



INTEGRITY_{UK}

ABOUT INTEGRITY UK

Integrity UK is an organisation committed to preventing extremism through innovative approaches to promoting integration, cohesion and social reconciliation within the MENA region and the UK.

5th – 12th August 2021

Morocco:

Morocco's Ministry of Health announced this week that it recorded 5,043 active cases of COVID-19 in the country, bringing the total number of infections to 701,325. More than 1,671 of these people were noted to be in critical state, with most of the cases in the Casablanca-Settat region. Describing the current state of the outbreak as a "peak", the Ministry called on all citizens to adhere to preventive measures and to get vaccinated. In a bid to meet a growing number of cases, officials in Marrakech have deployed additional medical tents. Although Africa Centres for Disease Control and Prevention (ACDC) hailed Morocco for leading on vaccinations in the continent, health experts in the country warned that the situation in the country is still disheartening, with infection rates - mostly of the Delta strain - higher than the projected levels. Azzedine Ibrahim, member of Morocco's Scientific Technical Committee for COVID-19 Management, warned that if the spread is not stopped immediately, the situation will worsen. These developments come after the country extended the COVID-19 curfews last week in response to rising infection levels, especially in hub cities such as Marrakech, Casablanca and Agadir.

In the international arena, Morocco had a very active week. Speaking at the annual Throne Day - which is usually seen as a barometer for Rabat's priorities - King Mohammed VI made a diplomatic overture to Morocco's traditional rival, Algeria. Describing Morocco and Algeria as "incredibly alike" and its people as increasingly connected via technology, the King called on the border between the two countries to reopen. He avoided criticising the current Algerian President, Abdelmadjid Tebboune, for the recent deterioration of relations following Washington's recognition of Western Sahara as Moroccan territory and the prolonged closure of the border, instead blaming historical colonisers for dividing what he said were a united people. So far, Algiers' response has been tepid and noncommittal.

Moroccan news outlets reported that the country has invited Spanish officials to participate in a visit to the headquarters of the Central Bureau of Judicial Investigation (BCIJ). The visit, which took place last Thursday but was reported only this week, is remarkable as it took place amidst tensions between Rabat and Madrid following Madrid's decision to permit Polisario leader Brahim Ghali to enter Spanish territory, with Morocco recalling its ambassador from Madrid. The commencement of such a high-level security meeting, coupled with positive statements from Spanish officials in the enclave of Ceuta, including Salvadora Mateos, regarding the state of Spanish-Moroccan relations, suggest that both countries are making an effort to normalise ties. It is likely that the dismissal of Spanish Foreign Minister, Arancha Gonzalez Laya, who dismissed Rabat's concerns regarding the Polisario movement, was a factor in the détente.

Rabat may also be making in-roads in building ties with major African powers such as Kenya. On Sunday, Morocco's ambassador to Kenya, El Mokhtar Ghambou, called on Nairobi to help resolve the Western Sahara conflict by supporting the autonomy plan Rabat had drafted. Although Nairobi has consistently backed the Polisario movement, analysts in Morocco opined that they have seen a shift in tone in the country that may offer Rabat an opening following years of chilly ties. Perhaps in an attempt to

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extend a further hand to Nairobi, Ghambou described Kenya's "human-centred and Pan-Africanism-driven approach to the continent" as preferable to European investments. This comes shortly after Morocco made headways with another African power, Nigeria, towards the construction of a gas pipeline that would cross the disputed Western Sahara region.

However, normalisation of ties to resolve the Western Sahara conflict in Rabat's favour will not be a smooth ride, as the country continues to face pressures over its activities in the region. In its latest report, the International Crisis Group warned that Morocco continues to suppress the Sahrawi pro-independence movements including arrest, ill-treatment and harassment. Meanwhile, speaking in Spain, the Polisario Movement's representative, Abdullah Arabi, described the scheduling of flights to Western Sahara as a serious breach. The announcement came after Spanish company, Binter Canarias, in cooperation with the Moroccan Government, said it would resume flights to the Sahrawi city of Laayoune.

In another foreign policy development, Morocco's Royal Air Maroc and Israel's Air Arabia announced they would increase the number of commercial flights between the two countries. The increase is reportedly due to rising demand, with new routes also due to be established in Marrakesh and Casablanca. Morocco and Israel resumed diplomatic ties as part of a wider initiative sponsored by the former President of the United States, Donald Trump, with Washington recognising Rabat's claims on Western Sahara in turn. The first flights between the two countries took place shortly afterwards.

Subsequently on Wednesday, Israeli Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, visited his Moroccan counterpart, Nasser Bourita. In a move described as "historic", the two sides signed an air service agreement; an agreement to cooperate in culture, youth and sports; and a memorandum of understanding on the establishment of a political consultation mechanism between their countries' foreign ministries. Israel is also due to open a liaison mission in Rabat. Speaking at the signing, Bourita expressed hope that the ties would help end the Palestinian-Israeli conflict while also helping foster economic developments in both countries.

Analysts from Global Data announced this week that Morocco is among the fastest growing economies in 2021 and in the top-five African economies alongside Kenya, Ghana, Egypt and South Africa. Morocco leads the list with a predicted GDP growth of 5.19%. In particular, the country's agriculture and fishing sector remained robust. According to the Ministry of Agriculture last week, agriculture products saw a 6% increase compared to the previous season. Meanwhile, while the exports of fishery products declined by 9%, their value rose by 15%. However, the country's tourism sector continues to struggle among continued COVID-19 restrictions.

Meanwhile, Morocco's SGTm-SOMAGEC won the bid to construct the new Dakhla-Atlantic port. The port is expected to support fishing, mining, energy, tourism, trade, and manufacturing activities. It will also support the activities of the Moroccan Navy. Its location in the city of Dakhla within the disputed territory of Western Sahara will likely draw the ire of supporters of Western Sahara's independence, including, but not limited to, Kenya and Algeria. The process is likely part of Rabat's wider policy of using infrastructure projects to link Western Sahara to Morocco, resulting in de-facto control over the territory even as the territory's status remains unresolved de-jure.

