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Founder and Publisher
YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

Editor-in-Chief
ABD AL-RAHMAN AL-ALYAN

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7
FAX : 24835620/1
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163
ACCOUNTS : 24835619
COMMERCIAL : 24835618
P.O. Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
E MAIL : info@kuwaittimes.net
Website: www.kuwaittimes.net

Focus

OBAMA ON FAREWELL
TOUR TO EU FEARFUL
OF 'TRUMP EFFECT'

Barack Obama travelled yesterday to Greece and Germany in a final official visit designed, in a strange bit of political contortion, at reassuring worried Europeans about a man he once warned was "unfit" for the presidency: Donald Trump. The irony is cruel: In the name of a peaceful transition, the American president, having thoroughly denounced the billionaire Republican during the recent campaign, must now do his best to reassure his European counterparts about the future of American democracy under a President Trump.

"I think the design of the trip was meant to just give everybody some reassurance that we made it through this campaign and we're going to come out of it all right," said Heather Conley of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, in Washington. "We just have a different scenario now." The bombastic populist, whose victory over Hillary Clinton surprised virtually everyone, has given Europeans ample cause for concern. He has questioned the relevance of some of America's paramount alliances, starting with NATO; put the Paris climate-change accord in doubt by calling global warming "a hoax," and sharply criticized the strenuously negotiated pact that Washington and five other countries signed with Iran to curb its nuclear program.

Trump's attitude toward Russian President Vladimir Putin - the New York mogul called him "a leader, far more than our president has been a leader" - is deeply concerning in Europe, particularly in small countries like the Baltic nations living in Russia's shadow. Beyond the many concerns over the future of American foreign policy, many European Union countries are bracing for a possible ripple effect of the outspoken Republican's victory.

"They are very worried, because the same populist, nationalist expressions" that Trump exposed in America on immigration and trade could amplify the already "very strong political currents within Europe," Conley said. She noted that several European countries have important elections coming up, not least of them the French presidential election next spring.

In Greece today for his first visit there, Obama is set to meet with President Prokopis Pavlopoulos and Prime Minister Alexis Tsipras. Security will be tight in central Athens, with thousands of police officers on the streets and traffic cut off for several hours. Civil servants, communists, far-left groups and anarchists all plan to hold demonstrations as Obama swings through the Greek capital.

