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MAX - MENA Region Daily Summary - November 17, 2020

The following report reviews current events in the MENA region and their possible effect on business continuity and security.

Highlights of the Day

- **Bahrain & Israel:** Bahraini Foreign Minister to visit Israel on November 17; notable given lack of precedent, meant to bolster bilateral ties
- **Egypt:** Authorities arrest director of Egyptian human rights organization on November 15; comes amid crackdown on political activists
- **Israel:** Right-wing activists interrupt visit by EU Heads of Mission to East Jerusalem on November 16; liable to trigger EU complaint
- **Libya:** NOC announces on November 16 unification of PFG to guard oil facilities; significant development for Libya's security situation
- **Turkey:** Two Syrian nationals in possession of explosives arrested in Mardin Province on November 16; shows existing threat of militancy

Notable Events

Bahrain & Israel: Bahraini Foreign Minister to visit Israel on November 17; notable given lack of precedent, meant to bolster bilateral ties

Bahrain's Foreign Minister, Abdellatif al-Zayani, will meet with the Israeli Prime Minister (PM), Benjamin Netanyahu, and the US Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo. Meanwhile, US President Donald Trump's Middle East envoy will reportedly lead a delegation to Israel and Bahrain to discuss the expansion of "economic cooperation between the two countries".

This development is notable as it constitutes the first visit of an official Bahraini delegation to Israel. It follows the signing of the Abraham Accords on September 15, which officially established diplomatic relations between the two countries. Subsequently, on October 18, Bahrain and Israel signed the "Joint Communiqué" and several Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) in Manama to facilitate cooperation across various sectors. Against this backdrop, while al-Zayani's planned visit highlights Bahrain's willingness to

cement its ties with Israel, it will likely elevate anti-Bahrain sentiments among segments of the Palestinian community and also trigger domestic backlash from the Shiite community within Bahrain as the visit will be perceived as a betrayal of the “Palestinian cause”. Nevertheless, Bahrain and Israel will continue to deepen their bilateral ties over the coming months.

Egypt: Authorities arrest director of Egyptian human rights organization on November 15; comes amid crackdown on political activists

Security forces reportedly conducted the arrest raid at the individual’s private residence in Cairo and have decided to imprison him for 15 days pending investigation. He was charged with “spreading false news” and “joining a terrorist organization”.

This development comes amid an ongoing crackdown by the President Abdel Fattal al-Sisi-led government on individuals and groups perceived as a threat to the administration. In this context, the individual was likely not involved in any acts of militancy. This is further evidenced by the charges of spreading fake news, particularly as the human rights organization aims to conduct research and advocacy in the fields of civil liberties and human rights. This therefore suggests that the individual was likely involved in the dissemination of information that was perceived by the government as subversive. This development highlights the authorities’ heightened intolerance towards such activities and their willingness to cite national security concerns in order to facilitate this crackdown. Taken as a whole, additional arrests of prominent political activists, largely on charges of militancy, will likely be witnessed in Egypt over the coming months.

Egypt: IS claims on November 16 attack on EAAF soldiers near Rafah; meant to attract support from locals with anti-government grievances

According to the claim, Islamic State (IS)-affiliated Wilayat Sinai militants attacked Egyptian Armed Forces (EAAF) soldiers with automatic weapons while the latter was “booby-trapping Muslim homes” on November 14. IS also claimed on November 16 to have conducted a sniper attack and destroyed a thermal camera in a watchtower at a checkpoint in Sheikh Zuweid.

These events come amid an uptick in Wilayat Sinai-perpetrated attacks in North Sinai’s Rafah-Sheikh Zuweid area, which three such incidents recorded in October as compared to eight in November thus far. The booby-trapping of residential homes in Rafah constitutes a part of the EAAF’s demolition projects to establish a buffer zone along the North Sinai-Gaza Strip border, which has displaced several residents, to prevent the cross-border smuggling of militants and weapons in the region. IS’s statement is therefore likely aimed at capitalizing on the anti-government grievances of segments of the local population surrounding these projects to gain support from such elements. Overall, additional militant attacks targeting EAAF personnel are likely to take place in the Rafah-Sheikh Zuweid area over the coming days and weeks.

