



Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** Largest escalation since Aug 2022 erupted in Gaza between Israel and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ), while deadly violence persisted across West Bank and Israel pursued pro-settler agenda.

Israel launched five-day operation in Gaza. PIJ member Khader Adnan 2 May died in Israeli prison after nearly three-month hunger strike. In response, PIJ same day fired 104 rockets from Gaza into Israel; Israel same day launched airstrikes on Gaza, killing one, before sides 3 May agreed to ceasefire. Israel 9-13 May launched Operation Shield and Arrow in Gaza, killing at least 33 Palestinians, including at least 18 PIJ members, and injuring nearly 200 civilians; notably, Israeli airstrikes 9 May killed three PIJ commanders and at least 12 civilians, including children. PIJ fired over 1,000 rockets, 11 May killed Israeli in Rehovot city. Israel and PIJ 13 May agreed to Egypt-brokered ceasefire. During escalation, Hamas reluctantly supported PIJ but refrained from engaging directly in conflict.

Deadly violence and volatility continued in West Bank and Jerusalem. Israeli forces conducted over 500 raids in West Bank during month, killing at least 19 Palestinians and arresting over 100 amid near-daily gun battles and settler attacks. Notably, Israeli forces 4 May killed at least three Hamas-affiliated gunmen in Nablus. Palestinian militants 30 May killed Israeli in drive-by shooting near Hermesh settlement. Israelis 18 May marched through Jerusalem's Old City to mark Jerusalem Day, as some assaulted Palestinians. Far-right National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir 21 May entered Al-Aqsa compound, declaring Israel "in charge".

Israel advanced pro-settler policies. Far-right Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich 18 May announced plan to double number of settlers in West Bank; army same day signed order allowing Israelis entry into Homesh outpost, paving way for formal settlement. Govt stalled court-ordered eviction of Palestinians living in Khan al-Ahmar amid international pressure but advanced plans to begin construction in E1 zone, which would break up Palestinian territorial contiguity in West Bank. Govt 24 May passed two-year budget, cementing pro-settler agenda. Meanwhile, protests against judicial overhaul continued.

Israel continued strikes in Syria. Notably, Israeli army 24 May said it retaliated against shots fired from Syria at Israeli surveillance drone (see Syria).

➔ **Lebanon** Central Bank and govt unveiled new measures likely to compound economic hardship for citizens, while presidential vacuum continued with no end in sight.

Economic crisis continued. Central Bank 7 May announced it would not renew scheme authorising so-called Sayrafa (Exchange) platform, policy tool bank uses to inject U.S. dollars into circulation, in attempt to slow down devaluation of national currency; exchange nevertheless remained operational amid signs of another sharp currency devaluation looming. Finance ministry 12 May announced that it would raise “customs dollar” – exchange rate used to calculate duty payable on imported goods – to 86,000 LBP to \$1, up from 60,000 LBP, in effect making VAT payable on imported goods four to six times higher than official rate; move will worsen inflation and put further financial strain on households.

Executive vacuum showed few signs of breakthrough. Presidential vacuum entered seventh consecutive month as parliament in May held no election session, reflecting deadlock. Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri 10 May publicly called for new president to be elected before 15 June, indicating that authorities will need to appoint new Central Bank governor when incumbent Riad Salameh’s term ends on 31 July. Suleiman Frangieh – preferred presidential candidate of Shiite parties Hizbollah and Amal – 11 May met with Saudi ambassador to Lebanon; observers argued that Frangieh’s candidacy must overcome opposition from Lebanon’s main Christian parties and perhaps from Riyadh, too. While Frangieh’s backers claimed that meeting indicated Saudi openness to his candidacy, his opponents claimed that Riyadh’s position had not materially changed.

