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Pompeo postpones Kuwait visit to attend family funeral

Top US envoy talks Khashoggi, Yemen, Iran, GCC rift with Saudis, then heads to Oman

KUWAIT/RIYADH: US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo cut short his Middle East tour yesterday and headed home early to attend a family funeral instead of travelling on to Kuwait. "Secretary Pompeo will return to the United States after his meetings in Muscat, Oman. This curtailment of travel is required so that the Pompeo family may attend a family funeral," US Ambassador to Kuwait Lawrence Silverman said in a statement.

"The secretary very much looks forward to visiting Kuwait to conduct the United States-Kuwait Strategic Dialogue with Deputy Prime Minister and Foreign Minister Sheikh Sabah Al-Khaled Al-Sabah in the near future. Secretary Pompeo places a high priority on our strategic dialogue, which commits the United States and Kuwait to increased cooperation in the areas of greatest practical benefit to our governments and our peoples," the statement added.

During his visit to Saudi Arabia yesterday, Pompeo faced a tough balancing act as he pressed the Saudi crown prince over critic Jamal Khashoggi's murder while shoring up strategic ties with Riyadh. The top US diplomat, on an extensive Middle East tour, held talks with King Salman and his son Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, which also focused on the conflict in Yemen and countering threats from Iran.

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(Left) US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo meets Saudi King Salman bin Abdulaziz at the Royal Court in Riyadh yesterday. (Right) Pompeo meets Sultan of Oman Qaboos bin Said at the Beit Al Baraka Royal Palace in Muscat yesterday. — AFP

News in brief

Azhar imam urges rethink

CAIRO: Egypt's top Muslim cleric Ahmed Al-Tayeb urged Al-Azhar University yesterday to reconsider the expulsion of a female student who was filmed hugging a male colleague. Tayeb, the grand imam of Al-Azhar, Egypt's most prestigious seat of Sunni Islamic learning, called on the university's disciplinary board to "reconsider the punishment". He cited the student's young age and her educational future, although said her conduct outside campus was "unacceptable" and unbecoming for "religious and oriental traditions". Hany Helal, spokesman for Mansoura University, where the man filmed is a student, said the disciplinary board "decided to expel the student for two years" although he can appeal the decision. — AFP

NSHR denounces 'inciting' women

RIYADH: An organization backed by Saudi Arabia accused several foreign countries of inciting young women to reject their families, the first public comments from Riyadh since a woman claiming domestic abuse was granted asylum in Canada. In a statement late on Sunday, the head of the National Society for Human Rights (NSHR) Mufleh Al-Qahtani accused unspecified countries and international organizations of pursuing political agendas and "pushing (women) ultimately to be lost and maybe to fall into the arms of brokers and human traffickers". NSHR "was surprised by some countries' incitement of some Saudi female delinquents to rebel against the values of their families and push them out of the country and seek to receive them under the pretext of granting them asylum," Qahtani said. — Reuters

Qatar rejects ties with Assad; won't reopen embassy

DOHA: Qatar's foreign minister ruled out yesterday the possibility of reopening an embassy in Damascus, in line with some other Gulf countries, calling Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad a war criminal. "Normalization (of relations) with the Syrian regime at this stage is the normalization of a person involved in war crimes, and this should not be acceptable," Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani said at a Doha press conference. He said the reasons why Assad - who was elected unopposed in 2000 and has stayed in power during nearly eight years of civil war - was excluded from the international community are still in place.

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Turkey vows not to be intimidated by Trump threats

ANKARA: Turkey yesterday vowed it would not be intimidated by US President Donald Trump's threats of economic devastation if Ankara attacks Kurdish forces as American troops withdraw. Trump's threat came after Ankara repeatedly threatened a new cross-border operation against the Kurdish People's Protection Units

(YPG), which have been working closely with the United States in the war on Islamic State (IS) extremists. US support for the YPG has been a major source of tension between the NATO allies.

"We have said repeatedly we are not scared of and will not be intimidated by any threats," Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu said, adding: "Economic threats against Turkey will get nowhere." Trump on Sunday warned the US would "devastate Turkey economically if they hit Kurds". While there have been tensions over American training of the YPG under the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) alliance, there appeared to be some improvement on the issue after Trump said last month 2,000 American troops would withdraw from Syria.

