

# Middle East and North Africa

---

## Eastern Mediterranean

---

➔ **Israel/Palestine** **East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Sheikh Jarrah remained tense flashpoint, while Palestinian Central Council convened for first time since 2018.** In occupied East Jerusalem, tensions ran high in Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood, which remained critical flashpoint of friction. Most notably, in provocative move, far-right lawmaker Itamar Ben Gvit 13 Feb reopened makeshift office in Sheikh Jarrah claiming to protect Israeli settlers, prompting clashes between Palestinians, settlers and police, injuring at least 14. EU and Palestinian Authority (PA) same day voiced concerns over potential for wider outbreak of violence. Israeli police 18 Feb violently dispersed protesters at weekly demonstration against eviction of Palestinian Salem family initially scheduled in March; court 22 Feb ruled to freeze judgment until at least after Ramadan in April. In West Bank, Israeli special forces 8 Feb carried out extrajudicial killing of three Palestinians in car in Nablus in first such operation since Second Intifada; dozens in Gaza and West Bank next day protested killings. Israeli forces 14-15 Feb killed two Palestinians during clashes in Silat al-Harithiya and Nabi Saleh villages. In first meeting since 2018, Palestinian Central Council (PCC) 6-7 Feb appointed members close to Palestinian President Abbas to Executive Committee; Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, second largest Palestinian faction after Fatah, and other smaller factions boycotted meeting, accusing Abbas of stocking Palestine Liberation Organization leadership with loyalists. PCC 9 Feb announced suspension of security cooperation with Israel and recognition of Israeli state until latter recognises Palestinian sovereignty and halts settler activities; similar statements in 2018 and 2015 had not been implemented. NGO Amnesty International 1 Feb published report accusing Israel of apartheid against Palestinians; Israeli govt and allies, including U.S., UK and Germany, rejected findings. Syria 9 Feb fired anti-aircraft missile toward Israel in response to alleged Israeli attack on Syrian capital Damascus that killed one soldier and injured five; Israel same day carried out airstrike on Syrian missile batteries. Syrian state media 16 Feb reported Israeli shelling targeting Zakiya town. On Lebanese border, tensions rose with Hizbollah (see Lebanon).

➔ **Lebanon** **Govt held talks with International Monetary Fund (IMF), political infighting continued among political elite, and tensions surfaced between Hizbollah and Israel.** Govt and Central Bank representatives 11 Feb concluded talks with IMF, which said “progress was made in agreeing on these necessary reform areas” but “more work is needed to translate them into concrete policies”, likely indicating that there is long way to go before deal is concluded; meanwhile, Central Bank continued attempts to stabilise exchange rate of Lebanese lira by injecting hundreds of millions of U.S. dollars into exchange market, further depleting country’s reserves. On political front, judge considered close to President Aoun 15 Feb requested Central Bank Governor Riyadh Salameh be brought in for questioning in investigation over alleged fraud; in sign of divisions among branches of security sector, Internal Security Forces (thought to be loyal to former PM Saad Hariri) reportedly prevented State Security (headed by Aoun’s ally) officers from entering residency where Salameh was present, raising spectre of clashes between

branches owing to tensions between political leaders. After Kuwaiti FM Ahmad Nasser al-Mohammad al-Sabah late Jan transmitted list of 12 demands from Gulf countries to restore relations between govt and Gulf, which inter alia reportedly called for Hizbollah's disarmament, Hizbollah 15 Feb hosted public event of main Bahraini Shiite opposition group Al-Wefaq in capital Beirut, likely intended to signal defiance. On regional front, Hizbollah's leader Hassan Nasrallah 16 Feb claimed group was producing drones domestically and would soon have capacity to turn rockets into precision-guided missiles. Israel 17 Feb reportedly downed Hizbollah drone violating its airspace. Hizbollah 18 Feb flew drone into Israeli airspace to undertake significant reconnaissance mission before drone returned; Israel confirmed foreign aircraft entered airspace and next day conducted overflights and staged mock raids above Beirut. U.S. senior official 8 Feb began new talks on demarcation of maritime border between Lebanon and Israel; FM Abdallah Bouhabib 18 Feb expressed positive position on new proposals.