Lebanon failed to hold municipal elections. After parliament in April extended mandates of municipalities and local public officials, due to expire on 31 May, Constitutional Council 30 May dismissed three appeals against mandate extension, citing need to prevent Lebanon’s local institutions from operating in legal vacuum. Postponement of elections will likely contribute to degradation of municipalities and essential services they provide, as elected council members resign, emigrate or pass away. Around 10% of municipalities countrywide are already officially defunct.

➡ **Syria Arab League readmitted Syria after 12-year suspension, Islamic State (ISIS) claimed first attack in capital Damascus since Sept 2021, and Jordan’s first airstrikes since 2015 killed drug kingpin and family.**

Arab League welcomed President Assad’s return. Arab League 7 May reinstated Syria’s membership, following 12-year suspension, after Damascus promised to end captagon trafficking. Syria and Saudi Arabia 9 May announced they would each reopen diplomatic mission in the other’s capital. Assad 18 May arrived in Jeddah in first visit to Saudi Arabia since start of war and next day attended Arab League summit, amid reports of limited refugee return policy being hammered out at gathering. Meanwhile, Turkish, Russian, Syrian and Iranian FMs 10 May met in Russian capital Moscow in highest-level talks since 2011 war.

ISIS activity slowed despite deadly attack in Damascus. ISIS activity in central Syria decreased following high-intensity attacks during truffle harvesting season; regime stepped up anti-ISIS operations in Suwayda province but ceased major operations in eastern Homs. ISIS 10 May claimed IED attack in Damascus, however, killing two police officers, and in first killing of senior officer in a year, ISIS 17 May killed army colonel and several others in Raqqa province.

Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) killed Russian colonel in north west. Idlib's dominant rebel group HTS continued harassing regime forces along north-western front with near-daily lethal sniper attacks, while regime conducted deadly artillery strikes, mainly in Idlib's Jabal al-Zawiyah area. HTS 26 May struck regime headquarters along Latakia front, killing Russian colonel – highest-ranking Russian officer killed by rebel forces since 2016; Russia responded with bombing runs in southern Idlib, first such attacks in six months.

Jordan, Israel, Türkiye and U.S. launched airstrikes. In its first-ever airstrikes on regime-affiliated positions, Jordan 8 May bombed abandoned drug facility in southern Deraa province and killed drug kingpin and his seven-member family in Suwayda province. Israeli missiles 1 May targeted Aleppo airport, killing one soldier (see Israel-Palestine). Türkiye continued drone strikes targeting Kurdistan Workers' Party (see Türkiye). U.S. military 3 May launched airstrike, killing man reportedly mistakenly identified as al-Qaeda member in Idlib province.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➡ Bahrain Govt advanced ties with Qatar and returned its ambassador to Lebanon, while authorities summoned senior Shiite cleric.

Govt continued normalisation with Qatar and returned ambassador to Lebanon. In sign that normalisation proceeds after pair announced resumption of formal relations in April, Bahrain 15 May announced it was resuming flights to and from Qatar starting 25 May. Govt 20 May said it would restore diplomatic representation at ambassador level in Lebanon, after Gulf countries supported Saudi Arabia in withdrawing ambassadors in Oct 2021 following critical comments made by Lebanon's then-information minister about Riyadh's role in war in Yemen.

Authorities detained senior cleric. Police 22 May summoned for interrogation senior Shiite cleric Muhammad Sanqour, as interior ministry accused him of "repeated inflammatory speeches" and "publicly inciting hatred"; during Friday prayers, Sanqour reportedly raised concern about treatment of prisoners. Videos on social media same day showed dozens of protesters expressing solidarity with Sanqour in front of his house. Authorities 25 May released Sanqour.

➡ Iran Govt sought to avoid censure vote ahead of nuclear watchdog meeting in June, while maritime tensions continued and West condemned gov't support for Russia and execution of dual national.

