

## Daily

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## MAX - MENA Region Daily Summary - July 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

- **MENA:** Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE used Israel-linked spyware, per July 19 reports; to draw international criticism
- **Iran:** Protests reported in Tehran, police officer killed in Khuzestan's Mahshahr on July 20; protest movement liable to spread
- **Israel & Palestinian Territories:** Global company withdraws sales in 'occupied' Palestinian Territories on July 19; such incidents may recur
- **Jordan:** US President Biden hosts King Abdullah II at White House on July 19; shows Washington's intent to signal Jordan's status as key ally
- **Saudi Arabia & UAE:** On July 19, OPEC extends 'Declaration of Cooperation' until December 2022; shows UAE's influence within OPEC

### Actionable Items

**Iraq: Students to protest across country, including Baghdad's Tahrir Square, at 17:00 (local time) on July 21; maintain heightened vigilance**

Student activists are demanding the resignation of Iraqi Minister of Education, Ali Hamid al-Dulaimi, due to his decision to hold on-site university exams despite a major increase in COVID-19 infections in Iraq in recent weeks. In addition to Baghdad, protesters are slated to gather in front of the Provincial Council buildings of all Iraqi provinces administered by the Iraqi Federal Government.

This comes amid the Iraqi public's long-standing grievances with the Iraqi authorities' perceived mismanagement of the COVID-19 pandemic. The latest call for protests thus highlights the widespread perception among Iraqi students that the Ministry of Education's decision to enforce on-site exams shows the authority's disregard for essential health concerns. The protests are likely to draw a high number of participants. In

major protest hotspots, such as Baghdad's Tahrir Square and Basra's Provincial Council building, an attendance in the hundreds can be expected. As the organizers have called upon participants to avoid confrontation with law enforcement, the likelihood of major civil unrest remains low. However, minor scuffles between some protesters and security forces cannot be excluded.

*Those operating or residing in Iraq during the evening hours of July 21 are advised to maintain heightened vigilance in the vicinity of Baghdad's Tahrir Square as well as Provincial Council buildings across the country due to the planned protests and the potential for localized unrest.*

## **Notable Events**

### **MENA: Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, UAE used Israel-linked spyware, per July 19 reports; to draw international criticism**

Data leaked by a French journalism non-governmental organization indicates that several countries have used the spyware to monitor domestic and international journalists, activists, political leaders, and other persons of interest. High-profile individuals such as the French President, Moroccan Prime Minister and King, Egyptian government officials, and the Iraqi Presidential candidate were reportedly under surveillance or planned to be so.

While the spyware is owned by a private Israeli firm, it is notable that all the four aforementioned countries have direct or indirect diplomatic and trade relations with the Israeli government. This indicates these countries' willingness to make significant expenditures and leverage diplomatic relations to curb dissent and influence regional political developments. This also comes amid widespread criticism of the human rights records of Morocco and most Gulf countries. For instance, Saudi Arabia's alleged assassination of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, who was reportedly also targeted by the spyware, drew extensive international criticism. The latest data leak will bolster domestic and international perception of the abuse of free speech and privacy by these countries, prompting them to deny their involvement in the use of the spyware.

### **Algeria: MDN reports on July 19 arrest of five militant supporters in Algeria; comes amid decrease in intensity of counter-militancy campaign**

According to the Ministry of National Defense (MDN), the counter-militancy operations took place between July 6-18.

This comes amid a marked decrease in the intensity of the People's National Army (ANP) counter-militancy campaign in recent months, with the focus shifting from militants to militant supporters. This can be attributed to the ANP's reduced threat perception of militancy in the country due to the success of its previous operations, which has lowered the morale of militants and prompted hundreds of them to voluntarily surrender to the ANP in recent years. Nonetheless, the sustained presence of militant supporters across Algeria shows that militants continue to draw support from radicalized segments of the

local population. Such individuals can aid militants by providing logistical support, low-sophistication weapons, as well as by eventually joining militant groups. Thus, by arresting such elements, the ANP likely aims to mitigate the remaining underlying threat of militancy in Algeria. The ANP will continue arresting militant supporters over the coming weeks and months, especially in known militant strongholds along Algeria's southern and northeastern borders.

