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Saudi calls for lifting sanctions on Syria

AFP
Riyadh

Saudi Arabia yesterday called for the lifting of sanctions on Syria after meetings with top diplomats from the Middle East and Europe that focused on the war-ravaged country's future.

The kingdom is seeking to increase its influence in Syria after long-time ruler Bashar al-Assad was toppled last month, analysts say.

"We stressed the importance of lifting unilateral and international sanctions imposed on Syria, as their continuation hinders the aspirations of the Syrian people to achieve development and reconstruction," Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan said after yesterday's talks concluded in Riyadh.

The agenda included a meeting of Arab officials as well as a broader gathering that also included Türkiye, France, the European Union and the United Nations.

Syria's new leader Ahmed al-Sharaa is pushing for sanctions relief. His administration is represented at the Riyadh talks by Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani.

Western powers, including the United States and the EU, imposed heavy sanctions on Assad's government over his brutal crackdown on anti-government protests in 2011, which triggered civil war.

More than 13 years of conflict have killed over half a million Syr-

ians, left infrastructure destroyed and the people impoverished, while millions have fled their homes, including to Europe.

The European Union's top diplomat, Kaja Kallas, said on Friday that the 27-nation bloc could begin lifting sanctions if Syria's new rulers took steps to form an inclusive government that protected minorities.

European foreign ministers are due to meet on Jan 27 to discuss the issue, Kallas told reporters in Riyadh.

German Foreign Minister Annalena Baerbock told reporters in Riyadh that her government wanted a "smart approach" that would enable aid to reach Syrians.

According to the UN, seven in 10 Syrians need help.

A statement published yesterday evening by Saudi state media did not include a call from all participants for sanctions relief, instead saying "steps were discussed to support the brotherly Syrian people and provide them with all aid and support in this important stage of their history".

It also voiced concern about Israel's entrance into the buffer zone that separated Israeli and Syrian forces in the Golan Heights.

Riyadh is negotiating how to support Syria's long-term recovery.

"This includes creating a conducive environment for the return of Syrian refugees," Prince Faisal said in his statement to reporters.



Syria's Foreign Minister Asaad al-Shaibani (left) meeting with Saudi Arabia's Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan on the sidelines of the Riyadh meetings on Syria between EU and Arab states and Türkiye yesterday.

Qatar reiterates its position in support of Syria's unity

PM participates in expanded ministerial meeting on Syria in Riyadh

QNA
Riyadh

HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani yesterday participated in the expanded ministerial meeting on Syria that Saudi Arabia is hosting in Riyadh, with the participation of foreign minister of Arab and western countries as well as representatives of regional and international organisations. During the meeting, the latest developments in Syria were discussed. HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs reiterated Qatar's position in support of Syria's unity, sovereignty and independence, and the realisation of the aspirations of its brotherly people for a decent life and building a state of institutions and law.

GCC Secretary-General Jassem Mohamed Albudaiwi emphasised the GCC countries' commitment to supporting Syria on all fronts, with priority given to improving the living and humanitarian conditions of the Syrian people.

He highlighted the provision of relief and developmental support to Syria to meet the basic needs of the Syrian people, facilitating the return of displaced persons and refugees to their homes, and supporting the return of political and security stability, economic recovery and development, stressing that necessary steps are to be laid out to achieve this and mobilise humanitarian and developmental support for Syria.



Albudaiwi was addressing the expanded ministerial meeting on Syria, which was held Sunday in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. He highlighted the developments in Syria noting the steadfast positions of the GCC countries and their continuous keenness to ensure Syria's sovereignty, territorial integrity and political independence, underlining that the convening of the 46th extraordinary session of the GCC Ministerial Council on Dec 26, 2024, in Kuwait, discussed developments in Syria.

The time has come for Syria and the people of Syria to enjoy the long-awaited safety and stability, and for Syria to regain its rightful place in the heart of the regional and international communities, Albudaiwi reaffirmed, adding that it is incumbent upon the GCC states as Syria's partners in this critical phase to be its support, aiding its resurgence and reclaiming its standing through reinforced cooperation on all fronts, political,

economic and social, contributing to building a better future for the Syrian people and the entire region.

He underscored the GCC's support for Lebanon's sovereignty, security, stability and territorial unity, as well as comprehensive reforms that enhance overcoming its crises and prevent Lebanon from becoming a launch point for activities threatening the region, stressing that commitment to Security Council resolutions and the Taif Agreement to ensure Lebanon's stability and sovereignty.

Albudaiwi highlighted the importance of supporting the Lebanese army and security forces, urging the international community to intensify efforts to provide humanitarian aid to Lebanon, while he also commended the role of Lebanon's partners, and the assistance provided by GCC countries and friendly nations to alleviate the suffering of the brotherly Lebanese people.

Education ministry, QF open Warif Academy

QNA
Doha

THE Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MoEHE), in partnership with Qatar Foundation for Education, Science and Community Development (QF), inaugurated yesterday Warif Academy, as part of its ongoing efforts to empower students with disabilities and provide them with equal educational opportunities in line with global best practices. The inauguration ceremony was attended by HE the Minister of Education and Higher Education Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhater, HE the Minister of Social Development and Family Buthaina bint Ali al-Jabr al-Nuaimi, alongside senior representatives from MoEHE and QF.

Marking the occasion, HE AlKhater highlighted Qatar's commitment to fostering inclusivity and ensuring equal opportunities, particularly for individuals with disabilities.

She emphasised that the establishment of Warif Academy marks a significant milestone in this effort, in line with Qatar's Third National Development Strategy (NSD3).

She said the academy aims to empower students with disabilities through transformative programmes, support their integration into society, and provide tailored resources for academic and social success. She further noted that education is a fundamental human right and a cornerstone of sustainable development, as outlined in the Qatar National Vision (QNV) 2030.

HE AlKhater indicated that Warif Academy offers educational and rehabilitative services in Arabic for students with multiple disabilities. These include developmental and cognitive disabilities, often accompanied by physical and health impairments that impose severe functional limitations. Catering to students aged 3-21 years old, the academy focuses on developing their educational and life skills through a unique curriculum aligned with Qatar's national standards.

She pointed out the academy's keenness to empower this group of students who have not had the opportunity to study before for various reasons, by providing comprehensive and innovative educational and therapeutic programs that qualify them to effectively integrate into society and achieve their ambitions. She



indicated that the criteria for selecting students at Warif Academy are based on a comprehensive assessment by a multidisciplinary team in several stages to ensure that their individual needs are met with high quality.

Regarding the academic programmes, HE AlKhater said that the academy designs programmes that include academic, behavioural, and therapeutic objectives, with therapeutic health plans and support services for the learning process according to the needs of each individual student.

She noted that Warif is a message that carries in its essence a deep belief in the importance

of achieving equality in learning opportunities, and a clear image of the principle of equal opportunities to which the MoEHE and QF are committed.

She highlighted that Warif Academy sets new standards for partnership with families and parents to provide an integrated experience for its students, meeting their unique requirements. She noted that the academy enjoys the support of the Ministry of Public Health by selecting a team specialised in educational and therapeutic fields to ensure the provision of comprehensive care according to the needs of each student individually. **To Page 5**

Report: 60% of families in Gaza are homeless

The Ministry of Public Works and Housing in the Gaza Strip said that over 60% of families in the Strip are homeless due to the war, stressing that this figure is beyond the capacity of any entity to promptly handle this issue.

In a report, the ministry emphasised that the scale of this war, which completely levelled residential neighbourhoods, is several times greater than the damage caused by the Israeli military's 51-day onslaught on Gaza in 2014, with the amount of rubble resulting from the decimated neighbourhoods, cities, and residential blocks due to the Israeli offensive in the Gaza Strip standing at tens of millions of tonnes. The Israeli forces killed at least 46,565 Palestinian civilians and injured at least 109,660 others since the beginning of the genocide that it has been committing against the Gaza Strip since October 2023, most of whom are children and women.

The Palestinian Health Ministry said that the Israeli forces committed two massacres against Palestinian families in the Gaza Strip over the past 24 hours, murdering at least 28 civilians and injuring at least 89 others. **(QNA)**

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky said yesterday he was ready to hand over captured North Korean soldiers to Pyongyang in exchange for the return of Ukrainian POWs held in Russia. Zelensky's offer came hours after South Korea's National Intelligence Service confirmed Ukraine's announcement from the previous day that it had captured two North Korean soldiers. Kyiv said on Saturday they had been wounded fighting Ukraine's troops in Russia's Kursk region, but at the time did not provide any proof of their nationality. But yesterday, the NIS told AFP it had "confirmed that the Ukrainian military captured two North Korean soldiers on January 9 in the Kursk battlefield in Russia". **(AFP) Page 8**

12 killed in gas facility explosion in Yemen

Twelve people were killed and over 100 injured in an explosion at a natural gas refilling facility in the Yemeni rebel-held Al-Bayda province, two officials told AFP yesterday. "Twelve people from Al-Bayda died and there are more than 100 injured" in an explosion on Saturday at the storage facility of a refilling station in the Al-Zaher area, the province's communications chief Aref al-Ghamri said. **(AFP)**

Doha workshop supports national efforts in prevention of conflict

The Department of International Organisations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs hosted yesterday a workshop on supporting national efforts in conflict prevention.

The three-day event is organised by the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies (CHS), the Swedish Folke Bernadotte Academy, the Joint UN Development Programme (UNDP) – UN Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) Programme on Building National Capacities for Conflict Prevention, and the UN Development Programme.

In this context, HE Director of the International Organisations Department Sheikha Hanouf bint Abdulrahman al-Thani said the meeting is held to participate in purposeful talks on strengthening national efforts to prevent conflicts and sustain peace, in line with the objectives of the Pact for the Future, and the collective commitment to peace and security.

In her opening remarks at the workshop, HE Sheikha Hanouf added that holding this event in Qatar, as a responsible member of the international community, confirms Qatar's deep commitment to conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

She noted that Qatar has always been a strong advocate for effective mediation and resolution of conflicts, in addition to its role in strengthening national capacities to prevent conflicts in all their forms.



She indicated that Qatar has witnessed the complexities of regional and global challenges and has realised the importance of its role as a bridge for dialogue and co-operation.

She underscored that hosting this workshop reflects Qatar's contribution to promoting peace solutions regionally and globally.

HE Sheikha Hanouf pointed out that the Pact for the Future, which was adopted by member states last September, represents an important step towards a more peaceful and sustainable global system as it emphasises the importance of adopting a new globally applicable approach under national leadership to prevent conflicts and sustain peace.

She noted that Qatar firmly believes that countries can prevent conflicts and address the underlying causes of instability through constructive participation and shared responsibility.

She urged the workshop to focus on ways to support national efforts to prevent conflicts, identify areas that need international support, and explore innovative ways to enhance partnerships between countries, institutions, and organisations.

Director of the Center for Conflict and Humanitarian Studies Dr Ghassan Elkahlout said this workshop constitutes a vital platform for exchanging ideas, sharing best practices, and strengthening partnerships that will contribute to formulating sustainable peace strategies, during which they will explore innovative approaches and reflect on the challenges and opportunities that help in strengthening national prevention efforts. (QNA)

HMC launches drive to showcase quality of specialist services

Hamad Medical Corporation (HMC) has launched a new campaign under the theme "Your health, our priority: Setting the standard for specialist care in Qatar and the region" to raise awareness about the high-quality care it offers and the major improvements it has made in healthcare.

Over the coming months, the new awareness campaign will showcase the quality of HMC's specialist services through various channels, including media tours, interviews, press releases, social media infographics and videos.

"HMC's growth and development have allowed many of our services to reach world-class levels, particularly in key areas such as stroke care, cardiology, surgery, cancer treatment, and trauma services," said Dr Abdulla al-Ansari, HMC's chief medical officer.

Highlighting the importance of the campaign, Hassan Mohammed al-Hail, HMC's chief communications officer, said: "This campaign is an important step in ensuring that everyone in Qatar is aware of the high-quality specialist healthcare services available to them. By highlighting our achievements and specialist capabilities, we aim to build trust and confidence in the care we provide to our community and reinforce HMC's position as the leading provider of specialist healthcare services in Qatar." (QNA)

Amir sends condolences to Saudi King Salman

His Highness the Amir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani, His Highness the Deputy Amir Sheikh Abdullah bin Hamad al-Thani and HE the Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman bin Jassim al-Thani sent yesterday cables of condolences to Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, King Salman bin Abdulaziz al-Saud of Saudi Arabia, on the death of the mother of Princess Fahda bint Fahd bin Khalid bin Nasser bin Abdulaziz al-Saud. (QNA)

Qatar strongly condemns attack in Benin

Qatar has expressed its strong condemnation and denunciation of an attack that targeted a military site in Benin, which resulted in the deaths of several soldiers. In a statement issued yesterday, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs reiterated Qatar's firm position in rejection of violence and terrorism, regardless of motives and reasons. The ministry expressed Qatar's condolences to the families of the victims and to the government and people of Benin. (QNA)

Shura Council attends APA panel meeting in Baghdad

The Shura Council participated in the meetings of the Standing Committee on Political Affairs of the Asian Parliamentary Assembly (APA) and the associated sessions, which concluded in Baghdad yesterday.

The Shura Council was represented at the three-day meetings by Council member and Vice-President of the APA, Ahmed bin Hitmi al-Hitmi, and Council member, Nasser bin Mutrif al-Humaidi. The discussions during the meetings covered a range of reports and various topics concerning the Assembly's role and its future strategic plans.

On the sidelines of the event, the Shura Council delegation participated in the Gulf co-ordination meeting, which focused on strengthening co-operation and co-ordination among GCC countries within the framework of the APA.

Additionally, the delegation held a meeting with Speaker of the Iraqi Council of Representatives, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, to discuss the parliamentary relations between Qatar and Iraq and explore ways to further enhance them. (QNA)



the Iraqi Council of Representatives, Mahmoud al-Mashhadani, to discuss the parliamentary relations between Qatar and Iraq and explore ways to further enhance them. (QNA)

Qatar to take part in GCC civil retirement meeting

The General Retirement and Social Insurance Authority (GRSIA) is slated to take part in the 60th meeting of the technical committee of civil retirement and social insurance agencies in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, from Jan 13-15.

Held within the framework of boosting co-operation among the GCC civil retirement and social insurance agencies, the meeting intends to achieve economic sustainability and social justice for the region's citizens, with the agenda encompassing the strategic action plan for the committee of heads of civil retirement and strategic social insurance agencies 2026-2030.

Additionally, the deliberations will highlight the retirement agencies' role in achieving shared strategic objectives, as well as updating the unified social insurance system and enhancing protection for GCC citizens working within member states.

The meeting is set to examine comparative studies of civil retirement and social insurance systems, statistical indicators and their development, along with the electronic linkage initiative among the Gulf agencies, to expedite data exchange and optimise administrative efficiency across the GCC member states. The event will honour outstanding personalities in the areas of civil retirement and social insurance, as well as the scientific research award for civil retirement and social insurance agencies. The deliberations will focus on exploring avenues for sharing expertise and best practices in awareness and training initiatives to advance human resource development. (QNA)



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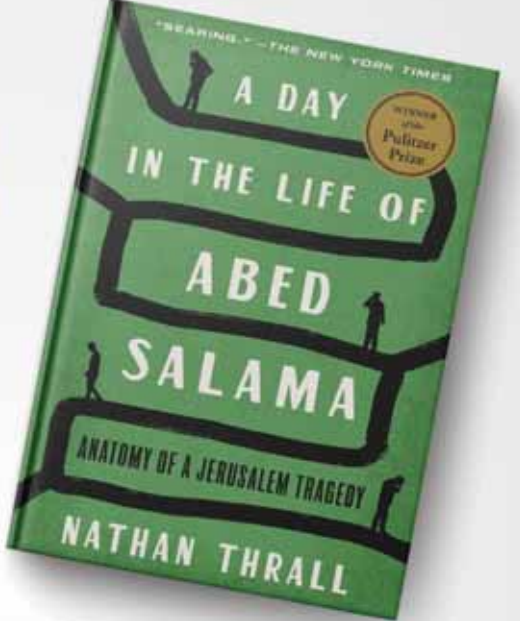
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Nathan Thrall


2024 Nonfiction
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in conversation with
Dean Safwan Masri



Tuesday, January 14

5:30 - 7:00 PM
Auditorium
Georgetown University in Qatar





Photograph by Judy Heiblum

Nathan Thrall is an American writer living in Jerusalem. In 2024, he received the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction for *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*. An international bestseller, it was translated into more than two dozen languages, selected as a New York Times Book Review Editors' Choice, and named a best book of the year by 18 publications. He is also the author of *The Only Language They Understand*.

