



Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** Israeli forces and settler attacks killed over a dozen Palestinians, as settler violence reached highest levels ever recorded and govt expanded settlement funding.

Israeli raids, settler violence and Palestinian gunmen roiled West Bank and Israel. Israeli military forces and settlers killed at least 18 Palestinians in Aug, while Palestinian attacks killed five Israelis. UN 4 Aug recorded 39% annual increase in settler attacks in first six months of 2023, highest since it began gathering data in 2006, while UN envoy 21 Aug said Palestinian casualties in 2023 have already surpassed 2022 figures, marking highest toll since 2005. Notably, Palestinian 1 Aug shot and injured six Israelis before being killed in Maale Adumim settlement. Israeli settlers 4 Aug killed Palestinian in Burqa village and 6 Aug killed Palestinian near Ramallah; Palestinian hours later killed Israeli security guard before being shot dead in Tel Aviv. Israeli forces 6 Aug killed three Palestinians near Jenin. Suspected Palestinian gunmen 19 Aug killed two Israelis in Huwara village. In rare clash, Palestinian security forces 30 Aug killed Palestinian in Tulkarem refugee camp.

Israel accelerated settlement building, Palestinian prisoners began hunger strike. Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich 15 Aug announced plans to allocate \$180mn to West Bank settlements after freezing funds to Palestinian communities in Israel and East Jerusalem; Arab local councils 21 Aug held strike in protest and Smotrich 28 Aug said he would unblock funds. Meanwhile, Palestinian administrative detainees in Israeli prisons early Aug began open-ended hunger strike in protest of detention without charge or trial; issue could provoke retaliation if any prisoner dies. Hundreds of Arab citizens of Israel 23 Aug voiced anger at govt's failure to curb wave of criminal violence.

In other important developments. Amid legitimacy crisis facing Palestinian Authority (PA), PA President Abbas 10 Aug fired 12 governors in West Bank and Gaza in apparent attempt to reclaim public confidence. Tens of thousands of Israelis 17-19 Aug continued protesting govt's judicial overhaul in Tel Aviv. Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant 8 Aug threatened to "return Lebanon to the Stone Age (see Lebanon). Suspected Israeli airstrikes struck Syrian capital Damascus.

➔ **Lebanon** Palestinian factions battled in southern refugee camp and Christian and Shiite groups clashed near capital Beirut; Hizbollah-Israel tensions remained high and presidential vacuum continued.

Intra-Palestinian fighting continued, Shiite-Christian hostilities erupted. After 30 July assassination of Fatah general, violent clashes early Aug continued inside Ein el-Helweh Palestinian refugee camp in south, resulting in at least 13 deaths, destruction of 400 houses and displacement of several hundred families. Separately, vehicle allegedly carrying Hizbollah ammunition 9 Aug crashed in Kahaleh, Maronite Christian-majority village outside capital Beirut, triggering gunfight that killed resident and Hizbollah member; various Christian parties denounced incident as consequence of Hizbollah maintaining its independent weapons arsenal. Hizbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah 14 Aug called for calm but warned that party's rivals were seeking to push country into civil war. Leader of Lebanese Forces (LF) party Samir Geagea 14 Aug suggested that Hizbollah may be behind death of former LF coordinator in southern town of Ain Ibl.

Hostile rhetoric continued between Hizbollah and Israel. Following tensions in July over Hizbollah's alleged build-up of military infrastructure along border, Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant 8 Aug threatened to "return Lebanon to the Stone Age"; Nasrallah 14 Aug returned threat. Israel's UN ambassador 30 Aug said Israel is closer to launching military action in Lebanon than at any time since 2006 war. Bellicose statements come after series of altercations at border, which have increased in regularity since mid-2022. U.S. Treasury 16 Aug designated Hizbollah-linked Lebanese NGO Green Without Borders as terrorist group.

Presidential vacuum entered its tenth consecutive month. Parliament speaker and Hizbollah ally Nabih Berri 8 Aug said Sept dialogue proposed by French envoy Jean-Yves Le Drian is opportunity that "should not be missed". Lack of president kept parliament at standstill, as body 17 Aug failed to secure necessary quorum to hold proposed legislative session.

Economic hardship persisted. Interim Central Bank governor, who succeeded Riad Salameh on 31 July, 17 Aug announced that total liquid foreign exchange reserves are down to around \$7bn. Army 9 and 13 Aug announced that it had arrested dozens of people accused of involvement with irregular migration to Europe.

