



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.

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Libya

- Libya elections postponed amidst political and security crisis.
- Security incidents in Tripoli and Sabha raise fears of a new war.
- UN appoints new Special Advisor to Libya.

Political and security crises force postponement of elections. On December 22nd, Libya's High National Elections Commissions (HNEC) officially announced that the elections, which were due to take place on December 24th, would not take place. The HNEC has proposed a new date of January 24th to hold the elections, although this has not yet been ratified by the House of Representatives (HoR), which decides the election dates.

The official postponement brings to an end a decision-making process that many onlookers both inside and outside Libya had been expecting for several days. On December 21st, the HNEC announced that it will dissolve its electoral committees nationwide, ordering temporary workers and the administrators in the polling stations to stop their work, effectively ensuring that the elections would not go ahead.

Prior to this, courts around the country continued to issue decisions regarding the eligibility of the candidates, seemingly on their own accord and with no oversight from higher authorities or consistency with the law, raising further concerns regarding both the integrity of the elections and their legitimacy. With security incidents around the country, including the capital Tripoli, picking up, more voices joined in the chorus arguing that the elections should be postponed.

Security incidents across Libya raise fears of a new war. As the political deadlock over the elections continued to fester, Libya witnessed a rapid deterioration of security conditions. In Tripoli, militia fighters affiliated with Salah Badi, a militia leader, launched a series of attacks and took over government buildings in Tripoli overnight on December 15th, including the office of the Prime Minister. A Tripoli-based military commander was also attacked by unknown assassins, surviving the attack with injuries. As a result of these developments, Tripoli University and other institutions have shut their doors.

Around the same time, clashes also erupted in the southern city of Sabha. The exact causes of the clashes are unknown, as are the parties. Some outlets reported that the clash took place between militias loyal to Khalifa Haftar while others reported it as a clash between the pro-Haftar and pro-Government of National Unity (GNU) forces.

Meanwhile in the oil crescent, militias forced the closure of the Sharara, al-Fil, al-Wafa and al-Hamada fields. The closure, reportedly as a result of disputes over unpaid salaries, forced the National Oil Corporation to cut down its output by more than 300,000 barrels per day.

While the situation in Tripoli and Sabha, in particular, has since calmed down, activists report that there are barricades and berms being erected in many major roads along southern Tripoli amidst an expectation of imminent war.

United Nations appoints new Special Advisor to Libya. The UN's Secretary-General António Guterres named Stephanie Williams as the UN's Special Advisor to Libya. Williams has extensive diplomatic and foreign policy security experience vis-à-vis the Middle East. She previously served as Acting Special Representative and Head of the United Nations Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL). With the surprise resignation of the UN Special Envoy to Libya, Jan Kubis, Williams will likely be the main UN appointee contending with the country's many problems amidst an increasingly-troubled election cycle. Williams already held meetings with several of the Presidential candidates including GNU Prime Minister Abdel Hamid Dbeibah and Khalifa Haftar, as well as the Foreign Minister of the GNU, Najla Mangoush.

Yemen

- Iranian ambassador to Sanaa recalled, dies abruptly.
- WFP warns that it has been forced to cut food aid due to lack of funds.
- Heavy fighting continues around Marib.

Iranian ambassador to Sanaa recalled after criticism from the Houthi movement. A report published by the *Wall Street Journal* claimed that the Houthi movement demanded the removal of the Iranian ambassador to Sanaa, Hasan Irlu. News of these developments emerged after the Houthi movement reportedly requested Saudi Arabia to permit an Iranian government-charted plane to land in Sanaa to pick up Irlu. Although Saudi Arabia rejected the request to let an Iranian plane through its air blockage, Irlu was reportedly able to leave the country via Iraq.

So far, the exact reasons for his removal are unclear. However, there have been rumours that Irlu has become too powerful politically, generating resentment from the Houthis who have often sought to balance their ties with Iran with their more local priorities. It is possible that Irlu's expulsion is indicative of tensions between Tehran and the Houthis.

