



Daily

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MAX - MENA Region Daily Summary - July 22, 2021

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

Highlights of the Day

- **Oman:** Meteorology department issues weather alert for multiple areas, including Muscat Governorate on July 22; remain cognizant of updates
- **Saudi Arabia:** State-owned oil company faces cyber extortion for 50 million USD, per July 21 reports; shows gaps in cybersecurity protocols
- **Syria & Israel:** Strikes recorded around Homs' al-Qusayr during overnight hours of July 21-22; likely Israeli curtailment of Iranian shipments
- **Tunisia:** PM Mechichi dismisses Minister of Health on July 20 amid shortages of critical supplies; indicative of depth of health crisis
- **Turkey:** Four Kurdish family members wounded in armed attack in Ankara on July 21-22; shows underlying ethnic hatred against Kurds

Actionable Items

Oman: Meteorology department issues weather alert for multiple areas, including Muscat Governorate on July 22; remain cognizant of updates

Omani authorities stated that heavy rains are expected during the course of July 22, in the southern areas of Muscat Governorate, and several other governorates in the country. This includes Ash Sharqiyah South, Ash Sharqiyah North, Ad Dakhiliyah, Ad Dhahirah, al-Batinah South, and al-Batinah North governorates. Fresh winds and hail will also be recorded and the chances for flash floods in valleys will be elevated. Authorities have advised citizens and residents to take necessary precautions, avoid sailing and low-lying areas on July 22. Flash floods following heavy rain have caused widespread damage across several parts of Oman over recent days, leaving at least one person dead and three missing.

Those operating or residing in Oman on July 22 are advised to remain cognizant of local

authorities' updates regarding inclement weather conditions in the country.

Saudi Arabia: Unvaccinated individuals to be banned from entering public spaces from August 1; adhere to government instructions

According to the Saudi Ministry of Municipal and Rural Affairs, authorities will prohibit all unvaccinated citizens and residents from entering public facilities such as malls, restaurants, cafes, public utility markets, salons, and commercial centers. This measure will go into effect on August 1. Only individuals who have received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccination will be allowed to enter such establishments upon presenting the proof of vaccination. This follows the authorities' decision to ban citizens from traveling outside the country unless they have received both doses of the COVID-19 vaccination starting August 9. Additionally, on July 22, the authorities have also banned direct and indirect travel for Saudi citizens to and from Indonesia. These measures have been implemented as part of the ongoing efforts to mitigate the spread of the COVID-19 virus in Saudi Arabia.

Those operating or residing in Saudi Arabia from August 1 onwards are advised to adhere to government instructions and take necessary precautions to ensure business continuity due to the mandatory requirement of COVID-19 vaccination for entry into public and private establishments.

Notable Events

Iraq: Two IEDs target activists' houses in Dhi Qar Governorate's Nasiriyah on July 20; liable to trigger protests

The IEDs exploded in Nasiriyah's al-Mutanazzah and Arido neighborhoods. Both houses were partly damaged but no casualties were reported.

This development comes amid prolonged anti-government sentiments harbored by large segments of the population in central and southern Iraq. Periodic assassinations of anti-government activists aggravate these grievances. On July 18, hundreds of locals protested in several cities, including Baghdad and Basra, to demand the "end of impunity" and government action against the perpetrators of such assassinations. Such attempted or successful attacks are perceived by large segments of the local population as orchestrated by Iran-backed militias. This is because anti-government protesters have frequently denounced Iran's influence and interference in Iraq. Thus, the latest IED attacks may have been perpetrated by Iran-linked elements, likely in an effort to prevent the dissemination of anti-Iran sentiments within Iraq. These attacks will likely reinforce the perception among locals that Iran-backed militias act with impunity and that the Iraqi government is unwilling to clampdown on such elements. Therefore, these developments will heighten anti-government sentiments, and possibly lead to demonstrations in Nasiriyah in the coming days.

