

THE EARLY PHOENIX

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

March 24, 2023

IRAN

1. [**Iran Officials Hold Secret Talks with West Without Raisi's Knowledge**](#) (*Middle east Eye*). Secret talks between representatives of the Iranian ruling establishment and Western officials over reviving the 2015 nuclear deal and freeing US prisoners happened recently, two sources told Middle East Eye. However, according to Iranian authorities, who are close to the talks, the government of President Ebrahim Raisi was not informed of the dialogue. According to analysts, this plays a part in a growing trend that has seen figures close to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei take the lead on foreign policy.
2. [**US Judge Orders \\$1.68 Billion Payout by Iran Over 1983 Beirut Bombing**](#) (*Iran International*). A federal judge in New York ordered Iran's central bank and a European intermediary to pay out \$1.68 billion to family members of troops killed in the 1983 bombing of the US Marine Corps barracks in Lebanon.
3. [**Iranian Oil Exports Reach 1.3M Barrels Per Day Despite US Sanctions**](#) (*Tasnim News*). Iran has achieved its highest level of oil exports for at least two years, surpassing the previous high of 1.3 million barrels a day despite US sanctions, according to Iranian Minister of Economic Affairs and Finance Ehsan Khandouzi. Khandouzi also stated that non-oil exports worth \$53 billion were 12% higher in the first 11 months of this year than last year.

GULF REGION

4. [**After Iran, Saudi Arabia to Re-establish Ties with Syria**](#) (*Reuters*). Syria and Saudi Arabia have agreed to reopen their embassies after cutting diplomatic ties more than a decade ago, three sources with knowledge of the matter said, a step that would mark a leap forward in Damascus's return to the Arab fold. [**The Saudi Ministry of Foreign Affairs reported**](#) that there are talks with Syria to resume consular services between the two countries after years of estrangement.

5. [**Qatar Affirms Unwavering Stance on Resolving Syrian Crisis**](#) (*The New Arab*). "On Thursday, the official spokesperson for the Qatari Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Majid Al-Ansari, reaffirmed Qatar's support for all initiatives aimed at achieving comprehensive peace in Syria and fulfilling the aspirations of the Syrian people. He also reiterated Qatar's backing for Arab and international efforts while noting that Qatar's position on resolving the crisis in Syria remains unchanged."
6. [**Qatar Offers \\$5.5 Billion to Purchase Manchester United**](#) (*The New Khalij News*). A struggle for the purchase of Manchester United has ensued between potential buyers from Britain and Qatar, as the club's American owners aim to achieve an offer of \$8 billion. However, reports suggest that the British billionaire, Jim Ratcliffe, plans to offer over £5 billion (\$6.12 billion). At the same time, other sources claim that Sheikh Jassim bin Hamad Al Thani, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Qatar Islamic Bank, has proposed a \$5.5 billion offer.

IRAQ

7. [**U.S. Will Shift Advanced Combat Aircraft from Middle East to the Pacific**](#) (*Al Arabiya*). According to a report by the Wall Street Journal on Thursday, the United States plans to send aging A-10 attack aircraft to replace advanced combat aircraft in the Middle East to relocate modern fighters to the Pacific Ocean and Europe to counter China and Russia. Citing US officials, the report stated that the scheduled deployment of the A-10 aircraft in April is part of a larger plan that involves maintaining a modest presence of naval and ground forces in the Middle East.

YEMEN

8. [**Yemeni Activists Urge Halt of Houthi Plan to Demolish 500 Buildings in Old Sana'a**](#) (*Al Sharq Al Awsat*). Yemeni intellectuals and activists have issued distress calls to halt the Houthi militia's plan to demolish 500 archaeological buildings in the Old City of Sana'a, listed as UNESCO World Heritage sites. The planned demolition includes four of the city's most important craft markets to construct a sectarian shrine.

