

# Middle East and North Africa

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## Eastern Mediterranean

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➔ **Israel-Palestine** Low-level violence continued between Israel and Palestinians in Gaza, new Fatah-dominated Palestinian Authority (PA) cabinet took office and Israeli PM Netanyahu, after resounding win in legislative polls, began negotiations to form right-wing coalition. In Gaza, after Israel and Hamas recommitted to cease-fire and previous agreements late March, Israeli army forcibly suppressed Palestinian protests at Gaza-Israel fence area 12 April killing one protester, and in response to Palestinian shots 20 April struck Hamas target in Gaza, no casualties reported. In West Bank, Palestinian Authority (PA) PM Shtayyeh's new cabinet – composed predominantly of members of President Abbas's Fatah – took office 13 April. During cabinet's first session, Abbas 15 April announced new Fatah delegation for reconciliation talks with Hamas in Cairo; FM Malki same day declared PA's readiness to engage in peace talks with Israel if under Russian and international auspices, rather than that of U.S. Israeli settlers 3 April killed Palestinian man, after attempted stabbing; Israeli security forces 16 April arrested five men for "hostile activities"; 24 April destroyed home of teenager suspected to have carried out deadly attack against Israeli soldier in March. Palestinian prisoners 8 April launched hunger strike over disruptive technology Israel installed to prevent prisoner usage of smuggled mobile phones in prison; Israeli authorities conceded usage of public phones 15 April on condition that they supervise calls. Following 9 April Israeli legislative election, PM Netanyahu's Likud party increased parliamentary seats from 30 to 35, strengthening Netanyahu as he prepared to begin negotiations to form right-wing coalition. U.S. Senior Advisor to President Trump Jared Kushner 17 April announced U.S. would not release Israeli-Palestinian peace plan before end of Ramadan 5 June.

➔ **Lebanon** President Aoun 9 April criticised U.S.'s recognition of Israeli sovereignty over Golan Heights, Israeli-occupied Syrian territories. Govt 6 April rejected U.S. "maximum pressure" policy toward Iran and allies, pointing out that Hizbollah is legitimate political party in Lebanon.

➔ **Syria** Govt continued bombardment of Idlib in north west, Islamic State (ISIS) stepped up attacks in east, while negotiations on fate of north east after U.S. withdrawal remained stalled. In north west, govt continued bombing in southern Idlib province and rebels continued to retaliate against pro-govt forces. In Idlib province, govt shelling 3-4 April killed around 29 civilians; 18 April killed ten, including three children. Jihadist coalition Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham killed at least twelve pro-govt fighters near Aleppo city 21 April. Russia and Turkey 9 April announced start of joint patrols across demilitarised strip around de-escalation zone. Iran, Russia and Turkey held new round of talks in Nursultan, renamed capital of Kazakhstan (formerly Astana) 25-26 April, no significant outcome. In east, ISIS stepped up low-level insurgency: in Raqqa, twin bombing killed at least eight people 9 April; militants 18-19 April launched separate attacks in Homs and Deir al-Zour provinces, killing at least 35 pro-govt fighters; ISIS killed around 60 local SDF fighters in attacks throughout April. In north east, Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) sought to strengthen control while U.S. retained presence on ground. U.S. remained vague on

timing and extent of troop withdrawal. U.S. Special Envoy James Jeffrey visited region mid-April to advance negotiations between U.S. and Turkey on one hand and YPG and Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) on other toward creation of safe zone along Turkish border in which local Arab and Kurdish forces would replace YPG. U.S. Sec State Pompeo 3 April warned of “devastating” results if Turkey took unilateral action against SDF. Facing fuel shortages, govt 15 April reduced petrol rations; PM Imad Khamis held U.S. and Egypt responsible for blocking passage of Iranian oil tankers through Suez Canal. Israel continued attacks on pro-govt infrastructure: Syrian state media 13 April reported airstrikes and damage to buildings in Hama governorate.

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## **Gulf and Arabian Peninsula**

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➡ **Bahrain** In mass trial 139 defendants (of which 60 outside country) convicted of working to establish “Bahraini Hizbollah” 16 April, 138 defendants to be stripped of citizenship and 69 sentenced to death. King Al Khalifa 21 April issued order to restore citizenship to 551 people previously stripped of it, many in mass trials, without giving reason.

