



Weekly

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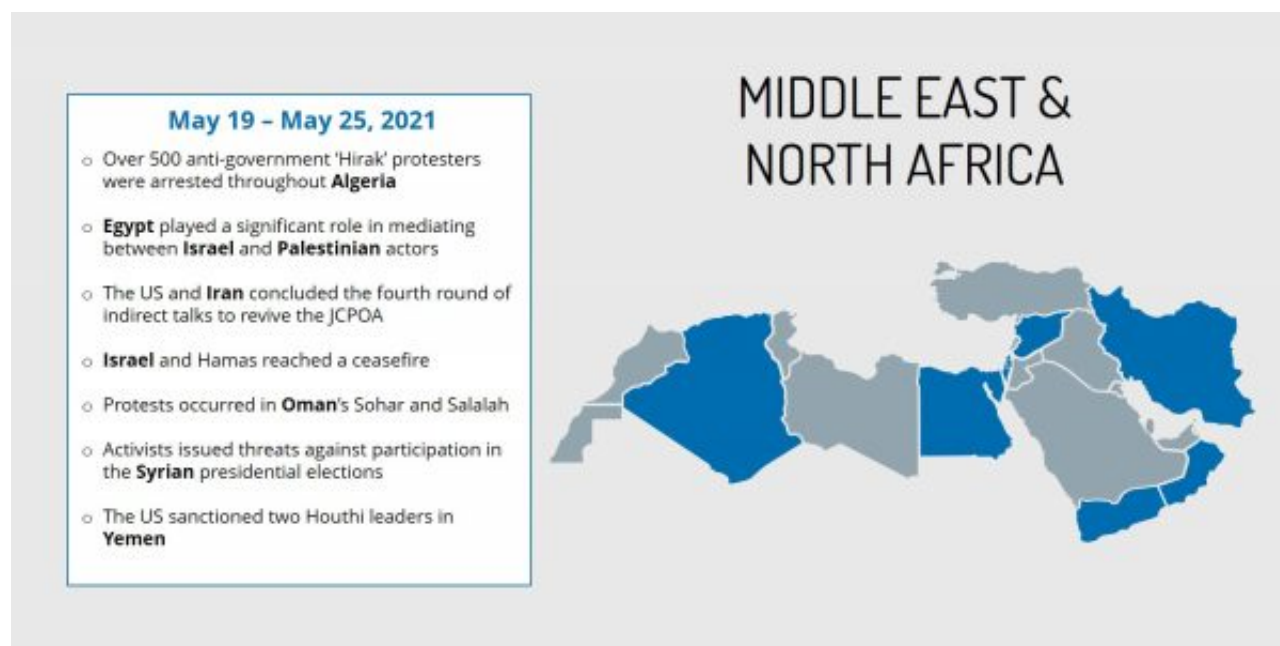
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MENA Weekly Summary - May 19-25, 2021

Highlights of the Week

This report reviews notable events this week in the Middle East and North Africa. This includes the arrest of hundreds of “Hirak” protesters throughout Algeria, the role of Egypt in mediating a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, the conclusion of the fourth round of indirect talks to revive the JCPOA, rare protests in Oman, the issuance of threats by activists against participation in the upcoming Syrian presidential elections, and the sanctioning of two Houthi leaders in Yemen by the US.



Algeria

Notable Developments:

1. On May 21, over 500 anti-government “Hirak” protesters, including activists and journalists, were reportedly arrested in Algiers, Annaba, Bouira, Skikda, Jijel, Khenchela, Tlemcen, Boumerdes, Tizi

- Ouzou, Sidi Bel Abbès, Oran, Oum El Bouaghi, and Constantine provinces.
2. The protesters were reportedly arrested for “incitement to unarmed assembly” and “rebellion”.

