



Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

⚠️ ⚡ **Israel-Palestine** Israel resumed onslaught in Gaza, expanding operations in south as famine loomed, while violence in West Bank worsened; hostilities with Hizbollah escalated, highlighting regional conflict risks.

Israeli assault on Gaza intensified and expanded south, as risk of starvation spread. After seven-day humanitarian pause 1 Dec collapsed, Israel intensified ground operation in Gaza's north and expanded in south, focusing on Khan Younis city and escalating bombardment, bringing Palestinian death toll since 7 Oct to over 22,000; clashes with Hamas and other militants killed at least 175 Israeli soldiers since start of ground offensive. Gaza authorities late Dec reported Israel had killed 106 Palestinian media workers, marking deadliest conflict for journalists globally. Israeli assault displaced 1.9m amid relentless bombing of hospitals, schools, mosques and churches. Notably, Israeli forces 12 Dec raided Kamal Adwan hospital in north, allegedly crushing dozens of patients and displaced persons with bulldozers; 16 Dec killed two women in Catholic church in Gaza city. Survivors alleged Israel summarily killed civilians, including at UN-run Shadia Abu Ghazala school and in Gaza city. Meanwhile, Human Rights Watch 18 Dec accused Israel of using starvation as war tactic. Multi-stakeholder global initiative Integrated Food Security Phase 21 Dec estimated Gaza population at imminent risk of famine. Internationally, U.S. shifted rhetoric, warning Israel against indiscriminate bombing despite continuing to block UN Security Council resolutions for ceasefire.

Talks on hostage exchange resumed. Israeli soldiers 15 Dec mistakenly killed three Israeli hostages in Gaza, increasing pressure on govt to restart hostage negotiations. Israel 19 Dec reportedly offered week-long pause and prisoner release in exchange for 40 hostages; Hamas rejected negotiations without end of bombardment.

Conditions in West Bank continued deteriorating sharply. Since 7 Oct, Israeli forces and settlers killed over 319 Palestinians, with over 4,500 arrested amid ubiquitous drone strikes and raids. Notably, Israel 14 Dec launched 60-hour operation in Jenin, killing at least twelve.

Border clashes with Hizbollah intensified. Israel expanded targets to residential areas in southern Lebanon. Hizbollah 7 Dec killed Israeli civilian in first non-military casualty since 7 Oct (see Lebanon).

↓ Jordan Security forces resisted cross-border armed raids by smugglers and militants from Syria, as military reportedly launched retaliatory airstrikes.

Security forces battled drug smugglers and cross-border raids from Syria. Notably, army 5 Dec killed three drug smugglers seeking to cross border from Syria during operation that seized over 200,000 captagon pills. Dozens of alleged drug smugglers from Syria 12 Dec crossed border at undisclosed location and exchanged fire with soldiers, leaving several smugglers and one soldier dead. Army 18 Dec said Iran-backed militants armed with advanced weaponry attempted to cross border from Syria's southern Suwayda province into Jordan's Mafraq governorate; armed forces reportedly struck vehicle and clashed with militants who fled back to Syria, killing several militants and injuring several army personnel. Armed forces that night reportedly launched multiple airstrikes in Syria's Suwayda and Deraa provinces in retaliation. Earlier on 18 Dec, army said it seized nearly five million pills of captagon, marking one of its largest busts in years.

➡ ⚡ Lebanon Lebanon continued to face spectre of war as deadly border clashes between Hizbollah and Israel continued to increase in frequency and intensity.