➡ **Iran** Tehran maintained focus on strengthening regional ties particularly with Iraq as U.S. stepped up “maximum pressure” campaign toward Iran. International Atomic Energy Agency 5 April reiterated assessment that Iran was complying with terms of 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Nevertheless, U.S. designated Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Iranian security force primarily responsible for Iran’s regional policies, as Foreign Terrorist Organisation, effective 15 April; Iran promptly blacklisted U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), U.S.’s military command covering Middle East and Central Asia, and President Rouhani 9 April approved for now mostly symbolic installation of more advanced IR-6 centrifuges in Natanz. U.S. Sec State Pompeo 22 April said U.S. would not grant any more sanctions waivers allowing countries to import Iranian oil; current waivers due to expire 2 May. Iraqi PM Mahdi in Tehran 6 April met Supreme Leader Khamenei and Rouhani. Iranian FM Zarif 16 April met Syrian President Assad in Damascus, and visited Ankara 17 April. While in New York 23-28 April Zarif proposed swap of Iranians jailed in U.S. for U.S. detainees in Iran. Iran, Russia and Turkey held new round of talks on Syria in Nursultan, renamed capital of Kazakhstan (formerly Astana) 25-26 April, no significant outcome. In response to flooding that reportedly caused 80 deaths, foreign aid included donations from Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates; Pompeo 2 April expressed condolences to victims while blaming Tehran for mismanagement in urban planning and emergency preparedness; govt blamed U.S. sanctions for impeding humanitarian relief.

➡ **Iraq** Govt pursued efforts to expand relations with Iran and Saudi Arabia, and continued operations against Islamic State (ISIS) remnants. PM Mahdi 6 April visited Iranian President Rouhani in Tehran to discuss expansion of energy imports from Iran and boost trade. In reaction to U.S. President Trump’s 8 April decision to designate Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as Foreign Terrorist Organisation, Shiite paramilitary groups and members of al-Fatah parliamentary coalition same day visited Iranian consulate in Najaf in show of solidarity. After Saudi delegation visited Iraq 3 April reopening consulate in Baghdad and promising \$1bn grant, Mahdi 17 April visited Saudi Arabia and met Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman;

two leaders signed thirteen agreements on trade, energy and political cooperation. PM Mahdi 10 April appointed leader of Badr Organisation and al-Fatah member Hadi al-Ameri as his Special Representative in Basra province in south, tasked with improving services. Basra Council 3 April voted to hold autonomy referendum and residents of Basra staged mass protests against federal govt 13 April. Operations against ISIS continued: in Kirkuk and Diyala provinces, counter-terrorism forces 11 April began operations in Hamrin mountains against ISIS remnants, killing twelve militants and Abu Idris, ISIS head of “general security” in Diyala. In Anbar province, security forces arrested twelve suspected terrorists. ISIS 14 April published video of execution of seven Sunni militiamen and village chiefs accused of collaboration. In north, Turkish military conducted cross-border raids against Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) targets: in Mount Qandil 1 April and in Gara region 5 April.

➡ **Kuwait** Govt 27 April said Kuwait-based Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development agreed to loan Sudan \$200mn for development projects.

➡ **Qatar** Govt 16 April called for enforcement of arms embargo against Libyan Field Marshal Haftar leading offensive against capital Tripoli backed by Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates, and called for his troops to withdraw from areas they have occupied (see Libya). Intra-Afghan dialogue between Afghan representatives and Taliban planned to take place in Doha 20-21 April postponed indefinitely 18 April amid disagreement over participation and representation (see Afghanistan).

➡ **Saudi Arabia** 37 citizens, including many from Shia community, executed 23 April for terrorism-related crimes, largest number of executions in one day since Jan 2016. NGO Human Rights Watch 24 April reported convictions relied on confessions extracted through torture; UK 24 April condemned “repulsive” mass executions; U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom 26 April said U.S. must stop giving Saudi govt “free pass”. Yemen-based al-Qaeda affiliate 26 April promised to retaliate for executions, indicating presence of some Sunni militants among convicted. U.S. Congress 5 April passed bipartisan War Powers Resolution that would withdraw U.S. support to Saudi-led coalition in Yemen, U.S. President Trump vetoed bill 16 April. Five days after Sudanese President Bashir ousted 11 April, high-level joint delegation from Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates (UAE) 16 April met Sudanese Transitional Military Council (TMC) in Sudan, TMC praised Sudan’s “distinguished ties” with both countries; Saudi Arabia and UAE 21 April said they would give Sudan aid worth \$3bn (\$500mn in central bank and \$2.5bn worth of food, medicine and fuel).

