



## Weekly

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## MENA Weekly Summary - August 11 - August 17, 2021

### Highlights of the Week

This report reviews notable events this week in the Middle East and North Africa. These include the appointment of a hardline foreign minister in the new Iranian administration, an IED attack at an oil well in Iraq's Kirkuk, the explosion of a fuel tank confiscated by Lebanese forces in Akkar that killed over 28 people, attacks against water infrastructure in Libya, tensions over an electoral law in Qatar, and an ongoing crackdown on stated corruption in Tunisia.



### Iran

#### Notable Developments:

1. On August 11, President Ebrahim Raisi appointed hardline diplomat Hossein Amirabdollahian as Foreign Minister, who reportedly harbors strong anti-Western sentiments.

2. Per reports from August 16, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) stated that Iran has produced 200 g of enriched uranium metal. The IAEA said this is step three in Tehran's four-step plan, which will bring them closer to producing a nuclear weapon.

**ANALYSIS:** Amirabdollahian's appointment falls in line with Raisi's efforts to consolidate the hardliner camp's power over the political echelon in Iran. Raisi has also stated that he will support "any diplomatic plan" to lift sanctions against Iran, which shows at least a partial effort to project openness to engagement with the West. Given this, and the Supreme Leader's previous decision to allow Iran to participate in Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) talks, the new FM's appointment is unlikely to significantly impact the probability of JCPOA negotiations resuming. That said, the IAEA's announcement regarding Iran's production of enriched uranium metal, which can be used to make the core of a nuclear bomb, signifies Iran's continued departure from the JCPOA's stipulations. These nuclear escalations are part of Tehran's long-standing pressure tactics to portray itself as inching closer to the potential weaponization of its nuclear program in a bid to compel the US to lift its economic sanctions with a sense of urgency. In this context, given that Amirabdollahian will lead the Iranian negotiation team at the Vienna talks, Tehran may adopt additional escalatory pressure tactics during the negotiations in the future. This is liable to increase tensions with Washington and pose additional challenges to the revival of the JCPOA over the coming months.

## Iraq

### Notable Developments:

1. On August 15, an IED attack targeted oil well number 87, situated in the northern part of the Bay Hassan Oil Field near Sebiran village in Kirkuk Province.
2. No disruptions to operations or casualties were reported.

**ANALYSIS:** Iraq's energy infrastructure in Kirkuk's environs has periodically been targeted by militants in recent months. On May 5, Islamic State (IS) militants detonated two IEDs at Bay Hassan Oil Field resulting in fires at two oil wells. Based on precedent, the location, and the jihadist group's interest in undermining the Iraqi government, the latest attack was likely also perpetrated by IS. This is part of what the Sunni militant group calls its strategy of "economic war" aimed at hampering operations at state-owned energy facilities. Such disruptions are liable to further exacerbate the local populace's socioeconomic grievances and undermine the authority of the Iraqi state. The attack shows IS's ability to exploit the partial security vacuum within the disputed territories between the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) and the territory controlled by the Iraqi Federal Government. It points to the continued absence of an effective coordinated security strategy between the two governments, despite the signing of a security cooperation agreement on May 13 to combat militancy. Kirkuk's rural agricultural landscape also likely inhibits the security forces in their efforts to track and apprehend militants operating in the province. These factors will render it difficult for the security forces to mitigate the threat of militancy against critical infrastructure, including oil and gas facilities as well as electrical towers, which IS has targeted over the recent weeks in the Kirkuk area.



## Lebanon

### Notable developments:

1. On August 12, the central bank lifted fuel subsidies as a result of depleting foreign exchange reserves.
2. On August 14-15, at least 28 people were killed in Akkar's Tleil after a fuel tank exploded.
3. On August 15, protestors vandalized the front of PM-designate Najib Mikati's home in Beirut and clashed with security forces. On the same day, Hezbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah said the group would begin importing fuel from Iran.