The Roots of Populism

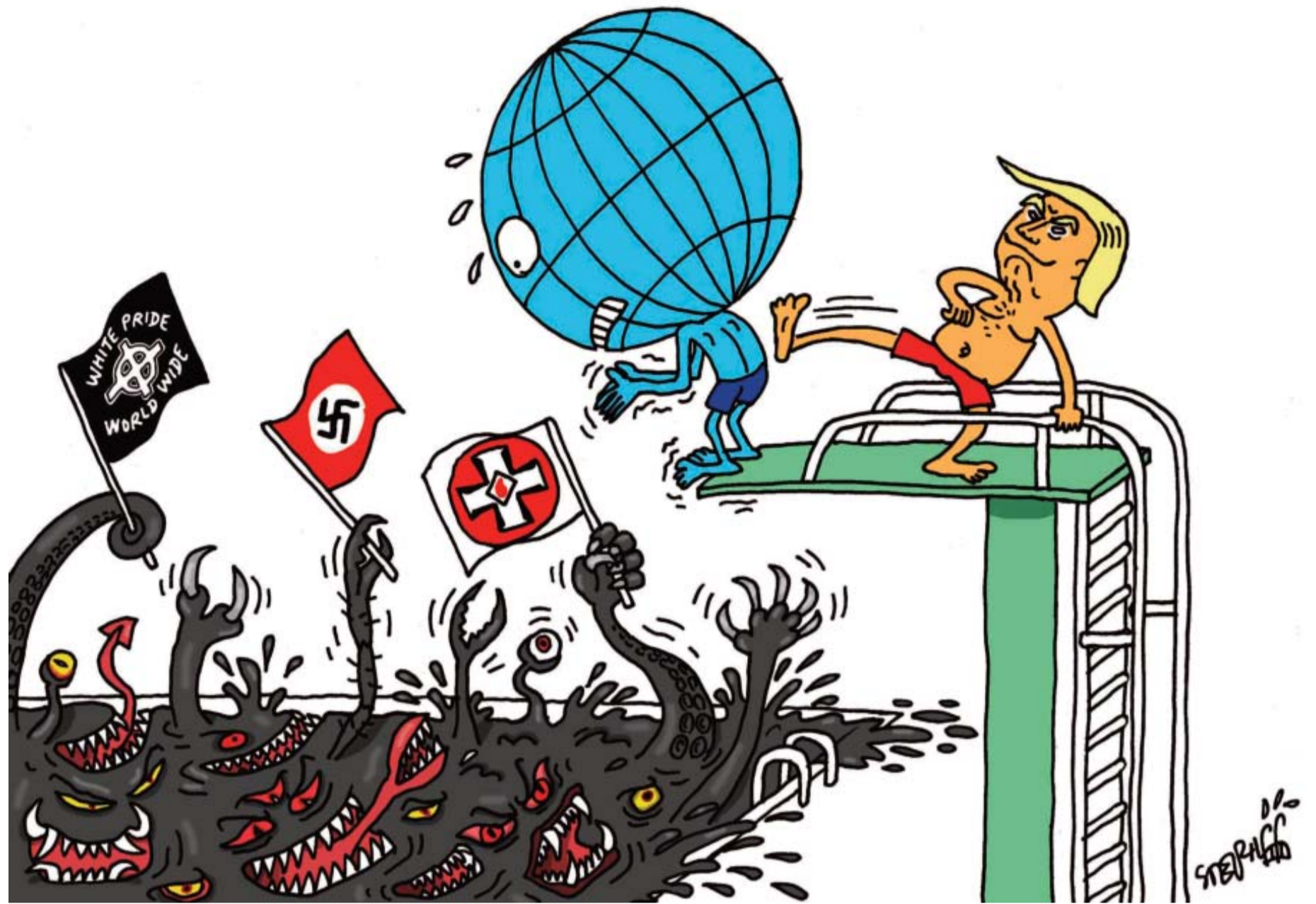
During a day heavy with symbolism, Obama tomorrow will visit the Parthenon in Athens, then deliver a speech - sure to have considerable resonance, given the recent US elections - on the challenges of globalization. His advisers, pointing to the results of that election but also to the equally stunning British vote to leave the European Union, said the US president would offer his thoughts on the reasons so many people in the world feel "like decisions are made beyond their control."

Speaking at the United Nations in September, at a time when the US presidential campaign was in full stride but a Trump victory seemed anything but certain, Obama had called on his fellow leaders to come to grips with the rising frustrations fueling populist movements. He warned them against succumbing to a "soulless capitalism that benefits only the few." "Twenty-five years after the Cold War, the world is less violent and more prosperous," he said, "and yet there is uncertainty and strife." "This is the paradox that defines our world today," he said, stressing that a world in which one percent of the people control as much wealth as the other 99 percent can never be stable.

For his sixth visit to Germany since coming to power in 2009, the Democratic president will again meet with Chancellor Angela Merkel, long one of his closest foreign partners, according to Ben Rhodes, the US national security adviser. The day after his election, the chancellor pointedly reminded Trump of the criteria that have long bound the two countries in close cooperation: "Democracy, freedom, as well as respect for the rule of law and the dignity of each and every person, regardless of their origin, skin color, creed, gender, sexual orientation or political views."

Obama will also meet in Germany with French President Francois Hollande - who once said Trump's "excesses" made people "want to retch" - British Prime Minister Theresa May, and Italian Prime Minister Matteo Renzi. The leaders plan to discuss the crises in Syria and Ukraine, as well as the fight against the Islamic State group. The American president will conclude his trip with a stop in Peru for a summit of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC). Among the leaders he is expected to meet there is President Xi Jinping of China. —AFP

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MALAYSIA CHILD ABUSE GOES UNPUNISHED

Most complaints of child sexual abuse in Malaysia do not lead to successful prosecutions, largely due to weaknesses in the nation's criminal justice system, police, lawmakers and child welfare groups say. According to classified data Malaysian police compiled and shared with Reuters, 12,987 cases of child sexual abuse were reported to police between January 2012 and July of this year. Charges were filed in 2,189 cases, resulting in just 140 convictions.

