

## TOP STORY:

1. **On Monday the UN Security Council voted 15-0 to extend the UN Mandate for cross-border humanitarian assistance into Syria.** In a surprising move, [Russia, which had threatened to veto the extension, voted in favor of it](#), as did Russia's traditional voting partner China. The smoothness of the vote, which normally is held hostage by the Russians as they seek US and European concessions in the Assad regime's favor, may be due to Turkiye's recent signals that it is open to normalizing relations with Assad. [Ahead of the UNSC vote, Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin warned](#) that three million Syrians stuck in Idlib might head to Turkey if the Syrian regime attacks the region, adding that Turkey had no ability to take in more refugees. The vote came one day after [the UNSC issued a special report stating that 14.6 million Syrians were in need of humanitarian assistance in 2022](#), with that number expected to rise to 15.3 million in 2023.

## IRAN

2. **On the third anniversary of the U.S. airstrike that killed Qassem Soleimani, the Iranian regime lashed out at the U.S. and Israel.** Iranian President Raisi was highlighted in several Iranian media outlets vowing to take revenge upon [94 Americans](#) the regime claims are responsible for Soleimani's killing. The regime-associated media outlet *Jam Jam* online published [a list, with photos, of 51 of the 94 Americans](#), whom the Iranian regime calls "fugitives" wanted on the charge of Soleimani's murder. The list is a mix of U.S. government officials from the Trump administration, military personnel of various ranks, and a few civilian media and think tank commentators. IRGC spokesman Ramazan Sharif was also quoted in several outlets warning that Iranian attacks on the U.S. base at Ain al-Assad in Iraq "[are still being considered and will become operational in due time](#)." Sharif also claimed that Soleimani, before dying, had succeeded in establishing an [anti-Israeli militant resistance movement among the third and fourth generation of Palestinians](#) in both the West Bank and Gaza, though Sharif did not give further details.
3. **Relations between the Iranian regime and Europe continue to fray.** Having already angered European countries by intervening on Russia's side in the Ukraine war, Tehran last week picked a fight with France over anti-Khamenei cartoons published by the French magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. The regime lashed out against the French government, forcing the [shutdown of the Cultural Wing of the French Embassy](#) in Tehran. Meanwhile, on Sunday [German authorities](#) announced the arrest of a 32-year old Iranian man for allegedly planning a terrorist attack in Germany using cyanide and ricin.
4. **Alongside its worsening tensions with Europe, the Iranian regime last week tried to shore up relations with potential allies.** Iran's foreign minister Hossein Amirabdollahian called his Pakistani counterpart Bilawal Zardari to "urge Muslim action against Western sacrilegious moves" and discuss how to "prevent Western states from promoting hate and committing acts of sacrilege in the name of freedom," in reference to

the *Charlie Hebdo* cartoons. During the phone call, Amirabdollahian also told Zardari that Tehran was eager to build closer economic ties, such as opening [the Pishin-Mand border market](#). As for two of Iran's other major allies, Russia sent a new ambassador to Tehran this week and [Venezuela's new foreign minister](#) was highlighted in regime media stating that the two countries are major partners. During the meeting with the new Russian ambassador Alexey Dedov, Iran's president urged Russia to enhance economic ties with Tehran, while Dedov reportedly said that [strategic economic ties between Iran and Russia have frustrated western sanctions](#).

5. **Internally, the Iranian government continues to execute protestors by hanging on a weekly basis.** This week two Iranians were hanged after the regime accused them of killing a Basij officer, though at trial the two were convicted of the broad crime of "[war against God](#)." Elsewhere, though the regime attempted to mount large-scale commemorations of Soleimani's death, [protestors marked the occasion by destroying posters and statues of Soleimani](#). Many media outlets published [videos](#) of Iranians countrywide burning Soleimani's pictures.

## **THE GULF & YEMEN**

6. **The Gulf region continues to struggle with the Assad regime's smuggling of Captagon.** [Qatar](#) is now a new target of Assad's narcotraffickers, as Qatari authorities announced seizing a shipment of more than 9000 tablets hidden inside children's mattresses. [UAE customs authorities](#) also announced the seizure of five shipments of the drug in December alone.
7. **Yemeni Foreign Minister Al-Eryani criticized the international community's dual standard in dealing with his government and with the Houthis.** Eyrani said on Sunday that the international community has a tendency to exert pressure on the Yemeni government because of its status as a legitimate state and as the side that is "sincere about launching a dialogue to end the war and the agony of the citizens," while at the same time "begging and appeasing the Houthi militia as it is an [unruly gang](#)." Eyrani complained that this dual-standard approach has failed throughout the years as the Houthis, at Iran's instigation, have vetoed all agreements, undermined cease fire efforts, and exploited diplomacy to buy time.

