

THE EARLY PHOENIX

A first look at today's most notable stories from the Middle East, selected by ACLS experts

February 23, 2023

SYRIA

1. [**Details of Arrest Carried Out by U.S.-backed Forces in Southern Syria**](#) (*Syrian Observer*). Confidential sources have told Athr Press that a Free Syrian Army patrol raided the Rukban camp on the Syrian-Jordanian border and arrested several people. Those arrested included the head of the local council, Muhammad Derbas al-Khalidi, and the head of the Palmyra and Badia Tribal Council. Diwan Badr al-Azab al-Rab... This incident comes a few days after about 70 civil leaders and activists went to Al-Tanf base to meet with a group of international coalition leaders. They were accompanied by a vehicle of Maher Al-Darwish, one of the leaders objecting to Farid Al-Qassim assuming leadership of the Free Syrian Army after the dismissal of Muhannad Al-Talaa. At that time, the delegation was prevented from entering the camp.
2. [**After the Devastating Earthquake in Turkiye, Syrian Refugees Seek to Knock on the Doors of Europe**](#) (*Syria TV*). Amid the growing need for shelter, food, and basic services in the earthquake-stricken areas of Turkiye, anti-refugee sentiment increased, and calls for their departure emerged. Smugglers demand between \$4,000 and \$5,000 per person to take the dangerous sea voyage from Turkey to Greece, which is why some 3,500 migrants died trying to make the journey in 2014. However, despite the high costs and risks, the number of migrants arriving in Europe has doubled over the past two years, from 620,000 in 2021 to about a million in 2022. Then, 260,000 asylum seekers registered over the past year were Afghans and Syrians, according to the Asylum Agency of the European Union.
3. [**Turkish Opposition Leader Kilicdaroglu Sent a Letter of Condolence to Assad for the Earthquake Victims**](#) (*Syria TV*). According to the statement, which was published by the Republican People's Party on its official website,

Kilicdaroglu offered his "deepest condolences" to the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar al-Assad, after the earthquake that struck southern Turkey and northwestern Syria.

4. [**The UAE is Behind Assad's Agreement to Open the Northern Crossings to Aid**](#) (*Enab Baladi*). Four sources said that the UAE was behind the approval of the head of the Syrian regime, Bashar al-Assad, to pass international aid to northwestern Syria through two additional crossings that he does not control. On Thursday, Reuters quoted four unnamed sources as saying that the UAE had a role in persuading Assad.
5. [**High-Precision Weapon: What Bomb Did Israel Use in Damascus?**](#) (*Enab Baladi*). Hours after the Israeli raids that hit a security headquarters in the Kafr Souseh neighborhood of Damascus, talk began that the raids targeted a high-level meeting, amid the speculation of military experts regarding the type of bombs used and conflicting opinions by specialists about the targeted personalities.
6. [**Ignoring the Earthquake Victims, Asma al-Assad Infuriates the Syrians**](#) (*Al Hadath*). An institution affiliated with the wife of regime President Bashar al-Assad created great popular discontent among Syrians affected by the earthquake within the shelter centers in regime-controlled areas because of the inequity in the distribution of aid by the institution (Al-Areen), which was formerly called the "Al-Bustan Association," according to reports from the Syrian Observatory. The Al-Areen Foundation, affiliated with Assad's wife Asma al-Akhras, was previously affiliated with Assad's cousin Rami Makhlouf, but was seized by Assad's wife on orders from Russia. The Foundation is responsible for distributing humanitarian aid within the areas controlled by the regime, especially the areas of the Syrian coast.
7. [**Syria's Earthquake Death Toll Rose to 6,747 as a Result of the large number of injuries**](#) (*Al Hadath*). Today, the death toll from the Syrians has

reached 6,747 inside the Syrian territory, distributed among 2,226 in regime-held areas, including 5 in the new earthquake on February 20, and 4,521 in opposition-held areas, in addition to thousands of injured, hundreds of whom are in critical condition. The number of Syrian victims whose bodies were returned to Syria through the crossings with Turkey reached 1,793...though this toll is not final because there are more bodies of Syrian victims in Turkey. This brings the total number of Syrian victims in Syria and Turkey to **8,531** citizens who were buried in the Syrian territories.