### **Iran: Protests reported in Tehran, police officer killed in Khuzestan's Mahshahr on July 20; protest movement liable to spread**

According to Iran's official news agency, "rioters" opened fire on security forces following a demonstration in Mahshahr's Taleghani, killing one officer. Per an unconfirmed report, several activists who staged a demonstration in solidarity with the Khuzestan protesters outside the Ministry of Interior in Tehran were detained. Meanwhile, people were heard chanting "Death to the Islamic Republic" during a spontaneous protest at Tehran's Sadeghieh metro station.

Protests over water shortages have persisted every night across several cities in Khuzestan Province since July 14. These shortages are a result of multiple factors, including an ongoing drought, low precipitation, and the government's poor management of water resources. Although President Hassan Rouhani ordered the allocation of a special fund to mitigate the water crisis on July 18, the sustained momentum of the protest movement shows the exacerbated grievances of locals in Khuzestan. The killing of a police officer will prompt the authorities to intensify their crackdown on upcoming demonstrations. The solidarity protests in Tehran highlight the increased potential for the spread of the protests in Khuzestan to other parts of Iran over the coming days.

### **Israel & Palestinian Territories: Global company withdraws sales in 'occupied' Palestinian Territories on July 19; such incidents may recur**

The international ice cream firm also stated that it will not renew its license agreement with its local Israeli licensee, set to expire in December 2022. It stated that it "will stay in Israel through a different arrangement." The firm's parent company stated that as per the parties' acquisition agreement, it recognizes the independent decisions made by its subsidiary with regards to its social mission but that it remains committed to its presence in Israel.

The development indicates that sensitivities surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict extend to commercial activity, with some firms taking steps to terminate their activities in the West Bank. Segments of the Jewish-Israeli population often perceive such stances as reflective of mere anti-Israeli sentiments. This extends to the political echelon as was highlighted by Israeli Prime Minister (PM), Naftali Bennett's statement that the company involved "decided to brand itself as an anti-Israel ice cream". The development will thus likely result in social media campaigns calling to boycott the firm's products within Israel, which may draw partial success. Regardless, similar actions by international firms will occasionally recur.

## **Jordan: US President Biden hosts King Abdullah II at White House on July 19; shows Washington's intent to signal Jordan's status as key ally**

US President Joe Biden highlighted King Abdullah II's "strategic relationship" with the US, stressing that Washington would "always be there" for Jordan.

King Abdullah II is the first Middle Eastern leader to have been received by Biden since he took office in January. This follows long-standing friction between King Abdullah II and the previous Trump administration. The monarch had criticized Donald Trump's 2017 recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, which undermined Jordan's role as custodian of the al-Aqsa Mosque. He also expressed reservations about the "Abraham Accords", as part of which Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and Sudan normalized relations with Israel. It is widely acknowledged that Saudi Arabia rather than Jordan was instrumental in brokering these accords. Thus, Biden's hosting of King Abdullah II highlights his administration's effort to signal that it views Jordan as a key ally and interlocutor regarding Washington's Middle East policy. This also serves to demonstrate the US's support for King Abdullah II, whose domestic legitimacy has recently eroded, particularly surrounding an alleged coup plot by former Crown Prince Hamzah bin Hussein. Overall, Jordan's relationship with the US will deepen over the coming months.

## **Morocco: Renowned journalist sentenced to six years in prison on July 19; Rabat's efforts to stifle anti-government voices to persist**

The journalist was sentenced on charges of "espionage" and "sexual assault", which he denied.

This famous journalist was known for his criticism of Morocco's human rights record and his trial has been denounced by international human rights groups as an effort by Moroccan authorities to silence voices critical of the government. A prominent international human rights organization had accused the Moroccan government of using spyware to monitor him and other journalists. The trial also garnered domestic criticism, including protests in front of the Parliament building in Rabat on April 16. Rabat has strongly denied these accusations and manifested its sensitivity towards this issue. On June 29, it banned a Belgian lawyer from entering Morocco to attend the journalist's trial. This, and the extensive prison sentence the journalist received, indicates that Moroccan authorities are resolved to go forth with their policy towards the journalist, despite any international condemnations. The reported use of spyware, in this case, allegedly Israeli-made spyware which can break into cell phones, points towards Moroccan authorities' propensity to monitor activists. Similar incidents will thus recur in Morocco.

