



Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ 🌟 **Israel-Palestine** Escalation loomed during Ramadan as deadly violence continued across West Bank amid unabated Israeli raids and growing Palestinian armed resistance; Israel's domestic crisis sharpened.

West Bank hostilities killed two dozen Palestinians and one Israeli. Deadly Israeli raids and settler attacks killed at least 27 Palestinians during March, while Palestinian attacks killed one Israeli. Notably, Israeli forces 7 March killed six Palestinians in Jenin; 9 March killed three Islamic Jihad affiliates in Jenin; Hamas gunman same day opened fire in Tel Aviv, killing one Israeli. Far-right Israeli govt continued incendiary rhetoric: Finance Minister Bezalet Smotrich 1 March called for erasure of West Bank village Huwara and 20 March denied existence of Palestinian people; govt late Feb handed Smotrich authority to effectively govern West Bank, marking step toward de jure annexation as it implies occupation forces are no longer temporary or military. Knesset 20 March passed amendment to resettle four illegal settlements in West Bank evacuated in 2005, drawing U.S. rebuke. Huwara continued to be major flashpoint, witnessing unabated settler violence, Israeli military presence and repeated Palestinian shooting attacks, including shooting that injured two soldiers 25 March. Israel and Palestinian Authority (PA) 19 March participated in U.S.-sponsored security meeting with Egypt and Jordan in effort to de-escalate violence, which could see upsurge during Muslim and Jewish holidays.

Israel faced unprecedented constitutional crisis, destabilising coalition govt. Amid anti-govt protests by hundreds of thousands and threats by security and intelligence reserve forces to refuse duty, Knesset 13-14 March advanced bills on judicial overhaul and making it harder to remove PM. PM Netanyahu 26 March fired Defence Minister Yoav Gallant after Gallant called for suspension of judicial overhaul, spurring further protests; Netanyahu next day froze overhaul plans for one month.

Suspected Hizbollah attack raised spectre of escalation. In rare incident, explosive device 13 March wounded civilian in Megiddo Junction, northern Israel; Israeli military same day killed suspect and pointed finger at Hizbollah and/or Palestinian factions in Lebanon, which may seek to test Israel as it faces multiple crises. Meanwhile, Gaza-based militants reportedly 8 and 18 March launched rockets. Israel continued strikes in Syria, including against Palestinian Al-Quds Brigades (see Syria).

➔ **Lebanon** Economic crisis worsened as currency spiral continued, while deadlock persisted over presidential vacuum without end in sight.

Economic plight continued to worsen. Lebanese lira 14 March crossed threshold of 100,000 to \$1 at parallel exchange rate and 21 March dropped to 140,000, prompting Central Bank to announce injection of U.S. dollars that stabilised rate around 100,000. Increasingly devalued currency continued to contribute to worsening living conditions. Supermarkets 1 March began pricing goods in U.S. dollars, fuel prices continued to rise, while citizens increasingly struggled to purchase other essential imported products. State electricity provider EDL 13 March reported that 2,000 customers per day were applying to unsubscribe from public grid after sharp tariff hikes. Deteriorating conditions continued to cause unrest and security incidents as depositors demanded access to savings trapped inside illiquid banks: security guard 3 March shot and wounded depositor in capital Beirut; security forces 22 March used tear gas against protestors outside parliament. Despite calls on 5 March by several public teachers' unions to end strike ongoing since Dec, many unions refused to return to work and demanded inflation-indexed salaries.

Double executive (president and cabinet) continued without end in sight. Presidential vacuum prevailing since 1 Nov continued as parliament in March held no presidential election sessions, reflecting deadlock. Leaders of Shiite parties Amal and Hizbollah 2 and 6 March respectively put forward Suleiman Frangieh as their preferred presidential candidate, leading House Speaker and Amal leader Nabih Berri to declare his preparedness to convene electoral session when opposing camp nominates "a candidate or two". Christian party Lebanese Forces (LF) leader Samir Geagea, however, swiftly threatened to block Frangieh's election by helping to frustrate quorum, alleging that Frangieh would unduly represent interests of Hizbollah and its allies. Free Patriotic Movement party also rejected Frangieh. Meanwhile, cabinet 27 March held meeting to discuss confusion over daylight savings time. France 18 March reportedly sought to convince Saudi Arabia – which retains influence over LF and Sunni MPs – to support proposal to elect Frangieh as president alongside new PM supported by opposition; Saudi Arabia, however, appeared unwilling to strangle its close ally LF.

