

# Middle East and North Africa

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## Eastern Mediterranean

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► **Israel-Palestine** Tensions between Israeli govt and Palestinian Authority (PA) rose amid possible looming Israeli annexation of West Bank; meanwhile new Israeli coalition govt was sworn in. In West Bank, Palestinian 12 May killed Israeli soldier during raid in Yabad near Jenin in first Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) combat fatality this year; Israeli security forces next day killed Palestinian teenager in Al-Fawar refugee camp near Hebron. IDF soldiers 29 May killed Palestinian driver in East Jerusalem; Israeli police officers 30 May killed autistic Palestinian man in Jerusalem's Old City. Israeli govt 3 May seized municipal power from PA in Hebron, placing Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories in control of planned Israeli construction works around Ibrahimi Mosque; PA's ministry of foreign affairs condemned move "in the strongest terms". Israel's Defence Minister Naftali Bennett 6 May approved construction of 7,000 new settlement units in West Bank. Israeli govt 9 May issued military order banning banks in occupied territories from processing payments to families of Palestinians formerly or currently held imprisoned in Israeli jails. United Arab Emirates (UAE) 19 May sent COVID-19 aid bound for Palestinian territories via Israeli airport, marking first direct flight between UAE and Israel; PA 21 May rejected move as "cover for normalisation". In Gaza, IDF 6 May struck three Hamas positions in northern Gaza strip in retaliation to rocket fired from Gaza into Israel; no casualties reported. Israeli parliament 17 May swore in coalition govt led by PM Netanyahu and Benny Gantz; Netanyahu reaffirmed intention to carry out annexation of West Bank. In response, PA President Abbas 19 May announced suspension of all agreements with Israel and U.S., including security coordination. Following late April alleged Iranian cyberattack on Israeli civilian water and sewage installations, Israel 9 May reportedly launched cyberattack on Iran's Bandar Abbas port. In Syria, Israel early May reportedly launched numerous airstrikes on Iranian and Iran-linked targets; outgoing Israeli Defence Minister Naftali Bennett 18 May claimed Israeli airstrikes on Iranian-backed forces were forcing Iran to begin withdrawing from Syria (see also Iran and Syria). PM Netanyahu's trial over corruption charges began 24 May.

► **Jordan** Constitutional Court 13 May ruled that cancellation of natural gas deal with Israel would be illegal, citing inconsistency with Israel-Jordan peace treaty; Jordanian parliament in Jan voted in favour of banning gas imports from Israel. Amid rising tensions between Jordan and Israel, King Abdullah 15 May warned of "massive conflict" if Israel proceeds with annexation plans in West Bank. Israeli security forces 20 May shot and wounded Jordanian south of Galilee Sea suspected of smuggling weapons into Israel.

► **Lebanon** Amid tanking economy and continued social and financial hardship affecting millions, govt 1 May applied for International Monetary Fund (IMF) financial assistance following IMF's 30 April approval of economic reform plan; govt 13 May reportedly began negotiations with IMF. Hundreds of anti-govt protesters 1 May gathered in front of Central Bank in capital Beirut to demonstrate against devaluation of currency and rising inflation. Banking sector 1 May rejected govt rescue

plan on grounds it will “further destroy confidence” in country, 20 May presented counter proposal. Prosecutor 18 May charged senior Central Bank official with manipulation of exchange rate and money laundering; Central Bank 15 May denied charges. Despite Central Bank’s efforts to impose rate of 3,200 Lebanese lira to the dollar through repressive measures, Lebanese lira 20 May remained at 4,200 on black market; in effort to defend currency, Central Bank 21 May announced it will provide dollars for food imports. Hizbollah chief Hassan Nasrallah 26 May rejected U.S. and Israeli pressure to change nature of mandate of UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL); U.S. ambassador to UN 4 May said “the time has come to either pursue serious change to empower UNIFIL or to realign UNIFIL’s staffing and resources with tasks it can actually accomplish.”

