

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine International Criminal Court (ICC) opened door to potential probe into alleged war crimes, Israel continued de facto annexation of West Bank, and Palestinian factions prepared for elections.** In major decision, ICC 5 Feb ruled it has jurisdiction to investigate war crimes that may have been committed in occupied Palestinian territories; U.S. same day expressed “serious concerns” about ICC ruling while PM Netanyahu 6 Feb called it “pure antisemitism”. In West Bank, Israeli forces 1, 3 Feb demolished Bedouin Humsah al Fouqa village for second time, displacing over 130 inhabitants. NGO Jewish National Fund 11 Feb shifted policy, authorising official and direct purchase of West Bank land to expand existing Israeli settlements in Area C or adjacent areas. Israeli settler 5 Feb shot dead Palestinian man near Ras Karkar village. Ahead of Palestinian legislative and presidential elections scheduled for 22 May and 31 July, respectively, representatives of fourteen Palestinian factions at meeting in Egyptian capital Cairo 7-9 Feb agreed to form unity govt following elections; Palestinian Authority President Abbas also formed “electoral court” with jurisdiction over electoral process. To unify party, senior Fatah official 11 Feb attempted to convince imprisoned popular leader Marwan Barghouti not to run for president. Central Elections Committee 17 Feb announced 2.6mn voters (93%) registered to vote in West Bank and Gaza, excluding Jerusalem residents. After Abbas 20 Feb issued decree on public freedoms, Hamas 25 Feb released 45 Fatah-affiliated prisoners. In Gaza, authorities 17 Feb received shipment of Russia’s Sputnik V COVID-19 vaccine after Israeli authorities delayed shipment. Egypt 9 Feb opened Rafah border crossing with Gaza indefinitely. Hamas 19 Feb held internal leadership elections. Meanwhile, Israel’s political parties 4 Feb completed electoral slates ahead of 23 March elections. Netanyahu 8 Feb pleaded not guilty in corruption trial. Israel and Syria 18 Feb concluded Russian-mediated prisoner exchange, involving release of Israeli woman and two Syrian shepherds. Israel 3, 15 and 28 Feb reportedly launched airstrikes in southern Syria (see Syria). After explosion 25-26 Feb hit Israeli-owned cargo ship in Gulf of Oman, causing material damage, Defence Minister Benny Gantz 27 Feb suggested “likelihood” of Iranian involvement.

➔ **Lebanon Govt formation efforts remained stalled while gunmen killed prominent activist and Hizbollah critic, raising fears of wave of political assassinations.** Govt formation remained at standstill amid gulf between PM-designate Hariri and President Aoun on cabinet proposed by Hariri in Dec; leaked list of candidates 17 Feb showed individuals with no political background and some listed without having been consulted. During 9 Feb visit to capital Beirut, Qatari FM Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al Thani raised “comprehensive economic program to support Lebanon” once govt formation completed. Amid French-led efforts to establish new govt, Hariri and French President Macron 10 Feb met to discuss situation. Unidentified assailants 3 Feb allegedly abducted Shiite political activist and Hizbollah critic Lokman Slim near Srifa, southern Lebanon; Slim next day found dead from gunshot wounds near Sidon. Following death, activists and supporters of Slim warned of return to 2004-2013 era of political

assassinations while many blamed Hizbollah, which 4 Feb condemned killing; Aoun same day called for investigation. Meanwhile, Lebanese army by 4 Feb arrested 30 demonstrators in Tripoli city on riot charges for alleged role in Jan unrest. Court of cassation 18 Feb dismissed Judge Fadi Sawan in charge of investigation into deadly Beirut port blast last Aug; families of victims 18-19 Feb protested decision outside Palace of Justice. Govt 14 Feb began rolling out COVID-19 vaccinations; concerns over fairness of distribution 23 Feb surfaced amid reports of lawmakers receiving preferential access to vaccinations, prompting World Bank to warn it would suspend COVID-19 support if violation of terms of agreement confirmed. UN Security Council 20 Feb extended funding for special tribunal investigating 2005 assassination of Lebanon's former PM Rafik Hariri. Hizbollah 1 Feb claimed it downed Israeli drone, ten days after Israel claimed it shot down drone that allegedly entered its airspace from Lebanon.