**ANALYSIS:** Fuel shortages and power cuts have resulted in the severe deterioration of socio-economic conditions in Lebanon. The decision to lift the subsidy has worsened this crisis, making fuel even more unaffordable for most of the population. The removal of the subsidy and general lack of fuel has triggered the army's involvement and it is now seizing tankers and directly distributing fuel to citizens in an attempt at preventing hoarding and smuggling. It was one such tanker, reportedly belonging to an individual with political ties, that exploded in Akkar. This explosion has reignited the discourse around the August 2020 Port of Beirut blast, in that the possibility of the political classes being held accountable is unlikely. This has heightened anti-government sentiments and resulted in violent protests like the one outside Mikati's home. In this context, Nasrallah's offer to import fuel from Iran is an attempt at shoring up support for Hezbollah, and a symbolic effort to portray the group as the savior of the Lebanese people. This is bolstered by the relative vagueness of his statement and the unlikelihood of Iran to deliver as well as the challenges posed by US sanctions. Declining socioeconomic

conditions and increasing political disillusionment are likely to result in increasing anti-government sentiment and civil unrest over the coming weeks.

## Libya

### Notable developments:

1. On August 11, Magarha tribesmen stormed Great Man-Made River (GMMR) facilities in Ash Shwayrif and al-Hasnawa and issued a 72-hour deadline for the release of Abdullah al-Senussi, the form Libyan Chief of Intelligence under Muammar Gaddafi's rule.
2. On August 15, the Man-Made River Authority (MMRA) cut off the water supply to Tripoli and its surrounding areas at the GMMR's main source. This decision was taken to avoid confrontation with groups threatening to "explode the main source of water supply" unless al-Senussi is released.
3. On August 16, the al-Radaa Special Deterrence Forces' Brigade 444 sent troop deployments to Ash Shwayrif to protect GMMR infrastructure.

**ANALYSIS:** The MMRA's August 15 decision was motivated by its efforts to preserve GMMR infrastructure. This is because there has been a sharp rise in attacks targeting GMMR facilities in western Libya in recent weeks, which threatens the collapse of the entire water system. The Magarha tribe's August 11 threat shows its willingness to use the country's strategic infrastructure as leverage for political gain as it attempts to secure al-Senussi's release from a prison run by the al-Radaa Special Deterrence Forces near Tripoli's Mitiga International Airport. The timing of this threat can be attributed to al-Senussi's recent cancer diagnosis. However, the al-Radaa Special Deterrence Forces are unlikely to release al-Senussi, which may prompt the Magarha tribe to act upon its threat in the coming days. Although Brigade 444 has been deployed to Ash Shwayrif to protect GMMR infrastructure, it is unlikely to be able to completely secure this water system as it consists of an underground network of pipes covering over 2,820 km of territory and about 1,300 wells over a vast geographical expanse.

## Qatar

### Notable developments:

1. On August 12, the Qatari Ministry of Interior reportedly issued a warning against gatherings that violate measures to combat the spread of the coronavirus and that fuel racial and tribal tensions.
2. This followed a reported protest by dozens of members of the al-Murrah tribe on August 10 against the recently passed electoral law for the Shura Council elections. Qatari authorities also arrested seven individuals for using social media to fuel "racial and tribal strife".

**ANALYSIS:** According to the new law passed by the Emir, only individuals aged 18 and over whose grandfather is of Qatari origin are eligible to vote. Candidates must be at least 30 years old and of Qatari origin to run in the election for the Qatari legislative body. Individuals of the al-Murrah tribe do not qualify for the election as they do not have exclusive Qatari origins, having historically lived between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. The

tribe has a strained relationship with the Qatari rulers as it was accused of supporting a failed coup attempt against the current Emir's father in 1996. The speed with which the protests by the al-Murrah tribe were seemingly contained and the arrest of seven individuals for allegedly spreading disinformation points to the government's determined efforts to clamp down on this issue. This effort has also been waged online when social media campaigns focusing on the tribe's exclusion from the elections gained traction. This prompted some Qatar-based news agencies to imply that the UAE was intentionally spreading false news and manipulating content, indicating efforts to deflect from the issue and blame an external actor. Tensions over the issue will persist until the election in October.