Nathan's reporting, essays, and criticism have appeared in the *London Review of Books*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The New York Review of Books*. He spent a decade at the International Crisis Group, and has taught at Bard College.

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CELEBRATING TWO DECADES IN QATAR

QIB reveals new millionaire for 2025

Qatar Islamic Bank (QIB) has announced the first millionaire of the eighth edition of the Misk Account, continuing its mission to promote saving habits and reward its customers for their financial discipline and loyalty.

Safran Misfer al-Marri is the first millionaire of this year's Misk edition during the draw, which was held in the presence of representatives from the Ministry of Commerce and Industry alongside QIB officials.

The new edition of QIB's Misk Account features the largest prize pool in Qatar, totalling QR17.4mn. This edition will reward 858 customers with exciting prizes, offering more opportunities to win.

The number of grand prize winners of QR1mn has increased from four to six, with the millionaire's draw now scheduled every two months. Additionally, the number of monthly winners of the QR50,000 prize has risen from four to six, while 15 customers will continue to win QR10,000 each on a weekly basis.

Al-Marri said: "I am deeply grateful to QIB for this life-changing prize. Winning the Misk Account grand prize is a true blessing that will help me achieve my financial goals and fulfil my needs. I encourage eve-



Safran Misfer al-Marri is the first millionaire of this year's Misk edition.

ryone to take advantage of this amazing opportunity by opening a Misk account and keep saving. Saving with QIB not only helps you build a secure future but also gives you the chance to win life-transforming rewards."

D Anand, QIB general manager - Personal Banking Group, said: "We are excited to announce the first Misk Millionaire in Misk's latest edition, reaffirming our commitment to supporting and rewarding our customers' financial journeys. The Misk Account continues to encourage responsible saving while offering meaningful opportunities for growth. As the

programme evolves, we remain dedicated to providing exceptional rewards and enhancing the overall experience for our valued customers."

Existing and new QIB customers can open a Misk Account easily through the QIB mobile app. Customers will receive a free debit card, become eligible to request a free, for the first-year credit card against their Misk Account balance, receive profits on their savings, and have the chance to frequently win cash prizes.

For more information, visit www.qib.com.qa/en-miskaccount

Conference puts spotlight on AI's role in media evolution

Media City Qatar partners with Al Jazeera Media Institute

Media City Qatar participated as a key partner with Al Jazeera Media Institute for the 'AI Jazeera Conference on Artificial Intelligence in Media', which concluded in Doha yesterday.

The conference featured dynamic panel discussions and workshops, where experts explored AI's evolving role in journalism, content personalisation, and immersive storytelling.

During the second edition of the conference, Media City Qatar reinforced its innovative contributions to AI technologies in the media and content creation sectors, highlighting its commitment to advancing the role of emerging technology. Through its dedicated booth, it fostered dialogue and collaboration with global experts, leading technology companies, renowned press organisations, and visitors interested in Qatar's growing media sector.

Engineer Jassim Mohamed al-Khori, Media City Qatar CEO, stated: "Our partnership with Al Jazeera Media Institute underscores our shared vision in the transformative potential of AI in shaping the next generation of content creation. This event stands as a testament to Qatar's leadership in media innovation, driving progress that not only pioneers new possibilities but also inspires the global industry to reimagine its potential."

As Media City Qatar continues to align with Qatar National Vi-



Engineer Jassim Mohamed al-Khori, Media City Qatar CEO, during the two-day event, which concluded yesterday.

sion 2030, it plays a vital role in strengthening the country's media and creative clusters. By fostering partnerships, supporting upcoming talent, and championing the integration of cutting-edge technologies, Media City Qatar reinforces Qatar's position as a global hub for innovation and knowledge exchange in the media industry.

In line with its continued efforts to showcase AI's potential, Media City Qatar has recently celebrated another milestone in its innovation journey to start the year. Among its most recent successes was the launch of the

AI-driven initiative 'Qatar Art-Beat', a project generated in partnership with Google Cloud, celebrating Qatar National Day 2024.

The groundbreaking campaign by Media City Qatar earned a Guinness World Records title for the 'Most People Contributing to an AI-Generated Image'. This achievement reflects the organisation's broader commitment to leveraging emerging technology like AI to engage communities and promote creativity. The project resonated widely, reaching over 5.4mn people and generating 68,000 engagements across the country. **Page 12**

Vodafone Qatar launches new OSNtv bundles for Home Fibre service subscribers

Vodafone Qatar has launched its new OSNtv bundles for customers who subscribe to its Home Fibre service.

By integrating premium OSNtv content with its state-of-the-art Home Fibre Internet, Vodafone Qatar is redefining in-home entertainment with an all-encompassing, value-packed solution.

Vodafone Qatar's new strategic partnership with OSNtv brings up to 170 channels to Home Fibre customers, creating a one-stop entertainment destination that includes

OSNtv's signature channels: OSNtv Movies Premiere, OSNtv One, OSNtv Movies Family, OSNtv Kids, OSNtv Yahala, and many more; regional and international favourites: Nickelodeon, Discovery Channel, CNN, Bloomberg, Sky News, and others; local channels and top Qatari local channels; and On-Demand access: an extensive library with up to 15,000 hours of top movies and series.

As part of the package, Vodafone Qatar will offer the OSNtv Box, an advanced Android-based set-top box designed to enhance the viewing experience with a range of features including, catch-up TV, a TV guide, playback options, and parental



By integrating premium OSNtv content with its state-of-the-art Home Fibre Internet, Vodafone Qatar is redefining in-home entertainment with an all-encompassing, value-packed solution.

controls. Customers can also download and access a selection of OTT applications and games. The OSNtv Box is available with two TV packages included in Home Fibre subscriptions: the Lite package for 1Gbps customers and the Premium package for 2Gbps customers.

Baran Yurdagul, chief operating officer at Vodafone Qatar, said: "In line with our commitment to delivering exceptional experiences and enriching the benefits of our Home portfolio, our new partnership with OSNtv marks a significant milestone for our Home Fibre services. We are excited to introduce these new

packages, with the flexibility of tailored TV packages and a simple, user-friendly experience."

Ellis D'Rozario, SVP, Commercial Sales at OSN, said: "We are proud to partner with Vodafone Qatar on this customer-first initiative. The early success of the service, as indicated by high engagement metrics, shows the strong demand for premium, exclusive content. We're excited to continue delivering an unbeatable lineup in 2025 and beyond."

To learn more about the exclusive OSNtv packages and Vodafone's Home Fibre offerings, visit OSNtv.

UDST hosts exciting 'Ahlan Welcome Week' for students

University of Doha for Science and Technology (UDST) has officially welcomed students to campus for the winter semester.

The University is hosting both new and returning students, offering comprehensive programmes across five Colleges: Business, Computing and Information Technology, Engineering and Technology, Health Sciences, and General Education.

President of UDST Dr Salem Al-Naemi said: "We are delighted to welcome our students for the winter semester. At UDST, we strive to provide an enriching and dynamic learning environment, supported by state-of-the-art facilities and a dedicated team of faculty and staff. The 'Ahlan Welcome Week' reflects our commitment to nurturing a sense of belonging and community among our students as they embark on or continue their



academic journey. We are confident that this semester will be an inspiring and successful chapter for everyone."

Furthermore, students had the opportunity to engage in different events including getting to know Student Counselling and Accessibility Services, discovering UDST student clubs, meeting

the new, democratically elected Student Council, and many more activities. 'Ahlan Welcome Week' at UDST continues to evolve as a platform for developing meaningful connections among students while promoting their academic, personal, and professional development. **(QNA)**

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Visit Qatar introduces digital raffle draw for Sealine Season

Visit Qatar's Sealine Season is in full swing for its second week, offering an exciting mix of adventure, entertainment, and curated experiences for visitors to enjoy.

The activation introduced a digital raffle draw, scheduled on January 24, giving visitors the chance to win a Ford Bronco or various ATVs.

To be eligible, guests must spend at least QR200 or more on services and activities within the Sealine Season camp, including food and beverage, The Outpost Al Barari or Belkhams Lounges, in a single day.

The raffle will be held digitally to ensure a user-friendly experience, with dedicated staff available at the information desk to assist guests with any inquiries and to guide them through the process. **Page 4**

Pulitzer winner Thrall to speak at GU-Q

Georgetown University in Qatar (GU-Q) will host a special event featuring Pulitzer Prize-winning author Nathan Thrall in conversation with GU-Q dean Safwan Masri tomorrow (Tuesday) at its campus.

Nathan Thrall, an American writer based in Jerusalem, was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for General Nonfiction in 2024 for his groundbreaking work, *A Day in the Life of Abed Salama*, telling the tragic story of a school bus accident, and the numerous political decisions that affect everyday lives in Palestine.

The international bestseller, translated into more than two dozen languages, has received



Nathan Thrall

critical acclaim, including being named a *New York Times* Book Review Editors' Choice and listed among the best books of the year by 18 publications. Thrall is also the author of *The Only Language They Understand*

and is known for his incisive essays, reporting, and criticism, which have been featured in prominent publications such as the *London Review of Books*, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times Magazine*, and *The New York Review of Books*. With a decade of experience at the International Crisis Group and teaching stints at Bard College, Thrall brings a wealth of expertise and perspective to his work. The conversation with dean Masri will delve into Thrall's literary journey, his experiences as a writer and journalist, and the themes explored in his award-winning works, offering insight into the mighty role of the pen in the pursuit of justice.

QU to host first edition of Captain Saeed Al-Mesnad League

Qatar University (QU) at a press conference announced the launch of the inaugural edition of the "ElCaptain" Futsal League.

The league will take place on the university's campus with broad participation from sports teams and support from several sponsors and organisers. The event aims to honour the legacy of Captain Saeed al-

Mesnad, one of Qatar's renowned sports figures, and to emphasise the societal role of sports in Qatar.

Dr Senaid al-Marri, director of the Sports Affairs Department at QU, stated: "At QU, we have three main pillars we strive to achieve: education, scientific research, and community service. Hosting the Captain Saeed Al-Mesnad League embodies our commitment to com-

munity service. We take pride in supporting and promoting a culture of sports in Qatar while highlighting the contributions of prominent sports figures like Captain Saeed al-Mesnad."

Dr al-Marri said that the idea of honouring Captain Saeed al-Mesnad had been in consideration for some time, but it gained momentum following an initiative from

his son and the support of Dr Omar al-Ansari, president of QU, and Dr Mohammed Diab, vice president of Student Affairs.

Abdullah al-Qahtani, head of the Competitions Committee for the Captain Saeed Al-Mesnad League, emphasised that the organisation of the tournament was the result of extensive studies aimed at delivering a distinguished championship.



The officials at the press conference.

Al-Qahtani stated: "The Captain Saeed Al-Mesnad League seeks to promote sportsmanship and to revitalise Qatari football through futsal. We have attracted over 60 Qatari players."

Qatar Charity establishes health centre in northern Ghana

Qatar Charity (QC) has established a new, specialised health centre offering essential medical services in northern Ghana as part of its ongoing humanitarian efforts in West Africa.

The new health centre, built on a 375sq m area, includes dedicated wings for women, children, and men. It features a maternity ward, a fully equipped laboratory, a pharmacy, consultation rooms, as well as isolation and medical examination areas. Additionally, it has a waiting area and a specialised dental section equipped with the latest tools. The centre's inauguration in the "Gombihini-Tamale" area was attended by several executive, parliamentary, community and religious leaders, all of whom expressed their happiness with the medical services the centre provides to the community and their appreciation for Qatar Charity's continued efforts to support and enhance the healthcare sector in Ghana. Idrissu Abdul Jabaro, the chief of the "Gombihini" area, said the establishment of the health centre marks a new chapter in the development of their community, as it provides a



solution to the health challenges they have faced for a long time. "For a long time, many of our people had to travel long distances to get medical

care, often resulting in delays that could mean the difference between life and death. Today, with this clinic in our community, we can access timely and high-

quality healthcare services," he said.

Dr Sido Brekisu Abu Bakr, Director of Health for the "Central Tamale" area, said the centre would address many issues, including the long travel distances to receive medical care and the pressure on existing healthcare facilities. She noted that the centre is equipped to provide essential services such as maternal and child health, disease prevention and emergency care.

"Let us use this achievement as an inspiration for all of us to continue working together for a healthier and more prosperous future for our community," she said.

Ibrahim Muntala Mohammed, a member of Parliament for the "Central Tamale" area, stated that QC's investment in the community and its generous support in establishing health centres and providing medical services will have a lasting impact. Now, families can access basic healthcare services at the centre without having to travel long distances, as was the case before QC's intervention and the support of the good people of Qatar, for whom we pray for blessings and great rewards.

Qatar Airways' AI-powered digital human cabin crew 'Sama' debuts on social media

Qatar Airways has introduced 'Sama', the world's first AI-powered digital human cabin crew, on social media.

"As the face of Qatar Airways' innovation, Sama will soon inspire and connect with a global audience on Instagram. Her account, @SamaOnTheMove, will offer followers a mix of travel tips, personal stories from her layovers, and a behind-the-scenes look at the life of a cabin crew member — all with a creative, human touch," the airline said in a release.

Qatar Airways senior vice president (Marketing and Corporate Communications), Babar Rahman said: "Introducing Sama on Instagram is an extension of our vision to blend human connection with technological innovation. Sama is not just a digital human; she's a reflection of how we see the future of travel — personal, engaging, and deeply connected to the experiences that matter. Her presence marks a step forward in how we humanise our brand and create moments that resonate with our global audience."

Unveiled during ITB Berlin 2024 to great acclaim, Sama represents



Qatar Airways' commitment to blending innovation with emotional engagement. As the first digital human cabin crew to debut on social media, Sama is designed to connect with a digitally native audience through relatable and inspiring content.

Whether she's discovering hidden gems in Paris, sharing tips on navigating a new city, or offering a behind-the-scenes look at life in the skies, Sama will showcase Qatar Airways' network of over 170 destinations in a fresh and imaginative way. Her content invites followers to explore new cultures, discover inspiring traditions, and see the world through her eyes.

Follow Sama on Instagram at [instagram.com/SamaOnTheMove](https://www.instagram.com/SamaOnTheMove) to join her journey and experience the future of travel storytelling, one post at a time.

Ministry supports ecotourism with Sealine Season

The Ministry of Environment and Climate Change has emphasised the importance of ecotourism, raising awareness about natural reserves in the country, and promoting environmental consciousness to adopt sustainable practices that contribute to preserving biodiversity.

The ministry is participating in the Sealine Season, organised by Visit Qatar in collaboration with several partners, as part of efforts to promote sustainable ecotourism. The event features educational trips to the Sealine Reserve, one of Qatar's most prominent ecological areas, known for its natural diversity and hosting various species of wildlife.

The event also includes awareness exhibitions, sports activities, and educational programs aimed at highlighting the unique environmental value of the Sealine area, with a focus on the importance of preserving ecosystems and protecting wildlife.

In this context, Director of the Natural Reserves Department at the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, Saleh Hassan al-Kuwari, stated that the ministry's participation in the Sealine Season aims to spread environmental awareness and encourage

sustainable practices among visitors through interactive activities that emphasize the importance of conserving natural resources and ecological diversity.

He noted that the ministry welcomes ideas from all entities in the country, whether governmental or private, that contribute to enhancing ecotourism and organizing exceptional events in natural reserves, beaches, islands, and parks.

Al-Kuwari added that the event features interactive displays about wildlife in Qatar, with a dedicated area showcasing the Arabian oryx as one of the country's prominent environmental symbols. The event also offers visitors the opportunity to explore the Sealine Reserve and enjoy the experience of visiting sand dunes, while learning about the role of natural reserves in preserving Qatar's environment. He highlighted that the ministry will continue its efforts to raise environmental awareness and introduce the public to Qatar's unique natural landmarks, stressing that the Sealine Season represents an ideal opportunity to educate visitors about the importance of wildlife and nature, thereby supporting ecotourism. (QNA)

QCAA unveils new digital services on its website

As part of its ongoing efforts to achieve excellence in performance and operations, Qatar Civil Aviation Authority (QCAA) has announced the launch of new digital services on its website.

This initiative, along with the enhancement of several existing services to better meet future demands, represents a significant milestone in the Authority's development.

This initiative will help simplify access to services and provide a smoother, more convenient experience compared to traditional procedures that often require significant time and effort. It also ensures the continuous innovation of advanced services.

The new services are offered to both the public and airlines/operators in Qatar. These include handling passenger complaints, processing requests for unscheduled flight permits, issuing crew certificates, providing a directory of travel and cargo offices, offering weather updates, sharing flight information, and accessing Climatological Atlas of Qatar.