➔ **Syria Russia brokered deal to end standoff between regime and Kurdish-led forces in north east while Islamic State (ISIS) continued attacks in central desert.** In north east, following Jan clashes between govt and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), both sides 2 Feb agreed to Russian-mediated deal; according to agreement, SDF lifts siege imposed on regime-controlled neighbourhoods in Qamishli and Hassakeh cities, and regime reinstates supply lines to Kurdish-populated areas near Aleppo. In central desert, ISIS attacks 3, 8, 23 and 24 Feb killed over 50 regime and pro-regime security personnel; ISIS 9 Feb reportedly killed four SDF fighters in Abu Khashab desert in Deir Ez-Zor province. Amid attacks, Russia 8 Feb evacuated military positions in Al-Taym oil field, and 19-20 and 23 Feb launched airstrikes killing at least 30 ISIS fighters in Aleppo, Hama and Raqqa provinces. Following regime's military buildup around Tafas town in western Daraa province, regime and former opposition forces 8 Feb agreed to halt hostilities in Russian-brokered deal. In Idlib province, members of al-Qaeda affiliate Ansar al-Tawhid 7 Feb attacked Russian headquarters near Kafr Nabl city, killing one senior Russian officer and ten Syrian soldiers. Jihadist rebel group Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham continued crackdown on rival groups: 7-8 Feb reportedly killed Turkish jihadist and former member of al-Qaeda-linked Hurras al-Din; 11 Feb detained senior Hurras al-Din member. U.S. airstrikes 25 Feb targeted "infrastructure utilised by Iranian-backed militant groups" in Deir Ez-Zor province in retaliation for rocket attacks in Iraq (see Iraq). After fifth round of Constitutional Committee talks aimed at drafting new constitution failed to make progress in Jan, head of opposition Syrian Negotiations Commission Nasr al-Hariri 3 Feb accused regime of playing for time until it can retake control militarily. Turkey, Russia and Iran 16-17 Feb held 15th round of Astana talks in Russian city Sochi. Syria and Israel 18 Feb concluded Russian-mediated prisoner exchange involving release of Israeli woman and two Syrian shepherds. Israel 3 Feb reportedly launched airstrikes on govt troops and Iran-linked targets in Quneitra province in south, 15 and 28 Feb reportedly struck targets on outskirts of capital Damascus.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Iran Tehran expanded nuclear activity and edged closer to reducing international monitoring of nuclear sites despite diplomatic efforts to resurrect nuclear deal.** Authorities continued to expand nuclear activity in

violation of 2015 deal: Iran's envoy to International Atomic Energy Association (IAEA) 2 Feb announced operationalisation of two centrifuge cascades, or sets of centrifuges, at Natanz facility, with work under way on centrifuge cascades at Fordow facility; IAEA 8 Feb reported production of 3.6g of uranium metal, banned for 15 years under 2015 deal, at Isfahan site; IAEA 17 Feb said Iran informed it of intention to set up two centrifuge cascades at Natanz site; E3 (UK, France and Germany) 12 Feb expressed "grave concern". In indication of Tehran's willingness to move beyond restrictions solely aimed at nuclear capabilities, IAEA 15 Feb announced Iran will limit agency inspection access to nuclear sites from 23 Feb; IAEA chief Rafael Grossi 20 Feb visited capital Tehran and next day reached temporary measures to ensure "necessary degree of monitoring and verification". On diplomatic front, U.S. and Iran expressed support for resurrecting 2015 nuclear deal but both called on other to move first: U.S. Sec of State Antony Blinken 16 Feb said "first step would be Iran returning to compliance" and then "we would do the same" while Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei next day said "if we see action on the part of the other side, we will take action, too". Incoming U.S. ambassador to UN 18 Feb informed presidency of Security Council that U.S. was rescinding Trump administration's contention of having snapped back all pre-nuclear deal UN sanctions on Iran; Biden administration also relaxed Trump-era restrictions on Iranian diplomats in New York. FM Javad Zarif next day reaffirmed U.S. must first "unconditionally and effectively lift all sanctions". Iran and U.S. expressed support for EU diplomatic role: Zarif 14 Feb said EU could "choreograph" next steps while U.S. 18 Feb indicated it would attend EU-proposed meeting of nuclear deal parties; Iranian Foreign Ministry 28 Feb said "time isn't ripe" for informal meeting. U.S. 25 Feb launched airstrikes in Syria on Iran-linked targets (see Syria).

