

# Middle East and North Africa

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## Eastern Mediterranean

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↓ **Israel-Palestine** **Israel's forced evictions of Palestinians in East Jerusalem and restrictions on worshippers sparked widespread unrest and 11-day war with Gaza's armed factions that killed hundreds.** Israeli police 7 May clashed with young Palestinians protesting planned expulsions in East Jerusalem's Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood and worshippers observing Ramadan at Al-Aqsa mosque inside Old City, injuring over 200 Palestinians and 17 Israeli police officers; Israel's restrictions and attacks on worshippers as well as police raids in compound continued over following days, injuring 1,000 Palestinians by 10 May. Palestinian residents of East Jerusalem 10 May protested Jewish ultra-nationalist plans to march through Old City toward al-Aqsa to mark Jerusalem Day, leading to police raids that injured some 300 Palestinians even as Israeli authorities same day redirected march. Responding to events, Hamas' military wing admonished Israel to halt violence. Joint Chamber of Palestinian Resistance Factions in the Gaza Strip 10 May issued ultimatum for Israel to withdraw forces from al-Aqsa and Sheikh Jarrah and release detainees by 6pm; shortly after deadline expired, Hamas fired rockets toward Jerusalem. Israeli forces 10-21 May heavily bombarded Gaza as Palestinian factions fired thousands of rockets into Israel; fighting killed at least 248 Palestinians in Gaza, including some 66 children, and 12 people in Israel, including two children, before ceasefire went into effect 21 May. Amid Gaza hostilities, unprecedented wave of violence erupted throughout Israel's mixed cities and neighbourhoods. Notably, govt 12 May declared state of emergency in Lod city for first time since 1966 to contain widespread violence, including Jewish gunman 10 May killing Palestinian and Palestinian same day setting fire to synagogue; Israeli ultranationalists 12 May attacked Lod's Al-Omari mosque, prompting mayor same day to declare "civil war"; Israeli police late month made 1,550 arrests, 70% of them Palestinians. Palestinians held protests throughout West Bank in solidarity with Palestinians in Jerusalem and Gaza; Israeli forces 14 May responded with rubber bullets, tear gas and live ammunition and 16 May killed 13 Palestinians and injured 1600 others. Palestinians in West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza Strip and Israel 18 May held strike for first time in decades.

➔ **Lebanon** **Political deadlock over govt formation continued amid ongoing economic and social strife; protesters rallied and groups fired rockets at border with Israel in support of Palestinians.** French FM Jean-Yves Le Drian 6 May visited Lebanon in another attempt to break stalemate between PM-designate Saad Hariri and President Aoun in forming new govt; Le Drian next day announced sanctions on politicians blocking process. In letter to parliament speaker, Aoun 18 May blamed Hariri for delay and demanded plenary debate, widely seen as call on parliament to rescind Hariri's PM nomination despite no constitutional provision providing for PM destitution. Hariri 22 May said he would "not form a government as the team of the president wants it, or any other political faction". Former PMs Fouad Siniora, Najib Mikati and Tammam Salam, widely seen as influential political voices in Sunni community, 19 May condemned Aoun's initiative as "attack on coexistence". Economic and social hardship continued.

Caretaker PM Hassan Diab 3 May said proposed ration card program aimed at replacing costly subsidies scheme and offering safety net to most vulnerable citizens faced political pushback. Petrol stations 10 May began closing amid continued fuel shortages and rationing, causing hours-long queues by 11 May; dispute over fuel allocation 17 May left one dead in north. World Bank 31 May warned that country's economic and financial crises could amount to one of "most severe crises episodes globally since the mid-nineteenth century". In response to deadly fighting between Israel and Gaza-based Palestinian armed factions (see Israel-Palestine), pro-Palestinian protesters 14 May attempted to cross border near Israeli town of Metula, prompting Israeli fire that killed one Hizbollah and injured two protesters; protests 17 May continued at border. Suspected Palestinian groups 18 May fired six rockets from south toward Israel that fell short of crossing border. Altercations broke out in-lead up to 26 May Syrian presidential elections (see Syria); notably, activists of Christian Lebanese Forces party attacked Syrian voters in and around capital Beirut, claiming voting indicated support for Assad regime.