Iran claimed progress on nuclear concerns ahead of key meeting in June. With International Atomic Energy Agency's (IAEA) Board of Governors meeting set for 5 June, Iranian media 30 May reported progress between gov't and UN watchdog over safeguards concerns; IAEA did not confirm claims, while its forthcoming quarterly report could determine prospect of U.S. and European states introducing censure resolution at meeting. Israeli military's chief of staff 23 May said Iran's uranium enrichment is more advanced than ever, warning "there are possible negative developments on the horizon that could lead to action". Iran 25 May successfully test-launched ballistic missile with potential 2,000km range.

Maritime tensions persisted. After U.S. late April reported that Iran's navy had seized Marshall Islands-flagged tanker in Gulf of Oman, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps 3 May detained another tanker sailing from Dubai to Fujairah in Strait of Hormuz. U.S. 12 May announced that it would increase presence of ships and aircraft with allies in Strait of Hormuz, adding that its Fifth Fleet would deepen cooperation with two parallel maritime security initiatives operating in area.

U.S. condemned Iran's support for Russia. U.S. 15 May indicated that it would "continue to impose costs" on those involved in sending equipment to Russia and 19 May sanctioned four entities linked to Iran-Russia maritime transfers. Canada 3 May designated ten Iranian individuals and entities, four connected to drone manufacturer and six over human rights concerns. European Union (EU) 22 May adopted eighth set of designations over human rights violations since anti-govt protests began in Sept 2022.

Iran executed dual national and three citizens, sparking condemnation. Authorities 6 May executed Habib Chaab, dual Swedish-Iranian national who had been sentenced to death on charges of involvement with separatist group, triggering condemnation from Sweden, U.S. and EU. Authorities 19 May executed three men sentenced to death in connection with their alleged involvement in killing three security personnel in Isfahan city during nationwide protests in Nov 2022.

➡ **Iraq Tensions eased between rival Kurdish parties following months-long feud, dispute between Erbil and Baghdad stalled federal budget, and violence broke out in centre and south.**

Rival Kurdish factions struck accord, as Türkiye continued strikes. U.S. delegation 3-4 May visited Erbil and Sulaymaniyah cities with aim of "bridging divisions". Kurdistan PM and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masrour Barzani 8 May met Kurdistan Deputy PM and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) leader Qubad Talabani for first time since tensions between parties spiked over assassination of intelligence officer in Oct 2022 that KDP blamed on PUK; leaders agreed to stop verbal attacks in media ahead of Nov regional elections. PUK 14 May ended its six-month boycott of regional govt's cabinet meetings. In Ninewa governorate, Turkish drone strike 16 May killed three PKK-affiliated Sinjar Resistance Units (YBS) fighters in Khanasor town and 23 May killed three in Khalaf village.

Erbil accused Baghdad of breaking oil deal, delaying federal budget. Federal parliament's finance committee 25 May made series of amendments to draft 2023 budget articles related to Kurdistan's oil revenue; Erbil next day condemned amendments as "unconstitutional" and contrary to previous agreement struck with federal govt. Dispute indefinitely postponed parliamentary vote on three-year budget bill scheduled for 27 May, as talks to resolve differences continued.

Centre and south witnessed violence, amid low-scale Islamic State (ISIS) insurgency. In Salah al-Din governorate, fighting between families 1 May reportedly killed three, including police colonel and Popular Mobilisation Forces member, in Albu Nassif village. In Dhi Qar governorate, security forces 20 May reportedly intervened in exchange of gunfire between Al-Awwad and Al-Sayed Taher clans in Al-Shatrah district. Meanwhile, army 5 May said it killed three alleged ISIS members in Wadi al-Shay in Kirkuk governorate. Alleged ISIS gunmen 21 May killed two in Tarmiya district, Salah al-Din governorate.

In other important developments. Protesters 1, 5 May filled Tahrir Square in capital Baghdad, demanding higher public-sector salaries. Demonstrators demanding employment 21 May clashed with security forces in Dhi Qar governorate, leaving 32 injured. Iran 13 May summoned Iraq's ambassador to protest presence of "terrorist" groups, likely Kurdish, in Iraq's Kurdistan region.

