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MAX - MENA Region Daily Summary - October 21, 2021

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

Highlights of the Day

- **Egypt & Turkey:** Egypt, Cyprus, Greece sign trilateral pact to link electricity grid on October 19; liable to strain relations with Turkey
- **Israel:** General strike declared in Umm al-Fahm on October 21; shows grievances pertaining to violence in Arab-majority cities
- **Lebanon:** Parliament announces on October 19 early legislative elections on March 27, 2022; unlikely to increase confidence in government
- **Qatar:** Emir orders cabinet reshuffle, appointment of new ministers on October 19; to portray increased efficiency of state institutions
- **Syria:** Aerial attack against US base in al-Tanf reported during night hours of October 20; likely to prompt US retaliation

Notable Events

Egypt & Turkey: Egypt, Cyprus, Greece sign trilateral pact to link electricity grid on October 19; liable to strain relations with Turkey

Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi described this agreement as an effort to connect the three national electricity grids to the rest of Europe. Meanwhile, Turkey condemned the summit and called the agreement a “manifestation of the hostile policies” towards it.

This was announced two days after Egypt and Greece signed an agreement to establish undersea cables to transmit power. The latest summit highlights the growing cooperation among Egypt, Cyprus, and Greece since 2014 and their willingness to work together to become a regional energy-exporting hub. In the broader geopolitical context, Turkey’s statement indicates that it sees the summit as another avenue for countries that are part of the East Mediterranean Gas Forum (EMGF), such as Egypt, Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, to specifically exclude Turkey from discovering energy resources in the disputed areas of

the eastern Mediterranean Sea. As both Ankara and Cairo will continue to pursue their core energy policy interests in the eastern Mediterranean Sea, this development will further increase tensions and strain their ongoing efforts to improve bilateral ties in the coming months.

Israel: General strike declared in Umm al-Fahm on October 21; shows grievances pertaining to violence in Arab-majority cities

The strike is called to denounce high levels of violence in Israel's Arab-majority cities, following two homicide incidents in the city within a 24-hour period. All public and private establishments will be closed in Umm al-Fahm, located in northern Israel.

Criminal violence and the extensive proliferation of arms in Israel's Arab community have been a source of significant tensions between residents of these communities and Israeli authorities. On October 3, Prime Minister (PM), Naftali Bennett, stated that the violence in the Arab sector had reached a "red line" and deliberated on plans to involve the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and Israel Security Service (Shin Bet) to combat the phenomenon. Nonetheless, Israeli authorities have yet to prove any significant development in addressing the issue, as the latest murder incidents within the Arab community marked the 102nd death of similar nature since the beginning of 2021. The strike, therefore, highlights the heightened distress within the Arab community against the government's perceived inaction to mitigate the issue. Therefore, further civil action in Arab-dominated cities is likely to recur in the coming weeks.

Israel & Palestinian Territories: Riot dispersal measures used against Palestinians at Jerusalem's Damascus Gate on October 19-20; clashes to recur

Palestinian protesters threw rocks at Israeli buses on both dates, which wounded two passengers. The Israeli Police used tear gas, water cannons, and stun grenades to disperse the protesters. 22 Palestinians were arrested and 17 others were wounded during the unrest on October 19.

This comes amid frequent violent confrontations between Palestinians and Israeli security forces at Damascus Gate over recent weeks. Clashes between the two parties were recorded for three consecutive nights at the locale between October 11-13. This increase in tensions can likely be attributed to the alleged desecration of Muslim graves at two cemeteries near Jerusalem's Old City by the Israeli authorities. The Israeli Police's use of riot dispersal measures against Palestinian protesters at Damascus Gate over the past week has likely further elevated the latter's perception that the former is using excessive force against them. The protesters' increasing resort to stone-throwing at public buses over recent days shows the risk of collateral damage to bystanders. Damascus Gate will remain a focal point for such clashes in the coming days.