➔ **Syria** Jihadist attack on govt forces threatened Idlib ceasefire while Russia and Turkey continued joint patrols in effort to uphold deal; Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) pursued rapprochement with rival Kurdish parties in north east. In Idlib, al-Qaeda linked group Hurras al-Din 10 May attacked govt forces in northern Hama and seized control of al-Manara village in severest cross-line attack since 5 March ceasefire implemented. Meanwhile, following a number of attempts to conduct joint patrols along M4 highway in April, Russia and Turkey conducted five patrols a few kilometres along highway on 5, 7, 12, 14 and 20 May, bringing total patrols to twelve since deal announced in March; IED attack 27 May killed Turkish soldier during patrol along M4 highway. In north east, YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Kurdish National Council (KNC), umbrella group of Syrian Kurdish opposition parties, resumed intra-Kurdish talks endorsed by U.S. and France, aimed at more inclusive governance in SDF-held areas; previous U.S. and French-backed initiatives failed. U.S. state department delegation, led by Deputy Special Envoy to Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS William Roebuck, reportedly met with YPG and KNC representatives in early May in show of support for process. Israel early May reportedly launched numerous airstrikes on Iranian and Iran-linked targets; Syrian army 4 May claimed Israel launched airstrikes on military barracks in al-Safirah in eastern Aleppo province. ISIS detainees in prison compound in provincial capital Hassakeh 2 May rebelled against YPG guards and briefly seized control of prison floor. Seven ISIS militants 17 May escaped from prison near al-Hol detention camp; SDF same day announced three were recaptured. Public rift erupted within Assad family and govt 19 May ordered seizure of assets belonging to Rami Makhlouf, President Bashar al-Assad’s cousin and one of Syria’s wealthiest businessmen; govt previously requested 134bn Syrian pounds (\$261mn) in taxes allegedly owed by Makhlouf-owned mobile phone company Syriatel.

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## **Gulf and Arabian Peninsula**

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➔ **Iran** U.S. continued to expand its sanctions designations against Iran and Iran-linked targets and warned of reimposing pre-nuclear deal sanctions, while regional tensions with both U.S. and Israel persisted. President Rouhani 6 May said govt “will give a crushing response if the arms embargo on Tehran is extended” beyond Oct expiry date. U.S. special representative for Iran 13 May confirmed plans to reinstate all pre-Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action sanctions if UN Security Council votes against upcoming U.S. resolution to extend arms embargo; Chinese and Russian UN missions next day separately voiced opposition to planned resolution. U.S. govt 27

May announced termination in 60 days of sanctions waivers for civil nuclear projects but extended waiver for Bushehr plant by 90 days; Iran next day said decision “will not in practice have any effect on Iran’s work” while UK, France and Germany 30 May said they “deeply regret the U.S. decision”. U.S. govt imposed series of sanctions, including: 19 May on Chinese company Shanghai Saint Logistics Limited for acting as general sales assistant for U.S. blacklisted airline Mahan Air; 20 May on Iranian Interior Minister Abdolreza Rahmani Fazli over alleged role in human rights abuses during Nov 2019 anti-govt protests; and 27 May on two Iranian nuclear officials. Israeli military 9 May reportedly launched cyberattack on Iran’s largest port facility at Bandar Abbas in retaliation to alleged 24-25 April cyberattack on Israeli water infrastructure. Supreme Leader Khamenei 17 May insisted that “Americans cannot stay for long in Iraq or Syria, and they will be expelled”; outgoing Israeli Defence Minister Naftali Bennett next day claimed Israeli airstrikes on Iranian-backed forces were forcing Iran to begin withdrawing from Syria (see also Israel and Syria). Tanker Fortune 25 May arrived in Venezuela; first of reported five tankers delivering gasoline from Iran. Authorities 16 May sentenced French-Iranian academic Fariba Adelkhah to six years imprisonment on national security charges; French govt same day condemned arrest as politically motivated and called for Adelkhah’s release. New parliament inaugurated 27 May; Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf next day elected to speakership.

