

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** In West Bank, Israeli army responded to multiple Palestinian attacks on Israeli settlers and army with mass raids and arrests; three Israelis and five Palestinians killed. In West Bank, Palestinian drive-by shooting near Israeli settlement of Ofra 9 Dec wounded seven including pregnant woman whose unborn baby later died; Israeli army 12 Dec shot dead suspected attacker and same day killed Palestinian suspected of attack in Oct. Israeli police 13 Dec killed Palestinian allegedly attempting to stab two Israeli policemen in East Jerusalem; Palestinians same day shot dead two Israeli soldiers outside Givat Asaf outpost; and Israeli army hours later killed Palestinian allegedly attempting to run over soldiers outside Bireh. Israel accused Hamas of masterminding attacks. In response, Israel closed entrances to city of Ramallah and carried out raids 14 Dec, arresting some 40 Palestinians and killing one. Throughout West Bank and Gaza Strip Palestinians protested against raids; Palestinian Authority (PA) heavily suppressed protests as it claimed Hamas had organised them. In Gaza, UN and Egyptian-mediated talks on ceasefire with Israel and reconciliation with PA continued. In accordance with ceasefire agreement, Qatar's second tranche of \$15mn distributed in Gaza 4 Dec for civil servants and poor families. Hamas claimed to have caught thirteen Palestinians alleged to have facilitated Israeli undercover operation that went awry in Nov; military tribunal 3 Dec sentenced six to death and seven to life imprisonment. Israeli govt 24 Dec dissolved ruling coalition and announced general elections to be held 9 April. UN General Assembly 6 Dec rejected U.S.-sponsored resolution seeking to condemn Hamas including "for inciting violence". Israeli military 4 Dec began operations to find and destroy Hizbollah tunnels dug in Lebanon, some of which crossed into Israeli territory. Australia 15 Dec recognised West Jerusalem as Israel's capital, but said it would not relocate embassy until peace deal is achieved.

➔ **Jordan** Hundreds demonstrated throughout Dec against austerity measures and high unemployment; clashes between police and protestors 13 Dec in capital Amman led to arrest of seventeen protestors.

➔ **Lebanon** Israel 4 Dec launched Operation Northern Shield to uncover and destroy tunnels allegedly dug by Hizbollah in Lebanon which cross into Israeli territory. UN mission in Lebanon (UNIFIL) 17 Dec expressed "serious concern" as two of four confirmed tunnels crossed "Blue Line" border demarcation, violating UN Security Council Resolution 1701. Hizbollah 9 Dec asserted its missiles could hit anywhere in Israel. Israeli delegation 10 Dec visited Moscow and confirmed Israel will continue operations against arms transfers from Iran to Hizbollah via Syria. Prospects for govt formation improved when President Aoun 18 Dec reportedly agreed to appoint independent Sunni minister as part of his bloc in govt, which could satisfy Hizbollah's demand that one minister represent independent Sunnis. New disputes over Sunni representative halted efforts to finalise deal, triggering protests 16-26 Dec across country with scuffles between demonstrators and soldiers. Syrian refugees continued to return from Lebanon to Syria through govt-run programs at Masnaa,

al-Zamarani and Abboudieh border crossings in centre and north, including around 1,000 6 Dec.

↓ **Syria** U.S. President Trump 19 Dec announced all 2,000 U.S. troops would withdraw from Syria, citing defeat of Islamic State (ISIS) and need to save U.S. from “spending precious lives and trillions of dollars”. Announcement contradicted most of Trump’s senior aides and U.S. Syria strategy as formulated in recent weeks. Russian President Putin 20 Dec applauded decision, while Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) – of which Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) forms military backbone – denounced withdrawal, saying it will impact negatively campaign against terrorism. Trump 23 Dec signed executive order and same day tweeted that withdrawal would be “slow and highly coordinated”. Trump 31 Dec confirmed troops would be brought home slowly “while at the same time fighting [ISIS] remnants”. Before U.S. announcement, Turkish President Erdoğan 12 Dec said Turkey would launch offensive against YPG east of Euphrates River “within days” (see Turkey); Turkish-backed Syrian civilian and armed opposition voiced support for Turkish intervention. U.S. voiced “grave concern” over potential military incursion and risks for U.S. personnel. Erdoğan 17 Dec said 15 Dec phone conversation with Trump about possible incursion was positive, but that Turkish forces could still intervene “at any moment”. Syrian Observatory for Human Rights 23 Dec reported Turkish military build-up at front line of SDF-controlled town of Manbij; Syria’s military 28 Dec entered Manbij area amid calls from YPG for help against threat of attack by Turkey. In north west, intermittent clashes and bombing continued on periphery of Idlib de-escalation zone, but Sept Russia-Turkey agreement covering area held. Following 24 Nov gas attack on Aleppo and Syrian army and Russian retaliatory airstrikes in de-escalation zone next day, U.S. State Department 7 Dec disputed Russian and Syrian govt claims that rebels launched chemical attack, saying it had “credible information that pro-regime forces likely used tear gas against civilians” in Aleppo. In south, after three months of fighting, anti-Islamic State (ISIS) coalition 5 Dec captured last remaining ISIS urban stronghold around Hajin. Some 2,500 ISIS fighters are thought to have withdrawn into desert further east toward Iraqi border. Following 28-29 Nov Astana talks at which parties failed to reach compromise on constitution drafting committee, foreign ministers of Iran, Russia and Turkey 18 Dec announced still-unformed constitutional committee would convene early 2019.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➡ **Bahrain** Results of 24 Nov parliamentary election released, first such election since govt dissolved opposition groups al-Wefaq in 2016 and Waad in 2017. Younger candidates and women gained significantly, as did newcomers; few incumbents chose to run. High Court 31 Dec upheld five-year jail sentence against human rights activist Nabeel Rajab convicted in Feb over social media posts accusing prison service of torture.

