

### GUARDIANSHIP LAW

## Saudi Arabia eases control on women

AFP, Riyadh

Saudi women no longer need a man's consent to carry out certain activities, local media reported on yesterday, but activists said the royal order does not go far enough.

Saudi Arabia has some of the world's tightest restrictions on women, and is the only country where they are not allowed to drive.

Under the guardianship system a male family member, normally the father, husband or brother, must grant permission for a woman's activities, travel and other activities.

But the Arab News said a royal decree issued by King Salman ordered that women are no longer required to obtain a guardian's consent for official services "unless there is a legal basis for this request" under Islamic law.

Government agencies were advised of this directive, the report said.

Other Saudi media including the Sabq online newspaper, which is close to authorities, have carried similar reports.

Sahar Hassan Nasief, a women's rights activist in the Red Sea city of Jeddah, welcomed royal attention to the issue but said it remained unclear what will change under the decree.

"We still need more. We still need to get rid of the guardianship completely," she told AFP.

Nassima al-Sadah, an activist in the Gulf coast city of Qatif, said she does not think the government is about to end guardianship.

"Maybe they will just reduce it," she said.

Last year thousands of people signed a petition calling for an end to guardianship.



(From left) French presidential election candidate Emmanuel Macron shakes hands with supporters during a campaign visit in Rodez yesterday and his challenger Marine Le Pen waves to the crowd as she arrives to deliver a speech during a campaign meeting in Ennemain as the race enters its final stretch.



PHOTO: REUTERS, AFP

# Macron stretches lead

## Surveys say he leads Le Pen 62 pc-38 pc as campaign ends

REUTERS, Paris

Centrist French presidential candidate Emmanuel Macron extended his lead in the polls over his far-right rival Marine Le Pen yesterday, the final day of a tumultuous election campaign that has turned the country's politics upside down.

The election is seen as the most important in France for decades with two diametrically opposed views of Europe and France's place in the world at stake.

The National Front's Le Pen would close borders and quit the euro currency, while independent Macron, who has never held elected office, wants closer European cooperation and an open economy. The candidates of France's two mainstream parties were both eliminated in the first round on April 23.

Four new polls showed Macron on track to win 62 percent of the votes in the second round compared to 38 percent for Le Pen, his best score in a voting survey by a major polling organisation since nine other candidates were eliminated in the first round on April 23. A fifth poll showed him on 61.5 percent.

Pollsters said Macron had been

boosted by his performance in a rancorous final televised debate between the two contenders on Wednesday, which the centrist was judged by French viewers to have won, according to two surveys.

Macron's strong showing in the debate, and another poll this week showing his En Marche! (Onwards!) movement likely to emerge as the biggest party in June legislative elections, have lifted the mood among investors worried about the upheaval

**FRENCH PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION**

a Le Pen victory could cause.

Le Pen was booed by several dozen protesters, including some holding Macron posters, as she visited the cathedral in Reims, northern France, where French kings were crowned in the Middle Ages.

Paris's police chief called emergency talks on security before the election after Greenpeace activists scaled the Eiffel Tower yesterday and unfurled a political banner.

Separately, police arrested a man

suspected of having radical Islamist beliefs near an air base at Evreux, western France, during the night after spotting a suspicious vehicle, police and judicial sources said. Counter-terrorism prosecutors were investigating.

Security is a key election issue after attacks by militant Islamists killed more than 230 people in the past two years.

Macron was already looking ahead to being in power, telling RTL radio he had decided who would be his prime minister if he wins. He did not reveal a name, saying he would only announce the make-up of his government after he took office.

The anti-immigration, anti-EU Le Pen was not giving up.

"My goal is to win this presidential election," she said on RTL radio. "I think that we can win."

A poll on Friday showed French voters to be among the most polarised in the European Union, with one in five describing themselves as "extreme" and only about a third as "centrist".

The survey from the Bertelsmann Foundation also showed an unusually high level of dissatisfaction in France with the direction of the country, underscoring the challenge that a new president will face.

## UK PM boosted by local polls results

AFP, London

Theresa May's Conservatives performed strongly in British local elections, early results showed Friday, handing the prime minister a boost ahead of next month's Brexit-dominated parliamentary polls.