➡ **Syria U.S. military raid in Idlib led to death of Islamic State (ISIS) leader, ceasefire in Idlib held, and Turkey launched airstrikes against Kurdish militants.** U.S. special forces 3 Feb carried out overnight raid in Atma town in Idlib province targeting ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, who reportedly detonated explosives that killed himself and family members; operation also killed several civilians and ISIS fighters. Raid raises concerns that Idlib could remain ISIS hideout, providing pretext for Russia and govt to attack area. Elsewhere in province, March 2020 ceasefire held despite violations; notably, govt shelling 12 Feb killed six civilians in Maraath al-Naasan village. Russia during month deployed long-range nuclear-capable bombers and hypersonic missiles at its Hmeimim airbase, likely to bolster presence along NATO's southern flank; fears rose that war in Ukraine may have knock-on effects in Idlib, as Turkish support for Ukraine may provoke ire of Russia and fuel tensions between Moscow and Ankara (see Ukraine). ISIS attacks increased in north east following last month's Ghwaryan prison clashes; notably, ISIS sleeper cell 9 Feb attacked SDF military point in Shuhail, Deir ez-Zor province, killing two SDF members. In north east, Turkey early month launched new military campaign Operation Winter Eagle against Kurdish militants, with dozens of warplanes carrying out air raids in Hasakah and Raqqah provinces. In Turkish factions-controlled area in north west, Kurdish group People's Defence Units (YPG) 15 Feb killed four civilians and injured 12 in Azaz, Aleppo province, with rockets fired from Tal Rifaat city; Turkish-backed forces responded by shelling YPG in Tal Rifaat. In rare protest in govt-controlled area, hundreds 11 Feb demonstrated against worsening economic conditions in Druze-majority city As-Suwayda (south west). Syria 9 Feb fired anti-aircraft missile toward Israel in response to alleged Israeli attack on capital Damascus that killed one soldier and injured five; Israel same day carried out airstrike on Syrian missile batteries. According to Syrian state media, Israeli attack 24 Feb killed three soldiers near Damascus.

---

## **Gulf and Arabian Peninsula**

---

➡ **Iran Marathon negotiations involving Iran, U.S. and other world powers reached inflection point that will determine whether 2015 nuclear deal is revived or collapses.** Eighth round of talks in Austrian capital Vienna 8 Feb resumed after short hiatus beginning late Jan. Iran's lead negotiator

16 Feb asserted that “we are closer than ever” to deal, but remarks from FM Hossein Amirabollahian published same day underscored that closer does not necessarily mean close; Iran continued emphasising U.S. guarantees against future withdrawal from nuclear deal and insistence on “total lifting” of Trump-era sanctions designations, both of which have been consistent Iranian terms since negotiations began and neither of which is likely to be attainable. Iran’s lead negotiator 23 Feb left Vienna for consultations in Tehran that could determine whether talks yield breakthrough or breakdown; while gaps between parties have narrowed, remaining areas of disagreement are significant enough to scupper breakthrough. Meanwhile, U.S. 4 Feb issued sanctions waivers, which Trump administration had issued after U.S. 2018 withdrawal from deal but revoked in 2020, on 2015 nuclear deal-linked nuclear co-operation project; U.S. asserted that decision was “designed to facilitate discussions” in Vienna and “serve U.S. non-proliferation and nuclear safety interests”; E3 (France, Germany and UK) next day welcomed announcement, while Iranian FM posited that “what happens on paper is good, but not enough”. South Korean officials 15-16 Feb held consultations with Iranian counterparts regarding Iran’s frozen assets, with Seoul noting that “sanctions-related issues, including the transfer of frozen funds, would be resolved when a deal is reached” in Vienna. Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps 9 Feb revealed new solid fuel-powered ballistic missile, with purported range of 1,450km; military chief of staff asserted that missile development would proceed “quantitatively and qualitatively”.

