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# US leadership role in Middle East facing deep challenges

Washington remains deeply preoccupied with Ukraine war

## News in brief

### Drug fugitive nabbed in Riyadh

**KUWAIT:** A fugitive accused of drug trafficking has been detained in Riyadh, Kuwait's interior ministry said on Friday. The man, wanted on charges of trafficking 18 kg of hashish into Kuwait for trading, was apprehended in Riyadh as a result of coordination between Kuwait's General Department for Drug Control and Saudi Arabia's General Directorate of Narcotics Control. Kuwaiti authorities are holding contacts with the Saudi authorities for the handover of the fugitive, pending legal procedures. — KUNA



**CAIRO:** Egypt's Foreign Minister Sameh Shoukry greets his Turkish counterpart Mevlut Cavusoglu on March 18, 2023. — AFP

### Erdogan and Sisi to meet

**CAIRO:** Turkey's top diplomat said Saturday President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi would meet to mark the end of a decade of estrangement between the two countries. Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu, speaking alongside his Egyptian counterpart Sameh Shoukry during a visit to Cairo, said Ankara wanted "to restore diplomatic relations between the two countries at the highest level". — AFP

### Ukraine grain deal extended

**ANKARA:** Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan on Saturday announced the extension of a deal that allowed exports of Ukrainian grain to resume following Russia's invasion. "Following talks with the two parties, we have assured the extension of the deal that was due to expire on March 19," Erdogan said. Erdogan did not say for how long the deal was extended, but Ukraine's infrastructure minister said the deal had been extended for 120 days. — AFP

### Dead fish clog Aussie river

**SYDNEY:** Millions of dead and rotting fish have clogged a vast stretch of river near a remote town in the Australian outback as a searing heatwave sweeps through the region. Videos posted to social media showed boats ploughing through a blanket of dead fish smothering the water, with the surface barely visible underneath. The New South Wales government said on Friday that "millions" of fish had died in the Darling River near the small town of Menindee, in the third mass kill to hit the area since 2018. — AFP

**WASHINGTON:** China's shock success at bringing Saudi Arabia and Iran together has challenged the United States' longstanding role as the key outside power broker in the Middle East. Beijing's persuading archrivals Riyadh and Tehran to reestablish diplomatic relations upstaged the United States just as Washington appears powerless to intervene in the political tensions in the Zionist entity over the Netanyahu government's sharp-right turn, which has inflamed Palestinians.

"Anything that can help reduce tensions, avoid conflict and deter in any way dangerous and destabilizing actions by Iran is a good thing," US Secretary of State Antony Blinken said Wednesday on the Saudi-Iran deal announced on March 10. US officials have tried to minimize Beijing's role in the region, saying it is far from supplanting the United States: Much of the Middle East still sits under the Pentagon's security umbrella.

But China's breakthrough is a real challenge,

as Washington remains deeply preoccupied with the Ukraine war and, over the long term, with blunting Beijing's diplomatic and military advance in the Indo-Pacific region. James Ryan, Director of the Middle East program at the Foreign Policy Research Institute, said Washington is happy if anyone can contribute to Middle East regional stability, even rival China.

"The Biden administration has very clearly said that when it comes to the Middle East they're going to favor security, they're going to favor stability," he told AFP. "American involvement just overall is going to be more on the sidelines than it has been in the past," a message the Saudis "very clearly" understand, Ryan said.

China stepped in in a period when the US views Iran as a major threat to the region and yet its own relations with longtime ally Saudi Arabia have frayed. Meanwhile, its ability to intervene in Zionist-Palestinian disputes has greatly diminished. Despite scor-

ing a huge \$37 billion contract to sell more Boeing jets to the Saudis last week, Washington's ties with Riyadh have been tense since President Joe Biden ordered a review of the relationship in October.

Biden has spoken of "consequences" after the Saudis snubbed US requests to increase oil output to force down prices that soared after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Instead, Riyadh cut production, sending prices even higher with global impacts. A Saudi-Iran rapprochement also threatens the ultimate goal of the US-crafted Abraham Accords: Arab powerhouse Saudi Arabia's recognition of the Zionist entity after decades of refusal.

In negotiations driven by Washington, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain launched the process of recognizing the Zionist entity in 2020, and since then Morocco and Sudan have followed suit. But Riyadh has resisted pressure to do so as well. The Wall Street Journal and the New York Times reported that the Saudis want security guarantees from Washington

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## Int'l war crimes court issues arrest warrant for Putin

**THE HAGUE:** The International Criminal Court on Friday announced an arrest warrant for Russian President Vladimir Putin on the war crime accusation of unlawfully deporting Ukrainian children. The Hague-based ICC said it had also issued a warrant against Maria Lvova-Belova, Russia's presidential

commissioner for children's rights, on similar charges.

Moscow dismissed the orders as "void." Russia is not a party to the ICC so it was unclear if or how Putin could ever end up in the dock. War-battered Ukraine welcomed the ICC announcement, with President Volodymyr Zelensky hailing the "historic decision". The court's shock notice came hours after other news with the potential to significantly impact Russia's war on Ukraine, including a Moscow visit from Chinese leader Xi Jinping and more fighter jets for Kyiv's forces.

More than 16,000 Ukrainian children have been deported to Russia since the February 24, 2022 invasion, according to Kyiv, with many allegedly

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Vladimir Putin

## Trump expects 'arrest', calls for protests

**NEW YORK:** Former US President Donald Trump said he expects to be "arrested" on Tuesday over hush money allegedly paid to a porn star before the 2016 election, calling on his supporters to protest. With signs mounting that prosecutors are moving closer to indicting Trump, the 76-year-old billionaire took to his Truth Social platform on Saturday morning, saying: "Leading Republican candidate & former President of the United States of America will be

arrested on Tuesday of next week. Protest, take our nation back!"

Trump chose to use his own social media platform to make the announcement, despite being reinstated on Facebook and YouTube on Friday, more than two years after he was banned over the US Capitol riot. The investigation, led by Manhattan district attorney Alvin Bragg, an elected Democrat, centers on \$130,000 paid weeks before the 2016 polls to stop Stormy Daniels, whose real name is Stephanie Clifford, from going public about an affair she says she had with Trump years earlier. If Trump were indicted, the 76-year-old would become the first former president to be charged with a crime.

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**LOS ANGELES:** This illustration photo shows the Facebook page of former President Donald Trump on a smartphone screen on March 17, 2023. — AFP

## Finland on course to join NATO

**ANKARA:** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan ended months of diplomatically charged delays on Friday and asked parliament to quickly back Finland's bid to join NATO. A simultaneous decision by fellow holdout Hungary to schedule a Finnish ratification vote for March 27 means the US-led defense alliance will likely grow to 31 nations within a few months.

NATO's expansion into a country

with a 1,340-km border with Russia will roughly double the length of the bloc's current frontier with its Cold War-era foe. Finland had initially aimed to join together with fellow NATO aspirant Sweden - a Nordic power facing a litany of disputes with Turkey that ultimately sunk its chance to join the bloc before an alliance summit in July.

Helsinki and Stockholm ended decades of military non-alignment and decided to join the world's most powerful defense alliance in the wake of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Their applications were accepted at a June NATO summit that signaled the Western world's desire to stand up to Russia in the face of Europe's gravest conflict since World War II.

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**ANKARA:** Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan points towards Finnish President Sauli Niinisto during a joint press conference at the Presidential Complex on March 17, 2023. — AFP