➔ **Syria Govt forces and rebels clashed in south west in lead-up to controversial presidential polls, which saw re-election of President Assad; meanwhile, ceasefire in Idlib held despite violations.** Ahead of 26 May presidential election, Constitutional Court 3 May approved two opposition candidates for poll alongside Assad; U.S., UK, France and Germany 25 May denounced "fraudulent election". Head of parliament 27 May declared Assad winner with over 95% of vote, marking his fourth term. In Daraa province in south west, discontent ahead of poll perceived as rigged fuelled tensions between former opposition groups and regime forces. Notably, unidentified gunmen 1-20 May reportedly killed at least 19 soldiers and ten former rebels who had enrolled in or struck reconciliation deals with govt forces. In Idlib province in north west, March 2020 ceasefire continued to hold despite reported clashes, artillery shelling and Russian airstrikes in countryside throughout month; notably, suspected Russian airstrike 3 March reportedly killed three people near Fuah town; militants affiliated with jihadist rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham 7 May reportedly killed five soldiers of Russian-backed fifth corps west of Malajah village; little-known group Ansar Abu Bakr al-Siddiq Brigade 10 May killed one Turkish soldier near Kafraya village. In Aleppo governorate, suspected Islamic State (ISIS) militants 18 May reportedly killed eight Iran-backed militiamen in Maskanah desert. In north east, armed protesters 18 May attempted to storm base of Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in Shadadi town following armed group's decision previous day to sharply raise fuel prices, leaving at least one protester dead; SDF 19 May cancelled price hike. Kurdish security forces 31 May opened fire to disperse residents protesting mandatory conscription in Manbij area, killing one. In central desert, Russia continued airstrikes against suspected ISIS targets throughout month, reportedly killing at least 27 militants; suspected ISIS militants 2 May killed four govt soldiers in Palmyra countryside (centre). Israel 5 May reportedly fired missiles on Iran-linked targets in Hama and Latakia countryside (west central), killing up to eight fighters and one civilian. In possible bid to mend ties, intelligence chief General Ali Mamlouk 3 May reportedly met with Saudi counterpart in capital Damascus.

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## **Gulf and Arabian Peninsula**

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➔ **Iran Indirect U.S.-Iran talks to revive nuclear deal continued as Tehran advanced its nuclear activities and regional maritime tensions with U.S. persisted.** U.S. and Iran continued to participate in international negotiations in Austrian capital Vienna aimed at reviving Iran nuclear deal, as gaps between two sides narrowed but significant hurdles, including scope of sanctions relief, remained; fifth round of talks in Vienna 25 May began with meeting of Joint Commission of nuclear deal. With roadmap toward mutual U.S. and Iranian compliance with deal emerging but still elusive, Tehran continued to advance its nuclear capacities. International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) 11 May informed member states of “an enrichment level of up to 63 per cent”. Separately, IAEA and Tehran reportedly held further discussions on resolving outstanding safeguards concerns; IAEA 24 May announced one-month extension of deal reached in Feb for monitoring and verification of nuclear sites; IAEA 31 May said Tehran yet to explain traces of uranium found at undeclared sites. Amid deadly fighting in Israel and Gaza (see Israel-Palestine), U.S. criticism of Biden administration’s diplomatic efforts to engage with Iran on nuclear deal rose as 44 Senate Republicans 12 May signed letter calling on Washington to immediately end talks with Iran, accusing Tehran of “supporting terrorist activity” against Israel; letter portends bitter domestic debate if and when nuclear deal is revived. Meanwhile, Iran-U.S. maritime tensions continued. Over dozen Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps speedboats 10 May approached six U.S. navy vessels accompanying U.S. submarine through Strait of Hormuz, leading U.S. vessels to fire warning shots; encounter follows similar incidents last month, potentially signalling shift toward increased sabre-rattling which raises risk of miscalculation at sea. Ahead of presidential election scheduled for 18 June, over 590 candidates 11-15 May registered to enter race; Guardian Council, an oversight body, 25 May disqualified many – including First VP Eshagh Jahangiri, former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and former parliament speaker Ali Larijani – and approved seven candidates, five of whom are conservatives, most notably judiciary chief Ebrahim Raisi. Foreign ministry 31 May said talks with Saudi Arabia are continuing, aimed at reaching “common understanding”.

