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.

Bi-Monthly MENA Report | November #2 2021

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Libya

- 98 candidates register candidacies for president in Libya's upcoming elections.
- UN Special envoy to Libya, Jan Kubis, resigns abruptly, fuelling fears of behind-the-scenes tensions ahead of the elections.
- Value of Libyan Dinar against the US Dollar falls.

A total of 98 candidates registered their candidacies for presidency in Libya's upcoming elections. This is the final number following the deadline for registrations which was reached on November 22nd. Among the candidates are well-known and anticipated individuals such as the former interior minister Fathi Bashagha; the head of the eastern-based Libyan National Army (LNA), Khalifa Haftar; Saif al-Islam Gaddafi, son of former Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi; Abdul Hamid Dbeibeh, Prime Minister in the Government of National Unity (GNU); and Aguila Saleh, Speaker of the Tobruk-based House of Representatives. Other notables include Laila bin Khalifa, the head of the National Movement Party and the first woman to run for presidency in Libya; Ali Al-Isawi: Former Deputy Prime Minister, 2011 and Former Foreign Minister in National Transitional Council; and Salama Al-Ghweil, Minister of State for Economic Affairs in the GNU.

In the days that followed, the electoral commission struck down 25 of the candidates, including Saif al-Islam Gaddafi and Abdul Hamid Dbeibah. Although Gaddafi attempted to appeal the decision, the appeals were interrupted by gunmen who attacked the court on 26th November, signalling an increasingly-fraught elections process.

While many of the remaining candidates are already established in Libyan politics, others are virtual unknowns, such as a Tripoli-based doctor named Fidan Hamza; and Hatem al-Kour, a comedian who makes frequent social commentaries. So far, many of these smaller candidates have offered limited insights about their platforms, with their announcements for their candidacy often consisting of buzzwords such as "democracy", "national sovereignty" and "reconciliation" without any clear roadmaps on how to achieve them. It is unlikely many of these candidates will gain many votes. However, being outsiders, they have a potential to secure dark-horse victories, especially given the dissatisfaction of Libyans with the status quo. Some of these candidates may also be aiming to split the vote of ideological rivals or otherwise get their names out there for future political ambitions.

Meanwhile, the number parliamentary legislative candidates reached 721, with registration open until December 7th.

The United Nations' Special Envoy to Libya announced his surprise resignation. Jan Kubis, who has been the envoy since March 2020, following the resignation of Ghassan Salameh, announced his resignation on November 23rd. While no reasons were given for his resignation, the UN's chief spokesperson, Stephane Dujarric, confirmed the resignation and announced that a replacement is being sought but did not say whether Kubis would remain on the job during the election. Indeed, the surprise resignation has been interpreted by some analysts that there are growing and severe disagreements behind the scenes and could put the elections in danger, forcing them to be delayed or risking post-election instability. Others, however, have noted his lack of visibility during his time as Special Envoy, suggesting that any impact will be extremely minimal.

Libyan Dinar value against the US Dollar fell sharply over the past two weeks.
The Dinar gained some value against the US Dollar over November 14th, with 1LYD valued in 0.219414 USD. In the days since, however, it experienced a precipitous drop, reaching 0.217414 USD as of November 22nd. The fall may be linked to the growing political uncertainty ahead of the elections.

However, the economic outlook may improve amidst developments this week. The country hosted the Libya Energy and Economic Summit 2021 this week, bringing partners from the rest of Africa, as well as multinational oil companies such as ConocoPhillips, Petrofac, TotalEnergies and others. Libyan officials are also due to meet Tunisian and Turkish economic officials as part of "Made in Libya" exhibition hosted by Tunisia and the Libyan-Turkish Forum for Enterprise Development.

Yemen

- The UN publishes damning report about humanitarian conditions in Yemen.
- New talks called in Hodeidah after Coalition withdrawal changes battlefield landscape.
- US increases diplomatic pressure on the Houthis.
- Heavy fighting across Yemen continues, with Marib still remaining the focal point.