In addition, an initial set of 103 specialised electronic services for air safety has been launched, including services for individual and pilot licensing, aircraft certifications and permissions, electronic

aircraft inspections, and exam management. The second phase of these services is scheduled to be launched by the end of the first quarter of 2025, bringing the total number of services to 160.

In Charge of Managing QCAA, Mohamed bin Faleh al-Hajri stated: "In today's era of technology and digital transformation, it is crucial to stay ahead of these advancements and effectively incorporate modern tools into our operations. The launch of these services is a significant step toward improving efficiency, providing innovative solutions, and utilizing technology to deliver high-quality services that are more accessible. This marks a major shift that will enhance operational efficiency and flexibility, simplifying numerous procedures in a modern and secure manner."

Al-Hajri went on saying: "The development of numerous advanced and smart services for both the public and aviation stakeholders in Qatar will open the door to a new phase marked by growth and innovation in this sector. This is part of our commitment to continue the development journey and deliver the best in alignment with Qatar's National Vision, while adapting to the global changes in this field." (QNA)

Qatar, Honduras sign air services agreement



Qatar and Honduras initialled yesterday an open skies air services agreement and a memorandum of understanding (MoU) for both passenger and cargo flights, allowing the national carrier to expand its network of destinations to reach more global destinations. The agreement and the MoU were signed by In Charge of Managing Qatar Civil Aviation Authority Mohammed Faleh al-Hajri and Executive Director of the Honduras Civil Aviation Authority Gerardo Gabriel Rivera Guifarro. Following the signing, the two parties discussed bilateral relations in civil aviation and ways to foster them. (QNA)

Qatar named guest of honour for Cairo book fair in 2027



Qatar has been named as the guest of honour for the 58th annual Cairo International Book Fair (CIBF), scheduled for 2027.

Egypt's Minister of Culture Dr Ahmed Heno said in a press conference yesterday in Cairo that it is the first time for the CIBF to name two countries as guests of honour for the next two editions.

He hailed the move as a tradition that reflects the strengthening of cultural openness with the countries of the world. Romania will be the guest of honour for the 57th edition in 2026.

Heno added the CIBF 2025, from Jan 23-Feb 5, will feature a rich and diverse cultural programme that includes over 600 activities, including literary seminars, intellectual dialogues and artistic performances, with the participation of world thinkers. (QNA)

Qatar Foundation INVITATION TO TENDER

Tender Reference	Description	Tender Fee (QAR)	Tender Bond (QAR)	Bid Closing Date
HBKU-RFQ-711	High-End Servers for QCRI Cyber AI Research	500	15,000	2nd February 2025
HBKU-RFQ-642	VEEAM M365 Licenses	500	16,000	2nd February 2025
HBKU-RFQ-729	Audio-Visual System Revamp for the Multipurpose Hall at HBKU RDC	1000	16,000	13th March 2025
HBKU-RFQ-715	LSM 900 Airyscan 2 Super-resolution Confocal Multiplex Microscope	500	18,000	2nd February 2025
HBKU-RFQ-738	Supply of Nanoparticle Tracking Analysis (NTA)	500	8000	2nd February 2025
HBKU-RFQ-504	Provision of Research-as-a-Service (Raas) Solutions for HBKU	1000	35000	12th February 2025
HBKU-RFQ-730	Purchase, installation, integration, commissioning, and training of an atmospheric water generation and green hydrogen system	500	9000	12th February 2025

HBKU-University Procurement Service (UPS) is inviting companies to participate in the above list public tenders. To receive the tender documents, please follow the following steps:

1) **Supplier Registration:** It is mandatory to be registered as a supplier with QF in order to participate in the above tender(s). Only QF registered suppliers will be allowed to pay the tender fees online. Therefore, please visit QF website: <https://www.qf.org.qa/supplier-registration> to complete the Supplier Registration process.

Tender Fee: Interested bidders can Sign in by visiting this link <https://Suppliers.qf.org.qa/abstract> and pay the respective non-refundable and non-transferrable tender fee online.

All Tender Fees are to be paid using credit cards only.


Tender Fee Payment Dates: Payment of Tender Fee online will be from 13-Jan-25 Until 20-Jan-25

2) All bidders, who are registered and have paid the required tender fees online to QF, will then be granted access to download the Tender Document.

3) Technical and Commercial bids need to be submitted and attached online in QF Supplier portal as per the instructions provided in the "Supplier Portal" work instruction.

- The Commercial bid must be valid for 180 Days from the Bid Closing Date.
- The Commercial bid must be accompanied by a Bank Guarantee (Tender Bond) issued by a local bank in Qatar and should be valid for 180 days from the bid closing date (where applicable as per the Tender documents)
- The successful tenderer will be required to submit a Performance Bond as prescribed in each of the above tender documents.
- Qatar Foundation special qualifications, terms and conditions shall apply as stipulated in the tender document.

Note: All work instructions for Supplier registration and Supplier portal can be found in the link below <https://www.qf.org.qa/supplier-registration>



QatarEnergy LNG Tender Invitation

No.	TENDER NUMBER / DESCRIPTION	TENDER ISSUE PERIOD	TENDER FEE (QAR)	TENDER BOND (QAR)	TENDER CLOSING DATE
1	LTC/C/EDU/6915/24 The Design, Supply and Installation of Educational Furniture and Related Services in AKIS	13/01/2025 to 27/01/2025	0	0	27/01/2025

Scope of Work:

- The objective of this CONTRACT is to design, supply and install educational furniture in COMPANY's Al Khor International School (AKIS) Classrooms, Libraries, Arts rooms, science rooms, Laboratories, and other areas within the school, for a duration of Five (5) years on a call-off basis when required by COMPANY.
- The CONTRACT comprises of a FIRM scope for the Design, Supply, delivered and installation of Education Furniture's in 20 classrooms in Al-Khor International School, as well as various services on a call-off basis for other classrooms and locations throughout the CONTRACT duration based on actual need of the COMPANY.

Requirements of the Contractor including but not limited to:

- Contractor must design, supply, and install educational furniture such as the following items: desks, tables, seating, carts and trolleys, lockers, stages etc.
 - Design: Design Services shall include, but are not limited to, space planning, installation plans, furniture migration strategies, reconfiguration of existing furniture, assistance with furniture selection, interior design, and digital plans, mock-ups, simulations & installation drawings.
 - Installation: Installation Services shall include all labour required to assemble, disassemble, delivery, set-up and install and or remodel an existing furniture.
- Educational classroom furniture must adapt to diverse teaching, supporting flexibility for both collaborative and individual work, be designed for comfort and efficiency, while promoting ergonomic health. Furniture must also be safe, durable, and easily adjustable to meet the needs of various curriculum areas.

Minimum technical requirement for Contractor including but not limited to:

- CONTRACTOR must demonstrate a minimum of two years of experience in similar projects specific to Education sector and/ or any other relevant industry.

Bid Validity: Bid should be valid for 180 calendar days from the Tender Closing Date.

Place for Tender Collection and Bid Submission:
ITT document for this tender will be available in QatarEnergy LNG website under Suppliers tab >Current Open Tenders. The bids shall be submitted through the QatarEnergy LNG online platform (SMART by GEP).

Note: Effective from 1st July 2023, bids received from Local Companies (established under the Laws of State of Qatar with local Commercial Registration) who are not in possession of an ICV score in the ICV portal by Bid Closing Date (or commercial bid submission date if separately mentioned/notified) will not be accepted. Local Company that has been established for less than 2 years and insurance companies are exempted from this requirement. For further details please visit ICV Digital Portal:- <https://icv.qa/en-US/>

Education ministry, QF open Warif Academy

From Page 1

HE AlKhatir underscored that "Warif" is only one chapter in a book of relentless efforts that have been and will continue to empower people with disabilities. She added that the lines of this book will extend to include other initiatives that fall within the framework of the MoEHE's strategic programme "My Special Path," which aims to enhance the inclusiveness of education.

On the other hand, she revealed the key projects announced by the MoEHE last August, which is the electronic educational voucher service, which aims to provide students with disabilities with the necessary support to continue their education in a stimulating environment.

She announced the automation of the service of collecting financial fees related to services provided to students with disabilities in private schools, as a complement to the educational voucher service. She indicated that the new system allows schools that provide these services to complete the procedures with ease and flexibility.

She added that developing the educational voucher service for people with disabilities includes increasing the support provided by the state to school students with disabilities, due to the specificity of their educational, therapeutic, and medical needs, and encouraging investors with a community mission to invest in providing high-quality educational services to care for and unleash the capabilities of people with disabilities and provide them with sufficient and equal opportunities.



She noted that the vouchers include three categories according to the medical and scientific evaluation of the degree of disability. The first voucher with the amount of QR43,000, the second voucher with the amount of QR53,000, and the third voucher with the amount of QR78,000.

HE the Minister of Education said that these efforts stem from Qatar's firm commitment to providing equal educational opportunities for all children. They also stem from the belief that ambition is not hindered by challenges and that every child deserves the opportunity to learn. She explained that the opening of the Warif Academy came as a continuation of this approach, and an investment in effective partnerships between the government sector and other sectors to achieve Qatar's vision of providing comprehensive education for all.

For her part, President of Pre-University Education (PUE) at QF

Abeer al-Khalifa highlighted the importance of the partnership with the MoEHE in establishing Warif Academy. She praised the Academy's role in providing comprehensive academic and therapeutic support to students with multiple disabilities.

Al-Khalifa said: "We are proud to collaborate with the MoEHE to offer students the best learning opportunities across various educational and therapeutic fields. Through specialised academic programs that take a holistic approach, integrating all necessary therapeutic interventions, we aim to meet the diverse educational needs of all students, enhance their abilities, and empower them to reach their fullest potential for growth, development, and learning." "Warif Academy goes beyond traditional education by offering specialized educational and therapeutic services meticulously designed to address the unique needs of students with disabilities," she

added. She highlighted the academy's role in fostering an inclusive and supportive environment that ensures meaningful learning experiences. It establishes a distinctive model that nurtures students' personal growth, promotes their active participation in society, and equips them with the confidence and skills needed to navigate future challenges.

In turn, Director of the Special Education Department Fatma al-Saadi indicated that the student selection process at the academy involves a thorough evaluation conducted by a multidisciplinary team of experts. This process includes multiple assessment stages to ensure that the unique needs of each student are understood and addressed through tailored, high-quality support.

This initiative forms part of the MoEHE's strategic plan to enhance the educational services available to students with disabilities and their families. It adheres to global



best practices, offering high-quality educational and training opportunities to meet the aspirations and abilities of all individuals, without exception, and promotes greater independence for students. It also encourages the private sector to provide more inclusive and specialised educational services.

As the first government school of its kind in Qatar, Warif Academy offers educational and rehabilitative services in Arabic for students with multiple disabilities. These include developmental and cognitive disabilities, often accompanied by physical and health impairments that impose severe functional limitations. Catering to students aged 3-21 years old, the academy focuses on developing their educational and life skills through a unique curriculum aligned with Qatar's national standards.

To maximise each student's potential, the academy provides a supportive and inclusive learning environment tailored to the needs

of students with multiple disabilities, who require specialised health-care in addition to therapeutic and educational support. It features a customised curriculum and a wide array of specialised services, including physiotherapy, occupational therapy, speech and language therapy, psychological support, and assistive technology tools to aid their functional and motor skills development. These services are delivered by a team of highly qualified professionals, carefully selected in collaboration with the Ministry of Public Health, and supervised by experts in their respective fields.

The academy will be rolled out in five progressive phases, with the initial phase commencing this month. Initially, the academy will feature five classrooms serving children aged 3-14 years old, expanding annually to accommodate students up to 21 years old. By the 2028-2029 academic year, the academy will comprise 25 classrooms with a capacity of 150 students.

National Archives of Qatar, Unesco join hands for archives protection

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

In a strategic move aimed at enhancing Qatar's regional and international role in managing documentary heritage, the National Archives of Qatar signed a partnership agreement with Unesco to host the regional conference titled "Memory in Heritage: Strengthening Co-operation on Documentary Heritage in the Arab Region".

The conference will be held in Doha on January 21-22. Bringing together experts, representatives of national libraries, museums, and archives from various countries in the region, as well as international and regional organisations.

The conference aims to foster regional co-operation to develop innovative mechanisms for the protection and sustainability of documentary heritage while addressing challenges such as climate change and regional conflicts. Additionally, it seeks to increase the representation of Arab documentary heritage in international forums through unified efforts and a shared strategic vision.

Dr Ahmed Abdullah al-Buenain, Secretary-General of the National Archives of Qatar, said: "Hosting this conference in partnership with Unesco reflects Qatar's commitment to supporting regional and international efforts to safeguard documentary heritage. At the National Archives of Qatar, we strive to provide a platform that brings together experts and relevant institutions to build strategic partnerships that contribute to protecting this documentary legacy. As well as leveraging it through innovative technological solutions and digitisation, thereby strengthening its sustainability and showcasing its value as an active element in cultural and regional development."

Al-Buenain added: "The Memory of the World programme, launched by Unesco, provides a significant framework to support regional and national institutions in protecting documentary heritage. This partnership represents an opportunity to enhance regional coop-



eration and develop sustainable policies that safeguard documentary heritage. Through this collaboration, we aim to play a role in strengthening the position of regional institutions and fostering a shared vision to ensure the continuity of efforts to protect this invaluable cultural legacy."

Salah Khaled, Unesco Representative to the Gulf states and Yemen and Director of the Unesco Office in Doha, highlighted the critical importance of preserving documentary heritage, said: "Protecting and preserving documentary heritage is vital—not only as a testament to the past but also for safeguarding cultural identity, explaining the present, and building bridges for future generations." He underscored its role in promoting intercultural dialogue, respect, and understanding while showcasing exchanges across regions and continents.

Khaled also pointed out that the Arab region is underrepresentation in the Memory of the World register, which accounts for just 4% of the international total. To address this, Unesco advocates for a regional committee to compile a documentary heritage register, promote coordination and capacity-building, and raise awareness about preserving

documentary heritage institutions.

Khaled noted that "this regional register will highlight the Arab region's contributions to science, culture, communication, and education, ensuring stronger representation at the international level." He emphasised that this initiative is a crucial step toward strengthening cooperation among national committees and institutions, with its success relying on collaborative efforts across the region.

The Memory of the World programme, launched by Unesco in 1992, serves as an international platform aimed at supporting national and regional institutions in developing policies and efficiently managing documentary heritage.

Through this conference, the National Archives of Qatar, in partnership with Unesco, seeks to present a forward-looking vision that ensures the sustainability of efforts to protect this cultural legacy and unifies efforts to address shared challenges threatening its continuity. The conference represents a significant step toward fostering regional co-operation and ensuring that this heritage remains an integral part of the Arab cultural identity and shared human history.

Qatari businessman redefines future of real estate investment

By Tawfik Lamari
Staff Reporter

Mohamed al-Obaidly, the visionary founder of QG Investments, a leading real estate investment company shaping the landscape of the industry in Qatar and beyond, gave an exclusive interview to Gulf Times.

Al-Obaidly has successfully merged innovation and strategy to redefine real estate investment, driving growth and creating sustainable opportunities in a competitive market. We delve into his journey, the philosophy behind QG Investments, and his outlook on the future of real estate.

Al-Obaidly stressed: "The inspiration to establish QG Investments in Greece was from my passion for sustainable real estate development and the country's untapped market potential. Following Greece's economic recovery, I found with my partners unique opportunities to invest in properties, particularly in prime locations of Athenian Riviera. The combination of strategic location, rising tourism, and investor-friendly policies, made it an ideal choice. My vision was to create high-quality, modern developments such as smart home technologies that blend with luxury, contributing to both economic growth and Greece's global appeal."

Concerning market trends, al-Obaidly said: "At QG Investments, we stay ahead in the luxury residential market by embracing and integrating smart home technologies. Where from the comfort of his home in Europe or elsewhere our client can remotely monitor and manage various aspects of his home in Greece. These systems bring together appliances, security systems, and other home functions into a centralised interface, making life easier and more efficient. Sustainable building practices, and cutting-edge design to create modern, elegant living spaces that cater to the needs of our clients. We anticipate shifting preferences in luxury living, and energy-efficient solutions. By combining innovation with timeless architecture, we deliver high-end residences that offer both luxury and lasting value."

About this transformative venture in Greece, al-Obaidly stressed: "I was inspired to invest in this venture because I am passionate about building sustainable, high-quality developments that make a positive, lasting impact. Greece - a great location, and potential for economic



Mohamed al-Obaidly, founder of QG Investments.

growth attracted me to its luxury real estate sector. Being part of this transformation is both exciting and rewarding—helping create jobs, and enhance Greece's global image. It's truly fulfilling to see how smart investments can boost the economy."

