The World

Figures current as of October 2026

The world in fourteen regions: the map and its 193 states, the world's numbers side by side, the six patterns that ran through nearly every region in 2025-26, the twenty-eight states that carry the story, and the calendar ahead.

MODULE 1 — The Map: Fourteen Regions, 193 States

Goal: Show how the world is divided here and why.

The fourteen regions in a table with the question that organizes each and the states in each, the four microstates left out, how to read the map, and the map itself.

MODULE 2 — The World's Numbers in One View

Goal: Put the regions side by side on people, output, trade, energy, and arms.

Two tables of the regions' weights, the concentrations they reveal, and a worked ranking of where power sits.

MODULE 3 — The American Agenda: One Power's Domestic Politics as Everyone Else's Foreign Policy

Goal: Trace how American coercion since 2025 shows up in every region.

The instruments — tariffs, the Iran war, the Venezuela seizure, the deportation campaign, the aid cut, the alliance doubts, the strikes at sea — in a table, how the regions replied, and the limits the instruments meet at home.

MODULE 4 — The Buyer and the Actor: China Buys, America Acts

Goal: Trace the pattern in which China is the largest customer and the United States the largest actor.

The pattern by region in a table, the asymmetry behind every government's hedge, and the three places where it breaks.

MODULE 5 — Russia: Contraction and Its Exceptions

Goal: Trace where Russia lost reach since 2022 and where it held or gained.

Russia's position by region in a table, the war economy that pays for the front, and the dependence on China.

MODULE 6 — Chokepoints: Transit as the Currency of Power

Goal: Trace the straits, canals, and routes the regions are organized around.

The chokepoints in a table with their October 2026 status, the year's two closures, a closure's cost worked, and the states that hold transit.

MODULE 7 — Regimes: The Strongman Cycle and the Youth Uprising

Goal: Trace the turnover of governments across the regions.

The 2025-26 changes of leadership by region in a table, the two patterns that ran everywhere, and where the ballot won.

MODULE 8 — Wars and Physical Facts

Goal: Trace the wars in progress and the constraints of water, energy, heat, food, people, and the sea.

The wars of October 2026 in a table, the physical facts in a second, and what the facts decide.

MODULE 9 — The Twenty-Eight: The States That Carry the Story

Goal: Set out the states whose decisions move the regions.

The Group of 20's nineteen states and nine others in one table — the leader, the people, the output, the rating, and the question each faces — and what the table shows.

MODULE 10 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

Goal: Close with the six patterns as one argument, the regions ranked by what changed, and the dated calendar.

The argument in a page, the fourteen regions ranked, the watch list from Alberta's referendum and Brazil's runoff to 2028, and a last word.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

Every armed group, party, institution, and abbreviation the modules name is defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the region each one belongs to or concerns — two regions by name, a count of the fourteen when it spans more, or Worldwide; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Institutions, Alliances, and Agreements

Region	Name	Who or what
Worldwide	UN (United Nations)	The organization of 193 member states, whose Security Council authorizes sanctions and peacekeeping forces.
Three of the 14	EU (European Union)	The union of 27 European states with a single market and a common trade policy, most of them sharing the euro.
Three of the 14	Excessive-deficit procedure	The EU's process for members whose budget deficits exceed 3% of national output.
Worldwide	World Trade Organization; UN Trade and Development	The body that administers the rules of world trade, and the UN's agency for trade and development; together they publish the standard trade statistics.
Worldwide	Group of 20	The forum of 19 of the world's largest economies, the EU, and the African Union, whose leaders meet each year.
Worldwide	IMF (International Monetary Fund)	The lender to governments in balance-of-payments crises, on policy conditions, and the source of the standard world economic forecasts.
Worldwide	ICJ (International Court of Justice)	The UN's court for disputes between states.
Worldwide	WHO (World Health Organization); UNESCO (UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)	The UN's agencies for health and for education, science, and culture.
Worldwide	Freedom House	The US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.
Worldwide	SIPRI (Stockholm International Peace Research Institute)	The research institute whose database is the standard count of military spending.
Eight of the 14	BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)	The bloc of large emerging economies named for its first five members, joined since 2024 by Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, the United Arab Emirates, and Indonesia.
Five of the 14	APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation)	The forum of 21 Pacific Rim economies, whose leaders meet each year.
Four of the 14	NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)	The Western military alliance of 32 states: the United States, Canada, and thirty European states, Turkey among them.
East Asia and South Asia	ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)	The bloc of Southeast Asia's states, eleven since Timor-Leste joined in 2025.
Four of the 14	Quad	The informal grouping of the United States, Japan, India, and Australia.
Three of the 14	AUKUS (Australia, the UK, the US)	The 2021 pact under which the United States and Britain help Australia acquire nuclear-powered submarines.
North America	USMCA (United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement)	The North American free-trade agreement of 2020, which expires in 2036 unless the three agree at a joint review to extend it.

Region	Name	Who or what
North America and South America	Caricom (Caribbean Community)	The bloc of the Caribbean's island states other than Cuba and the Dominican Republic, with Belize, Guyana, and Suriname.
The Pacific	Compacts of Free Association	The agreements under which the United States funds and defends Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau, with exclusive military access to them.
The Pacific	Falepili Union	The 2023 treaty under which Australia offers Tuvalu's citizens a path to residence and guarantees Tuvalu's security.
The Black Sea	Montreux Convention	The 1936 treaty under which Turkey controls the Bosporus and Dardanelles, open to merchant ships and closed to the warships of states at war.
South Asia	Indus Waters Treaty	The 1960 treaty dividing the Indus rivers between India and Pakistan.
The Mediterranean	UNIFIL (UN Interim Force in Lebanon)	The UN's peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon since 1978.
North America	Gang Suppression Force	The UN-authorized international force against Haiti's gangs, successor in 2025 to a Kenyan-led mission.
Central and Southern Africa	Lobito Corridor	The railway from Angola's Atlantic port of Lobito to the copper belt of Zambia and the Congo, backed by the United States and the EU.
The Baltic	Federal Convention	The assembly of Germany's federal parliament and an equal number of state delegates that elects the president.
The Gulf	Fifth Fleet	The US Navy's fleet for the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea, based in Bahrain.

American Laws and Programs

Region	Name	Who or what
North America	IEEPA (International Emergency Economic Powers Act)	The 1977 law that lets the president regulate commerce in a declared national emergency.
North America	Section 122; Section 232; Section 301	The trade-law provisions behind the tariffs that replaced or outlasted those under IEEPA: a temporary tariff of up to 15% for 150 days; tariffs on grounds of national security; and tariffs against a partner's unfair practices.
North America	Democrats	The Democratic Party, the center-left opposition to President Trump's Republicans.
North America	Federal Reserve	The central bank of the United States, which sets its benchmark interest rate.
North America	Temporary protected status	The US status that lets nationals of a country struck by war or disaster live and work in the United States while it lasts.
Worldwide	USAID (United States Agency for International Development)	The American government's foreign-aid agency from 1961 until its dismantling (3a).

Parties

Region	Name	Who or what
North America	Liberal Party	Canada's centrist governing party, led by Mark Carney.
The Pacific	Labor	The Australian Labor Party, the center-left party of Prime Minister Anthony Albanese.
The Baltic	AfD (Alternative for Germany)	The far-right party, the second-largest in Germany's federal parliament.
South Asia	BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party)	The center-right party founded by Ziaur Rahman in 1978, long the main rival of Sheikh Hasina's party.
East Asia	Bhumjaithai	The Thai conservative party of Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul.
Central and Southern Africa	ANC (African National Congress)	The liberation movement that has governed South Africa since 1994, in a coalition since 2024.

Armed Groups and Forces

Region	Name	Who or what
The Gulf	Houthis	The Iran-backed movement that holds northern Yemen.
The Mediterranean	Hezbollah	Lebanon's Iran-backed Shia party and militia.
The Mediterranean	Hamas	The Islamist movement that ruled Gaza from 2007 and led the October 7, 2023 attack on Israel.
The Gulf	Rapid Support Forces	Sudan's paramilitary, descended from the Darfur militias.
Central and Southern Africa; West Africa	JNIM (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims)	Al-Qaeda's Sahel affiliate, the largest jihadist group in Mali and Burkina Faso.
Central and Southern Africa; East Africa	M23 (March 23 Movement)	The Rwanda-backed rebel movement in eastern Congo.
Three of the 14	Africa Corps; Wagner Group	Russia's state-run military force in Africa, and the mercenary company whose African operations it took over.
South Asia	Arakan Army	The ethnic armed group of Myanmar's Rakhine state.
Central Asia	Taliban	The Islamist movement that has ruled Afghanistan since 2021.
East Africa	Fano; Oromo Liberation Army	The Amhara militias and the Oromo rebel group fighting Ethiopia's federal government.

Places, Terms, and Measures

Region	Name	Who or what
Worldwide	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year; here converted at market exchange rates.
Worldwide	LNG (liquefied natural gas)	Natural gas cooled to a liquid for shipping by tanker.
Worldwide	mb/d	Millions of barrels of oil a day.
Worldwide	Brent	The benchmark price of crude oil, set for oil from the North Sea and used to price most of the world's oil.
North America	Treasury yield	The interest rate on US government bonds; the ten-year bond's is the benchmark for long-term borrowing costs.
The Baltic	Gilts	British government bonds, whose yields set the cost of the government's borrowing.
Worldwide	AI (artificial intelligence)	Computer systems trained to perform tasks such as writing and image recognition, run on specialized chips in large data centers.

Region	Name	Who or what
Worldwide	Shadow fleet	The aging, often uninsured tankers that carry sanctioned Russian and Iranian oil.
Four of the 14	Middle Corridor	The trade route from China to Europe across Kazakhstan, the Caspian, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey that avoids Russia.
Seven of the 14	Youth uprisings	The leaderless, online-organized protests led by the generation born roughly 1997-2012, known as Gen Z.
The Gulf	Ras Laffan; Yanbu; Fujairah	Qatar's gas-export complex; Saudi Arabia's Red Sea oil port; and the United Arab Emirates' oil port outside the strait.

Module 1 — The Map

Fourteen Regions, 193 States

Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Tim Marshall, *Prisoners of Geography*

Reference: The UN's list of member and observer states; the UN's *World Population Prospects 2024* and the IMF's *World Economic Outlook* (April 2026) for the weights

1a. How the World Is Divided

The world is divided here into fourteen regions, and the rule for drawing them was not geography but logic: each region is a set of states whose politics reduce to a shared question. The Caspian's states ask which way the oil and gas flow; the Baltic's how one alliance's northern flank works under pressure; the Gulf's what two chokepoints and a war do to alignments that explain almost nothing; East Asia's how to live beside China; South Asia's how to live beside India; the Pacific's what very small states do with very large stakes; the two African coasts and the continental interior how strongmen, juntas, and the young contest the state; and the Americas what one power's domestic politics do to everyone else. A state that belongs to two regions' questions is counted once: Turkey with the Mediterranean, though it holds the Black Sea's straits; Russia with the Caspian, though its war is the Black Sea's and its fleet sails the Baltic; Egypt with the Mediterranean, though Suez is the Red Sea's northern gate. Four European microstates — Andorra, Liechtenstein, San Marino, and the Vatican — sit inside larger neighbors and are left out. The other 193 — 190 members of the UN, Palestine, Taiwan, and Kosovo — each belong to one region.

1b. The Fourteen Regions

Region	Organizing question	States
North America & the Caribbean	One power whose domestic politics are everyone else's foreign policy	The United States, Canada, Mexico, the seven Central American states, Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, and nine smaller island states (23)
South America	A continent that changed direction faster than any other	Brazil, Argentina, Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile, Paraguay, Uruguay, Guyana, Suriname (12)
The Baltic & North Sea	One alliance's northern flank under pressure	Britain, Ireland, Iceland, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Poland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania (15)
The Black Sea & Danube	The front of a war and the frontier between East and West	Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia, Armenia, Serbia, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Hungary, Slovakia, Czechia, Austria, Switzerland, Belarus (15)
The Mediterranean	One sea, three chokepoints, overlapping disputes	Spain, Portugal, France, Monaco, Italy, Malta, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania, Greece, Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco (23)
The Caspian	Which way the oil and gas flow	Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Azerbaijan (5)
Central Asia	Transit and water without a sea	Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, Mongolia (5)
The Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea & Gulf	Two chokepoints where alignments explain almost nothing	Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti, Somalia (13)

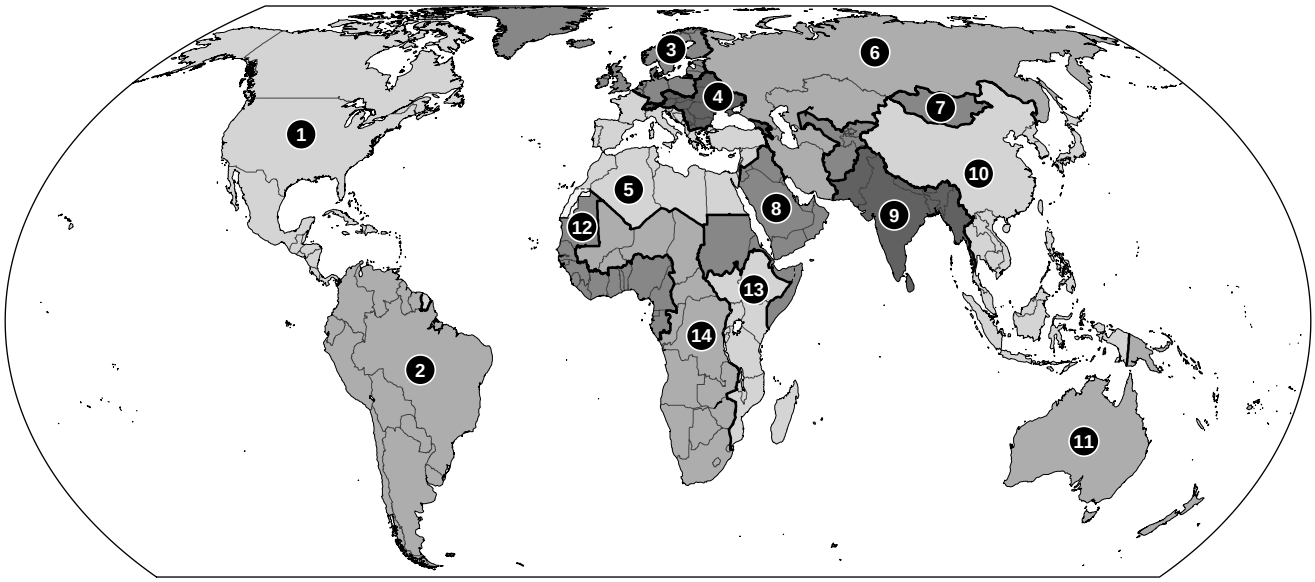
Region	Organizing question	States
South Asia & the Indian Ocean Rim	One gravitational center and no system	India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar (8)
East Asia & the South China Sea	Every policy a function of living beside China	China, Japan, the two Koreas, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Timor-Leste (15)
Australia & the Pacific Islands	Very small states with very large stakes	Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, Samoa, Tonga, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Naoero (Nauru), Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, Palau (14)
West Africa & the Gulf of Guinea	A coast holding a line against the Sahel	Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, the Gambia, Mauritania, Cape Verde, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Togo, Benin, Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, São Tomé and Príncipe (17)
East Africa & the Indian Ocean	Strongmen and the young; landlocked giants and coastal gatekeepers	Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, Mozambique, Malawi, Madagascar, the Comoros, Mauritius, the Seychelles (13)
Central & Southern Africa	A line across the continent — juntas north, elections south	South Africa, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, the Central African Republic, the Republic of the Congo, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini (15)

States as of October 2026; the regions' weights are in Module 2.

1c. Reading the Map

Three things stand out. Most of the regions are drawn around water: eleven of the fourteen are named at least in part for a sea, a gulf, or an ocean, which is why the map follows the water and not the atlas, and why Asia, which as one region would put Japan in the same group as Yemen, is split seven ways. The regions are unequal in everything but their questions: they run from five states to twenty-three, and their weights differ far more than their sizes (Module 2). And the questions converged: in 2025-26 the same six patterns ran through nearly every region — American coercion, Chinese demand, Russian contraction, contested chokepoints, the turnover of regimes, and wars resting on physical facts — and Modules 3 to 8 trace one each.

Map: The Fourteen Regions



1 North America & the Caribbean (23)
2 South America (12)
3 The Baltic & North Sea (15)
4 The Black Sea & Danube (15)
5 The Mediterranean (23)
6 The Caspian (5)
7 Central Asia (5)
8 The Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea & Gulf (13)
9 South Asia & the Indian Ocean Rim (8)
10 East Asia & the South China Sea (15)
11 Australia & the Pacific Islands (14)
12 West Africa & the Gulf of Guinea (17)
13 East Africa & the Indian Ocean (13)
14 Central & Southern Africa (15)

The regions on an equal-area projection (Equal Earth), so each appears at its true relative size. Each region is one of four grays, assigned so that no two regions sharing a border look alike; heavy lines mark the borders between regions, light ones the borders between states inside a region. Territories take the shade of the states that hold them (Greenland with Denmark, French Guiana with France); Western Sahara, whose status is disputed, is left white. The smallest island states are too small to show at this scale; the table in 1b lists every state. Boundaries: Natural Earth, drawn as the course treats them (Crimea with Ukraine).

Module 2 — The World's Numbers in One View

The Regions Side by Side

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: The UN's *World Population Prospects 2024* (estimates for mid-2026); the IMF's *World Economic Outlook* (April 2026); the trade figures of UN Trade and Development and the World Trade Organization for 2025 (March 2026); SIPRI's military expenditure data for 2025 (April 2026)

2a. People and Output

Region	People (2026)	Share	Output (2026)	Share	Output per head	Largest economy (its share)
North America & the Caribbean	617 million	7.4%	$37.9T	30.0%	$61,500	The United States (85%)
East Asia & the South China Sea	2.29 billion	27.6%	$33.1T	26.2%	$14,500	China (63%)
The Baltic & North Sea	262 million	3.2%	$16.4T	13.0%	$62,700	Germany (33%)
The Mediterranean	571 million	6.9%	$13.0T	10.3%	$22,800	France (28%)
South Asia & the Indian Ocean Rim	2.02 billion	24.4%	$5.4T	4.2%	$2,600	India (78%)
South America	440 million	5.3%	$5.2T	4.1%	$11,800	Brazil (51%)
The Black Sea & Danube	137 million	1.7%	$3.8T	3.0%	$28,000	Switzerland (30%)
The Caspian	276 million	3.3%	$3.5T	2.8%	$12,600	Russia (76%)
The Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea & Gulf	243 million	2.9%	$3.0T	2.3%	$12,200	Saudi Arabia (47%)
Australia & the Pacific Islands	46 million	0.6%	$2.5T	1.9%	$53,000	Australia (87%)
Central & Southern Africa	385 million	4.6%	$1.0T	0.8%	$2,700	South Africa (46%)
West Africa & the Gulf of Guinea	433 million	5.2%	$0.86T	0.7%	$2,000	Nigeria (44%)
East Africa & the Indian Ocean	460 million	5.6%	$0.55T	0.4%	$1,200	Kenya (27%)
Central Asia	105 million	1.3%	$0.27T	0.2%	$2,600	Uzbekistan (66%)
All fourteen regions	8.28 billion	100%	$126.4T	100%	$15,300	—

People: UN estimates for mid-2026. Output in dollars at market exchange rates: the IMF's April 2026 projections for 2026, summed by region; East Asia's total includes Hong Kong and Macau and North America's Puerto Rico, and the figures for Cuba, North Korea, and Monaco, which the IMF does not cover, are rough estimates. The last column gives each region's largest economy and its share of the region's output. Figures are rounded, so the regions may not add up to the totals.

2b. Trade, Energy, and Arms

Region	Share of goods exports (2025)	Energy position	Military spending (2025)	Nuclear-armed states
North America & the Caribbean	~14%	Net exporter: the United States the largest producer of oil and gas	~$1,010B (the US $954B, a third of the world's)	The US
East Asia & the South China Sea	~34%	The largest importer: China, Japan, Korea, and Taiwan buy most of their oil	~$530B (China $336B; Japan $62B; South Korea $48B)	China, North Korea
The Baltic & North Sea	~20%	Importer except Norway, Europe's largest gas supplier	~$340B (Germany $114B; the UK $89B; Poland $47B)	The UK
The Mediterranean	~10%	Importer; Algeria, Libya, Egypt, and Israel produce	~$290B (France $68B; Israel $48B; Italy $48B; Spain $40B)	France, Israel (undeclared)
The Caspian	~2.5%	Exporter: Russia's oil and gas rerouted to Asia; Iran's blockaded	~$200B (Russia $190B, about 7.5% of its output)	Russia
The Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea & Gulf	~5%	The largest exporter, its shipments shut in or rerouted behind Hormuz	~$160B (Saudi Arabia $83B)	—
The Black Sea & Danube	~6%	A transit corridor; Ukraine an importer at war	~$130B (Ukraine $84B, about 40% of its output)	—
South Asia & the Indian Ocean Rim	~2%	Importer: India buys almost 90% of its crude abroad	~$110B (India $92B)	India, Pakistan
South America	~3%	Exporter: Brazil, Guyana, Venezuela, Argentina's shale	~$55B (Brazil ~$25B)	—
Australia & the Pacific Islands	~1.5%	Exporter of coal, gas, and iron ore	~$40B (Australia)	—
The three African regions	~1.5%	Exporters of oil (Nigeria, Angola) and minerals; importers of fuel	~$25B	—
Central Asia	~0.2%	Gas, coal, and copper exporters; landlocked	Under $10B	—
World	$26.3T of goods, up 7.2%	Oil about 105 mb/d	$2,887B, a record, 2.5% of world output	Nine states

Goods exports: the world total from UN Trade and Development and the World Trade Organization for 2025; regional shares estimated from the leading exporters' figures and rounded. Military spending: SIPRI for the named states (estimates for China, Russia, Saudi Arabia, and Ukraine); regional totals estimated and rounded.

2c. What the Numbers Show

The tables show four concentrations. Output: North America and East Asia produce 56% of the world's output on 35% of its people; with the Baltic and the Mediterranean, four regions produce four-fifths of it, while the three African regions and Central Asia, home to 17% of humanity, produce about 2%. South Asia's people produce, per head, a twenty-third of what North America's do, which is why India — sixth in the world by output on the IMF's April figures, behind Japan and Britain, and the fastest-growing large economy — is the region's story. Trade: East Asia ships about a third of the world's goods, and China alone ran a trade surplus of about $1.2 trillion in 2025, the fact behind Module 4. Energy: the Gulf and the Caspian hold most

of the world's exportable oil and gas, the Gulf's behind a strait Iran closed in 2026 (Module 6), while the United States is the largest producer and the Asian importers the most exposed. And arms: world military spending (2b) rose in 2025 for the eleventh year in a row — though America's fell 7.5% in real terms, with no new military aid approved for Ukraine — and the United States, China, and Russia accounted for half of it. Debt is the shared condition: governments owe nearly as much as the world produces in a year, and interest is the constraint every region's politics runs into.

Worked example — Where Power Sits

Rank the fourteen regions on the three measures both tables share a scale for — output, goods exports, and military spending — and add the ranks, a rough score that weights the three equally and leaves out people, technology, and alliances. North America (first, third, and first) and East Asia (second, first, and second) tie at 5: the actor and the buyer of Modules 3 and 4. The Baltic and North Sea comes next at 8, a rich region that buys its security across the Atlantic, and the Mediterranean at 12, fourth on all three. Then a gap: the Black Sea at 19, the Gulf and the Caspian at 21, South Asia and South America at 22. A fourth measure, exportable energy, reorders the middle — it lifts the Gulf and the Caspian (2c), whose politics are therefore Module 6's chokepoints and Module 8's wars — but not the bottom: the three African regions and Central Asia rank last on everything but people, and are where other regions' decisions land. The exercise's lesson: power in 2026 is two regions' output, one region's trade, two regions' energy, and one state's arms, and the other regions' politics are mostly the management of what those do.

Module 3 — The American Agenda

One Power's Domestic Politics as Everyone Else's Foreign Policy

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: *Learning Resources v. Trump* (Supreme Court, February 20, 2026); the Section 122, 232, and 301 proclamations of 2025-26; the Congressional Research Service on the Iran war and the Venezuela operation; NATO's 2025 summit declaration

3a. The Instruments

Instrument	What the United States did (2025-26)	Where it landed, and the reply
Tariffs	'Reciprocal' tariffs on nearly every partner under IEEPA from April 2025, struck down by the Supreme Court on February 20, 2026, with about $166 billion being refunded; rebuilt on narrower laws — a 10% tariff under Section 122 from February 24 to July 24, then Section 301 tariffs of 10-12.5% on 60 economies — beside the Section 232 tariffs of 50% on steel, aluminum, and copper and 25% on cars	Canada, under a 50% tariff on cars, dairy, alcohol, and a broad list of other goods since August 22; Brazil (up to 37.5%); China (4b); India; Switzerland. The replies: exemptions bought with investment pledges (Japan's $550 billion; Taiwan's fabs), retaliation from China and Canada, diversification everywhere, and the USMCA left unrenewed at its July review, to be reviewed year by year
The Iran war	War beside Israel (8a) and a naval blockade of Iran's ports (6a)	The Gulf, whose exports were shut in (6b); the Asian importers; Europe's gas bills; Egypt's canal (6a)
Venezuela	Maduro seized by American forces on January 3, 2026 and flown to New York for trial; Delcy Rodríguez's government recognized and steered; the oil reopened to American companies	South America, split: the new right welcomed the seizure, while Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay joined Mexico and Spain in rejecting it; Cuba, which lost its oil lifeline
The deportation campaign	Removals at the fastest pace in more than a decade; third-country deportation deals; temporary protected status ended for Venezuelans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans in 2025 and, after a Supreme Court ruling in June 2026, for Haitians; a 1% tax since January 2026 on remittances sent in cash	Mexico and Central America, which complied; Haiti; the economies that live on remittances
The aid cut	USAID dismantled in 2025; withdrawals from the WHO and UNESCO; global health funding cut	East, West, and Central Africa (health and famine relief), South Asia, and the Pacific; the humanitarian system shrank
The alliance doubts	Allies treated as free-riders; NATO's pledge (2025) of 5% of GDP by 2035, at least 3.5% of it for core defense; a year of pressure on Denmark over Greenland, settled by the agreement of September 22, 2026; Ukraine talks held over Europe's head	Europe, which rearmed (3b); Japan and South Korea, which hedged; Canada
Force at sea and the cartels	Cartels designated as terrorist organizations; strikes on suspected drug boats in the Caribbean and the eastern Pacific — 79 by October 4, 2026, killing 238 people — and on targets ashore in Venezuela and Ecuador	Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, and Mexico; the Caribbean split, Trinidad and Tobago backing the strikes and most of Caricom calling for a 'zone of peace'

3b. The Replies

Every region's 2026 began with a decision made in Washington, and the replies sorted by leverage. The regions with something Washington wanted bought exemptions and hedged: East Asia's exporters with investment, the Gulf with its money (4a), and Europe with a tariff deal and its own rearmament — Germany amended its debt brake, the constitutional limit on its borrowing, to borrow for defense, Poland reached 4.7% of GDP on defense and the Baltic states about 5%, and Japan reached 2% on its own count two years early. The regions without leverage complied or absorbed: Mexico cooperated without retaliating, Central America took in deportees, and Africa and the Pacific islands absorbed the aid cut. Two states answered in kind — Canada, with a tariff war it is still fighting, and China, the only one to win a truce (4b). Latin America split by ideology rather than by interest. And where an outside threat united the center, incumbents gained (7c).

3c. The Limits at Home

The instruments meet three limits at home. The courts: besides the tariff ruling, judges struck down the order ending birthright citizenship. The bond market: the federal deficit reached $2 trillion in fiscal 2026 and gross debt passed $40 trillion in August; the Federal Reserve raised its rate on September 16, its first rise since 2023, against the war's oil shock; and the ten-year Treasury yield has been above 5% since mid-September, the highest since 2002. And the voters: the midterms (10c), with Democrats favored to take the House, are the variable every region's foreign policy waits on.

Module 4 — The Buyer and the Actor

China Buys, America Acts

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: China's customs statistics (2025-26); the Congressional Research Service on the export controls and the trade truce; the Lowy Institute's *Asia Power Index* (2026)

4a. The Pattern by Region

Region	China's role	America's role	The 2026 strain
East Asia & the South China Sea	The largest trading partner of nearly every state; the assembler of the region's supply chains; the coercer of Taiwan, Japan, and the Philippines	The guarantor of Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Taiwan; the fleet; the author of the chip controls	Japan under full Chinese economic coercion over Takaichi's remarks on Taiwan; China's drills around Taiwan (6a); the truce (4b)
Australia & the Pacific	The largest buyer of Australia's iron ore, coal, and gas (a third of its exports); security pacts and loans in the islands	AUKUS's submarines; the bases in Darwin and Guam; the Compacts of Free Association	China's submarine-launched missile test over four island states in July; Australia's treaties with Papua New Guinea, Vanuatu, and Fiji
South Asia & the Indian Ocean Rim	Pakistan's arms and corridor; Sri Lanka's and the Maldives' ports and debt; the Himalayan border with India	India's Quad partner and tariff antagonist; the claimed broker of the India-Pakistan ceasefire	India's tariff dispute (3a); Xi at India's BRICS summit in September; the Quad's leaders not met since 2024
The Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea & Gulf	The largest buyer of the Gulf's oil and gas; Huawei's networks; Iran's customer	The guarantor and the Fifth Fleet; the war's author; the AI campuses and chip licenses	The war tested both: China's oil shut in behind Hormuz, the guarantor fighting on the Gulf's doorstep
The Caspian and Central Asia	Russia's economic lifeline; the largest customer of Turkmenistan's gas; Central Asia's largest trading partner and lender; the railways	The sanctions' author; a backer of the Middle Corridor; minerals deals	Russia the junior partner (5c); Central Asia's routes through Iran disrupted by the war
The three African regions	The largest buyer of oil, copper, cobalt, and iron ore; the builder of ports, railways, and dams; the slow-restructuring lender	The aid cut (3a); the Lobito Corridor; the Congo minerals framework; the retreat from the Sahel	The Congo's cobalt quotas, meant to move refining home; Guinea's Simandou iron ore exported at last; the Sahel's juntas turned to Russia (5a)
South America	The largest buyer of soybeans, iron ore, copper, oil, and lithium; the builder of Peru's Chancay port; the swap lines	Tariffs; the Venezuela operation (3a); Argentina's $20 billion swap line; the terrorist designations	Every government sells to China and answers to Washington; the new right kept Chinese trade
Europe (the Baltic, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean)	The largest source of goods and the export surge's target; the rare-earth supplier (4b)	The guarantor in doubt (3a); the tariff deal; the Ukraine talks	The EU's duties on Chinese electric cars; rearmament against Russia (3b)
North America & the Caribbean	The largest source of American imports until 2023, now falling; the fentanyl precursors; the export controls' target	The home power	Mexico's tariffs on Chinese goods, raised in 2026

4b. The Asymmetry

China is the largest trading partner of about 120 countries and the largest buyer of what most regions sell — the Gulf's and the Caspian's oil and gas, Australia's and Brazil's iron ore, Africa's and Chile's copper and cobalt, South America's soybeans — and it builds what they need: the ports (Piraeus, Hambantota, Gwadar), the railways (Kenya's, Laos's, Simandou's), the dams and the networks. The United States is the largest actor: the guarantor of East Asia, the Gulf, and Europe, the author of the sanctions and export controls, the fleet in every sea, and in 2025-26 the war in the Gulf, the operation in Venezuela, and the tariffs on everyone. In region after region the economy leans on China and the security on America, and every government runs the hedge — Australia's iron ore to China under AUKUS, Saudi oil to China under the Fifth Fleet, Vietnam's factories in Chinese supply chains, exporting to America — because neither power can supply what the other does. The year stressed the hedge from both ends. American coercion made the guarantor a source of risk. And China's export weapon made the customer one too: its halt of rare-earth exports in April 2025 idled Western car plants within weeks, and the controls became Beijing's main lever: the truce Washington and Beijing agreed at Busan in October 2025 suspended the newest of them for a year and, after state visits in both directions, was extended in September (10c).

4c. Where the Pattern Breaks

The pattern breaks in three places. Where China is both: in the Caspian and Central Asia, Russia's dependence since 2022 (Module 5) and Central Asia's Chinese money make Beijing the economic and, increasingly, the security patron. Where America is both: in North America and the Caribbean, where the United States is the market, the guarantor, and in 2026 the coercer, and the hedge runs toward China only at the margins. And where neither decides: in the Sahel, where Russia's forces and the Gulf's money are the actors, and in the Pacific and Indian Ocean islands, where the two powers compete for the same small states with ports, loans, and pacts. The direction of travel is toward China's economic weight growing — the export surge, the commodity demand, the finance of the sanctioned — while its security role grows only where America's recedes, and toward America's security weight questioned by the allies who depend on it most.

Module 5 — Russia

Contraction and Its Exceptions

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: The Institute for the Study of War's daily assessments (2026); the Kiel Institute's Ukraine support tracker; Russia's Ministry of Finance budget data; the Africa Center for Strategic Studies on the Sahel

5a. Russia's Position by Region

Region	Before 2022	October 2026	Direction
The Black Sea & Danube	The war's launch pad; Belarus a base; influence in Hungary, Serbia, Moldova's Transnistria, and Georgia	The war in its fifth year (8a); Orbán, its closest partner inside the EU, voted out (7c); Georgia drifted toward Moscow	Held at great cost
The Baltic & North Sea	The gas supplier; Kaliningrad; influence operations	The gas gone; Finland and Sweden in NATO; the shadow fleet's exits policed (6a)	Lost
The Caspian	The hegemon; the route for Kazakhstan's oil	Kazakhstan's oil still through Russia's pipeline but hedged; Azerbaijan defiant, and Moscow forced to concede over the airliner its air defenses downed in 2024; Iran a partner at war	Held, weakened
Central Asia	The security guarantor; the migrants' destination	Its military alliance hollowed; China the money; the Taliban government recognized by Moscow in 2025	Ceding to China
The Mediterranean	Assad's patron; the Syrian bases; Libya's Haftar	Assad gone since December 2024, and with him most of Russia's Syrian position; Haftar still armed	Lost
Africa	Wagner in Libya, Mali, Sudan, and the Central African Republic	The Africa Corps protecting the Sahel's juntas for mining concessions, their capitals under jihadist siege (8a)	Gained, then strained
East Asia	North Korea's patron; China's partner	About 15,000 North Korean troops sent to fight for Russia; China's components and markets keep the war economy running	Dependent on China
South Asia	India's arms supplier	India buys Russian oil — record volumes under an American waiver during the Iran war — and still relies on Russian arms	Oil added to arms
South America and the Caribbean	Venezuela's and Cuba's patron	No response when Maduro was seized (3a); Cuba left to collapse	Lost
The Arctic	The dominant Arctic power	The Northern Sea Route, the bases, and the icebreakers intact	Intact

5b. The Contraction

Russia's reach has contracted in most regions since February 2022, held in two, and grown in one. The losses run from the Baltic, now a NATO lake, to the Mediterranean, where Assad's fall was its largest setback abroad since the Soviet collapse, to Central Asia, ceded to China, and the Americas, where Moscow did nothing for Maduro. The holds are the Black Sea, where it pays for the war with the military budget in 2b, and the Caspian, where its routes are being built around. The gain is the Sahel, won on the West's exit rather than on Russia's strength. At home the war economy is squeezed: growth down from 4%

to about 1%, the liquid part of the wealth fund down by more than half, and budget oil and gas revenue down 17% in the first nine months of 2026 despite the war's high oil price (6b), eaten by discounts, sanctions, and subsidies to refiners. Putin, in his twenty-seventh year in power, has a term to 2030, eligibility to 2036, and no mechanism for succession.

5c. The Exceptions, and the Dependence

Two things run the other way. The shadow fleet keeps the oil revenue flowing at a discount, through the Danish straits and the Black Sea to China and India (6a). And the Arctic is the one theater where Russia's position is intact. Behind both is China: nearly all Russia-China trade settles in rubles and yuan, Russia's oil and gas flow east at China's price, its components come from Chinese suppliers, and the partnership it led in 2022 is now one in which it is the junior. Russia contracted wherever the West was strong, held where it could pay in blood and oil, gained where the West left — and became, in the process, a Chinese dependency with an Arctic coast.

Module 6 — Chokepoints

Transit as the Currency of Power

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: The US Energy Information Administration's *World Oil Transit Chokepoints*; UN Trade and Development's *Review of Maritime Transport*; the Suez Canal Authority's and the Panama Canal Authority's traffic data; Lloyd's List on the 2026 Hormuz closure

6a. The Chokepoints in October 2026

Chokepoint	What passes	October 2026	The bypass
The Strait of Hormuz (the Gulf)	About a fifth of the world's oil and of its LNG before the war	Closed by Iran on February 28; partly reopened under the war's ceasefire and memorandum (8a); declared closed again on July 11; since then a gate — ships Iran authorizes pass, in lanes and at charges worked out with Oman, and others are attacked — while the United States blockades Iran's own ports	Saudi Arabia's pipeline to Yanbu on the Red Sea; the UAE's to Fujairah; Oman's ports outside the strait; none for Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, or most of Iraq
Bab el-Mandeb and the Red Sea (the Gulf)	About a tenth of seaborne trade before 2023	Much of the world's shipping diverted since the Houthi attacks began in November 2023 and returning only slowly in 2026; Saudi shipping attacked in the Saudi-Houthi war (8a)	The Cape of Good Hope, adding about two weeks to an Asia-Europe voyage
The Suez Canal (the Mediterranean)	About 12% of world trade before 2023	Revenue fell from $10.2 billion in 2023 to about $4 billion in 2024 and recovered to $4.7 billion in the year to June 2026; August's transits the most since December 2023, still about two-fifths below the level before the attacks	The Cape
The Strait of Malacca (East and South Asia)	About a quarter of seaborne trade; most of China's and Japan's oil	Open; China's 'Malacca dilemma', its dependence on a strait it cannot defend, the strategic constant	Indonesia's Sunda and Lombok straits; the pipelines across Myanmar to China
The Taiwan Strait (East Asia)	Much of East Asia's shipping; the world's leading-edge chips	Open; China's drills of December 29-30, 2025 rehearsed a blockade of Taiwan's two main ports, Keelung and Kaohsiung	None for the chips
The Panama Canal (North America)	About 5% of world trade	Open; after Panama's Supreme Court voided the Hong Kong-owned operator's concession in January, the state took over the canal's two terminals on February 23, 2026	American rail across the continent; Cape Horn
The Bosporus and Dardanelles (the Black Sea)	Ukraine's grain, Russia's oil, Kazakhstan's crude	Open to merchant ships under the Montreux Convention and closed to the belligerents' warships since 2022; Ukraine's grain corridor largely shut by strikes on ships since the summer of 2026	The Danube and Romania's Constanța
The Danish straits (the Baltic)	Russia's shadow-fleet oil; the Baltic's trade	Open; European states boarding or detaining shadow-fleet tankers (18 interventions or attempts from December 2024 to August 2026, by one count); seabed cables cut	None for Russia's Baltic ports

Chokepoint	What passes	October 2026	The bypass
The Northern Sea Route (the Arctic)	Russia's LNG and oil to Asia in summer	Open longer each year; militarized	The bypass for everything else
The Middle Corridor (the Caspian and the Black Sea)	China-Europe rail and Kazakhstan's oil around Russia	Container traffic growing, total tonnage down in 2025; the Caspian's ferries the bottleneck, its falling level the threat	—

6b. Two Closures in One Year

Two of the world's busiest chokepoints were closed at once in 2026. Iran shut Hormuz and struck every Gulf monarchy, knocking out about a sixth of Qatar's capacity to export gas, at Ras Laffan, for three to five years. The closure trapped the exports of the states with no bypass, rerouted Saudi crude to the Red Sea, sent Asia's importers to Russian and American oil, and lifted Brent from about $70 a barrel before the war to above $125 at the end of April, the highest since 2022; it stood at about $101 on October 7. It also showed that the Gulf's power is a function of a strait it does not control. At the peninsula's other end the Red Sea showed the slower cost of a closure: more than two years of diversion around the Cape cut deep into Egypt's canal revenue (6a), and its recovery met a new Houthi war (8a). The other chokepoints held, each contested in its own way.

Worked example — A Closure's Cost

Model the Hormuz closure's first month with round numbers. About 20 million barrels a day stop. The bypasses — Saudi Arabia's pipeline at up to 7 mb/d and the UAE's at about 1.5 — can carry 8.5 mb/d of it, so the world loses about 11.5 mb/d, roughly 11% of its supply. If emergency stocks release 3-4 mb/d and demand falls by 2-3 mb/d at the higher price, a gap of about 5-6 mb/d is left for the price to ration. The importers' bill: China, India, Japan, and South Korea import more than 20 mb/d of crude between them, so each $40 rise in the price costs them about $25 billion a month. The trapped exporters' loss: Kuwait's oil exports alone, about 2.4 mb/d of crude and fuels in 2025, are some $7 billion of revenue a month gone at $100 a barrel, and Qatar's gas is trapped beside them, while Saudi Arabia, selling through Yanbu at the higher price, loses far less. The lesson: a strait's closure is a transfer — from the importers to the price, from the trapped exporters to those with a bypass, from the ships inside to those outside — and the states that own a bypass gain power from the crisis.

6c. Transit as Power

Control of transit is the currency every region trades in. Turkey administers the Bosporus and holds the Black Sea's lock; Egypt lives on Suez; Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia hold Malacca and the Chinese ambition to bypass it; Panama holds a canal the United States claims a right to; Denmark and Sweden hold the Baltic's exits; Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Kazakhstan hold the route around Russia; Djibouti hosts a base for nearly every navy at the Red Sea's mouth; and Oman, with a coast outside Hormuz, and the UAE, with Fujairah, found that a shore on the right side of a strait is worth more than the oil behind it. The states that control transit gain leverage without producing anything; the states that depend on it are hostage to the controllers; and the powers that can close a strait or force it open — the United States with its fleet, Iran with its missiles, the Houthis with their drones, China with its drills — hold the currency in its highest denomination.

Module 7 — Regimes

The Strongman Cycle and the Youth Uprising

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026*; the V-Dem Institute's *Democracy Report 2026*; the Africa Center for Strategic Studies' coup tracker; the Inter-Parliamentary Union's election results (2025-26)

7a. The Changes of Leadership, Region by Region

Region	Changes of leadership (2025-26)	Pattern
North America & the Caribbean	Trump's second term; Carney's Liberal Party from far behind to victory in April 2025, and to a majority, through floor-crossings and by-elections, in April 2026; Asfura in Honduras after a disputed count; Costa Rica's Fernández elected in the first round; Bukele's bid for a third term (10c); a sovereigntist minority government in Quebec (October 5, 2026); Haiti without a single elected official	The incumbent revived by the neighbor's threat (Canada); the strongman consolidating (El Salvador)
South America	Venezuela's leader removed from outside (3a); Paz in Bolivia (November 2025), Kast in Chile (March 2026), Fujimori in Peru (July 2026), de la Espriella in Colombia (August 2026); Milei's midterm win; Brazil's runoff (10c)	The left's collapse by ballot, and in Caracas by a foreign hand
The Baltic & North Sea	Merz in Germany (May 2025); Starmer's resignation and Burnham's premiership without a general election (July 2026); Denmark's snap election, which kept Frederiksen in office; Sweden's governing bloc defeated (September 13, 2026); Jetten's minority cabinet in the Netherlands; a new king in Norway; new prime ministers in Latvia and Lithuania	The center holding; the far right the second force almost everywhere
The Black Sea & Danube	Orbán voted out (7c); Romania without a full government since May 2026; Radev's majority in Bulgaria; Vučić's resignation as president to run for prime minister (10c); Kosovo's president elected at a deadline after a year without institutions; Pashinyan re-elected; Georgia's suits to ban the opposition; Ukraine's new government; Babiš back in Czechia	The year's central case (Hungary) beside its cautionary ones (Georgia, Serbia)
The Mediterranean	France's serial governments; Italy's longest-lasting government; Spain's snap election (10c); Portugal's Socialist president; Janša's return in Slovenia; Turkey's main opposition split by a court; al-Sharaa's Syria; Israel's election (10c); Morocco's first woman head of government	The cycle at its most varied — the durable hybrid (Turkey) beside the transitional one (Syria)
The Caspian	Iran's Supreme Leader killed and his son named in his place eight days later, unseen since; Kazakhstan's new constitution and Tokayev's term count reset; the Aliyev and Berdimuhamedow dynasties	A succession made in a week of war (Iran), and one with no mechanism (Russia, 5b)
Central Asia	Japarov's purge of his security chief, and his bid for re-election (10c); Mongolia's third prime minister in a year; Uzbekistan's 2023 term reset; Tajikistan's heir; the Taliban's sixth year	The strongman cycle's textbook; Mongolia the exception
The Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea & Gulf	The monarchies unchanged through the war; Kuwait's parliament suspended and tens of thousands stripped of citizenship; Bahrain's election postponed; Iraq's new and incomplete government; Djibouti's Guelleh given a sixth term after the age limit was lifted; Somalia's presidential term extended to May 2027	The monarchies' durability against the republics' collapse

Region	Changes of leadership (2025-26)	Pattern
South Asia & the Indian Ocean Rim	Bangladesh's and Nepal's elections after their uprisings (7b), Hasina sentenced to death in absentia; Myanmar's junta chief made president (April 2026); Pakistan's field marshal given lifelong immunity	The youth uprising's home
East Asia & the South China Sea	Yoon sentenced to life for insurrection; Takaichi's two-thirds majority (February 2026); Thailand's February election, won by Bhumjaithai; To Lam general secretary and, from April, president; Indonesia's officers in civilian posts; Sara Duterte's Senate trial	Institutions' victory (Korea) beside the party-state's consolidation (Vietnam, China)
Australia & the Pacific Islands	Labor re-elected in Australia with its most seats ever (May 2025); new governments in Samoa and Tonga; a new prime minister in the Solomon Islands; New Zealand's election (10c); Fiji upgraded to Free	Stable democracies at the center; fluid island politics
West Africa & the Gulf of Guinea	Gabon's coup leader elected (April 2025); Guinea's junta leader elected (December 2025); Guinea-Bissau's coup (November 2025) and August referendum; Benin's coup attempt defeated (December 2025); Cameroon's Biya re-elected at 92; Senegal's president and prime minister split (2026); Cape Verde's government voted out; Nigeria's election (10c)	The coup belt's western edge against the coast's alternations
East Africa & the Indian Ocean	Madagascar's government toppled (7b); Tanzania's violent election (October 2025); Museveni's seventh term at 81 (May 2026); Abiy's 438 of 501 seats (June 2026); South Sudan's first election (10c)	The strongman and the young in the same region
Central & Southern Africa	The Sahel's juntas — Goïta's five-year self-grant, Traoré, and Tiani, who survived an August mutiny; Zimbabwe's presidential term extended to 2030; Hichilema re-elected in Zambia (August 2026); South Africa's coalition and Ramaphosa's revived impeachment case	The line across the continent held — juntas north, elections south

7b. The Two Patterns

Two patterns ran through most of the regions. The strongman cycle has five moves, and the table shows each: the term or age limit removed or reset (El Salvador, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Zimbabwe, Djibouti); the dynasty (Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Chad, Cambodia); the incumbent re-elected by force (Cameroon, Uganda, Tanzania); the coup civilianized by ballot (Gabon, Guinea) or entrenched by decree (the Sahel); and the succession without a mechanism (Russia, Eritrea) or improvised in war (Iran). The youth uprising is the other: organized online, leaderless, over corruption and failing services, against security forces that hesitate — in Bangladesh (2024), Kenya (2024-25), Indonesia and Mongolia (2025), Serbia (since November 2024), Nepal (September 2025), Madagascar (October 2025), Morocco, and Peru. The young toppled governments in Bangladesh, Nepal, Mongolia, and Madagascar, and the sequels diverged: Bangladesh's voters chose the old opposition, the BNP, in February 2026; Nepal's gave an outsider's party a majority in March; and Madagascar's uprising became a coup by the army unit that would not fire.

7c. Where the Ballot Won

Against both patterns, the ballot won in three settings. Hungary's electoral autocracy — sixteen years of Orbán, the courts packed, the media captured, the map drawn — was voted out on April 12, 2026 by a two-thirds majority on a record turnout, the year's central event and the proof that a tilted field can be overrun by an opposition that competes on the incumbent's issues; within two months the new government lifted Hungary's veto on Ukraine's and Moldova's EU accession talks. South Korea's president declared martial law in December 2024 and was removed by parliament and the Constitutional Court within four months. Romania annulled a presidential election over Russian interference in 2024, and a pro-European centrist won the 2025 rerun. Incumbents threatened from outside were saved by the threat, in Canada and Australia (7a). Latin America's swing right came through ballots, not coups, and Africa's south alternated by ballot while the Sahel entrenched by decree. The year's ledger: the strongman cycle advanced where institutions were weak, the youth uprising removed governments where they were corrupt, and the ballot decided where the field could be overrun, a court could act, or an outside threat united the center.

Module 8 — Wars and Physical Facts

What Decides More Than Diplomacy

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: The Uppsala Conflict Data Program and the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project (2026); Crisis Group's *CrisisWatch* (October 2026); the World Meteorological Organization's 2026 reports; the World Resources Institute's *Aqueduct* water-risk atlas

8a. The Wars

War	Status (October 2026)	Toll	Outside powers
Russia-Ukraine (since 2022; the Black Sea)	The fifth year: a front that barely moves; Ukraine's drones against refineries and the fleet; the US-brokered talks stalled after February, both sides open in September only to a limited truce on energy and grain	Hundreds of thousands killed or wounded; millions displaced	Europe's money (a €90 billion loan for 2026-27) and arms; Russia's suppliers (5a)
The Iran war (since February 28, 2026; the Gulf and the Caspian)	American and Israeli strikes, the first of which killed the Supreme Leader (7a); a ceasefire on April 8 and a memorandum in June, which collapsed in July; fire exchanged again on August 30 and September 1-3; Iran's offer of September 25 to reopen the strait in return for an end to the blockade and to the fighting in Lebanon and Yemen, rejected by Washington the next day	Not reliably counted; the Gulf states struck (6b)	Russia's and China's support for Iran; Pakistan's, Qatar's, and Oman's mediation
Israel's other fronts (since October 2023; the Mediterranean)	Gaza under the October 2025 ceasefire, with a phased disarmament deal announced in July 2026 that Hamas tied to Israel's withdrawal; Israel holding a strip of southern Lebanon despite a framework signed on June 26 for its withdrawal, which Hezbollah declared void; strikes in Syria	Tens of thousands dead in Gaza; most of its people displaced	The US, which brokered the Lebanon framework; Egypt's and Qatar's mediation; Iran's network of allies broken
Saudi Arabia and the Houthis (since July 2026; the Gulf)	Their truce collapsed; the Houthis declared a naval blockade of Saudi Arabia and took the port of Mocha in September, which the Saudi-led coalition says it retook in October	Not reliably counted	Iran's arms
Sudan (since April 2023; the Gulf)	The army and the Rapid Support Forces at war; two governments, both called illegitimate by Washington; famine	About 14 million displaced; deaths estimated from tens of thousands to more than 200,000	Gulf money on both sides
Myanmar (since 2021; South Asia)	The army has retaken 22 of the 101 towns it lost, some handed back under Chinese pressure; the Arakan Army holds most of Rakhine	More than three million displaced; tens of thousands killed	China's mediation and pressure
The Sahel (since 2012; Central and Southern Africa)	JNIM's blockade of Bamako's fuel routes, declared total in April 2026; Kidal taken by Tuareg separatists in April and retaken by the army and the Africa Corps on October 6; attacks spreading into Benin and Togo	Thousands killed a year	Russia's Africa Corps; Turkey's drones

War	Status (October 2026)	Toll	Outside powers
Eastern Congo (since the 1990s; Central and Southern Africa)	M23 holding Goma and Bukavu; the American-brokered accord of June 2025 largely unimplemented; since May 2026 the deadliest Ebola outbreak in the Congo's history	About 7 million displaced	Rwanda; the US minerals framework; Qatar's mediation
Ethiopia (East Africa)	The Tigray war resumed in September; federal forces retook Mekelle on October 3-4; relations with Eritrea broken on October 1; the Fano and Oromo Liberation Army insurgencies	Not reliably counted	Eritrea, Sudan, and Egypt, which Addis Ababa accuses of backing the Tigrayans
Pakistan and the Taliban (since February 2026; South Asia and Central Asia)	Open war, declared by Pakistan, with the border closed to trade	The UN counted 499 Afghan civilians killed from October 2025 to June 2026	Mediation by Qatar and Turkey in 2025 and by China in 2026, without a settlement
Haiti (North America)	Gangs holding up to 90% of the capital; the Gang Suppression Force at about 1,500 personnel, under 30% of its ceiling, and renewed to March 2027; elections without a date	Thousands killed a year	The US, the force's largest donor; Chad and the other contributors; the UN

Frozen or looming: India and Pakistan (four days of war in May 2025), Thailand and Cambodia (two border wars in 2025, a ceasefire since December), Taiwan (6a), the Korean peninsula, the South China Sea's shoals, Venezuela's claim to Guyana's Essequibo, and Armenia and Azerbaijan, whose peace treaty, initialed in August 2025, is unsigned.

8b. The Physical Facts

Constraint	Where it binds (2026)	What it decides
Water	The Colorado, whose operating rules are expiring (10c); the Indus, whose treaty India has suspended since April 2025; the Nile below Ethiopia's dam, completed in 2025; the Amu Darya, which Afghanistan's Qosh Tepa canal will tap; Iran's rationing; the Himalayan glaciers' retreat	Disputes between states, and the standing of governments that cannot deliver water (Iran, Iraq, Madagascar's uprising)
Energy and the grid	The Gulf's shut-in (6b); Cuba's island-wide blackouts; Nigeria's grid, delivering about 4,000 megawatts, some 17 watts a person; the Kariba dam's low water, which cut Zambia's and Zimbabwe's power; the data centers' demand in the US and the Gulf	Cuba's collapse; where the AI build-out goes; the complaints behind the uprisings
Heat and drought	The warmest year on record in 2024, and 2025 among the three warmest; low water on the Rhine; the Amazon's droughts; a coastal El Niño, a warming of the Pacific off Peru, given odds of 62% or more for the coming southern summer	River and canal freight, harvests, and the cooling of plants and people
Food and fertilizer	The war's fertilizer shock (the Gulf's urea and ammonia); famine in Sudan; Ukraine's grain corridor shut (6a)	Import bills, and the price politics behind every uprising
People	Japan, Korea, and China shrinking; Europe aging; Africa young (half of Nigerians under 19); India the most populous country	The migration politics of 3a; pensions; who does the work
The sea	The Pacific's atolls (Tuvalu's citizens applying for Australia's climate visa); Bangladesh's and Egypt's deltas; Jakarta sinking; the Arctic opening; the Caspian shrinking	Statehood without territory (the Falepili Union); the Arctic's militarization; the Caspian's ports

8c. What the Physical Facts Decide

The physical facts, this course argues, decide more than the diplomacy. Eleven wars are in progress, and nearly every one rests on a physical fact: Ukraine's on the Donbas and the Black Sea's grain; Iran's on the strait and the nuclear sites; Israel's on strips of land and their water; the Saudi-Houthi war on Bab el-Mandeb; Sudan's on the Nile's banks and the gold; Myanmar's on rare earths and jade; the Sahel's on gold and the fuel routes to Bamako; the Congo's on cobalt and tin; Ethiopia's on the sea it lacks. And the constraints that bind without a war — water, grids that fail where states cannot pay, heat, fertilizer, an old world walling out a young one, a rising sea — are what governments lose their standing over: the mechanism behind the uprisings of Module 7, and the reason the regions here are drawn around seas and rivers rather than borders.

Module 9 — The Twenty-Eight

The States That Carry the Story

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: The IMF's *World Economic Outlook* (April 2026); the UN's population estimates for 2026; Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026*

9a. The Table

Twenty-eight states carry most of the year's story: the nineteen states of the Group of 20 and nine that hold a region's key or its 2026 event — Taiwan (the chips and the strait), Iran (the war), Israel (its wars beside America), Ukraine (the front), Poland (NATO's eastern anchor), Vietnam (the factory the supply chains moved to), the UAE (the Gulf's capital and its bypass), Nigeria (Africa's largest population and its election), and Egypt (Suez, the Nile, and the fiscal strain). The table sets out each one's leader, weight, and rating, and the question its year turns on, region by region.

State	Leader, age; years in office	People	Output (2026)	Freedom House	The question in October 2026
United States *North America*	Donald Trump, 80; 1.7 years	349 million	$32.4T	Free	How far an expanded presidency goes before the courts, the bond market, and the voters check it (3c)
Canada *North America*	Mark Carney, 61; 1.6 years	40.5 million	$2.5T	Free	Whether the tariff war (3a) and Alberta's referendum (10c) strain the federation further
Mexico *North America*	Claudia Sheinbaum, 64; 2.0 years	133 million	$2.1T	Partly Free	Cooperation without retaliation (3b), growth near 1%, and judges now elected
Brazil *South America*	Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, 80; 3.8 years	214 million	$2.6T	Free	The runoff (10c), after Flávio Bolsonaro led Lula 47.0% to 45.2% in the first round on October 4; debt of 83% of GDP
Argentina *South America*	Javier Milei, 55; 2.8 years	46.0 million	$688B	Free	Whether inflation, stuck near a third a year, falls before the 2027 election (10c)
Germany *The Baltic*	Friedrich Merz, 70; 1.4 years	83.6 million	$5.5T	Free	Rearmament on borrowed money (3b), and an AfD that won Saxony-Anhalt's election in September with 43.8%
Britain *The Baltic*	Andy Burnham, 56; 0.2 years	69.9 million	$4.3T	Free	Whether a prime minister chosen by his party (7a) can govern within the limit the gilt market sets
Poland *The Baltic*	Donald Tusk, 69; 2.8 years	37.8 million	$1.1T	Free	Cohabitation with a president who vetoed a record 41 bills in his first year
Ukraine *The Black Sea*	Volodymyr Zelensky, 48; 7.4 years	39.5 million	$225B	Partly Free	The fifth winter (8a), and a budget deficit near a fifth of GDP financed from abroad
France *The Mediterranean*	Emmanuel Macron, 48; 9.4 years	66.7 million	$3.6T	Free	A deficit heading to 5.4% of GDP, no majority in the Assembly, and Le Pen cleared to run in 2027 (10c)
Italy *The Mediterranean*	Giorgia Meloni, 49; 4.0 years	58.9 million	$2.7T	Free	Whether it leaves the EU's excessive-deficit procedure in 2027, as its finance minister expects
Turkey *The Mediterranean*	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 72; 12.1 years	87.9 million	$1.6T	Not Free	Whether an opposition split by a court (7a), its leading candidate İmamoğlu on trial, can contest Erdoğan

State	Leader, age; years in office	People	Output (2026)	Freedom House	The question in October 2026
Israel *The Mediterranean*	Benjamin Netanyahu, 76; 3.8 years	9.6 million	$720B	Free	Whether its election (10c) ends the wars or continues them
Egypt *The Mediterranean*	Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, 71; 12.3 years	120 million	$430B	Not Free	Life after the IMF program, which ends in December; Suez half-recovered (6a); the Nile dammed upstream (8b)
Russia *The Caspian*	Vladimir Putin, 73; 14.4 years	143 million	$2.7T	Not Free	How long a squeezed war economy (5b) can pay for the front
Iran *The Caspian*	Mojtaba Khamenei (Supreme Leader), 57; 0.6 years	93.2 million	$300B	Not Free	Whether the theocracy survives a resumed war and a rial at about 2.5 million to the dollar
Saudi Arabia *The Gulf*	Mohammed bin Salman (crown prince), 41; 4.0 years	35.2 million	$1.4T	Not Free	A transformation paid for with oil a strait can shut in (6b), and a war with the Houthis (8a)
UAE *The Gulf*	Mohamed bin Zayed, 65; 4.4 years	11.6 million	$622B	Not Free	Whether a state that has bought a place in every camp can keep it under fire
India *South Asia*	Narendra Modi, 76; 12.4 years	1.48 billion	$4.2T	Partly Free	Growth of 7.7% after a statistical revision lowered its output; the fight over redrawing parliamentary seats; Pakistan and the Indus (8b)
China *East Asia*	Xi Jinping, 73; 13.9 years	1.41 billion	$20.9T	Not Free	Whether exports can keep carrying a deflating economy against the world's tariffs; the truce's expiry and the party congress (10c)
Japan *East Asia*	Sanae Takaichi, 65; 1.0 years	122 million	$4.4T	Free	Absorbing China's coercion (4a) without retreating, with interest rates at 1.25%, the highest since 1995
South Korea *East Asia*	Lee Jae-myung, 62; 1.3 years	51.6 million	$1.9T	Free	An AI-chip boom with rising interest rates; the world's lowest birth rate; the appeal against Yoon's life sentence
Taiwan *East Asia*	Lai Ching-te, 67; 2.4 years	23.0 million	$977B	Free	Growth forecast above 11% on AI servers, under a legislature that cut the special defense budget; the blockade risk (6a)
Vietnam *East Asia*	To Lam, 69; 2.2 years	102 million	$527B	Not Free	Growth near 9% under American tariffs aimed at its Chinese components
Indonesia *East Asia*	Prabowo Subianto, 74; 2.0 years	288 million	$1.5T	Partly Free	Nickel quotas cut by a third to lift the price; a free-meals program; seven cabinet reshuffles
Australia *The Pacific*	Anthony Albanese, 63; 4.4 years	27.2 million	$2.1T	Free	The cost of AUKUS; the central bank's rate raised to 4.60%; the treaties in the islands (4a)
Nigeria *West Africa*	Bola Tinubu, 74; 3.4 years	242 million	$377B	Partly Free	Its election (10c); insecurity from the northeast to the southeast; revenue of 10% of GDP
South Africa *Central and Southern Africa*	Cyril Ramaphosa, 73; 8.6 years	65.5 million	$480B	Free	A coalition led by a party with 40% of the vote; the American tariffs (3a); the local elections and the ANC's succession (10c)

Leaders' ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026; people: UN estimates for 2026; output: the IMF's April 2026 projections for 2026; ratings: Freedom House, *Freedom in the World 2026*.

9b. What the Table Shows

The twenty-eight hold 5.45 billion people, two-thirds of the world's, and about $103 trillion of output, four-fifths of it. Read down the rating column: fifteen are rated Free, five Partly Free, and eight Not Free — the eight together a quarter of the world's people and more than a fifth of its output. Read down the leaders: five have held their offices since 2012-14 — Putin, Xi, Modi, Sisi, and Erdoğan — and seven took office in 2025 or 2026. And read down the questions: the American midterms, China's export weapon and its congress, Ukraine's winter, the strait, and the elections in Brazil, Israel, and Nigeria recur, which is why the calendar in Module 10 is mostly theirs.

Module 10 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Six Patterns as One Argument, and the Calendar

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: The Council on Foreign Relations' elections and conflicts calendars (2026-27); the IMF's and the International Energy Agency's 2026-27 outlooks

10a. The Six Patterns as One Argument

The six patterns of Modules 3 to 8 are one argument about 2026. One power's domestic politics set every region's agenda, and that power acts while another buys, so every government runs a hedge between the security it gets from Washington and the demand it gets from Beijing — a hedge stressed from both ends this year. The third power contracted nearly everywhere and became the second's dependency, which removed a pole from the regions it had shaped. The currency the regions trade in is transit, and the year's two closures showed its value and who holds it. Within the regions, regimes turned over on two patterns — the strongman's cycle and the youth's uprising — with the ballot deciding where it could. And beneath all of it the physical facts decided more than the diplomacy. The world of October 2026 is a hedge under stress, a strait held as a gate, a set of regimes in turnover, and physical limits arriving faster than the politics that would manage them.

10b. The Regions Ranked by What Changed

Rank	Region	What changed in 2025-26	Direction
1	The Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea & Gulf	The war and the gated strait (6a, 8a); the Saudi-Houthi war; Sudan	The most changed; the least resolved
2	North America & the Caribbean	The source of Module 3's instruments; Canada's tariff war; Cuba's collapse; Haiti's gangs	The source of change for everyone else
3	South America	Venezuela's leader seized; the swing right by ballot (7a); Argentina's stabilization stalling	Direction reversed
4	The Black Sea & Danube	The war's fifth year and the grain corridor shut; Orbán's defeat (7c); Romania's and Serbia's crises	One pole removed, one front unchanged
5	The Caspian	Iran's war and succession; Russia's squeezed war economy (5b); the routes built around both	One succession made in war, one without a mechanism (7a)
6	East Asia & the South China Sea	The truce; Japan under Chinese coercion; Korea's verdict on its self-coup; Taiwan's boom	The hedge held under the most stress
7	The Mediterranean	Israel's wars and election; Syria's transition; France's fiscal question; Suez half-healed	Transition and stagnation together
8	South Asia & the Indian Ocean Rim	Two uprisings carried to elections (7b); India's tariff year; the Indus treaty suspended; Myanmar's staged presidency	The uprising's home
9	The Baltic & North Sea	Rearmament; Britain's change of leader; the Greenland settlement; the shadow fleet boarded	Rearmed and doubting its guarantor
10	East Africa & the Indian Ocean	Ethiopia's renewed war and break with Eritrea; Uganda's seventh term; Madagascar's coup	Strongmen and the young in the same year

Rank	Region	What changed in 2025-26	Direction
11	Central & Southern Africa	The Sahel's sieges; the Congo's cobalt quotas, war, and epidemic; Zimbabwe's extension	The line held; the juntas entrenched
12	West Africa & the Gulf of Guinea	Guinea-Bissau's coup and Benin's defended attempt; Senegal's split; Nigeria's election ahead	The coast holding
13	Central Asia	Squeezed by its neighbors' wars; Japarov's purge; Pakistan's war with the Taliban	The landlocked, squeezed
14	Australia & the Pacific Islands	Australia's treaties; China's missile test; the rising sea	Stable at the center; fluid at the edges

The ranking is a judgment of how much each region's position changed; the facts behind each entry are in the modules cited.

10c. The Calendar Ahead

Date	Event	Why it matters
October 19, 2026	Alberta's referendum on starting toward separation	How far Washington's pressure has strained Canada
October 25	Brazil's runoff; Serbia's snap parliamentary election; Bulgaria's presidential election	Whether the swing right reaches South America's largest economy; whether Vučić keeps power as prime minister; whether Radev's camp keeps Bulgaria's presidency
October 27	Israel's election	Whether the wars continue or end
November 3	The American midterms	Whether the president keeps a Congress that does not check him
November 7	New Zealand's election	A Pacific democracy with the polls level
November 10-12	The ASEAN summit in Manila	Whether a South China Sea code of conduct is concluded with China
November	The APEC summit in Shenzhen; South Africa's local elections	A planned Trump-Xi meeting; the coalition's first test at the ballot box
November 28-29	Taiwan's local elections and the Palestinian legislative elections (November 28); Spain's snap election (November 29)	The opposition's alliance in Taiwan; the first Palestinian legislative vote since 2006, if it is held; Sánchez's survival
December	Guinea-Bissau's election under its junta (December 6); South Sudan's first election; the Group of 20 summit in Miami	The coup template; a state formed or abandoned; a second planned Trump-Xi meeting
December 31	UNIFIL's mandate ends; the Colorado River's operating rules expire	Who keeps the peace in southern Lebanon; the template for every over-allocated river
January 10, 2027	The US-China truce expires	China's export controls and the American tariffs (4b)
January 16, 27, and 30	Nigeria's general election; Kyrgyzstan's presidential election; Germany's Federal Convention elects a president	Africa's largest democracy; the strongman's renewal in Central Asia; the successor to Steinmeier
February 2027	El Salvador's election (February 28); the ICJ's hearings on Guatemala's claim to half of Belize	Bukele's third term; a border claim on half a state
2027	France's presidential election; China's party congress and Xi's fourth term; Kenya's and Argentina's elections; the ANC's succession	The European right's largest prize; a succession that is not one; the youth's ballot and the stabilization's verdict
January 2028	Taiwan's presidential and legislative elections	Whether Taiwan elects a government Beijing can pressure

Date	Event	Why it matters
Ongoing	The strait; the Saudi-Houthi war; Ukraine's winter; Sudan; the Sahel's capitals; the next uprising and the next coup	The wars and patterns of Modules 6-8

10d. The Last Word

The six answers of 2026 will not hold in the same proportions for long. The midterms can check the actor; the truce's expiry can turn the buyer's export weapon on again; a settlement in the Gulf can reopen the strait, or a wider war close it; and the next uprising will come where services fail first. The questions will outlast the answers. Which way the oil flows, how to live beside China or India, who keeps a strait, and what one power's domestic politics do to everyone else were the regions' questions before this year and will be after it. The map's lines are drawn by seas, rivers, straits, and the decisions of three capitals, and the 193 states between them spend their politics managing what those lines and capitals do.

Key Points

The World

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Russia	Vladimir Putin	President	73	May 2012	14.4
China	Xi Jinping	General Secretary and President	73	November 2012	13.9
India	Narendra Modi	Prime Minister	76	May 2014	12.4
Egypt	Abdel Fattah el-Sisi	President	71	June 2014	12.3
Turkey	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	President	72	August 2014	12.1
France	Emmanuel Macron	President	48	May 2017	9.4
South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	President	73	February 2018	8.6
Ukraine	Volodymyr Zelensky	President	48	May 2019	7.4
UAE	Mohamed bin Zayed	President	65	May 2022	4.4
Australia	Anthony Albanese	Prime Minister	63	May 2022	4.4
Saudi Arabia	Mohammed bin Salman	Crown Prince and Prime Minister	41	September 2022	4.0
Italy	Giorgia Meloni	Prime Minister	49	October 2022	4.0
Israel	Benjamin Netanyahu	Prime Minister	76	December 2022	3.8
Brazil	Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva	President	80	January 2023	3.8
Nigeria	Bola Tinubu	President	74	May 2023	3.4
Argentina	Javier Milei	President	55	December 2023	2.8
Poland	Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	69	December 2023	2.8
Taiwan	Lai Ching-te	President	67	May 2024	2.4
Vietnam	To Lam	General Secretary and President	69	August 2024	2.2
Mexico	Claudia Sheinbaum	President	64	October 2024	2.0
Indonesia	Prabowo Subianto	President	74	October 2024	2.0
United States	Donald Trump	President	80	January 2025	1.7
Canada	Mark Carney	Prime Minister	61	March 2025	1.6
Germany	Friedrich Merz	Chancellor	70	May 2025	1.4
South Korea	Lee Jae-myung	President	62	June 2025	1.3
Japan	Sanae Takaichi	Prime Minister	65	October 2025	1.0
Iran	Mojtaba Khamenei	Supreme Leader	57	March 2026	0.6
Britain	Andy Burnham	Prime Minister	56	July 2026	0.2

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's continuous tenure in the current office; where a prime minister governs, the head of government is shown. Saudi Arabia's crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, governs for his father, King Salman, and Iran's Supreme Leader outranks its elected president, Masoud Pezeshkian. Putin has led Russia as president or prime minister since 1999 and Erdoğan Turkey since 2003; Netanyahu was also prime minister in 1996–99 and 2009–21, Lula president in 2003–10, Trump in 2017–21, and Tusk prime minister in 2007–14.

The Takeaways

• The world is fourteen regions of states whose politics reduce to a shared question — which way the oil flows, how to live beside China or India, what one power's domestic politics do to everyone else — and in 2025-26 every question had the same six answers.

• Power sits in two regions' output (North America and East Asia, 56% of it on 35% of the people), one region's trade (East Asia's third of goods exports), two regions' energy (the Gulf and the Caspian), and one state's arms (America's $954 billion of a record $2.9 trillion).

• The American agenda reached every region — the tariffs struck down in February and rebuilt, the Iran war, Maduro's seizure, the deportations, the aid cut, the alliance doubts, the strikes at sea — and the regions with leverage bought exemptions while the rest complied or absorbed.

• China buys and America acts: every government hedges between Beijing's demand and Washington's security, and 2026 stressed the hedge from both ends — China's rare-earth controls were Beijing's main lever in the truce that now runs to January 10, 2027.

• Russia contracted where the West was strong, held the Black Sea's front on a military budget of about $190 billion a year, gained only in the Sahel, and became a Chinese dependency whose oil revenue fell even with Brent above $100.

• Transit is the currency: Iran turned Hormuz from a closed strait into a gate it controls, the Houthis kept much of the world's shipping out of the Red Sea and widened their war to Saudi Arabia, and the states with a bypass — Saudi Arabia's Yanbu, the UAE's Fujairah, Oman's coast — gained.

• Regimes turned over on two patterns — the strongman cycle (resets, dynasties, juntas, and a succession made in a week of war in Iran) and the youth uprising (Bangladesh, Nepal, Madagascar) — and the ballot won where the field could be overrun, as in Hungary on April 12, 2026.

• Eleven wars are in progress, nearly all resting on a physical fact — the strait, the Donbas, the Nile, the cobalt, the gold — and water, grids, heat, fertilizer, aging, and the sea decide more than the diplomacy.

• Twenty-eight states — the Group of 20's nineteen plus Taiwan, Iran, Israel, Ukraine, Poland, Vietnam, the UAE, Nigeria, and Egypt — hold two-thirds of the world's people and four-fifths of its output, and eight of them are rated Not Free.

• The calendar: Alberta's referendum, Brazil's runoff, Serbia's and Israel's elections, the American midterms, the December deadlines in Lebanon and on the Colorado, the truce's January 10 expiry, Nigeria's election, and in 2027 France's vote and China's congress.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the world

1. How are the fourteen regions drawn?

A) By the political question its states share
B) By continent, as on an atlas
C) By population, from the largest region down to the smallest
D) By the trade blocs and the alliances each state belongs to

2. Which two regions produce about 56% of the world's output on about a third of its people?

A) East Asia and South Asia together
B) North America and East Asia
C) The Baltic and the Mediterranean
D) North America and the Gulf states

3. What did the world spend on its militaries in 2025, by SIPRI's count?

A) About $1.5 trillion, falling
B) About $2.2 trillion, flat
C) A record $2.9 trillion, a third of it American
D) About $4 trillion, half of it Chinese

4. What happened to the 'reciprocal' tariffs imposed under IEEPA?

A) Never collected at the border
B) Replaced by a free-trade deal with China
C) Made permanent by an act of Congress in 2025 and extended to every trading partner
D) Struck down by the Supreme Court in February 2026, then rebuilt on other laws

5. Which Chinese measure did the US-China truce, agreed at Busan in October 2025 and now running to January 10, 2027, suspend?

A) Its purchases of oil from Iran and Russia
B) Its military drills near Taiwan
C) Its newest rare-earth export controls
D) Its coast guard patrols near the Senkaku Islands

6. Where is Russia's position described as gained since 2022?

A) The Sahel, where it took the place the West left
B) The Baltic, through the shadow fleet
C) Syria, through the new government
D) Central Asia, through its military alliance

7. What is the state of the Strait of Hormuz in October 2026?

A) Fully reopened under the June memorandum
B) A gate run by Iran
C) Closed to all ships since February 28
D) Run by an international naval force

8. Which states had no way around a closed Hormuz?

A) Oman and the UAE
B) Saudi Arabia and Oman
C) Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates
D) Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain

9. What was the year's central case of a ballot defeating an entrenched government?

A) Georgia's disputed parliamentary election of 2024
B) The student protests against Serbia's government
C) Hungary's April 2026 election
D) The court ruling that split Turkey's main opposition

10. In which three states did youth uprisings topple governments, with elections in two and a coup in one?

A) Kenya, Indonesia, and Serbia
B) Peru, Morocco, and Mongolia, all in 2025
C) Bangladesh, Kenya, and Georgia, in that order
D) Bangladesh, Nepal, and Madagascar

11. Which war resumed in September 2026, with federal forces retaking Mekelle in October?

A) Sudan's war in Darfur
B) Ethiopia's war in Tigray
C) Mali's war in Kidal
D) The war in Myanmar's Rakhine state

12. How were the twenty-eight states that carry the story chosen?

A) The Group of 20's nineteen states plus nine regional keys
B) The world's twenty-eight most populous states
C) The members of the UN Security Council and NATO
D) The twenty-eight largest economies by output

13. How many of the twenty-eight are rated Not Free?

A) Eight
B) Two
C) Fifteen
D) None, by design

14. Which leaders of the twenty-eight were installed in 2026 without a general election?

A) Japan's and Germany's
B) Britain's and Iran's
C) Brazil's and Mexico's
D) China's and Russia's leaders

15. Which region is ranked as having changed most in 2025-26?

A) Australia & the Pacific Islands
B) Central Asia
C) The Baltic & North Sea
D) The Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea & Gulf

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. A 2. B 3. C 4. D 5. C 6. A 7. B 8. D 9. C 10. D 11. B 12. A 13. A 14. B 15. D

The Mediterranean

Figures current as of October 2026

The Mediterranean — twenty-three states from Spain to Morocco around one sea: leaders, governments, economies, partners, and the wars, migrations, and energy disputes that cross it.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: Why the Mediterranean Matters

Goal: Establish the shared vocabulary and structural fault lines before profiling individual countries.

Covers the three chokepoints, the map of EU and NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) membership, the north-south divide, and the disputes that recur.

MODULE 2 — Spain, Portugal, France & Monaco (the Western Rim)

Goal: Profile the two largest Western Mediterranean powers, the Iberian peninsula's Atlantic state, and the microstate on France's Riviera.

Covers Spain's snap election, Portugal's new president, France's budgets and the road to 2027, and Monaco's principality.

MODULE 3 — Italy & Malta (the Central Rim)

Goal: Profile Italy as the sea's central power and Malta as its strategically located microstate.

Covers Italy's longest-lasting government and its lost referendum, and Malta's neutral, Labour-dominated politics.

MODULE 4 — The Adriatic: Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania

Goal: Cover the post-Yugoslav states and Albania, with their different EU and NATO paths.

Covers Slovenia's change of government, Croatia's stability, Bosnia's October 2026 election, and the two accession frontrunners.

MODULE 5 — Greece & Cyprus

Goal: Profile both, including the Cyprus division and the Greece-Turkey rivalry that shapes both countries' foreign policy.

Covers Greece's government and the dispute over the Crete-Cyprus power cable, Cyprus's presidential system, and the island's division since 1974.

MODULE 6 — Turkey

Goal: Profile the region's most consequential swing power.

Covers the executive presidency, the opposition's removal and split, the Kurdish peace law, and Turkey's independent line across the region's disputes.

MODULE 7 — The Levant: Syria, Lebanon, Israel & Palestine

Goal: Profile the region's most conflict-affected shore.

Covers post-Assad Syria, Lebanon under occupation and in talks, Israel before its October election, and the Palestinians after the Gaza ceasefire.

MODULE 8 — Egypt

Goal: Profile the region's most populous country and the state controlling the Suez Canal.

Covers the presidency and the army, the debt and the canal, and Egypt's place between the Gulf, Israel, and the West.

MODULE 9 — Libya

Goal: Profile a state still divided between rival governments and the outside powers backing each.

Covers the Tripoli and eastern governments, the US plan for a shared executive, and the outside patrons on each side.

MODULE 10 — The Maghreb: Tunisia, Algeria & Morocco

Goal: Profile the three North African states, including the Algeria-Morocco rivalry and the Western Sahara dispute.

Covers Tunisia's one-man rule, Algeria's army and gas, and Morocco's September 2026 election and new head of government.

MODULE 11 — The Alliance Map: NATO, the EU, the Arab League & Outside Powers

Goal: Pull the individual profiles together into the region's overlapping and competing blocs.

Covers which countries belong to which institutions, and the roles of the US, Russia, China, and the Gulf states.

MODULE 12 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close the course by mapping the active disputes that cut across multiple countries.

Covers Lebanon and the unfinished Iran war, the maritime disputes, Cyprus, Libya, Western Sahara and Ceuta, and migration.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

Every armed group, party, institution, and abbreviation the modules name is defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country each one belongs to or concerns, or how many of the twenty-three when it spans several; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Institutions, Alliances, and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
Ten of the 23	NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)	The Western military alliance founded in 1949, whose members pledge to defend one another: Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, Greece, and Turkey belong, Montenegro the newest, since 2017.
Nine of the 23	European Union	The 27-member union, nine of whose members are profiled here: Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Malta, Slovenia, Croatia, Greece, and Cyprus. Monaco uses the euro and sits inside its customs area through France.
Four of the 23	EU candidates; negotiating chapters	Montenegro, Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Turkey are candidates for membership. Accession talks are divided into policy chapters that must all be closed before a country can join.
Eleven of the 23	Euro	The single currency, used by the nine EU members here and, by agreement or unilaterally, by Monaco and Montenegro.
Region-wide	Schengen area	The EU's zone of travel without passport checks.
France, Italy, Malta	Excessive-deficit procedure	The EU's process for members whose budget deficits exceed 3% of gross domestic product (GDP). France, Italy, and Malta were among the members placed in it in 2024.
Eight of the 23	Arab League	The league of 22 Arab states founded in 1945 and based in Cairo. Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco belong; Syria was suspended from 2011 to 2023.
Five of the 23	African Union	The union of African states founded in 2002 to succeed the Organization of African Unity. Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco belong.
Region-wide	IMF (International Monetary Fund)	The lender to governments in balance-of-payments trouble.
Region-wide	World Bank	The Washington-based development lender.
All 23	Freedom House	The US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.
Seven of the 23	East Mediterranean Gas Forum	The Cairo-based organization of gas producers and consumers founded in 2019: Cyprus, Egypt, France, Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and Palestine. It leaves out Turkey.
Turkey	Montreux Convention	The 1936 treaty giving Turkey control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, including the right to close them to the warships of countries at war.
Turkey, Libya	Turkey-Libya maritime memorandum	The 2019 agreement between Turkey and the Tripoli government drawing a maritime boundary across waters Greece and Cyprus claim.
Turkey	Mecca Joint Defense Agreement	The pact Turkey signed with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan on August 7, 2026, joining the two in mutual defense: an attack on one is an attack on all.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Dayton Agreement; High Representative	The 1995 US-brokered peace that ended the Bosnian war and wrote the country's constitution, and the international official it created to oversee it, with power to impose laws and remove officials.

Country	Name	Who or what
Israel, Palestine	Oslo Accords; Palestinian Authority	The 1993-95 Israeli-Palestinian agreements, and the self-governing authority they created to run parts of the West Bank and Gaza pending a final settlement that never came.
Israel, Morocco	Abraham Accords	The 2020 US-brokered agreements under which the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan normalized relations with Israel.
Israel, Palestine	Board of Peace	The body chaired by President Trump under his 2025 plan for Gaza, set up to oversee the strip's transition and reconstruction; it held its first summit in February 2026.
Lebanon	UNIFIL (UN Interim Force in Lebanon)	The UN peacekeeping force in southern Lebanon since 1978.
Syria	Constitutional Declaration	The interim constitution al-Sharaa signed in March 2025, setting a five-year transition before a permanent constitution and elections.
Syria	Caesar Act	The 2019 US law imposing sanctions on anyone dealing with Assad's government.
Morocco, Algeria	Resolution 2797	The UN Security Council's October 2025 resolution backing negotiations on Western Sahara on the basis of Morocco's autonomy plan.
France	Article 49.3	The clause of France's constitution that lets a government pass a budget or bill without a vote unless the National Assembly topples it in a censure motion.
Region-wide	EU Pact on Migration and Asylum	The EU's 2024 overhaul of its asylum rules, with faster procedures at the borders and shared responsibility for arrivals.
Region-wide	Frontex	The EU's border and coast guard agency.
Greece	European Public Prosecutor's Office	The EU body, operating since 2021, that investigates and prosecutes crimes against the EU budget.
Italy	Mattei Plan	Italy's program of investment in Africa, launched in 2024 and named for the founder of the energy company Eni, meant to secure energy and reduce migration.

Governments, Parties, and Armed Groups

Country	Name	Who or what
Spain	PSOE (Spanish Socialist Workers' Party); Sumar	Sánchez's center-left party, and the left-wing alliance that has been its coalition partner since 2023.
Spain	PP (People's Party); Vox	The center-right main opposition, led by Alberto Núñez Feijóo, and the far-right party.
Spain	Junts	The Catalan separatist party of Carles Puigdemont, whose votes returned Sánchez to office in 2023 in exchange for an amnesty.
Portugal	Social Democratic Party; Socialist Party	Montenegro's center-right party, which leads the minority government, and the center-left party, third in parliament since 2025.
Portugal	Chega	The far-right party founded in 2019 by André Ventura.
France	Socialist Party; Ecologists	The center-left party and the Greens, both in the left alliance that won the most seats in the 2024 election.
France	National Rally; National Assembly	The far-right party of Marine Le Pen and Jordan Bardella, and the lower house of parliament.
Italy	Brothers of Italy	Meloni's party, the largest in her four-party right-wing coalition.
Malta	Labour Party; Nationalist Party	Malta's two parties.
Slovenia	SDS (Slovenian Democratic Party); Freedom Movement	Janša's conservative party, and Robert Golob's liberal party.
Slovenia	Resni.ca	An anti-establishment party led by Zoran Stevanović.

Country	Name	Who or what
Croatia	HDZ (Croatian Democratic Union); Homeland Movement	Plenković's center-right party, and its right-wing coalition partner.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	Republika Srpska; Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina	The Serb-majority entity and the Bosniak-Croat entity into which the Dayton Agreement divided the country.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	SNSD (Alliance of Independent Social Democrats)	Republika Srpska's ruling party, led by Milorad Dodik.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	SDA (Party of Democratic Action); SDP (Social Democratic Party)	The main Bosniak nationalist party, first in the October 2026 vote for the state parliament, and the multi-ethnic Social Democrats, the party of Denis Bećirović.
Bosnia and Herzegovina	HDZ BiH (Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina)	The main Bosnian Croat party, allied with Croatia's governing party.
Montenegro	Europe Now!	Spajić's centrist movement, founded in 2022.
Albania	Socialist Party	Rama's party.
Greece	New Democracy	Mitsotakis's center-right party.
Cyprus	ELAM (National Popular Front)	The far-right party.
Cyprus	Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus	The state declared in 1983 in the island's north, held by Turkish troops since 1974 and recognized only by Turkey.
Turkey	AKP (Justice and Development Party); MHP (Nationalist Movement Party)	Erdoğan's Islamist-rooted party, and its nationalist ally.
Turkey	CHP (Republican People's Party); New Party	The party Atatürk founded, Turkey's main opposition, and the party its ousted leader, Özgür Özel, founded.
Turkey	PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party)	The Kurdish militant group that fought the Turkish state from 1984.
Syria	Baath Party; Islamic State	The Arab nationalist party that seized power in 1963 and ruled under the Assads until 2024, dissolved in 2025, and the jihadist group that held a territorial caliphate in Syria and Iraq from 2014 to 2019.
Syria	HTS (Hayat Tahrir al-Sham)	The Islamist rebel group al-Sharaa led, once al-Qaeda's Syrian branch, which toppled Assad in December 2024 and was dissolved into the new state in 2025.
Syria	SDF (Syrian Democratic Forces)	The Kurdish-led force that held Syria's northeast with US backing.
Syria	People's Assembly	Syria's interim parliament.
Lebanon	Hezbollah	The Iran-backed Shia militia and party.
Israel	Likud; Knesset	Netanyahu's right-wing party, and Israel's parliament.
Palestine	PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization); Fatah	The umbrella body recognized as the Palestinians' representative, and the largest faction within it, both led by Mahmoud Abbas.
Palestine	Hamas	The Islamist movement that won the 2006 Palestinian election, seized Gaza in 2007, and led the October 7, 2023 attack on Israel.
Egypt	Muslim Brotherhood	The Islamist movement whose Mohamed Morsi won Egypt's 2012 presidential election; the army removed him in 2013 and banned the movement.
Egypt	Nation's Future Party	The pro-Sisi party.
Libya	GNU (Government of National Unity)	The UN-recognized government in Tripoli, led by Abdul Hamid Dbeibah.
Libya	LNA (Libyan National Army); House of Representatives	Khalifa Haftar's eastern army, and the eastern-based parliament that backs it.

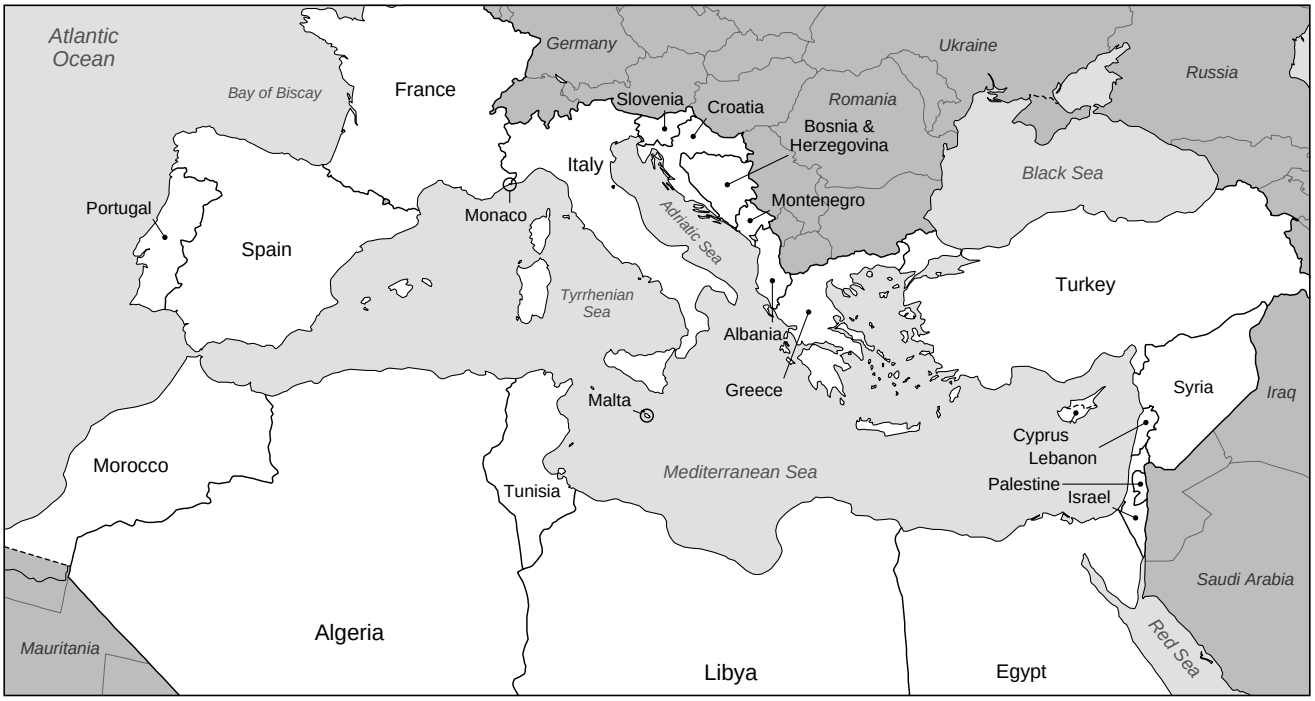
Country	Name	Who or what
Libya	Presidential Council	Libya's three-member collective head of state, chaired by Mohamed al-Menfi since 2021.
Algeria	FLN (National Liberation Front)	The movement that won the 1954-62 war of independence against France and has dominated Algerian politics since.
Algeria, Morocco	Polisario Front	The Algeria-backed movement seeking independence for Western Sahara.
Morocco	PAM (Authenticity and Modernity Party); RNI (National Rally of Independents)	The party founded in 2008 by a close adviser of the king, and the liberal party of the outgoing head of government, Aziz Akhannouch.
Region-wide	Houthis	Yemen's Iran-aligned movement, whose attacks on shipping from November 2023 drove traffic from the Red Sea and Suez.

Places, Projects, and Terms

Country	Name	Who or what
Region-wide	Gibraltar; Suez Canal; Turkish Straits	The three chokepoints: the strait between Spain and Morocco, Egypt's canal to the Red Sea, and the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to the Black Sea.
Spain, Morocco	Ceuta; Melilla	Spain's two cities on the Moroccan coast, which Morocco claims.
Morocco, Algeria	Western Sahara	The former Spanish colony, most of it held by Morocco since 1975, whose independence the Algeria-backed Polisario Front seeks.
Slovenia, Croatia	Bay of Piran	The bay whose maritime border an international tribunal drew in 2017.
Greece, Turkey	'Blue Homeland'	The Turkish naval doctrine claiming wide maritime zones in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean that Greece and Cyprus consider theirs.
Greece, Cyprus	Great Sea Interconnector	The planned undersea power cable from Crete to Cyprus.
Greece	Piraeus	Greece's largest port, majority-owned by COSCO (China Ocean Shipping Company).
Cyprus	Akrotiri; Dhekelia	The two British military bases on Cyprus.
Israel, Egypt, Cyprus	Leviathan; Tamar; Karish; Zohr; Cronos	The Eastern Mediterranean's main offshore gas fields: Israel's three, Egypt's, and Cyprus's.
Algeria, Spain, Italy	Medgaz; Transmed	The gas pipelines from Algeria to Spain, under the sea, and to Italy, through Tunisia.
Region-wide	LNG (liquefied natural gas)	Gas chilled to liquid so it can be shipped by tanker.
Lebanon	Litani River; 'yellow line'	The river north of the Israeli border, and the line around the strip of southern Lebanon that Israel holds.
Israel, Palestine	Gaza; West Bank; East Jerusalem	The Palestinian territories Israel captured in 1967.
Egypt	GERD (Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam)	Ethiopia's dam on the Blue Nile, which Egypt regards as a threat to its water.
Turkey	Akkuyu	Turkey's first nuclear power plant, built by Russia on the Mediterranean coast.
Region-wide	The 2026 Iran war	The war the US and Israel launched on Iran in 2026, which closed the Strait of Hormuz.
Region-wide	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year, converted at market exchange rates unless stated at purchasing-power parity, which adjusts for differences in prices.

Module 1 — Foundations

Why the Mediterranean Matters



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*

1a. Three Chokepoints Define the Sea

The Mediterranean is nearly enclosed, which is exactly why it matters so much: almost all traffic in and out passes through three narrow points. The Strait of Gibraltar at the western end, roughly 14 kilometers wide at its narrowest, connects the sea to the Atlantic and is flanked by Spain, Morocco, and the British territory of Gibraltar. The Suez Canal at the southeastern corner, controlled entirely by Egypt, is the shortcut between Europe and Asia that makes the sea a global trade artery rather than a regional one. The Turkish Straits (the Bosphorus and Dardanelles) at the northeast connect to the Black Sea and are governed by Turkey under a 1936 treaty that gives it authority to restrict warship transit in wartime. Whoever holds these three points holds disproportionate leverage over everyone else on the rim.

1b. The Membership Map

• **EU members (9):** Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Malta, Slovenia, Croatia, Greece, Cyprus. Monaco is not a member but uses the euro and sits inside the EU customs area through France.

• **NATO members (10):** Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, Slovenia, Croatia, Montenegro, Albania, Greece, Turkey. Malta and Cyprus are the two EU members here outside NATO.

• **EU candidates (4):** Montenegro and Albania, the frontrunners, which had closed 18 and 3 of the 33 negotiating chapters by July 2026; Bosnia and Herzegovina, cleared to open talks in 2024; and Turkey, whose talks have been frozen since 2018.

- **Arab League members (8):** Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco.

The overlap and the gaps in this map explain a great deal of regional behavior. Turkey is the largest of the three NATO members here outside the EU, which gives it unusual freedom to act against EU members (Greece, Cyprus) while remaining inside the Western alliance. Malta, constitutionally neutral, and Cyprus, whose membership Turkey would veto, are the EU members here outside NATO. And no state on the African or Levantine shores belongs to either Western institution.

1c. The North-South Divide

The single most consistent pattern across the rim is the gap between the northern shore (Europe) and the southern and eastern shores (North Africa and the Levant) in income, governance, and demographics. Northern-shore countries are wealthy, aging, and democratic to varying degrees; southern-shore countries are poorer, young, and range from constitutional monarchy to consolidated presidential rule to outright state fragmentation. This divide drives the migration pressure that recurs throughout the course, and it drives the tendency of northern governments to cut security and border-control deals with southern governments regardless of those governments' domestic character.

1d. The Disputes That Recur

A handful of disputes will appear in module after module, and it helps to know them in advance. The division of Cyprus since 1974 (Modules 5, 6, 12). Overlapping maritime claims in the Eastern Mediterranean, sharpened by offshore gas discoveries (Modules 5, 6, 12). Libya's split between rival governments backed by opposing outside powers (Modules 9, 11, 12). The Western Sahara question that poisons Algeria-Morocco relations and periodically spills onto Spain (Modules 2, 10, 12). The Israel-Palestine conflict and Israel's wars with Iran-aligned groups, which in 2026 escalated into a direct US-Israeli war with Iran and a renewed Israeli ground campaign in Lebanon (Modules 7, 12). And migration, which in 2026 produced the largest single border crossing in Spanish history at Ceuta (Modules 2, 3, 12).

1e. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office, and the second figure who matters — the head of state where a prime minister governs, the prime minister where a president or king leads (Turkey and Syria have none), the Turkish Cypriot leader in Cyprus, and the eastern commander in Libya — then the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religions with their shares, the main ethnic or language groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026, with a note where a census or official count differs markedly; land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or, where there is none, from published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. The economy heading covers each economy's size and shape, its main exports and imports, and its top trading partners, which often explain a country's foreign policy better than its formal alliances do. The course uses 'partners' and 'rivalries' rather than 'allies' and 'enemies' because most relationships on the rim are neither: Greece and Turkey are NATO allies and bitter rivals at once, and Spain and Morocco are close economic partners in a sovereignty dispute over Spain's enclaves on the Moroccan coast. Eleven of the twenty-three states are rated Free, six Partly Free, and six Not Free. The Who's Who before this module defines every group, institution, and abbreviation the profiles name, and the Key Points page ranks the leaders by time in office, from Morocco's king to Slovenia's prime minister.

Module 2 — Spain, Portugal, France & Monaco

The Western Rim



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: European Council on Foreign Relations, country briefings (ongoing)

2a. Spain

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Pedro Sánchez, 54 — in office since June 2018 (8.3 years); Spanish Socialist Workers' Party; minority coalition since 2023; snap election called for November 29, 2026
Head of state	King Felipe VI, 58 — in office since June 2014 (12.3 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary monarchy; the king is ceremonial
Freedom House	Free
Population	47.9 million (2026); UN estimate; Spain's statistics institute counted 49.1 million at the start of 2025, after record immigration
Land area	498,800 km² (192,590 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic about 55%, no religion about 40%, other faiths about 3% (survey estimates, 2025; the census does not ask)
People	Spanish citizens about 86%, foreign nationals about 14%, the largest groups Moroccan, Colombian, and Romanian (2025); Catalan, Galician, and Basque are co-official languages in their regions; median age 47; 82% urban
Minimum wage	€1,221 a month in 14 payments for 2026, €1,425 averaged over 12 months ($1,606 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Unified under Ferdinand and Isabella in 1492, the same year Columbus sailed and the last Muslim kingdom of Granada fell, Spain built one of the first global empires and then spent the 19th and early 20th centuries losing it. A brutal civil war (1936-39) brought General Francisco Franco to power for 36 years of dictatorship. After his death in 1975, King Juan Carlos I steered a negotiated transition to democracy, capped by the 1978 constitution, followed by NATO entry (1982) and EU membership (1986). Melilla has been Spanish since 1497 and Ceuta, Portuguese from 1415, since the 17th century, both longer than the modern Moroccan state has existed, which is the historical root of the current sovereignty dispute. Catalan and Basque regionalism, a 2008-14 economic crisis, and the 2017 Catalan independence referendum have been the defining domestic tensions of the democratic era.

Current leadership: Sánchez's working majority depended on regional and separatist parties until Junts, the Catalan separatists, broke with him in October 2025 and began blocking his bills and budgets. After the opposition voted down his housing decrees, Sánchez called the snap general election on October 5, 2026, about eight months early. Polls suggest that the center-right People's Party (PP) under Alberto Núñez Feijóo and the far-right Vox could together win a majority, and court cases touching his party, his wife, and his brother, the latter two denying any wrongdoing, have weighed on him.

Government structure: Real power rests with the prime minister and a bicameral parliament (Congress of Deputies and Senate). Spain is highly decentralized, with 17 autonomous communities holding substantial powers, and its two North African enclaves, Ceuta and Melilla, are the EU's only land borders with Africa.

Economy and trade: The rim's third-largest economy after France and Italy, about $2.1 trillion in 2026 on IMF estimates, and among the fastest-growing large economies in the euro area in the mid-2020s. Services dominate, with tourism the single largest earner: a record 96.8 million foreign visitors spent €134.7 billion in 2025, making Spain the world's second most-visited country. Exports are led by motor vehicles and auto parts (Spain is Europe's second-largest car producer), refined petroleum, pharmaceuticals, machinery, and agricultural products (olive oil, wine, fruit and vegetables). Imports are led by crude oil and natural gas (Spain produces almost none), vehicles and parts, pharmaceuticals, and electronics. Top trading partners: France, Germany, Italy, and Portugal on the export side; Germany, China, France, and the US on the import side. Algeria and Morocco matter far beyond their trade volume — Algeria as the largest gas supplier via the Medgaz pipeline, Morocco as the largest African trading partner and a key manufacturing and agricultural supplier.

Closest partners: The EU and NATO are the structural anchors. Within the Mediterranean, Spain's most consequential bilateral relationships are with Morocco (trade, migration control, and the enclaves) and Algeria (gas). Sánchez has pursued a notably independent line on the Middle East: he recognized Palestinian statehood in 2024, and on March 2, 2026 he refused to let the US use the jointly run bases at Rota and Morón for strikes on Iran, then denied Spanish airspace to the operation.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The Ceuta crisis at the end of July 2026 is the sharpest current dispute: some 60,000 people, most of them swimming, crossed from Morocco within two or three days, and at least 72 died by Spain's count. Most went back within days, but thousands remained into the autumn. Spain's 2022 decision to endorse Morocco's autonomy plan for Western Sahara, reversing decades of neutrality, led Algeria to suspend its friendship treaty with Spain; trade resumed in 2025, Algeria reactivated the treaty in March 2026, and Sánchez visited Algiers on July 20, less than two weeks before the crossing began. Spain's stance on Iran and Gaza has also produced open friction with the US and Israel, and Italy's response to the crisis (Module 3) strained relations inside the EU itself.

2b. Portugal

Portugal has no Mediterranean coast — its shore is entirely Atlantic — but it is profiled here with Spain because the Iberian peninsula is one political and economic system and Spain is its dominant partner by a wide margin.

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Luís Montenegro, 53 — in office since April 2024 (2.5 years); Social Democratic Party; minority government, returned in the May 2025 snap election
Head of state	President António José Seguro, 64 — in office since March 2026 (0.6 years); directly elected in February 2026; can veto laws and dissolve parliament
System	Semi-presidential republic: the prime minister governs; the elected president can veto laws and dissolve parliament
Freedom House	Free
Population	10.4 million (2026)
Land area	91,590 km² (35,360 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 80.2%, no religion 14.1%, other faiths about 6% (2021 census, people aged 15 and over)
People	Portuguese, with about 1.5 million foreign residents, roughly one in seven people, the largest group Brazilian (2024); median age 48; 69% urban
Minimum wage	€920 a month in 14 payments for 2026, €1,073 averaged over 12 months ($1,209 at $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Portugal's borders are Europe's oldest, fixed since the 13th century, and its 15th- and 16th-century navigators built the first global maritime empire, from Brazil to Goa to Macau. Decline followed — the 1755 Lisbon earthquake, Napoleonic occupation, the loss of Brazil in 1822 — and a 1910 republic fell to a military coup in 1926, from which António Salazar built the Estado Novo (1933–74), Western Europe's longest dictatorship, which fought unwinnable colonial wars in Africa until the 1974 Carnation Revolution overthrew it and freed Angola, Mozambique, and Guinea-Bissau. Portugal joined the European Community in 1986 alongside Spain and the euro in 1999, endured a 2011 bailout, and has since become a tourism and technology success. Three snap elections since 2022 and the far-right Chega's rise to second place in 2025 mark the end of its two-party stability.

Current leadership: President António José Seguro, a Socialist former party leader, won the February 8, 2026 presidential runoff with 66.8% over the far-right Chega's André Ventura — a landslide that followed a first round in which the governing coalition's own candidate finished fifth — and took office on March 9.

Government structure: Under the 1976 constitution a directly elected president with a five-year term appoints the prime minister and commands the armed forces but holds no executive power, and a prime minister is answerable to the 230-seat Assembly of the Republic. Portugal joined NATO as a founding member in 1949. Its politics have become unstable as the two-party system that governed since 1974 fragments.

Economy and trade: An economy of about $380 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates that has outgrown the euro-area average since its 2011 bailout, built on tourism (a record earner), services and technology (Lisbon as a startup and outsourcing hub), cork (the world's largest producer), wine, textiles and footwear, cars (a Volkswagen plant), and renewable energy, which met 68% of electricity demand in 2025. Exports are led by cars and parts, refined petroleum, machinery, clothing and footwear, wine, and cork; imports by fuel, machinery, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: Spain (by far the largest), Germany, France, the US,

and the UK. Housing costs driven by tourism and foreign buyers, low wages, and a December 2025 general strike are the domestic pressures; the port of Sines is a strategic Atlantic landing point for liquefied gas and data cables.

Closest partners: Spain, its dominant economic partner and Iberian twin; the EU and NATO; the Portuguese-speaking world — Brazil, Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé, Timor-Leste — through the Community of Portuguese Language Countries; the UK, its oldest ally under a 1386 treaty; and the US, with a base in the Azores.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Portugal has no adversaries. Its disputes are domestic: the rise of Chega on immigration and corruption and the fragility of minority government. A dormant territorial question with Spain over Olivenza persists on paper.

2c. France

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Emmanuel Macron, 48 — in office since May 2017 (9.4 years); second and final term ends May 2027
Head of government	Prime Minister Sébastien Lecornu, 40 — in office since September 2025 (1.1 years); minority government; resigned and was reappointed in October 2025
System	Semi-presidential republic: the president leads; the prime minister needs the National Assembly's confidence
Freedom House	Free
Population	66.7 million (2026); UN estimate for metropolitan France; about 68.6 million including the overseas departments (2025)
Land area	547,557 km² (211,410 sq mi)
Religion	No religion 51%, Catholic 29%, Muslim 10%, other Christian 9%, Jewish and Buddhist under 1% each (national survey of adults aged 18 to 59, 2019–20; the census does not ask)
People	No ethnic statistics, which French law restricts; immigrants, people born abroad without French nationality, are 10.7% of the population (2023); median age 43; 83% urban
Minimum wage	€12.31 an hour since June 1, 2026, €1,867 a month gross for a 35-hour week ($2,104 at $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: France's modern political identity dates from the 1789 Revolution, which abolished the monarchy and established the republican tradition, though the country cycled through empires, restored monarchies, and five republics before settling on the current Fifth Republic in 1958. That constitution, designed by Charles de Gaulle amid the Algerian War, created the strong presidency that defines French government today. France's Mediterranean role is inseparable from its colonial history: it ruled Algeria as an integral part of France from 1830 to 1962, held protectorates over Tunisia and Morocco, and governed Syria and Lebanon under League of Nations mandates between the world wars. The Algerian War of Independence (1954-62), which killed hundreds of thousands and brought down the Fourth Republic, remains the most sensitive chapter in France's relations with the southern shore.

Current leadership: Sébastien Lecornu resigned in October 2025, hours after naming his first cabinet, and was reappointed four days later, after a period in which France had five prime ministers in about three years. His government passed the 2026 budget only in February 2026, under the constitution's Article 49.3, after the censure motions against it failed. On October 1, 2026 it presented a 2027 budget seeking €54 billion of

savings to cut the deficit from an expected 5.4% of GDP to 5%; the Socialists called it a provocation and the Greens promised a censure motion.

Government structure: The directly elected president holds foreign policy and defense authority and appoints the prime minister. Since the 2024 snap legislative election produced a three-way split among the left, Macron's centrists, and the far-right National Rally, no bloc holds a majority, which is the root of the government instability.

Economy and trade: The rim's largest economy, about $3.6 trillion in 2026 on IMF estimates, and the euro area's second-largest after Germany. A diversified, services-heavy economy with globally significant aerospace, luxury goods, pharmaceutical, agricultural, and nuclear-energy sectors. Exports are led by aircraft and aerospace components (Airbus), pharmaceuticals, cars and parts, machinery, wine and spirits, and luxury goods. Imports are led by crude oil and gas, cars, machinery, electronics, and clothing. Top trading partners: Germany by a wide margin, then Italy, Belgium, Spain, and the US. France is a net electricity exporter thanks to its nuclear fleet, with record net exports in 2025, which gives it an unusual degree of energy independence for a European economy and reduces its exposure to the Mediterranean gas politics that constrain Spain and Italy.

Closest partners: France is a founding EU member, a NATO member, a nuclear power, and a permanent member of the UN Security Council. Its deepest Mediterranean partnership is with Greece, formalized in a 2021 defense pact that the two renewed for five years during Macron's April 2026 visit to Athens. France also has strong ties to Cyprus, Egypt, and Morocco, and historical influence across the Maghreb and Lebanon. With Britain, it leads the 'coalition of the willing' for Ukraine.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Turkey is France's most persistent Mediterranean rival, over Libya, the Eastern Mediterranean, and the Crete-Cyprus power cable that France backs and Turkey opposes. Relations with Algeria, strained by the colonial legacy and Western Sahara and ruptured in 2024-25, began to thaw in 2026 (Module 10). And France's 2027 presidential election could substantially change its posture toward the EU itself: in July 2026 an appeals court upheld Marine Le Pen's conviction for embezzling EU funds but shortened her ban from office, clearing her to run, and a late-September poll put her first in the first round with 31-36%.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility near 1.6, among the EU's highest	The demographic exception in Europe, fading
GDP	Seventh in the world; about $52,000 per head; growth assumed at 0.5% in 2026 by the government; exports about $950 billion, arms among them	Services 80%; tourism (the world's most visited)
Military	$68 billion in 2025 (ninth in the world); the nuclear deterrent (about 290 warheads), which Macron has offered to extend to European allies; the carrier; the Sahel exit completed (2025); a NATO pledge of 3.5% of GDP for defense by 2035 that the budget cannot fund	Europe's only full-spectrum force beside Britain's
Regime	89/100 from Freedom House; after the June 2024 dissolution, Michel Barnier's government fell to a censure motion in December 2024 and François Bayrou's to a confidence vote on his deficit plan in September 2025; for 2027, the center has no agreed successor to Macron, and the left is divided between Jean-Luc Mélenchon and the rest	The 2027 presidential election the horizon

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Energy	Nuclear about 68% of power in 2025 (373 of 547.5 terawatt-hours); a record 92.3 terawatt-hours of net exports, Europe's largest; six new large reactors planned	The Hormuz shock's smallest European exposure
Technology	Mistral (valued at about $14 billion in 2025; Europe's champion in artificial intelligence), the February 2025 summit on artificial intelligence, Dassault, Thales, STMicro	The Crolles chip project stalled
Europe	The Franco-German engine's weaker half; the driver of the European-deterrence and joint-borrowing debates; the chief opponent of the trade deal with South America's Mercosur bloc	The country that proposes and cannot pay
The Mediterranean	The Marseille-Fos port; Corsica; the migration politics; the Lebanon and Syria roles	The southern shore's former power

In depth — the question: Whether a system built for a president with a majority works with neither — and whether the country that proposes Europe's defense can finance its own.

Worked example — The Deficit and the Budget

France spends 57% of GDP through the state — among the highest in the rich world — and collects about 52%, so the deficit was 5.1% of GDP in 2025, among the euro area's largest, and the debt, at 115.6% of GDP at the end of 2025, keeps rising, with S&P and Fitch downgrades to A+ in 2025. The arithmetic of a fix: to stabilize the debt the primary balance must improve by about 2.5% of GDP, some €75 billion of spending cuts or tax rises, in a country where pensions cost 14% of GDP, the 2023 pension reform (the age to 64) produced the largest protests in a generation, and no government since 2024 has held a majority. Bayrou's plan (€44 billion; two public holidays abolished; a freeze on pensions and benefits) fell in September 2025. France began 2026 on a stopgap law, and Lecornu got the 2026 budget through only on February 2, after suspending the pension reform and invoking Article 49.3, and his 2027 plan seeks €54 billion more to bring the deficit to 5%. The bond market's response: a ten-year spread over Germany of 147 basis points in October 2026, wider than Italy's for a country with a lower debt ratio, and interest costs of about €60 billion rising toward €100 billion by 2030. The lesson is the country's constraint: France is the euro area's fiscal question the way Italy was in 2011, with a stronger economy, a weaker parliament, and a 2027 election that both the far right and the far left expect to win on promises the arithmetic forbids.

2d. Monaco

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prince Albert II, 68 — sovereign since April 2005 (21.5 years); holds executive power
Head of government	Minister of State Christophe Mirmand, 64 or 65 (63 in July 2025) — in office since July 2025 (1.2 years); a senior French official appointed by the prince
System	Constitutional monarchy in which the prince holds executive power
Freedom House	Free
Population	38,000 (2026)
Land area	2 km² (1 sq mi)
Religion	Roman Catholic, the state religion, a large majority (no census figure)
People	Monégasque citizens about a quarter of residents; French and Italians the largest foreign groups (2023 census); median age 54; 100% urban
Minimum wage	France's minimum plus 5%: about €12.93 an hour since June 2026 ($14.57 at $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Grimaldi family seized the fortress of Monaco in 1297 and has ruled it, with interruptions, ever since — making it one of Europe's oldest continuous dynasties. Monaco lost most of its territory in 1861 when it ceded Menton and Roquebrune to France, and turned to gambling (the Monte Carlo casino opened in 1863) and later tax-advantaged residency to sustain itself. A 1918 treaty and its 2002 successor bound Monaco's defense and sovereignty to France. Prince Rainier III (1949-2005) modernized the state and, through his marriage to Grace Kelly, gave it global visibility; his son Albert II has emphasized environmental diplomacy and financial-transparency reforms.

Current leadership: The Minister of State leads day-to-day government. Since a 2002 reform the minister may be French or Monégasque, appointed by the prince after consulting France.

Government structure: Monarchical power is unusually strong: the prince initiates legislation and appoints the government, while an elected National Council serves as a legislature with limited powers. Monaco is a UN member and uses the euro by agreement.

Economy and trade: A tiny, extremely wealthy economy of about $11 billion (2024), with one of the world's highest outputs per person. Built on financial services, real estate, tourism, and luxury retail, plus a small industrial base. Monaco has no meaningful goods exports in the conventional sense; its trade is dominated by imports of consumer goods, food, and luxury products, almost entirely through France, with which it forms a customs union. Its economic importance is as a wealth-management and residency hub rather than a trading state.

Closest partners: France, overwhelmingly — Monaco's security, currency, and customs arrangements all run through Paris. Italy is the other significant neighbor and economic partner.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Monaco has no meaningful geopolitical rivalries. Its recurring international friction is over financial transparency and tax practices, where it has faced pressure from the EU and international bodies to tighten oversight.

Module 3 — Italy & Malta

The Central Rim



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Istituto Affari Internazionali (IAI), Mediterranean policy analysis (ongoing)

3a. Italy

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, 49 — in office since October 2022 (4.0 years); Brothers of Italy; the republic's longest-lasting government since September 2026
Head of state	President Sergio Mattarella, 85 — in office since February 2015 (11.7 years); largely ceremonial, with a real role in forming governments; re-elected by parliament in 2022
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	58.9 million (2026)
Land area	294,140 km² (113,570 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic about three-quarters, no religion about a fifth, Muslim about 3%, mostly immigrants (survey estimates; the census does not ask)
People	Italian citizens about 91%; 5.4 million foreign residents, the largest groups Romanian, Moroccan, and Albanian (January 2025); median age 50; 73% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law: sectoral collective agreements set the pay floors

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Italy was unified only in 1861-70, assembling a patchwork of kingdoms, duchies, and Papal territory into a single state — which is why regional identity remains so strong. Benito Mussolini's Fascist regime (1922-43) allied with Nazi Germany and collapsed in wartime defeat; a 1946 referendum abolished

the monarchy and established the republic. Italy was a founding member of NATO (1949) and the European Communities (1957). The postwar decades produced remarkable economic growth alongside chronic governmental instability — more than 60 governments since 1946 — and the 1990s collapse of the entire postwar party system in corruption scandals. Italy's colonial rule over Libya (1911-43) is the historical basis of its continued deep involvement there.

Current leadership: President Sergio Mattarella is serving a second seven-year term. In early September 2026 Meloni's government overtook Silvio Berlusconi's second as the longest-lasting in the republic's history, and it is on course to serve the full parliamentary term to 2027. It survived its first major defeat: in March 2026 voters rejected its constitutional reform of the judiciary, 53.7% to 46.3%.

Government structure: The president also plays a genuine role in resolving crises. The prime minister (formally President of the Council of Ministers) leads the executive and must hold the confidence of both chambers of parliament. Italy has 20 regions with meaningful devolved powers, including five with special autonomous status.

Economy and trade: The rim's second-largest economy, about $2.7 trillion in 2026 on IMF estimates, and the euro area's third-largest. A manufacturing powerhouse with a distinctive base of mid-sized industrial firms. Exports are led by machinery and industrial equipment (Italy's largest category), pharmaceuticals, cars and auto parts, fashion and luxury goods, refined petroleum, and food (wine, pasta, cheese). Imports are led by crude oil and natural gas, cars, pharmaceuticals, metals, and electronics. Top trading partners: Germany, France, the US, Spain, and Switzerland. Italy is heavily dependent on imported energy, which is why Algeria (via the Transmed pipeline; Module 10) and Libya have outsized strategic importance; Italian energy company Eni is the dominant foreign operator in Libya's oil and gas sector.

Closest partners: Within the Mediterranean, Italy's key relationships are with Libya (energy, migration control, and its former colonial ties), Egypt, Tunisia, and Albania, where Italy set up offshore migrant centers (Module 4). Meloni has cultivated close ties with the US, and Italy is the dominant European actor in Libyan affairs alongside France.

Principal rivalries and disputes: France is Italy's main rival for influence in Libya, where the two have historically backed opposing sides. Migration is the central point of friction with Spain — Italy reimposed checks at its ports and airports on travelers from Spain during the Ceuta crisis — and with EU partners over burden-sharing generally.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Population falling; fertility about 1.2, among the EU's lowest; the EU's highest median age	The demographic squeeze on pensions and growth
GDP	Eighth in the world; about $46,000 per head; growth 0.5% in 2025; almost no real growth per head since 2000; exports about $700 billion	Manufacturing 17% (the second in the EU); tourism at records; the north-south divide
Public finance	Debt 137.1% of GDP in 2025, the euro area's second-highest; a deficit of 3.1% in 2025, just over the EU's 3% limit, so Italy stays in the excessive-deficit procedure into 2027, when the finance minister expects to leave it; ratings upgrades in 2025; a ten-year spread over Germany that fell to about 60 basis points in February 2026 and was 118 on October 5, 2026, below France's	The reversal of roles with France

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Military	$48 billion in 2025 (12th in the world), up about a fifth but still under 2% of GDP, which the NATO pledge would nearly double; the navy in the Red Sea missions; Leonardo the arms champion	The NATO targets the coalition's fiscal fight
Regime	87/100 from Freedom House	The next election due by 2027
Energy	Gas about 45% of power (Algeria, Azerbaijan, liquefied gas); nuclear abandoned after referendums in 1987 and 2011, and a law of September 29, 2026 to bring it back, with first reactors targeted for 2034-35; the Hormuz shock's exposure	The Mattei Plan for African gas and influence
Europe	The recovery fund's largest recipient (about €194 billion, ending in 2026); Meloni as the European right's respectable model of governing within the EU and NATO — the model Europe's other right-wing parties, from Spain's Vox to Portugal's Chega, measure themselves against — and Washington's preferred European, the intermediary on tariffs; a steady supporter of Ukraine against her coalition partners' instincts	The bridge between Brussels and the new right
The Mediterranean	The migration frontier (the Albania centers, blocked by the courts; the Tunisia and Libya deals), which Brussels went from condemning to copying, with central-Mediterranean crossings down 55% in January-August 2026; the Adriatic and Sicilian chokepoints	The southern shore's most engaged state

In depth — the question: Whether the stability is structural or personal: a coalition held together by one leader's discipline, a debt that a rate rise would reprice, and an election by 2027 that would test whether the respectable right has changed Italy or merely governed it.

3b. Malta

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Robert Abela, 48 — in office since January 2020 (6.7 years); Labour Party; won a fourth straight term for Labour on May 30, 2026
Head of state	President Myriam Spiteri Debono, 73 or 74 (born 1952) — in office since April 2024 (2.5 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic, constitutionally neutral
Freedom House	Free
Population	549,000 (2026)
Land area	320 km² (124 sq mi)
Religion	Roman Catholic, the state religion, about four in five (estimates)
People	Maltese; foreign nationals about 22% of residents in 2021, up from 5% in 2011 (censuses); median age 42; 95% urban
Minimum wage	€994 a month, set as a weekly rate (Eurostat, July 2026) ($1,120 at $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Malta's strategic position made it a prize for every Mediterranean power: Phoenicians, Romans, Arabs, Normans, and from 1530 the Knights of St. John, who withstood a famous Ottoman siege in 1565. Napoleon took the island in 1798, the British in 1800, and Malta became a key Royal Navy base, enduring devastating Axis bombing in World War II. Independence came in 1964, the last British forces left in 1979, and the constitution was amended in 1987 to enshrine neutrality. Malta joined the EU in 2004 and

the eurozone in 2008. Politics has been a two-party contest between Labour and the Nationalists since independence, with Labour dominant since 2013.

Current leadership: The fourth consecutive term for Labour, a first for any Maltese party, came in a snap election that Abela called a year early. Labour took 51.8% of the vote and 42 of 79 seats, against 44.7% for the Nationalists under Alex Borg, a narrower margin than in 2022.

Government structure: The single-chamber House of Representatives is elected by single transferable vote. Malta's constitution formally commits the country to neutrality and non-alignment, which is why it belongs to the EU but not NATO. It is the EU's smallest member by population.

Economy and trade: A small, open, services-based economy of about $31 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates that has grown faster than almost any EU member over the past decade. Built on financial services, online gaming, tourism, and a growing technology sector, with a small manufacturing base in electronics and pharmaceuticals. Exports are dominated by services (financial, gaming, tourism) plus refined petroleum re-exports, pharmaceuticals, and electronic components. Imports are led by refined fuels, machinery, food, and consumer goods — Malta imports nearly everything it consumes. Top trading partners: Italy (by far the largest), Germany, France, and the UK. Its import dependence is why the instability of the 2026 Iran war, which Abela cited in calling the May snap election, mattered so much.

Closest partners: The EU is the anchor, and Malta has historically maintained good relations with both Libya and Italy, its two nearest neighbors, positioning itself as a mediator. Its neutrality gives it access as a venue for talks that aligned states cannot host.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Malta's disputes are mostly about migration burden-sharing with EU partners and about financial-sector transparency, where it has faced international scrutiny. It has no significant military rivalries. The 2017 assassination of investigative journalist Daphne Caruana Galizia, which exposed high-level corruption, remains the defining rule-of-law issue in Maltese politics.

Module 4 — The Adriatic

Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro, Albania



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Balkan Insight, published by the Balkan Investigative Reporting Network (BIRN), regional political reporting (ongoing)

4a. Slovenia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Janez Janša, 68 — in office since June 2026 (0.3 years); Slovenian Democratic Party; elected by parliament May 22, 2026; also prime minister 2004–08, 2012–13, and 2020–22
Head of state	President Nataša Pirc Musar, 58 — in office since December 2022 (3.8 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	2.11 million (2026)
Land area	20,140 km² (7,780 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 57.8%, Muslim 2.4%, Orthodox 2.3%, no religion 10.1%, a quarter undeclared (2002 census, the last to ask)
People	Slovenes 83.1%, Serbs 2.0%, Croats 1.8%, Bosniaks 1.1% (2002 census, the last to ask); median age 46; 57% urban
Minimum wage	€1,482 a month gross (Eurostat, July 2026) ($1,670 at $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Slovene lands were ruled by the Habsburgs for centuries before joining the new Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later Yugoslavia) in 1918. Slovenia was the wealthiest and most Western-oriented Yugoslav republic, and in June 1991 it declared independence, on the same day as

Croatia, securing it after a ten-day war with the Yugoslav army — a far less bloody exit than the other republics experienced. It moved rapidly toward Western integration, joining the EU and NATO in 2004 and the euro area in 2007. Its politics since have alternated between liberal governments and the conservative SDS of Janez Janša, who has now served as prime minister four separate times.

Current leadership: In the March 22 election Robert Golob's liberal Freedom Movement won 29 seats to the SDS's 28 but could not form a majority; parliament elected Janša by 51 votes to 36, and his cabinet took office on June 4. He leads a five-party center-right coalition with 43 of the 90 seats, kept in power by the anti-establishment Resni.ca party and the two deputies of the national minorities.

Government structure: The president is directly elected. The 90-seat National Assembly determines the government. Slovenia was the first of the former Yugoslav republics to join the EU, NATO, and the euro area.

Economy and trade: The most prosperous former Yugoslav republic, with an economy of about $87 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates and output per person approaching the EU average. An export-oriented manufacturing economy well integrated into German and Austrian supply chains. Exports are led by pharmaceuticals (Slovenia is a significant generic-drug producer), cars and auto parts, electrical machinery and household appliances, and machinery. Imports are led by cars, pharmaceuticals, refined petroleum, and machinery. Top trading partners: Germany, Italy, Switzerland, Austria, and Croatia. The port of Koper is a strategically important Adriatic gateway for Central European trade, serving landlocked Austria and Hungary.

Closest partners: The EU and NATO. Slovenia maintains close ties with Croatia, Austria, and Italy, and has been a consistent advocate for Western Balkan EU enlargement.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Slovenia's main dispute is a long-running maritime border disagreement with Croatia over the Bay of Piran, which an international arbitration tribunal ruled on in 2017 but Croatia does not recognize. Janša's return is expected to shift Slovenia's posture closer to the more nationalist governments in Central Europe on migration and EU policy.

4b. Croatia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Andrej Plenković, 56 — in office since October 2016 (10.0 years); Croatian Democratic Union; third government since May 2024
Head of state	President Zoran Milanović, 59 — in office since February 2020 (6.6 years); directly elected; second term since February 2025; shares foreign and defense policy with the government
System	Parliamentary republic with a directly elected president
Freedom House	Free
Population	3.82 million (2026)
Land area	55,960 km² (21,610 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 79.0%, Orthodox 3.3%, Muslim 1.3%, no religion 4.7% (2021 census)
People	Croats 91.6%, Serbs 3.2%, Bosniaks 0.6% (2021 census); median age 47; 60% urban
Minimum wage	€1,050 a month gross since January 2026 ($1,183 at $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Croatia spent most of its history under Hungarian, Venetian, and Habsburg rule before joining Yugoslavia in 1918. During World War II, the Nazi-backed Independent State of Croatia (the Ustaše regime)

committed mass atrocities, a legacy that still shapes relations with Serbia. Croatia declared independence in 1991 and fought a four-year war against the Yugoslav army and Serb rebels, which ended with Croatian military victory in 1995 and the displacement of much of the Serb population. Under President Franjo Tuđman the 1990s were nationalist and semi-authoritarian; after his death in 1999 Croatia turned toward Europe, joining NATO in 2009 and the EU in 2013 as the union's newest member.

Current leadership: President Zoran Milanović, a left-leaning former prime minister, won a second five-year term in January 2025. Plenković governs in coalition with the right-wing Homeland Movement.

Government structure: The president holds limited but real powers, particularly over the military and foreign policy — producing recurring institutional friction between Milanović and Plenković. Croatia joined both the euro area and the Schengen area in 2023.

Economy and trade: An economy of about $117 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates, heavily dependent on tourism: foreign visitors spent a record €15.3 billion in 2025, about a sixth of GDP, one of the highest tourism dependencies in the EU. Exports are led by refined petroleum, electrical machinery, pharmaceuticals, wood products, and food. Imports are led by crude oil and gas, cars, machinery, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: Germany, Italy, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, and Austria. Croatia's Krk liquefied-gas terminal, opened in 2021, has made it a meaningful regional gas entry point for Central Europe since the reduction of Russian pipeline supply.

Closest partners: The EU and NATO. Croatia has strong ties to Germany and to the ethnic Croat community in Bosnia and Herzegovina, where it is a constitutional guarantor.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The Bay of Piran maritime dispute with Slovenia. Croatia's role in Bosnian politics, particularly its support for the main Bosnian Croat party, is a point of friction with Bosniak parties. Relations with Serbia remain shaped by the 1990s wars.

4c. Bosnia and Herzegovina

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Borjana Krišto, Chair of the Council of Ministers, 65 — in office since January 2023 (3.7 years); Croatian Democratic Union of Bosnia and Herzegovina; in office until a new council is formed after the October 2026 election
Presidency	Denis Bećirović, Bosniak member and, since March 2026, chair of the three-member Presidency, 51 — a member since November 2022 (3.9 years); re-elected October 4, 2026 with the Serb member, Željka Cvijanović; Darijana Filipović won the Croat seat (preliminary results)
System	Federal parliamentary republic under the 1995 Dayton constitution: a three-member presidency, two entities, and an international High Representative
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	3.11 million (2026); UN estimate; the 2013 census counted 3.53 million
Land area	51,200 km² (19,770 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 50.7%, Orthodox 30.8%, Catholic 15.2% (2013 census)
People	Bosniaks 50.1%, Serbs 30.8%, Croats 15.4% (2013 census, whose method Republika Srpska rejects); median age 47; 52% urban
Minimum wage	Set by each entity from January 2026: 1,027 marks a month net in the Federation and 1,000 in Republika Srpska ($592 and $576 at 1.7356 marks = $1, the euro peg on October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Ottoman rule from the 15th century made Bosnia the Balkans' most religiously mixed territory — Muslim Bosniaks, Orthodox Serbs, and Catholic Croats living intermingled. Austria-Hungary annexed it in 1908; the 1914 assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo triggered World War I. As Yugoslavia collapsed, Bosnia's 1992 independence declaration sparked the bloodiest of the Yugoslav wars: roughly 100,000 died, the siege of Sarajevo lasted nearly four years, and the 1995 Srebrenica massacre of some 8,000 Bosniak men and boys was ruled a genocide by international courts. The US-brokered Dayton Agreement ended the war in 1995 by freezing the ethnic divisions into the country's constitutional structure — the source of both its peace and its dysfunction ever since.

Current leadership: The collective presidency has one Bosniak, one Croat, and one Serb, and its chair rotates every eight months. In the general election of October 4, 2026, on preliminary results, Darijana Filipović of the main Bosnian Croat party, HDZ BiH, won the Croat seat, which Željko Komšić has held since 2018; in Republika Srpska, Savo Minić of Milorad Dodik's SNSD won the entity's presidency. The Council of Ministers is the state-level government.

Government structure: Bosnia has the most complex governance structure on the rim. The country is divided into two entities — the Bosniak-Croat Federation and the Serb-majority Republika Srpska — each with its own president, government, and parliament, plus a self-governing Brčko District. The state-level institutions are deliberately weak and require ethnic consensus, and since the High Representative, Christian Schmidt, resigned in 2026, his American deputy, Louis Crishock, has held the post on an acting basis since July 1, the overseeing powers having failed to agree on a successor. Bosnia has been an EU candidate since 2022 and is a NATO aspirant.

Economy and trade: An economy of about $37 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates, the poorest on the northern shore, with high unemployment and heavy reliance on remittances from its large diaspora. Exports are led by metals (aluminum, iron and steel), electricity, wood and furniture, and clothing and footwear produced for Western European brands. Imports are led by refined petroleum, machinery, cars, and food. Top trading partners: Germany, Italy, Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia. The country's political fragmentation directly constrains its economy: the two entities maintain separate economic administrations, which deters investment and complicates trade.

Closest partners: The EU (as the destination of its accession ambitions), the US, and Turkey (for the Bosniak community). Croatia and Serbia each act as patrons of their respective ethnic communities inside the country.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The dominant internal dispute is Republika Srpska's leadership, long personified by Milorad Dodik, repeatedly threatening secession and blocking state-level institutions. Dodik's conviction for defying the High Representative, upheld in August 2025 with a six-year ban from office, cost him the entity's presidency, but he still leads the SNSD. Externally, Russia has backed Republika Srpska's obstruction as a lever against Western integration.

4d. Montenegro

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Milojko Spajić, 39 — in office since October 2023 (2.9 years); Europe Now! movement
Head of state	President Jakov Milatović, 39 — in office since May 2023 (3.4 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	626,000 (2026)
Land area	13,450 km² (5,190 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox 71.1%, Muslim 20.0%, Catholic 3.3% (2023 census)
People	Montenegrins 41.1%, Serbs 32.9%, Bosniaks 9.5%, Albanians 5.0% (2023 census); median age 41; 70% urban
Minimum wage	€600 a month net (about €670 gross) since October 2024, and €800 net with a university-level qualification ($676 and $902 at $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026; Montenegro uses the euro outside the euro area)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Montenegro was one of the few Balkan territories to resist full Ottoman control, existing as a prince-bishopric and then a principality whose independence the Congress of Berlin recognized in 1878; it became a kingdom in 1910. It was absorbed into Yugoslavia after World War I and remained joined to Serbia after the other republics left in the 1990s. A 2006 referendum on independence passed narrowly (55.5%), making Montenegro Europe's newest state at the time. Milo Đukanović dominated politics from 1991 to 2023 in various offices, steering the country into NATO in 2017 despite a Russian-linked coup attempt on election day in 2016. A 2020 election ended his party's three-decade hold on power.

Current leadership: President Jakov Milatović is an Oxford-educated economist.

Government structure: The president is directly elected. Montenegro aims to close the rest of its negotiating chapters (Module 1) by the end of 2026. It uses the euro unilaterally.

Economy and trade: A very small economy of about $10 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates, heavily dependent on tourism along its Adriatic coast, plus aluminum production, energy, and construction. Exports are led by aluminum, electricity, and metal ores; the trade balance is structurally deep in deficit. Imports are led by refined petroleum, cars, food, and machinery. Top trading partners: Serbia, Italy, Germany, China, and Croatia. Chinese lending for a highway project left Montenegro with one of the region's largest debt exposures to China, a recurring point of EU concern during accession talks.

Closest partners: NATO, the EU accession process, and Croatia and Albania as immediate neighbors. Its NATO accession defines its Western orientation.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, which opposed Montenegro's NATO membership and retains influence through pro-Serb parties and Orthodox Church ties. Domestic politics remain divided between pro-Western and pro-Serbian camps, and the status of the Serbian Orthodox Church has been a recurring flashpoint.

4e. Albania

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Edi Rama, 62 — in office since September 2013 (13.1 years); Socialist Party; fourth term since September 2025
Head of state	President Bajram Begaj, 59 — in office since July 2022 (4.2 years); ceremonial; elected by parliament
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	2.75 million (2026); UN estimate; the 2023 census counted 2.40 million residents
Land area	27,400 km² (10,580 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 45.7%, Bektashi 4.8%, Catholic 8.4%, Orthodox 7.2%, believers without a denomination 13.8%, atheist 3.6% (2023 census)
People	Albanians the great majority, with Greek, Roma, Egyptian, Aromanian, Macedonian, and other minorities (2023 census); median age 39; 67% urban
Minimum wage	50,000 lek a month since January 2026 ($612 at about 81.67 lek = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Albania declared independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1912 after nearly five centuries of rule, during which most of the population converted to Islam. Italy occupied it in 1939, and after World War II Enver Hoxha established Europe's most isolated communist regime, breaking with Yugoslavia, the Soviet Union, and eventually China, and building hundreds of thousands of concrete bunkers against an invasion that never came. Communism collapsed in 1991, and the 1997 collapse of nationwide pyramid schemes triggered armed chaos and near-state failure. Stability returned in the 2000s; Albania joined NATO in 2009 and opened EU accession talks in 2022.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Edi Rama has one of the longest tenures in the region.