➔ **Saudi Arabia Kingdom reestablished ties with Syria and welcomed President Assad back into Arab fold, while continuing rapprochement with Iran.**

Riyadh resumed relations with Damascus, continued normalisation with Iran. After Arab League 7 May readmitted Syria, Saudi Arabia 9 May announced it would reopen diplomatic mission in Syrian capital Damascus and next day invited Syrian President Assad to Arab League summit in capital Riyadh. Assad 18 May arrived in Jeddah and next day attended Arab League summit after 12-year suspension (see Syria). Meanwhile, Iranian foreign ministry 1 May announced initial diplomatic activities had resumed at Iranian embassy in Riyadh. Iranian FM Hossein Amir-Abdollahian 10 May said Saudi Arabia previous day named new ambassador to Tehran and Iran would appoint ambassador to Riyadh "soon", as 10 May deadline passed without officially reopening embassies and appointing ambassadors. Iranian finance minister 11 May led economic delegation to Jeddah in first visit by Iranian official since March agreement to resume ties. Saudi Arabia and Canada 24 May agreed to restore full diplomatic relations after five years.

In other important developments. Negotiations with Huthis in Yemen stalled (see Yemen). Jeddah hosted joint U.S.-Saudi-led talks beginning 6 May between Sudan's warring parties (see Sudan). In sign of improving ties, U.S. National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan 7 May met Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman in Jeddah to discuss "strategic relations" and "significant progress" in Yemen war. Amnesty International 16 May said number of executions in Saudi Arabia in 2022 was highest recorded in 30 years.

➔ **Yemen Hopes of breakthrough deal between Saudi Arabia and Huthis dwindled, while southern separatists demanded independent state and factions jockeyed for control of Hadramawt province.**

Huthi-Saudi talks stalled. After Saudi diplomatic visit in April raised expectation of breakthrough, Huthis refused to sign Saudi-proposed roadmap or deal with Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), and refused to provide guarantees to enter intra-Yemen talks; Huthis reportedly demanded Riyadh pay reparations for war. UN Envoy Hans Grundberg 2-3 May visited capital Sanaa and held "constructive" meeting with Huthi leaders; 3 May travelled to Aden for "fruitful" discussion with PLC head al-Alimi. Grundberg 17 May briefed UN Security Council, noting "clear determination on all sides to make progress" toward peace deal despite violence along front lines, particularly in al-Jawf, Marib, Taiz and Saada governorates.

Southern Transitional Council (STC) made bid for leadership in south. In attempt to build consensus among southern groups on secession and position itself as main force in south ahead of anticipated intra-Yemeni talks, STC 4-8 May convened Southern National Consultative Meeting, which 8 May produced "national charter" calling for "restoration of the state of the south"; several important groups, notably Hadramawt Inclusive Conference and National Conference for the People of the

South, refused to attend, stating opposition to STC's expansionist agenda. STC 8 May announced council's restructuring, including creation of legislative body of 392 members. STC President and PLC Vice President Ayderous al-Zubaidi 9 May appointed three new STC vice presidents.

Tensions persisted in Hadramawt, UN proceeded to salvage FSO Safer. Amid STC threats to take over Wadi Hadramawt – northern valley of Hadramawt controlled by Saudi-aligned Islah forces – Saudi-led delegation 5-6 May met Hadramawt and Shebwa governors as part of Saudi strategy to challenge STC's power and deploy Nation's Shield Forces headed by al-Alimi. PLC 22 May met Saudi defence minister in Riyadh, where council members criticised STC's moves in Hadramawt. UN 4 May fell short of funding target to salvage stranded oil tanker *FSO Safer* but planned to begin rescue operation.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** Under international spotlight for increasing press freedom violations, authorities rekindled anti-Islamist rhetoric.

