

Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

➔ **Israel-Palestine** Israel signed bilateral normalisation agreements with United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain; Hamas and Fatah announced deal to hold elections and tit-for-tat attacks broke out between Gaza militants and Israel. At White House ceremony, PM Netanyahu alongside Emirati and Bahraini FMs 15 Sept signed deal to normalise relations. Ahead of signing, President Abbas 3 Sept chaired meeting with Palestinian factions, including Hamas, to define unified response, calling for formation of popular committees to oversee resistance activities against occupation and later stressing need to unite Palestinian political system. At Arab League meeting, UAE and Bahrain 9 Sept defended deal by citing Israel's commitment to halt prospective West Bank annexation. Following failure of Palestinian efforts to get Arab League to pass resolution condemning deals, Palestinian PM Mohammed Ishtayeh 14 Sept called for reconsidering relations with league, describing forum as "a symbol of Arab inaction". Hamas and Fatah 24 Sept announced deal to hold Palestinian Authority (PA) legislative elections, PA presidential elections and Central Council elections for the Palestinian Liberation Organisation. Across West Bank, Israeli security operations led to numerous arrests and clashes that caused injury of at least 70 Palestinians and two Israelis; notably, Israel 7 Sept detained over 45 Palestinians in Hebron in largest arrest campaign this year while skirmishes between Palestinians and settlers near Ramallah early Sept broke out. In sign of Israel's ongoing de facto annexation of West Bank, Israeli Defence Minister Benny Gantz 6 Sept approved construction of 5,000 settler housing units. In Gaza, Egyptian delegation 10 Sept visited amid efforts to mediate prisoner exchange talks between Hamas and Israel. Despite late Aug ceasefire between Israel and Hamas, armed factions 15 Sept protested normalisation deals by firing around 15 rockets into southern Israel, wounding two in Ashdod; Israeli air force retaliated with airstrikes. Meanwhile, COVID-19 cases continue to rise in Gaza despite lockdown, heightening fears of major outbreak in blockaded territory. In Israel, coronavirus cases rose rapidly; govt 13 Sept imposed a three-week national lockdown. Weekly anti-govt protests continued despite health restrictions: thousands 12 Sept gathered outside PM Netanyahu's residence denouncing corruption and govt's handling of pandemic.

↓ **Lebanon** New PM-designate resigned after failing to form govt amid deepening political polarisation, increased U.S. pressure on Hizbollah and clashes in capital Beirut. Following govt's resignation last month, French President Emmanuel Macron 1 Sept arrived in Beirut to pressure political elite to kickstart reforms to counter deteriorating economic crisis and secure commitment from new PM-designate Adib – former ambassador to Germany appointed PM-designate 31 Aug – to form govt within 15 days. However, by mid-Sept deadline Adib failed to form new govt due to dispute over allocation of finance portfolio and U.S.-France disagreement over role of Hizbollah. Adib 26 Sept resigned citing govt formation gridlock; Macron next day said there would be "serious consequences" for politicians who failed to uphold deal. Meanwhile, U.S. increased financial pressure on companies and individuals linked to Hizbollah: U.S. Treasury 9 Sept sanctioned Hizbollah allies, former Finance Minister Ali Hassan Khalil and Youssef Finianos of

the Christian Marada Movement; 17 Sept sanctioned two Lebanese companies and one individual for allegedly funneling funds to Hizbollah. President Macron expressed concern over sanctions, warning that confrontation with Hizbollah could further hamper reform efforts. In sign of worsening security across country, violence between rival political groups broke out in Beirut: in Tariq al-Jdide neighbourhood, clashes involving rifles and rocket-propelled grenades 7 Sept erupted between Sunni groups affiliated with former PM Saad Hariri and followers of his brother Bahaa, killing one and injuring two; in eastern suburb, clashes 14 Sept broke out between Christian party Free Patriotic Movement and Lebanese Forces. Four Lebanese soldiers 14 Sept killed in operation to apprehend alleged jihadist militant suspected of planning late Aug attack in Kaftoun village that killed three people; shootout between army and jihadist militants 27 Sept killed three near Miniyeh. Daily COVID-19 cases 14 Sept surged past 1,000 for the first time since outbreak. Accidental explosion at suspected Hizbollah arms depot 22 Sept rocked southern town of Ain Qana, reportedly causing four casualties.

