

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel/Palestine Violence and unrest ran high in East Jerusalem and West Bank as Palestinian attacks killed two Israelis and Israeli forces killed seven Palestinians.** In occupied East Jerusalem, Palestinian 4 Dec stabbed to death Israeli near Damascus Gate; border police subsequently shot dead assailant in what UN human rights office called “apparent extrajudicial execution”. Palestinian girl 8 Dec stabbed Israeli woman in Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood. Meanwhile, following U.S. pressure, state planning committee 6 Dec delayed approval of settlement project in Atarot, East Jerusalem. In West Bank, Israeli forces 6 Dec shot dead 16-year-old Palestinian who allegedly drove car into Jbara military checkpoint, injuring Israeli soldier. Israeli forces 10 Dec shot dead Palestinian during protest against illegal settlements in Beita village; 12 Dec killed Palestinian in Nablus city during clashes following arrest raid. Palestinian gunmen 16 Dec opened fire on Israeli settlers’ car leaving illegal outpost Homesh, killing one Israeli. In response, Israeli settlers launched reprisal attacks throughout West Bank; notably, 25 settlers 17 Dec attacked couple in Qaryut village. Israeli forces 21 Dec shot dead Palestinian allegedly attempting to drive into military checkpoint near Mevo Dotan settlement; next day, killed Palestinian near al-Amari refugee camp in Ramallah who military claimed opened fire on them from passing car. Israeli troops 31 Dec shot dead Palestinian near Ariel settlement. Palestinians 11 Dec held first phase of municipal elections in West Bank; Hamas boycotted vote. UN data 27 Dec revealed 450 settler attacks resulting in Palestinian casualties or property damage in 2021, compared to 358 attacks in 2020. In rare visit to Israel, Palestinian Authority President Abbas 28 Dec met Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz and announced “confidence-building measures”; Hamas condemned talks. Meanwhile, Israel 7 Dec completed construction of ‘iron wall’, including fence, underground wall and radar system surrounding Gaza Strip. Internationally, Israeli FM Lapid 9 Dec visited Egypt for talks with Egyptian President Sisi and FM Sameh Shoukry on consolidating ceasefire with Hamas; PM Bennett 12 Dec began first official visit by Israeli leader to United Arab Emirates. Syrian state media 7, 15, 28 Dec reported Israeli airstrikes on Latakia port (see Syria).

➔ **Lebanon Amid ongoing political paralysis, Central Bank took measure prompting currency devaluation, and France sought to mediate Beirut’s diplomatic spat with Saudi Arabia.** Cabinet meetings still on hold with little apparent prospect of resolution. Attempts to reach political deal ended in acrimony: PM Mikati and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri met 20 Dec, but did not succeed in resolving disputed issues – including Hizbollah and its allies demanding removal of Judge Tarik Bitar from investigation into Aug 2020 Beirut port explosion, Free Patriotic Movement party asking modifications to mode of expatriate voting, and issue of reshuffling senior security positions. On economic front, currency fell to record low. Following 3 Dec resignation of Information Minister George Kordahi, whose comments on Saudi-led war in Yemen had caused frictions with Gulf countries, Lebanese lira improved by nearly 10% within less than 24 hours, reaching 22,000 to U.S. dollar. However, in unexpected move Central Bank 9 Dec raised

amount of lira that depositors can receive for U.S. dollars from 3,900 to 8,000, triggering fears of inflation that sent lira to record lows at 29,000 to U.S. dollar on 14 Dec; currency stabilised at 27,000 after Central Bank same day announced injection of additional dollars into market. Shooting 12 Dec erupted at funeral procession in Palestinian camp Burj al-Shemali in Tyre city killing three Hamas members; Hamas blamed factions affiliated with Palestinian Authority (PA) while PA rejected allegations. During visit to Qatar, United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, French President Macron 3-4 Dec sought to restore relations between Riyadh and Beirut; Macron's attempt to arrange meeting reportedly failed but PM Mikati and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman 4 Dec held telephone call during which they struck agreement on unspecified mechanism for humanitarian cooperation. After Shiite Bahraini opposition group Al-Wefaq 11 Dec held press conference in capital Beirut criticising Bahrain's human rights record, Minister of Interior Bassam Al-Mawlawi 15 Dec ordered deportation of non-Lebanese members of Al-Wefaq in likely attempt to curry favour with Gulf Cooperation Council. UN Sec-Gen Antonio Guterres 19-21 Dec visited Lebanon on "mission of solidarity", met religious, civil society and political leaders.

