



Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

↓ **Israel-Palestine** Israeli forces killed dozens of Palestinians in West Bank as Palestinian shooter killed seven Israelis in Jerusalem; Israel's far-right govt adopted punitive measures.

West Bank and Jerusalem remained highly volatile amid deadly violence. In West Bank, Israeli forces conducted at least 900 raids, arrested at least 397 Palestinians and killed at least 35. Notably, Israeli forces 26 Jan killed seven gunmen and two civilians in Jenin; Palestinian Authority called it “massacre” and threatened to cease security coordination. Israel struck Gaza after it accused Gaza-based factions of firing two rockets into Israel 27 Jan. Palestinian shooting attacks continue to rise: gunman 27 Jan shot and killed seven Israelis in Jerusalem and injured three others; Palestinian child next day shot and injured two armed Israelis in East Jerusalem’s Silwan.

Israel's far-right govt pursued range of provocative and restrictive policies. In incendiary action seen as eroding status quo, National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir 3 Jan visited Jerusalem’s Holy Esplanade, drawing condemnation from Palestinians, Jordan and other Arab states. In response to UN General Assembly resolution calling on International Court of Justice to issue opinion on Israel’s occupation of Palestinian territories, Israeli govt 6 Jan announced retaliatory steps, including using Palestinian taxes to compensate Israeli victims of Palestinian militant attacks and freezing Palestinian construction in parts of West Bank. Israel pursued other hardline policies: Ben-Gvir 8 Jan ordered removal of Palestinian flags from public spaces; govt same day suspended Palestinian FM’s VIP pass facilitating travel; Knesset 11 Jan approved draft legislation to strip Palestinians convicted of terrorism of citizenship. Govt 2 Jan announced planned forced eviction of 14 villages in Masafer Yatta area near Hebron.

Govt pursued plans to weaken judiciary. Justice Minister Yariv Levin 4 Jan announced plan for judicial reform, including Knesset’s ability to override Supreme Court decisions by simple majority; tens of thousands of Israelis 8, 14, 21 and 28 Jan protested plans in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem and Haifa. PM Netanyahu 22 Jan fired Shas Party leader and Interior and Health Minister Aryeh Deri following Supreme Court’s ruling 18 Jan.

➔ **Lebanon** Executive vacuums continued without end in sight, economic hardship deepened, and tensions over land border surfaced between Hizbollah and Israel.

Double executive (president and govt) vacuum continued. Parliamentarians failed to elect new president, prolonging vacuum in place since 1 Nov. Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri 19 Jan convened 11th parliamentary session to elect president, which failed to achieve breakthrough as political factions insist on electing their preferred candidates. Meanwhile, attempts to form new govt to replace current caretaker administration practically ceased. PM Mikati 18 Jan managed to convene cabinet meeting, which was boycotted by Christian party Free Patriotic Movement that sees cabinet meetings as unconstitutional without president. Meanwhile, General Prosecutor Ghassan Oweidat 25 Jan ordered release of suspects held in relation to Aug 2020 Beirut port explosion and sued investigative Judge Tarik Bitar after latter attempted to resume investigation, frozen for year due to pending charges against Bitar; protesters against decision clashed with security forces near central courthouse.

Economic crisis persisted, fomenting pockets of public unrest. Lebanese Lira (LBP) 25 Jan reached new record low value of 60,000 to USD\$1, contributing to worsening living conditions for many households. Fuel prices continued to rise and citizens increasingly struggled to purchase imported products, such as medicine. Health Minister Firas Abiad 10 Jan announced that infant milk would no longer be subsidized, removing one of few remaining state subsidies. Deteriorating conditions led public school teachers to announce week-long strike on 9 Jan; depositors 10 Jan conducted armed hold-ups of two separate banks to demand access to savings. Dozens of protesters 25 Jan burnt tyres outside Central Bank to protest devaluing currency.

Hizbollah and Israel exchanged hostile rhetoric over land border. Hizbollah 3 Jan released video purporting to demonstrate how group's militant wing would invade northern Israel; several days later, Hizbollah reportedly announced that it had enlisted 9,000 new recruits to bolster military reserves. Israel same week announced plans to conduct military manoeuvres in disputed Shebaa Farms area. Hizbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah 3 Jan said Israeli infringements to "status quo" at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade could trigger regional chaos, after Israel's new national security minister visited site (see Israel-Palestine).

