

Kuwait Times

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
ESTABLISHED 1961Founder and Publisher
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Focus

CAMERON CLEARS
KEY HURDLES IN
BREXIT CAMPAIGN

By Florence Biedermann

Prime Minister David Cameron has cleared some key hurdles as he takes his first steps in what promises to be a bitter campaign ahead of an EU membership referendum in June, experts said. Starting with a reform deal struck at a European Union summit on Friday, Cameron went on to secure the support of the overwhelming majority of his cabinet on Saturday. "Cameron did well politically with the other member states" and "the best that he could" with eurosceptics within his own Conservative Party, John Springford, a research fellow at the Centre for European Reform, told AFP.

Cameron says the deal in Brussels confers a "special status" on Britain, protecting its status as a non-eurozone member, excluding it from the aim of "ever closer union" and curbing welfare benefits for EU workers in Britain. After the cabinet meeting on Saturday, only six ministers said they would campaign for "Leave" on the referendum question on June 23: "Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?"

The decision of Justice Secretary Michael Gove, a close personal friend and ally of Cameron, to support "Leave" was a blow to the premier, but the endorsement of heavyweights like Home Secretary Theresa May, Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond and Defence Secretary Michael Fallon was seen as crucial. One key uncertainty, however, is which way the Mayor of London Boris Johnson, who is seen as a potential successor to Cameron, will go. The gaffe-prone but popular eurosceptic politician could boost a "Leave" camp that so far lacks a national figurehead, aside from UK Independence Party (UKIP) leader Nigel Farage, who does not appeal to moderate voters.

'Cameron's Standing' is Key

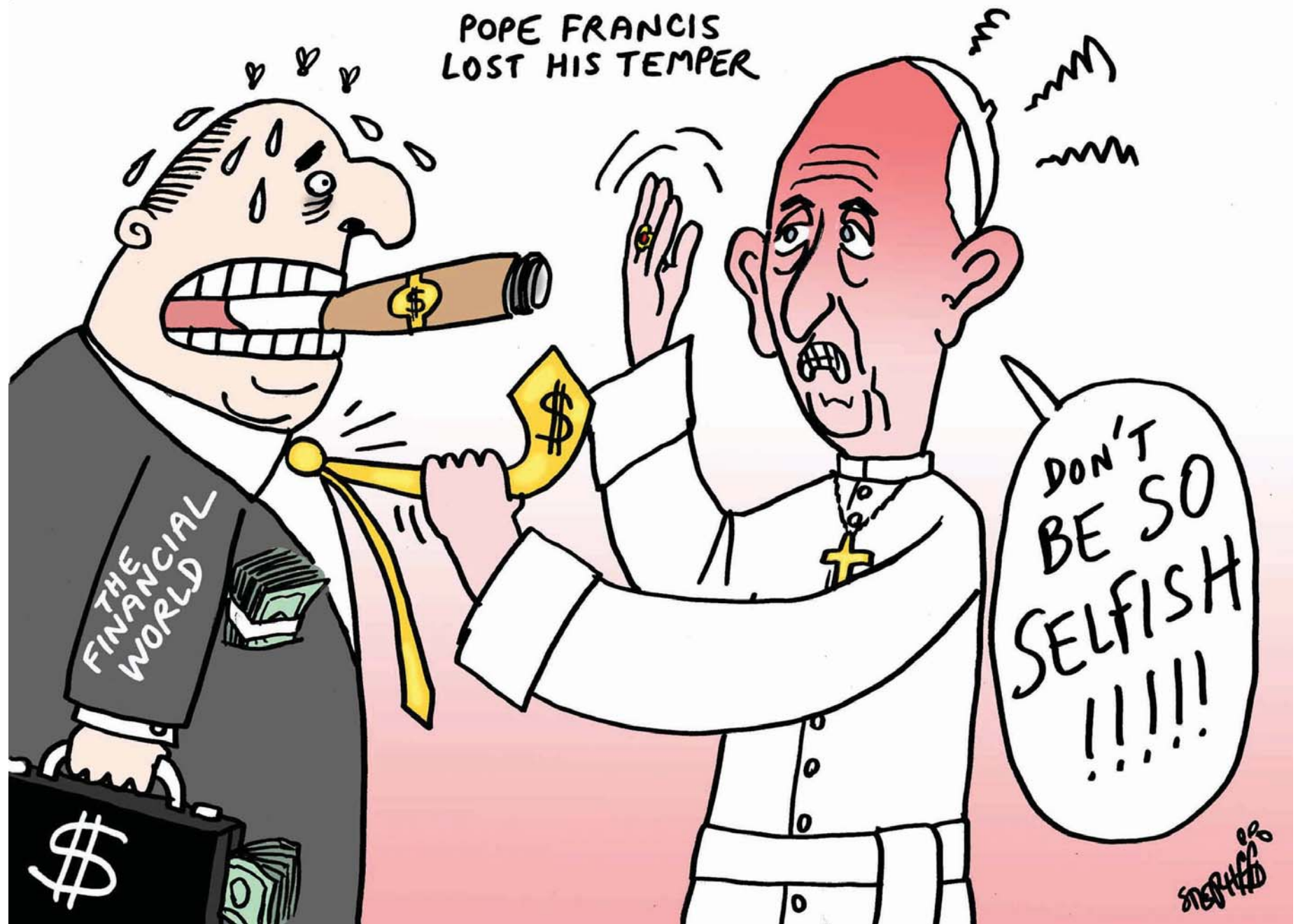
Whatever the arguments of the for and against camps, experts said it was unlikely the details of the EU deal would have much weight in a campaign that will hinge on larger issues about national prosperity and sovereignty. "The deal won't do that much to convince anybody," Springford said, adding that aside from the most ardent EU supporters and opponents "those in the middle will vote on the big arguments about economy and security".

