

# Middle East and North Africa

---

## Eastern Mediterranean

---

➔ **Israel-Palestine** Low-level violence persisted between Israeli forces and Palestinians along Gaza-Israel fence. Palestinians in Gaza resumed weekly “Great March of Return” protests along Gaza-Israel fence 6 Dec after three-week suspension. Palestinian militants 7 Dec fired three rockets from Gaza into Israel, two were intercepted and one landed in field; Israel responded with airstrikes on Hamas targets in Gaza. Israeli aircraft 17 Dec killed Palestinian approaching fence. Palestinian militants launched two rockets at Israel night of 18-19 Dec, one was intercepted and one landed in field; Israel retaliated by bombing three Hamas sites and temporarily reducing Palestinian fishing area. Palestinians 25 Dec launched rocket toward Ashkelon in Israel, where PM Netanyahu was addressing campaign rally; Israel intercepted rocket and responded by striking several Hamas targets in Gaza. Hamas 26 Dec said it would suspend weekly demonstrations along Gaza-Israel fence until April and would then reduce their frequency to monthly. In West Bank, Palestinians 9 Dec launched general strike and clashed with security forces in Hebron after Israeli defence minister approved construction of new settlement there. Ahead of anniversary of Hamas’s founding, security forces night of 11-12 Dec arrested a dozen senior Hamas officials across West Bank. Israel 15 Dec reduced power supply to Palestinian residential areas in several cities to pressure Palestinian electric company to pay outstanding debt. In Israel, after Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz failed to form coalition govt, Israeli lawmakers 11 Dec passed bill to dissolve parliament and hold new elections 2 March. PM Netanyahu won Likud party primaries 26 Dec with over 72% of votes. In Syria, suspected Israeli airstrikes targeting Iranian weapons depots 7 Dec killed at least five.

➔ **Lebanon** President Aoun appointed former minister Hassan Diab as new PM and anti-govt protests continued to lead to violence. Following PM Hariri’s resignation in Oct, consensus appeared to form early Dec on accepting businessman Samir Khatib as new PM. But after Khatib withdrew his candidacy 8 Dec, former and caretaker PM Hariri emerged as front runner. Hariri 18 Dec withdrew his candidacy after two largest Christian parties said they would not endorse him. Parliament 19 Dec voted former education minister Hassan Diab to become new PM and Aoun tasked him with forming govt. Diab said he planned to form govt of technocrats within six weeks. International Support Group for Lebanon in Paris 11 Dec conditioned financial aid on formation of credible govt committed to implementing economic reforms. Unrest mid-Dec left dozens injured. In capital Beirut, security forces 14 Dec prevented suspected supporters of Hizbollah and Shiite Amal Movement from attacking anti-govt protesters. Security forces later that night and 15 Dec clashed with anti-govt protesters. Scuffles broke out night of 16-17 Dec as security forces prevented Hizbollah and Amal supporters from reaching anti-govt protesters. Suspected Hizbollah and Amal supporters 17 Dec attacked several protest camps throughout country.

↓ **Syria** Regime and Russian forces intensified airstrikes and ground offensive in north west taking ground from rebels. In north west, regime forces 1 Dec launched

ground assault to retake territory they lost previous month. Regime and Russian airstrikes continued to target rebel-held areas in Idlib; Russian airstrikes and barrel bombs 8 Dec killed 21 civilians. Regime and Russian airstrikes on villages in Maarat al-Numan district, Idlib province 17 Dec killed 24 civilians. State news 22 Dec reported regime forces had retaken around twenty villages in Maarat al-Numan district. UN 27 Dec said regime offensive had displaced over 235,000 civilians in Dec. In north east, Turkey 8 Dec struck deal with Russia to connect areas under control of Turkish-backed Syrian forces to regime-controlled power plant and to withdraw Turkish-backed Syrian National Army and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces from M4 highway. Insecurity persisted in areas under control of Turkish-backed forces; car bombing in Al-Mabrukah in Hasakah province 18 Dec killed five civilians, and landmine at Tel Abyad border crossing in Raqqa province same day killed four. Car bombing 23 Dec killed eight in Turkish-controlled village of Suluk near Tel Abyad. Airstrikes of unknown origin 7 and 25 Dec killed ten pro-Iranian fighters in Deir al-Zour province in east; Lebanese Shia group Hizbollah blamed Israel for 25 Dec attack. Delegates from Russia, Turkey and Iran 10 Dec met in Kazakhstan for 14<sup>th</sup> round of talks on Syria, with focus on how UN-sponsored Constitutional Committee can overcome impasse in drafting new constitution; talks made no progress. U.S. Congress 17 Dec passed Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act enabling U.S. govt to sanction any person or entity engaging in economic activity with Syrian regime.