First results showed the governing Conservatives making solid gains, dealing a blow to the main opposition Labour Party and all but wiping out the anti-EU, anti-mass immigration UK Independence Party (UKIP).

Voters across England, Scotland and Wales went to the polls Thursday to choose nearly 5,000 new local councillors, in the shadow of campaigning for the snap June 8 general election and a bitter debate over Britain's departure from the European Union.

While local issues are usually the main influence in such polls, May's decision last month to call an early general election ensured her own record and Brexit would be on voters' minds.

The prime minister says she offers the most stable leadership to take Britain through two years of tough Brexit negotiations, and she took aim at Brussels on the eve of the local elections.

Speaking outside her Downing Street office, May accused Brussels of toughening its stance in statements "deliberately timed to affect the result of the general election."

Brussels was quick to dismiss the claims, with EU president Donald Tusk on Thursday cautioning against letting "emotions get out of hand" before formal negotiations are due to begin after Britain's June vote.

But May's hardened rhetoric appeared have translated into local votes.

## Clinton to launch 'resistance' PAC against Trump

CNN ONLINE

Hillary Clinton, reentering the political fray months after her 2016 campaign loss, will soon launch a political organization aimed at funding "resistance" groups that are standing up to President Donald Trump, sources with knowledge of the plans tell CNN.

Clinton, according to the sources, is currently working with former aides and donors to build an organization that will look to fund and invest in groups that have impressed her since her 2016 election loss.

Clinton identified herself as part of the so-called resistance earlier this week, and that was not in passing. The



former secretary of state has been watching groups stand up to Trump from afar and is "particularly fired up," in the words of one source, to fund these groups and broaden their reach.

"I'm now back to being an activist citizen and part of the resistance," Clinton said in her sit-down with CNN's Christiane Amanpour. At other events she has heralded the work of small organizations that have grown in response to Trump.

The organization -- Onward Together, an homage to her campaign slogan -- will look to identify groups that could benefit from outside funding. Clinton will act as the connector, said one source, bringing donors to these groups and helping raise money for them, too.

Nick Merrill, Clinton's spokesman, declined to comment for the story.

## Tillerson urges SE Asia allies to shun N Korea

### US House votes to expand sanctions

AFP, Washington

US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson urged his South East Asian colleagues on Thursday to take further steps to isolate North Korea's pariah regime.

President Donald Trump's top diplomat met foreign ministers and top envoys from the 10-strong Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in Washington.

North Korea is under UN sanctions targeting its efforts to develop a nuclear missile arsenal, but Washington wants its Asian allies to do more.

Deputy assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific Affairs Patrick Murphy stressed ties with Pyongyang are a sovereign matter for ASEAN states, but confirmed that Tillerson had urged them to review their positions.

The call came as the US House of Representatives on Thursday overwhelmingly voted in favor of broadening sanctions against North Korea, including efforts to cut the regime's sources of international financing.

Lawmakers voted 419 to 1 for the bill, which now heads to the Senate.

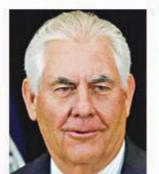
Rhetoric between the West and the reclusive regime have spiked in recent weeks, and Pyongyang has threatened to carry out a sixth nuclear test that would further inflame tensions.

The legislation prohibits vessels owned by North Korea or other countries that violate UNSC resolutions on the country from operating in US waters or docking at US ports.

In a bid to cut off Pyongyang's access to hard currency, the measure sanctions persons or entities that import North Korean coal, iron or iron ore beyond UN-imposed limits, or that facilitate the regime's online business activities.

The measure requires President Donald Trump's administration to determine within 90 days whether the North Korean government should be re-designated as a state sponsor of terrorism.

Pyongyang was removed from the US list in 2008.



Iraqi woman Lila Ayed, 37, whose husband was killed and two of her daughters went missing during the fighting in Mosul, waits with her children to cross the Tigris river by a military boat after the bridge has been temporarily closed, south of Mosul, Iraq on Thursday. PHOTO: REUTERS

## No US plane allowed to fly

### Says Russia, announces deal to come into force in hours

AGENCIES

The safe zones that regional powers have agreed to create in Syria will be closed for military planes of the international US-led coalition, Russia's envoy to Syria talks said.