↓ **Iraq Iran-linked armed groups vowed to increase attacks on U.S. forces and targeted killings increased ahead of October election, fuelling climate of fear; Islamic State (ISIS) launched annual Ramadan offensive.** Unknown groups 2-4, 24 May fired rockets at U.S.-led coalition troops in Baghdad airport as well as Balad and Ain al-Asad airbases. Coalition of Iran-aligned armed groups 24 May declared end of unofficial truce with U.S. forces and vowed further attacks, citing “lack of seriousness” of U.S. troop withdrawal. Meanwhile, targeted killings increased, sending chilling message ahead of Oct polls. Unidentified gunmen 9 May killed prominent activist Ihab al-Wazni in Karbala city; protesters same day rallied in Karbala to condemn killing, resulting in roadblocks and torching of vehicles outside Iranian consulate over accusations of pro-Iranian militia involvement. Unknown assailants 10 May shot and seriously injured journalist Ahmed Hassan in Diwaniya city (south). Unknown assailants 22 May injured activist Mohammed Khayat in Nasiriyah city; protesters same day stormed Dhi Qar governorate building. Head of Sunni political bloc Azm Coalition 22 May announced unknown assailants killed electoral candidate. Amid violence, several new parties linked to Oct 2019

protest movement throughout month announced withdrawal from poll citing fear of persecution. In attempt to regain public confidence, PM Kadhimi ordered security forces to raid group affiliated to paramilitary coalition Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), allegedly responsible for killing activist Reham Yacoub in August 2020; in retaliation, suspected PMF-affiliated groups 13 May reportedly attacked security forces' headquarters in Basra city (south). Kadhimi then ordered arrest of high profile PMF member Qassim Mahmoud Musleh on terrorism charges, prompting PMF factions 26 May to stage large armed rally surrounding Baghdad's Green Zone. Protesters in capital Baghdad 25 May demanded accountability for some 600 people killed since Oct 2019 protest movement began, and clashed with security forces who responded with live ammunition, killing two. Meanwhile, ISIS conducted dozens of attacks in Diyala and Kirkuk provinces as part of annual Ramadan offensive. Notably in Kirkuk, ISIS fighters 1 May killed three

➔ **Saudi Arabia Huthis launched series of cross-border attacks, including on Saudi oil company sites; meanwhile, Saudi-Iran talks on ways to deescalate regional tensions continued.** Huthis conducted numerous attacks throughout month. Notably, Saudi-led coalition 9 May said it intercepted explosive-laden drone headed toward Saudi city, Khamis Mushait; next day said it thwarted Huthi boat attack south of Red Sea. Huthis 13 May said they launched from Yemen 12 ballistic missiles and drones at numerous targets, including sites of Saudi oil company Aramco on Saudi territory. Saudi-led coalition 24 May discovered and destroyed marine mine south of Red Sea and same day downed two Huthi drones in northern Yemen. Huthis 31 May claimed they struck air base in Khamis Mushait with drone. Meanwhile, following April talks with Iranian officials in Iraqi capital Baghdad, senior Saudi diplomat 7 May indicated discussions “aim to explore ways to reduce tensions in the region”, but cautioned that “it is too early, and premature, to reach any definitive conclusions”; Iranian foreign ministry 31 May said talks with Saudi Arabia are continuing, aimed at reaching “common understanding”.

➔ **Yemen Huthis continued assault in north as ceasefire talks remained stalled; meanwhile, tensions between govt and southern separatists persisted in southern city Aden.** In north, intense fighting continued throughout month. Huthi offensive in Marib governorate halted as its forces met stiff resistance from govt-aligned forces and Saudi-led coalition airstrikes along mountainous ground west of Marib city; while Huthis appeared to remain intent on seizing Marib, ongoing Saudi-Iran security talks (see Saudi Arabia) could offer opportunity to prevent destructive battle of Marib city. On diplomatic front, UN Sec-Gen António Guterres 12 May confirmed Special Envoy for Yemen Martin Griffiths due to be next UN humanitarian coordinator, raising speculation over his successor as Yemen envoy. Griffiths and U.S. Envoy Timothy Lenderking throughout month expressed frustration over lack of progress in ceasefire talks with Huthis; Griffiths 12 May described Huthi assault on Marib as “relentless” and 26 May concluded three-day visit in Saudi Arabia where he met senior Saudi and Yemeni govt officials; Huthis reportedly maintained their support for nationwide ceasefire contingent upon unilaterally reopening Hodeida port and Sanaa airport. In south, ongoing tensions between Yemeni govt and pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC) risked imperilling Saudi-brokered Nov 2019 Riyadh agreement. Widespread electricity shortages in Aden city continued while prices of local goods rose due to ongoing depreciation of Yemeni riyal. Following his return to

Yemen after two years on 1 May, STC President Aydrous al-Zubaid criticised govt for failing to implement Riyadh agreement and starving Aden of resources; dispute with govt also persisted over appointment of senior officials to political posts. Political tensions between govt and STC raised prospect of renewed clashes in Abyan governorate, where govt- and STC-aligned forces are positioned.