Government structure: Albania aims to conclude its EU accession talks by the end of 2027, a goal the European Commission was reported in September 2026 to be preparing to back.

Economy and trade: An economy of about $33 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates that has grown steadily but remains among Europe's poorest, with tourism, construction, agriculture, and remittances as pillars. Exports are led by clothing and footwear (much of it finished for Italian brands), metals and minerals (chromium, oil), and agricultural products. Imports are led by machinery, food, refined fuels, and textiles. Top trading partners: Italy by a wide margin (roughly half of exports), then Greece, Germany, Spain, and China. The Italian relationship is structural — Italy is Albania's largest investor, trading partner, and host to its diaspora — which is why the two governments have cooperated so closely on migration.

Closest partners: NATO, the EU, and above all Italy, which built offshore migrant centers in Albania under a 2023 agreement, used since 2025 mainly to hold people awaiting deportation. Albania also maintains close ties to Kosovo and Turkey.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Albania has few active interstate rivalries. Its main external friction is with Serbia over Kosovo, and its main domestic issue is the rule-of-law and corruption agenda that conditions its EU accession. Greece and Albania have a long-running maritime boundary disagreement, which they agreed in 2020 to take to the International Court of Justice once the terms of the case are negotiated.

Module 5 — Greece & Cyprus

The Eastern Aegean and the Divided Island



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy (ELIAMEP), Eastern Mediterranean analysis

5a. Greece

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis, 58 — in office since June 2023 (3.3 years); New Democracy; also prime minister July 2019–May 2023, before a month of caretaker government; next election due by mid-2027
Head of state	President Konstantinos Tasoulas, 66 or 67 (born 1959) — in office since March 2025 (1.6 years); ceremonial; elected by parliament
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	9.90 million (2026); UN estimate; the 2021 census counted 10.48 million
Land area	128,900 km² (49,770 sq mi)
Religion	Greek Orthodox, the constitution's 'prevailing religion', about 80–90%; Muslim about 1–2%, mainly the Thrace minority and recent migrants (estimates; the census does not ask)
People	Greek citizens the large majority; foreign nationals under a tenth of residents, the largest group Albanian (2021 census); median age 48; 82% urban
Minimum wage	€920 a month in 14 payments since April 2026, €1,073 averaged over 12 months ($1,209 at $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Modern Greece won independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1830 after a war that drew European romantic support, and spent the next century expanding toward its current borders, ending in the catastrophic 1922 defeat in Anatolia and a population exchange with Turkey that shapes the two countries' rivalry to this day. A civil war (1946-49) between communists and royalists was an early Cold War battleground, and a military junta ruled from 1967 to 1974, collapsing after it provoked Turkey's invasion of Cyprus. Democracy was restored in 1974, Greece joined the European Community in 1981, and it adopted the euro in 2001. The 2010-18 sovereign debt crisis, with its bailouts and austerity, was the defining economic trauma of the modern era.

Current leadership: President Konstantinos Tasoulas was elected by parliament in February 2025. Mitsotakis holds a parliamentary majority, though a September 2026 poll put New Democracy at about 26% of voting intentions, far short of a majority, ahead of a new party led by the former prime minister Alexis Tsipras. An investigation by the European Public Prosecutor's Office into fraud with EU farm subsidies has weighed on the government since 2025.

Government structure: The prime minister leads a government accountable to a 300-seat unicameral parliament. Greece joined NATO in 1952.

Economy and trade: An economy of about $308 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates that has recovered substantially from its 2010s debt crisis, regaining investment-grade credit ratings from 2023, though its debt, at 143.5% of GDP in early 2026, is still the euro area's highest. Services dominate, with shipping (Greek owners control the world's largest merchant fleet by tonnage) and tourism the two largest earners. Exports are led by refined petroleum, aluminum, pharmaceuticals, food (olive oil, fruit), and shipping services. Imports are led by crude oil, natural gas, pharmaceuticals, cars, and machinery. Top trading partners: Italy, Germany, Bulgaria, Cyprus, and Turkey — Turkey being a significant trading partner despite the political rivalry. The port of Piraeus, majority-owned by China's COSCO since 2016, is one of the Mediterranean's largest container ports and the clearest example of Chinese economic presence on the rim.

Closest partners: The EU and NATO, with France as the closest bilateral partner (Module 2) and a deepening strategic alignment with Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt around Eastern Mediterranean energy. The US maintains a significant naval presence at Souda Bay in Crete.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Turkey, in a rivalry that runs through Aegean airspace and maritime boundaries, the Cyprus question, and Ankara's 'Blue Homeland' doctrine — even as Mitsotakis and Erdoğan met in Ankara in February 2026 and signed cooperation agreements. The Great Sea Interconnector, a planned power cable from Crete to Cyprus whose seabed surveys Turkey says need its permission in waters covered by the Turkey-Libya memorandum, is the most active point of friction: surveys have stalled since July 2024, a French investor took a 66% stake in August 2026, and on October 6 Greece rejected Turkey's demand for permission as surveys neared a restart.

5b. Cyprus

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Nikos Christodoulides, 52 — in office since February 2023 (3.6 years); head of state and of government
Northern Cyprus	Tufan Erhürman, Turkish Cypriot leader, 55 or 56 (born 1970) — in office since October 2025 (1.0 years); a former negotiator, elected October 2025; heads the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, which only Turkey recognizes
System	Presidential republic, divided since 1974; the self-declared Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus is recognized only by Turkey
Freedom House	Free
Population	1.38 million (2026); UN estimate for the whole island; the 2021 census of the government-controlled south counted 923,000
Land area	9,240 km² (3,570 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox Christian 89.1%, Catholic 2.9%, Protestant 2.0%, Muslim 1.8% in the south (2011 census); the north is mainly Muslim
People	Greek Cypriots in the south, where foreign nationals were about a fifth of residents (2021 census); Turkish Cypriots and settlers from Turkey in the north; median age 40; 67% urban
Minimum wage	€1,088 a month gross after six months in a job, a lower rate before (Eurostat, July 2026) ($1,226 at $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Cyprus passed through Byzantine, Crusader, Venetian, and Ottoman rule before Britain took control in 1878 and annexed it outright in 1914. A Greek Cypriot armed campaign for union with Greece in the 1950s ended instead in independence in 1960 under a power-sharing constitution that broke down within three years amid intercommunal violence. In July 1974 the Greek junta backed a coup seeking union with Greece; Turkey invaded five days later, occupying the northern third of the island and displacing roughly 200,000 people. The north declared itself the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus in 1983. The Republic of Cyprus joined the EU in 2004, a week after Greek Cypriots rejected a UN reunification plan that Turkish Cypriots had accepted.

Current leadership: President Nikos Christodoulides is an independent former foreign minister. Cyprus held the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU from January to June 2026. In the May 24, 2026 parliamentary election the two largest parties held their seats, while the far-right ELAM doubled its seats to eight and two new anti-establishment parties entered parliament.

Government structure: Cyprus is the only EU member with a full presidential system, and there is no prime minister. The unicameral House of Representatives is chaired by a speaker.

Economy and trade: A services economy of about $45 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates, built on tourism, shipping management (Cyprus has one of the world's largest ship-management sectors), financial and professional services, and real estate. Exports are led by pharmaceuticals, refined petroleum re-exports, and services; goods exports are small. Imports are led by fuels, cars, machinery, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: Greece, Italy, Germany, and the UK. Offshore natural gas discoveries since 2011 have not yet produced significant output, largely because the maritime disputes with Turkey covered elsewhere in this course have complicated development and export routes.

Closest partners: The EU, Greece (the closest partner by history and language), and an increasingly formalized energy and security alignment with Israel, Egypt, and France; in July 2026 Eni and TotalEnergies approved developing the Cronos gas field, whose gas will be liquefied in Egypt from 2028. The UK retains

two sovereign military base areas on the island. A drone launched from Lebanon, widely attributed to Hezbollah, hit the Akrotiri air base on March 2, 2026, and Christodoulides has since opened talks on the bases' status.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The division of the island since Turkey's 1974 military intervention is the defining issue. The north's leader, Tufan Erhürman, is more open to reunification talks than his predecessor. Settlement talks collapsed in 2017; the UN envoy María Ángela Holguín brought the two leaders together in December 2025, and in August 2026 they agreed to meet weekly, though formal negotiations have not resumed. Turkey also disputes Cyprus's maritime boundaries and offshore gas rights.

5c. Why These Two Are Profiled Together

Greece and Cyprus coordinate foreign policy more closely than almost any other pair of states on the rim, because they face the same principal rival (Turkey) over the same set of issues (the island's division and Eastern Mediterranean maritime rights). This alignment has drawn in France, Israel, and Egypt as partners in a loose Eastern Mediterranean grouping built around offshore gas and shared concern about Turkish maritime claims — a bloc Module 11 returns to.

Module 6 — Turkey

The Region's Most Consequential Swing Power



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Soner Cagaptay, *Erdogan's Empire: Turkey and the Politics of the Middle East*

6a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, 72 — in office since August 2014 (12.1 years); prime minister 2003–14; head of government as well as of state since 2018; term ends 2028
System	Executive presidential republic since 2018
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	87.9 million (2026)
Land area	769,630 km² (297,160 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 99%, mostly Sunni, including an Alevi minority estimated at 10–20% (estimates; the census has not asked since 1965)
People	Turks about 75–80%, Kurds about 15–20% (estimates; the census has not asked since 1965); median age 35; 79% urban
Minimum wage	28,075.50 lira a month net, 33,030 gross, since January 2026 ($571 net at about 49.18 lira = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Ottoman Empire ruled much of the Mediterranean rim for centuries before its defeat in World War I. Mustafa Kemal Atatürk led the war of independence, abolished the sultanate, and founded the secular republic in 1923, imposing sweeping Westernizing reforms. The army saw itself as guardian of that secular order and intervened in politics repeatedly (coups in 1960, 1971, 1980, and a 1997 'soft coup'). Turkey joined NATO in 1952 and applied for European membership in 1987. Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Islamist-rooted Justice and Development Party (AKP) won power in 2002 and has held it since; a failed 2016

coup attempt was followed by mass purges and the 2017 referendum that created the current executive presidency.

Current leadership: President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan won re-election in 2023. His principal rival, Istanbul mayor Ekrem İmamoğlu — the opposition's presidential candidate and the one figure who polled ahead of Erdoğan — has been jailed since March 2025, when he was arrested on corruption charges the opposition called political as his party nominated him; the largest protests in a decade and a market sell-off the central bank spent reserves to contain followed and produced no exit. His corruption trial opened in March 2026 and, after some 70 hearing days, had produced no verdict by September. In May 2026 a court annulled the congress that had elected Özgür Özel leader of the main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP), reinstating his predecessor, and police cleared the party's headquarters; in July Özel left to found a New Party, taking 91 of the CHP's 135 deputies.

Government structure: The 600-seat Grand National Assembly is the legislature. Turkey has been a formal EU candidate since 1999.

Economy and trade: The rim's fourth-largest economy, about $1.6 trillion in 2026 on IMF estimates, and the largest outside the EU. A diversified industrial and services economy that is the region's manufacturing hub, though plagued by chronically high inflation and currency weakness: the lira slid from 43 to 49 to the dollar during the year. Exports are led by cars and auto parts, machinery, textiles and clothing, iron and steel, and electrical equipment. Imports are led by crude oil, natural gas, gold, machinery, and electronics. Top trading partners: Germany, the US, the UK, Italy, and Iraq on the export side; China, Russia, Germany, and the US on the import side. Turkey's energy imports from Russia — gas via the TurkStream pipeline and oil — are a central economic reason for its refusal to join Western sanctions, and its role as a transit corridor for Caspian and Middle Eastern energy to Europe is a structural asset.

Closest partners: NATO formally, though Turkey routinely acts independently of allied consensus. Its most reliable partners are Azerbaijan, Qatar, Pakistan, and Libya's Tripoli-based government (Module 9), with which it signed a 2019 maritime memorandum; in August 2026 it joined Saudi Arabia and Pakistan in the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement. It maintains working relationships with Russia (energy, and the S-400 missile purchase that led to its expulsion from the F-35 program) and with the US, despite chronic friction. Turkey is also the principal external patron of Northern Cyprus, of Syria's new government, and of the Bosniak community in Bosnia.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Greece and Cyprus, over Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean maritime boundaries, the island's division, offshore gas, and the Crete-Cyprus power cable. France, over Libya and the Eastern Mediterranean. Egypt and the UAE, on opposing sides in Libya for most of the past decade, though relations with Cairo have thawed. Israel, with which relations have collapsed since 2023; Turkey halted all trade with it in 2024. In Syria, the Kurdish-led forces of the northeast merged into the state (Module 7), the outcome Ankara wanted.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility about 1.5 and falling; Syrian refugees, about 3.7 million at the 2021 peak, returning since Assad's fall	Europe's largest country by population after Russia
GDP	About $18,000 per head	Manufacturing (autos, textiles, white goods, defense), construction, tourism; the Bosphorus and the Anatolian corridor
Trade	Exports about $270 billion; the EU customs union	Russia's tourists and the Gulf's investment

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Public finance	Debt about 30% of GDP, low; the 2023 earthquake's reconstruction (about $100 billion)	Fiscal room; the current-account deficit the constraint
Military	$30 billion in 2025 (1.9% of GDP; 18th in the world); Baykar's Bayraktar drones, sold to Ukraine, the Gulf, and Africa, and a defense industry exporting more than $7 billion; the Kaan fighter; operations in Syria and Iraq; the PKK's announced dissolution in May 2025 and an August 2026 law on how its fighters disarm and return	The alliance's most independent member
Regime	32/100 from Freedom House — the durable hybrid	Erdoğan's term ends 2028 unless an early election resets it; the term-limit question
Energy	About 70% imported; gas from Russia (about 40%), Azerbaijan, Iran, and liquefied gas; the Akkuyu nuclear plant, its first unit due in 2026 but not yet generating in September; Black Sea gas (Sakarya); the pipelines to Europe	The corridor state for Caspian and Russian energy, whose routes did not pass a closed strait in the Iran war
Position	Russia's partner and rival; the Ukraine grain and mediation role; the Iran war's neighbor	The hedger among hedgers

In depth — the question: Whether a leader in his twenty-fourth year in power, with the opposition split and its candidate in prison and a constitution that limits him to this term, secures a way to stay — and whether a NATO member that is Russia's partner, Syria's patron, and Israel's antagonist can keep hedging when the region's wars ask it to choose.

Worked example — The Disinflation's Price

Turkey's inflation peaked at 85% in October 2022 under a policy of cutting rates into it; the 2023 turn to orthodoxy under Mehmet Şimşek at the treasury raised the policy rate from 8.5% to 50% by 2024, and inflation fell to 44% in 2024 and to 29.7% in September 2026, with the rate at 37%, unchanged since January 2026. The arithmetic of the bill: a real interest rate of about 7% on a corporate sector that had borrowed cheaply for a decade; a managed lira that fell from 19 to 49 to the dollar over the period, a devaluation for the household and a competitiveness gain for the exporter; a current-account deficit narrowed by the tourism boom (about 60 million visitors) and the drone and auto exports; reserves rebuilt from negative net levels; and an economy that kept growing through it on construction, exports, and the earthquake's reconstruction. The cost fell on wages (real incomes down a fifth before recovering), on the construction firms that owed in dollars, and on the government's politics — the 2024 local elections' defeat, the largest in Erdoğan's career, was the disinflation's vote. The lesson is the emerging-market template of the 2020s, learned late and expensively: orthodoxy works, it takes years, and the leader who imposes it pays at the polls before the economy pays him back — which is why the 2025 arrest, the 2026 court ruling against the opposition, and the 2028 question are the disinflation's political sequel.

6b. Why Turkey Is a Swing Power

No other rim country sits inside as many of the region's disputes at once, or on its own side of each. In Libya it backs Tripoli against the eastern government supported by Egypt, the UAE, and Russia, and historically by France. In the Eastern Mediterranean it contests the maritime claims of Greece, Cyprus, and their partners. In Syria it is the most powerful outside actor in the post-Assad order. In the Cyprus question it is the sole patron of the north. And it does all this while remaining a NATO member with the alliance's second-largest army, which means the Western institutions cannot simply treat it as an adversary. Turkey's position

between Russia and the West — buying Russian air defenses while hosting NATO radar — is the clearest single expression of this posture, and its 2026 defense pact with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan the newest.

6c. The Straits Card

The Montreux Convention gives Turkey the authority to close the Bosphorus and Dardanelles to warships of belligerent states in wartime, which it invoked after Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine. This makes Turkey the gatekeeper of the only naval route between the Black Sea and the Mediterranean, a lever that matters to Russia, Ukraine, and NATO simultaneously, and one of the structural reasons Turkey can afford a more independent foreign policy than its size alone would suggest.

Module 7 — The Levant

Syria, Lebanon, Israel & Palestine



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, Middle East and North Africa briefings (ongoing)

7a. The 2026 Context

The eastern shore cannot be understood without the events of 2026. On February 28 the United States and Israel launched a joint war against Iran (the US code name was Operation Epic Fury), whose opening strikes killed Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei. Hezbollah in Lebanon resumed rocket fire on Israel on March 2, and Israel responded with airstrikes across Lebanon and a ground invasion from March 16, announcing plans to occupy southern Lebanon up to the Litani River. More than a million people were displaced in Lebanon by late March. A Pakistan-mediated US-Iran ceasefire took effect in April, and on May 1 President Trump told Congress that hostilities had ended; a memorandum signed in Islamabad in June extended the truce but collapsed in July, when US strikes resumed and Iran closed the Strait of Hormuz again; the last US strikes on Iranian soil came on September 1-2, but attacks on shipping continued into October and the talks were deadlocked. Israel and the US maintained that the April ceasefire did not cover Lebanon, a position Iran and Pakistan disputed, and a separate, US-brokered Israel-Lebanon track followed: a truce from April 16, the first direct talks between the two states in decades, and a framework agreement signed in Washington on June 26. Israeli forces still hold a strip of southern Lebanon, and Israeli strikes continue. Syria stayed out of the war. Every profile in this module is shaped by this sequence.

7b. Syria

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Ahmed al-Sharaa, 43 — in power since December 2024 (1.8 years); led the offensive that toppled Assad; named transitional president January 29, 2025, for a five-year transition
System	Transitional presidential government under a five-year constitutional declaration of March 2025
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	26.5 million (2026)
Land area	183,630 km² (70,900 sq mi)
Religion	Sunni Muslim about 74%, Alawite about 12%, Christian about 10% before 2011 and far fewer now, Druze about 3% (pre-war estimates)
People	Arabs about 85–90%, Kurds about 9–10%, with Turkmen, Assyrians, Armenians, and Circassians (estimates; no census since 2004); median age 25; 59% urban
Minimum wage	12,560 new pounds a month for public-sector workers since a 50% raise paid from June 2026; the new pound, with two zeros removed, replaced the old in January 2026 (roughly $100 at about 122 new pounds = $1, a July 2026 rate; an October rate could not be confirmed); the private-sector minimum could not be confirmed

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Syria was an Ottoman province for four centuries, then a French mandate from 1920 until independence in 1946. Two decades of coups ended when the Baath Party seized power in 1963, and Hafez al-Assad consolidated a personal dictatorship in 1970, passing it to his son Bashar in 2000. The 2011 Arab Spring uprising was met with force and became a civil war that killed roughly half a million people, displaced half the population, drew in Iran, Russia, Hezbollah, Turkey, the US, and the Gulf states, and gave rise to the Islamic State's territorial caliphate. Assad appeared to have survived with Russian and Iranian backing until a rapid rebel offensive led by Ahmed al-Sharaa's forces toppled him on December 8, 2024, ending 54 years of Assad family rule.

Current leadership: A new People's Assembly first met in July 2026: two-thirds of its 210 members were chosen by provincial electoral bodies in October 2025 and a third appointed by al-Sharaa, with the three seats for Suwayda, the Druze-majority province, left vacant.

Government structure: A transitional republic still writing its post-Assad constitutional order. Power is concentrated in the presidency and the coalition of former rebel factions that took Damascus. The state's reach has grown: the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), which held much of the northeast, agreed in January 2026 to merge into state institutions, and their commander declared the integration complete in August.

Economy and trade: An economy of perhaps $20 billion, a fraction of its pre-2011 size after more than a decade of civil war, with most infrastructure destroyed and an estimated 90% of the population below the poverty line. Historically an exporter of crude oil, cotton, fruit, and phosphates; today exports are minimal and dominated by agricultural products and small-scale manufacturing. Imports — food, fuel, and basic goods — had been constrained by Western sanctions, which the US lifted in 2025 and ended in law with the Caesar Act's repeal in December 2025. Turkey is now the dominant trading partner, with Gulf states positioning for reconstruction contracts.

Closest partners: Turkey is the dominant outside power and closest partner of the new government. Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and other Gulf states have moved to back reconstruction, and the United States has lifted its sanctions. Syria has distanced itself from Iran, Assad's former patron.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Israel, which has struck Syrian territory repeatedly and holds an expanded occupation zone in the south. A security agreement that Syria's foreign minister said had been almost settled on paper was suspended after Israel struck the Abu al-Duhur air base in August 2026, and nothing has been signed. Iran and Hezbollah, as the former regime's patrons. Internally, sectarian violence — against Alawites on the coast in March 2025 and the Druze of Suwayda that July — and the settlement of the Kurds' political rights remain the central challenges to the transitional government's authority.

7c. Lebanon

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Joseph Aoun, 62 — in office since January 2025 (1.7 years); former army commander, elected by parliament after a two-year vacancy
Head of government	Prime Minister Nawaf Salam, 72 — in office since February 2025 (1.7 years); former president of the International Court of Justice
System	Parliamentary republic with its top offices shared among religious communities
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	5.90 million (2026)
Land area	10,230 km² (3,950 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about two-thirds, Sunni and Shia in roughly equal numbers, counting a Druze community of about 5%; Christian about a third, Maronites the largest group (estimates of citizens; no census since 1932)
People	Arab about 95%, Armenian about 4% (estimates); median age 30; 90% urban
Minimum wage	28 million Lebanese pounds a month in the private sector since August 2025 ($313 at the central bank's 89,500 pounds = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Carved by France out of Ottoman Syria in 1920 as a state with a Christian majority, Lebanon gained independence in 1943 under an unwritten National Pact dividing offices among its religious communities. Demographic shifts and the arrival of Palestinian refugees strained that arrangement, and a 15-year civil war (1975-90) killed an estimated 150,000 people and drew in Syria (which occupied the country until 2005) and Israel (which occupied the south until 2000). Hezbollah emerged during that war as an Iranian-backed Shia militia and became the country's most powerful armed force. A 2006 war with Israel, the 2019 financial collapse, the 2020 Beirut port explosion, and the 2023-26 wars have left the state weaker than at any point since the civil war.

Current leadership: In March 2026, with the country at war, parliament postponed the May election and extended its own term by two years.

Government structure: By convention the president is a Maronite Christian, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim, and the speaker of parliament a Shia Muslim, with parliamentary seats split between Christians and Muslims. This system, designed to balance the country's religious communities, has produced chronic deadlock and long presidential vacancies. The state's authority is contested by Hezbollah.

Economy and trade: An economy that collapsed after 2019 in one of the worst financial crises in modern history — the currency lost more than 95% of its value, the banking system froze depositors' savings, and output in dollars fell by more than a third — and that the 2024 and 2026 wars have hit again: more than 4,300 people were killed and more than 1.2 million displaced between March and September 2026. Lebanon exports little: jewelry, pharmaceuticals, food, and agricultural products. It imports almost everything, led by refined fuels, cars, food, and pharmaceuticals, financed largely by remittances from a

diaspora several times larger than the domestic population. Top trading partners: the UAE, Switzerland (gold and jewelry), the US, China, and Turkey. Gulf financial support, contingent on the government's posture toward Hezbollah, is the state's most important economic lifeline.

Closest partners: The United States, which mediated the 2026 talks with Israel and has pushed the Aoun government to disarm Hezbollah. France, historically Lebanon's closest Western partner. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, whose financial support is tied to reducing Hezbollah's influence.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Israel, which has occupied a strip of southern Lebanon since its March 2026 invasion — about 6% of the country behind a 'yellow line', with border villages demolished — and strikes daily. Lebanon and Israel signed a US-brokered framework in Washington on June 26, 2026: Israel is to withdraw as the Lebanese army deploys and oversees Hezbollah's disarmament. Hezbollah declared it null and void the next day, and by September Israel had withdrawn from a single pilot village. The government is caught between an armed group it cannot control and a neighbor occupying its territory, and the mandate of UNIFIL ends on December 31, 2026. Iran remains Hezbollah's patron and, by extension, the main external rival of the state's own project of asserting authority.

7d. Israel

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, 76 — in office since December 2022 (3.8 years); Likud; also prime minister 1996–99 and 2009–21, about 19 years in all; election set for October 27, 2026
Head of state	President Isaac Herzog, 66 — in office since July 2021 (5.2 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	9.65 million (2026); UN estimate; Israel's statistics bureau counted about 10.3 million in September 2026, a figure that includes Israelis living in the West Bank
Land area	21,640 km² (8,360 sq mi)
Religion	Jewish about 73%, Muslim 18%, Christian 2%, Druze 1.6%, and about 5% not classified by religion, mostly immigrants and their families (statistics bureau, 2023)
People	Jews and others about 79%, Arabs about 21% (statistics bureau, 2025); median age 30; 93% urban
Minimum wage	6,443.85 shekels a month since April 2026 ($2,114 at about 3.048 shekels = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Zionist settlement of Ottoman and then British Mandate Palestine grew through the early 20th century, and in 1947 the UN proposed partition into Jewish and Arab states. Israel declared independence in May 1948 and won the war that followed, expanding beyond the partition lines; roughly 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled in what Palestinians call the Nakba. Israel captured the West Bank, Gaza, East Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, and Sinai in the 1967 war, returning Sinai to Egypt under the 1979 peace treaty. The two-state framework of the 1993 Oslo Accords has eroded through subsequent conflicts. The 2023 Gaza war, the 2024 campaign against Hezbollah, and the 2026 war with Iran mark the most intense period of conflict since 1973.

Current leadership: Benjamin Netanyahu is the country's longest-serving prime minister. His coalition broke apart in July 2026 over a law to exempt ultra-Orthodox students from military service, which the rest of the country will not accept, and the Knesset dissolved; a July poll put a new party led by the former army chief Gadi Eisenkot narrowly ahead of Likud.

Government structure: Its unicameral 120-seat Knesset is elected by nationwide proportional representation, which produces coalition governments and gives small parties outsized leverage. Israel has no formal written constitution, relying on a set of Basic Laws. Its judiciary's independence has been a central domestic political battleground.

Economy and trade: A high-income economy of more than half a trillion dollars, the rim's most technologically advanced, with output per person comparable to Western Europe's. Exports are led by high technology — semiconductors and electronics, software and information-technology services, defense equipment, and medical devices — plus cut diamonds, pharmaceuticals, and chemicals. Imports are led by machinery, rough diamonds, refined fuels, cars, and electronics. Top trading partners: the US by a wide margin, then China, Germany, and the UK; trade with Turkey, once significant, stopped in 2024. Offshore gas from the Leviathan and Tamar fields has made Israel an energy exporter to Egypt and Jordan, the economic core of its Eastern Mediterranean alignment with Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt; the 2026 war shut Leviathan and the smaller Karish field for five weeks.

Closest partners: The United States, by a wide margin — including as its co-belligerent in the 2026 Iran war. Within the Mediterranean, Israel has built an energy and security alignment with Greece, Cyprus, and Egypt, where an Egyptian buyer signed a $35 billion deal in 2025 to import Israeli gas through 2040. It maintains peace treaties with Egypt (1979) and Jordan (1994) and the 2020 Abraham Accords.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Iran and its aligned groups — Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in Gaza, and others — are the principal adversaries, culminating in direct war in 2026. Israel's conduct in Gaza and Lebanon has produced serious friction with several European governments, including Spain, France, and Britain.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility about 2.9, the rich world's highest; the ultra-Orthodox about 14% and growing	The demography behind the conscription crisis
GDP	Output per head above Britain's; growth restored after the war's contraction	Technology about a fifth of GDP and half of exports; the arms industry
Public finance	Debt about 70% of GDP, from 60% before the war; war spending of $30 billion or more a year; ratings downgrades in 2024-25; the Bank of Israel's rate cut to 3.25% in September 2026	American aid of $3.8 billion a year plus war supplements, aid whose politics have shifted
Military	$48 billion in 2025, 7.8% of GDP (11th in the world); conscription; reserves mobilized for much of three years; an undeclared nuclear arsenal (about 90 warheads); the Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow layers	The 2026 Iran war's co-belligerent
Regime	73/100 from Freedom House; Netanyahu's coalition of the right and the religious parties, until July 2026	The corruption trial
The wars	Gaza (since October 2023; the October 2025 ceasefire, which brought the living hostages home, the Board of Peace, and a phased disarmament deal announced in July 2026, which Hamas tied to Israel's withdrawal); Lebanon (the 2024 war that broke Hezbollah's leadership; the 2026 invasion, the occupied strip, and the June framework); Syria (the strikes; the buffer zone); Iran (the twelve-day war of June 2025; the 2026 war beside the US, with strikes on the nuclear and missile sites and missile barrages on Israeli cities)	The most wars fought by any state in 2023-26

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Energy	Electricity about 70% gas; the Cyprus-Greece connector	A producer with one pipeline and one adversary
Position	The American alliance's closest; the Abraham Accords' partners strained; Saudi normalization frozen by Gaza; Turkey's antagonist; Europe's critic	The Gulf's silent partner in the Iran war

In depth — the question: Whether a state that has won every war it fought since 2023 and settled none votes for the wars' continuation or their end.

7e. Palestine

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Mahmoud Abbas, 90 — in office since January 2005 (21.7 years); also chairman of the Palestine Liberation Organization since 2004; elected to a four-year term in 2005; legislative elections called for November 28, 2026
Head of government	Prime Minister Mohammad Mustafa, 72 — in office since March 2024 (2.5 years); appointed by Abbas, whose deputy and designated successor since April 2025 is Hussein al-Sheikh
System	The Palestinian Authority governs parts of the West Bank under the 1990s Oslo Accords; Gaza is under a 2025 US-brokered ceasefire plan, with Israeli forces holding part of the strip
Freedom House	Not Free (rated as two territories, the West Bank and Gaza)
Population	5.69 million (2026)
Land area	6,020 km² (2,320 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim, almost all Sunni, about 98%; Christian about 1% (estimates)
People	Palestinian Arabs: about 3.4 million in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and 2.1 million in Gaza before the war (statistics bureau estimates); median age 21; 78% urban
Minimum wage	1,880 shekels a month since January 2022 ($617 at about 3.048 shekels = $1, October 6, 2026); Palestinians use the Israeli shekel

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Palestine was an Ottoman territory until 1917 and a British Mandate from 1920 to 1948, during which Arab and Jewish national movements collided. The 1948 war left Palestinians stateless, with Gaza under Egyptian and the West Bank under Jordanian control until Israel captured both in 1967. The Palestine Liberation Organization under Yasser Arafat became the recognized national movement, and the 1993 Oslo Accords created the Palestinian Authority. The 2000-05 Second Intifada, Hamas's 2006 election victory and 2007 seizure of Gaza, and repeated Gaza wars culminating in the 2023 conflict have left the Palestinian political system divided and the territories more fragmented than at any point since Oslo.

Current leadership: In July 2026 Abbas decreed elections for a new Palestinian Legislative Council, with a presidential vote to follow in early 2027. Gaza falls under the US plan's Board of Peace, with Hamas not yet disarmed.

Government structure: The State of Palestine is recognized by 157 of the 193 UN member states. The number grew in 2024, when Spain, Ireland, Norway, and others recognized it, and again in September 2025, when France, Britain, Canada, Australia, Portugal, Malta, Monaco, and others followed; but it is a UN observer state, not a member, and does not exercise sovereign control over its territory. Israel controls security and movement across most of the West Bank; Gaza has a Mediterranean coast but is largely destroyed.

Economy and trade: A roughly $19 billion economy before the 2023 war, now severely contracted, split between a West Bank economy dependent on Israeli labor markets and trade, and a Gaza economy that has been largely destroyed. Exports are small — stone and marble, agricultural products (olive oil, dates), and light manufacturing — and go overwhelmingly to or through Israel, which controls Palestinian borders, customs, and currency (the Israeli shekel is used). Imports of nearly all goods likewise pass through Israel. The economy depends heavily on international aid and on Palestinians working in Israel. The 1994 Paris Protocol under the Oslo framework binds the Palestinian economy to Israel's customs envelope, which is the structural reason it cannot function as an independent trading economy.

Closest partners: The Arab League, Egypt (which borders Gaza and has been the primary ceasefire mediator), Qatar, Turkey, and the European states that have extended recognition.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Israel, in the region's longest-running unresolved conflict. Internally, who will govern Gaza after the war remains unresolved.

Module 8 — Egypt

The Most Populous Rim Country and the Gatekeeper of Suez



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Carnegie Middle East Center, Egypt analysis (ongoing)

8a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, 71 — in office since June 2014 (12.3 years); led the 2013 overthrow of the elected government; term runs to 2030
Head of government	Prime Minister Mostafa Madbouly, 60 — in office since June 2018 (8.3 years); appointed by the president; kept on in February 2026
System	Presidential republic in which the military is the central institution
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	120.1 million (2026); UN estimate; Egypt's statistics agency counted 109.5 million residents in September 2026
Land area	995,450 km² (384,350 sq mi)
Religion	Sunni Muslim about 90%; Christian, mostly Coptic Orthodox, estimated at 5–10% (estimates; no census figure has been published since 2006)
People	Egyptians about 99%, with Nubian, Bedouin, and Siwi Amazigh minorities (estimates); median age 26; 44% urban
Minimum wage	7,000 pounds a month in the private sector since March 2025, with no change confirmed for 2026 ($134 at about 52.27 pounds = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Home to one of the world's oldest civilizations, Egypt was ruled by a succession of foreign powers — Persians, Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Ottomans — before Britain occupied it in 1882 to secure the Suez Canal (opened 1869). Gamal Abdel Nasser's 1952 officers' coup ended the monarchy, and his 1956 nationalization of the canal made him a hero of Arab nationalism. Egypt fought Israel in 1948, 1956, 1967, and 1973 before Anwar Sadat's 1979 peace treaty, the first by an Arab state, which cost him his life in 1981. Hosni Mubarak then ruled for 30 years until the 2011 Arab Spring uprising toppled him; the Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi won the 2012 election and was removed by the army in 2013, bringing General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to power.

Current leadership: President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi is a former defense minister and army field marshal. A 2019 constitutional amendment extended presidential terms.

Government structure: Executive power is heavily concentrated in the presidency, and the military has extensive economic holdings. A bicameral parliament exists but exercises limited independent authority: in the 2025 election the pro-government Nation's Future Party won the largest bloc, after Sisi himself called for results in some districts to be annulled. Political opposition and civil society operate under significant restrictions. Egypt is by far the most populous country on the rim.

Economy and trade: The rim's sixth-largest economy, about $430 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates, after France, Italy, Spain, Turkey, and Israel, and by far the largest in Africa's north, but one under severe strain from a debt and currency crisis that produced repeated IMF and Gulf bailouts. Exports are led by refined and crude petroleum, gold, fertilizers and chemicals, fruit and vegetables, and textiles; gas exports, once a mainstay, have largely stopped since Egypt became a net importer in 2024. Imports are led by wheat (Egypt is the world's largest wheat importer), refined petroleum, machinery, pharmaceuticals, and cars. Top trading partners: the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Italy, and the US on exports; China, the US, Saudi Arabia, Germany, and Russia on imports. Suez Canal transit fees, tourism, and remittances are the pillars of foreign currency earnings, and disruption to any one of them — as with Red Sea shipping from 2024 — hits the state's finances directly.

Closest partners: The United States, whose military aid Egypt has received since the 1979 peace treaty with Israel; Saudi Arabia and the UAE (financial backers); and increasingly the EU, which has expanded funding to Egypt in exchange for migration cooperation. Egypt maintains its peace treaty with Israel, imports its gas, and has served as the primary mediator on Gaza. It is part of the Eastern Mediterranean gas alignment with Greece, Cyprus, and Israel, and in Libya backs the eastern government against Tripoli.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Ethiopia, over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam on the Nile, inaugurated in September 2025 — Egypt's most existential foreign policy concern. Turkey, historically, over Libya and the Muslim Brotherhood, though relations have thawed considerably.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Growing by about 1.4 million a year; 97% on 4% of the land, along the Nile	The Arab world's most populous state; the youth bulge and the jobs it lacks
GDP	About $3,900 per head; growth of about 4.6% expected for the year to June 2026	Remittances (a record of about $36 billion in the year to June 2025)
Prices and the pound	Urban inflation 12.7% in August 2026, after a peak of 15.2% in March (38% in 2023); the pound about 52 to the dollar in early October, having neared 55 in March, as the war raised the price of the wheat and fuel Egypt imports	The 2024 rescue's terms

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Public finance	An interest bill among the world's highest shares of revenue; the $57 billion rescue of 2024, with the UAE's Ras el-Hekma deal and World Bank lending; the IMF program's seventh review, completed on July 30 after its extension in late February, releasing about $1.8 billion and judging the war's fallout 'relatively contained'	Fiscally the most exposed state in the region
Military	About 440,000 active troops; the army as the state's owner and its economy's largest firm; American military aid of $1.3 billion a year; Russian, French, and German arms	The regime's foundation
Regime	18/100 from Freedom House: the region's textbook electoral autocracy; tens of thousands of political prisoners by rights groups' estimates	The 2025 election, partly rerun
Energy	Gas production falling (Zohr's decline); liquefied-gas imports; Israeli gas (Module 7); summer blackouts	From exporter to importer in three years
Water and food	The Nile's 97% of fresh water; wheat imports of about 12 million tonnes	The physical facts that bind
Suez and the war	Canal revenue fell from $10.2 billion in 2023 to about $4 billion in 2024 after the Houthi attacks and recovered to $4.7 billion in the year to June 2026; transits recovered in 2026, with August's the most since December 2023, but remained about two-fifths below the pre-attack level	The transit state, half-restored and newly at risk

In depth — the question: Whether Egypt can be held by an army and its patrons through a decade in which its canal, its gas, and its river are each in someone else's hands — and what follows the IMF program.

Worked example — The Interest Trap

Egypt's interest bill takes more than half of the government's revenue: about 2.1 trillion pounds in the first eleven months of the 2025-26 fiscal year, roughly $40 billion, on a debt of about 90% of GDP that costs 20% or more on domestic bonds and 8-10% on dollar ones. The arithmetic: with growth near 4.5% and inflation near 13%, nominal GDP rises about 17% a year, which should shrink the debt ratio — except that the pound's 2024 devaluation raised the dollar debt's local value by half, the slide of March 2026 raised it again, and the canal's lost revenue, about $6 billion a year against 2023, is a large share of the foreign currency the state earns. The rescue's terms — the UAE's $35 billion (a land sale that was really a bailout), the IMF's $8 billion with a floating pound and subsidy cuts, the EU's €7.4 billion for migration control — bought time, and the 2026 shock tested it; the IMF program ends in December 2026, and the government has signaled it will not seek another. The trap's mechanism is the one every fragile importer faces: the interest bill grows faster than the revenue that pays it, the currency's every devaluation raises the foreign part, and the escape routes — growth, the canal's recovery, gas production, the Gulf's continued patience — are each in someone else's hands. The lesson is the region's: Egypt is too large to fail, and the price of that fact is being paid by its creditors, its patrons, and its 110 million people in the order the arithmetic sets.

8b. Why Suez Makes Egypt Structurally Important

The Suez Canal carries a substantial share of global trade between Europe and Asia and generates billions of dollars in annual revenue for the Egyptian state. Any disruption — the 2021 grounding of a single container ship, or the diversion of shipping around Africa during the Red Sea attacks by Yemen's Houthis from November 2023 — reverberates through global supply chains within days. Traffic began to return in 2026, even as the Houthis renewed attacks on Saudi-linked ships in July; in September their war with Saudi Arabia reached the Bab el-Mandeb, the Red Sea's southern entrance, when they seized the port of Mocha,

which the Saudi-led coalition says it retook in October. This gives Egypt a structural importance to every trading nation that is independent of its own economic weight, and it is the main reason outside powers consistently prioritize Egyptian stability over pressing it on domestic governance.

8c. The Mediation Role

Egypt's border with Gaza, its peace treaty with Israel, and its relationships across the Arab world have made it the indispensable intermediary in the Israel-Palestine conflict: with the US, Qatar, and Turkey it brokered the October 2025 Gaza ceasefire, signed at a summit in Sharm el-Sheikh, and throughout the war it refused to let Gaza's displaced into Sinai. It remains aligned with the US on much else while depending on Israeli gas, a characteristic example of the mixed relationships this course emphasizes.

Module 9 — Libya

A State Divided Between Rival Governments



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Frederic Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya*

9a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Abdul Hamid Dbeibah, 66 or 67 (born 1959) — in office since March 2021 (5.6 years); Government of National Unity in Tripoli, recognized by the UN
Rival power (east)	Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, commander of the Libyan National Army, 82 — commander since March 2015 (11.6 years); the power behind the eastern government; his son Saddam is deputy commander-in-chief and heir
System	Divided: a UN-recognized government in Tripoli and a rival eastern government backed by Khalifa Haftar's army, under a three-member Presidential Council chaired by Mohamed al-Menfi
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	7.54 million (2026)
Land area	1,759,540 km² (679,360 sq mi)
Religion	Sunni Muslim about 97% (estimates)
People	Arab and Amazigh (Berber) about 97%, with Tuareg and Tebu minorities and many migrant workers (estimates); median age 29; 83% urban
Minimum wage	1,000 dinars a month since May 2023 (about $157 at the central bank's official rate of about 6.37 dinars = $1, set in January 2026; much less at the parallel rate of more than 9)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Libya's three historic regions — Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, and Fezzan — were Ottoman provinces, then an Italian colony from 1911 to 1943 under a brutal occupation. Independence came in 1951 as a monarchy under King Idris, and oil discoveries in 1959 transformed the desert state into a wealthy one. Muammar Gaddafi seized power in a 1969 coup and ruled for 42 years through an idiosyncratic personal dictatorship, sponsoring militant groups abroad and clashing with the West before a 2003 rapprochement. The 2011 Arab Spring uprising, backed by NATO airstrikes, ended in Gaddafi's death, but the state collapsed into militia rule and, from 2014, civil war between rival governments in Tripoli and the east — a division that has persisted, in varying forms, ever since.

Current leadership: Dbeibah was appointed in 2021 as an interim leader pending elections that were postponed indefinitely. The eastern government is based in Benghazi and Tobruk; Saddam Haftar has been deputy commander-in-chief since 2025. In June 2026 the US envoy Massad Boulos made public a plan for a shared executive — Dbeibah to stay prime minister, and a new presidency, likely under Saddam Haftar, to give the east substantial sway — which the Haftars back; Dbeibah's camp has not signed, and in late September it was still a proposal.

Government structure: Formally a transitional republic, in practice a fragmented state. Since the 2011 overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi, Libya has lacked a unified government, a single armed force, or an agreed constitutional order. The eastern-based House of Representatives and the Tripoli-based institutions have each claimed legitimacy. In April 2026 the two administrations approved the first unified state budget in 13 years, brokered by the US; a shared executive would be the most significant reunification step in years, but previous agreements have repeatedly collapsed.

Economy and trade: An economy of about $53 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates, almost entirely dependent on oil, which provides over 90% of export earnings and most government revenue. Libya holds Africa's largest proven oil reserves, and output, which swings with the political situation when rival factions blockade fields and ports, reached about 1.49 million barrels a day in June 2026, a decade high, with no blockade that year. Exports are overwhelmingly crude oil and natural gas, with Italy, Spain, Germany, and China as the main buyers. Imports — refined fuels (despite its crude output, Libya lacks refining capacity), food, machinery, cars, and consumer goods — come chiefly from Turkey, Italy, China, and Egypt. The division of oil revenue between Tripoli and the east is the central economic dimension of the political split, and the central bank, which devalued the dinar by 14.7% in January 2026, its second cut in a year, has been a recurring point of contention.

Closest partners: Turkey is the Tripoli government's principal military patron and partner, under a 2019 maritime and security memorandum. Italy is the most engaged European state, focused on energy and migration. The eastern government has been backed by Egypt, the UAE, and Russia (including Russian military contractors), with France historically sympathetic to Haftar. The US has become the main broker — of the April 2026 budget, of joint military exercises in Sirte with American, British, and German participation, and of the plan for a shared executive — and Greece has quietly dealt with the east over migration.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The central dispute is internal — Tripoli versus the east — but it is fought largely through the outside patrons on each side, making Libya a proxy arena for the Turkey-versus-Egypt and UAE rivalry and, at points, for Russia against NATO members. Externally, the 2019 Turkey-Libya maritime memorandum, which Greece and Cyprus consider illegal, embeds Libya in the Eastern Mediterranean boundary dispute. Migration from Libya's coast to Italy and Greece is a chronic point of friction with Europe.

9b. Why Libya Is a Proxy Arena

Libya's importance to outsiders is out of proportion to its population, for three reasons: it holds Africa's largest proven oil reserves, its long coastline is the primary departure point for irregular migration to Italy and Malta, and its collapse created a vacuum that competing regional powers moved to fill. The result is that the Libyan conflict has functioned less as a domestic civil war than as a stage on which the rivalry of Turkey with Egypt and the UAE, the France-Italy competition for influence, and Russia's search for a Mediterranean foothold have all played out. Whether the US plan for a shared executive is signed, and holds, will depend as much on those patrons' calculations as on the Libyan parties themselves.

Module 10 — The Maghreb

Tunisia, Algeria & Morocco



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Middle East Council on Global Affairs, Maghreb analysis (ongoing)

10a. Tunisia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Kais Saied, 68 — in office since October 2019 (7.0 years); suspended parliament in July 2021; re-elected October 2024
Head of government	Prime Minister Sara Zaafrani Zenzri, 63 — in office since March 2025 (1.5 years); appointed by the president, to whom the government answers
System	Presidential republic under the 2022 constitution
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	12.4 million (2026)
Land area	155,360 km² (59,980 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 99%, almost all Sunni (estimates)
People	Arab about 98%, with a small Amazigh-speaking minority (estimates); median age 34; 72% urban
Minimum wage	554.736 dinars a month for a 48-hour week and 470.251 for 40 hours, from January 2026 under an April 2026 decree ($186 and $158 at about 2.98 dinars = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The site of ancient Carthage, Rome's great rival, Tunisia passed through Arab, Ottoman, and from 1881 French rule. Independence in 1956 brought Habib Bourguiba, who built a secular, modernizing state with the Arab world's most progressive family law but tolerated no opposition. Zine El Abidine Ben Ali deposed him in 1987 and ruled until a street vendor's self-immolation in December 2010 ignited the uprising

that launched the Arab Spring. Tunisia was the one country where the revolution produced a durable democracy, with a 2014 constitution and peaceful transfers of power, until President Kais Saied suspended parliament in 2021 and rewrote the constitution in 2022, returning the country to strongman rule.

Current leadership: President Kais Saied, a former constitutional law professor, is the dominant figure. Prime ministers serve at his discretion and are replaced often; Sara Zaafrani Zenzri, a former public-works minister, is the second woman to hold the post.

Government structure: In July 2021 Saied also assumed emergency powers, and the 2022 constitution he authored concentrated authority in the presidency. Opposition figures, journalists, and civil society have faced prosecution. Parliament now exercises little independent power.

Economy and trade: An economy of about $61 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates in a prolonged fiscal crisis, with high debt and high unemployment. Since rejecting an IMF program in 2023 it has financed its deficits at home, including a planned $3.7 billion direct loan from the central bank under the 2026 budget. Exports are led by electrical wiring and components (much of it for European car makers), clothing and textiles, olive oil (Tunisia is a top global exporter), dates, phosphates and fertilizers, and refined petroleum. Imports are led by refined fuels, machinery, cars, plastics, and grain. Top trading partners: France, Italy, Germany, and Spain — the EU accounts for roughly three-quarters of trade — with China the largest non-European import source. Tunisia's economic model is essentially that of a low-cost manufacturing and agricultural supplier to Europe, which is why European funding tied to migration control has such leverage.

Closest partners: The EU, which has expanded funding in exchange for migration control, and Italy in particular, which treats Tunisia as a frontline partner. Algeria has become a closer partner as Tunisia's Western relationships have cooled. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf provide some financial support.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Tunisia's disputes are mainly internal and economic: a severe fiscal crisis and Western criticism of democratic backsliding that Saied has rejected as interference. It maintains generally correct relations with both Algeria and Libya and has no significant territorial disputes.

10b. Algeria

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, 80 — in office since December 2019 (6.8 years); re-elected September 2024
Head of government	Prime Minister Sifi Ghrieb, 54 or 55 (born 1971) — in office since August 2025 (1.1 years); acting from August 2025, confirmed that September
System	Presidential republic in which the army is the decisive institution
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	48.0 million (2026)
Land area	2,381,741 km² (919,590 sq mi)
Religion	Sunni Muslim about 99% (estimates)
People	Arab and Amazigh (Berber) about 99%, with Amazigh speakers an estimated quarter (estimates); median age 30; 77% urban
Minimum wage	24,000 dinars a month since January 2026 (about $179 at about 134 dinars = $1, early October 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Algeria was an Ottoman regency for three centuries before France invaded in 1830 and, uniquely among its colonies, incorporated it as part of France itself, settling a million Europeans there. The

war of independence (1954-62) was among the most brutal decolonization conflicts of the century, and the National Liberation Front (FLN) that won it has dominated politics ever since. Oil and gas wealth funded a socialist one-party state until a 1991 election that Islamists were poised to win was cancelled by the army, triggering a civil war that killed some 150,000 people during the 1990s. Abdelaziz Bouteflika ruled from 1999 until the 2019 Hirak protest movement forced him out; the system he led, in which the military remains the ultimate authority, survived largely intact.

Current leadership: President Abdelmadjid Tebboune is the dominant civilian figure. Prime Minister Sifi Ghrieb is a former industry minister.

Government structure: The army and security services have been the central power since independence from France in 1962, with the presidency operating within limits they set. Algeria has Africa's largest land area and maintains a doctrine of non-alignment and non-intervention that dates to its anti-colonial origins.

Economy and trade: An economy of about $317 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates that is the rim's largest hydrocarbon exporter and one of the world's most oil-and-gas-dependent: hydrocarbons provide over 90% of export earnings and the majority of government revenue. Exports are overwhelmingly natural gas (by pipeline to Spain and Italy and as liquefied gas) and crude oil and petroleum products, with Italy, Spain, France, the Netherlands, and Turkey the main buyers. Imports are led by machinery, food (grain, dairy), cars, pharmaceuticals, and steel, chiefly from China, France, Italy, Germany, and Turkey. Algeria's importance to Europe rose sharply after 2022, when it displaced Russia as Italy's largest gas supplier; it is also Spain's largest, the concrete economic reason behind the Sánchez government's determination to repair relations with Algiers in 2026.

Closest partners: Algeria's most consequential external relationship is as a gas supplier to Italy and Spain. It has long-standing ties to Russia (arms) and China, and increasingly to Tunisia. Relations with Spain thawed in 2025-26 (Module 2). With France, a thaw began in 2026 after the crisis of 2024-25, as Algeria's ambassador returned to Paris in February and France's to Algiers in May.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Morocco, in the rim's most entrenched bilateral rivalry. Algeria supports the Polisario Front's claim to independence for Western Sahara, which Morocco controls and claims; Algeria closed its land border with Morocco in 1994 and severed diplomatic relations in 2021. In 2026 Algeria took part in US-sponsored talks on Western Sahara while describing itself as an observer.

10c. Morocco

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	King Mohammed VI, 63 — on the throne since July 1999 (27.2 years); holds executive power over defense, foreign policy, and religion
Head of government	Fatima Zahra El Mansouri, head of government, 50 — appointed September 2026 (one week); Authenticity and Modernity Party, first in the September 23, 2026 election; the first woman in the post; forming a government in early October while Aziz Akhannouch's outgoing government handles current business
System	Constitutional monarchy in which the king holds substantial executive power
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	38.8 million (2026); UN estimate, excluding Western Sahara, as does the land area; the 2024 census, which includes it, counted 36.8 million
Land area	446,300 km² (172,320 sq mi)
Religion	Sunni Muslim about 99% (official estimate; the census does not ask)

At a glance	As of October 2026
People	Arab and Amazigh; 24.8% use an Amazigh language in daily life (2024 census); median age 31; 67% urban
Minimum wage	17.92 dirhams an hour in industry and services since January 2026, about 3,423 a month for a 44-hour week ($364 at about 9.4 dirhams = $1, estimated from the dirham's euro-dollar basket, October 2026); farm work 97.44 dirhams a day since April 2026

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Morocco is the one North African state never conquered by the Ottomans, and its Alaouite dynasty has ruled since 1666 — giving the monarchy a legitimacy rooted in both religious descent and continuity. France and Spain established protectorates in 1912 and withdrew in 1956. King Hassan II (1961-99) survived two coup attempts and ruled harshly, but also launched the 1975 Green March that brought Western Sahara under Moroccan control when Spain withdrew — the origin of the dispute with Algeria and the Polisario Front that still organizes the region's politics. Mohammed VI, on the throne since 1999, liberalized the system, and a 2011 constitution adopted amid Arab Spring protests expanded parliament's role while preserving the king's ultimate authority.

Current leadership: In the general election of September 23, 2026, the Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) won 97 of 395 seats, and the National Rally of Independents (RNI) of the outgoing head of government, Aziz Akhannouch, fell to second with 66; turnout was 38%, the lowest since 2007. On September 29 the king appointed the PAM's Fatima Zahra El Mansouri, a former housing minister and mayor of Marrakesh, head of government.

Government structure: The king appoints the head of government, who must come from the party that wins the most seats. The elected government manages domestic policy within limits the palace sets. Morocco left the Organization of African Unity in 1984 over Western Sahara and joined its successor, the African Union, in 2017.

Economy and trade: An economy of about $194 billion in 2026 on IMF estimates, the Maghreb's most diversified and its most integrated with Europe. Morocco has transformed from a phosphate-and-agriculture exporter into a manufacturing platform: passenger cars are now the largest export (around 15% of the total, with Renault and Stellantis plants making Morocco Africa's largest car producer), followed by fertilizers (Morocco holds roughly 70% of the world's phosphate reserves), electrical wiring and cables, clothing, aircraft components, and agricultural products (tomatoes, citrus, fish). Imports are led by refined fuels, car parts, gas, wheat, and plastics. Spain (roughly 22% of trade) and France (roughly 20%) dominate, followed by Italy, the UK, and Germany, with China the fastest-growing import source. Trade runs roughly 94% of GDP and carries a structural deficit; tourism, remittances, and phosphates fill the gap.

Closest partners: The United States, which in 2020 recognized Moroccan sovereignty over Western Sahara as part of Morocco's normalization with Israel under the Abraham Accords, and which in 2026 sponsored talks on the territory. France and Spain, both of which have since endorsed Morocco's autonomy plan, as did Britain in 2025. The Gulf states. Morocco has also built extensive influence across West Africa.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Algeria, over Western Sahara. Spain, over the enclaves of Ceuta and Melilla, which Morocco claims; Spanish and independent analysts linked the July 2026 surge into Ceuta (Module 2) to Moroccan pressure, following the pattern of a smaller crossing in 2021.

10d. Western Sahara: The Dispute That Organizes the Maghreb

No single issue explains more about relations among these three countries, and their relations with Spain and France, than Western Sahara. The territory was a Spanish colony until 1975, when Morocco moved in and Spain withdrew. The Polisario Front, backed by Algeria, fought a war for independence until a 1991 ceasefire that promised a referendum which has never been held; the Polisario declared the ceasefire over in November 2020, and low-intensity fighting has continued since. Morocco now controls most of the territory and proposes autonomy under Moroccan sovereignty; the Polisario and Algeria insist on self-determination. The US (2020), Spain (2022), France (2024), and Britain (2025) have all shifted toward Morocco's position, the Spanish and French shifts each provoking Algerian retaliation, and in October 2025 the UN Security Council's Resolution 2797 backed negotiations on the basis of Morocco's autonomy plan. US-sponsored talks among Morocco, the Polisario, Algeria, and Mauritania, the first in years, followed in 2026, and the UN mission's mandate is up for renewal by October 31, 2026. Understanding this one dispute unlocks the Algeria-Morocco freeze, the Algeria-Spain rupture and thaw, and the recurring pattern of migration pressure on Spain's enclaves.

Module 11 — The Alliance Map

NATO, the EU, the Arab League & Outside Powers

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: NATO and EU official membership documentation; Arab League charter

11a. The Western Institutions

NATO and the EU are the structural anchors of the northern shore, but they are not the same bloc. On the rim, NATO includes Turkey, Albania, and Montenegro but not Cyprus or Malta; the EU includes Cyprus and Malta but not Turkey. This produces a specific, consequential gap: Turkey can contest the maritime claims of two EU members while the EU cannot bring collective security pressure to bear through NATO, and Cyprus has no NATO guarantee to invoke, as the drone strike on the British base there in March 2026 underlined. The EU's own security role is growing — its treaty binds members to aid one another if attacked — but it remains far short of a military alliance.

11b. The Eastern Mediterranean Alignment

The most significant new grouping on the rim is informal: Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Egypt, with France as an active partner, have converged since roughly 2019 around offshore gas development, a shared interest in maritime boundaries that exclude Turkish claims, and, for the European members, a preference for energy routes that bypass Turkey. The East Mediterranean Gas Forum, headquartered in Cairo, is its institutional expression, and the Cronos field off Cyprus, approved in July 2026 to send its gas through Egypt's liquefaction plants, is its newest project. Its defining feature is that it crosses every other line — it includes NATO members and non-members, EU members and Arab League members, and a country (Israel) that has no diplomatic relations with several other rim states — united by a common rival rather than a common institution.

11c. The Arab League and Its Limits

Eight of the states here belong to the Arab League, but it functions as a forum rather than an alliance, and its members are frequently on opposite sides of the region's disputes. Egypt and the UAE backed one side in Libya while Qatar and Turkey backed the other. Algeria and Morocco have no diplomatic relations. Syria was suspended from the League for over a decade before readmission in 2023. The League's most consistent unifying position is on Palestine, and even there, Morocco and the UAE normalized relations with Israel in 2020 while others did not.

11d. The Outside Powers

- **The United States** — the dominant external military power, with bases in Spain, Italy, Greece, and Turkey, the Sixth Fleet, and defining relationships with Israel and Egypt. Its 2026 war with Iran, fought jointly with Israel, reshaped the eastern shore; it brokered the Israel-Lebanon framework, Libya's unified budget, and talks on Western Sahara; and its pressure on Spain over base access and Middle East policy produced open transatlantic friction.

• **Russia** — seeking Mediterranean footholds since losing much of its Syrian position with Assad's fall in December 2024. It retains influence in Libya's east, in Bosnia's Republika Srpska, in Montenegrin and Serbian politics, and through Turkey's energy and arms ties, and it uses the Turkish Straits question as leverage.

• **China** — primarily an economic actor, with port investments (notably Piraeus in Greece), infrastructure lending across North Africa, and a growing role as a buyer of Algerian and Libyan energy. It has avoided direct security entanglement.

• **The Gulf states** — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar are major financial backers of Egypt, Syria's reconstruction, and Lebanon's state, and active participants in Libya's conflict, giving them influence on the southern and eastern shores disproportionate to their distance from the sea; since August 2026 Saudi Arabia is also Turkey's defense partner.

Module 12 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, CrisisWatch (monthly conflict tracker)

12a. The Lebanon War and the Unfinished Iran War

The most acute active conflict on the rim as of October 2026. Israel holds a strip of southern Lebanon and strikes daily, despite the US-brokered framework of June 26 (Module 7). Hezbollah rejects it. The Iran war around it has not ended, and the Strait of Hormuz remained closed to normal traffic (Module 7). This is the dispute most likely to draw in additional rim states, as the drone strike on the British base in Cyprus showed. What to watch: whether Israel withdraws beyond the single pilot village it has left, what replaces UNIFIL when its mandate ends on December 31, and whether Israel's October 27 election changes the government that decides.

12b. Eastern Mediterranean Maritime Boundaries

Turkey's Blue Homeland doctrine and the 2019 Turkey-Libya memorandum on one side; Greece, Cyprus, and their partners' exclusive economic zone claims on the other. The current flashpoint is the Great Sea Interconnector, the Crete-Cyprus power cable, whose seabed surveys neared a restart in October over Turkish objections (Module 5). This is a dispute between NATO allies, which is why it has never escalated to open conflict — but also why it has never been resolved.

12c. Cyprus

The 52-year division is the rim's longest-running frozen conflict. The 2025 election of Tufan Erhürman in the north and the appointment of new UN and EU envoys have produced the first serious talk of resumed settlement negotiations since 2017 (Module 5). Whether this produces movement depends on Turkey, which controls the north's freedom of action, and on whether the Greek Cypriot side will accept a settlement short of full reunification under its own constitutional order.

12d. Libya

The US plan for a shared executive (Module 9) is the test case for whether Libya's 12-year division can end. Dbeibah's camp has not signed, and every prior agreement has collapsed, usually when one side's outside patrons calculated they could do better by fighting. A signed and implemented deal would be the most significant positive development on the southern shore in years; its failure would leave the proxy contest of Turkey against Egypt and the UAE where it was.

12e. Western Sahara and the Ceuta Crisis

The mass crossing into Ceuta at the end of July 2026 (Module 2) immediately became a European crisis: 22 EU governments demanded an emergency meeting. In August anti-migrant protesters burned the shelters of those who stayed. It came less than two weeks after Sánchez's visit to Algeria, Morocco's rival, and amid Spain's open friction with the US and Israel over Iran and Gaza — an unusually clear case of how the rim's disputes interlock. Western Sahara itself has moved Morocco's way (Module 10), and the UN mission's mandate is up for renewal by October 31, 2026.

12f. Migration as the Cross-Cutting Issue

Migration is not a flashpoint between two countries but a pressure running through nearly every relationship in this course: it drives EU funding to Egypt, Tunisia, and Morocco; it underpins Italy's Albania centers and its dealings with Libya's rival governments; it periodically fractures EU solidarity, as the Ceuta crisis showed; and it gives southern-shore governments leverage over northern ones regardless of their relative wealth or power. The numbers moved in 2026 — irregular crossings into the EU fell 35% in the first eight months, and the EU's new asylum pact took effect in June — but the politics did not. Any account of the Mediterranean that treats migration as a humanitarian sideline rather than a central instrument of statecraft will misread most of what happens on the rim.

12g. The Last Word

The throughline of all twelve modules: the Mediterranean is not divided into two camps but organized by a small number of overlapping disputes — Cyprus and Eastern Mediterranean boundaries, Libya, Western Sahara, Israel and its adversaries, and migration — each of which cuts across the formal institutions and produces partnerships between countries that are rivals on other questions and rivalries between countries that are formal allies. Turkey is inside NATO and at odds with several of its Mediterranean members, and now a defense partner of Saudi Arabia; Egypt is aligned with the US, depends on Israeli gas, and opposes Israel over Gaza; Spain is an EU and NATO member in open dispute with the US, Israel, and, over Ceuta, Italy. Reading the region through its disputes rather than its institutions is the single most useful habit this course has tried to build.

Key Points

The Mediterranean

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Morocco	Mohammed VI	King	63	July 1999	27.2
Palestine	Mahmoud Abbas	President	90	January 2005	21.7
Monaco	Albert II	Prince	68	April 2005	21.5
Albania	Edi Rama	Prime Minister	62	September 2013	13.1
Egypt	Abdel Fattah el-Sisi	President	71	June 2014	12.3
Turkey	Recep Tayyip Erdoğan	President	72	August 2014	12.1
Croatia	Andrej Plenković	Prime Minister	56	October 2016	10.0
France	Emmanuel Macron	President	48	May 2017	9.4
Spain	Pedro Sánchez	Prime Minister	54	June 2018	8.3
Tunisia	Kais Saied	President	68	October 2019	7.0
Algeria	Abdelmadjid Tebboune	President	80	December 2019	6.8
Malta	Robert Abela	Prime Minister	48	January 2020	6.7
Libya	Abdul Hamid Dbeibah	Prime Minister	66–67	March 2021	5.6
Italy	Giorgia Meloni	Prime Minister	49	October 2022	4.0
Israel	Benjamin Netanyahu	Prime Minister	76	December 2022	3.8
Bosnia	Borjana Krišto	Chair, Council of Ministers	65	January 2023	3.7
Cyprus	Nikos Christodoulides	President	52	February 2023	3.6
Greece	Kyriakos Mitsotakis	Prime Minister	58	June 2023	3.3
Montenegro	Milojko Spajić	Prime Minister	39	October 2023	2.9
Portugal	Luís Montenegro	Prime Minister	53	April 2024	2.5
Syria	Ahmed al-Sharaa	President	43	December 2024	1.8
Lebanon	Joseph Aoun	President	62	January 2025	1.7
Slovenia	Janez Janša	Prime Minister	68	June 2026	0.3

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's continuous tenure in the current office. Where a prime minister governs, the president or monarch is head of state; the presidents of France, Cyprus, Turkey, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, Tunisia, and Algeria lead, and Morocco's king and Monaco's prince hold executive power. Lebanon's president and prime minister share power under its confessional system; Bosnia's state government is chaired by Borjana Krišto under a three-member presidency; Libya's Tripoli prime minister faces a rival eastern government backed by Khalifa Haftar. Erdoğan was prime minister in 2003–14 before becoming president; Netanyahu was also prime minister in 1996–99 and 2009–21, Janša in 2004–08, 2012–13, and 2020–22, and Mitsotakis in 2019–23, before a month of caretaker government. Al-Sharaa's tenure counts from Assad's fall in December 2024. Dbeibah's exact birth date is unpublished.

The Takeaways

• One sea, three chokepoints — Gibraltar, Suez, and the Bosphorus — and a region whose disputes cut across every line: the same states are EU members and candidates, NATO allies and antagonists, gas partners and migration adversaries.

• Suez is the region's wound, half-healed and newly at risk: canal revenue fell from $10.2 billion in 2023 to about $4 billion in 2024 after the Houthi attacks and recovered to $4.7 billion in the year to June 2026;

August 2026 brought the most transits since December 2023, still about two-fifths below the pre-attack level, and in September the Houthis' war with Saudi Arabia reached the Bab el-Mandeb.

• France is the euro area's fiscal question — a deficit of 5.1% in 2025 heading to 5.4%, no Assembly majority since 2024, a 2026 budget passed only under Article 49.3, a bond spread wider than Italy's — and 2027 is the horizon: an appeals court cleared Marine Le Pen to run, and she leads the polls.

• Italy reversed roles with France: the republic's longest-lasting government under Meloni, a bond spread below France's, and the European right's model of governing within the EU and NATO — though a 3.1% deficit in 2025 keeps it in the EU's deficit procedure and voters rejected its judicial reform in March 2026.

• Spain and Portugal are the region's growth stories on migration and services; Spain's government lost its Catalan votes in October 2025 and faces a snap election on November 29, 2026, while Portugal elected a Socialist president by a landslide over the far right.

• Greece and Cyprus are the Eastern Mediterranean's gas and maritime claimants against Turkey — the Crete-Cyprus power cable is the live dispute — and Cyprus remains the EU's one divided member, its two leaders having agreed in August 2026 to meet weekly.

• Turkey is the durable hybrid — Erdoğan's twenty-fourth year in power, İmamoğlu in prison and on trial, the main opposition party split by a court ruling — and the region's most independent power: NATO's second army, Syria's patron, Russia's partner and rival, Israel's antagonist, Saudi Arabia's new defense partner, and the corridor for Caspian and Black Sea energy that a closed Hormuz made valuable.

• Israel fought more wars in three years than any state — Gaza, Lebanon twice, Syria, and Iran twice, the 2026 war beside the United States — and settled none; its coalition broke over the conscription of the ultra-Orthodox, and the election of October 27, 2026 decides the wars' continuation or end.

• Syria's transition under al-Sharaa is a regime change without a democracy: a five-year constitutional declaration, a partly appointed parliament, sectarian massacres, the Caesar Act repealed, the Kurdish-led northeast folded into the state, and Israeli strikes; Lebanon, occupied in the south, signed a framework with Israel in June that Hezbollah rejects.

• Egypt is too large to fail and is paying for the fact: about 110 million people on 4% of the land, an interest bill above half of revenue, gas turned to imports, the Nile dammed upstream, and an IMF program that ends in December 2026 — held by an army that dominates the economy and by patrons in the Gulf, Washington, and Brussels.

• Libya remains two governments and the militias' oil, with a US plan for a shared executive unsigned.

• The Maghreb divides three ways: Morocco's monarchy, with its Western Sahara gains and its first woman head of government, Fatima Zahra El Mansouri; Algeria's gas leverage and its thaws with Spain and France; and Tunisia's one-man rule.

• Migration is the politics of every northern shore — Italy's Albania centers, the Tunisia and Libya deals, Ceuta's July surge, the EU's new asylum pact — and the southern shore's leverage, even as irregular crossings into the EU fell 35% in the first eight months of 2026.

• The region's 2026 lesson: transit and gas decide more than alliances, and the states that hold the straits, the canal, and the pipelines (Turkey on the Bosphorus, Egypt on Suez, Morocco on Gibraltar, Israel and Algeria with their gas) hold the leverage the others negotiate for.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. Who became Morocco's head of government after the September 23, 2026 election?

A) Aziz Akhannouch, for a second full term
B) Fatima Zahra El Mansouri of the Authenticity and Modernity Party
C) Abdelilah Benkirane of the Justice and Development Party
D) Nizar Baraka, leader of the Istiqlal party

2. Which party's break with Pedro Sánchez in October 2025 cost his government its working majority?

A) Junts, the Catalan separatists
B) Sumar, his coalition partner
C) The Basque Nationalist Party, a longtime ally
D) Podemos, the left-wing party that split from Sumar

3. What did Italian voters do in the March 2026 constitutional referendum?

A) Approved a directly elected prime minister
B) Approved the return of nuclear power plants
C) Rejected Meloni's judicial reform
D) Voted to cut the size of parliament again

4. Besides Turkey, which NATO members among the twenty-three states are outside the EU?

A) Malta and Cyprus
B) Monaco and Montenegro
C) Bosnia and Herzegovina and Albania
D) Albania and Montenegro

5. What happened to Turkey's main opposition party, the CHP, in 2026?

A) A court ousted its leader, who then founded a new party
B) It was banned by the Constitutional Court
C) It won a snap election and formed a government with the Kurdish party
D) It merged with the governing party in a national-unity government

6. What did Israel and Lebanon sign in Washington on June 26, 2026?

A) A full peace treaty and mutual recognition
B) A deal extending the UN force in Lebanon
C) An agreement dividing the offshore gas fields along a new maritime line
D) A framework for Israel's withdrawal as Lebanon's army deploys

7. Which leader among the twenty-three states has been in office longest?

A) Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian president
B) Morocco's King Mohammed VI
C) Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey
D) Prince Albert II, Monaco's sovereign

8. What became of Egypt's $8 billion IMF program in 2026?

A) Egypt defaulted on its bonds, and the IMF suspended the program
B) It was replaced by a new $20 billion program with Gulf co-financing
C) It was extended to the end of 2026, and a further review released more money
D) The Gulf states repaid it in full, ending the IMF's role in Egypt

9. Where did the US plan for a shared Libyan executive stand in late September 2026?

A) Signed by both camps and endorsed by the UN Security Council
B) Abandoned after Saddam Haftar refused the presidency
C) Still a proposal, unsigned by Dbeibah's camp
D) In force, with Saddam Haftar sworn in as president

10. What did UN Security Council Resolution 2797 of October 2025 do?

A) Ended the UN mission in Western Sahara
B) Called a referendum on independence for 2026
C) Recognized the Polisario Front's government in exile
D) Backed talks on Western Sahara on the basis of Morocco's autonomy plan

11. What has stalled the Crete-Cyprus power cable known as the Great Sea Interconnector?

A) Italy's objection to the cable's route
B) Turkey's claim that surveys need its permission
C) Israel's withdrawal from the project after the Iran war
D) A European Commission ruling against its subsidy

12. What happened to the Kurdish-led forces of Syria's northeast in 2026?

A) They merged into the state's institutions
B) They declared an independent state
C) They joined Turkey's army
D) They withdrew into Iraq under a US-brokered deal

13. What did Italy do during the Ceuta crisis at the end of July 2026?

A) Sent its navy to help Spain patrol the waters around Ceuta
B) Reimposed checks at its ports and airports on travelers from Spain
C) Recalled its ambassador from Madrid in protest at Spain's policy
D) Offered to take in half of the migrants who stayed in Ceuta

14. What did a Paris appeals court decide about Marine Le Pen in July 2026?

A) Acquitted her of embezzlement
B) Barred her from office for five more years
C) Sent her case back for a retrial in 2027
D) Cleared her to run in 2027

15. How does this course sum up the Mediterranean?

A) Organized by overlapping disputes, not two camps
B) Europe's lake, policed by the EU
C) A sea divided between NATO's members and the Arab League's
D) A Turkish-led bloc facing an Israeli-Greek-Egyptian alliance

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. B 2. A 3. C 4. D 5. A 6. D 7. B 8. C 9. C 10. D 11. B 12. A 13. B 14. D 15. A

The Caspian

Figures current as of October 2026

The Caspian — Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, and Azerbaijan around an inland sea of oil and gas: leaders, governments, economies, and the transit and war that shaped 2026.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: Why the Caspian Matters

Goal: Establish what the Caspian is, the fight over its legal status, and the energy and trade stakes.

Covers the sea-or-lake question, the 2018 convention, the five littoral states, and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — Russia

Goal: Profile the Caspian's largest power and how the Ukraine war reshaped its regional relationships.

Covers the northern shore, the war economy, the North-South corridor, and Ukraine's drones on the sea.

MODULE 3 — Kazakhstan

Goal: Profile Central Asia's largest state and its careful balancing of Russia, China, and the West.

Covers the post-2022 reset, the 2026 constitution, the giant fields, and routing exports around Russia.

MODULE 4 — Turkmenistan

Goal: Profile the region's most closed state and its hereditary succession.

Covers permanent neutrality, reliance on China as its main gas buyer, and the trans-Caspian pipeline.

MODULE 5 — Iran

Goal: Profile the southern shore in the 2026 war and the succession to a new Supreme Leader.

Covers the theocratic structure, Mojtaba Khamenei's succession, and the Caspian as a wartime lifeline.

MODULE 6 — Azerbaijan

Goal: Profile the western shore's energy exporter and its rupture and reconciliation with Russia.

Covers the dynastic presidency, victory over Armenia, the US charter, and the Southern Gas Corridor.

MODULE 7 — The Pipeline Map: Who Gets Caspian Energy to Market

Goal: Pull the profiles together through the region's defining question.

Covers the routes through Russia, through Azerbaijan to Europe, east to China, and the trans-Caspian option.

MODULE 8 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Disputes

Goal: Close with the active flashpoints that cut across the five states.

Covers the unfinished seabed, the Russia-Azerbaijan reconciliation, Iran at war, and the shrinking sea.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

Every armed group, party, institution, and abbreviation the modules name is defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country each one belongs to or concerns, or how many of the five when it spans several; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Treaties, Institutions, and Routes

Country	Name	Who or what
All 5	2018 Caspian convention (Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea)	Signed at Aktau in August 2018: a shared surface, a seabed to be divided by neighbors' agreement, and no outside militaries; it takes effect only when all five have ratified it.
All 5	Tehran Convention	The five states' 2003 treaty on protecting the Caspian's environment; its parties met in Tehran in September 2026.
All 5	NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)	The US-led Western military alliance, which the 2018 convention's ban on outside militaries was meant to keep off the sea.
Russia, Kazakhstan	CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization)	The Russian-led military alliance of six former Soviet states.
Russia, Kazakhstan	Eurasian Economic Union	The Russian-led customs union of five former Soviet states, Kazakhstan among them.
Three of the 5	SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation)	The China- and Russia-led security bloc, which Kazakhstan belongs to and Iran joined in 2023.
Four of the 5	CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States)	The loose association of former Soviet republics; Turkmenistan is an associate member.
Russia, Kazakhstan	CPC (Caspian Pipeline Consortium)	The pipeline company and line that carry most of Kazakhstan's oil exports across Russia to a terminal near Novorossiysk on the Black Sea.
Azerbaijan	Southern Gas Corridor	The chain of pipelines, completed in 2020, that carries Azerbaijani gas through Georgia and Turkey to Greece and Italy.
Azerbaijan	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline	The oil pipeline, opened in 2006, from Baku through Georgia to Turkey's Mediterranean coast.
Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan	Middle Corridor (Trans-Caspian International Transport Route)	The rail-and-ferry freight route from China across Kazakhstan, the Caspian, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey to Europe.
Russia, Iran	International North-South Transport Corridor	The rail, road, and sea route from Russia through the Caspian and Iran to India.
Russia	Power of Siberia 2	The planned gas pipeline from Russia to China through Mongolia, agreed in principle in September 2025.
Azerbaijan	TRIPP (Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity)	The US-backed transit route across Armenia's southern Syunik region linking Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave, agreed in August 2025.
Azerbaijan	Strategic Partnership Charter	The US-Azerbaijan agreement signed in Baku.
Azerbaijan	'Contract of the Century'	The 1994 agreement with Western oil companies to develop Azerbaijan's offshore fields.
Russia	Rosneft; Lukoil	Russia's two largest oil companies, state-controlled Rosneft and privately owned Lukoil, both placed under US sanctions in October 2025.
Azerbaijan	BP (formerly British Petroleum)	The British oil company, lead operator of Azerbaijan's offshore oil fields and export pipelines.

Country	Name	Who or what
All 5	Freedom House	US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.
Russia, Iran	V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy)	Research institute in Sweden whose regime classes run from closed autocracy to liberal democracy.
Russia	Economist Intelligence Unit	The research arm of The Economist's publisher, whose Democracy Index scores countries from 0 to 10.
Russia, Iran	IMF (International Monetary Fund)	Lender to governments in currency and debt crises, and a source of economic forecasts.

Governing Bodies, Parties, and Forces

Country	Name	Who or what
Russia	State Duma	The lower house of Russia's parliament.
Russia	National Wealth Fund	Russia's sovereign reserve fund, drawn down to finance the war.
Russia	Shadow fleet	The aging tankers, often of obscure ownership, that carry Russian oil outside Western sanctions and the price cap.
Russia	Africa Corps	Russia's state-run military force in Africa, which took over the Wagner Group's mercenary operations.
Kazakhstan	Kurultai	Kazakhstan's single-chamber parliament of 145 deputies, created by the 2026 constitution.
Kazakhstan	Ädilet; Amanat	Kazakhstan's ruling party, formed in 2026 as the successor to Amanat (formerly Nur Otan, Nazarbayev's party).
Kazakhstan	People's Council (Qazaqstan Halyq Kenesi)	The consultative body of presidential appointees created by the 2026 constitution, with the right to propose laws.
Turkmenistan	Halk Maslahaty (People's Council)	Turkmenistan's supreme representative body since 2023, chaired by the former president, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow.
Iran	Assembly of Experts	The elected body of 88 clerics that chooses, and can in theory remove, the Supreme Leader.
Iran	Guardian Council	The twelve-member council of clerics and jurists that vets candidates and laws.
Iran	Supreme National Security Council	Iran's top security body, which must approve projects such as the Rasht-Astara railway.
Iran	Revolutionary Guard (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps)	Iran's parallel army, intelligence service, and business empire, dominant since the 2026 war began.
Iran	Stability Front	The Front for the Stability of the Islamic Revolution, a hardline clerical-political faction.
Iran	'Axis of resistance'	Iran's network of allied armed groups: Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, and militias in Iraq.

Places, Terms, and Abbreviations

Country	Name	Who or what
Four of the 5	Shia; Sunni	Islam's two main branches; most Iranians and Azerbaijanis are Shia, most Kazakhs and Turkmens Sunni.
Russia	Volga	Europe's longest river, which supplies most of the Caspian's water.
Russia	Astrakhan; Makhachkala	Russia's main Caspian ports, at the Volga's mouth and in Dagestan; Makhachkala is the only ice-free deepwater one.
Russia	Dagestan; Kalmykia	Two of Russia's three Caspian regions: Muslim-majority Dagestan and Buddhist Kalmykia.
Russia	Novorossiysk	Russia's Black Sea oil port, near the CPC pipeline's terminal.
Iran	Strait of Hormuz	The outlet of the Persian Gulf, which carried about a fifth of the world's oil before the 2026 war.
Kazakhstan	Tengiz; Kashagan; Karachaganak	Kazakhstan's three giant oil and gas fields; Kashagan lies offshore in the northern Caspian.
Kazakhstan	Aktau	Kazakhstan's main Caspian port, where the 2018 convention was signed.
Iran	Bandar Anzali; Amirabad	Iran's main Caspian ports; Anzali also hosts its northern fleet.
Iran, Azerbaijan	Rasht-Astara railway	The missing 162-kilometer rail link of the North-South corridor in northern Iran, still unbuilt.
Azerbaijan	Nagorno-Karabakh	The Armenian-majority region inside Azerbaijan, held by Armenian forces from 1994 until Azerbaijan retook it in 2020 and 2023.
Azerbaijan	Nakhchivan; Zangezur corridor	Azerbaijan's exclave beyond Armenia, and Baku's name for a route linking it across Armenia's Syunik region.
Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan	Serdar/Kapaz field	The offshore field the two disputed until a 2021 joint-development deal.
All 5	LNG (liquefied natural gas)	Natural gas chilled to a liquid for shipment by tanker.
All 5	mb/d	Million barrels a day, the unit of oil output and flow.
All 5	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year.

Module 1 — Foundations

Why the Caspian Matters



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Steve LeVine, *The Oil and the Glory: The Pursuit of Empire and Fortune on the Caspian Sea*

1a. Sea or Lake? A Question With Real Consequences

The Caspian is the largest enclosed body of water on earth — roughly the size of Germany, salty but only a third as salty as the ocean, and connected to no other sea. For 27 years after the Soviet collapse, the five states around it could not agree whether it was legally a sea or a lake, and the answer mattered enormously. Under the law of the sea, each state would get a coastal zone and the center would be shared; under lake law, the whole thing would be divided into national sectors. Iran, which stood to get the smallest share, wanted equal fifths; Kazakhstan, with the longest coastline and the richest offshore fields, wanted division by coastline length. The dispute froze development in the contested waters for two decades.

1b. The 2018 Convention

The Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, signed by all five presidents in the Kazakh port of Aktau in August 2018, split the difference: the surface is treated like a sea (shared navigation, a 15-mile territorial zone and 10-mile fishing zone for each state), while the seabed is to be divided by bilateral agreement between neighbors. It also barred any non-littoral military presence, a Russian priority aimed at keeping NATO out. The convention's central gap is that it did not actually draw the seabed lines — it delegated that to future agreements — and it takes effect only when all five states have ratified it, which Iran, alone among them, has not: its cabinet sent the treaty to parliament only in July 2026, with officials citing changes in the security environment, and parliament had not ratified it as of September. Module 8 returns to what remains unfinished.

1c. The Five States at a Glance

- **Russia** — the largest power, the northern shore, and the historical hegemon whose 2022 invasion of Ukraine has pushed its Central Asian and Caucasian neighbors to seek routes around it.
- **Kazakhstan** — the longest coastline and the richest offshore oil, balancing Russia and China while courting the West, under a new constitution adopted in 2026.
- **Turkmenistan** — the most closed state, sitting on the world's fourth-largest gas reserves, formally neutral and selling almost everything to China.
- **Iran** — the southern shore, a theocracy under a new Supreme Leader, at war with the United States and Israel since February 2026, with the least Caspian energy, the most unresolved boundary claims, and a sea that has become its lifeline.
- **Azerbaijan** — the western shore, the only state through which Caspian energy reaches Europe without crossing Russia or Iran, and a 2023 military victor over Armenia.

1d. What All Five Share

Three features unite an otherwise very different group. Every one is classified Not Free by Freedom House, with power concentrated in a single leader or family — this is the least democratic sea on earth. Every one depends on hydrocarbon exports to a degree that makes energy routes a matter of state survival. And every one is being reshaped by Russia's war: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan are working to reduce their dependence on Russia — for exports, for trade transit, or for security — while Iran, at war with the United States, has grown more dependent on it, and all of them avoid an open break with a neighbor that remains militarily dominant on the sea.

1e. The Disputes That Recur

Five issues will appear throughout. The seabed division the 2018 convention left incomplete, especially between Iran and its neighbors (Modules 5, 8). The pipeline question — whether Central Asian gas and oil reach Europe through Russia, around it via Azerbaijan, or go east to China (Modules 3, 4, 6, 7). Russia's relations with Azerbaijan, broken by the December 2024 downing of an Azerbaijani airliner and repaired on Baku's terms in 2025-26 (Modules 2, 6, 8). The wars reaching the sea: Ukrainian drones now strike Russia's Caspian ports, platforms, and shipping, and the sea has become Iran's supply line in its war with the United States (Modules 2, 5, 8). And the sea itself: the Caspian's water level is falling fast, exposing ports and

threatening the ecosystem, a shared problem the five states began to take up together only in 2026 (Module 8).

1f. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office (and, in Iran, the president's; in Turkmenistan, the National Leader's), the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religion with its share, the main ethnic groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026 and land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or, where there is none, from surveys and published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states, and for Iran and Turkmenistan, whose official rates are far from the market's, the table says so. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. The Who's Who before this module defines every group, institution, and abbreviation the profiles name, and the Key Points page ranks the five leaders by time in office, from Ilham Aliyev's nearly 23 years to a Supreme Leader chosen in March 2026.

Module 2 — Russia

The Northern Shore and the Hegemon Under Strain



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Carnegie Russia Eurasia Center, analysis of Russia's post-2022 regional relations (ongoing)

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Vladimir Putin, 73 (74 on October 7) — in office since May 2012 (14.4 years); in power since 1999 as president or prime minister; term to 2030, eligible to run again to 2036
System	Federal semi-presidential republic in form, personalist presidency in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	143.4 million (2026)
Land area	16,376,870 km² (6,323,140 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox Christian 72%, Muslim 5%, no religion or atheist 18% (2023 survey; surveys likely undercount Muslims)
People	Russian 81%, Tatar 4%, Chechen 1%, Bashkir 1% of those who stated an ethnicity (2021 census; 12% did not); median age 42; 76% urban
Minimum wage	27,093 rubles a month since January 2026 ($317 at the central bank's 85.48 rubles = $1, October 7, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Russia reached the Caspian in the 1550s when Ivan the Terrible conquered the Volga khanates of Kazan and Astrakhan, giving Moscow the mouth of the Volga and a foothold on the sea that it has never relinquished. Peter the Great briefly seized the western shore in the 1720s, and the 19th-century Russian Empire absorbed the Caucasus and Central Asia, turning the Caspian into an inland

Russian-Persian lake governed by treaties (1828, 1921, 1940) that gave only the two of them any rights. The Soviet Union treated the sea as an internal waterway and pioneered offshore oil at Baku. Its 1991 collapse suddenly produced four new littoral states and a legal vacuum over who owned the seabed that took until 2018 to resolve. Russia's 2022 full-scale invasion of Ukraine, and the Western sanctions that followed, have driven its Caspian neighbors to build trade and energy routes that bypass Russian territory — the defining regional shift of the past four years.

Current leadership: President Vladimir Putin, who has dominated Russian politics since becoming acting president at the end of 1999, was re-elected in 2024, and constitutional changes in 2020 allow him to run again. Prime Minister Mikhail Mishustin has managed the government since 2020. Real decision-making is concentrated in the presidency and the security services.

Government structure: A federation of more than 80 regions under a 1993 constitution that is semi-presidential on paper — a directly elected president and a prime minister answerable to parliament — but functions as a highly centralized personalist system in which the State Duma exercises no independent check. The three Caspian regions (Astrakhan, Kalmykia, and the Republic of Dagestan) give Russia its northern shore; Dagestan, ethnically diverse and Muslim-majority, has been a recurring site of insurgency and unrest.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2.6 trillion economy, by far the Caspian's largest, heavily dependent on hydrocarbon exports and reshaped since 2022 by sanctions and war spending. Exports are led by crude oil and refined products, natural gas, coal, metals, grain, and fertilizers. Imports are led by machinery, vehicles, electronics, and pharmaceuticals, increasingly sourced from China and via third countries since Western suppliers withdrew. Top trading partners: China by a wide margin (now the destination for most Russian oil and the source of most imports), then India, Turkey, Belarus, and Kazakhstan. The Caspian matters to Russia less for its own oil than as a transport corridor: the Volga-Caspian route and the ports of Astrakhan and Makhachkala anchor the International North-South Transport Corridor linking Russia to Iran and India. Russia's Caspian Flotilla has launched cruise missiles into Syria and Ukraine from the sea — and in 2026 the sea came within reach of Ukraine's drones, which struck an offshore oil platform and a flotilla missile boat in July and the port of Makhachkala on September 10.

Closest partners: China is now the indispensable partner — the main buyer of Russian oil and gas and the main source of imports since 2022. Iran has become a strategic partner — supplying drones for the Ukraine war and sharing the North-South corridor (Module 5). Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan remain economically tied to Russia while quietly diversifying. Russia also leads the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union, which Kazakhstan belongs to.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Ukraine and the West, in the war that has defined Russian foreign policy since February 2022 and drawn escalating sanctions; the last three-way talks with Ukraine and the United States were held in February 2026, and a new round proposed for October was postponed to late in the month. Azerbaijan, after Russian air defenses hit an Azerbaijani airliner in December 2024 (Module 6). More broadly, Russia's Caspian neighbors' efforts to route trade and energy around it are a structural erosion of the position Moscow held for two centuries, and Kazakhstan's balancing between Moscow, Beijing, and Washington is watched closely from the Kremlin.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Population falling; fertility 1.4; the war's losses and the emigration since 2022 (~800,000 in 2022, 1 million-plus in all)	The demographic crisis the war deepened

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
GDP	~$7.1T at purchasing-power parity (fourth); per head ~$18,000; growth about 1% expected for 2026 (−0.2% in the first quarter, +1.3% in the second), down from 4% in 2024	Oil and gas ~15% of GDP and a shrinking share of the budget; the military-industrial sector the growth engine of 2023-25
Prices and rates	Inflation 6.3% (September 2026); the central bank at 14%	Overheating turned to stagnation
Public finance	Debt ~20% of GDP (low)	Low debt, thin reserves, a costly war
Military	Russian forces grinding forward in eastern Ukraine's Donbas region — the town of Pokrovsk taken, fighting in Kostiantynivka — at heavy cost; 17.1 trillion rubles (about $200B) budgeted for 2027; 1.5 million troops authorized; about 5,500 warheads, the world's largest nuclear arsenal; North Korea's troops and shells, in exchange for technology; chips smuggled; the drone industry's Iranian and Chinese inputs	The largest war economy since the Soviet Union
Regime (V-Dem)	Electoral autocracy: Putin's 27th year; Navalny dead (2024); the opposition in exile or prison; a society militarized	Freedom House 12/100; authoritarian (2.0 of 10 on the Economist Intelligence Unit's index)
Energy and trade	Oil output about 9-10 mb/d; the world's second-largest oil exporter, counting crude and products together; oil and gas ~$200B of exports; gas exports to Europe gone except LNG and Turkey's line, and the Power of Siberia 2 pipeline to China planned; the shadow fleet's 600-plus tankers to China and India, settled in yuan and rupees, under the price cap and the sanctions on Rosneft and Lukoil; 95% of China trade in rubles and yuan; refinery runs at their lowest since 2004 in June 2026 under Ukrainian drone strikes deep inside Russia, and fuel exports banned	The Hormuz premium eaten by discounts, sanctions, and refinery subsidies
Foreign position	The 'no limits' partnership with China; Syria's Assad lost in December 2024; the Africa Corps in Africa's Sahel; the August 2025 Trump-Putin summit in Alaska; no response to the American seizure of Venezuela's Nicolás Maduro	The state contracted abroad
The Caspian	The northern shore; Astrakhan and the Volga-Don canal to the Black Sea	The hegemon being routed around

In depth — the question: Whether a personalist regime at war for a fifth year, with a stalling economy and a succession with no mechanism, settles, continues, or has a settlement imposed on it — and what a Russia that is China's junior partner and the hired gun of Africa's Sahel juntas becomes when the war ends.

Worked example — The War Economy's Ledger

Russia spends about $150 billion a year on defense — about 5.5% of GDP, and about 7% counting internal security — and finances it three ways. Oil and gas revenue (about $100 billion in a normal year; about $66 billion in the first nine months of 2026, 17% less than a year earlier despite the Hormuz price spike, because the oil sells at a discount through the shadow fleet to China and India and the compensation the state pays refiners, which rises with the oil price, absorbed the gain); the National Wealth Fund (liquid assets down from about $113 billion before the invasion to about $47 billion on September 1, 2026, a cushion of under 2% of GDP); and domestic borrowing from the state banks. The costs on the other side: over a million killed and wounded on Western estimates, a labor shortage that pushed wages up 20% and inflation to 10%, a central-bank rate held at 21% until 2025 that stalled civilian investment, a wealth fund that could not cover many more bad years, and sanctions that have not stopped the oil but have raised the cost of everything imported and cut the technology flow to Chinese substitutes. The 2026 lesson cut against the old arithmetic: Brent above $100 should have filled the budget, but the discount, the sanctions, and the refinery subsidies

ate the windfall, and the federal deficit reached about $76 billion in January-July; the 2027 draft budget answers with defense spending 27% above earlier plans and cuts to social spending. Russia can fight at this intensity for as long as its revenue allows, and 2026 showed that a high oil price alone no longer guarantees it.

2b. The North-South Corridor

Russia's principal Caspian project since 2022 has been the International North-South Transport Corridor, a 7,200-kilometer rail, road, and sea route linking St. Petersburg to Mumbai through the Caspian ports and Iran. Conceived in 2000 but neglected for two decades, it became a priority once sanctions closed Russia's western trade routes, offering a path to Indian and Middle Eastern markets that no Western navy can interdict. Its weak links are Iranian rail gaps — the Rasht-Astara line is still unbuilt — and the shallow, silting Caspian ports, problems the sea's falling water level (Module 8) is making worse. In 2026 the corridor's sea leg took on a new role, carrying Russian grain and, by Western accounts, munitions to an Iran blockaded in the south, and with it a new risk: Ukrainian drones struck shipping on the route in July.

Module 3 — Kazakhstan

The Longest Coastline and the Most Careful Balancer



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Joanna Lillis, *Dark Shadows: Inside the Secret World of Kazakhstan*

3a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, 73 — in office since March 2019 (7.5 years); re-elected 2022 to a single seven-year term; a July 2026 court ruling lets him run again in 2029
System	Presidential republic with a single-chamber parliament, the Kurultai, since 2026
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	21.1 million (2026)
Land area	2,699,700 km² (1,042,360 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 69%, Christian 17% (2021 census; 11% did not answer)
People	Kazakh 70%, Russian 15%, Uzbek 3%, Ukrainian 2%, Uyghur 1.5% (2021 census); median age 31; 59% urban
Minimum wage	85,000 tenge a month since January 2025 ($192 at the National Bank's 441.91 tenge = $1, October 2, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Kazakh steppe was home to nomadic Turkic peoples organized into three hordes that came under Russian protection in the 18th century and full imperial control by the 1860s. Soviet collectivization in the 1930s caused a famine that killed roughly a third of ethnic Kazakhs, and the republic became a site for Stalin's deportations, the Baikonur space complex, and Soviet nuclear testing at Semipalatinsk. Nursultan Nazarbayev led Kazakhstan from before independence in 1991 until 2019, building

a stable, oil-funded, personalist state and moving the capital to a new city later named after him. He handed the presidency to Kassym-Jomart Tokayev but retained power behind the scenes until January 2022, when violent nationwide unrest — put down with the help of Russian-led troops — allowed Tokayev to purge Nazarbayev's network and consolidate his own authority under a reform program he calls the New Kazakhstan.

Current leadership: President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, a career diplomat and former UN official, took office as Nursultan Nazarbayev's hand-picked successor and consolidated genuine control after the January 2022 unrest, winning a 2022 election under rules he introduced to bar presidential re-election. Prime Minister Olzhas Bektenov, a former head of the presidential administration, manages the government; the new parliament re-approved him in August 2026, alongside Yerlan Karin in the restored post of vice president.

Government structure: Presidential republic under a new constitution approved by referendum in March 2026 and in force since July: a single-chamber parliament, the Kurultai, of 145 deputies elected from party lists replaced the old two-chamber legislature, the vice-presidency abolished in 1996 was restored, and a People's Council of presidential appointees can propose laws. The president remains dominant in practice; in the first Kurultai election, in August 2026, the ruling party, Ädilet, won 110 of 145 seats. Tokayev's earlier reforms, branded the New Kazakhstan, removed Nazarbayev's constitutional privileges and his name from the capital, which reverted from Nur-Sultan to Astana.

Economy and trade: A roughly $300 billion economy, Central Asia's largest, built on oil: the giant Tengiz, Kashagan, and Karachaganak fields account for most output, and Kashagan, offshore in the northern Caspian, is one of the world's largest discoveries in decades. Exports are led by crude oil (roughly half the total), refined copper, uranium (Kazakhstan is the world's largest producer), ferroalloys, wheat, and natural gas. Imports are led by machinery, vehicles, electronics, pharmaceuticals, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: China and Russia in roughly equal measure, then Italy (the largest buyer of its oil), the Netherlands, Turkey, and Uzbekistan. More than 80% of Kazakh oil exports flow through Russia via the Caspian Pipeline Consortium line to the Black Sea, a dependence that Astana has been actively trying to reduce since 2022 through tanker shipments across the Caspian to Azerbaijan; the 2026 drone strikes at the line's terminal led the government to cut its production target for the year to 96 million tons. In April 2026 the state oil company announced a find on the onshore Zhylyoi block near the Caspian that it called potentially comparable to Kashagan, and Uzbekistan's 2026 gas finds on the Ustyurt plateau, where BP and Azerbaijan's state oil company are now exploring, have added to interest in a trans-Caspian export route.

Closest partners: A deliberately multi-vector foreign policy: Russia (security, the Eurasian Economic Union, and oil export transit), China (a top trade partner and leading infrastructure investor), and the West (Chevron leads the largest field, Tengiz; ExxonMobil, Eni, and Shell hold stakes in the others; and the EU is the main oil customer). Kazakhstan has cultivated Azerbaijan as a partner in the Middle Corridor and hosts the Caspian's most active diplomacy.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Kazakhstan has no open conflicts, and that is by design. Its central tension is structural: how to reduce dependence on Russian export routes and avoid Western secondary sanctions without provoking a neighbor that invaded another former Soviet state and has a long shared border. The war made that dependence costlier in 2026: Ukrainian drone strikes on tankers at the Caspian Pipeline Consortium's Black Sea terminal more than halved Kazakh oil output in late July, and attacks there in January, June, and July cost an estimated 3.5 million tons of production. Tokayev hosted Putin on a state visit in May 2026 while courting US and European investment in trans-Caspian routes — the balancing act that defines the state.

3b. January 2022 and the Second Founding

The most important recent event in Kazakh politics was the unrest of January 2022, which began as protests over fuel prices and became the deadliest violence since independence, with more than 200 killed. Tokayev requested and received Russian-led CSTO troops, then used the crisis to dismantle the network of his predecessor Nazarbayev, who had retained the powerful post of Security Council chairman. The episode cut both ways: it left Kazakhstan indebted to Russia for military help weeks before the Ukraine invasion, and it freed Tokayev to pursue the diversification away from Russia that has characterized his rule since.

3c. The 2026 Constitution

Tokayev's second founding produced a new constitution, the country's third since independence. Approved by 87% of voters on a 73% turnout, it keeps the single seven-year presidential term — but in July the Constitutional Court, at Tokayev's own request, ruled that terms served under the old constitution count for nothing, which lets him run again in 2029 and potentially serve until 2036, though he had said in 2022 that he would not reset his term. Critics compared the reset to the one Putin engineered in 2020; supporters point to a simpler parliament elected entirely by party vote. Either way, the vice president, Yerlan Karin, now stands first in line if the presidency falls vacant.

Module 4 — Turkmenistan

The Closed Shore and the Hereditary Presidency



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Eurasianet, Turkmenistan coverage (ongoing)

4a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Serdar Berdimuhamedow, 45 — in office since March 2022 (4.6 years)
National Leader	Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow, the president's father, National Leader of the Turkmen People and chairman of the Halk Maslahaty, 69 — in office since January 2023 (3.7 years); president 2006–22; widely seen as the real decision-maker
System	Presidential republic in form, hereditary personalist rule in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	7.74 million (2026)
Land area	469,930 km² (181,440 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 96% (2020 estimate)
People	Turkmen 87%, Uzbek 9%, Russian 2%, Baloch 1% (2022 census, whose total is disputed); median age 28; 56% urban
Minimum wage	1,410 manat a month since January 2025 ($403 at the official 3.5 manat = $1, fixed since 2015; about $67 at the black-market rate, which in July 2026 was roughly six times the official one)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Turkmen tribes on the sea's eastern shore were the last part of Central Asia conquered by Russia, subdued only after the 1881 massacre at Geok Tepe. The Soviet republic was among the union's poorest and most remote. At independence in 1991, party boss Saparmurat Niyazov became president —

for life, from 1999 — styling himself Turkmenbashi (Leader of the Turkmens), erecting golden statues, renaming months after himself and his mother, and imposing his own book of spiritual guidance on schools. After his death in 2006, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow inherited the system and ruled for 15 years before installing his son Serdar as president in 2022 while retaining the title of National Leader — the region's only formal father-to-son succession. Throughout, the state has remained one of the most closed societies on earth.

Current leadership: President Serdar Berdimuhamedow, installed in a 2022 election after his father stepped down, is the nominal head of state. His father Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow is widely understood to remain the paramount decision-maker — foreign leaders and visiting officials routinely meet both.

Government structure: A presidential republic on paper, in practice a hereditary personalist autocracy with a pervasive personality cult, no independent media, no legal opposition, and severe restrictions on travel and information. The 2023 creation of the Halk Maslahaty as a supreme body above parliament, chaired by the elder Berdimuhamedow, formalized the dual leadership. Turkmenistan's 1995 declaration of permanent neutrality, recognized by the UN, means it belongs to no military alliance and hosts no foreign bases.

Economy and trade: A roughly $77 billion economy almost entirely dependent on natural gas — Turkmenistan holds the world's fourth-largest reserves, and gas provides the overwhelming majority of export earnings and state revenue. Exports are dominated by gas, with cotton, refined petroleum, and textiles far behind. Imports are led by machinery, vehicles, steel, and food. Trading partners are extraordinarily concentrated: China buys the large majority of gas exports through the Central Asia-China pipeline system and is by far the largest partner, with Turkey, Russia, and Uzbekistan following. This single-buyer dependence on China — and the loss of Russia as a customer after pricing disputes — is the economic driver behind Ashgabat's interest in a trans-Caspian pipeline that would give it a second export outlet to Europe — an idea Washington and Baku courted anew in 2026. Official statistics are unreliable, the currency is strictly controlled, and the state remains one of the least transparent economies in the world.

Closest partners: China, overwhelmingly, as the buyer of most of its gas. Turkey and Azerbaijan have become closer partners: President Serdar Berdimuhamedow's state visit to Baku in June 2026 offered electricity exports and backed a Caspian-to-Black Sea transport corridor through Azerbaijan and Georgia, which he promoted again on a state visit to Georgia in July. Russia and Uzbekistan are secondary partners. The US has shown renewed interest: Secretary of State Rubio backed a trans-Caspian pipeline in June 2026, and Senator Steve Daines visited Ashgabat in July, with the pipeline reportedly high on his agenda. On October 8-9 Turkmenistan hosted, at its Avaza resort, a summit of the Central Asian states and Azerbaijan and one of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which Putin attended.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Turkmenistan avoids open disputes by policy, but two structural tensions define it. Its near-total dependence on China as a gas buyer gives Beijing pricing leverage and is the reason Ashgabat keeps a trans-Caspian pipeline to Europe on the table. And its border with Afghanistan, and the Taliban government there, is a persistent security concern the state does not publicly discuss.

4b. Neutrality as Strategy

Turkmenistan's permanent neutrality, reaffirmed in the constitution, is the most consistent foreign-policy doctrine on the Caspian. It has kept the country out of the CSTO, the Eurasian Economic Union, and every regional security bloc, and gave it a basis for dealing with the Taliban before and after 2021. Its cost is isolation: Turkmenistan has fewer diplomatic and economic options than any of its neighbors, which is precisely why a single buyer was able to capture nearly its entire gas trade.

Module 5 — Iran

The Southern Shore in the 2026 War



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, Iran briefings (ongoing); Karim Sadjadpour's analyses of the Supreme Leader's office

5a. The 2026 Context

On February 28, 2026, the United States and Israel launched a joint war against Iran whose opening strikes killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who had led the country since 1989. A Pakistan-mediated ceasefire took effect on April 8, Iran declared the Strait of Hormuz open on April 17, and on June 17 the two governments signed a memorandum in Islamabad meant to end the war. It collapsed in July: American aircraft bombed Iran for most of three weeks, Iran declared the strait closed again on July 11, the United States reimposed its blockade of Iran's ports, and the two sides exchanged fire again in late August and on September 1-3. As of early October the strait is open only to ships Iran authorizes, and talks mediated by Qatar and Pakistan are deadlocked. The Caspian itself was struck: Israel hit naval vessels at Bandar Anzali on March 18, the war's first strike in northern Iran. The Assembly of Experts, the clerical body constitutionally charged with choosing the Supreme Leader, met from March 3 to 8 and selected Khamenei's son Mojtaba, who had never held public office, over publicly discussed alternatives such as former president Hassan Rouhani; injured in the opening strikes, he has made no verified public appearance since, and the Revolutionary Guard's commander, Ahmad Vahidi, and his circle are reported to run the military response and the negotiations. Every judgment about Iran's current posture must start from the fact that the regime is seven months into a wartime succession it never planned for in public.

5b. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei, 57 — in office since March 2026 (0.6 years); chosen by the Assembly of Experts after his father was killed; no verified public appearance since
President	President Masoud Pezeshkian, 72 — in office since July 2024 (2.2 years); heads the government under the Supreme Leader
System	Islamic republic: an unelected Supreme Leader above an elected president and parliament
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	93.2 million (2026)
Land area	1,628,550 km² (628,790 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 98%: Shia about 90%, Sunni about 8% (estimates)
People	Persian about 61%, Azeri 16%, Kurd 10%, Lur 6%, Baloch 2%, Arab 2% (estimates; the census does not record ethnicity); median age 36; 79% urban
Minimum wage	166,255,500 rials a month since March 2026, up 60% ($67 at the open-market rate of about 2.5 million rials = $1, late September 2026; about $111 at the central bank's rate of about 1.5 million in early September)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Persia's northern frontier on the Caspian was the front line of its 19th-century wars with Russia, which ended in the treaties of Gulistan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) that stripped Persia of the Caucasus, including what is now Azerbaijan — a loss that still shapes Iranian views of its northern neighbors. Reza Shah founded the Pahlavi dynasty in 1925 and modernized the state; his son was restored by a 1953 coup backed by American and British intelligence and overthrown by the 1979 Islamic Revolution, which created the Islamic Republic under Ayatollah Khomeini. The eight-year war with Iraq (1980-88) forged the Revolutionary Guard as the regime's central institution. Ali Khamenei succeeded Khomeini in 1989 and led for 37 years through sanctions, the 2015 nuclear deal and its 2018 collapse, and escalating confrontation with Israel, until he was killed on the first day of the 2026 war. His son Mojtaba's succession made the Islamic Republic, for the first time, a hereditary one.

Current leadership: Supreme Leader Mojtaba Khamenei, a mid-ranking cleric trained in the seminaries of Qom, with close ties to the Revolutionary Guard and the hardline Stability Front, had spent years as an unofficial power in his father's office but held no formal post. His messages are read out by others. President Masoud Pezeshkian, a reformist-leaning heart surgeon, remains head of government, though the presidency's authority relative to the Supreme Leader and the Guard has narrowed further in wartime — the Guard's commander blocked his choice of intelligence minister.

Government structure: The Islamic Republic layers an elected government under an unelected clerical one. The Supreme Leader commands the armed forces, appoints the judiciary and half the Guardian Council, and has final authority on all major questions. Beneath him, a president and parliament are elected, but candidates must first be approved by the Guardian Council, which routinely disqualifies reformists. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps operates as a parallel military, intelligence, and economic power center that has grown more dominant during the war. The 88-member Assembly of Experts selects and can theoretically remove the Supreme Leader.

Economy and trade: A roughly $370 billion economy in 2025, the Caspian's second-largest, severely constrained by sanctions, chronic inflation, and now the physical destruction of the 2026 war: inflation passed 80% at midyear, the rial fell to about 2.5 million to the dollar on the open market in September, and under the American blockade crude shipments are near zero. Exports are led by crude oil (mostly to China,

often through discounted and circuitous channels), petrochemicals, natural gas, metals, and pistachios, saffron, and other agricultural products. Imports are led by machinery, grain, vehicles and parts, and pharmaceuticals. Top trading partners: China overwhelmingly, then the United Arab Emirates (as a transshipment hub), Turkey, India, and Iraq. Iran has been the least willing littoral state to finalize offshore boundaries.

Closest partners: China, as the main oil buyer and diplomatic shield. Russia, as a strategic partner in the North-South corridor and in sanctions evasion, which has supplied drone components and intelligence since February — and, by a European government's account, explosives and munitions shipped across the Caspian — and whose president pledged continued support at the September 1, 2026 SCO summit in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, though the war's course exposed the limits of what Moscow would do beyond that. Iran's Caspian neighbors have kept it supplied: with the Gulf ports blockaded, its Caspian ports have run around the clock on Russian, Kazakh, and Turkmen grain, and Azerbaijan sent humanitarian aid that Pezeshkian thanked Aliyev for in August. Pakistan's mediation gave Islamabad new standing. The 'axis of resistance' network — Hezbollah, the Houthis, Iraqi militias — was degraded by the 2024-26 wars but fought on in 2026.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The United States and Israel, in a state of open hostility with no diplomatic relations and a war that resumed in July after the June memorandum collapsed; Washington rejected Iran's offer to reopen Hormuz on September 26, and on October 5 Pezeshkian called the talks meaningless. Azerbaijan, with which relations are chronically tense over Iran's large Azeri minority, Baku's ties to Israel, and Iranian suspicion that Azerbaijani territory could be used against it — strained further by a suspected Iranian drone strike on Nakhchivan's airport in March, then eased by wartime aid. Internally, the legitimacy question — a hereditary succession in a republic founded to reject monarchy, imposed during a war — is the deepest challenge the regime has faced since 1979: protests over the rial's collapse in December 2025 and January 2026 were crushed in a massacre on January 8-9 in which rights groups have documented more than 5,000 deaths (officials admit 3,117; other estimates run far higher), and at least 29 protesters were executed between March and August 2026.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility 1.7; a diaspora of 5 million	Urban, educated, and unemployed
GDP	Opaque, and shrinking in dollar terms with the rial; per head ~$4,000; the IMF projects a contraction of more than 5% in 2026 on the war, the blockade, and the currency	Oil the state's revenue; the bazaar and the Guard's conglomerates the economy
Prices and the rial	Inflation: the IMF projects about 69% on average for 2026; the rial at about 1 million to the dollar in 2025	Hyperinflation's edge
Public finance	Opaque; oil revenue ($30-40B in good years) collapsed; the subsidies; the Guard's foundations outside the budget	The state's fiscal core is the Guard's
Military	~$15B official; the Revolutionary Guard (190,000) and the army; the missile and drone force that struck Israel and the Gulf; the proxies (Hezbollah weakened, the Houthis active, the Iraqi militias); the nuclear program's sites struck in the twelve-day war of June 2025; American and Israeli strikes on nuclear, missile, naval, and leadership targets in 2026; the closure of Hormuz by Iranian mines and missiles, the tanker war; enrichment's status unknown after the strikes	The 2026 war's target
Regime (V-Dem)	Electoral autocracy — the theocracy; Pezeshkian won a 2024 runoff on a 50% turnout; the 2022-23 and 2025-26 uprisings crushed	Freedom House 10/100; the succession the region's largest unknown

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Energy	4 mb/d of oil capacity; exports that ran at 1.5-2 mb/d (no crude loaded since August 25, by the US Treasury Secretary's account); the offshore South Pars field's gas for domestic use; blackouts and gas shortages every summer and winter; a water crisis (Tehran's rationing; Isfahan's Zayandeh Rud river dry)	A petrostate that cannot power itself
The Caspian	The southern shore; the Bandar Anzali and Amirabad ports; the caviar	The corridor state, now the corridor's customer

In depth — the question: Iran's year was the war it had spent forty years preparing for and lost the first round of, and the regime faces its worst conditions since 1988. Its assets are the ones it has always had: a state that has survived war, sanctions, and uprising for 47 years and a population that hates the regime and fears the alternative. The question is whether the theocracy survives a resumed war and a collapsing economy under a leader chosen in a week and seen by no one since — and, if it does not, what replaces the state that holds the strait.

5c. Iran on the Caspian

The Caspian was long Iran's least important shore economically — its oil and gas lie in the Persian Gulf and southwest — but the war has made it vital, and it matters for four reasons. With the Gulf coast blockaded, it is Iran's main heavy-cargo route under its own control, a key channel for imported grain, and the sea lane by which Russia supplies it; that has made the route a target, struck by Israel at Bandar Anzali in March and by Ukraine at sea in July. Iran never accepted the median-line seabed division its neighbors favor, which would give it roughly 11-13% of the seabed rather than the equal fifth it long claimed, and it remains the one state not to have ratified the 2018 convention, which is therefore not yet in force. Iranian critics warn that ratifying could lock in the smaller share and ease a trans-Caspian pipeline, since the convention would require consent only from the states whose sectors a pipeline crosses. The northern coast is Iran's agricultural heartland and the terminus of the North-South corridor to Russia, whose missing Rasht-Astara rail link still awaits a decision by Iran's Supreme National Security Council. And the 1828 loss of the Caucasus to Russia, including what is now Azerbaijan, gives Iran a historical claim of cultural kinship with Azerbaijan that Baku firmly rejects.

Module 6 — Azerbaijan

The Western Shore and the Region's Energy Pivot



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Thomas de Waal, *Black Garden: Armenia and Azerbaijan Through Peace and War*

6a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Ilham Aliyev, 64 — in office since October 2003 (22.9 years); succeeded his father; re-elected 2024; his wife, Mehriban Aliyeva, is first vice president
System	Presidential republic, hereditary personalist rule in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	10.5 million (2026)
Land area	82,658 km² (31,910 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 96%, of whom about 65% are Shia and 35% Sunni (official estimates)
People	Azerbaijani 95%, Lezgin 2%, Talysh 1%, Russian 1% (2019 census); median age 35; 59% urban
Minimum wage	400 manat a month since January 2025 ($235 at 1.70 manat = $1, the rate held since 2017)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The territory of modern Azerbaijan was Persian for most of its history until Russia took it in the 1813 and 1828 treaties. Baku became the world's first great oil city in the 1870s, briefly producing half the world's supply, and the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic of 1918-20 was the Muslim world's first secular parliamentary republic before the Red Army ended it. Independence in 1991 came amid war with Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh, an Armenian-majority enclave inside Azerbaijan, which Armenia won in 1994. Heydar Aliyev, a former Soviet Politburo member, took power in 1993, stabilized the state, and signed the

1994 'Contract of the Century' with Western oil companies; his son Ilham succeeded him in 2003. Azerbaijan retook the districts around Nagorno-Karabakh and part of the enclave itself in a 2020 war and the rest in a 2023 offensive after which nearly the entire Armenian population fled, ending a 35-year conflict on Baku's terms.

Current leadership: President Ilham Aliyev was re-elected in February 2024 to a seven-year term. His wife Mehriban Aliyeva has served as first vice president since 2017. Prime Minister Ali Asadov manages the government but the presidency holds all real authority.

Government structure: A presidential republic in which the Aliyev family has held power since 1993 through constitutional changes that abolished term limits (2009) and extended terms (2016). Elections are not competitive, opposition and independent media are heavily restricted, and the state is financed by an oil fund controlled by the presidency. The 2023 recovery of Nagorno-Karabakh gave the government a surge of nationalist legitimacy it has used to consolidate further.

Economy and trade: A roughly $76 billion economy built on oil and gas, which provide about 90% of export earnings. Exports are led by crude oil and, increasingly, natural gas — production reached 25.3 billion cubic meters in the first half of 2026, and exports 12.7 billion, mainly to Turkey and Europe via the Southern Gas Corridor pipelines that run through Georgia and Turkey to Italy. Imports are led by machinery, vehicles, food, and pharmaceuticals. Top trading partners: Italy (the largest oil buyer), Turkey, Russia, China, and Georgia. Azerbaijan's strategic economic asset is geography: it is the only Caspian state through which energy and freight can reach Europe without crossing Russia or Iran, which makes it the hub of both the Southern Gas Corridor and the Middle Corridor rail-and-ferry route. The EU's 2022 deal to double Azerbaijani gas imports by 2027 cemented its role as an alternative to Russian supply, though deliveries to Europe — 12.8 billion cubic meters in 2025 — fell in the first half of 2026, and the target looks out of reach.

Closest partners: Turkey, in a relationship both governments describe as 'one nation, two states,' formalized in a 2021 alliance treaty and the basis of Azerbaijan's military modernization. Israel, a major arms supplier and oil customer, a relationship that antagonizes Iran. The United States, with which Aliyev signed a Strategic Partnership Charter with Vice President Vance in February 2026 and agreed to the US-backed TRIPP transit route through Armenia, whose construction has slipped to 2027. The EU, as its gas customer, and Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan as Middle Corridor partners. With Armenia, a peace treaty was initialled at the White House in August 2025 and Azerbaijan has let goods transit to Armenia since October 2025 and now sells it fuel, but Baku will not sign until Armenia changes its constitution.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, in what was the sharpest deterioration of any Caspian relationship: after Russian air defenses hit Azerbaijan Airlines Flight 8243 near Grozny, in Chechnya, in December 2024 — it crashed near Aktau, killing 38 of the 67 aboard — Aliyev demanded accountability, refused calls from Chechen leader Kadyrov, and restricted Russian influence at home. Putin acknowledged Russian responsibility in October 2025, but in February 2026 Aliyev still accused Moscow of deliberately striking Azerbaijan's diplomatic missions and energy sites in Ukraine. Reconciliation came on Baku's terms: compensation was settled in April 2026, Aliyev declared that period behind them in July, and the foreign ministers met in Moscow days later — a 'new normality,' in one Baku insider's phrase, not the old deference. Iran, over Azerbaijan's Israeli ties, Iran's Azeri minority, and mutual suspicion, sharpened by a suspected Iranian drone strike on Nakhchivan's airport in March 2026. And Armenia, where the peace is initialled but unsigned: Prime Minister Pashinyan's party won June 2026's election but not the two-thirds majority needed to call the constitutional referendum Baku demands.

6b. Why Azerbaijan Punches Above Its Weight

A country of ten million has become the Caspian's most consequential actor after Russia for a single geographic reason: it is the only littoral state whose territory offers a route to Europe that crosses neither Russia nor Iran. That makes it the hub of the Southern Gas Corridor (Baku through Georgia and Turkey to Italy), the Middle Corridor freight route from China, and any future trans-Caspian pipeline from Turkmenistan or Kazakhstan. The EU's 2022 decision to double Azerbaijani gas imports, the US partnership charter, and the 2026 alignment with Turkmenistan all flow from that one fact.

Module 7 — The Pipeline Map

Who Gets Caspian Energy to Market

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Energy Agency, Central Asia and Caucasus energy reports; Oxford Institute for Energy Studies, Caspian gas analyses

7a. The Defining Question

The Caspian basin holds some of the world's largest oil and gas reserves, but it is landlocked twice over — the sea has no outlet, and the states around it must cross someone else's territory to reach any customer. Every major political alignment in this course can be read as an answer to one question: which way does the energy go? There are four routes, and each has an owner.

• **North, through Russia.** The Soviet-era default. Kazakh oil flows through the Caspian Pipeline Consortium line to the Black Sea port of Novorossiysk, and historically Turkmen gas went north through Russian pipelines. Since 2022 this route carries sanctions risk, Russian leverage, and — for Kazakhstan — the memory that Moscow can throttle it at will. More than 80% of Kazakh oil still goes this way, and in 2026 the war reached it: Ukrainian drone attacks disrupted loading at the consortium's terminal in January, June, July, and September, and in late July, after at least eight tankers were hit, Kazakh output fell by more than half.

• **West, through Azerbaijan to Europe.** The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline (2006) and the Southern Gas Corridor (completed 2020) carry Azerbaijani energy through Georgia and Turkey to the Mediterranean and Italy. This is the only route to Europe that avoids both Russia and Iran, and the EU committed in 2022 to double gas imports through it by 2027, a target now out of reach. Its constraint is capacity: the corridor can carry Azerbaijani volumes but not, yet, Central Asian ones.

• **East, to China.** The Central Asia-China gas pipeline system (2009 onward) carries Turkmen, and some Kazakh and Uzbek, gas to China's Xinjiang region, and a Kazakhstan-China oil pipeline runs from the Caspian to the Chinese border. China has become Turkmenistan's near-sole customer and Kazakhstan's co-equal largest partner through this route — reliable, but with a single buyer setting the price.

• **Across the sea, the trans-Caspian option.** A pipeline under the Caspian from Turkmenistan or Kazakhstan to Azerbaijan would connect Central Asian gas to the Southern Gas Corridor and Europe. Proposed since the 1990s, it was blocked for decades by the unresolved legal status, Russian and Iranian opposition, and Turkmen reluctance. The 2018 convention would remove the legal obstacle once in force, and 2026 brought renewed interest: Turkmenistan's warming to Azerbaijan, open American backing (Secretary of State Rubio's in June, a senator's tour of Baku, Astana, and Ashgabat in July), gas finds on Uzbekistan's side of the Ustyurt plateau, and Iran's move to ratify the convention — though no agreement or investment decision has followed.

7b. Reading the Map Politically

The four routes explain the alliances. Russia wants energy to keep flowing north and opposes the trans-Caspian route because it would end its transit leverage. Azerbaijan and Turkey want everything to flow west because they own that corridor. China is content with the eastern route and has no interest in Central Asian gas reaching Europe. Iran, which has claimed a say over any seabed pipeline, has been an obstacle to the trans-Caspian option alongside Russia — though the convention, once in force, would require consent

only from the states whose sectors a pipeline crosses, so Iran's move to ratify it would weaken that claim. And Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, the producers, want as many routes as possible precisely so that no single transit state or buyer can dictate terms — which is why both keep the trans-Caspian line on the table.

7c. The Middle Corridor

The same logic applies to freight. The Middle Corridor, or Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, moves goods from China across Kazakhstan, by ferry across the Caspian to Azerbaijan, and on through Georgia and Turkey to Europe — bypassing both Russia's northern rail route and the sea route through Suez. Traffic grew 62% in 2024 to about 4.5 million tons but slipped to about 4.1 million in 2025, by Kazakh count, even as container traffic kept growing — up 11% in the first eight months of 2026; Kazakhstan aims for 10 million tons a year by 2028. Its bottleneck is the Caspian crossing itself: limited ferry capacity, port congestion at Aktau and Baku, and a sea whose falling level now keeps the ferries to about 80% of a full load.

Module 8 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Disputes

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Caspian Policy Center, regional briefings (ongoing)

8a. The Unfinished Seabed

The 2018 convention settled the surface but left the seabed to bilateral deals. The northern three — Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan — signed theirs in the early 2000s and have developed their sectors. The southern lines remain undrawn: Iran disputes the share a median line would give it (Module 5); Iran and Azerbaijan have never agreed on their boundary (an Iranian gunboat confronted a BP survey vessel in the disputed zone in 2001); and Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan only resolved their long fight over the Serdar/Kapaz field with a 2021 joint development deal. Any trans-Caspian pipeline would have to run through waters whose ownership is still contested at the southern end.

8b. Russia and Azerbaijan

The December 2024 airliner shootdown turned the Caspian's most stable bilateral relationship into its most volatile. Aliyev's decision to demand accountability publicly, refuse Kadyrov's calls, accuse Moscow of striking Azerbaijan's diplomatic missions in Ukraine, and simultaneously sign a US partnership charter represented a calculated bet that Russia, tied down in Ukraine, could not afford to punish him. The bet paid (Module 6): by July the foreign ministers were planning economic talks — a reconciliation on terms far more equal than before. Whether Moscow accepts a permanently more independent Baku, or waits for a moment to reassert itself once the Ukraine war ends, remains the sea's most important open question.

8c. Iran at War

A weakened Iran under an untested Supreme Leader changes the Caspian in two directions. It reduces Tehran's capacity to obstruct — and its move to ratify the 2018 convention could ease both the seabed division and a trans-Caspian pipeline. But it has also made the sea a war zone at one remove (Modules 2, 5), and the route that feeds Iran also arms it. The danger of a legitimacy-pressured regime seeking confrontation abroad remains, with Azerbaijan the most exposed neighbor given its Israeli ties — though wartime aid from Baku has, for now, warmed relations. Iran's northern relationships have historically been its calmest, and despite the March drone strike on Nakhchivan they have largely stayed so; whether that lasts under a Supreme Leader no one has seen in public since March is not yet clear.

8d. The Shrinking Sea

The Caspian's water level has been falling for decades and the decline accelerated in the 2020s, driven by reduced Volga inflow, dam construction, and rising evaporation; in Kazakhstan's sector it stood near 29.3 meters below ocean level in 2025. The northern shelf, only a few meters deep, is retreating by kilometers: Kazakhstan is dredging the port of Aktau to six or seven meters, and Russia closed the Volga-Caspian

channel near Astrakhan for emergency dredging in June 2026. The shallowing threatens the Middle Corridor ferries, the North-South corridor, offshore platforms, and the endemic Caspian seal and sturgeon. Only in 2026 did the five states begin to treat it as a shared priority — a conference of the Tehran Convention made the falling level its main topic in September, and on October 9, at a summit on the sea's environment that Turkmenistan hosted at Avaza, the five presidents agreed to form a commission to study the decline and coordinate a response, due to meet first in Azerbaijan in the first half of 2027 — but it allocates no water and creates no common monitoring body, and the region's politics remain structurally unequipped to address the decline.

8e. The Last Word

The throughline of all eight modules: the Caspian is organized not by institutions but by geography and energy. Five autocracies with very different politics share a landlocked sea whose value can only be realized by crossing a neighbor's territory, which makes transit routes the currency of power. For two centuries Russia held that currency. The Ukraine war has spent much of it — Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Azerbaijan are building routes around Russia, Azerbaijan has openly defied it and made it concede, and even neutral Turkmenistan is being courted, with American backing, for a pipeline Moscow has opposed for thirty years — even as the war in the Gulf has made Iran more dependent on Russia than ever. Whether this produces a multipolar Caspian, or a Russian reassertion once the wars end, is the question the next decade will answer.

Key Points

The Caspian

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Azerbaijan	Ilham Aliyev	President	64	October 2003	22.9
Russia	Vladimir Putin	President	73	May 2012	14.4
Kazakhstan	Kassym-Jomart Tokayev	President	73	March 2019	7.5
Turkmenistan	Serdar Berdimuhamedow	President	45	March 2022	4.6
Iran	Mojtaba Khamenei	Supreme Leader	57	March 2026	0.6

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's current continuous tenure; Putin turned 74 on October 7. Putin has held power since 1999 as president (1999–2008, and again since 2012) or prime minister (2008–12); his tenure counts from his return to the presidency. Iran's Supreme Leader outranks its president, who heads the government. In Turkmenistan the president's father, Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedow (president 2006–22), holds the title National Leader and is widely seen as the real decision-maker. Aliyev succeeded his father, Heydar, who ruled from 1993.

The Takeaways

• The Caspian is a landlocked sea whose politics reduce to one question — which way does the oil and gas flow — and 2026 answered it: around Russia where possible, through routes the wars made dangerous, and, for Iran, across the sea itself.

• Russia is the hegemon being routed around: a fifth year of war costing about 7% of GDP with internal security, a front that moves slowly at great cost, growth down from 4% to about 1%, a wealth fund's liquid reserves down by more than half — and budget oil and gas revenue that fell 17% in the first nine months despite the Hormuz price spike, eaten by discounts, sanctions, and the compensation paid to refiners.

• Russia can fight at this intensity for as long as its revenue allows, and 2026 showed that a high oil price alone no longer guarantees that revenue; the 2027 draft budget sets defense spending 27% above earlier plans and cuts social spending.

• In Putin's twenty-seventh year, Russia is a personalist regime with a term to 2030, eligibility to 2036, and no succession mechanism; its coalition is North Korea's troops, Iran's drones, and China's components, and its position abroad contracted everywhere the West was strong.

• Iran fought the war it spent forty years preparing for and lost the first round: Ali Khamenei killed on its first day and his son Mojtaba installed in a week and unseen since, the April ceasefire and the June memorandum collapsed in July, Hormuz open only to ships Iran permits, protesters massacred in January 2026, a rial at 2.5 million to the dollar and inflation above 80%.

• Iran's question is whether the theocracy survives a resumed war and a collapsing economy under a leader chosen in a week; for now the Caspian is its lifeline, and it is moving to ratify the convention it refused for eight years.

• Kazakhstan is the region's swing state — the world's largest uranium producer, oil through the CPC pipeline across Russia (struck by Ukrainian drones at its Black Sea end) and increasingly the Middle Corridor around it, a 2026 constitution that rebuilt parliament, and a court ruling that reset Tokayev's term count — hedging among Russia, China, and the West more successfully than any neighbor.

• Turkmenistan is a hermit gas state whose exports go to China through one pipeline system and whose dynasty (the Berdimuhamedows) has no politics beyond the family; the trans-Caspian pipeline to Azerbaijan and Europe, now openly backed by Washington, remains the region's unbuilt project.

• Azerbaijan won its war (Karabakh, 2023), defied Russia after the 2024 airliner shoot-down and made Moscow concede responsibility and settle compensation, sells gas to Europe as the corridor's engine, and runs the Middle Corridor's Caspian crossing — Aliyev's dynasty as the region's most independent small power, its Armenian peace initialled but unsigned.

• The pipeline map is the region's constitution: the CPC north through Russia to the Black Sea, the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan line west, the Central Asia-China lines east, the north-south corridor through Iran to India, and the Caspian ferries that bottleneck the route around Russia.

• The 2026 lesson: Russia contracted into a Chinese dependency with a shadow fleet, Iran into a state under siege supplied across the sea, and the states in the middle — Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan — gained by holding the routes between them.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. What did the 2018 Aktau convention settle, and what did it leave open?

A) Every seabed boundary, including Iran's
B) Only fishing quotas
C) Nothing at all, since Kazakhstan and Iran both refused to sign it
D) The surface's status, leaving the seabed lines to neighbors

2. Why did Iran move in 2026 to ratify the Caspian convention it had left unratified since 2018?

A) It needed Russian gas through a new pipeline.
B) Wartime security: the convention bars outside powers' forces from the sea.
C) The UN ordered all five states to ratify.
D) The June memorandum with Washington required it.

3. What did Kazakhstan's March 2026 referendum create?

A) A directly elected prime minister
B) A second chamber for the regions, elected separately
C) A one-chamber parliament and a vice president
D) A presidency limited to two five-year terms, with Tokayev barred from running again

4. Which state's president is widely seen as outranked by his father?

A) Turkmenistan's.
B) Azerbaijan's, where Heydar Aliyev still advises.
C) Kazakhstan's, where Nazarbayev still rules.
D) Iran's, where the Supreme Leader is the president's father.

5. Who is Iran's Supreme Leader, chosen in March 2026?

A) Ali Larijani
B) Mojtaba Khamenei
C) Masoud Pezeshkian
D) Ahmad Vahidi, the Guard's commander

6. What became of Russia's rift with Azerbaijan over the 2024 airliner?

A) It led to war in 2025
B) It remains frozen, with all flights suspended
C) Putin admitted responsibility and compensation was settled
D) Azerbaijan closed its airspace to Russia and expelled its ambassador

7. Why did Kazakhstan's oil output fall by more than half in late July 2026?

A) A blowout at Kashagan forced the field to shut.
B) Russia shut the pipeline to punish its trade with Ukraine.
C) A strike by oil workers spread from Tengiz to every field.
D) Drones hit tankers at its Black Sea outlet.

8. What has happened to the Caspian's water level?

A) It is falling, shrinking ports and limiting ferries to partial loads
B) It is rising after record Volga floods
C) It has held steady since 2018
D) It rose when Iran dammed its rivers

9. What role did the Caspian take on for Iran in 2026?

A) Its main oil-export route
B) A haven for its navy
C) Its supply line for food, freight, and reportedly Russian munitions
D) Its route for Chinese weapons

10. Which route takes Azerbaijan's gas to Europe without crossing Russia or Iran?

A) The Southern Gas Corridor via Georgia and Turkey
B) The Power of Siberia 2
C) The Druzhba pipeline
D) A seabed pipeline from Baku to Turkmenistan's port of Turkmenbashi

11. What happened to Russia's oil and gas budget revenue in January-September 2026?

A) It doubled on the Hormuz price
B) It fell 17%
C) It rose about 30%
D) It held flat at record highs

12. How many of the five Caspian states does Freedom House rate Free?

A) Two
B) One: Kazakhstan
C) Three, all but Iran and Turkmenistan
D) None of them

13. What happened to Middle Corridor freight volumes in 2025, measured in tons by Kazakh count?

A) They doubled
B) They rose 62% again
C) They tripled once Russia's northern rail route closed to Chinese cargo under sanctions
D) They fell

14. What carries most of Kazakhstan's oil exports?

A) Tankers to Baku
B) A pipeline across Russia
C) Rail to China
D) The Middle Corridor's ferries and railways

15. What does the course name as the Caspian's currency of power?

A) Naval strength on the sea
B) Seabed oil reserves
C) Transit routes that reach customers past a neighbor
D) Its caviar and fisheries

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. D 2. B 3. C 4. A 5. B 6. C 7. D 8. A 9. C 10. A 11. B 12. D 13. D 14. B 15. C

The Baltic & North Sea

Figures current as of October 2026

The Baltic and North Sea — Britain, Ireland, the Nordics, Germany, the Low Countries, Poland, and the Baltic states: leaders, governments, economies, and the alliance that Russia's war rebuilt.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: Two Seas, One Security Theater

Goal: Establish the geography, the chokepoints, and the encirclement of the Baltic by the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO).

Covers the North Sea's energy economy, the Baltic's chokepoints, the alliance map since Finland and Sweden joined, and the disputes that recur.

MODULE 2 — Iceland, the UK & Ireland (the Atlantic Rim)

Goal: Profile three states that sit outside the overlap of the EU and NATO in different ways.

Covers Iceland's vote against reopening EU talks, the UK under a prime minister who took office without a general election, and neutral Ireland.

MODULE 3 — Norway & Denmark

Goal: Profile the two Scandinavian kingdoms with the region's oil and Arctic weight.

Covers Norway's new king and its gas, Denmark's snap election, and the Greenland dispute and the agreement that settled it.

MODULE 4 — Sweden & Finland

Goal: Profile the two newest NATO members.

Covers the end of two centuries of neutrality, Finland's 1,340-kilometer Russian border, and Sweden's lost majority.

MODULE 5 — Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium & Luxembourg

Goal: Profile the North Sea's industrial and institutional core.

Covers Germany's rearmament and the far right's state-election wins, the Dutch minority cabinet, Belgium and Russia's frozen assets, and the grand duchy.

MODULE 6 — Poland

Goal: Profile the alliance's most consequential eastern member.

Covers one of NATO's largest defense budgets, the cohabitation between president and government, and the Ukraine logistics hub.

