

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** Israeli govt tensions with both Palestinian Authority (PA) and Hamas persisted amid COVID-19 outbreak, while PM Netanyahu and opposition leader forged power-sharing deal as step toward breaking political deadlock. In West Bank, Israeli authorities early April announced temporary suspension of demolition of Palestinian homes in Area C. PA 3 April called on Palestinians working in Israel to return to Palestinian territories following rising COVID-19 cases recorded among workers, and asked Israeli govt to release political prisoners, citing inadequate health care; Israeli forces 14 April shut down testing clinic in Silwan, East Jerusalem, citing clinic's cooperation with PA. Israeli security forces 22 April killed Palestinian after he stabbed Israeli police officer at checkpoint near Jewish settlement Ma'ale Adumin in West Bank. After cutting funding in 2017, U.S. mid-April pledged \$5mn support for East Jerusalem hospitals to help curb COVID-19. In Gaza, after authorities 21 March recorded first two COVID-19 cases, Hamas and PA in April said they hold Israel fully responsible for outbreak in Gaza Strip given its thirteen-year-long blockade; Israel's Defence Minister Naftali Bennett 3 April said Israel would allow World Health Organization to deliver medical supplies to Gaza Strip if Hamas releases four Israeli prisoners. PM Netanyahu of Likud and Blue and White opposition leader Benny Gantz 20 April signed agreement to form unity govt with rotating 18-month premierships; Israeli non-profits have appealed to Supreme Court against several components in agreement, notably one allowing Netanyahu to act as PM despite outstanding indictments; Likud indicated that if Supreme Court would accept any of the appeals, Israel would hold fourth election. Coalition agreement text also endorses West Bank annexation, providing there is "full U.S. consent"; Arab League 30 April condemned West Bank annexation plans as "new war crime".

➔ **Lebanon** Dire economic conditions continued to worsen amid COVID-19 outbreak despite govt efforts to soften impact; anti-govt protests mid-April resumed in Tripoli city and capital Beirut. Govt 1 April announced emergency support of 400,000 Lira for particularly hard-hit families; Central Bank next day instructed banks to pay out small depositors at rate near real value of Lebanese Lira, raising concerns about further devaluation of currency; Lebanese Lira continued to depreciate throughout month, 27 April reaching 4,200 to the dollar on black market. Leaked govt economic reform proposal early April sparked controversy over plans to use large deposits to cover banking losses. Meanwhile, Hizbollah announced plan to rely on 20,000 volunteers, 4,500 doctors and nurses, and 32 health centres across country to help counter COVID-19 spread. Reports 22 April of first COVID-19 case in al-Jalil Palestinian refugee camp, which hosts 9,400 people, in Bekaa Valley raised fear of wider spread among vulnerable population. Govt 9 April extended nationwide state of emergency until 26 April, thereafter announced five-phase plan to end lockdown with 27 April opening of some businesses. Six months after mass rallies first erupted over corruption and economic hardship, several hundred anti-govt protesters 17 April returned to streets in Tripoli in defiance of lockdown to demonstrate against soaring food prices leading to death of one protester on 27 April. Protesters 21 April drove around Beirut in cars to express discontent with political leadership;

protestors 24-28 April launched wave of firebomb attacks on banks in Sidon, Tyre and Tripoli reportedly in response to currency deterioration.

► **Syria** Islamic State (ISIS) launched one of its deadliest attacks in Homs governorate since Dec 2019, leaving eighteen govt forces killed, while Turkey and Russia enforced March ceasefire in Idlib. ISIS militants 9 April attacked govt military positions in desert town of Al-Sukhna in Homs region formerly held by jihadist group; eighteen govt forces and eleven ISIS militants killed. Pro-govt fighters with Russian air support reportedly attempted to halt militants' advance after attackers captured parts of town. In north west Idlib province, Turkey and Russia 15 April attempted fourth joint patrol along M4 highway in effort to uphold 5 March ceasefire after three previous patrols since 15 March were fully or partially obstructed by local protesters; Russia and Turkey conducted fifth and sixth joint patrols in area on 25 April and 28 April, respectively. Unclaimed truck bomb attack in northern town of Afrin 28 April killed at least 40 civilians; Turkey same day blamed Kurdish-led People's Protection Forces (YPG), which 28 April denied carrying out attack. Meanwhile, Turkey continued military reinforcements in Idlib. Syrian authorities maintained or extended measures to slow COVID-19 spread in govt-controlled areas, including stay at home order, daily curfew and suspension of schools, universities and Friday prayers. In north east, first reported COVID-19 case 17 April raised fears of possible wider outbreak in region amid limited medical equipment. Govt 20 April said it intercepted Israeli missiles over Palmyra in Homs; govt 27 April said Israel conducted airstrikes on military airfield near capital Damascus.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

