

'Worst debate ever' – US expats lament lack of substance in Trump-Biden bust-up

Wed, 2020-09-30 23:18

DUBAI: Americans living in the Gulf looked on, aghast, as personal insults flew back and forth between the two men who aspire to lead the US.

A chaotic 90 minutes of insults, temper tantrums, endless interruptions and attacks on an opponent's family turned the first televised debate between Donald Trump and Democratic challenger Joe Biden into the most acrimonious televised presidential head-to-head in US history.

Expatriates in the Middle East set their alarms for the early hours to watch what turned out to be a "dumpster fire" of a debate, as some commentators described it, unfold in Cleveland, Ohio.

"This debate completely lacked in substance, so how could an expat understand anything about Biden (or Trump's) positions," said Liberty Jones, who is from Washington D.C. and has lived in Dubai for eight years. "Aside from a quick discussion on how Trump is handling COVID, it was devoid of any depth on their approaches."

Opinion

This section contains relevant reference points, placed in (Opinion field)

The debate was the first of three between the two candidates in the run up to election day on Nov. 3. Any attempt at substantive exchanges about the six main issues – the Supreme Court, COVID-19, race and violence in US cities, the economy, and the integrity of the election – were drowned out by acrimony.

"You're the worst president that America ever had," Biden told Trump. "In 47 months I've done more than you have done in 47 years," Trump responded.

The moderator, Chris Wallace of Fox News, had to raise his voice on several occasions to demand that Trump respect the two-minute time allocated for uninterrupted answers to questions and let Biden speak. Biden also provided fuel for the fire with a series of personal attacks, calling Trump a liar and a racist.

Then there was Biden's "inshallah" moment, which lit up Twitter across the Arab world. It came after Trump promised to release his still-hidden tax returns, some details of which were published by the New York Times last

week. Biden sarcastically asked, "When?" followed by a word that many viewers thought sounded like "Inshallah," meaning "God willing."

Whether or not he actually uttered the familiar Arabic expression remains a mystery but it certainly caught the attention of American expats in the Gulf, some of whom feel distanced from the core issues of the election.

"As expats, we are naturally not as close to the candidates and their platforms," said Jones, who is a public relations director for luxury retailer Tiffany & Co. "While we can consume news, we don't have the benefit of our community and families sharing their perspectives on the candidates. This places greater weight on the debates to help expats understand the platforms and policies of the respective candidates."

James Erazo Ruiz, a healthcare company director who lives in Abu Dhabi and describes himself as a Republican, said: "The American people are the losers of this debate.

"History tells us that presidential debates are not decision-making events. I hoped this one would be different but all we saw was name-calling and an insulting debacle that served no purpose.

"The debate was light on policy, issues and solutions. Quite frankly, it was the worse debate I have ever seen. It was a joke."

Brian Raggott, who has worked in Dubai for nine years for an American IT company, said the debate reinforced the negative image of America outside of the US.

"America needs someone who can bring the country back together again and last night we didn't see it," he said. "As an American outside of the US, you want to bring American ideals wherever you go – and right now it's a tough time."

Ali Khalaf, who has lived in Dubai since 2007, sounded a slightly more optimistic note for the future of American politics. He said that he hopes the "disturbing" nature of the debate will shock more people into greater engagement with the political process.

"The hope that can be drawn from these debates is that we emerge from these elections with the desire to invest more in our nation's choices," he added.

The last topic of the debate, the integrity of the election, in particular struck a chord with Americans in the Gulf, many of whom said that despite submitting a request weeks ago they are still waiting to receive their absentee ballots.