As far as the exciting Ellinikon Project in Greece is concerned and what motivated QG investments to work there, al-Obaidly said: "The Ellinikon Project is one of the biggest projects in Europe; considered as a catalyst for Greece's economic recovery. It is also one of the largest sustainably built urban regeneration project in Europe. The Ellinikon Metropolitan Park, is set to be the largest park in Europe and second in size after New York City's Central Park. This project is set to generate over 80,000 jobs, and significantly increase tourism and investments."

Al-Obaidly added: "The Ellinikon Project is incredibly exciting because it represents one of the largest development initiatives in Europe with sustainable hub for luxury living. Being part of such a project aligns perfectly with QG Investments' vision of creating world-class, future-forward developments that enhance the quality of life."

Al-Obaidly views QG investments in the future to "evolve into a leading name in luxury real estate development, not only in Greece but across key international markets. Our focus will remain on creating innovative, sustainable properties that set new standards for modern living. We aim to expand our portfolio with landmark projects that blend cutting-edge design with environmental responsibility. QG Investments will stay at the forefront of luxury real estate, delivering enduring value for our clients and contributing to economic growth wherever we invest."

1,105 poems for Katara Prize for Prophet's Poets

Katara - the Cultural Village announced that it has received a total of 1,105 poems participating in the 7th Katara Prize for Prophet's Poets.

There was a 22% increase from the erstwhile edition which reached 861 submissions, including 1,015 poems by males, while 90 were by females. In classical poetry, 982 poems were submitted, with 897 by males and 85 by females. In the Nabati poetry category, 123 poems were submitted, 118 by males and 5 by females. Egypt, Sudan, and Somalia had the highest



number of submissions, totalling 347, followed by the Levant and Iraq with 255, and the Maghreb countries with 247, with the Gulf countries snagging the fourth rank with 224 submissions, while 32 submissions came from non-Arab countries.

The Gulf countries also recorded the highest participation in the Nabati poetry category with 90 submissions and 134 in classical poetry. The prize follows several stages, by shortlisting 30 competitors, 15 each in classical and Nabati poetry to compete in three rounds before a final jury committee, which will choose five participants from each category accordingly to advance to the semifinals, with the contest concluding with the selection of three winners from each category. (QNA)





Palestinian support march in Karachi



Activists of Pakistan's Jamaat-e-Islami (JI) party shout pro-Palestinian slogans as they hold placards and flags during a march to express their solidarity with the Palestinians, in Karachi, yesterday, amid the ongoing war between Israel and the Hamas group.

Thousands flee south Sudan town amid escalating clashes: UN

AFP
Port Sudan

Thousands have fled a town in southern Sudan since clashes erupted last week between the Sudanese army and rival paramilitaries, the United Nations' migration agency said yesterday.

The conflict in Sudan, which erupted in mid-April 2023, has pitted the forces of army chief Abdel Fattah al-Burhan against his former deputy Mohamed Hamdan Daglo, who leads the paramilitary Rapid Support Forces (RSF).

"Between 1,000 and 3,000 households were displaced from Um Rawaba town" in North Kordofan state in the country's south

in just five days, the UN's International Organisation for Migration said.

Clashes broke out in the area last week between the army and the RSF, at the same time that the military led an advance on the central Sudan state of Al-Jazira, some 300 kilometres northeast.

Families fled "due to increased security concerns following continued clashes across the locality", the IOM said.

In North Kordofan, over 205,000 people are currently displaced, according to the latest UN figures released on Wednesday.

Across the country, 11.5mn people are internally displaced — including 2.7 displaced in prior conflicts — in what the UN has called the world's largest displacement

crisis. The war has also claimed the lives of tens of thousands and pushed the country to the brink of famine.

Last month, the Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) review said that famine has gripped five areas in western and southern Sudan, and is expected to spread to five more.

Around 350,000 people in North Kordofan are currently experiencing emergency levels of hunger, the report found — the final stage before famine is declared.

The IPC said that "only a ceasefire can reduce the risk of famine spreading further", with 24.6mn people — nearly half the population — already facing "high levels of acute food insecurity".

Iran military expands drills to Fordow, Khondab N-sites

Iran has expanded military drills to cover two additional nuclear facilities in the west and centre of the country, state media reported yesterday, AFP reported from Tehran. The drills — dubbed Eqtedar, or "might" in Farsi — began last week and are set to continue until mid-March. They involve the army and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the ideological branch of Iran's military. On Tuesday, the IRGC announced the drills were initially focused on the Natanz nuclear enrichment plant in central Iran. "The exercises are currently being held at the Fordow and Khondab nuclear facilities," in central and western Iran respectively, state TV reported yesterday. They involve missile and radar units, electronic warfare units, electronic intelligence

and reconnaissance command carrying out "offensive and defensive missions", it said. The military activities are taking place with Iran's nuclear programme under close watch ahead of US president-elect Donald Trump's return to the White House. In his first term, Trump pulled the US out of a 2015 nuclear deal with Tehran, and he also ordered the killing of an IRGC general in a drone strike. Iran is set to hold nuclear talks with France, Britain and Germany on January 13 in Switzerland. In January, US news website Axios reported that White House national security adviser Jake Sullivan had presented President Joe Biden with options for a potential US strike on Iran's nuclear facilities if Tehran moved toward developing an atomic weapon before January 20.

Gaza doctor treats war victims after losing leg

AFP
Deir Al-Balah

Palestinian paediatrician Khaled al-Saidani moves through his Gaza hospital with determination, using a prosthetic leg and an aluminium walker as he cares for children also injured in the war.

With a stethoscope draped over his shoulders, he carefully examines his patients at Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital, offering warm smiles and handshakes to the children as he moves from one to the next.

He knows all too well the devastating impact of wounds sustained during war, having lost his right leg after an Israeli air strike on his house last year.

"I was injured by shrapnel, and because I am diabetic, things got worse for me, and we had to amputate my leg," al-Saidani said at the hospital in central Gaza.

The prosthetic "is tiring and has several downsides, but I'm able to move and walk", he said as he examined a patient.

A child with bandaged fingers and an IV tube watched as al-Saidani conducted an examination.

Al-Aqsa hospital, particularly its general ward, is crowded with patients and their relatives, many receiving treatment for injuries from Israeli bombardment.

The medical facility is located in Deir Al-Balah, where Israeli forces have frequently clashed with Hamas fighters.

Vast areas around Al-Aqsa



Palestinian paediatrician Khaled al-Saidani, who lost one of his legs because of an Israeli army attack on his home, continues to serve his duties at the Al-Aqsa Martyrs hospital in Deir Al-Balah.

Martyrs Hospital have seen heavy fighting since the war began. In recent months, this has intensified as the military expanded its offensive, which was initially focused on the northern parts of the Palestinian territory.

HEALTH WORKERS KILLED

The war in Gaza has taken a devastating toll on healthcare workers as well as medical facilities since it broke out on October 2023 following a storming of Israel by Hamas fighters.

A recent report by UN experts, quoting figures provided by the Hamas-run territory's health ministry, said at least 1,057 Palestinian health and medical

professionals have been killed in Gaza since the war began.

And on Wednesday, the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies lamented the "continuing attacks on health facilities across the Gaza Strip", which it said meant people were unable to access the treatment they need.

The Israeli military, which has repeatedly carried out deadly assaults on and around Gaza's hospitals, claims that the facilities are being used by Hamas for operations against Israeli forces.

Most of the 36 hospitals in the besieged Gaza Strip have been rendered inoperative. The territory's largest, Al-Shifa Hospital, sustained heavy damage in an Israeli military raid, and now only has its emergency ward open.

Meanwhile, doctors like al-Saidani continue to provide what treatment they can to the relentless stream of patients flooding into barely functioning facilities like Al-Aqsa Martyrs Hospital.

"Despite the prosthetic limb that makes me tired, I'm happy and comfortable doing my job, which is why I decided to return to work," al-Saidani said.

Relatives of patients are also happy that he is back around.

"My daughter suffers from kidney disease," said a woman whose child, Mira Hamid, is being treated at the hospital.

"Despite the amputation of his leg, Doctor Khaled al-Saidani follows up with his patients and provides his services. May God bless his hard work."

CRIME

Tanzania rights activist kidnapped in Kenya: Amnesty

Renowned Tanzanian rights activist Maria Sarungi Tsehai was kidnapped on the streets of the Kenyan capital Nairobi yesterday, Amnesty International and her organisation said, AFP reported from Nairobi.

Tsehai's movement, Change Tanzania, wrote on X: "We believe her abductors are part of Tanzania security agents operating beyond Tanzania borders to silence... legitimate criticism." Her "courage in standing up for justice has made her a target, but we won't let this moment silence her voice," it added. Kenya has a history of allowing foreign governments to kidnap their citizens and forcibly extradite them in violation of international law.



Residents assess the damage to a road affected by multiple earthquakes near the town of Kabanna, yesterday.

4.8-magnitude quake hits central Ethiopia

QNA
Addis Ababa

An earthquake measuring 4.8 on the Richter scale hit northeast the city of Metehara yesterday, in central Ethiopia.

The US Geological Survey

(USGS) said in a statement that the quake occurred 10 kilometres away from the city, at a depth of 10 kilometres.

No casualties or material damage due to the quake have been reported so far.

Previously, an earthquake measuring 5.5 on the Richter scale hit Ethiopia.

Syrian businesses hope for revival after Assad

Thomson Reuters Foundation
Damascus

Behind his desk in a bright marble-floored shop in the heart of the Syrian capital, Saeed has a stack of envelopes he used to stuff with cash whenever a government official stopped by.

Now the former president, Bashar al-Assad, has been overthrown, Saeed hopes he will have no more use for

them. Saeed said bribes cost his business selling pots and pans around \$40 per month, a hefty sum in a country where almost a quarter of the population lives in extreme poverty after more than 13 years of conflict.

"The Finance Ministry was a partner in this store," said the 23-year-old shopkeeper, who wanted to give only his first name.

"Whenever an official walks in and says hello, I give him an envelope," Saeed said he also had to pay for licences and permits to stay open — fees that business owners and analysts said were designed to enrich Assad loyalists.

Syria's new caretaker government, put in place by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, that ousted Assad in early December, has told business leaders it will adopt a free-market model and integrate the country into the global economy.

Assad's administration imposed strict controls on trade, using an arcane system that required traders to get permission for imports and then deposit Syrian pounds at the Central Bank in exchange for dollars.

Saeed said he constantly had to break the law because he was forced to sell his wares above the price set by the state. He pointed to a bronze cooking pot hanging above his head.

"They force me to sell it at 300,000 Syrian pounds (\$23) and it costs me 350,000 Syrian pounds to get it here," he said.

In the days after Assad's downfall, the Syrian pound strengthened against the US dollar by at least 20% due to an influx of Syrians from neighbouring Lebanon and Jordan, and an end to foreign exchange controls.



A Syrian street vendor shows traditional sweets to customers in a market at the Old City of Damascus, after the ousting of Syria's Bashar al-Assad.

Syrian economist Samir Aita said small and medium enterprises (SMEs) had big hopes for the future of their country.

"SMEs were favourably reassured by the new authorities and encouraged to develop their economic activities," he said.

That is a far cry from Assad's Syria where even uttering the word "dollar" was enough to land people in jail.

Whenever shopkeeper Ayman Wadoud wanted to know the latest dollar exchange rate, he would phone a friend and tell him a man wearing green was heading his way.

"How much will you give him?" the 41-year-old shopkeeper would ask. The answer he got would be the latest value of the Syrian pound against the dollar.

Syrians came up with a litany of

nicknames for the greenback. It became known as 'peppermint' or another phrase from a religious text.

"My life was for eating and paying bribes," Wadoud said from his dimly lit, sparsely stocked corner shop not far from Saeed's store.

He said he paid almost a third of his revenue in bribes to around four government officials who came to his shop every month. He called it extortion and said he was gripped with fear whenever one of them showed up.

"I was worried I would go to jail for selling a Mars bar," he said.

An official once accused him of giving children cancer because he was selling goods that came from neighbouring Turkey, which backed rebels opposed to Assad.

"They make you feel like you are a drug dealer," he said.

In the Christian neighbourhood of Bab Touma, Adnan said he now planned to try to turn his dreams into reality.

"I am 28 and this is the first time in my life I feel like I am working for myself," he told the Thomson Reuters Foundation, sitting in his clothing store, which was bathed in a yellow light from a window overlooking the grimy street.

Fashion was not his first choice. Adnan once owned a small shop that sold mobile phones. But when a company backed by Syria's rulers monopolised the market in 2018, he quit.

"You were only allowed to buy from them, and we would only make a dollar or two in profits," he explained.

He could have bought smuggled phones, but he said the risk was too great and many of his friends had been jailed for such activities.

"It became crony capitalism. The relatives and friends of Bashar established private companies that generated rent and revenues directly from the population, such as mobile phones or real estate," Aita, the economist said.

Adnan estimates he used to spend 25% of his shop's income on bribes and government fees.

"It was a mafia, and we operated with them on that basis: you were either with them, or you paid them." Now he dreams of travelling to manufacturing hubs like Turkey or China to import clothes for his shop. He said he can breathe now the economic playing field has been levelled.

"Before we were weak and only the people with the regime were strong," he said. "Now we are all equal."

ANNOUNCEMENT

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Trump bashes California leaders over fire response

AFP
Los Angeles

US President-elect Donald Trump sharpened his criticism yesterday of California's handling of the wildfires roaring around Los Angeles, as the state's governor urged him to come witness the damage in person.

"The fires are still raging in LA. The incompetent pols (politicians) have no idea how to put them out," Trump said on his Truth Social platform. "This is one of the worst catastrophes in the history of our Country. They just can't put out the fires. What's wrong with them?"

Democratic Governor Gavin Newsom, long a target of Trump's criticism, pushed back in an interview which aired yesterday, but also offered a conciliatory hand.

"Responding to Donald Trump's insults, we would spend another month," he said on NBC's *Meet the Press*. "Every elected official that he disagrees with is very familiar with them."

However, in a pivot, the governor added: "I called for him to come out, take a look for himself. We want to do it in the spirit of an open hand, not a closed fist. He's the president-elect."

He said he had received no response from Trump to his invitation so far.

Trump has frequently clashed with Newsom,



Trump: The fires are still raging in LA. The incompetent pols (politicians) have no idea how to put them out. This is one of the worst catastrophes in the history of our country. They just can't put out the fires. What's wrong with them?

a man seen as a possible Democratic presidential candidate in 2028, and in the past week the president-elect revived his dismissive nickname: "News-cum."

However, perhaps heedful of Trump's past threat - in a dispute over water management - that if elected he might cut federal wildfire aid

to California, Newsom tempered his own approach.

"In the spirit of this great country, we must not politicise human tragedy or spread disinformation," he wrote in a letter to Trump shared on social media.

"I invite you to come to California again - to meet with the Americans affected by these fires, see the devastation firsthand, and join me and others in thanking the heroic firefighters and first responders who are putting their lives on the line."

"That's his style... we take it seriously," the governor told NBC of Trump's threat to cut off funding.

State and local officials in California have faced searing criticism as Trump and other Republicans, as well as those whose homes have burned or been threatened, have demanded answers about the state's planning and preparedness.

The fires have so far killed at least 16 people, displaced 150,000 more, and destroyed more than 12,000 structures, according to state officials.

"Thousands of magnificent houses are gone, and many more will soon be lost. There is death all over the place," Trump said in his post.

Despite firefighters' efforts, the Palisades Fire has continued to push east toward the densely populated San Fernando Valley and the priceless collections of the Getty Centre art museum.

'Dangerous and strong' winds fanning Los Angeles inferno

Reuters/AFP
Los Angeles

US officials have warned "dangerous and strong" winds were set to push deadly wildfires further through Los Angeles residential areas as firefighters struggled to make progress against the flames.

At least 16 people have been confirmed dead from blazes that have ripped through the city, reducing whole neighbourhoods to ashes and leaving thousands without homes.

Despite massive efforts, including precision sorties from aerial crews, the Palisades Fire continued to grow, spreading east towards the priceless collections of the Getty Centre art museum and north to the densely populated San Fernando Valley.

"The winds are potentially getting dangerous and strong again," Deanne Criswell, head of the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), told CNN. "The biggest thing that people need to know is that this is still dangerous."

Firefighters were however slowly making progress in their battle to contain the inferno that has burned wide areas of Los Angeles' Pacific Palisades neighbourhood to the ground.

Aircraft dropped water and fire retardant on steep hills to stem the eastward spread of the Palisades Fire and KTLA television reported that ground crews had managed to save a number of houses, although others were lost.