## **IRAQ**

8. **Iraq's government echoed Tehran's anti-U.S. rhetoric on anniversary of Soleimani's death.** Iranian influence in Iraq's state institutions was on full display last week as the head of Iraq's Supreme Judicial Council, Judge Faiq Zaidan, spoke at a ceremony commemorating the deaths of Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al Muhandis and said that Iraqi judiciary had issued an [arrest warrant against former President Donald Trump](#), adding that Trump had "confessed to committing the crime." In response to Zaidan's statements, Iraqi politician Mithal Al-Alusi said on Thursday ["that the matter will harm Iraq's interests, which are linked to strong relations with the United States."](#)

Finally, former Iraqi Prime Minister Adel Abdul-Mahdi, who reportedly has visited the grave of Al-Muhandis on a [monthly basis](#), was highlighted on Iranian media outlet *Al Alam* as [having kept a vigil at the gravesite on the anniversary of Muhandis's death](#).

9. **Iraqi military thwarts drone threat to base housing U.S. troops.** On Sunday, 8 January, two days after the IRGC warned of possible attacks against U.S. forces at Iraq's [Ain al-Assad base](#), Iraqi defense systems [intercepted and shot down](#) a drone flying over the base.

## **EGYPT**

10. **Egypt opens 2023 in economic uncertainty, with its currency sliding against the dollar and external debt growing.** After several years of managing a peg of 16 pounds to the U.S. dollar, the Egyptian government has been forced in recent weeks to let the market set the value of the pound, and the currency now trades at [more than 27 to the dollar](#). The pound's rapid devaluation has caused prices of imports to spike and created a shortage of dollars with which to pay for shipments that are stuck in Egyptian ports. In December, [Egypt turned to the IMF for its fourth loan in six years](#) after agreeing to let the pound's value be determined by market forces, but the government will still struggle to find means to pay the \$45 billion in external debt that will come due this year, out of a [total external debt that was estimated at more than \\$155 as of September 2022](#). Addressing the spike in prices of daily needs such as dairy products, bread, and vegetables, President Sisi gave a speech last Friday urging Egyptians "not to worry or be afraid" and explaining that the country's current economic woes are due [strictly to the effects of Russia's war on Ukraine](#). Separately, though, the news outlet *Atalayar* assessed that Egypt and other Arab countries may be benefiting from EU sanctions on Russia, which is allowing Egyptian firms to take some of Russia's market share. *Atalayar* reported that the volume of exports grew by 171% over the last year, resulting in a marginal profit of 5 billion euros in 2022.

## **TURKIYE**

11. **The Turkish opposition accused President Erdogan of making deals with Russia to influence Turkiye's upcoming elections.** Russia announced [postponing 20 billion dollars of Turkiye's debt for Russian natural gas deliveries](#) even though Turkiye has announced it will soon extract its own gas. The Republican People's Party (CHP) claimed that the delay of the Turkish debt was a Russian attempt to influence the elections. Former Undersecretary of Labor and Social Security Birol Aydemir questioned [why Russia, a country at war and facing its own economic crisis, would do Turkiye such a favor](#) and demanded that the government make public the terms of the agreement, including any political or economic concessions made. Meanwhile, the Turkish opposition parties announced on Monday that they will [nominate one candidate from the opposition factions to run against Erdogan for the presidency and will announce their nominee in February](#). The opposition parties also announced they aim to return Turkiye to a parliamentary form of government, reversing Erdogan's transformation to a

presidential system via a constitutional referendum in 2017.

12. **Concerning Turkiye's position on the accession of Sweden into NATO**, Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson said on Sunday that "Turkey maintains that we did what we said we would do, but they also say they want things that [we can't give them or we don't want to](#)." Kristersson noted that Turkiye has demanded Sweden agree to the extradition of a journalist suspected of being a supporter of Fethullah Gulen, whom Turkiye blames for the failed coup attempt of July 2016.
13. **Turkish intelligence sources claimed to have [killed PKK military leader Zaki Gurbuz](#)** in an operation in the northeastern Syrian city of Hasakah. On 6 January, Turkish intelligence sources told Turkiye's *Andalou* news agency that Gurbuz, who went by the nom de guerre of "Ahmed Shoresh," had become a leader of the PKK's operations in Turkey in 2008 and then made his way to Greece, where he was arrested in 2012. After being released by the Greeks in 2013, Gurbuz had traveled to Iraq and then relocated to Syria in 2019. The Turkish intelligence sources said Gurbuz had been responsible for attacks against Turkiye in April and August 2022.

