

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** **Israel normalised relations with Morocco and proceeded with de facto annexation of West Bank, while collapse of its unity govt triggered new elections.** In fourth deal of its kind, U.S. President Trump 10 Dec announced normalisation of relations between Israel and Morocco. Amid growing speculation over potential normalisation deal with Saudi Arabia, senior Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal 6 Dec condemned normalisation agreements, while Saudi cabinet 8 Dec reiterated commitment to 2002 Arab Peace Initiative. Palestinian Authority (PA), Jordan and Egypt 2 Dec agreed to form joint committee to set up international peace conference aimed at resolving Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In Qatari capital Doha, PA President Abbas 14 Dec met with Qatar's Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani who confirmed Qatar's support for Palestinian cause. In West Bank, following PA's decision to resume security cooperation with Israel last month, Israel 2 Dec released more than \$1bn of withheld tax revenue to PA in first transfer since June. Israeli forces 4 Dec killed Palestinian teenager during protest against Israeli settlements; 21 Dec killed Palestinian man who allegedly fired toward Israeli officers in Jerusalem's Old City. Israeli home demolitions continued in West Bank, including in Jericho, Ramallah and Hebron cities; notices for evictions of Palestinians from East Jerusalem expanded, notably in Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighbourhoods. Knesset 17 Dec legalised 65 Israeli outposts in West Bank that were previously deemed illegal by domestic Israeli laws. In Gaza, unidentified group 25 Dec reportedly fired rocket into Israel; retaliatory Israeli airstrikes next day wounded at least two Palestinians. EU Heads of Mission 8 Dec visited Gaza to assess impact of COVID-19 outbreak and Israel's blockade. Armed groups in Gaza, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad, 29 Dec conducted first joint military exercise. Following longstanding tensions within Israeli coalition govt between Blue and White and Likud parties, Knesset 22 Dec failed to meet deadline to pass budget, triggering fourth round of elections in less than two years; new elections scheduled for March 2021. Following postponement of maritime border talks with Lebanon scheduled for early Dec, U.S. Sec State Pompeo 22 Dec said Israel and Lebanon remained "far apart".

➔ **Lebanon** **Political deadlock over govt formation persisted while senior officials were charged with negligence for deadly August Beirut blast, prompting pushback from political elite.** After Central Bank governor Riad Salameh 1 Dec said subsidies for basic commodities could only continue for two more months, protesters 7 Dec took to streets across country, including in capital Beirut; UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) and International Labour Organization 7 Dec warned removal of subsidies would inflict "social catastrophe"; Diab 29 Dec said rationing foreign reserves could stretch subsidies for another six months. French President Macron and UN Sec-Gen António Guterres in virtual aid conference 2 Dec announced creation of fund handled by World Bank, UN and EU, while reiterating aid was contingent upon formation of new govt and political reforms. PM-designate Hariri – whom lawmakers nominated in Oct to form new govt – 9 Dec presented President Aoun with line-up of new govt but deadlock persisted; Aoun and Hariri 14

Dec blamed each other for delay in govt formation. Meanwhile, Fadi Sawwan – judge responsible for investigating 4 Aug deadly Beirut port explosion – 10 Dec charged caretaker PM Diab and three former ministers for negligence; move sparked criticism among political elite as Diab 10 Dec questioned legitimacy of charges and 14 Dec refused questioning, while caretaker Interior Minister Mohammed Fahmi 14 Dec said he would not enforce arrest warrants for officials, and two of accused ex-ministers asked Court of Cassation to replace judge. Sawwan 17 Dec suspended investigation for ten days to respond to legal challenges to his authority. After various private universities announced tuition hikes, clashes 19 Dec broke out between police and student protesters. In north, group of Lebanese nationals 26 Dec set fire to refugee settlement, destroying camp and injuring at least four; army 27 Dec announced arrest of two Lebanese and six Syrian nationals allegedly involved in altercation that led to incident. Following postponement of maritime border talks with Israel scheduled for early Dec, Aoun 2 Dec reiterated difficulties in negotiations could be overcome, while U.S. Sec State Pompeo 22 Dec said Israel and Lebanon remained “far apart”.

