



Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** Israel continued near-daily lethal raids in West Bank, while far-right Israeli coalition was sworn in amid fears of its anti-democratic, anti-Palestinian policies.

Israel continued raids, leading to near-daily clashes in West Bank and hostilities with Gaza-based factions. 2022 saw some of worst settler violence in decade and highest Palestinian fatalities in over 16 years; Israeli security forces killed at least 219 as of 28 Dec. Israel conducted at least 463 raids as of 28 Dec in West Bank and East Jerusalem, arresting at least 176 and killing at least 13. Notably, Israeli forces 2 Dec killed Palestinian alleged assailant in what Palestinians called “execution” in Hawara town; Israeli forces 11 Dec killed 16-year-old girl in Jenin. Israeli settler 17 Dec killed two Palestinians at Zaatara checkpoint, south of Nablus city. Gaza-based militants 3 Dec fired rockets; Israel next day carried out airstrikes against alleged Hamas sites.

Far-right coalition entered office, pursuing destabilising policies. Israel’s far-right coalition was sworn in 29 Dec and immediately took several destabilising steps, including passing laws that provide expanded powers to far-right leaders over police and Civil Administration in West Bank. PM Netanyahu previous day announced govt’s guiding principles, including expanding Israeli settlements in occupied territories, preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapon and normalising relations with Saudi Arabia. Earlier, attorney general 15 Dec warned coalition’s plans could “disrupt the system of checks and balances”, while President Herzog 25 Dec voiced concern that policies could contradict “basic democratic and ethic principles”. With govt in place, plans by far-right leaders to visit Holy Esplanade and legalise settler outposts in West Bank could trigger violent escalation.

In other important developments. Fatah and Hamas 3 Dec announced they would continue Algerian-mediated reconciliation efforts in Algerian capital Algiers. Israel 18 Dec deported Jerusalem-born French-Israeli human rights lawyer Salah Hammouri. Syrian military 20 Dec reported Israeli airstrikes injured two soldiers near Syrian capital Damascus (see Syria).

➔ **Jordan** Strikes over rising fuel prices triggered anti-govt protests countrywide, leading to violent clashes with police; authorities reached deal with protestors mid-month, largely ending contestation.

Growing economic hardship triggered protests that turned violent. Truck drivers 5-9 Dec held strikes, particularly in country’s south, to protest against rise in fuel prices, as diesel cost had nearly doubled since Jan 2022. Protests spread across country as thousands 14-15 Dec took to streets to demand lower prices, notably in

southern city of Maan, capital Amman and northern city of Irbid; young demonstrators reportedly set fire to tyres to block highways and attacked public buildings, while anti-riot police fired tear gas as part of clampdown. Notably, as clashes between protesters and anti-riot police 15 Dec erupted in Maan, unknown assailant shot dead police officer. Security forces 19 Dec launched raid on suspected killer's hideout, killing one alleged militant who allegedly embraced "takfiri radical ideology", arresting five and seizing stash of weapons; operation left three police officers dead.

Authorities agreed to meet protester's demands, which largely appeased tensions. Protests largely ended after truck drivers and govt 17 Dec signed agreement in which govt pledged to meet protesters' demands, although sporadic anti-govt demonstrations in southern provinces continued. Authorities 17 Dec reported that 44 people had been arrested over protests.

➡ **Lebanon** Efforts to elect new president faltered, security incidents proliferated amid economic deterioration, while gunfire killed UN peacekeeper in south.

Executive vacuum continued without exit in sight. Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri during month convened three parliamentary sessions on 1, 8 and 15 Dec to elect president, which failed to achieve breakthrough like previous seven sessions held Sept-Nov. Anti-Hizbollah camp largely voted for candidate Michel Moawad, while Hizbollah and its parliamentary allies returned blank votes. Rift between Christian party Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and Hizbollah appeared to deepen after ministers considered loyal to latter 5 Dec attended controversial cabinet meeting called by caretaker PM Mikati, while FPM rejected meeting as unconstitutional amid current dual executive vacuum. Meanwhile, attempts to replace caretaker govt with empowered cabinet practically ceased during month.

