's Health Ministry, said at

least 1,057 Palestinian health and medical professionals have been killed in Gaza since the war began. On Wednesday, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies lamented the "continuing attacks on health facilities across the Gaza Strip," which it said meant people were unable to access the treatment they needed. Most of the 36 hospitals in the besieged Gaza Strip have been rendered inoperative. The territory's largest, Al-Shifa Hospital, sustained heavy damage in an Israeli military raid, and now only has its emergency ward open. Meanwhile, doctors like Al-Saidani continue to provide

what treatment they can to the relentless stream of patients flooding into barely functioning facilities like Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital. "Despite the prosthetic limb that makes me tired, I'm happy and comfortable doing my job, which is why I decided to return to work," Al-Saidani said. Relatives of patients are also happy that he is back around. "My daughter suffers from kidney disease," said a woman whose child, Mira Hamid, is being treated at the hospital. "Despite the amputation of his leg, Dr. Khaled Al-Saidani follows up with his patients and provides his services. May God bless his hard work."

SAFETY
Young gorilla rescued from aircraft hold recovers at Istanbul zoo

AP Istanbul
A young gorilla rescued from a plane's cargo hold is recovering at an Istanbul zoo, officials said on Sunday, while wildlife officers consider returning him to his natural habitat. The 5-month-old gorilla was discovered in a box on a Turkish Airlines flight from Nigeria to Thailand last month. After a public competition, he has been named Zeytin, or Olive, and is recuperating at Polonezkoy Zoo. "Of course, what we want and desire is for the baby gorilla ... to continue its life in its homeland," Fahrettin Ulu, regional director of Istanbul Nature Conservation and National Parks, said Sunday. "What is important is that an absolutely safe environment is established in the place it goes to, which is extremely important for us."

FASTFACT

The 5-month-old gorilla was discovered in a box on a flight from Nigeria to Thailand last month. In the weeks since he was found, Zeytin has gained weight and is showing signs of recovering from his traumatic journey. "When he first came, he was very shy. He would stay where we left him," said veterinarian Gulfem Esmen. "He does not have that shyness now. He does not even care about us much. He plays games by himself." Both gorilla species — the western and eastern gorillas, which populate central Africa's remote forests and mountains — are classified as endangered by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. As Istanbul emerges as a central air hub between continents, customs officials have increasingly intercepted illegally traded animals. In October, 17 young Nile crocodiles and 10 monitor lizards were found in an Egyptian passenger's luggage at the city's Sabiha Gokcen Airport.

SUFFERING

Displaced Gazan digs shelter against winter weather and war

AFP Gaza Strip
Faced with plunging temperatures and heavy rain in war-battered central Gaza's Deir Al-Balah, displaced Palestinian father Tayseer Obaid resorted to digging for a modicum of domestic comfort. In the clay soil of the encampment area his family has been displaced to by the war, Obaid dug a square hole nearly 2 meters deep and capped it with a tarpaulin stretched over an improvised wooden A-frame to keep out the rain. "I had an idea to dig into the ground to expand the space as it was very limited," Obaid said. "So I dug 90 centimeters, it was okay, and I felt the space get

a little bigger," he said from the shelter while his children played in a small swing he attached to the plank that serves as a beam for the tarpaulin. In time, Obaid managed to dig 180 centimeters deep and then lined the bottom with mattresses, at which point, he said, "it felt comfortable, sort of." He paved the entry to the shelter with old flour sacks filled with sand to keep it from getting muddy while he carved steps into the side of the pit. The clay soil is soft enough to be dug without power tools and strong enough to stand independently. The pit provides some protection from Israeli air strikes, but Obaid said he feared the clay soil



A girl dresses a doll as she sits outside a tent at a cemetery where families displaced by conflict are taking shelter in Deir Al-Balah in the central Gaza Strip, AFP

could collapse should a strike land close enough. "If an explosion happened around us and the soil collapsed, this shelter would become our grave." Nearly all of Gaza's 2.4 million

inhabitants have been displaced by the war that has ravaged the Palestinian territory for over 14 months. The UN's satellite center, or UNOSAT, determined in September 2024 that 68 percent of Gaza's buildings had been damaged or destroyed by the war, in which Israel has made extensive use of air strikes as it fights the militant group Hamas. For Palestinian civilians fleeing the fighting, the lack of safe buildings means many have had to gather in makeshift camps, mostly in central and southern Gaza. Shortages caused by the complete blockade of the coastal territory mean that construction materials are scarce, and the displaced must make do with what is at hand. On top of the hygiene problems created by the lack of proper water and sanitation for the thousands of people crammed into the camps, winter weather

has brought hardships. On Thursday, the UN's Palestinian refugee agency, UNRWA, warned that eight newborns died of hypothermia and 74 children died "amid the brutal conditions of winter" in 2025. "We enter this New Year carrying the same horrors as the last — there's been no progress or solace. Children are now freezing to death," UNRWA's spokeswoman Louise Wateridge said. At least 46,537 Palestinians, a majority of them civilians, have been killed in Israel's military campaign in Gaza since the war began, according to data provided by the Health Ministry. The UN has acknowledged these figures as reliable.

STRENGTHENING TIES

Direct commercial flights resume between Rome and Tripoli

Many airlines suspended flights in and out of Libya since the civil war erupted in 2014

Reuters Tripoli

Italy's ITA Airways resumed direct flights to Libya's Tripoli on Sunday, the first airline from a major west European nation to do so after a 10-year hiatus due to civil war in the north African country, ITA and Tripoli's transport minister said.



ITA said it would operate two direct flights a week from Rome's Fiumicino airport to Tripoli's Mitiga airport. Reuters

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"We are proud to inaugurate today our first direct commercial flight between Tripoli and Rome Fiumicino, strengthening commercial and cultural

ties between Libya and Italy in support of bilateral relations between the two countries," Andrea Benassi, ITA Airways general manager, said in a statement.

Many international airlines have suspended flights in and

out of Libya since the civil war in 2014 that spawned two rival administrations in east and west following the NATO-backed uprising that toppled Muammar Qaddafi in 2011.

Some airlines resumed flights to Libya after security was restored

when major fighting paused with a ceasefire in 2020. But efforts to end the political crisis have failed, with factions occasionally staging armed clashes and competing for control over economic resources.

The EU still bans Libyan civil aviation from its airspace

The minister of transport in the government of national unity, Mohamed Al-Shahoubi, said the resumption of ITA flights between Tripoli and Rome confirmed "the safety and security of our airspace and the eligibility of Libyan airports."

Shahoubi said at a ceremony marking the arrival of the ITA flight at Mitiga that Tripoli is ready "to grant ITA additional transport rights to connect Libyan airports with other

HIGHLIGHTS

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Shahoubi said Libya was looking forward to the return of some Gulf countries in the first half of 2025.

He added that the airlines of Tunisia, Egypt, Malta, Turkiye, and Jordan had already resumed direct flights with Libya.

Ivan Bassato, chief aviation officer of Rome's airports, said the Libya route was a strategic bridge between the two countries.

Flights would strengthen "the positioning of our hub to support the connectivity of Africa, a continent that in 2024 reached a record level exceeding the threshold of 2 million passengers to and from Rome, up 38 percent compared to the previous year."

CONFLICT

Thousands flee southern Sudan town amid escalating clashes

AFP Port Sudan

Thousands have fled a town in southern Sudan since clashes erupted last week between the Sudanese army and rival paramilitary troops, the UN migration agency said Sunday.

The conflict in Sudan, which erupted in mid-April 2023, has pitted the forces of army chief Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan against his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, who leads the Rapid Support Forces.

"Between 1,000 and 3,000 households were displaced from Um Rawaba town" in North Kordofan state in the country's south in just five days, the UN's International Organization for Migration said. Clashes broke out in the area last week between the army and the RSE. The military has led an advance on the central Sudan state of Al-Jazira, some 300 kilometers northeast.

Families fled "due to increased

HIGHLIGHTS

Families fled "due to increased security concerns following continued clashes across the locality," the International Organization for Migration said.

In North Kordofan, over 205,000 people are currently displaced, according to the latest UN figures.

The war has also claimed the lives of tens of thousands and pushed the country to the brink of famine.

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Across the country, 11.5 million people are internally displaced



Across the country, 11.5 million people are internally displaced in what the UN has called the world's largest displacement crisis. AFP

— including 2.7 displaced in prior conflicts — in what the UN has called the world's largest displacement crisis.

The war has also claimed the lives of tens of thousands and pushed

the country to the brink of famine.

Last month, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification review said that famine has gripped five areas in western and southern Sudan, and is expected to

spread to five more.

Around 350,000 people in North Kordofan are currently experiencing emergency levels of hunger, the report found — the final stage before famine is declared.

The IPC said that "only a ceasefire can reduce the risk of famine spreading further," with 24.6 million people — nearly half the population — already facing "high levels of acute food insecurity."

ELECTIONS

Comoros goes to polls in vote snubbed by opposition

AFP Moroni

The Indian Ocean nation of Comoros headed to the polls Sunday to elect lawmakers, with many opposition groups planning to snub a vote they say lacks transparency.

Comorian President Azali Assoumani's eldest son, Nour El-Fath Azali, who is 39 and the country's secretary general, is running to represent a constituency just outside the capital Moroni.

Several voting booths opened

late after material failed to materialize in time, a reporter saw.

One US observer, James Burns, said officials had to "improvise" one booth comprising two panels around a table.

Nearby, another booth consisted of a simple box placed on a chair — making it nigh on impossible to preserve voter privacy as ballots were cast.

Before he was appointed to the post in July 2024, Nour had been a private adviser to his father, 65, a former military ruler who came to

power in a 1999 coup.

Critics said Nour's new powers — which entail approving all decrees issued by ministers and governors — elevate his role to that of de facto prime minister.