Algeria:

This week, Algeria became the latest Mediterranean country to be hit by wildfires. On Monday, fires broke out across 13 provinces, with the eastern region of Kabylie seeing the largest blazes that quickly spread over the local hills and forests. With temperatures as high as 46 degrees Celsius, the fires quickly spread, threatening towns and villages including the provincial capital of Tizi Ouzou. In addition to property damage, at least 69 people were killed in the fires, including 28 soldiers, many of whom died evacuating residents of local villages. Algeria, like many Mediterranean countries afflicted with wildfires, has been

experiencing intense heat and the region itself is known to be highly mountainous, with few sources of water, all of which contribute to the dry climate and hamper the efforts to put the fires out. However, speaking at a press conference, Prime Minister Aïmene Benabderrahmane said that the fires started around 30 locations in a “highly synchronised” manner, suggesting arson as the likely source. The Prime Minister further stated on Wednesday that several individuals were arrested in Medea for alleged involvement in the fires and have admitted to committing arson.

On Sunday, prior to the wildfires breaking out, President Abdelmadjid Tebboune issued a response to the Moroccan King Mohammed VI after the latter offered a new round of dialogues to restore ties. Responding to the King's Throne Day speech where he said the people of the two countries are “incredibly alike”, Tebboune said that he has “no answer” to the offer. He added that the recent tensions between Algeria and Rabat were due to comments made by Morocco's permanent representative to the United Nations, Omar Hilal. Back in June, Hilal had expressed support for the independence of the Kabylie which is predominantly populated by the Berber people, resulting in already-tense relations rocking further. However, the Algerian President left some room for diplomacy, remarking that his government is ready to mediate between Rabat and the Polisario movement.

Sunday also saw an announcement by President Tebboune to raise the production of oxygen from 360,000 litres currently to 470,000 litres to ensure that healthcare facilities dealing with COVID-19 cases do not run out of oxygen, especially in population centres where COVID-19 rates have surged recently as part of the wider wave that is having severe impacts across North Africa. The country will also import another 100,000 litres every two days to meet demands. President Tebboune also commented on the country's vaccination campaign, noting that the rates of jabs need to pick up especially in urban centres such as Algiers, Oran, Setif and Constantine where a vaccination rate of about 60% is the current goal. Health officials had previously reassured the public that there remains sufficient quantities of the COVID-19 vaccine to cover the country for August.

Tunisia:

Tunisian political activists have criticised President Kais Saïed for failing to set out a roadmap despite the country being halfway into the 30-day “state of exception” announced last month. In particular, activists criticised that the position of the Prime Minister remains vacant. They further added that uncertainty regarding the parliament is damaging the economy despite widespread support towards removing the immunities of many MPs. There is widespread fear, especially among those affiliated with the Ennahda Party, that the President Saïed's “coup” will damage the country's political progress and spell the return of authoritarian politics.

Further amplifying these fears are the reports that Saïd Jaziri, a member of Tunisia's suspended parliament, was arrested on Monday. The arrest was based on a complaint filed against him by the Independent High Authority for Audiovisual Communication, accusing him of illegal broadcast of a radio channel. A member of Errahma, a Salafi-leaning party, Jaziri is the fifth MP to be arrested since the parliament was suspended on July 25. Last week, Independent MP Faycal Tebini was also arrested last week over “defamation on social media”, as well as the arrest of another Independent, Yassine Ayari, for criticising what she referred to as a “coup”. Before then, two members of al-Karama Party, Maher Zid and Mohamed Affes, were arrested over charges relating to a military investigation.

Tunisian officials also announced on Monday that 12 officials have been barred from travelling due to corruption allegations in the transportation and phosphate extraction sectors. Among those banned from travelling is a former minister and member of the parliament. However, among others banned from travelling were political activists like Iskandar Rekik who said that he has no legal or judicial impediments. Subsequently on Tuesday, a judge from Monastir was also arrested following suspected currency smuggling. Corruption has been at the forefront of the protests in Tunisia alongside

dissatisfaction over economic conditions and failure to control the COVID-19 crisis. The phosphate sector, in particular, has yet to reach its pre-2011 revenue levels.

Speaking on Thursday, Tunisia's ambassador to Cairo, Mohamed Ben Youssef, praised the Egyptian Government and its President, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, for its support of "Tunisian stability" following the suspension of the Parliament in July 25. Ben Youssef also expressed appreciation for the assistance Egypt sent to help Tunisia combat the COVID-19 outbreak and praised Egypt's urban development projects. The fears among activists and opposition members that Saied's "coup" could result in democratic rollback will likely be accentuated by the warm communications between Tunis and Cairo, as well as increased support Tunis is receiving from Algeria - which is also currently suppressing the Hirak movement motivated by similar grievances - as well as the Gulf countries. The main prerogatives of Saied's foreign supporters are likely to limit Turkish soft power which has often been politically aligned with Ennahda. However, Ankara's muted response to the situation so far suggests Ankara either does not see the situation to be winnable or is attempting to avoid a total breakdown of relations similar to what took place with Egypt after 2013.

Meanwhile, the country continues to grapple with a COVID-19 wave that has yet to be contained. Although cases have dropped significantly compared to the July figures, some 3,136 new cases and 131 deaths were registered as of Wednesday, with active cases now at an estimated 46,000 and the death toll at 21,220. However, there are fears that the actual numbers could be a lot higher due to under-counting.

The situation has triggered widespread anger from medical workers as well as staff such as cemetery workers who are working overtime and remain exposed to the virus, with many such workers suffering from low morale and feeling that their lives are being "sacrificed". Activists, in particular, have expressed anger over continued underinvestment in the healthcare sector - which receives 5% of the budget - as well as the low vaccination rates that are hovering around 9%. Although President Saied launched a mass vaccination campaign on Sunday, he was criticised by the General Union of Health over giving full credit for the vaccination campaign to the Tunisian military. The statement noted that healthcare workers have been working non-stop and have borne the brunt of the difficulties, highlighting the mood in the country.

The COVID-19 situation comes as the country also grapples with a record heatwave, with temperatures reaching 49 Celsius on Tuesday. The heatwave and the resulting use of air conditioners has resulted in blackouts around the country and raised fears of wildfires similar to those afflicting neighbouring Algeria. Indeed, the country already experienced wildfires in July that destroyed 450 hectares of woods in Bizerte and Jendouba provinces.