The United Nations' Development Programme published a damning new report about the humanitarian situation in Yemen. The report warned that the war deaths – including both direct and indirect causes – in Yemen will reach 377,000 by the end of the year and could reach as high as 1.3 million by 2030. The report estimated that 70% of those killed would be children under the age of five, with 60% of the deaths due to indirect causes like hunger or disease. The report also estimated a surge in malnutrition, reaching 9.2 million by 2039, with extreme poverty impacting 22 million people. It added that extreme poverty in the country could disappear within a generation if the war was to end immediately.

The UN also called for new talks in Hodeidah following the withdrawal of Saudi-led Coalition forces from some areas south of the city. The situation around the strategic port city has become increasingly fluid after Coalition forces reportedly withdrew from the vicinity of the city in early-November, with the Houthi forces taking control of many of these positions. In the days since, the Saudi-led Coalition launched numerous airstrikes on these positions, raising fears that the UN-brokered deal around the city could collapse. The UN mission said that the changes in the terrain need to be discussed and the framework of the Hodeidah Agreement adjusted accordingly. It remains unclear why the Saudi forces withdrew from their positions. When the news first emerged, Saudi officials denied any withdrawals, describing the situation as a redeployment. However, many sides, including local fighters, were reportedly caught unaware of the developments.

Houthis face increased diplomatic pressure. The United States' Secretary of State, Anthony Blinken, issued a new statement, calling once again for the release of the Yemeni staff working in the US Embassy compound in Sanaa. Describing their arrest as unprovoked, the statement called on the group to release the workers. Meanwhile, the US treasury has sanctioned Saleh Mesfer Alshaer, a senior Houthi military officer, for seizing assets worth more than $100 million from the opponents of the Houthi Movement. These moves came amidst increased criticisms from Washington over the Houthi Movement, with support from Iran, exacerbating the situation in Yemen and endangering local shipping. It would appear that Washington is increasing its diplomatic and political pressure on the Houthis even as it reduces its military involvement with the Coalition.

Heavy fighting continues across Yemen. Over the past two weeks, the majority of the fighting – barring the skirmishes in Hodeidah – were concentrated around the strategic city of Marib where the Houthi Movement remains stalemated against the Saudi-led Coalition. The Houthi forces have continued to shell Coalition forces around Marib with rockets while the Coalition announced that it has launched several airstrikes on Houthi positions around Sanaa, destroying a missile launch site. In its statement, the Coalition also accused the

Houthis of using civilian installations as “human shields” and called on civilians to not gather around sites that could potentially be targeted with strikes. In turn, the Houthi movement announced that it has launched 14 drones at several Saudi bases around Riyadh, Jeddah, Abha, Jizan and Najran, as well as Aramco facilities in Jeddah itself. The drone attacks appear to have done limited damage.

Lebanon

- President Aoun refuses to authorise March elections.
- Medical professionals warn of “surge in deaths” after drug subsidies lifted, leaving hospitals undersupplied.
- Investigation into corruption in Lebanon’s central bank suspended.

Lebanon grapples with upcoming elections. On November 19th, Lebanese President, Michel Aoun, said he would not authorise the legislative elections to take place in March even after the parliament has already approved the elections. Aoun said that the election, due to take place on March 27th, would “deprive” thousands of voters from reaching the age of 21, as well as limit access to voting stations in mountainous areas that experience frequent snow. Aoun was quoted preferring May 8th or May 15th as the ideal election date. The move may frustrate many in Lebanon who have come to see the elections as the “last hope” for a country that has been mired in an economic crisis, bringing with it severe deprivation across most segments of Lebanese society.

The Lebanese Foreign Ministry said that 244,442 Lebanese people living abroad registered to vote in the election, representing twice the number of expats who voted in the 2018 polls when they were allowed to vote from abroad for the first time.