Hostilities resumed on border after temporary de facto truce. Hizbollah and Israel 1 Dec resumed attacks after collapse of so-called humanitarian pause in Gaza lasting seven days, which sides had unofficially observed in north (see Israel-Palestine). Israel expanded its range of targets in southern Lebanon to include residential areas, notably destroying many homes in Aitaroun village on 12 Dec and bringing number of displaced on Lebanese side to over 50,000; Hizbollah reportedly lost some 134 fighters, as of late Dec, while Israeli strikes killed several civilians and one Lebanese Armed Forces soldier. Hizbollah during Dec frequently claimed "direct hits" on Israeli military personnel and infrastructure; notably, Hizbollah strike 7 Dec killed Israeli civilian, marking first such non-military fatality near border since 7 Oct. Although Hizbollah and Israel have avoided large-scale escalation to date, Israeli government increasingly faces domestic pressure to confront Hizbollah's presence along border, as tens of thousands of residents in northern Israel have been displaced. Israel Defence Minister Yoav Gallant 6 Dec assured Hizbollah would be forced away from border, either by diplomatic or other means. Gallant and Israeli PM Netanyahu 18 Dec reportedly informed U.S. they will allow some time for diplomacy but expect tangible progress; spectre of wider conflict will continue to loom so long as no general ceasefire is reached in Gaza and border hostilities continue, raising risk of escalation by accident or design. Following alleged Israeli assassination of deputy Hamas leader Saleh al-Arouri in Beirut on 2 Jan, Hizbollah vowed retaliation.

Domestic crisis and executive vacuum persisted. Govt continued to struggle to secure funding for its national emergency plan to deal with spillover of Hamas-Israel war. Armed Forces 1 and 17 Dec announced it had rescued 110 and 50 refugees, respectively, off Lebanese coast on Europe-bound boats. Meanwhile, presidential vacuum entered its thirteenth consecutive month in Dec. Parliament 14-15 Dec convened on exceptional basis to extend term of army commander Joseph Aoun, who was scheduled to retire on 10 Jan.

➔ **Syria** Israel and U.S. traded deadly tit-for-tat attacks with Iran-backed groups amid tensions over Israel-Hamas war, hostilities persisted in north west, and Islamic State (ISIS) maintained its desert insurgency.

Israel launched airstrikes, U.S. and Iran-backed groups targeted each other. Israel continued to target various locations, including in retaliation against alleged Hizbollah rocket launches. Notably, Israeli airstrike 2 Dec killed four Iran-linked militants in capital Damascus; drone 8 Dec killed four, including three Hizbollah fighters in Quneitra province. In significant attack, airstrike 25 Dec killed prominent Iranian commander Razi Mousavi; Tehran warned Israel to expect “smart response”. Drone attack 29 Dec targeted warehouses in Al-Bukamal; confirmed casualties included at least four Hizbollah members and six Iranian-linked militants. Meanwhile, U.S. 1 Dec struck alleged “Islamic Resistance” headquarters in Al-Bukamal. Attacks 14 Dec targeted U.S. base in Conoco gas field, Deir ez-Zor, and Al-Tanf and Rukban bases, Homs; in response, U.S. 9 Dec struck military site in Al-Mayadin, Deir ez-Zor.

In north west, hostilities continued. Rebel raid 7 Dec targeted army in Aleppo province, claiming seven army members as casualties. Rebels 17 Dec targeted govt forces in Latakia province, prompting Russia 18, 19, 25 Dec to resume airstrikes targeting Idlib city and countryside, killing at least five civilians. Shelling in Idlib throughout Dec killed at least sixteen civilians; UN reported 40% of fatalities since early Oct were children. Meanwhile, in Aleppo province, Manbij Military Council 16 Dec fired rockets at Turkish base in Sheikh Nasser village. SDF claimed Turkish airstrikes 23-25 Dec killed eight civilians in SDF-controlled area (see Türkiye).

ISIS continued to show signs of resurgence. Suspected ISIS attack 8 Dec killed Iranian commander and four others in Al-Bukamal city, Deir ez-Zor province; same day killed seven pro-regime fighters near Al-Bukamal. Russian airstrike 15 Dec killed ISIS militants near Al-Sukhna village, Homs province, and Al-Rasafa villages, Hama province.