Azali was reelected president in January 2024 after a disputed vote followed by two days of deadly protests.

"Thank God, since the beginning of the campaign there has not been any trouble. It's raining but it's a blessing," Azali said after voting in his hometown of

Mitsoudje, 15 kilometers south of the capital Moroni.

"I thank the opposition candidates who stood in the elections. We need a constructive opposition," he added.

Several opposition candidates were standing election to avoid an outcome similar to the boycott of the 2020 legislative vote, which gave free rein to his ruling Convention for the Renewal of the Comoros party, or the CRC.

One man clad in a boubou and kofia, typical Comorian headgear,

complained that "I dipped my finger in the inkwell but the ink's already gone," showing his index finger with no indelible ink stain.

The CRC is expected to dominate parliament again in this year's vote, not least as its candidates in some constituencies face no competition.

Thirty-three members of parliament will be elected directly by around 340,000 registered voters in a two-round ballot.

A second round of voting will take place on Feb. 16.

PERSECUTED MINORITY

Sri Lankans rally to stop deportation of Rohingya refugees to Myanmar

Activists stage protests in northeastern Mullaitivu district and capital Colombo

Mohammed Rasooldeen Colombo

Sri Lankan civil society groups and activists are mobilizing to save more than 100 Rohingya refugees rescued off the Indian Ocean island nation last month following a government announcement that they will be deported.

A group of about 100 Rohingya refugees, which reportedly included over two dozen children, was rescued off the coast of the northeastern Mullaitivu district on Dec. 19.

Several protests were recently

organized in Mullaitivu and the capital Colombo after Sri Lanka's Minister of Public Security and Parliamentary Affairs Ananda Wijepala announced on Jan. 3 that the government was in talks with Myanmar authorities over the deportation of the Rohingya refugees.

"These are stateless people, they don't have a home to go to," social activist Thasneema Dahlan, who took part in a protest in Colombo on Friday, told Arab News.

"The Rohingya are massacred and chased and terrorized in their own home, and that is why they fled their own country looking for greener pastures elsewhere."

The mostly Muslim Rohingya

FAST FACT

Rohingya risk deadly sea crossings as fighting intensifies in Myanmar.

— the "world's most persecuted minority," according to the UN — have faced decades of oppression in Myanmar.

In 2017, more than 730,000 Rohingya from Rakhine State were forced to flee to neighboring Bangladesh to escape a brutal military crackdown that UN experts have referred to as a "genocidal campaign," amid evidence of ethnic cleansing, mass rape, and killings.

Sri Lanka, which is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol, is a transit point for refugees until the UNHCR helps them resettle in another country.

In 2022, its navy also rescued about 100 Rohingya refugees, who have been under the care of local NGOs as they await resettlement.

Sri Lankan activists have also filed petitions with the government, urging authorities to relocate the new group of refugees from the Keppapulavu Air Force base in Mullaitivu, where they have stayed since Dec. 23. According to protesters, aid agencies, including the UN, have been stopped from meeting the Rohingya.



Cold spell Boys pull sleds on a slope on a snow-covered hill in the suburbs of the Bulgarian capital Sofia after heavy snowfalls on Sunday.

AFP

HEAVY LOSSES

Los Angeles crews fight heavy winds to save homes and landmarks

AP Los Angeles

The death toll from the wildfires ravaging the Los Angeles area rose to 16 as crews battled to cut off the spreading blazes before potentially strong winds return that could push the flames toward some of the city's most famous landmarks.

Five of the deaths were attributed to the Palisades Fire and 11 resulted from the Eaton Fire, the Los Angeles County coroner's office said in a statement

Saturday evening.

The previous number of confirmed fatalities before Saturday was 11, but officials said they expected that figure to rise as teams with cadaver dogs conduct systematic grid searches in leveled neighborhoods. Authorities have established a center where people can report the missing.

There were fears that winds could move the fires toward the J. Paul Getty Museum and the University of California, Los Angeles, while

new evacuation warnings left more homeowners on edge.

CalFire Operations Chief Christian Litz said Saturday that a main focus was the Palisades Fire burning in the canyon area, not far from the UCLA campus.

The National Weather Service warned that strong Santa Ana winds could soon return. Those winds have been largely blamed for turning the wildfire into infernos that leveled entire neighborhoods around to city where there has

been no significant rainfall in more than eight months. The fire also threatened to jump over Interstate 405 and into densely populated areas in the Hollywood Hills and San Fernando Valley.

No cause has been determined for the largest fires and early estimates indicate the wildfires could be the nation's costliest ever. A preliminary estimate by AccuWeather put the damage and economic losses so far between \$135 billion and \$150 billion.

Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

No casualties

6.2 magnitude earthquake strikes Mexico

A magnitude 6.2 earthquake rattled a region of south-west Mexico on Sunday, the US Geological Survey said, but there were no immediate reports of casualties or damage. The tremor was centered 8 kilometers from Coalcoman de Vazquez Paltares, a municipality of around 20,000 people which is about 600 kilometers west of the capital Mexico City. Mexican President Claudia Sheinbaum said on X that the national emergency services had reported "there are no new developments and are initiating review protocols" in Coalcoman. **AFP**

Under control

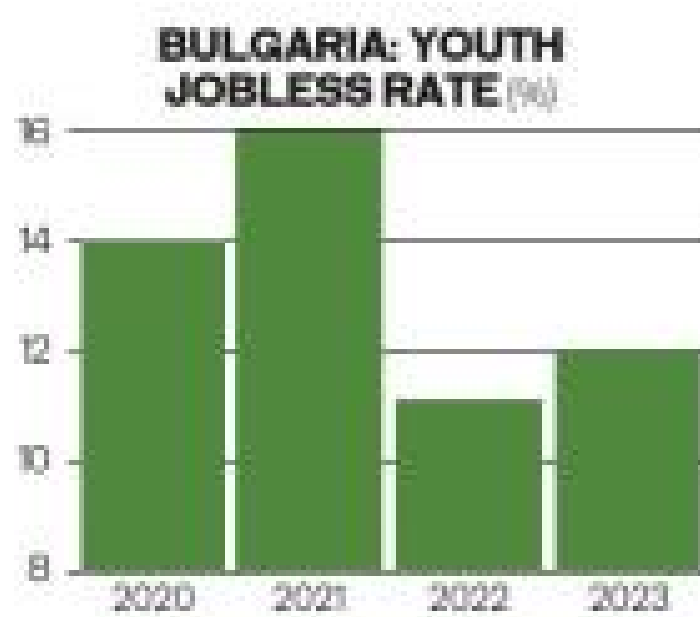
Czech Republic restaurant fire kills 6 people

A fire broke out in a restaurant in northern Czech Republic, killing six people and leaving six others with serious injuries, officials said Sunday.

Firefighters said the U Kojota restaurant in the city of Most, some 100 kilometers north of Prague, was still open when the fire started before midnight Saturday. Police and firefighters said the likely cause was a gas heater that overturned. It took more than 60 firefighters until 1:00 a.m. to get the fire under control. The injured were treated in hospitals in Most and nearby cities. An investigation was underway. **AFP**

The Day's FIGURES

Source: Statista



What We're Reading Today

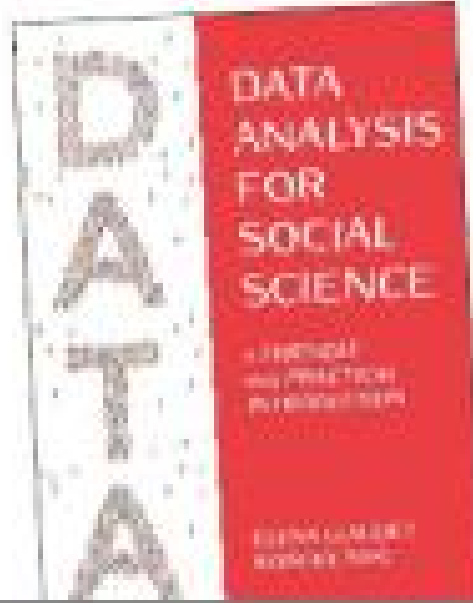
FOR THE TRAIN OR ON THE PLANE

'Data Analysis for Social Science'

ELEBA LLAUDET AND KOSUKE

"Data Analysis for Social Science" provides a friendly introduction to the statistical concepts and programming skills needed to conduct and evaluate social scientific studies. Assuming no prior knowledge of statistics and

coding and only minimal knowledge of math, the book teaches the fundamentals of survey research, predictive models, and causal inference while analyzing data from published studies with the statistical program R.



Rare accident

Toll from French tram crash rises to 68 injured

The toll from a collision of two trams in Strasbourg has risen to 68 injured in a rare accident that sowed panic near the eastern French city's main train station, authorities said Sunday. On Saturday afternoon, a stationary tram at the underground stop at Strasbourg's main railway station was violently hit by another tram, which began to move backwards for unknown reasons. The moving tram, which had stopped due to a traffic jam, reversed and rolled down a slope leading to the station. Around a hundred people escaped unharmed. **AFP**

International concern

HMPV infections declining in northern China

The rate of infections with the flu-like human metapneumovirus in northern China is declining, a health official said Sunday, amid some international concern over a potential pandemic.

"The human metapneumovirus is not a new virus, and has been with humans for at least several decades," said Wang Liping, a researcher at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. Wang added that the increase in recent years in the number of cases of the virus, first detected in the Netherlands in 2001, is due to better detection methods. **AP**

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB
I never knew how much I enjoyed being close to him until I felt the pain of his absence.
Abu Tammam
(Abbasid-era poet)

Opinion

Multipolarity reinforces Gulf's powerhouse status

ZAID M. BELBAGI



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Strategically located at the crossroads of Asia, Africa and Europe, the Gulf has historically facilitated international trade as a highway between East and West. Today, countries in the region are enhancing these historical trade links as they seek to diversify their economies away from oil. They are actively creating business-friendly environments to attract foreign direct investment and build new trade partnerships.

