

## THE EARLY PHOENIX: WEEKEND RECAP

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

*ACLS experts*

**Apr 1-3, 2023**

### **IRAN**

1. [\*\*Saudi and Iranian Foreign Ministers Discuss Next Steps Following Tripartite Agreement\*\*](#) (*Al Arabiya*). On Sunday, during a phone call, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan and Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir Abdollahian discussed the next steps in light of the recent tripartite agreement [brokered by China to restore relations between Tehran and Riyadh]. As a result, both sides agreed to have their next meeting before the end of Ramadan.
2. [\*\*Iran Hands Azerbaijan a Note of Protest Over Media Actions\*\*](#) (*Tehran Times*). The note came amid renewed diplomatic tensions between Iran and Azerbaijan over the latter's military frictions with Armenia and its opening of an embassy in Israel. "We demanded an explanation from the Azeri government regarding the Zionist regime's remarks about an agreement between Tel Aviv and Baku to form a united front against Iran. The Azeri Foreign Ministry spokesman declined to respond and instead leveled new accusations against Iran," Nasser Kanaani, the spokesman for the Iranian foreign ministry, recently said on Twitter.
3. [\*\*Iranian Navy Claims to Shoo Away US Spy Drone\*\*](#) (*Tasnim Agency*). On Sunday afternoon, the Iranian Navy's public relations department said that an EP-3E airplane of the US Navy was about to intrude into Iran's airspace over the Sea of Oman.
4. [\*\*Iran Is Burning Off 17.5 bln Cubic Meters Of Natural Gas Per Year – World Bank\*\*](#) (*Iran International*). Second, only to Russia, Iran is on top, along with Iraq, in terms of volume and intensity.
5. [\*\*Printing More Money, Iran May Face Hyperinflation In Coming Months\*\*](#) (*Iran International*). The Central Bank of Iran announced in

late March that the annual inflation rate is 46.5 percent. Although the official inflation rate is usually less than what actual prices reflect, even 46.5-percent inflation is among the highest in Iran in more than 30 years.

6. [\*\*Iranians Dance As Civil Disobedience During Nowruz Holidays\*\*](#) (***Iran International***). Iranian holidaymakers have been sharing videos of themselves dancing and merry on the streets, at the beach, and in shopping malls or parks.
7. [\*\*Conflicts Over Hijab Continue In Iran As Regime Insists On Enforcement\*\*](#) (***Iran International***). A video from the CCTV of a convenience store in Shandiz near the sacred city of Mashhad went viral on social media Friday; that showed a man dumping a large tub of yogurt after an argument on the head of a 'hijabless' woman and her mother, who was wearing a headscarf. The man was a member of the Revolutionary Guard's Basij militia and carried out his Islamic duty of "calling to virtue and forbidding wrong." Local authorities said the man was arrested Saturday for disturbing public peace and insulting the women. Officials said that carrying out the duty of hijab enforcement should remain limited to verbal warnings only.
8. [\*\*Iranian Diaspora Holds Global 'No To Islamic Republic' Rallies\*\*](#) (***Iran International***). Iranians worldwide held rallies and demonstrations on Saturday to declare solidarity with the uprising and call for an end to the Islamic Republic. The protests were held on Islamic Republic Day, a public holiday in Iran marking the anniversary of the beginning of the Islamic Republic, with hundreds of Iranians coming out to demonstrate.
9. [\*\*Top British Military Veteran Warns the Middle East of Iran's Allegiance With Russia\*\*](#) (***Iran International***). Air Marshal Martin Sampson, a veteran of 500 air combat sorties across the Middle East, said the two allies posed threats globally, including the provision of Iranian drones to Moscow, used in the invasion of Ukraine. Britain's top military adviser stated that Iran is highly likely to receive missile equipment and advanced

drone technology from Russia instead of finances, given its current sanctioned status. Iran is also likely seeking Russian support for its nuclear program after the JCPOA talks broke down last year.