↓ **Syria Major battle erupted between Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and regime in northwest as Russia renewed airstrikes and Islamic State (ISIS) killed dozens in centre; collapsing currency triggered protests.**

Hostilities escalated between HTS and regime, leading to fierce battle. In Idlib province, HTS 7 Aug launched raid 10km behind regime lines to destroy Russian-Syrian base, 11 Aug conducted raid on Latakia front, and 26 Aug detonated tunnel bomb beneath regime base in southern Idlib. As of 28 Aug, HTS continued to heavily shell regime forces around southern Idlib amid one of most intense battles in northwest since 2020 ceasefire, although fighting remained contained to artillery and sniper fire. Amid hostilities, Russian resumed airstrikes in Idlib: 21-22 Aug killed 15 HTS members and late Aug intensified deadly strikes across region.

ISIS attacks surged in centre. ISIS 7 Aug temporarily captured largest regime position near village of Shoula, Deir Ez Zor and two checkpoints along Raqqa-Deir Ez Zor highway. ISIS 8 Aug killed eight regime troops and pro-govt fighters in Raqqa province and 10 Aug killed at least 25 soldiers outside Mayadeen town. Upsurge in attacks may indicate group's shift away from areas dominated by international

coalition. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) 18 Aug killed group's eastern region emir in Raqqa city.

Currency crisis sparked rare anti-govt rallies. Syrian pound 16 Aug fell to 15,500 to \$1 USD, sparking general strike next day in Suwayda province, protests 18 Aug in Daraa city and rare protest in capital Damascus amid reports of increased social media criticism of govt among Alawites; protestors in Suwayda city 24 Aug raided ruling party's office. Anti-regime protests persisted late month among Druze population of Suwayda and across opposition-held northern Syria.

Hostilities erupted in northeast, regime allowed aid in northwest. In eastern Deir Ez Zor in northeast, clashes beginning 28 Aug between SDF and Arab groups reportedly killed dozens after SDF 27 Aug arrested commander. After month-long pause, Damascus 8 Aug acquiesced to UN efforts to reopen Bab al-Hawa border crossing for humanitarian aid for six months; HTS-aligned authorities in Idlib, however, rejected aid sanctioned by Damascus.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➡ Bahrain Hundreds of prisoners began mass hunger strike in protest of detention conditions.

Prisoners in Jau prison in south – which incarcerates majority of Bahrain's 1,200 political prisoners – 7 Aug began hunger strike to demand better conditions, including increased time outside cells and better health and education facilities; by late month, reports suggested more than 800 prisoners had joined action, making it largest prisoner hunger strike in country's history. In rare demonstrations, villagers 7 Aug in Sanabis, on outskirts of capital Manama, held protest in solidarity with prisoners; protesters also took to streets in downtown Manama.

➡ Iran De-escalatory understandings between U.S. and Iran began to take shape, underscoring potential for sustained mutual restraint on nuclear and regional fronts, but maritime tensions remained elevated.

First evidence emerged of U.S.-Iran de-escalation. U.S. 10 Aug confirmed Iran's release of five U.S. nationals from prison to house arrest. Iran's deputy FM same day indicated that frozen Iranian assets in South Korea were in process of being released, along with "several Iranians who were illegally detained in America"; assets, estimated at around \$6bn, will be held in Qatar, where they be available for non-sanctionable humanitarian trade. Additionally, U.S. media reports mid-Aug indicated Tehran had tapered growth of its enriched uranium stockpiling at highest end, while major attacks on U.S. and allied forces by Iranian/Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria appeared to be in lull.

Tensions in maritime domain persisted. After U.S. throughout July announced series of military deployments to Gulf region, various media outlets 3 Aug reported Washington was in advanced deliberations about possibility of dispatching U.S. forces aboard commercial vessels that request it. U.S. 6 Aug announced arrival of 3,000 forces in region facilitating "greater flexibility and maritime capability"; next day Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps warned Iran would "respond in kind to any U.S. action and mischief, including the seizure of ships". U.S., EU and UK naval

authorities 12 Aug alerted commercial vessels of unspecified threat and advised distance from Iranian waters.

Normalisation with Saudi Arabia continued. After Iranian officials 13 Aug reported reopening of Saudi consulate in Mashhad, FM Hossein Amir-Abdollahian 17-18 Aug travelled to Saudi Arabia for meetings with his Saudi counterpart and Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman; Amir-Abdollahian described meetings as “frank, beneficial and productive” (see Saudi Arabia).

Western sanctions mounted. Canada 8 Aug sanctioned seven Iranian individuals, including secretary of Supreme National Security Council, citing their involvement “in activities that gravely threaten international peace and security or that constitute gross and systemic violations of human rights”. UK same day blacklisted nearly dozen Iranian persons and organisations as part of set of 25 designations of foreign entities giving military support to Russia.

