

# Middle East and North Africa

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## Eastern Mediterranean

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➔ **Israel-Palestine** Violence between Israeli security forces and Palestinians in Gaza flared early May, killing 25 Palestinians and four Israelis. Israeli soldiers at Israel-Gaza fence began shooting at Palestinian protesters' head and chest areas 2 May, prompting retaliation. Palestinian factions fired 700 rockets and projectiles into Israel and Israelis carried out 320 airstrikes in Gaza 3-6 May. Israel claimed responsibility for 5 May killing of Hamas member whom it said had been transferring money from Iran to militant groups in Gaza. Israel 4 May closed Erez and Kerem Shalom border crossings and banned fishing off Gazan coast. Hamas and Islamic Jihad delegations in Cairo 5 May agreed to Egyptian-mediated ceasefire, which came into effect 6 May. As part of ceasefire agreement, Israel 12 May reopened border crossings and allowed fishing up to twelve nautical miles offshore, only to reduce fishing zone to up to five nautical miles offshore 16 May, citing Hamas's use of incendiary balloons. Qatar 7 May pledged \$480mn to West Bank and Gaza: \$180mn for humanitarian aid and electricity in Gaza, \$50mn grant to Palestinian Authority (PA) and \$250mn loan to PA over twelve months. Following his April electoral victory, PM Netanyahu failed to form governing coalition in allotted time, instead he passed bill 29 May to dissolve parliament and hold new election 17 Sept. U.S. 19 May announced that as first phase of Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative it would convene "Peace to Prosperity" economic conference in Bahrain 25-26 June; Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) 20 May said it would not attend. Israel 27 May announced it had agreed to take part in U.S.-mediated talks with Lebanon on disputed maritime border.

➔ **Lebanon** Govt's draft 2019 budget described by PM Hariri as one of "the most austere in the history of Lebanon" led to strikes and protests in capital Beirut and elsewhere. Leaks that draft budget could target public wages, services and social benefits led to wave of discontent. In Beirut, central bank employees went on strike 6 May. Veterans 10 May protested against possible cuts in pensions and benefits. Veterans 13 May blocked roads in Beirut and throughout country. Anti-austerity protesters in Beirut 20 May attempted to storm Grand Serail, PM's headquarters, which led to clashes with police, leaving two policemen and one civilian wounded. U.S. officials 15 May met President Aoun, FM Gebran Bassil, PM Hariri and other officials to discuss Israel-Lebanon maritime border dispute.

⬇ **Syria** Pro-govt forces intensified bombing in Idlib province in north west. Syrian and Russian warplanes ramped up bombardment of Idlib province largely controlled by jihadist coalition Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS); UN confirmed over 160 people killed, while Syrian Observatory for Human Rights reported at least 313 civilians killed 30 April-31 May. Pro-govt forces 6-9 May seized strategic towns of Tal Othman, Kafr Nabudah and Qalaat al-Madiq; offensive seemingly aimed at recapturing strategic highways that cross Idlib. UN 17 May reported airstrikes on civilian targets throughout Idlib, damaging hospitals and schools; govt forces allegedly used chlorine gas 19 May. HTS retaliated: 2-19 May launched rocket attacks on Russian

Hmeimim base near Latakia city; 21 May recaptured Kafr Nabudah before withdrawing again amid govt counter-offensive 26 May. Govt offensive on Idlib strained Russian-Turkish Dec de-escalation agreement: Turkish President Erdoğan in phone call with Russian President Putin 13 May accused Damascus of sabotaging deal; Russian and Turkish defence ministers 14 May met to discuss de-escalation measures; Russia 19 May announced unilateral ceasefire, but Russian airstrikes in Kafranbel same day killed ten. In east, amid ongoing Islamic State (ISIS) insurgency, Arab tribes continued protests – launched late April – against Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which took back territory from ISIS, citing poor service provision, forced conscriptions, arbitrary detentions, as well as SDF's oil shipments to govt-controlled territories; protests petered out by end month. In south, pro-govt media 17-18 May reported govt forces had allegedly intercepted Israeli missiles from Golan Heights, targeting Iranian positions near capital; govt 27 May said Israel carried out attack in Quneitra in retaliation to anti-aircraft fire on Israeli warplane same day.

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## Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

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➔ **Bahrain** Govt 19 May said it would host U.S.-led Palestine investment meeting in Manama 25-26 June, as first part of upcoming U.S.-developed Israeli-Palestinian peace plan; United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia 22 May, and Qatar 25 May, said they would take part.

