

## Whispering Bell Monitor

### Regional Overview- May 2011

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## Introduction

Whispering Bell Monitor offers its latest overview for the Middle East and North Africa region. Based on the latest developments, this document highlights major trends at the political and security levels, as well as prospective scenarios for the near future. It also reviews the position of selected countries in the tiered threat assessment framework, which has been especially designed by our team to reflect on the unprecedented developments that currently take place across the region. At the end of each country assessment, WB Monitor provides advice aimed at travelers, personnel and foreign residents in these countries.

Brief review of Whispering Bell Monitor's tiered system for country classification:

- ✘ **Tier 1** countries are those in which the situation is judged "critical" and where sudden changes with dramatic consequences for local populations, authorities and businesses can be expected.

**In the current state of affairs, Libya and Yemen enter this category (as of May 8).**

- ✘ **Tier 2** countries are those in which the situation is judged "alarming" and where sudden changes with important consequences for local populations, authorities and businesses could be expected.

**In the current state of affairs, Syria and Bahrain belong to this category (as of May 8).**

- ✘ **Tier 3** countries are those in which the situation is judged "of concern" and where sudden changes with potential consequences for local populations, authorities and businesses could be expected.

**In the current state of affairs, Egypt, Tunisia, Israel/Palestinian Territories, Algeria, Morocco, Saudi Arabia and Oman enter this category (as of May 8).**

## Country-by-country assessments

Tier 1 countries: critical situation.

### Libya

*Ongoing military conflict.* Troops loyal to Libyan leader Muammar Ghaddafi are engaged in fierce battles against opposition fighters over territorial control, with a focus on a handful of disputed locations. The western city of Misrata is highly disputed and confrontations over past weeks have

led to a delicate humanitarian situation for residents. The city is currently held by rebels, but Ghadafi forces are well positioned in the outskirts, from where shelling is conducted on a daily basis against rebel targets and the city's port, in which extensive damage has affected the arrival of medical supplies. Military activities are also intense in western Libya, where regime forces seek to retake control of cities under rebel control (Zintan, Nalut) and prevent further rebel expansion. Most recently, clashes have extended over the Tunisian border. Eastern Libya is mostly under rebel control.

*NATO intervention.* The continuation of NATO's air campaign against Ghadafi targets as well as the enforcement of a non fly zone over Libya are critical to the survival of the opposition movement. While frequently criticized by anti-regime forces for not doing enough, NATO airstrikes have been key in stopping ground capabilities (mostly tanks and armored vehicle convoys) from advancing into rebel-held cities. NATO strikes have increased in the capital Tripoli against suspected military command facilities. In one such strike the son of Muammar Ghadafi Seif Al-Arab was reportedly killed, provoking outcry among Ghadafi supporters and some criticism from NATO detractors around the world.

*Libya's opposition movement.* The Transitional National Council (TNC) has worked intensively on the diplomatic front and is already collecting the fruits of its efforts: it has been recognized by France, the United Kingdom, Italy and Qatar and is receiving material and financial assistance from these countries in addition to Kuwait and the United States. The TNC counts on this international backing to have access to funds, military equipment and training, and assistance in the rehabilitation of oil facilities. Though the opposition movement is still in its infancy stage and is currently undergoing internal transformations, it enjoys significant international support to carry on the struggle against the Libyan regime.

*International diplomacy.* Active diplomacy involving high-level representatives from Western and Arab countries has helped build international support for the NATO mission and the TNC. Although NATO's air campaign remains controversial and is disputed by UNSC members China and Russia, the Libyan regime is increasingly isolated. All attempts to reach a ceasefire have so far failed, mainly due to Ghadafi's uninterrupted operations against civilians and NATO/GCC conviction that the Ghadafi regime has no place in Libya's future. Turkey is the latest Libyan ally to turn its back to Ghadafi. The International Criminal Court is expected to release an arrest warrant against Ghadafi on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity.

