

THE REGION is a weekly news digest summarizing significant Middle East developments that will be of interest to the English-speaking audience. The news items in *THE REGION* are curated by ACLS experts and drawn from a wide range of English, Arabic, and other regional language sources. Subscribe to this weekly newsletter and daily intercepts [here](#).

TOP STORY: Tensions On the Rise in Northeast Syria

The Russian media outlet “Sputnik” claimed on 17 December that [a missile struck the US military base at the Omar oil field in eastern Syria](#). Two days later on 19 December, Syrian media reported that a Coalition airstrike in the nearby Deir Ez Zour region killed or wounded [22 Assad militia fighters](#).

Last week, American forces in Syria reportedly [established a new military base in the city of Raqqa](#) and conducted a patrol near the city three years after evacuating the Raqqa region in October 2019. US troops also met with the commander of the “Revolutionaries of Raqqa” faction, Ahmed Alloush, [without any representatives of the Kurdish forces present](#). It was the first time US troops conducted such a meeting without a Kurdish presence since the Defeat ISIS Coalition and its allies took control of the city in 2017. According to a local Syrian news outlet, the US delegation agreed to give Alloush \$15,000 per month to be paid to the members of his military faction. The agreement reportedly is meant to encourage the return of fighters who left the faction under the pressure of Kurdish-led security operations that targeted Arab factions.

Residents of Qamishli in northeast Syria [distributed leaflets denouncing the presence of Lebanese Hizballah and Iranian regime forces](#) near the city. The leaflets opposed [“Iranian penetration” into the region](#) and accused the Iranian of recruiting young men and attempting to change their identity--implying the Iranians are attempting to proselytize locals to Shi’ism. The leaflets called for local clans and notables to publicly denounce the Iranian presence as well.

On 13 December, Syria TV reported that YPG/Syrian Democratic Forces installed new advanced cameras to monitor Qamishli’s airspace and airport, which has been the scene of an increase in Russian and Assad regime military presence in recent weeks. A source told [Syria TV](#) that “The new monitoring system aims to monitor the airspace of Qamishli and send warning messages to the SDF in the event of the presence of Turkish drones in the city’s skies.” The source also said that the “SDF is also monitoring the movements of the regime forces and the Russian forces inside Qamishli airport through cameras that it has placed in the vicinity of the airport and its northern entrance,” and that the SDF planned to install similar cameras in all towns on the border strip with Turkey.

SYRIA

Resentment Against Iranians in Western Syria

Locals in Homs province in western Syria reported the arrival of a new group of families of the Afghan "Fatemiyoun Brigade" militia that had transited from Iraq. The Fatemiyoun are a Shia Hazara militia organized early in the Syrian conflict by now-deceased IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani. Homs locals reported that IRGC officer Mahdi Atallah planned to house the Fatemiyoun and their families in apartments belonging to Syrians who had been forcibly displaced from Homs. Atallah planned to keep the Afghans in the confiscated apartments [until completion of a residential complex near the strategic IRGC warehouses southeast of Palmyra, a site that has become one of the most prominent Iranian bases in eastern Syria.](#)

Meanwhile, Orient News published accounts by new defectors from the Syrian regime who said that Iranian militias treat Sunnis in Assad's forces with deep distrust, and often place Sunni units in the front line of battle so they will be killed quickly. Qusai Al-Mousa, a soldier who defected from the Syrian regime's special forces, said that Iranian militias constantly accuse Sunni troops of Assad's militias of treason, called them by the epithet of "Yazidi Sunnis." Al-Mousa said that many of his [Sunni peers were executed on false charges of fleeing the battlefield.](#) Another defector said that he and other Sunni fighters suffered humiliation tactics at the Iranians' hands, such as being banned from entering the Iranians' dormitories or military headquarters.

Syrian Regime Receives Stolen Ukrainian Wheat—and UN Coverings for Syrian Army Tanks

Syrians were outraged on 18 December when the Syria Response Coordinators group in northwest Syria published [photos of Assad regime tanks covered in UN-provided canvas meant to serve as shelter coverings for refugees.](#) The Response Coordinators charged that the Assad regime is using UN aid to fund its army at the same time that Russia is threatening to cut off UN aid coming to the northwest. The following day, 19 December, Syria TV reported that [large shipments of stolen Ukrainian wheat had arrived in Assad regime ports, delivered by Russia.](#) "The quantities of wheat sent to the areas controlled by the Syrian regime from the port of Sevastopol, overlooking the Black Sea in Crimea, increased by 17 times this year," Syria TV reported.