Israel: Right-wing activists interrupt visit by EU Heads of Mission to East Jerusalem on November 16; liable to trigger EU complaint

According to the EU's External Action Service (EEAS), 16 European Heads of Mission "urgently convened" in Givat Hamatos "to overlook the site for the planned new settlement in the occupied West Bank". They were reportedly met by about 50 Israeli right-wing activists, who shouted at them, labelling them as "antisemites" and "supporters of terror." The action reportedly hindered delegation members from delivering statements.

The development follows the Israel Lands Authority's November 15 opening of biddings for the construction of 1,257 housing units in East Jerusalem for the planned Givat Hamatos neighborhood. The EU warned that the project will "block the possibility of territorial contiguity between East Jerusalem and Bethlehem", reiterating that "all settlement activity must stop." The activists likely perceived the EU visit as an attempt to undermine the construction project. Regardless, disturbances of events attended by senior diplomats are rare. EU representatives may perceive the police's failure to keep the activists at a distance as a deliberate effort to disrupt the event. The EU may raise the issue with the Israeli government, but will refrain from public criticism.

Libya: NOC announces on November 16 unification of PFG to guard oil facilities; significant development for Libya's security situation

The eastern and western commanders of the Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) reached an agreement during the UN-brokered 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC) talks to restructure and unify under the Tripoli-based National Oil Corporation (NOC) for the protection of oil facilities in Libya. Meanwhile, the participants of the Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) failed to agree on an interim government during talks in Tunisia.

The unification of the PFG under the NOC constitutes a significant development with regards to the stability of the security situation in Libya, as the former has thus far been responsible for the guarding of oil facilities. The provision of stable security for the energy sector in the country would serve to streamline the country's oil revenues and therefore facilitate economic development. However, the failure of the LPDF to reach an agreement regarding an interim government highlights the continued challenges to the formation of a unified political system in Libya. This has the risk of spilling over to the security and energy sector. Overall, the LPDF negotiations will remain tenuous over the coming months.

Syria: Grenades thrown at state security headquarters in Homs' Talbiseh on November 15; likely part of infighting within pro-government ranks

Several security personnel were wounded. A group identifying itself as "Resistance Brigades" reportedly claimed responsibility for the attack, citing the authorities' lack of protective measures against the coronavirus as the motivation.

Acts of militancy in Talbiseh are rare. In May 2018, the former rebel stronghold agreed to a Russian-mediated reconciliation deal with the Syrian government following a prolonged siege, with pro-government forces subsequently consolidating their grip on the region. Unconfirmed reports from November 12 indicate ongoing tensions between the Tiger Forces, a Russia-backed pro-government militia, and police forces in Talbiseh, fanned by the temporary detention of a Tiger Force commander by the latter. This suggests that this attack is likely part of infighting within pro-government forces' ranks. While a part of the city's residents likely remain opposed to the Syrian government, the long-standing absence of rebel activity in Talbiseh renders it less probable that former rebel fighters are responsible. Thus, the Resistance Brigades' claim is likely not credible and may constitute an effort by anti-government elements to raise their profile. Further attacks may occur in Talbiseh over the coming weeks.

Tunisia: Residents stage sit-in in front of Kasserine's Douleb oil field on November 15; government unlikely to meet protesters' demands

According to Tunisia's state news agency, approximately 200 locals observed a sit-in, calling on the state-owned oil company operating at the field to employ locals and contribute to local development. Protesters agreed to meet with Kasserine's governor to discuss potential resolutions.

This development comes amid several protests surrounding socio-economic issues across Tunisia, particularly in its outlying areas and around oil facilities. In this context, on November 6, El Kamour protesters, who had disrupted oil operations in Tataouine Governorate since July, reached an arrangement with the government for increased employment opportunities and investment in local development. Hence, it is possible that the Kasserine protesters were inspired by the success of the aforementioned agreement to stage the latest sit-in. While the protesters will meet with the local governor to attempt to reach a solution, given Tunisia's deteriorating economy, which has declined by ten percent in 2020 thus far, the government is unlikely to be able to address the locals' demands in the near future. This will prompt additional protests over the coming weeks, which may also result in disruptions to oil operations.