Economic hardship continued to worsen amid insecurity. Lebanese Lira (LBP) reached all-time lows in Dec, trading at around 47,000 LBP to \$1 on 26 Dec; central bank 27 Dec intervened to bring rate closer to 43,000 LBP, yet similar interventions in past have proved unsustainable. Fuel prices remained high and pharmaceutical manufacturers announced looming price hikes for medicines. Localised security incidents persisted: violent clashes erupted during Dec in northern city of Tripoli, prompting local MP to call for increased presence of state security in city, while depositors continued to hold up banks demanding access to their savings trapped inside illiquid banking system.

Shooting killed UN peacekeeper in south. Unknown assailants 14 Dec allegedly fired on UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) in southern village of Al-Aaqbiya, killing Irish peacekeeper, after local residents reportedly responded in hostile fashion to UNIFIL vehicle entering village; incident follows UN Security Council's renewal of peacekeeping mandate 31 Aug that included slight revision permitting UNIFIL to operate in south without coordination with Lebanese army, which Hizbollah had criticised as affront to Lebanon's sovereignty.

➡ **Syria** Hostilities between Turkish and Kurdish-led forces eased in north, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) raided regime positions, and protests erupted in Suwayda over economic hardship.

Hostilities between Türkiye and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) somewhat eased. Following start of new Turkish operation on 19 Nov, hostilities continued along “Peace Spring” front line during month, albeit at lower intensity. Notably, suspected Turkish drone 17 Dec reportedly killed three civilians near Kobani, Aleppo province. Concern persisted that Ankara remains intent on new ground incursion into north (see Türkiye). Govt mid-month began moving Russian-backed 25th division units to Manbij countryside, Aleppo province. Meanwhile, Turkish officials hinted at normalisation with Damascus: Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar and intelligence chief Hakan Fidan 28 Dec met with Russian and Syrian counterparts, marking first official ministerial-level engagement between Türkiye and Syria in 11 years.

HTS launched series of raids on regime positions. Following raids in Sept-Oct and marking escalation in ground activity, Idlib’s dominant rebel group HTS 11 Dec conducted raids on regime positions in northern Latakia and eastern Idlib provinces, 17 Dec in western Aleppo province and 18 Dec in eastern Idlib province; HTS described raids as “defensive actions” aimed at countering regime forces’ movements and new positions.

Popular unrest erupted in Suwayda province in south west. Amid acute fuel shortage and consequent spike in cost of basic goods, mass anti-govt protests 4 Dec broke out in Suwayda city, Suwayda province; protesters burnt down governorate building and attacked police station, while security forces reportedly responded with live fire, leaving one police officer and one protester dead.

Islamic State (ISIS) continued low-level insurgency, as Israel struck targets. Two ISIS militants 26 Dec infiltrated Internal Security headquarters in Raqqa city, killing at least six security forces personnel; ISIS militants 30 Dec killed at least ten oil workers in Tayyem Oil Field outside Deir Ez Zor city. U.S. forces 11 Dec killed two ISIS militants in helicopter raid in east; U.S. 20 Dec said it arrested six ISIS members, including “senior official” Al-Zubaydi, in east. Military 20 Dec said Israeli airstrikes injured two soldiers near capital Damascus (see Israel-Palestine).

