

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

📌🌐* **Israel-Palestine** Fighting between Israel and Hamas in Gaza rose to highest level since 2014 Gaza War and risks escalating into new war. Palestinian protesters in Gaza continued to launch incendiary kites across Gaza-Israel border, setting fire to crops in Israel. In response, Israel upped bombing of Hamas targets, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad increased rocket attacks on Israel. Israel 14-15 July struck dozens of Hamas targets, killing two militants, and Hamas and Islamic Jihad launched around 200 rockets at Israel. Israeli air raid 19 July reportedly killed Hamas militant. Gazan sniper 20 July killed Israeli soldier at border, first death of Israeli soldier on Gazan front since 2014. Same day Israel bombed 60 Hamas targets, killing four militants. Hamas sniper wounded Israeli soldier 25 July, in response Israel attacked multiple Hamas positions, killing three militants. Gazan health ministry said Israeli airstrikes 29 July killed two in north Gaza. Israel tightened blockade on Gaza 9 July, stating it was closing Gaza's border to all exports, restricting imports to "humanitarian equipment (including food and medicine)" and reducing Palestinian fishing area in Mediterranean from nine to six nautical miles from shore. Egypt closed Rafah border crossing 16-17 July. Israel 17-23 July halted supply of fuel and cooking gas into Gaza. Hamas 19 July accepted Egyptian plan for reconciliation with Fatah, other main Palestinian faction, which controls West Bank; Fatah yet to respond to proposal. Israeli parliament 19 July passed law that defines state of Israel as nation state of Jewish people, discriminating against Arab minority. Israeli Arabs, EU, Arab League and various nations condemned law. Netanyahu 3 July ended two-year ban on visits by parliamentarians to Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade. As pro-Syrian govt forces in Syria advanced toward border with Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, Israel retaliated to spillover of fighting between Syrian army and rebels: 23 July fired missiles at Syrian rockets – Israel's first use of mid-range missile shield – and 24 July shot down Syrian warplane which it said entered its airspace. PM Netanyahu welcomed U.S. President Trump and Russian President Putin's commitment to Israel's security at 16 July Helsinki summit. Netanyahu 23 July rejected Russian offer to keep Iranian-backed forces in Syria at least 100km from Golan Heights, stating Iranian forces should leave Syria altogether.

➡ **Lebanon** Hundreds of Syrian refugees returned to Syria throughout month, many from border town Aarsal. PM Hariri 24 July said he was considering Russian plans to assist in repatriation of Syrian refugees, which include monitoring safety of returnees. Human Rights Watch 4 July condemned FM Gebran Bassil's June criticisms of UN refugee agency as sign of "escalation of pressure on refugees" in Lebanon.

➡ **Syria** Pro-govt forces backed by Russian air power pursued offensive launched late June in Daraa and Quneitra provinces in south west, forcing series of rebel surrenders and reasserting govt control up to Israeli-held Golan Heights. Pro-govt forces late July advanced on last pocket of territory held by local Islamic State (ISIS) affiliate in south-west Daraa. Amid understandings with Moscow, Israel did not intervene to obstruct govt advance, but did strike in response to incidents adjacent

to or in airspace above Israeli-controlled territory: Israeli airstrike 6 July hit Syrian army post in Syria that Israel said had shelled buffer zone; Israel 12 July attacked Syrian army posts near Golan Heights after Syrian drone crossed border; Israel 23 July said it had fired missiles at two rockets fired by Syrian govt in fight against ISIS, which landed inside Syrian territory – Israel's first use of its mid-range missile shield. Israel 24 July said it had shot down Syrian warplane that crossed into airspace over Golan Heights; Syrian govt said plane had been shot while inside Syria. Israel 23 July reportedly rejected offer by Russia to keep Iran-allied forces at least 100km from Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, stating Iranian forces should leave Syria altogether. ISIS militants 25 July carried out multiple suicide bombings in govt-held Sweida city and attacked pro-govt forces and civilians in several nearby villages, killing at least 200. In east, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) backed by U.S.-led coalition continued efforts to retake pockets controlled by ISIS. Delegation representing SDF and allied political bodies visited Damascus late July, opening high-profile negotiating track with govt; talks currently focused on service provision, major rifts between parties remained on core issues of security control and structure of Syrian state. Turkish President Erdoğan 14 July reportedly warned Russian President Putin that attack on Idlib province in north by pro-govt forces could abrogate Astana accord between Turkey, Russia and Iran which has limited conflict in north.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Bahrain** U.S. 10 July designated al-Ashtar Brigades, Shiite militant group which it characterised as Iranian proxy, as terrorist organisation; Bahrain 16 July praised U.S. decision (see Iran).

