Weekly

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MENA Weekly Summary – November 10 – November 16, 2021

Highlights of the Week

This report reviews notable events this week in the Middle East and North Africa. These include a joint maritime exercise in the Red Sea led by the US, Israel, Bahrain, and the UAE, the detention of an Israeli couple on national security charges in Istanbul, the announcement by several high-profile individuals of their intention to run in the presidential elections in Libya, an economic agreement reached between Syria and the UAE, various protests in Tunisia, and an attack by the Houthis on the US Embassy in addition to the kidnapping of various Yemeni nationals working for the US government.

Bahrain, Israel, & UAE

Notable Developments

1. On November 11, Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain, together with the US, launched a joint multilateral

maritime exercise in the Red Sea.
2. The US Navy's Fifth Fleet reportedly announced that the training exercises focused on maritime "visit, board, search and seizure tactics" and will "enhance interoperability" between the four participating navies.

ANALYSIS: This is the first occasion wherein these parties have formally acknowledged the holding of joint naval exercises in international waters in the Middle East. Israeli naval officers have overtly stated that such drills help to confront their shared adversary, Iran, and its perceived acts of aggression in the region. This is in reference to Iran's effort to dominate the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman by projecting these waters as an extension of its maritime territory. This has manifested in Iranian operations to detain and seize commercial vessels on various charges, which it has then utilized to fulfill its economic or political goals. Additionally, Iran and Israel have engaged in tit-for-tat hostilities on the maritime front over the past several months. The Bab-al Mandab Strait between the Gulf of Aden and the Red Sea is strategically important for Israel's freedom of movement as it is a crucial link connecting the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. Therefore, by launching such exercises, all four countries, but especially the US and Israel, likely aim to send a message to Iran that they will unitedly confront any future transgressions by Iran in international waters.

Israel & Turkey

Notable Developments

1. On November 11, an Israeli couple who were in Istanbul on vacation were detained by police after taking photographs of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's Residence. Photographing sensitive locations and installations is a criminal offense in Turkey.
2. On November 12, a Turkish court extended the couple's detention by 20 days, with authorities alleging that they are spies.
3. As of November 16, the couple has yet to be formally charged. According to reports, they may either face charges of espionage, or a lesser offense of harming Turkey's national security.

ANALYSIS: Relations between Turkey and Israel have been poor over the last decade due to disagreements pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as the "Mavi Marmara" flotilla incident in 2010 when Israel targeted civilian vessels aiming to break an Israeli blockade of Gaza and several Turkish civilians were killed. Amid this prolonged diplomatic deterioration, the Israeli government is likely to perceive the couple's detention as politically motivated and an attempt to use its citizens as bargaining chips to extract concessions from Jerusalem. Such sought-after concessions may include granting Ankara increased influence surrounding affairs at Jerusalem's al Aqsa Mosque/Temple Mount Compound, further easing of restrictions on the Gaza Strip, and dropping a recently proposed bill in the Israeli Knesset to recognize the "Armenian Genocide". The detention also likely represents a Turkish effort to distract the public from the ongoing economic crisis in the country that has reduced Erdogan's approval ratings in the country. Overall, the detention will further strain Israel-Turkey relations, particularly in the event of the Israeli nationals being prosecuted. It also points to the increased risk of detention of

foreign nationals on national security charges, particularly those from countries that have a hostile relationship with Ankara.

Libya

Notable developments:

1. On November 14, Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of former Libyan ruler Muammar Gaddafi, submitted his candidacy for the December 24 presidential elections in Sebha.
2. On the same day, the International Criminal Court (ICC) stated that the arrest warrant issued against Saif, for two counts of crimes against humanity, is still in place.
3. Reports quoting a High National Elections Commission (HNEC) official stated that residents and armed groups closed down electoral centers in Zawiyah, Gharyan, Khoms, and Zliten to protest Saif al-Islam's candidacy. Notables from Misrata and Zawiyah also rejected his candidacy.
4. On November 16, Libyan National Army (LNA) leader, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, announced his intention to participate in the upcoming presidential elections.

ANALYSIS: This marks Saif al-Islam's first public appearance in a decade. By submitting his candidacy, Saif al-Islam is signaling his return to the political scene and hinting at more long-term political ambitions. The anti-Gaddafi sentiment shared by large segments of the Libyan population will likely hinder Saif al-Islam's bid for president. However, Saif al-Islam still commands a certain degree of support from Gaddafi era officials and residents of his hometown, Sirte, where supporters celebrated his candidacy. This support is likely to cut into that offered to Haftar, especially by certain tribes residing in southern Libya. This could subsequently result in alliances shifting within Libya in an attempt to prevent an al-Islam victory. Al-Islam's controversial candidacy highlights the limitations of political progress in Libya. It will also likely increase political divisions within the country and elevate political instability.

