

# Middle East and North Africa

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## Eastern Mediterranean

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♦ **Israel-Palestine** **Amid tensions in Jerusalem, Jewish extremist attacks injured over hundred Palestinians; President Abbas indefinitely postponed elections, raising prospects of major protests in coming weeks.** In Jerusalem, Israeli police 13 April clashed with Palestinians near Damascus Gate who were demonstrating against restrictions on gatherings to mark start of Ramadan previous day. Police 15-16 April arrested boy suspected of posting videos on TikTok showing Orthodox Jews being slapped in Beit Hanina, Jerusalem; in response to videos, far-right Jewish supremacists chanting “death to Arabs” 22 April attacked Palestinians and skirmished with police in East Jerusalem, injuring over hundred Palestinians and 20 police officers. Protesters overnight 24-25 April clashed with police; authorities 26 April removed barricades around Damascus Gate, relieving tensions. In Jaffa, old district of Tel Aviv city, police 18 April arrested at least two Palestinian citizens of Israel for allegedly attacking yeshiva (religious school) head; incident next day triggered clashes between Israeli and Palestinian protesters that injured two police officers. In West Bank, Israeli soldiers 5 April fatally shot Palestinian man and wounded his wife in village near Ramallah town, claiming car sped toward checkpoint; soldiers 9 April shot Palestinian child in eye with rubber bullet in Hebron. Palestinian Authority’s President Abbas 30 April cancelled Legislative Council elections scheduled for 22 May. Palestinian electoral commission 3 April had approved 36 candidate lists, including “Freedom List” headed by Yasser Arafat’s nephew Nasser al-Qidwa and Fadwa Barghouthi, spouse of imprisoned Fatah leader Marwan Barghouthi, in direct challenge to official Fatah list. Hamas 30 April condemned cancellation as “coup”, while decision raised prospect of protests given high voter registration. In Gaza, Israeli jets 16 April struck Hamas targets in response to rocket fire into southern Israel; militants 23 April fired more rockets into Israel. Meanwhile, PM Netanyahu’s trial 5 April resumed; President Rivlin next day asked Netanyahu to form governing coalition by 4 May following inconclusive results of 23 March election. Internationally, Israel blamed Iran for 13 April missile strike on Israeli commercial vessel in Gulf of Oman (see Iran). Errant missile from Syria 22 April exploded in near Dimona nuclear plant in southern Israel, triggering retaliatory Israeli airstrikes (see Syria).

♦ **Jordan** **Govt accused former crown prince of plot to destabilise country.** Authorities 3 April placed former crown prince and half-brother of King Abdullah II, Prince Hamza bin al-Hussein, under de facto house arrest for allegedly conspiring with foreign parties in “malicious plot” to destabilise country as police arrested over dozen other high-profile figures. Following arrest, Hamza 3 April recorded video in which he accused govt of “incompetence and corruption”. FM Ayman Safadi next day said plot had been foiled at “zero hour” and those detained will be referred to state security court. In sign of tensions subsiding, Hamzah 5 April pledged allegiance to King Abdullah; authorities next day banned publication of information regarding alleged plot. Abdullah 7 April said “sedition has been nipped in the bud”. PM Bisher al-Khasawneh 12 April denied that there had been “coup” and

said Hamzah will not face charges. Authorities 22 April released 16 people detained on sedition charges.

➔ **Lebanon** **Govt warned of further funding cuts as fighting over dwindling subsidised goods in northern city Tripoli turned deadly; France considered new approach to break deadlock over govt formation.**

Economic situation remained critical. Finance Minister Ghazi Wazni 2 April said funding for basic imports would run out by end of May, indicating rationing and overhaul of blanket subsidy scheme costing \$500 mn per month. In northern city Tripoli, fighting over dwindling subsidised goods, which has become commonplace, 14 April killed one and injured two in further sign of deteriorating economic situation and rising social tensions. Hizbollah 16 April moved to create own subsidy system, issuing ration cards for food and importing medicine and fuel of primarily Iranian and Syrian origin. Political stalemate over govt formation continued. Over 100 high-profile economists and political scientists 3 April co-signed op-ed urging French President Macron to freeze assets of Lebanese politicians held in France. In sign of possible new Paris approach to break stalemate, which may include punitive measures, French FM Jean-Yves Le Drian 6 April signalled travel bans and asset freezes on Lebanese politicians under consideration to foster agreement on govt formation. PM-designate Saad Hariri 14 April visited Russian capital Moscow to request support in overcoming economic crisis and political deadlock; Russian FM Sergei Lavrov 16 April affirmed support for Hariri's efforts to form cabinet. Meanwhile, amid dispute with Israel over maritime border demarcation, Public Works Minister Michel Najjar 12 April signed decree to formally extend Lebanon's maritime claims to include roughly half of Karish gas field claimed by Israel; President Aoun next day declined to grant presidential approval, citing need for cabinet sign-off and warning that decree would lead to collapse of negotiations with Israel.