➔ **Iran** UK, France, Russia, China and Germany (P4+1) reiterated commitment to Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at ministerial-level JCPOA Joint Commission meeting in Vienna 6 July. U.S. 2 July said it had issued sanctions against 53 Iranian and Iran-related persons and entities since May; U.S. 9 July imposed sanctions on Malaysian sales agent for Iran's Mahan Air, and 10 July designated al-Ashtar Brigades, Shiite militant group in Bahrain, which U.S. characterised as Iranian proxy, as terrorist organisation. Iran 16 July lodged complaint against U.S. sanctions with International Court of Justice. President Rouhani and Revolutionary Guards 5 July threatened to close Strait of Hormuz if Iran was prevented from exporting oil. Insecurity in border areas continued. Iran 18 July said it had finished building factory for production of centrifuge rotors. Rhetoric escalated between Iran and U.S. when Rouhani's 22 July warning to President Trump that "war with Iran is the mother of all wars" prompted Trump to tweet that if Iran threatened U.S. again it could "suffer consequences the likes of which few throughout history have ever suffered before". Trump 30 July said he was willing to meet Rouhani; Iranian govt 31 July rejected offer seeing "no value" in it. In north west on border with Iraq, Revolutionary Guards 14 July claimed to have killed three unidentified militants; Kurdish militants 21 July killed ten Revolutionary Guards in attack on border post in Marivan area, several militants also killed. In south east near Pakistani border, security forces clashed with Pakistan-based Iranian Sunni extremist group Jaish al-Adl in Lar 19 July, Iranian border guard killed. Belgian authorities 2 July said they had detained Iranian diplomat and couple with Iranian

heritage for involvement in terrorist plot against 30 June Iranian opposition rally in Paris; govt said incident was ploy by opposition to damage Iran's reputation.

↓ **Iraq** Protests erupted in oil-rich south over poor services and unemployment, with some protesters attacking govt and political party offices; security forces responded harshly, killing some 50 protesters. Protests began in Basra 8 July and spread to nine provinces in south, smaller protests held in capital Baghdad. Protesters targeted govt and party offices, oil fields and other economic infrastructure. Security forces, including police and Counter-Terrorism Service, forcibly repressed protests, in some places shooting at protesters. Govt shut down internet and social media platforms to disrupt organisation of protests. PM Abadi promised to change ministers and implement reforms, 17 July pledged \$2.5bn to improve services in Basra and to generate 10,000 jobs. Popular Shiite clerics Ali al-Sistani and Moqtada al-Sadr both offered support to demonstrators. Abadi 29 July suspended electricity minister until investigation carried out into poor electricity provision. Protests continued end month: demonstrators 31 July threatened to block all roads to West Qurna 1 oil field. Following 12 May general election, recount of votes in areas where fraud suspected began 3 July, reportedly revealing serious discrepancies between original results and new count in Kirkuk. Islamic State (ISIS)-related insecurity continued in Kirkuk, Diyala and Saladin provinces, with militants increasingly abducting and killing soldiers and officials. Army, police and Kurdish peshmerga forces 4 July launched joint operations in Kirkuk, Diyala and Saladin provinces targeting ISIS forces. Peshmerga fighters 16 July claimed to have killed fourteen ISIS militants in northern Qarachukh mountain region, Erbil province, six peshmerga fighters also killed. In Erbil, capital of Kurdistan, three gunmen took over governorate building until forced out 23-24 July, two gunmen and one civilian killed; no group claimed responsibility but mayor blamed ISIS. In far north, Turkey continued operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), claiming to have killed at least 55 in airstrikes and ground operations throughout month.

➔ **Kuwait** Court 8 July sentenced four former MPs to three and a half years in prison and reduced sentences of two MPs and one former MP to three and a half years for forcing their way into parliament in Nov 2011 to protest corruption, alongside dozens of activists. Court acquitted seventeen defendants and declined to sentence 34.