## **THE GULF REGION**

10. **China: Gulf of Oman Exercises Enhanced the Capabilities of the Naval Forces** (*Al Sharq Al-Awsat*). The Chinese Ministry of Defense said yesterday that joint naval exercises between China, Iran, and Russia in the Gulf of Oman had enhanced the ability of the navies of the three countries to carry out various naval tasks. Tan Kefei, a ministry spokesman, said the exercise had "enhanced friendship and practical cooperation between the three countries.
11. **Under the Multi-Trillion Dollar Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), Saudi Arabia and China Launched Joint Refinery Petrochemical Venture** (*Daily Sabah*). According to the Chinese daily Global Times, the \$12.2 billion project between China and Saudi Arabia, dubbed a green and low-carbon initiative, was launched in Panjin city of northeastern Liaoning province.
12. **Recent OPEC+ Decision to Cut Oil Production Could Raise Oil Prices by \$10 a Barrel** (*Al Khaleej Online*). The reason for this voluntary cut is due to OPEC+'s unanimous rejection of selling oil according to set prices by the West, said the Saudi Minister of Energy. Commenting on the new cut, Amrita Sen, founder, and director of Energy Aspects, told Reuters: "OPEC is taking proactive steps in the event of any potential demand cut."
13. **Saudi Arabia Will Invite Bashar al-Assad to the Arab Summit** (*Al Khaleej Online*). Reuters reported that Saudi Arabia plans to officially invite Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to the Arab Summit in Riyadh on May 19. The agency cited three unnamed, well-informed sources, stating that "the kingdom intends to invite Assad to the Arab League summit

hosted by Riyadh, a move that would formally end Assad's regional isolation."

14. [\*\*UAE Cancels License for Russia's Sanctioned MTS Bank Branch\*\*](#) (*Al Arabiya English*). On Friday, the United Arab Emirates Central Bank said it would cancel the license for a branch of Russia's MTS bank, which it approved to operate last year and was made subject to British and US sanctions in February. Operations at the bank licensed in the emirate of Abu Dhabi will wound down within six months under central bank supervision.
15. [\*\*Saudi Arabia Succeeded in Combating Unemployment\*\*](#) (*Al Khaleej Online*). The government's plan to combat unemployment is based on a gradual reduction in its rate, as the unemployment rate reached 12.9% between 2016 and 2018; However, it witnessed a significant decline in subsequent years until it reached 11% in the fourth quarter of 2021, according to official data. Unemployment among Saudi women decreased to 15.4% in the last quarter, down from 20.5% in the third quarter of 2022. The General Authority for Statistics stated that the country's total unemployment rate, including Saudis and non-Saudis, decreased to 4.8% in the fourth quarter, compared to 5.8% in the previous quarter.

## **ISRAEL & PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES**

16. [\*\*Israeli Air Force Downs Unidentified Aircraft Crossing into Israeli Airspace from Syria\*\*](#) (*Times of Israel*). The military said that air force combat helicopters and planes downed an unidentified aircraft that appeared to have crossed into Israeli airspace from Syria on Sunday. The incident came amid escalating tensions between Israel and Iran related to Iran's presence on Israel's northern border and after a series of airstrikes attributed to Israel in Syria. Around an hour after the incursion, Syrian media reported explosions at an airport near Damascus but did not blame Israel.

17. [\*\*Netanyahu Told UK Israel Will Respond To Iran's 90% Uranium Enrichment\*\*](#) (*Iran International*). A senior Israeli official, who accompanied Netanyahu on his trip to London on Friday, informed Iran International that the Israeli prime minister told UK's Rishi Sunak that "military attacks on nuclear facilities in Iran are not the only solution for Israel, and this country is considering other solutions to stop Iran."
18. [\*\*Fear of Confrontations During Easter, A Request from the Churches of Jerusalem to Israel\*\*](#) (*AFP*). On Friday, the leading Christian churches in Jerusalem called on the Israeli authorities to "cooperate" to ensure security and religious freedoms for Christians in the Holy Land with the advent of Easter, expressing concern about the recent "escalation of violence." [Al Sharq Al Awsat](#) reported that Israel had thwarted a plan to attack a police bus in Jerusalem supposed to be carried out by a HAMAS member after receiving instructions from one of the movement's activities in Lebanon.
19. [\*\*Settlers stormed Al-Aqsa While the Israeli Forces Expelled Muslim Monasticism\*\*](#) (*Al Sharq Al Awsat*). The Islamic Endowments Department in Jerusalem reported that dozens of settlers stormed on Sunday morning, the courtyards of Al-Aqsa Mosque from the Mughrabi Gate, with heavy security from the Israeli police, who forcibly removed the Muslim seclusions from the mosque and removed the young men from the path of the incursions.
20. [\*\*Israel Declares a Gesture of Goodwill for Tens of Thousands of Work Permits for Palestinians from Gaza\*\*](#) (*Elaph*). The security system in Israel is considering increasing the number of those who have the right to enter Israel to work from the Gaza Strip. The number of regular work permits may reach about fifty thousand in the coming months. An informed Israeli security source indicated that the number could be increased as well, which contributes to improving the economic situation of the residents of the Gaza Strip.