Assad Regime Fuel Crisis and Economic Collapse Continue

The southern region of Syria including Damascus continues to witness the worst fuel crisis forcing main hospitals to [cancel all cold operations.](#) The Syrian currency also continues to collapse, falling to an exchange rate of just [6100 to 6300 Syrian pounds to the dollar.](#)

Assad Drug Traffickers Fight Over Profits

In other news from the south, Assad security forces released the most dangerous drug dealer and Hezbollah's arm in As-Suwayda only four days after his arrest. Local activists stated that the main reason for the arrest was not due to pressure from the Jordanians, but instead was

the result of [a disagreement between the drug dealer and Assad regime intelligence official General Kifah Melhem](#) over the division of drug money in the region.

ISRAEL

Israeli Prime Minister Interviewed by Saudi Television

Benjamin Netanyahu [gave an exclusive interview to Saudi Arabia's main English news outlet, Al Arabiya](#), days before he is due to resume office as Israel's prime minister. Netanyahu said he wants "every young Arab boy or Arab girl in Israel to have the same opportunities to partake in the remarkable success story that is Israel." He also said an Israeli-Saudi peace deal [would be a quantum leap toward an overall peace between Israel and the Arab world](#). "It will change our region in ways that are unimaginable. And I think it will facilitate, ultimately, a Palestinian-Israeli peace," Netanyahu said.

TURKEY

Turkey Arrests Dozens on Suspicion of Spying for Israel

On 14 December a Turkish media outlet reported that Turkey had arrested [44 people on suspicion of spying for the Israeli Mossad](#). Turkish intelligence reportedly targeted "private investigators" who, on behalf of the Mossad, monitored and followed Palestinian individuals and non-governmental organizations in Turkey. The same report said that Turkish authorities are still searching for 13 additional people suspected of spying for the Mossad.

Erdogan Calls for New Gas Route to Europe, Circumventing Russia

During the first tripartite summit between the leaders of Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Turkmenistan, President Erdogan called for the start of natural gas transportation from Turkmenistan to Western countries. The oil pipeline linking Baku (Azerbaijan) - Tbilisi (Georgia) - Ceyhan (Turkey) and the "southern gas corridor" could serve as an alternative energy source for Europe as well as benefit the exporting countries, Erdogan said. He added that Turkey is ready to cooperate with Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan regarding the operation of the ["Friendship Field"](#) for oil and gas, stressing the need to exploit new opportunities that are developing because of the recent change in the global gas market. Erdogan's remarks indicated that he is looking for ways to supplant Russia's gas trade with Europe, in light of Vladimir Putin's invasion of Ukraine and Russia's many areas of confrontation with Turkey, such as the Caucasus.

Erdogan Suggests Meeting with Putin and Assad

President Erdogan announced last week that he offered Russian President Vladimir Putin a tripartite meeting of himself, Putin, and Bashar al Assad. He said that Turkey had lost patience with the United States because of U.S. support to the Syrian Democratic Forces. Addressing the U.S., Erdogan warned, "If you will continue to supply this terrorist organization with weapons, equipment and ammunition, we will manage ourselves and we will do what is necessary to remove the threat of terrorism from our borders." In response to a journalist's

question about a statement by former US Envoy for Syria James Jeffrey, who said that Washington would not view an Erdogan-Assad meeting positively, Erdogan said: "This means that [you have not known your president yet](#). I do not ask permission when I want to meet with anyone. I met with the Egyptian president in Qatar. I did not ask anyone's permission, and with regard to Syria, our national interests will determine what steps we will take." Meanwhile, Russian news agency RIA Novosti reported that [Assad's position on the idea of a tripartite summit was not yet known](#), but that Moscow was in contact with officials in Damascus.

Erdogan's harsh comments toward the SDF/YPG came one day before a terrorist bombing in Turkey's southeastern province of [Diyarbakir](#). A parked van exploded as an armored police van was passing by, wounding eight police officers and one civilian.