➔ **Iraq** Islamic State (ISIS) continued to increase level of activity – including engaging in direct clashes with security forces, stepping up attacks on infrastructure, and targeting civilians – while parliament approved new govt amid resuming protests. ISIS early May launched series of attacks in Salah al-Din, Diyala and Kirkuk provinces; clashes between ISIS fighters and paramilitary coalition Popular Mobilisation Unit (PMU) forces in Salah al-Din province 2 May killed at least 10 PMU militants. Suspected ISIS fighters 7 May sabotaged three high voltage towers in Nineveh province, 11 May set fire to farm crop in Makhmour in Erbil province. In retaliation, coalition-backed security forces stepped up anti-ISIS operations; coalition 15 May launched airstrikes targeting ISIS infrastructure near Mosul, killing seven ISIS fighters. Turkish air raids targeted Kurdistan Workers’ Party militants in northern Sulaymaniyah province 27 May. Meanwhile, parliament 7 May approved PM designate Mustafa al-Kadhimi’s cabinet, U.S. and Iran both welcomed move; U.S. same day renewed sanctions waiver allowing Iraq to import Iranian electricity and gas for 120 days. However, Kataib Hizbollah 7 May criticised parliamentarians for endorsing Kadhimi whom they accuse of involvement in U.S. killing in Jan of Iran’s Quds Force chief Qassem Soleimani and PMU deputy chief Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Unclaimed rockets 6 and 9 May struck capital Baghdad, one near U.S. facilities; no casualties reported. PM Kadhimi following first cabinet meeting 9 May reinstated and promoted popular Lieutenant General Abdul-Wahab al-Saedi to head Counter-Terrorism Service; al-Saedi’s demotion by previous govt triggered protests in Sept. New govt 9 May ordered release of all protesters detained since demonstrations erupted in Oct 2019 and set up committee investigating crimes committed against protesters. Thousands of anti-govt protesters 10-11 May took to streets in south and central Iraq demanding government hold early elections and accountability for abuses against protesters. After militants of Iran-backed militia Thar Allah 10 May reportedly fired live rounds at protesters in Basra city that killed one protester, PM Kadhimi 11 May ordered closing of group’s headquarters. Following renewed clashes nationwide be-

tween protesters and security forces mid-May, UN 23 May published report documenting armed groups' abductions of more than 100 people during anti-govt protests since Oct, including allegations of torture.

➡ **Qatar** Suspected Saudi disinformation campaign further dimmed prospects for resolution of ongoing Saudi-Qatari spat. Saudi Gazette newspaper 3 May alleged that member of Qatari ruling family, Sheikh Mubarak bin Khalifa Al-Thani, had called on Emir Al-Thani to step down, prompting next day wide circulation of Twitter hashtag "coup in Qatar" alongside video appearing to show gunshots in Qatari city Wakrah; Doha-based professor said video was fake, tracing pattern of amplification to Saudi-based Twitter users.

➡ **Saudi Arabia** Despite Saudi Arabia's COVID-19 ceasefire extension in Yemen late April, fighting between Saudi-backed Yemeni government and Huthi forces in northern Yemen continued while struggle between Southern Transitional Council (STC) and government forces in south Yemen threatened to unravel Saudi-brokered Nov 2019 Riyadh Agreement. Fighting between government and allies, and Huthis, in north Yemen continued throughout month despite Saudi Arabia's 24 April announcement of unilateral ceasefire extension; UN envoy Martin Griffiths in address to UN Security Council 14 May reported "significant progress" toward ceasefire agreement. In Yemen's south, Saudi-backed govt forces and STC 1 May reached de-escalation agreement after STC's attempt to take control of Socotra island in Gulf of Aden sparked fighting. Meanwhile, struggle between Saudi-backed govt forces and southern separatists for control of south escalated in Abyan; Riyadh 20 May hosted STC negotiation team to discuss implementation of Nov 2019 Riyadh Agreement (see Yemen). U.S. 7 May announced withdrawal of Patriot antimissile systems and other military equipment from Saudi Arabia, downscaling military build-up initiated in 2019 to counter Iranian threat. NGO Human Rights Watch 9 May reported Prince Faisal bin Abdullah, son of Saudi Arabia's late King Abdullah, held in "incommunicado detention" since his arrest late March; authorities reportedly refused to reveal his whereabouts, sparking speculation about forced disappearance. To stem economic impact of COVID-19 outbreak and low oil prices, govt 11 May announced austerity measures, including three-fold increase of value-added tax (VAT) rate to 15% and suspension of living allowance paid to state employees.

