

## Analysis

**Kuwait Times**  
Established 1961  
The First Daily in The Arabian Gulf

THE LEADING INDEPENDENT  
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF  
ESTABLISHED 1961

Founder and Publisher  
YOUSUF S. AL-ALYAN

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

EDITORIAL : 24833199-24833358-24833432  
ADVERTISING : 24835616/7  
FAX : 24835620/1  
CIRCULATION : 24833199 Extn. 163  
ACCOUNTS : 24833199 Extn. 125  
COMMERCIAL : 24835618

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

## Wary hope for French families awaiting returns from Syria

After years of waiting for his son to come home from Syria, Jacques Le Brun is cautiously hoping that day may be nearing - along with the chance to meet three grandchildren who have never seen France. "He'll certainly go to prison, and he knows that. He probably even deserves it a little," Le Brun says at the family home in Labastide-Rouairoux, a village tucked in a forested valley of southern France.

The important thing, he says, is that Quentin makes it home alive after taking his wife and infant daughter in 2014 to join the Islamic State group in Syria - where he later appeared in a chilling IS propaganda video burning his passport. About six weeks ago Le Brun learned that his son, now 30, was stranded near the Euphrates river in the last pocket of IS-held territory, besieged by Kurdish forces and targeted by coalition airstrikes.

Then last month reporters from the magazine Paris Match found Quentin and his family as they were surrendering, raising the possibility they could be among the roughly 130 French nationals who may soon be repatriated to France from Kurd-controlled prison camps in northern Syria. The government is weighing the move after President Donald Trump announced in December that he would withdraw US troops from the war-torn country.

That prompted fears of a security vacuum in the north of Syria, in particular if Kurdish forces abandoned their surveillance of the captured fighters to defend against a potential assault by Turkey, which considers the Kurds a terrorist threat. For Quentin's family, along with dozens of others across France, it's a chance to be reunited after years of anxiety over his fate. "Our life has changed," said his sister, asking not to be identified by name. "Before we woke up each morning wondering if they were alive. It was hell."

### 'Glimmer in the night'

French government sources say 70 to 80 children are among the citizens being held by Kurdish forces, and around 15 women - half of whom are considered "dangerous". An additional 250 men, as well as accompanying wives and children, are thought to be elsewhere in Syria. An estimated 300 French militants are thought to have been killed during the years-long coalition fight to eradicate IS' self-proclaimed caliphate.

France had long insisted that captured French fighters must be tried locally, either in Syria or Iraq, a hard-line stance which nodded to fears that returned fighters could stage attacks on French soil upon their release from prison. "We, their families, just want them to be able to return to France and be judged fairly, sentenced only for what each of them has done - and not have to pay for all the IS crimes," said the mother of a 30-year-old woman now in Syria with her four children, aged 10 months to nine years old.

While calling their potential return "a glimmer in the night", she worries they could be killed before any decision is made to bring them back. "We've heard of at least four French women killed in the past few months, along with their husbands and 18 children in total" during the coalition bombings, the woman said. Like several family members who spoke with AFP, she asked that her name be withheld, fearing harassment or ostracization in a country deeply scarred by the wave of deadly jihadist attacks since the Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan massacres of 2015.

### 'Get them away from all that'

Despite reports that repatriations could begin in the coming days, Jacques Le Brun says he has had "no information, no official contact" from French authorities. The 58-year-old retired truck driver says he is still trying to understand how his son, who later took the name Abou Osama Al-Faransi, became caught up in extremist Islamic ideology. Quentin began attending a local mosque before falling in with the "Artigat" network, named for a village near the southwestern city of Toulouse.

The village was the home Olivier Corel, a Syrian-born Salafist imam suspected of mentoring several militants including Mohamed Merah, who was shot dead by police after he murdered seven people, among them a rabbi and three Jewish children, in Toulouse in a 2012 killing spree. Albert Chennouf-Meyer, father of one of Merah's seven victims, has called on President Emmanuel Macron to keep the jihadists out. "Mr President, you will in the coming weeks (...) bring back 130 French jihadists, some of whom have the blood of our children on their hands," he said in an open letter seen by AFP on Saturday. "I intend to use all my strength against this criminal decision," he added.

Le Brun wants to believe his son wasn't involved in any violence or killings, but the release of the IS propaganda video has been a heavy burden on his family. Quentin's mother finds it hard to hold down a job, and his youngest brother has been hounded by high school classmates. Many in the village make no secret of their hostility to Quentin's return. "It's not necessarily a good idea to bring back these jihadists, they might start again," said Laurent Montagou, a 53-year-old pizzeria owner in Labastide-Rouairoux. "They'll scare people if they come back here." Jacques Le Brun knows the suspicions will be hard to bear, but he is determined to recover his grandchildren and "get them away from all that". — AFP



Commuters are seen in a filled commuter train heading for the city on Jan 29, 2019 in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. — AFP

## Zimbabwe's only commuter train is packed

Crushing through townships, maize fields and scrubland as the sun rises, Zimbabwe's only commuter train is cheap and reliable - two qualities that its passengers cherish in a downwards-spiralling economy. Each morning sleepy travellers walk to the tracks and clamber aboard before the train leaves the Cowdray Park settlement at 6:00 am on its 20-km journey into Bulawayo, the country's second city.

