



Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

↓ 🌐 **Israel-Palestine** Gaza faced “imminent famine” as Israel targeted and restricted aid and reiterated threat to invade Rafah amid stalled ceasefire talks; Israel intensified crackdown on West Bank and clashed with Hizbollah in north.

Amid imminent famine in Gaza, Israel killed thousands more and restricted aid. Israel continued its war, killing at least 32,700 since Oct and displacing two million; UNRWA head 13 March reported 12,300 of those killed were children, a higher toll than all children killed in conflict worldwide from 2019-2022. Integrated Food Security Phase Classification (IPC) 18 March warned “famine is imminent as 1.1 million people, half of Gaza, experience catastrophic food insecurity”. Israel continuously blocked and restricted aid supplies in March, as starvation/dehydration killed at least 27 children in northern Gaza, and Israeli forces mid-March killed dozens of Palestinians waiting for aid delivery in Gaza city. Israel 24 March banned UNRWA food aid deliveries to north. Meanwhile, Israeli PM Netanyahu repeatedly reiterated intention to invade Rafah, currently sheltering 1.5 million Palestinians, to eliminate remaining Hamas forces despite U.S. opposition; Israeli forces 18 March for second time besieged al-Shifa hospital, where over 30,000 have sought shelter, claiming Hamas re-organised itself there; following Israeli withdrawal, reports of alleged atrocities surfaced. Ceasefire negotiations continued. Hamas 15 March reiterated demand for 40-day ceasefire leading to end of hostilities, withdrawal of Israeli troops and detainee exchange, which Israel rejected as “unrealistic”. Stop-start talks thereafter continued, offering hope deal could avert Rafah offensive. UN Security Council 25 March called for “immediate ceasefire” during Ramadan; Israel rebuked U.S. for its abstention.

Israel ramped up crackdown in West Bank and East Jerusalem. Settler violence remained high, while Israel deployed around 15,000 additional soldiers to West Bank during Ramadan and intensified crackdown on Muslim worshippers in East Jerusalem. Israeli forces continued raids, killing at least 434 since 7 Oct; notably, Israeli drone strike 20 March killed four in Jenin refugee camp.

Internal divisions wracked Israeli govt. Israel’s war cabinet remained paralysed as signs of instability in PM Netanyahu’s coalition grew, including over looming military conscription law requiring ultra-Orthodox Jews to serve.

Israel-Hizbollah attacks escalated. Israel expanded attacks against Hizbollah deeper into Lebanese territory, highlighting risk of expanded war (see Lebanon).

➡ **Jordan** Thousands of protestors in capital Amman rallied in support of Palestine amid Israel's onslaught in Gaza.

Thousands of pro-Palestine protestors beginning 23 March gathered in capital Amman in front of Israeli embassy, demanding abrogation of 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty, expressing support for Hamas and condemning Israel's assault on hospitals in Gaza (see Israel-Palestine). As protestors 25 March breached security cordon, riot police dispersed crowds with tear gas and struck demonstrators with batons, and arrested at least 200. Demonstrations continued in following days.

➡ **Lebanon** Cross-border strikes between Hizbollah and Israel persisted as Israel sought to secure Hizbollah's retreat from border, while tensions during Ramadan in April risk triggering expanded conflict.

Israel continued strikes deep inside Lebanese territory. Lebanon continued to face spectre of all-out war as Israel and Hizbollah engaged in cross-border hostilities amid Israel's ongoing military campaign in Gaza (see Israel-Palestine). Following first on 26 Feb, Israel 11, 12 and 24-26 March continued to expand strikes to eastern Lebanon, which hosts several key communities aligned with Hizbollah and has not witnessed such attacks since 2006 war. In retaliation, Hizbollah 12 March launched over 100 rockets into northern Israel, and further major missile salvos in response to subsequent Israeli attacks. Israeli drone strike 13 March killed Hamas member outside Tyre city – major urban centre in south. Israeli air strike 26 March killed seven rescue workers, prompting UN peacekeeping force UNIFIL to express “deep concern” over escalating conflict. Israel 31 March killed senior Hizbollah commander, Ismail al-Zin, in Kounine village. Growing severity of strikes, as well as increasing proximity to (and killing of) civilians, risk propelling Hizbollah and Israel towards an open-ended, disastrous war – even though both sides have at times taken clear steps since Oct to avoid massive escalation. Various diplomatic missions continue to seek to find terms for settlement between parties, but Hizbollah repeatedly asserted it will not entertain discussions until ceasefire is reached in Gaza. Further heightening conflict risk, Ramadan – which ends in mid-April – could see rising tensions between Palestinians and Israel, including at Jerusalem's Holy Esplanade, which could provoke further violent actions by Hizbollah or Palestinian armed groups in Lebanon.

