

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** Israel and Hamas implemented initial elements of UN and Egyptian-mediated ceasefire agreement in Gaza strip; even though two-day escalation mid-month set back progress. Palestinian Authority (PA) President Abbas – who previously demanded that any ceasefire should come after PA has retaken control of Gaza – met Egyptian President Sisi in Cairo 3 Nov and acquiesced to early stages of ceasefire’s implementation. Hamas contained Palestinian protests at Gaza-Israel fence 2 and 5 Nov while Israel withdrew naval blockade from 3 to 12 nautical miles from shore and allowed increased delivery of Qatari-funded fuel and payments to civil servants and impoverished families in Gaza. However, Israeli undercover operation east of city of Khan Younis in Gaza went awry 11 Nov, resulting in clash between Israeli security forces and Hamas militants that left one Israeli soldier and seven militants dead. In retaliation, Hamas 12 Nov fired over 500 rockets into Israel, killing Palestinian resident of Israel, and Israel bombed 160 locations in Gaza, killing at least seven Palestinians. Hamas 13 Nov said it had resumed ceasefire; Israel issued no statement but suspended bombing. Israeli Defence Minister Lieberman 14 Nov resigned in protest at ceasefire. Abbas 11 Nov denounced forthcoming U.S. peace plan as “conspiracy” and accused Hamas of blocking Palestinian statehood. Kuwait 18 Nov announced \$500m contribution for PA budget.

➔ **Jordan** Parliamentary delegation 19 Nov visited Syrian President Assad for first time since 2011 to discuss cooperation in trade, tourism and transport; including reopening of Ramtha-Daraa border, shut for seven years.

➔ **Lebanon** Syrian refugees in Lebanon continued to return to Syria through govt-run programs at Masnaa, al-Zamarani and Abboudieh border crossings in centre and north, including around 800 16 Nov. Govt 2 Nov said that since July it had organised return of 7,670 Syrian refugees and over 80,000 had returned home independently.

➔ **Syria** Russia and Turkey maintained that their Sept agreement to stave off govt offensive on rebel-held Idlib in north west continued to hold despite tit-for-tat attacks between govt-aligned forces and rebels. Notably, govt forces 9 Nov bombed Jarjanaz, killing eight residents and two dozen fighters from rebel faction Jaish al-Izzah. Jihadist alliance Hei’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and Turkish-backed National Liberation Front allegedly carried strikes on Syrian military positions in retaliation for govt bombings. Rebel group Wa-Harrid al-Mumineen (which includes al-Qaeda loyalist HTS splinter Hurras al-Din and other jihadist hardliners) continued to claim small-scale attacks on govt positions in Lattakia, Hama and southern Aleppo countryside. Gas attack on Aleppo 24 Nov injured about 100 people; Syrian army and Russia blaming rebels 25 Nov retaliated with airstrikes in buffer zone, rebels denied responsibility. Russian officials expressed satisfaction with Turkish efforts to implement deal but increasingly highlighted violations of ceasefire inside Idlib zone. In south, authorities arrested increasing numbers of former rebels, including those ac-

quitted of any crimes by “settlement” procedures; former rebels and families appealed to Russian military police to secure rebels’ release. Also in south, Russian-supported govt-aligned forces, that included reconciled rebel fighters, by 17 Nov drove hundreds of Islamic State (ISIS) fighters further into desert east of Sweida. In rebel-held north east, Turkey 1 Nov shelled Kurdish-controlled towns of Kobani and Tell Abyad; in response, opposition Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – of which Kurdish YPG forms military backbone – suspended operations against ISIS in its remaining strongholds around Hajin in lower Euphrates valley. Month saw spate of unclaimed killings of SDF members; ISIS 3 Nov claimed assassination of Sheikh Bashir Faisal al-Huwaidi, Arab member of Raqqa governing council and SDF ally, but responsibility unclear. After “intensive diplomatic efforts” by U.S.-led coalition, SDF 11 Nov resumed offensive against ISIS. ISIS counterattack 23-27 Nov killed 92 SDF members, heaviest loss since SDF’s 2015 creation. In new round of talks in Kazakh capital Astana 28 Nov, Russia, Turkey and Iran failed to reach agreement on establishment of constitutional committee. Jordanian parliamentary delegation 19 Nov visited Syrian President Assad for first time since 2011 to discuss cooperation in trade, tourism and transport; including reopening of Ramtha-Daraa border, shut for seven years.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Bahrain** First round vote for 40 parliamentary seats and 30 municipal council seats since govt dissolved opposition groups al-Wefaq in 2016 and Waad in 2017 held 24 Nov. Opposition disputed official turnout of 67%. In first round parliamentary vote, two of nine winners were incumbents; run-off vote set for 1 Dec to decide remaining 31 seats. In run-up to vote, court 4 Nov sentenced former al-Wefaq leader, Shiite cleric Sheikh Ali Salman, to life in prison on charges of spying for Qatar in 2011, also charging two Bahraini nationals with receiving late Oct illicit Qatari support to fund parliamentary campaigns.

