

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** **Tit-for-tat attacks between Gaza factions and Israel continued, while internationally Israel normalised relations with Sudan.**

Building on normalisation deals last month, Israel intensified bilateral activities with United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain: Israeli and UAE FM's 6 Oct met in German capital Berlin in first ever public meeting; Knesset 15 Oct approved normalisation deal with UAE by large majority; Israeli delegation in Bahrain's capital, Manama, 18 Oct signed memoranda of understanding on economic and trade cooperation. In third deal of its kind, U.S. President Trump 23 Oct announced normalisation of relations between Israel and Sudan. In Gaza, Palestinian armed groups 5 Oct fired single rocket into southern Israel; Israeli air force retaliated against military site in southern Gaza causing material damage, no casualties. Hamas and Islamic Jihad 14 Oct threatened to end ceasefire if Palestinian hunger striker Maher al-Akhras dies in Israeli custody. Militants 16 Oct launched two rockets into southern Israel; Israeli air force same day responded with airstrikes against military installations. Hamas 5 Oct announced intention to hold internal elections in early 2021. Meanwhile, Israeli justice ministry 1 Oct approved moratorium on demolition of buildings in East Jerusalem citing COVID-19 concerns. Palestinian Authority (PA) 2 Oct issued first batch of building permits for Palestinians in Jordan Valley in bid to assert sovereignty over Area C. Israeli defence ministry 14-15 Oct approved additional 5,000 settlement household units in West Bank in move that advances de facto annexation. Elsewhere in West Bank, Israeli forces 5 Oct killed Palestinian youth in Tulkarem city; Israeli soldiers 24 Oct allegedly beat to death Palestinian protester north east of Ramallah. PA 7 Oct reiterated commitment to hold international conference to advance Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in coordination with U.S., UN, EU and Russia. In first non-security-related talks in three decades, Israel and Lebanon 14 and 28 Oct engaged in U.S.-mediated discussions at UN base in Naqoura town, Lebanon; PM Netanyahu 15 Oct rejected prospect of "real peace" with Lebanon so long as Hizbollah "effectively controls Lebanon." Amid record daily COVID-19 cases, demonstrations in Tel Aviv continued against govt corruption and handling of pandemic despite strict lockdown.

➔ **Lebanon** **Former PM Saad Hariri returned to power as new PM while govt began negotiations with Israel on disputed maritime border.**

Following PM-designate Adib's resignation last month, former PM Saad Hariri – who stepped down following mass demonstrations last year – 8 Oct declared himself "the natural candidate" to form unity govt; despite opposition from major Christian parties, Hariri 22 Oct earned mandate to form new govt after receiving narrow parliamentary support in consultations held with President Michel Aoun, vowing to lead non-aligned technocratic cabinet and implement French-led reform initiative. In first non-security related talks in three decades, Lebanon and Israel began negotiations to delineate maritime border: Lebanese and Israeli delegations 2 Oct confirmed agreement on terms of negotiations; U.S.-mediated discussions 14 and 28 Oct took place at UN base in southern Naqoura town; Hizbollah 8 Oct declared negotiations over border did not amount to "reconciliation" or "normalisation" with

Israel. Amid fraying security situation, rival clans in eastern Beqaa valley early Oct threatened confrontation with heavy machine guns and medium-range missiles; Lebanese Armed Forces 8 Oct deployed to Baalbek to prevent further escalation, arresting over dozen; clashes resumed late Oct. Meanwhile, local police reports publicised late Oct indicated boom in petty crime, robbery and murder in Lebanon in last year. Protesters outside French embassy in Beirut 30 Oct clashed with police, leaving three injured. U.S. Treasury 23 Oct imposed sanctions on senior Hizbollah members Nabil Qaouk and Hassan al-Baghdadi of party's central council. Daily COVID-19 cases tripled since early Sept while foreign exchange reserves dwindled, threatening stocks of medical supplies.

