

SKIING IN GOLAN, ON EDGE OF SYRIA'S WAR

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Israel, more known for its southern desert, is not a country famed for its expertise in winter sports. But the country's only resort and its 14 slopes - which range from green to black - are able to accommodate up to 8,000 visitors a day.

Itay, 28, took a day off from Tel Aviv and made the three-hour journey to test the year's first snow and feel "like I am on holiday abroad." "We have not stopped taking the bus because it could be blown up, or stopped surfing because there could be another war, like the French didn't stop going to concerts because there were attacks," he said, reflecting a widespread mindset among Israelis accustomed to violent conflict.

"There is not much snow in Israel. So coming here is an attraction. We just want to have fun," said Amir Cohen, who brought his children sledging. On the slopes a cross sec-

tion of society includes veiled Muslim women, ultra-Orthodox Jews and UN soldiers on leave from monitoring duties nearby. The most dangerous projectiles traded here are usually snowballs. "Anyway the bombings, you hear them far louder in the villages below than here," said Fayad Abu Saleh, who is, like the majority of other employees at the site, from one of the neighboring Druze villages.

Druze Arabs, who belong to an offshoot of Shiite Islam, are divided between Syria, Lebanon and Israel. "Our dream is that one day this region will be safer and at the turn of a piste you can end up in Syria, and then back to the station to get the Lebanon chairlift," sighed Nabir Abu Saleh, the ski patrol chief. "Every day when you go up here, we think of what is happening in Syria - children and refugees who sleep in tents in the cold. We come with our equipment, our suits, and you can still feel the cold. But them? Yet we cannot do much from here. We just want it to end as soon as possible." — AFP

ISRAEL RAZES EU-FUNDED BUILDINGS

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Israel has carried out a long campaign to relocate the residents of the area, which was declared a military zone by the Israeli government in the 1970s. Human rights groups have repeatedly challenged Israel's claim to the land, arguing it is illegal to establish a military zone in occupied territory, Sarit Michaeli from the B'Tselem NGO told AFP.

The families argue that their ancestors, who were cave dwellers, have lived on the land since long before Israel occupied the West Bank in 1967. A statement from COGAT, the Israeli defence ministry unit that administers civilian affairs in the West Bank, confirmed "enforcement measures were taken against illegal structures and solar panels built within a military zone." The EU called on Israel to change its policies in the occupied West Bank. "The EU expects its investments in support of the Palestinian people to be protected from

damage and destruction," said a spokesman, who condemned the demolitions. A High Court injunction later in the day ordered a halt to all demolitions until at least Feb 9. The residents of the region had been undergoing a process of arbitration with Israeli authorities after a High Court ruling, Michaeli said.

However talks broke down in recent days. "This basically means we are back to square one. The government wants to remove them. The residents object," Michaeli said. COGAT said the negotiations failed as "the building owners showed no willingness to get the situation in order and illegal construction did not stop." As such, "measures were taken in accordance with the law," it said. In total, more than 1,000 people could be affected, Michaeli explained, as there are around 10 other villages that could face similar action. The villages are represented by a number of different legal teams, so yesterday's demolitions concerned only one of the claims. — AFP

WHITE HOUSE RACE WIDE OPEN

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Surging past expectations, Cruz claimed victory with 27.7 percent of the vote, having invested heavily in campaigning in the deeply conservative state to out-manoeuvre his many rivals.

The showman Trump, 69, built his personal brand on the concept of winning and will need to prove he can turn a commanding lead in the New Hampshire polls into votes after failing to do so in Iowa. Trump struggled to hide his disappointment Monday night, saying he was "honored" to finish second after being given no chance to win Iowa at the outset - before he began dominating the air waves, thanks partly to a series of controversial remarks on Muslims and immigration.

A second hiccup in New Hampshire could spell political disaster for the man who has never held elected office and has always maintained that being second was tantamount to being nowhere. David Redlawsk, a professor at Rutgers University who was in Iowa for the caucuses, told AFP Trump was "the big loser" on the night. That was in stark contrast to Cruz, whose campaign rolls into New Hampshire with renewed vigor.

Once reviled by fellow Republicans as a "wacko bird" eager to shut down the US government, Cruz proved with his Iowa win that his arch-conservatism may yet propel him into the White House. Cruz, who has fought hard to maintain a prominent place for faith in American life, sees himself in a battle for the very soul of the United States. "To God be the glory!" exclaimed Cruz, after Iowans flocked to churches, school gymnasiums and libraries to be the first voices officially heard in the boisterous, tortuous nominating process that leads to Election Day on Nov 8. "Tonight is a victory for courageous conservatives across Iowa and all across this great nation."