➔ **Syria** **Türkiye targeted Kurdish and regime forces in north and signalled willingness to normalise ties with regime, while Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) battled regime and economic hardship persisted.**

Türkiye continued operations in north amid concerns over its warming ties with regime. Türkiye reportedly carried out at least eight drone strikes targeting Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) in north east. After Türkiye's presidential spokesperson 14 Jan asserted ground operation was "possible any time", Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) head Mazlum Kobani 16 Jan said he expected attack in Feb. In Aleppo, Türkiye continued shelling regime forces, notably killing two high-ranking officers near Nubl town 12 Jan. Meanwhile, concerns rose over Ankara's rapprochement with Damascus: Idlib's dominant group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) 2 Jan criticised last month's Ankara-Moscow-Damascus talks as "dangerous deviation", while U.S. 3 Jan said "now is not the time"; Turkish Defence Minister Hulusi Akar 4 Jan reassured Türkiye-backed groups Ankara would not take steps they oppose. Turkish President Erdoğan 5 Jan signalled possible meeting with President Assad. Thousands 6 Jan protested in Idlib and Aleppo provinces against Turkish reconciliation with regime.

HTS continued raids on regime positions. HTS conducted six raids against regime in Idlib and Aleppo provinces, as allied units from HTS-led Fatah Mubin coalition joined operations for first time; regime responded by shelling towns in Idlib.

Regime grappled with growing economic and fuel crises. Assad 14 Jan met Iranian FM in capital Damascus to discuss much-needed fuel shipments and financial support, and agreed to renew strategic economic ties; moved followed Assad's approval in Dec of draft 2023 budget at \$3.6bn, compared to 2022's \$5.3bn, reflecting slashed subsidies.

In other important developments. Military announced Israeli missiles 2 Jan hit Damascus airport, killing at least two soldiers; airstrikes 29-30 Jan reportedly struck convoy of Iran-linked groups near Iraq-Syria border. Two rockets 4 Jan hit site housing U.S. troops in Deir ez-Zor province; three drones 20 Jan targeted U.S. al-Tanf base, Homs province. SDF early and 25 Jan conducted anti-Islamic State operations in Hasakah province and Raqqa, arresting hundreds. UN Security Council 9 Jan unanimously extended cross-border aid into north west for six months.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Iran Govt maintained harsh crackdown on protests as Western states continued censure and sanctions, further sapping appetite for engagement on nuclear file, while attack targeted Isfahan military facility.**

Govt continued crackdown, further straining relations with West. Govt 7 Jan executed two individuals linked to protests, convicted as part of campaign that UN human rights chief described as tantamount "to state sanctioned killing". Govt 14 Jan executed dual UK-Iranian national accused of espionage, prompting UK to temporarily recall its ambassador and blacklist prosecutor general. European Union (EU) continued diplomatic rebuke and preparing new sanctions. Notably, calls grew in UK and EU to label Islamic Republic Guard Corps (IRGC) as "terrorist organisation", which Tehran threatened would evoke strong response; European Parliament 19 Jan passed non-binding resolution calling for designation. In first sanctions of 2023, U.S. 6 Jan targeted six individuals linked to Iranian company said to be engaged in drone proliferation, as well as director of organisation that is "responsible for overseeing Iran's ballistic missile programs". EU 23 Jan approved sanctions against 37 Iranian individuals and entities over human rights concerns; UK same day blacklisted seven individuals and entities and U.S. in parallel designated 11.

Nuclear talks remained moribund. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) chief Rafael Grossi 12 Jan asserted that nuclear negotiations "have broken down", adding "the Agency – and I personally – do not want to leave this political vacuum around such a volatile and dangerous issue"; Grossi asserted willingness to meet Iranian officials but no meetings have been confirmed to resume discussions on outstanding safeguards concerns. Grossi 24 Jan called nuclear deal "an empty shell" as "every limit that existed [in deal] has been violated several times".

Isfahan military facility targeted in drone attack. Govt 28 Jan confirmed bomb-laden drones struck defence facility in Isfahan but maintained damage was minimal;

attack widely attributed in media to Israel. Earlier, U.S. Central Command 6 Jan intercepted 2,000 assault rifles aboard sailboat transiting “from Iran to Yemen”. Azerbaijan withdrew staff from Tehran embassy following 27 Jan attack that killed one and injured two.