TUNISIA

8. **Tunisian Arrests Unite the Opposition—and Qais Saeed Does Not Care** (*Al Nahar*). Arrest campaigns continue in Tunisia, as the police on Wednesday arrested the Secretary-General of the opposition Republican Party, [Issam Al-Shabi](#), and the leader of the opposition Salvation Front, [Shaima Issa](#). On the same day, Tunisian police also arrested [Ezzedine Hazqui](#), one of the harshest critics of President Qais Saieed and the father of the prominent dissident, Jawhar bin Mubarak, who was arrested on Wednesday, according to his daughter. On Wednesday evening, President Qais Saeed sacked [the Minister of Employment and Vocational Training](#), Nasreddin Al-Nassibi, making him the fifth minister to be sacked since the beginning of this year, in light of the tense political situation in the country.

ISRAEL & PALESTINE

9. **Israeli Minister of Intelligence Calls for Severe Sanctions Against Iran to Stop its Nuclear Program** (*Al Hadath*). The Israeli Minister of Intelligence, Gila Gamliel, considered that the only way to prevent the killing of demonstrators and stop the development of Iran's nuclear program is to impose severe sanctions on the Iranian regime. Israeli Foreign Minister Eli Cohen expected that "the Western world will re-impose sanctions on Iran before the 78th session of the United Nations General Assembly in September of this year."

10. **Israeli Iron Dome Intercepted Five Missiles Fired from the Gaza Strip** (*Al Jazeera*). On Thursday morning, the Israeli air force bombed two sites of the Palestinian resistance in Gaza City after militants fired missiles from the Gaza Strip. The Israeli army announced that its warplanes attacked two Hamas sites, one of which is used to produce weapons in the center of the Strip, and another to store naval weapons west of Gaza City, in response to the firing of missiles at settlements.

LEBANON

11. **Lebanese Public Prosecutor Accuses Central Bank Governor of Several Crimes** (*Al Maydeen*). On Thursday the Public Prosecutor of Appeal in Beirut sued the Governor of the Banque du Liban, Riad Salameh, for several crimes, including embezzlement and money laundering, in the first local allegation against him on the sidelines of investigations conducted by several European countries about his wealth. The judicial official stated that Judge Raja Hamoush "charged Salameh, his brother, his assistant Marianne Al-Hawik, and everyone whom the investigation showed, with crimes of embezzlement of public funds, forgery, counterfeiting, illegal enrichment, money laundering, and violation of the tax law."
12. **The first judicial ruling from outside Lebanon in the case of the Beirut port explosion** (*Al Jazeera*). The Lebanese Bar Association announced that the British Supreme Court of Justice issued a judicial ruling against the "SAVARO" company in the case of the ammonium nitrate shipment that the company transported to Lebanon, the cargo that later caused the Beirut port explosion in 2020. The British court issued a ruling in the civil lawsuit filed against the company registered in London, and confirmed its responsibility towards the victims.