➔ **Iran** U.S. reimposed on Iran remainder of sanctions it had lifted in 2016 under 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and imposed new ones. International Atomic Energy Agency 12 Nov confirmed Iran’s continued full compliance with JCPOA. U.S. 5 Nov unveiled new or re-imposed previous sanctions against over 700 individuals and entities in Iran’s energy, banking and maritime sectors. Iran and U.S. faced off over effect of sanctions on supply of food and medicine; FM Zarif 10 Nov accused U.S. Sec State Pompeo of “threatening to starve Iranians” while U.S. officials maintained that humanitarian goods are exempt. U.S. 5 Nov gave eight countries (China, India, South Korea, Japan, Italy, Greece, Taiwan and Turkey) temporary waivers to continue importing Iranian oil, and gave Iraq 45-day exemption to continue importing Iranian electricity and gas. Three Iranian nuclear sites and port of Chabahar also spared from sanctions. Sanctions expected to have significant economic impact; International Monetary Fund 6 Nov predicted Iranian GDP will contract by 3.6% in 2019 and inflation will reach 34%, up from under 10% in 2017. Creation of EU’s Special Purpose Vehicle – announced in Sept to support trade with Iran – stalled as no EU member state stepped forward to host it; senior Iranian official 26 Nov warned of “ominous” situation if Iran loses JCPOA’s economic dividends. Govt 14 Nov executed two gold traders accused of corruption as part of anti-corruption drive that has reportedly led to some 170 arrests for economic crimes in past three

months. Army 15 Nov said Sunni militant group Jaish al-Adl had freed five of fourteen Iranian border guards it kidnapped in Oct; fate of remaining hostages unknown. Senior army official 4 Nov suggested Saudi Arabian involvement in kidnapping.

➡ **Iraq** Following May legislative elections, new PM Mahdi – installed in Oct – still to appoint eight of 22 cabinet ministers, including interior and defence ministers. Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr 27 Nov said he would only accept independent candidates for these security positions. Govt 16 Nov announced deal with Kurdish region to restart oil exports from Kirkuk oilfields through pipeline to Turkey; flows halted since 2017 Kurdish independence referendum. Islamic State (ISIS)-related insecurity continued, mainly in west and north. Bombings in various locations in capital Baghdad killed some seven civilians 4 Nov. Car bombing killed at least five in Tikrit, Salah al-Din province (north) 18 Nov, while roadside bomb 22 Nov killed at least four students in Shura area, Nineveh province (north west). Unidentified gunmen 12 Nov shot dead local paramilitary leader and eight others near Garma, Anbar province (west). Govt 20 Nov claimed to have killed 40 ISIS militants in two airstrikes in eastern Syria. In far north, Turkey continued operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), claiming airstrikes 9-11 Nov killed 38 militants. New President Salih 11 Nov urged U.S. to consider relieving Iraq from effect of renewed sanctions on Iran; U.S. 5 Nov granted Iraq 45-day exemption to continue importing Iranian electricity and gas while it finds alternative sources. Salih 17 Nov met with Iranian President Rouhani, reaffirming Iraq's commitment to trade relations.

➡ **Qatar** FM al-Thani 22 Nov said govt would maintain ties with Iran despite U.S. sanctions; stated readiness to mediate between U.S. and Iran. Emir Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad 4 Nov reshuffled his cabinet to elevate younger technocrats.