Anti-govt protests continued in south amid unstable Syrian-Jordanian border. Anti-govt protests in Suwayda city 1, 9, 10, 15, 20 Dec demanded political change, release of detainees. Jordan mid Dec reportedly launched airstrikes after cross-border raids (see Jordan).

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Iran** War in Gaza reverberated across region as Iran-backed groups engaged in hostilities with U.S. forces and Israel, spotlighting risks of escalation; West imposed series of sanctions against Iran.

Iran-backed groups maintained regional pressure amid ongoing Gaza onslaught. Iran-backed groups continued engagement in hostilities with Israel and/or U.S. throughout Dec as Israel continued war in Gaza (see Israel-Palestine): hostilities between Hizbollah and Israel continued to expand in frequency and intensity, “Axis of Resistance” attacks on U.S. forces in Syria and Iraq reached 113 as of 31 Dec as Iran 25 Dec vowed retaliation for killing of senior Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps official by alleged Israeli strike in Syria, and U.S. Navy killed Houthi militants

in Red Sea amid threats against commercial vessels (see Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen). Iran disavowed direct engagement, but White House official 22 Dec accused Tehran of being “deeply involved in planning” Houthi attacks in Red Sea, and Israeli PM Netanyahu 30 Dec contended Iran was leading “aggression against us on various fronts”.

Western sanctions continued to mount on Iran-linked entities. U.S. Commerce Department 5 Dec added eleven companies linked with “Iranian-Russian efforts to develop unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) facility” to its Entity list. U.S. 7 Dec sanctioned another thirteen persons and companies said to be financing Houthis. U.S. 8 Dec blacklisted two Iranians for various operations, notably plots against U.S. officials. UK same day sanctioned five Iranian officials over human rights concerns. EU 11 Dec announced sanctions against eleven persons and entities involved in development of UAVs used in Russia-Ukraine war. U.S., UK 14 Dec designated several Iranian officials and Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad representatives to Iran.

In other important developments. Sunni militant group Jaish al-Adl claimed responsibility for 15 Dec attack against police station in Balochistan (south east), which killed eleven. International Atomic Energy Agency 26 Dec informed member states that Iran increased production rate of 60% enriched uranium since Nov; U.S., UK, France and Germany 28 Dec jointly condemned Iran’s action.

➡ **Iraq Iran-backed groups and U.S. traded deadly attacks amid Israel-Gaza war, country held first provincial elections in a decade, and lethal clashes occurred in north between Türkiye and Kurdish militants.**

Iran-backed militias attacked U.S. assets, U.S. conducted retaliatory strikes. Iran-linked groups throughout Dec continued multiple attacks targeting U.S. troops at Ain al-Asad base, Anbar governorate, and Hareer base, Erbil governorate; groups launched attacks into eastern Syria targeting U.S. bases. Notably, U.S. drone 3 Dec killed five Iran-linked militants in Kirkuk governorate. Rockets 8 Dec targeted U.S. embassy in capital Baghdad in first attack on non-military U.S. asset since outbreak of Gaza war (see Israel-Palestine) and rockets same day struck Ain al-Asad airbase; in response, govt took stance against groups, established investigative task force and 14 Dec announced detention of several affiliates of groups. Kataib Hizbollah 25 Dec attacked Erbil airbase, injuring three U.S. personnel; U.S. same day struck three Kataib Hizbollah and Harakat al-Nujaba sites, killing one and injuring eighteen; govt condemned U.S. strike as “hostile act”.

Country held first provincial elections in ten years. Iraq 18 Dec held first provincial elections since 2013 in which Shia Coordination Framework reportedly won 101 of 285 seats. In southern governorates, Shiite State of Law Coalition, tied to former PM Nuri al-Maliki, and Nabni coalition, tied to Popular Mobilisation Forces, stood out among Shia parties. In Kirkuk governorate, where voter turnout reached highest nationwide at 66%, Kurdish parties such as Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and Kurdistan Democratic Party won most votes.