➔ **Iraq Parliament failed to elect new president, stalling govt formation and leading country into uncharted constitutional waters, while Turkey launched new military campaign in northern Iraq.** Govt formation came to unprecedented standstill after parliament 7 Feb failed to reach necessary two-thirds quorum to elect new president within constitutional deadline. Unsure of obtaining two-thirds of votes for their Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) presidential candidate Hoshiyar Zebari, tripartite alliance – comprising Sunni parties, KDP and Shiite Sadrist movement and led by Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr – boycotted session. Supreme Court 13 Feb invalidated Zebari’s candidacy over corruption charges. Fearing Sadr could form govt excluding rival Shiite Coordination Framework, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps commander 8 Feb visited Iraq to meet Sadr who maintained intention to form majority govt. Lack of precedent for deadlock fuelled uncertainty, which may eventually force new elections. In move likely to raise tensions between Baghdad and Erbil and possibly cause rift within tripartite alliance, Supreme Court 15 Feb ruled Kurdistan regional govt’s law regulating region’s independent oil industry unconstitutional. Meanwhile, Turkey early Feb launched new military campaign Operation Winter Eagle against Kurdish militants, constituting most significant escalation in airstrikes since Aug 2021. Turkish air force 1 Feb conducted over 20 airstrikes in Sinjar district, Nineveh governorate, and Makhmur district, Erbil governorate, killing ten Yazidi Resistance Units (YBS) and Kurdish Workers’ Party (PKK) members. In following days, YBS protested in Sinjar, raising tensions with military who banned protests. Previously unknown Ahrar Sinjar group – likely front for pro-Iran Shiite group Asaib Ahl al-Haq – claimed 2 Feb rocket attack on Turkish military base in Sinjar. Group deemed to be front for pro-Iran faction Alwiat al-Wa’ad al-Haqq claimed responsibility for three drones targeting United Arab Emirates on 2 Feb. In Maysan governorate, PM Al-Kadhimi 7 Feb established new operations command amid insecurity; notably, unidentified gunmen 9 Feb assassinated member of Sadrist militia Saraya al-Salam in Amara city, latest in series

of killings involving Sadrists and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, raising fears of more clashes between groups. Anti-Islamic State operations continued throughout month.

➡ **Saudi Arabia Cross-border Huthi attacks injured dozens, while Tehran and Riyadh reaffirmed intention to hold fifth round of direct negotiations.** Saudi air defence 10 Feb intercepted explosive-laden Huthi drone targeting Abha airport in 'Asir province, injuring at least 12 people. Saudi-led coalition 21 Feb destroyed drone allegedly fired from Yemeni capital Sanaa targeting King Abdallah airport in southern Jizan city; shrapnel injured 16 civilians. In response, Saudi-led coalition throughout month carried out airstrikes in Yemen (see Yemen). Meanwhile, Iranian President Raisi 5 Feb reportedly said Tehran was ready for negotiations with Saudi Arabia if Riyadh was willing to maintain "atmosphere of mutual understanding and respect"; FM Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud 19 Feb said kingdom was planning fifth round of direct talks with Iran. During phone call to King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud, U.S. President Biden 9 Feb reaffirmed "commitment to support" kingdom against Huthi attacks.

➡ **Yemen Anti-Huthi forces maintained multi-front offensive to regain lost territories as fighting in Marib stalemated, while tensions in south and economic hardship across country persisted.** Govt-affiliated forces throughout month launched multi-front offensive, restoring degree of military equilibrium after two years of Huthi gains, but suffered series of reversals on ground. Govt forces advanced on Haradh city, Hajjah governorate, and reportedly gained parts of al-Safra district, Saada governorate. In Taiz governorate, United Arab Emirates (UAE)-backed National Resistance Forces advanced along Red Sea-Taiz city road between Jabal Habashi and Maqabana districts. However, Huthis launched counteroffensives in each area, claiming to have retaken most territory. In Marib governorate, fighting largely stalemated. Saudi-led coalition early month reportedly deployed newly-formed "Happy Yemen Brigades" near Marib. While UAE-backed Giants Brigades late Jan withdrew from Shebwa and southern Marib governorates, two brigades remained in northern Shebwa and Harib governorates where fighting continued. In southern Marib governorate, govt forces encircled Huthis from strategic al-Ain and Harib road. Huthis continued cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia throughout month (see Saudi Arabia). Saudi-led coalition responded with airstrikes; notably, strike 14 Feb hit telecommunications infrastructure in capital Sanaa. In Hadramawt governorate in south, tensions between govt and tribal Hiba movement rose as Hiba blocked oil exports, demanding greater share of oil revenues from Shihr port. Southern Transitional Council official 17 Feb called for "escalation" of protests demanding withdrawal of govt troops from governorate. Fuel shortages remained widespread, particularly in Huthi-controlled territories, with govt and Huthis accusing each other of blocking passage of oil. Yemeni riyal 15 Feb fell to 1,180 to U.S. dollar, further increasing pressure on fuel price. Internationally, U.S. govt – under pressure from UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel – 4 Feb held internal meeting about possible designation of Huthis as Foreign Terrorist Organisation; Treasury Dept 23 Feb sanctioned members of international network funding Huthis. UN Envoy Hans Grundberg 3 Feb met Huthi spokesperson in Oman's capital Muscat; Huthis still refused Grundberg's entry into Sanaa. In UN Security Council briefing, Grundberg 15 Feb announced new framework for inclusive process. UN Security Council 28 Feb imposed arms embargo on Huthis.