The data doesn't show how many people were involved, or what happened in the cases where there were no convictions after charges were filed. No details were disclosed in the cases where there were convictions. Child rights advocates have long pushed the government to publicly disclose data on child sexual abuse to increase awareness so action can be taken to address what they call a growing problem.

A veil was lifted in June when a British court handed Richard Huckle 22 life sentences for abusing up to 200 babies and children, mostly in Malaysia, and sharing images of his crimes on the dark Web. The reason the Malaysian government doesn't publish child sexual abuse data is because it is protected under Malaysia's Official Secrets Act. The government provides data on child abuse only at the request of a member of parliament.

"We don't want people to misinterpret it," said Ong Chin Lan, the head of the Sexual, Women and Children Investigation Division of the Malaysian national police. The government doesn't want to unduly alarm the public about possibly high numbers of child abuse cases, she explained. It is unclear how Malaysia's number of reported cases compares with its neighbors, some of whom are also reluctant to disclose a high incidence of child sexual abuse.

Thailand's government declined to provide data to Reuters. A senior health ministry official, who did not want to be identified, said it could "make Thailand look bad." Cambodia, long known as a destination for travelling pedophiles, also does not disclose official data.

Criminal Justice Weakness

Weak policing and child protection laws make it difficult to punish child abusers in Malaysia, leading to inadequate investigations and low convictions on the reported cases, according to officials and child welfare groups Reuters interviewed. They also say a significant number of child sexual abuse cases are never reported because of taboos around child sex abuse and mistrust of authorities. In 17 years of operation, PS the Children, Malaysia's biggest NGO dealing with child abuse, has seen zero convictions on the cases it has handled, its founder Madeleine Yong told Reuters.

"There needs to be improvement in the criminal justice system if we want to encourage more people to report, otherwise we will re-victimize the child," she said. Ong at the sexual crimes unit said police take every case of child sexual abuse seriously and "all cases are investigated in detail." Police blame weak laws and rules governing court evidence that give little weight to children's testimony as the reason most cases never result in charges.

Malaysia does not have a law specifically prohibiting child pornography and defines rape narrowly as penile penetration. "Grooming" - touching and befriending children as a prelude to sexual abuse - draws no legal penalties. By contrast, Indonesia's parliament has passed legislation authorizing chemical castration, minimum sentences and even execution for convicted pedophiles. Thailand introduced stricter laws against child pornography last year.

A Child Sexual Crimes bill, expected to be introduced to parliament by the end of the year, would widen the definition of sexual crimes to include online abuse, and make such crimes easier to prosecute. It would also set up a special court to deal with child sex abuse cases more quickly.

The Dark Web

Foreign pedophiles could be targeting Malaysia as other countries around the region strengthen child protection laws and step up enforcement, some experts said. Snow White Smelser, program officer at the child

sex offences team in the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime's (UNODC) East Asia headquarters in Bangkok, said pedophiles compare notes and share information online about countries, where they can operate most freely.

Elena Martellozzo, a London-based criminologist who specializes in child sex abuse on the internet, said Huckle could have chosen Malaysia "because it was not on the radar, or perhaps it's where he found it easier to get work permits, visas and some work opportunities". Typically, children are sexually abused by someone they know - a neighbor, a relative, a caregiver, or someone like Huckle, who according to court testimony groomed children in an impoverished ethnic Indian neighborhood in Kuala Lumpur.

But increasingly, pedophile activity is moving into the online world, police say. Australian detectives who investigate pedophiles in the region believe Malaysia has become one of Southeast Asia's biggest centers for the transmission of child pornography on the Internet. Team Argos, the Australian detective unit that found Huckle in the dark web in late 2014, made a startling discovery from the team's scouring of online pedophile networks: The unusual number of Internet addresses in the Kuala Lumpur area transmitting child sexual abuse material from the dark Web.

The dark Web is a vast virtual space within the Internet, which requires special encryption tools to access. The Brisbane, Australia-based detectives found 1,000 transmissions of child pornographic materials from the Malaysian capital over a 24-hour period last year, according to Argos data provided by the UNODC. It was the second-largest transmission location in Southeast Asia after Bangkok's 1,800 - Bangkok's population of 8.2 million is more than four times that of Kuala Lumpur's.