Erdogan's Top Political Rival Gets Prison Sentence for Insulting Turkey's Election Council

Last week a Turkish court sentenced Istanbul mayor Ekrem Imamoglu to two years in prison for the crime of insulting members of Turkey's Supreme Electoral Council. The court also banned Imamoglu, who is widely considered Erdogan's leading challenger in Turkey's next presidential election, from running for elected office. The news of Imamoglu's sentencing prompted protests by thousands of people who gathered outside the Istanbul municipal building [to denounce the verdict](#). President Erdogan, however, announced to the public that there is [no final decision on Imamoglu's conviction and claimed that the ruling is not political](#). "There have been many court rulings that we have harshly criticized ourselves, but that doesn't give anyone the right to insult judges or to ignore court rulings," Erdoğan told a rally in southeast Türkiye's Mardin." Imamoglu's case resembles a similar prison sentence and political ban that a Turkish court imposed on Erdogan himself in 1998—a politically motivated sentencing that prompted large rallies of support and effectively launched Erdogan's national political career.

LEBANON

Fallout After Hizballah Kills a UNIFIL Peacekeeper

UNIFIL's commander had a zoom meeting with a senior Hizballah security official to discuss [the deadly 14 December attack on a UNIFIL convoy in southern Lebanon](#) that left one UNIFIL peacekeeper (an Irish soldier) dead and three others wounded. The Lebanese news outlet An Nahar reported that security officials believe the attack on the convoy was not spontaneous, but instead a deliberate ambush that [attacked the peacekeepers from multiple sides](#). According to the Lebanese newspaper Nidaa al-Watan, Lebanese officials told Hizballah leaders that the incident had become embarrassing and that an appropriate exit from the crisis should quickly be found. During the call with the UNIFIL commander, the Hizballah official denied that the group had anything to do with the attack and claimed they are keen to preserve relations with UNIFIL. In response, the UNIFIL commander reportedly said, ["If you are not directly responsible for the incident, you are responsible for inciting the popular environment in the South against us."](#)

US Envoy Blames Lebanon for Delay in Arab Gas Deal

US Energy Envoy Amos Hochstein on 12 December told the Lebanese news outlet An Nahar that [the Lebanese government's failure to undertake specific reforms is the reason that the Arab gas and electricity deal he announced in 2021 has not come to pass](#). Hochstein said the Lebanese government was told from the beginning that the deal to bring Egyptian gas to Lebanon via Jordan and Syria cannot proceed until the Lebanese 1) appoint a board of directors, 2) conduct an audit, and 3) carry out specific reforms required by the World Bank. These steps are required before Lebanon can receive a World Bank loan to actually purchase the gas, Hochstein said. Hochstein claimed that if Beirut takes these steps, the deal can proceed without hindrance from the US Congress, though he noted that the US Treasury has the final say within the US government on whether the arrangements violate US sanctions. Hochstein also said that with the Israel-Lebanon maritime border now delineated, it could be possible for the two countries to delineate their land border as well, but current conditions will not allow for such an agreement at present.

Lebanese Security Chief: Syrian Refugees Do Not Want to Return to Syria

Director General of Lebanese Security Abbas Ibrahim told an Iraqi TV news outlet that the 1.33 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not wish to return to their home country. Ibrahim's statement starkly contradicted the narrative promoted by Lebanon's Minister of the Displaced, Issam Sharafeddine, who has claimed that increasing numbers of Syrians are returning to Syria voluntarily. Sharafeddine has been among a number of senior Lebanese politicians urging the Lebanese state to pressure Syrian refugees to leave the country. Ibrahim made the further claim that the actual number of Syrians in Lebanon is over two million, a figure far above the UN estimate. UN officials have said that Lebanese officials have exaggerated the number of Syrian refugees in the country, which the UN estimates [does not exceed 850,000 refugees, most of whom come from the border area of Qalamoun](#). One day after Abbas's interview, the Hizballah-linked Al Akhbar reported that [30 Syrian people were arrested after being abandoned by a boat driver at sea](#).

IRAN

CIA Director Says Russia Could Help Iran Pose a New Threat to the Middle East

CIA Director William Burns told [PBS](#) that Iran and Russia are on their path to a "full-fledged defense partnership" which "could have an even [more dangerous impact on the Middle East \[than in Ukraine\]](#)." Illustrating the potency of the Moscow-Tehran military relationship, Iranian-Made Drones were used by Russia to strike mostly civilian targets in Kyiv this week. The city's Mayor, [Klitschko](#) said that air-defense systems shot down 10 Iranian-made Shahed drones causing explosions in the central district. On the 19th of December, the military administration of Ukraine's capital warned of more drone attacks on the city, [nine of which were shot down in Kiev airspace](#).