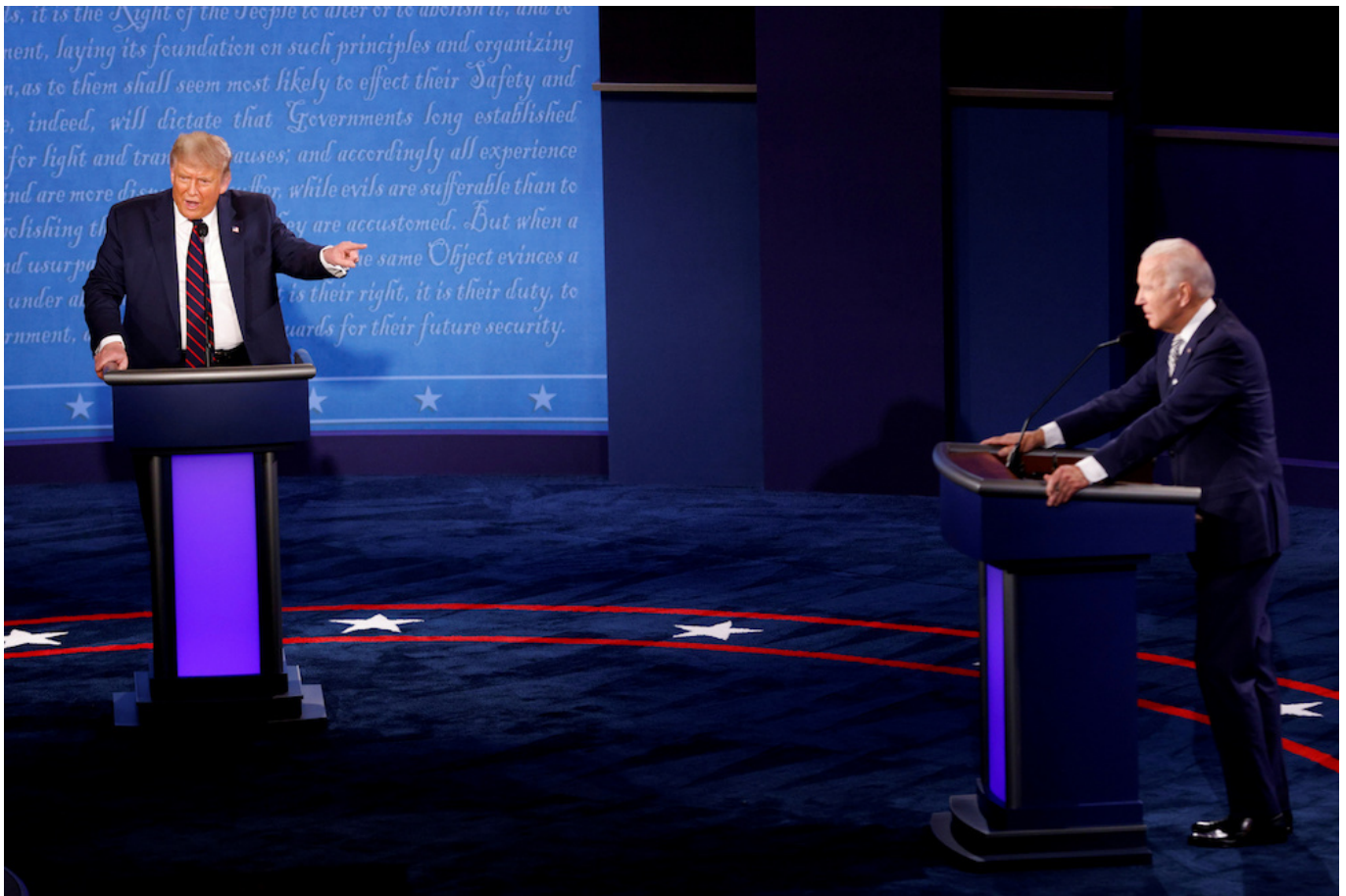
Approximately 9 million Americans live overseas, according to 2016 figures from the US State Department. If they were considered to be a US state, it would rank as the 12th largest in population size, so they represent a powerful block of votes.

An anonymous US citizen living in Dubai, who declined to be named, said: "Americans abroad deserve to feel confident that our votes are accurately

counted and protected from fraud. It's strange to wait this long for a ballot – and then when it comes and we mail it in, can we trust that it will be counted appropriately?"

"Our votes absolutely count," said Jean Candiotte, a creative director, writer and producer who has lived in Dubai for almost seven years. "This has the potential to be a close election, which means that every single vote is important.

"As Americans, we get to take our home country with us when we live overseas; we file and pay our home country's taxes and we maintain the right to vote, and it's important to exercise that right – it's who we are as a nation."



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'Just shut up, man' – Biden and Trump trade personal insults in first presidential debate
Did Biden just 'Inshallah' Trump on his taxes during the US presidential debate?

Iraq says 'not happy' with 'dangerous' US pullout threat

Author:

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Wed, 2020-09-30 12:02

BAGHDAD: Baghdad is "not happy" with a "dangerous" threat by Washington to pull its troops and diplomats out of Iraq, Foreign Minister Fuad Hussein said Wednesday.

Several political and diplomatic sources have told AFP that US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo issued an ultimatum last week that all US personnel would leave Iraq unless the government puts a stop to a rash of attacks against them.

"A US withdrawal could lead to further pullouts" by members of the US-led coalition fighting holdout extremists, which would be "dangerous, because the Daesh group threatens not only Iraq but the whole region," the minister said. "We hope that the United States will rethink its decision," which at the moment is only "preliminary," Hussein added.

