

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

📌 🇮🇱 Israel-Palestine **Deadly violence at hands of Israeli forces and Palestinians rose, leaving at least dozen Palestinians and 11 Israelis dead; tensions could escalate ahead of April religious holidays.**

In occupied East Jerusalem's Old City, Israeli forces 6 March shot dead Palestinian after he stabbed Israeli police officer at Bab Hutta Gate, and next day killed Palestinian who stabbed two officers at Cotton Merchants' Gate. Israeli soldiers 6 March killed Palestinian teenager who threw fire bomb at army post in Abu Dis village outside Jerusalem. Risk of escalating violence, which could potentially trigger wider confrontation, remains high ahead of Muslim holy month Ramadan and Jewish holiday Passover in April. Israel's Supreme Court 1 March halted eviction of four families in flash-point Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood. In West Bank, Israeli forces clashed with Palestinians protesting Israeli settlements and forced evictions, and carried out arrest raids. Notably, Israeli forces 1 March shot dead Palestinian near Beit Fajar town and killed two others who came under fire during arrest raid in Jenin refugee camp. Israeli forces 15 March killed Palestinian teenager during clashes in Balata refugee camp, near Nablus city, and shot dead Palestinian in Qalandia refugee camp near Ramallah city; same day killed Palestinian during raid in Rahat town in Naqab/Negev desert. Israeli forces 31 March killed two Palestinians during raid on refugee camp near Jenin city. Israeli bus passenger same day shot dead Palestinian who allegedly stabbed another passenger near Jewish settlement. Palestinian citizens of Israel – identified as Islamic State (ISIS) supporters – 22, 27 March attacked Israelis in Beersheba and Hadera cities, and Palestinian resident of West Bank 29 March carried out gun attack in Tel Aviv, leaving total of 11 people dead, including three police officers; Israeli forces began detaining Palestinians without charge for fear of further attacks ahead of Ramadan. Regionally, Israeli airstrike 7 March killed two Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders near Syrian capital Damascus; Iran 13 March fired missiles claiming to target Israeli "strategic centre" site in Iraq (see Iran, Syria and Iraq). Israel 27-28 March hosted unprecedented summit attended by FMs of U.S., United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Bahrain and Morocco, in part to discuss Iran.

➡ **Lebanon** **War in Ukraine exacerbated economic crisis, while candidates registered for May election.**

Lebanese lira mid-March again dropped some 20% in value, likely driven by spiking oil prices generated by war in Ukraine, as Lebanon imports all of its energy needs and remains exposed to market volatility; devaluation came despite ongoing Central Bank scheme to support exchange rate of Lebanese lira by providing banks with U.S. dollars at price significantly below market rate, which is rapidly depleting foreign exchange reserves. Rising food prices also increased pressure on govt's room to address economic crisis, and put further strain on fragile social cohesion. As country imports more than 80% of its grain from Ukraine, skyrocketing prices during month fuelled concerns that govt may struggle to continue subsidies for grain, which are critical to prevent public unrest; bread has become increasingly central for food security of rising number of Lebanese impoverished by enduring economic crisis. Judge Ghada Aoun 21 March charged Central

Bank Governor Riad Salameh with illegal enrichment and money laundering, after ordering arrest of his brother and freezing assets of several banks; banking association same day announced two-day bank closure to protest decisions. EU 28 March announced assets totalling some \$130bn belonging to Salameh were seized in France, Germany and Luxembourg. International Monetary Fund 2 March reportedly warned Lebanese leaders that demanded reforms necessary to unlock financial support would have to be real and “not only on paper”; Deputy PM Saadeh Shami 9 March warned that hole in financial system, currently estimated at \$69bn, will continue to grow. Meanwhile, preparations continued for elections scheduled for 15 May; 1,043 candidates, including 155 women, registered candidacies by 15 March deadline. Hizbollah Sec Gen Hassan Nasrallah in televised speech 18 March categorically denied Ukrainian Ministry of Defence’s assertions, made previous day, that Hizbollah fighters were supporting Russian military operations in Ukraine, saying: “These are lies that have no basis in truth.” Judge 24 March announced he had charged Lebanese Forces party leader Samir Geagea in relation to deadly clashes in capital Beirut in Oct 2021.