Turkey: Two Syrian nationals in possession of explosives arrested in Mardin Province on November 16; shows existing threat of militancy

Turkey's official news agency reported that security forces arrested the individuals along the Syrian border and seized 400 g of explosives and six detonators. Meanwhile, police forces reportedly arrested a suspected Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militant planning an attack in Mardin's Kiziltepe District. The arrestee was caught with almost two kg of explosives concealed in a plaster-like cast on his arm and in a shampoo container found in his bag.

These developments come amid frequent counter-militancy operations in Mardin Province, located in southeastern Turkey, close to the border with Syria. This is because the relatively porous Turkey-Syria border facilitates the cross-border movement of

militants, either affiliated with the Islamic State (IS) or the PKK. However, the discovery of explosives from suspected militants are rare, thus rendering both developments relatively significant. While this highlights the existing threat of militant attacks in the country, the arrests of these individuals prior to the materialization of an attack highlights the authorities' ability to mitigate such threats. Overall, security forces will likely increase security protocols in and around Mardin over the coming days and weeks.

Turkey: TSK soldier killed during security operation in Hakkari's Cukurca on November 16; notable given infrequency of TSK casualties

According to the Ministry of National Defense, the Turkish Armed Forces' (TSK) soldier was killed when the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) opened fire during a counter-militancy operation along the Turkey-Iraq border.

The development comes amid frequent counter-militancy operations by the TSK in Hakkari's Cukurca District, with 22 such operations recorded since the beginning of October. These operations generally manifest in the discovery of weapons and neutralization of PKK militants in the area. The latest incident is notable as TSK casualties during such operations are infrequent, with the latest such instance recorded on July 20. This highlights the PKK's persistent entrenchment along the Turkey-Iraq border in Hakkari Province and the militant group's willingness and ability to forcefully resist the TSK's operations in the region. This can be partly attributed to the region's rugged terrain, which provides natural shelter for militants, bolstering their ability to move relatively freely and transfer weapons easily without being detected by security forces. Hence, similar clashes between the TSK and PKK militants are liable to be witnessed during counter-militancy operations in Hakkari Province over the coming weeks.

Yemen: STC-linked forces ambush pro-Hadi forces' convoy in Abyan Governorate's Mahfad on November 15; comes amid elevated tensions in region

Southern Transitional Council (STC)-linked forces reportedly opened fire at pro-Hadi military vehicles, without causing any casualties. Conflicting reports indicate that several pro-Hadi elements were killed. Clashes were also recorded between STC-linked and pro-Hadi forces near Zinjibar on November 16. Meanwhile, on November 15, the Presidency of the STC denounced "attempts by the Brotherhood militias...to abort the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement".

Tensions between the UAE-backed STC-linked forces and pro-Hadi forces have recently increased amid an overall stagnation in negotiations over the implementation of the Riyadh Agreement. Clashes between the two parties have been increasingly recorded in Abyan's Sheikh Salem and al-Tariyah over recent days. Both sides reportedly sent military reinforcements to these frontlines on November 14. Taken as a whole, the latest development highlights both sides' deep distrust and unwillingness to concede territorial control in southern Yemen, particularly in Abyan Governorate, where a majority of the clashes have been recorded. Overall, the persistence of these hostilities will henceforth complicate any potential negotiations between the STC and the Hadi government to

implement the Riyadh Agreement over the coming months.

Upcoming Notable Dates

November 18

- **Morocco:** Independence Day
- **Oman:** National Day

November 19

- **Oman:** Birthday of Sultan al-Qaboos

November 22

- **Lebanon:** Independence Day

November 30

- **Yemen:** Independence Day
- **UAE:** Martyrs' Day

December 1-3

- **UAE:** National Day