Israel & Lebanon: IDF detains two unarmed individuals that crossed into Israel from Lebanon on July 22; likely job seekers

During the overnight hours of July 21-22, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) cordoned off areas along the Israel-Lebanon border and instructed the residents of two northern Israeli towns to remain indoors. The suspects were caught near the border fence during the morning hours of July 22. The infiltrators were reportedly Sudanese nationals.

There is an increasing trend of Sudanese nationals crossing from Lebanon into Israel in recent months. Israel constitutes a destination for Sudanese refugees and immigrant workers. These immigrants used to predominantly reach Israel by traveling by foot through Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. However, in 2013, Israel completed the construction of the Israel-Egypt border barrier, curbing the influx of illegal Sudanese migrants into Israel. Therefore, Sudanese immigrant workers attempting to enter Israel have sought to use other routes, including by crossing through Lebanon. Furthermore, Lebanon is currently experiencing a significant economic crisis, which is forcing several residents and foreign immigrants to move to other neighboring countries for work. Thus, similar incidents will recur over the coming months, especially as the Lebanese economy continues to deteriorate.

Lebanon: US offers reward for intelligence on Hezbollah operative on July 21; effort to weaken Shiite militant group, Iranian influence

The US Department of State "Rewards for Justice" program offered up to five million USD for information on Fouad Shukr, a senior operative in Hezbollah. Washington alleges that Shukr was involved in the killing of American troops in the 1983 Beirut Barracks bombings.

Since designating Hezbollah as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) in 1997, Washington has continued to seek information on Hezbollah operatives, particularly for being involved in attacks against US forces. On July 18, the US issued a similar notice requesting information on Hezbollah's Salman Raouf Salman. The pursuit of Shukr is indicative of the US's desire to bring Hezbollah members to justice, even decades after the 1983 attack. This also falls in line with Washington's overall effort to disrupt Hezbollah's leadership structure. This, to curtail the influence that the movement, and by extension, Iran exerts in Lebanon, particularly at the current crisis in the country. Washington likely believes that the significant economic crisis in Lebanon may incentivize locals to provide information on Hezbollah operatives for financial gains. The US will therefore continue to publish similar calls in the coming months.

Morocco: SPLA on July 21 claims attacks against RMA positions along 'berm' in Western Sahara; conflict to remain contained

The Sahrawi People's Liberation Army (SPLA), the Polisario Front's armed wing, claimed attacks against Royal Moroccan Army (RMA) positions in Hawza and Mahbes.

This comes amid continuous SPLA shelling attacks against Moroccan forces along the security barrier, known as the “Berm”, in Western Sahara since Rabat commenced a military operation in Guerguerat in November 2020. The SPLA often claims to have been able to inflict “heavy losses” upon the RMA, including in the latest incident. However, the SPLA’s inability to extend to fighting beyond the main areas that are located along the “berm”, the fortified barrier area separating Moroccan-controlled and SPLA-controlled Western Sahara, indicates that its military capabilities are currently limited. This is likely partially enabled by Rabat’s growingly reported usage of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) for combat and reconnaissance purposes in the region, which likely bolsters its capabilities. Moreover, Morocco’s adaptation to SPLA attacks without resorting to any concessions indicates that the SPLA has not been able to apply sufficient pressure on the RMA. Hostilities will continue to be confined to areas along the “berm” over the coming weeks.

Saudi Arabia: State-owned oil company faces cyber extortion for 50 million USD, per July 21 reports; shows gaps in cybersecurity protocols

Saudi Arabia’s state-owned oil company acknowledged that leaked data, likely from one of its contractors, is being used in a cyber extortion attempt for 50 million USD-worth cryptocurrencies. The company did not specify if the contractor was hacked or if the data was leaked through other means.