➔ **Iraq Govt sought to pass 2023 budget and stabilise currency amid protests against hardship, armed groups targeted international coalition forces, and Islamic State (ISIS) continued attacks.**

Govt haggled over budget amid protests demanding jobs. PM Sudani 11 Jan met Kurdistan Regional Govt (KRG) PM Barzani in capital Baghdad to discuss KRG’s share in 2023 federal budget and other bilateral issues; Barzani 15 Jan said they had reached “preliminary agreements”. PM Sudani 23 Jan replaced Central Bank governor Mustafa Ghaleb Mukheef with Muhsen al-Allaq after Iraqi dinar 20 Jan reached new low at 1,670 to U.S. dollar. Demonstrations took place across country as protesters demanded employment; notably, hundreds 2 Jan protested in front of North Oil Company in Kirkuk city as police responded with tear gas, injuring five. Hundreds 8 Jan reportedly demonstrated in front of finance ministry in Baghdad. Hundreds 25 Jan protested currency devaluation in Baghdad.

IED attacks targeted International Coalition. In first attack targeting International Coalition convoy in months, IED 12 Jan hit convoy in Taji district, Baghdad; armed group al-Muqawama al-Dawliya same day claimed attack. IEDs 19 and 26 Jan targeted convoy in Yusufiya district, Baghdad governorate. PM Sudani 15 Jan defended U.S. troop presence, saying: “We think that we need the foreign forces”. Sudani 16 Jan received White House Envoy Brett McGurk to discuss bilateral relations; McGurk reaffirmed U.S. commitment to support Iraq against ISIS.

Low-level ISIS insurgency continued. Alleged ISIS sniper 9 Jan killed police officer in Muqdadia district, Diyala governorate. Suspected ISIS militants 18 Jan killed two police officers in Jabal Bur, Kirkuk governorate. Counter-terrorism operations continued; notably, airstrikes 21 Jan killed two alleged ISIS militants in Salah al-Din governorate.

In other important developments. U.S. forces 8 Jan shot down drone near Ain al-Asad airbase housing U.S. personnel in Anbar governorate. In possible indication of political comeback after months of silence, Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr 13 Jan addressed supporters ahead of Friday prayer.

➔ **Saudi Arabia Saudi Arabia explored return to dialogue with Iran and continued backchannel talks with Yemen’s Huthis.**

Saudi and Iranian officials signalled openness for dialogue. After Saudi FM Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud and Iranian FM Amir-Abdollahian met in Dec at Baghdad Conference in Jordan, marking their first meeting for several years, Saudi FM 2 Jan met with Iran’s VP for Parliamentary Affairs Mohammad Hosseini on sidelines of Brazil’s presidential inauguration. Amir-Abdollahian 13 Jan expressed hope for restoration of diplomatic relations with Saudi Arabia and stated both sides had reached agreement at last month’s summit to resume bilateral talks. Saudi FM Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud 17 Jan confirmed Riyadh was exploring avenues for dialogue with Iran.

Riyadh continued backchannel talks with Huthis. Saudi officials continued back-channel talks with Huthis to reinstate truce in Yemen, as tensions arose between Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates over influence in Yemen's Hadramawt province (see Yemen).

➔ **Yemen** **Backchannel talks between Huthis and Saudi Arabia intensified amid steady rise in skirmishes along front lines, while Saudi-Emirati tensions rose over influence in Hadramawt governorate.**

Huthis and Saudi Arabia pursued dialogue to reinstate truce. After Omani mediators 10 Jan arrived in capital Sanaa, Huthi chief negotiator 15 Jan called talks with Omanis "serious and positive" but group warned of military escalation if their conditions are not met. Govt remained excluded from talks, raising fears that Riyadh could make unacceptable concessions. UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg 16 Jan visited Sanaa to discuss truce restoration with Huthi officials and same day briefed UN Security Council, reporting "potential step change" in conflict's trajectory. Meanwhile, low-scale fighting along key front lines in Saada, Marib, Taiz, al-Dhale and Hodeida continued to steadily rise, raising threat of miscalculation and renewed conflict. Head of Presidential Leadership Council (PLC) Al-Alimi late Jan established Nation Shield Forces, new military units under his direct command.

Emirati-backed groups sought to shift balance of power in Hadramawt. Southern Transitional Council (STC) – backed by United Arab Emirates (UAE) – 3 Jan mobilised protesters in Seyoun city demanding replacement of Islah-affiliated First Military Region with UAE-aligned Hadrami Elite Forces. Local tribal bloc Hadramawt Tribes Confederation denounced STC moves. In sign of unity with First Military Region, Saudi delegation 10 Jan met Hadramawt governor. STC's efforts to establish military presence in areas with strong historical ties to Saudi Arabia could mark beginning of UAE-led initiative to uproot Saudi-backed Islah from Hadramawt, threatening localised conflict.

