Iraq. The Houthis claim to have used long-range drones, which could also hit oilfields in the UAE. At least three times since May the group has fired missiles at the international airport in Abha, in southern Saudi Arabia. Oije person has been killed.

In June the militia lobbed a rocket at a major Saudi desalination plant in Al-Shuqaiq. It caused little damage but highlighted another vulnerability: the kingdom gets about one-third of its drinking water, more than 1bn cubic metres a year, from such facilities, which are expensive to build and easy to target. The Qataris even worry about their national air carrier, which has been forced, since its Arab neighbours imposed an embargo in 2017, to route hundreds of daily flights over Iran. At least two drones (one American, one Iranian) have recently been shot down in the area.

/Gulf states struggle to counter these threats. Though they have spent tens of billions of dollars on military kit from America and Europe, it is not always the right kit. Tanks and fighter jets have limited value in an asymmetric conflict. Their navies are small and lack combat experience; they train with the Americans and are investing in new ships, but play only a supporting role in regional security. Years of talk about an integrated GCC missile-defence command has led nowhere, and individual defences are spotty. If drones hit Saudi Arabia’s oil pipeline they would have spent hours flying undetected over the kingdom.

Saudi Arabia has long viewed Iran as its chief enemy. It still broadly supports American policy. Officials in the smaller Gulf emirates are unhappy, though, and those in the UAE feel particularly stuck. In public they cannot break with Mr Trump or their Saudi allies. But they are subtly distancing themselves. They are withdrawing troops from Yemen partly to lower tensions with the Houthis—and thus avoid being attacked. They have also taken a cautious line on Iran, even suggesting it may not have been responsible for the sabotage in Fujairah. “They could shut this place down with a few missiles,” says an official in Dubai. “We need to protect our own interests.”

Ethiopia

The southern problem

Ethnic separatists are challenging Ethiopia’s unity

July 18th was supposed to be a day of celebration for the Sidama. Ethiopia’s fifth-biggest ethnic group was to vote on statehood in a referendum. Some members anticipated the moment by hoisting Sidama flags over local-government buildings in the territory that would make up their semi-autonomous state. In Hwassa they began erecting billboards welcoming visitors to their new capital. “Our officials told us, you can celebrate,” says Gosaye, a Siddama activist.

In the end there were no festivities. Rather than hold the promised referendum, the central government said it would take place within five months. Sidama officials agreed to the delay and told their supporters to be patient. But protesters burned vehicles, looted businesses and attacked government buildings. Angry mobs set upon members of other ethnic groups. The army was deployed and the internet switched off. At least 25 people were killed in clashes, most by the security forces (activists claim the true figure is higher). More than 150 people were arrested.

The roots of the crisis lie in Ethiopia’s constitution, which created nine ethnically based, semi-autonomous states, but gave each of Ethiopia’s more than 80 ethnic groups the right to form its own state or secede. For decades the ruling Ethiopian Peoples’ Revolutionary Democratic Front prevented any group from actually exercising that right. But Abiy Ahmed, the prime minister, came to power last year promising greater freedoms. Under the new dispensation ethnic elites have revived their demands for more autonomy.

Sport in Egypt

Masters of the mallet

CAIRO
How Egypt conquered croquet

As Egypt was buffeted by revolution and political unrest early this decade, members of the sporting club in Heliopolis, a neighbourhood in Cairo, faced a mild form of hardship. The club is located across the street from a presidential palace that was occasionally besieged by protesters. Members wanting to play croquet first had to pick tear-gas canisters off the grass.

Yet neither upheaval nor Egypt’s hot desert climate deters local croquet players. When the game’s world championships are held on July 27th in Sussex, a county in south-east England, it will have more Egyptian than English competitors. The former dominate the version of the game called golf croquet. Egyptian men have won nine of the past 12 world championships; Egyptian women have won three of the past six.

Croquet was introduced to Egypt by its British occupiers in the early 20th century. (So was squash, at which Egyptians also excel.) After the British left in 1956 many assumed the game had withered. But in 1985 a British Airways pilot called Geoff Roy, who was also a tournament croquet player, discovered the packed courts of the Gezira club in central Cairo. “He spent the rest of the day being thrashed by the locals,” says Stephen Mulliner, the secretary-general of the World Croquet Federation. Mr Roy returned to England with his story, bringing Egypt to the attention of the wider croquet-playing world.

Golf croquet is simpler than the more traditional form, called association croquet. Old-timers scoff that it is like comparing checkers with chess. But the Egyptians made their version faster and more exciting to watch. Boundary markers are needed to keep all of the action on the court. (The airborne Egyptian jump shot is particularly audacious.) Egyptian rules have been adopted by croquet’s bigwigs. Today golf croquet is the most popular form of the game.

Mostafa Elssa, winner of the Egyptian Open in 2015, attributes Egypt’s success at golf croquet to an aggressive style, weather that allows for year-round play and ebullient fans. But the competition has caught up. Reg Bamford, a South African, has won two of the past three world championships. This month Mr Elssa will try to bring the trophy back to Egypt. For inspiration he can look to Soha Mostafa, an Egyptian who won the women’s world championship in New Zealand earlier this year.