

# Middle East and North Africa

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## Eastern Mediterranean

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➔ **Israel-Palestine** **Israeli settlers attacked Palestinians in West Bank, Palestinian factions pledged support for electoral process, and Israel's fourth election in two years resulted in deadlock.** In West Bank, Israeli settlers 10 March attacked Palestinian Saeed Alyan Awad and his family near Mitzpe Yair settlement, south of Hebron, leaving him with cracked skull and broken jaw. Israeli soldiers same day detained five Palestinian children aged eight-13 in South Hebron Hills after settlers accused them of trespassing. Israeli settlers 12 March threw stones in Palestinian neighbourhood in northern West Bank, damaging two cars. Israeli human rights group B'tselem mid-month reported 94 violent attacks by Israelis against Palestinian civilians between 21 Dec 2020 and 13 March 2021. Israel 12 March issued banning order prohibiting Palestinian Authority (PA) Governor of Jerusalem Adnan Ghaith from communicating with President Abbas and other officials. Israel's Jerusalem municipality 17 March asked courts to reactivate demolition orders for dozens of buildings housing 1,500 Palestinians in East Jerusalem neighbourhood of Silwan. In sign of internal party rifts ahead of Palestinian summer elections, President Abbas 11 March expelled Yasser Arafat's nephew Nasser al-Kidwa from Fatah over his attempt to field separate list of candidates for legislative poll in May. As concern rose over uncertain outcome of legislative election, Abbas 16 March rejected request from Israel and U.S. to postpone vote. PA, Central Elections Commission and 15 Palestinian factions 16-17 March convened in Egyptian capital Cairo for second round of national dialogue; parties agreed mechanism to form new Palestinian National Council while factions affirmed support for electoral process. In Gaza, Hamas 14 March announced that Yahya Sinwar was re-elected as head of movement's political bureau in Gaza. Israel 24 March carried out night-time airstrikes on Hamas positions in response to rocket fire. Over 10,000 Palestinian citizens of Israel 5, 12, 19 March demonstrated against police brutality and criminal gangs. Israel's 23 March election produced no clear winner; PM Netanyahu's bloc won 52 seats, nine short of threshold to form govt, setting stage for arduous coalition negotiations and possible fifth election. Israel 12 March conducted airstrikes in Syria (see Syria).

➔ **Jordan** **Deaths of COVID-19 patients due to lack of critical medical supplies prompted health minister's resignation and sparked protests.** At least six patients 13 March died due to oxygen shortage in COVID-19 ward in hospital in Al Salt town, north west of capital Amman, prompting health minister to resign same day. Protests 14, 15 March erupted in Salt as well as Irbid, Karak, Aqaba, and Amman cities over economic impact of lockdowns and pandemic emergency laws; police used tear gas against protesters and detained over 200 in total. Police 24 March broke up protests held to mark 10th anniversary of Arab Spring pro-democracy protests, detaining dozens of activists. Meanwhile, tensions surfaced with Israel. Israeli PM Netanyahu's first public visit to United Arab Emirates (UAE) was cancelled on 11 March after Jordan refused to approve Netanyahu's flight path from Amman to UAE capital Abu Dhabi, following Jordanian Crown Prince Hussein bin Abdullah's cancellation of planned visit to Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade compound

over dispute with Israel regarding security arrangements at site; Netanyahu in turn ordered Israel's airspace closed to flights from Jordan – direct violation of 1994 Israeli-Jordan peace accord; however, move ultimately reversed before being implemented. FM Ayman Safadi 21 March publicised new military agreement signed with U.S. in Jan, allowing free entry of forces, aircraft and vehicles onto Jordanian territory.