Libya:

Libya's internationally-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) announced on Friday that it would impose a complete lockdown over Saturday, Sunday and Monday, following up on a partial curfew that has already been in place. The move is aimed at curbing outbreaks of COVID-19 which is hovering at a rate of about 21%. GNA officials also announced that 800,000 doses of the Chinese Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines arrived in Tripoli last week, following up on the delivery of 1.2 million doses the previous week. It is estimated that over 750,000 Libyans have, so far, been vaccinated, with active cases around 65,000. The National Centre for Disease Control in Libya (NCDC) told members of the press that the overall situation in the country has improved, but the epidemiological situation is still in a "society spread level." The Ministry also announced on Wednesday that a new testing centre, the largest in the country, has been opened in Tripoli. Established in a sports complex, the centre holds 60 vaccination stations.

In a statement issued on Saturday, the Libyan Presidential Council announced that all military units in Libya need to follow its orders and commands regarding promotions and appointments of military commanders. The statement was made after the head of the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA) (sometimes called Libyan Arab Armed Forces (LAAF)), Khalifa Haftar, appointed a militia leader who partook in the LNA offensive on Tripoli last year as the military commander in Sabha. However, the appointment was rejected by military formations under GNA. In the statement, the Presidential Council said that such appointments need to pass through itself as part of the Libyan Political Dialogue Process.

However, in a move that will likely hamper the already-sclerotic peace process further, Haftar reportedly made additional appointments to posts, including appointing one of his supporters as the Head of the 5+5 Joint Military Commission. Haftar issued a statement on Monday, asserting that the “Libyan Army” is under no authority and would not submit itself to “trickery” in the name of “civilian life”. He added further that without his forces, “there won't be a unity government and elections”. Haftar’s belligerent tone, despite the defeat of his forces in Tripoli last year, could be an attempt to project strength at a time when Libya seems to be struggling towards a political solution without him. However, his words could also be indicative of renewed confidence in his political fortunes following developments in Tunisia. Either way, the dispute risks breaking what little trust had developed during the peace process and could sow the seeds of renewed conflict.

Meanwhile on Friday, the US Ambassador and Special Envoy to Libya, Richard Norland, held an interview with *Al Jazeera* during which he discussed Washington's stance on certain matters. In particular, Norland noted that the goal in Libya now is to unify all institutions, including the military. He added that the 5+5 committee can play an important unifying role and added that Khalifa Haftar could play an important role. While Norland could not comment on the legal proceedings against Haftar, he added that while accountability is important, so is reconciliation. Norland also noted that the removal of mercenaries, especially Syrians, fighting on both sides, is vital to peace. Norland's comments, especially about Haftar, drew criticisms from associations representing victims of Haftar-linked groups. Washington may also find it harder to justify continued use of the 5+5 committee following Haftar’s appointments.

The matter of mercenaries, especially those linked to Haftar and Russia, may gain further urgency in light of revelations surrounding the Wagner group this week. A BBC investigation into tablets and other documentation left by the LNA following its withdrawal from Tripoli in 2020 is believed to be one of the clearest into the group's inner workings. In addition to details about troop deployments, funding streams and equipment, the investigation - including interviews with former Wagner members - revealed possible evidence of war crimes, including summary executions of prisoners. Responding to the BBC, Moscow reiterated its stance that the Wagner group is not linked to the government and most evidence about it comes from “rigged data.”

Authorities in the city of Tarhuna announced that they unearthed 10 more bodies from a mass grave in the area. The grave was discovered in an agricultural region known as Mashrou Al-Rabet and is the second mass grave discovered around Tarhuna over the past 10 days. Most of the mass graves were unearthed after the LNA withdrew from the region in June 2020 and most of the victims are believed to be victims of the group. Some 3,650 people across Libya are reported missing, with 350 from Tarhuna itself.

News outlets in Syria reported that three Syrian and one Russian fighters were killed near Jufra after they stepped on a mine. It is believed they were hired by the Wagner group or were otherwise operating alongside the LNA.

Egypt:

In a statement issued on Tuesday, the administration of the US President Joe Biden called Egypt a “constructive” defence partner amidst talks of continued military aid to the country. Although

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the administration took office with the intent of not delivering “blank checks” on grounds of the repression of civil society activists in the country after 2013, it cited various aspects of roles played by Egypt in recent months to promote national security. In particular, the Pentagon praised Cairo for its facilitation of a ceasefire in Gaza earlier this year, as well as its diplomatic efforts vis-à-vis its conflict with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam and its position in Libya. The softening stance is in line with the geopolitical realities in the region, which many analysts predicted would limit Biden's efforts to make human rights at the forefront of his administration's treatment of Egypt. Indeed, Pentagon officials acknowledge that human rights remain a concern but added that Egypt has legitimate security concerns that needs Washington to support it. While this development suggests that the latest batch of military aid – currently estimated at \$300 million – will go through, it is likely that Cairo's relations with Washington will be downgraded compared to the highs of the Trump years.

Egypt's Ministry of Health announced that it recorded 86 new COVID-19 cases over Wednesday and that six patients died, bringing the total death toll in the country to 16,588. The Ministry further announced that it will receive 260,000 doses of the Johnson and Johnson vaccine in a second batch and will support the African Vaccine Acquisition Trust (AVAT) to receive the COVID-19 vaccines. It announced that another shipment of 525,000 doses of AstraZeneca vaccine arrived in Cairo on Tuesday as part of a tripartite deal conducted between AstraZeneca, Egypt and Romania. The shipments come as Egypt prepares to manufacture vaccines domestically, with Vacsera, Egypt's main vaccination producer and distributor, announcing that it is ready to ship vaccines across Africa.

On Monday, there were reports that Egyptian security forces detained an *Al Jazeera* journalist in the Cairo International Airport, suggesting that despite the on-going détente between Egypt and Qatar, tensions and disagreements remain. The arrested journalist, Rabie El-Sheikh, is a producer for *Al Jazeera Live* and was arrested shortly after returning from a vacation in the Qatari capital of Doha, allegedly on grounds of “spreading false news.” *Al Jazeera* had a tense relationship with the Egyptian Government since 2013 after its local operations were shut down following accusations by Egyptian authorities that it was biased in favour of the Muslim Brotherhood. Egypt also joined Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates in demanding the closure of the channel in 2017. Nevertheless, relations between Egypt and Qatar have since thawed somewhat, with *Al Jazeera* broadcasting in Egypt last week, for the first time in eight years. While it is likely that the Egyptian-Qatari détente will continue in some capacity, incidents such as these highlight that there remains a significant deficit of trust between the two countries.