➔ **Syria** **Clashes resumed between Kurdish and govt-affiliated forces in north east amid hostilities between Kurdish and Turkish-backed forces; Idlib ceasefire largely held and violence continued in south west.**

In north east, regime-backed militia National Defence Forces 20 April reportedly killed one Kurdish security forces officer in Qamishli city, triggering days-long fighting that killed at least three civilians and several fighters; Russia 25-26 April brokered ceasefire after initial attempt collapsed 22 April. Elsewhere in region, Turkish-backed armed groups and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) continued fighting in Ain Issa countryside throughout month. Following late March security operation, SDF 2 April said they had arrested 125 suspected Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated individuals in al-Hol camp, which holds over 60,000 displaced persons as well as families of suspected ISIS fighters. In Idlib province in north west, March 2020 ceasefire continued to hold despite reported clashes, artillery shelling and Russian airstrikes in countryside throughout month; notably, suspected govt missile attack 8 April reportedly killed seven civilians in al-Najiyah area. Jihadist rebel group Hayat Tahrir al-Sham 5-16 April reportedly killed two and arrested at least 16 suspected members of al-Qaeda-linked group Hurras al-Din. In Daraa province in south west, following clashes in March between govt forces and former opposition fighters, unidentified gunmen 7-29 April reportedly killed at least 14 soldiers and ten former rebels who had enrolled in govt forces. In central desert, Russia continued airstrikes against suspected ISIS targets throughout month, reportedly killing some 29 ISIS militants 3-5 April and some 200 militants 16-19 April. Suspected ISIS militants 6

April reportedly killed one civilian and kidnapped at least 19 civilians and govt troops in al-Saan area in Hama province. Israel 8 April reportedly fired missiles and 22 April launched airstrikes on govt targets on outskirts of capital Damascus; errant Syrian anti-aircraft missile 22 April exploded near Dimona nuclear facility in Israel, prompting latter same day to strike Syrian missile batteries. President Assad 21 April said he would run for fourth consecutive term in elections scheduled for 26 May.

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## **Gulf and Arabian Peninsula**

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➔ **Iran U.S. and Iran participated in expert-level negotiations as sabotage attack targeted nuclear facility, prompting Tehran to ramp up enrichment activities.** New diplomatic process commenced as Iran and P4+1 (UK, France, Russia, China and Germany) 2 April held virtual session of nuclear deal's Joint Commission, which concluded with commitment to continue discussions in person in Austria's capital Vienna in P4+1/EU format; U.S. same day confirmed it would send diplomats there. Talks 15 April held in Vienna and third round of negotiations 27 April began with parallel working groups discussing nuclear steps, sanctions relief and sequencing. President Rouhani 20 April suggested that "talks have progressed about 60, 70 per cent". Complicating diplomatic efforts, Iran's atomic energy organisation 11 April reported "incident" at Natanz nuclear facility that knocked "a number" of centrifuges offline, subsequently describing it as "sabotage"; Iranian FM Javad Zarif next day called attack "nuclear terrorism" and suggested Israel as likely suspect. In response, Tehran 13 April announced expansion of enrichment rates at Natanz from 20% (on par with pre-deal levels) to 60% using IR-4 and IR-6 centrifuges. UK, France and Germany next day expressed "grave concern" over decision while U.S. Sec of State Antony Blinken called it "provocative". Meanwhile, IAEA 21 April verified installation of six cascades of IR-2m and two cascades of IR-4 centrifuges; IAEA 19 April confirmed parallel talks with Iran on clarifying safeguards concerns. Regional tensions continued with U.S. and Israel. Foreign ministry 7 April acknowledged reports that Iranian ship *Saviz* had been hit by explosion in Red Sea; U.S. official, according to *New York Times*, confirmed Israel carried out operation. Israeli-owned vessel 13 April reportedly struck by missile in Gulf of Oman. U.S. navy reported 2 and 26 April Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy's "unsafe and unprofessional" manoeuvres near U.S. vessels, raising "risk of miscalculation and/or collision"; incidents are first reported cases of U.S.-Iran naval tension since April 2020. EU 12 April sanctioned eight individuals and three entities for "violent response" to Nov 2019 demonstrations. Iranian and Saudi officials 9 April commenced talks in Iraqi capital Baghdad (see Saudi Arabia).