➡ **Syria Regime and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) resumed hostilities in north west, tensions flared between U.S. and Iran-backed forces in east, and President Assad sought to end diplomatic isolation.**

In north west, cross-line tit-for-tat attacks returned and Turkish-backed militants killed Kurdish civilians. After weeks-long hiatus following earthquake, Idlib's dominant faction HTS in March resumed raids and sniping operations on regime positions in north west, including in Idlib province 16 March and in Latakia province next day; regime had stepped up shelling of Idlib province following earthquakes. HTS and regime 23 March clashed in northern Aleppo province, killing 10 from both sides. Turkish-backed militants 20 March killed several Kurds during Kurdish new year celebrations near Jinderis town, Aleppo province; thousands next day protested in Jinderis.

U.S. and Iran-backed forces clashed in east and Islamic State (ISIS) continued attacks in centre. Alleged Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated groups 23 March launched drone attack on base near Hasakah city, killing U.S. contractor and injuring six U.S. troops; in retaliation, U.S. conducted airstrikes on alleged IRGC-affiliated groups, killing several militants (see Iran). Further attacks next day targeted coalition forces, wounding U.S. service member. Meanwhile, suspected ISIS

cells in March increased activity in centre, conducting at least 30 attacks that killed dozens. Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and International Coalition continued anti-ISIS operations in north east.

Regime continued normalisation drive as Syrian-Turkish rapprochement stalled. President Assad 15 March met Russian President Putin. Assad 19 March visited United Arab Emirates and met President Sheikh Mohamed bin Zayed Al Nahyan. Saudi media 23 March reported Riyadh was in talks with Damascus to reestablish consular relations (see Saudi Arabia). Assad 16 March ruled out meeting Turkish President Erdoğan until Ankara announces timetable for withdrawal from Syria; reports late month indicated possible meeting between Iran, Türkiye, Syria and Russia in early April.

In other important developments. Israeli airstrikes 7, 22 March reportedly hit Aleppo airport and 30-31 March struck Damascus; alleged Israeli rockets 12 March hit Hama and Tartus provinces. World Food Programme 15 March said situation in Syria is “worse than ever” with over half of population lacking food.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Iran Engagement with International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) forestalled international censure, govt and Saudi Arabia announced breakthrough normalisation deal, and tensions with U.S. flared in Syria.**

Iran avoided censure at IAEA’s Board of Governors, Western sanctions mounted. Ahead of first Board of Governors meeting in 2023, IAEA chief Rafael Grossi 3-4 March visited capital Tehran for meetings with senior officials and President Raisi amid heightening concerns over longstanding safeguards issues as well as recent discovery of uranium particles enriched to near-weapons grade and undeclared modifications at Fordow facility; visit produced joint statement on increased cooperation. U.S. and E3 (France, UK and Germany) did not introduce censure resolution during board meeting on 7 March, but underscored serious concern of Tehran’s nuclear activity. Meanwhile, U.S. 2 March expanded its sanctions against Iranian petroleum and petrochemical export companies. European Union 7 March sanctioned Iranian prison over human rights concerns. UK next day sanctioned govt institution The Headquarters for Enjoining Right and Forbidding Evil in Iran, as U.S. issued its tenth round of human rights-related sanctions since protests began in Sept.

Tehran and Riyadh announced breakthrough agreement. Following undisclosed talks in Chinese capital Beijing, Iran and Saudi Arabia 10 March announced deal to restore diplomatic relations seven years after they were severed, and following nearly two years of intermittent dialogue (see Saudi Arabia). Deal could mark constructive shift in de-escalating regional tensions, but may prove transitory unless Iran and West address nuclear standoff, hostages in Iran and Tehran’s military support for Russia.

Iran-U.S. tensions surged in Syria. Alleged Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)-affiliated groups 23 March launched drone attack on base near Syria’s Hasakah city, killing U.S. contractor and injuring six U.S. troops; in retaliation, U.S.

conducted airstrikes on alleged IRGC-affiliated groups, killing several militants (see Syria); President Biden asserted that “the U.S. does not ... seek conflict with Iran” but would “forcefully” protect its people. Earlier, UK 2 March announced Royal Navy and U.S. 23 Feb interdicted vessel from Iran in Gulf of Oman carrying anti-tank guided missiles and medium-range ballistic missile components, likely intended for Huthis in Yemen.

