



ABOUT INTEGRITY UK

Integrity UK is an organisation committed to challenging hate and empowering communities through innovative approaches to promoting integration, cohesion and social reconciliation within the MENA region and the UK.

Geo-Political Risk Report | October 2021

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Libya

- General elections due December 24th, with 2.8 million Libyans registered.
- HoR withdrawal of support from the GNU could hobble transition process.
- Massive crackdown launched against migrants and refugees.
- There are fears that militia infighting in Tripoli and political wrangling over oil trade could lead to election violence or post-election instability.

Libya's general and presidential elections are still due to take place on December 24th. Over the course of September, major international actors including the United Nations and the European Union, as well as regional countries such as Egypt, have offered political and technical support for the elections. In accordance with the law, a number of officials expected to run for the post of President, including Aguila Saleh, the speaker of Libya's Tobruk-based Parliament and Khalifa Haftar, the head of Libyan National Army (LNA) have taken a three-month leave from their posts. Other notables who expressed interest in running include Aref Ali Nayed, the former coordinator of the National Transitional Commission, and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, the son of former Libyan dictator Muammar al-Gaddafi. Some 2.8 million Libyans have registered to vote, with the majority of newly-registered voters under the age of 30. International observers hope that the elections will help end the country's fraught political situation. Alternatively, numerous politicians, including Foreign Minister Najla al-Mangoush, warned that the election could be delayed in the event of a political impasse.

There are, however, some troubling signs ahead of the election. On September 21st, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives, withdrew support from the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity (GNU), leaving its Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Mohammed Dbeibah on a caretaker capacity. According to HoR Speaker Aguila Saleh, the vote of no confidence in the GNU was motivated by economic concerns. However, the situation could result in a tricky post-election landscape that observers warn could lead to further instability.

Some 5,000 migrants and refugees were detained following the launch of a massive crackdown launched in October. The United Nations said At least one person was shot and another 15 were injured during the violence following the crackdowns. The UN has since called for the deaths to be investigated, warning that many migrants and refugees themselves are victims of smugglers and traffickers. Indeed, numerous activists have criticised the Libyan Interior Ministry, which launched the crackdown, for focusing on the migrants and refugees but making no mention of the actual traffickers. Activists have also warned that many detention centres are over-capacity and rife with abuses.

The security situation in the country, especially around Tripoli, have also raised concerns of election violence. Although the country has not witnessed any significant fighting since the LNA's Tripoli offensive ended, the city witnessed significant militia infighting in early September. The country's National Oil Corporation (NOC) has also seen power struggles between its chairman, Mustafa Sanallah and the Oil and Gas Minister, Mohammed Aoun. Aoun, who was originally part of Tobruk's attempts to form a breakaway "Eastern NOC" was accused by Sanallah of destabilising the NOC out of personal motives. Given the oil revenues represent one of the main sources of income for Libya and therefore one of the strongest sources of patronage, control over the NOC represents a major prize for all sides. In addition to political tensions, conflict over the NOC could lead to open fighting as it has in the past, resulting in interruptions to the oil trade.

Yemen

- New UN Envoy to Yemen takes office, warns that the country is “stuck in an indefinite state of war”.
- Yemen currency crash raises fears of economic collapse, famine.
- Clashes wind down around Marib but escalate in the surrounding countryside amidst Houthi gains.
- Infighting between STC forces in Aden leaves 10 dead, raises concerns for stability in the south.

The post of the United Nations Special Envoy to Yemen is now occupied by Hans Grundberg who officially started his term on September 5th, 2021. Grundberg, a seasoned diplomat from Sweden, Grundberg said that he is keen to engage with all Yemeni factions and other key interlocutors to bring an end to the conflict. Warning that Yemen is “stuck in an indefinite state of war”, Grundberg added that there won’t be any quick wins in the country and restarting the stalled diplomacy process will not be easy. In particular, he noted that “meaningful participation of women” is a priority for the peace process. The humanitarian situation around the strategic city of Marib, which has seen the majority of the fighting in Yemen in recent months, was also raised as a significant concern.

