

OMAN  
Observer  
دَائِلْي



VOL. 44, NO. 45  
PAGES 12 | BAISAS 200

SUNRISE 06:48 AM  
PRAYER TIMINGS  
FAJR 05:27 AM  
DHUHR 12:14 PM  
ASR 03:15 PM  
MAGHRIB 05:35 PM  
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STAR  
OF THE DAY  
SALEM  
AL DAWSARI

10

SAUDI BEAT  
IRAQ TO SET  
UP OMAN  
SEMIFINAL

INBRIEF

JABAL SHAMS  
FREEZES AT 6°C

Jabal Shams stands out as a must-visit destination for tourists during this time of year, offering a chance to witness the occasional hailstorm.

VINOD NAIR  
MUSCAT, DEC 28

Jabal Shams currently holds the title of the coolest destination in the Sultanate of Oman, with maximum temperatures around 6°C and minimum hovering near 0°C. Saiq ranks as the second coldest, with temperatures ranging from 15°C during the day to 5°C at night. In the Wilayat of Al Jabal Al Akhdhar, temperatures have also dropped to single digits and sub-zero levels, as noted by some visitors.

While most governorates enjoy pleasant night-time temperatures under 20°C, Jabal Shams stands out as a must-visit destination for tourists during this time of year, offering a chance to witness the occasional hailstorm.

Adding to its allure, the Al Dakhiliyah Governorate recently unveiled the ambitious Jabal Shams Grand Canyon project to enhance tourism in the wilayat. This project features a recreational area, a tourist resort, a zip line, and a hiking trail.

Among its highlights is a stunning 97-metre-long, 2.5-metre-wide glass walkway, designed to give visitors the sensation of floating in the air. Other attractions include geological exhibitions, a rock garden and an adventure centre.

Oman condemns burning  
of Kamal Adwan Hospital

Gaza hospital shut after Israeli raid, director held

THE SULTANATE OF OMAN has condemned the Israeli occupation forces' continued aggression against the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the burning of Kamal Adwan Hospital, forcing patients and medical staff to evacuate by force.

Oman's Foreign Ministry statement said that such acts show their disregard for all international demands for a ceasefire, protection of civilians and respect for international humanitarian law.

The ministry reiterated the Sultanate of Oman's firm position in achieving just peace and establishing an independent Palestinian state under the provisions of international law. The Israeli raid forced a major hospital in northern Gaza out of service and led to the detention of its director, the WHO and health officials said on Saturday. The assault on Kamal Adwan Hospital has rendered the facility 'useless', further worsening Gaza's severe health crisis, the Palestinian territory's health officials said.

"This morning's raid on Kamal Adwan Hospital has put this last major health facility in north Gaza out of service. Initial reports indicate that some key departments were severely burnt and destroyed during the raid," the World Health Organisation said overnight on X, referring to the Israeli operation that began in the early hours of Friday.

The WHO said 60 health workers and 25 patients in critical condition, including

Wounded Palestinians evacuated from Kamal Adwan hospital in northern Gaza, after Israeli forces raided the medical facility, arrive at Al-Ahli al-Arabi hospital. — Reuters

some on ventilators, reportedly remain in the hospital. Patients in moderate to severe conditions were forced to evacuate to the destroyed, non-functioning Indonesian Hospital, the UN health agency said, adding it was "deeply concerned for their safety." Gaza's health ministry reported that Israeli forces detained Kamal Adwan Hospital's director, Hossam Abu Safiyeh, along with several medical staff members. On Thursday, Abu Safiyeh said five staff members of the

hospital had been killed in an Israeli strike near the facility. The army had ordered 350 people to leave Kamal Adwan for a nearby school sheltering displaced families. They included 75 patients, their companions and 185 medical staff. Abu El-Rish said soldiers were transferring patients and medical staff to the Indonesian Hospital, which had already been put out of action by heavy damage and had been evacuated by Israeli forces a day earlier. — Agencies



Voting for Oman's  
Promotional Brand  
www.omanbrand.om

What is the campaign?

The Sultanate's country-wide Oman Promotional Visual Identity. Voting Campaign is dedicated to selecting a visual identity for the long-term nation brand strategy aimed at showcasing Oman's inspiring story to the world.

Why this campaign?

After 12 months of extensive research, the campaign aims to enhance Oman's promotional positioning through a brand inspired by diverse and innovative Omani design elements.

Voting for Oman's Promotional Brand

Voting Mechanism

1 Visit [omanbrand.om](#)

2 Select your preferred logo from the available options

3 Enter your information

4 click on "Vote"

Next Step >>

The winning identity will be announced early 2025

The winning logo will become the official emblem of Oman's promotional visual identity

Vote Now!

  
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www.omanbrand.om

OMAN

SHORT TAKES



The ‘Challenge and Discover,’ event celebrated adventure tourism

‘CHALLENGE AND DISCOVER’ TREK CONCLUDES

**WADI BANI KHALID:** The exhilarating mountain hike event, ‘Challenge and Discover,’ concluded on Saturday, marking another milestone in the executive programme for Sur, the Arab Tourism Capital 2024. Organised by the Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT), the event celebrated adventure tourism while emphasising security, safety, and the exploration of Oman’s stunning natural trails.

Participants embarked on a breathtaking journey that began near the water ponds in Maqal village, Wadi Bani Khalid, situated at an altitude of 640 metres. The trail offered a progressive climb, reaching the highest peak overlooking Wadi Bani Khalid, spanning a distance of 4 to 5 kilometres. The journey continued on moderate mountain paths, leading to the camping point in Halut village, located at 2,050 metres above sea level. The first leg covered an impressive 20 kilometres.

On the second day, hikers ventured onward from Halut village to the Niyabat of Tiwi in the Wilayat of Sur, traversing a challenging yet rewarding 30 kilometres.

This event underscored the Ministry’s dedication to promoting adventure tourism and preserving ancient mountain trails while ensuring the highest safety standards. By spotlighting Oman’s diverse geography, geological marvels, and cultural richness, the initiative encourages the growth of specialised adventure tourism companies. It also fosters awareness of Oman as a premier destination for adventure enthusiasts.

With initiatives like ‘Challenge and Discover,’ Oman continues to enhance its reputation as a hub for adventure tourism, offering unforgettable experiences amidst its stunning natural landscapes. — ONA

MOH TO CONDUCT NATIONAL SURVEY ON NCDS

**MUSCAT:** The Ministry of Health (MoH) on Sunday launches the National Survey on Non-Communicable Diseases in all governorates of the Sultanate of Oman. The survey targets citizens and residents aged 15 years and above and will be carried out in two phases.

The Ministry of Health banks on the confidence of residents and residents and their response for the success of the survey which would enhance the health of current and future generations. The MoH calls on the public to ignore rumours about the health teams in charge of implementing the survey urging them to obtain correct information from its official sources. — ONA

Oman hosts first Asian Arab Business Forum

KABEER YOUSUF  
@kabiyousef

**MUSCAT:** The First Asian Arab Business Forum 2024 brought together experts, diplomats and representatives from the Ministry of Commerce, Industry and Investment Promotion (MoCIIP) to explore new avenues of international cooperation and strengthen economic ties between Asia, the Arab world and other global regions.

Organised by the Asian Arab Chamber of Commerce (AACC) in collaboration with the Indian Economic Trade Organisation (IETO), the forum was held at the College of Banking and Financial Studies (CBFS) in Muscat.

It spotlighted Oman’s pivotal role as a strategic global hub for fostering partnerships and unlocking opportunities across key sectors such as renewable energy, technology, logistics, tourism and agriculture.

Distinguished dignitaries graced the event, including Nasima bint Yahya al Balushiyah, Director General of Invest Oman; Noralizan Abdul Momin, Ambassador of Brunei Darussalam to Oman; Dr Asif Iqbal, Global President of AACC; Dr Santosh Geever, Chairman of AACC; and Dr Elias Nikolakopoulos, Honorary Consul of Greece to Oman.

Together, they championed a vision of economic, diplomatic and cultural collaboration, placing Oman at the centre of regional and global connectivity.

Nasima al Balushi highlighted Oman’s unique geographical location and its longstanding ties with Asia and the Arab world, emphasising the nation’s growing significance in global commerce.

“Oman is not just a destination for business but a gateway for global trade,” she said. “Through platforms like this forum, we aim to showcase Oman’s investment-friendly policies and position our nation as a critical link in the global economic chain.”

The forum underscored the synergy between Asia’s dynamic economies and the Arab world’s strategic resources, offering untapped potential for inclusive growth.

Ambassador Noralizan Abdul Momin of Brunei Darussalam remarked, “By aligning our shared interests, we can drive inclusive growth that uplifts all stakeholders and



The first Asian Arab Business Forum spotlighted Oman’s pivotal role as a strategic global hub.

contributes to global economic stability.”

Expanding the conversation beyond Asia and the Arab world, the event also fostered connections with Europe, particularly Greece.

Dr Nikolakopoulos emphasised Oman’s role in bridging East and West, stating, “This event has reaffirmed Oman’s role in bringing together diverse economies and fostering partnerships that go beyond borders. The relationships established here today will strengthen economic and cultural ties that span continents.”

Dr Iqbal, Global President of AACC and IETO, expressed his commitment to Oman’s

global trade leadership. “The Asian Arab Business Forum is just the beginning of a journey towards a more interconnected world,” he said, announcing a series of upcoming initiatives to maintain momentum in fostering collaboration.

The forum marked a transformative milestone for Oman, paving the way for partnerships that foster sustainable growth, knowledge exchange and mutual prosperity. With the AACC’s commitment to promoting trade, investment and cultural ties across 32 countries, Oman is poised to solidify its position as a global centre for commerce, diplomacy and cultural exchange.

‘Will Makes Change’ campaign concludes in Dhofar

**SALALAH:** The six-day awareness campaign, ‘Will Makes Change,’ organised by the Omani Association for Persons with Disabilities in Dhofar Governorate, concluded on Friday in Itin Plain, Salalah. The initiative was conducted in collaboration with government and civil entities across Salalah, Taqah, and Mirbat.

Amal bint Ahmed al Ibrahim, Head of the Social Committee of Dhofar’s Municipal Council, emphasised the importance of recognising the abilities and creativity of people with disabilities, calling them a source of inspiration and strength in building society.

The closing event featured a community marathon promoting social integration, an inspiring success story of a person with disabilities, a theatrical performance, and poetry.

An awareness exhibition showcased



The closing event featured a community marathon promoting social integration.

handicrafts by productive families and contributions from Al Wafa Centres, the Omani Association for Persons with Disabilities, and Al Noor Association for the

Blind. The ceremony, sponsored by Shaikh Tariq bin Khalid al Hinai, Wali of Taqah, concluded with honours for participants and contributors. — ONA

New discoveries at Al Baleed Archaeological Site in Salalah

**SALALAH:** The Directorate-General of Heritage and Tourism in Dhofar Governorate has presented the findings from the seventh season of archaeological work at Al Baleed Archaeological Site.

The results were showcased in a multimedia session held at Al Baleed Archaeological Park in Salalah.

Dr Alexia Pavan, Deputy Head of the Archaeological Mission from the University of Naples, Italy, led a visual presentation detailing the latest discoveries and survey work.



The findings at Al Baleed offers new insights into the archaeological site’s historical significance

She highlighted the excavation efforts south of the fort and Al Baleed Mosque, near Al Farda area, and the road leading to the site’s southwestern gate.

Among the notable discoveries were a building with several small rooms, areas used as stoves and



numerous ovens. Additionally, quantities of shells and various archaeological artefacts were uncovered, including items locally made and others originating from India, Africa and China.

These findings date back to the 16th to 18th centuries, offering new insights into the site’s historical significance. The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism has been collaborating with the University of Naples on archaeological studies and excavations at Al Baleed for

seven seasons.

This season’s work began in early December, with plans underway to implement restoration projects for Al Baleed Fort and Al Baleed Mosque within the archaeological park.

The presentation was part of the Directorate-General of Heritage and Tourism’s 2024 programme to showcase updates from ongoing archaeological missions and research, shedding light on the rich history of Dhofar Governorate.

— ONA

SHORT TAKES



The exhibition aimed to promote local talent and revitalise the historic Al Aqr Wall

NIZWA EXHIBITION  
SPOTLIGHTS  
ENTREPRENEURS

**NIZWA:** Last Thursday, Al Aqr Wall in Nizwa hosted a vibrant three-day exhibition showcasing products by 24 entrepreneurs, four student companies, and artisans. Organised by the Directorate of SME Development in Al Dakhiliyah Governorate, in collaboration with Bawareq Nizwa International Investment Company, the event aimed to promote local talent and revitalise the historic site.

Visitors explored a variety of products, including handmade crafts, incense, perfumes, dates, honey, traditional foods, and beverages. The exhibition provided a platform for entrepreneurs to market their products and for student companies to present innovative ideas.

Inaugurated by Ahmed bin Saleh al Rashdi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs, the event attracted a large audience, highlighting its role in supporting small businesses and preserving Nizwa’s cultural heritage.



The programme revolved around enhancing social skills, digital proficiency, and promoting sustainability

OMANI YOUTH SHINE  
AT GULF BRIDGES  
PROGRAMME

**SHARJAH:** The Ministry of Culture, Sports and Youth (MoCSY), representing the tanate of Oman, participated in the inaugural edition of the ‘Gulf Bridges — Gulf Youth Leadership Programme’, held in Sharjah, UAE. This pioneering programme aims to cultivate a generation of Gulf youth who are conscious, impactful, and equipped to contribute to shaping the future.

Designed for Gulf youth aged 15 to 18, the programme offers a platform to foster leadership skills within a framework that aligns with the GCC countries’ visions. It seeks to empower young leaders to build a sustainable future while reflecting the aspirations of the region’s governments. The initiative is spearheaded by the Rubu’ Qarn Foundation for Creating Leaders and Innovators, emphasising the development of well-rounded personalities primed for future leadership roles. — ONA

STAFF REPORTER  
MUSCAT, DEC 28

**MUSCAT:** Arun Thadhaagath, a daring cyclist from Kerala, is on an extraordinary solo journey across the globe. Having started his adventure from the Paris Olympics venue, he has already pedaled through numerous countries in Europe and the Middle East, including Switzerland, Germany, Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, Türkiye

and the UAE. Now, he finds himself in Oman, where he plans to stay for the next month before continuing his travels across Europe, Asia and Africa. Oman plays a crucial part in Arun’s route, marking a significant stop as he heads towards the next stages of his journey. “I am excited to experience Oman’s culture and landscapes, which are truly unique,” Arun shared. Reflecting on his time in Oman, Arun expressed deep



Arun Thadhaagath from India cycled to Oman last week.

appreciation for the hospitality extended by the Omani people. “The kindness of Omanis has been overwhelming. Whether cycling through bustling towns or remote villages, I was always greeted with smiles, offers of food, and shelter. Oman has some of the best roads in the world and I would certainly love to return,” he said. His travels are made possible by a bank loan, a bold move inspired by the idea that people typically take loans for cars

or homes — but why not invest in a life-changing adventure? “This is not just a trip; it’s a lifelong investment in experiences,” he said. The journey, which spans two years, is driven by Arun’s passion for cultural exchange. He views each encounter with new people as a valuable opportunity to learn and connect. “Traveling is not about destinations. It’s about the people you meet and the stories you share,” he noted.

MoHT to develop Al Jalali  
Fort as major tourist spot



Al Jalali Fort lies on a rocky outcrop on the east side of the Muscat harbour.

VINOD NAIR  
MUSCAT, DEC 28

The Ministry of Heritage and Tourism (MoHT) has invited bids from interested parties for its plans to manage and operate the Al Jalali Fort, which is one of the important landmarks of the capital.

It may be noted that according to various travel blogs, the 16th-century Portuguese fort offers some of the best harbour views in Old Muscat as it looks out over the Sea of Oman. Built during Portuguese occupation in the 1580s, the fort once served to protect the Muttrah Harbour’s eastern side from any threat coming by sea.

The fort was used as a prison for most of the 20th century but was later restored and converted into a private museum of Omani heritage and culture.

The scope of the project includes purchasing documents and preparing a business plan on how to develop and manage the site, submitting the timetable for the preparatory work for the proposed business plan and the date for starting the operation and management of the castle.

The plan should include studying the sites from a tourism and economic perspective and determining appropriate activities according to a comprehensive plan for the castle, identifying the needs, uses and appropriate utilisation of the castle components and key attractions, re-use and diversification of buildings/spaces/rooms of outstanding historical significance.

The project should display the historical status of Muscat Governorate with regards to heritage buildings in particular, apart from highlighting the architectural wealth of the

castle. The plan should include marketing the castle commercially for cultural and heritage tourism determining the route of guided tours in the castle and the environment surrounding the landmark, conducting workshops and short courses to transfer knowledge and experience to the younger generations, organising seminars and artistic and cultural events to attract contributions from researchers and academics. It should introduce activities to revive the castle by involving the local community in various cultural and social events. Al Jalali Fort lies on a rocky outcrop on the east side of the Muscat harbour. It faces the Al Mirani Fort, which was also recently restored. The fort is made up of two towers with a connecting wall pierced by gun ports for cannon.