"Some people in Washington make parallels with Benghazi but it's a faulty analysis, just as this is a faulty decision," he said, referring to Libya's second city.

Four US personnel, including the ambassador to Libya, were killed in Benghazi in 2012, when Islamist militants among a crowd of protesters stormed the US consulate.

Between October 2019 and July this year in Iraq, around 40 rocket attacks have targeted the US embassy or bases housing US troops.

Since Prime Minister Mustafa Al-Kadhemi was received in the White House amid great fanfare in August, the frequency of such attacks has increased significantly.

In the space of just two months, another 40 attacks have taken place, targeting not only the embassy and military bases, but also the supply convoys of Iraqi contractors for Washington and its allies.

"Attacks on foreign embassies are attacks on the government, which has responsibility for protecting them," the Iraqi minister said.

Recent attacks have mostly been claimed by little known factions among the array of Shiite armed groups equipped and trained by neighboring Iran during the war against the Sunni extremists of Daesh.

The armed groups have been locked in a tug-of-war with Kadhemi, who is seen as more pro-American than some of his predecessors.

Underlining the risks, a rocket attack targeting Baghdad airport hit a nearby home on Monday evening, killing five children and two women from the same family.

The US still has hundreds of diplomats in its mission in the high-security Green Zone in Baghdad and around 3,000 troops based in three bases across the country.



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Iran-backed groups behind Erbil rocket attack -Iraqi Kurdish security agency
Italian defense minister, Iraqi Kurds hold talks

[Prisoners threaten suicide to pressure Lebanese parliament over amnesty law](#)

Author:

Wed, 2020-09-30 22:19

BEIRUT: Inmates at Lebanon's Roumieh Central Prison threatened to kill themselves on Wednesday in a bid to pressure parliament over an amnesty law.

Video footage from inside the prison showed them threatening to hang themselves if the law was not passed.

"Yes, we have stolen, but that was due to hunger and poverty," said one inmate. "The big thieves are untouchable, and only those who steal an egg get prosecuted. The one who killed former PM Rafic Hariri has been acquitted."

Another inmate wrapped cloth around his neck, preparing a noose. "If they do not approve the general amnesty, our lives do not concern us," he said. "May I rest in peace." Others were quick to stop him from taking his own life.

The families of detainees demanded amnesty for their loved ones and held a sit-in near where parliamentarians were meeting to discuss the law.

But disagreements among parliamentary blocs meant the proposed law was referred to a committee.

Another point of difference during the session was the Illicit Enrichment Act. Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri said the matter required a session to amend the constitution in order to waive immunity for everyone.

He told Parliament: "As long as there is sectarianism and sects, progress cannot be made in Lebanon. Ministers have been arrested, and I was the one who turned them in, and no one bid on it."

The Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) said the bill's wording affected everyone including ministers and MPs, while the Future Movement believed it did not because they enjoyed immunity.

The bill was approved with an amendment upon request from the Future bloc, which demanded the removal of the phrase "waiving the immunity of the prime minister and the ministers" and replacing it with: "The offense of illicit enrichment is subject to the jurisdiction of the judicial judiciary."

The act has been a demand of the civil movement for about a year and one of the reform terms required of Lebanon.

FPM head Gebran Bassil, who is in quarantine due to having coronavirus, hailed the passing of the bill as an achievement for his parliamentary bloc "on the path of holding every public service accountable."

But Future bloc MP Hadi Hobeich said the act did not include parliamentarians, ministers, and presidents, and that this matter required a constitutional amendment.

"The immunity of an MP is constitutional, and illicit enrichment is a criminal offense," he said. "The current text did not extend to the prime minister and ministers, and we want an amendment to extend this act to the president, the prime minister, speaker of parliament, and the employees."

The fate of Lebanon's government – or rather the formation of a new one – still hangs in the balance and was further complicated by a speech from Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah on Tuesday night.

"Hezbollah wants to participate in the government, and we want to choose those who represent the Shiites in it," Nasrallah said. "The goal is not that the Shiites are represented and that they take this portfolio or that. Rather, what is required is to know who controls the decision of these Shiites."

He also declared that the party's presence in government was about having access to the conditions that the IMF would impose in exchange for financial aid to Lebanon.

Prime Minister-designate Mustapha Adib, who was tasked with forming the government, resigned after Hezbollah and the Amal Movement insisted on taking the finance portfolio and naming all the Shiite ministers in the government.