*Humanitarian situation.* Residents of Misrata are enduring poor humanitarian situation as electricity has been long cut off and basic necessities such as clean water, food and medical supplies are scarce or running low. In Tripoli, food and fuel scarcity has sent prices upward, adding to social discontent. Military activities in the Western Mountains region have increased numbers of refugees seeking to cross over to Tunisia, whose authorities might soon be unable to cope with tens of thousands of displaced people escaping the Libya conflict.

Potential scenarios in the coming month:

- **Almost certain.** The Libya conflict is expected to continue as none of the parties involved appears to be gaining the upper hand. The military stalemate will not be easily broken as rebels are not sufficiently equipped nor trained to be able to overpower Ghadafi forces on their own. For its part, the Libyan army is restricted in its ability to move due to NATO's air campaign. A negotiated ceasefire will not immediately occur. The country could face 'de facto' partition.
- **Highly likely.** NATO airstrikes will progressively weaken the regime's military capabilities, but not to the extent that the Libyan offensive means will be completely disabled. Targeting military facilities might also result in civilian casualties and indirect damage to foreign assets. In the coming weeks, battles are expected to intensify in Misrata and in the Western Mountains region, with a heavy toll on human lives. Rebels will consolidate their hold on eastern Libya.
- **Credible.** A foreign intervention on humanitarian grounds cannot be ruled out. Shelling on civilian populations by Ghadafi forces might convince Western powers to put boots on the ground to ensure evacuation of civilians at risk, despite likely opposition from Russia, China and other UNSC members.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*Foreigners should avoid traveling to Libya and those still in the country should leave immediately. There is a continuous risk of fatality and serious injury from heavy weaponry attacks from Ghadafi forces on populated areas and along main roads. NATO airstrikes in Tripoli also pose a risk to civilians close to military facilities and other infrastructure used by the regime. Exit through the Libyan-Egyptian border is the safest option for travelers and other foreigners in the eastern part of the country. Consular assistance should be requested before attempting to leave or enter Libya. GSM communications are currently working fine in eastern Libya through Libyana network. Internet is only available through satellite connection.*

## Yemen

*Political stalemate.* The Yemeni ruling party, headed by President Saleh, and the opposition led by the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) have been unable to reach an agreement to solve the political crisis, despite active diplomacy by officials from the Gulf Cooperation Council. A GCC proposed deal would have seen Saleh transfer power to his deputy within a month and the formation of national unity government in which the prime minister and almost half of the cabinet would be drawn from the opposition. Two months later, elections would be organized to elect a new parliament. The deal failed after Saleh refused to sign it. While there was hope the crisis would be solved peacefully, many never trusted Saleh would give up power that easily, even though he and his family were to be granted immunity from prosecution.

*Continuous street mobilization.* Youth-led protesters across Yemen opposed the mediated deal, namely the issue of immunity and the one-month period Saleh was offered before transferring duties. Protest leaders and the opposition came very close to splitting as the former's demands were not taken into account and felt sidelined. Protests have continued unabated for several weeks, and intensified in cities such as Taiz, Hudaida, Ibb and Aden. Security forces used gunfire and tear gas to disrupt demonstrations, leading to dozens of civilian deaths, which in turn provoked further

popular anger. Cities in southern Yemen particularly responded to calls from anti-regime youth councils for civil disobedience, resulting in the near paralysis of all economic activities. In the capital Sana'a, economic life is business as usual except for the areas used for gatherings by activists on both sides of the political spectrum.

*Regime support.* Despite widespread anti-government protests, President Saleh continues to have a great deal of support within Yemen. This is particularly the case in Sana'a, where tens of thousands of pro-government activists take to the streets by the thousands, particularly on Fridays. The defection of a handful of army officers and military units has not significantly altered the allegiance of Yemeni security forces to Saleh.