Lebanon: Parliament announces on October 19 early legislative elections on March 27, 2022; unlikely to increase confidence in government

Gebran Bassil, the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), opposed the move by reportedly citing predicted stormy weather on March 27 and the coincidence of the date with the Christian fasting holiday of Lent. The elections were originally slated for May 2022.

This announcement comes amid significant pressure by the international community on Prime Minister (PM) Najib Mikati to implement major political and economic reforms and ensure transparent elections. It also coincides with increased sectarian tensions following the October 14 armed clashes in Beirut during a Hezbollah-orchestrated protest. In addition, the government needs to gain trust to obtain financial aid from international players, such as the International Fund (IMF). Thus, by bringing forward the elections, the government likely aims to demonstrate its commitment to meeting expectations voiced by the international community following Mikati's September inauguration. However, the step shortens Mikati's current tenure, which will further diminish his ability to initiate reforms. Moreover, the fact that the FPM, one of the largest political factions, is opposed to this measure indicates that political tensions will increase over the coming weeks. International confidence in the Lebanese government will thus remain low.

Lebanon: Prices of fuel increased by 25 percent on October 20; to amplify anti-government sentiments, prolong civil unrest

The price of 20 liters of 95-octane fuel has been increased to 302,700 Lebanese Pounds (LBP), which is reportedly 25 percent more than the previous week's prices.

The Lebanese government has increased fuel prices several times in recent weeks. The new increase will reportedly bring the cost of 20 liters of fuel to almost half the monthly minimum wage in the country. This shows that the government has effectively removed all subsidies on energy derivatives due to the severe depletion of its foreign reserves. To express their distress against the worsening socioeconomic situation, a certain segment of the population has persistently resorted to violence against energy infrastructures. This development will thus magnify these sentiments and likely trigger further disruptive protests. The successive increases in fuel prices overall indicate that the newly elected Prime Minister (PM) Najib Mikati government remains unable to secure international aid to offer subsidies for essential goods, which is conditioned on the implementation of economic reforms. Therefore, the situation in Lebanon will remain unstable over the coming weeks and months.

Qatar: Emir orders cabinet reshuffle, appointment of new ministers on October 19; to portray increased efficiency of state institutions

In the reshuffle, many ministries like the ones for municipality and environment, transport and communications, and culture and sports, were demerged and new ministries were formed. New cabinet ministers were also appointed to the portfolios of finance, education, commerce, and industry, among others. The ministries of interior, foreign, defense, energy, justice, and health were unaffected by the reshuffle.

The swift decision to reshuffle the cabinet just weeks after the October 2 Shura Council elections, was likely part of Emir's efforts to build an international perception that Qatar is undertaking key measures to increase the efficiency of state institutions. This follows the Emir's appointment of two women on the Shura Council on October 15 after Qatar reportedly faced criticism for having a male-dominated Shura Council. This further indicates the government's efforts to showcase the country as progressive and supportive of women's role in political decision-making. This is especially since Qatar is set to host the Formula 1 Grand Prix (GP) in November and the FIFA World Cup in 2022, which will put significant international attention on the country over the coming months.

Syria: Aerial attack against US base in al-Tanf reported during night hours of October 20; likely to prompt US retaliation

US Central Command (CENTCOM) officials reportedly stated that a “coordinated attack” involving unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) and other means targeted the US base. No casualties were reported.

No attacks have been reported against the US base in al-Tanf in recent years. The incident follows several airstrikes that targeted sites close to the T-4 airbase in Homs Province on October 8 and 13-14. Pro-Iran sources indicated that these airstrikes were conducted by aircraft from al-Tanf’s airspace and that they were joint American-Israeli operations. These outlets also reported that “Syria’s Allies Operations Room” [pro-Iran factions] had vowed to respond to these strikes. The latest attack targeting al-Tanf thus likely constitutes a retaliation by Iran-backed factions. This suggests that Iran-backed groups are willing to orchestrate attacks in response to airstrikes in Syria that are attributed to Israel and the US. It also highlights that US bases in Syria could be targeted for strikes conducted independently by Israel due to the two countries’ broader alliance. The incident will likely elicit retaliatory US airstrikes against Iran-backed militias in Syria, likely along the Iraq border over the coming weeks.