➡ **Iran** UN Sec-Gen Guterres 6 Dec issued sixth report on implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231 that endorsed 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), noting Iran continued to adhere to deal’s commitments in “face of considerable challenges”. Guterres also applauded efforts to protect economic freedoms for “legitimate business” (likely referring to EU’s unrealised Special Purpose

Vehicle) but report highlighted possible Iranian weapons transfers to proxies and seven Iranian ballistic missile tests in 2018. U.S.-Iran tensions continued: U.S. Sec State Pompeo 1 Dec reported and condemned Iran's test same day of medium range ballistic missile and 12 Dec pledged to continue "building coalition of responsible nations" confronting Iranian "ballistic missile activity"; Iran responded that U.S. had breached UNSCR 2231, Iran was not responsible for arms transfers and missile tests did not break resolution. Israeli PM Netanyahu 16 Dec hinted Israeli intelligence operations inside Iran were continuing. Insecurity in Iran's border areas persisted as Baluchi jihadist group Ansar al-Furqan killed two and injured more than two dozen in suicide attack in city of Chabahar in south near Pakistan border 6 Dec; FM Zarif claimed perpetrators were "foreign-backed". Govt and Pakistan 13 Dec signed MoU to enhance border security. Iranian official visiting Afghan capital Kabul 26 Dec said Iran had been holding talks with Taliban on security issues in Afghanistan; govt 31 Dec said it had held talks with Taliban representatives in Tehran previous day.

➡ **Iraq** In govt formation process following May 2018 legislative elections, rival political blocs continued to contest remaining empty cabinet posts, especially interior and defence. Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr late Nov denounced Iran's support for former National Security Adviser Faleh al-Fayyad for interior minister. MPs aligned to Sadr and former PM Abadi boycotted parliamentary session to vote in remaining ministers 4 Dec, preventing Fayyad's election. Parliament 24 Dec approved Shaima Khalil as education minister and Nawfal Moussa as migration minister, leaving three seats unfilled. In Kurdistan, dominant party Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) 3 Dec appointed KDP head Massoud Barzani's son and nephew as Kurdish PM and president respectively. KDP 13 Dec announced willingness to reopen road connecting Dohuk, Dohuk province (north) and Sinjar, Nineveh province (north west) to help enable displaced Yazidis to return home. Islamic State (ISIS)-related insecurity continued; bombing in Youssef Bek village, Diyala province (east) killed two policemen 11 Dec and bombing in Ramadi, Anbar province (west) killed policeman 15 Dec. Govt 12 Dec claimed its airstrike against ISIS camp in Syria killed 44 militants. In north west, ISIS-claimed car bombing killed three people in Tal Afar, Nineveh province 25 Dec. In far north, Turkey continued operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) with airstrikes killing eight militants 13 Dec and six more 16 Dec. U.S. 20 Dec granted Iraq 90-day extension of its exemption from U.S. sanctions on Iran-related trade, allowing Iraq to continue importing Iranian electricity and gas while it finds alternative sources.

➡ **Qatar** In further steps toward asserting independence from Saudi-led regional bloc, Emir Tamim bin Hamad al-Thani did not attend 9 Dec Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Riyadh. Hosting Turkish and Iranian FMs at Doha forum 15-16 Dec, FM Thani said regional alliance "must be reshaped". Qatar 3 Dec withdrew from Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC).