➡ **Syria** **Ceasefire in north west faced new strains, jihadist group Hei'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) sought to consolidate control in Idlib, and Islamic State (ISIS) stepped up deadly attacks.** In north west, March ceasefire continued to hold despite daily shelling in southern Idlib and western Aleppo countryside; Russia 25 Sept conducted some 30 airstrikes in opposition-controlled areas, marking highest uptick in strikes since ceasefire. Following late-Aug attacks on Russian-Turkish patrols along M4 highway by unidentified assailants, Russian and Turkish forces 1 Sept held joint military trainings; Russia 15 Sept however declined participation in joint patrol, triggering speculation of impasse between countries over Idlib; Turkish FM 16 Sept described meeting between Turkish and Russian military officials as not “fruitful” while Russian FM Lavrov 21 Sept assured patrolling “would resume soon”. In Idlib, jihadist rebel group HTS reportedly cracked down on rival factions: group early Sept detained French jihadist Omar Omsen and members of rival faction Hizb al-Tahrir; alleged U.S. drone 14 Sept killed two senior commanders of Hurras al-Din – jihadist group competing with HTS – in move likely to aid HTS consolidation in Idlib city; HTS 27 Sept killed two Iraqi ISIS senior commanders in Salqin, Idlib. Confrontations between ISIS militants and regime persisted in area between Aleppo, Hama and Raqqa, raising concerns of jihadist resurgence: fighting first week of Sept killed 48 regime soldiers and 22 ISIS fighters; ISIS militants 7 Sept took control of Doubayat gas field in Homs briefly before Russian forces regained control; heavy fighting between Syrian Army and ISIS in Raqqa province 19-22 Sept reportedly killed at least 64 on both sides. In south west, high-profile assassinations targeted regime: unknown gunmen 1 Sept reportedly killed Syrian Arab Army 5th Corps leader Abdel Salam al-Masri; unknown assailants 2 Sept killed govt officer in Nawa; alleged ISIS assassinations against regime-affiliated senior figures continued, 10-15 Sept killing at least six military commanders. In north east, U.S. Central Command 18 Sept announced additional force deployments following collision last month with Russian military vehicles. Meanwhile, Israeli airstrikes 3, 11 Sept struck Iran-linked targets near Iraqi border and Aleppo, respectively.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Iran** U.S. ratcheted up pressure on Iran by unilaterally declaring restoration of all pre-nuclear deal UN sanctions on Iran, despite widespread international opposition to move. After triggering “snapback” mechanism of Resolution 2231 in Aug, U.S. 19 Sept declared “the return of virtually all previously terminated UN sanctions” on Iran that were lifted following Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), warning that it will use its “domestic authorities” if UN member states fail to implement sanctions. However, UK, German and French (E3) UN envoys 20 Sept reiterated their view that U.S. snapback notification “is incapable of having legal effect” and restoration of pre-2231 sanctions “would also be incapable of having any legal effect”. Given wide divergence between U.S. on one side and UN Security Council members and JCPOA signatories on other, President Rouhani 16 Sept said U.S. “was left alone” at UN, and hailed its failure as “great and historic victory”. U.S. rolled out sanctions throughout month: Treasury 3 Sept blacklisted six entities linked to already-sanctioned petrochemical company; Treasury 17 Sept unveiled sanctions against “Iranian cyber threat group Advanced Persistent Threat 39 (APT39)”; executive order 21 Sept accompanied by “sweeping” nuclear, missile and conventional arms designations; State Dept 24 Sept blacklisted Iranian judicial officials and entities for human rights violations. Meanwhile, Joint Commission of JCPOA 1 Sept convened with all sides underscoring continued commitment to salvaging nuclear deal; in positive sign, International Atomic Energy Agency Director General 14 Sept confirmed that agency had already visited one of two sites previously in dispute with Iran and expected to inspect second site soon. Non-nuclear tensions persisted with U.S.; President Trump 14 Sept echoed media report that Iran may be planning attack against U.S. in retaliation for killing of Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) commander Qassem Soleimani in Jan and vowed retaliation “1,000 times greater in magnitude!”; IRGC head 19 Sept remarked “we will target those who had an either direct or indirect role” in attack. Amid concern of third wave of COVID-19 infections, national currency 20 Sept hit a historic low of 273,000 rial to dollar.

