

Daily

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MAX - MENA Region Daily Summary - October 16, 2021

The following report reviews current events in the MENA region and their possible effect on business continuity and security.

Highlights of the Day

- **Egypt:** On October 15, IS claims attack on EAAF MRAP in Central Sinai's al-Mashba; amid rare attacks in area
- **Kuwait:** Prominent scholar sentenced to prison for financing Syrian HTS on October 15; late action shows concern of public backlash
- **Libya:** ISA arrests Tunisian IS militant involved in 2015 Corinthia Hotel attack on October 14; shows risk of cross-border militancy
- **Turkey:** President Erdogan dismisses three CBRT officials on October 14; institution to be increasingly perceived as political body
- **Yemen:** Houthis reportedly capture Marib's al-Abdiya District, per October 15 reports; will elevate pressure on anti-Houthi forces

Actionable Items

Saudi Arabia: COVID-19 regulations to be eased from October 17, no longer mandatory to wear masks outdoors; remain abreast of updates

According to the Ministry of Interior (Mol), the two Holy Mosques in Mecca and Medina will operate at full capacity for those who have received two doses of an approved vaccine. However, both workers and visitors will be required to wear masks within the mosque's premises. Additionally, while it will no longer be mandatory to wear masks in open spaces across Saudi Arabia, they will have to continue to be worn inside closed venues. Public transport, gatherings, wedding halls, restaurants, and cinemas will now be allowed to operate at full capacity as long as the attendees are fully vaccinated. The Mol has also stated that it will revise these regulations in the event of a significant increase in the number of COVID-19 cases in the country.

Those operating or residing in Saudi Arabia on October 17 and onwards are advised to

remain cognizant of the authorities' updates regarding restrictions on travel and gatherings as well as other health procedures to ensure business continuity.

Syria: AANES imposes lockdown on northern Syria's Euphrates region from October 16-25; adhere to authorities' instructions

According to a circular issued by the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES), all industrial and commercial shops, as well as fruits and vegetable stores, are closed. Educational institutions, as well as non-essential government offices, are closed as well. Places of worship, wedding halls, and mourning tents are not permitted to operate. Those employed in the agricultural sector are allowed to carry out essential work between 06:00-08:00 (local time) and between 17:00-19:00. The AANES-administered Euphrates region comprises Aleppo Province's Ayn al-Arab District, Raqqah Province's Tal Abyad District, and parts of Hasakah Province's Ras al-Ayn District. The lockdown is imposed due to rising COVID-19 infection rates.

Those operating or residing in the AANES-administered Euphrates region between October 16-25 are advised to adhere to the authorities' instructions and take necessary precautions to ensure business continuity due to the planned lockdown and updated COVID-19-related restrictions.

Notable Events

Egypt: On October 15, IS claims attack on EAAF MRAP in Central Sinai's al-Mashba; amid rare attacks in area

As per the claim published in Islamic State's (IS) weekly newsletter al-Nabaa, an IED attack on an Egyptian Armed Forces (EAAF) mine-resistant ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicle resulted in its destruction as well as the "deaths and injuries" of those onboard. The incident took place on October 8, near the Mount Maghara area.

Islamic State (IS)-affiliated Wilayat Sinai attacks in the Central Sinai District of North Sinai Governorate are relatively rare with only three such attacks recorded this year, in January-March. Attacks in North Sinai are focused in the known IS strongholds of Rafah, Bir al-Abd, Sheikh Zuweid and Al-Arish. However, there has been a downtick in the frequency of attacks in North Sinai in recent months, due to intensive counter-militancy campaigns carried out by the EAAF, especially in the four known strongholds. In this context, militants likely targeted Central Sinai due to the constraining of their capabilities by EAAF counter-militancy operations in the latter's usual areas of operation. Further attacks are likely to take place in North Sinai Governorate over the coming months.

Israel: IDF arrests two suspects that planted an IED along Gaza-Israel border on October 15; denotes persistent threat along Gaza border

The Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) stated that the IED exploded shortly after the arrests

were made.