➔ **Syria Idlib ceasefire continued to hold, protests erupted against Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in north east, and Islamic State (ISIS) carried out attacks.** In Idlib (north west), March 2020 ceasefire held despite violations. U.S.-led coalition 3 Dec reported carrying out airstrike killing alleged al-Qaeda-affiliated leader in al-Mastumah village and injuring six civilians. Russian fighter jets continued airstrikes which 11 Dec killed three civilians and injured 12 in Al-Yacoubian area near Jisr al-Sughour city. Depreciation of Turkish lira in opposition-held areas drove up key commodity prices in Idlib and Turkish-backed areas. In Deir ez-Zor governorate (east), IED targeting bus around 2 Dec killed ten workers near Al-Kharatah oil field; SDF 13 Dec reported carrying out raid backed by U.S.-led coalition near al-Busaira town, killing five suspected ISIS militants. Also in Deir ez-Zor, anti-SDF demonstrations broke out; notably, protesters 6-7 Dec demonstrated against deteriorating living standards in Abu Hammam town and called for release of detainees, reportedly taken during raid. In response to regime "settlement" campaign, SDF threatened to punish anyone signing regime pledges. ISIS continued deadly attacks in east, including 11 Dec reportedly killing seven regime-affiliated militants and soldiers and injuring 17 others in al-Masrab desert. In central desert, Russian fighter jets throughout month carried out airstrikes against ISIS targets. In south west, targeted assassinations continued in Daraa governorate and reports of regime forces' build-up surfaced in As-Sweida governorate; local sources reported armed groups clashed with regime forces in As-Sweida city as regime planned to end governorate's semi-independent status. U.S. and UK confirmed destroying one of two small drones which 14 Dec approached Al-Tanf garrison in south. State media reported that Israeli airstrike 7 Dec struck Latakia port (west) causing fire in container storage area; Israeli missile attacks 15 Dec reportedly targeted Syrian Golan region killing soldier, and 28 Dec hit Latakia port reportedly killing two govt-backed militiamen. Govt and opposition representatives along with Turkish, Russian and Iranian delegations 21-22 Dec met in Kazakhstan's capital Nur Sultan for 17th round of Astana talks. EU 13 Dec imposed sanctions on Wagner Group, Russian paramilitary group active in Syria on behalf of Assad regime.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Iran Nuclear talks continued in Austria without breakthrough, while Tehran and UN nuclear watchdog struck deal on surveillance at key nuclear site.** Seventh round of talks, that began late Nov in Austrian capital Vienna, 3 Dec adjourned as European participants and U.S. asserted that Tehran's opening bids substantially widened gaps previously narrowed during earlier rounds; E3 (UK, France and Germany) 3 Dec voiced "disappointment and concern" while U.S. 4 Dec accused Iran of walking back its positions. During talks, Iran 1 Dec announced deployment of cascade of IR-6 advanced centrifuges enriching to 20% at its Fordow facility. Negotiators 9 Dec reconvened as seventh round continued, concluding 17 Dec. EU representative Enrique Mora 17 Dec said: "We now have a text that with some minor exceptions is a common ground... But that does not mean by any means that we have an agreement on any text", while Iran's lead negotiator same day described "good progress" and U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan assessed talks as "not going well". Eighth round 27 Dec kicked off with Mora highlighting "sense of urgency in all delegation". Meanwhile, following weeks of stalled progress, International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) 15 Dec announced agreement with Iran's atomic energy organisation to replace its surveillance cameras at Karaj centrifuge production facility and carry out "other related technical activity" by late Dec, forestalling possibility of censure resolution by IAEA Board of Governors; other safeguard concerns however remained unresolved. U.S. 7 Dec sanctioned 13 Iranian persons and entities for human rights abuses and 16 Dec announced action against entities for "diverting or attempting to divert U.S. items to Iran's military programs". Authorities 4 Dec claimed reports of explosion near Natanz nuclear facility due to missile drill. Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps 24 Dec concluded five-day drill by testing multiple ballistic missiles and drones. Iran 30 Dec launched three research devices into space that failed to reach orbit; operation drew criticism from Germany, France and U.S. who said launch was in breach of UN Security Council resolutions. Clashes 1 Dec erupted at border with Afghanistan, leaving multiple casualties on both sides (see Afghanistan).