➔ **Iraq** PM Kadhimi embarked on major govt reshuffle amid persistent attacks on U.S.-led coalition forces and partial withdrawal of U.S. troops. In significant govt reshuffle, PM Kadhimi 14 Sept replaced heads of Central Bank and Trade Bank of Iraq, mayor of Baghdad, and eight deputy ministers; opposition coalitions Sairoon Alliance, al-Fatah and State of Law 15 Sept separately criticised move, while Baghdad protesters same day accused PM of sectarian motivations. Kadhimi 14 Sept also replaced heads of Iraqi National Intelligence Service and provincial command centres in Anbar, Basra, Diyala and Salah al-Din. In sign of support for govt’s program, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani 13 Sept wrote letter to Kadhimi in support of early elections and called on govt to combat corruption, control border crossings and confiscate illegal arms. Meanwhile, authorities 16-17 Sept arrested senior govt employees – heads of Iraq’s retirement fund and Baghdad’s investment commission – as well as CEO of electronic payment company Q-card as part of PM’s anti-corruption drive. Attacks on U.S.-led coalition forces continued: numerous IED attacks 3-19 Sept targeted foreign diplomats and supply convoys of coalition forces, reportedly killing one and injuring another; unidentified groups 15-16 and 22 Sept fired rockets at green zone; rocket attack 28 Sept near Baghdad’s airport killed five civilians. Following successful rounds of U.S.-Iraq “strategic dialogue” in Washington DC, U.S. 9 Sept declared force drawdown

from 5,200 to 3,000 troops as U.S. Central Command cited advances in Iraqi forces' capacity to fight Islamic State (ISIS). U.S. 25 Sept informed Baghdad of intention to close embassy unless govt helped stop attacks on U.S. personnel. ISIS-related violence and military operations against group continued: Iraqi security forces and coalition 10-14 Sept killed at least 14 ISIS militants in Ninewa, Salah ad-Din, Kirkuk, Anbar and Diyala; ISIS attacks around Diyala and Kirkuk 12-17 Sept killed at least 11; later in month, Popular Mobilization Forces 19 Sept killed five ISIS fighters south of Mosul. Kadhimi 10 Sept completed first visit to Erbil, raising prospect of improved relations between Baghdad and Kurdistan Autonomous Region and expectation of upcoming new security arrangements in disputed territories.

➔ **Saudi Arabia Huthis throughout month launched cross-border missile attacks on Saudi Arabia.** Huthis 10 Sept claimed they launched missile and drone attack from Yemen on "important target" in Saudi capital Riyadh; Saudi state media 20 Sept reported Huthi attack on village in southern Jizan province wounded five civilians. Uptick in Huthi attacks prompted by apparent attempt to force Riyadh into renewing direct talks with Huthi leaders in hope it would allow group to sidestep Yemen's Hadi govt in peace process; Huthis mid-Sept claimed their communications channels with Saudis have become more active since early Sept. Saudi authorities 28 Sept said security forces detained ten individuals after uncovering "terrorist cell" allegedly linked to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

➔ **United Arab Emirates Country signed historic normalisation deal with Israel.** United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain 15 Sept signed bilateral normalisation agreements with Israel at White House ceremony in Washington DC, U.S.; deal paves way for greater cooperation between two Gulf states and Israel in areas of defence, tourism, trade, and cybersecurity.