Debut ‘Duathlon’ race held in Khasab

**KHASAB:** The inaugural ‘Duathlon’ race, part of the Musandam Winter Season activities, took place on Friday in the Wilayat of Khasab, attracting 175 participants from across the governorate.

Organised by the Office of the Governor of Musandam, the Khasab Cycling Team, and Khasab Sports and Cultural Club, this debut event showcased a unique blend of competitive spirit and tourism promotion.

Speaking about the event, Faisal bin Mohammed al Shehhi, Head of the Organising Committee, expressed his delight at hosting the duathlon in Khasab for the first time. He emphasised that the primary goal of this competitive event was to promote the diverse natural attractions of Musandam, as participants traversed breathtaking landmarks of the wilayat during the race.

Al Shehhi also highlighted the importance of hosting such sporting events to bolster Musandam’s reputation as a premier sports tourism destination. He noted that these events attract the attention of sports



The inaugural ‘Duathlon’ race attracted 175 participants from across the governorate

federations, clubs, athletes, and enthusiasts, demonstrating the governorate’s capability to host a variety of sporting competitions.

The duathlon, a thrilling composite sport, comprises two disciplines: running and cycling. The Khasab race featured a 3-kilometre run, followed by a 4-kilometre

cycling segment, and concluded with a 1.5-kilometre run. In the general category, tan bin Idris al Shehhi secured first place, followed by Ahmed bin Abdullah al Shehhi in second, and Abdulhakim bin Ahmed al Shehhi in third.

Indian cyclist’s global adventure finds inspiration in Oman



# RCA highlights Oman’s beauty at Muscat Flower Festival



**MUSCAT:** The Royal Court Affairs (RCA), represented by the Royal Farms and Gardens and the Royal Hospitality, is participating in the Muscat Flower Festival held as part of ‘Muscat Nights 2024’ with a unique and diverse display that reflects the beauty of Oman’s nature and the creativity of Omani handicrafts, showcasing a dazzling collection of natural and artificial roses.

The RCA’s participation in the Muscat Flower Festival, held at Al Qurum Natural Park, is distinguished by the display of the Sultan Qaboos Rose, the Sultan Haitham Rose and the Rose of Her Highness the Honourable Lady.

The RCA also presents a simulation of the beauty of garden design and implementation and displays home-grown flowers, including Tuberose rose and orchids.

The RCA further showcases a wide range of distinctive international roses and flowers, most notably the fragrant O’hara rose, lily flowers, chrysanthemum, hydrangea, anthurium, mattiola, heliconia and other distinctive flowers used for decoration and attractive designs.

The RCA’s corner includes large flower sculptures, such as a vase made entirely of roses in the shape of a peacock, a crown arranged with roses, as well

as other sculptures reflecting innovative flower designs by Omani hands.

The RCA’s participation aims to enhance the Sultanate of Oman’s presence in the Muscat Flower Festival and showcase imported roses from the Netherlands, Thailand and African countries to enrich the visitors’ experience and set up an atmosphere of beauty and sophistication at the event.

This participation is a testament to the pioneering role of the Royal Court Affairs in highlighting the Omani identity and high craftsmanship, focusing on the cultural and natural diversity of the Sultanate of Oman. — ONA



# WHERE CULTURE MEETS THRILL



AHMED AL KAABI  
MUSCAT, DEC 28

**THE** OMAN AUTOMOBILE ASSOCIATION (OAA) has transformed the winter season in Muscat with the vibrant and dynamic ‘Muscat Nights Festival.’ This one-of-a-kind event combines culture, sports, and entertainment to create a memorable experience for families and individuals of all ages. Running until January 21, the festival offers a rich blend of performances, interactive activities, and thrilling events.

One of the festival’s standout features is the central theatre screen, which serves as the heart of the festivities. The theatre hosts an array of captivating performances, including fire displays, bubble shows, and hula hoop acts, alongside traditional Omani cultural showcases. Live musical performances

also add a nostalgic touch, highlighting the Sultanate of Oman’s deep cultural heritage. Football enthusiasts are in for a treat, as the central theatre also broadcasts live matches featuring Oman’s national team, drawing in large crowds. The combination of sports and entertainment has made this a favourite spot for visitors. Interactive competitions during match breaks and dedicated activities for men and women add to the event’s appeal, fostering a spirit of fun and camaraderie.

In an exclusive interview, Hisham bin Bashir al Hinai, producer and host of the ‘Muscat Nights Festival’ at OAA, shared insights into the event’s planning and execution. “Our vision for ‘Muscat Nights’ is to create an extraordinary experience that caters to diverse preferences. Each day, we kick off with family-friendly performances like bubble displays and hula hoop acts. As the evening progresses, the stage transforms

to feature thrilling fire shows, Omani traditional dances, and live music,” he explained.

Al Hinai emphasised the unique atmosphere created by the live football screenings, stating, “The giant screen and energetic crowds amplify the excitement, creating a stadium-like experience. We’ve also added light competitions to engage participants and make every moment enjoyable.”

The festival’s schedule runs from 5 pm to 10 pm, with carefully coordinated performances ensuring a seamless and safe environment for visitors. Al Hinai extended a warm invitation to everyone, promising daily surprises and new experiences. “Whether you’re a sports enthusiast, a culture lover, or just looking for family entertainment, ‘Muscat Nights’ offers something for everyone.”

Families are a key focus of the festival, with many activities tailored to children. “Our goal is to leave a positive and joyful

Live musical performances also add a nostalgic touch, highlighting Oman’s deep cultural heritage

impact on every child who visits. From interactive games to enchanting shows, we aim to create lasting memories,” Al Hinai added. Sports enthusiast Salim al Balushi, who visited the festival with family and friends, praised the event’s organisation and vibrant atmosphere. “The giant screen brings matches to life, and the interactive activities during breaks make it even more enjoyable. It’s a perfect blend of sports, culture, and entertainment,” he said. Beyond the theatre, the festival features an impressive lineup of events, including the ‘MENA Drift Cup,’ ‘Fight Arena’ championship, karting tournaments and classic car shows. Visitors can also explore the ‘African Village’ and ‘Levant Village,’ which offer rich cultural experiences. With its diverse offerings, ‘Muscat Nights Festival’ promises to be an unmissable highlight of Oman’s winter season, uniting people through culture, sports and entertainment.

SHORT TAKES



The second edition of Al Dhahirah Tourism Festival will be held in Ibri from January 2 to 31

AL DHAHIRAH  
TOURISM FESTIVAL  
FROM JAN 2

**IBRI:** The Office of the Governor of Al Dhahirah has announced special preparations for the second edition of Al Dhahirah Tourism Festival 2025. A press conference was held at Al Dhahirah Municipality Hall, under the auspices of Najeeb bin Ali al Rawas, Governor of Al Dhahirah.

The second edition of the festival will be held in the Wilayat of Ibri from January 2 to 31. The festival will feature a range of activities daily from 4 pm to 11 pm throughout the month. Ahmed bin Rashid Al Marshoudi, the official spokesperson for Al Dhahirah Governorate and a member of the Executive Committee of Al Dhahirah Tourism Festival, highlighted the festival’s alignment with Oman Vision 2040, particularly in empowering governorates and enhancing decentralisation.

He also emphasised the success of the first edition of the festival, which attracted over 300,000 visitors and benefited job-seekers, productive families, home projects, and small and medium enterprises. Al Marshoudi shared that the second edition will see an expansion of the event square and an increase in parking capacity. – ONA

AL BALUSHI  
WRAPS UP  
FILMING OF  
‘AL WAQID’  
SERIES

**MUSCAT:** Director Yousef al Balushi has recently finished the filming of the Omani series Al Waqid, produced by Blue Cave for Art and Media Production and written by Said Amer.

The series brings together stars from across the Gulf and Arab region including Mohammed Nour, Talib Mohammed, Amina Abdul Rasoul and Fakhriya Khamis.

The series sheds light on an important historical period in the Omani history and reflects the

struggle between good and evil while highlighting the life of travel and sea and the suffering of families and the challenges they faced at that time. Going through a series of tragedies and challenges, actor Mohammed Nour embodied the good side whereas the evil side was played by actor Talib Mohammed. The filming took place in various locations in the Sultanate of Oman. The series is anticipated to be broadcast in the month of Ramadhan.

Director Yousef al Balushi said

the filming started in June and was carried out in a number of governorates with a focus on tourist and heritage locations. He noted that the series is set in the 1950s and 1970s and the events revolve around a power struggle between two brothers. In an exciting dramatic setting, one of the brothers decides to take his family on a sea trip but the ship sinks due to a storm and the family splits apart with his father, mother, son and daughter each going his/her own way.

Third phase of Al Aqr Wall  
restoration completed

AMAL AL RIYAMI  
NIZWA, DEC 28

**I**N A SIGNIFICANT achievement, the restoration of the famous Sur Al Aqr (Al Aqr Wall) in the Wilayat of Nizwa has reached a major milestone with the completion of the third phase.

This phase, which restored 275 metres of the wall, was officially opened in a ceremony attended by Eng Ahmed bin Saleh al Rashdi, Under-Secretary of the Ministry of Awqaf and Religious Affairs. Suleiman bin Mohammed al Sulaimani emphasised that this phase builds on the earlier phases completed earlier this year. The newly restored section spans 275 metres, starting from Harat Al Zamma Tower and ending at Qassam Orchard. Notably, a 75-metre entrance has been built, ensuring accessibility for people with special needs and families with strollers.



Official opening of Al Aqr Wall restoration project in Nizwa

The restoration was completed over four months with a focus on creating accessible pathways and installing an electric elevator, which will be operational in the next phase. The project’s broader goal is to restore the entire 2,000-metre length of the wall. To date, about 700 metres have been restored, including key landmarks such as Sabkha Gate and

several towers. The project has significant cultural and tourism value, with plans to further enhance the area’s infrastructure, including paving neighbourhood alleys, installing surveillance and extending essential services. The work was completed in cooperation with Bawareq Nizwa International Company, the real estate developer.

### Tender Announcement

The Internal Tender committee of Ministry of Social Development hereby announces the following tender :-

| Tender No. | Tender Subject                                                                                                            | Grade                                                                                                                                                                                                | Last date for obtainment of Tender Document | Last date for Tender Submission | Tender Document Price (non-retundable) |                 |
|------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|----------------------------------------|-----------------|
|            |                                                                                                                           |                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                             |                                 | Small and Medium Companies             | Local Companies |
| 558/2024   | Rental of 9 four-wheel drive vehicles and 2 saloon vehicles for the Ministry's General Office building in Airport Heights | Companies specialized in the field of renting cars, machinery and equipment and registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board in the excellent, first, second, third or fourth degree. | Thursday 16-01-2025 02:00 PM                | Wednesday 05-02-2025 10:00 AM   | 10 R.O                                 | 25 R.O          |
| 559/2024   | Supply and installation of floor coverings for the offices of employees of the Ministry's General Office                  | Companies specialized in the field of furniture supply and registered with the General Secretariat of the Tender Board with excellent or first degree                                                | Thursday 16-01-2025 02:00 PM                | Wednesday 05-02-2025 10:00 AM   | 10 R.O                                 | 25 R.O          |

❖ Specialized Companies, registered with the **Tender Board** may obtain the Tender documents at the Tender Board e-tendering digital portal link (<https://etendering.tenderboard.gov.om>). On **Sunday 29/12/2024**.

❖ For Inquiry, please contact though the e-tendering website ([reg@tenderboard.gov.om](mailto:reg@tenderboard.gov.om)) tel. (24402200).

“ The lowest or any other tender shall not be binding to the Ministry”

[www.mosd.gov.om](http://www.mosd.gov.om)

### جامعة صُحار Sohar University

#### TENDER NOTICE

Sohar University announces the issuance of the following tender and invites specialized and certified companies with sufficient experience in the relevant field within government or private institutions to provide the services and perform the tasks outlined below:

| رقم المناقصة<br>Tender No. | عنوان المناقصة<br>Tender Description                                                                                                                                  | رسوم المناقصة<br>(ريال عماني)<br>Tender Fee (OMR) | تاريخ بدء الحصول على وثائق المناقصة<br>Tender Collection Start Date | آخر موعد الحصول على وثائق المناقصة<br>Tender Collection Last Date | آخر موعد لتقديم العطاء<br>Bid Submission Last Date |
|----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| 009/2024 - PR#9120         | توريد وتثبيت وتنفيذ النظام التقني المتكامل لاستعادة البيانات السيريرية بجامعة صُحار<br>Supply, Delivery, and Installation of Sohar University Cyber Recovery Solution | 150                                               | 30.12.2024                                                          | 08.01.2025                                                        | 30.01.2025                                         |

The tender document can be obtained from the Procurement and Contracts Department from 08:00 am to 03:00 pm at Sohar University campus in Sohar after payment of tender fees (non-refundable) at the cashier counter in the Al Khaubora Building/ Ground floor, or via bank transfer to account number 002020004411 at Sohar International Bank, Sohar Branch. The receipt of payment has to be provided to the Procurement and Contracts Department so that the tender document can be collected.

Tender offers must be submitted in closed sealed envelopes. The tender number should only be written on the envelope, no other indication shall be written. The deadline to submit offers is 3:00 pm on 30 January 2025.

Site visits will be on 09 January 2025 from 11:00 am to 12:00 Noon.

Offers should be addressed to the office of Pro. Vice Chancellor for Administration & Finance and deposited in the tender Box at PVCAF Office as details below during office hours 8:00 am to 3:00 pm, Sunday to Thursday.

#### إعلان مناقصات

تعلن جامعة صُحار عن طرح المناقصة التالية وتدعو الشركات المتخصصة والمعتمدة التي لديها خبرة كافية في المجال ذي الصلة لدى المؤسسات الحكومية أو الخاصة لتقديم الخدمات والأعمال الموضحة أدناه:

يمكن الحصول على مستندات المناقصة من دائرة المشتريات والعقود من الساعة ٨:٠٠ صباحاً إلى ٣:٠٠ مساءً في الحرم الجامعي في صُحار بعد دفع رسوم المناقصة (المبالغ غير قابلة للاسترجاع). يمكن الدفع مباشرة لدى المحاسبين في الدور الأرضي في مبنى الخابورة بالحرم الجامعي، أو عن طريق التحويل البنكي على حساب رقم ٠٠٢٠٢٠٠٤٤١١ بنك صُحار الدولي - فرع صُحار. يجب تسليم إيصال الدفع إلى دائرة المشتريات والعقود لاستلام مستندات المناقصة.

يجب تقديم العروض في مغاريف مغلقة ومختومة. يجب كتابة رقم المناقصة فقط على الظرف الخارجي للعطاء، ويجب عدم كتابة اسم صاحب العطاء أو ما يشير إليه. الموعد النهائي لتقديم العطاءات هو تمام الساعة ٣ مساءً من يوم ٣٠ يناير ٢٠٢٥م.

يمكن للراغبين القيام بزيارة ميدانية في تاريخ ٠٩ يناير ٢٠٢٥م، من الساعة ١١:٠٠ صباحاً إلى الساعة ١٢:٠٠ ظهراً.

يجب تقديم العطاءات باسم مساعد رئيس الجامعة للشؤون الإدارية والمالية وتوضيح العطاءات في صندوق العطاءات بـمكتب مساعد رئيس الجامعة للشؤون الإدارية والمالية خلال ساعات العمل من الساعة ٨:٠٠ إلى الساعة ٣:٠٠ مساءً من الأحد إلى الخميس.

مكتب مساعد رئيس الجامعة للشؤون الإدارية والمالية

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WORLD

SHORT TAKES



Emergency specialists work at the crash site of an Azerbaijan Airlines' Embraer passenger plane.

PUTIN APOLOGISES TO AZERBAIJAN OVER PLANE CRASH



VLADIMIR PUTIN

MOSCOW: Vladimir Putin said on Saturday that Russian air defence was working when an Azerbaijani Airlines plane tried to land in Grozny before crashing, breaking the Kremlin's silence as speculation mounted Russia may have accidentally

shot the plane. The Russian leader called his Azerbaijani counterpart Ilham Aliyev, apologising for the incident took place in Russian airspace while stopping short of saying Russian air defence shot the plane.

Baku, meanwhile, said Aliyev had "emphasised" to Putin that the plane was hit by outside interference over Russia, saying it wanted those responsible "held accountable." The phone call between the allies came three days after the Embraer 190 plane flying from Baku to Grozny crashed in Kazakhstan, killing 38 people out of 67 onboard. Western experts have pointed the finger at Russia, while the US said it had "early indications" the plane was shot.

Putin told Aliyev the plane had tried to land in Grozny "several times." "During this time, Grozny, (the town of) Mozdok and Vladikavkaz were being attacked by Ukrainian combat drones and Russian air defence was repelling these attacks," Putin said, according to a Kremlin transcript. It added that: "Vladimir Putin had presented his apologies that the tragic incident happened in Russia's air space and again expressed his deep and genuine condolences to the families of the dead, wishing a quick recovery to those affected."

But Aliyev appeared in no doubt that the plane was shot at over Russia. "President Ilham Aliyev emphasised that the Azerbaijan Airlines passenger plane encountered external physical and technical interference while in Russian airspace, resulting in a complete loss of control," Baku's presidency said in a statement. It added Aliyev "highlighted that the multiple holes in the aircraft's fuselage, injuries sustained by passengers and crew due to foreign particles penetrating the cabin mid-flight, and testimonies from surviving flight attendants and passengers confirm evidence of external physical and technical interference." Survivors have told the media about hearing an "explosion" as the plane attempted to land. Aliyev's office said Baku wanted an investigation "ensuring those responsible are held accountable."