21. [\*\*Israeli Government Approves Ben-Gvir's Proposal to Form National Guard\*\*](#) (*Jerusalem Post*). The government on Sunday approved a proposal by National Security Minister MK Itamar Ben-Gvir to form a National Guard that would operate independently of the Israel Police in different emergency scenarios, fight terror, and apply sovereignty in "areas where this is necessary."
22. [\*\*Israeli Minister Says Government Will Restart Judicial Reform After Passover\*\*](#) (*Jerusalem Post*). Transportation Minister Miri Regev told the Likud publication Melukadim on Sunday that immediately after the Passover break, the government would continue to move forward with the judicial reforms. She even claimed that "Netanyahu paused [legislation] to allow for negotiation, but if there will be none, we will bring it [back up] for reconfirmation."

## **IRAQ**

23. [\*\*Iraq and Russia Sign an Agreement Exempting Entry Visas\*\*](#) (*Al-Nahar Al-Arabi*). The official Iraqi News Agency (INA) quoted Al-Sahhaf as saying, "A draft agreement was signed at the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs today to exempt holders of diplomatic, service, and special passports from entry visas between the government of the Republic of Iraq and the government of the Russian Federation."
24. [\*\*Iran Envoy Claims Iraq Owes \\$11 B for Gas, Electricity Import\*\*](#) (*Iran International*). Mohammad Kazem Al-Sadegh commented in an interview with an Iraqi network on Saturday that 80% of Iraq's water comes from Turkey, and Iran provides 8-10%.
25. [\*\*Tehran Exploits Iraq's Dependence on Gas Imports from Iran\*\*](#) (*Iraq News Network*). The financial advisor to the Iraqi Prime Minister, Mazhar Muhammad Salih, estimated that Iraq suffers considerable losses due to gas flaring and importing natural gas, amounting to approximately \$12 billion annually. Salih stressed that these losses represent an exorbitant cost to the country's oil and financial resources. Economic expert Abd al-Rahman

al-Mashhadani attributed Iraq's failure to exploit the gas associated with oil extraction to political reasons that may be linked to pressures from Tehran on the political forces so that dependence on Iranian gas used to generate electric power remains.

26. [\*\*A Preliminary Agreement to Resume Exporting Kurdistan's Oil this Week\*\*](#) (*Sky News Arabia Business*). "After several meetings between the KRG and the federal government, a tentative decision was reached to resume oil exports via Ceyhan this week," Lok Ghafouri, head of external media affairs at the KRG, said in a tweet. He added, "This agreement will remain in force until the Iraqi parliament ratifies the draft oil and gas law."
27. [\*\*Major Oil Refinery Inaugurated in Iraq's Karbala\*\*](#) (*Sky News Arabia Business*). On Saturday, Iraqi Prime Minister Muhammad Shia al-Sudani inaugurated the Karbala oil refinery, with a production capacity of 140,000 barrels per day. According to a statement issued by the Iraqi Ministry of Oil, the refinery's production helps meet a large portion of the local demand for gas products and significantly reduces imports. The oil minister stated that the refinery would produce 9 million liters of fuel per day, replacing more than half of the 15 million liters per day that Iraq currently imports.