*International stance.* Though Western powers believe time has come for Saleh to leave office, their approach has been cautious, refraining from endorsing the popular uprising. Instead, they have been supportive of Gulf efforts to find a mediated solution. The United States and the United Kingdom, along with Saudi Arabia, perceive that a political vacuum might benefit Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and the agenda of those entities in Yemen seeking to partition the country, which could then lead to domestic instability and regional insecurity. Western governments fear that Al-Qaeda could exploit its presence in Yemen to plan further terrorist attacks against their interests.

Potential scenarios in the coming month:

- **Almost certain.** Peaceful anti-regime protests are almost certain to continue to gather hundreds of thousands of people calling on Saleh to resign. Escalation tactics, such as taking government buildings and marching outside protest areas, could lead to violence in the hands of armed pro-Saleh supporters and security forces. Revolutionary youths are increasingly organized.
- **Highly likely.** The current political stalemate in Yemen is highly likely to continue as Saleh appears uninterested in a deal that would see him stripped from his presidential powers. Instead, Saleh will work to remain in office claiming that he has a constitutional mandate to do so. Deterioration in the security environment is expected to ensue. GCC mediation will cease and might only be revived if and when the president shows willingness to discuss an eventual negotiated solution. Opposition parties are likely to dismiss any proposal lacking credibility.
- **Credible.** Clashes between security forces and renegade army units in Sana'a could turn deadly if both sides make use of light and heavy weaponry to assert control over certain areas of the capital, such as checkpoints and public spaces used by protesters to gather. Unless negotiations resume in the coming days, prospects for the security situation to spiral out of control will increase. The possibility of civil war cannot be ruled out.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*Foreigners should avoid all travel to Yemen at this time unless it is business critical. Those that need to travel or are currently residing in Yemen should be briefed on the prevailing threats and should be confident in their local security arrangements. While in country, movements should be limited to the*

*essential only and stringent security precautions must be in place at all times. The use of professional security service providers might be necessary for those moving outside the capital Sana'a. Foreigners should likewise avoid approaching political-motivated gatherings and limit the time spent close to sensitive locations, such as government buildings and public squares, to mitigate risks of incidental violence.*

Tier 2 countries: alarming situation.

## Syria

*Security forces crackdown.* The army siege against Daraa has been the most extreme measure taken so far by the regime in the weeks-long crackdown against anti-government protesters. Tanks and armored vehicles were used to roam the streets and seal off the city. Hundreds of arrests and forced disappearances of suspected activists have been reported. Electricity was cut off for several days and power supply remains discontinuous to this day. Between 500 and 1,000 people have been arrested, and a good portion of whom face prison on charges of discrediting the regime. All in all, more than 600 people are said to have been killed since the protests erupted mid-March.

*Protest activities.* Sit-ins and protests have been continuous for the past month and a half in several areas of the country, with a focus on the southern city of Daraa but also in Latakia, Homs, the suburbs of Damascus as well as cities in the Kurdish region in northern Syria. Friday protests are generally large and result in scenes of violence in which civilians and members of security forces are often injured and killed. In many cases, individuals at protests were seen carrying guns and knives. In terms of their demands, protesters are now for the most part calling for the resignation of President Assad. The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood has given its support to the protest movement.

*Government response.* Authorities have long claimed that protests are the work of foreign entities attempting to fuel unrest and chaos. Anti-government activists are often called 'terrorists' by authorities and treated as such. Unprecedented reforms were proposed in March and some of them have been put into text, such as the lifting of the emergency laws. However, reforms are esthetical and have had little impact on the ground.

*International response.* Western governments have strongly condemned the crackdown and criticized President Bashar Al-Assad for failing to address legitimate demands of the people. The US government approved targeted sanctions, such as travel bans and assets freezes, against selected members of the Syrian regime accused of killing civilians. The EU has followed suit with targeted sanctions against some individuals, adding to that a suspension in economic assistance with the Syrian government. The UN human rights council condemned Syria for violence against civilians. The US, UK and France have all three advised their citizens against travelling to Syria, also calling on those residing there to leave the country to avoid exposure to risks.

