

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** **Israel continued de facto annexation of West Bank while Palestinian Authority (PA) set date for elections this year following breakthrough in talks between Hamas and Fatah.**

Israel advanced de facto annexation of West Bank: govt 11 Jan announced construction of nearly 800 settler homes in Itamar, Beit El, Shavei Shomron, Oranit and Givat Zeev settlements as well as Nofei Nehemia outpost; UN Sec-Gen Antonio Guterres 18 Jan urged govt to “halt and reverse” decision. Israeli govt 19 Jan issued tenders for 2,572 settler units in East Jerusalem. Elsewhere in West Bank, Israeli forces 1 Jan shot and injured Palestinian man; 5 and 26 Jan reportedly killed Palestinian man over alleged knife attacks. In major breakthrough, Palestinian political parties Hamas and Fatah 6 Jan agreed to hold elections in Palestinian territories, which will be first in 15 years; PA President Abbas 15 Jan signed decree setting legislative and presidential elections for 22 May and 31 July, respectively. Guterres 16 Jan welcomed deal, calling it “a crucial step towards Palestinian unity”. Palestinian PM Shtayyeh 18 Jan called on EU to send team of international observers to monitor polls. Meanwhile, Palestinian MFA 11 Jan called on UN Security Council to stop Israeli govt’s excavations at Jerusalem’s Holy Esplanade, specifically at Western Wall/al-Buraq Square and near al-Maghariba/Dung Gate, accusing Israel of “Judaising” some sites. Following 11 Jan meeting of “Munich Quartet” (Germany, Jordan, Egypt and France) in Egyptian capital Cairo aimed at reviving Israeli-Palestinian peace process, four FMs called for relaunch of “credible negotiations”. New U.S. administration 26 Jan confirmed commitment to two-state solution. In Gaza, unidentified assailants 18 Jan reportedly fired two rockets into Israel; Israeli airstrikes same day struck Hamas targets. After normalisation deal with Israel announced in Oct, Sudan 6 Jan formally signed Abraham Accords in its capital Khartoum. World Health Organization and human rights organisations criticised Israeli govt for withholding COVID-19 vaccines from Palestinians in occupied territories; NGO Amnesty International 6 Jan accused govt of “institutionalized discrimination”. Jerusalem’s District Court 11 Jan postponed PM Netanyahu’s corruption trial to 8 Feb. In Syria, suspected Israeli air raids struck Iran-linked targets (see Syria).

↓ **Lebanon** **Amid worsening economic crisis and COVID-19 lockdown, deadly protests erupted; meanwhile, govt formation remained stalled.**

Govt 14 Jan imposed 11-day lockdown; 21 Jan extended it by two weeks. Taxi drivers 20 Jan clashed with security forces in capital Beirut in protest against lockdown measures; clashes reportedly left some protesters injured. In northern city Tripoli, protests against lockdown and lack of govt support 25-28 Jan turned violent; protesters 28 Jan set municipality building on fire while security forces responded with live bullets amid clashes that left one protester dead and more than 400 people injured, including 40 soldiers and police. Meanwhile, relations between PM-designate Hariri – whom lawmakers nominated in Oct 2020 to form new govt – and President Aoun reached new low after leaked video 12 Jan showed Aoun accusing Hariri of lying about their exchanges over govt formation process. Gebran Bassil – leader of largest Christian political party Free Patriotic Movement – 10 Jan

ruled out joining new govt, citing Hariri's insistence on appointing all ministers. In response to deepening economic crisis, World Bank 12 Jan approved credit of \$246mn to support 147,000 vulnerable families that will enable cash assistance of 100,000 Lebanese lira per person per month – equivalent to \$12 on black market. NGO Human Rights Watch 13 Jan lamented “sharp decline in human rights” due to “failure to address the massive political and economic crises”. Swiss authorities 19 Jan said they had requested legal assistance from Lebanon's judiciary with investigation into money laundering and possible embezzlement tied to Central Bank; Central Bank's governor Riad Salameh same day denied allegations, 21 Jan answered questions from Lebanon's public prosecutor; in separate case, judge 28 Jan charged Salameh with dereliction of duty and breach of trust over alleged mishandling of foreign currency scheme. Internationally, caretaker FM Charbel Wehbe 12 Jan filed complaint to UN Security Council about Israel's violations of Lebanese airspace. Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Air Force Commander Amir Ali Hajizadeh 2 Jan claimed Lebanon owed its missile capabilities to Iran, describing it as “front line of confrontation”; Aoun next day said “the Lebanese have no partner in preserving [their] independence”.