## **SYRIA**

28. [\*\*Israel Strikes Syria Three Times in 72 Hours\*\*](#) (*Iran International*). Assad's defense ministry announced the attacks without providing much detail. After the announcement of the first killed officer, Milad Haydari, sources close to the IRGC reported that a second officer, Meqdad Meqdatani described as a military adviser, was also killed in the strikes.
29. [\*\*First Official Ministerial Meeting Between Turkiye and Syria\*\*](#) (*Al Hadath*). Today, Monday, the quadripartite meeting will be held in the Russian capital, Moscow, on efforts to normalize relations between Ankara and Damascus, at the level of deputy foreign ministers of Russia, Iran, Syria, and Turkey. Ayman Soussan, Assad's Deputy Foreign Minister, said his

government delegation would hold bilateral consultations with the Russian and Iranian sides on April 3 and will participate in the four-way meeting on the fourth of this month.

30. [\*\*Car Bomb in Prominent Damascus Neighborhood \(SOHR\)\*\*](#). An explosion sounded near the Al-Mazzeah neighborhood, eastern villas, West of the capital, Damascus, due to an explosive device in a parked car, which led to its burning with no casualties reported.
31. [\*\*The Rising Influence of Asma al-Assad \(Financial Times\)\*\*](#). Asma al-Assad, Bashar's wife, sits at the head of the president's secretive economic council staffed with the first couple's close acolytes and business associates. Her NGOs have helped build the Assad family a vast patronage network while controlling how the international aid money flows in the country.
32. [\*\*US Extends Aircraft Carrier Deployment Following Attacks in Syria \(Al Sharq Al Awsat\)\*\*](#). On Saturday, the International Coalition forces introduced new military reinforcements to their base in Al-Shaddadi city, located in the southern countryside of Al-Hasakah. These reinforcements comprised 25 logistic trucks and weapons. This development follows the announcement by US military officials on Friday that the United States decided to extend the mission of the strike group accompanying the aircraft carrier "George H. W. Bush." The decision aims to provide options for policymakers following the violent attacks carried out by Iranian-backed forces in Syria last week.
33. [\*\*Russia Calls US Military Actions in Syria "Provocative" \(Al Hadath\)\*\*](#). The deputy head of the Russian Center for Reconciliation between the warring parties in Syria, Oleg Gorinov, said, "Provocative actions were observed by units of the US armed forces in Al-Hasakah Governorate. During [a] joint Russian-Turkish patrol, the movement of two patrols of the so-called international anti-terrorism coalition in the de-escalation zone was detected. The Russian side protested against the



coalition." According to Gorinov, the coalition's violation of the rules of non-engagement threatens the fragile balance of power in the region.

34. [\*\*Iran Reserves Right to Respond to Israel after Martyrdom of Advisors in Syria\*\*](#) (*Tasnim Agency*). In a statement released on Sunday, Foreign Ministry Spokesperson Nasser Kanaani described the martyrdom of two Iranian military advisors in the wake of "the Zionist regime's aggressive and cowardly attack" on Syria as "part of the price of the great Iranian nation's endeavors in the courageous and responsible fight against Takfiri terrorism and its well-known sponsors, including the fake Zionist regime."

#### **LEBANON**

35. [\*\*The Court of Appeal in Paris is Considering the Validity of the Property Seizure of Riad Salameh\*\*](#) (*AFP*). The Paris Investigation Chamber is discussing the requests submitted by Salameh to recover more than ten properties and funds that were frozen in France, including apartments in the sixteenth arrondissement of Paris and on the Champs-Elysees Avenue, as well as in the United Kingdom and Belgium, as well as bank accounts and others.
36. [\*\*The IRGC Confirms the Killing of Iranian Leader, 41 Years After He Disappeared in Beirut\*\*](#) (*Al Sharq Al-Awsat*). After 41 years of ambiguity and accusing the Israeli army of killing Ahmed Mutoselian, The IRGC announced during a meeting with his family that Mutoselian was killed in Beirut during the July 1982 war.

#### **EGYPT**

37. [\*\*Cairo Supports a Comprehensive Political Settlement of the Syrian Crisis\*\*](#) (*Al-Nahar Al-Arabi*). Egypt expressed its support for a comprehensive political settlement of the Syrian crisis during a meeting between the Egyptian Foreign Minister, Sameh Shoukry, and his Syrian counterpart, Faisal Al-Miqdad, who is visiting Cairo for the first time in 12 years. In this regard, Shoukry reiterated "Egypt's full support for efforts to

reach a comprehensive political settlement of the Syrian crisis as soon as possible," stressing "Cairo's support for the relevant efforts of the UN Special Envoy to Syria and the importance of completing the procedures related to achieving national consensus among the Syrian brothers, and building confidence." And the continuation of the meetings of the Syrian Constitutional Committee.

