



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

- Political wrangling between Libyan capitals continues.
- HCS session to elect new government in Tripoli attacked by armed gunmen.
- Value of Libyan Dinar remains relatively stable despite political tensions.

Political wrangling continues in Libya. On February 16th, the Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) approved constitutional amendments towards creating a committee of experts who will redraft the current constitution. The planned amendments will create a roadmap would see the holding of elections on a constitutional basis and could potentially enshrine the HoR's appointment of former Minister of Interior, Fathi Bashagha, as Prime Minister. Unsurprisingly, the move was criticised by both the current Prime Minister in Tripoli, Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, as well as the head of the High Council of State (HCS) Khaled Al-Mishri, who criticised the HoR's move for undermining trust. Dbeibah, meanwhile, vowed to only hand over power to an elected government and warned that attempting to replace him could trigger a war. The power struggle between Libya's two capitals once again risks sliding the country into instability, if not outright conflict.

HCS attacked by gunmen during session to form a new government. In the days following the HoR announcement, the Tripoli-based HCS launched an initiative to form a new government. The HCS convened in Tripoli on 23rd February. However, before the session could proceed, the centre was attacked by unknown gunmen who also cut power to the building. No members of the HCS were injured or killed during the attack and were able to evacuate. However, the incident further raises the spectre of renewed conflict in the country, especially as much of the international attention is focused on the war in Ukraine.

Libyan dinar relatively stable despite political tensions. Over the past two weeks the US dollar exchange rate against the Libyan dinar experienced some fluctuations but overall remained stable. On February 13th, the value of the Libyan dinar fell to LYD4.5739 against \$1 before recovering to LYD4.5889. Although the value fluctuated daily over the next two weeks, it has continued to hover around the same value, suggesting that despite the political crisis impacting the country, there are no immediate economic concerns.

Yemen

- The UN warns that aid to Yemen will run out in March without funds.
- Saudi-led Coalition launches further airstrikes around Sanaa, gains ground near Marib.
- Yemeni Rial sees sharp fluctuations.

United Nations warns that aid to Yemen will run out in March without funds.

According to the UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg and UN Humanitarian Chief Martin Griffiths, nearly two-thirds of the major UN aid programmes are being scaled back or closed due to lack of funds even as the number of combat zones continue to multiply. Grundberg especially warned about rising incidents of civilian casualties, including a Coalition airstrike in a prison in Sanaa last month that left 70 dead, as well as the “alarming” rise of air raids in the residential areas of Sanaa and Hodeidah and warned that the conflict is spiralling amidst continued drone attacks by the Houthi Movement. Grundberg warned that despite these worsening conditions, aid agencies are running out of money, with 2021 already seeing the lowest level of funding received. In 2021, the UN humanitarian plan for Yemen received only \$2.27 billion out of its required \$3.85 billion.

Meanwhile, in a sign of further UN woes in Yemen, five UN workers were abducted in the Abyan Province while returning to Aden. The kidnappers are believed to be al-Qaeda linked. However, there have been no confirmations about their affiliations.

Saudi-led Coalition launches further airstrikes around Sanaa, gains ground near Marib.

The Saudi-led Coalition announced that it has destroyed a telecommunications system used by the Houthi movement to launch drones from Sanaa. Accusing the Houthis of using the facilities of the Ministry of Telecommunications and Information Technology in Sanaa for hostile operations, the Saudi officials called on civilians to vacate government buildings in the country’s capital.

In Marib, fighting continued, with the Houthi Movement still in the backfoot. The Saudi-led Coalition announced that its forces captured a number of sites in the Mala’a Mountains south of the city of Marib following airstrikes on Houthi positions in the area.

Yemeni Rial sees sharp fluctuations. Over the past two weeks, the periodic fluctuations of the value of the Yemeni Rial against the US dollar have become especially acute. Following a sharp dip where the value of \$1 equalled to YER250.171 on 14th February, the value of the Rial climbed back to YER250.261. However, the rise was unsteady, and there were severe fluctuations to the value of the Rial over 16th, 17th, 18th, 19th and 21st February, pointing towards growing currency instability after a period of relatively stable exchange rates.

Lebanon

- Lebanese Government approves draft 2022 budget.
- Clashes erupt in Beirut between Hezbollah supporters and opponents.
- Lebanese security forces thwart Captagon smuggling to Saudi Arabia.

Lebanese Government approves draft 2022 budget. The draft budget for 2022 as published by the Lebanese Government lines up with the first drafts presented to *Reuters* earlier in February and will see hikes to customs duties and impose new taxes. With the country undergoing its worst economic crisis, there are fears that these changes can cause the prices of goods and services to rise precipitously, especially raw materials needed by local factories. Following the approval, Prime Minister Najib Mikati announced that the customs dollar will be applied when the budget is ratified in the parliament and added that the exchange rate of customs transactions for imports will be set by the central bank's foreign exchange platform, known as Sayrafa, and will be announced by the minister of finance on a monthly basis. He added that customs taxes on medication, food, coffee and tea will be removed, likely in an attempt to alleviate some of the stresses. Despite such reassurances, however, many Lebanese remain critical of the new budget and the expectation of rising prices has already resulted in speculation on some commodities.