---

## Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

---

↓ 🇮🇷\* **Iran** Iran-U.S. tensions rose as U.S. responded to series of attacks on U.S. assets in Iraq with strikes on Iran-backed militia there; tensions could spiral further in Jan, especially around Iran's planned further violation of nuclear deal 6 Jan. In Iraq, attacks on U.S. assets intensified: unidentified assailants 3, 5, 9 and 11 Dec launched rockets at military bases housing U.S. troops; rocket attack on base outside Kirkuk 27 Dec killed U.S. contractor. U.S. Sec State Pompeo blamed "Iran's proxies". U.S. airstrikes 29 Dec hit bases in Iraq and Syria of Iran-backed Kataib Hizbollah militia, part of paramilitary Popular Mobilisation Units, killing at least 25 fighters. In response, supporters and members of Kataib Hizbollah protested outside U.S. embassy, 31 Dec broke into compound. Chair of joint commission of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) during meeting in Austria 6 Dec noted "serious concern" in relation to Iran's incremental violations of nuclear deal. Russia's State Nuclear Energy Corporation Rosatom 5 Dec announced suspension of work ostensibly for technical reasons at Fordow nuclear facility, where in Nov Iran restarted uranium enrichment. U.S. 15 Dec withdrew sanctions waiver for international civil nuclear cooperation at Fordow. Iran and U.S. exchanged prisoners in Switzerland 7 Dec; Iran released Princeton University doctoral student Xiyue Wang in exchange for release of Iranian scientist Masoud Soleimani held since 2018 for sanctions violations. U.S. 11 Dec announced new sanctions against Iranian shipping and aviation industries. NGO Amnesty International 16 Dec reported that nationwide protests over fuel prices in Nov had led to violent clashes between protesters and security forces that left 304 demonstrators dead. Govt 11 Dec said it had foiled "state sponsored" cyberattack on national banking system; 15 Dec said it had foiled another cyberattack.

↓ 🇮🇷\* **Iraq** Following PM Mahdi's resignation, wrangling over his successor extended political paralysis; security forces continued deadly crackdown on anti-govt

protests; and in response to increasing attacks on U.S. assets, U.S. airstrikes on Iran-backed militia triggered violent protest at U.S. embassy raising risk that U.S.-Iran tensions fuel further escalation in Jan. After parliament 1 Dec accepted PM Mahdi's resignation, two main parliamentary coalitions both claimed constitutional right to name new PM by virtue of being largest bloc; President Salih 15 Dec tasked parliament speaker to determine largest bloc. Parliament 24 Dec passed electoral law allowing people to vote for individual candidates instead of party lists. Iran-backed bloc proposed governor of southern Basra province Asaad al-Eidani, but Salih 26 Dec refused to appoint him PM "to avoid more bloodshed" and offered his resignation to parliament. Protesters 1 and 3 Dec stormed Iranian consulate in Najaf. U.S. 6 Dec sanctioned leaders of Iran-backed Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) for roles in repressing protests. In capital Baghdad, gunmen night of 6-7 Dec killed at least 22 protesters and three policemen. Drone 7 Dec hit home of Moqtada al-Sadr, Shiite cleric and leader of Reform and Construction parliamentary bloc, causing no casualties. Attacks on U.S. assets intensified: unidentified assailants 3, 5, 9 and 11 Dec launched rockets at military bases housing U.S. troops; rocket attack on base outside Kirkuk 27 Dec killed U.S. contractor. U.S. Sec State Pompeo blamed "Iran's proxies". U.S. airstrikes 29 Dec hit bases of Iran-backed Kataib Hizbollah militia, part of PMU, in Iraq and Syria killing at least 25 fighters. In response, supporters and members of Kataib Hizbollah protested outside U.S. embassy, 31 Dec broke into compound. Islamic State (ISIS) attacks in Diyala and Kirkuk provinces left at least 26 security force members dead. Police 3 Dec announced capture of alleged deputy of ISIS leader al-Baghdadi. Security forces 15-31 Dec killed 57 ISIS militants in Diyala, Nineveh, Erbil and Salah al-Din provinces.