38. [\*\*Al-Sisi Visits Saudi Arabia and Met with Crown Prince Bin Salman\*\*](#) (*The New Arab*). Egyptian diplomatic sources said the meeting between Sisi and Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman would address regional issues, particularly Syria's return to the Arab League during the upcoming Arab summit in the Kingdom and the implications of the recent Saudi-Iranian agreement.
39. [\*\*What Are the Repercussions of Raising the Interest Rate of 2 Percent on the Egyptian Economy?\*\*](#) (*Sky News Arabia Business*). On Thursday evening, the central bank raised key interest rates by 200 basis points. The overnight lending rate was 19.25 percent, and the overnight deposit interest was 18.25 percent. Two hundred basis points also raised the credit and discount rate to 18.75 percent. The Central Bank of Egypt said that "the recent developments in inflation showed a widespread rise in consumer prices.

## **TURKIYE**

40. [\*\*Turkiye's Trade Deficit Rose 51.4% in February\*\*](#) (*Sky News Arabia Business*). On Friday, the Turkish Statistical Institute revealed that the country's foreign trade deficit increased by 51.4% year-on-year in February, reaching \$12.08 billion. This increase is attributed to a 10.1% jump in imports, amounting to \$30.71 billion, while exports experienced a 6.4% decline to \$18.64 billion.
41. [\*\*Türkiye Denounces Deal Between New Jersey National Guard and Greek Cypriots\*\*](#) (*Daily Sabah*). An agreement between the National Guard of the State of New Jersey and the Greek Cypriot administration's

Defense Ministry drew the ire of Türkiye, a staunch supporter of Turkish Cypriots on the divided island. The Turkish Foreign Ministry on Sunday condemned the deal that is "encouraging the Greek Cypriot side's armament."

42. [\*\*Defense Minister Akar Announced the Elimination of 340 Members of the U.S.-Backed PKK and Its Syrian Offshoot, the YPG, in the Last Three Months\*\*](#) (*Daily Sabah*). Akar used a term to indicate that the terrorists were killed, injured, or captured alive, though the term mainly refers to the first party in most cases.
43. [\*\*Türkiye to Put Black Sea Gas into Use on April 21, 2023\*\*](#) (*Daily Sabah*). Türkiye operates two seismic research ships, the Oruç Reis and the Barbaros Hayrettin Paşa, and three drillships: Fatih, Kanuni, and Yavuz. The three drilling vessels are expected to join hands soon and work simultaneously in the Black Sea to expedite utilizing the natural gas discovered in the region.

## **YEMEN**

44. [\*\*Torrents Flood the Streets of Sana'a, and the Houthis Ignore the Suffering of the Population\*\*](#) (*Al Sharq Al Awsat*). Witnesses in Sana'a told Asharq Al-Awsat that many neighborhoods and streets in Sana'a, including Al-Tahrir neighborhood, Jamal and Hael streets, Al-Sunaina, Al-Raqas, Al-Rabat, and others, have turned into lakes due to heavy rains. The torrential rains flowed into several shops and citizens' homes and besieged others for hours amid the militia's disregard and the absence of its civil defense teams.
45. [\*\*Saudi-Russian Collaboration to Halt Iran's Arms Smuggling to Houthis\*\*](#) (*Al Khaleej Online*). According to Intelligence Online, Saudi Arabia relies on Russia to mediate in resolving the Yemen conflict and preventing weapons from reaching Houthis. As a result, senior officials from the Saudi General Intelligence Presidency met with their Russian counterparts. According to the site, Russia has mobilized its foreign

intelligence services to cooperate with Riyadh to prevent Iran from delivering weapons to the Houthi militia.

46. **US Justice Department Plans to Keep Iranian Weapons Seized En-route to Yemen** (*Al Arabiya*). The US Justice Department on Friday filed a forfeiture complaint to take possession of more than one million rounds of ammunition and thousands of other weapons that were seized in transit from Iran to Yemen's Houthis. Previous media reports have suggested that the US wants to send weapons to Ukraine.

