

# Middle East and North Africa

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## Eastern Mediterranean

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↓ **Israel-Palestine** Flare-up in strikes between Hamas and Israel threatened ceasefire and U.S. President Trump signed decree recognising Israeli sovereignty over Golan Heights, Israeli-occupied Syrian territories. Palestinian militants in Gaza fired rockets into Israel 14 and 25 March, both times provoking heavy Israeli strikes in Gaza. Meanwhile, Egypt continued to mediate between Israel and Hamas. In Gaza, residents protested 14 March against high cost of living and unemployment; Hamas violently cracked down on crowd, and blamed Palestinian Authority (PA) for instigating protests. Tens of thousands of Palestinians protested 30 March on first anniversary of Great March of Return protests; Israeli security forces shot dead four at border. Palestinians launched rockets from Gaza into Israel night of 30-31 March, Israel responded with tank fire. Israel 31 March expanded Palestinian fishing zone off Gaza and opened Erez and Kerem Shalom border crossings. In West Bank, Israeli security forces shot dead six Palestinians in five incidents, including one suspected of killing Israeli soldier and Rabbi near Ariel 17 March, and 27 March detained thirteen Palestinians for “suspected involvement in popular hostile activities”. Mohammed Shtayyeh 10 March appointed PM of PA; Hamas said new govt unconstitutional as not ratified by now dissolved Palestinian Legislative Council. PA same day announced emergency budget, following late Feb statement that it would not accept taxes collected by Israel on its behalf as long as Israel withheld taxes owed to families of, what PA called, martyrs. In Jerusalem, U.S. Consulate General – responsible for Palestinian affairs – 4 March closed with functions taken over by U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem. U.S. President Trump 25 March signed decree recognising Israeli sovereignty over Golan Heights, overturning decades of U.S. policy and drawing global condemnation; UN said “status of Golan has not changed”. Israel 27 March carried out airstrike near Aleppo in northern Syria reportedly targeting Iranian weapons depot and killing several Iraqi and Iranian fighters.

➔ **Lebanon** U.S. Sec State Pompeo 21 March met PM Hariri in Beirut, stating “Lebanon faces a choice; bravely move forward as an independent and proud nation or allow the dark ambitions of Iran and Hezbollah to dictate your future”. Following UK’s decision to classify Hizbollah in its entirety as “terrorist organisation” late Feb, Hizbollah 8 March called for donations as it claimed Western sanctions had put it under financial pressure; party leader warned other countries may follow UK’s example and U.S. sanctions may get tougher.

➔ **Syria** Turkey began patrols in Idlib in north west to help contain violence even as govt and Russia upped bombing there; Kurdish-led forces took Islamic State’s (ISIS) last holdout in east; and anti-govt protests erupted in Daraa in south. In north west, govt and Russian airstrikes 13-23 March killed 35 civilians and damaged Idlib prison, enabling dozens of ISIS and pro-govt prisoners to escape. Russian warplanes 10 March struck “White Helmets” first responders, killing two. Jihadist coalition Hei’at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and other militants attacked govt forces in areas surrounding de-escalation zone. Turkey-backed rebels 9 March attacked govt positions in Hama governorate. Male suicide bomber 1 March killed seven civilians in Idlib

city, prompting HTS to execute ten detained alleged ISIS members. Turkey 8 and 15 March launched first two patrols in demilitarised strip around de-escalation zone. Israel 27 March carried out airstrike near Aleppo, reportedly targeting Iranian weapons depot, killing several Iraqi and Iranian fighters. Regarding north east, U.S. 29 March said it would withdraw half of its 2,000 troops by early May, with further withdrawals dependent on developments. Turkish President Erdoğan 6 March reiterated demand for Turkish-controlled 30km-wide safe zone along Turkish border, refusing compromise with Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Syrian govt 18 March insisted on full U.S. withdrawal and refused to concede any autonomy to YPG-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). In east, SDF renewed assault on ISIS in Baghouz near Iraqi border; 23 March claimed "total elimination" of ISIS caliphate in Syria. In south, residents of Daraa 10 March protested against govt decision to erect statue of former President Hafez al-Assad, and suspected rebel sleeper cells continued attacks on pro-govt forces. U.S. President Trump 25 March signed decree recognising Israeli sovereignty over Golan Heights, Syrian territories which Israel occupied in 1967, overturning decades of U.S. policy and drawing global condemnation; Syria called move "blatant attack" on its territorial integrity, UN said "status of Golan has not changed".

