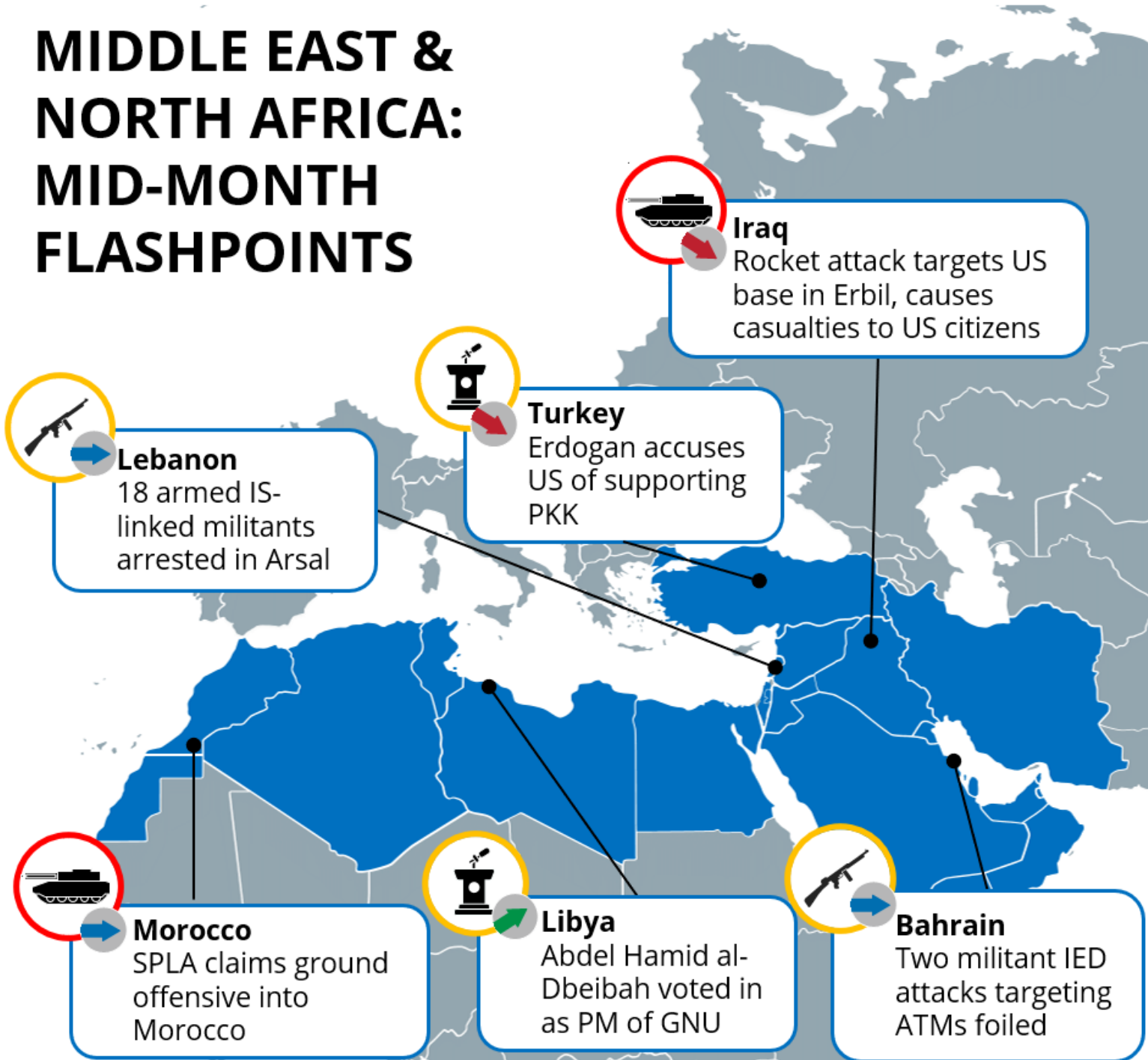




MIDDLE EAST & NORTH AFRICA: MID-MONTH FLASHPOINTS



Icons	Risk Levels	Stability Forecast
Politics	Low Risk	Improving
Cyber	Medium Risk	Stable
Militancy	High Risk	Deteriorating
Armed Conflict	Extreme Risk	
Crime		
Civil Unrest		



REGIONAL HIGHLIGHTS:

Bahrain: Security forces foil two militant IED attacks targeting ATMs in Manama Governorate on February 3; highlights risk to bystanders

- Authorities announced that explosive disposal forces discovered and defused two “bombs” placed at two separate ATMs belonging to a “national bank” in Manama Governorate’s al-Naim and Jidhafs regions.
- An investigation that followed the dismantlement of the two devices led to the arrest of several suspects.
- The MoI statement indicated that the incident was considered an act of “terrorism”.

