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**OPINION**  
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TAKES A MORE  
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**SUNDAY**, January 19, 2025  
Rajab 19, 1446  
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# ARAB NEWS

The Voice of a Changing Region

Since 1975

MIDDLE EAST WAR

## Israel to release 1,890 Palestinians today in exchange for 33 hostages

Hamas had taken 251 Israelis hostage during their Oct. 7 attack last year

AFF, Reuters Cairo, Jerusalem

Mediator Egypt said on Saturday that Israel is to release more than 1,890 Palestinian prisoners in exchange for 33 Israeli hostages in the first phase of a Gaza truce.

The Foreign Ministry said the prisoners would be freed during the first, 42-day phase of the ceasefire which is set to begin at 0630 GMT on Sunday.

Under the deal, the three-stage ceasefire starts with an initial six-week phase when hostages held by Hamas will be exchanged for prisoners and detainees jailed in Israel.

Hamas militants had taken 251 people hostage during their deadly Oct. 7, 2023, attack on Israel that triggered the war.

Thirty-three of the 98 remaining hostages, including women, children, men over 50 and ill and wounded captives, are to be freed in this phase. In return, Israel will release almost 1,890 Palestinians from its jails.

They include 737 male, female and teenaged prisoners, some of whom are members of militant groups, as well as hundreds of Palestinians from Gaza in detention since the start of the war.

Sunday's ceasefire will be only the second truce in 15 months of war in the Gaza Strip, which has claimed more than 50,000 lives and devastated the Palestinian territory.

Early on Saturday, after



Protesters in London on Saturday express support for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza. AFP

meeting for more than six hours, the Israeli Cabinet ratified the ceasefire deal

In Gaza, Israeli warplanes have kept up attacks since the deal was agreed, and pounded the territory on Saturday.

Israeli tanks shelled the Zeitoun neighborhood of Gaza City and airstrikes hit central and southern Gaza, residents said.

Medics in Gaza said five people were killed in an airstrike that hit a tent in the Mawasi area, west of the city of Khan Younis.

At least 123 Palestinians have been killed in Israeli strikes

### HIGHLIGHT

Sunday's ceasefire will be only the second truce in 15 months of war in the Gaza Strip, which has claimed more than 50,000 lives and devastated the Palestinian territory.

since the ceasefire deal was announced on Wednesday, the Palestinian Civil Emergency Service said.

In Tel Aviv, a Palestinian man stabbed and wounded one person, police said, before he was shot by a passerby.

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NATION IN TURMOIL

## 55,000 displaced Sudanese return home

AFF Port Sudan

Over 55,000 internally displaced Sudanese have returned to areas across the southeastern state of Sennar, more than a month after the army recaptured the state capital from paramilitary forces, the UN migration agency said on Saturday.

The International Organization for Migration said its field teams "monitored the return of 55,466 displaced persons to locations across Sennar state" between Dec. 18 and Jan. 10.

Across the entire country, the UN says 21 months of war have created the world's worst internal displacement crisis, uprooting more than 12 million people.

Famine has been declared in parts of the country, but the risk is spreading for millions more people, including to areas north of Sennar, a UN-backed assessment said last month.

In November, the Sudanese army, battling the Rapid Support Forces since April 2023, said it had regained control of Sinja, the Sennar state capital and a key link between army-controlled areas of central and eastern Sudan.

The RSF had controlled Sinja since late June when its attack on Sennar state forced nearly 726,000 people — many displaced from other states — to flee, according to the UN. The war has killed tens of thousands.

The US Treasury Department has sanctioned army chief Abdel Fattah Al-Burhan and RSF commander Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo.

## The Brief

### DIRIYAH SEASON

Diriyah Season at Al-Turaif offers visitors a range of cultural experiences to explore Saudi Arabia's heritage. **P4**

### INDIAN TOURISTS

India is seeing an increase in travelers heading to Saudi Arabia as there is a growing interest in the Kingdom's heritage, among Gen Z Indians. **P8**

### STARTUPS

Funding for startups across the Middle East and North Africa ended 2024 on an upward trajectory. **P13**

WINTER DELIGHT

## Hopkins 'humbled' to perform at Riyadh Season

Oscar-winning Hollywood star presents 'Life is a Dream' concert in Boulevard City

Arab News Riyadh

Hollywood star Sir Anthony Hopkins graced the Bakr Al-Shaddi Theater in Boulevard City, Riyadh, with a performance titled "Life is a Dream" as part of the Riyadh Season festivities.

The actor opened his speech with "As-salamu alaykum" and thanked Turki Al-Sheikh, chairman of the General Entertainment Authority, for the invitation to perform.

"I am deeply humbled and immensely grateful to premiere



'My life, to me, is a profound mystery,' said Hopkins at the show. Supplied

my piece, 'Life is a Dream,' during Riyadh Season," he said.

The Oscar winner spoke of the path his life had taken, from "the son of a simple baker" in South Wales to world-renowned composer and movie star.

"My life, to me, is a profound mystery," he said. "It's impossible to understand or take credit for the blessings I've been given. That's why I believe life is a dream."

Hopkins described being able to perform in Saudi Arabia, "the cradle of Islam," as an "unimaginable honor." He said: "I cannot

imagine a better place than here to come together, bridge our differences and envision a world of peace, balance and love."

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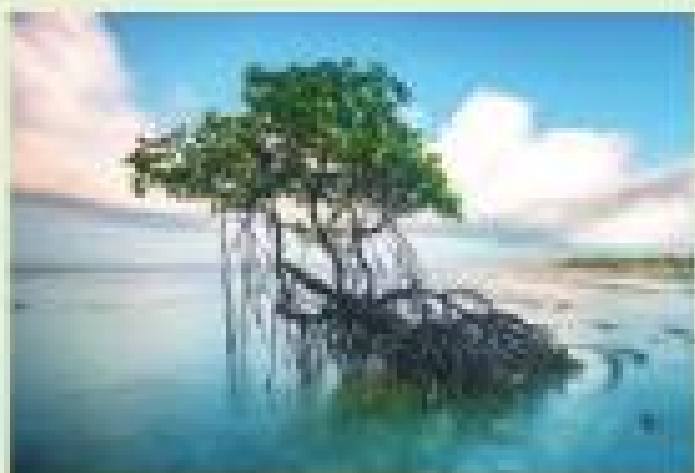
The Royal Belgian Palace's reception for European Union officials and diplomats was an opportunity to reconnect with leaders of EU institutions and fellow ambassadors.

**Halfa Al-Jedea**  
Saudi Ambassador to the EU



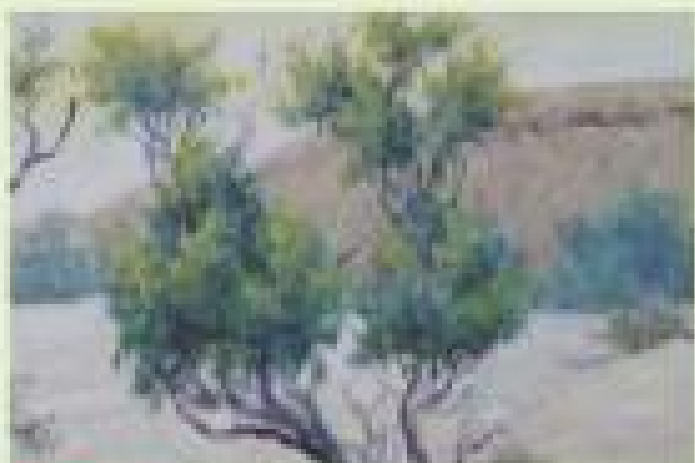
# Radar

## KSA today



### Dhahran Eco-workshop

Discover the environmental importance of the Kingdom's mangrove trees via this scientific adventure at Ihra's Energy Exhibit.



### Riyadh Art exhibition

An exhibition honoring the late Saad Al-Obaid. It features more than 150 works, and will include talks, workshops, live painting demonstrations, and the screening of a documentary celebrating his legacy.



### Jeddah Thriller room

Enjoy a mysterious adventure in "a cursed Romanian apartment in 1961." Uncover the dark truth behind a tenant's death while evading unexpected dangers. More details available on the Hala Yalla app.



### Taif Rural getaway

Get away from it all with a break in one of the cottages at Mishaal Farm, situated high in the tranquil Shafa Mountains. The farm offers a variety of attractions for all the family, including horse riding and a chance to feed the animals.

## The Register

THE PICTURES THAT MARK THE DAY



Saudi Ambassador to Mauritius Fayez bin Meshal Al-Temyat recently met Mauritian Minister of Labour and Industrial Relations Mohammed Reza Cassam Uteem, the Saudi Embassy wrote on X on Saturday.

During the meeting, they discussed ways to enhance bilateral relations as well as other topics of mutual interest. Meanwhile, officials at the Digital Cooperation Organization received Austrian Ambassador to the Kingdom

Oskar Wustinger and a delegation from Austria's Ministry of Finance, the Agency for Economic Cooperation and Development, and other institutions, the organization wrote on X on Saturday.

## What's Trending

Today's hot topics explained by Afshan Aziz



### 'BROTHER SHAWN' Shawn Mendes

Pop icon Shawn Mendes, 26, has social media users buzzing after he was spotted attending Friday sermon at New York University alongside fellow Canadian artist Mustafa the Poet, 28.

The unexpected appearance quickly became a viral sensation, with fans flooding social media expressing reactions ranging from surprise to admiration.

Mustafa Ahmed, known for his evocative poetry and acclaimed debut album "Dunya," embraced Islam at the age of 15, and has often shared his spiritual journey and activism.

Photos and videos of Mendes participating in the prayer circulated online, sparking a wave of emotional responses from fans. On X users celebrated what many referred to as Mendes' "whole-some side quest" of 2025.

### 'BACK IN ACTION' Cameron Diaz

Cameron Diaz is returning to the big screen after a decade-long hiatus, starring alongside Jamie Foxx in Netflix's aptly named new action-comedy, "Back in Action."

The film marks her return to acting since her last role in 2014's "Annie," which also starred Foxx.

In a recent appearance on The Graham Norton Show, Diaz revealed that Foxx played a pivotal role in her decision to return.

"I had 10 years of not paying attention to anything; not accepting any advances, and then I got this script and thought that maybe it was time," she said. "If I was going to leave my family for 10 hours a day, I wanted to do it with the most talented man in the entertainment business."

Diaz and Foxx have a long history of working together, dating back to "Any Given Sunday" in 1999, and again in "Annie."

Reflecting on her time away from acting, Diaz expressed gratitude

for the opportunity to return. "It is a privilege to make films, and we are all so lucky to do what we do. That the door was even open for me after a decade was amazing."

She added: "I loved those 10 years for me and my family, but I thought, 'If I let this go away, if I don't engage again, and if I don't give it a chance, I am a fool.' It might be the beginning of something, but it's here now and I am grateful for it."

In addition to Foxx, Diaz credited her husband, musician Benji Madden, for encouraging her return.

In a previous interview, she shared: "He's like, 'It's time for us to support you and let mommy ascend and do her thing.'"

She told Empire in December: "I reserve the right to say no to doing a movie ever again," adding that Foxx's enthusiasm was hard to resist. "How do you say no to Jamie Foxx when he says, 'Hey, I've got this big action comedy that we can just have so much fun on.'"



## Today's Number

# 1.8K

Saudi aid agency KSrelief distributed 335 food baskets in Mali's Mopti region, benefiting 1,876 individuals from vulnerable families as part of this year's Food Security Support Project in Mali, Saudi Press Agency reported.

## Review

### Slice of Bread bakery

SULafa ALKHUNAIZI

On entering Slice of Bread bakery, located in Qatif municipality in the Eastern Province, you will be greeted with the sweet and comforting aroma of freshly baked goods.

This local business offers an international selection of in-house-made savory and sweet baked treats made from high-quality ingredients, created with love.

Enjoy baked treats, from date-filled maamoul cookies and breadsticks to buttery French croissants with a variety of fillings and creamy Japanese cheesecakes. Slice of Bread is known locally for their freshly baked speciality breads such as brioche, ciabatta and keto bread. My favorite is their sourdough bread, a gut-healthy alternative to white bread,



providing nutrients such as protein, fiber and folic acid.

Sourdough is baked differently from traditional bread, with a more intricate preparation required to level the bread and ferment it. Slice of Bread has nailed their own recipe, with a consistent result every time. The sourdough is offered in different flavors: plain, olive herb, and grain.

To satisfy a sweet tooth, try the "gers ogaily" bites, fluffy saffron and cardamom cakes from Kuwait, or their tiramisu, a rich and hearty Italian desert made of coffee-infused ladyfinger pastries layered in a mixture of mascarpone cream cheese.

## TheRegion

The Middle East Roundup

### Arab News Jeddah

- The Qatar Kite Festival runs at Old Doha Port until Jan. 25. The festival includes workshops, arts and crafts activities, and competitions. Experts from around the world will showcase their creations, and visitors can take part in flying sessions and lessons on

kite building, decorating, and handling. More details at visitqatar.com.

- Boho by Marassi is hosting a series of activities perfect for all ages at Marassi Galleria in Bahrain until Jan. 31. Enjoy workshops on lantern, plate, and canvas painting, as well as vision-board crafting and engag-

ing games. For more details, visit calendar.bh.

- Italian pianist and composer Ludovico Einaudi will perform in Abu Dhabi for the first time at the Etihad Arena on Jan. 19. Enjoy an unforgettable evening filled with music and emotion. Tickets available at abudhabi.platinumlist.net.