Govt continued active diplomatic engagement amid economic deterioration. U.S. Special Envoy Timothy Lenderking and U.S. Ambassador to Yemen Steven Fagin 6 Jan met al-Alimi and PM Maeen Abdulmalik Saeed to mobilise international support for govt; al-Alimi 10 Jan met U.S., UK, French and European Union ambassadors. PLC members and govt officials 8 Jan met in Saudi capital Riyadh to discuss stabilising economy and govt initiative to lower exchange rates against U.S. dollar. Following Huthi-enforced halt to oil exports, govt 8 Jan approved increase of customs exchange rates from 500 to 750 riyals; STC immediately called for reversal as fuel and other commodity prices spiked.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** **Restrictions on free speech continued, tensions with Morocco remained high over Western Sahara, and diplomatic engagement with Mali and France continued.**

Crackdown on dissent continued. Court in capital Algiers 15 Jan extended pre-trial detention of prominent journalist Ihsane El Kadi – arrested in Dec and charged with

“receiving foreign funds” and “harming the security of the state” – in absence of journalist’s lawyers as court failed to inform them that appeal hearing initially scheduled for 18 Jan had been moved to earlier date. Ruling of administrative court dissolving NGO Algerian League for the Defence of Human Rights leaked online 20 Jan; league 22 Jan confirmed document’s authenticity, while also saying it had never been notified of procedure.

Relations between Algiers and Rabat remained tense over Western Sahara. Authorities refused to grant Moroccan football team authorisation to fly directly to Algeria for African Nations Championship (CHAN) held 13 Jan-4 Feb, resulting in team’s absence from competition; airspace has remained closed to all Moroccan flights since Sept 2021. At CHAN’s opening ceremony, Nelson Mandela’s grandson Mandla Mandela 13 Jan called for liberation of “the last colony of Africa, Western Sahara”; Morocco’s football federation next day condemned “provocative” speech.

Authorities discussed regional security with Mali and France. Malian FM Abdoulaye Diop 15-16 Jan visited Algiers, discussed issues related to 2015 Algiers peace agreement between Bamako and northern armed groups with President Tebboune and FM Ramtane Lamamra (see Mali). Army chief of staff Gen. Saïd Chengriha 24 Jan visited France, met with French Defence Minister Sebastien Lecornu reportedly to discuss security situation in Sahel after Tebboune late Dec criticised presence of Russian private military company Wagner Group in Mali.

In other important developments. Tebboune 19 Jan said foreign exchange reserves were exceeding \$60bn and economic growth was expected to reach 5% in 2023.

➔ **Egypt President Sisi continued to push for national dialogue and praised security gains in North Sinai in apparent bid to deflect pressure as economic crisis deepened.**

Economy entered uncharted territory as Egyptian pound hit record lows. After govt committed to moving toward flexible exchange rate to secure \$3bn loan from International Monetary Fund in Dec, exchange rate from 4 Jan began nosediving from its previous level of EGP24 to \$1, temporarily hitting EGP32 to \$1 on 11 Jan and subsequently stabilising around EGP30 to \$1. Central Bank 16 Jan said adjustment had succeeded in restoring trust, with foreign investors transferring nearly \$1bn into Egypt’s foreign exchange market following devaluation. Fitch Ratings agency 18 Jan said move “should have a positive influence” on Egypt’s credit profile but warned that “large external financing needs and related policy adjustments still represent important risks”. Govt in Jan also ordered ministries to cut spending for next six months, though health, interior, foreign affairs and defence ministries were exempted.

President Sisi-sponsored national dialogue initiative remained stalled. National dialogue Sec Gen Mahmoud Fawzi 16 Jan said official start of dialogue would be announced shortly. Opposition Civil Democratic Movement 20 Jan again urged authorities to release more political prisoners, allow political parties to operate freely, and lift restrictions on media to prepare “suitable climate” for national dialogue. U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 30 Jan met with Sisi in capital Cairo, discussed human rights situation among other topics.

High-level officials highlight security gains in Sinai Peninsula. PM Mustafa Madbouly and Army Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Osama Askar 14-15 Jan made rare visits to North Sinai, said security situation is stable and state institutions fully functional, and paid tribute to soldiers' efforts against Islamic State-affiliated Sinai Province. Sisi 23 Jan said Egypt "succeeded to a great extent to eliminate terrorism in Sinai".