➔ **Iraq Rocket attacks targeted U.S.-led coalition forces while Turkey launched military operation against Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).**

Barrage of rockets 15 Feb struck airport hosting international coalition forces and residential areas of central Erbil city in Kurdistan Regional Govt's territory, killing one U.S. contractor and one civilian as well as injuring 14 others, including one U.S. soldier; newly established pro-Iran Shiite paramilitary group Saraya Awliya al-Dam next day claimed responsibility, citing U.S. troops as main target and vowing further attacks. U.S. Sec of State Antony Blinken expressed "outrage" and 17 Feb issued joint statement with UK, France, Germany and Italy condemning attack. At least four rockets 20 Feb hit military base hosting U.S. contractors in Balad, north of capital Baghdad, injuring one Iraqi contractor; at least two rockets 22 Feb hit Green Zone in Baghdad. Meanwhile, Ankara 10 Feb launched military operation against PKK in Iraq's Gara Mountain region, Duhok province that resulted in deaths of three Turkish soldiers and, according to Turkish officials, 13 hostages held by PKK (see Turkey). Turkey 15 Feb also warned of intervention in Sinjar district, Ninewa province, in case of continued PKK activity; paramilitary coalition Popular Mobilisation Front-linked groups warned Turkey not to launch such operations. In south, protests 5 Feb in Nasiriyah city called for basic services, end to corruption and information on whereabouts of local activist Sajjad al-Iraqi allegedly kidnapped in Sept 2020; clashes between demonstrators and security forces 26 Feb in Nasiriyah killed five protesters and injured over 175. Demonstrators in Wasit province in east 7 Feb demanded dismissal of local govt and accountability for protesters who had been killed by security forces. Earlier in month, security forces 1 Feb began vacating Jeddah 5 displacement camp in Ninewa governorate, home to 7,000 people

displaced during battles with Islamic State (ISIS); rapid pace has alarmed humanitarian groups that warn of lack of basic services or reprisals over ISIS family ties. Parliament's Finance Committee 5 Feb voted in favour of cutting 2021 budget in bid to reduce federal deficit; Erbil and Baghdad continued to dispute terms of Kurdistan's share of budget.

➔ **Saudi Arabia Huthis launched cross-border attacks while U.S. sanctioned senior officials for 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.** Yemen's Huthis launched series of attacks throughout Feb. Notably, armed group 10, 13 Feb targeted Abha International Airport in south west and 11 Feb launched drone attack on southern town of Khamis Mushayt that hosts major Saudi airbase. Saudi-led coalition 14 Feb said it intercepted two Huthi drones targeting Abha airport. Huthis next day claimed they struck Jeddah and Abha airports. Saudi forces said they intercepted two Huthi drones targeting Abha airport 16 Feb, and two Huthi drones targeting Khamis Mushait 18 Feb. Huthis 28 Feb announced they targeted capital Riyadh with missiles and drones, while threatening to continue attacks. Reports late Feb indicated 23 Jan drone attack on Yamama Palace in Riyadh was launched from Iraqi territory. Declassified U.S. intelligence report 26 Feb concluded that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman approved operation that led to 2018 murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Turkey; U.S. State and Treasury Departments same day announced sanctions on alleged Saudi perpetrators – sanctions, however, did not include Mohammed bin Salman.