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## North Africa

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↓ **Algeria Authorities stepped up repression against Hirak protest movement ahead of 12 June legislative elections, quashing demonstrations and arresting scores.** In joint statement, 300 public figures, civil society activists and NGOs 1 May said authorities had declared “war against the Algerian people”, citing recent wave of arrests of Hirak protesters demanding wholesale political change. Interior ministry 9 May said all protests would now be subject to administrative authorisation; Algerian Human Rights League’s President Noureddine Benissad 11 May said move aimed to “undermine all forms of peaceful expression”. Police 14 May arrested several journalists covering Hirak protest in capital Algiers, and for first time prevented leaders of opposition parties from joining march; dozens of detentions reported nationwide. NGO Amnesty International 17 May said 15 Hirak activists faced death penalty or lengthy prison sentences for alleged “participation in a terrorist organisation” and “conspiracy against the state”, and called on authorities to drop charges. High Security Council under supervision of President Tebboune 18 May added Rachad movement, which gathers former Islamic Salvation Front party officials, and Movement for the Self-determination of Kabylie (MAK) to list of domestic terrorist organisations; move came after defence ministry late April announced dismantling of cell allegedly planning terrorist attacks during Hirak marches and composed of MAK activists. Security forces 21 May suppressed Hirak protest in Algiers, and NGO National Committee for the Liberation of Detainees 31 May recorded around 200 “prisoners of conscience” across country, up from 66 mid-April. Meanwhile, labour strikes and social movements continued. Notably, education sector 9 May went on three-day strike to protest plummeting purchasing power.

➔ **Egypt Authorities sought to purge state institutions of outlawed Muslim Brotherhood amid steps toward reconciliation with Ankara.** Egyptian newspaper *Al-Shorouk* 3 May reported parliament was set to discuss draft law aimed at removing civil servants suspected of supporting or sympathising with Islamist organisation Muslim Brotherhood (MB); bill comes after Transport Minister Kamel al-Wazir late April blamed recent spate of deadly train accidents, which prompted calls for his resignation, on “extremists” working in railway sector. Several NGOs, including Democracy for the Arab World Now, in following days criticised bill as “persecution” of MB members. Jihadist violence in Sinai Peninsula persisted at low level; suspected Sinai Province militants 1 May killed three civilians in Al-Arish area. Turkish delegation led by Deputy FM Sedat Önal 5 May visited Cairo to discuss re-establishing diplomatic ties; both sides recorded some progress, but presence of MB members in Turkey and Turkish troops in Libya remained stumbling blocks to full reconciliation; Egyptian delegation expected to visit Turkey in coming weeks. In possible warning to Addis Ababa and preparation for possible escalation of tensions amid reports Ethiopia had started second filling of Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, Sudan and Egypt 26-31 May held third joint military exercise

since Nov 2020 (see Nile Waters). After violent conflict broke out between Israel and Palestinian armed factions in Gaza Strip, Cairo mid-May sent ambulances to Gaza and opened Rafah crossing to allow passage of humanitarian aid; also played leading role in brokering 20 May ceasefire (see Israel-Palestine).

➔ **Libya Implementation of Oct 2020 ceasefire provisions and discussions on electoral roadmap and budget remained largely stalled.**

