



Middle East and North Africa

Eastern Mediterranean

⚡🔴 **Israel/Palestine** Israel launched long-feared Rafah offensive, displacing around 1m and exacerbating risk of famine, as international prosecutor sought arrest warrants for Israeli and Hamas leaders; domestic pressure mounted on Netanyahu.

Israel launched deadly and destructive offensive in Rafah. Israel killed over 1,700 Palestinians in May, bringing death toll since Oct to at least 36,224. Israeli forces 7 May launched ground invasion in eastern Rafah and gradually expanded assault into city, prompting around 1m of 1.4m seeking refuge there to flee; Israel same day occupied Rafah crossing and closed all humanitarian aid deliveries, worsening famine conditions. World Food Programme 22 May warned humanitarian operations are “near collapse”. International Court of Justice 24 May ordered Israel to halt Rafah offensive yet Israel continued advance; Israeli strike in Rafah 27 May killed at least 45, including many women and children. Alleged Israeli strike next day targeted camp in so-called “safe zone” hosting displaced in al-Mawasi, killing at least 21. Exchange of fire with Egyptian forces at border crossing 27 May killed Egyptian soldier; Israel 29 May announced full control of 14km “Philadelphi Corridor” along Gaza-Egyptian border (see Egypt). Meanwhile, Israel continued ground incursions in north, namely Jabalia city and areas around Gaza city, where Hamas demonstrated its ability to regroup and battle Israeli forces in areas previously “cleared”. Hamas 3-6 May launched attacks on Kerem Shalom crossing, killing four Israeli soldiers, and 26 May launched first rockets at Tel Aviv since Jan. Gaza’s authorities 8 May announced discovery of seventh mass grave of Palestinian bodies at a hospital.

Israel rejected ceasefire; International Criminal Court (ICC) mulled leaders’ arrest. Hamas 6 May accepted Qatar- and Egypt-mediated ceasefire proposal, which Israel 8 May rejected. ICC prosecutor Karim Khan 20 May sought arrest warrants against Israeli PM Netanyahu, Defence Minister Yoav Gallant and three Hamas leaders.

Israel’s war cabinet faced widening cracks. Gallant 15 May criticised Netanyahu for failure to provide “day-after” Gaza plan. War cabinet member Benny Gantz 18 May criticised Netanyahu for acting in personal interests and 30 May proposed vote to dissolve parliament to bring elections.

Israel raided West Bank and battled Hizbollah. In West Bank, Israeli forces conducted deadly raids and demolitions, displacing hundreds, and settlers continued attacks. Tit-for-tat strikes with Hizbollah remained intense (see Lebanon).

➡ **Lebanon** **Hizbollah and Israel continued to trade heavy cross-border blows, underscoring risk of expanded conflict; EU bolstered financial support as security forces cracked down on Syrians amid surging anti-refugee sentiment.**

Border clashes between Hizbollah and Israel continued. Lebanon continued to face spectre of all-out war, as Hizbollah expanded territorial range of attacks and deployed more sophisticated weaponry. Notably, Hizbollah missile attack 14 May killed Israeli civilian and injured five soldiers. Hizbollah 15 May struck Israel's Tel Shamayim military base, some 35km from border – marking group's deepest strike inside Israel since Oct 2023. Hizbollah 16 May launched Russian-made air-to-surface rockets from drone for first time. Israeli airstrike 5 May killed four civilians in Mays al Jabal town. Israel 18 May said it killed around 300 Hizbollah personnel since Oct; strikes, however, appear to have had little discernible impact on group's offensive capabilities. Israeli airstrikes 26 May killed at least eight across south; Hizbollah same day reportedly responded by launching over 150 missiles at Israeli targets. Harsh rhetoric and warnings of escalation continued. Hizbollah's chief Hassan Nasrallah 13 May said fighting would continue as long as war in Gaza persists, reiterating Hizbollah's months-long position (see Israel/Palestine). Israeli Defence Minister Yoav Gallant 8 May warned of "hot summer" in border region. Israeli Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich 20 May said Israel should threaten to occupy southern Lebanon if Hizbollah does not withdraw north of Litani river.

