

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** Tensions rose temporarily between Hamas and Palestinian Authority (PA) mid-month and violence flared at Gaza-Israel fence. Tensions between Hamas and PA mounted after PA President Abbas 22 Dec upheld ruling of Supreme Constitutional Court to dissolve Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC), PA's parliament in which Hamas held majority. In Gaza, five assailants 4 Jan raided PA building; Hamas denied responsibility and arrested five suspects. PA 7 Jan withdrew its forces from Rafah crossing between Egypt and Gaza, citing alleged Hamas crack-down on Fatah. Hamas denied accusation and said move undermined Gaza's reconciliation with West Bank since Egypt had conditioned border opening on PA's presence at Rafah. Israel same day said it would delay transfer of Qatar's third \$15mn tranche to Gaza. Following call by Palestinian protest leaders, some 13,000 demonstrated at Gaza-Israel border 11 Jan; Israeli fire killed one woman and injured 25. To defuse tensions, Egypt 13 Jan opened Rafah crossing in one direction, allowing Palestinians into Gaza, and Hamas 18 Jan reportedly took steps to restrain protests. Israeli fire injured four Palestinians 18 Jan and killed one 25 Jan. In West Bank, thousands protested 15 Jan against PA's new social security law. Israeli army carried out raids in Ramallah throughout month leading to arrests and clashes with Palestinian protestors. Clashes erupted 26 Jan between Palestinian and Israeli civilians near Jewish settlement in West Bank, killing one Palestinian. Abbas 29 Jan accepted PM Hamdallah's resignation to enact Fatah Central Committee decision to establish new govt. Standoff between Israeli police and Jordanian Waqf guards at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade triggered scuffle between police and hundreds of Palestinians 14 Jan; Jordanian mediation led to withdrawal of Israeli police, and sheikhs intervened to calm Muslim worshippers. Israel carried out airstrikes against installations it said Iran and pro-Iranian militias were using south of Syrian capital Damascus 25 Dec and 11, 20 and 21 Jan; latter, in response to missile fired at Golan Heights, targeted Iranian Al-Quds Force and reportedly killed twelve.

➔ **Jordan** Foreign ministry 22 Jan announced it had appointed chargé d'affaires to Syria to work in embassy in Damascus after warming of ties.

↑ **Lebanon** PM Hariri 31 Jan announced formation of new national unity govt, ending nearly nine months of deadlock. Amid mounting economic pressure, opposed political forces reached compromise. Hizbollah allocated post of health minister, controlling fourth largest ministerial budget, in addition to two ministerial positions it held previously and Hizbollah's Sunni allies allocated one ministry. New cabinet includes four women, two as ministers of interior and energy, up from one woman minister in previous cabinet. Govt expected to enact reforms to unlock \$11bn in loans and grants pledged by international donors at 2018 Paris conference.

↓ **Syria** Jihadists took control of Idlib in north west straining Russia-Turkey deal holding off govt assault on opposition stronghold, rise in Israeli airstrikes against Iranian and Iran-allied targets in south west provoked retaliation, and U.S. sought assurances from Turkey it would not attack Kurdish fighters in north east when U.S.