ANALYSIS:

This development reiterates the government’s bolstered crackdown on political opposition in the weeks leading up to the legislative elections on June 12. On May 16-17, 44 “Hirak” protesters were arrested and sentenced to prison on the same charges. Additionally, on May 18, the government classified two opposition groups, the Rachad Movement and the Movement for the Autonomy of Kabylie (MAK), as “terrorist organizations”. This indicates an effort by President Abdelmadjid Tebboune to undermine these movements and limit their political influence on voters. The heightened clampdown on protesters and opposition groups is also meant to preserve the legitimacy of the upcoming elections, as large-scale nationwide gatherings against the electoral process could undermine the new parliament. This is because the “Hirak” protesters have rejected the upcoming election process as they maintain that it will be merely ceremonial and not result in any meaningful political change. However, the high number of arrests of civil activists and journalists will elevate the “Hirak” protesters’ perception that their civil liberties are coming under increasing threat under Tebboune. This will exacerbate the already widespread anti-government sentiments in Algeria, thus fuelling the nationwide “Hirak” protest movement and increasing the risk of unrest during future demonstrations.

Egypt

Notable Developments:

1. On May 21, Egypt dispatched a delegation to Israel and the Palestinian Territories to discuss avenues to solidify the Israel-Hamas ceasefire as well as the provision of aid to the Gaza Strip.
2. On May 24, Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, met with Palestinian Authority (PA) leader, Mahmoud Abbas, in Ramallah to discuss ways to revive the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and provide support to the Palestinian people.

ANALYSIS:

This came against the backdrop of the recent ceasefire between Israel and Gaza-based militant factions. As in prior rounds of conflict, Egypt played a significant role in mediating between the parties. This forms part of Cairo’s strategy to position itself as a regional power broker and ensure stability along its northeastern borders. Within this context, Egypt’s involvement in the ceasefire successfully bolstered its status amongst the international community, particularly the US, and resulted in increased recognition of its influence in the region. This is evidenced by US President Joe Biden directly contacting Egyptian President, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, for the first time since coming to office in January 2021. The conversation between the two presidents is notable given Biden’s previous criticism of Egypt’s perceived poor human rights record and his public acknowledgment of the critical role played by al-Sisi in brokering the ceasefire. Cairo’s desire to play an active

role in reviving the Israeli-Palestinian peace process will further endear the country to Washington. Overall, Egypt will continue to strive to position itself as a regional broker, particularly in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, to bolster its influence in the Middle East.

Iran

Notable Developments:

1. On May 19, the US and Iran concluded the fourth round of indirect talks to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in Vienna. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stated that the “main agreement has been made”. The EU’s Political Director and JCPOA Chairperson, Enrique Mora, stated that an “agreement is shaping up”.
2. On May 24, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)’s Director-General announced that Iran has extended an agreement to allow the IAEA to monitor its nuclear facilities until June 24.

ANALYSIS:

Iran and the US have been engaged in indirect negotiations since April 6 to revive the JCPOA. Rouhani’s statement, albeit somewhat contradicted by other officials at the talks, indicates the constructive course of the negotiations and the parties’ relative optimism to reach certain understandings. This comes ahead of Iran’s June 18 presidential elections, in which the victory of a conservative hardline candidate is possible. Thus, Rouhani’s statement likely constitutes an effort to raise the profile of the reformist faction by projecting progress in ongoing negotiations. Meanwhile, the May 24 extension is a notable, de-escalatory development as the IAEA monitoring of nuclear sites was one of the pillars of the 2015 nuclear deal and shows some will among the Iranian leadership to maintain elements of the JCPOA. The JCPOA members will likely attempt to make further progress ahead of the new deadline set with the IAEA and the upcoming elections. However, given the depth of the rift between the US and Iran, the reaching of an agreement over the coming weeks remains uncertain.

Israel & Palestinian Territories

Notable Developments:

1. On May 20-21, Israel and Hamas agreed to an Egypt-mediated ceasefire.
2. On May 21, clashes between Palestinian residents and Israeli security forces occurred at Jerusalem’s al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount Compound. In the evening, Palestinian worshippers expelled the Palestinian Authority (PA)-appointed Mufti of Jerusalem from the mosque, chanting slogans in support of Hamas.
3. On May 23, a confrontation occurred between Hamas and Fatah supporters at the al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount Compound.

