

News

Saudi chess PR gambit checked by controversies

DUBAI: Saudi Arabia brushed aside rulings from top clerics to host a big money chess tournament, but the gambit to improve the kingdom's image has been jolted by regional powerplays. The landmark event and its record \$2 million prize pot come as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman looks to repackage his oil-rich nation as more welcoming - and moderate. But a refusal to give Israeli players visas, doubts whether Iranians and Qataris will come, and a no-show over Saudi Arabia's record on women's rights have all cast their shadows.

The King Salman Rapid and Blitz 2017 tournament opened on Monday, but just a day later Israel's chess federation said it was seeking compensation from the game's governing body FIDE over the rejection. Hints of a tentative political rapprochement between the ultra-conservative Sunni Muslim kingdom and the Jewish state had stirred hope that Israeli players might play. But the Saudis ultimately nixed their participation after Arab ire surged over US President Donald Trump's decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

The Israeli team was not the only one to find itself caught up in the broader chess game of Middle East politics. Players from Iran and Qatar - both locked in their own regional rivalries with Riyadh - were also a major doubt. As reports swirled that the Iranian and Qatari delegations were not granted visas, World Chess Federation FIDE insisted they could show up - even if they chose not to in the end. "Groundbreaking special arrangements have been made to issue visas upon arrival for over 200 persons, including the players of Iran and Qatar," FIDE said Sunday. "The fact that play-

ers from Iran and Qatar may decide not to participate, after consulting with their own authorities, is clearly their own individual decision," the statement added.

Beyond politics, the decision to hold the tournament in Riyadh drew criticism from some female players over Saudi Arabia's tight regulations on women. FIDE claimed success when it got the authorities to loosen up their traditional demands for full-body abayas with a "historic" dress code: high-necked white blouses. But that was not enough to convince double champion Anna Muzychuk from Ukraine, who dropped out of the tournament despite the record-busting financial incentives. "I am going to lose two World Champion titles - one by one," she wrote on Facebook. "Just because I decided not to go to Saudi Arabia. Not to play by someone's rules, not to wear abaya, not to be accompanied getting outside."

While the chess tournament might have been dented by the controversies, it has still drawn the game's biggest names, including world number one Magnus Carlsen. Saudi Arabia may be a chess backwater, but in the energy-rich Gulf region, using sporting showcases to build international prestige is a tried and trusted play. Riyadh handed FIDE a "\$1.5 million" cheque to host the event, analyst James Dorsey of the S Rajaratnam School of International Studies wrote in an op-ed for the Huffington Post. "Saudi Arabia joined the likes of Qatar and the United Arab Emirates in using sports to polish its troubled international image," he said.

Dorsey pointed out the move came despite the kingdom's current grand mufti less than two years back saying "Islam forbids chess as a form of gambling and a waste of time". Other edicts in the past have gone even further, with two religious fatwas saying chess "distracts people away from the remembrance of Allah" and that playing for money was "prohibited". Those objections appear to have been deemed outdated, as the reform push under Prince Mohammed - which includes lifting bans on cinemas and women drivers - takes precedent.

For people in the kingdom, chess may still remain a



RIYADH: Norwegian chess player Magnus Carlsen (right) attends the King Salman World Rapid and Blitz Championships on Tuesday. — AFP

very niche pursuit. The best rated Saudi Ahmed Al-Ghamdi only ranks number 13,355 among the world's active players. But the landmark tournament seems to have stirred some interest. When the state sports authority shared a live feed of opening matches on

YouTube it was filled with comments by curious Saudis. "They say chess is forbidden," one posted. "No, it's not forbidden," retorted another. "How about nobody talks about religion, okay?" a third responded exasperatedly. — AFP

Iran police take softer line on Islamic codes

TEHRAN: Iranian police are taking a softer approach to breaches of Islamic rules, opting for education over punishment, Tehran's police chief said yesterday. "According to a decision of the commander of the police force, those who do not observe Islamic codes will no longer be taken to detention centers nor judicial files opened on them," Brigadier General Hossein Rahimi said in a speech in the Iranian capital. "We offer courses and 7,913 people have been educated in these classes so far," he

said, adding that there were more than 100 counseling centers in Tehran province.

Rahimi, who was appointed in August, did not elaborate on which Islamic codes were in question or when the new guidelines were introduced. It marks a stark shift from his predecessor, General Hossein Sajedinia, who announced in April 2016 that there were 7,000 undercover morality police reporting on things like "bad hijab" - a blanket term usually referring to un-Islamic dress by women.

Figures are rarely given, but Tehran's traffic police said in late 2015 they had dealt with 40,000 cases of bad hijab in cars, where women often let their headscarves drop around their necks. These cases generally led to fines and temporary impounding of the vehicle, the spokesman said at the time. Mandatory headscarves have been key symbol

of Iran's Islamic rule since the revolution of 1979, fiercely defended by hardliners but ever harder to enforce, particularly in wealthier areas where loose and colorful scarves have become the norm.

President Hassan Rouhani, who came to power in 2013 promising a more moderate stance, has said it is not the job of police to enforce religious rules. "It is not the police's duty to enforce Islam. No police officer can say I did something because God or the Prophet (PBUH) have said so... Many religious issues are a matter of personal faith," he told a police conference in 2015. Although his comments attracted criticism from conservative clerics and supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, there has been a generally softer approach on the streets, with far fewer reports of morality police accosting women. — AFP

Saudi king, Turkish...