Potential scenarios in the coming month:

- **Almost certain.** The protest movement will gain pace in the coming weeks. Large peaceful protests should be expected across Syrian cities despite threats from the government to clamp

down on anti-regime activists. Friday prayer gatherings offer ideal platforms for anti-government demonstrations.

- **Highly likely.** Crackdown by security forces continues and at times strengthens against protesters and suspected anti-government elements. Armed men fire live bullets against protesters and create panic in gatherings. Arrests and forced disappearances of activists, opposition figures and foreign journalists will likely continue.
- **Likely.** In the same way as Daraa, other protest spots in Syria, such as Baniyas, Homs and Al Rastan, might also see an increase in security forces presence and activities in the coming days and weeks.
- **Credible.** Defections within regime institutions affect the credibility of President Assad. While the risk of cracks remains high, the regime is not likely to suffer serious divisions that would jeopardize its hold on to power.
- **Credible.** The continuation of the protest movement and the ensuing violence could incite sectarian tensions vis-à-vis Sunni Syrians, especially among Christian and Allawite communities which are largely assumed to be supportive of the regime and see the current unrest as undermining their own safety and security.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*Travelers should avoid non-essential travel to Syria at this time. Foreigners currently residing in Syria are advised to leave the country pending improvements in the security situation. Western citizens face the risk of being forcibly detained and interrogated by security forces. While in country, personnel should assess their need to stay and exercise extreme caution. They are also advised to limit movement and avoid approaching public gatherings, especially on Fridays. Presence in Syria must be reported to appropriate embassies or consulates. Relatives /colleagues outside the country should be kept informed of any domestic travel.*

## Bahrain- Arabian Gulf

*Government measures.* For the past weeks, Bahraini authorities have taken judicial measures against those who took part or supported the protest movement. According to officials, 400 supporters of the opposition will soon face trial in military courts on charges of acting against the state and taking part in illegal gatherings. 300 others have already been released. Four protesters were given death sentences on charges of assaulting and killing two police officers during the unrest. Dozens of doctors and nurses who treated injured protesters during the crackdown were also charged with attempts to topple the monarchy. Several opposition figures have been arrested and are still detained pending trial for threatening state security. Two former MPs from the Shia Al-Wafaq movement were reportedly detained by security forces, showing that the post-protests crackdown has reached the highest level of representation within Shia Bahrainis. Worker unions and other state-controlled associations took action against members who participated in anti-government demonstrations or skipped work during the uprising.

*Sunni-Shia divide.* Government actions against protesters have increased discontent within the Shia community in Bahrain. Sunni Bahrainis, most of whom are supportive of the government, appear

however to approve the measures taken against those they have qualified as ‘terrorists’. The sectarian divide has widened since the uprising. Though the government has insisted that the door for political dialogue remains open to opposition parties, the latter have consistently refused to accept reconciliation talks whilst dozens of figures and hundreds of anti-government supporters remain behind bars or unaccounted for.

*International response.* The United States has refrained from condemning Bahrain’s crackdown on protesters, though administration officials have asked authorities in Manama to respect human rights, reach national dialogue and ensure fair trial of those detained. Washington is supportive of the current leadership and is concerned that Iranian influence and interference in Bahrain’s internal affairs might affect the island’s long-term security and stability. All GCC countries have thrown their complete political support behind the Bahraini monarchy, inking new security cooperation deals to prevent or prepare for future internal destabilization. Criticism of Bahrain’s response to the protests has come strongly from the UN human rights commission.

*GCC/Iran tensions.* Iran and Saudi Arabia continue to exchange accusations on their role within Bahrain. Tehran sees the Saudi army presence in Bahrain as an occupation and a threat to the Shia community there. Riyadh, along with other GCC government, remains deeply worried about Iran’s growing interference in Bahrain internal affairs. Iran’s army chief lately declared that the Gulf belonged to Iran, a controversial statement that was immediately condemned by Arab Gulf governments. In addition, the Saudi embassy in Tehran was recently attacked by angry protesters, prompting Saudi authorities to blame the Iranian government for not doing anything to protect it. Spying and interference allegations are causing a great deal of damage to diplomatic and trade relations between Iran and GCC countries. Bahrain’s chamber of commerce and industry has called for GCC countries to boycott Iranian products and halt financial transactions with Iran, a move that is highly unlikely to be followed but is nevertheless indicative of the heightened tensions.