Crackdown on Syrian refugees intensified following EU financial support. Following upsurge in violence against Syrian refugees in April, and after Lebanon stopped taking back Syrian refugees crossing to Cyprus "illegally", European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen and Cypriot President Nikos Christodoulides 2 May announced €1bn support package for refugee relief and migration control, much of which repackaged pre-existing funding commitments; announcement caused public outcry accusing EU of "bribing" Lebanon to permanently settle refugees. General Security 8 May announced measures to crack down on "illegal" Syrian refugees, including forced closure of shops and seizure of vehicles, adding to climate of fear among 1.5mn refugees. First "voluntary return" convoy of over 300 Syrian refugees 14 May left Lebanon, as human rights organisations warned of increased forced deportations.

➡ **Syria** **Opposition to Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) rule continued in east as Islamic State (ISIS) staged attacks, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) cracked down on protesters, and tensions surfaced among Türkiye-aligned groups.**

In east, Iran-backed groups contested SDF rule, as ISIS escalated strikes. Amid months-long tensions between SDF and Arab tribes backed by govt and Iran, new militia Saraya al-Bu Shaaban 5 May joined uprising against SDF. SDF leader Mazlum Abdi same day met leaders from Baggara and al-Aqidat tribes to discuss regional security and administration. Meanwhile, Islamic State (ISIS) killed dozens; notably, 3 May killed fifteen National Defence Forces members near al-Sukhna town, Homs province. Car bomb 10 May killed three SDF members in al-Shuhayl. ISIS ambush 21 May killed three govt soldiers in Homs province.

In north west, HTS quashed protests; rifts surfaced between Turkish-backed forces. Protests 17 May erupted across towns in Idlib province demanding release of detainees and for HTS leader Abu Mohammed al-Jolani to step down; HTS cracked down with unprecedented force, injuring 36 in Binnish city, sixteen in Idlib city, and ten in Jisr al-Shughour city. Elsewhere, clashes between factions of Turkish-backed Syrian National Army broke out: fighting between Jaysh al-Islam and Ahrar Olan 7 May killed two in Al-Bab city, Aleppo province. Türkiye 10 May announced neutralising seven Kurdistan Workers' Party militants (see Türkiye).

In south, Israel continued airstrikes. Israeli airstrike 2 May injured eight soldiers in Najha town. In response to missile launched from Nawa area towards occupied Golan Heights, Israel 5 May shelled launch area, killing govt forces member. Israeli airstrike 20 May killed at least six pro-Iran militants in Qusayr city, Homs province.

Govt appointed new loyalists to security and administrative positions. In ongoing effort to shore up control, govt 10 May appointed new heads of branches of Air Force Intelligence agency and 12 May appointed new governors in Rif Dimashq, Deir ez-Zor, Hama, and Suwayda provinces. President Assad 16 May attended 33rd Arab League Summit in Bahrain and discussed inter-Arab cooperation in meeting with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.

Gulf and Arabian Peninsula

➔ **Iran President Raisi and FM Amir-Abdollahian were killed in helicopter crash, nuclear watchdog's chief visited Tehran amid transparency concerns, and deterrence with Israel held after April escalation.**

Helicopter crash killed President Raisi and FM Amir-Abdollahian. Govt 20 May confirmed helicopter crash in north-western Iran previous day killed President Raisi and FM Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, as well as six others. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei approved VP Mohammad Mokhber in executive branch caretaker capacity while preparations get underway for presidential elections set for 28 June; Amir-Abdollahian's deputy Ali Bagheri-Khan, lead interlocutor on nuclear negotiations, took over as acting FM. Following 1 March elections and 10 May run-off votes, which saw hardline victory and record low turnout, new parliamentarians 27 May took seats; Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf was re-elected as speaker.