Doctors in Lebanon warn of “surge in deaths” after drug subsidies lifted. Medical professionals are warning that hospitals are struggling to purchase expensive medications after the Lebanese Ministry of Health partially lifted the subsidies of medications earlier this month, including drugs for chronic illnesses. In the days that followed, prices for medicines rose sharply, depriving both patients and hospitals from purchasing them. Dr Mohammed Hassoun, the chief medical officer of Beirut’s Rafik Hariri University Hospital, said that his hospital is relying on support from NGOs to keep itself supplied. Many pharmacies also warned that their stocks are running empty. With the economic crisis pushing two-thirds of the country into poverty and promised support systems such as ration cards still not implemented, there are fears that the shortcomings could cause deaths among the chronically ill, while further limiting the country’s fight against COVID-19.

Investigation into corruption of Lebanon’s central bank governor suspended. The investigation, which was led by Judge Jean Tannous and targeted the bank’s governor, Riad Salameh, on suspicion of illegal enrichment, was suspended after one of the four Lebanese banks he sought as a witness filed a lawsuit, accusing him of gross misconduct. In particular, the banks claimed that some of the information requested was against the banking secrecy laws. However, critics warned that the case is yet another example of judicial officials being intimidated to slow down investigation into corruption. Perhaps in an attempt to allay such criticisms, Salameh announced on November 25th that the bank would be honouring all data requests from the auditing company A&M, which had threatened to pull out following similar allegations of obstruction. While this will not impact the case, it could offer prosecutors an opening to get the bank to comply with their own requests.

Tunisia

- President Saied announces work is underway to get the country out of “exceptional measures”.
- Unemployment rises to 18.4%.
- Value of Tunisian Dinar fluctuates.

Preparations underway to “exit exceptional measures phase” but tensions persist. Tunisian President, Kais Saied, announced on November 20th that preparations are underway to end the “exceptional measures” that were put in place since he assumed power back in July. Saied’s statement added that he has been in contact with the United States’ Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, and added that the US would offer support to Tunisia once it has announced dates for political reform, appealing for understanding among Tunisia’s partners due to the severity of socio-economic problems facing the country.

However, many on the opposition remain unconvinced about Tunis’s present direction. On November 19th, the Tunisian General Labour Union called for early elections to get the country out of the “political crisis”. The week preceding the call also saw numerous protests calling for the end of the “police state”. Some of the protests turned violent, with police using tear gas.

Tunisian unemployment rises to 18.4%. In a development that will reduce President Saied’s room to manoeuvre, the Tunisian National Institute of Statistics announced that unemployment in the country reached 18.4%, with the number of unemployed persons at 762,600. This represents a rise of 0.5%, though the rate is distributed unequally between men and women, with female unemployment at 24.1%. The minister for Employment and Vocational Training, Nasreddine Nsibi, said that the government is working with the unions, including the General Labour Union, to improve the country’s economic outlook, including raising the minimum wage.

Value of the Tunisian Dollar fluctuates against the US Dollar. After a relatively steady few weeks over October and November, the value of the Tunisian Dinar against the US Dollar experienced fluctuations, with the value of one dinar falling from the high of 0.357044 US Dollars to lows of 0.346633 and largely remained there. These developments, coming after several weeks of stability, could suggest that confidence in Tunisia’s direction is eroding.

Syria

- Two major pro-Iran figures, the Grand Mufti of Syria and the head of IRGC in Syria, are removed from their positions.
- US Treasury eases Syria sanctions for humanitarian aid.
- Authorities in northern Syria accused of pay-for-release scheme with IS prisoners.
- Collapse of Turkish Lira hits Opposition-controlled Idlib.

