MAX **IT'S A TOUGH WORLD.**

Weekly

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Highlights of the Week

This report reviews notable events this week in the Middle East and North Africa. These include the reaction to the alleged use of an Israeli private company's spyware by multiple state actors in the region, the expansion of anti-government protests in Iran, the announcement that the US will transition its mission in Iraq to a fully advisory role by the end of 2021, the revelation of an IS-inspired attack plot along the Israel-Jordan border foiled by Jordanian authorities, the nomination of Naijb Mikati to form a government in Lebanon, clashes in Libya's Tripoli, a cyber extortion attempt against Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil company, and the suspension of parliament and dismissal of the PM by President Saied in Tunisia amid widespread protest activity.

July 21 – July 27, 2021

- Reaction across the region to the alleged use of a spyware program by multiple state actors
- Anti-government protests expanded in **Iran**
- The US will transition its mission in **Iraq** to an advisory role by the end of the year
- A thwarted IS-inspired attack against IDF, JAF troops was revealed in **Jordan**
- Najib Mikati was tasked with forming a government in **Lebanon**
- Clashes occurred in **Libya**'s Tripoli between the SSA and al-Radaa Special Deterrence Forces
- **Saudi Arabia**'s state oil company revealed that leaked data was used in an attempted extortion
- President Saied suspended the ARP for 30 days and dismissed the PM in **Tunisia** amid large protests

MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA

MENA

Notable Developments:

1. On July 22, the UAE's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation categorically denied accusations regarding the nation's alleged use of Israeli spyware to surveil journalists and dissents.
2. Days prior, both Morocco and Saudi Arabia also refuted similar allegations.
3. On July 26, four US Members of Congress issued a statement calling for punitive action to be taken against an Israeli private company alleged to have supplied cyber intrusion software to a variety of governments around the world and the MENA region, including Morocco, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain.

ANALYSIS: While the spyware is owned by a private Israeli firm, it is notable that the above four countries have direct or indirect diplomatic and trade relations with the Israeli government. This highlights these countries' ability to leverage diplomatic relations with Israel to gain access to highly sophisticated cyber systems. This in turn enables these countries to bolster their surveillance capabilities, particularly for the monitoring of critics and political activists both domestically and abroad. Within this context, the recent revelations will likely create some degree of trepidation among known dissidents and activists, especially with regards to the level of privacy of their online and telephone communications. Additionally, the recent accusations will bolster the international perception of the abuse of free speech and privacy by these countries, as illustrated by the statement by US congress members. Nonetheless, these governments and potentially others will likely be undeterred and persist with their strategy of monitoring dissidents and political activists as a means of curbing opposition to their rule.

Iran

Notable Developments:

1. On July 24, hundreds gathered in East Azerbaijan's Tabriz to support Khuzestan protesters denouncing water shortages. Similar protests were recorded in Kordestan's Saqez, North Khorasan's Bojnurd, and Karaj's Alborz.
2. On July 26, demonstrations denouncing power cuts occurred in Tehran and Karaj. Some of the demonstrators reportedly chanted "no to Gaza and Lebanon".
3. On July 26, the Iranian Parliament postponed the review of the internet restriction bill, which include the handover of internet monitoring to Iran's armed forces.

ANALYSIS: These developments come amid near-daily protests denouncing water shortages across Khuzestan Province since July 15. The latest demonstrations highlight the wide geographical expansion of the protest movement to other parts of the country. The protests in East Azerbaijan and Kordestan, which host Iran's Azeri and Kurdish ethnic minorities, respectively, indicate that the grievances of Khuzestan's Arab population resonate among segments of other national minorities. This is because these communities have long harbored feelings of marginalization, and the reported use of force against demonstrators in Khuzestan has likely fueled pre-existing anti-government sentiments. The reported chants at protests in Tehran and Karaj demonstrate that the protests are also triggered by opposition to Iran's involvement in external conflicts and are not purely

motivated by current failures in the supply of basic services. In this context, the review of the internet bill's postponement was likely due to fears that the passing would add momentum to the protest movement. This is, however, unlikely to appease protesters' grievances. Further protests will likely be recorded across Iran over the coming days. Taken as a whole, this will add to the multiple challenges facing President-elect Ebrahim Raisi when he takes office on August 3.

