

ON IRAN-SAUDI RIFT, GULF ACTS WITH CAUTION

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"The problem is, common ground between everyone in this region is shrinking."

Some officials calculate that cutting ties with Tehran would complicate efforts to end Syria's war, in which Iran is providing military support to President Bashar Al-Assad. It would also risk antagonizing an emerging regional power that is set to benefit from an easing of international sanctions after its landmark nuclear deal with world powers last July, and is already being courted by Western investors. "Sudden escalations like this create a lot of anxiety in the region, a lot of fear. Oil prices are getting lower and lower and budgets are being restricted," said Shafeeq Ghabra, a professor of political science at Kuwait University. "For business at least, it's a bad time to be making enemies."

Different Outlooks

Despite their similarities, the Gulf Arab monarchies have varying regional outlooks, economies and political systems. Relations between Iran and Bahrain, a Sunni-ruled monarchy where Shiites are a majority,

were already poor. Over the past four years, Bahrain has regularly accused Tehran of meddling in its internal affairs by backing various Shiite opposition groups since the start of the Arab Spring in 2011.

Elsewhere in the region, though, the calculus is less straightforward. Oman stands apart from its Gulf Arab neighbors in keeping a cordial, even collaborative, relationship with Iran: much to the chagrin of its GCC partners, it played the role of intermediary in opening negotiations between the United States and Iran. Then there is the UAE, Iran's most important regional trade partner. Despite a decades-old territorial dispute between the two countries over small Gulf islands near the Strait of Hormuz, the UAE in 2013 sent over \$12 billion worth of goods to Iran according to IMF estimates. Most of this was exported from Dubai, which is home to a large population of Iranian nationals.

Trade between the other Gulf states and Iran is small, but goes back centuries. Much of that, too, is routed via Dubai. "We, as Arabs, do not want a conflict, a confrontation or even a war with Iran. Instead we seek to drive development in our countries, our peoples and our region," UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh

Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahyan said in an interview on Sunday after an emergency Arab League meeting in Cairo.

'No Grey Areas'

Navigating the rift between Iran and Saudi Arabia is particularly tricky for Qatar. The tiny, vastly wealthy monarchy shares access to the world's largest natural gas field beneath the Gulf waters with Iran which, following the nuclear deal, has sought to entice European and US oil firms to invest in its energy infrastructure. Qatar has drawn closer to Saudi Arabia since a spat in 2014 when Riyadh briefly withdrew its ambassador from Doha in a dispute over Qatar's alleged support for the Muslim Brotherhood.

Still, it took Doha more than three days after the attack on the Saudi embassy in the early hours of Jan 3 to announce it was withdrawing its ambassador to Tehran. During that time, Saudi Arabia banned access for its citizens to a major Qatari-owned news site, signalling the potential for tensions between the neighbors to reignite. Analysts see another possible reason for Qatar's cautious approach: Iran has declared its support for efforts to free 26 Qatari nationals kid-

napped in December while on a hunting trip in southern Iraq. "The Saudis need to know who supports them and who does not, because major, fateful battles have no grey areas," wrote Jamal Khashoggi, a Saudi commentator, in an article published in a Qatari newspaper on Sunday that compared Riyadh's conflict with Iran to the European fight against fascism in the 1930s. Middle Eastern countries, Khashoggi wrote, faced a choice: "Submit to the Guardianship of Islamic Jurists or defend freedom."

But the GCC has so far largely avoided the upheaval that has swept the region, and analysts say suggestions that the hardline Saudi position on Iran could cause splits within the economic bloc, or see states break away, are overstating the case. "We can go on forever talking about disunity within the GCC. Yes of course there are differences of opinions, but to make too much of that diversity is to neglect completely the unity that also prevails, especially over Iran," said Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, a political science professor in the United Arab Emirates. "This is a time when the GCC are standing up to Iran and saying 'we've had enough of Iranian expansionism and we're going to be more determined to confront it.'" — Reuters

PALESTINIAN DREAMS OF RACING PAST USAIN...

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And when he runs, he "meditates at the same time." Nothing stops him: Not even the construction of a new building in Ramallah that encroaches on his athletics field, including cranes carrying iron sheets over the track.

For Mohammed has already been through a lot, he said from the garden of the stone house where he lives with his roommates. He has not yet known international competitions, adrenaline-filled stadiums or the stress of the starting blocks, but he has entered competitions "where the lanes are not curved but square, with 90-degree turns". Even if he doesn't make the time, other potential qualification routes exist: A small number of places are usually given to those who fell just short of the time, while some countries that have no representative are also granted a 'wildcard' spot.