troops pull out. In Idlib in north west, clashes between jihadist alliance Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and rival rebel faction Nour al-Din al-Zinki erupted 1 Jan, with Turkish-backed rebel groups Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham joining against HTS. HTS defeated Nour al-Din al-Zinki by 4 Jan and imposed civilian Salvation Govt, which it controls, in captured areas. HTS 10 Jan reached settlement with Ahrar al-Sham and Suqour al-Sham, which conceded HTS authority. Turkish President Erdoğan and Russian President Putin in Moscow 23 Jan agreed on closer military cooperation in Idlib, but Putin reaffirmed Russia's support for dialogue between Damascus and Kurds. In response to what govt called "terrorist violations" of truce in southern Idlib, army 29 Jan shelled Maarat al-Numan killing at least eleven civilians. Tensions rose in south: Israel carried out airstrikes against installations it said Iran and pro-Iranian militias were using south of Damascus 25 Dec and 11 and 20 Jan. In apparent retaliation, missile fired allegedly by Iranian forces 20 Jan at Israeli-controlled Golan Heights. Israel responded with another airstrike 21 Jan targeting Iranian Al-Quds Force, reportedly killing twelve. Following President Trump's announcement in Dec that U.S. troops would withdraw, U.S. National Security Adviser John Bolton 6 Jan conditioned withdrawal on Turkey guaranteeing it would not attack "Kurdish fighters"; Turkey condemned remarks. Turkey 13 Jan deployed tanks and armoured vehicles to districts on border with Syria. After Trump 13 Jan tweeted that U.S. "will devastate Turkey economically if they hit the Kurds", he and Erdoğan 14 Jan had phone call on possible twenty-mile-wide "safe zone" in north east along Turkish border. Syrian Kurds and Syrian govt rejected Turkish control over potential "safe zone". Turkey reportedly sought Russian permission to use Syrian airspace for possible operation in north east against Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) – backbone of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Russian FM Lavrov 16 Jan said northern territories should return to Syrian govt control. Kurds continued to explore political settlement with Syrian govt including integration of YPG into Syrian armed forces. Suicide attack claimed by Islamic State (ISIS) in Manbij 16 Jan killed sixteen, including four U.S. personnel. Another suicide attack targeting U.S. troops and Syrian partners in Hassakeh 21 Jan caused no casualties.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➡ **Bahrain** Highest court 28 Jan upheld life sentence for jailed leader of outlawed Shia opposition society al-Wefaq, Sheikh Ali Salman, accused of spying on behalf of Qatar during 2011 uprising.

➡ **Iran** As implementation of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) entered fourth year 16 Jan, deal's future became increasingly uncertain. U.S. sanctions on Iran have significantly reduced its crude oil exports and dissuaded international companies from doing business there. Remaining JCPOA participants continued efforts to ease trade with Iran: European participants 31 Jan launched Special Purpose Vehicle to support trade with Iran, originally expected late 2018. Govt's purported hand in series of assassinations and attempted attacks against Iranian political dissidents in several European countries further strained EU-Iran relations, leading EU 8 Jan to impose sanctions on unit of intelligence ministry and two Iranian individuals. U.S.-Iran tensions continued: U.S. Sec State Pompeo 10 Jan pledged to pursue American campaign "to stop Iran's malevolent influence and actions" and 15 Jan protested Iranian launch of satellite, accusing govt of using it as cover for developing

ballistic missile capabilities. Israel carried out airstrikes in southern Syria against installations it claimed Iran and pro-Iranian militias were using south of Damascus 25 Dec and 11, 20 and 21 Jan; latter strike targeted Al-Quds Force and Syrian air defences, twelve reported dead. Expediency Council – constitutional arbitrator between parliament and Guardian Council – 5 Jan approved second of four bills aimed at shoring up measures against money laundering and terrorism financing.

➡ **Iraq** In surprise visit to U.S. military base at Ain al-Asad in Anbar province 27 Dec, President Trump confirmed continued U.S. military presence in Iraq despite planned withdrawal from Syria; some MPs criticised visit as violation of Iraqi sovereignty. As U.S. increased pressure on Iraq to stop importing gas from Iran, U.S. Sec State Pompeo 9 Jan met PM Mahdi and members of cabinet to discuss greater economic cooperation. Amid U.S. attempts to forge strategic alliance to confront Iran including the Gulf Cooperation Council, Egypt and Jordan, King Abdullah of Jordan visited 14 Jan to reassure Iraq of Jordanian cooperation. Iranian FM Zarif 13 Jan embarked on five-day visit to Iraq taking in Baghdad, Erbil and Suleimaniya, signalling continued commitment to Iranian presence in Iraq. In Kurdistan, two main parties, Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), from early Jan attempted to draft new agreement to forge power-sharing arrangement, but continued to disagree on redistribution of positions in new Kurdish cabinet, assignment of positions in Baghdad, and appointment of new Kirkuk governor. Suspected Islamic State (ISIS) attacks continued: in Tikrit, Salah al-Din province (north) car bombing killed two and injured six 8 Jan and two roadside bombs killed four policemen and wounded eleven 26 Jan, another blast killed two and injured a dozen in Al-Qaim, Anbar province (west) 11 Jan and another killed one soldier in Kirkuk (north) 23 Jan. FM Ali al-Hakim 30 Jan met Russian FM Lavrov in Moscow; Russia pledged to support Iraq in fighting ISIS and to reestablish security ties between two states. In far north, Turkey continued operations against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) conducting two major airstrikes 6 and 20 Jan killing seven and six civilians respectively. In response to raids, hundreds of protesters 26 Jan stormed Turkish military base in Dohuk province (north) and burnt Turkish military vehicles; clashes resulted in at least one killed and ten injured.