Türkiye-Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) clashes killed twelve Turkish soldiers. Marking escalation in casualties, clashes with PKK 22-23 Dec killed twelve Turkish soldiers in north; Turkish Defence Minister 27 Dec said retaliatory attacks struck 71 sites in Iraq and Syria, “neutralizing” 59 Kurdish fighters. Meanwhile, two explosive-

laden drones 30 Dec struck Peshmerga base in Primam, north of Erbil; regional authorities blamed “government-linked outlaw groups”.

In another important development. Clashes in Baghdad between militiamen loyal to Shia cleric Muqtada al-Sadr and rival Asaib Ahl al-Haq (AAH) group 26 Dec reportedly injured two, after AAH erected portraits of slain Iranian general Qassem Soleimani.

➔ **Saudi Arabia Kingdom continued rapprochement with Iran against backdrop of escalation in Red Sea, while Russian President Putin visited capital Riyadh.**

Riyadh and Tehran reasserted commitment to normalisation. Saudi Arabia’s and Iran’s deputy FMs 15 Dec held tripartite meeting in Chinese capital Beijing to reassert commitment to normalisation deal brokered in March 2023. Iran previous day announced it would lift visa restrictions for 33 states, including Saudi Arabia, while Iranian pilgrims from 19 Dec were allowed to complete Umrah pilgrimage in Mecca city for first time in eight years. Despite improvement in relations between pair, Riyadh fears regional escalation as result of Israel’s war in Gaza and reportedly asked U.S. to show restraint in responding to attacks in Red Sea by Yemen’s Houthis; regional media reports mid Dec surfaced accusing U.S. of putting pressure on Riyadh to postpone deal with Houthis and join maritime task force in Red Sea (see Yemen).

Crown Prince met Putin. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman 6 Dec met Putin in capital Riyadh to discuss oil, trade, Ukraine, and Israel-Hamas war. Mohammed bin Salman 13 Dec met U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan to discuss Gaza crisis.

↓ **Yemen In escalation in Red Sea, U.S. killed ten Houthi militants attempting to board commercial ship as group’s drones targeted Israel; Yemen’s warring parties agreed steps toward peace process under UN auspices.**

U.S. took first military action to rebuff Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping. After Houthis in Nov threatened to target any ship travelling to or from Israel unless food and medicine are allowed into Gaza (see Israel-Palestine), Houthi attacks on shipping since 19 Nov reached at least two dozen as of 31 Dec, according to U.S. forces. Notably, Houthi missiles and drones 3, 11, 15, 18 Dec struck ships in Red Sea; Houthis 15 Dec launched drones toward Israeli city Eilat; Egypt next day intercepted suspected Houthi drone off Red Sea coast. International naval presence grew: French navy 9 Dec shot down two alleged Houthi drones; UK navy 15 Dec downed drone; U.S. navy 16 Dec intercepted fourteen drones originating from Houthi-controlled territory and 30 Dec intercepted two missiles targeting container ship. U.S. 19 Dec announced maritime task force to protect shipping; Iran’s defence minister 14 Dec warned task force would face “extraordinary problems”. In significant escalation that may reset rules of engagement, U.S. navy helicopters 31 Dec fired on small boats carrying Houthis attempting to board container ship, killing ten; UK and U.S. vowed more action if necessary, underscoring risk of further hostilities that could broaden Gaza war.

Govt and Houthis committed to steps toward ceasefire and UN-led peace process. UN Envoy Hans Grundberg 23 Dec announced govt and Houthis committed to steps

toward ceasefire, including resumption of oil exports, opening of roads in Taiz and easing restrictions on Sanaa airport and Hodeida port, and said parties would work toward roadmap under UN auspices. Announcement came after Houthis and Saudi-led coalition late Nov finalised draft deal addressing humanitarian issues, including Riyadh's commitment to pay public sector salaries for one year.

In other important developments. U.S. 8 Dec imposed sanctions on thirteen individuals and entities accused of financing Houthis. World Food Programme 5 Dec suspended food aid in Houthi-controlled areas due to limited funding and disagreement with local authorities.