Adding further intrigue, Iran's Foreign Ministry announced on December 21st that Irlu had passed away after contracting COVID-19.

The World Food Programme (WFP) announces it will be forced to cut aid to Yemen. The UN organisation said the cuts were implemented due to a lack of funds and warned that there will be a big surge in hunger in the coming months. The WFP estimates that they will be able to provide only for eight million Yemenis from January onwards despite some 16 million Yemenis expected to experience starvation. The WFP said that \$1.97 billion is needed over the course of 2022 to deliver the necessary food aid to the Yemeni people.

Heavy fighting around Marib continues as airstrikes target Sanaa, Taiz. After a period of relative lull over the early days of December, fighting around Marib intensified once again. Much of the fighting in recent days was concentrated south of the strategic city, particularly around Jabal Balk where the Saudi-backed Coalition engaged with the Houthi Movement. Despite intense fighting, the Houthis do not appear to have made any progress towards Marib.

In Sanaa, Coalition airstrikes targeted the Sanaa Airport. The Coalition said that six sites used in the launching of drone attacks, as well as drone-related logistics, were targeted. Although the airport has not seen civilian use since 2015, it is still being used by the UN, which was forced to halt flights to Sanaa following the strikes. The Coalition has since continued its airstrikes on Sanaa, announcing that it had targeted another seven sites. It appears that the intensity of the Coalition strikes are intended as a retaliation for a drone attack at the Abha Airport in Saudi Arabia earlier this week.

In Maqbna, west of Taiz, a senior Houthi commander named Abd al-Salam Yahya al-Mutawakil was reportedly killed when the Coalition struck a group of Houthi combat vehicles.

Along the Saudi-Yemeni border, 14 Sudanese soldiers fighting as part of the Coalition were killed on December 17th following a Houthi attack near Haradh.

Lebanon

- UN chief visits Lebanon, meets President.
- Lebanon-based Bahraini opposition group ordered to leave the country after holding human rights conference.
- Egyptian and Syrian officials announce readiness to supply Lebanon with gas by 2022.

President Michel Aoun affirms elections will take place on time; says negotiations are taking place with the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

President Aoun met with the United Nations' Secretary-General, Antonio Guterres, on December 19th, with the two officials discussing ways to pull the country out of the crisis. During the meeting, Guterres emphasised the UN's commitment to Lebanon but was nevertheless deeply critical of the country's governance and the political paralysis that has prevented any solutions from being implemented. During the meeting with the President, the UN chief called for elections, now due March 2022, to be held on time, describing them as "key" to resolving the crisis. President Aoun, on his part, reaffirmed that the election would go ahead and added that talks with the IMF are focused on restarting the national economy and implementing the needed economic, financial and administrative reforms.

Bahraini opposition group deported from Lebanon. Members of al-Wefaq, the largest opposition party in Bahrain until 2016, have been ordered to leave the country by Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi. The party's deportation came after they held a conference in Lebanon about the state of human rights in Bahrain, with numerous reports of abuses taking place. Members of al-Wefaq, as well as human rights activists in Lebanon generally, warned that Gulf leaders are taking advantage of Lebanon's crisis to target activists critical of them. Indeed, it is likely that the Lebanese authorities have allowed the party to be expelled as part of improving diplomatic ties with Gulf states following the recent diplomatic spat that saw relations between the two sides collapse. With the person ostensibly responsible for the spat, George Kordahi, having also resigned, it is possible that Gulf states will begin normalising their ties with Beirut. However, the expulsion of activists and an organisation hostile to the Gulf suggests that such normalisation will come at a price.