➡ **Qatar** Afghan Taliban and U.S. officials held talks in capital Doha 21-26 Jan; Taliban said they expected new round of talks in Doha in Feb (see Afghanistan).

➡ **Saudi Arabia** Govt 30 Jan said anti-corruption campaign launched Nov 2017 now ended; \$100bn in assets recovered, settlements reached with 87 individuals, eight cases referred to public prosecutor and 56 charges yet to be resolved. U.S. Sec State Pompeo 14 Jan visited capital Riyadh, reportedly pressed Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman on status of investigation into killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi consulate in Istanbul in Oct and secured govt's verbal commitment to Yemen political process. UN Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths travelled to Riyadh 23-24 Jan to discuss implementation of Stockholm Agreement with Saudi authorities and Yemeni govt. U.S. lawmakers 30 Jan re-introduced bipartisan resolution to end U.S. support for Saudi-led coalition in Yemen; two-thirds majority needed in both houses of Congress to overrule potential presidential veto (see Yemen).

➡ **United Arab Emirates** In letter to UN Security Council 17 Jan, govt restated commitment to implementation of Stockholm Agreement in Yemen, while condemning Huthi ceasefire violations. Govt has repeatedly warned privately that Saudi-led coalition reserves right to return to hostilities if no progress made on Huthi redeployment from Hodeida. Country's global port operator DP World 3 Jan said first convoy of trucks had travelled along newly reopened 2,500km corridor from Jebel Ali port to Syria. Govt 20 Jan hosted inaugural UAE-Syria private sector forum.