North Africa

➔ Algeria Algiers reiterated commitment to Palestine amid war in Gaza, and relations with Bamako soured over northern Mali rebellion.

Algeria reiterated support for Palestine amid war in Gaza. Jibril Rajoub, secretary general of Palestinian political party Fatah's central committee, 17 Dec visited Algiers and met with President Tebboune; Rajoub reportedly asked Algeria to help unify different Palestinian factions to constitute national unity govt.

Mali recalled ambassador to Algeria. Amid renewed conflict between Bamako and coalition of mostly Tuareg rebel groups (CMA) in northern Mali, tensions heightened between Mali and Algeria, which has been main mediator in peace efforts. Mali 20 Dec summoned Algeria's top diplomat accusing Algiers of holding meetings with Tuareg separatists without involving Malian authorities. Algeria next day summoned Malian ambassador urging "all Malian parties to renew commitment to implementation of [2015] agreement on peace and national reconciliation". Bamako 22 Dec recalled ambassador to Algeria condemning interference in internal affairs.

In other important developments. PM Nadir Larbaoui 10 Dec instructed govt to implement wage increase for civil servants starting next Jan, citing Tebboune's commitment to improving purchasing power; increase will be third and final stage in process of raising civil servants' salaries by 47% between 2022 and 2024. International Monetary Fund 14 Dec presented conclusions of visit carried out in Algeria 3-14 Dec, highlighting need to diversify economy in view of threats posed by volatile hydrocarbon price, among others; mission also recommended "gradual fiscal rebalancing to limit expected increase in financing requirements and public debt in medium term". During Algerian-American military dialogue held 4-6 Dec in Washington, American suppliers of military equipment encouraged Algeria to diversify its suppliers (which are mostly Russian) by turning to American ones.

➔ Egypt Election authority announced President Sisi's re-election by landslide in presidential vote; Cairo accelerated talks for new loan with IMF, and put forward three-step plan for ending war in Gaza.

President Sisi secured third consecutive term in power. Following presidential election held 10-12 Dec, National Elections Authority 18 Dec declared Sisi winner with 89.6% of votes, and turnout highest ever at 66.8%; Alongside threats and intimidation deployed by authorities to make sure voters turned out, Gaza war seems to have had mobilisation effect on voters, who have rallied behind Sisi's public stance

against threat of forced displacement of Gazans and narrative that he is able to provide security and stability to country surrounded by crises.

Govt accelerated talks for new loan with International Monetary Fund (IMF). IMF 7 Dec confirmed discussing with Egypt possible increase in loan that Cairo originally secured in 2022. News Agency Bloomberg 20 Dec reported IMF loan would be expanded from \$3bn to \$6bn; IMF expected to request depreciation of exchange rate as prerequisite to agreement.

Cairo continued to promote ceasefire in Gaza. Egypt maintained mediation efforts amid growing pressure from displaced Gazans crowding Rafah border area. Egyptian security sources 25 Dec said Hamas and allied Islamic Jihad rejected Egyptian proposal that they relinquish power in Gaza Strip in return for permanent ceasefire. Govt 28 Dec confirmed having put forward three-stage proposal to end conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, security forces 16 Dec shot down drone near resort town of Dahab on Red Sea, highlighting security repercussions that Gaza war and Yemen's Houthi rebels' attacks on shipping have on Egypt; another "flying object" reportedly shot down 26 Dec off coast of Dahab.

GERD talks ended with failure. Water Resources Ministry 19 Dec said fourth round of direct talks between Egypt, Ethiopia and Sudan over Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) ended without breakthrough.

