

THE EARLY PHOENIX

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

7 March 2023

SYRIA

1. **[US State Department Sanctions Amjad Youssef, Perpetrator of the Tadamun Massacre](#)** (*Syria TV*). On Monday the United States imposed sanctions on Amjad Youssef, an officer in the Syrian regime's military intelligence and the perpetrator of the 2013 Tadamun massacre. The move aims to strengthen accountability measures for the Syrian regime and serves as a reminder of the reasons why countries should not normalize relations with the regime. The State Department said that the Syrian conflict, which began twelve years ago, has witnessed countless atrocities, some of which amount to war crimes and crimes against humanity. Youssef's killing of at least 41 unarmed civilians in Damascus in 2013 is one such atrocity. The crimes were captured on video and committed in cold blood and systematically, the State Department said.
2. **[Israel Strikes Iranian and Syrian Regime Military Targets in Northern Syria](#)** (*Syria TV*). According to reports in local media, a series of explosions were heard in Aleppo, Idlib, and Latakia, which were reportedly caused by Israeli airstrikes targeting military positions in the vicinity of Aleppo International Airport and Nayrab Military Airport. Sources aligned with the Syrian regime stated that the Israeli attacks disabled the runway of Aleppo International Airport and fired missiles at the headquarters of the "80th Brigade" near the airport. Twitter accounts posted photos and videos claiming to show the aftermath of the Israeli attack on the airport's surroundings and the sites of the "80th Brigade."
3. **[Assad Scheduled to Visit Moscow](#)** (*Enab Baladi*). Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov has announced that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is planning to visit Russia.

The date of the visit will be announced at a later time due to security reasons. This statement follows a report by Russian newspaper "Vedomosti" ...that al-Assad will visit Moscow in mid-March and may meet with Russian President Vladimir Putin. Nikolai Surkov, a senior researcher at the Center for Middle East Studies, suggested that the agenda of the negotiations between Damascus and Moscow will include humanitarian aid, fuel supplies, and investment in Syria, including bilateral trade issues, as well as Syrian-Turkish relations mediated by Russia.

GULF REGION

4. **[Saudi Arabia Deposits \\$5 Billion in Turkey's Central Bank](#)** (*Al Arabiya English*). Saudi Arabia will deposit \$5 billion in Turkey's central bank to boost foreign exchange reserves, following joint efforts by Ankara and Riyadh to improve relations. Despite a rebound in Turkey's net foreign exchange reserves, the country lost \$8.5 billion due to a recent earthquake that hit its southern region, leaving millions homeless.

TURKIYE

5. **[Opposition Alliance Reaches Consensus to Nominate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as Presidential Candidate](#)** (*Haberler*). Türkiye's six opposition parties agreed on Monday to nominate Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu as their joint candidate against President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in the upcoming May polls. The agreement was reached after a 4.5-hour-long meeting...The opposition alliance faced a crisis when IYI Party Chairman Meral Akşener opposed Kılıçdaroğlu's candidacy, insisting on Mansur Yavaş or Ekrem İmamoğlu. However, after three days of tension, Akşener came to Kılıçdaroğlu with the proposal to make Yavaş and İmamoğlu vice presidents, and the six-party opposition bloc eventually reached a compromise.
6. **[Erdoğan Says Türkiye's Presidential Election Process to Start March 10](#)** (*Daily Sabah*). President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan announced on Monday that the process for Türkiye's presidential elections would be officially launched on March 10. In a Cabinet

meeting, he emphasized the need for a robust government and a strong political will to help Türkiye recover from recent disasters and their impacts. Erdoğan stated that the priority is to focus on the recovery process without getting distracted by political discussions, and it is crucial to leave behind the election process as soon as possible to avoid any deviation from the recovery agenda.