TURKIYE

13. [Earthquake Damage Assessment in Hatay at 80% \(Al Jazeera\)](#). In an interview on the official Turkish channel "TRT" on Wednesday, Turkish Interior Minister Suleiman Soylu said the new death toll from the earthquake in Turkey reached 43,556. Soylu added that the rate of damage assessment in Hatay province ranges between 75% and 80%, noting that 750,000 "independent sections" were damaged, including commercial areas.
14. [Turkiye Blocks Iraqi Kurdish News Site Rudaw \(Middle East Eye\)](#). A court in Türkiye blocked access to Iraqi Kurdistan news outlet Rudaw late on Wednesday after Turkish police filed a complaint, alleging that it assisted terror propaganda. The court's decision was part of a larger judgment, which blocked dozens of Twitter accounts and a few websites, including Avesta Kitap, a site that sells Kurdish language books, and a blog belonging to Dutch journalist Frederike Geerdink. The Turkish government on Tuesday also blocked the popular Turkish social media website Eksi Sozluk without giving any reason.
15. [US-backed YPG Members Kill 3 at Activist's Funeral in Syria \(Daily Sabah\)](#). At least three people were killed and a large number of others including children were injured when members of the YPG/PKK opened fire on a crowd gathered at the funeral of activist Hussein Jamil al-Zawbaa in Syria's Deir el-Zour on Wednesday. Al-Zawbaa himself was killed at a checkpoint set up by the terrorist group on Tuesday. Al-Zawbaa was among the prominent figures in the region opposing the YPG/PKK's presence in rural parts of Deir ez-Zour and a vocal opponent of the group's scheme to exclude the local population from oil revenues it controlled. The area controlled by the terrorist group since 2019 is home to rich oil and gas fields and locals often stage protests against its presence in the region.
16. [Erdoğan Likely to Stick with Pre-set Election Date After Quakes \(Daily Sabah\)](#). Erdoğan and his senior AK Party members held a seven-hour-long meeting Wednesday to discuss whether to postpone the much-anticipated

election date, and their conclusion was to stick with the proposed vote on May 14.

17. **Sweden, Türkiye to Resume NATO Talks Mid-March** (*Daily Sabah*).

Sweden's talks with Türkiye about its impending NATO membership are set to resume in mid-March after stalling in January in the wake of protests by terrorist sympathizers and a far-right extremist, according to Swedish Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson.

18. **Another Earthquake Hits Türkiye's Southernmost Hatay Province**

(*Anadolu Agency*). A fresh earthquake rocked Türkiye's southernmost Hatay province on Thursday evening, the country's disaster agency said. Hatay Governor Rahmi Dogan said a few buildings, which were already damaged from the previous quakes, collapsed.

IRAN

19. **Iranian Regime Issues Counter-Sanctions Against Europe** (*Tehran*

Times). The counter-sanctions list includes 15 current and former European officials, including Isabelle Lonvis-Rome, France's Minister for Gender Equality, Diversity, and Equal Opportunities; Roland Lescure, France's Minister Delegate for Industry; Josef Schuster, Germany's Central Council of Jews; Alex Benjamin, Europe Israel Public Affairs' Director; Jamie M. Fly, President and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty; and head of Ger. It also lists 13 European organizations, including Christians for Israel, the European Coalition for Israel, the Center for Information and Documentation Israel, the Eurospike armaments manufacturer, and six German defense contractors. Eight more British citizens are included on the list, including Alan Jacob, a member of The Jewish Chronicle's board of directors, Matthew Jonathan Jukes, assistant commissioner for specialist operations for the Metropolitan Police Service, and six military officers.

20. [**Exiled Prince Says if World Supports Protests, Iran's Regime Won't Last Long**](#) (*Iran International*). During a conference in the European American Press Club (EAPC) in Paris on Wednesday, Prince Reza Pahlavi said that if Western countries adopt the policy of "maximum support" for the current protests, the regime will not last long. It would take months as opposed to years, if the international community stands behind the popular protests.
21. [**Iranian Defense Minister Calls for Withdrawal of US Occupying Forces from Syria**](#) (*Tasnim Agency*). Iran's Defense Minister Brigadier General Mohammad Reza Gharaei Ashtiani and his Syrian counterpart, Lieutenant General Ali Mahmoud Abbas, met in Tehran on Wednesday, where Ashtiani condemned the presence of American forces in Syria as "destabilizing."
22. [**The Telegraph: White House is Pressuring London not to Designate Revolutionary Guards as Terrorists**](#) (*Al Mayadeen*). The British newspaper, The Telegraph, reported that US President Joe Biden's administration is putting pressure on the United Kingdom to prevent the designation of the Iranian Revolutionary Guards as a "terrorist organization," noting that "the British government can play a major diplomatic role with Tehran" that "will be undermined if the Revolutionary Guards are banned."
23. [**Site linked to Khamenei acknowledges UN accusations about 84% Enrichment of Uranium**](#) (*Al Hadath*). The admission came from the Iranian "Noor News" website, which is linked to the Iranian Supreme National Security Council, which is supervised by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