### Prayer Times in Saudi Arabia

Jan. 19	Fajr	Sunrise	Dhuhr	Asr	Maghreb	Isha
Makkah	5:41	7:00	12:32	3:40	6:02	7:32
Madinah	5:46	7:07	12:32	3:36	5:57	7:27
Riyadh	5:18	6:39	12:04	3:08	5:29	6:59
Abha	5:27	6:44	12:21	3:33	5:57	7:27
Dammam	5:06	6:28	11:51	2:52	5:12	6:42

All I've wanted is the truth about who actually murdered my daughter and why she was not protected.

**Jim Swire**  
Father of Pan Am Flight 103 victim

# Spotlight

**RESEARCH & STUDIES**  
THE MIDDLE EAST, BETTER EXPLAINED

**ARAB NEWS**



All 259 passengers and crew on board Pan Am Flight 103, main, and 11 residents of Lockerbie, below right, were killed when a bomb hidden in a suitcase exploded on Dec. 21, 1988. AFP file/Getty Images

## FAST FACTS

• Pan Am Flight 103 exploded over the town of Lockerbie, Scotland, on Dec. 21, 1988, killing 270 people.

• Investigators concluded Libyan agents had planted a bomb, hidden in a suitcase, on the Boeing 747.

• Libyan intelligence officer Abdelbaset Al-Megrahi was convicted in 2001 for his involvement in the attack.

## LOCKERBIE

# The shadow of Flight 103

Thirty-seven years after the airliner bombing that killed 270, a new trial could well rewrite the official narrative

Jonathan Gornall London

**More than 37 years on from the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 over the Scottish town of Lockerbie that claimed the lives of 270 people, a third Libyan man is about to stand trial for his alleged part in the plot.**

On Dec. 21, 1988, Pan Am Flight 103, a Boeing 747 en route from London to New York, was a little over an hour into its flight when a bomb hidden in a suitcase in the cargo hold exploded.

As the bodies of all 259 passengers and crew fell to earth, 11 residents of Lockerbie were killed in their homes by falling wreckage.

On Nov. 13, 1991, after a three-year joint investigation by Scottish police and the FBI, indictments for murder were issued against two Libyans — intelligence officer Abdelbaset Al-Megrahi and Lamin Khalifah Fhimah, the station manager for Libyan Arab Airlines at Luqa Airport in Malta.

Investigators believed the bomb had originated from Malta, making its way to Flight 103 in London in an unaccompanied suitcase via a feeder flight from Frankfurt.

It would be more than 11 years after the bombing before the trial began. In exchange for relaxing sanctions, Libyan leader Muammar Qaddafi agreed to hand them over for trial at a special Scottish court convened in The Netherlands.

On Jan. 31, 2001, Fhimah was acquitted, but Al-Megrahi was



found guilty and sentenced to life imprisonment.

Al-Megrahi would serve only a fraction of his sentence. Following a diagnosis of terminal prostate cancer, on Nov. 2, 2009, he was released by the Scottish government on compassionate grounds and returned to Libya, where he died soon after.

But the case was far from closed.

From the outset, conspiracy theories swirled around the tragedy. But the greatest challenge to the official version of events came from an unexpected quarter — the father of one of the passengers.

Jim Swire, an English doctor who lost his daughter, Flora, came to believe Al-Megrahi was innocent and that the evidence against him and Fhimah had been falsified. He campaigned for years on Al-Megrahi's behalf, even traveling to Tripoli to meet him after his release.

Abu Agela Masud, below left, is to stand trial accused of plotting the attack with Lamin Khalifah Fhimah, above left, who was earlier acquitted, and Abdelbaset Al-Megrahi, bottom right. AFP file/Getty Images

Swire's campaign has become the subject of two new TV dramatizations — the five-part "Lockerbie: A Search for Truth," starring Colin Firth, and a BBC-Netflix drama series, "Lockerbie."

What both dramatizations will not cover, however, is the latest extraordinary chapter in the story.

On May 12 this year, a man identified in court papers as Abu Agila Mohammad Masud Kheir Al-Marimi, or simply Masud, will go on trial in Washington, DC, charged with having made the bomb that destroyed Pan Am Flight 103.

The original investigation identified a suspect called Abu Agela Masud, who at the



time could not be traced. But according to an affidavit filed by an FBI special agent in December 2020, in 2017, the bureau received a transcript in Arabic of an interview conducted by Libyan security officers in September 2012 with a man identified as Masud.

According to the transcript, Masud, a former colonel in Libya's External Security Organization, had worked as a "technical expert" for the ESO, "building explosive devices from in or around 1973 to in or around 2011," when Qaddafi was overthrown.

In the interview, Masud had allegedly "admitted to building the bomb that brought down Pan Am Flight 103 and to working with Megrahi and Fhimah to execute the plot."

Furthermore, Masud, who also "admitted his involvement in other plots against citizens of the US and other Western countries," is

alleged to have "confirmed that the bombing operation of Pan Am Flight 103 was ordered by Libyan intelligence leadership."

According to the transcript, he also told his Libyan interrogators that "after the operation, Qaddafi thanked him and other members of the team for their successful attack on the US."

It is not clear why the transcript of the interview was shared with

US investigators when it was but, as the FBI affidavit noted, the Libyan law enforcement officer who obtained Masud's statement had "expressed a willingness to testify at a trial if the Libyan government agrees to make the officer available."

US authorities announced on Dec. 12, 2022, that Masud was in custody on American soil, and had been charged in a Washington, DC court. How he got there is uncertain, as there is no extradition treaty between the US and Libya.

Human Rights Watch claims Masud was "violently seized" from his home in the Abu Salim district of Tripoli on Nov. 17, 2022, by members of an "armed group."

But in a statement at the time, Michael H. Glasheen, acting assistant director in charge of the FBI Washington Field Office, said: "The lawful arrest and presentment in court of the alleged bombmaker ... is the product of hard work and partnerships across the globe."

Depending on what emerges in court in May, Masud's trial could prove fateful for Fhimah. Although he was acquitted by the Scottish court in 1991, he remains a wanted man in America. For those involved in the long search for closure, the trial is a last chance to "renew confidence in the justice process," in the words of Scotland's public prosecution service.





Live performances and discussions connect audiences with the stories of At-Turaif district's past. Supplied

CULTURAL HUB

# Diriyah Season brings history to life at UNESCO site

Visitors can explore Kingdom's heritage through immersive experiences, workshops, performances

Arab News Riyadh

Diriyah Season launched a new program of activities at At-Turaif district, a UNESCO World Heritage site, offering visitors a range of cultural and historical experiences to explore Saudi Arabia's heritage.

The program highlights key moments from the history of the first Saudi state through workshops, theatrical performances, and cultural sessions. Visitors can engage in activities such as traditional Najdi design workshops, poetry recitations, and demonstrations of the Saudi Ardah, the Kingdom's traditional sword dance. This year's program also features the updated "850 Interactive Experience," named after the establishment of Diriyah in the Islamic calendar year 850 AH (1446 or 1447 AD in the



Visitors were greeted with authentic Saudi coffee and dates. Photo/X: @DiriyahSeason

Gregorian calendar). The experience uses storytelling and puzzles to explore notable historical figures, including Imam Turki bin Abdullah, and key events from Diriyah's history. Workshops in traditional construction techniques, historical games, and exhibitions

showcasing the district's architecture are designed to deepen understanding of the region's cultural significance, while live performances and discussions will further connect audiences with the stories of At-Turaif's past, including its role in Saudi Arabia's early statehood. The event aims to promote Diriyah as a cultural hub, combining historical education with live entertainment and creative showcases.

SECURITY MEASURES

## Saudi customs tackle 2,124 smuggling cases in single week

Arab News Riyadh

Customs officials at land, air, and sea ports across the Kingdom were involved in 2,124 seizures of prohibited items in a single week, the Zakat, Tax and Customs Authority reported. The figure reflected the authority's commitment to protecting society from smuggling and illegal activities, the Saudi Press Agency reported on Saturday. The crackdown included

HIGHLIGHT

Saudi authorities seized narcotics, weapons, cash and tobacco. They urge the public to report smuggling and offer rewards for accurate tips.

more than 350 cases linked to prohibited substances, of which 98 involved narcotics such as hashish, cocaine, heroin, shabu and captagon pills.

The authorities also thwarted more than 1,745 attempts to smuggle tobacco and its derivatives, 22 cases involving money and three cases involving weapons and related accessories. The authority urged the public to report any information regarding smuggling by calling 1910, the international number 009661910 or by emailing 1910@zatca.gov.sa. Financial rewards are offered for accurate information.

## TheSpace

### Economic growth soars: a promising outlook for 2025

TALAT ZAKI HAFIZ



Following the notable fiscal and economic performance of 2024, driven by non-oil and government activities, including the private sector's remarkable performance, the Saudi economy is expected to continue showing impressive results in 2025. This projection is based on the government's efforts to achieve Saudi Vision 2030 objectives, which focus on implementing comprehensive fiscal and economic structural reforms.

According to the Ministry of Finance, preliminary estimates indicate that the Kingdom's real gross domestic product will grow by 4.6 percent in 2025, compared to 0.8 percent in 2024 and -0.8 percent in 2023. This growth is driven by an increase in the GDP of non-oil activities, the expected growth of the private sector's contribution to non-oil GDP, and the government's efforts to enhance economic diversification, develop the labor market, create sustainable job opportunities and improve the business environment.

The Kingdom's real GDP is expected to reach \$1.161 trillion in 2025, up from \$1.091 trillion in 2024, representing a 6.4 percent increase.

The inflation rate is expected to rise to 1.9 percent in 2025, up from 1.7 percent in 2024.

The projected significant growth in the Saudi economy positively impacts the Kingdom's fiscal budget for 2025, with increases in both total revenues and expenditures. Total revenues are estimated at \$315.7

billion, with expectations to reach \$343.7 billion by 2027. Total expenditures are estimated at \$342.7 billion in 2025 and are projected to rise to \$381.1 billion by 2027.

The projected budget deficit is expected to reach \$26.9 billion in 2025, representing 2.3 percent of the Kingdom's GDP.

The budget deficit is likely to remain at a similar level to 2025 over the medium term, reaching \$34.7 billion and \$37.3 billion in 2026 and 2027, respectively, representing -2.9 percent and -3.0 percent of GDP.

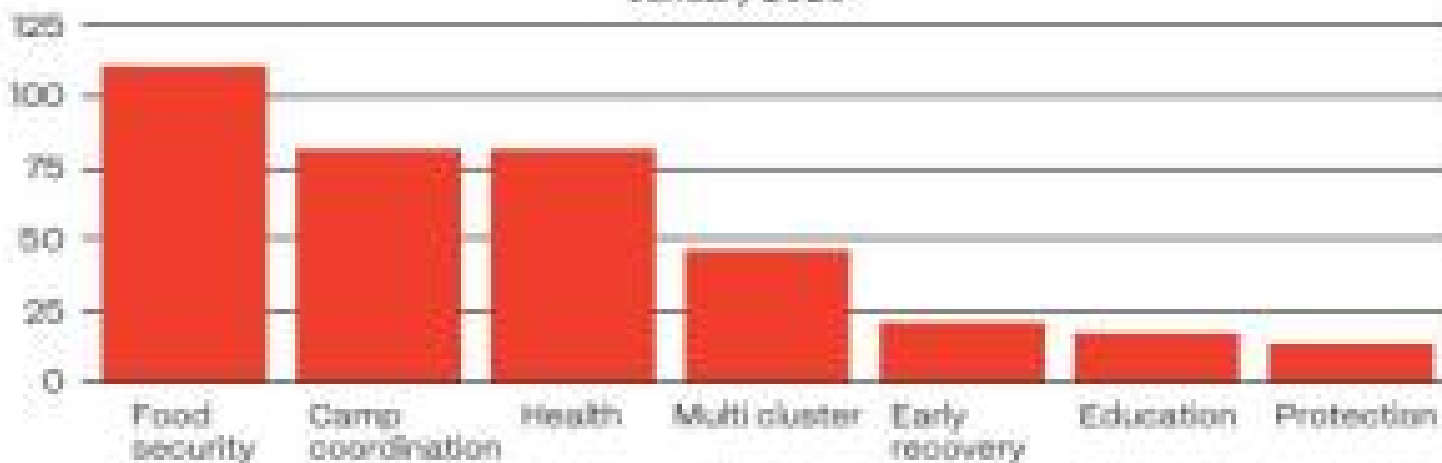
The Saudi government has projected funding needs of \$37.1 billion for 2025, intended to cover the anticipated budget deficit and the repayment of maturing debt, estimated at about \$10.1 billion. It is expected that the government will continue borrowing over the medium term to meet its financing needs. Public debt is expected to reach \$346.7 billion, \$381.3 billion and \$418.7 billion in 2025, 2026 and 2027, respectively, representing 29.9 percent, 32.2 percent and 33.3 percent of the Kingdom's GDP. Despite the expected budget deficit and the rise in public debt in 2025, the Kingdom's economic outlook remains promising, especially considering the contraction in the oil sector due to voluntary production cuts and the government's commitment to achieving the economic transformation goals of Vision 2030.

Financial reforms will continue to enhance economic growth and improve public finance management, with a focus on raising the quality of services provided to citizens, residents and visitors.