Tunisia: Authorities arrest suspected militant in Sidi Bouzid Governorate, per October 19 reports; counter-militancy operations to recur

The individual was arrested for “glorifying acts of terrorism”, browsing Islamic State (IS) websites, and reviewing “banned books”.

This development comes amid a nationwide counter-militancy campaign, which frequently entails the arrest of suspected militants in Tunisia’s outlying governorates, such as Sidi Bouzid. The fact that no weapons were uncovered during the operation indicates that the arrestee was likely a radicalized individual rather than an active militant. This reflects the Tunisian authorities’ long-standing vigilance towards radicalized individuals as they are more prone to conduct low sophistication “lone-wolf” attacks that do not require extensive training and are therefore more challenging for the authorities to mitigate beforehand. Nevertheless, the arrest indicates the susceptibility to radicalization of segments of the local populace and the subsequent underlying threat of militancy in the country. This can largely be attributed to some locals’ perception of marginalization by the authorities, particularly those who reside in the impoverished and underdeveloped outlying parts of the country, such as Sidi Bouzid. Security forces will conduct further operations targeting suspected militants in Tunisia over the coming weeks and months.

Tunisia: Locals denounce ‘foreign interference’ during protest in Tunis on October 19; shows sensitivity to perceived US, French meddling

A few dozen activists gathered outside the Municipal Theatre on Tunis’ Habib Bourguiba Avenue and chanted slogans on the “freedom of sovereignty” and “No” to American and French interference.

This protest follows a meeting by a US Congressional committee on October 14 on the “increasing danger to democracy” in Tunisia as well as the EU’s calls to reopen the Tunisian parliament on October 19. Both anti-President Kais Saied and pro-Saied protests

have stressed sovereignty in opposition to foreign interference, especially by western countries. This was seen in the anti-French tone of the September 26 anti-Saied protest wherein demonstrators interpreted French President Emmanuel Macron's potential presence at the 18th Francophone Summit in Tunisia in November as tacit French support for Saied's actions. While the summit has now been canceled, Tunisia's past colonial ties with France have made Tunisians very sensitive towards perceived French and European intervention in Tunisia's domestic affairs. While the Tunisian foreign minister has now stated that Saied would take more steps to "reassure" Tunisia's international partners, Tunisians will likely remain sensitive to any perceived meddling by western countries over the coming weeks.

Yemen: Anti-Houthi forces claim recapturing locations in Marib's al-Juba, Harib on October 19; armed hostilities to persist

Harib and al-Juba districts are respectively located approximately 50 km and 44 km south of Marib city. Meanwhile, the Saudi-led Coalition reportedly conducted 14 airstrikes targeting Marib's al-Juba and al-Kasara districts on October 19-20.

This comes amid an escalation in hostilities between anti-Houthi and Houthi forces, particularly in southern Marib Governorate, amid the former's long-standing efforts to capture the provincial capital of Marib city. On October 17, the Houthi military spokesperson claimed the capture of 3,200 square km in Marib and Shabwa governorates. The recapture of locales in Harib and al-Juba shows the anti-Houthis' efforts, supported by the Saudi-led Coalition, to push back the Houthis from southern Marib. Securing control over these locales is strategically significant for the anti-Houthi forces as both Harib and al-Juba are located along the N17 highway, which links Shabwa's Ataq to Marib city. The Houthis will likely launch a counter-offensive in the area to preserve its recent control in southern Marib. Given the significant value of this region for both sides, hostilities will persist particularly along the N17 highway, over the coming days and weeks.

Upcoming Notable Dates

October 23

- **Libya:** Liberation Day

October 25

- **Iran:** Birthday of Prophet Muhammad/Imam Sadegh

October 27

- **Egypt & Saudi Arabia:** Arab solidarity motorcycle rally

October 28-29

- **Turkey:** Republic Day

October 29

- **Israel:** Jerusalem Marathon

November 1

- **Lebanon:** All Saints' Day
- **Algeria:** Revolution Day