

*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](#).  
January 16, 2023*

## **TOP STORY:**

### **Iranian Regime Executes British Citizen, Sparking UK Outrage**

On January 14, the Iranian regime announced it had [executed Alireza Akbari, a British-Iranian dual national](#) who formerly served as Iran's deputy defense minister, after sentencing him to death for [allegedly spying on behalf of MI6](#). Akbari was a close ally of Ali Shamkhani, the powerful Secretary of Iran's Supreme National Security Council, and was once a vocal advocate for the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement. In the UK, Akbari's execution prompted broad outrage and [calls for the British government to take a harsher stance toward the Iranian regime](#).

The reaction to Akbari's execution was the latest indication that **Tehran's violent crackdown on protests and its military support to Russia is angering Europeans** and prompting tougher European policies toward the Iranian regime. Regime-aligned media outlets reported on January 15 that Tehran will receive [24 Sukhoi Su-35 warplanes from Russia within months](#). This revelation came one day after the United States disclosed information that [the Iranian regime is planning to sell hundreds of ballistic missiles to Russia](#), apparently for Russia to employ against Ukraine.

### **American Detainee Starts Hunger Strike**

On January 16, U.S. citizen **Siamak Namazi announced his intention to stage a hunger strike** in the Iranian regime prison where he has been detained for more than seven years on specious charges of spying for a foreign government. In a letter published in *Iran International*, Namazi urged U.S. President Biden to do more [“to return all the American hostages in Iran to the United States, and to reflect on their suffering in the Iranian regime's prisons, for just one minute a day for seven days.”](#)

## **Islamic Republic Founder's Grandson Denounces Iranian Regime**

Ali Khomeini, an Iranian cleric who is **the grandson of the Islamic Republic's first Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini**, issued a **statement on January 15** [defending the protests in Iran and calling for the Iranian regime's leaders to hand over the government to the Iranian people](#). Writing from Najaf, Iraq, the younger Khomeini said that if the Iranian people were entrusted with governing the country, [they would do a better job of implementing Islam than the Islamic Republic had done](#). He added that the protests were a natural popular response to the regime's mistakes, and that if the Iranian people had remained silent, "we should have said either that the people died, or that it was Saddam's rule where no one utters a word."

## **Iranian Regime Suffering Gas Shortage**

Finally, on June 14 media outlets reported that **Iran, despite having some of the world's largest natural gas reserves, is suffering a severe natural gas shortage** due to the Iranian regime's [poor energy efficiency and ailing infrastructure](#). The shortage has reportedly forced schools and government offices to close. The day after these reports appeared, Iranian President Raisi visited Iran's national gas company, where he publicly blamed the gas shortage on [the disruption of gas imports from Turkmenistan due to internal problems in Turkmenistan's supply network](#).

## **SYRIA**

### **Iranian Foreign Minister Visits Damascus as Tehran Doubles Assad's Bill for Oil**

On Sunday, the same day that Iranian foreign minister Amirabdollahian visited Damascus, the [Wall Street Journal](#) reported that **Tehran has more than doubled the price it charges the Syrian regime for oil and fuel, effectively discontinuing a longstanding Iranian subsidy to Assad**. The Iranian regime in recent weeks has demanded \$70 per barrel of oil—up from \$30—and required that Damascus make all payments in advance. This change of Iranian regime policy, which apparently is driven by Tehran's acute

shortage of foreign currency, coincides with Syria's worst fuel crisis since 2011. It also coincides with the collapse of the Syrian pound in the past two months, which could be due to the Assad regime's attempt to pay the new price Tehran requires.

Amirabdollahian's official visit papered over these difficulties. In joint statements with Syrian counterparts, the Iranian foreign minister said the two sides had discussed [cooperating to build new power stations in Syria](#). Both Amirabdollahian and Syrian foreign minister Feisal Mikdad used familiar anti-Israel rhetoric to deflect from other stories. Amirabdollahian, who met with Palestinian militants in Damascus, said that the Palestinian resistance had consigned American plans such as the Oslo and Abraham Accords [“to the dustbin of history.”](#) Mikdad, meanwhile, said that his government [“vows to inflict losses on Israel and make it sorry.”](#)

Concerning Turkiye's recent normalization outreach to Assad, Mikdad said that [the Assad regime refused to hold further talks with Turkey until Turkiye made a “complete military withdrawal”](#) from northern Syria and ended support to the Syrian population there, whom Mikdad referred to as “terrorists.” The Iranian foreign minister said that Ankara's outreach to Assad would not drive a wedge between [Tehran and Damascus](#) and that Iran [“trusts the prudence of the Syrian president.”](#) Amirabdollahian also said that Tehran had cooperated to stop Turkiye from mounting a military incursion into Syria.