MODULE 7 — Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania

Goal: Profile the three Baltic states on the frontline.

Covers NATO's highest defense spending, new governments in Riga and Vilnius, Russian minorities, Kaliningrad, and the Suwałki gap.

MODULE 8 — The Alliance Map: NATO's Northern Flank, the EU & the Nordic-Baltic Bloc

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's institutions.

Covers how NATO and the EU overlap here, the Nordic-Baltic Eight, the Joint Expeditionary Force, and the Russia-Belarus axis.

MODULE 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers cable sabotage and the shadow fleet, Kaliningrad, Greenland after the agreement, the eastern frontier, and Russian reconstitution.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

The parties, institutions, and abbreviations the modules rely on are defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country each one belongs to or concerns, or how many of the fifteen when it spans several; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Institutions, Alliances, and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
Fourteen of the 15	NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)	The Western military alliance founded in 1949, whose members pledge to defend one another.
Region-wide	Article 4; Article 5	The North Atlantic Treaty's clauses on consultation when a member feels threatened and on collective defense, under which an attack on one is an attack on all.
Region-wide	Baltic Sentry; Eastern Sentry	NATO's missions to patrol the Baltic against seabed sabotage and to guard the eastern flank's airspace.
Twelve of the 15	European Union	The 27-member union.
Region-wide	European Council; Council of the EU	The summit of the EU's heads of state or government, which sets the union's direction, and the body of national ministers that legislates with the European Parliament, chaired by each member in turn for six months.
Nine of the 15	Euro	The EU's single currency, used by the members of the euro area.
Iceland, Norway	EEA (European Economic Area)	The 1994 agreement that extends the EU's single market to non-members.
Thirteen of the 15	Schengen area	The zone of travel without passport checks.
Poland	SAFE (Security Action for Europe)	The EU's €150 billion program of loans to member states for defense, agreed in 2025.
Eight of the 15	NB8 (Nordic-Baltic Eight)	The informal format of the five Nordic and three Baltic states.
Ten of the 15	JEF (Joint Expeditionary Force)	A northern European defense grouping.
Nordic states	Nordic Council; NORDEFCO (Nordic Defence Cooperation)	The Nordic states' interparliamentary council, founded in 1952, and their defense-cooperation framework, founded in 2009.
Poland, Baltic states	Bucharest Nine	A caucus of NATO's eastern-flank members.
Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg	Benelux	The union of Belgium, the Netherlands, and Luxembourg.
Region-wide	G7 (Group of Seven)	The forum of seven large advanced economies: the US, Japan, Germany, the UK, France, Italy, and Canada.
Region-wide	Freedom House	The US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.
United Kingdom	Five Eyes	The intelligence-sharing alliance of the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.
United Kingdom	OBR (Office for Budget Responsibility)	The UK's official fiscal watchdog, whose forecasts each budget must meet.
Ireland	Triple lock	Ireland's rule that troops deploy abroad only with the approval of the government, the Dáil, and the UN.
Germany	Debt brake	Germany's constitutional limit on borrowing, adopted in 2009.

Governments, Parties, and Parliaments

Country	Name	Who or what
United Kingdom	Labour; Conservatives	The two parties that have governed Britain for a century.
United Kingdom	Reform UK	Nigel Farage's right-wing populist party, founded in 2018 as the Brexit Party.
United Kingdom	SNP (Scottish National Party); Plaid Cymru	The parties seeking independence for Scotland and for Wales.
United Kingdom	Sinn Féin	The Irish republican party, which seeks a united Ireland.
Iceland	Althing	Iceland's parliament.
Ireland	Dáil; Taoiseach; Tánaiste	Ireland's lower house, its prime minister, and its deputy prime minister.
Ireland	Fianna Fáil; Fine Gael	Ireland's two main center-right parties.
Denmark	Social Democrats; Venstre	Frederiksen's center-left party, and the center-right Liberal party.
Greenland	Demokraatit; Inuit Ataqatigiit; Atassut; Siumut	Greenland's liberal, left-wing, unionist, and social-democratic parties.
Sweden	Tidö parties	The Moderates, Christian Democrats, Liberals, and Sweden Democrats, named for the castle where they struck their 2022 agreement.
Sweden	Riksdag	Sweden's parliament.
Finland	National Coalition; Finns Party	Orpo's center-right party and its nationalist coalition partner.
Germany	CDU (Christian Democratic Union); CSU (Christian Social Union)	Germany's main center-right party and its Bavarian sister party, which sit together in parliament.
Germany	SPD (Social Democratic Party)	Germany's oldest party, on the center left.
Germany	AfD (Alternative for Germany)	The far-right party founded in 2013.
Germany	Die Linke; BSW (Sahra Wagenknecht Alliance)	The left-wing party, and the left-populist party that split from it in 2024.
Germany	Bundestag; Bundesrat; Federal Convention	The federal parliament, the chamber of the 16 states, and the assembly of both that elects the president.
Netherlands	D66 (Democrats 66); VVD (People's Party for Freedom and Democracy); CDA (Christian Democratic Appeal)	The social-liberal, center-right, and Christian democratic parties.
Netherlands	PVV (Party for Freedom)	Geert Wilders's far-right party.
Belgium	N-VA (New Flemish Alliance)	De Wever's Flemish nationalist party.
Belgium	'Arizona' coalition	De Wever's five-party government, named for the parties' colors, which match Arizona's flag.
Luxembourg	CSV (Christian Social People's Party)	Frieden's party, Luxembourg's largest.
Poland	Civic Coalition; PiS (Law and Justice)	Tusk's centrist alliance, and the national-conservative party.
Poland	Sejm; Constitutional Tribunal	Poland's lower house, and its constitutional court.
Estonia	Reform Party	Michal's liberal party.
Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania	Riigikogu; Saeima; Seimas	The parliaments of Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.
Latvia	United List; New Unity	Kulbergs's center-right alliance and the party of his two predecessors.
Latvia	Latvia First; Sovereign Power	A populist party, and a pro-Russian party.

Country	Name	Who or what
Lithuania	Social Democratic Party; Nemunas Dawn	Lithuania's center-left party, and a nationalist party.

Places, Companies, and Terms

Country	Name	Who or what
Region-wide	Danish straits	The three channels that connect the Baltic to the North Sea.
Russia	Kaliningrad; Suwałki gap	Russia's exclave between Poland and Lithuania, and the strip of Polish-Lithuanian border land that separates it from Belarus.
Region-wide	GIUK (Greenland-Iceland-UK) gap	The North Atlantic passages between Greenland, Iceland, and the UK.
Region-wide	Shadow fleet	The aging, often uninsured tankers that carry Russian oil around Western sanctions.
Finland, Estonia	Estlink-2; Eagle S	The power cable between Finland and Estonia, and a shadow-fleet tanker.
Denmark	Greenland; Faroe Islands; Pituffik	The two self-governing nations of the Danish realm, and the US base in northern Greenland formerly called Thule.
Norway	Svalbard	Norway's Arctic archipelago.
Belgium	Euroclear	The Brussels-based securities depository.
Netherlands	ASML (Advanced Semiconductor Materials Lithography)	The Dutch company that makes the world's most advanced chip-lithography machines.
Germany	SAP (Systems, Applications and Products)	The German software company.
United Kingdom	Chagos Islands	The British territory in the Indian Ocean, home to the US base at Diego Garcia, which a 2025 treaty would hand to Mauritius.
United Kingdom	Gilts	UK government bonds.
Lithuania	LNG (liquefied natural gas)	Gas chilled to liquid so it can be shipped by tanker.
Region-wide	The 2026 Iran war	The war the US and Israel launched on Iran on February 28, 2026.
Region-wide	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year, converted at market exchange rates unless stated at purchasing-power parity, which adjusts for differences in prices.

Module 1 — Foundations

Two Seas, One Security Theater



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Oliver Moody, *Baltic: The Future of Europe*

1a. Two Different Seas

The North Sea and the Baltic are joined by the Danish straits but are economically and strategically distinct. The North Sea is open to the Atlantic, deep, and rich: its oil and gas fields made Norway and Britain energy exporters, and its shallow southern basin is now the world's largest offshore wind development zone. The Baltic is nearly enclosed, shallow, brackish, and frozen in parts each winter — a sea whose value is transit rather than resources. Nine countries share its shore; since Finland and Sweden joined NATO, all of them except Russia are alliance members, which is why the Baltic is now routinely called a 'NATO lake.'

1b. The Chokepoints

• **The Danish straits** — the Øresund, Great Belt, and Little Belt are the Baltic's only outlets, all within Danish and Swedish territorial waters. Every Russian warship and tanker leaving St. Petersburg or Kaliningrad passes through them.

• **The Gulf of Finland** — the narrow eastern arm of the Baltic leading to St. Petersburg, Russia's largest port, flanked by Finland to the north and Estonia to the south.

• **Kaliningrad** — the exclave and the 65-kilometer Suwałki gap beside it (7c, 9b).

• **The GIUK gap** — the passages Russian submarines must cross to reach the Atlantic, the Cold War's most-watched waters and again a priority.

1c. The Membership Map

Fourteen of the 15 states profiled here are NATO members; Ireland is the exception. Twelve are EU members; Iceland, Norway, and the UK are not, though Iceland and Norway are in the EEA. Nine use the euro (Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Luxembourg, Ireland, and the three Baltic states); Denmark, Sweden, Poland, Norway, Iceland, and the UK keep their own currencies. The overlap is unusually tight: no state here sits inside one institution while working against the other.

1d. The Disputes That Recur

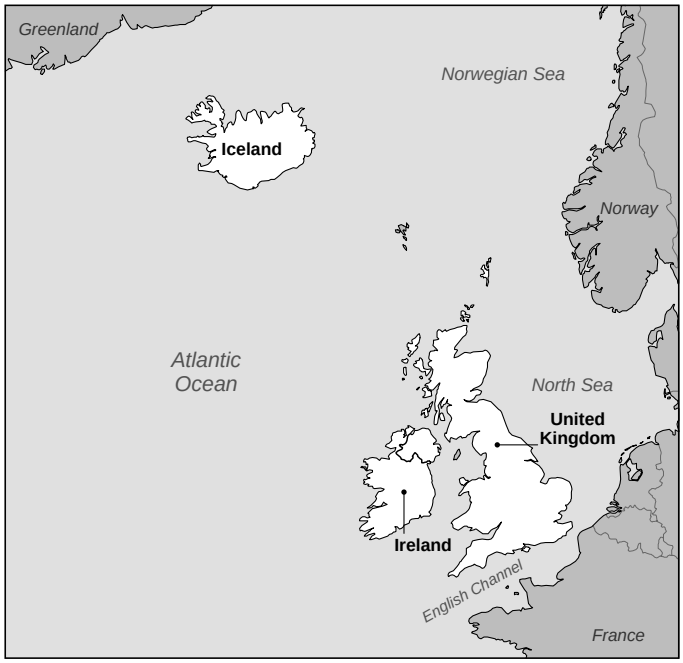
Four issues run through the course. Russia's hybrid campaign in the Baltic — severed undersea cables, a 'shadow fleet' of tankers, airspace violations, drones, and cyberattacks (Modules 4, 6, 7, 9). Greenland, where American pressure to acquire the island put Denmark in open dispute with its most important ally until this year's agreement (Modules 3, 9). The eastern frontier — Finland's closed border, the Baltic states' Russian minorities, Poland's militarized frontier with Belarus, and the Suwałki gap (Modules 4, 6, 7, 9). And Brexit's long tail, which reshaped the UK's relationship with every other state here (Module 2).

1e. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office, and the second figure who matters — the head of state where a prime minister governs, and in Lithuania, where the president leads foreign policy, the prime minister — then the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religions with their shares, the main ethnic or language groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars, where the law sets one. A note under each table gives its sources. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. In a region where almost everyone is formally allied with almost everyone else, the rivalries heading captures the frictions that alliance membership does not remove. All fifteen states are rated Free. The Who's Who before this module defines the parties, institutions, and abbreviations the profiles rely on, and the Key Points page ranks the leaders by time in office, from Denmark's prime minister to the UK's.

Module 2 — Iceland, the UK & Ireland

The Atlantic Rim



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Chatham House, UK foreign policy analysis (ongoing); Institute of International and European Affairs (Dublin)

2a. Iceland

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Kristrún Frostadóttir, 38 — in office since December 2024 (1.8 years); Social Democratic Alliance
Head of state	President Halla Tómasdóttir, 57 — in office since August 2024 (2.2 years); ceremonial; directly elected
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	402,000 (2026)
Land area	100,250 km² (38,710 sq mi)
Religion	Church of Iceland, the Lutheran state church, a little over half of residents; Catholic about 4%; most of the rest in smaller faiths or none (Statistics Iceland's register)
People	Icelanders; immigrants nearly a fifth of residents, Poles the largest group (Statistics Iceland); median age 38; 94% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law: collective agreements, binding on every employer in a sector, set the pay floors

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Settled by Norse farmers in the 9th century, Iceland founded the Althing in 930, one of the world's oldest parliaments, before falling under Norwegian and then Danish rule for six centuries. It gained home rule in 1904, sovereignty in 1918, and full independence as a republic in 1944 while Denmark was

under German occupation. A founding NATO member in 1949, it hosted a US base at Keflavík until 2006 and fought three 'Cod Wars' with Britain over fishing rights. The 2008 collapse of its oversized banking sector was proportionally the largest financial crash in history; the country recovered on tourism, fishing, and geothermal energy, applied to join the EU in 2009, and suspended the talks in 2013.

Current leadership: President Halla Tómasdóttir is a former businesswoman. Kristrún Frostadóttir was 36 when she took office, the youngest prime minister in Icelandic history, at the head of a center-left coalition of her Social Democratic Alliance, the Liberal Reform Party, and the People's Party whose term runs to 2028. Her government brought forward to August 2026 a referendum it had promised for 2027 on resuming EU accession talks; voters rejected reopening them, 52.5% to 47.5%, and she said the result would be respected, so talks are not expected to resume this term.

Government structure: The Althing, a 63-seat unicameral parliament, chooses the government; the president has a rarely used power to refer laws to a referendum. Iceland has no military and relies on NATO membership and a 1951 defense agreement with the US.

Economy and trade: A roughly $32 billion economy, among the world's richest per capita, built on three pillars: tourism (the largest earner since the 2010s), fishing (still the historic core), and energy-intensive aluminum smelting powered by cheap geothermal and hydroelectric power. Exports are led by aluminum, fish and seafood, and tourism services; imports by fuels, machinery, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: the Netherlands (as a transshipment hub), the UK, Germany, the US, and Norway. Iceland is in Schengen, produces nearly all its electricity from renewables, and kept its central-bank rate at 8% in August 2026, against the European Central Bank's 2.25%.

Closest partners: NATO and the US, which returned to periodic deployments at Keflavík after 2014. The Nordic states, with which Iceland shares the Nordic Council. The EU, through the single market, and the UK as its nearest large neighbor.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Iceland has no meaningful adversaries. Its recurring disputes are over fishing quotas with the EU, Norway, and the Faroes, and over whaling, which it is one of three countries still to practice. Its strategic significance lies in the GIUK gap: renewed Russian submarine activity in the North Atlantic has revived Iceland's Cold War role as NATO's northern sentinel.

2b. The United Kingdom

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Andy Burnham, 56 — in office since July 2026 (0.2 years); Labour
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy with devolved legislatures in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland
Freedom House	Free
Population	69.9 million (2026)
Land area	241,930 km² (93,410 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 46.2%, no religion 37.2%, Muslim 6.5%, Hindu 1.7% (England and Wales, 2021 census); a majority in Scotland reported no religion in 2022
People	White 81.7% (White British 74.4%), Asian 9.3%, Black 4.0%, Mixed 2.9% (England and Wales, 2021 census); median age 41; 85% urban
Minimum wage	National Living Wage of £12.71 an hour from age 21 since April 2026 ($16.87 at about £0.753 = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The union of England and Scotland in 1707, and with Ireland in 1801, created the state that built the world's largest empire and led the Industrial Revolution. Britain's 20th century was shaped by two world wars, imperial retreat, and the postwar welfare state. It joined the European Community in 1973 and left in 2020 after the 2016 Brexit referendum — a decision whose economic and political consequences still dominate. Northern Ireland's Troubles (1968-98) ended with the Good Friday Agreement; Scottish independence, rejected in a 2014 referendum, remains a live question. Six prime ministers have followed David Cameron since the referendum.

Current leadership: Andy Burnham, the former mayor of Greater Manchester, reached Downing Street without a general election. After Labour's heavy losses in the May 2026 local and devolved elections, a Labour member of parliament (MP) gave up his Makerfield seat so that Burnham could return to the Commons, and two cabinet ministers, Wes Streeting and John Healey, resigned. Burnham won the by-election on June 18 with 54.8% to Reform UK's 34.5%; Keir Starmer announced his resignation on June 22; and Burnham, the only candidate nominated, was declared Labour leader on July 17 and became prime minister on July 20, naming Healey Chancellor, Ed Miliband Foreign Secretary, and Streeting Defence Secretary. The next general election is due by 2029.

Government structure: There is no single written constitution. The House of Commons is sovereign in practice; the House of Lords is unelected and revising. A prime minister must command a Commons majority and can be replaced by their own party mid-term, as Burnham's accession showed. Since the May 2026 elections nationalist parties lead all three devolved governments: the Scottish National Party (SNP), with 58 of 129 seats, governs Scotland as a minority under John Swinney; Plaid Cymru took 43 of 96 seats in Wales, where Rhun ap Iorwerth became first minister and a century of Labour dominance ended; and Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill has been Northern Ireland's first minister since 2024.

Economy and trade: A roughly $4.3 trillion economy, the region's second-largest after Germany's and the world's fifth, dominated by services — London is one of the world's two largest financial centers. Exports are led by financial and business services, machinery, cars, pharmaceuticals, aerospace, and crude oil from the North Sea; imports by cars, machinery, fuels, food, and electronics. Top trading partners: the US (the largest single partner), Germany, the Netherlands, France, China, and Ireland. Brexit removed the UK from the EU single market, and its trade with the EU — still around half the total — has been more bureaucratically encumbered since 2021. Growth has stagnated for a decade, the central economic inheritance of the Burnham government, whose Chancellor presents his first budget on October 28, 2026.

Closest partners: The US, in the 'special relationship' anchored in intelligence sharing (Five Eyes), nuclear cooperation, and NATO; relations with the Trump administration are transactional, and the president marked Burnham's arrival with a post calling Britain 'a Poverty Stricken Disaster' that North Sea drilling could make rich. NATO, where the UK is the second-largest European contributor. The Joint Expeditionary Force (8b). France, through the 2010 Lancaster House defense treaties and the 'coalition of the willing' for Ukraine that the two have led since 2025. Ireland, with relations warmer than at any point since Brexit. The EU, with which a 2025 'reset' agreed closer cooperation on defense, food standards, and youth mobility.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, with which relations are at a post-Cold War low after poisonings on British soil, cyberattacks, and Britain's leading role in arming Ukraine. The EU, on the unresolved economics of Brexit. China, over espionage, Hong Kong, and economic security. At home, Reform UK led national polls for about a year and won the most seats, 677, in the May 2025 local elections, but has fallen back since Burnham took office: a YouGov poll of October 4–5, 2026 put Labour on 27%, Reform on 22%,

and the Conservatives on 20%. The Chagos treaty stalled after the Trump administration turned against it in January 2026, and the government shelved the bill to ratify it in April.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Migration	Net migration falling from the 2023 peak of 900,000 toward 300,000	The politics of the decade
GDP	Per head about $56,000; growth under 1% forecast for 2026	Services 80%; finance and the City; the productivity stall since 2008
Trade	Exports about $1.1T, half of them services; the May 2025 US deal (a 10% base tariff, with exemptions for cars and steel)	Brexit's costs estimated at 4% of GDP by the OBR
Public finance	A deficit about 4.5% of GDP; gilt yields near 4.9% on the ten-year and 5.5% on the thirty-year, the highest in the G7; inflation 3.1% in August 2026; the Bank of England at 3.75%, held in September 2026 with three of nine members voting to raise	The gilt market as the constraint (the worked example)
Military	About $90B (2.3% of GDP); a pledge to reach NATO's 3.5% of GDP by 2035 without a plan yet, and a path to an interim 3% due at the spring 2027 spending review, which the OBR costs at £17.3B a year more; the nuclear deterrent's renewal; the 2025 Strategic Defence Review; an army of 70,000, its smallest in two centuries	The carrier deployments
Electoral system	First past the post: Labour's 2024 landslide won 412 of 650 seats (63%) on 34% of the vote	A third party above 20% can win much or nothing
Energy	Gas at Europe's prices; North Sea output declining; the world's second-largest offshore wind fleet; the Sizewell nuclear build; the 2026 Iran war's gas-price shock	The industrial electricity price the highest in the G7
Technology	DeepMind (Google's), Arm (SoftBank's), the government's institute for testing advanced artificial intelligence; the largest research base outside the US and China	Talent and evaluation, not ownership

In depth — the question: Whether a two-party system that produced a landslide on a third of the vote survives a third party that led the polls for a year, and whether a state whose constraint is its own gilt market can rearm, reset with Europe, and rebuild at the same time.

Worked example — The Gilt Constraint

Britain's government owes £3 trillion, about 100% of GDP, at an average rate near 4% and rising as the 2010s' cheap debt matures: interest of £110 billion a year, 9% of revenue, more than the defense budget and approaching education's. The fiscal rules require the current budget to balance by 2029-30 and debt to fall as a share of GDP, which leaves the Chancellor a margin of £10-20 billion against a £1.3 trillion budget — a margin the gilt market moves in a week: a 50-basis-point rise in yields adds £8-10 billion of interest within two years and erases the room, which is why in 2025 the government reversed a welfare cut it needed and then raised taxes it had promised not to. The 2022 mini-budget's lesson — a £45 billion unfunded package that sent thirty-year yields up 150 basis points in three days and removed a prime minister — is the constraint's constitution: Britain cannot borrow its way to rearmament, an EU reset, and a housing program at once, and the choice among them is made by the bond market's tolerance before it is made by the cabinet. The arithmetic explains the parliament: a government with a landslide and no room, a third party promising what the yields forbid, and a Chancellor whose largest constituency is the gilt auction.

2c. Ireland

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Taoiseach Micheál Martin, 66 — in office since January 2025 (1.7 years); Fianna Fáil; also Taoiseach 2020–22
Head of state	President Catherine Connolly, 70 — in office since November 2025 (0.9 years); ceremonial; directly elected
System	Parliamentary republic, militarily neutral
Freedom House	Free
Population	5.36 million (2026)
Land area	68,890 km² (26,600 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 69%, no religion 14%, Church of Ireland 2.4%, Orthodox 2%, Muslim 1.6% (2022 census)
People	White Irish about 77%, other White about 10%, Asian about 4%, Black about 1.5%, Irish Traveller 0.6% (2022 census); median age 40; 65% urban
Minimum wage	€14.15 an hour since January 2026, about €2,391 a month full-time (Eurostat) ($15.95 an hour at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: English rule from the 12th century hardened into colonization and the 17th-century plantations that created a Protestant ascendancy over a Catholic majority. The Great Famine of the 1840s killed a million and drove millions more to emigrate. The 1916 Easter Rising and the 1919-21 War of Independence produced the Irish Free State in 1922, with six northern counties remaining in the UK — a partition that still defines the island's politics. Ireland declared a republic in 1949, stayed neutral through World War II and ever since, and joined the European Community in 1973. From the 1990s the 'Celtic Tiger' turned one of Western Europe's poorest countries into one of its richest, built on low corporate taxes and multinational investment.

Current leadership: Catherine Connolly, an independent of the left and a former member of the Dáil, won the October 2025 presidential election. Micheál Martin of Fianna Fáil leads a coalition with Fine Gael and independents formed after a Dáil stand-off in January 2025; under the coalition agreement he serves three years and then hands over to Simon Harris, the Fine Gael leader and Tánaiste, as the two parties rotated the office in 2020-25. Ireland holds the rotating presidency of the Council of the EU from July to December 2026, with migration, security, and Ukraine's accession talks as its stated priorities.

Government structure: The Dáil, a 174-seat lower house elected by single transferable vote, chooses the Taoiseach; the Seanad is a largely indirectly chosen upper house. The president can refer bills to the Supreme Court after consulting the Council of State; Connolly consulted it on the 2026 asylum overhaul in April and then signed the bill. Neutrality is government policy rather than a constitutional rule — the constitution bars only joining an EU common defense — and Ireland belongs to no alliance, though it takes part in EU defense cooperation and NATO's Partnership for Peace. The live neutrality question is the 'triple lock': a bill to drop its UN condition was deferred in June 2026 and is on the Dáil's autumn program.

Economy and trade: A roughly $600 billion economy on paper, though that figure is heavily distorted by the accounting of the US multinationals — Apple, Google, Meta, Pfizer, Intel — that base European operations in Ireland for its 12.5% corporate tax rate, 15% for the largest groups since 2024 under the global minimum tax. Exports are led by pharmaceuticals, chemicals, computer and information-technology services, medical devices, and food (dairy, beef); imports by aircraft, machinery, fuels, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: the US by a wide margin, the UK, Germany, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Corporate tax receipts produced large surpluses in the 2020s, much of them banked into sovereign funds; as the Apple tax windfall

fades, the government's pre-budget forecasts show a small Exchequer deficit, and the dependence on a handful of American firms is the economy's central vulnerability.

Closest partners: The EU, which Ireland treats as the guarantor of its economic model and its position on Northern Ireland. The US, as the source of the multinational investment that drives its economy and home to a vast diaspora. The UK, with the Good Friday Agreement's institutions and a 2026 subsea cable protection framework as the current basis of cooperation.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Ireland has no adversaries and its neutrality is popular, but that neutrality is under growing pressure: Ireland's waters carry a large share of the transatlantic cables linking Europe to the US, it has almost no navy to protect them, and Russian vessels have loitered over them. The 2026 UK-Ireland cable agreement is a direct response. Domestically, housing costs are the defining concern.

Module 3 — Norway & Denmark

The Scandinavian Kingdoms



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI); Danish Institute for International Studies (DIIS)

3a. Norway

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Jonas Gahr Støre, 66 — in office since October 2021 (5.0 years); Labour Party
Head of state	King Haakon VIII, 53 — in office since August 2026 (0.1 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	5.65 million (2026)
Land area	365,268 km² (141,030 sq mi)
Religion	Church of Norway members about three in five; Muslim and Catholic congregations about 3% each (Statistics Norway)
People	Norwegians; immigrants and the Norway-born children of immigrants about a fifth (Statistics Norway, 2025); an indigenous Sámi minority; median age 41; 85% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law: collective agreements, some extended by law to whole sectors such as construction and cleaning

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Norway was united under Viking kings around 900, then spent four centuries under Danish rule and a further century in a union with Sweden before full independence in 1905, when it chose a Danish prince as its own king. It stayed neutral in World War I but was occupied by Germany from 1940 to 1945, an

experience that drove it into NATO as a founding member in 1949. North Sea oil, discovered in 1969, transformed a fishing and shipping nation, and the sovereign wealth fund created to hold the proceeds is now the largest in the world. Norwegians rejected EU membership in referendums in 1972 and 1994, choosing the EEA instead.

Current leadership: Haakon VIII became king on August 28, 2026, when his father, Harald V, king since 1991, died at 89. Jonas Gahr Støre's Labour Party was re-elected in September 2025 and governs alone as a minority; its 2026 budget passed only after a December 2025 deal with four parties of the left averted a confidence vote, and its 2027 budget, presented on October 7, 2026, needs their votes again.

Government structure: The Storting, a 169-seat unicameral parliament, cannot be dissolved early — governments serve fixed four-year terms and minority governments are the norm. Membership of the EEA binds Norway to most EU single-market rules without a vote on them.

Economy and trade: A roughly $500 billion economy, one of the world's wealthiest per capita, built on North Sea oil and gas. Since 2022 Norway has been the EU's largest gas supplier, replacing Russia, which made it a strategic asset for the entire continent. Exports are led by natural gas, crude oil, fish (the world's largest salmon exporter), aluminum, and shipping services; imports by machinery, vehicles, and manufactured goods. Top trading partners: the UK, Germany, the Netherlands, Sweden, and the US. The Government Pension Fund Global, which invests the oil proceeds abroad, is forecast at 22,400 billion kroner, about $2.3 trillion, at the start of 2027; the 2027 budget draws 608 billion kroner from it, 2.7% of its value, as petroleum revenue falls.

Closest partners: NATO, where Norway describes itself as the alliance's 'eyes and ears in the north,' monitoring Russia's Northern Fleet from its Arctic border; its 2027 budget plans defense spending of 3.4% of GDP. The US, with pre-positioned Marine Corps equipment and expanded basing agreements. The Nordic states and the Joint Expeditionary Force. The EU, and especially Germany and the UK as gas customers.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, with which Norway shares a 196-kilometer Arctic border and the Barents Sea; Svalbard, where Russia retains a mining settlement under a 1920 treaty, is a recurring friction point, as is Russian jamming of satellite-navigation signals in Norway's north. Norway's relationship with the EU is a permanent low-level tension: it pays into EU budgets, and fisheries disputes with the EU and UK recur.

3b. Denmark

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, 48 — in office since June 2019 (7.3 years); Social Democrats
Head of state	King Frederik X, 58 — in office since January 2024 (2.7 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	6.02 million (2026)
Land area	42,430 km² (16,380 sq mi)
Religion	Church of Denmark (Lutheran) members about 71% (2025); Muslim an estimated 4–5%
People	Danish origin about 84%; immigrants and their descendants about 16% (Statistics Denmark, 2025); median age 42; 89% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law: collective agreements set the pay floors

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Europe's oldest continuous monarchy, Denmark ruled Norway until 1814 and lost Schleswig-Holstein to Prussia in 1864, shrinking to roughly its modern borders. Occupied by Germany from 1940 to 1945, it joined NATO in 1949 and the European Community in 1973, though it negotiated opt-outs from the euro and, until a 2022 referendum reversed it, from EU defense cooperation. Denmark retains a realm that includes Greenland and the Faroe Islands as self-governing territories; Greenland, the world's largest island, gained home rule in 1979.

Current leadership: Frederik X succeeded his mother, Margrethe II, on her abdication in January 2024. Mette Frederiksen called a snap election for March 24, 2026, in which her Social Democrats lost 12 seats but stayed the largest party with 38. After the Liberal leader, Troels Lund Poulsen, failed to form a government, she formed her third in June: a minority coalition of the Social Democrats, the Green Left, the Moderates, and the Social Liberals, with the Red-Green Alliance and the Alternative as its main support parties. The grand coalition with Venstre that had governed since 2022 ended, and Venstre went into opposition.

Government structure: The Folketing is a 179-seat unicameral parliament including two seats each for Greenland and the Faroe Islands, which have their own parliaments and control most domestic affairs, while Copenhagen retains defense and foreign policy.

Economy and trade: A roughly $430 billion economy with a strong export base in pharmaceuticals (Novo Nordisk, maker of Ozempic, was Europe's most valuable company until SAP overtook it in 2025, and its weight-loss drugs drove much of Denmark's recent growth), shipping (Maersk is the world's second-largest container line), wind turbines (Vestas), and food. Imports are led by machinery, vehicles, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: Germany, Sweden, the US, the UK, and the Netherlands. Denmark is a world leader in offshore wind and pioneered the North Sea energy island concept.

Closest partners: NATO and the US — Denmark has been among Washington's most reliable allies, deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan. The Nordic states and the Joint Expeditionary Force. Germany, its southern neighbor. The EU, where Frederiksen has been a leading voice on migration control and Ukraine support.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The United States, over Greenland — the sharpest dispute between any two NATO allies in this course. Through 2025 and January 2026 the Trump administration pressed to acquire the island and would not rule out coercion; Frederiksen warned in January that a US takeover would mean the end of NATO. The two governments agreed that month to reopen their 1951 defense agreement, and on September 22, 2026 the US, Denmark, and Greenland signed a defense agreement that affirms Danish sovereignty and Greenlanders' right to self-determination (3c). Russia, over Baltic security and the Danish straits, through which Russian shadow-fleet tankers pass daily.

3c. Greenland: The Dispute Inside the Alliance

Greenland's importance is threefold: its position on the shortest air route between Russia and North America, which is why the US built bases there in World War II and keeps Pituffik as a missile-warning site; its mineral wealth, including rare earths; and its Arctic waters, opening to shipping as ice retreats. The 57,000 Greenlanders have a right to independence under a 2009 law but depend on an annual Danish subsidy for roughly half their budget. Premier Jens-Frederik Nielsen's coalition of Demokraatit, Inuit Ataqatigiit, and Atassut holds 19 of the 31 seats in Greenland's parliament after Siumut left it in March 2026. The agreement (3b) settled the dispute inside the alliance: it gives the US new defense areas at Narsarsuaq in the south and Mestersvig in the east and expanded operations at Pituffik, with no end date; bars non-NATO states from bases and investors from outside NATO and the EU from significant control of Greenland's minerals; and requires an independent Greenland to stay in NATO and honor it. Washington got the access it sought and Denmark kept the island — a test of whether an alliance can absorb its dominant member's demands.

Module 4 — Sweden & Finland

The Newest Members



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Finnish Institute of International Affairs (FIIA); Swedish Defence Research Agency (FOI) reports

4a. Sweden

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Ulf Kristersson, 62 — in office since October 2022 (4.0 years); Moderate Party
Head of state	King Carl XVI Gustaf, 80 — in office since September 1973 (53.1 years); ceremonial; Europe's longest-reigning monarch
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	10.7 million (2026)
Land area	410,340 km² (158,430 sq mi)
Religion	Church of Sweden members about 52% (2024); Muslim an estimated 5–8%
People	No ethnic statistics; about a fifth of residents born abroad, the largest groups from Syria, Iraq, and Finland (Statistics Sweden, 2024); median age 41; 89% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law: collective agreements set the pay floors

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A great power in the 17th century that controlled much of the Baltic coast, Sweden has not fought a war since 1814 — the longest peace of any European state. It stayed neutral through both world wars and the Cold War, building a large domestic arms industry to make that neutrality credible. Sweden

joined the EU in 1995 but rejected the euro in a 2003 referendum. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine ended two centuries of military non-alignment within months: Sweden applied to NATO alongside Finland in May 2022 and became the alliance's 32nd member in March 2024. Gang violence and immigration have dominated domestic politics through the 2020s.

Current leadership: Ulf Kristersson of the center-right Moderates governed from 2022 at the head of a three-party minority coalition backed from outside the cabinet by the nationalist Sweden Democrats — the Tidö arrangement. In the September 13, 2026 election the opposition parties won 176 of the 349 seats to the Tidö parties' 173: the Social Democrats took 99, the Moderates 70, and the Sweden Democrats 62, down 11. Kristersson resigned on September 17 and heads a caretaker government. The Speaker has twice asked the Social Democratic leader, Magdalena Andersson, to explore forming a government, the second time with a report due on October 12; the Centre Party backs her but rejects a government that depends on parties at the political edges. Four failed votes for a prime minister would force a new election.

Government structure: The Riksdag is a unicameral parliament elected by proportional representation; a prime minister takes office unless an absolute majority, 175 members, votes against.

Economy and trade: A roughly $600 billion economy, the Nordic region's largest, with a diversified industrial base — vehicles (Volvo, Scania), telecoms (Ericsson), engineering, iron ore, forestry and paper, pharmaceuticals, and one of Europe's largest arms industries (Saab, maker of the Gripen fighter). Exports are led by machinery, vehicles, pharmaceuticals, paper products, and iron and steel; imports by machinery, vehicles, fuels, and electronics. Top trading partners: Germany, Norway, the US, Denmark, and Finland. The northern iron ore mines at Kiruna, the port of Gothenburg, and the naval base at Karlskrona give Sweden a central role in Baltic logistics and defense.

Closest partners: NATO and, within it, Finland, with which Sweden coordinates defense more closely than with anyone. The Nordic states, the Joint Expeditionary Force, and the US, with which Sweden signed a 2023 defense cooperation agreement. The EU and Germany. Ukraine, to which Sweden has agreed to sell Gripen E fighters — a contract for 16, signed in June 2026, for delivery in 2029-30 — on top of substantial aid.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, whose Baltic Fleet and Kaliningrad forces face Sweden's island of Gotland — the strategic key to the central Baltic, which Sweden remilitarized in 2018. Turkey, whose objections over Kurdish exiles and Quran burnings delayed Sweden's NATO entry, remains a wary partner.

4b. Finland

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Petteri Orpo, 56 — in office since June 2023 (3.3 years); National Coalition Party
Head of state	President Alexander Stubb, 58 — in office since March 2024 (2.6 years); directly elected
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	5.62 million (2026)
Land area	303,890 km² (117,330 sq mi)
Religion	Evangelical Lutheran about 62%, Orthodox about 1%, no affiliation about 36% (Statistics Finland, 2024)
People	Finnish speakers about 84%, Swedish speakers about 5%, other languages about 10% (Statistics Finland, 2024); a Sámi minority in the north; median age 44; 86% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law: collective agreements, binding sector-wide, set the pay floors

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Part of Sweden for six centuries and then an autonomous grand duchy of the Russian Empire from 1809, Finland declared independence in December 1917 and immediately fought a civil war. It fought the Soviet Union twice — the Winter War of 1939-40 and the Continuation War of 1941-44 — losing territory but keeping its independence, a rare outcome for a Soviet neighbor. Cold War 'Finlandization' meant formal neutrality and careful deference to Moscow. Finland joined the EU in 1995 and the euro in 1999, and after Russia invaded Ukraine it abandoned 80 years of non-alignment, joining NATO in April 2023 as its 31st member.

Current leadership: President Alexander Stubb is a former prime minister. Petteri Orpo of the center-right National Coalition leads a four-party coalition including the nationalist Finns Party; the next parliamentary election is due in April 2027.

Government structure: The president commands the armed forces and co-leads foreign policy, while the prime minister and the 200-seat Eduskunta control domestic policy. Finland maintains conscription, a wartime strength of 280,000, and one of Europe's largest artillery forces.

Economy and trade: A roughly $300 billion economy built on forestry and paper, engineering and machinery, electronics and telecoms (Nokia's legacy), shipbuilding, and metals. Exports are led by paper and pulp, machinery, refined petroleum, vehicles, and electronics; imports by machinery, fuels, vehicles, and chemicals. Top trading partners: Germany, Sweden, the US, the Netherlands, and China. Russia was a top-five partner before 2022 and is now negligible — a larger economic adjustment than any other EU state faced — and trend unemployment reached 10.1% in August 2026.

Closest partners: NATO, and within it Sweden, the US (a 2023 defense agreement opening 15 bases to American forces), and the Baltic states, whose security Finland treats as inseparable from its own. The Nordic Council and the Joint Expeditionary Force. The EU, where Finland is a consistent hawk on Russia and a strong supporter of Ukraine.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, across the alliance's longest border. Finland closed all land crossings in late 2023 after Russia channeled migrants to the frontier as a hybrid pressure tactic, and they remain closed 'until further notice'; the government has fenced sections of the border. Finnish ports on the Gulf of Finland face St. Petersburg directly. The Estlink-2 power cable to Estonia was damaged in December 2024, allegedly by the dragged anchor of the shadow-fleet tanker Eagle S; a Helsinki court dismissed the case against its officers for lack of jurisdiction in October 2025, but the Court of Appeal ruled on August 27, 2026 that it can be tried in Finland, so no court has yet ruled on intent.

4c. The End of Neutrality

Swedish and Finnish accession (4a, 4b) was the largest expansion of NATO's northern flank since 1949. The strategic effect is geometric: the Baltic's long northern shore turned from non-aligned to allied, and the Baltic states gained a defensive depth they never had — reinforcements can now come across the sea from Sweden and Finland rather than only through the Suwałki gap. It also placed 1,340 kilometers of new NATO-Russia border in Finland, which now accounts for more than half of the alliance's entire frontier with Russia.

Module 5 — Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium & Luxembourg

The Industrial and Institutional Core



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP); Clingendael Institute (The Hague); Egmont Institute (Brussels)

5a. Germany

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Chancellor Friedrich Merz, 70 — in office since May 2025 (1.4 years); Christian Democratic Union
Head of state	President Frank-Walter Steinmeier, 70 — in office since March 2017 (9.5 years); ceremonial; second and final term ends March 2027
System	Federal parliamentary republic of 16 states
Freedom House	Free
Population	83.6 million (2026)
Land area	348,560 km² (134,580 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 24%, Protestant 22% (church membership, 2024); Muslim about 6–7% (estimates); about 45% unaffiliated
People	About a quarter of residents immigrated or have a parent who did (microcensus, 2024); Danes, Frisians, Sorbs, and Sinti and Roma are recognized minorities; median age 47; 78% urban
Minimum wage	€13.90 an hour since January 2026, about €2,343 a month (Eurostat) ($15.66 an hour at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Unified under Prussia in 1871, Germany's path through two world wars, the Nazi dictatorship, and the Holocaust ended in 1945 with defeat, occupation, and division. West Germany rebuilt as a federal democracy anchored in NATO (1955) and the European Communities (founding member, 1957); East Germany was a Soviet satellite until the Berlin Wall fell in 1989 and the two states reunified in 1990. Germany became the EU's central power, but its post-Cold War model — cheap Russian gas, export dependence on China, and a US security guarantee — was upended by the 2022 Ukraine invasion.

Current leadership: Friedrich Merz of the CDU leads a coalition with the SPD, formed after the previous three-party government collapsed and the February 2025 election made the AfD the second-largest party. The coalition came through its worst crisis in late September 2026, over care insurance, pensions, and income tax, after the president intervened with its leaders. A Federal Convention elects Steinmeier's successor on January 30, 2027.

Government structure: The Bundestag elects the chancellor, who cannot be removed except by a 'constructive' vote of no confidence that simultaneously elects a successor — a deliberate stability mechanism. The states hold substantial powers, including over policing and education, and are represented in the Bundesrat. The Federal Constitutional Court is unusually powerful. The debt brake was loosened for defense and infrastructure (the worked example below).

Economy and trade: A roughly $5.5 trillion economy, the region's and Europe's largest and the world's third, built on manufacturing exports — cars (Volkswagen, Mercedes-Benz, Porsche), machinery, chemicals, and electrical equipment. Exports are led by cars and parts, machinery, chemicals, pharmaceuticals, and electronics; imports by cars, machinery, fuels, electronics, and pharmaceuticals. Top trading partners: the US (the largest since 2024), China, the Netherlands, France, and Poland. The economy contracted in 2023 and 2024. The ports of Hamburg and Bremerhaven are the North Sea's largest after Rotterdam and Antwerp.

Closest partners: The EU, of which Germany is the largest member and effective anchor, and France, its indispensable partner in it. NATO and the US, though Merz has spoken openly of the need for European 'independence' from Washington. Poland, increasingly, as the eastern flank's key state. The Netherlands and the Nordic states as North Sea partners. Ukraine, to which Germany is Europe's largest single donor, with €11.6 billion budgeted for 2027.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, whose war it now arms against. China, over cars, industrial competition, and dependence. The US, over tariffs and the reliability of the security guarantee. At home the AfD is the central political fact: the domestic intelligence service labeled it extremist in May 2025, a designation suspended while the party challenges it in court. In September 2026 it won the Saxony-Anhalt election with 43.8% and 39 of 83 seats and came first in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania with 38.2%, where the CDU fell below the 5% threshold; Die Linke, the left-wing party, won Berlin's election the same day. Every other party refuses to govern with the AfD, and the test of that 'firewall' comes in December, when its candidate, Ulrich Siegmund, stands for minister-president of Saxony-Anhalt in a parliament where the AfD's seats equal those of the CDU, the SPD, the Greens, and Die Linke combined, and the five members of the left-populist BSW say they will abstain.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility 1.35; net immigration about 400,000 a year	Europe's largest population; the workforce shrinking without migration

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
GDP	Per head about $60,000; growth of 0.2% in 2025 and 1.3% forecast for 2026 by the leading economic institutes (September 2026), with inflation of 2.8%	The stagnation: energy costs, Chinese competition in autos and machinery, under-investment
Trade	Exports about $1.7T, the world's third-largest after China's and America's; a 15% US tariff under the 2025 deal; China the largest competitor	The auto industry's crisis: Volkswagen's plant closures; the flood of Chinese electric cars; the American tariff
Public finance	A general-government deficit of 4.1% of GDP forecast for 2026, rising to 4.7% in 2028; the institutes warn that spending is outrunning the EU's fiscal rules	The fiscal turn's bill (the worked example)
Military	A 2027 draft defense budget of €109.7B plus about €30B from the expiring special fund, about €140B, the largest since the Cold War; the Bundeswehr at 180,000 toward 260,000; a military-service law passed in December 2025, voluntary in 2026; the Lithuania brigade (7c)	The 'turning point' declared in 2022 made real under Merz
Regime	95/100 from Freedom House; the AfD at 21% in 2025 and the 'firewall' against it cracked once, in a January 2025 Bundestag vote; in March 2026 the Greens' Cem Özdemir held Baden-Württemberg and the CDU won Rhineland-Palatinate	The AfD ban debate
Energy	Gas at twice the American price; nuclear closed (2023); renewables about 60% of power; the Rhine's 2025-26 low water; the 2026 Iran war's gas-price shock	The competitiveness question's core
Europe	The EU's paymaster; the joint defense borrowing's swing vote; the test case of Mario Draghi's 2024 competitiveness agenda	The leader that Europe waits for

In depth — the question: Whether the country that can fund the continent's defense and its competitiveness agenda will — a fiscal turn made, an economic one not yet — and whether the firewall against the AfD holds now that the far right wins states outright.

Worked example — The Debt Brake's Arithmetic

Germany's constitution limited the structural deficit to 0.35% of GDP — about €15 billion a year on a €4.5 trillion economy — which is why a country with 65% debt and negative real rates under-invested for a decade in rail, bridges, broadband, and the army. In March 2025, before the new Bundestag sat, Merz used the old one to change two numbers, reversing a policy he had campaigned on: defense spending above 1% of GDP is exempt (so a 3.5% target puts 2.5% of GDP, about €110 billion a year, outside the brake), and a €500 billion fund over twelve years (about €42 billion a year, 1% of GDP) finances infrastructure. The result is a fiscal impulse of 3-3.5% of GDP a year at full pace — the largest in the rich world outside America — that raises the deficit from 2% toward 4-5% and the debt from 65% toward 80% by 2030, still the lowest of the G7. The bond market's response was a 50-basis-point rise in Bund yields to 2.8%, the term premium's arrival in Europe's benchmark, and a stronger euro; the economy's response was slower, because the money must pass through planning procedures, a shrinking construction workforce, and defense contracts whose capacity is sold out — which is why the 2026 growth forecast (the table above) is so modest against a 3% impulse, and why the turn's success is measured in 2028's numbers rather than 2026's. The arithmetic's lesson is the country's: Germany had the room and the rule, and changing the rule was the easy part.

5b. The Netherlands

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Rob Jetten, 39 — in office since February 2026 (0.6 years); D66; the youngest prime minister in Dutch history
Head of state	King Willem-Alexander, 59 — in office since April 2013 (13.4 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	18.4 million (2026)
Land area	33,720 km² (13,020 sq mi)
Religion	No religious affiliation about 58%, Catholic about 17%, Protestant about 13%, Muslim about 6% (Statistics Netherlands survey, 2023)
People	About three-quarters born in the Netherlands to Dutch-born parents; about a quarter first- or second-generation migrants, the largest groups of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese, and Indonesian origin (Statistics Netherlands, 2024); median age 43; 94% urban
Minimum wage	Set by the hour and indexed each January and July: about €2,338 a month full-time (Eurostat, July 2026) ($2,635 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Dutch Republic won independence from Spain in the 80 Years' War (1568-1648) and became the 17th century's leading maritime and commercial power. It was a constitutional monarchy from 1815, stayed neutral in World War I, and was occupied by Germany in World War II. A founding member of NATO, the European Communities, and the Benelux union, the Netherlands built its prosperity on trade. Its politics fragmented in the 2000s around immigration and Islam, culminating in the PVV's victory in the 2023 election; the coalition it joined collapsed when it walked out in June 2025.

Current leadership: Rob Jetten of the social-liberal D66 took office on February 23, 2026, the first openly gay prime minister, at the head of a minority cabinet of D66, the center-right VVD, and the Christian Democratic CDA with 66 of the 150 seats. D66 tied with the PVV on 26 seats in the October 2025 election — the lowest total ever for a largest party — and edged it on votes; the cabinet was sworn in 117 days later and builds majorities bill by bill.

Government structure: The States General has two chambers. Dutch politics is highly fragmented — more than a dozen parties sit in the lower house — so every government is a multiparty coalition, and formation routinely takes months.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1.2 trillion economy, one of the world's most open, organized around trade and logistics: Rotterdam is Europe's largest port and the entry point for much of Germany's trade. Exports are led by machinery, refined petroleum, chemicals, electronics (ASML's lithography machines), and agricultural products — the Netherlands is the world's second-largest food exporter by value despite its size; imports by fuels, machinery, and electronics, much of it re-exported. Top trading partners: Germany, Belgium, France, the UK, and the US. The Groningen gas field, once Europe's largest, closed in 2024 after decades of production-induced earthquakes.

Closest partners: The EU and Germany. NATO and the US. Belgium and Luxembourg in the Benelux union. The UK, with which it shares the North Sea and cooperates on wind and cables. Ukraine, to which the Netherlands has been a leading supplier of F-16s and air defense; with Sweden, Spain, and Poland it presses the EU to lend Ukraine the value of Russia's frozen assets over Belgium's objections.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The Netherlands has no state adversaries, but three tensions define it. Immigration and asylum, which remain the axis of politics, though seven of Wilders's MPs have since split off, leaving the PVV with 19 seats. Russia, over the 2014 downing of Malaysia Airlines flight 17 (MH17) over Ukraine, which killed 196 Dutch citizens and left a lasting national grievance, and over cable and port security. And China and the US, which both pressure the Netherlands over ASML's chip-lithography exports — the single most strategically significant Dutch company.

5c. Belgium

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Bart De Wever, 55 — in office since February 2025 (1.7 years); New Flemish Alliance
Head of state	King Philippe, 66 — in office since July 2013 (13.2 years); ceremonial
System	Federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	11.8 million (2026)
Land area	30,280 km² (11,690 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic about half by self-identification, Muslim about 7%, no religion about a third (survey estimates; there is no census question)
People	Dutch speakers about 60%, French speakers about 40%, German speakers under 1% (estimates by language region); foreign nationals about 13% of residents (Statbel); median age 43; 98% urban
Minimum wage	€2,234 a month (Eurostat, July 2026), after a 5.8% rise during 2026 ($2,518 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Belgium broke away from the Netherlands in 1830 and was guaranteed neutrality by the great powers — a guarantee Germany violated in both world wars, which is why Brussels became the home of NATO and the European institutions after 1945. The state is divided between Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north and French-speaking Wallonia in the south, and six state reforms since 1970 have converted it into one of the world's most decentralized federations.

Current leadership: King Philippe plays a real role in brokering Belgium's protracted coalition formations. Bart De Wever of the N-VA leads the 'Arizona' coalition, the first Flemish nationalist to head the federal government; it agreed a budget in November 2025 amid nationwide strikes and opened a new budget round in the autumn of 2026.

Government structure: Among the world's most complex federations: power is divided among the federal government, three regions (Flanders, Wallonia, Brussels), and three language communities, with overlapping competences. Governments must balance Dutch- and French-speaking parties, which often makes formation take months or, in 2010-11, a record 541 days.

Economy and trade: A roughly $650 billion economy centered on the port of Antwerp — Europe's second-largest and its largest chemical cluster — plus pharmaceuticals, diamonds (Antwerp has long been the world's main rough-diamond market, though Dubai now rivals it), machinery, and food. Exports are led by chemicals and pharmaceuticals, cars, machinery, plastics, and diamonds; imports by cars, chemicals, fuels, and machinery. Top trading partners: Germany, France, the Netherlands, the US, and the UK. The economic gap between Flanders and Wallonia — the north wealthier and export-oriented, the south post-industrial — underlies the country's political divide. The EU's and NATO's institutions in Brussels are themselves a major economic sector.

Closest partners: The EU and NATO. The Netherlands and Luxembourg in Benelux. Germany and France, its neighbors. The US, though De Wever's government has been critical of American tariff policy.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Belgium's most consequential external role since late 2025 is its hold over Russia's frozen central-bank assets: of about €210 billion immobilized in the EU, some €193 billion sit at Euroclear in Brussels. De Wever, who calls confiscation 'an act of war' and wants the legal risk shared, withheld consensus at the December 2025 European Council from a plan to lend their value to Ukraine, and the leaders agreed instead on a €90 billion loan backed by the EU budget. The plan returns at the European Council of October 15-16, 2026, with Belgium still unconvinced. Internally, the Flemish nationalist movement De Wever leads ultimately seeks to reduce Belgium to a confederation, and his premiership is an experiment in whether that agenda can be pursued from inside the state it targets.

5d. Luxembourg

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Luc Frieden, 63 — in office since November 2023 (2.9 years); Christian Social People's Party
Head of state	Grand Duke Guillaume V, 44 — in office since October 2025 (1.0 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy, the world's only grand duchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	687,000 (2026)
Land area	2,590 km² (1,000 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic a majority, perhaps three in five; about a quarter with no religion (estimates; official religious statistics ended in 1979)
People	Luxembourg citizens about 53%, foreign nationals about 47%, the largest groups Portuguese, French, Italian, and Belgian (national statistics office, 2025); median age 41; 93% urban
Minimum wage	€2,771 a month for unskilled workers aged 18 and over, after indexation in 2026 (Eurostat, July 2026) ($3,123 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026); 20% more for skilled workers

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A grand duchy since 1815 and fully independent from 1867, Luxembourg was occupied by Germany in both world wars and abandoned neutrality afterward, becoming a founding member of NATO, the European Communities, and Benelux. It transformed from a steel economy into one of the world's largest financial centers and the home of several EU institutions, including the Court of Justice. Grand Duke Henri abdicated in October 2025 after 25 years in favor of his son Guillaume V, continuing the Nassau-Weilburg line that has reigned since 1890.

Current leadership: Luc Frieden of the Christian Social People's Party (CSV) leads a center-right coalition with the Democratic Party; a pension reform has strained its relations with the unions.

Government structure: The 60-seat unicameral Chamber of Deputies chooses the government. Besides the Court of Justice, Luxembourg hosts the European Investment Bank and parts of the Commission and Parliament.

Economy and trade: A roughly $90 billion economy, the world's highest GDP per capita, built almost entirely on financial services — it is the largest investment fund center in Europe and second in the world after the US — plus steel (ArcelorMittal is headquartered there) and satellite operations, led by SES (Société Européenne des Satellites). Exports are dominated by financial services, then steel and machinery; imports

by machinery, vehicles, and fuels. Top trading partners: Germany, France, Belgium, and the Netherlands. Nearly half the workforce commutes daily from neighboring countries.

Closest partners: The EU, in which Luxembourg has produced three Commission presidents. Belgium, Germany, and France as neighbors and trading partners, and the Netherlands in Benelux. NATO, to which it contributes disproportionately in intelligence and satellite capacity through its space industry.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Luxembourg has no adversaries. Its recurring international friction is over financial transparency and tax rulings, where EU state-aid cases and international pressure have periodically targeted its role as a corporate and fund domicile.

Module 6 — Poland

The Alliance's Most Consequential Eastern Member



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Polish Institute of International Affairs (PISM); Centre for Eastern Studies (OSW), Warsaw

6a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Donald Tusk, 69 — in office since December 2023 (2.8 years); Civic Coalition; also prime minister 2007–14
Head of state	President Karol Nawrocki, 43 — in office since August 2025 (1.2 years); directly elected
System	Semi-presidential parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	37.8 million (2026)
Land area	306,230 km² (118,240 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 71.3%, no religion 6.9%; about a fifth declined to answer (2021 census)
People	Polish identity 97.7% (2021 census, which allowed two answers), Silesians the largest minority; about a million Ukrainians under temporary protection since 2022; median age 44; 61% urban
Minimum wage	4,806 złoty a month gross since January 2026 ($1,241 at about 3.87 złoty = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: One of Europe's largest states in the 16th century, Poland was partitioned out of existence by Russia, Prussia, and Austria in 1795 and did not reappear until 1918. Invaded by Germany and the Soviet Union in 1939, it lost six million citizens in World War II, including most of its Jewish population, and emerged as a Soviet satellite with borders shifted 200 kilometers west. The Solidarity trade union movement

of 1980 began the unraveling of communism across the bloc, and Poland's 1989 election was the first breach. It joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004, and has since become the alliance's most hawkish large member on Russia. Politics is polarized between the nationalist Law and Justice party, which governed 2015-23, and Donald Tusk's centrist coalition.

Current leadership: Karol Nawrocki, a nationalist historian backed by Law and Justice (PiS), beat Warsaw's mayor, Rafał Trzaskowski, 50.9% to 49.1% in June 2025. He and Tusk's four-party coalition coexist in a hostile cohabitation: in his first year Nawrocki vetoed 41 bills, a record, among them the government's judicial-council reform, the law implementing Poland's EU defense loans, and a civil-partnership substitute, and he has withheld ambassadorial appointments and military promotions.

Government structure: The prime minister and the 460-seat Sejm hold most governing power, but the president commands the armed forces, conducts foreign policy alongside the government, and holds a veto the Sejm can override only with a three-fifths majority Tusk lacks. The Constitutional Tribunal is itself contested: Nawrocki swore in two of six judges the Sejm elected in 2026, and the Tribunal rejected the other four in April.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1.1 trillion economy, Central Europe's largest and one of the EU's fastest-growing over three decades, built on manufacturing integrated into German supply chains — cars and parts, machinery, furniture (Poland is the world's largest furniture exporter after China), food, and electronics. Exports are led by cars and parts, machinery, furniture, food, and plastics; imports by cars, machinery, fuels, and electronics. Top trading partners: Germany by a wide margin, then the Czech Republic, France, the Netherlands, and Italy.

Closest partners: The US, with which Poland has cultivated the closest relationship of any European state — a permanent American armored presence and the Aegis Ashore missile-defense site at Redzikowo — sustained across both Trump and Biden administrations. NATO and its frontline members, the Baltic and Nordic states. Ukraine, for which Poland is the main logistics hub. Germany and the EU, with which Tusk repaired relations after 2023.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia and Belarus, which share Poland's eastern border: Belarus's 2021 engineering of a migrant crisis at the frontier led Poland to build a fence and suspend asylum rights, Russian sabotage and arson attacks inside Poland have multiplied since 2022, and in September 2025 Russian drones entered Polish airspace, leading Poland to invoke NATO's Article 4. Relations with Ukraine carry historical friction over World War II-era massacres — Nawrocki moved to revoke the Polish order awarded to Zelensky over Ukraine's honoring of its wartime nationalist army, and Zelensky returned it — and current friction over agriculture.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility near 1.1, among the lowest in the world	Aging fast; emigration reversed by growth
GDP	Per head about $27,000; from about half the EU average in purchasing power at accession in 2004 to about four-fifths; growth about 3.5% (2026)	The EU funds; the EU's fifth-largest population
Trade	Exports about $450B (batteries among them; Europe's largest battery producer); Germany a third of trade; the EU three-quarters	The German stagnation's largest exposure; the Ukraine trade and reconstruction position

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Military	4.68% of GDP in NATO's 2026 estimate, fourth after the three Baltic states; an army growing toward the largest in the EU by 2027; about €44B of the EU's SAFE defense loans, agreed in April 2026	The alliance's eastern anchor
Regime	82/100 from Freedom House in 2025, recovering; the public broadcaster's and prosecution service's leadership replaced by decree in 2024 where the law was blocked; the judicial-council and Constitutional Tribunal disputes unresolved	A Sejm elected to 2027 and a president in office to 2030
Energy	Coal about 55% of power and falling; the first nuclear plant (Westinghouse; the first unit due in the mid-2030s); LNG through Świnoujście; the Baltic Pipe from Norway	Europe's fastest coal exit and its latest start
The war	Eastern Sentry, launched after the drone incursion; a Russian military helicopter in Polish airspace on September 23, 2026; the Belarus border's hybrid pressure	The front's rear

In depth — the question: Whether Law and Justice's institutional legacy can be undone by a government that lost the presidency to the party it beat, and whether the frontline state that is the alliance's eastern anchor can hold its deficit, a divided constitution, and a war on its border to the 2027 election.

Worked example — The Eastern Anchor's Bill

Poland's defense spending, about $45 billion, compares with NATO's new 3.5% core target and its 5% headline, and the composition explains the number: about $20 billion a year of procurement (Korean tanks and howitzers, American F-35s and Patriots, rocket launchers and Apache helicopters, the East Shield's $2.5 billion of fortifications on the Belarus border), personnel for an army growing from 150,000 toward 300,000, and the logistics of being the hub through which Ukraine's arms pass. Against it: a deficit of 6% of GDP, a debt of 60%, EU recovery funds of €60 billion unfrozen in 2024 that end with the current budget cycle, and an economy whose largest customer (Germany) has barely grown for three years. The arithmetic's margin is the growth: at 3.5% real growth plus inflation, Poland's nominal GDP rises about $60 billion a year and the defense bill holds its share without a tax rise; at Germany's pace, the same bill climbs toward 6% of GDP and collides with the deficit. The country's bet is the one it has won since 1989 — that convergence continues — and the war on its border is both the reason for the bill and the risk to the bet.

6b. Why Poland Gets Its Own Module

Three facts justify treating Poland separately. It is the largest state on NATO's frontier with Russia and Belarus, with one of the alliance's fastest-growing militaries. It is Ukraine's logistics artery (6a). And its domestic politics (6a) make it the region's most volatile democracy. Its 2027 parliamentary election will determine whether the country's westward turn under Tusk holds or reverses.

Module 7 — Estonia, Latvia & Lithuania

The Frontline



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Centre for Defence and Security (ICDS), Tallinn

7a. Estonia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Kristen Michal, 51 — in office since July 2024 (2.2 years); Reform Party
Head of state	President Ülle Madise, 51 — in office since October 2026 (newly in office); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	1.33 million (2026)
Land area	42,390 km² (16,370 sq mi)
Religion	No religion 58%, Orthodox 16%, Lutheran 8% (2021 census, residents aged 15 and over)
People	Estonians 69.1%, Russians 23.7%, Ukrainians 2.1% (2021 census); median age 44; 70% urban
Minimum wage	€946 a month gross since April 2026, up from €886 ($1,066 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Estonians lived under Danish, German, Swedish, and Russian rule for seven centuries before winning independence in 1918-20. The 1939 Nazi-Soviet pact consigned all three Baltic states to Soviet occupation; Estonia was annexed in 1940, occupied by Germany, and re-annexed in 1944, with mass deportations to Siberia. The 'Singing Revolution' of the late 1980s led to restored independence in August 1991. Estonia joined NATO and the EU in 2004 and the euro in 2011, built the world's most digitized state,

with nearly all government services online, and after a 2007 Russian cyberattack became the home of NATO's cyber defense center. Its large Russian minority is a legacy of Soviet settlement that Moscow has repeatedly exploited.

Current leadership: Alar Karis, a former university rector, did not seek a second term; on September 2, 2026 the Riigikogu elected Ülle Madise, the chancellor of justice since 2015, in a single round with 71 votes, three more than required. Kristen Michal of the liberal Reform Party succeeded Kaja Kallas when she became the EU's foreign policy chief; his coalition expelled the Social Democrats in March 2025 and lost its majority in August 2026 when MPs left their parties, but he expects it to last until the March 2027 election.

Government structure: The 101-seat Riigikogu chooses the government and elects the president by a two-thirds majority, failing which an electoral college does. Estonia spends 5.1% of GDP on defense, NATO's second-highest share in 2026, and hosts a British-led NATO battlegroup.

Economy and trade: A roughly $45 billion economy, the Baltic region's most advanced, built on information technology and digital services (Skype and Wise were founded there), electronics, timber, and machinery. Exports are led by electronics, wood products, machinery, and services; imports by machinery, vehicles, fuels, and food. Top trading partners: Finland, Latvia, Sweden, Germany, and Lithuania. Estonia's economy contracted after 2022 as Russian transit trade and Finnish demand fell, making it one of the EU's weaker performers in recent years despite its digital reputation.

Closest partners: NATO, the US, the UK, and Finland, its closest cultural and economic partner across the Gulf of Finland. Latvia and Lithuania in the Baltic format, and the Nordic-Baltic Eight. The EU, where Estonia consistently pushes for tougher lines on Russia.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, across a border where Moscow has removed navigation buoys, jammed satellite navigation, and conducted cyberattacks; in September 2025 three Russian fighter jets violated Estonian airspace, and Estonia requested NATO consultations under Article 4. Narva, on the border, is 95% Russian-speaking, and some of Estonia's Russian speakers still lack citizenship.

7b. Latvia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Andris Kulbergs, 47 — in office since May 2026 (0.4 years); United List
Head of state	President Edgars Rinkēvičs, 53 — in office since July 2023 (3.2 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	1.84 million (2026)
Land area	62,200 km² (24,020 sq mi)
Religion	Lutheran, Catholic, and Orthodox the main churches, with a large unaffiliated share (church data and surveys; the census does not ask)
People	Latvians 63%, Russians 23%, Belarusians 3%, Ukrainians 2%, Poles 2% (official statistics, 2024); Russian is the first language of about a third; median age 45; 69% urban
Minimum wage	€780 a month gross since January 2026 ($879 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Latvia's history parallels Estonia's: centuries of German and Russian rule, independence in 1918-20, Soviet annexation in 1940, German occupation, Soviet re-annexation in 1944 with deportations,

and restored independence in 1991 after the Baltic Way human chain of 1989. It joined NATO and the EU in 2004 and the euro in 2014. Its Russian-speaking minority is the largest in the Baltic states, and the status of non-citizens who never naturalized after 1991 remains a point of contention with Moscow. Riga, the largest city in the Baltic states, was a major Soviet industrial and naval center.

Current leadership: Edgars Rinkēvičs, a long-serving foreign minister, became president in 2023. Evika Siliņa of New Unity resigned as prime minister on May 14, 2026, and the Saeima approved Andris Kulbergs's interim coalition on May 28. In the October 3 election Kulbergs's United List won 35.3% and 41 of the 100 seats, the best result in Latvian history, ahead of Latvia First with 17 and Sovereign Power with 15; the National Alliance and the Progressives won 10 each, New Unity fell to 7, and the Union of Greens and Farmers, a governing party, dropped out of parliament. Turnout was 51.8%. Kulbergs is expected to form a pro-European coalition with new partners, and most parties rule out Sovereign Power.

Government structure: The Saeima, elected by proportional representation with a 5% threshold, chooses the government and the president. Latvia hosts a Canadian-led NATO brigade at Ādaži, has reinstated conscription, and spends 4.92% of GDP on defense in NATO's 2026 estimate.

Economy and trade: A roughly $45 billion economy built on timber and wood products, transit and logistics (Riga was historically the Soviet Union's Baltic gateway), food processing, and machinery. Exports are led by wood products, machinery, food, and metals; imports by machinery, vehicles, fuels, and chemicals. Top trading partners: Lithuania, Estonia, Germany, Sweden, and Poland. The collapse of Russian transit trade since 2014 and especially 2022 has hollowed out the port and rail sector that once defined the economy.

Closest partners: NATO, Canada, the US, and the other Baltic and Nordic states. The EU. Latvia has been particularly active in pushing the shadow-fleet issue, since the tankers pass its coast.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, whose influence over Latvia's Russian speakers has been the central domestic security question since independence; Latvia has closed Russian-language schools, expelled Russians who failed language tests, and banned Russian television. Belarus, from which migrants have been channeled to Latvia's border as to Poland's.

7c. Lithuania

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Gitanas Nausėda, 62 — in office since July 2019 (7.2 years); directly elected
Head of government	Prime Minister Mindaugas Sinkevičius, 42 — in office since July 2026 (0.2 years); Social Democratic Party
System	Semi-presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	2.80 million (2026)
Land area	62,674 km² (24,200 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 74.2%, Orthodox 3.7%, no religion 6.1%; 13.7% did not answer (2021 census)
People	Lithuanians 84.6%, Poles 6.5%, Russians 5.0%, Belarusians 1.0% (2021 census); median age 44; 69% urban
Minimum wage	€1,153 a month gross since January 2026 ($1,299 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Unlike its northern neighbors, Lithuania was a medieval great power, the Grand Duchy that stretched to the Black Sea and united with Poland in a commonwealth that lasted until the partitions (Module 6). It declared independence in 1918, was annexed by the Soviets in 1940 alongside Estonia and Latvia, and in March 1990 became the first Soviet republic to declare independence — a move Moscow answered with a military crackdown in January 1991 that killed 14 people in Vilnius. Lithuania joined NATO and the EU in 2004 and the euro in 2015. The Suwałki gap on its border with Poland is the only land link between the Baltic states and the rest of NATO.

Current leadership: Gitanas Nausėda, a former banker, won a second term in 2024. The Social Democrats, who won the 2024 election, are on their third prime minister: Gintautas Paluckas resigned in 2025, and Inga Ruginienė resigned on June 23, 2026, after her party ended its coalition with Nemunas Dawn following police raids on that party's offices and leaders' homes. The Seimas approved the Social Democrats' chairman, Mindaugas Sinkevičius, as prime minister on June 30 by 80 votes to 2, and his government — the Social Democrats, the Democrats 'For Lithuania', the Farmers and Greens Union, and the Polish minority's party — took office on July 14 with 75 of the 141 seats.

Government structure: The president has genuine authority over foreign and security policy while the prime minister and the Seimas govern domestically. Lithuania spends 5.33% of GDP on defense, NATO's highest share in 2026, and hosts a German brigade being built up to a permanent force of about 5,000 by 2027 — Germany's first permanent stationing of a combat brigade abroad since World War II.

Economy and trade: A roughly $85 billion economy, the largest of the three Baltic states, built on refined petroleum (the Mažeikiai refinery), furniture, food, chemicals, and a growing fintech and laser industry. Exports are led by refined petroleum, furniture, food, machinery, and chemicals; imports by crude oil, machinery, vehicles, and fuels. Top trading partners: Germany, Poland, Latvia, the US, and the Netherlands. The Klaipėda LNG terminal, opened in 2014, ended dependence on Russian gas years before the rest of Europe, and Lithuania's 2021 decision to open a Taiwanese representative office triggered Chinese trade retaliation that it absorbed with EU and US support.

Closest partners: NATO, Germany (whose brigade is the largest allied presence in the Baltic states), Poland, the US, and the other Baltic and Nordic states. Ukraine, for which Lithuania has been among the most vocal advocates.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia and Belarus, which together border Lithuania on three sides: Kaliningrad to the southwest and Belarus to the east and south. Lithuania's 2022 restriction of sanctioned goods transiting to Kaliningrad by rail prompted Russian threats, and Belarus's hosting of Russian nuclear weapons and Wagner fighters in 2023 placed them within miles of the capital. Since late 2025 smuggling balloons from Belarus have repeatedly shut Vilnius airport; Lithuania declared a national emergency in December 2025 and closed the border in August 2026. China, over Taiwan, though the trade dispute has eased.

7d. The Frontline Logic

The three Baltic states are small — six million people combined — and have no strategic depth: Tallinn, Riga, and Vilnius are each within a few hours' drive of the Russian or Belarusian border. Their security therefore rests entirely on the certainty that NATO would fight for them, which is why they spend and host as they do (7a-7c) and are the alliance's most insistent voices on Russia. Their nightmare is a Russian seizure of the Suwałki gap before reinforcements arrive, a scenario Nordic NATO membership has made less decisive (4c).

Module 8 — The Alliance Map

NATO's Northern Flank, the EU & the Nordic-Baltic Bloc

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: NATO Strategic Concept (2022) and Nordic-Baltic Eight documentation

8a. NATO's Northern Flank

The alliance's posture in the region changed more between 2022 and 2024 than in the previous three decades. Finland and Sweden joined, the Baltic battlegroups grew from tripwire battalions toward brigades, Germany and Poland made the commitments described in Modules 6 and 7, and NATO adopted regional defense plans with actual force assignments for the first time since the Cold War. A new land component command for northern Europe is being set up in Mikkeli, Finland, and NATO added two missions in 2025, Baltic Sentry and Eastern Sentry. The result is a flank that is far better prepared than in 2021 and still dependent, for its heaviest capabilities, on the United States — the dependence that makes American reliability the region's central strategic anxiety.

8b. The Sub-Regional Groupings

• **The Nordic-Baltic Eight (NB8)** — the region's most active diplomatic caucus since 2022, speaking jointly on Ukraine and Russia.

• **The JEF** — a UK-led grouping of ten states (the Nordics, Baltics, Netherlands, and UK) able to deploy without NATO consensus, increasingly focused on Baltic maritime security and cable protection.

• **The Nordic Council and NORDEFCO** — long-standing Nordic political and defense cooperation, transformed by the fact that all five are now in NATO and can integrate air forces and logistics.

• **The Bucharest Nine** — NATO's eastern-flank members from Estonia to Bulgaria, in which Poland and the Baltics press for the hardest line on Russia.

• **Benelux** — founded in 1944, the prototype for European integration and still a coordination format.

8c. The EU's Role

The EU is the region's economic and regulatory framework but a limited security actor: its sanctions on Russia, its funding of Ukraine, its defense loans, and its energy coordination are the main instruments, and the Nordic-Baltic states plus Poland form its most hawkish bloc. Germany's position as the EU's anchor and the Netherlands' and Belgium's as founding members give the region disproportionate weight in Brussels; Ireland's presidency (Module 2) and Poland's in 2025 both prioritized Ukraine and security. The three non-members coordinate with it on Russia, the UK under its post-Brexit agreements.

8d. The Other Side

Facing this map is a Russia-Belarus axis. Belarus under Alexander Lukashenko, dependent on Moscow since the 2020 protests, served as the launch point for the 2022 invasion of Ukraine and is the source of the hybrid pressure on its NATO neighbors (Modules 6, 7). Russia's Baltic Fleet at Kaliningrad and its Northern Fleet on the Kola Peninsula bracket the region. Russia's conventional forces are depleted by Ukraine; how fast they rebuild is the question 9e takes up.

Module 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), Baltic security assessments

9a. Cable Sabotage and the Shadow Fleet

The Baltic seabed carries the power and data cables and gas pipelines that tie the Nordic and Baltic states together, and since 2023 a series of them have been cut: the Balticconnector gas pipeline and a telecom cable in October 2023, cables between Sweden, Finland, Germany, and Lithuania in November 2024, the Estlink-2 power cable (Module 4), and cables dragged by the cargo ship Fitburg's anchor for at least 130 kilometers on December 31, 2025, for which its captain and boatswain were charged in June 2026. The shadow fleet — several hundred vessels — is the region's most persistent security problem: an environmental disaster waiting to happen in a shallow enclosed sea, a sanctions leak, and a suspected sabotage tool. Estonia, Finland, Sweden, Germany, and the UK have boarded or detained vessels — 18 interventions or attempts by European states between December 2024 and August 2026 by one count — and Russia has answered with naval and air escorts and re-flagging. What states may do to ships beyond their territorial waters is unsettled, and the Finnish appeal ruling (Module 4) only partly answers it. What to watch: whether Finland's Supreme Court takes the Eagle S case, for which leave to appeal must be sought by October 26, 2026, and whether escorts turn boardings into naval confrontations.

9b. Kaliningrad

Russia's exclave is simultaneously its most exposed territory and its most dangerous forward base. Surrounded by NATO, supplied only by sea or through Lithuanian transit, it would be indefensible in a full war; but it hosts nuclear-capable Iskander missiles, the Baltic Fleet, and air defenses that threaten the entire southern Baltic. Lithuania's transit restrictions (Module 7) showed how quickly the exclave can become a crisis; Nordic NATO membership has reduced, but not removed, its leverage.

9c. Greenland

The region's sharpest dispute between allies is settled on paper (Module 3). Whether it holds depends on Washington treating the agreement as final, and Greenland's own independence debate continues.

9d. The Eastern Frontier and the War

From Finland's closed border to Poland's fenced one, the region's eastern frontier is now the most militarized line in Europe outside Ukraine itself. Finland, the Baltic states, and Poland have left the anti-personnel mine treaty, are building fortifications, and treat migrant flows and smuggling balloons engineered by Belarus as hybrid attacks. The Ukraine war's outcome is the variable that determines everything: a Russian victory or a ceasefire that frees Russian forces would bring renewed pressure on this frontier (9e), which is why the region's states are the war's most committed backers. What to watch: whether

the limited energy and grain truce discussed in September 2026 leads anywhere, and the European Council's return to Russia's frozen assets (Module 5).

9e. The Reconstitution Question

Every defense plan in this course rests on an estimate of how fast Russia can rebuild after Ukraine. Regional intelligence services have put the window at three to five years from a ceasefire; some German and Danish assessments have been shorter. The response has been the largest peacetime military buildup in the region's modern history (Modules 3-7), with Sweden and Denmark doubling their budgets. Whether it is enough, and whether the US remains committed, are the open questions. The region's states have concluded they cannot wait to find out.

9f. The Last Word

The throughline of all nine modules: this is a region where nearly everyone is on the same side, and the analytical task is therefore not mapping rival blocs but understanding how a single alliance's flank actually works under pressure — the frictions between allies (Greenland, Brexit, burden-sharing, frozen assets), the gaps in a security architecture that depends on a distant power, and the hybrid threats (cables, tankers, balloons, migrants, cyber) that fall below the threshold of the mutual-defense clause. The calendar ahead tests the governments rather than the alliance: Sweden's vote on a prime minister and Latvia's coalition talks (Modules 4, 7), Britain's first Burnham budget (Module 2), Saxony-Anhalt's choice of a minister-president and Germany's Federal Convention (Module 5), and the Estonian and Finnish elections of 2027 (Modules 4, 7). Fourteen allies facing one adversary and its client have built, in four years, the most integrated regional defense system in Europe. Its test has not yet come.

Key Points

The Baltic & North Sea

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Denmark	Mette Frederiksen	Prime Minister	48	June 2019	7.3
Lithuania	Gitanas Nausėda	President	62	July 2019	7.2
Norway	Jonas Gahr Støre	Prime Minister	66	October 2021	5.0
Sweden	Ulf Kristersson	Prime Minister	62	October 2022	4.0
Finland	Petteri Orpo	Prime Minister	56	June 2023	3.3
Luxembourg	Luc Frieden	Prime Minister	63	November 2023	2.9
Poland	Donald Tusk	Prime Minister	69	December 2023	2.8
Estonia	Kristen Michal	Prime Minister	51	July 2024	2.2
Iceland	Kristrún Frostadóttir	Prime Minister	38	December 2024	1.8
Ireland	Micheál Martin	Taoiseach	66	January 2025	1.7
Belgium	Bart De Wever	Prime Minister	55	February 2025	1.7
Germany	Friedrich Merz	Chancellor	70	May 2025	1.4
Netherlands	Rob Jetten	Prime Minister	39	February 2026	0.6
Latvia	Andris Kulbergs	Prime Minister	47	May 2026	0.4
United Kingdom	Andy Burnham	Prime Minister	56	July 2026	0.2

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's continuous tenure in the current office. Prime ministers lead everywhere except Lithuania, whose directly elected president leads foreign and security policy; the monarchs of the UK, Norway, Denmark, Sweden, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Luxembourg and the other presidents are heads of state, Finland's and Poland's with real powers. Sweden's prime minister has headed a caretaker government since resigning on September 17, 2026. Tusk was also prime minister in 2007–14 and Martin Taoiseach in 2020–22.

The Takeaways

• The North Sea is a resource sea (oil, gas, offshore wind) and the Baltic a transit sea whose only exit runs through the Danish straits — and since 2022 that exit carries Russia's shadow-fleet tankers through what is now a NATO lake.

• Fourteen of the region's fifteen states are in NATO and twelve in the EU, an unusually tight overlap; Finland's border is now over half the alliance's frontier with Russia, and the northern flank its most militarized.

• Four chokepoints structure the region — the Danish straits, the Gulf of Finland, Kaliningrad and the Suwałki gap, and the GIUK gap — and the cable and pipeline cuts since 2023 made seabed sabotage the region's daily security problem, though no court has yet ruled on intent in the Estlink-2 case.

• Germany made the fiscal turn Europe waited for — the debt brake amended in March 2025, a 2027 defense budget near €140 billion, a €500 billion infrastructure fund, a brigade in Lithuania — but not yet the economic one, and in September 2026 the AfD won Saxony-Anhalt and came first in Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania.

• Britain's Labour landslide on a third of the vote collapsed within a year; Starmer resigned in June 2026, and Andy Burnham, after winning a by-election, became prime minister in July without a general election. Labour has since drawn ahead of Reform UK, but the gilt market remains the constraint on what any government can do.

• Poland is the alliance's eastern anchor — 4.68% of GDP on defense, an army growing toward the EU's largest, the logistics hub for Ukraine — in a hostile cohabitation in which President Nawrocki issued a record 41 vetoes in his first year.

• The Baltic states now spend about 5% of GDP on defense, NATO's highest shares; Latvia and Lithuania changed prime ministers in 2026, Latvia's United List won a record mandate on October 3, and Estonia's parliament chose a new president.

• The Nordics are the region's most active caucus: Norway, under a new king, is Europe's largest gas supplier and NATO's Arctic sentinel; Denmark settled a year of American pressure over Greenland with a September 2026 agreement that affirms its sovereignty; Sweden's governing bloc lost its majority; Finland keeps its border closed.

• The Netherlands holds one of the world's chokepoints in ASML's lithography and is governed by a minority cabinet under Rob Jetten; Belgium holds most of Russia's frozen central-bank assets and the veto over lending them to Ukraine; Luxembourg hosts the EU's court.

• Kaliningrad is both Russia's most exposed territory and its most dangerous forward base, and the Suwałki gap is the single point where the Baltic states' land link to the alliance could be cut.

• The region's 2026 doubt is its guarantor's: an American administration that went to war with Iran, pressed Denmark over Greenland, and treats allies as free-riders has produced the largest European rearmament since the Cold War.

• The region is the Ukraine war's rear: its arms pass through Poland, Russian drones entered Polish airspace in September 2025, and the war's settlement — or its fifth winter — is the variable every Baltic capital plans around.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. Why is the Baltic now often called a 'NATO lake'?

A) Every shore state but Russia is in the alliance
B) The EU took over Baltic patrols
C) Russia withdrew its Baltic Fleet
D) NATO moved its naval headquarters to the Baltic coast

2. How did Andy Burnham become prime minister in July 2026?

A) He won a general election
B) He won a by-election, then the Labour leadership unopposed
C) The King appointed him after the Commons failed to elect a prime minister
D) He won a ballot of Labour members against Keir Starmer after a leadership challenge

3. Which of the fifteen states is not a NATO member?

A) Luxembourg
B) Norway, outside the EU
C) Ireland
D) Iceland, which has no army

4. What did the September 22, 2026 agreement on Greenland do?

A) Sold Greenland to the United States
B) Made Greenland independent within NATO
C) Ended the US base at Pituffik
D) Affirmed Danish sovereignty and gave the US new defense areas, with no end date

5. Why did Sweden's Ulf Kristersson resign in September 2026?

A) His bloc won 173 of 349 seats, losing its majority to the opposition's 176
B) He lost a vote on the budget
C) He became NATO's secretary-general
D) The Sweden Democrats joined the cabinet

6. Which state's defense spending was NATO's highest share of GDP in its 2026 estimates?

A) Netherlands
B) Poland, at 4.68%
C) Lithuania
D) The United Kingdom

7. What is the Joint Expeditionary Force?

A) An EU battlegroup
B) A UK-led force of ten states that can deploy without NATO consensus
C) A Russian naval formation based at Kaliningrad that shadows NATO exercises
D) The Nordic Council's standing military wing, created in 2009 alongside its defense pact

8. Who succeeded Harald V as Norway's head of state?

A) Queen Sonja
B) An elected president
C) Crown Princess Ingrid Alexandra
D) His son, as King Haakon VIII

9. Why is Ireland's headline GDP figure misleading?

A) It counts Northern Ireland
B) US multinationals' accounting inflates it
C) It is calculated in pounds sterling rather than in euros
D) It leaves out agriculture, the largest sector of the economy

10. What is distinctive about the German brigade in Lithuania?

A) It is a temporary training mission
B) It is led by Poland
C) It replaced a Canadian battalion
D) It is Germany's first permanent stationing of a combat brigade abroad since World War II

11. Which party won Latvia's October 3, 2026 election?

A) United List
B) Latvia First
C) Sovereign Power
D) The National Alliance

12. What did Finland's Court of Appeal decide about the Eagle S case in August 2026?

A) That the case was closed
B) That the officers were guilty of sabotage
C) That Finland has jurisdiction to try the officers
D) That the tanker's owners must pay the cable operators €105 million in damages at once

13. What role does Belgium play in the dispute over Russia's frozen central-bank assets?

A) It has already seized them for Ukraine's budget
B) Most of them sit at Euroclear in Brussels, and De Wever has blocked using them for a loan to Ukraine
C) It holds none of them
D) It proposed the EU's €90 billion loan

14. What makes Poland's cohabitation hostile?

A) A coalition with the far right
B) A constitutional court that has dissolved the government twice since 2023
C) A president who vetoed a record 41 bills in a year
D) A prime minister who refuses to sign laws passed by the president's party in the Senate

15. What did the AfD achieve in the September 2026 state elections?

A) A majority in Berlin
B) Its first seats in a state parliament
C) A coalition with the CDU in Saxony-Anhalt, breaking the firewall for the first time
D) First place in Saxony-Anhalt and Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. A 2. B 3. C 4. D 5. A 6. C 7. B 8. D 9. B 10. D 11. A 12. C 13. B 14. C 15. D

The Black Sea & Danube

Figures current as of October 2026

The Black Sea and the Danube — Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Bulgaria, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Central Europe: leaders, governments, economies, and the war and the hybrid politics that define them.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: A Sea at War and a River That Ties the Interior to It

Goal: Establish the geography, the Black Sea's wartime status, and the disputes that recur.

Covers the Black Sea as a front of the Ukraine war, the Danube as the artery of the landlocked interior, the membership map of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) and the EU, and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — Ukraine

Goal: Profile the country at war, in its own module.

Covers the fifth year of the war, a new prime minister, the stalled peace talks, and the Black Sea corridor that Russian strikes have largely shut.

MODULE 3 — Moldova, Romania & Bulgaria (the Western Shore)

Goal: Profile Moldova and the two NATO members on the Black Sea's western shore.

Covers Moldova's new government, Romania's fallen government, and Bulgaria's new majority.

MODULE 4 — Georgia & Armenia (the Caucasus)

Goal: Profile the two Caucasus states moving in opposite directions.

Covers Georgia's move to ban its opposition under a disputed government, and Armenia's re-elected government and unsigned peace treaty.

MODULE 5 — Serbia, Kosovo & North Macedonia (the Balkan Interior)

Goal: Profile the three Balkan states not on the Mediterranean.

Covers Vučić's resignation and Serbia's snap election, Kosovo's new government and president, and North Macedonia's blocked EU path.

MODULE 6 — Hungary, Slovakia & Czechia

Goal: Profile the three Central European states whose politics diverged in 2025-26.

Covers Orbán's fall and Magyar's first months, Fico's Russia-friendly Slovakia, and Babiš's return in Prague.

MODULE 7 — Austria & Switzerland (the Alpine Neutrals)

Goal: Profile the two neutral states of the interior.

Covers Austria's neutrality and budget deficit inside the EU, and Switzerland's 2026 votes on immigration and neutrality and its new EU treaties.

MODULE 8 — Belarus

Goal: Profile Russia's closest ally in its own module.

Covers Lukashenko's rule, dependence on Moscow, prisoner releases for sanctions relief, and Belarus's pressure on NATO's borders.

MODULE 9 — The Alliance Map: NATO's Southeastern Flank, EU Enlargement & the Russian Orbit

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's institutions.

Covers who is in NATO and the EU, who is waiting, the Russian-led organizations, and the outside powers.

MODULE 10 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers the Ukraine war and the Black Sea, Transnistria, Georgia's direction, Kosovo and Serbia, the Caucasus peace, and Hungary's reversal.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

The parties, institutions, and abbreviations the modules rely on are defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country each one belongs to or concerns, or how many of the fifteen when it spans several; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Institutions, Alliances, and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
Six of the 15	NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)	The Western military alliance founded in 1949, whose members pledge to defend one another.
Six of the 15	European Union	The 27-member union.
Five of the 15	EU candidates; negotiating clusters	Countries the EU has accepted as candidates for membership. Accession talks cover some 33 policy chapters, grouped into six clusters that are opened together; every chapter must be closed before a country can join.
Region-wide	European Council	The summit of the EU's heads of state or government, which sets the union's direction.
Three of the 15	Euro	The EU's single currency.
Region-wide	Freedom House	The US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.
Belarus, Armenia	CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization)	The Russian-led military alliance of six former Soviet states.
Belarus, Armenia	Eurasian Economic Union	The Russian-led customs and economic union of five former Soviet states.
Belarus	Union State	The 1999 treaty union of Russia and Belarus.
Region-wide	Montreux Convention	The 1936 treaty giving Turkey control of the Bosphorus and Dardanelles, including the right to close them to the warships of countries at war.
Ukraine, Moldova	IMF (International Monetary Fund)	The lender to governments in balance-of-payments trouble.
Ukraine	National Security and Defense Council; Verkhovna Rada	Ukraine's top security body, chaired by the president, and its 450-seat parliament.
Region-wide	Group of Seven; Group of Twenty	The forums of seven large advanced economies and of the largest advanced and emerging economies.
Kosovo	KFOR (Kosovo Force)	NATO's peacekeeping force in Kosovo since 1999.
Kosovo, Serbia	Brussels Agreement	The EU-mediated accord on normalizing relations between Serbia and Kosovo.
Kosovo	Kosovo Specialist Chambers	The court in The Hague, part of Kosovo's legal system but staffed by international judges, that tries former fighters of the Kosovo Liberation Army (KLA) for war crimes.
North Macedonia	Prespa Agreement; Ohrid Agreement	The name accord with Greece, and the power-sharing accord with the Albanian minority.
Armenia, Azerbaijan	TRIPP (Trump Route for International Peace and Prosperity)	The US-backed transit route linking Azerbaijan to its Nakhchivan exclave.

Governments, Parties, and Companies

Country	Name	Who or what
Ukraine	Naftogaz; Energoatom	Ukraine's state oil-and-gas company and its state nuclear-power company.
Moldova	PAS (Party of Action and Solidarity)	Sandu's pro-European party.
Romania	National Liberal Party; PSD (Social Democratic Party)	The center-right party of the caretaker prime minister, and the center-left party, the largest in parliament.
Romania	AUR (Alliance for the Union of Romanians)	The far-right party.
Bulgaria	Progressive Bulgaria	Rumen Radev's party.
Georgia	Georgian Dream	Georgia's governing party.
Georgia	United National Movement	The party of former president Mikheil Saakashvili, the largest opposition party.
Armenia	Civil Contract; Strong Armenia	Pashinyan's party, and the new party of the businessman Samvel Karapetyan.
Serbia	Serbian Progressive Party	Vučić's party.
Serbia	Students Win; European Serbia	The electoral list of the student protest movement, and a pro-Western opposition alliance.
Serbia	NIS (Naftna Industrija Srbije)	Serbia's oil company, owner of the Pančevo refinery.
Kosovo	Vetëvendosje	Albin Kurti's left-nationalist movement.
Kosovo	PDK (Democratic Party of Kosovo)	An opposition party founded by former guerrilla leaders.
North Macedonia	VMRO-DPMNE (Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization–Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity)	Mickoski's nationalist party.
North Macedonia	VLEN ('Worth It')	An alliance of ethnic Albanian parties.
Hungary	Tisza; Fidesz	Magyar's center-right party, which he has led since 2024, and Orbán's national-conservative party.
Slovakia	Smer; Hlas	Fico's left-nationalist party, and the party Pellegrini founded in 2020 as its offshoot.
Czechia	ANO (Action of Dissatisfied Citizens); SPD (Freedom and Direct Democracy); Motorists	Babiš's populist party, and a nationalist and a right-wing party.
Austria	People's Party; Social Democrats; NEOS (The New Austria)	The center-right, center-left, and liberal parties.
Austria	Freedom Party	The far-right party founded in 1956 by former Nazis.
Austria	OMV (Austrian Mineral Oil Administration)	Austria's partly state-owned oil and gas company.
Switzerland	SVP (Swiss People's Party); Federal Council	Switzerland's largest party, national-conservative and opposed to closer EU ties, and the seven-member executive that governs collectively.
Switzerland	UBS (originally Union Bank of Switzerland)	Switzerland's largest bank.

Places and Terms

Country	Name	Who or what
Ukraine	Crimea; Donbas	The Black Sea peninsula, and the eastern coal region of Donetsk and Luhansk.
Moldova	Transnistria; Gagauzia	The Russian-backed breakaway strip east of the Dniester, and the autonomous region of the Turkic-speaking Gagauz in the south.
Georgia	Abkhazia; South Ossetia	Georgia's two breakaway regions.
Armenia, Azerbaijan	Nagorno-Karabakh	The formerly Armenian-populated region inside Azerbaijan, fought over from 1988.
Region-wide	Middle Corridor	The trade route from China and Central Asia across the Caspian Sea and the Caucasus to the Black Sea and Europe, bypassing Russia.
Region-wide	Druzhba pipeline	The Soviet-built oil pipeline from Russia to Central Europe, still supplying Hungary and Slovakia.
Belarus	Oreshnik	Russia's nuclear-capable intermediate-range ballistic missile.
Region-wide	The 2026 Iran war	The war the US and Israel launched on Iran on February 28, 2026.
Region-wide	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year, converted at market exchange rates unless stated at purchasing-power parity, which adjusts for differences in prices.

Module 1 — Foundations

A Sea at War and a River That Ties the Interior to It



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Charles King, *The Black Sea: A History*; Nick Thorpe, *The Danube: A Journey Upriver*

1a. The Black Sea as an Active Front

The Black Sea has a full-scale war fought on and around it. Since 2022 Ukraine has sunk or disabled roughly a third of Russia's Black Sea Fleet with drones and missiles despite having almost no navy of its own, forced the fleet out of Sevastopol in Crimea to Novorossiysk, and in 2023 opened a grain corridor from Odesa along the Romanian, Bulgarian, and Turkish coasts by force rather than by agreement (Module 2). Turkey has closed the straits to belligerents' warships under the Montreux Convention since 2022, so Russia cannot bring warships in from outside, and the navies of NATO members from beyond the sea have stayed out; Romania, Bulgaria, and Turkey run a joint mine-clearing force. The sea's other shores are NATO territory (Romania, Bulgaria, Turkey) or contested ground (Georgia, with Russian-occupied Abkhazia on its coast).

1b. The Danube as the Interior's Artery

The Danube flows 2,850 kilometers from Germany's Black Forest through ten countries to the Black Sea delta on the Romania-Ukraine border — the most international river in the world. It is the reason landlocked Austria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Serbia have a stake in Black Sea affairs at all, and in 2022-23 its ports — Ukraine's Izmail and Reni, and Romania's Constanța by the canal — were the critical outlet for Ukrainian

grain while the sea was blockaded. The interior states of this course — from Switzerland and Austria to the Balkans — are connected to the sea by the river, by shared Habsburg and Ottoman history, and by the fact that every one of them lies on the historical frontier between Western and Russian spheres.

1c. The Membership Map

- **NATO and EU members (5):** Romania, Bulgaria, Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia. Austria is in the EU only, and neutral; North Macedonia is in NATO only; Switzerland is in neither.
- **EU candidates (5):** Ukraine, Moldova, Serbia, North Macedonia, and Georgia, with Kosovo and Armenia further back (Module 9).
- **The Russian orbit:** Belarus (Module 8); Armenia formally, though it is pulling away; Georgia and Serbia in part (Modules 4, 5, 9).
- **Referenced but not profiled:** Turkey and Russia, the sea's two largest powers, and Croatia and Bosnia, Serbia's neighbors to the west.

1d. The Disputes That Recur

Five issues run through the course. The Ukraine war and its endgame (Modules 2, 9, 10). Frozen conflicts left by Russian intervention — Transnistria in Moldova, Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia — where Russian troops hold territory (Modules 3, 4, 10). Kosovo's unresolved status with Serbia (Modules 5, 10). The Armenia-Azerbaijan peace and the reopening of Caucasus transit (Modules 4, 10). And the reversal in Central Europe (Modules 6, 9, 10).

1e. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office, and the second figure who matters — the prime minister where a president leads (Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Belarus), the head of state where a prime minister governs — then the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religions with their shares, the main ethnic or language groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars, where the law sets one. A note under each table gives its sources. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. The region spans a wide range of ratings and alignments: six states are rated Free, eight Partly Free, and one Not Free, and they run from NATO's frontline to Russia's closest ally. The Who's Who before this module defines the parties, institutions, and abbreviations the profiles rely on, and the Key Points page ranks the leaders by time in office, from Belarus's president to Hungary's prime minister.

Module 2 — Ukraine

The Country at War



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Serhii Plokhy, *The Gates of Europe: A History of Ukraine*; Institute for the Study of War daily assessments

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Volodymyr Zelensky, 48 — in office since May 2019 (7.4 years); in office beyond his five-year term because martial law bars elections
Head of government	Prime Minister Serhiy Koretskyi, 48 — in office since July 2026 (0.2 years); non-partisan
System	Semi-presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	39.5 million (2026); UN estimate within Ukraine's internationally recognized borders, including the occupied territories; there has been no census since 2001
Land area	579,320 km² (223,680 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox Christian the large majority, most now in the independent Orthodox Church of Ukraine; Greek Catholic about a tenth, mainly in the west (survey estimates)
People	Ukrainians 77.8%, Russians 17.3% (2001 census; identification has shifted since 2014); median age 43; 71% urban
Minimum wage	8,647 hryvnias a month since January 2026 ($192 at the National Bank of Ukraine's 45.06 hryvnias = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The medieval state of Kyivan Rus is claimed as an origin by both Ukraine and Russia, and that contested inheritance underlies the present war. Ukrainian lands were divided for centuries among Poland-Lithuania, the Habsburgs, and the Russian Empire. A brief independence in 1917-21 ended in Soviet conquest; the 1932-33 famine engineered under Stalin killed millions, and Ukraine was the bloodiest battlefield of World War II. Independence came in 1991 with a 92% referendum vote. Two revolutions — the Orange Revolution of 2004 and the Maidan uprising of 2014 — turned the country toward Europe, and Russia answered the second by seizing Crimea and igniting war in the Donbas. Russia's full-scale invasion of February 24, 2022 failed to take Kyiv and became a war now in its fifth year.

Current leadership: Volodymyr Zelensky governs with wartime power concentrated in the presidency and the National Security and Defense Council; Kyrylo Budanov, the former military intelligence chief, heads his office. In July 2026 Zelensky replaced his government, saying Ukraine needed new people for a new political strategy: the Verkhovna Rada accepted Yulia Svyrydenko's resignation on July 14 and appointed Serhiy Koretskyi, a businessman who had chaired Naftogaz, on July 16 with 289 votes, while Andrii Sybiha stayed on as foreign minister. A corruption investigation that broke in November 2025 — the 'Midas' case over kickbacks at Energoatom — led to charges against a former energy minister and to Zelensky's former chief of staff, Andriy Yermak, being named a suspect.

Government structure: In peacetime the directly elected president controls foreign policy and defense while the prime minister and the Verkhovna Rada govern domestically; martial law, in force since February 2022, has also restricted some political activity. Roughly a fifth of Ukraine, including Crimea and most of the Donbas, is under Russian occupation. Ukraine is a NATO aspirant.

Economy and trade: A roughly $230 billion wartime economy, still about a fifth smaller in real terms than in 2021, kept afloat by Western aid. From 2023 its exports moved through the Black Sea corridor (Module 1) and overland through Poland and Romania. Exports are led by grain and oilseeds, iron ore and metals, and information-technology services (a sector that has grown through the war); imports by weapons, fuel, vehicles, and machinery. Top trading partners: Poland, Germany, China, Turkey, and Romania. The occupied east held much of the coal and heavy industry, and reconstruction is estimated at over $500 billion.

Closest partners: European states — Germany, the UK, France, Poland, the Nordics, and the Baltics — and the EU now provide most of Ukraine's military and financial support (the worked example below). The United States, its largest donor until 2025, now sells it weapons that Europeans pay for. Turkey, as drone supplier. Increasingly Armenia and Moldova, fellow states pulling away from Russia.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, in a war that has killed or wounded hundreds of thousands and displaced millions, and its ally Belarus (Module 8). Orbán's Hungary was Ukraine's most persistent obstacle inside the EU until he lost power in 2026; Slovakia's Fico, despite the February 2026 dispute over power supplies (Module 6), said in May, by Zelensky's account, that he would back its EU membership. The central dispute is over the terms of peace: Ukraine's position is that any settlement must be based on the current line of contact with binding Western security guarantees; Russia demands Ukraine's withdrawal from the parts of the Donbas it still holds and a bar on NATO membership (2b).

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	About 32-33 million in government-held territory, against 44 million in 2021; about 6 million refugees abroad and 4 million displaced at home; fertility below 1.0	The demographic catastrophe the war compounded
GDP	Growth of about 2% in 2026	Slow growth on a shrunken base

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Military	About a million under arms; drones made by the million each year	Europe's largest army at war
Regime	51/100 from Freedom House in 2025; the anti-corruption agencies' independence curbed in July 2025 and restored after protests	Wartime restrictions
The front	Largely static across the Donbas and Zaporizhzhia; the Kursk incursion of 2024-25 reversed; Russian gains of 154 km² in September 2026 by the DeepState monitors' count, while the Institute for the Study of War found Ukraine retook more than it lost that month; the heaviest fighting on the Pokrovsk and Kostiantynivka axes	The war of attrition
The sea	28 civilian ships struck and 21 people killed off the Odesa region between June 20 and July 20, 2026; shipowners stopped calling from July 22; grain exports down 76% year on year in August; Ukraine's strikes halted Novorossiysk's three oil terminals in August	The 2023 corridor largely shut
Energy and the minerals deal	The grid struck every winter (half of generation capacity damaged); the April 2025 US minerals agreement (a joint fund on new licenses); the Zaporizhzhia nuclear plant under Russian control	The physical war

In depth — the question: Whether the war ends by settlement, by exhaustion, or by a winter's decision, and whether a state that has held this long against a nuclear power on Europe's money holds when the money, the guarantor, or the winter turns.

Worked example — The Survival Budget

Ukraine's 2026 budget spends about $107 billion, some $62 billion of it on defense, against revenue of about $63 billion: a deficit of 18.4% of GDP, the largest of any state at war since 1945, financed almost entirely from abroad. The sources in 2026: the EU's €90 billion loan for 2026-27, raised by joint borrowing among 24 member states (Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia stayed out), of which €45 billion falls in 2026 — €16.7 billion for the budget and €28.3 billion for arms, with preferences for European suppliers; the Group of Seven's $50 billion loan of 2024, serviced from the income on Russia's immobilized central-bank assets; a new four-year IMF program of $8.1 billion; and bilateral aid from the Nordics, Britain, Japan, and Canada. American budget support, more than $60 billion in 2022-24, has fallen to near zero. The arithmetic's fragility: deficits near 20% for four years have taken debt from 50% to about 100% of GDP; the EU chose joint borrowing over lending the roughly €210 billion of Russian assets it holds, which stay immobilized against reparations; Zelensky says the loan 'has proven too small' and puts the 2026 gap at about €23 billion; and the winter grid strikes (the table above) add $5-10 billion of repairs. The lesson is the war's: Ukraine's survival is an annual European decision dressed as a budget, Russia's is an oil price, and the side whose funder tires first loses a war neither can win on the ground.

2b. Where the War Stands

As of October 2026 the front runs for more than 1,000 kilometers, from the Russian border near Kharkiv through the Donbas to the Dnipro. Both sides now fight a war dominated by drones, and Ukraine's strikes on Russian refineries, ports, and airbases have imposed costs deep inside Russia. At sea, Russia answered Ukraine's corridor with a campaign against merchant shipping (the table above); Ukraine has offered a truce for civilian shipping through third countries, and Turkey has urged a moratorium. The diplomacy stalled after the last three-way round with the US and Russia, in Geneva in February 2026, when the US-Israeli war on Iran drew Washington's attention away. In September the US envoys Steve Witkoff and Jared Kushner saw Putin in Moscow and then made their first wartime visit to Kyiv; during the UN General Assembly both sides told the US they were open to a limited ceasefire covering energy and grain, though Russia insists that any meeting of leaders be held in Moscow. The same month the US, as the Group of Twenty's chair, invited Russia's finance minister to a meeting of the group's finance ministers, over European objections.

Module 3 — Moldova, Romania & Bulgaria

The Western Shore



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Carnegie Europe, Black Sea regional analysis; Balkan Insight (BIRN) reporting

3a. Moldova

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Maia Sandu, 54 — in office since December 2020 (5.8 years)
Head of government	Prime Minister Vasile Tofan, 44 — in office since July 2026 (0.2 years); governs with the Party of Action and Solidarity's majority
System	Parliamentary republic with a directly elected president
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	2.96 million (2026); UN estimate, including Transnistria; the 2024 census of the territory the government controls counted 2.42 million
Land area	32,850 km² (12,680 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox Christian, over 90% (2014 census)
People	Moldovans about 77%, Romanians about 8%, Ukrainians about 5%, Gagauz about 4%, Russians about 3% (2024 census, excluding Transnistria); median age 40; 44% urban
Minimum wage	6,300 lei a month since January 2026 ($352 at the National Bank of Moldova's 17.90 lei = $1, October 9, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Moldova's territory was part of the principality of Moldavia, annexed by Russia in 1812, joined to Romania in 1918, and seized back by the Soviets in 1940. Independence in 1991 was immediately followed by a war in which Russian-backed separatists carved out Transnistria. The country has oscillated

between Russian- and Romanian-oriented governments for three decades; Romanian-speaking Moldovans hold Romanian citizenship in large numbers. Maia Sandu's election in 2020 and her party's parliamentary wins in 2021 and 2025 set Moldova firmly on an EU path.

Current leadership: Maia Sandu, a former World Bank economist, was re-elected in 2024. The first PAS government after the September 2025 election lasted eight months: Prime Minister Alexandru Munteanu resigned on July 3, 2026 amid a corruption scandal at the state air-traffic-control company, a blow to the government's anti-corruption credentials, and parliament approved Vasile Tofan, an investor, with 53 votes on July 21, keeping most of the cabinet.

Government structure: The president holds foreign policy and security authority and, under Sandu, dominates in practice; the 101-seat parliament chooses the government. Transnistria hosts roughly 1,500 Russian troops, and Gagauzia is pro-Russian.

Economy and trade: A roughly $18 billion economy, among Europe's poorest, dependent on agriculture (wine, fruit, sunflower), remittances from a large diaspora, and EU assistance. Exports are led by wine, sunflower oil, grain, and electrical components; imports by fuels, machinery, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: Romania (now the largest by far), Ukraine, Germany, Italy, and Turkey; Russia has fallen sharply. The government-controlled territory stopped buying Russian gas from late 2022, importing through Romania instead, and Moldova's power grid has been synchronized with Europe's since 2022.

Closest partners: The EU, which Moldova has treated as an existential choice. Romania, its closest partner by language, citizenship, and energy. Ukraine, whose survival shields Moldova from Russian reach. The US and other Western donors.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, which has run the most intensive influence campaign against Moldova of any state its size — vote-buying, disinformation, energy cutoffs, and the Transnistrian garrison. Transnistria itself (Module 10).

3b. Romania

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Nicușor Dan, 56 — in office since May 2025 (1.4 years); independent; directly elected
Head of government	Ilie Bolojan, caretaker prime minister, 57 — in office since June 2025 (1.3 years); National Liberal Party
System	Semi-presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	18.8 million (2026)
Land area	230,170 km² (88,870 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox 85.3%, Catholic 4.5%, Reformed about 3%, Pentecostal about 2% (2021 census, of those who answered)
People	Romanians 89.3%, Hungarians 6.0%, Roma 3.4% (2021 census, of those who answered); median age 44; 55% urban
Minimum wage	4,325 lei a month gross since July 2026, up from 4,050 ($911 at about 4.75 lei = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Formed by the union of Wallachia and Moldavia in 1859, Romania won independence from the Ottomans in 1878 and doubled in size after World War I by gaining Transylvania from Hungary. It sided with Germany in World War II, switched sides in 1944, and became a Soviet satellite under a communist

regime that Nicolae Ceaușescu turned into one of the bloc's most repressive and personalist. The 1989 revolution ended with Ceaușescu's execution. Romania joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007. In 2024 the constitutional court annulled a presidential election after a pro-Russian outsider won the first round amid evidence of Russian interference on social media; a rerun followed in May 2025.

Current leadership: Nicușor Dan, a pro-European former mayor of Bucharest, won the rerun. Romania has had no full government since May 5, 2026, when 281 members of parliament, led by the PSD, which had left the coalition, and AUR, passed a no-confidence motion against Ilie Bolojan's four-party coalition, which had imposed austerity to close the EU's largest deficit. Three nominees failed to form a government — among them Eugen Tomac, who withdrew, and the Liberal Adrian Vestea, who lost a confidence vote in June — before Dan named a diplomat, Luca Niculescu, on October 5. The deficit fell to 2.89% of GDP in January-August 2026, from 4.51% a year earlier, but the economy slipped into technical recession.

Government structure: The president leads foreign and defense policy and chairs the security council; the prime minister and bicameral parliament govern domestically. Romania hosts a US Aegis Ashore missile-defense site at Deveselu and a growing NATO presence at the Mihail Kogălniceanu air base near Constanța, under long-term expansion into the alliance's largest European base.

Economy and trade: A roughly $400 billion economy, the largest on the Black Sea's western shore and among the EU's fastest-growing over two decades, built on car manufacturing (Dacia, Ford), information-technology services, agriculture, and energy — Romania has the EU's largest onshore gas reserves, and its Neptun Deep field in the Black Sea, due to produce from 2027, will add about 8 billion cubic meters a year. Exports are led by cars and parts, machinery, electrical equipment, and grain; imports by machinery, fuels, and chemicals. Top trading partners: Germany, Italy, Hungary, France, and Poland. The port of Constanța is the Black Sea's largest.

Closest partners: NATO and the US, with which Romania has one of the region's closest defense relationships, though the US announced in October 2025 that it would cut some of its troops there. Moldova, which Romania treats as kin and whose EU path it sponsors. Ukraine, Poland, and the other eastern-flank states. The EU, whose Schengen area Romania fully joined in 2025.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia: beyond the 2024 election interference, its drones have repeatedly crashed on Romanian territory near the Danube. Domestically, AUR leads the polls by double digits; the legal conditions for an early election are met, and Dan calls one a last resort.

3c. Bulgaria

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Rumen Radev, 63 — in office since May 2026 (0.4 years); Progressive Bulgaria; president 2017–26
Head of state	President Iliana Iotova, 61 — in office since January 2026 (0.7 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	6.67 million (2026); UN estimate; Bulgaria's statistics office counted 6.4 million at the end of 2024
Land area	108,560 km² (41,920 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox about 72%, Muslim about 11% (2021 census, of those who answered)
People	Bulgarians 84.6%, Turks 8.4%, Roma 4.4% (2021 census, of those who answered); median age 46; 78% urban

At a glance	As of October 2026
Minimum wage	€620.20 a month since January 2026 ($699 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The medieval Bulgarian empires rivaled Byzantium before five centuries of Ottoman rule ended in 1878. Bulgaria fought on the losing side in both world wars, became a Soviet satellite in 1944, and was the bloc's most loyal member under Todor Zhivkov's 35-year rule. Communism ended in 1989 and Bulgaria joined NATO in 2004 and the EU in 2007, though it was long kept out of Schengen and the eurozone over corruption concerns. A political crisis from 2021 produced seven elections in four years and a string of caretaker and short-lived governments.

Current leadership: Iliana Iotova, Rumen Radev's vice-president, succeeded him on January 23, 2026, when he resigned the presidency to enter parliamentary politics — the first vice-president to succeed mid-term. Radev, a former air force commander, led his new Progressive Bulgaria to 131 of the 240 seats with 43.9% in the April 19 election, the eighth since 2021, and parliament elected him prime minister on May 8, ending the deadlock — the first former president to become prime minister.

Government structure: The National Assembly chooses the government. Bulgaria joined the Schengen area fully in 2025.

Economy and trade: A roughly $110 billion economy, the EU's poorest per capita, built on manufacturing (auto parts, machinery), software outsourcing, tourism, and agriculture. Exports are led by refined petroleum, copper, machinery, and grain; imports by fuels, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: Germany, Romania, Italy, Turkey, and Greece. Bulgaria adopted the euro on January 1, 2026, and the Balkan gas interconnectors through its territory make it a transit hub for Azerbaijani gas into Central Europe.

Closest partners: The EU and NATO formally, though Radev has been a critic of both, has called for renewed ties with Russia, and opposed military aid to Ukraine as president — making Bulgaria's direction under his government a live question. Greece and Turkey as neighbors and gas-transit partners; Romania in the Black Sea NATO framework.

Principal rivalries and disputes: North Macedonia, over history, language, and identity (Module 5). Domestically, corruption and the loss of more than a quarter of the population since 1989 to emigration and low birth rates are the structural problems.

Module 4 — Georgia & Armenia

The Caucasus, Moving in Opposite Directions



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Thomas de Waal, *The Caucasus: An Introduction*; Civil.ge and Eurasianet reporting

4a. Georgia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze, 48 — in office since February 2024 (2.7 years); Georgian Dream
Head of state	President Mikheil Kavelashvili, 55 — in office since December 2024 (1.8 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic under one-party dominance
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	3.80 million (2026)
Land area	69,490 km² (26,830 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox 83.4%, Muslim 10.7%, Armenian Apostolic 2.9% (2014 census, excluding Abkhazia and South Ossetia)
People	Georgians 86.8%, Azerbaijanis 6.3%, Armenians 4.5% (2014 census, excluding Abkhazia and South Ossetia); median age 39; 62% urban
Minimum wage	20 lari a month under a 1999 decree that has never been updated, so in practice no effective minimum (about $8 at about 2.60 lari = $1, October 9, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A Christian kingdom since the 4th century, Georgia was annexed by Russia in 1801, enjoyed three years of independence after 1918, and was reconquered by the Bolsheviks in 1921; Stalin was a Georgian. Independence in 1991 brought civil war and the loss of Abkhazia and South Ossetia to Russian-backed separatists. The 2003 Rose Revolution installed a pro-Western government, and Russia's

2008 invasion cemented the two regions' de facto separation, with Russian troops still there. Georgian Dream has governed since 2012 and has drifted toward Moscow.

Current leadership: Irakli Kobakhidze's government is disputed after the October 2024 election, which the opposition and international observers said was marred by fraud and intimidation. Mikheil Kavelashvili, a former footballer, was chosen by an electoral college — the method in force since 2017 — built on the disputed parliament; neither the previous president, Salome Zourabichvili, nor many Western governments recognize him. Georgian Dream's founder, the billionaire Bidzina Ivanishvili, is widely regarded as the real power.

Government structure: Georgian Dream holds a parliamentary majority the opposition boycotts, has passed 'foreign agent' laws and laws restricting the rights of gay and transgender people modeled on Russia's, and has jailed opposition leaders, among them Mikheil Saakashvili and the United National Movement's leader, Levan Khabeishvili. Since October 2025 it has asked the constitutional court in three lawsuits to ban the main opposition parties; the third, filed by 88 members of parliament on September 24, 2026, names five, four of which crossed the 5% threshold in 2024. In November 2024 it suspended EU accession until 2028, triggering months of nightly protests.

Economy and trade: A roughly $35 billion economy built on transit, tourism, wine, agriculture, and remittances. Exports are led by copper ore, cars (re-exports), wine, and ferroalloys; imports by fuels, vehicles, and machinery. Top trading partners: Turkey, Russia (which grew sharply after 2022 as Georgia declined to join sanctions), China, Azerbaijan, and the EU. Georgia's strategic economic asset is its position on the Middle Corridor — the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan and Southern Gas Corridor pipelines and the rail link from Azerbaijan all cross it — and the planned Anaklia deep-water port, whose Chinese-led construction contract in 2024 drew Western concern.

Closest partners: Turkey and Azerbaijan, as transit partners on the Middle Corridor. China, a growing investor. Russia, with which Georgian Dream has restored trade and flights while stopping short of formal ties. Hungary under Orbán was Georgian Dream's main EU defender; that support ended with Orbán's fall.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The EU and the West: the EU suspended visa-free travel for Georgian diplomats and officials in March 2026, and a Commission report warned that ordinary Georgians could lose it too; the US and several European states have sanctioned Georgian officials, and Western aid has been suspended — a rupture Georgian Dream frames as foreign interference. Russia, formally, over the occupied regions, though the government has abandoned confrontation.

4b. Armenia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Nikol Pashinyan, 51 — in office since May 2018 (8.4 years); Civil Contract
Head of state	President Vahagn Khachaturyan, 67 — in office since March 2022 (4.6 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	2.93 million (2026)
Land area	28,470 km² (10,990 sq mi)
Religion	Armenian Apostolic about 93% (2011 census)
People	Armenians about 98%, Yazidis about 1% (2022 census); median age 38; 64% urban
Minimum wage	85,000 drams a month since January 2026 ($235 at about 362 drams = $1, October 9, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The first state to adopt Christianity, in 301, Armenia spent most of its history under Persian, Ottoman, and Russian rule. The 1915 genocide in the Ottoman Empire killed up to 1.5 million Armenians and scattered a diaspora larger than the country. Independence in 1991 came amid war with Azerbaijan over Nagorno-Karabakh, which Armenia won in 1994 and lost in 2020. The 2018 Velvet Revolution brought Nikol Pashinyan to power; the 2020 defeat nearly toppled him, and Azerbaijan's 2023 offensive emptied Karabakh of its Armenians entirely. Armenia has since turned away from a Russia that failed to protect it, pursued peace with Azerbaijan and Turkey, and moved toward the EU.

Current leadership: Nikol Pashinyan won a third election on June 7, 2026: his Civil Contract took 49.9% and 64 of the 105 seats, a governing majority but short of the two-thirds needed to call the constitutional referendum Azerbaijan demands. Strong Armenia came second with 29 seats, and Robert Kocharyan's Armenia Alliance third with 12. President Vahagn Khachaturyan reappointed Pashinyan on August 2, when the new parliament first sat, and the cabinet stayed almost unchanged. Putin pointedly did not congratulate him; the European Commission's president said the vote brought Armenia 'ever closer to Europe.'

Government structure: Under the 2015 constitution, parliament elects the president for a single seven-year term and the prime minister holds executive power. Armenia is a member of the Russian-led CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union, but froze its CSTO participation in 2024, and parliament passed a law in 2025 launching an EU accession process.

Economy and trade: A roughly $25 billion landlocked economy, historically dependent on Russia, that has grown rapidly since 2022 as Russian capital, technology workers, and re-export trade relocated to Yerevan. Exports are led by copper and other ores, gold, brandy, and diamonds (processed); imports by fuels, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: Russia (still the largest, though Armenia is diversifying), China, the United Arab Emirates, Iran, and the EU. With its borders with Turkey and Azerbaijan closed, Armenia depends on Georgia and Iran for land routes — the reason it has invested in a 'Crossroads of Peace' plan to reopen regional links, and why the TRIPP route matters so much to it.

Closest partners: The EU; France, Armenia's leading Western arms supplier; the US, which brokered the peace framework with Azerbaijan and the TRIPP route; India, another arms supplier; and Iran and Georgia.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Azerbaijan, with which a peace treaty was initialed at the White House in August 2025 but remains unsigned: Baku will not sign until Armenia removes from its constitution's preamble the reference to the 1990 Declaration of Independence, which it reads as a claim on Karabakh. The TRIPP route across southern Armenia is agreed but unbuilt. Russia, whose abandonment of Armenia in 2020-23 and hostility to Pashinyan have turned a former patron into an adversary in all but name; Moscow has restricted imports of Armenian goods and pressed Yerevan to choose between the Eurasian Economic Union and the EU. Turkey, with which normalization talks resumed. Domestically, the opposition and the church accuse Pashinyan of surrendering Karabakh.

4c. Why They Are Diverging

Georgia and Armenia have swapped places: the Caucasus's Western success story after 2003 now leans toward Moscow, and Russia's most dependent ally for three decades is now the region's most pro-Western government. The common factor is Russia's diminished capacity: too weak to save Armenia's Karabakh or to reward Georgia's loyalty with much, it has lost one client and gained a half-hearted one. Azerbaijan, not profiled here, has become the pivot both now orient around.

Module 5 — Serbia, Kosovo & North Macedonia

The Balkan Interior



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: European Western Balkans (portal); Balkan Insight; Tim Judah, *The Serbs*

5a. Serbia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Đuro Macut, 62 — in office since April 2025 (1.5 years); non-party, backed by the Serbian Progressive Party
Head of state	Ana Brnabić, acting president, 51 — in office since September 2026 (nine days); speaker of the National Assembly
System	Parliamentary republic with a directly elected president
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	6.64 million (2026); UN estimate, excluding Kosovo; the land area, from Serbia's statistics office, also excludes it
Land area	77,474 km² (29,910 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox 81.1%, Muslim 4.2%, Catholic 3.9% (2022 census)
People	Serbs 80.6%, Hungarians 2.8%, Bosniaks 2.3%, Roma 2.1% (2022 census); median age 46; 58% urban
Minimum wage	Set as a net hourly rate in dinars; about €743 a month gross on Eurostat's comparison (July 2026) ($837 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Medieval Serbia fell to the Ottomans at Kosovo in 1389, a defeat central to national identity, and won autonomy in the 19th century. It was the core of Yugoslavia from 1918, and under Slobodan Milošević fought the wars of its breakup in Croatia, Bosnia, and Kosovo — the last ending in Kosovo's

separation (5b). Milošević fell in 2000, and Montenegro left in 2006. Aleksandar Vučić, once Milošević's information minister, has dominated politics since 2012, balancing EU candidacy against ties to Russia and China. A November 2024 railway-station canopy collapse in Novi Sad that killed 16 ignited the largest protests of his rule, which continued through 2026.

Current leadership: After saying in late June 2026 that he would resign 'within weeks,' Aleksandar Vučić, prime minister from 2014 and president from 2017, stepped down on September 27 to lead the Serbian Progressive Party's list for prime minister in a snap parliamentary election on October 25, pardoning 49 people, 23 of them convicted over the protests, as a final act; the presidential election must follow within 90 days. Đuro Macut, a physician with no prior political profile, replaced a prime minister who resigned amid the protests.

Government structure: The constitution makes the presidency largely ceremonial, but Vučić made it the center of power through his party, the media, and the security services; whether power now moves with him to the premiership is the October election's question. The National Assembly has 250 seats. Serbia has been an EU candidate since 2012, is militarily neutral by declaration, and hosts no NATO presence.

Economy and trade: A roughly $85 billion economy, the Western Balkans' largest, built on manufacturing (cars, electrical equipment), agriculture, information-technology services, and mining — the Jadar lithium deposit, one of Europe's largest, is a major EU interest and a major domestic controversy. Exports are led by electrical machinery, cars, metals, and grain; imports by fuels, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: Germany, Italy, China, Bosnia, and Russia. Serbia depends on Russian gas and on Chinese investment (Zijin owns its largest copper mine, and Chinese firms built its rail and roads), while the EU accounts for most of its trade — the economic expression of its balancing act.

Closest partners: Russia and China, which Serbia treats as counterweights to the West; China also sells it arms. The EU, the destination of its stalled accession path. Hungary: Orbán was Vučić's closest EU ally, and Hungary's national oil company agreed in June 2026 to buy the Russian majority stake in Serbia's US-sanctioned oil company, NIS, a deal that ties Belgrade to Budapest whoever governs and still needs US approval. The United Arab Emirates as an investor.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Kosovo, whose Serb-majority north Serbia treats as a client. The protest movement born of the Novi Sad canopy collapse, whose list, Students Win, contests the October election against the Progressives and European Serbia. Croatia and Bosnia, over the 1990s wars and Serbia's role in Republika Srpska. And the EU, over Serbia's refusal to align with sanctions on Russia.

5b. Kosovo

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Albin Kurti, 51 — in office since March 2021 (5.5 years); Vetëvendosje
Head of state	President Justina Shiroka Pula, 72 or 73 (born 1953) — in office since October 2026 (newly elected); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	1.67 million (2026); UN estimate; the 2024 census counted about 1.59 million residents
Land area	10,887 km² (4,200 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 95.6%, Catholic 2.2%, Orthodox 1.5% (2011 census, which the Serb-majority north boycotted)
People	Albanians 92.9%, Bosniaks 1.6%, Serbs 1.5% (an undercount), Turks 1.1% (2011 census); median age 34; no UN urban estimate

At a glance	As of October 2026
Minimum wage	€500 a month since July 2026 ($563 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026; Kosovo uses the euro outside the euro area)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The site of Serbia's defining medieval battle (5a), Kosovo became Albanian-majority over centuries of Ottoman rule and was an autonomous province of Serbia within Yugoslavia. Milošević revoked its autonomy in 1989; an Albanian insurgency and Serbian repression in 1998-99 led to NATO's bombing campaign and a UN administration. Kosovo declared independence in February 2008, with the backing of the US and most of the EU. The 2013 Brussels Agreement began an EU-mediated normalization process with Serbia that has never been completed.

Current leadership: Albin Kurti's Vetëvendosje has led every government since 2021, but 2025-26 tested the state: three parliamentary elections in 16 months, in February and December 2025 and June 2026; a presidency vacant after Vjosa Osmani's term ended on April 4, 2026, with the speaker, Albulena Haxhiu, acting; and a parliament dissolved on April 28 after twice failing to muster the quorum to elect a successor. Vetëvendosje won the June 7 election with 47% and 53 of the 120 seats, and Kurti's fourth government was approved on September 13 with 62 votes. On October 6 the Assembly passed, with 88 votes, amendments agreed between the governing party and the PDK that narrow the Kosovo Specialist Chambers' jurisdiction, cap its sentences at 15 years, and allow presidential pardons; just after midnight, in a ballot opened minutes before a constitutional deadline, it elected Justina Shiroka Pula — an economist who heads the Academy of Sciences and Arts and a former minister and member of parliament for the PDK — with 81 votes. A fourth election was averted, though the ballot's timing may be challenged in the constitutional court.

Government structure: The 2008 constitution guarantees minorities 20 seats, ten of them for Serbs. The Assembly elects the president — 80 votes in the first two rounds, 61 in the third — with an 80-member quorum. Kosovo is recognized by roughly half of UN members, more than 110 by its own count, but not by Serbia, Russia, China, or five EU states (Spain, Greece, Cyprus, Romania, Slovakia), which blocks UN membership and its EU path.

Economy and trade: A roughly $11 billion economy, among Europe's poorest, dependent on remittances from a diaspora in Germany and Switzerland, international aid, and lignite coal, which provides most of its electricity. Exports are small — metals, minerals, and plastics; imports of nearly everything are financed by remittances. Top trading partners: Germany, Albania, North Macedonia, Turkey, and Italy. Its trade with Serbia is minimal and periodically cut off entirely by political disputes.

Closest partners: The US and Albania, its two closest allies by far. Germany, home to its largest diaspora. NATO through KFOR. The EU.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Serbia, over recognition, the status of the Serb-majority north, and a normalization dialogue stalled since 2023. The EU, which imposed measures on Kosovo in 2023 over Kurti's handling of the north. The Specialist Chambers, which Kosovo set up in 2015 under Western pressure and has now curbed.

5c. North Macedonia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Hristijan Mickoski, 49 — in office since June 2024 (2.3 years); VMRO-DPMNE
Head of state	President Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, 73 — in office since May 2024 (2.4 years); ceremonial; directly elected
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	1.80 million (2026)
Land area	25,220 km² (9,740 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox 46.1%, Muslim 32.2%, other Christian 13.2% (2021 census)
People	Macedonians 58.4%, Albanians 24.3%, Turks 3.9%, Roma 2.5% (2021 census, with 7.2% counted from records without ethnicity); median age 42; 61% urban
Minimum wage	About €624 a month gross on Eurostat's comparison, after a 6.9% rise during 2026 ($703 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The region was contested by Serbia, Bulgaria, and Greece in the Balkan Wars, became a Yugoslav republic in 1944, and gained independence peacefully in 1991. Its name provoked a 27-year dispute with Greece, which claimed 'Macedonia' as its own heritage and blocked NATO and EU accession until the 2018 Prespa Agreement renamed the country North Macedonia. It joined NATO in 2020 and opened EU talks in 2022. A 2001 Albanian insurgency ended with the Ohrid Agreement.

Current leadership: Gordana Siljanovska-Davkova, a law professor, and Hristijan Mickoski of VMRO-DPMNE both took office after the 2024 elections, which ended a decade of Social Democratic government. Mickoski governs with VLEN.

Government structure: The 120-seat Sobranie chooses the government. The Ohrid Agreement guarantees the Albanian minority representation and language rights, and by convention an Albanian party sits in every government. North Macedonia has been an EU candidate since 2005.

Economy and trade: A roughly $16 billion economy built on manufacturing in foreign-owned free zones (auto parts, electrical equipment), textiles, agriculture, and mining. Exports are led by auto parts and catalytic converters, electrical equipment, and food; imports by fuels, machinery, and metals. Top trading partners: Germany by a wide margin, then Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece, and the UK. The economy is tightly bound to German car supply chains, and emigration to Western Europe is the central demographic and economic challenge.

Closest partners: NATO and the US. Albania, as fellow NATO member and partner of its Albanian minority. Greece, a partner since the Prespa Agreement. Germany; Turkey and Serbia as regional partners.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Bulgaria, which insists that the constitution recognize a Bulgarian minority before the negotiating clusters can open, and disputes the Macedonian language's distinctness. Mickoski has set conditions for the amendment, the opposition demands a referendum, and the talks remain stuck 35 years after independence. Domestically, the tension between the nationalist government and the Prespa Agreement, which Mickoski's party opposed, and the Albanian minority's grievances over Ohrid's implementation.

Module 6 — Hungary, Slovakia & Czechia

Central Europe's 2025-26 Divergence



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Visegrad Insight; Balázs Orbán and Péter Krekó analyses of Hungarian politics

6a. Hungary

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Péter Magyar, 45 — in office since May 2026 (0.4 years); Tisza
Head of state	President András Baka, 73 — in office since August 2026 (0.1 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	9.59 million (2026)
Land area	90,530 km² (34,950 sq mi)
Religion	Roman Catholic about 26%, Reformed about 10%, Greek Catholic and Lutheran about 2% each, no religion about 16%; about 40% did not answer (2022 census)
People	Hungarians the great majority; Roma and Germans the largest minorities (2022 census); median age 45; 74% urban
Minimum wage	322,800 forints a month gross since January 2026 ($997 at about 323.9 forints = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A kingdom founded in 1000, Hungary was partitioned by the Ottomans and Habsburgs and became a co-equal partner in Austria-Hungary in 1867. Defeat in World War I cost it two-thirds of its territory under the 1920 Treaty of Trianon, leaving large Hungarian minorities in neighboring states — a grievance that still shapes politics. It allied with Germany in World War II, became a Soviet satellite, and rose in 1956 in

a revolution crushed by Soviet tanks. Communism ended in 1989 and Hungary joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004. Viktor Orbán's 16-year rule from 2010 built what he called an 'illiberal democracy' and aligned Hungary with Moscow.

Current leadership: Péter Magyar's Tisza won the April 12, 2026 election with 53.2% and 141 of the 199 seats, a two-thirds majority, on a turnout of 79%, the highest since 1990, ending Viktor Orbán's rule; Fidesz took 52 seats. Magyar, a lawyer and former Orbán loyalist who broke with the government in 2024, describes himself as a 'critical pro-European' conservative. When President Tamás Sulyok ignored his call to resign, the new majority passed a constitutional amendment that ended his term on July 20, and parliament elected András Baka, a former president of the Supreme Court, who took office on August 19.

Government structure: Orbán's 2011 constitution and his two-thirds majorities concentrated power in the prime minister, captured the courts and media, and drew years of EU rule-of-law proceedings; Magyar's supermajority gives him the same power to reverse course. The amendment of July 2026 also loosened political control of the Constitutional Court and created an office to recover state assets. Hungary keeps the forint.

Economy and trade: A roughly $230 billion economy built on car manufacturing (Audi, Mercedes-Benz, and Chinese battery plants), pharmaceuticals, electronics, and agriculture. Exports are led by cars and parts, electronics, machinery, and pharmaceuticals; imports by machinery, fuels, and electronics. Top trading partners: Germany overwhelmingly, then Austria, Italy, Poland, and China. Orbán's government made Hungary the EU's largest recipient of Chinese investment and kept it dependent on Russian oil and gas, and the Paks nuclear plant is Russian-built and Russian-fueled.

Closest partners: The EU, with which Magyar agreed on May 29, 2026 to release €16.4 billion of frozen funds — €10 billion once agreed reforms are implemented, the rest to follow. Germany. Poland and Czechia in the Visegrád group (6d). The US, though the Trump administration had backed Orbán.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, from which Magyar has begun to distance Hungary: in June he lifted the 17-month veto on opening Ukraine's and Moldova's accession clusters, in exchange for an agreement on the rights of the Hungarian minority in Ukraine's Transcarpathia region, and in May his government reversed Orbán's decision to leave the International Criminal Court. But he has kept the door open to Russian energy, which Hungary's contracts and its nuclear plant make hard to replace. Domestically, dismantling Orbán's institutional legacy without replicating its methods is the central test.

6b. Slovakia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Robert Fico, 62 — in office since October 2023 (2.9 years); Direction–Social Democracy (Smer)
Head of state	President Peter Pellegrini, 51 — in office since June 2024 (2.3 years); ceremonial; directly elected
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	5.45 million (2026)
Land area	48,088 km² (18,570 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 55.8%, no religion 23.8%, Lutheran 5.3%, Greek Catholic 4.0% (2021 census)
People	Slovaks 83.8%, Hungarians 7.8%, Roma 1.2% by self-declaration, though estimates of the Roma population run several times higher (2021 census); median age 44; 55% urban

At a glance	As of October 2026
Minimum wage	€915 a month gross since January 2026 ($1,031 at the European Central Bank's $1.1269 = €1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Slovak lands were part of the Hungarian kingdom for a thousand years before joining the Czechs in Czechoslovakia in 1918. A Nazi-aligned Slovak state existed during World War II. After communism, the 'Velvet Divorce' of 1993 separated Slovakia peacefully from the Czech Republic. It joined NATO and the EU in 2004 and the euro in 2009. Robert Fico has been the dominant figure for two decades, serving as prime minister four times, latterly on an anti-Ukraine, anti-migration platform.

Current leadership: Robert Fico's Smer leads a coalition with Hlas and the nationalists; Fico survived being shot in May 2024, and his attacker was sentenced to 21 years in October 2025. Peter Pellegrini, elected with Smer's backing, remains broadly aligned with Fico.

Government structure: The 150-seat National Council chooses the government. Fico's government has curbed public broadcasting, restricted non-governmental organizations, ended military aid to Ukraine, amended the constitution in September 2025 to recognize only two sexes, and moved in 2026 to end postal voting from abroad, drawing protests and EU criticism.

Economy and trade: A roughly $140 billion economy that is the world's largest car producer per capita — Volkswagen, Kia, Stellantis, and Jaguar Land Rover plants make cars, nearly half of exports. Exports are led by cars, electronics, machinery, and steel; imports by car parts, fuels, and machinery. Top trading partners: Germany, the Czech Republic, Poland, Hungary, and Austria. Slovakia is heavily dependent on Russian gas and oil, which Fico's government has fought to keep flowing, and its car industry is exposed to the EU's electric-vehicle transition and Chinese competition.