Talat Zaki Hafiz is an economist and financial analyst. X: @TalatHafiz  
For full version, log on to [www.arabnews.com/thespace](http://www.arabnews.com/thespace)

## The Day's FIGURES

KSRELIEF PROJECTS IN SYRIA  
January 2025



Source: ksrelief.org

## Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

**Innovation**  
**Fashion startups award reaches final stage**

The Fashion Commission and luxury group Kering have launched the selection process for the winners of the Kering Generation Award X Saudi Arabia. The initiative aims to support innovative startups making a significant impact on the fashion industry.

More than 100 startups applied, with 20 selected to participate in a three-day training camp in Riyadh. The awards ceremony will take place on Jan. 27, where the top three startups will be announced.

Winners will have the opportunity to travel to Paris for mentoring with Kering's teams and present their innovations at the ChangeNOW 2025 summit. **SPA Riyadh**

**Rich culture**  
**Jazan festival showcases region's heritage**

The Jazan Winter Festival has attracted a large number of visitors with a variety of heritage events.

Erth Village, a highlight of the festival, is showcasing traditional handicrafts, games and clothing.

The event stimulates the local economy and highlights the region's culture through performances and folk dances. Local perfumes and herbs are on display, highlighting the area's rich heritage.

Spanning three months, the event features 300 activities across 42 sites in Jazan and its governorates. The festival's activities also include art exhibitions, plays and poetry gatherings. **SPA Riyadh**

**Law enforcement**  
**Kingdom arrests 21,485 illegals in one week**

Saudi authorities arrested 21,485 people in one week for breaching residency, work and border security regulations.

According to an official report, a total of 13,562 people were arrested for violations of residency laws, while 4,853 were held over illegal border crossing attempts, and a further 3,070 for labor-related issues.

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

## News Saudi Arabia

NIGHT OF PRESTIGE

# Anthony Hopkins enchants Riyadh with dreamlike symphony

Performing concert in Saudi Arabia 'an unimaginable honor,' Hollywood icon says

Arab News Riyadh

In a captivating blend of art and humanity, Hollywood icon Anthony Hopkins graced the Bakr Al-Shaddi Theater in Boulevard City, Riyadh, with a performance titled "Life is a Dream" as part of the Riyadh Season festivities.

Introduced by fellow actor Morgan Freeman, Hopkins opened his speech with the Arabic greeting, "As-salamu alaykum," setting a tone of cultural respect and unity.

Hopkins shared his reflections on life and art, drawing from the words of Edgar Allan Poe: "I have always believed that all we see or seem is but a dream within a dream."

He thanked Turki Al-Sheikh, chairman of the General Entertainment Authority, for the invitation to perform in Riyadh.

"I am deeply humbled and immensely grateful to premiere my piece, 'Life is a Dream,' during Riyadh Season," he said.

Reflecting on his life, he described the path from "the son of a simple baker" in South Wales to a world-renowned composer and actor.

"My life, to me, is a profound mystery," he said. "It's impossible to understand or take credit for the blessings I've been given. That's why I believe life is a dream, and this piece, 'Life is a Dream,' was inspired by my dreamy childhood in South Wales, my wonderfully supportive mother and my father, who was larger



Actor and composer Anthony Hopkins with Chairman of General Entertainment Authority Turki Al-Sheikh at an event for Riyadh Season this weekend. Supplied

than life and worked tirelessly throughout his life."

Hopkins invoked the philosophy of Ralph Waldo Emerson, highlighting music and art as spiritual connectors.

"Music and art are paths to God, the primary means to connect all human souls. Emerson understood that touching one soul means touching all souls and I too believe that music is a

transformative power," he said.

"I always dreamed of being a composer, but I never knew how. Yet performing this concert in Saudi Arabia, the cradle of Islam, where Prophet Muhammad



Hopkins premiered his piece 'Life is a Dream' with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in Riyadh.

**I cannot imagine a better place than here (Saudi Arabia) to come together, bridge our differences and envision a world of peace, balance and love.**

Anthony Hopkins  
Actor and composer

received his messages and home to the holy cities of Makkah and Madinah is an unimaginable honor."

Addressing global challenges, Hopkins stressed the importance of unity and peace.

"I cannot imagine a better place than here to come together, bridge our differences and envision a world of peace, balance and love," he said.

"At 87 years old, I understand deeply that death is inevitable. But the theme of this concert is that life is a long farewell to everything we love, a prolonged goodbye, but one filled with forgiveness and wonder."

Hopkins concluded by acknowledging the team that made the concert possible, giving special thanks to Rakan Al-Harthi, managing director of Sela, his music producer Stephen Barton, conductor Matthew Freeman, and the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. He ended his speech with "Shukran."

Through this event, Hopkins not only showcased his musical talents but also made a lasting impression on Riyadh Season, emphasizing the unifying power of art and music in promoting tolerance, love and understanding across cultures.

## ARTISTIC HERITAGE

## Beauty in every stroke: Calligraphers make their mark in Dammam exhibition

Hind Alkhunaiji Dhamran

In the heart of Dammam, the Saudi Arabian Society for Culture and Arts is hosting a calligraphy art exhibition titled "The Pulse of Ink," showcasing works of the Qatif Calligraphy Group.

Art enthusiasts and curious minds alike have until Jan. 20 to explore works by renowned calligraphy and ornamentation artists, including some as young as 12-years-old.

To complement the exhibition, the Qatif Calligraphy Group has organized a series of engaging activities, including workshops for aspiring calligraphers.

The first workshop was

presented by 14-year-old Hussein Bazaroun, who has been practicing calligraphy for two and a half years.

Bazaroun's passion and dedication to the craft are a source of inspiration for young and aspiring artists alike.

Additional workshops will focus on Diwani script, led by calligrapher Ali Al-Khuwailidi, and Ruq'ah script, taught by his fellow calligrapher, Hassan Al-Radwan.

Among the showcased talents is 12-year-old calligrapher Ali Al-Kadhim, a prodigy who has been perfecting his craft for just over a year and a half. His talent is a testament to the group's

mission to promote and preserve the ancient art of Arabic calligraphy.

The exhibition also features a diverse range of pieces, each a captivating blend of intricate lines, curves and ornaments that seem to dance across the page.

The calligraphy group's goals are diverse and far-reaching. By hosting workshops, exhibitions and lectures, they promote

Arabic calligraphy as an Islamic and artistic art form, while also supporting local artists and enriching the cultural landscape of Qatif.

Through competitions and showcases, they are creating a new generation of calligraphers to carry forward the tradition.

For Al-Khuwailidi, vice president of the calligraphy group, calligraphy is more than just a

hobby — it is a refuge, a source of comfort and a means of creative expression.

"I fell in love with calligraphy in elementary school, and it evolved from a hobby into a refuge throughout my life," he told Arab News.

"Whenever life gets overwhelming, I return to it like a bird to its nest." His words reflect the therapeutic power

of calligraphy, which requires patience, dedication and a deep understanding of the intricate relationships between letters, lines and spaces.

Hassan Al-Bashrawi, secretary of the calligraphy group, highlighted the unique appeal of Arabic calligraphy: "It combines two key aesthetic qualities: artistic construction and meaningful values reflecting Islamic civilization and Arab heritage."

Al-Bashrawi's own journey as a calligrapher has been marked by intense study, practice and collaboration with fellow artists. Through his work, he is building a strong foundation for renewal, drawing inspiration from both ancient resources and contemporary artists.

For Muna Al-Muhanna, a talented artist featuring her first piece in the exhibition, the experience is nothing short of exhilarating.

"My feelings were a mix of the joy of accomplishment and pride in creating something in remembrance of Allah, the Most High," she said.



Muna Al-Muhanna is among the calligraphy artists showcasing their works at 'The Pulse of Ink' exhibition in Dammam. AN photos by Hind Alkhunaiji

## FASTFACT

Art enthusiasts and curious minds alike have until Jan. 20 to visit 'The Pulse of Ink' and explore works by renowned calligraphy and ornamentation artists, including some as young as 12-years-old.



'CRISIS OF IMPUNITY'

# Ban on UNRWA 'will make plight of Gazans worse and undermine truce'

Commissioner general deplores 'fierce global disinformation campaign' mounted against the aid agency for Palestinians

Ephrem Kossaily New York

The head of the largest aid agency for Palestinians has warned that the full implementation of a new Israeli law preventing its workers from operating within the country would be "catastrophic" for Gaza, "massively" weaken the international humanitarian response there, and make already "dire and catastrophic" living conditions "immeasurably" worse.

It would also undermine the Gaza ceasefire agreement, said Philippe Lazzarini, the commissioner general of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine refugees.

He was speaking in New York where he earlier briefed the UN Security Council on the plight of the UNRWA, less than two weeks before the Israeli ban on the agency is due to take effect.

Lazzarini welcomed the recent ceasefire agreement and hostage-release deal in Gaza as a "starting point," and stressed the "absolute" need for "rapid, unfettered" access for humanitarians to respond to the "tremendous suffering" in the territory.

The anti-UNRWA legislation, approved overwhelmingly by the Knesset in October, would bar the agency from operating within Israel and ban the country's authorities from any contact with it.

The delivery of aid to Gaza and the West Bank requires close coordination between UNRWA and Israeli authorities.

If the legislation is implemented as planned, Israel would no longer issue agency staff with work or entry permits, and the coordination with the Israeli military that is essential for ensuring safe passage for aid deliveries will no longer be possible.

Since the start of the war in Gaza, Israel has relentlessly condemned and attacked the aid agency.

More than 260 of its staff



A chaotic dismantling of UNRWA will irreversibly harm the lives and the future of the Palestinians, and I believe it will obliterate their trust in the international community and any solution it attempts to facilitate.

Children walk along a street near the rubble of a collapsed building at a camp for people displaced by conflict in Bureij in the central Gaza Strip. AFP

have been killed; its schools, where displaced Palestinians sought shelter, were bombed; and a coordinated Israeli media campaign has attempted to discredit the agency by portraying it as a tool of Hamas.

Lazzarini said that though the Israeli government suggests the services provided by UNRWA could be delivered by other agencies, its mandate and capacity to provide public services to an entire population — including education for more than 600,000 Palestinian children, and healthcare — are "unique and far exceed any other entity."

This means "these services, in reality, can only be transferred to

a functioning state public institution," said Lazzarini, adding that this is in line with the aims of the Global Alliance for the Implementation of the Two-State Solution, initiated last year by Saudi Arabia, the EU and the Arab League.

"UNRWA's services are also tightly woven into the social fabric of Gaza," he said.

"The disintegration of the agency would intensify the breakdown of social order. So dismantling UNRWA outside the political process would undermine the ceasefire agreement, and sabotage Gaza's recovery and the political transition."

Turning to the situation in the West Bank, Lazzarini said the

Palestinian Authority has stated clearly that it does not have the financial resources or capacity to make up for any loss of UNRWA services.

"A chaotic dismantling of UNRWA will irreversibly harm the lives and the future of the Palestinians, and I believe it will obliterate their trust in the international community and any solution it attempts to facilitate," he added.

He reminded the Security Council during his briefing earlier in the day of "the fierce global disinformation campaign" mounted against the agency, and what he described as "the intense diplomatic lobbying by the government of Israel, as well

as affiliated nongovernmental organizations, targeting UNRWA and governments of donor countries."

According to Knesset figures, Israel has allocated an additional \$150 million to its 2025 propaganda budget in an effort to reshape global opinions about its actions in Gaza, which critics allege amount to genocide.

Lazzarini said that "misinformation campaigns" have endangered UNRWA staff in the West Bank and Gaza, where 269 of them had been killed as of Friday.

"It has also created a permissive environment for the harassment of UN representatives wherever they are, including in Europe and in the United States," he added.

Lazzarini said he urged the Security Council and UN member states to do what they can to persuade Israel not to implement the new legislation, and to ensure that the funding crisis UNRWA faces does not abruptly halt the lifesaving services it provides.

The agency was established by UN General Assembly in the aftermath of the 1948 Arab-Israeli War to provide direct relief and works programs for Palestinian refugees.

Lazzarini said the attacks against the agency are attacks on the international multilateral system itself.

While UN member states and donor countries, including EU countries, continue to publicly assert that UNRWA is irreplaceable in the absence of a Palestinian state, these statements of support have not been backed up by pressure on Israel to rethink its ban on the agency.

Asked by Arab News about this discrepancy between public statements of support and meaningful action, and whether or not it means Western countries are, through lack of action, undermining the very multilateral values upon which they were founded, Lazzarini said: "The same question could be asked about the importance of international humanitarian law and the blatant and constant disregard of that law."

"You can ask the same question about the disrespect for the resolutions of the Security Council and the General Assembly. And you can ask the same question about" the International Court of Justice's ruling that Israel's presence in the West Bank and East Jerusalem is illegal, and the court's call for its withdrawal.

"And so it's obviously frustrating," Lazzarini added.

"What we have witnessed is an extraordinary 'crisis of impunity,' to the extent that international humanitarian law is almost becoming irrelevant if no mechanism is put in place to address this impunity."

RELIEF

## EU in talks to revive Rafah border mission

Reuters Brussels

The EU is in talks to revive a civilian mission to monitor the border crossing between Gaza and Egypt at Rafah following the announcement of the ceasefire deal between Israel and Hamas, EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said.

A civilian EU mission to help monitor the Rafah crossing was set up under an agreement between Israel and the Palestinian Authority in 2005, part of international help with peace

efforts at a time when Israel had pulled troops and settlers from Gaza.

But the mission operated for only a year and a half before it was suspended when Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip and drove out the internationally recognized Palestinian Authority.