"LA County had another night of unimaginable terror and heart-break," Los Angeles County Supervisor Lindsey Horvath said.

Six simultaneous blazes that have ripped across the second-largest US city since Tuesday had killed at least 16 people.

At least 16 people are estimated to be missing.

California Governor Gavin Newsom said he expected the death toll to rise.

"I've got search and rescue teams out. We've got cadaver dogs out and there's likely to be a lot more," he told NBC's *Meet the Press* programme.

Newsom said the fires are likely to be the worst natural disaster in US history "in terms of just the costs associated with it".

Active duty military personnel are ready to support the firefighting effort, FEMA administrator Criswell said in a series of television interviews yesterday, adding

the agency has urged residents to begin filing for disaster relief.

"We have the funding to support this response, to support this recovery," she told ABC's *This Week* programme.

The blazes have damaged or destroyed 12,000 structures, fire officials said.

The flames have reduced whole neighbourhoods to smouldering ruins, destroying the homes of the rich and famous and ordinary folk alike and leaving an apocalyptic landscape.

Over the past 24 hours, the Palisades Fire spread over an additional 1,000 acres (400 hectares), consuming more homes, officials reported.

Cal Fire official Todd Hopkins said that while 11% of the Palisades Fire was now contained, it has burned more than 22,000 acres.

Hopkins told a press conference that fire had spread into the Mandeville Canyon and threatened to jump into Brentwood, an upscale neighbourhood that is home to many celebrities, and the San Fernando Valley.

It also inched toward the north-south 405 freeway.

Although the Santa Ana winds that have fanned the flames had calmed some over the weekend, the National Weather Service (NWS) warned that stronger gusts of up to 70mph (110kph) could return early next week.

Local officials said they expect the strongest winds to occur tomorrow.

Red Flag warnings remain in effect for LA and Ventura counties through to Wednesday, the NWS said.

"These winds, combined with dry air and dry vegetation, will keep the fire weather threat in the area," it said. Conditions were expected to moderate by Thursday.

Evacuation orders throughout the Los Angeles area now cover 153,000 residents.

Another 166,000 residents have been warned that they may have to evacuate, Los Angeles County Sheriff Robert Luna said.

President Joe Biden spoke by phone with officials to get an update on their efforts and was briefed by aides on federal resources that were being dispatched.

His declaration of a major disaster unlocked federal assistance for those affected by the wildfires, clearing the way for the FEMA to provide support.

"FEMA is now starting to support, with the major disaster declaration, the individuals that have



A firefighting helicopter drops water as the Palisades fire grows near the Mandeville Canyon neighbourhood and Encino, California. - AFP

been impacted," Criswell said on *Fox News Sunday*, urging people to register for assistance through the website DisasterAssistance.gov

Support can range from funding for home repairs to money to replace lost food or medication, FEMA spokesperson Michael Hart said, adding that assistance can be provided within days.

Newsom also signed an executive order to reduce the amount of state government red tape needed to rebuild lost homes and businesses.

In Altadena, official Don Fregulia said managing the Eaton Fire and its impact will be a "huge, Herculean task" that he said will take "many weeks of work".

The Cal Fire website reported that the Eaton Fire was 27% contained, up from 15% on Saturday, after burning 14,117 acres.

The two big fires combined have consumed more than 36,000 acres (14,500 hectares), or 56sq miles (145sq km) - 2-1/2 times the land area of Manhattan - in one of the worst disasters in Los Angeles history.

Officials have declared a public health emergency due to the thick, toxic smoke and poor air quality, as the fires lofted traces of metals, plastics and other synthetic materials.

Progress was reported in bringing electrical power back to Los Angeles neighbourhoods.

Southern California Edison chief executive Steven Powell said there were now about 50,000 customers without power, down from more than half a million days earlier.

Private forecaster AccuWeather estimated the damage and economic loss at \$135-150bn, pending soaring homeowners' insurance costs.

Meanwhile, the sudden rush of evacuated people needing somewhere to live posed a growing problem for the city.

"I'm back on the market with tens of thousands of people," said a man who gave his name as Brian, whose rent-controlled apartment has burned. "That doesn't bode well."

With incidences of looting and a nighttime curfew in place, police and National Guard mounted checkpoints to prevent people getting into the disaster zones.

Two people were arrested near Vice-President Kamala Harris's Brentwood house for violating the curfew order after police received reports of burglary.

A handwritten sign with "looters will be shot" was hung on one tree, next to the US flag outside a house in Pacific Palisades.

However, the security checkpoints have left residents frustrated as they queue for up to 10 hours to try to get back in and see what, if anything, is left of their homes or check on family.

Prevented from entering an evacuation zone, Altadena resident Bobby Salman, 42, said: "I have to be there to protect my family, my wife, my kids, my mum and I cannot even go and see them."

The queues left some people fuming about poor management, the latest complaint from a population who are already angry over hydrants that ran dry in the initial firefight.

Teams with cadaver dogs were combing through the rubble, with several people known to be missing and fears that the death toll will grow.

A huge investigation by federal and local authorities was underway to determine what caused the blazes.

Trump prosecutor Smith resigns from Justice Department

Reuters
Washington

US Special Counsel Jack Smith (pictured), who led the federal cases against Donald Trump on charges of trying to overturn his 2020 election defeat and mishandling of classified documents, has resigned, as the Republican president-elect prepared to return to the White House.

Smith resigned on Friday from the Department of Justice, according to a court filing on Saturday to US District Judge Aileen Cannon, asking her to lift a court order that she issued blocking release of his final report.

Notice of Smith's resignation came in a footnote in the filing, which said the Special Counsel had completed his work, submitted his final confidential report on January 7, and "separated" from the Justice Department on January 10.

A former war crimes prosecutor, Smith brought two of the four criminal cases Trump faced after leaving office, but saw them grind to a halt after a Trump-appointed judge in Florida dismissed one and the US Supreme Court - with three justices appointed by Trump - found that former presidents have sweeping immunity from prosecution for official acts.

Neither case went to trial.

After Trump defeated Democratic Vice-President Kamala Harris in the November 5 election, Smith dropped both cases, citing a longstanding Justice Department rule against prosecuting sitting presidents.

In asking courts to dismiss the charges, Smith's team defended the merits of the cases they had brought, signalling only that Trump's impending return to the White House made them untenable.

Trump welcomed Smith's departure, saying on Truth Social that Smith had accomplished nothing and accused the prosecutor of "destroying the lives of many people and families".

Smith's departure is another marker of the collapse of the criminal cases against Trump, which could end without any legal consequences for the incoming president and sparked a backlash that helped fuel his political comeback.

Smith's resignation from the Justice Department was expected.

Trump, who has frequently called Smith "deranged", had said that he would fire him immediately upon taking office on January 20, and has suggested that he may pursue retribution against Smith and others who investigated him once he returns to office.

Trump in 2023 became the first sitting or former US president to face criminal prosecution, first in New York, where he was charged with trying to cover up a hush money payment to an adultery entertainment actor during his 2016 presidential campaign.

Smith's charges followed, accusing Trump of illegally retaining classified material after leaving office and of trying to overturn his 2020 loss, a campaign that sparked the January 6, 2021, assault on the US Capitol.

Prosecutors in Georgia also charged Trump over his efforts to overturn his election defeat in that state.

Trump denied wrongdoing and assailed the prosecutions as politically motivated attempts to damage his campaign.

He raised millions in campaign contributions from court-house appearances and used the cases to drive a powerful narrative that the political establish-



ment was arrayed against him and his supporters.

The Justice Department defended the cases, saying they were run by career prosecutors who operated free of political influence.

Garland appointed Smith in November 2022 - nearly two years after the Capitol attack - to lead the Justice Department's twin ongoing investigations into Trump. That move came just days after Trump announced a campaign to return to the White House in the 2024 election.

US Attorney-General Merrick Garland, an appointee of Democratic President Joe Biden, said Smith would provide a degree of independence in the highly sensitive investigations.

Garland had rebuffed earlier calls to name a special prosecutor, insisting that he could appropriately oversee the Trump probes.

Smith returned to Washington from The Hague where he prosecuted war crimes cases arising from the 1998-1999 Kosovo War.

He previously led the Justice Department's Public Integrity Section and worked in the federal prosecutor's office in Brooklyn, New York, developing a reputation as a tenacious investigator.

At the Hague, Smith won the conviction of Salih Mustafa, a former Kosovo Liberation Army commander who ran a prison where torture took place during the conflict.

The indictments, the first federal cases against a former US president, accused Trump of taking highly sensitive national security documents to his Florida resort and using false claims of voter fraud to attempt to derail the collection and certification of votes following his 2020 election loss.

"The attack on our nation's Capitol on January 6, 2021, was an unprecedented assault on the seat of American democracy. As described in the indictment, it was fuelled by lies - lies by the defendant, targeted at obstructing the bedrock function of the US government," Smith said in announcing the election indictment in August 2023, one of only two public appearances he made during his investigation.

In the classified documents case, Florida-based US District Judge Cannon, a Trump nominee, dismissed all charges in July after ruling that Smith was improperly appointed as special counsel.

Trump was convicted of falsifying business records following a trial in the New York hush money case, which was brought by state prosecutors.

The Georgia case, which also includes charges against 14 Trump allies, remains in limbo while an appeals court determines if the lead prosecutor, Fani Willis, must be disqualified for misconduct over a romantic affair with a former top deputy.

The case against Trump is unlikely to move forward while he remains president.

Venezuela's consulate in Lisbon firebombed

Portugal's government has condemned an overnight firebomb attack on Venezuela's consulate in Lisbon, amid tensions over Nicolas Maduro's contested swearing in for another term as Venezuela's leader.

"The Portuguese government roundly condemns the attack on Venezuela's consulate in Lisbon," the foreign ministry said on X, adding that security would be stepped up.

Portuguese media reported police sources as saying yesterday that a Molotov cocktail was thrown at the building, which was closed at the time.

Nobody was hurt. The Lisbon government stated that "the inviolability of diplomatic missions must be respected under all circumstances".

Venezuela's foreign minister, Yvan Gil, denounced the attack as "fascism" and thanked Portugal for its "swift intervention".

Friday saw the investiture for a third term of Maduro as president after a controversial election win in July.

The United States and much of Latin America have recognised his challenger, Edmundo Gonzalez Urrutia, as the legitimate election winner and accused Maduro of staging a "coup". - AFP



A person sleeps on the beach in front of a ferris wheel displaying a message as a tribute to the victims of the California wildfires, at the Santa Monica Pier in Santa Monica, California. - Reuters



Korea's Yoon will not attend first impeachment hearing: report

Reuters/AFP
Seoul

South Korea's impeached president, Yoon Suk-yeol, will not attend the first hearing of the trial to determine whether he is removed from office or reinstated, due to concerns about his safety, Yonhap News reported yesterday, citing his lawyer.

"The officials in the Corruption Investigation Office (CIO) and the police are trying to execute illegal and invalid arrest warrants through illegal methods, raising concerns about personal safety and mishaps," lawyer Yoon Kab-keun was quoted as saying. "In order for the president to appear for the trial, the issue of personal safety and security must be resolved."

The Constitutional Court hearing is scheduled for tomorrow.

The Constitutional Court has scheduled five trial dates spanning January 14-February 4, which will proceed in his absence if he does not attend.

The court will decide whether to uphold his impeachment or restore him to office.

The anti-graft office plans a second attempt to arrest Yoon in a criminal probe over his failed attempt to impose martial law in early December.

An arrest effort on January 3 failed after a six-hour standoff with security person-

nel at Yoon's fortified compound in central Seoul.

Yoon's lawyer did not respond to Reuters calls seeking comment.

The CIO said in a text message that Yoon's attorneys submitted notice of appointment of lawyers yesterday afternoon, without elaborating.

The president's move to impose martial law plunged South Korea into its biggest political crisis in decades and hit growth expectations for Asia's fourth largest economy.

Separately, investigators seeking to question Yoon on insurrection charges linked to his ill-fated martial law declaration are preparing another arrest attempt.

His lawyers have repeatedly said an initial seven-day warrant and the new one they secured this week were both "unlawful".

Investigators have kept secret the length of the new warrant, with local media reports saying it is longer than the previous seven days.

Rival protesters for and against Yoon have gathered almost daily in the South Korean capital since the crisis unfolded.

Yesterday more demonstrations were planned by rival camps outside Yoon's residence and on the streets of Seoul - either calling for his impeachment to be declared invalid or for him to be detained.

The president's legal team say that his



A supporter of impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk-yeol speaks in front of a screen that displays his portrait near his residence in Seoul. - AFP

guards remain on "high alert".

Yoon would become the first sitting South Korean president to be arrested if investigators are able to detain him.

If convicted, he faces prison or even the death penalty.

As the crisis goes on Yoon's ruling party has seen a bump in approval ratings.

A Gallup survey published on Friday showed the People Power Party's approval rating had risen to 34% from 24% three weeks ago.

Thai murder suspect says he acted out of 'gratitude'

AFP
Bangkok

A Thai man accused of killing a former Cambodian opposition lawmaker in Bangkok said that he committed the crime to repay someone who helped him during a tough period in his life, police told AFP yesterday.

Ekkalak Paenoi confessed to the crime on Saturday in a livestream video after being charged with premeditated murder and unauthorised gun ownership.

Lim Kimya, a former lawmaker for the dissolved Cambodia National Rescue Party (CNRP), was gunned down on Tuesday by a motorcyclist as he arrived in Bangkok by bus from Cambodia with his French wife.

Cambodian opposition figures have accused the country's powerful former leader Hun Sen of ordering the shooting, although a government spokesman has denied official involvement.

Ekkalak - who Thai media have said was a former marine - was arrested in Cambodia on Wednesday, before being extradited to Thailand on Saturday.

"The shooter said he took this job to pay a debt of gratitude to someone who had helped him during a tough period after he was sacked from the navy," said Attaporn Wongsiripreda, a senior police official in Bangkok.

Some Thai media reports said he was paid 60,000 baht (\$1,700), but Attaporn told a local broadcaster that Ekkalak claimed he did not receive payment.

Attaporn refused to elaborate. Another senior police official said on Saturday that an arrest warrant for a Cambodian accomplice had also been issued.

At a court hearing today, police will seek to place Ekkalak - who worked as a motorbike taxi driver - in pre-trial detention.

Scores of Cambodian opposition activists have fled to Thailand in recent years to avoid alleged repression at home.

Some were arrested and deported back to the country.

Hun Sen ruled Cambodia with an iron fist for nearly four decades, with rights groups accusing him of using the legal system to crush opposition to his rule.

He stepped down and handed power to his son Hun Manet in 2023, but is still seen as a major power in the kingdom.

On Tuesday Hun Sen called for a new law to label anyone who attempts to topple Hun Manet's government as "terrorists".

Manila sends coastguard ship to counter China patrols

AFP
Manila

The Philippines said yesterday that it had deployed a coastguard ship to challenge Chinese patrol boats attempting to "alter the existing status quo" of the disputed South China Sea.

Beijing claims most of the strategic waterway despite a 2016 international tribunal ruling that went against it, and there have been frequent clashes or tense standoffs between Philippine and Chinese vessels.

Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam also have claims to the waters.

Commodore Jay Tarriela, a Philippine Coastguard spokesman, said that Chinese patrol ships had this year come as close as 60 nautical miles (111km) west of the main Philippine island of Luzon.

"Their goal is to normalise such deployments, and if these actions go unnoticed and unchallenged, it will enable them to alter the existing status quo," he said.

He later told reporters Manila had deployed a coastguard ship to the area to challenge the "unlawful" Chinese patrols.

He said the deployment aimed to ensure Chinese patrols "are not normalised, and that this bullying behaviour does not succeed".

Tarriela said the Chinese coast guard deployed three vessels from its Guangdong and Hainan bases to Philippine waters between December 30 and January 11.

The South China Sea confrontations have sparked concern they could draw the United States, Manila's long-time security ally, into armed conflict with China.

Zelensky 'ready' to hand N Korean PoWs to Pyongyang

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky (pictured) said yesterday that he is ready to hand over captured North Korean soldiers to Pyongyang in exchange for the return of Ukrainian prisoners of war (PoW) held in Russia.

Zelensky's offer came hours after South Korea's National Intelligence Service (NIS) confirmed Ukraine's announcement from the previous day that it had captured two North Korean soldiers.

Kyiv said on Saturday that they had been wounded fighting Ukraine's troops in Russia's Kursk region, but at the time did not provide any proof of their nationality.

However, yesterday the NIS told AFP that it had "confirmed that the Ukrainian military captured two North Korean soldiers on January 9 in the Kursk battlefield in Russia".

In a post on X yesterday, Zelensky said: "Ukraine is ready to hand over Kim Jong-un's soldiers to him if he can organise their exchange for our warriors who are being held captive in Russia."

