

Whispering Bell Monitor

Monthly Regional Overview for July 2011

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Introduction

Whispering Bell Monitor offers its latest overview of the Middle East and North Africa region for the month of July 2011. 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, Whispering Bell 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 August 3).

- **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 belongs to this category (as of August 3).

- **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, Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Tunisia, Lebanon, Morocco and Jordan enter this category (as of August 3).

Country-by-country assessments

Tier 1 countries: Critical Situation

Libya

The situation in Libya has not significantly changed throughout the month of July. Clashes have intensified across the country and although rebel forces are now pushing more decisively toward

Tripoli, the frontlines have remained largely static. Efforts to achieve territorial gains have multiplied in Western Mountain as rebel forces attempted to take control of supply routes used by the Ghadafi regime, as well as to get closer to Tripoli. It is hoped that this would encourage an uprising by anti-Ghadafi elements within the capital. In practical terms, however, it is hard to devise how advancing rebels can make dissident groups more capable to raise up against Libyan security forces. Subversive elements in Tripoli are assumed to be disorganized, undertrained and poorly armed. In general, rebel forces are struggling to make progress on the ground, slowed down by constant counter-offensives and landmines left behind by departing enemy troops. The oil port town of Brega has been on the brink of falling to rebel control for several days, but stiff resistance and large presence of mines have slowed rebel progress. A similar situation prevents rebels from seizing the town of Zlitan, to the east of Misrata.

Diplomatic overtures acknowledged by Tripoli, the National Transitional Council (NTC) and individual Western countries did not translate into any concrete negotiations toward a political resolution of the conflict, at least not publicly. The Libyan regime and the NTC continue to differ on the future of Muammar Ghadafi, who in recent weeks has made repeated audio appearances threatening NATO and Libyan rebels. The NTC is comforted by growing diplomatic recognitions, which are progressively opening the door to foreign assistance and the transfer of frozen Libyan assets.

Refugees who fled to Tunisia are slowly returning to villages in western Libya, as the security situation in some areas has largely improved. Towns in Western Mountain under rebel control continue to rely heavily on supplies brought from Tunisia. In eastern Libya, the assassination of the chief of staff of rebel forces Abdel Fatah Younis brought to light disorganization and factional disagreements within the rebel movement. The incident was followed by a purge of armed militias suspected of ties to the Ghadafi regime and new measures to regulate the use of weapons in NTC-controlled areas.

Potential scenarios in the coming month:

- **Almost certain. Fighting to continue on three main fronts.** Fierce battles will continue throughout August in Western Mountain, around Zlitan and in eastern Libya, despite the Ramadan season. Rebel forces will eventually succeed in capturing Zlitan and Brega, but only at a high human cost and with the decisive support of NATO airstrikes. In Western Mountain, the advances will be more limited due to stiff resistance by Ghadafi troops and lack of significant support for the revolution within the local population.
- **Highly likely. NATO airstrike campaign slows pace.** Mindful of the sensitivities typical of the Holy month of Ramadan, NATO's air command will limit airstrikes in areas that could lead to civilian casualties and generate a damaging backlash against the Western coalition. Instead, airstrikes will likely concentrate on Libyan army targets along the main fronts of the conflict in an effort to facilitate advancing rebel forces.
- **Credible. Security situation deteriorates in Benghazi.** The drive by the NTC to regulate the use of weapons in Benghazi and other areas in eastern Libya could be resisted by armed militias opposed to Ghadafi but not necessarily willing to obey to the orders of NTC-appointed commanders. Disagreements within the rebel movement could lead to brief but

violent clashes between rival factions. Personal and tribal vendettas could resurface as the NTC seeks to re-assert control of eastern Libya.