This comes as the global order is becoming increasingly multipolar, with the ascent of emerging economies such as China, Russia, India and Türkiye. The Gulf states are navigating the new world order by positioning themselves as economic and geopolitical powerhouses. Key to this transition is diversifying trade and investment relations, particularly as the West turns its focus to the Asia-Pacific. This strategic pivot has enabled the Gulf states to expand their influence beyond the Arab world, reshaping their role in global trade and diplomacy.

Historically, the West, particularly the US and the EU, has been the key international trade partner for the Gulf Cooperation Council. Early Western investments in the

region's energy sector laid the foundation for enduring trade relationships. In 2023, the total trade value between the US and GCC countries surpassed \$80 billion. The EU, similarly, has robust trade relations with the GCC and is the latter's second-largest trade partner. In 2023, the EU accounted for 11.1 percent of the GCC's total trade in goods.

Today, the Gulf is rapidly forming new trade partnerships with emerging economies, especially in Asia. China is the region's largest trade partner and in 2023 accounted for more than 20 percent of the Gulf's exports. It is closely followed by India, which accounted for 15 percent of Gulf energy exports. Asia now absorbs more than 70 percent of GCC oil and gas exports, with major consumers including China, India, Japan and South Korea. Africa is another priority region for GCC trade and investments as the Gulf secures its global influence. GCC investments in Africa, valued at more than \$53 billion in 2023, have focused on infrastructure, energy and technology.

Despite a reorientation toward the Global South, the West remains relevant for the region. A forthcoming Gulf-UK free trade agreement is projected to boost trade by 16

percent, add \$2.1 billion to the UK economy and allow the Gulf access to British technology, resources and expertise. This highlights the continued interdependence of the Gulf and its Western partners, a relationship that will not disappear but rather evolve as the Gulf boosts trade ties with emerging markets.

The GCC's robust international trade is complemented by the rise of regional financial centers, notably the Dubai International Financial Centre, Abu Dhabi Global Market, King Abdullah Financial District and the Qatar Financial Centre. By creating a business-friendly environment through these institutions, the region is carving a place for itself in global finance and attracting significant FDI.

The Dubai and Abu Dhabi centers have emerged as leading financial hubs underpinned by English Common Law frameworks. These centers specialize in sectors like banking, fintech and sustainable finance, with a strong emphasis on innovation and digital transformation. The Dubai International Financial Centre reported a 24 percent growth in registered companies in the first half of 2024.

Saudi Arabia, through the creation of

King Abdullah Financial District in Riyadh, is providing incentives for international investment in the Kingdom. With regulatory reforms, tax incentives and a business-friendly environment, it has become a significant financial hub. In 2024, 127 international companies moved their regional headquarters to Riyadh, including global technology giants Apple, Google and Microsoft. Between 2017 and 2023, FDI inflow to Saudi Arabia increased by 61 percent to reach \$215 billion, highlighting the success of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 and its subsidiary Regional Headquarters Program.

Faced with a multipolar global order, the Gulf states have found the opportunity to not only diversify trade partnerships but also position themselves as sites of economic and strategic influence. The success of their domestic financial hubs reflects the Gulf's economic potential and its sustained ability to attract Western investments despite geopolitical disturbances and strategic realignment in the region. The upswing in international trade and investment between the Gulf and Western and emerging economies reinforces the Gulf's position as an economic powerhouse.

The relationship with the West will not disappear but rather evolve as the Gulf boosts trade ties with emerging markets

COURTESY: AMAD NASIR/ASHARQ AL-AWSAT



NEOM is tackling the global food production dilemma by investing in innovative solutions, such as controlled environment agriculture

Tackling food security in the age of climate change

DR. JUAN CARLOS MOTAMAYOR



Dr. Juan Carlos Motamayor is CEO of Topian.

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

The theme of last month's COP16 event, which took place in Riyadh, shone a light on urgent global issues: land degradation, desertification and drought.

According to the UN, almost a quarter of the world's total land area has degraded, impacting 3.2 billion people, driving species to extinction and intensifying climate change.

Arable land around the world has borne the brunt of this degradation, with unsustainable farming methods contributing to a decline in food security. With the global population projected to surpass 9 billion by 2050, our current food production systems are alarmingly inadequate and expected to feed only half that number if left unchanged.

Our existing food systems are grossly inefficient. They consume enormous amounts of resources and emit millions of tonnes of greenhouse gases each year.

Estimates indicate that the agri-food sector is responsible for about 30 percent of global greenhouse gas emissions and accounts for 70 percent of freshwater withdrawals.

Recent global events have further intensified the need to transform our food systems into sustainable, technology-driven models that are less harmful to the environment. The COVID-19 pandemic exposed vulnerabilities in global food supply chains. More recently, geopolitical tensions in Europe and the resulting threat to grain exports have emphasized the need for accelerated action.

One initiative addressing this challenge is NEOM, the region currently under development in northwest Saudi Arabia, which places sustainability at its core. Situated in a region with low annual rainfall, NEOM is prioritizing food security alongside rewilding its landscapes and increasing biodiversity.

Through its food subsidiary, Topian, launched in December 2023, NEOM

is tackling the global food production dilemma by investing in innovative solutions, such as controlled environment agriculture. This indoor, closed-loop food production system is highly efficient, with systems that can use as little as 4 liters of freshwater to grow 1 kg of tomatoes, compared to the 250 liters required by more traditional farming methods. Such efficiency results in significantly reduced greenhouse gas emissions, making it a far more environmentally friendly method of food production.

Topian's food production has already entered its pilot phase, with its first controlled environment agriculture greenhouse opening at NEOM's reimagined industrial hub, Oxagon, last month.

With renewable solar and wind energy on tap, a food production ecosystem with a low carbon footprint will be established, setting a sustainable farm-to-fork template for NEOM. Initially serving NEOM's

thousands of residents and visitors, the plan is for the model to move beyond self-sufficiency, with surplus produce eventually being exported globally through the Port of NEOM, also located at Oxagon.

The benefits of Topian's research extend beyond harvesting food in a region not naturally conducive to large-scale agriculture. By serving as a testbed for future innovations, Topian is contributing to knowledge advancement and preparing the world for a new reality — an era likely to see more sustainability regulations applied to food production.

Topian's efforts offer a hopeful glimpse into the future of food security, as its desert greenhouses and research laboratories begin to bear fruit, both literally and figuratively. The world will be watching closely to see if this innovative approach can truly pave the way for a new era — one that feeds a growing population while safeguarding the health of people and planet.

Opinion

Australia's great social media experiment

PETER SINGER

Late last year, Australia's parliament, reacting to concerns about the effect of social media on children's mental health, amended the Online Safety Act to require users to be at least 16 years old to open an account on social media platforms such as TikTok, Snapchat, Instagram and X. The amendment is expected to come into effect by the end of 2025.

The law received widespread support in Australia, both in parliament and among the public, but it has also been criticized. Some dispute the link between social media use and mental health problems in teenagers. Others see a violation of the right to freedom of expression. Even those who support the effort wonder how it can be enforced.

There is little doubt that the mental health of teenagers, especially girls, has deteriorated sharply since the introduction of smartphones and the emergence of social media. The digital platforms targeted by the law design algorithms to keep people on their sites, because more clicks mean more advertising revenue. The result? A Gallup survey showed that US teenagers spend an average of 4.8 hours per day on social media.

That is a big slice of a teenager's free time, which could otherwise be spent interacting

with friends in person and with places and objects in the real world. Jonathan Haidt, a social psychologist, has said that social media platforms have "rewired childhood and changed human development on an almost unimaginable scale."

Heavy teenage social media use and higher levels of depression and anxiety clearly go together; what is disputed is whether this is merely a correlation or a causal relationship. Good studies that test whether sufficiently long periods of reduction in social media use reduce depression and anxiety are difficult to carry out, because trials in which individual teenagers leave a platform while their friends remain on it can be expected to produce less benefit — and could even cause harm to the children who are now isolated from their friends.

It is important that groups of teenagers all go off social media together, so that social media use is replaced by real-world interaction. In addition, one would need other, randomly selected control groups whose members do not reduce social media use. In the absence of such rigorous trials, the evidence we have does suggest that heavy social media use causes anxiety and depression, but it is not conclusive.

Australia may therefore be doing the world a service by effectively running a



Peter Singer is Emeritus Professor of Bioethics at Princeton University and Visiting Professor at the Centre for Biomedical Ethics at the National University of Singapore. @ProjectSyndicate

national experiment. This assumes, of course, that Australia does substantially reduce the time young teenagers spend on social media. Policymakers plan to achieve their goal by imposing heavy fines on companies that operate the newly age-restricted social media platforms if they fail to take "reasonable steps" to prevent those under 16 from opening accounts. The law assigns the task of outlining what counts as "reasonable steps" to Australia's eSafety Commissioner, an independent statutory office.

WhatsApp and similar messaging apps, as well as some online health and educational services, will be exempted from the legislation. Young people will continue to be able to view YouTube videos or pages on social media, such as business landing pages on Facebook, without an account. On the other hand, the government has announced its intention to introduce further legislation creating a "Digital Duty of Care" that will put the onus on digital platforms to prevent known or foreseeable harms.

Paradoxically, the Australian law may benefit social media executives and programmers who are sufficiently aware of what they may be doing to children's mental health to be uneasy about it. Given the current lack of regulation, any social

media platform that gets serious about ensuring that children are not opening accounts will simply lose business to less scrupulous rivals. The law creates a level playing field for all platforms, thus overcoming the collective action problem.

The Australian constitution does not make sweeping statements about basic rights. In general, and in contrast to the US, courts accept the supremacy of the elected legislature. The High Court of Australia has,

however, ruled that the provisions of the constitution establishing representative and responsible government imply that parliament should not place an undue burden on political communication.