Amid transparency concerns, nuclear watchdog's chief visited Iran. Director General of International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) Rafael Grossi 6-7 May travelled to Iran, met with senior officials and "proposed set of concrete practical measures for revitalisation of 4 March 2023 Joint Statement" aiming to restore confidence and increase transparency in Iran's nuclear program, which continues to advance; Grossi also noted Iran's willingness to cooperate rather than continue divergent course risking "more escalation [...] including war", but noted "huge question mark about what they are doing and why they are doing it" and criticised "loose talk about nuclear weapons" among senior officials. It remained unclear how much progress was made ahead of next IAEA Board of Governors meeting 3-7 June.

Regional tensions simmered; West imposed more sanctions. After April's unprecedented escalation between Iran and Israel, pair refrained from further direct hostilities; however, Iran-backed Iraqi armed groups claimed over two dozen missile and drone attacks against Israel during May, while Israeli strikes in Syria persisted and exchanges between Houthis and U.S.-led forces in and around Yemen continued apace (see Iraq, Syria and Yemen). Meanwhile, Australia 14 May sanctioned total of eight persons and entities, including Iran's defence minister and commander of Iran Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force. Council of EU next day announced expansion of sanctions on Iran's unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) activity to include "persons and entities supplying, selling or otherwise being involved in transferring Iran's missiles".

➡ **Iraq** **Iran-backed armed groups targeted Israel, Turkish airstrikes on Kurdish militants persisted, and Islamic State (ISIS) attacks killed several soldiers; govt requested end to UN assistance mission.**

Iran-backed groups maintained regional pressure on Israel. Following unprecedented escalation between Iran and Israel in April, Tehran-aligned Islamic Resistance in Iraq claimed over two dozen drone and missile attacks on Israel, including cities of Tel Aviv, Haifa, Eilat, Ashkelon as well as Nevatim military base; attacks proved ineffectual. Israeli military 30 May reported interception of cruise missile, likely launched from Iraq, aimed at Israel-occupied Golan Heights.

Türkiye targeted Kurdish militants; Kurdistan leader made rare visit to Iran. Amid ongoing preparations for potential large-scale operation in summer, Türkiye carried out airstrikes targeting alleged Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) in Hakurk, Gara and Qandil regions of Kurdistan region, claiming to have killed dozens of PKK members (see Türkiye); PKK IED attack 22 May killed Turkish soldier. Kurdistan President and Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) leader Nechirvan Barzani 5 May arrived in Iranian capital Tehran, meeting President Raisi and Supreme Leader Khamenei; meetings sought to normalise ties and overcome historic tensions. Barzani sought Iran's support to delay Kurdistan regional elections, reflecting KDP's perceived disadvantage vis-à-vis its rival after Supreme Court annulled eleven quota seats under de facto control of KDP.

ISIS staged deadly attacks. In deadliest ISIS attack in months, group 13 May killed six soldiers in Mutaibijah town between Salah al-Din and Diyala governorates. ISIS 15 May killed one soldier in al-Dibis district, Kirkuk governorate; 22 May killed one between Diyala and Salah al-Din provinces.

Govt requested end of UN assistance mission in Iraq (UNAMI). Govt 12 May confirmed PM Sudani had requested that UN Sec-Gen end UNAMI mandate by end of 2025, arguing mission established in 2003 is no longer necessary for political stability; minority groups opposed decision given UNAMI's role in resolving territorial disputes and tensions over budget between Erbil and Baghdad. Meanwhile, parliament 18 May convened to elect speaker of parliament for second time since Nov but failed to award either of top nominees required simple majority; brawl between two opposing Sunni MPs ended session prematurely.

➡ **Saudi Arabia** **Negotiations over Saudi-U.S. defence pact inched ahead.**

Bilateral deal with U.S. appeared to advance. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman 19 May met U.S. National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan in Dhahran city to discuss bilateral agreements on nuclear energy, defence and security cooperation, reportedly in exchange for Riyadh limiting Chinese investment and arms purchases; U.S. Sec State Antony Blinken 22 May said agreements “could be weeks away”. Regional dimension that includes Saudi Arabia’s normalisation with Israel and pathway to Palestinian statehood remained stalled amid Israel’s reluctance to end war in Gaza and withdraw from territory – Riyadh’s reported requirements for normalisation (see Israel/Palestine).