Economic crisis and presidential vacuum continued. Amid severe economic hardship, govt struggled to secure funding for its national emergency plan to deal with consequences of spillover from Hamas-Israel war, including providing shelter and supplies for displaced people. Presidential vacuum that has prevailed since 1 Nov 2022 continued with little apparent prospect of resolution as parliament did not hold presidential election session, reflecting deadlock between political factions. Army 11 March claimed it had rescued twenty refugees from sinking boat off coast of Tripoli city.

➡ **Syria** Tit-for-tat strikes continued between Iran-backed groups and Israel, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) continued to battle regime in north west and Türkiye signalled potential operation in north.

In south, Iran-aligned forces and Israel exchanged attacks. Notably, Israeli airstrike 1 March killed three, including Iranian adviser in Banias town, Tartous

province. Missiles from Nawa town, Deraa province 16, 17 March targeted Israeli-occupied Golan Heights; Israeli retaliatory strikes 17, 19 March struck targets near capital Damascus. Israel stepped up attacks late March: airstrike 26 March killed seventeen, including advisor of Iran's Revolutionary Guards and Iranian-backed fighters, in Deir ez-Zor and Al-Bukamal; Israel 29 March killed dozens of Hizbollah and regime soldiers in Aleppo province. After hiatus since mid-Feb, Iranian-backed groups 26 March resumed attacks on U.S. forces by launching drone at base at Conoco gas field.

In north west, deadly clashes between HTS and regime continued. Notably, regime 7 March launched thirteen drones at HTS positions, killing civilian and HTS member near Darat Izza; HTS ambush 17 March killed two regime soldiers in western Aleppo governorate. Meanwhile, protests against HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Golani late Feb erupted across Idlib and Aleppo provinces, sparked by reports of torture in HTS prisons. HTS 5 March opened fire on protestors in Darat Izza town, Aleppo province. HTS-backed Syrian Salvation Govt next day released 420 detainees.

In north east, Türkiye threatened new invasion. Turkish President Erdoğan 4 March vowed to launch new operation in Iraq and northern Syria to implement 30-40 km deep security corridor along border. Signs of intra-Kurdish tensions re-emerged after assailants 1-11 March burnt offices of Kurdish National Council (KNC), part of Turkish-backed Syrian National Coalition, in Aleppo and Hasakah provinces; KNC blamed reported Democratic Union Party (PYD)-affiliate, Revolutionary Youth movement.

In east, tribal militias and SDF clashed. Tribal militias, backed by regime and Iran, intensified attacks on SDF; attack 15 March killed SDF member in Diban town, Deir ez-Zor province. Unidentified drones 6 March killed three Iran-backed forces near al-Mayadeen town, Deir ez-Zor. Islamic State (ISIS) attack 6 March reportedly killed eighteen truffle foragers in Deir ez-Zor province.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Iran International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) expressed concern over growth and opacity of Iran's nuclear activity, as regional tensions between Iran-backed groups and U.S. ebbed in Iraq and Syria but remained in Red Sea.**

Nuclear watchdog, U.S. and European states spotlighted Iran's nuclear program. IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi 4 March told first Board of Governors meeting of 2024 "Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium continues to increase, even though level of uranium enriched to 60% has fallen slightly", further noting that IAEA had "lost continuity of knowledge" on key components in nuclear infrastructure, and expressed frustration at lack of "progress in resolving the outstanding safeguards issues". U.S. and E3 (UK, France and Germany) 6-7 March raised series of related concerns. U.S. intelligence community's annual threat assessment 11 March asserted "Iran is not currently undertaking the key nuclear weapons-development activities necessary to produce a testable nuclear device".

Anti-U.S. attacks largely halted in Iraq and Syria, Houthis continued strikes on shipping. Lull in attacks on U.S. forces by Iran-backed groups in Iraq and Syria since

early Feb appeared to largely hold in March, with exception of drone late March targeting U.S. forces in Syria, while Houthis in Yemen continued attacks in Red Sea/Gulf of Aden (see Iraq, Syria and Yemen). Amid tit-for-tat attacks between Iran-backed groups and Israel in Syria, Iran 26 March confirmed death of IRGC “military advisor” in Syria during alleged Israeli strikes. Meanwhile, U.S. sanctioned numerous Iranian/Iran-linked entities. Notably, U.S. 6 March designated four entities and vessels for their role in Qods Force-linked network supporting Houthis. U.S. 26 March sanctioned nine entities, individual and tankers for “facilitating commodity shipments and financial transactions for the IRGC-Qods Force, the Houthis and Hizbollah”. G7 statement 15 March warned “we are prepared to respond swiftly” were Iran to provide ballistic missiles to Russia, including “with new and significant measures”.

