



## Weekly

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## MENA Weekly Summary - June 23 - June 29, 2021

### Highlights of the Week

This report reviews notable events this week in the Middle East and North Africa. These include a tripartite meeting between Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan in Baghdad; US airstrikes in Iraq and Syria in retaliation to Iran-backed militias' UAV attacks near Erbil; tribal clashes in Libya's Benghazi; anti-Palestinian Authority (PA) protests in the West Bank; and the UAE's reported request for Italy to withdraw military aircraft and personnel from an airbase near Dubai.

## MENA

### Notable Developments:

1. On June 27, Egyptian President, Abdel Fatah al-Sisi, and Jordanian King, Abdullah II, arrived in Iraq for a summit with the Iraqi Prime Minister (PM), Mustafa al-Kadhimi.
2. The parties reportedly agreed to bolster security and economic cooperation.

**ANALYSIS:** The summit is another indication of the emerging alliance between the Egyptian, Jordanian, and Iraqi governments. In November 2020, Egypt and Iraq signed 15 agreements and Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) on cooperation in different fields, including transport, water resources, investment, housing, construction, industry, trade, and finance. The leaders of the three countries have also sought agreements for the transfer of Egyptian natural gas and electricity through Jordan to Iraq. They have additionally considered the construction of an oil pipeline from Basra in Iraq to Aqaba in Jordan, and from there to Egypt, which would bolster Iraq's oil export capacity. The latest visit of the Jordanian and Egyptian leaders to Baghdad thus shows their resolve to advance these strategic plans. This is further manifested by the fact that al-Sisi's arrival in Baghdad is the first visit by an Egyptian President to Iraq since 1990. The implementation of these agreements would be of geopolitical importance as Iraq's ability to acquire energy through Jordan will diminish its current dependency on Iran for these commodities. Egypt and Jordan will thus likely receive the backing of the US to deepen their relations with Iraq as Washington also aims to hinder Iran's influence over Baghdad. Tripartite relations between the countries will likely grow over the coming months.

## Iraq & Syria

### Notable Developments:

1. On June 26, four UAVs were fired toward a compound linked to the US Consulate in Erbil in the Kurdistan Regional Government's (KRG) village of Bragh. No casualties were caused.
2. On June 27, the US Department of Defense (DoD) announced that the US conducted retaliatory airstrikes against operational facilities linked to Iran-backed Shiite militias in Syria's al-Bukamal and Iraq's al-Qaim. According to Kata'ib Sayyid al-Shuhada (KSS), four of its fighters were killed.
3. On June 28, Iran-backed Shiite militias reportedly targeted a US base at Syria's al-Omar oil field, Deir Ezzor Province, with mortar and rocket fire. According to the spokesperson of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), US forces conducted counter artillery fire towards the launch positions.

**ANALYSIS:** The use of explosive-laden UAVs against US-linked interests in Iraq by Iran-backed Shiite militias is a trend that has emerged since April. While retaliatory US strikes against such militias in the Syria-Iraq border region are not unprecedented, they have typically materialized after attacks on US-linked facilities caused casualties. Thus, the June 27 strikes highlight Washington's attempt to set a new equation vis-a-vis Iran-backed actors and demonstrate that it will no longer tolerate the persistent attacks. While symbolic, the strikes do not however reduce the Iran-backed militias' capability to launch attacks, as rockets and UAVs can be easily resupplied. Meanwhile, the June 28 attack targeting the al-Omar Oil field, likely a direct response, demonstrates that Washington's

goal to establish deterrence vis-a-vis Iran-backed elements remains elusive at the current juncture. Attacks against US interests in Iraq, and potentially Syria, will persist over the coming weeks.

## Iran

### Notable Developments:

1. Iranian authorities announced that a quadcopter targeted an Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) building in Karaj, located near Tehran, without causing damages or casualties on June 23.
2. A US-based news agency reported that the site is a manufacturing center for the production of centrifuges used in nuclear facilities. The site was reportedly on a list of targets presented by Israel to former US President Donald Trump in 2020.

**ANALYSIS:** The targeting of a strategic site and the use of an unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) as the modus operandi, which is rare in Iran, makes this incident notable. Israel has long opposed Iran's nuclear program and has increased its efforts to dissuade Washington to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which may empower Iran through sanctions relief. Thus, given Israel's resolve and known operational capabilities, Jerusalem's involvement in the incident is likely. Israel has also proven its ability to operate covertly within Iran to conduct attacks against Iranian nuclear assets. This signals that the quadcopter, which can only fly short distances, was likely launched by an on-ground actor cooperating with Israel. If Tehran formally attributes the attack to Israel, it would raise the potential for a retaliatory response against Israel-linked interests, although it will likely occur in the medium term and will be limited in scope. This is because Tehran will likely seek to avoid an escalation in hostilities that may destabilize the beginning of the Iranian president-elect Ebhraim Raisi's term in office and imperil the ongoing JCPOA negotiations and the prospect of sanctions relief.

## Libya

### Notable Developments:

1. At least five people were reportedly killed in a gunfight between the al-Jawazi tribe and the Libyan National Army (LNA)-affiliated al-Awaqir tribe in Benghazi's Shibhnah neighborhood on June 27. The clashes were prompted by a land dispute between the two tribes.