➔ **Syria** In Idlib, rebel group Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) clashed with rival jihadist groups and Russia resumed airstrikes, while regime forces clashed with Islamic State (ISIS) in east and assassinations targeted opposition leaders in south west. In north west, jihadist rebel group HTS 5-19 Oct continued to launch crackdown on rival groups: HTS arrested at least 30 al-Qaeda-backed Hurras al-Din members in Idlib province, including senior commander; HTS security operation 10 Oct killed ten ISIS fighters in Talada area; HTS 12 Oct killed 13 ISIS members in western Aleppo countryside, and ISIS same day killed two HTS militants in al-Mastouma, Idlib province. Meanwhile, Russia 17 Oct renewed airstrikes on jihadist positions in Idlib after month-long hiatus, escalating to highest daily strike tally since March ceasefire on 20 Oct; suspected Russian air raids 26 Oct targeted military training camp of Turkey-backed Failaq al-Sham, reportedly killing dozens. Simultaneous rebel attacks in Idlib, Hama, Latakia, and Aleppo 27 Oct reportedly killed 15 regime soldiers. U.S. drone attack on Idlib's Salqin city 22 Oct killed 23, including 17 militants allegedly linked with Hurras al-Din. Large number of wildfires 9 Oct broke out in forests along Syrian coast, killing at least three and displacing as many as 25,000. In Aleppo governorate, two explosions in Turkish-controlled al-Bab 4-6 Oct killed at least 16. In north east, Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Council 5 Oct issued blanket amnesty to all 25,000 Syrians in al-Hol camp, which holds displaced people and families of suspected ISIS fighters. In Deir Ez-Zor and Hama countryside, fierce battles persisted between regime forces and ISIS fighters; heaviest day of fighting 17 Oct in Deir Ez-Zor saw 37 killed on both sides. In south west, wave of assassinations continued against former opposition leaders who reconciled with regime: unidentified gunmen 1-14 Oct killed at least five former opposition leaders; notably, death of commander Adham al-Karad 14 Oct constituted highest-profile killing since regime takeover of Daraa and is set to dent efforts by former opposition leaders to consolidate power in area. In first attack since mid-Sept, alleged Israeli strikes 21 Oct hit Iran-linked targets in al-Quneitra province.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Iran** As country faced worsening economic crisis and enduring COVID-19 effects, Tehran hailed technical expiration of UN arms restrictions while U.S. continued to roll out unilateral sanctions. Following U.S. efforts in Aug-Sept to "snap back" pre-nuclear deal sanctions on Iran and thereby extend UN arms embargo, UN arms restrictions on Tehran technically expired 18 Oct; Iran's MFA same day hailed expiration as "a momentous day" and assuaged fears of major weapons procurement by stating "a buying spree of conventional arms ha[s] no place in Iran's defence doctrine"; Iranian defence

officials predicted sales would outpace purchases. Meanwhile, U.S. rejected expiration of embargo; Sec State Pompeo 17 Oct said “virtually all U.N. sanctions on Iran returned” when Washington unilaterally triggered “snapback” on 19 Sept; Pompeo next day warned, “We are prepared to use domestic authorities to sanction individuals or entities contributing to these arms sales.” U.S. also continued to expand its sanctions designations against Iran and Iran-linked targets. U.S. Treasury 8 Oct blacklisted 18 Iranian banks; Iranian FM Javad Zarif same day accused Washington of wanting “to blow up our remaining channels to pay for food and medicine”. U.S. 19 Oct blacklisted eight additional companies and persons linked to Iran’s Shipping Lines company; 22 Oct sanctioned “five Iranian entities for attempting to influence U.S. elections” and Iranian ambassador in Iraq; 26 Oct blacklisted energy targets on counter-terrorism authorities; and 29 Oct sanctioned eight entities for “their involvement in the sale and purchase of Iranian petrochemical products”. Iran continued to face worsening economic hardship and rampant third wave of COVID-19 cases: national currency mid-Oct hit new historic low of 322,000 rial to U.S. dollar before regaining some ground; authorities 27 Oct announced highest single-day death toll from COVID-19 with 346 confirmed dead. Central bank governor 12 Oct announced agreement with Baghdad on release of estimated \$5bn in Iranian assets held in Iraq, part of tens of billions in funds govt says are blocked worldwide. MFA 7 Oct announced it had issued letters of protest to Armenia and Azerbaijan after stray mortars and rockets fell within Iranian territory amid hostilities between two countries (see Nagorno-Karabakh).