Israeli news outlets reported that the country's incoming and outgoing national security advisers, Eyal Hulata and Meir Ben-Shabbat, held a meeting in Cairo with Egypt's head of intelligence, Abbas Kamel. The two sides, who reportedly met on Sunday, discussed maintaining the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza. The meeting appears to be in response to renewed signs of escalation between the two sides, with Israeli officials noting that both Israel and Hamas have hardened their stances, with Hamas finding itself riding the political windfall from the clashes at the expense of its rival, Fatah. For Israel, the situation may be of even greater urgency amidst signs of Cairo's stance towards Hamas softening somewhat after years of crackdowns against the group over its alleged links to the Muslim Brotherhood.

During a meeting earlier this week with Senegal's Ambassador to Egypt, Elie C Bay, the Grand Imam of Al Azhar Institute, Ahmed El-Tayyeb, said that his organisation is ready to establish an Azharite institute in Senegal in a bid to counter radicalism. The Grand Imam said that some 350 Senegalese students study in Al Azhar and that the institute sent 41 teachers to the country. The foremost Sunni Islamic authority in the country, Al Azhar Institute, has been active in promoting a “moderate” Islam. While such efforts have a domestic political dimension vis-à-vis Cairo's opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, the institution has nevertheless been deeply engaged with other religious

institutions around the world. Last week, it announced the graduation of 21 imams from Russia on the issuance of fatwas against “extremist ideologies.”

For the first time in six years, direct flights took place between Russia and Egyptian Red Sea resorts. The flights were suspended after the bombing of a Russian airliner that killed 224 people on-board. In the aftermath of the bombing, claimed by the Islamic State (IS), Russian officials had criticised Egyptian security measures as insufficient. The first flight, taking place on Monday, saw 300 tourists travel to Hurghada along the Red Sea. In a statement, Egypt Air said it would operate seven flights between Moscow and Red Sea resorts of Sharm El-Sheikh and Hurghada, with the total number of flights estimated at 20 per week. However, so far, the state-owned Rossiya has been flagged as the only Russian carrier operating in the Red Sea. Other carriers, such as the budget airline Pobeda, have been cleared but have yet to schedule flights. Prior to the bombing, Russians were Egypt’s top visitors. As a result, the suspensions had severe impacts on the economy of the Red Sea region.

A state-run statistics agency report warned that inflation in Egypt rose to a new high of 5.4% in July, marking a significant jump compared to the rate of 4.9% the previous month. The increase has been linked to hikes in electricity bills and consumer goods like cigarettes. Food and beverages, in particular, saw some of the most significant increases in inflation-related costs. Despite the rising inflation, the levels are still on the lower end of the Egyptian Central Bank's target estimates. For that reason, the uptick in inflation is unlikely to be a serious concern for the Egyptian Government. However, it could also result in the central bank extending its pause of monetary easing.

The Information and Decision Support Centre (IDSC) of the Egyptian cabinet said on Sunday that rumours about reductions to health and education allocations for the budget of 2021-2022 were baseless. The IDSC said that it has verified with the Ministry of Finance that these sectors would not experience reductions after rumours emerged online about impending cuts. The IDSC said that the current plans will see the budget for the health sector rise by 6.6%, reaching EP275.6 billion. The education sector, meanwhile, is expected to receive a 6-8% increase in budget, bringing its allocation to EP388.2 billion.

Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has approved an \$18 million loan for the construction of seawater desalination plants in two new towns in North Sinai, including one in Rafah, which serves as the only crossing to Gaza. It is expected that these desalination plants will be the largest in Africa, with a capacity of 300,000 m³. The loan itself was acquired from the Kuwait Fund for Arab Economic Development (KFAED) and will also include construction of a desalination plant in the newly-built town of Bir al-Abed. Desalination technologies are becoming increasingly popular in the Middle East due to chronic lack of freshwater supplies. For Egypt, the plants also offer a way to relieve water pressures that became especially acute with the construction of GERD. With many new urban projects also moving away from the Nile River Basin and, instead, looking to cultivate the desert, desalination plants will become especially important in the medium-to-long term.

Egypt's Tourism and Antiquities Ministry said on Saturday that a 4,600-year-old solar boat commissioned by Pharaoh Khufu has been transported to a new antiquities museum which is preparing to open its doors. The new museum was constructed as part of an effort to revive Egypt's struggling tourism sector. Earlier in April, a procession was held through the streets of Cairo as the mummies of four royals and 18 pharaohs, including renowned figures such as Ramses II and Queen Hatshepsut.

Lebanon:

Late on Wednesday, Lebanon’s central bank announced that it would effectively end providing subsidies on fuel. Up until now the central bank was using its dollar reserves to fund fuel imports, but now it will be providing a line of credit to fuel importers at market prices as the bank’s reserves have

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begun to dry up. The move is aimed at gradually restoring the bank's reserves, but it will likely lead to further social unrest as fuel prices are predicted to rise as a result.

A parliamentary session called to discuss a petition related to the inquiry concerning accountability for the 2020 Beirut explosion will be boycotted by several parties, according to statements made this week by political leaders. The petition was lodged following a request made by judge Tarek Bitar to lift immunity from a number of high-profile ministers in the current government. The petition seeks to refer those ministers to a special council, which, critics claim, will prevent an independent hearing from taking place.

Hezbollah launched rockets at Israeli positions in the north of the country on Friday morning, following which Hassan Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah, stated that Israeli air strikes will receive a "suitable and proportionate" response but that the group is "not looking for war". This comes after Israel conducted air strikes in south Lebanon on Wednesday, launching 92 rounds of artillery fire, in response to three rockets fired from Lebanon into Israel on the same day. Nasrallah also stated that these were the first air strikes conducted by Israel into Lebanese territory since the 2006 war. The Israeli government has called on the Lebanese government to take responsibility for the actions of Hezbollah. These incidents took place against the backdrop of the inauguration of the new Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi and the attack on the Israeli-operated MV Mercer Street Oil Tanker on 29th July, which was attributed to Iran, Hezbollah's ally state. The US has called on Israel to "not change the rules of confrontation" with Hezbollah in the lead up to nuclear talks with Tehran in September and State Department spokesperson Ned Price also urged the Lebanese government on Friday to prevent Hezbollah from launching rockets into Israel. The Lebanese army had stated last Thursday that Israel was responsible for "changing the rules of engagement" with its air strikes on Lebanese soil.