Elections saw record low turnout. Iran 1 March held elections for parliament and Assembly of Experts with 41% turnout, a record low for legislative races since 1979. Substantial vetting of candidates meant outcome was dominated by conservatives, who have tightened their grip over parliament and body to select Supreme Leader.

➡ **Iraq Tensions mounted between Baghdad and Erbil as Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) announced regional election boycott, while Türkiye struck Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK); lull in attacks by Iran-backed groups persisted.**

Relations between Baghdad and Erbil remained under stress. KDP 18 March announced boycott of Kurdistan’s June parliamentary elections over Federal Supreme Court ruling in Feb to annul minority seats in parliament, most of which are allocated to KDP-dominated areas; minority Christian and Turkmen parties also announced boycott. KDP’s decision may have also been motivated by Supreme Court mandating Baghdad to centrally disburse Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) employee salaries. In sign of deteriorating ties, KRG PM Barzani’s deputy chief of staff 18 March said KDP was considering “outright exit from Iraq’s political process”.

Govt banned PKK to boost ties with Türkiye, which continued attacks on group. Ahead of expected visit by Turkish President Erdoğan in April – which would mark his first visit in over twelve years – high-level Turkish delegation led by FM Fidan 14-15 March visited Iraqi capital Baghdad and jointly met senior ministers, chairman of Hashd al-Shaabi, and KRG interior minister. Meeting established joint permanent commission on counterterrorism, water governance, trade and transportation, and Baghdad also designated PKK as “banned organisation”. Signalling possible escalation of anti-PKK campaign in coming months, Erdoğan 18 March announced that Iraqi border would be entirely secured by summer. Meanwhile, Turkish airstrike 8 March reportedly killed two civilians in Duhok governorate. Turkish security forces 4 and 19 March announced killing of two of PKK’s “youth leaders” in Sulaymaniyah governorate, while clashes with PKK 19 March killed Turkish soldier; Türkiye same day responded with round of airstrikes in Kurdistan. Türkiye 23 March “neutralised” twelve PKK members in Metina region (see Türkiye).

Iran-backed Iraqi groups refrained from attacking U.S. Pressure from Iran and Iraqi govt appeared to prevent attacks by Iran-backed groups on U.S. assets, continuing lull since early Feb; hiatus could end, however, with potential Israeli

offensive in Gaza's Rafah (see Israel-Palestine). Islamic Resistance in Iraq 1, 5, 6, 11, 20 March claimed launching drones at Israeli targets.

➔ **Saudi Arabia** **Saudi Arabia pursued diplomatic efforts to end Gaza war, while U.S.-Saudi talks on normalisation with Israel reportedly continued.**

Jeddah city 5 March hosted second Organisation of Islamic Cooperation meeting since Gaza war as Riyadh continued to lead coordination of "Arab contact group" comprising Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, and Palestinian Authority to work towards plans for so-called "day after" Gaza war. King Salman Humanitarian Aid and Relief Center 20 March pledged additional \$40mn for UN Relief Agency for Palestinians (UNRWA). Meanwhile, senior Saudi and U.S. officials reportedly continued talks on Saudi-Israeli normalisation of relations, as U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 21 March said sides made "good progress"; Riyadh reportedly wants unilateral recognition of Palestinian state by U.S. or European states and U.S. security guarantees, both of which remain unlikely in current political climate.

➔ **Yemen** **Houthis caused first fatalities in attacks on international shipping amid ongoing U.S-UK airstrikes; Houthi bombing in al-Bayda killed civilians, sparking protests, while local mediation sought to reopen roads.**

In Gulf of Aden, Houthi attacks caused first fatalities as group vowed wider strikes. In Red Sea and Gulf of Aden, Houthis continued attacks targeting merchant vessels as well as U.S. and UK warships, 5 March vowing more "painful" attacks and 14 March announcing targeting of shipping in Indian Ocean. Notably, Houthi missile strike 6 March killed three crew members on Barbados-flagged ship in Gulf of Aden. U.S. and UK continued strikes on Houthi targets; notably, 11 March conducted six airstrikes and 27 March struck Saada province. In rare engagement, Houthi and Hamas representatives 15 March met in Lebanon's capital Beirut to discuss coordinating actions in Red Sea, while reports circulated of secret U.S.-Iran talks held in Jan in Oman's capital Muscat to de-escalate Houthi attacks. EU naval mission in Red Sea began operations: notably, Italian destroyer 2 and 12 March intercepted Houthi attacks. Houthis 19 March announced launching missiles at Israeli city Eilat, which for first time hit open ground near city. Bloomberg 21 March reported that China and Russia agreed safe passage for their ships through Red Sea in exchange for "political support" for Houthis.