One possible response to those who have suggested that Australia's legislation violates this principle

is that children under 16 do not vote and hence have less need for political communication. Moreover, it could be argued that the burden is not disproportionate, because the harm caused by social media is sufficiently serious to justify the modest restriction contained in the legislation. The Australian government could also exempt social media platforms that are limited to political communications, although that would require someone in government to determine which communications are political and which are not.

Heavy teenage social media use and higher levels of depression and anxiety clearly go together

The law creates a level playing field for all platforms, thus overcoming the collective action problem

Eastern European energy crisis could spell trouble

LUKE COFFEY

Immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Europe entered an energy crisis. European countries scrambled to diversify away from Russian energy sources. The crisis caused mass inflation across the continent and drastically increased heating and electricity costs for Europeans. However, after resilience, tenacity and billions of euros in new investments, Europe has made significant progress, but it has not been able to move completely away from Russian energy.

Now, almost three years later, a new energy crisis is developing in Eastern Europe, and it is not getting the attention it deserves. This month, Transnistria, a break-away region of Moldova essentially under Russian control, stopped receiving Russian gas. This development is already affecting the rest of Moldova and could potentially impact the broader Eastern European region.

The Kremlin has long used its energy resources as a hybrid weapon against Moldova. In 2006, Gazprom dramatically increased prices for Moldova, which had a negative impact on the economy. Again, in

2009, 2014, 2021 and 2022, Russia either cut or threatened to cut gas to Moldova for political reasons. Direct Russian attacks on Ukraine's energy infrastructure have also triggered massive blackouts in several Moldovan cities.

Moldova's Western allies have worked to counteract Russia's energy pressure campaign. As poor weather and inflation gripped the region in winter 2022, the EU provided hundreds of millions

of euros in emergency support, while Romania supplied electricity to replace that lost due to the Russian bombing of Ukrainian power plants. By October 2023, Moldova announced it would no longer purchase gas from Gazprom.

Despite these measures, Moldova remains indirectly dependent on

Russian gas. Transnistria received free Russian gas supplies transiting Ukraine en route to the breakaway territory. Transnistrian authorities then used this gas at the Russian-owned Cuciurgan power plant to generate electricity, which they sold — cheaply within Transnistria and at higher prices to the rest of Moldova.

Further complicating matters, the



Luke Coffey is a senior fellow at the Hudson Institute. X: @LukeDCoffey

For full version, log on to www.arabnews.com/opinion

regional Soviet-era power grid forces even Romania-generated electricity to pass through Ukraine and Transnistria before reaching Moldova. To address this vulnerability, Moldova is constructing modern power lines directly with Romania, but these are not slated for completion until later this year.

In the meantime, Moldova's energy outlook is grim. Transnistrian authorities have already implemented rolling blackouts and switched their main power plant from gas to coal. However, coal reserves are expected to last only until the end of February. Additionally, Transnistria is now only producing enough electricity for its own needs, leaving the rest of Moldova without supplemental energy. Although this energy crisis is currently confined to a small sliver of Moldova, it has the potential to escalate and impact the broader region.

If Transnistria's economy collapses due to a lack of revenue from electricity sales and reduced industrial activity, there is concern about a mass exodus of Transnistrians into Moldova proper. Such an influx could place enormous strain on Moldova's already overstretched public services. If Moldova

cannot manage the influx, refugees are likely to move into Romania, creating additional challenges for that country.

This situation could have been avoided and there is plenty of blame to go round. While it is understandable that Ukraine does not want Russian gas transiting its territory given Moscow's ongoing invasion, the EU has been slow to prepare for the expected crisis. Meanwhile, Russia could have continued exporting gas to Trans-

nistria via other routes, such as the TurkStream pipeline through Bulgaria and Romania into Moldova, but the Kremlin chose not to. Moldovan authorities have stated they would not block Russian gas transit to Transnistria, prioritizing the well-being of citizens in the breakaway region. However, Moscow has used alleged Moldovan debts to

Gazprom as a pretext for halting supplies.

The more likely explanation is that Moscow sees an energy crisis in Moldova as a means to weaken its pro-European government ahead of critical parliamentary elections this year. Once again, energy is being wielded as a tool of foreign policy, leaving ordinary people to suffer the consequences.

Transnistrian authorities have already implemented rolling blackouts and switched their main power plant from gas to coal

If Transnistria's economy collapses, there is concern about a mass exodus of Transnistrians into Moldova proper

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Through this program, we also aspire to achieve sustainability by launching economically viable projects.

Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman
Saudi energy minister



Business



Top Saudi ministers speak about the industrial and investment ecosystem in the Kingdom at an event held in Riyadh to launch the Standard Incentives Program worth SR10 billion. AN photo

STANDARD INCENTIVES PROGRAM

Saudi Arabia unveils \$2.66bn program to boost industrial growth

First-of-its-kind initiative aims to localize industries and foster innovation

Nadim Hassan, Nirmal Narayanan
Riyadh

Saudi Arabia announced the allocation of SR10 billion (\$2.66 billion) to activate the Standard Incentives Program for the Industrial Sector, followed by approval from the Cabinet last month.

The announcement was made during the Standard Incentives for the Industrial Sector event on Jan. 11.

This initiative seeks to spur growth in the industrial sector by accelerating investments and achieving sustainable industrial development in the Kingdom to elevate the competitiveness of Saudi industries globally.

"These incentives were developed within the framework of an integrated governmental effort, characterized by collaboration with various relevant government entities, particularly the Localization and Balance of Payments Committee," said Minister of Industry and Mineral Resources Bandar Alkhorayef.

He added: "This committee serves as the overarching body for shaping policies, directions, and initiatives that enhance the empowerment of industrial investments and support national talents."

The incentives program offers coverage of up to 35 percent of the initial project investment, capped at SR50 million for each qualifying initiative.

The program is divided evenly across the project lifecycle, granting 50 percent during construction and the remaining 50 percent during production.

The first phase of this program will target investments in chemical conversion industries, the automotive sector, and machinery and equipment.

We look forward to seeing non-oil activities increase in number and become more sustainable.

Faisal Al-Ibrahim
Minister of economy and planning

The program will be rolled out to other industry segments in subsequent phases in the latter part of this year.

"This program is the first of its kind in the region and aims to enable the manufacturing of products that are not currently produced in the Kingdom. It opens new horizons for high-quality investments and allows both local and international investors to benefit from the unique capabilities the Kingdom possesses," said Alkhorayef.

He added: "The Standard

Incentives Program has been designed to focus on achieving localization and local content targets, as these are fundamental elements for sustainable development."

During the event, Saudi Arabia's Minister of Investment Khalid Al-Falih said that the Standard Incentives Program marks a significant step toward realizing the objectives of the Kingdom's Vision 2030 and National Investment Strategy.

"The program seeks to achieve the Vision 2030 goals in the short and medium term, including increasing non-oil exports to 50 percent of the size of the non-oil economy and localizing critical materials essential to the economy," said Al-Falih.

He added: "Today, the industrial sector contributes to an investment that accounts for 40.8 percent of the gross domestic product. The industrial sector accounts for approximately 30 percent of foreign direct investment."

Al-Falih further noted that most of the licenses granted by the Ministry of Investment to international companies are in the manufacturing industries sector.

The investment minister added that 571 international companies have opened their regional headquarters in the Kingdom, most of which

FASTFACTS

● The incentives program offers coverage of up to 35 percent of the initial project investment, capped at SR50 million for each qualifying initiative.

● The program is divided evenly across the project lifecycle, granting 50 percent during construction and the remaining 50 percent during production.

are industrial firms.

"We will provide these companies with enablers and incentives through various programs. Our role is not just to promote ourselves but also to enable various sectors to be competitive and ensure that all key sectors, as everyone has mentioned — starting with the industrial sector— are indeed attractive for investment," said Al-Falih.

Al-Falih added that projections indicate that the initiative is expected to generate an estimated SR23 billion annually in GDP from the targeted projects.

During the event, Energy Minister Prince Abdulaziz bin Salman said each sector should understand its role in achieving its objectives.

"Through this program, we

also aspire to achieve sustainability by launching economically viable projects, creating quality job opportunities for Saudi men and women, and fostering innovation and creativity in industrial sectors," he said.

He added: "We believe this methodology, centered on empowering industrial projects, will contribute to the gradual expansion of these investments, broadening the industrial base for both investors and the

The objective of the program is to equip the industrial sector and investors in the Kingdom.

Hamad Al-Sheikh
Saudi minister of state

Kingdom as a whole."

The minister further underlined that these initiatives, in the future, will grow into leading companies that enrich the national economy, diversify income sources, steady the balance of payments, and boost non-oil exports.

Faisal Al-Ibrahim, minister of economy and planning, said that the program has been developed to grow and deepen the industrial base, which will significantly impact the overall non-oil economy.

"We look forward to seeing non-oil activities increase in number and become more sustainable. Therefore, it is important to design these incentives in a way that does not create additional dependency on them," said Al-Ibrahim.

He added: "Instead, they should create dynamism in the private sector, enabling it to mature and reach a stage where it grows, continues to produce, and competes sustainably."

According to Al-Ibrahim, the nation wants to create a dynamic private sector that relies on itself and benefits from the incentives program.

"We measure success through the creation of high-quality jobs, increased productivity, higher non-oil exports, and an overall increase in investment in the Kingdom, leveraging global value chains," added Al-Ibrahim.

During the event, Hamad Al-Sheikh, minister of state and member of the Council of Ministers, said that the objective of the program is to equip the industrial sector and investors in the Kingdom.

"The goal is to empower the industrial sector and investors, ensuring clarity regarding application mechanisms, evaluation criteria, and a clear process for prioritization in case multiple investors apply for the same opportunity," he said.