The skirmishes between Hezbollah and Israel in the border regions have drawn criticism from opponents of Hezbollah in Lebanon. On Sunday, Head of the Maronite Church, Patriarch Bechara Boutros Al-Rai, called for an end to rocket attacks from Lebanon and stated that Lebanon is not interested in military actions leading to "destructive Israeli responses". Supporters of Hezbollah criticised Al-Rai of surrendering to Zionism. On Tuesday, President Michel Aoun condemned criticisms made against Al-Rai following his comments and defended his right to freedom of expression. Al-Rai has previously been critical of the Lebanese government's mismanagement of the economic crisis.

Violent incidents across Lebanon continued as the fuel crisis in the country deepens, leading to outburst of social tensions. The incidents were concentrated in the north of the country, which has suffered the most from the crisis. Three men have been killed over the past week. A man was shot in the village of Bakhoun on Monday as a motorist attempted to cut the queue, while two men were killed last Friday in Tripoli in retaliation for a confrontation over fuel that had taken place earlier. In both instances the murderers turned themselves in to the authorities.

These incidents and developments are indicators of the depth of the economic crisis into which Lebanon has plunged over the past two years. A new report published by the UN Office for the Co-ordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) revealed that 78% of Lebanon's population is currently living under the poverty line. The figure was set at 55% in a similar report from last year. Extreme poverty rose from 8% to 23% between 2019-2020 according to the latest report. The price of a gallon of fuel has risen by over 220% in the past year and a government void of public funds is incapable of distributing imported fuel to the population. The failure to distribute fuel is also leading to widespread power outages as Lebanon's fuel-dependent electricity company is providing only an hour of electricity per day to deprived areas.

Jordan:

The Ministry of Health affirmed on Sunday that it is seeking to revamp efforts to increase the number of COVID-19 vaccinations in the country. Adel Bilbeisi, the Secretary General of the Health Ministry for epidemiological affairs and the official in charge of the COVID-19 crisis, stated on Sunday that 545,000 individuals have missed their COVID-19 vaccine appointments. The statistics show that hundreds of thousands of individuals who have registered for the vaccine are missing appointments for either their first or second dose. As of Sunday, 3,171,813 have taken their first dose and 2,417,262 have taken their second.

The Chinese Ambassador to Jordan, Chen Chuandong, stated on Sunday that trade between China and Jordan has picked up over the past year following a decrease of 12.08% in 2020 as a result of the pandemic. This year has seen an increase of 21.4% in bilateral trade with an increase of 14.1% in Jordanian exports to China. Ambassador Chen stressed the importance of Jordan's location in the Middle East and it being an "oasis of stability in the region, while also praising Jordan's participation in China's Belt and Road Initiative.

Jordanian media reported on Sunday that the lawyers representing the two former royal aides convicted on charges of sedition, Bassem Awadallah and Sherif Hassan Bin Zaid, have filed an appeal against their conviction. The case refers to what in Jordanian media has been termed "Fitnah" (meaning sedition in Arabic), in which individuals connected to the royal family were accused in April 2020 of conspiring to overthrow the monarchy, accusing it of corruption.

Khalifa Al-Mashlamani, deputy chairman of the Qatari-Jordanian Business Council at the Qatar Chamber of Commerce and Industry, stated on Monday that Qatari investments in Jordan now exceed \$4.5 billion, \$950 million of which lies in equity in companies listed on the Amman Stock Exchange. Other Qatari investments in Jordan have been made in real estate, tourism, banks, health, ICT and energy. Al-Muslamani noted that Jordan is a "preferred destination" for Qatari and Gulf investors in general thanks to its "infrastructure and attractive and stimulating climate", expecting a surge in investments from Qatar in the near future.

A local women's organisation, Solidarity Is Global Institute (SIGI), recently reported that the rates of underage marriage in Jordan during the pandemic in 2020 increased by 1.2%. A total of 7,964 underage marriage contracts were reported in the year 2020 for girls aged between 15-18. SIGI notes that there is a strong correlation between dropping out of school and underage marriage and that the pandemic has been a significant factor in this phenomenon.

Security breaches across the Syrian-Jordanian border are continuing as another attempt to smuggle drugs and weapons into Jordan was thwarted on Saturday, resulting in the death of one smuggler and the injuring of others. The Jordanian military stated that a "large quantity of narcotics as well as ammunition and a communications device" were seized in eastern Jordan, with no further details provided. This incident follows an attempt to smuggle around half a million narcotic pills through the Jaber border crossing a number of hours after the crossing had been partially re-opened, as reported by Jordan's Anti-Narcotics Department. The re-opening of the border crossing has been delayed in recent weeks due to the resumption of military clashes in the Daraa region of Syria.

Saudi Arabia:

The Ministry of Interior announced on Monday that Saudi Arabia would accept visitors to the country who have received both COVID-19 vaccines. This means that Saudi Arabia will begin receiving visitors for the Umrah pilgrimage, having blocked worshippers from arriving for the past year and a half. It is predicted that the number of pilgrims to Makkah and Medina will rise from 60,000 per month to 2 million.

COVID-19 cases in the country over the past week stand at around 900 cases per day. Over 30 million vaccines have thus far been administered. Citizens are now obliged to take the second dose of the COVID-19 vaccine if they wish to travel abroad. In other COVID-19-related news, the Saudi Press

Agency (SPA) reported on Sunday that families of healthcare workers who died from the virus while treating infected patients will receive 500,000 Saudi Riyals (\$133,300) as compensation.

The Oversight and Anti-Corruption Authority, also known as Nazaha, released a statement on Monday announcing that 207 citizens and residents in the country were arrested on charges of bribery, abuse of office, abuse of power and forgery. This includes employees working in a number of ministries. The most prominent court rulings (including prison sentences and fines) were published on the body's Twitter page from Tuesday onwards. This is the second wholesale series of arrests instigated by the Nazaha following the arrests of 241 citizens and expatriates announced in March.

Following a joint naval exercise between the UAE and India on Saturday, India's guided-missile destroyer INS Kochi reached Saudi Arabia on Monday to conduct an exercise with the Saudi navy. These exercises took place after Indian Army Chief of Staff General Naravane had visited Riyadh and the UAE last December. Saudi Arabia represents India's second largest supplier of oil, after Iraq, and the two countries are seeking to strengthen their security ties, largely driven by India's energy security requirements. This marks a general shift in Saudi Arabia's foreign policy approach to India which had thus far been restricted due to the former's close relationship with India's rival, Pakistan.