The Malaysian capital is a "high concern" location for the distribution of child sexual abuse materials, said Smelser at the UNODC. Ong at the child sex crime unit said Malaysian police can't properly monitor the encrypted pedophile networks. "We do not have expertise in handling the dark Web. We get alerted from our counterparts overseas," she said. —Reuters

COALITION ADVISERS HELP FIGHT FOR RAQQA

On the roof of a house in northern Syria, a foreign soldier from the US-led coalition against the Islamic State group monitors progress towards the militant bastion of Raqqa. He is one of a few dozen advisers from the international coalition helping a Kurdish-Arab alliance known as the Syrian Democratic Forces advance towards IS' Syrian stronghold. The advisers are leery of journalists, demanding that an AFP photographer stop taking photographs and leave when they spot him.

SDF sources say that around 50 foreign troops are involved in the operation, which began on Nov 6, primarily to guide anti-IS coalition air strikes. AFP journalists on the ground have seen soldiers with US markings on their uniforms, along with others speaking French. The coalition's press office declined to detail the number of its forces on the ground, or their nationalities, but confirmed they were playing a wide-ranging role in the fight for Raqqa.

"As part of the coalition's commitment to advise, assist and accompany the SDF, we are asked to help with operational planning, the coordination of air strikes, arranging troop movements, training and supplying equipment to the SDF for the isolation of Raqqa," a spokesperson told AFP. In the village of Al-Huriya, one adviser peers through binoculars at the fighting in the nearby village of Al-Heisha, which SDF fighters eventually wrenched from IS control on Friday. On radios, SDF fighters can be heard relaying details to commanders about their progress and where they might need help from the coalition aircraft flying constantly overhead.

'Civilian Human Shields'

"The forces advancing on the ground give us coordinates close to the targets," says SDF commander Ahmed Osman, in the yard of another house that has been turned into a command center. "They calculate the distances between them and the mercenaries and work out where the fire is coming from, then they send us the coordinates and we transmit them to the coalition so the targets are hit." The strikes are sometimes used against one of IS' favored weapons: Suicide car bombs. "Sometimes we take them out with our

weapons, but other times coalition aircraft strike them after we tell them the coordinates," Osman says.

The US-led coalition began strikes in Syria in Sept 2014, and has worked closely with Syrian Kurdish-led forces to push IS from large swathes of territory. Such cooperation has angered Washington's NATO ally Turkey, which considers the main Syrian Kurdish YPG militia a "terrorist" group, and is currently waging its own offensive inside Syria, targeting both IS and the Kurds. On the ground, SDF vehicles speed through the desert towards the front line, despite the

mortar rounds IS fires as it struggles to hang on to Al-Heisha.

"Our comrades are preparing for an attack, and the mercenaries are firing mortars, but planes are over the region now," says Akid Kobane, another SDF commander. Kobane says the air strikes are a key part of the SDF assault, considered a precise way to target IS while minimizing civilian casualties. "IS is using civilians as human shields," he says. "We're not using heavy weapons in the battle for Raqqa, we're relying on personal weapons and the coalition's strikes."

Concealing Car Bombs

In a bid to protect themselves, some civilians have raised white flags on their roofs, but there have been allegations of civilian deaths in air strikes. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, a Britain-based monitor, reported at least 20 civilians killed in coalition strikes on Al-Heisha on Nov 9. An SDF spokeswoman at the time dismissed the report as IS propaganda, although the coalition said it was investigating the incident. Civilians who have fled the fighting confirm that IS is embedded among local residents.

"There are always strikes on areas where Daesh (IS) is present... and Daesh hides itself, even among children," says 38-year-old Amsha at a makeshift camp for displaced civilians outside the town of Ain Issa, around 50 km north of Raqqa. "Our children are terrified when the planes are overhead. We've a little girl who shrieks 'Plane, plane!' each time she hears one and runs to hide," she says. "Daesh would hide explosive-packed cars between houses to try to conceal them from the planes," adds Ghada, in her twenties. "The militants would tell us they had no problem dying, so why would they care if civilians are killed alongside them?" —AFP



Fighters from a Kurdish-Arab alliance known as the Syrian Democratic Forces are seen in the northern Syrian village of Al-Huriya on Nov 11, 2016 near the frontline of fighting against militants of the Islamic State group. —AFP