



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 | December #1 2021

- [Libya - 2](#)
- [Yemen - 3](#)
- [Lebanon - 5](#)
- [Tunisia - 6](#)
- [Syria - 7](#)
- [Iraq - 9](#)
- [Egypt - 11](#)
- [Jordan - 12](#)

Libya

- Tensions around polarising candidates and increased militia impunity around courts risks post-election conflict.
- Libya's 5+5 Joint Military Committee meets Turkish and Russian officials to discuss withdrawal of foreign forces.
- Roadmap agreed to unify Libya's splintered Central Bank.

With the election competition underway, the past two weeks saw appeals filed against the candidacies of several high-profile candidates including Khalifa Haftar and Saif al-Islam Gaddafi. While both candidates have since been cleared to run, the appeals process was marred by violence, with the courthouse in Sabha processing Saif al-Islam Gaddafi's candidacy attacked by armed fighters linked to Haftar. Haftar's candidacy, meanwhile, was rejected by courts in western Libya, with several militia leaders threatening violence should he win. Furthermore, the High Electoral Commission reported that five polling stations were robbed by armed fighters, with voting cards among the items stolen.

All these developments raise the risk of post-election violence, as well as the possibility of renewed conflict should a particularly polarising candidate win. Indeed, officials from the United Nations' Security Council warned on December 6th that the situation in the country is becoming too unstable for elections. A similar warning was made by the High State Council on December 8th. In their statement, the body warned that growing legal jostling over the rules and increasing violence could render elections and post-election stability risky.

Libya's 5+5 Joint Military Committee has ramped up its efforts to remove foreign fighters from Libya. The Committee met with officials from the European Union to gather support for the removal of foreign fighters. Subsequently, Committee officials held talks with their counterparts from Russia and Turkey, the two main foreign powers presently involved in Libya, and have facilitated the arrival of foreign fighters. Although Turkish officials emphasized that they are present in the country through legitimate channels – the request of the UN-recognised government in Tripoli – the two sides nevertheless discussed a roadmap, with Ankara reportedly welcoming the process so long as all other forces are withdrawn.

Libya's splintered Central Bank begins unification process. On December 6th, the heads of the country's Tripoli and Tobruk-based central banks met to discuss the matter of unifying the bank and their assets. Describing the unified Central Bank of Libya as one of the most important steps facing the country, the two sides reportedly discussed a roadmap proposed by the accounting firm Deloitte. The two sides agreed on the composition of the technical teams involved, as well as the steps for implementation and consolidation of the Central Bank.

Yemen

- France-based Yemeni NGO claims the Saudi-led Coalition is cooperating with al-Qaeda.
- Yemen's central bank governor replaced amidst unprecedented crash of Yemeni riyal.
- Marib offensive loses momentum; Houthis and Saudi-led Coalition exchange rocket attacks.

A France-based Yemeni NGO submitted a lawsuit against the Crown Princes of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) over their conduct during the war. The Legal Centre for Rights and Development NGO, filing the complaint on behalf of eight victims of Yemen's war, claimed on December 3rd that the two countries had "financed terrorism" by establishing an alliance with al-Qaeda. The complaint alleged that the Saudi-led Coalition had funnelled money to al-Qaeda via the First Abu Dhabi Bank in return for the group's withdrawal from the cities it controlled. It also accused high-ranking Saudi and Emirati officials, including the crown princes of Saudi Arabia and Abu Dhabi, for "forced disappearance", "war crimes" and "forming a terrorist criminal gang." While it is unlikely that the lawsuit will have a tangible impact, it will nevertheless come at a time of increased scrutiny on the Saudi-led Coalition. Indeed, just two days before the complaint was filed, the UK-based *Guardian* newspaper accused the Coalition of using "incentives and threats" as part of a lobbying campaign to shut down a United Nations investigation of human right violations committed by all sides in the Yemen conflict. The UN's Human Rights Council shut down the investigation in October. Citing political and diplomatic sources, the report alleged, among other things, that Saudi Arabia suggested it would make Hajj travel for Indonesians harder to convince their officials to vote against the resolution, which they did this year.