➔ **Libya UN-led push to convene meeting of five major political stakeholders faced setbacks as disagreements persisted on whether new govt or elections should come first.**

UN envoy's initiative to convene stakeholders' meeting faced obstacles. UN Special Representative for Libya, Abdoulaye Bathily, 18 Dec briefed members of UN Security Council on his latest initiative to convene meeting of Libya's five main political stakeholders, said all invitees had submitted names of their respective delegations but lamented that "Libyan leaders show no commitment to ending the long-standing stalemate". Stakeholders have reportedly stated irreconcilable conditions for their participation. Notably, eastern-based House of Representatives (HoR) Speaker Aguila Saleh conditioned attendance to focusing discussions on formation of "new govt for elections" and rejected participation of Tripoli-based PM Abdelhamid Dabaiba on grounds that he is no longer legitimate. Meanwhile, Dabaiba, while ready to discuss outstanding issues in electoral laws, categorically rejected any discussions on "new govt". Libyan National Army (LNA) chief Khalifa Haftar conditioned Dabaiba's Govt of National Unity (GNU) participation to inclusion of HoR-appointed govt, or exclusion of both govts.

Drone allegedly targeted Russian military cargo in country's east. Local media reports suggested drone mid Dec targeted Russian Ilyushin military cargo aircraft in Jufra airbase in central Libya; U.S. Africa Command denied involvement. Cargo plane could have presumably been used to deliver equipment to Haftar or to his allies as Jufra airbase falls under LNA's authority; base is also known, however, to be transit point for Russian military activity in neighbouring African states. Some foreign analysts suggested strike could be work of Tripoli-based authorities who possess armed drones but whether these have sufficient autonomy to carry out strike in Jufra, some 500 kilometres from capital, is unclear.

In other important developments. UN Mission 21 Dec expressed concern over death in custody of former Defence Minister Al-Mahdi al-Barghathi after authorities in Oct arrested him in Benghazi city, demanded independent investigation. Presidency Council early Dec expressed concern after Niger in Nov repelled law that criminalised transportation of irregular migrants to neighbouring Libya and Algeria for onward travel to Europe, while GNU reportedly appealed for urgent EU support to secure country's southern border.

➡ **Tunisia Local elections recorded low voter turnout amid boycott by parties across political spectrum; repression of govt critics continued.**

Local council elections underscored voter disaffection. First round of local elections, which will determine composition of second chamber of parliament, took place 24 Dec; some 150 intellectual and political figures mid Dec signed petition calling for election boycott, saying vote would participate in "consolidation of the system of repression and oppression". Election Commission 27 Dec placed turnout at 11.84%, highlighting high level of voter disaffection; second round scheduled for Feb 2024.

Crackdown on businessmen and journalists continued. Authorities 12 Dec issued arrest warrant against Adel Grar, former managing director of Al Karama Holding (responsible for sale of companies confiscated during 2010-2011 revolution), for allegedly using his position to obtain unjustified advantage and improperly disposing of public or private funds. Police 28 Dec arrested journalist Zied el-Hani and judge later issued arrest warrant against him for defamation against trade minister. Opposition Free Destourian Party mid Dec said authorities banned demonstration in support of party president Abir Moussi, who has been in detention since 3 Oct following scuffle with staff of president's palace.

In other important developments. Shortages of basic commodities persisted, leading to tense scenes in queues, filmed and broadcast on social networks. Notably, Tunis region 7 Dec ran out of fuel for several days due to delayed delivery by tanker, and many bakeries around Tunis mid Dec were unable to make bread due to shortage of flour. Meanwhile, interior ministry said National Guard and military personnel 27 Dec killed three "terrorists" in mountainous area of Kasserine near Algerian border.

➡ **Western Sahara In renewed effort for Western Sahara conflict resolution, U.S. administration dispatched key North Africa diplomat to conduct new round of consultations with Algeria and Morocco.**

U.S. Deputy Assistant Secretary for North Africa, Joshua Harris, 7 Dec met with Algerian FM Ahmed Attaf in capital Algiers, and 17 Dec met with Moroccan FM Nasser Bourita in capital Rabat. Washington's engagement with both Algeria and Morocco is part of U.S. efforts to take more balanced stance on Western Sahara dispute in context where regional repercussions of Gaza war increase risk of escalation.