UN Sec-Gen Guterres 14 April said there had been “no reduction of foreign fighters” since Oct 2020 ceasefire, reiterated calls for their withdrawal and for all parties to stop violating arms embargo, also said defensive positions reportedly being set up in centre along ceasefire line between forces loyal to now dissolved UN-backed Govt of National Accord and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar’s Arab Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF). UN Special Envoy for Libya Ján Kubiš 21 May said efforts to reopen strategic road linking Misrata city (west) to Sirte city (centre), gateway to Libya’s main oil terminals, had stalled. Amid continued disagreement over electoral roadmap, France, Germany, Italy, UK and U.S. 6 May jointly called on Libyan authorities to facilitate 24 Dec elections and agree on constitutional and legal basis for elections by July. Delegates of UN-backed Libyan Political Dialogue Forum 26-27 May failed to reach consensus on which elections should be held; Kubiš referred matter back to House of Representatives (HoR) and High Council of State. HoR 24 May discussed amended state’s budget proposed by Govt of National Unity (GNU), approved salaries and subsidies sections, but rejected operational and development expenditures. Meanwhile, Presidency Council 7 May appointed Hussein al-Aeb as new intelligence chief, prompting Tripoli-based armed groups allied to former intelligence chief Imad Tarabulsi to reportedly storm Council’s headquarters in capital Tripoli. HoR members 24 May also protested Aeb’s appointment, which they had not been consulted over in violation of UN roadmap. Haftar 29 May organised military parade in Benghazi city (east), which High Council of State same day condemned. UK 13 May imposed asset freezes and travel bans on ALAF-aligned al-Kani militia and its two leaders over alleged abuses. International Criminal Court 17 May said it had collected evidence of “serious crimes” in detention facilities, including torture and sexual violence, and urged GNU to investigate. Following sudden surge in migrant departures for Europe early May, GNU late May said EU, Italy and Malta had agreed to help secure Libya’s southern border.

➔ **Morocco Rabat continued to take increasingly confrontational stance vis-à-vis European partners over Western Sahara.**

Around 8,000 Moroccans and sub-Saharan Africans 17-18 May entered Spanish enclave of Ceuta. In following days, tensions ran high between Morocco and Spain, with both sides trading accusations. Hours after Spanish foreign ministry 18 May summoned Morocco’s ambassador to Spain Karima Benyaich, Rabat recalled her for consultations. Morocco’s Human Rights Minister Mustapha Ramid same day linked relaxation of border controls to Polisario Front independence movement leader Brahim Ghali’s hospitalisation in Spain since April (see Western Sahara); Spanish Defence Minister Margarita Robles 20 May denounced “blackmail” and Morocco’s “aggression of Spanish borders”. Rabat 6 May recalled its ambassador to Germany in protest at Berlin’s alleged “destructive attitude” on Western Sahara; move comes after Morocco early March suspended relations with Berlin, citing “profound misunderstandings [...] on fundamental issues”. Meanwhile, Morocco by month’s

end had not responded to UN Sec-Gen Guterres' proposal of Italian-Swedish diplomat Staffan de Mistura as next personal envoy to Western Sahara.

➔ **Tunisia Presidency remained locked in power struggle with parliament and govt, while security forces conducted counter-terrorism operations in west.** UK-based media Middle East Eye 23 May alleged unknown supporters of President Saïed had 13 May exhorted him to carry out “constitutional coup” by declaring “national emergency” to disempower govt; Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party, which is part of coalition govt and largest group in parliament, 25 May called for investigation; Saïed next day met PM Hichem Mechichi and Defence Minister Brahim Bartagi, said he did not intend to stage coup and commended “complementarity of institutions”. In joint “call of last hope”, six retired military officers 27 May urged Saïed to break political deadlock and initiate national dialogue. Amid continued economic crisis, govt and International Monetary Fund (IMF) early May discussed possibility of new assistance program; IMF reportedly reiterated need for Tunisia to formulate “social compact” reform plan first. Govt 17 May said U.S. would grant Tunisia \$500mn in aid to finance infrastructure and other projects. As part of anti-terrorism operations, security forces overnight 16-17 May killed five suspected jihadists in Chaambi mountains near Algerian border (west). After violent conflict broke out in Gaza Strip (see Israel/Palestine), hundreds 19 May protested in capital Tunis and several other cities in support of Palestinians, calling on govt to outlaw normalising relations with Israel.

➔ **Western Sahara Tensions continued to run high between Polisario Front independence movement and Morocco.** Polisario Front 20 May said it had consented to appointment of Italian-Swedish diplomat Staffan de Mistura as UN Sec-Gen Guterres' new envoy to Western Sahara, accused Morocco of “blocking” Mistura's appointment. Spanish govt 23 May said Polisario Front leader Brahim Ghali, who has been treated for COVID-19 in Spain since April, should answer legal charges before leaving country; Polisario Front 26 May said Ghali would answer allegations of torture and genocide before Spanish court on 1 June; Ghali's presence in Spain fuelled tensions between Rabat and Madrid throughout month (see Morocco).