➔ **Syria Islamic State (ISIS) stepped up attacks in central desert in face of reduced Russian airstrikes, Idlib ceasefire held, and President Assad visited Arab country for first time since 2011 uprising.** In central desert, ISIS escalated attacks throughout month; most notably, suspected ISIS attack on military bus 6 March killed at least 13 soldiers in Palmyra desert, Homs governorate. In Idlib province, March 2020 ceasefire held despite ongoing Syrian govt shelling; after decline in airstrikes since 24 Feb invasion of Ukraine, Russia 28 March reportedly carried out strikes in Idlib. Following death of ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Quraishi in Feb, ISIS 10 March appointed Juma Awad al-Badri, known as Abu al-Hassan al-Hashemi al-Quraishi, as new leader; al-Quraishi is believed to be brother of ISIS’s former “caliph”, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. Turkish artillery attacks and airstrikes continued against Kurdish group People’s Protection Forces (YPG)-linked targets; notably, Turkish military 8, 10 March targeted “Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)/YPG” positions at Turkey-Syria border. Turkish drone 15 March reportedly injured two civilians near Manbij, Aleppo governorate. Govt-aligned forces 27 March reportedly struck Turkish military vehicle near Atarib city in Aleppo governorate. In Hasakah province in north east, clashes between Syrian Democratic Forces and regime forces 1 March killed two regime soldiers in Ghazliya village near Tel Tamr. Israeli airstrike 7 March killed two Iranian Revolutionary Guard commanders near Syrian capital Damascus (see Iran, Israel/Palestine and Iraq). Constitutional Committee including regime, opposition and civil society representatives 21-25 March held seventh round of talks in Swiss city Geneva. In first trip to Arab state since outbreak of civil war in 2011, President al-Assad 18 March visited United Arab Emirates (UAE) to meet UAE PM and Dubai’s ruler Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum and Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan to discuss strengthening bilateral relations. Following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, prices for basic goods including bread and cooking oil rose by 20% or more, while black market prices for diesel and benzine rose by nearly 50% and 40%, respectively, further aggravating economic and humanitarian crisis.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

↓ **Iran** **Tensions with Israel peaked as both sides increasingly threatened to attack the other, fuelling regional security concerns; talks between Iran, U.S. and other world powers paused following 11th-hour Russian demands.** Following alleged Israeli attack on drone facility in Iran's Kermanshah province last month, Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) in rare announcement 8 March revealed death of two colonels in Israeli airstrike near Syrian capital Damascus previous day. In retaliation, IRGC 13 March fired dozen ballistic missiles at Erbil in Iraq's Kurdistan region, targeting Israeli "strategic centre" (see Iraq). Reports 13 March surfaced that authorities uncovered alleged Israel spy network in north-western Iran; IRGC next day announced arrest of members of alleged Israeli intelligence-linked group plotting sabotage acts at Fordow nuclear facility. Israel 14 March announced it suffered "broad cyber attack" on govt sites. Israeli FM 28 March asserted that Negev Summit attended by counterparts from U.S., Egypt, Bahrain, Morocco and United Arab Emirates "intimidates and deters our common enemies – first and foremost Iran and its proxies". Govt-affiliated media 13 March reported Tehran had "unilaterally suspended" talks with Saudi officials (see Saudi Arabia). Tehran and International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) 5 March resolved longstanding dispute over IAEA investigation into possible undeclared nuclear material and nuclear-related activities at four sites, jointly announcing roadmap addressing safeguards-related concerns. However, deep rift between West and Russia over latter's invasion of Ukraine in Feb threw up hurdle in talks. Russian FM Sergei Lavrov 5 March stated Moscow expected that Western sanctions "will by no means affect our right to free and full-fledged trading, economic, investment, military and technical cooperation with Iran" if deal revived; EU foreign policy chief Josep Borrell 11 March announced pause in talks "due to external factors". Lavrov 15 March indicated much less maximalist demand related to civil nuclear cooperation projects that U.S. same day assured were part and parcel of deal. In positive move, UK govt 16 March announced UK nationals Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe and Anoosheh Ashoori detained in Iran since 2016 and 2017, respectively, were released; third UK national Morad Tahbaz arrested in 2018 was briefly furloughed but since returned to jail.

➔ **Iraq** **Iran launched missiles at alleged Israeli target in Erbil, govt formation remained deadlocked, and Islamic State (ISIS) appointed new leader.** Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) 13 March fired 12 ballistic missiles at alleged Israeli "strategic center" in area near U.S. consulate in Kurdistan's regional capital Erbil; attack reportedly conducted in response to Israeli drone strike that killed two IRGC officers in Syria 7 March (see Syria) and Israeli attack on drone facility in Iran's Kermanshah province in Feb; attack was launched from Iranian soil and without consultation of local Iranian allies who faced backlash for Iran's violation of Iraqi sovereignty. On political front, govt formation remained deadlocked. Following failure to elect president last month, parliament 5 March voted to reopen nomination period for presidential candidates; Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) subsequently officially nominated Reber Ahmed as candidate. Parliament speaker 15 March announced election of president would take place on 26 March, however quorum was not obtained with session postponed again to 30 March; head of al-Fateh bloc Abbas al-Zamili next day reportedly said Shiite Coordination Framework

