



Middle East Debriefing

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INTRODUCTION

EDITOR'S NOTE

This is a quarterly debriefing on the most important developments in the geopolitical arena of the middle east. The authors have chosen to present highlights meant to provide with a general overview of what is happening in the region. Every information presented is properly cited and accompanied with the list of sources.



THE JORDANIAN ROYAL FAMILY IN "INTELLIGENCE" PROBLEMS

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A split within the ruling monarchy in Jordan and the detention of about 20 people raised concerns about the country's stability, which is recognized as an important voice of moderation in the Middle East. Jordan was on alert in early April 2021, after a series of arrests in an alleged attempt to destabilize the government of King Abdullah I, adding that the day before security and armored vehicles had been parked in front of the royal palaces patrolling certain settlements in Amman (Bloomberg, 2021).

Jordan's Prince Hamzeh bin Hussein, the former heir to the throne was under house arrest after an alleged coup attempt, reaffirmed his loyalty to his half-brother, King Abdullah II, according to a letter with Hamzeh's signature released by the royal court. Jordanian Deputy Prime Minister Ayman al-Safadi said on April 4 2021, that former Crown Prince Abdullah Hamzeh bin Hussein had worked with foreign groups to destabilize the country (Reuters, 2021).

Ammon, a news site linked to the Jordanian intelligence community, reported that Israeli businessman and close friend of Hamzeh Roy Shaposhnik, whom he identified as a former part of Mossad, an Israeli intelligence agency, had offered to flee Jordan. The only Israeli response came from Defense Minister Benny Gantz, who called the situation an "internal" issue. The United States, along with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and many other regional allies, quickly expressed support for the monarch. The military has issued a warning to the prince over actions aimed at "security and stability". Among them was a foreign intelligence agency that contacted Prince Hamzeh's wife to arrange a plane for the couple to leave Jordan. Efforts were made to resolve the crisis within the Jordanian royal family, but Prince Hamzeh bin Hussein did not co-operate, adding: "This is a departure from the tradition and values of the Hashemite family," (Washington Post, 2021).

This development is likely to "shake" the image of Jordan as an island of stability in the turbulent Middle East.

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THE 11-DAY VIOLATION OF PALESTINIAN-ISRAELI PEACE

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In early May 2021, over 200 Muslim believers were injured during a prayer in the month of Ramadan and 17 Israeli police officers by the Israeli police at the Al-Aqsa complex in Jerusalem (Klix: A, 2021). Turkey immediately accused Israel of terrorizing Palestinians, after Israeli police fired rubber bullets and stunning bombs at worshipers near the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem (Klix: B, 2021). Hamas, established for the armed struggle of Palestinians, announced that they fired several rockets in response to the violence of the Israeli police against Muslims in the Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem, after which Israel retaliated with ground and air strikes on Palestinian territories. The disruption of peace was also addressed by Pope Francis, who called on Israelis and Palestinians for peace. The United Nations Security Council also held multiple extraordinary sessions on growing tensions between Israel and Palestine and on Israeli attacks on Gaza (Klix: D, 2021).

US President Joe Biden was also involved in communication with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and stressed that the United States supports a ceasefire between Israel and Palestinian Hamas. European Council President Charles Michel welcomed the ceasefire between Israel and Hamas in Gaza (Klix: E, 2021). U.S. Secretary of State Anthony Blinken ended his visit to the Middle East, during which he called for regional cooperation to consolidate the ceasefire between Israel and armed Palestinian groups in Gaza. After a meeting with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Blinken promised to renew relations between the United States and the Palestinian Authority, by reopening the consulate in Jerusalem and securing millions of dollars in support for the Gaza Strip (Avaz, 2021).

The global public has become polarized over this 11-day Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The ceasefire between Israel and the Palestinian group Hamas entered into force on the morning of May 21, 2021 and ended the 11-day bombing, which killed more than 240 people, including at least 65 children and 39 women, mostly in Gaza. More than 1,700 people were injured in the attacks, and at least 75,000 people have been forcibly displaced by the attack.

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THE CONTINUOUS ACQUISITION OF WEAPONS IN YEMEN, DESPITE THE ONGOING HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

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The war in Yemen began in 2014 between the Yemeni government and the Iran-backed Houthi rebel movement and escalated a year later when Saudi Arabia and eight other Arab states, aided by the United States, Britain and France, launched airstrikes on the Hutus. Tens of thousands of people have been killed in the civil war, including large numbers of civilians, while 80 percent of the country's 24 million people are on the brink of poverty. According to the UN, Yemen is currently experiencing the biggest humanitarian catastrophe on Earth. The framework for all international negotiations on Yemen remains United Nations Security Council Resolution 2216. The Security Council passed Resolution 2216 in April 2015, just after the Saudis led a military coalition to try to expel the Houthis from territories they had seized. The resolution defines the Houthis as the primary belligerent in Yemen's conflict. It established a U.N. mechanism to review imports to Yemen in order to prevent Iran from smuggling weapons to the Houthis, which Saudi Arabia uses to justify its ongoing blockade. Most significantly, Resolution 2216 demands that the Houthis relinquish their weapons and territorial gains. But, given the present situation on the battlefield, the Houthis will reject any negotiation based these outdated terms (Shelline, 2021).