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Iran Govt faced global condemnation for crackdown on protesters and drone supply to Russia as nuclear talks remained deadlocked, while tensions persisted in maritime domain.**

International censure continued over govt’s harsh crackdown and drone provision to Russia. Amid ongoing protests across country, international NGO Amnesty International 16 Dec reported that at least 26 people were at risk of execution in Iran for alleged role in nationwide unrest; NGO Human Rights Activists News Agency 29 Dec estimated at least 500 protesters killed and 19,000 arrested, with real numbers likely higher. U.S. 9 Dec announced sanctions and/or travel bans against more than dozen Iranian officials over human rights abuses and 21 Dec blacklisted prosecutor general among additional six designees, while European Union 12 Dec approved sanctions against 21 Iranian persons and entities over human rights concerns, and further eight over govt’s provision of drones to Russia. U.S.-initiated resolution at UN Economic and Social Council 14 Dec passed to remove Iran from UN

Commission on the Status of Women. U.S. and E3 (France, Germany and UK) 19 Dec voiced concern over both Iran's nuclear escalation and provision of UAVs to Russia, with U.S. warning that Russia may consider "importing complete ballistic missiles from Iran".

Prospects of nuclear talks progress remained dim as govt expanded enrichment. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief early Dec said Iran had informed agency it was "tripling [its] capacity to enrich at 60 per cent, which is very close to military level... This is not banal". IAEA 18-19 Dec visited capital Tehran in latest effort to make progress on longstanding investigation into past activities at undeclared nuclear sites, with little indication of success. Throughout Dec, U.S. repeatedly dismissed Iran's suggestions of possible progress in nuclear negotiations.

Maritime tensions persisted. U.S. military 3 Dec announced that its naval forces had two days earlier uncovered 50-ton arms shipment, including ammunition and rocketry components, aboard ship in Gulf of Oman, blaming Iran. U.S. Central Command 6 Dec reported that Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Navy patrol boat had previous day harassed two U.S. Navy ships in Strait of Hormuz, marking first reported instance of unsafe/unprofessional encounter since June.

➔ **Iraq Govt struggled to pass 2023 budget amid street protests and internal political jockeying, while Islamic State (ISIS) staged multiple deadly attacks.**

Govt faced popular protests and internal rifts over 2023 budget. Govt struggled to draft 2023 budget having promised to create 500,000 public sector jobs, while population suffered from decreasing value of Iraqi dinar. Notably, protesters throughout month demonstrated outside electricity and education ministries in capital Baghdad and local branches in southern governorates demanding permanent state employee contracts; demonstrations could grow in scale and become politicised if opposition parties, such as Sadrist movement or those formed after 2019 protest movement, join unrest. Elsewhere, hundreds 7 Dec protested prison sentence handed to activist over Twitter post allegedly insulting Iran-linked armed groups in Nasiriyah city, Dhi Qar governorate; security forces opened fire, killing three and injuring at least 17. Meanwhile, primary backers of PM Sudani in Shiite Coordination Framework, former PM Nuri al-Maliki (State of Law Coalition) and Qais al-Khazali (Asaib Ahl al-Haq), competed for influence over govt portfolios and security institutions; Sudani's failure to balance demands could prompt leaders to oppose govt program and budget allocations.

ISIS conducted deadly attacks amid ongoing insurgency. Suspected ISIS IED 14 Dec killed three soldiers in Tarmiya district, Salah al-Din governorate. ISIS IED 18 Dec targeting federal police patrol killed at least nine security personnel in Riyadh district, Kirkuk governorate. Unknown gunmen 19 Dec stormed Abu Bali village, Diyala governorate, killing eight civilians and injuring seven; local police blamed ISIS.

In other important developments. Missile attack 3 Dec targeted Turkish base in Zilkan, Ninewa governorate; armed group Liwaa Ahrar al-Iraq 3 Dec claimed attack; another attack next day again targeted base. Meanwhile, Turkish air campaign targeting Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) abated during month (see Türkiye). Leaders, including from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Iran, France and European Union, 20

Dec held second round of high-level Baghdad conference in Jordanian capital Amman to enhance regional dialogue on challenges facing Iraq.