PROTESTS RECORDED IN KHUZESTAN PROVINCE, OTHER PARTS OF IRAN

CHALLENGES FACING PRESIDENT-ELECT EBRAHIM RAISI

- Deep economic crisis
- Widespread protests over power, water shortages
- Labor strike by energy, manufacturing sector workers
- Establish legitimacy in the eyes of the people
- Revival of JCPOA

Iraq

Notable Developments:

1. On July 26, the US State Department stated that the US will conclude its combat missions in Iraq by December 31, 2021, and fully transition to a "training, advising, assisting, and intelligence-sharing role".
2. The announcement was made by US President Joe Biden during a meeting with Iraqi Prime Minister (PM) Mustafa al-Kadhimi as part of the final session of the countries' "Strategic Dialogue" in Washington.
3. At present, the US troop deployment in Iraq numbers 2,500.

ANALYSIS: This announcement comes against the backdrop of successive troop reductions and redeployments by the US in Iraq and sustained attacks over recent years against US-linked interests in Iraq by Iran-backed Shiite militias with the aim of compelling the US to withdraw. The latest development does not indicate a troop withdrawal or major shift in policy by Washington given that US troops have long been involved in the roles defined in the Strategic Dialogue. The announcement is thus primarily a symbolic gesture and is unlikely to have a bearing on the operational capabilities of the US troops in Iraq or the campaign against the Islamic State (IS). Washington's decision is likely meant to bolster Kadhimi's profile by projecting that he can gain concessions from the US and appease critics of the US military presence in Iraq. The US will seek to preserve its combat capacity in Iraq in order to assist the Iraqi security forces against the threat posed by the IS and to preserve its broader security and economic interests in the Middle East. Regardless, the continued US military presence will

prompt further attacks against its positions over the coming months.

Jordan & Israel

Notable Developments:

1. According to an unconfirmed report from July 27 citing Jordanian state security prosecution, four individuals were arrested between the end of 2020 and February 2021 for plotting an attack targeting the Jordanian Armed Forces (JAF) and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) along the Jordan-Israel border in the Gawr as-Safi area.
2. The assailants were exposed to Islamic State (IS) ideology on the internet and involved in spreading IS propaganda.
3. The individuals, of unknown nationality, planned to use firearms. They were arrested before they could obtain any weapons.

ANALYSIS: Although uncorroborated, the source of this information is generally reliable, indicating that the information is likely credible. Militant attacks are rare in Jordan, evidenced by the fact that the last militant attack occurred on November 6, 2019, when an IS-inspired militant stabbed four foreign nationals in Jerash. The latest incident shows the susceptibility of segments of individuals residing in Jordan to jihadist ideology and their ability to organize themselves into militant cells and plot attacks. IS has often called for attacks against Israelis and Jewish people. Large segments of those residing in Jordan already harbor anti-Israel sentiments. Thus, the assailants' consumption of IS ideology likely motivated them to plot an attack against the IDF. These anti-Israel sentiments can also extend to other foreign nationals, especially those from countries that are perceived as Israel's allies. While this incident is not indicative of an increase in the threat of jihadist militancy in Jordan, it does reiterate this underlying risk in the Kingdom due to the consumption of jihadist propaganda. The Jordanian security forces will continue to closely monitor and apprehend further IS sympathizers.

Lebanon

Notable Developments:

1. On July 26, President Michel Aoun tasked former Prime Minister (PM) Najib Mikati with the mandate to form a government.
2. Mikati received the support of a majority of the 128 members of parliament (MPs), including the Hezbollah-affiliated Shiite bloc and the Sunni bloc's Future Movement.