Anand Menon, a European politics professor at King's College London, also said it was "unbelievable" that anyone would decide their vote based on the substance of the EU deal. "Come June 23, no one is going to be talking about the specifics of the deal," he told AFP. As the campaign gets underway, Cameron will also be reassured by the backing of the City of London, Europe's biggest financial hub, and the main centre-left opposition Labour Party.

Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn has dismissed Cameron's EU negotiations as a "sideshow" but has said he will campaign for Britain to stay in the EU to protect investments, jobs and worker and consumer protection rights. Come June 23, The Economist weekly argued, voters' decision will hinge largely on their views on Cameron, who does not want to go down in history as the prime minister who led Britain out of the European Union.

"Nothing will matter as much as Mr Cameron's standing," it said, adding that his "personal appeal and abilities" would be key. "If it currently looks like the 'In' campaign will prevail, that is because he remains relatively well-liked and respected (with the emphasis on relatively)," it said. There is little scope for complacency though. Springford identified two "risks" that remain for Cameron - a massive new influx of migrants into Europe as weather conditions improve later this year and a fresh eurozone crisis as Greece prepares for an important debt repayment in June. —AFP

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ABADI KEEPS IRAN AT ARM'S LENGTH

By Maher Chmaytelli

As fighting in Iraq raged last summer, Iranian Major-General Qassem Soleimani came across unexpected opposition to his plans to defeat Islamic State. Soleimani is the commander of Iran's Al-Quds brigade and has been a key figure in the fight against the Sunni Islamist group in Iraq. That fight has been led not by Iraq's army but by Iranian-backed Shiite militias. But in August, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider Al-Abadi told Soleimani that a planned assault on the Sunni city of Ramadi should be left to the Iraqi army, according to a government official and two diplomats.

Abadi, a 64-year-old Shiite, wanted the militias to stay away to avoid inflaming ethnic tensions, the sources said. Abadi's office declined to comment on the story, which has been repeated in Baghdad's diplomatic circles for months. Three Iraqi politicians denied it ever happened. But the government official and the diplomats said the incident was one of a series of moves by Abadi to assert his authority as leader and to distance himself from Tehran and the militias that came to Baghdad's rescue in 2014 and early 2015.

Abadi has begun to push for reconciliation between Iraq's Shiites and Sunnis, and for better relations with Sunni Arab neighbors like Saudi Arabia, they said. If he can bridge the gap between rival sectarian communities as he has promised, he will have gone a long way towards reuniting a country which has been deeply riven since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003.

According to the government official and the two diplomats, Abadi also objected to Soleimani's plane landing at Baghdad airport without prior permission. Abadi was also irritated that Soleimani used an official VIP hall at the airport when entering Iraq, even though he was not officially invited by the government. The deterioration in their relationship, the sources said, began in August when Soleimani attended a top Iraqi security meeting run by Abadi and behaved in, what one source said, was "a bossy manner as if Iraq was an Iranian protectorate".