Ukrainian leader Volodymyr Zelensky said he also spoke to Aliyev on Saturday, saying the footage of the plane makes it look "very much like an air defence missile strike." "The key priority now is a thorough investigation that will answer all questions about what really happened. Russia must provide clear explanations and stop spreading disinformation," Zelensky said on social media.

FIRST WAR-TIME AID CONVOY REACHES BESIEGED SOUTH KHARTOUM

CAIRO: Civilians in a besieged area south of Sudan's war-torn capital received their first aid convoy this week since the war began 20 months ago, local volunteers said. A total of 28 trucks arrived in the Jebel Awliya area, just south of Khartoum, the state's emergency response room (ERR), part of a volunteer network coordinating frontline aid across Sudan, said. The convoy included 22 trucks carrying food from the UN's World Food Programme (WFP), one truck from Doctors Without

Borders and Care, and five trucks loaded with medicine from the UN children's agency, Unicef.

The local group and Unicef said the supplies would help meet the "urgent health and nutrition needs of an estimated 200,000 children and families". ERR volunteers endured months of negotiations, constant suspicion and threats of violence to secure even limited access. "Access to the area has been essentially cut off due to the conflict dynamics," Unicef's Sudan

representative Sheldon Yett said, adding it took three months of talks to get the convoy through. "The trucks were detained on more than one occasion, and drivers were understandably reluctant given the risks involved," he said.

The lack of access has also prevented experts from making an official famine declaration in Khartoum. Famine has already taken hold in five areas of Sudan, a UN-backed report said this week. — AFP

S Korean prosecutors say Yoon authorised 'shooting'

SOUTH

KOREA'S suspended president Yoon Suk Yeol authorised the military to fire their weapons if needed to enter parliament during his failed bid to impose martial law, according to a prosecutors' report on Saturday. The 10-page summary from former defence minister Kim Yong-hyun's prosecution indictment report, which was provided to the media, also says Yoon vowed on December 3 to declare martial law three times if necessary. Yoon, who was stripped of his duties by the National Assembly this month, is under investigation for his short-lived attempt to scrap civilian rule, which plunged the country into political turmoil and led to his impeachment.

Yoon's lawyer Yoon Kab-keun dismissed the prosecutors' report, saying that it was "a one-sided account that neither corresponds to objective circumstances nor common sense". As lawmakers rushed to parliament on December 3 to vote down Yoon's martial law declaration, heavily armed troops stormed the building, scaling fences, smashing windows and landing by helicopter. According to the prosecution indictment report, Yoon told the chief of the capital defence command, Lee Jin-woo, that military forces could shoot if necessary to enter the National Assembly. "Have you still not got in? What are you doing? Break down the door and drag them out, even if it means shooting," Yoon told Lee, according to the report. Yoon also allegedly told the head of the Defense Counterintelligence Command,



So quickly get inside the National Assembly and bring out the people inside the chamber, and break down the doors with an axe if necessary and drag everyone out. Even if it's lifted, I can declare martial law a second or third time, so just keep going

YOON SUK YEOL Korea's suspended president



Protesters take part in a rally calling for the ouster of South Korea's impeached President Yoon Suk Yeol in front of the Gwanghwamun Gate of Gyeongbokgung Palace in Seoul. — AFP

General Kwak Jong-keun, to "quickly get inside" the National Assembly since the quorum for the martial law declaration to be lifted had not been met.

"So quickly get inside the National Assembly and bring out the people inside the chamber, and break down the doors with an axe if necessary and drag everyone out," the report quotes Yoon as saying at the time. After lawmakers rushed inside parliament and voted 190-0 to nullify Yoon's declaration in the early hours of December 4, the report says Yoon told Lee, "Even if it's lifted, I can declare martial law a second or third time, so just keep going."

The report also included screenshots of senior defence officials' messages from the day of the martial law declaration. It said there was evidence that Yoon had been discussing declaring martial law with senior military officials

as early as March. The declaration followed a budget tussle between Yoon's party and the opposition. Days later, Yoon in a speech apologised for the "anxiety and inconvenience" and promised there would not be a second declaration of martial law. Ex-defence minister Kim was arrested over his role in the failed martial law bid. Opposition Democratic Party lawmaker Kang Sun-woo said in a statement on Saturday that "the prosecution has laid bare the undeniable ugly truth about Yoon Suk Yeol, the treasonous ringleader", adding that he must be "arrested immediately". South Korea's Constitutional Court held its first preliminary hearing on the validity of Yoon's impeachment on Friday. The court will also decide the fate of Yoon's replacement, Han Duck-soo, who was impeached on Friday over his refusal to complete Yoon's impeachment process and bring him to justice. — AFP

MANMOHAN FAREWELL WITH STATE HONOURS

NEW DELHI: The body of Manmohan Singh, the former Indian prime minister whose death has sparked outpourings of grief at home and accolades from abroad, was cremated on the banks of the Yamuna River in New Delhi with full state honours. The funeral was conducted in the Sikh tradition as priests chanted hymns, after Singh's body, draped in the Indian flag, was carried through the capital on a flower-decked carriage pulled by a ceremonial army truck.

Since Singh died on Thursday at 92, many have taken up his comment

near the end of his 10-year rule that "history will be kinder to me than the contemporary media". He was referring to a perception of weak leadership as he headed a coalition government facing numerous charges of corruption, which was thrown out of office in the 2014 election won by his successor Narendra Modi. Modi, who called Singh one of the nation's "most distinguished leaders" after his death, attended the funeral, along with President Droupadi Murmu and representatives of various countries. — Reuters

FIRE EXCHANGE

Pakistan soldier killed in border clash



A Pakistani paramilitary soldier was killed and seven others wounded in cross-border exchanges of fire with Afghanistan's forces, a security source said on Saturday, while hundreds of Afghans protested against the deadly air strikes that sparked the clashes. Sporadic fighting, including with heavy weaponry, erupted overnight between border forces on the frontier between Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province in Pakistan and Khost province in Afghanistan, officials from both countries said. — AFP

FATAL ATTACK

WHO chief says narrowly escaped death



The head of the World Health Organization said he only narrowly escaped death in fatal Israeli strikes on the airport in Yemen's capital. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said that his ears were still ringing following Thursday's attack, and stressed that the protection for civilian installations under international law must be respected. "It's a matter of luck. Otherwise, if the missile deviated just slightly, it could have been on our heads," Tedros said. — AFP

SUSPECTED VESSEL

Finland moves tanker probing cable damage



Finnish authorities said on Saturday they are moving an impounded tanker closer to port after boarding the vessel carrying Russian oil earlier this week on suspicion it had damaged an undersea power line and four telecoms cables. "The police begin an operation to transfer the Eagle S tanker from the Gulf of Finland to Svartbeck, an inner anchorage near the port of Kilpilahti," the Helsinki police department said in a statement on Saturday. — Reuters

The New York Times

Canadian ministers meet Trump Aides to Discuss Border, Tariffs



IAN AUSTEN

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**TWO** TOP CANADIAN ministers met with members of president-elect Donald Trump's circle in Florida about a border security plan that Canada hopes will ward off Trump's threats to impose economically damaging tariffs on imports from the country. But the ministers returned home without any assurances. The meeting was characterised in advance as an attempt to build on a dinner Prime Minister Justin Trudeau had with Trump at Mar-a-Lago over the Thanksgiving weekend as well as on a recent telephone conversation between members of Trudeau's Cabinet and Thomas Homan, Trump's designated border czar. Mélanie Joly, Canada's foreign minister, and Dominic LeBlanc, its finance minister, arrived in Florida on Thursday evening for the session with Howard Lutnick, Trump's choice for commerce secretary, and former Gov. Doug Burgum of North Dakota, the president-elect's pick to run the Interior Department who would also coordinate energy policy.

Trump has said he will impose 25% tariffs on imports from Canada when he takes office in January if the country does not reduce the flow of migrants and fentanyl into the United States. Such a move could be devastating for Canada, whose economy depends heavily on exports to the United States. But on at least one occasion, Trump has suggested that his tariff plan may have less to do with border security than with

his desire to eliminate the \$50 billion trade deficit with Canada. Oil and gas exports from Canada account for most of that trade imbalance. Without them, the US generally has a trade surplus with Canada. Jean-Sébastien Comeau, a spokesperson for LeBlanc, described the Mar-a-Lago session as a "positive, productive meeting" and said that the two nominees "agreed to relay information to president-elect Trump."

During the meeting, the Canadians outlined their government's package of border security measures, which they estimated will cost about 1.3 billion Canadian dollars (about \$900 million) over several years. In an earlier statement Comeau said they planned to discuss "the negative impacts that the imposition of 25% tariffs on Canadian goods would have on both Canada and the United States."

The Trump transition team did not respond to a request for information about the meeting. Trump has also repeatedly mocked Trudeau, a US ally, on social media, referring to him as "Governor Justin Trudeau of Canada." On Christmas Day, he taunted Trudeau again, writing in a post on Truth Social that "if Canada was to become our 51st State, their Taxes would be cut by more than 60%, their businesses would immediately double in size, and they would be militarily protected like no other Country anywhere in the World." Trump has mused about other territorial expansions.

Trump has said he will impose 25% tariffs on imports from Canada when he takes office in January if the country does not reduce the flow of migrants and fentanyl into the United States. Such a move could be devastating for Canada

In recent days, he has called for reclaiming US control over the Panama Canal and "owning" Greenland, an autonomous territory of Denmark.

Last week, Trudeau's hold on power slipped and his political future became uncertain after Chrystia Freeland, the deputy prime minister and finance minister, unexpectedly quit both posts. Freeland, who renegotiated the North American Free Trade Agreement during the first Trump administration, left after Trudeau said that he was going to move her out of the finance minister job, one of the most important Cabinet positions, and into another role. In a blistering resignation letter, Freeland said she was frustrated with recent economic moves made by Trudeau's government, including the lifting of a federal sales tax on some items during the holiday season. She called them "political gimmicks" that would weaken Canada's economy at a moment when the country needed to prepare itself for potential tariffs. Trump derided Freeland, with whom he had clashed during the NAFTA negotiations, after she stepped down.

In the aftermath, a growing number of Liberal members of Parliament called for Trudeau to quit as their leader and, thus, as prime minister. All of the opposition parties, including the New Democrats, Trudeau's former allies, are now vowing to bring down his government when Parliament resumes at the end of January.

AFTER DAYS OF SILENCE, NASA'S PARKER SOLAR PROBE PHONES HOME



KATRINA MILLER

The author is a science reporter at The New York Times.

NASA's Parker Solar Probe swooped closer than it ever had before to the sun, just a few million miles above its blazing hot surface. The team behind the mission waited nervously, trusting that the probe would survive the encounter. Then, a few minutes shy of midnight on Thursday, Parker phoned home. The probe sent back not one but

four signals indicating it was healthy, according to Nour Rawafi, an astrophysicist at Johns Hopkins Applied Physics Laboratory and the project scientist of the mission. "It's like the spacecraft wanted to reassure us," he said, adding that the team was excited and relieved.

With the help of Venus' gravity, Parker has crept closer and closer to the sun with a series of flybys since its launch in 2018. In the early stages of the mission, the team was anxious about the spacecraft getting so close to a star. But over time, Parker's successful orbits — 21 and counting — built confidence. Still, there was some fear that the probe might not survive this time.

Parker's heat shield is designed so that the front of the vehicle can withstand facing the blistering heat of the sun's outer atmosphere, which reaches millions of degrees, while the back, which contains the probe's sensitive instruments, sits at a comfortable 85 degrees Fahrenheit.

"Literally one side is at a temperature that is unfathomable," said Joseph Westlake, the director of heliophysics at NASA. "And the back of it is a hot, sunny day." The spacecraft is also subject to a more tempestuous solar environment because the sun is currently at peak activity levels, which crest and trough on an 11-year cycle.

Parker's latest flyby occurred at 6:53 a.m. Eastern time on Christmas Eve, grazing a mere 3.8 million miles above the solar surface while travelling at a whopping 430,000 mph. But signs of the probe's successful travels so far didn't reach Earth until nearly three days later.

Mission specialists crowded around a control room in Maryland on the night of Dec. 26 to wait for the expected signal, which, to their relief, arrived a few seconds early.

"I'm proud of what has been achieved," Rawafi said. "It's really a historic milestone for space exploration."

The probe's solar data collected from this flyby is expected to reach Earth on New Year's Day. The data will help scientists study various aspects of the sun, including the origin of the solar wind, a stream of particles that creates a protective bubble around the solar system.

A month on, a tenuous ceasefire holds in Lebanon



Destruction caused by Israeli shelling in the southern Lebanese city of Tyre.



ABDI LATIF DAHIR

The writer is the East Africa correspondent for The New York Times

Israel has conducted a series of strikes on Lebanon since the ceasefire began, most of them concentrated in Hezbollah's stronghold in south Lebanon. But last week, Israel attacked the eastern Bekaa region for the first time since the deal was agreed.

weapons and surveillance systems and demolishing a Hezbollah command centre. Lebanon's foreign ministry filed an official complaint with the U.N. Security Council this week, saying Israel had launched more than 816 land and air attacks against Lebanon from November 27 to December 22. The violations "represent a serious threat to international efforts to achieve security in the region," the ministry said.

More than 3,700 people in Lebanon were killed during the war and some 16,000 injured, according to the Lebanese Health Ministry, which does not differentiate between combatants and civilians. The conflict displaced about 1.3 million people in Lebanon, wiped out billions of dollars from the economy and devastated everything from farms to schools, businesses and hospitals. In Israel, dozens of people living in front-line communities in the north near the Lebanese border were killed during the war, and more than 60,000 civilians were uprooted. To end the cross-border fighting, the United States brokered a deal that requires Hezbollah to withdraw its fighters and weapons from southern Lebanon and Israeli troops to gradually return to their side of the border, both within 60 days.

Lebanese forces backed by

UNIFIL, the United Nations peacekeeping mission in southern Lebanon, were supposed to deploy to the area south of the Litani River to maintain peace in the border zone. A committee, including France and the United States, has been set up to monitor compliance by all sides. An Israeli army spokesperson has also been warning residents against returning to dozens of villages across south Lebanon, without further explanation as to why they cannot go back. The move has incensed some of the displaced Lebanese. So far, Khiam in southern Lebanon is the only town the Israeli military has vacated and the Lebanese army has deployed in, according to UNIFIL head of mission and force commander, Lt Gen Aroldo Lázaro. Lázaro said the peacekeeping force has conveyed its concern "at the continuing gunfire, demolitions, blasts and roadblocks" by Israeli forces around Naqoura, the town where the peacekeeping mission is headquartered.

Both UNIFIL and Lebanese officials have in the past week called on Israel to accelerate its withdrawal from south Lebanon. While visiting Khiam this week, Lebanon's caretaker prime minister, Najib Mikati, called on the monitoring panel to pressure Israel to completely pull out of south Lebanon. "There must be no justification for Israeli occupation of any part of our land," Mikati said, according to the Lebanese national news agency. It was not clear to what extent Hezbollah has withdrawn its fighters and weapons from southern Lebanon. Lebanese military and government officials did not respond to requests for comment on the question. About 6,000 Lebanese army soldiers have deployed to the south, and thousands more are expected in the coming months. Mikati has insisted the army is capable of securing the south and stabilising the country.

OPINION

We need to see beyond talents



DR HAMED  
AL SINAWI

The writer is a senior consultant psychiatrist at Sultan Qaboos University Hospital

RECENTLY CAME across a podcast of an interview with a young Saudi man describing his struggles with sadness, lack of achievement, and “feeling stuck with life”, as he describes it. These feelings are then replaced with times when he feels very energetic telling his friends that he “should have been a prophet”. He described living at the airport for 22 days where he spent his time watching passengers and sleeping in the airport seats and sometimes on the floor. He then took a tour visiting the different cities and villages of the kingdom meeting strangers staying with them and having meals with them. The podcast host was amazed at the young man’s thoughts and talents. I listened to the whole podcast with one question in mind, where is the talent exactly? How is living in the airport and visiting strangers considered a talent? Who is paying this man’s bills and keeping his wife and children company while he is away? While listening to the podcast it was clear to me that this man most likely suffers from an undiagnosed mental illness, probably bipolar disorder. The feeling of failure can be explained by a depressive episode while

the feeling of “I should have been a prophet” is a hypomanic episode. Both are features of bipolar disorder yet there is no mention of that in the podcast. It is not uncommon that mental health struggles are often romanticised or misunderstood in our society. A person experiencing a manic or hypomanic episode may exhibit creativity, boundless energy and confidence. However, these highs can lead to impulsive decisions, strained relationships and financial or personal consequences. Similarly, depressive episodes can rob individuals of their sense of purpose, drive and self-worth. Instead of recognising these as signs of a mental health condition, society often labels such individuals as eccentric, talented, or simply lost in thought. Unfortunately, mental health awareness still has a long way to go. There remains a significant stigma surrounding conditions like bipolar disorder, preventing many from seeking help. Individuals struggling with these symptoms may not realise they are experiencing a medical condition that can be managed with appropriate treatment and

It is not uncommon that mental health struggles are often romanticised or misunderstood in our society

support. Instead, they are left to navigate these challenges alone, often feeling misunderstood or judged. Podcasts and social media platforms have an incredible reach and a responsibility to raise awareness, especially when such clear signs of mental health challenges emerge. Instead of celebrating what might be symptomatic behaviour, hosts could use these opportunities to discuss mental health openly. A mention of seeking professional help or a conversation with a mental health expert could provide listeners with valuable insights and resources. Rather than dismissing these struggles as unique talents, we need to foster understanding and compassion. It’s important to ask questions like: Is this person okay? Are they getting the help they need? Encouraging mental health evaluations and therapy can lead to healthier outcomes for individuals and their families. In the end, recognising mental illness is about empowering people and helping them to lead a balanced and fulfilling life. Remember that, the real talent lies in recognising when we or others need help - and being brave enough to seek it.