Of the five members of the Palestinian delegation to the London 2012 Games, four were wildcards. The fifth, judoka Maher Abu Remeleh, was the first Palestinian in Olympic history to qualify on merit. Palestine has never won an Olympic medal and its national committee is under no illusions about the difficulty of doing so. But, as with qualifying matches for the football World Cup, participation in the Games is not only a sporting event but a

political statement in support of a Palestinian state.

Khatib is convinced he can set an example: Israel "wants to convince us that we can't do anything, you will always remain backwards, that's what they want the Palestinians to believe," he said. "I will prove them wrong." Instead of using his energy throwing stones at Israeli soldiers like many young Palestinians, "I prefer to use it to build something for my society: The idea of the Olympic Games is to create hope, to show that we are able to succeed".

To take the next step after years of training without supervision, he needed a push from outside. For that, he found a coach, but in Texas. After obtaining an American visa - far from a formality for Palestinians - he needed to raise nearly \$8,000 for three months in America. So he turned to the Internet. Launching a fundraising page, he was amazed at the result. "In three or four days, I met the whole amount." A few days later, it was close to \$13,000.

If after his training he is fast enough then "we are ready to support him and send him to train abroad as we do already with several other athletes", Munther Masalma, Secretary General of the Palestinian Olympic Committee, told AFP. "This year we hope to achieve an unprecedented feat and send between eight and ten Palestinian athletes to Rio," he added. Ten more reasons for hope for the Palestinians. — AFP

MUSIC LEGEND DAVID BOWIE DIES AGED 69

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In the first of many re-inventions, he took the name David Bowie in 1966 to avoid being mixed up with Davy Jones, lead singer with Beatles rivals The Monkees, and also studied Buddhism and mime. Married twice, he was notorious in the 1970s for his hedonistic lifestyle and ambiguous sexual orientation, once declaring he was bisexual but then retreating from his comments. During the 70s, he brought out a string of successful albums, dominating the British music scene, and also conquered the United States, his ever-changing fashion as groundbreaking as his music.

Beginning with the critically-acclaimed "Hunky Dory", he went on to produce "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars", followed by rock album "Aladdin Sane", the apocalyptic "Diamond Dogs" before a fling with so-called plastic soul on "Young Americans". He then switched gears once more, moving to Berlin to work with the electronic experimentalist Brian Eno to produce a trio of albums - "Low", "Heroes" and "Lodger".

The 1980s saw him win over a new generation with "Let's Dance", which yielded the hit singles "China Girl" and "Modern Love" before a 1985 team up with Mick Jagger for a cover of "Dancing in the Street" that helped to push the BandAid and LiveAid charity projects. His chameleon-like ability to reinvent his image, drawing on everything from cabaret to kabuki theatre, was accompanied by a string of albums until heart problems curtailed his productivity in the 2000s. But he also appeared on screen, making a striking appearance in the 1986 cult film "Labyrinth", playing a prisoner-of-war in Japan "Merry Christmas, Mr Lawrence" (1983) and

portraying inventor Nikola Tesla in "The Prestige" (2006).

Rarely seen in public, Bowie's last live performance was a decade ago. But he surprised the world by launching a surprise single "Where Are We Now?" on his 66th birthday in 2013 after nearly 10 years of silence, recalling his days in Berlin in the 1970s and hailed by critics as a major comeback. An innovator to the end, Bowie on Friday released his final album "Blackstar". The work can be seen in a new light by the revelation of how ill he was when he created it, with lyrics including "Look up here, I'm in heaven, I've got scars that can't be seen."

Long-time collaborator Tony Visconti wrote on Facebook that he had known for a year what was coming. "His death was no different from his life - a work of art," Visconti wrote. "He made Blackstar for us, his parting gift." He leaves behind his second wife Iman, a Somali-born supermodel who he married in 1992 and with whom he had a daughter, Alexandria Zahra Jones. He also had a son, film director Duncan Jones, with his first wife Angie Bowie. She was informed of her ex-husband's death while cut off from the outside world on the television show "Celebrity Big Brother".