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## **Gulf and Arabian Peninsula**

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➔ **Iran** International Atomic Energy Agency 6 March published quarterly report confirming Iran has continued to abide by terms of 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Special Trade and Finance Institute (STFI), Iranian sister organisation of Instrument for Supporting Trade Exchanges (INSTEX), mechanism created by European JCPOA members in Jan to facilitate Iran's purchases of humanitarian goods, formally registered in Iran 19 March. President Rouhani 11-13 March visited Iraq, first time as president, meeting senior Iraqi politicians, businessmen and religious leaders, including Grand Ayatollah Sistani. Iran and Iraq signed five memoranda of understanding to deepen economic and diplomatic ties. Iranian officials and counterparts from France, Germany, UK and Italy convened 18 March under Iran-E4 framework in Brussels to discuss regional issues, notably Yemen. Supreme Leader Khamenei 7 March appointed hardliner Ebrahim Raisi as new Chief Justice, to replace Sadeq Larijani, appointed as new chairman of Expediency Council – constitutional arbitrator between parliament and Guardian Council. U.S. 22 March issued sanctions designation against 31 individuals and entities linked to Iranian nuclear program; 26 March issued sanctions on additional companies and individuals in Iran, Turkey and United Arab Emirates for alleged sanctions evasion. Israel 27 March carried out airstrike near Aleppo in northern Syria reportedly targeting Iranian weapons depot and killing several Iraqi and Iranian fighters.

➔ **Iraq** Iranian President Rouhani visited Iraq for first time as president and leading Kurdish parties agreed to share power in Kurdistan, as Islamic State (ISIS) kept up insurgency. Rouhani visited Iraq 11-13 March, meeting President Salih and PM Mahdi and signing MoUs for joint projects involving energy sector, trade and railway infrastructure. In Najaf, site of Shiite shrine, Rouhani met Shiite cleric Sistani, who insisted that Iraqi govt must take control of Popular Mobilisation Units (PMU) Shiite militias, some of whose factions are considered loyal to Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). U.S. Treasury 6 March blacklisted PMU faction Harakat al-Nujaba

close to IRGC. U.S. 19 March granted govt new 90-day sanction waiver so it could continue importing energy from Iran. In Kurdistan, two leading parties, Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), 4 March reached deal to speed up formation of regional govt, allocating high executive and security positions to KDP and making PUK junior partner. Parliament 27 March voted to sack Ninewa's governor Nawfal Hammadi al-Sultan after at least 90 people killed in ferry accident in provincial capital Mosul. ISIS-related clashes continued: insurgents 6 March ambushed PMU on Mosul-Kirkuk road, killing six; in Mosul, car bomb killed two 8 March; in north Baghdad, militants 19 March killed three soldiers; security forces arrested five alleged ISIS members in east Mosul 20 March. After Syrian rebels Syrian Democratic Forces transferred some 400 suspected ISIS foreign fighters from Syria to Iraq, Iraqi authorities 15 March initiated court proceedings against fourteen French nationals. In north, Turkish air raids 3-6 March targeted Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) positions in Haftanin and Hakurk areas; Iraqi army 17-19 March clashed with PKK-backed Yezidi militias in Sinjar district, five militia members and two soldiers killed; talks late month between militias and army chief of staff eased fighting.

➡ **Qatar** During Russian FM Lavrov's tour of Gulf states, Lavrov 4 March discussed with FM Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdulrahman Al-Thani possible sale of Russian S-400 missile defence system to Doha, despite U.S. and Saudi opposition. Govt early March hosted further round of U.S.-Taliban talks in Doha (see Afghanistan).

➡ **Saudi Arabia** International pressure on govt mounted due to its role in Yemen war and Jamal Khashoggi's killing in Oct. Germany 6 March extended temporary ban on arms exports to Saudi Arabia until end month, citing concerns over govt's military conduct in Yemen; 28 March extended ban for six more months to 30 Sept. U.S. Senate 13 March adopted resolution aimed at ending U.S. support to Saudi-led coalition in Yemen; legislation U.S. President Trump has said he would veto. Interpol 14 March issued arrest warrants at Turkey's request for twenty people allegedly involved in killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Saudi consulate in Istanbul in Oct; list includes two of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's close aides. Same day, Saudi human rights commission dismissed international investigation into killing saying govt had already taken necessary measures to resolve matter. Trial of ten female activists for allegedly conspiring with foreign entities began 13 March amid outcry in Western press, particularly amid reports that they had suffered torture and other forms of ill-treatment including sexual abuse. King Salman 27 March met Libyan commander of eastern military coalition Khalifa Haftar. Under pressure from Saudi Arabia, European govts 1 March blocked publication of EU blacklist of jurisdictions at high risk of being used for money laundering and terror financing, which includes Saudi Arabia.