would not attend session without agreement on govt formation with Tripartite Alliance that includes Sadrists, Sunni Sovereignty Alliance and KDP. Parliament 30 March failed to elect president due to lack of quorum. Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr 10 March held phone calls with top officials, including former PM and rival Nouri al-Maliki, who al-Sadr had long refused to include in govt-formation; indicated consensus govt is likely to prevail notwithstanding division between Sadrists and Framework leaders that could lead to months of wrangling. Hundreds of protesters supporting Iran-aligned groups 27 March reportedly attacked KDP's office in capital Baghdad. Following death of ISIS leader Abu Ibrahim al-Quraishi in Syria in Feb, ISIS 10 March appointed new leader (see Syria). Meanwhile, low-scale ISIS attacks and anti-terrorism operations continued throughout month. At least four rockets attributed by military to "criminal terrorist gangs" 17 March targeted Balad airbase in Salah al-Din province. Protests erupted 9 March in south over rising food prices; notably, over 500 protesters gathered in Nasiriyah, Dhi Qar governorate.

➡ **Saudi Arabia** **Huthis launched cross-border attacks targeting oil infrastructure, while Iran suspended talks with Riyadh following mass execution in kingdom.** State media throughout month reported alleged Huthi's cross-border attacks; notably, drone 10 March struck Saudi Aramco refinery in capital Riyadh; Huthis next day claimed attack and said they also targeted southern Jizan and Abha cities. Huthis 19-20 March launched barrage of drone and missile attacks, including on energy and water desalination facilities in Al-Shaqeeq city, Jizan province, Yanbu city, Al Madinah province, Dhahran al-Janub governorate and Khamis Mushait city in 'Asir province, and Jeddah city in Mecca province. In response to Huthi-launched drone strikes hitting Kingdom's Aramco facilities in Riyadh and Jeddah among other oil and gas sites, Saudi Arabia 26 March launched string of retaliatory attacks targeting Sanaa and Hodeida cities (see Yemen). In largest mass execution in decades, kingdom 12 March executed 81 people – half of whom were Shias – on number of charges including murder and terrorism; Iran next day condemned executions as "violation of basic human rights principles and international law". Iraqi Foreign Ministry 12 March announced fifth round of Iran-Saudi Arabia talks due to be hosted in Iraqi capital Baghdad following week; however, Iran next day suspended talks without specifying reasons. Amid global surge in oil prices, Saudi Arabia mid-March refused to break commitment to OPEC+ deal with countries, including Russia, despite U.S. and UK pressure aimed at persuading Riyadh to increase oil production.

➡ **Yemen** **Fighting slowed on front lines, UN envoy initiated political talks, and rising fuel prices and food shortages exacerbated humanitarian crisis.** Fighting remained largely stalemated throughout month with clashes concentrated in Hajjah and Marib governorates. In Hajjah, Huthis retook areas in Harad city they lost in Feb. In Marib, fighting took place in Harib district near al-Balaq mountains encircling Marib city. Elsewhere, govt-aligned forces launched attacks on Huthis in Mukayras district, al-Bayda governorate, and Lawdar district, Abyan governorate; relative calm on front lines could signal Huthis re-grouping for counteroffensive around Muslim holy month of Ramadan. Huthis continued cross-border attacks into Saudi Arabia that provoked retaliatory airstrikes (see Saudi Arabia). On diplomatic front, UN Envoy Hans Grundberg 7 March initiated consultations with political parties (excluding Huthis) in Jordanian capital Amman; no tangible results. Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) 15 March proposed multiparty talks in

Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh with Huthis, who next day said they would welcome talks only in neutral country; GCC states elected instead to hold political consultations in Riyadh with anti-Huthi parties, in apparent effort at forming united front, and potentially restructuring govt. Grundberg 19 March met Huthi chief negotiator to discuss possible truce during Ramadan. Head of Huthi-led Supreme Political Council 26 March proposed initiative via mediators to halt Huthi cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia and ceasefire for three days in exchange for coalition reopening Sanaa International airport, and bring Hodeida port back up to full capacity; Saudi-led coalition 29 March announced it would halt military operations from next day. Russian invasion of Ukraine compounded already dire humanitarian situation. With 30%-40% of country's wheat imported from Ukraine and Russia, outbreak of war (see Ukraine) led to skyrocketing prices as country has four months of reserves. Rising costs and depreciating currency raise risk of social unrest, not least during Ramadan when average household consumption rises; Integrated Food Security Phase Classification 14 March predicted 60% of population likely to experience acute food insecurity June-Dec 2022. High-level donor conference 16 March only raised \$1.3bn of estimated \$4.3bn budget, forcing UN to scale down humanitarian programs in 2022.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** **Tensions with Spain ran high over Western Sahara; several encounters reported between military and suspected jihadists.** In major policy shift, Spanish PM Pedro Sánchez 18 March publicly supported Moroccan autonomy plan for Western Sahara. Algiers next day recalled ambassador to Spain for consultations, condemning Madrid's "abrupt U-turn"; late March said govt will review all agreements with Spain (see Western Sahara). Spain 24 March extradited former soldier and Hirak protest movement militant Mohamed Benhalima to Algeria; Algerian court last year sentenced Benhalima in absentia to ten years in prison on charges of "publishing false information". Algiers 2 March abstained from voting on UN General Assembly resolution condemning Russian invasion of Ukraine and urging Moscow to withdraw troops. U.S. Deputy Sec State Wendy Sherman 10 March met with President Tebboune in capital Algiers; officials reportedly discussed possible U.S. sanctions against Algeria should country continue to buy Russian weapons and possible U.S. investment in Algerian gas sector; U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 30 March met with Tebboune and FM Ramtane Lamamra in Algiers, urged govt to reconsider ties with Moscow and improve relations with Morocco. Meanwhile in Skikda province (north east), army 16 March captured seven al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) combatants and 19 March killed seven other AQIM militants in security operations in Collo district. Suspected jihadist group 20 March killed three soldiers in Bordj Baji Mokhtar province (south west near Malian border).

➔ **Egypt** **Authorities took steps to mitigate impact of soaring wheat price; uptick in jihadist violence recorded in Sinai Peninsula.** Amid disruption of wheat imports due to Russian invasion of Ukraine, govt from 11 March banned exports of key staple items for three months, 21 March imposed price cap on unsubsidised bread and throughout month announced new incentives for domestic wheat producers to increase supply. Authorities 21 March devalued currency by

around 15%. International Monetary Fund 23 March said Cairo had asked for support to help weather impact of war in Ukraine. Meanwhile, G7 ambassadors to Cairo 1 March jointly called on President Sisi to vote in favour of UN resolution condemning Russian invasion; authorities 2 March complied with request. In signal that Cairo is not ready to cut ties with Moscow, Sisi and Russian President Putin 9 March held phone call to discuss bilateral cooperation. In Sinai Peninsula, Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated Sinai Province (SP) stepped up attacks on military and pro-govt tribal militiamen. SP militants 7 March allegedly attacked army base in Al-Arish area, killing unspecified number of soldiers. SP 10 March pledged allegiance to new ISIS leader Abu al-Hassan al-Hashemi al-Qurashi. Heavy exchanges of fire reported 11-14 March between soldiers and tribal militia fighters on one hand, and suspected SP militants on the other, in Shibana and al-Barth areas south of Rafah town; up to 14 soldiers and several militiamen reportedly killed. Alleged SP militants 21 March attacked and killed four militiamen south of Rafah. SP also launched several explosive device attacks throughout month: four militiamen killed 1 and 21 March in three separate locations, several soldiers killed or wounded 11 March south west of Bir al-Abd town.