➔ **Iraq Anti-U.S. groups announced conditional halt on rocket attacks, while PM Kadhimi and Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) struck deal over Sinjar.** Following last month's attacks on Baghdad's Green Zone and U.S. assets, so-called anti-U.S. "resistance factions" 10 Oct announced conditional ceasefire with militant group Kataib Hezbollah 11 Oct claiming ceasefire depended on implementation of parliament's 5 Jan decision to expel U.S. forces; no known rocket attacks reported since announcement. After U.S. threatened to close embassy in Sept, Sec State Mike Pompeo 14 Oct expressed gratitude to Iraqi govt for improving security for U.S. diplomats. Federal govt 9 Oct announced deal with Kurdish Regional Govt over Sinjar district, establishing unified administration to facilitate return of 200,000 displaced Yazidis and 2,500-member force under Baghdad-Erbil supervision. Deal drew resistance from local groups linked with Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) and Kurdistan Workers' Party, such as Sinjar Resistance Units, that were excluded from negotiations despite being called upon to withdraw from district under agreement; Sinjar Autonomous Administration claimed deal favoured return of Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) to disputed territories ahead of 2021 parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, tensions rose between PMF and Kurdish forces after Kurdish authorities 1 Oct blamed PMF for Erbil airport rocket attack previous day; PMF supporters 17 Oct set fire to KDP headquarters in capital Baghdad after Kurdish minister earlier in month advocated "clean up" of PMF militias. Anti-Islamic State (ISIS) activities persisted throughout month: security forces 13 Oct established two security coordination centres in Erbil and Baghdad for joint operations with KRG; security forces 19 Oct launched campaign against ISIS strongholds in Kirkuk, Salah ad-Din, and Ninewa. Unidentified gunmen 17 Oct executed eight men in Salah al-Din's al-Farhatiya village; PM's office 21 Oct blamed ISIS for killings. Amid worsening economic situation, federal govt 13 Oct unveiled austerity measures to reduce public sector wages from 25% to 12% of budget; Kadhimi 19 Oct embarked on European tour to win economic support. Thousands 25 Oct protested in Baghdad and southern cities to mark one-year anniversary of anti-govt protests; clashes with police resulted in dozens injured on both sides.

➔ **☘ Yemen Huthis continued their military campaign in north, raising prospect of escalating offensives toward Marib and Hodeida in Nov, while Hadi govt and Huthis implemented major prisoner swap agreement.** In north, fighting continued along key front lines throughout month and could further worsen around Marib and Hodeida in Nov. Notably, Huthis reportedly pushed into Marib's al-Abdiyah and Harib districts. Both pro- and anti-Huthi forces also claimed progress in strategically important Rahabah and Jebel Murad districts; govt-aligned forces in turn claimed progress in their push across northern desert in al-Jawf governorate towards key Huthi-held military base. Skirmishes around Red Sea port city of Hodeida further strained Dec 2018 Stockholm Agreement: Huthis early Oct made concerted push into Durayhimi district, south of Hodeida, and reportedly regained full control of Durayhimi town and its environs; heavy fighting followed on "Kilo 16" front line, stretch of territory along main highway linking Hodeida with northern highlands; Huthi's capture of Kilo 16 could lead to end of partial siege of city as well as collapse of Dec 2018 ceasefire. In south, violent clashes between United Arab Emirates (UAE)-backed forces and local govt-affiliated military forces continued throughout month in and around Taiz city. Hadi govt and pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC) 1 Oct swapped total of 58 detainees; reports of clashes between STC and govt reduced during month amid speculation of imminent force redeployments on both