Syria & UAE

Notable Developments

1. On November 11, Syria state media reported that an agreement had been signed between the country's Ministry of Electricity and Emirati firms to build a 300 megawatt (MW) photovoltaic facility in Wedian al-Rabea in the Damascus countryside.
2. The investment will reportedly be repaid through quarter-year installments.

ANALYSIS: This development follows an economic cooperation agreement signed between the two nations on October 10, followed by the UAE Foreign Minister's visit to Damascus on November 9, the first time an Emirati official visited Syria since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. These events are noteworthy, given that indicate that Damascus is succeeding in its quest for economic investments to aid recovery, in addition to highlighting the growing regional recognition of the Assad government. In this regard, the latest agreement will enhance the Assad government's capacity to provide a more

consistent supply of electricity to its citizens, which in turn will likely increase the former's support within government-held territories. Warming ties also represent an economic opportunity for the cash-strapped nation, particularly given that the UAE accounts for 14 percent of Syria's foreign trade. From its perspective, by strengthening relations with Syria, Abu Dhabi is likely seeking to increase its influence in the country at the expense of regional foes like Iran and Turkey. Additionally, given that the UAE has previously lobbied for Syria's return to the Arab League, further regional engagements between Arab states and the Assad government will likely be reported over the coming months.

Tunisia

Notable Developments:

1. Thousands of protesters marched in Sfax Governorate's Agareb on November 10 to denounce violence between protesters and security forces in the town on November 8-9. The protesters then blocked National Highway 14 with tire fires on November 11. These protests erupted over the government's decision to reopen the "al-Quena" landfill, which has been closed since September 2020 over environmental and health concerns.
2. On November 14, about 3,500 demonstrators gathered in front of Tunis' Parliament building in Bardo Square chanting slogans denouncing President Kais Saied in a protest organized by the "Citizens Against the Coup" campaign. Videos showed protesters attempting to remove security barricades to bypass security forces, resulting in limited scuffles. At least 15 individuals were arrested for possession of knives.

ANALYSIS: Although unruly anti-government protests are occasionally reported in Tunisia's outlying areas, the high level of violence recorded in Agareb in recent days makes this development notable. It highlights the proclivity for localized issues to trigger prolonged unrest, which can have an adverse impact on supply chains as protesters often block major highways to express their discontent with the authorities. Such protest movements can also impact operations in Tunis as underscored by a protest in the capital on November 10 in solidarity with locals in Agareb. Against this backdrop, while the November 14 protest in Tunis' Bardo Square was specifically organized to denounce President Kais Saied and his perceived autocratic behavior, the recent developments in Agareb are likely to have shaped anti-Saied sentiments in Tunis as well. This is especially considering that Saied has recently implied that the protests in Agareb were "intentionally provoked" to undermine the state. Overall, anti-Saied sentiments will remain high in Tunisia in the coming days.

Yemen

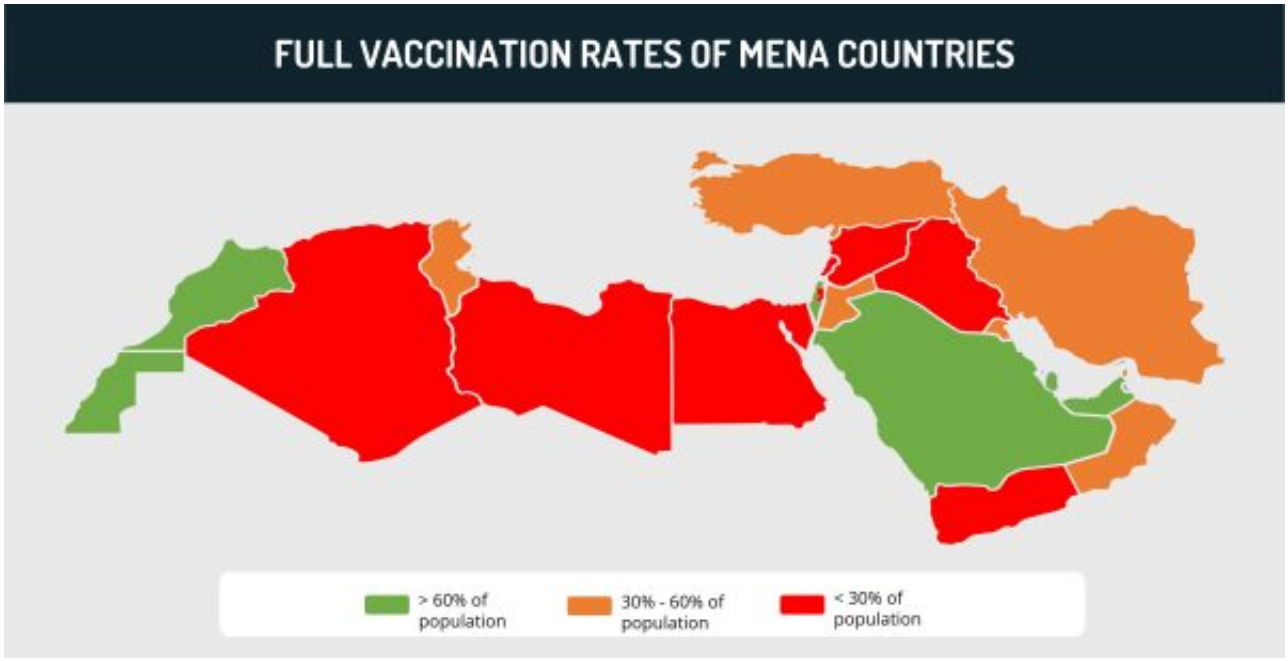
Notable Developments:

1. According to reports from November 10, 25 Yemeni individuals working as security staff at the US Embassy in Sanaa, and USAID, the international development arm of the US government, were kidnapped by the Houthis. The arrests reportedly occurred over a period of three weeks since mid-October.
2. The Houthis additionally stormed the US Embassy building on November 10 and looted equipment

from the premises. Washington expressed “extreme concern” regarding the situation.

ANALYSIS: Although the exact motive behind these arrests remains unclear, it comes at a time of increased international pressure on the Houthis to negotiate a ceasefire with the Saudi-led Coalition and bring an end to the ongoing conflict in Yemen. Therefore, the Houthis likely aim to use these arrests to gain leverage during future ceasefire negotiations or to facilitate a prisoner exchange with the Saudi-led Coalition. Alternatively, the arrests may have been conducted due to the Houthis’ perception that individuals employed by Washington could be potential spies with a role in providing intelligence to the Coalition or the US on the local dynamics in Sanaa under the Houthi leadership. Thus, the arrests may have been aimed at preventing the transfer of information and to deter future cooperation between locals with the US and its allies. Overall, the arrests and the storming of the US Embassy, indicate the Shiite group’s efforts to project that it continues to be the dominant authority in Sanaa, despite the Saudi-led Coalition’s campaign. Houthis may conduct additional arrest campaigns against US-linked individuals over the coming months.

COVID-19 VACCINATION STATUS IN MENA



Other Developments

- **Algeria**: 21 members of the Rachad Movement were arrested in Medea on November 12 amid an ongoing government crackdown on political opposition in the country.

- **Israel**: Ministers approved a bill limiting the Prime Minister from serving more than eight years in total on November 14. In order to become a law, the bill must clear three Knesset plenum

hearings.

- **Palestinian Territories & Qatar:** Qatar announced the transfer of 18 million USD to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNWRA) on November 10.

- **Qatar**: A deal was signed for Qatar to serve as the US's protecting power in Afghanistan on November 12. Qatar will establish a US "Interests Section" within its embassy in Kabul to provide certain consular services and monitor the security of US diplomatic facilities.

- **Saudi Arabia**: Citizenship was granted to expatriates from various fields including athletics, academics, and the medical sector following a decree issued by King Salman bin Abdulaziz al Saud on November 11.

- **Syria**: On November 10, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) reportedly struck weapons and ammunition depots in Baghouz and Gharanij located near the al-Qaim border crossing with Iraq.

- **Tunisia:** Zouheir Makhlouf, a Member of Parliament representing the Qalb Tounes party, was sentenced to one year in prison for sexual harassment on November 12.

The Upcoming Week

- **November 19:** The Expo 2020 Dubai Run will take place in the **UAE**. Travel disruptions can be expected in Dubai.

- **November 19-21**: The Formula 1 Grand Prix will occur at **Qatar's** Losail Circuit Racing Track. Security protocols will be tightened across Doha, and traffic disruptions are likely.

- **November 22: Iraqi** nationals will be required to present a valid COVID-19 vaccination certificate to enter the country. This regulation will be in place until further notice.

- **November 22:** The **Saudi Arabian** Football Federation is slated to launch the Saudi Women's Football League.

- **November 22-23:** The **Libya** Energy & Economy Summit will be held at Tripoli's Corinthia Hotel. It is reportedly the first international in-person energy conference in a decade.

- **November 24: Israel's** Defense Minister, Benny Gantz, is slated to pay an official visit to Morocco. The agenda includes the signing of bilateral security cooperation agreements.

- **November 24:** Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi and Deputy Supreme Commander of the **UAE** Armed Forces, is expected to arrive in **Turkey** for a state visit.