Tehran Announces Increased Uranium Enrichment

Ahead of a visit to Iran by the International Atomic Energy Agency, [Iran announced on 18 December that it has significantly increased its uranium enrichment capabilities](#). [Tasnim News Agency](#), a regime controlled media outlet, reported on the same day that Iran has unveiled its first homegrown electrostatic particle accelerator to be used in “industrial irradiation applications.”

Iranian Regime Attempts to Portray Itself as Not Isolated

Tehran Times reported on 17 December that Iranian officials would likely [meet Saudi counterparts on the sidelines of the Baghdad Convention in Jordan](#). On 18 December, Tehran Times reported that the Iranian regime’s objectives for the meeting would be to highlight that “tensions have de-escalated” with Saudi Arabia, signal [“readiness to reach a deal with Saudi Arabia on a range of issues including the reopening of embassies](#), and to prove that Iran is an “inevitable player” that is not isolated. On the same day, however, the pro-Hezbollah Al Mayadeen news reported that [Saudi Arabia and Iran have no plan to meet](#) during the conference after all. Tasnim News on 18 December added that the administration of Iranian president Ebrahim Raisi has signed [“a document on comprehensive cooperation”](#) with Nicaragua, in keeping with Tehran’s effort to portray itself as not isolated in international affairs.

Khamenei and Raisi Tell Universities to Inform on Student Protesters

Ayatollah Khamenei declared in October that Iran’s universities serve as the greatest obstacles to the aims of the “arrogant powers”—i.e., those countries that opposed the Iranian regime. In keeping with Khamenei’s remarks, President Raisi on Sunday addressed a gathering of Iranian university representatives and called on Iranian intellectuals to [“give timely warnings against threats to the society”](#)—in other words, calling on Iran’s university faculty to systematically report students who oppose the regime.

Report: Iranian Regime Falsely Inflating Its Oil Export Numbers

Last week, the Iranian regime announced that its crude oil exports have reached 1.5 million barrels per day, but Iran International reported that [many outside experts, including the U.S. government, believe Tehran’s real level of daily exports is far lower](#). The U.S. Energy Information Administration estimates the Iranian regime is currently exporting only 600,000 barrels per day, far below Tehran’s announced levels. The regime’s false export numbers may represent an attempt by Tehran to shore up confidence in Iran’s collapsing currency. Iran International explained that while the Iranian government does not reveal how much it earns from crude oil exports, the lower estimate of shipments could mean Tehran earned just \$20-22 billion in oil export revenues for 2022. The economic and currency collapse indicates that the lower estimate is more probable. According to the newspaper, Iran’s central bank printed 1,000 trillion rials in the past seven months, despite the fact that the currency was losing its value, and the regime is now playing a dangerous political game because “a public under tremendous financial pressure can ask where all the income has gone.”

Iranian Social Media Shows Regime Atrocities

This week in Iranian social media, one [video](#) went viral that depicted a grieving Iranian father whose son was killed by security forces on his birthday. The father was shown carrying a cake and dancing on his son's grave. Meanwhile, as news emerged that the regime had [arrested a famous actress](#) who supports the protest movement in Iran, the body of a female doctor treating protesters was returned to her family with various injuries and bruises, including her genitals, and broken arms. "[The lid of one of the eyes of the young doctor was stitched together, apparently to conceal the removal of the eyeball.](#)" Activists in Iran are [calling for three days](#) of protests in Iran and the government is considering [shutting all access to the internet](#).

IRAQ

US and Turkey Have Different Counterterrorism Priorities for Iraq

[CENTCOM Commander General Erik Kurilla](#) and US Ambassador to Baghdad Alina Romanowski met with Iraqi Prime Minister Sudani last Thursday to discuss continuing the security partnership between Iraq and the United States to achieve a lasting defeat of ISIS. On Friday, Turkish Foreign Minister Cavasoglu criticized the Iraqi government's counterterrorism priorities, accusing Iraqi officials in Baghdad and Erbil of refusing to cooperate on combating the PKK in northern Iraq. Cavasoglu said that Turkey wanted to cooperate with Baghdad against the PKK, and added that Ankara's message to Iraqi counterparts was "[If you listen to us, we will walk together and fight terrorism together.](#)" Two days later in Kirkuk, [nine Iraqi police officers were killed in an attack claimed by ISIS](#). Saudi Arabia [condemned the terrorist attack and offered its condolences to the Iraqi government](#).