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This development is highly notable given the rarity of militancy acts in Bahrain over the past year. However infrequent, militancy-related incidents in the Kingdom have largely been carried out by radicalized Shiite elements, motivated by radical Iran-linked ideologies and perceived marginalization of the Shiite majority populace by the Sunni-led government. For example, on February 1, 18 individuals were arrested for forming a militant cell supported by the Iranian Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) and plotting to attack key landmarks to avenge the US-perpetrated killing of IRGC commander Qassem Soleimani. With regard to this latest incident, it is possible that the militants were affiliated with, or members of, an Iran-backed militant group given that Iran is known to provide military, funding, and logistical support to local Bahraini groups. The foiling of the attacks underscores the Bahraini authorities’ heightened vigilance to the threat of militancy. Authorities will likely increase their security protocols, particularly in Shiite-populated areas, which may materialize in raids and arrests over the coming weeks and months. However, given that militant groups in Bahrain have been largely inactive over the past year and anti-government unrest has also declined significantly suggesting a lack of motivation among potentially radicalized individuals, an increase in militancy attacks is overall unlikely over the coming months.

Iraq: Rocket attack against US base near Erbil International Airport on February 15 causes US casualties; may prompt US retaliation, escalate regional tensions

- The US-led Coalition spokesperson stated that eight civilian contractors, of whom four were US nationals, and one US serviceman, were wounded during the rocket attack.
- A total of 14 “107 mm rockets” were launched, with three having landed within the US base grounds.
- Additional picture material of two of the rockets that landed outside Erbil near a Peshmerga base, the military forces of the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG), indicate that they were Iran-made 107 mm Fajr-1 rockets.

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This development is highly notable given the rarity of such incidents in Erbil as well as the scale and scope of the attack. Such attacks are generally conducted by Iran-backed Shiite militias aiming to compel the US forces to leave Iraq, rendering them the likely perpetrators of the latest incident. The perpetrators likely had relatively high capabilities as the range of the 107 mm rocket is approximately 8-10 km and were therefore likely able to infiltrate into KRG-administered territories, which are generally far more secure than other areas of Iraq and where Shiite militias in the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU) have far less freedom to conduct the attack. Meanwhile, the scale and target of the attack highlight Iran-backed Shiite militias’ willingness and increased efforts to expand the scope of their operations against US-linked interests in Iraq. Given the current tensions between Iran and the US regarding the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the attack may have been directed by the former, which would increase regional geopolitical tensions. Regardless, as casualties to US citizens are generally considered a “red line” by Washington it will likely be compelled to retaliate over the coming days and weeks in the form of targeted strikes against Iran-backed Shiite militias, which may lead to back-and-forth hostilities.



Lebanon: LAF announces on February 1 arrest of 18 armed IS-linked militants in Baalbek-Hermel Governorate's Arsal; highlights latent threat of militancy

- The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) announced that it conducted counter-militancy operations over a two-week period that led to the arrest of 18 armed Islamic State (IS)-linked militants of Lebanese and Syrian nationalities in the Arsal region, located 124 kilometers northeast of Beirut.
- The militants had confirmed their affiliation with IS and were planning to carry out unspecified "terrorist attacks". Authorities also seized rifles, pistols, ammunition, and digital materials.

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The development is notable due to the relative rarity of arrest of IS-linked militants, particularly in such large numbers, and foiled militant plots in the past months. Although the LAF periodically announces the arrest of IS-linked elements, as evidenced by a subsequent February 6 security raid wherein armed IS operatives of Syrian origin were arrested in Arsal, a June 2019, shooting attack in Tripoli remains the only successful militant attack in a major city in recent years. This points to the authorities' capabilities in monitoring militant activity and apprehending jihadist elements who could pose a threat to the security environment. Nonetheless, this development highlights the ability of radicalized individuals to exploit the security gaps along the Lebanon-Syria border to enter the country and reside undetected in places such as Arsal, which are located in relative proximity to the Syrian border. These militants are then able to successfully procure weapons that could aid in carrying out militant plots within Lebanon. Overall, this incident underscores the underlying threat of militancy in Lebanon. Therefore, authorities will maintain heightened vigilance and carry out counter-militancy operations in the coming weeks and months to neutralize the threat posed by jihadist elements in the country.

Libya: Abdel Hamid al-Dbeibah voted in as PM of GNU on February 5; highly notable given lack of precedence, political unification process to face challenges over coming weeks, months

- Mohammed Yunus al-Menfi, from Tobruk, was voted in as President of the Presidency Council (PC), while Musa al-Koni from Ubari and Zawiyah's Abdallah al-Lafi from Zawiyah were voted in as PC members.
- The Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) procedures stipulate that al-Dbeibah must form a new government, which must be approved by the House of Representatives (HoR) within 21 days.
- On February 9, HoR Speaker Aguila Saleh announced that all HoR members must be in attendance to grant confidence to the Government of National Unity (GNU) and that the GNU must be based in Sirte until Tripoli has been "secured".