**ANALYSIS:** Disputes between tribes in LNA-controlled territories of eastern Libya are not without precedent. The al-Awaqir tribe in particular has a background of tensions with other tribes and militias in Benghazi. For instance, in March 2020, the al-Awaqir tribe accused another LNA-aligned militia, under the control of Nasser al-Shark, of forcibly seizing land belonging to one of its members. The latest clashes thus reiterate the challenges facing the LNA in completely securing and stabilizing eastern Libya, including Benghazi. They also underscore the persistent volatile nature of the security environment of Libya due to the widespread proliferation of weapons in the country. In eastern Libya, this can partly be attributed to the mutually exclusive economic interests of local tribes and militias, despite their shared political interests under the LNA umbrella. These inter-tribal clashes in Benghazi are liable to undermine LNA Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's persistent efforts to project himself as a formidable political and military actor in Libya, especially amid the ongoing UN-led peace process in the country. This is because these hostilities will cast a shadow on Haftar's stated ability to secure territories under the control of the LNA. Overall, inter-tribal clashes are liable to recur in and around Benghazi in the coming weeks.

## Palestinian Territories

### Notable Developments:

1. Between June 24-27, civil unrest occurred in several cities in the West Bank, particularly Ramallah and Hebron. In Ramallah, Palestinian Authority (PA) security forces forcefully dispersed protesters with tear gas and made multiple arrests.
2. The protests occurred following the death of an anti-PA activist, Nizar Banat, while in the custody of PA security forces.
3. On June 24, PA Prime Minister Mohammad Shtayyeh announced the formation of a commission of inquiry to investigate Banat's death.

**ANALYSIS:** This development occurred amid the PA's long-standing efforts to suppress critics and civil society activists in the West Bank. Within this context, many Palestinians believe that Banat was severely beaten or even tortured by PA security personnel. The subsequent large-scale protests and the demonstrators' willingness to engage in confrontations with PA security forces illustrate the high level of outrage and disillusionment with the PA that is harbored by segments of the Palestinian public. This was further bolstered by calls among the protesters that the PA is Israel's "collaborator" and has no legitimacy. The PA is likely to continue its policy of cracking down on any act

of dissent or challenges to its authority in the West Bank, including by conducting arrests. This is likely partially the reason why the current protest wave has overall subsided. However, the PA's authority and legitimacy in the West Bank will continue to be undermined as this process also constitutes a strategic goal of the PA's rivals, such as the Hizb al-Tahrir Islamist movement in Hebron, the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and Hamas.

## UAE

### Notable Developments:

1. An Italian Parliament Member (MP) and member of the Italian parliamentary defense commission stated to a US-based magazine that the UAE had given Italy until July 2 to withdraw its military aircraft and personnel from Minhad airbase near Dubai. According to the report, the withdrawal process has started.
2. No official Italian or Emirati confirmation has since been issued.

**ANALYSIS:** Despite not being formally announced, the reported measure is credible due to the strained relations between Italy and the UAE after the former halted arms sales worth approximately 485 million USD to the latter in January 2021 over Abu Dhabi's military involvement in Yemen. The strain in their bilateral relations was evidenced by the UAE's June 9 refusal to allow an Italian aircraft to enter its airspace, following which Italy summoned the UAE Ambassador. The latest measure by Abu Dhabi likely constitutes an effort to pressure the new Italian government, formed in February with the same Italian Foreign Minister who halted the arms sales, to revoke this decision. While Abu Dhabi's reported measure will further complicate its relations with Rome, the two countries will likely attempt to mitigate a significant diplomatic fallout over the coming months. This is because Minhad airbase is instrumental for Italy's military operations in the broader region. The two countries will also likely seek to prevent a deterioration of their economic ties, especially as the UAE represented seven percent of Italy's international trade surplus before the COVID-19 pandemic commenced.

### Other Developments

- **Israel:** On June 24, the Israeli government postponed the entry of vaccinated foreign nationals until at least August 1 due to a recent increase in COVID-19 infections in the country.
- **Lebanon:** The Lebanese Pound (LBP) hit a new record low against the USD on June 26.
- **Palestinian Territories & Turkey:** On June 25, the German parliament's lower house passed a bill banning symbols of groups on the EU "terror list", including Hamas and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).
- **Turkey:** Police utilized riot dispersal measures to disperse demonstrators during an unauthorized LGBT Pride Parade rally held in Istanbul's Beyoglu District on June 26.
- On June 28, the Syrian Ministry of Interior announced the resumption of flights to Dubai starting from July 3.

### The Upcoming Week

- **June 30:** The June 30 revolution anniversary will be celebrated in **Egypt** to commemorate protests in 2013, which resulted in the removal of former President Mohamed Morsi.
- **July 1:** The Ministry of Interior stated that the third phase of the gradual lifting of COVID-19 restrictions will begin in **Turkey**. A nightly curfew and full Sunday curfew will end and various places of entertainment and culture will be permitted to open.
- **July 1: Kuwait** will allow direct flights from the UK, the US, France, Italy, Germany, Austria, Spain, Netherlands, Greece, Switzerland, Kyrgyzstan, and Bosnia and Herzegovina.
- **July 5: Algeria** will celebrate its 59th independence day.
- **July 5-6:** Banking and finance sector employees are slated to stage a nationwide strike in **Tunisia** to demand an increase in wages.