INDUSTRIALIZATION

New industrial initiative to prioritize investor demand in Saudi Arabia: Alkhorayef

Program aims to attract high-value industrial investments in the Kingdom

Nadim Hassan Riyadh

Saudi Arabia is taking a flexible approach to distributing its SR10 billion (\$2.66 billion) standardized incentive program to maximize its impact across industries, according to a senior official.

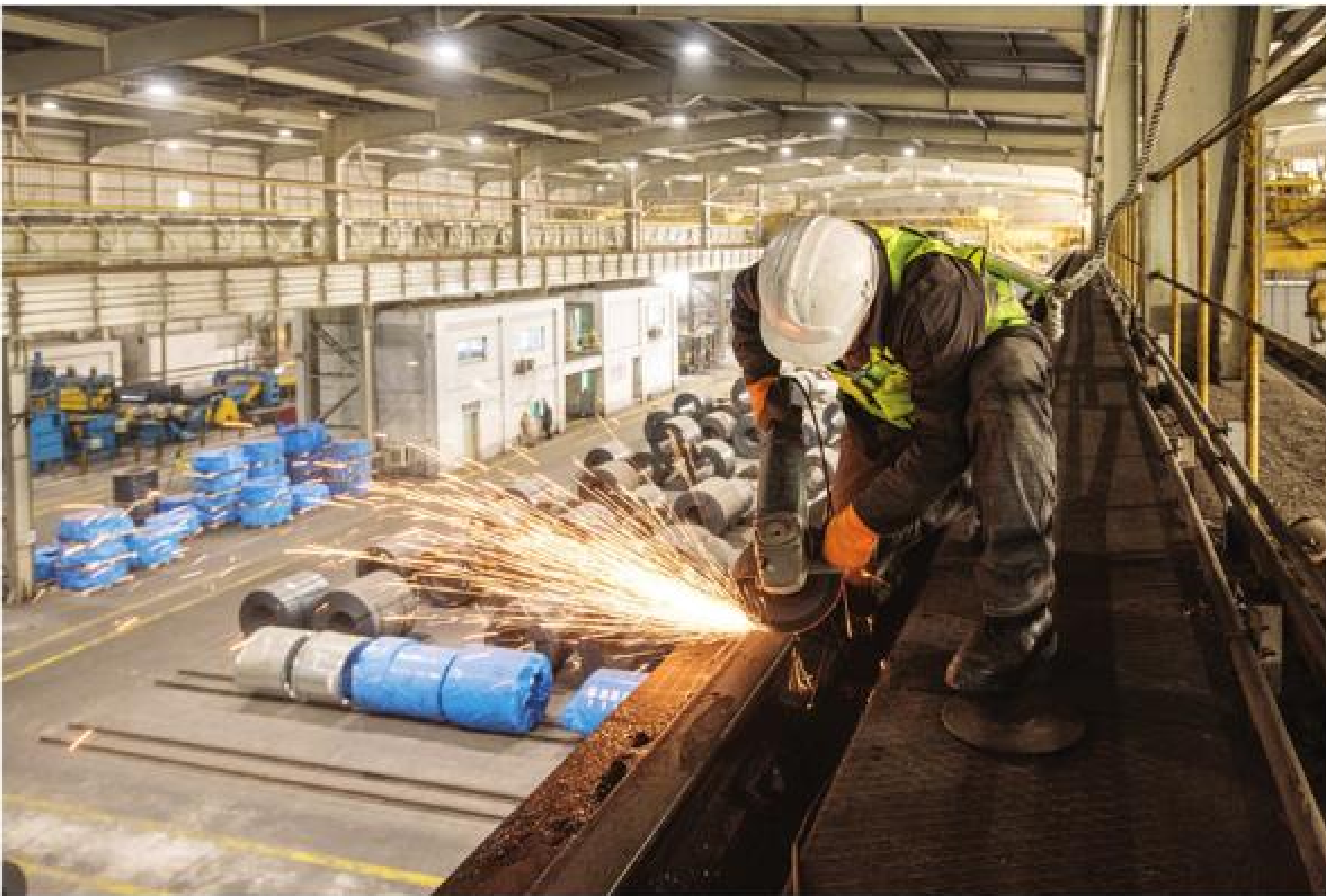
In an interview with Arab News on the sidelines of the Standard Incentives for the Industrial Sector event, Saudi Minister of Industry and Mineral Resources Bandar Alkhorayef said the program is designed to align with investor demand and deliver optimal returns.

“We are now very flexible with regards to the split between different sectors because we would like to see, you know, how the appetite of the investor and where are the areas where maybe the program needs to focus more and put more effort,” Alkhorayef said.

The SR10 billion standardized incentive program, announced by Alkhorayef in his opening speech, aims to empower industrial investments and promote sustainable development.

Covering up to 35 percent of a project's initial investment, capped at SR50 million per project, the program seeks to reduce reliance on imports by targeting sectors with high dependency on foreign products and no local production.

The initiative targets at least 200 projects, focusing on



The program seeks to reduce reliance on imports by targeting sectors with high dependency on foreign products and no local production. Shutterstock

FASTFACT

As part of Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 strategy, the incentive program aims to attract high-value investments, diversify the industrial base, and build a globally competitive manufacturing ecosystem.

industries where the Kingdom relies heavily on imports.

“The impact is mainly going to be on the balance of payment where all of the products that we have targeted are products where we have a lot of imports but there is no local production,” Alkhorayef said.

The objective is to “reduce



Any investor who registers as a Saudi investor doesn't have to be a Saudi national.

Bandar Alkhorayef
Saudi minister of industry and mineral resources



our imports” while enhancing the industrial sector's capabilities through new products and technologies.

The program is inclusive, accommodating foreign and local investors. “Any investor who registers as a Saudi investor doesn't

OPPORTUNITIES

Saudi Arabia de-risks investments to attract foreign SMEs

Nadim Hassan Riyadh

Saudi Arabia is de-risking investments for foreign small and medium-sized enterprises to encourage their entry into the Kingdom, according to a senior official.

In an interview with Arab News on the sidelines of the Standard Incentives for the Industrial Sector program, Saudi Minister of Investment Khalid Al-Falih said the initiative aims to attract international SMEs that have for decades been integral to supply chains in their home countries.

The announcement follows a joint effort by the ministries of industry and mineral resources and investment to allocate SR10 billion (\$2.66 billion) to activate standardized incentives for the industrial sector.

This initiative, approved by the Cabinet last month, seeks to empower industrial investments, foster sustainable development, and enhance Saudi Arabia's global industrial competitiveness.

“De-risking is a key component. Come to Saudi Arabia. We will de-risk the investment for you,” Al-Falih said, emphasizing



Saudi Investment Minister Khalid Al-Falih said the initiative will attract international SMEs that have for decades been integral to supply chains in their home countries.
AN photo

the government's commitment to creating a business-friendly environment.

He added: “We will do match-making with the Saudi investors, and then they can, hopefully,

recreate, and maybe we innovate with them to do something bigger for what they are doing in their home country.”

The program also aims to build value chains by encouraging

international SMEs to collaborate with local Saudi firms, fostering innovation and shared growth.

“I think the Kingdom has been doing well in attracting large multinationals. However, when we go to Germany, we find out 70 to 80 percent of the German GDP is by SMEs, who may only operate in Germany and Europe. They don't know the Middle East. They don't know Saudi Arabia,” Al-Falih said.

“As we build these value chains, we need to help our SMEs in Saudi Arabia by bringing with them some international SMEs

that have been doing some of this production and manufacturing, feeding the large OEMs (original equipment manufacturers) for decades in their own home country.”

While Saudi Arabia has successfully attracted large-scale investments in multibillion-dollar projects like the green hydrogen initiative, Lucid, and Ceer, Al-Falih noted that mid-sized companies face unique challenges. These include a lack of credit history, limited local ecosystems, and rising costs of funding and production.

CONFIDENCE

Saudi SME job growth hits 10-month high

Nirmal Narayanan Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's small and medium enterprises recorded their strongest employment growth in 10 months during December, fueled by long-term expansion plans and robust domestic demand, according to a new report.

The Riyadh Bank Saudi Arabia SME Purchasing Managers' Index stood at 56.9 in December,

slightly lower than November's 57.1 but well above the neutral 50 mark, indicating sustained growth in the sector.

Strengthening the SME segment is a cornerstone of the Kingdom's economic diversification strategy under Vision 2030, aimed at reducing dependence on oil revenues.

Finance Minister Mohammed Al-Jadaan highlighted the

FASTFACT

The Riyadh Bank Saudi Arabia SME Purchasing Managers' Index stood at 56.9 in December, slightly lower than November's 57.1 but well above the neutral 50 mark, indicating sustained growth in the sector.

sector's rapid growth in October, noting that the number of SMEs in Saudi Arabia had doubled over the past seven years, with 45 percent now led by women entrepreneurs.

“The Riyadh Bank Saudi Arabia SME PMI concluded the year on a high note, reflecting a robust performance of the SME sector. The fourth quarter of the year showcased a marked

improvement over the third quarter, with the average PMI hitting 56.8, the highest quarterly reading since the end of 2023,” said Naif Al-Ghaith, chief economist at Riyadh Bank.

He added: “This upturn in the SME sector is a testament to the thriving economic environment, characterized by increasing output levels and a surge in incoming new work.”

Business News



The entertainment sector is expected to generate 450,000 jobs and contribute 4.2 percent to Saudi Arabia's gross domestic product by 2030. [File](#)

DRIVING INNOVATION

Saudi accelerator targets 32 entertainment startups

The 10-month initiative is designed to foster entrepreneurship

Nour El-Shaerl Riyadh

Saudi Arabia's entertainment sector is set for growth as the General Entertainment Authority launches the third edition of its accelerator program, which will support 32 startups.