---

## North Africa

---

➔ **Algeria** **Senate elections confirmed dominance of ruling party; dismissal of top presidential aides reflected jockeying for power among state institutions; silencing of dissent continued.** Indirect elections for Council of the Nation (Senate) 5 Feb confirmed dominance of ruling party National Liberation Front (FLN) with 62 seats and FLN's traditional ally National Democratic Rally with 21 seats. Meanwhile, power game between presidency, army and intelligence services intensified. Under pressure from Army Chief of Staff Saïd Chengriha, President Tebboune 8 Feb dismissed close adviser and former intelligence officer Boualem Boualem, who had reportedly been leading anti-Chengriha clan within govt. After at least 40 members of Hirak protest movement imprisoned in capital Algiers' El-Harrach prison 28 Jan went on hunger strike to denounce "false accusations" against them and "unjustified extensions of pretrial detention", authorities early Feb transferred prisoners to different prisons; NGO Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights 4 Feb denounced "illegal and arbitrary" transfers aiming to break hunger strike. Authorities 18 Feb arrested Hirak activist Zaki Hannache, 24 Feb charged him with "praising terrorism" and "spreading false news"; 19 Feb arrested rights activist Faleh Hammoudi, next day sentenced him to three years on several charges including "spreading false news". On occasion of third anniversary of Hirak protest movement, 21 local and international NGOs 22 Feb denounced "escalating repression" threatening "survival of Algerian civil society". Tebboune 13 Feb froze new taxes introduced by 2022 finance law citing need to "save the people from famine linked to higher prices and food shortages". Diplomatic tensions with France continued to subside: authorities 17 Feb reopened Algerian airspace to French military planes after four-month closure.

➔ **Egypt** **Violence persisted in Sinai Peninsula, and country's human rights record came under international spotlight.** In Sinai Peninsula, low-intensity fighting between Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated Sinai Province (SP) and security forces and allied militiamen continued. Pro-govt Sinai Tribal Union (STU) 4 Feb said it had killed ISIS commander in central Sinai, Abu Rawaha al-Ansari; 13 Feb said it had lost eight militiamen in clashes with SP militants in Sinai Peninsula. Explosive devices 6, 9 Feb wounded at least four civilians in Rafah area (North Sinai); 19-20 Feb killed three civilians including one child in Sheikh Zuweid area (North Sinai). Suspected SP militants 9 Feb killed one soldier in same area; 15 Feb abducted two civilians in Al-Gafgafa region (central Sinai). Meanwhile, 175 EU lawmakers 3 Feb called on UN Human Rights Council to establish monitoring and reporting mechanism to bring Egypt's "devastating" human rights situation under global scrutiny during body's 49th regular session 28 Feb-1 April. Ahead of 17 Feb AU-EU Summit in Belgian capital Brussels, NGO Human Rights Watch 14 Feb called on Europe not to "roll out the red carpet" for President Sisi in light of "human rights crisis unfolding under his rule". After Addis Ababa 20 Feb announced it had begun producing electricity from Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, FM Sameh Shoukry same day accused Ethiopia of violating 2015 Declaration of Principles (see Nile Waters).