Whispering Bell Monitor advice:

For security reasons, foreigners should avoid traveling to Libya. There is a persistent risk of fatality from heavy weaponry along the main frontlines. Land travel to Benghazi through the Egyptian border is viable and still the safest option, but could nevertheless expose travelers to random attacks, robbery and kidnapping by armed gangs along the stretch of land separating Tobruk from Benghazi. Border crossings to Tunisia in western Libya (Dahiba, Ras Jdir) get frequently congested and are the scene of periodical incidents. Consular assistance and professional security advice is highly recommended for foreigners trying to exit or enter Libya. Internal GSM communications are currently working fine in eastern Libya through Libyana network. International calls to landlines in Misrata are now possible by dialing 00218-5 plus the local number. Internet is only available through satellite communications. Some hotels and offices in Benghazi currently offer internet connectivity.

Yemen

There has been no progress between the Yemeni government and opposition parties on the resolution of the five month long political crisis. Government officials insist on the need to maintain dialogue, but the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP) refuses to sit down for talks unless President Saleh transfers powers to his deputy, as outlined in the Gulf initiative. Visits to Sana'a by UN, US and EU envoys have failed to bring about a breakthrough in negotiations. Frustrated over the lack of progress, the revolutionary protest movement established a transitional council, a move quickly imitated by Yemeni opposition parties. These instances, however, have so far played a coordinating role only and are in no way challenging the regime. While several international players have publicly urged Saleh to relinquish power, most influential actors, namely the United States and Saudi Arabia, fell short of supporting the Yemeni opposition, suggesting that the rule of President Saleh still meets their strategic interests.

Anti-government protests have continued uninterrupted across the country during the month of July, particularly in Taiz, Sana'a, Aden and Hudaidah. Protests are no longer gathering hundreds of thousands as in previous months, but continue to repudiate Saleh in the strongest terms, often calling for escalation against the regime. In addition to anti-government sentiment, street demonstrations are increasingly denouncing harsh living conditions, particularly in relation to the lack of fuel and electricity, as well as increasing fuel prices.

Security has sharply deteriorated in the cities of Sana'a, Taiz and Aden. The capital is feeling the impacts of a struggle between Republican Guards and armed tribes in Arhab region, north of Sana'a. In Taiz, Republican Guards continuously shell tribal positions in residential areas of the city, causing severe damage and civilian casualties. Successive truces between opposing forces in Taiz have failed to hold. In Aden, several terrorist attacks were registered in previous weeks, notably a car bomb attack that killed a senior British citizen and another car bomb that killed eight soldiers in front of an army barrack. Islamist operatives linked to Al-Qaeda are allegedly behind these attacks.

The Yemeni army, backed by tribal militias, is still fighting Islamist extremists in the town of Zinjibar, in Abyan province. Despite recent indications that Islamists were being defeated, combats continue and casualties on both sides are reported on a frequent basis.

Potential scenarios in the coming month:

- **Almost certain: Saleh to retain power despite pressure.** President Saleh is highly unlikely to cede power as a result of domestic/external pressure. His return to the country has become more possible after almost two months of recovery time in Saudi Arabia. Loyalty to Saleh is considered to be intact within the ruling party and the security apparatus.
- **Highly likely. Continuous protests and economic paralysis in Yemen's main cities.** Supporters and detractors of the government are increasingly frustrated over continuing economic paralysis and difficult access to the most basic commodities, which could lead to an escalation of protests and violent confrontations with security forces and between rival groups. Regular protests are likely to continue in the cities of Sana'a, Taiz, Hudaidah, Aden and Ibb.
- **Highly likely. Terrorist attacks in Aden.** Further bomb attacks by Islamist militants against government and foreign interests remain highly likely in Aden as the army continues to combat Islamist fighters in Abyan province.
- **Credible. Civil war.** Civil war has become a credible scenario in Yemen as efforts to end the crisis politically have failed for the past five months. Use of heavy artillery and airstrikes by the Yemeni army, mainly the Republican Guards and Central Security Forces controlled by Saleh's relatives, provoke powerful tribal militias, which retain the capability to seize government buildings and defy regime control of the capital. Clashes in Sana'a could erupt and encourage defected army units to confront security forces loyal to Saleh.

