

# Middle East and North Africa

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## Eastern Mediterranean

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➔ **Israel-Palestine** As COVID-19 began to take hold in Israel, West Bank and Gaza, violence between Palestinians and Israeli forces continued at low ebb in West Bank and third set of elections in Israel failed to produce clear winner. In West Bank, Palestinian protesters clashed with Israeli forces 11 March near Beita following rumours that Israel intended to create new settlements; Israeli forces shot and killed Palestinian teenager. Palestinian Authority (PA) early March protested Israeli Defence Minister Bennett's approval of "sovereignty road" between Jerusalem and Ma'ale Adumim settlement that enables Jewish settlement in E1 area. PA 6 March declared state of emergency following first reports of COVID-19 in West Bank. After Israel 13 March closed crossings into Palestinian territories, PA 18 March restricted movement across borders with Jordan and Egypt, as well as through checkpoints into Israel. U.S. 11 March changed description of Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem to "Arab residents" or "non-Israeli citizens" in human rights report. In Gaza, accidental explosion in Nuseirat refugee camp 5 March killed ten. Authorities in Gaza 22 March reported first COVID-19 cases. Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh 2 March met Russian FM Lavrov in Moscow, and Islamic Jihad's leader Ziyad al-Nakhalah led delegation to Moscow following week. In Israel's 2 March elections, PM Netanyahu fell short of securing majority in parliament. President Rivlin 16 March tasked Blue and White Party leader Benny Gantz with forming new govt. Gantz split Blue and White party, leading half of it into negotiating national emergency govt, in which for eighteen months premiership would rotate between Netanyahu, who would go first, and Gantz. Govt 15 March postponed Netanyahu's trial to 24 May citing COVID-19.

➔ **Lebanon** Govt's measures to slow spread of COVID-19 dealt further blow to economy already in dire straits. To prevent spread of virus, govt 15 March declared state of mobilisation including closure of airport 18 March and of many businesses until 29 March and deployed army and riot police to enforce social distancing; 26 March extended measures till 12 April. Lebanese Lira continued to depreciate, 6 March surpassing 2,700 to the dollar on black market. PM Diyab 7 March declared Lebanon will default on foreign debt payment, deciding against payment of Eurobonds maturing 9 March. In televised speech, Hizbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah 13 March said it may approve assistance from International Monetary Fund on certain conditions, moderating previous statements by party representatives that indicated strong rejection. In defiance of instructions by Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni, Lebanese banks 16 March announced they would close until 29 March during nationwide mobilisation to contain COVID-19. By 30 March some banks opened branches for limited hours and for non-cash operations only, while others were receiving clients on appointment.

⬆ **Syria** Turkey and Russia agreed temporary ceasefire in Idlib province in north west halting most fighting and freezing regime offensive toward Idlib city, but jihadist attack on Turkish convoy in Idlib sparked clash between jihadists and rebels; from mid-March authorities took measures to slow spread of COVID-19. Turkish

President Erdoğan and Russian President Putin met in Moscow 5 March and agreed to halt hostilities in Idlib along current front lines, allowing Syrian regime forces to keep control over areas taken during offensives in Feb and remain within striking distance of Idlib city. Deal includes creation of “security corridor” running along M4 highway between Latakia and Aleppo and extending 6km either side and launch of joint Turkish-Russian patrols along highway. Protesters 15 and 23 March forced joint patrols to turn around. Pro-opposition media 19 March reported that al-Qaeda aligned group Hurras al-Din attacked Turkish forces on M4 highway; attack sparked clashes between militants of Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and unidentified group along road. Turkish Defence Ministry confirmed earlier rocket attack by unnamed “radical group” along M4 highway killed two Turkish soldiers. In response to COVID-19 crisis, President Assad 14 March postponed parliamentary elections scheduled for 13 April to 20 May and closed schools, mosques and several public offices; govt 23 March also closed border with Lebanon. In north west, Turkish-aligned opposition authorities Syrian Interim Govt took steps mid-March to slow and monitor spread of COVID-19 and opened three quarantine centres. In north east, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) 23 March closed all crossings into govt-controlled territory to reduce COVID-19 spread; 24 March endorsed UN Sec-Gen’s call for humanitarian ceasefire to combat virus. Islamic State (ISIS) detainees 29-30 March rioted in prison in Hasakah city; militants gained control of areas of prison and attempted to break out. SDF 30 March reported four escaped detainees had been captured. Govt 31 March announced interception of Israeli missiles targeting Al-Shayrat airbase in Homs province (centre).