STAND-UP COMEDY RETURNS TO POST-ASSAD SYRIA

LAYAL ABOU RAHAL

In post-Assad Syria, stand-up comedians are re-emerging to challenge taboos, mocking the former president and his regime and even testing the waters with Damascus’s new rulers. Melki Mardini, a performer in the Syrian capital’s stand-up scene, is among those embracing newfound freedoms. “The regime has fallen,” he declares from the stage, referring to Assad’s abrupt departure, ending more than half a century of his family’s rule. The audience at an art gallery hosting the show remains silent. “What’s the matter? Are you still scared?” Mardini says, triggering a mix of awkward laughter and applause. “We’ve been doing stand-up for two years,” says the 29-year-old. “We never imagined a day would come when we could speak so freely.” Now, his performances are “safe spaces”, he says. “We can express our views without bothering anyone, except Bashar.” Under the old regime, jokes about elections, the dollar or even mentioning the president’s name could mean arrest or worse. Chatting with the audience during his set, Mardini learns one man is a psychiatrist. “A lord in the new Syria!” he exclaims, imagining crowds rushing into therapy after five decades of dictatorship. For two hours, 13 comedians -- including one woman -- from the collective Styria (a play on the words Syria and hysteria) take the stage, sharing personal stories: an arrest, how they dodged compulsory military service, how they sourced dollars on the black market. “Syria wants freedom!” declares Rami Jabr as he takes the stage. “This is our first show without the mukhabarat in the room,” he quips, referring to the feared intelligence agents. He reflects on his experience in Homs, dubbed the “capital of the revolution” in March of 2011. A commercial representative for a foreign company, Jabr recalls being detained for a month by various security services, beaten and tortured with a taser, under the accusation that he was an “infiltrator” sent to sow chaos in Syria. Like him, comedians from across the country share their journeys, united by the same fear that has suffocated Syrians for decades living under an iron fist. Hussein al Rawi tells the audience how he never gives out his address, a vestige of the paranoia of the past. “I’m always afraid he’ll come back,” he says, referring to Assad. “But I hope for a better Syria, one that belongs to all of us.” Said al Yakhchi, attending the show, notes that free speech is flourishing. “During the last performance before the regime fell, there were restrictions,” says the 32-year-old shopkeeper. “Now, there are no restrictions, no one has to answer to anyone. There’s no fear of anyone.” Not even Syria’s new rulers who quickly marched on Damascus and toppled Assad’s government. “We didn’t live through a revolution for 13 or 14 years... just to have a new power tell us, ‘You can’t speak,’” Mardini says. — AFP

What I learned most from my trip to China

THERE WERE A LOT of raised eyebrows and quiet chuckles this month when President-elect Donald Trump invited President Xi Jinping to Washington for his inauguration. Foreign leaders don’t attend our inaugurations, of course, but I think Trump’s idea was actually a good one. Having just returned from a trip to China, I can tell you that if I were drawing a picture of relations between our two countries today, it would be two elephants looking at each other through a straw. That is not good. Because suddenly the US and China have a lot more to talk about than just trade and Taiwan — and who’s the undisputed heavyweight champion of the 21st century.

The world today faces three epochal challenges right now: runaway artificial intelligence, climate change and spreading disorder from collapsing states. The US and China are the world’s AI superpowers. They are the world’s two leading carbon emitters. And they have the world’s two biggest naval forces, capable of projecting power globally. America and China are the only two powers, in other words, that together can offer any hope of managing superintelligence, superstorms and superempowered small groups of angry men in failed states — not to mention superviruses — at a time when the world has become superfused. Which is why we need an updated Shanghai Communique, the document that set out parameters for normalising US-China relations when Richard Nixon went to China and met Mao Zedong in 1972. Right now, unfortunately, we are denormalising. Our two countries are drifting farther and farther apart at all levels. In the three decades I have been visiting Beijing and Shanghai, I had never felt what I felt on this trip — as if I were the only American in China. Of course I wasn’t, but the American accents you would usually hear at a big Shanghai train station or Beijing hotel lobby were notably absent. Chinese parents say that many families no longer want their kids to go to the US for schooling, because they fear it’s becoming dangerous — the FBI



America must compete with China, but there’s also a complicated reality that both countries have to face



THOMAS L  
FRIEDMAN

The writer is a three-time Pulitzer Prize winner and a weekly columnist for TNYT

might follow them while they are in America, and their own government might suspect them when they return home. The same is now true for US students in China. A professor in China who works with foreign students told me that some Americans don’t want to study there anymore for semesters abroad, in part because they don’t relish competing against superintense Chinese undergraduates and in part because, these days, having studied or worked in China can raise security suspicions with future potential US employers. True, underneath all the talk of the new China-US cold war, there are still over 270,000 Chinese students studying in America, according to the US Embassy in Beijing, but there are now only about 1,100 American college students studying in China. That is down from around 15,000 a decade ago — but up from a few hundred in 2022, not long after Covid peaked. If these trends continue, where will the next generation of Chinese-speaking American scholars and diplomats come from and, similarly, Chinese who will understand America? A new Shanghai Communique could help govern the new realities that both countries and the world face. The first is that US and Chinese tech firms are racing towards artificial general intelligence; theirs is more focused on enhancing

industrial production and surveillance and ours on a broad array of uses, from writing movie scripts to designing new drugs. Even if artificial general intelligence — a sentient machine — is five or seven years away, Beijing and Washington need to be collaborating on a set of rules that we will both use to govern AI and that the rest of the world must follow. That would be to embed into all AI systems algorithms that ensure that the system cannot be used for destructive purposes by bad actors and cannot go off on its own to destroy the humans who built it. On managing climate change, China, the world’s largest emitter of carbon and the US, the second largest, need to agree on a set of strategies to get the world to net-zero carbon emissions by 2050 — to reduce the ruinous health, economic and extreme weather challenges wrought by climate change, which are going to create increasing disorder in failing states. As I tried to explain to my Chinese interlocutors on this trip: You think we are each other’s enemy. We might be, but we also now have a big common enemy, just as we did in 1972. Only this time it is not Russia. It’s disorder. More and more nation-states are falling apart — into disorder — and haemorrhaging their people as migrants scrambling to get to zones of order. — The New York Times

## 2024: A year of gratitude and connection



RAY PETERSEN  
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WELL, HERE we are again, at the time of year that sparks our emotions like no other. For some, poignant, for others celebratory, but for us all, contemplative, as we ponder the challenges, as we anoint it our ‘annus horribilis,’ our horrible year, our ‘annus mirabilis,’ our wonderful year, or even our ‘annus optimus,’ our year of success and prosperity.

It’s been my habit, for the last twelve years, to share with you the journey of my wife Lena and our family and friends, during 2024, addressing the revitalising nature, the opportunities, and of course, those carbuncles that masquerade as New Year resolutions. Undoubtedly, on a personal level, the highlight for Lena and I, has been watching our grand-daughter Nina grow up. That third year can feature so many challenges, and our delight at seeing Nina reach so many of her key developmental milestones has been unrivalled. Whether it’s what she says or does, she has an old head on those young shoulders, and she knows how to twist me, for one, around her little finger. I’m only ever a smile away.

We absolutely love being grandparents, never taking Nina for granted, but all the praise for how she is growing up must be laid at the feet of her proud parents, Chris and Sasha.

They are, I feel, ‘new age’ parents, as they do a lot of research, rarely resting on their laurels, as they seek active, enabling cognitive and social growth opportunities

for Nina, and they are doing an amazing job of it.

Other highlights among my family have been back in New Zealand, where we spent time with Kevin, Kathy, Barry and Denise, lifelong Kiwi friends, at Easter time and honestly, it felt like we had never been away, such good mates. Meanwhile, in the deep South, Kian is making a name for himself as an entertainer with several stage appearances to date.

Max is also keen on the guitar, while Jackson is showing genuine promise on the rugby paddock. We spent time with Kevin, Kathy, Barry and Denise, lifelong Kiwi friends, Sue and Dave, Pete and Julene, at Easter time, and honestly, it felt like we had never been away. It was so good.

### URBAN DEVELOPMENT

I must be getting old... because I don’t want to be the ‘smarty pants’ I usually am about my friends this year. Maybe I am appreciating them more? Andrew, in Saudi Arabia, has been working on the massive Metro project, and just moved onto another massive urban development. Our good mate Bernie is ‘working hard’ as he makes the most of retirement. Les is enjoying England’s cricket dominance over New Zealand as he too enjoys retirement, while Norma is much recovered from her ‘argument with a bus,’ becoming more mobile every day.

And no year is complete without my best mate, my ‘good doctor,’ Vishal Srivastava. We’re so looking forward to catching up with

Looking back, I’m grateful for all we have, while nostalgic for that, and those, we no longer have

him, his wife Yesha, and daughter Anvisha this week. He will be so delighted ‘his’ Ferrari team have performed well in F1, but I’ll keep the cricket bragging rights over his Indian team, the Black Caps beating them in a series for the first time. We’ll catch up too with Sandeep Jaitly, his family and all the staff at the Golden Tulip in the Wilayat of Nizwa.

My ‘Wednesday Weirdos,’ my once weekly social circle at the Houghton Rugby Club continues to entertain, as Mark and Lisa, Steve and Wendy, share their traveller’s tales and much, much more, as we ‘put the world to rights.’ Smithy keeps us entertained, Kitch keeps us informed (he always knows what’s going on!), Emily is now at uni, though soon to grace the stage again. A cast of ‘characters’ pop in and out of our little circle, keeping us entertained, and Josie keeps us wonderfully hydrated. What more could we want?

In looking ahead with anticipation to the next year, I’m hoping that my articles continue to amuse and inform you, that the fish are ‘biting’ on the Al Sharqiyah South Governorate coastline while we’re there, and that my knee replacement operation in February goes according to plan. Looking back, I’m grateful for all we have, while nostalgic for that, and those, we no longer have.

I am so fortunate to have family and friends I can rely on, all around the world, but none more so, of course, than my charming wife Lena... “to the moon and back dear.”

## KEY PUBLIC SERVICE MAKES QUITE RETURN IN GAZA

The quiet resumption of operations at a desalination plant in the Gaza Strip last month marked a small but significant step towards restoring public services in the Palestinian territory ravaged by more than 14 months of war. The process of restarting the plant in Deir el Balah, in central Gaza, involved both Israeli and Palestinian stakeholders who could have a hand in the territory’s future, especially amid renewed hopes for a ceasefire in recent days. While its reopening has had a limited tangible impact so far, diplomats close to the project suggest it could offer a tentative road map for Gaza’s post-war administration.

Since being reconnected to Israel’s electricity grid, the station has been producing approximately 16,000 cubic metres of water per day, according to Unicef. It serves more than 600,000 Gaza residents through tankers or the networks of Deir el Balah and Khan Yunis governorates in central and southern Gaza, respectively.

“Its production capacity remains limited in the face of immense needs,” an official within the Palestinian Energy and Natural Resources Authority (PENRA) said. Residents of the devastated Palestinian territory have struggled since the early days of the war between Israel and Hamas to secure even basic necessities, including food and clean water.

Human Rights Watch last week accused Israel of committing “acts of genocide” in Gaza by restricting water access — a claim denied by Israeli authorities.

The WASH Cluster, which brings together humanitarian organisations in the water sector, reports that distribution of water has become very complex in Gaza. The pipelines transporting water have been damaged, leaving Gazans — many of whom are living in makeshift shelters after being displaced by bombardments — without any means of storing the essential resource.

The plant is one of three such seawater processing facilities in the Gaza Strip, which before the war met around 15 per cent of the 2.4 million residents’ needs.

In the months following the outbreak of war, the plant operated at minimal capacity, relying on solar panels and generators amid a persistent scarcity of fuel in Gaza. It could fully resume operations only after reconnecting to one of the power lines supplied by Israel, which charges the Palestinian Authority for the electricity.

Unicef, which provides technical support for the Deir el Balah plant, indicated in late June that it had reached an agreement with Israel to restore electricity to the plant. Subsequently, COGAT, a division of Israel’s defence ministry overseeing civilian affairs in the Palestinian territories, announced that the desalination plant had been reconnected to the Israeli grid. — AFP

# Upholding research ethics by faculty

## RESEARCH

CAN GENERALLY be seen as any activity that involves deliberately or consciously planned inquiry and examination of facts, or revision of accepted theories or laws.

The scope of work of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) revolves around three major areas. These are teaching and learning, research and community engagement, out of which, research is of primary importance to the mission of HEIs.

Higher education institutions devote serious effort to have in place clear policies and procedures that guide, promote and encourage research and scholarly activities carried out by academic staff and students within their institutions.

HEIs often expand their support to research by providing incentives to academic staff publishing papers, participating in conferences, or working as part of research groups.

Research serves as a standard by which HEIs may be measured or judged for their progress and reputation. The true value of research lies in the ability of HEI academic staff and research centres to produce substantially real and practical results. Innovations and products which are an outcome of research and scholarly activities should clearly and peremptorily contribute to human development and societal advancement. HEIs should focus not only on knowledge confined to theory or speculation, but also on practical applications with tangible results and impact.

HEIs with strong conscious academic and intellectual standing adopt robust and rigorous procedures for academic integrity and ethics that academic staff must follow while applying for research funding/approval. They have to declare that matters falling within research ethics should be disclosed and are subject to ethical approval.

To further enhance research ethics, HEIs extend ethical and



academic integrity policies to include academic staff applying for promotion, in which they have to declare that research ethics are adhered to in all research submitted for consideration in their promotion dossier even though the research was published before.

### ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

As a result, quality driven HEIs always adopt a zero-tolerance policy to plagiarism or any other acts in infringement with academic integrity, prohibiting any act of stealing and passing off the ideas or words of others as their own. Plagiarism involves any act to use another’s production without crediting the source or to commit literary theft by presenting as new and original an idea or product derived from an existing source.

HEIs and academic journals with academic credibility use to a great extent web-based tools to check the originality of written work and ensure academic integrity. Plagiarism detection software are widely used to compare written work against a vast database of sources, including academic papers, websites, books and other student submissions.

Despite all the efforts made by HEIs, there are still shortfalls, with a lot of researchers failing

to come up to expectation. While some researchers lack the power of independent thought and constructive imagination, there are some research outputs degraded with unsound principles and moral values. Some researchers still cannot come up with new innovative ideas. What they do is to use others’ ideas, formulated thoughts and opinions again especially in a different way or after reclaiming and reprocessing such ideas. It is a pity to see some researchers introducing thoughts and possibilities that do not in essence differ from preceding ones.

With some researchers, consciousness of guilt is almost dead. While such researchers feel and show pride in the list of scholarly activities they add to their curriculum vitae, the list of publications is somehow need to be carefully read. Some researchers collaborate negatively by adding other names to their publications without actual contribution. This kind of act shows how such researchers in reality meddle, tamper and experiment thoughtlessly and ignorantly.

While it is difficult to generalise such deceptive acts, it is with deep distress, sadness and regret a common practice that HEIs must firmly address. A strong and decisive response to this matter should be taken with determination, authority and no hesitation.

Further, it is sad to see some postgraduate students are subjected to mistreatment by their supervisors who blatantly add their names with zero-contribution to students’ publications.

While a sense of shame and modesty should be the natural regulator of human behaviour, such researchers have unfortunately lost their sense of shame, as they act without regard for moral, ethical, or academic norms or for socially acceptable conduct, customs and manners.

If you feel no shame, then do as you wish!