↓ 🌐 **Yemen Huthis intensified military offensive in Marib governorate, threatening further escalation in area, while U.S. changed course to address conflict with renewed focus on mediation.** In some of heaviest fighting since 2018, Huthis mid-month significantly stepped up their year-long offensive in Marib governorate where they advanced in north west, west and south of province, making particular progress in western district of Sirwah some 20km from Marib city. Looming battle for Marib city and nearby oil and gas production facilities could trigger more mass displacement, deepen country's humanitarian and economic crisis, and spark renewed armed conflict in south and along Red Sea coast in March. Govt-aligned forces late Feb announced imminent counter-offensive to expel Huthi forces from Marib governorate, but Huthis held recent gains by end of Feb. Rebels also intensified cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia (see Saudi Arabia). In major policy shifts, U.S. President Biden 4 Feb announced that U.S. will halt "offensive support" for Saudi-led coalition's war effort in Yemen, including transfer of precision-guided munitions, while "stepping up" diplomatic support for UN-led mediation; appointed veteran diplomat Timothy Lenderking as new U.S. special envoy to Yemen; and, lastly, revoked Trump administration's designation of Huthi movement and its three top leaders as "foreign terrorists". In renewed diplomatic push, Lenderking 22 Feb-3 March travelled to several Gulf countries to meet govt officials and UN special envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths. Meanwhile, UN humanitarian chief Mark Lowcock 18 Feb briefed UN Security Council on Yemen, warning of "worst famine the world has seen in decades". UN 21 Feb announced that talks proceeding since 24 Jan between Huthis and govt on potential prisoner swap failed to reach agreement.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** **Protesters took to streets on two-year anniversary of pro-democracy Hirak movement, and President Tebboune announced early legislative elections.** Despite COVID-19 ban on protests, around 5,000 people 16 Feb demonstrated in Kheratta town, Bejaia province, site of first protest against former President Bouteflika in 2019; thousands took to streets in capital Algiers and other cities to mark two-year anniversary of first Hirak nationwide protest 22 Feb; in apparent resumption of nationwide Friday protests, thousands 26 Feb gathered across country, security forces fired tear gas to disperse protesters in Algiers. In address to nation, Tebboune – who 12 Feb returned home from Germany after month-long medical treatment of COVID-19 complication – 18 Feb announced dissolution of lower house of parliament and early legislative elections within six months; also said he was offering pardon to around 55 jailed Hirak movement activists. Tebboune 21 Feb partially reshuffled govt, keeping key figures – including PM Abdelaziz Djerad and Justice Minister Belkacem Zeghmami, symbol of judicial repression against opposition and Hirak activists – in place. Earlier in month, govt 13 Feb accused Bouteflika-era officials of banking on resumption of protests to regain influence. State-owned media 17 Feb broadcast confession of jihadist known as Abu Dahdah who claimed he used social media in collaboration with Hirak activists to encourage protests. Meanwhile, student and Hirak activist Walid Nekiche 1 Feb claimed during his trial that security forces physically and sexually abused him when he was in detention following his Nov 2019 arrest; public prosecutor 7 Feb ordered preliminary investigation into Nekiche's claims. Local NGOs National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees, National Coordination of Algerian Academics for Change and Collective of Lawyers for the Defence of Prisoners of Conscience 13 Feb launched joint committee to combat abuse of prisoners. Court 18 Feb sentenced to death main suspect in 2014 kidnapping and beheading of French citizen Hervé Gourdel; Islamic State affiliate had claimed responsibility for killing.

➔ **Egypt** **Govt came under parliament's scrutiny, while jihadist insurgency persisted in North Sinai, albeit at lower level.** Amid rumours of imminent cabinet reshuffle since Jan, parliament late Jan-early Feb questioned govt ministers about implementation of govt's program, voicing strong criticism of several ministers' performance; head of parliament's Local Administration Committee Ahmed Al-Sigini late Feb said some ministers should be replaced. Former presidential candidate and leader of Ghad party Ayman Nour 11 Feb launched platform of exiled opposition figures Union of Egyptian National Forces, with stated aim to oust President Sisi. Authorities 6 Feb released TV channel Al Jazeera journalist Mahmoud Hussein after more than four years of pre-trial detention; Hussein had been accused of spreading false news, joining banned group and receiving foreign funds. NGO Human Rights Watch 19 Feb condemned govt's targeting of Egypt-based family members of critics living abroad; statement comes after authorities 13 Feb arrested two cousins of U.S.-based rights activist Mohamed Soltan in Menoufiya governorate. In North Sinai, Islamic State affiliate Sinai Province 9 Feb killed six tribal militiamen and reportedly abducted another in Maghara area in central Sinai; IED attacks 10 Feb destroyed army bulldozer in Naga Shabana village south of Rafah, and 12 Feb wounded several soldiers in Sheikh Zuweid area. Govt early Feb announced construction of 36km-long fence to protect

Sharm al-Sheikh resort town in southern Sinai from North Sinai violence. Amid stalled AU-led negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan on Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on Blue Nile River, Egypt 24 Feb endorsed Sudan's proposal for quadripartite mediation by AU, EU, U.S. and UN. Egypt 8-9 Feb hosted reconciliation talks between Palestinian factions in capital Cairo (see Israel/Palestine); 9 Feb for first time in years "indefinitely" opened Rafah border crossing with Gaza Strip.

