

# Middle East and North Africa

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## Eastern Mediterranean

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➔ **Israel-Palestine** Tensions mounted at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade and Palestinian protests in Gaza flared mid-month. In Jerusalem, Jordan's newly reconstituted and enlarged Waqf Council, leadership of Islamic organisation that administers Holy Esplanade, met for first time 14 Feb, giving larger role to Palestinian national institutions. Ending meeting, Waqf Council held prayers in area to which Israel has restricted access since 2003, Israel removed worshippers. Protest prayers 19-21 Feb led to clashes between worshippers and Israeli police, over 60 arrested. In Gaza, after week of increased protests in Jabaliya region, organisers of Great March of Return weekly demonstrations 15 Feb escalated protests at Gaza-Israel border, citing Israel's failure to fulfil its side of ceasefire agreement. Hamas 17 Feb took control of Kerem Shalom crossing on Gaza-Israel border, expelling Palestinian Authority (PA) employees. Hamas and Islamic Jihad delegation 3 Feb met Egyptian authorities in Cairo to discuss ceasefire agreement, opening of Rafah border and disbursement of Qatari funds to Palestinians in Gaza. PA early Feb cut salaries of 5,000 employees, prisoners and families of martyrs in Gaza for alleged links to Hamas, Islamic Jihad or Mohammed Dahlan. In West Bank, following PM Hamdallah's resignation in Jan, several political factions 4 Feb announced boycott of new Fatah govt line-up citing what they viewed as Fatah's agenda to centralise power and deepen national rifts. Palestinian factions, including Hamas, Islamic Jihad and Fatah, 11-13 Feb met in Moscow to discuss Palestinian unity, but failed to agree on closing statement. Israel 17 Feb affirmed its decision to withhold \$130mn of tax money owed to PA in bid to stop transfer of funds to families of prisoners and martyrs. Regarding peace process, U.S. 14 Feb said it would unveil peace plan after 9 April Israeli elections. Ireland 19-20 Feb hosted meeting of several European and Arab countries committed to traditional peacemaking positions and Palestine Liberation Organization to coordinate stances ahead of EU and Arab League summit in Egypt 24-25 Feb in which participating states declared commitment to traditional peace-making positions.

➔ **Jordan** Two blasts in Wadi Al Azraq area, Balqa governorate in west 14 Feb killed five people, including four security officers; govt 15 Feb said explosives matched material used by militant cell in Fuheis, Balqa governorate in Aug 2018. Arrest of two men who refused to show identification in Anjara, Ajloun governorate in north west 15 Feb triggered riots and clashes with police 16 Feb, one person killed.

➔ **Lebanon** Parliament 15 Feb gave vote of confidence to new govt formed late Jan; PM Hariri's policy declaration underscored need for urgent economic reforms and right of citizens to "resist Israeli occupation and repel its aggression," providing cover for Hizbollah's separate military structures. Army 17 Feb detained in Hermel in north east two suspected Islamic State (ISIS) leaders who had fled eastern Syria, where U.S.-backed forces are waging offensive against ISIS's last Syrian stronghold. UK 25 Feb announced decision to put Hizbollah's political arm on its list of proscribed groups, classifying Hizbollah in its entirety as "terrorist organisation"; Hiz-

Hizbollah's military arm already on list. About 1,300 Syrian refugees returned from Lebanon to Syria 27 Feb through govt-run programs at Masnaa, Abboudieh and Qaa border crossings in centre and north.