► **Iran** Elevated tensions with the U.S. continued in Iraq and the Gulf, while govt remained in breach of 2015 nuclear deal although it did not intensify nuclear-related activities during month. President Trump 1 April tweeted that Iran and proxies plan to attack U.S. troops or assets in Iraq, warning "Iran will pay a very heavy price". Iranian naval forces 14 April boarded Hong Kong-flagged tanker in Sea of Oman and briefly detained vessel in Iranian waters. U.S. military next day said eleven Iranian ships "repeatedly conducted dangerous and harassing approaches" toward six U.S. vessels in international waters; Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) 19 April dismissed claims, accused U.S. forces of "illegal, unprofessional, dangerous and adventurist" manoeuvres. Trump 22 April tweeted that he has instructed U.S. navy to "destroy any and all Iranian gunboats that harass our ships". IRGC 22 April launched military satellite Nour; U.S. 25 April urged extension of UN embargo and sanctions against missile program. U.S. 26 April extended by 30 days Iraq sanction waiver for Iranian electricity imports. Govt continued nuclear-related activities at same tempo as in March, and International Atomic Energy Agency continued inspections of nuclear facilities. Chief of Atomic Energy Organization of Iran 5 April announced intention to install new centrifuges at Natanz fuel enrichment plant. During 20 April meeting with Syrian President Assad in Damascus, FM Zarif criticised U.S. for maintaining sanctions on Iran and Syria throughout COVID-19 crisis. Govt continued to await official response from International Monetary Fund for March request for \$5bn emergency loan to tackle COVID-19; U.S. Sec State Pompeo 14 April said Iran should not receive financial assistance "which will be used to fund its proxy wars". President Rouhani 5 April announced gradual lifting of COVID-19 lockdown

restrictions; 19 April extended furlough for prisoners temporarily released in March to 20 May.

➡ **Iraq** Amid ongoing open hostility between U.S. and Iran-backed militias, President Salih appointed new PM designate in attempt to resolve political paralysis, while Islamic State (ISIS) stepped up attacks on civilians and security forces. U.S. President Trump 1 April accused Iran or proxies of planning “sneak attack” on U.S. forces in Iraq; Iranian FM Zarif next day denied accusations. Iran-backed militia Kataib Hezbollah early April warned U.S. against striking group, demanded full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. Unknown perpetrators 6 April fired rockets near U.S. company Halliburton in south causing no casualties. U.S. 10 April offered \$10mn reward for information on Muhammad Kawtharani, senior Hezbollah military commander overseeing Iran-backed militias in Iraq. Nine pro-Iranian militias 4 April jointly announced efforts to confront U.S. in Iraq. U.S. Sec State Pompeo 7 April announced U.S.-Iraq “strategic dialogue” in June. Efforts to form govt continued: PM designate Adnan al-Zurfi 8 April withdrew nomination due to lack of support from Shiite parties, especially pro-Iranian Fateh coalition; President Salih 9 April appointed intelligence director Mustafa al-Kadhimi as PM designate. Leader of Fateh coalition Hadi al-Amiri attended Kadhimi’s nomination ceremony in sign of support but Kataib Hezbollah 10 April condemned nomination, accusing al-Kadhimi of involvement in U.S. killing of Iran’s Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani and deputy chief of Shiite militia coalition Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis in Jan. Following 5 April killing of activist Anwar Jassem Mhawwas in Nasiriyah in Dhi Qar province, violent clashes ensued between security forces and protesters, which left two dead. Clashes between ISIS and security forces increased throughout month in Kirkuk, Erbil, Nineveh, Diyala and Salah al-Din provinces, with group planting IEDs targeting civilians and security forces; in retaliation, security forces 13 April killed 20 ISIS fighters in Kirkuk. Suspected ISIS suicide attack 28 April targeted Iraqi intelligence directorate in Kirkuk; Iraqi officials said at least three security personnel wounded.