➔ **Iraq Suspected Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) paramilitary groups continued rocket attacks in capital Baghdad and north as U.S. and govt struck initial deal on withdrawal of coalition troops.** Tensions continued between PMF-affiliated groups and U.S. forces. Leader of PMF-affiliated group Asaib Ahl al-Haq 1 April threatened attacks on U.S. assets. Unidentified militants 4 April launched two rockets at Balad air base, north of Baghdad, with no reported casualties, and at least five rockets 18 April hit Balad city in Saladin governorate, wounding two Iraqi soldiers. Explosive-laden drone 14 April targeted coalition forces at Erbil International Airport; pro-Iran group Saraya Awliya al-Dam praised attack; rockets 22 April hit Erbil airport, leaving no reported casualties. In

response, Kurdish peshmerga 15 April fired rocket at PMF Brigade 30 outpost in Hamdaniya, Ninewa. Tensions between PMF-linked groups and Turkey over presence of Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Sinjar district continued. After Turkish Ministry of Defence 3 April declared readiness to take all necessary measures to "neutralise" PKK presence in area, unidentified armed group 14 April fired rockets at Zilkan military base in Ninewa governorate hosting Turkish military personnel, killing one Turkish soldier; two rockets same day fell short in Gudad village, injuring two civilians; Iraqi security forces recovered launcher in area where PMF Brigade 30 operates; fighting late month killed four more Turkish soldiers. Car bomb 15 April detonated in Sadr City neighbourhood, Baghdad, killing four and wounding 17 with no group immediately claiming responsibility. Meanwhile, U.S. and Iraq 7 April agreed upon withdrawal of all U.S. and coalition combat troops deployed to fight Islamic State (ISIS) forces, stating forces are now "focused on training and advisory tasks", with further talks expected on exact withdrawal timeline. In south, protesters 3 April shut down three oil facilities in Dhi Qar governorate over lack of support for job security in oil sector in annual federal budget approved 31 March. Protesters 25 April took to streets in several governorates, including Dhi Qar, Wasit, Babil, Karbala and Basra in solidarity with victims of 24 April fire in Baghdad hospital that killed at least 82 people.

✂ **Saudi Arabia** While Huthis continued cross-border attacks, Saudi and Iranian officials began dialogue to de-escalate inter-state tensions, raising prospect of deepening talks in coming weeks. In positive step forward, senior Saudi and Iranian officials 9 April held direct diplomatic talks in Iraqi capital Baghdad, facilitated by Iraqi PM Mustafa al-Kadhimi; talks, which showed signs of progress, focused on Huthi cross-border missile and drone attacks on Saudi Arabia, frequency of which has increased in recent months. Meanwhile, Huthis 12 April said they launched drones and ballistic missiles at Aramco facilities in Jubail and Jeddah cities; 15 April launched ballistic missiles and armed drones at Aramco oil facility and Patriot missile batteries in Jizan port city, with debris falling from intercepted drones causing fire on Jizan University campus. Saudi coalition 16 April announced that it intercepted ballistic missile launched by Huthis toward Jizan city. Huthis 17 April also claimed responsibility for explosive drone strike on King Khalid air base, Khamis Mushait city. Saudi-led coalition 18 April announced that it intercepted bomb-laden drone before it crossed into Saudi territory; Huthis same day said they successfully launched drone attack inside King Khalid air base. Saudi-led coalition 20 April destroyed explosive drone fired toward Khamis Mushait. Huthis 23 April claimed attack on King Khalid air base. Saudi defence ministry 27 April said it destroyed remotely controlled explosive-laden boat off Red Sea port city Yanbu, home to Aramco oil refinery.