DR MUSALLAM AL MAANI

The writer is Dean, Al Zahra College for Women



SPORTS



100THCAP



OMAN REGISTER SEVENTH SEMIFINAL IN GULF CUPS

WALEED AL JAHWARI  
KUWAIT CITY, DEC 28

*The Oman national football team snatched Group A lead and reached the semifinals of the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup with an exciting draw against the UAE, after being on the verge of saying goodbye.*

*Oman topped the group with 5 points, tied with Kuwait, who also had 5 points and they were equal in everything except fair play (number of cards).*

*UAE finished third with two points and Qatar came in fourth with two points to exit.*

*The Red Warriors are reaching the semifinals for the seventh time out of 10 editions after the group system was launched 20 years ago. Oman reached the final five times, won the title twice in the 19th and 23rd editions and lost the final in the 17th, 18th and 25th editions.*

*Issam al Subhi, Omani striker, confirmed that “the match was extremely difficult and for the third match in a row our team succeeded in returning after falling behind, due to the players’ confidence in themselves.”*

*Al Subhi praised the coach for guiding the team. “We thank team’s coach, Rasheed Jaber, for giving us the confidence and for having a clear influence on our team.”*

*“From now on, our focus is on the semifinal match and working to reach the final match,” he ended.*

*Ibrahim al Mukhaini, Oman goalkeeper, said: “The team did not perform as expected during the first half, but in the second half we entered the atmosphere of the match and we all joined together to win the ticket to the semifinals.”*

*“I made a mistake that cost the team a penalty kick, but I succeeded in stopping the ball successfully and keeping the result equal until the referee’s whistle.”*

*“I was confident in saving the ball thanks to the instructions of goalkeeping coach, Chadli al Mabrouki, and he told me about his expectations and reading of the situation,” he concluded.*

Saudi Arabia beat Iraq to set up Oman semifinal

ADIL AL BALUSHI  
MUSCAT, DEC 28

Saudi Arabia defeated defending champions Iraq by 3-1 to secure slot in the semifinals of the 26th Arabian Gulf Cup at Jaber Al Ahmed International Stadium in Kuwait City on Saturday night.

The triumph took Saudi Arabia to the sixth point to end as second in Group B, while Iraq remained on three points in third place to end their campaign in the Gulf Cup.

Saudi Arabia will meet Oman on Tuesday in the first semifinal.

Saudi Arabia, who entered the match with two chances for draw and win, got off to a strong start seeking an early goal. In the 14th minute, Saudi’s Musab al Juwayr was very close to score as he managed to enter the danger area of Iraq and sent a strong ball but it touched the outside net.

Later, Iraq players responded through creating pressure towards Saudi’s goalie Mohammed al Owais.

Iraqi forward Ayman Hussain was near to score as he received a cross within the penalty area but Saudi’s defender Ali al Bulaihi cleared the ball for a corner in the 22nd minute.

After half an hour in the first half, Iraq pressed hard to take the lead and Mohanad Ali al Shamari was very close as he played through Saudi’s defenders and managed to reach to face the Saudi’s goalie but Al Bulaihi saved the ball to outside the corner area. The first half ended with a goalless draw.

In the 54th minute, referee returned back to the VAR to check the penalty after the ball touched Iraq’s Ibrahim al Bayesh and he confirmed the penalty.

The penalty was converted by Salim al Dawsari in the 57th minute to give the lead for Saudi Arabia.

In the 60th minute, Salim al Dawsari moved between the Iraqi players to send a strong shot but was saved by Iraq’s goalie Jalal Hassan.

Just four minutes later, Iraq came back with a goal by Mohanad Ali al Shamari as he received a ball inside the box and converted the ball to the target.

Ahead of the match end by 10 minutes, Abdullah al Hamdan managed to put Saudi Arabia in lead again as he registered the second goal in style in the 80th minute.

Five minutes later, Abdullah al Hamdan



Saudi Arabia’s Awn Al Saluli in action with Iraq’s Aymen Hussein during the Arabian Gulf Cup Group B match at Jaber Al Ahmad International Stadium, Kuwait City. — Reuters

added another goal for Saudi Arabia following perfect assistance from Salim al Dawsari.

Iraq players worked hard in the dying minutes to bounce back as their strikers worked hard to reduce the scoring gap but they faced a strong defending line besides Saudi goalkeeper Mohammed al Owais who saved their attempts.

Nine minutes were added as additional time and Saudi Arabia confirmed their win by 3-1. Salim al Dawsari was named as the best player of the match.



Saudi Arabia’s Abdullah Al Hamdan celebrates scoring their third goal. — Reuters

Yemen stun Bahrain to earn first ever victory in Gulf Cups

AHMED AL KAABI  
MUSCAT, DEC 28

Yemen secured their first ever victory in the history of Arabian Gulf Cup with a 2-1 result against Bahrain in their final Group B match at Jaber Al Mubarak Stadium in Kuwait City on Saturday night.

The Bahraini players started the match with high pressure on Yemen’s goal, with the first Bahraini threat coming in the fourth minute through a shot by Ibrahim al Kahtal. The Bahraini team played the match with their reserve players, as they had already secured qualification as group leaders regardless of the outcome.

The Bahraini team continued their high pressing and in the 10th minute, Yemen’s Ali al Dugin received a yellow card. Mohammed al Romaihi nearly opened the scoring for Bahrain with a dangerous header in the 14th minute, but Yemeni goalkeeper Mohammed Aman brilliantly saved it. The Yemeni team began to regain their balance after the first 15 minutes and pushed forward in search of their first win in the tournament. In the 36th minute, Yemen earned a direct free kick, which Ahmed al Matari struck, but it rebounded off the wall and was followed up by his teammate Nasser al Gahwashi without finding the net.



Yemeni players celebrate after the win.



Bahrain’s Mohammed al Romaihi celebrates his goal.

Yemen won a corner kick, which was played short and then followed up by Nasser al Gahwashi. The ball deflected off Bahrain’s Ibrahim al Khattal, surprising the Bahraini goalkeeper and entering the net to announce Yemen’s lead with the opening goal. The Bahraini players tried to equalise after the goal, but in the final minute of the first half, Yemen’s Al Gahwashi broke through Bahrain’s defence and scored another goal, only for it to be disallowed for offside. The first half ended with Yemen leading 1-0.

The Bahraini players entered the second half with clear determination to score an equaliser. After a series of attempts, they managed to level the score with a brilliant pass from Ibrahim al Khattal, which Mohammed al Romaihi converted into the net in the 61st minute.

In the 73rd minute, Nasser al Gahwashi was fouled by Bahraini defender Sayed Mehdi Baqer, who, after a review by VAR, received a red card, leaving Bahrain with 10 players. Both teams continued to exchange attacks, but Yemen had the upper hand due to Bahrain’s numerical disadvantage. In the 87th minute, Haroon al Zubaidi scored the winner for Yemen, sealing a 2-1 victory.

Despite the loss, the Bahraini team claimed the top spot in Group B, setting up a semifinal clash with Kuwait.

FIRST T20



New Zealand's Mitchell Hay (L) tries for a run out of Sri Lanka's Kusal Mendis (R) during the first Twenty20 at Mount Maunganui. — AFP

DUFFY BOWLS KIWIS TO 8-RUN VICTORY OVER SRI LANKA

MOUNT MAUNGANUI, NEW ZEALAND: A late bowling fightback sparked by Jacob Duffy produced a remarkable eight-run victory for New Zealand against Sri Lanka at Mount Maunganui on Saturday.

Sri Lanka, with openers Pathum Nissanka and Kusal Mendis in sparkling form, were cruising towards the 173-run target when they reached 95 without loss at the halfway stage.

But in the 14th over, with Sri Lanka 121-0, Duffy changed the game with three wickets in four balls, all caught behind by Mitchell Hay, beginning with the dismissal of Mendis for 46 off 36 deliveries.

Nissanka went on to make 90 off 60, which included seven fours and three sixes for his highest Twenty20 score, while no other Sri Lankan reached double figures.

"We should have done better," was the succinct summary from Sri Lankan captain Charith Asalanka who was out for three and also dropped a catch.

"Pathum and Kusal batted well, the rest including me should take responsibility for this loss."

New Zealand captain Mitchell Santner said Duffy changed the game with his 3-21 after the home side reached 172-8 in their 20 overs with the innings propped up by a century stand by Daryl Mitchell and Michael Bracewell.

The pair came together in the 10th over with New Zealand struggling at 65-5 and put on 105 before both were dismissed in the final over.

Mitchell was stumped for 62 off 42 deliveries while Bracewell was caught behind for 59 off 33.

"It was a massive partnership for us, the way they went about it, they soaked it up for a bit then put the pressure back on to put up a pretty good score," Santner said.

Binura Fernando, who removed both New Zealand openers in his second over, finished with 2-22.

Tim Robinson was caught and bowled for 11 when he drove a short-pitched delivery straight back to the bowler.

Three balls later Rachin Ravindra, on eight, nicked an outswinger and was caught behind.

Mark Chapman, dropped on four, reached 15 before he was caught on the boundary by Kamindu Mendis off the bowling of Matheesha Pathirana.

Glenn Phillips had made eight off nine deliveries when he was trapped in front and Mitchell Hay went first ball when he played and missed at a delivery drifting into the pads. — AFP



India's Nitish Kumar Reddy celebrates his century as Mohammed Siraj looks on. — Reuters

Reddy's defiant maiden ton claws India back

NITISH KUMAR REDDY scored a defiant maiden century on Saturday as India fought back to reach 358-9 on a rain-hit third day of the fourth Test against Australia.

Rising all-rounder Reddy was applauded off the Melbourne Cricket Ground on 105 not out after rain ended play for the day midway through the final session.

Having provided much-needed stability to another shaky Indian batting effort, the 21-year-old will resume on Sunday alongside Mohammed Siraj, on two, with the first-innings deficit reduced to 116 runs.

Australia's push for a much bigger advantage after scoring 474 was stymied by Reddy and spin-bowling all-rounder Washington Sundar, who scored 50 as the pair put on 127 for the eighth wicket.

To the roar of a large contingent of Indian supporters among a record 83,073 third-day crowd at the MCG, Reddy lofted Scott Boland over mid-on to reach three figures just before play was halted.

It was an innings memorable for resolute defence, mixed with classical stroke-play.

Reddy faced 176 balls, hitting 10 fours and one six, continuing the fine batting form at number eight in the order that has marked his debut series.

In his first six Test innings, he has scored 284 runs — the most in the series by any Indian player — at an average of 71.

Sundar described Reddy's innings as

"unbelievable" and said he always knew a century was well within his team-mate's ability.

"Mentally he's very, very strong," Sundar said. "I've known him for quite a few years. The way he went about his business today was amazing. He gives a hundred per cent, that's his approach to life.

"I'm sure this hundred will be talked about and remembered for a very, very long-time."

Seamers Boland, who took 3-57, and Pat Cummins with 3-86 were the most productive Australian bowlers in conditions that offered little assistance despite overcast skies. Boland said Reddy was a "nice player" whose range of shots proved hard to contain.

"It looks like he's got pretty much every shot in the book," Boland said.

"Obviously he's playing really nicely. Coming in down in the lower order, he's trying to put the pressure back on us."

RECORD CROWD

Boland believed Australia were still well placed to push for victory, with the pitch still containing a "bit of nip" for the seamers.

He said team-mate Mitchell Starc was bowling with a "niggle in his back or rib" but expected the paceman would continue to play a full part in the Test.

"He's someone who can still bowl at the same pace even when he is really sore, which is a great trait to have."

The recalled Sundar's dogged knock off 162 balls ended when he was caught at first

slip by Steve Smith from off-spinner Nathan Lyon. It ended a partnership that traversed the entire second session after India had advanced from 164-5 overnight to 244-7 at lunch.

Sundar survived the most freakish moment of the day when on 18.

Attempting to flick a leg-sided delivery from Starc, the ball flew from the back of the bat into the slip cordon where a diving Smith spilled a one-handed opportunity.

India lost Rishabh Pant and Ravindra Jadeja in the opening session.

Pant's innings of 28 ended when he overbalanced while attempting a ramp shot for six off Boland, top-edging the ball to third man where Lyon held the catch.

Jadeja was trapped lbw when on 17, playing back to a Lyon delivery that skidded on.

The crowd of 83,073 was a record for the third day of a Boxing Day Test, according to Cricket Australia, and the largest day three crowd at the Melbourne Cricket Ground since 1937.

The record total attendance for a Boxing Day Test is 271,865, which looks certain to be smashed on Sunday after 255,462 spectators came through the gates on the first three days. Rain threatened throughout the day and about 40 minutes of play was lost in a period either side of tea.

The series is locked at 1-1 with the fifth and final Test to be played in Sydney next week. — AFP

Abbas, Shahzad rock South Africa at start of chase

CENTURION, SOUTH AFRICA: Pakistan opening bowlers Mohammad Abbas and Khurram Shahzad struck three blows late on the third afternoon as South Africa set out in pursuit of 148 runs to win the first Test at SuperSport Park on Saturday.

South Africa were reeling at 27 for three at the close, 121 runs short of a victory which would clinch them a place in the World Test championship final in England next June. Abbas took two wickets for three runs in four immaculate overs of swing bowling, dismissing Tony de Zorzi and Tristan Stubbs, while Shahzad trapped Ryan Rickelton.

Aiden Markram, South Africa's top scorer in the first innings, was unbeaten on 22 going into what

could be a nervy fourth day for the hosts. All three wickets were leg before wicket decisions — and all three were reviewed. De Zorzi batted outside his crease in an attempt to counter the swing which undid him in the first innings — but Abbas beat his inside edge and he was given out.

He reviewed umpire Alex Wharf's decision but replays showed the impact was "umpire's call", with the ball going on to hit the stumps, and he had to go for two runs.

Rickelton failed to score before he was trapped by Shahzad and Stubbs made one before falling to Abbas — with Pakistan successfully reviewing on both occasions after the batsmen were initially given not out.

It was a dramatic end to a day in which the start was delayed by three



South Africa's Marco Jansen (2nd L) celebrates with teammates after the dismissal of Pakistan's Salman Agha (unseen) during the third day of the first Test match. — AFP

hours because of rain.

South Africa seemed well on target for victory when Pakistan were bowled out for 237, with left-arm fast bowler Marco Jansen taking six for 52.

Saud Shakeel made 84 for Pakistan.

Resuming at 88 for three, Babar Azam and the left-handed Shakeel batted confidently, adding another 65 runs in 14.5 overs.

Babar made 50, his first half-century in 19 Test innings, before Jansen had a burst of three wickets in 14 balls, starting when Babar slapped a short ball from Jansen to deep point. Shakeel was the ninth man out when he missed a full toss from Jansen after hitting 10 fours and a six in a 113-ball innings. — AFP

SPORTS



# Argentina upset Australia, Swiss beat France in United Cup

**ALEX** de Minaur swept past Tomas Martin Etcheverry to win his first match of the season on Saturday but it was not enough to prevent Argentina from upsetting hosts Australia at the United Cup, while Switzerland beat France. The world number nine crushed his opponent 6-1, 6-4 to level the tie after teammate Olivia Gadecki crashed to Nadia Podoroska 6-2, 6-4 in the women's singles rubber at Ken Rosewall Arena in Sydney.

But the home side couldn't lift in the deciding mixed doubles with Etcheverry returning to partner Maria Carle and beating Matt Ebden and Ellen Perez 6-2, 6-4.

Despite losing the tie, De Minaur was happy with his early-season form. "I've been putting some great work in the pre-season," he said.

"I felt comfortable with the way I was playing before the tournament, so I just told myself to back myself and play the type of tennis I wanted to play."

Former Olympic gold medallist Belinda Bencic won her first tour-level match since the 2023 US Open to help Switzerland beat France.

The 27-year-old, a one-time world number four who is now ranked 487, took down Chloe Paquet 6-3, 6-1, winning 10 of the last 11 games.

While she tentatively returned to the court at low-key events in November after having a baby in April, it was her first win at tour-level since her third-round victory at the 2023 US Open. Her teammate Dominic Stricker slumped 6-3, 7-5 to Ugo Humbert in their singles clash to send the tie to the mixed doubles. Bencic fronted up again alongside



Stricker to down Edouard Roger-Vasselin and Elixane Lechemia 6-1, 7-6 (7/4) and earn Switzerland the win.

**TRUST**

"I'm really excited to be back, of course," said Bencic, who won Olympic gold at the 2021 Tokyo Games and has eight career WTA titles to her name. "I had a little bit of nerves at the start and a little bit of rust, so I'm happy I kind of accepted that and tried to fight through it.

"And after, I felt like it went smoother, I became a little bit more calm, and kind of was more able to focus on my tennis."

In Perth, Canada bounced back after Felix Auger-Aliassime lost his singles rubber to prevail 2-1 over Croatia. The win came thanks to a 6-3, 6-4 mixed doubles victory from Auger-Aliassime and Leylah Fernandez against Lucija Ciric Bagaric and Ivan Dodig. "It was all about trusting each other and not trying to go for too much," Auger-Aliassime said. "We stuck to the game plan and it worked out well."

After 2021 US Open finalist Fernandez easily dispatched Donna Vekic 6-4, 6-3 to start the tie, Auger-Aliassime got into trouble against Borna Coric, crashing 0-6, 6-4, 6-4.

The 18-nation mixed-team United Cup is being played in Perth and Sydney.

Each team features three men and three women, with ties comprising one men's and one women's singles and an often decisive mixed-doubles clash.

The tournament began on Friday with Spain crashing 2-1 to Elena Rybakina's Kazakhstan, while China swept past Brazil 3-0. — AFP

## Muscat Nights launches International Drift Cup

KABEER YOUSUF  
@kabiyousef

**MUSCAT:** Over 30 professional racers from 10 countries are taking part in the International Drift Cup organised by the Oman Automobile Association (OAA) in cooperation with the Muscat Municipality, which was flagged off on Friday.

By adding such an exclusive sporting event, Muscat Nights are again the focal point of international racers and other sports enthusiasts as the MENA Drift Cup serves as a unique sporting event for motorsports and drifting enthusiasts.