➔ Iraq Hostilities intensified between Türkiye and Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in north, parties formed lists ahead of provincial elections in Dec, and Islamic State (ISIS) continued low-scale insurgency.

Türkiye escalated drone strikes on PKK. Turkish drone 6 Aug killed two PKK militants in separate strikes in Sulaymaniyah and Dohuk governorates; 9 Aug killed two PKK members in separate strikes in Sulaymaniyah. Clashes between Turkish forces and PKK 9-10 Aug killed at least six Turkish soldiers in Zap region, Dohuk governorate; Türkiye 10 Aug responded with airstrikes, killing four PKK members. Türkiye 24 Aug launched drone strikes in Erbil governorate, killing seven PKK members. IED 25 Aug killed Turkish soldier in north. Turkish FM Hakan Fidan 22 Aug visited capital Baghdad and Erbil, declaring “we will clear this virus [PKK] from Iraq together”.

Shiite parties formed separate lists for forthcoming provincial elections. Ahead of provincial polls set for 18 Dec, party registration 14 Aug closed with 303 registered parties and 37 coalitions. Shiite Coordination Framework parties decided to compete separately through multiple lists, including former PM Nuri al-Maliki’s State of Law coalition and Hadi al-Ameri’s Fateh alliance comprising many Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF)-affiliated groups; scattered coalition reflects parties’ competing local interests, particularly in south. While Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr’s movement continued boycott of formal politics, it could back independents.

ISIS continued attacks as govt discussed role of U.S. forces. ISIS 7 Aug attacked PMF position in Salah al-Din governorate, killing one. Clashes between French/Iraqi forces and ISIS cell 28 Aug killed French soldier in Salah al-Din. UN experts 14 Aug warned that ISIS still commands 5,000-7,000 members in Iraq and Syria. Defence Minister Thabit Muhammad al-Abbasi 7 Aug met U.S. Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin in U.S. capital Washington to discuss defence partnership beyond defeat of ISIS; continued presence of around 2,500 U.S. troops is recurring issue of contention, particularly for pro-Iran parties that constitute governing coalition and in wake of reports that U.S. forces recently bolstered presence at Ain-al-Asad airbase.

In another important development. Iran 28 Aug said it agreed with Iraq that “armed separatists and terrorist groups” in Kurdistan would be disarmed before 19 Sept.

➡ **Saudi Arabia** Govt pursued normalisation process with Iran and cracked down on freedom of expression at home.

Iranian-Saudi rapprochement made progress as normalisation with Syria stalled. Iranian FM Hossein Amir-Abdollahian 17 Aug met Saudi counterpart in capital Riyadh, describing relations “on the right track”; Amir-Abdollahian next day met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) in highest-level talks since March reconciliation. Reports during month indicated Saudi Arabia delayed opening of embassy in Syria, which was reportedly planned for June. Amid talk of U.S. efforts to secure normalisation deal with Israel, Saudi Arabia 12 Aug named its ambassador to Jordan, Nayef al-Sudairi, non-resident envoy to Palestine. Riyadh 5-6 Aug hosted Ukraine “peace summit”. BRICS 24 Aug invited Saudi Arabia alongside other nations, including Iran, United Arab Emirates and Egypt, to join bloc.

Govt continued domestic crackdown. Amid series of arrests of social media personalities, authorities early Aug arrested public health expert and social media influencer, Mohammed Al Hajji, before releasing him on 15 Aug; arrests point to authorities’ attempt to stifle perceived criticism of govt policies. Human Rights Watch 21 Aug alleged Saudi border guards conducted “widespread and systematic” killings of hundreds of Ethiopian migrants between March 2022 and June 2023.

➡ **Yemen** Oman sought to advance peace talks as Huthis threatened escalation and clashed heavily with separatists in south, while armed raid on Aden’s presidential palace revealed deep govt divisions.

Omani delegation visited capital Sanaa in hope of fostering talks. Amid growing resentment among civil servants over stalled salary payments, Huthi leader Abdul Malek al-Huthi 11 Aug threatened escalation against Saudi-led coalition if talks do not make progress. After last visit in April, Omani delegation 17 Aug arrived in Sanaa to meet Huthi leadership and discuss latest developments in talks; while Huthis want humanitarian file and salaries addressed first, Omanis suggested addressing salary payments and concurrently establishing principles. Meanwhile, UN special envoy Hans Grundberg 8-9 Aug met Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) members and Saudi officials and 15 Aug met Omani and Huthi officials. In briefing to UN Security Council, Grundberg 16 Aug highlighted dire economic situation and intermittent fighting on Taiz, Marib, Dhale, Hodeida, Shebwa and Saada front lines.