➔ **Bahrain Country signed historic normalisation deal with Israel.** Bahrain and United Arab Emirates (UAE) 15 Sept signed bilateral normalisation agreements with Israel at White House ceremony in Washington DC, U.S.; deal paves way for greater cooperation between two Gulf states and Israel in areas of defence, tourism, trade, and cybersecurity. News of agreement was met with some local opposition, with small protests mid-month erupting across country; 17 political and civil society groups 18 Sept signed petition expressing opposition to agreement; hashtag "Bahrainis Against Normalization" 15 Sept became top trending social media topic in country.

➔ **Yemen Huthi military campaign continued in north amid renewed clashes around Hodeida port; in south, govt and separatists resumed talks.** In north, Huthis throughout month made new gains in oil-rich Marib governorate and consolidated control over territory in neighbouring al-Bayda governorate. Huthis mid-Sept negotiated truce with elements of Murad tribe in al-Mahaliya, thereafter claiming to control the territory. Huthis also continued to launch cross-border missile attacks on Saudi Arabia in apparent attempt to force Riyadh into renewing direct talks that they hoped would allow them to side-step Hadi govt in peace process; Huthis early Sept claimed communications channels with Saudis had become more active. In Taiz in north, clashes early Sept broke out between United Arab Emirates (UAE)-affiliated and govt forces on one hand and Islah-backed military and security forces on other; UAE-backed forces also clashed

with Huthi fighters around Red Sea port city of Hodeida throughout month, raising prospect that Huthis may withdraw from Dec 2018 Stockholm agreement that prevented govt assault on Hodeida. Hadi govt continued to halt fuel imports to Hodeida port amid ongoing spat with Huthis over collection of revenues. In south, govt and separatist Southern Transition Council (STC) mid-Sept resumed power-sharing talks after STC withdrew from talks late Aug citing govt attacks on its forces; both sides, however, continued tit-for-tat attacks in Abyan governorate. Meanwhile, on diplomatic front, UN Special Envoy Martin Griffiths mid-Sept presented latest draft of his “Joint Declaration” initiative to Huthis and Hadi govt; initiative calls for nationwide ceasefire, economic and humanitarian confidence-building measures and national political talks. Hadi govt and Huthis 27 Sept agreed on prisoner exchange deal first outlined in Stockholm agreement following talks in Geneva, Switzerland; Huthis to release 400 prisoners while govt will release 681 prisoners in deal Griffiths hailed as “very important milestone”; exchanges to take place mid-Oct.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria** **Series of court cases marked restricted space for media and civil society.** Appeal court 15 Sept sentenced journalist Khaled Drareni to two years in prison, reducing his original three-year sentence, on charges of “inciting an unarmed gathering” and “undermining the integrity of the national territory”. NGO Reporters without Borders immediately condemned “unfair and violent repression”. Court of Ténès 17 Sept sentenced Hirak figure and former policeman Toufik Hassani to two years in prison on charges of “threatening police agents” and “divulging professional secrets on Facebook”. Govt 21 Sept banned French TV M6 from operating in Algeria after it broadcast documentary on Hirak protest movement. Court in Akbou 27 Sept sentenced former opposition politician Khaled Tazaghart to one year in prison on charges of “inciting an unarmed gathering” and “disrupting public order”; thousands 29 Sept reportedly took to streets in neighbouring Tazmalt town, Bejaia province, to call for his release. Court in Bordj Bou Arreridj 27 Sept sentenced Hirak figure Brahim Laalami to three years in prison on unclear charges; Laalami was arrested 9 Sept after he was released from prison 30 Aug. Dozens of lawyers 27 Sept held sit-in in capital Algiers to demand independent judiciary and right to counsel. Bar association 30 Sept started nationwide two-day strike to demand “respect for the right to a defence”. Amid major economic downturn, President Tebboune 20 Sept said oil rent was over.