⚡ **Iran** Tension between Iran and U.S. increased markedly. Citing “troubling and escalatory indications and warnings” from Iran, U.S. 5 and 10 May announced it would bolster military assets in Middle East, including naval and air forces and missile defence systems. U.S. 24 May announced additional deployment of 1,500 troops, a dozen fighter jets and drones to Middle East. U.S. Sec State Pompeo 7 May visited Iraq to meet senior officials, referring to indications of imminent attacks on U.S. assets. Tension rose further following unclaimed attacks on four oil tankers (two Saudi, one Emirati, one Norwegian) off United Arab Emirates coast 12 May and drone attacks on pipeline in Saudi Arabia 14 May claimed by Huthi forces in Yemen; Saudi officials accused Iran of guiding Huthis' actions. U.S. 15 May ordered non-essential U.S. personnel to leave Iraq. In Iraq, rocket landed in Baghdad's Green Zone about a mile from U.S. embassy 19 May causing no casualties. President Trump 19 May tweeted that “If Iran wants to fight, that will be the official end of Iran”. U.S. waivers allowing countries to import Iranian oil expired 2 May. U.S. revoked nuclear-related waivers 3 May, no longer permitting countries to purchase Iran's surplus heavy water and low enriched uranium (LEU). Tehran 8 May responded by downgrading compliance with LEU and heavy water limits in Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and also threatened to step up uranium enrichment if P4+1 (UK, France, Russia, China and Germany) failed to protect Iran's oil and banking sectors from sanctions within 60 days; U.S. same day announced restrictions on Iran's metal industries. EU/E3 (France, Germany and UK) 9 May said they rejected any Iranian ultimatums but underscored their commitment to JCPOA.

➔ **Iraq** Govt continued to stay neutral amid intense U.S.-Iran rivalry, Islamic State (ISIS) continued low-intensity insurgency and Turkey clashed with Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in north. U.S. 6 May approved deployment of aircraft carrier and bomber task force to Persian Gulf in response to “Iranian threats”. U.S. Sec State

Pompeo 7 May made surprise visit to Baghdad and reportedly warned Iraqi leaders of their responsibility to protect U.S. troops and citizens against possible attacks by Iranian-backed militia. President Salih 8 May reiterated govt's neutral stance in U.S.-Iran standoff and PM Mahdi 15 May denied threats to U.S. assets from Iran or Iran-backed Popular Mobilisation Units. U.S. 15 May decided to pull some diplomatic staff from Baghdad and Erbil; U.S. oil company ExxonMobil 18 May evacuated foreign staff, after it signed \$53bn deal with Baghdad 7 May. Unidentified assailants 19 May fired rocket at Green Zone in Baghdad which landed a mile from U.S. embassy. ISIS continued low-intensity attacks: in Salah al-Din province, suspected ISIS fighters 8 May killed seven in al-Mazari village; in Nineveh province near Mosul, militants 9 May targeted village chief and his family, killing five; in Baghdad, suicide bombing same day killed eight; in Mosul province, explosion 26 May killed five in market in Rabia. In Kirkuk province, gunmen 16 May killed nine police officers in two separate attacks; coordinated explosions 31 May killed at least three in Kirkuk city centre. Anti-corruption protests 16 May broke out in Najaf and clashes with security personnel left four dead. In north, Turkey and PKK continued to clash: at Sherwan Mazin border crossing, PKK 4 May killed three soldiers; Turkey same day reported 28 militants "neutralised" in subsequent pursuit; cross-border air raids 1-16 May hit PKK targets in Hakurk, Zap, Metina and Gara areas; Iraqi Kurdistan officials 14 May reported one civilian dead in Turkish drone strike.

➔ **Qatar** Qatar 25 May confirmed that it will take part in U.S.-led Palestine investment meeting to be held 25-26 June in Manama, Bahrain, as part of upcoming U.S.-developed Israeli-Palestinian peace plan.

↓ **Saudi Arabia** Tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran escalated with govt blaming Iran for Huthi-claimed attacks on its territory. Unidentified attackers 12 May damaged four oil tankers (two Saudi, one Emirati, one Norwegian) near Fujairah port in United Arab Emirates (UAE). UAE refrained from attributing blame and opened joint investigation with U.S., France and Norway. U.S. defence officials 24 May said Iran was responsible for attacks. Huthis in Yemen claimed responsibility for drone attack 14 May on state oil company Aramco pipeline in centre of country as response to Saudi-led coalition "aggression" in Yemen; attacks caused company to temporarily close pipeline. Saudi officials 17 May blamed Huthis and accused Iran of guiding Huthi actions. Saudi-led coalition 16 May launched airstrikes in Sanaa in apparent retaliation, with humanitarian agencies reporting at least six civilians killed. FM al-Jubeir 19 May said govt did not want war but would not allow Iran to "continue its hostile policies". U.S.'s Bahrain-based Fifth Fleet 18 May said it had begun "enhanced security patrols" around Arabian Peninsula. State media 20 May reported security forces intercepted two "Huthi ballistic missiles" over Taif targeting Jeddah and Mecca; Huthis denied cities were targets. Huthis 21 May claimed they had launched drone attack on arms depot at Najran airport, but coalition spokesman said Huthis targeted civilian site. King Salman late May convened emergency meetings of Gulf Cooperation Council and Arab League in Mecca to address what he called Iranian "escalations" and other regional issues. Govt 22 May said it would take part in U.S.-led Palestine investment meeting to be held 25-26 June in Manama, Bahrain, as part of upcoming U.S.-developed Israeli-Palestinian peace plan. Govt 19 May said it had deposited \$250mn into Sudan's central bank, following UAE deposit of same amount in April.