Closest partners: Hungary under Orbán was Fico's closest ally in blocking EU action on Russia; that alliance ended with Orbán's defeat (6a). Russia, whose leaders Fico has visited. Czechia, its closest partner by history and trade despite political divergence. Germany and the Visegrád group economically.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Ukraine, whose government Fico has publicly antagonized: in February 2026 he threatened and then halted emergency electricity supplies to Ukraine over the disruption of the Druzhba oil pipeline, though Slovak factories still supply Ukraine commercially. The EU, over rule of law and Russia policy. Domestically, mass protests against his pro-Russian turn and a polarized electorate.

6c. Czechia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Andrej Babiš, 72 — in office since December 2025 (0.8 years); ANO; also prime minister 2017–21
Head of state	President Petr Pavel, 64 — in office since March 2023 (3.6 years); directly elected; limited formal powers
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	10.5 million (2026)
Land area	77,240 km² (29,820 sq mi)
Religion	No religion 47.8%, Catholic 7.0%; 30.1% did not answer (2021 census)
People	Czech 57.3%, Moravian 4.8%, Slovak 1.0%, with about 30% not answering (2021 census); median age 45; 75% urban

At a glance	As of October 2026
Minimum wage	22,400 koruny a month gross since January 2026 ($1,034 at about 21.66 koruny = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Bohemia and Moravia were Habsburg lands until Czechoslovakia's founding in 1918 as one of interwar Europe's few stable democracies. It was dismembered by Nazi Germany in 1938-39, restored in 1945, and taken over by communists in 1948; the 1968 Prague Spring reforms were crushed by a Warsaw Pact invasion. The 1989 Velvet Revolution ended communism under Václav Havel, and the country split peacefully from Slovakia in 1993. It joined NATO in 1999 and the EU in 2004 but keeps the koruna.

Current leadership: Andrej Babiš, a billionaire agrochemical magnate, returned to office after ANO won the October 2025 election, governing with the Motorists and the SPD; before taking office he said he would put his Agrofert conglomerate beyond his control to satisfy the conflict-of-interest law. Petr Pavel, a former chairman of NATO's Military Committee, is a strong Atlanticist; his relationship with Babiš has become a mild cohabitation, with the president insisting on continued support for Ukraine.

Government structure: The president has real influence over foreign policy and government formation; parliament has a 200-seat Chamber of Deputies and an 81-seat Senate.

Economy and trade: A roughly $340 billion economy, one of Central Europe's most industrialized, built on cars (Škoda, Toyota, Hyundai), machinery, electronics, and a large arms industry. Exports are led by cars and parts, machinery, electronics, and electrical equipment; imports by machinery, electronics, fuels, and car parts. Top trading partners: Germany by a wide margin, then Slovakia, Poland, France, and Austria. The Czech arms industry has been a major supplier to Ukraine, and unemployment is among the EU's lowest.

Closest partners: NATO and the EU; Germany, Poland, and Slovakia. The previous government made Czechia one of Ukraine's most active supporters, leading the 2024 initiative that sourced artillery shells worldwide for Kyiv; in January 2026 Babiš kept the initiative going but ended Czech state funding, leaving allies to pay while Prague coordinates. The US, under both administrations.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, from which Czechia expelled dozens of diplomats in 2021 over a 2014 arms-depot bombing attributed to Russian intelligence. Domestically, whether Babiš's arrangements for his conglomerate end his conflicts of interest.

6d. The Visegrád Reversal

The four Visegrád states — Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary — were once a bloc; by 2024 they had split, with Poland and Czechia backing Ukraine and Hungary and Slovakia obstructing. The 2025-26 elections rearranged the split again (6a, 6c) — the most consequential shift in Central European alignment since 2004.

Module 7 — Austria & Switzerland

The Alpine Neutrals



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Austrian Institute for International Affairs (oiip); Swiss Institute of International Studies

7a. Austria

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Chancellor Christian Stocker, 66 — in office since March 2025 (1.6 years); Austrian People's Party
Head of state	President Alexander Van der Bellen, 82 — in office since January 2017 (9.7 years); directly elected; formal powers rarely used; second term ends January 2029
System	Federal parliamentary republic of nine states
Freedom House	Free
Population	9.11 million (2026)
Land area	82,409 km² (31,820 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 55.2%, no affiliation 22.4%, Muslim 8.3%, Orthodox 4.9%, Protestant 3.8% (Statistics Austria survey, 2021)
People	Austrian citizens about 80%; foreign nationals about 20%, the largest groups German, Romanian, and Serbian (2025); median age 45; 60% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law: sectoral collective agreements, covering almost all employees, set the pay floors

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Habsburg seat for six centuries and the center of a vast multinational empire, Austria was reduced to a small German-speaking republic in 1918, absorbed by Nazi Germany in 1938, and occupied by the Allies until 1955, when it regained sovereignty and declared permanent neutrality, which became a

national identity. Austria joined the EU in 1995 and the euro in 1999. The Freedom Party has been in and out of government repeatedly.

Current leadership: Alexander Van der Bellen, a former Green party leader, was re-elected in 2022. Christian Stocker's People's Party leads a coalition with the Social Democrats and NEOS, formed after the Freedom Party came first for the first time, in the September 2024 election, with 28.8% and 57 of the 183 seats, but its leader, Herbert Kickl, failed to form a government with the People's Party. The coalition's main task is the budget: the 2025 deficit was 4.2% of GDP and public debt 81.5%, and the EU opened an excessive-deficit procedure against Austria in 2025.

Government structure: Parliament's lower house, the National Council, chooses the government. Neutrality is constitutional law; Austria takes part in EU defense cooperation and the European Sky Shield air-defense initiative but not NATO. Vienna hosts UN agencies, including the International Atomic Energy Agency, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

Economy and trade: A roughly $580 billion economy with high living standards, built on machinery, cars and parts, steel and metals, pharmaceuticals, tourism (Alpine skiing), and banking — Vienna's banks are major lenders across Central and Eastern Europe. Exports are led by machinery, cars and parts, pharmaceuticals, and metals; imports by machinery, cars, fuels, and chemicals. Top trading partners: Germany overwhelmingly, then Italy, the US, Switzerland, and the Czech Republic.

Closest partners: Germany, its dominant economic and cultural partner. The EU. Switzerland as fellow neutral. Central European neighbors, especially Czechia, Slovakia, and Hungary. The US.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Russia, ambivalently: Austria depended on Russian gas until OMV ended its contract with Gazprom in December 2024 and transit through Ukraine stopped in January 2025, Raiffeisen Bank kept operating in Russia, and Vienna has been a hub for Russian intelligence — while Austria has aligned with EU sanctions. Domestically, the Freedom Party, denied government, is the main opposition.

7b. Switzerland

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Guy Parmelin, President of the Confederation, 66 — in office since January 2026 (0.8 years); Swiss People's Party; a federal councillor since 2016
System	Federal directorial republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	9.01 million (2026)
Land area	39,516 km² (15,260 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 32%, Reformed 20%, no affiliation 34%, Muslim 6% (Federal Statistical Office, 2022)
People	Main languages German 62%, French 23%, Italian 8%, Romansh 0.5%, more than one may be named; foreign nationals about 27% of residents (Federal Statistical Office); median age 44; 75% urban
Minimum wage	No national minimum; five cantons set their own, the highest Geneva's 24.59 francs an hour since January 2026 ($29.61 at about 0.83 francs = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Swiss Confederation began as a 1291 alliance of three Alpine cantons and grew into a federation of cantons. Its neutrality was recognized by the great powers in 1815 and has held through every European war since. The 1848 federal constitution created the directorial system, with no single head of

state, and the referendums and initiatives that make Switzerland the world's most extensive direct democracy. Switzerland stayed out of the UN until 2002 and has stayed out of the EU, though it is bound to the single market by bilateral agreements and is in Schengen. Its banking secrecy was dismantled under international pressure after 2009.

Current leadership: The presidency rotates annually among the Federal Council's members and carries no additional power; the council's seats are divided among the four largest parties under a long-standing 'magic formula' — two each for the SVP, the Liberals, and the Social Democrats, and one for the Centre. Ignazio Cassis is foreign minister and Martin Pfister defense minister.

Government structure: The 26 cantons hold wide powers, and citizens vote several times a year at federal, cantonal, and communal levels; any federal law can be challenged by referendum.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1 trillion economy, the region's largest and among the world's richest per capita, built on pharmaceuticals (Roche, Novartis), banking and wealth management (UBS), precision machinery, watches, and commodity trading — Geneva and Zug host many of the world's largest commodity traders. Exports are led by pharmaceuticals, gold (refined and re-exported), watches, machinery, and precision instruments; imports by gold, pharmaceuticals, cars, and machinery. Top trading partners: Germany, the US, Italy, France, and China.

Closest partners: The EU, its overwhelming trading partner: a package renewing the bilateral treaties, concluded in December 2024, was signed in Brussels on March 2, 2026 and is before parliament, with a referendum to follow. Germany, France, Italy, and Austria as neighbors. The US as its second-largest partner: after a 39% tariff in August 2025 and a framework deal in November, the US Supreme Court struck down the emergency tariffs in February 2026, and a duty of up to 12.5% has applied since July 24. Switzerland's role as a neutral host — Geneva's UN offices, the Red Cross, and the February 2026 Ukraine talks (Module 2) — is central to its identity.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Switzerland has no adversaries, but its neutrality has been strained from both sides: it adopted EU sanctions on Russia in 2022, drawing Russian accusations of abandoning neutrality, while its refusal to let other countries re-export Swiss-made arms to Ukraine drew Western criticism; parliament loosened those rules in December 2025, and voters decide on November 29, 2026. In September 2026 voters rejected, by about 70% and in every canton, an SVP-backed initiative that would have limited sanctions to those of the UN Security Council, and in June they rejected, by 54.8%, its initiative to cap the population at 10 million, which threatened free movement with the EU. The 2023 collapse of Credit Suisse and its absorption by UBS created a bank too large for the country to plausibly rescue.

7c. Two Kinds of Neutrality

Austria and Switzerland are both neutral, but differently. Austria's neutrality was the price of ending the occupation and has been hollowed out by EU membership; Switzerland's is older, self-chosen, and more complete, backed by a large citizen army. Russia's war has tested both — Austria over gas and espionage, Switzerland over sanctions and arms re-exports — and in both countries neutrality is now debated rather than assumed, though Swiss voters' rejection of a stricter neutrality in September 2026 (7b) showed which way that debate runs there.

Module 8 — Belarus

Russia's Closest Ally



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Belarus Analytical Digest (Center for Security Studies, Zurich); Andrew Wilson, *Belarus: The Last European Dictatorship*

8a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Alexander Lukashenko, 72 — in office since July 1994 (32.2 years); Europe's longest-serving leader
Head of government	Prime Minister Alexander Turchin, 51 — in office since March 2025 (1.6 years)
System	Presidential republic; in practice a personalist dictatorship
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	8.94 million (2026)
Land area	202,910 km² (78,340 sq mi)
Religion	Orthodox about half, Catholic about 7%, many non-believers (government estimate, 2011)
People	Belarusians 84.9%, Russians 7.5%, Poles 3.1%, Ukrainians 1.7% (2019 census); Russian is the main home language for most; median age 43; 82% urban
Minimum wage	858 Belarusian rubles a month since January 2026, up from 726 ($280 at about 3.06 rubles = $1, October 9, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Belarusian lands were part of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, then Poland-Lithuania, then the Russian Empire, with only a brief 1918 independence. Belarus lost a quarter of its population in World War

II. Independence in 1991 was followed by the election of Alexander Lukashenko, who has ruled ever since by rigging elections, jailing opponents, and preserving a Soviet-style economy. The 2020 election, which he claimed with 80%, triggered the largest protests in the country's history, crushed with Russian backing that left him dependent on Moscow.

Current leadership: Alexander Lukashenko claimed a seventh term in January 2025 with 87% in a vote with no genuine opposition. Alexander Turchin manages the government. Lukashenko has no designated successor; his son Nikolai's prominence has fueled succession speculation.

Government structure: The president appoints the government, controls the courts and legislature, and rules by decree. After the 2020 protests the regime jailed or exiled the entire opposition and dissolved independent media and civil society; it has since freed hundreds of political prisoners in deals with Washington, 250 of them in March 2026, while others remain jailed. The exiled opposition under Sviatlana Tsikhanouskaya, widely believed to have won the 2020 election, works from abroad.

Economy and trade: A roughly $75 billion state-dominated economy, heavily dependent on Russia for subsidized oil and gas, markets, and loans. Exports are led by refined petroleum (from Russian crude), potash fertilizer (Belarus is a top-three global producer), machinery and tractors, and dairy; imports by crude oil, gas, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: Russia overwhelmingly, then China, Ukraine (before 2022), and Poland; Western sanctions since 2020 and 2022 have cut EU trade sharply and blocked potash exports through Lithuania's port of Klaipėda, rerouting them through Russia.

Closest partners: Russia, overwhelmingly: its nuclear weapons have been stationed in Belarus since 2023 — joined, Lukashenko said in December 2025, by the Oreshnik missile, now on combat duty. China, as a secondary investor and partner. Iran and other sanctioned states. The US, which has eased some sanctions in return for the prisoner releases, without loosening the Russian embrace.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Ukraine, whose invasion Belarus hosted in 2022 and whose territory Russian missiles have crossed Belarus to strike, though Belarusian troops have not joined the fighting. Poland, Lithuania, and Latvia, whose borders Belarus has weaponized with engineered migrant flows since 2021 and, since late 2025, with smuggling balloons that repeatedly shut Vilnius airport; Lithuania closed its border again in August 2026, while Poland reopened two crossings in November 2025. The EU, over its sanctions. Internally, his own population.

8b. Why Belarus Gets Its Own Module

Belarus is the only state in this course fully inside the Russian orbit, and its position between three NATO members and Ukraine makes it consequential far beyond its size. It is also a succession question waiting to happen: the state most tightly bound to Russia could become unstable at a moment Moscow can least afford it. Whether a post-Lukashenko Belarus remains a Russian dependency, becomes a formal Russian region, or reopens the question its people tried to answer in 2020 is one of the region's genuine unknowns.

Module 9 — The Alliance Map

NATO's Southeastern Flank, EU Enlargement & the Russian Orbit

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: European Council on Foreign Relations, enlargement and eastern-neighbourhood analysis

9a. NATO's Southeastern Flank

NATO's presence on the Black Sea rests on its three shore members, and Romania has become the hub: beyond its bases (Module 3), it hosts a French-led multinational brigade. Bulgaria hosts an Italian-led brigade. The alliance's July 2026 summit in Ankara put Turkey forward to lead the naval part of a post-ceasefire force for Ukraine, with a command center set up in Istanbul. The flank's constraint is Montreux (Module 1), which keeps the alliance's posture land- and air-based. Hungary, Slovakia, and Czechia sit behind this flank as the alliance's Central European rear, now more reliable after Hungary's 2026 turn.

9b. The Enlargement Queue

- **Ukraine and Moldova** — the war-driven fast track: candidates since 2022 and in talks since June 2024, they opened their first clusters together in June and July 2026, with no chapters yet closed. Moldova's accession may run ahead of Ukraine's given its size, though Transnistria complicates that (Module 10).
- **Serbia and North Macedonia** — the stalled Western Balkans track: Serbia has opened 22 chapters and closed 2, its next openings tied to the rule of law and to normalization with Kosovo; North Macedonia has opened none, pending the constitutional amendment Bulgaria demands (Module 5).
- **Georgia** — the only candidate to have suspended its own accession (Module 4).
- **Armenia** — an aspirant that has not yet applied (Module 4).
- **Kosovo** — a potential candidate that applied in 2022, blocked by non-recognition (Module 5).

Hungary's change of government (Module 6) is what moved the queue.

9c. The Russian-Led Institutions

Russia's organizations in the region are hollowing out. With Armenia's participation frozen (Module 4), the Collective Security Treaty Organization has Belarus as its only committed European member, and the Eurasian Economic Union keeps an Armenia heading for the EU; only the Union State with Belarus has deepened, to the point of Russian nuclear weapons on its soil (Module 8). Georgia's drift gives Moscow a sympathetic government, though not a formal ally. Russia's institutional reach has contracted to the states with no alternative.

9d. The Outside Powers

- **The United States** — the flank's security guarantor through NATO, but under an administration that pressed for a Ukraine settlement (Module 2); American reliability is the region's central uncertainty.
- **Turkey** — the straits' gatekeeper (Module 1) and a power in the Caucasus through Azerbaijan.

• **China** — an economic actor across the region, from Georgia's Anaklia port to Serbia's mines and Hungary's battery plants (Modules 4-6), and Russia's diplomatic shield, avoiding direct security involvement.

• **Germany** — the dominant economic partner of nearly every state in this course and Ukraine's largest European donor.

Module 10 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, Europe and Central Asia briefings; CrisisWatch

10a. The Ukraine Endgame

Everything in this course is downstream of how the war ends. A settlement on the current line with real security guarantees would stabilize Moldova, embolden Armenia, and free the frontier states to consolidate; a settlement that rewards Russia with territory and a NATO bar would put every frontier state on notice and vindicate Georgia's accommodation. The talks have shown that the gap between the two sides' terms is about the nature of the peace, not its timing, and that the United States wants a deal more than either combatant does (Module 2). The nearer question is whether a limited truce reopens Ukraine's ports before winter. What to watch: the new three-way round Kyiv expects in October; the European Council of October 15-16, which returns to lending Ukraine the value of Russia's frozen assets; the Rada's vote on extending martial law beyond November; and whether Russia's strikes on the grid this winter match last year's.

10b. Transnistria

The breakaway strip's January 2025 energy collapse, when Russian gas stopped flowing, showed how fragile its 30-year existence is without Moscow's subsidy, and Ukraine's control of the border cuts it off from Russian resupply. Moldova's first negotiating clusters (Module 9) make reintegration a live question: the EU will not admit a state with a Russian garrison on its territory, so resolving Transnistria is now on the accession path rather than beside it.

10c. Georgia's Direction

Georgia is the region's clearest case of a state choosing to leave the Western track, and the standoff between its disputed government and its pro-European street is unresolved. Its outcome matters beyond Georgia: a Georgia aligned with Moscow gives Russia a chokehold on the Middle Corridor (Module 4), the one route that was supposed to bypass it. What to watch: the constitutional court's ruling on banning the main opposition parties (Module 4), which Georgian Dream wants by January 2027, and whether the EU suspends visa-free travel for all Georgians.

10d. Kosovo and Serbia

Both sides of the Kosovo dispute changed their leadership arrangements within a fortnight (Module 5), while the north of Kosovo stays calm but fragile. What to watch: whether Vučić's party wins the snap election and who succeeds him as president in the election promised by the end of December; whether the student list breaks through; and whether a Kosovo with working institutions and a new government in Belgrade reopen the dialogue or harden it.

10e. The Caucasus Peace

The Armenia-Azerbaijan peace framework and the TRIPP route are the region's most positive development in decades, but both are unfinished (Module 4), and the constitutional referendum Baku demands would need the yes votes of at least a quarter of registered voters to pass. The risks are Baku's continuing demands, Russian efforts to spoil a peace that excludes it, and domestic Armenian opposition led by the church. If it holds, it reopens the South Caucasus's closed borders for the first time since 1991.

10f. Hungary's Reversal and Its Limits

Magyar's supermajority still faces the limits set out in Module 6. Whether Hungary becomes a normal EU member again, or whether Fico's Slovakia and Radev's Bulgaria fill the space Orbán vacated, is the question for the alliance's eastern members. What to watch: Bulgaria's presidential election on October 25, which Iotova contests; the first release of Hungary's unfrozen funds; and Slovakia's election, due in 2027.

10g. The Last Word

The throughline of all ten modules: this is the region where the war is being fought and where its outcome will be felt first. Fifteen states from the Alps to the Caucasus, alike in almost nothing else (Module 1), are all positioned along the line where Western and Russian influence meet, and the events of 2026 (Hungary's reversal, Pashinyan's re-election, Bulgaria's new government and Romania's fallen one, Georgia's push to ban its opposition, Serbia's snap election, Kosovo's late-night president) show that line moving in both directions at once. Where Europe's northern flank has consolidated into a single alliance, this region remains a frontier still being contested, state by state.

Key Points

The Black Sea & Danube

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Belarus	Alexander Lukashenko	President	72	July 1994	32.2
Armenia	Nikol Pashinyan	Prime Minister	51	May 2018	8.4
Ukraine	Volodymyr Zelensky	President	48	May 2019	7.4
Moldova	Maia Sandu	President	54	December 2020	5.8
Kosovo	Albin Kurti	Prime Minister	51	March 2021	5.5
Slovakia	Robert Fico	Prime Minister	62	October 2023	2.9
Georgia	Irakli Kobakhidze	Prime Minister	48	February 2024	2.7
North Macedonia	Hristijan Mickoski	Prime Minister	49	June 2024	2.3
Austria	Christian Stocker	Chancellor	66	March 2025	1.6
Serbia	Đuro Macut	Prime Minister	62	April 2025	1.5
Romania	Nicuşor Dan	President	56	May 2025	1.4
Czechia	Andrej Babiš	Prime Minister	72	December 2025	0.8
Switzerland	Guy Parmelin	President of the Confederation	66	January 2026	0.8
Bulgaria	Rumen Radev	Prime Minister	63	May 2026	0.4
Hungary	Péter Magyar	Prime Minister	45	May 2026	0.4

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's continuous tenure in the current office. The presidents of Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, and Belarus lead; elsewhere the prime minister does, and Switzerland's seven-member Federal Council governs collectively under a president who serves one year. Pashinyan's tenure counts from May 2018, including spells as acting prime minister before the 2018 and 2021 elections, and Kurti's from March 2021, including caretaker spells. Serbia's president, Aleksandar Vučić, resigned on September 27, 2026 to run for prime minister; Romania's prime minister has headed a caretaker government since May 2026. Babiš was also prime minister in 2017–21, and Fico in 2006–10 and 2012–18.

The Takeaways

• The region is the Ukraine war's front and the frontier where Western and Russian systems meet — fifteen states from the Danube's headwaters to the Caucasus, with NATO's and the EU's edges, Russia's client (Belarus), and the contested middle (Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, Serbia) between them.

• Ukraine holds a front that barely moves in the war's fifth year and survives on a deficit of about 20% of GDP financed by Europe — the EU's €90 billion loan for 2026-27, raised by joint borrowing — while Russian strikes on merchant ships largely closed its Black Sea corridor in the summer of 2026.

• Zelensky replaced his government in July 2026 with Serhiy Koretskyi's; the US-brokered talks stalled after February 2026, and in September both sides said they were open only to a limited truce on energy and grain.

• Hungary's Orbán, in power for sixteen years and the EU's most persistent obstacle on Ukraine, was voted out on April 12, 2026 by Magyar's two-thirds on a record turnout; within two months Hungary lifted its veto and Ukraine and Moldova opened their first EU negotiating clusters.

• Romania annulled a presidential election over Russian interference and has had only a caretaker government since May 2026; Bulgaria joined the euro, and after eight elections since 2021 Rumen

Radev's new party won an outright majority; Moldova's Sandu held the country's Western course against Moscow's money and Transnistria's frozen conflict.

• Georgia drifted to a closed hybrid — the disputed 2024 election, the Russian-style foreign-agents law, opposition leaders jailed, three lawsuits to ban the opposition, the EU path frozen; Armenia left Russia's orbit after losing Karabakh, re-elected Pashinyan in June 2026, and initialed a peace treaty that Azerbaijan will not sign until Armenia changes its constitution.

• Serbia's Vučić resigned the presidency in September 2026 to run for prime minister in an October 25 snap election, after two years of student protests over the Novi Sad canopy collapse; Kosovo elected a president on October 7 after a year without stable institutions; North Macedonia's EU path waits on Bulgaria's demand for a constitutional change.

• Slovakia's Fico leads the region's remaining Moscow-friendly government inside NATO and the EU; Czechia's Babiš took office in December 2025 with a populist coalition; Austria's far-right-first election produced a centrist coalition now cutting a 4.2%-of-GDP deficit; Swiss voters rejected a stricter neutrality and a population cap in 2026.

• Belarus is Russia's base and Lukashenko's three-decade dictatorship: the launchpad of 2022, the host of Russian nuclear weapons and Oreshnik missiles, a trader of political prisoners for US sanctions relief, and the source of hybrid pressure on Lithuania and Poland.

• The Danube and the straits are the region's arteries — the river the outlet for Ukraine's grain in 2022-23, the straits under Turkey's Montreux rules the sea's lock — and the war made both into strategic infrastructure.

• The region's 2026 lesson: Russia held its front and lost its pole in the region's politics when Hungary voted, and the ballot decided in Bucharest and Budapest what the tanks could not in the Donbas.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. What happened to Ukraine's Black Sea grain corridor in the summer of 2026?

A) Turkey closed the straits to grain ships
B) A UN-brokered deal reopened it
C) Ukraine moved all exports to the Danube
D) Russian strikes on merchant ships led shipowners to stop calling at Odesa-region ports

2. How is the EU's €90 billion loan to Ukraine for 2026-27 funded?

A) By the IMF
B) By confiscating Russia's frozen central-bank assets outright
C) By joint borrowing among 24 member states
D) By the income on Russia's frozen assets, under the 2024 agreement

3. Who became Ukraine's prime minister in July 2026?

A) Yulia Svyrydenko, reappointed
B) Serhiy Koretskyi
C) Andrii Sybiha, the foreign minister
D) Kyrylo Budanov, the former intelligence chief

4. Why did Romania's constitutional court annul the 2024 presidential election?

A) Evidence of Russian interference on social media
B) The winning candidate's death
C) Turnout below the legal threshold
D) A counting error found in a recount ordered by the electoral bureau

5. What brought down Moldova's prime minister in July 2026?

A) A lost vote of confidence over gas prices from Romania
B) Pressure from the EU after it refused to open negotiating clusters
C) A corruption scandal at air traffic control
D) A Russian-backed uprising in Gagauzia that the army could not contain

6. Why did Rumen Radev leave Bulgaria's presidency in January 2026?

A) To enter parliamentary politics
B) Illness
C) His term ended and the constitution barred a third
D) He was impeached by parliament over his opposition to arming Ukraine

7. What has Georgian Dream asked Georgia's constitutional court to do?

A) Extend its term
B) Annul the 2024 election
C) Approve Georgia's entry into the Russian-led CSTO military alliance
D) Ban the main opposition parties

8. Why has Azerbaijan not signed the peace treaty initialed in August 2025?

A) Armenia rejected the TRIPP route

B) It demands that Armenia remove from its constitution a reference to the 1990 declaration of independence

C) Russia vetoed it in the CSTO

D) The US withdrew as mediator

9. Why did Aleksandar Vučić resign Serbia's presidency in September 2026?

A) To take up a post Putin offered him in Moscow

B) To run for prime minister

C) Because the protest movement won a referendum on his recall

D) Because the constitutional court removed him over the canopy collapse

10. How did Kosovo avoid a fourth parliamentary election in October 2026?

A) Serbia agreed to recognize it

B) The EU appointed an interim president under the Brussels Agreement

C) The constitutional court extended Albulena Haxhiu's acting presidency to 2028

D) Parliament elected a president as the deadline ran out

11. What did Hungary's new government do about Ukraine's EU accession?

A) Vetoed it again

B) Left it to Slovakia

C) Lifted Orbán's 17-month veto in exchange for an agreement on the Hungarian minority's rights

D) Demanded a referendum first

12. How did Andrej Babiš change the Czech ammunition initiative for Ukraine?

A) Kept it running but ended Czech state funding

B) Ended it entirely

C) Doubled its budget

D) Handed it to Slovakia's government along with the arms industry's contracts

13. What did Swiss voters decide in September 2026?

A) They rejected an initiative to limit sanctions to those of the UN Security Council

B) They voted to join NATO

C) They approved the EU treaty package

D) They capped the population at 10 million

14. Which state in this course is rated Not Free by Freedom House?

A) Hungary under Orbán

B) Georgia, since 2024

C) Moldova's Transnistria

D) Belarus

15. Why does the Montreux Convention matter to the war at sea?

A) It bans all NATO ships

B) Turkey has closed the straits to belligerents' warships since 2022

C) It gives Russia the straits

D) It requires Romania and Bulgaria to share their naval bases with Russia's Black Sea Fleet

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. D 2. C 3. B 4. A 5. C 6. A 7. D 8. B 9. B 10. D 11. C 12. A 13. A 14. D 15. B

The Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea & Gulf

Figures current as of October 2026

The Arabian Peninsula, the Red Sea, and the Gulf — the six monarchies, Iraq, Jordan, Yemen, and the Horn: leaders, governments, economies, and the 2026 war that closed Hormuz.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: Two Chokepoints and a War That Has Not Ended

Goal: Establish the geography, the 2026 Iran war's effect on the region, and the disputes that recur.

Covers Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb, the war's closure of the strait, the Gulf Cooperation Council, and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — Saudi Arabia

Goal: Profile the peninsula's dominant power in its own module.

Covers the absolute monarchy under Mohammed bin Salman, Vision 2030, and a kingdom fighting the Houthis again while the Iran war goes on.

MODULE 3 — The United Arab Emirates & Qatar (the Gulf's Rival Small Powers)

Goal: Profile the two wealthy small states whose rivalry structures the Gulf.

Covers the Emirates' interventionism and Israel ties, Qatar's mediation and gas, and the 2017-21 blockade's legacy.

MODULE 4 — Kuwait, Bahrain & Oman

Goal: Profile the three smaller Gulf monarchies.

Covers Kuwait's suspended parliament and citizenship purge, Bahrain's Saudi dependence, and Oman's neutrality under fire.

MODULE 5 — Iraq & Jordan

Goal: Profile the two states between the Gulf and the Levant.

Covers Iraq's new and incomplete government and Iranian influence, and Jordan's monarchy under pressure from Gaza and Iranian missiles.

MODULE 6 — Yemen

Goal: Profile the fragmented state at the Red Sea's mouth in its own module.

Covers the Houthi north, the anti-Houthi camp after the southern separatists' defeat, the Red Sea shipping war, and the renewed Saudi-Houthi war.

MODULE 7 — The African Shore: Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti & Somalia

Goal: Profile the four Red Sea and Gulf of Aden states on the African side.

Covers Sudan's partition, Eritrea's closed state, Djibouti's bases, and Somalia's contested transition.

MODULE 8 — The Alliance Map: The Gulf Cooperation Council, the Iran Axis at War, Israel & Outside Powers

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's blocs.

Covers the Gulf Cooperation Council and its Saudi-Emirati fracture, the Iran axis, the Abraham Accords, and the US, China, Turkey, and Pakistan.

MODULE 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers the strait Iran controls, the Red Sea's new war, Sudan's partition, Yemen and the Saudi-Emirati rivalry, and Israel normalization.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

Every armed group, party, institution, and abbreviation the modules name is defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country each one belongs to or concerns, or how many of the thirteen when it spans several; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Ruling Families, Parties, and Movements

Country	Name	Who or what
Saudi Arabia	Al Saud	The ruling family since the kingdom's founding in 1932, allied since 1744 with the clergy of Wahhabism, the puritanical school of Sunni Islam founded by Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab.
United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Al Nahyan; Al Maktoum	The ruling families of Abu Dhabi and Dubai; by convention the federation's president comes from the first and its prime minister from the second.
Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain	Al Thani; Al Sabah; Al Khalifa	The ruling families of Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain.
Oman, Jordan	Al Said; the Hashemites	Oman's ruling dynasty since the eighteenth century, and Jordan's royal family, who ruled Mecca until the Saudis drove them out in 1925.
Region-wide	Sunni; Shia	Islam's two main branches, divided since the seventh century over the succession to the Prophet; Sunnis are the majority, while Shia form majorities in Iran, Iraq, and Bahrain.
Region-wide	Muslim Brotherhood	Sunni Islamist movement founded in Egypt in 1928; backed by Qatar and Turkey, opposed by the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt.
Qatar	Hamas	The Palestinian Islamist movement that took control of Gaza in 2007 and whose attack on Israel on October 7, 2023 began the Gaza war.
Region-wide	Hezbollah	Lebanon's Iran-backed Shia party and militia, the strongest member of Iran's regional network until its 2024 war with Israel.
Yemen	Houthis (Ansar Allah)	Zaydi Shia revivalist movement from Yemen's far north, named for its founding family; it seized the capital, Sanaa, in 2014.
Yemen	STC (Southern Transitional Council)	UAE-backed movement founded in 2017 to restore an independent south.
Iraq	Coordination Framework	Alliance of Shia parties, most of them close to Iran, that forms the largest bloc in Iraq's parliament and chooses the prime minister.
Iraq	KDP (Kurdistan Democratic Party); PUK (Patriotic Union of Kurdistan)	The Kurdistan Region's two dominant parties, rivals since the 1970s, built around the Barzani and Talabani families.
Iraq	Baath Party	Arab nationalist party that ruled Iraq from 1968 to 2003, under Saddam Hussein from 1979.
Eritrea	PFDJ (People's Front for Democracy and Justice)	Eritrea's only legal party, the successor to the front that won independence.
Somalia	Somali Future Council	Opposition coalition of former presidents and the leaders of Puntland and Jubaland, formed in 2025.

Armed Groups and Forces

Country	Name	Who or what
Sudan	RSF (Rapid Support Forces)	Paramilitary force grown out of Darfur's Arab militias, at war with Sudan's army since April 2023.
Sudan	Government of Peace and Unity	The RSF-led rival government, seated at Nyala, in Darfur.
Iraq	Popular Mobilization Forces	Iraq's coalition of mostly Shia militias, formed in 2014 to fight the Islamic State.
Iraq	PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party)	Kurdish insurgency that fought Turkey from 1984.
Somalia	Al-Shabaab	Al-Qaeda's Somali affiliate, at war with the government since 2007.
Region-wide	Al-Qaeda; Islamic State	The two global jihadist networks; the Islamic State seized a third of Iraq in 2014 and was defeated there in 2017.
Qatar	Taliban	The Islamist movement that has ruled Afghanistan since 2021; Qatar hosted its political office and the talks on the American withdrawal.

Institutions, Agreements, and Companies

Country	Name	Who or what
Six of the 13	GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council)	The bloc of the six Gulf monarchies — Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman — founded in 1981 against revolutionary Iran.
Twelve of the 13	Arab League	The 22-member league of Arab states, founded in 1945; every state in this course belongs except Eritrea, an observer.
Four of the 13	African Union	The continental body of 55 states, based in Addis Ababa; Sudan has been suspended since its 2021 coup.
Four of the 13	OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries); OPEC+	The oil exporters' cartel founded in 1960 and led by Saudi Arabia, whose members here include Kuwait and Iraq; Qatar left in 2019. OPEC+ adds Russia and other producers, which have coordinated output with it since 2016.
UAE, Bahrain	Abraham Accords	The 2020 US-brokered agreements under which the UAE and Bahrain, followed by Morocco, normalized relations with Israel; Sudan signed in 2021 but never completed normalization.
Region-wide	Islamabad Memorandum	The memorandum of understanding the United States and Iran signed in 2026, through Pakistani mediation, to end their war.
Saudi Arabia	Makkah Joint Defence Agreement	Mutual-defense pact signed by Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and Turkey in 2026, under which an attack on one counts as an attack on all.
Sudan	Quad	The United States, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, which have pressed Sudan’s two sides toward a truce.
Yemen	Presidential Leadership Council; Supreme Political Council	The body, created in April 2022 with eight members, that heads Yemen's internationally recognized government, and the Houthis' governing body in Sanaa.
Sudan	Sovereignty Council	The collective head of state created in 2019 to oversee a transition to civilian rule; the army has controlled it since its 2021 coup.
Iraq	Council of Representatives	Iraq's parliament.
Somalia	AUSSOM (African Union Support and Stabilization Mission in Somalia)	The African Union force fighting al-Shabaab alongside Somalia's army.
Saudi Arabia	Vision 2030	Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's program, launched in 2016, to diversify the economy away from oil.
Saudi Arabia	PIF (Public Investment Fund)	Saudi Arabia's sovereign wealth fund, which finances Vision 2030.

Country	Name	Who or what
Saudi Arabia	NEOM (new future)	Vision 2030's flagship giga-project on the Red Sea, whose 170-kilometer linear city, the Line, has been cut back to a fraction.
Saudi Arabia	Aramco	Saudi Arabia's state oil company, the world's largest oil producer.
Saudi Arabia	Nitaqat (Saudization)	The quota system requiring private employers to hire Saudi citizens.
UAE	ADNOC (Abu Dhabi National Oil Company)	Abu Dhabi's state oil company.
UAE	ADIA (Abu Dhabi Investment Authority); Mubadala; ADQ (Abu Dhabi Developmental Holding Company)	Abu Dhabi's sovereign funds.
UAE	MGX (Abu Dhabi's artificial-intelligence investment fund); G42 (Group 42)	The funds and the company through which the UAE has bought into American artificial intelligence: MGX invests in the largest artificial-intelligence (AI) firms, and G42 builds the federation's data centers and models.
UAE	DP (Dubai Ports) World	Dubai's state-owned port operator, with terminals on every continent.
UAE	CEPA (Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement)	The UAE's bilateral free-trade deals, with India, Turkey, Indonesia, and others.
UAE, Saudi Arabia	BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)	Bloc of large emerging economies named for its first five members; the UAE joined in 2024, and Saudi Arabia has not formally accepted its invitation.
Qatar	Al Jazeera	Doha-based satellite news network, founded in 1996 with state money, whose closure the 2017-21 blockade demanded.
Qatar	Al Udeid	The largest American air base in the Middle East, outside Doha.
Bahrain	Fifth Fleet	The US Navy fleet for the Gulf, the Red Sea, and the Arabian Sea, headquartered in Manama.
Djibouti	Camp Lemonnier	The only permanent American base in Africa.
Qatar, Jordan	NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization); major non-NATO ally	The US-led Western alliance, and the American designation that gives close partners outside it privileged access to US weapons and training.
All 13	Freedom House	US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.
Saudi Arabia, UAE	V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy)	Research institute in Sweden whose regime classes run from closed autocracy to liberal democracy.

Places, Terms, and Abbreviations

Country	Name	Who or what
UAE	UAE (United Arab Emirates)	Federation of seven emirates on the Gulf, led by Abu Dhabi and Dubai.
Saudi Arabia, UAE	MBS (Mohammed bin Salman); MBZ (Mohamed bin Zayed)	Common shorthand for Saudi Arabia's crown prince and prime minister and for the UAE's president.
Region-wide	Strait of Hormuz	The strait between Iran and Oman, the Persian Gulf's only exit to the open sea.
Region-wide	Bab el-Mandeb	The strait between Yemen and Djibouti, at the Red Sea's southern entrance.
Saudi Arabia	East-West pipeline; Yanbu	The pipeline that carries up to 7 million barrels of oil a day across Saudi Arabia, and the Red Sea port at its end: the kingdom's bypass around Hormuz.

Country	Name	Who or what
UAE	Fujairah	Emirate on the Gulf of Oman, outside Hormuz, at the end of Abu Dhabi's bypass pipeline.
Oman	Duqm; Salalah	Omani ports on the Arabian Sea, outside the strait.
Qatar	Ras Laffan; North Field	Qatar's gas-export complex, and the offshore field it draws on, the world's largest, shared with Iran.
Kuwait, Iraq	Khor Abdullah	The waterway between Kuwait and Iraq's Fao peninsula, the sea approach to Iraq's port of Umm Qasr; its boundary is disputed.
Yemen	Mukalla; Mocha	Mukalla, the port of Hadramawt in the east; Mocha, a Red Sea port north of Bab el-Mandeb.
Yemen	Zaydi	The branch of Shia Islam of Yemen's north, to which the Houthis belong.
Oman	Ibadi	A branch of Islam distinct from both Sunni and Shia, the faith of most Omanis.
Sudan	Darfur; Kordofan	Sudan's western regions: Darfur and Kordofan, between it and the Nile.
Somalia	Somaliland	The former British territory in Somalia's northwest that declared independence in 1991.
Somalia	Puntland; Jubaland	Two of Somalia's six federal member states, in the northeast and the far south.
Somalia	'4.5' formula	Somalia's clan power-sharing rule: equal shares of seats for the four major clan families and half a share for the minorities.
Region-wide	LNG (liquefied natural gas)	Natural gas chilled to a liquid for shipment by tanker.
Region-wide	mb/d	Million barrels a day, the unit of oil output and flow.
All 13	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year.
Saudi Arabia	THAAD (Terminal High Altitude Area Defense)	American missile-defense system.

Module 1 — Foundations

Two Chokepoints and a War That Has Not Ended



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The Gulf States in International Political Economy*; International Crisis Group Gulf and Arabian Peninsula briefings

1a. Two Chokepoints

The region is defined by two straits. The Strait of Hormuz, 33 kilometers wide at its narrowest between Iran and Oman, is the only exit from the Persian Gulf and normally carries about a fifth of the world's oil and a fifth of its LNG. The Bab el-Mandeb, 30 kilometers wide between Yemen and Djibouti, is the southern

entrance to the Red Sea and the route between the Suez Canal and the Indian Ocean. Every Gulf producer except Saudi Arabia (which has a Red Sea coast), Oman (outside Hormuz), and the UAE (with a pipeline to the Gulf of Oman) depends entirely or almost entirely on Hormuz; every Suez-bound ship depends on Bab el-Mandeb. In 2026 Iran shut the first, and the Houthis, who have attacked shipping near the second since 2023, turned their campaign against Saudi Arabia.

1b. The 2026 War

On February 28, 2026 the United States and Israel launched a war on Iran that killed Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei on its first day; his son Mojtaba was named his successor on March 8-9. Iran answered by closing the Strait of Hormuz and striking every Gulf monarchy: its missiles and drones hit cities, oil plants, and American bases, and on March 18-19 knocked out two of the liquefaction trains at Qatar's Ras Laffan complex, about a sixth of Qatar's capacity to export gas, for three to five years. A Pakistan-brokered ceasefire took effect on April 8, and on June 17 the two governments signed a memorandum in Islamabad meant to lead to a settlement; traffic through the strait partly resumed, and the United States lifted the blockade of Iran's ports it had imposed in April. The memorandum collapsed in July: President Trump declared it over on July 8, American aircraft bombed Iran for most of the next three weeks, Iran declared the strait closed on July 11 and resumed its strikes on Gulf states, and the United States reimposed its naval blockade of Iran's ports. After a lull the two exchanged fire again on August 30 and on September 1-3, when American strikes on southern Iran drew Iranian missiles and drones on US bases in Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, and the UAE; at the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation's summit in Bishkek on September 1, Russia's president pledged to keep supplying Iran. As of early October the strait is open only to ships Iran authorizes: transits remain far below their pre-war level, though trackers disagree on how much oil is getting out; Iranian forces attack ships that defy them — about a dozen between late September and October 5; and on September 26 Washington rejected Tehran's offer, relayed through Qatar, to reopen the strait within a week in return for an end to the blockade and to oil sanctions, the release of frozen assets, and an end to hostilities in Lebanon and Yemen. Every profile in this course is shaped by a war that, in its eighth month, is not over.

1c. The Membership Map

- **Gulf Cooperation Council (6):** Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman — the monarchies' bloc since 1981, fractured by the 2017-21 Qatar blockade and now by the Saudi-UAE rivalry.
- **Arab League (12):** every state here but Eritrea, an observer — a forum rather than an alliance, whose members have backed opposing sides in Sudan and Yemen.
- **The Makkah Joint Defence Agreement (2026):** Saudi Arabia's mutual-defense pact with Pakistan and Turkey, signed August 7.
- **US security partners:** every Gulf state hosts US forces — the Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, Al Udeid in Qatar, bases in the UAE, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, access to Oman's ports and airfields — plus Jordan, Djibouti, and Iraq under a diminished arrangement.
- **Abraham Accords (2020):** the UAE and Bahrain normalized with Israel; Saudi Arabia has not, and the Gaza and Lebanon wars have frozen further normalization.
- **Referenced but not profiled:** Iran, Egypt, and Israel, the region's three other central actors, and Turkey and Pakistan, whose forces and treaties now reach into it.

1d. The Disputes That Recur

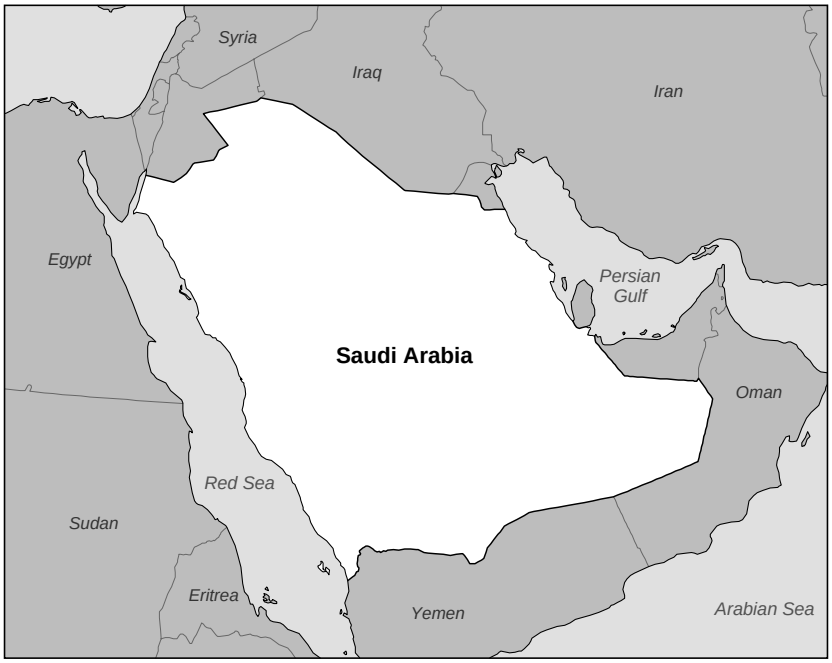
Five issues run through the course. Iran's war with the United States and Israel, which has drawn in every Gulf state and kept Hormuz shut (Modules 2-5, 8, 9). The Saudi-Emirati rivalry, which moved from competition to opposing sides in Yemen and Sudan and, on December 30, 2025, to a Saudi-led strike on a UAE-linked arms shipment in Yemen, after which Saudi-backed forces drove the Emirates' southern allies from power (Modules 2, 3, 6, 7, 9). The Houthis' Red Sea campaign, turned in July 2026 into a war on Saudi Arabia (Modules 2, 6, 9). Sudan's civil war and de facto partition, fueled by Gulf money on both sides (Modules 7, 9). And Israel normalization, frozen by Gaza and Lebanon but structurally still on the table (Modules 2, 8, 9).

1e. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office (and, in Saudi Arabia and Iraq, where a prime minister leads, the head of state's; in Yemen and Sudan, the rival authority's), the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religion with its share, the main ethnic or national groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026 and land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or, where there is none, from published estimates, as each table notes. In the six Gulf monarchies, where foreign workers make up between two-fifths and nine-tenths of residents, the table gives the citizens' share, and several of their minimum wages cover citizens only. Eight of the thirteen currencies are pegged to the dollar — those of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, Jordan, Djibouti, and Eritrea — so their wages convert at fixed rates; Iraq's and Sudan's currencies trade at several rates far apart, and the tables give two. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. All but Jordan, which is Partly Free, are rated Not Free; three — Yemen, Sudan, and Somalia — have no single government controlling their territory; and seven are monarchies, the six of the Gulf and Jordan, in which the ruler rather than an elected parliament decides. The Who's Who before this module defines every group, party, and abbreviation the profiles name, and the Key Points page ranks the thirteen leaders by time in office, from Isaias Afwerki's 33 years in Eritrea to an Iraqi prime minister in office since May 2026.

Module 2 — Saudi Arabia

The Peninsula's Dominant Power



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed bin Salman*

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman, 41 — in office since September 2022 (4.0 years); crown prince and de facto ruler since 2017
Head of state	King Salman bin Abdulaziz, 90 — in office since January 2015 (11.7 years); an absolute monarch in law; his son governs
System	Absolute monarchy
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	35.2 million (2026)
Land area	2,149,690 km² (830,000 sq mi)
Religion	Islam, the state religion: citizens almost all Muslim, about 85–90% of them Sunni and 10–15% Shia (estimates)
People	Saudi citizens 58%, foreign residents 42%, mostly from South Asia, other Arab states, and Southeast Asia (2022 census); median age 31; 86% urban
Minimum wage	No general minimum; Saudi citizens in the private sector must earn 4,000 riyals a month to count fully toward Saudization quotas ($1,067 at the fixed 3.75 riyals = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Al Saud family allied with the puritanical cleric Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in 1744, a partnership between throne and clergy that defined the state for 270 years. Abdulaziz ibn Saud reconquered

Riyadh in 1902 and unified most of the peninsula by 1932, creating the kingdom; oil was discovered six years later, and the 1945 meeting between Ibn Saud and Franklin Roosevelt founded the US-Saudi security-for-oil relationship. The kingdom led the 1973 oil embargo, financed the Afghan jihad in the 1980s, hosted US troops against Iraq in 1991 (provoking Osama bin Laden), and produced 15 of the 19 September 11 hijackers. Since 2017 Mohammed bin Salman has centralized power, sidelined the clergy, loosened social restrictions, jailed rivals, approved, according to US intelligence, the 2018 killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, and launched Vision 2030.

Current leadership: King Salman still chairs the cabinet, most recently on September 22, 2026. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) controls the economy, the security services, the sovereign fund, and foreign policy. The succession from father to son is the only question, and it is one of timing.

Government structure: There is no elected legislature; the Basic Law of 1992 affirms the Quran as constitution, and an appointed Consultative (Shura) Council advises. Under MBS the traditional balance among senior princes, clergy, and merchant families has been replaced by centralized personal rule: rivals were detained in the 2017 Ritz-Carlton purge, the religious police were curbed, and dissent is prosecuted under counterterrorism law. The kingdom holds the Islamic world's two holiest cities.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1.4 trillion economy, the Arab world's largest and the world's largest oil exporter, with about 17% of proven reserves. Exports are led by crude oil and petroleum products (still roughly 75% of the total), petrochemicals, and plastics; imports by machinery, vehicles, electronics, and food. Top trading partners: China (the largest oil buyer), Japan, India, South Korea, and the US. Vision 2030 has poured hundreds of billions into tourism, entertainment, mining, and megaprojects like NEOM, with mixed results. The sovereign Public Investment Fund held roughly $900 billion at the end of 2024. Saudi Arabia leads OPEC+ production decisions, and its Red Sea and Gulf coasts give it export outlets on both sides of Hormuz.

Closest partners: The United States, under a security relationship renewed under the Trump administration with the $600 billion investment pledge and arms deals of the May 2025 visit, though the kingdom has stayed formally out of the 2026 war while absorbing Iranian retaliation, and Washington has given it targeting help but no strikes against the Houthis. China, its largest oil customer and a growing technology partner. Pakistan and Turkey, its partners since August 2026 in the Makkah Joint Defence Agreement, which built on a 2025 Saudi-Pakistani pact. Egypt, as the anchor of its Arab alignment, including in Sudan. The other GCC monarchies, with the UAE as the exception.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Iran, in the region's defining rivalry: a 2023 China-brokered restoration of relations was overtaken by the 2026 war, in which Iran's closure of Hormuz cut off most of the kingdom's export route, and Riyadh now wants guarantees on the strait, not just its reopening — in September it sought changes to an Iranian-Omani plan for managing it. The Houthis, whose truce with the kingdom collapsed in July 2026: they declared a naval blockade of Saudi Arabia, set fire to the Jazan refinery, and have fired missiles at Riyadh, Taif, and Yanbu. The UAE, in a rivalry that went from competition over investment and influence to opposing proxies in Yemen and Sudan and to a Saudi-led strike on a UAE-linked arms shipment at Mukalla on December 30, 2025, after which Saudi-backed forces pushed the Emirates' Yemeni allies out of power. Israel, with normalization frozen by Gaza and conditioned on a Palestinian state. Domestically, the human-rights record — Khashoggi, mass executions, jailed activists — remains the constraint on Western partnership.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
GDP	Per head about $35,000; exports ~$300B; growth 4% in 2025, then the strait's closure and the Houthi war in 2026; non-oil growth about 4%	Oil about 40% of GDP and 65% of revenue; the giga-projects (the Red Sea, Qiddiya, Diriyah)
Energy	Capacity 12 mb/d; output about 9-9.5 mb/d under OPEC+ before the war; exports rerouted through the East-West pipeline to Yanbu — the pipeline shut by drones from September 10 to 22, Yanbu within Houthi range; the gas and solar expansion; the nuclear bid	The chokepoint's bypass owner, now under fire
Public finance	Inflation ~2%; debt about 26% of GDP (2025) and rising; a record first-quarter 2026 deficit of 125.7 billion riyals ($33.5B); the price windfall set against the volume lost; Aramco's dividend cut	The Vision's cost meets the war's revenue
Military	~$80B (about 7% of GDP; among the world's ten largest); 250,000 active; American, British, French, and now Chinese systems; Patriot and THAAD batteries against Iranian and Houthi missiles; a French pledge of air defenses for Yanbu in September	The American guarantee tested and found partial
Regime (V-Dem)	Closed autocracy	Freedom House 9/100; authoritarian (2.1 of 10 on the Economist Intelligence Unit's index)
Vision 2030	Ten years in, four to go: tourism past 100 million visits a year (the target now 150 million), women in the workforce from 17% to 36%, entertainment and sport, the non-oil share of GDP rising; the PIF's overseas bets pulled home; Humain (the AI champion; $10B-plus of chips under the May 2025 licenses); the sovereign compute campuses; the mining ambition (Ma'aden; Manara)	The transformation's scorecard: social change real, diversification partial
Position	The Gulf's leader; OPEC+ co-manager with Russia; the American guarantee's dependent; China the arms hedge; the yuan sales; the Sudan war's onetime mediator (the 2023 Jeddah talks)	The hedger with the most to hedge

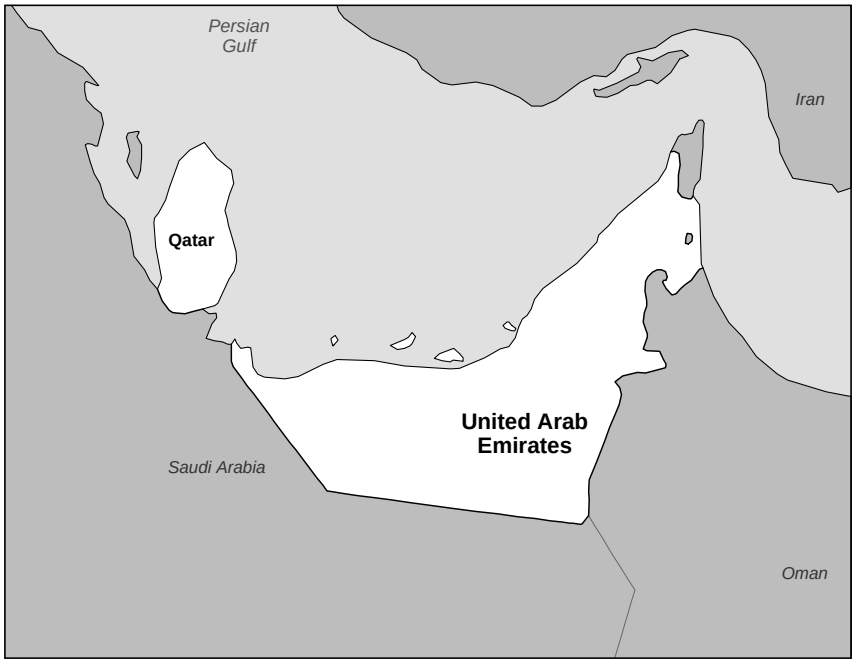
In depth — the question: Whether an absolutism personalized in one man, funding a transformation on oil that a strait can shut in and a militia can reach, can keep hedging between the guarantor that fights its wars without consulting it and the customer that buys its oil — and what the succession does to a state whose politics have been one person's for nine years.

2b. Vision 2030 and the Kingdom's Bet

MBS's project is to prepare Saudi Arabia for a world that uses less oil by building tourism, entertainment, mining, and technology sectors before the revenue runs out — funded by the oil revenue it aims to replace. The megaprojects have been scaled back — NEOM above all — even as the kingdom prepares to host the 2034 World Cup, and it runs deficits when oil falls below roughly $90 — as it did after the 2025 unwinding of OPEC+ cuts, until the Iran war sent Brent past $100 (about $101 on October 7). The 2026 war exposed the model's other vulnerability: a tourism and investment economy requires stability that a Gulf war destroys, which is why Riyadh wants the war ended, and why the Houthis' renewed war on the kingdom threatens the Vision as much as the oil price does.

Module 3 — The UAE & Qatar

The Gulf's Rival Small Powers



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Andreas Krieg, *Divided Gulf: The Anatomy of a Crisis*

3a. The United Arab Emirates

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Mohamed bin Zayed, 65 — in office since May 2022 (4.4 years); ruler of Abu Dhabi; the federation's de facto leader since 2014
System	Federation of seven hereditary emirates; the seven rulers choose the president
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	11.6 million (2026)
Land area	71,020 km² (27,420 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 75% (Islam the state religion), Christian about 13%, Hindu about 6%, Buddhist about 3% (2020 estimates)
People	Emirati citizens about a tenth of residents; the rest foreign, mostly Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Egyptian, and Filipino (estimates); median age 33; 88% urban
Minimum wage	No general minimum; Emirati citizens in the private sector: 6,000 dirhams a month since January 2026 ($1,634 at the fixed 3.6725 dirhams = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Trucial States were seven sheikhdoms under British protection from 1820 until Britain's withdrawal from the Gulf in 1971, when Abu Dhabi's ruler Sheikh Zayed federated them as the UAE. Abu Dhabi's oil, discovered in 1958, financed the federation; Dubai, with little oil, built itself into a global trade, aviation, and finance hub. After the 2011 Arab Spring, Abu Dhabi's Mohamed bin Zayed turned the UAE into

the Gulf's most assertive interventionist power — against the Muslim Brotherhood everywhere, in Libya, Yemen, and Sudan — and in 2020 normalized relations with Israel under the Abraham Accords. It has become the region's most capable military and a major backer of the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan's war.

Current leadership: Vice President and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Rashid, ruler of Dubai, runs the federal government and Dubai's economy. Power is concentrated in Abu Dhabi, which holds the oil and the military.

Government structure: Each emirate is an absolute hereditary monarchy, under a Federal Supreme Council of the seven rulers. Abu Dhabi and Dubai dominate. A Federal National Council is half-appointed and advisory. There are no political parties, and dissent is prosecuted; the state is highly effective administratively and among the region's most surveilled.

Economy and trade: A roughly $620 billion economy, the Gulf's most diversified: Abu Dhabi holds the oil (about 6% of world reserves) and two of the world's largest sovereign funds; Dubai runs trade, logistics (Jebel Ali is the region's largest port), aviation (Emirates airline), finance, real estate, and tourism. Exports are led by crude oil, gold and jewelry (Dubai is a global gold-trading hub, including for African conflict gold), refined petroleum, and re-exports; imports by gold, machinery, electronics, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China, India, Japan, Saudi Arabia, and the US. The UAE's port and logistics investments — DP World operates across Africa and Asia — are the economic arm of its foreign policy. On May 1, 2026, after 59 years, the UAE left OPEC and the wider OPEC+ group, citing the flexibility to use its expanding production capacity.

Closest partners: The United States, which bases forces in the UAE and has sold it advanced weapons; Israel, under the Abraham Accords, in security and technology; India, its largest trading partner after China; Egypt, in the anti-Islamist Arab alignment; and a network of client forces — the Rapid Support Forces in Sudan and Haftar in Libya, and until January 2026 the Southern Transitional Council in Yemen. France maintains a naval base in Abu Dhabi.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Iran, across the Gulf and over three occupied islands; the UAE kept trade channels open until the 2026 war, in which Iran has fired more than 2,000 missiles and drones at the federation by late March, putting an aluminum smelter out of action for up to a year and striking Fujairah in May and an air base on September 3. Saudi Arabia, in the rivalry that now defines the Gulf, sharpened when Saudi-backed forces drove the UAE's allies from power in southern Yemen in January 2026 and when the UAE walked out of Saudi-led OPEC in May, though the Emirates declared full solidarity with Riyadh when the Houthis turned on the kingdom in July. Qatar, which the UAE helped blockade; Turkey, historically over the Brotherhood, though relations have thawed; and the Houthis, who struck Abu Dhabi in 2022. The UAE's role in Sudan has made it the target of accusations of complicity in atrocities.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Among the most foreign-majority states on earth	Nine in ten residents foreign and without politics
GDP	Per head about $47,000 (citizens far higher); growth about 4% in 2025, before the war's strikes	Oil about a quarter of GDP (Abu Dhabi's ADNOC); the sovereign funds (ADIA, Mubadala, ADQ, MGX; $1.5T-plus)

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Energy and the bypass	Oil ~3.3 mb/d before the war; Fujairah's pipeline (1.5 mb/d) and port outside Hormuz; the crude sold at the war's premium; ADNOC's expansion to 5 mb/d of capacity, outside OPEC's quotas; ADNOC's gas and LNG expansion; the Barakah nuclear plant (four reactors); solar at record low prices	The chokepoint's other bypass owner
Public finance	Inflation ~2%; debt ~30% of GDP; surpluses at $70-plus oil; the funds' dividends	The Gulf's soundest balance sheet
Military	~$25B; 65,000 active; the bases (French, American, and its own); the missile and drone defenses; Sudan	'Little Sparta'
Regime (V-Dem)	Closed autocracy; the surveillance state	Freedom House 18/100; authoritarian (3.0 of 10 on the Economist Intelligence Unit's index)
Position	The Abraham Accords' anchor (strained by Gaza); Sudan's RSF patron (the war's most contested foreign role); the Horn's port builder, with a reach that rivals states ten times its size; Russia's trading window; the sanctions-evasion questions (Russia, Iran); China's trade and arms partner	The hedger who invests in every side
Technology and finance	The AI state: G42; MGX in every large American AI round (xAI, OpenAI, and the data-center financings); the five-gigawatt Emirati-American AI campus in Abu Dhabi, whose first phase, Stargate UAE, OpenAI is building with Nvidia and Oracle; the American chip licenses of May 2025; the Falcon models; Dubai as the Gulf's, Russia's, and Africa's financial hub, absorbing the region's displaced business	Capital and power more than research

In depth — the question: Whether a state that has bought a place in every system — American AI, Chinese arms, Russian money, Israeli technology, African ports — can keep them all when the systems fight each other, as they have in 2026 over the strait its own bypass runs around.

3b. Qatar

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Emir Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, 46 — in office since June 2013 (13.3 years); succeeded on his father's abdication
System	Absolute monarchy
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	3.17 million (2026)
Land area	11,610 km² (4,480 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 68% (Islam the state religion), Christian 14%, Hindu 14% (2010 estimates)
People	Qatari citizens about a tenth of residents; foreign workers mostly from India, Bangladesh, Nepal, Egypt, and the Philippines (estimates); median age 34; 99% urban
Minimum wage	1,000 riyals a month, plus 300 for food and 500 for housing unless the employer provides them, since March 2021, for all workers ($275, or $495 with allowances, at the fixed 3.64 riyals = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A British protectorate from 1916, Qatar became independent in 1971 after declining to join the UAE. The discovery of the North Field, the world's largest gas reservoir, made it the richest country per capita on earth once LNG exports began in 1997. Emir Hamad, who deposed his father in 1995, built Al

Jazeera, courted the Muslim Brotherhood, and pursued an independent foreign policy. Qatar mediated the Gaza ceasefires and Afghan withdrawal, and hosted the 2022 World Cup.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Mohammed bin Abdulrahman, who is also foreign minister, has led the government since 2023 and is the public face of Qatar's mediation, which in 2026 has carried messages between Washington and Tehran.

Government structure: A 2021 election for an advisory council was the first and, after a 2024 constitutional referendum returned the council to full appointment, the last. No political parties; the state is small, wealthy, and tightly controlled, with a citizen population of about 300,000 governing a workforce of over two million foreigners.

Economy and trade: A roughly $220 billion economy, the world's highest GDP per capita by some measures, built almost entirely on liquefied natural gas from the North Field. Exports are led by LNG (before the war Qatar was one of the world's three largest exporters, with the United States and Australia), crude oil, and petrochemicals; imports by machinery, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: China, India, Japan, South Korea, and the UK. The Qatar Investment Authority holds roughly $500 billion. The 2026 war shut Qatar's exports, about a fifth of the world's LNG supply, behind Hormuz — demonstrating both Qatar's global weight and its total dependence on a strait Iran can close.

Closest partners: The United States, which operates Al Udeid and designated Qatar a major non-NATO ally; Turkey, which maintains a base in Qatar and stood with it during the blockade; Iran, with which Qatar shares the North Field and kept relations through the blockade, though Iranian missiles struck Ras Laffan in March 2026; and the Muslim Brotherhood-aligned movements, including Hamas, whose political office Qatar hosted.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt, which blockaded Qatar from 2017 to 2021 over its independent foreign policy, Al Jazeera, and Brotherhood ties; the blockade failed but the underlying dispute persists. Israel, over Qatar's Hamas ties and the 2025 Israeli strike on Hamas leaders in Doha. And the 2026 war, in which Iran's closure of Hormuz and its strikes on Ras Laffan cost Qatar more than any other Gulf state — a reminder that its gas partnership with Iran offers no protection when Iran is at war.

3c. Why These Two Are Profiled Together

The UAE and Qatar are the Gulf's two hyper-wealthy small states, and they have pursued opposite theories of how a small state survives. The UAE bets on hard power and alignment: military capability, American and Israeli partnership, and intervention against Islamists everywhere. Qatar bets on indispensability: hosting the US base, mediating every conflict, funding every faction, and keeping channels to Iran, the Brotherhood, and the Taliban open so that everyone needs Doha. The 2017 blockade, led by the UAE and Saudi Arabia, was an attempt to crush Qatar's model; its failure confirmed that both can coexist. The 2026 war tested both — the UAE's alignment drew Iranian strikes, and Qatar's channels to Tehran did not save Ras Laffan.

Module 4 — Kuwait, Bahrain & Oman

The Smaller Gulf Monarchies



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, country analyses

4a. Kuwait

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Emir Mishal al-Ahmad al-Sabah, 86 — in office since December 2023 (2.8 years); has ruled by decree since suspending parliament in May 2024
System	Hereditary emirate; the elected parliament suspended since May 2024
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	5.10 million (2026)
Land area	17,820 km² (6,880 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 75% (Islam the state religion; citizens roughly 70% Sunni, 30% Shia), Christian about 18% (estimates)
People	Kuwaiti citizens about 31% of residents; foreign workers mostly Indian, Egyptian, Bangladeshi, and Filipino (estimates); median age 36; 100% urban
Minimum wage	75 dinars a month in the private sector since 2017 (about $245 at roughly 0.306 dinars = $1; the dinar is pegged to a currency basket)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Al Sabah family has ruled Kuwait since the 1750s; it was a British protectorate from 1899 to 1961. Oil, discovered in 1938, made it enormously wealthy. Kuwait's 1962 constitution created the Gulf's only elected parliament with real powers, which has clashed with the ruling family for decades. Iraq's 1990 invasion and the US-led 1991 liberation defined its modern security orientation.

Current leadership: Emir Mishal al-Ahmad, who succeeded his half-brother at 83, in June 2024 named Sabah al-Khalid al-Sabah crown prince without the parliamentary approval the constitution requires. Prime Minister Ahmad Abdullah al-Sabah, a member of the ruling family, has led the government since May 2024.

Government structure: Constitutional monarchy under the 1962 constitution, historically the Gulf's most open: an elected 50-seat National Assembly with real powers to question and remove ministers. The emir dissolved parliament and suspended the articles governing it for up to four years, citing chronic deadlock between the assembly and the ruling family's cabinets — the most significant rollback of Gulf political participation in decades. Political parties remain banned. Since 2024 the government has also stripped tens of thousands of Kuwaitis of their citizenship — 71,059 cases by April 2026 — and a decree-law that month made nationality decisions sovereign acts, limiting the courts' review. Freedom House downgraded Kuwait from Partly Free to Not Free in 2025 because the emir had dissolved parliament and suspended elections, and lowered its score again in 2026 over the revocations.

Economy and trade: A roughly $160 billion economy almost entirely dependent on oil: Kuwait holds about 6% of world reserves, and oil provides over 90% of export earnings and government revenue. Exports are led by crude oil and refined products; imports by machinery, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: China, India, South Korea, Japan, and the UAE. The Kuwait Investment Authority is the world's oldest sovereign fund, holding roughly $1 trillion. Diversification has lagged the rest of the Gulf, and the parliament's suspension was justified partly as clearing obstacles to economic reform.

Closest partners: The United States, which maintains a large military presence; Saudi Arabia and the GCC; and, economically, China and India as oil buyers. Kuwait has avoided the Saudi-UAE rivalry and the Qatar dispute, positioning itself as a GCC mediator.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Iraq, historically, over the 1990 invasion and a still-contested maritime border at Khor Abdullah, where a 2023 Iraqi court ruling voiding a border agreement reopened the dispute and Iraq's filing of maritime claims with the UN in February 2026 deepened it. Iran, across the Gulf and, in 2026, the source of repeated strikes: on the oil ministry's complex in April, a power and desalination plant in July, a residential complex in Kuwait City on September 2, and an air base hosting US forces on September 3, while Kuwaiti tankers are among the ships attacked in the strait. Domestically, the parliament's suspension and the citizenship purge have put the ruling family in direct conflict with the political culture the constitution created.

4b. Bahrain

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, 76 — in office since March 1999 (27.6 years); emir from 1999, king since 2002; his son, the crown prince, is prime minister
System	Constitutional monarchy in form, absolute in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	1.68 million (2026)
Land area	760 km² (293 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 70%, Christian 15%, Hindu 10% (2010 estimates); a Shia majority among citizens (estimates)
People	Bahraini citizens 47%, foreign residents 53%, mostly South Asian (2020 census); median age 34; 90% urban
Minimum wage	Sector-only: 300 dinars a month in the public sector ($798 at the fixed 0.376 dinars = $1); no private-sector minimum

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Al Khalifa family conquered Bahrain in 1783 and ruled under British protection from 1861 to 1971. It was the first Gulf state to find oil (1932) and the first to see it run low, turning to banking and services. A Sunni ruling family governs a Shia-majority population, a tension that exploded in the 2011 Arab Spring uprising, crushed with Saudi and Emirati troops. In 2020 Bahrain joined the UAE in normalizing relations with Israel. It has remained the Gulf state most dependent on Saudi backing.

Current leadership: Crown Prince Salman has been prime minister since 2020, replacing the king's uncle who had held the post for 49 years, and is regarded as a modernizer within the family.

Government structure: There is an elected lower house and an appointed upper house, but the king appoints the government, the opposition has been banned since 2011, and Shia political movements are dissolved. In April 2026 the king extended the elected chamber's term by a year, postponing the election due in November 2026 to late 2027, and a wartime crackdown on alleged sympathizers of Iran has brought some 350 arrests, by one rights group's count, and the revocation of 69 people's citizenship.

Economy and trade: A roughly $45 billion economy, the Gulf's smallest and, by necessity, among its least oil-dependent, built on banking and financial services (a regional hub since the 1970s), aluminum (one of the world's largest smelters), refining of Saudi crude, and tourism from Saudi Arabia via the King Fahd Causeway. Exports are led by refined petroleum, aluminum, and financial services; imports by crude oil (from Saudi Arabia), machinery, and food. Top trading partners: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, China, and the US. Bahrain depends on Saudi financial support and shares an oil field with the kingdom.

Closest partners: Saudi Arabia, on which Bahrain depends for security and oil; the United States, whose Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Manama, a base Iranian strikes have heavily damaged in 2026; and Israel, under the Abraham Accords. The UAE, in the anti-Iran, anti-Brotherhood alignment.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Iran, which Bahrain accuses of backing its Shia opposition, which has periodically claimed Bahrain as a lost province, and whose missiles and drones have struck the island repeatedly in 2026; Qatar, over a territorial dispute settled by the International Court of Justice in 2001 and the 2017 blockade; and domestically, the unresolved sectarian settlement, with the Shia majority excluded from power.

4c. Oman

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Sultan Haitham bin Tariq, 70 — in office since January 2020 (6.7 years); also prime minister
System	Absolute monarchy
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	5.67 million (2026)
Land area	309,500 km² (119,500 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 86% (most Omanis Ibadi, with Sunni and Shia minorities), Christian 6%, Hindu 6% (2020 estimates)
People	Omani citizens about 57%, foreign workers about 43%, mostly South Asian (estimates); median age 31; 90% urban
Minimum wage	325 rials a month for Omani citizens in the private sector, since 2013 ($845 at the fixed 0.3845 rials = $1); none for foreign workers

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Oman was a maritime empire in the 17th-18th centuries with holdings in East Africa; Zanzibar was ruled from Muscat until 1856. Sultan Qaboos overthrew his father in 1970 with British help, ended a Marxist insurgency in Dhofar, and ruled for 50 years, building a modern state and a foreign policy of neutrality that made Oman the region's mediator — it hosted the secret US-Iran talks that produced the 2015 nuclear deal. Qaboos died childless in 2020, naming his cousin Haitham as successor in a sealed letter. Haitham has maintained the neutral course and mediated between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia.

Current leadership: In 2021 Sultan Haitham named his son Theyazin crown prince — the first formal succession arrangement in Oman's history — and in January 2026 made him deputy prime minister for economic affairs.

Government structure: A 2021 basic law formalized succession; a bicameral Council of Oman includes an elected lower house with advisory powers. Oman is the only Ibadi Muslim majority state, which underlies its neutral posture. The sultanate has long been among the region's most stable states.

Economy and trade: A roughly $110 billion economy dependent on oil and gas but with smaller reserves than its neighbors, pushing earlier diversification into ports (Duqm, Salalah), logistics, mining, and tourism. Exports are led by crude oil, LNG, refined products, and metals; imports by machinery, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: China (the largest oil buyer), the UAE, India, Saudi Arabia, and Japan. Oman's coast lies outside the Strait of Hormuz on the Arabian Sea, which makes its ports strategically valuable as export outlets that Iran cannot close — a fact the 2026 war underlined.

Closest partners: Everyone, by design: Oman maintains working relations with Iran, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, the US (with which it has a 1980 access agreement), Britain (its oldest partner), India, and China. In 2026 it worked out with Iran a regime of shipping lanes for the strait — which drew President Trump's threats to bomb Oman, in May and again in August, and Saudi objections that postponed a regional meeting on it in September.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Oman has no adversaries and treats that as its principal asset. Its frictions are economic — debt, youth unemployment, and dependence on modest oil reserves — and structural: its neutrality is tested each time the Gulf goes to war, as in 2026, when Iranian drones struck its ports at Duqm and Salalah in the war's first days and again in July, and its role as Iran's partner on the strait made it indispensable and exposed at once.

Module 5 — Iraq & Jordan

Between the Gulf and the Levant



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, Iraq reports; Congressional Research Service, Iraq and Jordan briefings

5a. Iraq

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi, 41 — in office since May 2026 (0.4 years); confirmed with 14 of 23 ministers; nine posts, defense and interior among them, still vacant in September
Head of state	President Nizar Amidi, 58 — in office since April 2026 (0.5 years); ceremonial
System	Federal parliamentary republic with ethno-sectarian power-sharing
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	48.0 million (2026)
Land area	434,320 km² (167,690 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 95–98%: Shia about 60–65%, Sunni about 30–35%; Christian about 1% (estimates)
People	Arab 75–80%, Kurdish 15–20%; Turkmen, Assyrian, Yazidi, and others about 5% (estimates); median age 22; 72% urban
Minimum wage	350,000 dinars a month since 2018 ($269 at the official 1,300 dinars = $1; $225 at the market rate of 1,556 on September 7, 2026); 450,000 in the Kurdistan Region since August 2025 ($346, or $289 at the market rate)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Britain created Iraq from three Ottoman provinces after World War I and installed a monarchy, overthrown in 1958. The Baath Party seized power in 1968 and Saddam Hussein ruled from 1979 through

the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88), the invasion of Kuwait (1990), and a decade of sanctions, until the 2003 US invasion. The occupation triggered a Sunni insurgency, a sectarian civil war, and the rise of the Islamic State, which seized a third of the country in 2014 before its defeat in 2017 by Iraqi forces, Kurdish fighters, Iran-backed militias, and a US-led coalition. Iraq's post-2003 system divides power among Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish blocs, with Iran-aligned parties dominant and Iran-backed militias operating alongside the state — the central fault line the 2026 Iran war exposed.

Current leadership: President Nizar Amidi, a Kurdish engineer from the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, was elected by parliament on April 11, 2026 after a five-month deadlock — the rival Kurdistan Democratic Party does not recognize the outcome. Prime Minister Ali al-Zaidi, a banker and businessman with no party or seats of his own, was named on April 27 by the Iran-aligned Coordination Framework as a compromise after the United States blocked its first choice, the former prime minister Nouri al-Maliki; parliament confirmed him on May 14, keeping the Kurdistan Democratic Party's Fuad Hussein as foreign minister. Al-Zaidi oversees defense and interior through acting officials. His predecessor Mohammed Shia al-Sudani's coalition had won the most seats in the November 2025 election, but he was passed over.

Government structure: Under the 2005 constitution, an informal ethno-sectarian pact governs: the president is a Kurd, the prime minister a Shia Arab, the parliament speaker a Sunni Arab. The 329-seat Council of Representatives elects the president by a two-thirds majority, and the president names the prime minister from the largest bloc — a process that routinely takes months. The Kurdistan Region is autonomous with its own government and forces. Iran-backed militias of the Popular Mobilization Forces are formally part of the state but answer to their own commanders, the central unresolved question of Iraqi sovereignty.

Economy and trade: A roughly $270 billion economy, the world's fifth-largest oil reserves, and one of its most oil-dependent states: crude provides over 90% of government revenue and nearly all exports. Exports are led by crude oil; imports by machinery, vehicles, food, and fuel (Iraq imports refined products and Iranian gas and electricity despite its own reserves). Top trading partners: China (the largest oil buyer), India, the UAE, Turkey, and Iran. The Kurdistan Region exports separately through Turkey under a long-disputed arrangement. The 2026 war's closure of Hormuz, through which nearly all of Iraq's oil leaves from Basra, put the budget at the mercy of the strait and disrupted Iranian gas imports; a bloated public payroll funded by oil is the fiscal crisis the new government inherits.

Closest partners: Iran, whose aligned parties dominate parliament and whose militias operate inside the state; the United States, which retains a reduced military presence, buys influence through Iraq's need for dollars, vetoed Maliki's return, and has since courted al-Zaidi, who visited the White House in July 2026 — and Tehran days later; China, the largest oil buyer; Turkey, over Kurdish issues and water; and the Gulf states, which have re-engaged Baghdad as a counterweight to Tehran.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The pull between Iran and the United States, which the 2026 war turned from chronic to acute — Iran-backed militias have struck US targets from Iraqi soil, and on September 10 drones that US officials said came from Iraq shut Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline; the blocs' quarrels over who fills the defense and interior ministries, the two that would have to rein the militias in, have kept both vacant. Turkey, whose forces have long operated in Iraqi Kurdistan against the PKK, a Kurdish insurgency that declared its dissolution in 2025, and whose dams control Iraq's rivers. Kuwait, over the Khor Abdullah border. Internally, the Kurdish region's disputes with Baghdad over oil and budget, and the split between the KDP and the PUK that delayed the presidency.

5b. Jordan

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	King Abdullah II, 64 — in office since February 1999 (27.7 years)
System	Constitutional monarchy in which the king holds decisive power
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	11.6 million (2026)
Land area	88,780 km² (34,280 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 97% (Sunni; Islam the state religion), Christian about 2% (estimates)
People	Jordanian citizens 69%, Syrians 13%, Egyptians 7%, Palestinians without Jordanian nationality 7%, Iraqis 1% (2015 census); most citizens are of Palestinian origin (estimates); median age 26; 93% urban
Minimum wage	290 dinars a month since January 2025, fixed through 2027 ($409 at the fixed 0.709 dinars = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Britain carved Transjordan from the Palestine Mandate in 1921 for the Hashemite prince Abdullah, whose family the Saudis would drive from Mecca in 1924-25. The kingdom absorbed the West Bank in 1948, lost it to Israel in 1967, and expelled the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1970 'Black September' civil war. King Hussein ruled for 46 years, signing peace with Israel in 1994. His son Abdullah II has maintained the kingdom as a Western security partner and absorbed waves of Palestinian, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees.

Current leadership: King Abdullah II holds decisive authority over foreign policy, security, and the appointment of governments; Crown Prince Hussein is heir. Prime ministers serve at his pleasure: Jafar Hassan, a technocrat and former director of the king's office, has led the government since September 2024.

Government structure: The king appoints the prime minister and senate, can dissolve the elected lower house, and commands the armed forces. Elections are held and an Islamist opposition won the largest bloc in 2024, but parliament's power is limited, the security services are central, and in April 2025 the government banned the Muslim Brotherhood. Jordan is a US major non-NATO ally and hosts American forces.

Economy and trade: A roughly $55 billion economy with no oil, dependent on US and Gulf aid, remittances from Jordanians in the Gulf, phosphate and potash exports, tourism (Petra), pharmaceuticals, and garment exports to the US under a free trade agreement. Exports are led by clothing, fertilizers and potash, pharmaceuticals, and phosphates; imports by fuel, machinery, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: the US (the largest export market), Saudi Arabia, China, India, and Iraq. Jordan hosts over a million Syrian refugees and two million registered Palestinian refugees.

Closest partners: The United States, which provides roughly $1.5 billion a year and treats Jordan as an indispensable partner; Saudi Arabia and the Gulf, as financial backers; Egypt, the first Arab state to make peace with Israel; and the EU. Israel, under the 1994 peace treaty, with intelligence and water cooperation that continues despite public hostility.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Israel, over Gaza, the West Bank, and Jerusalem's holy sites (of which Jordan is custodian) — the Gaza war produced mass protests, Israeli talk of moving Palestinians into Jordan revived the kingdom's oldest fear, and the treaty is under more strain than at any point since 1994. Iran, whose missiles and drones — many aimed at the American forces Jordan hosts — it has shot down over its territory in 2024 and throughout 2026, 18 missiles on September 9 alone. Domestically, a population majority-Palestinian in origin, an Islamist opposition, and an economy dependent on aid make the Gaza question existential in a way it is for no other state in this course.

Module 6 — Yemen

The Fragmented State at the Red Sea's Mouth



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Helen Lackner, *Yemen in Crisis*; Sana'a Center for Strategic Studies

6a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Rashad al-Alimi, chairman of the Presidential Leadership Council, 71 or 72 (born 1954) — in office since April 2022 (4.5 years); heads the internationally recognized government, seated in Aden
Rival authority	Abdul-Malik al-Houthi, leader of the Houthi movement, 46 or 47 (born 1979) — in control of Sanaa since September 2014 (12.0 years); rules the north, where most Yemenis live
System	Divided state at war since 2014: the recognized government in Aden, the Houthi administration in Sanaa
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	43.0 million (2026)
Land area	527,970 km² (203,850 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 99%, of whom about 65% are Sunni and 35% Zaydi Shia (estimates)
People	Arab, with Afro-Arab and South Asian minorities (estimates); median age 19; 42% urban
Minimum wage	Could not be confirmed: no national minimum is enforced across the divided country, and public salaries in the Houthi-held north have been paid only sporadically since 2016

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: North Yemen became a republic in 1962 after a coup against the imamate and a civil war in which Egypt and Saudi Arabia backed opposing sides; South Yemen was a British colony until 1967 and then the Arab world's only Marxist state. The two unified in 1990 under Ali Abdullah Saleh, who ruled for 33 years until the 2011 Arab Spring forced him out. The Houthi movement, a Zaydi Shia revivalist group from

the north, seized Sanaa in 2014; Saudi Arabia and the UAE intervened in 2015 and failed to dislodge them in a war that produced the world's worst humanitarian crisis. Since 2023 the Houthis have attacked Red Sea shipping in support of Gaza and Iran, while the anti-Houthi camp fractured between Saudi- and UAE-backed factions.

Current leadership: There were three centers of power until January 2026; now there are two. The Houthi movement under Abdul-Malik al-Houthi rules through a Supreme Political Council. The internationally recognized government's Presidential Leadership Council, backed by Saudi Arabia, holds the south and east. The third, the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council, seized Hadramawt and al-Mahra in the east in December 2025 and moved toward secession; after a Saudi-led strike on a UAE-linked arms shipment at Mukalla on December 30, Saudi-backed forces defeated it in January and pushed it and its Emirati patron out of Yemen.

Government structure: A collapsed state. The 1990 unification constitution nominally applies; in practice the Houthis run a theocratic-military administration in the north, and the recognized government depends on Saudi Arabia, which pays for much of it. A 2022 UN truce largely held between the Houthis and Saudi Arabia until July 13, 2026, when the Houthis fired missiles at the Saudi city of Abha after a strike on Sanaa airport's runway to stop an Iranian flight; the fronts inside Yemen have reopened too. In September a Houthi offensive down the Red Sea coast took the port of Mocha; on October 4-5 the government and the Saudi-led coalition launched a counteroffensive that the coalition says retook it, which the Houthis deny.

Economy and trade: A roughly $20 billion economy, one of the Arab world's poorest, shattered by a decade of war; GDP has fallen by more than half since 2014, and most of the population depends on humanitarian aid. Prewar exports were crude oil and LNG from the south and coffee; the recognized government's oil exports have been halted since Houthi drone strikes on its terminals in 2022, while the Houthis tax trade through the port of Hodeidah. Imports — food (Yemen imports 90% of its grain), fuel, and medicine — arrive through Hodeidah and Aden. The economy is split between a Houthi-controlled north with its own currency valuation and central bank, and a government-controlled south whose main financial backer, since the UAE's exit, is Saudi Arabia.

Closest partners: For the Houthis: Iran, which supplies missiles, drones, and training, and the wider 'axis' with Hezbollah and Iraqi militias, degraded by the 2024-26 wars but not out of the fight. For the recognized government: Saudi Arabia, its protector. Oman mediates between the Houthis and Riyadh.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Saudi Arabia, against which the Houthis declared a naval blockade on July 20, 2026, followed by strikes on tankers. Israel, which has struck the Houthis repeatedly since 2023 and killed their prime minister and much of his cabinet in August 2025. The United States, which struck them in 2024 and 2025 but called off planned strikes in September 2026, after which the Houthis pledged not to target American ships. And internally, the contest for the state: with the UAE's allies defeated, Yemen's war is again the Houthis against Saudi Arabia and the government it backs.

6b. The Red Sea Campaign

From November 2023 the Houthis attacked commercial shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden in declared solidarity with Gaza, sinking several vessels, seizing others, and forcing much of the world's container traffic to divert around Africa — adding two weeks and enormous cost to Asia-Europe trade and cutting Suez Canal revenue by more than half. US, British, and Israeli strikes degraded but did not stop the campaign, which the Houthis paused and resumed with each phase of the Gaza war. In the Iran war's first months they fired only at Israel; their attacks on ships resumed on July 22, 2026, now aimed at Saudi-linked vessels — seven struck in the Red Sea and one in the Gulf of Aden by October 1 — after they declared their blockade of the kingdom. The campaign has made a militia that controls no navy one of the greatest disruptions to global shipping in decades and given Yemen's northern rulers a strategic weight far beyond their country's size; in 2026 it turned the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia's route around a closed Hormuz, into a second front.

Module 7 — The African Shore

Sudan, Eritrea, Djibouti & Somalia



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*; Critical Threats Africa File

7a. Sudan

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan, chairman of the Sovereignty Council and army commander, 66 — in office since April 2019 (7.5 years); head of the military council from April 2019 and the Sovereignty Council from August 2019; took full power in an October 2021 coup
Rival authority	General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo (Hemedti), chairman of the Rapid Support Forces' rival Presidential Council, 50 to 53 (birth year reported as 1973, 1974, or 1975) — in office since August 2025 (1.1 years); sworn in at Nyala; recognized by no state
System	Military rule over a divided country at war since April 2023
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	53.3 million (2026)
Land area	1,765,048 km² (681,490 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 91% (Sunni), Christian 5%, traditional religions 3% (2010 estimates)
People	Sudanese Arab about 70%; Fur, Beja, Nuba, Fallata, and others (estimates); median age 20; 38% urban
Minimum wage	12,000 pounds a month, frozen while prices soared ($3.71 at the Bank of Khartoum's commercial rate of 3,232 pounds = $1, or $1.64 at the parallel-market rate of about 7,300, September 20, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Egypt and Britain ruled Sudan jointly from 1899 until independence in 1956. Africa's largest country until 2011 was governed by alternating military and civilian regimes and fought two civil wars with its

non-Arab south, which seceded as South Sudan in 2011. Omar al-Bashir ruled from 1989 to 2019, presided over the Darfur genocide, and was overthrown by a popular uprising. A transitional government was ended by a 2021 coup by the two generals who then turned on each other in April 2023: Burhan's army and Hemedti's Rapid Support Forces, the paramilitary descended from the Darfur militias. The war has produced famine.

Current leadership: General Abdel Fattah al-Burhan's Sudanese Armed Forces hold Khartoum (retaken in 2025, and the seat of government again since January 2026), the north, the east, and Port Sudan; his government appointed Kamil Idris as prime minister in May 2025. General Mohamed Hamdan Dagalo, known as Hemedti, commands the Rapid Support Forces, which hold Darfur and much of West and South Kordofan, and chairs the presidential council of their rival 'Government of Peace and Unity', proclaimed in April 2025. On September 22, 2026 the United States declared that neither side represents legitimate, constitutional government and withheld Burhan's visa to address the UN General Assembly.

Government structure: A collapsed state, de facto partitioned. Neither authority has a constitutional basis: the army rules by decree from Khartoum, the RSF through a parallel administration based in Nyala, in Darfur, with its own central bank and banknotes. The RSF's October 2025 capture of El Fasher, the army's last Darfur stronghold, was followed by mass killings that UN investigators say bear the hallmarks of genocide, and completed the west's separation. In 2026 the army lifted the siege of El Obeid and pushed west through North Kordofan, while the RSF and its allies advanced in Blue Nile, on the Ethiopian border.

Economy and trade: A prewar economy of roughly $35 billion that has collapsed by more than half since 2023. Gold is now the dominant export and the war's financial engine — the RSF controls mines in Darfur and exports through Chad and the UAE, while the army exports through Port Sudan. Prewar exports were gold, oil (transit fees from South Sudan), livestock, sesame, and gum arabic (Sudan supplies most of the world's). Imports of food, fuel, and arms flow through Port Sudan for the army and across the Chadian and Libyan borders for the RSF. The UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia are the main external economic actors; Russia has sought a Red Sea naval base at Port Sudan.

Closest partners: For the army: Egypt (its most important backer), Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Qatar, Eritrea, and Iran (for drones). For the RSF: the UAE, through arms flows via Chad, Libya, and other neighbors that Abu Dhabi denies but that have been extensively documented, plus commercial gold links through Dubai; Haftar's eastern Libya; and up to 2,000 Colombian mercenaries, by UN investigators' count. The Quad — the United States, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE — proposed a truce roadmap in September 2025; a US plan for a 90-day truce, put forward in June 2026, stalled when the army demanded a full RSF withdrawal from the cities it holds and the RSF refused.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The war itself is the dispute: it has displaced about 14 million people, left some 20 million in acute hunger, and killed a number no one has counted, put by various estimates at anywhere from tens of thousands to more than 200,000; it is described as the world's largest humanitarian crisis. It is also the sharpest proxy arena of the Saudi-UAE rivalry, since Riyadh and Cairo back the army and Abu Dhabi the RSF. Ethiopia, over the Nile dam and the border, and over persistent allegations that RSF operations in Blue Nile are supplied from Ethiopian territory. The civilian opposition, sidelined by both generals.

7b. Eritrea

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Isaias Afwerki, 80 — in office since May 1993 (33.4 years); led the provisional government from 1991; chosen by the National Assembly in 1993, never by popular vote
System	One-party state: no national elections, no constitution in force, no sitting legislature
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	3.68 million (2026)
Land area	101,000 km² (39,000 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 63% (mostly Eritrean Orthodox), Muslim about 37% (Sunni) (2010 estimates)
People	Tigrinya 55%, Tigre 30%, Saho 4%; Kunama, Rashaida, Bilen, Afar, and others (estimates); median age 21; 45% urban
Minimum wage	No national minimum wage

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: An Italian colony from 1890 and a British-administered territory after 1941, Eritrea was federated with Ethiopia in 1952 and annexed in 1962; the war of independence, begun in 1961, ended with victory in 1991 and formal independence in 1993. Isaias Afwerki, the liberation leader, has ruled ever since, under indefinite national service that has driven hundreds of thousands to flee. A 1998-2000 border war with Ethiopia killed some 80,000; a 2018 peace deal won Ethiopia's leader a Nobel Prize, and Eritrean troops then fought alongside Ethiopia in the 2020-22 Tigray war before the two fell out again.

Current leadership: There is no vice president, no cabinet with independent authority, and no designated successor.

Government structure: The 1997 constitution was never implemented; the National Assembly has not met since 2002; there is no independent judiciary, press, or civil society. Indefinite national service conscripts most adults for years or decades. Eritrea is routinely ranked among the world's most repressive states.

Economy and trade: A roughly $3 billion economy, one of the world's poorest and most closed, with no reliable statistics. Gold, copper, and zinc mining (the Bisha mine, majority-owned by a Chinese firm) are the main exports, with fish, livestock, and remittances from a large diaspora. Imports of food and fuel are state-controlled. Top trading partners: China, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. The economy is dominated by the ruling party's conglomerate and by indefinite national service that functions as forced labor. The ports of Massawa and Assab are underused; Ethiopia's desire for access to them is a source of regional tension.

Closest partners: Eritrea has partners rather than friends: Egypt and Saudi Arabia, in the anti-Ethiopian alignment over the Nile and the Red Sea; Sudan's army, whose leader visited Asmara in July 2026; the UAE, which used the port of Assab for the Yemen war; Russia and China, as sources of arms and mining investment; and, newly, the United States, which in September 2026 lifted the sanctions it had imposed on Eritrea's army and ruling party over the Tigray war.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Ethiopia, its former ruler and wartime ally, now again its principal adversary — Ethiopia's landlocked status and its leader's stated desire for Red Sea access (which could only mean Eritrean ports) have made a new war a live possibility, and in September 2026 Asmara accused Ethiopia's ruling party of sponsoring armed groups against it and coveting the port of Assab, though no fighting between the two states has been reported. Djibouti, over a border dispute. European governments and rights groups, over human rights and the outflow of refugees.

7c. Djibouti

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh, 78 — in office since May 1999 (27.4 years); won a sixth term with 97% of the vote on April 10, 2026
System	Presidential republic under one-party dominance
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	1.20 million (2026)
Land area	23,180 km² (8,950 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 94% (Sunni), Christian about 6% (estimates)
People	Somali, mainly Issa, about 60%; Afar about 35%; Arab, French, Ethiopian, and others about 5% (estimates); median age 26; 79% urban
Minimum wage	Could not be confirmed

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: French Somaliland from 1896, Djibouti became independent in 1977 and has been ruled by a single party since. Ismaïl Omar Guelleh succeeded his uncle in 1999 and has been re-elected in uncompetitive votes ever since. Its position at the Bab el-Mandeb strait, the Red Sea's southern entrance, is its entire economy: its port is landlocked Ethiopia's outlet to the sea.

Current leadership: President Ismaïl Omar Guelleh won his sixth term against a single challenger, after parliament voted in November 2025 to remove the age limit of 75 that would have barred him. He reappointed Prime Minister Abdoulkader Kamil Mohamed, in office since 2013, who runs the day-to-day government.

Government structure: The opposition is marginal. Djibouti's constitution has been repeatedly amended to extend Guelleh's eligibility. Succession, with no clear heir, is the central question.

Economy and trade: A roughly $5 billion economy that is essentially a port and a collection of foreign bases. Port and logistics services for Ethiopia — over 90% of whose trade transits Djibouti — provide the bulk of income, alongside base rents. Exports are re-exports and livestock; imports are food, fuel, and goods for Ethiopian transit. Top partners: Ethiopia, China (which built the port expansion and the Addis Ababa railway), France, and the UAE. Djibouti's debt to China is among the highest in Africa as a share of GDP.

Closest partners: Every power with a base there: the United States (Camp Lemonnier), France (its former colonial ruler, whose garrison there is its largest in Africa), China (its first overseas base, 2017), Japan, and Italy. Ethiopia, whose trade is Djibouti's economy. The UAE, though relations soured after Djibouti seized DP World's port concession in 2018.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Eritrea, over a border dispute at Ras Doumeira. Ethiopia's search for alternative sea access — through Somaliland's Berbera or Eritrea's Assab — which would undercut Djibouti's monopoly. China's growing leverage through debt. And the Houthis' war at the Red Sea's mouth, which threatens the shipping on which Djibouti's port depends.

7d. Somalia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud, 70 — in office since May 2022 (4.4 years); also president 2012–17; a 2026 constitution extended his term to May 2027, which the opposition rejects
System	Federal republic in form; the federal government controls only part of the territory
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	20.3 million (2026)
Land area	627,340 km² (242,220 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim nearly 100% (Sunni; Islam the state religion)
People	Somali about 85%; Bantu and other minorities about 15% (estimates); median age 17; 50% urban
Minimum wage	No national minimum wage

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Italian and British Somalilands united at independence in 1960. Siad Barre's dictatorship collapsed in 1991 into clan warfare and famine; the 1992-94 US intervention ended after the 'Black Hawk Down' battle. Somaliland declared independence in 1991 and has governed itself since. A federal government was re-established in 2012 but controls limited territory against al-Shabaab; African Union forces have fought it since 2007. Piracy off the coast peaked in 2011.

Current leadership: President Hassan Sheikh Mohamud has pushed to replace Somalia's clan-based indirect elections with direct universal suffrage. In March 2026 parliament adopted a new constitution that lengthened terms from four years to five, which the government says extends his mandate to May 2027; the opposition Somali Future Council and the leaders of Puntland and Jubaland reject the extension, armed clashes broke out in Mogadishu in June, and as of late September talks had produced no election deal and no date. Prime Minister Hamza Abdi Barre, appointed in June 2022, heads the government.

Government structure: The new constitution replaced the 2012 provisional text; until an election is held, the president and parliament remain those chosen in 2022 under the '4.5' clan power-sharing formula. Six federal member states have substantial autonomy — the sixth, Northeastern State, was created in 2025 — and several are in open dispute with Mogadishu: Puntland, Jubaland, and South-West State suspended relations, and federal forces then took South-West's capital, Baidoa, in March 2026. Al-Shabaab controls much of the rural south and center. An African Union force (AUSSOM) supports the government, its mandate running to the end of 2026.

Economy and trade: A roughly $12 billion economy dependent on livestock exports (camels, goats, and sheep to the Gulf, especially Saudi Arabia), remittances from a large diaspora that exceed exports, and international aid. Exports are led by livestock, then fish, charcoal, and sesame; imports by food, fuel, khat, and construction materials. Top trading partners: the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kenya, and Turkey. Somaliland runs a separate economy around the port of Berbera, developed by the UAE's DP World.

Closest partners: Turkey, which built its largest overseas base in Mogadishu, trains the army, and runs the port and airport — Somalia's closest partner; the United States, which conducts strikes on al-Shabaab and in 2026 reaffirmed Somalia's territorial integrity; Qatar and the UAE, competing for influence; Egypt, which has aligned with Somalia against Ethiopia; and the African Union and EU as funders.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Al-Shabaab, which by mid-2026 was judged stronger than at any point since 2022. Ethiopia, whose 2024 agreement with Somaliland for sea access in exchange for possible recognition Somalia treated as an act of aggression, drawing Egypt and Turkey into a Horn alignment against Addis Ababa; a declaration brokered in Ankara in December 2024 eased the dispute, and Ethiopia has not recognized Somaliland. Israel, which in December 2025 became the first state to recognize Somaliland. Internally, the federal-state disputes and the contested electoral transition.

Module 8 — The Alliance Map

The Gulf Cooperation Council, the Iran Axis at War, Israel & Outside Powers

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Chatham House Middle East and North Africa Programme; Gulf Research Center

8a. The Gulf Cooperation Council and Its Fracture

The GCC was founded in 1981 by the six Gulf monarchies against the threat of revolutionary Iran and has never functioned as a real alliance: it has no integrated command, and its members have blockaded each other (Qatar, 2017-21) and backed opposing sides in Yemen and Sudan. The Saudi-UAE rivalry that replaced the Saudi-Qatar one is more dangerous because both are heavily armed and both intervene abroad. In Yemen it ended in a Saudi victory — Saudi-backed forces drove the Emirates' allies from power in January 2026, and when the Houthis declared their blockade of the kingdom in July the UAE declared its full solidarity with Riyadh — but in Sudan the two remain on opposite sides, and in May 2026 the UAE walked out of the Saudi-led OPEC. What holds the GCC together is what founded it — Iran — and the 2026 war's demonstration of Iranian reach into every Gulf capital has revived that logic without healing the divisions.

8b. The Iran Axis at War

Iran's regional network — Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen, militias in Iraq, and the Assad government in Syria until December 2024 — was the region's other alliance system. The 2024-26 wars degraded every part of it: Hezbollah shattered, Assad gone, Iraqi militias exposed, the Houthis bombed, and Iran itself struck at home with its Supreme Leader killed. But 'degraded' is not 'destroyed', and in 2026 the network fought on: the Houthis went to war with Saudi Arabia again in July and pushed toward Bab el-Mandeb in September, Iraqi militias have struck American targets and, by US officials' account, Saudi Arabia's East-West pipeline, and Iran under Mojtaba Khamenei has fired hundreds of missiles and drones since July while holding the strait shut. Whether the axis is rebuilt, fragments into locally driven actors, or is traded away in a settlement — Tehran's offer of September 25 tied reopening Hormuz to an end of hostilities in Lebanon and Yemen — is the region's central open question.

8c. Israel and the Accords

The 2020 Abraham Accords brought the UAE and Bahrain into open partnership with Israel, and Saudi normalization appeared close in 2023. The Gaza war froze it, and the Lebanon and Iran wars of 2026 have made public Arab alignment with Israel politically toxic even where security cooperation continues quietly — as it does between Israel and the Gulf states against Iran. Jordan and Egypt maintain their older treaties under strain, and Israel's recognition of Somaliland in December 2025, condemned by Somalia and Egypt, opened a new quarrel on the Red Sea's African shore. The structural logic of normalization — shared fear of Iran, American encouragement, economic opportunity — has not changed, which is why it remains on the table despite being impossible for now.

8d. The Outside Powers

• **The United States** — the guarantor of every Gulf monarchy's security, with bases in all six, and the belligerent in the 2026 war that brought Iranian retaliation onto Gulf soil. It has fought the war on its own timetable — a ceasefire in April, a memorandum in June, renewed bombing in July, a blockade of Iran's ports since — and in September it rejected Iran's offer to reopen the strait and called off planned strikes on the Houthis, who then pledged to spare American ships while attacking Saudi ones: a demonstration of both its reach and the limits of what it will do for its partners.

• **China** — the largest oil buyer of nearly every producer in this course, the broker of the 2023 Saudi-Iran thaw, the holder of Djibouti's debt and its first overseas base, and increasingly a security actor by default as the US grows weary.

• **Turkey** — Qatar's military ally, Somalia's closest partner, a backer of Sudan's army, the patron of the new Syria, and since August 2026 Saudi Arabia's treaty ally alongside Pakistan; its reach extends across this region's Red Sea shore.

• **Russia** — a diminished actor after losing Syria, still seeking a naval base at Port Sudan, and Iran's supplier of drone components and intelligence through the 2026 war.

• **Egypt** — the anchor of the Saudi-aligned Arab bloc, the army's backer in Sudan, Somalia's ally against Ethiopia, and the state most damaged by the Houthi campaign through lost Suez revenue.

• **Pakistan** — the broker of the April ceasefire and the June memorandum, and Saudi Arabia's defense partner since 2025, a tie widened in August 2026 to include Turkey.

Module 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, CrisisWatch; Sana'a Center; Rift Valley Institute (Sudan)

9a. The Strait Iran Controls

The 2026 closure of Hormuz was the first time in the modern era that the strait was actually shut rather than merely threatened, and it changed every Gulf state's calculations. Oman's ports outside the strait, the UAE's pipeline to Fujairah, and Saudi Arabia's Red Sea outlet at Yanbu went from redundancies to strategic assets — and then to targets (Modules 2-4). Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain, with no alternative, and Iraq, with only the Kurdish pipeline through Turkey, learned that their economies are hostage to the strait. Iran now runs it as a gate, letting through ships it has authorized and attacking others, and has worked out with Oman a regime of lanes and charges that Saudi Arabia sought to amend and Bahrain refused to discuss; the United States blockades Iran's own ports. Whether the strait reopens on terms that leave Iran its gatekeeper, is forced open, or is bypassed for good is the question every Gulf state is planning around.

9b. The Red Sea

The Red Sea has become the war's second front (Module 6). Suez traffic has not recovered. The Houthi campaign's future depends on Gaza, on the Iran war, and on whether the Houthis' patrons can still resupply them; its persistence has already reshaped global shipping, damaged Egypt more than any Gulf state, and given a Yemeni militia leverage over trade between Asia and Europe.

9c. Sudan's Partition

Sudan is the war the region's powers are fighting through proxies, and its de facto partition — army east, RSF west — is hardening into the kind of division that becomes permanent (Module 7). The Quad has sat both Gulf patrons at one table since September 2025, but no truce has held: Burhan rejected the Quad's roadmap in March 2026. The danger is a Somalia-style fragmentation on the Red Sea's African shore, a Russian naval base at Port Sudan, and a famine already underway becoming a generation's catastrophe; the next marker is the UN Security Council's decision on Sudan's sanctions, which it rolled over on October 8 only until December 11, after an American push to extend the Darfur arms embargo to all of Sudan stalled.

9d. Yemen and the Saudi-Emirati Rivalry

The Saudi-led strike at Mukalla (Modules 2 and 6) crossed a line: one of the Gulf's two leading powers used force against the other's proxies inside a third country. The rivalry did not end; it moved. In Yemen the Emirates stood with Riyadh once the Houthis turned on the kingdom, but in Sudan the two still back opposite sides, and their competition runs on through the Horn's ports. The question is whether it stays a contest of proxies, money, and ports or spreads into a direct confrontation between the two states the Gulf Cooperation Council was built to unite.

9e. Normalization and the Palestinian Question

Saudi-Israeli normalization was the region's most anticipated realignment in 2023 and is now indefinitely frozen. The Gaza and Lebanon wars have made the Palestinian question, which the Abraham Accords tried to bypass, once again the precondition for any Arab-Israeli opening. Whether the regional order that emerges from the war includes Israel as a partner of the Gulf, or leaves the Accords confined, in the Gulf, to the UAE and Bahrain, will be settled by what happens in Gaza and the West Bank, not in Riyadh.

9f. The Last Word

The throughline of all nine modules: this is a region where formal alignments explain almost nothing and actual behavior explains everything. Six monarchies in one council have backed opposing sides in two wars; every Gulf monarchy hosts American forces while hedging with China; the war still under way was begun by Israel and the United States against the adversary every Gulf state fears most, and the Gulf states, every one of them struck in it, have stayed formally outside it. Two chokepoints give the region its global weight, and the 2020s have shown both can be closed or crippled — one by a state, one by a militia. This region is organized by the gap between what its states say and what they do, and reading that gap is the skill this course has tried to build.

Key Points

The Arabian Peninsula, Red Sea & Gulf

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Eritrea	Isaias Afwerki	President	80	May 1993	33.4
Jordan	Abdullah II	King	64	February 1999	27.7
Bahrain	Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa	King	76	March 1999	27.6
Djibouti	Ismaïl Omar Guelleh	President	78	May 1999	27.4
Qatar	Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani	Emir	46	June 2013	13.3
Sudan	Abdel Fattah al-Burhan	Chairman, Sovereignty Council	66	April 2019	7.5
Oman	Haitham bin Tariq	Sultan	70	January 2020	6.7
Yemen	Rashad al-Alimi	Chairman, Presidential Leadership Council	71–72	April 2022	4.5
UAE	Mohamed bin Zayed	President	65	May 2022	4.4
Somalia	Hassan Sheikh Mohamud	President	70	May 2022	4.4
Saudi Arabia	Mohammed bin Salman	Crown Prince and Prime Minister	41	September 2022	4.0
Kuwait	Mishal al-Ahmad al-Sabah	Emir	86	December 2023	2.8
Iraq	Ali al-Zaidi	Prime Minister	41	May 2026	0.4

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's current continuous tenure. Saudi Arabia's crown prince leads as prime minister and has been the de facto ruler since 2017; his father, King Salman, is head of state. Iraq is parliamentary: its prime minister leads and its president is ceremonial. In the other monarchies the ruler leads; Oman's sultan is his own prime minister, and elsewhere the prime minister serves under the ruler. Yemen and Sudan are divided; the table lists the authority that holds the country's UN seat, while the Houthis hold Yemen's north and the Rapid Support Forces Sudan's west. Hamad was emir from 1999 and king from 2002; Burhan's tenure counts from the military council he headed in April 2019; Isaias led the provisional government from 1991; Hassan Sheikh was also president in 2012–17. Alimi's exact birth date is unpublished, and Zaidi's birth year is also reported as 1983 and 1986.

The Takeaways

• Two chokepoints organize the region — Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb — and in 2026 Iran shut the first while the Houthis turned the approaches to the second into a war on Saudi shipping; as of October both remain contested.

• Formal alignments explain almost nothing here: the states that host American bases hedge with China, buy Russian and Chinese arms, mediate with Iran, fund opposite sides in Sudan, and discovered in 2026 that the guarantee they hedged is the one that went to war on their doorstep without asking them.

• Saudi Arabia is an absolutism personalized in one man — the clerics subordinated, the rivals jailed, a 90-year-old king's succession prepared — funding a transformation (Vision 2030, with four years to run: social change real, diversification partial) on oil that a strait can shut in; it rerouted up to 7 mb/d through Yanbu, absorbed Iranian strikes, and since July has fought the Houthis again, with a new defense pact with Pakistan and Turkey.

• The UAE is the small hedger who invests in every side — Fujairah's bypass, the sovereign funds in every American AI round and the five-gigawatt AI campus, Chinese arms, Russian money in Dubai,

Israeli technology, the Horn's ports, the RSF in Sudan — and in 2026 it lost its role in Yemen, quit OPEC, and took Iranian missiles on its soil.

• Qatar is the war's most exposed rich state: one of the world's three largest LNG exporters before the war, shut in behind Hormuz with no bypass and a sixth of its capacity knocked out for years, yet still the mediator carrying messages between Washington and Tehran and the host of the region's largest American base.

• Kuwait suspended the Gulf's only real parliament in 2024 and has since stripped tens of thousands of their citizenship; Bahrain hosts the Fifth Fleet over a Shia majority and has postponed its 2026 election; Oman, which shares the strait with Iran and has ports outside it, is the region's mediator and Iran's partner in managing Hormuz — and a target of both Iranian drones and American threats.

• Iraq's new prime minister governs without defense or interior ministers, between Iran's militias and American troops, with nearly all its oil normally shipped through the strait Iran now controls; Jordan is the monarchy that survives on aid and shoots down Iranian missiles aimed at the American forces it hosts.

• Yemen is a militia state with a chokepoint: the Houthis hold the north, outlasted the UAE's southern allies, saw their truce with Saudi Arabia collapse in July 2026, and took Mocha in September, while their Red Sea campaign since 2023 has halved Suez revenue and sent much of the world's shipping around the Cape.

• The African shore is the region's catastrophe and its gatekeepers: Sudan's war (about 14 million displaced, deaths uncounted but estimated from tens of thousands to more than 200,000, two governments that Washington calls illegitimate, famine, Gulf money on both sides), Eritrea's total state, Djibouti's bases for every navy, and Somalia's contested state, with Somaliland recognized by Israel.

• The region's 2026 lesson: transit is the currency, a strait's closure is a transfer from the trapped to the bypassed — Saudi Arabia's Yanbu, the UAE's Fujairah, Oman's Duqm — and the bypasses themselves become the next targets.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. Which three states can still export oil with the Strait of Hormuz shut?

A) Kuwait, Bahrain, and Iraq
B) Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman
C) Qatar, Kuwait, and Bahrain
D) Qatar, Iraq, and Bahrain, through Saudi pipelines

2. What became of the US-Iran ceasefire that took effect in April 2026?

A) It ended in a peace treaty signed in May
B) It has held since April
C) Iran surrendered in June
D) A June memorandum collapsed in July and the fighting resumed

3. Why does Freedom House now rate Kuwait Not Free?

A) The emir dissolved parliament and suspended elections.
B) It held a rigged election in 2025.
C) It joined the Abraham Accords and recognized Israel in 2026.
D) Its emir abdicated in favor of an unelected council of princes.

4. Which leader in this course has held power the longest?

A) King Abdullah II of Jordan
B) Ismaïl Omar Guelleh
C) Isaias Afwerki
D) King Hamad of Bahrain

5. What did Iranian missiles do to Qatar's Ras Laffan complex in March 2026?

A) Destroyed the entire complex
B) Missed it, though the strait's closure halted exports
C) Damaged only the oil terminal, which reopened within days
D) Knocked out a sixth of its capacity for years

6. What became of the UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council in Yemen?

A) It took Sanaa from the Houthis
B) It merged with the Houthis
C) Saudi-backed forces defeated it in January 2026
D) It now governs an independent south

7. Since July 2026, whom have the Houthis blockaded and attacked at sea?

A) American warships
B) Saudi Arabia
C) Egypt's Suez traffic
D) Iranian tankers

8. What is unusual about the Iraqi government confirmed in May 2026?

A) Nine ministries, defense and interior among them, went unfilled for months
B) Its prime minister is a Sunni Arab
C) It excludes the Kurdish parties
D) It was imposed by a United Nations resolution after the November election failed

9. Which Gulf state worked out a Hormuz shipping plan with Iran and drew threats from President Trump?

A) Qatar
B) Kuwait
C) Oman
D) The United Arab Emirates

10. What did the United States say about Sudan's rival authorities in September 2026?

A) It recognized the army's government.
B) It recognized the RSF's rival government as the legitimate one.
C) It endorsed Burhan's government and invited him to address the UN.
D) Neither represents legitimate, constitutional government.

11. What did Somalia's March 2026 constitution do to the president's term?

A) Ended it in May 2026
B) Extended it from four years to five, to May 2027
C) Made it a life term
D) Cut it to two years

12. What happened to Somaliland's international standing in December 2025?

A) Israel became the first state to recognize it
B) The US recognized it
C) Ethiopia recognized it
D) The African Union admitted it as its 56th member

13. Which states make up the Gulf Cooperation Council?

A) Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Oman
B) The six monarchies plus Iraq and Yemen
C) Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait
D) All twelve Arab League members in this course

14. Why does the Houthis' war on Saudi Arabia threaten the kingdom's answer to a closed Hormuz?

A) Its pipelines run through Yemen.
B) The Houthis control Hormuz too.
C) Its bypass exports leave through Yanbu, on the Red Sea.
D) Its only refinery is in Jazan, which the Houthis now occupy and run.

15. What does the course name as the skill for reading this region?

A) Tracking oil prices
B) Mapping its formal alliances and treaty commitments
C) Following the sectarian balance between Sunni and Shia
D) Reading the gap between words and deeds

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. B 2. D 3. A 4. C 5. D 6. C 7. B 8. A 9. C 10. D 11. B 12. A 13. A 14. C 15. D

Central Asia

Figures current as of October 2026

Central Asia — Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Afghanistan, and Mongolia: leaders, governments, economies, and the corridors between Russia, China, and the Taliban's emirate.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: The Landlocked Interior

Goal: Establish what unites five states with no coastline, and the questions that recur.

Covers the double-landlocked geography, Soviet borders, water and transit, and the Russia-China balance.

MODULE 2 — Uzbekistan

Goal: Profile the region's demographic center and its opening state.

Covers Mirziyoyev's reforms and term reset, the gold and gas economy, and the bid to route trade south.

MODULE 3 — Kyrgyzstan & Tajikistan (the Mountain States)

Goal: Profile the two upstream states that control the region's water.

Covers Kyrgyzstan's reversed democracy, Tajikistan's nearly 34-year rule, and their settled border war.

MODULE 4 — Afghanistan

Goal: Profile the Taliban emirate in its own module.

Covers the emirate's structure, its war with Pakistan, the Qosh Tepa canal, and its neighbors.

MODULE 5 — Mongolia

Goal: Profile the region's only democracy.

Covers the 'third neighbor' policy, dependence on China, and three prime ministers in a year.

MODULE 6 — The Alliance Map: Russia, China & the West

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's institutions.

Covers the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, Russia's alliance, China's corridors, and the West.

MODULE 7 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Questions

Goal: Close with the region's active disputes.

Covers water, Afghanistan's spillover, sanctions evasion, China's rise, and the Iran war's fallout.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

Every armed group, party, institution, and abbreviation the modules name is defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country each one belongs to or concerns, or how many of the five when it spans several; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Institutions, Alliances, and Routes

Country	Name	Who or what
All 5	SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation)	The China- and Russia-led security forum founded in 2001; Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are members and Mongolia and Afghanistan observers.
Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization)	The Russian-led military alliance of six former Soviet states.
Three of the 5	Eurasian Economic Union	The Russian-led customs union of five former Soviet states.
Three of the 5	C5 (the five former Soviet Central Asian states); C5+1	The United States' meeting format with the five former Soviet Central Asian states.
Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan	Organization of Turkic States	The Turkish-centered group of Turkic-speaking states.
All 5	Belt and Road Initiative	China's program of loans and infrastructure abroad, announced in Kazakhstan in 2013.
Region-wide	Middle Corridor	The rail-and-ferry freight route from China across Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Turkey to Europe, bypassing Russia.
Region-wide	Global Gateway	The European Union's infrastructure-investment program, its answer to the Belt and Road.
Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan	China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway	The line from Xinjiang through Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan.
Uzbekistan, Afghanistan	Trans-Afghan railway	The planned line from Uzbekistan through Afghanistan to Pakistan's ports.
Mongolia	Power of Siberia 2	The planned gas pipeline from Russia to China across Mongolia; Russia's gas company signed a binding memorandum in September 2025.
All 5	WTO (World Trade Organization)	The global trade body; four of the five are members.
Kyrgyzstan	Anti-circumvention tool	The EU's power to ban exports to a country that lets sanctioned goods reach Russia.
All 5	Freedom House	US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.
Region-wide	Condominium	Joint rule of a territory by two powers; here, the shared dominance of Russia and China over the region.
Afghanistan	International Criminal Court	The court in The Hague that tries individuals for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Governments, Parties, and Armed Groups

Country	Name	Who or what
Afghanistan	Mujahideen; al-Qaeda	The Islamist guerrillas who fought the Soviet occupation of 1979-89, and the terrorist network that the Taliban sheltered before 2001.
Afghanistan	Taliban; Islamic Emirate	The Islamist movement that ruled Afghanistan in 1996-2001 and again since August 2021, and the name of its state.
Afghanistan	TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Pakistani Taliban)	The militant group fighting Pakistan's government from bases in Afghanistan.
Afghanistan, Tajikistan	Islamic State's Khorasan branch	The Islamic State's affiliate in Afghanistan and Central Asia.
Afghanistan, Tajikistan	Panjshir resistance	The anti-Taliban armed opposition based in Afghanistan's Panjshir valley.
Tajikistan	Islamic Renaissance Party	Tajikistan's Islamist opposition party.
Tajikistan	Supreme Soviet	The Soviet-era parliament; its chairman was Tajikistan's head of state until the presidency was restored in 1994.
Tajikistan	'Leader of the Nation'	The constitutional title Rahmon took in 2016, with lifelong immunity for himself and his family.
Kyrgyzstan	GKNB (State Committee for National Security)	Kyrgyzstan's security service.
Kyrgyzstan	Kloop; Temirov Live	Independent investigative news outlets.
Mongolia	Mongolian People's Party; Democratic Party	Mongolia's two main parties.
Mongolia	HUN ('Human') Party; National Coalition	The smaller parties in the governing coalition formed in April 2026.
Mongolia	State Great Khural	Mongolia's parliament.

Places, Projects, and Terms

Country	Name	Who or what
Four of the 5	Amu Darya; Syr Darya	Central Asia's two great rivers, which rise in the mountains of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan and once fed the Aral Sea.
Uzbekistan	Aral Sea	The inland sea, once the world's fourth-largest lake, that Soviet irrigation drained to a fraction of its size.
Three of the 5	Fergana Valley	The fertile valley divided among Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, with enclaves inside each other's borders.
Afghanistan	Qosh Tepa canal	The canal Afghanistan is digging to draw water from the Amu Darya for its northern plains.
Tajikistan	Rogun dam	The hydroelectric dam on the Vakhsh River.
Tajikistan	Gorno-Badakhshan; Pamiris	Tajikistan's eastern mountain region and its Ismaili minority.
Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	Kant air base; 201st Military Base	Russia's bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.
Kyrgyzstan	Kumtor	Kyrgyzstan's largest gold mine, nationalized from a Canadian company in 2022.
Tajikistan	Talco	Tajikistan's state-owned aluminum smelter.
Mongolia	Oyu Tolgoi; Rio Tinto	Mongolia's giant copper mine and the Anglo-Australian company that operates it.
Afghanistan	Kandahar	Afghanistan's southern city, the Taliban's birthplace and their leader's seat.
Afghanistan	Bagram	The former US air base north of Kabul.

Country	Name	Who or what
Tajikistan	Crocus City Hall attack	The March 2024 Islamic State attack on a concert hall near Moscow, carried out by Tajik gunmen, which killed more than 140 people.
Kyrgyzstan	'Foreign representatives' law	Kyrgyzstan's 2024 law, modeled on Russia's foreign-agent law, that brands foreign-funded groups.
Afghanistan	'Vice and virtue' law	The Taliban's 2024 law codifying restrictions on women's dress, speech, and movement.
Mongolia	'Third neighbor' policy	Mongolia's strategy of ties with the US, Japan, South Korea, Europe, and others to balance Russia and China.
Four of the 5	Sunni; Shia; Ismaili	Islam's two main branches, and the branch of Shia Islam followed in Tajikistan's Pamirs.
All 5	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year.

Module 1 — Foundations

The Landlocked Interior



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*; Eurasianet (ongoing)

1a. Five States With No Coastline

This course is organized around the absence of a sea. Uzbekistan is one of just two doubly-landlocked countries on earth — every neighbor is itself landlocked — and Afghanistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Mongolia are all cut off from the ocean by Russia, China, Iran, or Pakistan. That geography makes transit the region's currency: every export must cross a neighbor, every pipeline and railway is a diplomatic act, and the two powers that surround the region, Russia and China, have historically decided who trades with whom. Central Asia's two Caspian-shore states, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, appear here only as neighbors; the subject is the interior, from the Fergana Valley to the Mongolian steppe.

1b. Soviet Borders and Their Consequences

Three of the five states were Soviet republics whose borders were drawn by Moscow in the 1920s to divide rather than unite — Tajik-speaking Samarkand went to Uzbekistan, Uzbek-populated valleys to Kyrgyzstan, and the Fergana Valley was split among three republics with enclaves inside each other. The result at independence in 1991 was a set of borders that ran through communities, water systems, and roads, and produced the region's deadliest post-Soviet conflicts: Tajikistan's civil war, the Osh violence of 2010, and the Kyrgyz-Tajik border wars of 2021-22. Mongolia, a Soviet satellite rather than a republic, escaped this legacy; Afghanistan was never Soviet and has borders drawn by British and Russian imperial agreement.

1c. Water as the Other Currency

The region's two great rivers, the Amu Darya and Syr Darya, rise in the mountains of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and flow through the deserts of Uzbekistan toward what remains of the Aral Sea. Soviet planners built a system in which the upstream states released water for downstream cotton in summer and received downstream energy in winter; that system collapsed in 1991, and water has been a source of dispute ever since. Tajikistan's Rogun dam, Uzbekistan's dependence on the flow, and now Afghanistan's Qosh Tepa canal, which will divert a large share of the Amu Darya before it reaches Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, make water the region's most likely cause of future conflict.

1d. The Russia-China Condominium

Russia has been the region's security provider since the 19th century — it keeps bases in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and leads the CSTO alliance — while China has become its economic patron since the 2000s, its largest trading partner, creditor, and infrastructure builder through the Belt and Road. The two have managed this division of labor through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, whose 2026 summit met in Bishkek on August 31 and September 1. But the Ukraine war has weakened Russia's capacity, the 2026 Iran war has disrupted the southern routes, and every state in this course is now recalculating how much weight to put on each patron — and whether a third option, through Turkey, the Gulf, the West, or the south, exists.

1e. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office (and, in Afghanistan, the prime minister's; in Mongolia, where the prime minister leads the government, the president's), the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religion with its share, the main ethnic groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026 and land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or, where there is none, from published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. Four of the five states are rated Not Free, including two of the world's most repressive (Tajikistan, Afghanistan); Mongolia, rated Free, is the region's only democracy. The Who's Who before this module defines every group, institution, and abbreviation the profiles name, and the Key Points page ranks the five leaders by time in office.

Module 2 — Uzbekistan

The Demographic Center and the Opening State



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Central Asia Roundup, New Lines Institute (monthly); Carnegie Endowment Central Asia analysis

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, 69 — in office since December 2016 (9.8 years); acting president from September 2016; re-elected in 2023 to a seven-year term under a constitution that reset his term count, eligible to 2037
System	Presidential republic under the 2023 constitution; no opposition party registered
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	37.7 million (2026)
Land area	440,650 km² (170,140 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim, overwhelmingly Sunni: 88% on a US government estimate, 96% on the government's own (no census data)
People	Uzbek 89%, Tajik 3%, Karakalpak 2%, Kazakh 2%, Russian 1.5% (2026 census, preliminary); median age 28; 51% urban
Minimum wage	1,360,000 soums a month since September 2026 ($115 at the central bank's 11,791 soums = $1, October 7, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The oasis cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva were the heart of the Silk Road and of Timur's 14th-century empire, later ruled by three khanates that Russia conquered in the 1860s-70s. Soviet

planners drew Uzbekistan's borders in 1924 and turned it into a cotton monoculture that drained the Aral Sea. Islam Karimov, the last Soviet party boss, ruled from independence in 1991 until his death in 2016 as one of the world's most repressive leaders, closing borders, crushing Islamist and secular opposition alike, and presiding over the 2005 Andijan massacre, in which troops killed hundreds of protesters. His successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev opened the country dramatically — freeing political prisoners, ending forced cotton labor, reconciling with neighbors, and welcoming investment — while keeping the political system closed.

Current leadership: President Shavkat Mirziyoyev succeeded Islam Karimov after serving as his prime minister for 13 years. A 2023 constitutional referendum extended presidential terms to seven years and reset his count. Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov, in office since 2016, manages the government. Mirziyoyev's daughter Saida has headed the presidential administration since June 2025 and is widely discussed as a potential successor.

Government structure: The 2023 constitution concentrates power in a presidency that appoints the government and dominates a two-chamber parliament with no genuine opposition. Mirziyoyev's reforms opened the economy, the borders, and civil space relative to Karimov's era — political prisoners were freed, forced labor ended, and the media loosened — but elections are not competitive. Uzbekistan belongs to the Organization of Turkic States and holds observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union.

Economy and trade: A roughly $145 billion economy in 2025, when it grew 7.7% — Central Asia's second-largest after Kazakhstan's. Exports are led by gold (Uzbekistan is a top-ten producer and the state sells it directly), natural gas, copper, cotton and textiles, and fruit; imports by machinery, vehicles, chemicals, and metals. Top trading partners: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and South Korea. Remittances, mostly from Russia, reached a record $18.9 billion in 2025, about 13% of GDP. Uzbekistan's WTO accession talks are in their final stage after it missed a March 2026 target, and its push to route trade south through Afghanistan to Pakistan reflects its effort to reduce dependence on Russian and Chinese routes.

Closest partners: Uzbekistan's foreign policy is deliberately balanced. Russia, as the destination for millions of migrant workers and a security partner (though Uzbekistan left the CSTO in 2012 and has not rejoined). China, as the largest trading partner and investor. Turkey, through the Turkic states organization. The Gulf states and South Korea as investors; Mirziyoyev made a state visit to Seoul in September 2026 for the first Central Asia–South Korea summit. Kazakhstan, its regional co-leader, and increasingly all four Central Asian neighbors, with which Mirziyoyev has resolved every border dispute Karimov left frozen. The US and EU, courted through the C5+1 format — the five former Soviet Central Asian presidents met President Trump at the White House in November 2025, when minerals deals including Uzbek rare earths were announced, and Secretary of State Rubio was reported to be expected in Samarkand in mid-October 2026 for a C5+1 ministerial meeting, with a delegation of more than 100 American companies — and through the WTO bid.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Uzbekistan has no active adversaries — Mirziyoyev's signature achievement is having turned Karimov's hostile neighbors into partners. Its structural disputes are over water with upstream Tajikistan (Rogun dam) and Kyrgyzstan, and now with Afghanistan over the Qosh Tepa canal, which threatens the Amu Darya flow that Uzbek agriculture depends on. It engages the Taliban pragmatically — trade, electricity exports, and a planned railway through Afghanistan to Pakistan, still at the feasibility-study stage — without recognition. The EU's April 2026 sanctions on two Uzbek cotton-pulp makers for supplying Russian gunpowder plants showed the price of its Russian trade. Domestically, the question is whether the economic opening will ever be matched by a political one.

2b. Why Uzbekistan Is the Region's Pivot

Uzbekistan has 39 million people by its first census since 1989, taken in early 2026 — more than Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Mongolia combined, and more than any other former Soviet Central Asian state — and borders all four other former Soviet Central Asian republics plus Afghanistan, which makes it the only state through which every regional road runs. Under Karimov that centrality was wasted on isolation; under Mirziyoyev it has become the basis of a regional leadership claim, expressed through border settlements, joint summits with Kazakhstan, and a push to open a southern route through Afghanistan to Pakistani ports that would give the region its first outlet not controlled by Russia, China, or Iran. With Pakistan and the Taliban at war, that railway has no near-term path to the sea. Whether it materializes is the single biggest variable in Uzbekistan's — and the region's — economic future.

Module 3 — Kyrgyzstan & Tajikistan

The Mountain States That Control the Water



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, Central Asia reports; Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty's Kyrgyz and Tajik services

3a. Kyrgyzstan

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Sadyr Japarov, 57 — in office since January 2021 (5.7 years); a candidate in the presidential election of January 27, 2027
System	Presidential republic under the 2021 constitution
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	7.40 million (2026)
Land area	191,800 km² (74,050 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 90%, Christian about 7% (US government estimates)
People	Kyrgyz 78%, Uzbek 14%, Russian 4%, Dungan 1% (2022 census); median age 26; 39% urban
Minimum wage	3,280 soms a month since January 2026 ($38 at the National Bank's 87.45 soms = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Nomadic Kyrgyz tribes came under Russian rule in the 1860s, and the Soviet republic was among the union's poorest and most remote. At independence in 1991 Kyrgyzstan was briefly Central Asia's 'island of democracy,' but its politics became the region's most turbulent: three presidents were overthrown by uprisings in 2005, 2010, and 2020, and ethnic violence between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh killed hundreds in 2010. A 2010 constitution created the region's only parliamentary system; Sadyr Japarov

reversed it in 2021, concentrating power in a presidency he has used to jail critics, seize assets, and close independent media. Border wars with Tajikistan in 2021 and 2022 killed over a hundred before a 2025 settlement.

Current leadership: President Sadyr Japarov is a nationalist populist who was freed from prison during the October 2020 uprising and won the presidency three months later. In February 2026 he broke with his longtime ally Kamchybek Tashiev, dismissing him as head of the GKNB security service after 75 public figures signed a letter calling for an early presidential election; in July a court convicted Tashiev, the former speaker Nurlanbek Turgunbek uulu, and six others of plotting to seize power, and in September an appeal court changed the charge to interfering with voting rights and left them on probation. A February 2026 Constitutional Court ruling counted Japarov's current term as his first under the 2021 constitution. Adylbek Kasymaliev has chaired the Cabinet of Ministers since December 2024.

Government structure: The 2021 constitution that Japarov pushed through restored the strong presidency that had produced two earlier uprisings. The 90-seat parliament, elected in a November 2025 snap vote, is compliant. Since 2022 the government has jailed opposition politicians and journalists, closed independent outlets — in 2025 courts declared Kloop and Temirov Live 'extremist' — and passed a Russian-style 'foreign representatives' law, the sharpest democratic reversal in the region. Kyrgyzstan is a member of the CSTO and the Eurasian Economic Union and hosts a Russian air base.

Economy and trade: A roughly $22 billion economy (2025), one of the region's poorest but its fastest-growing — up 11% in 2025 and again in the first eight months of 2026 — dependent on gold (the Kumtor mine provides a large share of exports), remittances from workers in Russia (historically over a quarter of GDP), and re-export trade of Chinese goods to Russia and Kazakhstan. Exports are led by gold, then agricultural products and re-exports; imports by fuel, machinery, and Chinese consumer goods. Top trading partners: China, Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Since 2022 Kyrgyzstan has become a major channel for sanctioned goods reaching Russia, drawing EU, UK, and US sanctions; in May 2026 the government ordered 50 companies to cease operating over sanctions risks.

Closest partners: Russia, as security guarantor, host to a million Kyrgyz migrant workers, and the destination for the re-export trade that has boomed since 2022. China, as the largest trading partner, creditor, and builder of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, launched in December 2024, whose first tunnel was holed through in September 2026. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan as neighbors, and Tajikistan since the 2025 border treaty. The SCO, whose 2026 summit Kyrgyzstan hosted in Bishkek before handing the chair to Pakistan.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The EU and US, which have pressed Kyrgyzstan over its role as a channel for sanctioned goods reaching Russia: the US and UK have sanctioned Kyrgyz banks, and in April 2026 the EU used its anti-circumvention tool against a whole country for the first time, banning exports of machine tools and radio equipment to Kyrgyzstan. Tajikistan, historically, over the Fergana Valley border — settled by a 2025 treaty, with the first border pillars installed in July 2026. Internally, the concentration of power in Japarov alone since Tashiev's fall, and the question of whether the country that overthrew three presidents will tolerate a fourth who does not leave.

3b. Tajikistan

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Emomali Rahmon, 74 — head of state since November 1992 (33.9 years); president since November 1994; holds the title Leader of the Nation, with lifelong immunity
System	Presidential republic in form, hereditary personalist rule in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	11.0 million (2026)
Land area	138,790 km² (53,590 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim over 90%, mostly Sunni, with Ismaili Shia in Gorno-Badakhshan (estimates)
People	Tajik 86%, Uzbek 11%, Turkmen 2% (2020 census); median age 23; 29% urban
Minimum wage	1,000 somoni a month since September 2025 (about $108 at the National Bank's rate of about 9.3 somoni = $1, July 2026); a reported rise to 1,300 from September 2026 could not be confirmed

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Persian-speaking Tajiks were the settled population of the Silk Road cities, but Soviet borders in 1924 left Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan and gave Tajikistan the mountains. Independence in 1991 was followed by former Soviet Central Asia's only full civil war (1992-97), between a Moscow-backed government and an Islamist-democratic opposition, which killed up to 100,000 and brought Emomali Rahmon to power. Tajikistan shares a 1,357-kilometer border with Afghanistan that has defined its security since 1991.

Current leadership: President Emomali Rahmon, who turned 74 on October 5, 2026, is the longest-serving leader in the former Soviet Union. His son Rustam Emomali, speaker of the upper house and mayor of Dushanbe, is the designated successor in all but name. Prime Minister Kokhir Rasulzoda has held a largely administrative post since 2013.

Government structure: The Islamic Renaissance Party, legalized by the 1997 peace accord, was banned as extremist in 2015, its leaders jailed or exiled; independent media and civil society have been eliminated; and the Pamiri minority of the Gorno-Badakhshan region was crushed in a 2022 crackdown. Tajikistan is a member of the CSTO and hosts Russia's 201st Military Base, Moscow's largest abroad.