In south, Huthis and Southern Transitional Council (STC) clashed amid spate of militant attacks. Huthis attempted to seize control of strategic military sites in Al Hadd Yafea, northeast of Lahj governorate, triggering clashes with STC on 26 Aug that killed eight STC fighters with unknown Huthi casualties. Meanwhile in Abyan governorate, suspected al-Qaeda attack 1 Aug killed at least five STC-affiliated troops in Wadi Omran; similar assault 10 Aug killed six fighters, including senior STC commander, in Madiyah district. Unknown gunmen 15 Aug assassinated govt officer in Taiz city investigating last month’s killing of UN official.

Southern militia raided presidential palace. Giants Brigades, southern salafi group aligned with United Arab Emirates (UAE), 13 Aug stormed presidential palace in Aden, besieging PM Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed’s residence for several hours following his return from Riyadh in attempt to pressure Saeed to agree to financial benefits for associates of salafi commander Abu Zara’ah al-Mahrami; raid underscored divisions within PLC, likely stemming from tensions between Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.

In other important developments. Saudi Arabia 1 Aug announced \$1.2bn economic aid for PLC. UN 11 Aug removed over 1m barrels of oil from decaying FSO *Safer* to avert ecological disaster.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** Algiers posed as mediator in Niger crisis amid fears of greater instability along shared border; BRICS bloc of emerging economies dealt a blow to Algeria's membership bid.

Algiers offered to mediate Niger crisis. Tebboune 5 Aug said Algeria was "ready to help" resolve crisis in Niger following late-July coup against elected President Bazoum; Algiers, which favours diplomatic path to ensure return to constitutional order, has intermediate position between West African regional bloc ECOWAS' threat of military intervention, and Burkina Faso and Mali's support for military coup leaders. FM Ahmed Attaf 23 Aug started tour of three ECOWAS member states – Nigeria, Benin and Ghana – to hold consultations on Niger crisis, and 29 Aug proposed six-month transitional plan to restore "constitutional and democratic order"; Niger coup leader Gen. Abderrahmane Tchiani 19 Aug had called for three-year transition.

Repression of dissent continued. Constantine court 29 Aug sentenced Algerian-Canadian researcher for NGO Global Initiative against Transnational Organized Crime, Raouf Farrah, and Algerian journalist Mustapha Bendjama, to two years in prison for allegedly publishing classified information; their lawyers same day filed appeal.

In other important developments. BRICS bloc of emerging economies 24 Aug invited six countries to join alliance, not including Algeria; move deals a blow to President Tebboune who in recent months had engaged in advocacy drive to advance Algiers' candidacy. Meanwhile, Ahmed Attaf 9 Aug met with U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken in U.S. capital, Washington DC, to discuss situations in Niger, Ukraine and Western Sahara; visit also focused on reinforcing bilateral ties.

➔ **Egypt** Govt continued to shy away from fulfilling International Monetary Fund loan conditions, and President Sisi received timid recommendations from national dialogue.

Implementation of IMF reform program remained suspended. Govt continued to prioritise boosting country's foreign currency liquidity over implementing politically-sensitive structural reforms negotiated with International Monetary Fund. Notably, in effort to boost foreign currency inflow, govt 14 Aug announced measures targeted at Egyptians abroad, including U.S. dollar pension plan and \$5,000 fee to avoid military draft. Authorities 18 Aug extended acting Central Bank governor Hassan Abdalla's term by another year, providing further sign of continuity in current approach.

National dialogue submitted conclusions. National Dialogue Board of Trustees mid-Aug submitted recommendations on number of topics to President Sisi; proposals however fall short of addressing pressing issues including plight of political detainees and exercise of political rights.

Tensions persisted with U.S. over human rights record, stance on Ukraine war. In joint letter, group of U.S. lawmakers 10 Aug urged President Biden's administration to withhold \$300mn conditional to human rights record out of annual \$1.3bn in military assistance to Egypt, citing continuous repression of journalists, opposition officials and civil society activists; U.S. administration expected to release decision before 30 Sept. Meanwhile, U.S.-based daily newspaper *The Wall Street Journal* 11 Aug published article detailing Egypt's reluctance to meet U.S. request to provide weapons to Ukraine, highlighting Cairo's still warm relations with Moscow.

In other important developments. BRICS bloc of emerging economies 24 Aug invited Egypt and five other countries to join alliance. Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan 27-28 Aug held direct talks on Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) for first time in two years; talks ended without breakthrough (see Nile Waters).