➡ **United Arab Emirates** After repatriation of Pakistani citizens from United Arab Emirates (UAE) began late April, Pakistani govt early May voiced concern that many citizens returned home testing positive for COVID-19, with some flights reporting 50% infection rate; UAE denied claims, warning it could review labour ties with states refusing to take back their nationals. Amid ongoing tensions between UAE and Turkey, UAE 11 May issued joint statement with Egypt, Greece, Cyprus and France condemning "Turkey's military interference in Libya"; in response, Turkey's FM Cavusoglu next day accused UAE of sowing chaos in Middle East, notably in Libya and Yemen. UAE 19 May sent COVID-19 aid bound for Palestinian territories via Israeli airport, marking first direct flight between UAE and Israel; PA 21 May rejected move as "cover for normalisation" of relations with Israel.

⬇️🚫🚧 **Yemen** Fierce fighting between govt forces and Huthis continued in north while escalating struggle between govt forces and southern separatists threatened to unravel Nov 2019 Riyadh Agreement; UN continued efforts at nationwide ceasefire and Saudi Arabia attempted to mediate in south but risk of intensified violence in

south and north in June remains high. In north, Saudi Arabia's 24 April announced extension of its purported unilateral ceasefire failed to halt military activities as fighting between govt forces and Huthis continued in al-Jawf and Marib, as did Saudi airstrikes, albeit without major shifts in territorial control. Huthis' advance east toward Marib remained stalled in face of resistance from local tribes. In south, following Southern Transition Council's (STC) 25 April declaration of self-administration, power struggle between govt and separatists centred on Abyan and Socotra island in Gulf of Aden; govt forces and STC 1 May reached de-escalation agreement on Socotra after STC's attempt to seize checkpoints in Hadibo, capital of Socotra, sparked fighting. Meanwhile, fighting between govt forces and STC forces 11 May erupted in Abyan following govt-led offensive on outskirts of STC-held Zinjibar, capital of Abyan; clashes reportedly killed more than 20 soldiers on both sides. Saudi-led coalition 31 May reportedly downed two Huthi drones they claimed were aimed at civilian targets; Huthis did not claim attacks and same day reported coalition airstrikes in Marib. STC negotiation team 20 May arrived in Riyadh at Saudi Prince Mohammed bin Salman's invitation to discuss implementation of Nov 2019 Riyadh Agreement. UN envoy Martin Griffiths in address to UN Security Council 14 May reported "significant progress" toward ceasefire agreement, raising hopes for comprehensive cessation of hostilities. World Health Organization early May warned of disastrous consequences of potential COVID-19 outbreak, predicting at least 55% infection rate and more than 40,000 deaths. Huthi authorities 5 May confirmed first COVID-19 cases in areas under its control; govt accused Huthis of covering up outbreak and 11 May declared Aden "infested city" following spike in COVID-19 cases.

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## North Africa

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➡ **Algeria** Crackdown on civil society and activists continued, while govt announced major budget cuts amid falling oil prices. Police continued to arrest protest supporters for social media posts on charges including "attack on the integrity of the national territory" and "inciting illegal demonstrations", which carry prison sentences of up to eighteen months. Notably, Algiers court 20 May sentenced activist to one year imprisonment for Facebook post; El Bayadh court 20 May sentenced two activists to eighteen months imprisonment for Facebook posts; Chlef court 20 May sentenced twelve activists to prison terms ranging from six to eighteen months imprisonment; Ain Temouchent court 27 May sentenced activist to six months imprisonment. Algiers court 17 May released Abdelwahab Fersaoui, leader of youth group involved in Hirak movement, arrested during demonstration in Oct 2019 and sentenced in April to one year imprisonment. Amid COVID-19 pandemic, President Tebboune 3 May announced plan to halve budget expenditures due to falling oil prices. Presidency 7 May published proposed revisions to constitution; activists welcomed amendment to relax regulations governing associations but voiced concern that amendment to enshrine armed forces' participation in foreign peacekeeping operations could increase military's influence over domestic affairs.