➡ **Kuwait** Emir swore in new govt 17 Dec following resignation of previous govt in Nov due to vote of no confidence against interior minister. Authorities 13 Dec arrested Egyptian man over alleged links to banned Muslim Brotherhood group; suspect deported to Egypt next day after admitting to transferring funds to organisation.

➡ **Qatar** Emir Al-Thani did not attend Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in Saudi capital, Riyadh 10 Dec but sent PM, highest ranking Qatari to attend GCC summit since beginning of dispute in June 2017; meeting achieved no breakthrough on tensions between Saudi-led bloc and Qatar. FM 15 Dec said recent talks with Saudi Arabia had broken stalemate and introduced line of communication; FM announced govt would analyse demands of blockading countries but would refuse to alter relations with ally Turkey to end dispute.

➡ **Saudi Arabia** Govt continued efforts to de-escalate its conflict with Huthi rebels in Yemen and implement agreement between Yemeni govt and Yemen's southern separatists. Saudi-led coalition continued informal talks with Huthi rebels on de-escalation measures. Govt accused Huthi rebels of attack on medical facility in Saudi city of Jizan in south 10 Dec, which caused no casualties; Huthis denied attack, but claimed 27 Dec strike on local military headquarters in Najran (see Yemen). Saudi-led coalition continued to oversee implementation of Riyadh Agreement struck in Nov between Yemeni govt and southern separatists. Ceasefire held in south, but other key aspects of agreement remain unimplemented (see Yemen). At annual Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) summit in capital Riyadh 10 Dec, members committed to enhancing security cooperation while taking steps to establish financial and monetary unity by 2025, but made no breakthrough on resolving dispute between Saudi-

led bloc and Qatar. Govt 1 Dec assumed presidency of G20 forum, becoming first Arab state to lead group. Saudi Aramco oil and gas company 11 Dec began trading on Saudi stock exchange following initial public offering (IPO); IPO raised \$25.6bn, with total company valuation at \$1.7tn.

➤ **Yemen** Following signing of Riyadh Agreement in Nov, ceasefire between govt and southern separatists held and de-escalation talks between Saudi-led coalition and Huthi rebels continued. In south, while truce largely held, tensions remained over troop build-ups in strategic locations across south and failure to implement key aspects of agreement, including formation of unity govt and appointment of governor and security chief in Aden. Informal de-escalation talks between Huthi rebels and Saudi-led coalition continued as fighting along Saudi-Yemeni border and Saudi airstrikes decreased. Senior military commander Adnan al-Hammadi shot and killed by his brother in Taiz in south 6 Dec; dispute reportedly fuelled by split between factions loyal to Sunni Islamist group Islah and factions supportive of United Arab Emirates. Saudi govt accused Huthis of carrying out 10 Dec attack on medical facility in Saudi city of Jizan in south; no fatalities recorded in first reported cross-border attack since Sept. Huthis claimed 27 Dec missile strike on local Saudi military headquarters in Najran; Saudis denied strike. Yemeni govt and Huthi rebels exchanged prisoners in Taiz 19 Dec; govt released 60 Huthi rebels in exchange for 75 govt-affiliated detainees. U.S. navy 4 Dec announced seizure of “significant” shipment of Iranian missile components bound for Yemen. U.S. State Department 5 Dec announced \$15mn reward for information on Yemen-based Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps senior commander Abdul Reza Shahlai.

---

## North Africa

---

➤ **Algeria** Former PM Abdelmadjid Tebboune won presidential election 12 Dec with 58% of votes as protests against regime continued. Electoral commission said turnout was 39.9% but independent observers put it at 15%. In first speech after elections, Tebboune 13 Dec offered dialogue with protest movement against ruling elite. Tebboune sworn in 19 Dec. Demonstrations continued before and after elections. Thousands protested against poll in capital Algiers 11 Dec. Security forces cracked down on protests in second largest city Oran 11-13 Dec, reportedly arresting 450. Thousands of students and teachers demonstrated in Algiers 17 Dec against new president, rejecting his offer of dialogue. Army chief of staff Gaïd Salah died of heart attack in Algiers 23 Dec aged 79. Tebboune 28 Dec named former diplomat Abdelaziz Djerad as new PM. Thousands protested 27 Dec in Algiers and students gathered 24 Dec despite day of mourning for Salah. Court in Algiers 10 Dec convicted former PMs Ahmed Ouyahia and Abdelmalek Sellal to fifteen and twelve years in prison respectively for corruption.