ANALYSIS: Aoun's decision to task Mikati to form the next government could break the long-term political vacuum, which was exacerbated when former PM and PM-designate Saad Hariri abandoned months-long efforts to form a government on July 15. Mikati's nomination shows some level of urgency within Lebanon's political class to name a replacement candidate for Hariri in an effort to appease the local population and prevent the security and economic situation from further spiraling out of control. Despite Mikati's

intent to initiate the "French Initiative", which includes a roadmap and a timetable for reforms to revive the Lebanese economy and unlock international aid, one of its key stipulations is that the Lebanese cabinet must be made up of technocratic ministers. The political complexities of achieving a purely technocratic cabinet devoid of a sectarian allocation of seats will remain a challenge, particularly due to the interests of the Hezbollah-led bloc and its alliance with Aoun. This is also rooted in the Taif Agreement, which outlines the basis for power-sharing in the parliament and contains a framework for the allocation of parliamentary positions based on religious sect. Therefore, the timeline for the formation of the next government remains uncertain despite Mikati securing support from a majority of political parties. Thus, the security and economic situation in Lebanon will remain unstable in the coming days and weeks.

Libya

Notable Developments:

1. The Stability Support Apparatus (SSA), led by Abdel Ghani al-Kikli, and the al-Radaa Special Deterrence Forces, led by Abdel Raouf al-Kara, clashed on Saidi, Zawiyah, and al-Madar streets in Tripoli's Bab Ben Ghashir District on July 22. This area is located about 200 m west of the Government of National Unity (GNU) Prime Minister's Office (PMO).
2. The hostilities reportedly occurred after the Special Deterrence Forces mobilized and closed off al-Seka Street near the PMO building. This prompted the SSA's involvement as it is responsible for securing government officials and institutions in western Libya.

ANALYSIS: The al-Radaa Special Deterrence Forces and al-Kikli-led forces have occasionally clashed in recent months, such as on January 28 in Tripoli's Hay al Andalus neighborhood. While the exact reason behind the latest clashes remains unknown, these hostilities underscore the persistent power struggle between militias in western Libya. Such militias, despite previously having cooperated under the Government of National Accord (GNA) umbrella, now operate fairly independently and without any government oversight. This frequently leads to clashes in and around Tripoli either over territorial influence or economic gain. Such hostilities carry a significant risk of collateral damage to civilians and civil infrastructure, especially because these militias possess and are willing to use both medium and heavy weapons. The latest incident thus reiterates the persistent volatility of the security environment of Tripoli due to the 5+5 Joint Military Commission's (JMC) inability to demilitarize local militias as well as unify Libya's security and military apparatus. The recurrence of such inter-militia hostilities can be expected in Tripoli over the coming weeks and months.

Saudi Arabia

Notable Developments:

1. On July 21, Saudi Arabia's state-owned oil company acknowledged that leaked data, likely from one of its contractors, was used in a cyber extortion attempt for 50 million USD worth of cryptocurrencies "last month".
2. The company did not specify if the contractor was hacked or if the data was leaked through other

means.

ANALYSIS: This incident comes amid frequent cyberattacks, including ransomware and data theft, targeting both public and private companies across the Middle East region. The company faced a major cybersecurity attack in 2012 when it was hit by the "Shamoon" virus, forcing the firm to shut down its network and destroy over 30,000 computers. The company's statement that the release of data was not due to a breach in the systems and that no "impact on operations" were recorded was likely an effort to deflect external attention and subsequently protect their image and business interests. The demand for 50 million USD in cryptocurrencies indicates that the breach was conducted by financially motivated cybercriminals rather than for obtaining or destroying sensitive information, as would possibly be the motive for more ideologically motivated Iran-backed hackers. Such an attack nonetheless poses an operational threat to businesses, especially given the highly sensitive nature of data gathered and stored by oil and gas companies. Overall, this incident shows the gaps in the company's cybersecurity protocols and, by extension, the vulnerability of Saudi Arabia's strategic infrastructure to cybercrime. The company will likely upgrade its cybersecurity protocols over the coming weeks to mitigate such threats.