Egyptian, Syrian officials announce readiness to supply Lebanon with gas. The oil ministers of Egypt and Syria, Tarek el-Molla and Bassam Tohme, announced that they are preparing to supply Lebanon with gas. Tohme told Syria TV that the Arab Gas Pipeline inside Syria is ready and waiting for a trade agreement between Egypt and Lebanon. El-Molla, meanwhile, said that he expects Egypt to export natural gas to Lebanon within the first quarter of 2022. Speaking to al-Sharq TV, el-Molla added that reaching a deal without negative repercussions is very important and called on all stakeholders and countries to ensure that all technical, commercial and political measures are in order. Obliquely referencing the US sanctions on Syria, el-Molla said that he does not want his country to be penalised for helping Lebanon. Lebanese leaders have hedged their bets on gas from Egypt

to ease shortages, with Syria acting as the transit route. Damascus has sought to deeply integrate itself to this process as part of rehabilitating its international standing.

Tunisia

- President Saied announces elections and constitutional reform for 2022.
- UGTT accused government of looking to cut public sector salaries.
- Value of the Tunisian dinar against the US dollar fails to recover from the sharp drop early-December.

President Kais Saied announces elections and constitutional referendum for 2022. On December 14th, President Saied announced that a constitutional referendum would be held on July 25th, 2022. The process, the President explained during a televised speech, would follow an online public consultation starting in January. He added that parliamentary elections would take place at the end of 2022. The roadmap announced by Saied was long-awaited by the country's opposition who have accused the President of a coup. However, opposition groups were not mollified by the roadmap which will put the reopening of the Parliament to 2022 despite the freeze in its activities being intended to last only thirty days to begin with. In addition, the online consultation processes will isolate many Tunisians without internet while the current conditions may make many Tunisians unwilling to express their views. Meanwhile, despite no details provided about the new constitution, Saied announced that he alone will appoint the commission responsible for drafting it, raising fears among the opposition that it will be used to entrench the government's powers. Indeed, many Tunisians who came out in demonstrations to observe the 10th anniversary of the Arab Spring protests in the following days did so while drawing parallels between the situation back then and now.

The Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT) accuses government of planning to cut civil servant pay by 10%. These accusations were made by the UGTT's Secretary-General Nouredine Taboubi, who said that he was told by officials in a closed-door meeting that the government is struggling to pay civil servants. Explaining that the UGTT "strongly rejected" the proposal, he noted that his side had presented an alternate economic programme which would see the freezing of public salaries for the next five years, lifting of subsidies on commodities, and privatising public enterprises. While the talks are on-going, it is clear that whatever the outcome, Tunisia's public sector will experience belt-tightening in the coming years as the country works its way out of a severe economic crisis.

Value of the Tunisian dinar remains stagnant despite occasional spikes. After falling sharply against the US dollar during the earlier part of December, the value of the Tunisian rose against the US dollar to 0.3489. However, this outlook was not maintained, with the value of one dinar falling back to 0.3469 on December 20th.

Syria

- New round of peace talks in the Astana format held in Nur-Sultan.
- Arab normalisation with Damascus seemingly stalled amidst new pressures from Washington.
- Syrian Government announces 2022 budget.

Syrian Government, Opposition convenes in Nur-Sultan for new round of talks.

The 17th and newest round of talks in the Astana format were held. The talks, which were held on December 21st and 22nd, did not focus on major issues, likely over low expectations around the talks and the lack of significant changes to the strategic terrain. Despite the low expectations, however, the two sides agreed on a number of smaller, more basic provisions. Among such provisions were the exchanges of prisoners taken by the two sides. Overall, however, this latest round of talks was among the lowest profile talks to take place in the Astana format. Although observers previously remarked that the talks in the Astana format were followed by major military offensives, so far, the Syrian frontlines have witnessed little to no escalation, suggesting that a period of relative calm will follow.

As usual, the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC) were not invited to the talks. Speaking in Raqqa on December 18th, the Chief Executive of the SDC, Ilham Ahmed, said that there has been no progress in the talks with Damascus over the recent months. Ahmed noted that Russian efforts to mediate between Damascus and the SDC have not borne any fruit and no steps were taken to suggest the two sides can reconcile their differences.

