

Analysis

Kuwait Times
Established 1961
The First Daily in The Arabian Gulf

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
ESTABLISHED 1961

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 : 24833199 Extn. 125
COMMERCIAL : 24835618

P.O.Box 1301 Safat, 13014 Kuwait.
Email: info@kuwaittimes.com
Website: www.kuwaittimes.net

Mexico's week of bloodshed. What is going on?

Mexico's President Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador took office in December, promising not to repeat the "failed policies" of past administrations that have done little to stem a tide of drug-related violence that cost some 29,000 lives last year. But events in the states of Sinaloa, Michoacan and Guerrero this past week, including two mass killings and an all-out gun battle on Thursday that saw security forces overwhelmed by cartel gunmen, have raised questions about the effectiveness of his new security strategy.

What happened in Mexico?

On Monday, cartel hitmen shot dead at least 13 police in an ambush in Aguililla in the western state of Michoacan, long convulsed by turf wars between drug gangs, latterly the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) and its enemies. The following day, a gunfight left 14 civilians and one soldier dead in Tepochica, near Iguala, a city notorious for the 2014 disappearances of 43 student teachers.

Tuesday's mass killing in Guerrero raised questions about whether the armed forces used excessive force, reviving the specter of past executions. Then came the bungled arrest on Thursday of the son of jailed kingpin Joaquin "El Chapo" Guzman that turned the streets of Culiacan in Sinaloa into a scene of nightmarish urban warfare. Cartel gunmen surrounded security forces in the northwestern city and made them free Ovidio Guzman after his brief capture.

What's this new strategy?

Veteran leftist Lopez Obrador's new strategy for battling crime focuses on addressing the root causes of violence, in particular reducing poverty, stamping out entrenched corruption, and giving young adults job opportunities. He has boosted wages along the US-Mexico border, created thousands of apprenticeships, and is promoting investments in the impoverished south. He says he believes in the inherent good of all Mexicans, and says "you can't fight fire with fire," and "hugs not bullets." As well as his emphasis on combating the social ills that spark violence, he has created a new National Guard force that replaces the federal police and has absorbed thousands of soldiers.

Is it working?

Not so far. Homicides in 2019 are on track to surpass last year's record. Analysts warn the government has not clearly explained how it will use the National Guard to outsmart the cartels. With no clear short term strategy, there is a sense on the ground that this government is less tough on gangs, said Falko Ernst, Mexico analyst with the International Crisis Group, who has done extensive fieldwork in crime-wracked states. "The inertia and lack of definition of a security strategy by the government has allowed regional armed conflicts to spin out of control," Ernst said. "Criminal group members and commanders have told me in Michoacan and in Guerrero that this (inertia) has meant a looser leash." Additionally, many of the National Guard have been rerouted to deal with a wave of illegal migration through Mexico at the behest of US President Donald Trump.

When did this start?

Lopez Obrador regularly heaps blame on previous governments for the delicate security situation in Mexico. Mexico's 'War on Drugs' started in 2006 with former President Felipe Calderon, who sent in armed forces to tackle the increasingly powerful drug cartels, which had shifted gears from smuggling cocaine for the Colombian cartels to becoming full narcotics trafficking operations themselves. Since then, more than 200,000 people have been killed in gang-fueled violence and over 40,000 are missing.

The crackdown led to the splintering of Mexico's cartels and some notable wins for the government, including the arrest of 'El Chapo' Guzman. He escaped twice from jail in Mexico before being extradited to the United States, where he was found guilty in February of smuggling drugs and sentenced to life in prison. The US government says that under Guzman's leadership, the Sinaloa cartel imported and distributed tons of cocaine, marijuana, methamphetamine and heroin in the United States over more than two decades. The extradition of Guzman was a double-edged sword. It "appears to have led to violent competition from a competing cartel, the CJNG," according to an August report prepared by the US Congressional Research Service. The CJNG had split from Sinaloa in 2010 and is considered by many analysts to now be the most dangerous and largest Mexican cartel. Photos of Monday's police ambush published on social media showed shot-up and burning police vehicles, as well as the slain officers. — Reuters

All articles appearing on this page are the personal opinion of the writers. Kuwait Times takes no responsibility for views expressed therein.