➡ **Syria** Govt forces continued to bomb jihadist-held Idlib in north west, U.S. announced 400 troops would remain in north east, and U.S.-backed Kurdish forces launched push to take Islamic State's (ISIS) last stronghold in east. In north west, jihadist group Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and al-Qaeda loyalist splinter Hurras al-Din 10 Feb reached new agreement after public spat. Leadership of HTS-linked civilian administration Salvation Govt took part in opposition conference in Bab al-Hawa on Syria-Turkey border 10 Feb; closing statement called for election of Shura council to form new civilian administration to replace Salvation Govt and for creation of military council including all Idlib's armed factions. Govt forces 15-28 Feb shelled opposition areas in Idlib, killing at least 40 civilians. Unclaimed bombings next to Salvation Govt offices in Idlib 18 Feb killed 24 people. Russian President Putin hosted summit on Syria with Turkish and Iranian counterparts in Sochi 14 Feb; after summit, Russia said military operations against HTS in Idlib were inevitable. U.S. military 11 Feb said troop withdrawal from north east could begin in weeks. President Assad 17 Feb rejected Kurdish autonomy in north east. Russia 18 Feb insisted Turkey needed Syrian govt's approval for military action against Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), backbone of Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). U.S. 21 Feb said France and UK refused U.S. request to deploy coalition "observer force". U.S. President Trump 22 Feb said 400 U.S. troops would remain in Syria as residual peacekeeping force to set up safe zone. Following Trump's announcement, Turkish President Erdoğan 23 Feb evoked 1998 Syria-Turkey Adana agreement which apparently allows Turkey to conduct cross-border antiterrorist operations up to 5km into Syria, while stressing proposed safe zone in north east should be under Turkish control. In east, SDF 9 Feb launched push against ISIS's last holdout in Baghouz area near Iraqi border; besieged fighters 20 Feb began allowing civilian evacuation. In south west, Israeli tank 11 Feb fired at alleged Hizbollah observation posts in Quneitra governorate, despite Russia's 8 Feb warnings against Israeli attacks in Syria.

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## Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

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➡ **Bahrain** Govt 9 Feb said it would cut costs to meet deficit reduction targets mandated by \$10bn aid package from fellow Gulf states agreed Oct 2018 aimed at eliminating budget deficit by 2022.

➡ **Iran** On 40th anniversary of 1979 revolution, govt insisted on right to develop "defensive power", meanwhile rift between U.S. and Europe over Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) widened. Following 31 Jan launch by European JCPOA participants (Germany, France and UK) of Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), mechanism to facilitate trade with Iran avoiding unilateral U.S. sanctions, U.S. VP Pence at Munich Security Conference 16 Feb urged Europeans to "stop undermining U.S. sanctions" and to "withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal". U.S. and Poland chaired ministerial meeting in Polish capital Warsaw 13-14 Feb titled Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East, which focused on countering Iran's regional policies; meeting failed to deliver diplomatic breakthroughs, but Israeli PM Netanyahu attended alongside Arab leaders. Iran 11

Feb commemorated 40th anniversary of 1979 revolution; President Rouhani said “we have not – and will not – ask for permission from anybody for improving our defensive power” and Supreme Leader Khamenei 13 Feb counselled against trusting European govts and negotiating with U.S.. FM Zarif resigned 25 Feb without giving reasons; Rouhani 27 Feb rejected resignation and Zarif continued duties. Satellite launch failed 5 Feb. Suicide attack claimed by Sunni militant group Jaish al-Adl against Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps vehicle 13 Feb killed 27 in south east, govt accused Pakistan of sheltering group and accused Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) of involvement.

➔ **Iraq** Debate intensified over U.S. military presence and Islamic State (ISIS) continued insurgency. U.S. President Trump 3 Feb said U.S. military will remain in Iraq “to watch Iran”; President Salih 4 Feb criticised statement and stressed Iraq’s sovereignty. In surprise visit to Iraq, acting U.S. Sec Defence Patrick Shanahan 12 Feb corrected Trump’s remarks saying counterterrorism goals guide U.S.-Iraq partnership. Statements come after Shiite MPs from Sadrism Sayirun alliance and Iran-backed al-Fatah coalition 31 Jan submitted draft legislation demanding end of agreements which govern presence of U.S. troops in Iraq and bilateral security cooperation. Resisting these demands, PM Mahdi 20 Feb stressed Iraq’s sovereign request for presence of U.S. troops and their importance to national security. Parliament 31 Jan passed federal budget for 2019 which signalled improved relations between Baghdad and Kurdistan Regional Govt (KRG): KRG to receive same share of budget as in 2018 but due to overall increase will receive nearly 30% more funds and central govt guaranteed salaries to Kurdish public servants and security forces, even if it makes deductions from budget transfers. Sayirun and al-Fatah 11 Feb said they had agreed to form joint committee to speed up cabinet formation. In Kurdistan, two main parties, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), 15 Feb announced preliminary agreement on outline for next regional govt, first govt since late 2017 independence referendum. ISIS continued insurgency: near Samarra north of Baghdad, gunmen 3 Feb wounded nine people, including six Iranian Shiite pilgrims, and two roadside bombs 14 Feb killed eight members of Shiite Popular Mobilisation Forces; in Najaf, Anbar and Salah al-Din provinces, ISIS 7-17 Feb kidnapped twenty civilians, reportedly killed nine of them and released five in return for ransom; suspected ISIS sleeper cells 23 Feb killed five fishermen in Therthar Lake, 60km north of Baghdad. In north, Turkey carried out raids against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK); Turkey 22 Feb said it had carried out fifteen operations in Harkuk region of Iraq, destroying PKK hideouts.