Economists are raising concerns of an economic collapse in Yemen following the dramatic crash of the Yemeni Riyal earlier in July. Representing the worst currency collapse Yemen has experienced, mid-July saw the value of \$1 reach YR1,000 in the city of Aden. The crash has propelled the country’s already-fragile economy to new lows, with unemployment reaching an estimated 55% and a quarter of businesses shuttering their doors between July and September. It is estimated that some 80% of the Yemeni population now depends on international aid. With Yemeni exports of oil and gas still producing a fraction of the country’s pre-war GDP, experts warn that the economic situation could easily impact food imports, leading to widespread famine.

Widespread clashes around Marib has continued relatively unabated despite the renewed efforts to relaunch the peace process. Over the course of September, the Houthi forces pushed steadily towards the city. While the fighting around the city itself has lulled over the latter half of September, the Houthi forces have instead focused their efforts on the countryside south of Marib. Since then, they’ve numerous territorial gains in the neighbouring Shabwa Governorate, especially Bihan District bordering Marib. However, Marib itself continues to witness violence, including sporadic rocket attacks.

Small clashes were also reported in other parts of the country. On September 28th, the Saudi-led coalition announced the interception of drones heading towards the city of Khamis Mushait. Sporadic clashes were also reported around the southern city of Taiz in

southern Yemen. However, the commencement of a successful prisoner exchange between the Houthis and the local forces around Taiz on September 29th suggests that backchannel diplomacy continues and is making modest gains. However, such gains are modest in contrast to the extent of fighting taking place in the country.

At least 10 people were killed in Aden during infighting between the forces belonging to the Southern Transitional Council. The clashes were centralised in Aden's central Crater district. The source of the infighting appears unclear. Although the STC is nominally on the side of the Saudi-led coalition, ties between the Saudi-backed government forces and the Emirati-backed STC has been deteriorating and violent incidents between two are becoming increasingly commonplace.

Lebanon

- Lebanon forms new government after 13 months of impasse. Early elections announced for March 2022.
- Fuel crisis continues to worsen amidst new rises to prices.
- Beirut port blast investigation frozen again, eliciting protests from activists and families of victims.

Lebanon formed a new government after grappling with the challenge for the past 13 months. In the aftermath of the formation, Najib Mikati was given a vote of confidence by 85 lawmakers against 15 who rejected his appointment. Following his appointment, Mikati vowed to end Lebanon's on-going economic collapse by taking on the reforms needed to halt the crisis and resume bailout talks with the International Monetary Fund (IMF). However, Mikati will struggle to push reforms due to relatively weak position, being viewed more as a caretaker government. Meanwhile, there are also questions on whether Mikati will be able to apply any reforms beyond "band-aid" solutions. Indeed, perhaps in a bid to solidify his position, Prime Minister Mikati announced that elections would take place in early 2022. Mikati stated that the date is almost certainly 27 March 2022 but this has yet to be finalised. Opposition parties have welcomed the announcement. However, prominent government politicians including Gibran Bassil have expressed opposition due to fears that it would reduce the 29 MP parliamentary majority held by his party, the Free Patriotic Movement.

Lebanon's fuel crisis continues to worsen amidst worsening economic crisis across the country. Over the latter part of September, the newly-appointed Mikati government has, once again, raised fuel prices as the country looks towards moving away from subsidies. The latest changes represent a 15% increase and will likely be followed by a total end of subsidies. While the Lebanese Government likely hopes that the cutting of subsidies and the raising of prices will help fill its coffers to help import much needed supplies, the rises will nevertheless hit the growing number of poor in the country especially hard. Furthermore, there are fears that groups such as the Lebanese Hezbollah may exploit the crisis. Indeed, the end of September saw Iranian diesel arrive in Lebanon following brokerage by the Hezbollah. The group's supporters hailed the arrival of the fuel as a victory against US sanctions which they say is behind the country's crisis. In the medium-to-long term, such brinkmanship will do little to fix the country's woes. Indeed, the country's public electricity company, EDL, warned that Lebanon could be plunged to total darkness after September.