➔ **Qatar** Govt and U.S. 24 July launched expansion of al-Udeid military base, 35km from Doha, which hosts largest U.S. military presence in Gulf.

➔ **Saudi Arabia** Govt suspended oil exports via Bab al-Mandeb strait between Yemen and Horn of Africa after two oil tankers were attacked 25 July, allegedly by Huthi militants in Yemen. Military 10 July shot down missile fired from Yemen by Huthi forces at Jizan Economic City in south west.

➔ **United Arab Emirates** Huthi forces in Yemen 26 July claimed to have launched drone attack on Abu Dhabi airport, which UAE denied. Leaders of Ethiopia and Eritrea met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan 24 July in Abu Dhabi and thanked UAE for role in fostering peace between two countries after twenty-year frozen conflict; Prince Mohammed awarded both leaders highest civilian honour for ending war (see also Ethiopia and Eritrea).

↓ 🇲🇪 🇮🇲 🇮🇲 **Yemen** Yemeni forces backed by United Arab Emirates (UAE) preparing to take Hodeida city on Red Sea coast from Huthis consolidated positions south of city and fighting intensified elsewhere; UN proposal presents opportunity to avoid battle for Hodeida and restart talks, but fight for Hodeida could also intensify in Aug. UAE-backed forces held positions south of Hodeida, claiming it had paused offensive to facilitate UN mediation, but continued to fight Huthis in Hays, Tuhayta and Durayhimi along Red Sea coast south of Hodeida. UAE-led fighters and Hadi govt forces also gathered in Mokha, port town south of Hodeida, apparently preparing for attacks on Huthi positions on inland road between Mokha and Hodeida, including Zabid town; fighting for Zabid intensified end month with dozens reportedly killed on both sides. Saudi-led coalition resumed air strikes late July in and around Hodeida and in Zabid damaging water facility there that supplies most of Hodeida's water. UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths mid-July submitted to Huthis, Hadi govt and Saudi-led coalition for comment his proposal to avert battle for Hodeida: plan proposes UN oversee Hodeida port and two ports north of city; Huthis undertake phased withdrawal from Hodeida; UAE-led forces pull back from city; reopening of Sanaa airport; national de-escalation and resumption of talks. Govt and Huthis proposed changes. Griffiths shuttled between parties to organise "consultations" between Hadi govt and Huthis in Geneva late Aug or early Sept. Fighting intensified elsewhere. Huthi fighters redoubled efforts to take back territory in Taiz city lost earlier in 2018 and pushed into Lahj province, while govt forces 17-19 July made progress south east of Taiz. In north, Saudi-backed forces made gains in Huthis' home Saada province and in neighbouring Hajja, while Huthis launched missiles into Saudi city of Najran. Huthis 18 July claimed drone attack on oil refinery in Saudi capital, Riyadh; refinery same day said minor fire on site was due to "operational incident". Huthis 25 July allegedly attacked two tankers in Bab al-Mandeb strait, prompting Saudi Arabia to suspend oil shipments through strait; 31 July said they would halt attacks in Red Sea for two weeks from 1 Aug and could extend and expand ceasefire if Saudi-led coalition reciprocates. Huthis 26 July claimed to have launched drone attack on Abu Dhabi airport, UAE denied attack. Tensions between UAE-backed forces and Hadi govt rekindled as Abu al-Yamamah, commander of UAE proxy Security Belt forces, 15 July threatened to attack Hadi govt in Aden.

North Africa

➡ **Algeria** Senate President Abdelkader Bensalah 3 July urged President Bouteflika to run for fifth term in 2019 election, following similar calls by other officials. Blogger Merzoug Touati 8 July went on hunger strike to protest his seven-year prison sentence on charges of sharing "intelligence with a foreign country" following interview with Israeli official. After medical students in public hospitals suspended seven-month strike late June, they called on govt to keep its promise to begin talks on improving working conditions and abolishing compulsory civil service. Army 30 July clashed with suspected Islamist militants in Bessi locality, Skikda province in north east, four militants and seven troops killed.