➔ **Saudi Arabia Chinese President Xi visited Riyadh, and high-level Saudi and Iranian officials met on sidelines of regional conference.**

Riyadh strengthened ties with Beijing. In his first trip since 2016, Chinese President Xi 7-9 Dec visited capital Riyadh for Saudi-China summit, China-Arab states summit and China-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit; during visit, Saudi and Chinese companies signed agreements in sectors including green energy, technology and manufacturing, reflecting Saudi desire to diversify economic engagement with China. Xi 9 Dec vowed to import more oil and gas urging use of Chinese yuan in oil trade. Saudi-China and GCC-China joint statements highlighted political alignment on regional issues, including Iran's nuclear program.

Saudi and Iranian FMs met in Jordan. FM Faisal bin Farhan 20 Dec attended second Baghdad Conference in Jordanian capital Amman aimed at enhancing regional dialogue on challenges facing Iraq, which was attended by regional and international officials including from Iran; Iranian FM Hossein Amir Abdollahian 21 Dec tweeted that he had met Saudi FM previous day on sidelines of conference, in positive signal for multilateral regional dialogue efforts. In Yemen, govt continued back-channel efforts to restore truce but with little sign of breakthrough (see Yemen).

➔ **Yemen Back-channel efforts to restore truce showed little sign of breakthrough, as economic conflict escalated amid lingering risks of front-line hostilities and regional escalation.**

No signs of progress in renewing truce emerged, despite ongoing efforts. Back-channel talks between Saudi Arabia and Huthis failed to make breakthrough as Huthis maintained demand for Saudi-led coalition to use govt oil revenues for public sector salaries, including of security services, which govt refused, while Saudi Arabia sought reassurance that Huthis would commit to political process. Diplomatic efforts continued nonetheless: notably, UN Envoy Hans Grundberg 6 Dec concluded trip to Saudi Arabia; European Union (EU) ambassadors 8 Dec concluded visit to Aden city where they met Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) head al-Alimi; EU delegation 10 Dec met Taiz governor and military, security and civil society leaders in Taiz city; head of Huthi Ministry of Planning and International Cooperation 6 Dec met EU delegation to Yemen to discuss humanitarian situation. In attempt to ease intra-PLC tensions, al-Alimi, Southern Transitional Council chief and PLC member Ayderous al-Zubaidi, and PLC Islah representative Abdullah al-Alimi 2 Dec met in United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Huthis and govt targeted each other on economic front. Although front-line hostilities did not significantly escalate, parallel economic conflict became increasingly visible. Following Huthi attacks in recent months on govt oil facilities, which paralysed state revenues, economic situation in govt-held areas deteriorated markedly; notably, Aden city witnessed repeated power outages, heightening risk of civil unrest. Huthis intensified threats to target facilities with drones to prevent exports without Huthis receiving share. In response, Central Bank of Aden 6 Dec ordered money exchange companies to freeze accounts of, and stop transactions with, 12 Huthi-affiliated entities; tit-for-tat measures heighten risk of miscalculation that could trigger return to hostilities.

In other important developments. PLC member and leader of National Resistance Force Tareq Saleh 7 Dec oversaw opening of UAE-financed airport in Mokha port city, Taiz governorate, easing movement restrictions for besieged Taiz residents. Defence minister 8 Dec signed military and security cooperation agreement with UAE; Huthi Deputy FM same day called agreement illegal and threatened to target Abu Dhabi.

North Africa

➡ **Algeria** Algiers gave indications of downgrading relationship with Russia; court sentenced former senior state officials to prison as part of govt's anti-corruption drive.

Algiers seemed to distance itself from Russia. Defence ministry late Nov said joint military manoeuvres with Russia scheduled to take place 16-28 Nov on Algerian territory had been cancelled. Several media outlets, including The New Arab 1 Dec, alleged Algeria was downgrading military cooperation with Russia due to U.S. pressure, including sanction threat. President Tebboune's visit to Russia to discuss deepening strategic partnership, initially scheduled for late Dec, did not take place. Meanwhile, U.S. National Security Council coordinator for North Africa, Brett McGurk, 6 Dec met with Tebboune in capital Algiers to discuss Algiers' relationship with Moscow, among other topics. Energy Minister Mohamed Arkab 3 Dec announced govt's willingness to revive GALSI gas pipeline project connecting Algeria to Italy; 18 Dec suggested exporting country's spare electricity capacity to Europe.