➔ **Iraq Islamic State (ISIS) attacks killed dozens, U.S.-led coalition forces formally ended combat mission, and deadlock over govt formation continued following disputed election results.** Surge of ISIS attacks on Peshmerga forces along border between Kurdistan region and disputed territories continued early Dec; notably, ISIS 2 Dec killed ten Peshmerga and three civilians in attack on Khidir Jija village in Makhmur region; 5 Dec reportedly killed four Peshmerga and one civilian in Qara Salem village. ISIS same day took control of Luhaiban village before Iraqi security forces recaptured it next day. ISIS 6 Dec killed four Peshmerga in attack near oilfield between Kirkuk and Makhmur cities. In southern city Basra, rare motorcycle bomb 7 Dec killed four and injured 20; while attack remained unclaimed, Basra governor blamed ISIS. In Diyala governorate, ISIS attack killed three soldiers in Qara Tapa. Ahead of 31 Dec deadline for withdrawal of coalition troops, National Security Advisor Qasim al-Araji 9 Dec announced end of Coalition Forces' combat mission. Coalition next day announced start of new "advise, assist and enable mission" consisting of 2,500 U.S. troops; pro-Iran paramilitary groups subsequently condemned largely unchanged troop numbers. Two rockets 18 Dec hit Green Zone near U.S. embassy in capital Baghdad. Federal Supreme Court 27 Dec

ratified final election results, after rejecting fraud allegations submitted early month by Fateh Alliance leader Hadi al-Ameri, who requested results be annulled. Meanwhile, Shiite parties continued negotiations over govt formation. In Sinjar district, Turkish airstrike targeting vehicle outside Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK)-affiliated Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) headquarters 7 Dec killed local commander Marwan Badal in Khanasour village; protests against Turkish airstrikes 12 Dec set fire to Iraqi army vehicle in Sinuni town. Turkish defence ministry 9 Dec announced death of three soldiers in PKK attack in northern Iraq; Ankara launched retaliatory air attacks reportedly killing PKK-affiliated militants in northern Iraq throughout month. Syrian PKK-affiliated Revolutionary Youth Union members 15 Dec clashed with Iraqi border authorities at Fishkhabour-Semalka border crossing, demanding return of Syrian Kurdish fighters' bodies killed in Turkish airstrike; clashes prompted closure of border point, sparking fears among humanitarian agencies about access to Syria.