➔ **Syria** **Fighting escalated between rival armed groups in north east, Russia-Turkey tensions persisted in Idlib, and Islamic State (ISIS) continued deadly assaults.** Clashes erupted between Turkish-backed groups and Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) in and around city of Ain Issa: Turkish-backed forces 6 Dec carried out artillery attacks on Ain Issa and nearby villages, wounding at least nine civilians, including two children. Although Russia and SDF 8 Dec reached agreement over redeployment of military units and establishment of three Russian observation posts near Ain Issa, Turkish-backed forces 11, 13 and 14 Dec launched ground assaults targeting SDF positions, and mutual shelling continued. Russia 27 Dec confirmed deployment of additional military units to Ain Issa. Elsewhere in north east, protesters 8, 9 and 15 Dec took to streets in SDF-controlled parts of Deir Ez-Zor city to protest against deteriorating living conditions and high cost of fuel. In Idlib in north west, Turkey withdrew from observation points in regime-controlled territory, while setting up new ones in rebel-controlled parts of province and further strengthening position in Jabal al-Zawiya area near M4 highway throughout month. Militants 29 Dec reportedly wounded three Russian soldiers on patrol near Trumba in Idlib province. Meanwhile, ISIS 2-13 Dec launched series of attacks in Deir Ez-Zor, Homs and Hama cities, killing at least 29 pro-regime fighters and injuring 25 others; in retaliation, Russian forces in coordination with regime forces mid-Dec launched over 170 airstrikes in central desert, reportedly killing 37 ISIS members. ISIS 30 Dec claimed responsibility for attack that killed nearly 40 regime soldiers in eastern Syria. Russian forces 11 Dec conducted joint patrol in Golan Heights, Quneitra province, and established five observation points along disengagement line with Israel. U.S. govt 7 Dec designated rebel group Hei’at Tahrir al-Sham among “Entities of Particular Concern”; 22 Dec sanctioned Central Bank, close aide to President Assad and several of first lady’s UK-based relatives. Alleged Israeli airstrikes 4 Dec hit Iran-linked sites in Raqqa city and 6 Dec killed three pro-Iran militants in Deir Ez-Zor province. Govt 24 Dec reported Israeli missiles over western Hama countryside.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ Iran Parliament passed law mandating further steps away from 2015 nuclear deal, while U.S. continued to roll out unilateral sanctions.

In response to killing of senior Iranian nuclear scientist in Nov, parliament 2 Dec approved law described as “strategic action to lift sanctions” mandating govt to immediately expand uranium enrichment rates to 20 per cent – major increase from current 4.5 per cent and on par with pre-nuclear deal levels – and suspend enhanced International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access if sanctions relief fails to materialise by Feb 2021; President Rouhani same day said legislation is “detrimental to the process of diplomatic activities”. UK, France and Germany 7 Dec expressed “great concern” over envisioned steps and denounced Iranian moves to deploy advanced centrifuges at Natanz facility in violation of nuclear deal. After U.S. President-elect Biden 1 Dec expressed willingness to rapidly re-enter nuclear deal once in office, Rouhani 14 Dec remarked “if the P5+1 returns to all its commitments, we will immediately return to all our commitments”. Joint Commission of nuclear deal 16 Dec met at political director level and 21 Dec at ministerial level; joint statement underscored “commitment to preserve the agreement” and noted “prospect of a return of the U.S.” to deal. Iran 31 Dec informed IAEA of intent to enrich at 20 per cent at Fordow facility. Meanwhile, U.S. administration throughout month continued to expand unilateral sanctions designations, including: 8 Dec sanctioning Tehran’s envoy to Huthis in Yemen; 14 Dec designating two Iranian intelligence officials implicated in 2007 disappearance of U.S. citizen; and 16 Dec sanctioning five companies and one individual for involvement in Iranian energy exports. Following 20 Dec rocket attack against embassy in Iraq’s capital Baghdad blamed on “Iranian-backed rogue militia group”, U.S. President Trump 23 Dec warned U.S. would “hold Iran responsible” if U.S. citizen killed; U.S. dispatched B-52 bombers to Persian Gulf and submarine to Middle-East region ahead of first anniversary on 3 Jan of U.S. killing of Iranian General Qassem Soleimani. Govt 12 Dec executed Ruhollah Zam, manager of popular social media platform critical of govt during 2017 protests, prompting international condemnation.

⬇ Iraq Mass protests spread in Kurdish region amid clashes between Kurdish armed factions; meanwhile, tensions ran high between U.S. and Iran-backed militias.