Economy and trade: A roughly $19 billion economy (2025), the poorest in the former Soviet Union, which grew 8.4% in 2025 and depends on migrants' remittances more than any country on earth: about $9.2 billion in 2025, roughly half of GDP. Its other pillars are aluminum from the state-owned Talco smelter, cotton, and hydroelectricity from the Rogun dam, designed to be the world's tallest at 335 meters, which had risen about 190 meters by August 2026 with two of its six turbines running. Exports are led by aluminum, gold and other metals, cotton, and electricity; imports by fuel, machinery, food, and Chinese goods. Top trading partners: China (also its largest creditor, and since 2025 ahead of Russia), Russia, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan.

Closest partners: Russia, as security guarantor and destination for the migrant workers whose remittances sustain the economy, though Moscow's tightening of migrant rules since the 2024 Crocus City Hall attack — language tests for migrants' children and a mandatory tracking app, with work entries from the region down 15% in the first half of 2026 — has strained the relationship. China, as the largest creditor and investor, with a security post on the Afghan border. Uzbekistan, with which relations have transformed since 2016; Rahmon made a state visit to Uzbekistan in March 2026. Iran, as a Persian-speaking cultural partner, to which Tajikistan sent the region's largest aid convoy, 3,610 tons, in March 2026.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Afghanistan, whose Taliban government Rahmon long refused to engage, sheltering Panjshir resistance figures and treating the border as a front line; since 2025 Dushanbe has moved to a guarded 'cold cooperation' — border talks and a Tajik security delegation in Kabul in November 2025 — without recognition, even as attacks from Afghan territory killed five Chinese workers in Tajikistan in late November 2025. The Islamic State's Khorasan branch, which recruits Tajiks and carried out the 2024 Moscow attack. Kyrgyzstan, until the 2025 border treaty. Domestically, the eventual succession from father to son in a state with no institutions independent of the family.

3c. Why These Two Are Profiled Together

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan share the mountains where the region's water originates, the poverty that makes both dependent on remittances from Russia, the Russian bases that make both Moscow's closest security clients in the region, and the 1,000-kilometer border that was the site of the deadliest fighting between former Soviet states here until its 2025 settlement. They differ in trajectory: Kyrgyzstan is a former democracy sliding into strongman rule, Tajikistan a dictatorship that never had one. Kyrgyzstan is the region's main channel for sanctioned goods reaching Russia, and both depend on remittances from Russia — Tajikistan's set a record in 2025 — even as Russia tightens its migrant rules, so both face the question of what happens if the Russian labor market that feeds them closes.

Module 4 — Afghanistan

The Taliban Emirate



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Carter Malkasian, *The American War in Afghanistan*; Afghanistan Analysts Network (ongoing)

4a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, 58 (Taliban sources give October 1967; other estimates about 1960) — in power since August 2021 (5.1 years); Taliban leader since May 2016; rules by decree from Kandahar
Prime Minister	Prime Minister Mohammad Hasan Akhund, 67 to 81 (UN listings estimate 1945-50 or 1955-58) — in office since September 2021 (5.1 years); the interim label dropped in August 2025
System	Islamic Emirate: rule by the Supreme Leader's decree, with no constitution, elections, or legislature
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	45.0 million (2026)
Land area	652,230 km² (251,830 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 99.7%: Sunni about 85-90%, Shia about 10-15% (estimates)
People	Pashtun about 42%, Tajik 27%, Hazara 9%, Uzbek 9%, Turkmen 3%, Baloch 2% (estimates; there has been no full census since 1979); median age 18; 28% urban
Minimum wage	Could not be confirmed: the labor code ties pay to a public-sector minimum, and no current figure could be found

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A crossroads of empires that none could hold — the 'graveyard of empires' — Afghanistan was a buffer between British India and Russian Central Asia in the 19th century, a monarchy until 1973, and a Soviet client after a 1978 coup. The Soviet invasion of 1979 triggered a decade of war and US-backed jihad; the Soviets left in 1989, the communist government fell in 1992, and civil war among the mujahideen produced the Taliban, who took Kabul in 1996 and hosted al-Qaeda. The US invasion after September 11 toppled them in weeks, but a 20-year war and $2 trillion could not build a state that survived the American withdrawal: the Taliban retook Kabul in August 2021 as the republic collapsed, and have since ruled as an emirate, while suppressing the opium trade and an Islamic State insurgency.

Current leadership: Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada, a religious scholar, is almost never seen or photographed; he led Eid prayers in Kandahar in March 2026, one of a handful of known appearances. His decrees are final on most questions and have overridden more pragmatic ministers in Kabul, especially on women's rights, though a nationwide internet shutdown he ordered in September 2025 was reversed within two days after senior ministers intervened. In July 2025 the International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest over the persecution of women and girls. Mohammad Hasan Akhund, a founding Taliban figure, is prime minister; Sirajuddin Haqqani, the interior minister, and Mullah Yaqoob, the defense minister and son of the Taliban's founder, lead the Kabul-based faction.

Government structure: The 2004 republican constitution was discarded and governance proceeds by the Supreme Leader's decrees — at least 470 since 2021, 79 of them aimed at women and girls, by the UN's count — interpreted through a strict reading of Islamic law. Girls are barred from school beyond sixth grade, women from universities, most work, and public spaces; a 2024 'vice and virtue' law codified these rules, and a January 2026 criminal procedure code permits husbands to beat their wives short of broken bones or open wounds. The emirate has restored order and suppressed corruption relative to the republic. Russia recognized it in July 2025 and remains the only state to have done so; China, the Central Asian states, Iran, India (which upgraded its Kabul mission to an embassy in October 2025), the Gulf states, and Turkey engage it without recognition.

Economy and trade: A roughly $18 billion economy (2024) that contracted by a quarter after the 2021 takeover, cut off from the international financial system with billions in central bank reserves frozen abroad; it grew an estimated 4.8% in 2025, but income per person fell 5.6% as returnees swelled the population by about 11% — more than 3.5 million Afghans came back between January 2025 and May 2026, by the UN migration agency's count, most of them forced out of Iran and Pakistan. Exports are led by coal, dried fruit and nuts, cotton, and carpets — coal exports, which went mostly to Pakistan, fell almost to zero after the border closed — and imports of food, fuel, and goods now come mainly through Central Asia and Iran. The Taliban's 2022 opium ban eliminated a crop that had been the country's largest export, at enormous cost to farmers. The Qosh Tepa canal — diverting the Amu Darya to irrigate the north, with more than 200 of its planned 285 kilometers dug by March 2026 — is the emirate's signature project and the region's most contentious water issue.

Closest partners: China, which has secured mining and oil concessions and accepted a Taliban ambassador. Russia, the first and so far only state to recognize the emirate. Qatar, which hosted the Taliban's political office and mediates with the West. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which trade, export electricity, and plan railways through the country; with the Pakistan border shut, Central Asia supplied nearly half of Afghanistan's imports by mid-2026. Iran, ambivalently, sharing a border and water disputes, and still the source of 46% of imports in June 2026 despite its own war. India, a new partner since 2025.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Pakistan, once the Taliban's patron and now their enemy in open war: after border fighting in October 2025 and a Doha ceasefire that talks in Istanbul failed to turn into a lasting deal, Pakistan's defense minister declared 'open war' in February 2026 and Pakistan struck Kabul,

Kandahar, and Paktia — a March strike on a Kabul drug-treatment center killed 143 by the UN's count — and China-mediated talks in April produced no settlement. The UN counted 499 Afghan civilians killed from October 2025 to June 2026, and the border has been closed to trade since October 2025. At the core is Pakistan's demand that the Taliban act against the Pakistani Taliban (TTP), which they will not do. The Islamic State's Khorasan branch, which bombs Taliban targets and Shia minorities and plans attacks abroad. The West, over women's rights, terrorism, and the frozen central bank reserves — and President Trump's September 2025 demand for the return of Bagram air base. Uzbekistan and downstream states, over the Qosh Tepa canal. Internally, the Kandahar-Kabul split between the Supreme Leader's absolutists and ministers who want international engagement.

4b. Creeping Normalization

No state recognized the Taliban for nearly four years after the 2021 takeover; then Russia did, while nearly every other neighbor engages the emirate without recognition. The exception is Pakistan, the Taliban's former patron, now at war with them. The logic of engagement is practical: the emirate is not going anywhere, it has suppressed the opium trade and much of the terrorism the neighbors feared, and Afghanistan sits on the routes — Uzbekistan to Pakistan, Turkmenistan to India — that the region needs. The cost is that normalization proceeds on the Taliban's terms, with women's exclusion untouched and the Kandahar leadership unmoved, even after the International Criminal Court's warrants for the Supreme Leader and his chief justice. The emirate has proved that a state can be a pariah on rights and a partner on trade at the same time.

Module 5 — Mongolia

The Region's Only Democracy



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Morris Rossabi, *Modern Mongolia: From Khans to Commissars to Capitalists*

5a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Nyam-Osoryn Uchral, 39 — in office since March 2026 (0.5 years); Mongolian People's Party; heads a coalition with the HUN Party and the National Coalition
Head of state	President Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh, 58 — in office since June 2021 (5.3 years); directly elected; his single six-year term ends in 2027
System	Semi-presidential parliamentary democracy
Freedom House	Free
Population	3.56 million (2026)
Land area	1,558,500 km² (601,740 sq mi)
Religion	Buddhist 52%, no religion 41%, Muslim 3%, shamanist 2.5% (2020 census, ages 15 and over)
People	Mongol 96%, mostly Khalkh; Kazakh 4% (2020 census); median age 28; 70% urban
Minimum wage	792,000 tugriks a month in 2026 ($220 at about 3,596 tugriks = $1, October 7, 2026), rising to 1,000,000 in January 2027

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan was the largest contiguous empire in history; after its fragmentation, Mongolia fell under Manchu Qing rule from 1691 until the Qing collapse in 1911. Soviet-backed revolutionaries established the world's second communist state in 1924, and Mongolia was a Soviet satellite for 66 years, with Stalinist purges that destroyed Buddhist monasteries and killed tens of

thousands. A peaceful 1990 revolution brought multiparty democracy, and Mongolia has held free elections ever since. A mining boom in the 2010s and recurring corruption scandals have defined recent politics.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Nyam-Osoryn Uchral is the country's third prime minister in a year. His predecessor, Gombojavyn Zandanshatar, had replaced Luvsannamsrain Oyun-Erdene — who lost a confidence vote in June 2025 after weeks of protests over his family's displays of wealth — and survived a parliamentary vote to dismiss him in October 2025 only because the president vetoed it and the Constitutional Court struck it down, before resigning in March 2026. Uchral was a compromise choice among his party's factions. President Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh is a former prime minister from the same party.

Government structure: The 1992 constitution provides for a directly elected president with limited but real powers (veto, foreign policy role, single term since 2019 amendments) and a prime minister answerable to the 126-seat State Great Khural, expanded from 76 seats in 2024. Elections are free and competitive and power has alternated between the two main parties; the crisis of 2025-26 strained the system but kept it within its rules.

Economy and trade: A roughly $23 billion economy, dependent on mining — coal, copper (the Oyu Tolgoi mine, one of the world's largest, operated by Rio Tinto, whose underground expansion doubled copper export earnings in the first half of 2026), gold, and rare earths — and on China, which bought 89% of its exports in 2025. Exports are led by coal, copper concentrate, gold, and cashmere; imports by fuel (more than 94% of its petroleum from Russia), machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China by an overwhelming margin, Russia, Japan, South Korea, and the US. The economy grew about 7% in 2025, though inflation reached 12% by mid-2026.

Closest partners: The 'third neighbor' policy: the United States (a strategic partnership), Japan, South Korea, the EU, India, Turkey, and Australia, cultivated to balance dependence on Russia and China; South Korea's president made the first state visit by a Korean leader in 15 years in July 2026, and Uchral's first official trip abroad was to Japan in September. Russia, its fuel supplier and historical patron, and China, its overwhelming trading partner — both managed rather than embraced. Mongolia is an SCO observer, not a member, and has declined to join Russian-led blocs, though an interim trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union took effect in July 2026.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Mongolia has no adversaries, and its disputes are structural: dependence on China for its exports and on Russia for its petroleum, which limits how far the third-neighbor policy can go — a fuel shortage forced gasoline rationing in August 2026; Russia's plan to route the Power of Siberia 2 gas pipeline to China across Mongolian territory, which would deepen that dependence but still lacks a final Russia-China deal; and domestic corruption, especially in the coal trade with China, which has repeatedly brought crowds into Ulaanbaatar's central square.

5b. Why Mongolia Is in This Course

Mongolia is the outlier in every respect — democratic, Buddhist, a Soviet satellite rather than a republic, and separated from the other four states by hundreds of miles of China and Kazakhstan — but it belongs here because it faces the same structural problem in its purest form: a landlocked state between Russia and China with no third border. The 'third neighbor' policy is the region's most developed answer to that problem, and its limits are the same limits every other state in this course confronts. Mongolia shows what the Central Asian states might look like if they had democratized; its constraints show why democratization alone would not solve their geography.

Module 6 — The Alliance Map

The SCO, Russia's Institutions, China's Corridors & the West

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Shanghai Cooperation Organisation official documentation; Carnegie Endowment, 'Central Asia's New Geopolitics'

6a. The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

The SCO is the region's umbrella institution: founded in 2001 by China, Russia, and four Central Asian states to settle borders and coordinate security, it has grown to include India, Pakistan, Iran, and Belarus, with Mongolia and Afghanistan as observers (Afghanistan's seat has lain dormant since the Taliban takeover). Its 2026 summit in Bishkek gathered Xi Jinping, Putin, Modi, Pakistan's Shehbaz Sharif, Iran's Pezeshkian, Belarus's Lukashenko, and the Central Asian presidents, with Turkey's Erdoğan and Mongolia's Khürelsükh among the guests; it adopted a Bishkek Declaration calling for a 'just multipolar world order'. The SCO is a forum rather than an alliance — it has no mutual defense clause and its members include adversaries (India and Pakistan) — but it is where the Russia-China condominium over the region is formally managed, and its expansion to Iran and Belarus makes it the institutional core of the non-Western order in Eurasia.

6b. Russia's Institutions

- **The CSTO** — Russia's mutual defense alliance, with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan as members (Uzbekistan left in 2012, Mongolia and Afghanistan never joined). Its credibility was damaged by its failure to defend Armenia — which froze its participation in 2024 and remains a member only on paper — and by Russia's absorption in Ukraine, but its intervention in Kazakhstan in 2022 showed it can still act where Moscow chooses.
- **The Eurasian Economic Union** — Russia's trade bloc, with Kyrgyzstan as a member and Uzbekistan as an observer, whose main practical effect in this region has been to open the Russian labor market to Kyrgyz workers.
- **The bases** — Russia's 201st Base in Tajikistan and Kant air base in Kyrgyzstan are the physical expression of its security role, and the reason both states remain its closest regional clients.

6c. China's Corridors

China's Belt and Road Initiative was announced in Kazakhstan in 2013, and Central Asia is its original theater. The Central Asia-China gas pipelines, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, mining and oil concessions in Afghanistan, and loans that have made China the largest creditor of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are its instruments. China has also become a security actor by stealth — a border post in Tajikistan, arms sales, and police training — while formally deferring to Russia. It has overtaken Russia as the larger trading partner of every former Soviet state here, narrowly so in Tajikistan, where it moved ahead only in 2025.

6d. The West and the Alternatives

The United States engages through the C5+1 format with the five former Soviet Central Asian states and has renewed its interest since 2022 in critical minerals, sanctions enforcement, and transit routes that bypass Russia. The EU pursues the same ends through its Global Gateway program and the Middle Corridor. Turkey offers a cultural alternative through the Organization of Turkic States, chaired by Azerbaijan since October 2025, with its next summit due in Ankara on October 29-30, 2026, and the Gulf states have become major investors. None of these can replace Russia's security role or China's economic one, but together they give the region's states the leverage of a third option — which is precisely what Uzbekistan's southern route and Mongolia's third-neighbor policy are designed to exploit.

Module 7 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Questions

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, CrisisWatch; New Lines Institute Central Asia Roundup

7a. Water and the Qosh Tepa Canal

Afghanistan's Qosh Tepa canal, under construction since 2022, will divert as much as a fifth of the Amu Darya's flow to irrigate northern Afghanistan before the river reaches Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan — and Afghanistan is not party to any of the Soviet-era water agreements the downstream states rely on. The canal is due for completion in 2028; Uzbekistan's water minister has said a withdrawal of about 2 billion cubic meters a year would be manageable but one of about 4 billion would pose serious risks. Combined with Tajikistan's Rogun dam upstream and a warming climate shrinking the glaciers that feed both rivers, the canal makes water the region's most likely source of interstate conflict in the coming decade. Uzbekistan has chosen engagement over confrontation, but the physics of the river do not negotiate.

7b. Afghanistan's Spillover

The emirate's stability has surprised its neighbors, but three spillovers persist: the Islamic State's Khorasan branch; the Pakistani Taliban's sanctuary in Afghanistan; and the mass expulsions of Afghans from Pakistan and Iran (Module 4). Uzbekistan's embrace and Tajikistan's guarded 'cold cooperation' mark the range of a regional debate that Russia's recognition has tilted toward engagement.

7c. Sanctions Evasion and Its Price

Kyrgyzstan and, to a lesser degree, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have become the corridors through which Western goods reach Russia despite sanctions, a trade that has enriched intermediaries and drawn EU, UK, and US sanctions on regional firms and banks (Modules 2 and 3). The region's states are caught between a Russia that is their labor market and security guarantor and a West whose markets and investment they need — a version of the balancing problem that the Ukraine war has made acute and that will outlast it.

7d. Russia's Decline and China's Rise

The Ukraine war has drained Russia's capacity to be the region's security provider even as it remains the labor market and the base host, and China has filled the economic space while avoiding the security role. The question is whether this division holds — whether China eventually takes on security responsibilities, whether Russia's tightening of migrant rules (Module 3) and the eventual end of the war change the labor relationship, and whether the region's states can keep both patrons at arm's length. The 2026 SCO summit in Bishkek showed both powers still committed to the condominium; the region's own governments are quietly building alternatives to it.

7e. The 2026 Iran War's Fallout

The war on Iran disrupted the southern routes — through Iranian ports to the Gulf and India — that Uzbekistan and Tajikistan had been developing as alternatives to Russia and China: cargo sat for weeks in Iranian ports, and prices of Iranian goods rose in Central Asian markets. It weakened the one regional power that offered Tajikistan cultural affinity, and it drew all three former Soviet states here into sending aid to Tehran. The war, which opened on February 28 with American and Israeli strikes that killed Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, paused under an April ceasefire and resumed in July when the June 17 Islamabad memorandum collapsed, and renewed fire in late August and early September kept the routes uncertain; at the SCO summit in Bishkek on September 1 Putin promised Pezeshkian continued help in a meeting on the sidelines. What a post-Khamenei Iran at war means for the region's Persian-speaking state and for the Caspian and Afghan routes is an open question. The war's main lesson for Central Asia was that the southern option depends on stability in states the region does not control.

7f. The Last Word

The throughline of all seven modules: this is a region defined by what it lacks — a coastline, independent water, and a third border — and governed by how its states manage that lack. Four autocracies and one democracy share the same structural problem: they sit between Russia and China with few ways out that avoid them, and every strategy in this course — Uzbekistan's southern route, Mongolia's third neighbor, Kyrgyzstan's re-export trade, Tajikistan's Russian base, the Taliban's engagement without recognition — is a different answer to the same question. On the Caspian shore, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan trade on energy routes; here, where there is no sea, transit and water are the currency, and the states that control the mountains and the roads hold the cards.

Key Points

Central Asia

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Tajikistan	Emomali Rahmon	President	74	November 1992	33.9
Uzbekistan	Shavkat Mirziyoyev	President	69	December 2016	9.8
Kyrgyzstan	Sadyr Japarov	President	57	January 2021	5.7
Afghanistan	Hibatullah Akhundzada	Supreme Leader	58	August 2021	5.1
Mongolia	Nyam-Osoryn Uchral	Prime Minister	39	March 2026	0.5

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's current continuous tenure. Rahmon's counts from November 1992, when he became head of state as chairman of the Supreme Soviet; he has been president since November 1994. Mirziyoyev's counts from his inauguration in December 2016; he was acting president from September. Hibatullah Akhundzada has led the Taliban since May 2016; his tenure counts from the fall of Kabul in August 2021, and his birth year is uncertain (Taliban sources give 1967). Mongolia's prime minister heads the government; its president, Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh, in office since June 2021, is head of state.

The Takeaways

• The region is organized around the absence of a sea: five landlocked states (Uzbekistan doubly so) whose politics are transit and water — which neighbor's port, pipeline, and river they depend on — and Soviet borders that split the Fergana Valley and the rivers among three republics.

• Uzbekistan is the region's reformer and its center: Mirziyoyev opened the economy and resolved every border dispute Karimov left frozen, reset his own term limits in 2023, and governs 39 million people (its first census since 1989) and a $145 billion economy — though its WTO entry missed a March 2026 target and its southern railway is still a feasibility study.

• Kyrgyzstan's Japarov reversed the region's only parliamentary system, copied Russia's foreign-agent law, and in February 2026 broke with his security chief, Tashiev, later convicted of plotting to seize power, a charge an appeal court changed in September; he stands for re-election in January 2027 while the EU targets Kyrgyzstan as Russia's sanctions channel.

• Tajikistan's Rahmon, in power since 1992, runs a hereditary dictatorship with his son as successor, the world's most remittance-dependent economy (about half of GDP), a Rogun dam rising to be the world's tallest, and a guarded new contact with the Taliban across a border where Chinese workers were killed in 2025.

• Afghanistan under the Taliban is the purest theocracy on earth — rule by decree from Kandahar, girls barred from school past sixth grade, women from most work and public space — recognized only by Russia, engaged by China, India, and Central Asia, and since February 2026 in open war with Pakistan, its former patron.

• Mongolia is the region's exception: the only Free state, a 'third neighbor' policy balancing Russia and China with the US, Japan, and Korea, a coal-and-copper economy that sells 89% of its exports to China, and three prime ministers in a year, the latest chosen in March 2026.

• Water is the war that has not started: the Amu Darya and Syr Darya shared by the five former Soviet Central Asian republics and Afghanistan, the Aral Sea's ghost, the glaciers retreating, and Tajikistan's Rogun dam and Afghanistan's Qosh Tepa canal — more than 200 kilometers dug — as the projects that decide who drinks.

• Russia's institutions — the CSTO, the Eurasian Economic Union, the bases — are the region's declining security frame, the CSTO hollowed by Armenia's frozen membership; the SCO, whose 2026 summit in Bishkek handed the chair to Pakistan, is the umbrella under which Beijing and Moscow manage their condominium.

• China is the larger trading partner of every former Soviet state here and of Mongolia, the main creditor of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the builder of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway; the US returned through the C5+1 summit of November 2025 and minerals deals, and the Gulf and Turkey are the newer arrivals.

• The region's 2026 lesson: the landlocked interior was squeezed by its neighbors' wars — the southern routes through Iran disrupted and the Afghan border shut by Pakistan's — while its strongmen tightened their hold: a court ruling that lets Japarov run again, a rival convicted, critics' outlets branded extremist, and heirs in waiting in Dushanbe and Tashkent.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. What happened in 2026 to Kamchybek Tashiev, Japarov's longtime ally?

A) He became prime minister after Kasymaliev resigned

B) Japarov fired him as security chief, and he was convicted, though an appeal court later changed the charge

C) He was elected speaker of the new parliament

D) He fled to Moscow and was granted asylum after a failed coup in March

2. Who has headed Uzbekistan's presidential administration since June 2025?

A) Saida Mirziyoyeva, the president's daughter

B) Islam Karimov's daughter, Gulnara

C) Abdulla Aripov, who moved over from the premiership

D) Kamchybek Tashiev, after his transfer from the security service

3. Which state has formally recognized the Taliban's emirate?

A) Pakistan, which recognized it in 2021

B) China, by accepting its ambassador in 2024

C) Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, jointly, in 2024

D) Russia, alone, since July 2025

4. Roughly what share of Tajikistan's GDP did migrants' remittances reach in 2025?

A) About a tenth

B) About a quarter, half the 2020 level

C) About half, the highest share in the world

D) Almost nothing, since Russia banned Tajik workers after the 2024 attack

5. Which country took over the SCO chair at the 2026 Bishkek summit?

A) Iran

B) India

C) Kazakhstan

D) Pakistan

6. Who is Mongolia's prime minister as of October 2026?

A) Nyam-Osoryn Uchral

B) Ukhnaagiin Khürelsükh

C) Gombojavyn Zandanshatar

D) Luvsannamsrain Oyun-Erdene

7. Which leader in this course has held power the longest?

A) Sadyr Japarov

B) Emomali Rahmon

C) Shavkat Mirziyoyev

D) Hibatullah Akhundzada

8. What did the EU do about Kyrgyzstan's sanctions trade in April 2026?

A) Lifted all sanctions on Kyrgyz banks
B) Opened membership talks with it
C) For the first time, it used its anti-circumvention tool against a whole country, banning some exports to it
D) Granted it duty-free access in exchange for monitoring

9. How has Tajikistan's stance toward the Taliban changed since 2025?

A) It recognized their government
B) It closed the border completely and expelled their envoys
C) It opened guarded contacts without recognizing them
D) It joined Russia in recognizing the emirate and opened an embassy in Kabul

10. Which is the region's only state that Freedom House rates Free?

A) Kyrgyzstan
B) Uzbekistan, since 2023
C) None of the five
D) Mongolia

11. What has Pakistan's conflict with the Taliban become?

A) An alliance against the Islamic State
B) An open war, declared in February 2026, with the border closed to trade
C) A trade boom after a 2025 border deal
D) Pakistan's recognition of the emirate in 2026

12. What is Afghanistan's Qosh Tepa canal expected to take once complete?

A) About a fifth of the Amu Darya
B) Half the Syr Darya
C) All of the Aral Sea
D) Nearly all of the Amu Darya's water

13. Which states in this course belong to the CSTO?

A) Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan
B) Uzbekistan and Afghanistan
C) All five, Mongolia included
D) Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan

14. What is the status of the railway Uzbekistan wants through Afghanistan to Pakistan?

A) Completed in 2025
B) Under construction since 2024
C) Open to freight since a 2026 deal ended the Pakistan-Afghanistan war
D) A feasibility study, with no construction date

15. What does the course name as the region's currencies?

A) Oil and gas
B) Transit and water
C) Russian bases and Chinese loans
D) Remittances, which outweigh everything else

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. B 2. A 3. D 4. C 5. D 6. A 7. B 8. C 9. C 10. D 11. B 12. A 13. A 14. D 15. B

South Asia & the Indian Ocean Rim

Figures current as of October 2026

South Asia and the Indian Ocean — India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, the Maldives, Bhutan, and Myanmar: leaders, governments, economies, and the rivalries and uprisings of 2025-26.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: One Gravitational Center

Goal: Establish India's centrality, the Partition legacy, and the disputes that recur.

Covers India as every state's reference point, the Himalaya and the ocean, and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — India

Goal: Profile the region's dominant power in its own module.

Covers Modi's coalition third term, the fast-growing economy, the tariff year, and the fight over seats.

MODULE 3 — Pakistan

Goal: Profile India's rival and the region's military-tutelage state.

Covers the army's formalized power under Field Marshal Munir, the economy, and conflict on two borders.

MODULE 4 — Bangladesh

Goal: Profile the state that changed course in 2024-26.

Covers the 2024 uprising, the February 2026 election, a new president, and the turn away from India.

MODULE 5 — Sri Lanka & the Maldives (the Island States)

Goal: Profile the two island states where the India-China contest is most visible.

Covers Sri Lanka's outsider president and its 2025-26 shocks, and the Maldives between Delhi and Beijing.

MODULE 6 — Nepal & Bhutan (the Himalayan States)

Goal: Profile the two buffer states between India and China.

Covers Nepal's Gen-Z revolution and its 36-year-old prime minister, and Bhutan's guided democracy.

MODULE 7 — Myanmar

Goal: Profile the state in civil war in its own module.

Covers the junta's conversion into a nominally civilian presidency, the war, the Rohingya, and China.

MODULE 8 — The Alliance Map: India's Neighborhood, China's Ring, the Quad & the Gulf

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's blocs.

Covers the stalled regional bodies, China's ports and corridors, India's partners, and the Gulf.

MODULE 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers Kashmir, the Indus, Bangladesh's realignment, Myanmar's war, and the India-China contest.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

Every armed group, party, institution, and abbreviation the modules name is defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country each one belongs to or concerns, or how many of the eight when it spans several; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Institutions, Alliances, and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
Seven of the 8	SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation)	The regional body founded in 1985 by the seven states here other than Myanmar, joined by Afghanistan in 2007.
Six of the 8	BIMSTEC (Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation)	The Bay of Bengal grouping of India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Thailand, which leaves out Pakistan.
India	Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue)	The informal security partnership of India, the US, Japan, and Australia.
India, Pakistan	SCO (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation)	The China- and Russia-led security forum, whose members include India and Pakistan; Pakistan took the chair at the 2026 summit in Bishkek.
India	BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)	The bloc of large emerging economies, named for its first five members and since enlarged.
Region-wide	Gulf Cooperation Council	The alliance of the six Gulf monarchies — Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.
Myanmar	ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)	The eleven-member Southeast Asian bloc.
All 8	Belt and Road Initiative	China's program of loans and infrastructure abroad, launched in 2013.
Pakistan	CPEC (China-Pakistan Economic Corridor)	The Belt and Road's flagship: roads, power plants, and the Gwadar port, launched in 2015.
Three of the 8	IMF (International Monetary Fund)	The lender to governments in balance-of-payments trouble.
Region-wide	World Bank	The Washington-based development lender.
India	Reserve Bank of India	India's central bank, which sets the policy interest rate.
All 8	Freedom House	US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free.
India	Varieties of Democracy project	A research project based in Sweden that classifies the world's political regimes.
India	Carnegie Endowment for International Peace	A Washington-based research institute.
India, Pakistan	Indus Waters Treaty	The 1960 World Bank-brokered treaty giving Pakistan the Indus system's three western rivers and India the three eastern.
India, Pakistan	Court of Arbitration	The tribunal under the Indus treaty that Pakistan invoked, whose 2025 awards held that India's suspension of the treaty does not halt the case.
India	Operation Sindoor	India's name for its May 2025 strikes on Pakistan after the Pahalgam attack.
Pakistan	27th Amendment	The 2025 constitutional amendment that made the army chief Chief of Defence Forces over all three services.

Country	Name	Who or what
Pakistan	Strategic Mutual Defense Agreement; Mecca Joint Defense Agreement	Pakistan's 2025 pact with Saudi Arabia, and the 2026 agreement that extended it to Turkey: an attack on one is an attack on all.
Pakistan	Islamabad Memorandum	The Pakistan-brokered US-Iran memorandum of June 17, 2026, which extended the April ceasefire in the Iran war; it collapsed in July.
Bangladesh	July Charter	The reform charter drafted after the 2024 uprising.
Bangladesh	International Crimes Tribunal	Bangladesh's war-crimes court.
India, Bangladesh	Ganges Water Treaty	The 1996 India-Bangladesh agreement on sharing the Ganges' dry-season flow.
Bangladesh, Nepal	Least-developed-country status	The UN category of the poorest countries, which brings trade preferences; Bangladesh and Nepal are due to graduate on November 24, 2026; the UN's Economic and Social Council endorsed their request for a three-year delay in July 2026, pending the General Assembly's vote.
Myanmar	International Court of Justice	The UN's highest court.
Nepal	Millennium Challenge Corporation	The US aid agency behind a grant for Nepal's power lines and roads.

Governments, Parties, and Armed Groups

Country	Name	Who or what
India	BJP (Bharatiya Janata Party); RSS (Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh)	Modi's Hindu nationalist party and the volunteer movement that is its ideological parent.
India	Lok Sabha; Rajya Sabha	The directly elected lower house of India's parliament, and the upper house, chosen mainly by the state legislatures.
India	Delimitation	The redrawing of constituencies to match population.
India	Congress	The Indian National Congress, India's main opposition party, which governed for most of the decades after independence.
Pakistan	Pakistan Muslim League (N); Pakistan Peoples Party	The Sharif family's party and the Bhutto-Zardari family's party.
Pakistan	PTI (Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf)	Imran Khan's party, kept from contesting the 2024 election under its own symbol.
Pakistan	TTP (Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan, the Pakistani Taliban)	The militant group fighting Pakistan's state from bases in Afghanistan.
Pakistan	Afghan Taliban	The Islamist movement ruling Afghanistan since August 2021.
Pakistan	Baloch Liberation Army	The separatist insurgents of Balochistan.
Bangladesh	BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party)	The party of Khaleda Zia and her son Tarique Rahman.
Bangladesh	Awami League	Sheikh Hasina's party, which ruled under her father in 1972-75 and under her in 1996-2001 and 2009-24; its activities were banned in May 2025.
Bangladesh	Jamaat-e-Islami	Bangladesh's largest Islamist party, banned under Hasina.
Bangladesh	National Citizen Party	The party founded in 2025 by student leaders of the 2024 uprising.
Sri Lanka	JVP (Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna); National People's Power	The Marxist party that led armed uprisings in 1971 and 1987-89 before turning to elections, and the coalition it leads.
Sri Lanka	Tamil Tigers	The separatist Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam.
Maldives	People's National Congress; People's Majlis	Muizzu's party, and the parliament.

Country	Name	Who or what
Nepal	RSP (Rastriya Swatantra Party)	The anti-establishment party founded in 2022.
Nepal	Nepali Congress; Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist); Maoists	The three parties that rotated in power from 2008 to 2025.
Bhutan	People's Democratic Party	Tshering Tobgay's party.
Myanmar	Union Solidarity and Development Party	The military's party.
Myanmar	National League for Democracy	Aung San Suu Kyi's party, winner of the 2015 and 2020 elections, dissolved by the military government in 2023.
Myanmar	National Unity Government; People's Defence Forces	The government formed by lawmakers ousted in the 2021 coup, which claims legitimacy from the 2020 election, and the armed resistance it directs.
Myanmar	Arakan Army; Kachin Independence Army	Two of the strongest ethnic armed organizations, in Rakhine State and the Kachin north.
Myanmar	Karen and Shan forces	The ethnic armies of the southeast, led by the Karen National Union, and of Shan State in the northeast, where two groups, the Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army and the Ta'ang National Liberation Army, handed towns back to the army under Chinese pressure.

Places, Projects, and Terms

Country	Name	Who or what
India, Pakistan	Partition	The 1947 division of British India into India and Pakistan.
India, Pakistan	Kashmir; Line of Control	The former princely state divided among India, Pakistan, and China, and the line that splits the Indian- and Pakistani-held parts: the 1949 ceasefire line as redrawn after the 1971 war.
India	Pahalgam	The Kashmir resort town where militants killed tourists in April 2025, setting off the May war.
India, Bhutan	Galwan; Doklam	The Ladakh valley, and the plateau claimed by Bhutan and China.
India, Bangladesh	Brahmaputra; Yarlung Tsangpo	The river that rises in Tibet as the Yarlung Tsangpo and flows on through India and Bangladesh.
Pakistan	Gwadar	The Chinese-built deep-water port in Pakistan's Balochistan province, the end point of the economic corridor.
Sri Lanka	Hambantota	The Chinese-built port leased to a Chinese company.
Myanmar	Kyaukphyu	The Rakhine coast site of China's planned deep-sea port and the start of its oil and gas pipelines to Yunnan.
Bangladesh	Cox's Bazar	The district on Bangladesh's southeastern coast where Rohingya refugees live in camps.
India, Bangladesh	Teesta	A Himalayan river shared by India and Bangladesh, whose water-sharing deal India has never signed.
Myanmar, Bangladesh	Rohingya	Myanmar's mostly Muslim minority, denied citizenship.
Nepal	Gen Z uprising	The September 2025 youth protests against corruption and a social-media ban.
Nepal	Kalapani; Lipulekh	The border area Nepal claims and India holds, and the pass through it.
Bhutan	Gross National Happiness; Gelephu Mindfulness City	Bhutan's development philosophy, which weighs well-being above output, and the special economic zone on the Indian border that the king announced in 2023.

Country	Name	Who or what
Maldives	'India Out'	The slogan demanding the withdrawal of Indian military personnel.
Region-wide	'String of pearls'	An Indian and American term for the Chinese-financed ports around India, from Gwadar to Hambantota and Kyaukphyu.
India	AI (artificial intelligence) Impact Summit	The global meeting India hosted, which closed with a declaration endorsed by 88 countries and organizations.
Myanmar	Scam compounds	Fortified complexes on Myanmar's borders, run by Chinese criminal networks, where trafficked workers carry out online fraud.
All 8	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year, converted at market exchange rates unless stated at purchasing-power parity, which adjusts for differences in prices.

Module 1 — Foundations

One Gravitational Center



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi*; C. Raja Mohan on Indian Ocean geopolitics

1a. India at the Center

Few regions are defined by a single state as completely as this one. India has about 2.7 times as many people as the other seven states combined — almost three-quarters of the region's population — an economy more than three times the size of theirs together, and a land or maritime border with every one of them. Every other state's foreign policy is, at bottom, a strategy for managing India: Pakistan through rivalry

and nuclear deterrence, Bhutan through close alignment, Nepal and Bangladesh through balancing between Delhi and Beijing, the island states through playing the two against each other. Reading the region means reading each country's relationship to India first.

1b. The Partition Legacy

The 1947 division of British India into India and Pakistan, and Pakistan's own division in 1971 into Pakistan and Bangladesh, created the region's borders and its deepest enmity. Kashmir, claimed by both India and Pakistan and divided by a ceasefire line since 1949, has caused three wars and, in May 2025, a four-day conflict fought with missiles and drones between two nuclear powers. The Partition also left the region with some of the world's most militarized borders and almost no regional trade: India-Pakistan commerce has been cut off entirely since 2025, and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) has not held a summit since 2014 because the two will not sit together.

1c. The Himalaya and the Ocean

The region is walled off from China by the highest mountains on earth and opens south onto the Indian Ocean, through which pass the sea lanes carrying Gulf oil to East Asia. The mountains make Nepal and Bhutan buffer states and the India-China border a contested line of nearly 3,500 kilometers, where soldiers fought hand-to-hand in 2020. The ocean makes Sri Lanka and the Maldives, astride the shipping lanes, strategic prizes. Indian and American strategists call China's ports around India — Gwadar in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, the planned deep-sea port at Kyaukphyu in Myanmar — a 'string of pearls', though not all are built and none is yet a Chinese naval base. India's answer is naval expansion, the Quad with the US, Japan, and Australia, and its own port and base network.

1d. The Disputes That Recur

Six issues run through the course. India-Pakistan hostility, escalated by the 2025 war and India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty (Modules 2, 3, 9). The India-China contest for every smaller state's alignment, visible in Sri Lanka, the Maldives, Nepal, and Bangladesh (Modules 4, 5, 6, 8, 9). Myanmar's civil war and the Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh (Modules 4, 7, 9). Democratic upheaval — uprisings that toppled governments in Sri Lanka (2022), Bangladesh (2024), and Nepal (2025) — and the military's formalized power in Pakistan (Modules 3, 4, 5, 6). Water, from the Indus to the Himalayan rivers that India and China both dam (Modules 2, 3, 4, 9). And, since February 2026, the Iran war, which closed the strait that carries most of the region's oil — still restricted in early October 2026, after a June memorandum collapsed — and shook the Gulf economies that employ millions of its workers (Modules 2, 3, 5, 8).

1e. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office, and the second figure who matters — the ceremonial president in India, Bangladesh, and Nepal, the army chief in Pakistan, the prime minister in Sri Lanka and Bhutan, the commander-in-chief in Myanmar — then the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religions with their shares, the main ethnic or language groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026, with a note where a census or official estimate differs markedly or none has been taken recently, and land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or, where there is none, from published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. Six of the eight states are rated Partly Free, Bhutan Free, and Myanmar Not Free. This is a restless region: street uprisings toppled three governments between 2022 and 2025; in 2026 two new prime ministers took office and Myanmar's junta chief made himself president. The Who's Who before this module defines every group, institution, and abbreviation the profiles name, and the Key Points page ranks the eight leaders by time in office, from Bhutan's king to Nepal's prime minister.

Module 2 — India

The Region's Dominant Power



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Ramachandra Guha, *India After Gandhi*; Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India*

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Narendra Modi, 76 — in office since May 2014 (12.4 years); Bharatiya Janata Party; third term since June 2024, the first in coalition
Head of state	President Droupadi Murmu, 68 — in office since July 2022 (4.2 years); ceremonial
System	Federal parliamentary republic; the prime minister governs and the president is ceremonial
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	1.48 billion (2026); UN estimate; India has not completed a census since 2011
Land area	2,973,190 km² (1,147,950 sq mi)
Religion	Hindu 79.8%, Muslim 14.2%, Christian 2.3%, Sikh 1.7% (2011 census; the next count is due in February 2027)
People	No census of ethnicity; by first language, Hindi 44%, Bengali 8%, Marathi 7%, Telugu 7%, Tamil 6% (2011 census); median age 30; 38% urban
Minimum wage	No binding national figure yet: states set their own. The central government's minimum for unskilled construction and cleaning work outside the large cities is 565 rupees a day from October 1, 2026 ($5.90 at about 96.4 rupees = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The subcontinent's civilizations — the Indus Valley, the Maurya and Gupta empires, the Mughals — were followed by two centuries of British rule that ended in 1947 with independence and the

Partition that created Pakistan, displacing some 15 million people and killing hundreds of thousands, by some estimates two million. India under Nehru built a secular parliamentary democracy and a non-aligned foreign policy; it fought wars with Pakistan (1947, 1965, 1971, 1999) and China (1962), tested nuclear weapons (1974, 1998), and liberalized its economy in 1991. Narendra Modi's Hindu nationalist BJP revoked Kashmir's autonomy in 2019 and has reshaped the secular state's identity. In May 2025 India and Pakistan fought their first war since 1999, the most serious since 1971.

Current leadership: Modi's BJP lost its parliamentary majority, so he governs in coalition with regional parties that constrain him. The limits showed when his constitutional amendment to enlarge the Lok Sabha fell 54 votes short of the two-thirds it needed. President Droupadi Murmu is the first tribal woman in the office. Home Minister Amit Shah is Modi's principal lieutenant, Nitin Nabin became the BJP's president in January 2026, and the RSS shapes the government's Hindu nationalist agenda. In May 2026 the BJP won West Bengal for the first time, while Tamil Nadu and Kerala voted for parties outside its alliance.

Government structure: Under the 1950 constitution, the world's largest democracy has 28 states, a directly elected 543-seat Lok Sabha, and an upper house, the Rajya Sabha. The Supreme Court is powerful and has checked the government intermittently. Freedom House rates India 62 of 100 in its 2026 report, citing pressure on the media, civil society, and Muslims and the 2019 revocation of Kashmir's autonomy.

Economy and trade: A roughly $4.15 trillion economy in 2026 on the IMF's April figures — sixth in the world, behind Japan and the UK, after a statistical revision lowered India's GDP and the rupee weakened — and the fastest-growing major economy, expanding 7.7% in the year to March 2026 and 7.8% in April-June 2026. Its population passed China's in 2023. Services dominate — information-technology and business services, finance, and a fast-growing digital economy — alongside manufacturing (pharmaceuticals, cars, textiles, and a growing electronics sector as Apple and others shift from China) and agriculture, which still employs over 40% of workers. Exports reached a record $863 billion in the year to March 2026, nearly half of them services; goods exports are led by refined petroleum, electronics (smartphones above all), pharmaceuticals, gems and jewelry, machinery, and textiles, and imports by crude oil, gold, electronics, and coal. Top trading partners: the US (largest export market), China (largest import source), the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Russia, which supplied about half of India's crude in mid-2026. India is the world's largest recipient of remittances and its third-largest energy consumer.

Closest partners: The United States, in a strategic partnership built on shared concern about China, defense trade, and the Quad — though 2025-26 tested it: a 50% tariff from August 2025, half of it a penalty for buying discounted Russian oil and among the highest rates the US imposed on any country; a February 2026 deal that dropped the penalty in return for a pledge to stop buying Russian oil and to buy $500 billion of American goods over five years; and, after the US Supreme Court struck down the emergency tariffs, an extra 10% duty that since July covers a little over half of India's exports to the US, with no trade agreement yet signed. Washington's warmth toward Pakistan's army chief added to the strain. Russia, its historic arms supplier and for most of the time since 2022 its largest source of oil, a relationship Delhi has refused to abandon. The European Union, with which India concluded a free trade agreement in January 2026, still to be signed. Japan, Australia, and France as defense partners. The Gulf states, where some nine million Indians worked before the 2026 war. Israel, a close defense partner. Bhutan, its closest neighbor; Sri Lanka and the Maldives, recovered as partners; and Myanmar's military government.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Pakistan, in the region's defining rivalry — the May 2025 war, India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, and a near-freeze on diplomacy. China, over the disputed border where 20 Indian soldiers died in 2020, over China's ports around India and its arms for Pakistan, and over Tibet, water, and a trade deficit that passed $100 billion in 2025-26 — even as a thaw since October 2024 brought back direct flights in October 2025, border talks between the two sides' special representatives in

Beijing in August 2026, and Xi Jinping to New Delhi for the September 2026 BRICS summit. Bangladesh, over Sheikh Hasina and water (Module 4). Domestically, Hindu-Muslim tensions, Kashmir, the ethnic conflict in Manipur, and the south's resistance to losing seats to the north.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility about 2.0, below replacement; nearly a billion registered voters	The demographic dividend to 2050, and the jobs it needs
GDP	Third at purchasing-power parity; about $3,000 per head	Manufacturing ('Make in India', Apple's iPhones) about a sixth of output
Prices and rates	Consumer inflation 4.8% in August 2026, up from a record low of 0.25% in October 2025 as the oil shock fed through; the Reserve Bank of India's policy rate held at 5.25% from December 2025 through August 2026	The rupee near record lows
Public finance	General-government debt around 80% of GDP; a combined deficit around 7%; heavy public investment in roads, rail, and ports	The states account for about half
Trade	Services exports $421 billion in the year to March 2026; record Russian crude volumes, partly under a temporary US waiver that expired in June	The tariffs were the year's shock
Military	$92 billion in 2025, the world's fifth-largest budget; about 1.4 million active troops; French Rafales, American and Israeli systems, Russian S-400s; a nuclear triad	Operation Sindoor 'remains ongoing', the army said in January 2026
Regime	An 'electoral autocracy' since 2021 on the Varieties of Democracy project's classification (contested)	The world's largest election, in 2024
Energy	About 88% of crude oil imported, mostly through Hormuz until the 2026 war; coal about 70% of power; about 150 gigawatts of solar by May 2026, a record 45 added in the year to March; nuclear expanding	Cooking-gas queues in March 2026; Russian oil filled the gap
Technology	Tech-services giants exposed to the AI agents that automate what they export; more than 100 million weekly ChatGPT users, second only to the US; the AI Impact Summit in New Delhi in February 2026; the IndiaAI Mission; chip-packaging plants; the state-built Unified Payments Interface, with a record 24.5 billion payments in August 2026	The services economy's AI question

In depth — the question: Whether India, with more than a sixth of humanity and under 4% of world output at market prices, converts a demographic dividend into a manufacturing one before the dividend closes, and does so as a democracy.

Worked example — The Delimitation Arithmetic

India's parliamentary seats have been allocated among the states on the 1971 census since 1976, a freeze extended in 2001 so as not to punish the states that controlled their population growth; the constitution lifts it after the first census taken after 2026 — the count now under way, whose population enumeration is due in February 2027. Reapportioned to current population in a house of 543, the arithmetic moves power north. A widely cited 2019 projection by the Carnegie Endowment found that Uttar Pradesh (about 240 million people) and Bihar (about 130 million), where fertility stayed high, would gain about 21 seats between them, while Tamil Nadu and Kerala, where it fell below replacement decades ago, would lose 16; the five southern states, which produce about 30% of the country's output on a fifth of its people, would lose about 24, cutting their share of the Lok Sabha from 24% to about 19%. The politics: the BJP's base is the Hindi-speaking north and its opponents govern most of the south, so delimitation converts demography into power for the

party of the states that grew. In March 2025 Tamil Nadu's then government convened parties from several states, which demanded that the freeze be extended another 25 years. In April 2026 the government tried a different route — a constitutional amendment enlarging the house to 850 seats, allocated on the 2011 census, with a third reserved for women; it promised the south 195 seats instead of 129, though the south's share would still have slipped from 24% to 23% — and the Lok Sabha defeated it, 298 to 230, short of the two-thirds required. The lesson is the federation's: the census that measures India's dividend also redistributes its power, and whether the productive south accepts rule by the populous north is the 2027-29 question that no election answers.

2b. The 2025 War and Its Consequences

The April 22, 2025 killing of 26 people in Kashmir, 25 of them tourists, by militants India linked to Pakistan led India to suspend the Indus Waters Treaty the next day and, on May 7, to launch Operation Sindoor: missile and air strikes on targets across Pakistan, Pakistani retaliation with drones and missiles, four days of escalating exchanges between nuclear powers, and a ceasefire on May 10 that Washington says it brokered and India says the two militaries agreed directly. The treaty's suspension — India calls it holding the treaty 'in abeyance' — remains in force: India has stopped sharing river data and attending the treaty's joint commission and rejects the awards of the Court of Arbitration that Pakistan invoked, and Pakistan calls any diversion of the rivers an act of war. The war showed that the two states' 'no war, no peace' equilibrium can break in days, and it pushed Pakistan's army into unprecedented formal power at home.

Module 3 — Pakistan

The Military-Tutelage State



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Ayesha Siddiqa, *Military Inc.*; International Crisis Group Pakistan reports

3a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif, 75 — in office since March 2024 (2.6 years); also prime minister 2022–23; leads a coalition within limits the army sets
Dominant power	Field Marshal Asim Munir, army chief and Chief of Defence Forces, about 58 (born about 1968; unconfirmed) — army chief since November 2022 (3.9 years); field marshal since May 2025; Chief of Defence Forces, over all three services, since December 2025 for five years
System	Federal parliamentary republic in which the army sets the limits; President Asif Ali Zardari (since March 2024) is ceremonial
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	259.3 million (2026); UN estimate; the 2023 census counted 241.5 million
Land area	770,880 km² (297,640 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 96.4%, Hindu 1.6%, Christian 1.4% (2023 census; Ahmadis, counted separately, 0.07%)
People	By mother tongue, Punjabi 37%, Pashto 18%, Sindhi 14%, Saraiki 12%, Urdu 9%, Balochi 3% (2023 census); median age 22; 39% urban
Minimum wage	A federal minimum of 40,700 rupees a month in the budget for the year from July 2026, up from 37,000; provinces set their own (about $147 at about 276.7 rupees = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Created in 1947 as a homeland for the subcontinent's Muslims, Pakistan lost its eastern wing as Bangladesh in the 1971 war with India, and has alternated between military and civilian rule since 1958 — the army has governed directly for more than three decades and indirectly for much of the rest. It tested nuclear weapons in 1998, backed the Afghan Taliban, and became a frontline state in the US war on terror after 2001. Imran Khan's 2018 government was removed in 2022, his arrest in May 2023 triggered the largest anti-army protests in decades, and the 2024 election was widely seen as rigged against his party.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Shehbaz Sharif of the Pakistan Muslim League (N) is the younger brother of three-time prime minister Nawaz Sharif. President Asif Ali Zardari is the widower of Benazir Bhutto, whose Pakistan Peoples Party is the government's main partner. The decisive figure is Field Marshal Asim Munir, whose new command under the 27th Amendment is the most explicit legal entrenchment of military power in Pakistan's history. Imran Khan remains in jail, serving sentences that include 17 years imposed in December 2025; in August 2026 the Supreme Court ordered a hospital examination after his lawyers said he had lost much of the sight in one eye.

Government structure: The 1973 constitution provides for a National Assembly and four provincial assemblies, but in practice the army controls foreign and security policy, dominates the economy through its business conglomerates, and has removed or installed prime ministers throughout the country's history. Besides Munir's new command, the 27th Amendment gave the president lifelong immunity and moved constitutional cases from the Supreme Court to a new Federal Constitutional Court, leaving the older court mainly with appeals. A further amendment to pull back powers devolved to the provinces is under discussion. Pakistan is a nuclear power and, since 2004, a designated major US ally outside the North Atlantic alliance.

Economy and trade: A roughly $450 billion economy, which grew 3.7% in the year to June 2026, short of its target, and remains in chronic crisis — about two dozen IMF programs since 1958, the latest a $7 billion facility agreed in 2024, with repeated bailouts from Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and China; the oil shock of 2026 pushed inflation back above 10% by September and the central bank's policy rate to 11.5% by June. Textiles and clothing provide most exports, about $18 billion in the year to June 2026, with rice, leather, sports goods, and surgical instruments; imports are led by fuel, machinery, palm oil, and Chinese goods. Top trading partners: China (largest overall, and the builder of CPEC and the Gwadar port, a program valued at about $60 billion), the US (largest export market), the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and the UK. Remittances from workers abroad, mostly in the Gulf, reached a record $41.6 billion in the year to June 2026, more than all exports. Trade with India, its natural largest partner, has been cut entirely since 2025.

Closest partners: China, its 'all-weather' ally, supplier of most of its arms — including the jets it flew in May 2025 — and its diplomatic shield. Saudi Arabia, with which it signed a mutual defense pact in September 2025, extended to Turkey in the Mecca Joint Defense Agreement of August 2026; Pakistani troops and jets deployed to the kingdom during the Iran war. The UAE and Qatar, as lenders and employers. The United States, transformed in 2025-26 from estrangement into warmth: President Trump hosted Munir, minerals deals followed, and Pakistan brokered the April 2026 US-Iran ceasefire, hosted the talks that followed in Islamabad, and brokered the June Islamabad Memorandum, remaining a main channel between Washington and Tehran after it collapsed. Turkey and Azerbaijan, as Muslim-world partners.

Principal rivalries and disputes: India, in the defining rivalry. Afghanistan under the Taliban, Pakistan's former client and now its enemy: over sanctuary for the TTP, whose attacks have surged, Pakistan fought border battles in October 2025, declared 'open war' in February 2026, and struck Kabul and Kandahar — a March strike on a Kabul drug-treatment center killed 143 people by the UN's count — then resumed airstrikes in September after a summer lull; the border has been closed to trade since October 2025, and more than a million Afghans have been pushed out of Pakistan since 2023. Iran, with which it exchanged

airstrikes in 2024 before repairing ties. Domestically, the Baloch insurgency — a May 2026 bombing of a train in Quetta killed at least 47 — TTP attacks in the northwest, and the confrontation between the army and Imran Khan's mass following.

3b. The Army's Formalized Power

Pakistan's army has always been the state's most powerful institution, but until 2025 its dominance was informal — exercised through coups, pressure, and the manipulation of elections. The 27th Amendment, enacted in November 2025, changed that: it created a Chief of Defence Forces post for Munir, folded the old chairmanship of the joint chiefs into it, and granted him lifelong rank and immunity. The war with India provided the justification and the field marshal's rank the symbolism. The result is a state in which the civilian government of Shehbaz Sharif is openly subordinate, whose army now fights on two fronts — the Afghan border war and the insurgencies at home — and whose principal domestic adversary is not a party but a jailed former prime minister whose popularity it has been unable to break.

Module 4 — Bangladesh

The State That Changed Course



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, Bangladesh reports; The Daily Star (Dhaka)

4a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Tarique Rahman, 60 — in office since February 2026 (0.6 years); Bangladesh Nationalist Party, which won 209 seats on February 12, 2026
Head of state	President Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, 78 — in office since August 2026 (0.1 years); ceremonial; elected by parliament after Mohammed Shahabuddin resigned in July 2026
System	Parliamentary republic; the president is ceremonial
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	177.8 million (2026)
Land area	130,170 km² (50,260 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 91.0%, Hindu 8.0%, Buddhist 0.6%, Christian 0.3% (2022 census)
People	Bengali 99%; about 1.65 million people of some 50 smaller ethnic groups, the largest Chakma and Marma (2022 census); median age 27; 43% urban
Minimum wage	No national minimum: wage boards set rates by industry. The garment industry's entry-level minimum was set at 12,500 taka a month in December 2023, before annual increments (about $102 at about 122.8 taka = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: East Bengal became East Pakistan in 1947 and, after the Pakistani army's 1971 crackdown killed hundreds of thousands, won independence as Bangladesh with Indian intervention. Its founder Sheikh

Mujibur Rahman was assassinated in 1975, and politics became a bitter contest between his daughter Sheikh Hasina's Awami League and Khaleda Zia's Bangladesh Nationalist Party. Hasina governed from 2009 to 2024 with increasing authoritarianism and close ties to India, until a student uprising in July-August 2024 forced her to flee to India. Nobel laureate Muhammad Yunus led an interim government, and Khaleda Zia's son Tarique Rahman returned from 17 years of exile.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Tarique Rahman was sworn in on February 17, 2026. Former prime minister Khaleda Zia died in December 2025, days after his return from exile in London. Jamaat-e-Islami won 68 seats to become the main opposition. Hasina's Awami League was barred from contesting, and in November 2025 the International Crimes Tribunal in Dhaka sentenced Hasina to death in absentia over the killing of protesters. President Mohammed Shahabuddin, a Hasina-era appointee, resigned nearly two years early, citing ill health amid reported pressure from BNP leaders, and parliament elected the BNP's secretary-general, Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, to succeed him.

Government structure: Parliament has 300 elected seats plus seats reserved for women. Hasina's governments had hollowed out the courts, election commission, and press; the 2024-26 interim government under Muhammad Yunus drafted the July Charter of institutional reforms, which 68% of those voting approved in a referendum held with the election, giving the new government a mandate to carry it out. The student-founded National Citizen Party won six seats in Jamaat-e-Islami's alliance. The army played a decisive role in Hasina's fall and remains a background power.

Economy and trade: A roughly $500 billion economy — it passed that mark in the year to June 2026, when it grew 4.1% — built over two decades of faster growth than almost any Asian peer on garment exports: Bangladesh is the world's second-largest clothing exporter after China, with the sector providing over 80% of exports, which totaled about $48 billion in the year to June 2026. Other exports are leather, jute, and seafood; imports are led by cotton and textile inputs, fuel, machinery, and food. Top trading partners: the US, the EU (Germany, Spain), and the UK as garment buyers; China and India as import sources. Remittances, mostly from the Gulf, reached a record $35 billion, the second-largest source of foreign earnings. The 2024 uprising exposed the previous government's inflated statistics and banking-sector looting; an IMF program continues, and Bangladesh has asked the UN to delay its graduation from least-developed-country status to November 2029, since graduation would end some trade preferences.

Closest partners: China, the largest arms supplier and infrastructure builder and a prospective funder of works on the Teesta river; Rahman's first trips abroad as prime minister were to Malaysia and to China, where he met Xi Jinping in June 2026. Pakistan, in a rapid rapprochement since 2024 that has reversed 50 years of estrangement — direct flights, trade, military contacts, and visits. The United States and EU, as supporters of the transition, though an extra 10% US tariff now applies on top of normal duties. Japan, Turkey, and the Gulf states, where millions of Bangladeshis work. Bangladesh has also dealt with both Myanmar's military government and the Arakan Army over the Rohingya.

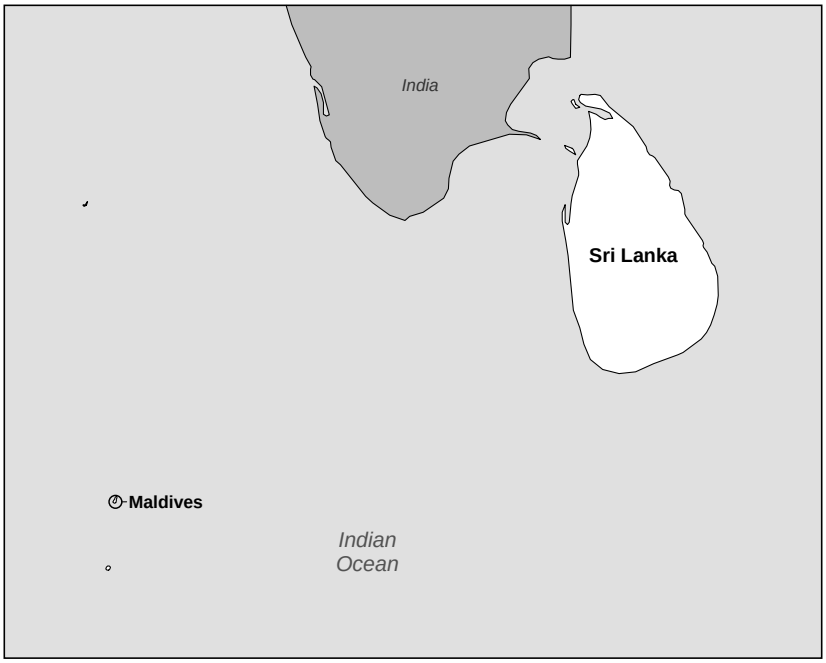
Principal rivalries and disputes: India, whose 15-year alliance with Hasina made it the target of the uprising's anger: India shelters Hasina, Bangladesh demands her extradition to face her sentence, and in August 2026 Dhaka said Rahman would not visit India until she is handed over; India says the request is 'under examination'. The Ganges Water Treaty expires in December 2026 with no renewal agreed, and the Teesta, the border, and India's treatment of Bangladeshi migrants are all in dispute. Myanmar, over the more than one million Rohingya refugees in Cox's Bazar whom Bangladesh cannot return and Myanmar will not take. Domestically, whether the BNP will govern differently from the Awami League it replaced, now that it holds the presidency as well as two-thirds of the elected seats, and the role of the resurgent Islamist parties.

4b. The Realignment

Bangladesh's turn is the region's largest single shift in alignment since the Cold War. Under Hasina it was India's closest partner — transit rights, security cooperation, and a shared hostility to Islamists. The uprising that toppled her was, in part, a revolt against that relationship, and both governments since have moved the other way: toward Pakistan, which Bangladesh fought a war of independence against; toward China, which India regards as its rival; and away from India, which Bangladesh accuses of harboring a fugitive and bullying a neighbor. The BNP calls its foreign policy 'Bangladesh First'. India has lost the partner that anchored its eastern flank, and the Bay of Bengal, once an Indian lake, is now contested.

Module 5 — Sri Lanka & the Maldives

The Island States



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, Sri Lanka reports; Carnegie India, Indian Ocean analysis

5a. Sri Lanka

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Anura Kumara Dissanayake, 57 — in office since September 2024 (2.0 years); National People's Power, with a two-thirds majority in parliament since November 2024
Prime Minister	Harini Amarasuriya, 56 — in office since September 2024 (2.0 years); appointed by the president, who heads the cabinet
System	Semi-presidential republic: the directly elected president holds executive power
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	23.3 million (2026); UN estimate; the 2024 census counted 21.8 million
Land area	61,864 km² (23,890 sq mi)
Religion	Buddhist 69.8%, Hindu 12.6%, Muslim 10.7%, Christian 6.9% (2024 census)
People	Sinhalese 74.1%, Sri Lankan Tamil 12.3%, Moor 10.5%, Tamils of Indian origin 2.8% (2024 census); median age 35; 20% urban
Minimum wage	30,000 rupees a month since January 2026 (about $91 at about 331 rupees = $1, October 8, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Ceylon was a British colony until 1948, and its post-independence politics were dominated by tension between the Sinhalese Buddhist majority and the Tamil minority, which erupted into a 26-year civil war (1983-2009) that ended with the government's crushing of the Tamil Tigers at a cost of tens of thousands of civilian lives. The Rajapaksa family dominated the post-war years, borrowed heavily from

China, and presided over the 2022 economic collapse — default, fuel and food shortages — that a mass uprising ended by driving them from office. Anura Kumara Dissanayake, leader of the JVP, won the 2024 presidency on an anti-corruption platform, the first leader from outside the parties that had alternated in power since independence.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Harini Amarasuriya is an academic. The government has weathered two shocks: Cyclone Ditwah, which killed more than 600 people in late November 2025 and did about $4.1 billion of damage, and the 2026 Iran war, which in March brought back weekly fuel quotas and a weekly shutdown of government offices and schools, and pushed inflation to 8% by September.

Government structure: The president commands the military and appoints the government; parliament has 225 seats. The state is unitary, with limited devolution to provincial councils created in 1987, which Tamil parties want strengthened. Dissanayake's supermajority has been used for anti-corruption prosecutions — including the 2025 arrest of former president Ranil Wickremesinghe — and continuity with the IMF program rather than the radical change his party's history suggested.

Economy and trade: An economy of about $110 billion — income per head passed $5,000 in 2025, when growth was 5% — recovering from its 2022 default and collapse under an IMF program, with debt restructured in 2024. The recovery was hit twice: Cyclone Ditwah's damage equaled about 4% of GDP, and the Iran war cut tourist arrivals — the 2026 target was lowered from 3 million to 2.5 million — and raised fuel prices by about a third. Exports are led by garments, tea (Sri Lanka is a top exporter), rubber products, and gems; imports by fuel, machinery, textile inputs, and food. Top trading partners: the US and EU as export markets, India and China as import sources. Tourism and remittances are essential earners. Chinese lending built the Hambantota port, leased to a Chinese company for 99 years in 2017 after Sri Lanka could not service the debt — the case that made 'debt-trap diplomacy' a global term.

Closest partners: India, which provided about $4 billion in emergency credit, currency swaps, and deferred payments during the 2022 collapse, more than any other lender at the time, and signed Sri Lanka's first defense cooperation agreement with it in April 2025; Dissanayake has aligned with Delhi despite his party's historic anti-Indian stance. China, the largest bilateral creditor, holder of the Hambantota lease, and the prospective builder of a $3.7 billion refinery there, a partner Sri Lanka cannot afford to alienate. The IMF, whose program had disbursed about $2.4 billion by May 2026, plus about $200 million of emergency financing after the cyclone, and Western partners on debt. Japan, historically a major donor.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The India-China contest itself is Sri Lanka's central external issue — every port lease, research-vessel visit, and loan is read in Delhi and Beijing as a move in that game. A one-year ban on foreign research ships, imposed under Indian and American pressure for 2024, lapsed, and the new government's rules for such visits were still unwritten in 2025, leaving all of them in limbo. Domestically, the unresolved Tamil question in the north and east, accountability for civil-war atrocities, the austerity of the IMF program, and recovery from the cyclone.

5b. The Maldives

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Mohamed Muizzu, 48 — in office since November 2023 (2.9 years); People's National Congress, with a supermajority in parliament since April 2024
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	532,000 (2026)
Land area	300 km² (116 sq mi)
Religion	Sunni Islam is the state religion, and only Muslims may be citizens; no census breakdown is published
People	Maldivian citizens about three-quarters, foreign residents, mostly South Asian workers, about a quarter (2022 census); median age 34; 43% urban
Minimum wage	Set by employer size since January 2022: 8,000 rufiyaa a month at large businesses, 7,000 at medium ones and for permanent public-sector staff, 4,500 at small ones ($519, $454, and $292 at the official 15.42 rufiyaa = $1); micro-businesses are exempt, and no revision since could be found

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A sultanate under British protection until independence in 1965, the Maldives was ruled for 30 years by Maumoon Gayoom before its first democratic election in 2008. Politics has since oscillated between India-aligned and China-aligned governments, with the 2023 election of Mohamed Muizzu on an 'India Out' platform and the expulsion of Indian military personnel marking the sharpest turn toward Beijing — later moderated by economic necessity. The archipelago of about 1,190 islands is among the countries most existentially threatened by climate change.

Current leadership: President Mohamed Muizzu has used his parliamentary supermajority to consolidate power, including a constitutional amendment that strips lawmakers of their seats if they switch parties and a 2025 media law, condemned by the UN's human rights chief and press groups, that lets a single regulator fine and suspend outlets. In April 2026 voters handed him his first defeat in a national vote, rejecting by 69% to 31% a constitutional amendment to hold presidential and parliamentary elections together from 2028.

Government structure: The 2008 constitution provides for a directly elected president and a 93-seat People's Majlis. The Maldives has seen repeated backsliding, and Muizzu's supermajority has reduced checks on the executive. The country is 99% water, with fewer than 200 of its islands inhabited.

Economy and trade: A roughly $7 billion economy almost entirely dependent on tourism (nearly 30% of GDP directly, far more indirectly) and fishing (tuna). Imports of nearly everything — food, fuel, construction materials — come from India, China, the UAE, and Singapore; exports are fish. India is the largest supplier of essentials and, with China, the largest creditor; both have financed infrastructure and both compete for the port and airport contracts through which their rivalry plays out.

Closest partners: China, which Muizzu courted with a 2024 state visit and a defense agreement, and whose free trade agreement with the Maldives took effect in January 2025. India, whose military personnel Muizzu expelled but whose financial support he sought within a year when debt distress hit in 2024-25 — a $400 million currency swap and repeated rollovers of Indian-held treasury bills — producing a pragmatic reconciliation sealed by Prime Minister Modi's visit in July 2025. Turkey and the Gulf as partners; the UN and small-island coalitions on climate.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The India-China contest, in its purest form: the Maldives sits astride the sea lanes between the Gulf and East Asia, and both powers treat its alignment as strategic. Muizzu's swing to Beijing and partial swing back illustrate the limits of small-state agency. Domestically, debt — a $500

million Islamic bond fell due in April 2026, which the government said record reserves would cover — the Iran war's blow to tourism, with arrivals down about a fifth in March and April 2026, and the existential threat of sea-level rise to a country whose highest natural point is about 2.4 meters above the sea.

5c. Why the Islands Matter

Two small states with fewer than 25 million people between them get a full module because they sit on the shipping lanes that carry most of the oil from the Gulf to China, Japan, and Korea. A Chinese naval presence at Hambantota or in the Maldives would put Beijing astride India's sea approaches; an Indian presence keeps them open. That is why Sri Lanka's port leases and research-ship rules and the Maldives' base politics attract attention far out of proportion to either country's size — and why both have learned to extract aid from Delhi and Beijing by threatening to tilt toward the other. The 2026 Iran war added a third lesson: both run on Gulf fuel, Gulf jobs, and tourists who fly through Gulf hubs, and both were hit when Hormuz closed.

Module 6 — Nepal & Bhutan

The Himalayan States



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: The Kathmandu Post; Bhutan's Kuensel; International Crisis Group Nepal reports

6a. Nepal

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Balendra (Balen) Shah, 36 — in office since March 2026 (0.5 years); Rastriya Swatantra Party, which won 182 of 275 seats on March 5, 2026
Head of state	President Ram Chandra Paudel, 81 — in office since March 2023 (3.6 years); ceremonial
System	Federal parliamentary republic; the president is ceremonial
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	29.6 million (2026)
Land area	143,350 km² (55,350 sq mi)
Religion	Hindu 81.2%, Buddhist 8.2%, Muslim 5.1%, Kirat 3.2%, Christian 1.8% (2021 census)
People	142 caste and ethnic groups, the largest Chhetri 16.5%, Hill Brahmin 11.3%, Magar 6.9%, Tharu 6.2%, Tamang 5.6% (2021 census); median age 27; 23% urban
Minimum wage	19,550 rupees a month since July 2025 (about $126 at about 155 rupees = $1, early October 2026; the Nepali rupee is pegged at 1.6 to the Indian)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Never colonized, Nepal was a Hindu monarchy until a Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) killed 17,000 and, combined with a 2001 palace massacre that wiped out most of the royal family, ended the monarchy in 2008. In September 2025 a Gen-Z uprising against corruption and a social media ban burned parliament and toppled the government within days; an interim administration under former chief justice Sushila Karki held elections in March 2026.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Balendra 'Balen' Shah, a structural engineer and former rapper elected Kathmandu's independent mayor in 2022, joined the RSP in January 2026 and led it to the first single-party majority since 1999 to become Nepal's youngest elected prime minister. He defeated former prime minister K.P. Sharma Oli in Oli's own constituency. The Gen-Z uprising had toppled Oli. The day after Shah took office, police arrested Oli and his former home minister after an inquiry held them responsible for failing to stop the police shootings in which protesters died; at least 76 people were killed in the uprising.

Government structure: The 2015 constitution provides for seven provinces and a House of Representatives. Nepal had 14 governments in the 17 years before 2026, mostly rotating among the Nepali Congress, the Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist-Leninist), and the Maoists, whose leaders the uprising rejected wholesale; in March the first two won just 38 and 25 seats. Shah's majority is the first chance in a generation for a government to serve a full term. The RSP is anti-corruption and technocratic rather than ideological.

Economy and trade: A roughly $45 billion economy, among Asia's poorest, dependent on remittances from millions of Nepalis working in the Gulf, Malaysia, and India — a record $16.2 billion in the year to mid-July 2026, equal to about a third of GDP — plus tourism (Everest and the Himalaya), agriculture, and hydropower exports to India. Exports are led by electricity, palm oil re-exports, textiles, and carpets; imports by fuel, machinery, vehicles, and food, overwhelmingly from India, which supplies about two-thirds of imports and controls Nepal's transit to the sea — a lever India used in a 2015 blockade. China is the second partner and a competing infrastructure builder. Balen Shah's government has made corruption and job creation its central agenda; its first budget, presented in May 2026, totaled 2.12 trillion rupees (about $14 billion).

Closest partners: India, with which Nepal shares an open border, a 1950 treaty, and about two-thirds of its trade; Shah accepted an invitation from Prime Minister Modi, though the visit was still pending in July 2026. China, its other neighbor, a growing infrastructure partner and the counterweight every Nepali government invokes. The Gulf states and Malaysia as employers of Nepali workers, whose remittances rose 28% in dollars in the year to July 2026. The US, whose $500 million Millennium Challenge grant, ratified after a bitter fight in 2022, is building power lines.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Nepal has no adversaries, but its structural dispute is the India-China balance — the Kalapani border dispute and Chinese Belt and Road projects are its recurring form; in August 2026 India and China began trading through the Lipulekh pass, in territory Nepal claims, over Nepal's diplomatic protests to both. Domestically, the uprising's demands for accountability, the corruption of the old parties, Nepal's scheduled graduation from least-developed-country status, and whether an outsider with a near-two-thirds majority governs as a reformer or a strongman.

6b. Bhutan

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck, 46 — on the throne since December 2006 (19.8 years); a constitutional monarch since 2008; the constitution requires the king to step down at 65
Head of government	Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay, 61 — in office since January 2024 (2.7 years); People's Democratic Party; also prime minister 2013–18
System	Constitutional monarchy with an elected parliament since 2008
Freedom House	Free
Population	802,000 (2026); UN estimate; Bhutan's own projection for 2024 was about 777,000
Land area	38,140 km² (14,730 sq mi)

At a glance	As of October 2026
Religion	Buddhist about 75%, Hindu about 23% (estimates; the census does not record religion)
People	Ngalop about 50%, people of Nepali origin (Lhotshampa) about 35%, other indigenous groups about 15% (older estimates; the census records no ethnicity); median age 32; 46% urban
Minimum wage	215 ngultrum a day (about $2.20: the ngultrum is pegged 1:1 to the Indian rupee, about 96.4 = $1 on October 6, 2026); the date it took effect could not be confirmed

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Himalayan kingdom, unified in the 17th century, remained isolated until the 1960s and was never colonized, though it accepted British and then Indian guidance of its foreign policy. The fourth king introduced 'Gross National Happiness' as a development philosophy and voluntarily converted the absolute monarchy into a constitutional one, with the first elections in 2008. More than 100,000 ethnic Nepalis fled or were expelled in the early 1990s, Bhutan's main historical stain. It has no diplomatic relations with China.

Current leadership: King Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck retains substantial influence and moral authority and launched the country's signature project of this decade, the Gelephu Mindfulness City. Prime Minister Tshering Tobgay has called emigration 'the biggest existential threat' to the country.

Government structure: The 2008 constitution, which the fourth king pressed on a reluctant population — one of the world's youngest democracies — provides for a 47-seat National Assembly, a National Council, and a king who, for willful violation of the constitution or permanent mental incapacity, can be made to abdicate by a three-fourths vote of parliament in joint sitting, confirmed in a national referendum. Politics is orderly, with power alternating between parties and the monarchy above the fray. Freedom House has rated Bhutan Free since 2025.

Economy and trade: A roughly $3 billion economy, dependent on hydropower exports to India (the largest export and revenue source), tourism under a deliberately restrictive high-fee policy, and agriculture. Imports of fuel, machinery, and food come mostly from India, which accounts for about 80% of trade and provides substantial aid; India also builds and finances Bhutan's dams. Bhutan's economy is the most India-dependent in the region by design; the bitcoin its state investment company mined with cheap hydropower has shrunk sharply since 2024, by blockchain analysts' count.

Closest partners: India, by treaty and design: the 2007 friendship treaty, which replaced a 1949 clause under which Bhutan was 'guided by the advice' of India in its external relations, commits the two to cooperate closely on their national interests and not to let their territory be used against each other; India trains Bhutan's army, buys its hydropower — exports from the new Punatsangchhu-II plant began in September 2025 — and provides much of its development budget. Bhutan has diplomatic relations with 61 UN members and the EU but with none of the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, though it conducts its own boundary talks with China.

Principal rivalries and disputes: China, over an unresolved border that includes the Doklam plateau, where Indian and Chinese troops faced off in 2017 on Bhutan's behalf; Beijing has been building villages in disputed areas and pressing Bhutan for a settlement that India resists. The two sides' boundary experts met for a 15th round in Beijing in spring 2026 under a 2021 'three-step roadmap' toward demarcation. Domestically, youth emigration — some 25,000 Bhutanese received Australian student visas in the two years to mid-2024, more than 3% of the population — is the government's central concern.

6c. Buffers Between Giants

Nepal and Bhutan are the two Himalayan states wedged between India and China, and their histories are two different answers to that position. Bhutan chose India and got stability, subsidy, and a guided democracy in return. Nepal chose balance, playing the two against each other, and got a generation of chaotic coalition politics that its youth finally overturned in 2025. Whether Balen Shah's Nepal keeps balancing or tilts — the Lipulekh trade route shows how little either giant consults it — and whether Bhutan's China border settlement comes at India's expense are the questions the giants are watching.

Module 7 — Myanmar

The State in Civil War



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Thant Myint-U, *The Hidden History of Burma*; International Crisis Group Myanmar reports

7a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Min Aung Hlaing, 70 — in power since February 2021 (5.7 years); led the February 2021 coup; president since April 10, 2026, after a military-run election
Army chief	General Ye Win Oo, about 60 (reported as 60 in March 2026) — in office since March 2026 (0.5 years); former head of military intelligence
System	Military-dominated republic under the 2008 constitution, in civil war since 2021
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	55.2 million (2026)
Land area	652,670 km² (252,000 sq mi)
Religion	Buddhist 87.9%, Christian 6.2%, Muslim 4.3% of those counted in 2014, a census that missed about 1.2 million people, most of them Rohingya Muslims
People	Officially 135 'national races'; Bamar about two-thirds, with Shan, Karen, Rakhine, Mon, Kachin, Chin, and others (estimates; the census's ethnic data were never published); median age 31; 33% urban
Minimum wage	7,800 kyat a day since October 2025, a 4,800 base plus allowances (about $3.70 at the central bank's official 2,100 kyat = $1; far less at the market rate, which could not be confirmed for October 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Burma was a British colony until 1948, and a 1962 coup began five decades of military rule that isolated one of Asia's richest countries into one of its poorest. A 1988 uprising was crushed; Aung San

Suu Kyi's party won a 1990 election the generals ignored. A partial opening from 2011 led to her government in 2016, which then presided over the 2017 expulsion of 700,000 Rohingya Muslims to Bangladesh in what UN investigators called genocide. The army seized power again in February 2021, triggering a nationwide armed resistance that, allied with ethnic armies, took much of the country's territory by 2024.

Current leadership: President Min Aung Hlaing ruled as junta chief until a military-managed election in December 2025 and January 2026 — boycotted or barred to the opposition and held only in areas the army controlled — gave the military's Union Solidarity and Development Party 231 of the 263 lower-house seats contested. The new parliament elected him president on April 3, 2026; he had handed command of the army to General Ye Win Oo on March 30. The National Unity Government directs the People's Defence Forces from exile and resistance-held areas; Aung San Suu Kyi, 81, was moved from prison to house arrest in Naypyidaw in April 2026, and an amnesty cut her 27-year sentence by a sixth.

Government structure: The 2008 military-drafted constitution, which reserves a quarter of parliamentary seats and the security ministries for the army, has been restored in form to give military rule a civilian face. In practice the state is fragmented: the army holds the central lowlands, major cities, and most of the coast, while ethnic armed organizations — the Arakan Army in Rakhine, the Kachin Independence Army, the Karen and Shan forces — and the People's Defence Forces hold much of the periphery and border regions. The Arakan Army holds most of Rakhine State, including the border with Bangladesh, though the state capital, Sittwe, and the Chinese-backed port site at Kyaukphyu remain in the army's hands.

Economy and trade: A roughly $65 billion economy that has contracted sharply since the 2021 coup and was hit again by the March 2025 earthquake near Mandalay, with the currency collapsed and much of the country in conflict. Exports are led by natural gas (to Thailand and China), garments, rice, jade and gems (the illicit jade trade with China is worth billions), and rare earths (Myanmar is a major supplier to China from mines in rebel-held Kachin State); imports by fuel, machinery, and Chinese goods. Top trading partners: China (dominant), Thailand, Singapore, and India. Conflict has made Myanmar the world's largest opium producer — the UN counted 53,100 hectares of poppy in 2025, up 17%, as Afghanistan's crop kept falling — and a hub for online scam compounds, which the army raided under Chinese and Thai pressure in 2025.

Closest partners: China, the military's most important partner — arms, diplomatic cover, the Kyaukphyu port and pipeline corridor to Yunnan — which also keeps ties to the ethnic armies on its border and pressed several to hand back towns they had taken, among them Lashio. Russia, the other arms supplier, whose president congratulated Min Aung Hlaing on the election result. India, which has engaged the military pragmatically to secure its own border and counter China, and whose invitation brought the new president on his first foreign visit. Thailand, whose prime minister was the first Southeast Asian leader to congratulate him; ASEAN, which has not agreed on whether to recognize the new government.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The resistance — the National Unity Government, the People's Defence Forces, and the ethnic armies — in a war that has displaced more than three million people and killed tens of thousands; the army has been regaining ground, and by mid-2026 had retaken 22 of the 101 towns it lost after the coup. The Arakan Army has created a new authority on the Bangladesh border with its own Rohingya policy. Bangladesh, over the Rohingya refugees, and The Gambia, whose genocide case against Myanmar was heard on its merits at the International Court of Justice in January 2026. ASEAN, which has kept Myanmar's leader out of its summits since 2021 and whose 2021 peace plan the military ignored. Western governments, which sanction the military and have not endorsed the election.

7b. The Election as Strategy

The 2025-26 election was not an attempt to restore democracy but to exit the junta: by holding a vote in the territory it controlled, with the main opposition party dissolved and its leader in detention, the army converted Min Aung Hlaing from coup leader to president under a constitution the military wrote. The point was recognition, and the strategy has partly worked, giving neighbors who wanted to deal with Naypyidaw a civilian pretext. On the ground the war goes on.

Module 8 — The Alliance Map

India's Neighborhood, China's Ring, the Quad & the Gulf

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Observer Research Foundation (Delhi); Carnegie India; Lowy Institute Asia Power Index

8a. The Absence of a Regional Bloc

South Asia is among the least integrated regions on earth. SAARC, founded in 1985, has been paralyzed since 2014 by India-Pakistan hostility and has held no summit since; intra-regional trade is around 5% of the region's total, against about a quarter in Southeast Asia. In 2025 China and Pakistan floated a new grouping with Bangladesh that would leave India out, but none has formed. India's answer has been BIMSTEC, the Bay of Bengal grouping of India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, and Thailand, which excludes Pakistan — but Bangladesh's turn and Myanmar's war have undercut it, and Bangladesh has chaired it since April 2025. The region's states relate to India bilaterally and to each other barely at all.

8b. China's Ring

China's presence is the region's other organizing fact: CPEC and the Gwadar port in Pakistan, Hambantota in Sri Lanka, port and infrastructure projects in Bangladesh and the Maldives, the Kyaukphyu corridor through Myanmar, Belt and Road projects in Nepal, and border pressure on Bhutan and India. Beijing is the largest trading partner of Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Myanmar, India's largest source of imports, and the largest bilateral creditor of Pakistan and Sri Lanka. It offers every smaller state an alternative to Indian dominance, which is why each of them — even Bhutan, cautiously — has used it. India cannot match China's money; it relies on proximity, culture, and the fact that every neighbor knows China's interest is transactional.

8c. India's Partnerships

• **The Quad** — India, the US, Japan, and Australia, the framework for balancing China in the Indo-Pacific, focused on maritime security and technology; India is its only member without a US alliance and keeps it short of one. Its leaders have not met since 2024 — the summit India was due to host in 2025 has not been held — though its foreign ministers met in New Delhi in May 2026.

• **The United States** — India's most important partner on China, defense, and technology, but a relationship Delhi keeps deliberately non-exclusive and that 2025-26 strained: tariffs, Washington's warmth toward Pakistan's army chief, and India's purchases of Russian oil.

• **Russia** — the arms supplier India will not abandon and, for most of the time since 2022, its largest source of oil; the relationship that most distinguishes India from a Western ally.

• **France, Japan, Israel, the UAE, and the European Union** — defense, technology, investment, and trade partners in India's multi-aligned strategy; the EU free trade agreement, concluded in January 2026, awaits signature.

• **The Gulf states** — where some nine million Indians and millions more from Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka worked before the 2026 war: the region's largest employer and remittance source, and increasingly its financier and bailout provider. The 2026 Iran war sent nearly a million Indians home

by mid-April.

8d. The Region's Other Alignments

Pakistan's alliance with China and its defense pacts with Saudi Arabia (2025) and with Saudi Arabia and Turkey together (2026); Bangladesh's tentative triangle with Pakistan and China, first convened in Kunming in June 2025; Myanmar's dependence on China and Russia, and its new opening to India; Bhutan's treaty with India; and the island states' oscillation. The 2026 Iran war touched the region through Pakistan's mediation, the Gulf workers' exposure, fuel shortages from India to Sri Lanka, and India's oil supply, but South Asia's alignments are shaped less by the Middle East than by the single question of India versus China — and, since 2025, by the reopened question of India versus Pakistan.

Module 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, CrisisWatch; Stimson Center South Asia program

9a. Kashmir After 2025

The May 2025 war (Module 2) ended the assumption that India and Pakistan could manage their rivalry below the threshold of open conflict. The equilibrium since is worse than before: Pakistan's army empowered and confident of American favor, and India's deterrent credibility tied to its declared policy of treating the next major attack as an act of war. Kashmir remains the trigger, and neither side has changed the policies that make the next trigger likely.

9b. The Indus

India's suspension of the 1960 treaty — the one agreement that survived every previous war — puts the rivers on which 80% of Pakistan's irrigated agriculture depends under India's unilateral discretion. India cannot yet physically stop the flow at scale, but it can withhold flood data, alter the timing of releases, and build storage. Water has moved from the region's background to its most dangerous foreground, and the Himalayan rivers that India and China both dam — the Brahmaputra above all, where China began building the world's largest hydropower project in July 2025 — extend the same logic to the India-China frontier.

9c. Bangladesh's Realignment

Eight months in, the BNP government has chosen distance from India (Module 4). Whether that settles into a balanced relationship with India, Pakistan, and China or hardens into the anti-Indian alignment that the uprising's anger and the Islamist resurgence point toward depends above all on Hasina's extradition and on the Ganges Water Treaty; meanwhile the economy faces graduation from least-developed-country status unless the General Assembly confirms the delay. India's eastern flank, and the Bay of Bengal's status, depend on the answer.

9d. Myanmar's Fragmentation

The military's presidential conversion has not ended the war, but the war has shifted: the army has recovered ground (Module 7). China manages the outcome to protect its corridor. A Myanmar that fragments into ethnic statelets, a Rohingya population with no state willing to take it, and the scam compounds and opium that criminal networks run from the borderlands are the region's spillover risks — for Bangladesh, India's northeast, and Thailand.

9e. The India-China Border and the Ocean

The 2020 Galwan clash, the October 2024 patrol agreement, and China's continued building along the line leave the Himalayan frontier armed and unresolved, even as the political thaw advanced (Module 2). At sea, China's ports ring India, and India's response is the region's slowest-moving but largest contest. The 2026 Iran war — tankers struck as late as September 29 — showed how fast the Indian Ocean's energy lanes can be disrupted; the India-China contest is about who controls them in the next crisis.

9f. The Last Word

The throughline of all nine modules: this is a region with one center and no system. India's weight defines everything, but it has failed to build the institutions — trade, security, water — that would turn dominance into order, and its neighbors have used China to escape it. The result is a region where street uprisings toppled governments, two nuclear powers fought a war, the largest state's closest partner turned to tariffs against it, and the state with the most people and the fastest growth is surrounded by countries hedging against it. India's rise is real; whether it produces a South Asian order or merely a South Asian anxiety is the question this course leaves open.

Key Points

South Asia & the Indian Ocean Rim

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Bhutan	Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck	King	46	December 2006	19.8
India	Narendra Modi	Prime Minister	76	May 2014	12.4
Myanmar	Min Aung Hlaing	President	70	February 2021	5.7
Maldives	Mohamed Muizzu	President	48	November 2023	2.9
Pakistan	Shehbaz Sharif	Prime Minister	75	March 2024	2.6
Sri Lanka	Anura Kumara Dissanayake	President	57	September 2024	2.0
Bangladesh	Tarique Rahman	Prime Minister	60	February 2026	0.6
Nepal	Balendra Shah	Prime Minister	36	March 2026	0.5

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's current continuous tenure. India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Nepal are parliamentary: the prime minister leads and the president is ceremonial, though in Pakistan the army chief, Field Marshal Asim Munir, is the dominant power. Sri Lanka's and the Maldives' presidents lead; Bhutan's king is head of state and its prime minister, Tshering Tobgay, heads the government. Min Aung Hlaing's tenure counts from the February 2021 coup; he became president in April 2026. Shehbaz Sharif was also prime minister in 2022–23.

The Takeaways

• The region has one gravitational center and no system: India has nearly three-quarters of its people and more than three-quarters of its output, and every neighbor but Bhutan uses someone else — China, the Gulf, America — to balance it.

• India is the most populous country on earth (nearly 1.48 billion) and the fastest-growing large economy (7.7% in the year to March 2026), though sixth by GDP on the IMF's April figures after a statistical revision and a weaker rupee (about 96 per dollar by October) — hedging as it always has through a year of American tariffs (50%, then 10% on a little over half its US-bound exports), record Russian oil bought under a US waiver during the Iran war, and Xi Jinping at its BRICS summit.

• The May 2025 India-Pakistan war was the first since 1999, and India's suspension of the Indus Waters Treaty, still in force, added water to a nuclear rivalry; Pakistan's real executive is Field Marshal Asim Munir, made Chief of Defence Forces with lifelong immunity in 2025, with the most popular politician in prison, the economy under the IMF, and a second war, against the Afghan Taliban, on its western border.

• Delimitation is India's next fight: the census now under way ends the 1971 seat freeze, and on a 2019 projection reapportionment would move about 21 seats to Uttar Pradesh and Bihar and cost the five southern states about 24; the government's April 2026 bid to enlarge the house to 850 seats on the 2011 census failed in the Lok Sabha, 298 to 230.

• Bangladesh and Nepal carried youth uprisings to the ballot box: the BNP's Tarique Rahman took office in February 2026 with Hasina's party banned and Hasina sentenced to death in absentia, then installed his party's own president in August; Nepal's RSP won a single-party majority in March, and Oli, the prime minister the uprising toppled, was arrested the day after Balen Shah took office.

• Sri Lanka's recovery under the IMF survived a cyclone that killed more than 600 and an oil shock that brought back fuel quotas; the Maldives under Muizzu swung from India to China and back toward India, and lost a referendum in April 2026; Hambantota, leased to China, and the Maldives, courted by both, are the ocean's prizes.

• Myanmar's junta chief became president in April 2026 through a military-run election; the army has retaken 22 of the 101 towns it lost, some of them handed back under Chinese pressure, but the Arakan Army holds most of Rakhine and the resistance much of the periphery — a state that has stopped being one.

• Bhutan, rated Free, and Nepal live on India's border and China's offers: Bhutan negotiates its border with Beijing while bound closely to Delhi, Nepal protested in vain as India and China reopened the Lipulekh pass to trade, and the Himalayan glaciers' retreat is the physical fact beneath every treaty.

• The Indian Ocean is the region's strategic geography — Malacca at one end, the Gulf's oil at the other, China's ports and India's navy between — and the 2026 Iran war showed the rim's exposure: India imports about 88% of its crude, Sri Lanka rationed fuel, nearly a million Indians left the Gulf, and Pakistan became a main channel between Washington and Tehran.

• The region's 2026 lesson: the young removed governments where states were corrupt, and voters then chose outsiders in Sri Lanka and Nepal and the old opposition in Bangladesh, but the forces that shape the region did not change with them — the army in Pakistan, the military in Myanmar, the rivers that India and China dam, and the Gulf on which every economy here depends.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. Who is Bangladesh's president as of October 2026?

A) Mohammed Shahabuddin, re-elected by parliament in 2026
B) Muhammad Yunus, kept on after the election
C) Mirza Fakhrul Islam Alamgir, elected by parliament in August 2026
D) Shafiqur Rahman of Jamaat-e-Islami

2. How did Pakistan's 27th Amendment change the army chief's position?

A) Placed his budget and promotions under civilian control
B) Abolished his post and moved its powers to the prime minister
C) Made him president for a five-year term, replacing Zardari
D) Made him commander of all three armed services

3. Which country has chaired BIMSTEC since April 2025?

A) India
B) Bangladesh
C) Thailand, its founding host
D) Sri Lanka, which hosted the 2022 summit

4. What happened to the Indian government's April 2026 bill to enlarge the Lok Sabha to 850 seats?

A) It won a majority but fell short of two-thirds
B) It passed, effective 2029
C) The Supreme Court struck it down
D) It passed both houses and awaits the census to take effect

5. Where did Myanmar's new president make his first foreign visit?

A) China
B) India, at Prime Minister Modi's invitation
C) Russia
D) Thailand, its eastern neighbor

6. What US tariff has applied to Indian goods since late July 2026?

A) None, under a signed trade deal
B) 50%, including the Russian-oil penalty
C) 25% on all goods except pharmaceuticals, chips, and smartphones
D) 10%, on a little over half of India's exports to the US

7. What happens to the India-Bangladesh Ganges Water Treaty in December 2026?

A) China joins it
B) It is replaced by a Teesta agreement signed in 2025
C) It expires, unrenewed so far
D) It enters into force after a decade of delays

8. Which of the eight states does Freedom House rate Free?

A) Bhutan
B) Sri Lanka
C) Bangladesh
D) The Maldives

9. What did the 2026 Iran war bring to Sri Lanka?

A) A second sovereign default and a new IMF bailout
B) Its tea exports to Iran doubled under a barter deal
C) Fuel quotas returned and inflation rose
D) Its navy joined the US blockade of Iranian ports

10. What happened to K.P. Sharma Oli the day after Balen Shah took office?

A) He became president
B) He fled to India
C) He was named deputy prime minister in a unity cabinet
D) He was arrested over the protest killings

11. Which force still holds Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine State?

A) Myanmar's military
B) The Arakan Army
C) The Kachin Independence Army
D) The National Unity Government's forces

12. What has Bangladesh asked the UN to delay?

A) Rohingya repatriation
B) Its graduation from least-developed-country status
C) Its next election
D) Repayment of its loans to China

13. Which leader in this course has held his position longest?

A) Narendra Modi
B) Min Aung Hlaing
C) Bhutan's King Jigme Khesar
D) Ram Chandra Paudel, Nepal's president

14. Which country brokered the April 2026 ceasefire between the US and Iran?

A) Oman
B) Qatar
C) India, through its Chabahar port talks
D) Pakistan, which also hosted the talks that followed

15. How does this course sum up South Asia?

A) A Chinese ring
B) One center and no system
C) Two blocs balanced by Washington
D) A shared market under India's leadership

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. C 2. D 3. B 4. A 5. B 6. D 7. C 8. A 9. C 10. D 11. A 12. B 13. C 14. D 15. B

East Asia & the South China Sea

Figures current as of October 2026

East Asia and the South China Sea — China, Japan, the Koreas, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia's ten: leaders, governments, economies, alliances, and the region's live flashpoints.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: One Common Factor

Goal: Establish China as the variable every other state's policy is a function of, and introduce the South China Sea and the disputes that recur.

Covers the first island chain, the nine-dash line, the hedging of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), the US alliance system, and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — China

Goal: Profile the region's dominant power in depth.

The numbers, Xi's party-state and the purge of the military command, the economy's structure with the export surge worked, the 2025-26 record from the rare-earth halt to the truce, and the strait question.

MODULE 3 — Japan

Goal: Profile the region's second power in depth.

The numbers, Takaichi's supermajority, the exit from deflation and the confrontation with China, the demographic arithmetic worked, the rearmament, and the question of insuring rather than choosing.

MODULE 4 — The Two Koreas

Goal: Profile the peninsula's divided states in depth.

South Korea's numbers and its restored democracy, North Korea's nuclear dynasty and Russian alliance in a table, the peninsula in 2026, and the South's question of the bomb.

MODULE 5 — Taiwan

Goal: Profile the island at the center of the region's most dangerous dispute, in depth.

The numbers, the divided government, the silicon shield priced by the 2026 trade agreement and its energy limits, a blockade's first month worked, the 2025-26 record, and the strait's question.

MODULE 6 — The Philippines & Vietnam (the Frontline Claimants)

Goal: Profile the two South China Sea claimants that push back hardest.

Covers the Marcos-Duterte war and the American alliance, and To Lam's consolidation of Vietnamese power.

MODULE 7 — Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei (Maritime Southeast Asia)

Goal: Profile the four states of the Malay archipelago.

Covers Prabowo's Indonesia, Anwar's Malaysia, Wong's Singapore, and Brunei's silent sultanate.

MODULE 8 — Thailand, Cambodia, Laos & Timor-Leste (the Mainland and the Newest Member)

Goal: Profile the remaining states, and point to Myanmar.

Covers Thailand's restored establishment and its border war with Cambodia, Cambodia's dynasty and Chinese base, Laos's debt dependence, and ASEAN's eleventh member.

MODULE 9 — The Alliance Map: US Alliances, ASEAN, China's Partners & the Quad

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's blocs.

Covers the hub-and-spokes alliances, the submarine pact of Australia, the UK, and the US (AUKUS) and the Quad, ASEAN's centrality and limits, and China's partners.

MODULE 10 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers Taiwan, the South China Sea, the Japan-China confrontation, the Korean peninsula and Russia, the trade war's truce, and the mainland's wars.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

The parties, institutions, and abbreviations the modules rely on are defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country or countries each one belongs to or concerns, how many of the fifteen, or 'Region-wide'; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Institutions, Alliances, and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
Ten of the 15	ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations)	The regional organization of the Southeast Asian states, which decides by consensus.
Region-wide	Code of conduct	The rules for behavior in the South China Sea under negotiation between ASEAN and China.
Region-wide	Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue)	The security dialogue of the US, Japan, Australia, and India.
Region-wide	AUKUS (Australia, the UK, and the US)	The 2021 pact under which the US and the UK help Australia acquire nuclear-powered submarines and share military technology.
Region-wide	RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership)	The free-trade pact of ASEAN, China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, and New Zealand.
Region-wide	APEC (Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation)	The forum of 21 Pacific Rim economies, whose leaders meet each year.
Region-wide	Belt and Road Initiative	China's program of loans and contracts for ports, railways, and power plants abroad.
Indonesia, Malaysia	BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)	The bloc named for its first five members, since expanded.
Philippines	International Criminal Court	The court in The Hague that tries individuals for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.
Philippines	Mutual Defense Treaty; EDCA (Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement)	The US-Philippine alliance treaty, and the agreement giving US forces rotational access to Philippine military sites.
Taiwan	Taiwan Relations Act	The 1979 US law that governs relations with Taiwan and commits the US to supply it with defensive arms, without a guarantee to defend it.
Japan	Article 9	The clause of Japan's postwar constitution renouncing war, reinterpreted since 2014 to allow collective self-defense.
Region-wide	Freedom House	The US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free, with a score out of 100.
Region-wide	V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy)	The Swedish-based research project that classifies regimes on a scale from liberal democracy to closed autocracy.

Governments, Parties, and Parliaments

Country	Name	Who or what
China, North Korea, Vietnam, Laos	General secretary	The head of a ruling communist party, the top post in each of the four.
China	Central Military Commission	The party body, chaired by Xi Jinping, that commands the armed forces.
China	People's Liberation Army; Party Congress	China's armed forces, commanded by the Communist Party, and the party's national congress, held every five years, which chooses its leadership.
Japan	Diet	Japan's parliament: the House of Representatives and the House of Councillors.
Japan	LDP (Liberal Democratic Party)	Japan's dominant conservative party.
Japan	Komeito; Ishin (Japan Innovation Party)	The Buddhist-backed party long allied with the LDP, and the Osaka-based reformist party.
Japan	Centrist Reform Alliance; Sanseito	The opposition party formed by the merger of the Constitutional Democrats and Komeito, and the populist party that campaigns against immigration.
South Korea	Democratic Party; People Power Party	South Korea's main progressive and conservative parties.
South Korea	Chaebol	The family-controlled conglomerates, such as Samsung and Hyundai, that dominate South Korea's economy.
North Korea	Workers' Party of Korea	North Korea's ruling party.
Taiwan	DPP (Democratic Progressive Party)	Lai's party, rooted in the movement for democracy and a Taiwanese identity.
Taiwan	KMT (Kuomintang)	The Nationalist party that ruled China until 1949 and Taiwan without a break until 2000, which favors closer ties with Beijing.
Taiwan	TPP (Taiwan People's Party)	The third party, founded in 2019 by Ko Wen-je.
Taiwan	Legislative Yuan	Taiwan's parliament.
Indonesia	Gerindra	Prabowo's party, the Great Indonesia Movement Party.
Malaysia	Pakatan Harapan; People's Justice Party	Anwar's multiethnic reformist alliance and the party at its core.
Malaysia	UMNO (United Malays National Organisation)	Malaysia's main Malay nationalist party.
Singapore	People's Action Party	Singapore's ruling party.
Thailand	Bhumjaithai; Pheu Thai; People's Party	Anutin's conservative party; the Shinawatra family's populist party; and the reformist party.
Cambodia	Cambodian People's Party; FUNCINPEC (the French initials of the National United Front for an Independent, Neutral, Peaceful, and Cooperative Cambodia)	The ruling party, and the royalist party.
Cambodia	Candlelight Party	Cambodia's main opposition party.
Laos	Lao People's Revolutionary Party	The ruling communist party.
Timor-Leste	National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction	Gusmão's party.

Country	Name	Who or what
Myanmar	USDP (Union Solidarity and Development Party)	The party of Myanmar's military.

Places, Companies, and Terms

Country	Name	Who or what
Region-wide	AI (artificial intelligence)	Software that learns from data to perform tasks such as writing, translation, and image recognition.
Region-wide	Spratly and Paracel Islands; Scarborough Shoal; Second Thomas Shoal	The disputed island groups and reefs of the South China Sea.
Japan	Senkaku Islands	Japanese-administered islands in the East China Sea that China claims as the Diaoyu.
Philippines	Typhon; Balikatan	The US Army's mobile launcher for medium-range missiles, and the annual US-Philippine military exercise.
Taiwan	TSMC (Taiwan Semiconductor Manufacturing Company)	The world's largest contract chipmaker.
Taiwan	NT (New Taiwan) dollar	Taiwan's currency, written NT$.
South Korea	Samsung; SK (Sunkyong) Hynix	South Korea's two memory-chip makers, the world's largest.
Region-wide	HBM (high-bandwidth memory)	Stacked memory chips used in AI accelerators.
Region-wide	Nvidia	The American maker of the chips that train and run most AI models.
China	BYD (Build Your Dreams); CATL (Contemporary Amperex Technology)	China's largest electric-vehicle maker and the world's largest battery maker.
China	DeepSeek; Qwen	Chinese AI models, from a Hangzhou start-up and from Alibaba.
Indonesia	Danantara	Indonesia's sovereign investment fund.
Indonesia	RKAB (Rencana Kerja dan Anggaran Biaya)	The annual work plan and budget that sets each Indonesian mine's production quota.
Cambodia	Prince Group	A Cambodian conglomerate that Western governments accuse of running scam compounds.
Timor-Leste	Greater Sunrise	The offshore gas field between Timor-Leste and Australia.
Thailand	Lese-majeste law	Thailand's law against insulting the monarchy.
North Korea	Songbun	North Korea's hereditary caste system, which ranks families by their loyalty to the regime.
Region-wide	Carry trade	Borrowing in a low-interest currency, such as the yen, to invest in higher-yielding assets elsewhere.
Region-wide	LNG (liquefied natural gas)	Gas chilled to liquid so it can be shipped by tanker.
Region-wide	The 2026 Iran war	The war the US and Israel launched on Iran in February 2026, which disrupted shipping through the Strait of Hormuz.
Region-wide	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year, converted at market exchange rates unless stated at purchasing-power parity, which adjusts for differences in prices.

Module 1 — Foundations

One Common Factor



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Bill Hayton, *The South China Sea: The Struggle for Power in Asia*; Rush Doshi, *The Long Game*

1a. China as the Variable

Every state in this course has a China policy, and in most of them it is the foreign policy. China is the largest trading partner of nearly all of them, the security threat to several, the patron of a few, and the claimant of one. The region has no shared institution that includes China as a member and constrains it — ASEAN

excludes it, the US alliances oppose it — which means each state manages China alone, and the pattern of how they do so is the map of the region. This course reads every country through that relationship first.

1b. The South China Sea

China claims nearly the entire sea within its 'nine-dash line,' a claim a 2016 international tribunal ruled has no legal basis and which China ignores. It has built and militarized seven artificial islands in the Spratlys, seized the Scarborough Shoal from the Philippines, and uses a coast guard and maritime militia to enforce its claim against Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia. Through the sea pass roughly a third of global shipping and most of Northeast Asia's oil; beneath it lie oil, gas, and the region's richest fisheries. The Philippines contests China's actions openly, in confrontations China has turned violent; Vietnam contests them quietly; Malaysia and Brunei mostly stay silent; Indonesia denies it has a dispute (7a).

1c. The First Island Chain

From Japan through Okinawa, Taiwan, and the Philippines to Borneo, a chain of islands encloses China's coast and separates its navy from the open Pacific. Every one of those islands is held by a US ally or partner, which is why China regards them as a containment line and why Taiwan — the chain's center — is the decisive link: a China that held Taiwan would break out into the Pacific and could cut Japan's and Korea's sea lanes. This geography explains the region's alliance structure better than any ideology.

1d. The Membership Map

- **US treaty allies (4 in this course):** Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, and Thailand, plus Australia outside it; Taiwan and Singapore are partners without treaties.
- **ASEAN (11):** all of Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste the newest member (8d), a consensus-bound organization that includes China's closest partners and its sharpest opponents and therefore rarely takes a position China opposes.
- **China's partners:** North Korea (treaty ally), Cambodia and Laos (dependents), and, in different degrees, Brunei, Malaysia, and Thailand.
- **The nuclear powers:** China and North Korea; Japan and South Korea under the American nuclear umbrella, and Taiwan under the strategic ambiguity of the Taiwan Relations Act.
- **Referenced but not profiled:** Myanmar, an ASEAN member (8e), and Australia, an American ally and AUKUS partner.

1e. The Disputes That Recur

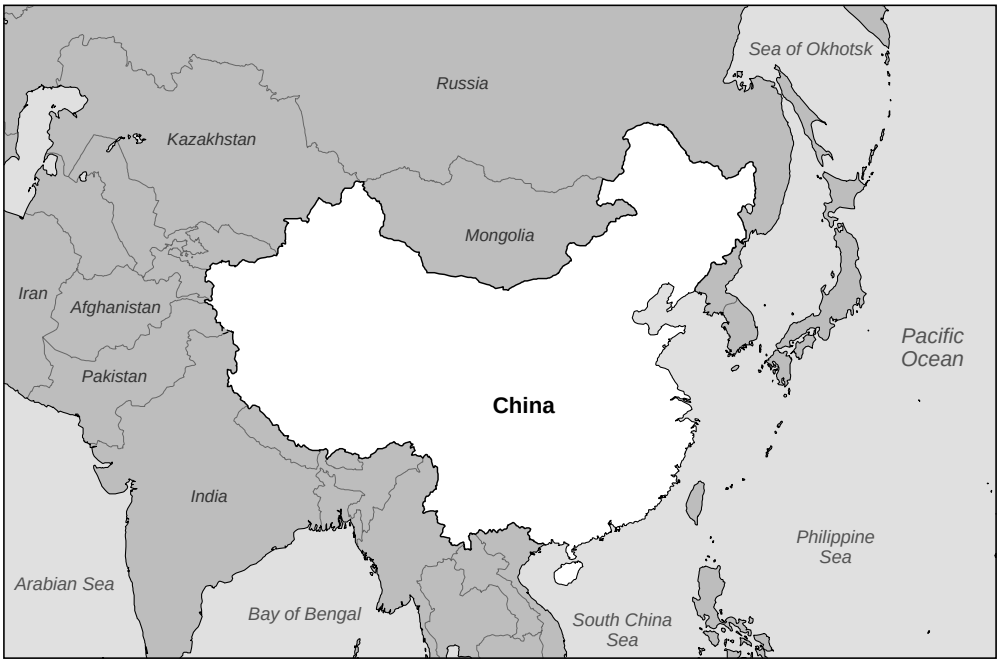
Six issues run through the course. Taiwan, the region's most dangerous flashpoint (Modules 2, 3, 5, 9, 10). The South China Sea claims (Modules 6, 7, 9, 10). The Japan-China confrontation that has sharpened since 2025 (Modules 2, 3, 10). The Korean peninsula's nuclear standoff and North Korea's alignment with Russia (Modules 4, 10). The US-China economic war — tariffs, export controls, and decoupling — which has made Vietnam, Malaysia, and others both beneficiaries and hostages (Modules 2, 6, 7, 9, 10). And the mainland's wars: Thailand and Cambodia's border fighting and Myanmar's civil war (Modules 8, 10).

1f. How to Read the Profiles

Each country opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office and the second figure who matters — the premier where a party leader or president governs, the monarch or president where a prime minister does, the heir in Brunei, and in the Philippines and Indonesia the vice president — then the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religions with their shares, the main ethnic or language groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars where the law sets one. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026; land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or, where there is none, from registers or published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states. China, Japan, the two Koreas, and Taiwan follow the table with a profile in depth — the numbers, the regime, the economy, the 2025-26 record, and, for all but the Koreas, a worked example. The ten Southeast Asian states follow it with a brief history and five headings: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes, and Indonesia and Vietnam with a table of numbers and a worked example. Four of the fifteen are rated Free, four Partly Free, and seven Not Free. The Who's Who before this module defines the parties, institutions, and abbreviations the profiles rely on, and the Key Points page ranks the leaders by time in office, from Brunei's sultan to Japan's prime minister.

Module 2 — China

The Region's Dominant Power, in Depth



Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Kevin Rudd, *On Xi Jinping*

Reference: The International Monetary Fund's Article IV consultations for China; the National Bureau of Statistics' releases; the General Administration of Customs' trade data; the Pentagon's annual China military-power report; the Congressional Research Service on the export controls and the trade truce

2a. The Numbers

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Xi Jinping, General Secretary of the Communist Party and President, 73 — in office since November 2012 (13.9 years)
Head of government	Premier Li Qiang, 67 (born July 1959; the day is unpublished) — in office since March 2023 (3.6 years)
System	One-party state under the Communist Party
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	1.41 billion (2026)
Land area	9,388,211 km² (3,624,810 sq mi)
Religion	No census question; surveys find about a tenth of adults formally religious (Buddhist about 4%, Christian about 2%, Muslim about 1%), with folk practice far wider (estimates)
People	Han 91.1%; 55 recognized minorities 8.9%, the largest the Zhuang, Uyghurs, and Hui (2020 census); median age 42; 67% urban
Minimum wage	Set by province: Shanghai's, the highest, 2,740 yuan a month since July 2025 ($409 at about 6.70 yuan = $1, October 6, 2026); Beijing's 2,540 since September 2025

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Falling since 2022: 1.405 billion at the end of 2025 by the official count, down 3.39 million in the year, with a record-low 7.92 million births; India larger since 2023	Fertility about 1.0; 23% aged 60 and over; the workforce shrinking
GDP	140.2 trillion yuan in 2025, about $20 trillion (second); about $40 trillion at purchasing-power parity (first)	About 18% of world output at market rates; per head about $14,000
Growth	5.0% in 2025; 4.7% in the first half of 2026 (4.3% in the second quarter)	The 2026 target cut to 4.5-5%, the first below 5%; the property drag since 2021
Prices	Consumer prices up 0.8% and producer prices up 3.8% in August 2026, after three years of falling factory prices	Factory deflation broken by the oil and metals shock of 2026; domestic demand still weak
Public debt	~90% of GDP including local governments' $10T; the hidden financing vehicles	The central government modest; the localities the problem
Military	An official budget of 1.91 trillion yuan for 2026 (about $280 billion, up 7%), against outside estimates near $320 billion (second); the world's largest navy by hull count (370-plus ships); about 600 nuclear warheads, heading toward 1,000 by 2030	The Pentagon's 2025 report; the purges (2b)
Regime (V-Dem)	Closed autocracy	Freedom House 9/100
Reserves and currency	Over $3 trillion of reserves; the yuan, managed near 7.1-7.3 to the dollar through the tariff war, stronger than 7 in 2026	Held by the daily fix and capital controls
Energy	75% of oil imported (Russia, Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq the sources); the world's largest coal user and the largest producer of wind turbines	The Hormuz shock's largest Asian exposure; a 2035 climate pledge to cut emissions 7-10%

2b. Regime and Leader

China is a Leninist party-state — 100 million Communist Party members, a cadre system that promotes by measured performance, and a security apparatus that has built the world's most complete surveillance state — personalized since 2012 by Xi Jinping, who removed term limits in 2018, wrote his thought into the constitution, and expects a fourth term as general secretary. He has purged the military's leadership in waves: the rocket force in 2023-24, then five of the six generals he named to the Central Military Commission in 2022, both vice-chairmen among them, so that the commission is down to Xi and a single vice-chairman, Zhang Shengmin (2d); Bloomberg counted at least 14 of the 79 generals Xi had promoted ousted by October 2025. The system's strengths are the ones that built four decades of growth — state direction of credit, an industrial policy that has made China the world's manufacturer (2c), and a meritocratic bureaucracy — and its weaknesses are the ones Xi's personalization has exposed: no exit for bad decisions (the 2022 lockdowns), information that distorts as it rises, and a succession question with no mechanism. The politics of 2026 are those of an economy that stopped delivering the growth the bargain rested on, answered with nationalism, the export weapon, and control.

2c. The Economy's Structure

Sector	Share of GDP	Position	2025-26
Manufacturing	~27% (a third of the world's manufacturing output)	The world's factory: steel (55%), ships (50%), solar (80%), batteries (75%), electric vehicles (60% of world production), electronics	The export surge (the worked example below)
Property and construction	~15% (from 25% at the 2021 peak)	The collapse: sales down 50%, prices down 20-30%, 60 million unsold units; a quarter of household wealth erased	The whitelist completions; the developers' defaults (Evergrande's founder sentenced to life in August 2026); the local governments' lost land revenue
Services and consumption	~55% (consumption ~40% of GDP against 60%-plus in the West)	The structural weakness: households save 35% of income; the safety net thin	The 2025-26 consumption subsidies
Technology and AI	Rising	DeepSeek, Qwen, Huawei's Ascend chips, BYD, CATL; the open-weight frontier; the chip industry a generation behind (no extreme-ultraviolet lithography; no HBM at scale)	The chip war's managed rivalry; Huawei's AI chips gaining at home
State finance	The state banks' $60T of assets; the local governments' debt (2a)	The property collapse's losses absorbed slowly; the Big Fund's $47B for chips	Rate cuts into a liquidity trap
External	Exports a sixth of the world's; the largest trading partner of 120 countries; the Belt and Road's $1T of loans; the export controls on rare earths, graphite, and minor metals	The buyer of the world's commodities; the export weapon	The rare-earth controls of 2025 (2d)

Worked example — The Export Surge's Arithmetic

China's domestic demand cannot absorb what its factories make: with property's share of output collapsed and consumption stuck (the table above), about $1 trillion of annual output that construction and households once bought must go abroad. In 2025 it did: exports reached a record of about $3.8 trillion and the trade surplus a record of about $1.2 trillion, even as exports to the United States fell sharply under the tariffs, because the goods went instead to Southeast Asia, Europe (the electric-car and solar flood), Africa, and Latin America, at prices that fell with the deflation at home. The receiving economies' arithmetic is the same in reverse: a Chinese electric car at $20,000 against a European one at $35,000, a Chinese steel coil at 20% below Korea's, a Chinese solar panel at a tenth of its 2015 price — a deflationary export that helps their consumers and hollows their producers, which is why the EU's electric-vehicle tariffs, Brazil's and Mexico's steel measures, and Indonesia's textile restrictions arrived in 2024-26 as the Global South joined the American tariff wall. China's own arithmetic closes only one way: consumption must rise as a share of GDP, which requires the safety net that would let households save less, which the state has not built because the money went to industry — the structural choice behind the deflation, the surplus, and every tariff the world raised against it.

2d. The Security Position and the 2025-26 Record

Date	Event	Significance
April 2025	The rare-earth export halt after the American tariffs; Western auto lines idled within weeks	The export weapon demonstrated; the tariff war's strongest card
May 2025-September 2026	The Geneva and London truces; the sweeping controls of October 9, 2025, suspended by the Busan truce of October 30; Trump's state visit to Beijing in May 2026 and Xi's to Washington in September, the first in eleven years, which extended the truce by two months but produced no new deals	Chips and rare earths as one negotiation; rare-earth magnet exports still below their pre-truce level
February-July 2026	The US Supreme Court struck down the emergency tariffs on February 20; a temporary 10% global tariff followed, then a permanent 12.5% 'forced labor' tariff from July 24, on top of the older duties on Chinese goods	The tariff wall rebuilt on new law
2025	The purge's second round (He Weidong, Miao Hua); the largest drills around Taiwan (5d); the confrontation with Japan (3c); the aircraft carriers' Pacific deployment	Coercion short of war
January-September 2026	The third round: Zhang Youxia and Liu Zhenli placed under investigation in January, removed from the military commission in August, and expelled from the party in September; Politburo member Ma Xingrui under investigation from April	The purge reaching the top
2025-26	The property collapse's floor unfound; the 15th five-year plan (2026-30), adopted in March 2026, emphasizing technology and 'new quality productive forces'	The economy's structural choice restated
2026	The Iran war: China's oil imports disrupted; purchases of discounted Iranian and Russian crude; helium exports halted in July; Beijing's mediation offers	The energy exposure (2a) and the diplomatic opportunity
2025-26	Sales of Nvidia's H200 (a previous-generation AI chip) licensed by Washington and discouraged by Beijing; new DeepSeek and Qwen models	The technology race's scorecard

China's security position is the strongest in its modern history and its ambitions exceed it. The People's Liberation Army has a rocket force that can strike every American base in the western Pacific and an annual rehearsal of Taiwan's blockade; it has not fought since 1979, its command has been gutted by the purges, and its commander's confidence in it is the question every Taiwan scenario turns on. Around it, the region hedges: Japan, Korea, the Philippines, and Australia deepen their American alliances while selling to China; Vietnam and Indonesia take the factories the chains moved from China while buying Chinese goods; and Taiwan's chips remain the strait's deterrent and its prize. The 2025-26 record shows the two instruments Beijing used — the export weapon, which worked, and military coercion short of war, which has not yet been put to the test — and the question the profile ends on: whether a leader in his fourteenth year, with an economy that has stopped delivering and a fourth term to secure, reads the strait's window as open.

Module 3 — Japan

The Region's Second Power, in Depth



Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: David Pilling, *Bending Adversity: Japan and the Art of Survival*

Reference: The International Monetary Fund's Article IV consultations for Japan; the Bank of Japan's 2026 statements; the Ministry of Defense's white paper (2026); the cabinet office's demographic projections

3a. The Numbers

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi, 65 — in office since October 2025 (1.0 years); Liberal Democratic Party
Head of state	Emperor Naruhito, 66 — in office since May 2019 (7.4 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	122.4 million (2026)
Land area	364,555 km² (140,760 sq mi)
Religion	Shinto and Buddhist practice overlap, and most people tell surveys they have no religion; Christians about 1% (Agency for Cultural Affairs)
People	Japanese about 97%; foreign residents about 3%, mainly Chinese, Vietnamese, Korean, and Filipino (the census records nationality, not ethnicity); median age 51; 92% urban
Minimum wage	Set by prefecture: a weighted national average of ¥1,121 an hour, rising to about ¥1,176 ($7.44 at about ¥158 = $1, October 6, 2026) from autumn 2026 after a recommended ¥55 increase; Tokyo's to about ¥1,281

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	30% over 65; fertility 1.2	The world's most advanced aging (the worked example below)
GDP	About $4.4 trillion in 2026 (fourth, ahead of Britain and India); about $6.5 trillion at purchasing-power parity	Per head about $34,000; the yen's weakness cut the dollar figure
Growth	~1% (2026)	Potential near zero on demography; productivity the lever
Prices and rates	Inflation about 3%; the highest policy rate since 1995 (3d)	The exit from thirty years of deflation (3c)
Trade and investment	Exports ~$700B (cars, machinery, chips' materials and equipment); with Germany one of the two largest net creditors ($3.5T); the largest foreign holder of Treasuries ($1.1T)	The auto exposure; the tariffs (3d)
Military	About $70B: 2% of GDP on the government's count, reached in fiscal 2025, after Takaichi brought the target forward from 2027; a record ¥8.9 trillion requested for fiscal 2027; counterstrike missiles (Tomahawks; the upgraded Type 12) entering service	Article 9 reinterpreted
Regime (V-Dem)	Liberal democracy	Freedom House 96/100
Energy	90% of energy imported; nuclear restarting (about 14 reactors online of 33 operable; the target about 20% of power by 2040); the LNG buyer of last resort	The Hormuz shock's exposure; Qatar's and the Gulf's LNG
Technology	The chip materials and equipment chokepoints (60% of wafers; 90% of resist; Tokyo Electron); Rapidus's 2-nanometer bet; SoftBank's stake in OpenAI; the world's most enthusiastic enterprise AI adopter	The supply chain's quiet power

3b. Regime and Leader

Japan has been governed by one party for seventy years with two interruptions, and 2025-26 brought that party both its largest reversal in a decade and its largest victory. The Liberal Democratic Party lost its upper-house majority in July 2025, Shigeru Ishiba resigned, its partner Komeito left the coalition, and Sanae Takaichi — the conservative wing's standard-bearer, a defense hawk and a Yasukuni visitor — became the first woman to lead the country, at the head of a new coalition with Ishin that lacked a majority in either chamber. She called a snap election for February 8, 2026 and won the largest result of any party in postwar Japan: 316 of the 465 lower-house seats, a two-thirds majority on the LDP's own, while the Centrist Reform Alliance fell to 49 and Sanseito rose to 15. The upper house, where the coalition has no majority, is the remaining check, and her approval, above 65% at the start, had fallen to 49% by July 2026. Her program is the Abe program extended: fiscal stimulus, the largest military build-up since 1945 with the alliance at its center, a hard line on China and immigration, and a nationalism the neighbors read closely; in July 2026 the Diet created a National Intelligence Council and let the imperial family adopt male relatives to secure the succession.

3c. The Economy's Structure and the Confrontation With China

Aspect	Detail (2026)	Note
Structure	Services 70%; manufacturing 20% (autos, machinery, electronics components, chemicals); the keiretsu and the trading houses	The Nikkei at records on the weak yen and governance reform
The exit from deflation	Prices above 2% since 2022; wages up 5% in the 2025 and 2026 spring rounds; monetary normalization (3d)	The carry trade's unwind the global risk
The China confrontation	China the largest trading partner and the primary threat: the Senkakus' coast-guard incursions; Takaichi's statement to the Diet on November 7, 2025 that a Chinese attack on Taiwan could be a 'survival-threatening situation', in which Japan may use force, never retracted; Beijing's reply — travel advisories, a renewed ban on Japanese seafood, a ban on dual-use exports to Japan (January 2026), export curbs on 40 Japanese entities (February), and disrupted rare-earth supplies; the detained executives; the first party-level talks, in Beijing in August 2026	The hedge under the most stress in the region after Taiwan's
The alliance	The 55,000 American troops; the Golden Dome and missile cooperation; the doubt about the guarantee after the Iran war and the allies-as-free-riders rhetoric	Rearming as insurance
The neighbors	Korea's Lee and the trilateral with the US; Taiwan's Lai; the Philippines' Marcos (the reciprocal access agreement); Australia's frigates; Southeast Asia's supply chains	Japan as the region's second organizer

Worked example — The Demographic Arithmetic

The number of Japanese citizens falls by about 900,000 a year — a city the size of Sendai — and the working-age population by about a percent, which means that to hold GDP flat productivity must rise a percent a year and to grow 1% it must rise two. The government's levers: participation (women's employment rose from 60% to over 70% under Abe; the elderly work past 70), immigration (2.5 million foreign workers, up from 700,000 in 2012, under a system that admits them as 'trainees' and specified-skill workers and, in 2025, drew the Sanseito backlash), automation (one of the world's highest robot densities; the AI adoption), and the exit from deflation (rising wages and prices lift nominal GDP and tax revenue against a debt that is fixed in nominal terms). The debt's arithmetic runs the other way: at 230% of GDP, the world's highest, financed at near zero for a decade by the Bank of Japan, each point of interest costs 2.3% of GDP once the stock reprices, and the central bank's rises from zero will, over a decade, take interest from a tenth of revenue toward a quarter — which is why Takaichi's stimulus and the central bank's normalization are in tension and why the forty-year bond's record yields are the market's vote. The profile's arithmetic is the country's bargain: a rich, aging, shrinking society financing its debt from its own savings at rates that must stay below its nominal growth — and 2026 is the first year in thirty in which nominal growth is high enough to make that possible and rates high enough to make it hard.

3d. The 2025-26 Record and the Question

Date	Event	Significance
March 2024-September 2026	The Bank of Japan's rises from −0.1% to 1.25%, the last on September 18, 2026 by seven votes to two; the end of yield-curve control; bond yields repricing	The exit from deflation (3c); the carry trade's August 2024 unwind
July 2025-July 2026	The tariff deal (15% on Japanese goods; $550B of US investment pledged), its 15% voided by the Supreme Court's ruling (2d); since July 24 a combined 12.5% tariff under the same 'forced labor' finding, with autos and steel under separate duties	The price of the alliance's economics
2025-26	The defense build-up and the counterstrike missiles (3a); the Philippines and Australia agreements	The rearmament (3b)
2026	The Iran war: oil and gas disruption; the reserves drawn; the nuclear restarts accelerated	Imported energy's exposure (3a)
2026	Rapidus's pilot line; the Samsung-SK Hynix competition's Japanese suppliers booming; SoftBank's Stargate role	The chip chokepoints (3a)

The question the profile ends on is Japan's version of the region's: how a rich, aging, shrinking democracy defends itself beside a rising power under a guarantee it doubts. The answers of 2025-26 — the rearmament, the counterstrike missiles, the network of agreements (3c), the tariff bargain, the nuclear restarts, and the chip-materials chokepoints that give it a quiet leverage no rearmament matches — are the answers of a country that has decided to insure rather than to choose, now with a parliamentary majority to pay for it; and the demography that makes the insurance harder to pay for each year is the fact the whole profile rests on.

Module 4 — The Two Koreas

A Restored Democracy and a Nuclear Dynasty, in Depth



Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Barbara Demick, *Nothing to Envy*

Reference: The Constitutional Court of Korea's April 2025 ruling; the Bank of Korea's 2026 statements; the International Monetary Fund's Article IV reports for Korea; the Congressional Research Service on the US-South Korea alliance (September 2026); the reports of the monitors that succeeded the UN Panel of Experts on North Korean sanctions

4a. South Korea: The Numbers

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Lee Jae-myung, 62 (born in December 1963; registered as born 22 December 1964) — in office since June 2025 (1.3 years); Democratic Party
Head of government	Prime Minister Han Seong-sook, 59 — in office since July 2026 (0.3 years); non-partisan
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	51.6 million (2026)
Land area	97,230 km² (37,540 sq mi)
Religion	No religion 56.1%, Protestant 19.7%, Buddhist 15.5%, Catholic 7.9% (2015 census)
People	Korean; foreign residents about 5% of the population; median age 47; 82% urban
Minimum wage	₩10,320 an hour since January 2026, ₩2,156,880 a month at 209 hours ($7.71 an hour at about ₩1,339 = $1, October 6, 2026); ₩10,700 from January 2027

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility 0.75 in 2024 (the world's lowest, up from 0.72); population falling since 2021	The conscription base shrinking
GDP	~$1.9T (fifteenth); per head ~$37,000 — above Japan's	The chaebol ~60% of the stock market
Growth	About 3% in 2026 (the Bank of Korea's forecast of 3.3%, raised from 2.6% in August), lifted by the AI-chip boom	Exports of chips at records; autos and ships strong; construction weak
Prices and rates	Inflation 2.8% in July 2026; the Bank of Korea's rate raised to 2.75% in July and 3.00% in August, its first rises since 2023	Household debt about 100% of GDP
Trade	Exports ~$700B (chips $200B-plus; autos, ships, petrochemicals, batteries); the US the largest market after China; the 2025 deal (15%, with a $350B investment pledge), its 15% voided by the ruling (2d); a combined 12.5% tariff since July 24, with autos at 15% under a separate law	The US plants (Georgia, Texas, Tennessee); the first projects under the pledge still pending
Military	~$50B (2.8% of GDP), with a pledge to reach 3.5%; about 450,000 active troops; 28,500 American troops; a conventional force built against the North	The nuclear-armament debate (4d); the alliance's cost-sharing fights
Regime (V-Dem)	Liberal democracy	Freedom House 83/100
Energy	95% imported; nuclear 30% of electricity and expanding (the 2022 reversal of the phase-out); LNG the swing	The Hormuz shock's exposure; the reactor exports (Czechia, the United Arab Emirates)

4b. South Korea: The Restored Democracy

South Korea is the region's institutional victory. On December 3, 2024 President Yoon Suk Yeol declared martial law and sent troops to the National Assembly; legislators climbed fences to vote it down within six hours; the Assembly impeached him on December 14; the Constitutional Court removed him unanimously on April 4, 2025; Lee Jae-myung was elected on June 3 — a self-coup defeated in four months by a parliament, a court, a military that would not fire, and a public in the winter streets. The courts have since sentenced Yoon to life imprisonment for insurrection (February 2026, under appeal) and to seven years for obstructing his arrest, a term the Supreme Court made final in July; his prime minister, Han Duck-soo, received 23 years, and his wife, Kim Keon-hee, seven. Lee's Democratic Party won 12 of the 16 top regional posts in the local elections of June 3, 2026, though the conservative People Power Party held Seoul, and his new prime minister, Han Seong-sook, who succeeded Kim Min-seok, is a former chief executive of the internet company Naver and the first woman in the post in twenty years. Lee's government inherited the deepest polarization since 1987, an economy riding a chip boom (SK Hynix's lead in HBM; Samsung's comeback) that is its engine and its cycle risk, and an alliance whose patron went to war with Iran, curtailed joint exercises in 2026 without consulting Seoul, and questions its allies' contributions — which has pushed the government toward Japan (the trilateral) and its own arms industry, one of the world's fastest-growing exporters (tanks to Poland, howitzers, jets).

4c. North Korea: The Nuclear Dynasty

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Kim Jong Un, General Secretary of the Workers' Party and President of State Affairs, 42 (born 8 January; the year is given as 1984 by the US, 1983 by South Korea, and 1982 by North Korea) — in power since December 2011 (14.8 years)
Head of government	Premier Pak Thae-song, 71 — in office since December 2024 (1.8 years)
System	Hereditary one-party dictatorship
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	26.6 million (2026); UN estimate; the last census, in 2008, counted 24.1 million
Land area	120,410 km² (46,490 sq mi)
Religion	Officially atheist; Korean shamanism and Cheondoism the largest traditions among believers, and Christians persecuted (estimates)
People	Korean, ethnically homogeneous, with a small Chinese community; median age 38; 64% urban
Minimum wage	None: the state sets wages

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

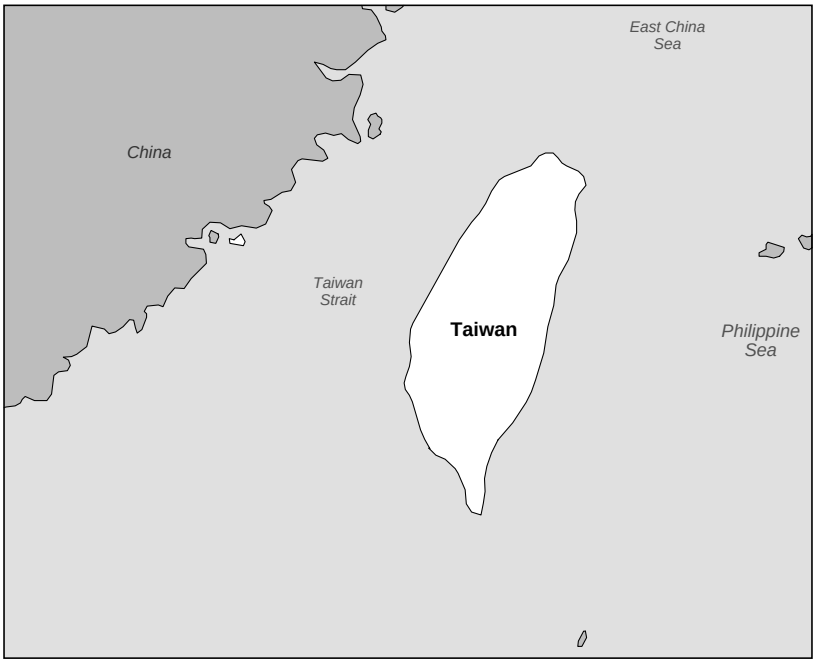
Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Income	Per head about $1,200, roughly a thirtieth of the South's	Chronic malnutrition; the 1990s famine's legacy
Regime	The last total state: the Kim dynasty, with Kim Jong Un's daughter Ju Ae designated successor according to South Korea's intelligence service (February 2026), though Pyongyang has not said so; songbun, the camps, the information blockade	Freedom House 3/100
Nuclear and missiles	50-plus warheads; fissile material for 90-plus; intercontinental missiles (the Hwasong-19, and the Hwasong-20 unveiled in October 2025) that reach the American mainland; solid-fuel and hypersonic tests, and launches through 2026; a nuclear submarine program	The doctrine of preemptive use written into law (2022)
Alliances	Russia: the 2024 mutual-defense treaty; about 15,000 troops sent from late 2024 to fight in Russia's Kursk region, about 2,000 of them killed by Seoul's estimate, paid for in oil, food, missile technology, and air defenses; China: the economic lifeline (90% of trade), with Xi visiting Pyongyang in June 2026, his first visit in seven years	The Russia alignment the decade's change
Economy	~$30B GDP; sanctions evaded through crypto theft ($1.5B from Bybit in 2025 alone), arms sales to Russia, and Chinese trade	Cyber the state's largest earner
The South	Reunification renounced (2024); the two states as 'hostile'; the border fortified; the balloons and loudspeakers ended under Lee	Lee's outreach rejected (4d)

4d. The Peninsula in 2026, and the Question

The peninsula's 2026 is a restored democracy beside a dynasty that has stopped pretending to want reunification. Kim Jong Un's state is more secure than at any time in its history — the arsenal, the Russian alliance, the Chinese lifeline, and the succession in the table above — and its price is a South that has moved from deterrence to the debate over its own bomb. The Ninth Party Congress (February 19-25, 2026) re-elected Kim, declared relations with the South 'completely eliminated', and excluded South Koreans from the 'fellow countrymen', while offering Washington coexistence if it respects the North's nuclear status. The American position under an administration that has praised Kim is the peninsula's largest uncertainty; and the question the profile ends on is the South's: whether a democracy that just saved itself from its own president can hold an alliance it doubts, a rival that will not talk, and a neighbor (Japan) it is learning to trust — or reaches for the weapon 70% of its public now wants.