➔ **United Arab Emirates** Unidentified attackers 12 May damaged four oil tankers (two Saudi, one Emirati, one Norwegian) near Fujairah port. Govt opened joint investigation with U.S., France and Norway and refrained from attributing blame; U.S. defence officials 24 May said Iran was responsible for attacks. Govt 22 May said it would take part in U.S.-led Palestine investment meeting to be held 25-26 June in Manama, Bahrain, as part of upcoming U.S.-developed Israeli-Palestinian peace plan.

↓ 🇲🇵\* **Yemen** Huthis launched drone strikes on oil pipeline in Saudi Arabia and fighting escalated on several fronts in Yemen; military escalation and rising tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran raise risk of worse fighting in Yemen and more Huthi attacks on Saudi and Emirati assets in coming weeks. Huthis unilaterally redeployed from Hodeida, Ras Issa and Saleef ports 11-14 May under UN monitoring. Saudi-led coalition reportedly consented to Huthi move, but govt accused UN of Huthi bias; govt 23 May sent letter to UN Sec-Gen criticising UN envoy Martin Griffiths. Cross-border attacks intensified: Huthis claimed drone attacks in Saudi Arabia on oil pipeline 14 May, on Najran airport 21 and 23 May (latter was intercepted), and on airport in Jizan 26 May (also intercepted). Saudi Arabia accused Iran of guiding Huthi actions, and 20 May accused Huthis of targeting Jeddah and Mecca with ballistic missiles that Saudi military intercepted; Huthis denied cities were targets. Saudi Arabia 16 May launched airstrikes targeting Sanaa in apparent retaliation for drone attacks, reportedly causing civilian deaths. Fighting on other front lines intensified; clashes took place in Durayhimi district south of Hodeida city; battles between United Arab Emirates (UAE)-backed southern forces and Huthis continued in al-Dhale, Abyan and Lahj governorates; fighting reportedly intensified near Sanaa and in Taiz, and along Saudi border. Tensions between rival factions in anti-Huthi bloc persisted; govt publicly denounced UAE influence after UAE-backed forces 8 May landed on Socotra, Yemeni island in Arabian Sea; local media reported that members of Presidential Guard clashed with UAE-backed forces in al-Dhale.

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## North Africa

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➔ **Algeria** Ahead of 4 July presidential elections, interim govt and military launched wave of arrests of Bouteflika regime allies as nationwide protests against military control and elections continued. Military 4 May arrested former president's brother Said Bouteflika, former intelligence head Mohamed Mediene and his successor Major-General Tartag; authorities charged them with "undermining authority of army and plotting against state". Military 9 May imprisoned opposition figure Louisa Hanoune on same charges; leftist parties denounced arrest as first step toward military dictatorship. Berber activist Kamel Eddine Fekhar 28 May died as result of hunger strike, after his March arrest for "undermining state security"; following his funeral and protests, authorities 30 May announced probe into death. Interim President Ben Salah 16 May replaced prosecutors in Algiers and Sidi M'hamed and head of anti-corruption agency; security services same day revoked bank directors' passports; prosecutor 27 May asked Supreme Court to investigate ten former ministers for corruption, including former PMs Ahmed Ouyahia and Abdelmalek Sellal. Hundreds of thousands continued to protest peacefully in main cities every Friday against interim political leaders, military control of transition and 4 July elections.

Dozens of civil society organisations 18 May created Civil Forum for Change platform, publishing proposed roadmap including postponing elections for six months, consensual three-person council at head of state, and national conference on economy. Constitutional Council 26 May announced two presidential candidates, Abdelhakim Hamadi and Hamid Touahri, both relatively unknown figures; no major party nominated a candidate. Army Chief of General Staff Gaid Salah 20 May reiterated calls for elections “as soon as possible” and refused to set up transitional bodies ahead of vote, insisting that without elections country risked a “constitutional void” and instability; 29 May called for inclusive dialogue as only means to overcome political crisis.