➔ **Lebanon** **Currency slide triggered fresh wave of protests, while government formation remained stalled despite international pressure.**

Lebanese pound 2 March fell to low of 10,000 to \$1, triggering five consecutive days of protest in response to prolonged govt inaction over economic crisis; 50 demonstrators 7 March burned tyres and protested in front of banking association in capital Beirut demanding access to deposits, while protesters in northern city Tripoli blocked roads and staged sit-in. Market dealers 16 March said Lebanese pound was trading at 15,000 to dollar, representing loss of 90% value since late 2019 financial crisis began; downturn same day triggered further protests and roadblocks in Beirut. Armed forces Commander-in-Chief Joseph Aoun 8 March affirmed people's right to peaceful protest in meeting with military commanders, warning govt that army should not be relied upon to repress popular discontent. Meanwhile, govt formation efforts faced continued deadlock. PM-designate Saad al-Hariri 17 March met President Aoun to discuss cabinet; Hariri same day agreed to additional meeting to discuss his proposed cabinet candidates, indicating Aoun should call early presidential elections if candidates are not approved. Hizbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah next day pledged support to new cabinet if announced, but cautioned against reliance on technocrats and specialist appointees. Hariri 22 March publicly rebuked Aoun over latter's demands for veto powers in govt and continued rejection of proposed cabinet line-up. French diplomat 17 March reportedly indicated France and international partners were set to increase political pressure on Lebanon's leadership in coming months; UN special coordinator for Lebanon next day urged Lebanese authorities to facilitate cabinet formation during address to UN Security Council. NGO Amnesty International 23 March published report documenting alleged abuses committed by Lebanese military intelligence against Syrian detainees, including fair trial violations and torture; prosecutor general 29 March ordered probe. NGO Human Rights Watch 30 March said security forces "forcibly disappeared and allegedly tortured" detained protesters in Tripoli.

➔ **Syria** **Country marked 10 years since uprising as Kurdish and Turkish-backed forces clashed in north east, Idlib attacks strained Russia-Turkey ceasefire, and govt forces fought former opposition in south west.**

In north east, Turkish-backed armed groups and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) 16-17 and 19-21 March clashed in Ain Issa countryside, reportedly prompting Turkey to launch airstrike – its first in 17 months in north east – on Saida village 20 March. In Idlib province in north west, March 2020 ceasefire largely continued to hold despite reported Russian airstrikes. Notably, regime forces 5 March launched rocket on Bzapour town, reportedly killing three civilians; Russian airstrike 21 March reportedly targeted Sarmada city and suspected Russian missile attack same day struck Qah city near refugee camp. Turkey 25 March said it had agreed with Russia to "take measures to hold ceasefire" in Idlib province. In Aleppo governorate, suspected Russian missile attacks 5 March reportedly killed four near

Jarablus and al-Bab cities. Russian artillery 21 March hit hospital in rebel-held Atarib city west of Aleppo, reportedly killing at least six civilians and wounding 16 others, including 5 health workers. In Daraa province in south west, amid govt efforts to reassert security control, gunmen loyal to former opposition commander known as Abu Tariq Al-Subaihi 16 March ambushed govt troops who sought to capture him; 21 soldiers and unknown number of gunmen killed. In central desert, Russia continued to launch airstrikes against suspected Islamic State (ISIS) targets throughout month, notably killing dozens of militants 6-16 March. In Deir Ez-Zor province, ISIS reportedly killed nine Iran-backed militiamen 12, 21 March in al-Mayadin area. To mark tenth anniversary of 2011 uprising, thousands took to streets in Idlib city 15 March and hundreds reportedly gathered in Daraa city 18 March, chanting anti-regime slogans. UK, France, Germany, Italy and U.S. 15 March issued joint statement renewing commitment to holding regime accountable for its crimes. United Arab Emirates 9 March called for reinstatement of Syria in Arab League. Israel next day reportedly launched missiles on Iran-linked targets in southern outskirts of Damascus.