Ankara welcomed the pullout decision after Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan told Trump in a phone call that Turkey could finish off the last remnants of IS. Trump had also pushed for the creation of a 30-km "safe zone". US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo yesterday said talks were under way on Washington's proposal to establish the zone in flashpoint border areas of northeastern Syria. "We want to make sure that the folks who fought with us to down the (Islamic State group) have security... and also that terrorists acting out of Syria aren't able to attack Turkey," Pompeo said in Riyadh. Cavusoglu earlier said that Turkey was "not against" a "security zone" in Syria, during a press conference in Ankara.

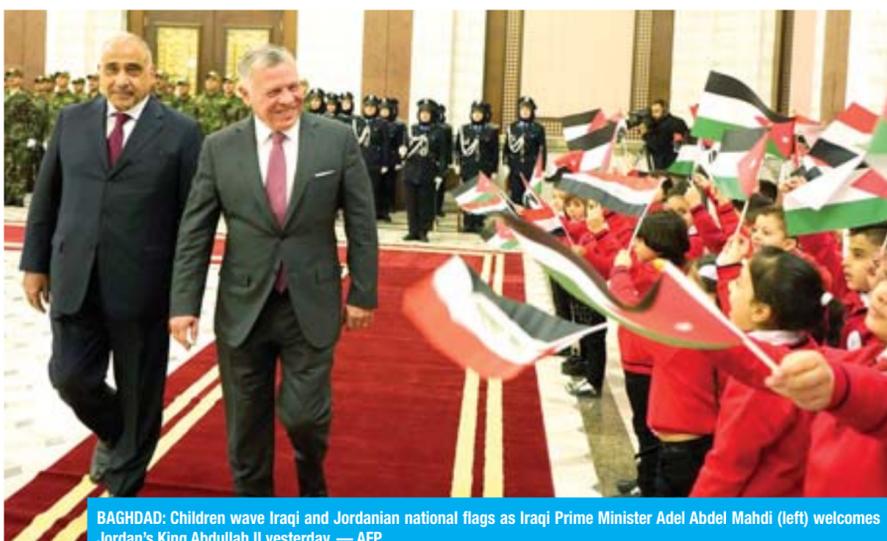
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Jordan king visits Iraq for first time in decade

BAGHDAD: Jordanian King Abdullah II met Iraq's president and prime minister in Baghdad yesterday, in the monarch's first trip to Iraq in more than a decade. It is the latest in a string of top-level visits to Iraq in recent weeks, which kicked off with a surprise Christmas trip by US President Donald Trump. King Abdullah met separately with Iraqi President Barham Saleh, who had travelled to Jordan in November, and Prime Minister Adel Abdel-Mahdi, their press offices said. They said Jordan and Iraq were looking to strength bilateral ties but did not give additional details.

Abdullah's last trip to Iraq was in 2008, when he became the first Arab leader to visit Baghdad after strongman Saddam Hussein was toppled by the US-led invasion in 2003. The two countries share a 179-km border, and Jordan is a major importer of Iraqi crude oil.

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BAGHDAD: Children wave Iraqi and Jordanian national flags as Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdel Mahdi (left) welcomes Jordan's King Abdullah II yesterday. — AFP

15 killed in Iran plane crash; Amir sends condolences

TEHRAN: A military cargo plane overshot a runway, crashed and caught fire during a botched landing near the Iranian capital Tehran, killing 15 people, the army said yesterday. The plane was carrying meat from Bishkek in Kyrgyzstan when it crashed near the capital Tehran, an army spokesman told state TV, adding that only the flight engineer survived. "The plane had 16 passengers, 14 of whom were the army crew and two were civilians; 15 were martyred," spokesman Amir Taghikhani said. "One, the flight engineer, was injured and is currently in hospital."

III the Amir of Kuwait Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah expressed his deepest sympathies yesterday over the victims of the crash.

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TEHRAN: People gather amid the debris of a Boeing 707 cargo plane that crashed into a residential complex yesterday. — AFP