France lifted visa restrictions for Algerian nationals. French Interior Minister Gérald Darmanin 18 Dec visited Algiers, announced return to "normal consular relations" with Algeria, suggesting that Paris will no longer limit number of visas delivered to Algerians; France in Sept 2021 reduced visa quotas for Algerians and other North Africans in bid to pressure govts to step up cooperation against irregular migration. In interview with French daily *Le Figaro*, Tebboune 29 Dec welcomed new "relationships of trust" between France and Algeria.

In other important developments. Algiers court 1 Dec sentenced former President Bouteflika-era PMs, Ahmed Ouyahia, Abdelmalek Sellal and Noureddine Bedoui, to ten to 12 years in prison for corruption. Army 11 Dec killed three suspected jihadist militants and detained another one during operation at Mount Gouraya in Tipaza region. Authorities overnight 23-24 Dec detained prominent journalist Ihsane El-Kadi, 29 Dec placed him in pre-trial detention on charges of "receiving foreign funding".

➡ **Egypt** Preparations for national dialogue among country's political forces dragged on, jihadists launched rare attack west of Suez Canal in mainland Egypt, and govt secured IMF rescue package.

President Sisi-sponsored national dialogue initiative remained stalled. No date in sight for official launch of national dialogue among political forces more than eight months after Sisi announced initiative in April. Opposition Civil Democratic Movement 3 Dec conditioned participation in dialogue to release of 1,074 political prisoners.

Police suffered rare Sinai Province attack in mainland Egypt. Security forces early Dec reinforced checkpoints along Suez Canal, conducting night patrols and reconnaissance flights in area to prevent attacks by Islamic State-affiliated Sinai Province (SP). SP militants 30 Dec however attacked police checkpoint in Ismailia city, located on west bank of Suez Canal in mainland Egypt, killing at least three police officers.

Cairo secured external support amid financial crisis. International Monetary Fund 16 Dec approved 46-month \$3bn bailout package, while govt 23 Dec announced World Bank approved \$500mn support for social protection programs. Meanwhile, Cairo continued to diversify partnerships. Sisi 8 Dec attended China-Arab summit in Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh, met with Chinese President Xi Jinping and Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman. Reports in following days emerged of Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund eyeing \$600mn purchase of Egypt's state-owned United Bank and of China preparing \$500mn in financing for Egypt. Sisi 13 Dec attended U.S.-Africa Leaders Summit in U.S. capital, Washington DC, met with U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken.

➡ **Libya UN efforts to foster dialogue between rival parliaments faced new challenges, handover of terrorism suspect to U.S. sparked outrage domestically, and maritime borders riled Mediterranean waters.**

Spat erupted between country's rival parliaments after period of rapprochement. East-based House of Representatives (HoR) 6 Dec voted to set up constitutional court in eastern city of Benghazi. Tripoli-based advisory High Council of State (HCS) same day condemned move – which could invalidate recently reactivated Tripoli-based Constitutional Chamber – as unlawful, and 11 Dec suspended contact with HoR. HoR Speaker Aguila Saleh and HCS Chairman Khaled al-Mishri 23 Dec however agreed to drop plans to create constitutional court. Meanwhile, meeting between Saleh and al-Mishri scheduled for 4 Dec as part of UN-led political process postponed for “logistical reasons” and “political obstacles”. U.S. embassy in Libya 24 Dec called for “alternative mechanisms” to be considered as way of producing constitutional basis for elections if HoR-HCS talks fail.