*Security environment.* Security has been restored in most of the island. Security forces remain positioned in key areas of the capital, which remains largely calm following a violent crackdown against protesters late March. The official curfew remains active between midnight and 4am in some areas, and is reportedly being enforced. Random shootings between anti-regime activists and the police continue to take place in some Shia districts.

Potential scenarios in the coming month:

- **Almost certainly.** Continuing government action against protesters and suspected activists reinforces sectarian divide and hampers prospects of national dialogue. Opposition forces remain divided as to whether accepting talk offers is a good strategy to follow. Authorities move on with trials against detained activists. Western and GCC support for Bahraini leadership is maintained despite criticism from human rights groups.
- **Highly likely.** Anti-government activists gather within Shia districts on a frequent basis, notably on Fridays, to demand the release of detainees or the reversal of judicial decisions and other punitive measures taken by the government against protesters. Such protests are closely watched by helicopters and plainclothes security forces. Short-lived skirmishes take place in

Shia neighborhoods and those suspected of threatening public order are arrested. Firefights and sporadic clashes in these areas are highly likely.

- **Credible.** Rising tensions between Bahrain and Iran might lead to a complete breakdown of diplomatic relations, with repercussions on Saudi and GCC relations with the Islamic Republic. Deterioration of diplomatic links could also result in provocative moves from both sides, such as air and naval drills in Gulf waters.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*Bahrain is once again safe for foreigners to travel to and reside in as long as certain areas, such as Shia neighborhoods, are avoided. Trips between the capital city center and the airport are said to be safe and traffic flows normally. Security screening at the airport can be lengthy due to fears of entry of weapons and material that could be used to incite protests. Some army checkpoints remain in place, though most of them have been lifted. Foreigners are advised to follow instructions from authorities at all times and stay away from public gatherings that could attract security forces. Registration at appropriate embassies is highly recommended. Curfew hours should be respected as security forces are known to enforce this measure through interrogation and detention.*

Tier 3 countries: situation ‘of concern’.

## Egypt

The situation in Egypt has stabilized and there has been a sharp decrease in political-motivated violence in the past month. The ruling military council is responding to demands of revolutionary youths that former officials be investigated and prosecuted for crimes and wrongdoings committed during Mubarak’s era. Former interior minister was given a 12-year sentence on corruption charges. Mubarak himself is currently under detention and could face severe sentences if convicted. He maintains however a solid support base within Egypt and any prosecution or sentence, especially death sentence, could lead to violent acts by his followers. Indeed, supporters of the former president gather from time to time to contest his detention and put pressure on authorities, leading to short-lived clashes with anti-Mubarak activists.

The Muslim Brotherhood (MB) is cautious not to display its true electoral strength ahead of elections and has claimed that it will contest only half of the seats disputed in the upcoming parliamentary elections. As part of its efforts to play by the rules that forbid religious-based parties, MB formed the Freedom and Justice Party, which is open to other faiths but will retain an Islamic background. Sectarian tensions between Christian Copts and Muslim Salafists are on the rise over a number of controversial appointments which led to demonstrations and limited violence in the city of Qena. Bedouin tribes in the Sinai province are showing discontent vis-à-vis the authorities through frequent demonstrations and violent acts, such as the blowing of oil and gas pipelines. Though the intense political debate has not led to significant levels violence, the overall security environment is reported to have gone worsened in Egypt (petty crime is rampant and there have been a number of high-level prison breaks).