➔ **Syria Tensions continued in north east as fighting broke out between Kurdish-led and pro-govt forces; Islamic State (ISIS) continued deadly attacks.** In north east, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and govt-affiliated troops 23 Jan clashed in Qamishli city in Hassakeh province, reportedly wounding two pro-govt fighters after they opened fire on Kurdish-controlled post. Prior to fighting, SDF 10 Jan arrested regime officers and soldiers in Qamishli and 14 Jan cut off supply lines to regime-forces in Qamishli and Hassakeh cities. Kurdish security forces 31 Jan reportedly opened fire on pro-govt demonstrators protesting siege in Hassakeh, killing one and injuring four. Turkey blamed Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) for 2 Jan vehicle-borne IED attack in Ras al-Ayn city near Turkish border, which killed two children, and for 30 Jan car bomb that killed at least five in Afrin town, Aleppo province. IEDs 2 and 31 Jan also killed at least 13 civilians in Aleppo province. In north west, Russia continued airstrikes targeting southern countryside of Idlib, Hama and Latakia provinces. Turkey 12 Jan evacuated last observation points in regime-controlled territory while mid-month further strengthened positions in southern Idlib. Also in north west, jihadist group Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Brigade 17 Jan claimed previous day attack that reportedly injured three Turkish troops in Aleppo province. Meanwhile, ISIS continued attacks in centre and east: suspected ISIS attack 3 Jan reportedly killed at least nine govt troops in Hama province and attack in Deir Ez-Zor province 11 Jan killed at least eight pro-govt forces; in retaliation, Russia 17-19 Jan conducted 40 airstrikes targeting ISIS-linked targets in Aleppo, Hama and Raqqa provinces. In south, govt forces 11 Jan reportedly threatened to restore security control over western part of Daraa province unless reconciled former rebels cleared area of ISIS and al-Qaeda-backed cells. In Daraa, unknown assailants launched targeted killings of civil servants and IED attacks against former rebels continued. Suspected Israeli air raids 6 Jan reportedly struck Iran-linked targets in south and southern outskirts of capital Damascus, killing at least three; 13 Jan hit Iran-linked targets in Deir Ez-Zor province, killing dozens of pro-govt forces.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ ✂ **Iran** **Tehran continued to violate 2015 nuclear deal and tensions with outgoing Trump administration ran high; new U.S. administration could take steps to re-enter nuclear deal in Feb.** Iran 4 Jan began enriching uranium at 20 per cent – major increase from current 4.5 per cent cap and on par with pre-nuclear deal levels; FM Javad Zarif same day underscored that move and Iran’s other violations “are fully reversible upon full compliance by all”. U.S. 4 Jan called move “nuclear extortion” while UK, France and Germany (E3) 6 Jan said it “carries very significant proliferation-related risks”. International Atomic Energy Agency’s (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi 11 Jan underscored that “we have weeks” to salvage nuclear deal. IAEA 13 Jan reported Iran was working on components for production of uranium metal at Isfahan plant, banned by nuclear deal until 2031; E3 16 Jan said move “has potentially grave military implications”. Meanwhile, outgoing Trump administration continued to impose unilateral sanctions, including 13 Jan on two Iranian foundations, and 15 Jan on Iranian shipping and metals with potential military application, as well as on three Iranian organisations. Regional tensions persisted: FM Zarif 2 Jan claimed that “Israeli agent provocateurs are plotting attacks against Americans” in Iraq; Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) same day described Lebanon as “front line of confrontation” (see Lebanon) and 4 Jan detained South Korean-flagged tanker along with its crew. U.S. 8, 17 and 27 Jan dispatched B-52 bombers to region. U.S. Sec State Mike Pompeo 12 Jan alleged existence of “Iran-al-Qaeda Axis”; FM Zarif same day called accusation “warmongering lies”. Iran launched multiple military drills, including 15 Jan test firing ballistic missiles and drones. As U.S. President Biden’s new administration 20 Jan entered office, hopes rose of U.S. taking steps to re-enter nuclear deal in Feb in case of Iran’s full compliance, as Biden previously pledged; FM Zarif 22 Jan suggested that U.S. had to take initiative, while warning that window of opportunity “will not be open forever”; U.S. 29 Jan appointed Robert Malley, Obama-era official previously involved in negotiations on 2015 nuclear agreement, as special envoy for Iran.