The initiative is designed to drive innovation, foster entrepreneurship, and help shape the future of the Kingdom's entertainment industry, according to the Saudi Press Agency.

The 10-month accelerator program offers participating startups a comprehensive suite of benefits, including mentorship, consulting, co-working spaces, and international exposure.

Each cohort, consisting of 16 companies, will receive

192 hours of expert guidance and two international trips to explore global market trends.

Aligned with Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 objectives of economic diversification, the program is set to play a key role in strengthening the entertainment ecosystem. With projections indicating that the sector will generate 450,000 jobs and contribute 4.2 percent to the country's gross domestic product by 2030, the initiative aims to enhance innovation, attract investment, and position Saudi Arabia as a regional entertainment hub.

The program builds on the success of its previous editions. The first accelerator, launched in 2023, reviewed 260 project registrations and selected 14 startups after a rigorous vetting process. Entrepreneurs benefited from weekly

FASTFACTS

- The accelerator will support startups through two cohorts, each comprising 16 businesses.

- Participants will receive expert guidance, co-working spaces, and two international trips to explore global trends.

workshops, personalized consulting, and opportunities to connect with investors.

In the second edition, which launched in mid-2023, the GEA expanded its efforts to help startups overcome market challenges and achieve sustainable growth. Tailored programs helped participants navigate the unique obstacles of the entertainment sector, increasing their chances of success.

The GEA's initiative is part of a broader strategy to support the Kingdom's growing entertainment industry. Through this accelerator, the GEA aims to foster an environment where innovation thrives, businesses grow, and global partnerships are forged.

In addition to the extensive mentorship and training, participants also had access to 56 hours of expert counseling in June 2023, with speakers and consultants from Saudi Arabia's leading entrepreneurs sharing valuable insights.

The success of the first two accelerators laid the foundation for the third edition, which is expected to continue driving momentum in the entertainment sector as it evolves into a major contributor to Saudi Arabia's economic transformation.

DATA

Oman's import price index up 1.1% in Q3 2024

Reem Walid Riyadh

Oman's general index of import prices saw an increase of 1.1 percent in the third quarter of 2024 compared to the same period in 2023, according to data from the National Center for Statistics and Information.

The largest price hike was observed in the miscellaneous manufactured goods category, which rose by 11 percent. This was followed by beverages and tobacco (up 6.7 percent), and food and live animals (up 5.7 percent).

Other notable increases included machinery and transport equipment (5.3 percent),

chemicals and related materials (4.3 percent), raw materials (4.3 percent), manufactured goods primarily categorized by material (1.6 percent), and vegetable and animal oils, fats, and waxes (0.9 percent).

In contrast, the category of mineral fuels and related materials saw a significant decrease of 22.2 percent.

This increase in import prices aligns with Oman's overall rise in imports, which grew by 10.8 percent, reaching 8 billion Omani rials (\$20.8 billion) by June 2024, up from 7.2 billion rials in the same period of 2023.

Additionally, the general index of import prices declined by 4.8

HIGHLIGHTS

- The largest price hike was observed in the miscellaneous manufactured goods category, which rose by 11 percent.

- This increase in import prices aligns with rise in imports, which grew by 10.8 percent, reaching 8 billion rials by June 2024.

- The general index of import prices declined by 4.8 percent when compared to the second quarter of 2024.

percent when compared to the second quarter of 2024. This drop was largely due to decreases in the prices of beverages and tobacco (-22.4 percent), mineral fuels and related materials (-11.6 percent), and chemicals and related materials (-10.8 percent).

The miscellaneous manufactured goods category also saw a reduction of 10.2 percent, while machinery and transport equipment dropped by 3.9 percent. However, the raw materials category saw a 32 percent increase, vegetable and animal oils, fats, and waxes rose by 9.2 percent, and food and live animals increased by 3.5 percent.

BizBriefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

Outlook

IMF chief sees steady world growth in 2025

The International Monetary Fund will forecast steady global growth and continuing disinflation when it releases an updated report on Jan. 17, IMF Managing Director Kristalina Georgieva said.

Georgieva said the US economy was doing "quite a bit better" than expected, although there was uncertainty around the trade policies of President-elect Donald Trump.

With inflation moving closer to the Federal Reserve's target, the Fed could afford to wait for more data before undertaking further interest rate cuts, she said. [Reuters](#)

Decline

Unemployment rate in Canada ticks down

Canada's unemployment rate ticked down in December, the national statistics agency said, ending 2024 with signs of strength as the country readies for potential economic upheaval triggered by incoming US President Donald Trump.

It said the December unemployment rate was 6.7 percent, down from 6.8 percent in November.

November's figure was the highest since January 2017, excluding 2020 and 2021, when pandemic lockdowns dramatically impacted the number of people working.

The economy added some 91,000 jobs in December, most of them full-time. [AFP](#)

Chart of THE DAY

Amazon claimed the top spot among online retailers in the US in 2023, capturing 37.6 percent of the market.

Source: Statista

MARKET SHARE OF E-COMMERCE FIRMS IN US (2023)



What We're Reading

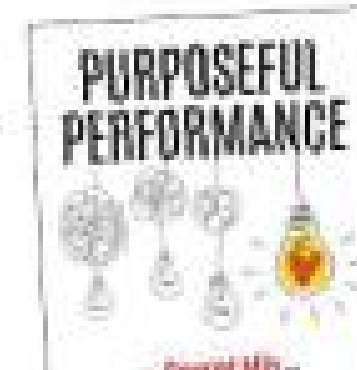
FOR THE TRAIN OR ON THE PLANE

Purposeful Performance

JONATHAN STANLEY

In "Purposeful Performance," business-strategy consultant and coach Jonathan Stanley gives business owners the key to developing a sense of purpose and meaning within and beyond their organization, says a review published on [goodreads.com](#).

Stanley distills decades of experience as a business owner and CEO into a powerful framework that simplifies strategic planning into just eight slides. It is a guide to transform your business.



Energy

French oil firm begins work on Iraq gas project

French oil major TotalEnergies has begun building a gas processing facility in Iraq, it said.

ArtawiGas25 will process 50 million cubic feet of gas per day from the Ratawi field, which is currently flared, or burned off. The gas will then supply local plants to power 200,000 households in the Basra region.

The facility represents a \$250 million investment, part of a total \$10 billion to be spent by Total over four years. It will create up to 160 direct and indirect jobs during the construction phase. [Reuters](#)

Liberalization

Ethiopia opens 1st stock exchange in five decades

Ethiopian Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed rang a Wall Street-style bell to officially launch the country's first stock exchange in 50 years, part of efforts to liberalize the struggling economy.

Only one company was listed on the exchange on opening day — Wegagen Bank — but an official said they were aiming to eventually include 90 firms and 4 million investors, without setting a timeline.

A first sale of shares in state-owned Ethio Telecom was launched in October, but the firm was not immediately listed on the exchange as expected. [AFP](#)

The Autosport Awards partnership with Qiddiya represents a pivotal moment for both our organizations.

Werner Brell
CEO of Motorsport Network



PRESS RELEASES

FROM THE WORLD OF BUSINESS AND COMMERCE

ANNUAL TRADE SHOW

Leading industry suppliers line up for Gulf Print & Pack 2025

More than 150 exhibitors including Konica Minolta, Bobst, Ricoh, Canon and Fujifilm will take part in Gulf Print and Pack 2025, the Middle East's leading commercial print and packaging trade show for printers, machinery buyers and brand owners. This edition will take place for the first time in Saudi Arabia at Riyadh Front Exhibition and Conference Center from Jan. 14-16.

Live demonstrations of the latest commercial and package printing technologies are set to take center stage at the show.

Konica Minolta will showcase its latest innovations in production printing and embellishment, including its MGI embellishment technology, which adds striking decorative effects to printed materials, and the AccurioLabel digital label press.

Bobst will promote its most recent introductions for narrow and mid-web label and packaging printing, including the Digital Master 340/510 All-in-One and Digital Expert 340 presses.

Ricoh will present a broad range of digital printing solutions including the Pro 8400 digital mono sheetfed press, Pro C7500 digital colorsheetfed press, Pro C9500 digital color sheetfed press and Pro C5300 digital color sheetfed press, along with the Ricoh Auto Color Adjuster.



FAST FACT

Gulf Print and Pack 2025 will take place for the first time in Saudi Arabia at Riyadh Front Exhibition and Conference Center from Jan. 14-16.

Live demonstrations of the latest commercial and package printing technologies are set to take center stage at this leading trade show in Riyadh.

Canon will demonstrate a range of equipment including the Arizona flatbed UV series for rigid media, the UVgel/ Colorado M-series for high-productivity roll-to-roll printing, and the imagePROGRAF series for premium photo and fine art applications. These are supported by the PRISMA XL software suite.

The showcase will also feature a mezzanine area highlighting retail interior décor, signage, and commercial applications, emphasizing Canon's versatility in serving this market. The company will also present information and print samples from its varioPRESS iV7 B2 press and LabelStream 2000 digital label press.

Meanwhile, Fujifilm will offer visitors live demonstrations of its latest technologies for the analogue and digital print markets, including the Revoria Press PC1120, Revoria Press EC2100S and SC285S, Revoria Press EI136 and ApeosPro C multi-function printer.

Barry Killengrey, event

director, Gulf Print and Pack, said: "We are delighted to welcome leading industry suppliers from across the commercial and package printing landscape to Gulf Print and Pack 2025 — another great reason why PSPs, commercial printers and packaging converters should visit the show."

EXCELLENCE IN MOTORSPORT

Autosport Awards name Qiddiya as presenting sponsor

The Autosport Awards, motorsport's most prestigious awards evening, announced that Qiddiya will be the presenting sponsor for 2025. This sponsorship includes the inaugural Business Exchange, which will take place on the morning of the awards celebration on Jan. 29 at London's iconic Roundhouse.