Algiers rekindled anti-Islamist rhetoric. Former leader of outlawed Islamist party Islamic Salvation Front, Ali Belhaj, 1 May announced he was placed under judicial supervision after he spoke to London-based Al-Magharibia TV, which is financed by Islamist movement Rachad (classified as a terrorist organisation by Algiers). In editorial, army's official magazine *El Djeich* 8 May emphasised army's commitment to combat alleged "despicable attempts" by violent extremists to plunge country back into terror. Military 10 May reportedly detained four suspected Islamist militants in Tissemsilt region (south west of capital Algiers) during operation which left army officer dead.

EU parliament condemned crackdown on media freedom. European Parliament 11 May adopted resolution calling for "immediate release" of all those detained in Algeria for exercising their right to freedom of expression, including prominent journalist Ihsane El-Kadi – who was sentenced in April to five years in prison on charges of receiving foreign funding for political propaganda and to harm state security; resolution also urged govt to bring laws limiting freedom of expression in line with international human rights standards. Algiers in following days rejected resolution as "blatant interference".

In other important developments. Authorities 23 May arrested prominent member of Hirak protest movement Karim Tabbou in Algiers on undisclosed charges; Tabbou released two days later under judicial supervision.

➔ **Egypt** Scepticism persisted about Cairo's ability to make economic reforms and avoid default, while national dialogue kicked off amid harassment of regime critics.

Cairo made limited progress on asset sales. After long stalemate, govt from late April made limited progress in selling state-owned assets, key step in securing foreign revenues and meeting external debt liabilities. Notably, finance ministry 14 May announced sale of 9.5% stake of state-owned Telecom Egypt, which raised around \$120mn; how much went to foreign investors remained unclear. Meanwhile, rating

agency Fitch 5 May downgraded Egypt's long-term foreign-currency issuer default rating from B+ to B. Finance Minister Mohamed Maait 9-10 May addressed parliament on 2023-2024 draft budget, which allocates 56% of total spending to debt servicing and anticipates that new borrowing will represent 49% of total revenues, suggesting that Cairo expects to meet almost all of its current foreign liabilities through borrowing.

National dialogue kicked off amid opposition mistrust. National dialogue between govt and opposition representatives 14 May began after months-long preparations. Some opposition parties, including Socialist Popular Alliance Party, boycotted dialogue, citing authorities' failure to meet preconditions, particularly release of political prisoners. Meanwhile, crackdown on dissent continued. Notably, prominent critic of President Sisi, Ahmed Tantawi, who fled country in 2022, delayed return planned for 6 May after authorities 5 May detained several of his relatives and supporters on terrorism-related charges; Tantawi 11 May eventually arrived in Egypt after release of two family members, vowed to run for president in 2024.

Conflict in Sudan led to border chaos. Thousands of people fleeing conflict in Sudan in May reportedly remained stranded for days at Sudan-Egypt border. Sisi 27 May said Egypt has received 150,000 Sudanese citizens since 15 April.

↓ **Libya** **Violence broke out in west as efforts to form new executive heightened political tensions, all the while undermining UN moves to organise elections in late 2023.**

Eastern-based PM Bashagha dismissed amid negotiations for unified executive. Eastern-based House of Representatives (HoR) 16 May suspended PM Bashagha as head of HoR-backed govt citing allegations of financial irregularities, and appointed finance minister and close ally of eastern army commander Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, Osama Hammad, as interim PM. Haftar's sons and heads of militias close to rival Tripoli-based PM Dabaiba in May met in Egypt's capital Cairo to forge deal on new unity govt that would leave Dabaiba in place, while conceding some ministries to Haftar affiliates; some MPs are opposed to this plan, however, and want Dabaiba removed. Meanwhile, as part of UN-backed efforts to hold presidential and legislative elections by year's end, 6+6 joint committee – composed of HoR and rival Tripoli-based High State Council representatives – 23 May announced breakthrough on number of issues related to elections but conditioned further steps on agreement on new govt.