The investigation into the Beirut port blast was frozen again on Monday 27th September. The investigation was frozen after prosecutors called on the former interior minister, Nuhad Mashnouq, for questioning. Mashnouq filed a lawsuit against the investigation, questioning the lead investigator Judge Tarek Bitar's neutrality over the matter. Bitar himself replaced Judge Fadi Sawwan under similar circumstances, resulting in

a barrage of criticism from activists. Responding to this round of suspension of the investigation, activists labelled the situation as “shameful.” Demonstrations were also held by the victims of the families.

Tunisia

- Tunisian President shores up power, raising alarm among opposition and civil society.
- President Saied appoints new Prime Minister.
- Tunisian opposition increases its efforts to counter what they describe as a coup.

Tunisia's president, Kais Saied, announced that he can rule by decree in a move that has been labelled as a power-grab by opposition politicians and activists. The announcement on September 22nd allows Saied to shutter the parliament indefinitely, abolish a key law-monitoring body, and disregard much of the country's 2014 constitution. The move has raised fears among members of Tunisia's civil society, including those that had previously backed Saied. Meanwhile, Saied appointed Najla Bouden Romdhan as Prime Minister, marking the first time a Tunisian and Arab government had a female Prime Minister. A relative political newcomer, Romdhan was previously at Tunisia's Ministry of Higher Education, where she directed World Bank projects. The move, while unlikely to allay criticisms of authoritarianism towards Saied, may placate some more secular-minded activists. However, it is unlikely to offer a long-term answer about Saied's intentions, especially amidst slow and steady erosion of support for his actions amidst the Tunisian public despite riding high in the earlier days of what some activists described as a "coup".

Tunisian opposition parties announced a coalition to counter the President in a move that could further complicate the country's political landscape. Democratic Current party, Ettakatol (FDTL), the Republican Party and Afek Tounes announced the coalition on September 28th, warning that the current political path could lead to the end of the democratic transition. The secretary-general of the Democratic Current party, Ghazi Chawashi said that if Saied "insists on his decisions", the coalition would apply pressure and "exercise all peaceful means of protest". Meanwhile in a sign of further opposition, Parliamentary Speaker, Rached Ghannouchi from the Ennahdha party, announced on October 1st that the parliament was in session, defying the President's closure of the parliament. Anticipating trouble during the arrival of lawmakers from Ennahdha and its ally, Qalb Tounes, police surrounded the parliament, blocking access. Meanwhile, Tunis saw the gathering of thousands of protesters both in support and opposition of the President.

Syria

- Russian and Turkish presidents meet in Sochi amidst growing military activity in Opposition-held Idlib.
- Amman and Damascus continued to normalise their ties amidst signs of further détente with the wider Arab world.
- Idlib-based jihadi group tightens control over the region.

Russian and Turkish presidents met in Sochi on September 29th to discuss bilateral ties, with a focus on the situation in Syria. Prior to the talks, tensions between the Turkish and Russian sides have been picking up, with Ankara once again criticising Moscow's conduct in Crimea while Russian Air Force and the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) picked up its attacks on Opposition-held Idlib, resulting in new waves of displacement towards the Turkish border at a time when anti-refugee sentiments are becoming highly volatile in Turkey. September also saw a rare instance of a Russian airstrike on the Turkish-backed forces near Afrin, a development commonly interpreted as a signal to Ankara that Moscow is not pleased with the status quo.

The meeting, which lasted an uncharacteristically-short three hours, were described as “productive” and the two leaders had cordial interactions before the cameras during which they praised each other's capacity for compromise in negotiations. Despite such positive indicators, however, no breakthrough was announced. In Opposition-held Idlib, meanwhile, there is widespread anticipation of a new SAA offensive amidst sustained rumours and on-going SAA troop deployments into the area. With the insurgency in Daraa seemingly pacified following the summer clashes, it is likely that Damascus will become more emboldened to launch a new military offensive. However, they will have to contend with an increasingly-assertive Turkey whose drones were instrumental in the Idlib clashes of 2020, as well as subsequent engagements in Libya.