## **LEBANON**

### **Iranian Foreign Minister Visits Beirut**

On Friday and Saturday, **Iranian foreign minister Amirabdollahian visited Beirut** and met with senior Lebanese officials and Hizballah leaders. In meetings with Lebanese foreign minister Abdullah Bou Habib, caretaker prime minister Najib Mikati, and parliament speaker Nabih Berri, Amirabdollahian said [Tehran is ready to build power plants in Lebanon](#) to help alleviate the country's energy crisis. He also said [Tehran wants to see the Lebanese resolve their impasse over the election of a new president](#) “through dialogue and domestic compromise without any foreign

interference,” an implicit swipe at the efforts of France to press the Lebanese parties to resolve the stalemate. Separately, Amirabdollahian used meetings with [Hizballah leader Hassan Nasrallah](#) and [Palestinian Islamic Jihad leader Ziyad al-Nakhala](#) to reiterate the Iranian regime’s support for the Palestinian resistance against Israel.

## **ISRAEL**

### **Protests Against Netanyahu Government in Tel Aviv**

On January 14, **tens of thousands of Israelis took to the streets in Tel Aviv to protest the new Netanyahu government’s proposed changes to Israel’s judicial system.** On the following day, [opposition political leaders announced their plans for strikes and continued demonstrations in a bid to paralyze the new government](#) until it drops the judicial initiative. Despite the large-scale demonstration turnout, Haaretz reported that [Israel’s Arab citizens are not joining in the protests](#), and the Jerusalem Post highlighted an opinion poll that found [49% of Israelis are optimistic about the country’s future](#).

### **Netanyahu Makes Key Security Appointments**

On the same weekend of the protests, **Prime Minister Netanyahu made two important national security appointments.** [Netanyahu appointed General Herzi Halevi to replace General Aviv Kohavi as chief of staff of the Israeli Defense Forces](#), Israel’s top military post. Halevi most recently headed Israeli military intelligence and then commanded Israel’s operations against Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza. Halevi was reportedly not Netanyahu’s first choice, but Netanyahu did not reverse former Defense Minister Benny Gantz’s selection of Halevi for the job.

Separately, [Netanyahu selected his former deputy national security advisor Ronen Levy to become Director General of Israel’s Foreign Ministry](#), the country’s top professional diplomatic posting. Levy is a career intelligence official who speaks fluent Arabic and previously served as Netanyahu’s backchannel envoy to regional Arab governments.

## **TURKIYE**

### **New Friction Among Ankara, Washington, and Stockholm**

Last week brought **new friction among the United States, Turkiye, and NATO hopeful Sweden**. Despite U.S. lawmakers' public warnings that they will [object to the potential sale of U.S. F-16s](#) to Turkiye, Turkish media outlets Anadolu Agency and the Daily Sabah reported that the State Department has conveyed to Congress its intention to [approve the F16 sale](#) in exchange for Turkiye approving Sweden and Finland's accession to NATO. President Erdogan, however, publicly condemned [Sweden's reluctance to extradite 130 Swedish residents that Turkiye has accused of terrorism](#) and warned that if Sweden does not do more to quash [“the ongoing terrorist PKK/PYD propaganda”](#) then Turkiye's parliament will not ratify Sweden's NATO membership. Erdogan's warnings came just days after PKK supporters staged a demonstration in Stockholm during which they hanged Erdogan in effigy.

## **GULF REGION**

### **Saudi Arabia and Egypt Reiterate Opposition to Normalization of Assad**

The Kingdom hosted both the French Envoy for Syria and the Egyptian foreign minister during the week, with Syria on the agenda of both meetings. In light of Turkiye's recent normalization outreach to the Assad regime and threats to conduct a new military incursion into Syria, the Saudi and Egyptian foreign ministers issued a joint statement emphasizing [“their rejection of any threats of military operations](#) affecting the Syrian territories and terrorizing the Syrian people,” and their continued call for the implementation of a UN-supervised political resolution to the Syrian conflict in accordance with UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

### **Former Qatari Leader Opposes Military Action Against Iran**

On January 14, Qatar's former prime minister and minister of foreign affairs [Hamad bin Jasim issued a string of statements on Twitter opposing military action against Iran](#) and warning that a failure to peacefully resolve the nuclear dispute with Iran could lead to conflict in the

region. Specifically, Sheikh Hamad said that if the nuclear dispute cannot be solved, then the United States may decide to equip Israel with the advanced weapons that Israel would require to destroy Iran's nuclear program. In that scenario, Hamad said, "I hope that we, in the Gulf region, will explain to America and the West, through all possible channels, the danger of any military escalation and the need to deal with the existing problems peacefully, because we will be the first to lose."