7. **Türkiye Summons US Ambassador After Top U.S. General Visited Northeast Syria (Anadolu Agency)**. US Ambassador to Ankara, Jeff Flake, was reportedly summoned to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs over U.S. General Mark Milley's visit to northeastern Syria on March 4th. In response, the US State Department confirmed that Ambassador Flake had attended meetings and negotiations with Turkish officials, but referred all questions about General Milley's visit to the Department of Defense. Meanwhile, the State Department spokesman indicated that General Milley's visit was limited to meetings with American soldiers, and did not involve any discussions with non-US forces.
8. **Turkish Watchdog Fines Elon Musk over Twitter Takeover (Daily Sabah)**. Türkiye's competition watchdog has imposed a fine on billionaire Elon Musk, citing his acquisition of Twitter without the agency's consent. The Competition Authority levied a fine on Musk equal to 0.1% of Twitter's gross income in Türkiye for 2022. While the board noted that Musk's takeover did not significantly infringe upon competition, the lack of permission from the board resulted in the penalty. The agency also stated that the ruling may be challenged legally.

IRAN

9. **Iran's Khamenei Condemns Suspected Poisonings as 'Unforgivable' (Daily Sabah)**. Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has publicly condemned the recent wave of schoolgirl poisonings, which have sickened hundreds of children across the country since late last year. Speaking on Monday, Khamenei said that if the poisonings are found to be deliberate, the perpetrators should be sentenced to death for

their "unforgivable crime." This is the first time the Supreme Leader has commented on the attacks, which have been acknowledged by Iranian officials only recently. Authorities have reported suspected attacks at over 50 schools in 21 of Iran's provinces since November, but have provided no details on the perpetrators or the chemicals used.

10. **[Iran Detains Journalist Reporting on School Poison Attacks](#)** (*Rudaw*). On Sunday, Iranian authorities detained journalist Ali Pourtabatabei for reporting on the poison attacks targeting schools in the central city of Qom, where the incidents first began in early December. Pourtabatabei had previously worked for the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' Tasnim News. His arrest appears to be a move to intimidate journalists from investigating the issue, as authorities face increasing pressure.
11. **[Tehran Will Buy Sukhoi 35 Fighter Jets from Russia](#)** (*Al Jazeera*). Iran's Defense Minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani has confirmed that Iran had previously purchased Sukhoi 35 fighters from Russia and was following up on the matter, although he denied receiving any of the equipment yet. Ashtiani also announced that Iran is in talks with China to sell it Iranian drones.
12. **[Iran Says It's Ready for Prisoner Swap with Belgium](#)** (*Al Arabiya English*). Iran has announced its readiness for a long-awaited prisoner exchange with Belgium, following a recent decision by the Belgian Constitutional Court to allow such a move. Nasser Kanani, the spokesperson for Iran's foreign ministry, said the way to implement the agreement has been opened and that Iran welcomes the change. The swap would involve Belgian aid worker Olivier Vandecasteele, who is serving a 40-year jail sentence in Iran, and Iranian official Assadollah Assadi, who was convicted in Belgium for his involvement in a 2018 plot to bomb an opposition event in Paris. The treaty between Belgium and Iran, signed in 2022, had been suspended, but Friday's decision by the Constitutional Court paves the way for the swap to proceed.

IRAQ

13. Iraqis Protest Against Amendment of Election Law (*Al Sharq Al Awsat*).

Hundreds of protesters took to the streets in central and southern Iraq, including in Baghdad, Babil, Diwaniyah, and Wasit, to demonstrate against proposed amendments to the election law. The protesters blocked major roads by burning tires and issued angry statements threatening to escalate their actions in the coming days if the dominant political forces in parliament insist on amending the law. The battle between supporters and opponents of amending the election law is raging between the forces of the "coordinating framework," who insist on the amendment due to their dominance in parliament, and the Sadrist movement that has withdrawn from parliament and some civil forces and small parties who reject the amendment. The Sadrists and their allied forces had succeeded in amending the election law at the end of 2020 and canceling the "St. Lego" formula, which had a semi-closed list and one constituency, in favor of multiple constituencies and open lists.