➡ **United Arab Emirates** Five days after Sudanese President Bashir ousted 11 April, high-level joint delegation from United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Saudi Arabia 16 April met Sudanese Transitional Military Council (TMC) in Sudan, TMC praised Sudan’s “distinguished ties” with both countries; UAE and Saudi Arabia 21 April said they would give Sudan aid worth \$3bn (\$500mn in central bank and \$2.5bn worth of food, medicine and fuel). In response to launch of military offensive led by Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar to take Libyan capital Tripoli, UAE 4 April co-signed statement with France, Italy, UK and U.S. calling for de-escalation around Tripoli.

⬇️ 🇲🇵\* **Yemen** Fighting escalated along multiple front lines as negotiations over military redeployments around Hodeida remained stalled, increasing risk that fighting resumes there, while tensions within anti-Huthi camp could spark further conflict in south. Govt and Huthi delegates to UN-led Redeployment Coordination

Committee, body tasked with implementing Hodeida agreement, agreed plan for first phase of redeployments 13 April. But both govt and Huthis said phase one will not take place until they agree on phase two redeployments and on composition of local security forces due to control of city and ports after redeployments. Violence around Hodeida continued while clashes escalated along Red Sea coast, in particular in Tuhayta and Hays districts. UK FM Hunt 26 April held meeting in London with Saudi and Emirati counterparts and U.S. and UN representatives to discuss next steps in UN-led process. Fighting intensified across much of country, including in Hajja governorate in north west along border with Saudi Arabia, and in al-Jawf governorate in north. Coalition airstrikes on capital Sanaa 10 April reportedly killed thirteen, highest number of civilian casualties in capital in over a year. Clashes between Huthis and southern fighters also intensified in al-Dalia governorate in south. Secessionists allied to Southern Transitional Council (STC), organisation working for secession of south, accused army of withdrawing from key positions and ceding ground to Huthis, exacerbating tensions between rival factions in anti-Huthi bloc. President Hadi 13 April held parliamentary session in Seyoun in east; pro-STC activists organised protests against meeting, having said they would block proposed session in Aden. Huthis also opposed what they called “illegitimate” session on grounds that it did not meet quorum; Huthis responded with elections for 24 parliamentary seats in areas they controlled. U.S. President Trump 16 April vetoed War Powers Resolution that would have withdrawn U.S. support to Saudi-led coalition, despite U.S. Congress passing bipartisan bill 5 April.

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## North Africa

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► 🇩🇿\* **Algeria** Following President Bouteflika’s resignation early April, nationwide weekly protests called for end of military’s control of transition and continued to grow, raising risk of more violent confrontation and political instability in coming weeks. After five weeks of protests, Bouteflika resigned 2 April; leader of upper house of parliament Abdelkader Bensalah was declared interim president for three months to prepare for presidential elections. Authorities 8-11 April suppressed protests in capital Algiers in bid to regain control, using tear gas and water cannon and arresting 108; having been forced out, protesters 12 April retook Grande Poste Square. Despite increased repression, hundreds of thousands took part in Friday demonstrations 5, 12, 19 and 26 April throughout country, many shouting slogans against army Chief of General Staff Gaïd Salah and security forces. Twelve autonomous unions 12 April joined demonstrations and went on strike. 100 magistrates 13 April announced they would boycott supervision of upcoming presidential election; in Bouira city, about 100km south east of Algiers, lawyers 17 April organised march demanding end of regime. In Hassi Messaoud and Hassi R’Mel, both in centre, oil and gas workers 14 April went on strike to support protest movement. Civil society organisations and activists 13 April called for citizen committees to work toward democratic transition. Several Islamist and centre-left opposition parties 16 April jointly called for election boycott in absence of reforms, including creation of independent election commission. Authorities removed some regime figures from power: Algerian media 1 April published list of businessmen under investigation for corruption; authorities 22 April arrested Algeria’s richest man Issad Rebrab and four brothers from influential

Kouninef family; head of Constitutional Council Tayeb Belaiz resigned 16 April. Ruling National Liberation Front (FLN) party 30 April named 50-year-old businessman Mohamed Djemai as new leader.