Handover of Lockerbie suspect to U.S. sparked tensions. Media outlets, including British daily *The Guardian* 13 Dec, reported Tripoli-based govt (GNU) handed over Abu Ajila Masoud al-Marimi – key suspect in bombing of Pan American Flight 103 over Lockerbie town in Scotland in 1988 – to U.S. authorities after armed group in Nov kidnapped him in Tripoli. Head of rival govt, east-based PM Fathi Bashagha, 13 Dec called move “illegal”. Attorney general's office next day announced investigation into Tripoli-based PM Dabaiba's decision to extradite Masoud, and demonstrations against extradition 16 Dec took place in several cities.

Standoff persisted over maritime borders in Mediterranean Sea. GNU 7 Dec criticised as “irresponsible” Greece's recent agreements with energy firms for oil and gas exploration near maritime borders with Libya. Athens same day retorted that GNU's recent energy deals with Türkiye violated international law. After Egyptian President al-Sisi 11 Dec issued decree demarcating Egypt's western maritime border, GNU 16 Dec and HoR 22 Dec said decision violated Libya's territorial waters. Bashagha 14 Dec called on Egypt, Türkiye and Greece to not “take any unilateral

steps” that would “worsen the situation in the Mediterranean”. Greek media late-Dec reported Athens plans to extend territorial waters south and west of Crete island.

➡ **Tunisia Record-low turnout in legislative elections increased President Saïed’s political isolation amid worsening economic and social situation.**

Legislative elections saw record-low turnout, opposition urged Saïed to step down. Only 11,22% of voters cast ballots in legislative elections held 17 Dec. In response, main opposition coalition, National Salvation Front, 18 Dec said Saïed had no legitimacy and should quit office, called for mass protests to demand early presidential elections. Election commission in following days announced only 23 candidates had secured seat; remaining 131 seats to be decided in run-off elections expected early Feb.

UGTT hardened stance toward Saïed, IMF postponed decision on rescue package. In clearest challenge to Saïed to date, powerful labour union UGTT 3 Dec openly questioned electoral process, saying it had “no colour and taste” as result of new constitution; also denounced “lack of transparency” on reform program negotiated with International Monetary Fund (IMF). UGTT 26 Dec threatened street protests and sit-ins in rejection of 2023 austerity budget and 28 Dec announced two-day strike by transport workers in late Jan. In last-minute move, IMF postponed board meeting scheduled for 19 Dec on four-year \$1.9bn rescue package for Tunisia, citing need to give govt more time to finalise reform program. Amid inflation nearing 10% and shortage of many food commodities, European Investment Bank around mid-Dec approved €220mn loan including €150mn in emergency food support. Algeria 1 Dec pledged \$200mn low-interest loan and \$100mn financial assistance to Tunisia.

In other important developments. Police around 19 Dec detained Islamist-inspired party An-Nahda VP, former PM Ali Larayedh, over terrorism allegations. An-Nahda immediately denounced political attack to cover “failure” of polls, and party supporters 23 Dec protested in front of justice ministry in capital Tunis to demand Larayedh’s release.

➡ **Western Sahara UK court validated Morocco-UK association agreement; France reiterated support for Moroccan autonomy plan for Western Sahara.**

Morocco-UK association agreement including Western Sahara deemed legal. London court 5 Dec quashed campaign group’s lawsuit against UK’s post-Brexit trade arrangements with Morocco, which extend preferential rate of import duty to goods originating from Western Sahara. Lawsuit unlikely to presage European Union (EU) Court of Justice’s verdict on inclusion of Western Sahara in EU’s association agreement with Morocco given different legal systems in use in UK and EU.

France reiterated support for Moroccan autonomy plan for Western Sahara. French FM Catherine Colonna 16 Dec met with Moroccan counterpart Nasser Bourita in Morocco’s capital Rabat, said Paris remained “favorable” to Morocco’s autonomy plan for Western Sahara.