Turkey and Iran agreed on Thursday to Russia's proposal for "de-escalation zones", a move welcomed by the United Nations but met with scepticism from the United States and Syrian rebel groups.

Speaking from the Syria summit in the Kazakh capital, Astana, on Thursday, Russian envoy Alexander Lavrentyev said that Syrian government fighter jets are also not expected to fly over the "de-escalation" zones for six months.

Russian military aircraft will refrain from flying over such areas, he added, unless there are what he described as attempts to destabilise the situation.

The agreement will come into force from midnight tonight, but Russia's air force will continue striking Islamic State elsewhere in the country, Russian

news agencies cited Russian Defence Ministry as saying on Friday.

The first and the largest safe zone in northern Syria will include the Idlib province and adjoining districts of Latakia, Aleppo and Hama with a total population of over 1 million, the ministry said.

The position of the United States allowed to create conditions for political settlement in Syria, the agencies quoted Russian Deputy Defence

Minister Alexander Fomin as saying.

The fact that the de-escalation agreement was supported by the United Nations, the United States and Saudi Arabia guarantees its implementation, he said.

Military analysts estimated that the no-fly zone imposed over Iraq in 1991 helped save countless lives. It is unclear though who will be responsible for policing the air space and what the consequences would be for breaking the interdiction.

Neither the Syrian government, nor the opposition had signed the de-escalation zones agreement. Representatives of several rebel groups say they cannot accept Iran as a guarantor of the deal.

Syria's civil war, currently in its seventh year, has killed hundreds of thousands of people and has drawn in world powers on all sides.

The negotiations in Astana are viewed as complementary to broader United Nations-brokered talks in Geneva on a political settlement, but neither have yielded real progress as of yet.



## MOSUL OFFENSIVE

### Forces gain foothold in northwest

REUTERS, Hulayla

Iraqi forces pushed further into Mosul from the north on the second day of a new push to speed up the nearly seven-month attempt to dislodge Islamic State, commanders said yesterday.

Footage taken by a drone operated by the Iraqi 9th Armoured Division over the northwestern suburb of Musherfa and seen by Reuters, showed the militants had scant defences there, unlike in other parts of Mosul where streets are blocked by anti-tank barriers and vehicles.

Islamic State tried to block the troops' northerly advance into their de facto Iraqi capital with suicide car bombs and sniper fire, Brigadier General Walid Khalifa, deputy commander of the 9th brigade, told Reuters in Hulayla, west of Musherfa.

## Trump to wade into Mideast politics on first foreign trip

### Announces tour to Saudi Arabia, Israel and Vatican

REUTERS, Washington

US President Donald Trump said on Thursday he will travel to Saudi Arabia and Israel this month, kicking off his first foreign trip, where he will work to reinvigorate traditional alliances in the region.

Trump said he would also visit the Vatican along with his swing through the Middle East before attending a Nato meeting in Brussels on May 25 and the Group of Seven summit in Sicily on May 26.

The maiden foreign trips of US presidents often take on broader symbolic import, and by choosing the Middle East as his first stop, Trump will highlight his lofty promises to eradicate Islamic State insurgents and bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Trump cast his trip as an effort to build cooperation and support between Muslims, Christians and Jews for fighting terrorism.

Trump's predecessor President Barack Obama had a testy relationship with both Israel and Saudi Arabia, whose leaders viewed him as being concerned less with traditional alliances than with negotiating a deal to rein in Iran's nuclear program.

Trump has been criticized for his "Amer-

ica First" mantra for national security issues, for challenging allies in Nato and the Middle East to do more to pay for their own defense, and for immigration policies that have been cast as anti-Muslim.

Even as he has described himself as a non-interventionist unwilling to be "the policeman of the world", Trump has recently shown he is willing to engage militarily when he sees fit.

Last month, he ordered missile strikes on a Syrian airfield in retaliation for a chemical weapons attack that he blamed on Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

In meetings in Israel, Trump will discuss how he plans to broker peace between Israel and the Palestinians, a goal that has evaded many previous administrations.

Trump has provided no concrete details on how he will revive long-stalled peace talks, but has asked Israel to limit its building of Jewish settlements on land the Palestinians want for a state.

He has assigned his son-in-law Jared Kushner to oversee efforts.

"We'll approach it, I think, with a lot of humility," a senior administration official told reporters during a preview of the meeting.