➔ **Qatar** Qatari forces 20 Feb joined other Gulf countries in Saudi Arabia for Peninsula Shield military exercise. Govt 25-28 Feb hosted U.S.-Taliban talks in Doha following previous meeting in Doha in Jan (see Afghanistan).

➔ **Saudi Arabia** In joint statement on Yemen 13 Feb, “Quad” comprising Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates (UAE), U.S. and UK denounced Iranian support for Huthis and blamed latter for lack of progress in implementation of Dec Stockholm Agreement. U.S. House of Representatives same day adopted resolution aimed at ending U.S. support for Saudi-led coalition in Yemen. FM al-Jubeir 10 Feb denounced what he called congressional efforts to curtail U.S. allies’ fight against “terrorist organisations supported by Iran and Hezbollah”. Moroccan officials 7 Feb said Morocco had frozen its involvement in Saudi-led coalition. Govt and UAE 26 Feb

both pledged additional \$500mn to UN 2019 humanitarian plan for Yemen. Govt 23 Feb appointed Princess Reema bint Bandar bin Sultan as ambassador to U.S., first Saudi woman ambassador. Same day, Khaled bin Salman, outgoing ambassador to U.S., appointed deputy defence minister by royal decree. Govt 20 Feb began hosting joint military exercise Peninsula Shield with Gulf states including Qatar, to conclude 14 March. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman travelled to Pakistan, India and China 17-22 Feb announcing trade and investment agreements. Govt 12 Feb said state oil company Saudi Aramco will develop energy assets outside country for first time.

➔ **United Arab Emirates** FM Gargash 3 Feb called for implementation of Stockholm Agreement in Yemen and to make 2019 “the year of peace in Yemen”. In joint statement on Yemen 13 Feb, “Quad” comprising UAE, Saudi Arabia, U.S. and UK denounced Iranian support for Huthis and blamed latter for lack of progress in implementation of Stockholm Agreement. Govt and UAE 26 Feb both pledged additional \$500mn to UN 2019 humanitarian plan for Yemen. Govt hosted joint military exercise with Oman 3-14 Feb.

📌 🌐 🗺️ **Yemen** Govt and Huthis agreed to redeploy their forces from front-line positions in and around Hodeida, opening opportunity in coming weeks to implement deal, but disagreement over details could lead to breakdown of talks and trigger fighting in and around city, and intense fighting along and across Yemen-Saudi border could escalate further. Redeployment Coordination Committee (RCC) comprising UN, govt and Huthis reached deal 16 Feb on first phase of redeployments by both sides from Red Sea ports and infrastructure around Hodeida. But debate over who will secure Hodeida once both sides have made redeployments delayed implementation. World Food Programme 26 Feb regained access, blocked for five months by fighting, to Red Sea Mills, major wheat facility in outskirts of Hodeida. UAE FM Gargash 3 Feb called for implementation of Dec Stockholm Agreement and to make 2019 “the year of peace in Yemen”. “Quad” comprising Saudi Arabia, UAE, U.S. and UK 13 Feb denounced Iranian support for Huthis and blamed latter for lack of progress in implementation of Dec agreement. Fighting intensified on Yemen-Saudi border, with govt and Huthis claiming military successes in Hajja, Saada and al-Jawf governorates; clashes escalated in Hajja in north west between al-Hajour tribesmen and Huthis. Huthi Head of Supreme Commission for Elections and Referendum (SCER) in Huthi-held capital Sanaa 1 Feb announced plans to hold elections to fill vacant seats in parliament; President Hadi 3 Feb said he would relocate SCER headquarters to Aden, as he moves to reconvene parliament in temporary capital. In Mukalla in east, Southern Transitional Council (STC), organisation working for secession of south, 16-17 Feb held third meeting of what it calls its National Assembly; its chair warned Hadi that STC would block any attempt to convene parliament in Aden. U.S. House of Representatives 13 Feb adopted resolution aimed at ending U.S. support for Saudi-led coalition. Saudi FM al-Jubeir 10 Feb denounced congressional efforts to curtail U.S. allies’ fight against “terrorist organisations supported by Iran and Hezbollah”. Moroccan officials 7 Feb said Morocco had frozen its involvement in Saudi-led coalition.