➔ **Egypt** After bombing targeted tourists near pyramids, authorities launched crackdown on suspected Islamist militants. Roadside bombing near Giza pyramids 19 May injured seventeen people. Next day security forces killed twelve suspected Islamist militants in two raids in Cairo. Authorities accused Hasm group, alleged wing of Muslim Brotherhood, of “planning chaos”, but did not say that raids were linked to Giza bombing. In Sinai, military 16 May reported 47 Islamic State (ISIS) fighters and five soldiers killed, without saying when or where; in El Arish city, police 20 May stormed ISIS hideouts, killing sixteen militants. NGO Human Rights Watch 28 May published report on military operations in Sinai since 2011, highlighting systematic war crimes and abuses by security forces; same day accused govt of coordinating smear campaign and issuing threats on staff. Marking Ramadan, President Sisi 16 May pardoned 560 prisoners, including suspected supporters of Muslim Brotherhood and journalist Abdel Halim Qandil. Top prosecutor 21 May ordered release of five opposition figures on human rights grounds, including former ambassador Masoum Marzouq held in solitary confinement since Aug 2018. Following 23 May court release order, authorities 29 May returned Al Jazeera journalist Mahmoud Hussein to prison and announced opening of new investigation.

↓ **Libya** Fighting intensified in and around capital Tripoli between Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s Libyan National Army (LNA) and forces nominally loyal to UN-backed Govt of National Accord (GNA). Stalemate persisted with pro-GNA forces preventing LNA advance on centre, but unable to launch counteroffensive against LNA strongholds in Tarhunah and Gharyan, 60km south east and 80km south of capital respectively. Both sides stepped up airstrikes: LNA carried out several air and drone strikes against bases of armed groups in Tripoli and nearby towns and on front lines, causing significant damage to equipment. GNA air force also struck LNA-held areas. LNA shot down GNA fighter jet 70km south of Tripoli 7 May and captured pilot, who claimed to be Portuguese. Both sides intensified fighting 24-25 May, but achieved no major victory. Dozens of Turkish-made armoured vehicles arrived in Tripoli port 19 May, reportedly intended for pro-GNA forces. UN Security Council 10 May called on parties to “return to UN political mediation, and to commit to a ceasefire and de-escalation to help mediation succeed”. UN envoy Ghassan Salamé 21 May urged UN to stop other countries fuelling conflict by supplying weapons. EU Foreign Affairs Council 13 May called LNA’s offensive “a serious threat to international peace and security”, called on “all parties to implement a ceasefire” and return to political negotiations. Both sides rejected calls for ceasefire. Haftar 16 May told Italian PM Conte in Rome he was about to take Tripoli and in talks with French President Macron in Paris 22 May Haftar ruled out ceasefire. During visits to Rome, Paris, Berlin and London, UN-backed PM Serraj mid-May conditioned resumption of talks on

LNA forces' complete withdrawal from west. In south, Islamic State (ISIS) claimed attacks against LNA in Sebha 4 May, Ghadwa 9 May and Zilla 18 May that reportedly killed at least three LNA fighters. LNA 29 May handed over to Egypt authorities prominent Egyptian militant Hisham al-Ashmawi, arrested in eastern Libya in Oct 2018.

➡ **Mauritania** Constitutional Council 12 May confirmed list of six candidates for 22 June presidential election. Over 100 people 15 May held sit-in in front of Nouakchott prison to call for release of two bloggers held since March on charges of defamation against president.

➡ **Tunisia** Ahead of legislative elections in Oct and presidential in Nov political alliances continued to shift and debates intensified. Several politicians joined PM Chahed's new party Tayha Tounes, including former ministers Lassâad Zarrouk and Afif Chelbi early May, and al-Moubadara party leader Kamel Morjane 22 May. Several public figures gained prominence as potential presidential candidates; in opinion poll released early May, law professor Kaïs Saïed won most votes with 22.4%, owner of private TV channel Nabil Karoui came second with 21.8%; former official of former President Ben Ali's party Abir Moussi came third with 12.4%; PM Chahed came fourth with 7.4%. Sec Gen of president's party Nida Tounes 8 May called for delay of elections to prevent political scene from fragmenting further. Ben Ali mid-May posted first political message since his ouster in 2011, thanking thousands of Tunisians who had sent him "love letters" and encouraging "my people to overcome the difficulties". Member of UN panel of experts on Libya with dual Tunisian and German nationality Moncef Kartas, charged 10 April with "spying for foreign parties" and jailed despite UN immunity, was released 21 May; Kartas reportedly left Tunisia for Germany next day. National guard 1 May arrested al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM)-affiliated militant Raed Touati at Mount Chaambi in west.

➡ **Western Sahara** UN envoy for Western Sahara Horst Köhler resigned 22 May, reportedly for health reasons. Senior official in Polisario Front independence movement said Köhler resigned because of political pressure, notably from France at UN Security Council.