

THE EARLY PHOENIX

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

8 March 2023

IRAQ

1. [**Pentagon chief pledges continued US forces' presence in Iraq during visit to Baghdad**](#) (*Al Arabiya English*). US Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, making an unannounced trip to Iraq on Tuesday nearly 20 years after the US-led invasion that toppled Saddam Hussein, said Washington was committed to keeping its military presence in the country...“US forces are ready to remain in Iraq at the invitation of the government of Iraq,” Austin told reporters after meeting Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed al-Sudani...The United States currently has 2,500 troops in Iraq - and an additional 900 in Syria - to help advise and assist local troops in combating ISIS, who in 2014 seized swathes of territory in 2014 in both countries.
2. [**Fighting ISIS is Washington's Only Purpose in Iraq: Pentagon Chief**](#) (*Rudaw*). The United States' only purpose in Iraq is its focus on ensuring the defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS), said Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin following his arrival in the capital Baghdad on Tuesday, as the 20th anniversary of the US invasion of Iraq approaches...“We are focused on the mission of defeating Daesh [ISIS]. We are here for no other purpose,” said Austin in a press conference in Baghdad, adding that US troops are ready to remain Iraq upon the invitation of the government...Austin [was] scheduled to visit the capital of the Kurdistan Region, Erbil, later in the day to meet with the President and Commander-in-Chief of the Region's Armed Forces, Nechirvan Barzani.
3. [**In Iraq, German Foreign Minister Condemns Iran's Cross-Border Attacks**](#) (*Al Sharq Al Awsat English*). Iranian missile attacks across the Iraqi border are unacceptable and put both civilians and regional stability at risk, German Foreign

Minister Annalena Baerbock said on a visit to the Iraqi capital nearly 20 years after the US-led invasion. "With its missile attacks, the Iranian regime shows not only that it recklessly and brutally suppresses its own people, it also puts human life and the stability of the whole region at risk to hold on to power," she said on Tuesday...Last year, Tehran fired missiles at bases of Kurdish groups in northern Iraq it accuses of involvement in protests against its restrictions on women, displacing hundreds of Iranian Kurds and killing some.

IRAN

4. [**IAEA Unlikely to Censure Iran at Board Meeting This Week \(Iran International\)**](#). Western officials indicate there will be no censoring of Iran at a meeting of the UN watchdog, the IAEA, this week in the wake of its visit to Tehran last weekend. Rafael Grossi, IAEA's Director General, was invited by the Islamic Regime in a bid to show transparency, fighting the implications of bitter sanctions which are crippling the country's economy. Grossi received commitments that the Islamic Republic will cooperate with the watchdog to resolve outstanding issues regarding monitoring and past activities but the pledges Iran made have yet to be worked out in any great detail. On Monday, Grossi announced in a press conference that he cannot guarantee any tangible changes or that greater transparency will result from his visit.

5. [**Iranian Regime Announces Arrests in Schoolgirls' Poisoning \(Independent Arabia\)**](#). On Tuesday, the Iranian Ministry of Interior announced the first arrests related to the poisoning of hundreds of schoolgirls in three months, and Deputy Interior Minister Majid Mir Ahmadi told state television, "Many people have been arrested in five provinces and the agencies are continuing their investigations." He did not mention details of their identities, the circumstances of their arrest, or the extent of their involvement in this mysterious case that arouses great anger in Iran, as the families of the schoolgirls demand the authorities to take action.

6. [Iran Claims to Develop Ballistic Missiles That Can Hit Moving Naval Targets](#) (*Tasnim News*). In comments on Monday, Chief of Staff of the Iranian Armed Forces Major General Mohammad Hossein Baqeri said Iran has gained the technical know-how to produce ballistic missiles capable of hitting moving naval units. The missile has been tested successfully and is being mass produced, he added, noting that Iran is now among the only three countries in the world that have the know-how to manufacture these missiles. The top general also said that the new missile will ensure remarkable security at the seas around Iran within a radius of over 1,000 kilometers.

GULF REGION

7. [Qatari Emir Appoints New Prime Minister](#) (*Al Khaleej Online*). Qatar's Emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, has appointed Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdul Rahman Al Thani as the new prime minister to succeed Sheikh Khalid bin Khalifa bin Abdulaziz Al Thani...Sheikh Mohammed bin Abdul Rahman Al Thani was born in 1980 and graduated from Qatar University in 2003. He held several diplomatic positions, most recently serving as the foreign minister since 2016. He led efforts to end the Gulf dispute and is known for his cooperation and multilateralism.
8. [Saudi Foreign Minister Calls for Dialogue with Iran and Says Situation in Syria "Not Acceptable"](#) (*Al Sharq Al Awsat*). Prince Faisal bin Farhan, the Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs, denied any divergence in the relations between his country and the United Arab Emirates, stressing that reports of divergence in relations between the two countries are "exaggerated"...Farhan stressed that the nuclear agreement with Iran "is not ideal, and it must address the concerns of neighboring countries," but added, "We are open to dialogue with Iran"...The Saudi foreign minister revealed that there is a dialogue for Syria's return to the Arab embrace, "but it is too early to talk about that," but he stressed that "There is a consensus that the situation in Syria is not acceptable."

9. [**Saudi Arabia's FM: Saudi Policy Not to Raise Oil Production This Year is Correct**](#) (*Al Arabiya English*). Decisions on oil output taken by OPEC+ countries reflect consensus in the group and Saudi Arabia judges that its current output policy - that it won't raise production this year - is correct, its foreign minister said on Tuesday. "We always say that we are committed to a stable market... (the minister of energy) feels the market doesn't need any production changes until the end of the year," Prince Faisal bin Farhan told reporters in London.

