



Daily

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MAX - MENA Region Daily Summary - February 11, 2021

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

Highlights of the Day

- **Iran:** IAEA confirms start of uranium metal production by Tehran, per February 10 reports; likely to elevate international concerns
- **Iran:** Tehran summons Belgian ambassador on February 9 to protest conviction of Iranian diplomat in foiled bomb plot; will elevate tensions
- **Iraq:** One Asayish member killed, five wounded in armed fight with Peshmerga in Sulaymaniyah on February 10; notable given lack of precedent
- **Libya:** PFG members terminate sit-in, lift blockade over oil exports from Tobruk's Hariga Port on February 10; operations may resume
- **Saudi Arabia & Yemen:** Houthis claim UAV attack against Asir's Abha International Airport on February 10; shows risk to civilian sites

Actionable Items

Libya: PFG members terminate sit-in, lift blockade over oil exports from Tobruk's Hariga Port on February 10; operations may resume

Petroleum Facilities Guard (PFG) members reportedly terminated their sit-in after they received part of their overdue salaries.

This follows the PFG's January 24 announcement that they will be halting oil exports from the Hariga Port until the Government of National Accord (GNA) pays them their 18 months-long overdue salaries. Although the blockade on oil exports has been lifted, this event highlights the willingness and ability of armed groups in Libya to successfully use strategic infrastructure as leverage for negotiations with the GNA. This may embolden other armed actors in the country to use similar tactics to put pressure on the GNA to meet their demands. This is underscored by the recent threats issued by PFG members responsible for securing the Ras Lanuf and Sidra oil terminals that they will also halt oil

exports from these facilities if their overdue salaries are not paid within ten days. Regardless, considering that PFG members operating out of the Hariga Port have only reportedly been paid part of their overdue salaries, there is a potential for further similar labor action over the coming months.

Those conducting business through the Hariga Port in Tobruk may resume operations as of the afternoon hours of February 11, while remaining apprised of further updates regarding potential closures of oil terminals throughout Libya over the coming weeks.

Notable Events

Egypt: At least four Tarabin tribesmen killed in IS ambush in Central Sinai District on February 9; notable given rarity of attacks in area

Although reports indicate that six tribal members were killed by Islamic State (IS)-affiliated Wilayat Sinai militants in an ambush on Mount Maghara, the Sinai Tribal Federation confirmed the killing of four Tarabin tribesmen. IS has not formally claimed the attack at the time of writing.

Wilayat Sinai-perpetrated attacks in North Sinai Governorate's Central Sinai District are rare, rendering this incident notable. The last Wilayat Sinai attack on Mount Maghara occurred on June 21, 2020. The Tarabin tribe constitutes a prominent faction of the Sinai Tribal Federation that assists the Egyptian Armed Forces (EAAF) in its anti-Wilayat Sinai campaign across the North Sinai Governorate. Most recently, local tribes reported on the discovery of active IEDs on Mount Maghara on January 30, which likely triggered the latest attack. Through such attacks, Wilayat Sinai aims to deter security cooperation between local tribes and security forces, which generally manifests in the form of physical on-ground support lent by the Tarabin's paramilitary arm or through intelligence-sharing. Further attacks against perceived EAAF collaborators are likely in the North Sinai Governorate over the coming weeks and months.

Iran: IAEA confirms start of uranium metal production by Tehran, per February 10 reports; likely to elevate international concerns

According to an International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) report, Tehran has produced 3.6 grams of uranium metal as of February 6 at a nuclear facility in Isfahan.

The production of uranium metal is banned under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as around half a kilogram of highly enriched uranium metal can be used in a nuclear weapon's core. This follows Iran's decision to boost its nuclear program in December 2020, under which Tehran stated that it would start producing uranium metal over the coming months. Overall, the latest breach is likely an effort to increase pressure on the Joe Biden-led US administration to force Washington to make a conciliatory move with regards to the lifting of sanctions on Iran. However, a standoff has persisted over recent weeks, with both Tehran and Washington refusing to make the first move. Additionally, given that Iran has warned that it will restrict access of IAEA inspectors in Iran starting from February 21 if US sanctions are not lifted, international concerns

surrounding Iran's nuclear program are likely to be elevated over the coming weeks.