Yemeni riyal experiences unprecedented crash, forcing replacement of Central Bank governor. On December 6th, the Yemeni riyal experienced an unprecedented crash on the black market, with \$1 worth YR1,700, more than three times the official rate of \$1 for YR530 maintained by Yemen's Central Bank affiliated with the Saudi-backed Government. In response to the crash, Yemeni President Abd-Rabbu Mansour Hadi announced that the Central Bank's governor, Ahmed Obaid Al Fadhli, would be replaced, appointing Ahmed bin Ahmed Ghalleb Al-Maabqi in his place. However, economists warn that many structural causes for the collapse of the riyal remain unaddressed and the new governor may not be able to do much to change the course.

The Houthi offensive on Marib seemingly loses momentum, but clashes continue. Despite heavy shelling and rocket attacks conducted by both the Houthi Movement and the Saudi-led Coalition, the situation around the strategic city of Marib changed little over the past two weeks, with the Coalition announcing repelling several Houthi attacks and claiming that at least military advisor affiliated with the Lebanese Hezbollah was among those killed. Instead, both sides appear to be focusing on long-range strikes. The Coalition announced that it has carried out several airstrikes on Houthi

positions in Marib, al-Jawh and Sana'a. In turn, the Houthi movement announced that it launched ballistic missiles and armed drones towards Saudi Arabia, targeting the Ministry of Defence in Riyadh and Aramco facilities in Jeddah. Saudi officials said that the attacks were intercepted, and no footage of major explosions in these facilities emerged so far.

Lebanon

- Lebanese Information Minister resigns amidst efforts to rebuild Gulf ties.
- Three senior Lebanese judges resign citing political interference in cases.
- Lebanese Pound dips to new lows on the black market, triggering protests in major cities.

Diplomatic efforts pick up to repair rift between Lebanon and the Gulf. On November 29th, Lebanese President Michel Aoun met with the Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Tamin bin Hamad Al-Thani, to discuss bilateral ties, with the two sides discussing potential investments. While Qatar has been an outlier in the tensions between Lebanon and the Gulf, the kingdom itself has been working on improving its ties with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. These contacts between Doha and Beirut may work to heal the relations with the wider Gulf. Indeed, on December 2nd, French and Saudi officials met, with the French President Emmanuel Macron promising to help rebuild diplomatic ties between Lebanon and the Gulf. Subsequently on December 3rd, Lebanon's Information Minister George Kordahi, whose words around Yemen triggered the crisis to begin with, resigned. In his resignation message, Kordahi expressed hope that his resignation would open a window for improved Lebanon-Gulf ties.

Three senior Lebanese judges resign citing political interference. Three senior judges who have not been named in the media announced on November 25th that they were resigning in protest of the political interference on the work of the judiciary. While the exact involvement of the judges in major cases are unknown, Lebanon has been grappling with two high-profile cases that have both been stalled due to allegations of politically-motivated investigations: The Beirut Port Blast investigation; and the investigation into the Lebanese Central Bank, which is under accusations of misusing funds. The resignation took place on the same day as the Lebanese Central Bank announced that it would cooperate with all data requests of the consultancy firm Alvarez and Marsal (A&M). A&M had previously threatened to pull out of Lebanon due to concerns that its forensic audit was being stonewalled.

Lebanese Pound dips to new lows on the black market. On Friday, November 26th, the black market rate for the pound dipped to LP25,000 for one US Dollar. This is a new record from a previous low of LP24,000, which occurred earlier the same week. Notably, both valuations are significantly lower than the official exchange rates of LP1,500 per \$1. The official exchange rates also suffered dips on the same day but have recovered somewhat to its pre-crash levels. However, the spiralling black market rates suggest that the Pound's woes are far from over despite the on-going Gulf détente raising prospects for the economy. Indeed, following the crash on Friday, protesters blocked roads and burnt tyres in major cities like Beirut, Tripoli and Sidon. Further dips took place in the black markets on 9th December after the Lebanese Central Bank raised the official exchange rate for US dollars from 3,900 Lebanese pounds to 8,000, bringing the black market value of \$1 to LP27,500. It is expected that the rate may fall further to LP40,000 per \$1 in the coming weeks.