## **LEBANON**

14. **Hizballah leaders used the anniversary of Qassem Soleimani's death to criticize the US and Israel.** In a high-profile speech, Hassan Nasrallah gave a tour d'horizon of anti-US and anti-Israeli conspiracy-theory rhetoric, including these high points:
  - The aim of the United States is to "dominate West Asia and seize its wealth, including the vast oil and gas reserves."
  - Nasrallah also said that "Soleimani and other leaders and martyrs challenged the initial phase of the new 'U.S. Middle East project' in Lebanon and Palestine," adding that the September 11 attacks "gave impetus to the American project to enter Afghanistan and Iraq, while approaching Iran and Syria."
  - Nasrallah claimed that "the aim of the [Soleimani] assassination was to "break the resistance, terrorize the Iraqis, and weaken the parties to the axis of resistance in Syria, Iran, Lebanon, and Palestine."
  - Regarding the new Israeli government, Nasrallah described it as "a mixture of corrupt, criminals, extremists and madmen," noting that "this mixture of madmen in the Israeli government may hasten the end of this temporary entity."
15. **Elsewhere, Hizballah forces commemorated the event in a rally on the airport road** with "dozens of citizens, diplomats, politicians, religious leaders, and children " joining the crowd in front of a statue of Soleimani. The Iranian Charge' d' Affairs, Hassan Khalili, told the crowd that the deceased leaders "[were able to prevent the American Islam that America was planning to spread in the world, which is represented by the Takfiri Islamic organizations, namely Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, which are funded by America](#)." Separately, Nasrallah's Deputy Naim Qassem stated that he had returned from a visit to Iran "[reassured of \[Iran's\] stable situation](#)...America and those with it built great hopes

with their media, political and terrorist aggression against Iran, and they failed. Ordinary and active, Iran is progressing and shining."

16. **Concerning Lebanon's weeks-long presidential vacuum**, Naharnet reported that [the United States and France have agreed on characteristics of the next Lebanese president](#). Those characteristics include being "uninvolved in corruption," having "sober-minded behavior" and the ability to be "independent and distant from regional political axes," as well as being able "to communicate with all parties without being subordinate to any political group." Finally, the next president should "work to restore the state's prestige and carry out the needed reforms in coordination with the Cabinet."

## **SYRIA**

17. **Rumors flew through the Arabic media in recent days about a possible tripartite meeting of the foreign ministers of Turkiye, Syria, and Russia in the UAE**. This speculation is a consequence of the UAE foreign minister's surprise visit to Assad in Damascus last week. To address these rumors, [the Assad regime's media outlet Al/Watan reported on Monday](#) that "there are still no specific dates for holding a meeting between the foreign ministers of Syria and Turkey, and everything that has been published so far is unfounded." Nevertheless, in the wake of the Emirati visit, Syrian news outlets picked up a speculative Bloomberg report that there is [an emerging Russian-Turkish-Emirati deal to recognize Assad's legitimacy](#) as Syria's president. This report came on the same day that [the UAE's UN mission seemingly criticized international pressure on the Assad regime's chemical weapons violations](#), complaining that the "Syrian chemical file" has become overly "politicized" at the UN.
18. **Syria TV reported that the Assad regime's narco trafficking is increasingly targeting Cyprus as a destination for drug smuggling**. [In late December, Cypriot authorities confiscated a shipment of more than 100 kg of hashish from Syria](#). The smuggled shipment is part of a wave of Assad regime drugs in the sea routes of the eastern Mediterranean, which have become an alternative route for the Syrian regime's smuggling of hashish and Captagon. Assad's narco trafficking through Cyprus may be growing as a result of greater measures by Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and Kuwait to disrupt drug shipments coming from Syrian ports.
19. **Orient TV reported that Iranian militias are imposing Shia religious practices in the areas of Aleppo city that they control**. According to Orient's sources, [the militias require mosques in some Aleppo neighborhoods to use the Shia call to prayer in place of the Sunni one](#), while using Friday sermons in those areas to speak about w prevents the "Sunnah call to prayer" in its areas of control in Aleppo and uses Friday sermons to talk about the "Sunni betrayal" of the Imam Hussein. Syrians have long expressed concern that the Iranian regime is attempting to import Shi'ism into the Sunni-majority Syrian population.

20. Finally, **Syrian media carried the remarkable story of an American woman detained in Syria who expressed her remorse for joining ISIS.** The 28-year-old Hoda Muthana, who left her native Alabama to join ISIS eight years ago, is now trapped with her child in the al-Hol IDP camp in northeastern Syria. [Muthana told a Syrian news outlet that she regretted joining ISIS and that she had been “brainwashed” by ISIS’s extremist ideology.](#) She said she was ready to return to America to help raise awareness against the ISIS ideology, even if it meant she would have to go to prison.