Political tensions fuelled violence between armed groups in Zawiyah city. Clashes between rival militias who battle for influence and control of trafficking routes 21-24 April left at least four civilians dead in Zawiyah city (west). Renewed clashes 11 May erupted, reportedly leaving two people dead. Precarious calm in following days prevailed following mediation by notables and community leaders, but tensions rose again after Tripoli-based govt 25 May ordered drone strikes on militia-held buildings in Zawiyah, targeting factions close to MPs who want to dislodge Dabaiba. Fresh drone strikes in Maya port outside Zawiyah 29 May killed two and wounded nephew of HoR MP Ali Bouzriba; HoR immediately condemned attack, and armed group close to Bouzriba same day closed off gas pipeline to local electricity plant in retaliation.

Concerns persisted over fallout of conflict in Sudan. State-owned National Oil Corporation 1 May denied media reports that it delivered oil from Sarir refinery to Mohamed “Hemedti” Hamdan Dagalo’s paramilitary Rapid Support Forces in Sudan, however locals claimed fuel smuggling from south-eastern Libya toward Sudanese border continued.

➡ **Tunisia** **Attack at Jewish pilgrimage site left several dead, while renewed violence erupted against sub-Saharan migrants; court sentenced most prominent opposition leader to prison.**

Gunman killed four in attack on El Ghriba synagogue. National guard member 9 May opened fire upon worshippers attending annual Jewish pilgrimage at El Ghriba synagogue on Djerba island, killing two security personnel, two civilians and wounding a dozen others before security forces shot him dead; assailant earlier same day also killed colleague. Interior Minister Kamel Fekih 11 May said targeting of synagogue was premeditated, but referred to it as a “criminal” rather than terrorist act, meaning regular judiciary will carry out investigation.

Violence against migrants turned deadly. Armed individuals around 22 May attacked 19 sub-Saharan migrants near Sfax city, killing Beninese man and injuring at least four others; authorities in following days arrested three Tunisian nationals in relation to case and opened judicial enquiry. Over 20 rights organisations 29 May condemned “context of uninterrupted speeches of incitement, hatred and racism against migrants from sub-Saharan Africa” since President Saïed in Feb linked migrants to violence and criminality.

Judicial harassment of govt critics continued unabated. Authorities 6 May arrested Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party official Sahbi Atig, notably on allegations of money laundering and illegal possession of currency. Anti-terrorism court in capital Tunis 15 May sentenced Saïed’s most prominent critic, An-Nahda president and founder Rached Ghannouchi (who has been in preventive detention since April), to one year in prison on terrorism-related charges. Appeals court in Tunis 16 May increased prison sentence for journalist Khalifa Guesmi from one to five years on charges of disclosing national security information. Journalists 18 May held sit-in protest near Tunisian Journalists’ Union headquarters in Tunis to denounce “one of the heaviest sentences in the Tunisian media’s history” and “dramatic escalation in the persecution of the media and journalists”.

➡ **Western Sahara** **U.S. govt held meetings with Moroccan and Algerian officials on Western Sahara, highlighting Washington’s efforts to inject momentum into UN attempts to resume peace talks.**

U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken and Moroccan FM Nasser Bourita 14 May held phone conversation on Western Sahara and other matters. Call readout mentioned U.S. support for UN Envoy Staffan de Mistura’s efforts to intensify “UN process on Western Sahara toward an enduring and dignified political solution”; readout however lacked usual reference to Washington’s support for Rabat’s autonomy plan as U.S. pressures Morocco to soften its position and resume talks with Polisario Front independence movement. U.S. Ambassador to Algeria Elizabeth Moore Aubin mid-May met with Algerian Foreign Affairs Ministry’s Sec Gen Amar Belani in Algiers; Algerian foreign affairs ministry said two sides agreed on “importance of supporting” UN envoy’s efforts to resume negotiations over Western Sahara.