On Sunday, Dr Abdullah Rabeeah, the supervisor general of the King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Centre (KSrelief) met with Dr Qassem Buhaibah, the Yemeni Minister of Health. They reviewed KSrelief health projects being implemented in Yemen, most prominently those related to tackling the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Buhaibah praised Saudi efforts for their response to the pandemic by providing medical aid and constructing oxygen factories in Yemen. KSrelief has thus far spent over \$756 million in health projects in Yemen.

22 members of Hamas, including the Hamas representative to Riyadh, Mohammed Al-Khodari, were sentenced to prison in Saudi Arabia on Sunday. Al-Khodari received a 15-year prison sentence while his son Hani was sentenced to three years. In total, 69 Palestinians and Jordanians had been detained in a wave of arrests in March 2018, however the rest of the detainees were acquitted. Hamas responded to the arrests, stating that they were "shocked" by the decision and asserting that the sentences against the imprisoned individuals were "unjustified", calling for their release. The Arab Organisation for Human Rights in the UK (AOHR UK) also condemned the rulings, calling the trial "unfair and politicised". The Houthis in Yemen have also responded to the arrests, renewing their offer to trade Saudi officers held captive in Yemen for the detained Hamas members. The offer was made by the leader of the group, Abdel-Malik Al-Houthi, in his speech commemorating the start of the Islamic New Year. Prisoner exchanges have been commonplace over the course of the conflict in Yemen. Saudi Arabia has not yet officially commented on the proceedings.

For the first time in the history of Saudi Arabia, two female assistants were appointed in the management of the Two Holy Mosques on Thursday by the Imam of the Grand Mosque, Sheikh Abdul Rahman Al-Sudais. Both positions relate to women's affairs, as Dr Fatima Al-Rushood was made assistant president for women's affairs and advisor to the president, while Dr Al-Anoud was made assistant president for women's development affairs. This follows a series of modernising efforts by the Ministry of Hajj and Umrah regarding women as in July women were permitted to perform Hajj without a *mahram* (male guardian) and female guards were appointed for the first time at the Grand Mosque in Makkah.

The Saudi Ministry of Finance released figures for its public finances in the second quarter (April to June), reporting an increase in revenues following the economic crisis of last year as a result of the pandemic. During this period the amount of revenue from oil exports rose by 38% compared to the same period last year, while non-oil revenue tripled. Higher oil prices and a rise in tax revenue, following an increase in value-added tax (VAT) to 15%, have contributed these figures. This has also led

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to a decrease in the budget deficit to 4.6 billion riyals (\$1.2 billion), compared to 7.4 billion riyals (\$2 billion) in the first quarter. The report also showed a decline in: military spending by 2%; municipal services by 25% and infrastructure and transportation by 18% in the first half of the year. These decreases came largely at the cost of an increase of 20% in spending on health and social development, linked to the pandemic.

Following the drone attack by Houthi militia last Wednesday there was another attempt to target the southern region of Saudi Arabia, specifically the city of Khamis Mushayt, by Houthi drones, which were intercepted by the Saudi air defences. The attacks received condemnation from the Secretary General of the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation (OCI), Dr Yousef Bin Ahmed Al-Othaimeen, as well as the UAE and Bahrain authorities. These developments have taken place against the backdrop of the UN-led peace talks that have failed to reach a result, with the chief negotiator for the Houthi movement stating that talks are futile while the blockade is still in force.

Kuwait:

The Ministry of Health is stepping up efforts to vaccinate the population by increasing vaccination capacity to around 100,000 a day. The spokesperson for the Ministry of Health, Dr Abdullah Al-Sanad, stated on Sunday that there was a massive turnout for the vaccine during the Hijri New Year holiday, as tens of thousands of texts are being sent to citizens on a daily basis encouraging them to take the vaccine. Kuwait has seen a steady decrease in COVID-19 cases since the start of July, when the number of daily cases reached their peak, as the past week has seen an average of just over 600 cases a day. Dr Al-Sanad had mentioned last Wednesday that 91.1% of deaths from COVID-19 in July were among those who had not been vaccinated.

Kuwait has sent support to both Greece and Turkey on Sunday to combat the fires raging in both countries. Two Air Force transport planes were dispatched to Greece with around 40 Kuwaiti firefighters on the instructions of the Emir of Kuwait, Nawaf Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah. In addition, 45 Kuwaiti firefighters arrived in Turkey on Sunday to assist in efforts to put out the wildfires.

The Ministry of Finance released figures on Saturday for the country's financial budget, revealing that the budget deficit had increased by 174.8% between 2020-2021, reaching 10.8 billion dinars (\$35.5 billion), marking the highest deficit in the country's fiscal history. Finance Minister Khalifa Hamada linked the increase in the budget deficit to the sharp decline in oil prices as a result of the pandemic, as oil revenue decreased by 42.8% between 2020-2021. Revenue from non-oil sources fell by 6.5%. Kuwait's lack of a financial strategy to deal with its deficit led to a drop in its credit rating last month from A+ to AA- by Standard & Poor's Global Ratings.

In related news, the country's sovereign wealth fund, called the Kuwait Investment Authority (KIA), appointed Badr Al-Ajeel as its interim managing director this week. This follows the appointment of a new board of directors at KIA last week. Last year, parliament blocked a law that would permit the Kuwaiti government to finance its budget deficit by borrowing on international markets, which has increased the significance of the KIA in attempting to balance the government's books. Political disagreements between the government and parliament have thus far prevented this from happening. Opposition figures in the parliament have criticised the government of mismanagement and lack of accountability as reasons for the increase in the budget deficit.

United Arab Emirates (UAE):

The Emirati Government, through the Emirates Red Crescent, the UAE's largest charity, has sent aid to Greece on Tuesday with the aim of subduing the fires that have swept across the country. This is in addition to a helicopter that has already been sent to Greece used to dampen the flames. Some of the supplies were provided by the Abu Dhabi National Oil Company.