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## **Gulf and Arabian Peninsula**

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↓ **Iran** New tensions between govt and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) over possible undeclared nuclear sites fuelled U.S.-Iran antagonism, attacks escalated between Iran-backed militia and U.S. in Iraq, and COVID-19 spread rapidly with serious humanitarian and economic consequences. IAEA’s 3 March quarterly report on implementation of Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action said Iran had trebled its stockpile of enriched uranium between Nov and Feb. IAEA Director General 3 March circulated separate report identifying three sites potentially used for undeclared nuclear-related activity and requesting access to two; govt denied requests and refused to clarify situation. U.S. 16 March imposed sanctions on five Iranian nuclear scientists due to “unacceptable nuclear escalations”; 18 March put sanctions on twelve entities and individuals involved in transporting Iranian petrochemicals; next day U.S. Treasury levied sanctions on five other companies. U.S. 26 March announced additional sanctions against twenty companies and individuals in Iran and Iraq. In Iraq, rocket attack on Taji military camp hosting anti-Islamic State (ISIS) coalition personnel 11 March killed two Americans and one British soldier; U.S. next day accused “Iranian-backed Shia militia groups”. U.S. 12 March launched retaliatory strikes targeting five weapons depots used by Iranian-backed militia Kataib Hizbollah. Second rocket attack on Taji camp 14 March wounded coalition and Iraqi soldiers. In 12 March letter to UN Sec-Gen, FM Zarif called for lifting of U.S. sanctions in light of COVID-19 outbreak; U.S. 26 March extended sanctions waiver for Iraqi imports of Iranian electricity, but did not lift sanctions. COVID-19 had killed over 2,900 by 31 March, university study concluded outbreak had not yet peaked,

and health ministry said it urgently needed medical supplies and equipment. Media reported significant declines in domestic business including complete collapse in tourism and official reported 18% drop in trade. Govt 9 March released 70,000 prisoners to reduce COVID-19 spread in prisons; 17 March announced temporary release of further 85,000 detainees including political prisoners; 29 March furlough of 100,000 prisoners confirmed up to 19 April.

↓ **Iraq** Violent confrontation between U.S. and pro-Iranian groups intensified, while stalemate persisted over formation of new govt amid ongoing anti-govt protests. Rocket attack on Camp Taji base north of capital Baghdad 11 March killed two U.S. and one UK personnel. U.S. blamed attack on Iran-backed militia Kataib Hizbollah and retaliated next day with strikes against five of its alleged weapons' depots, killing three Iraqi soldiers, two police officers and one civilian. U.S. 13 March deployed Patriot and C-Ram missile systems to Iraq to protect U.S. bases. Rockets hit Camp Taji again 14 March, injuring five U.S. servicemen and Iraqi forces. Kataib Hizbollah 14 March denied involvement in attacks; previously unknown group League of Revolutionaries (Usbat al-Thairin) 16 March claimed responsibility, calling for U.S. withdrawal from Iraq. Rockets struck Iraqi Basmaya base south of Baghdad which hosts U.S. soldiers 16 March and hit Baghdad's Green Zone near U.S. embassy 17 March. PM designate Mohammed Tawfiq Allawi 1 March withdrew nomination after failing to win support of Sunni and Kurdish blocs and losing support from Shiite parties. Shiite parties organised committee to find consensus candidate but two major coalitions, Ammar al-Hakim's al-Hikma and Muqtada al-Sadr's Sairoon, 16 March withdrew from negotiations. In response, President Salih 17 March appointed former governor of Najaf province Adnan Al-Zurfi as new PM and tasked him with forming govt; several Shiite parties rejected nomination. Clashes between anti-govt protesters and govt forces in Baghdad and Nasiriyah 8 March left three protesters dead; clashes 10-11 March injured a dozen more. To counter spread of COVID-19, authorities 15 March suspended all flights to and from Baghdad International Airport until 24 March and imposed weeklong curfew in Baghdad starting 17 March, later extending measures till 11 April. U.S. 20 March announced "temporary" troop drawdown due to COVID-19. Turkish airstrikes in northern Iraq 14 March "neutralised" eleven members of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK).