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## North Africa

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➔ **Algeria** Ahead of presidential elections planned for 18 April, President Bouteflika said he would run for fifth term triggering waves of protests in urban centres. Ruling party National Liberation Front (FLN) 9 Feb declared support for President Bouteflika. Despite declining health, Bouteflika 10 Feb announced his candidacy. In meeting organised by Islamist Justice and Development Front party (MRN) opposition parties 21 Feb failed to agree on joint candidate. Thousands protested against prospect of Bouteflika's fifth term 16 Feb in several places, notably in cities east of capital Algiers like Kheratta, Bordj Bou Arreridj and Tizi Ouzou; in Khenchela 20 Feb authorities barred opposition figure from holding rally, triggering protests. Following 14 Feb call for nationwide march by Mouwatana (Citizenship) movement, thousands of protestors demonstrated peacefully against Bouteflika in Algiers 22-24 Feb; on third consecutive day, security forces fired tear gas, and also detained 40 people. Police in Algiers 28 Feb dispersed journalists protesting against govt censorship of recent demonstrations, arresting several.

➔ **Egypt** Parliament initiated process to extend presidential terms and increase term limit and security forces continued to fight Islamic State (ISIS) in Sinai. 485 of 596 MPs 6 Feb voted to start parliamentary process to change constitution extending presidential terms from four to six years and increasing limit from two to four terms; changes would enable President Sisi – due to step down in 2022 at end of second term – to run for two more six-year terms and potentially stay in power until 2034. If MPs endorse changes in vote expected early March, national referendum would be held on proposed amendments. Former presidential candidate Hamdeen Sabbahi 7 Feb announced new movement, Union for Defending the Constitution, comprising opposition parties, MPs and civil society activists. In Cairo, unclaimed bombings appeared to target security forces: homemade bomb detonated in Giza district 15 Feb wounding three people including policeman, govt blamed Muslim Brotherhood; after attempted bombing of police station, officers pursued suspect, who detonated explosive device upon capture in central Cairo, killing three police officers 18 Feb. In Sinai, attack claimed by ISIS south of provincial capital Arish 16 Feb left fifteen military personnel and seven militants dead; security forces 19 Feb said they had killed sixteen suspected militants in two raids in Arish districts of Obeidat and Abu Eita. Govt continued crackdown on civil society and opposition. Despite repeated reports that authorities used torture to extract confessions, fifteen male prisoners charged with murder executed 7-20 Feb. Prosecutors 14 Feb charged and formally detained journalist Ahmed Gamal Ziada for spreading false news, after his 29 Jan arrest and disappearance at Cairo airport. Authorities failed to provide whereabouts of Australian Hazem Hamouda, detained without charges at Cairo airport 25 Jan and due to be released 21 Feb by order of prosecutor general.

⬇️🔴\* **Libya** Following its mid-Jan advance into south west, Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's east-based Libyan National Army (LNA) continued to consolidate control in area, securing Sebha peacefully but triggering fighting in Murzuq region, 100km south west of Sebha; local armed groups or forces in north allied to Tripoli-based Govt of National Accord (GNA) could retaliate against LNA in coming weeks. Murzuq region saw heavy fighting: clashes between LNA-allied local Arab forces and local Tebu non-Arab armed groups near Ghadduwah from 1 Feb left at least fourteen

