

Higher oil prices offer 'temporary relief' to Mena exporters: IIF

Higher oil prices offer "temporary" relief to the oil exporters of the Middle East and North Africa (Mena) whose economic prospects are improving, according to the Institute of International Finance (IIF), the Washington-based economic think tank.

Oil prices rose rapidly in the past six months on unanticipated sharp output fall in Venezuela, the extension of the producers' pact on production cuts to the 2018- end, the escalation of tensions in the Mena, which enhanced risks of oil supply disruption; and higher global oil demand. We have revised upward our average Brent oil price assumption to \$72 per barrel for 2018 (33% increase form 2017)," IIF said.

With the projected \$18 increase in average oil prices in 2018 against last year, it expects the cumulative current account surplus for the nine Mena oil exporters (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Bahrain, Algeria, Iraq and Iran) to increase from \$56bn in 2017 to \$233bn (9.5% of gross domestic product) in 2018. "The fiscal situation for Mena oil exporters (except Bahrain and Oman) is now on firmer footing. The respective authorities in the region have implemented serious fiscal adjustment in recent years," it said.

Higher oil prices, combined with additional non-hydrocarbon revenue, should more than offset the 7% average increase in public spending, leading to narrower deficits (excluding investment income), according to the IIF. "We expect the consolidated fiscal deficit for the nine Mena oil exporters to decrease from 7.5% of GDP in 2017 to 3% in 2018," it said, adding when included investment incomes, which are very large

in Kuwait, the UAE and Qatar, the cumulative deficit will be much smaller.

Highlighting that gross public foreign assets will resume its rise to \$2.9trn by end-2018; it said about 70% of these assets are in the form of sovereign wealth funds. With relatively little public external debt, the region's net public external assets position of \$2.6bn (108% of GDP) is substantial, the report added. Expecting non hydrocarbon growth to accelerate from 2.3% in 2017 to 2.8% in 2018 (still well below the average growth of 6.2% in 2001-2014); IIF said the growth pickup will be supported by the shift to fiscal expansion following three years of consolidation. A tighter monetary stance in the six GCC countries and Iraq, whose currencies are pegged to the US dollar, could offset some of the gains from expansionary fiscal stances. "We expect a cumulative increase of 100 bps in key policy rates, in line with the four Fed hikes of 25 bps each," it said.