Tunisia

- Unions and opposition parties call for early general elections.
- Paris and Milan consuls dismissed amidst apparent reshuffle of diplomatic officials.
- Value of Tunisian Dinar against the Dollar falls.

Opposition parties and unions call for early general elections. On November 26th, the Ennahda Movement called for early general elections alongside “serious” national dialogue on electoral law. The Ennahda statement accused President Kais Saied of demonstrating “his inability to provide solutions to the country’s issues” despite the authority he has amassed since dissolving the parliament in July. Tunisia’s powerful UGTT union joined in the calls for the election, warning about the country’s democratic gains and reluctance by the President to announce a plan for political reforms. Three other political parties, Democratic Current Party, the Democratic Forum for Labour and Liberties (Ettakatol) and the Republican Party issued a statement criticising Saied for a recent speech in which he discussed the role of the armed forces. The statement denounced the President for politicising the army.

President Saied dismisses Paris and Milan consuls amidst a reshuffle of diplomatic officials. The announcement of the dismissal of the consuls was made on December 5th, alongside the announcement that the consulates would receive a “financial and administrative audit.” No specific reasons were given. However, since November 24th, as many as 20 diplomats have been removed from their posts with no explanation.

Value of Tunisian Dinar against the US Dollar falls. After spending the latter half of November with fluctuations, the value of the Tunisian Dinar against the US Dollar has showed a trend of slow but steady decline. The value of the Dinar bottomed on November 25th, with an exchange rate of 0.344 per \$1. Although the value of the Dinar rose somewhat since, it has not recovered to the mid-November highs of 0.356 and has continued to hover around the 0.344s.

Syria

- The EU to continue humanitarian aid to Idlib and notes position vis-à-vis Damascus is unchanged.
- Severe rise in COVID-19 cases reported in Daraa.
- No major clashes take place, but localised security incidents continue.

The European Union announced that it will continue to provide humanitarian aid to Idlib. Speaking on December 3rd, the EU's High Commissioner for Foreign and Security Policy affirmed that the EU's policy regarding the Syrian Government remains unchanged, despite signs of normalisation between some Gulf Arab states and Damascus. He further added that aid would continue for at least one million displaced Syrians living in the region. The announcement comes amidst deteriorating economic conditions in the region due to wider impacts of COVID-19, diminishing aid due to other crises taking priority over Syria, and the widespread adoption of the Turkish Lira, which has recently suffered in value. Indeed, in addition to aid, numerous local governments and organisations, including the Idlib-based Syrian Salvation Government (SSG), have pledged to increase subsidies for food staples.

Activists and media outlets in Daraa report severe rise in COVID-19 cases.

According to activists, the number of COVID-19 cases seen in the southern province of Daraa have risen past 52,000 cases between October and November. The spike has been attributed to the destruction of local infrastructure during the conflict, with the availability of many services, including healthcare, still lagging some three years after Damascus re-established control over southern Syria. However, activists noted that a combination of cavalier attitudes to the virus; low vaccination rates; and the Syrian Government's Ministry of Health reporting lower numbers than reality is also having an impact in the spread. The rise of COVID-19 in Daraa may not only impact local lives, but the regional economy as well, especially if neighbouring Jordan chooses to shut its borders to Daraa to contain the outbreak, just as it has done several times since 2020 during the course of the pandemic.