➡ **Yemen** Hostilities in Taiz and Marib governorates continued between Huthis and govt-backed forces while tensions between separatists and govt persisted in south. Fighting continued throughout month between Huthis and govt-aligned forces in Taiz governorate as latter sought to open road access to Aden city and Red Sea coast in attempt to break Huthi siege of Taiz city and relieve pressure on Marib governorate. Fears rose that Huthis may be planning more attacks in Marib governorate in May aimed at securing tactical positions ahead of new offensive in summer months when dust storms will likely limit Saudi-led coalition's ability to provide defensive air support. Huthis late April intensified offensive

and advanced deeper into Marib, seizing control of territory to west of Marib city; fighting reportedly killed dozens of Huthi and govt fighters, including senior military official Major General Abdullah al-Hadhiri on 24 April. On diplomatic front, as UN Security Council Resolution 2216 marked its sixth anniversary on 14 April, efforts to broker ceasefire remained stalemated as Huthis continued to reject Riyadh's unveiling in March of "an initiative to end the Yemeni crisis", largely reiteration of Riyadh's position in year-long UN-led negotiations. In south, tensions continued between govt and pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC) in Aden amid electricity shortages and protests as STC accused govt of purposely withholding services in city; discord also centred on series of military, judicial and local appointments made by President Hadi, with STC claiming they were not consulted despite formation of unity govt in Dec 2020; popular anger could rise further in summer months if increased demand for electricity is not met. Meanwhile, Huthis continued cross-border attacks on Saudi Arabia (see Saudi Arabia).

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## North Africa

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### ➔ **Algeria** Authorities continued to respond to resurgence of Hirak protest movement with combination of repression and co-optation.

Thousands took to streets throughout month in capital Algiers and other cities to reject early legislative elections scheduled for June and demand release of imprisoned Hirak activists. Police 3 April arrested over 20 demonstrators during Hirak protest in Algiers; several rights organisations including Amnesty International next day alleged 15-year-old subjected to sexual violence while in custody and called for investigation. Meanwhile, President Tebboune 6 April accused "separatist circles and illegal movements close to terrorism" of committing "subversive activities" to manipulate Hirak movement. Tebboune 8 April held new round of consultations with civil society representatives, 12 April created new consultative body National Observatory of Civil Society in alleged attempt to "promote civil society". Authorities 18 April detained journalist Rabah Kareche in southern city of Tamanrasset, next day charged him with spreading "false news harmful to the public order" and "undermining national security and unity"; move comes after Kareche published articles on land-use protests by members of Tuareg community. Court in Oran city 21 April sentenced Nouredine Tounsi to one year in prison for allegedly "insulting the president of the Republic", after he reported on alleged corruption in state-owned company. Authorities 28 April detained opposition activist Karim Tabbou on charges of "slander", released him on probation next day. NGO National Committee for Liberation of Detainees 20 April recorded 66 "prisoners of conscience" across country and called for their release. Series of strikes from public health care, postal and education employees held throughout month amid deteriorating economic and social situation. Notably, demonstrations 6 April erupted in Bouira town after publication of social housing beneficiaries' list; protesters 8-9 April set up roadblocks and police fired tear gas, with several injured on both sides.

### ➔ **Egypt** Jihadist insurgency persisted in Sinai Peninsula, while govt took further steps toward rapprochement with Turkey.

In Sinai Peninsula, Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated Sinai Province reportedly redeployed from north to central Sinai under army's pressure, with build-up reported in Bir al-Abd region and Jabal Maghara area. Suspected Sinai Province militants 2 April killed unspecified

number of pro-army militiamen in Manjam village. ISIS 5 April published pictures of execution of tribal militiaman previously kidnapped in al-Barth area, south of Rafah city; 17 April released video showing killing of Coptic Christian and two other men in Sinai Peninsula. Court in capital Cairo 8 April sentenced Mahmoud Ezzat, former acting leader of outlawed Islamist organisation Muslim Brotherhood, to life imprisonment on terrorism charges. In likely attempt to respond to U.S. pressure, authorities 13 April released former opposition party leader Khaled Daoud, next day set free journalists Hosam al-Sayed and Solafa Magdy; all three had been imprisoned since 2019. After train wreck 18 April killed at least 11 people north of capital Cairo, Transport Minister Kamel al-Wazir 20 April sacked head of Railways Authority; al-Wazir 26 April appeared before Parliament amid mounting popular anger over recurrent train accidents. After Egyptian and Turkish officials late March took initial steps to normalise relations, bilateral contacts culminated in 15 April announcement of Turkish delegation's visit to Cairo in early May; Cairo's request that Ankara extradite Muslim Brotherhood officials who have taken shelter in Turkey after 2013 military coup remains stumbling block. Meanwhile, tensions mounted further with Ethiopia amid persistent deadlock in negotiations over Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on Blue Nile river (see Nile Waters).