Kallas met with the Palestinian Authority's Prime Minister Mohammed Mustafa in Brussels recently and spoke on the phone with Israel's Foreign Minister Gideon Saar.

The EU is "in discussions about redeploying our monitoring mission to Rafah to ensure the stability at the border, so we have it ready," Kallas told reporters in Brussels.

Kallas said redeploying would require invitations from Israel and the Palestinian Authority and a cooperation agreement

with Egypt.

She said the mission now had 10 international staff and eight locals on standby.

"We will also be ready to assist in reconstruction and recovery," she said.

Kallas said the EU was committed to a two-state solution to the broader Israel-Palestinian conflict. "Of course,

lasting peace means compromises on both sides," she said.

"I think there is a chance to prevent further loss of life with this ceasefire."

Humanitarian workers have warned of the monumental challenges that could impede aid operations — including the destruction of infrastructure that previously processed shipments.

Egyptian Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty said 50 fuel trucks are set to enter the Gaza Strip when the ceasefire starts

on Sunday.

He said the ceasefire deal provides for "the entry of 600 trucks per day to the Strip, including 50 trucks of fuel."

At a joint news conference with his Nigerian counterpart, Abdelatty said "we hope that 300 trucks will go to the north of the Gaza Strip." Humanitarian workers have warned of the monumental challenges that could impede aid operations — including the destruction of infrastructure that previously processed shipments.



EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas.

## News Middle East

CAIRO TALKS

## El-Sisi highlights Egypt's commitment to Libyan unity

AFP Cairo

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi on Saturday hosted Libyan military leader Khalifa Haftar for their first meeting since September 2021.

El-Sisi's office said that during their talks, he stressed Egypt's commitment to "ensuring the

unity and cohesion of Libya's national institutions."

He also urged "coordination between all Libyan parties to crystallize a comprehensive political roadmap" toward long-overdue parliamentary and presidential elections.

Haftar's last visit to Cairo was a few months before nationwide



Egypt's President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi receives Libyan military leader Khalifa Haftar in Cairo on Saturday. AFP

parliamentary and presidential elections that were later delayed due to disagreements over their legal framework.

Libya, which borders Egypt to the east, is struggling to recover from years of conflict after the 2011 NATO-backed uprising that ended dictator Muammar Qaddafi's four-decade rule.

The country remains split between the UN-recognized government of Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah in Tripoli and Haftar's authority in the east.

El-Sisi on Saturday said "all foreign forces and mercenaries must be expelled from Libyan territory."

DIPLOMACY

## Aoun stresses urgent need for Israeli withdrawal from south under truce deal

Lebanese leaders ask UN chief to help repatriate Syrian refugees as he pledges international support

Najla Houssari Beirut

**Lebanon's President Joseph Aoun stressed to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres on Saturday the urgency of an Israeli military withdrawal as stipulated by a ceasefire deal that ended the Israel-Hezbollah war in November.**

President Aoun told the visiting UN chief that it was necessary for "Israeli forces to withdraw from occupied territories in the south within the deadline set by the agreement reached on Nov. 27."

Aoun also highlighted "the readiness of the Lebanese army to replace the Israelis once they withdraw" from the Lebanese border area, which was invaded on Oct. 1.

"Israel's continued violations on land and in the air ... blowing up homes and destroying border villages, completely contradicts what was stated in the ceasefire agreement," a statement from Aoun's office added.

Aoun said that the Israeli breaches were "a continued violation of the Lebanese sovereignty and the international community's will to restore stability in southern Lebanon."

Guterres inspected the Blue Line and met UN peacekeepers carrying out their operations south of the Litani River.

On his second day in Lebanon on Saturday, he conveyed to Lebanese officials the UN's "continued commitment to support the Lebanese army and the Lebanese institutions, as well as President Aoun in his tenure."

Guterres said that he would "do everything possible to secure the withdrawal of the Israeli forces from the south within the specified period."

According to the presidential



Lebanon's President Joseph Aoun and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres pose for a group photo on Saturday at the presidential palace in Baabda, east of Beirut. AFP

palace's media office, Guterres said: "I am confident that under your leadership, things will go back to normal in Lebanon, and the country will regain its strength and stability in the region."

He added: "It is true that your mission is not easy, but a solid will can achieve what we're aiming for."

Guterres reiterated "the support of the UN and all its institutions for Lebanon."

He said: "We have the will to mobilize to secure the international community's support so Lebanon can rise again and recover from the repercussions of the last years."

According to the president's media office, Aoun "tackled Israel's burning of cultivated lands in southern Lebanon."

He called on "the UN, namely the Food and Agriculture Organization, to help farmers restore their lands and make them investment-ready."

Aoun also urged the UN to "help secure the return of the Syrian refugees to their country

since the political and security reasons for their asylum are no longer valid."

Following the meeting, Guterres said: "It was an opportunity to express our solidarity with the people of Lebanon who have suffered so much and our total support to the president and the future government."

He added: "Now, it will be possible to consolidate the Lebanese institutions, and it will be possible to create the conditions for the Lebanese state to protect its citizens fully."

"With the withdrawal of the Israeli forces and with the presence of the Lebanese army in the whole of the Lebanese territory, it will also be possible to open a new chapter of peace."

Guterres said: "I know that the Lebanese are dynamic, resilient and courageous."

"And I know that reconstruction begins as soon as a conflict ends."

"I want to express our total support and our will to fully mobilize the international community to provide Lebanon

with all the support for what we believe will be a speedy recovery of this country, making it again the center of the Middle East."

Guterres visited Prime Minister-designate Nawaf Salam at his residence.

After the meeting, Guterres reiterated the UN's "full support for the ongoing process in Lebanon, where the country has witnessed the election of a new president and a new prime minister tasked with forming a government."

"New opportunities are emerging for Lebanon with the completion of the ceasefire agreement, the withdrawal of Israeli forces, and the Lebanese armed forces assuming full responsibilities entrusted to them," he said.

"We are convinced this development will represent an extraordinary qualitative leap for Lebanon."

"The UN fully supports the president and the Lebanese government in mobilizing the international community to provide comprehensive support for Lebanon, which must regain

its status as a pivotal center in the Middle East."

Salam said that he relied on the secretary-general "to mobilize diplomatic support to ensure the Israelis' withdrawal on the scheduled day and to rally efforts for the reconstruction conference mentioned by French President Emmanuel Macron during his visit to Lebanon on Friday, which will be held soon."

Salam added: "With the changing situation in Syria, we need to begin preparations with the UN for the safe and dignified return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon."

The UN chief also met Lebanese Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri.

He confirmed the UN's support for Lebanon. He said that the government would "soon be formed, representing all Lebanese parties, and the Israeli army must withdraw after the set deadline."

Berri's media office reported that he highlighted "the necessity for Israel to adhere to its withdrawal from Lebanese territories that it still occupies, under

the terms of the agreement, and to halt its violations and systematic destruction of villages, fields, agricultural lands and forests."

Meanwhile, Israeli forces continued their violations in the south through incursions and bulldozing operations in the Marjeyoun plain and the towns of Yaroun and Mays Al-Jabal, as well as extensive operations in Wadi Saluki and the storming of homes west of the town of Houla.

The Red Cross and the Lebanese army have not yet been able to search for three people targeted by an Israeli drone three days ago in the Jabal Sadana area, pending the results of UNIFIL's communications with the Israeli side.

The UN chief emphasized to the UNIFIL forces during a meeting in Naqoura on Friday the importance of "enabling them to resume patrols and monitoring tasks," stressing that "adapting operational methods is crucial for restoring freedom of movement and access throughout the UNIFIL operational area."

DEFIANT MILITIA

## Israel intercepts missiles fired from Yemen

AFP Jerusalem

The Israeli military said it intercepted two missiles fired from Yemen on Saturday, a day before a ceasefire is set to take effect in war-battered Gaza.

The military activated air raid

sirens in Jerusalem and parts of central and southern Israel ahead of the interceptions during the day, with the first projectile shot down in the morning.

Yemen's Iran-backed Houthi rebels claimed the morning attack hours after the Israeli

military intercepted the incoming missile.

The Houthis "carried out a specific military operation targeting the so-called Ministry of Defense of Israel ... using a ballistic missile" in central Israel, the militia said in a statement.

The morning attack had triggered explosions over Jerusalem as the military intercepted the missile, journalists reported.

Later, sirens blared across southern Israel as a second missile was fired from Yemen

and intercepted by the Israeli air force, the military said.

"Following the sirens that sounded a short while ago in the areas of Eilat and Arava, a missile that was launched from Yemen was intercepted" before crossing into Israeli territory, it said.

CHANGING TREND

# AlUla is top destination as Saudi tourism gains appeal in India

India's outbound tourism is expected to reach 45 million travelers by 2030

Sanjay Kumar New Delhi

India is seeing an increase in travelers heading to Saudi Arabia, according to a top Indian tourism body, which also said there is growing interest in the Kingdom's heritage, especially among Gen Z Indians.

Tourism is booming in Saudi Arabia under the Vision 2030 transformation plan. In the past few years there has been significant investment in the development of destinations including its eight UNESCO World Heritage Sites, eco-friendly and luxury resorts on the Red Sea coastline, and entertainment and sports complexes.

The promotion for these developments has also included Bollywood stars, and more and more Indians are looking to visit Riyadh, Jeddah and AlUla, rather than Dubai — traditionally the most popular destination in the GCC for Indian travelers.

"Earlier it was only Dubai ... but now that trend is changing," Himanshu Kesari Patil, president of the Outbound Tour Operators Association of India, an organization representing over 800 travel companies and agents, told Arab News. "There are lots of inquiries for Saudi Arabia, a lot of people are going. The top-selling destination for Saudi Arabia is AlUla."

AlUla, in northwestern Saudi Arabia, is often described as an "open-air museum." One of its most famous areas is Hegra, a UNESCO World Heritage site that features tombs and monuments from the Nabatean civilization dating back to the 1st century BCE.

Another is Elephant Rock, a



Indian traveler and vlogger Barkha Singh visits AlUla on the invitation of the Royal Commission of AlUla. Supplied

natural rock formation in the AlUla desert, which has become one of the region's most photographed natural landmarks.

Many notable Bollywood celebrities, including Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, Deepika Padukone, Ranveer Singh, and Priyanka Chopra, have visited AlUla, while others, such as up-and-comers Janhvi Kapoor and Ali Fazal, have partnered with the local authorities to promote it, increasing the site's appeal among Gen Z travelers, which data portal Statista refers to as the "most travel-hungry" generation.

"Gen Z, they are more tech-savvy, they are always on social media and they want to explore unexplored places. (They) are not going to the routine places where everyone else is going, they want to do something different," Patil said.

## FASTFACTS

- Many notable Bollywood celebrities, including Shah Rukh Khan, Salman Khan, Deepika Padukone, Ranveer Singh, and Priyanka Chopra, have visited AlUla.
- Himanshu Kesari Patil, president of the Outbound Tour Operators Association of India, said that there are lots of inquiries about the Kingdom.

India's outbound tourism market is growing, and the Pacific Asia Travel Association estimates that the number of Indians traveling abroad annually will reach 45 million in the next five years.

By then, the Kingdom expects to welcome 7.5 million Indian travelers a year, according to the Saudi Tourism Authority.

"Saudi Arabia is investing a lot of money in the Indian market and I'm sure, soon, Saudi Arabia will get more numbers out of India," Patil said.

"They are friendly, have great multicultural cuisine ... for the tourists it's amazing," he continued. "I think, soon, with the new developments and new cities they are building, the new luxury hotels they are building, there is a bright future for Saudi Arabia on the tourism side."

## Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

### Fighting detention

#### Impeached South Korean president attends court

Impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol attended court for the first time on Saturday to fight a request by investigators to extend his detention as they probe his failed martial law bid. Thousands of Yoon's supporters rallied outside the court and scuffled with police as they chanted support for the suspended leader. Yoon declined to cooperate during the initial 48 hours detectives were allowed to hold him. However, the disgraced president remains in custody after investigators requested a new warrant on Friday to extend his detention. **AFP**

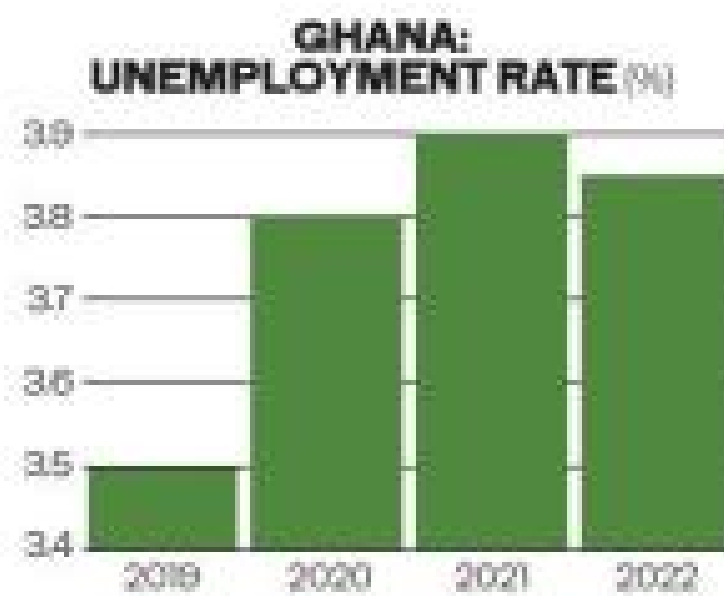
### Inappropriate act

#### Croatian deputy PM quits over gun shooting video

Croatian Deputy Prime Minister Josip Dabro, a leading member of a nationalist hard-right party, resigned on Saturday after a video surfaced of him shooting at random from a moving car. "I hereby submit my irrevocable resignation," Dabro posted on Facebook. The 42-year-old was also agriculture minister in Plenkovic's government. The video, made public by the daily Jutarnji List earlier this week, shows him sitting in the passenger seat of a moving car, singing to loud music and firing a pistol into the dark. **AFP**

## The Day's FIGURES

Source: Statista



## What We're Reading Today

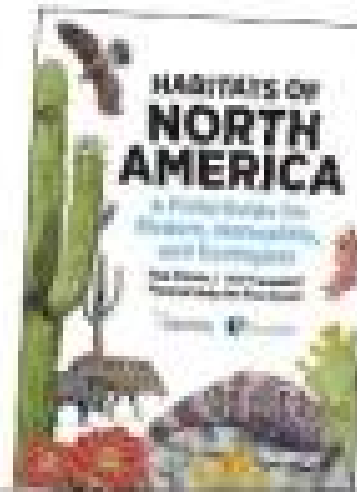
FOR THE TRAIN OR ON THE PLANE

### 'Habitats of North America'

PHIL CHAON AND IAIN CAMPBELL

Whether you're a birder, naturalist, outdoor enthusiast, or ecologist, knowing the surrounding habitat is essential to getting the most out of your experiences in the field. This compact, easy-to-use guide provides an unparalleled treatment of the wonderfully diverse habitats of North America. Inclusive and up-to-date descriptions

cover the unique features of each habitat, from geology and climate to soil and hydrology. Requiring no scientific background, "Habitats of North America" offers quick and reliable information for anyone who wants a deeper understanding and appreciation of the habitats around them.