### **Israel and Arab Allies Meet**

On January 10, the UAE hosted [the Negev Forum](#), **the largest meeting yet between Israel and its new Arab partners** including Egypt, the UAE, Bahrain, and Morocco. The meetings, which notably did not include Jordan, were an outgrowth of the Abraham Accords and will be followed by a second annual ministerial meeting in Morocco next March.

### **IRAQ**

#### **Sudani Sees Need for U.S. Troops**

Prime Minister Sudani gave an interview to the Wall Street Journal on January 15 in which he said Iraq is still in need of "foreign forces" to combat ISIS and that [Iraq wishes to enjoy good relations with both Iran and the United States](#). Sudani's statements were in marked contrast to recent calls by some key members of his government, including Hadi al Ameri, for the U.S. to withdraw its troops.

### **Intra-Kurdish Tensions Boil Over in Public**

On January 15, Iraqi Kurdistan's two major parties traded public accusations that signaled tensions between the two have reached a boiling point. KDP leader and Prime Minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government [Masrour Barzani accused the rival PUK of hindering the functioning of the regional government and of being behind the October 2022 assassination](#) of a senior Kurdish counterterrorism official who had switched party allegiance from the PUK to the KDP. In reply on the same day, [PUK leaders accused Barzani of heading "the worst cabinet in the KRG's history."](#) The PUK also

repeated an earlier claim that under Barzani, the KRG cabinet was “blockading” the PUK-dominated city of Sulaymaniyah by refusing to pay the city’s operating expenses. The tensions between the two parties are at one of their worst points since the two fought an intra-Kurdish civil war in the late 1990s.

### **Breakdown in the Maliki-Khazali Political Coalition**

On January 15, Iraqi and regional Arabic media reported that the political battle between former Prime Minister Nouri Maliki and militia leader Qais al-Khazali have escalated to the point that several key ministers of the Sudani government could resign. Al-Sharq Al-Awsat cited sources who claimed that [Maliki directed Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Oil Hayan Abdul Ghani](#), who belongs to Maliki’s political bloc, to submit his resignation after a dispute with Khazali’s bloc over “the mechanisms for signing oil contracts.” The political coalition between the Maliki and Khazali blocs is the core component of Prime Minister Sudani’s three-month-old government, and if the two blocs turn against one another, the government could very well collapse.

### **EGYPT**

#### **Cairo Hosts Regional Summits**

This week Cairo is hosting an [Egyptian-Jordanian-Palestinian summit](#) to discuss peace efforts and coordinate positions on regional policy. The summit comes just after [Egypt also hosted meetings](#) between the head of the Libyan Presidential Council, Muhammad Al-Munfi, retired General Haftar, and Speaker of the Libyan Parliament Aqila Saleh. The tripartite meeting is meant to establish a roadmap to new Libyan elections that would satisfy all Libyan political parties.

#### **Egypt’s Currency and Economic Crises Worsen**

[Egypt’s currency dropped more than 20 percent in just days to an all-time low of 32 pounds to the dollar before stabilizing at just under 30 pounds per dollar later in the week](#). Egypt’s currency has lost more than half its value

since March 2022, with the drop accelerating in recent weeks as Egypt has been forced to release billions from its foreign currency reserves to address a severe dollar shortage in Egyptian markets. Prices of imports to Egypt have skyrocketed as a result, plunging the country into its deepest economic crisis in years.

### **Musk Touts Egyptian Tourist Site**

Finally, the Egyptian media highlighted Elon Musk's tweet over the weekend about Egypt's ["Dendera"](#) temple, an ancient historical site dating from the Greco-Roman Ptolemaic era that took 200 years to build. The temple is famous for the astronomical scenes depicted on the ceiling as well as the many scenes depicting Egyptian kings and emperors. After multiple years in which Egypt's tourism industry suffered from pandemic lockdowns and travel restrictions, Egyptian officials and celebrities were ecstatic, inviting Musk to visit Egypt and hailing the Twitter owner's tweet as the best recent advertisement for Egyptian tourism.

### **TUNISIA**

#### **Tunisians Protest Against President Said**

Thousands of Tunisians [organized protests against President Kais Said](#) in Tunis on the 12th anniversary of the overthrow of the late president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The Arabic news outlet Elaph reported that "Avenue Habib Bourguiba, the traditional site of major demonstrations, was packed with thousands of protesters waving Tunisian flags, chanting similar chants to those heard against Ben Ali 12 years ago." For his part, [President Said said that his country is at war with corruption](#) and with those he described as traitors and agents.