➡ **Saudi Arabia** Amid COVID-19 outbreak, Riyadh announced and then extended unilateral ceasefire to end hostilities with Huthis in Yemen, and reached agreement to resolve oil price war with Russia. Saudi Arabia 8 April announced unilateral two-week freeze in military operations in Yemen in response to UN appeal to end hostilities amid COVID-19 outbreak; Huthis next day dismissed announcement as ploy, demanded Saudi Arabia end siege on Yemen and lift its blockade of airspace, land borders and ports in Huthi-held areas. In Yemen’s south, Riyadh 1 April expanded deployment of elite forces in Aden amid rising tensions between pro-govt forces and STC; STC 25 April announced self-administration, raising concerns over collapse of Riyadh Agreement. State media 19 April confirmed arrest of at least three senior Saudi officials for involvement in corruption scheme related to COVID-19 outbreak. Saudi Arabia 12 April reached agreement with OPEC, Russia and other oil-producing countries to reduce global oil production by 9.7mn barrels a day after oil price war with Russia broke out early March.

➡ **United Arab Emirates** Amid COVID-19 pandemic, United Arab Emirates (UAE) helped dispatch aid to several countries, including Iran. As part of efforts to combat COVID-19, UAE throughout month helped channel aid to several countries, including Pakistan, Indonesia and Botswana; humanitarian gestures followed late-

March telephone call between Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed and Syrian President al-Assad, which had marked first contact between Arab leader and al-Assad since start of Syria's civil war in 2011, and during which UAE had offered to dispatch aid to support Syria's efforts to combat COVID-19 pandemic. After UAE helped channel aid to Iran in March, Iran FM Seyed Abbas Mousavi 6 April responded that COVID-19 response had brought "more reason and logic" to bilateral relationship. Govt 12 April reached agreement with Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries and other oil-producing countries to reduce global oil production by 9.7mn barrels a day after oil price war between Saudi-Arabia and Russia broke out early March. To slow spread of COVID-19, govt 17 April announced extension of 24-hour curfew in Dubai city, repatriation of thousands of foreign workers back to home countries and warned that it will review labour ties with countries refusing to take back citizens; Govt 22 April said UAE and Pakistan deepened cooperation over repatriation of Pakistani citizens.

↓ 🌐 ✂️ **Yemen** Secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) announced autonomous self-administration in south Yemen after weeks of rising tensions with govt forces, increasing likelihood of renewed violence in south and placing Nov 2019 Riyadh Agreement, and efforts to broker a nationwide political settlement to end the war, in peril. Meanwhile, fighting between pro-govt forces and Huthis intensified in north despite Saudi Arabia's announcement of military freeze and extension, raising prospect of continued escalation in May unless parties agree to nationwide ceasefire. Saudi Arabia 24 April extended two-week ceasefire announced 8 April in response to UN appeal to end hostilities amid COVID-19 pandemic. Huthis next day dismissed Saudi "ceasefire" announcement as sham, demanded Riyadh lift its blockade of airspace, land borders and ports in Huthi-held areas; President Hadi opposed demands. UN envoy Martin Griffiths 16 April told UN Security Council that agreement between warring parties on nationwide ceasefire, humanitarian measures and resumption of talks would be finalised in "immediate future", raising hopes for comprehensive cessation of hostilities. Progress however limited by end of month; amid ongoing Saudi airstrikes throughout month despite ceasefire declaration, fighting between Huthis and govt forces persisted in al-Jawf, Marib and al-Bayda. Meanwhile, after flash floods in Aden city, STC 25 April announced autonomous self-administration in south, prompting condemnation from govt and calls from Riyadh, Washington and UN for implementation of Riyadh Agreement. Previously, STC mid-April accused govt forces of preparing military offensive in Aden city, sparking concerns over collapse of Riyadh Agreement; Mahram al-Qubati, prominent commander in Hadi's Presidential Guards, early April reportedly announced plan to "liberate" Aden while Saudi Arabia increased deployment of elite forces in Aden. Power struggle within govt late March also broke out: PM Saeed 27 March suspended Saleh al-Jabwani, transport minister and outspoken critic of Riyadh Agreement and Saudi Arabia; although President Hadi reportedly rejected PM Saeed's decision, al-Jabwani shortly after resigned. Authorities 29 April reported total of five COVID-19 cases in south, raising fears of outbreak across country where local population already in midst of major humanitarian crisis; senior UN officials 21 April estimated seventeen million people face acute food insecurity.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** Amid fears of COVID-19 spread, authorities took steps potentially restricting rights and space of opposition movement, including through law criminalising dissemination of false information. Following halt to opposition protests due to COVID-19 fears, judiciary 9 April blocked online media websites Maghreb Emergent and Radio M that cover anti-govt protest movement; authorities 19 April blocked Interlignes website. Council of ministers 19 April adopted new law criminalising dissemination of false information; lower and upper houses of parliament 22-23 April ratified new law, fuelling fears that imprecise wording in law could be used to target peaceful critics. Meanwhile, military intelligence Central Directorate of Army Security (DCSA) 13 April arrested General Wassini Bouazza, head of civil intelligence Central Directorate of Internal Security (DCSI, formerly DRS), on charges of “high treason, illicit enrichment and influence peddling”. Media 17 April reported DCSA also arrested central communications manager General Abdelkader Lachkhem and former DCSA director General Othmane “Kamel” Belmiloud; Defence Ministry 18 April however denied arrests. Presidency 18 April extended all COVID-19 lockdown measures until 14 May.