➡ **Iraq Govt approved first draft budget in three years as parliament advanced electoral reform, while low-scale violence persisted in north and Islamic State (ISIS) continued its insurgency.**

Govt approved budget and parliament pursued electoral reform. Council of Ministers 13 March approved 2023-2025 federal budget for parliament ratification, which expands public employment but fails to address structural causes of poor economic and financial situation and lack of govt services. Parliament 20-25 March passed 15 articles of new draft electoral law for Nov 2023 provincial council and parliamentary elections; new law reintroduces voting along party lists, turns each governorate into single electoral constituency, and raises minimum age for candidates to 30, which marks major setback for emerging parties and reform-minded independent candidates; Sadrist movement expressed opposition. Meanwhile, PM Sudani 13 March announced agreement with Kurdistan Regional Government to deposit Kurdistan’s oil revenues in bank account under federal govt’s supervision.

Türkiye targeted Kurdish militants and intercommunal violence flared in north. Turkish drone 1 March hit vehicle in Sinjar, Ninewa governorate, killing two Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) fighters. Following months of tit-for-tat attacks between Shi-ite Dulaimi and Sunni Azzawi tribes in Diyala governorate, militants 6 March attacked al-Haziniyah village, reportedly killing at least five members of local leader Sheikh Mustafa al-Tamimi’s tribe; PM Sudani 8 March visited governorate and deployed military reinforcements. Two helicopters 15 March crashed in Chamanke region, Duhok governorate, killing nine Syrian Democratic Forces members on knowledge-sharing trip.

Low-scale ISIS insurgency and anti-ISIS operations continued. Military 12 March announced security forces killed 22 alleged ISIS members in Anbar governorate. Alleged ISIS militants 8 March killed one in attack on security forces in Tuzkhormatu district, Kirkuk governorate.

In other important developments. Court 3 March issued warrants to freeze assets of former Finance Minister Ali Allawi and three senior aides to former PM Kadhimi for alleged facilitation of tax misappropriation. Govt and Iran 19 March signed border agreement aimed at securing frontier between Iran and Iraq’s Kurdish region.

↑ **Saudi Arabia In breakthrough China-brokered agreement, Riyadh and Tehran agreed to restore diplomatic relations after seven years of severed ties.**

Saudi Arabia and Iran announced deal to reinstate diplomatic relations. After China 6-10 March hosted secret Saudi-Iranian talks in its capital Beijing, parties 10 March issued joint statement outlining plan to resume diplomatic relations and reopening of embassies within two months; while details of agreement remained unclear, it could mark constructive shift in de-escalating regional tensions among Gulf

rivals and signals Riyadh's desire to diversify global relationships as China's regional clout grows (see Iran). Iranian official 19 March said King Salman invited Iranian President Raisi to country, while Iranian FM Amirabdollahian same day said he would meet Saudi counterpart "in the near future".

Riyadh signalled openness to normalisation with Syria. FM Prince Faisal bin Farhan 7 March said engagement with Damascus was necessary to address Syria's humanitarian crisis; United Arab Emirates 19 March hosted Syrian President Assad for second time since March 2022. Saudi media 23 March reported Riyadh was in talks with Damascus to reestablish consular relations.

↓ **Yemen** **Huthis escalated hostilities in Marib and Shebwa governorates, ending months-long de facto truce and overshadowing prisoner exchange deal with govt as well as Iran-Saudi agreement.**

Huthis launched attacks in Marib and Shebwa. Huthis launched assaults on govt-aligned forces 20 March in Marib's Harib district and 26 March in mountain range connecting to Merkhah Al Ulya district in southern Shebwa, leading to deadly clashes, displacing hundreds and ending de facto truce in last six months as govt warned of possible return to all-out fighting; Huthi offensive seemingly sought to break stalemate in ongoing backchannel talks with Riyadh and dampened hopes for Saudi-Iran détente. Huthis 25 March conducted drone attack on Taiz Governor Nabil Shamsan, killing one. Huthis same day announced restrictions on humanitarian flights arriving in capital Sanaa, citing alleged Saudi prohibition on commercial flights.

Diplomatic efforts bore fruit before escalation. Following 10 March Saudi-Iran deal to restore ties (see Saudi Arabia and Iran), Saudi officials reportedly revealed deal included Iranian commitment to halt weapons shipments to Huthis; govt, Huthis and Southern Transitional Council (STC) cautiously welcomed agreement, fuelling hopes of reducing risk of new Huthi offensive; longstanding grievances of local factions, however, remained unaddressed. Meanwhile, Huthi-Saudi talks continued and, in parallel, govt and Huthi delegations 20 March reached deal to exchange 887 detainees in UN-facilitated talks in Switzerland.

Rift between STC and Riyadh continued, govt made overtures to Islah. STC official criticised deployment of Saudi-backed army National Shield Forces in STC-controlled areas, which threatens STC's grip in south. STC 9 March voiced concern over Saudi-Huthi talks, warning against any deal that goes beyond UN-led process. Separately, Presidential Leadership Council member and leader of Joint Resistance Forces Tareq Saleh 2 March travelled to Islah-stronghold Taiz city and shook hands with rival and Islah military leader Abdo Farhan Mekhlafi, likely signalling attempts to secure pockets of influence in event of Saudi-Huthi settlement.