### 'Great respect'

#### Meloni to attend Trump's inauguration

Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni will attend Donald Trump's inauguration as US president in Washington on Jan. 20, her office said on Saturday. Far-right Meloni has positioned herself as the closest mainstream European leader to Trump and is believed to be the only one going to the swearing-in. Foreign leaders by tradition do not attend US inaugurations but Meloni said earlier this month she was invited — a gesture seen by Italian sources as a sign of the "great respect" Trump has for her and Italy. **AFP**

### Cable failure

#### Dozens injured, trapped in Spain ski lift accident

A ski lift collapsed at a resort in the Spanish region of Aragon on Saturday, injuring dozens of people, nine of them very seriously and eight seriously, the regional government said. Around 80 people remain trapped, hanging in the chairlift at the ski resort of Astun, in the province of Huesca, according to state TV channel TVE. "It's like a cable has come off, the chairs have bounced and people have been thrown off," a witness told TVE. The cause of the cable failure remains unknown. The ski resort's management declined to comment. **Reuters**

## SLOW PROGRESS

# ASEAN, China must start tackling issues of South China Sea, says diplomat

Reuters Langkawi

The regional bloc ASEAN and China should make headway on a protracted code of conduct for the South China Sea by tackling thorny "milestone issues," including its scope and if it can be legally binding, the Philippines' top diplomat said on Saturday.

The South China Sea remains a source of tension between China and neighbors the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia,

with ties between Beijing and US ally Manila at their worst in years amid frequent confrontations that have sparked concerns they could spiral into conflict.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations and China pledged in 2002 to create a code of conduct, but took 15 years to start discussions and progress has been slow.

In an interview ahead of Sunday's meeting with his ASEAN counterparts on the Malaysian island of Langkawi,

## HIGHLIGHT

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations and China pledged in 2002 to create a code of conduct, but took 15 years to start discussions and progress has been slow.

Philippine Foreign Minister Enrique Manalo said discussions on a code were well underway, but it was time to start thrashing out the meatier,

trickier aspects.

"It's time that we try to look at issues which are, in our view, essential, which have not really been discussed in a thorough way or even much less negotiated. These are the so-called milestone issues," Manalo told Reuters.

Those would include the code's scope, whether it is legally binding and its impact on third-party countries, he said, adding the aim was to make it effective and substantive.

YOUR DAILY ARABIC PROVERB  
*Liberty imbued with pain is more honorable than happy slavery.*  
Al-Ghazali  
(Jurist and theologian)

# Opinion

## Saudi Arabia takes a more proactive leadership role

DR. AZEEM IBRAHIM

Saudi Arabia has emerged as a central player in efforts to address some of the most pressing regional issues affecting the Middle East, which signals a profound shift in its foreign policy approach.

Under the leadership of King Salman and Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Kingdom is no longer content to operate in the shadows of American diplomacy or maintain a reactive posture. Instead, it is taking proactive steps to redefine its role as a much-needed stabilizing force in the region.

This new approach is particularly evident in recent engagements with Lebanon and post-Assad Syria, with Riyadh positioning itself as a key guarantor of peace and normalization, and as a broker for regional stability.

One of the clearest examples of an evolving Saudi foreign policy is its leadership in Gulf states' rapprochement with Syria. After more than a decade of civil war, the country remains fractured and

unstable. The fall of Bashar Assad's regime has given way to a new government led by Ahmad Al-Sharaa, which is now in full control and playing its cards very carefully.

Recognizing the need for pragmatic engagement with the new authorities, Saudi Arabia has spearheaded efforts to bring Syria back into the Arab League fold, a move that reflects a strategic pivot from isolation to integration.

This shift is not without controversy. Critics argue that reengagement with Syria risks legitimization of a nation still grappling with the aftermath of conflict and external influence. However, the Saudi calculus is clear: The continued isolation of Syria will do little to alleviate the suffering of its people.

By leading the Gulf states in the process of normalizing ties with Damascus, Riyadh aims to bring the reconstruction of Syria under the purview of Arab states rather than of external powers.

The Kingdom's leadership role in this underscores its commitment to fostering a new regional order in which Arab states



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take the lead in efforts to resolve their own crises.

In Lebanon, too, Saudi Arabia has reemerged as a significant player in the country's political dynamics. For years, Riyadh distanced itself, frustrated by the outsized influence of Hezbollah.

However, Lebanon's deepening political and economic crises — exacerbated by a prolonged presidential vacuum that was finally resolved this month — prompted the Saudis to reengage. This renewed interaction has been instrumental in shaping the political landscape as Lebanon elects a new president and hopes to implement much-needed reforms.

The Saudi involvement has been particularly evident in the form of behind-the-scenes diplomacy intended to help build consensus among Lebanon's fractured political factions. Riyadh's influence was also felt through its support for a French initiative to resolve the political deadlock in the country, signaling a willingness to work collaboratively with international partners.

While Saudi Arabia's renewed

engagement in Lebanon is still unfolding, its proactive role is already helping to reshape the political calculus in Beirut. By reasserting its influence, Riyadh hopes to foster a more balanced political environment that is conducive to stability and economic recovery.

The Kingdom's active roles in Syria and Lebanon are emblematic of a broader shift in its regional strategy. Under King Salman and the crown prince, the nation has moved away from its historically cautious and reactive foreign policy to embrace a more assertive and dynamic approach.

This shift reflects both recognition of changing geopolitical realities and a desire to position Saudi Arabia as a leader in the Arab world.

While challenges remain, Saudi Arabia's bold approach offers a promising framework for addressing the complex and interrelated crises that have long plagued the Middle East. If successful, the Saudi leadership could pave the way for a more stable and prosperous region, with Riyadh firmly at its helm.

Riyadh offers a promising framework for addressing complex crises that have long plagued the Middle East



COURTESY AMAR RISHMASHANG AL-JAWAF

It is during times of crisis that the voice of the opposition is needed, more than at any other time

## How a weak opposition kept Netanyahu in power

YOSSI MEKELBERG

The phrase — "When the cannons are heard, the muses are silent. When the cannons are silent, the muses are heard" — is attributed to a Soviet Culture Ministry official and was immortalized by Truman Capote in his non-fiction book, "The Muses Are Heard," in which he laments the fact that governments cannot be criticized during wartime.

Ironically, it is during times of crisis and conflict that the voice of the opposition is needed, more than at any other time, to scrutinize government activities relating to the most acute issues of national interest, including those of life and death, and possibly the very survival of the country. The pressing need is for an opposition voice that is both constructively critical and responsible. Over the past two years, the Israeli opposition has been composed of a number of parties who have not covered themselves in glory, neither before the Oct. 7 attacks by Hamas nor after.

There are elements within the opposition

— including its head, Yair Lapid from the Yesh Atid party, and one or two from what remains of the Israeli Labor Party, such as Naama Lazimi and Gilad Kariv — who did set an example for others on how to function as a proactive opposition. They did so, first by strongly contesting the government's assault on the nation's democratic system and then by making it clear, until the intervention by incoming US President Donald Trump, that the government was leading the country into a never-ending war in Gaza, whether for ideological reasons or other purposes, in order to remain in power and, in the case of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, to derail his corruption trial.

An opposition has the "cumbersome" dual task of overseeing the policies and behavior of a government while establishing itself as a credible alternative. For too long the opposition in the Knesset, much as elsewhere in Israeli society, allowed the prime minister to completely control the national agenda and how it was conducted. It fell into the right-wing, populist demagoguery trap,



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which is even more venomous during times of war, thereby enabling the government to accuse it of lack of patriotism, naivety, being pro-Palestinian, ready to risk the security of the country for their lofty "pacenik" ideals, and serving foreign interests. Pushed into a defensive stance in such circumstances, an opposition therefore feels the need to react to such smears instead of going on the attack.

Members of the current right-wing coalition government in Israel operate on the premise that if one repeats a lie often enough, the people will end up believing it. They have used this strategy effectively against the opposition, not well enough to completely silence it but sufficiently well to cow it into self-censorship to the point that it has become less critical and effective than it should be in such crucial times.

In the nine months before the war began, when hundreds of thousands of Israelis regularly took to the streets in protest against the judicial coup being carried out by the government through legislation designed to damage democratic pillars

and weaken the judiciary, one might have expected the opposition in the Knesset, in all its shades, to be at the forefront of the demonstrations, standing alongside civil society organizations to lead them and shield them as police violence against protesters became more prevalent.

That the government has let down the country and its people hardly needs further elaboration. But the inability of opposition members — whether those already in the Knesset or emergent figures yet to be elected — to oppose the actions of the administration is as powerful a testimony to their own failings as it is to Netanyahu's manipulative survival instincts.

Common wisdom has it that elections are won from the center ground. But there are times at which the electorate should be presented with a clear, distinctive and courageous alternative choice, and Israel is desperately in need of such an opposition to restore trust and hope in the people. However, such a muscular opposition has yet to emerge.



# Business



Deploying new nuclear energy projects at scale will require global leaders to translate pledges into action.

**Amy Drake**  
Assistant director at the Nuclear Energy Policy Initiative

PARTNERSHIPS

## Nuclear power industry needs \$120bn a year by 2030

Private sector is increasingly viewing nuclear energy as an investible energy source

Nirmal Narayanan Riyadh

**Nuclear energy development funding needs to double to \$120 billion a year by 2030 to meet the rising demand for infrastructure development, according to an analysis.**

In its latest report, the International Energy Agency said that both public and private investments are needed to meet the rising financial needs in the sector.

According to the analysis, ensuring the predictability of future cash flows is key to bringing down financing costs and attracting private capital to the nuclear sector.

The analysis from IEA comes at a time when countries such as Saudi Arabia are actively exploring ways to ramp up nuclear programs to diversify their energy mix.

"Public funding alone will not be sufficient to build a new era for the nuclear energy sector. Private financing will be needed to scale up investments," said IEA.

It added: "The private sector is increasingly viewing nuclear energy as an investible energy source with the promise of firm, competitive, clean power that can serve energy-intensive operations 24/7."

IEA suggested that a supportive regulatory framework that increases visibility, including limiting liabilities, is crucial for debt financing in the nuclear energy sector, as financial institutions lend based on reliable future cash flow expectations.

"Long-term power purchase agreements can also be underwritten by large consumers, who can lock in future supplies of electricity at average cost. These arrangements can also open the door to proven commercial financing instruments, such as green bonds, supported by accommodating regulations and taxonomies," said IEA.

In a separate analysis published on Jan. 15, the Atlantic Council, an American think tank in the field of international affairs, echoed similar views and said the COP28 goal of tripling nuclear energy capacity is within reach, if investments are deployed in the sector in an adequate manner.

Amy Drake, assistant director at the Nuclear Energy Policy Initiative with the Atlantic Council Global Energy Center said that tripling nuclear energy capacity would require upwards of \$150 billion in annual global investment by 2050.

"Private investment — in



addition to government-backed initiatives — is critical to accelerate nuclear energy deployment at scale. Leaders in the nuclear energy industry must continue to engage with banks and financial institutions to mobilize capital to support anticipated levels of

growth," said Drake.

She added: "Deploying new nuclear energy projects at scale will require global leaders to translate pledges into action. Multilateral engagement, backing from the financial sector, and buy-in from new customers could deliver major wins for nuclear energy."

### IEA forecasts record nuclear energy generation in 2025

According to the report, electricity generated using nuclear power is expected to reach unprecedented levels this year, accounting for nearly 10 percent of global production — with a further 63 nuclear reactors currently under construction.