This, the sources said, had led Abadi to ask Soleimani why he was at the meeting. The Iranian general had then left. "Abadi questioned his presence. It was a matter of Iraqi sovereignty and nationalism," one Western diplomat said. Abadi's office declined to comment. The Iraqi government official said Abadi and Soleimani had not fought but were "keeping an operational, business-like relationship. We can't say it's warm".

Whatever the case, Soleimani has receded from public view in Iraq in the past six months. The omnipresent posters and television images of him on the battlefield have all but disappeared. There are likely to be limits to that change.

Iran's allies within Abadi's Shiite camp are pushing back against his more muscular stance, while the collapse in oil prices has cut the government budget, said Hisham Al-Hashemi, an Iraqi government adviser and an expert on Islamic State. For now though, Abadi seems to be trying to deliver on his initial address to parliament in 2014 in which he painted a vision of a decentralized and united Iraq.

Victory in Ramadi

The army's victory in Ramadi against the ultra-hardline Sunni militant group was a key moment. An elite corps of the Iraqi army dislodged Islamic State from the city, the largest in western Iraq, in the final days of 2015. Support came from US warplanes while Sunni tribesmen held the ground behind the army lines. The army is now preparing to take on Islamic State in Fallujah, a bastion of Sunni jihadists to the west of Baghdad, and plans to start a push towards Mosul, the largest northern city.

It was the fall of Mosul to Islamic State in 2014 that forced the exit of Abadi's predecessor Nouri Al-Maliki. Many Iraqi lawmakers blamed Maliki for the Iraqi army's defeat in the city. Crucially, Maliki lost the backing of Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani, a reclusive octogenarian who enjoys almost mythical status among millions of Shi'ite followers and wields authority that few Iraqi politicians openly challenge. Sistani called for a consensus candidate. Abadi was Maliki's replacement, in part because he promised to heal the sectarian rift between Iraq's Shi'ite and Sunnis.

The new prime minister grew up in Baghdad amongst Sunni, Christians and other communities. "His father was a prominent doctor. (Abadi) is used to living with other communities," said Mustafa Alani, an Iraqi security analyst with the Geneva-based think-tank Gulf Research Center. After more than 20 years in exile in Britain where he studied in the northern English city of Manchester and worked as an electrical engineer, Abadi returned to Iraq in 2003 following the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam's Baath party.

Like Maliki, Abadi is a member of the Shiite Dawa Party, which along with other Shiite groups carried out a US-initiated de-Baathification campaign, effectively removing Sunnis from state, army and police positions. A decade ago, Abadi backed that campaign. But when he became prime minister he promised to unite the country. At first, he struggled to assert himself. Some US officials then perceived him as a weak leader who needed the backing of the militias.

But in the past few months that perception has begun to shift. On Feb 9 he renewed a bid to dismantle the country's patronage system and root out corruption. Abadi said he wants a government reshuffle with technocrats as ministers. The move surprised several groups of his ruling

coalition, the government official said. "He made the announcement straight to the media, without consulting the party leaders."

Abadi has also improved relations with Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia. In December, Riyadh reopened its embassy in Baghdad, 25 years after it shut following Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. Saudi Ambassador Thamer Al-Shabhan told newspapers the move would enable greater cooperation against extremism. The closer ties survived their first test in January, when Saudi Arabia executed Shiite cleric Nimr Al-Nimr. The Iraqi government resisted pressure from Shiite groups to break off ties and instead offered to mediate between Riyadh and Tehran. "Abadi has kept himself at arm's length" from Iran, said a European diplomat. "He has only been to Tehran two or three times in 18 months, not like his predecessor who would go all the time."

The Limits to Change

Convincing Sunni Iraqis that he is sincere will not be easy. Parliamentary speaker Salim Al-Jabouri, the most senior Sunni in the Iraqi state, said Abadi is showing good intentions but "does not use all of his authority to do what he promised to do". Many Shiite politicians feel like Abadi is already too accommodating. Shiite political parties continue to back de-Baathification measures affecting tens of thousands of Sunnis. They also oppose the creation of a National Guard that would incorporate provincial forces like the Sunnis who are fighting Islamic State.

The government official said most Shiite politicians still have a strong anti-Sunni feeling. After Abadi's recent call for reforms, some Shiite government officials even discussed replacing the prime minister, the official said. The European diplomat said the resistance Abadi faced made it hard to implement real change. "The feeling remains that Sunnis should pay the price for what they have done under Saddam," he said.