↓ 🇱🇾 **Libya House of Representatives appointed Fathi Bashagha as new PM, increasing polarisation and raising risk of institutional division; vote of confidence in new govt could result in two rival govts vying for power.** Unidentified gunmen 10 Feb attacked incumbent PM Abdulhamid Dabaiba's convoy in capital Tripoli; sources close to Dabaiba denounced "assassination attempt". Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) hours later appointed former Tripoli-based Interior Minister Fathi Bashagha as PM-designate and tasked him with forming new govt by late Feb. HoR same day postponed elections indefinitely by passing new political roadmap stipulating HoR and rival Tripoli-based assembly, High State Council, will task experts committee with amending never-adopted 2017 draft constitution; amendments to be subjected to referendum prior to elections. Bashagha's appointment follows 2021 deal with his past foe, Libyan National Army head Khalifa Haftar, providing that in case of failure to hold presidential election in Dec 2021, Haftar would support Bashagha as head of new govt in return for concessions in cabinet line-up and on condition that Bashagha increase funds allocated to Haftar-led military forces. Dabaiba immediately rejected HoR's move, vowed to remain in post until national elections are held. Hundreds 11 Feb demonstrated in Tripoli and Misrata city against HoR; military brigades loyal to Dabaiba next day converged on Tripoli from other towns to "secure the government headquarters and key sites in the capital". Dabaiba 21 Feb announced multi-track plan leading to parliamentary elections in June and postponing constitutional review and presidential election to after new parliament is seated; also reiterated elections "sole solution" to political crisis. HoR 28 Feb postponed vote of confidence in Bashagha's proposed govt citing need for more consultations on cabinet line-up. Foreign powers remained divided on way forward, with several foreign capitals adopting wait-and-see attitude while Egypt and Russia supported Bashagha's bid to premiership. Dabaiba's Govt of National Unity 17 Feb criticised UN Special Adviser Stephanie Williams for allegedly making contradictory statements on political crisis.

➡ **Tunisia President Saïed dissolved top judicial watchdog, tightening his grip on judiciary.** Saïed 6 Feb announced dissolution of Supreme Council of the Judiciary, body tasked with ensuring judicial independence, accusing it of "bias", "corruption" and delaying politically sensitive investigations; police next day blocked Council's access in capital Tunis. In response, Association of Tunisian Judges 9 Feb launched two-day strike; some 1,000 judges and lawyers 10 Feb protested decision in Tunis. Move also drew international condemnation. G7 and EU member states' ambassadors in Tunisia 8 Feb said decision tampers with "functioning of the judicial system and respect for its independence"; UN human rights chief Michelle Bachelet same day condemned "clear violation of Tunisia's obligations under international human rights law". Saïed 12 Feb issued decree formally dissolving Supreme Council, setting up provisional judicial council de facto under his control; also granted himself power to dismiss judges, block their promotion or nomination. Some 2,000 people 13 Feb protested decree in Tunis as part of march organised by Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party. Saïed 24 Feb said he will outlaw foreign funding for civil society organisations, citing need to stop foreign interference. A dozen NGOs and rights groups next day jointly denounced "desire to monopolise power", said move would "undermine human rights and freedoms". Military court 18 Feb sentenced member of suspended parliament Yassine Avari in absentia to ten-month imprisonment on charges of insulting president and army after Avari decried Saïed's move to freeze

parliament in July 2021 as coup. NGO Human Rights Watch 9 Feb accused authorities of using 2015-established state of emergency to place individuals in “secret detention”, warned practice on the rise under Saïed; Saïed 18 Feb extended state of emergency until year’s end.

➡ **Western Sahara Military tensions remained high despite UN-led de-escalation efforts.** Polisario Front independence movement 11 Feb said it had killed 12 Moroccan soldiers in series of operations first week of Feb; claim comes after several Moroccan airstrikes or drone attacks reportedly hit Polisario-held Western Sahara in late-Jan. UN Sec-Gen’s Personal Envoy for Western Sahara Staffan de Mistura 3 Feb met with U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken; Blinken reiterated U.S. support for UN political process for Western Sahara. Moroccan FM Nasser Bourita 14 Feb reaffirmed his country’s commitment to negotiations under UN auspices, insisted autonomy plan is only solution and said Algeria “party to the conflict”.