➔ **Libya** **Dialogue between rival assemblies on amending draft constitution to chart roadmap toward elections reached dead end, and disputes around demarcation of maritime boundaries continued.**

Rival assemblies' dialogue track came to an abrupt halt. Heads of rival assemblies, Aghela Saleh of Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) and Khaled Mishri of Tripoli-based High State Council (HSC), 5 Jan met in Egyptian capital Cairo, pledged in vaguely-worded joint statement to refer amended constitutional draft to their respective chambers. Cairo 11 Jan hosted meeting between head of Presidential Council Mohamed Menfi and head of Libyan National Army, Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar; 15 January held another meeting between Menfi, Haftar and Saleh. Saleh in following days however refused to sign off on document outlining key agreements between HoR and HSC and reaffirmed HoR is Libya's one and only legislative body and does not need HSC's approval, suggesting that HoR amend 2011 constitutional declaration "before March".

Diplomatic initiatives to press for elections continued. U.S. Central Intelligence Agency Director William Burns 12 Jan made first visit to Libya since 2012, met with PM Abdelhamid Dabaiba in capital Tripoli and reportedly also with Haftar in Benghazi city; Burns pressed on his interlocutors need to move forward with elections before year's end. Turkish intelligence chief Hakan Fidan 17 Jan also visited Tripoli and met with Dabaiba and Mishri to discuss political situation; reportedly also met with some armed groups' leaders in Tripoli.

Controversies over disputed demarcation of maritime boundaries continued. National Oil Corporation 2 Jan protested against Athens' ongoing oil and gas exploration in waters disputed between Greece and Libya. Tripoli's Court of Appeals 9 Jan suspended implementation of Libya-Türkiye deal on oil and gas exploration that two countries had signed in Oct until final verdict on case. Meanwhile, Tripoli-based Govt of National Unity 28 Jan signed deals with Italian govt aimed at boosting Libyan energy supplies to Europe and clamping down on migrants attempting to cross Mediterranean Sea.

➔ **Tunisia** **Second round of parliamentary polls recorded low turnout as judicial crackdown on opposition leaders and former political officials intensified, and country faced risk of payment default.**

Opposition and civil society mobilised before second round of legislative elections. On 12th anniversary of former President Ben Ali's departure, thousands 14 Jan rallied in capital Tunis against President Saïed's power grab and deteriorating economic conditions. Powerful labour union UGTT 19 Jan announced it had started consultations with civil society groups including Tunisian Human Rights League, Bar Association and Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights to work on national initiative to "save the country from the crisis and put it back on democratic tracks". Second round of parliamentary elections held 29 Jan with 11.3% turnout, as

low as in first round of voting in Dec. Opposition coalition National Salvation Front leader Ahmed Nejib Chebbi same day urged united front against Saïed.

Legal repression of dissent intensified. Justice Minister Leila Jaffel early Jan filed complaint against opposition figure and lawyer Ayachi Hammami under Sept 2022 decree criminalising spreading “false information and rumours” online. Judiciary 9 Jan froze bank accounts of at least 100 people close to Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party on charges of money laundering. Tunis Court 17 Jan sentenced Saïed’s former chief of staff, Nadia Akacha, to 14 month-imprisonment in absentia for criticising Saïed in leaked audio recordings.

Country faced payment default. Ratings agency Moody’s 28 Jan cut Tunisia’s long-term foreign-currency and local-currency issuer ratings to Caa2 from Caa1 and changed outlook to negative. As shortages of many commodities, notably gasoline, medicines and daily products, continued, International Monetary Fund did not re-schedule board meeting initially planned for Dec to approve new loan program for Tunisia, meaning country risks payment default in March or April 2023.

➡ **Western Sahara Polisario Front independence movement re-elected Brahim Ghali as president; Rabat continued to press international partners to side with Morocco over Western Sahara.**

Polisario leader re-elected during national congress. Polisario Front independence movement 13 Jan launched 16th Congress in Algeria’s Tindouf province and 20 Jan re-elected Brahim Ghali as president with 69% of votes; Ghali, who was challenged by other Polisario heavyweight Bechir Mustapha Sayed amid growing internal rifts over movement’s strategy, vowed to intensify struggle against Morocco to achieve sovereignty.

Morocco continued to exert pressure on partners over Western Sahara. U.S.-based news outlet Axios 4 Jan revealed Rabat demanded that Israel recognise Morocco’s sovereignty over Western Sahara before kingdom opens embassy in Tel Aviv. In interview with French newspaper *L’Opinion*, Moroccan PM Aziz Akhannouch 16 Jan said Paris “cannot simply be an observer” in Western Sahara conflict and needs to clarify stance; statement comes ahead of expected official visit by French President Macron to Morocco in Feb or March.

In other important developments. At opening ceremony of African Nations Championship football tournament in Algiers, Nelson Mandela’s grandson Mandla Mandela 13 Jan called for liberation of “the last colony of Africa, Western Sahara”; Morocco’s football federation next day condemned “provocative” speech.