➡ **Egypt** President Sisi continued reshuffle of military leadership: 2 July appointed former director of Armed Forces Morale Affairs Department, Major-General Mohsen Mahmoud Abdel Nabi, head of presidential office, replacing Major-General Abbas

Kamel, who became head of General Intelligence Service late June. Parliament 3 July approved draft law giving Sisi power to grant military officers lifelong immunity for any alleged crimes committed since 2013 when then army chief Sisi led military in coup deposing former President Morsi. Former military chief of staff Sami Anan, imprisoned since Jan after he tried to run for presidency, taken into intensive care 14 July. Court 28 July sentenced 75 people to death for taking part in 2013 demonstration in support of deposed President Mohamed Morsi, referred cases to country's Grand Mufti for final decision. Islamic State (ISIS)-related violence continued in Sinai. Two ISIS Sinai Province (SP) commanders early July reportedly surrendered to security forces in Rafah city, North Sinai. Military 3 July said three suspected SP militants and two civilians had been killed in North Sinai in preceding days. Security forces 11 July killed eleven suspected SP militants during raid on hideout in Arish city, North Sinai. SP 22 July said one of its commanders, Abu Jaafar al-Maqdesi, had been killed earlier in July. Security forces 24 July killed thirteen SP militants in shootout in Arish city. As fighting between Israel and Hamas in Gaza escalated, Egypt tried in vain to broker truce and closed Rafah border crossing citing "technical fault" 18-19 July. Parliament 16 July passed law that will allow authorities to block social media accounts and penalise journalists for publishing so-called fake news.

➡ **Libya** Under international pressure, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's east-based Libyan National Army (LNA) 11 July reversed decision made late June and returned oversight of oil sales from area under its control to internationally recognised Tripoli-based National Oil Corporation (NOC). Reversal came after Tripoli-based Govt of National Accord (GNA) said audit would be conducted of Central Bank of Libya branches in both east and west. GNA also sacked anti-Haftar Minister of Defence al-Mahdi al-Barghati 29 July, addressing one of LNA's grievances. Eastern Tobruk-based House of Representatives held session 30-31 July to vote on draft new constitution that would go to referendum, amid protests in city and divisions on new constitution's current draft and referendum procedure; vote postponed by two weeks. Islamic State (ISIS) and other armed groups continued attacks on civilians, especially in south. Notably, in south east, suspected Islamist militants 7 July killed two workers and kidnapped two others at Tazirbu water plant. ISIS's weekly newspaper al-Naba 6 July said ISIS had captured two air force officers from forces loyal to Haftar in Fezzan region in centre. ISIS-linked militants 24 July killed two policemen in eastern town of Agheila.

➡ **Morocco** Govt and EU officials 24 July in capital Rabat signed new fisheries agreement: EU to give Morocco €52mn per year for allowing boats from EU to fish in Morocco's waters, including waters off Western Sahara. Spanish police in Ceuta, Spain's enclave in Morocco, 26 July clashed with migrants from sub-Saharan Africa as some 800 stormed border fence between Morocco and Ceuta, about 150 people injured including 132 migrants and at least sixteen police officers.

➡ **Tunisia** President Essebsi 15 July asked PM Chahed, if he does not manage to win significant support for his govt, to resign or seek confidence vote in parliament. Following meeting between two major parties in ruling coalition, Islamist party An-Nahda and Chahed's Nida Tounes, An-Nahda 16 July called on Chahed not to run in 2019 presidential election. Minister in charge of constitutional affairs Mehdi Ben Gharbia 14 July resigned, said opposition was non-constructive and hampering

legislative reform. Chahed 24 July appointed Hichem Fourati as new interior minister following dismissal of Lotfi Brahem early June. Suspected jihadist militants 8 July ambushed National Guard patrol in Ain Sultan area near Algerian border in north west, killing at least six members of security forces.

➡ **Western Sahara** EU's General Court 19 July ruled that territory of Western Sahara and its adjacent waters do not fall under Moroccan sovereignty, confirming rulings of European Court of Justice. Morocco and EU 24 July signed new fisheries agreement: EU to give Morocco €52mn per year for allowing boats from EU to fish in Morocco's waters, including waters off Western Sahara; Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) said deal "encourages the Moroccan occupation" of Western Sahara and "European Commission is accomplice to this robbery". Polisario Front independence movement's dissident wing Khatt al-Shahid early July sent letter to African Union contesting SADR's claim to be sole representative of Sahrawi people, denouncing human rights violations by security forces during crackdown on protesters taking part in sit-in 16 June in Tindouf refugee camps after political activist died in prison early June.