➡ **Saudi Arabia** **Tit-for-tat cross-border attacks between Huthis and Saudi-led coalition ran high.** Saudi-led coalition throughout month intercepted increased number of Huthi drones and ballistic missiles; notably, 6 Dec caught ballistic missile over capital Riyadh; in response, coalition pledged to "strike with an iron fist" and 7 Dec bombed military targets in Yemeni capital Sanaa. Huthis 7 Dec claimed they fired 25 drones and several ballistic missiles across border, including at Saudi Aramco facilities in Jeddah city; 15 Dec announced firing ballistic missiles targeting King Khalid airbase in 'Asir province and targets in Jizan province; coalition same day confirmed interception of two ballistic missiles targeting Abha city in 'Asir province, which Saudi Press Agency said caused damage in Ahad Al-Masariyah industrial area in Jizan province. Coalition 19, 20, 23 Dec destroyed drones targeting King Abdullah airport in Jizan province, Abha International Airport and Khamis Mushait in 'Asir province. Alleged Huthi projectile 24 Dec killed two and injured seven in Jizan city while another missile hit Najran city. Saudi-led coalition throughout month carried out near daily airstrikes on targets in Yemen, including on Yemeni capital Sanaa (see Yemen). Meanwhile, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman 6 Dec began tour of Gulf states and 8 Dec met Qatari leader Sheikh Tamim bin Hamed al-Thani in Qatari capital Doha in first visit since 2017-2021 blockade of Qatar.

➡ **Yemen** **Govt forces regained some positions from Huthis in southern Hodeida amid ongoing fighting around Marib city, tit-for-tat violence at Saudi border escalated, and protests erupted in south.** On Red Sea coast, govt-aligned Joint Resistance Forces reclaimed some areas in southern Hodeida province lost during Nov withdrawal, including most of Hays district and al-Udayn junction, temporarily cutting off Huthi supply lines from Taiz province. Joint Resistance Forces then focused operations on northern Maqbana axis in western Taiz, notably to gain economically strategic Saqim custom point. In Marib governorate, fighting remained focused around al-Balaq mountain range encircling Marib city. In blow to govt forces, clashes with Huthis 13 Dec reportedly killed senior govt military commander. Elsewhere, govt forces achieved minor gains in western Shebwa while fighting in al-Dhale and al-Bayda governorates slowed. Huthis continued cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia (see Saudi Arabia). Saudi-led coalition responded with airstrikes in Sanaa, Saada, Taiz, Marib and Hodeida governorates; notably, airstrike 3 Dec struck vehicle in Maqbana, Taiz province, killing five civilians and five Huthi fighters; coalition 20 Dec struck targets at Sanaa International Airport. Huthis 21-27 Dec halted humanitarian flights entering capital Sanaa. In south,

protests over currency collapse and high food prices early Dec erupted in Aden, Hadramawt, Abyan and Taiz governorates; notably, hundreds 5 Dec protested in Taiz city calling for removal of Taiz governor and PM Abdulmalik Saeed. On political front, tribal members 6 Dec launched sit-in in Nisab district, Shebwa province, calling for removal of govt-aligned governor and protesting economic deterioration; President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi 26 Dec replaced governor with member of parliament aligned with former ruling General People's Congress party. Economic situation improved with Riyal dropping to below 1,000 to U.S. dollar after govt 6 Dec replaced governor and deputy governor of govt-controlled Central Bank. Internationally, UN Envoy Hans Grundberg 13 Dec concluded visit to Oman's capital Muscat where he met Yemeni and Omani officials, including Huthi chief negotiator Mohammed Abdul Salem, while Huthis continued to deny Grundberg entry into Sanaa. Grundberg 14 Dec briefed UN Security Council emphasising dire economic situation and need for negotiations even without ceasefire.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** **Ruling party narrowly won regional and local elections, and tensions continued to brew with Morocco over Western Sahara.** National Election Authority 22 Dec announced final results of 27 Nov local and regional elections, which President Tebboune framed as final step in renewing politics after former President Bouteflika's ouster in 2019: ruling party, National Liberation Front, arrived in first position but lost absolute majority in most municipal councils it previously controlled; also narrowly dominated regional assemblies elections; independents achieved good results, while support for Islamist parties lessened. Selection of mayors still pending in several municipalities by month's end, allegedly due to tensions between local politicians and security forces, who had presented their own candidates in municipal elections. For first time since 2014, trade balance positive with \$1bn surplus, though inflation continued to rise. Sahel Intelligence publication, which many Algerians consider close to Moroccan intelligence, 14 Dec alleged Algerian Army Chief of Staff Saïd Chengriha asked for Iranian troop support around Sahrawi refugee camps in Tindouf area, near border with Western Sahara; Algeria's Special Envoy for Western Sahara and Maghreb Amar Belani next day denied allegation. League of Arab States late Dec advised all bodies and organisations under its banner to adopt map of Morocco including Western Sahara in official events, prompting Algiers' ire. Mauritanian President Ould Ghazouani 27-29 Dec visited Algeria in first Mauritanian state visit to neighbouring country for over ten years; Tebboune and Ould Ghazouani 28 Dec signed several cooperation agreements. In bid to "relaunch relationship" after months of tensions, French FM Jean-Yves Le Drian 8 Dec met with Tebboune in capital Algiers, said Algeria was "essential partner for France".