Organized Crime Alive and Well in Iraq

The Economist reported this week that Iraq's airport has been being used as an easy way [to smuggle millions of dollars out of the country](#). Meanwhile, Iraqi authorities destroyed six tons of narcotic substances that were seized and preserved in various locations in Iraq announcing the largest destruction operation since [2009](#).

France and Iraq to Co-Chair Stabilization Conference in Jordan

On 20 December French President Macron and Iraqi Prime Minister Sudani will co-chair [the Baghdad-2 conference](#) in Jordan. The conference will focus on the requirements for stabilizing Iraq's economy and security situation. The event will include representatives of the nine countries that attended the Baghdad-1 last August, in addition to Oman and Bahrain.

Iran-Aligned Political Parties Push Against Their Sunni and Kurdish Rivals

The leader of the Iran-Aligned Coordination Framework, Turki Al-Atbi, said that [changing the Sunni Parliament Speaker Mohamad Al-Halbousi from power is possible](#) if there was a consensus within the Sunni blocs and agreement on an alternative. Meanwhile, a member of Nuri Maliki's State of Law Coalition accused [Kirkuk's Kurds of having brought Syrian Kurds in order to manipulate the city's elections](#) and said the fraud was possible due to the lack of accurate statistics for the population of each ethnic community in the city.

GULF & YEMEN

KSA Eases Visas Requirements for Western Travelers

Saudi Arabia announced the [lifting of visa restrictions on travelers from the United States](#), the United Kingdom, and European Union countries, or holders of United States, United Kingdom, and Schengen visas. Travelers from these countries can obtain the visa upon arrival at the international airports in Jeddah, Medina, Riyadh, and Dammam. The Saudi government noted that it will establish similar facilities for Turkish nationals to visit Mecca and Medina as well.

Belgium Investigating Greek MEP's Ties to Qatar

Tensions are rising between Qatar and the European Union after the Belgian government announced it had launched an investigation into alleged corrupt activities of Greek member of the European parliament Eva Kaili. Kaili has been an outspoken advocate for Qatar within the EU, and she is [accused of taking bribes from Qatar](#) in exchange for her pro-Qatar stances and actions. The EU parliament reacted to the Belgian investigation by halting all legislative work with the Qatari government. The Qatari government responded by claiming that the investigation is baseless and will hinder Qatari-Belgian relations, as well as potentially hindering the supply of Qatari natural gas to Belgium.

Houthis Sentence 32 Yemenis to Death

In Yemen, following the footsteps of Iran, the Houthis [sentenced 32 detainees to death this week](#) on charges of aiding what the criminal court called “aggression,” a term the Houthis use to refer to the activities of the international coalition to support the Yemeni government. Meanwhile, the Houthis’ media platform published on 17 December a warning that joint Egyptian-American activities in the Red Sea are a threat to international navigation. The Houthi news outlet said that while U.S. Envoy for Yemen Tim Lenderking attempts to present himself as a [“pigeon of peace, his actions confirm he is a banshee owl.”](#)

NORTH AFRICA

New Egyptian Gas Field

Egypt’s Energy Minister on 15 December announced the country had discovered a large new gas field in the [Mediterranean Sea](#). The minister said the size of the new “Narges” field was not yet known, but it is likely to be Egypt’s second-largest field when its reserves are known.

European Investigators Probe MEPs’ Ties to Morocco

European newspapers in Italy, France, and Spain reported that European investigators claim fifteen members of the European parliament have been involved in [efforts by the government of Morocco to influence EU decisions and actions](#). Several newspapers claimed Moroccan intelligence was involved in outreach to the EU MEPs to shape EU actions concerning Morocco. The investigations come at the same time that Belgium is investigating an MEP’s alleged corrupt relationship with the government of Qatar.

Tunisian Election Turnout Less Than Ten Percent

Tunisian voters signaled a strong vote of disapproval of Tunisian President Kais Saied by making the choice not to vote in Tunisia's new parliamentary elections. [Only nine percent of Tunisia's nine million eligible voters participated](#) in the vote, the lowest turnout recorded in any modern election. The voter participation was a sharp collapse from the 40 percent of Tunisians who participated in Tunisia's previous round of elections in 2019.