Tunisia

Notable Developments:

1. On July 25, President Kais Saied suspended the work and powers of the Assembly of the Representatives of the People (ARP) for 30 days and assumed all executive powers. He also lifted the parliamentary immunity of all ARP members.
2. The Speaker of the ARP and leader of the Ennahda Movement, Rached Ghannouchi, stated that Saied's actions constitute a "coup".
3. On July 26, Saied ordered the dismissal of the Prime Minister (PM) and acting Minister of Interior, Hichem Mechichi; the acting Minister of Justice, Hasna Ben Slimane; and the Minister of National Defense, Brahim Berteji.

ANALYSIS: This development comes against the backdrop of growing disillusionment in Tunisia over the government's perceived failure to address the worsening health and economic crisis in the country. This triggered violent protests across Tunisia on July 25, which is commemorated as Republic Day, to demand the resignation of the government. Saied's latest directives are therefore likely an attempt to placate the protesters. This has appeased segments of the local population as underscored by the multiple pro-Saied protests recorded across Tunisia on July 26. However, the Ennahda Movement, which holds the most numbers of seats in the ARP, has a wide support base, and its stance that this is a "coup" attempt by Saied has instigated the party's supporters to organize protests against Saied. As political tensions in Tunisia remain high over the coming days and weeks, the security situation will become more volatile. This is especially given the increasing risk of clashes between pro-Saied and pro-Ennahda supporters, both of whom are known to engage in violent activity.

Other Developments

- **Egypt:** The Fuel Automatic Pricing Committee announced that effective July 23, the cost of fuel will increase by 0.25 Egyptian Pound (EGP) per liter.

- **Iran:** On July 22, Iran inaugurated a 1000 km-long crude oil pipeline from Bushehr's Goreh to Hormozgan's Jask port.

- **Israel & Palestinian Territories:** On July 23, over 140 Palestinian individuals and two Israel Defense Forces (IDF) were wounded during clashes near an Israeli outpost in West Bank.

- **Lebanon:** The Pharmacy Owners' Association issued a statement announcing the indefinite suspension of operations at pharmacies from July 23. This was due to difficulties in importing medicines and the government's halting of subsidies for such purchases.

- **Morocco:** Two intoxicated individuals attempting to rob and stab locals in Rabat's Yacoub al-Mansour on July 22 were apprehended by the police. One of the criminals was wounded by a shooting conducted by a police officer.

- **Syria:** An IED attack targeted the al-Jabsa-al-Rayyan gas pipeline near Deir Ezzor on July 22. The pipeline transports gas from Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF)-held Hasakah Province to Syrian government-administered Homs Province.

- **Turkey:** Heavy rains led to flooding in Turkey's eastern Black Sea region on July 22, including in Artvin Province's Arhavi and Murgul districts. This led to evacuations and power cuts.

- **Yemen:** From July 26 until August 15, flight operations at Aden International Airport will be suspended each night between 19:00-05:00 (local time). due to slated maintenance work of the airport's runways.

The Upcoming Week

- **July 29:** In **Israel,** the "Green Pass" was reinstated. Individuals over the age of 12 will require a vaccination certificate to enter events with more than 100 people. This includes hotels, conferences, weddings, performances, gyms halls, restaurants, and places of worship. Unvaccinated adults must present a negative PCR test certificate to enter.

- **July 30:** Throne Day, which commemorates the accession of King Mohammed V to the throne of Morocco in 1927, will be celebrated as a public holiday in **Morocco.**

- **July 30: Qatar** will end all COVID-19 restrictions amid a "return to normal".

- **August 1:** Only vaccinated foreign travelers will be allowed to enter **Kuwait.** Meanwhile, only vaccinated Kuwaiti citizens and residents will be allowed to travel abroad from the country.

- **August 1:** In **Saudi Arabia**, a ban on access to public facilities like malls, restaurants, government buildings, and public transport for unvaccinated individuals will be implemented.

- **August 3:** President elect-Ebrahim Raisi and his administration will take office in **Iran**.

- **August 4:** France will host an international conference on the first anniversary of the port explosion in **Lebanon's** Beirut.