➔ **Egypt** **Amid repression of critics, rights groups continued to warn about recent series of laws restricting civil liberties; violence remained low in North Sinai.** After President Sisi 29 Nov ratified new law giving authorities special powers to curb COVID-19 pandemic, prominent human rights defender Sherif Azer and other civil society activists in following days accused authorities of seeking alternative to state of emergency, which Sisi lifted in Oct, to maintain extraordi-

nary powers. Several prosecutions appeared to be fast-tracked as military courts established under state of emergency continued to oversee previously referred trials. Notably, military court 20 Dec sentenced prominent civil society activist Alaa Abdel Fattah to five years in prison, and human rights lawyer Mohamed el-Baqer and blogger Mohamed “Oxygen” Ibrahim to four years imprisonment, all on charges of “spreading false news”; convictions not subject to appeal before higher court. Low-intensity guerrilla warfare continued in Sinai Peninsula. Notably, mine allegedly planted by Islamic State-affiliated Sinai Province (SP) 4 Dec killed or wounded five soldiers in Maliz area, central Sinai; suspected militants 14 Dec attacked village and killed soldier near Sheikh Zuweid town (North Sinai). Meanwhile, Sinai Tribal Union operating alongside govt forces around 1 Dec reportedly killed two militants engaged in planting dozens of explosive devices in Manjam area (central Sinai); 3 Dec killed another two near Sheikh Zuweid in operation that reportedly thwarted suicide bombing against army and police forces; late Dec launched large-scale offensive against SP in Al-Arjaa area south of Rafah town, killing two militants. Military around 5 Dec reportedly killed senior jihadist leader Mahmoud Akram al-Laham, also known as Abu Duaa, at undisclosed location in Sinai. Meanwhile, FM Sameh Shoukry 12 Dec met with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) representatives in Saudi Arabia to discuss Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam; GCC officials reportedly expressed support for Egypt’s water security concerns though final statement did not mention issue.

➔ **Libya Authorities postponed presidential election in last-minute move as tensions ran high around capital Tripoli.** Amid disputes over eligibility of candidates, electoral timetable and scope of future president’s powers, High National Electoral Commission (HNEC) 20-22 Dec postponed first round of presidential election, initially scheduled for 24 Dec, for one month, as House of Representatives (HoR) committee tasked with monitoring election process 22 Dec said it was “impossible” to hold polls as planned. U.S. Ambassador Richard Norland immediately expressed “disappointment”. After British embassy 24 Dec expressed continued support for Govt of National Unity (GNU), said it would “not endorse the establishment of parallel governments or institutions”, HoR Foreign Affairs Committee next day accused UK of “interference”, said only HoR could decide on formation of new govt or continuation of GNU. Elections unlikely to take place in Jan as HoR election committee 27 Dec recommended laying out “new, realistic and applicable roadmap ... rather than fixing new dates and repeating the same errors”; HoR next day suspended session on political roadmap. Earlier in month, several controversial presidential candidates cleared to run: Tripoli Appeals Court 1 Dec upheld PM Abdulhamid Dabaiba’s presidential bid; Sebha Appeals Court next day reinstated Saif al-Islam Qadhafi as candidate; Tripoli Appeals Court 6 Dec overturned Zawiya court ruling barring Khalifa Haftar from running. Run-up to tentative polls marred by tensions. HNEC 2 Dec said electoral centres subjected to armed robbery and voter cards theft; militiamen 8 Dec entered HNEC’s Zawiya premises to demand postponement of elections until adoption of new constitution. Forces affiliated with different armed groups 16-21 Dec took up positions in and around Tripoli in possible protest at Presidential Council’s 15 Dec decision to replace Tripoli Military Zone Commander Gen Abdelbasit Marwan with Gen Abdelkader Mansour; Council 21 Dec suspended appointment, while UN mission (UNSMIL) same day said mobilisation “creates tensions and increases the risk of clashes that could spiral into conflict”. Following Nov resignation of UN Envoy Ján Kubiš, UN Sec-Gen António Guterres 6 Dec appointed

