

## THE EARLY PHOENIX

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

February 16, 2023

### **SYRIA**

1. [Five More Civilians Executed by ISIS While Collecting Truffles in the Palmyra Desert](#) (*Al Araby Al Jadeed*). The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights stated that the bodies of five people were found today in the Syrian desert, 4 of them in one location, bringing the number of those executed by the organization's members to 16, among those who were kidnapped a few days ago, while they were collecting truffles in the Palmyra desert within the Homs desert. Al-Sharqiya, including a woman and a member of the regime forces, while the fate of about 59 is still unknown.
2. [Assad Responds to Jordanian Humanitarian Aid by Sending Drug Shipment](#) (*Zaman Al Wasel*). On February 12, 2023, Jordanian authorities announced seizing a new shipment of Captagon and other drugs attempted to be smuggled to the Gulf from Assad controlled territories.
3. [White Helmets Chief Raed Al-Saleh Says UN Threatened Syrian Humanitarian Organizations](#) (*Sham News*). The head of the Syrian Civil Defense Organization (the White Helmets), Raed Al-Saleh, revealed the threat of United Nations agencies to Syrian humanitarian organizations after the UN agencies were disturbed by accusations of their failure to respond to the humanitarian disaster after the earthquake in Syria. Al-Saleh published tweets through his official Twitter account, noting that "United Nations agencies are disturbed by accusations of their failure to respond to the humanitarian catastrophe after the earthquake in Syria," and said the United Nations

threatened Syrian humanitarian organizations and demanded that they “define their role.”

4. [The victims of Syria are displaced among cars, tents and temporary shelters](#)

“The situation we live in does not allow us to think about the future.”

(*Sharq al-Awsat*). Five provinces were mainly affected in Syria, most notably Idlib and Aleppo, which border Turkey. Correspondents of the French Press Agency in the affected areas saw buildings completely flattened, and families sleeping in schools, mosques, squares, olive groves, and even camps for the displaced, which remained untouched by the repercussions of the earthquake.

5. [Aftershocks Continue: 4.8-magnitude earthquake hits Syria and is felt by the residents of Lebanon](#) (*Al Nahar*).

An earthquake measuring about 4.8 in magnitude struck, this afternoon, Syria, with its center in the sea off the city of Latakia. Residents of the Syrian coast, Homs, and Hama felt the tremor, in addition to some Lebanese regions, including Beirut.

## TURKIYE

6. [Six Billion US Dollars Collected for Donations in Turkiye](#) (*Al Jazeera*).

Turkish, Azeri, and “Turkish Cypriot” channels and radio stations launched a donation campaign in Turkiye to help those affected by the earthquake. And those channels (213 TV stations and 562 radio stations inside and outside Turkey) broadcast a joint campaign called “Turkey is One Heart”, in which Turkish celebrities participated in presenting the campaign live. Over the course of 7 hours of live broadcasting, the campaign received large donations amounting to 115 billion and 146 million and 528 thousand Turkish liras (about 6.1 billion dollars).

7. [Turkiye: Rescue of a girl who spent 248 hours under the rubble](#) (Al Sharq al-Awsat). A team of miners managed to reach the survivor, who stayed for 11 days under the rubble of the "Atabay" building, after sensors picked up sound signals from under the rubble. The girl was taken to hospital for treatment, as she showed signs of severe fatigue.

## IRAQ

8. [Iraqi Central Bank Confirms its Intention to Stabilize Exchange Rates; 20% of Currency Transfers Abroad are "Fake"](#) (Al Sharq al Awsat). Mazhar Muhammad Salih, economic advisor to the Prime Minister, said...“the decrease in the sale of the currency by the Central Bank came due to old accumulations or its rejection by the electronic platform.” For the first time, the government advisor revealed the percentages of money that are being smuggled to neighboring countries through the currency auction, when he said: “There is fraud by taking the currency abroad...by importing materials that do not benefit the Iraqi people,” stressing that “the rate of counterfeiting currency transfers abroad reached 20 percent.”
9. [American Resentment at the Meeting of the Australian Ambassador in Baghdad with the Terrorist Khazali; the U.S. Warns Allies Not to Repeat This](#) (Al Iraq News). The Australian network “ABC” reported Thursday that differences have occurred between Sydney and Washington over the meeting of the Australian ambassador to Iraq, Paula Ganley, with the terrorist leader of the Asa’ib militia, Qais Khazali...American newspapers and some political officials attacked the Australian ambassador in Baghdad because of her meeting with Khazali, referring to the statements of former US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, during which he declared the leader of “Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq” responsible for nearly six thousand attacks on US forces.

10. [\*\*Iraq Will Sign an Agreement with US General Electric to Improve Electricity\*\*](#) (*Rudaw*). According to the memorandum of understanding, the contract will be signed for five years, in order to continue the work of energy production units prepared by the company...to generate electricity in a phased manner that is appropriate to the amount of available fuel and resources.