Clashes erupt near the Lebanese American University (LAU) between Hezbollah supporters and opponents. The clashes took place on 16th February near the LAU campus in Beirut and reportedly erupted after supporters of the Hezbollah raised photos of some of the group's leaders, with opponents attempting to prevent the photos from being hung. The clashes only subsided after university security force intervened in the incident. Although Hezbollah's stature in Lebanon grew over the 2010s, a mixture of developments including accusations of the group contributing to the country's political impasse and having a hand in the Beirut port explosion in 2020 have all tarnished the group's reputation and strained its alliances with other parties, as well as contributing to the deterioration of Lebanon's ties with the Gulf.

Lebanese security forces thwart Captagon smuggling to Saudi Arabia. Lebanese security officials announced on 18th February that a shipment of 700,000 Captagon pills were confiscated as it was prepared for shipment to Saudi Arabia. Officials added that the shipment was the largest of three shipments confiscated in a single week alone, raising concerns that the availability of Captagon, an amphetamine-style stimulant, is rising. Although neither Syria, nor the Hezbollah was implicated in this particular incident, both entities have been regularly accused of smuggling drugs to the Gulf and has contributed to the breakdown of ties between the Gulf kingdoms and Beirut.

Tunisia

- Tunisia's President establishes new judiciary body to replace the recently-abolished Supreme Judiciary Council.
- State of Emergency in Tunisia extended until 2022.
- Fears of food scarcity due to war between Russia and Ukraine.

Tunisia's President, Kais Saied, establishes new Supreme Judiciary Council.

The establishment of the Council, presently on a provisional basis, will effectively replace the older Supreme Judicial Council which was dissolved by a decree on February 6th.

According to official publications, Saied will be in control of the selection, appointment, promotion, and transfer of judges and will have the right to act, in certain circumstances, as a disciplinary body in charge of removals. None of the judges will be elected. The decree also forbids judges from going on strikes, which has been used as a form of dissent by judges.

The announcement was met with protests organised by the Ennahda Party and other civil society groups who accused Saied of "completing" the coup and turning Tunisia into a dictatorship. The criticisms appear to have pushed Saied to address some of the concerns, with the Justice Minister Leila Jaffel stating that the body would be reformed. Critical voices, however, still accused the President of consolidating power. The International Court of Justice also criticised the decision and stated that the decision ended "any semblance of judicial independence" in Tunisia.

Tunisia's State of Emergency Extended until end of 2022. On February 19th, President Saied announced that the country's state of emergency, due to end on 23rd July, will be instead extended until 31st December 2022. No new reasons were given for the extension which was first implemented in 2015, following a terrorist attack. Since then, it has been extended despite the lack of clear security risks in the intervening years. However, security authorities in the country have periodically announced thwarting attacks, including on January 28th.

Tunisians fear food scarcity due to war between Russia and Ukraine. Tunisian outlets reported on February 24th that basic food amenities such as flour and semolina are already running short in some commercial areas around Tunis. The trigger appears to have been as a result of panic buying in reaction to the war that broke out between Russia and Ukraine overnight. The two countries are some of the largest wheat exporters to the MENA region. As a result, there are fears that the conflict could cause food shortages across the region, especially Tunisia which imports 75% of its wheat from foreign markets.

Syria

- Signs of inter-jihadi tensions in Syria's Idlib.
- Rising tensions in Suweida.
- Damascus lifts subsidies in a sign of worsening economic conditions.

Signs of inter-jihadi tensions in Syria's Idlib. Local news outlets in Idlib report that Hayy'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), the de-facto ruling faction of the region, has stepped up its clampdowns against other jihadi factions, especially those with foreign militants. The clampdown came after the HTS issued a warning to jihadi fighters and their families not part of the HTS to vacate their houses in central Idlib. The moves have drawn criticisms from opponents of the HTS who accuse the group's leader, Abu Muhammad al-Golani, of ignoring the sacrifices made by these fighters and accused him of betrayal. The HTS itself claimed that the move is aimed at moving families of jihadi fighters to less populated areas, preventing from civilians getting caught in the crossfire. However, many opponents of the HTS has been critical of these rationalisations.