Syria witnesses low frequency of clashes, but security incidents continue. Over the past two weeks, clashes and security incidents have remained relatively low, with the frontlines along Idlib and Aleppo witnessing few exchanges of fire and skirmishes. However, continued security incidents suggest the country remains far from safe. In al-Kharrata oil field, roughly 20 kilometres southwest of Deir ez-Zour, ten oil workers were killed after an explosion targeted their bus. While no group claimed responsibility, the Islamic State (IS), which is active in the region, has been cited as the obvious culprit by local outlets. An IED attack on a US military convoy in Hasakah, north of Deir ez-Zour, was also reported by activists on December 7th, with no reports of casualties. In the Port of Latakia, an explosion caused damage to several shipping crates in the early hours of December 7th. While many observers claimed the incident was an Israeli airstrike, the incident stood out due to both the Port not being a usual target for the Israel Air Force (IDF), as well as reports of local officials granting the press immediate access. Since then, observers suggested that the

incident was a bombing and not an airstrike. In Idlib, a US drone strike targeted a senior member of Tanzim Hurras al-Din named Mus'ab Qinan on December 3rd. In the aftermath, however, the US Central Command announced that it would open an investigation after footage from the area suggested civilians may have been hurt in the attack.

Iraq

- Iraqi High Electoral Commission announced Muqtada al-Sadr as the biggest winner of the recent elections.
- First press conference held regarding the attempted assassination of the PM al-Kadhimi.
- Uptick of IS-linked attacks across Iraq raise fears of security breakdown.
- US concludes combat missions in Iraq.

Iraq's High Electoral Commission announced on November 30th that the bloc representing Muqtada al-Sadr emerged as the biggest winner. The commission stated that Sadr's bloc has won 73 out of the total of 329 seats in the parliament. Although some parties, mainly those leaning towards Iran, have disputed some of the results, only five seats in Nineveh, Erbil, Kirkuk, Basra and Baghdad have changed. However, these results did not impact Sadr's win, closely followed by Sunni Parliament Speaker Mohammed Al-Halbousi's Taqadum group with 37 seats and former prime minister Nouri Al-Maliki's State of Law bloc was third with 33 seats. The results will now be confirmed by the federal court, with additional appeals to be considered. Meanwhile, Sadr himself announced that he will not be forming a coalition government but is rather looking for a "national majority" government.

The first press conference was held regarding the attempted assassination of Prime Minister Kadhimi. Chaired by Iraqi National Security adviser Qasim al-Araji on November 29th, new details were revealed about the attack. Araji, who leads the committee investigating the attack, disclosed that two explosive-laden drones packed with Composition C-4 targeted the prime minister's residence in the Green Zone. It appears one drone was meant to force the Prime Minister to flee from his residence while the second targeting him directly in the courtyard. He also announced that the director of explosives control, Major General Sabah Hassan al-Shibli, was arrested due to tampering with evidence after footage emerged of him handling a leftover rocket carelessly and detonating the C4-packed rocket in the Tigris later. So far, no suspects have been named. However, the leader of Asail Ahl al-Haq, Qais al-Khazali, who was frequently named as a suspect and who had maintained that the assassination was a "fake operation", called on Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani to intervene. Khazali warned that the situation is reaching dangerous levels and the allegations around him could drag the country into a crisis.

Uptick of Islamic State (IS) attacks raise security concerns. Suspected IS attacks have picked up significantly since the end of November. Many of the attacks, consisting of bombings and assassinations, took place along the "disputed territories" between the Government of Iraq and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) straddling Diyala and Nineveh and have targeted both the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Kurdish Peshmerga. Among the more notable incidents was an IS attack in the village of Lheban north of Kirkuk. The IS militants not only attacked the village but took control of it for 24 hours before being ousted by the ISF and the Peshmerga on December 6th. However, the threat is not contained

to the region, as attacks have also occurred in the Suleymaniyah province controlled by the KRG. A bombing in the southernmost city of Basra on December 7th, which killed four, is also suspected of being IS-linked, highlighting the group's reach. The KRG Prime Minister, Masrour Barzani, warned that the IS remains a "serious threat" to security.