Regarding this formulation that the Houthis are known formally as Ansar Allah, who "continue to hold out" it could be concluded, that they do not give up further fighting and that they order weapons and equipment around the world. Thus, the U.S. Fifth Fleet announced on May 9th, that it had seized large quantities of illegal Russian and Chinese weapons on a ship that was in international waters in the Arabian Sea. The seized weapons include dozens of anti-tank missiles to guide Russian production, thousands of Chinese 56-type assault rifles and hundreds of PKM machine guns, sniper rifles and grenade launchers, the statement said. This seizure is the latest in the Arabian Sea or the Gulf of Aden, which refers to weapons probably intended for Yemen. The weapons are believed to resemble other deliveries destined for Houthi rebels in Yemen (RFE, 2021).

Additionally, a mysterious airbase is being built on the volcanic island of Yemen that sits on one of the world's crucial maritime chokepoints for energy shipments and commercial cargo. While no country has claimed the Mayun Island airbase in the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, shipping traffic associated with a prior attempt to build a huge runway across the 5.6-km (3.5 mile)-long island years ago links back to the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Satellite images from Planet Labs Inc obtained by The Associated Press showed dump trucks and graders building a 1.85km (6,070-foot) runway on the island on April 11. A runway of that length can accommodate attack, surveillance and transport aircraft (Al-Jazeera, 2021).

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RIOTS IN LEBANON OVER SUBSIDIZED GOODS

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The country was facing an outbreak of riots in April 2021 in all supermarkets over subsidized goods. Lebanon is in fact huge importer of products like sugar, rice or oil and the Lebanese people are paying the highest food prices in the Middle East and North Africa region due to the currency's depreciation. The average person's income did not rise in tandem with the rise in the price of products. With the bad economic situation and COVID-19, the rising dependency on imports raises questions about the accessibility of a wide range of goods. Due to quarantine efforts, the pandemic may restrict physical access to food as well as inefficient delivery channels. As some facilities and shops were forced to close, due to the deflationary spiral, the Lebanese' purchasing power was already strained. Because of chaotic governmental steps in the country, anxiety of scarcity has prompted panic buying and stockpiling. In many stores, only one imported item per person has been allowed which has resulted in brawls. Disgruntled customers accused supermarkets of concealing inventory in order to sell it at a greater price later (Rose, 2021; Zhaki, 2020; Mathur-Ashton, 2021).

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CONFLICT DYNAMICS IN SYRIA

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Since the beginning of the Syrian war, conflict dynamics have varied across the country. Although the number of conflicts in northwest Syria has decreased in 2020 compared to the previous year, the Idleb canton remains one of Syria's most insecure areas. In 2020, Idleb was home to about a third of all violent acts in the country. The year 2020 started with a military campaign by the government and its allies against the current opposition and Islamist groups' last foothold in northwest Syria. The intensification of fighting in northwest Syria has resulted in a clash between Russian supported troops and Turkish ones - the most serious clash since Turkey's direct military engagement in 2016, where shortly after, Turkey and Russia negotiated a ceasefire agreement. Despite a ceasefire agreement, tensions have been rising between Syria and Turkey as rebel forces, supported by Russia, continued their march north. While fighting between government forces and Islamist groups in northwest Syria has decreased dramatically since March 2020, the regime's occasional skirmishes and daily artillery barrages persisted until the end of the year and into 2021. The future of the ceasefire agreement, as well as whether military operations would continue, is contingent on the current discussions between Turkey and Russia. Daily ceasefire violations and fatal attacks are however expected to continue (Albaik, 2021; Roth, 2020; Reliefweb, 2021).

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SUDAN ABOLISHES "THREE NO" TO ISRAEL

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On April 6, 2021, the Council of Ministers of Sudan approved a bill that would end the boycott of Israel after 63 years. Several Arab countries, including Sudan, Morocco, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, have normalized relations with Israel in 2020 under the auspices of Washington. In an effort to re-enter Sudan's international scene, the Sudanese transitional government has also agreed to normalize diplomatic relations with Israel in exchange for lifting US sanctions against Khartoum (RFE, 2021).

Establishing diplomatic ties with Israel was an incentive for the Trump's administration to remove Sudan from the US's list of state sponsors of terrorism. The Israel-Sudan deal, however, is deeply symbolic.

Khartoum hosted the historic Arab League summit after the 1967 Mideast War. The conference approved a resolution that became known as the "three no's" — no peace with Israel, no recognition of Israel and no negotiations. Sudan also had close ties with Israel's rivals like the Hamas and Hezbollah groups (TRT World, 2021).

Sudan is on its way to democracy after a popular uprising led the military to overthrow longtime dictator Omar al-Bashir in April 2019. The country is now ruled by a joint military and civilian government that seeks better ties with Washington and the West. (The Times for Israel, 2021)

"No reconciliation, no coexistence and no negotiations with Israel" – those were the famous "Three Nos" of the August 1967 Khartoum summit of the Arab League, but everything is possible.

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