



After a holiday hiatus, here is the first 2023 edition of the ACLS newsletter
The Region
27-December- 5 January

TURKEY

1. Turkey's defense minister and intelligence chief met with Russian and Syrian regime counterparts in Moscow on 28 December to discuss potential steps toward normalization between Ankara and Damascus. The Assad regime demanded that [Turkey withdraw its forces from Syria](#), according to a Turkish statement the following day. For his part, Turkish Defense Minister Hulusi Akar said that Turkey had stressed "the necessity of resolving the Syrian crisis, including all parties, in accordance with Resolution No. 2254" during the tripartite meeting. After the meeting, Russia appeared to [pressure Turkish counterparts to set a date for a follow-up meeting at the foreign minister level](#), leading Turkish Foreign Minister Cavusoglu to state that a [foreign ministerial meeting could potentially take place in the second half of January](#). Cavasoglu said that while Turkey and the Assad regime share the belief that the PKK seeks to implement a separatist agenda in Syria, the two governments have not yet formulated any plans to combat the PKK together.
2. **Erdogan Welcomes an Israeli Ambassador Back to Ankara After Four Years of Broken Relations.** On 27 December, Turkish President Erdogan [received the credentials of an Israeli ambassador to Ankara](#), ending a four-year diplomatic estrangement during which Israel had no ambassador in Turkey. The Turkish media outlet Daily Sabah reported that the restoration of the Israeli ambassador was a key part of Ankara's [intensified efforts to restore relations with regional neighbors](#), including not just Israel, but also Armenia, Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.
3. **Erdogan Foils Opposition's Push for Early Elections.** Last week President Erdogan announced his intention for Turkey to hold its next elections not earlier than April 30, 2023, a decision he reached after [meeting with his coalition partner Devlet Bahceli, head of Turkey's far-right MHP party](#). Opposition groups [had requested to hold the elections before April 6](#), the date on which election law amendments that are expected to negatively affect the opposition's chances will go into effect. Erdogan's AKP party argued that current parliamentary conditions do not support conducting early elections before April 6, since doing so would

require either that 360 members of parliament agree to dissolve the body, or the President himself to dissolve parliament. In a signal that the presidential campaign has begun in earnest, [Erdogan launched a massive social media blitz touting his government's accomplishments in 2022](#). Elsewhere, however, one notable Turkish commentator published [an analysis indicating that Erdogan's AKP is likely to lose the presidency](#) if the opposition parties can remain unified in the elections.

THE GULF AND YEMEN

4. **UAE Foreign Minister Visits Assad in Damascus a Second Time.** Emirati Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed met with Syrian regime leader Bashar al-Assad in Damascus on Wednesday. It was the UAE official's second visit to Damascus in a little over a year. According to Sheikh Abdullah's official statement about the meeting, the two men discussed regional developments and [ways to increase economic cooperation and trade relations between the two countries](#). It was not clear from the UAE statement how increased trade relations between the Emirates and Damascus would account for the tight U.S. and EU sanctions on the Assad regime—nor how the UAE stands to benefit from its normalization push with the Syrian dictator.
5. **Israel and Saudi Arabia: Can Netanyahu Bring a Normalization Deal?** As Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu leads his new government into office, one of his priorities will be to seek a normalization deal with Saudi Arabia under the umbrella of the Abraham Accords. Netanyahu's predecessor is predicting that such a deal could happen soon. On 29 December, just ahead of the session to swear in Netanyahu's new government, outgoing PM Yair Lapid told the Knesset that he and outgoing foreign minister Naftali Bennett had taken steps to lay the groundwork for Saudi Arabia's entry into the Abraham Accords, and, in Lapid's estimation, the new government [could achieve a normalization agreement quite soon](#).

EGYPT

6. **Egypt's Economic Crisis Deepens.** Egypt is experiencing runaway inflation, rising interest rates, and an economic crisis that has placed the entire country on edge. Egypt's currency lost more than one-third of its value during 2022, and the currency collapse has created a severe shortage of hard foreign currency with which to fund foreign exchange. As a result, billions of dollars worth of goods are stacking up at Egyptian ports for lack of dollars to pay for the shipments. Egypt's prime minister said the government had worked with the Egyptian Central Bank to release \$5 billion to reduce the port backlog since late November, but goods worth [\\$9.5 billion](#) are still stranded in the ports awaiting currency for foreign exchange. A net importer of fuel and food commodities, Egypt has suffered an economic shock as a result of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, which has disrupted grain and energy deliveries that Egypt depends upon.
7. **ISIS Claims Terror Attack in Ismailia.** Egypt's economic troubles have been joined by a potential increase in terrorism. On 30 December an armed group attacked a security checkpoint in the city of Ismailia, near the Suez Canal. The attackers used machine guns to [kill three police officers and wound at least 12 others](#) in the first terrorist attack to take place outside the Sinai Peninsula in three years. The following day, 31 December, ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement issued by its media arm, Amaq.