In other important developments. In first maritime incident in Red Sea this year, unidentified assailants 17 March attacked ship with machine-gun fire. Huthis doubled down on efforts to remove restrictions at Hodeida port, which could jeopardise govt revenues.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** President Tebboune conducted major cabinet reshuffle ahead of 2024 presidential election.

FM and other govt heavyweights sacked in reshuffle. Tebboune 16 March conducted cabinet reshuffle affecting 11 ministerial portfolios, notably dismissing FM Ramtane Lamamra, Finance Minister Brahim Djamel Kessali and Trade Minister Kamel Rezig. Col. Mahrez Djeribi 11 March also replaced Gen. Abdelaziz Nouiouet Chouiter as head of Algeria's most influential security agency, Central Direction of Army Security.

Authorities discussed military and economic cooperation with partners. U.S. Under-Sec State for Arms Control and International Security Affairs Bonnie Denise Jenkins 5-7 March visited Algeria and met with Tebboune, as Algeria plans to spend around \$21bn in 2023 to purchase weapons and other military equipment. European Union (EU) foreign policy chief Josep Borrell 12-13 March met with Tebboune and PM Aïmene Benabderrahmane in capital Algiers to discuss 2005 association agreement between Algeria and EU, energy issues, and relations between Algeria and Spain. Tebboune 16 March met with head of Russia's upper house of parliament, Valentina Matvienko, in Algiers; Matvienko invited him to visit Russia and meet with President Putin. Meanwhile, Algeria's ambassador to France, recalled home in Feb after Algiers accused Paris of orchestrating "exfiltration" of binational civil society activist Amira Bouraoui, 29 March returned to his post.

Tensions with Morocco remained high over Western Sahara. During military visit in Tamanrasset province (south), Army Chief of Staff Saïd Chengriha 15 March said army "is ready to cut the hand of those who want to undermine Algeria's sovereignty"; comments came after director of Moroccan Royal Archives, Bahija Simou, late Feb said Morocco's sovereignty extends over Western Sahara but also Eastern Sahara (which is part of Algeria). Tebboune in interview with Al Jazeera news channel 21 March said Algeria's relations with Morocco have reached "the point of no return" (see Western Sahara).

➔ **Egypt** Economic tensions built up again, security outlook in Sinai Peninsula continued to improve, and govt took new steps toward reconciliation with Türkiye.

Inflation climbed to record highs and pressure on exchange rate increased. President Sisi 2 March announced package of measures, including state wage and pension raises to help alleviate economic pressures, which could spark tensions especially as Muslim holy month of Ramadan started 23 March. Central Bank 30 March raised key interest rates by 2% in attempt to curb rocketing inflation, as annual inflation rose to 31.9% in Feb, highest in five years, with food prices rising most steeply. Value of Egyptian pound relative to U.S. dollar in March continued to decline on black market while official exchange rate remained stable at EGP30 to \$1, possibly indicating that Central Bank has gone back to managing value of pound despite International Monetary Fund's request that it switch to flexible exchange rate.

Human rights situation remained dire, lull in violence continued in Sinai Peninsula. Special Court (Emergency State Security Court) 5 March sentenced 31 members of

NGO Egyptian Coordination for Rights and Freedoms to lengthy prison terms on terrorism-related charges. UN Human Rights Chief Volker Türk 7 March expressed “fair trial concerns”. NGO Human Rights Watch 13 March said crackdown on opposition extends beyond Egypt’s borders, alleging authorities systematically refuse to provide or renew identity documents to dissidents, journalists and activists abroad. Amid few incidents in Sinai Peninsula, army unit and Islamic State-affiliated Sinai Province militants 7 March exchanged fire near al-Tur town, South Sinai, wounding one soldier.

Progress continued toward reconciliation with Türkiye. FM Sameh Shoukry 18 March met with Turkish counterpart Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu in capital Cairo, marking new phase in gradual reconciliation between Egypt and Türkiye; Shoukry and Çavuşoğlu said relations would be normalised “at the appropriate time”, and announced President Sisi and Turkish President Erdoğan would meet after Turkish elections in May.