Stephanie Williams – who served as Acting Special Representative in March 2020-Jan 2021 – as new Special Adviser on Libya.

➡ **Tunisia President Saïed extended suspension of parliament by one year, sparking renewed opposition.** Powerful labour union UGTT 4 Dec called for early elections, said Saïed’s “excessive reluctance to announce a roadmap” since July power grab posing threat to “democratic gains”. Diplomatic mission heads of G7 countries and EU 10 Dec jointly called for “swift return to functioning democratic institutions” and respect of “fundamental freedoms”. Saïed 13 Dec extended state of exception and suspension of parliament for one year, and announced timeline for transition: electronic public consultation on constitutional and political reforms to begin 1 Jan; national committee to sum up proposals and submit project for revision of 2014 constitution by 22 March; constitutional referendum to take place 25 July, and legislative elections 17 Dec. Almost all political forces expressed opposition. UGTT next day hit back by claiming Saïed had asked union to accept austerity plan that includes 10% pay cut and subsequent five-year salary freeze for civil servants, and end to state subsidies for basic items; also threatened strikes in coming weeks. Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party president and Parliament Speaker Rached Ghannouchi 16 Dec rejected “unconstitutional and illegal” extension of parliament freeze, reiterated call for “immediate cancellation of exceptional measures”. On anniversary of 2010-2011 uprising that toppled then-President Ben Ali, around 200 pro- and 2,000 anti-Saïed demonstrators 17 Dec held separate protests in capital Tunis; no security incidents reported. Meanwhile, An-Nahda activist 9 Dec self-immolated inside party’s headquarters in Tunis, killing himself and causing fire that seriously wounded two others. Court in Tunis 22 Dec sentenced in absentia former President Marzouki to four years in prison on charges of “undermining the external security of the state”; Marzouki in Oct had pressed France, where he lives, to oppose Saïed’s rule. An-Nahda 31 Dec said plainclothes security officers had same day captured party’s deputy president and former justice minister Nouredine Bhiri in Tunis and taken him to undisclosed destination, condemned “dangerous precedent”.

➡ **Western Sahara Polisario Front independence movement hardened stance against UN-led negotiations, further widening gap with Morocco.** In letter to UN Sec-Gen Guterres made public 7 Dec, Polisario leader Brahim Ghali said movement would not participate in any UN-led peace process on Western Sahara, citing UN silence on Morocco’s “policy of terror against Sahrawi civilians in the occupied areas of Western Sahara”; move comes after Polisario late Nov-early Dec withdrew from roundtable negotiations hosted by Switzerland, a format preferred by Morocco that includes Algeria and Mauritania, said it would only accept AU-led bilateral talks. Meanwhile, repression against Sahrawi activists inside Morocco-controlled Western Sahara intensified. In run-up to 11 Dec Morocco-Algeria football match, Rabat imposed curfew and closed cafés and restaurants in Laayoune and other Western Sahara cities. After Algeria’s victory, spontaneous celebrations erupted in Laayoune with Sahrawi activists shouting pro-independence and anti-Moroccan slogans; Moroccan security forces reportedly arrested and beat several individuals.