Iran: Tehran summons Belgian ambassador on February 9 to protest conviction of Iranian diplomat in foiled bomb plot; will elevate tensions

On February 4, a Belgian court handed a 20-year prison sentence to an Iranian diplomat, who worked at the Iranian Embassy in Vienna. The diplomat was found guilty of planning a foiled plot to bomb a rally of the exiled Iranian opposition group, National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI), near Paris in June 2018. Three Belgians of Iranian origin were given jail sentences of between 15 and 18 years and stripped of their Belgian nationality in the trial. Iran's foreign ministry urged Belgium to immediately release the diplomat.

The conviction of the Iranian diplomat constitutes the first time in recent European history that an active diplomat has been sentenced on militancy-related charges. This comes at a sensitive time in Iran's relationship with Western countries, as the new US administration weighs whether to lift economic sanctions and rejoin the 2015 Iranian nuclear deal. Although Iran has dismissed the charges, calling it a "shallow fabrication", the summoning of the Belgian ambassador indicates that diplomatic tensions, particularly between Brussels and Tehran, are liable to be elevated over the coming weeks and months.

Iraq: One Asayish member killed, five wounded in armed fight with Peshmerga in Sulaymaniyah on February 10; notable given lack of precedent

Five Peshmerga fighters reportedly attacked an Asayish-controlled checkpoint in Tasluja, located approximately 20 east of Sulaymaniyah over a "misunderstanding" that resulted in a knife-fight. The cause for the misunderstanding remains unspecified. In the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)-administered territories, the Peshmerga are the military forces while the Asayish are responsible for internal security. The authorities stated that those found guilty will be prosecuted.

This event is highly notable given the lack of precedent. The personal motivation for the incident indicates that it was an isolated occurrence and likely conducted without the knowledge of the Peshmerga central command. Regardless, the incident brings to light the willingness of certain members of an organized military force, such as the Peshmerga, to use arms against members of the local security forces within KRG-administered territories to resolve disputes. The authorities' statement that they will prosecute the perpetrators highlights an effort to de-escalate tensions and project that the security environment around Sulaymaniyah remains stable. Regardless, the fight will likely elevate tensions between the Peshmerga and Asayish forces deployed around Sulaymaniyah, potentially triggering localized retaliations.

Israel: Police, Ultra-Orthodox protestors clash in Jerusalem on February 9; unruly protests in Ultra-Orthodox communities likely to recur

According to the Israel Police, the clashes took place in the Mea Shearim neighborhood, where hundreds of Ultra-Orthodox protestors had gathered to denounce the government's COVID-19-related restrictions. The protestors burned garbage bins and hurled rocks at the police. The police responded by arresting one individual and dispersing the protesters using water cannons.

This comes amid frequent protests by segments of the Ultra-Orthodox community as they continue to denounce the government's ongoing COVID-19-related restrictions in Israel. Similarly, on January 27, protestors clashed with the police in Mea Shearim neighborhood. Such protests are motivated by the fact that access to spaces considered essential by the Ultra-Orthodox community, such as Talmud Torah or religious schools, is restricted. During the latest protest, protestors called this "the persecution of religion in the Holy Land". The Ultra-Orthodox protestors' willingness to resort to violence during such protests poses a risk to passersby, which will likely lead to increased police vigilance during demonstrations by this community. Nonetheless, similar protests by segments of the Ultra-Orthodox community are likely to recur as long as the COVID-19-related regulations are being implemented.

Morocco: SPLA claims on February 9 attacks on RMA positions along 'Berm' in Western Sahara; localized hostilities likely to persist

Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the military wing of the Polisario Front, claimed attacks on Royal Moroccan Army (RMA) positions in Umm Dreiga, Aousserd, Mahbes, and Tichla, all located along the "Berm" in Western Sahara, on February 8-9.