There would "undoubtedly be more" North Korean soldiers captured by Kyiv.

"For those North Korean soldiers who do not wish to return, there may be other options available," said Zelensky. "In particular, those who express a desire to bring peace closer by spreading the truth about this war in Korean will be given that opportunity."

Ukraine, the United States and South Korea have accused nuclear-armed North Korea

of sending more than 10,000 soldiers to help bolster Russian forces.

Neither Moscow nor Pyongyang has acknowledged that North Koreans have been deployed to fight against Ukraine.

The two countries have boosted their military co-operation since Russia launched its 2022 invasion of Ukraine.

"There should be no doubt left in the world that the Russian army is dependent on military assistance from North Korea," said Zelensky.

The Ukrainian president posted a video of an interrogation of the two North Korean prisoners of war, one of whom is lying in a bunk bed and the other is sitting up in bed with a bandage around his jaw.

One man can be heard speaking to a Ukrainian official through an interpreter, saying in translated comments that he did not know he was going to fight in a war with Ukraine and that his commanders "told him it was just training".

In translated comments, one of the men says he wants to return to North Korea. The other says he will do what he is told but, if given the chance, wants to live in Ukraine.

South Korea's confirmation yesterday added weight to Kyiv's account, confirming details released by Ukraine the previous day.

The NIS said one of the captured soldiers had revealed that he received military training from Russian forces after arriving there in November.



A drone view shows the creation by Tanyapong Jaikham. - Reuters

Thai rice fields transformed into vibrant art

Reuters
Chiang Rai, Thailand



Tanyapong Jaikham

A red dragon, a feline icon and dogs and cats cover Tanyapong Jaikham's rice paddies in northern Thailand, a living tribute in rice plants to flooding that inundated nearby areas in September, stranding thousands.

To transform more than two hectares (five acres) of land into the vibrant images, Tanyapong and his team used artificial intelligence (AI) to plot and refine the design outlines and GPS to mark precise co-ordinates for the careful planting of 20kg (45 pounds) of rainbow rice seeds.

Tanyapong, who began the work in Oc-

tober, chose the dragon and the local four-eyed, five-eyed feline icon to mark the Lunar New Year's end, along with dogs and cats trapped in floodwaters, waiting for help from the flooding of Chiang Rai and other areas in the north of the southeast Asian nation.

"We designed the dragon to carry away all the negativity, hoping this crisis would soon pass," Tanyapong told Reuters.

Since the paddy art's launch in December, thousands of visitors, including students, families and locals, have visited, finding inspiration, hope and reflection, he said.

"We couldn't make a living at all," said farmer Tanet Mala, reflecting on the flooding. "Everything was like a sea."

China's women e-sports players face up to challenges for love of the game

By Luna Lin
AFP

For women e-sports players in China, mastering the game is just the first hurdle to carving out a space for themselves in the male-dominated field.

To compete, casually but especially professionally, they must also overcome vicious trolls, gender norms, familial expectations and limited opportunities.

China has become one of the world's largest markets for e-sports.

Its teams participate in the top tier of international competitions, despite state media once dubbing video games "spiritual opium".

E-sports in China generated more than \$3.7bn in revenue in 2024 and attracted 490mn viewers to sell-out tournaments with lucrative prize pools and top players, according to an industry report by the China Audio-Video and Digital Publishing Association.

However, more than 90% of the 195 professional e-sports clubs in China are exclusively for men, by

industry insiders' estimation.

"People wouldn't recognise my skills because I'm a girl," professional e-sports player Liu Anqi, 23, told AFP after a game with her all-women club RE-girls. "I wanted to prove them wrong and earn the title of 'professional player' so they couldn't say I cheated or wasn't good enough."

Unsolicited, malicious comments follow them everywhere: their skills and strategies belittled, their voices and appearances picked on - even their choice of character or usernames can make them targets.

"If you make a mistake, they say you don't deserve to play professionally," said Wang Qianna, an e-sports player from Killer Angel Girl E-Sports Club (KA).

Even "Liooon" Li Xiaomeng, the country's most prominent woman e-sports player, was questioned about whether her boyfriend was secretly playing for her.

Women gamers also face misogynistic accusations that they use sex to get promotions.

"I just throw these insults right back at them," Wang said.

The challenges extend beyond online abuse.

Structural but often unspoken inequalities, like a lack of recruitment opportunities for women, make it harder for women players to progress.

Liu said a lower-tier club rejected her for a rookie training programme - despite her clear over-qualification - seemingly because she was a woman.

"They asked me why I only had experience in women's tournaments."

That reluctance by elite and more established clubs to train women has led many to start clubs of their own.

It was like "wanting to punch but finding no target", player Wang Fei said.

"E-sports was basically just for men," said KA coach Chen Bo, adding that official tournaments for women only began to emerge in the past few years.

Although the times are slowly changing, women players still see fewer opportunities and receive less recognition than their male counterparts.



Female gamer Liu Anqi practising gaming at her home in Linyi. - AFP

The prize pool for 2024's Honour of Kings Women's Open in December amounted to \$140,000.

By comparison, last year's inaugural King Pro League Grand Finals, the most prestigious championship for the same e-sports title, handed out \$9.6mn between 12 male teams.

Liu says most women players are still "generating electricity for love" - meaning they play for passion rather than financial gain.

And with so few examples of prominent players, those who do seek a career in e-sports find

it much harder to convince their families that what they do is worthwhile.

"I really understand nothing about this e-sports industry," said Liu's father Liu Yuanjun, who did not support his daughter's career choice at first.

He has slowly come around, but still not watched any of her professional matches.

The financial solution, Liu and coach Chen said, lies in increased investment from big gaming companies and more supportive policies from authorities.

"Only with substantial prize money can clubs invest in top players and coaches," she said.

"If the prize money is only \$135,000 or so, and there are only two tournaments a year or... none at all, who will spend the money running a club?" said coach Chen.

On a chilly December evening, Liu and her team battled rivals in the semi-final of last year's Women's Open for Honour of Kings - one of the world's biggest mobile games.

Her opponents, the blue team, inched through the last line of defence and the red bar indicating the health of her team's crystal became shorter and shorter until it exploded - game over.

Liu's team lost 3:0, but she was unfazed.

"There will be next year and many other opportunities to come," Liu explained as she processed the defeat. "What others think doesn't matter as much anymore."

"Winning a championship isn't as important as before."

"What matters is finding self-validation."

Activist Malala returns to a region in crisis



The world's youngest Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai speaks during an international summit on 'Girls' Education in Muslim Communities', in Islamabad yesterday. Right: Malala arriving to riveted attention at the summit. (AFP)

AFP
Islamabad

Twelve years after she was evacuated out of Pakistan as a badly wounded schoolgirl, Malala Yousafzai has returned to her home country at a critical time for girls' education.

"For her, it is a homecoming to a region that shaped who she is today, but also a reminder of the work still left unfinished," Yousafzai's friend and fellow rights activist Nighat Dad told AFP.

Millions more families are living in poverty while more than a third of children are still out of school, as the cash-strapped state grapples with cycles of political chaos and resurging militancy.

In neighbouring Afghanistan, the Taliban have returned to power and banned girls from studying at secondary school and university.

This weekend, 27-year-old Yousafzai was the guest of honour at a global summit on girls' education in Islamic nations hosted by Islamabad, where she called on

leaders to stand up for Muslim girls. "Her presence in Pakistan during such a time is a message to those in power: the fight for education cannot be silenced, whether it's in the Swat Valley or across the border in Afghanistan," Dad added.

In 2012 at the age of 15, Yousafzai was shot in the head while on her way home from school by a Pakistan Taliban militant incensed by an education blog she wrote.

At the time, an insurgency against the government had spread to her remote, picturesque Swat Valley and militants had ordered girls to stay home.

Across the frontier, the war raged between Nato forces and the Afghan Taliban, a separate but closely linked group from the Pakistan Taliban which flourished in the border regions.

Always flanked by heavy security, Yousafzai has made only a handful of public visits to Pakistan since her evacuation to Britain, where she made a remarkable recovery and went on to become the youngest Nobel Prize winner at the age of 17.

Since then she has frequently shared

the world stage with international leaders.

But Pakistan's relationship with her is complicated: a symbol of resilience and pride to some, and a stooge of the West to others, in a country where Islam is perceived as under threat by creeping Western values.

Sanam Maher, an author who has written about high-profile Pakistani women, told AFP that Yousafzai is a "contentious figure".

"There's a perception of her being 'handled' or 'managed', which creates distrust", she said.

"There are many who criticise Malala for her absence in Pakistan," she added. "They are indifferent to her commitment."

Still, Yousafzai retains star power in Pakistan, especially among young girls.

"Malala is an icon and a powerful voice for girls' education. She has faced violence, hatred, and criticism simply for advocating for girls' education," said Hadia Sajid, a 22-year-old media student who attended Yousafzai's closing speech in Islamabad.

"It's disheartening that things remain largely unchanged since she left, but there has been marginal improvement, largely due to the impact of social media – it's more difficult to hold back girls from their rights."

Yousafzai founded the Malala Fund with her father, once a teacher in the Swat Valley who pushed against societal norms to champion his daughter's education.

The charity has invested millions of dollars in tackling the plight of 120m girls out of school across the world.

"Pakistan is where I began my journey and where my heart will always be," Yousafzai said in her speech yesterday.

But in her native country the projects she backs in rural areas are rarely publicised.

"I still think Malala is a paradox in Pakistan," said Dad.

"While her global achievements are undeniable, officials and the public remain divided, caught between admiration and mistrust. Yet Malala's impact transcends these perceptions," Dad told AFP.

Malala to Muslim leaders: Don't 'legitimise' Taliban

Nobel Peace Prize laureate Malala Yousafzai urged Muslim leaders yesterday not to legitimise the Afghan Taliban government and to "show true leadership" over their assault on women's rights. "Do not legitimise them," she said at a summit focused on girls' education in Islamic nations being held in Pakistan's capital Islamabad. "As Muslim leaders, now is the time to raise your voices, use your power. You can show true leadership. You can show true Islam," said 27-year-old Yousafzai.

The two-day conference has brought together ministers and education officials from dozens of Muslim-majority countries, backed by the Muslim World League (MWL). Since sweeping back to power in 2021, the Taliban government has imposed an austere version of Islamic law that the United Nations has labelled "gender apartheid". Afghanistan is the only country in the world where girls are banned from secondary school and university.

Delegates from Afghanistan's Taliban government did not attend the event despite being invited, Pakistan Education Minister Khalid Maqbool Siddiqui told AFP on Saturday.

"Simply put, the Taliban do not see women as human beings," Yousafzai told the conference. "They cloak their crimes in cultural and religious justification."

Muhammad al-Issa, a Saudi cleric and MWL secretary-general, on Saturday told the summit that "those who say that girls' education is un-Islamic are wrong".

Yousafzai also highlighted the impact of wars in Yemen, Sudan and Gaza on schooling.

"In Gaza, Israel has decimated the entire education system," she said. "I will continue to call out Israel's violations of international law and human rights."

Pakistan's state PTV channel censored a portion of her speech which alluded to a mass deportation scheme by Islamabad launched in 2023 that has seen hundreds of thousands of Afghan nationals leave under threat of arrest.

"I cannot imagine an Afghan girl or an Afghan woman being forced back into the system that denies her future," she told the conference in remarks cut from the air.

Yousafzai was shot in the face by the Pakistani Taliban when she was a 15-year-old schoolgirl in 2012, amid her campaigning for female education rights.



Supporters of Alliance for the Union of Romanians and of presidential candidate Calin Georgescu attend a march in Bucharest yesterday. (AFP)

Romanian protesters push for cancelled election to go ahead

Tens of thousands of Romanians angered by the cancellation of a presidential election marched through Bucharest yesterday to demand that the ballot should go ahead and that outgoing centrist President Klaus Iohannis should resign.

In a move that polarised voters, Romania's top court voided the presidential election on Dec 6, two days before the second round. The cancellation came after state documents showed frontrunner Calin Georgescu, a critic of Nato, had benefited from an unfair social media campaign likely to have been orchestrated by Russia, accusations Moscow has denied.

The court ordered that the election be re-run in its entirety. The pro-European coalition government has yet to approve a calendar for the election, although party leaders agreed to hold the two rounds on May 4 and May 18.

Iohannis, whose term expired on December 21, will stay on until his successor is elected.

Yesterday, tens of thousands of protesters, including left-wingers and those angered by the way the way the election was cancelled, joined the protest organised by the opposition hard-right Alliance for Uniting Romanians (AUR), Romania's second-largest party.

"We ask for a return to democracy by resuming the election with the second round," AUR leader George Simion told reporters. Organisers said 100,000 people were at the protest, but riot police along the march estimated the numbers at around 20,000. Protesters waved flags and shouted "Freedom" and "Bring back the second round."

"Our right to vote was broken," said Bogdan Danila, a 43-year-old truck driver. "In addition, Iohannis was in power for ten years and did nothing for the people, while parties betrayed us, they are all corrupt. We want something else."

Some protesters carried portraits of Georgescu or Christian Orthodox icons while street vendors sold flags and vuvuzelas. "Authorities must say why they cancelled the election, we want to see the evidence," said Cornelia, 57, an economist wrapped in a Romanian flag who declined to give her last name.

"At this rate we won't be voting anymore, they will impose a leader like in the old days."

It remains unclear whether Georgescu, who opposes Romanian support for Ukraine against Russia's invasion, will be allowed to run for president again.

Toll from French tram crash rises to 68 injured

The toll from a collision of two trams in Strasbourg has risen to 68 injured in a rare accident that sowed panic near the eastern French city's main train station, authorities said yesterday.

On Saturday afternoon, a stationary tram at the underground stop at Strasbourg's main railway station was violently hit by another tram, which began to move backwards for unknown reasons.

The moving tram, which had stopped due to a traffic jam, reversed and rolled down a slope leading to the station. Both trams carried dozens of passengers.

As a result of the collision, 68 people were injured, according to the prefecture, which released an updated toll yesterday.

Around a hundred people escaped unharmed.

The collision occurred near Strasbourg's main train station, one of the busiest in France outside of Paris.

Video footage posted online showed chaotic scenes with the two trams significantly damaged, an alarm going off and people screaming.

Populist Croatia president re-elected in a landslide

AFP
Zagreb

Croatia's populist President Zoran Milanovic was re-elected in a landslide, defeating his conservative rival in yesterday's run-off, according to an exit poll.

Milanovic took 77.86% of the vote and Dragan Primorac, backed by the centre-right HDZ party that governs Croatia, 22.14%, according to the exit poll shown on state-run HRT television.

While the role of the president is largely ceremonial in Croatia, if Milanovic's wide victory is confirmed, it would be the latest setback for the HDZ and Prime Minister Andrej Plenkovic – Milanovic's political arch-rival – after a high-profile corruption affair in November.

The outspoken Milanovic, backed by the left-wing opposition, won more than 49% of the vote in the contest's first round two weeks ago – narrowly missing an outright victory.

The vote was held as the European Union member nation of 3.8m people struggles with the highest inflation rate in the euro-zone, endemic corruption and a labour shortage.

At 1530 GMT, or two and a half hours before voting was to end, turnout was nearly 35%, the electoral commission said – slightly lower than at that time in the first round.

Even with its limited roles, many Croatians see the presidency as key to providing a political balance by preventing one party from holding all the levers of power.

The former Yugoslav republic has been mainly governed by the HDZ since declaring independence in 1991.

The party "has too much control and Plenkovic is transforming into an autocrat," Mia, a 35-year-old administrator from Zagreb who declined to give her last name, told AFP explaining her support for the incumbent.

Milanovic, a former left-wing prime minister, won the presidency in 2020 with the backing of the main opposition Social Democrats (SDP) party.

A key figure in the country's political scene for nearly two



Social Democratic Party presidential candidate Zoran Milanovic casts his ballot in the country's presidential elections at a polling station in Zagreb yesterday. (AFP)

decades, he has increasingly employed offensive, populist rhetoric during frequent attacks aimed at EU and local officials.

"Milanovic is a sort of a political omnivore," political analyst Zarko Puhovski told AFP, saying the president was largely seen as the "only, at least symbolic, counterbalance to the government and Plenkovic's power".

His no-holds-barred speaking style has sent Milanovic's popularity soaring and helped attract the backing of right-wing supporters.

Yesterday, after voting in Zagreb and voicing confidence in victory, Milanovic criticised Brussels as "in many ways autocratic and non-representative", run by officials who are not elected.

The 58-year-old also regularly pans the HDZ over the party's perennial problems with corruption, while also referring to Plenkovic as "Brussels' clerk".