➡ **Saudi Arabia** Following killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi consulate in Istanbul in Oct, Saudi royal family and regional allies continued to defend Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in face of international censure. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) assessment, as reported 16 Nov, concluded that crown prince ordered killing. Saudi FM al-Jubeir 20 Nov said CIA report not based on "conclusive evidence" and next day warned that questioning country's leadership was "red line". Govt 15 Nov said it would seek death penalty for five of eleven individuals charged with killing. In apparent show of unity by royal family, King Salman's brother Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz 31 Oct returned to Saudi Arabia from UK to support to crown prince. King Salman throughout Nov visited some of Saudi Arabia's regions, for some first visit by monarch in decades. Crown prince 24 Nov embarked on regional tour to United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Egypt and Tunisia, in first trip outside kingdom since Khashoggi affair, to demonstrate that regional allies still strongly support his govt. Israeli PM Netanyahu 2 Nov expressed support for govt "stability", while UAE Crown Prince bin Zayed also praised Saudi role in regional stability 22 Nov. U.S. President Trump 20 Nov said U.S. intended to remain "steadfast partner of Saudi Arabia", citing economic and security interests, but U.S. Congress same day demanded investigation into alleged role of crown prince in Khashoggi's killing, while Treasury 15 Nov sanctioned seventeen Saudi officials – including crown prince's former adviser al-Qahtani – for role in killing. U.S. Sec State Pompeo and Sec Defense Mattis 28 Nov told Senate there was no hard evidence that Crown Prince was behind killing, warning that downgrading ties with Saudi Arabia would harm U.S. national security. Govt late Nov opposed UN Security Council draft

resolution on Yemen proposed by UK that aims at humanitarian objectives. Govt 20 Nov announced joint pledge with UAE of \$500mn in aid to Yemen.

➔ **United Arab Emirates** Court 21 Nov sentenced to life in prison British academic Matthew Hedges, arrested in May for spying. After UK FM Hunt 22 Nov warned of “serious diplomatic consequences” if govt did not release Hedges, govt 25 Nov pardoned him “in consideration of the historical relationship between the UAE and the UK”. Govt opposed UK’s draft UN Security Council resolution on Yemen late Nov. Govt 20 Nov announced joint pledge with Saudi Arabia of \$500mn in aid to Yemen.

➔ 🌍 🇻🇪 **Yemen** UN-led talks between warring parties expected early Dec offer chance to restart negotiations toward political settlement, but fighting could also escalate in coming weeks, especially in Huthi-held Hodeida. Yemeni forces backed by United Arab Emirates (UAE) 31 Oct launched new offensive along Red Sea coast, moving from south of Hodeida to encircle eastern half of city, within striking distance of port. Saudi-led coalition 15 Nov reported “pause” in offensive, in apparent response to calls from international community. UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths 16 Nov told UN Security Council that warring parties had given “firm assurances” of their commitment to attend peace talks. Huthis 19 Nov said they would cease drone and missile attacks on coalition forces at Griffiths’s request and said they were ready for broader ceasefire. Fighting continued in north, most intensely along Yemen-Saudi Arabia border. Saudi-led coalition reported intercepting four ballistic missiles fired by Huthis into Mareb governorate mid-Nov. Hodeida residents 20 Nov reported fighting around city had increased. As part of continued push for talks, Griffiths 22-23 Nov met Huthi leader Abdulmalik al-Huthi in capital Sanaa and Huthi officials in Hodeida. U.S. Sec Defense Mattis 9 Nov said U.S. would no longer refuel Saudi-led coalition aircraft in support of “decision by the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, after consultations with the U.S. Government”. U.S. Senate 29 Nov voted to advance resolution ending U.S. support for Saudi-led coalition. UK FM Hunt 13 Nov said he had brokered deal with Saudi Arabia for evacuation of injured Huthi fighters from Sanaa to Muscat as part of confidence-building measures. UN Security Council 20 Nov began debate on UK’s draft resolution aimed at humanitarian objectives; Saudi-led coalition told allies that new resolution was unhelpful. UN 23 Oct warned of imminent famine, increasing estimate of people severely food insecure from 8 to 14 million. UN World Food Programme 27 Nov warned of “nearly 50% decrease in operations at Hodeida port over last two weeks ... because of the high levels of insecurity in the city”. Saudi Arabia and UAE 20 Nov announced joint pledge of \$500mn in aid.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** Ahead of 2019 presidential election, ruling coalition 8 Nov launched initiative to support President Bouteflika’s bid for fifth term, while politicians reportedly strove to build consensus on his successor. New parliament Speaker Mouad Bouchareb named secretary general of Bouteflika’s party, National Liberation Front (FLN), 15 Nov replacing Djamel Ould Abbès, who resigned 14 Nov for unclear reasons. FLN executive bureau refused to recognise Bouchareb as party leader. Boute-

flika 25 Nov dissolved FLN's governing bodies, installed six-member interim transitional executive body led by Bouchareb to reform party ahead of party congress next year. Five senior army generals arrested 15 Oct on charges of illicit enrichment, influence peddling and corruption were set free 6 Nov pending trial, allegedly after Bouteflika's intervention. Social unrest continued. Youths 15 Nov clashed with security forces in Bab el Oued district of capital Algiers after video of policemen beating football fan circulated on social media; 30 people reportedly arrested and ten police officers wounded. Security forces 20 Nov used tear gas to disperse protest in Bejaia, 220km east of Algiers, to demand release of blogger Merzoug Touati sentenced in June to seven years in prison on charges of sharing "intelligence with a foreign country"; several protesters arrested and briefly detained.