sides from Aden city and Abyan governorate and formation of new unity govt. Study by London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine 28 Oct found Aden suffered 2,100 excess deaths between April and Sept 2020, likely due to COVID-19 outbreak. International Committee of Red Cross and UN 15-16 Oct oversaw largest prisoner swap since war began in March 2015: Huthis and govt transferred 1,081 detainees; deal first agreed as part of Dec 2018 Stockholm Agreement but faced persistent delays. More than 240 people 14 Oct arrived in Huthi-held Sanaa from Oman's capital, Muscat, as part of parallel deal involving Huthis, Saudi Arabia and U.S., facilitated by Oman, that saw release of two U.S. nationals detained by Huthis in past two years.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** **Amid persistent repression of dissent, civil society renewed calls for political change.** On anniversary of 1988 pro-democracy riots, hundreds 5 Oct took to streets in capital Algiers despite COVID-19 ban on protests; demonstrators called for release of members of Hirak anti-govt protest movement, denounced army's extensive role in country's politics and demanded genuine democracy; police reportedly arrested over 20. Small-scale demonstrations took place same day in other cities and towns. Repression of civil society and opposition continued. Court in Khenchela city (east) 8 Oct sentenced Hirak activist and figure of Amazigh community Yacine Mebarki to ten years in prison for "inciting atheism" and "offending the precepts of Islam"; sentence is longest ever given to Hirak activist. Constitutional referendum set for 1 Nov continued to spark tensions. Main opposition parties and Hirak activists continued to reject draft constitution, saying it fails to ensure separation of powers and end concentration of powers in president's hands, and called for boycott of referendum. Campaigning kicked off 7 Oct, with all parties and individuals calling for boycott banned access to public media. Islamist parties and religious bodies late Sept-early Oct stepped up campaign against additional protections provided to Tamazight language in draft constitution in alleged attempt to gain popularity among non-Amazigh and conservative voters. Notably, Association of Algerian Ulemas 6 Oct said "certain articles of the proposed constitution are time bombs threatening national identity and the place of Islam". Economic situation continued to deteriorate amid COVID-19 pandemic. Credit insurance company Euler Hermès mid-Oct projected GDP would contract by 6.7% in 2020 and budget deficit would reach 18% of GDP by end of year. President Tebboune was admitted into "specialized care unit" in Algiers military hospital 27 Oct and transferred to Germany next day, after he went into self-isolation 24 Oct due to COVID-19 cases among his close collaborators.

➔ **Egypt** **Govt faced increased international scrutiny for crackdown on dissent and jihadists continued to pose serious security threat in Sinai peninsula.** Following Sept protests against corruption and govt's illegal building demolition policy, NGO Amnesty International 2 Oct said security forces killed at least two demonstrators, and human rights lawyer Khaled Ali 12 Oct said authorities arrested around 2,000 people in relation to protests. Over 50 Democrat U.S. Congress members 19 Oct called on President Sisi to release political detainees; 200 European lawmakers 21 Oct followed suit, calling on Sisi to release human rights

defenders, lawyers, political activists and other prisoners of conscience unjustly detained. NGO Human Rights Watch 22 Oct said 49 detainees including 15 political prisoners were executed 3-13 Oct, called on authorities to immediately halt carrying out death sentences; series of executions followed clashes last month inside death row ward at capital Cairo's Scorpion prison that reportedly left four policemen and four inmates dead. In North Sinai, jihadist militants targeted soldiers, mainly through IEDs and ambushes; notably, IED 14 Oct killed soldier and wounded four others in Bir al-Abd area. On occasion of Armed Forces Day celebrations, residents of Bir al-Abd area – who were displaced in late July-early Aug when Islamic State (ISIS) Sinai Province took control of several villages – 6 Oct protested to demand right to return to their homes. In following weeks, at least 14 citizens were reportedly killed by IEDs upon returning to their villages, including six from same family 24 Oct; devices were allegedly planted by jihadists before fleeing. Govt late Sept to mid-Oct stepped up diplomatic engagement on Libyan crisis. After Hurghada city late Sept hosted military talks, which paved way for permanent ceasefire, delegations from Libya's rival parliaments 11-13 Oct met in Cairo to discuss constitutional roadmap. Tripartite meeting on Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam took place 27 Oct (see Nile Waters).