The newly reimagined Autosport Awards will bring together elite drivers, industry leaders, and celebrities for an evening celebrating excellence in motorsport. The evening is the highlight of the racing social calendar and will celebrate the best of the industry, across all the motorsport series, including those just starting out in their careers and those who have been fundamental in the development of the sport for decades.

The Autosport Business Exchange is a high-level industry conference that will explore key topics in discussions on the impact of artificial intelligence technologies and the growing role of women in motorsports. A highlight of the event will be a keynote by Zak Brown, CEO of

McLaren Racing, who will share his unique perspective on the global racing series his teams participate in.

"The Autosport Awards partnership with Qiddiya represents a pivotal moment for both our organizations," said Werner Brell, CEO of Motorsport Network. "For the first time, we are inviting fans to experience the evening in person and become immersed in the experience. Qiddiya's groundbreaking sports and entertainment complex perfectly aligns with our commitment to redefining how fans connect with motorsports, and we're thrilled to partner with them to bring the reimagined Autosport Awards to life."

Qiddiya is creating a groundbreaking entertainment city near Riyadh, which is poised to become one of the world's premier sports and cultural destinations.

"We are pleased to partner with the Autosport Awards, a renowned platform celebrating the talent and innovation driving the future of motorsports," added Abdullah Al-Dawood, managing director of Qiddiya Investment Company.

IMPACTFUL INVESTMENT

Arab Energy Fund-led consortium acquires Metito Utilities

The Arab Energy Fund, formerly known as APICORP, a leading multilateral impact financial institution focused on the MENA energy sector, has successfully led a consortium to acquire a 100 percent stake in, and provide further growth capital to, Metito Utilities, a global investor, developer and operator of sustainable water management solutions and climate-resilient water assets.

This landmark transaction, in partnership with Zamil Group Investment Company and the Ghandour family, aligns with TAEF's strategic vision to advance energy security and sustainability by driving impactful investments that address critical infrastructure needs in water and wastewater management across the Middle East, Africa, and Asia.

Metito has been an industry leader in the water sector since 1958, and Metito Utilities has more than 25 years of experience in the investment, development, and long-term operation and maintenance of water and wastewater concessions. It has a proven track record of over 35 successful concessions and



An independent sewage treatment plant in Dammam.

has a long-standing legacy of pioneering water and wastewater management, delivering first public-private partnership projects in the sector in countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Uzbekistan, Egypt, Rwanda, Serbia, Qatar and beyond.

Khalid Ali Al-Ruwaigh, CEO of TAEF, said: "The investment in Metito Utilities marks a strategic milestone in TAEF's mission to advance sustainable infrastructure and energy value chains. Water and energy are deeply interconnected, and this collaboration, alongside our partners Zamil Group Investment Company and the Ghandour

family, as well as Metito Utilities' talented team, allows us to strengthen regional leadership in addressing water scarcity challenges while delivering long-term value creation. We aim to accelerate growth and innovation across new and existing markets."

Abdullrahman K. Al-Zamil, president of Zamil Group Investment Company, said: "We have consistently sought opportunities that combine business excellence with meaningful impact. Water security is fundamental to our region's future, and Metito's expertise in water management aligns perfectly with our commitment to sustainable development."

Corporate Briefs

THE BEST OF THE BEST

Logistics

FedEx boosts e-commerce growth in KSA

FedEx, the world's largest express transportation company, has launched FedEx International Connect Plus in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. It is a shipping solution ideal for e-commerce packages weighing up to 20 kg. This new international, day-definite service combines speed with competitive rates, connecting e-tailers in just three to four business days.

The launch of FICP further enhances FedEx e-commerce capabilities, as e-tailers are increasingly seeking more diversified, cost-effective solutions to meet their customers' evolving needs.

Cybersecurity

Kaspersky reveals 'free' crypto trap

Researchers at Kaspersky have uncovered a new cryptocurrency fraud scheme that manipulates users into transferring funds under the guise of acquiring "free" crypto assets. The scheme operates through comments left on YouTube videos devoted to financial topics. These comments are written by newly created accounts and include a seed phrase for a crypto wallet supposedly containing USDT (Tether) tokens. Since knowing the seed phrase usually means controlling funds in the crypto wallet, an unsuspecting user, tempted by the prospect of easy money, can easily be drawn into the scam.

Creativity

Sharjah Literature Festival kicks off Jan. 17

The emirate of Sharjah is set to launch the inaugural Sharjah Literature Festival, which will take place from Jan. 17 to 21, under the slogan "Emirati Tales Inspire the Future." The festival is held under the patronage of Sheikh Dr. Sultan bin Muhammad Al-Qasimi, member of the Supreme Council and ruler of Sharjah, and the guidance of Sheikhha Bodour bint Sultan Al-Qasimi, chairperson of the Sharjah Book Authority and honorary president of the Emirates Publishers Association. This event is poised to establish itself as a major fixture in the emirate's annual cultural calendar.

Sport News



Ja Morant scored the game-winner with 18.6 seconds left, lifting the Grizzlies to a 127-125 victory over the Minnesota Timberwolves in a tension-packed NBA shootout.

SAUDI VISION 2030

Boxing Magazine poised for bold new era under Turki Al-Sheikh's stewardship

Relaunch at London's Old Royal Naval College sees historic celebration

Bahar Hussain London

The historic Old Royal Naval College was the perfect backdrop for a momentous occasion: the relaunch of Boxing Magazine, a publication steeped in tradition and renowned for its in-depth coverage of the sweet science.

Established in 1922, Boxing Magazine has chronicled the evolution of boxing for more than a century, becoming a trusted voice for fans and insiders alike.

Now, under the stewardship of Turki Al-Sheikh, adviser to the Saudi Royal Court and head of the Kingdom's General Entertainment Authority, the magazine is poised for a bold new era.

First published in the early 20th century, Boxing Magazine quickly cemented its reputation as the definitive source of news, analysis and profiles in the world of boxing. Over the decades, it has covered legendary bouts, celebrated champions, and documented

the sport's growth on a global scale. From the roaring 1920s to the digital age, the magazine has adapted to changing times while maintaining its commitment to quality journalism.



Boxing Magazine is a bridge between tradition and modernity.

Turki Al-Sheikh

Saudi entertainment authority chief



Saturday's relaunch event was a tribute to this legacy, with guests including prominent figures from the boxing community, sports media, and entertainment industry. Attendees marveled at an exclusive exhibition of iconic magazine covers and memorabilia, offering a nostalgic journey through boxing's storied past. Al-Sheikh, who attended the event, highlighted the magazine's potential to unite global boxing enthusiasts.

Visionary leadership

The acquisition of Boxing Magazine by Al-Sheikh is a significant turning point for the publication. Known for his transformative work as GEA head, Al-Sheikh has been instrumental in fostering cultural and sporting advances in the Kingdom. His presence at the event underscored his commitment to elevating the magazine's profile and broadening its global reach.

In his remarks, Al-Sheikh emphasized his passion for boxing and the role of sport in bridging cultures. "This magazine is more than a publication; it is a bridge between tradition and modernity, a testament to the enduring power of sport to inspire and unite," he said.

As part of the event, special awards were presented to recognize outstanding achievements in the boxing world. Billy Dib was honored with The Ring Comeback of the Year award, while Daniel Dubois received The Ring Knockout of the Year award for his stunning KO of Anthony Joshua.

Saudi Vision 2030

The relaunch of Boxing Magazine aligns seamlessly with Saudi Vision 2030, the Kingdom's ambitious blueprint for economic and cultural transformation. By investing in global cultural and sporting assets, Saudi Arabia aims to establish itself as a hub for innovation, creativity and entertainment. The

reinvigoration of a historic brand like Boxing Magazine reflects this commitment, showing how tradition and progress can harmonize.

Under Al-Sheikh's leadership, the magazine is expected to expand its reach to new audiences, particularly in the Middle East and Asia, regions where boxing is experiencing rapid growth. Plans include bilingual editions, interactive digital platforms, a dedicated app, and printed versions of the magazine. These initiatives aim to celebrate boxing's heritage while nurturing its future.

Bright future ahead

As Boxing Magazine enters this exciting new chapter, its relaunch at the Old Royal Naval College symbolizes the enduring appeal of boxing as a sport and cultural phenomenon. With Al-Sheikh at the helm, the magazine is well positioned to honor its storied past while embracing the opportunities of the future.

INJURIES

Arab tennis hero Ons Jabeur plans to bounce back

The Tunisian star is confident of hitting the heights again

All Khaled Dubai

Last year was not one that Tunisian tennis superstar Ons Jabeur will remember with great fondness.

Having enthralled fans with her unique brand of tennis in the two previous years, reaching two Wimbledon finals and hitting the world No.2 ranking, 2024 was beset by injuries and disruptions.

As Jabeur prepares to launch her Australian Open campaign against Anhelina Kalinina of the Ukraine, she is determined to get back to the form that her army of supporters had come to expect of her.

"I'm feeling much better, happy to be back," she told Arab News. "I feel like I'm playing good, I'm getting back into the game. I feel very motivated and definitely very positive. I can continue playing even better and the good news is there are a lot of great things to improve."

Since landing in Australia at the start of the year, Jabeur has taken part in the Brisbane International, where she reached the quarterfinals, as well as the Adelaide International. Improving her form, and not her current WTA world ranking of 39, is the priority.

"I feel like ranking maybe would be a bit irrelevant in this case because if I focus a lot on it, I might kind of not see the level that I was in (before). I was in the top 10 for a good time and I think I need to always remember that I have that level to be one of the great players in the world."

"I always say the most important thing is that I should have the level and the ranking will follow up no matter how much time it will take."