While Cruz is aiming to capitalize on his sudden momentum, Sanders returns to what can safely be described as his home turf in New Hampshire, with the potential to land a hammer blow against the former first lady Clinton and her dreams to be America's first female commander-in-chief. Democratic party chair Andy McGuire called the results "the closest in Iowa Democratic caucus history" and that was borne out in the final tally, which did not filter through until Tuesday late morning.

With 100 percent of precincts reporting, Clinton took 49.8 percent, against 49.6 for the Vermont senator Sanders, her sole remaining challenger for the Democratic nomination. Brian Fallon, Clinton campaign spokesman, admitted to CNN that Clinton, who lost out to President Barack Obama last time and has rallied against Wall Street and money in politics, faces an emboldened Sanders in New Hampshire. "There's no doubt that we go into this final week before New Hampshire slightly down (in the polls)," he said.

Experts say Clinton may be seeking to merely tread water for this next week, until the race shifts to South Carolina and Nevada, where she has commanding leads in the polls. It was a gratifying night for 74-year-old Sanders, who has built a particular fanbase with young Americans on the left with his calls for "political revolution." Clinton may have inched past him in Iowa, but Sanders, who has called for a more equitable society, was claiming a victory of another sort. "We started our campaign 40, 50 points behind," he told CNN. "I am proud of bringing a whole lot of young people into the political process that would revitalize American democracy. And if we're going to change America, that's what we've got to do."

Iowa has held the first contest in the country since the early 1970s, giving it extra weight in the electoral process that can translate into momentum for winning candidates. Rubio, 44, may benefit from that momentum as much as Cruz. The Florida lawmaker established himself as the mainstream alternative to the two frontrunning rivals. "Rubio has staying power. He weathered \$30 million in negative ads and late deciders broke his way due to his upbeat and optimistic close," said Republican strategist Scott Reed.

Republican establishment candidates more traditional than Rubio did not fare well in Iowa. Former Florida Governor Jeb Bush took 2.8 percent, Ohio Governor John Kasich took 1.9 percent, and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie took 1.8 percent. Surgeon Ben Carson, an outsider, placed fourth among Republicans with 9 percent. As the frontrunning contenders hit the ground running in New Hampshire, they leave behind several candidates - Republican Mick Huckabee and Democrat Martin O'Malley - who announced they were giving up on the White House after being mauled in Iowa. — Agencies

NEW OIL DEAL CAN DRAW LESSONS FROM '98

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Iraq expects to raise output further in 2016.

Meanwhile, Iran says the removal of European sanctions in January should allow it to claw back oil production and a deal with OPEC is unacceptable until output reaches four million bpd. "You cannot have a deal with non-OPEC, until you achieve a credible OPEC framework which at the moment is not possible because of Iraq and Iran. Until there can be some framework between Iran, Saudi and Iraq, all this non-OPEC talk is just noise," said Elguindi.

Saudi Arabia's Oil Minister Ali Al-Naimi, who has been in office since 1995, has said the kingdom would join cuts if key OPEC and non-OPEC players cooperated. But insiders say, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies Kuwait, Qatar and the United Arab Emirates are all deeply sceptical that a workable consensus can be reached. "Iran and Iraq remain the main challenges inside OPEC and Russia won't agree to a cut and is not to be trusted," a senior Gulf OPEC delegate told Reuters.

Change in Dynamic

In the past month, however, all parties involved have sent signals suggesting the world oil dynamic may be changing. Iran's main oil export official, Mohsen Qamsari, said in January he did not want a price war and might increase shipments gradually to avoid hurting world prices. And Iraqi Oil Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi also said his country would support an extraordinary OPEC meeting if a joint cut with non-OPEC could be agreed beforehand. "It is useless to go to a meeting without deciding up front. We said 'yes' if others are willing to go but we have to decide before. Otherwise this will backfire on us," he said.

The statements by Iran and Iraq coincided with a change of rhetoric from Russia where the head of its pipeline monopoly and close ally of President Vladimir Putin, Nikolai Tokarev, said joint action was possible to halt slumping prices. For years, Russian officials said oil production cuts were technically difficult after an ill-fated deal with OPEC in 2001, when Moscow agreed to cooperate but raised exports instead. It was this that created the mistrust that exists today.

But back then Putin was only at the start of his first presidential term and had little control of the oil industry, split between various oligarchs following the chaotic privatisation after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Fast forward 15 years, and the oil industry is mostly owned by the Kremlin and Putin has almost absolute power. "You have to take this seriously now. Key will be if Russia can deliver," said OPEC watcher and founder of US-based Pira Group Gary Ross, who was involved in the 2001 Russia-OPEC talks.