This comes amid periodic reports of Palestinians attempting to infiltrate Israel from the Gaza Strip. For instance, on October 2, the IDF detained two armed Palestinians attempting to cross Gaza border fence. The latest incident was likely an opportunistic attempt by the suspects to target Israeli civilians or forces present in the area, which lies within Israel's 1949 Armistice Line (Green Line), rather than an attempt to attack any specific target. Although it is currently unclear if the assailants were linked to Gaza-based militant factions such as Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), the incident underscores the exacerbated anti-Israel sentiments within the local population in Gaza. If the assailants are found to not have ties with Gaza-based militant groups, it will highlight the locals' ability to gather and assemble IEDs to conduct such attacks. Nevertheless, the arrest showcases that IDF's bolstered security protocols and extensive monitoring along the Gaza-Strip-Israel border. Overall, further similar attempts from Gaza-based individuals may be recorded over the coming weeks.

Kuwait: Prominent scholar sentenced to prison for financing Syrian HTS on October 15; late action shows concern of public backlash

The Court of Cassation sentenced scholar and cleric Shafi Al-Ajmi, and his brother to prison for seven years. They were also fined 700,000 Kuwait dinars each.

Al-Ajmi was sanctioned by both the US and the UN in 2014 for "financing terrorism". In the same year, he was briefly arrested and then released by Kuwaiti authorities. In January 2020, he was detained for two days then released, and in October 2020 he was acquitted of charges. Following the breakout of the 2011 Syrian civil war, Kuwait-based private financiers like al-Ajmi began funding rebel groups including Al-Qaeda affiliate Jabhat Al Nusra, now known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), in order to curb Shiite Iranian influence in the region. This ruling constitutes an effort by Kuwait to show that it is clamping down on its citizens with links to militant groups, especially to their ally, the US, which sanctioned al-Hajmi in 2014. At the same time, the long-drawn out manner in which the authorities have addressed this case indicates their wariness of public backlash given al-Ajmi's popularity. Nevertheless, Kuwait will likely continue to take action perceived as critical of support to militancy over the coming months.

Libya: ISA arrests Tunisian IS militant involved in 2015 Corinthia Hotel attack on October 14; shows risk of cross-border militancy

In a confession to the Internal Security Agency (ISA), the militant Omar Bashir Izadeen stated that he was from Tunisia's Tataoiune and that he was tasked by the Islamic State (IS) with facilitating the movement of militants across the Libyan-Tunisian border. This included the transportation of the individual responsible for the Corinthia Hotel attack that left over nine dead.

This incident follows a slight uptick in IS attacks in Libya with four attacks being recorded in June- September prior to which there was a one-year lull in operations. While these

recent attacks have largely targeted the Libyan National Army (LNA), the outfits' increased activity has likely elevated the threat perception of all security agencies operating in Libya. Izadeen's confession highlights the risks posed by the cross-border movement of militants between Libya and Tunisia. In August, Tunisia increased its security presence on its side of the border with Libya after reports of possible infiltration of militants from Libya into Tunisia. Overall, given the ISA's intelligence-gathering capabilities as evidenced by the latest arrest, it will likely conduct further such counter-militancy operations in the coming months.

Saudi Arabia & Yemen: Houthi-launched UAV intercepted over Jazan Province on October 7; to increase pressure on Kingdom

The official Saudi news agency reported that Saudi forces intercepted one explosive-laden unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) over Jazan. No casualties or damage was reported.

This immediately follows the Houthi-perpetrated armed UAV attack targeting Jazan on October 14. While Asir's Khamis Mushayt remains a focal point for most such attacks, Houthis also periodically attempt to target strategic infrastructure within Jazan, Najran, and other locations deep within Saudi territory. Through such attacks, the Houthis seek to increase pressure on Saudi Arabia to extract concessions, which includes the complete lifting of the Kingdom's blockade on Houthi-held territories in Yemen as well as a cessation of its military involvement in the Yemeni civil war. Moreover, the near-daily occurrence of these attacks over recent months, especially since August, highlights the Houthis' relatively bolstered military capabilities to replenish and maintain a steady arsenal of aircraft systems and projectiles. Although Saudi authorities intercept the majority of these attacks due to their heightened vigilance of the threat posed by the Houthis, the latter will continue to target strategic military and civilian infrastructure in Saudi's southern provinces over the coming days.