In Kurdish region, after hundreds of protesters 2 Dec gathered in Sulaymaniyah city to demand disbursement of unpaid salaries, week-long protests spread to other parts of province. Authorities responded by detaining hundreds, shutting down opposition media and using water cannons and live ammunition; clashes left nine people dead, including eight protesters, and 60 injured. Kurdish Peshmerga and Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) militants 13 Dec exchanged fire in Duhok province, killing one Peshmerga soldier and one PKK militant. Peshmerga 16 Dec reportedly foiled attack by Syrian-Kurdish People’s Protection Units (YPG) and PKK militants attempting to infiltrate Kurdish region in Ninewa province; first direct clash between Peshmerga and YPG. Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Masoud Barzani 22 Dec asked U.S. govt to deploy observers to patrol border with Kurdish-controlled north east of Syria. Meanwhile, unilateral ceasefire announced by pro-Iran militias faced strains as roadside IEDs 9, 10 and 23 Dec hit convoys belonging to U.S.-led international coalition forces; U.S. missile defence system 20 Dec intercepted eight rockets targeting Baghdad’s Green

Zone near U.S. embassy, injuring one Iraqi soldier; U.S. Sec State Mike Pompeo 20 Dec blamed attack on Iran-backed militias and U.S. President Trump 23 Dec warned Iran against further attacks on U.S. targets. Islamic State (ISIS) continued deadly assaults across country: ISIS militants 3, 5, 7 and 9 Dec attacked security checkpoints in Diyala, Kirkuk and Anbar, killing dozen Iraqi soldiers and wounding several more. In response, U.S.-led coalition 5 Dec launched airstrikes in Salah al-Din and Kirkuk provinces, killing at least 11 ISIS militants. Amid worsening economic situation, leaked 2021 draft budget 18 Dec prompted national outcry on grounds that it confirmed govt's intention to devalue Iraqi dinar and cut public sector salaries; cabinet 21 Dec approved 2021 draft budget.

➔ **Yemen** **Deadly bombing in Aden city overshadowed long-awaited progress toward implementing Riyadh Agreement, while fighting in north continued.** In positive step, govt and pro-independence Southern Transitional Council (STC) moved toward implementation of Nov 2019 Riyadh Agreement after Saudi officials 17 Dec announced both sides' military and security forces had redeployed from Aden and key front lines in Abyan governorate, east of Aden, where new security cordon had been formed by non-aligned Salafist fighters previously based along Yemen's Red Sea coast; Yemeni state media 18 Dec also announced formation of long-awaited 24-minister cabinet led by returning PM Maen Saeed Abdulmalek to be based in temporary capital Aden. Multiple explosions 30 Dec however rocked Aden airport as new cabinet arrived and disembarked plane, killing at least 26 people and injuring more than 100; second attack reportedly struck Aden's Mashiq Palace, where cabinet due to be based. In north, after seizing key military base west of Marib city in Nov, Huthi fighters intensified attacks throughout month in southern and north-western Marib; STC-linked forces in al-Dhale governorate in early Dec reported wave of Huthi attacks on front lines between their governorate and Huthi-held Ibb governorate. In south, tensions mounted between govt-affiliated forces and STC over United Arab Emirates (UAE)'s control of two military bases in Shebwa governorate; local media 14 Dec reported exchange of artillery fire around major gas export facility overseen by French oil company Total at Balhaf town in Shebwa governorate; French parliamentarians 12 Dec demanded review of UAE control of terminal, citing concerns over allegations of torture at base. Meanwhile, fears persisted throughout month of potentially imminent U.S. decision to designate Huthis as foreign terrorist organisation that could further dent prospects for stalled UN peace process; Washington 10 Dec sanctioned three Huthi security officials for alleged human rights abuses. Saudi and U.S. officials mid-month blamed Huthis for 13 Dec attack on oil tanker off the port of Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, although Huthis denied responsibility. Saudi and Yemeni govt officials blamed Huthis for what they termed "terrorist" attack on Aden airport on 30 Dec, strengthening case for U.S. designation.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** **President Tebboune returned to Algeria, and authorities condemned Morocco's normalisation agreement with Israel in exchange for U.S. recognition of its sovereignty over Western Sahara.** Tebboune 13 Dec announced that he would direct revision of electoral law, confirming his intention to speed up promulgation of new constitution and organise early legislative and local elections; video published online was his first public appearance since he left for Germany late Oct to receive COVID-19 treatment. Several opposition parties, including those close to pro-democracy Hirak protest movement, declared anew their opposition to current govt and any election. Tebboune 29 Dec returned to Algeria and same day briefly appeared on television. After U.S. 10 Dec recognised Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara and announced normalisation of diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel, PM Abdelaziz Djerad 12 Dec condemned “foreign manoeuvres which aim to destabilise Algeria” and complained of “a desire to bring the Israeli and Zionist entity to our borders”, while FM same day said U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over disputed territory undermined efforts to end decades-long conflict. Meanwhile, army increasingly resorted to warlike tone. In army's monthly magazine El Djeich, military leadership 7 Dec called on Algerians to get ready to face national security threats. In El Ancer area, north-eastern Jijel province, army 1 Dec reportedly killed three al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) combatants, including a regional commander and a member of AQIM's consultative council; more clashes next day reportedly killed soldier; army 16 Dec alleged capturing another AQIM figure. Army 28 Dec said it had retrieved “slice of the ransom” cash – nearly \$100,000 – allegedly paid out in Oct to free hostages held by jihadist groups in neighbouring Mali, during recent operation in Jijel province.