JORDAN

14. Jordan Requests US Assistance in its "Drug War" on the Syrian Border (*Enab Baladi*).

Jordan's King Abdullah II has requested assistance from US Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin to combat the increasing "drug war" on the Jordanian-Syrian border, during Austin's visit to Amman on Monday. The king attributed the smuggling of drugs on the border to Iranian-backed militias, and has expressed a need for greater US support to enhance border security. According to sources, since the conflict in Syria began over a decade ago, Washington has already provided approximately one billion dollars to establish border posts along the 375-kilometer Jordan-Syria border.

15. Austin Seeks to Reassure Middle Eastern Allies and Send a Tough Message (*Al Arabiya*).

US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin seeks to reaffirm America's commitment to the Middle East during his three-nation tour of the region, despite the recent US focus on China and Russia. Officials report that Austin, who arrived in

Jordan on Sunday, aims to encourage Israeli leaders to reduce tensions in the West Bank and strengthen ties with Egyptian officials. Speaking to reporters during his visit to a joint training center near Amman, Austin emphasized that the US has the ability to rapidly enhance capabilities anywhere in the world, especially in the Middle East where it has been operating for more than two decades.

LEBANON

16. [Hezbollah Endorses Franjeh as Presidential Candidate](#) (*Independent Arabia*).

On Monday, Hezbollah Secretary-General Hassan Nasrallah announced the party's support for former minister Suleiman Franjeh as their presidential candidate in Lebanon, following a vacancy in the position for over four months. Franjeh became the second candidate for the presidency after Representative Michel Moawad, and Hezbollah considers him to be the “natural candidate” who meets their specifications. Nasrallah also stated that he discussed the issue with the head of the Free Patriotic Movement, Gebran Bassil, and added that Franjeh might be the best option since Bassil is not running for president.

ISRAEL AND PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

17. [IDF Chief to Meet Pilots, Officers as Judicial overhaul Protests Roil Israeli Military](#) (*Times of Israel*).

According to the Israel Defense Forces, military chief Herzi Halevi will be meeting with pilots, officers, and other troops this week to address concerns that reserve soldiers protesting the government’s judicial overhaul may refuse to show up for service or training. Halevi will be meeting with reserve pilots and air force commanders on Tuesday, and officers from various reserve units on Wednesday. He has warned Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that the protests’ entry into the military could harm its operational capabilities.

18. [Shin Bet Says it Busted Turkey-Based Hamas Ring Planning Attacks in Israel](#)

(*Times of Israel*). The Shin Bet security agency revealed on Monday that it had detained four Palestinians from the West Bank in recent weeks for allegedly planning to

carry out attacks on behalf of the Hamas terror group. The main suspect, 24-year-old student Ahmed Mahmoud Abu Salah, was arrested upon his return from studying abroad. The Shin Bet stated that Abu Salah was recruited by Hamas during his stay in Turkey and Syria, where he underwent weapons training and learned how to manufacture explosives. The suspect allegedly met with senior Hamas officials in Turkey who instructed him to recruit other members for a local terror cell.

19. **Six European Countries Call for Easing Tensions in the West Bank**

(Independent Arabia). A joint statement released by the foreign ministers of France, Germany, Italy, Poland, the United Kingdom, and Spain expressed deep concern regarding the ongoing and escalating violence in the Palestinian territories under Israeli occupation. The statement condemned the recent terrorist attacks that resulted in the loss of Israeli lives and also condemned the indiscriminate violence carried out by Israeli settlers against innocent Palestinian civilians. The foreign ministers called for accountability and prosecution of the perpetrators of these acts of violence.

TUNISIA

20. **World Bank Suspends Cooperation with Tunisia Following Saied's Talk about African Immigrants** ***(Al Sharq Al Awsat)***. The World Bank has suspended talks with Tunisia regarding future cooperation due to attacks on migrants from sub-Saharan Africa following a speech by President Kais Saied. The bank's President, David Malpass, said in a note sent to employees that Saied's speech caused "racially motivated harassment and even violent incidents," and that the institution had postponed a scheduled meeting with Tunisia until it finished assessing the situation. However, ongoing projects and funding programs will continue. The suspension comes after Saied denounced "hordes of irregular migrants" in a speech.