"It's clear today that the strong comeback for nuclear energy that the IEA predicted several years ago is well underway, with nuclear set to generate a record level of electricity in 2025," said Fatih

The renewed momentum behind nuclear energy has the potential to open a new era for the secure and clean power source as demand for electricity grows strongly around the world. SPA

Birol, executive director of IEA.

He added: "In addition to this, more than 70 gigawatts of new nuclear capacity is under construction globally, one of the highest levels in the last 30 years, and more than 40 countries around the world have plans to expand nuclear's role in their energy systems."

### Ushering a new era in nuclear energy sector

The energy think tank said that renewed momentum behind nuclear energy has the potential to open a new era for the secure and clean power source as demand for electricity grows strongly around the world.

The agency added that the nuclear energy sector is showing a fresh impetus of growth driven by new policies, projects, investments and technological advances, such as small modular reactors.



"SMRs in particular offer exciting growth potential. However, governments and industry must still overcome some significant hurdles on the path to a new era for nuclear energy, starting with delivering new projects on time and on budget — but also in terms of financing and supply chains," added Birol.

IEA highlighted that SMRs can dramatically cut the overall investment costs of individual projects to levels similar to those of large renewable energy projects such as offshore wind and large hydro, which makes these projects less risky for commercial lenders.

Another major positive factor that could drive the growth of

SMRs is their modular design which will significantly cut construction times, with projects expected to reach cash flow break-even up to 10 years earlier than for large reactors.

"The strong credit rating of the technology players behind data centers can also facilitate financing for SMR projects targeting this sector," added the energy agency.

Last year, some of the world's largest tech firms announced big commitments to invest in nuclear energy projects, including agreements between Google and Kairos Power, Amazon and X-energy, and Microsoft and Constellation Energy.

Atlantic Council said that partnerships between so-called Big Tech and reactor companies marked some of the most promising developments toward establishing demand at scale.

"The partnerships illustrate the potential for financial mechanisms, such as power purchase agreements, to de-risk investments in novel projects. Using these developments as a blueprint, nuclear energy providers should work closely with other energy-intensive sectors, such as heavy manufacturing, as demand for clean electricity surges worldwide," said Drake.

IEA also highlighted the importance of the government's role in strengthening the nuclear energy sector, which includes providing incentives and public finance. The report added that this power source can provide services and scale that are difficult to replicate with other low-emissions technologies.

"Taking advantage of this opportunity requires a broad approach from governments, encompassing robust and diverse supply chains, a skilled workforce, support for innovation, de-risking mechanisms for investment as well as direct financial support, and effective and transparent nuclear safety regulations, alongside provisions for decommissioning and waste management," the IEA report added.

The analysis also highlighted the demographic and geographic distribution of nuclear power plants globally, with most of the existing nuclear power fleet today being in advanced economies, but many of those plants were built decades ago.

IEA added that the global map for nuclear energy is changing, with the majority of projects under construction in China, which is on course to overtake both the US and Europe in installed nuclear capacity by 2030.

It's clear today that the strong comeback for nuclear energy that the IEA predicted several years ago is well underway, with nuclear set to generate a record level of electricity in 2025.

**Fatih Birol**  
Executive director of IEA



EXPANSION

# Domestic demand propels Saudi cement sales up 12 percent

Growth was primarily driven by strong domestic demand, accounting for 96 percent of total sales

Dayan Abou Tine Riyadh

**Cement sales in Saudi Arabia saw an annual increase of 12.33 percent in the fourth quarter of 2024, reaching 14.87 million tonnes, according to recent data.**

Figures released by Al-Yamama Cement showed this growth was primarily driven by strong domestic demand, accounting for 96 percent of total sales, while exports comprised the remaining 4 percent.

For the full year of 2024, cement sales exhibited a more moderate growth of 3.67 percent, culminating in a total volume of 51.15 million tonnes.

Amr Nader, CEO and co-founder of cement consultancy A3&Co. told Arab News: "These figures may not fully align with the anticipated surge in demand from ambitious infrastructure projects."

He added: "Megaprojects such as NEOM, The Red Sea Project, and FIFA World Cup-related developments require vast quantities of construction materials, the maximum anticipated demand in the next 5 years is 78 million tonnes annually."

According to Nader, with current market dynamics characterized by oversupply, utilization rates are projected to remain below 80 percent for the next 10 years, falling short of both installed capacity and anticipated maximum utilization levels.

Among the 17 Saudi cement companies, Al-Yamama Cement led the domestic market in the fourth quarter, capturing a 12.84 percent share with sales of 1.83 million tonnes, a substantial 22 percent increase year-over-year.

Following the successful acquisition of Hall Cement Company, Qassim Cement Company solidified its position as the second-largest player in the domestic market, capturing an 11.43 percent market share, equivalent to 1.63 million tonnes of cement sales.

Yanbu Cement, and Southern Cement were the next largest players in the domestic market, holding 10.27 percent, 8.51 percent, and 7.75 percent market shares, respectively.

Al Jawf Cement demonstrated the highest growth in domestic sales, achieving a 38 percent increase to 468k tonnes during this period, despite holding a relatively small 3.28 percent market share.

United Cement followed closely with a 31.55 percent annual increase in local sales, reaching 613k tonnes. Eastern Cement also experienced strong growth, recording a 27.96 percent increase to 723k tonnes.

In terms of cement exports, Saudi Cement dominated with 80.10 percent of total shipments,

amounting to 487k tonnes that quarter. This figure represents a 71 percent increase compared to the same period of 2023.

Najran Cement accounted for 14.64 percent of exports, totaling 89k tonnes, marking a 2.2 percent decline. Eastern Cement with 5.26 percent share saw a 60 percent rise in exports, reaching 32k tonnes.

Saudi Arabia's cement sector plays a critical role in the Kingdom's industrial landscape, supporting a booming construction market driven by massive infrastructure projects under the Vision 2030 initiative.

As one of the largest cement producers globally, Saudi Arabia's cement industry is well-positioned to meet the growing demand spurred by developments like NEOM, the Red Sea Project, and FIFA World Cup-related construction.

The sector faces significant challenges, however, including oversupply, rising fuel costs, and the need for environmental sustainability. Despite these hurdles, it remains resilient due to government support and strong domestic demand, which accounts for the majority of sales.

## Clinker production and sales

According to data from Al-Yamama Cement, Saudi cement companies produced 14.89 million tonnes of clinker in the fourth quarter of 2024, a 7 percent increase from the same quarter of 2023, and held 135.32 million tonnes of clinker stock, a 14 percent annual rise.

Saudi Arabia also exported 1.15 million tonnes of clinker during this period, marking a 28 percent decline compared to the same period of the previous year.

Clinker, a crucial intermediate product in cement production, is commonly exported due to its cost-effectiveness. It is more economical to ship it to other countries for final processing into cement than to produce the finished product and then export.

Several factors contributed to the significant clinker inventory buildup observed. A key factor according to Nader was a mismatch between supply and demand.

The expert explained that while domestic cement sales surged,



Saudi Arabia's cement industry is well-positioned to meet the growing demand spurred by developments like NEOM, the Red Sea Project, and FIFA World Cup-related construction. SPA

the decline in clinker exports contributed to a domestic oversupply. This imbalance was further exacerbated by the increase in clinker production, driven in part by an oversupply situation stemming from installed capacity consistently exceeding domestic demand by more than 30 percent.

This means there's more capacity to produce clinker than is actually needed for the domestic market.

Nader added: "A highly competitive market has driven producers to maintain high production levels to capture market share, and low cost to meet the price pressure generated by oversupply on the local market despite subdued export demand."

He went on: "There is also stockpiling strategy where companies have deliberately built inventories in anticipation of future demand spikes from megaprojects like NEOM and FIFA World

Cup-related initiatives and due to anticipated further increase in fuel prices."

The consultant attributed the low demand for cement to infrastructure delays, stemming from regulatory hurdles or logistical challenges, which have slowed the pace of construction projects, consequently reducing the immediate consumption of clinker.

## Managing oversupply and rising fuel costs

The cement market is currently facing two major challenges — high inventory risks and rising fuel prices.

According to Nader, to mitigate the risks associated with high clinker inventory levels, Saudi cement companies can implement several strategies.

Strengthening export channels to emerging markets in Africa

and Asia, where clinker demand is growing, through competitive pricing and improved logistics can help expand export footprints.

Exploring innovative applications for clinker, such as blending it into specialized cement products for niche markets like marine construction or precast solutions, can diversify revenue streams.

Furthermore, adjusting production schedules to align with actual demand can help reduce unnecessary inventory buildup. Finally, collaborating with megaproject developers to secure long-term supply agreements can stabilize clinker consumption and provide a more predictable demand outlook.

According to Nader, the rise in fuel prices, methane, ethane, and diesel, is expected to increase production costs significantly, especially in energy-intensive processes like clinker manufacturing.

However, Saudi cement companies are well-positioned to manage this challenge by passing

on the added costs to customers.

With a regulatory price cap of SR240 (\$63.97) per tonne, there is still considerable room for price increases before reaching the limit, as the current market price remains approximately SR50 per tonne below the cap, he said.

This provides companies a substantial buffer to adjust prices without violating the cap. Additionally, Saudi Arabia's cement sector enjoys the highest global average net profit, further enhancing its resilience to cost pressures.

Nevertheless, the expert said that despite this pricing flexibility, fierce competition and an oversupplied market may constrain price hikes. Companies seeking to maintain market share could face challenges in fully transferring costs, as supply currently outpaces demand.

To mitigate cost pressures, Nader said that firms may adopt strategies like improving energy efficiency, switching to alternative fuels like waste-derived fuels or biomass, and optimizing operations.

Government initiatives also provide support, with incentive programs offering up to SR60 million annually for some manufacturers. These incentives are designed to assist cement companies in adopting greener technologies, improving energy efficiency, and reducing carbon emissions.

Additionally, the government is working on long-term solutions to address energy challenges, such as plans for a national natural gas pipeline to phase out liquid fuels and meet the sector's growing energy demands.

These efforts are part of Saudi Arabia's broader vision to decarbonize heavy industries and align with global sustainability goals under its Vision 2030 strategy.

## Cement alternatives

As construction costs rise, analysts suggest that turning to supplementary cementitious materials and innovative technologies like carbon capture and storage, offers a viable path for developers seeking cost-effective and sustainable solutions.

These alternatives not only align with global sustainability goals but also promise long-term economic and environmental benefits. This can reduce reliance on traditional concrete and cement, which alone accounts for approximately eight percent of global CO2 emissions.

However, Nader challenged the feasibility of significantly replacing cement with alternative materials.

He emphasized that the current global supply of these alternatives is less than five percent of total cement production, making large-scale substitution impractical.

**A highly competitive market have driven producers to maintain high production levels to capture market share.**

**Amr Nader**  
CEO and co-founder  
of A3&Co.



## Business News



Palestinian-Dutch company TAP raised \$1 million in funding led by Invest International, alongside contributions from impact angel investors. Supplied

## STARTUP WRAP

# MENA startup funding ends year on the rise

Startups raised \$279 million in what was an 8 percent rise from November

Nour El-Shaerli Riyadh

**Funding for startups across the Middle East and North Africa ended 2024 on an upward trajectory, raising \$279 million in what was an 8 percent rise from November.**

The investment was spread across 42 deals, yet when debt financing — which accounted for 44 percent of the total — is excluded, the amount falls to \$156 million.

Despite the month-on-month increase, the total sum marks a significant 76 percent drop compared to the same period in 2023, highlighting a challenging environment for the region's startups.

The UAE emerged as the top destination for investments, attracting \$217 million across 18 deals. A substantial portion of this came from ALLO's \$100 million debt financing round.

Saudi startups followed with \$30 million raised by 11 companies, while Bahrain secured third place with \$25 million, led by Calo's \$25 million series B round. Bahraini startup Unipal also closed a funding round during the month, though the value was undisclosed.

Egypt's startup ecosystem experienced weak performance, raising just \$2 million across five transactions. Meanwhile, startups in Morocco, Jordan, Tunisia, and Qatar collectively raised \$4.4 million, indicating limited funding activity across these markets in December.

The web 3.0 sector led in overall funding, but fintech emerged as the most funded area when debt financing was excluded. Fintech startups raised \$93.5 million



**Egypt-based fintech Raseedi acquired Kashat, along with its subsidiary Pharos Microfinance S.A.E., in an equity deal aimed at expanding financial inclusion services.** Supplied

across seven deals, maintaining strong investor interest in the region.

Food tech ranked among the top three funded sectors, raising \$25.1 million across two transactions, with Calo accounting for the majority of this total. Education tech startups also saw a modest recovery, raising \$16 million through five funding rounds.

Investment at early stages remained a priority for investors. Seed-stage startups attracted \$59 million, while pre-seed rounds raised \$7.7 million across seven deals.

Six startups in the series A stage raised \$53 million, further showcasing sustained interest in startups transitioning from early stages. Later-stage funding activity was minimal, with Calo's Series B round being the only notable deal in this category.

Business-to-consumer startups led funding activity, with 18 companies collectively raising \$128.4 million. Meanwhile, 22 startups focused on

business-to-business solutions raised a combined \$124.6 million. This distribution reflects a strong focus on consumer-facing innovations, even as B2B models continued to attract significant investment.

Funding in December highlighted a persistent gender gap within the MENA startup ecosystem. Startups founded by men received \$263 million, accounting for the vast majority of funds raised.

In contrast, four female-led startups secured \$12.6 million, while two startups co-founded by both genders raised \$1.5 million. These figures underscore ongoing challenges in bridging gender disparities in access to venture capital in the region.