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This development is highly notable as it resulted in a loss for the Government of National Accord (GNA) Interior Minister Fatih Bashaga and HoR Speaker Saleh, both key figures in western and eastern Libya. The LPDF members likely voted for al-Dbeibah or al-Menfi as they do not exercise strong influence in their regions and are therefore easier to influence. Therefore, it is possible that al-Dbeibah's government will be approved by the HoR. This is particularly because the cabinet is mandated with executing the planned national elections on December 24 and will not remain in power from January 2022. Hence, stronger candidates such as Bashaga will likely rather aim to gain influence for and votes in the upcoming elections for the final government. However, the GNU's government-formation process will likely face significant challenges, as underscored by the conditions set by Saleh for HoR members to approve the government. In addition to the above, he also stated that he will reject any HoR meeting that is held outside Benghazi or Tobruk even if it meets the quorum. Moreover, significant political maneuvering by key local actors from Libya's Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan regions will be recorded over the coming weeks, as they attempt to influence the cabinet's formation. Meanwhile, al-Dbeibah's close links with Turkey may aggravate opposing actors, such as Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and European states, such as France, Greece, and Italy, which may therefore manifest in domestic opposition to the GNU.



Morocco: SPLA claims ground offensive against Moroccan military base in Touizgui area in Assa-Zag Province of Morocco on February 8; highly notable if confirmed, hostilities to remain localized

- The Sahrawi People's Army (SPLA), the armed wing of the Polisario Front, claimed that the attack "completely destroyed" the Royal Moroccan Armed Forces (FAR) base and killed three soldiers. Touizgui is located about 100 km deep within undisputed Moroccan territory.
- On February 10, Morocco's Prime Minister (PM), Saad Eddine el-Othmani, rejected SPLA's claim.
- On February 12, Pro-Polisario Front media reported that the RMA deployed additional troops, tanks, and armored vehicles to the vicinity of Samara, located in Moroccan-controlled territory of Western Sahara.

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While the SPLA claim remains unconfirmed confirmed, the group has generally refrained from significantly exaggerating the success of its operations against Moroccan positions and the claim included very specific details that would be easy for Moroccan authorities to refute if false. If confirmed, it would be highly notable as it would represent an escalation in hostilities in Western Sahara, as all of the previous SPLA-claimed attacks have manifested in shelling attacks along the "Berm", which separates Moroccan-held and Polisario Front-held parts of Western Sahara. Subsequent SPLA-claimed attacks have been restricted to artillery shelling along the "Berm", which indicates that it likely does not have the capabilities to sustain operations within undisputed Moroccan territory. Should the Moroccan troop deployment to Samara be confirmed, it may indicate that the Rabat seeks to bolster its presence near SPLA positions potentially to deter further offensives by the latter. However, it is equally possible that the deployment constitutes a routine operation. Overall, hostilities will likely remain localized and focused on areas along the "Berm".

Turkey: President Erdogan accuses US of supporting PKK on February 15, Minister of Interior Suleyman Soylu states US behind July 2016 coup attempt on February 4; likely to further strain ties

- Erdogan stated that the US is "with them [the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)], pure and simple".
- Soylu stated the US was behind the coup attempt and that the US-based cleric Fetullah Gulen-led organization, known in Turkey as "Fethullahist Terrorist Organization" (FETO)" carried it out upon the US's orders.

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Erdogan's comments follow the claim by Turkey on February 14 of the execution by the PKK of 13 Turkish citizens in northern Iraq. The US had issued a conditional condemnation of this alleged act of militancy, stating that "if reports [of the attack] are true...we condemn this action in the strongest possible terms". Turkey likely perceived Washington's statement to be an expression of doubt in Ankara's narrative and legitimacy. The US since issued a more substantive and explicit condemnation of the PKK, which it considers a "terrorist organization". Regardless, together with the February 4 accusations that the US was behind the 2016 coup attempt in Turkey, the bilateral diplomatic rhetoric employed by the two marks an escalation, which Washington will likely perceive as an indication of Ankara's unwillingness to improve ties amid long-standing tensions. This is despite initial indications that President Erdogan sought to improve relations with the Biden-led US administration. Given the numerous disagreements between the countries, including Turkey's exclusion from the F-35 program, Turkey's purchase of the Russian-made S-400 systems, and that Ankara and Washington support opposing groups in Syria, tensions are liable to escalate further over the coming months, which could in the long term lead to punitive measures by the US against Turkey, such as sanctions.

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