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quarrel broke out last week over the retweet that Erdogan called an insult. Anwar Gargash, Minister of State for Foreign Affairs of the United Arab Emirates, said there was a need for Arab countries to rally around the "Arab axis" of Saudi Arabia and Egypt. "The sectarian and partisan view is not an acceptable alternative, and the Arab world will not be led by Tehran or Ankara," he wrote on his official Twitter page.

Last week, Turkey summoned the charge d'affaires at the UAE embassy in Ankara, after UAE Foreign Minister Sheikh Abdullah bin Zayed Al-Nahayan shared a tweet that accused Turkish troops of looting the holy city of Madinah a century ago. Erdogan himself lashed out: "Some impertinent man sinks low and goes as far as accusing our ancestors of thievery ... What spoiled this man? He was spoiled by oil, by the money he has," the Turkish leader said at an awards ceremony.

Turkey's state-run Anadolu newspaper reported on Saturday that Turkey planned to rename the street where the UAE embassy is located in Ankara after Fakhreddin Pasha, the commander of the Ottoman Turkish troops at Madinah in 1916. Madinah, the holiest site in Islam after Makkah, is now in Saudi Arabia. The UAE sees itself as a bulwark against political forms of Islam, and views Erdogan's Islamist-rooted ruling AK Party as a supporter of groups like the Muslim Brotherhood, which it opposes.

Meanwhile, Erdogan yesterday called

Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad a terrorist and said it was impossible for Syrian peace efforts to continue with him. Syria's foreign ministry quickly responded by accusing Erdogan of himself supporting terrorist groups fighting Assad in Syria's civil war. Turkey has demanded the removal of Assad from power and backed rebels fighting to overthrow him, but it has toned down its demands since it started working with Assad's allies Russia and Iran for a political resolution.

"Assad is definitely a terrorist who has carried out state terrorism," Erdogan told a televised news conference with his Tunisian counterpart Beji Caid Essebsi in Tunis. "It is impossible to continue with Assad. How can we embrace the future with a Syrian president who has killed close to a million of his citizens?" he said, in some of his harshest comments for weeks.

Though Turkey has long demanded Assad's removal, it is now more focused in Syria on the threat from Islamist militants and Kurdish fighters it considers allies of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), who it says have formed a "terror corridor" on its southern border. Turkey says the Syrian Kurdish YPG militia, which Ankara views as an extension of the outlawed PKK which has fought an insurgency in southeast Turkey since the 1980s, cannot be invited to Syrian peace talks in the Kazakh capital Astana.

The YPG is the main element in a force that Washington has assisted with training, weapons, air support and help from ground advisers in the battle against Islamic State. That U.S. support has angered Ankara, a NATO ally of Washington. Despite its differences with Russia and Iran, Turkey has worked with the two powers in the search for a political solution in Syria. — Agencies

Under-30 expat ban on hold...

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a debate on the jailing of two sitting lawmakers who enjoy parliamentary immunity has been set for Jan 9.

The announcement came after opposition lawmakers threatened to grill the prime minister if the issue was not debated. He said the government should come prepared and should submit the legal justification for jailing the two MPs while they still enjoy immunity.

MPs Jamaan Al-Harbash and Waleed Al-Tabtabaei were among 67 opposition activists sentenced by the appeals court to various jail terms for storming the National Assembly building during a protest in 2011. Opposition lawmakers are demanding why the two MPs have been arrested and sent to

jail although the ruling is not final and will be looked by the court of cassation.

Member of the Assembly's human rights panel MP Abdullah Fahhad said he visited the jailed MPs and activists in the case and expressed deep regret for the jailing of the activists while "MPs who took bribes are free in the Assembly". Fahhad was referring to the issue that the activists were protesting against - a highly-publicized corruption case involving 13 current and former MPs who were accused of accepting millions of dinars in bribes for casting votes in the Assembly.

During the protests, activists entered the Assembly building and 70 of them were taken to court. The lower court acquitted them, while the appeals court convicted them. Fahhad said that he learned that police abused five of the activists in jail and complained to the interior minister, who promised to investigate the claims. Opposition MP Mohammad Hayef strongly lashed at some senior officers in the interior ministry "who

are abusing both Kuwaitis and expatriates", demanding it was high time to sack them.

Assembly speaker Marzouk Al-Ghanem said that it was agreed with the MPs to allocate two hours in the session of Jan 9-10 to debate the case of the jailed lawmakers. During the debate, opposition MP Shuaib Al-Muwaizri clashed with pro-government MP Salah Khorshid when the latter objected to the raising of the issue, demanding that all MPs should respect court verdicts.

Also during the Assembly session, which was cut short because of a lack of quorum, MP Adnan Abdulsamad called on the government to treat Sunnis and Shiites equally with regards to issuing licenses for building mosques. Abdulsamad said that it is "illogical" that there are only 50 mosques for Shiites against as many as 1,800 mosques for Sunnis, and called for fair treatment. State Minister for Cabinet Affairs Anas Al-Saleh assured the lawmaker that the government treats all citizens equally without discrimination.

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