**Raseedi acquires Kashat to expand services for the underbanked**

Egypt-based fintech Raseedi acquired Kashat, along with its subsidiary Pharos Microfinance S.A.E., in an equity deal aimed at expanding financial inclusion services.

Raseedi, founded in 2018, offers underbanked users tools to make cheaper calls, receive savings tips, and access microloans without requiring a credit history.

Kashat, also founded in 2018, specializes in providing instant small loans to financially excluded individuals.

The acquisition will enable both companies to scale their operations across Africa and Asia, delivering digital financial solutions to underserved communities.

**TAP secures \$1m to empower youth employment**

Palestinian-Dutch company TAP raised \$1 million in funding led by Invest International in the Netherlands, alongside contributions from impact angel investors.

Initially founded in 2018 to create job opportunities in Gaza, TAP has since evolved into a scalable tech platform that supports local job creation.

The funding will be deployed to strengthen TAP's impact in Palestine, Jordan, and Lebanon, while also enabling the launch of its next-generation AI-powered platform in early 2025.

The platform will focus on providing mentorship networks, personalized coaching, and tools to help young people secure meaningful employment without needing to migrate.

TAP previously raised \$1 million in October 2023 in a seed round led by Wamda Capital, with participation from the World Bank and other angel investors.

**Opteam raises pre-seed round to enhance construction tech solutions**

UAE-based construction technology startup Opteam raised an undisclosed pre-seed funding round led by Plus VC, with participation from Dar Ventures, SIAC Ventures, and Oraseya Capital.

Founded in 2020, Opteam provides tools to construction teams, including real-time dashboards, progress monitoring systems, and AI-powered schedule optimization.

The funding will be used to expand Opteam's team, deepen its AI capabilities, and strengthen its market presence in the UAE and Saudi Arabia.

## BizBriefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

### Industrial gains

#### China economy meets official growth target

China's economy grew 5 percent last year, matching the government's target, but in a lopsided fashion, with many people complaining of worsening living standards.

The imbalance raises concerns that structural problems may deepen in 2025.

December data showed industrial output far outpacing retail sales, and the unemployment rate ticking higher, highlighting the supply-side strength of an economy running a trillion-dollar trade surplus, but also its domestic weakness. **Reuters**

### Premium models

#### Vietnam's VinFast to enter India EV market

Vietnamese electric vehicle maker VinFast will enter the Indian market with two premium electric SUVs, taking on homegrown rival Mahindra & Mahindra and China's BYD, which already has a presence in the world's third-largest car market.

VinFast unveiled its VF6 and VF7 SUVs at the India Auto Show in New Delhi, as it hopes to draw buyers to its EVs and contribute to India's goals of eliminating carbon emissions on a net basis, said Pham Sanh Chau, VinFast's Asia CEO. **Reuters**

### Chart of THE DAY

In 2023, net sales of biotech company Qiagen stood at \$1.9 billion.

Source: Statista



## What We're Reading

FOR THE TRAIN OR ON THE PLANE

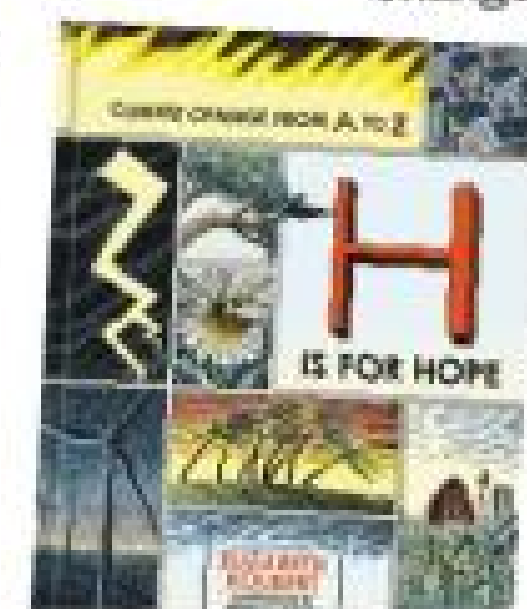
### H Is for Hope

ELIZABETH KOLBERT

In "H Is for Hope," Elizabeth Kolbert investigates the landscape of climate change — from "A," for Svante Arrhenius, who created the world's first climate model in 1894, to "Z,"

for the Colorado River Basin, the ground zero for climate change in the US. Along the

way she looks at Greta Thunberg's "blah blah blah" speech ("B"), and struggles with the deep uncertainty of the future of climate change ("U").



### Preferential pricing

#### US sues Pepsi over Walmart discounts

The US Federal Trade Commission sued PepsiCo. on Friday for offering preferential pricing to a large retailer, whom a source confirmed was Walmart. The practices fed high consumer prices by placing at a disadvantage other retailers, from large grocery chains to independent convenience stores, the FTC said.

"PepsiCo. strongly disputes the FTC's allegations, and the partisan manner in which the suit was filed," the company said.

The lawsuit alleges the soft drink manufacturer violated the Robinson-Patman Act, a law that went largely unenforced for decades. **Reuters**

### Developing economies

#### Nigeria admitted as BRICS partner country

Nigeria has been admitted as a "partner country" of the BRICS bloc of developing economies, according to Brazil, the group's chair.

BRICS was formed by Brazil, Russia, India and China in 2009, with South Africa added in 2010.

Last year, the bloc added Iran, Egypt, Ethiopia and the United Arab Emirates. Turkey, Azerbaijan and Malaysia have formally applied to become members, and a few others have expressed interest.

Nigeria becomes the ninth BRICS partner country, joining Belarus, Bolivia, Cuba, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Thailand, Uganda, and Uzbekistan. **AP**

**Opteam provides tools to construction teams, including real-time dashboards, progress monitoring systems, and AI-powered schedule optimization..** Supplied



“We are honored to collaborate with Kidana, led by a vision to enhance the services offered to pilgrims, in line with Saudi Vision 2030.”  
**Majid bin Saad Al-Arifi**  
Spokesman and Vice President of Marketing at Elm



# Corporate

PRESS RELEASES FROM THE WORLD OF BUSINESS AND COMMERCE

CREATIVE CONTENT

## Hilton-STA campaign spotlights Saudi Arabia’s must-visit hotspots

Hilton and the Saudi Tourism Authority have partnered to showcase the diverse travel experiences tourists can enjoy in Saudi Arabia through an engaging creative content campaign.

In a first-of-its-kind collaboration, short films and photos have been creatively produced to promote Riyadh, Jeddah, AlUla, Makkah and Madinah. These captivating visuals transport viewers to discover the country’s distinctive destinations. The campaign builds on last year’s successful partnership between the two entities, in which they created engaging seasonal content for viewers, and is now being rolled out internationally, including across the Middle East, South Africa, the UK, Germany, Italy, France, Malaysia, and Indonesia.

The announcement follows the signing of a memorandum of understanding between Hilton and STA in 2023 to explore cooperation opportunities to promote Saudi Arabia and attract visitors to the Kingdom, in line with Vision 2030. It also comes as Hilton continues its plans to more than quadruple its presence with over 70 hotels under development — adding more than 18,000 keys to its growing portfolio, introducing more of its award-winning brands, and creating over 15,000 jobs for hospitality professionals across the Kingdom — with more than half of new hires being Saudi nationals.

The content serves as a window that immerses visitors in Saudi experiences before their arrival. It brings to life the Kingdom’s must-visit hotspots and dives into the heart of its



The campaign promotes Riyadh, Jeddah, AlUla, Makkah and Madinah through creatively produced short films and photos, encouraging viewers to discover the country’s various destinations.

welcoming cities. From the spiritual significance of its holy cities, and highlighting the historical treasures of Diriyah, to revelling in the beauty of ancient oases and the stunning topography of the country, the campaign covers it all.

It invites visitors to experience the very best of Saudi Arabia with

Hilton, highlighting the global hospitality company’s hotels across the country including Waldorf Astoria Jeddah — Qasr Al-Sharq, Hilton Riyadh Hotel and Residences and Conrad Makkah, and demonstrating the exceptional hospitality and comfort that Hilton guests can expect.

Hilton currently operates 21 hotels in the Kingdom including the recently opened Hilton Riyadh Olaya and The Hotel Galleria Jeddah, Curio Collection by Hilton. The global hospitality



### BACKGROUND

Hilton is committed to expanding its presence in Saudi Arabia with plans to grow its footprint to exceed 100 hotels in the coming years.

company is committed to expanding its presence in Saudi Arabia with plans to grow its footprint to exceed 100 hotels in the coming years. Its development pipeline includes the recently signed agreement with Dan Company, a Public Investment Fund company, to open three resorts in Al-Ahsa; an agreement with Rua Al-Madinah Holding to open three properties at Rua Al-Madinah; and a partnership with Taiba Investments to launch the first Waldorf Astoria in Madinah.

## Corporate Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

### Trade Ties Bahrain Chamber hosts India’s FICCI delegation

Chairman of the Bahrain Chamber Sameer Nass welcomed on Jan. 15 at the chamber’s headquarters an Indian business delegation spearheaded by President of the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry Girish Luthra. The meeting was attended by Second Vice-Chairman Mohammed Al-Kooheji and Board Member Yusuf Salahuddin.

During the meeting, Nass highlighted the longstanding relationship between Bahrain and India, noting the trade volume between both friendly countries, which surpassed \$1.1 billion in 2023.

### Trade Show F2D Medical to debut Thermodiag at Arab Health

French company F2D Medical has announced its participation in Arab Health 2025, the Middle East’s premier healthcare event running from Jan. 27 to 30.

The event offers a unique opportunity to engage with F2D Medical experts supported by its exclusive distributor Datavitalis, and explore how their advanced technology is redefining patient care.

Healthcare professionals and visitors will discover F2D Medical’s Thermodiag, an innovative breakthrough in medical monitoring, at Zaabeel Hall 2, Stand Z2D10.

### Premium Tourism Visit Qatar hosts Arabia Luxury Travel Show

Visit Qatar hosted the Arabia Luxury Travel Show for the first time in Doha, which ran from Jan. 12 to 15. Designed to strengthen Qatar’s position as a leading luxury destination in the Middle East, the event welcomed more than 160 luxury tour operators and meetings, incentives, conferences and exhibitions agents from key markets, including Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Georgia, Moldova, and the Baltic States.

More than 50 hotels, destination management companies, and tourism boards from across the region including Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the UAE, Oman, Jordan, Türkiye and the Indian Ocean participated in the event.

JOINT COOPERATION

## Elm, Kidana ink deal to drive digital transformation of holy sites

Elm, a pioneer in digital solutions, signed an MoU with Kidana Development Company, a major developer of the holy sites that is wholly owned by the Royal Commission for Makkah City and Holy Sites. The agreement will bolster joint efforts in the development and operation of digital platforms, as well as deliver consulting services and promote digitization in the holy sites. It will also facilitate inspection and field supervision services to ensure the highest standards of quality and efficiency.

The MoU was signed by Mohammad Abdulaziz Alomair, CEO of Elm, and Majed Ahmed Al-Shangiti, executive vice president of human capital and shared services at Kidana, in the presence of key officials from both organizations.

As part of the MoU, both entities will coordinate their efforts to achieve mutual goals in areas of shared expertise while leveraging Elm’s electronic solutions, technological systems, and consulting services to drive the digital transformation of the holy sites.

Majid bin Saad Al-Arifi, official spokesman and vice president of marketing at Elm, said: “We are honored to collaborate with Kidana, led by a vision to enhance the services offered to pilgrims of Umrah, in line with the objectives of Saudi Vision 2030. The collaboration will enable us to develop a range of electronic platforms and enhance the digital infrastructure while offering specialized consultancy services and complete support in the field of digital transformation.”

Bigo Live, a global social live streaming platform, hosted its first BIGO MENA Gala on Jan. 9 at Atlantis, The Palm, Dubai. The event brought together top content creators, influential users, and Bigo “Family” groups from across the globe, reinforcing the platform’s commitment to fostering real-time connections and cross-cultural exchange.

The gala recognized standout creators with prestigious awards, including gold-plated iPhone 16 Pro Max devices, standard iPhone 16 Pro Max models, and other prizes. Honorees represented diverse regions, including the MENA, Russia, Türkiye, the Philippines, Pakistan, Indonesia, France, and Thailand, demonstrating the platform’s international reach and inclusive community. The awards celebrated innovation, creativity,

INTERNATIONAL REACH

## Bigo Live celebrates global creators at Dubai gala



The gala recognized standout creators with prestigious awards.

and the ability of creators to engage diverse audiences, highlighting the significant contributions they make to the Bigo Live ecosystem.

“The BIGO MENA Gala 2025 underscores the remarkable achievements of our creators and users who make Bigo Live a dynamic space for meaningful interactions,” said Ian Goh,

director at BIGO Technology. “This event celebrates the global collaboration and innovation that have driven our growth and strengthened our community.”

The event featured captivating performances from acclaimed artists, including Eman Abdulaziz and Hwaida Yousef, alongside other international talent. These performances showcased the platform’s ability to connect communities through shared cultural experiences and entertainment, further emphasizing Bigo Live’s global reach.

The event was supported by Coda, a key partner in the MENA region. This strategic partnership underscores a shared commitment to developing and advancing digital platforms that empower users to create and connect on a global scale.

Iga Swiatek demolished Emma Raducanu on Saturday to sweep into the last 16 of the Australian Open.