## Tunisia

### Notable Developments:

1. On August 11, senior Ennahda Movement member, Radwan Masmoudi, resigned. Meanwhile, party leader, Rached Ghannouchi, stated that Ennahda "will declare its self-criticism with courage".
2. On August 15, Democratic Current MP, Anouar Benchahed, was prevented by authorities from traveling to France.
3. On August 16, MP Zouhair Makhoulf and MP Mohamed Salah Ltifi were put under house arrest. Meanwhile, during a visit to the Tunis-Carthage International Airport, Saied assured citizens that the recently imposed travel bans are "temporary" and intended to target those involved in "corruption, terrorism, and tax evasion".

**ANALYSIS:** This comes amid Saied's ongoing crackdown on government officials and businessmen accused of corruption and other crimes. Daily arrests and travel restrictions indicate that Saied is actively utilizing his executive powers to put in place candidates who are favorable to him and who likely carry a more accountable track record. A crackdown on corruption is liable to placate large segments of the local population who hold longstanding grievances with the Tunisian political elite due to their perceived lack of accountability. The developments on August 11 indicate that the Ennahda Movement is seemingly responding to these moves by Saied by projecting a clean public image. Saied's August 16 announcement that the recently imposed travel bans are "temporary" is an attempt to assure the public that his actions do not constitute a "coup", as declared by his political opponents. Saied will nevertheless continue detaining prominent figures accused of corruption and other crimes over the coming weeks in order to justify his assumption of executive powers on July 25.

### Other Developments

- **Algeria:** On August 15, authorities extended a COVID-19-related night curfew in 37 of the country's provinces until at least August 29.
- **Iran:** The government imposed a five-day nationwide lockdown, which is in place from August 16 to August 20.



- **Israel:** On August 16, authorities revised the COVID-19 travel regulations. Citizens and permanent residents are now banned from traveling to Bulgaria, Brazil, Georgia, Mexico, Spain, and Turkey, barring exceptional circumstances. Travel to the vast majority of countries will require seven-day isolation on return to Israel, regardless of vaccination status.
- **Israel & Palestinian Territories:** On August 16, Gaza-based Palestinian militants fired two rockets into southern Israel. One was intercepted by Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system and the other landed in the Gaza Strip.
- **Libya:** On August 14, the Government of National Unity (GNU) lifted a partial curfew that had been in effect in parts of western and central Libya. Existing restrictions on commercial activities remain in place.
- **Turkey:** Flash floods in Turkey's Black Sea Region resulted in the deaths of at least 62 people and dozens of missing people.
- **UAE:** Emirati authorities approved COVID-19 vaccine certificates issued abroad for incoming travelers as of August 15.

## The Upcoming Week

- **August 18: Abu Dhabi** will remove Armenia, Austria, Israel, Italy, the Maldives, and the US from its green list, which will be reduced to 28 countries. Passengers traveling from green list countries are not required to quarantine upon arrival in the emirate.
- **August 18:** In **Israel**, the authorities will extend the COVID-19 "green pass" requirements for entry to various establishments. Only individuals who have been vaccinated or recovered from COVID-19, or have a negative test, will be able to enter entertainment and sports events, gyms, restaurants, and other attractions. The "purple badge" will also be applied at commercial centers and malls, requiring social distancing of two meters and capacity restrictions.
- **August 18-19: Algeria, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, and, Lebanon** will celebrate the Ashura holiday, the tenth day of the month of Muharram in the Islamic calendar, which marks the climax of the Mourning of Muharram. It is a particularly poignant day in Shia Islam.

- **August 20: Morocco** will celebrate the Anniversary of the Revolution of the King and the People. This public holiday celebrates King Mohamed V's return to Morocco from exile.
- **August 21:** Youth Day will be celebrated as a public holiday across This day commemorates the struggle of Morocco's youth during the fight for independence.
- **August 22:** The final voter lists for the Shura Council elections in **Qatar** are set to be announced.