↑ **Libya In unexpected breakthrough, participants to UN-led political talks elected new political leadership; implementation of Oct 2020 ceasefire however still on hold.** UN-backed Libyan Political Dialogue Forum 5 Feb elected heads of unified transitional govt to lead country to general elections scheduled for Dec 2021; winning ticket secured 39 votes of 74, with Abdelhamid Dabaiba, a businessman with ties to former Qadhafi regime, elected PM-designate, Mohamed al-Menfi (representing east) chosen as Presidency Council president-designate, and Musa al-Koni (south) and Abdullah al-Lafi (west) elected Presidency Council VP-designates; vote of confidence in House of Representatives (HoR), currently scheduled on 8 March, needed for new leadership and upcoming cabinet to officially replace Libya's two rival govts. Tripoli-based Govt of National Accord (GNA) immediately welcomed breakthrough and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, leader of east-based Arab-Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF), 6 Feb said he was ready to work with new leadership. UN Security Council 9 Feb welcomed "important milestone in Libyan political process". In east, in bid to foster unity ahead of vote of confidence, al-Menfi 11 Feb met dozens of tribal elders, academics and activists in Benghazi city, next day met mayor of Tobruk city and pledged to unify all state institutions. Dabaiba 25 Feb delayed submitting list of cabinet members to HoR for approval. AFP 28 Feb leaked UN report alleging at least three delegates had received bribes to vote for Dabaiba in 5 Feb election. Meanwhile, UN Security Council 4 Feb called on Sec-Gen Guterres to deploy advance team to monitor implementation of Oct 2020 ceasefire, and UN Special Envoy for Libya Ján Kubiš 19 Feb met with Haftar in Benghazi city to discuss ceasefire implementation. Unclaimed mortar attack during tenth anniversary celebrations of Libyan uprising 17 Feb killed one child in Sabha city in south. GNA Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha 21 Feb claimed he was target of assassination attempt after gunmen same day opened fire on his motorcade outside capital Tripoli; one person killed and two arrested.

➔ **Tunisia Amid socio-economic crisis, political standstill continued, while protesters took to street in capital Tunis to demand compromise and denounce police brutality.** Amid deepening constitutional crisis, President Saïed 3 Feb reiterated refusal to swear in 11 ministers whom PM Hichem Mechichi appointed in Jan, citing breach of constitution over alleged lack of deliberation prior to cabinet reshuffle; in attempt to circumvent Saïed, Mechichi 15 Feb appointed outgoing ministers as interim heads of vacant portfolios. Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party, which is part of Mechichi's coalition govt and largest group in parliament, 27 Feb gathered some 20,000 supporters in Tunis to call on Saïed to compromise. Following countrywide demonstrations over deteriorating socio-economic crisis in Jan, NGO Human Rights Watch 5 Feb said police had used "violent tactics to quash protests" and called on authorities to investigate death of protester. Thousands next day took to streets in Tunis to denounce police violence; march coincided with eighth anniversary of politician and human rights defender

Chokri Belaïd's assassination. Amid delays in implementation of Nov agreement between govt and activists from oil-rich Kamour area in south, who demand redistribution of hydrocarbon wealth, army 11 Feb prevented protesters from closing valve of Kamour oil pumping station; protesters 24 Feb staged general strike across Tataouine governorate. Court 24 Feb released on bail media mogul and Qalb Tounes party leader Nabil Karoui, arrested in Dec on charges of money laundering and tax evasion. Explosive device 3 Feb killed four soldiers during counter-terrorism operation in Mount Mghila area (centre west) near Algerian border.

➔ **Western Sahara Polisario Front independence movement said it killed Moroccan soldiers inside Morocco for first time since 1991 ceasefire; Rabat denied claim.** Polisario 9 Feb said it raided Moroccan army garrison in Ouarkziz area in southern Morocco previous day, killing three soldiers; Polisario's claim of inflicting losses on kingdom's soil is a first since 1991 ceasefire. Moroccan PM Saad-Eddine El Othmani next day denied claim as propaganda war. Bipartisan group of 27 U.S. senators 17 Feb urged U.S. President Biden to reverse former U.S. President Trump's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara; group also called on U.S. to recommit to referendum on self-determination as solution to conflict. Position of UN envoy for Western Sahara remained vacant after Polisario Front in Jan rejected appointment of former Romanian PM Petre Roman, citing his ties with Morocco and past participation in event organised inside Morocco-controlled Western Sahara. Polisario late Feb said "UN bears great responsibility for Morocco's actions" in Western Sahara, including Rabat's incursion into UN-monitored Guerguerat Buffer Strip in Nov. Rights activist Mahmoud Lemaadel mid-Feb said Morocco had launched brutal crackdown on Western Sahara's civil society in recent weeks.