United States concludes combat mission in Iraq. Senior US and Iraqi officials announced on December 4th, that a final round of talks to formally end the US-led combat mission against the IS has been concluded. National Security Adviser Qasim al-Araji said that the coalition would continue to provide technical assistance and training to the ISF. The announcement is ahead of schedule and suggests that the US pledge to end the Coalition's combat mission in Iraq by December is going ahead.

Egypt

- Egypt and Turkey mull appointing ambassadors as part of their on-going détente.
- Israeli Foreign Minister visits Cairo.
- Egyptian companies unveil new drone and counter-drone technologies.

Egyptian détente with Turkey picks up speed as the two sides discuss appointing ambassadors. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced on November 28th that Turkey is looking to improve its ties with Egypt alongside that of Israel. Speaking during his return from Turkmenistan, Erdoğan suggested that appointing ambassadors to both countries are in the works just as Ankara is working to improve its ties with the United Arab Emirates. Ankara and Cairo have shown some signs of détente over the recent weeks after a diplomatic break that has lasted for nearly a decade. The move is seen as a wider strategy to reduce Turkey's diplomatic isolation, as well as part of its efforts to attract investments amidst a severe economic crisis. However, the two governments remain on opposite sides on a number of issues including the conflict in Libya.

Israeli Foreign Minister visits Egypt. Israel's Foreign Minister, Yair Lapid, arrived in Cairo on December 9th to discuss bilateral ties with his Egyptian counterpart, Sameh Shoukry. The Egyptian head of intelligence was also present, suggesting that the talks focused on matters of security. The two sides will likely discuss the situation vis-à-vis Palestine in which Egypt played a mediating role between factions such as Hamas and the Israeli Government.

Egypt shows signs of entering the military drone market. During the Egypt Defence Expo held between November 29th and December 2nd, an Egyptian company, the Arab Organization for Industrialization, unveiled locally-produced drone technologies. Among those displayed was the DJ-400 counter-drone technology which is expected to enter service in the near future. Like other counter-drone systems, the DJ-400 blocks signals controlling the drone. Other companies such as Benha Electronics – part of Egypt's Ministry of Military Production – also unveiled similar weapons. Civilian drones are increasingly used by insurgents in the region, especially groups like the Islamic State (IS), which has operated drone-mounted bombs with great effectiveness. The Egyptian entry into the drone market will create further competition with Turkey which has already carved itself a veritable niche in drone and counter-drone technologies.

Jordan

- Protesters in Amman criticise constitutional amendments.
- General local elections to take place on March 22nd.
- Jordan to start oil exploration in two sites by February.

Protests broke out in Amman on December 3rd. Organised by Unified Jordanian Movement, a coalition of opposition groups, the protests accused the Jordanian Government of amassing power despite promises from the King to accelerate transition to a constitutional monarchy. The protests appear to have been triggered by the amendments to the constitution recently submitted to the parliament. Among the controversial amendments is the creation of a national foreign relations and security council that would be responsible for external political affairs, the state budget and other sovereign and security issues and would be headed by the King. The amendments also gave the King the sole role in appointing and dismissing high-ranking posts in the country including the police chief, the head of the judiciary and the mufti. With the royal palace already under fire for increased repression and evidence of corruption, it seems the opposition movements are highly alert for any more signs of tightened control.

March 22nd set as the date for local elections. The announcement was made by Jordan's electoral commission on November 28th, following the dissolution of local councils back in March 2021.

Jordan to start oil exploration in al-Jafr and al-Sarhan in February. The announcement was made by the country's Minister of Energy, Saleh al-Kharabsheh, who told reporters that a study is currently underway in al-Jafr and that the ministry, in cooperation with Jordan's National Petroleum Company, is considering drilling three medium-depth wells there. The minister noted that work in the sites will start in February and the country is expecting strong activity over the next couple years. Although the prices and popularity of hydrocarbons used in energy has been on the decline, recent surges in prices has encouraged a number of regional countries to ramp up exploration. While Jordan, with uncertain economic prospects, would benefit from the windfall, there is a risk that intensifying market competition and increasing production would reduce Amman's economic gains.