📌 🇲🇪 **Yemen** Despite hundreds of reported infractions, fragile ceasefire in Hodeida port city stemming from Stockholm Agreement in Dec eased fighting there and offers chance for further de-escalation in Feb; but collapse of deal or too slow implementation could see battle for city resume. UN Security Council 16 Jan unanimously approved creation of UN Mission to support the Hodeida Agreement (UNMHA), mandating 75 monitors to oversee implementation of agreement and ceasefire initially for six months. Govt-aligned and Huthi forces failed to redeploy from Hodeida by 8 Jan deadline. Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) – group comprising UN, govt and Huthis to oversee implementation of Hodeida agreement – yet to agree on ceasefire terms and joint verification mechanisms for redeployment. Third RCC meeting failed to convene because Huthis refused to meet in coalition-controlled territory. UN Envoy Martin Griffiths shuttled between capital Sanaa and Saudi capital Riyadh late Jan, reportedly securing both sides' buy-in for redeployment plan. UN 24 Jan said it would replace RCC chair, retired Dutch General Patrick Cammaert, in Feb. Talks between Huthis and govt in Jordan 16 Jan on possible prisoner exchange ended without final agreement, but sides agreed on timeline for future steps, reportedly including second meeting in Jordan in coming week. In letter to UN Security Council 17 Jan, UAE restated commitment to Stockholm Agreement, but also warned it would resume hostilities if no progress made on redeployment. Suspected mortar fire 24 Jan started fire that damaged vital World Food Programme wheat storage, milling and distribution facility on Hodeida's outskirts. Huthi media 30 Jan reported coalition airstrikes in Hodeida governorate in breach of ceasefire; UAE said airstrikes outside ceasefire zone; FM Gargash 30 Jan said coalition prepared to use "more calibrated force" to pressure Huthi compliance with Stockholm Agreement. Germany 16 Jan pledged €5.4mn (about \$6.2mn) to help create UN office to support civilian aspects of Hodeida agreement, including administration of Hodeida, Salif and Ras Issa ports and demining. UK 22 Jan pledged £2.5mn (about \$3.3mn) for same purpose. U.S. lawmakers 30 Jan re-introduced bipartisan resolution to end U.S. support for Saudi-led coalition in Yemen; two-thirds majority needed in both houses of Congress to overrule potential presidential veto. In continued fighting, Huthi drone 10 Jan hit military parade in Lahj province, killing three senior military officials; govt 15 Jan claimed to have arrested Huthis responsible. Coalition 19 Jan launched airstrikes on Huthi military targets in Sanaa. Heavy fighting took place during month at key frontlines, including on Saudi-Yemeni border, around Taiz city in south, and in Damt district, al-Dhalea governorate. Local media early Jan reported clashes between rival southern Yemeni groups in Shabwa governorate.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** President Bouteflika 18 Jan decreed that presidential election would take place 18 April, ending speculation over possible delay. Disputes over potential successor to Bouteflika within ruling coalition and military reportedly continued. Govt inflated external threats: senior interior ministry official 2 Jan said regional powers were organising Syrian terrorists' entry into Algeria from Niger, Mali and Libya; same official 6 Jan said 150 Syrian migrants arrested early Jan in south included former rebels from Aleppo. Suspected Islamist militants 16 Jan opened fire in Tarik Ibn Ziad south west of capital Algiers, killing one civilian and wounding another.

➔ **Egypt** Sectarian tensions persisted following violent incidents and jihadist attacks on Coptic Christians and in Sinai fight against Islamist militancy continued. One police officer killed 5 Jan as police tried to safely detonate explosive device outside church just east of Cairo. President Sisi 6 Jan inaugurated cathedral in new administrative capital 30km east of Cairo day before Coptic Christmas. Police 11-12 Jan dispersed violent mobs outside church in Manshiyet Zaafarna, Minya province in centre demanding authorities close church. In Sinai, security officials said roadside bomb 14 Jan hit police convoy in Rafah, killing conscript; security forces 14 Jan raided homes of suspected Islamic State (ISIS) members in Arish, arrested four; govt 16 Jan said police killed five suspected Islamist militants in raid in Arish; Islamist militants 17 Jan reportedly kidnapped Christian man near Arish, police pursued assailants and killed one, but did not free abductee; security forces 20 Jan said they had killed fourteen suspected Islamist militants outside Arish; military 22 Jan said at least seven soldiers and 59 suspected militants had been killed in recent operations in Sinai and that it had arrested 142 suspected militants, without giving timeframe; military 27 Jan said airstrike on ISIS "outpost" killed several, including two local commanders in northern Sinai. Authorities maintained repression of civil society: in appeal trial, Cairo criminal court 9 Jan sentenced activist Ahmed Douma to fifteen years in prison for alleged role in Dec 2011 Cairo protests. Authorities 29 Jan said 54 people detained for plotting to foment chaos on anniversary of uprising. Lawyer 30 Jan said at least six civil society activists arrested over previous two days after commemoration of 2011 uprising. Sisi 22 Jan attended African Union (AU) summit as country took over AU chairmanship for 2019.