The sharp drop in oil prices and growing economic crisis in Iraq make things even harder. "For the prime minister you can't spend on the military, otherwise you can't defeat (Islamic State)," the same diplomat said. "He has a lot less money to play with than any of his predecessors have had since 2003." Abadi's limited influence on the Shiite militias was apparent in January when his government failed to stop revenge attacks on Sunni civilians after Islamic State carried out a series of bombings east of Baghdad.

"Instead of holding Shiite militias to account the authorities have turned a blind eye to this shocking rampage. In some cases abductions and killings took place in full view of local authorities, who failed to intervene," said James Lynch, Deputy Director of Amnesty International's Middle East and North Africa Programme. —Reuters

WHY TRUMP COULD WIN GOP NOMINATION

By Ivan Couronne

Billionaire businessman Donald Trump has in the past eight months defied his critics and proven his White House bid is not simply a surreal stunt. To the shock of the political world, the 69-year-old onetime reality TV star's nomination to be the Republican presidential candidate is now a genuine possibility. His populist campaign has morphed into a national protest movement against Washington elites and establishment "politicians".

He has rallied fiscal and social conservatives as well as moderate Republicans who could propel him to the nomination - but the GOP trophy will depend on the behavior of other party rivals still in the race. The crowded field shrank by one after Saturday's South Carolina primary slugfest, leaving five: Trump, Senators Ted Cruz and Marco Rubio, and two underdogs - Ohio Governor John Kasich and retired neurosurgeon Ben Carson.

Trump has a solid support base of about 30-35 percent of the Republican vote: He won New Hampshire with 35 percent and South Carolina with 32.5 percent. In national polls, he is averaging about 34 percent support. So long as the remaining

votes are divided between other candidates, as occurred in the first three nomination contests, Trump appears unbeatable. And from March 15, most states will award their delegates via the winner-take-all method, which would help Trump clinch the nomination before the Republican convention in July in Cleveland.

But if several others withdraw - as Jeb Bush, the son of one president and brother of another, did Saturday after faring poorly in South Carolina - voters could in theory elevate a challenger capable of uniting the Republican electorate against Trump. "I do think Trump has a ceiling, probably around 40 percent, and that he's not going to do much better than that," explained University of Massachusetts political science professor Brian Schaffner, who also directs the UMass Poll.

Trump might snag some voters from Carson, who is popular with evangelicals, should the doctor drop out, and he is likely to earn trickles of support from Bush and others who suspend their campaigns. But Schaffner has studied surveys about voters' second, third and fourth choices, and has concluded that it's pretty black or white on Trump. "Most of the people who don't support him really have no interest in support-

ing him," and the majority of those who had backed Bush or Kasich - symbols of the establishment - would switch allegiance to either Cruz or Rubio, he explained.

'A Three-Person Race'

Trump has no patience or use for the calculations of such "geniuses," and who can blame him? He has defied expectations daily since last summer. "They don't understand that as people drop out," Trump said Saturday night, "I'm going to get a lot of those votes also." Indeed, voters are hardly beholden to the prognostications of political experts. They may be more sensitive to personality traits than political platforms.

Trump's undisputable talent "is to keep the focus on him" and not necessarily his policies, generic as they are, said Timothy Hagle, a professor of political science at the University of Iowa. America's political left has essentially anointed Trump a bona fide frontrunner. "Nothing is certain in politics," wrote Josh Marshall, editor of web-based Talking Points Memo. "But it's time to dispense with any faith-based logic that disputes the fact that Donald Trump is now the overwhelming favorite to win the Republican nomination."

Cruz, a champion of the religious right,

is struggling to reach voters beyond his arch-conservative core, but he is determined to hang on. Rubio nipped Cruz for second place on Saturday in South Carolina, consolidating his position as the mainstream darling. "After tonight, this has become a three-person race, and we will win the nomination!" Rubio told cheering supporters.

There are indeed some obstacles in Trump's path, notably involving his campaign organization. "Can he expand his campaign to more than one state at a time?" Hagle asked. Eleven states across the country will cast ballots in Republican nominating contests on "Super Tuesday" (March 1), and Trump's campaign team has fewer staff and volunteers - and less ground experience - than his well-stocked rivals. There is also the scenario in which Trump, Cruz and Rubio remain in the race until the July convention, with none having managed to secure an absolute majority of delegates - 1,237 out of the 2,472 available.

Should that unfold, after a first round of voting, delegates would be released from their initial commitments and could vote for the candidate of their choosing in the second round. Woe to whoever predicts the outcome in that scenario. —AFP