Houthi bombing in centre tarnished growing popularity. Houthis 19 March bombed residential buildings in Radea district, al-Bayda governorate, allegedly in retaliation for ambush, reportedly killing twelve and sparking protests. Houthi-run Interior Ministry next day condemned bombing as individual act; attack negatively impacted Houthis' popularity for their stance on Gaza war, and may provoke tribal retaliation.

Local bid to open roads during Ramadan made modest progress. In sign of growing public dissatisfaction with roads closed since 2015, media, tribal leaders and activists called for reopening of roads during Muslim holy month Ramadan. After Marib governor late Feb opened Marib-Sana'a road and called on Houthis to do same, Houthis refused, suggesting opening Sana'a-Khwalan-Marib road instead. Renewed

clashes 12 March suspended mediation between Houthis and Southern Transitional Council to reopen al-Dhale-Ibb road.

North Africa

➔ Algeria President Tebboune announced early elections to be held in Sept as diplomatic ties with Morocco further deteriorated.

Early presidential elections announced for Sept. President Tebboune 21 March announced presidential elections to be held on 7 Sept, three months ahead of schedule, providing no immediate explanation for rescheduling. Tebboune has not officially announced re-election bid, but is likely to run for second term if his health allows, having secured army support. Unexpected rescheduling of elections raised questions among electorate.

Morocco announced plan to confiscate Algerian embassy properties in Rabat. Morocco 13 March issued decree ordering expropriation of Algerian embassy buildings in Morocco's capital Rabat amid deteriorating relations between neighbouring countries over Western Sahara question. Algerian foreign ministry decried Moroccan "provocations" and vowed to retaliate against Rabat's plan to use confiscated Algerian properties to expand administrative buildings of Moroccan foreign ministry.

Algerian Hirak movement activist fined and given suspended sentence. Algerian court 13 March issued six-month suspended sentence and 50,000 dinar (\$372) fine to prominent pro-democracy activist Karim Tabbou. Sentence is part of broader campaign of harassment of pro-democracy Hirak movement.

➔ Egypt Cairo continued to warn Israel against a possible ground invasion in Rafah and secured major financial deals with IMF, EU and World Bank.

Egypt pursued high-level diplomacy to prevent attack on Gaza's Rafah city. President Sisi 13 March met Dutch PM Mark Rutte, in subsequent press conference warned Israel against launching ground invasion in Rafah, said it would threaten lives of more than a million Palestinians; 15 March, said that Egypt was working to reach ceasefire in Gaza, increase aid and allow for displaced people to return home. While threat of immediate invasion of Rafah seems to have temporarily receded, despite Israel's repeated warnings that it might soon happen, authorities continue to worry about potential consequences of all-out attack for domestic stability and Sinai, due to possible forced displacement of Palestinian refugees.

Major financial foreign deals helped stabilise economic outlook. PM Mostafa Madbouly 6 March unveiled a new deal with International Monetary Fund (IMF), which agreed to \$8 billion loan, in return for floating currency, spending cuts and levelling playing field between public and private sector firms. Announcement took place on same day as authorities let Egyptian pound float, triggering devaluation of official exchange rate from around 30 to the dollar to around 50 to the dollar. European delegation led by Ursula von der Leyen 17 March visited capital Cairo, presented EU financial support package worth \$7.4 billion to support country's green and digital transitions, investment in various other areas and, most

importantly, migration control. World Bank 18 March confirmed deblocking \$6 billion lending package to support country. Ratings agency S&P next day upgraded Egypt outlook from stable to positive.

In other important developments. Egyptian Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry 5 March met Somali Foreign Minister Ali Mohamed Omar in Cairo, re-affirmed Egypt's support for Somalia's stance against Ethiopia's deal with Somaliland on red sea access. Shoukry 18 March met with U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan Tom Perriello in Cairo, highlighted country's diplomatic efforts through neighbouring countries and other channels to promote de-escalation, secure sustainable ceasefire, and support Sudan's unity.

