

THE EARLY PHOENIX

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

March 15, 2023

SYRIA

1. [**Assad in Moscow to Discuss Comprehensive Settlement in Syria**](#) (*Syria TV*). The Kremlin announced that Putin and Assad would meet in Moscow on Wednesday to discuss Russian-Syrian cooperation in political, commercial, economic, and humanitarian fields, as well as prospects for a comprehensive settlement of the situation in and around Syria. The state-run news agency, SANA, reported that Assad was received at Vnukovo International Airport in Moscow by Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov, Russia's ambassador to Damascus, Alexander Yefimov, and the regime's ambassador to Moscow, Bashar al-Jaafari.
2. [**US Says Closure of ISIS Prisons in Syria Depends on Countries Repatriating Their Citizens**](#) (*Syria TV*). The spokesperson of the US State Department, Ned Price, said the closure of ISIS prisons in northeastern Syria is contingent upon countries accepting the repatriation of their citizens. During a press conference on Tuesday, Price emphasized that returning ISIS members to their countries of origin is the only sustainable solution and commended the countries that have already accepted to take back their citizens from these camps. He further asserted that this is the most effective way to address this challenge.
3. [**Syrian Pound is Falling to Unprecedented Levels**](#) (*Zaman Al Wasl*). The Syrian pound continues to plunge to historic lows, as it experienced further decline during Tuesday's afternoon and evening trading. In the daily

transactions' outcome and comparison to the previous day's closing rates, the "Damascus Dollar" increased by 100 pounds, with a closing rate ranging between 7,550 pounds for purchase and 7,650 pounds for sale.

IRAN

4. **Belarusian President Lukashenko Visits Iran to Learn from its Experience in Evading Sanctions** (*Tehran Times*). Leader of the Islamic Revolution Ayatollah Ali Khamenei said in a meeting on Monday with Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko that the countries that are being put under unilateral sanctions by the U.S. and its Western allies must join hands to nullify sanctions. "Those countries that have been sanctioned by America must destroy the weapon of sanctions through cooperation with one another and forming a common group, and we believe this is possible to do," the Leader suggested. Ayatollah Khamenei added, "Severe sanctions made Iran notice its own intrinsic capabilities and forces."...For his part, the Belarusian president said his visit to Iran was aimed at opening a new chapter in the two countries' relations, vowing to follow up on all agreements between the two countries through cooperation and determination of his Iranian counterpart.

5. **US Pursues Diplomacy with Iran, but not on Restoring Nuclear Deal** (*Iran International*). The US State Department refused Monday to comment on the possible release of Iran's frozen funds in exchange for three Americans held by Iran. However, the State Department's outgoing spokesperson Ned Price signaled that efforts are underway for their release. He also sounded optimistic about last week's deal between Iran and Saudi Arabia to restore relations brokered by China. There have long been signs that a US agreement to free \$7 billion frozen by South Korean banks would be the price to pay for releasing three dual-nationals considered, in effect, hostages held by Iran...At the same

time, Price reiterated that restoring the 2015 nuclear deal (JCPOA) with Iran “is not on the agenda.”

6. **Iranian Protesters Return to Streets Ahead of “Festival of Fire”**

(Iran Wire). Protesters took to the streets of multiple Iranian cities on the evening of March 13 to call for the overthrow of the Islamic Republic ahead of Chaharshanbe Suri, the Persian festival of fire. Videos shared on social media show demonstrators in cities including Tehran, Sanandaj, Kamiyaran, and Mashhad, chanting “Woman, life, freedom,” the main slogan of the nationwide protest movement triggered by the September death of a 22-year-old woman, Mahsa Amini, in the custody of morality police.

7. **France Says Tehran Publicly Acknowledged Arbitrary Detention of French Citizens** *(Al Sharq Al Awsat)*.

Paris said Tehran has “publicly” acknowledged the arbitrary detention of French citizens after an Iranian spokesman criticized France’s “interfering role” and “unconstructive” position that allegedly hampers talks for the release of detained French citizens. French Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Anne-Claire Legendre stated at a press conference that they were informed of the statements made by Nasser Kanaani, the Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesman, on Monday. The statements are said to be “disturbing” as they demonstrate the arbitrary nature of the arrests.

GULF REGION

8. **US Welcomes Saudi Arabia-Boeing Deals Worth \$37B** *(Al Arabiya*

English). The White House on Tuesday welcomed the recent “landmark deals” between Saudi Arabia and Boeing worth \$37 billion...The deal will see Saudi Arabia acquire 121 Boeing 787 Dreamliner aircraft equipped with General Electric engines if it exercises an option to buy 43 planes after the initial 78. The

White House lauded the deal, one of Boeing's two largest transactions ever. If all 121 aircraft are purchased, the deal will support over one million American jobs across 44 states, according to the White House.