SYRIA

8. **New Israeli Government, Same Israeli Airstrikes in Syria.** Damascus airport went out of service again after Israeli strikes at 2:00 a.m. Monday morning. The Syrian regime's "SANA" news agency reported that two members of the Syrian regime forces were killed and caused material damages that put Damascus International Airport out of service. According to the Israeli channel i24 News, the Israeli government hopes to continue its covert campaign of airstrikes against Iranian and Hizballah military infrastructure in Syria, despite the difficulty posed by the newly increased close cooperation between [Russia and Iran in Syria](#).
9. **Assad's Narcotrafficking into Jordan and Saudi Arabia Continues Unabated.** Events last week illustrated the constant fight Jordan and Saudi Arabia are forced to make to combat the Assad regime's narcotrafficking into their countries and the region beyond. Syrian media sources identified two new

Captagon smuggling routes controlled by Hizballah and Iranian militias, one near [the Jordanian border](#) and one [extending along the Euphrates valley](#). The former route is the same one used by ISIS and Iranian militia fighters to infiltrate areas under the protection of the Syrian Democratic Forces/YPG/PKK. Another Hizballah smuggling point that was previously struck by Israeli forces in northeast Syria is now fully operational [just 50 days after it was closed](#). On December 28, Jordanian authorities [thwarted a new drug shipment from Syrian territory](#) after a gunfight with the smugglers. Three days later, Saudi Arabia seized almost three million Captagon pills hidden inside shipments that originated in Assad regime territory, including a shipment of electrical cables that had come across the Saudi border [from Jordan](#).

10. ISIS Steps Up Attacks as U.S. Warns of the Terror Group's Return in Syria.

Turkish leaders in recent days expressed skepticism about the need for the Global Coalition to continue its campaign against ISIS in Syria using the Syrian Democratic Forces as local partners. However, in the period since Turkey announced its intention to conduct normalization talks with the Assad regime, ISIS attacks have continued in northeast Syria. In one high profile incident, an [ISIS cell attacked the headquarters of the "Asayish" northwest of Raqqa](#). Some of the ISIS fighters wore explosive belts in a bid to liberate ISIS fighters from a nearby detention facility, but the attack was foiled in a gun battle with local security forces. Arabic media also highlighted a [warning by U.S. forces of the possible return of ISIS despite a high tempo of operations against the group](#). The U.S. warning cited ISIS's continuing intention to attack detention facilities, coupled with chaotic governance conditions in a large portion of eastern Syria.

11. Assad Helps Putin Evade U.S. Aviation Sanctions. After Egypt and Lebanon canceled all Russian civil flights through their airspace in compliance with new U.S. sanctions against Russia, the Assad regime did its part to help insulate Russia from the sanctions by [opening Syrian airspace to Russian civil aircraft](#). While Russian sources described Syrian airspace as still insecure and requiring further evaluation, a Russian flight landed at Latakia Airport after a 12-year hiatus, carrying notable Russian personalities.

12. Iraqi Leaders Mourn IRGC Chief Qassem Soleimani, Denounce the U.S. for Killing Him. This week Iraqi politicians and government officials made public shows of mourning on the third anniversary of the death of Iranian terrorist chief Qassem Soleimani and his Iraqi deputy Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who were killed by a U.S. airstrike in Baghdad on 2 January 2020. Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad Shia al-Sudani denounced the U.S. airstrike that killed Soleimani as [“a violation of all international norms and laws.”](#) Iraq’s six southern provinces declared [January 2 an official holiday](#) to honor the two men, while on Tuesday a large group of pro-Iran militia members and leaders made a pilgrimage to the site of Soleimani’s death near Baghdad airport [to unveil a new monument to Soleimani and Muhandis](#). Iraq’s French-educated Former Prime Minister [Adel Abdel Mahdi, meanwhile, made a pilgrimage to Muhandis’s gravesite in Najaf](#), where he sat in vigil graveside while reading the Qur’an.

IRAN

13. IRGC General Claims Regime Insiders Failed to Support the Regime’s Crackdown. In a leaked video, [a senior IRGC official criticized some IRGC Commanders for “standing on the sidelines”](#) and failing to support the Iranian regime’s efforts to crack down on the ongoing protest movement in the country. Brigadier General Hamid Abazari also criticized some civilian regime officials for not doing enough to stop the protests. IRGC spokesmen were quick to contradict him, claiming on 31 December that Abazari’s remarks were his “personal opinion” and were not supported by facts.

14. Iranian Regime Ousts its Central Bank Governor After Currency Collapse. [Iran’s Central Bank governor resigned on 29 December](#) amid a collapse in the value of Iran’s currency, which has lost a quarter of its value in the past two months. Ali Salih Abadi is leaving the governor’s post after just 15 months in office, and his successor, Mohammed Reza Farzin, will face the unenviable task of trying to shore up a rial which is now trading at a historical low of 430,000 to the dollar. The task will be exacerbated by protests and strikes that are [paralyzing Tehran’s bazaars](#) and disrupting commercial activity across the country, which is now experiencing 50 percent inflation.

15. **Get Fit with the Basij!** On a lighter note, Iranians this week reacted to a viral video clip from [an Iranian state TV breakfast show with uniformed militiamen conducting an exercise class accompanied by music](#), something akin to the style of Richard Simmons, if Simmons were to don military fatigues.