↓ **Egypt** Entrenching President Sisi's authoritarian rule, referendum endorsed constitutional changes that will enable Sisi, elected in 2014, to rule until 2030 and authorities intensified repression of civil society. Following referendum 20-22 April, National Election Authority (NEA) 23 April declared 88.8% voted in favour of constitutional changes that would enable Sisi to rule until 2030 by extending his current four-year mandate by two years to 2024 and allowing him to stand for third term of six years; NEA reported turnout of 44%. Vote came after 531 of 596 MPs voted in favour of constitutional changes 17 April. Opposition bloc Civil Democratic Movement 18 April called proposed changes "assault on democracy" and urged people to vote "no". Referendum spurred new crackdown on civil society and opposition: NGOs 15 April reported authorities had blocked estimated 34,000 internet domains, including newly-launched opposition campaign site; in east Cairo, authorities 21 April arrested lone protester for holding sign against referendum. Amid reports of bribes and coerced voting, NGO Human Rights Watch 20 April said referendum lacked legitimacy. EU 24 April urged Egypt to maintain commitments on rule of law. ISIS-Sinai Province attacks continued in north Sinai: in Sheikh Zuweid marketplace, suicide bomber 9 April killed seven, including four soldiers and one six-year-old; near provincial capital Arish, twin bombs same day killed four people.

↓ 🇱🇻\* **Libya** War broke out as Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA) advanced on capital Tripoli intent on taking city from UN-backed Govt of National Accord (GNA), but pro-GNA forces held LNA at bay; fighting could escalate if both sides continue to mobilise and external actors strengthen Libyan allies. LNA 3 April launched advance on Tripoli from east with apparent backing of Egypt, Saudi Arabia, UAE, France and Russia taking control of surrounding countryside. By making deals with local commanders, LNA took Garyan, 80km south of Tripoli, 3-5 April and set up base there; in same period LNA took Tarhunah and 'Aziziya south east of Tripoli, Sabratah and Sorman east of Tripoli, and reached city's outskirts. GNA's PM Serraj mobilised loyalist militias under banner of Tripoli Protection Force (TPF) and armed groups from Misrata. TPF by 14 April had pushed LNA out of Zahra and Suwani on Tripoli's western outskirts; same day shot down LNA warplane; 19 April expelled LNA from 'Aziziya and Ain Zara in south-eastern outskirts, prompting LNA to withdraw to Qasr bin Gashir and Wadi al-Rabia south of city. Artillery fire killed six civilians in Tripoli residential area 16 April, LNA and GNA blamed each other. In southern Libya, pro-GNA Southern Protection Force 18 April attacked LNA air base at Tamanhint near Sebha and withdrew. Same day, LNA crushed uprising in Garyan. World Health Organization 23 April said 264 people killed around Tripoli since start of offensive, including 21 civilians. LNA reportedly used armed drones, provided and possibly controlled by foreign backer, for precision strikes on GNA military installations in Tripoli. GNA also received some military assistance. U.S. shifted from opposition to apparent support for Haftar: Sec State Pompeo 7 April condemned LNA offensive; U.S. 18 April objected to draft UNSC resolution calling for ceasefire; President Trump reportedly had phone conversation with Haftar 15 April, reportedly praising his efforts in counter-terrorism and to protect oil fields.

➡ **Mauritania** Govt 17 April said first round of presidential election will take place 22 June and possible run-off vote 6 July.

➡ **Morocco** Casablanca appeals court 5 April upheld sentence of 42 activists of Hirak protest movement that formed in Rif region in north in late 2016 to demand jobs and denounce state corruption and repression; court confirmed 20-year prison sentences for Hirak leader Nasser Zefzafi and three other activists for threatening state security; also confirmed other sentences ranging from one to fifteen years. Thousands demonstrated 21 April in capital Rabat to demand release of Hirak activists. Police 25 April used water cannon to disperse some one thousand teachers protesting in capital. Authorities 23 April arrested seven suspected Islamic State members in Salé, near Rabat.

➡ **Tunisia** Political rivalry between Islamists and anti-Islamists continued ahead of legislative and presidential elections in Oct and Nov, as escalation in neighbouring Libya raised security concerns. Govt 5 April prolonged state of emergency citing persistent threat of terrorism and said it had reinforced military along Libyan border in south east to prevent “terrorist infiltration”. President Essebsi’s Nida Tounes sought to elect central committee and representatives for Nov 2019 legislative elections, but party leadership struggle between head of parliamentary bloc Sofian Toubel and president’s son Hafedh Caïd Essebsi saw each hold their own separate congress 6-7 April; both congresses elected separate central committees. President Essebsi 6 April said he would not stand for re-election in Nov vote. After arresting member of UN panel of experts on Libya 26 March, authorities 10 April charged him with “spying for foreign parties”.

➡ **Western Sahara** Moroccan FM Bourita 17 April reiterated that Morocco would only accept Western Sahara to have autonomy, rejecting calls by Polisario Front for referendum on independence. UN Security Council 30 April renewed mandate of UN Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara (MINURSO) for additional six months until 31 Oct.