Primorac, a former education and science minister returning to politics after a 15-year absence, has campaigned as a unifier for Croatia. The 59-year-old also insisted on patriotism and family values. "My message is always the same – Croatia always comes first for me," he told journalists after

voting in Zagreb, adding that he would now attend a mass.

But critics say Primorac lacks political charisma and has failed to rally the HDZ base behind him.

He accuses Milanovic of being a "pro-Russian puppet" who has undermined Croatia's credibility in Nato and the European Union.

Milanovic condemned Russia's invasion of Ukraine but has also criticised the West's military support for Kyiv.

He is also a prominent opponent of a programme that would have seen Croatian soldiers help train Ukrainian troops in Germany.

"The defence of democracy is not to tell everyone who doesn't think like you that he's a 'Russian player'," Milanovic told reporters yesterday.

Such a communication style is "in fact totalitarian", he added.

Meanwhile, young Croatians voiced frustration over lack of discussion among political leaders over the issues that interest them, such as housing or students' standard of living.

"We hear them (politicians) talking mostly about old, recycled issues. What's important to young people doesn't even cross their minds," student Ivana Vuckovic, 20, told AFP.



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GULF TIMES

Nato won't back Trump's new defence spending target, will raise its sights

Nato won't heed Donald Trump's proposal for a massive hike in defence spending but will likely agree to go beyond its current target, according to officials and analysts.

The US president - elect declared on Tuesday members of the military alliance should spend 5% of gross domestic product (GDP) on defence - a huge increase from the current 2% goal and a level that no Nato country, including the United States, currently reaches.

Trump's comments - at a press conference that also generated a blizzard of headlines on Greenland, Canada and Panama - were a reminder of his focus on Nato spending during his first term and his threats not to protect allies that fail to meet the target.

Officials from Nato countries said they agreed defence spending needs to rise further but did not endorse the 5% figure, which analysts said would be politically and economically impossible for almost all members. It would require hundreds of billions of dollars in extra funding.

However, a new target is likely to be agreed at a Nato summit in The Hague in June, spurred by fears that Russia may attack a Nato country after Ukraine and by Trump's exhortations, officials said.

The key open questions are what that new target will be and whether it will be enough to satisfy Trump. Some expect Nato's 32 members to agree, after much wrangling, to a target of around 3% of GDP. But even that would be a stretch for many, who barely meet or fall short of the 2% goal now - a decade after it was set.

"It seems there will be a shift," Italian Defence Minister Guido Crosetto told Reuters. "I don't think it will be 5%, which would be impossible for almost every nation in the world right now but... it will not be two (percent), which we are already struggling to reach, but it will be more than two."

Italy, with defence spending at around 1.5% of GDP, is among eight Nato members that do not meet the current target.

Some analysts see his 5% suggestion as a deliberately high opening bid to kick off negotiations

Poland, which borders Ukraine, is the Nato member that spends the highest share of GDP on defence - 4.12% last year, alliance estimates show. It is followed by Estonia with 3.43% and the United States with 3.38%.

Nato estimated the combined defence spending of its members at \$1.474tn in 2024 - around \$968 billion from the United States and \$507 billion from European nations and Canada. The overall average is about 2.71% of Nato GDP.

Some officials and analysts see Trump's 5% suggestion as a deliberately high opening bid to kick off months of negotiations and expect he may settle for something closer to 3%.

During last year's US presidential election campaign, Trump proposed a 3% target, adding this would mean a defence budget increase of about 30% for most Nato countries.

Shocked by Russia's war in Ukraine, many European countries have ramped up defence spending in recent years. But with public finances tight, and defence spending not politically popular in some countries, it would not be easy for governments to find the extra billions that even a move to spend 3% of GDP on defence would entail.

While Trump has likened Nato defence spending to alliance membership fees, they reflect budgets set by national governments. Fenella McGerty, a defence economics expert at the International Institute for Strategic Studies think tank, said recent increases had been "remarkable" but it takes years for countries to start reaching new targets.

"Even if Europe were to continue that rate of quite extraordinary growth - in excess of 10% in real terms in 2024 - it would still take another 10 years to even get to 3% of GDP," she said.

However, many European governments say the continent should do more to defend itself and rely less on the United States.

France and the Baltic states are pushing for joint European Union borrowing to fund defence spending. The outcome of that debate may depend on next month's national election in Germany, which has so far opposed the idea.

To become more self-reliant, the European allies need to spend more to develop capabilities that the US currently provides such as air-to-air refuelling, heavy-duty military air transport and electronic warfare, said Camille Grand, who previously served as Nato's top official for defence investment. - Reuters



A no-brainer for global growth and US Jobs

By Joseph Stiglitz and Mark Weisbrot
New York

In August 2021, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) issued \$209bn to developing countries in the form of special drawing rights (the IMF's reserve asset). SDRs are much like cash, because recipient governments can convert them to hard currency. As such, they are a highly effective tool, and the IMF can and should make greater use of them.

While the 2021 issuance helped billions of people around the world, hundreds of thousands of Americans also benefited - and would do so again. Exports of US goods and services to developing countries total around \$1tn, and if these countries get an infusion of reserves, they will import even more.

This effect can be quite significant. An SDR distribution the size of the 2021 issuance would be expected to create about as many jobs in the United States in one year as the \$740bn Inflation Reduction Act did in its first year. We are talking, conservatively, about 111,000-191,000 new jobs, most of which would be in export-related areas such as manufacturing, transportation, and warehousing.

In fact, the total number of jobs created could be substantially more, since we also must account for the role of SDRs - as reserves - in stabilising developing economies. This effect would be even more important if the world economy slowed, as it seems to

be doing now. (The global growth rate has declined sharply since the last SDR distribution, from a record 6.6% in 2021 to half that today.)

Nor is this the only compelling reason to favour another SDR issuance. With so many countries facing tight budgetary constraints in the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, it could help countries make the investments needed to mitigate climate change.

And even if one puts these considerations aside, it is obvious that the world needs another SDR issuance. Many countries are facing debt crises, with the result that some 3.3bn people live in countries that spend more on interest payments than on health care, while 2.1bn people live in countries that spend more on interest than on education.

So why hasn't a new issuance already happened? It turns out that the US Treasury Department is the biggest hurdle. Under IMF rules (which were written in 1944), the 190-member organisation does not follow the principle of "one country, one vote." Instead, the US has 16.5% of the votes, and any decision to authorise a new SDR issuance requires 85% approval. The Treasury Department, which represents the US at the IMF, thus wields a veto, and as long as it brings along other high-income countries, it can push through almost any measure it wants.

What is needed for another SDR issuance, then, is America's support. Though the Treasury Department would be required to give Congress a 90-day notice, a 2021-size issuance

would not actually require a congressional vote. The outgoing Biden administration could start the process today, and Donald Trump's incoming administration need only concur with the decision.

Would Trump go along with this? It is certainly possible, considering that a new issuance would create jobs in the US. If it happens quickly, without any slowdown in Congress, it could even be distributed as early as April.

While US organised labour has already voiced support for a new issuance, Wall Street also has a big stake in the matter. US financial firms are holding tens of billions of dollars in debt-distressed developing countries' sovereign bonds, and a fresh infusion of cash into those economies could save them from potentially massive losses on their investments. As global economic growth has slowed, the bonds they are holding are more at risk than they were three years ago. Moreover, like the 2021 issuance, a new one would have zero cost to the US budget.

Of course, the biggest impact would be on the developing world. Globally, 282mn people are at risk of starvation, up from 135mn before the pandemic, and from 258mn in 2022. The additional reserves created by new SDRs would enable more imports of food and medicine, as well as investments in badly needed public-health equipment and infrastructure.

In 2021, the \$209bn SDR issuance exceeded all official development aid that developing

countries received that year. Issuing SDRs can save hundreds of thousands of lives around the world, and, unlike most aid, it comes with no debt and no strings attached. For all of these reasons, the Catholic Church and other religious organisations have consistently supported new SDR allocations.

No economists, including at the US Treasury, have offered any plausible argument that a new issuance would carry significant downside risks. The IMF's own assessment concluded that the last issuance "contributed to global financial stability," with "no evidence that allocation materially contributed to global inflation."

The Biden administration should take the advice of virtually all the economists who have looked at this question and initiate a new issuance of SDRs. Doing so would steer the IMF onto a path toward creating hundreds of thousands of US jobs and saving countless lives around the world. - Project Syndicate

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Europe CEOs must dilate on AI regulation

By Sylvain Duranton and Kirsten Rulf
Paris

Artificial intelligence (AI) reshapes economies and societies, business leaders must consider how they will work with policymakers to govern the technology's development. In the European Union, the recently adopted AI Act requires businesses to take precautionary measures depending on the risks associated with different use cases. Thus, using AI to engage in "social scoring" is deemed "unacceptable", whereas AI-augmented e-mail filters come with "minimal risk".

The success of this approach will depend on businesses contributing technical expertise and practical insights to strike a balance between promoting innovation and addressing societal concerns. Leaving regulation entirely to policymakers and a few powerful companies risks creating rules that serve only Big Tech's interests, while sidelining other industry perspectives.

In the case of the EU's AI Act, a lack of business participation in the drafting process has already left critical implementation details unresolved. For example, the law could be construed as regulating conventional statistical techniques such as linear regression, which is commonly used in the financial sector. If so, that would add an unnecessary compliance burden. Similarly, the law is ambiguous about which standard tools in drug development fall under its scope; such uncertainty could slow development and increase costs in an already heavily regulated industry.

Such issues can be avoided if CEOs from these sectors get more involved. Although the text of the AI Act is finalised, questions of interpretation, implementation, and enforcement are still evolving. The precise list of high-risk AI systems – the most important category for sectors ranging from health care to banking – may change over time, based on industry feedback.

Moreover, with rules and frameworks



being formulated in the United States and other countries, as well as through international collaborations, business leaders need to broaden their scope. They could make valuable contributions to what is quickly becoming a complex, multi-jurisdictional regulatory landscape.

Historically, public-private collaboration has been key to managing transformative technologies. During the Covid-19 pandemic, it ensured a proper balance between innovation and safety in achieving accelerated vaccine development. Similarly, the nuclear energy industry's early engagement with regulators yielded rules for small modular reactors that reduced costs, streamlined licensing, and harmonised standards, enabling companies to expand into new markets, attract investment, and improve their competitive position – a notable departure from the sector's traditionally burdensome regulatory landscape.

In both cases, regulatory frameworks benefited from real-world input. Yet in the case of AI, too many companies remain on the sidelines, heightening the risk of poorly designed rules that hinder progress. This absence of business engagement does not reflect a lack of opportunity. Only 7% of corporate participants invited to the EU's drafting process for its General-Purpose AI Code of Practice turned up, leaving NGOs and academics to dominate the discussions. Meanwhile, a recent BCG survey found that 72% of executives say their organisations are not fully prepared for AI regulation.

If you are a CEO, what should you do? Since AI regulation and deployment are primarily sector-specific processes, a first step is to align with your industry so that you are all speaking in unison. That is the best way to make yourself heard alongside tech giants that are spending more than

\$100mn per year lobbying policymakers in Brussels (with Meta leading the pack).

But AI regulation is not only about erecting guardrails and setting limits. In addition to building industry coalitions and agreeing on common AI standards, CEOs need to contribute to the full set of digital regulations that may affect their industries.

As part of its broader digital strategy, the European Commission has implemented four other major laws and introduced the concept of "data spaces". These are supposed to allow data to flow securely within the EU and across sectors, while maintaining compliance with EU laws. It now falls to industry to build these channels (with public funding). CEOs that align their corporate strategies with this emerging regime will be best positioned to capitalise on sector-specific opportunities. Executives also should identify

and establish relationships with top policymakers and other influential stakeholders in their respective sectors, and at all levels of governance. These include the European Data Protection Board and national AI regulatory bodies in Europe, as well as agencies like the Federal Trade Commission and the Department of Justice in the United States. In each case, it is best to play the long game by building stable relationships based on expertise and trust, not transactional exchanges.

To support these efforts, CEOs should have a specialised team dedicated solely to regulatory engagement. Simply rejecting proposed regulations is not an option, so defining fair trade-offs is key. Corporate leaders should be prepared to respond with clear, actionable alternatives presented in policymakers' language, not industry jargon. For example, banks could propose that assessments of creditworthiness be exempted from the AI Act's high-risk designation, on the grounds that these assessments strike an appropriate balance between innovation and accountability, and could reduce costs and make financing more available to consumers.

AI regulation is not merely a compliance exercise. Industry leaders have an opportunity to shape rules that directly affect innovation and operations. By remaining disengaged, businesses risk allowing regulations to evolve without their input, leading to frameworks that are disconnected from operational realities. We do not want an environment in which regulators have overreacted to theoretical risks at the expense of practical progress.

Just as the Industrial Revolution demanded new rules to govern transformative technologies, advances in AI call for guardrails. Business leaders have always had important contributions to make at such moments, and this one is no different. – Project Syndicate

• Sylvain Duranton is Global Leader of BCG X. Kirsten Rulf is a partner and associate director at Boston Consulting Group.

S Korea jet crash puts fast-growing Jeju Air's safety under scrutiny

By Hyunjoo Jin and Dan Catchpole
Seoul/Seattle

Before it suffered the deadliest crash in South Korea's history, budget airline Jeju Air was moving fast: racking up record passenger numbers and flying its aircraft more than domestic rivals and many of its global peers, data show.

The high "utilisation rate" of Jeju Air's planes – the number of hours they fly in a day – is not problematic in itself, experts say, but means scheduling enough time for required maintenance is crucial.

Authorities have suggested a bird strike contributed to the accident, but as part of their probe into the incident aboard Boeing 737-800, police have raided the airlines' Seoul office to seize documents related to the operation and maintenance of the plane.

"You're literally looking at everything," said aviation safety and crash investigation expert Anthony Brickhouse. "You're going to start off with their accident history and safety history. What kind of events have they had in the past, what happened, what was done to correct the issues?"

Jeju Air told Reuters that it did not neglect maintenance procedures and that it would step up its safety efforts. The December 29 crash, which killed 179 people, was the airline's first fatal accident since its 2005 founding and the first for any Korean airline in more than a decade.

The company's CEO, Kim E-bae – who has been barred from travelling overseas during the investigation – told a news conference last week that Jeju's maintenance is in line with regulatory standards and that there were no maintenance issues with the doomed jet during pre-flight inspection.

He acknowledged the airline's safety measures had not been sufficient in the past, but said improvements had been made.

The authorities have not said poor maintenance contributed to the crash and the exact circumstances behind the disaster remain unclear.

Besides the reported bird strike, authorities are looking into why the pilot may have rushed a second landing attempt after declaring an emergency, and why the landing gear was not deployed.

Investigators have recovered the cockpit and flight data recorders but have not released any details.

The country's transport regulator is inspecting all 101 737-800s in South Korea – more than a third of which are operated by Jeju Air – focusing on how often and how well the planes were maintained, among other considerations.

Although it had recorded no violations in the last two years, it was hit with more fines and suspensions



Rescuers work the wreckage of an aircraft that went off the runway and crashed, at Muan International Airport, in Muan, South Korea, on December 29, 2024. (Reuters)



Relatives of passengers that were on the plane react at Muan International Airport. (Reuters)

for aviation law breaches than any of its domestic rivals in 2020-2022, just during and after the Covid-19 pandemic, records show.

According to transport ministry data on major airlines from 2020 to August 2024, Jeju Air was hit by about 2.3bn won (\$1.57mn) in fines and the affected aircraft were kept out of operation for a total of 41 days, according to Reuters calculations based on the data.

The next-most penalized airline, T'way Air, had 2.1bn won in fines and four days of suspended operation during that period.

Jeju Air flies its planes more than any other major airline in the country, data show, and also outpaces most global peers such as Ireland's Ryanair and Malaysia's AirAsia.

Jeju Air 7C2216 was flying from the Thai capital of Bangkok to Muan in southwestern South Korea at night when it belly-landed, overshot the runway and burst into flames after hitting an embankment. The aircraft flew every day in 2024, according to flight data reviewed by Reuters.

High utilisation rates are prized in the industry as an indicator of economic efficiency, especially at low-cost carriers, experts say.

Jeju Air, which ranks behind only Korean Air and Asiana Air in terms

of passenger volumes in the country, saw record numbers from January to December 2024, according to transport ministry data.

Its monthly utilisation hours for passenger jets nearly doubled to 412 in 2023 from 2022, higher than Korean Air at 332 hours and Asiana Airlines at 304 hours, according to stock exchange filings.

T'way averaged 366 hours per month in passenger and cargo jets combined, Jin Air averaged 349 hours, and Air Busan 319 hours, according to their filings.