Syria: Anti-Turkish group claims October 15 IED attack targeting TSK convoy near Idlib's Maarat Misrin; HTS to increase crackdown

The Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Squadron stated that an armored Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) vehicle was destroyed, and "all" occupants were killed. On October 14, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham's (HTS) General Security Service (GSS) announced the arrest of a suspected Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq operative accused of involvement in previous IED attacks targeting the TSK.

The developments come amid persistent roadside IED attacks by the anti-Turkish militant faction against TSK convoys across Idlib. On October 5, another TSK convoy was targeted on the road between Nahleh and Ariha. These persistent attacks are aimed at hindering TSK's supply lines between Turkey and northwestern Syria. The GSS's arrest of a suspected Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq operative is noteworthy given that such operations have rarely been reported. The development thus suggests a growing HTS effort to crack down on the anti-Turkish group's operational structures in HTS-controlled territory. This is possibly a result of Turkish pressure on HTS. Over the coming weeks, further arrest raids

targeting Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Squadron operatives are likely to occur in Idlib. At the same time, the risk of further attacks against TSK vehicles remains high.

Turkey: President Erdogan dismisses three CBRT officials on October 14; institution to be increasingly perceived as political body

Two deputy governors, Ugur Namik Kucuk and Semih Tumen as well as Abdallah Yavas, who was reportedly the longest-serving member of the Central Bank of Turkey's (CBRT) monetary policy committee were dismissed. Kucuk was reportedly the sole committee member who opposed the cutting of the interest rate last month.

President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has constantly interfered in CBRT policy over recent years and pushed the institution to lower interest rates against conventional economic wisdom. As CBRT governors have remained reluctant to implement such measures, Erdogan has frequently dismissed leading officials. In this context, the current dismissal of deputy governor Kucuk shows that Erdogan remains willing to dismiss officials who do not implement his economic preferences. This will further erode international confidence in the government's strategy to deal with the country's economic crisis as the CBRT will be perceived as a political rather than professional body. As shown by a steady decline in the Erdogan-led Justice and Development Party's (AKP) popularity in opinion polls, Turkey's public is likely to increasingly hold the Turkish government, rather than the CBRT, responsible for the country's economic woes.

Yemen: Houthis reportedly capture Marib's al-Abdiya District, per October 15 reports; will elevate pressure on anti-Houthi forces

Al-Abdiya District is located approximately 100 kilometers south of Marib city.

This comes amid an escalation in hostilities between Houthi and anti-Houthi forces in the oil-rich Marib Governorate, amid the former's efforts to capture the provincial capital of Marib city. The latest gains indicate the Houthis' success in breaking through the anti-Houthi forces' defenses as it follows a reported siege imposed by the former over al-Abdiya since September 21. This will allow the Houthis to consolidate control over Marib's southern districts after they established a foothold in Marib's Medghal and Majzar districts in the northeast, and al-Juba and Harib districts in the south, in recent weeks. Moreover, the recent Houthi victories will embolden the Shiite group to capitalize on their ongoing momentum to advance towards Marib city from several fronts. Overall, this is liable to elevate pressure on the anti-Houthis who will likely review their battle strategy and attempt to push back the Houthis from captured territories over the coming weeks. Should the Houthis secure the majority of districts around Marib city, anti-Houthis may either surrender or withdraw from Marib in the near future.

Upcoming Notable Dates

October 18-19

MENA: Al-Mouled Al-Nabawy (Birthday of Prophet Muhammad)

October 23

Libya: Liberation Day

October 25

Iran: Birthday of Prophet Muhammad/Imam Sadegh

October 27

Egypt & Saudi Arabia: Arab solidarity motorcycle rally

October 28-29

Turkey: Republic Day

October 29

Israel: Jerusalem Marathon