It aims to provide an experience that combines technical skill and excitement, allowing the

audience to follow unprecedented and challenging sporting events. Speaking at the launch, Mohammed bin Talib al Raisi, Marketing Manager at the OAA, said that the championship brings together motorsports and drifting enthusiasts from all over the Sultanate of Oman and abroad.

It is witnessing exciting competitions full of enthusiasm and suspense, where elite drivers present dazzling performances that combine high technical performance and sports skill.

"We, at the OAA, are striving to advance motorsports in the Sultanate of Oman by organising a group of local, regional, and international championships to attract fans of these sports



and motivate them to practice them safely in accordance with the rules and standards set by the International Automobile Federation," Mohammed al Raisi added.

Each competitor faced their opponents to compete in two rounds of the race on the first day of the championship.

The points collected by the competitors were calculated to qualify 16 competitors for the rounds and stages of the final day of the championship the next day. A variety of other sports events are lined up as part of the 30-day-long Muscat Nights, which are sure to give an adrenaline rush to sports enthusiasts in the country and the region.

# BUSINESS

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## SHORT TAKES



The share of non-oil activities in the GDP grew 4.2 per cent

### OMAN’S GDP AT CONSTANT PRICES HITS RO 28.1 BILLION

MUSCAT: The Sultanate of Oman’s gross domestic product (GDP) at constant prices recorded an increase of 1.9 per cent at the end of the third quarter of 2024, reaching RO 28.146 billion, compared to RO 27.632 billion at the end of the third quarter of 2023.

Preliminary data issued by the National Centre for Statistics and Information (NCSI) indicated that the added value of oil activities decreased by 2.8 per cent, recording RO 8.881 billion by the end of the third quarter of this year, compared to RO 9.133 billion by the end of Q3 2023.

Crude oil activities accounted for 31.6 per cent of GDP. In value term, the sector’s contribution to GDP reached RO 7.479 billion, entailing a decline of 4.1 per cent over the year. Natural gas activities increased by 4.7 per cent, recording RO 1.401 billion. The added value of non-oil activities increased by 4.2 per cent, recording RO 20.527 billion, up from RO 19.706 billion a year earlier. Total industrial output was recorded at RO 6.220 billion, up from RO 5.889 billion in 2023. Agriculture, forestry and fishing activities accounted for RO 735.700 million of GDP, while service activities totalled RO 13.571 billion. — ONA

### OMAN’S BROAD MONEY SUPPLY GREW BY 12.6%



Oman’s broad money supply sees 12.6% annual growth, reaching RO 24.8 billion by October 2024.

MUSCAT: The broad money supply in the Sultanate of Oman recorded an annual growth of 12.6 per cent, reaching RO 24.8 billion by the end of October 2024. This increase resulted from a 24.8 per cent rise in narrow money and a 8.4 per cent rise in quasi-money, which comprises savings and time deposits in Rials Omani, certificates of deposit issued by banks, margin accounts and all foreign currency deposits within the banking sector.

As of the end of October, currency held by the public decreased by 5.9 per cent, while demand deposits increased by 33.2 per cent.

Regarding the structure of interest rates at traditional commercial banks, the weighted average interest rate on Rial Omani deposits rose from 2.531 per cent in October 2023 to 2.709 per cent in October 2024. Similarly, the weighted average interest rate on loans in Rials Omani increased from 5.452 per cent to 5.628 per cent over the same period. The overnight inter-bank lending rate saw a decline, averaging 4.681 per cent in October 2024, compared to 5.584 per cent in October 2023. This decrease was attributed to a drop in the weighted average repurchase agreement (repo) rate, which fell to 5.500 per cent compared to 6.000 per cent during the same period last year, aligning with the policies of the US Federal Reserve. — ONA

# Oman Nation brand voting drive concludes today

**FOLLOWING** A WIDESPREAD response to the Oman Nation brand visual identity voting drive, campaign organisers are now encouraging all Omani citizens and residents who haven’t yet cast their vote to do so during the fourth and final day of voting, which falls on Sunday, December 29, 2024.

Participants can cast their vote for one of three Oman Nation brand visual identities — which will subsequently be used as the official logo for the Sultanate of Oman’s long-term nation branding strategy, after the winning logo is revealed to the public in early-2025.

To-date, the visual identity voting campaign has achieved a widespread, positive response and enjoyed representation from Omani citizens and residents, country-wide.

Commenting on the positive response to the campaign, Eng Aisha bint Mohammed al Saifiyah — Director of Oman’s Unified Promotional Nation Brand Project, and Vice-President for the National Programme for Investment and Export Development (Nazdaher) stated: “Today is the final day to take part in this exciting Oman Nation brand voting campaign. For Omani citizens and Oman-based residents, the process is very easy. All you have to do is visit the official voting website [www.omanbrand.om](http://www.omanbrand.om) — where you can cast your vote for the brand logo which you feel best represents our nation’s authentic values and aspirations, and national story.”

**ENG AISHA BINT MOHAMMED AL SAIFIYAH**

A distinct, authentic and positive Oman Nation brand shapes how we’re perceived globally as a highly attractive country for foreign investment, tourism and trade; and as an ideal working and lifestyle location for both Omanis and foreign nationals; along with many other factors that support the growth and development of our economy and society.

Today is our last chance to vote and I encourage everyone to do so — because this is a wonderful opportunity to play a part in bringing to life an exciting new chapter in Oman’s national story.



The visual identity voting campaign forms part of a long-term nation branding strategy.

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Today is our last chance to vote and I encourage everyone to do so — because this is a wonderful opportunity to play a part in bringing to life an exciting new chapter in Oman’s national story,” Eng Al Saifi added.

The visual identity voting campaign forms part of a long-

term nation branding strategy, which plans to positively impact how Oman is perceived globally and leverage this perception for the benefit of the country’s economy and society.

Each of the Oman nation brand visual identities takes the form of a branded logo that unites both traditional and contemporary Omani design elements in a visually appealing way. The identities were developed as part of Oman’s broad nation branding strategy and involved an extensive and rigorous 12-month period of research, with the entire process being overseen by a Creative Committee consisting of Omani creative professionals.

## GCC states record significant financial surplus in 2022-23

**BUSINESS REPORTER**  
MUSCAT, DEC 28

Data issued by the Statistical Centre for the Cooperation Council for the Arab Countries of the Gulf (GCC-Stat) indicate that the financial risks of the GCC countries will be low in the short term amid forecasts of stable or declining interest rates locally and globally. The reports issued by credit rating agencies also signaled an improvement in the sovereign bond rating of the GCC countries in 2023. It is also expected that the credit attractiveness of GCC countries will increase, which would allow for the rescheduling of their public debts at lower financial costs.

According to the estimates of the GCC-Stat, the public debt of the GCC countries is expected to stabilise at 28 per cent of the GCC countries’ GDP during the years 2024 and 2025. The financial budget reform plans, which



are based on improving the efficiency of public spending and programmes to stimulate growth in non-oil sectors, would contribute to achieving a balance between maintaining the economic growth rate and the sustainability of public spending.

The data issued by the GCC-Stat also reveal that the public debt of the GCC countries has doubled over the past ten years to reach about \$628 billion in 2023, after it was \$144

billion in 2014. The volume of debt as a percentage of the GCC Countries’ GDP increased to reach its peak in 2020 at 40.3 per cent, before declining in the following years to reach about 29.8 per cent in 2023.

The total public finances in the GCC countries also recorded a significant deficit during the period from 2014-2021. The highest deficit value was registered in 2015, with an amount of about \$158 billion, which accounts for 11.1 per cent of the total

GCC Countries’ GDP. In 2020, a deficit of \$128 billion was recorded, which represents 8.8 per cent of the total GDP.

The public finances of the GCC countries witnessed a significant financial surplus in 2022 estimated at \$134 billion, representing 6.1 per cent of the gross domestic product, followed by a surplus of \$2 billion in 2023.

The total public revenues in the GCC developed significantly during the period 2021-2023 to record about \$641 billion in 2023. Oil revenues accounted for 62 per cent of public revenues, compared to \$723 billion in 2022, of which oil revenues accounted for 67 per cent. Total public spending in the GCC countries reached its highest levels in 2023, recording about \$639 billion. Current spending accounted for 85 per cent of the total public spending, compared to 15 per cent for investment spending in the GCC countries.

BUSINESS

SHORTTAKES



National Bank of Oman (NBO) Headquarters.

NBO ENHANCES CUSTOMER CONVENIENCE WITH NEW DIGITAL COMPLAINT TRACKER

As part of its digital strategy and migration efforts, the National Bank of Oman (NBO) has introduced a new feature on the NBO app that allows customers to register and track complaints digitally anytime, anywhere, without needing to visit a branch or contact the Call Centre.

This innovative feature provides a convenient and transparent way to address customer concerns by enabling the submission of essential details such as complaint type, account number, and attachments, while also offering real-time progress tracking.

Commenting on the initiative, Dr Ali bin Salim al Shekaili, Assistant General Manager and Head of Digital Banking & E-Channels at NBO, said, “At NBO, we are committed to enhancing our customers’ experiences by providing exclusive services that cater to their needs and expectations. This digital initiative simplifies the process of registering and tracking complaints, ensuring faster and more transparent resolutions. It underscores our ongoing efforts to deliver exceptional service and foster a positive banking experience for all customers.” This new digital feature reflects NBO’s alignment with the Consumer Protection Framework and enhances the bank’s complaints handling process. It is part of NBO’s broader commitment to improving service efficiency, convenience, and customer satisfaction through digitisation.

Sohar International receives ‘Exemplary CSR Leadership’ award

**SOHAR** INTERNATIONAL, Oman’s best bank, has been awarded the prestigious ‘Exemplary CSR Leadership’ accolade at the recently held Oman CSR Summit and Awards 2024, reaffirming the bank’s steadfast commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR). This recognition underscores the bank’s clear, strategic approach to corporate social responsibility (CSR), with human development at its core. The award highlights Sohar International’s commitment to creating sustainable, long-term impact through initiatives that focus on empowering individuals, fostering community growth, and advancing national progress.

The award ceremony, held under the auspices of Shaikh Salim bin Mustahail al Mashani and graced by Dr Mahad bin Said bin Ali Baawain, Minister of Labour, convened senior government officials, business leaders, and nonprofit organisations to celebrate leadership in CSR and sustainability. Receiving the award on behalf of the bank was Mazin bin Mahmood Al Raisi, Chief Marketing Officer of Sohar International.

Said bin Mohamed al Aufi, Chairman of Sohar International, expressed his pride in the award, stating: “At Sohar International, we define success through a dual lens – achieving strong financial performance while delivering lasting, positive impact within the communities we serve. This recognition affirms our strategy of embedding human development as a key pillar in our CSR efforts. Our approach is rooted in empowering individuals and fostering inclusive growth across Oman. Through purposeful collaborations with government entities, businesses, and local communities, we are working towards creating opportunities that deliver sustainable and meaningful impact.” Rooted in purpose, Sohar International’s CSR framework drives sustainable, long-term impact, positioning the bank as a key enabler of socioeconomic growth. By aligning its initiatives with national development priorities, the bank continues to unlock inclusive opportunities, fostering positive change and shaping a more resilient and equitable future for all.

Mazin bin Mahmood al Raisi, Chief Marketing Officer, further elaborated on the bank’s strategic approach: “Our CSR strategy is grounded in creating long-term value that transcends short-term efforts. We focus on initiatives that drive social



Sohar International was honoured with the prestigious ‘Exemplary CSR Leadership’ award at the Oman CSR Summit and Awards 2024.

integration, economic opportunity, and empowerment, which in turn contribute to the sustainable growth of the nation. By aligning our CSR activities with national development goals, we aim to foster lasting prosperity. Our commitment to supporting entrepreneurship, empowering women, and providing for vulnerable communities positions us as a forward-thinking institution, focused on creating a resilient and inclusive future for Oman.” Aligned with Oman’s long-term development goals and driven by a commitment to foster national progress, Sohar International remains steadfast in its commitment to advancing societal development through sustainability-focused corporate social responsibility (CSR) initiatives. The bank’s multifaceted contributions reflect a strategic approach to community enrichment, individual empowerment, and inclusive economic growth. By enhancing maternal healthcare infrastructure through the donation of advanced ultrasound machines to the Directorate General of Health in Muscat for Al Seeb Polyclinic, and partnering with the Al Noor Association for the Blind to deliver soft-skills training for visually impaired individuals, Sohar International actively drives social integration and workforce inclusion.

Further reinforcing its role as an enabler of economic opportunity, the bank continues to foster entrepreneurship and

SME growth through strategic initiatives such as Sharakahh, alongside a six-month programme designed to equip 10 Omani female entrepreneurs with the digital capabilities required to expand and modernise their businesses. Sohar International’s community engagement extends to addressing immediate societal needs, exemplified by its Ramadan initiative, which supported 100 underprivileged families in Muscat with essential food hampers and electronic items. Simultaneously, the bank champions local culture and the creative economy through the Safiya Art Gallery, providing a platform to promote Omani artists and preserve the nation’s artistic legacy. Through these initiatives, Sohar International not only reinforces its position as a key driver of sustainable economic and social progress but also strengthens its role as a trusted partner in shaping a more inclusive and resilient future for Oman. These initiatives illustrate Sohar International’s holistic approach to sustainable development, demonstrating a deep understanding of the interconnectedness between community well-being, economic resilience, and national growth. By driving impactful change across the Sultanate of Oman, the bank solidifies its reputation as a forward-thinking institution prioritising socio-economic impact alongside financial success.

Bank Nizwa launches flexible financing bundle for Haj and Umrah

**STAYING TRUE** to its ethos as Oman’s leading and most trusted Islamic bank, Bank Nizwa, has introduced an exclusive Haj and Umrah Financing Bundle, a strategic initiative aimed at providing the necessary financial solution to individuals wishing to undertake these sacred journeys. Bank Nizwa enables individuals to achieve their diverse aspirations through innovative financing solutions, while also offering exclusive benefits tailored to enhance their banking experience.

Bank Nizwa offers its customers this product at a competitive profit rate on the Haj & Umrah financing product, with repayment terms extending up to ten years. Customers are eligible for Platinum or Titanium credit cards, with annual fee waivers for the first year along with a complimentary travel insurance. Bank Nizwa offers fast processing, with approvals finalised on the same day of application, allowing convenience and ease for customers.

Commenting on the launch of the Haj and Umrah financing bundle, Mohamed al Ghassani, Chief Retail Banking officer at Bank Nizwa, said, “We continuously strive to meet the evolving and diverse needs of our community by providing innovative, Sharia-compliant financial solutions.

**UNWAVERING COMMITMENT**  
The launch of this financing bundle reflects our unwavering commitment to meeting the growing demand for Islamic financial products, which underscores the increasing preference for Islamic banking services.

By offering tailored solutions that empower individuals to achieve their aspirations, we continue to solidify our position as leaders in Islamic financing, committed to enhancing financial inclusion and ensuring easy access to our services. In alignment with Oman Vision 2040, which promotes shared values and societal cohesion, this initiative reinforces our role as a socially



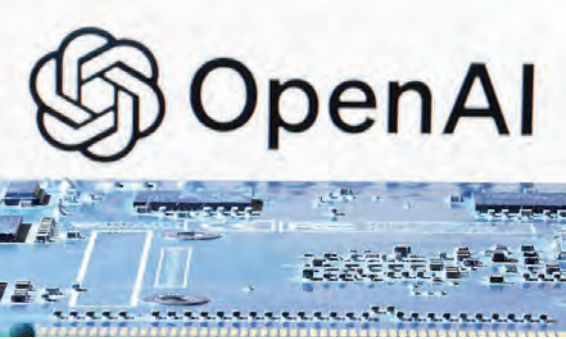
Bank Nizwa continues its pursuit of shaping a prosperous future while meeting its customers’ diverse needs.

responsible institution and ensures that our services reflect the values and aspirations of our customers.”

**PREMIUM CREDIT**  
The financing bundle has been designed to combine convenience and value, offering benefits such as premium credit cards and complimentary travel insurance. Bank Nizwa remains dedicated to providing a seamless and supportive banking experience, highlighting its innovative, customer-focused approach that has earned it trust and loyalty as a leader in Islamic finance within the Sultanate of Oman.

As a forward-looking organisation, Bank Nizwa continues its pursuit of shaping a prosperous future while meeting its customers’ diverse needs. Through such initiatives, the bank reaffirms its commitment to delivering financial solutions that align with its customers’ values and contribute to the advancement of Oman’s financial sector, building a thriving and sustainable future.

STRONG SUPPORT



An illustration of the OpenAI logo placed near a computer motherboard. — Reuters

OPENAI OUTLINES NEW FOR-PROFIT STRUCTURE IN BID TO STAY AHEAD IN COSTLY AI RACE

**BENGALURU:** OpenAI on Friday outlined plans to revamp its structure, saying it would create a public benefit corporation to make it easier to “raise more capital than we’d imagined,” and remove the restrictions imposed on the startup by its current non-profit parent.

The acknowledgement and detailed rationale behind its high-profile restructuring confirmed a Reuters report in September, which sparked debate among corporate watchdogs and tech moguls including Elon Musk. At issue were the implications such a move might have on whether OpenAI would allocate its assets to the non-profit arm fairly, and how the company would strike a balance between making a profit and generating social and public good as it develops AI.