➡ **United Arab Emirates** During Russian FM Lavrov's visit as part of 4-7 March Gulf tour, United Arab Emirates (UAE) govt and Lavrov discussed political transition in Syria. Govt end Feb announced it would deploy 5G mobile phone network in partnership with Chinese tech giant Huawei, despite U.S. lobbying against move.

⬇️ 🌐\* **Yemen** Fighting escalated in Taiz and Hajja governorates and continued elsewhere, and implementation of Dec Stockholm Agreement stalled, raising risk that warring parties resume combat around Hodeida port and city. Govt and Huthis failed to redeploy forces away from front-line positions in and around Hodeida, as agreed in Feb, as both sides raised objections to redeployment plan; primary point

of contention was composition of local security forces due to assume control of city and ports after redeployment. UK FM Hunt 3 March warned Stockholm process “could be dead within weeks” if sides did not stick to commitments. U.S. Envoy Matthew Tueller 21 March publicly blamed Huthis for delays in implementation and said weapons in non-state actors’ possession posed threat to “neighbouring countries”. Huthis 17 March said they had intelligence that Saudi-led coalition planned to escalate violence in Hodeida and that they were ready to strike capitals of Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirates if implementation of deal is breached. Other components of Stockholm Agreement also remained stalled, including prisoner exchange and talks over contested city of Taiz in south. Fighting escalated in Taiz in second part of month between nominally allied pro-govt Yemeni groups; medical facilities late March received two dead and 49 wounded in four days. After flaring in Feb, fighting intensified in Hajja governorate in north west between al-Hajour tribes and Huthis; UN 11 March reported 22 civilians killed in attacks in Hajja’s Kushar district, and Saudi-led coalition reported Huthi shelling of houses killed several tribesmen. Huthis prevailed in Kushar, allegedly killing several key local leaders. NGO Save the Children said missile 26 March struck petrol station near entrance to hospital it supports about 100km from Saada in north killing seven people, including four children; U.S. 28 March urged Saudi-led coalition to conduct transparent investigation into bombing. U.S. Senate 13 March adopted resolution aimed at ending U.S. support to Saudi-led coalition in Yemen; legislation President Trump has said he would veto. Germany 6 March extended temporary ban on arms exports to Saudi Arabia until end month, citing concerns over Saudi Arabia’s conduct in Yemen.

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## North Africa

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📌🌐\* **Algeria** Facing nationwide protests, President Bouteflika agreed not to run for fifth term, postponed elections indefinitely and promised reform; army and ruling party called on constitutional council to declare him unfit to rule and initiate transition, but some protesters rejected plan, demanding end of regime, heightening uncertainty and political volatility in coming weeks. While Bouteflika in hospital in Geneva, his campaign manager 3 March submitted Bouteflika’s candidacy for 18 April elections ahead of his term’s end 28 April. Bouteflika same day promised early elections if he won and reforms including constitutional referendum; protesters rejected promises. Following mass protests 8 March, Bouteflika 10 March returned to Algeria, 11 March postponed sine die presidential elections, withdrawing his candidacy, and said national conference would decide new date for elections. Same day, he replaced PM Ouyahia with Interior Minister Bedoui, and tasked him with appointing new govt. Several Bouteflika allies stepped down: Ali Haddad 28 March resigned as president of Business Leaders’ Forum (FCE), authorities 31 March arrested him after he tried to cross Tunisian border; former Agriculture Minister Sid Ahmed Ferroukhi resigned as MP for ruling party National Liberation Front (FLN) 4 March. Interim FLN leader Moab Bouchareb 20 March backed Bouteflika’s transition roadmap. Over ten million people took part in weekly protests after Friday prayers 15, 22 and 29 March, but opposition struggled to form united front. Loose opposition coalition National Coordination for Change (CNC) 18 March called for dissolution of parliament and urged Bouteflika to hand over power to temporary collective presi-

dency when his term ends. Army Chief of Staff Gaïd Salah 26 March called on constitutional council to rule Bouteflika unfit for office; parliament would have to ratify council's decision with two-thirds majority. Ruling FLN said it backed army's initiative. Protesters called not just for Bouteflika's resignation but also end of regime.