➔ **Qatar** After sudden rise in COVID-19 cases with 238 new cases detected in one day 11 March, govt 15 March said it would suspend incoming flights for two weeks starting 18 March and approved \$23.3bn economic stimulus. Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani 15 March ordered delivery of six tonnes of medical aid to Iran.

↓ **Saudi Arabia** In further consolidation of power, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman ordered arrest of four family members and hundreds of civil servants, and late month govt retaliated against intensified cross-border strikes by Yemen's Huthi rebels by stepping up airstrikes in Yemen's north. Mohammed bin Salman 7 March ordered arrest of four high-ranking family members, including brother of King Salman, Prince Ahmed bin Abdulaziz al-Saud, and former crown prince and interior minister, Prince Mohamed bin Nayef, both accused of treason. In largest mass arrests since 2017, anti-corruption commission 15 March detained hundreds of public servants, including military officers; 298 people reportedly charged with corruption. In Yemen, Saudi-led coalition kept up military operations in bid to prevent Huthi forces taking control of Marib governorate in north. Saudi officials 15 March allegedly barred senior officials of southern separatist Southern Transitional Council

(STC) from flying from Jordanian capital Amman to Aden in south. Angered, STC leaders warned of further unrest in Aden if Riyadh failed to adjust course. Saudi-led coalition, govt, Huthis and other armed actors 25 March expressed support for UN Sec-Gen Guterres's call for ceasefire in Yemen to counter potential COVID-19 outbreak. Cross-border war escalated late March as Huthis launched drone and missile attacks on Riyadh and Saudi economic and military installations in Saudi provinces along border with Yemen 27-28 March; rebels claimed attacks were in retaliation for Riyadh's stepped-up air campaign in Jawf and Marib. Riyadh responded with airstrikes on Huthi positions in northern Yemen, Sanaa and Hodeida. After Russia 6 March rejected agreement among members of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries to cut oil production due to COVID-19, Saudi Arabia 7 March cut oil prices by nearly 10% sparking oil price war with Russia. To slow spread of COVID-19, govt 7 March closed land borders with Bahrain, Kuwait and United Arab Emirates, 15 March suspended all international flights for two weeks.

➔ **United Arab Emirates** In response to COVID-19 outbreak in Iran, govt early March assisted with delivering seven tonnes of World Health Organization medical aid and 16 March said it would provide a further 32 tonnes.

↓ 🇲🇪 🇻🇪 **Yemen** Huthi forces continued their advance into govt-held Marib governorate in north and cross-border attacks between Huthis and Saudi Arabia escalated late month, raising risk of more intense fighting in April if parties do not heed UN's call for ceasefire; fighting continued on other fronts including along Red Sea coast. In north, Huthis 2 March claimed to have taken control of al-Hazm, capital of al-Jawf governorate, and continued advancing east toward Marib governorate. Fighting between govt forces and Huthis in central Marib in March left hundreds injured and killed from both sides. Huthis and govt forces continued fighting in Sirwa district in western Marib and in areas of eastern al-Jawf. Clashes between Huthis and govt-aligned forces also ongoing along Red Sea coast. Govt 12 March said it was withdrawing military observers from UN outposts around Hodeida after Huthi sniper reportedly killed one; govt boycotted meetings of Redeployment Coordination Committee, UN-chaired body tasked with overseeing ceasefire around city. In south, with forces aligned with separatist Southern Transitional Council (STC) repeatedly preventing Saudi forces from taking control of strategic locations in Aden, Saudi officials 15 March allegedly barred senior STC officials from flying from Jordanian capital Amman to Aden. STC leaders warned of further unrest in Aden if Riyadh did not adjust course. To slow spread of COVID-19, Huthis 14 March cancelled flights in and out of Sanaa; govt same day cancelled flights from Aden and Seiyoun. Discussions in Amman over prisoner swaps between govt and Huthis halted as meetings were cancelled due to COVID-19. Following his 23 March call for global ceasefire to limit COVID-19 outbreak, UN Sec-Gen Guterres 25 March urged Yemen's warring parties to end hostilities and restart talks. Saudi-led coalition, govt, Huthis and other armed actors 25 March expressed support for UN appeal. But cross-border war escalated late March as Huthis 27-28 March launched drone and missile attacks on Riyadh and Saudi economic and military installations in provinces along border. Riyadh responded with airstrikes on Huthi positions in northern Yemen, Sanaa and Hodeida.