Module 5 — Taiwan

The Island at the Center of the Region's Most Dangerous Dispute, in Depth



Recommended Reading / Reference

Book: Chris Miller, *Chip War* (on TSMC)

Reference: TSMC's 2026 reports; the US-Taiwan Agreement on Reciprocal Trade (February 2026); the Pentagon's China military-power report (2025); Taiwan's Ministry of National Defense white paper; the statistics agency's August 2026 forecast; the Bloomberg Economics estimate of a Taiwan conflict's cost

5a. The Numbers

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Lai Ching-te, 67 — in office since May 2024 (2.4 years); Democratic Progressive Party
Head of government	Premier Cho Jung-tai, 67 — in office since May 2024 (2.4 years)
System	Semi-presidential republic, self-governing and claimed by China
Freedom House	Free
Population	23.0 million (2026); UN estimate; the household register counted 23.30 million in December 2025; land area from Taiwan's interior ministry
Land area	36,197 km² (13,980 sq mi)
Religion	No census question; Buddhist about 28%, no religion about 27%, Taoist about 24%, Christian about 7%, with folk religion overlapping the Buddhist and Taoist shares (estimates, 2023)
People	Han about 95% (Hoklo, Hakka, and post-1949 mainlanders), Indigenous peoples 2.5% (2024); median age 46; 81% urban
Minimum wage	NT$29,500 a month and NT$196 an hour since January 2026 ($931 a month at about NT$31.7 = $1, early October 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility about 0.9 and falling; population falling	One of the world's lowest birth rates
GDP	About $1 trillion in 2026; per head above $42,000, more than Japan's and Korea's	The AI supply chain's core: TSMC alone ~8% of GDP and 40% of the stock market
Growth	11.05% forecast for 2026 by the statistics agency in August, the fastest in 39 years, after 15.4% and 12.9% in the first two quarters	Exports forecast at $904B, up 41%; a US goods deficit with Taiwan of $127B in January-November 2025
The chips	TSMC's 2-nanometer production; the leading-edge share (5c)	TSMC's American investment pledged at $165B; the newest process kept at home
Military	Defense spending 3.32% of GDP in 2026 on the government's count, with 3.01% (NT$1.12 trillion, about $35B) proposed for 2027 as GDP surges, and a goal of 5% by 2030; 170,000 active troops; a year's conscription restored (2024); the 'porcupine' turn toward missiles, drones, and mines	The Han Kuang exercises lengthened; civil defense drills; the reserve reform
Regime (V-Dem)	Liberal democracy; a divided government (5b)	Freedom House 93/100, second in the region after Japan
Energy	97% imported; nuclear ended in May 2025, when the last reactor closed, and an August 2025 referendum to restart it failed its turnout threshold	The blockade's first casualty
China's pressure	Daily air incursions (~300 a month); the blockade rehearsals (5d); the coast guard's quarantine tactics; cable cuttings; disinformation; infiltration (5b)	Coercion short of war

5b. Regime and Politics

Taiwan has the region's most divided government. President Lai Ching-te, elected in January 2024 with 40% in a three-way race, faces a legislature, the Legislative Yuan, controlled by the KMT and the TPP — 52 and 8 of its 113 seats, against the DPP's 51 — that cut his budgets and attempted to expand its own powers (partly struck by the Constitutional Court). Civic groups backed by the DPP tried in the summer of 2025 to recall opposition legislators and removed none; in December 2025 the premier refused to countersign an opposition budget law, an unprecedented step; the legislature's impeachment of Lai failed on May 19, 2026, 56-50, short of the two-thirds required; and on May 8 it passed his special defense budget cut from NT$1.25 trillion to NT$780 billion (about $25 billion), for American arms only. The KMT's chair, Cheng Li-wun, criticized as pro-Beijing, met Xi Jinping in the spring. The division is the island's politics: the DPP's identity (Taiwanese, sovereign, aligned with Washington and Tokyo) against the KMT's (Chinese-inheritance, cross-strait accommodation, trade with the mainland) and a third party of the young that holds the balance — and Beijing works it, with invitations to KMT delegations and with the espionage and infiltration that prosecutors charged in 2025-26. The local elections this autumn and the national elections of 2028 (Module 10) are the strait's political calendar, and Beijing's stated preference for a KMT return is the least secret fact in the region.

5c. The Silicon Shield and Its Limits

Taiwan's security rests on three things and the chips are the first. TSMC makes about 90% of the world's leading-edge semiconductors — every Nvidia accelerator, every Apple processor — and the 'silicon shield' argument holds that this makes the island too valuable to attack and too valuable for the United States to abandon. The trade agreement concluded in January and February 2026 priced the shield: a 15% US tariff on Taiwanese goods, down from 20%, set under emergency powers voided days later (2d); $250 billion of American investment pledged by Taiwanese companies, TSMC's commitments among it, and $250 billion more in Taiwanese government credit guarantees; and $84.8 billion of purchases of American energy, aircraft, and equipment through 2029, subject to the legislature's approval — so that the shield is being partly moved to Arizona, a process generation behind (5a). The second is deterrence: the American ambiguity (a policy of not saying whether it would fight, under a president who has said allies must pay and who said after meeting Xi in May that he had made 'no commitment' on Taiwan), the Seventh Fleet and Japan's southwestern islands, and the island's own porcupine turn (5a). The third is Beijing's calculation: the army, economy, and leader weighed in 2d, and a closure whose cost the worked example below measures — so that the question is never whether China could, but whether it believes it must before the window it perceives closes. The shield's limit is the island's energy (5a): a quarantine that stopped the tankers would decide the island's politics before a shot was fired.

Worked example — A Blockade's First Month

Beijing declares a 'customs inspection zone' around Taiwan and its coast guard stops the tankers. Energy: the island burns LNG for half its power with eleven days of storage; coal has a month; the reactors are closed; by day twelve the grid is rationing, by day thirty the economy runs at half. Chips: TSMC's fabs need power, water, chemicals, and the wafers that arrive by sea; they run on backup for days, then stop — and with them most of the world's leading-edge chips (5c) and the AI build-out of every American company. Bloomberg Economics put a blockade's first-year cost at about 5% of world GDP, and a war's at about $10 trillion, nearly a tenth — the largest of any conceivable shock — with China's own output falling with its trade. Finance: Taiwan's $600 billion of reserves and its insurers' $1 trillion abroad are frozen or fled; the Taiwan dollar and the stock market close; every Asian currency falls. The response: American and Japanese escorts would break the quarantine or start the war; sanctions on China would dwarf Russia's and cost the sanctioners a tenth of their trade; the island's politics would split between endurance and negotiation within weeks. The arithmetic's lesson is the strait's: a blockade is cheaper for China than an invasion and costlier for the world than any war since 1945, and the eleven days of gas are the island's shortest fuse.

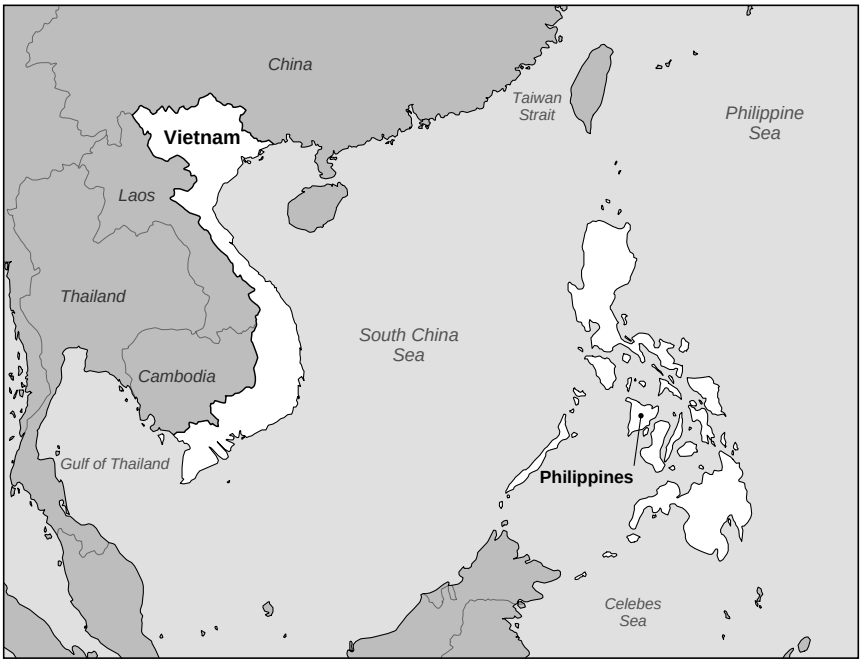
5d. The 2025-26 Record and the Question

Date	Event	Significance
April-December 2025	The largest drills yet: Strait Thunder-2025A in April, and Justice Mission-2025 on December 29-30, which rehearsed a blockade of Keelung and Kaohsiung with live-fire zones inside Taiwan's territorial waters, sent 130 aircraft in a day, and disrupted 857 international flights	Coercion intensified
December 2025-May 2026	An $11.1B American arms package, the largest yet, in December; a $14B sale postponed after the Beijing summit in May, Trump calling such sales 'a very good negotiating tool'	The guarantor's ambiguity priced
March 2026	Taiwan's premier at a baseball tournament in Tokyo, the first visit to Japan by a premier since 1972	The Japan link

The question Taiwan's profile ends on is the region's most dangerous: whether the strait stays open through the window Beijing perceives — Xi's fourth term (10a), an American administration that prices its commitments, an island whose shield is moving to Arizona and whose energy arrives by sea. Every party is betting the answer is yes; the fabs are the reason the bet is rational and the LNG terminals the reason it is not certain.

Module 6 — The Philippines & Vietnam

The Frontline Claimants



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: The Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative of the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS); Fulcrum, from the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) in Singapore

6a. The Philippines

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Ferdinand Marcos Jr., 69 — in office since June 2022 (4.3 years); Partido Federal ng Pilipinas
Vice President	Vice President Sara Duterte, 48 — in office since June 2022 (4.3 years)
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	117.7 million (2026); UN estimate; the 2024 census counted 112.7 million
Land area	298,170 km² (115,120 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 78.8%, other Christian 12.7%, Muslim 6.4% (2020 census)
People	Tagalog 26.0%, Bisaya 14.3%, Ilocano 8.0%, Cebuano 8.0%, Ilonggo 7.9%, Bicolano 6.5% (2020 census); median age 28; 49% urban
Minimum wage	Set by region: Metro Manila's ₱755 a day for non-farm work since July 2026, rising to ₱780 in January 2027 ($12.03 at about ₱62.7 = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Spanish for three centuries and American for half of one, the Philippines became independent in 1946 and hosted the largest US bases in Asia until they were closed in 1992. Ferdinand Marcos ruled as a dictator from 1972, under martial law until 1981, until the 1986 People Power revolution

drove him out; his son won the presidency in 2022 in alliance with Sara Duterte, daughter of the previous president, Rodrigo Duterte, whose drug war killed thousands. Marcos reversed Duterte's tilt toward China and made the Philippines the frontline state of the South China Sea dispute.

Current leadership: Marcos broke with Sara Duterte, and the two families' war now dominates politics. His government arrested her father, Rodrigo Duterte, on an International Criminal Court warrant in March 2025 and sent him to The Hague, where the court confirmed charges of crimes against humanity over his drug war in April 2026 and set his trial for November 30. The House impeached Sara Duterte in February 2025; the Supreme Court voided that impeachment under a one-year bar, and the House impeached her again on May 11, 2026, 257-25, on charges including the misuse of confidential funds and threats to kill the president. Her Senate trial opened in July, and in September the Senate cut the votes needed to convict from 16 to 14; a conviction would end the presidential bid for 2028 she declared in February 2026. Marcos's own camp is in the dock as well: his cousin Martin Romualdez, who resigned as House speaker over the flood-control scandal, was arrested for plunder on September 7, 2026.

Government structure: The 1987 constitution gives the president a single six-year term and strong executive power, checked by the Supreme Court and a bicameral Congress — a 24-member Senate and a House of more than 300 — in a politics dominated by dynasties: roughly 80% of legislators come from political families. The Philippines is a US treaty ally under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, and EDCA, signed in 2014 and expanded in 2023, gives American forces rotational access to nine Philippine military sites.

Economy and trade: A roughly $500 billion economy driven by services — business-process outsourcing (call centers), remittances from ten million overseas Filipinos (close to a tenth of GDP), and tourism — plus electronics assembly and agriculture. Exports are led by electronics and semiconductors, machinery, and coconut and fruit products; imports by electronics, fuel, machinery, and rice. Top trading partners: China (largest overall), the US (largest export market), Japan, South Korea, and Singapore. The economy's dependence on Chinese trade coexists uneasily with the sharpest anti-Chinese security posture in the region.

Closest partners: The United States, in the alliance Marcos revived: the EDCA sites facing Taiwan and the South China Sea, joint patrols, the Typhon launcher, first fired in the Philippines during Balikatan in 2026, and Washington's repeated assurance that the treaty covers attacks on Philippine vessels; Japan, under a reciprocal access agreement signed in 2024; Australia; and the EU, which has raised its South China Sea profile. Marcos has also built a US-Japan-Philippines trilateral.

Principal rivalries and disputes: China, in the region's most violent maritime dispute: water cannon, rammings, and injuries at Second Thomas Shoal, Scarborough Shoal, and Sabina Shoal, where the Philippines publicizes every incident to rally international support — most recently in July 2026, when Chinese coast-guard ships turned water cannon on Philippine vessels at Scarborough on two successive days and a Chinese crew struck a Filipino sailor with a baton at Second Thomas. The Duterte family, whose supporters treat Rodrigo Duterte's arrest as a betrayal. Domestically, the flood-control corruption scandal that brought protesters into the streets in September 2025, and insurgencies in Mindanao.

6b. Vietnam

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	To Lam, General Secretary of the Communist Party and State President, 69 — in office since August 2024 (2.2 years)
Head of government	Prime Minister Le Minh Hung, 55 — in office since April 2026 (0.5 years)
System	One-party state under the Communist Party
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	102.2 million (2026)
Land area	310,070 km² (119,720 sq mi)
Religion	The 2019 census counted 13.7% as followers of a recognized religion (Catholic 6.1%, Buddhist 4.8%); most others follow folk religion and ancestor worship
People	Kinh 85.3%; 53 recognized minorities 14.7%, the largest the Tày, Thái, Mường, Hmong, and Khmer (2019 census); median age 35; 42% urban
Minimum wage	Set by region: 5.31 million dong a month in Region I, the main cities, since January 2026 ($206 at about 25,760 dong = $1, early October 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A millennium of Chinese rule ended in 938, and Vietnam spent the next centuries resisting China, expanding south, and, from the 1880s, under French rule. Ho Chi Minh's Communists won independence for the north in 1954 and, after the American war that killed millions, unified the country in 1975. War with Cambodia and a 1979 border war with China followed; the 1986 doi moi reforms opened the economy on the Chinese model, and normalization with the US in 1995 began a rise that has made Vietnam a manufacturing power.

Current leadership: To Lam, the former public security minister whose 'burning furnace' anti-corruption campaign eliminated his rivals on the way to the party's leadership, was re-elected general secretary by the 14th Party Congress in January 2026 and elected State President by the new National Assembly on April 7, 2026 — holding both posts again, as he briefly did in 2024 and Nguyen Phu Trong did in 2018-21. The Assembly elected Le Minh Hung, a former central bank governor and head of the party's organization commission, prime minister the same day. To Lam's consolidation has ended the collective leadership that had distinguished Vietnam's system from China's.

Government structure: The Communist Party's Politburo and Central Committee make all significant decisions, and the National Assembly — 500 seats, 482 of them won by party members in the March 2026 election, on a reported turnout of 99.7% — ratifies them unanimously. Under To Lam the state was restructured in 2025, before the congress: ministries merged, the bureaucracy cut, and the 63 provinces merged into 34. Independent media, unions, and dissent are suppressed. Vietnam is a member of ASEAN and pursues a 'four no's' policy of no alliances, no foreign bases, no siding with one power against another, and no force.

Economy and trade: A roughly $520 billion economy, transformed into a manufacturing hub as firms shifted production from China — Samsung, Apple suppliers, Nike, and Intel among them. Exports are led by electronics and phones, textiles and footwear, machinery, furniture, and seafood; imports by electronic components, machinery, and fabrics, largely from China. Top trading partners: the US (largest export market), China (largest import source), South Korea, Japan, and the EU. Vietnam is the region's clearest beneficiary of US-China decoupling and its clearest hostage to it.

Closest partners: Vietnam's 'bamboo diplomacy' bends toward everyone: the United States, elevated to a comprehensive strategic partnership in 2023; China, its ideological sibling, which To Lam visits first; Russia, its historic arms supplier; South Korea, its largest investor and a state whose president made Vietnam's leader his first foreign guest; Japan, India, and Australia. Vietnam and the Philippines have coordinated on the South China Sea.

Principal rivalries and disputes: China, over the South China Sea — the Paracel Islands China seized in 1974, the Spratlys, oil blocks, and fishing grounds — a dispute Vietnam presses quietly through island-building of its own and legal positioning rather than the Philippines' publicity. The US, over the trade surplus that drew tariffs. Cambodia, over Chinese influence and the Funan Techo canal. Domestically, the question of whether To Lam's concentration of power produces reform or a Vietnamese Xi.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility 1.9	The demographic window still open, closing in the 2030s
Growth	8.0% in 2025; 9.0% in January-September 2026 (9.95% in the third quarter), against a 10% target, Southeast Asia's fastest; per head about $5,100	Inflation 4.5% in the first nine months, 5.1% in September
Trade	Exports about 90% of GDP, the most trade-dependent large economy; a $120B surplus with the US; a 12.5% US tariff on many goods since late July	The transshipment risk (the worked example below)
Investment	Foreign direct investment ~$25B a year: Samsung ($20B cumulative; a fifth of Vietnam's exports), Apple's suppliers, Intel's packaging, Foxconn, the Chinese firms relocating to avoid tariffs	The 'China plus one' destination
Public debt	~35% of GDP	Fiscal room; the infrastructure push (the north-south high-speed rail; the ports)
Military	~$8B; 480,000 active; Russian arms diversified toward American, Israeli, Korean, and Indian	Island-building since 2022 (above)
Regime (V-Dem)	Closed autocracy	Freedom House 20/100
Energy	Coal 45% of power; the solar boom of 2019-21 stalled on the grid; the 2024 direct-purchase decree; Russian-designed nuclear revived (2025)	The grid the manufacturing boom's constraint

In depth — the question: Vietnam is the hedge's hardest case: an economy that lives on trade, with its largest market in Washington and its largest supplier in Beijing, under American tariffs that treat the second as contraband in the first — and a party-state, consolidated in one man, that has staked its legitimacy on the double-digit growth its 2026 congress promised and the tariffs threaten.

Worked example — The Transshipment Rule's Arithmetic

A Vietnamese electronics exporter ships $100 of goods to the United States. Under the July 2025 deal, the tariff was 20% ($20) if the goods were 'Vietnamese' and 40% ($40) if they were 'transshipped' from China — and the definition turned on value added: a phone assembled in Vietnam from Chinese components has perhaps 15-20% Vietnamese content, which may or may not clear the bar the American customs service applies. The deal's legal basis fell with the Supreme Court's ruling, and the tariff that replaced it (the table above) is lower — but the question survives every change of rate, because whatever Washington charges Vietnam, it can charge more for the Chinese content routed through it. For the exporter, the difference is the margin; for Vietnam, the exposure is $140 billion of exports, about a quarter of GDP; for China, it is the route by which its components reach the American market; and for the United States, it is a rule that cannot be

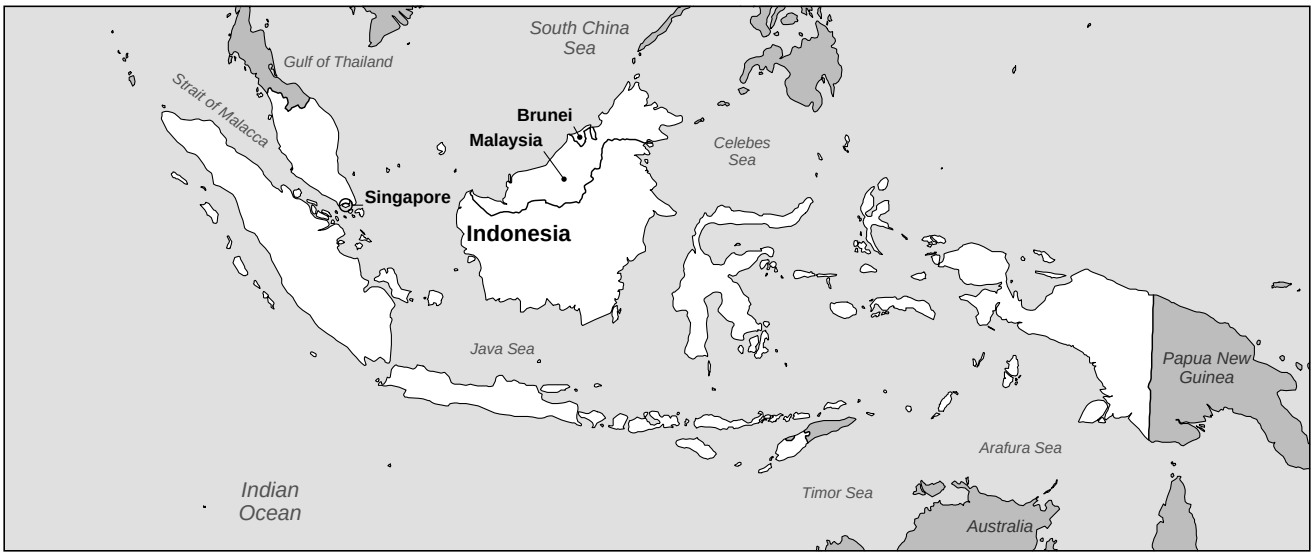
enforced without tracing every component — which is why the deal's text was vague, the enforcement selective, and the arithmetic, so far, a threat more than a bill. Vietnam's answer is to raise its own content (the Samsung and Apple ecosystems' local suppliers; the rare-earth and chip-packaging plants), which takes a decade, and to grow the other markets (the EU's deal; Japan; Korea; India), which takes as long — so that the country's growth rests on rules Washington can rewrite with a memo.

6c. Two Ways to Push Back

The Philippines and Vietnam are the two claimants that refuse to yield in the South China Sea, and they have chosen opposite methods. The Philippines has gone loud: an alliance with the US, sites open to American forces, cameras on every coast-guard vessel, and a 2016 tribunal ruling it invokes constantly. Vietnam has gone quiet: the 'four no's', its own island-building, and a party-to-party channel with Beijing that keeps confrontation below the threshold of crisis. The Philippines' approach has won it international support and Chinese water cannon; Vietnam's has won it Chinese restraint and no guarantees. Both have pushed back harder than Malaysia, Brunei, and Indonesia.

Module 7 — Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore & Brunei

Maritime Southeast Asia



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute State of Southeast Asia survey (annual); Lowy Institute

7a. Indonesia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Prabowo Subianto, 74 — in office since October 2024 (2.0 years); Gerindra
Vice President	Vice President Gibran Rakabuming Raka, 39 — in office since October 2024 (2.0 years)
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	287.9 million (2026)
Land area	1,811,570 km² (699,450 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 87%, Protestant about 7%, Catholic about 3%, Hindu about 1.7%, Buddhist about 0.7% (civil registry, 2023)
People	Javanese 40.1%, Sundanese 15.5%, Malay 3.7%, Batak 3.6%, Madurese 3.0%, among more than 600 groups (2010 census); median age 32; 60% urban
Minimum wage	Set by province: Jakarta's Rp 5.73 million a month for 2026 ($321 at about Rp 17,841 = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Dutch East Indies won independence in 1949 under Sukarno, whose leftward drift ended in the 1965-66 military takeover and anti-communist massacres that killed at least 500,000 and brought Suharto to power for 32 years. The 1998 Asian financial crisis toppled him, and Indonesia became a democracy, electing its presidents directly since 2004. Joko Widodo (2014-24), a furniture-maker turned president, built infrastructure and began a new capital; his successor Prabowo Subianto, a former

special-forces general dismissed from the army over the abduction of activists in 1998 and Suharto's former son-in-law, won in 2024 with Widodo's son as running mate — a return of the old elite through democratic means.

Current leadership: Prabowo has governed with a coalition of nearly every party, a free-school-meals program, a new sovereign fund, and a more military-inflected style than his predecessors, and has reshuffled his cabinet seven times — most broadly on October 1, 2026, when he replaced the foreign minister and the national police chief. The protests of August 2025, the largest since 1998 — over legislators' housing allowances, a delivery driver killed by a police vehicle, and the militarization — were answered with concessions and a security response, and the finance minister, Sri Mulyani Indrawati, was replaced in September 2025; her successor was replaced in turn in September 2026. A July 2026 poll put Prabowo's approval near 51%.

Government structure: Direct presidential elections, a bicameral legislature, and substantial regional autonomy across 38 provinces and 17,000 islands make Indonesia the world's third-largest democracy and its largest Muslim-majority one; Freedom House's concerns are the military's expanding civilian role under Prabowo, a 2025 law restoring officers to government posts, and pressure on civil society.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1.5 trillion economy, Southeast Asia's largest and the world's seventeenth, built on commodities — coal (the world's largest exporter), palm oil (the largest producer), nickel (the largest producer), LNG, copper, and gold — plus manufacturing and a large domestic market. Exports are led by coal, palm oil, nickel products, iron and steel, and LNG; imports by machinery, fuel, electronics, and chemicals. Top trading partners: China (largest by far), the US, Japan, India, and Singapore. The nickel policy is the region's most consequential resource-nationalism experiment (the worked example below).

Closest partners: Indonesia's 'free and active' foreign policy aligns with no bloc: China, the financier of its nickel industry and high-speed rail; the US, a security partner with growing defense ties; Japan and South Korea as investors; the Gulf states; Australia, with which Prabowo signed a security treaty in Jakarta on February 6, 2026; and BRICS, which Indonesia joined in 2025 — the first Southeast Asian member. It leads ASEAN by weight, hosts its secretariat, and has prepared troops for the UN-backed stabilization force in Gaza.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Indonesia denies having a South China Sea dispute with China while its navy confronts Chinese vessels in the Natuna Sea, where China's line overlaps Indonesia's waters. Domestically, Papua's insurgency, Prabowo's authoritarian instincts, and the nickel industry's environmental and labor record.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	The world's fourth-largest population	The demographic dividend to 2040
Growth	5.3% in the second quarter of 2026, against a 5.4% budget target; per head about $5,100; the only Southeast Asian member of the Group of 20	Manufacturing a fifth of GDP
Trade	Exports ~$270B (China 25%, the US 10%); the 2025 US tariff deal at 19% void since the ruling (2d), leaving Indonesia a temporary global 10% tariff and US trade investigations	The nickel industry (the worked example below)

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Public finance	Debt ~40% of GDP; the deficit 2.9% of GDP in 2025, near the 3% legal cap; the free-meals program, Rp 335 trillion (about $20B) in 2026 for 83 million recipients; Danantara, which took over the state companies (a claimed $900B of assets)	The fiscal turn under Prabowo; the rupiah past 18,000 to the dollar in September 2026
Military	~$12B; 400,000 active; French Rafales, Turkish drones, the American F-15 talks	The militarization of the state
Regime (V-Dem)	Electoral democracy	Freedom House 56/100
Energy	Coal 60% of power; the $20B Just Energy Transition Partnership stalled after the US withdrew in 2025; the nickel smelters' captive coal plants; the 2025 nuclear plan	The transition's laggard
Capital	Jakarta sinking; Nusantara (the new capital in Borneo) half-built and deprioritized	The $30B project in limbo

In depth — the question: whether Indonesia, a generation after Suharto, is being governed back toward the officer-state its president came from — with a free-meals program as the bargain and a commodity boom as the means.

Worked example — Nickel Nationalism's Return

Indonesia banned nickel-ore exports in 2020, let Chinese companies build the processing industry on Sulawesi and Halmahera, and went from a quarter of world supply to 60% — which crashed the price to $15,000 a tonne by 2024-25 and idled the Western industry. In 2026 the state turned the tap: the RKAB quotas for ore were cut to 250-260 million tonnes from 379 million in 2025, about a third, and nickel jumped 21% in a month to near $18,000 a tonne. The arithmetic: Indonesia mines about 2.3 million tonnes of nickel a year, 60% of a 3.8-million-tonne world market, and the old quotas ran above what was mined, so a third off the quota is less than a third off supply — but even a tenth off Indonesia's output removes 230,000 tonnes, 6% of world supply, enough to lift the price from the trough; Indonesia's export revenue rises on lower volume (the Congo's cobalt template), the Chinese smelters absorb the squeeze, and the battery makers' shift to iron-phosphate chemistry accelerates. For the state, the quota is revenue and leverage; for the smelters, it is a rule changed on a permit; for the transition, it is the reminder that a commodity's price is set by whoever holds 60% of it — and Indonesia's 2026 lesson to every other producer is that the leverage is worth more than the volume.

7b. Malaysia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, 79 — in office since November 2022 (3.9 years); People's Justice Party
Head of state	Sultan Ibrahim of Johor, King, 67 — in office since January 2024 (2.7 years); ceremonial
System	Federal parliamentary elective monarchy
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	36.4 million (2026); UN estimate; the statistics department's 2026 estimate is 34.4 million
Land area	328,550 km² (126,850 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 63.5%, Buddhist 18.7%, Christian 9.1%, Hindu 6.1% (2020 census)
People	Among citizens: Bumiputera 69.4% (Malays about 57%), Chinese 23.2%, Indians 6.7% (2020 census); median age 32; 80% urban

At a glance	As of October 2026
Minimum wage	1,700 ringgit a month since February 2025 ($416 at about 4.09 ringgit = $1, October 6, 2026); a rise to 2,000 ringgit is under review

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: British Malaya became independent in 1957 and federated with Singapore, Sabah, and Sarawak in 1963 (Singapore left in 1965). The 1969 race riots produced the affirmative-action policies for the Malay majority that still structure politics, and UMNO governed for 61 years until the 2018 election, which followed the 1MDB (1Malaysia Development Berhad) scandal, in which billions were stolen from a state fund under Prime Minister Najib Razak — convicted in 2020 and again in December 2025, when he was sentenced to 15 years. Anwar Ibrahim — deputy prime minister in the 1990s, imprisoned twice on charges he called political — became prime minister in 2022 after 25 years in opposition.

Current leadership: Anwar governs with a coalition spanning his multiethnic Pakatan Harapan alliance and UMNO, the Malay-nationalist party he once fought, and his reform credentials have been tested by the compromises of governing with former adversaries. The Sabah state election of November 2025 left Pakatan Harapan one of 73 seats; his amendment to limit prime ministers to ten years fell two votes short of two-thirds in March 2026; and in September 2026 UMNO's president, Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, pressed him to call an early election, which must be held by early 2028.

Government structure: Thirteen states and three federal territories; a king elected every five years from among the nine hereditary rulers — a unique arrangement; and a bicameral parliament whose 222-seat lower house chooses the government. Politics is organized around ethnicity, with the Malay majority's constitutional privileges the permanent fault line. Malaysia is an ASEAN founder and chaired it in 2025, when it brokered the Thai-Cambodian ceasefire (8a).

Economy and trade: A roughly $450 billion economy, one of Southeast Asia's most developed, built on electronics and semiconductors (Malaysia is a major chip-packaging hub), palm oil (the world's second-largest producer), oil and gas, and manufacturing. Exports are led by electronics and semiconductors, refined petroleum, palm oil, LNG, and machinery; imports by electronics, machinery, fuels, and chemicals. Top trading partners: China (largest), Singapore, the US, Japan, and Hong Kong. Malaysia has benefited from the semiconductor supply-chain shift and is a data-center boom site, while its Petronas-run oil sector operates in South China Sea waters China also claims.

Closest partners: China, a major investor, with which Anwar has been notably warm; Singapore, its closest economic partner and estranged sibling; Indonesia; the US, though in March 2026 Malaysia became the first country to declare its 2025 US trade agreement void after the ruling (2d); Japan; and the Muslim world, where Anwar has positioned Malaysia as a voice on Gaza. Malaysia joined BRICS as a partner country.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Malaysia's disputes are mostly muted: with China over the oil and gas blocks (above), pressed through diplomatic notes rather than confrontation; with Singapore over water, airspace, and history, all managed; with the Philippines over Sabah, dormant. Domestically, the ethnic settlement, corruption (the 1MDB legacy), and the coalition's fragility.

7c. Singapore

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, 53 — in office since May 2024 (2.4 years); People's Action Party
Head of state	President Tharman Shanmugaratnam, 69 — in office since September 2023 (3.1 years); ceremonial; directly elected
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	5.91 million (2026); UN estimate; the official count, including non-residents, was 6.21 million in June 2026
Land area	700 km² (270 sq mi)
Religion	Buddhist 31.1%, no religion 20.0%, Christian 18.9%, Muslim 15.6%, Taoist 8.8%, Hindu 5.0% (2020 census, residents aged 15 and over)
People	Residents: Chinese 74.3%, Malay 13.5%, Indian 9.0% (2020 census); median age 38; 100% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law: the Progressive Wage Model fixes mandatory pay ladders in sectors such as cleaning, security, and food services, and employers of foreign workers must pay local staff a qualifying salary

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A British trading post founded in 1819, Singapore was expelled from Malaysia in 1965 and, under Lee Kuan Yew, transformed itself from a poor port into one of the world's richest societies through export manufacturing, finance, and rigorous state planning. The People's Action Party has governed without interruption since 1959 in a system that holds regular elections but restricts opposition, press, and assembly. Lee's son Lee Hsien Loong governed from 2004 to 2024 and handed over to Lawrence Wong.

Current leadership: Wong, only the fourth prime minister since 1965 and the first born after independence, won the election of May 3, 2025 with 87 of 97 elected seats and 65.6% of the vote. Tharman Shanmugaratnam, the president, is a former deputy prime minister. Lee Hsien Loong remains senior minister.

Government structure: A unicameral parliament of 97 elected seats, plus opposition and nominated members appointed under special schemes, chooses the government. The state is technocratic and widely regarded as the world's most effective, and Singapore has a small but highly capable military and mandatory conscription.

Economy and trade: A roughly $550 billion economy, the highest-income in Asia and one of the world's most open — the world's second-busiest container port, a global financial center, and a hub for refining, chemicals, semiconductors, and pharmaceuticals. Exports are led by electronics and semiconductors, refined petroleum, chemicals, and machinery, much of it re-exports; imports mirror them. Top trading partners: China, Malaysia, the US, Hong Kong, and Indonesia. The government raised its 2026 growth forecast to 2-4% on demand for AI hardware.

Closest partners: Everyone, by design: the United States, its closest security partner, whose navy uses Changi base; China, with which it shares ethnic ties and a governance model; Malaysia and Indonesia, its neighbors, with Indonesia's president joining Wong in July 2026 in pledging to keep the Strait of Malacca open; Japan, India, Australia. Singapore hosts the Shangri-La Dialogue, the region's premier security forum, and positions itself as the state trusted by both Washington and Beijing.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Singapore has no adversaries and its central dispute is structural: it is the state most dependent on the open trading order that US-China rivalry threatens, and the one working

hardest to avoid being forced to choose. Its frictions with Malaysia are managed (7b); its domestic questions are succession, inequality, immigration, and the sustainability of one-party dominance.

7d. Brunei

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, 80 — on the throne since October 1967 (59.0 years); also prime minister, defense minister, and finance minister
Heir	Crown Prince Al-Muhtadee Billah, 52 — crown prince since August 1998 (28.2 years); senior minister since 2005
System	Absolute monarchy
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	470,000 (2026)
Land area	5,270 km² (2,030 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 82%, Christian about 7%, Buddhist about 7% (estimates)
People	Malay about 66%, Chinese about 10%, indigenous groups and foreign workers the rest (official estimates); median age 34; 80% urban
Minimum wage	B$500 a month in the sectors covered so far, beginning with banking, finance, and information technology in July 2023 ($392 at about B$1.28 = $1, the Brunei dollar at par with Singapore's, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A sultanate that once ruled Borneo, Brunei was a British protectorate from 1888 until independence in 1984, and its 1962 rebellion against joining Malaysia was crushed with British help. Oil, discovered in 1929, made its people among the richest in Asia and its sultan among the wealthiest monarchs on earth. The sultan has ruled absolutely since independence, imposing a sharia penal code in 2014-19 that drew international condemnation.

Current leadership: The sultan is the world's longest-reigning current monarch and its longest-serving head of state. His cabinet of June 4, 2026 moved the foreign ministry, which he had held, to his son Prince Abdul Mateen and made another son, Prince Abdul Malik, a minister in the prime minister's office — the clearest steps yet toward a generational handover, though no formal succession step has been announced. Brunei chairs ASEAN periodically and otherwise keeps a low profile, though the sultan met Vladimir Putin at an ASEAN-Russia summit in Kazan in June 2026.

Government structure: The 1959 constitution's emergency provisions have been in force since 1962, suspending the legislature's elected element, and the sultan rules by decree; executions under the sharia code remain under the moratorium declared in 2019. Brunei joined ASEAN on independence in 1984.

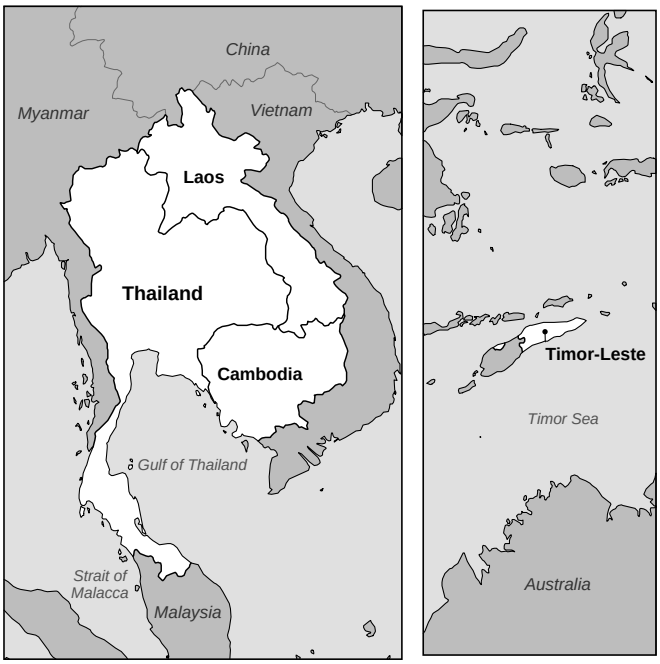
Economy and trade: A roughly $15 billion economy almost entirely dependent on oil and gas, which provide about three-quarters of government revenue and fund a welfare state with no income tax; crude oil and LNG fell below 40% of exports in 2025, overtaken by a Chinese-owned refinery's fuels and chemicals. Exports are crude oil, LNG, and refined products, mainly to Japan, Singapore, Australia, and China; imports are machinery, food, and vehicles. Reserves are declining, and diversification beyond hydrocarbons has largely failed.

Closest partners: Malaysia and Singapore, as neighbors and defense partners (Singapore trains in Brunei); Britain, whose Gurkha battalion remains stationed there under a long-standing arrangement; China, increasingly; Japan and South Korea as gas customers.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Brunei has a South China Sea claim overlapping China's and has chosen silence to protect Chinese investment — the clearest case in the region of economics overriding sovereignty.

Module 8 — Thailand, Cambodia, Laos & Timor-Leste

The Mainland and the Newest Member



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Fulcrum (ISEAS); International Crisis Group Southeast Asia reports

8a. Thailand

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Anutin Charnvirakul, 60 — in office since September 2025 (1.1 years); Bhumjaithai Party
Head of state	King Vajiralongkorn (Rama X), 74 — in office since October 2016 (10.0 years)
System	Constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	71.6 million (2026)
Land area	510,890 km² (197,260 sq mi)
Religion	Buddhist about 93%, Muslim about 5%, Christian about 1% (National Statistical Office survey, 2018)
People	Thai majority, including Central, Northern, Southern, and Lao-speaking Isan Thai; Chinese descent about a tenth; Malay Muslims about 3%, in the deep south (estimates); median age 42; 56% urban
Minimum wage	Set by province: 400 baht a day in Bangkok since July 2025, as low as 337 elsewhere ($11.91 at about 33.6 baht = $1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The only Southeast Asian state never colonized, Siam became a constitutional monarchy in a 1932 revolution and has since experienced a dozen successful coups, the most recent in 2014. King Bhumibol's 70-year reign (1946-2016) made the monarchy the center of national identity, protected by the

world's harshest lese-majeste law; his son Vajiralongkorn has expanded royal power. Politics since 2001 has been a struggle between the populist movement of Thaksin Shinawatra — twice ousted by coups — and the royalist-military establishment, whose courts kept the 2023 election's winner, Move Forward, from power and dissolved it.

Current leadership: Anutin came to power after the Constitutional Court removed Paetongtarn Shinawatra in August 2025 over a leaked call with Cambodia's former leader, Hun Sen. He dissolved the House in December, and Bhumjaithai won the election of February 8, 2026 with about 193 of 500 seats, ahead of the People's Party's 120 and Pheu Thai's 74; the House re-elected him on March 19 by 293 votes, at the head of a coalition of about 16 parties including Pheu Thai. A referendum held with the election backed drafting a new constitution. The king holds substantial informal power, and the People's Party, Move Forward's successor, leads the opposition.

Government structure: The 2017 constitution, drafted under the military, set up a bicameral parliament, and the Constitutional Court has repeatedly dissolved parties and removed prime ministers. Thailand has ordered a Chinese submarine.

Economy and trade: A roughly $550 billion economy, among Southeast Asia's largest, built on manufacturing (cars — Thailand is Southeast Asia's largest producer — electronics, hard drives), tourism (roughly 12% of GDP), and agriculture (rice, rubber). Exports are led by cars and parts, electronics, machinery, rubber, and food; imports by fuel, electronics, machinery, and steel. Top trading partners: China (largest), the US (largest export market), Japan, and Malaysia. Growth has lagged its neighbors for a decade under political instability, household debt, and an aging population — 1.9% in the second quarter of 2026, the lowest among the main ASEAN economies — and the car industry faces Chinese electric-vehicle competition.

Closest partners: The United States, its oldest treaty ally in Asia, though the relationship has thinned; China, its arms supplier and the patron the establishment has increasingly favored; Japan, the largest investor; ASEAN, which Thailand co-founded. Thailand hosts Cobra Gold, one of the region's largest US military exercises.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Cambodia, over disputed temples and the frontier: the two fought from July 24 to 28, 2025, until a ceasefire brokered by Malaysia, signed a peace accord in Kuala Lumpur on October 26 with Trump and Anwar as witnesses, and fought again from December 8 to 27 after Thailand suspended the accord over a landmine that wounded its soldiers. More than 40 were killed in the second round and about a million displaced; the ceasefire of December 27 has held, but the boundary commission had still not met by July 2026. Myanmar, whose war spills across the border (8e). Domestically, the permanent conflict between the royalist-military establishment and reformist movements; Thaksin Shinawatra, ordered back to prison in 2025, was paroled in May 2026.

8b. Cambodia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Hun Manet, 48 — in office since August 2023 (3.1 years); Cambodian People's Party
Head of state	King Norodom Sihamoni, 73 — in office since October 2004 (22.0 years); ceremonial
System	Constitutional monarchy, in practice a one-party state
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	18.1 million (2026); UN estimate; the 2019 census counted 15.55 million
Land area	176,520 km² (68,150 sq mi)
Religion	Buddhist 97.1%, Muslim 2.0% (2019 census)
People	Khmer about 95%, with Cham, Chinese, and Vietnamese minorities (estimates); median age 27; 27% urban
Minimum wage	No general minimum: $210 a month in the garment, footwear, and travel-goods industries in 2026, rising to $212 in January 2027

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Khmer Empire of Angkor was Southeast Asia's greatest medieval power; French rule ended in 1953. The Vietnam War's spillover brought the Khmer Rouge to power in 1975, and their genocide killed roughly two million — a quarter of the population — before Vietnam invaded in 1979. Hun Sen, a former Khmer Rouge officer installed by Vietnam, ruled from 1985 to 2023, eliminated the opposition, and handed power to his son.

Current leadership: Hun Manet, a West Point graduate, governs while his father, Hun Sen, remains president of the ruling party and of the Senate and the country's real ruler — the voice of Cambodia's side in the 2025 fighting with Thailand. The ruling party won 120 of the National Assembly's 125 seats in 2023, FUNCINPEC the other five.

Government structure: The main opposition party was dissolved in 2017 and its leaders jailed or exiled, and its successor, the Candlelight Party, was barred from the 2023 election, so elections offer no real choice. Cambodia hosts a Chinese-built naval base at Ream on the Gulf of Thailand, which Phnom Penh denies is a Chinese base.

Economy and trade: A roughly $45 billion economy built on garments and footwear (over half of exports), tourism (Angkor), agriculture (rice), and construction financed by Chinese capital. Exports are led by clothing, footwear, and travel goods to the US and EU; imports by fabrics, fuel, vehicles, and Chinese goods. Top trading partners: the US and EU (export markets), China (import source, investor, and creditor by far). US tariffs of 2025 hit its garment sector hard, and the scam compounds have become a multibillion-dollar shadow economy.

Closest partners: China, overwhelmingly — its patron and arms supplier — though Hun Manet calls ties with China and the US 'not mutually exclusive' and sought Trump's mediation with Thailand; Vietnam, a partner despite friction; Japan and the EU as aid donors. Cambodia has blocked ASEAN statements on the South China Sea on China's behalf.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Thailand, in the 2025 fighting (8a) and a temple dispute dating to 1962. Vietnam, over the Chinese-financed Funan Techo canal that would reduce Cambodia's dependence on Vietnamese ports. The US and EU, over the destruction of democracy and the Ream base. Internationally, the online scam industry — Chinese-run compounds employing trafficked workers — which has made Cambodia a global law-enforcement concern: the US and Britain sanctioned the Prince Group and its

chairman, Chen Zhi, in October 2025, the EU followed, and the government says it is drafting an anti-scam law.

8c. Laos

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Thongloun Sisoulith, General Secretary of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party and President, 80 — in office since January 2021 (5.7 years)
Head of government	Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone, 60 — in office since December 2022 (3.8 years)
System	One-party state under the Lao People's Revolutionary Party
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	7.97 million (2026)
Land area	230,800 km² (89,110 sq mi)
Religion	Buddhist about 66%, Tai folk religion about 31%, Christian about 1.5% (estimates)
People	Lao 53.2%, Khmu 11.0%, Hmong 9.2%, Phu Thai 3.4%, among 50 recognized groups (2015 census); median age 26; 40% urban
Minimum wage	2.5 million kip a month since October 2024, up from 1.6 million ($112 at about 22,240 kip = $1, early October 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A French protectorate until 1953, Laos was drawn into the Vietnam War, becoming the most heavily bombed country per capita in history, and fell to the communist Pathet Lao in 1975. The Lao People's Revolutionary Party has ruled since, following Vietnam's reform model from the 1980s and China's investment model from the 2000s. The Chinese-built Laos-China railway (2021) and a hydropower building spree followed, financed largely by Chinese loans.

Current leadership: The 12th Party Congress re-elected Thongloun general secretary in January 2026, and the National Assembly elected on February 22 — 169 of its 175 seats won by the party — re-elected him president and Sonexay prime minister in March, with Viengthong Siphandone as the new vice president. Sonexay is the son of a former party chief, Khamtai Siphandone.

Government structure: The system follows the Vietnamese model: a National Assembly elected from party-approved candidates, and no opposition, independent media, or civil society. Laos is an ASEAN member and chaired it in 2024.

Economy and trade: A roughly $16 billion economy, one of Asia's poorest, built on hydropower exports (the 'battery of Southeast Asia'), mining (copper, gold, potash), agriculture, and Chinese-financed infrastructure. Exports are led by electricity to Thailand and Vietnam, copper and gold, and agricultural products; imports by fuel, vehicles, and machinery. Top trading partners: Thailand, China, and Vietnam. Laos owes roughly half its external debt to China, has avoided default since its 2022 debt crisis only through Chinese deferrals, and has handed a Chinese company control of its national power grid — the region's clearest case of debt dependence.

Closest partners: China, its largest investor and the builder of its power grid; Vietnam, its historic ideological patron, whose influence China's has overtaken; Thailand, its largest trading partner and electricity customer.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Laos has no external adversaries; its dispute is with its own debt (above). Its dams on the Mekong are a friction with downstream Cambodia and Vietnam.

8d. Timor-Leste

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, 80 — in office since July 2023 (3.3 years); National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction
Head of state	President José Ramos-Horta, 76 — in office since May 2022 (4.4 years); directly elected
System	Semi-presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	1.44 million (2026)
Land area	14,870 km² (5,740 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 97.6%, Protestant 2.0% (2015 census)
People	Tetum and Portuguese the official languages; Tetum the most common first language, then Mambai and Makasae, among some 30 languages (2015 census); median age 23; 34% urban
Minimum wage	$115 a month since 2012 (the US dollar is the currency); the government proposed raising it to $154 in May 2026

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A Portuguese colony until 1975, East Timor was invaded by Indonesia nine days after declaring independence and occupied for 24 years, during which roughly a quarter of the population died. A 1999 UN-supervised referendum voted for independence, Indonesian-backed militias destroyed much of the country in response, and an Australian-led force restored order. Independent since 2002, Timor-Leste has been governed by the independence generation.

Current leadership: Ramos-Horta, a Nobel peace laureate, and Gusmão, the independence leader, have alternated in the top offices since 2002. Timor-Leste was admitted to ASEAN on October 26, 2025, at the Kuala Lumpur summit.

Government structure: The 2002 constitution pairs the president with a prime minister answerable to the 65-seat National Parliament. With Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan it is one of the region's four Free-rated democracies, and the only one in Southeast Asia.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2 billion economy almost entirely dependent on a petroleum fund built from now-depleted offshore oil and gas; the government spends the fund down each year, and its exhaustion within a decade is the central economic threat. Exports are mainly coffee; imports are nearly everything. Top partners: Indonesia, China, Singapore, and Australia. The Greater Sunrise gas field, disputed with Australia until a 2018 maritime boundary treaty, is the hoped-for successor to the exhausted fields but remains undeveloped, and in September 2026 the government pushed back its earliest production date again.

Closest partners: Australia, its security guarantor; Indonesia, a partner and ASEAN sponsor; Portugal and the Lusophone world; China, a growing investor; and ASEAN, which it lobbied for two decades to join.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Timor-Leste has no adversaries; its disputes are over how and when Greater Sunrise is developed, and with its own future, the fund's exhaustion (above).

8e. Myanmar

Myanmar, an ASEAN member since 1997, has been at war with itself since its 2021 coup, and this course does not profile it. The military held a three-phase election from December 2025 to January 2026 in which voting was cancelled across much of the country; its party, the USDP, won 231 of the 440 lower-house seats, beside the quarter reserved for the army, and the coup leader, Min Aung Hlaing, was sworn in as president on April 10, 2026. For this course, Myanmar matters as the war on ASEAN's western edge — a member whose junta the organization kept out of its summits, a source of refugees and drugs for Thailand, and a corridor China manages for its own access to the Indian Ocean.

Module 9 — The Alliance Map

US Alliances, ASEAN, China's Partners & the Quad

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: CSIS Asia Program; ISEAS State of Southeast Asia survey

9a. The Hub and Spokes

The United States built its Asian security architecture as bilateral alliances radiating from Washington — Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand, Australia — rather than a collective pact like the North Atlantic alliance, and that structure persists. Its recent evolution is toward connecting the spokes: the US-Japan-South Korea trilateral, the US-Japan-Philippines trilateral, Japan-Philippines and Japan-Australia reciprocal access agreements, and AUKUS, whose defense ministers met in Singapore in May 2026 to confirm the sale of in-service Virginia-class submarines to Australia, though a British parliamentary inquiry found its second pillar, on technology, losing credibility. Japan is emerging as the hub's deputy, with its own network of partnerships. The system's weakness is American reliability under an administration that treats allies transactionally — tariffs on Japan and Korea, demands for payment, exercises curtailed in Korea (4b), requests for allied ships in the Strait of Hormuz, and a Taiwan arms sale postponed after a summit in Beijing (5d) — which every ally hedges against.

9b. ASEAN's Centrality and Its Limits

ASEAN is the region's only inclusive institution and insists on its 'centrality' — every regional forum runs through it. Its consensus rule and non-interference principle make it effective at economic integration and weak on security: it has rarely taken a position on the South China Sea that China opposed, because Cambodia and Laos block it; and its members range from US allies to Chinese dependents. The Philippines, chairing it in 2026, has pressed to conclude the code of conduct with China, under negotiation for more than a decade; it was still unfinished at the May summit in Cebu. ASEAN's real function is to give small states a collective identity that keeps the great powers from dividing them completely — which they are dividing anyway.

9c. The Quad and the Minilaterals

The Quad is the region's main non-alliance grouping against China, focused on maritime security, technology, and infrastructure but kept deliberately short of a defense pact by India; its leaders have not met since September 2024, though its foreign ministers launched critical-minerals and maritime-surveillance projects in New Delhi in May 2026. Below it, a web of minilaterals — trilaterals, reciprocal access agreements, joint patrols — has become the real architecture of China-balancing, connecting states that will not join a formal alliance. Vietnam and Singapore participate at the edges of this web while refusing membership in any of it, and Indonesia has moved closer through its treaty with Australia (7a).

9d. China's Partners and Instruments

China has one treaty ally and two dependents (1d), but its instruments are economic: the trade that makes it the largest partner of nearly every state here (1a), the Belt and Road's ports and railways, the RCEP trade pact it anchors, and the coercion it applies — to Japan in 2025-26, South Korea in 2017, Australia in 2020, Lithuania and the Philippines — when states cross it. Its strategy is to make the economic cost of confrontation unbearable, and the region's hedging is the measure of how well it has worked.

Module 10 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, CrisisWatch; CSIS China Power Project

10a. Taiwan

The one flashpoint that would remake the world. China's pressure is at unprecedented levels (5d), Taiwan's defense budget is bitterly contested (5b), Japan's prime minister has said a Chinese attack could be grounds for Japan to use force (3c), and the United States has said neither yes nor no (5c). To watch: the local elections on November 28, 2026, a test of the opposition's alliance; the Party Congress of 2027 and Xi's fourth term; the next drills, after Justice Mission-2025; the trade agreement's fate in the legislature; and the presidential and legislative elections of January 2028, which will show whether Taiwan elects a government Beijing can pressure rather than one it must fight. No one in the region can plan without a view on this.

10b. The South China Sea

The dispute follows the pattern of 6c, and 2026's incidents fit it (6a). The risk is an incident — a death at Second Thomas Shoal, a collision with a US-escorted vessel — that triggers the defense treaty (6a). To watch: the ASEAN summit in Manila on November 10-12, 2026, where the Philippines, as chair, hopes to conclude the code of conduct with China (9b). The sea is where the region's war could begin by accident rather than decision.

10c. Japan and China

The 2025-26 confrontation is the first time China has applied full economic coercion to the region's second power, and Japan, like Australia in 2020-23, has absorbed it without retreating. How it resolves — whether Beijing escalates, whether Tokyo's economy can sustain the cost, whether the party-level talks (3c) widen into a thaw — will set the price of defiance for every other state in the course. To watch also: China's next move at the Senkakus or over Taiwan; the alliance under an unpredictable patron; and Japan's debt as rates rise, with the upper house (3b) the last check on Takaichi's spending until its election in 2028.

10d. The Korean Peninsula and Russia

North Korea's Russian alliance has changed its calculus: it has hard currency, technology, combat experience, and a patron other than China. A nuclear-armed state that answers to no one's restraint is the peninsula's new normal. South Korea's response — dialogue Pyongyang refuses, alliance with a distracted Washington, rapprochement with Tokyo — is the best available and not obviously sufficient. To watch: whether Trump meets Kim before the end of 2026, as he said in August he expects to — on the terms Pyongyang set at its congress, as a nuclear state — and the appeal against Yoon's life sentence.

10e. The Economic War

American tariffs on China and its neighbors, rebuilt on new laws after the Supreme Court's ruling (2d); Chinese export controls on rare earths, suspended under the truce; American controls on chips; the relocation of supply chains from China to Vietnam, Malaysia, and India — the economic war is reshaping the region faster than the security contest. The states that gained from decoupling are now the states most exposed to its next phase, and every one of them is discovering that hedging between two economies that are decoupling from each other has a limit. To watch: the truce's expiry on January 10, 2027, and the meetings between Trump and Xi planned for the APEC summit in Shenzhen in November and the Group of 20 summit in Miami in December.

10f. The Mainland's Wars

The region's only fighting between states in 2025 was on the mainland: Thailand and Cambodia's border war (8a). Beside it, Myanmar's civil war continues under the military-backed government the election installed (8e). To watch: whether the boundary commission meets, and whether ASEAN readmits Myanmar's leaders to its summits.

10g. The Last Word

The throughline of all ten modules: this is the region where the twenty-first century's central rivalry is being fought, and where every state has answered the same question — how to live next to China — differently. Japan has chosen to rearm and to say so; the Philippines has chosen its alliance; Vietnam has chosen bamboo; Singapore has chosen indispensability; Cambodia, Laos, and North Korea have chosen dependence; Taiwan has no choice. The pattern is hedging by nearly everyone, because China is both the economy no one can leave and the threat no one can ignore. Whether that hedging survives a crisis — over Taiwan, in the South China Sea, or on the peninsula — is the question the region has not yet had to answer, and the one this course leaves open.

Key Points

East Asia & the South China Sea

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Brunei	Hassanal Bolkiah	Sultan	80	October 1967	59.0
North Korea	Kim Jong Un	General Secretary	42	December 2011	14.8
China	Xi Jinping	General Secretary and President	73	November 2012	13.9
Laos	Thongloun Sisoulith	General Secretary and President	80	January 2021	5.7
Philippines	Ferdinand Marcos Jr.	President	69	June 2022	4.3
Malaysia	Anwar Ibrahim	Prime Minister	79	November 2022	3.9
Timor-Leste	Xanana Gusmão	Prime Minister	80	July 2023	3.3
Cambodia	Hun Manet	Prime Minister	48	August 2023	3.1
Singapore	Lawrence Wong	Prime Minister	53	May 2024	2.4
Taiwan	Lai Ching-te	President	67	May 2024	2.4
Vietnam	To Lam	General Secretary and President	69	August 2024	2.2
Indonesia	Prabowo Subianto	President	74	October 2024	2.0
South Korea	Lee Jae-myung	President	62	June 2025	1.3
Thailand	Anutin Charnvirakul	Prime Minister	60	September 2025	1.1
Japan	Sanae Takaichi	Prime Minister	65	October 2025	1.0

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's continuous tenure in the current office. In China, North Korea, Vietnam, and Laos the party leader leads, and Brunei's sultan rules as an absolute monarch; the presidents of South Korea, Taiwan, the Philippines, and Indonesia lead; elsewhere the prime minister does, under a monarch in Japan, Malaysia, Thailand, and Cambodia and a president in Singapore and Timor-Leste. Xi's tenure counts from his election as general secretary in November 2012, To Lam's from August 2024, and Kim Jong Un's from his father's death in December 2011. Gusmão was also prime minister in 2007–15, and Ramos-Horta president in 2007–12.

The Takeaways

• Every state's foreign policy in the region is a function of one variable — how to live beside China — and nearly every government runs the same hedge: the economy on Beijing, the security on Washington, both a source of risk in 2026.

• China is the world's manufacturer: a record trade surplus of about $1.2 trillion in 2025, property collapsed from a quarter of GDP to 15%, consumption stuck at 40%, factory deflation broken only by the 2026 oil and metals shock, and a growth target cut to 4.5-5% — closable only by a consumption shift the state has not funded.

• Xi Jinping's party-state is personalized and its military command gutted — five of the six generals he named to the Central Military Commission in 2022 purged, leaving Xi and one vice-chairman — while its export weapon works: the rare-earth controls were its main lever in the truce that, after state visits in both directions in 2026, runs to January 10, 2027.

• The first island chain from Japan through Taiwan to the Philippines is held entirely by American allies and partners, which is why Taiwan — its center, with ~90% of the world's leading-edge chips — is the flashpoint that would remake the world.

• Taiwan's economy is booming — growth forecast above 11% for 2026 on AI servers — under a divided government: the opposition legislature cut Lai's special defense budget to NT$780 billion and failed to impeach him, while the island's energy, 97% imported with no reactors since May 2025, is a blockade's shortest fuse.

• Japan has decided to insure rather than choose: Takaichi, the first woman prime minister, won a two-thirds majority in February 2026, reached 2% of GDP on defense two years early, and has absorbed China's coercion over her Taiwan remarks without retracting them, while the Bank of Japan raised its rate to 1.25%, the highest since 1995.

• South Korea defeated a self-coup through its institutions — Yoon was sentenced to life for insurrection in February 2026 — and rides an AI-chip boom that has the central bank raising rates, beside the lowest birth rate on earth and a public 70% in favor of a bomb of its own.

• North Korea is more secure than at any time in its history — an arsenal that reaches America, a Russian alliance paid for with about 15,000 troops sent to fight in Russia, Xi's first visit in seven years, a successor presented — and its Ninth Party Congress declared relations with the South 'completely eliminated'.

• The Philippines and Vietnam refuse to yield in the South China Sea by opposite methods — the Philippines loud with the American alliance and the shoal confrontations, Vietnam quiet with its own island-building — while the Marcos-Duterte war has reached a Senate impeachment trial and The Hague.

• Vietnam is the factory the chains moved to — growth of 9% in 2026 against a 10% target — under American tariffs that treat its Chinese components as contraband, and a party-state consolidated in To Lam, general secretary and, since April 2026, president.

• Indonesia's Prabowo governs the world's third-largest democracy back toward the officer-state he came from — a free-meals bargain, a sovereign fund, officers in civilian posts, seven cabinet reshuffles — while cutting nickel quotas by a third to lift the price of the metal it dominates.

• Thailand and Cambodia fought two rounds of border war in 2025, held since December by a ceasefire; Thailand's establishment won the February 2026 election through Anutin's Bhumjaithai, and Myanmar's coup leader made himself president through an election held across only part of the country.

• ASEAN's centrality is real for trade and weak for security — the South China Sea code of conduct still unfinished after more than a decade — the US alliances are a hub-and-spokes being connected by minilaterals, and the Quad's leaders have not met since 2024.

• The Japan-China confrontation tests whether the region's second power can absorb full Chinese coercion without retreating, as Australia did in 2020-23, and its outcome sets the price of resistance for everyone else in the region.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. What left China's Central Military Commission with only two members by late 2026?

A) A planned retirement wave under party age limits
B) Purges
C) A reorganization merging it into the defense ministry
D) The deaths of its two longest-serving generals in 2025

2. How did Sanae Takaichi strengthen her position in February 2026?

A) She won a snap election
B) Komeito rejoined
C) She won the LDP's leadership race
D) The upper house passed her first budget

3. What did Japan's prime minister tell the Diet in November 2025 that set off China's coercion?

A) That Japan would recognize Taiwan
B) That Japan would host American nuclear weapons
C) That Japan would stop buying Chinese rare earths
D) That a Chinese attack on Taiwan could be a situation in which Japan may use force

4. What sentence did a Seoul court hand Yoon Suk Yeol for insurrection in February 2026?

A) Death
B) A suspended sentence
C) Life imprisonment
D) Twenty years

5. Why does the course call Taiwan's energy a blockade's shortest fuse?

A) A nuclear plant near the coast that a blockade would have to shut down
B) Its coal stockpiles
C) Imported gas
D) Power cables to the mainland

6. What did Taiwan's opposition-run legislature do with Lai's special defense budget in May 2026?

A) Cut it to NT$780 billion
B) Rejected it
C) Passed it in full, unamended
D) Doubled it on Washington's demand

7. Which state signed a security treaty with Australia in Jakarta in February 2026?

A) Vietnam
B) Malaysia
C) The Philippines
D) Indonesia

8. What happened to the 2025 tariff deals the US struck with Japan, South Korea, and Vietnam?

A) Congress ratified them
B) The Supreme Court voided their legal basis in February 2026
C) They were extended to 2030
D) China joined them

9. Where is Rodrigo Duterte's trial set to open on November 30, 2026?

A) Before the Philippine Senate
B) At the International Criminal Court in The Hague
C) At a Manila regional trial court
D) At the Supreme Court in Manila

10. What did the House of Representatives do to Vice President Sara Duterte on May 11, 2026?

A) Censured her
B) Elected her speaker
C) Impeached her a second time
D) Voted to drop the charges against her

11. What did To Lam add to his post as general secretary in April 2026?

A) The presidency
B) The premiership
C) Command of the army as defense minister
D) Chairmanship of the National Assembly

12. Which party won the most seats in Thailand's February 2026 election?

A) The People's Party
B) Pheu Thai
C) The Democrat Party
D) Bhumjaithai

13. How did Thailand and Cambodia's 2025 border conflict unfold?

A) In two rounds of fighting
B) In one week of fighting in July
C) In a naval clash in the Gulf of Thailand
D) In a war that ended with Cambodia's surrender

14. What did Myanmar's coup leader become in April 2026?

A) Premier
B) ASEAN chair
C) President of Myanmar
D) Head of a unity government with the opposition

15. Why can ASEAN rarely take a position on the South China Sea that China opposes?

A) China is a member
B) Its charter forbids it from discussing security matters
C) The Philippines, as chair, vetoes every draft statement
D) Consensus lets Cambodia and Laos block it

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. B 2. A 3. D 4. C 5. C 6. A 7. D 8. B 9. B 10. C 11. A 12. D 13. A 14. C 15. D

Australia & the Pacific Islands

Figures current as of October 2026

Australia and the Pacific Islands — Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, and the island states: leaders, governments, economies, and the contest for influence across the ocean.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: An Ocean of Small States and One Contest

Goal: Establish the geography, the three sub-regions, the rising sea, and the China-Australia contest.

Covers the exclusive economic zones, Melanesia-Polynesia-Micronesia, climate as existential fact, and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — Australia

Goal: Profile the region's dominant power in its own module.

Covers the Albanese government, the submarine pact with the UK and the US (AUKUS), the new treaty network across the Pacific, and the China trade dependence.

MODULE 3 — New Zealand

Goal: Profile the second power and its independent tradition.

Covers Luxon's coalition before its election, the nuclear-free legacy, and the shift toward alignment.

MODULE 4 — Papua New Guinea

Goal: Profile Papua New Guinea (PNG), the largest island state, in its own module.

Covers Marape's government, the Australian defense treaty, resource wealth and poverty, and Bougainville's vote for independence awaiting ratification.

MODULE 5 — Melanesia: Fiji, Solomon Islands & Vanuatu

Goal: Profile the three states where the China contest is sharpest.

Covers Rabuka's Fiji before its election, the Solomons' new prime minister and his first no-confidence motion, and Vanuatu's Australian treaty.

MODULE 6 — Polynesia: Samoa, Tonga & Tuvalu

Goal: Profile the three Polynesian states.

Covers Samoa's 2025 change of government, Tonga's noble prime minister, and Tuvalu's migration treaty with a disappearing homeland.

MODULE 7 — Micronesia: Kiribati, Nauru, the Federated States, the Marshall Islands & Palau

Goal: Profile the five northern states, three of them in free association with the US.

Covers Kiribati's China turn, Nauru's new name and its treaty, the three Compact states of the Federated States of Micronesia (FSM), the Marshall Islands, and Palau, the American nuclear legacy, and Palau's Taiwan ties.

MODULE 8 — The Alliance Map: Australia's Treaties, the American Compacts, the Forum & China

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's blocs.

Covers Australia's treaty network, the US Compacts, the Pacific Islands Forum's fractures, the Taiwan-China recognition contest, and France.

MODULE 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers sea-level rise as the existential question, the China security contest, Bougainville, the Forum's cohesion, and the sustainability of Australia's treaty strategy.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

The parties, institutions, and abbreviations the modules rely on are defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country or countries each one belongs to or concerns, or 'Region-wide'; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Institutions, Alliances, and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
Region-wide	Pacific Islands Forum	The region's main political organization, which decides by consensus.
Australia, New Zealand	ANZUS (Australia, New Zealand, United States Security Treaty)	The alliance treaty of the three.
Australia	AUKUS (Australia, the UK, and the US)	The 2021 pact under which the US and the UK help Australia acquire nuclear-powered submarines (its first pillar) and develop military technology together (its second).
Australia	Quad (Quadrilateral Security Dialogue)	The security dialogue of the US, Japan, Australia, and India.
Australia, New Zealand	Five Eyes	The intelligence-sharing alliance of the US, the UK, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand.
FSM, Marshall Islands, Palau	Compacts of Free Association	The treaties that bind the three states to the United States.
Region-wide	International Court of Justice	The UN's court for disputes between states, which also gives advisory opinions.
Region-wide	Freedom House	The US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free, with a score out of 100.
Region-wide	V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy)	The Swedish-based research project that classifies regimes on a scale from liberal democracy to closed autocracy.

Governments, Parties, and Parliaments

Country	Name	Who or what
Australia	Labor; the Coalition	Australia's center-left party, and the alliance of the Liberal and National parties on the center right.
New Zealand	National; Labour	New Zealand's main center-right and center-left parties.
New Zealand	ACT (Association of Consumers and Taxpayers); New Zealand First; Opportunity Party	A libertarian party, Winston Peters's populist party, and a centrist party founded in 2016.
Papua New Guinea	Pangu Party	Marape's party, the country's oldest.
Fiji	People's Alliance; National Federation Party; SODELPA (Social Democratic Liberal Party)	Rabuka's party and its two coalition partners.
Fiji	FijiFirst	Frank Bainimarama's party, which governed from 2014 to 2022.
Solomon Islands	Solomon Islands Democratic Party	Wale's party.
Vanuatu	Leaders Party of Vanuatu	Napat's party.

Country	Name	Who or what
Samoa	FAST (Fa‘atuatua i le Atua Samoa ua Tasi)	The party of La‘auli Leuatea Schmidt, founded in 2020.
Samoa	Human Rights Protection Party	Samoa's long-dominant party.
Kiribati	Tobwaan Kiribati Party; Maneaba ni Maungatabu	Maamau's party, and Kiribati's parliament.

Places, Companies, and Terms

Country	Name	Who or what
Papua New Guinea	Bougainville; Panguna	The autonomous island region of Papua New Guinea, and the copper mine at the root of its war.
Marshall Islands	Kwajalein; Runit Dome	The atoll that hosts the US missile-testing range, and the concrete dome over nuclear-test waste on Enewetak.
Region-wide	Exclusive economic zone	The sea out to 200 nautical miles from a state's coast, in which it controls fishing and seabed resources.
Region-wide	New Caledonia; French Polynesia	France's two large Pacific territories.
Region-wide	LNG (liquefied natural gas)	Gas chilled to liquid so it can be shipped by tanker.
Region-wide	AI (artificial intelligence)	Software that learns from data to perform tasks such as writing, translation, and image recognition.
Region-wide	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year, converted at market exchange rates unless stated at purchasing-power parity, which adjusts for differences in prices.

Module 1 — Foundations

An Ocean of Small States and One Contest



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map and analysis; Greg Fry, *Framing the Islands*

1a. Small Land, Vast Water

The 12 Pacific island states in this course have a combined land area about the size of Spain and a combined population of about 13.7 million, four-fifths of the people and seven-eighths of the land in Papua New Guinea. But their exclusive economic zones cover about 17 million square kilometers, roughly the area of Russia, making them 'large ocean states' whose fisheries, seabed minerals, and sea lanes matter far beyond their populations. Kiribati's zone alone is the size of India. This is why states with a few thousand people command the attention of Washington, Beijing, and Canberra: they control the ocean between Asia and the Americas.

1b. Three Sub-Regions

- **Melanesia** — Papua New Guinea, Fiji, the Solomon Islands, and Vanuatu (plus French New Caledonia): the largest, most populous, most resource-rich, and most politically volatile sub-region, where the China-Australia contest is sharpest.
- **Polynesia** — Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu (plus the Cook Islands and Niue in free association with New Zealand, and French Polynesia): small, remittance-dependent, and culturally cohesive.
- **Micronesia** — Kiribati, Nauru, the Federated States, the Marshall Islands, and Palau: tiny island states, three of them bound to the United States by Compacts of Free Association (7f).

1c. The Sea Is Rising

The region faces a physical fact that could end the existence of several of its states. Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands sit two to four meters above a sea rising faster in the western Pacific than the global average, and are projected to become uninhabitable within decades. This has produced the world's first climate-migration treaty (Tuvalu-Australia, 2023; 6c), a landmark International Court of Justice opinion on states' climate obligations (2025; 5c), and a diplomatic posture in which climate, not China, is what island leaders say they care about most — and in which they judge outside powers by their emissions as much as their aid.

1d. The Contest

The contest's sharpest 2026 episode was military rather than economic. On July 6, 2026, China fired a submarine-launched ballistic missile carrying a dummy warhead about 7,000 kilometers from the South China Sea into the South Pacific, over the waters of the Federated States of Micronesia, Nauru, Kiribati, and Tuvalu, to land between Kiribati and Tuvalu — its first long-range missile test into the Pacific since a 2024 launch that was the first since 1980. Beijing said the states concerned had been told in advance; New Zealand said the warning came hours before. Tuvalu condemned the launch, and the Solomon Islands' prime minister opposed missile testing in the region by anyone. But the Forum would not name China (8c) — a demonstration that Beijing's influence has become political leverage capable of shaping the region's collective diplomacy.

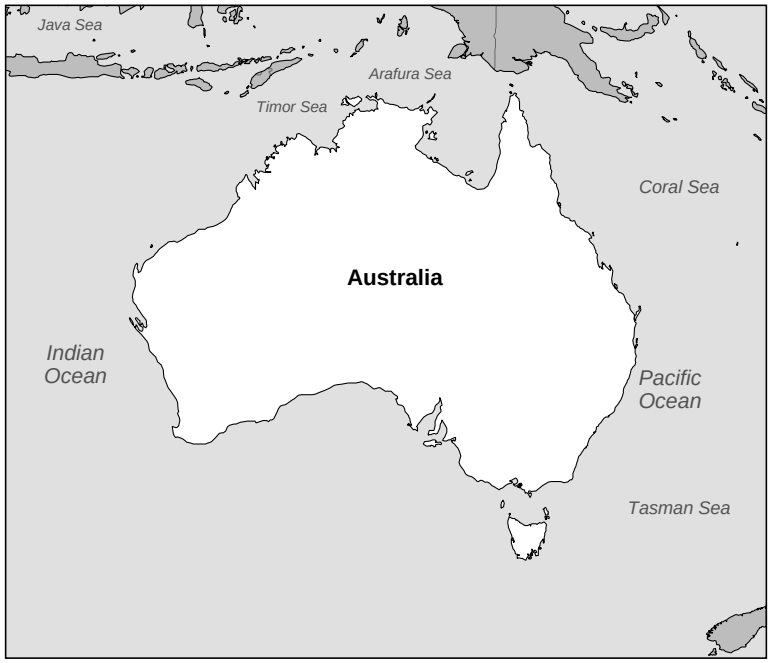
Since roughly 2018 the region has become an arena of competition between China — offering infrastructure, loans, police training, and a 2022 security pact with the Solomon Islands — and Australia, the United States, and New Zealand, which have responded with a surge of aid, treaties, and attention. Nine island states recognize China and three (Palau, the Marshall Islands, Tuvalu) still recognize Taiwan, and switching is a currency both Beijing and Taipei pay for. Australia's answer has been a network of binding treaties (2b).

1e. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office and the second figure who matters — the head of state where a prime minister governs, with the governor-general who represents King Charles III in his realms — then the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religions with their shares, the main ethnic or language groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars where the law sets one. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026, and where a recent census differs markedly the table gives it too; land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes, and Australia's profile adds a table of numbers. Thirteen of the 14 states are rated Free and only Papua New Guinea Partly Free. Five are realms of King Charles III, one has its own king, and several have no political parties at all. The Who's Who before this module defines the parties, institutions, and abbreviations the profiles rely on, and the Key Points page ranks the leaders by time in office, from Kiribati's president to the Solomon Islands' prime minister.

Module 2 — Australia

The Region's Dominant Power



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Lowy Institute; Australian Strategic Policy Institute (ASPI)

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Anthony Albanese, 63 — in office since May 2022 (4.4 years); Labor Party
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Sam Mostyn since July 2024
System	Federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	27.2 million (2026)
Land area	7,682,300 km² (2,966,150 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 43.9% (Catholic 20.0%, Anglican 9.8%), no religion 38.9%, Muslim 3.2%, Hindu 2.7%, Buddhist 2.4% (2021 census)
People	Ancestry, with more than one answer allowed: English 33.0%, Australian 29.9%, Irish 9.5%, Scottish 8.6%, Chinese 5.5%; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 3.2% (2021 census); median age 40; 87% urban
Minimum wage	A$26.44 an hour, A$1,004.90 a week, since July 1, 2026 (US$18.37 an hour at about A$1.44 = US$1, October 8, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have inhabited the continent for over 60,000 years; British settlement began as a penal colony in 1788 and dispossessed them through frontier violence

and, later, the forced removal of children. Six colonies federated in 1901, and Australia fought in both world wars as a British dominion before the fall of Singapore in 1942 turned it toward the United States. The ANZUS treaty of 1951 anchored that alliance; the White Australia immigration policy was dismantled from the 1960s, and the country became one of the world's most multicultural. A 2023 referendum on an Indigenous Voice to Parliament failed decisively.

Current leadership: Albanese won re-election on May 3, 2025, with 94 of the 150 House seats, the most Labor has ever held, as the opposition leader, Peter Dutton, lost his own seat — the Trump effect: an external threat that made the opposition's closeness to Washington's model a liability, as it had in Canada a week earlier. Foreign Minister Penny Wong and Defense Minister Richard Marles have driven the Pacific treaty strategy and AUKUS.

Government structure: Six states and two territories, with a bicameral parliament (a House elected by preferential voting and a proportionally elected Senate), compulsory voting, and a High Court as constitutional arbiter; a 1999 referendum on becoming a republic failed. Australia is a member of the Quad and AUKUS.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2.1 trillion economy, the world's twelfth-largest and the region's dominant one by a wide margin, built on mining and energy exports — iron ore (the world's largest exporter), coal, LNG, gold, and lithium — plus agriculture, education (international students are a top export), finance, and services. Exports are led by iron ore, coal, LNG, gold, and education; imports by refined fuel, vehicles, machinery, and electronics. Top trading partners: China (largest by far, buying most of the iron ore), Japan, South Korea, the US, and India. China's 2020-23 trade coercion — bans on coal, wine, barley, and lobster after Australia called for an inquiry into the pandemic's origins — was largely reversed after 2023, but the dependence it exposed persists. Australia is the region's aid donor of first resort.

Closest partners: The United States, in an alliance deepened by AUKUS and expanded American basing in the north, though tested by Trump-era tariffs and demands. New Zealand, its closest partner. Japan, under a 2022 reciprocal access agreement, Indonesia, with which it signed a security treaty in February 2026, and the Philippines, South Korea, and India as Indo-Pacific partners. The Pacific island states, through the treaty network (2b). The UK, through AUKUS and history.

Principal rivalries and disputes: China, in a relationship that combines the largest trade dependence of any developed country with the sharpest security competition: the trade coercion (above), China's security pact with the Solomons, its naval circumnavigation of Australia in 2025, and cyberattacks on one side; Australia's AUKUS, basing, and Pacific treaties on the other. Relations were stabilized after 2022 but the structural rivalry is untouched. Domestically, housing costs and interest rates, Indigenous reconciliation, and the cost and timeline of the AUKUS submarines.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Growth ~1.5% a year on migration (cut from the 2023 peak); fertility 1.5	A migration economy in a housing crisis
Growth	2.1% in the year to June 2026, led by household spending, with business investment falling; per head ~$68,000	Mining 12% of GDP and 60% of exports (iron ore $80B, coal $60B, LNG $50B); the world's fourth-largest pension pool (more than A$4 trillion)
Prices and rates	The Reserve Bank's cash rate raised to 4.60% on September 29, 2026, its fourth rise of the year and the highest since 2011	Sticky core inflation, oil prices, and AI-related demand; further rises possible

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Trade	Exports ~$400B; China 30% (iron ore, coal, LNG), the US 10% (the beef and pharmaceutical fights)	The China customer and the American ally in one balance sheet
Public finance	Debt ~50% of GDP (low); a deficit ~1.5%; the states' debts higher	Among the rich world's soundest fiscal positions
Military	2.8% of GDP in 2026-27 on the government's measure, rising to 3% by 2033 under the April 2026 National Defence Strategy, which added A$53 billion over ten years; 60,000 active; AUKUS's nuclear-powered submarines (up to A$368 billion, about US$240 billion, to the mid-2050s), which the Pentagon's review, completed in December 2025, endorsed; the northern bases (Darwin's Marines); the Pacific patrols	The alliance's most expensive bet
Regime (V-Dem)	Liberal democracy; the next election due by 2028	Freedom House 94/100
Energy	Coal 45% of power (falling); renewables 40% and rising; the world's largest LNG exporter with Qatar and the US; gas at home short; nuclear banned (the Coalition's 2025 proposal defeated)	The exporter with a domestic shortage
Critical minerals	The world's largest lithium producer, a top rare-earth, nickel, and uranium miner; the October 2025 US framework ($8.5B pipeline; a A$1.2B strategic reserve); Lynas and Iluka; the nickel industry idled by Indonesia	The West's mine trying to become its refinery

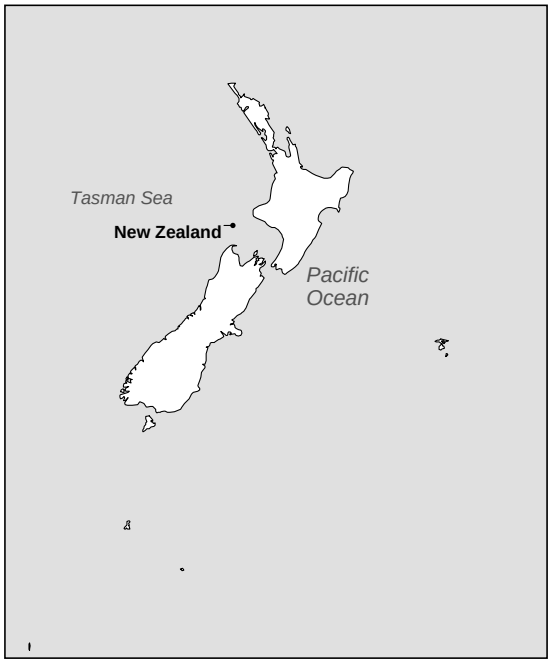
In depth — the question: whether a rich democracy that sells its ore to China and buys its submarines from America can keep both when the customer coerces and the guarantor doubts — while interest rates rise against a housing crisis that the landslide postponed rather than settled.

2b. The Treaty Strategy

Australia's response to Chinese competition has been to convert influence into law: Tuvalu's Falepili Union in 2023 (6c), a treaty with Nauru in 2024 (7b), the Pukpuk mutual defense treaty with Papua New Guinea in 2025 (4a), the Nakamal Agreement with Vanuatu in June 2026 (5c), and the Vuvale Union and the Ocean of Peace Alliance, a mutual defense treaty, with Fiji on July 6, 2026 (5a), with treaty talks opened in August with the Solomon Islands (5b). The logic is to make it legally impossible, or at least costly, for a partner to sign a Chinese security pact without Australian consent — through a veto in Tuvalu and Nauru, mutual defense with Papua New Guinea and Fiji, and a bar on foreign bases in Vanuatu. The risk is that treaties bind governments that change, in a region where they change often, and that island states resent a relationship that looks like tutelage.

Module 3 — New Zealand

The Second Power and Its Independent Tradition



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: New Zealand Institute of International Affairs; Radio New Zealand (RNZ) Pacific

3a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Christopher Luxon, 56 — in office since November 2023 (2.9 years); National Party
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Cindy Kiro since October 2021, her term extended to March 31, 2027
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	5.29 million (2026)
Land area	263,310 km² (101,660 sq mi)
Religion	No religion 51.6%, Christian about 32%, Hindu about 3%, Māori religions about 1.6% (2023 census)
People	European 67.8%, Māori 17.8%, Asian 17.3%, Pacific peoples 8.9%, with more than one answer allowed (2023 census); median age 39; 87% urban
Minimum wage	23.95 New Zealand dollars an hour for adults since April 2026 (US$13.39 at about 1.79 New Zealand dollars = US$1, October 8, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Māori settled the islands around 1300; the 1840 Treaty of Waitangi between Māori chiefs and the British Crown remains the founding document. New Zealand became a dominion in 1907 and fought alongside Australia at Gallipoli and in both world wars. Under Jacinda Ardern (2017-23) it drew global attention for its response to the Christchurch mosque attacks and the pandemic.

Current leadership: Luxon, a former Air New Zealand chief executive, leads a coalition of his National Party (49 seats), the libertarian ACT (11), and the populist New Zealand First (8) — 68 of 123 — and has called the general election for November 7, 2026, with the polls level: surveys in August and September gave the coalition between 58 and 64 seats against the 61 needed, with the Opportunity Party, which Luxon has ruled out working with, holding the balance in several. Foreign Minister Winston Peters has pushed a more assertive Pacific and China posture.

Government structure: An uncodified constitution and a unicameral parliament elected by mixed-member proportional representation since 1996, which has made coalition government the norm; seven seats are reserved for Māori voters. The Treaty of Waitangi's status is the deepest constitutional question, and the coalition's Treaty Principles Bill provoked the largest protests in decades before its defeat in 2025. New Zealand has been nuclear-free by law since 1987.

Economy and trade: A roughly $250 billion economy built on agriculture — dairy (Fonterra is the world's largest dairy exporter), meat, wool, and wine — plus tourism, forestry, and a growing technology sector. Exports are led by dairy, meat, forestry products, fruit (kiwifruit), and wine; imports by vehicles, machinery, fuel, and electronics. Top trading partners: China (largest), Australia, the US, Japan, and the EU. New Zealand was the first developed country to sign a free trade agreement with China (2008); a recession in 2024-25 and emigration to Australia are the current pressures.

Closest partners: Australia, its closest partner in every dimension, with which it shares a single labor market and the Anzac tradition; the United States, in a relationship restored after the nuclear rift and now deepened by Five Eyes and a possible role in AUKUS's second pillar; the Pacific islands, especially the Polynesian states, its associated states (the Cook Islands, Niue), and its territory of Tokelau; the UK; and China (above).

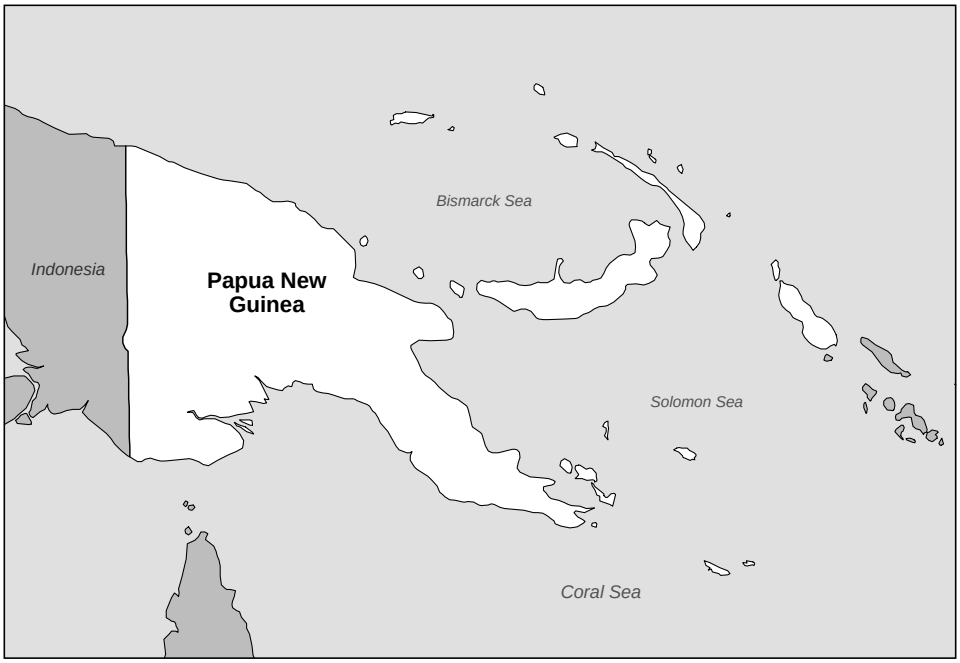
Principal rivalries and disputes: China, over its Pacific push, its 2025 naval deployment to the Tasman Sea, cyberattacks, and the Cook Islands' 2025 agreements with Beijing that New Zealand said breached their relationship. Domestically, the Treaty of Waitangi debate and the election.

3b. The Independent Tradition Under Pressure

New Zealand's 1985 refusal to admit nuclear-armed US ships, which cost it its ANZUS role, created a foreign-policy identity of independence within the West that has lasted four decades. That tradition is now under pressure from both sides: China's Pacific push (above) has pulled Wellington toward Canberra and Washington, while its economic dependence on China and its Pacific partners' preference for a less confrontational posture pull the other way. Luxon's government has moved toward alignment (above), and the election will test whether the public agrees.

Module 4 — Papua New Guinea

The Largest Island State



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Sean Dorney, *The Embarrassed Colonialist*; the Australian National University's Department of Pacific Affairs

4a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister James Marape, 55 — in office since May 2019 (7.4 years); Pangu Party
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Bob Dadae since 2017
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	10.9 million (2026); UN estimate; the 2024 census counted 10.19 million
Land area	452,860 km² (174,850 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 96%: Catholic 26%, Lutheran 18%, Seventh-day Adventist 13%, Pentecostal 10%, United Church 10% (2011 census)
People	Melanesian and Papuan peoples speaking about 840 languages; no official ethnic count; median age 24; 14% urban
Minimum wage	5 kina an hour since January 2026, up from 3.50 (US$1.10 at about 4.53 kina = US$1, October 8, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Now the most linguistically diverse country on earth, the eastern half of New Guinea was divided between Germany and Britain in the 1880s, wholly administered by Australia from World War I, and

the site of brutal fighting between Japan and Allied forces in World War II. Independence from Australia came in 1975. A secessionist war on the island of Bougainville (1988-98) killed up to 20,000 people.

Current leadership: Marape has survived repeated no-confidence attempts — a vote in September 2024 among them — in a parliament where governments routinely fall. A constitutional amendment passed in March 2025, 84-4, bars a new no-confidence motion for 18 months after a prime minister defeats one, which shields him toward the 2027 election, and in May 2026 the Supreme Court rejected the opposition leader James Nomane's challenge over a motion.

Government structure: A 118-seat unicameral parliament, elected by limited preferential voting across thousands of clans, in which parties are weak and members change sides freely; provinces have substantial autonomy, and Bougainville its own government (4b). Governance is weak, corruption pervasive, and tribal violence in the Highlands endemic; a 2025 constitutional amendment declared Papua New Guinea a Christian country.

Economy and trade: A roughly $32 billion economy, the Pacific islands' largest, built on natural resources — LNG (the PNG LNG project operated by ExxonMobil), gold, copper (the Ok Tedi and planned Wafi-Golpu mines), oil, timber, and palm oil — while over 80% of its people live by subsistence agriculture. Exports are led by LNG, gold, copper, palm oil, and timber; imports by machinery, fuel, food, and vehicles. Top trading partners: Australia (largest), China, Japan, and Singapore. Resource revenue is poorly distributed and infrastructure minimal; TotalEnergies has cut the cost of the planned Papua LNG project to about $14 billion and is handing its operation to ExxonMobil ahead of a final investment decision.

Closest partners: Australia, its former colonial power and largest aid donor, now its ally under the Pukpuk treaty, signed in October 2025 and in force since July 2026 — PNG's first defense alliance and Australia's first new one in more than seven decades, which lets up to 10,000 Papua New Guineans serve in the Australian Defence Force — and the sponsor, under a separate deal, of a PNG team in Australia's National Rugby League from 2028; the United States, under a 2023 defense cooperation agreement giving access to bases; China, a major investor, lender, and infrastructure builder; Indonesia, its only land neighbor; and Japan.

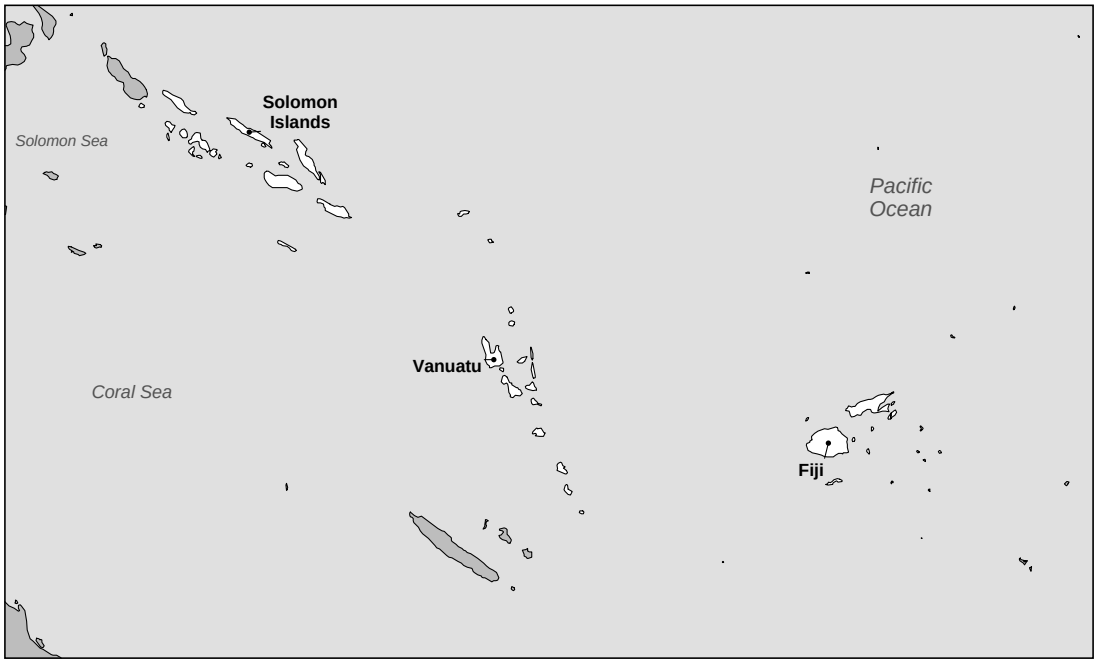
Principal rivalries and disputes: The China-Australia contest plays out in PNG's ports, telecoms, and policing, with Marape balancing both while binding PNG to Canberra. Bougainville's unratified independence is the central constitutional question (4b). Indonesia's Papua provinces across the border, where a separatist insurgency has run for decades, are a persistent source of friction. Domestically, resource-revenue distribution and Highlands violence (above), and the 2024 Enga landslide's aftermath.

4b. Bougainville

Bougainville's war (4a), fought over the Panguna copper mine, still closed, and secession, ended with a 2001 agreement that granted autonomy and promised a referendum. When it came, in 2019, 98% voted for independence. PNG's parliament, which must ratify the result, has not done so, fearing a precedent for other provinces. The joint consultation report was tabled in August 2026, but 111 of the 118 members said they could not decide without an agreed procedure, and Marape conceded the vote would slip to October at the earliest; Port Moresby wants a two-thirds or three-quarters majority — the coalition has asked for 89 votes — while Bougainville argues that a simple majority of 60 should do. Ishmael Toroama, re-elected Bougainville's president in a landslide in 2025, says the mandate 'cannot be denied': his government targets independence in 2027 and plans to declare sovereignty unilaterally by 2030 if parliament delays further. Both Australia and China are positioned to be the new state's first partners.

Module 5 — Melanesia

Fiji, Solomon Islands & Vanuatu



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Islands Business; RNZ Pacific; Lowy Institute Pacific analysis

5a. Fiji

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka, 78 — in office since December 2022 (3.8 years); People's Alliance
Head of state	Ratu Naiqama Lalabalavu, President, 72 — in office since November 2024 (1.9 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	937,000 (2026)
Land area	18,270 km² (7,050 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 64.4%, Hindu 27.9%, Muslim 6.3% (2007 census, the latest to publish religion)
People	iTaukei (Indigenous Fijians) 56.8%, Indo-Fijians 37.5% (2007 census); median age 29; 60% urban
Minimum wage	5.00 Fijian dollars an hour since April 2025 (US$2.22 at about 2.25 Fijian dollars = US$1, October 8, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Fiji was a British colony from 1874 until independence in 1970, and the indentured Indian laborers Britain imported created a society divided between Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians. Four coups — two in 1987 led by Sitiveni Rabuka, one in 2000, and one in 2006 led by Frank Bainimarama — have followed the ethnic fault line. Bainimarama ruled for 16 years, first as military dictator and then as elected leader under a 2013 constitution he wrote, before Rabuka's coalition defeated him in 2022. Fiji hosts the

Pacific Islands Forum secretariat and the University of the South Pacific, and its military is the region's largest outside Australia and New Zealand.

Current leadership: Rabuka, an elected prime minister in the 1990s, leads a coalition of his People's Alliance, the National Federation Party, and SODELPA. The general election must be held by February 6, 2027: the window for issuing the writ opened in June, a record ten parties have registered, and Rabuka expects polling between late December and early February. Bainimarama was jailed in 2024, and FijiFirst, the largest party in the 2022 parliament, was dissolved the same year.

Government structure: The 2013 constitution provides a 55-seat parliament elected by open-list proportional representation and gives the military a role as guardian of the state. Rabuka's coalition has been fractious but has restored press freedom and repealed Bainimarama-era media laws, and Freedom House upgraded Fiji to Free in 2026.

Economy and trade: A roughly $6 billion economy, the Pacific islands' largest after PNG's, built on tourism (roughly 40% of GDP), sugar, remittances, garments, and bottled water (Fiji Water). Exports are led by bottled water, sugar, fish, and garments; imports by fuel, machinery, food, and vehicles. Top trading partners: Australia (largest), the US, New Zealand, Singapore, and China. Fiji is the region's transport and institutional hub, and emigration of skilled workers is its chief constraint.

Closest partners: Australia, its treaty ally (2b), and New Zealand, the two largest donors and tourism sources; the United States and Japan; India, with which Fiji shares the Indo-Fijian community; and China, which Rabuka has kept at arm's length after Bainimarama's closeness, scaling back police cooperation.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The China question, which Rabuka has resolved toward Australia; the ethnic settlement between Indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians (above); the military's constitutional role; and the coalition's fragility before the election. Rabuka's 'Ocean of Peace' proposal seeks to keep great-power militarization out of the region.

5b. Solomon Islands

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Matthew Wale, 58 — in office since May 2026 (0.4 years); Solomon Islands Democratic Party
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General David Tiva Kapu since July 2024
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	858,000 (2026)
Land area	27,990 km² (10,810 sq mi)
Religion	Anglican 31.9%, Catholic 19.6%, South Seas Evangelical 17.1%, Seventh-day Adventist 11.7%, United Church 10.1% (2009 census)
People	Melanesian 95.3%, Polynesian 3.1%, Micronesian 1.2% (2009 census); median age 22; 27% urban
Minimum wage	8.00 Solomon Islands dollars an hour since August 2019 (US$0.99 at about 8.06 to the US dollar, October 8, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A British protectorate from 1893, the Solomons were the site of the Guadalcanal campaign, the Pacific war's turning point, and became independent in 1978. Ethnic conflict between Guadalcanal and

Malaita islanders in 1998-2003 collapsed the state until an Australian-led intervention force restored order and stayed 14 years. Manasseh Sogavare, prime minister four times, switched recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019 and signed a secret security pact with Beijing in 2022 that alarmed Australia and the US; riots in Honiara in 2021 targeted Chinese businesses. Jeremiah Manele succeeded him in 2024.

Current leadership: Wale, opposition leader for seven years and a critic of the China security pact, was elected 26-22 by parliament over Peter Shanel Agovaka after Jeremiah Manele fell to a no-confidence vote on May 7, 2026. He pledged to review the China pact, chose Australia for his first visit, and opened treaty talks with Canberra. On August 30, hours after arriving in Palau for the Forum summit he was due to open as outgoing chair, he flew home to face a no-confidence motion filed by his own home affairs minister, Manasseh Maelanga; three ministers resigned. He headed off the motion, withdrawn on the eve of its debate in early September, by sacking his finance minister, Gordon Darcy Lilo, and now claims the support of 31 of the 50 members.

Government structure: Weak parties and shifting coalitions make no-confidence votes the rhythm of politics — prime ministers rarely serve full terms. Provincial governments, especially Malaita's, have their own foreign-policy views, and Malaita openly opposed the China switch.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2 billion economy dependent on logging (unsustainably, with forests projected to be exhausted), fishing (tuna), agriculture (palm oil, cocoa), and aid. Exports are led by timber, fish, palm oil, and cocoa; imports by fuel, food, and machinery. Top trading partners: China (buying most of the timber), Australia, Malaysia, and Singapore. Chinese firms dominate logging and have built infrastructure including the 2023 Pacific Games stadium; the economy's dependence on Chinese timber purchases underlies its political tilt.

Closest partners: Australia, the largest donor; China (above) — though Wale backed the one-China principle on a visit to Beijing in 2025 and his approach to China has softened, a rebalancing rather than a break; New Zealand, PNG, and the US, which reopened its embassy in 2023.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The China pact and its review are the defining dispute, splitting the government from the opposition and the capital from Malaita. Domestically, the instability that produced no-confidence motions against consecutive prime ministers within months, and the legacy of the ethnic conflict (above).

5c. Vanuatu

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Jotham Napat, 54 — in office since February 2025 (1.6 years); Leaders Party of Vanuatu
Head of state	President Nikenike Vurobaravu, 74 — in office since July 2022 (4.2 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	343,000 (2026)
Land area	12,190 km² (4,710 sq mi)
Religion	Presbyterian about 28%, Anglican about 15%, Seventh-day Adventist about 12%, Catholic about 12% (2009 census)
People	Ni-Vanuatu about 99% (2009 census); Bislama, English, and French the official languages; median age 21; 26% urban
Minimum wage	300 vatu an hour since June 2023 (US$2.50 at about 120 vatu = US$1, October 8, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The New Hebrides were governed from 1906 by an Anglo-French condominium — two administrations, two legal systems, two languages — until independence as Vanuatu in 1980, which was accompanied by a brief secessionist rebellion on Espiritu Santo. Vanuatu's politics are the region's most unstable, with frequent no-confidence votes. It is a leading voice on climate change: it drove the 2023 UN resolution seeking an International Court of Justice opinion on states' climate obligations.

Current leadership: Napat, a former airline executive, was elected by parliament after the snap election of January 16, 2025, held weeks after a devastating earthquake in Port Vila in December 2024 and called when the president dissolved parliament at the outgoing prime minister's request. He survived a no-confidence vote in December 2025, and signed the Nakamal Agreement with Australia in Canberra on June 29, 2026, after pulling out of a planned signing in September 2025 over its limits on sovereignty.

Government structure: A 52-seat parliament with many small parties, and constitutional amendments passed in 2024 to curb party-switching and stabilize governments; the president is chosen by an electoral college.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1.2 billion economy built on tourism, agriculture (copra, kava, beef), fishing, and the sale of citizenship — passport sales have provided up to a third of government revenue and drawn EU sanctions on visa-free access. Exports are led by kava, copra, beef, and fish; imports by food, fuel, and machinery. Top trading partners: Australia, New Zealand, China, and Fiji. Cyclones cause recurring devastation, and Vanuatu is among the world's most disaster-exposed states.

Closest partners: Australia, its largest donor, under the Nakamal Agreement: 500 million Australian dollars over a longer term than the ten years first proposed, in exchange for no foreign military bases or infrastructure, consultation with Australia on third parties in critical infrastructure, and Australia as the primary policing partner, though policing with China is still allowed — ratified by Vanuatu and awaiting Australia's parliament; New Zealand and France, the former co-colonial power; China, which built the parliament, wharfs, and roads, is a major creditor, and is seeking a 'Namele Agreement' of its own; and the Non-Aligned Movement and small-island coalitions on climate.

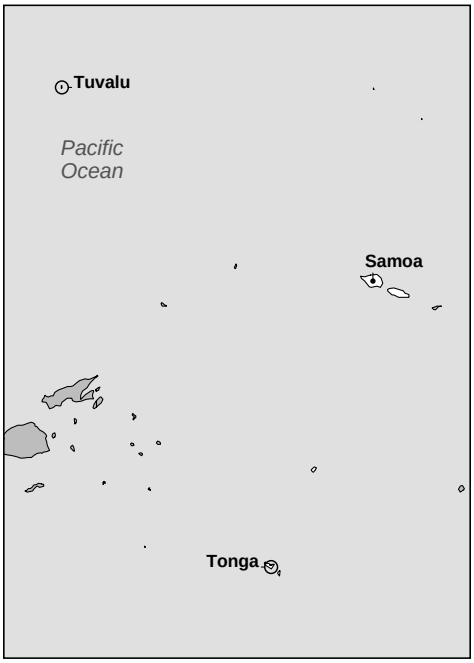
Principal rivalries and disputes: Vanuatu has no adversaries; its defining issues are climate and cyclone recovery, the passport sales (above), Chinese debt, and the West Papua independence cause it champions against Indonesia.

5d. Why Melanesia Is the Front Line

The three states here, with PNG, are where the China contest is decided, because they have the population, resources, strategic ports, and political volatility that make outside influence both possible and consequential. The Solomons' 2022 pact was the contest's opening shot; Australia's treaties with Fiji, Vanuatu, and PNG, and Wale's election in Honiara, are the counterattack. The pattern in 2026 is a swing toward Canberra — but it rests on governments that change through no-confidence votes, in a sub-region where the Solomons' new prime minister faced one within four months.

Module 6 — Polynesia

Samoa, Tonga & Tuvalu



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: RNZ Pacific; Samoa Observer; Matangi Tonga

6a. Samoa

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Laʻauli Leuatea Schmidt, 60 — in office since September 2025 (1.1 years); FAST
Head of state	Tuimalealiʻifano Vaʻaletoʻa Sualauvi II, O le Ao o le Malo (head of state), 79 — in office since July 2017 (9.2 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	221,000 (2026)
Land area	2,830 km² (1,090 sq mi)
Religion	Congregational about 29%, Catholic about 19%, Latter-day Saints about 17%, Methodist about 12% (2016 census)
People	Samoan about 96% (2011 census); median age 21; 17% urban
Minimum wage	5.24 tālā an hour since July 2026, up from 4.84 (US$1.88 at about 2.79 tālā = US$1, October 8, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: German Samoa was seized by New Zealand in 1914 and administered under a mandate that saw the Mau independence movement and a 1929 massacre. Samoa became the first Pacific island state to win independence, in 1962. The Human Rights Protection Party governed for four decades until Fiamē Naomi Mataʻafa won in 2021 after a constitutional standoff resolved by the courts.

Current leadership: La‘auli, founder and chairman of the governing FAST party and Fiamē Naomi Mata‘afa's agriculture minister, was sacked from her cabinet in January 2025 after refusing to resign over criminal charges, among them conspiring to pervert the course of justice; the split brought down her government, and FAST, under La‘auli, won 30 seats in the snap election that followed, in which Fiamē, Samoa's first female prime minister, lost. He was treated in Auckland for illness in October 2025, barred the Samoa Observer from covering the government in November, and apologized in October 2026 over a video of a Nazi salute.

Government structure: Only matai — holders of chiefly titles — may stand for parliament, which blends Westminster institutions with the fa‘a Samoa chiefly system and elects the head of state for five years. Christianity is constitutionally established.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1 billion economy built on remittances (from Samoans in New Zealand, Australia, and the US, roughly a quarter of GDP), tourism, agriculture (coconut products, taro), fishing, and aid. Exports are led by coconut oil, fish, and beer; imports by food, fuel, and vehicles. Top trading partners: New Zealand (largest and the main remittance source), Australia, the US, and China, which has become a major creditor and builder.

Closest partners: New Zealand, its former administering power and home to a Samoan diaspora larger than Samoa's population; Australia; the United States, with American Samoa next door; and China (above), which has built much of Apia's infrastructure.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Samoa has no adversaries; its issues are Chinese debt, the 2025 political rupture and its aftermath, emigration, and climate. It has kept a cautious distance from great-power security competition.

6b. Tonga

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Lord Fakafanua, Prime Minister, 41 — in office since December 2025 (0.8 years); a noble
Head of state	King Tupou VI, 67 — in office since March 2012 (14.6 years)
System	Constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	103,000 (2026)
Land area	720 km² (278 sq mi)
Religion	Free Wesleyan about 35%, Latter-day Saints about 19%, Catholic about 14%, Free Church of Tonga about 12% (2016 census)
People	Tongan about 97% (2016 census); median age 22; 23% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The only Pacific island state never colonized, Tonga was a British protectorate from 1900 but kept its monarchy and sovereignty, becoming fully independent in 1970. King Tupou IV's 41-year reign ended in 2006; pro-democracy riots that year burned much of the capital, and the reforms of 2010 followed. A 2022 volcanic eruption and tsunami devastated the islands.

Current leadership: Lord Fakafanua, the long-serving speaker, was elected prime minister by parliament after the general election of November 2025, defeating the incumbent, ‘Aisake Eke, 16 votes to 10. Eke, a

commoner, had replaced Siaosi Sovaleni, who resigned in December 2024 ahead of a no-confidence vote widely seen as driven by the palace. Fakafanua is a royal relative — his sister is married to the crown prince — and King Tupou VI retains substantial constitutional powers, including over the military and foreign affairs, and has reasserted them.

Government structure: The 2010 reforms created a majority-elected parliament — 17 seats elected by commoners, 9 by the 33 hereditary nobles — from which the prime minister is chosen. The king appoints the cabinet on the prime minister's advice but has withheld consent, and the crisis of 2024 showed the palace can still remove a government.

Economy and trade: A roughly $500 million economy, the region's most remittance-dependent — over a third of GDP comes from Tongans abroad, mostly in New Zealand, Australia, and the US — plus agriculture (squash, vanilla, root crops), fishing, and tourism. Exports are led by agricultural products and fish; imports by food, fuel, and vehicles. Top trading partners: New Zealand, Australia, the US, Fiji, and China, to which Tonga owes a large share of its debt from post-2006 reconstruction loans.

Closest partners: New Zealand and Australia (above); the United States; Japan; and China (above), which built key infrastructure.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Tonga's defining tension is internal: the monarchy versus the elected government, unresolved since 2010 and reopened by the 2024 crisis and the noble premiership that followed. Externally, Chinese debt and the 2022 eruption's recovery dominate.

6c. Tuvalu

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Feleti Teo, 63 — in office since February 2024 (2.6 years)
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Temukisa Auina Penehuro Hauma since September 2026
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy with no political parties
Freedom House	Free
Population	9,000 (2026); UN estimate; Tuvalu's 2022 census counted 10,643
Land area	30 km² (12 sq mi)
Religion	Church of Tuvalu (Congregational) about 86% (2012 census)
People	Tuvaluan (Polynesian) about 96%, I-Kiribati about 2% (2012 census); median age 25; 67% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law for private employers; the public service has its own pay scale

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Ellice Islands separated from the Gilberts in 1975 and became independent as Tuvalu in 1978, nine atolls whose highest point is 4.6 meters.

Current leadership: Teo, a former Pacific fisheries official, was chosen after an election fought partly over the Falepili Union with Australia, which he has upheld, and over Taiwan, whose recognition he has maintained. The governor-general is the first woman in the post.

Government structure: A 16-seat parliament chooses the prime minister. Tuvalu is one of the world's smallest states.

Economy and trade: A roughly $60 million economy, one of the world's smallest, dependent on fishing-license fees, income from leasing its .tv internet domain (a significant share of revenue), remittances, and aid. Exports are negligible; imports are nearly everything. Top partners: Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, and Taiwan. The Tuvalu Trust Fund, established by Australia, New Zealand, and the UK in 1987, supplements the budget.

Closest partners: Australia, under the 2023 Falepili Union — which gives Tuvaluans a migration pathway (280 a year), climate cooperation, and a defense guarantee, in exchange for an Australian veto over Tuvalu's security agreements; registrations for the first visa ballot came from more than half the population, and a second ballot's registration ran in May 2026; Taiwan (1d); New Zealand; and the small-island coalitions on climate.

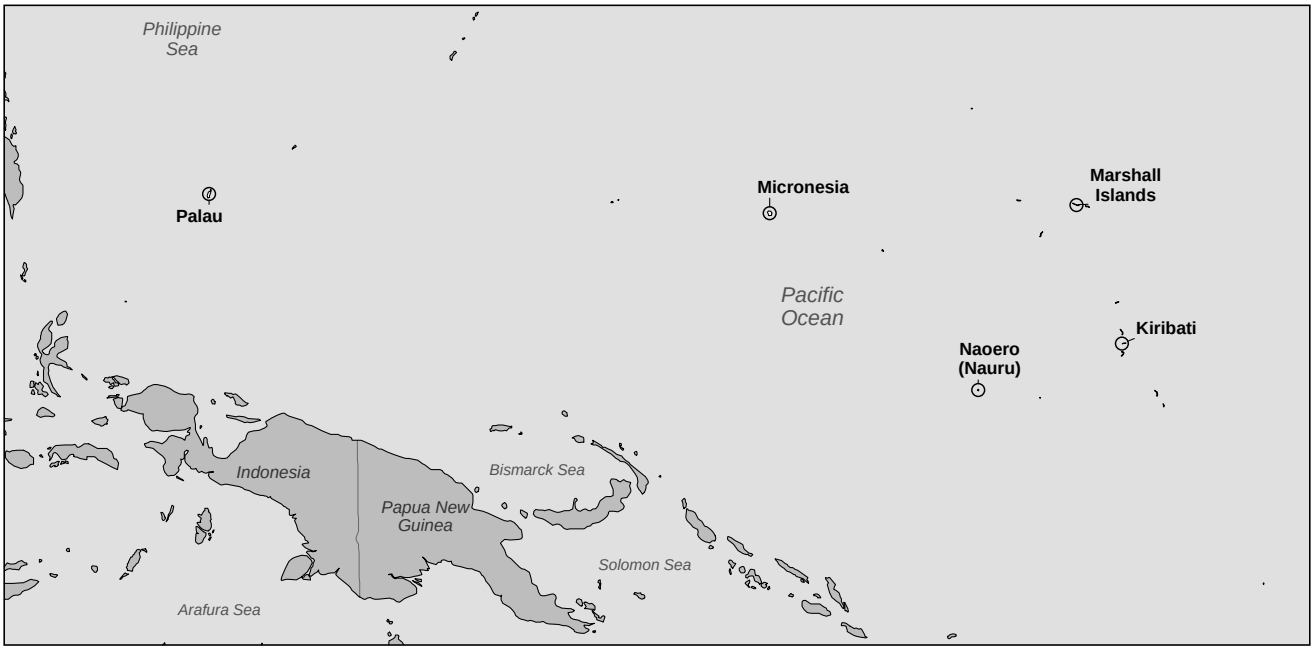
Principal rivalries and disputes: Tuvalu's dispute is with the sea (1c): it has pursued 'digital nation' and land-reclamation projects and treats climate diplomacy as survival. The Falepili Union's sovereignty tradeoffs and the Taiwan-China question are the political issues.

6d. The Polynesian Pattern

Polynesia's three states are small, cohesive, deeply Christian, and bound to New Zealand and Australia by their diasporas. They have kept a greater distance from the China contest than Melanesia — Samoa and Tonga through caution, Tuvalu through Taiwan and its Australian treaty. Their politics turn on chiefly systems (Samoa), monarchy (Tonga), and consensus (Tuvalu) rather than the coalition instability of Melanesia, though 2025 showed even Samoa's and Tonga's governments can fall.

Module 7 — Micronesia

Kiribati, Nauru, the Federated States, the Marshall Islands & Palau



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Congressional Research Service, Compacts of Free Association; Pacific Island Times

7a. Kiribati

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Taneti Maamau, 66 — in office since March 2016 (10.6 years); Tobwaan Kiribati Party
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	138,000 (2026); UN estimate; the 2020 census counted 119,940
Land area	810 km² (313 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic about 59%, Kiribati Uniting Church about 21%, Kiribati Protestant Church about 8%, Latter-day Saints about 6% (2020 census)
People	I-Kiribati about 96% (2020 census); median age 24; 60% urban
Minimum wage	A$1.30 an hour with local employers and A$3.00 on overseas-funded projects, the rates of November 2016 and the latest published (US$0.90 and US$2.08 at about A$1.44 = US$1, October 8, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Gilbert Islands, under British rule from 1892 and the site of the bloody 1943 Tarawa battle, became independent as Kiribati in 1979. Its 33 atolls straddle the equator and the date line, with a land area smaller than Los Angeles and an average elevation of two meters. Kiribati has bought land in Fiji as a refuge against sea-level rise, and its Phoenix Islands Protected Area was one of the world's largest marine reserves until the government reopened it to fishing in 2021.

Current leadership: Maamau, re-elected in 2024, switched recognition from Taiwan to China in 2019 and has drawn Chinese police and investment. He stayed home from the 2026 Forum summit, citing a parliamentary sitting and a shortage of flights.

Government structure: A hybrid system: the president is directly elected from candidates nominated by the parliament, the Maneaba ni Maungatabu, and can be removed by it. Parties are loose alliances.

Economy and trade: A roughly $300 million economy dependent on fishing-license fees from foreign tuna fleets (the largest revenue source), remittances from seafarers, copra, and aid. Exports are fish and copra; imports are nearly everything. Top partners: Australia, Fiji, Japan, and China. Kiribati's Revenue Equalisation Reserve Fund, built from phosphate mined before 1979, and its vast exclusive economic zone — the island states' largest — are its assets.

Closest partners: China (above), also a fisheries partner; Australia and New Zealand, the largest donors; Japan and the US on fisheries; and Fiji (above).

Principal rivalries and disputes: The China turn has strained relations with Australia and drawn scrutiny of Chinese police. A 2022 constitutional crisis saw the government suspend judges. The existential issue is the rising sea (1c).

7b. Nauru

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President David Adeang, 56 — in office since October 2023 (2.9 years)
System	Parliamentary republic with no formal parties
Freedom House	Free
Population	12,000 (2026)
Land area	20 km² (8 sq mi)
Religion	Nauru Congregational about 36%, Catholic about 33%, Assemblies of God about 13% (2011 census)
People	Nauruan about 89%, part-Nauruan about 7%, I-Kiribati about 2% (estimates); median age 21; 100% urban
Minimum wage	None set by law for private employers; the public service has a graded pay scale

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A single island whose phosphate deposits, mined by Germany, Britain, Australia, and then Nauru itself after independence in 1968, briefly made its people among the world's richest per capita before the phosphate was largely exhausted and the trust fund was squandered. Nauru turned to selling passports, hosting an Australian offshore detention center for asylum seekers from 2001, and recognizing whichever of China or Taiwan paid more.

Current leadership: Adeang switched recognition from Taiwan to China in January 2024, days after Taiwan's election, signed the treaty with Australia in December 2024, and was re-elected unopposed after the October 2025 election, at which voters rejected a four-year parliamentary term in a referendum. In August 2026 the country formally took its Nauruan name, the Republic of Naoero; this course uses both.

Government structure: The 19-member parliament elects the president, and governments change often.

Economy and trade: A roughly $150 million economy dependent on fishing-license fees, residual phosphate mining, the Australian-funded refugee processing center (the largest revenue source for most of

the past two decades), and passport sales. Exports are phosphate and fish; imports are nearly everything. Top partners: Australia (dominant), Taiwan until 2024, now China, and Fiji.

Closest partners: Australia, under the Nauru-Australia Treaty, which provides budget support and a policing partnership in exchange for an Australian veto over Nauru's security, banking, and telecom arrangements; and China (above).

Principal rivalries and disputes: Nauru's dispute is with its own depletion (above) and with the sovereignty tradeoffs of the Australian treaty.

7c. Federated States of Micronesia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Wesley Simina, 65 — in office since May 2023 (3.4 years)
System	Federal republic in free association with the US
Freedom House	Free
Population	114,000 (2026)
Land area	700 km² (270 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 54.7%, Protestant 41.1% (2010 census)
People	Chuukese and Mortlockese 49.3%, Pohnpeian 29.8%, Kosraean 6.3%, Yapese 5.7% (2010 census); median age 24; 24% urban
Minimum wage	No national minimum for private employers; the states set their own, Pohnpei's US$1.75 an hour for private work (2015, the latest published)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Caroline Islands passed from Spain to Germany to Japan to the United States, which administered them as a UN trust territory after World War II. Four states — Yap, Chuuk, Pohnpei, and Kosrae — federated in 1979 and entered a Compact of Free Association with the US in 1986 (7f).

Current leadership: Simina is a former speaker of Congress and governor of Chuuk; the presidency rotates informally among the four states.

Government structure: A 14-member Congress elects the president from among its four at-large senators, one per state; there are no parties.

Economy and trade: A roughly $450 million economy dependent on US Compact funding (roughly a third of GDP), fishing-license fees, and public-sector employment. Exports are fish and agricultural products; imports are food, fuel, and manufactured goods, mostly from the US and Asia. The 2023 Compact renewal provides $3.3 billion over 20 years. Chinese diplomatic pressure has grown.

Closest partners: The United States, which provides defense, funding, and exclusive military access under the Compact, and treats FSM as if it were US territory for defense purposes; Japan; China, recognized since 1989 — FSM has never recognized Taiwan — and a growing investor; Australia; and the other Micronesian states.

Principal rivalries and disputes: FSM's central tension is between Compact dependence on the US and Chinese investment, which Washington has pressed it to limit; internally, Chuuk's repeated talk of secession and the federation's weakness, with the states holding most power.

7d. Marshall Islands

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Hilda Heine, 75 — in office since January 2024 (2.8 years)
System	Parliamentary republic in free association with the US
Freedom House	Free
Population	35,000 (2026); UN estimate, which assumes heavy emigration; the 2021 census counted 42,418
Land area	180 km² (69 sq mi)
Religion	United Church of Christ about 54%, Assembly of God about 26%, Catholic about 8% (2011 census)
People	Marshallese about 92%, mixed Marshallese about 6% (estimates); median age 21; 80% urban
Minimum wage	US$4.50 an hour since October 1, 2025, in the public and private sectors

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Japanese-held from 1914, the Marshalls were the site of the US nuclear testing program from 1946 to 1958 — 67 tests at Bikini and Enewetak atolls, including the largest US hydrogen bomb, which left islands uninhabitable and a legacy of radiation illness and displacement. Self-governing from 1979 and in free association with the US since 1986, the Marshalls host the Kwajalein missile-testing range and have been a leading voice on climate change and on nuclear justice.

Current leadership: Heine is the first woman elected president of a Pacific island state.

Government structure: The 33-seat Nitijela, the parliament, elects the president, and a Council of Iroij (chiefs) advises.

Economy and trade: A roughly $280 million economy dependent on US Compact funding and the Kwajalein base lease, fishing licenses, a ship registry (the world's third-largest by tonnage, a flag of convenience), and copra. Exports are fish and copra; imports are nearly everything, mostly from the US. The 2023 Compact renewal provides $2.3 billion over 20 years, including a nuclear-legacy fund.

Closest partners: The United States, defense provider, funder, and Kwajalein tenant; Taiwan, which the Marshalls recognize; Japan; and Australia.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The nuclear legacy (above), including the Runit Dome, threatened by rising seas, remains the defining grievance with Washington. China has pressed the Marshalls to switch recognition.

7e. Palau

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Surangel Whipps Jr., 58 — in office since January 2021 (5.7 years)
System	Presidential republic in free association with the US
Freedom House	Free
Population	18,000 (2026)
Land area	460 km² (178 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 46.9%, Protestant 30.9%, Modekngei 5.1%, Muslim 4.9% (2015 census)
People	Palauan about 73%, Filipino about 16%, other Asian about 5% (2015 census); median age 40; 83% urban

At a glance	As of October 2026
Minimum wage	US$5.00 an hour since October 1, 2025, for all but foreign workers

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The westernmost Carolines were Japanese, then American, and became the last UN trust territory to gain independence, in 1994, after a decade-long struggle over its nuclear-free constitution's compatibility with the US Compact of Free Association. Palau has since been one of the most US-aligned Pacific states.

Current leadership: Whipps, a businessman re-elected in 2024, hosted the Forum's 55th leaders' meeting in Koror from August 31 to September 4, 2026, and now chairs the Forum. He is the region's most outspoken critic of China and its most vocal supporter of the US and Taiwan.

Government structure: A directly elected president, a bicameral congress, and no parties, under a 1981 constitution that was the world's first nuclear-free one; traditional chiefs hold advisory roles.

Economy and trade: A roughly $300 million economy dependent on tourism (which the pandemic and China's boycott devastated), US Compact funding ($889 million over 20 years under the 2023 renewal, a significant share of the budget), fishing, and public employment. Exports are fish; imports are nearly everything. Top partners: the US, Japan, and Taiwan. Palau's marine sanctuary covers 80% of its waters.

Closest partners: The United States, which has expanded military installations in Palau including a radar system and treats it as a forward position; Taiwan, which Palau recognizes and whose tourists replaced China's; Japan, its former colonial power and a major donor; Australia; and the Micronesian states.

Principal rivalries and disputes: China, which imposed a tourism boycott over Palau's Taiwan ties and has been accused of influence operations; the sovereignty implications of expanding US military presence; and climate.

7f. The Compact States and the American Nuclear Legacy

FSM, the Marshall Islands, and Palau are bound to the United States by Compacts of Free Association: Washington provides defense, funding, and free migration to the US, and gains the right to exclude any other military from their territory and waters — a zone stretching from Hawaii to the Philippines. The 2023 renewals, worth about $6.5 billion over 20 years ($7.1 billion with federal services), were driven by fear of Chinese inroads, though the Government Accountability Office found in May 2026 that the first year's money was not paid until the end of fiscal 2024 and that oversight appointments came more than a year late. The relationship carries the Marshalls' nuclear legacy (7d), and the three states are among the most US-dependent on earth. Kiribati and Nauru, outside the Compacts, have swung to China and, in Nauru's case, then to an Australian treaty — the two paths available to Micronesian states without an American guarantee.

Module 8 — The Alliance Map

Australia's Treaties, the American Compacts, the Forum & China

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat; Lowy Institute Pacific Aid Map

8a. Australia's Treaty Network

In three years Australia has built a formal alliance structure where none existed (2b). Combined with the Pacific Policing Initiative, it is the most ambitious Australian foreign-policy project in decades, and it is explicitly designed to foreclose the option the Solomons exercised in 2022. Its limits are visible too: Vanuatu's agreement requires consultation rather than a veto and still allows policing with China (5c), and the Solomons' prime minister is pressing a region-wide 'Blue Pacific Ocean of Peace' security treaty of his own.

8b. The American Compacts

The Compacts (7f) are the American counterpart to Australia's treaties — older, more comprehensive, and more dependent. Beyond them, the US reopened its embassy in the Solomons (5b), opened its first in Vanuatu in 2024, and signed a defense agreement with PNG (4a), but its attention is intermittent and its aid a fraction of Australia's; island leaders judge it by its climate policy as much as its security offers.

8c. The Pacific Islands Forum

The Forum, founded in 1971, is the region's own institution — 18 members including Australia, New Zealand, and the French territories — and the venue where island states set the agenda, above all on climate. It nearly split in 2021 when the Micronesian states walked out over a leadership dispute, and it splits again on China, Taiwan, and whether Australia's treaties are partnership or tutelage. Its 2026 leaders' meeting in Koror (7e), under a China-critical chair, showed both its indispensability and its fragility: the Solomons' prime minister left hours after arriving (5b); at least five leaders stayed home — Kiribati's (7a), Fiji's, Samoa's, and Vanuatu's among them — amid suggestions of foreign interference; and the communiqué 'registered concern' about China's July missile test and asked for at least 24 hours' notice of any such launch without naming China, after Kiribati reportedly vetoed stronger language at the foreign ministers' meeting in August — and Naoero dissented even from that, a rare break in a body that decides by consensus. The leaders adopted a Palau Declaration on climate and a regional peace and security plan for 2026-30, and divided the outside powers into tiers, with 13 'strategic partners', China and the US among them; Taiwan attended as a development partner over China's protests. The leaders also reaffirmed the Ocean of Peace Declaration (5a).

8d. China, Taiwan, and the Others

- **China** — the region's second-largest lender and a major infrastructure builder, with police deployments in the Solomons and Kiribati, the Solomons' 2022 security pact, and the 2025 naval deployment around Australia and New Zealand (2a, 3a); its bid for a region-wide security deal in 2022 failed.

• **Taiwan** — its three Pacific allies (1d) are among its last diplomatic partners, which China works to reduce state by state.

• **New Zealand** — the second Western partner, with associated states (Cook Islands, Niue) and a Polynesian focus.

• **France** — a Pacific power through New Caledonia and French Polynesia, both Forum members; New Caledonia's 2024 unrest over voting rules and a 2025 accord on its status keep decolonization on the agenda.

• **Japan, India, the UK, the EU** — donors and partners of growing but secondary weight.

• **Indonesia** — a Melanesian power through its Papua provinces, whose independence movement Vanuatu champions (5c).

Module 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

> **Reference:** Lowy Institute; the Department of Pacific Affairs' 'In Brief' series; the Government Accountability Office on the Compacts (May 2026)

9a. The Rising Sea

The region's existential question is not geopolitical. The three atoll states of 1c face the loss of habitable land; every other state faces cyclones, coastal erosion, and saltwater intrusion. The Falepili Union is the first attempt to answer what happens to a state whose territory disappears — it affirms Tuvalu's continued statehood — and the International Court of Justice's opinion (1c) establishes that major emitters have legal obligations. Island leaders have made climate the price of their partnership: Australia's coal exports and America's policy reversals are held against them in every forum.

9b. The China Contest in 2026

The contest's 2026 scorecard favors Australia: treaties with five states (2b), a government in Honiara reviewing the China pact, a China-critical Forum chair, and Fiji's alignment. But the gains rest on governments that fall to no-confidence votes (5d) and on a treaty model that some island leaders call tutelage. China's counter is patient: infrastructure, police, debt, the agreement it seeks with Vanuatu (5c), and the next change of government. To watch: Fiji's coming election (5a), the Solomons' treaty talks with Canberra, and whether Australia's parliament ratifies the Nakamal Agreement.

9c. Bougainville

The Pacific's most likely new state is on a timeline PNG's parliament has not accepted (4b). To watch: the ratification vote and the majority it will require. A negotiated path to independence would create a resource-rich micro-state courted by everyone; a refusal risks the return of the war (4a). Australia's treaty with PNG makes it a party to the outcome.

9d. The Forum's Cohesion

The Forum's divisions (8c) leave it able to speak with one voice on climate, its strength, but not on security, its limit. Whether it can absorb Australia's treaty network without becoming an instrument of it is the institutional question. To watch: Palau's year in the chair, and whether Naoero's dissent becomes a pattern.

9e. The Treaty Strategy's Sustainability

The strategy's success depends on sustaining the money, migration, and attention that make the treaties worthwhile to partners, and on avoiding the perception of a new colonial relationship that Chinese diplomacy exploits. A change of government in Canberra, a fiscal squeeze, or a single treaty partner repudiating its agreement would test whether law can hold what influence could not.

9f. The Last Word

The throughline of all nine modules: this is a region of very small states with very large stakes, where the physical fact of a rising sea and the political fact of a great-power contest have arrived at the same time. The island states have responded by making the first the price of the second — demanding climate action as the condition of partnership — and by playing the contest for what it yields: treaties, aid, migration, police. Australia has answered with law, the United States with Compacts, China with patience. Nearly all the states are democracies (1e), and their governments change often, which means that every alignment in this course is provisional and every treaty is a bet on the next election in a capital of a few thousand people.

Key Points

Australia & the Pacific Islands

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Kiribati	Taneti Maamau	President	66	March 2016	10.6
Papua New Guinea	James Marape	Prime Minister	55	May 2019	7.4
Palau	Surangel Whipps Jr.	President	58	January 2021	5.7
Australia	Anthony Albanese	Prime Minister	63	May 2022	4.4
Fiji	Sitiveni Rabuka	Prime Minister	78	December 2022	3.8
Micronesia	Wesley Simina	President	65	May 2023	3.4
Nauru	David Adeang	President	56	October 2023	2.9
New Zealand	Christopher Luxon	Prime Minister	56	November 2023	2.9
Marshall Islands	Hilda Heine	President	75	January 2024	2.8
Tuvalu	Feleti Teo	Prime Minister	63	February 2024	2.6
Vanuatu	Jotham Napat	Prime Minister	54	February 2025	1.6
Samoa	Laʻauli Leuatea Schmidt	Prime Minister	60	September 2025	1.1
Tonga	Lord Fakafanua	Prime Minister	41	December 2025	0.8
Solomon Islands	Matthew Wale	Prime Minister	58	May 2026	0.4

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's continuous tenure in the current office. Prime ministers lead the parliamentary states; the presidents of Kiribati, Nauru, the Federated States of Micronesia, the Marshall Islands, and Palau are heads of both state and government. King Charles III is head of state of Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, and Tuvalu, represented in each by a governor-general, and Tonga's king keeps real powers. Rabuka was also prime minister in 1992–99, and Heine president in 2016–20.

The Takeaways

• Very small states with very large stakes: fourteen countries from Australia's 27 million people to Tuvalu's 10,000 or so, where a rising sea and a great-power competition arrived together and the islands' votes, waters, and wharves are the currency.

• Australia is the region's power and the hedger in its most comfortable form — iron ore, coal, and gas to China (a third of exports) under AUKUS's American submarines — re-elected with the most seats Labor has ever held in May 2025, lifting defense spending toward 3% of GDP, and raising interest rates to 4.60% as inflation sticks.

• AUKUS is the alliance's most expensive bet — up to A$368 billion for nuclear-powered submarines — and it survived the Pentagon's 2025 review, which endorsed it.

• New Zealand votes on November 7, 2026, with the polls level; Papua New Guinea, the largest island state, is Australia's first new ally in seven decades under the Pukpuk treaty and has yet to ratify Bougainville's 2019 vote for independence.

• Melanesia is the competition's front: Fiji and Vanuatu signed treaties with Australia in mid-2026, the Solomon Islands' new prime minister is reviewing the Chinese security pact and survived a no-confidence motion within four months, and Beijing courts Vanuatu with an agreement of its own.

• In Polynesia, Samoa and Tonga changed governments in 2025 and Tuvalu's people apply in their thousands for Australia's climate visa; in Micronesia, the three American compact states hold a defense zone from Hawaii to the Philippines, while Kiribati and Naoero lean toward Beijing.

• China's July 2026 submarine-launched missile test over four island states showed the contest's military edge, and the Forum's refusal to name China — with Naoero dissenting even from a mild statement — showed its political reach.

• The rising sea is the physical fact: atolls a few meters above the water, the Falepili Union's affirmation of Tuvalu's statehood, and an International Court of Justice opinion that major emitters have legal obligations.

• Thirteen of the fourteen states are rated Free, Fiji upgraded in 2026, and their governments fall often — which makes every alignment provisional and every treaty a bet on the next election in a small capital.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. How many of the twelve Pacific island states in the course recognize China?