↓ **Iraq** **Islamic State (ISIS) launched one of deadliest suicide attack in years in capital Baghdad; tensions persisted between U.S. and Iran-backed militias and anti-govt protests resurged in south.** Twin suicide bombings in centre of Baghdad 21 Jan killed at least 32 people and wounded over 110 in one of deadliest attacks on civilians in Baghdad in years; ISIS next day claimed responsibility. PM Kadhimi 28 Jan said security forces killed senior ISIS figure Abu Yaser al-Issawi. Earlier in month, thousands of protesters 3 Jan gathered in Tahrir Square in Baghdad to commemorate one-year anniversary of U.S. killing of Iran’s Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani and paramilitary coalition Popular Mobilisation Unit’s (PMU) deputy chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, calling for retaliation and withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq; PMU chairman Faleh al-Fayadh, and leading member of Kataib Hizbollah and acting deputy chairman of PMU Abu Fadak attended rally. Iraqi court 7 Jan issued arrest warrant for U.S. President Trump, citing investigation into U.S. killing of Soleimani and Muhandis. Outgoing U.S. administration 8 Jan sanctioned al-Fayadh over human rights violations, which Iraqi MFA 9 Jan denounced as “unacceptable”; U.S. 13 Jan also added Fadak to list of Specially Designated Global Terrorists. In south, anti-govt protest-

ers 8-10 Jan took to streets in Nasiriyah city in Dhi Qar province, demanding release of detained activists; clashes between protesters and security forces 10 Jan reportedly killed one policeman and wounded dozens more police and protesters. After army commanders 10 Jan sent soldiers to calm down tensions, soldiers and police reportedly clashed as former defended demonstrators; authorities same day detained those involved in violence and launched investigation; protesters 12 Jan continued to gather in Nasiriyah. Prominent activist Alaa al-Rikabi 15 Jan announced formation of Imtidad party, seeking to represent “October Revolution” protest movement formed in 2019. Cabinet 19 Jan postponed general elections, initially scheduled for 6 June, until 10 Oct due to incomplete technical preparations. Deadlock in parliament over 2021 budget persisted over Kurdish region’s budget and govt’s proposal to increase taxation on salaries and pensions.

↑ **Qatar** **Country signed reconciliation deal to end three-and-a-half-year intra-Gulf dispute.** Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain agreed to reopen their land, air and sea borders with Qatar after all four states and Egypt 5 Jan signed al-Ula Declaration at Gulf Cooperation Council summit in Saudi Arabia’s capital Riyadh; agreement ends three-and-a-half-year blockade of Doha by three neighbouring states and Egypt who cut ties with Qatar in July 2017.

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↓ ♦ **Yemen** **Outgoing U.S. administration designated Huthi group and leaders as terrorists, potentially imperilling aid and diplomatic efforts and risking Huthi retaliation.** In one of its final acts in office,

outgoing U.S. Trump administration 11 Jan designated Huthi movement as Foreign Terrorist Organisation and Specially Designated Global Terrorist entity, and three top leaders as Specially Designated Global Terrorists, all of which came into force on 19 Jan. Move comes after Huthis early Jan warned of “reciprocal responses” to designation; possible retaliation in Feb could include ban on contact with U.S. citizens, freezing communication channels with UN, and cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia and maritime traffic in Red Sea. UN Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Mark Lowcock 14 Jan warned designation would precipitate “a large-scale famine on a scale that we have not seen for nearly 40 years” while UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths same day warned it would have “chilling effect” on his efforts to mediate end to conflict. Speaking at his 19 Jan Senate confirmation hearing, incoming U.S. Sec State Anthony Blinken promised to immediately review designation and launch review of Yemen policy; new U.S. Biden administration 25 Jan approved all transactions involving Huthis for one month while designation faces review, and next day announced temporary pause on arms sales to Saudi Arabia. Meanwhile, fighting continued along Yemen’s major front lines in Hodeida, al-Dhale and Marib governorates; intense clashes were reported along Red Sea coast in first two weeks of month, prompting UN mission 7 Jan to issue statement of concern after wedding hall 1 Jan was hit during fighting, reportedly killing five. Huthis 17 Jan reportedly launched projectile into Saudi Arabia that hit village in southern Jazan region, injuring three civilians; Huthis denied responsibility of 23 Jan missile attack on Riyadh (see Saudi Arabia). In south, tensions rose between Southern Transitional Council (STC) and govt after President Hadi 15 Jan appointed former PM Ahmed Obeid bin Daghr as head of Shura Council without consulting STC, which accused govt of breaching Nov 2019 Riyadh Agreement.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** **Authorities continued to use legal means to stifle peaceful activism, and army held large-scale military exercise at border with Morocco.** Crackdown on pro-democracy Hirak protest movement activists continued. Court 4 Jan sentenced 25-year-old activist Walid Kechida to three years in prison for “offending president and precepts of Islam”; Kechida 31 Jan released after jail term reduced to one year in appeal trial same day. Court 18 Jan handed eighteen-month sentence to 45-year-old activist Dalila Touat, close to Hirak, on charges of “insulting a state body, slander, and circulating publications affecting public order”. Meanwhile, Algiers courts sentenced several Bouteflika-era officials to prison on corruption charges. Notably, Algiers court 4 Jan handed former PM Ahmed Ouyahia, who has been imprisoned since June 2019 for other offenses, additional seven-year jail term; and Court of Cassation 28 Jan confirmed Ouyahia and other former PM Abdelmalek Sellal’s 15- and 12-year prison sentences, first handed in 2019. Military appeals court in Blida city 2 Jan acquitted former military intelligence chief Gen Mohamed “Toufik” Mediène, former President Bouteflika’s brother and adviser Saïd, and two others; all four had been sentenced to 15 years in prison in 2019 for plotting to “damage state’s and army’s authority”. President Tebboune 1 Jan signed into law new constitution, approved by referendum in Nov 2020, paving way for revision of electoral law and early legislative elections. Teb-