Another source of tension has been linked to the recent killing of the leader of the Islamic State (IS), Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi. Since Qurayshi's killing, there have been growing rumours that the HTS collaborate with the US to eliminate the rival jihadi leader. Proponents of these claims noted that both Qurayshi and his predecessor, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, were killed in HTS-held territories even as the same facts were used by others to accuse the HTS of harbouring IS leaders. Although the HTS rejected the US raid or the claims, there are signs that jihadi groups not affiliated with the HTS, such as the de-facto al-Qaeda affiliate in Syria, Hurras al-Din, now view the HTS with suspicion.

These developments come as HTS is attempting to present itself as a mainstream representative of the Syrian Opposition, as opposed to an extremist jihadi group.

Rising tensions in Suweida. Protests in the Druze-majority city of Suweida and its surrounding countryside have picked up significantly over the course of February. Protests focused on the prevalence of corruption and worsening living standards. In particular, protesters noted that there has been a significant uptick in violent incidents in the province, with 134 people killed over the course of 2021 according to local media activists, despite the province being one of the few regions to be relatively untouched by the conflict in Syria. Activists blamed Damascus for supporting gangs in a bid to destabilise the region. However, the prevalence of arms among the public following a major IS attack in 2018 was also blamed.

Suweida occupies something of a grey zone in Syria. Although officially under the control of Damascus, the region has been effectively autonomous, and has seen resistance against efforts by the Syrian Government to re-establish full control.

Damascus lifts subsidies in a sign of worsening economic conditions. In an announcement made earlier in February, the Syrian Prime Minister, Hussein Arnous, announced that his government would be removing subsidies on essential goods from a wide segment of citizens. Explaining that the Syrian state can no longer sustain the kind of support it used to offer its citizens, Arnous noted that the aid would be restructured to

reach those in most need. Indeed, the process has been underway for some time, with many families finding themselves increasingly excluded.

In another sign of worsening economic fortunes, the Ministry of Finance offered treasury bonds valued at SYP 200 billion (About \$55 million according to the current parallel market exchange rate of SYP 3,635 to \$1) in the first government securities auction of the year. The recent weeks also saw rises in fuel prices and removal of electricity subsidies. While the lifting of the subsidies may be among the only options Damascus has as it grapples with an economic crisis, they also represent one of its main levers of social control. With many of the conditions that led to the emergence of the protest movement in 2011 still unresolved, the removal of the subsidies could lead to renewed protests, although such protests are unlikely to reach the intensity of those seen in 2011.

Iraq

- Top Iraqi court deals blow to KRG's bid for independent oil sales.
- Muqtada al-Sadr asserts resistance against Iran-linked parties.
- Security incidents across Iraq continue.

Erbil and Ankara dealt a heavy blow after top Iraqi court deems 2007 oil and gas law unlawful. The decision made by Iraq's Federal Supreme Court concluded that the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) has no authority to sell oil on its own, and the revenues for the sales need to go through Baghdad. The move is a heavy blow to both the KRG and Ankara. Since 2007, the KRG justified selling the oil in its territories to generate revenues in a bid to increase the KRG's independence from Baghdad. For Turkey, meanwhile, the law ensured relatedly close and cost effective access to high-quality oil while allowing Ankara to increase its influence over the KRG. The KRG itself justified the unilateral sales on grounds that Baghdad did not grant the KRG a fair share of the revenues.

The announcement comes at a difficult time for the KRG whose two main parties, the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) are engaged in a power struggle for the post of Iraqi Presidency. The post was traditionally held by the PUK, with the KDP holding executive power in the KRG in turn. However, the KDP has recently pushed its own candidate for the post of Iraqi President.

The jockeying will likely continue amidst rejection of the court's decision by the KRG.

Muqtada al-Sadr asserts resistance against Iran-linked parties. Al-Sadr, whose bloc emerged as the winner of the recent elections, made the statement after he received the commander of Iran's Quds Force, Esmail Ghaani during which al-Sadr was reportedly asked to include Iranian-linked blocs in the government in a bid to retain Shia unity. In a subsequent speech, al-Sadr vowed to not let Iraq be ruled from outside the borders and announced that he would continue supporting a national majority government.

Security incidents across Iraq continue. On the evening of February 18th, a bomb targeted the headquarters of the Iraqi Parliament Speaker Mohamed Al-Halbousi's party, Progress Party in western Anbar. This is not the first attack against the party whose offices in Baghdad and Kirkuk was also targeted. No group took responsibility.

In the deserts of western Anbar, Islamic State (IS) militants claimed the killing of at least three Iraqi soldiers and a civilian during an IED attack near Rawa. Security officials operating in the region warned that IS-linked attacks in the deserts of Anbar, Salah al-Din and Nineveh have picked up since the prison break in Syria's Hasakah, suggesting that some militants did manage to escape.