➔ **Egypt** Islamic State (ISIS) attack on Coptic Christians on mainland provoked heavy security response, as security forces continued counter-insurgency operations in Sinai and mainland. ISIS militants 2 Nov attacked bus carrying Coptic Christian pilgrims in Minya governorate some 250km south of capital Cairo, killing seven. ISIS said it carried out attack in "revenge for arrest of our virtuous sisters" after security forces in previous weeks arrested twenty ISIS militants across country, including eleven women. Govt 4 Nov said security forces had killed nineteen suspected ISIS militants allegedly responsible for Minya attack. Security forces continued operations in Sinai. Govt 12 Nov said security forces had foiled suicide attack targeting checkpoint in Arish city in north Sinai. Authorities 22 Nov said police had stormed three buildings in Arish city used by Islamist militants as hideouts, killing twelve. In video released 15 Nov, ISIS Sinai Province (SP) said several fighters including SP leader Abu Osama al-Masri had been killed in ongoing military operation and issued call to fight govt and military. Govt continued crackdown on dissent. NGO Human Rights Watch 18 Nov said security forces had arrested over 40 lawyers, opposition representatives and human rights workers since late Oct, including daughter of former deputy leader of Muslim Brotherhood. President Sisi 4 Nov repeated his two-year-old promise to amend highly restrictive NGO law.

➔ **Libya** UN unveiled revised political roadmap and participants in international conference in Palermo, Italy, endorsed it, but deep divisions between rival Libyan leaders and competing agendas emerged. At UN Security Council 8 Nov, UN envoy Ghassan Salamé said elections would take place in 2019, acknowledging for first time that they will not be held in Dec as planned. Salamé presented revised action plan consisting of National Conference in Jan 2019 and establishment of "electoral framework" by spring 2019. At international conference in Palermo, Italy 12-13 Nov, stakeholders expressed support for revised action plan but heads of delegations representing Tripoli-based UN-backed Presidency Council, Tripoli-based High State Council, Tobruk-based parliament House of Representatives (HoR) and Field Marshal Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) did not sit side-by-side. While nominally supporting UN efforts, delegations disagreed on which elections should be held and what powers, if any, National Conference should wield. Haftar refused to attend any conference event, instead took part in unscheduled and inconclusive meeting with Tripoli-based PM Serraj 13 Nov, alongside leaders from Russia, Egypt, Algeria, Tunisia, France, Italy, UN and EU. Disregarding new UN action plan, Tobruk-based HoR 27 Nov claimed that previous day it passed constitutional referendum law and constitutional amendment that recognises modified version of 2015 Libyan Political Agree-

ment (which HoR never recognised) and requires appointment of new three-member Presidency Council and separate PM. Some HoR members and their political opponents in Tripoli contest legality of HoR vote and substance of approved legislation. Islamic State (ISIS) claimed 23 Nov attack in southern town of Tazerbo that killed nine police. Score-settling between militias in Tripoli continued: former head of Tripoli Revolutionary Brigades Haythem Tajouri allegedly killed three of group's leaders. U.S. 30 Nov said its airstrike previous day near al-Uwaynat in south killed eleven al-Qaeda militants.

➔ **Mauritania** President Aziz 20 Nov said that he would not run for re-election in 2019, respecting constitution that limits number of presidential terms to two, but would run again as soon as constitution allows.

➔ **Tunisia** Govt 5 Nov announced cabinet reshuffle despite President Essebsi's opposition. PM Chahed named ten new ministers, but did not change ministers whose portfolios lie within president's prerogative such as foreign affairs and defence. Parliament 12 Nov expressed its confidence in new govt; Essebsi's Nida Tounes party boycotted session. Parliament's legislative commission 15 Nov accepted principle of increasing electoral threshold (from 3 to 5%) for upcoming legislative elections. Civil servants 22 Nov staged largest general strike in five years reportedly involving hundreds of thousands of public-sector workers. At least 3,000 people gathered outside parliament in capital Tunis, after powerful public-sector workers union UGTT failed to secure raise in wages.

➔ **Western Sahara** UN Security Council 31 Oct renewed mandate of UN mission MINURSO for six months instead of one year to pressure parties into resuming talks ahead of roundtable meeting between Morocco, Polisario Front independence movement, Algeria and Mauritania under UN auspices planned for 5-6 Dec in Geneva.