ANALYSIS:

The ceasefire agreement marks an end to an almost two-week-long armed conflict between Israel and Gaza-based militants, manifesting in the firing of over 4,300 rockets from the Gaza Strip into southern and central Israel. The absence of major hostilities since then shows that both parties are currently attempting to maintain calm, which can be expected to last over the short-term. However, the May 21 resurgence of clashes at the al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount Compound highlights that confrontations between Israeli security forces and Arab residents in Jerusalem will continue. The heightened tensions were also evidenced by the militant stabbing of two Israelis in Jerusalem on May 24. Hamas' capacity to sustain large-scale rocket barrages into Israel will foster perceptions among Palestinians across East Jerusalem and the West Bank that the Islamist movement is the protector of Palestinian interests vis-a-vis the Israeli government, in contrast with the Fatah-led PA. Over the coming days, Palestinians will likely continue to demonstrate open support for Hamas, including at the al-Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount Compound, highlighting the group's growing influence among the local populace.

Oman

Notable Developments:

1. On May 24, protesters gathered outside the Ministry of Manpower in Sohar city to denounce unemployment and worsening economic conditions. Security forces used tear gas after some protesters threw stones at the former.
2. Protests in the city were also recorded on May 23 and May 25.
3. On May 24, a protest march was also recorded in Dhofar Governorate's Salalah city.

ANALYSIS: These incidents are highly notable due to the rarity of protests in Oman, especially those resulting in civil unrest. The protesters' chants against lay-offs and the economic situation in the Sultanate highlight the socio-economic grievances of segments of the local population. In recent months, the Sultanate passed "Omanization" policies that mandate the prioritization of Omani employees over the expat population across various sectors. Such efforts are aimed at increasing economic opportunities for the local populace amid the general economic downturn in Oman, which was exacerbated by the global decline in oil and gas prices. The protests suggest that parts of the Omani population have failed to reap the economic benefits of Omanization policies. The fact that the protests occurred in Sohar for three days in a row indicates that the city is currently the primary focal point of protest action. The May 24 protest in Salalah underscores the potential for the expansion of protests to other areas in the country, possibly including Muskat. The use of tear gas and arrests by security forces will likely be perceived by the locals as excessive use of force, which may trigger further protests over the coming days.

Syria

Notable Developments:

1. On May 22, unidentified perpetrators circulated leaflets in Daraa's Inkhil containing death threats to residents voting in the Syrian presidential elections.
2. The elections will take place across Syrian-government-controlled territories on May 26. Aside from President Bashar al-Assad, two additional candidates are running: Mehmoud Merei and Abdullah

Sallum Abdullah.

ANALYSIS:

The presidential elections are widely perceived by international and domestic observers as a farce that will ultimately result in the re-election of President Assad. Authorities can be expected to try to force a high turnout in regions under firm government control, such as Damascus, as well as Latakia and Tartus provinces. In Syria's southern provinces particularly, the Syrian government has struggled to impose its authority, as demonstrated by persistent asymmetric attacks by rebel elements against government personnel and periodic acts of civil disobedience by parts of the population, who harbor strong anti-government sentiments. As indicated by the May 22 leaflet, rebels are likely to attempt to target individuals suspected of voting or engaging in the election. As local residents are vulnerable to attacks in the aftermath of the May 26 presidential elections, the threat is liable to discourage participation, particularly in areas with a less consolidated presence of the government's security apparatus. Militants are also likely to attempt to attack polling booths and government installations on election day. Finally, jihadist groups, primarily the Islamic State (IS), may attempt to conduct attacks to gain support among disenfranchised Sunni population segments. Civil unrest in condemnation of the election result is also possible in the days following the vote.