➔ **Egypt** Attempts to mediate talks over Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam stalled, crackdown on dissent continued, and fears of jihadist attacks on Coptic community resurfaced. Security forces 14 April killed seven suspected jihadist militants in al-Amirya district in capital Cairo, citing alleged plot to attack Coptic communities over Easter. Cairo judicial authorities 18 April charged former legislator Zyad El-laimy and twelve others for collaborating with outlawed Muslim Brotherhood, spreading false news and undermining trust in state institutions. Govt 12 April arrested chairman of Daily News Egypt Mostafa Sakr after newspaper published story about central bank manipulation of exchange rate. Due to economic impact of COVID-19, finance minister 9 April said country had lost total \$8.5bn in foreign investment over previous three months. President al-Sisi 16 April pardoned hundreds of detainees; he made no link to concerns about COVID-19 in prisons. In ongoing dispute over Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Sudanese water minister Yasser Abbas 7 April said his govt would not mediate talks between Egypt and Ethiopia; Egypt intelligence head Abbas Kamel and water minister Mohammed Abdul Motti 9 April met Sudan’s Sovereign Council head Abdel Fattah al-Burhan in Khartoum.

↓ 🇱🇲* **Libya** Despite renewed international calls for ceasefire amid COVID-19 pandemic, fighting around capital Tripoli and in western Libya reached unprecedented levels of violence, with a strong likelihood of continued escalation in May; meanwhile financial pressures mounted. The battle for Tripoli reached one-year anniversary in early April as fighting intensified between Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s Arab-Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF) and forces allied to Tripoli-based Govt of National Accord (GNA). ALAF forces early April continued missile strikes on southern Tripoli residential areas, causing civilian casualties, including 6 April targeted al-Hadba hospital equipped for COVID-19 patients. Tripoli residents week of 6 April suffered electricity shortages and cuts in water supply as pro-Haftar tribesmen in central Libya shut down water pumping station linked to Tripoli’s reservoirs. Turkey throughout month increased military support to GNA, partly enabling it to score significant victories across western Libya: GNA forces 14 April captured central coastal towns

Sabratha and Sorman, under control of pro-Haftar tribesmen since 2018; GNA forces 18 April surrounded Tarhuna, ALAF stronghold in western Libya and base of operations for war on Tripoli. Meanwhile, GNA and ALAF forces throughout month continued confrontation near Sirte, central Libya, with heavy casualties reported on both sides, and GNA 12 April downed ALAF-operated, Russian-made attack helicopter. Turkish fighter jets 18 April conducted first ever military exercises over Misrata. Haftar 27 April declared that he accepted the people's "mandate" to scrap 2015 UN-mediated Libyan Political Agreement and empower ALAF General Command to take control of country's governing institutions; proposal divided supporters, adversaries called it a coup. Financial pressures increased in absence of oil revenues; ALAF-backed tribes continued blockade of oil production and export sites in place since mid-Jan, causing \$4.5bn revenue shortfall. Increased dependence on foreign currency reserves led to tension between PM Serraj and Central Bank Governor Sadiq Al-Kabir; Central Bank 8 April adopted stringent measures on credit letters that paralysed food imports, increased both prices and black market requests for hard currency.

➡ **Tunisia** Following two-week dispute between Speaker of Parliament Rached Ghannouchi, President Saïed and PM Fakhfakh, parliament 4 April approved govt request for emergency powers to contain spread of COVID-19 and mitigate economic impact. Interior Ministry 4 April announced soldiers and national guard forces in Kasserine governate killed two members of Islamic State (ISIS) affiliate, Jund al Khilafa. Interior Ministry 16 April announced it foiled alleged plot to spread COVID-19 among security forces; two men arrested in Kebili governate, including suspected member of militant group.

➡ **Western Sahara** UN Security Council 9 April adopted resolution on Western Sahara peace process following closed-door meeting, reiterating previous resolutions' commitment to negotiations. Prior to meeting, Polisario Front independence movement requested Security Council address absence of UN special envoy for Western Sahara; post vacant since Horst Köhler resigned in May 2019. Polisario's UN representative Sidi Mohamed Omar 18 April said UN process is in "total paralysis".