Sheikh Nahyan bin Mubarak, Minister of Tolerance and Coexistence, visited Tehran on Saturday and met with newly elected Iranian President Ebrahim Raisi. Raisi expressed Iran's interest in strengthening relations with the UAE during the meeting. Relations between Iran and the UAE have been strained in recent years especially following rapprochement between the UAE and Israel, in keeping with the general tendency of Gulf countries establishing relations with Israel. However, rising tensions between the UAE and Saudi Arabia, Iran's most prominent rival in the region, as well as the UAE's formal withdrawal from Yemen (despite claims that it is still indirectly involved), represent possible openings for rapprochement between the UAE and Iran.

The Emirati real estate company Sky Abu Dhabi Developments is close to finalising an investment deal with Egypt worth \$15 billion. The investments will be centred in New Cairo and the northern coast of Egypt. It is expected that the housing units in these new developments in New Cairo will start from around 1.4 million Egyptian pounds (\$90,000), as Sky Abu Dhabi Developments seeks to take advantage of the growing real estate sector in Egypt. The company has already been involved in housing developments in the new capital city in March. The continuous investment in high-end housing developments in Cairo and other parts of the country has met criticism in Egypt due to the demolishing of houses and eviction of residents in order to make room for the new developments.

The UAE and the Indian Navy conducted a joint naval exercise, codenamed "Zayed Talwar 2021", off the coast of Abu Dhabi on Saturday. India deployed its guided-missile destroyer INS Kochi and two Sea King MK 42B helicopters to join the UAE's UAES AL- Dhafra guided missile corvette and AS 565B Panther helicopter. This joint military exercise preceded the joint Indian-Saudi naval exercise two days later as the Gulf countries seek to strengthen their military ties with India.

Qatar:

In a sign of a further thawing of tensions in relations between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the former has appointed a new ambassador to Riyadh on Wednesday. The new ambassador, Bandar Mohammed Al-Attiyah, was previously Qatar's ambassador to Kuwait, the country which acted as mediator in the political crisis between Gulf countries that had led to the severing of relations with Qatar by a number of countries, including Saudi Arabia, from 2017 till the start of this year. The diplomatic crisis had led to a boycott not only on political, but also economic and travel ties with Qatar, leading Qatar to rely more on its relations with other countries in the region, most prominently Iran and Turkey. The easing of relations with Saudi Arabia and other neighbouring countries will likely contribute to Qatar's re-integration into the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).

Lionel Messi, known to be the most illustrious football player of the contemporary era, joined Qatari-owned Paris Saint-Germain (PSG) on a free transfer on Tuesday. News of Messi's transfer from Barcelona to PSG has sparked widespread global interest and will bring increased attention to the club in the near future. PSG is owned by Qatari Sports Investments, a subsidiary of the Qatar Investment Authority, whose chairman is the Emir of Qatar, Tamim bin Hamad Al-Thani. Messi's transfer to the club marks a significant development in Qatar's branding and marketing strategy on the international stage. It also represents part of the country's strategy to diversify its company in sectors other than oil, according to its 2030 national vision. Qatar will be hosting the 2022 World Cup amid allegations of human rights abuses concerning the mistreatment or negligence shown towards cheap labour workers involved in construction projects connected to the competition. The country is thus looking to improve its image and reputation on the international scene and the PSG project has represented a means to achieve this geopolitical end following a series of high-profile transfers this summer, most notably that of Messi.

Figures released by the Ministry of Public Health on Wednesday show that over four million vaccine doses have now been administered in Qatar. 88.8% of the population aged 12 or over have received at least one dose of the vaccine. The health authorities are now encouraging pregnant women to take the vaccine amid fears of the spread of the Delta variant in the country. The rate of COVID-19 cases in Qatar have been relatively and steadily low over the past two months with daily cases averaging between 100-200.

In the lead up to Qatar's first ever elections in parliament, set to take place in October, seven individuals have been referred to prosecutors for allegedly "publishing fake news" and inciting "racial and tribal arrogance" on the matter of discontent regarding the election regulations on the part of the Al-Murrah tribe in the country. Candidates for the upcoming elections are required to be of Qatari origin, with at least a grandfather born in Qatar. This may potentially prevent certain members of the Al-Murrah tribe from participating as the tribe extends between Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Members of the tribe posted videos on social media raising the matter. The Al-Murrah tribe has a history of fractious relations with the state in Qatar, with thousands of tribe members having been stripped of their Qatari citizenship in 2005, as well as other instances of political disagreements in recent history.

Bahrain:

One of Bahrain's highest level diplomats, Dr Shaikh Abdullah bin Ahmed Al-Khalifa, arrived in Israel on Sunday to undertake a four-day diplomatic trip, which included meetings with Israeli President Isaac Herzog and Foreign Minister Yair Lapid. This marked his third visit to Israel since he first travelled to the country in November 2020. Israeli media reported on Sunday that Al-Khalifa expressed criticism over the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran which, according to him, has been much of the source of instability in the Middle East in the past few years, playing to the negative cohesion shared by Israel and Bahrain vis-à-vis Iran. Al-Khalifa also criticised Iran's "continuous interference in domestic affairs [in Bahrain]" and "support of extremism and terrorism". According to Israeli sources an agreement has been signed between the two countries to combat Iran in the "war of ideas". Israeli media also announced that there were discussions regarding the opening of direct flights between the two countries.

On a related note, on Monday, Bahrain's ambassador to the US, Sheikh Abdullah bin Rahis Al-Khalifa, praised the Abraham Accords, signed between Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco, for improving lines of communications between these countries and preventing a more prolonged conflict in the recent 11-day war in Gaza. Although it is not clear how Bahrain contributed to the de-escalation, Khalifa mentioned that the establishment of diplomatic ties with Israel provides an avenue of communication that can "reduce conflict and escalation". Nevertheless, Khalifa maintained that Bahrain continues to be "committed to the grievances of the Palestinian people" and to a two-state solution.

The Americans for Democracy and Human Rights in Bahrain (ADHRB) and the Bahrain Institute for Rights and Democracy (BIRD) issued a joint statement on Wednesday calling on the Bahraini authorities to launch an independent investigation into the death of Hasan Abdalnabi Mansoor, who was arrested for drug-related charges and died in prison following medical complications. The human rights organisations are accusing the Kuwaiti authorities of medical negligence amidst a series of complaints regarding the mistreatment of prisoners in the country. Mansoor's death represents the third prison death in Kuwait since April as a result of medical negligence according to the statement made by BIRD.