In other important developments. In sign of ongoing rapprochement with Iran, Saudi ambassador to Iran 6 May attended International Conference on Nuclear Science and Technology in Iranian city Isfahan to discuss plans to work together to develop peaceful nuclear energy. FM Prince Faisal bin Farhan 2 May held phone calls with leaders of Sudanese warring parties and promised to resume expanded Jeddah talks including Gulf and African actors (see Sudan).

➔ **Yemen Houthis announced fourth phase of escalation in Red Sea crisis, while military build-up and clashes with govt forces along frontlines in Marib and Sana’a provinces pointed to possible offensive and escalation.**

Houthis announced new phase of strikes on international shipping. Houthi leader Abdul Malik al-Houthi 2 May announced new round of attacks on international shipping, citing Israeli and U.S. “intransigence” (see Israel/Palestine); group next day said Houthis would target ships heading to Israel regardless of their nationality, including in Indian Ocean and Mediterranean, potentially threatening alternative Cape of Good Hope route used by shipping companies. Houthis 18 May struck Panama-flagged, Greek-owned oil tanker in Red Sea. Meanwhile, U.S. and UK continued strikes on Houthi targets: notably, 2 May reportedly targeted Houthi-controlled Hodeida airport. Houthis 17 May claimed downing U.S. drone over Marib province and 21 May claimed destroying another over al-Bayda province. Houthis 27 May announced missile attacks on three commercial ships and two U.S. destroyers in Indian Ocean and Red Sea; U.S. said group fired five anti-ship ballistic missiles. U.S. and UK forces 30 May struck thirteen Houthi targets in three areas of Hodeida; Houthis claimed attacks killed sixteen.

In north, Houthi and govt forces clashed in Marib. Despite de facto truce, Giants Brigades (aligned with govt) and Houthis 17 March clashed on southern Marib governorate front following Houthi attacks on govt forces in Marib’s Harib district; both sides sent reinforcements to consolidate positions, including districts in Sana’a governorate bordering Marib. Govt forces are preparing for Houthi offensive that may seek to seize oil sites in Marib to address economic hardship facing group and pre-empt potential U.S./Western support to govt forces as Red Sea crisis persists.

In south, Southern Transitional Council (STC) clashed with Houthis and Al-Qaeda. STC 18 May accused Houthis of launching drone attack on STC military position in Abyan province. STC and Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula 11, 16 and 17 May clashed.

In Aden, security forces cracked down on protesters. Govt security forces 13-14 May cracked down on hundreds of demonstrators protesting electricity cuts in Aden city, 15 May deployed armoured vehicles across city.

North Africa

➔ **Algeria Political jostling continued ahead of Sept presidential elections; relations with United Arab Emirates (UAE) remained tense.**

Parties continued positioning for 7 Sept vote. Anticipation for presidential polls grew as several politicians announced candidacies. Belkacem Sahli, president of nationalist party National Republican Alliance, 5 May reiterated intention to run on behalf of coalition of several small parties, while Louisa Hanoune, Sec Gen of Workers' Party and three-time previous candidate, 18 May announced she would be on ballot. Meanwhile, amid persistent reports of internal splits within security forces over who to support in vote, President Tebboune 8 May gave pro-military speech at army headquarters.

Tebboune boycotted Arab League summit due to tensions with Emiratis. Tebboune 16 May avoided Arab League summit in Bahrain's capital Manama reportedly due to strains with UAE. Tensions may be linked to Emirati support for military authorities in Mali whose ties with Algeria have become strained, with reports govt rejected several Gulf countries' mediation initiatives. Reuters media 6 May reported Algeria may cancel gas delivery to Spanish company Naturgy if firm's shares are bought by Emirati firm TAQA.

New regional grouping held first external meeting. Interior ministers of Algeria, Libya and Tunisia 2 May met Italian counterpart Matteo Piantedosi in Italian capital Rome as part of new three-party grouping, amid ongoing Algiers-Rabat tensions and persistent rumours of creation of new bloc of central North African states as alternative to pre-existing body Arab Maghreb Union that includes Mauritania and Morocco.