➔ **Egypt** **President Sisi's allies won absolute majority in parliament's lower house, and jihadist insurgency persisted in north Sinai.** Following third and final round of legislative elections 7-8 Dec, Mostaqbal Watan party, loyal to Sisi, increased its share of seats to at least 316 from 53 in 596-seat chamber (Sisi still to appoint 28 deputies); Republican People's Party, another pro-Sisi party, won 50 seats, up from 13; meanwhile opposition further marginalised as several opposition deputies lost seats. Crackdown on dissent continued unabated; NGO Amnesty International 2 Dec said authorities executed at least 57 individuals, including at least 15 sentenced to death in cases relating to political violence, in Oct-Nov alone, nearly twice as many as in 2019. Security forces 3 Dec arrested businessman Sayed Sowerky for allegedly supporting outlawed Muslim Brotherhood. In North Sinai, Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated Sinai Province continued to target security forces and local energy infrastructure. Spate of sniper attacks 2-9 Dec killed at least four soldiers in Bir al-Abd, Sheikh Zuweid and Rafah areas; roadside bomb 18 Dec killed five soldiers south of Sheikh Zuweid town. Suspected jihadists 10 Dec blew up gas pipeline in Sabika area; 24 Dec detonated explosive at natural gas pipeline near Al-Arish city. Counter-insurgency operations continued in Sinai and elsewhere. Army 8 Dec said ground and air operations had killed 40 suspected jihadist militants since Sept across Sinai; next day struck jihadist group near border with Libya in west, reportedly destroying 21 vehicles. Govt continued to strengthen ties with informal anti-Turkey alliance. Joint naval exercise involving

Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece and United Arab Emirates took place 30 Nov-6 Dec off coast of Alexandria city; Sisi 6 Dec met with French President Macron in Paris to discuss regional issues, bilateral relations and military cooperation. FM 30 Dec said it had summoned Ethiopia's top diplomat in Cairo after Addis Ababa 29 Dec said Cairo uses dispute over Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam as "diversion from internal problems".

➔ **Libya** **Implementation of Oct ceasefire agreement continued to falter, while political dialogue aimed at unifying country's divided institutions stalled.** Tripoli-based Govt of National Accord (GNA) 7 Dec accused Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar-led Arab-Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF) of mobilising in south in attempt to take over military base in desert town of Obari; ALAF same day denied claim and instead accused Tripoli of having dispatched "militias, weapons and military equipment toward front lines west of Sirte and Jufra" towns in centre; GNA in following weeks continued to alert foreign partners to suspected ALAF military build-up in south. Meanwhile, ALAF naval forces 7 Dec intercepted Turkish cargo vessel near port city of Derna in east, prompting Turkey's FM to warn that "targeting Turkish interests in Libya will have grave consequences"; ALAF 9 Dec accused Turkey of "undermining Libyan sovereignty and its resources" by "dispatching military equipment" and "transporting mercenaries and foreign fighters to fight" alongside GNA forces. Turkish parliament 22 Dec extended Ankara's direct military support to GNA, including deployment of Turkish troops, for another 18 months. In letter to UN Security Council, UN Sec-Gen Guterres 29 Dec proposed to set up international monitoring group to support ceasefire. Meanwhile, political talks stalled. UN Acting Special Representative for Libya Stephanie Williams 15 Dec said Libyan Political Dialogue Forum (LPDF) failed to agree on mechanism to choose transitional govt to lead country to elections in Dec 2021 despite six online meetings since face-to-face talks in Tunisia in Nov. UN however moved forward with election preparations and 21 Dec established Legal Committee, consisting of 18 LPDF members, tasked with drafting proposals on legal framework for elections. UN Security Council 15 Dec approved Guterres's proposal to appoint Bulgarian diplomat Nickolay Mladenov as UN special envoy for Libya; UN 22 Dec however said Mladenov had declined position due to "personal and family reasons". Meeting of Central Bank of Libya's board of directors held 16 Dec for first time in five years; participants agreed to devalue Libyan dinar and fixed official exchange rate of 4.48lyd/\$, with aim to unify Libya's exchange rate system.