There are signs of anti-Iran pushback in Damascus. On November 16th, President Bashar al-Assad issued a new decree eliminating the post of the Grand Mufti, the highest Muslim authority in the country for the Sunni population. The elimination of the post will also force the Grand Mufti, Ahmed Badreddin Hassoun, into retirement. His responsibilities will now be handled by the Ministry of Religious Endowments, particularly the Council on Islamic Jurisprudence. The Syrian Opposition condemned the removal of the post, citing it as an Iranian-engineered process to weaken Sunni institutions and bring them under state control. Indeed, the Istanbul-based Syrian Islamic Council refused to acknowledge the removal of the post and appointed Osama al-Rifaie into the position. However, while Damascus may indeed be interested in tightening control over Sunni religious affairs, Hassoun's removal is a loss for Iran, given that he has been very pro-Iran over the course of the war, whereas the current Minister of Religious Endowments, Mohammed Abdel Sattar al-Sayyid, is known to be pro-Russian.

In conjunction, the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) has removed the head of its Syria operations, Javad Ghaffari, who held the position since 2015. Known for his closeness to the deceased Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani and instrumental in forming the pro-Government National Defence Forces (NDF) militias, Ghaffari's ouster reportedly came after President Assad requested Iran to remove him, allegedly for becoming a "liability" due to spoilerism, threatening to derail several international agreements.

It is possible that these developments are part of the on-going normalisation efforts between Damascus and several Gulf Arab states.

Washington amends sanctions regulations to ease aid. The United States' Treasury issued a new amendment to its sanctions regime in Syria, making it easier for humanitarian organisations to deliver aid and do business in Syria. These include license of invest in Syria; purchase refined petroleum products of Syrian origin; and transactions with elements of the Syrian Government. The treasury emphasised that these authorisations are limited to non-profits. While small, these adjustments mark a significant departure from the "six degrees of separation" clauses the Caesar Act, which came into effect in 2020 and was criticised by aid workers in the country. With the Biden Administration seemingly refraining from new sanctions on Syria, the amendments suggest that Washington, while not moving to re-establish ties, is reducing its pressure campaign, likely to let US Gulf allies to take a greater role in Syria and avoid further destabilising effects, given the sensitive state of the region amidst Lebanon's economic collapse.

Kurdish authorities in northern Syria accused of pay-for-release scheme of Islamic State (IS) militants. A report by the UK newspaper, *The Guardian*, claims that the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) are releasing suspected IS detainees under a scheme in which they pay some $8,000. The report cited accounts of two individuals interviewed, both of whom fought with the IS and were held in jails before being released and subsequently moving to Turkey with their families where they live right now. Their release, the report claims, included signing a document vowing to not involve themselves in an armed group. While IS prisoners and families were periodically released as part of reconciliation agreements with local tribes, the news of release based on monetary exchanges raises concerns about how many prisoners having been released without proper vetting, especially given that IS supporters have already been holding fundraisers to help release people from the camps where IS families are held. An SDF spokesperson, Farhad Shami, denied the practice taking place.

Sliding Lira value hits Opposition-controlled markets. The collapsing value of the Turkish Lira, which hit new lows this week, is having severe impacts on Opposition-held parts of Syria which have semi-officially adopted the Lira in recent years. According to Idlib-based traders, the loss of some 40% of the Lira's value is resulting in severe price fluctuations, compounded by transportation difficulties and other logistical hurdles. With much of the region relying on imports from Turkey, there are reports that the rapid price fluctuations have left many Syrians unable to purchase even the most basic commodities. With aid to the region also declining steadily, many Syrians are concerned about getting through the winter.

Iraq

- Iraq's High Electoral Commission upholds a number of objections filed by Fatah Alliance.
- Some 400 Iraqis stranded in the Belarus-Poland Border return.
- US Secretary of Defence reaffirms withdrawal of US combat troops.
- Muqtada al-Sadr disbands one of the armed groups loyal to him as a "goodwill gesture."