In other important developments. Worker's Party head Hanoune early May demanded govt reverse ban on demonstrations in support of Palestinian cause; govt 28 May shared draft UN Security Council resolution demanding immediate ceasefire in Gaza. Military 2 May announced it had killed jihadist in Tinzaouatine commune on Malian border; operation followed late April killing of another jihadist in Bordj-Badji-Mokhtar sector also on border.

↓ **Egypt Tensions with Israel worsened amid deadly border incident and as govt suspended humanitarian coordination in Gaza; new external credit offered financial reprieve.**

Tensions soared at border after Israel launched Rafah offensive in Gaza. Exchange of fire with Israeli forces at border crossing at southern Gazan city of Rafah 27 May left one soldier dead and others injured; although much remained unclear about what happened, incident marked heightened tensions throughout month. Earlier, after Israeli troops 7 May took over Palestinian side of Rafah border point (see Israel/Palestine) – traversing Philadelphi Corridor in which Cairo maintains limited military presence – Foreign Ministry same day issued statement condemning move as “dangerous escalation”; state media 11 May announced authorities' refusal to coordinate humanitarian operations with Israel, halting flow of aid through Rafah border. Govt 15 May rejected Israeli proposal to reopen Rafah crossing under Israeli supervision, instead reiterating border point must be in hands of Palestinian

authorities; FM Shoukry 20 May justified deadlock and suspension of aid by arguing Israeli military endangers aid convoys. Following diplomatic engagement with Washington, aid deliveries restarted through nearby Kerem Shalom crossing 26 May, although Israel 29 May announced it had taken full control of Philadelphi Corridor. Meanwhile, amid deteriorating Gaza situation, govt 12 May said it would support South Africa in legal action against Israel alleging genocide at International Court of Justice.

Short-term economic outlook stabilised as Cairo negotiated key financing deals. Govt 15 May received \$14bn from United Arab Emirates in second tranche of funds from Ras al-Hekma deal for development of real estate on Mediterranean coast. Authorities 18 May met with International Monetary Fund delegation to discuss possible additional loan of \$1.2bn for promotion of climate and green transition projects.

In another important development. Amid govt's ongoing crackdown on pro-Palestinian protesters, authorities 8-9 May arrested two students and 13 May issued order to detain them for fifteen days on charges of joining terrorist organisation and publishing false news. Court 27 May upheld one year prison sentence for former presidential hopeful Ahmed Tantawi on forgery charges, banning him from running in elections for five years.

➡ Libya Political deadlock continued as parallel govts engaged internationally; corruption and insecurity persisted.

Outgoing UN envoy decried stalemate amid Western officials' visits to parallel govts. Abdoulaye Bathily, who resigned as head of UN mission in April, 14 May said Libyan leaders not interested in stabilising country or holding elections and had "fuelled rivalries" among armed groups to maintain status quo. However, deputy UN special representative Stephanie Koury 21 May launched new discussions with Libyan officials. Meanwhile, parallel administrations both engaged with Western officials. Tripoli-based PM Dabaiba 15 May met EU Council President Charles Michel and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen in Brussels to discuss migration issues and renewable energy, while earlier in month, Italian PM Giorgia Meloni 7 May visited Tripoli to sign agreements including on education and health; Meloni later same day met with eastern military commander Khalifa Haftar, whose entourage also received visits from other international officials including from EU and U.S.; engagement with Haftar occurred amid his growing military cooperation with Russia and proposal for Russian-built oil refinery in east announced 18 May.

IMF noted positive economic prospects despite need for public sector reform. International Monetary Fund's monitoring mission to Libya 13 May estimated GDP to grow by 8% in 2024 thanks to rise in oil exports, despite lack of budgeting accountability and high public sector wages and subsidies; IMF urged authorities to adopt governance reforms to fight corruption and called for reunification of central bank. Meanwhile, court 12 May ordered arrest of four customs officials accused of "conspiring to smuggle" 26 tonnes of gold worth over \$1.8bn through Misrata airport in Dec 2023.