Whispering Bell Monitor advice:

Foreigners should avoid all travel to Yemen at this time. There is a persistent risk of terrorist attacks across the country, both against government and foreign interests. Westerners, particularly aid workers deployed to remote areas, additionally face the threat of kidnapping by criminal gangs, tribes and Islamist groups. All foreigners are urged to leave Yemen while commercial means remain available. Sana'a International Airport could face disruptions, and even attacks, as a consequence of clashes in nearby Arhab region. Tribal militias have threatened to hit the airport in response to artillery attacks by security forces. 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 should be seriously considered for those moving outside the capital Sana'a. Foreigners should likewise avoid approaching political gatherings and limit the time spent close to sensitive locations, such as government buildings and public squares, to mitigate risks of being affected by incidental violence. Travel to southern Abyan province must be avoided for security reasons. Visiting Aden is not recommended at this time due to risks of terrorism and violence by Islamist militants.

Tier 2 countries: Alarming Situation

Syria

The protest movement against the Syrian regime has continued and even consolidated throughout July. Mass demonstrations, the biggest since the uprising began, took place in the cities of Homs, Hama (in central Syria) and Deir es-Zor (in eastern Syria). These protests gathered several hundred thousand people calling for President Assad to step down and denouncing the violent crackdown by security forces. Almost daily anti-government protests also took place in the Sunni-populated suburbs of Damascus. Following the same pattern seen in previous months, authorities responded to demonstrations by deploying army units supported by tanks and armored vehicles, which in several instances launched violent raids against suspected anti-regime activists. Armed forces and militias loyal to the regime have been accused of being behind most of the violence. An undetermined number of civilians, counted in the hundreds, have reportedly been killed in July alone. Several hundreds have also been reported missing. Evidence and testimonies from the ground also revealed the use of guns and other weapons by civilians against members of security forces. In Homs, sectarian violence flared up between Sunni and Allawite communities, leading to dozens of atrocious revenge killings. During the last days of July, security forces prepared to launch an assault on the city of Hama, which has clearly emerged as a leading protest hub. A portion of refugees who fled to Turkey has now returned to villages in northern Syria, but thousands still remain in Turkish camps due to fears of reprisal. The violence in Homs and Hama also forced hundreds to cross the border with Lebanon. Brief Syrian army incursions into Lebanese territory have been reported.

Mild political concessions by the regime have failed to prevent demonstrations and armed violence. A government-sponsored dialogue that took place in Damascus did not lead to any positive results. Instead, it revealed the widening gap between what the regime was ready to discuss 'in principle' and concrete actions demanded by a diverse opposition movement. The government also tried to show its will to reform by proposing a law allowing the creating of new political parties. However, the opposition dismissed it on the grounds that it imposed tough restrictions that would have kept the Muslim Brotherhood and Kurdish parties out of the political scene. Syrian opposition figures continue to organize themselves from abroad, having most recently sought to integrate representatives of protest movements. The international community has responded to developments in Syria by calling on Assad to cease the violence, pull out armed forces from protest areas and release thousands of detainees. The United States and European countries are considering more sanctions against officials in Damascus. The regime is increasingly isolated at the international stage.

Potential scenarios in the coming month:

- **Almost certain. Anti-regime protests and crackdown to continue.** The protest movement against the regime has consolidated and will in all likelihood continue to urge the fall of the regime through demonstrations, most of which will remain peaceful. During the fasting month of Ramadan, protests are most likely to take place after evening prayers and organize around local mosques or main squares. Security forces are expected to pursue

the violent crackdown, fuelled by sectarian hatred and drive for revenge. The increasing use of weapons by civilians could lead to the formation of armed groups to evict opposed militias and army units. Largest protests and scenes of violence are most likely in Hama/Homs, Deir es-Zor and the suburbs of Damascus.