➔ **Libya UN initiative to provide constitutional framework for elections struggled to gain traction.**

UN envoy’s plan for elections failed to secure endorsement. Special Representative of UN Sec-Gen for Libya Abdoulaye Bathily 11 March said legislative bodies, House of Representatives (HoR) and High State Council (HSC), had agreed to form joint committee of six members each to draft electoral laws; also said presidential and legislative elections could be held by year’s end if clear roadmap and electoral laws are in place by June. Statement appeared to give centre stage to legislative bodies’ initiative to provide legal framework for elections, suggesting Bathily has backtracked on his recent proposal to establish High-Level Panel for Elections. HoR Speaker Aguila Saleh 13 March reiterated opposition to Bathily’s proposal, confirmed HoR is on track with its own roadmap and intends to appoint new interim govt once election laws are finalised; issue of new executive to replace Tripoli-based govt of PM Abdelhamid Dabaiba is major point of departure from Bathily’s plan. UN Security Council 16 March adopted presidential statement on Libya, stating that Council “recognises the continued role of the HoR and HSC” to securing legal basis for elections, while downplaying Bathily’s initiative.

Efforts to unify divided military institutions inched forward. Bathily 16 March hosted meeting of 5+5 Joint Military Commission (JMC) – which brings together representatives of armed forces from eastern and western Libya – in Tunisia’s capital Tunis to discuss way forward in security track and reunification of military institutions; renewed commitment to create initial joint force (one unit) to be deployed in central Libya. Military leaders from both east-based Libyan National Army (LNA) and Tripoli-based military coalition, including some JMC members, 26 March met in capital Tripoli under UN auspices, committed to continue to work toward unification of military.

National oil company chairman allegedly under U.S. scrutiny. Allegations in March surfaced among Libyan businessmen that chairman of Libya’s National Oil Corporation, Farhat Bengdara, is under U.S. scrutiny for his alleged role in allocating funds to cover expenses of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s LNA forces, part of which might have bankrolled sanctioned Russian paramilitary Wagner Group.

➔ **Tunisia** **Opposition protested President Saïed’s increasingly authoritarian drift, while violence against African migrants caused international outcry.**

Saïed continued to assert control over public institutions. Saïed 8 March vowed to dissolve municipal councils elected in 2018 and replace them with “special councils” to be elected under new rules. New parliament 13 March held first session in absence of independent and foreign journalists, who were barred from attending, and elected former president of Bar Association Brahim Bouderbala as speaker; opposition coalition National Salvation Front (NSF) same day said it did not recognise legitimacy of parliament elected with 11.3% turnout. Interior Minister Taoufik Charfeddine 17 March resigned, citing family reasons; Saïed same day replaced him with hardline supporter, Tunis Governor Kamal Feki.

Opposition protested wave of arrests targeting govt critics. As part of campaign of arrests launched in Feb, authorities 2 March detained leader of Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party Habib Ellouze, allegedly on terrorism charges. Main workers’ union UGTT 4 March rallied thousands of protesters in capital Tunis to denounce politically motivated detentions and rising cost of living as well as to urge Saïed to accept UGTT’s dialogue initiative. NSF next day also protested wave of arrests and Saïed’s power grab; 27 March started open sit-in in Tunis to demand release of all political detainees.

International institutions condemned attacks on sub-Saharan Africans. After Saïed’s comments linking migration and crime in Feb triggered violent attacks on sub-Saharan African in Tunisia, several countries including Guinea, Mali and Côte d’Ivoire early March began repatriation of nationals who submitted voluntary return applications. World Bank early March suspended partnership framework with Tunisia for 2023-2027 “until further notice”, deeming Saïed’s remarks “completely unacceptable”, while U.S. State Dept 6 March expressed “deep concern” about reports of arbitrary arrests and violence against migrants.

➔ **Western Sahara** **UN envoy held consultations with parties to Western Sahara conflict ahead of Security Council meeting due in April.**

Preparations under way for next UN Security Council meeting on Western Sahara. UN 28 March said UN Sec-Gen’s envoy for Western Sahara, Staffan de Mistura, invited representatives of Morocco, Algeria, Mauritania and Polisario Front independence movement “to informal bilateral consultations” “to continue seeking mutually agreeable formulas to advance the political process” ahead of Security Council meeting on Western Sahara scheduled for 20 April.

Tensions continued to run high between Morocco and Algeria. After director of Moroccan Royal Archives, Bahija Simou, late Feb said Morocco’s sovereignty extends over Western Sahara but also Eastern Sahara (which is part of Algeria), Algeria’s Army Chief of Staff Saïd Chengriha 15 March said army “is ready to cut the hand of those who want to undermine Algeria’s sovereignty”. Algeria’s President Tebboune in interview with Al Jazeera news channel 21 March said Algeria’s relations with Morocco have reached “the point of no return” (see Algeria).