9. **[Arab Summit Will Take Place in Saudi Arabia in May](#)** (*Al Khaleej Online*). During a press conference in Beirut on Tuesday, Ahmed Aboul Gheit, the Secretary-General of the League of Arab States, officially announced that the Arab Summit would be held in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May of this year. Aboul Gheit also stated that the main topic of the summit would likely be economics, focusing on how to support underprivileged regions in the Arab world. Furthermore, regarding the recent Saudi-Chinese-Iranian meeting, Aboul Gheit expressed a positive outlook, noting that its effects could lead to more excellent political and security stability between Saudi Arabia and Iran.
10. **[Qatar Ranks as World's Top Arms Importer Despite Surge in Weapons to Ukraine](#)** (*Middle east Eye*). Middle East and North African countries remained among the world's largest global arms importers in 2022, despite global attention on arms shipments to Ukraine amid Russia's invasion, according to a report published on Monday by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (Sipri)...Qatar, a gas-rich country of just three million people, is the world's biggest arms importer as of last year. Shipments of weapons to the country increased by 311 percent between 2013-17 and 2018-22.
11. **[After Saudi Arabia, Iran is Holding Direct Talks with Bahrain to Restore Relations](#)** (*The New Khalij News*). According to the Russian news agency "Sputnik," Iran and Bahrain are currently engaged in bilateral talks to restore relations between the two countries. These talks come just days after Iran restored its relationship with Riyadh. Citing anonymous sources, Sputnik reports

that the consultations between the two countries are taking place on a bilateral level without the involvement of any other parties. The results of these talks are expected to be announced soon if the contentious issues under discussion can be resolved.

IRAQ

12. Iraqi Prime Minister Sudani Has Initiated a New Phase of Good

Relations in Erbil (*Al Sharq Al Awsat*). Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad al-Sudani aims to establish a fresh chapter of constructive relations with the country's northern region of Kurdistan following years of animosity and disagreement on various contentious matters. These issues include the dispute over certain areas between Baghdad and Erbil, the implementation of Article 144 of the constitution in relation to Kirkuk governorate, the legislation of the oil and gas law, and the allocation of the region's share of the federal budget funds... Today, Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad al-Sudani made his first visit to the northern region of Kurdistan since assuming his position at the end of October 2022. During his visit, he held meetings with senior officials in the area, including the head of the Democratic Party and former president of the region, Massoud Barzani.

13. **Al Sudani to Dismiss The Health Minister** (*Yasser Eljuboori Twitter*). A source confirmed the intention to dismiss the Minister of Health after information was proven that administrative positions in the ministry had been sold and that the ministry has an acute shortage of medicines.

North Africa

14. **Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb Suspected of Prison Attack in Mauritania** (*Al Arabiya*). According to well-informed sources, Al-Qaeda in

the Islamic Maghreb in northern Mali was involved in the recent terrorist attack on the central prison in the heart of Nouakchott, the capital of Mauritania. The attack resulted in the deaths of two soldiers from the Gendarmerie Battalion and the escape of four highly dangerous prisoners affiliated with extremist organizations. After a multi-day pursuit, three of the escapees were killed or apprehended, while the fourth remains under tracking.

EGYPT

15. **[FM Shoukry: All Options Available to Egypt in Renaissance Dam Crisis](#)** (*Al Hadath*). The Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, said his country has the right to defend its people's interests and take disciplined positions that consider all considerations and relations. He said all options are open in the Renaissance Dam crisis; all alternatives remain available, and Egypt has its capabilities and external relations.

LEBANON

16. **[Because of Presidential Vacuum, France Considers Sanctioning Lebanon](#)** (*Sawt Beirut International*). On Tuesday, the French Foreign Ministry announced that it is currently in talks with its allies to assess the potential imposition of sanctions against those obstructing efforts to overcome the constitutional impasse in Lebanon. Since the end of the term of former President Michel Aoun in October 2022, Lebanon has been without a president, further hindering the ability of institutions to function effectively in a country already suffering from one of the world's worst economic crises in recent years.
17. **[Lebanon's Banks Resume Strike, and Lira Falls to 100,000 to the Dollar](#)** (*Al Sharq News*). On Tuesday, commercial banks in Lebanon resumed their open strike as the country's economic crisis deepens, with the value of the

Lebanese currency plummeting to an unprecedented level. As a result, the lira exchange rate reached 100,000 against one dollar on the black market, further exacerbating the financial turmoil that has plagued the country for years.

ISRAEL

18. **[Netanyahu Weighs Defensive Military Aid to Ukraine](#)** (*Jerusalem Post*).

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is exploring the possibility of providing defensive military equipment to Ukraine, which is expected to anger the Russians. He held a discussion Tuesday with top government officials to review the country's policy on Ukraine in advance of his trip Wednesday to Berlin, where European fears regarding Russia are expected to be on the agenda.

19. **[Right-Wing Think Tank that Inspired Judicial Overhaul Calls for Compromise](#)** (*Times of Israel*).

The Kohelet Policy Forum, which formulated the ideological foundations for the government's radical judicial overhaul program, called for compromise Tuesday over the far-reaching proposals as the government continued its legislative drive despite trenchant and widespread public opposition. In a statement published on social media channels, the conservative organization believed that deep legal and judicial system reform was necessary. In addition, achieving broad consensus over "the necessary changes" was essential for longer-term constitutional change.

TURKIYE

20. **[US National Security Advisor Meets Turkish Presidential Spokesman](#)**

(*Anadolu Agency*). White House National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan said he would meet Turkish presidential spokesman Ibrahim Kalin in Washington on Tuesday. In a press statement, he said the meeting would focus on a series of issues of concern to the two countries, including the issue of Sweden and Finland

joining the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO). He expressed his belief that there is no reason why Sweden and Finland should not be guaranteed NATO membership during the alliance's summit this summer.