YEMEN

24. [**American Girl Kidnapped and Forcibly Imprisoned in Houthi Controlled Sana'a**](#) (*Al Hadath*). In an unusual story, a father kidnapped his daughter...from New York State and deported her by force to the Yemeni capital, Sana'a, where she was forcibly detained in preparation for her forced marriage.

While her fate remains unclear, US authorities arrested the father and his son and charged them with kidnapping, which carries a penalty of life imprisonment.

25. [**Yemen Announced the Recovery of 77 Smuggled Artifacts from the United States**](#) (*Al Hadath*). The official Yemeni news agency reported that the Yemeni ambassador to Washington, Muhammad al-Hadrami, received the seized antiquities in a ceremony in the presence of officials from the US Ministries of Foreign Affairs, National Security, and Justice. Given the current conditions the country is going through, and in order to raise awareness and promote Yemeni heritage in American circles, the Yemeni government decided to loan these antiquities to the famous Smithsonian Museum in the heart of the American capital, Washington. Chase Robinson, Director of the Smithsonian Asian Art Museum, praised the loan agreement, stressing the museum's keenness to preserve these antiquities, study them, and display some of them to the public to introduce Yemeni nobility and heritage.
26. [**Saudi Arabia Deposited One Billion Dollars at the Central Bank of Yemen**](#) (*Mareb Press*). The Governor of the Central Bank of Yemen, Ahmed Ghaleb, said that the Saudi deposit will enable the Yemeni government to implement economic reforms in cooperation with Arab and international monetary institutions, in addition to strengthening efforts to build reserves at the Central Bank of Yemen to enable it to enhance economic stability.
27. [**Yemen: Torture Victims Accuse Total of Breaching French Corporate Duty Law**](#) (*Middle East Eye*). Lawyers for two men allegedly detained in secret and then tortured by Emirati forces at a gas plant used as a prison in Yemen have filed a lawsuit against French energy giant TotalEnergies...In the suit filed in the Paris Court of Justice on Wednesday, the lawyers argue that TotalEnergies failed to identify and prevent human rights violations as required by a 2017 French law. The French firm is the largest shareholder of Yemen LNG, the company operating the Balhaf gas liquefaction plant in the southern governorate of Shabwah, where both men were taken in 2018 and 2019.

IRAQ

28. **Iraq Adopted the Chinese Yuan in Oil Trade** (*Al Hadath*). The Iraqi central bank announced that the financing of foreign trade from China will be regulated directly and in the Chinese yuan currency through two options. The first option includes strengthening the balances of Iraqi banks that have accounts with Chinese banks in the Chinese yuan currency.
29. **Iraq Calls for Dialogue with Turkiye Regarding Water Management** (*Al Hadath*). Iraq is suffering from a water crisis in which it blames Turkey and Iran for their "non-compliance" with international agreements and their "infringement" on Iraq's water quotas. The Turkish Ilisu Dam is located on the Tigris River, less than 70 km from the Iraqi border. Its storage capacity is 10.40 billion cubic meters, and its hydroelectric station has a capacity of about 1,200 megawatts. Since 2003, Iraq has been suffering from a decline in the water level across the Tigris and Euphrates rivers as a result of the water policies adopted by Turkey and Iran by reducing release rates, changing the paths of tributaries and building giant dams on them.

EGYPT

30. **US Dollar Records New Highs Against the Egyptian Pound** (*Al Hadath*). The highest dollar exchange rate at Abu Dhabi Islamic Bank came at 30.63 pounds for purchase, compared to 30.68 pounds for sale. With 24 banks led by the Central Bank of Egypt, the exchange rate of the US green note stabilized at 30.58 pounds for purchase, compared to 30.68 pounds for sale.