📌 🇱🇐 **Libya Crisis of two rival govts raised spectre of renewed localised clashes and tug of war over control of state's resources, putting 2020 ceasefire at risk.** Tobruk-based House of Representatives (HoR) 1 March endorsed PM Fathi Bashagha's 39-member cabinet in controversial vote of confidence marred by procedural shortcomings. Bashagha same day vowed to install his govt in capital Tripoli "peacefully and securely". Tripoli-based incumbent PM Abdulhamid Dabaiba immediately condemned "fraudulent vote", refused to cede power and said he will "hold accountable anyone who dares to approach any government building" in Tripoli. Armed groups loyal to Tripoli-based govt 3 March shut down airspace and detained two ministers of Bashagha-led govt to impede them from attending swearing-in ceremony in Tobruk city (east); ministers released next day, domestic flights between east and west resumed 22 March. Pro-Bashagha forces 10 March deployed on eastern edges of Tripoli, raising fears of confrontation with pro-Dabaiba forces. U.S. Ambassador Richard Norland immediately warned against escalation, while UN mission same day called on parties to "refrain from any action that could lead to armed clashes". Bashagha next day said forces had withdrawn and assured "there will not be a war". Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar's forces 15 March stormed Dabaiba's Government of National Unity (GNU) headquarters in Benghazi city (east) and dismissed all employees; later handed building over to Bashagha's govt deputy PM Salim Al-Zadma. UN Under Sec-Gen for Political and Peacebuilding Affairs Rosemary DiCarlo 16 March warned Security Council that "political polarization" in Libya "risks dividing the institutions once again"; also highlighted recent increase in human rights violations, hate speech and political violence. After UN Special Adviser on Libya Stephanie Williams 4 March asked HoR and Tripoli-based consultative High State Council (HSC) to nominate six delegates each to form "joint committee" to resolve political impasse, HSC 15 March nominated representatives, but HoR failed to appoint representatives and did not attend UN-backed HoR-HSC Joint Committee talks in Tunisia 22-24 March. Bashagha 22 March banned implementation of GNU-issued decrees or instructions; next day accused GNU of usurping power and occupying state institutions' headquarters in Tripoli; 26-28 March repeatedly vowed to enter Tripoli in next few days.

➡ **Mauritania Diplomatic row erupted as govt accused Mali's army of crimes against Mauritians.** Dozens of people 8 March demonstrated outside presidency in capital Nouakchott to protest reported disappearance in early March of Mauritanian citizens on Malian side of border south of Adel Bagrou town. Govt later same day said it had summoned Malian ambassador "to protest the recent criminal acts perpetrated by regular Malian forces against our defenceless and innocent citizens in Malian territory". Bamako 9 March said there was "no proof" of Malian armed forces' involvement but promised investigation into disappearances. Malian FM Abdoulaye Diop 11-12 March led high-level delegation to Nouakchott in bid to appease tensions; neighbours agreed to establish joint mission to investigate disappearances; delegation of Mauritanian experts 16 March arrived in Mali's capital Bamako to take part in mission.

⬇️ **Tunisia Political crisis escalated as President Saïed dissolved parliament after suspended lawmakers defied him in plenary session.** In most direct challenge to Saïed since his July 2021 power grab, suspended parliament 30 March held online plenary session, voted to repeal presidential decrees suspending their chamber and giving Saïed near-total power; Saïed hours later announced dissolution of parliament, denouncing move as "coup attempt"; also accused lawmakers of conspiracy against state security and ordered investigations into them. Earlier in month, thousands 13 March joined opposition Free Destourian Party (FDP) protest in capital Tunis to call for early legislative elections; thousands 20 March rallied around Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party and "Citizens against the Coup" civil society platform in Tunis to commemorate independence anniversary and protest Saïed's power grab. Saïed's online consultation on constitutional reform failed to mobilise massively: only about 500,000 people participated by closing date of 20 March. Saïed next day praised initiative as "success", said results of consultation will feed into constitutional revision. Military courts continued to target civilians, notably sending Abderrazak Kilani, lawyer of An-Nahda Deputy President Nourredine Bhiri, to pre-trial detention 2 March for "disturbing public order" and "insulting public officials" following verbal altercation with police officers in Jan. After dissolution of top judicial watchdog in Feb, temporary Supreme Judicial Council sworn in 7 March; nine of 21 members directly appointed by Saïed. Amid price increases and shortages of basic goods, Saïed 10 March declared "war" on food speculators; several traders and retailers arrested in following days; NGO Amnesty International 25 March said new anti-speculation law, which went into effect 21 March, threatens free speech by criminalising spread of "false or incorrect news". Fitch Ratings agency mid-March downgraded Tunisia's Long-Term Foreign-Currency Issuer Default Rating to "CCC" from "B-". Meanwhile, firefight 20 March erupted between suspected jihadists and police in Kairouan region (centre), leaving no casualties.

➡ **Western Sahara In major policy shift, Spain endorsed Moroccan autonomy plan for Western Sahara, raising tensions with Algeria.** Spanish PM Pedro Sánchez 18 March publicly supported Moroccan autonomy plan for Western Sahara; move, which came after months of suspended diplomatic relations between Spain and Morocco, ends Madrid's longstanding neutral stance on Western Sahara conflict. Algeria next day recalled ambassador to Spain for consultations, condemning Madrid's "abrupt U-turn". Earlier in month, Morocco 2 March avoided participating in UN General Assembly vote to condemn Russian invasion of Ukraine, while Algiers abstained; both countries keen to avoid antagonising Russia, which can

play key role in Western Sahara conflict as veto-wielding permanent member of UN Security Council.