A) Six
B) Nine
C) Eleven
D) Twelve

2. Which treaty between Australia and Papua New Guinea came into force in July 2026?

A) Pukpuk
B) Falepili Union
C) Nakamal Agreement
D) Vuvale Union

3. What did Papua New Guinea's 2025 constitutional amendment on no-confidence motions do?

A) It abolished the monarchy
B) It extended parliament's term to six years
C) It barred a new motion for 18 months after a prime minister defeats one
D) It gave Bougainville independence

4. Who became Tonga's prime minister in December 2025?

A) ʻAisake Eke
B) Siaosi Sovaleni
C) Crown Prince Tupoutoʻa ʻUlukalala, the king's heir
D) Lord Fakafanua, a noble and former speaker

5. How did Freedom House's 2026 report change Fiji's rating?

A) Downgraded it to Partly Free
B) Downgraded it to Not Free
C) Upgraded it to Free
D) Suspended it over the election delay

6. What happened to the no-confidence motion against Matthew Wale in September 2026?

A) It passed 26-22
B) It was withdrawn before the debate
C) It was ruled unconstitutional by the High Court
D) It failed by one vote

7. What does Vanuatu's Nakamal Agreement rule out?

A) Foreign military bases
B) Chinese aid
C) Any policing role for China
D) Citizenship sales to foreigners

8. Why does the course say the Forum's response to China's July 2026 missile test showed Beijing's reach?

A) The Forum condemned the United States instead
B) Australia vetoed the statement
C) The Forum expelled Palau for protesting
D) The communiqué registered concern without naming China, and Naoero dissented even from that

9. What do the Compacts of Free Association give the United States?

A) Sovereignty over the three states
B) The right to exclude other militaries from the three states' territory and waters
C) Ownership of their fisheries
D) A veto over their votes at the UN

10. What name did Nauru formally take in 2026?

A) Naoero
B) Pleasant Island
C) Nauru-Pacifica
D) Republic of Yaren

11. By when must Fiji's general election be held?

A) December 2025
B) July 2028, after a constitutional review
C) Within a month of a no-confidence vote
D) February 6, 2027

12. What did Australia's Reserve Bank do on September 29, 2026?

A) Cut the rate to 3.10%
B) Held the rate at 3.60%
C) Raised the cash rate to 4.60%
D) Began buying government bonds again

13. How did Laʻauli Leuatea Schmidt become Samoa's prime minister?

A) His party won a snap election
B) A military coup
C) The head of state appointed him without a vote
D) He succeeded Fiamē as her deputy prime minister

14. What does Bougainville's government plan if Papua New Guinea's parliament keeps delaying ratification?

A) To join the Solomon Islands
B) To hold a second referendum
C) To declare sovereignty unilaterally by 2030
D) To seek Australian administration

15. What do the polls say about New Zealand's November 2026 election?

A) Labour leads by twenty points
B) The governing coalition hovers around the 61 seats it needs
C) The Greens have collapsed
D) ACT and New Zealand First have both announced they will retire from parliament

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. B 2. A 3. C 4. D 5. C 6. B 7. A 8. D 9. B 10. A 11. D 12. C 13. A 14. C 15. B

West Africa & the Gulf of Guinea

Figures current as of October 2026

West Africa and the Gulf of Guinea — Nigeria, Ghana, Senegal, the coastal and Sahel states, and Cameroon: leaders, governments, economies, and the coups and growth of the region.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: A Coast Between the Sahel and the Sea

Goal: Establish the geography, the colonial inheritance, the coup wave, and the disputes that recur.

Covers the coastal-Sahel divide, the split between French- and English-speaking states, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and its rupture, and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — Nigeria

Goal: Profile the region's dominant power in its own module.

Covers Tinubu's reforms and their cost, the federal system, the security crises, and the 2027 election.

MODULE 3 — Ghana & Côte d'Ivoire (the Cocoa Coast)

Goal: Profile the two most prosperous coastal states and their diverging politics.

Covers Ghana's model democracy and debt recovery, and Ouattara's fourth-term Côte d'Ivoire.

MODULE 4 — Senegal, The Gambia, Mauritania & Cape Verde (the Atlantic Northwest)

Goal: Profile the four states on the region's northwestern edge.

Covers Senegal's sovereigntist government and the split at its top, the Gambia's post-Jammeh democracy, Mauritania's stability, and Cape Verde's model and its 2026 change of government.

MODULE 5 — Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone & Liberia (the Mano River States)

Goal: Profile the four states of the region's most troubled corner.

Covers Guinea's legitimized coup leader, Guinea-Bissau's junta, and the post-war democracies of Sierra Leone and Liberia.

MODULE 6 — Togo & Benin

Goal: Profile the two small states between Ghana and Nigeria.

Covers Togo's permanent dynasty under a new constitution and Benin's managed transition to Wadagni.

MODULE 7 — Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon & São Tomé (the Gulf's Southern Shore)

Goal: Profile the four states of the Gulf of Guinea's central African coast.

Covers Biya's Cameroon at 93, Obiang's 47-year rule, Gabon's coup-to-election transition, and São Tomé's 2026 elections.

MODULE 8 — The Alliance Map: ECOWAS's Rupture, France's Retreat, the Sahel Juntas & the Outside Powers

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's blocs.

Covers ECOWAS after the Sahel exit, the euro-pegged franc zone, France's withdrawal, Russia, China, the Gulf, and the United States.

MODULE 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers jihadist spillover to the coast, the coup contagion, Nigeria's 2027 election, the Gulf of Guinea's oil and piracy, migration, and the succession question.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

Every armed group, party, institution, and abbreviation the modules name is defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country each one belongs to or concerns, or how many of the seventeen when it spans several; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Parties and Movements

Country	Name	Who or what
Nigeria	APC (All Progressives Congress)	Nigeria's ruling party, formed in 2013 by a merger of opposition parties; Bola Tinubu's party.
Ghana	National Democratic Congress	The party Jerry Rawlings founded in 1992; John Mahama's party.
Senegal	Pastef (African Patriots of Senegal for Work, Ethics and Fraternity)	The party Ousmane Sonko founded in 2014; it brought Faye to power in 2024, and it stayed with Sonko when he and Faye split in 2026.
Senegal	Kiiraay–The Republican Patriots	The party President Faye launched, formalizing his break with Sonko.
Cape Verde	PAICV (African Party for the Independence of Cape Verde)	The independence movement that governed until 1991 and again in 2001-16; Prime Minister Francisco Carvalho and President José Maria Neves both belong to it.
Cape Verde	MpD (Movement for Democracy)	Cape Verde's center-right party, in government in 1991-2001 and 2016-26.
Guinea-Bissau	PAIGC (African Party for the Independence of Guinea and Cape Verde)	The movement that won Guinea-Bissau's independence war under Amílcar Cabral; now the main opposition.
Sierra Leone	Sierra Leone People's Party	Julius Maada Bio's party, one of the two that have alternated in power since 2002.
Liberia	Unity Party	Joseph Boakai's party, which was also Ellen Johnson Sirleaf's.
Benin	The Democrats	Benin's main opposition party, led by former president Thomas Boni Yayi.
São Tomé	ADI (Independent Democratic Action)	The party of former prime minister Patrice Trovoada.
São Tomé	MLSTP (Movement for the Liberation of São Tomé and Príncipe)	The independence movement and former single party.

Armed Groups and Juntas

Country	Name	Who or what
Nigeria, Cameroon	Boko Haram	Jihadist movement founded in northeastern Nigeria in 2002 (the name is usually rendered 'Western education is forbidden'); its insurgency since 2009 has spread around Lake Chad.
Nigeria, Cameroon	ISWAP (Islamic State West Africa Province)	The Islamic State's branch around Lake Chad, which split from Boko Haram in 2016.
Four of the 17	JNIM (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims)	Al-Qaeda's Sahel coalition, formed in 2017 (from its Arabic name, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin); it has pushed south into Benin, Togo, and the borders of Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana.
Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger	Islamic State Sahel	The Islamic State's branch in the three Sahel states, a rival of JNIM.

Country	Name	Who or what
Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger	Africa Corps (formerly Wagner)	Russia's state-run military force in Africa, which took over the Wagner Group's mercenary operations after 2023 and protects the Sahel juntas.
Cameroon	Anglophone separatists	Armed groups fighting since 2017 for an independent 'Ambazonia' in Cameroon's two English-speaking regions.
Senegal	Casamance separatists	Rebels fighting since 1982 for the independence of Senegal's southern Casamance region.
Guinea-Bissau	High Military Command	The junta that seized power in November 2025; its chief, General Horta N'Tam, is transitional president.

Institutions and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
12 of the 17	ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States)	Regional bloc founded in 1975, with free movement, a court, and a standby force.
Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger	Alliance of Sahel States	Confederation of the three Sahel juntas, formed in 2024 as they left ECOWAS, with a joint force and Russian backing.
All 17	AU (African Union)	The continental body of 55 states, based in Addis Ababa; it suspends members after coups.
Four of the 17	ECCAS (Economic Community of Central African States)	Central Africa's counterpart to ECOWAS, to which Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon, and São Tomé belong.
Eight of the 17	CFA (African Financial Community) franc	The currency of 14 mostly former French colonies, in a West African and a Central African zone (the second's initials stand for Financial Cooperation in Central Africa), pegged to the euro and guaranteed by the French treasury.
All 17	Freedom House	US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free on political rights and civil liberties.
All 17	V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy)	Research institute in Sweden whose regime classes run from closed autocracy to liberal democracy.
Ghana, Senegal	IMF (International Monetary Fund)	Lender to governments in currency and debt crises; its loans come with policy conditions.
Three of the 17	OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries)	The oil producers' cartel, which sets members' output quotas; Nigeria, Equatorial Guinea, and Gabon belong.
Cape Verde	NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)	The US-European military alliance.
Four of the 17	Accra Initiative	Security pact formed in 2017 by Ghana, Togo, Benin, Côte d'Ivoire, and Burkina Faso against jihadist spillover; Burkina's junta has since drifted away from it.
Four of the 17	Mano River Union	Regional body of Sierra Leone, Liberia, Guinea, and Côte d'Ivoire, named for the river on the Sierra Leone-Liberia border.
Three of the 17	Constitutional Council	In French-speaking systems, the court that rules on constitutional questions and certifies elections.
Mauritania	Arab League; Arab Maghreb Union	The association of 22 Arab states, and the dormant North African bloc of Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya.
Four of the 17	Lusophone community	The Community of Portuguese Language Countries: Cape Verde, Guinea-Bissau, São Tomé, and, though Spanish-speaking, Equatorial Guinea.

Country	Name	Who or what
Seven of the 17	Commonwealth	Association of 56 mostly former British territories; Gabon and Togo joined in 2022 without a British colonial past.
Ghana	African Continental Free Trade Area	The continent-wide free-trade agreement, trading since 2021.
Côte d'Ivoire	African Development Bank	The continent's development lender.

Places, Terms, and Abbreviations

Country	Name	Who or what
Region-wide	Sahel	The semi-arid belt south of the Sahara; here, chiefly Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, which lie outside this course.
Region-wide	UAE (United Arab Emirates)	Gulf federation of seven emirates, a major buyer of the region's gold and an investor in its ports.
All 17	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year.
Four of the 17	LNG (liquefied natural gas)	Natural gas chilled to a liquid so it can be shipped by tanker.
Nigeria	CPI (consumer price index)	The standard measure of inflation.
Nigeria	b/d; mb/d	Barrels of oil a day; million barrels a day.
Nigeria	Dangote refinery	Africa's largest oil refinery (650,000 barrels a day), near Lagos, opened in 2024 by the industrialist Aliko Dangote.
Nigeria	Sharia	Islamic law.
Ghana	Galamsey	Illegal small-scale gold mining, which has poisoned rivers with mercury.
Côte d'Ivoire	Ivoirité	'Ivorianness': the 1990s nationalist doctrine that excluded northerners and Muslims from citizenship and office.
The Gambia	'Back way'	Gambians' term for irregular migration to Europe across the Sahara and the Mediterranean.
Mauritania	Haratin; Bidhan	Arabic-speaking Black Mauritanians descended from people enslaved by the Arab-Berber elite; and that elite itself.
Guinea	Simandou	The world's largest untapped high-grade iron ore deposit, in southeastern Guinea.
Senegal, Mauritania	Greater Tortue Ahmeyim	Offshore gas field straddling the Senegal-Mauritania border.

Module 1 — Foundations

A Coast Between the Sahel and the Sea



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Africa Center for Strategic Studies; International Crisis Group Africa reports; *The Africa Report*

1a. The Coast and the Interior

The 17 states in this course share the Atlantic coast from the Sahara's edge in Mauritania to the equatorial forest in Gabon, and the sea gives them what the landlocked Sahel states to their north lack: ports, oil, fisheries, and access to world markets. That division — coastal states with ports and comparative stability, interior states with juntas and jihadist wars — has become the region's organizing fact. The Sahel states (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad) lie outside this course; here they appear as the source of the insurgency, the refugees, and the political contagion that the coast now absorbs.

1b. The Colonial Inheritance

Two colonial systems left two kinds of state. The former French colonies (eight here) share French as a language of government, a tradition of strong presidencies, and, until recently, French military bases and political tutelage; all but Guinea and Mauritania use the CFA franc, pegged to the euro and guaranteed by the French treasury. The former British colonies (Nigeria, Ghana, Sierra Leone, the Gambia) inherited common law, English, and looser ties to London. The Portuguese (Guinea-Bissau, Cape Verde, São Tomé) and Spanish (Equatorial Guinea) legacies are smaller; Liberia was never colonized, and Cameroon is both French and British. These lines still determine who trades with whom, whose currency is whose, and, since 2020, which states' soldiers overthrew which governments.

1c. The Coup Wave and ECOWAS's Rupture

Since 2020 the region has seen more coups than any period since the 1980s: Mali (2020, 2021), Guinea (2021), Burkina Faso (2022 twice), Niger (2023), Gabon (2023), Guinea-Bissau (2025), and failed attempts in Benin (2025), Sierra Leone (2023), and elsewhere. The Economic Community of West African States, founded in 1975 and the continent's most integrated bloc, responded with sanctions and a threatened intervention in Niger that never came; in January 2025 Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger formally left ECOWAS and formed their own Alliance of Sahel States. ECOWAS now has 12 members, a credibility problem, and a frontier with a hostile bloc that its coastal members depend on for trade.

1d. The Membership Map

- **ECOWAS (12 remaining members, all in this course):** Nigeria, Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, the Gambia, Cape Verde, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone, Liberia, Togo, Benin — Mauritania left in 2000 and the Sahel three in 2025.
- **The CFA franc zone (8 in this course):** Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea-Bissau, Togo, Benin (West African CFA) and Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon (Central African CFA), plus the Sahel states — a shared currency pegged to the euro that Senegal's government has vowed to leave.
- **Under military or post-coup rule:** Guinea (elected coup leader), Guinea-Bissau (junta), Gabon (elected coup leader).
- **Under leaders in power more than 15 years:** Equatorial Guinea, Cameroon, Togo (after his father's 38 years), and Côte d'Ivoire.
- **Rated Free by Freedom House (4):** Ghana, Senegal, Cape Verde, São Tomé; four are Not Free.

1e. The Disputes That Recur

Five issues run through the course. The jihadist insurgency spilling from the Sahel into northern Benin, Togo, Côte d'Ivoire, and Ghana (Modules 3, 6, 8, 9). The coup contagion and the question of whether elected coup leaders are a new normal (Modules 5, 7, 8, 9). France's retreat and the competition of Russia, China, Turkey, and the Gulf to replace it (Module 8). Nigeria's internal crises and its 2027 election, which matter to every neighbor (Modules 2, 9). And the succession question in states ruled by the very old — Biya, Obiang, Ouattara — where transitions are unplanned (Modules 3, 7, 9).

1f. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office (and, where a prime minister leads, the head of state's), the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religion with its share, the main ethnic groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026 and land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or, where there is none, from published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states, and the eight franc-zone states share one rate because the CFA franc is pegged to the euro. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. The Who's Who before this module defines every group, party, and abbreviation the profiles name, and the Key Points page ranks the seventeen leaders by time in office.

Module 2 — Nigeria

The Region's Dominant Power



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Max Siollun, *What Britain Did to Nigeria*; Council on Foreign Relations Nigeria analysis

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Bola Tinubu, 74 — in office since May 2023 (3.4 years); next election January 16, 2027
System	Federal presidential republic of 36 states
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	242.4 million (2026)
Land area	910,770 km² (351,650 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 54%; Christian about 46% (estimates: no census has asked about religion since 1963)
People	Hausa about 30%, Yoruba and Igbo about 15% each, Fulani 6%, among more than 250 groups (estimates; the census does not record ethnicity); median age 19; 56% urban
Minimum wage	70,000 naira a month nationally since July 2024 ($53 at 1,328 naira = $1, October 2); many states pay more

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The British amalgamated the Muslim north and Christian-animist south into one colony in 1914 and left in 1960 a state of over 250 ethnic groups and three regional power blocs. A 1966 coup and counter-coup led to the Biafran secession and civil war (1967-70) that killed over a million. Military rule dominated until 1999, punctuated by the Second Republic (1979-83) and the annulled 1993 election; oil, discovered in 1956, made the state rich and the Niger Delta a zone of pollution and insurgency. Democracy

since 1999 has seen four peaceful transfers, the rise of Boko Haram in the northeast (2009-), banditry across the northwest, separatism in the southeast, and a 2023 election that brought Bola Tinubu to power.

Current leadership: President Bola Tinubu of the All Progressives Congress, a southern Muslim, a former Lagos governor and political kingmaker, won the 2023 election with 37% in a three-way race the opposition contested in court. He faces re-election — moved up from February after a new electoral law — amid economic hardship, against Atiku Abubakar and Peter Obi, the 2023 runners-up, on separate opposition tickets; campaigning opened in August. Vice President Kashim Shettima, a northern Muslim, balances the ticket. Insecurity worsened through 2026: the second quarter was the most violent since conflict records began in 1997, gunmen abducted hundreds of worshippers from a mosque in Niger State in August, and in September protests over 37 detained miners who died in a paramilitary agency's custody brought a curfew to the state capital, Minna.

Government structure: A 1999 constitution modeled on the American, with a bicameral National Assembly, a directly elected president limited to two four-year terms, and an informal north-south rotation of the presidency. States have significant autonomy; twelve northern states apply sharia law. The judiciary is independent but slow, elections are marred by vote-buying and violence, and the military, out of politics since 1999, fights insurgencies on multiple fronts.

Economy and trade: A roughly $380 billion economy on the IMF's 2026 figures, which include the 2025 revision of its national accounts — Africa's largest by population but, since a 2024 currency collapse, third by GDP — built on oil and gas (over 85% of exports and about half of government revenue), agriculture, services, telecoms, and a large informal sector. Exports are led by crude oil, LNG, and cocoa; imports by refined petroleum (Nigeria imported most of its fuel until the Dangote refinery opened in 2024), machinery, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: India, Spain, and the Netherlands (oil buyers), China (import source), and the US. Oil theft, Delta insecurity, and underinvestment keep output below OPEC quota.

Closest partners: The United States, its largest source of investment and a security partner, though relations were strained in 2025 by American accusations over the treatment of Christians; the UK, its former colonial power; China, its largest trading partner and infrastructure lender; India, its largest oil buyer; the Gulf states; and its ECOWAS neighbors, whose bloc Nigeria leads by weight.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Nigeria has no state adversaries; its wars are internal. Boko Haram and its Islamic State offshoot in the northeast, bandits and kidnappers across the northwest, farmer-herder conflict in the center, separatists in the southeast, and oil theft in the Delta. The Sahel juntas' hostility, especially Niger's, has closed a border and a pipeline. Domestically, the cost-of-living crisis from Tinubu's reforms, ethnic and religious tension, and the 2027 election.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	The world's sixth-largest population; fertility 4.5; about 360 million by 2050 (UN projection)	The demographic fact of the continent
GDP	Africa's third-largest on the IMF's 2026 figures, after South Africa and Egypt, down from $500 billion in 2022; per head ~$1,100; growth ~3.5% (2026)	Agriculture 25% of GDP employing a third; the informal economy the majority
Prices and the naira	CPI ~20% (from 35% in 2024); the 2023-24 float took the naira from 460 past 1,500; the central bank's rates raised; real incomes down by a third	The Tinubu reforms' cost
Public finance	Debt ~50% of GDP; interest ~60% of federal revenue (the region's Egypt); the 2024-25 Eurobond returns; the states' arrears	Revenue at 10% of GDP — the core weakness

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Oil	~1.5 mb/d (from 2.5 in 2010); the Dangote refinery ending a $10 billion-a-year fuel-import bill; the Niger Delta's amnesty economy	The producer that imports its fuel no longer
Military	~$5 billion; 230,000 active; insecurity in every region; the Sahel's spillover	The state's monopoly of force contested everywhere
Regime (V-Dem)	Electoral democracy (contested); the informal north-south rotation, which leaves the presidency with the south until 2031, under northern strain	Freedom House 44/100

In depth — the question: Nigeria's year was the reforms' bill coming due before their dividend, in a country that has never known a government that delivered power, security, or jobs. The question the profile ends on is Africa's: whether the continent's largest country becomes the market and the power its size implies or the failed state its insecurity describes.

Worked example — The Power Deficit

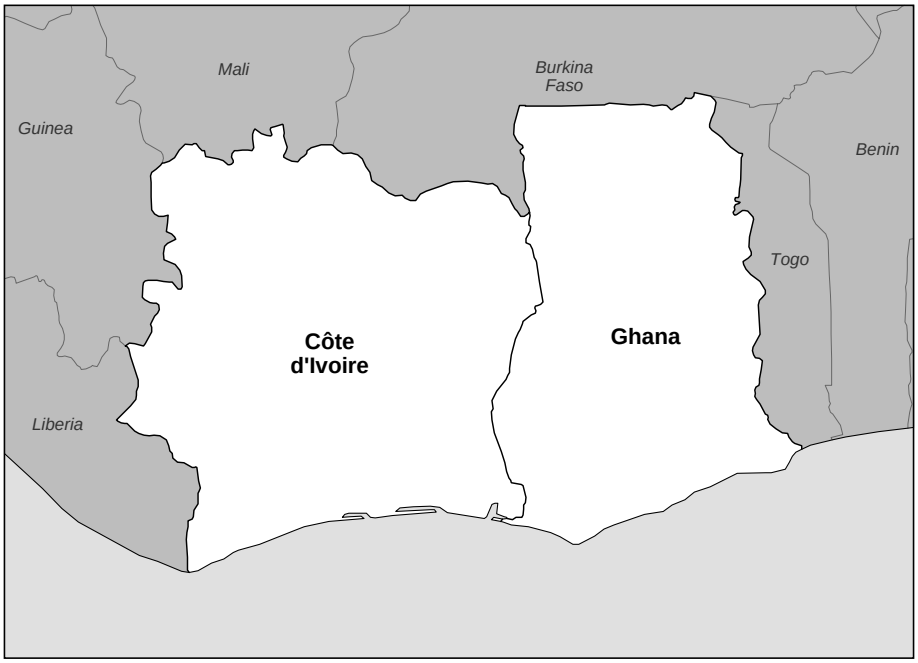
Nigeria's grid delivers about 4,000 megawatts to 242 million people — about 17 watts per person, a tenth of South Africa's and a hundredth of America's — because the gas is flared rather than piped, the transmission lines lose a third of what they carry, the distribution companies collect for half of what they deliver, and the tariff was held below cost for decades. The economy's answer is 20 million diesel and petrol generators producing perhaps 40,000 megawatts at four times the grid's cost: a $20 billion-a-year private power sector that is the country's largest and least productive investment, which is why manufacturing is 10% of GDP and every factory, bank, and hospital runs its own utility. The arithmetic of a fix: a grid of 30,000 megawatts for the current population would cost $100 billion in generation, transmission, and distribution over a decade — 40% of GDP — against a federal revenue of 10% of GDP, of which 60% goes to interest; the private market's answer arrived faster than the state's, in the solar-and-battery systems that fell 80% in price in a decade and now displace generators household by household. The lesson is the continent's: the state that cannot build the grid is being routed around by the technology that no longer needs it, and Nigeria's 2030s will be electrified — if at all — by rooftops rather than by Abuja.

2b. Tinubu's Reforms and Their Price

On his first day in office Tinubu ended the fuel subsidy that had cost the state billions and, weeks later, let the naira float; both were reforms economists had urged for decades. The immediate result was the naira losing 70% of its value, inflation above 30%, and the worst cost-of-living crisis in a generation, with protests in 2024. By 2026 the reforms had stabilized public finances and growth had resumed — but the political cost falls due when a president must ask voters who have grown poorer for a second term.

Module 3 — Ghana & Côte d'Ivoire

The Cocoa Coast



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Afrobarometer surveys; International Crisis Group Côte d'Ivoire reports

3a. Ghana

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President John Mahama, 67 — in office since January 2025 (1.7 years); also president 2012–17
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	35.7 million (2026)
Land area	227,540 km² (87,850 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 71% (Pentecostal and Charismatic 32%); Muslim 20% (2021 census)
People	Akan 46%, Mole-Dagbani 19%, Ewe 13%, Ga-Dangme 7%, Gurma 6% (2021 census); median age 23; 61% urban
Minimum wage	21.77 cedis a day from January 2026, about 588 a month over 27 working days ($50 at 11.80 cedis = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Gold Coast was the first sub-Saharan colony to win independence, in 1957 under Kwame Nkrumah, the pan-Africanist whose one-party state was overthrown in 1966. Four coups and two republics followed until Jerry Rawlings, who seized power in 1979 and 1981, converted his rule into an elected presidency in 1992. Since then Ghana has held eight elections and seen power alternate between the two main parties four times, making it West Africa's model democracy. A debt crisis and default in 2022 brought an IMF program and returned John Mahama to office.

Current leadership: President John Mahama of the National Democratic Congress returned to office after winning the December 2024 election decisively over the ruling party's candidate — his second, non-consecutive term. Vice President Jane Naana Opoku-Agyemang is the first woman in the office.

Government structure: The 1992 constitution, with a directly elected president limited to two terms and a unicameral parliament. The judiciary is independent; the press is free; the economy's debt crisis, not politics, has been the recent strain.

Economy and trade: A roughly $80 billion economy built on gold (Africa's largest producer), oil (since 2010), cocoa (the world's second-largest producer), and services. Exports are led by gold, crude oil, and cocoa; imports by refined fuel, machinery, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: China, Switzerland and the UAE (gold buyers), India, and the US. A 2022 default on $30 billion in debt and a 2023 IMF program forced restructuring; Mahama's government inherited a recovery, a cedi that stabilized in 2025, and a galamsey (illegal gold mining) crisis poisoning rivers.

Closest partners: The United States and UK, as democratic partners and investors; China, the largest trading partner and lender; the IMF; the EU; Nigeria and Côte d'Ivoire, its neighbors and cocoa co-producers. Ghana hosts the African Continental Free Trade Area secretariat and has positioned itself as the region's diplomatic and investment gateway.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Ghana has no adversaries. Its disputes are the jihadist threat on its northern border with Burkina Faso, the debt restructuring's austerity, and a maritime boundary with Côte d'Ivoire settled by tribunal in 2017.

3b. Côte d'Ivoire

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Alassane Ouattara, 84 — in office since December 2010 (15.8 years); re-elected to a fourth term in October 2025
System	Presidential republic with a vice president and a prime minister
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	33.5 million (2026)
Land area	318,000 km² (122,780 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 43%; Christian 40%; no religion 13% (2021 census)
People	Among citizens, Akan 38%, Gur 22%, Northern Mandé 22%, Kru 9%, Southern Mandé 9%; foreign nationals are 22% of residents (2021 census); median age 20; 55% urban
Minimum wage	75,000 CFA francs a month since January 2023 ($129 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent from France in 1960 under Félix Houphouët-Boigny, who ruled for 33 years and built the region's most prosperous economy on cocoa and close French ties, Côte d'Ivoire descended after his death into a politics of 'Ivoirité', a 1999 coup, and two civil wars (2002-07, 2010-11) that ended with French and UN forces removing Laurent Gbagbo after he refused to accept Alassane Ouattara's 2010 election victory. Ouattara has governed since, presiding over rapid growth and a 2016 constitution that reset his term count.

Current leadership: President Alassane Ouattara won a fourth term in October 2025 with over 89% after the Constitutional Council barred his two main rivals, Tidjane Thiam and Laurent Gbagbo, from the ballot.

Prime Minister Robert Beugré Mambé manages the government. The opposition regards his fourth term as illegitimate, and succession is unplanned.

Government structure: The 2016 constitution, with a strong presidency and a bicameral parliament. The state functions well administratively and the economy has boomed, but political competition has been narrowed by exclusions, and the memory of the 2010-11 post-election war shapes every contest.

Economy and trade: A roughly $85 billion economy, francophone West Africa's largest and the world's largest cocoa producer (about 40% of global supply), also exporting cashews (the world's largest), rubber, gold, oil, and refined petroleum. Imports are led by fuel, machinery, rice, and vehicles. Top trading partners: the Netherlands, Switzerland, and Belgium (cocoa), the US, China, and Nigeria. Growth has averaged over 6% for a decade under Ouattara; Abidjan is the regional hub for francophone finance and the CFA franc zone, and new offshore oil finds are expanding output. A slump in world cocoa prices led the government to cut the guaranteed farm-gate price for the 2026-27 crop to 1,200 CFA francs a kilogram, from 2,800.

Closest partners: France, its closest partner despite the 2025 handover of the last French base — Côte d'Ivoire is the anchor of what remains of French influence in West Africa; the EU and the Netherlands as cocoa buyers; the US; China; and Nigeria and Ghana as regional partners. Abidjan hosts the African Development Bank.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Jihadist attacks on its northern border with Burkina Faso and Mali, which have made Côte d'Ivoire a frontline state; hostility from the Sahel juntas, which accuse it of hosting French forces and opposition figures; the excluded opposition at home; and the succession question after Ouattara.

3c. Two Paths From Cocoa

Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire together produce 60% of the world's cocoa and share a coast, a border, and a colonial-era rivalry. They have diverged politically: Ghana has become the region's model of alternation and concession, its recent crisis economic rather than political; Côte d'Ivoire has become its model of growth under an aging president who excludes rivals and has no successor. Both now face the same threat from the north, where the Sahel's jihadists probe their borders — and the contrast between them is a test of whether democratic alternation or managed stability better withstands it.

Module 4 — Senegal, The Gambia, Mauritania & Cape Verde

The Atlantic Northwest



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Institute for Security Studies (Dakar); Jeune Afrique

4a. Senegal

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, 46 — in office since April 2024 (2.5 years)
System	Semi-presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	19.4 million (2026)
Land area	192,530 km² (74,340 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 97%, most in Sufi brotherhoods; Christian about 3% (government estimates)
People	Wolof 40%, Fula 28%, Serer 16%, Mandinka 5%, Jola 4% (estimates); median age 21; 51% urban
Minimum wage	370.5 CFA francs an hour since July 2023, about 64,200 a month full-time ($110 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent from France in 1960 under the poet-president Léopold Senghor, Senegal is the only mainland West African state never to have had a coup, with peaceful transfers of power in 2000, 2012, and 2024. Its Sufi brotherhoods are central to political and social life. President Macky Sall's 2024 attempt to postpone the election triggered a crisis resolved by the Constitutional Council; his jailed opponent Ousmane Sonko was barred, and Sonko's deputy Bassirou Diomaye Faye, released from prison ten days before the

vote, won outright. Sonko became prime minister, and their party won a parliamentary landslide in November 2024 on a platform of sovereignty, reform, and ending the CFA franc.

Current leadership: President Bassirou Diomaye Faye, elected in March 2024 and inaugurated at 44, governed for two years in tandem with Prime Minister Ousmane Sonko, the charismatic opposition leader whose disqualification had made Faye the candidate. The tandem broke in late May 2026: Faye dismissed Sonko and named the economist Ahmadou Al Aminou Lo prime minister, and the National Assembly — where Sonko's party, Pastef, holds 130 of 165 seats — elected Sonko its speaker with 132 of 133 votes cast, the opposition boycotting. Pastef refused to join Lo's government, and on July 26 Faye launched a party of his own, Kiiraay–The Republican Patriots. Faye cannot dissolve the assembly before November 2026, so the president governs through a prime minister whose majority belongs to his rival.

Government structure: A directly elected president, a prime minister answerable to parliament, and a two-term limit. Senegal's democratic institutions — the Constitutional Council that blocked the 2024 postponement, a free press, and the Sufi brotherhoods as social ballast — are the region's strongest.

Economy and trade: A roughly $32 billion economy built on fishing, phosphates and fertilizer, gold, groundnuts, tourism, and offshore oil (Sangomar, since 2024) and gas (Greater Tortue Ahmeyim, shared with Mauritania, since 2025) that are transforming its finances. Exports are led by gold, refined petroleum, phosphates, fish, and now crude oil; imports by fuel, rice, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: Mali (largest export market), Switzerland, India, China, and France. A 2024 audit revealed the previous government had concealed debt, now put at about 132% of GDP; the IMF suspended its program, and only on September 1, 2026 agreed in principle to a new $2.2 billion, three-year loan with safeguards against hidden debt — a test of the government's sovereignty agenda.

Closest partners: France, historically, though the government has demanded the closure of French bases (completed in 2025); the EU and the Gulf as partners; Mauritania, in the shared gas field; Mali, its largest export market despite the junta; the US; and China. The government has courted the Sahel juntas as fellow sovereigntists while remaining in ECOWAS.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Senegal's disputes are with its inheritance: a hidden-debt scandal from the previous government; the tension between sovereigntist promises (renegotiating contracts) and fiscal reality; and the split between Faye and Sonko, now fought out between the presidency and the assembly. The Casamance separatist conflict, Africa's oldest, is largely dormant.

4b. The Gambia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Adama Barrow, 61 — in office since January 2017 (9.7 years); seeks a third term on December 5, 2026
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	2.88 million (2026)
Land area	10,120 km² (3,910 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 96%; Christian about 4% (estimates)
People	Mandinka 34%, Fula 25%, Wolof 15%, Jola 10%, Soninke 8% (2024 census); median age 20; 66% urban
Minimum wage	Sector minimums only, set by joint industrial councils from January 2025; the rates could not be confirmed as of October 2026

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A sliver of a state along the Gambia River, entirely surrounded by Senegal, The Gambia was a British colony until 1965. Yahya Jammeh seized power in 1994 and ruled for 22 years with increasing brutality until he lost the 2016 election to Adama Barrow and was forced into exile by an ECOWAS military intervention in January 2017 — the bloc's clearest success.

Current leadership: President Adama Barrow was re-elected in 2021. He has abandoned an earlier pledge to serve only three years and then two terms. Protests over rolling power cuts turned violent in September 2026.

Government structure: The 1997 constitution; a 2020 attempt to adopt a new constitution with term limits failed in parliament. A unicameral National Assembly. Democratic since 2017, with a free press and an active civil society, but institutional reform has stalled and Jammeh-era abuses remain unprosecuted.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2.5 billion economy dependent on tourism (British and Dutch beach tourists), groundnut and fish exports, re-export trade, and remittances from a large diaspora. Imports of food, fuel, and goods far exceed exports. Top partners: China, Senegal, India, and the EU. The Gambia is among the poorest countries in the region, and its youth emigrate in large numbers via the 'back way' to Europe.

Closest partners: Senegal, which surrounds it, led the 2017 intervention, and remains the guarantor of its security; ECOWAS, which maintained a stabilization force until 2025; the EU and UK as donors and tourism sources; and China, since the Gambia switched from Taiwan in 2016.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The Gambia has no adversaries. Its issues are the 2026 election and Barrow's third-term bid, the unfinished accountability for Jammeh's crimes, and the 'back way' emigration of its youth.

4c. Mauritania

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, 69 — in office since August 2019 (7.2 years); re-elected 2024
System	Presidential republic under military-rooted rule
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	5.46 million (2026)
Land area	1,030,700 km² (397,960 sq mi)
Religion	Sunni Muslim about 99% (official figures count all citizens as Muslim)
People	Haratin (Arabic-speaking descendants of the enslaved) about 40%, Bidhan (Arab-Berber) about 30%, and Black African peoples (Halpulaar, Soninke, Wolof) about 30% (estimates; there are no official figures); median age 19; 60% urban
Minimum wage	28.85 ouguiyas an hour from April 2026, about 5,000 a month full-time ($124 at 40.2 ouguiyas = $1, a market rate)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A French colony until 1960, Mauritania bridges Arab North Africa and Black West Africa, a divide that has defined its politics: slavery persisted legally until 1981 and in practice long after, and ethnic violence in 1989 expelled tens of thousands of Black Mauritanians to Senegal. The military has ruled directly or through its officers for most of the period since 1978, with coups in 2005 and 2008. Mohamed Ould Ghazouani succeeded his predecessor in the first peaceful transfer between elected presidents.

Current leadership: President Mohamed Ould Ghazouani, a former army chief and defense minister, succeeded Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz and was re-elected with 56%; his predecessor was jailed for corruption. Prime Minister Mokhtar Ould Djay manages the government.

Government structure: A 1991 constitution, with a two-term limit, a single-chamber parliament (the Senate was abolished in 2017), and a politics in which the military and the Arab-Berber elite dominate. Elections are held but contested by the Black Mauritanian and Haratin (former slave) communities, which allege exclusion. Mauritania is a member of the Arab League and the Arab Maghreb Union, not ECOWAS.

Economy and trade: A roughly $11 billion economy built on iron ore (the Zouérat mines, the largest export), gold, fishing (among the world's richest waters, licensed to EU and Chinese fleets), and, since 2025, offshore gas from the Greater Tortue Ahmeyim field shared with Senegal. Exports are led by iron ore, gold, fish, and gas; imports by fuel, machinery, and food. Top trading partners: China (iron ore), Switzerland and the UAE (gold), Spain, and the EU. Green hydrogen projects in the desert have drawn European investment.

Closest partners: The EU, which pays for fishing rights and migration control (Mauritania is the main departure point for the Canary Islands route); Senegal, in the shared gas field; Morocco and the Gulf; the US, which has cultivated it as a Sahel security partner that has stayed out of the war; Spain; and China.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Mauritania has no adversaries; it has managed relations with both the Sahel juntas and their opponents. Its disputes are internal — the ethnic and caste hierarchy, the legacy of slavery, and the 1989 expulsions — plus migration pressure and the Western Sahara question, on which it stays neutral.

4d. Cape Verde

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Francisco Carvalho, 55 — in office since June 2026 (0.3 years)
Head of state	President José Maria Neves, 66 — in office since November 2021 (4.9 years); ceremonial; duties suspended while he runs for re-election on November 15, 2026; the speaker of parliament, Janira Hopffer Almada, is acting president
System	Parliamentary republic with a directly elected, mostly ceremonial president
Freedom House	Free
Population	530,000 (2026)
Land area	4,030 km² (1,560 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 73%; no religion 16% (2021 census)
People	Creole (mixed African and European descent) about 71%, African about 28% (estimates; the census does not record race); median age 31; 69% urban
Minimum wage	17,000 escudos a month since January 2025, 19,000 in the public sector ($174 and $194 at 97.85 escudos = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: An uninhabited archipelago settled by the Portuguese in the 1460s as a slave-trade entrepôt, Cape Verde won independence in 1975 in union with Guinea-Bissau's liberation movement, separating in 1980. It became a multiparty democracy in 1991 and has alternated power peacefully since. With almost no natural resources, it has built a stable services economy.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Francisco Carvalho, the former mayor of Praia, took office after his PAICV won 37 of 72 seats in the May 17 election, ending ten years of government by Ulisses Correia e Silva's center-right MpD — the country's fourth alternation since 1991. President José Maria Neves, from Carvalho's party, suspended his duties on September 14; the acting president, Janira Hopffer Almada, is the first woman to hold the office.

Government structure: Semi-presidential parliamentary republic in which the prime minister, chosen by parliament, governs. Two parties have alternated since 1991. Cape Verde is Africa's highest-rated democracy on Freedom House and most indices of governance.

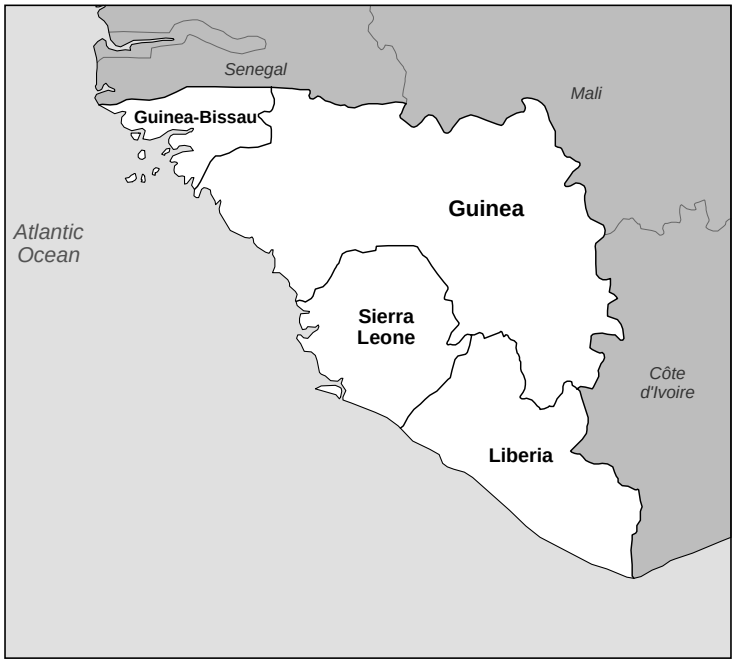
Economy and trade: A roughly $2.5 billion economy built on tourism (roughly a quarter of GDP, from Europe), remittances from a diaspora larger than the resident population, fishing, and services. Exports are fish and re-exported fuel; imports are nearly everything. Top partners: Spain, Portugal, the Netherlands, and China. The escudo is pegged to the euro, and Cape Verde is among Africa's most stable and best-governed small economies.

Closest partners: Portugal, its former colonial power and closest partner; the EU, with which it has a special partnership; the US, home to a large diaspora; ECOWAS; and China, a growing investor. Cape Verde has hosted NATO exercises and sits on the Atlantic sea lanes.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Cape Verde has no adversaries and no significant disputes. Its challenges are structural: drought, dependence on tourism and remittances, and emigration.

Module 5 — Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Sierra Leone & Liberia

The Mano River States



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Guinea reports; Amnesty International West Africa

5a. Guinea

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Mamady Doumbouya, 41 — in office since September 2021 (5.1 years); took power in a September 2021 coup; elected December 2025
System	Presidential republic under a 2025 constitution with seven-year terms
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	15.4 million (2026)
Land area	245,720 km² (94,870 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 89%; Christian about 7% (estimates)
People	Fula 33%, Malinke 29%, Susu 21%, Kpelle 8%, Kissi 6% (estimates); median age 19; 39% urban
Minimum wage	550,000 Guinean francs a month since June 2022 ($63 at 8,797 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Guinea rejected Charles de Gaulle's French Community in 1958 — the only colony to vote for immediate independence — and France withdrew everything down to the telephones. Sékou Touré ruled as a paranoid dictator until 1984; Lansana Conté's military regime followed until 2008; a 2008 coup and 2009 stadium massacre preceded the 2010 election of Alpha Condé, who changed the constitution for a third term in 2020. Mamady Doumbouya, a special-forces colonel, overthrew him.

Current leadership: President Mamady Doumbouya, the special-forces general who promised not to run, changed the constitution by referendum in September 2025, was elected with 86.7% after major opposition parties were dissolved or barred, and completed his 'transition' with a May 2026 parliamentary election in which his coalition won 93 of 147 seats while the opposition boycotted. Prime Minister Bah Oury manages the government.

Government structure: A bicameral legislature with a partly appointed senate and no bar on military candidates. More than 50 parties were dissolved in 2024 and 40 more, the main opposition among them, in March 2026; opposition figures have disappeared or fled, and the UN rights chief described the election campaign as 'severely restricted.' ECOWAS and the African Union nonetheless lifted sanctions and welcomed the 'return to constitutional order.'

Economy and trade: A roughly $25 billion economy built on bauxite — Guinea holds the world's largest reserves and is the second-largest producer, mostly for Chinese refiners — gold, diamonds, and now iron ore from Simandou, the world's largest untapped high-grade deposit, whose Chinese-Rio Tinto-led exports began in late 2025 after decades of delay. Exports are led by bauxite, gold, and now iron ore; imports by fuel, machinery, rice, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China (dominant), the UAE, India, and Singapore. Doumbouya has revoked mining licenses to increase state control. Most Guineans remain poor despite the mineral wealth.

Closest partners: China, its dominant trading partner and the buyer of its bauxite and iron ore; Russia, with which Doumbouya has cultivated ties; the Gulf states; and ECOWAS and the AU, which have accepted his election. France's influence has faded; the US and EU engage cautiously.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The opposition and civil society, suppressed at home and in exile; the question of whether an elected coup leader is a precedent the region accepts; and control of mining revenue. With Gabon's before it, Guinea's path is the template Guinea-Bissau's junta may follow.

5b. Guinea-Bissau

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	General Horta N'Tam (Horta Inta-A), transitional president, about 66 (born about 1960; unconfirmed) — in office since November 2025 (0.9 years); installed after the November 2025 coup; elections set for December 6, 2026
System	Military transitional government; a constitution approved by referendum in August 2026 strengthens the presidency
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	2.30 million (2026)
Land area	28,120 km² (10,860 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 45%; Christian 22%; traditional religions 15%; 16% did not answer (2009 census)
People	Fula 29%, Balanta 23%, Mandinka 15%, Papel 9%, Manjaco 8% (2009 census); median age 21; 47% urban
Minimum wage	Unverified: published figures conflict (59,000 CFA francs a month plus a bag of rice under a 2015 rate, or 15,000 under one from 1988) and could not be confirmed as of October 2026

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Portugal's most bitterly fought colonial war ended with independence in 1974 under Amílcar Cabral's PAIGC (Cabral was assassinated the year before). The state has been the region's most unstable — coups or attempted coups in 1980, 1998-99, 2003, 2012, and 2025, no elected president completing a full

term until 2019, and a role as a transit hub for Latin American cocaine bound for Europe that earned it the label 'narco-state.'

Current leadership: General Horta N'Tam, the army chief of staff, was installed as transitional president on November 27, 2025 by the army's High Military Command, which seized power days after a disputed election in which both President Umaro Sissoco Embaló and his opponent claimed victory. The junta suspended the constitution, named Ilídio Vieira Té prime minister, and set elections, which the transitional charter bars N'Tam from entering. A new constitution, approved by referendum on August 30, 2026 with about 70% on a turnout near 60% after the PAIGC called a boycott, lets the president appoint and dismiss the government and dissolve parliament, which shrinks from 102 seats to 65. Embaló announced a comeback bid, but on October 2 the military blocked his return, citing security; the PAIGC's leader, Domingos Simões Pereira, remains detained.

Government structure: The semi-presidential 1984 constitution, suspended after the coup, has been replaced by the August 2026 constitution. Guinea-Bissau has never had a stable civilian order: the army, entangled in the cocaine trade, has intervened repeatedly. ECOWAS suspended the country after the coup.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2 billion economy, among the world's poorest, dependent on cashew nuts (over 90% of exports), fishing licenses, and aid. Imports of food, fuel, and goods far exceed exports. Top partners: India (cashews), Senegal, Portugal, and China. The cocaine transit trade is estimated to rival the legal economy, and successive coups have been linked to it.

Closest partners: Senegal, its dominant neighbor; Portugal and the Lusophone community; ECOWAS, despite suspension; and, for the cocaine trade, Latin American cartels whose money underwrites much of the political class. China and the EU as donors.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The junta's legitimacy, the new constitution, and the December 2026 election, with Embaló kept out of the country; the cocaine trade that has corrupted its army; and the region's fear that it will follow Guinea's model of a coup leader running for president.

5c. Sierra Leone

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Julius Maada Bio, 62 — in office since April 2018 (8.5 years); second and final term ends 2028; briefly military head of state in 1996
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	9.00 million (2026)
Land area	72,180 km² (27,870 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim about 77%; Christian about 22% (government estimates)
People	Temne 35%, Mende 31%, Limba 9%, Kono 4%, Koranko 4% (estimates); median age 21; 46% urban
Minimum wage	1,200 new leones a month from April 2026, up from 800 ($52 at 22.9 leones = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Founded in 1787 as a settlement for freed slaves and a British colony until 1961, Sierra Leone endured a civil war (1991-2002) fought over diamonds and marked by mass amputations, child soldiers, and the intervention of Nigerian, UN, and British forces that ended it. The 2014-16 Ebola epidemic killed thousands. Democracy has held since 2002.

Current leadership: President Julius Maada Bio of the Sierra Leone People's Party, a 1996 coup participant who became an elected president, was re-elected in 2023 in a vote the opposition and observers disputed. A November 2023 coup attempt was suppressed.

Government structure: The 1991 constitution, with a two-term limit and a unicameral parliament. Power has alternated between two parties since 2002, though the 2023 election damaged confidence. Bio has abolished the death penalty and passed gender-quota laws.

Economy and trade: A roughly $7 billion economy built on iron ore, diamonds, rutile (a major producer), gold, and agriculture, with most of the population in subsistence farming. Exports are led by iron ore, diamonds, rutile, and cocoa; imports by fuel, rice, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China (iron ore), Belgium (diamonds), the UAE, and India. Inflation and currency depreciation have been severe, and Sierra Leone remains among the world's poorest countries by human development.

Closest partners: The UK, its former colonial power and closest partner; China, its largest trading partner and lender; ECOWAS, which Bio has chaired; the US and EU; and Guinea and Liberia in the Mano River Union.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Sierra Leone has no adversaries. Its issues are economic — inflation, currency depreciation, and poverty — plus the 2023 election's legacy, the 2023 coup attempt, and the 2028 succession.

5d. Liberia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Joseph Boakai, 81 — in office since January 2024 (2.7 years); vice president 2006–18
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	5.85 million (2026)
Land area	96,320 km² (37,190 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 85%; Muslim 12% (2022 census)
People	Kpelle 20%, Bassa 14%, Grebo 10% (2022 census), followed by the Gio, Mano, and Kru among 16 recognized groups; median age 20; 55% urban
Minimum wage	$5.50 a day for unskilled laborers, set in US dollars (about $143 a month over 26 days); $3.50 for domestic workers

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Founded in 1822 by freed American slaves and independent since 1847 — Africa's oldest republic — Liberia was ruled by the Americo-Liberian elite until Samuel Doe's 1980 coup, which began a descent into two civil wars (1989-2003) that killed 250,000 and produced the warlord-president Charles Taylor, later convicted of war crimes. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Africa's first elected female president, governed from 2006 to 2018, followed by footballer George Weah.

Current leadership: President Joseph Boakai of the Unity Party won the 2023 election narrowly over George Weah, who conceded — Liberia's second peaceful transfer since the wars. Boakai has focused on corruption and infrastructure.

Government structure: A system modeled on the American, with a bicameral legislature and a two-term limit. Democratic since 2005, with three presidents elected in succession, though corruption is pervasive and the state weak.

Economy and trade: A roughly $5 billion economy built on iron ore, rubber (Firestone's plantation is the world's largest), gold, timber, and palm oil, with a ship registry (the world's second-largest flag of convenience) providing revenue. Exports are led by iron ore, gold, and rubber; imports by fuel, rice, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: Switzerland and the UAE (gold), China (iron ore), the US, and the EU. Liberia uses the US dollar alongside its own, and most infrastructure destroyed in the wars remains unrebuilt.

Closest partners: The United States, its historic patron since 1822 and largest donor; China, its largest trading partner; ECOWAS; the UN, which withdrew its peacekeepers in 2018; and its Mano River neighbors.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Liberia has no adversaries. Its issues are corruption, the unimplemented recommendations of its truth commission on war crimes, and poverty.

5e. The Coup Template

Guinea has written the playbook the region now fears: seize power, promise not to run, rewrite the constitution by referendum, dissolve the opposition, hold an election, win by a landslide, and receive ECOWAS's blessing as a 'return to constitutional order.' Gabon had taken the same road months earlier, electing its coup leader in April 2025; Guinea-Bissau's junta has taken the referendum step and scheduled the election that would complete it. Sierra Leone and Liberia, the two post-war democracies of the Mano River, show the alternative — alternation, concession, and slow recovery — and the contrast within one small corner of the coast is the region's argument with itself.

Module 6 — Togo & Benin

The Two Small States Between Ghana and Nigeria



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: African Arguments; Jeune Afrique

6a. Togo

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Faure Gnassingbé, President of the Council of Ministers, 60 — in office since May 2005 (21.4 years); president of the republic from 2005 until May 2025, when he moved to the new post
Head of state	President Jean-Lucien Savi de Tové, 87 — in office since May 2025 (1.4 years); ceremonial; elected by parliament
System	Parliamentary republic in form, hereditary personalist rule in practice
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	9.93 million (2026)
Land area	54,390 km² (21,000 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 42%; traditional religions about 37%; Muslim about 14% (estimates)
People	Adja-Ewe and Mina 42%, Kabyè and Tem 26%, Para-Gourma and Akan 17% (estimates); median age 20; 46% urban
Minimum wage	52,500 CFA francs a month since January 2023 ($90 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A German colony divided between Britain and France after World War I, French Togo became independent in 1960; its first president was assassinated in 1963 in Africa's first post-independence coup, and Gnassingbé Eyadéma seized power in 1967 and ruled for 38 years. His son Faure succeeded

him, winning four elections the opposition rejected. A 2024 constitution converted Togo to a parliamentary system.

Current leadership: Faure Gnassingbé has ruled since 2005, when the army installed him on his father's death. In May 2025 he became President of the Council of Ministers under a new parliamentary constitution — a post with no term limits, elected by a parliament his party controls. The change, passed without a referendum, provoked protests that were suppressed.

Government structure: The President of the Council of Ministers holds executive power indefinitely so long as his party holds parliament, which it does through elections the opposition boycotts or loses under contested rules. The Gnassingbé family has held power for 59 years. The military is loyal to the family.

Economy and trade: A roughly $10 billion economy built on phosphates, cotton, cocoa, coffee, and, above all, transit — the deep-water port of Lomé is West Africa's largest transshipment hub and serves the landlocked Sahel states. Exports are led by refined petroleum re-exports, phosphates, cotton, and cement; imports by fuel, machinery, and food. Top trading partners: India, Burkina Faso, Benin, China, and France.

Closest partners: France, historically, though Togo has diversified; the Sahel juntas, with which Faure has cultivated ties as their outlet to the sea and a mediator, positioning Togo as the coastal state friendliest to the Alliance of Sahel States; China; Turkey; and ECOWAS, where Togo mediates. Nigeria and Ghana as neighbors.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The domestic opposition and civil society, which regard the 2024-25 constitutional change as a coup in legal form; jihadist attacks in the north since 2021; and the question of whether the family's rule, now potentially permanent, survives Faure himself.

6b. Benin

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Romuald Wadagni, 50 — in office since May 2026 (0.4 years)
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	15.2 million (2026)
Land area	112,760 km² (43,540 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 49% (Catholic 26%); Muslim 28%; Vodun 12% (2013 census)
People	Fon 38%, Adja 15%, Yoruba 12%, Bariba 10%, Fula 9% (2013 census); median age 19; 52% urban
Minimum wage	52,000 CFA francs a month since January 2023 ($89 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The kingdom of Dahomey, notorious for its role in the slave trade and its female warriors, was conquered by France in 1894; Benin became independent in 1960 and endured six coups before Mathieu Kérékou's Marxist regime (1972-90) gave way to a 1990 national conference that made Benin a democratic pioneer. Patrice Talon, a cotton magnate elected in 2016, narrowed the political space — excluding the opposition from parliament and jailing rivals — while delivering growth.

Current leadership: President Romuald Wadagni, Patrice Talon's finance minister for a decade and a former Deloitte executive, was elected on April 12, 2026 with 94% and inaugurated on May 24. The main opposition party, the Democrats, was unable to field a candidate under ballot-access rules and had already

been excluded from parliament in January 2026 elections; the only rival conceded on election night and his party joined the ruling coalition in May. Talon honored his two-term limit and remains influential.

Government structure: A 1990 constitution amended in 2019 to tighten candidacy rules. Once a democratic pioneer, Benin under Talon became a managed system: the ruling coalition holds every parliamentary seat, opposition figures have been jailed or exiled, and international observers called the 2026 election neither free nor fair — while the transfer of power itself was orderly. A December 2025 coup attempt was foiled with Nigerian and ECOWAS help.

Economy and trade: A roughly $22 billion economy built on cotton (the largest export), transit trade through the port of Cotonou serving Nigeria and Niger, cashews, and agriculture, with growth above 6% for a decade under Talon's reforms. Exports are led by cotton, cashews, and re-exports; imports by fuel, rice, machinery, and goods for re-export to Nigeria. Top trading partners: Nigeria (informal trade), India, China, Bangladesh, and the UAE. Nigeria's 2019-20 border closure and Niger's post-coup rupture hit the transit economy; jihadist attacks in the north are the security threat to growth.

Closest partners: Nigeria, its dominant neighbor and largest informal trading partner; France and the EU; the US; China and India as trade partners; and Togo, with which Wadagni has sought closer ties. Benin has hosted a French military presence and cooperated with Western counterterrorism.

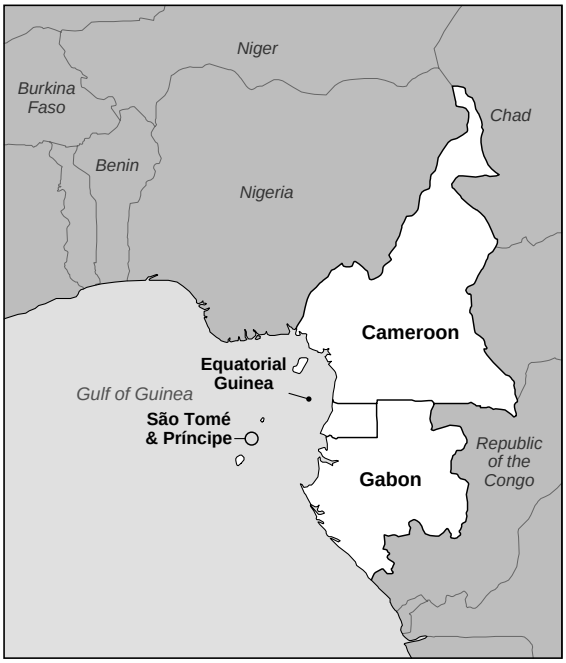
Principal rivalries and disputes: Jihadist attacks in the north from the Sahel — JNIM killed 54 soldiers in one 2025 attack — are the security crisis; Niger's junta, which has closed the border and accused Benin of hosting French forces; the excluded opposition; and the question of whether Wadagni's presidency is a transition or a continuation.

6c. Two Small States, Two Ways to Stay in Power

Togo and Benin are the two narrow states squeezed between Ghana and Nigeria, both facing jihadist attacks from the north, and both governed by systems that have narrowed political competition — but differently. Togo's family has made itself constitutionally permanent by converting the presidency into a parliamentary post without term limits. Benin's outgoing president honored his term limit but ensured his successor faced no serious opponent. One is a dynasty; the other is a managed succession. Both were welcomed by ECOWAS, and both illustrate how the region's coastal states, alarmed by coups, have accepted narrowed democracy as the price of stability.

Module 7 — Cameroon, Equatorial Guinea, Gabon & São Tomé

The Gulf's Southern Shore



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Cameroon reports; Human Rights Watch Central Africa

7a. Cameroon

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Paul Biya, 93 — in office since November 1982 (43.9 years); re-elected October 2025; prime minister 1975–82
System	Presidential republic, personalist in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	30.6 million (2026)
Land area	472,710 km² (182,510 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 69% (Catholic 38%, Protestant 26%); Muslim 21% (2005 census, the latest)
People	Some 250 groups; the largest, the Bamileke and Bamum of the western highlands, are about a quarter (estimates); median age 19; 61% urban
Minimum wage	60,000 CFA francs a month outside agriculture since March 2023, 45,000 in agriculture ($103 and $77 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A German colony divided between Britain and France, Cameroon reunified at independence in 1960-61 and is bilingual, with an English-speaking minority in the west whose grievances erupted in 2017 into the Anglophone separatist conflict. Paul Biya has ruled since 1982 — Africa's second-longest-serving

leader — through constitutional changes, contested elections, and long absences abroad, and was re-elected in October 2025 at 92 in a vote the opposition rejected.

Current leadership: President Paul Biya was declared winner of the October 2025 election with 54% over Issa Tchiroma Bakary, a former minister who claimed victory; protests followed in which security forces killed demonstrators. Biya governs through a small circle; his son Franck is discussed as successor, and the vice presidency would let Biya name an heir without an election. Prime Minister Joseph Dion Ngute manages a government the presidency controls.

Government structure: A bicameral parliament; term limits were abolished in 2008, the ruling party dominates, and the presidency controls the courts and electoral commission. An amendment promulgated on April 14, 2026 re-created a vice presidency whose holder, appointed and removable by the president, would succeed him and serve out his term; no one had been named by early October. The state is bilingual and formally decentralized but centrally run from Yaoundé.

Economy and trade: A roughly $50 billion economy, Central Africa's largest, built on oil and gas, cocoa, coffee, timber, cotton, aluminum, and the port of Douala serving Chad and the Central African Republic. Exports are led by crude oil, cocoa, timber, aluminum, and cotton; imports by fuel, machinery, rice, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China, the Netherlands, India, France, and Spain. The Anglophone conflict has devastated the west's economy, corruption is pervasive, and infrastructure is Chinese-built and debt-financed.

Closest partners: France, its closest partner and Biya's longtime patron; China, its largest trading partner and lender; the US, in counterterrorism against Boko Haram; Nigeria, its neighbor and the other party to the Anglophone regions' border; and the Central African CFA zone it anchors.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The Anglophone separatist conflict in the northwest and southwest, which has killed thousands and displaced hundreds of thousands; Boko Haram in the far north; the disputed 2025 election and its aftermath; and the succession from a president who has created, but not filled, the office that would decide it — the Gulf of Guinea's most consequential unknown.

7b. Equatorial Guinea

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo, 84 — in office since August 1979 (47.2 years); took power in a 1979 coup
System	Presidential republic, hereditary dictatorship in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	1.98 million (2026)
Land area	28,050 km² (10,830 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 93% (Catholic 88%); Muslim about 2% (government estimate, 2015)
People	Fang 86%, Bubi 7%, Ndowe 4% (1994 census); median age 22; 76% urban
Minimum wage	117,304 CFA francs a month in the private sector since 2011, more in some industries ($202 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Spain's only sub-Saharan colony became independent in 1968 under Francisco Macías Nguema, whose terror killed or exiled a third of the population, until his nephew Teodoro Obiang overthrew and executed him in 1979. Obiang has ruled since — the world's longest-serving president — and offshore

oil discovered in the 1990s made the country nominally one of Africa's richest per capita while most citizens remain poor.

Current leadership: President Teodoro Obiang was re-elected in 2022 with 95%. His son Teodorín, vice president since 2016, is the designated successor despite convictions in France for embezzlement and the seizure of his assets abroad.

Government structure: The ruling party holds every seat, no genuine opposition exists, and the family controls the oil revenue. The constitution was amended in 2011 to create the vice presidency for the succession.

Economy and trade: A roughly $12 billion economy almost entirely dependent on oil and gas, whose declining output has shrunk the economy by more than half since 2014. Exports are crude oil, LNG, and methanol; imports are machinery, food, and fuel. Top trading partners: China, Spain, India, and the US. The wealth is concentrated in the Obiang family.

Closest partners: China, its largest trading partner; Spain, its former colonial power; the US, whose oil companies developed its fields; France; and Russia, which has provided security personnel. Equatorial Guinea is in the CFA zone, OPEC, and the Lusophone community despite not speaking Portuguese.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Equatorial Guinea has no external adversaries. Its issues are the succession, declining oil, and the international pursuit of the family's assets. A 2017 coup attempt was blamed on foreign mercenaries.

7c. Gabon

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Brice Oligui Nguema, 51 — in office since August 2023 (3.1 years); took power in an August 2023 coup; elected April 2025
System	Presidential republic with no prime minister (the post was abolished in 2025)
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	2.65 million (2026)
Land area	257,670 km² (99,490 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 80%; Muslim about 11% (estimates)
People	Fang 23%, Shira-Punu and Vili 19%, Nzabi-Duma 11%; foreign nationals about 20% (estimates); median age 23; 92% urban
Minimum wage	150,000 CFA francs a month guaranteed minimum income since 2010, of which the base wage is 80,000 ($258 and $137 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A French colony until 1960, Gabon was ruled by Omar Bongo from 1967 to 2009 and his son Ali from 2009 to 2023 — 56 years of one family, sustained by oil, French support, and rigged elections. In August 2023, hours after Ali Bongo claimed a third term, General Brice Oligui Nguema, the presidential guard commander and a Bongo cousin, seized power in a bloodless coup welcomed on the streets.

Current leadership: President Brice Oligui Nguema was elected with 90% under a constitution he wrote, ending the transition. He has cultivated an image as a reformer, restoring some freedoms, while consolidating personal power.

Government structure: The 2024 constitution, with a seven-year presidential term renewable once and a bicameral parliament. The 2025 election was competitive in form but dominated by the incumbent.

Economy and trade: A roughly $22 billion economy built on oil (declining), manganese (the world's second-largest producer), timber (85% of the country is forest), and iron ore. Exports are led by crude oil, manganese, and timber; imports by machinery, food, and fuel. Top trading partners: China (dominant buyer), Singapore, India, and France. Oligui's government has moved to renegotiate French and Chinese contracts and nationalize some assets; Gabon is the region's most forested state and a leader in forest-carbon finance.

Closest partners: France, its former colonial power, whose base Gabon has kept while renegotiating terms; China, its largest trading partner; the US; the Central African CFA zone and its regional bloc; and the Commonwealth. ECOWAS's Central African counterpart, ECCAS, briefly suspended and then readmitted it.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Gabon has no adversaries. Its issues are the Bongo family's fate and assets, the sustainability of Oligui's reformist image, declining oil, and whether an elected coup leader consolidates a new personalist system.

7d. São Tomé and Príncipe

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Américo Ramos, 68 or 69 (born 1957) — in office since January 2025 (1.7 years); his party lost its majority in the September 27, 2026 election; a new government is pending
Head of state	President Carlos Vila Nova, 67 — in office since October 2021 (5.0 years); directly elected; appoints the prime minister; second term began September 3, 2026
System	Semi-presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	245,000 (2026)
Land area	960 km² (371 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 72% (Catholic 56%); no religion 21% (2012 figures)
People	Mostly of African and mixed African-Portuguese descent: forros, angolares, and the descendants of contract laborers from Angola, Mozambique, and Cape Verde (no published breakdown); median age 21; 78% urban
Minimum wage	3,000 dobras a month since late 2025 in the private sector and the civil service ($136 at 22.0 dobras = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Portuguese from the 1470s and built on slave-worked sugar and then cocoa plantations, the islands won independence in 1975 and became a multiparty democracy in 1991. Politics has been marked by cohabitation conflicts between presidents and prime ministers, a brief 2003 coup, and a 2022 coup attempt. Offshore oil, long promised, has not materialized; the country has instead courted Chinese, Taiwanese (until 2016), and now renewed Western interest in its position in the Gulf of Guinea.

Current leadership: President Carlos Vila Nova dismissed Prime Minister Patrice Trovoada in January 2025; his first replacement resigned within days, and Américo Ramos, from Trovoada's ADI, has governed since. Vila Nova won a second term with 55.9% in July 2026. In the September 27 legislative election the opposition MLSTP won 24 of 55 seats to the ADI's 23 — its first win in 24 years, but short of the 28 needed for a majority — and a six-seat coalition holds the balance while a new government is negotiated.

Government structure: The president and a parliament-chosen prime minister share power, a structure that has produced chronic institutional conflict. Democratic since 1991 with peaceful alternation.

Economy and trade: A roughly $600 million economy, one of Africa's smallest, dependent on cocoa, tourism, fishing, and aid. Imports of nearly everything are financed by aid and remittances. Top partners: Portugal, Angola, the Netherlands, and China. The islands' strategic position in the Gulf of Guinea has drawn interest in port and airport projects from China, the US, and the EU.

Closest partners: Portugal and the Lusophone community; Angola; the EU and China as donors; the US, interested in its Gulf of Guinea position; and Nigeria, with which it shares a joint oil development zone that has produced no oil.

Principal rivalries and disputes: São Tomé has no adversaries. Its issues are the president-prime minister conflict, poverty, and the never-realized oil.

7e. The Old Men of the Gulf

The Gulf of Guinea's southern shore is ruled by the region's oldest and longest-serving leaders — Biya and Obiang — and by the region's first coup leader to convert himself into an elected president, in Gabon. All three states are oil-dependent, CFA-zone members, and personalist. The successions in Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea are the Gulf's most consequential unknowns: neither has a plan beyond a son, and both have militaries, minorities, and neighbors with an interest in the outcome. Gabon's 2023 coup, welcomed on the streets after 56 years of one family, is the precedent both dynasties fear.

Module 8 — The Alliance Map

ECOWAS's Rupture, France's Retreat, the Sahel Juntas & the Outside Powers

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Africa Center for Strategic Studies; Chatham House Africa Programme

8a. ECOWAS After the Rupture

ECOWAS was the continent's most integrated bloc — free movement, a common market in principle, a record of military intervention in Liberia, Sierra Leone, and the Gambia. The 2023 Niger coup broke it: the bloc threatened force, could not deliver, imposed sanctions that hurt populations, and watched Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger walk out in January 2025 to form the Alliance of Sahel States. The remaining 12 members are divided between those hostile to the juntas (Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, Benin) and those courting them (Togo, Senegal, Ghana), and the acceptance of Guinea's elected coup leader by ECOWAS, and of Gabon's by its Central African counterpart, has redefined 'constitutional order' downward. Nigeria's weight still makes ECOWAS the region's only real institution.

8b. France's Retreat

For six decades France was the region's external power: bases, currency, military intervention, and political sponsorship of leaders like Houphouët-Boigny, Bongo, Eyadéma, and Biya. Since 2022 it has been expelled from Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad, and has withdrawn its remaining bases from Senegal and Côte d'Ivoire by agreement, keeping only Gabon and Djibouti. The CFA franc, its last instrument, is under attack from Senegal's government and the Sahel juntas. What replaced France is not one power but several, and the coastal states — unlike the Sahel — have mostly chosen to diversify rather than to rupture.

8c. The Outside Powers

- **China** — the largest trading partner of nearly every state in the course, the buyer of Guinea's bauxite and iron ore, the builder of ports, railways, and stadiums, and the largest lender; its interest is minerals and markets, and it does not ask about governance.
- **Russia** — the Sahel juntas' security partner through the Africa Corps (formerly Wagner), with a growing presence in Guinea and Equatorial Guinea, offering regime protection without conditions.
- **The United States** — a security partner (counterterrorism, the Gulf of Guinea maritime coalition), a democracy promoter with diminishing leverage, and, in 2025-26, a source of friction with Nigeria over religious freedom and with the region over aid cuts.
- **Turkey, the Gulf states, India, Morocco** — Turkey sells drones and builds; the UAE and Saudi Arabia invest and fund; India buys Nigerian oil and Guinea-Bissau's cashews; Morocco pursues an Atlantic initiative offering the Sahel states sea access through its ports.
- **The Alliance of Sahel States** — Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the hostile bloc on the coast's northern border, whose juntas trade through Togo, Senegal, and Guinea while feuding with Nigeria, Côte d'Ivoire, and Benin.

Module 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, CrisisWatch; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project

9a. The Jihadist Spillover

The Sahel's insurgency — JNIM and the Islamic State's Sahel branch — has moved south into the coastal states' northern regions: the 2025 Benin attack (Module 6), recurring assaults in Togo, probes into Côte d'Ivoire and Ghana. The coastal states have the ports, the money, and the Western partnerships the Sahel lacks, and the question is whether that is enough to hold a border the juntas' retreat has left open. The Accra Initiative and Western training are the response; the juntas' hostility to the coast is the complication.

9b. The Coup Contagion

Guinea-Bissau's November 2025 coup and Benin's foiled December attempt showed the contagion has reached the coast. The precedent that matters is Guinea's and Gabon's: a coup leader who holds an election and wins is now accepted by ECOWAS and the African Union. That lowers the cost of the next coup, and the region's next test is whether Guinea-Bissau's junta follows the template in December 2026 — and whether the bloc accepts it again.

9c. Nigeria's 2027 Election

The region's most consequential vote (Module 2). A Tinubu defeat would be Nigeria's first incumbent loss since 2015 and would test whether the reforms survive; a disputed Tinubu victory would test the institutions. Either way, the outcome sets the tone for ECOWAS, the Gulf of Guinea's security, and the region's largest economy.

9d. The Gulf of Guinea

The Gulf holds the region's oil, its fisheries, and its shipping lanes, and it was the world's piracy hotspot until Nigerian and international patrols cut attacks after 2021. New finds off Côte d'Ivoire, Senegal, and Mauritania, the Simandou iron ore railway to Guinea's coast, and the port competition among Lomé, Tema, Abidjan, and Lagos make it the region's economic future — and the arena where China, the Gulf, and the West compete for concessions.

9e. The Successions

Biya, Obiang, Ouattara, Gnassingbé's permanent post — the region's longest-serving rulers have no successors beyond sons and few institutions to manage a transition (Modules 3, 6, 7). Gabon showed what

happens when a dynasty ends: a popular coup. Cameroon, with its Anglophone war and Boko Haram, is the case where an unplanned succession could become a state crisis.

9f. The Last Word

The throughline of all nine modules: this is a coast holding a line — against the Sahel's jihadists and juntas to its north, and against the coup contagion in its own barracks — while its democracies narrow and its old men age. Nigeria's weight, Ghana's and Senegal's institutions, and Cape Verde's example are the region's assets; Guinea's template, the Gulf's dynasties, and ECOWAS's lowered standards are its warnings. France has gone; China, Russia, the Gulf, and Turkey have arrived, and the coastal states have chosen to diversify rather than rupture. Whether the coast holds its line, or whether the Sahel's story becomes its own, is the question the next two years — Guinea-Bissau in December, Nigeria in January 2027, the successions whenever they come — will begin to answer.

Key Points

West Africa & the Gulf of Guinea

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Equatorial Guinea	Teodoro Obiang Nguema Mbasogo	President	84	August 1979	47.2
Cameroon	Paul Biya	President	93	November 1982	43.9
Togo	Faure Gnassingbé	President of the Council of Ministers	60	May 2005	21.4
Côte d'Ivoire	Alassane Ouattara	President	84	December 2010	15.8
The Gambia	Adama Barrow	President	61	January 2017	9.7
Sierra Leone	Julius Maada Bio	President	62	April 2018	8.5
Mauritania	Mohamed Ould Ghazouani	President	69	August 2019	7.2
Guinea	Mamady Doumbouya	President	41	September 2021	5.1
Nigeria	Bola Tinubu	President	74	May 2023	3.4
Gabon	Brice Oligui Nguema	President	51	August 2023	3.1
Liberia	Joseph Boakai	President	81	January 2024	2.7
Senegal	Bassirou Diomaye Faye	President	46	April 2024	2.5
Ghana	John Mahama	President	67	January 2025	1.7
São Tomé	Américo Ramos	Prime Minister	68–69	January 2025	1.7
Guinea-Bissau	Horta N'Tam	Transitional President	~66	November 2025	0.9
Benin	Romuald Wadagni	President	50	May 2026	0.4
Cape Verde	Francisco Carvalho	Prime Minister	55	June 2026	0.3

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's current continuous tenure. In Cape Verde, Togo, and São Tomé the head of government leads: Cape Verde's and Togo's presidents are ceremonial, and São Tomé's appoints the prime minister. Gnassingbé has ruled since 2005, as president until he moved to the new top post in 2025; Ouattara's tenure is counted from his oath of December 2010, after the disputed runoff (he took control in April 2011). Biya was also prime minister in 1975–82, Mahama president in 2012–17, and Bio military head of state in 1996. Ramos's exact birth date is unpublished, and N'Tam's birth year is unconfirmed.

The Takeaways

- The coast holds a line against the Sahel: seventeen states from Mauritania to São Tomé between the juntas and jihadists to the north and the Gulf of Guinea's oil, ports, and piracy to the south — and 2025-26 tested the line at both ends.
- Nigeria is the continent's demographic fact — 242 million at a median age of 19, some 360 million by 2050 — with insecurity in every region (jihadists, bandits, separatists, herder-farmer killings), revenue at 10% of GDP and 60% of it going to interest, 4,000 megawatts for the whole country, and reforms (the subsidy ended, the naira floated) whose bill came due before their dividend; the January 2027 election and the north-south rotation are its politics.
- Nigeria's power deficit, worked through: 17 watts per person, 20 million generators producing ten times the grid at four times the cost, a $100 billion fix the state cannot fund — and the rooftop solar that no longer needs the state routing around it.

• Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire are the coast's two pillars — Mahama's 2024 return in Ghana after its 2022 default and restructuring; Ouattara's fourth term in Abidjan as the region's growth pole and the franc zone's anchor — and the Sahel's frontier states, with Benin and Togo, absorbing the spillover.

• Senegal, the coup-free democracy now on an oil and gas horizon after closing France's bases, split at the top in May 2026 when Faye dismissed Sonko, who now runs the assembly; Cape Verde voted out its government in May and the Gambia votes in December — the Atlantic's small states, with Mauritania the migration and gas frontier.

• The coup belt's western edge: Guinea's Doumbouya civilianized his junta by ballot in December 2025; Guinea-Bissau's army seized power in November 2025 days after a disputed election and won an August 2026 referendum strengthening the presidency; Benin defended an attempted coup in December 2025 with Nigerian and regional help — the first attempt stopped by the standby force; Sierra Leone and Liberia hold their post-war democracies.

• Cameroon's Biya, re-elected at 92 in October 2025, is the continent's gerontocracy, with a new vice presidency still unfilled; Gabon's Oligui converted a coup into a presidency by ballot in April 2025; Equatorial Guinea's Obiang dynasty and São Tomé's small democracy, where the opposition won the most seats in September, complete the Gulf's southern shore.

• ECOWAS lost its three Sahel members in January 2025 and its credibility with its failed Niger threat in 2023, and regained some in Benin; the franc zone's CFA debate, the coastal states' anti-jihadist initiative (the Accra Initiative), and the Gulf of Guinea's piracy patrols are the region's own instruments.

• China builds the ports and buys the oil, cocoa, and minerals; America cut the aid and kept the Nigerian security partnership; France's bases closed from Senegal to Côte d'Ivoire; Turkey and the Gulf sell the drones and buy the influence; Russia's shadow reaches the coast through the Sahel.

• The region's 2026 lesson is that a coup's cost fell and a democracy's defense rose in the same year — Guinea-Bissau's seizure and Benin's defended attempt a month apart — and that the coast's line holds where its neighbors will actually send troops.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. Which divide does the course call the region's organizing fact?

A) French-speaking states against English-speaking ones
B) The coast's ports and stability, against the interior's juntas and jihadists
C) Oil exporters against the states without oil, a split that decides who can borrow abroad
D) A Muslim north against a Christian south, a line that runs through every coastal country

2. Which states left ECOWAS in January 2025 to form their own confederation?

A) Guinea, Togo, and Chad
B) Ghana, Gabon, and Benin
C) Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger
D) Senegal, Mali, and Chad

3. Why does the course say the bill for Nigeria's 2023 reforms came due before their dividend?

A) Ending the fuel subsidy and floating the naira brought 35% inflation before the gains arrived
B) Nationalizing the oil industry cut output and revenue
C) Leaving OPEC set off a price war with its neighbors
D) Adopting the CFA franc tied the naira to the euro, and the new peg collapsed within a year of the switch

4. How have Ghana and Côte d'Ivoire diverged, according to the course?

A) Ghana adopted the CFA franc in 2024, while Côte d'Ivoire announced that it would leave the currency
B) Côte d'Ivoire alternates power between parties, while Ghana's ruling party has never lost an election
C) Both are now run by military juntas that have promised elections but have set no dates for them
D) Ghana alternates power; Côte d'Ivoire's aging president excludes rivals

5. What happened at the top of Senegal's government in May 2026?

A) Sonko won a snap presidential election
B) Faye dismissed Prime Minister Sonko, whom the National Assembly then elected its speaker
C) The army removed both men in a coup
D) Faye resigned under pressure from Pastef, and Sonko became acting president until a new election

6. How did Cape Verde change government in 2026?

A) The opposition won the May election, and its leader became prime minister in June
B) A referendum abolished the prime minister's post
C) The president dissolved parliament after a coup attempt and named a caretaker government
D) The ruling party won a fourth straight term, and its leader stayed on as prime minister

7. What is the 'coup template' the course says Guinea wrote?

A) Seize power, then hand over to an elected civilian government within a year
B) Seize power and rule as a junta indefinitely, holding no election at all
C) Seize power, promise not to run, then win a managed election
D) Seize power, then let ECOWAS run an election the coup leader cannot enter

8. What did Guinea-Bissau's August 2026 referendum approve?

A) The return of the ousted president, Umaro Sissoco Embaló

B) Membership in the Alliance of Sahel States

C) A parliamentary system with a ceremonial president

D) A constitution that lets the president appoint and dismiss the government and dissolve a smaller parliament

9. How do Togo and Benin show the coast's narrowed democracy?

A) Togo's ruler took a post without term limits; Benin's chosen successor faced no real rival

B) Both abolished elections after coup attempts

C) Both joined the Alliance of Sahel States and expelled French forces after their 2025 elections

D) Togo's ruler retired after 20 years, and Benin restored the opposition's right to stand in elections

10. What did Cameroon's April 2026 constitutional amendment create?

A) Term limits that bar Biya from running again

B) A vice presidency, appointed by the president, whose holder would succeed him

C) A federal system for the English-speaking regions

D) A prime minister chosen by direct election

11. Which two rulers are the region's longest-serving, each with a son discussed as a successor?

A) Ouattara and Mahama

B) Oligui and Doumbouya

C) Obiang and Biya

D) Barrow and Gnassingbé

12. Where does France still keep a military base in this course's region?

A) Senegal, at Dakar

B) Côte d'Ivoire, at Abidjan

C) Cameroon, at Douala

D) Gabon, at Libreville

13. Which of the seventeen states does Freedom House rate Free?

A) Ghana and Cape Verde only, the two oldest democracies

B) Nigeria, Ghana, Benin, Senegal, and Cape Verde

C) Ghana, Senegal, Cape Verde, and São Tomé

D) None of them; the best-rated is Partly Free

14. Why can one exchange rate convert the minimum wages of all eight franc-zone states?

A) Their central banks set wages jointly

B) Both CFA francs are pegged to the euro at the same rate

C) The IMF fixes their wages in dollars

D) Their wages are paid in euros

15. What does the course call the region's 2026 lesson?

A) A coup's cost fell and a democracy's defense rose — Guinea-Bissau's seizure, Benin's defended attempt

B) Jihadists were driven back from the coast

C) ECOWAS readmitted the three Sahel states

D) France returned to the Sahel at the juntas' request, reversing the expulsions of 2022 to 2024 within a year

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. B 2. C 3. A 4. D 5. B 6. A 7. C 8. D 9. A 10. B 11. C 12. D 13. C 14. B 15. A

East Africa & the Indian Ocean

Figures current as of October 2026

East Africa and the Indian Ocean — Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and the coast and islands: leaders, governments, economies, and the wars, elections, and ports of the region.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: The Highlands, the Lakes, and the Swahili Coast

Goal: Establish the geography, the ports-and-interior structure, the strongman pattern, and the disputes that recur.

Covers the three sub-regions, the landlocked states' dependence on Kenyan and Tanzanian ports, the East African Community, and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — Ethiopia

Goal: Profile the region's largest and most consequential state in its own module.

Covers Abiy's June 2026 supermajority and second term, the renewed Tigray war, the ethnic federation, the completed Nile dam, and the break with Eritrea.

MODULE 3 — Kenya & Tanzania (the Swahili Coast)

Goal: Profile the two states whose ports serve the interior.

Covers Kenya's youth uprising and 2027 election, and Tanzania's 98% election and deadly crackdown.

MODULE 4 — Uganda, Rwanda & Burundi (the Great Lakes)

Goal: Profile the three landlocked states around Lake Victoria and the Congo's eastern border.

Covers Museveni's seventh term and dynastic succession, Kagame's Congo war, and Burundi on the other side of it.

MODULE 5 — South Sudan

Goal: Profile the world's newest state in its own module.

Covers the collapsed peace deal, Machar's arrest, the December 2026 election, and Sudan's war next door.

MODULE 6 — Mozambique & Malawi

Goal: Profile the two southern states of the region.

Covers Mozambique's contested 2024 election and the Cabo Delgado insurgency, and Malawi's 2025 alternation.

MODULE 7 — The Indian Ocean Islands: Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius & Seychelles

Goal: Profile the four island states.

Covers Madagascar's 2025 coup, Comoros's dynasty, and the two prosperous democracies of Mauritius and Seychelles.

MODULE 8 — The Alliance Map: The East African Community, the Congo War's Sides, the Nile, and the Outside Powers

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's blocs.

Covers the East African Community and its strains, the Congo war's alignments, the Nile basin, the Gulf and Turkey, China, and the United States.

MODULE 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers Ethiopia-Eritrea, the Congo war, South Sudan's collapse and Sudan's spillover, the youth uprisings, dynastic successions, and the Indian Ocean contest.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

Every armed group, party, institution, and abbreviation the modules name is defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country each one belongs to or concerns, or how many of the thirteen when it spans several; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Parties and Movements

Country	Name	Who or what
Ethiopia	TPLF (Tigray People's Liberation Front)	Tigrayan party and former rebel army that led the coalition ruling Ethiopia from 1991 to 2018 and fought the 2020-22 war against Abiy's government.
Ethiopia	Prosperity Party	Ethiopia's ruling party, formed by Abiy in 2019 from the parties of the old ruling coalition, which the TPLF refused to join.
Tanzania	CCM (Chama Cha Mapinduzi, 'Party of the Revolution')	Tanzania's ruling party, formed in 1977 from the two parties that led Tanganyika and Zanzibar to independence.
Kenya	United Democratic Alliance	William Ruto's party in Kenya, built on his appeal to 'hustlers' — the young and the poor.
Uganda	NRM (National Resistance Movement)	Yoweri Museveni's ruling party in Uganda, grown out of the rebel army that took power in 1986.
Rwanda	Rwandan Patriotic Front	The Tutsi-led rebel army that ended the 1994 genocide, now Rwanda's ruling party under Paul Kagame.
Burundi	CNDD-FDD (National Council for the Defense of Democracy–Forces for the Defense of Democracy)	Former Hutu rebel movement that has ruled Burundi since 2005.
South Sudan	SPLM-IO (Sudan People's Liberation Movement-in-Opposition)	Riek Machar's party and army, formed when South Sudan's ruling movement split at the start of the 2013 civil war.
Mozambique	Frelimo (Mozambique Liberation Front)	The independence movement that has governed Mozambique since 1975.
Mozambique	Renamo (Mozambican National Resistance)	Rebel movement that fought Frelimo in the 1977-92 civil war, backed first by Rhodesia and then by South Africa; now an opposition party.
Malawi	Democratic Progressive Party	Peter Mutharika's party in Malawi, founded in 2005 by his late brother, President Bingu wa Mutharika.
Seychelles	United Seychelles	The party that governed Seychelles from 1977 to 2020 under earlier names; Patrick Herminie's party.

Armed Groups

Country	Name	Who or what
Congo, Rwanda	M23 (March 23 Movement)	Rebel group of Congolese Tutsi backed by Rwanda, named for a March 23, 2009 peace deal it says Congo broke.
Uganda, Congo	ADF (Allied Democratic Forces)	Islamist rebel group of Ugandan origin based in eastern Congo and aligned with the Islamic State since 2019.
Somalia, Kenya	al-Shabaab	Somalia's al-Qaeda affiliate (the name means 'the youth'), fighting the Somali government since 2006.
Mozambique	Cabo Delgado insurgents	Islamist rebels in northern Mozambique since 2017, called al-Shabaab locally though unrelated to Somalia's group, and affiliated with the Islamic State.
Ethiopia	Fano	Amhara militias that fought beside Ethiopia's army in the 2020-22 Tigray war and have been in revolt against Abiy's government since 2023.
Ethiopia	Oromo Liberation Army	Rebel force fighting for Oromo self-determination in Ethiopia's Oromia region since breaking from the Oromo Liberation Front, a political party, in 2018-19.
Ethiopia	TDF (Tigray Defense Forces)	Tigray's armed forces, formed in 2020 to fight the federal government; their fighters are now split between the TPLF and the Tigray Peace Force.
Ethiopia	Tigray Peace Force	Pro-government militia of former Tigrayan fighters.
Sudan	RSF (Rapid Support Forces)	Sudanese paramilitary force grown out of Darfur's Janjaweed militias, at war with Sudan's army since April 2023.
Burundi	Imbonerakure	Youth league of Burundi's ruling party (the name means 'those who see far'), used as a militia against opponents.
Madagascar	CAPSAT (the Malagasy army's personnel and administrative services corps)	Elite army unit that backed the 2009 coup.

Institutions and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
Six of the 13	EAC (East African Community)	Regional bloc of eight states — Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, Congo, and Somalia — with a customs union and a common market in principle; based in Arusha, Tanzania.
Seven of the 13	SADC (Southern African Development Community)	Sixteen-member southern African bloc that includes Tanzania, Mozambique, Malawi, Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius, Seychelles, and Congo.
All 13	AU (African Union)	The continental body of 55 states, based in Addis Ababa; it suspends members after coups.
The four islands	Indian Ocean Commission	Regional body of Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius, Seychelles, and France, a member through its island of Réunion.
All 13	Freedom House	US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free on political rights and civil liberties.
Ethiopia, Malawi	IMF (International Monetary Fund)	Lender to governments in currency and debt crises; its loans come with policy conditions.
Kenya, Somalia	ICJ (International Court of Justice)	The UN's court for disputes between states, in The Hague.
Kenya	International Criminal Court	The court in The Hague that tries individuals for genocide, war crimes, and crimes against humanity.
Ethiopia	BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)	Bloc of large emerging economies named for its five founders.

Country	Name	Who or what
Kenya	NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization)	The US-European military alliance; 'major non-NATO ally' is a US designation that gives close partners outside it privileged defense cooperation.
Most of the 13	Commonwealth; Francophonie	Associations of 56 mostly former British territories and of French-speaking states; Rwanda belongs to both.
Burundi	Arusha Agreement	Burundi's 2000 peace accord, signed in Tanzania, which set ethnic power-sharing quotas.
South Sudan	Revitalized Agreement	The 2018 deal that ended South Sudan's 2013-18 civil war and made Riek Machar first vice president in a unity government.
Ethiopia	Pretoria Agreement	The November 2022 deal, signed in South Africa, that ended the 2020-22 Tigray war.
The seven Nile states	Cooperative Framework Agreement	Nile Basin treaty on sharing the river's water, opened in 2010, backed by the upstream states, rejected by Egypt and Sudan, and in force since October 2024.
Mauritius	Chagos agreement	The 2025 treaty under which Britain would hand the Chagos Islands to Mauritius and keep the Diego Garcia military base on a 99-year lease.

Places, Terms, and Abbreviations

Country	Name	Who or what
Eritrea, Ethiopia	Asmara; Addis Ababa	The capitals of Eritrea and Ethiopia, often used to mean their governments.
Region-wide	UAE (United Arab Emirates)	Gulf federation of seven emirates.
Ethiopia	GERD (Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam)	Africa's largest hydroelectric dam, on the Blue Nile near the Sudanese border, inaugurated in September 2025.
Somalia, Ethiopia	Somaliland	Breakaway northern region of Somalia, self-governing since 1991 but largely unrecognized.
Congo	The Kivus	North and South Kivu, the eastern Congo provinces on the Rwandan and Burundian borders; Goma and Bukavu are their capitals.
Kenya, Madagascar	Gen Z (Generation Z)	People born roughly 1997-2012; here, the youth-led protests organized online.
Ethiopia	Derg	The Marxist military junta that seized power in Ethiopia in 1974 and ruled, latterly in civilian form, until 1991; the name means 'committee'.
Kenya	Mau Mau	The 1952-60 uprising against British settler rule in Kenya, fought mainly by Kikuyu rebels.
Mozambique, Tanzania	LNG (liquefied natural gas)	Natural gas chilled to a liquid so it can be shipped by tanker.
All 13	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year.

Module 1 — Foundations

The Highlands, the Lakes, and the Swahili Coast



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Alex de Waal, *The Real Politics of the Horn of Africa*; International Crisis Group Great Lakes reports

1a. Three Sub-Regions

• **The Horn's southern flank** — Ethiopia and South Sudan: the region's largest state and its newest, both landlocked, both at war internally, and both dependent on neighbors for the sea.

- **The Great Lakes and the coast** — Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi, the East African Community's core: two coastal states whose ports serve three landlocked ones, bound by the Swahili language, the community's common market, and the war in eastern Congo on their western border.
- **The south and the islands** — Mozambique and Malawi on the mainland, and Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius, and Seychelles in the western Indian Ocean, where the mainland's poverty and the islands' prosperity sit a few hundred kilometers apart.

1b. Ports and the Interior

Six of the 13 states are landlocked — Ethiopia, South Sudan, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, and Malawi — and every one depends on a neighbor's port: Ethiopia on Djibouti, the Great Lakes states on Mombasa and Dar es Salaam, Malawi on Mozambique's Nacala and Beira. That dependence structures the region's politics as thoroughly as oil structures the Gulf's: it is why Ethiopia's leader demands Red Sea access, why Kenya and Tanzania compete for transit trade with railways and pipelines, and why the coastal states hold leverage over interior states many times their size.

1c. The Strongman Pattern

The region has one of Africa's highest concentrations of long-serving rulers who have removed the limits on their own tenure: Museveni (term and age limits abolished), Kagame (constitution rewritten), Kiir (never faced an election), Azali (rotation abolished), and now Abiy, whose supermajority and reported plans for a presidential system point the same way. Tanzania's ruling party has governed for 65 years and Mozambique's for 51. Against this, Kenya, Malawi, Mauritius, and Seychelles have produced alternations, and Kenya's and Madagascar's Gen-Z uprisings — one contained, one that toppled a president — show the generational pressure building beneath the strongmen.

1d. The Disputes That Recur

Five issues run through the course. The war in eastern Congo, in which Rwanda backs the M23 rebels and Burundi, and at points Uganda and Tanzania, back the other side — a war fought mainly inside Congo but shaping every Great Lakes state here (Modules 4, 8, 9). Ethiopia's confrontation with Eritrea over the Red Sea and the collapse of the Tigray peace (Modules 2, 9). South Sudan's disintegration and the spillover of Sudan's war (Modules 5, 9). The Nile, where Ethiopia's completed dam has changed the balance with Egypt and Sudan (Modules 2, 8). And the succession question in states ruled by aging strongmen with sons in waiting — Uganda, Comoros, and, without a son, Ethiopia (Modules 4, 7, 9).

1e. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office, the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religion with its share, the main ethnic groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026 and land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or, where there is none, from published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. The Who's Who before this module defines every group, party, and abbreviation the profiles name, and the Key Points page ranks the thirteen leaders by time in office. Only two states — Mauritius and Seychelles, the two islands — are rated Free; six are Not Free; and one is under a junta. Three heads of government took office or were re-elected in 2025-26 in votes their opponents rejected.

Module 2 — Ethiopia

The Region's Largest and Most Consequential State



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Ethiopia reports; Center for Strategic and International Studies Africa Program

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed, 50 — in office since April 2018 (8.5 years); sworn in for a second full term on October 5, 2026
Head of state	President Taye Atske Selassie, 70 — in office since October 2024 (2.0 years); ceremonial
System	Federal parliamentary republic organized by ethnicity
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	138.9 million (2026)
Land area	1,000,000 km² (386,100 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 63% (Ethiopian Orthodox 44%, Protestant 19%); Muslim 34% (2007 census, the latest)
People	Oromo 34%, Amhara 27%, Somali 6%, Tigrayan 6%, Sidama 4%, and some 80 other groups (2007 census); median age 20; 25% urban
Minimum wage	No private-sector minimum: a 2019 labor law provides for a wage board, which has not set one; federal civil servants start at 6,000 birr a month ($37 at 162 birr = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Africa's oldest independent state — never colonized, apart from Italy's 1936-41 occupation — Ethiopia was an empire under Haile Selassie until a 1974 Marxist military coup; the Derg's terror and the 1984-85 famine ended with its 1991 overthrow by a Tigrayan-led coalition that ruled for 27 years and built

the world's most explicitly ethnic federation. Abiy Ahmed, an Oromo, took power in 2018 amid protests, freed prisoners, made peace with Eritrea (winning the 2019 Nobel Peace Prize), and then fought a 2020-22 war against the Tigrayan leadership that killed hundreds of thousands. The 2022 Pretoria Agreement collapsed in September 2026, and the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam was completed in 2025.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Abiy Ahmed led his Prosperity Party to 438 of 501 contested seats in the June 1, 2026 election — held with no voting in Tigray, 143 polling stations closed by insecurity in Oromia and Amhara, and the main opposition suppressed. The new parliament reappointed him to a five-year term, and he promised constitutional amendments drawn from a national dialogue commission's recommendations; opposition figures and analysts have warned that the changes point toward a presidential system.

Government structure: Under a 1995 constitution, regional states hold a theoretical right to secede. The Prosperity Party dominates every level. A 2025 law bars foreign-funded organizations from election monitoring or advocacy; media and civil society are constrained. In Tigray, TPLF forces seized the regional capital, Mekelle, and its airport from September 23, and federal troops and the pro-government Tigray Peace Force retook the city on October 3-4 after the TPLF withdrew, vowing to fight on; the fighting has spread into the neighboring Afar region. Insurgencies continue in Amhara (the Fano militias) and Oromia (the Oromo Liberation Army).

Economy and trade: A roughly $120 billion economy, East Africa's largest until the 2024 float of the birr cut its dollar value, now second to Kenya's, and among the world's fastest-growing (officials project 10% in 2026). Built on agriculture (coffee — Ethiopia is Africa's largest producer — plus oilseeds, flowers, and livestock), a growing manufacturing sector in industrial parks, Ethiopian Airlines (Africa's largest), and hydropower from the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam. Exports are led by coffee, gold (record levels since a 2024 currency float), flowers, oilseeds, and khat; imports by fuel, machinery, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: China (largest import source and lender), the US, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Djibouti (through which over 90% of trade passes — the landlocked constraint driving Abiy's Red Sea demand). A 2023 default and 2024 IMF program brought currency liberalization.

Closest partners: The UAE, Abiy's closest backer, which armed him in the Tigray war and invests heavily; China, the largest builder; Turkey, a drone supplier; Saudi Arabia; the US and EU, which restored ties after the war but remain critical; and Somalia and Kenya as regional partners. Ethiopia joined BRICS in 2024.

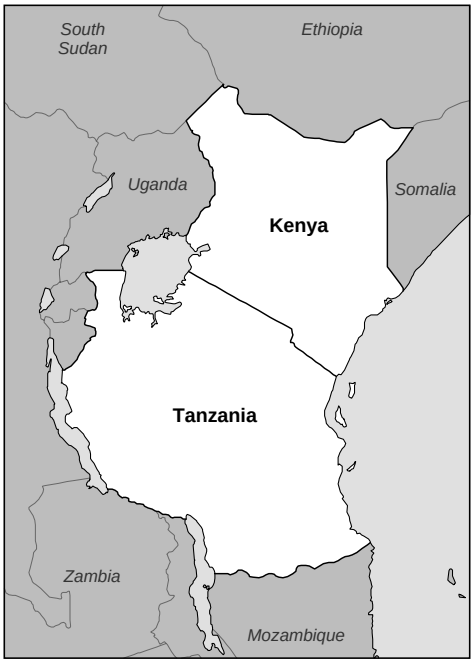
Principal rivalries and disputes: Eritrea, its former enemy, wartime ally, and now enemy again: Abiy's declared need for Red Sea access, which can only mean Eritrean ports, and Eritrean troops' continued presence in Tigray have brought the two to the brink of a new war. Egypt, over the Nile dam, which Cairo regards as an existential threat and whose disputes Trump offered to mediate in 2026. Sudan, whose government accuses Ethiopia of training RSF fighters. Somalia, over Ethiopia's 2024 deal for sea access through Somaliland. Ethiopia closed its embassy in Asmara and expelled Eritrean diplomats on October 1, 2026, accusing Eritrea — with Sudan and Egypt — of backing the Tigrayan forces, and Eritrea cut diplomatic ties in return. Internally, Tigray, Amhara, and Oromia.

2b. The Supermajority and the Red Sea

Abiy's 2026 landslide gives him a mandate to reshape the constitution and removes any electoral incentive to accommodate the regions that could not or would not vote. It coincides with two external pressures: the Nile dam, now complete, which fixes Ethiopia's hydro-hegemony over Egypt and Sudan; and the Red Sea, where a landlocked country, routing 90% of its trade through Djibouti, has declared access a matter of survival. The peace with Eritrea that won Abiy the Nobel Prize has inverted into the region's most likely interstate war — and a supermajority at home has historically been the condition under which Ethiopian leaders look outward. Both pressures now run through Tigray, where the war resumed in September 2026 and where Addis Ababa says Eritrea, Sudan, and Egypt are backing the forces it is fighting — a charge that has already ended diplomatic relations with Asmara.

Module 3 — Kenya & Tanzania

The Swahili Coast



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Africa Center for Strategic Studies; The Elephant (Nairobi)

3a. Kenya

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President William Ruto, 59 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); next election August 2027
System	Presidential republic with 47 devolved counties
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	58.6 million (2026)
Land area	569,140 km² (219,750 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 85%; Muslim 11% (2019 census)
People	Kikuyu 17%, Luhya 14%, Kalenjin 13%, Luo 11%, Kamba 10%, and some 40 other groups (2019 census); median age 21; 31% urban
Minimum wage	Set by occupation and place, from May 2026: 18,047 shillings a month for a general laborer in Nairobi, Mombasa, Kisumu, Nakuru, and Eldoret and 9,268 in other areas ($139 and $71 at 129.8 shillings = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A British settler colony whose Mau Mau uprising hastened independence in 1963 under Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya was a one-party state under Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi until 1991. Multiparty politics has been organized around ethnic coalitions, and the disputed 2007 election produced violence that killed over 1,000 and led to International Criminal Court charges against William Ruto and Uhuru Kenyatta, later dropped. Ruto won the 2022 election, and his 2024 finance bill triggered Gen-Z protests in which police

killed dozens and demonstrators stormed parliament — a movement that has recurred and reshaped Kenyan politics ahead of 2027.

Current leadership: President William Ruto of the United Democratic Alliance has had the most turbulent presidency since multiparty rule: the Gen-Z uprising forced him to withdraw the finance bill, sack his cabinet, and bring the opposition into government. Deputy President Kithure Kindiki replaced Rigathi Gachagua, impeached in 2024.

Government structure: Under the 2010 constitution, Kenya has a directly elected president limited to two terms, a bicameral parliament, counties with their own governors and assemblies, an independent judiciary that has annulled a presidential election (2017), and a vigorous press and civil society. The 2027 alignment is forming.

Economy and trade: A roughly $150 billion economy, East Africa's largest since Ethiopia's currency float, its commercial hub, and its most diversified, built on services (Nairobi's finance, technology — the M-Pesa mobile-money pioneer — and logistics), agriculture (tea, the world's largest black-tea exporter; flowers; coffee), tourism, and manufacturing. Exports are led by tea, flowers, coffee, and refined petroleum; imports by fuel, machinery, vehicles, and food. Top trading partners: China (largest import source and lender for the Chinese-built railway), Uganda (largest export market), the US, the UAE, and India. Debt distress — Kenya spends over half of revenue on debt service — drove the 2024 finance bill's tax rises and the Gen-Z uprising they provoked. The port of Mombasa serves Uganda, Rwanda, and South Sudan.

Closest partners: The United States, which designated Kenya a major non-NATO ally in 2024 and whose forces operate from Kenyan bases against al-Shabaab; the UK; China, the largest lender and builder of the Nairobi-Mombasa railway; the Gulf states; the East African Community, which Kenya anchors economically; and Somalia, where Kenyan troops have fought since 2011.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Kenya has no state adversaries; its disputes are internal and fiscal. Police killings of protesters have become a recurring pattern, and the 2027 election will test whether the Gen-Z movement translates into votes. Al-Shabaab attacks from Somalia persist, and a maritime boundary dispute with Somalia was settled by the ICJ in 2021, mostly in Somalia's favor.

3b. Tanzania

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Samia Suluhu Hassan, 66 — in office since March 2021 (5.5 years); declared re-elected October 2025
System	Presidential republic under one-party dominance (the CCM and its predecessors since 1961)
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	72.6 million (2026)
Land area	885,800 km² (342,010 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 60%; Muslim about 35%; Zanzibar almost entirely Muslim (estimates: the census has not asked about religion since 1967)
People	More than 120 groups, none dominant; the largest, the Sukuma, is about a sixth; median age 19; 40% urban
Minimum wage	Sector minimums only (mainland; Zanzibar sets its own), from January 2026: 175,000 shillings a month where no sector rate applies ($66 at 2,640 shillings = $1); some sector rates are lower, from 80,000 for certain domestic workers

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Tanganyika (independent 1961) and Zanzibar (1963) united in 1964 under Julius Nyerere, whose one-party socialism built national unity and a stable state at the cost of economic stagnation. His party, the CCM, has governed continuously since — Africa's longest-ruling party — through the multiparty era since 1992. John Magufuli's authoritarian turn (2015-21) ended with his death; his vice president Samia Suluhu Hassan succeeded him as Tanzania's first female president.

Current leadership: President Samia Suluhu Hassan of the CCM was declared re-elected with 98% after the main opposition leader was charged with treason and his party barred, and a second challenger disqualified. Protests on election day were met with a crackdown in which security forces killed hundreds — the worst political violence in Tanzania's independent history — and an internet shutdown.

Government structure: Zanzibar is semi-autonomous with its own president and parliament. Samia's early liberalization (2021-23) reversed into the repression of 2024-25; the judiciary and electoral commission are not independent.

Economy and trade: A roughly $85 billion economy built on gold (Africa's fourth-largest producer), tourism (Serengeti, Kilimanjaro, Zanzibar), agriculture (cashews, coffee, tobacco), and, prospectively, natural gas from offshore fields whose $40 billion LNG project has been repeatedly delayed. Exports are led by gold, cashews, tobacco, and coffee; imports by fuel, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China, India, the UAE, South Africa, and Kenya. The port of Dar es Salaam serves the landlocked interior, and the Chinese-built standard-gauge railway and Ugandan oil pipeline are the major infrastructure projects.

Closest partners: China, the largest trading partner and builder of the railway and port; India; the Gulf states; the East African Community and the Southern African Development Community; and, until 2025, Western donors, who suspended some support after the crackdown.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The domestic opposition, now largely jailed or exiled; Western donors over the 2025 violence; and a recurring friction with Kenya over trade and transit. Tanzania has stayed out of the region's wars while sending troops to Congo against M23 and Mozambique against the insurgents.

3c. Two Coasts, Two Directions

Kenya and Tanzania share the Swahili coast, the ports that serve the interior, and the East African Community, and they have diverged sharply. Kenya's turbulence is the turbulence of a functioning democracy — courts that annul elections, protests that force policy reversals, a press that names the police who kill. Tanzania's calm was the calm of one-party rule, and when it broke in October 2025 the state's response was the deadliest in its history. The two now represent the region's alternatives: contested pluralism under fiscal stress, or dominant-party stability enforced by force.

Module 4 — Uganda, Rwanda & Burundi

The Great Lakes



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Great Lakes reports; Michela Wrong, *Do Not Disturb*

4a. Uganda

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Yoweri Museveni, 82 — in office since January 1986 (40.7 years); seventh elected term began May 2026
System	Presidential republic, personalist in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	52.8 million (2026)
Land area	199,810 km² (77,150 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 82% (Catholic 36%, Anglican 29%, Pentecostal 15%); Muslim 13% (2024 census)
People	Baganda 15%, Banyankole 9%, Basoga 8%, Iteso 7%, Bakiga 6%, and dozens of other groups (2024 census); median age 18; 29% urban
Minimum wage	None in effect: the legal minimum, 6,000 shillings a month (about $1.50 at 4,020 shillings = $1), was set in 1984 and never revised; a 2019 bill to update it has not taken effect

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A British protectorate until 1962, Uganda descended under Idi Amin (1971-79) into one of Africa's most notorious tyrannies, followed by a second Obote regime and civil war. Yoweri Museveni's rebel army took Kampala in 1986, and he has ruled ever since — Africa's fourth-longest-serving leader.

Current leadership: President Yoweri Museveni won a January 2026 election in which his challenger Bobi Wine was placed under house arrest, the internet was shut down, and observers reported intimidation; his party retained a two-thirds majority. His son, General Muhoozi Kainerugaba, is army chief, a prolific social-media provocateur, and the presumed successor.

Government structure: The 1995 constitution was stripped of its term limits (2005) and age limits (2017). A unicameral parliament in which the ruling NRM dominates. The military is the regime's core, and the 2025 amendments restored military trials of civilians. Opposition figures are routinely detained; the 2023 anti-homosexuality law drew Western sanctions.

Economy and trade: A roughly $55 billion economy built on agriculture (coffee — Africa's second-largest producer — tea, fish, and food crops), services, and, from 2026, oil from the Lake Albert fields exported via a Chinese-financed pipeline through Tanzania. Exports are led by gold (much of it re-exported from Congo and South Sudan), coffee, fish, and tea; imports by fuel, machinery, vehicles, and pharmaceuticals. Top trading partners: the UAE (gold), Kenya, China, India, and Tanzania. Uganda hosts Africa's largest refugee population, from South Sudan and Congo.

Closest partners: The United States and the West, which have relied on Uganda as a security partner in Somalia and Congo despite sanctions over rights; China, a major lender; the Gulf states; Kenya and Tanzania; and Rwanda, in a relationship of cooperation and rivalry that has oscillated for three decades.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Uganda's disputes are with its own opposition and its succession. Externally, its role in eastern Congo — where its troops have fought the ADF Islamist rebels since 2021 and have at points aligned with M23's advance — puts it at odds with Congo's government and in an ambiguous relationship with Rwanda. South Sudan's war and Sudan's spillover drive refugees across its border.

4b. Rwanda

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Paul Kagame, 68 — in office since April 2000 (26.5 years); de facto leader since 1994
System	Presidential republic; a tightly controlled one-party state in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	14.9 million (2026)
Land area	24,670 km² (9,530 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 92% (Catholic 40%, Pentecostal 21%, other Protestant 15%, Adventist 12%); Muslim 2% (2022 census)
People	Ethnicity is no longer recorded; before 1994, Hutu about 85%, Tutsi about 14%, Twa about 1%; median age 21; 19% urban
Minimum wage	None in effect: the legal minimum, 100 francs a day (under 10 cents at 1,475 francs = $1), dates from 1974; a 2018 law lets the labor minister set sector minimums, but no new rates are in force

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Belgian rule entrenched the Hutu-Tutsi distinction that a Hutu-led state exploited after independence in 1962. The 1994 genocide killed some 800,000 Tutsi and moderate Hutu in 100 days, ending when Paul Kagame's Tutsi-led rebel army took the country. Kagame has ruled since — as vice president and de facto leader until 2000, president since — building a disciplined, corruption-free, rapidly developing state with no tolerance for opposition, and winning elections with 93-99%. Rwanda's armed

intervention in eastern Congo, through the M23 rebels who seized Goma in January 2025, has made it the region's most consequential military actor.

Current leadership: President Paul Kagame was re-elected in 2024 with 99%. Prime Minister Justin Nsengiyumva manages a government the presidency directs entirely.

Government structure: The Rwandan Patriotic Front controls every institution, critics have been jailed or killed at home and abroad, and the state is efficient. A 2015 referendum allowed Kagame to run until 2034.

Economy and trade: A roughly $15 billion economy that has grown at 7-8% for two decades from a devastated base, built on services (Kigali as a conference and finance hub), tourism (gorilla trekking, at a premium), agriculture (coffee, tea), and mining — including tin, tantalum, tungsten, and gold, a significant share of which is smuggled from eastern Congo, the economic engine behind Rwanda's intervention there. Exports are led by gold, minerals, coffee, and tea; imports by fuel, machinery, and food. Top trading partners: the UAE (gold), Congo, China, Kenya, and Uganda. Rwanda is landlocked and dependent on Kenyan and Tanzanian ports.

Closest partners: The United Kingdom and, historically, the US, which have treated Rwanda as a development model; the UAE; the Gulf states; Qatar; Mozambique, where Rwandan troops fought the insurgency; and the Commonwealth and Francophonie, both of which Rwanda hosts summits for.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The Democratic Republic of the Congo, in the region's defining conflict: Rwanda's support for the M23 rebels, who took Goma and Bukavu in early 2025, has drawn Western sanctions, a UN finding that Rwandan troops fight alongside M23, and a Congolese-Rwandan peace process under US and Qatari mediation that has not stopped the fighting. Burundi, which fights M23 and accuses Rwanda of plotting against it. South Africa and the regional force whose troops M23 killed in Goma. Uganda, its ambivalent neighbor.

4c. Burundi

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Évariste Ndayishimiye, 58 — in office since June 2020 (6.3 years)
System	Presidential republic under one-party dominance (the CNDD-FDD)
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	14.7 million (2026)
Land area	25,680 km² (9,920 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 86% (Catholic 62%, Protestant 24%); Muslim about 2.5% (2008 estimates)
People	Hutu about 85%, Tutsi about 14%, Twa about 1% (estimates; the constitution sets ethnic quotas in government); median age 18; 16% urban
Minimum wage	None in effect: the legal minimum, 160 francs a day in Bujumbura and Gitega and 105 elsewhere (about 5 cents at the official 3,000 francs = $1), dates from 1988

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Rwanda's twin — same colonial history, same Hutu-Tutsi divide — Burundi's post-independence history was a Tutsi military dominance punctuated by massacres (1972, 1993) and a civil war (1993-2005) that killed 300,000. Elections under the 2000 Arusha peace agreement brought the Hutu-led CNDD-FDD to power in 2005; President Pierre Nkurunziza's 2015 bid for a third term triggered a crisis, a failed coup, and repression that drove hundreds of thousands into exile. His successor Évariste Ndayishimiye, elected in 2020, has eased some pressure.

Current leadership: President Évariste Ndayishimiye, a former general, was re-confirmed by the ruling CNDD-FDD's sweep of the 2025 legislative elections, which the opposition boycotted or was excluded from. Prime Minister Nestor Ntahontuye manages the government.

Government structure: A 2018 constitution lengthened presidential terms to seven years and weakened the Arusha power-sharing guarantees. The CNDD-FDD and its Imbonerakure youth militia control the state; opposition and media are suppressed.

Economy and trade: A roughly $3 billion economy, the world's poorest by GDP per capita, dependent on coffee and tea exports, subsistence agriculture, and aid. Exports are coffee, tea, and gold; imports are fuel, food, and goods. Top partners: the UAE, Congo, Tanzania, and China. Nickel deposits are undeveloped; foreign exchange shortages are chronic.

Closest partners: Tanzania, its closest partner and refuge for its exiles; the Democratic Republic of the Congo, alongside whose army Burundian troops fight M23; the East African Community; China; and, cautiously, the EU, which has resumed aid.

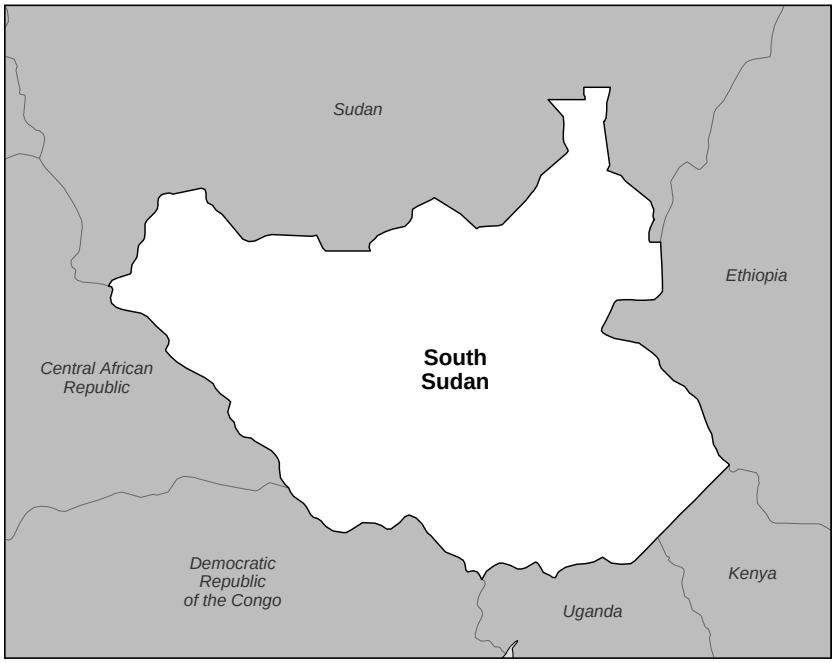
Principal rivalries and disputes: Rwanda, which Burundi accuses of backing rebels against it; and the exiled opposition.

4d. The Congo War's Eastern Shore

The three Great Lakes states are the eastern shore of the war in Congo, and they are on different sides of it. Rwanda backs M23, which holds Goma and Bukavu and much of the Kivus; Burundi fights it; Uganda pursues its own rebels and has at points tolerated M23's advance. The war is fought over minerals — gold, tin, tantalum — that flow east through Rwanda and Uganda to the UAE, and over the unresolved legacy of 1994, when the genocide's perpetrators fled into Congo. The East African Community deployed a force to the Kivus in 2022 and withdrew it in 2023; its members cannot agree on which side they are on.

Module 5 — South Sudan

The World's Newest State



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group South Sudan reports; The Sentry investigations

5a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Salva Kiir Mayardit, 75 — in office since July 2011 (15.2 years); led the south since 2005; first national election scheduled for December 2026
System	Presidential republic under a transitional power-sharing arrangement
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	12.4 million (2026)
Land area	610,952 km² (235,890 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 60%; traditional religions about a third; Muslim about 6% (estimates; no census since independence)
People	Dinka about 36%, Nuer about 16%, and some 60 other groups including the Shilluk, Azande, and Bari (estimates); median age 20; 22% urban
Minimum wage	None: the 2017 Labour Act provides for a minimum wage, but none has been set; civil servants' pay is often months in arrears

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The world's newest state, South Sudan won independence from Sudan in July 2011 after two civil wars spanning half a century and a 99% referendum. Within two years it collapsed into its own civil war between President Salva Kiir's Dinka-dominated forces and Vice President Riek Machar's Nuer-dominated rebels, killing some 400,000 and displacing millions. A 2018 peace deal restored Machar as first vice

president in a transitional government that has never held the election it promised — postponed in 2022 and 2024.

Current leadership: President Salva Kiir has never faced an election. First Vice President Riek Machar was placed under house arrest in March 2025 and charged with treason, effectively ending the power-sharing arrangement; Machar's forces have resumed fighting in parts of the country. The scheduled election will use pre-independence constituencies because no census has been held. Kiir's health and succession are constant speculation.

Government structure: South Sudan is governed under a 2011 transitional constitution and the 2018 Revitalized Agreement, which created a power-sharing government, a transitional legislature, and a timeline for elections and a permanent constitution that has never been met. In practice, the state is a patronage network distributing oil revenue among Dinka elites and their allies, with a security apparatus loyal to Kiir. Ten states and three administrative areas exist on paper.

Economy and trade: A roughly $5 billion economy almost entirely dependent on oil, which provides over 90% of government revenue and nearly all exports — and which must flow through Sudan's pipelines to Port Sudan, leaving South Sudan hostage to Sudan's war; a 2024-25 pipeline rupture halted exports for months. Imports of food, fuel, and goods come through Uganda and Kenya. Top partners: China (the oil buyer), Uganda, Kenya, and the UAE. Most of the population lives by subsistence agriculture and cattle, and over half face acute food insecurity.

Closest partners: Uganda, whose troops have intervened on Kiir's side, most recently in 2025; Kenya, its trade and finance outlet; China; the UAE; and Sudan's army — a relationship complicated by Sudan's war and South Sudan's dealings with both sides.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Machar and the opposition forces; Sudan's war, which has cut the pipeline, sent a million refugees south, and drawn South Sudanese factions into both camps; the ethnic militias that the state cannot control; and the election, which will be held in conditions no observer considers credible or postponed again.

5b. A State That Never Formed

South Sudan won independence with more international goodwill than any new state in decades and squandered it within two years. The 2013 war between Kiir and Machar was fought along the Dinka-Nuer line, the 2018 peace paired them in a government neither wanted, and Machar's 2025 arrest ended the pretense. The oil that should have built the state was captured by elites, the humanitarian system replaced the government as provider of services, and Sudan's collapse has removed the neighbor on which the oil depended. The December 2026 election is either the founding of a state or its formal abandonment.

Module 6 — Mozambique & Malawi

The Region's South



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Institute for Security Studies (Pretoria); Cabo Ligado conflict monitor

6a. Mozambique

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Daniel Chapo, 49 — in office since January 2025 (1.7 years)
System	Presidential republic under one-party dominance (Frelimo since 1975)
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	36.6 million (2026)
Land area	786,380 km² (303,620 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 60% (Catholic 27%, Zionist 16%, Evangelical and Pentecostal 15%); Muslim 19%; no religion 14% (2017 census)
People	Bantu-speaking peoples: the Makhuwa (the largest), Tsonga, Lomwe, Sena, and others; median age 18; 40% urban
Minimum wage	Sector minimums only, from April 2026: 7,072 meticais a month in agriculture up to 20,361 in banking and insurance ($111 to $319 at 63.8 meticais = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Portugal's most bitterly fought African war ended with independence in 1975 under the Marxist Frelimo, followed by a 16-year civil war with the South African-backed Renamo that killed a million. Peace in 1992 brought multiparty elections that Frelimo has won every time since 1994, often disputed.

Current leadership: President Daniel Chapo of Frelimo, a former provincial governor, was declared the winner of the October 2024 election with 65% — a result the opposition candidate Venâncio Mondlane rejected and that triggered months of protests in which police killed over 300 people. Chapo has since sought dialogue with Mondlane and inherited the Cabo Delgado insurgency. Prime Minister Maria Benvinda Levi manages the government.

Government structure: A unicameral Assembly of the Republic, provincial governors appointed centrally until recent reforms, and a judiciary and electoral commission aligned with Frelimo.

Economy and trade: A roughly $22 billion economy built on aluminum (the Mozal smelter), coal, natural gas (offshore Rovuma basin fields, with one floating LNG project operating and TotalEnergies' $20 billion onshore project stalled by the insurgency), electricity from the Cahora Bassa dam, and agriculture. Exports are led by aluminum, coal, LNG, electricity, and rubies; imports by fuel, machinery, and food. Top trading partners: India (coal), South Africa, China, and the Netherlands. A 2016 hidden-debt scandal ($2 billion in secret loans) led to default, and the ports of Maputo, Beira, and Nacala serve the landlocked interior.

Closest partners: South Africa, its largest neighbor and trade partner; Rwanda, whose troops fought the Cabo Delgado insurgents on behalf of the LNG projects; the EU and Portugal; China; India; the Gulf, especially the UAE, as investors; and the Southern African Development Community, whose force also deployed.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado, which has killed thousands, displaced a million, and stalled TotalEnergies' project since 2021; the post-election opposition, whose protests were the largest challenge to Frelimo since independence; and the legacy of the hidden-debt scandal. Renamo, the former rebel movement, has been eclipsed by Mondlane's new movement.

6b. Malawi

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Peter Mutharika, 86 — in office since October 2025 (1.0 years); also president 2014–20
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	22.8 million (2026)
Land area	94,280 km² (36,400 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 77%; Muslim 14% (2018 census)
People	Chewa 34%, Lomwe 19%, Yao 13%, Ngoni 10%, Tumbuka 9% (2018 census); median age 19; 19% urban
Minimum wage	157,500 kwacha a month nationwide from June 2026, and 83,720 for domestic workers ($90 and $48 at the official 1,750 kwacha = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Nyasaland became independent in 1964 under Hastings Banda, who ruled as a one-party dictator until a 1994 referendum forced multiparty elections. Democracy has held since, with a landmark 2020 Constitutional Court annulment of a rigged 2019 election and a rerun that the opposition won. Peter Mutharika, defeated in that rerun, returned at 85 — one of the region's few genuine alternations.

Current leadership: President Peter Mutharika of the Democratic Progressive Party defeated the incumbent Lazarus Chakwera in September 2025 — an alternation driven by economic collapse, fuel and foreign-exchange shortages, and the aftermath of cyclones.

Government structure: The 1994 constitution provides for a two-term limit and a unicameral National Assembly. The 2020 annulment was one of only two such rulings in Africa, and the country has alternated power three times — a functioning if fragile democracy.

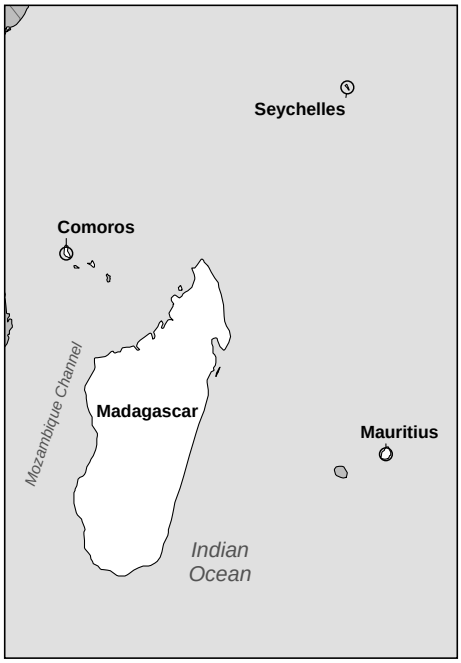
Economy and trade: A roughly $12 billion economy, among the world's poorest, dependent on tobacco (the largest export), tea, sugar, and subsistence agriculture, with a 2023-25 foreign-exchange crisis, fuel shortages, and a 2024 IMF program lapse. Exports are tobacco, tea, sugar, and macadamia; imports are fuel, fertilizer, and goods. Top partners: South Africa, China, India, and Belgium. Uranium and rare-earth mining offer prospects.

Closest partners: The UK, its former colonial power and a donor; the US, historically the largest donor, whose 2025 aid cuts hit Malawi hard; China; the EU; South Africa; and Mozambique and Tanzania, its transit routes.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Malawi has no adversaries. Its disputes are economic — the currency crisis, the IMF program's lapse, and dependence on aid that has fallen — plus a long-dormant border dispute with Tanzania over Lake Malawi.

Module 7 — The Indian Ocean Islands

Madagascar, Comoros, Mauritius & Seychelles



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Indian Ocean Commission documentation; Jeune Afrique

7a. Madagascar

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Colonel Michael Randrianirina, transitional president, 51 or 52 (born 1974) — in office since October 2025 (1.0 years); took power in a military takeover; election promised for September 2027
System	Military-led transitional government
Freedom House	Partly Free (rated before the October 2025 coup)
Population	33.5 million (2026)
Land area	581,795 km² (224,630 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 85%, often alongside traditional ancestor veneration; Muslim about 3% (estimates)
People	18 recognized Malagasy groups, the largest the Merina, Betsimisaraka, and Betsileo; median age 20; 43% urban
Minimum wage	315,000 ariary a month for the lowest private-sector grade from October 2026, up from 300,000 in March ($73 at about 4,300 ariary = $1, a mid-2026 rate)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The island's Merina kingdom was conquered by France in 1896; independence came in 1960. Politics has been a cycle of crises: a 1972 uprising, a 1991 movement, a 2002 standoff, and a 2009 coup that brought Andry Rajoelina, a 34-year-old former disc jockey and mayor of the capital, to power. Rajoelina was elected in 2018 and 2023.

Current leadership: Colonel Michael Randrianirina, commander of the elite CAPSAT unit, seized power after weeks of Gen-Z protests over water and electricity cuts and his unit's refusal to fire on them; President Andry Rajoelina fled abroad and was impeached. Randrianirina was sworn in as president of a transitional 'refoundation' government and suspended most institutions.

Government structure: The 2010 constitution's semi-presidential system is suspended; the High Constitutional Court endorsed the takeover. The African Union suspended Madagascar; the region's response was muted. The coup was the first of the current African wave outside the Sahel-Gulf of Guinea belt, and its trigger — youth protests over basic services — was the same as Kenya's and Nepal's.

Economy and trade: A roughly $17 billion economy, among the world's poorest despite unique biodiversity, dependent on vanilla (the world's largest producer), nickel and cobalt, textiles, tourism, and subsistence agriculture. Exports are led by vanilla, nickel, cloves, and clothing; imports by fuel, rice, and machinery. Top partners: France, the US, China, and India. Chronic power and water failures triggered the 2025 uprising; the coup's economic effects are unfolding.

Closest partners: France, its former colonial power, largest partner, and the destination of its exiles; the US; China and India, as investors; the Indian Ocean Commission; and the AU and SADC, which have pressed for a transition timeline.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The junta's legitimacy and the transition; Rajoelina's exile and his allies; and the Scattered Islands, French-held islets claimed by Madagascar.

7b. Comoros

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Azali Assoumani, 67 — in office since May 2016 (10.4 years); also president 1999–2006
System	Federal presidential republic, personalist in practice
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	899,000 (2026)
Land area	1,861 km² (719 sq mi)
Religion	Sunni Muslim about 98%
People	Comorian, of mixed Bantu African, Arab, and Malagasy descent; median age 22; 31% urban
Minimum wage	No officially published minimum wage could be confirmed as of October 2026

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Three of the four Comoros islands voted for independence from France in 1975; the country has since seen more than 20 coups and attempted coups, many involving the French mercenary Bob Denard. A 2001 constitution rotating the presidency among the islands brought stability until Azali Assoumani, a former coup leader, abolished the rotation in 2018.

Current leadership: President Azali Assoumani, who returned to power by election, won disputed elections in 2019 and 2024 — the latter followed by riots. His son Nour El Fath, a senior adviser, is being positioned to succeed him; Azali chaired the African Union in 2023-24.

Government structure: The three islands have their own governments, but the 2018 constitution centralized power in a presidency Azali dominates. Opposition is harassed and the press constrained.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1.5 billion economy dependent on remittances from a diaspora in France (roughly a quarter of GDP), vanilla, cloves, ylang-ylang, and aid. Imports of food and fuel far exceed exports. Top partners: France, the UAE, India, and China. Mayotte's status and migration to it are the central economic and political issue.

Closest partners: France, despite the dispute over Mayotte; the Gulf states, especially Saudi Arabia and the UAE, as funders; China; the Arab League and African Union; and Tanzania and Madagascar as neighbors.

Principal rivalries and disputes: France, over Mayotte, the fourth island, which voted to remain French and is now a French department — Comoros claims it, and migration from the other islands to Mayotte is deadly and politically explosive in France. Domestically, the abolished rotation, the succession, and the opposition.

7c. Mauritius

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam, 79 — in office since November 2024 (1.9 years); also prime minister 1995–2000 and 2005–14
Head of state	President Dharam Gokhool, 76 — in office since December 2024 (1.8 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	1.27 million (2026)
Land area	2,030 km² (784 sq mi)
Religion	Hindu 48%; Christian 32%; Muslim 18% (2022 census)
People	Indo-Mauritian about two-thirds, Creole about a quarter, with Sino-Mauritian and Franco-Mauritian minorities (estimates; ethnicity not recorded since 1972); median age 39; 41% urban
Minimum wage	17,745 rupees a month from January 2026 ($374 at 47.4 rupees = $1, September 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Uninhabited until Dutch, French, and British colonization, Mauritius was populated by African slaves and Indian indentured laborers. Independent since 1968, it built a democratic, prosperous state on sugar, textiles, tourism, and offshore finance, and has alternated power peacefully among a handful of political families.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Navin Ramgoolam, son of the independence leader, returned to office when his alliance won 60 of 62 seats in a landslide over the government of Pravind Jugnauth, ending a decade of the rival dynasty.

Government structure: The Westminster-model constitution provides for a unicameral National Assembly, which elects the president. Africa's most stable democracy, with a free press and an independent judiciary.

Economy and trade: A roughly $16 billion economy, Africa's second-wealthiest per capita, built on financial services (an offshore hub for investment into India and Africa), tourism, textiles, sugar, and information technology. Exports are led by textiles, sugar, fish, and services; imports by fuel, food, and machinery. Top partners: France, the UK, South Africa, India, and China. The Chagos treaty would bring British payments, and Mauritius's exclusive economic zone is among the world's largest.

Closest partners: India, its cultural and strategic partner, which has developed Agaléga island for naval use; France, its neighbor through Réunion; the UK, its former colonial power and the other party to the 2024-25 Chagos agreement; the US; China, a major trade partner; and the African Union and SADC.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Mauritius has no adversaries. Its historic dispute — the Chagos Islands, detached by Britain before independence — is unresolved: the treaty signed in May 2025 has been ratified by neither side and stalled after the United States turned against it in 2026, and the Chagossians' return remains contested. A dispute with France over Tromelin island is dormant.

7d. Seychelles

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Patrick Herminie, 63 — in office since October 2025 (0.9 years)
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	135,000 (2026)
Land area	460 km² (178 sq mi)
Religion	Christian majority: Catholic 61% (2022 census)
People	Seychellois Creole majority, of mixed African, European, and Asian descent; Indian and Chinese minorities; median age 36; 60% urban
Minimum wage	40.95 rupees an hour from April 2025, about 7,100 a month full-time ($490 at 14.5 rupees = $1, September 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Uninhabited until the French settled it in 1770, Seychelles passed to Britain in 1814 and became independent in 1976. A 1977 coup installed France-Albert René's one-party socialist state, which lasted until multiparty elections in 1993 and lost power only in 2020, when the opposition's Wavel Ramkalawan won the presidency.

Current leadership: President Patrick Herminie of United Seychelles defeated incumbent Wavel Ramkalawan in an October 2025 runoff, the country's second peaceful alternation.

Government structure: The 1993 constitution provides for a directly elected president limited to two terms and a unicameral National Assembly. Seychelles has become a stable democracy.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2 billion economy, Africa's wealthiest per capita, built on tourism (over a quarter of GDP) and tuna (a major canning industry) plus a growing blue-economy and financial-services sector. Exports are canned tuna and fish; imports are nearly everything. Top partners: the UAE, France, the UK, and India. Seychelles pioneered debt-for-nature swaps for marine conservation.

Closest partners: India, which has expanded naval and coast-guard cooperation and sought a base at Assumption island; the UAE, its largest investor and a security partner; France and the UK; the EU on fisheries; and China. Seychelles balances all of them.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Seychelles has no adversaries. Its issues are the Indian Ocean naval contest for access to its waters, drug trafficking (it has one of the world's highest heroin-use rates), and climate exposure.

7e. The Islands and the Ocean Contest

The four islands span the region's extremes — Madagascar and Comoros among Africa's poorest and least stable, Mauritius and Seychelles its wealthiest and most democratic — and all sit on the western Indian Ocean's sea lanes, where India, China, the Gulf states, France, and the US compete for naval access. India has built up Agaléga (Mauritius) and sought Assumption (Seychelles); China has courted Madagascar and Comoros; the UAE is the largest investor in Seychelles; France holds Réunion, Mayotte, and the Scattered Islands. The stalled Chagos treaty, written to preserve the US base at Diego Garcia, shows the contest's stakes. Madagascar's 2025 coup is the reminder that the largest island's instability can undo everything the smaller ones have built.

Module 8 — The Alliance Map

The East African Community, the Congo War's Sides, the Nile & the Outside Powers

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: East African Community documentation; Chatham House Africa Programme

8a. The East African Community

The EAC — Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of the Congo (since 2022), and Somalia (since 2024) — is the region's institution, with a customs union, a common market in principle, and an aspiration to political federation. In practice its members are on opposite sides of the Congo war, Kenya and Tanzania compete for transit trade, and the 2022-23 regional force in the Kivus collapsed because Congo and Rwanda both belong. The EAC is more integrated than most African blocs and less able to act on security than any.

8b. The Congo War's Sides

The war in eastern Congo divides the region into camps that cut across every institution: Rwanda and M23 on one side; Congo, Burundi, and — through SADC's force, withdrawn in 2025 — South Africa and Tanzania on the other; Uganda ambiguous; the US and Qatar mediating; the UAE buying the gold that funds everyone. The war is fought mainly inside Congo, but its alignments are the Great Lakes' alliance map, and Rwanda's willingness to fight for its interests in Congo — and its impunity in doing so — is the region's central security fact.