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## **Gulf and Arabian Peninsula**

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➔ **Iran** **Tehran continued to ramp up its nuclear activity and regional tensions stayed high as U.S. and Iran remained at odds over how to return to mutual compliance with 2015 nuclear deal.** Efforts to jumpstart nuclear negotiations with U.S. fell flat as Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei 21 March reaffirmed that Iran would return to its nuclear commitments only after effective lifting of sanctions. Iran continued to expand nuclear activity. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Director General Rafael Grossi 1 March said Tehran was still not satisfactorily answering questions on safeguards concerns at four separate undeclared sites, visits to three of which had revealed man-made uranium particles. IAEA's quarterly report 4 March revealed Tehran's stockpile of enriched uranium stands at 14 times nuclear deal limit. IAEA 8 March confirmed operationalisation of new IR-2 centrifuge cascade at Natanz site – third such cascade, with another three in works – and cascade of IR-4s. Iran's atomic energy organisation 19 March announced plan to “cold test” Arak nuclear reactor. Meanwhile, U.S. Biden administration 9 March unveiled first Iran-specific sanctions, designating two individuals identified as Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps interrogators for human rights abuses during 2019-2020 protests. U.S. National Intelligence Council 15 March issued report asserting that Iran conducted “multi-pronged covert influence campaign intended to undercut former President Trump's re-election prospects” during 2020 elections. Regional tensions remained fraught. Iran's UN envoy 14 March condemned U.S. 25 Feb strikes in Syria on sites U.S. said linked to “Iranian-backed militant groups”, denied Iranian involvement in attacks on U.S. interests in Iraq. U.S. Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley 17 March observed: “It's not really helping the climate in the U.S. to have Iranian allies take shots at Americans in Iraq or elsewhere”. Following late Feb explosion on Israeli-owned ship in Gulf of Oman, for which Israel blamed Tehran, Israeli PM Netanyahu 1 March said: “We are striking at [Iran] all over the region”. Iranian cargo ship in Mediterranean Sea 10 March reportedly suffered explosion that Iranian shipping official 12 March called “terrorist attack”; incidents

could signal maritime domain becoming new front where Israel and Iran engage in tit-for-tat attacks.

➔ **Iraq Rocket attacks targeted U.S.-led forces, Pope Francis embarked on historic visit, and anti-govt protests continued in south.** Unknown assailants 3 March fired barrage of rockets at Ain al-Asad airbase in western Anbar province that hosts U.S.-led coalition and Iraqi military forces; one U.S. contractor died of cardiac arrest. Unidentified group 15 March launched rockets at Iraqi military's Balad airbase, north of capital Baghdad, leaving no casualties, while stray rockets damaged civilian house. In first ever trip to Iraq, Pope Francis 5 March arrived in Baghdad and made presidential palace address, urging "an end to acts of violence and extremism, factions and intolerance"; Pope 6 March met senior Shia leader Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani in Najaf to discuss religious coexistence and protection of Christian population of Iraq; Pope 7 March arrived in Erbil city to meet Kurdish leaders and travelled to formerly Islamic State (ISIS)-occupied Christian town Qaraqosh. Meanwhile in south, protests 8 March resumed in al-Muthanna governorate following lull during Pope's visit, demanding dismissal of governor. Demonstrators 13, 14 March clashed with security forces in Najaf city during protest demanding resignation of governor, injuring at least ten. Protests 15 March resumed in Nasiriyah city with roadblock and 31 March shut down Dhi Qar oil refinery. Unidentified gunmen 10 March shot dead Jaseb Hattab, father of kidnapped activist Ali Jaseb Hattab, in Maysan province; Hattab had blamed Iran-backed group for son's kidnapping. Protesters 11, 12 March demonstrated in Baghdad and Muthanna, Babil, Maysan, and Dhi Qar governorates to condemn killing and 12 March clashed with security forces near provincial govt offices in Samawah city, Muthanna governorate. In Sinjar city, Ninewa province, Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) supporters 10 March clashed with Iraqi army during protest against deadline for removal from area of PKK forces, as stipulated in Oct 2020 deal, leaving one civilian injured. ISIS 12 March claimed responsibility for murders of family of six in Al-Bou Dor village, Salahaddin province. Coalition 20 March conducted airstrikes in Qarachogh mountain region over numerous days, destroying dozens of ISIS hideouts and killing unknown number of ISIS militants.