dead, LNA said at least four LNA soldiers killed. LNA airstrike in outskirts of Murzuq 4 Feb reportedly killed seven Tebu, including civilians. LNA 8 Feb bombed Murzuq residential area, no casualties reported. Fighting inside Murzuq 20-23 Feb between LNA-allied Arab forces and Tebu armed groups left dozens of tribesmen and three LNA soldiers dead, including Murzuq's GNA-affiliated security chief. Tebu accused pro-Haftar forces of attacking them and ransacking houses, LNA accused Tebu of harbouring Chadian armed groups. LNA 6-7 Feb announced it had taken control of Sharara oil field, 200km west of Sebha, reportedly after local Tuareg guards previously aligned with GNA switched sides; LNA 22 Feb said it had taken over al-Feel oil field near Murzuq. GNA made several military appointments 6 Feb allegedly in response to LNA advance: Tuareg general Ali Kanna appointed commander of southern region; Mohammed al-Sharif of Jufra region appointed chief of staff and Salem Joha of Misrata as his deputy. GNA said it and U.S. forces conducted airstrikes on al-Qaeda camp in Ubari in south west 13 Feb, killing four militants; U.S. denied involvement. In eastern city of Derna, clashes between LNA and coalition of Islamist militants Derna Protection Force intensified early Feb, seven civilians reportedly killed 11 Feb. LNA mid-Feb claimed final victory in Derna. Libyan Red Crescent 21 Feb said it had recovered over 30 bodies in Derna in Feb. UN envoy Ghassan Salamé hosted meeting between PM Serraj and Haftar in Abu Dhabi 27 Feb; leaders reiterated need to hold elections.

➡ **Mauritania** Political manoeuvring continued ahead of presidential election planned for later this year. Opposition platform, including among National Forum for Democracy and Unity (FNDU) and Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD), continued consultations to agree on common candidate. In document submitted to govt early Feb, opposition demanded reform of electoral commission, audit of electoral register and national dialogue to ensure free and fair election.

➡ **Morocco** Protests and strikes continued. 42 members of Hirak protest movement that formed in Rif region in north in late 2016 to demand jobs and denounce state corruption and repression 15 Feb boycotted hearing before Casablanca court of appeal for first time since appeal trial started 17 Dec, citing lack of conditions for impartial trial. Thousands demonstrated in Brussels 16 Feb to call for release of Hirak movement activists. Thousands of public school teachers 20 Feb went on strike and demonstrated in capital Rabat against poor working conditions; police intervened to disperse protesters.

➡ **Tunisia** Political tensions and societal rift between Islamists and anti-Islamists continued to grow, fuelled by struggle between President Essebsi and PM Chahed. Far-left and Arab nationalist coalition Popular Front 4 Feb called for govt's resignation ahead of late 2019 legislative and presidential elections to ensure transparent poll and accused govt of covering up Islamist party An-Nahda's alleged involvement in killing of two leftist and Arab nationalist leaders in 2013. An-Nahda President Rached Ghannouchi 17 Feb said Chahed could be forced to resign before elections, signalling that parliament could pass vote of no confidence. Tunis court 6 Feb sentenced in absentia secretary general of Essebsi's party Nida Tounes, Slim Riahi, to five years in prison for involvement in affair of bouncing cheques. Thousands of teachers 7 Feb demonstrated in capital Tunis to demand bonuses and better working conditions. Public sector union UGTT reached agreement with govt on salary increases 9 Feb, called off general strike planned for 20-21 Feb and ended months-long

strikes in secondary schools. Libyan militia demanding release of Libyan in prison in Tunisia on drug-related charges 14 Feb kidnapped fourteen Tunisian oil workers in Zawiya city near Libya's capital Tripoli; hostages freed 17 Feb in unclear circumstances. EU Commission 13 Feb kept Tunisia on black list of 23 countries highly exposed to money laundering and terrorist financing. Tunis court 9 Feb sentenced seven people to life in prison for 2015 attacks that killed 60 in Tunis and Sousse, sentenced others to six months to sixteen years in prison, and discharged 27; prosecutors said they would appeal.

➡ 🇵🇸 **Western Sahara** After direct talks between Morocco and independence movement Polisario Front resumed in early Dec for first time in six years, second round planned for March offers opportunity to advance negotiations over status of Western Sahara. UN envoy for Western Sahara Horst Köhler mid-Feb said he planned to convene second round of talks in March. European Parliament 12 Feb voted in favour of new fisheries partnership between EU and Morocco that Polisario Front, European Court of Justice, European MPs and NGOs have criticised for including waters off Western Sahara.