➔ **Egypt** Parliament continued constitutional amendment process to extend presidential mandate and increase term limits amid ongoing repression of dissenting voices. Following 14 Feb vote to begin deliberation on constitution, parliament 20-28 March held hearings with religious, economic, social and political representatives to propose changes. Constitutional and Legislative Affairs Committee to draft constitutional articles according to proposed amendments and submit them to vote in parliament by mid-April, followed by national referendum. In Sinai, military 11 March reported 46 Islamic State (ISIS) militants and three soldiers killed, without disclosing dates or locations. In Cairo, prosecutors 25 March referred 28 people to court on charges of joining ISIS and al-Qaeda; 30 March sentenced 30 alleged ISIS members over plot to attack church. Repression intensified after protests over govt response to 28 Feb train crash: authorities 28 Feb-3 March arrested 70 people in Cairo, Giza, Alexandria and Beheira; 4 March released ten and 7 March charged 35 with terrorism and spreading false news. Human rights groups 13-16 March denounced police torture of two transgender activists. Exiled television commentator Moataz Matar 4 March accused authorities of abducting eight of his family members.

➔ **Libya** Fighting eased in south and UN renewed efforts to mediate agreement between head of eastern military coalition Field Marshall Khalifa Haftar and PM of Tripoli-based internationally-recognised Govt of National Accord (GNA) Faiez Serraj to form new unity govt and unify state institutions, including military. Following Haftar-Serraj meeting 27 Feb in United Arab Emirates under UN auspices, UN Envoy Ghassan Salamé early March shuttled between them or their advisors in Libya. To show support for potential Haftar-Serraj deal, French FM Le Drian visited Tripoli and Benghazi 18-19 March, and commander of U.S. Africa Command Thomas Waldhauser visited Tripoli 19 March. After months of delay, Salamé 20 March said National Conference, part of UN Action Plan, would take place mid-April in desert city of Ghaddames in west near borders with Algeria and Tunisia, but did not disclose agenda nor list of invitees. At meeting of Libya Quartet (League of Arab States, African Union (AU), EU and UN) in Tunis 30 March, AU President Moussa Faki announced national reconciliation conference would be held in Addis Ababa in July. Local elections took place in nine municipalities in country's first voting for five years; turnout low at 38%, electoral commission said local elections would take place in about 60 other municipalities in coming weeks. Fighting eased in south as Haftar's Libyan National Army consolidated control, following offensive launched in Jan, and oil production resumed in Sharara oil field, closed since Dec.

➔ **Mauritania** Ahead of presidential election planned for later this year, Defence Minister Mohamed El Ghazouani 1 March confirmed he would be ruling majority's candidate. Leaders of opposition platform including National Forum for Democracy and Unity (FNDU) and Rally of Democratic Forces (RFD) 12 March failed to reach agreement on common candidate; 27 March called for dissolution of electoral commission and formation of new one with greater opposition representation. Former

PM Sidi Mohamed Ould Boubacar 30 March said he would stand in presidential election as independent candidate, with support from opposition Islamist party Te-wassoul.

➡ **Morocco** Police 23 March fired water cannon to disperse some 15,000 teachers protesting low-wage temporary contracts outside parliament in capital Rabat in continuation of month-long protest movement; thousands demonstrated again next day. Govt took part in second round of talks with Western Sahara's Polisario Front independence movement 21-22 March under UN auspices in Geneva, in presence of Algeria and Mauritania. UN envoy for Western Sahara Horst Köhler said parties had agreed to continue discussions, but there was "still a lot of work ahead".

➡ **Tunisia** Political manoeuvring continued ahead of elections planned for late 2019. Electoral commission 6 March said legislative elections would take place 6 Oct and first round of presidential election 10 Nov. Several centrist politicians joined PM Chahed's new political party. Authorities detained UN official tasked with investigating alleged violations of UN arms embargo on Libya in Tunis 26 March on suspicion of spying. UN late March asked Tunisia to free UN official, stressed he had diplomatic immunity.

➡ **Western Sahara** Morocco and Polisario Front independence movement 21-22 March held second round of talks under UN auspices in Geneva, in presence of Algeria and Mauritania. UN envoy for Western Sahara Horst Köhler said parties had agreed to continue discussions, but there was "still a lot of work ahead".