LEBANON

10. [**TotalEnergies Will Begin Drilling in Lebanon in Late September**](#) (*Nabarnet*). French oil giant TotalEnergies will begin drilling for potential gas reserves in Lebanon's offshore Block 9 in late September, a company official said. "The results of the drilling operations will be announced at the end of this year," said Romain de la Martinière, the General Manager of Exploration and Production at TotalEnergies, following a meeting in Beirut with caretaker Public Works and Transport Minister Ali Hamieh.
11. [**Lebanon Regains the Right to Vote in the United Nations**](#) (*Al Sharq Al Awsat*). The Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced on Tuesday that Lebanon, which is going through a stifling financial crisis, has regained the right to vote in the United Nations after paying dues for the years 2022 and 2023, after losing voting rights for the second time in three years. The Secretary-General of the United Nations, Antonio Guterres, published a message on January 17 announcing that Lebanon had lost the right to vote in the United Nations General Assembly, as well as the Dominicans, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, South Sudan and Venezuela. Guterres said Lebanon needed to pay about \$1.8 million to restore the right to vote.

SYRIA

12. [**European Union Sanctions the Syrian Republican Guard on Grounds of Sexual Violence**](#) (*Enab Baladi*). The European Union imposed sanctions on nine individuals and three entities involved in crimes of sexual violence and violations of

women's rights, including the Syrian Republican Guard...On Tuesday, the AFP quoted diplomatic sources as saying that the European Union has sanctioned bodies and persons in six countries, namely Syria, Iran, Russia, Burma, South Sudan, and Afghanistan...The Republican Guard is considered one of the strongest fighting military divisions within the ranks of the Syrian regime forces, responsible for protecting the capital, Damascus, from any threat. Its divisions are deployed at the four entrances to the capital, in addition to their deployment in other provinces.

TURKIYE

13. **[UN Says Türkiye Quake Damage Could Exceed \\$100B \(Daily Sabah\)](#)**. Damage from the massive earthquakes that jolted southeastern Türkiye last month is estimated to be over \$100 billion, the United Nations said Tuesday. "Already it is clear that just the damages alone will amount to more than \$100 billion," Louisa Vinton of the U.N. Development Programme (UNDP) told reporters via video link from Gaziantep province, adding that the recovery costs "will be on top of that." The magnitude 7.7 and 7.6 quakes on Feb. 6 caused widespread destruction in the southeast of Türkiye, killing over 45,000 people and leading to the collapse or severe damage of over 230,000 buildings.

14. **[UN Relief Coordinator: Global Supply Chain Unable to Supply Turkey with Enough Tents \(Anadolu Agency\)](#)**. The United Nations Resident Coordinator in Turkey, Alvaro Rodriguez, says that the global supply chain is unable to meet the urgent need for tents in the aftermath of the devastating earthquake in southern Turkey. The UN appeal to raise \$1 billion within three months has only been funded by \$100 million. Most of the aid comes from the United States and Germany, and additional contributions are needed to meet the humanitarian needs of about 9 million people living in 11 states affected by the earthquake.

ISRAEL AND PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

15. [**Alleged Huwara Terrorist among Six Palestinians Killed as IDF Raids Jenin**](#) (*Times of Israel*). The alleged terrorist behind a deadly shooting attack in the northern West Bank town of Huwara was one of six Palestinians killed as Israeli troops raided Jenin and exchanged fire with gunmen Tuesday. Palestinian officials said Abdel Fattah Hussein Kharousha, 49, was killed in the operation. The Shin Bet security agency said Kharousha, a Hamas member from the Askar refugee camp near Nablus, was the terrorist who opened fire on an Israeli car driving through Huwara on February 26, killing Israeli brothers Hallel and Yagel Yaniv.

16. [**Dermer, Hanegbi Meet with Senior US officials in DC amid West Bank Tensions**](#) (*Times of Israel*). A pair of senior Israeli officials held meetings with US counterparts in Washington on Monday, as the sides worked to present a business-as-usual front, even as the Biden administration was considering barring entry to an Israeli minister who called to “wipe out” an entire Palestinian town last week. Strategic Affairs Minister Ron Dermer and National Security Adviser Tzachi Hanegbi met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan to discuss Iran’s pursuit of nuclear power and its threat to the region, but the conversation also included focus on the ongoing violence in the West Bank, according to US readouts...Blinken, Dermer, and Hanegbi discussed US-Israel ties, the commitment to preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon and the joint work to advance “mutual cooperation on threats posed by Iran,” as well as the recent violence in Israel and the West Bank and “the need for all parties to take steps to restore calm and de-escalate tensions.”

NORTH AFRICA

17. [**Al Qaeda leader in North Africa grants exclusive interview to FRANCE 24**](#) (*France 24*). Algerian Islamist Abu Obeida Youssef al-Aanabi, the current leader of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), granted an exclusive interview to FRANCE 24 in which he officially confirmed his group is holding French journalist Olivier Dubois, who was kidnapped in Mali in 2021, and discussed the role of jihadism in the

Sahel...When asked whether AQIM was planning attacks in France, al-Aanabi said his group's dispute with France was limited to local issues in the Sahel and wider Africa. He went on to criticise Western leaders for failing to acknowledge that AQIM's interests were exclusive to Africa.