bourne 10 Jan returned to Germany for medical treatment of foot complication after COVID-19 infection previously kept him abroad for two months in late 2020. In Tipaza region, west of Algiers, army early Jan reportedly killed at least six suspected al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb combatants. In Tebessa region in east, roadside bomb 14 Jan killed five civilians. Amid simmering tensions between Morocco and Polisario Front independence movement in Western Sahara, army 17-18 Jan held large-scale military exercise in Tindouf area near border with Morocco and Western Sahara territory, in apparent warning to Rabat not to pursue Polisario combatants into Algerian territory (see Morocco, Western Sahara).

➔ **Egypt** **Jihadist violence left several dead in North Sinai, and govt mended ties with Qatar after years-long dispute.** In North Sinai, Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated Sinai Province continued to target security forces. Spate of IED attacks 1, 3, 11 and 26 Jan killed at least four security forces personnel in Bir al-Abd area; 3-10 Jan left unknown number of casualties in and around Rafah city at border with Gaza strip; 21 Jan killed at least one security forces personnel in Sheikh Zuweid area. Suspected jihadists 2 Jan reportedly kidnapped nine civilians near Bir al-Abd town; 17 Jan detonated explosive at gas pipeline near Al-Arish city. Parliament's lower house 12 Jan elected former head of Supreme Constitutional Court Hanafy Ali El-Gebali as speaker; lower house currently dominated by Mostaqbal Watan party, loyal to President Sisi, following last year's legislative elections. Police 25 Jan arrested cartoonist Ashraf Hamdi after he posted online video commemorating 2011 uprising that overthrew former President Mubarak. In concerted move to end over-three-year-long Qatar blockade, Egypt, along with Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates and Bahrain, 5 Jan signed reconciliation agreement with Doha, vowing to restore diplomatic, trade and travel ties; Cairo 12 Jan reopened Egyptian airspace to Qatari flights; 20 Jan exchanged official memoranda with Qatar on resuming diplomatic relations. Negotiations between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over filling and operation of Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam resumed early Jan but failed to make progress.

➔ **Libya** **Participants to UN-led political talks agreed on mechanism for choosing transitional govt, while implementation of Oct 2020 ceasefire continued to falter.** In apparent breakthrough, UN-backed Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) 19 Jan agreed on hybrid mechanism to choose transitional three-member Presidency Council and PM to lead country to elections scheduled for Dec 2021; LPDF members to elect PM with 70% of votes, and simultaneously to be divided into three regions to elect with 70% of votes their representative on Presidency Council; votes scheduled for Feb; back-up list-based system to kick in if abovementioned voting procedure fails. Meanwhile, Tripoli-based Govt of National Accord (GNA) and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar-led Arab-Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF) continued to accuse each other of pursuing military build-up in violation of ceasefire signed in Oct, and missed 23 Jan deadline to ensure departure from Libya of all foreign fighters. ALAF 13 Jan accused Turkey of continuing to send military equipment to GNA, and media including U.S.-based TV channel CNN 22 Jan alleged ALAF-allied Russian military contractors had recently dug 70km trench fortification from Sirte city to Jufra airbase to prevent possible GNA military offensive in central and eastern Libya. New U.S. administration 28 Jan called on all external parties, including Turkey and Russia, to immediately cease military operations in Libya and withdraw their forces; United Arab Emirates next day said it was