The hugely popular service was only revived in November after being suspended for 13 years as the rail network collapsed under President Robert Mugabe, who ruled for nearly four decades until ousted in 2017. At Cowdray Park, there is no platform, and no station except for a makeshift ticket office made out of an old carriage sitting in a field. En route, the train stops several times in the open to pick up more passengers who stream in from surrounding homes, climbing up the steps and squeezing into 14 packed carriages. Soon after 7:00 am, it pulls into Bulawayo's grand but dilapidated station and disgorges about 2,000 workers, uniformed school children and other travellers into the city center, ready for the day ahead.

### Infrastructure investment

"The prices for kombis (minibuses) went up to two dollars, and that's just too expensive," said Sipeka Mushoma, 61, a heavy vehicle driver at a Bulawayo steel manufacturer, who managed to grab a precious early seat. "The train is 50 cents. My children have to get the kombi to go to school, but this saves me a lot of money to buy vegetables and bread. Zimbabweans are hurting badly, some of us are really starving now."

The government last month announced that fuel prices would more than double - triggering violent protests, a security crackdown and further pressure on minibuses to hike prices. Bulawayo once had two commuter train lines carrying workers in from either side of the city, while the capital Harare had three lines - all of them dubbed "Freedom Trains" as they allowed passengers to avoid higher road costs. The services were scrapped around 2006, and the Cowdray Park line is the only one to be re-launched in a \$2.5-million project funded by the state-owned National Railways of Zimbabwe (NRZ).

Mugabe's successor President Emmerson Mnangagwa has backed railway investment as part of his plans to turn around the economy. But the outcome of the commuter train is a rare success in his efforts, which have struggled to produce concrete results. "The president and new government are very supportive of the railways," said Nyasha Maravyanika, the railways' press relations chief, adding that talks were under way for an international consortium to fund a full-scale re-launch of the whole rail network.

"We had to re-furbish old carriages to get this service going, and it has been a huge success," Maravyanika told AFP. "The old commuter trains were suspended as the coaches and the signalling became more and more rundown. People know that when they are on the train, they are on their way to work," he added. "It is an answer to their transport blues. We are here to attract commuters as kombi fares rise - that's our job."

### Former 'heartbeat' of the region

Maravyanika says just \$10 million would put the

other four commuter lines back in operation. "We hope to re-open the other Bulawayo line next and, despite all the challenges, revive Zimbabwe's railways," he said. "They were the heartbeat of the southern African rail network." Zimbabwe's rail network - which includes the dramatic line across the Victoria Falls into Zambia - was built under British colonial rule, and at its peak in the 1990s had 600 locomotives and 3,000 passenger carriages.

Today it has less than 100 locomotives and a few hundred carriages, running a threadbare schedule between major cities, and a much-reduced freight service carrying sugar, chrome and quarried stone. The main line between Harare and Bulawayo - opened in 1907 - was once electrified, but vandalism stripped it of its copper cables, signalling system and track motors. Today diesel-powered trains on the line are often heavily delayed and drivers are often forced to communicate using text and WhatsApp messages, Maravyanika said.

On the Bulawayo commuter train, some windows on older carriages are even still marked "RR" for "Rhodesian Railways" - Zimbabwe's name before independence in 1980. Rattling along on her return journey home, Ashley Sinda, 40, was weary after a long day working as a cleaner at a pharmaceutical company. "I live 300 metres from the last stop, so it is easy for me," said the single mother of two, sitting among nurses, teachers, office workers staring at mobile phones and laborers who swilled cheap local beer. "It is impossible to afford the kombis, even if they are faster," she said. "I am glad of this train, it is a good thing for us." — AFP

## Turks and Caicos overwhelmed by Haitian influx

Handmade wooden boats and the artisans who craft them line a lengthy stretch of Haiti's north coast. Under a sun rising over water as smooth as glass, it makes for an idyllic vignette. Ask any of the boat builders what their vessels' purpose is and "fishing" is the standard response. But the port district of Cap-Haitien is a hub for a people smuggling trade that has claimed numerous lives and plunged the nearby British territory of Turks and Caicos into chaos.

"We have begged the UK to help. I don't think they realize how urgent the situation is," said the archipelago's housing minister, Goldray Ewing. "As a British territory we don't have our own defense force. We told them it's an invasion and a national crisis. There's no other way to describe it."