## **Saudi Arabia & UAE: On July 19, OPEC extends 'Declaration of Cooperation' until December 2022; shows UAE's influence within OPEC**

The Declaration of Cooperation (DoC) was signed in 2016 to secure the mutual interests

of Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) members. OPEC also agreed to adjust its production by 0.4 million barrels per day (mb/d) on a monthly basis from August until it has phased out the 5.8 mb/d production adjustment. The baselines for the calculation of the production adjustments will be revised for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Russia, Iraq, and Kuwait from May 2022.

Tensions between the UAE and Saudi Arabia have been recently high over the former's unwillingness to extend the DoC unless its production baseline is revised and supply cuts eased. The UAE's ability to at least partially achieve its demands highlights its significant influence within OPEC. However, as the new baselines are only applicable from May 2022, this was likely a calculated effort to appease the UAE to ensure the extension of the DoC. This shows that while Saudi Arabia has significant influence within OPEC, it is dependent upon other influential members and is willing to make certain compromises to secure the interests of its oil-dependent economy.

### **Yemen: Anti-Houthi forces claim territorial gains in southern Marib Governorate on July 19; back-and-forth hostilities to persist**

Anti-Houthi forces secured areas near Wadi Al-Wayanan, including the Al-Mansaa Mountains, Umm al-Qubur, al-Shaheed, Tawailqa, and Tabab Alfa. A pro-Houthi news channel reported that the Shiite group launched several attacks to retake control over the center of Rahba District.

This comes amid an intensification in fighting between the Houthis and anti-Houthi forces in southwestern Marib since July 15. These advances are part of the anti-Houthis' strategy to strengthen their positions near strategic supply routes used by the Houthis. Road 5621, which passes through southern Marib connects to the N17 Highway leading to Marib city towards its north and to the N6 Highway that links to Bayda city in the south. Therefore, the latest anti-Houthi operations close to Rahba and Mahaliya districts are aimed at consolidating their control near these arterial roads, which would aid them in cutting off Houthi supply lines running from the frontlines in Marib and Bayda governorates. As the Houthis will continue to attempt to retake control of Rahba over the coming days, back-and-forth hostilities are likely to persist in southern Marib Governorate over the coming days.

### **Yemen: Houthi-launched ballistic missile hits school in Marib's Jabal Murad District on July 20; reprisal against territorial advances**

The Hadi government's Minister of Information, Muammar al-Iryani, condemned the attack on the school and stated that it was part of the Houthis' efforts to destroy civilian infrastructure, including schools, universities, health centers, roads, and bridges, across various governorates in Yemen. The Houthis also reportedly bombed the residence of an anti-Houthi security officer in Rahba District.

These attacks were likely conducted by the Houthis in retaliation for the anti-Houthi forces' offensive and subsequent territorial advances in southwestern Marib over recent

days. The Houthis are known to launch ballistic missiles towards civilian areas when they face defeat on the ground. Through such attacks, the Houthis aim to escalate the risk posed to civilians and civil infrastructure as this could increase the locals' grievances with the Hadi-led government. This could in turn pressure the anti-Houthi forces to tone down their offensive or withdraw from certain positions so as to prevent similar attacks against civilians. However, the Hadi-led government will use these attacks to call on its supporters to join and bolster the anti-Houthi offensive in southern Marib Governorate over the coming days.

## Upcoming Notable Dates

### July 19-23:

- **MENA:** Eid al-Adha

### July 23:

- **Egypt:** Revolution Day
- **Oman:** Renaissance Day

### July 25:

- **Tunisia:** Republic Day

### July 28

- **Iran:** Eid-e-Ghadir

### July 30

- **Morocco:** Throne Day