The killing of Osama Bin Laden could potentially lead to a resumption of violence by extremist Islamist groups in Egypt. US/Western interests could be targeted but the likelihood of high visibility attacks is low due to heavy security forces presence and increased vigilance.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*Travelers and foreign residents in Egypt face no imminent threat in the context of the recent political convulsion, though vigilance is required following the killing of the Al-Qaeda leader. Western embassies and tourist sites are the most likely targets of attacks by extremist groups. However such risks are diminished by greater presence of security forces in these locations. Trips to Sinai province should be avoided due to volatile situation there.*

## Morocco

In the past months Morocco has witnessed an increase in public demonstrations aimed at putting pressure on the government to improve socio-economic conditions and open up the political system. For the most part, these peaceful gatherings have been dealt with orderly by security forces and the government has made a number of pledges to appease discontent. Late March, an explosion in a trendy coffee shop in Marrakesh killed 16 people, most of them Westerners, one Israeli and two Moroccans, pointing to a resurgence of Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM). Authorities have arrested three suspects with alleged Al-Qaeda links. Pro-reform activists are concerned that the latest terrorist attack might bring security and counter-terrorism to the top of the government's agenda to the detriment of democratic and socio-economic reforms.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*Leisure and business travelers are advised to be cautious while in Morocco, as there is a high risk of terrorism following the late March blast in Marrakesh and the killing of Osama Bin Laden. AQIM operatives could seek to conduct attacks in locations frequented by Westerners, so these places should be avoided. Demonstrations, though mostly peaceful, should also be avoided.*

## Israel – Palestinian Territories

The signing of a Hamas-Fatah agreement ending almost five years of divisions between the two factions is seen by Israeli authorities as negative and undermining the peace process. Both Palestinian factions are likely to form a national unity government, in which case Israel will probably suspend peace talks with the Palestinian Authority (PA). This said, the Hamas-Fatah reconciliation could fail over the nomination of the new government's prime minister and divisions on how to deal with Israel. To Israel, the PA is choosing peace with Hamas over peace with Israel. As a result, Tel Aviv might take measures against an eventual joint Palestinian government in which Hamas participates.

Escalating tensions could drive Hamas to reconsider the current truce with Israel and lead to resumption in rocket attacks against Israeli targets. This being said, Hamas has an interest to maintain the current truce with the Jewish state and improve its reputation regionally and internationally. The Israeli government will be under pressure from conservatives to take on

Hamas and other more extremist and less visible Palestinian factions. Tensions between Israel and the Palestinians could progressively deteriorate in the coming weeks and months, undermining the prospect of peace negotiations and increasing the likelihood of a unilateral statehood declaration by the PA.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*Military confrontation is not expected in the near term although mistrust is growing between the Israeli government and the Palestinians. Cross-border clashes could take place if extremist groups in Gaza resume rocket firing in violation of the truce. The threat of terrorism inside Israel is currently elevated but no significant (subject to variations in the political situation).*

## Tunisia

Tunisia is undergoing intense political debate ahead of elections due to take place in July. The resulting parliament will be tasked with drafting a new constitution. Observers claim that Islamists, who are strong in the south of the country where the revolution that toppled former president Ben Ali started, could be victorious in the polls. There is concern that loyalists of the former regime, concentrated in Tunisia's coast, could stage a coup against the current authorities if Islamists win the elections.

The post-revolution situation remains fragile. Early May, Tunisia witnessed the greatest demonstrations since the Ben Ali was ousted, as security forces intervened to break protests and used force to disperse activists. In the latest decision to deal with growing discontent and protests, the interim government imposed a night-time curfew in Tunis and surrounding districts. Tunisia has in addition begun to feel the repercussions of the Libya conflict. At several occasions Libyan soldiers entered the territory and exchanged fire with Tunisian soldiers or shelled suspected Libyan rebels inside Tunisia late April. The flow of Libyan refugees in Tunisia is growing as Ghadafi forces intensify their attacks on the Western Mountains region close to the Tunisian border.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*Travelers should avoid approaching the Libyan border. The rest of the country remains calm except for random protests taking place in the capital Tunis. Foreigners have not been targeted by any group inside Libya since the revolution took place. Tourist sites are seen to be free of risk. This being said, the internal situation must be monitored at all times as deterioration in the relation between political forces could lead to violence, especially in Tunes and important cities in southern Tunisia. Curfew hours in Tunis should be respected as long as this measure remains in place.*