Each year, thousands of young Haitians try to escape the poorest economy in the Caribbean, where 60 percent of the population of 11 million people live on less than \$2 a day. High inflation, endemic corruption and a perilous drop in the value of the currency have further immiserated the locals. Turks and Caicos officials say almost all of the boats landing in the island chain depart from Cap-Haitien, 200 km away. With migrants willing to pay anything from \$300 to \$1,000 to reach the territory of 35,000 people in the hope of a better life, this is big business. At least five boats have arrived in the last month, carrying 50 to 200 people each. But journeys aboard these rickety, overcrowded vessels too often end in disaster. A boat that sank on Feb 2 near the Bahamas, which is also struggling with an influx of undocumented migrants, killed at least 28 people.

### 'Existential threat'

Turks and Caicos officials say inadequate resources limit them to intercepting just half of the boats that arrive. Several thousand Haitians are thought to be hiding in the bush and in shantytowns across the island of Providenciales, the chain's tourism hotspot, with a population of 24,000. Undocumented arrivals are nothing new but recent unrest in Haiti and new job opportunities in Providenciales have triggered a dramatic surge. Ewing, the housing minister, says repatriation costs for a boat carrying 187 people that



Captured boats reportedly used by Haitian immigrants litter a cove in Turks and Caicos on Jan 28, 2019. — AFP

landed on the island of Salt Cay on January 17 topped \$300,000. Opposition leader Washington Miskick argued the Haitian government could not be counted on to stem the flow of migrants - while noting that its economy benefited from the remittances they send home. "The situation poses an existential threat to our islands and our way of life," he said.

But the Haitians prepared to make the treacherous voyage say it is their only hope for a better future. "I need work," said one Cap-Haitien man, "and I know people there who can help me find it." A British government delegation is due to visit next month to assess maritime security needs, a spokesman for Governor John Freeman told AFP, adding that London deployed the Royal Navy last year, funded helicopter patrols and paid for repairs to the radar system.

### Seeking a better life

President Donald Trump's effort to end "temporary protected status" for Haitians who fled the 2010 earthquake, currently being challenged in court, has sparked fears over a possible escalation of the crisis. Meanwhile the 14 shantytowns across the Turks and Caicos grow every day, said Ewing. Newcomers cause difficulties for long-term residents, one shantytown dweller said. "The area gets flooded with people coming in fresh off the boats and they're not always friendly," he told AFP. "They sometimes bring guns with them - it's frightening for us. People just keep coming."

Efforts to identify people who are on the islands illegally include a police practice of stop-and-search, along with visits to workplaces to view employees' papers. Since April 2016, anyone caught harboring illegal immigrants has faced a \$20,000 fine and four years in prison. Some Haitian officials have lamented a lack of communication with Turks and Caicos authorities. — AFP

## Modest praise for US reform of visa program

The Trump administration's new rules for a US visa program widely used for technology workers are getting cautious praise from Silicon Valley amid surging demand for high-skill employees. The H-1B visa program, which admits some 85,000 foreign nationals each year, will give higher priority to people with post-graduate degrees from US universities, under a final rule published in January by the Department of Homeland Security.

"US employers seeking to employ foreign workers with a US master's or higher degree will have a greater chance of selection in the H-1B lottery" under the new rule, said Francis Cissna, director of US Citizenship and Immigration Services, in announcing the change on Jan 30. The changes come with the tech industry pleading for more immigrants to fill key skilled positions, and responds in part of concerns that the program has been exploited by some tech giants and outsourcing firms to depress wages and displace US employees.

"The changes are, on the whole, a positive step in the right direction," said Todd Schulte of the immigration reform group FWD.us backed by Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg, Microsoft founder Bill Gates and others in the industry. Ed Black of the Computer & Communications Industry Association, which represents several major tech firms, said the program has not always been administered as well as it could have been. "We are hopeful something in the newly announced revisions will improve efficiency, but it's too soon to say what the impact will be in practice," Black said.

The H-1B program, in place since 1990, has been used for a variety of skilled occupations including nurses and pastry chefs, but in recent years two-thirds have been for computer-related jobs and three-fourths of the employees have come from India. Because visa-holders can stay up to six years, the number currently living in the United States is estimated at more than half a million.

### Pressing needs?

Ron Hira, a Howard University political scientist who has followed the visa program for two decades, said it has been exploited by some large tech companies and outsourcing firms to keep wages down and in some cases displace American employees. Hira said the visas have not been allocated to the "most pressing needs" of the labor market and that "the typical H-1B employee is working in a back office through an outsourcer". He said that the reform "inches us a little closer to a better quality pool, but it's still not selecting the 'best and brightest' - you could reform it much better."

Hira said the system has been disappointing up to now because of large outsourcing firms that flood the system with thousands of applications, and some Silicon valley firms that use it to keep wages down. A US Labor Department complaint alleged that Oracle discriminated against some Americans by bringing in large numbers of H-1B visa holders, who were paid less than US nationals.

The new DHS rule reverses the order of two lotteries for H-1B visas, by selecting the first 65,000 from the pool of all applications, and subsequently choosing 20,000 with advanced degrees. Officials expect this will mean an increase of some 5,000, or 16 percent, for advanced degree-holders. Hira said this potentially changes the mix of visa holders to positions with higher pay and skill levels. — AFP