➡ **Libya** **Discussions on roadmap for elections planned late this year and budget stalled amid disagreement between different constituencies.**

Legal Committee of UN-backed Libyan Political Dialogue Forum 7-9 April failed to reach consensus on legal roadmap for general elections scheduled for Dec; disagreements persisted over whether Libya should hold referendum on draft constitution first, or opt directly for parliamentary election or both parliamentary and presidential elections. Budget discussions turned into tug of war between institutions. Eastern-based House of Representatives 19 April rejected PM Dabaiba's govt budget, reportedly making its approval conditional on Central Bank's governor's replacement, which eastern constituencies have long requested; National Oil Corporation same day said it was forced to declare force majeure – lifted 26 April – at key export terminal due to Central Bank's reported refusal to release budget funds, accused latter of politicising oil sector. Dabaiba 25 April cancelled next day's cabinet meeting in Benghazi city (east) after security officers aligned with Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar's Arab Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF) barred Dabaiba's security escort from entering city over presence of Tripoli-based militias in its ranks; ALAF 27 April clarified it had no issue with Dabaiba visiting if coordinated with local security forces. New mass graves in and around Tarhuna city (west), former stronghold of ALAF-aligned militia, continued to be uncovered throughout month; Dabaiba early April pledged to deliver justice. NGO Amnesty International 26 April said east-based military courts had convicted hundreds of civilians perceived to be ALAF critics or opponents – including 22 sentenced to death – in “sham, torture-tainted trials” between 2018 and 2021. UN Security Council 16 April unanimously approved deployment, “when conditions allow”, of UN team to Sirte city to monitor Oct 2020 ceasefire. Presidency Council Chairperson Mohamed al-Menfi 21 April ordered armed forces to secure southern border with Chad immediately after Haftar-aligned Chadian rebel group Front for Change and Concord based in southern Libya 11 April crossed border into Chad in bid to depose Chadian President Déby (see Chad).

➡ **Tunisia** **Power struggle pitting presidency against parliament and govt continued.** President Saïed early April refused to ratify Parliament's late

March amendments to Constitutional Court's law, saying constitutional deadline to create court had expired; bill aimed to reduce majority required to elect Constitutional Court members from 145 to 131 MPs in bid to reactivate process of setting up court, which has been delayed since 2015. In latest escalation of dispute with PM and acting Interior Minister Hichem Mechichi over division of powers, Saïed 18 April reiterated that his presidential powers as armed forces commander cover internal security forces, drawing criticism from PM Mechichi and largest party in Parliament, Islamist-inspired party An-Nahda; latter 20 April denounced Saïed's "violation of constitution" and his "attempts to involve security forces in political conflicts" as threat to democracy. Despite Saïed's statement, Mechichi subsequently appointed Lazhar Loungou as new interior ministry's director for special services. Opposition MP Rached Khiari 19 April accused Saïed of treason for allegedly receiving from U.S. \$5mn to fund election campaign in 2019; military court next day reportedly opened investigation into case, and 22 April summoned Khiari to appear before court on accusations of "undermining national security". Security forces 1 April killed three suspected jihadists, including Hamdi Dhoub, senior figure of Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated group Jund al-Khilafa, in two operations in centre west near Algerian border. Mechichi 30 April said Tunisia would seek \$4bn loan from International Monetary Fund early May in "last opportunity" to save economy.

➡ **Western Sahara** **Morocco reportedly used drone for first time on disputed territory, killing one Polisario Front independence movement leader.** Moroccan forces 6 April reportedly killed Polisario gendarmerie chief Ad-dah al-Bendir in suspected drone strike near Tifariti town inside UN buffer zone; strike, which could be first-ever use of drone by Moroccan army in Western Sahara, reportedly followed Polisario attempt to raid Moroccan positions along Morocco's sand wall. French newspaper *Le Figaro* 15 April reported **Polisario** had turned down UN Sec-Gen Guterres' proposal of former Portuguese FM Luis Amado as new UN envoy to Western Sahara; Amado is ninth candidate to be rejected by either Morocco or Polisario since former envoy Horst Köhler resigned in 2019. Local media late April reported Guterres had proposed Italian-Swedish diplomat Staffan de Mistura as next envoy. UN Security Council 21 April failed to adopt U.S.-drafted proposal on Western Sahara which warned of possible "escalation" in disputed territory and stressed need to speed up envoy appointment process. Senegal 5 April inaugurated consulate in Dakhla city in Morocco-controlled Western Sahara, thereby joining other African countries in supporting Morocco's sovereignty claims over disputed territory.