Insecurity persisted. Members of Stability Support Authority and First Support Force armed groups 18 May clashed in Al-Zawiya city, west of Tripoli, killing one and

injuring six others. Benghazi MP Ibrahim al-Dressi went missing 16 May amid concerns he may have been kidnapped and calls for his immediate release.

In another important development. Interior ministers of Algeria, Libya and Tunisia 2 May met Italian counterpart Matteo Piantedosi as part of new three-party grouping (see Algeria).

➡ **Mauritania Tensions with Mali remained high over cross-border incidents.**

Following April incident in which Malian soldiers and allied Russian paramilitary Africa Corps, formerly Wagner Group, reportedly killed and wounded Mauritanian civilians in cross-border anti-jihadist operations, govt 2 May said it was ready to defend “territorial integrity of the country” and said it would protect its citizens; military 5 May said it had held military exercises along border with Mali.

↓ **Tunisia Tensions erupted as authorities launched string of arrests of journalists, lawyers and activists, provoking widespread uproar.**

Repression of civil society sparked protests and stretched political tensions. Wave of arrests and attacks on activists, journalists and lawyers – including several regime critics – highlighted govt’s authoritarian drift. Notably, police 11 May stormed lawyer association and arrested media commentator and lawyer Sonia Dahmani, and later same day arrested journalists Mourad Zeghidi and Borhen Bsaies; hundreds protested next day in capital Tunis, demanding their release and date for presidential election, mandated for Sept-Oct 2024 but as yet unscheduled. Police 13 May again stormed association and arrested lawyer Mehdi Zagrouba, known critic of President Saïed; lawyers and rights groups alleged security forces tortured Zagrouba while in custody 13-15 May. Lawyers 16 May staged general strike and protested in Tunis to denounce torture of Zagrouba, while Interior Ministry denied accusations. Court 22 May sentenced Zeghidi and Bsaies to one year imprisonment on charges of publishing false news, prompting hundreds to demonstrate in Tunis 24 May. Meanwhile, amid continued migration crisis, govt also cracked down on immigration NGOs. Police early May raided premises of organisations involved in defence of migrants and arrested affiliated activists, including head of Mnementy anti-racist organisation Saadia Mosbah 5 May and asylum rights activist Sherifa Riahi 7 May over supposed financial crimes. Earlier, several hundred people 4 May demonstrated in eastern city of Sfax, demanding departure of migrants, while concerns also grew over presence of vigilante groups.

Crackdown provoked international backlash and forceful govt defence. After EU, France, U.S. and UN expressed concern over repression, Saïed 15 May ordered Foreign Ministry to summon several foreign ambassadors to protest against external interference; 850 people 19 May demonstrated in Tunis supporting govt and protesting against alleged foreign meddling in domestic affairs. Earlier, Saïed 6 May blamed Western NGOs for migration crisis.

In another important development. Interior ministers of Algeria, Libya and Tunisia 2 May met Italian counterpart Matteo Piantedosi as part of new three-party grouping (see Algeria).

➡ **Western Sahara Polisario attacked Morocco-controlled area; Algerian and Moroccan officials sparred at UN meeting over Sahrawi independence.**

Polisario Front launched attack on Morocco-controlled city. Low-intensity nature of conflict continued as Polisario military units 18 May attacked Smara inside Morocco-controlled Western Sahara, third attack on city since Oct; rockets, however, fell 12km from city in area Morocco claimed is uninhabited, although Polisario argued they hit military targets.

Algeria and Morocco exchanged provocative remarks at international meeting. Algerian UN representative Amar Bendjema proclaimed support for Western Sahara's right to self-determination at UN decolonisation committee 14-16 May in Venezuelan capital Caracas. In response, Morocco's UN representative Omar Hilale highlighted his country's support for same rights for Algeria's Berber majority region Kabylia. Earlier, Algerian President Abdelmadjid Tebboune 8 May delivered speech reiterating Algiers's steadfast commitment to Sahrawis right to govern themselves.

In another important development. Over 30 UK lawmakers 23 May signed open letter calling on UK govt to support Moroccan autonomy plan for Western Sahara, which would give Rabat control over area's national security and foreign affairs.