↑ **Libya** **Warring parties signed countrywide ceasefire agreement and resumed political talks under UN auspices, while oil production continued to increase.** Representatives of UN-backed Govt of National Accord (GNA) and Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar-led Arab-Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF) 23 Oct signed countrywide “permanent ceasefire” agreement, following UN-led talks in Geneva. Both sides agreed to stop hostilities across country, withdraw respective forces from front lines, expel foreign mercenaries and freeze foreign military training programs in Libya until new govt is formed. UN late Oct relaunched Libyan Political Dialogue; talks between 75 delegates representing rival camps, Tripoli-based High Council of State (HCS) and Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HOR), and other delegates handpicked by UN took place virtually 26 Oct; in-person meetings scheduled to start 9 Nov in Tunisia; discussions focus on formation of unified cabinet with view to reaching comprehensive political settlement. GNA 30 Oct announced PM Serraj, who last month said he would hand over duties by end of Oct, will stay in office until new govt is formed “to avoid a political vacuum”. Earlier in month, foreign actors hosted meetings between rival camps. Morocco 2-6 Oct convened delegations from rival assemblies to discuss appointment of heads of national institutions including Central Bank of Libya; delegations agreed to appoint either institutions' chairman or deputy on basis of regional quotas. Egypt 11-13 Oct hosted HCS-HOR talks on constitutional roadmap. Meanwhile, tensions around central city of Sirte early to mid-Oct remained high as both sides reportedly continued to amass equipment and forces in spite of Aug local ceasefire; GNA early month accused Haftar's camp of violating ceasefire by allegedly launching rockets against GNA positions, which Haftar denied. In attempt to pressure Russian military to withdraw from Libya, EU 15 Oct imposed travel ban and economic sanctions on Kremlin insider Yevgeny Prigozhin. Following Sept deal to lift months-long oil sector blockade, National Oil Corporation progressively lifted *force majeure* on export terminals and major oil fields, and oil production late-Oct reached 500,000 barrels per day. IMF data in Oct showed Libya's GDP is expected to shrink by 66% this year and prices to increase by 22%.

➔ **Tunisia** **Violent protests erupted in centre, and political tensions persisted.** Dozens of residents 13 Oct clashed with police in town of Sbeitla, Kasserine province in centre as they protested death of man previous night during destruction by local authorities of informal newspaper kiosk where he was sleeping; protesters reportedly broke into several govt buildings, erected roadblocks and threw stones at police who attempted to disperse them; PM Mechichi same day dismissed governor of Kasserine province and several other local officials and deployed military personnel to town, while authorities arrested head of municipal police. In capital Tunis, dozens 8 Oct demonstrated against draft security law, saying it would give security forces virtual impunity and might lead to increased police brutality. At govt's request, parliament 12 Oct suspended discussion on draft law. Following President Saïed's criticism in late Sept of PM Mechichi for appointing as advisers two close collaborators of former President Ben Ali, tensions between two leaders remained high. Notably, Mechichi 5 Oct dismissed Cultural Affairs Minister Walid Zidi after he criticised new COVID-19 restrictions; during formation of govt in Aug, Saïed had stepped in to support Zidi's appointment. After authorities early Oct implemented night curfews in several regions amid rise in COVID-19 infections, govt 28 Oct announced nationwide night curfew, ban on inter-regional movement and school closure.