➔ **Saudi Arabia Huthis continued cross-border attacks on Saudi soil from Yemen.** Yemen's Huthi movement launched series of attacks throughout month. Saudi-led coalition 6 March said it intercepted seven drones launched toward southern town of Khamis Mushayt that hosts major Saudi airbase and one toward Jizan city; 7 March said it intercepted ten drones, including one targeting oil storage yard at Ras Tanura city, and launched airstrikes towards Huthi military targets in Yemen's capital Sanaa – first strikes on city since beginning of year. Huthis 19 March targeted state-controlled Saudi Aramco oil refinery in capital Riyadh, causing fire. Saudi forces 20 March say they intercepted drone targeting Khamis Mushayt and in response struck Huthi military targets in Sanaa next day. Following Saudi ceasefire proposal 22 March, which Huthis dismissed as "nothing new" (see Yemen), Huthis same day targeted Abha International Airport in south west. Saudi-led coalition 25 March said it intercepted attacks targeting universities in Najran and Jizan cities and destroyed six armed drones; same day announced Huthi projectile had struck fuel tank in Jizan. Huthis 26 March said they targeted Saudi Aramco facilities in Ras al-Tanura, Rabigh, Yanbu and Jizan cities as well as King Abdelaziz military base in Damman and military sites in Najran and Air, vowing to "carry out stronger

and harsher military attacks in coming period”. Saudi coalition 28 March claimed it destroyed two explosive-laden boats Huthis allegedly planned to use in “imminent” attack and three drones; 30 March destroyed two additional drones.

➡ **Yemen Huthis continued offensive in Marib and cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia, while govt and Huthi forces clashed along Red Sea Coast and in Taiz and Hajja regions; anti-govt protests erupted in south.**

In north, Huthis and govt-aligned forces throughout month fought heavily in western and southern Marib governorate; Huthis claimed limited gains around Marib dam south west of Marib city while govt and Saudi-backed forces made repeated attempts to seize control of highway connecting Marib city with Huthi-held Sanaa and al-Jawf in west; threat of Huthi assault to take Marib city remained distinct possibility. Huthis continued drone and missile attacks on targets inside Saudi Arabia (see Saudi Arabia); Riyadh 7, 21 March launched airstrikes on targets inside capital Sanaa for first time since beginning of year. Fighting also broke out in Hodeida, Taiz and Hajja governorates as govt-aligned forces early March launched new offensives on Huthi positions in attempt to relieve pressure on Marib; govt-aligned forces 9 March reportedly seized mountaintop positions west of Taiz city. On diplomatic front, U.S. Yemen Envoy Timothy Lenderking throughout month stepped up outreach to Huthis, reportedly proposing plan that calls for nationwide ceasefire in exchange for lifting restrictions on Sanaa airport and Hodeida’s ports as well as national salary payment mechanism. Riyadh 22 March announced “an initiative to end the Yemeni crisis”, largely reiteration of existing peace proposal that Huthis called “nothing new”. U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken and UK, France and German FMs 24 March met to discuss peace efforts; Blinken 25 March held call with Yemeni PM Saeed, stressing need for ceasefire and inclusive peace agreement. In south, protests erupted mid-month in Aden city over deteriorating economic conditions, including repeated blackouts, fuel shortages and food price hikes, with Yemeni riyal sliding to YR900 to dollar; protesters 16 March stormed presidential Ma’shiq palace, where PM Maen Abdulmalik Saeed has been based since late Dec. Riyadh 25 March allowed fuel shipments to enter Huthi-held Hodeida port for first time in almost two months. UN Sec-Gen Antonio Guterres 2 March expressed disappointment after donors pledged only \$1.7bn for UN’s humanitarian efforts, \$1bn less than 2019 pledges.

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## **North Africa**

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➡ **Algeria Pro-democracy Hirak movement continued to gain momentum as it restarted protests after months of online activism.** After Hirak late Feb resumed Friday protests despite COVID-19-related ban on gatherings, thousands 5, 12, 19 and 26 March took to streets in capital Algiers and other cities against political and military elites, early elections and repression; several journalists assaulted while covering protest in Algiers 12 March, reportedly by group of individuals operating on behalf of security forces. President Tebboune 11 March scheduled early legislative elections for 12 June. Students also resumed Tuesday marches in Algiers to demand “free and democratic Algeria” and an end to military’s domination. Authorities responded to resurgence of protest movement with combination of repression and co-optation. UN human rights office 5 March expressed concern over “increasing crackdown” on Hirak activists and “deteriorating human rights situa-