Damascus normalisation seemingly stalled as US pressure increases. Despite signs that Damascus was on the path towards normalisation of ties with the wider Arab world, there are signs that the process is slowing down. Although Damascus has been invited to the 2022 Arab League summit, not every member of the League supports normalising ties with Damascus. As a result, the League has demanded Syria take several political and technical steps before normalisation can follow, essentially placing the onus of normalisation on Damascus.

It also appears that the Arab states have been spooked by signs of further US sanctions on Syria. Indeed, on December 15th, the US Senate passed the annual defence budget for 2022. Among other things, the budget gives Congress more control vis-à-vis Washington's Syria policy. The 2022 National Defence Authorization Act, for example, would require an endgame roadmap for the conflict in Syria as well as putting pressure on Arab states to prevent normalisation. Indeed, US sanctions were among the concerns of some Arab states such as Egypt when they formulated the plan to transfer fuel to Lebanon via Syria.

Damascus publishes 2022 budget. The budget for 2022, which was approved by the Damascus-based People's Assembly mid-December, amounts to SYP13.325 trillion (approximately \$5.3 billion). This year's budget is SYP4.825 trillion less than the 2021 budget, highlighting Damascus' growing economic struggles.

Despite the reduced budget, however, Damascus's priorities for stymying criticism with the government are apparent. In particular, the new year will see salaries for civil and military employees increase by 30%. This is likely a necessary measure to balance the rise in costs for goods and utilities. In particular, the Syrian Government's Ministry of Trade announced that it will increase the prices for subsidised gasoline for the third time, sparking criticisms amidst mounting public poverty. The prices for water are also expected to go up.

Iraq

- Al-Sadr reaches out to rival Shia parties to form government.
- Competition among Sunni parties for the post of Speaker of the Parliament intensifies.
- Iraqi dinar experiences drop after stable month.

Muqtada al-Sadr reaches out to rival Shia parties. With the bloc of prominent cleric Muqtada al-Sadr confirmed as the winner of the recent parliamentary elections, efforts are now underway to build a political consensus. Despite previous announcements that al-Sadr was looking for a “national majority” government rather than a coalition, it seems that he is looking to bridge the divide within the Shia establishment. The move is likely motivated after the Fatah bloc, broadly representing the Iran-backed factions of the Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU), objected to the results and issued a legal challenge to get them annulled, significantly raising the risks of post-election violence in the country. Indeed, perhaps concerned by the potential for violence, the United Nations itself has involved itself as a mediator to the talks in a bid to break the political deadlock.

Competition among Sunni parties for the position of parliament speaker intensifies. The competition kicked off after prominent businessman, Khamis al-Khanjar, launched the New Determination bloc made up, so far, of 34 winners of the election from five smaller parties. The move represents a serious challenge to the current Speaker of the Parliament, Mohammed al-Halbousi, whose Progress bloc had claimed the spot as the top Sunni winner with 37 seats. With the post of Speaker, the highest post in Iraq reserved for a Sunni, in line, both blocs are now working to expand their membership. In addition, al-Khanjar and al-Halbousi have launched direct talks with one another in an attempt to prevent the Sunni blocs from disintegrating further. So far, however, the outcome remains uncertain. Although al-Khanjar’s bloc is gaining prominence, the bloc is known to be made up of parties whose only common ground is opposition to al-Halbousi.

Value of Iraqi dinar against the US dollar falls after a stable month. On December 20th, the value of one Iraqi dinar against the US dollar fell from 0.000685 to 0.000680, representing the largest drop in value for the Iraqi dinar in over a month.

Egypt

- Muslim Brotherhood official, activists given jail sentences.
- Egyptian trade with East Africa, China picks up.
- Egyptian pound value against the dollar remains stable, but experiences drop at the end of December.