This picture taken from the Turkish side of the border at Ceylanpinar district in Sanliurfa shows a member of the 'July 15 martyrs families and veterans' federation waving a Turkish national flag in front of the Syrian town of Ras Al-Ain. Turkish and Kurdish leaders accused each other of violating a US-brokered truce in northeastern Syria even as it appeared to be taking hold on its second day. — AFP

The Need for Arab Strategy: In the wake of Trump's broken promises

Dr James J Zogby
President Arab American Institute

When Donald Trump was first elected, I warned Arab friends to be careful not to put their all of their eggs in a basket that I had every reason to believe would soon unravel. Back then, many Arabs, having felt let down by the initial hope they had in the promise of the Obama Administration, were keen to believe that Trump would develop a firm policy on Syria and Iran and deliver on his pledge to craft the "Deal of the Century," bringing a just end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In fact, in polling we conducted in the fall of 2017, we found that Arab respondents in some countries - including at least a third of those in Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE - had at least some expectation that positive change might be forthcoming from the Administration on some of these concerns. Two and a half years later, these hopes have come crashing down to earth.

Trump did end the Iran nuclear deal and impose new tough sanctions on Iran - which our polling showed Arabs hoped might rein in Iran's regional ambitions. But the Islamic Republic, despite the economic hardships that resulted from these sanctions, has appeared to become further emboldened and aggressive. Their position in Iraq was somewhat strengthened by the role their allied militias played in the war against the "Islamic State."

Iran remains deeply entrenched in Syria, supported by sectarian armed units from Lebanon, Iraq, and Afghanistan they brought in, armed, and trained. And their support for the Houthi's rebellion in Yemen has continued to consume the Saudi-led coalition's resources and attention. In response to the US sanctions, Iran has demonstrated its capacity to respond by creating mischief in the Gulf, including a tit for tat threat to interrupt oil tanker traffic and a "mysterious" devastating attack on Saudi oil fields.

In Syria, as in Iraq, President Trump's policy did not significantly deviate from Obama's approach. He provided tactical and material support, as well as air power, to an American-trained, largely Kurdish army, in the effort to defeat the "Islamic State." Despite repeated verbal threats to stop the Syrian government's attacks on civilians, Trump made do with a single air strike on an air base - but only after signaling his intention 24 hours in advance, which had the result of minimizing the

loss of life and military assets. Meanwhile, the rest of Syria was left to Syrian government forces, Russia, and Iran. As for the "Deal of the Century," two and one-half years later, the region is still waiting for its release. In spite of the continued delay, Trump Administration policies have made clear its outlines. They have, in essence, "given away the store" to Israel. Trump famously "took Jerusalem off the table," and followed by making it clear that they were taking away the rights of refugees (they no longer consider them as refugees) and the status of Israeli settlements (these remained uncontested).

If there remained any confusion as to whether the initial hope some had placed in the Trump Administration was mistaken, events of the past month sealed the deal. Despite tough talk about Iran, the US showed that its bark was bigger than its bite. The best they could do to respond to the attack on Saudi oil fields was to offer to send an additional 1,000 troops to the Kingdom.

The US Ambassador to Israel, in public remarks, made clear that the US had no intention to see any Israeli settlements removed from occupied Palestinian lands. And, for many, the coup de grace was the President's decision to pull American forces back from Syria's northern border, abandoning its Kurdish allies. This US withdrawal allowed the Turkish army to enter Syria, creating "a safe zone" into which they hope to forcibly "repatriate" Syrians who had sought refuge in Turkey. Abandonment by the US also forced the Kurds to make a pact with the Syrian government, effectively ceding control over what they hoped might become an autonomous Kurdish area. The winners in all of this has been Iran and Russia. The losers are the Kurds, the Palestinians, and Arabs who hoped that the Trump Administration might represent any constructive change in US policy.

The sad truth is that the US role in the region has been in a tailspin since the George W. Bush Administration decided to invade Iraq and remove Saddam Hussein's regime. Despite Bush's projections that the US occupation would be welcomed, that democracy would bloom in Iraq and spread throughout the Middle East, and the US would establish itself as the hegemonic power for the 21st century, the opposite happened. Instead, the US found itself ground down in a long war it could not win, Iraq descended into bloody sectarian civil conflict, Iran was emboldened and unleashed, finding a foothold not only in Iraq, but across

the region, and the US emerged less respected with its military weakened and demoralized. In an effort to stop the hemorrhaging, the Obama Administration was determined to leave Iraq, which it did. But the US departure left Iran as the ascendant power in a county with a government that pursued sectarian policies leading to the emergence of the Islamic State.