Putin and his ally, head of Kremlin oil major Rosneft, Igor Sechin, have yet to speak about the recent talk of a

joint move with OPEC. But Sechin in the past said he would not support cooperation by Russia, where one popular conspiracy theory maintains that the low oil prices of the 1980s were orchestrated by Saudi Arabia and the United States to undermine the Soviet Union. Sechin has also said OPEC had "lost its teeth".

A year ago, Putin said it was possible that the current price crash was orchestrated in the same way as the crash of the 1980s, which effectively led to a collapse of the Soviet Union - a huge tragedy, according to Putin. "There is a lot of talk today about why it is happening. Maybe it is a Saudi-US plot to punish Iran, or put pressure on the Russian economy or Venezuela," Putin said back then. But with the Russian rouble sinking to a record low and a parliamentary election this year and a presidential election in 2018, pressure is rising on the Kremlin to protect state revenues and limit public discontent.

'Grand Bargain'

Russia's latest rhetoric has left OPEC watchers and Kremlinologists guessing if it is just a verbal intervention to lift oil prices or whether it is part of a real deal for Putin, which may also involve a compromise with Saudi Arabia over Syria or indeed any other "Grand Bargain". Putin has dispatched heavyweight veteran foreign minister Sergei Lavrov to the Middle East this week. Lavrov, who has almost never spoken about oil, will travel to Oman and the UAE to discuss the oil market.

Meanwhile, Venezuelan Oil Minister Eulogio Del Pino will visit Russia, Qatar, Iran and Saudi Arabia this week to drum up support for a joint cut in oil production. And just like in 1998, behind-the-scenes talks are gathering pace. When Putin met the Emir of Qatar last month in Moscow, oil was on the agenda, according to a senior source in the Gulf. And just as in 1998 and 1999, when it took two years and many secret meetings in Miami, Madrid, the Hague, Amsterdam and Riyadh to clinch two decisive supply cuts, the process in 2016 could be equally painful.

The head of Kremlin-backed Russian Direct Investment Fund, Kirill Dmitriyev, said a deal between Russia and OPEC was possible but at the right time, "maybe within a year", when the markets rebalance and it became easier to reach agreements. Goldman Sachs, which is bearish on oil, said it believes cooperation between OPEC and Russia would be "highly unlikely" and also self-defeating as higher prices would bring shelved output, including in the United States, back onto the market. But sceptics could do well to read a paper by Robert Mabro, founder of the Oxford Institute for Energy Studies who helped to broker the 1998 deal. Mabro wrote at the time: "Changes in policy are always possible, even likely, when significant revenue losses are at stake." — Reuters

TATA RENAMES 'ZICA' CAR AS VIRUS SPREADS

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born with microcephaly, or abnormally small heads. Brazil has warned pregnant women to stay away from the Olympics, which open in August in Rio de Janeiro. The Aedes aegypti mosquito, which

carries Zika and the dengue and chikungunya viruses, is also widely prevalent in India. Zika was first detected in a Ugandan forest of the same name in 1947, but it was considered a relatively mild disease until the current outbreak was declared in Latin America last year. — AFP

PACI TO INCREASE CIVIL ID FEES TO KD 5 FROM...

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Zalzalah was quoted as saying in Al-Anbaa newspaper yesterday that the government will raise prices of petrol by up to 61 percent. He said that low-grade petrol (90) will be raised from 60 to 85 fils, high grade (95) from 65 to 105 fils while ultra-grade petrol (98) will be raised from 90 to 145 fils. He gave no indications about new electricity charges.

The Assembly bureau is scheduled to meet with the Supreme Planning Council and the government on Sunday to study the issue ahead of the Assembly session. Information Minister Sheikh Salman Al-Humoud Al-Sabah said yesterday that a national conference for rationalizing expenditures will be held early next month to launch an awareness campaign to stop squandering of public resources and misuse of services.

In another development, MP Abdullah Maayouf asked the finance ministry about alleged financial violations committed by the office of Justice Minister Yaqoub Al-Sane. He asked if financial controllers have made any remarks regarding the finances of the two ministries and authorities under them since Sept 2014. He inquired about the size of any financial violations found by the controllers and if any violations were committed by the minister's office in the two ministries. Maayouf demanded a list of the alleged violations and photocopies of the reports of the financial controllers about the two ministries.

Last week, Maayouf accused the minister of committing violations regarding politically-motivated appointments to boost the minister's electoral position. The lawmaker also threatened to grill the minister unless he stops such appointments.

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