## **THE GULF**

11. [\*\*UAE Intervenes in Sudan and Establishes a Senior Support Group\*\*](#) (*Al Sharq al-Awsat*). During a visit from Sudan's military leader Fattah Al-Burhan to the President of the United Arab Emirates Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan, both leaders announced forming a high-level joint working group to develop a vision for the conduct of bilateral relations.
12. [\*\*France Seeks Qatar's Assistance in Evacuations from Kabul\*\*](#) (*Al Jazeera*). So far, France has evacuated 2,384 people from Afghanistan, including 142 French and 17 Europeans, and more than 2,600 Afghans have been at risk since August 17, according to Macron.
13. [\*\*US Meeting In Oman Coincides With Report Of Talks To Free Americans In Iran\*\*](#) (*Iran International*). US Special Envoy for Iran Robert Malley held talks with Omani officials about Iran, as reports emerged of indirect talks to free US prisoners held in Tehran...NBC had reported earlier that \$7 billion of Iran's funds held in South Korea will be released as part of a prisoner deal. Iran International's correspondent asked State Department Spokesman Ned Price if the US is willing to give the Iranian people assurances that any released funds are not going to end up in IRGC's hands. Price responded that he is not in a position to confirm or deny any reports.

## **ISRAEL**

14. [Netanyahu & Putin Agree to Continue Air Strikes on Iranian Headquarters in Syria \(Syrian Observer\)](#). According to Dr. Mahmoud al-Hamza, a researcher and expert on Russian affairs, the understandings between Israel and Russia regarding Syria are not new. Israel has previously notified Russia of its intention to launch air strikes, but the level of coordination between the two sides had decreased in recent times. However, with the return of Netanyahu, who has a strong relationship with Russian President Vladimir Putin, the level of coordination has increased once again, and the two sides are now returning to their previous course.
  
15. [News of a "sharp and noisy" debate between Washington and Tel Aviv... Expectations of the Security Council's vote to call on Israel to halt settlement activity \(Al Jazeera\)](#). Al-Jazeera's correspondent in New York reported that next Monday the UN Security Council will discuss a draft resolution that would demand that Israel immediately stop all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territories...And the "Walla" website reported that the discussion - which the White House had with the representative of the Israeli government and Minister of Strategic Affairs Ron Dermer in this regard - was sharp and loud.
  
16. [Israeli Intelligence Warns Ben Gvir's Policy Will Detonate the Security Situation \(Al Jazeera\)](#). The Israeli Channel 13 quoted the head of the Israeli internal intelligence service, Ronen Bar, as having warned Ben Gvir that his actions in Jerusalem would push more Palestinians into the circle of carrying out operations.

## IRAN

17. [Chinese Are No Longer Willing To Work On Iran Oil Projects](#) (**Iran International**). The development comes as President Ebrahim Raisi is in Beijing this week on an official visit discussing the implementation of a 25-year cooperation pact signed in 2021 as a general outline, but details have not been worked out. However, according to moderate news website Rouydad 24, Moradi did not mention why the project is now being carried out by Iranian experts.
  
18. [US Confirms That Al Qaeda Top Man Is In Iran](#) (**Iran International**). Seif al-Adel, the apparent new leader of al Qaeda is in Iran, a United Nations report has said and the United States confirmed the information on Wednesday. State Department spokesperson Ned Price was asked during his daily press briefing to comment on the UN report. He said: “Our assessment aligns with that of the UN...offering safe haven to al Qaeda is another example of Iran’s wide-ranging support for terrorism, its destabilizing activities in the Middle East and beyond.”
  
19. [After five months of protests...the Iranian opposition seeks to unify its ranks](#) (*Al Sharq Al Awsat*). Since the revolution of 1979, opponents of the Iranian regime have clashed with each other as much as they clashed with the apparatus of power in Tehran. Today, however, there is an effort to reach a consensus to turn the demonstrations into an alternative political proposition...On February 10, Georgetown University in Washington hosted a conference of exiled opposition figures who, until recently, would not speak to each other. Among these figures are Masih Alinejad, who campaigns against the veil, Hamid Ismailiyun, a spokesman for the relatives of the victims of the Ukrainian plane crash that was shot down by Iran in 2020, and Reza Pahlavi, son of the Shah who was overthrown by the revolution in 1979.

## **LEBANON**

20. [Hizballah Media Outlet Asks: Is This the Hour for the American Abandonment of Riad Salameh?](#) (*Al Manar [Affiliated with Lebanese Hizballah]*). During the past hours, news spread of the imminent imposition of US sanctions on the Governor of the Central Bank of Lebanon, Riad Salameh, in news that some considered surprising because the man had always been American-supported and had full cover from Washington and carried out everything it asked for. In many cases he was “a king more than The King,” as he and those with him from the banks have always been outbidding the Americans themselves in imposing a siege on some Lebanese and devoting penalties on them by closing accounts, preventing financial transfers, and checking the sources of funds, even if they were small sums coming from an expatriate to his family in Lebanon, and other practices that increased the stranglehold on the Lebanese. But the most important question remains: Has the time for America to abandon Riad Salameh arrived?

21. [Anger in Lebanon– Burning banks and food in dollars](#) (Al Nahar).

Dozens of protesters smashed bank facades and burned some of them in Beirut, protesting their inability to withdraw their deposits at a time when the local currency recorded a new record deterioration, and the Minister of Economy announced that today, Thursday, a decision will be issued obliging supermarket owners to price food products in dollars.