Although the SPLA claims near-daily attacks targeting RMA positions along the "Berm" in Western Sahara, the latest hostilities follow the February 8 SPLA-claimed artillery shelling and subsequent ground offensive targeting an RMA base in Touizgui, located about 100 km deep within undisputed Moroccan territory, which has yet to be corroborated by the Moroccan authorities or independent sources. In this context, the latest hostilities indicate that regardless of whether the SPLA's claim of an attack in Touizgui was credible or not, the group likely does not have the capabilities to sustain such operations within undisputed Moroccan territory over a long term. This is because of the difficulty of infiltrating undisputed Moroccan territory without being detected by the RMA. Therefore, hostilities in the region are likely to remain largely localized and focused on areas located along the "Berm" over the coming days and weeks.

Saudi Arabia & Yemen: Houthis claim UAV attack against Asir's Abha International Airport on February 10; shows risk to civilian sites

According to the Saudi authorities, the fire broke out as a result of a Houthi-perpetrated attack. The Houthi military spokesperson stated that they targeted "the airfields of warplanes" at Abha International Airport, which are allegedly used for "military purposes to target the Yemeni people."

This comes amid occasional attempts by the Houthis to conduct attacks against military

and civilian infrastructure in Saudi Arabia's southern provinces. This includes the Abha International Airport, which is used for both domestic and international flights. The attack reflects the Houthis' continued motivation and capabilities to effectively target the Abha International Airport, located over 100 km from the Saudi-Yemeni border, which poses a risk to civilians at the site. The timing of this attack is significant as it follows US President Joe Biden's February 4 announcement that Washington is terminating its support for the Saudi-led offensive in Yemen. The Houthis likely perceived this as a victory and were thus emboldened by it to elevate the pressure on Saudi Arabia. The Houthis will attempt to conduct further attacks against strategic assets within Saudi Arabia over the coming weeks.

Syria: IED attached to car explodes in Idlib's Talteta wounding 'Uzbek' jihadist on February 9; shows instability in HTS-held territories

Talteta is located over 20 km northeast of Idlib city.

The development comes amid periodic attacks targeting rebels and jihadists in the Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS)-held territories of northwestern Syria. While the motive for the attack and the profile of the jihadist wounded in the latest attack remains unspecified, given precedent of such incidents, there is a possibility that it was perpetrated by members of rival jihadist groups operating in the region. Should this be the case, the attack may have been a deliberate effort to undermine the capabilities of the jihadist group that the target of the attack was associated with. However, there is also a possibility that the assassination attempt was motivated by personal grievances and therefore constituted a criminal attack. Regardless, the incident highlights the proliferation of explosives in the region and the inability of the HTS to secure its territories. Overall, the attack underscores the precarious security environment and continued instability in northwestern Syria, indicating the potential for further similar attacks against rebels and jihadists in the region in the coming weeks.

Tunisia: Mol reports on February 9 arrest of militant in Sidi Bouzid Governorate; notable given recent rarity of militant arrests in region

According to the Ministry of Interior (Mol), the militant was arrested on February 8 and sentenced to ten years in prison. Meanwhile, on February 9, the Mol also reported the arrest of a militant in Bizerte Governorate on February 8. He was sentenced to one year in prison.

While counter-militancy operations are frequently recorded across Tunisia, yielding the arrests of militants, they have been recently rare in Sidi Bouzid Governorate. The last such militant arrest in the region took place in August 2020. The latest arrest was likely prompted by the February 3 killing of four soldiers during a counter-militancy operation on Mount Mghila, which is located along the borders of Kasserine and Sidi Bouzid governorates. Against this backdrop, the sentencing of the militant to ten years in prison instead of one to five years, which is more frequently recorded, indicates the authorities' heightened threat perception of this arrestee, potentially due to his involvement in the

February 3 incident. Overall, additional counter-militancy operations are liable to be witnessed in Sidi Bouzid Governorate over the coming days and weeks.

Upcoming Notable Dates

February 14

- **Bahrain:** February 14 Anniversary
- **Lebanon:** Rafik Hariri Memorial Day

February 17

- **Libya:** February 17 Revolution Day