BASHAR AL-ASSAD

Party:
Arab Socialist Baath Party

Current Position:
President of Syria (2000-present)

Profession:
Politician



MEHMOUD MEREI

Party:
Democratic Arab Socialist Party (NCC)

Current Position:
Head of Arab Organization for Human Rights

Profession:
Lawyer



ABDULLAH SALLUM ABDULLAH

Party:
Socialists Unionists Party

Current Position:
Former member of parliament (MP)

Profession:
Politician

Yemen

Notable Developments:

1. On May 20, the US Treasury Department sanctioned Muhammad Abd Al-Karim al-Ghamari, the Head of the General Staff of the Houthi forces, for “orchestrating” attacks that have harmed civilians in Marib”, and Yusuf al-Madani, a Houthi military leader, for posing “a risk of committing acts of terrorism that threaten US nationals or national security”.
2. On May 23, Chairman of the Houthis’ Supreme Revolutionary Committee, Mohammed Ali al-Houthi stated that the sanctions “do not scare” the Shiite group and warned that if they [the Saudi-led Coalition] continue their blockade and conflict within Yemen, the Shiite group may strike “unexpected sites” within “some countries of aggression”.

ANALYSIS:

The sanctions highlight Washington’s determination to hold the Shiite group responsible for the deterioration of the humanitarian crisis in Yemen, particularly amid the Houthis’ offensive in Marib. This is despite the US’s February 12 revocation of the Houthis’ Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) designation. Al-Houthi’s statement is likely a message to the US and its regional allies, namely Saudi Arabia, that any punitive action will increase the group’s resolve to bolster its attacks against its adversaries. However, the Houthis are unlikely to significantly shift their strategy of targeting strategic assets within Saudi Arabia. This may nonetheless result in an uptick in cross-border attacks against the Kingdom’s southern and interior regions over the coming days and weeks. The Houthis may also seek to elevate the risk associated with maritime activity, as evidenced by the May 24 destruction of a Houthi-launched “booby-trapped” boat in the southern Red Sea.

Other Developments

- **Egypt:** On May 20, dozens of protesters gathered in Cairo and set fire to Israeli flags and chanted slogans celebrating the “victory of the Palestinian resistance”.
- **Israel:** On May 23, Israel officially reopened its border to small groups of vaccinated or recovered tourists. As part of the first stage of a pilot program slated to continue until June 15, 20 groups of 5-30 tourists will reportedly be permitted to enter Israel. Individual vaccinated or recovered tourists will potentially be permitted to enter from July.
- **Kuwait:** On May 22, opposition figure Obaid al-Wasmi received 95 percent of the vote in a parliamentary by-election, the highest number of votes in Kuwait’s parliamentary history.
- **Lebanon & Israel:** On May 19, four rockets were launched from Lebanon towards northern Israel. Israeli air defense systems intercepted one rocket, while one landed in an open area and two others landed in the sea. This was likely an expression of solidarity with Hamas and other Gaza militants by Lebanon-based Palestinian militant groups.
- **Morocco:** The Moroccan authorities announced that from May 21 the daily night curfew will be shortened to between 23:00 (local time) and 04:30. Previously, the curfew was being implemented

between 20:00 and 06:00.

- **Saudi Arabia:** On May 22, the Saudi Minister for Foreign Affairs, Adel al-Jubeir, received the UK Minister for the Middle East and North Africa, James Cleverly, in Riyadh. The officials reportedly discussed the bilateral relationship between Riyadh and London.

The Upcoming Week

- **May 26** - The presidential elections in **Syria** are slated to take place in government controlled-territories. It is advised to maintain heightened vigilance in the vicinity of polling stations, election-related facilities and government buildings due to the potential for unrest or security incidents.
- **May 26** - A general strike will be observed in **Tunisia's** Kasserine Governorate to denounce the increase in the poverty rate and the overall decline in development indicators in the region.
- **May 26** - The Executive of Council of the General Labor Union has called for a general strike in **Lebanon** to protest the deterioration of services in the health, educational, and financial sectors.
- **May 27** - In **Iran**, the Guardian Council, an unelected body responsible for monitoring the election, will announce the final list of approved candidates.
- **June 1** - Land and air borders will reopen partially in **Algeria**. Five international flights will be allowed to run to and from Algiers, Constantine, and Oran.
- **June 1** - **Dubai** will allow full foreign ownership of commercial firms.