➔ **Morocco** **Govt resumed diplomatic relations with Israel and scored major diplomatic victory in dispute over Western Sahara.** U.S. President Trump 10 Dec announced resumption of diplomatic relations between Morocco and Israel, including immediate reopening of liaison offices in Tel Aviv and Rabat – shut in 2000 – and eventual opening of embassies; as part of deal, U.S. recognised Moroccan sovereignty over disputed Western Sahara. Polisario Front independence movement same day condemned U.S. stance on Western Sahara as "blatant violation" of international law (see Western Sahara). Algerian govt 12 Dec rejected U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, said it undermined efforts to end the decades-long conflict (see Algeria). Israeli National Security Adviser Meir Ben-Shabbat and Trump's senior adviser Jared Kushner 22 Dec met with King Mohammed VI in capital Rabat to expand U.S.-brokered deal; Morocco

and Israel signed four agreements covering direct flights, visa waivers for diplomats, investment and financial facilitations, and water management.

➔ **Tunisia** **Upsurge in political tensions marked tenth anniversary of popular uprising which toppled former President Ben Ali.** Dispute between centre-left Democratic Trend (DT) and populist Karama coalition MPs 7 Dec escalated into brawl in parliament, leaving one DT deputy wounded; violence reportedly erupted after DT MPs accused Karama deputy of making misogynistic comment and called for investigation. Five major parties in parliament same day called for parliamentary immunity to be lifted to allow prosecution of Karama MPs involved in violence. DT leader Mohamed Abbou 9 Dec called for dissolution of parliament and urged President Saïed to deploy army to protect strategic sites to avoid “state collapse”. MP from second largest parliamentary group Qalb Tounes 10 Dec accused those who “try to dissolve parliament” of “coup d’Etat”. Main trade union and political powerbroker UGTT 15 Dec called for national dialogue to prevent deepening of political, social and economic crisis; following meeting with UGTT, Saïed 30 Dec committed to launch national dialogue in coming weeks “to correct the revolution that has deviated from its goals.” Parliament Speaker and Islamist-inspired An-Nahda party leader Rached Ghannouchi next day declared support for UGTT initiative. Authorities 24 Dec arrested Qalb Tounes leader Nabil Karoui on charges of money laundering and tax evasion. On tenth anniversary of beginning of popular uprising against Ben Ali, protesters disillusioned with political class 17 Dec gathered outside parliament in capital Tunis to ask for assembly’s dissolution. Security forces 17 Dec dispersed sit-in of families of those killed and wounded during 2010-2011 uprising at govt square in Tunis. Military same day fired warning shots to disperse protesters asking for jobs and local development as they were blockading trans-Tunisian gas pipeline facilities in Awlad Marzoug town, Kasserine province (centre). Islamic State (ISIS)-affiliated militants 20 Dec kidnapped and beheaded shepherd in Jebel Salloum area, Kasserine province near Algerian border.

➔ **Western Sahara** **Morocco scored major diplomatic victory in battle over disputed Western Sahara while low-level violence continued.** U.S. President Trump 10 Dec announced U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara as part of deal under which Morocco agreed to resume diplomatic relations with Israel (see Morocco). Polisario Front independence movement same day condemned U.S. stance on Western Sahara as “blatant violation” of international law, said Trump “attributes to Morocco something which does not belong [to it]”. Algerian govt 12 Dec rejected U.S. recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara, said it undermined efforts to end decades-long conflict (see Algeria). U.S. Sec State Pompeo 24 Dec launched process to open consulate in Western Saharan city of Dakhla. Meanwhile, Polisario throughout month continued to shell Moroccan defensive positions along East-West sand berm that separates Moroccan-controlled Western Saharan territory from Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic-controlled territory; no significant damages reported.