Germany thanked Bowie for what it said was his role in helping to topple the Berlin Wall in 1989, with a tweet linking to a video of his Cold War-era anthem "Heroes" set in the then-divided city. "For gay people, he was a leading light to give us hope," said charity worker Charlie Rice, 66, who was visiting the Brixton mural. "He was fearless." One tribute came from a real star man: British astronaut Tim Peake, who wrote a message from the International Space Station: "Saddened to hear David Bowie has lost his battle with cancer - his music was an inspiration to many." — AFP

AID TRUCKS ENTER STARVING SYRIA TOWN

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Some people went through garbage bins, others ate grass. We sought food from the fighters but they refused to give it to us." Since Dec 1, some 28 people had died of starvation in Madaya, according to Doctors Without Borders, a Paris-based charity known by its French acronym MSF. Residents have described desperate scenes, saying they have been reduced to eating weeds and paying exorbitant prices for what little food could be smuggled through the blockade. Fifty trucks bearing the Red Crescent symbol were on their way to Madaya and 21 heading to Fuua and Kafraya, the ICRC said. The trucks were carrying food, water, infant formula, blankets and medication for acute and chronic illnesses, as well as surgical supplies.

The three towns, along with rebel-held Zabadani near Madaya, were part of a landmark six-month deal reached in September for an end to hostilities in those areas in exchange for humanitarian assistance. A first aid delivery went ahead in October and in December some 450 fighters and civilians were evacuated from Zabadani, Fuua and Kafraya. But aid had not reached Madaya in nearly three months, and residents and rights groups have raised the alarm about deteriorating conditions.

Government forces have been able to airdrop some supplies into Fuua and Kafraya, which are home to around 20,000 people, but rebel forces are not able to do the same for Madaya. Over the weekend, MSF said 23 people had died of starvation since Dec 1 at one of the facilities it supports in Madaya. On Sunday it reported five additional

deaths, including that of a nine-year-old boy. "MSF-supported medics in the besieged town have 10 critical starvation patients needing urgent hospitalization," said MSF. It said that "200 more malnourished patients could become critical and in need of hospitalization within a week if aid doesn't arrive".

Another 13 people who tried to escape in search of food have been killed when they stepped on landmines laid by regime forces or were shot by snipers, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a British-based monitor. Last week, the UN said only 10 percent of its requested aid deliveries to hard-to-reach and besieged areas of Syria last year were approved and carried out. More than 260,000 people have been killed in Syria since the conflict began in March 2011 with anti-government demonstrations.

Britain yesterday called for an end to all sieges in Syria. "Starving civilians is an inhuman tactic used by the Assad regime and their allies," said Matthew Rycroft, the British ambassador to the United Nations. "All sieges must be lifted to save civilian lives and to bring Syria closer to peace," he said in a statement.

Elsewhere in Syria, at least 12 children were killed along with their teacher and two other adults when a Russian air strike hit their school in the west of Aleppo province, the Observatory reported. Russia, a staunch ally of Assad, began a campaign of air strikes in support of the regime in late September. It says it is targeting the Islamic State group and other "terrorists" and has dismissed reports that its raids have killed hundreds of civilians as "absurd". — AFP

BAHRAIN HIKES PRICE OF FUEL AS KUWAIT...

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Saleh said that the government will explain to the Assembly the financial and economic status of the nation and the urgent financial challenges the country is facing. The government will brief the Assembly on the proposed measures to face the challenges to ensure a sustainable capability for the state to continue to provide a dignified living for citizens, the minister said.

Saleh did not say what measures the government plans to propose to face the impact of the sharp fall in oil prices on the Kuwaiti economy, but he was referring to a study made by Ernst & Young that proposed massive cuts in subsidies on a wide range of services and commodities, especially raising the price of petrol, electricity and water.

A large number of MPs have openly refused any government austerity measures that could impact citizens and urged the government to find other alternatives to cut spending and deal with the budget deficit. Ghanem said that the Assembly may hold a special meeting or debate to discuss the issue, adding that he met Prime Minister HH Sheikh Jaber Al-Mubarak Al-Sabah who promised that the government will not take any unilateral

action on this issue. The speaker said the country is facing difficult challenges but "we are capable of overcoming them without hurting low-income people".

At the start of last year, the government lifted subsidies for diesel and kerosene. Under a law, the government cannot increase charges on public services without amending a two-decade old law that bans the government from doing so without prior approval of the Assembly. But it is in the hands of the government to raise the prices of fuel without prior consent of MPs.

Kuwait's moves come after almost all GCC peers have increased or plan to raise the prices of fuel and other heavily-subsidized commodities and services. With the latest decisions, Kuwait collects the cheapest rates on electricity, water and fuel in the GCC. Based on an oil price of \$45 a barrel, the total cost of subsidies on fuel and electricity is about KD 2.2 billion in the budget of the current fiscal year 2015/2016, which ends March 31.

A similar amount of subsidies is spent on social allowances and aid to citizens, which includes KD 625 million for social aid, KD 495 million for supporting national labor employment in the private sector, marriage and housing allowances and others.



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