In 2024, Jeju Air flew its airplanes more each day – 11.6 hours – than almost any other airline offering cheap tickets and flying only narrowbody aircraft, according to data from aviation analytics company Cirium, which calculates utilisation rates differently from the earnings filings.

Only Saudi Arabia's Air Arabia flew its planes more – 12.5 hours a day. Vietnam's VietJet flew its planes 10 hours a day. Ryanair's average use was 9.3 hours, while Malaysia's AirAsia was 9 hours. China's Spring Airlines flew 8 hours a day.

"The utilisation itself is not a problem," said Sim Jae-dong, a professor of aircraft maintenance at Sehan University in South Korea. "But there could be higher fatigue for pilots, crew members and mechanics given the higher utilisation rates." – Reuters

What are the health risks from wildfire smoke?

By Nancy Lapid

Multiple massive wildfires are raging in Los Angeles, blanketing the surrounding regions under a pungent haze caused by smoke carrying noxious gases and particulate matter that pose serious health risks. Here is what you need to know about the risks of the smoke that is likely to linger not only in southern California but in other regions around the world where wildfires are burning:

What is contained in wildfire smoke? More toxic than normal air pollution, wildfire smoke can linger in the air for weeks and travel hundreds of miles.

Wildfires can burn not only vegetative materials and trees but also cities, destroying vehicles and buildings and their contents. Along with particles of soil and biological materials, wildfire smoke often contains traces of chemicals, metals, plastics and other synthetic materials.

What are the known health effects? In laboratory experiments, a given amount of wildfire smoke causes more inflammation and tissue damage than the same amount of air pollution, according to Kent Pinkerton, co-director of the Center for Health and the Environment at the University of California, Davis. Studies have linked wildfire smoke with higher rates of heart attacks, strokes, and cardiac arrests, increases in emergency room visits for respiratory conditions, and weakened immune defences. A study in Maryland identified a spike in heart and lung illnesses in 2023 that was associated with wildfire smoke originating up to 2,100 miles away in Canada.

Wildfires also have been linked with eye irritation and skin problems. The effects of exposure can persist for years. After Australia's 2014 Hazelwood Coal Mine fire, rates of heart disease remained elevated for two and a half years and respiratory illnesses for five years, researchers have reported. Wildfire exposure in pregnancy has been associated with pregnancy loss, low birth weight, and preterm delivery. A study from California found a link between wildfire exposure and cellular damage in first- and second-trimester placentas. Canadian researchers have reported that people who lived outside of major cities and within 31 miles of a wildfire in the past decade had a 4.9% higher risk of lung cancer and a 10% higher risk of brain tumours. Exposure to the 2018 Camp Fire in California was linked to

changes in cognition and brain activity six to 12 months later, possibly related to stress and trauma, according to California researchers. Data from California also show an increase in fungal infections in the months following wildfire smoke exposure, likely due to fungal spores in the smoke.

Higher exposure to wildfire smoke is also associated with higher odds of developing dementia, according to a study of southern California seniors without dementia at baseline. Even "a few really severe wildfire smoke days," with the Air Quality Index over 200, could translate into increased risk, said Joan Casey of the University of Washington in Seattle, who led the study.

What is unknown? More frequent wildfires likely linked to climate change mean people will be exposed more often and the health effects of wildfire smoke exposure over multiple seasons are not yet clear. "Repeated exposure is more likely to cause diseases, but it is hard to make predictions because it is hard to say how many fires people will be exposed to, how long the fires will burn, or what the smoke will contain," said Keith Bein of the Center for Health and Environment at UC Davis.

Researchers are also looking into the long-term effects of smoke particles in water supplies, on crops or ingested by livestock; the long-term effects of urban wildfire smoke; the effects of wildfire exposure in utero on children's neurological development and respiratory outcomes; and whether wildfire smoke amplifies the adverse effects of extremely hot weather. Nutrients carried in wildfire smoke may contribute to downwind algal blooms, which has implications for drinking water reservoirs and lake ecology, researchers warn.

What can help mitigate the risks? Experts say it is best to limit outdoor activities, especially strenuous sports, and to wear N95 masks when wildfire smoke is present. An online course with instructions for reducing outdoor and indoor exposure to wildfire smoke is available from the US Environmental Protection Agency.

Do we really need to worry? Doug Brugge, who chairs the Department of Public Health Sciences at UConn School of Medicine, said wildfire smoke can be deadly. "People should... reduce their exposure, especially if they are in a vulnerable population, such as the elderly, young children or people with respiratory diseases."



Firefighters battle the Palisades Fire, one of simultaneous blazes that have ripped across Los Angeles County, as seen from the Tarzana neighbourhood of Los Angeles, on Saturday. (Reuters)

QatarDebate concludes GCC Youth Summit 2025 with key recommendations

The QatarDebate Centre, founded by Qatar Foundation, has successfully concluded the GCC Youth Summit 2025.

Held under the theme *Dialogue and Visions*, the summit featured two days of discussions about groundbreaking ideas, focused on the future of the Gulf region and the pivotal role of youth in advancing various industries.

Organised in collaboration with the Ministry of Sports and Youth of Qatar, the strategic partner, and Msheireb Museums, the logistical partner, the event took place at Bin Jelmood House in Msheireb Downtown Doha.

The summit provided a vibrant and interactive platform for youth and experts from across the Gulf to present their visions, exchange ideas, and formulate constructive recommendations for the future of the region.

The summit's closing session was attended by HE the Minister of Education and Higher Education Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhatir, Ministry of Sports and Youth Undersecretary Yasser bin Abdul-



HE Lolwah bint Rashid AlKhatir along with other officials at the event. (Supplied picture)

lah bin Ahmed al-Jamal, and decision-makers from across GCC countries, along with members of the QatarDebate Centre, led by executive director Dr Hayat Abdullah Marafi.

During the closing session on the topic of "Our Cultural Identity in the Digital Age: Bridging Media Diversity and Cultural Heritage in Production", participants discussed at length the role of initiatives in the GCC to produce visual

and written cultural content. They highlighted the integration of technological advancements in the process while focusing on preserving Gulf identity through the promotion of linguistic heritage and regional cultural production.

The session brought together Kuwaiti content creator and host of *Atheer*, Habka Saad AlQahtani, Saudi founder and creative director of *Mauzoun* Layan Abdul Shakkor, and Fatma Alremaihi, chief

executive of the Doha Film Institute (DFI).

Al-Jamal emphasised the ministry's commitment to youth development, stating: "At the Ministry of Sports and Youth, we believe that young people are the pillar of sustainable development."

"Therefore, we strive to provide an environment that enables youth to achieve their ambitions and develop their skills," he said.

Key recommendations from the



A panel discussion at the summit. PICTURE: Ram Chand

summit, developed by the participants, emphasised the development of policies in several key areas.

These included the preservation of cultural heritage, supporting sustainability efforts, addressing climate challenges, developing the Gulf technology sector, and diversifying the economy away from reliance on oil.

Other focal points included leveraging the Gulf's political legacy

and its international policy paths, and enhancing the region's health-care system to meet the needs of its societies.

"Gulf youth are the force driving significant societal transformations today," said Dr Marafi. "In a rapidly changing world, the youth of the region are not only facing significant challenges but also creating innovative solutions that impact both their societies and the global community."

Al Jazeera conference addresses challenges of AI usage in media

The second edition of the "Al Jazeera Conference: AI in Media", organised by the Al Jazeera Media Institute, concluded yesterday with the participation of experts and specialists in media and technology.

The two-day conference hosted in-depth discussions on the role of artificial intelligence (AI) in advancing the media industry, improving content quality, and analysing big data. It also addressed the challenges posed by the use of AI in media.

Participants, including representatives from global media and technology institutions, shared their experiences with technological advancements in recent years, focusing specifically on AI applications.

Speaking to the Qatar News Agency (QNA), Director of the Cybersecurity Strategies and Policies Department at the National Cyber Security Agency, Abdulrahman Mohammed al-Shafi, emphasised the importance of engaging with technology and leveraging its potential while remaining cautious of associated risks.

He highlighted the dangers of deep-fakes, misinformation campaigns, and the spread of false information.

Assistant Professor at University of Doha for Science and Technology, Dr Amani al-Abd, told the QNA that media organisations can benefit significantly from AI tools, particularly in understanding public trends.

However, she cautioned against over-reliance on AI, noting the risks of disseminating non-credible news and data.

Dr al-Abd underscored the importance of viewing AI as a complementary tool rather than a replacement for human expertise, emphasising the need to preserve the role of human professionals in the media ecosystem.

The conference included a technical exhibition featuring companies specialising in AI applications for product and service development.

This provided attendees with an opportunity to explore the latest technological innovations in the field.

Director of Engagement and Audience Growth at Al Jazeera 360, Murad Hassan, highlighted the significance of participating in the exhibition to exchange experiences, particularly regarding AI's role in the platforms operations.

He noted that Al Jazeera 360, launched in mid-September, has introduced unique features, including its proprietary servers that allow unrestricted audience access to content.

The platform also plans to expand globally by translating Al Jazeera's archive into English and broadcasting English-language documentaries, programmes, and investigations, reflecting the networks commitment to reaching broader audiences worldwide.

On the final day, the conference featured two key sessions.

The first, titled "Artificial Intelligence in Newsrooms: Pioneering Experiences", included prominent speakers such as Director of Products and Artificial Intelligence Services at the Associated Press, Troy



Thibodeau; Reuters Imagine executive director David Wilkinson; vice-president of Artificial Intelligence for Content at ArcXP at the *Washington Post*, Joey Marburger; and chief executive of No Border, journalist, and entrepreneur Takashi Osugi.

The session showcased successful applications of AI in global media organisations, such as Reuters, the *Washington Post*, the Associated Press, and News Without Borders.

It underscored the transformative role of AI in enhancing journalistic performance and modernising media practices.

The second session explored findings from the Al Jazeera Fellowship, which focused on AI's impact on journalism, the challenges it presents, and the opportunities it offers for advancing journalistic practices.

Presentations included "Using Artificial Intelligence Techniques to Verify False and Misleading Information During the 2023 Gaza War" by Bakr Abdul Haq, founder and director of the Palestinian Observa-

tory "Tahaqaq"; "Evaluating Artificial Intelligence in Producing Political News: Original Artificial Intelligence News as a Model" by Syrian journalist Kawthar Saleh; and "Employing Artificial Intelligence in Data Journalism" by Bassam al-Shamiri, Yemeni journalist and trainer.

A special session was held to examine future challenges for media in light of increasing reliance on technology for content creation and dissemination.

Topics included addressing cybersecurity concerns and adapting educational and training curricula to keep pace with technological advancements.

The conference concluded with two workshops.

Abram Maldonado, ambassador of OpenAI, presented cutting-edge tools for multimedia video production, AI agents, and advanced video editing.

Mohamed Ajaz from Al Jazeera Media Network led a workshop on using AI within the organisation, focusing on opportunities for growth and risk mitigation. - QNA

Seminar highlights the role of Arabic calligraphy in promoting cross-cultural dialogue

A seminar organised by the Qatar International Arabic Calligraphy Competition "Al Raqim" at the Ministry of Endowments (Awqaf) and Islamic Affairs and Qatar Committee for Alliance of Civilisations at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs highlighted the impact of Arabic calligraphy in promoting inter-civilisational and cultural dialogue, focusing on artistic and aesthetic aspects that distinguish Arabic writing from other languages.

The seminar focused on the main topics of the history of Arabic calligraphy, the different civilisations it has passed through, its schools and types, the impact it has had on communication and interaction between Islamic civilisation and other civilisations, and its widespread presence as an aesthetic art form in architecture, such as in mosques, palaces, and beyond in the Islamic world and outside.

Speakers emphasised the connection between Arabic calligraphy, religious and cultural identity of Islamic nation.

They highlighted its aesthetic and artistic dimensions, which have influenced many nations and peoples that came into contact with Islamic civilisation.

Chairperson of the organising committee for Qatar International Arabic Calligraphy Competition "Al Raqim", Dr Saleh bin Ali al-Marri, stated that Arabic calligraphy represents a page of rich Islamic civilisation, opening a window for dialogue, interaction, and communication with various nations.

It has entered the languages and visual arts of Muslim societies, regardless of their different cultures.

Calligrapher of the Mushaf Qatar, Obaidah al-Banki, presented a lecture on development of Arabic calligraphy from first century of Hijra until the present day.

He explained how Muslims' commitment to writing and preserving the Qur'an contributed to the development of Arabic calligraphy, granting it aesthetic dimensions that made it a purely Islamic art and a reflection of the beauty of Islam and Islamic civilisation.

He also reviewed the schools of Arabic calligraphy from Hijaz to Kufa, Baghdad, Persia, and Turkiye, its various types, and different stages it went through.

Ahmad Fares, a calligrapher and expert in calligraphy and Islamic arts, discussed the Muslims' care for Arabic calligraphy and its use in spreading Islam.

He added that Arabic calligraphy was a spiritual nourishment for Muslims, shaping their aesthetic identity.

Just as Islam connected great ancient civilisations from China and India in the East to Andalusia



in the West, Fares said, the appreciation of calligraphic beauty united the people of these civilisations.

Islamic preacher Dr Abdel Salam al-Basyouni addressed the spread of Arabic calligraphy in architecture, noting that its significance lies in its role in preserving the Qur'an, Sunnah, and Islamic sciences.

Other arts came to serve it, he said, highlighting its aesthetics. The speakers concluded that Arabic calligraphy is a deep-rooted and authentic art that has accompanied Arab civilisation before Islam, with its true emergence coinciding with revelation of the Qur'an, which propelled both Arabic language and calligraphy to new horizons.

They commended Qatar's focus on Arabic calligraphy as part of its commitment to Arabic language and noted that "Al Raqim" competition, held as part of this seminar, is a testament to this dedication.

The Qatar International Arabic Calligraphy Competition "Al Raqim" is one of the largest competitions in its field, organised by Sheikh Abdulla Bin Zaid Al Mahmoud Islamic Cultural Centre and Museum of Islamic Art.

Its first edition took place in July last year, with prizes amounting to QR1mn. - QNA

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Qatar Kite Festival 2025 taking off at three iconic locations

By Joey Aguilar
Staff Reporter

The Qatar Kite Festival 2025 is set to be the largest and expansive edition, unfolding in three iconic locations: from the Sealine dunes to the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo, and culminating at Old Doha Port, Safe Flight Solutions chief executive Hassan al-Mousawi told *Gulf Times*.

The event organised by Safe Flight Solutions will kick off at Sealine from January 16-18, where the desert landscape will serve as the backdrop for breathtaking kite demonstrations.

"The festival moves to the desert, where kite displays will harmonise with the dramatic dunes," al-Mousawi said. "Families can enjoy workshops, kite-flying demonstrations, and other interactive activities."

Simultaneously, from January 16-17, kites of varying designs, sizes and colours will soar above Hotel Park during the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo, adding a lively spectacle to the sporting vibe.

Al-Mousawi said that Old Doha Port becomes the central venue from January 19-25.

Kites will take flight alongside cultural performances, workshops, and exhibitions, offering an exciting attraction for Qatar residents and visitors, as well as international cruise passengers.

Similar to the previous edition, this year's event is expected to provide festival-goers a picturesque view of the Doha skyline and the skies around the Museum of Islamic Art park from Old Doha Port.

Al-Mousawi said that one of the festival highlights would be a spectacular display of giant kites, including a manta ray, a falcon, and a flying dhow - a symbol of Qatar's maritime heritage.

The vibrant atmosphere will be further enhanced by a number of activations and food stalls, including candy drops and a children's carnival, among others.

"Old Doha Port was chosen as the primary venue for its ideal wind conditions, large grassy areas, and breathtaking views of the

The event will highlight eco-friendly innovations, showcasing biodegradable kite materials to promote sustainability



Old Doha Port becomes the central venue of Qatar Kite Festival on January 19-25 after its kick-off at Sealine on January 16-18. Kites will also take to the skies above Hotel Park on January 16-17, offering a colourful atmosphere during the Doha Marathon by Ooredoo. Old Doha Port also hosted the festival in 2023. PICTURE: Joey Aguilar



Hassan al-Mousawi

sea and cruise ships," al-Mousawi said. "Its rich maritime history perfectly complements the festival's celebration of Qatar's heritage, making it one of the best kite-flying locations in the world."

He noted that this year's festival will feature more than 60 professional kite flyers from more than 20 countries, including France, Belgium, and China.

Among the standout designs are China's 1,000-disc centipede kite and unique Qatar-themed kites.

Al-Mousawi also announced that the festival will highlight eco-friendly innovations, showcasing biodegradable kite materials to promote sustainability.