↓ 🇱🇲* **Libya** Fighting erupted between rival armed groups in capital Tripoli, while in south west tensions heightened after forces from east-based Libyan National Army (LNA) moved into region's capital, Sebha, raising risk of new fighting there in Feb. Breaking Sept 2018 UN-brokered ceasefire, rival armed groups clashed in Tripoli 16 Jan reportedly over implementation of new UN-backed Tripoli security plan; at least sixteen killed 16-20 Jan, including civilians. Armed groups 21 Jan agreed to new ceasefire following local mediation. LNA troops in about 100 vehicles arrived in Sebha, main city in south west, 16 Jan saying they intended to "rid the south of terrorists and foreign armed groups" and secure oil installations. Local armed groups from Tebu, Tuareg and Arab tribes nominally allied to Tripoli-based Presidency Council (PC) vacated military bases in Sebha, but tensions remained high as many of them declared opposition to LNA's arrival. LNA 18 Jan said it had killed three suspected Islamist militants including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)

commander in Brak Shati, north of Sebha. UN Envoy Ghassan Salamé 20 Jan expressed “deep concern” about LNA’s deployment in south; LNA 23 Jan referred to Salamé as “opponent”. UN-backed National Conference planned for early Jan was postponed sine die. International efforts to broker agreement between Tripoli-based UN-backed PM Serraj and LNA commander Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar continued; they allegedly met in Jordanian capital Amman early Jan but reached no compromise. Political feuds within Tripoli-based govt continued. In open letter 12 Jan, three vice presidents in Serraj’s UN-backed PC representing west, south and east accused him of making unilateral decisions and cabinet appointments, including of new health and local governance ministers in Jan, without consulting them. LNA said it killed two suspected Islamic State (ISIS) militants in eastern city of Derna 21 Jan. Local official 31 Jan said security forces arrested leading ISIS member Khalifa al-Barq in Sirte 30 Jan.

➡ **Mauritania** President of ruling Union for the Republic (UPR) party and govt spokesperson 29 Jan said Defence Minister Mohamed El Ghazouani would be ruling majority’s candidate for 2019 presidential election. Anti-slavery campaigner and MP Biram Dah Abeid 30 Jan said he would run for president.

➡ **Morocco** Security forces 23 Jan arrested thirteen suspected Islamist militants reportedly linked to Islamic State (ISIS) in several cities including economic capital Casablanca. Civil society organisation Racines 15 Jan said it would appeal Casablanca court’s dissolution order issued 26 Dec after Racines in Aug 2018 hosted recording of talk show critical of king. Civil servants and municipal workers went on strike 17 Jan to demand better working conditions. European Parliament 16 Jan voted to extend preferential tariffs to Western Sahara as part of EU-Morocco trade agreement, despite 2016 ruling by EU Court of Justice that no trade agreement could cover Western Sahara unless inhabitants of territory consented to it. UN Envoy for Western Sahara Horst Köhler late Jan said he planned new round of talks between Morocco and Polisario Front independence movement in March (see Western Sahara).

➡ **Tunisia** Struggle between President Essebsi and PM Chahed continued. Feud and Essebsi’s efforts to destabilise Islamist party An-Nahda, which has supported Chahed, paralysed govt and prevented parliament from appointing members of new Constitutional Court. Parliament 30 Jan filled four open positions in electoral commission including president. Support committee of two leftist politicians killed in 2013 and lawyers 10 Jan said magistrate had accused An-Nahda supporter Mustafa Kheder of involvement in killing; they also accused public prosecutor of not fully investigating An-Nahda’s alleged role. About 90% of civil servants took part in general strike organised by public-sector workers union UGTT 17 Jan after pay negotiations with govt failed. UGTT 19 Jan called for new general strike 20-21 Feb. UGTT Secretary General Nourredine Taboubi accused Chahed of being “puppet of the IMF [International Monetary Fund]” and endangering Tunisia’s sovereignty, while Essebsi reportedly courted Taboubi to form “national front” with his party Nida Tounes for late 2019 parliamentary and presidential elections. Chahed 27 Jan created political party Long Live Tunisia with support of Nida Tounes defectors.

➡ **Western Sahara** European Parliament 16 Jan voted to extend preferential tariffs to Western Sahara as part of EU-Morocco trade agreement, despite 2016 rul-

ing by EU Court of Justice that no trade agreement could cover Western Sahara unless inhabitants of territory consented to it. UN Envoy for Western Sahara Horst Köhler late Jan said he planned new round of talks between Morocco and Polisario Front independence movement in March. Polisario Front 29 Jan said there was “window of opportunity” to resolve conflict.