When the Arab Spring erupted, the Obama Administration was unsure how to respond. This forced Arabs to take matters into their own hands in an effort to restore the old order. Conflicts in Syria, then Libya, and then Yemen followed soon after - each in turn involving a number of competing regional and global powers seeking to shape the outcome and secure their advantage. In each, the US role was reduced to a supportive one, at best.

It was this sad state of affairs that led some Arabs to find hope in Trump's pledge to work more closely with their governments and to provide American leadership to help resolve some of the region's pressing concerns, namely an end to the bloodshed in Syria, pressure on Iran to end its meddling in several Arab countries, and a determined effort to achieve a just resolution to the long Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Two and one-half years later, the blush is off the rose. As the dust settles on the broken promises, realization is dawning that the region will be left to its own to solve its pressing problems.

Signs of this are everywhere: the welcome given to the Russian leader in the Arab Gulf countries; the tentative outreach by some countries to Iran; recognition that, despite deep reservations, the Assad government will need to be engaged; renewed efforts to negotiate a solution to Yemen; and even some initial efforts at overtures to Israel - to name a few. In the end, the Arab World is in greater need, not just of unity, but real operational unity, if it is to address the many challenges it now faces.

There is an need for the Arab states to create regional mechanisms to address conflicts, to implement the Arab Peace Initiative, to address the region's refugee crisis, and to develop an investment strategy creating jobs, improving education and expanding health care - all of which will help to promote the progress, security, and stability the region needs. In all of these areas, the US can help, as can other global powers. But the Arab World should never again be dependent on the promise of any outside power to provide what it should be able to do for itself.

Brexit deal: What's in it

'Fair and reasonable' - that's how both Britain's Boris Johnson and the EU described the new draft Brexit deal which is being voted on by the British parliament. The new agreement was reached in Brussels on Thursday after days of intense haggling. Here's what's in the accord - and what each side gave up to get there.

Northern Ireland

Arrangements for the UK province of Northern Ireland were the trickiest part of the new deal, and the core of what has changed since last year's withdrawal agreement, which was rejected by British MPs three times. The new protocol stipulates that Northern Ireland remains in Britain's customs territory, but in practice there would be a sort of customs border between the province and the mainland. That is because of a hybrid system under which goods arriving and staying in Northern Ireland from non-EU countries, such as the United States, will come under British customs rules, while those going on to the EU via Ireland will come under the EU system. Northern Ireland would keep aligned with the EU on a limited number of standards so food, animals and permitted industrial goods can more easily cross into

or from Ireland. British authorities would have responsibility for the checks. But the EU has the right to have its officials present too to ensure the application of EU rules.

Consent

Britain and the EU agreed there should be "democratic consent" by Northern Ireland on the dual-rule customs system. A simple majority in the province's assembly would have to vote for its continuance every four years, or eight years if there is sizeable cross-community support. If the vote fails, the protocol would cease to be applied two years later, giving both sides time to try to come up with a workable alternative. This voting requirement comes into force four years after the end of the transition period.

Transition period

The transition period would run to the end of 2020, during which things would stay pretty much the way they are now. It could be extended by another year or two if agreed by both sides. This is unchanged from the previous deal.

VAT

Value-added tax was a technically difficult point that was only resolved in the last few hours of the talks in Brussels. Differing VAT regimes would have contributed to the need for a hard border between Ireland and Northern Ireland - something both sides said they needed to avoid at all costs. EU rules on VAT are therefore to continue



A still image grabbed from footage recorded and broadcast by the UK Broadcast Pool shows thousands of people taking part in a People's Vote march calling for a final say in the form of a second Brexit referendum in central London. — AFP

in Northern Ireland, but British customs officials would be in charge of applying and collecting them.

Giving ground

The EU notes that it compromised on its previous divorce agreement with the UK by dropping an insistence that Northern Ireland remain in the EU customs area - the heart of the previous "backstop" which was so unpopular in London. It also adopted the consent provision for the Northern Ireland assembly,

and along with it a way to end the protocol instead of having potentially indefinite application. On the other side, the UK conceded on allowing customs checks between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK. It also dialed back its original Northern Ireland consent proposal by agreeing to a simple majority vote in the assembly, instead of what would have amounted to a right of veto to minority unionists. It also agreed to Northern Ireland being subjected to a degree of EU oversight. — AFP