Normalisation of ties between Jordan and Syria appear to be in full-swing amidst signs of wider détente between Damascus and the rest of the Arab world. On the last week of September, the Jordanian Government announced it would reopen the Jaber Border Crossing which was shut down in 2020 due to COVID-19 and 2021 due to fighting in Daraa. By September 29th, crossing was confirmed to have opened. In a sign of further détente, Jordan's King Abdullah held phone talks with the Syrian President, Bashar al-Assad, marking the first contact between the two heads of state in 10 years. Jordan's state carrier also resumed flights to Syria for the first time in a decade, pending approval. Since then, Egyptian officials have also described Syria as an “integral part of Arab national security” in a sign of regional governments looking to “bring Damascus back to the Arab fold”. Damascus has also been included in the Egyptian and Jordanian-led plan to supply the crisis-struck Lebanon with fuel, likely in a bid to make normalisation of relations more palatable for the more pragmatically-minded. With Ankara already looking to mend ties

with Egypt after nearly a decade of acrimony, some analysts suggested that Ankara may be the next to try and mend ties, especially amidst calls from the Turkish opposition parties to do so and a growing anti-refugee movement.

Hayy'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continues to tighten its grip on Idlib. Earlier in September, journalists working for the pro-Opposition Orient News announced that they were told to cease the channel's activities in HTS-controlled Idlib. The ban was under the pretext of "professional violations" which some have interpreted as Orient publishing stories critical of some Opposition factions. However, the move was condemned by numerous journalistic associations in the region. The move comes after the HTS started clamping down on foreign militants earlier this summer, with a focus on Chechen and Uzbek factions in particular. At the time, this was interpreted as a move by the HTS to further "nationalise" the group's goals, with many such militants expected to move towards Afghanistan in light of the Taliban's victory there. However, in an interview early September, the HTS leader, Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, described the foreign militants as "part of us" and "part of the people", suggesting that either the group came under pressure from other factions, such as the al-Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Din or the move was intended as a political move to bring independent groups of foreign militants under its own umbrella.

Iraq

- Upcoming Iraqi elections marred by widespread voter apathy and fears of fraud.
- Oil ministry officials warn of market volatility due to steady rise of crude oil prices.
- ISF and the Kurdish Peshmerga launch operations around Kirkuk following a spate of IS attacks.

Iraqi general elections are still due to take place on October 10th. However, ahead of the elections, there are a number of myriad concerns regarding the integrity of the elections. Over the course of September, there have been growing signs of voter apathy amidst signs that the voter turnout could fall beneath 44.5%, the turnout in the most recent legislative elections in 2018. The apathy has been linked to a widespread sense that none of the politicians offer anything tangible as well as fears that the country has little future amidst low oil prices and the COVID-19 pandemic. Indeed, around 40 parties associated with the 2019 protest movement announced that they would boycott the elections on grounds of “lack integrity, fairness and equal opportunities”. Since the election was one of the demands of the movement, the decision to boycott the elections could seriously hamper the legitimacy of the vote and open the path to further disruption.

Iraqi election officials have also taken a number of steps to counter fraud, improve security and encourage voter turnout. Government officials said that the coming elections will be the most secure in the country’s history and have improved on the election system since 2018 which saw widespread allegations of fraud. Last month, authorities foiled a plan by a group of blackmailers who tried to manipulate the election with fake news reports. The United Nations has also called on its experts to monitor the elections and called on Iraqis to not boycott the elections.

This year, more than 3,250 candidates are competing to win a total of 329 seats in the Iraqi parliament.

Iraq's Oil Minister, Ihsan Abdul Jabbar Ismail, warned that crude oil prices of \$100 per barrel would be “unsustainable” amidst fears that the winter of 2021 will bring forth a global gas crunch. Iraqi officials said that they were working with OPEC countries to increase Iraqi crude oil production to 8 million barrels daily to balance the production capacity. Although rising prices would be good for Iraq after suffering under chronically low prices over the past half-a-decade, the sharp growths, especially if not met with production capacity, could lead to economic contractions and price crashes. Indeed, OPEC officials noted that the oil market could remain bullish until 2035 and that the main concern right now is to maintain price stability. Iraqi daily oil production reached 4 million barrels last month and Jabbar noted that it can easily raise that number to 5 million once OPEC ends restrictions, which is expected to take place over the second half of 2022.

The Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) launched operations around Kirkuk after a spate of attacks claimed by the Islamic State (IS). The group conducted that some its deadliest attacks this year over the course of September, killing 19 federal police officers in total. The ISF, alongside the Kurdish Peshmerga, launched joint operations in the region, engaging in clashes with the militants around Tuz Khurmatu. Sporadic IS attacks also continued in Ramadi where a police official was targeted with a car bomb; and Mosul where the IS claimed a mortar attack. It is estimated that 25 suspected IS militants were arrested in Nineveh alone.

Egypt

- President Sisi threatens the deployment of the army to prevent Nile encroachment, raising the risks of military conflict between Egypt and Ethiopia.
- Egyptian and Turkish officials meet in Ankara amidst signs of on-going rapprochement.

The dispute between Egypt and Ethiopia over the construction of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) will be brought before the United Nations Climate Change Conference due to take place in November. This announcement was made by the Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, who noted that there is need for an international framework concerning transboundary water conflicts. The move is the latest in the dispute between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over the dam which has brought Egypt and Ethiopia, in particular, to the brink of war.

Indeed, in a sign of further developing tensions over the dam, President Sisi threatened to deploy the army to “preserve its share in the Nile River and confront any phenomena that negatively affect it.” While the ultimatum is primarily aimed at illegal domestic consumption, it highlights the increasing militarisation of Egypt’s water-related concerns. Increased military involvement to stop illegal use of water could normalise the idea of a military operation against Ethiopia over the dam.

Turkish and Egyptian officials met in Ankara in what appears to be an on-going rapprochement process between the two countries after nearly a decade of acrimony. According to Turkish Foreign Minister, Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu, interactions between the two sides have so far been “positive” and added that the two sides are currently discussing the appointment of ambassadors, with a wider focus on aligning the two countries on a number of outstanding issues. Despite the positive outlook, it seems both sides are cognisant of the limits of rapprochement, with the prospect of a meeting between the President Sisi and the Turkish President, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan not viewed as possible. Regardless, restoration of relations between the two sides could lead to some positive regional developments and may open the path for Ankara’s détente with Saudi Arabia and the Emirates.

Jordan

- Jordan's King Abdullah II accused of hidden property empire worth more than \$100.
- King Abdullah II meets World Bank officials for an economic recovery plan.

Jordan's King Abdullah II was has come under fire after leaked financial documents revealed that he secretly spent more than \$100 million on property purchases in the UK and US. The leaks were part of the wider Pandora Papers release that implicated dozens of world leaders with hiding millions of dollars in offshore tax havens. Among the properties linked to the King are beachfront Mansions in Malibu; luxury apartments in Washington DC; and a house in Ascot, one of England's most expensive towns. The leaks revealed that the purchases continued in the years after the Arab Spring protests against economic conditions and corruption.

Jordanian officials noted that all the King's properties were legally bought and the secrecy around them was due to security and privacy rather than corruption and denied that these expenses were funded by the state budget or treasury. In a subsequent statement, the King himself stated that he has nothing to hide, alleging that the accusations are an attempt to tarnish Jordan's reputation.

The accusations come at a sensitive time for the King. Jordan has experienced intense and widespread protests prior to the COVID-19 pandemic over corruption and economic conditions, resulting in several government reshuffles and promises for improvement. A further challenge arose when his half-brother accused the country's leadership of corruption. The revelations may not lead to new protests but will likely bolster the existing protest movement. Indeed, Jordanian news outlets have been limiting the reporting of the story, suggesting that the Palace is alarmed by the claims.

King Abdullah II met World Bank officials, including its President David Malpass, to discuss an economic recovery plan for Jordan. The country, which has suffered from a chronically-high unemployment levels that spiked to 25% in 2020, as well as widespread deprivation and poverty among the country's population of 10 million, as well as many Palestinian and Syrian refugees.

However, the release of the Pandora Papers, which coincided with the meeting, could make things more difficult for the Jordanian Government which already received \$5 billion in foreign aid last year, including budget assistance and grants. With the US supplying more than a quarter of the aid, the reveals could be deeply damaging. Indeed, former aid official, Dave Harden, predicted a "serious review" into the aid even if aid for the country itself is not cut.