## Algeria

Despite frequent protests in the streets of Algiers by targeted social and professional groups (students, doctors, etc) with specific demands, discontent vis-à-vis the government in Algeria has not taken similar proportions as in Tunisia or Egypt. Though anti-government sentiment is palpable among pro-reform youths and portions of the middle class, opposition groups have failed to unite behind an organized movement. Moreover, the government has been able to discourage public

demonstrations by responding to certain of these groups' demands. In the latest such move, President Bouteflika promised political reforms, subsidies for primary foodstuffs, salary increases for the public sector and the creation of jobs. Security forces have nevertheless been used to disperse protesters, leading to clashes and people injured on both sides.

Algeria's oil revenues and encouraging economic growth allow the government to calm down the spirits of youths and a middle class determined to get some benefits from the ongoing wave of protests and reform taking place across the Middle East and North Africa. The security environment remains stable, although there is significant risk of terrorist attacks against foreign interests following the killing of Osama Bin Laden. Al-Qaeda's regional affiliate in North Africa is assumed to have a solid presence and support base in Algeria.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*Visitors should consider personal safety before traveling to Algeria. The threat of terrorism against foreign citizens remains high. Protests in public spaces do not pose a threat to foreigners, though these should avoid approaching politically-motivated gatherings. Travel outside Algiers is not recommended. The use of the road network could expose travelers to risk of abduction by criminal and extremist syndicates operating in southern Algeria and in bordering areas with Libya, Mali, Mauritania and Niger.*

## Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia's Eastern Province has recently witnessed small but repeated peaceful protests in support of Shia demonstrators in Bahrain and against the Saudi military presence in the neighboring country. However, gatherings of few hundred in the city of Qatif and neighboring towns were quickly dispersed by security forces. Staging protests is illegal in the Kingdom. Up to 140 people, mostly human rights and pro-reform activists, have been detained in the last two months. Demonstrations in Saudi Arabia failed to gain pace, but frustration remains high among the Shia community who feel discriminated against and restricted in their civil rights.

A recently-approved media law forbids media activities that go against Islamic values, serve the interests of foreign countries or undermines national security. This instrument will certainly limit incitement to protests at times when the Middle East goes through major socio-political transformations. Protests by Shia Muslims in the future are unlikely to gather support from the wider population and will be restricted to cities in the east of the country. Scattered protests in Qatif and other towns in Eastern Province will remain low-impact and should not disrupt commercial and industrial activities.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*The threat of terrorism is present in Saudi Arabia. Though Al-Qaeda is known to have a strong support base in the Kingdom, authorities have been successful at dismantling operation networks and putting behind bars hundreds of suspected militants. Following the killing of Osama Bin Laden, business travelers and foreigners residing in the country should avoid unnecessary public exposure and limit their movements within known and secure areas.*

## Oman

A small-size but persistent protest movement has developed in Oman since last January. The cities of Sohar and Salalah have been focal points for demonstrators asking for political reforms, jobs and measures against government corruption. The leadership has responded with some generous financial concessions, promises that corruption would be dealt with as well as greater responsibilities to the Shura council, a consultative and advisory body that serves decision-making. At the same time, security forces have been used to disrupt peaceful demonstrations, leading to the killing of two protester in Sohar. More than two hundred protesters were arrested and later pardoned by the ruler, except for those charged with destroying public property and assaulting security officers. Small and peaceful protests continue to take place in Sohar, Salalah and Muscat, particularly on Fridays after prayers.

*Whispering Bell Monitor advice:*

*Oman remains a risk-free country for travelers and foreign residents. Foreigners are however advised against approaching politically-motivated public gatherings as this could result in interrogation and arrest by security forces.*

*Views expressed in this article are not necessarily those of SAGE International*