TUNISIA

9. [**U.S. Says Tunisian President Has Undermined Democratic Checks and Balances**](#) (*Al Quds Al Arabi*). On Thursday, the US Assistant Secretary of State,

Barbara Leaf, said that Tunisian President Kais Saied's actions have raised "grave concern" about the country's direction due to measures that have weakened democratic checks and balances...This marks the most substantial criticism yet of Washington's approach to Saied.

LEBANON

10. **IMF Warns Lebanon is in Perilous Situation, and Everyone Must Share the Losses** (*Al Nahar*). The IMF's mission head, Ernesto Rigo, urged the Lebanese government to cease borrowing from the central bank and to accelerate the implementation of the fund's requirements to receive a \$3 billion rescue package. Rigo expressed disappointment with the lack of progress in implementing the required reforms and stated that progress is "plodding." He emphasized that Lebanon is in a precarious position, using unusually candid language during a press conference held in Beirut.
11. **Nasrallah Says Saudi-Iranian Agreement Does Not Include Lebanon** (*Al Khaleej Online*). On Wednesday, Hassan Nasrallah, the Secretary-General of Lebanese Hezbollah, refuted news websites' reports that the Saudi Arabia and Iran agreement included a clause regarding Lebanon. In a televised speech, Nasrallah stated that such claims are "incorrect news and have no basis in truth."

SYRIA

12. **Drone Strikes Target Iranian Militia in Deir Ezzor** (*Syria TV*). Unknown drones bombed three Iranian militia trucks entering from Iraq in Deir Ezzor, Syria, on Wednesday evening. The Anadolu Agency quoted local sources saying, "the drones targeted the trucks after they arrived at the Imam Ali base, south of Albu Kamal, associated with an Iranian militia. There were no reports of casualties resulting from the attack."
13. **Dismantling Al-Hol Camp, Considered the Most Dangerous in the World, Will Require Years to Complete** (*Al Sharq Al Awsat*). In an interview with Asharq Al-Awsat, Jihan Hanan, the director of the camp, explained that dismantling the camp would take years due to the total number of residents, estimated at 51,500 people, including 26,000 Iraqi refugees, 18,000 displaced Syrians, and over 7,700 foreign citizens in the special section. In addition, Hanan stated that the camp has

become "the most dangerous camp in the world" due to the presence of families and members of the terrorist organization ISIS.

TURKIYE

14. **Turkish Parliament Approves Finland's NATO Membership Proposal** (*Anadolu Agency*). The Bill of Law for approving the protocol of Finland's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO) was approved by the Foreign Affairs Committee of the Turkish Grand National Assembly...The Foreign Affairs Committee will present its report on the proposal to the General Assembly. The proposal is expected to become law without interruption due to the parliamentary election.
15. **HDP Joins Green Party Lists for Upcoming Elections Amidst Possible Ban** (*Bianet*). The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) will compete in the May elections under the Green Left (Yeşil Sol) Party, as confirmed by its co-leader Mithat Sancar. The possible closure of the party spurred the decision, Sancar said late yesterday (March 22) during a live interview on Halk TV. The closure case filed in 2021 is currently in the newest phase. Sancar recalled that they had predicted that the closure case would coincide with the elections as part of "the government's strategy." "We will not enter a process where there is a risk of closure, even if there is a one in a thousand chance," said Sancar.

ISRAEL AND PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

16. **Thousands of Israelis Participate in 'Day of Paralysis'** (*Jerusalem Post*). Israelis of all ages and from various sectors took to the streets on Thursday to protest against the judicial reform in a Day of Paralysis. The morning began with a reservists' demonstration outside the homes of Shas leader Arye Deri and Education Minister Yoav Kisch on Thursday morning as the "Day of Paralysis" began.
17. **Israel Offered PA Full Security Duties over City as Pilot, Ramallah Refused** (*Times of Israel*). According to an unsourced Channel 12 report, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Jordan's King Abdullah II secretly discussed the proposal in their meeting in January. The plan would reportedly see Palestinian security forces responsible for arresting suspected terror operatives in the cities of Tulkarem or Qalqilya...However, the PA was uninterested in the offer, believing it would weaken its already-dire status in the eyes of many Palestinians.