This incident comes amid frequent cyber attacks and data breaches targeting both public and private companies in the Middle East region. Saudi Arabia’s state-owned oil company has been the target of various cyberattacks, particularly since 2012, when the firm was hit by the “Shamoon” virus, forcing the company to shut down its network and destroy over 30,000 computers. This attack was attributed to Iran-linked hackers. While it remains unclear if the Saudi energy company was hacked or not, it nevertheless highlights the gaps in the company’s cybersecurity protocols. Given that the data is being used for extortion, it is more likely that the breach was conducted by financially motivated cybercriminals rather than for obtaining or destroying strategic information, as would be the motive for Iran-backed hackers.

Syria & Israel: Strikes recorded around Homs’ al-Qusayr during overnight hours of July 21-22; likely Israeli curtailment of Iranian shipments

According to reports, one of the targets in the attack was the Shayrat Airbase, a military airbase located 30 km east of al-Qusayr and 30 km southeast of Homs city.

These strikes are highly notable as they come just days after Israel has struck sites in Aleppo. Such frequency of Israeli strikes within Syria is rare. Taken together with the Aleppo incidents, Israel is likely currently responding to a potential ongoing operation that includes the shipment of arms by Iran to military facilities in Syria. Furthermore, al-Qusayr reportedly constitutes Lebanese-Hezbollah’s center of operations on Syrian soil. The town is located nine km north of a border crossing to Lebanon on the major “Highway 4” connecting Syria’s Homs to Lebanon’s Beqaa area. Thus, the target of the strikes may

have been a specific arms shipment from Iran to Hezbollah, which Israel had openly and repeatedly declared it aims to curtail. This will elevate tensions between Israel and Hezbollah in the short term. Israel will continue its policy to curtail Iran's "axis of resistance" operations in Syria.

Tunisia: PM Mechichi dismisses Minister of Health on July 20 amid shortages of critical supplies; indicative of depth of health crisis

President Kais Saied stated on July 21 that the TAF will take charge of handling the health crisis. On July 21, the Tunisian Armed Forces (TAF) had supplied oxygen to hospitals in Sidi Bouzid, Gafsa, Beja, Jendouba, Kef, Zaghouan, and Siliana.

Tunisia's health system is currently under significant strain amid its worst COVID-19 infections wave. Hospitals are overcrowded, and shortages of critical supplies, primarily oxygen, are being recorded. Several Arab governments had donated oxygen supplies to Tunisia. On July 19, Health Minister Faouzi Mehdi opened vaccination stations to all Tunisians over 18. This, however, led to stampedes in more than 20 stations, where vaccinations also ran out. This was likely the trigger for his dismissal by Prime Minister (PM) Hichem Mechichi. President Saied's decision to put the TAF in charge shows his mistrust in the Mechichi-led government and its ability to stabilize the situation. As only seven percent of the Tunisian population is currently vaccinated, the health crisis is likely to deepen over the coming weeks, which will further strain supplies at hospitals and elevate political tensions.

Turkey: Four Kurdish family members wounded in armed attack in Ankara on July 21-22; shows underlying ethnic hatred against Kurds

A Kurdish family was attacked by around 150 people, with some possessing firearms and axes, after the group surrounded their private residence in Altindag over a personal dispute. Meanwhile, about 60 people surrounded and attacked the private vehicle of a Kurdish family in Konya's Meram District over a similar personal dispute, killing one member of the family.

These incidents come amid frequent attacks against Kurdish individuals in Turkey in the past weeks. The attacks highlight the underlying sentiments of ethnic hatred harbored by certain groups of Turks against Kurdish people and their willingness to use personal disputes as a legitimate reason to conduct violent attacks against the latter. The ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP)-led Turkish government has maintained a hostile stance against Kurdish political parties and civil activists. Such an outlook likely promulgates a culture of impunity, which the perpetrators use to their advantage to carry out attacks against Kurds without legal repercussions. Overall, it highlights the underlying threat to Kurdish civilians due to the prevalence of discriminatory ideologies against the ethnic group.

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