➔ **Libya Amid poor economic outlook and stalled political process, new feud emerged about currency depreciation.**

Political process remained deadlocked despite nominal pledges to unify country. During meeting in Saudi Arabia's capital Riyadh, foreign ministers of member countries of Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) 3 March expressed "support for the efforts of the United Nations to reach a political solution, hold elections and unify state institutions" in Libya. Libya's Parliament Speaker Aghela Saleh, head of Presidential Council Mohamed Mnefi, and head of Tripoli-based High State Council Mohamed Tekkala 10 March met in Egypt's capital Cairo under Arab League aegis, agreed to form "technical committee" to resolve contentious points of electoral legislation. Despite pledges to break deadlock, UN envoy's efforts to resolve disagreements in draft electoral laws and address contentious issue of appointing new interim government stalled.

Move to depreciate currency sparked political recriminations. In wake of rising foreign currency exchange rate on black market, Parliament speaker Aghila Saleh 14 March issued decree imposing 27% tax (labelled as fee) on foreign currency exchange, stating this was a means to raise money for "development projects and debt". Move faced opposition in parliament, with deputy parliament speaker Fawzi Nuweiri 15 March declaring he opposed what amounts to devaluation of currency. In televised speech PM Abdul Dabaiba 18 March also rejected proposed tax on foreign currency exchange, claiming that Libya's economy is strong with a surplus, low inflation, and high foreign reserves; accused Central Bank of mismanagement and blamed Speaker of Parliament for trying to cover costs of Khalifa Haftar's spending in eastern Libya through tax. Central Bank 19 March, however, ordered banks to comply with imposition of tax on foreign currency purchases.

➔ **Tunisia Thousands protested against deteriorating economic situation, authorities continued preparations for Oct presidential elections, and EU increased support toward migration control.**

Protestors rallied against worsening economic and social situation in Tunis. Nearly 2,000 people 3 March demonstrated in capital Tunis to protest against deteriorating social and economic outlook, in show of force organised by Tunisian General Labour Union (UGTT). Several trade unionists claimed that break between UGTT and President Saïed's regime is far from complete; UGTT move may be bid to extract concessions from Saïed in run-up to Oct presidential elections, in particular to obtain pay rises in public sector. Following Feb local elections, 279 local councils held their first meeting on 1 March; councils next day designated members of regional councils

in each governorate. A national council comprising members of regional councils is due to be set up shortly; although its prerogatives are not legally clear, it will likely deal with economic and development issues.

Crackdown on dissent continued in lead-up to Oct elections. Mondher Zenaïdi, a former minister under former President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali in the 2000s, 6 March published a Facebook post criticising Saïed's record and implying that he would run in Oct presidential elections; judiciary two days later issued international arrest warrant against him in connection with corruption case linked to privatisation operation in 2005. Independent High Authority for Election and Central Electoral Commission for Russia 15 March signed a memorandum of cooperation in Russia's capital Moscow; cooperation officially aims at establishing joint cooperation to support electoral processes.

Migrants continued to flee Tunisia by boat, EU stepped up migration support. Media reports 15 March revealed 34 migrants reported missing off the south-eastern coast of Tunisia, 34 others rescued, and two found dead. European Commission 14 March disbursed 150mn euros in budgetary support for Tunisia to improve migration control, even though Tunis failed to meet EU's own eligibility criteria.

➔ **Western Sahara Expert opinion recommending EU court to cancel partnership deal over Western Sahara dealt blow to Morocco; Polisario threatened to sue Spain over possible airspace management transfer.**

EU legal adviser backed cancellation of Morocco-EU partnership agreement over Western Sahara. Advocate General for EU Court of Justice Tamara Čápetá 21 March recommended court to cancel 2019 EU Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement with Morocco as agreement failed "to treat territory of Western Sahara as 'separate and distinct' from Morocco". Čápetá highlighted that agreement should treat Western Sahara as separate territory from Morocco, also recommended that EU negotiates with Morocco (and not necessarily with Polisario Front) as "administering power" on behalf of local population. Overall, she recommended case be sent to lower court for further discussion. Court of Justice will issue ruling based on this recommendation in coming weeks.

Polisario threatened legal action against Spain over airspace management transfer. Polisario front representative in Switzerland's Geneva city 10 March threatened to sue Spain before international judicial bodies if it goes ahead with plans to transfer management of Western Sahara airspace to Morocco.