## Sport News

### PREMIER LEAGUE

# Kluivert hat trick helps Bournemouth beat Newcastle

Crystal Palace sign promising teenage talent Romain Esse from Millwall

AFF Newcastle

**Justin Kluivert's stunning hat trick snapped Newcastle's winning streak in style as Bournemouth stormed into the Premier League's top six with a 4-1 win at St. James' Park on Saturday.**

The Magpies were looking to set a club record with a 10th consecutive victory in all competitions but were thoroughly outplayed by the Cherries, who are themselves now on an 11-game unbeaten streak.

Kluivert, son of former Newcastle striker Patrick Kluivert, was the star of the show before Milos Kerkez fired in a fourth in stoppage time.

Defeat leaves Newcastle still in fourth but now just one point clear of Bournemouth in the race for a place in next season's Champions League.

Alexander Isak's hopes of matching the Premier League record scoring streak also came to an end on a humbling afternoon for the Magpies.

The Swedish striker had struck in eight consecutive games, but was barely given a sniff of a chance by a brilliant Bournemouth display.

Andoni Iraola's men flew out of the traps and never let up to move above defending champions Manchester City in the table.

The visitors should have led inside four minutes when Dango Ouattara's shot was saved by Martin Dubravka and Antoine



Semenyo blasted the rebound over.

Bournemouth had to wait just 2 minutes more to take the lead when Semenyo's cut-back was swept into the far corner by Kluivert.

Newcastle were shellshocked in

Kluivert, son of former Newcastle striker Patrick Kluivert, was the star of the show before Milos Kerkez fired in a fourth in stoppage time. Reuters

the early stages but looked to have restored some order when Bruno Guimaraes headed in Lewis Hall's corner.

Yet the home side headed in at half time behind once more after another classy finish from Kluivert to turn in Ouattara's pass.

Separately, Crystal Palace signed promising teenage talent Romain Esse from neighboring Championship outfit Millwall on Saturday.

The 19-year-old had scored five times in 26 appearances for the Lions this season and joins on a five-and-a-half year deal for a reported £12m (\$15 million), rising to £14.5m with add-ons.

However, Esse was not registered in time to face West Ham on Saturday.

Palace chairman Steve Parish said: "Romain is the type of player who gets crowds off their seats — the type of player long associated

### HIGHLIGHT

**Defeat leaves Newcastle still in fourth but now just one point clear of Bournemouth in the race for a place in next season's Champions League.**

with South London and Crystal Palace — and everyone at the club is looking forward to watching him shine on the pitch, and fulfill his exciting potential."

The Eagles, whose Selhurst Park ground is only 8 miles from Millwall's Den, have made a habit of picking up young stars from the second tier in recent years.

Eberechi Eze and Adam Wharton have developed into England internationals at Selhurst Park after moving from QPR and Blackburn respectively.

Palace sit 15th in the Premier League, eight points above the relegation.

## Sport Briefs

THE BEST OF THE REST

### Golf

**Daniel Hillier holds narrow Dubai lead**

New Zealand's Daniel Hillier birdied his last two holes to edge ahead by one shot going into the final round of the Dubai Desert Classic on Saturday, while Rory McIlroy moved to within seven strokes of the lead.

At the Majlis course of Emirates Golf Club, Hillier enjoyed a three-shot lead midway through the back nine as swirling wind made for tough scoring conditions.

However, the world No. 223 made three successive bogeys from the 13th to 15th holes to open the doors for his rivals before the strong finish took him to 13-under par 203 aggregate.

### French football

**PSG sign Napoli forward Kvaratskhelia**

Georgia winger Khvicha Kvaratskhelia completed a move to Paris Saint-Germain from Italian league leaders Napoli, the French champions announced.

"Paris Saint-Germain is pleased to announce the signing of Khvicha Kvaratskhelia. The 23-year-old winger, who will wear number seven, becomes the first Georgian player in the club's history," said a PSG statement.

No transfer fee was revealed but media reports in France said the Parisians would pay 70 million (\$72m), not including potential bonuses, for the player. **AFF**



### AUSTRALIAN OPEN

# Sinner gets back to 4th round; Swiatek beats Raducanu

AP Melbourne

Defending champion Jannik Sinner beat 46th-ranked Marcos Giron of the US 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 at the Australian Open on Saturday, reaching the fourth round at Melbourne Park for the fourth time.

Sinner stretched his unbeaten run to 17 matches, dating to last season. He had an eventful 2024, claiming his first two Grand Slam titles, reaching No. 1 in the ATP rankings for the first time — and going through a doping case that is still not quite resolved, because the World Anti-Doping Agency appealed his exoneration.

The 23-year-old Italian's next opponent in Australia will be No. 13 Holger Rune, who beat Miomir Kecmanovic 6-7 (5), 6-3, 4-6, 6-4, 6-4.

After eliminating Giron, who was trying to get to the fourth round of a major for the first time, Sinner was critical of himself, pointing specifically to his 16-of-24 success rate on points when he moved forward.

"The percentage of my net game was not really good," Sinner said with a chuckle.

"For sure, if I want to go on in this tournament, I have to improve," he added. "So hopefully in the next round, I'm able to raise my level."

In women's singles, everything came so easily for Iga Swiatek during a 6-1, 6-0 victory over Emma Raducanu on Saturday in the only Australian Open women's third-round match between two past Grand Slam champions — if you thought that meant it would be close, you'd have been rather wrong — that this was how she described it:

"I felt like the ball," Swiatek said, "is listening to me."

Loud and clear. Asked to explain that sensation, Swiatek put her two index fingers a few inches apart and said, "It's just being able to aim for this kind of space." Then she spread her palms more than a foot apart to show that's the margin for error on other days.

The difference, she said,



Jannik Sinner stretched his unbeaten run to 17 matches, dating to last season. Reuters

comes down to "being more precise and actually knowing where the ball is going to go, seeing the effects that you want it to."

When the five-time major champion and former long-time No. 1-ranked woman — now No. 2, behind Aryna Sabalenka — is

at the height of her powers, as she sure has seemed to be in Week 1 at Melbourne Park, it is hard for anyone to slow Swiatek down.

The heavy-spinning, high-bouncing forehands. The squeaky-sneaker scrambling to get to every shot. The terrific returning. And so on.

Later Saturday, No. 4 Taylor Fritz, the runner-up at last year's US Open, became the

highest-seeded man to leave the bracket, defeated by 38-year-old Gael Monfils 3-6, 7-5, 7-6 (1), 6-4. Monfils joined Roger Federer as the only men 38 or older to get to the fourth round in Melbourne since the field expanded to 128 players in 1988.

At the other end of the age spectrum, a pair of young Californians who have been pals for a while and trained together in the offseason — Learner Tien, 19, and Alex Michelsen, 20 — earned debuts in the fourth round at a major. Ben Shelton, who is 22, won, too. No. 1 Jannik Sinner, however, eliminated American Marcos Giron 6-3, 6-4, 6-2 and will next face No. 13 Holger Rune, who beat Miomir Kecmanovic 6-7 (5), 6-3, 4-6, 6-4, 6-4.

Tien, a qualifier ranked 121st, followed up his surprising win against No. 5 Daniil Medvedev in a five-setter that ended at 3 a.m. on Friday with a 7-6 (10), 6-3, 6-3 victory over Corentin Moutet of France. Michelsen, who is ranked 42nd, overwhelmed No. 19 seed Karen Khachanov of Russia 6-3, 7-6 (5), 6-2.

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Goldplay has partnered with Indian billionaire Mukesh Ambani's broadcast venture to livestream one of its two upcoming Ahmedabad concerts on Disney+ Hotstar, India's most popular streaming app.



# & Finally

## TheSix

Timeless designs

These six Middle Eastern jewelry brands offer a diverse range of styles and craftsmanship.



### APOA

The Saudi brand, "injected with strong Saudi DNA," draws inspiration from culture, architecture, nature and travel. It won the jewelry category prize at the 2024 Fashion Trust Arabia Awards.



### Ofa

Founded by Saudi influencer and entrepreneur Hala Abdullah, Ofa offers contemporary jewelry featuring minimalist designs, including versatile pieces such as earrings, necklaces and rings for everyday wear.



### Malath Gallery Designs

This Bahraini brand, known for creating wearable art, stands out with its text-inscribed designs inspired by Islamic patterns, Qur'anic verses and poetry.



### Tharwa L'Atelier

Tharwa L'Atelier is a Lebanese fine jewelry brand offering gold and diamond pieces that blend timeless craftsmanship with modern design.



### Myne the Label

Co-founded by Lebanese influencer Maya Ahmed, the brand offers jewelry and body accessories that are designed with gem stones, rough crystals and zodiac signs.



### Fabula Jewels

The Dubai-based brand specializes in customizable fine jewelry, offering intricate designs such as name necklaces, birthstone rings and stackable pieces.

CLOSE UP

# Simi and Haze Khadra donate SimiHaze Beauty sales to LA fire victims

Arab News Dubai

**US Palestinian beauty entrepreneurs Simi and Haze Khadra, the twin founders of SimiHaze Beauty, are stepping up to support those in need in their Los Angeles community.**

This week, the duo announced that 100 percent of all sales generated through their beauty brand will be donated to aid displaced Black and Latino families affected by the recent LA fires.

The contributions will be directed to individual GoFundMe campaigns for families who have lost their homes or been displaced.

In a heartfelt message shared on Instagram, Simi and Haze highlighted the significance of their connection to Los Angeles, a city they have called "home for the past 14 years." "Our community means everything to us," they expressed, emphasizing their commitment to giving back during challenging times.

Their efforts mirror the actions of other public figures, such as The Weeknd, who recently pledged \$1 million to support firefighters and residents affected by the wildfires.

In light of the disaster, the singer, born Abel Tesfaye, also postponed a concert at the Rose Bowl as well as the release of his upcoming album.

"Out of respect and concern for the people of Los Angeles County, I am canceling the Rose Bowl concert originally scheduled for January 25th," he wrote on social media. "My focus remains on supporting the recovery of these communities and aiding its incredible people as they rebuild."



For Simi and Haze, this initiative reflects the values their beauty brand has embodied since its launch in 2021. Known for their bold and innovative stick-on makeup designs — such as chrome wings and holographic cat-eyes — SimiHaze Beauty quickly

gained attention for making statement looks effortless. The brand later expanded its offerings to include a wider range of products, from lipsticks and bronzing powders to mascaras. In 2024, they expanded their brand to the Middle East,

describing the experience to Arab News as "so surreal." "The market has been such a huge goal of ours since we started because we grew up here," Simi said in a previous interview. "We're so happy that our products are finally accessible to our amazing followers here."

## REVIEW

# William Goldenber's 'Unstoppable' is a predictable, feel-good outing

Matt Ross London

It is easy to forget that, sometimes, all you want from a movie is a healthy dose of good vibes — and few genres are better suited to that than the sports biopic.

The film "Unstoppable" tells the real-life story of Anthony Robles, an American wrestler who won the 125-pound (57 kg) US National college wrestling championship in 2011 despite being born with one leg.

Directed by William Goldenberg in his debut, "Unstoppable"

stars Jharrel Jerome as Robles, alongside Jennifer Lopez as his mother Judy and Bobby Cannavale as stepfather Rick. Already a talented high-school wrestler, Robles misses out on his dream college scholarship, but opts instead to pay to attend Arizona State University and win a place on their fated wrestling team.

Despite facing Rick's abuse at home, Robles earns his teammates' respect and, with support from his mom and coach (Michael Peña), proves himself on the national stage.



'Unstoppable' is directed by William Goldenberg. Supplied

Here is the thing with sports movies (or the good ones, at least), you have to really lean into every single cliché and embrace all the heartstring-plucking

tropes. Because, if you do — and if the film has a decent cast doing an earnest job — the payoff is worth it.

And so it is with "Unstoppable," a movie that is as determined as its real-world protagonist. Sure, there are a few story beats that get teased and then dropped. Sure, the by-the-numbers buildup to the climactic showdown is beyond predictable.

But this movie has a stellar lead performance from Jerome (helped by absolutely seamless



Ian McDiarmid

CELEBRITY GUEST

**Ian McDiarmid, Hideo Ishikawa to headline Middle East Film & Comic Con 2025**

Arab News Dubai

Scottish actor and director Ian McDiarmid, known for his portrayal of Emperor Palpatine in the "Star Wars" saga, has been announced as the first confirmed celebrity guest for the Middle East Film & Comic Con 2025.

The region's largest pop culture event will take place from April 18 to 20, 2025, at the Abu Dhabi National Exhibition Centre.

In addition to his role as the "Star Wars" saga, McDiarmid is also known for his performances in films such as "Sleepy Hollow" and "Dirty Rotten Scoundrels," as well as his extensive work in theater, including his Olivier Award-winning role in "Faith Healer."

Anime fans are also in for a treat with the announcement of Japan's leading voice actor, Hideo Ishikawa, best known as the voice of Itachi Uchiha from "Naruto."

His notable roles include Toyotomi Hideyoshi in "Samurai Warriors," Kyo-ya Onizuka in "Aesthetica of a Rogue Hero," Ray Penber and Hideki Ide in "Death Note," and Squall Leonhart, Auron, and Cait Sith in the "Final Fantasy" series.

Loy Pinheiro, show director of MEFCC said in a statement: "MEFCC 2025 is set to be our most diverse and engaging event yet. From casual fans to devoted collectors, we've created an experience that celebrates every aspect of pop culture with something for everyone."

The event is organized in partnership with the Department of Culture and Tourism in Abu Dhabi.