➤ **Egypt** Following late Sept anti-govt protests, President Sisi reshuffled security apparatus in late Nov and early Dec and jihadist attacks and counter-terrorism operations continued in Sinai. Sisi reportedly appointed commander of Republican Guard Gen. Ahmed Ali as head of presidency office, former army Chief of Staff Gen. Mahmoud Higazi to key position within presidency office, and former military official Mostafa Shawkat as head of Republican Guard. In Sinai, Islamic State (ISIS)-Sinai Province militants 8 Dec launched simultaneous attacks on military camp at

Al-Ahrash near Rafah and military vehicle in Sheikh Zuweid, killing four soldiers. Army raid 5 Dec killed three suspected jihadists in North Sinai. Talks between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over Ethiopia's construction of its Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on River Nile continued in U.S. in bid to resolve dispute by 15 Jan. After FMs met in Washington 9 Dec, Egyptian officials said negotiations were moving forward. Further talks took place in Sudanese capital Khartoum 21-22 Dec. Sudan 22 Dec said countries had come closer to agreeing on operation of dam and filling of reservoir. President Sisi showed growing concern over Turkey's expanding ties with Libya's UN-backed govt (GNA); govt mid-Dec warned against attempts "to control" neighbouring Libya and protested to UN Security Council against agreements signed in Nov between Turkey and GNA on maritime rights in Mediterranean Sea and military cooperation.

➡ 🇱🇾\* **Libya** Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) made some advances in offensive to take capital Tripoli from UN-backed Govt of National Accord (GNA) as UN-led efforts to promote ceasefire remained stalled, and Turkey's potential deployment of troops to support GNA could escalate fighting in coming weeks. LNA raided Al-Swani neighbourhood south of Tripoli 1 Dec, reportedly killing five children. Haftar 12 Dec urged his forces to advance toward centre of Tripoli in what he said would be "final battle" for capital. In following days, LNA forces intensified shelling and published footage of reinforcements coming from eastern Libya to Tripoli, and Russian-provided attack helicopters flying over capital. GNA 19 Dec approved implementation of military deal signed with Turkey in Nov, paving way for reinforced Turkish military and logistical support. Turkish parliament 30 Dec debated bill that, if passed in 2 Jan session, could empower govt to send troops to Libya to reinforce GNA. LNA 20 Dec gave GNA-affiliated militias from Misrata 72 hours to leave Tripoli and coastal city of Sirte, threatening to further target Misrata with airstrikes. Berlin 10 Dec hosted fifth UN-backed meeting to prepare ground for peace process, but parties remained at odds over ceasefire conditions.

➡ 🇲🇷 **Mauritania** Tensions within ruling party Union for the Republic (UPR) increased as President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani and former President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz competed for influence. Security forces late Nov arrested presidential guard commander and his deputy, both Abdel Aziz loyalists. Ghazouani won outright backing of ruling party during party congress in capital Nouakchott 28-29 Dec. Party delegates renewed all party's governing bodies including National Council and entrusted them to Ghazouani's close allies, and elected Ghazouani's chosen candidate, Sidi Mohamed Ould Taleb Amar, as party president.

➡ 🇲🇷 **Morocco** Police 14 Dec arrested suspected Islamic State (ISIS) militant in Meknes in north and said he was planning suicide attack. Parliament's foreign affairs committee 16 Dec approved two bills extending Rabat's maritime boundaries over Western Sahara's territorial water.

➡ 🇹🇺 **Tunisia** PM-designate Habib Jemli 12 Dec asked President Saïed to push back 15 Dec deadline to form govt by one month until 15 Jan. Jemli continued consultations with party leaders to build majority of 109 MPs needed to form govt.

➡ 🇵🇸 **Western Sahara** Leader of Polisario Front independence movement Brahim Ghali 16 Dec denounced UN's inability to end diplomatic stalemate over disputed territory, as young Sahrawis increased pressure on Polisario leadership to end status

quo. After Moroccan parliament's foreign affairs committee 16 Dec approved two bills extending Rabat's maritime boundaries over Western Sahara's territorial water, Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) 18 Dec said move was "null and void". Polisario Front renewed confidence in Brahim Ghali as secretary general with 86.10% of votes during its fiftieth congress in Tifariti 19-23 Dec.