- **Highly likely. Government runs out of political tools to deal with crisis.** As the situation in the country deteriorates further, the government is unlikely to present new alternatives capable of appeasing the protest movement and the international community. Recent reform proposals have failed to create enthusiasm and divide the opposition. Western governments step up sanctions against the regime and review their diplomatic links with Damascus.
- **Credible. Growing army defections and sectarian strife.** The continuation of the crackdown on protesters is understood to be undermining unity within security forces. In this context, we could witness large defections in the Syrian army, mostly among the lower ranks not linked to Allawite-dominated elite circles. Should this be the case, the government could lose control of certain areas of the country. The potential for widespread sectarian violence is significant, both within security forces themselves and between rival communities in protest-stricken towns and cities.

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. Most Western governments have urged their citizens to leave Syria immediately while commercial means are still available. 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 at all times. Presence in Syria must be reported to appropriate embassies or consulates. Relatives/colleagues outside the country should be kept informed of any domestic travel.

Tier 3 countries: Situation of Concern

Algeria

The so-called 'Arab Spring' has not taken root in Algeria. Despite palpable socio-economic discontent in the form of sporadic protests and area-specific strikes, the government has not been meaningfully challenged. Due to the lack of popular pressure, the government is moving very slowly on promised democratic reforms. The greatest challenge to stability and security appears to come from an increase in terrorist attacks against security forces. In July, several suicide attacks took place in Kabylia region, which left more than a dozen people dead. Roadside bombs have also been planted to inflict damage on army convoys. Shootings between police and suspected terrorists also take place on a frequent basis.

Although the general security environment in Algeria is stable, there is a significant risk of terrorist attacks against security forces and foreign interests by homegrown Islamist extremists. Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb (AQIM) is known to have a considerable presence and support base in Algeria.

Whispering Bell Monitor advice:

Visitors should consider personal safety before traveling to Algeria. The threat of terrorism against security forces and foreign citizens remains high. Protests in public spaces do not pose a threat to foreigners, though these should avoid approaching political gatherings. Travel outside Algiers is not advised. Foreigners should not travel to Kabylia region. 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.

Bahrain

Bahrain was recently downgraded from Tier 2 to Tier 3 due to a significant improvement in the security environment across the island, and based on the assessment that large disrupting demonstrations, heavy troop deployments and widespread violence are not likely. A government-sponsored national dialogue took place in July, but its achievements lie essentially on the opportunity given to various social movements to voice their respective concerns and formulate specific demands. There have been no actionable proposals to move the country towards a more democratic political system, as requested by the political societies behind the February-March demonstrations. Al Wefaq, Bahrain's largest opposition force, walked out of the national dialogue following complaints that it had only been given a limited space to voice its concerns and demands. Opposition leaders have urged supporters to maintain pressure on the government by staging peaceful demonstrations.

Protests continue to take place in Bahrain on an almost daily basis, but these are generally small and confined to Shia-populated districts. Police forces deploy heavily to contain rallies. Friday protests are normally larger and more organized. Demonstrators demand the release of prisoners and the trial of state officials behind the March crackdown. Riot police use tear gas and rubber bullets to disperse the crowds, and protesters often respond by throwing stones. Activists are also routinely arrested in police raids, but are most of the times released after interrogation. There is evidence that those arrested are sometimes tortured while on detention. Spontaneous night-time protests are likely during August (coinciding with Ramadan) as residents in Shia neighborhoods gather after evening prayers. Hundreds of troops sent by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are still deployed in Bahrain.

Whispering Bell Monitor advice:

Prospects of large demonstrations triggering a violent response from security forces are currently low. Travelers and foreign expatriates are however advised to avoid movement in Shia-populated districts across the island, as there is a persistent risk of brief clashes between protesters and riot police. Friday demonstrations along busy roads and roundabouts can provoke serious traffic congestion. Residents

and foreigners are therefore advised to follow instructions from authorities at all times and stay away from public gatherings.