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## North Africa

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➔ **Algeria** COVID-19 crisis put halt to one-year-old protest movement. Govt 17 March imposed bans on rallies and gatherings to slow spread of coronavirus. Protest movement's leaders called for "pause" for public health reasons and no-one took to streets Friday 20 March for first time since protest movement began Feb 2019. Student leaders 16 March announced pause of weekly demonstrations on Tuesdays. Algiers appeals court 24 March sentenced Karim Tabbou, leading figure of opposition group Democratic and Social Union, to one year in prison sentence and fined him 50,000 Algerian dinars on charges of "incitement to violence" and "harming national security" through videos on social media. Algiers appeals court 25 March upheld fifteen-year and twelve-year sentences for former PMs Ahmed Ouyahia and Abdelmalek Sellal respectively, for corruption charges linked to car assembly industry and illegal financing of former President Bouteflika's election campaign.

↓ **Egypt** Tensions between Egypt and Ethiopia rose after Ethiopia end-Feb refused to sign U.S.-drafted agreement on filling and operation of Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on Blue Nile. Arab League 5 March supported Egypt's position, while Sudan requested not to feature on list of countries in favour, saying Egypt had not consulted it. Egyptian FM Shoukry early March toured Arab capitals to put pressure on Addis Ababa not to take unilateral steps to fill reservoir behind dam. Shoukry 12 March visited Brussels to ask EU to mediate between Egypt and Ethiopia. Interior ministry 16 March said security forces in Abu Shilla city, North Sinai killed six alleged militants. Due to possible spread of COVID-19 in prison facilities, Supreme State Security Prosecution 21 March released fifteen opposition activists held on remand, including Hassan Nafaa arrested Sept 2019, Hazem Abdel Azim and Shadi Ghazali Harb, both arrested May 2018.

↓ **Libya** Fighting intensified around Tripoli and elsewhere as UN mediation efforts floundered. New round of fighting began mid-March between Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Arab-Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF) and forces allied to Tripoli-based Govt of National Accord (GNA). ALAF 19 March fired missiles on Ain Zara neighbourhood killing four civilians. GNA 20 March reportedly killed 25 ALAF fighters. GNA fighters from Misrata attempting to recapture Sirte, under ALAF control since early Jan, clashed occasionally with ALAF. UN Security Council-recognised National Oil Corporation (NOC) in Tripoli 16 March reported illegal shipments of jet fuel arriving in ALAF-held Benghazi from United Arab Emirates (UAE). ALAF-backed tribes maintained closure of oil production and export sites causing \$3bn shortfall since blockade began mid-Jan. UN Sec-Gen's Special Representative Ghassan Salamé resigned 2 March, dealing blow to peace talks. Salamé's political deputy, U.S. diplomat Stephanie Williams, named acting head of UN mission 11 March. Embassies of Algeria, Canada, China, France, Germany, Italy, Netherlands, Turkey, UK, U.S., EU delegation, and govts of Tunisia and UAE 17 March called on conflict parties to declare humanitarian ceasefire, halt transfers of military equipment and personnel, and allow local authorities to respond to COVID-19 challenge. GNA and ALAF issued responses 18 and 21 March respectively, but fighting escalated thereafter dashing hopes of ceasefire. GNA 25 March launched offensive to capture ALAF-controlled Wutiya airbase south west of Tripoli, but failed and retreated with ALAF prisoners; ALAF forces moved west taking control of small towns of Jmeil and

Ragdalin. Fighting escalated around Abu Ghrein, near Sirte from 28 March: dozens killed on both sides, reportedly including at least six high-level ALAF commanders.

➡ **Tunisia** Two suicide bombers 6 March attacked security post near U.S. embassy in capital Tunis killing themselves and one policeman.

➡ **Western Sahara** Liberia 12 March became latest country to open consulate to Morocco in Laayoune, administrative capital of Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara prompting Polisario Front independence movement to strongly condemn Morocco's policy of "fait accompli".