Iraq's High Electoral Commission announced on November 21st that the results of the October election will be "strongly affected" by the legal challenges. A member of the Commission, Imad Mohsen, was quoted saying that it is preparing to announce the results once the judicial authorities have finalised the results. Many of the challenges to the results were put forward by pro-Iran parties such as the Fatah Alliance, which initially only won 14 seats. In a statement, the Fatah Alliance cited the changes as proof that the vote was tampered with. Although the fact that the electoral commission was able to address the challenges is a positive sign regarding the maturing of Iraq's electoral bureaucracy, the outcomes of these challenges could also be used to discredit individuals and groups where the loser does not agree with the new result. Furthermore, supporters of the candidates whose wins were overturned following investigations will likely be galvanised by what they have viewed as the election being "stolen". Indeed, shortly after the results in Hillah (Baghdad) were overturned in favour of Fatah, supporters of the independent candidate, Amir al-Maamouri, who was initially listed as the winner, protested. Muqtada al-Sadr, whose bloc emerged as the winning side, also criticised the "political and security pressure" exerted on the Commission. Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) have increased their alertness in anticipation of further protests and potential clashes.

Some 400 Iraqis stuck in the Belarus-Poland Border return. The Iraqi Government arranged its first repatriation flight for 400 Iraqis, most of them Kurdish, after they spent weeks stranded along the Belarus-Poland Border. Many of the returnees were noted to be in bad physical and emotional state, having spent thousands of dollars during the journey, with some sourcing their funds from selling everything they had back home. While those who undertook the dangerous journey cited worsening economic conditions and governance in the Kurdistan Region, Kurdish officials have so far denied that the conditions had to do with anything in their control, instead putting the blame of wider crises like COVID-19 and people smugglers. However, such statements seem to be doing little to mollify questions asked in the international scene about the state of affairs in the Kurdistan Region, which has been cited as a source of relative stability and development compared to the rest of Iraq. With the region witnessing violent student protests during the last week of November over socio-economic conditions, the region may witness further emigration even as the number of available routes to Europe and elsewhere are becoming harder to access. It is estimated that some 3,000 to 20,000 people remain along the Belarus-Poland Border, the majority of whom are Iraqi Kurds.

US Defence Secretary reaffirms commitment to withdraw combat troops from Iraq. Speaking at a meeting with the Iraqi Defence Minister Jubah al-Jaburi, the US

Secretary of Defense, Lloyd Austin, said that Washington aims to withdraw from its combat role in Iraq by the end of 2021. Austin noted that Washington will continue to share intelligence, advice and assistance with the ISF and that the US remains committed to security in the Middle East, both against the Islamic State (IS) and the Iranian influence in Iraq. The withdrawal, while consistent with Washington's desire to reduce its Middle Eastern footprint in favour of focusing on Asia-Pacific, has raised concerns among some observers that other forces could try to fill the vacuum, resulting in a new wave of violence in the region similar to what took place after the US' withdrawal from Iraq in the 2000s. However, the ISF has notably matured in the years since and has already been at the forefront of numerous counter-IS military operations. Indeed, by fulfilling one of the demands of both pro-Iran and nationalist factions by withdrawing combat troops, Washington may find it easier to conduct relations with Baghdad.

Muqtada al-Sadr disbands Promised Day Brigades. The prominent cleric and national politician announced that he was dissolving the armed group and the closure of its headquarters as part of a "goodwill gesture" towards dissolving armed militia factions as a whole. The weapons held by the group, al-Sadr said, will be handed over to the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) and the armed forces and called on other armed factions to follow suit. The move represents a positive step towards the de-militarisation of Iraq and will put further pressure on other PMU factions to disarm, especially Iranian-linked ones, even as they come under increased political pressure following the assassination attempt on the Prime Minister on November 7th. However, Sadr himself still retains the Peace Brigades that are operating under the PMU, and thus Sadr's gesture is likely better interpreted as a political move rather than the disarmament process gaining momentum.

Egypt

- Cairo enters talks with Eritrea and Tanzania over the GERD dispute with Ethiopia.
- Egyptian and US officials undertake their first “strategic dialogue” under US President Joe Biden.
- Egyptian Government begins transferring staff and operations to the New Administrative Capital.