"It is very important for me to get back to my game, and definitely improve a lot of points in my game. That would help me be a better player, especially, playing against these



Since landing in Australia at the start of the year, Ons Jabeur has taken part in the Brisbane International. AP

unbelievable players, they're improving all the time and tennis is improving all the time. And I think it is really important for me to keep up with that game."

Despite a tough year, Jabeur is now looking forward to mixing it with the next generation of players, for whom she has

plenty of praise.

"It's very impressive. A lot of things are growing very fast, (there are) a lot of unbelievable players," she said. "You can see the level is super close between different players and it's definitely an honor for me to be part of this generation,

they are younger than me, but playing at the same time, it's great to see that."

"It's definitely motivating to get back on to the court and try to impose my game, because I know my game is a bit different than any other player and the challenge is kind of exciting."

Sport Briefs

THE BEST OF THE BEST

NBA

Morant lifts Grizzlies over Timberwolves

Memphis star Ja Morant scored the game-winner with 18.6 seconds left, lifting the Memphis Grizzlies to a 127-125 victory over the Minnesota Timberwolves in a tension-packed NBA shootout.

Morant, playing his second game back from a shoulder injury, scored a modest 12 points and missed all four of his three-point attempts.

But he came through when it mattered, driving for a layup that made it 125-125 with 54.1 seconds left. **AFP**



Indian cricket

BCCI elects Devajit Saikia to top job

India's powerful and hugely wealthy cricket board on Sunday elected its new chief, former player and advocate Devajit Saikia, the only person nominated to the top post.

"Devajit Saikia is declared duly elected as the Secretary of BCCI," the Board of Control for Cricket in India said in a statement.

Saikia, 55, succeeds Jay Shah who left the position to become chairman of the International Cricket Council, the global governing body. **AFP**

'Mental toughness'

Sabalenka survives early Open wobble

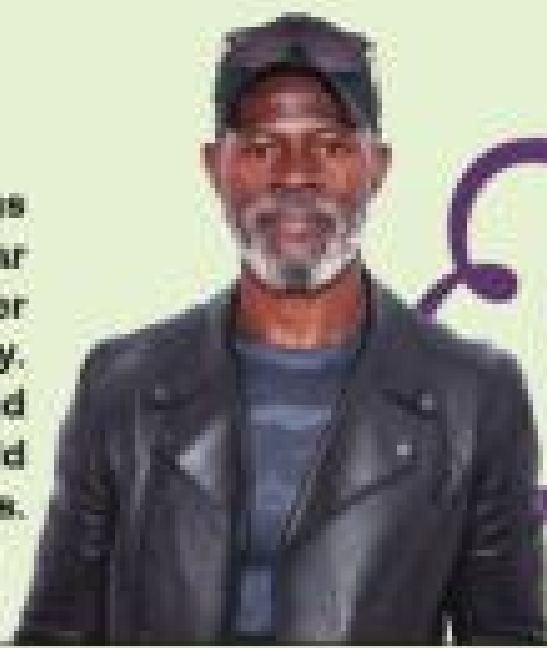
A battling Aryna Sabalenka credited new a "mental toughness" Sunday for helping her survive an Australian Open first-set wobble that a few years ago might have cost her the match.

The two-time defending champion beat Sloane Stephens 6-3, 6-2 in the first round to begin her bid for a historic hat-trick at Melbourne Park. But the Belarusian did not have it all her own way against the 2017 US Open champion on Rod Laver Arena.

She raced into a 4-0 lead before a series of unforced errors allowed the 31-year-old American to break back twice for 4-3. **AFP**

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'I've been in this business making films now for over two decades with two Oscar nominations, been in many blockbuster films, and yet, I'm still struggling financially. I'm definitely underpaid,' 'Gladiator' and 'Blood Diamond' actor Djimon Hounsou told CNN's African Voices Changemakers.



& Finally

TheSix

Coffee spots

Explore these vibrant spots to enjoy Riyadh's growing cafe scene.



Wisdom Cafe

Inspired by Russian cafes, Wisdom Cafe offers drinks in vibrant ceramic cups, cozy seating, and greenery, all set against pink and blue decor. The raff Russian coffee is a must-try.



Lazy Cat Cafe

Located in Laysen Valley, this cat-themed spot offers feline-inspired interiors and an outdoor dining patio. The menu features dishes like crème brulee pancakes, lazy egg pastrami and Turkish Simit Benedict.



Cavida Café

Perfect for any time of day, Cavida offers cozy corners for work or sweet treats with friends. Try their tiramisu cake, saffron mousse, or spicy chocolate drink.



Laduree

The Parisian classic import is known for its colorful macarons (lemon, raspberry, pistachio) and breakfast options like shakshouka, croissants, and mushroom omelets.



Musa and the Palm

A Jeddah-born cafe in the Diplomatic Quarter featuring dates with unique fillings and signature drinks like the palm latte and date smoothie.



Ouia

In Al-Qairawan, Ouia's pastel decor and playful tagline accompany hot drinks like Spanish lattes and treats like melifei cheesecake.

CLOSE UP

Lyna Khoudri urges voting ahead of Cesar Awards



Arab News Dubai

French Algerian actress **Lyna Khoudri** took to social media to drum up support for "Bye Bye Tiberias," which is eligible in the documentary category at the 50th Cesar Awards in France.

France's answer to the Academy Awards, the Cesar Awards will be held on Feb. 28, with voting for all categories closing on Jan. 28.

The awards are voted on by a cohort of 4,000 professionals in the film and media industries.

Khoudri does not feature in "Bye Bye Tiberias," French Palestinian Algerian filmmaker Lina Soualem's documentary feature that follows Palestinian actress Hiam Abbass, who is best known for her roles in HBO's "Succession" and Hulu's "Ramy," as well as films including "Munich" and "Blade Runner 2049." Abbass grew up in the Galilean village of Deir Hanna. In her early 20s, she made the decision to leave her family home and follow her dream of becoming an actress in Europe. Behind her she left her mother, grandmother, and seven sisters.

It is this decision that is central to "Bye Bye

Tiberias." Reflecting on Abbass' chosen exile and the ways in which the women of her family have influenced her and her mother's lives, Soualem's film portrays four generations of daring Palestinian women, including her great grandmother, Um Ali, her grandmother Nemat, and her great aunt Hosnieh.

"When my mother reads a poem about my great grandmother, we can feel that she is overwhelmed by emotion," Soualem, who is also Abbass' daughter, previously told Arab News.

"And the story of my great aunt combines all the tragedy of our family, because it's the loss of place, it's the separation from family, it's the body separated from the soil. I couldn't imagine being separated from my mother and sister for 30 years. And what is impressive is that, despite all of this, my great aunt seems to be a model of femininity and positivity for my mother. The one who lost the most is the one who taught her the most."

Khoudri also took to Instagram to promote director Hakim Atoui's "Blood Ties" in the Best Short Fiction Film category.

Lyna Khoudri took to Instagram to garner support for two films, including 'Bye Bye Tiberias.' File/ Getty Images and Instagram



NETWORKING HUB

The Harrods Hive networking hub returns to Saudi Arabia

Rahaf Jambri Riyadh

The Harrods Hive Riyadh returned for its second edition on Saturday, this time hosted at the Diriyah Sales Center in Al-Diriyah. In partnership with the Saudi Youth Society, the event featured afternoon tea and three insightful panels.

The first panel, titled "Growing a Creative Community in the Spotlight," discussed the importance of connection amid rapid evolution and growth in

the Kingdom. The second panel, "Stories That Matter," centered on owning one's passion and pioneering change. The final panel, "Sparkling Innovation Locally through Global Influencers," explored the intersection of local and global creativity.

The first panel included Saudi artist Lubwah Al-Homoud, bespoke tailor Yousef Tammar, chef Mona Mosly, and cultural advisor Yasmine Rasool. An artist known for blending traditional Islamic art with modern



Panelists at The Harrods Hive networking event in Diriyah. AN photo

abstraction — Al-Homoud emphasized the significance of connection in art.

"Art is a bridge that connects us all ... when someone resonates with my work, it feels like a validation of my journey."

Tammar, an emerging Saudi tailor studying in Rome, reflected on the cultural shifts he experienced and expressed a desire to integrate his skills into Saudi culture, focusing on elevating the quality of traditional clothing. "I want to bring

a new perspective to traditional designs," he shared. "It's about honoring our heritage while embracing innovation."

For her part, Rasool said: "This is the best time to be in Saudi ... we're on the brink of a cultural renaissance, with so many voices ready to be heard."

This year, the hub focused on the concept of building connections — as Al-Homoud concluded: "In a world that often feels divided, art and creativity are what unite us."



J-Hope

K-POP

BTS' J-Hope sets first solo world tour

Arab News Dubai

South Korean pop star J-Hope, best known as a member of BTS, has revealed plans for his inaugural solo world tour. The tour, titled "Hope on the Stage," will begin in February and span continents, with stops scheduled in major cities across Asia and North America.

The announcement was made on fan platform Weverse on Friday.

The tour will open with a three-day residency at the KSPO Dome in Seoul from Feb.28 to March 2. The performances will also be streamed live, giving fans worldwide a chance to join in. Following the Seoul kickoff, J-Hope will embark on a 31-show itinerary across 15 cities, including Brooklyn, Chicago, and Mexico City in North America, along with Manila, Saitama, Singapore, Jakarta, Bangkok, Macao, Taipei, and Osaka in Asia.

STAR WARS

Rory McCann joins 'Ahsoka' cast

Arab News Dubai

Scottish actor Rory McCann, most famous for playing the The Hound on HBO's "Game of Thrones," will replace late actor Ray Stevenson for a second season of Star Wars show "Ahsoka," The Hollywood Reporter has confirmed.

Stevenson played the former Jedi known as Baylan Skoll in the Disney+ series. He died after a brief illness in May 2023, three months before the series premiered.

The actor also had roles in "Punisher: War Zone," the "Thor" movies and TV's "Rome."