Egypt

Frustrated pro-reform movements in Egypt resumed protests in the first days of July due to the lack of response from the ruling military council to their demands: speedy trials for former officials and members of security forces accused of corruption and killing of protesters. Thousands of people moved to Tahrir Square in central Cairo and set up tents, vowing to pursue the sit-in as long as necessary. Similar protests also took place in the cities of Alexandria and Suez, where roads were blocked and protesters clashed with police forces trying to disperse them. In response to popular pressure and discontent, the prime minister dismissed the cabinet and appointed new ministers. He also called for the dismissal of police officers accused of abuses. Parliamentary elections were rescheduled to November, in a move seen as a gesture to new political forces needing more time to mobilize their electorates. The trial of Hosni Mubarak and other former officials is due to take place in Cairo throughout the month of August, reducing the prospect of large demonstrations but increasing the risk of clashes between Mubarak supporters and families of martyrs near the police academy in New Cairo, where the trial will take place.

Islamist militancy is emerging as a new challenge for Egyptian authorities. A gas pipeline in northern Sinai province was attacked at least three times during July, disrupting the provision of gas to Israel and Jordan. Nobody was arrested in connection to these attacks, but Islamist activists are widely assumed to be responsible. On July 29, dozens of armed Islamists attacked a police station in the town of El-Arish in Sinai province. At least six policemen were killed during the shootout. Police interrogation of suspects revealed that Islamists were planning further attacks against government buildings in the same town.

Whispering Bell Monitor advice:

Political tensions do not pose a threat to travellers and foreigners residing in Egypt. However, public gatherings, as well as government and judicial buildings in Cairo, Suez and Alexandria should be avoided as clashes between protesters and security forces remain likely. Trips to Sinai province should be avoided due to the risk of terrorist attacks and random shootings involving Islamist militants.

Tunisia

The security situation in Tunisia suddenly deteriorated in the first weeks of July as protests and riots took place in the suburbs of Tunis and other towns across the country. Police forces intervened in several occasions to disperse the crowds. Tensions rose when a minor was killed by a falling bullet fired by police in Sidi Bouzid. In another incident, suspected Islamists attacked a police station in Menzel Bourguiba. These incidents led to the imposition of curfews in these two towns. Curfews have now been lifted. Tunisian authorities extended indefinitely the state of emergency

(initially due to end on July 31). Tensions also flared up along the border with Libya. Security is poor in the border crossing of Dahiba due to frequent skirmishes between Ghadafi loyalists on the one side, and rebel supporters and security forces on the other. Tunisia's southern governorates neighboring Libya are now facing gas shortages due to a high number of Libyan refugees returning to their villages with the full tank. Prior to the start of Ramadan, border crossings in Dahiba and Ras Jdir suffered severe congestions and long queues on both directions.

Registration for upcoming elections (October 23) has been much lower than initially hoped, a situation that has forced authorities to extend the voting registration period. The political debate ahead of the voting is lively but respectful. The government's commitment to the trial of former president Ben Ali and several of his associates has helped the population put the past behind and look more optimistically toward the future.

Whispering Bell Monitor advice:

Travel to the Libyan border should be avoided unless essential. Long delays should be expected in the border crossings of Ras Jdir and Dahiba. Although foreigners have not been targeted by any group inside Tunisia since the revolution took place, they should be mindful of underlying tensions created by Islamist extremist groups seeking to derail the democratic process. Public gatherings should be therefore avoided. A state of emergency remains in place, which gives security forces the right to arrest and shoot if public order is threatened. Deterioration in the security environment leading to sporadic violence remains possible. Local press should be monitored at all times to remain up to date with security measures, such as curfews and demonstration areas.