In Maysan, southern Iraq, assassinations, armed tribal clashes and organised crime are all reported to have picked up. Among those assassinated were members of Saraya al-Salam, a militia affiliated with the Sadrist movement; as well as a judge and an Interior Minister officer. In addition, a three-day tribal conflict took place in the Qal'at Saleh District. These developments have led to protests calling for the removal of Maysan's Governor, Ali Douai. It seems Baghdad has taken note of these developments, as Prime Minister Mustafa al-

Kadhimi has announced the establishment of a special operations command to prevent the uptick of violence.

Egypt

- Cairo positions itself as mediator in Sudan.
- Cairo slams Addis Ababa following GERD activation.
- Egyptian courts see “historic” appointments.

Cairo positions itself as mediator in Sudan. After announcing support for a United Nations initiative towards intra-Sudanese dialogue, Egyptian officials launched a series of meetings to help Sudanese factions reach an agreement towards resolving the political impasse in the country. Egyptian outlets reported that a high-level Egyptian delegation visited Sudan mid-February in a bid to kick-start the diplomatic process. The delegation reportedly included senior officials from the Foreign Ministry and intelligence services. The delegation also reportedly met with the leaderships of Sudan’s Popular Congress Party and the Sudanese National Umma Party, suggesting a multi-pronged approach.

Relations between Cairo and Khartoum have been traditionally frosty and only warmed since the overthrow of Omar al-Bashir. Therefore, Cairo is not too invested in protecting the current military-led government. Indeed, Cairo’s main concern in Sudan appears to be stability, as well as a desire to obtain Sudanese support vis-à-vis the dispute over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD).

Cairo slams Addis Ababa following GERD activation. On 20th February, the Egyptian Government denounced Ethiopia for unilaterally launching electricity production. Cairo claimed that in doing so, Addis Ababa has violated 2015 Declaration of Principles. These developments suggest that Egyptian efforts to push for the resumption of talks are not succeeding. While the likelihood of escalation and military tensions is low compared to the previous months, the situation remains unpredictable and relations between the two countries will likely continue to deteriorate some more before they show any signs of improvements. The current trajectory of events will also likely compel Cairo to continue building alliances in East Africa.

Egyptian courts see “historic” appointments. For the first time in its history, the Egyptian Government swore in a Coptic Christian judge as the head of the Supreme Constitutional Court. Boulos Fahmi, who already held several positions including vice president of the Supreme Constitutional Court in 2010 and 2014 and head of the Cairo Court of Appeal, will replace Saeed Marie who is preparing to retire due to poor health. Although seemingly a minor development, the move is significant, as the Coptic Christian constituency has generally been more supportive of President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi. Furthermore, the move will likely allow al-Sisi to brandish his human rights credentials after being the subject of regular criticisms since coming to power in 2013.

Another development of note came from the Egyptian State Council, one of the country’s highest judicial institutions. The Egyptian Government announced it would, for the first time, accept applications of women for the position of Assistant Delegate, marking the first time since 1946 where women were eligible for the position. The applicants will be required to have completed degrees in law and Sharia in Egyptian universities.

Jordan

- Jordan warns drug trafficking from Syria is becoming more organised.
- Jordan's King Abdullah implicated in Credit Suisse data leaks.

Jordan warns drug trafficking from Syria is becoming more organised. These warnings were made by Colonel Zaid al-Dabbas along Jordan's border with Syria. The Colonel warned that drug traffickers were using drones and better vehicles and added that armed groups were increasingly accompanying traffickers. Warning that the operations have become more sophisticated, al-Dabbas noted that they have identified around 160 different groups in southern Syria that are engaged in drugs trade. Drug smuggling from Syria has become an increasingly acute concern for Jordan which has confiscated 17,348 packs of hashish and over 16 million Captagon pills in 2022 already, marking a sharp rise from both 2021 which saw 15.5 million pills confiscated over the whole year. Although another senior Jordanian official, Colonel Mustafa al-Hiyari, described their contacts with Damascus over the matter as "very positive", they acknowledged that some Syrian Government and military elements are helping the smugglers, he avoided attributing blame to Damascus.

Jordan's King Abdullah implicated in Credit Suisse data leaks. On 20th February, a trove of data linked to 30,000 clients of the Swiss bank, Credit Suisse, was leaked by an anonymous whistle-blower to the German newspaper *Süddeutsche Zeitung*. The data included the secret wealth hoarded by many clients who are involved in torture, drug trafficking, money laundering, corruption and other serious crimes. In addition to details of officials from Egypt, Yemen, Iraq and Algeria, the leak also yielded data about the holdings of King Abdullah and his wife, Queen Rania. These accounts were found to be opened during the period of unrest in 2011, suggesting that they were opened as an insurance policy in the event of the collapse of the Jordanian Government. At least one account was worth \$244 million. With King Abdullah already under pressure following last year's revelations of hidden bank accounts linked to him in off-shore tax havens. With Jordan still experiencing economic difficulties and regular protest over living conditions, these revelations could spark a new round of protests.