Cairo redoubled its diplomatic efforts to find a resolution to the dispute with Ethiopia over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD). On November 17th, a delegation from Eritrea met with Egyptian officials, with the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, meeting his Eritrean counterpart, Othman Saleh, the following day. An official readout indicated that the two sides discussed challenges in the Horn of Africa. While the two countries do have long-standing ties, the on-going conflict in Ethiopia and the impact it can have on the GERD dispute was almost certainly discussed, given that Eritrea emerged as Ethiopia’s ally during Ethiopia’s conflict. Egyptian officials also entered talks with Tanzania to facilitate talks surrounding GERD, with the Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, expressing that he looks forward to a “legal, binding and fair” agreement over GERD. With the conflict in Ethiopia casting doubt in GERD’s future for the time being, it seems Cairo is utilising the unexpected opening to rally diplomatic resources to achieve its goals. While it could be reasonably expected that Cairo would capitalise the moment militarily – especially given that the two sides nearly went to war over the dispute – it seems Cairo is concerned about the escalation of regional instability, should the situation in Ethiopia worsen.

Cairo and Washington held their first “strategic dialogue” under the administration of US President Joe Biden. The talks, which lasted two days, saw Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, meet the US Secretary of State, Antony Blinken, discussing bilateral ties. The two sides also discussed a number of regional developments, including the dispute over GERD and the instability in Sudan, although readouts suggest the latter mentioned only in passing. The talks came at the backs of tensions in September during which Washington withheld $130 million in annual aid due to human rights concerns, the first time in recent years when US aid to Egypt was conditioned to human rights.

Egyptian Government begins move to new capital. Six years after the Egyptian Government launched the construction of the New Administrative Capital to move the capital out of Cairo, government departments are starting to transfer their operations and employees. It is estimated that some 50,000 government employees will move to the new capital and the process is expected to take about six months. The new capital, located some 60 kilometres east of Cairo, includes numerous residential and business districts, as well as a diplomatic district. Egyptian officials often framed the construction of the new capital as a means to ease congestion and services in Cairo. However, activists suggested that the new capital is aimed at shielding the government from protests like those that took place during the Arab Spring protests.

Jordan

- Jordan signs energy and water agreement with Israel, UAE and the US.
- Jordanian officials express support for Palestinians.
- Protests against Defence Law and high cost of living take place in Amman.

Jordan signs energy and water agreement with Israel, United Arab Emirates (UAE) and the United States. The agreement, signed as a memorandum of agreement, would facilitate cross-border water and solar energy transactions, with Jordan exporting 600 megawatts of Solar energy to Israel while Israel will export up to 200 million cubic meters of desalinated water. The deal comes in the aftermath of severe droughts in Jordan, with many dams in the country drying up and the country facing a water deficit of 40 million cubic meters. In addition to purchasing water, Jordan is also eyeing desalination projects of its own, including a desalination plant. Critics, especially Palestinians, warned that the deal to provide electricity to Israel would go towards powering illegal Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory. However, Amman, already facing the risk of instability due to unemployment and a moribund economy, is deeply vulnerable to water-related insecurity, with few good options. In entering the deal, however, Jordan may have inadvertently taken a side in the brewing rivalry between Saudi Arabia and the UAE after it emerged that Saudi Arabia attempted to block the deal and substitute it with its own offers, one that excluded Israel.

Indeed, Jordanian officials made a number of statements supporting the Palestinian cause, perhaps in a bid to deflect criticisms over its deals with Israel. On November 16th, Jordan's King Abdullah II announced that his country will still remain on the side of Palestinians until they establish an independent state. 75 Jordanian MPs also criticised a plan by the United Kingdom to designate the Palestinian group Hamas as a terrorist organisation, deeming the move to be "aggression" against Palestinians and Arabs as a whole. Jordanian students also launched protests against what they referred to as the UAE's "academic normalisation" with Israel.

The state of Jordan's economy also continues to be a source of protests. On November 12th, protesters gathered around the King Hussein Mosque in Amman to protest fuel price hikes and the high cost of living. In addition to economic concerns, protesters also spoke against the Defence Law passed in 2019, granting unrestricted, unwritten powers to the Prime Minister.