Lebanon

The indictment of several Hezbollah members by the Special Tribunal for Lebanon did not lead to scenes of violence between the Shia militant movement and political forces supportive of the tribunal. Yet, political parties and blocs represented at the new government remain deeply divided, both within the cabinet and in the parliament. Differences are voiced peacefully, but accusations suggest an increase in political tensions. The most preoccupying violent incidents over the past month were related to the situation in Syria. Several protests took place to either show support or denounce Syrian president Assad. In Beirut, anti and pro-Assad groups clashed at least two times in the capital's streets following demonstrations in front of the Syrian embassy in Beirut. In the northern city of Tripoli, protests against Assad also take place on a regular basis, without major incidents due to heavy deployment of security forces.

A UNIFIL patrol vehicle was attacked near the southern city of Sidon. Three French soldiers were injured by the roadside bomb. There was a unanimous and immediate condemnation of the attack by all forces in the country, including Hezbollah, which dominates southern Lebanon. Tensions are also on the rise between Lebanon and Israel, as the latter intends to demarcate its northern maritime borders prior to planned gas exploration operations. Any attempt by Israel to demarcate this border unilaterally, either through diplomatic means or by starting underwater drilling, could spark a crisis between the two countries. On August 1, a cross-border shooting incident took place

between Lebanese and Israeli soldiers along the Blue Line in southern Lebanon. Both sides blamed each other. Incidents and skirmishes of limited scope along the disputed Lebanon-Israel border remain likely.

Whispering Bell Monitor advice:

Travelers and foreign residents should cautiously plan their movements within the country. In Beirut and Tripoli, public gatherings in which protesters wave Syrian flags should be avoided, as these could lead to clashes between rival groups and the intervention of security forces. Border areas with Syria and Israel should also be avoided as tensions have recently risen and any misunderstanding could translate into a violent incident. Foreign companies should consider contingency planning for personnel already in country.

Morocco

On July 1, Morocco opened a new chapter in its political history. A constitutional reform package proposed by King Mohammed VI was put to referendum and approved by the overwhelming majority of voters (98.5%). The government was quick to highlight the approval rate as a sign that the Kingdom had unequivocally chosen the path of peaceful and concerted democratic transformation, unlike other countries in the Arab world. The referendum was largely praised in Morocco and abroad. The new constitution gives the prime minister greater powers and prerogatives, previously held by the king only. New parliamentary elections are expected to be held before the end of this year, but a date has not been yet scheduled. Detractors of the government-sponsored reform push, however, argued that the proposed amendments were rejected by at least half of the adult population eligible to vote, which did not participate in the referendum.

Throughout the month of July, the 'February 20 Movement' organized a number of large protests denouncing the current political system and demanding meaningful democratic reforms. Demonstrations, held mostly on Sundays, gathered several thousand pro-democracy supporters in the cities of Casablanca and Rabat. Much smaller protests also took place in dozens of other cities and towns across the country. Marches remained generally peaceful and police forces deployed in the largest cities to avoid disturbances and potential clashes with loyalists.

Whispering Bell Monitor advice:

Pro-reform demonstrations should be avoided as there is a persistent risk of them being forcibly disrupted by security forces or confronted by monarchy loyalists. An increase in protests is likely in the run-up to elections, for which a date is yet to be announced. As Al-Qaeda in the Maghreb is known to have a presence and support base within Morocco, sites crowded with Western tourists are best avoided, especially during this summer season.

Jordan

Several Friday protests called by the Islamic Action Front (IAF) took place in the Jordanian capital Amman during the month of July. Crowds of two to three thousand people marched to demand political reforms and an end to government corruption. Serious disturbances took place mid-July as pro-reform protesters clashed with pro-government supporters in Amman. The police intervened violently to separate the two sides. Several journalists and a number of policemen were injured during the clashes. The pro-reform movement in Jordan has failed to gather steam despite efforts by the IAF to mobilize its support base.

Whispering Bell Monitor advice:

Pro-reform demonstrations in Amman should be avoided as these could lead to clashes with security forces and rival groups. Foreign journalists should exercise caution as threats have been voiced against foreign media outlets by supporters of King Abdullah following accusations of biased reporting.