Under the proposed plan, the ChatGPT maker’s existing for-profit arm would become a Delaware-based public benefit corporation (PBC) - a structure designed to consider the interests of society in addition to shareholder value.

OpenAI has been looking to make changes to attract further investment, as the expensive pursuit of artificial general intelligence, or AI that surpasses human intelligence heats up.

Its latest \$6.6 billion funding round at a valuation of \$157 billion was contingent on whether the ChatGPT-maker could upend its corporate structure and remove a profit cap for investors within two years, Reuters reported in October.

The nonprofit, meanwhile, will have a “significant interest” in the PBC in the form of shares as determined by independent financial advisers, OpenAI said in a blog post, adding that it would be one of the “best resourced non-profits in history.” OpenAI started in 2015 as a research-focused non-profit but created a for-profit unit four years later to secure funding for the high costs of AI development. Its unusual structure gave control of the for-profit unit to the non-profit and was in focus last year when Sam Altman was fired as CEO only to return days later after employees rebelled.

“We once again need to raise more capital than we’d imagined. Investors want to back us but, at this scale of capital, need conventional equity and less structural bespokeness,” the Microsoft-backed startup said on Friday. — Reuters

Stocks hit, dollar slips in illiquid year-end profit

**US** STOCKS wrapped up Christmas week on Friday with retracements of double-digit uptrends, and, alongside the dollar to a smaller degree, succumbed to profit taking in illiquid markets heading into the last weekend of 2024.

Even with its slight loss on Friday, the US dollar was headed for an almost 7 per cent annual gain, as traders anticipated robust US growth, as well as tax cuts, tariffs and deregulation by the incoming administration of President-elect Donald Trump, would make the Federal Reserve cautious on rate-cutting well into 2025.

Selling in Wall Street’s main indexes gathered steam through the morning, chilling the mood after the week started out showing the hallmarks of a classic year-end rally to crown what was already a stellar year.

“The Santa Claus rally came a bit earlier this year, and I think this is profit taking ahead of another holiday-shortened week next week,” said Jeff Schulze, head Of economic and market strategy at Clearbridge Investments. “That’s another reason I think this isn’t causing more apprehension heading into a weekend. It’s not uncommon for the market to hit air pockets when the volumes are light.” Selling in Wall Street’s main indexes gathered steam through the morning, chilling the mood after the week started out showing the hallmarks of a classic year-end rally to crown what was already a stellar year.

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“I’ve heard anecdotes that pension funds are rebalancing ahead of year-end, selling stocks and buying bonds,” said Steve Sosnick, chief market strategist at Interactive Brokers, who added he could not verify.



Campaign hats for Republican presidential candidate and former US president.



The Santa Claus rally came a bit earlier this year, and I think this is profit taking ahead of another holiday-shortened week next week. That’s another reason I think this isn’t causing more apprehension heading into a weekend. It’s not uncommon for the market to hit air pockets when the volumes are light.

**JEFF SCHULZE**  
head Of economic and market strategy at Clearbridge Investments

“It would explain the sudden sell-off on no news. And of course, if large funds are selling stocks en masse, the megacap tech stocks would bear the brunt because of their heavy weighting in major indices.” MSCI’s broad global share index fell 0.59 per cent on Friday, and was 1.45 per cent higher for the week.

MSCI’s broadest index of Asia-Pacific shares outside Japan eased 0.1 per cent, marking a 1.5 per cent weekly rise, while Tokyo’s Nikkei rose 1.8 per cent.

Europe’s Stoxx 600 rose 0.67 per cent on Friday and was about 1 per cent higher for the week.

“There is some potential upside left for this bull market, but it is limited,” said Luca Paolini, chief strategist at Pictet Asset Management “(Trump’s) inauguration day is a potential inflection point and all the (prospective) good news will be in the price by then,” Paolini added.

The dollar index, which measures the currency against six other major currencies, eased 0.06 per cent, with a 0.2 per cent weekly gain, and showed a 6.6 per cent 2024 gain.

Dollar/yen was down 0.06 per cent, but near Tuesday’s 5-1/2 month high. The greenback was also showing a 5.4 per cent gain this month against the beleaguered yen and a near 12 per cent advance for 2024. The euro, was steady, not far from November’s two-year low and showing a 5.6 per cent loss year to date. The BoJ held back from a rate hike this month, which weighed on the yen. Governor Kazuo Ueda said he preferred to wait for clarity

on Trump’s policies, underscoring rising angst among central banks worldwide of US tariffs hitting global trade.

Fed Chair Jerome Powell said earlier this month that US central bank officials “are going to be cautious about further cuts” after an as-expected quarter-point rate reduction.

The US economy also faces the impact of Donald Trump, who has proposed deregulation, tax cuts, tariff hikes and tighter immigration policies that economists view as both pro-growth and inflationary.

Traders, meanwhile, anticipate the Bank of Japan will keep its monetary policy settings loose and the European Central Bank will deliver further rate cuts, neither positive for their currencies.

Traders are pricing in 37 basis points of US rate cuts in 2025, with no reduction fully priced into money markets until May, by which time the ECB is expected to have lowered its deposit rate by a full percentage point to 2 per cent as the euro zone economy slows.

Higher US rate expectations pulled the 10-year Treasury yield, which rises as the price of the fixed income instrument falls, to its highest since early May early on Thursday, at 4.641 per cent. It was last up 4.6 basis points at 4.625 per cent. The two-year Treasury yield, which tracks interest rate forecasts, eased 0.4 bp to 4.328 per cent. US debt trends also sent euro zone yields higher, with Germany’s benchmark 10-year bund yield rising 7.6 bp to 2.401 per cent on Friday. — Reuters

Chinese firm to supply green hydrogen systems for ACME Oman project

CONRAD PRABHU  
MUSCAT, DEC 28

Shuangliang Hydrogen, a subsidiary of the Chinese integrated energy systems conglomerate Shuangliang Group (SLG), has announced that it has secured a contract to supply green hydrogen production equipment for a major green ammonia project planned by India’s ACME Group in the Sultanate of Oman. Shanghai-headquartered SLG said in a post on Friday that it will provide the required hardware to support the production of 300 tonnes/day of green ammonia at ACME’s Oman project. “Following the end of 2024, SLG together with India’s ACME Group, have taken a solid step in international clean energy cooperation,” the Chinese firm said. “Recently, after many rounds of in-depth exchanges and field visits in the previous period, the two sides officially signed the order agreement for the green electric hydrogen production system for the Oman green hydrogen and green ammonia project. The cooperation between both sides in the global clean energy industry will open a new chapter

and meet the challenges of global climate change,” it added in its post.

For ACME, a prominent player in India’s renewable and green energy industry, the agreement marks another key milestone in its ambition to invest in Oman’s mega-scale green hydrogen sector. ACME’s wholly-owned subsidiary, Green Hydrogen and Chemicals Company SAOC (GHC), is developing a 100,000 tonnes per annum (tpa) capacity green ammonia plant at the Duqm Special Economic Zone. This capacity is envisioned to expand to 900,000 tpa over multiple phases.

Established in 1982, Shuangliang is ranked among China’s top 500 enterprises, with manufacturing interests across the clean energy, environmental protection, and water services industries. The group oversees a portfolio of 22 subsidiaries operating across the renewable and clean energy value chain.

Under its contract with ACME Oman, SLG has committed to providing multiple sets of green electricity hydrogen production systems, with delivery slated for completion before



Representatives of ACME Oman and Shuangliang Hydrogen (SLG) at the agreement signing.

the end of 2025. Meanwhile, ACME Oman has been making significant headway in advancing its Duqm green ammonia venture. Earlier this year, the company announced the signing

of a firm and binding agreement with the leading Norwegian crop nutrition company Yara for the supply of green ammonia on a long-term basis from the Oman project. The long-term offtake

agreement, covering the supply of 100,000 tpa of renewable ammonia, is one of the world’s first arm’s length contracts for renewable ammonia of this scale and tenure. The parent company, ACME Group, is also collaborating with the German firm Hydrogenious LOHC Technologies to explore the feasibility of utilising the latter’s Liquid Organic Hydrogen Carrier (LOHC) technology to ship Omani hydrogen to Europe. Hydrogenious is credited with pioneering LOHC technology for the bulk transportation of green hydrogen at ambient pressure and temperature while using existing liquid fuel infrastructure. As part of an MoU signed in April this year, ACME Group and Hydrogenious will explore the joint development of large-scale hydrogen supply chains from ACME’s Oman project to supply hubs in Europe using the innovative LOHC technology. Transported in combination with LOHC, the green molecules can be distributed to industrial clusters around Europe by train, barge, tanker, and truck, thereby contributing to the decarbonisation of key sections of the economy.

OPINION

From blockchain to AI: a decade of tech revolution



**STEFANO VIRGILLI**  
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*The author is a member of the International Press Association*

**MONEY**, IT SEEMS, is by far the most tangible way to measure a technology’s impact, as it awakens in everyone the desire to become rich overnight. Bitcoin has paved the way for hundreds of other cryptocurrencies to play that role in many lives. However, it’s crucial to understand that the cryptocurrency market is highly volatile. Bitcoin didn’t reach its previous all-time high of nearly \$70,000, nor the most recent at \$105,000 overnight; it took 15 long years of ups and downs to get there. In fact, very recently in its history, Bitcoin’s price plummeted from around \$67,000 to \$14,000, leading many to believe that the cryptocurrency was finished. When these collapses in price occur, people tend to ignore the entire industry for months on end, sometimes missing out on the potential upside opportunities.

It’s important to note that I am in no way attempting to advise anyone on their finances, but if we were to draw a comparison to the real estate market, prices go up, and sometimes prices go down. The real estate market has experienced its fair share of volatility, often driven by external factors such as financial crises and pandemics. For

instance, the global financial crisis of 2007-2008, triggered by the subprime mortgage crisis in the United States, had a profound impact on real estate markets worldwide. As credit markets froze and foreclosures soared, property prices plummeted, leaving many homeowners underwater on their mortgages. It took years for the market to recover, with some regions experiencing a more gradual rebound than others. More recently, the Covid-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the real estate market. The initial uncertainty and economic downturn caused by the pandemic led to a temporary slowdown in the housing market.

However, as lockdowns persisted and remote work became more prevalent, many people began to reassess their living situations, leading to a surge in demand for larger homes and properties in suburban and rural areas. This shift in preferences, combined with historically low interest rates, has driven up prices in many markets, creating a seller’s market despite the ongoing economic challenges. In the middle of the crisis, I was offered to buy an apartment in a condo in Malaysia at exactly 50 per cent of its current price in 2024.

The real estate market’s ups and downs

demonstrate that there is always a reason why any market will fluctuate. A financial crisis, a pandemic, another financial crisis, a war, and yet another war—all of these events can have a significant impact on market sentiment and prices. As humans, we tend to get excited when prices rise and turn our heads when they fall.

However, it is clear that the best deals are often made when prices are down because the upside potential is higher. Conversely, the best time to sell is when prices are high, as that’s when it’s time to reap the rewards. The same principles can be applied to the cryptocurrency market. While the volatility can be intimidating, it also presents opportunities for those who are willing to do their research and invest wisely. In the case of Bitcoin, the cryptocurrency has experienced multiple boom-and-bust cycles over its 15-year history.

Early adopters who bought Bitcoin when it was trading for just a few dollars per coin have seen their investments grow exponentially, despite the market’s volatility. However, those who bought at the peak of a bull run, such as in late 2017 or early 2021, may have had to wait years to see a return on their investment, if at all.

EU UNIVERSAL CHARGER RULES COME INTO FORCE

**BRUSSELS:** EU rules requiring all new smartphones, tablets and cameras to use the same charger came into force on Saturday, in a change Brussels said will cut costs and waste.

Manufacturers are now obliged to fit devices sold in the 27-nation bloc with a USB-C, the port chosen by the European Union as the common standard for charging electronic tools.

“Starting today, all new mobile phones, tablets, digital cameras, headphones, speakers, keyboards and many other electronics sold in the EU will have to be equipped with a USB Type-C charging port,” the EU Parliament wrote on social media X.

The EU has said the single charger rule will simplify the life of Europeans and slash costs for consumers. By allowing consumers to purchase a new device without a new charger, it will also reduce the mountain of obsolete chargers, the bloc has argued.

The law was first approved in 2022 following a tussle with US tech giant Apple. It allowed companies until December 28 this year to adapt. Makers of laptops will have extra time, from early 2026, to also follow suit.

Most devices already use these cables, but Apple was more than a little reluctant.

The firm said in 2021 that such regulation “stifles innovation”, but by September last year it had begun shipping phones with the new port.

Makers of electronic consumer items in Europe had agreed on a single charging norm from dozens on the market a decade ago under a voluntary agreement with the European Commission.

But Apple, the world’s biggest seller of smartphones, refused to abide by it and ditch its Lightning ports.

Other manufacturers kept their alternative cables going, meaning there were about half a dozen types knocking around, creating a jumble of cables for consumers.

USB-C ports can charge at up to 100 Watts, transfer data up to 40 gigabits per second, and can serve to hook up to external displays.

At the time of its approval, the commission said the law was expected to save at least €200 million (\$208 million) per year and cut more than a thousand tonnes of EU electronic waste every year.

“It’s time for THE charger,” the European Commission wrote on X on Saturday.

“It means better-charging technology, reduced e-waste, and less fuss to find the chargers you need.” — AFP

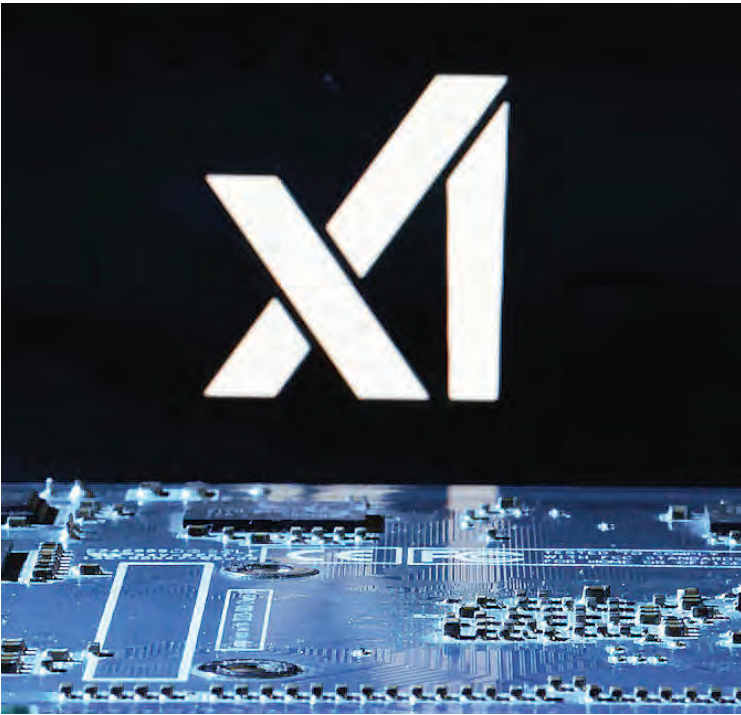


Elon Musk and GCC: a partnership shaping the Gulf’s tech future

**ELON** MUSK, a global icon of innovation, has extended his influence beyond electric vehicles and space exploration to redefining the future of artificial intelligence (AI) through his company, xAI. Established in 2023, xAI has attracted significant Gulf investments, reflecting a growing relationship between Musk and the region, which aspires to become a global hub for technology and innovation.

In recent years, Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the Sultanate of Oman, and Qatar have emerged as key partners in Musk’s ventures. The most recent example is Oman Investment Authority’s (OIA) acquisition of a stake in xAI, announced in December 2024. The company specialises in developing artificial general intelligence (AGI), aimed at solving complex global challenges while prioritising ethical and safe development. This investment aligns with the Gulf’s broader strategies to leverage advanced technologies, enhance economic diversification, and develop robust digital infrastructure. Initiatives such as Oman Vision 2040 and Saudi Vision 2030 reflect an ambition to move beyond oil-dependent economies by embracing knowledge-based industries.

Oman’s investment in xAI is not an isolated case. Saudi Arabia, for instance, has played a significant role in Musk’s ventures, particularly through its investment in X (formerly Twitter). Entities like the Public Investment Fund (PIF) and Kingdom Holding, owned by Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, have established Saudi Arabia as a key financial supporter of Musk’s vision. Similarly, Qatar’s sovereign wealth fund has participated in Musk’s projects, contributing to a growing Gulf presence in the global technology ecosystem. These partnerships demonstrate the Gulf’s commitment to fostering innovation not only through funding but also by collaborating with global tech leaders. The



xAI announced earlier this month that it had raised around \$6 billion in equity financing. — Reuters



**QASIM AL MAASHANI**

*The author is the head of Oman Observer’s Business section*

Gulf’s investment in xAI is part of a long-term strategy to harness the transformative potential of artificial intelligence. By integrating AI into key sectors such as education, healthcare, resource management, and smart cities, Gulf countries aim to address pressing challenges while driving economic growth. For example, AI technologies can enhance urban planning by streamlining transportation networks in rapidly expanding cities, improve healthcare through predictive diagnostics, and increase efficiency in managing critical natural resources like water and energy. These alignments underscore why the Gulf sees xAI’s work as vital to its vision of a sustainable future.