↓ **Egypt** **Demonstrations broke out across country calling for President Sisi to resign; security forces deployed in main cities in response.** Hundreds of anti-Sisi protesters 20 Sept took to streets in capital Cairo, Alexandria, Aswan and Suez cities and smaller towns after Spain-based businessman Mohamed Ali (who had sparked wave of protests in Sept 2019) called for new demonstrations against political repression, corruption and economic crisis. Protesters reportedly set presidential residence in Aswan on fire and attacked several police vehicles; security forces fired tear gas and arrested dozens. After several days of lower-scale demonstrations, thousands 25 Sept took to streets notably in Cairo, Giza and Luxor cities; one protester reportedly killed in unclear circumstances in Al-Blida village, Giza governorate. In days before protests, govt deployed security forces

in main cities, particularly Cairo, where they reportedly carried out random checks and inspections of passers-by. Earlier in month, around 300 protesters 7 Sept gathered outside police station in Giza governorate to protest death in custody of shopkeeper, who was reportedly detained after refusing to bribe police officer on 5 Sept. Ahead of elections for lower house of parliament due to take place by end of year, main pro-Sisi party Mostaqbal Watan 13 Sept unveiled coalition of 16 parties. In North Sinai, military forces late Aug-early Sept reportedly regained control of several villages in Bir Al-Abd area seized by Islamic State (ISIS) in July. Negotiations with Ethiopia over Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam remained at a standstill (see Nile Waters). High-level Egyptian delegation 14 Sept met with eastern Libya leaders Aguila Saleh and Khalifa Haftar in Benghazi city in Libya notably to discuss resumption of oil exports; Haftar 18 Sept agreed to lift months-long oil blockade and oil sales resumed 26 Sept (see Libya).

↑ **Libya Oil exports resumed after rival camps brokered deal to lift months-long oil sector blockade, and rival PMs pledged to step down amid protests.** East-based strongman Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar 18 Sept agreed to lift eight-month oil sector blockade and allow resumption of oil sales; move followed weeks of intense diplomatic efforts and meeting between Haftar's camp and west-based UN-backed PM Serraj's Deputy Ahmed Meitig in Russia mid-Sept. Central Bank and officials in Tripoli late Sept distanced themselves from deal on grounds that Meitig made too many financial concessions to Haftar camp, but oil exports resumed 26 Sept. Ceasefires declared by rival east-based House of Representatives' head Aguila Saleh and Serraj in Aug mostly held, despite Haftar's Arab-Libyan Armed Forces (ALAF) shelling UN-backed Govt of National Accord (GNA) forces' headquarters west of strategic city of Sirte 1 Sept. Heads of rival assemblies, Saleh and Tripoli-based High State Council's Khaled Mishri 6-10 Sept met in Morocco and agreed to start consultations on appointment of five top institutional posts, including Central Bank governor; leaders also agreed to appoint members of their institutions to participate in UN-mediated talks scheduled to restart in Oct, with aim to reach agreement on new unified govt to guide country toward general elections within 18 months. Protests against corruption and worsening living conditions subsided in west but continued in east. Protesters 13 Sept set fire to govt headquarters in Benghazi city and attacked police station in al-Marj town, prompting police to fire live ammunition, leaving one dead and several wounded. Amid unrest and in alleged attempt to pressure representatives of various factions to agree on new unity govt, rival PMs announced their intention to step down. East-based PM Abdullah al-Thani 14 Sept tendered his resignation to Saleh, who left him in caretaker capacity until lawmakers review his resignation. Serraj 16 Sept said UN-brokered talks have led to "new preparatory phase" to unify institutions and announced his intention to resign by end of Oct. Two militias loyal to GNA 24 Sept clashed in Tripoli suburb of Tajoura, leaving at least three killed and several wounded.

➔ **Tunisia Parliament approved new govt, while Islamic State (ISIS) launched deadly attack on security forces.** Parliament 2 Sept approved PM-designate Hichem Mechichi's technocratic govt with 134 votes out of 217; move followed weeks of power struggle between President Saïed and major parties in parliament after Saïed late July tasked Mechichi with forming new technocratic govt, disregarding balance of forces in parliament; Islamist-inspired party An-Nahda, largest group in parliament, eventually backed Mechichi citing country's "difficult situation". Three suspected jihadists 6 Sept attacked national guard checkpoint in Akouda town near Sousse city, killing one officer and wounding another; security forces subsequently killed all three and arrested dozens suspected of involvement; ISIS next day claimed responsibility for jihadist attack.