tion” in country; also alleged hundreds have been detained since street protests resumed in Feb. Tebboune 4 March called on Hirak activists to participate in elected institutions and throughout month continued consultations with political parties and Hirak militants favourable to building consensus with authorities. In alleged attempt to take wind out of Hirak, Tebboune’s adviser in charge of relations with civil society and diaspora 6 March announced creation of “National Initiative” (*Nidaa al Watan*), gathering hundred associations and trade unions, to “create a force of proposal to promote reforms”. Authorities also played up political and identity divisions within protest movement, notably by agitating spectre of Islamist violence. Court in Algiers 21 March issued international arrest warrants against four activists close to Hirak on terrorism charges, notably accusing former diplomat Mohamed Larbi Zitout – prominent leader of outlawed Rachad movement gathering former Islamic Salvation Front’s officials – of seeking to turn Hirak into violent movement. Authorities 30 March announced arrest of five people on suspicion of planning “terrorist” acts against Hirak protests in north. Amid growing tensions with Morocco over Western Sahara, authorities mid-March reportedly ordered Moroccan farmers to leave El Arja border area in south by 18 March.

➡ **Egypt** **Low-intensity jihadist violence persisted in North Sinai, and group of Western countries, including U.S., condemned crackdown on dissent.** In North Sinai, Islamic State (ISIS) affiliate Sinai Province 4 and 11 March reportedly killed eight including at least two civilians; mid-March detonated IED near army armoured vehicle in Sheikh Zuweid area, killing several soldiers. Bedouin tribal force and security forces mid-March killed Salim Salma Said al-Hamadin, senior ISIS commander in Rafah and Sheikh Zuweid areas, south of Rafah town. NGO Human Rights Watch 17 March said demolition of buildings and forced evictions of residents as part of govt’s counter-insurgency policy in Sinai “likely amount to war crimes”. U.S. 12 March joined group of 30 UN Human Rights Council member states to condemn “restrictions on freedom of expression and the right to peaceful assembly” and “application of terrorism legislation against peaceful critics” in first such statement since 2014; govt immediately rejected “reckless” accusations. Amid growing convergence between Egypt and Sudan notably on Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam dispute with Ethiopia (see Nile Waters entry), both countries 2 March signed military cooperation agreement; in following days, President Sisi 6 March visited Sudan’s capital Khartoum for first time since 2019 overthrow of Sudan’s former President al-Bashir, while Sudan’s PM Hamdok 11 March travelled to capital Cairo. Turkish FM *Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu* 12 March reported first diplomatic contacts with Cairo since 2013 coup in Egypt. Egyptian FM Sameh Shoukry 14 March confirmed diplomatic contacts with Ankara but said dialogue was limited and Turkey’s actions must “show alignment with Egyptian principles and goals” for relations to return to normal, in possible allusion to presence of Egyptian opposition leaders in Turkey; partial rapprochement could pave way for understanding on Eastern Mediterranean dispute.

↑ **Libya** **Unified govt, first in over seven years, received vote of confidence and assumed power in major step forward for peace process.** PM-designate Dabaiba 4 March submitted cabinet line-up proposal to House of Representatives (HoR) Speaker Aghela Saleh notably featuring two deputy PM positions for eastern and southern Libya. Following two-day parliamentary debate in strategic city of Sirte (centre) and closed-door negotiations which led Dabaiba to replace ten