Former Muslim Brotherhood leader and activist given jail sentences. On December 19th, a criminal court in Cairo upheld the life sentence of Mahmoud Ezzat on charges of conspiring with foreign powers to destabilise Egypt. Ezzat, who was among the leading figures of the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, was arrested in 2020. He was also accused of handing defence secrets to the Palestinian group Hamas. Meanwhile, another arrest sentence, this time of five years, was given to activist Abdel Fattah. Fattah, who was a leading figure in the 2011 protest movement, was charged with distributing “fake news” alongside blogger Mohamed Ibrahim and lawyer Mohamed el-Baqer.

Egyptian foreign investment and collaboration picks up. Over the latter half of December, Egyptian companies have launched or inaugurated numerous projects with China and along East Africa. These projects include the inauguration of an Egyptian-built industrial city in Tanzania’s Dar es Salaam; 27 underground wells and seven dams across Uganda; and a deal with Kenya for the development of military technologies. Meanwhile, the state-owned El Nasr Automotive Manufacturing Co. announced that it is looking to collaborate with three Chinese firms for the production of electric cars in a project worth \$127 million and set to begin in 2023. These developments suggest Egypt is looking to increase its footprint in Africa, as well as increase its industrial capacities as a whole as part of its efforts to recover its economy from a prolonged period of stagnation. These efforts will bring Cairo in competition with other regional powers who are also expanding into Africa such as the United Arab Emirates and Turkey. Indeed, the bid for the Kenya project put Cairo in competition with Ankara which sought to sign a similar deal.

Egyptian pound sees fall and recovery against the US dollar. Although the value of one Egyptian pound against the US dollar has hovered steadily around 0.0635, it experienced a fall on December 20th, dropping to a low of \$0.0631 before recovering in value.

Jordan

- Budget for 2022 announced.
- Jordanian officials host Saudi-Iranian talks amidst signs of thaw in relations.
- Overall unemployment falls but remains high among youth and women.

Jordan announces 2022 budget. The budget, which was announced on December 20th, projected public expenditures of 10,0668 billion Jordanian dinars, with an expected deficit of 2,604 billion Jordanian dinars, amounting to about 7.7% of GDP. Even with the foreign aid factored in, the deficit is expected to remain substantial. The increase in expenditures has been linked to increased spending in payrolls and pensions for civil and military workers, as well as retirees. Healthcare allocations are also due to go up by 177 million Jordanian dinars to a total of 1,113 billion Jordanian dinars. The education budget is also expected to go up, making up about 12% of the overall budget.

Jordan's Finance Minister, Mohamad al-Ississ, also announced tax and customs reforms as part of a revamped public debt strategy. He explained that the move is expected to reduce Jordan's debt to 90% of the estimated GDP for 2022, a reduction from 91.6% in 2021. The minister projected the debt-to-GDP ratio to go down to 84.4% by 2024.

Jordanian officials hold Saudi-Iranian talks. Jordanian officials announced that they held a security dialogue session involving regional arch-rivals Saudi Arabia and Iran. The talks took place in the Arab Institute for Security Studies and topics such as regional stability, as well as security and technical challenges, were discussed. Other topics discussed involved ending missile strikes towards Saudi Arabia within the context of the Yemeni conflict, but no further details were given. Jordanian officials said that they've been working to break the ice between Iran and Saudi Arabia and these efforts gained speed following earlier talks in Iraq. Although many contentious issues remain unresolved, the news is nevertheless highly significant as Washington moves its attention towards China.

Unemployment falls from 24.8% down to 23.2% in the third quarter of 2021.

The new figures represent a drop of unemployment by 1.6% from previous highs of 24.8%. However, unemployment among youth and women remains significantly higher: 44.9% and 33.1% respectively. Nevertheless, the new numbers represent a glimmer of hope for the country which has seen numerous protests over economic conditions.