➡ **Egypt** With highest number of COVID-19 cases in Africa and Middle East, govt remained occupied with concerns over public health and economic recession, while Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam project remained foreign policy priority. PM Mostafa Madbouli 13 May announced preparation of austerity budget for 2021 as govt signalled growing gap in national budget and current account deficits; International

Monetary Fund 11 May granted Egypt \$2.77bn loan, while govt estimated total \$9bn needed from international financial institutions to meet shortfall. Following Cairo and Khartoum's early May rejection of Ethiopian PM Ahmed's proposed interim agreement on Ethiopian dam, and anticipating test phase beginning July 2020, Egyptian FM Shoukry 6 May sent letter to refer dispute to UN Security Council; Ethiopia, Egypt and Sudan 21 May agreed to resume stalled talks (see Nile Waters entry). Islamic State (ISIS)-Sinai Province 1 May claimed responsibility for 30 April attack on military vehicle near Bir al-Abd in northern Sinai that killed ten soldiers; ministry of interior announced security forces 3 May killed eighteen alleged ISIS members, and 23 May killed 21 alleged ISIS members in clashes near Bir al-Abd.

📌🌐\* **Libya** Tripoli-aligned forces claimed significant military victories as urban areas in capital Tripoli faced unprecedented shelling and civilian casualties, while socio-economic conditions continued to deteriorate amid COVID-19 lockdown and oil blockade; external military support on both sides could fuel an escalation in June. UN mission 19 May said fighting between UN-recognised Government of National Accord (GNA) and General Haftar's Arab Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF) killed at least 58 civilians since 1 April; almost double the number of civilian casualties in first quarter of 2020. ALAF forces throughout month launched repeated artillery strikes on Tripoli's Meitiga airport and residential neighbourhoods; ALAF forces 7 May killed two police and one civilian in attack on Zawiyat al-Dahmani suburb in Tripoli near foreign ministry, Turkish embassy and Italian ambassador's residence. GNA forces 5 May launched new offensive and 18 May seized control of ALAF-stronghold Wutiya airbase; dozens killed in offensive. ALAF 20 May announced tactical withdrawal from southern Tripoli neighbourhoods, under its control since April 2019 but fighting in city continued. Turkey continued sea and air deliveries of military aid to Libyan forces allied to Ankara; Russia delivered at least 14 MIG-29 and SU-24s fighter jets to Haftar-controlled bases throughout May, prompting U.S. 26 May to voice concern over Moscow's increased military footprint in Libya and possible escalation. ALAF air force chief 21 May announced plan for "largest air campaign in Libyan history in coming hours" and said "all Turkish positions and interests in all cities are legitimate targets". U.S., Russia, Turkey, UN and Algeria late May voiced support for ceasefire and resumption of political talks. Central Bank 1 May projected 2020 budget deficit of more than \$18bn, in addition to loss of over \$4.5bn due to ongoing ALAF-backed tribes blockade of oil production and export sites in place since mid-Jan. Austerity measures, including limits on foreign exchange, led to loss of income, food shortages, price spikes and supply chain disruptions; measures worsened impact of businesses closed due to COVID-19 public health measures and absence of govt financial plan to assist business owners.

➡ **Tunisia** Political fissures widened between Islamist-inspired party An-Nahda and other parties while debate over type of political system to adopt intensified. An-Nahda party faced increasing pressure amid fear of being marginalised by new political front comprising partner and opposition parties: 11 MPs of total 38 belonging to parliamentary coalition partner Qalb Tounes resigned in May; President of Free Destourian Party and MP Abir Moussi 22 May organised parliament sit-in targeting An-Nahda president and Parliament Speaker Rached Ghannouchi. General Tunisian Labour Union Sec Gen Noureddine Taboubi 18 May called for popular referendum to change political system; move seen as endorsement of presidential system proposed by President Saïed and against current parliamentary regime supported by An-

Nahda. Ghannouchi 19 May in telephone call congratulated Libyan PM Fayed al-Sarraj on capture of strategic Wutiya airbase in western Libya and stressed need for political solution to conflict; seven opposition parties next day denounced Ghannouchi's actions as dragging Tunisia into Libya's conflict and requested President Saïed's intervention.