cabinet picks, HoR 10 March approved his Govt of National Unity (GNU) with close to all of 132 lawmakers present voting in favour, drawing international commendation; GNU tasked with leading country to general elections scheduled for Dec. GNU 15 March took oath before HoR in Tobruk city (east). UN-backed Govt of National Accord (GNA) PM Serraj in Tripoli 16 March and east-based PM Abdullah al-Thani in Benghazi city 23 March officially handed over power to GNU. Meanwhile, UN 3 March deployed advance team to assess possible UN support to Oct 2020 ceasefire. UN Security Council 12 March urged all parties to fully implement ceasefire agreement, called for withdrawal of all foreign forces and mercenaries. UN expert panel report 16 March said arms embargo imposed in 2011 remained “totally ineffective”. Amid rumours that Turkish-backed Syrian mercenaries had begun withdrawing, FM Najla al-Mangoush 25 March called for “immediate departure” of all foreign mercenaries following meeting with French, German and Italian counterparts in Tripoli. Unidentified gunmen 24 March killed Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s Arab Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF) senior commander Mahmoud al-Werfalli – wanted by International Criminal Court for alleged war crimes and crimes against humanity in 2016-2018 – in Benghazi. PM Dabaiba 19 March ordered investigation after over a dozen bodies found in mass grave in Benghazi previous day. Authorities throughout month also discovered new mass graves in and around Tarhuna city (west), former stronghold of ALAF-aligned al-Kani militia, on whose leaders EU 22 March imposed sanctions for alleged extrajudicial killings and enforced disappearances in Tarhuna between 2015 and 2020. ALAF 14 March announced arrest of prominent Islamic State figure Mohamed Miloud Mohamed, aka Abu Omar in Ubari city (south).

► **Tunisia** **Deadlock within executive branch persisted, while rights groups denounced police repression.** Parliament speaker and Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party leader Rached Ghannouchi 10 March joined calls for new national dialogue to address political crisis and recurrent disputes over constitution; move comes amid President Saïed’s refusal to swear in PM Mechichi’s new cabinet since Jan. Main trade union and political powerbroker UGTT, which has spearheaded calls for national dialogue, 26 March said Saïed had committed to participating in UGTT’s national dialogue. Meanwhile, MP Hassouna Nasfi, leader of parliamentary coalition La Réforme, same day said he had collected 104 of 109 signatures needed to hold vote of no confidence against Ghannouchi. Hundreds 6 March protested in capital Tunis to demand release of LGBTQI+ activist Rania Amdouni, after Tunis court 4 March sentenced her to six months in prison on charges of “insulting police”. In joint statement, dozens of human rights organisations and political parties in Tunisia and abroad – including France’s Human Rights League and Tunisian Organisation Against Torture – 16 March called for her immediate release, said 2,000 civil society activists were currently imprisoned and denounced “police and judicial downward slide”. Appeals court next day released Amdouni. President of secular Free Destourian Party and MP Abir Moussi along with dozens of supporters 9 March stormed Muslim Brotherhood-affiliated International Union of Muslim Scholars (IUMS) office in Tunis, accusing association of terrorism and demanding it be dissolved; Moussi had for weeks organised sit-in protest demanding IUMS dissolution outside organisation’s offices in Tunis and country’s second largest city Sfax. Police 30 March fired tear gas on protesters after hundreds tried to storm govt building in southern city of Tataouine to protest govt’s failure to provide jobs. In first presidential visit to neighbouring Libya since 2012, Saïed 17 March met newly sworn-in

Libyan PM Abdelhamid Dabaiba and Presidency Council Chairperson Mohamed al-Menfi in Libyan capital Tripoli to discuss bilateral relations and trade.

➡ **Western Sahara** **Situation remained tense between Polisario Front independence movement and Moroccan authorities.** Morocco's security forces throughout month strove to close series of possible security breaches and reinforce its detection system along east-west sand berm that separates Moroccan-controlled Western Saharan territory from Polisario-controlled Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic. AU Peace and Security Council meeting 9 March discussed Western Sahara for first time since 2019; in subsequent statement, AU 18 March vowed to reactivate its role in search for political solution to conflict, in reversal of its 2019 decision to limit AU's role in Western Sahara to offering support for UN-led efforts. AU also urged UN Sec-Gen Guterres to request UN Legal Counsel to provide legal opinion on opening of consulates in Moroccan-controlled Western Sahara. U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 29 March urged Guterres to speed up appointment of personal envoy to Western Sahara. Morocco 1 March suspended diplomatic relations with Germany; move comes after Berlin in Dec 2020 demanded that UN Security Council discuss developments in Western Sahara in closed-door session.