Yemen:

On Friday, the UN Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, named Hans Grundberg as his special envoy to Yemen. A seasoned Swedish diplomat, Grundberg succeeded Martin Griffiths as the envoy after receiving support from regional and international countries, including the Yemeni factions.

Grundberg previously played an active role in brokering the ceasefire that defused the fighting in the critical port of Hodeidah in 2018. Omani officials, who visited Sanaa recently in a failed bid to get the Houthi movement to declare a ceasefire, expressed hope that Grundberg could help end the crisis as soon as possible.

Despite the new appointment, recovering the country's moribund peace process will be difficult. Responding to Grundberg's appointment, the chief negotiator for the Houthi movement, Mohammed Abdulsalam, said on Sunday that it would be futile to hold peace talks without any movement on the key conditions set by the group. He further told Reuters that Grundberg "has nothing in his hands" and that there was no progress following last month's visit to Riyadh by the US envoy for Yemen, Tim Lenderking.

If the Houthi movement expects some of its key demands to be considered ahead of the talks, they will likely find disappointment amidst statements from the US whose Special Envoy to Yemen, Tim Lenderking, directed a series of verbal broadsides at the Houthis. Lenderking accused the Houthis of preventing a spoiler and manipulating the price of fuel through their on-going military offensive in the gas-rich Marib Province. Linking the Houthis to Iran, Lenderking said that he does not see Iran preparing to have any constructive role in Yemen and called on Tehran to change its stance by stopping the flow of arms. He further called on the Houthi movement to lessen its relationship with Iran. In contrast, he praised Riyadh as an actor that is fully engaged in a constructive manner and added that he feels Saudi Arabia genuinely wants to end the war. He also warned that the humanitarian situation in Yemen remains dire and although the US is the largest donor, with a share of more than \$3.6 billion since the crisis began, it is unable to meet the needs of the Yemeni people on its own. Lenderking further announced that the US will provide \$165m in additional humanitarian aid to Yemen in a bid to prevent famine in the country. The envoy's words will likely be seen as a validation in Sanaa and Tehran that Washington is fully on Riyadh's side. Indeed, the Houthi spokesperson, Mohammed Abdul-Salam, accused the US on Tuesday of blocking a political solution to the crisis. In the statement, Abdul-Salam accused the US, alongside the Emirates and Saudi Arabia, of activating al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS).

Meanwhile, in a development that highlights the tensions, the US military and G7 countries accused Iran of being responsible for an attack on an oil tanker off the coast of Oman. HV Mercer Street was in international waters off the coast of Oman on July 29 when it was struck with a drone laden with explosives, killing two. At the time of the attack, there was some speculation that the Houthi movement had launched the drone on Iran's behalf. However, while US Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defence for the Middle East, Dana Stroul, suggested in a press conference that the drone was launched from Yemen, the US Department of Defence has since denied Stroul's claims and stated that no direct links with Yemen were drawn.

Activists warned that Saudi Arabia may be preparing to deport as many as 800,000 Yemenis living in the country. The claims emerged after classified documents were leaked to local media, calling on businesses in Jizan, Aseer, Baha and Najran to "transfer their existing Yemeni workers to other branches outside these provinces, or employ them in other companies." The sources added that the document had included an order to prevent the Yemeni migrants from renewing their housing contracts in these areas. The move is likely aimed at both ensuring Saudi disengagement from Yemen and filling employment positions with Saudis as part of a plan to bolster domestic employment rates.

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However, many deported Yemenis will find themselves at risk of being pushed into a warzone, potentially worsening the humanitarian conditions in the country.

Fighting across Yemen, which escalated following the peace talks in February, continues, with the epicentre of the fighting still the gas-rich Marib Province. Over the course of the week, the Saudi-led Coalition reported that at least 45 Houthi fighters were killed in clashes across the province, with the Coalition acknowledging that one of its commanders was also killed. Fighting has been more limited in the past couple of days, likely as a result of the Islamic New Year. But the clashes will likely pick up again in the coming days.

Meanwhile in Najran, alongside the Yemeni border, the Saudi Arabian Air Defence Forces announced that they shot down two drones that were launched towards the country from Yemen. The incident was reported on Monday.

Oman:

Oman's Ministry of Health announced on Wednesday that 476 new COVID-19 cases were registered in the country, representing more than double the numbers registered a mere two days ago. The ministry also said 20 people had died over the past two days, representing a rise from Monday's 12 and bringing the total number of deaths to 3,968. Overall, however, the Ministry said that the recovery rates, now at 96%, are a source of optimism. The Ministry also said that more than two million people have been vaccinated, representing 57% of the targeted population.

The price for Omani oil continued to rise on Wednesday, reaching almost \$70 on the Dubai Mercantile Exchange. The rise comes as the global economy slowly opens up after the sharp drop in activity in 2020. Although the current price tag is not a peak, it is nevertheless good news for the Omani economy which has been hit hard by the sharp drops in oil prices due to the country's reliance on it for exports. Given the global shift away from oil, the rise in oil prices will neither last long, nor will it reach the highs of the mid-2000s. Muscat would be wise to invest the windfall on infrastructure projects that can help improve the country's economic resilience. This will be especially important in light of the protests over economic conditions and unemployment that took place in the country in recent weeks.

Indeed, this trend seems to be in progress in the country. According to the International Railway Journal, the Omani Government has drawn plans for a new metro network to connect Muscat with the international airport. The metro, the first in the country, would also link commercial hubs such as Ruwi, the administrative centre of Muttrah and the town of Seeb along the coast. Other plans to link Seeb to the port city of Sohar are also included in discussions. The plans were drawn as part of the wider Urban Revitalisation and Regeneration Projects (URRP) and the Oman National Spatial Strategy (ONSS) that set a framework for economic development in the country. The government hopes that the construction of the network will spur growth around the stations.

On Monday, Oman's Capital Market Authority has approved the legislation to set up crowdfunding platforms in the country. Describing the process of crowdfunding platform regulation as being in its final stages, the CMA said that it hopes the platforms will give boosts to micro, small and medium enterprises and, thus, spur economic growth. Like the metro, the project is part of Oman's efforts to diversify its economy in light of low oil prices and a general shift away from fossil fuels that have supported the Omani economy.

Despite these efforts, the Omani economy remains vulnerable. The country's Ministry of Finance announced on Thursday that it has a budget deficit of 1.1 billion rials (\$2.86 billion).