Their demands undermine an initiative from France, which has called for a mini-government comprising specialized ministers who have nothing to do with the political parties in power.

Former MP Fadi Karam, the secretary of the Strong Republic Parliamentary bloc, criticized Nasrallah.

"The rescue initiatives of Lebanon's friends have their conditions and steps, and they will not be according to your demands and instructions," he said. "The initiatives basically emerged to rescue Lebanon from the disasters caused by your policies, your axes, and the corruption of your authorities. You want it to rescue you, and that is why you held the people of Lebanon hostage, but these initiatives are here to rescue the people from you."

MP Nadim Gemayel reminded Nasrallah of his refusal to declare Hassan Diab's government, which resigned in August after a massive explosion in Beirut, as Hezbollah's.

"Here is Hezbollah today telling the whole world that it wants to participate in the government to protect the resistance and rescue the country," he said. Hezbollah's weapons were "illegal" and the cause of the country's "destruction and devastation."

"Your words are proof of your determination to eliminate what is left of Lebanon," he added.



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Lebanon says 9 Daesh-linked suspects killed in hunt for 'terrorists' Two soldiers killed in northern Lebanon barracks attack

[Iran-backed groups behind Erbil rocket attack -Iraqi Kurdish security agency](#)

Wed, 2020-09-30 22:11

SULAIMANIYA/MOSUL: Iran-backed Iraqi paramilitary groups launched a rocket attack targeting U.S. troops in the semi-autonomous Kurdistan Region's capital Erbil, Iraqi Kurdistan's counter terrorism service said on Wednesday. "Six rockets were launched from the borders of the Sheikh Amir village in Nineveh province by the Popular Mobilisation Forces who were targeting (U.S.-led) coalition forces in Erbil International Airport," the service said in a statement.

Four rockets landed at the edge of the airport compound and two did not explode, it added.



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Italian defense minister, Iraqi Kurds hold talksUS warns Iraq of Baghdad embassy closure if attacks continue

[US pressures Assad by slapping new sanctions on Syrian entities and individuals](#)

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Wed, 2020-09-30 16:28

BEIRUT: The Trump Administration imposed sanctions Wednesday on entities and individuals in Syria as part of Washington's pressure campaign against President Bashar Assad and his inner circle.

The sanctions came a day after intense clashes in southern Syria broke out between Russia-backed Syrian troops and local fighters who belong to the minority Druze sect, killing and wounding dozens. The sanctions were not related to the fighting in southern Syria.

The Treasury Department and State Department sanctions are the result of legislation known as the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act, named after the pseudonym of a Syrian policeman who turned over photographs of thousands of victims of torture by the Assad government.

Among those sanctioned Wednesday was the Syrian army's Russian-backed 5th Corps that was established during the country's conflict that started in March 2011. The 5th Corps includes rebels who later paid allegiance to Assad's government.

The State Department said it is sanctioning 5th Corps commander Maj. Gen. Milad Jedid "for his involvement in the obstruction, disruption, or prevention of a cease-fire in Syria."

The sanctions also included two sisters of Yasser Ibrahim, who is suspected of obstructing a political solution to the Syrian conflict and using his networks across the Middle East and beyond to cut deals to enrich Assad.

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Caesar Act sends Syria's Bashar Assad a stark reality check

"The Ibrahim family, led by Yasser Ibrahim, acts as a front for Bashar Assad and his wife Asma Al-Akhras," Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said. The State Department identified the sisters as Nasreen and Rana.

The US began implementing the Caesar Act in June with a raft of economic and travel sanctions for human rights abuses and blocking a settlement of the country's bloody nine-year conflict.

Sanctions imposed earlier this year included Assad and his wife and their eldest son, Hafez, as well as members of the extended Assad family, senior military leaders and business executives. Many of those on the list were already subject to US sanctions, but the penalties also target non-Syrians who do business with them.

The new wave of sanctions came as opposition activists reported clashes in southern Syria between the 5th Corps and local fighters who belong to the minority Druze sect.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, an opposition war monitor, said the fighting that broke out Tuesday in Sweida province left 16 Druze fighters and 12 members of the 5th Corps dead. It added that dozens were wounded on both sides.

The Observatory said the situation was relatively calm in the province Wednesday.

The Suwayda 24, an activist collective in Sweida, said a funeral was held Wednesday in the provincial capital, also called Sweida, for 15 fighters killed the day before.

It said the fighting broke out on Tuesday when local fighters attacked the 5th Corps in the nearby village of Qaraya to force them out of agricultural

lands they had entered earlier.



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Caesar Act sends Syria's Bashar Assad a stark reality check