➡ **Saudi Arabia** Following killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi consulate in Istanbul in Oct, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) continued efforts to restore international credibility amid accusations he orchestrated murder. U.S. Senate 13 Dec passed resolution blaming MBS for murder; govt rejected Senate's move and "accusations". Senate also passed resolution calling for end to U.S. military support for Saudi-led coalition in Yemen (see Yemen). Govt 20 Dec an-

nounced creation of three departments to increase oversight of intelligence operations. King Salman 27 Dec shuffled cabinet replacing key posts including FM and national security adviser. Economic impact of fallout from murder and MBS's policies continued; investment bank JP Morgan estimated Saudi investors had pulled out \$90bn from country in 2018, roughly 10% of GDP.

➔ **United Arab Emirates** Govt 27 Dec reopened embassy in Syrian capital Damascus.

📌 🇻🇪 🇲🇵 **Yemen** At UN-led peace consultations in Sweden, govt and Huthis agreed to withdraw forces from Hodeida city and port, and wider Red Sea trade corridor. If ceasefire in Hodeida governorate holds, further talks planned for Jan could open path to wider de-escalation, but if it fails or implementation falters, rival forces could restart battle for Hodeida port and city. Consultations led by UN special envoy Martin Griffiths 6-13 Dec culminated in Stockholm Agreement comprising agreement on Hodeida city and Hodeida, Salif and Ras Issa ports; agreement for prisoner exchange; and statement of understanding on city of Taiz. Texts said parties made deals for humanitarian purposes only and are not to be seen as part of broader political process. Hodeida and ports agreement includes ceasefire; withdrawal of all forces from city and ports to agreed-upon locations within 21 days of start of ceasefire; and agreement for revenue from ports to flow to Hodeida branch of Central Bank. Parties agreed to reconvene in Jan in yet to be agreed location to discuss framework for political negotiations. Ceasefire in Hodeida governorate took effect 18 Dec and held with mostly minor violations till end-month. UN Security Council 21 Dec passed UK-drafted resolution that calls on all parties to uphold Stockholm Agreement; on UN to oversee implementation; and on parties to keep working with UN envoy Griffiths to stabilise economy and reopen Sanaa airport. Resolution approves 30-day deployment of UN team to monitor ceasefire in Hodeida region. UN source and Huthis 29 Dec said Huthi forces had begun withdrawing from Hodeida port as per Stockholm Agreement. Redeployment Coordination Committee including govt and Huthi representatives will oversee ceasefire and demilitarisation, and report weekly to UN Security Council. In largely symbolic move, U.S. Senate 13 Dec passed bill that, if enacted, would end all U.S. military support for Saudi-led campaign in Yemen. New U.S. House of Representatives will consider legislation in 2019.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** Political positioning continued ahead of 2019 presidential election. Islamist party Movement of Society for Peace (MSP) 3 Dec called for postponement of election to allow time to find consensual successor to President Bouteflika and start political and economic reforms needed to tackle country's problems, sparking national debate about possibility of delaying vote. Ruling coalition continued to publicly support Bouteflika's bid for fifth term, but behind the scenes struggle continued between most credible candidates to succeed him. Thousands demonstrated in Bejaia 11 Dec, 220km east of capital Algiers, calling for release of blogger Merzoug Touati, jailed since Jan 2017 on charges of sharing intelligence with foreign country and calling for unblocking of five industrial projects undertaken by prominent businessman and Bouteflika critic Issad Rebrab.

➡ **Egypt** Anger against govt grew within Coptic Christian community after attacks Nov-Dec. Police guard outside church 12 Dec shot and killed two Copts in Minya city, 250km south of capital Cairo. Thousands of Copts 13 Dec attended burial and protested what they perceived as lack of security across Minya province. Govt credited military with return of security to Sinai Peninsula, but instability continued. Military 12 Dec said armed forces had killed at least 27 suspected Islamist militants in North Sinai and along border with Libya, without specifying time period. Authorities said two roadside bombs 17 Dec hit police convoy west of Rafah town, North Sinai, killing two conscripts. Govt 23 Dec said security forces had killed fourteen suspected Islamist militants in shootouts in Arish city. Roadside bomb 28 Dec hit bus in Giza's Haram district south west of Cairo, at least four killed including three Vietnamese tourists and their Egyptian guide. Govt 29 Dec said security forces killed 30 suspected Islamist militants in raids in Giza and ten others in Sinai same day, reportedly in response to Giza bombing previous day. Italian prosecutors 29 Nov accused seven Egyptian security officials of involvement in arrest, torture and killing of Italian student Giulio Regeni in Cairo in early 2016. Regional military exercises carried out at base on North Coast 10-14 Dec bringing together Sudan, Niger and Burkina Faso, and regional partners such as Jordan. Sudanese ambassador to Russia 7 Dec said Egypt and Sudan would create joint military force to target terrorists and weapons smuggling along Libya-Sudan-Egypt borders; Egypt did not confirm.