Beyond AI, Elon Musk’s expertise in renewable energy provides another avenue for collaboration with the Gulf. Tesla’s energy storage solutions, such as its Megapack batteries, could play a crucial role in helping Gulf countries manage renewable energy resources like solar and wind power. For nations transitioning towards cleaner energy, leveraging

Musk’s technologies could be instrumental in reducing reliance on oil, addressing peak demand issues, and creating sustainable energy solutions that align with their climate goals. While these Gulf-Musk partnerships reflect ambitious aspirations, they are not without challenges.

**CAPACITY BUILDING**

One significant hurdle is ensuring that these investments translate into local capacity building. Developing skilled talent, fostering innovation hubs, and creating an ecosystem for homegrown startups will be critical for Gulf countries to achieve self-reliance in advanced technologies. Furthermore, ethical considerations surrounding AI, such as data privacy and accountability, must be addressed to ensure these technologies are deployed responsibly. Gulf nations, through partnerships like those with xAI, have an opportunity to lead in setting global standards for the safe use of AI. The evolving relationship between Elon Musk and the Gulf represents a new model of international collaboration.

It merges Gulf financial resources with Musk’s groundbreaking ideas, forming a partnership that not only promises economic returns but also positions the region as a global leader in technology. This collaboration goes beyond technology adoption. It reflects a paradigm shift where the Gulf is emerging as an active player in shaping the global tech narrative. By investing in ventures like xAI, Gulf countries are asserting their ambition to drive innovation that delivers both regional and global impact. Gulf nations are no longer content with merely consuming technology. They are striving to be genuine partners in its creation, embedding innovation into the core of their economic and societal progress. The investment in xAI symbolises this forward-thinking vision, enabling Gulf countries to lead the next wave of the technological revolution.

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**Indian Social Club Oman (SUR BRANCH)**

**NOTICE CALLING THE AGM**  
Members are hereby notified that 8<sup>th</sup> Annual General Meeting of the Indian Social Club, Sur branch is scheduled for Friday, 14<sup>th</sup> February 2025, at 7.00 p.m at Sur Indian Social Club Office. The AGM will be followed by election to the Management Committee, Indian Social Club Oman, Sur Branch for the year 2025-2027.  
**AGENDA**  
1. Reading of the notice calling the meeting by the General Secretary.  
2. Opening address by the President.  
3. Approval of the minutes of the previous Annual General Body meeting.  
4. Report by General Secretary.  
5. Presentation of the Accounts of 2024 by the Treasurer.  
6. Discussion and Approval.  
7. Appointment of auditor for 2025.  
8. Any other points raised by the members with the permission of the Chair.  
Only those who are already members of the Indian Social Club Oman, Sur branch, and have regularized the membership by payment of the prescribed fees for 2025 on or before 17.01.2025 are entitled to attend the AGM and Election.  
The details of the election procedures are displayed in the Circular placed on the Notice Board of the Indian Social Club, PO Box No.120, PC 411, Sur, at its office, for the information of the members who desire to vote or submit nominations for the Management Committee Membership.  
**GENERAL SECRETARY, INDIAN SOCIAL CLUB, SUR BRANCH.**

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# ART/LIFE

A R T

## A JOURNEY THROUGH SURREALISM AND SELF-EXPRESSION > 20



TRAVEL

### Medici secret passageway in Florence reopens after refit



A SECRET passageway built 500 years ago to allow the Medici family to pass through the Italian city of Florence unhindered reopens to the public Saturday after an 10-million-euro restoration.

The Vasari Corridor, which is more than 700 metres (nearly half a mile) long and runs above the famous Ponte Vecchio, has been closed for eight years.

Designed in 1565 by Giorgio Vasari, a commission by Duke Cosimo I to mark his son's wedding, the corridor begins at what is now the Uffizi Galleries and ends up in the Pitti Palace across the Arno river.

Its 73 windows offer unrivalled views over the city centre, a Unesco World Heritage site, and will now finally be accessible to the general public.

It had since the 1970s held the large collection of the Uffizi's self-portraits, but was closed in 2016 to allow for upgrades to meet modern safety standards.

"Now restored to its original simplicity, the corridor presents itself to visitors as a plain 'aerial tunnel,'" the Uffizi said in a statement on Friday.

It passes above the heart of the city, "just as it appeared when the Florentine rulers used it for quick, safe and uninterrupted passage between their residence and the seat of government".

The works, which began in 2022, include new disability access, emergency exits, toilets, energy-efficient LED lighting and video surveillance.

"After an eight-year wait, the reopening of the Vasari Corridor returns a masterpiece within a masterpiece to Florence and Italy," Italian Culture Minister Alessandro Giuli said. — AFP

## QUICK FEATURES



FILM

Renowned Bollywood film-maker Shyam Benegal passed away on December 23, 2024 at a hospital in Mumbai, as cited by media reports. — AFP



ENTERTAINMENT

A musical performance by Paloma Faith during the Together At Christmas carol service at Westminster Abbey in London, Britain. —Reuters



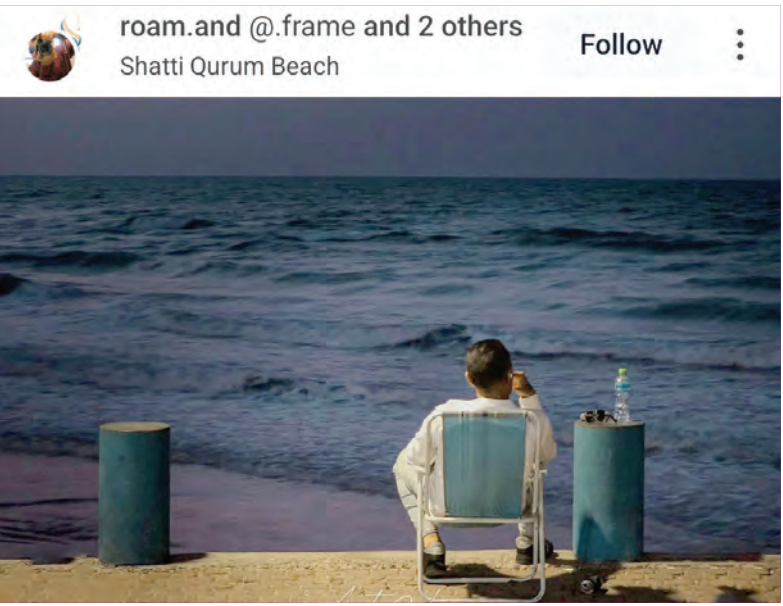
LIFESTYLE

A jewellery artefact from the repatriated Lombok collection is displayed during the reopening ceremony ahead of the public opening at the National Museum of Indonesia in Jakarta. — AFP

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‘Amphibious mouse’ among 27 new species discovered in Peru’s Amazon



AN “AMPHIBIOUS mouse” with partially webbed feet that eats aquatic insects was among 27 new species discovered during a 2022 expedition to Peru’s Amazon, according to Conservation International.

Scientists also discovered a spiny mouse, a squirrel, eight types of fish, three amphibians and 10 types of butterflies, Trond Larsen, head of Conservation International’s Rapid Assessment Program, said.

He added that another 48 species found by investigators were potentially new, but needed further study.

The new species were found in Alto Mayo, a protected area with several ecosystems, Indigenous territories and villages.

“Discovering so many new species of mammals and vertebrates is really incredible, especially in such a human-influenced landscape as Alto Mayo,” Larsen said.

The expedition between June and July 2022 was made up of 13 scientists plus local

technicians and members of Indigenous groups.

“It was really fantastic to work so closely with the Awajun people. They have extensive traditional knowledge about the forests, animals and plants they live side-by-side with,” Larsen said.

Among the new species, Larsen highlighted the spiny mouse that has stiff fur, the amphibious mouse, and a dwarf squirrel that measures 14 cm (5.5 in).

“(The squirrel) fits so easily in the palm of your hand. Adorable and beautiful chestnut-brown colour, very fast,” Larsen said. “It jumps quickly and hides in the trees.”

Another favourite discovery was the blob-headed fish, a type of armoured catfish, he said. A total of 2,046 species were recorded during the 38-day expedition using camera traps, bioacoustic sensors and DNA sampling. Among them, 49 were classified as threatened, including the yellow-tailed woolly monkey and the tree monkey. — AFP



Pimp my carriage: How to ride in style like Austria’s famed emperor Franz Joseph

A LONG-LOST carriage once used almost daily by Austria’s longest-serving monarch Franz Joseph for his commute from the Schoenbrunn palace to his office in central Vienna has gone on display after an epic renovation.

With tourists flocking to Vienna for Christmas, the carefully restored vehicle can be seen at the Imperial Carriage Museum, which houses one of the world’s most important collections.

“People usually saw him in exactly this type of vehicle, and the emperor in his beloved everyday carriage became a popular subject of postcards and paintings,” Mario Doeberl, historian and museum curator, said.

People would line the streets, hoping to throw petitions and protest letters into his carriage, knowing it was the only way to get the emperor’s ear, Doeberl said.

But his well-known commute also made him a potential assassination target and police also patrolled to make sure nobody came close.

The head of the Habsburg dynasty had access to about 600 vehicles including sleighs and sedan chairs.

After the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy in 1918, only 100 of the most valuable vehicles went into the Imperial carriage museum which opened four years later.

The royal carriage collection in Paris — once the most important centre of production — was mostly destroyed in the French revolution.

The emperor’s everyday carriage was thought to have been lost until it resurfaced at a stud farm in the 1990s and was painstakingly restored after a 20-year-long fight for funding.

- RESTORING MASTERPIECES -

Museum conservator Matthias Manzini was one of a handful of experts who brought the carriage back to life.

The run-down, rusty vehicle,



which had been repainted, was barely recognisable when it first entered the collection.

The carriage has gone on show again more than a century after one of the world’s longest-serving leaders last sat in it.

“A carriage is a moving work of art, and many different craftsmen are involved, including blacksmiths, sculptors, carpenters and architects,” Manzini said.

“These vehicles are no longer in use, but back then they were the most elaborate, most expensive ones — similar to a Rolls Royce nowadays,” said the 37-year-old conservator.

His task is not only to preserve the carriages, but also to find out how they were built and embellished in the first place.

Armed with a gilding brush made from the tail of a squirrel and gold leaf, Manzini is restoring the wheels of an imperial gala coach once used for coronations and weddings.

LAST RIDES

The museum’s most valuable carriage — the gilded Imperial state

coach — was once hauled across the Alps to Milan and taken to Budapest for the 1867 coronation of Empress Elisabeth. But it nearly became a victim of conflict.

Just a few months before the end of World War II, in February 1945, US planes bombed the Schoenbrunn palace, burying the carriages under debris.

The most daunting carriage is the collection’s jet-black hearse, which caused a stir when it last rolled through the streets of Vienna in 1989. Built in 1876, the neo-baroque hearse was used for five funerals, including Empress Elisabeth, Emperor Franz Joseph and Austria’s last empress Zita.

“It was controversial to use this museum piece again — nobody could guarantee that a strap wouldn’t rip, which would have been highly unpleasant for reasons of piety, but also dangerous for the hearse itself,” Doeberl shared. Fabian Daubner, 24, who was visiting Vienna for a few days, said he was awestruck by some of the carriages’ huge wheels which are almost “as big as” a human being. — AFP

FEATURES

BY RUQAYA AL KINDI  
*Instagram: @ruqaya.alkindi*

**ASAAD** Al Khalili, a passionate Omani artist, has been captivated by the surreal and the extraordinary since childhood. Drawn to scenes that distort reality, he has developed a unique artistic voice that resonates with the surrealism movement originating in the 20th century.

“Most of my artworks, even today, carry a surrealistic tint,” he explains. “Surrealism aims to unleash the creative potential of the unconscious mind.”

Al Khalili finds himself instinctively drawn to the nuances of human expression, from the details in eyes and postures to the subtleties of facial features. “I strive to capture intricate details on paper — not just appearances or emotions, but the very textures of skin and the smallest elements detectable.”

In his compelling work titled “Unconscious Effect,” Al Khalili explores the subtle influences people have on one another, often without realising it. “Individuals tend to adopt similar behaviours and attitudes to those they live with, reflecting their emotional and physical interactions.”

In another striking piece, “Nostalgic Reflection,” Al Khalili depicts a dimly lit room where an elderly man gazes out at a world that feels increasingly distant. “The old man finds himself ensnared in the labyrinth of his mind, where memories cycle through an eternal loop,” he reflects.

His artwork “Burden of Time” tackles the weight of life’s responsibilities. “This piece reflects the challenges of aging and the resilience required to navigate the complexities of life,” he adds.

Al Khalili also enjoys creating small, surrealistic bookmarks that incorporate elements like scaling, transformation and juxtaposition. He acknowledges the challenges faced by artists in a digital age, particularly with advances in artificial intelligence that can generate complete artworks with ease.

“AI technology poses a significant challenge for many artists. However, to create memorable and personal artworks, it’s essential for artists to cultivate their unique styles and continuously refine their skills,” he emphasises.

Looking ahead, Al Khalili is determined to push his creative boundaries and master new techniques. “I aspire to build a legacy that leaves a lasting intellectual and emotional impact on others.”

Throughout his journey, Al Khalili has achieved notable successes. “I’ve garnered several local awards and currently offer drawing lessons in perspective and charcoal techniques. My major project involves melding my experiences with 3D design technology to develop 3D-printed artworks alongside my traditional pieces,” he shares.

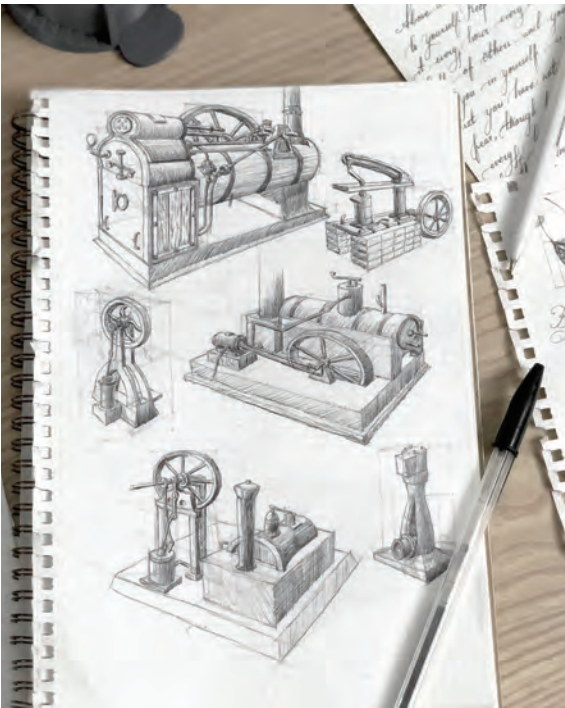
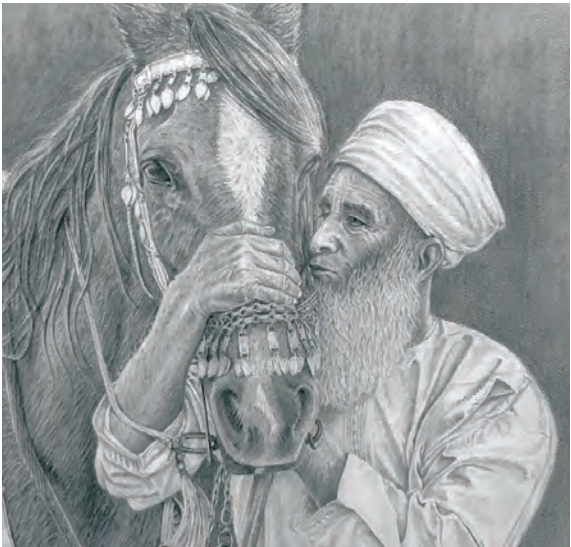
For many emerging artists, transforming passion into a viable income source is a common struggle. Al Khalili advises that building a strong social media presence to showcase artwork, selling online and offering drawing classes can help. “Artists can also sell prints of their work or provide custom services through various platforms,” he suggests.

Describing his relationship with art, Al Khalili notes, “Drawing often leads to a state of flow where time slips away, and I become fully immersed in my work. Experimenting with new techniques or colours keeps the process invigorating and inspirational.”

He believes that successful artistic expression hinges on a combination of skills, tools and timing. “Daily practice and learning about perspective, colour theory,



# A JOURNEY THROUGH SURREALISM AND SELF-EXPRESSION



as well as lighting and shading techniques, are crucial for advancing as an artist,” he explains.

Visual inspiration is vital for artistic development, and Al Khalili cites surrealist icon Salvador Dali and contemporary Iranian artist Raoof Haghighi as significant influences. “Their work blurs the lines between reality and fantasy, creating a dreamlike atmosphere.”

Al Khalili maintains a cherished routine when pursuing his art. “A comfortable workspace with a drawing board and appropriate tools is essential. Surrounding myself with plants or objects that inspire calmness enriches my creative process. Most of my free time involves drawing, sketching and preparing thumbnails before embarking on final projects.”

He concludes passionately, “Art goes beyond mere visual appeal; it enhances well-being. Living in spaces filled with art and creativity elevates people’s psychological states. For those starting their artistic journey, I encourage finding a supportive community of like-minded individuals.”