► **Libya** **In apparent policy shift, UN envoy for Libya called for unified govt before elections take place; rival militias engaged in deadly clashes in Tripoli, revealing precarious security outlook in capital.**

Amid political gridlock, UN urged unified govt for elections. Tripoli-based consultative body, High State Council (HSC), 6 Aug elected Mohamed Takala as new leader, unseating incumbent Khaled Mishri, with unclear consequences on HSC's support for eastern-based House of Representatives (HoR)'s plan to appoint interim govt as part of roadmap to general elections. HoR 8 Aug discussed draft election laws agreed upon in June by UN-backed "6+6" joint committee (composed of HoR and HSC representatives) and referred comments back to committee. Meanwhile, UN envoy for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily 22 Aug told UN Security Council agreement on unified govt is "imperative" to lead country to elections; statement appears as reversal of UN longstanding position that elections should be held ahead of govt unification.

Central Bank announced reunification after decade-long division. Central Bank Governor Sadiq al-Kabir 20 Aug said Central Bank of Libya reinstated as unified institution almost ten years after splitting into two rival branches; it is still unclear, however, whether procedures required to make unification operational have been activated.

Fighting between rival Tripoli militias left dozens dead. Members of Special Deterrence Force (alias Rada militia) 14 Aug detained commander of 444 Brigade, Mahmud Hamza, at Mitiga airport in capital Tripoli. In response, members of 444 Brigade opened fire at Rada militiamen, leading to intense fighting with heavy artillery around Mitiga airport and elsewhere in Tripoli that continued into 15 Aug; UN reported at least 55 people killed and over 100 injured. Fighting, which in following days subsided as Hamza was released, took place amid turf war between Rada militia and 444 Brigade commanders (both allied to Tripoli-based PM Dabaiba) for control of Tripoli International Airport upon its reopening.

In other important developments. Eastern strongman Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army 25 Aug launched airstrikes against Chadian rebel positions on Libyan side of border with Chad (see Chad). Dabaiba 28 Aug suspended FM Najla Mangoush after protests previous day erupted in several cities over Mangoush's meeting with Israeli counterpart.

➡ **Tunisia Grain and bread shortages turned into crisis, and govt reached agreement with Libya to share responsibility for rescuing migrants expelled by Tunis to border zones.**

Bread shortages turned into crisis. Govt 1 Aug issued decree banning privately-owned bakeries – employing around 20,000 people across country – from purchasing subsidised flour, blaming country’s grain and bread shortages on their selling of bread at higher price than govt-subsidised baguette. Move prompted most privately-owned bakeries to close doors, while around 200 bakery owners 7 Aug protested in front of trade ministry in Tunis. Trade ministry 19 Aug cancelled decree and agreed to restore subsidised flour supply to private bakeries.

President Saïed dismissed PM, showing continued rejection of IMF program. Saïed 1 Aug sacked PM Najla Bouden and appointed little-known former central bank executive Ahmed Hachani as replacement; move indicates Saïed’s continuous rejection of International Monetary Fund loan terms, including economic reform program that Bouden had tried to advance.

Tunisia and Libya agreed to rescue migrants stranded along border. UN Sec Gen António Guterres 1 Aug called on Tunis to stop expelling migrants into desert border areas and demanded “urgent relocation of those stranded along the border to safe locations”. Interior Minister Kamel Fekih 2 Aug conceded authorities have pushed back “small groups” of sub-Saharan migrants trying to enter Tunisia into desert no man’s land, but labelled claims of collective deportations and mistreatment of migrants as “false allegations”. Libyan authorities 8 Aug reported death of at least 27 sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia-Libya border zone. Tunis and Tripoli next day reached agreement to share responsibility for providing shelter to at least 300 migrants stranded in shared border zone. Meanwhile, EU-Tunisia migration control deal faced pushback. In confidential note leaked early Aug, German Federal Foreign Office argued Germany and other EU member states were not properly consulted before EU Commission and Tunisia mid-July signed migration deal.

➡ **Western Sahara Polisario Front independence movement leader attended summit of BRICS bloc of emerging economies in South Africa.**

Amid tense relations between South Africa and Morocco, president of self-proclaimed Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic and Polisario Front independence movement leader, Brahim Ghali, 22-24 Aug attended summit of BRICS bloc of emerging economies in South African city of Johannesburg. Earlier in month, Morocco’s state news agency MAP 19 Aug denied South Africa’s FM Anil Sooklal’s claim that Morocco was among countries seeking to join BRICS, said Morocco would not send delegation to BRICS summit in South Africa.