⬇ **Libya** Tensions rose in capital Tripoli following 25 Dec Islamic State (ISIS) attack on foreign affairs ministry that killed at least six people including three assailants and injured 21. Infighting between Tripoli-based militias also continued: Tripoli militia leaders known as al-Aweinat and Salah al-Marghani killed in Tripoli 26 Nov and 15 Dec respectively. Wrangling among west and east-based politicians continued to stall political process. Referendum law and two constitutional amendments, passed by Tobruk-based parliament House of Representatives (HoR) in east late Nov, supposed to pave way for referendum on draft constitution and selection of new Presidency Council, angered politicians in Tripoli-based High State Council (HSC) in west and provoked criticism regarding alleged substantive and procedural flaws. Police and security officers from rival west and east-based govts 29 Dec met in eastern city of Benghazi in effort to unite security forces. Fezzan Rage, youth protest movement demanding better services in impoverished Fezzan region in south, backed by Petroleum Facilities Guards militia nominally loyal to PM Serraj's govt, forced closure of country's largest oil field Sharara 8 Dec. Internationally recognised Tripoli-based National Oil Corporation (NOC) 16 Dec declared force majeure on Sharara's operations. PM Serraj 19 Dec visited oil field to negotiate with protesters, but NOC said oil field would remain closed until new security arrangements are set up. Chadian armed group 27 Dec attacked camp of forces loyal to Field Marshal Haftar, de facto commander in east, near town of Traghen in south west, reportedly killing one and injuring thirteen others.

➡ **Mauritania** Anti-slavery campaigner and new MP Biram Dah Abeid in custody since early Aug released 31 Dec after authorities withdrew charges of slander.

➡ **Morocco** Two women, one Danish and one Norwegian, were found dead 17 Dec near Imlil village in Atlas Mountains south of Marrakech, one had been beheaded. Security forces arrested one suspect 18 Dec and three others 20 Dec. Govt 20 Dec said it suspected terrorist motive. Danish intelligence services 20 Dec said they had

authenticated video circulating on social media that appeared to show murder of one of the women.

➡ **Tunisia** As rivalry persisted between President Essebsi and PM Chahed, Essebsi tried to destabilise Islamist party An-Nahda, which has supported Chahed. Essebsi 29 Nov asked National Security Council – which includes PM and defence and interior ministers – to investigate An-Nahda’s alleged involvement in killings of two leftist politicians in 2013. Secretary general of Essebsi’s party Nida Tounes, Slim Riahi, 23 Nov lodged complaint against Chahed, accusing him of preparing coup; however military tribunal 10 Dec refused to hear case in absence of plaintiff. Chahed mid-Dec visited Saudi Arabia, met with King Salman, 15 Dec said Saudi Arabia had pledged financial aid worth about \$830mn, including \$500mn budget support. Protests erupted in interior. Leftist activists 14 Dec launched movement called *gilets rouges*, inspired by *gilets jaunes* protests in France. Militants allegedly linked to Islamic State (ISIS) affiliate Jund al-Khilafa 14 Dec robbed bank in Sbiba city in west, taking equivalent of \$100,000, then killed in his home Khaled Zoghlani, brother of soldier killed in similar circumstances in 2016. Govt 19 Dec said security forces had arrested all eight members of terrorist cell dubbed Jihad and Tawhid Battalion that had allegedly been planning attacks in central Sidi Bouzid province. National Guard 19 Dec reportedly killed Aymen Ben Younes Jendoubi, leader of Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)’s local splinter group Okba Ibn Nafaa brigade, near Sakiet Sidi Youssef, Kef province in north. Leading figure in expat community from Côte d’Ivoire, Falikou Coulibaly, who had spoken out against racist violence, stabbed to death in capital Tunis 23 Dec. After posting online video in which he expressed frustration at economic problems and unfulfilled promises of 2011 revolution and called for revolt, journalist Abderrazak Zorgui set himself on fire and died 24 Dec in Kasserine in centre. Anti-govt protesters sympathetic to Zorgui’s complaints clashed with police for three consecutive nights in Kasserine and other cities; eighteen protesters arrested.

➡ **Western Sahara** Morocco and Polisario Front independence movement 5-6 Dec resumed direct talks under UN auspices in Geneva, first time in six years; agreed to hold another meeting in first quarter of 2019.