ready to cooperate with UN and U.S. to find “diplomatic and political solutions” to conflict. Central Bank of Libya early Jan introduced new unified exchange rate, devaluing Libyan dinar by 300% in attempt to alleviate faltering economy; move prompted major spike in price of basic food commodities, with bread and oil prices rising by 30% by mid-Jan. Rival finance ministers 12 Jan met to discuss unification of 2021 national budgets. UN Sec Gen Antonio Guterres 18 Jan appointed former Slovakian FM Ján Kubiš as new UN envoy to Libya; Kubiš due to take office in early Feb. UN Security Council mid-Jan also extended sine die mandate of UN Acting Special Representative for Libya Stephanie Williams to allow her to continue political dialogue efforts.

➔ **Morocco** **Authorities continued to build on normalisation deal with Israel, while tensions persisted in Western Sahara territory.** U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan 23 Jan said new U.S. administration under President Biden will build on Morocco-Israel normalisation agreement, in exchange for which U.S. last Dec recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara. Israeli govt 24 Jan approved normalisation agreement and 26 Jan reopened diplomatic mission in capital Rabat after govts 21 Jan signed agreement allowing direct flights between two countries; new agreement forms part of provisions of Joint Declaration signed by Morocco and Israel 22 Dec. Meanwhile, tensions persisted in Western Sahara region; Algeria 17-18 Jan held large-scale military exercise in Tindouf area near border with Morocco (see Western Sahara).

↓ **Tunisia** **Amid deteriorating socio-economic crisis, riots and protests erupted across country, leaving at least one dead.** After govt 14 Jan implemented new COVID-19-related nationwide lockdown, street riots overnight 15-16 Jan erupted in capital Tunis and over 15 other locations across country, mainly in underprivileged peri-urban areas; discontent fueled mainly by deteriorating economic and social conditions exactly ten years after former President Ben Ali’s overthrow. During five consecutive nights of unrest, police clashed with rioters, fired tear gas and water cannons to disperse them amid sporadic reports of vandalism and looting; protester injured in 18 Jan clashes, reportedly by tear gas canister, died 25 Jan. Govt 18 Jan said police had arrested over 600 people, sparking several days of daytime peaceful protests in Tunis and other cities against govt, economic crisis and arbitrary arrests. Tunisian Human Rights League 25 Jan said over 1,200 people had been arrested since unrest started. Riots subsided while daytime protests were still ongoing by month’s end. Amid tensions between President Saïed and PM Hichem Mechichi, Mechichi 5 Jan dismissed Saïed’s close ally, Interior Minister Taoufik Charfeddine, and 16 Jan reshuffled cabinet, naming 11 new ministers. In response, Saïed 25 Jan said he will not organise oath-taking ceremonies for new ministers, saying some are suspected of corruption or may have conflicts of interest. Meanwhile, parliament next day approved Mechichi’s cabinet reshuffle as police turned water cannon on hundreds of anti-govt protesters to hold them back from parliament. Authorities 27-28 Jan said letter addressed to Saïed and received 25 Jan contained suspicious powder that caused staffer who opened it to be hospitalised, denounced possible poisoning attempt. Authorities 8 Jan said they had arrested five individuals suspected of planning to carry out “terrorist operations in Tunisia”, including al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb senior figure.

➔ **Western Sahara** **Tensions remained high as Polisario Front independence movement threatened to step up attacks against Morocco, and Algeria held military exercise at border with Morocco.** Polisario Front throughout month continued to shell Moroccan positions along East-West sand berm that separates Moroccan-controlled Western Saharan territory from Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic-controlled territory; notably, Polisario 23 Jan fired four rockets at UN-monitored Guerguerat Buffer Strip – where Moroccan troops have been deployed since Nov – and next day threatened to escalate military operations. Polisario 19 Jan said it was ready to join UN-led talks on territory’s future, but would not lay down arms; UN-led negotiations involving Morocco and Polisario, with Algeria and Mauritania as observers, suspended since March 2019. Rumours of possible appointment of former Romanian PM Petre Roman as new UN envoy for Western Sahara drew criticism from Algerian media; notably, newspaper *El Watan* repeatedly decried him as Rabat’s ally. Following U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara in Dec, Algeria 9 Jan said it expected U.S. to exercise “impartiality” in conflict; 17-18 Jan held large-scale military exercise in Tindouf area, near border with Morocco and Western Sahara territory, in apparent warning to Morocco not to pursue elements of Polisario inside Algeria.