8c. The Nile Basin

The completed Ethiopian dam has ended the era in which Egypt's colonial-era treaties governed the Nile: Ethiopia now controls the Blue Nile's flow, and the upstream states — Uganda, Kenya, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, South Sudan — have backed Ethiopia's Cooperative Framework Agreement against Egypt and Sudan. Egypt's response has been to court Ethiopia's enemies: Eritrea, Somalia, and Sudan's army. The Nile is the region's slowest-moving dispute and, with Egypt treating it as existential, its most dangerous latent one.

8d. The Outside Powers

- **The Gulf states and Turkey** — the UAE is the region's most active outside power: Abiy's backer, the buyer of the gold that funds the Congo war, Seychelles' largest investor, and a port-builder across the Horn; Saudi Arabia and Qatar fund and mediate; Turkey arms Ethiopia and Somalia with drones.
- **China** — the largest lender and builder of nearly every state's railways, ports, and dams, and the buyer of South Sudan's oil and Ethiopia's exports; its debt to Kenya and Ethiopia is a political issue in both.
- **The United States** — a security partner (Kenya as major non-NATO ally, Uganda in Somalia, drone bases), a mediator in Congo, and a shrinking donor after 2025 aid cuts that hit Malawi, Uganda, and Kenya.

• **India** — the rising naval power in the western Indian Ocean, with facilities in Mauritius and Seychelles, and a growing partner of Kenya and Tanzania.

• **France and the UK** — France through Réunion, Mayotte, and Madagascar; the UK through Kenya, Rwanda, and the Chagos Islands.

• **Egypt and Eritrea** — the anti-Ethiopian axis on the region's northern edge, which Addis Ababa now accuses, with Sudan, of backing the Tigrayan forces.

Module 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, CrisisWatch; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project

9a. Ethiopia and Eritrea

The region's most likely interstate war, and closer than at any point since 2022 (Module 2). Abiy's supermajority and new term, his Red Sea demand, Eritrea's troops in Tigray, and Egypt's cultivation of Asmara align every incentive toward conflict; only the exhaustion of both states after the 2020-22 war argues against it. A war would draw in Egypt, Sudan's factions, Somalia, and the Gulf, and would end Ethiopia's growth story.

9b. The Congo War

M23's hold on Goma and Bukavu, Rwanda's sanctioned but undeterred backing, the US-Qatari peace process that has produced signatures but not a ceasefire, and the gold and mineral flows that fund every side make eastern Congo the region's open wound. The Great Lakes states will remain on opposite sides until Rwanda's calculation changes, and nothing in 2026 has changed it.

9c. South Sudan and Sudan

Two states on the region's northern edge are disintegrating at once, and each accelerates the other's collapse (Module 5), and the December 2026 election is the moment the world's newest state either forms or formally fails. Uganda and Kenya absorb the consequences.

9d. The Gen-Z Uprisings

Kenya's 2024 protests forced a president to reverse course; Madagascar's 2025 protests toppled one. Both were driven by a generation that is the region's demographic majority — the median age is about 20 — facing unemployment, failing services, and gerontocratic rulers. Kenya's 2027 election and Madagascar's transition are the tests of whether the movement institutionalizes; Uganda's, Tanzania's, and Ethiopia's rulers have answered it with force.

9e. The Successions

Museveni with a son in the army command, Azali positioning his son, Kiir with no successor, Kagame eligible to 2034 — the region's strongmen have planned for dynasty or not at all. Uganda's transition, whenever it comes, is the one most likely to be contested by force; South Sudan's could dissolve the state.

9f. The Last Word

The throughline of all nine modules: this is a region of strongmen and youth, of landlocked giants and coastal gatekeepers, where some of Africa's most repressive states and two of its wealthiest island democracies share one ocean. Its institutions — the EAC, the Nile framework — are more developed than most of Africa's and paralyzed by the wars among their members. Its future is being decided in three places: Addis Ababa, where a supermajority faces a choice between reform and war; the Kivus, where Rwanda's impunity holds; and the streets of Nairobi and Antananarivo, where a generation has shown it can bend or break a government. Whether the strongmen's successions or the youth's uprisings shape the next decade is the question this course leaves open.

Key Points

East Africa & the Indian Ocean

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Uganda	Yoweri Museveni	President	82	January 1986	40.7
Rwanda	Paul Kagame	President	68	April 2000	26.5
South Sudan	Salva Kiir Mayardit	President	75	July 2011	15.2
Comoros	Azali Assoumani	President	67	May 2016	10.4
Ethiopia	Abiy Ahmed	Prime Minister	50	April 2018	8.5
Burundi	Évariste Ndayishimiye	President	58	June 2020	6.3
Tanzania	Samia Suluhu Hassan	President	66	March 2021	5.5
Kenya	William Ruto	President	59	September 2022	4.1
Mauritius	Navin Ramgoolam	Prime Minister	79	November 2024	1.9
Mozambique	Daniel Chapo	President	49	January 2025	1.7
Malawi	Peter Mutharika	President	86	October 2025	1.0
Madagascar	Michael Randrianirina	President (transitional)	51–52	October 2025	1.0
Seychelles	Patrick Herminie	President	63	October 2025	0.9

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's current continuous tenure. Ethiopia and Mauritius are parliamentary: the prime minister leads and the president is ceremonial. Kiir led southern Sudan from 2005, before independence; Kagame was the de facto leader from 1994; Azali was also president in 1999–2006, Mutharika in 2014–20, and Ramgoolam prime minister in 1995–2000 and 2005–14. Randrianirina's exact birth date is unpublished.

The Takeaways

• Three sub-regions and one pattern: the Horn's southern flank (Ethiopia, South Sudan), the Great Lakes and the Swahili coast (Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, Mozambique, Malawi), and the Indian Ocean islands — with six of thirteen states landlocked and dependent on a neighbor's port, which structures the politics as oil structures the Gulf's.

• Strongmen and youth in the same year: Uganda's Museveni took a seventh term at 81 in May 2026 with his challenger under house arrest; Ethiopia's Abiy won 438 of 501 seats in June 2026 with no voting in Tigray; Rwanda's Kagame rules at 99%; Tanzania's election of October 2025 was the region's most violent — and Madagascar's government fell to Gen Z protests over water and power in October 2025, turned into a coup by the unit that would not fire.

• Ethiopia is the region's giant at war with itself — the Tigray war resumed in September 2026 and federal forces retook Mekelle on October 3-4, while the Fano insurgency in Amhara and the Oromo Liberation Army fight on — and its most likely interstate war: Abiy, sworn in for a second term on October 5, has broken relations with Eritrea, and his supermajority, the Red Sea access claim, and the GERD's completion give every incentive for a conflict with Asmara.

• Kenya is the region's economic anchor, a functioning democracy whose courts constrain its president, and the Gen Z uprising's first case: the 2024 finance-bill protests forced Ruto to withdraw his budget, and the 2027 election is his reckoning; Tanzania's CCM held power by force in October 2025.

• South Sudan has never held an election — its first is scheduled for December 2026 after two postponements — and Kiir's rivalry with Machar, the oil through Sudan's pipeline, and the Sudan war's spillover make it the region's most fragile state.

• Mozambique's disputed 2024 election produced months of protests and a new president, Chapo, in January 2025; the Cabo Delgado insurgency has stalled a $20 billion LNG project since 2021 and drawn Rwandan troops; Malawi is the region's poorest democracy.

• The Indian Ocean islands are the sea's front line and its fluid politics: Madagascar's military transition, the Comoros' abolished rotation and dynastic succession, Mauritius's alternation and its Chagos deal, the Seychelles' balance — and the ocean's ports and lanes courted by every navy.

• The Congo war divides the region into camps — Rwanda and M23 against Congo, Burundi, and the SADC force, Uganda ambiguous — and eastern Congo is the region's open wound: Goma and Bukavu held, Rwanda's backing sanctioned and undeterred, the June 2025 American accord partial.

• The East African Community is more integrated than most African blocs and less able to act on security; the Gulf's money (the UAE in the Horn's ports and Sudan's war), China's rail and ports (Mombasa, Bagamoyo), America's cut aid and kept partnership with Kenya, Turkey's drones, and Russia's arms are the outside powers.

• The region's 2026 lesson: the strongman cycle (seventh terms, supermajorities, sons in waiting) and the youth uprising (Kenya, Madagascar) ran through the same year and the same states — and the physical facts (the Nile's dam, the Cabo Delgado gas, the Congo's minerals, the islands' rising sea) set the stakes for both.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. Six of the region's thirteen states are landlocked and depend on a neighbor's port. Which pair are both landlocked?

A) Kenya and Uganda
B) Tanzania and Burundi
C) Mozambique and Rwanda
D) Ethiopia and Malawi

2. Why did Ethiopia and Eritrea break off diplomatic relations in October 2026?

A) Ethiopia signed a deal for sea access through Somaliland.
B) Ethiopia accused Eritrea of backing the Tigrayan forces it was fighting.
C) Eritrea withdrew from the peace agreement the two signed in 2018.
D) Eritrea closed its Red Sea ports to Ethiopian trade and halted fuel shipments bound for Addis Ababa.

3. How has the completion of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam changed the politics of the Nile?

A) It handed Sudan control of the Blue Nile's flow under a 2025 deal.
B) It cut the White Nile's flow to South Sudan and Uganda.
C) It ended Egypt's treaty-based control of the river.
D) It pushed Egypt and Ethiopia into a binding water-sharing treaty.

4. Kenya and Tanzania share a coast and the ports that serve the interior. What alternatives does the course say the two now represent?

A) Contested pluralism under fiscal stress, and dominant-party stability enforced by force
B) Federal government in Kenya, unitary rule in Tanzania
C) Aid-funded growth in Kenya, gas-funded growth in Tanzania
D) A presidential system in Kenya, a parliamentary one in Tanzania

5. What do Kenya and Malawi have in common that sets them apart on the mainland?

A) Both are landlocked and ship their trade through Tanzania's ports
B) Both abolished presidential term limits so their presidents could run again
C) Their courts have annulled a presidential election, and power has changed hands at the ballot box
D) Both have been governed by the same party since independence, despite multiparty elections

6. Where do Rwanda, Burundi, and Uganda stand in the war in eastern Congo?

A) All three back Congo's army against M23
B) Rwanda and Uganda openly back the M23 rebels, while Burundi has stayed neutral throughout
C) Burundi backs the M23 rebels against Congo, Rwanda mediates alongside Qatar and the United States, and Uganda has withdrawn its troops
D) Rwanda backs the M23 rebels, Burundi fights them, and Uganda's role is ambiguous

7. Which two rulers are positioning a son to succeed them?

A) Kagame of Rwanda and Ndayishimiye of Burundi
B) Museveni of Uganda and Azali of Comoros
C) Samia of Tanzania and Chapo of Mozambique
D) Mutharika of Malawi and Herminie of Seychelles

8. Why does South Sudan's oil revenue depend on its northern neighbor?

A) Its oil is piped out through Sudan, whose war has cut the flow
B) Sudan buys all of its crude
C) Sudan's army holds the oil fields
D) Sudanese companies own the export licenses under the terms of independence in 2011

9. What has stalled TotalEnergies' $20 billion onshore gas project in northern Mozambique?

A) A fall in world gas prices.
B) A border dispute with Tanzania over the offshore Rovuma fields.
C) Protests after the disputed 2024 election, which shut down the north.
D) An Islamist insurgency in Cabo Delgado province.

10. What turned Madagascar's 2025 youth protests into a change of government?

A) An elite army unit refused to fire and took power
B) A snap election called to calm the streets, which the opposition won
C) Strikes that shut the ports and forced the president to resign in favor of his deputy
D) African Union mediators, who persuaded the president to step down and hand power to a civilian interim government

11. What would the 2024-25 Chagos agreement do?

A) Give India a naval base on the islands.
B) Make the Chagos Islands an independent state.
C) Return the islands to Mauritius, with Britain keeping the Diego Garcia base on a 99-year lease.
D) Hand the islands to Seychelles, which would keep the Diego Garcia base open to Britain.

12. Which outside power does the course call the region's most active?

A) Turkey
B) The United Arab Emirates
C) The United States
D) China, the largest lender and builder

13. Which of the region's states does Freedom House rate Free?

A) Kenya and Malawi
B) Only Mauritius and Seychelles
C) Kenya, Mauritius, and Seychelles
D) Mauritius, Seychelles, Kenya, and Malawi

14. What do Uganda, Rwanda, and Burundi have in common on minimum wages?

A) Each sets wages by sector only
B) Each indexes its minimum to inflation
C) All three follow an East African Community wage floor
D) Each legal minimum is decades old and worth almost nothing, so none is in effect

15. What does the course see as the region's defining tension in 2025-26?

A) Aging strongmen extending their rule, against a young majority whose protests forced one president to reverse course and toppled another
B) A wave of military coups across the mainland
C) Chinese debt, which has pushed every mainland state into default
D) An Islamist insurgency spreading south from Somalia through Kenya and Tanzania into northern Mozambique, which every state now treats as its main threat

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. D 2. B 3. C 4. A 5. C 6. D 7. B 8. A 9. D 10. A 11. C 12. B 13. B 14. D 15. A

Central & Southern Africa

Figures current as of October 2026

Central and Southern Africa — South Africa, the Congo, the Sahel juntas, Angola, Zambia, and their neighbors: leaders, governments, economies, minerals, and the conflicts of 2025-26.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: Three Zones and One Interior

Goal: Establish the geography, the mineral economy, the Russia-China-West contest, and the disputes that recur.

Covers the Sahel, the Congo basin, and the south; the copper-cobalt-gold economy; the coup belt; and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — South Africa

Goal: Profile the continent's southern anchor in its own module.

Covers the African National Congress's loss of its majority, the coalition government, the dispute with Washington, and the structural crises.

MODULE 3 — The Democratic Republic of the Congo

Goal: Profile the continent's mineral heart and its open war in its own module.

Covers Tshisekedi's government, the rebel occupation of the east, the minerals-for-security deals, the 2026 Ebola outbreak, and the 2028 question.

MODULE 4 — The Sahel Juntas: Mali, Burkina Faso & Niger

Goal: Profile the three states that expelled the West and formed their own alliance.

Covers Goïta, Traoré, and Tiani; the Alliance of Sahel States; Russia's Africa Corps; and the jihadist war they have not won.

MODULE 5 — Chad & the Central African Republic

Goal: Profile the two states between the Sahel and the Congo.

Covers Chad's dynasty and Sudan's spillover, and the Central African Republic as Russia's African client.

MODULE 6 — The Republic of the Congo & Angola (the Oil States)

Goal: Profile the two Atlantic oil states.

Covers Sassou Nguesso's fifth term and Angola's turn to the West and the Lobito corridor.

MODULE 7 — The Southern Interior: Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho & Eswatini

Goal: Profile the six states of the southern cone.

Covers Zambia's re-election, Zimbabwe's term extension to 2030, Botswana's alternation, Namibia's first female president, and the two kingdoms.

MODULE 8 — The Alliance Map: The Southern African Development Community, the Sahel Alliance, Russia's Corps, China's Mines & the Western Counter

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's blocs.

Covers the Southern African Development Community, the Alliance of Sahel States, Russia, China, the US and EU, and the Gulf.

MODULE 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers the Congo war, the Sahel's unwon war, Sudan's spillover, the mineral contest, Zimbabwe's succession, and South Africa's coalition.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

Every armed group, party, institution, and abbreviation the modules name is defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country each one belongs to or concerns, or how many of the fifteen when it spans several; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Parties and Movements

Country	Name	Who or what
South Africa	ANC (African National Congress)	The liberation movement that has governed South Africa since 1994.
South Africa	DA (Democratic Alliance)	South Africa's liberal party, long the ANC's main opponent and since 2024 its largest coalition partner.
South Africa	Government of National Unity	The ten-party coalition formed in June 2024 after the ANC lost its majority.
South Africa	EFF (Economic Freedom Fighters)	Julius Malema's radical-left party, founded in 2013 after his expulsion from the ANC.
South Africa	MK (uMkhonto weSizwe)	Jacob Zuma's party, named for the ANC's former armed wing ('Spear of the Nation').
Angola	MPLA (Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola)	The Soviet- and Cuban-backed independence movement that has governed Angola since 1975.
Angola	UNITA (National Union for the Total Independence of Angola)	The US- and South African-backed rebel movement of Angola's 1975-2002 civil war, now the main opposition party.
Zimbabwe	ZANU-PF (Zimbabwe African National Union–Patriotic Front)	Zimbabwe's ruling party since 1980, formed when Robert Mugabe's ZANU (Zimbabwe African National Union) absorbed its liberation-war rival in 1987.
Zimbabwe	Citizens Coalition for Change	Zimbabwe's main opposition party, founded by Nelson Chamisa in 2022.
Namibia	SWAPO (South West Africa People's Organisation)	The liberation movement that has governed Namibia since independence in 1990.
Zambia	United Party for National Development	Hakainde Hichilema's party, in power since 2021.
Botswana	Umbrella for Democratic Change; Botswana Democratic Party	The opposition coalition led by Duma Boko, and the party that governed from independence in 1966 until 2024.
Congo (Brazzaville)	Congolese Party of Labour	Sassou Nguesso's party, the former Marxist single party.
Lesotho	Revolution for Prosperity	Sam Matekane's party.

Armed Groups

Country	Name	Who or what
Congo (Kinshasa)	M23 (March 23 Movement)	Rebel group of Congolese Tutsi backed by Rwanda, named for a March 23, 2009 peace deal it says Congo broke.
Congo (Kinshasa)	Alliance Fleuve Congo (Congo River Alliance)	The political coalition, led by Corneille Nangaa, through which M23 administers the territory it holds.
Congo (Kinshasa)	ADF (Allied Democratic Forces)	Islamist rebel group of Ugandan origin based in eastern Congo and aligned with the Islamic State since 2019.
Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger	JNIM (Group for the Support of Islam and Muslims)	Al-Qaeda's Sahel coalition, formed in 2017 (from its Arabic name, Jama'at Nusrat al-Islam wal-Muslimin).
Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger	Islamic State Sahel	The Islamic State's branch in the three Sahel states, a rival of JNIM.
Mali	Azawad Liberation Front	Alliance of Tuareg separatist groups in northern Mali (Azawad is their name for the north), formed in 2024.
Four of the 15	Africa Corps (formerly Wagner)	Russia's state-run military force in Africa, which took over the Wagner Group's mercenary operations after 2023; it protects the juntas of Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and the government of the Central African Republic.
Sudan, Chad	RSF (Rapid Support Forces)	Sudanese paramilitary force grown out of Darfur's Janjaweed militias, at war with Sudan's army since April 2023.
Chad, Nigeria	Boko Haram	Jihadist movement founded in northeastern Nigeria in 2002, whose insurgency has spread around Lake Chad.

Institutions and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
Nine of the 15	SADC (Southern African Development Community)	Sixteen-member southern African bloc, headquartered in Gaborone, with a free-trade area and a mutual defense pact.
Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger	AES (Alliance of Sahel States)	Confederation of the three Sahel juntas, formed in 2024, with a joint force, a shared passport, and Russian backing.
Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger	ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States)	West Africa's regional bloc.
All 15	African Union	The continental body of 55 states, based in Addis Ababa.
All 15	Freedom House	US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free on political rights and civil liberties.
All 15	V-Dem (Varieties of Democracy)	Research institute in Sweden whose regime classes run from closed autocracy to liberal democracy.
Zambia, Congo (Brazzaville)	IMF (International Monetary Fund)	Lender to governments in currency and debt crises; its loans come with policy conditions.
South Africa, Zambia	G20 (Group of Twenty)	Forum of 19 large economies, the EU, and the African Union.
South Africa	BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)	Bloc of large emerging economies named for its first five members — South Africa joined in 2011 — and enlarged at its 2023 Johannesburg summit to include Egypt, Ethiopia, Iran, and the United Arab Emirates, among others.
South Africa, Lesotho	AGOA (African Growth and Opportunity Act)	The US law of 2000 granting duty-free access to eligible African exports.
South Africa	ICJ (International Court of Justice)	The UN's court for disputes between states, in The Hague, where South Africa brought a genocide case against Israel in December 2023.

Country	Name	Who or what
Congo (Kinshasa)	Washington Accords; Doha Framework	The December 2025 peace accords between Congo and Rwanda, signed with President Trump, and the November 2025 framework agreement between Kinshasa and M23, mediated by Qatar.
Three of the 15	Lobito Corridor	The US- and EU-backed railway linking the copper belt of Congo and Zambia to Angola's Atlantic port of Lobito.
Six of the 15	CFA (African Financial Community) franc	The currency of 14 mostly former French colonies, in a West African and a Central African zone (the second's initials stand for Financial Cooperation in Central Africa), pegged to the euro and guaranteed by the French treasury.

Places, Terms, and Abbreviations

Country	Name	Who or what
Congo (Kinshasa)	DRC (Democratic Republic of the Congo)	Also called Congo-Kinshasa; distinct from its western neighbor, the Republic of the Congo, or Congo-Brazzaville.
Central African Republic	CAR (Central African Republic)	Landlocked state between Chad and Congo whose government depends on Russian forces.
Region-wide	Sahel	The semi-arid belt south of the Sahara; here, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad.
Region-wide	UAE (United Arab Emirates)	Gulf federation of seven emirates, the buyer of much of the region's gold and the RSF's supplier.
Congo (Kinshasa)	The Kivus	North and South Kivu, the eastern Congo provinces on the Rwandan and Burundian borders; Goma and Bukavu are their capitals.
All 15	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year.
South Africa	CPI (consumer price index)	The standard measure of inflation.
South Africa	VAT (value-added tax)	A sales tax collected at each stage of production.
South Africa	'State capture'	South Africans' term for the systematic looting of state institutions under President Jacob Zuma (2009-18).
South Africa	Phala Phala	Ramaphosa's game farm.
South Africa	Eskom; Transnet	South Africa's state electricity company and its state freight-rail and ports company.
Zimbabwe	ZiG (Zimbabwe Gold)	The gold-backed currency introduced in 2024, the latest of several since the 2000s collapse.
Zimbabwe	Gukurahundi	The 1983-87 massacres of Ndebele civilians in Matabeleland by an army brigade under Mugabe.
Chad	Zaghawa	The Déby family's ethnic group, which straddles the Chad-Sudan border.
Botswana	Kgotla	The traditional village assembly, the model for consensus in Botswana's politics.
Eswatini	Tinkhundla	Eswatini's system of local constituencies, in which candidates stand as individuals because parties are banned.

Module 1 — Foundations

Three Zones and One Interior



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Jason Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters*; Institute for Security Studies (Pretoria); Africa Center for Strategic Studies

1a. Three Zones

• **The Sahel** — Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Chad: the belt below the Sahara where a decade-long jihadist war, six coups and military takeovers since 2020, the expulsion of France and the US, and the arrival of Russia have produced a bloc of juntas hostile to their coastal neighbors and to the West.

• **The Congo basin** — the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Republic of the Congo, and the Central African Republic: the continent's mineral heart and its most contested ground, where the DRC's east is under rebel occupation, the CAR is a Russian client, and Brazzaville is a 29-year personalist state.

• **The south** — South Africa, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, and Eswatini: the continent's most industrialized and, outside Zimbabwe and Eswatini, most democratic sub-region, anchored by South Africa's economy and the Southern African Development Community.

1b. The Mineral Economy

This is the region that supplies the world's energy transition: over 70% of its cobalt (Congo), a large share of its copper (Congo, Zambia), platinum (South Africa), lithium (Zimbabwe), uranium (Niger, Namibia), diamonds (Botswana, Angola, Namibia, Congo), and gold from every Sahel state. The minerals are the reason outside powers compete here — China's dominance of Congolese cobalt and copper, the American- and European-backed Lobito corridor to break it, Russia's gold-for-security deals with the juntas, the UAE's gold trade — and the reason the region's wars are fought where they are fought: the Kivus, the Sahel's goldfields, the Congo-Zambia copper belt.

1c. The Coup Belt and the Democratic South

The region contains both the continent's densest concentration of military rule — Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and, by inheritance, the CAR and Congo-Brazzaville — and its most consistent democracies: South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, and Zambia, where elections decide who governs — Zambia's and Botswana's voters have removed ruling parties, and South Africa's took away the ANC's majority. The dividing line runs roughly through the Congo basin. North of it, the state has collapsed or been seized; south of it, the state holds, with Zimbabwe and Eswatini as the exceptions; the Congo itself, its east under occupation, is where the two meet. Understanding why the same continent produces both outcomes within a few hundred kilometers is the course's underlying question.

1d. The Membership Map

• **The Southern African Development Community (SADC, 9 in this course):** South Africa, Angola, Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho, Eswatini, plus the DRC — the south's bloc, which deployed and withdrew a force in Congo.

• **The Alliance of Sahel States (AES):** Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger, the juntas' confederation formed in 2024, out of ECOWAS since January 2025, with a joint force and a shared Russian patron.

• **Under military or coup-derived rule (5):** Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and Zimbabwe (a 2017 coup's beneficiary); the CAR's elected government survives under Russian protection.

• **Rated Free (3):** South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia — no Sahel or Congo basin state. Ten are Not Free; Zambia and Lesotho are Partly Free.

• **Referenced but not profiled:** the neighbors whose wars and trade reach in — Rwanda, Uganda, Burundi, Tanzania, Mozambique, Malawi, Sudan, and the Gulf of Guinea states.

1e. The Disputes That Recur

Five issues run through the course. The war in eastern Congo, where Rwandan-backed M23 holds Goma and Bukavu (Modules 3, 8, 9). The Sahel's jihadist war, which the juntas have not won and which has spread to Chad, Niger, and the coast (Modules 4, 5, 9). Sudan's war, supplied through Chad and spilling into the CAR (Modules 5, 9). The contest for minerals among China, the US and EU, Russia, and the Gulf (Modules 3, 6, 7, 8, 9). And the pattern of leaders extending their own rule — Goïta through an appointed parliament, Déby and Touadéra by amendment, Sassou by election, Mnangagwa by an amendment (Modules 4, 5, 6, 7, 9).

1f. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office (and, in Lesotho, where the prime minister leads, the king's), the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religion with its share, the main ethnic groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026 and land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or, where there is none, from surveys and published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states — one rate for the six franc-zone states, because the CFA franc is pegged to the euro, and South Africa's rate for Namibia, Lesotho, and Eswatini, whose currencies are pegged one-to-one to the rand. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. The Who's Who before this module defines every group, party, and abbreviation the profiles name, and the Key Points page ranks the fifteen leaders by time in office, from Mswati's 40 years on Eswatini's throne to Namibia's president.

Module 2 — South Africa

The Continent's Southern Anchor



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Institute for Security Studies (Pretoria); Daily Maverick; Ferial Haffajee's political analysis

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Cyril Ramaphosa, 73 — in office since February 2018 (8.6 years); second full term since June 2024
System	Parliamentary republic; parliament elects the president
Freedom House	Free
Population	65.5 million (2026)
Land area	1,213,090 km² (468,380 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 85%; traditional African religion 8% (2022 census)
People	Black African 81%, Coloured 8%, White 7%, Indian or Asian 3%; the largest home languages are isiZulu (24%) and isiXhosa (16%) (2022 census); median age 30; 70% urban
Minimum wage	30.23 rand an hour from March 2026, farm and domestic workers included; about 5,240 a month on a 40-hour week ($314 at 16.68 rand = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Dutch settlement from 1652 and British conquest produced a state built on racial hierarchy, formalized as apartheid after 1948 and dismantled after decades of struggle, international sanctions, and negotiation, with Nelson Mandela's election in 1994. The African National Congress governed with majorities for 30 years through the Mandela, Mbeki, and Zuma presidencies — the last marked by 'state capture' corruption that Cyril Ramaphosa promised to reverse. In May 2024 the ANC fell to 40% and formed a

Government of National Unity with the liberal Democratic Alliance and eight smaller parties, the most significant political shift since 1994. South Africa chaired the G20 in 2025 and has been in open dispute with the Trump administration.

Current leadership: President Cyril Ramaphosa of the African National Congress, a former union leader and mining magnate, leads the Government of National Unity. His second and final term ends in 2029, and the ANC's succession contest is underway. The coalition has survived budget fights and a 2025 clash over the DA's role. In May 2026 the Constitutional Court revived impeachment proceedings over the 2020 theft of about $580,000 in cash from Ramaphosa's Phala Phala game farm, setting aside Parliament's 2022 rejection of a panel report that found he had a case to answer; a court order has paused the impeachment committee while Ramaphosa challenges the report, and judgment was reserved in September. Municipal elections on November 4, 2026 are the coalition's first test at the polls.

Government structure: The 1996 constitution, one of the world's most liberal: a proportional-representation parliament, nine provinces, an independent Constitutional Court that has ruled against every president, a free press, and strong institutions weakened but not broken by the Zuma-era 'state capture.' Jacob Zuma's new MK party, which took 15% in 2024, and Julius Malema's Economic Freedom Fighters are the populist opposition.

Economy and trade: A roughly $480 billion economy, sub-Saharan Africa's most industrialized and diversified, built on mining (platinum — the world's largest producer — gold, coal, iron ore, chrome, manganese), manufacturing (cars, chemicals), finance (Johannesburg's exchange is Africa's largest), agriculture, and services. Exports are led by platinum-group metals, gold, coal, iron ore, cars, and fruit; imports by oil, machinery, vehicles, and electronics. Top trading partners: China (largest), the US (strained by 2025 tariffs and the loss of AGOA trade preferences), Germany, India, and Japan. Unemployment, rolling power cuts (eased since 2024), and failing rail and ports are the structural constraints; the rand and the stock market have rallied under the coalition government.

Closest partners: The Southern African Development Community, which South Africa anchors; the BRICS, which gave it a platform it used carefully; China; the EU and UK; and, historically, the US, though the relationship is now the region's most strained. Ramaphosa's foreign policy has been non-aligned in principle and pro-Global South in practice — Russia, Palestine, and the ICJ genocide case against Israel.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The United States, under an administration that has cut aid, expelled South Africa's ambassador, and admitted white Afrikaners as refugees over a land law and the Israel case — the sharpest US-South Africa rupture since apartheid. Domestically, inequality among the world's highest, crime, corruption, collapsing municipalities, and the coalition's fragility. In Congo, the deaths of South African soldiers at Goma in 2025 and SADC's withdrawal exposed the limits of its regional power.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography and jobs	fertility 2.2; unemployment 32% (60% among the young) — the world's highest measured	The failure the whole profile rests on
GDP	Africa's largest with Egypt and Nigeria by turns; per head ~$6,500; growth ~1.5% (2026), lifted by the gold and platinum windfall	Mining 8%
Prices and rates	CPI ~3.5%; the Reserve Bank at 7.0% (the 3% target adopted 2025); the rand strong on gold	The credible central bank
Public finance	Debt ~75% of GDP; a deficit ~4.5%; Eskom's and Transnet's debts the state's largest liabilities; the 2025 budget's VAT fight that nearly broke the coalition	The state-owned enterprises' hole

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Military	~$3 billion (0.7% of GDP); 70,000 active	A regional power without a usable force
Regime (V-Dem)	Electoral democracy	Freedom House 79/100
Energy and logistics	Eskom's load-shedding ended in 2024-25 after a decade; coal 80% of power; the renewables auction and the private generation boom; Transnet's rail and ports (Richards Bay, Durban) the export bottleneck	The infrastructure recovery's test
Position	BRICS's first African member, joined by Egypt and Ethiopia in 2024; Washington's G20 boycott; the American tariff (12.5% since July 2026); the Lobito and Beira corridors' competitor	Africa's democracy most exposed to the American turn

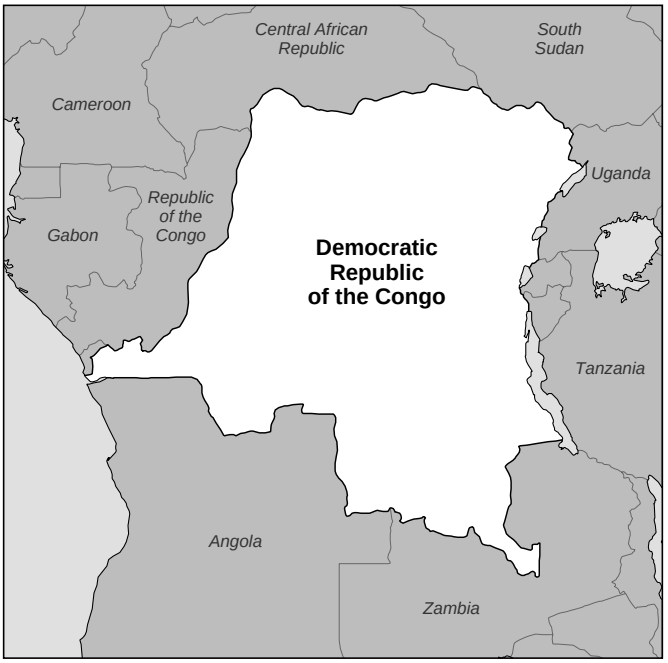
In depth — the question: Whether a coalition of a liberation party and its liberal opposition, governing a country with state enterprises that swallowed a decade, can deliver enough by the November 2026 local elections and the ANC's 2027 succession to keep the populists (Malema's EFF; Zuma's MK) from the majority the ANC lost.

2b. The Coalition Experiment

The 2024 election produced something new in Africa's largest democracy: a governing coalition between a liberation movement and the party of its historic opponents. The Government of National Unity has held for two years, delivered market confidence, and governed better on power and infrastructure than the ANC alone, while fighting over foreign policy.

Module 3 — The Democratic Republic of the Congo

The Continent's Mineral Heart and Its Open War



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Jason Stearns, *Dancing in the Glory of Monsters*; Congo Research Group; International Crisis Group

3a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Félix Tshisekedi, 63 — in office since January 2019 (7.7 years); second term since January 2024
System	Semi-presidential republic; the east is under rebel occupation
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	116.5 million (2026)
Land area	2,267,050 km² (875,310 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 93% (Catholic 30%, Protestant 27%, other churches 37%); Muslim 1% (2014 survey; no census since 1984)
People	More than 200 groups, mostly Bantu; the Mongo, Luba, Kongo, and Mangbetu-Azande together about 45% (estimates); median age 17; 49% urban
Minimum wage	21,500 Congolese francs a day from January 2026, about 559,000 a month over 26 working days ($242 at about 2,311 francs = $1, a market rate); widely unpaid in the informal economy

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: King Leopold II's Congo Free State (1885-1908) killed millions; Belgian rule ended in 1960 with Patrice Lumumba's murder and Mobutu Sese Seko's 32-year kleptocracy. The 1994 Rwandan genocide spilled into Congo and triggered two wars (1996-97, 1998-2003) that drew in nine countries and killed over five million — Africa's deadliest conflict. Joseph Kabila ruled from 2001 to 2019; Félix Tshisekedi succeeded him in a deal that gave Congo its first peaceful transfer. The Rwandan-backed M23 rebellion, revived in 2021, seized Goma in January 2025 and Bukavu in February.

Current leadership: President Félix Tshisekedi was re-elected in December 2023 with 73% in a chaotic vote the opposition rejected. Constitutionally barred from a third term in 2028, he has floated constitutional revision, provoking accusations he intends to stay; in June 2026 the Senate unanimously passed a bill to amend the constitution that would allow a referendum opening the way to a third term. Prime Minister Judith Suminwa, the country's first female premier, manages the government. Former president Joseph Kabila, accused of backing the rebels, was sentenced to death in absentia in 2025. An Ebola outbreak declared on May 15, 2026, centered on Ituri and North Kivu, had by October 2 become the deadliest in the country's history, with about 8,300 confirmed cases and 4,018 deaths in seven provinces.

Government structure: A 2006 constitution with a directly elected president, a prime minister, a bicameral parliament, and 26 provinces — on paper. In practice the state does not control the east, where M23 and its Alliance Fleuve Congo administer Goma, Bukavu, and much of North and South Kivu, and where over 100 armed groups operate; the ADF Islamist rebels kill civilians in Ituri; and the army is corrupt and ineffective. Elections are disorganized and the judiciary politicized.

Economy and trade: A roughly $75 billion economy — one of the world's poorest per capita despite mineral wealth estimated in the trillions: the world's largest cobalt producer (over 70%), a top copper producer, and a source of gold, tin, tantalum, diamonds, and coltan. Exports are led by copper, cobalt, gold, and diamonds; imports by fuel, machinery, food, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China (dominant in mining and trade), the UAE (gold), South Africa, Zambia, and Belgium. A 2025 US-Congo minerals-for-security framework and the Lobito corridor to Angola's coast are the Western counter to Chinese dominance.

Closest partners: The United States, under a 2025 minerals-for-security framework and Washington's mediation of a Congo-Rwanda accord; Qatar, which mediates with M23; the EU; South Africa and SADC; Burundi, whose troops fight M23; Angola, a mediator; Uganda, an ambiguous partner; and China, the dominant mining investor and trade partner.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Rwanda and M23, in the war that has defined the east for three decades, with Rwanda's sanctioned but continuing support. The Washington and Doha processes have produced agreements and a ceasefire that has not held, and an August 2026 roadmap for talks with M23 has not stopped the fighting in Masisi and the South Kivu highlands. Domestically, Tshisekedi's third-term ambitions, Kabila's opposition, and the ADF. Externally, the mineral-smuggling routes through Rwanda and Uganda that fund the war.

3b. The East Under Occupation

M23's 2025 offensive changed the war's nature: a rebel group that had previously raided now governs — collecting taxes, appointing officials, and running the region's mineral trade through Rwanda. Congo's army, SADC's force, and the UN mission all failed to stop it. The east is, in practice, a Rwandan protectorate, and the question is whether the international deals ratify that or reverse it.

Module 4 — The Sahel Juntas

Mali, Burkina Faso & Niger



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Sahel reports; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project; Africa Center for Strategic Studies

4a. Mali

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	General Assimi Goïta, transitional president, 42 — in office since May 2021 (5.4 years); led the August 2020 coup; five-year renewable mandate since July 2025; his own defense minister since May 2026
System	Military junta; political parties dissolved in May 2025
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	25.9 million (2026)
Land area	1,220,190 km² (471,120 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 96%; Christian 2% (2022 census)
People	Bambara 36%, Fula 13%, Senufo 9%, Malinke 8%, Soninke 8%, Dogon 6% (2022 census); median age 17; 48% urban
Minimum wage	40,000 CFA francs a month since 2016 ($69 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Heir to the medieval Mali and Songhai empires, Mali was French until 1960, a one-party state until 1991, and then a democracy held up as a model until a 2012 Tuareg rebellion and jihadist takeover of the north triggered a coup and a French intervention that lasted nine years. Coups in 2020 and 2021 brought Colonel Assimi Goïta to power; he expelled France and the UN, brought in Russia's Wagner Group (now

Africa Corps), and retook the northern rebel stronghold of Kidal in 2023. Mali left ECOWAS in January 2025 and co-founded the Alliance of Sahel States.

Current leadership: General Assimi Goïta was granted his mandate by the junta-appointed transitional parliament — no election has been held or scheduled. Defense minister Sadio Camara was killed in a coordinated jihadist and separatist offensive on April 25, 2026, the largest in nearly fifteen years. Prime Minister Abdoulaye Maïga, a general, replaced a civilian premier who had criticized the delays. Party leaders were detained or exiled.

Government structure: Rule by decree under a 2023 constitution that concentrated power in the presidency. The transitional charter's election deadlines have passed repeatedly. Civil society, media, and opposition are suppressed; the Tuareg separatists of the north and the jihadists of JNIM and Islamic State Sahel control large areas.

Economy and trade: A roughly $22 billion economy built on gold (Africa's fourth-largest producer, over 80% of exports), cotton, and livestock, with most of the population in subsistence farming. Exports are gold and cotton; imports are fuel, food, machinery, and arms. Top trading partners: the UAE and Switzerland (gold), Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, and China. The junta has seized control of the gold sector — detaining foreign executives, taking a stake in Barrick's Loulo-Gounkoto mine. Mali is landlocked and dependent on Senegalese and Ivorian ports.

Closest partners: Russia, whose Africa Corps (formerly Wagner) is the junta's security partner and whose price is gold and mining concessions; Burkina Faso and Niger in the AES; Turkey as a drone supplier; China; the Gulf states; and Togo and Senegal as sea outlets.

Principal rivalries and disputes: JNIM and the Islamic State, which the junta has not defeated and which have expanded: JNIM has blockaded Bamako's fuel routes since September 2025, declared a full blockade in April 2026, and overran the army camp at Dioura on September 10, killing more than 100 soldiers. The Tuareg separatists of the Azawad Liberation Front, who allied with the jihadists after the junta broke a 2015 peace deal, took Kidal in April 2026 and withdrew on October 6, when the army and the Africa Corps retook it. Beyond them: Algeria, over the north and a 2025 drone shootdown, though the two began mending ties in September 2026; the coastal ECOWAS states; and the West, which the junta expelled. Domestically, the dissolved parties and the question of what Goïta's 'mandate' means.

4b. Burkina Faso

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Captain Ibrahim Traoré, transitional president, 38 — in office since September 2022 (4.0 years); took power in a September 2022 coup; transition extended to 2029
System	Military junta; political parties dissolved in January 2026
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	24.6 million (2026)
Land area	273,600 km² (105,640 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 64%; Christian 26% (Catholic 20%); traditional religions 9% (2019 census)
People	Mossi 54%, Fula 7%, Gurunsi 6%, Bissa 5%, Gurma 5% (estimates); median age 19; 34% urban
Minimum wage	45,000 CFA francs a month since January 2024, excluding farm workers ($77 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Upper Volta became Burkina Faso ('land of upright people') under Thomas Sankara, the Marxist captain who ruled from 1983 until his assassination in 1987 by Blaise Compaoré, who then governed for 27 years until a 2014 uprising. Jihadist violence spreading from Mali after 2015 made Burkina the epicenter of the Sahel's war — over 40% of the territory is outside state control and millions are displaced. Two coups in 2022 brought Captain Ibrahim Traoré, at 34 the world's youngest head of state, who expelled France and aligned with Russia.

Current leadership: Captain Ibrahim Traoré has survived several coup attempts and built a personality cult that extends across Africa's youth as a pan-Africanist icon. Prime Minister Rimtalba Jean Emmanuel Ouédraogo manages the government.

Government structure: A transitional charter amended in 2024 to extend Traoré's rule and make him eligible to run. Critics are conscripted or disappeared, and the state controls over half the territory at best. Burkina left ECOWAS in 2025 and co-founded the AES.

Economy and trade: A roughly $22 billion economy built on gold (the largest export, mined by Western and now Russian companies), cotton, and livestock, with most of the population in subsistence agriculture. Exports are gold and cotton; imports are fuel, food, and machinery. Top partners: Switzerland and the UAE (gold), Côte d'Ivoire, Togo, and China. The junta has nationalized mines and created a state gold company; Russia's presence is paid in concessions.

Closest partners: Russia, whose Africa Corps has a smaller presence than in Mali but whose backing is total; Mali and Niger in the AES; Turkey; China; and Togo as its sea outlet. Traoré has become the AES's public face; Burkina broke off diplomatic relations with France in June 2026.

Principal rivalries and disputes: JNIM, which controls or contests over 40% of the country, has massacred hundreds in single attacks, and besieges towns; the coastal states, especially Côte d'Ivoire, which the junta accuses of hosting its enemies; the West, expelled; and the internal threat of a counter-coup, several of which have been claimed foiled.

4c. Niger

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	General Abdourahamane Tiani, president, 61 to 66 (birth year reported as 1960, 1961, or 1964) — in office since July 2023 (3.2 years); took power in a July 2023 coup; five-year transitional term since March 2025
System	Military junta; political parties dissolved in March 2025
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	28.8 million (2026)
Land area	1,266,700 km² (489,080 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 99% (2012 census)
People	Hausa 55%, Zarma-Songhai 21%, Tuareg 9%, Fula 9%, Kanuri 5% (2001 census); median age 17; 18% urban
Minimum wage	42,000 CFA francs a month from January 2026, up from 30,047 ($72 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent from France in 1960, Niger alternated between military and civilian rule, with coups in 1974, 1996, 1999, and 2010, and became the West's last Sahel partner after Mali's and Burkina's turns — hosting French troops and the largest US drone base in Africa. In July 2023 General

Abdourahamane Tiani, the presidential guard commander, overthrew President Mohamed Bazoum. ECOWAS threatened intervention and did not act; France and the US were expelled by 2024.

Current leadership: General Abdourahamane Tiani was sworn in under a charter that made him general of the army. Bazoum remains detained in the presidential palace. Prime Minister Ali Lamine Zeine, an economist, manages the government. On the night of August 28-29, 2026, mutinous soldiers attacked the airport air base, the state broadcaster, and the presidential palace in Niamey; the presidential guard put the revolt down with help from Russia's Africa Corps, Algeria flew in fighter jets, the junta blamed France, and Tiani replaced his army chief in September.

Government structure: A 2025 transitional charter with no election scheduled. The constitution is suspended and media constrained. Niger expelled French, American, and EU forces and halted uranium exports to France. It left ECOWAS in 2025 and co-founded the AES.

Economy and trade: A roughly $20 billion economy, among the world's poorest, built on uranium (a top-ten producer, historically supplying France), oil (a Chinese-built pipeline to Benin's coast, disrupted by the post-coup border closure), gold, and subsistence agriculture. Exports are uranium, oil, and gold; imports are food, fuel, and machinery. Top partners: China (oil), the UAE, France (halted), Nigeria (closed border), and Togo. The junta nationalized the French uranium operation in 2025.

Closest partners: Russia's Africa Corps; Mali and Burkina Faso in the AES; Turkey; China, which operates its oil pipeline and refinery; Togo as its sea outlet; and Iran, with which it has discussed uranium.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The jihadists of both JNIM and Islamic State Sahel, who have killed hundreds of soldiers since the coup; Benin, over the closed border and the oil pipeline; Nigeria, over the border and ECOWAS; France, over uranium and the expulsion; and the detained Bazoum, whose fate is a diplomatic issue.

4d. The Alliance of Sahel States

Three juntas that took power promising to defeat jihadism, expelled the French and Americans who had failed to, brought in Russians who have not done better, and have formed a confederation. The AES is the most coherent anti-Western bloc on the continent, and it rests on a single unproven claim: that sovereignty and Russian partnership can win a war that international partnership lost. Three years in, the jihadists hold more territory than when the juntas took over, and the juntas have answered by extending their own rule. The bloc's coherence is real; its strategy has not yet worked.

Module 5 — Chad & the Central African Republic

Between the Sahel and the Congo



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Chad and CAR reports; The Sentry

5a. Chad

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Mahamat Idriss Déby, 42 — in office since April 2021 (5.5 years); installed by the army on his father's death; elected May 2024
System	Presidential republic, dynastic military rule in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	21.6 million (2026)
Land area	1,259,200 km² (486,180 sq mi)
Religion	Muslim 58%; Christian 34%; animist and other 8% (2009 census, the latest)
People	Sara 31%, Kanembu-Bornu-Buduma 10%, Arab 10%, and some 200 other groups (2015 survey); median age 17; 25% urban
Minimum wage	355 CFA francs an hour since 2011, about 60,000 a month ($103 at 582 francs = $1); farm workers 303 an hour

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A French colony until 1960, Chad was at civil war for most of its first three decades, with Libya intervening in the north. Idriss Déby seized power in 1990 and ruled for 30 years as a French and Western security partner against Boko Haram and Sahel jihadists, until he was killed at the front in 2021. His son Mahamat, a general, was installed by the army in violation of the constitution and crushed protests in 2022.

Current leadership: President Mahamat Idriss Déby won a 2024 election with 61% over his own prime minister and in 2025 pushed through a constitutional amendment extending presidential terms to seven years with no limit. Prime Minister Allamaye Halina manages the government. The Déby family has ruled for 35 years.

Government structure: A 2023 constitution; in practice the Zaghawa clan and the presidential guard hold power. Parties exist but the main opposition leader was killed in 2024 and another jailed in 2025. The military is the state's core.

Economy and trade: A roughly $14 billion economy dependent on oil (over 90% of exports, via a pipeline through Cameroon), cotton, livestock, and gum arabic, with most of the population in subsistence agriculture and pastoralism. Exports are oil, gold, and livestock; imports are food, fuel, and machinery. Top partners: China and the UAE (oil and gold), Cameroon (transit), and France. The UAE's use of Chadian territory to supply Sudan's RSF is the region's most consequential commercial-military link.

Closest partners: France, historically its closest partner — Chad hosted the last French base in the Sahel until expelling it in 2024-25 — and now a diversified set: the UAE, which funds the government; Russia, courted since 2024; Hungary, which deployed troops; Turkey; China; and Cameroon as its transit route.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Sudan's war, which has sent a million refugees into eastern Chad and provoked Sudanese army threats against Chadian airports; Boko Haram in the Lake Chad basin; the jihadists spreading from the Sahel; and the internal succession within the Déby clan and the Zaghawa.

5b. Central African Republic

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, 69 — in office since March 2016 (10.5 years); third term since March 2026
System	Presidential republic dependent on Russian security forces
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	5.70 million (2026)
Land area	622,980 km² (240,530 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 80%; Muslim 10% (2003 census, before the 2013-14 war displaced many Muslims)
People	Gbaya 29%, Banda 23%, Mandja 10%, Sara 8% (2003 census); median age 16; 45% urban
Minimum wage	29,000 CFA francs a month under a rate not revised since 1991 ($50 at 582 francs = $1); sources conflict, and enforcement is minimal

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent from France in 1960, the CAR endured Jean-Bédel Bokassa's self-coronation as emperor (1976-79), repeated coups, and a 2013 Muslim-led rebel takeover that triggered sectarian killings and a French intervention. Faustin-Archange Touadéra invited Russia's Wagner Group in 2018 to fight the rebels and protect his government.

Current leadership: President Faustin-Archange Touadéra, a former mathematics professor, won a third term in December 2025 after a 2023 referendum removed term limits. Prime Minister Félix Moloua manages the government. Touadéra is protected by Wagner-successor forces and advised by Russians at the presidency.

Government structure: The 2023 constitution extended terms to seven years. The state controls the capital and little else without Russian forces; rebel groups hold much of the periphery. Elections are held under Russian security; the UN peacekeeping mission remains.

Economy and trade: A roughly $3 billion economy, among the world's poorest, built on diamonds, gold, timber, and subsistence agriculture, with Russian Wagner-linked companies controlling significant mining and timber concessions as payment for security. Exports are diamonds, gold, and timber; imports are nearly everything. Top partners: China, Cameroon (transit), Russia, and the UAE. Most of the population depends on humanitarian aid.

Closest partners: Russia, whose Africa Corps is the state's security force — the clearest case of a Russian client state in Africa; Rwanda, which supplies troops; Cameroon as its transit route; Chad; China; and the UN mission, which coexists uneasily with the Russians.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The rebel coalitions of the periphery, some allied with the former president Bozizé; Sudan's war, which spills across the northeast with RSF and allied militias; Chad, over border incidents; and the West, which has sanctioned the Russian presence and cut aid.

5c. Sudan's Southern Spillover

Chad and the CAR are where Sudan's war reaches into this region. Chad is the RSF's supply corridor — Emirati flights land at Amdjarass and weapons cross the border — and the host of a million Darfuri refugees, which puts N'Djamena on one side of Sudan's war whether it wants to be or not. The CAR's northeast is a zone where RSF-allied militias, Sudanese refugees, and Central African rebels overlap, and where Russian forces on both sides of the border pursue different clients. The two states show how Sudan's war has become a regional one, and how the UAE's and Russia's competing networks extend across the Sahara.

Module 6 — The Republic of the Congo & Angola

The Atlantic Oil States



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Ricardo Soares de Oliveira, *Magnificent and Beggar Land: Angola Since the Civil War*

6a. Republic of the Congo

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Denis Sassou Nguesso, 82 — in office since October 1997 (28.9 years); also president 1979–92; fifth term since April 2026
System	Presidential republic, personalist in practice
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	6.64 million (2026)
Land area	341,500 km² (131,850 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 87% (revivalist and Protestant churches 56%, Catholic 24%); no religion 8%; Muslim 3% (2025 survey)
People	Kongo about 50%, Teke 16%, Mbochi 14% (2025 survey); median age 20; 71% urban
Minimum wage	70,400 CFA francs a month in the private sector from January 2025 ($121 at 582 francs = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: French Congo became independent in 1960 and a Marxist one-party state in 1969; Denis Sassou Nguesso first took power in 1979, lost the 1992 election, and returned in 1997 by winning a civil war with Angolan help. He has ruled since, winning elections in 2016 and 2021. Brazzaville is Africa's most oil-dependent capital after Malabo, and the Sassou family's wealth abroad has been the subject of French prosecutions.

Current leadership: President Denis Sassou Nguesso was declared re-elected to a fifth term with 95% on a reported 85% turnout in the March 15, 2026 election — after the main opposition boycotted, activists were arrested, a nationwide internet blackout was imposed on election day, and he was the only candidate permitted to campaign nationally. His son Denis Christel is a minister and presumed heir. Prime Minister Anatole Collinet Makosso manages the government.

Government structure: A 2015 constitution that removed age and term limits to allow Sassou's continued rule. The Congolese Party of Labour dominates; elections are managed; the family controls the oil revenue.

Economy and trade: A roughly $16 billion economy dependent on oil (over 80% of exports), timber, and a small manufacturing base, with high debt to China and traders. Exports are crude oil and timber; imports are food, machinery, and fuel. Top partners: China (the oil buyer and largest creditor), Italy, Spain, and India. Debt restructuring with China and the IMF has been recurring.

Closest partners: China; France, historically; Rwanda; Angola; and the Central African CFA zone.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The boycotting opposition and the exiled critics; the succession to a family that has held power for 42 of the last 47 years; and debt.

6b. Angola

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President João Lourenço, 72 — in office since September 2017 (9.0 years); second and final term ends 2027
System	Presidential republic under one-party dominance (the MPLA since 1975)
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	40.2 million (2026)
Land area	1,246,700 km² (481,350 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 79% (Catholic 44%, Protestant 35%); no religion 12% (2024 census)
People	Ovimbundu about 37%, Ambundu 25%, Bakongo 13%, mestiço (mixed) 2% (estimates); median age 18; 70% urban
Minimum wage	100,000 kwanzas a month since September 2025, 50,000 for micro-enterprises ($110 and $55 at 913 kwanzas = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Portugal's largest African colony won independence in 1975 and immediately fell into a 27-year civil war between the MPLA and UNITA, which ended with Jonas Savimbi's death in 2002. José Eduardo dos Santos ruled for 38 years, building a family fortune on oil; his successor João Lourenço prosecuted the dos Santos clan, opened the economy, and turned toward the US — hosting Biden in 2024 and the Lobito railway corridor project.

Current leadership: For President João Lourenço of the MPLA, the party's succession, and whether it holds power against a rising UNITA opposition, is the central question. Lourenço chaired the African Union in 2025 and mediated in Congo. He has filed to stay on as MPLA leader at the party's December 2026 congress, which would give him a hand in choosing his successor. Vice President Esperança da Costa is the first woman in the office.

Government structure: A 2010 constitution in which the leader of the party winning parliamentary elections becomes president; the MPLA won the 2022 election narrowly (51%) over UNITA in a vote the opposition contested. Institutions are stronger than under dos Santos but the party-state persists.

Economy and trade: A roughly $95 billion economy, Africa's second-largest oil producer (over 90% of exports), with diamonds, and a growing agricultural and logistics sector. Exports are crude oil, diamonds, and gas; imports are food, machinery, fuel products, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China (the largest oil buyer and creditor — Angola has been China's largest African debtor), India, the UAE, and the US. The Lobito Corridor is the region's most significant infrastructure project and a Western answer to Chinese dominance of the mineral trade.

Closest partners: The United States, courted under Lourenço; the EU; China, still the largest oil buyer and creditor despite Lourenço's diversification; the Gulf states; Portugal; and SADC and the African Union.

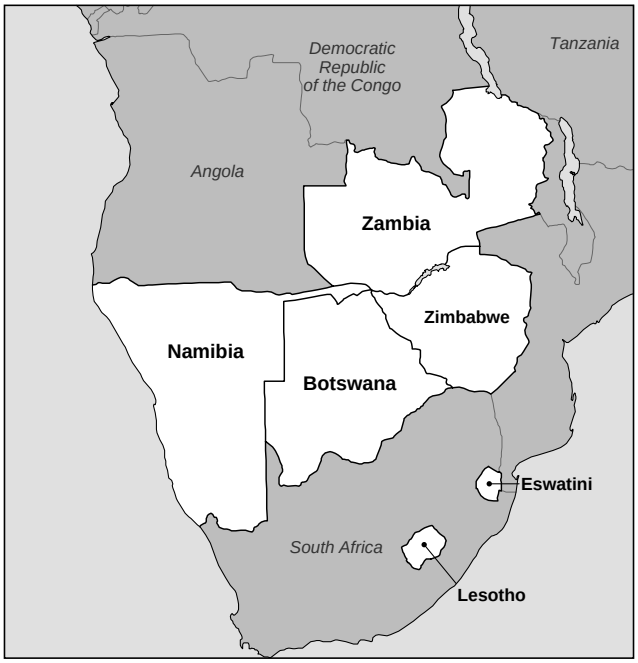
Principal rivalries and disputes: Angola has no adversaries. Its disputes are the 2027 succession and the contest between the MPLA and UNITA; the debt to China; oil dependence and decline; and the Cabinda enclave's low-level separatism.

6c. Two Oil States, Two Trajectories

Both states are Atlantic oil producers in the CFA and MPLA molds, and both were long-ruled personalist systems — Sassou since 1997, dos Santos for 38 years. They have diverged: Congo-Brazzaville has doubled down, with an 82-year-old winning a fifth term behind an internet blackout and a son in waiting; Angola has opened, with a president who prosecuted his predecessor's family, courted the West, built the region's most consequential railway, and will leave office in 2027. The Lobito corridor is the reason Angola matters far beyond its oil.

Module 7 — The Southern Interior

Zambia, Zimbabwe, Botswana, Namibia, Lesotho & Eswatini



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Institute for Security Studies; Afrobarometer; Mail & Guardian

7a. Zambia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Hakainde Hichilema, 64 — in office since August 2021 (5.1 years); second and final term began September 1, 2026
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	22.5 million (2026)
Land area	743,390 km² (287,020 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 98% (2022 census)
People	Bemba 25%, Tonga 15%, Chewa 9%, Lozi 7%, and dozens of smaller groups (2022 census); median age 19; 48% urban
Minimum wage	Sector minimums only, from January 2024: 1,487 kwacha a month basic for a general worker, 2,313 with required allowances ($75 and $116 at 19.9 kwacha = $1, a market rate); domestic workers 1,300

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Northern Rhodesia became independent in 1964 under Kenneth Kaunda, who built a one-party state on copper until a 1991 democratic transition. Voters have removed the ruling party three times — in 1991, 2011, and 2021, when Hakainde Hichilema defeated the incumbent at his sixth attempt.

Current leadership: President Hakainde Hichilema of the United Party for National Development won a second and final term on August 13, 2026 with 60.5% over Brian Mundubile in a race the opposition alleged was rigged, though the margin cleared the 50% threshold without a runoff; the Constitutional Court petition window has closed. He was declared re-elected on August 18; Mundubile was charged with treason after an election-night security operation.

Government structure: A constitution amended in 2016 to require an absolute majority. Two-term limit, unicameral National Assembly, and an independent judiciary that has ruled against presidents. Concerns have grown over media restrictions and prosecutions of opposition figures under Hichilema.

Economy and trade: A roughly $30 billion economy built on copper (Africa's second-largest producer, over 70% of exports) and cobalt, with agriculture (maize, tobacco) and tourism (Victoria Falls). Exports are copper, cobalt, and gemstones; imports are fuel, machinery, and fertilizer. Top trading partners: Switzerland and China (copper), Congo, South Africa, and the UAE. Zambia's 2020 default — the first African pandemic-era default — and its 2023-24 restructuring made it the test case for the G20 Common Framework; copper output is recovering, and the Lobito corridor offers an alternative to South African ports.

Closest partners: The IMF and Western creditors, after the landmark 2023-24 restructuring; China, its largest bilateral creditor and a major copper investor; the US and EU; the UAE; South Africa; and SADC.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Zambia has no adversaries. Its disputes are the contested 2026 election, the debt legacy, and copper's dependence on Chinese and Western investors.

7b. Zimbabwe

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Emmerson Mnangagwa, 84 — in office since November 2017 (8.9 years); a July 2026 constitutional amendment extends his term to 2030
System	Presidential republic under ZANU-PF dominance since 1980
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	17.3 million (2026)
Land area	386,850 km² (149,360 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 85% (Apostolic churches 40%, Pentecostal 17%); no religion 8%; traditional 5% (2022 census)
People	Black African over 99%; by mother tongue, Shona 81% and Ndebele 12% (2022 census); median age 19; 33% urban
Minimum wage	$150 a month, set in US dollars (November 2024 notice); most formal jobs follow higher industry agreements, and farm and domestic workers are exempt

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Rhodesia's white-minority government declared independence from Britain in 1965 and fought a liberation war until Robert Mugabe's ZANU took power at independence in 1980. Mugabe ruled for 37 years — the Gukurahundi massacres of the 1980s, the violent land seizures of the 2000s, and hyperinflation that reached billions of percent — until a 2017 coup replaced him with Emmerson Mnangagwa, his former enforcer. Mnangagwa won disputed elections in 2018 and 2023.

Current leadership: President Emmerson Mnangagwa faced a constitutional limit in 2028 until he signed the Constitution Amendment (No. 3) Act on July 7, 2026. It lengthens presidential, parliamentary, and council terms from five years to seven, applies to the sitting office-holders — moving the next general election to 2030 — and has Parliament, not voters, choose future presidents. Vice President Constantino

Chiwenga, the general who led the coup, opposed the extension, and a challenge seeking to void the law or force a referendum was pending before the Constitutional Court in early October.

Government structure: A 2013 constitution whose two-term limit ZANU-PF circumvented with the 2026 amendment. Elections are neither free nor fair by observer consensus; the opposition Citizens Coalition for Change was hollowed out after 2023 through court-engineered recalls; the military is the ultimate arbiter, as 2017 showed.

Economy and trade: A roughly $35 billion economy that has never recovered from the 2000s collapse, built on gold, platinum, lithium (a major new producer, mostly for China), tobacco, and diamonds, with chronic currency instability. Exports are gold, platinum, tobacco, lithium, and diamonds; imports are fuel, machinery, and food. Top trading partners: the UAE and South Africa, China, and Mozambique. The informal economy dominates.

Closest partners: China, its largest investor and the buyer of its lithium; Russia; the UAE, where its gold is traded; South Africa, its economic lifeline and refuge for millions of emigrants; SADC; and Belarus and Iran as sanctioned-state partners. Western sanctions on individuals persist.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The internal succession war between Mnangagwa's faction and Chiwenga's; the shattered opposition; a currency that has been replaced six times; and the emigration of a third of its population. Zimbabwe's 2017 coup is the precedent every observer of the extension cites.

7c. Botswana

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Duma Boko, 56 — in office since November 2024 (1.9 years)
System	Parliamentary republic with an executive president elected by parliament
Freedom House	Free
Population	2.60 million (2026)
Land area	566,730 km² (218,820 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 87%; no religion 7%; traditional 5% (2022 census)
People	Tswana about 79%, Kalanga 11%, San 3% (estimates); Setswana is the home language of 78% (2022 census); median age 25; 75% urban
Minimum wage	Sector minimums only, from February 2024: 9.06 pula an hour in eight trade and industry sectors, about 1,767 a month, and 1,500 for domestic and farm workers ($131 and $112 at 13.44 pula = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A British protectorate that became independent in 1966 as one of the world's poorest countries, Botswana discovered diamonds a year later and used them to become Africa's development success — stable, democratic, and prudently governed under the Botswana Democratic Party for 58 years. That dominance ended in November 2024 when Duma Boko's opposition coalition won a landslide amid a collapse in diamond revenue, youth unemployment, and fatigue with the ruling party — Africa's cleanest recent alternation.

Current leadership: President Duma Boko, a human-rights lawyer, took office after his Umbrella for Democratic Change won the election — the outgoing president conceded before results were final, and the transition was immediate and peaceful.

Government structure: Africa's longest continuous democracy since 1966, with a two-term limit, an independent judiciary, low corruption, and a tradition of consensus (the kgotla). The 2024 alternation confirmed the system's resilience.

Economy and trade: A roughly $20 billion economy built on diamonds (the world's largest producer by value, with De Beers), which provide most exports and normally a third of revenue (a sixth in the 2026/27 budget), plus beef, tourism (the Okavango), and copper. Exports are diamonds, copper, and beef; imports are fuel, food, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: the UAE, Belgium, and India (diamonds), and South Africa (imports). The 2024-25 collapse in diamond demand — from lab-grown competition — produced a recession.

Closest partners: South Africa, its dominant trading partner and neighbor; De Beers and the diamond industry; the United States, historically close; the EU and UK; and SADC.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Botswana has no adversaries. Its crisis is economic: the collapse in diamond demand threatens the model that built the state. Boko's government has sought a larger stake in De Beers, which its owner is selling, and diversification.

7d. Namibia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah, 73 — in office since March 2025 (1.5 years)
System	Presidential republic under SWAPO dominance since 1990
Freedom House	Free
Population	3.15 million (2026)
Land area	823,290 km² (317,870 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 97%, about half of them Lutheran (estimates)
People	Ovambo about half, with Kavango, Damara (7%), Herero (6%), Nama, San, Coloured, Baster, and White minorities (2023 census); median age 23; 58% urban
Minimum wage	N$18 an hour from January 2025, about N$3,120 a month on a 40-hour week ($187 at 16.68 Namibian dollars = $1); less for domestic and farm workers

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: German South West Africa, site of the 1904-08 Herero and Nama genocide, was ruled by South Africa from 1915 until a liberation war and UN-supervised independence in 1990. Namibia has since had a stable democracy and a mixed economic record. Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah became Africa's second elected female head of state.

Current leadership: President Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah of SWAPO, a liberation-era veteran and former vice president, won the November 2024 election with 57% in a vote marred by logistical failures and extended voting that the opposition contested, and became the country's first female president. Prime Minister Elijah Ngurare manages the government.

Government structure: A 1990 constitution regarded as one of Africa's best, with a directly elected president, two-term limit, and bicameral parliament. SWAPO's majorities have declined; the judiciary and press are independent.

Economy and trade: A roughly $14 billion economy built on diamonds (marine mining, with De Beers), uranium (a top-three producer), fishing, beef, and tourism, with offshore oil discoveries since 2022

(TotalEnergies, Shell) that could double the economy by the 2030s, and green-hydrogen projects. Exports are diamonds, uranium, fish, and copper; imports are fuel, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: South Africa, China, Botswana, and the EU. Inequality is among the world's highest.

Closest partners: South Africa, its former ruler and largest trading partner; Angola; Germany, its former colonial power, with which a 2021 genocide reconciliation agreement remains contested; China and the EU; the oil majors developing its offshore finds; and SADC.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Namibia has no adversaries. Its issues are the contested 2024 election, the German genocide settlement, land reform, inequality, and the management of the oil and hydrogen windfall that could remake the economy.

7e. Lesotho

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Sam Matekane, 68 — in office since October 2022 (3.9 years)
Head of state	King Letsie III, 63 — in office since February 1996 (30.7 years); ceremonial; also king 1990–95
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	2.39 million (2026)
Land area	30,360 km² (11,720 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 96% (Protestant 48%, Catholic 39%) (2014 estimates)
People	Basotho over 99%; median age 23; 32% urban
Minimum wage	Sector minimums only; the April 2026 rates could not be confirmed, and the general rate from March 2025 was 2,242 maloti a month ($134 at 16.68 maloti = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A mountain kingdom entirely surrounded by South Africa, Basutoland became independent in 1966. A 2014 coup attempt brought South African mediation. Lesotho was hit by the 2025 US tariffs harder than any state in Africa.

Current leadership: Prime Minister Sam Matekane, a diamond and construction magnate, took office after his Revolution for Prosperity party, founded months earlier, won the 2022 election.

Government structure: A 1993 constitution, with a bicameral parliament and a history of coups, military interventions, and unstable coalitions that SADC has mediated. Reforms to stabilize government were passed in 2024.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2.5 billion economy dependent on garment exports to the US under AGOA (its largest employer), water exports to South Africa (the Highlands Water Project), diamonds, and remittances from miners in South Africa. Exports are clothing, diamonds, and water; imports are nearly everything from South Africa. The 2025 US tariffs — initially 50%, the highest on any country — devastated the garment sector.

Closest partners: South Africa, which has intervened militarily (1998); SADC; the United States, its garment export market until the 2025 tariffs; the EU and UK; and China.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Lesotho's disputes are with the 2025 US tariffs; with its own history of instability; and with South Africa over water pricing. It has no external adversaries.

7f. Eswatini

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	King Mswati III, 58 — in office since April 1986 (40.4 years); absolute monarch
System	Absolute monarchy; political parties are banned
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	1.27 million (2026)
Land area	17,200 km² (6,640 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 89%, mostly Protestant and Zionist churches (2017 census)
People	Swazi about 97%, with Zulu and European minorities (estimates); median age 24; 25% urban
Minimum wage	Sector minimums only: from 1,366 emalangeni a month in day care and 1,453 for domestic workers ($82 and $87 at 16.68 emalangeni = $1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Swaziland became independent in 1968 and its king Sobhuza II abolished the constitution and banned parties in 1973. His son Mswati III, king at 18, has ruled with 15 wives, a large fortune, and no tolerance for dissent. The country was renamed Eswatini in 2018.

Current leadership: King Mswati III appoints the prime minister — currently Russell Dlamini — and controls parliament and the judiciary. The 2023 assassination of the human-rights lawyer Thulani Maseko remains unsolved.

Government structure: The tinkhundla system, with a parliament the king can dissolve and whose laws he can veto. Africa's last absolute monarchy and one of the world's few.

Economy and trade: A roughly $5 billion economy built on sugar, soft-drink concentrate (a Coca-Cola plant), forestry, and textiles, with South Africa providing most trade and the customs union the largest share of revenue, about 40%. Exports are sugar, concentrate, and wood pulp; imports are fuel, machinery, and food. Top partners: South Africa (dominant), the US, and Taiwan. The monarchy controls much of the economy through royal trusts.

Closest partners: South Africa; Taiwan, of which Eswatini is the last African diplomatic ally; the United States, which sent deportees to Eswatini under a 2025 arrangement; SADC; and the Commonwealth.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The banned pro-democracy movement, whose 2021 uprising was crushed with dozens killed; the exiled opposition; and the international criticism the monarchy dismisses. Its unique position as Taiwan's ally draws Chinese pressure.

7g. The Democratic South and Its Exceptions

Four of these six states — Zambia, Botswana, Namibia, and Lesotho — are functioning democracies whose governments answer to elections. The exceptions are instructive: Zimbabwe, where a coup-installed president has extended his own rule by amendment and the army is the arbiter, and Eswatini, where an absolute monarch has ruled for 40 years. The south's democracies are under economic pressure — Botswana's diamonds, Lesotho's tariffs, Zambia's debt — but their institutions have held where the Sahel's did not.

Module 8 — The Alliance Map

SADC, the Sahel Alliance, Russia's Corps, China's Mines & the Western Counter

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: SADC documentation; Africa Center for Strategic Studies; Chatham House

8a. SADC

The Southern African Development Community — anchored by South Africa — is the region's institution, with a record of intervention (Lesotho, Mozambique, Congo). Its Congo force, deployed in 2023 against M23, lost soldiers at Goma in 2025 and withdrew — a humiliation that exposed the gap between SADC's ambitions and its members' capacity. SADC has protected Zimbabwe's government from Western pressure; the only member it has suspended was Madagascar, after its 2009 coup.

8b. The Alliance of Sahel States

The AES is the region's other bloc, and its opposite: three juntas united by hostility to ECOWAS, France, and the West, by Russian patronage, and by a war they are losing. It has plans for a bank and a currency to replace the CFA. Chad and the CAR are sympathetic without joining. The AES is the continent's most explicit rejection of the post-colonial order, and its survival depends on the juntas surviving each other and their enemies.

8c. The Outside Powers

- **Russia** — the Africa Corps (Wagner's successor) is the security force of Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and the CAR, paid in gold and mining concessions, and Russia's model — regime protection without conditions — is the AES's foundation. Its results against jihadists have been poor and its massacres documented.
- **China** — the dominant mining investor in Congo's cobalt and copper, Zimbabwe's lithium, and Zambia's copper; the largest creditor of Angola, Congo-Brazzaville, and Zambia; and South Africa's largest trading partner. Its interest is minerals and markets.
- **The United States and the EU** — the Lobito corridor is their flagship counter to Chinese mineral dominance; the 2025 Congo minerals-for-security framework and the Congo-Rwanda mediation are the US's most active regional role; and the 2025 tariffs, aid cuts, and rupture with South Africa are its most damaging.
- **The UAE** — the buyer of gold from every Sahel state, Zimbabwe, and Congo; the supplier of Sudan's RSF through Chad; and an investor across the south. The Gulf's most active African power.
- **Rwanda** — the region's most consequential military actor, occupying eastern Congo through M23, deploying to Mozambique and the CAR, and defying sanctions.
- **France** — expelled from the Sahel and Chad, retaining only Gabon and Djibouti; its six decades as the region's external power ended between 2022 and 2025.

Module 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, CrisisWatch; Armed Conflict Location and Event Data project; Africa Center for Strategic Studies

9a. The Congo War

The east's occupation by a Rwandan-backed rebel administration is the region's defining open conflict, and 2026 has not changed it: the Washington and Doha deals stand signed and unimplemented (Module 3). The mineral frameworks that accompany the diplomacy — US access to cobalt and copper in exchange for security guarantees no one has delivered — are the war's economic layer. The risk is that the east's status becomes permanent by default.

9b. The Sahel's Unwon War

The juntas' claim was that sovereignty and Russia would succeed where France failed (Module 4). The war's spread — south into the coastal states, east into Niger and Chad — is the region's most consequential trend, and no strategy on offer has reversed it.

9c. Sudan's Spillover

Sudan's war has made the region's northern tier part of a conflict system stretching from the Red Sea to Lake Chad (Module 5). The Sudanese army's threats against Chad and the RSF's cross-border raids are the points where spillover could become war.

9d. The Mineral Contest

The contest for the energy transition's raw materials is the region's slow-moving structural struggle (Module 8), and it determines which outside power each government answers to. It is also the contest that has drawn the US into Congo's war and kept it there.

9e. Zimbabwe's 2030 and South Africa's Coalition

Two succession questions in the south. Zimbabwe's — settled on paper by the July 2026 amendment but contested by Vice President Chiwenga and in the courts (Module 7) — carries the 2017 precedent of a coup, and its outcome shapes whether ZANU-PF's dominance survives. South Africa's — whether the coalition survives the ANC's 2027 contest and the 2029 election — determines whether Africa's largest democracy has entered a coalition era or a temporary interruption of one-party rule.

9f. The Last Word

The throughline of all nine modules: this is a region divided by a line — north of it, states seized by soldiers, protected by Russians, losing wars to jihadists, and extending their own rule; south of it, states that change governments by election, argue with Washington, and manage diamond collapses and tariff shocks with institutions that hold. Between them lies the Congo, the continent's mineral heart, occupied in the east and contested by every outside power. The region supplies the world's energy transition and cannot secure its own territory. Whether the democratic south's institutions spread north, or the Sahel's model of sovereignty-by-junta spreads south, is the question the next decade will answer — and the Congo, where both models meet, is where it will be decided.

Key Points

Central & Southern Africa

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Eswatini	Mswati III	King	58	April 1986	40.4
Congo (Brazzaville)	Denis Sassou Nguesso	President	82	October 1997	28.9
Central African Republic	Faustin-Archange Touadéra	President	69	March 2016	10.5
Angola	João Lourenço	President	72	September 2017	9.0
Zimbabwe	Emmerson Mnangagwa	President	84	November 2017	8.9
South Africa	Cyril Ramaphosa	President	73	February 2018	8.6
Congo (Kinshasa)	Félix Tshisekedi	President	63	January 2019	7.7
Chad	Mahamat Idriss Déby	President	42	April 2021	5.5
Mali	Assimi Goïta	President of the Transition	42	May 2021	5.4
Zambia	Hakainde Hichilema	President	64	August 2021	5.1
Burkina Faso	Ibrahim Traoré	President of the Transition	38	September 2022	4.0
Lesotho	Sam Matekane	Prime Minister	68	October 2022	3.9
Niger	Abdourahamane Tiani	President	61–66	July 2023	3.2
Botswana	Duma Boko	President	56	November 2024	1.9
Namibia	Netumbo Nandi-Ndaitwah	President	73	March 2025	1.5

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's current continuous tenure. Lesotho is a parliamentary monarchy, so its prime minister leads and its king is ceremonial; Eswatini's king rules as an absolute monarch. Goïta led the August 2020 coup and dominated the junta before taking the presidency in May 2021; Sassou Nguesso was also president in 1979–92. Tiani's birth year is reported variously as 1960, 1961, and 1964.

The Takeaways

• A line runs across the continent: a north of juntas and strongmen (Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, Chad, and the Russian-protected Central African Republic) and an election-changing south (South Africa, Botswana, Zambia, Namibia) — and 2025-26 held the line where it was and moved nothing across it.

• South Africa is the continent's deepest democracy and its most exposed to the American turn — a 12.5% tariff, an aid cut, a boycotted G20 presidency, the ICJ confrontation — governed by a coalition of the liberation party at 40% and its liberal opposition that nearly broke over a budget and held, with the world's highest unemployment, a 75% debt, state enterprises that swallowed a decade, and a gold-and-platinum windfall to spend before the November 2026 local elections and the ANC's 2027 succession — while a revived impeachment case hangs over Ramaphosa.

• The Democratic Republic of the Congo is the world's cobalt and a war: M23 holding Goma and Bukavu with Rwandan backing, a June 2025 American-brokered accord largely unimplemented, 7 million displaced — and a state that turned its 70% of cobalt into leverage — a 2025 export ban that doubled the price, then quotas of about 96,000 tonnes a year for 2026-27 meant to push refining onshore — with the Lobito Corridor as the West's route to it — and since May 2026 the deadliest Ebola outbreak in its history.

• The Sahel's juntas — Goïta's five-year self-grant, Traoré's popularity, Tiani's uranium nationalization — left ECOWAS in January 2025, expelled France and America, brought in Russia's Africa Corps paid in gold, and hold capitals under jihadist siege (Bamako's fuel routes; Burkina's countryside) that their security partner has not lifted — Mali lost its defense minister in April 2026 and retook Kidal only in October, and Niger's junta survived an August mutiny; the belt's future is whether the capitals hold, not any election.

• Chad's Déby dynasty and the Central African Republic's Touadéra (with Russia's mercenaries) are the junta north's interior; the Republic of the Congo's Sassou and Angola's Lourenço are the oil states of the Atlantic coast, Angola the Lobito Corridor's terminus and the region's turn toward Washington.

• The southern interior is the continent's democratic exception: Botswana's 2024 alternation after 58 years, Zambia's 2026 election and its 2023-24 restructuring, Namibia's first woman president, Lesotho's and Eswatini's dependence on Pretoria — and, against the region's grain, Zimbabwe's Mnangagwa, whose term a July 2026 amendment extended to 2030.

• China buys the region's copper, cobalt, iron ore, and oil and builds its rail, dams, and mines; America's presence retreated from the Sahel and advanced through the Lobito Corridor and the Congo minerals framework; Russia gained the juntas; the Gulf's money is in Chad's and Sudan's wars.

• The physical facts bind: the Congo's cobalt and the Zambian copperbelt's water, South Africa's coal and its Transnet bottlenecks, the Sahel's gold and its drought, the Kariba dam's low water that cut Zambia's and Zimbabwe's power.

• The region's 2026 lesson is the coup belt's and the producer's at once: where the West left, Russia arrived and the cost of a coup fell; where a state held 70% of a mineral, it discovered the leverage was worth more than the volume.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. Roughly where does the course draw the line between the region's coup belt and its democratic south?

A) Along the course of the Zambezi River
B) Along the Niger River
C) Between the French- and English-speaking states
D) Through the Congo basin

2. How many of the fifteen states does Freedom House rate Free?

A) Four, with Zambia
B) Six, including Lesotho and Angola
C) Three: South Africa, Botswana, and Namibia
D) None of them

3. What has governed South Africa since June 2024?

A) The ANC alone, with a two-thirds majority
B) A ten-party coalition led by the ANC
C) The Democratic Alliance, after it won outright
D) The ANC in partnership with Zuma's MK party alone

4. Why did impeachment proceedings against Ramaphosa revive in 2026?

A) The Constitutional Court revived a panel report on cash stolen from his farm
B) He lost a confidence vote in Parliament after the coalition's budget collapsed in the spring
C) The DA left the coalition and moved to remove him
D) He sought a third term in breach of the constitution

5. What has the war in eastern Congo become since 2025, according to the course?

A) A war the UN mission has won
B) Rebel rule: M23 governs Goma and Bukavu with Rwandan backing
C) A frozen conflict since Rwanda withdrew its troops under the 2025 Washington accords
D) A border war between Kinshasa and Brazzaville

6. What made the Democratic Republic of the Congo's 2026 Ebola outbreak historic?

A) It was the first Ebola outbreak ever recorded there
B) It never spread beyond the capital, Kinshasa, and its suburbs
C) A new vaccine ended it within weeks of the first case
D) It became the deadliest in the country's history

7. Who retook the northern Malian city of Kidal on October 6, 2026?

A) The Azawad Liberation Front, from Mali's army
B) JNIM, from the Tuareg separatists
C) Mali's army and Russia's Africa Corps, after the separatists withdrew
D) Algerian forces, at Mali's request

8. What happened in Niger on the night of August 28-29, 2026?

A) A mutiny in Niamey, put down by the presidential guard with Russian help
B) Tiani handed power to a civilian government
C) French troops returned at the junta's invitation to secure the uranium mines in the north
D) Bazoum escaped from the palace and formed a government in exile in neighboring Nigeria

9. What role does Chad play in Sudan's war?

A) It fights alongside Sudan's army
B) It is the UAE's supply corridor to the RSF and hosts a million refugees
C) It mediates under a UN mandate
D) It sealed its border and stayed out of the war, accepting refugees only under a UN agreement

10. How have the Republic of the Congo and Angola diverged?

A) Both joined the Alliance of Sahel States
B) Brazzaville turned to Washington while Angola turned to Moscow
C) Both held free elections in 2026
D) Brazzaville doubled down on personalist rule; Angola opened up, and its president leaves office in 2027

11. What does Zimbabwe's July 2026 constitutional amendment do?

A) Extends Mnangagwa's term to 2030
B) Restores the two-term limit and bars Mnangagwa from running again
C) Abolishes the vice presidency and lets the army name a successor
D) Calls an early general election for 2027 under international supervision

12. Which southern state ended 58 years of one-party rule at the ballot box in 2024?

A) Namibia
B) Mozambique
C) Botswana
D) South Africa

13. Which outside power provides the security forces of four of the region's states, paid partly in gold and mining concessions?

A) China
B) Turkey
C) Russia, through its Africa Corps
D) The United States

14. Why are Namibia's, Lesotho's, and Eswatini's minimum wages converted at South Africa's exchange rate?

A) They pay their workers in rand rather than in their own currencies
B) SADC sets a single regional minimum wage for its member states
C) The IMF requires them to report in a common currency
D) Their currencies are pegged one-to-one to the rand

15. What is the course's throughline?

A) Mineral wealth has made the region secure
B) A line between a junta-ruled north and an election-run south, with the Congo between
C) The region's states are converging on democracy as the juntas schedule elections for 2027
D) China has displaced every other outside power, from the Sahel's goldfields to the Cape

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. D 2. C 3. B 4. A 5. B 6. D 7. C 8. A 9. B 10. D 11. A 12. C 13. C 14. D 15. B

North America & the Caribbean

Figures current as of October 2026

North America and the Caribbean — the United States, Canada, Mexico, Central America, and the islands: who leads each, how each is governed, what each trades, and where the region's alliances and disputes stand.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: One Power and Its Neighborhood

Goal: Establish the United States as the reference point for every other state, the Caribbean basin as a single system, and the disputes that recur.

Covers the basin's trade, migration, and drug routes; the membership map, from the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) to the Caribbean Community (Caricom) and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS); the Monroe Doctrine's revival; and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — The United States

Goal: Profile the hemisphere's dominant power in its own module.

Covers the second Trump term and the courts' checks on it, the tariff regime after the Supreme Court's ruling, the strikes on drug boats and the seizure of Venezuela's president, and the midterms.

MODULE 3 — Canada

Goal: Profile the northern neighbor and its rupture with Washington.

Covers Carney's government and its new majority, the tariff war of 2026, rearmament, and the October votes in Quebec and Alberta.

MODULE 4 — Mexico

Goal: Profile the southern neighbor and America's largest trading partner.

Covers Sheinbaum's supermajority, the elected judiciary, the cartels, and the cooperation that has kept Washington at bay.

MODULE 5 — Northern Central America: Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador & Nicaragua

Goal: Profile the four states of the migration corridor.

Covers Arévalo's embattled reform, Asfura's disputed election, Bukele's model and his bid for a third term, and the Ortega-Murillo dictatorship.

MODULE 6 — Southern Central America: Costa Rica, Panama & Belize

Goal: Profile the isthmus's three stabler states.

Covers Costa Rica's new president and crime surge, Panama's canal and ports, and Belize's border case.

MODULE 7 — The Greater Antilles: Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic & Jamaica

Goal: Profile the four states of the Greater Antilles.

Covers Cuba's collapse under an oil blockade, Haiti's state failure, the Dominican boom, and Jamaica's fiscal success and its hurricane.

MODULE 8 — The Smaller Islands: The Bahamas, Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago, and the Six OECS States

Goal: Profile the nine small island states.

Covers the archipelago, the republic, the energy state, and the microstates of the Lesser Antilles.

MODULE 9 — The Alliance Map: The USMCA, Caricom, the Organization of American States (OAS), the Monroe Doctrine Revived & China

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the region's blocs.

Covers the trade blocs, the Caricom system, the OAS's decline and the Shield of the Americas, and Chinese and Taiwanese competition.

MODULE 10 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers the tariff and USMCA fight, migration and deportation, the cartel war, Haiti and Cuba, Panama and the Venezuelan spillover, and the votes ahead.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

The parties, institutions, and abbreviations the modules rely on are defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country or countries each one belongs to or concerns, or 'Region-wide'; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Institutions, Alliances, and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
United States, Canada, Mexico	USMCA (United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement)	The free-trade agreement of the three, in force since 2020 in place of the North American Free Trade Agreement of 1994; it expires in 2036 unless all three agree at a joint review to extend it.
Twelve of the 23	Caricom (Caribbean Community); Caribbean Court of Justice	The economic and political union of fifteen Caribbean members, founded in 1973, whose chair rotates every six months; and its court, set up in 2005.
Six of the 23	OECS (Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States)	The union of the smaller eastern Caribbean islands, with a shared currency, the Eastern Caribbean dollar, and a common central bank.
Region-wide	OAS (Organization of American States)	The hemisphere's political organization, founded in 1948 and based in Washington.
Region-wide	Summit of the Americas	The meeting of the hemisphere's elected leaders, held every three or four years from 1994 to 2022.
Region-wide	Shield of the Americas	The US-led coalition against drug cartels, formed in 2026 with like-minded governments of the region, outside the OAS.
United States, Canada	NATO (North Atlantic Treaty Organization); NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command)	The Western military alliance founded in 1949, and the joint US-Canadian command that guards North American airspace.
Seven of the 23	CAFTA-DR (Dominican Republic-Central America Free Trade Agreement)	The free-trade agreement of the United States with Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, and the Dominican Republic, in force since 2006-09.
Four of the 23	OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)	The club of 38 mostly rich democracies that sets common policy standards; the United States, Canada, Mexico, and Costa Rica belong.
Region-wide	IMF (International Monetary Fund); World Bank	The two Washington-based lenders to governments: the first for balance-of-payments crises, on policy conditions, the second for development.
Region-wide	International Court of Justice	The UN's court for disputes between states.
Twelve of the 23	Commonwealth	The association of 56 states, most of them former British territories, to which Canada, Belize, and the ten English-speaking island states of this course belong.
Region-wide	Freedom House	The US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free, with a score out of 100.
Region-wide	Belt and Road Initiative	China's program of infrastructure lending and investment abroad, launched in 2013.
Barbados	Bridgetown Initiative	Mia Mottley's proposals, first made in 2022, to reform how the IMF and the World Bank lend to indebted and climate-exposed states.

Governments, Agencies, and Parties

Country	Name	Who or what
United States	Republicans; Democrats	The two parties of American politics: Trump's party of the right, and the party of the center-left.
United States	Federal Reserve	The central bank, which sets the benchmark short-term interest rate; its governors serve fixed terms.
United States	ICE (Immigration and Customs Enforcement)	The federal agency that detains and deports migrants.
United States	CIA (Central Intelligence Agency)	The US foreign intelligence service.
United States	National Guard	The military reserve of each state, commanded by its governor unless the president calls it into federal service.
Canada	Liberals; Conservatives	Canada's governing center-left party, led by Mark Carney, and the center-right opposition, led by Pierre Poilievre.
Canada	Parti Québécois; Coalition Avenir Québec	Quebec's party of independence, founded in 1968, and the nationalist center-right party that governed the province from 2018 to 2026.
Mexico	Morena (National Regeneration Movement)	The left-wing party Andrés Manuel López Obrador founded in 2014, which has held the presidency since 2018.
Mexico	PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party)	The party that governed Mexico without interruption from 1929 to 2000.
Mexico	National Guard; Pemex	The federal security force created in 2019 and placed under the army in 2024; and the state oil company.
Guatemala	Semilla; Raíces	Arévalo's anti-corruption party, founded in 2017, and a new party some of its former deputies founded.
Honduras	National Party; Liberal Party; Libre (Liberty and Refoundation)	Honduras's two traditional parties — Asfura's conservatives and their centrist rivals — and the left-wing party of former President Xiomara Castro.
El Salvador	Nuevas Ideas	Bukele's party, founded in 2018, which with its allies controls the Legislative Assembly.
Nicaragua	Sandinista National Liberation Front	Ortega's party, founded in 1961 as a guerrilla movement.
Costa Rica	Pueblo Soberano	The party of Rodrigo Chaves and Laura Fernández.
Panama	Realizando Metas	Mulino's party, founded by former President Ricardo Martinelli.
Belize	People's United Party; United Democratic Party	Belize's two parties: Briceño's governing center-left party and the center-right opposition.
Cuba	Communist Party of Cuba	The only legal party, which the constitution makes the leading force of society and the state.
Haiti	Transitional Presidential Council	The nine-member body that held Haiti's presidency from April 2024 to February 2026.
Dominican Republic	Modern Revolutionary Party	Abinader's center-left party, founded in 2014.
Jamaica	Jamaica Labour Party	Holness's center-right party, one of the two that have alternated in power since independence.
Bahamas	Progressive Liberal Party; Free National Movement	The Bahamas' two parties: Davis's governing party and the opposition.
Barbados	Barbados Labour Party	Mottley's party.
Trinidad and Tobago	United National Congress; People's National Movement	Persad-Bissessar's party, rooted among Trinidadians of Indian descent, and the party that led the country to independence, rooted among those of African descent.

Country	Name	Who or what
Four of the 23	The Labour parties of Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, and Saint Lucia	The governing parties of Browne, Drew, Skerrit, and Pierre.
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	New Democratic Party	Friday's center-right party.
Grenada	National Democratic Congress	Mitchell's party.

Armed Groups and Forces

Country	Name	Who or what
Mexico	Sinaloa Cartel; Jalisco New Generation Cartel	Mexico's two largest trafficking organizations: the older Sinaloa group, split into warring factions since 2024, and its western rival, which rose in the 2010s.
El Salvador, Honduras, Guatemala	MS-13 (Mara Salvatrucha); Barrio 18	The two street gangs that formed in Los Angeles, MS-13 among Salvadoran migrants, and spread to Central America through deportations.
Nicaragua, Honduras	Contras	The rebels who fought Nicaragua's Sandinista government in the 1980s, armed by the United States and based largely in Honduras.
Haiti	Viv Ansanm	The coalition of Port-au-Prince's gangs, formed in 2023.
Haiti	Gang Suppression Force	The international force the UN Security Council authorized in 2025, with a ceiling of 5,500 troops and police and the power to arrest, to succeed the Kenyan-led Multinational Security Support mission of 2024-25.

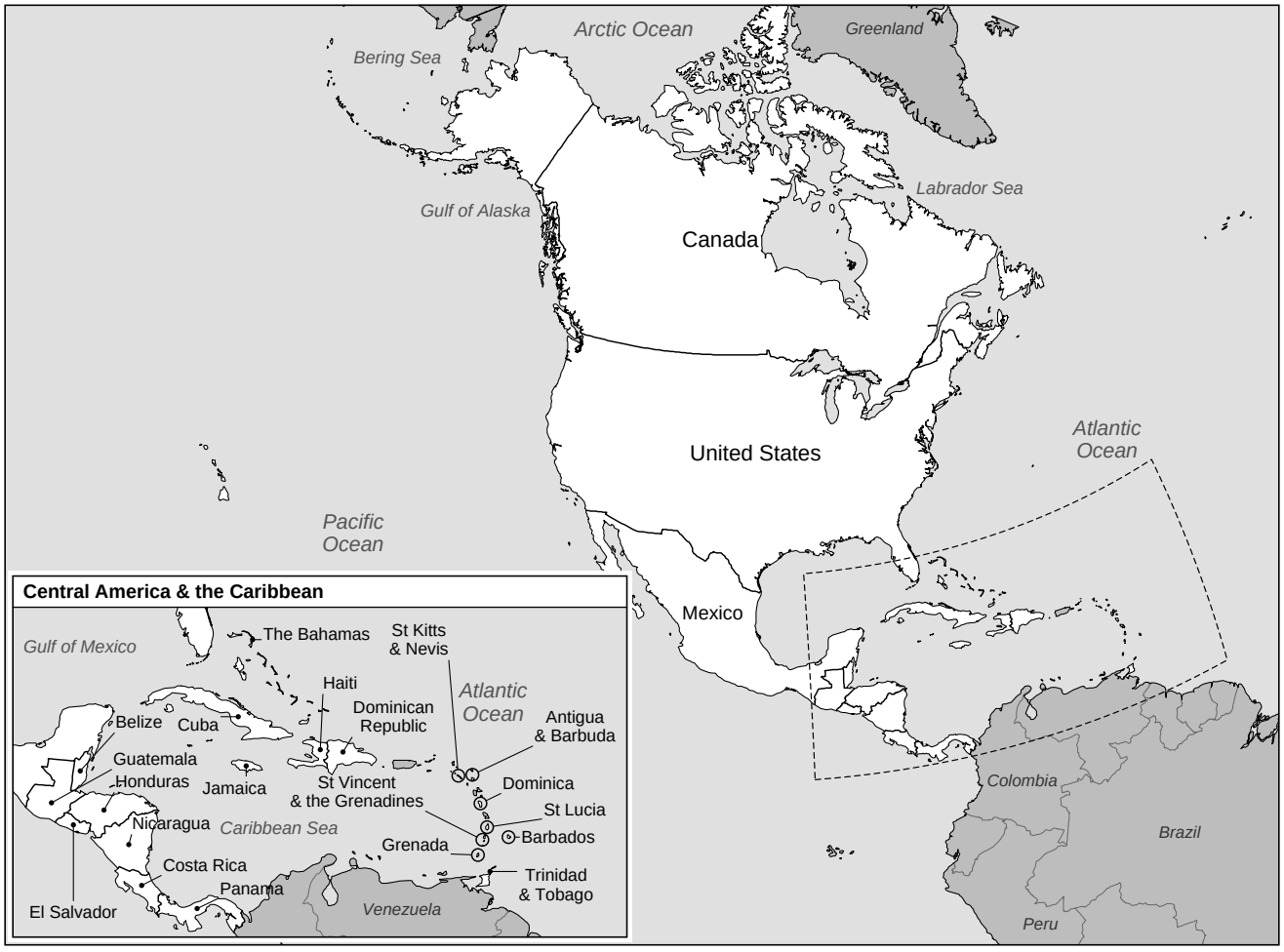
Laws, Places, Companies, and Terms

Country	Name	Who or what
United States	IEEPA (International Emergency Economic Powers Act)	The 1977 law that lets the president regulate commerce in a declared national emergency, under which the 2025 tariffs were imposed.
United States	Sections 122, 232, 301, and 338	Trade-law provisions under which a president may impose tariffs: for up to 150 days against a payments deficit; on national-security grounds; against unfair foreign practices; and, under a 1930 law never before used, against countries that discriminate against American commerce.
United States	Temporary protected status	The US status that lets nationals of a country struck by war or disaster live and work in the United States while it lasts.
Region-wide	Monroe Doctrine	President James Monroe's declaration of 1823 that the Americas were closed to new European colonization, later read as a claim to an American sphere of influence.
Region-wide	Nearshoring	Moving production closer to the market it serves — for the United States, to Mexico.
Five of the 23	Citizenship by investment	The sale of passports to foreign investors, a main source of revenue for Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, Saint Lucia, and Grenada.
El Salvador	CECOT (Terrorism Confinement Center)	The mega-prison for 40,000 inmates that El Salvador opened in 2023.
Panama	Panama Ports Company; Hutchison	The operator of the Balboa and Cristóbal terminals at the canal's two ends from 1997 to 2026, and its parent, a Hong Kong conglomerate.
Panama	Cobre Panamá	The copper mine of the Canadian company First Quantum, Latin America's largest new mine when a 2023 court ruling closed it.

Country	Name	Who or what
Trinidad and Tobago	Dragon field	A Venezuelan offshore gas field near Trinidad's waters.
Region-wide	Exclusive economic zone	The sea out to 200 nautical miles from a state's coast, in which it controls fishing and seabed resources.
Region-wide	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year, converted at market exchange rates.
Region-wide	AI (artificial intelligence); LNG (liquefied natural gas)	Software that learns from data to perform tasks such as writing and image recognition; and gas chilled to liquid so it can be shipped by tanker.

Module 1 — Foundations

One Power and Its Neighborhood



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Americas Society/Council of the Americas; Wilson Center Latin America Program; Inter-American Dialogue

1a. The Reference Point

Every other state in this course except Cuba has the United States as its largest trading partner, its largest source of remittances or investment, and the reference point for its foreign policy. The US economy is about six times the size of the other 22 combined, its military presence is unchallenged, and its domestic politics — on trade, migration, drugs, and Cuba — are the region's foreign policy. Since 2025 that dominance has been exercised more coercively than at any point since the Cold War: tariffs on Canada and Mexico, annexation talk toward Canada, canal demands on Panama, deportation deals with El Salvador and others, strikes on suspected drug boats, the seizure of Venezuela's president, and a revived Monroe Doctrine (2b). Every other profile is, in part, a study of how a state manages that pressure.

1b. The Basin as a System

The Caribbean basin — the Gulf of Mexico, the Caribbean Sea, and the isthmus — is a single system of trade, migration, and drugs. Goods flow north through Mexico's factories and the Panama Canal; people flow north through Central America to the US border; cocaine flows north from South America through the isthmus and the islands; and money flows south as remittances, which reach a fifth of GDP or more in four Central American states and Haiti. The basin's small states are price-takers in all four flows, and their politics — Bukele's prisons, Haiti's gangs, Honduras's extradited former president, the islands' citizenship sales — are shaped by them.

1c. The Membership Map

- **The USMCA (3):** the United States, Canada, and Mexico (9a).
- **Caricom (12):** Belize, Haiti, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and the six OECS states; Guyana, Suriname, and the British territory of Montserrat are the other members (9b).
- **The OECS (6):** Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Dominica, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Grenada (Module 8).
- **Realms of King Charles III (9):** Canada, Belize, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Antigua and Barbuda, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, and Grenada; Barbados, Dominica, and Trinidad and Tobago are parliamentary republics.
- **Freedom House ratings:** Not Free (3) — Cuba, Nicaragua, and Haiti; Partly Free (5) — Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, and the Dominican Republic; Free (15) — the rest.
- **Taiwan's allies (6):** Belize, Guatemala, Haiti, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines — half of the twelve states that still recognize Taipei (9d).

1d. The Disputes That Recur

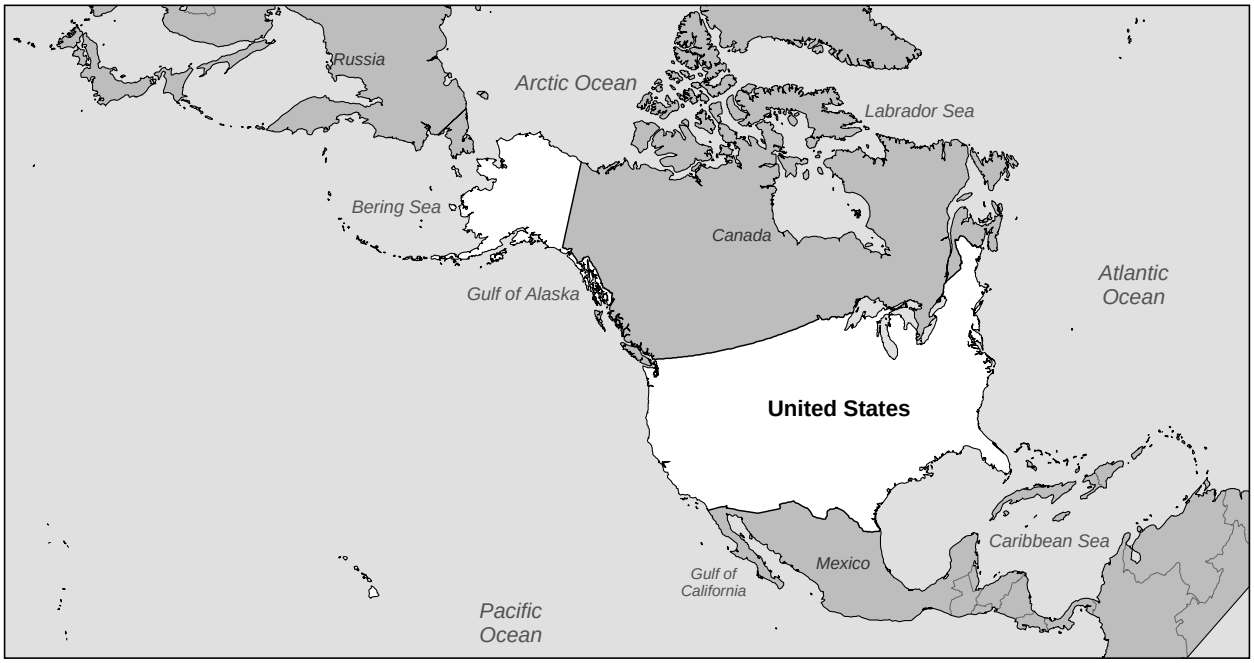
Five issues run through the course. US trade coercion — tariffs, the USMCA's future, and the sovereignty demands on Canada and Panama (Modules 2, 3, 4, 6, 9, 10). Migration and deportation, from the Central American corridor to Haitian and Cuban flight and the US removal campaign (Modules 2, 5, 7, 10). The cartels and the drug war, now fought with American military strikes (Modules 2, 4, 5, 10). The failed and failing states of Haiti and Cuba (Modules 7, 10). And the China contest — Panama's ports, Taiwan's allies, Chinese loans (Modules 6, 8, 9).

1e. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office and the second figure who matters — the head of state where a prime minister governs, with the governor-general who represents King Charles III in his realms, Cuba's prime minister, and Nicaragua's co-president — then the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religions with their shares, the main ethnic groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars where the law sets one. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026, and where a recent census or official estimate differs markedly the table gives it too; land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes. The six OECS microstates receive compact profiles, and those of the United States, Canada, and Mexico add a table of numbers. The region's twenty governments chosen in competitive elections sit beside a state with no elected officials, a one-party communist state, and a family dictatorship. The Who's Who before this module defines the parties, institutions, and abbreviations the profiles rely on, and the Key Points page ranks the leaders by time in office, from Dominica's prime minister to Costa Rica's president.

Module 2 — The United States

The Hemisphere's Dominant Power



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Congressional Research Service; Brookings Institution; the Council on Foreign Relations

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Donald Trump, 80 — in office since January 2025 (1.7 years); Republican; also president 2017–21; midterm elections November 3, 2026
System	Federal presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	349.0 million (2026); the Census Bureau estimated 341.8 million on July 1, 2025
Land area	9,147,420 km² (3,531,840 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 62% (Protestant 40%, Catholic 19%), no religion 29%, other faiths 7% (Pew Research Center, 2023-24)
People	Hispanic or Latino (of any race) 18.7%; by race alone, white 61.6%, Black 12.4%, Asian 6.0%, American Indian 1.1%, two or more races 10.2% (2020 census); median age 40; 84% urban
Minimum wage	US$7.25 an hour federally since July 2009; 30 states and Washington, D.C. set higher rates

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Thirteen British colonies declared independence in 1776, adopted a federal constitution in 1789, expanded across a continent through purchase, conquest, and the dispossession of Native nations, and fought a civil war (1861-65) over slavery that killed 750,000. Industrialization, two world wars, and the Cold War made it the world's dominant power, and the 1991 Soviet collapse left it without a peer. The 2001 attacks, the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, the 2008 financial crisis, and rising polarization defined the century's

first decades. Donald Trump's 2016 election, his 2020 defeat, the January 6, 2021 assault on the Capitol, and his return in the 2024 election have made American politics the most volatile among the developed democracies.

Current leadership: Trump's second term has been defined by tariffs, mass deportations, the dismantling of federal agencies, and confrontation with allies abroad and with the courts at home. Republicans hold the Senate 53-47 and a narrow House majority, and both are at stake in the midterms: in early October 2026 Democrats led the generic congressional ballot by eight to nine points and prediction markets gave them about a 90% chance of taking the House, despite a mid-decade redistricting campaign that netted Republicans about ten seats on paper. Vice President J.D. Vance is the presumptive heir for 2028.

Government structure: The 1789 constitution, the oldest written national constitution in force, sets a president limited to two terms, a bicameral Congress, an independent judiciary led by a Supreme Court with a six-to-three conservative majority, and 50 states with substantial powers. The administration's claims of expansive executive power have tested every check, and in its 2025-26 term the Court drew lines both ways: it struck down the emergency tariffs in February 2026 and the order ending birthright citizenship in June, and kept a Federal Reserve governor in office pending due process — but it also overruled the 1935 precedent that shielded the heads of independent agencies from removal, leaving the Federal Reserve as the exception. Polarization is such that each party regards the other's rule as illegitimate.

Economy and trade: A roughly $32 trillion economy, the world's largest and the region's overwhelming center of gravity. Exports are led by refined petroleum, crude oil and gas, aircraft, machinery, semiconductors, cars, and pharmaceuticals; imports by cars, electronics, machinery, pharmaceuticals, and oil. Top trading partners: Mexico and Canada (the two largest), China, Japan, and Germany. The dollar's reserve status and the Federal Reserve's independence are the structural questions.

Closest partners: Formally, the alliance system — NATO, the Indo-Pacific treaties, Israel, the Gulf states — which the administration treats as transactional, demanding payment and imposing tariffs on allies. In the hemisphere, the right-leaning governments of its Shield of the Americas coalition (9c), with El Salvador's Bukele and Argentina's Milei the closest; Mexico and Canada, economically indispensable and politically pressured.

Principal rivalries and disputes: China, in the rivalry that organizes American strategy — tariffs, chip controls, Taiwan, and the Pacific — under a trade truce extended in September to January 10, 2027. Iran, in the war that began with US-Israeli strikes on February 28, 2026: an April ceasefire and a June memorandum meant to lead to a settlement collapsed in July, a US naval blockade of Iran's ports was reimposed, the Strait of Hormuz remained largely closed into October, and Trump promised no new strikes before the midterms while talks went on. Russia, with which the administration has pursued a Ukraine settlement over European objections. In the hemisphere, Cuba and Nicaragua, and by turns Canada, Mexico, Brazil, and Colombia before its August change of government. At home, the polarization that produced January 6.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility about 1.6; growth slowed to 0.5% in the year to July 2025 as net migration fell	The demographic engine slowing
Growth	2.2% (annualized) in the second quarter of 2026; the Federal Reserve projects 2.3% for the year; per head ~$88,000	Services 80%; the AI investment boom; the dollar's issuer

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Prices and rates	Consumer inflation 3.4% in August 2026 on the Iran war's oil shock; the Fed raised its rate to 3.75-4.00% on September 16, unanimously — its first rise since 2023 and the first under Kevin Warsh, chair since May; the ten-year Treasury yield above 5% since mid-September, the highest since 2002	A president who wants rates at 1% against a Fed that raised them
Public finance	Gross debt past $40 trillion since August 18, 2026; a deficit of $2.0 trillion in fiscal 2026; net interest above $1 trillion a year	The July 2025 tax law, which adds $3.4 trillion to deficits over ten years; the record 43-day shutdown of October-November 2025; the government funded only to December 11, 2026
Trade	Since the Court's ruling, a 10% global tariff under Section 122 until July 24, 2026, then Section 301 tariffs of 10-12.5% on 60 economies; Section 232 tariffs of 50% on steel, aluminum, and copper and 25% on cars and parts; the average effective rate about 12% in July 2026, from about 27% in April 2025	The largest trade shock since 1930, partly unwound by the courts
Immigration	ICE removals of about 320,000 in fiscal 2025 and 356,000 in fiscal 2026 by mid-July; more than 65,000 people in detention	The deportation campaign the region absorbs
State	The federal civilian workforce cut by 237,652 (10%) in 2025; the foreign aid agency dismantled	The administrative state remade
Military	~$1 trillion a year, about a third of world military spending; 1.3 million active troops; the Iran war; the boat strikes; the National Guard still deployed in Washington, Memphis, and New Orleans	The hemisphere's only military power
Regime	Freedom House cut its score to 81 of 100 in 2026, the lowest since it adopted the 100-point scale, citing legislative dysfunction and executive dominance	Courts, states, and voters as the checks
Energy	Record crude output of 13.7 million barrels a day in 2025, with 13.8 forecast for 2026; the largest gas producer and LNG exporter; data centers' power demand rising	The swing supplier of the Hormuz year
Technology	The AI frontier (Anthropic, OpenAI, Google, xAI); the chip designers; hundreds of billions of dollars a year of data-center investment; export controls on chips	The industry's center and the state's leverage

In depth — the question: whether a power that has spoken the Monroe Doctrine aloud and turned tariffs and force on its own hemisphere runs its region by consent or by coercion — and whether its own democracy, checked so far by its courts and its states, is checked next by its voters.

Worked example — The Tariff's Arithmetic for the Neighborhood

The United States imported $535 billion of goods from Mexico and $382 billion from Canada in 2025, and most of it qualifies under the USMCA's rules of origin — 88% of imports from Mexico did in early 2026. The emergency tariffs of 2025 put 25% on the rest from Mexico and, from August 2025, 35% on the rest from Canada; now a 10% Section 301 tariff applies to non-qualifying goods from both, and Mexico chose not to retaliate. What the Court's ruling did not touch are the national-security tariffs on metals and cars, which apply whatever the treaty says: a Canadian aluminum ingot pays the full metals rate, and a Mexican-assembled car pays on its non-American content. For Mexico, the 10% on the small non-qualifying share is a nuisance; the metals and car tariffs are the cost, and nearshoring has slowed while the treaty's future is unsettled. For Canada, whose exports to the United States are about a fifth of GDP, the cost rose again with a separate tariff on much of its trade (3b). For Americans, the emergency tariffs raised about

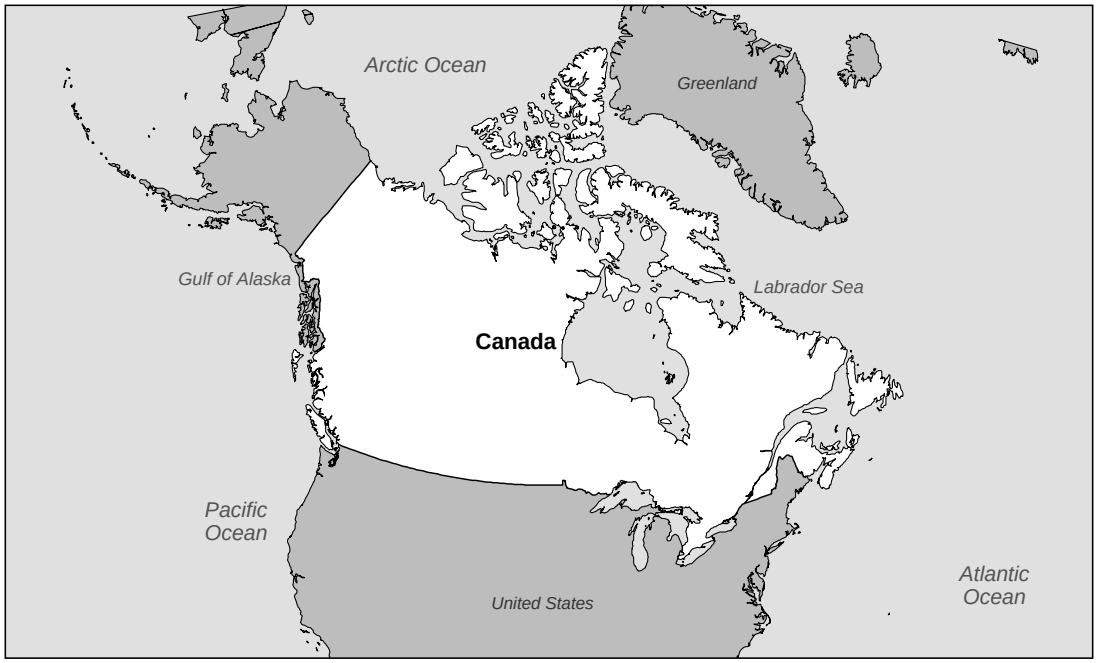
$166 billion before the Court struck them down, and about $122 billion had been refunded, with interest, by mid-September 2026. The lesson is the region's: integration built over thirty years can be taxed in a week, and the tax lands on the integrator too.

2b. The Hemisphere Under the Second Term

The administration's approach to its neighborhood is the most assertive since the Cold War: a Monroe Doctrine spoken aloud, treating the hemisphere as an American sphere; tariffs used as leverage on migration and drugs; strikes on suspected drug-smuggling boats in the Caribbean and the eastern Pacific — 79 of them by October 4, 2026, killing 238 people — and on targets ashore in Venezuela and Ecuador; and, on January 3, 2026, a raid on Caracas that seized Venezuela's president, Nicolás Maduro, who awaits trial in New York in June 2027 while Washington works with his former vice president, Delcy Rodríguez, as interim president. Add deportation agreements that send migrants of any nationality to El Salvador, Costa Rica, Panama, and elsewhere, an oil blockade of Cuba (7a), and open preference for right-wing candidates, with endorsements and threats deployed in Honduras and Argentina. The effect has been to make every government in this course calculate its distance from Washington — and to give China, whose economic presence the doctrine targets, the argument that it is the less demanding partner.

Module 3 — Canada

The Northern Neighbor and Its 2025 Rupture



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Canadian Global Affairs Institute; Policy Options; The Globe and Mail

3a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Mark Carney, 61 — in office since March 2025 (1.6 years); Liberal Party; a majority in the House of Commons since April 2026
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor General Louise Arbour since June 2026
System	Federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	40.5 million (2026); Statistics Canada estimated 41.80 million on July 1, 2026
Land area	8,788,700 km² (3,393,330 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 53.3%, no religion 34.6%, Muslim 4.9%, Hindu 2.3%, Sikh 2.1% (2021 census)
People	Largest origins Canadian, English, Irish, Scottish, and French; visible minorities 26.5%, Indigenous 5.0% (2021 census); median age 42; 82% urban
Minimum wage	C$18.15 an hour for federally regulated workers since April 1, 2026 (US$12.78 at about C$1.42 = US$1, October 6, 2026); provincial and territorial minimums run from C$15.00 (Alberta) to C$20.17 (Nunavut)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: French and British colonization, British conquest in 1763, and confederation in 1867 produced a bilingual federation that gained full sovereignty gradually — the last constitutional ties to Britain ended in 1982. Quebec's separatism nearly succeeded in a 1995 referendum. Canada's identity has been

defined by not being the United States, while its economy has been defined by dependence on it. Justin Trudeau announced his resignation in January 2025, after a decade in power, as Trump threatened tariffs and talked of making Canada the '51st state'.

Current leadership: Mark Carney, a former governor of both the Bank of Canada and the Bank of England, replaced Trudeau as Liberal leader and won the April 2025 election with 169 of 343 seats, three short of a majority. Five opposition members crossed the floor between November 2025 and April 2026, and by-election victories delivered the majority; after three more by-election wins on August 31 — one of them a Quebec seat taken from the Conservatives — the Liberals held 173 seats, one more than needed, and they led the Conservatives by 12 to 22 points in September polls. The Conservative leader, Pierre Poilievre, lost his own seat in 2025, returned through a by-election, and survived a leadership review with 87% in January 2026.

Government structure: Ten provinces and three territories under the 1867 and 1982 constitutions, with a House of Commons elected by first-past-the-post, an appointed Senate, a bilingual federal government, and provinces holding substantial powers over resources, health, and education. Quebec's distinct status and Alberta's resentment of federal energy policy are the permanent federal tensions, and both come to a head in October 2026 (3c). The next federal election is fixed for October 2029.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2.5 trillion economy, the world's eleventh-largest, built on energy (the world's fourth-largest oil producer), minerals (potash, uranium, nickel, gold), forestry, cars (integrated with the US industry), agriculture, and services. Exports are led by crude oil, cars and parts, gas, gold, lumber, and machinery; imports by cars, machinery, electronics, and fuel. Top trading partners: the US, China, Mexico, the UK, and Japan. Carney's government aims to double exports outside the United States within a decade.

Closest partners: The United States, still by necessity — three-quarters of exports, NORAD, NATO, and integrated industries — but no longer by trust. Europe, with which Carney has pursued a security and defense partnership and closer trade; the UK; Mexico, as fellow USMCA partner; and Japan, South Korea, and Australia.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The United States, in the sharpest rupture in the two countries' modern history: the sectoral tariffs on steel, aluminum, cars, and lumber, and a tariff war (3b). Domestically, housing costs, a decade of flat productivity, the Quebec and Alberta questions, and Indigenous reconciliation.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Growth slowed to 0.5% in the year to July 2026, the slowest since 1915-16, as temporary-resident numbers were cut; fertility about 1.3	The immigration reversal of 2024-26
Growth	1.7% in 2025; about 1% forecast for 2026; per head ~$55,000	The tariffs' toll: output about 1.6% below the pre-tariff path by 2029, by the finance minister's estimate
Public finance	Federal deficit C$66.9 billion in 2025-26 and C$65.3 billion (1.9% of GDP) projected for 2026-27; federal debt about 41.5% of GDP; a new C$25 billion sovereign wealth fund	Fiscal room spent on defense and infrastructure
Military	NATO's 2% of GDP pledged for 2025-26, and 5% by 2035, at least 3.5% of it for core defense; the Arctic sovereignty push; the brigade in Latvia	Rearmament under an ally's doubt
Regime	Liberal democracy	Freedom House 97/100

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Energy	About 5 million barrels a day of oil, most of it from the oil sands; the Trans Mountain expansion's Pacific exports since 2024; LNG Canada's first exports in 2025; the consumer carbon tax set to zero in April 2025	The energy-superpower ambition
Position	The US's closest ally and its 2025-26 target; NATO's Arctic member; a critical-minerals partner	The alliance's most bruised member

In depth — the question: whether a country so dependent on a neighbor that questions its sovereignty can diversify faster than the neighbor's politics change — and whether the unity the threat produced survives a sovereigntist government in Quebec and a vote on separation in Alberta.

3b. The Rupture and the Response

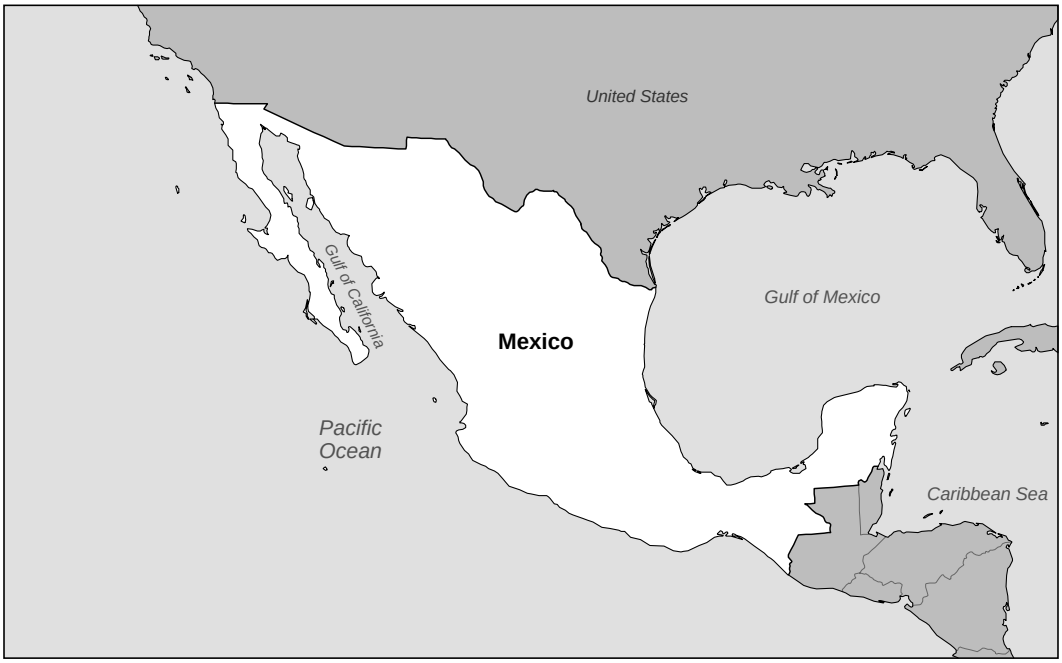
The threats produced in Canada what decades of policy had not: a surge of nationalism, a boycott of American goods, and an election won on the question of who could stand up to Washington. Carney's answer has been to diversify — trade deals with Europe and Asia, pipelines to both coasts, the removal of interprovincial trade barriers — and to rearm, while negotiating. The negotiation broke down in August 2026. After the USMCA's July review (9a), Carney suspended trade talks on August 21, and the next day a 50% tariff took effect under Section 338 on Canadian cars, dairy, alcohol, and a broad list of other goods, with no exemption for goods that meet the treaty's rules; import bans on some Canadian goods followed on September 29. Canada answered with counter-tariffs on C$27.6 billion of American goods from September 8 and a C$7.5 billion support package for the industries hit. The structural fact is unchanged: a country an eighth the size of its neighbor cannot decouple, and the question is whether it can reduce its dependence enough to have a choice.

3c. Quebec and Alberta

Quebec and Alberta vote within two weeks of each other in October 2026. On October 5 the Parti Québécois won 59 of the National Assembly's 127 seats — a minority, on about 28% of the vote, the lowest share ever for a winning party in Quebec — while the Coalition Avenir Québec lost every seat, its premier's included. Paul St-Pierre Plamondon becomes premier on October 15 and has promised a third referendum on sovereignty in his first term, though not before Trump leaves office in January 2029; the two largest opposition parties in the Assembly have vowed to block it. On October 19 Albertans answer the tenth question on a provincial ballot: whether to remain in Canada or to begin the constitutional process toward a binding referendum on separation. Premier Danielle Smith added the question after a court quashed a separatist petition in May for failing to consult First Nations; she says she will vote to stay, and polls put remaining at about 70%. The external threat has so far united Canadians more than it has divided them, but the two votes show how quickly the federation's old questions reopen under pressure.

Module 4 — Mexico

The Southern Neighbor and America's Largest Trading Partner



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Wilson Center Mexico Institute; International Crisis Group Mexico reports

4a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Claudia Sheinbaum, 64 — in office since October 2024 (2.0 years); Morena; single six-year term to 2030
System	Federal presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	133.0 million (2026)
Land area	1,943,950 km² (750,560 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 77.7%, Protestant or evangelical 11.2%, no religion 8.1% (2020 census)
People	19.4% identify as Indigenous and 2.0% as Afro-Mexican; most are of mixed (mestizo) descent, which the census does not ask (2020 census); median age 31; 82% urban
Minimum wage	315.04 pesos a day since January 1, 2026 (US$17.53 at 17.97 pesos = US$1, Bank of Mexico, October 6, 2026); 440.87 pesos in the northern border zone

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Aztec empire's conquest in 1521, three centuries of Spanish rule, independence in 1821, the loss of half its territory to the US in 1848, and the 1910-20 Revolution shaped the one-party state of the PRI. The drug war launched in 2006 has cost more than 400,000 lives. Andrés Manuel López Obrador's 2018 election and his Morena movement remade politics, and his successor, Claudia Sheinbaum, a climate scientist and former mayor of Mexico City, won the presidency in 2024 with 60% of the vote.

Current leadership: Sheinbaum, Mexico's first female president, governs with Morena-led two-thirds majorities in Congress that can amend the constitution, and has combined continuity on her predecessor's social programs with a more technocratic style and a firmer hand on security. Her approval was 70% in El Financiero's September 2026 survey, its highest since March, though other pollsters put it lower.

Government structure: Thirty-one states and Mexico City under the 1917 constitution, with a bicameral Congress and, since a 2024 overhaul, a judiciary elected by popular vote — the first in the world at every level. The new nine-member Supreme Court, elected in June 2025 on a turnout of about 13%, took office that September under Hugo Aguilar Ortiz, a Mixtec lawyer; the rest of the judiciary is elected in 2027. Morena's dominance has recreated the one-party pattern of the PRI era, and the autonomous regulators, the transparency agency among them, were abolished. Cartels control territory and coerce local governments across much of the country.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2.1 trillion economy, the world's thirteenth-largest and, since 2023, the largest trading partner of the United States, built on manufacturing integrated with the US (cars, electronics, aerospace, medical devices), oil (declining, under Pemex), agriculture, tourism, and remittances. Exports — a record $665 billion in 2025 — are led by cars and parts, computers, electronics, and machinery, about 80% of them to the US; imports by electronics, car parts, machinery, and fuel. Top trading partners: the US overwhelmingly, China, Canada, South Korea, and Germany. 'Nearshoring' brought record investment; Trump's tariffs and the USMCA's uncertain future have made the relationship the economy's central risk.

Closest partners: The United States, by necessity: the USMCA, about 38 million people of Mexican origin across the border, and security cooperation Sheinbaum has expanded to manage Trump (4b). China, a growing investor and the source of components Washington wants out of North American supply chains, now facing Mexican tariffs (4b). The EU, with which Mexico signed a modernized trade agreement in May 2026. Canada, as fellow USMCA partner; and Latin America, where Mexico stays diplomatically low-key.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The United States, over tariffs, the USMCA's future, migration, fentanyl, the remittance tax (10b), and Trump's threats of military action against the cartels inside Mexico (4b). The cartels themselves: the war between Sinaloa's factions, the Jalisco cartel's reach, and the extortion, disappearances, and political killings that persist even as homicides fall. Domestically, the judicial overhaul's consequences, Pemex's debt, and the concentration of power in Morena.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Remittances	$62.5 billion in 2025, down 3.9% — the first fall in eleven years — and up 2.2% in January-August 2026	Fewer transfers, larger amounts
Growth	0.8% in 2025, the weakest since 2020; about 1.2% expected for 2026; per head ~$14,000	Manufacturing about a fifth of output, the nearshoring base
Prices and rates	Inflation 3.45% in September 2026; the Bank of Mexico's rate 6.50%, held since its last cut in May	The easing cycle over; the 3% target not expected until late 2027
Public finance	Debt ~55% of GDP; a deficit ~4%; Pemex's financial debt down to 1.35 trillion pesos (about $75 billion) in June 2026, the lowest since 2015, plus about $21 billion owed to suppliers	Pemex still the state's largest liability
Military	~$12 billion; the army and the National Guard in the cartel war and migration control	The army as the state's builder and its policeman
Regime	Freedom House 58/100, down from 59	The institutions' erosion and the democracy debate

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Security	About 28,000 homicides in 2025, down 17% and the fewest since 2016; official daily averages by mid-2026 about half those of September 2024, though analysts warn that disappearances and reclassification flatter the figures; the cartels designated terrorist organizations by Washington in February 2025	The sovereignty question
Energy	Pemex's crude output 1.37 million barrels a day in the first half of 2026, near its lowest on record; refining above 1 million barrels a day for the first time since 2016; about 70% of gas imported from Texas	Energy nationalism against integration

In depth — the question: whether a country so bound to a power that calls its criminals terrorists, and whose own institutions it has remade around one party, can keep its sovereignty, its treaty, and its democracy at the same time.

4b. Managing Washington

Sheinbaum's approach to Trump has been the region's most studied: cooperate visibly on what he demands while drawing an absolute line at American military operations on Mexican soil and refusing public confrontation. Mexico has sent 92 cartel figures to the United States in three mass transfers outside the extradition process — 29 in February 2025, 26 in August 2025, and 37 in January 2026; deployed troops to the border; accepted deportees; and from January 2026 imposed tariffs of up to 50% on 1,463 product lines from China and other countries without trade agreements. In February 2026 the army killed the leader of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel, Nemesio Oseguera ('El Mencho'), with American intelligence. The approach has kept Mexico's tariffs below Canada's, and no American strike on Mexican territory had been confirmed by October 2026, despite Trump's January threat to start 'hitting land'. Its costs are dependence on an unpredictable counterpart and American indictments that reach into Morena itself: in April 2026 the United States charged the governor of Sinaloa, Rubén Rocha Moya, and nine officials, and Sheinbaum demanded 'irrefutable proof'.

Module 5 — Northern Central America

Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador & Nicaragua



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Central America reports; InSight Crime; the Washington Office on Latin America

5a. Guatemala

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Bernardo Arévalo, 67 — in office since January 2024 (2.7 years); sworn in just after midnight on January 15; single term to January 2028; his party, Semilla, was dissolved in March 2026
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	19.0 million (2026)
Land area	107,160 km² (41,370 sq mi)
Religion	Evangelical 40%, Catholic 39%, no religion 19% (Latinobarómetro, 2024)
People	Ladino (mixed or European descent) 56.0%, Maya 41.7%, Xinka 1.8% (2018 census); median age 25; 54% urban
Minimum wage	3,816.90 quetzales a month for non-farm work outside the capital since January 1, 2026, plus a 250-quetzal bonus (US$499 before the bonus at about 7.65 quetzales = US$1, October 2026); rates vary by activity and region

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1821, Guatemala saw a 1954 CIA-backed coup end a decade of democratic reform and lead to a 36-year civil war (1960-96) in which some 200,000 people were killed, most of them Indigenous Maya and most by the army. The 1996 peace was followed by a UN-backed anti-corruption

commission that jailed a president before the elite expelled it in 2019. In 2023 Bernardo Arévalo, an anti-corruption outsider, won a runoff that the attorney general's office then tried to annul; international pressure and mass Indigenous protests secured his inauguration.

Current leadership: Arévalo is a sociologist and the son of Juan José Arévalo, the first president of the democratic decade of 1944-54. In May 2026 he finally replaced Attorney General Consuelo Porras, sanctioned by some 40 countries, the United States among them, when her term ended: her successor, Gabriel García Luna, took office on May 17, removed the anti-corruption prosecutor Rafael Curruchiche, and set up a commission to review the cases brought against her critics. But Arévalo's approval had fallen to about 28% by September, last among 18 Latin American leaders in one regional poll; the first round of the election to choose his successor is set for June 27, 2027.

Government structure: The 1985 constitution provides a unicameral Congress of 160, in which the 23 deputies elected for Arévalo's former party have been divided since May 2025, when 14 of them launched a new project — former Semilla deputies registered a new party, Raíces, in September 2026 — and in August 2026 Congress summoned 12 of his 14 ministers for questioning. The judiciary and the prosecutor's office were captured by the old elite, the 'pact of the corrupt'; a new Constitutional Court took office in April 2026. Indigenous Maya communities remain largely excluded from power.

Economy and trade: A roughly $120 billion economy, Central America's largest, built on remittances (a record $25.5 billion in 2025, from Guatemalans in the US), agriculture (coffee, sugar, bananas, cardamom), garments, and services. Exports are led by clothing, coffee, sugar, bananas, and cardamom; imports by fuel, machinery, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: the US (dominant), Mexico, China, El Salvador, and Honduras. Chronic malnutrition, inequality, and emigration define the economy despite growth.

Closest partners: The United States, which backed his inauguration and sanctioned his opponents, though the Trump administration's priorities shifted to migration, deportation, and trade: a 2025 migration agreement, a reciprocal trade agreement signed in January 2026, and in March 2026 the lifting of limits on arms sales to Guatemala's army that dated from 1977. The EU; Mexico; and Taiwan, of which Guatemala is the largest remaining ally.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The prosecutors and judges of the old order, who blocked his agenda; the congressional opposition; the gangs, whose prison riots and killings of police in January 2026 brought a 30-day state of siege; and the transport unions and Indigenous authorities whose blockades over fuel prices closed roads in September. Guatemala has a territorial claim against Belize (6c).

5b. Honduras

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Nasry Asfura, 68 — in office since January 2026 (0.7 years); National Party; term to 2030
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	11.2 million (2026)
Land area	111,890 km² (43,200 sq mi)
Religion	Evangelical 48%, Catholic 33%, no religion 19% (a 2025 survey by Gallup's Central American affiliate)
People	Mostly mestizo; 8.6% identify with an Indigenous or Afro-Honduran people, the Lenca the largest (2013 census); median age 26; 62% urban
Minimum wage	9,596.64 to 19,298.72 lempiras a month by sector and firm size, retroactive to January 1, 2026 (US$355 to US$714 at 27.03 lempiras = US$1, central bank, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The original 'banana republic', Honduras was dominated by US fruit companies and the military through the 20th century, hosted the Contra war against Nicaragua in the 1980s, and saw a 2009 coup remove President Manuel Zelaya. Twelve years of National Party rule followed, and its last president, Juan Orlando Hernández, was extradited to the US in 2022; Zelaya's wife, Xiomara Castro of Libre, governed from 2022 to 2026.

Current leadership: Nasry Asfura, a former mayor of Tegucigalpa, was declared the winner of the November 30, 2025 election on December 24, after a slow and disputed count, beating the Liberal Salvador Nasralla by less than a point; Trump had endorsed him and threatened to cut aid if he lost. Asfura has bet his presidency on Washington — Trump received him at Mar-a-Lago in February 2026 — and on austerity: a smaller budget, a plan to cut state institutions from 113 to 74, and an IMF program that expires at the end of 2026. His approval stood at about 43% in September 2026.

Government structure: The 1982 constitution sets a single four-year presidential term — an attempt to allow re-election triggered the 2009 coup — and a unicameral Congress of 128, in which the National Party's 49 seats govern with Liberal support. Institutions are weakened by narco-penetration: Hernández, sentenced in New York in 2024 to 45 years for drug trafficking, was pardoned by Trump two days before the 2025 election and freed on December 1; he returned home in July 2026, and a judge dismissed a Honduran fraud case against him in September, a ruling prosecutors are appealing. The extradition treaty with the United States, which Castro had moved to end, remains in force.

Economy and trade: A roughly $38 billion economy built on remittances (over a quarter of GDP), garments and textiles from export zones, coffee, bananas, palm oil, and shrimp. Exports are led by clothing, coffee, bananas, and palm oil; imports by fuel, machinery, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: the US (dominant), Guatemala, El Salvador, Mexico, and China.

Closest partners: The United States; Taiwan, abandoned for China in 2023 — a decision Asfura has reviewed without reversing, while promised free-trade talks with Beijing have stalled; and Guatemala and El Salvador.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Libre, which rejected the result; the gangs and cartels that made Honduras a cocaine corridor — in September 2026 the government declared MS-13, Barrio 18, and a local cartel terrorist groups and Congress voted to hold suspected members in maximum-security cells before trial; and the poverty that sends a tenth of the population abroad.

5c. El Salvador

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Nayib Bukele, 45 — in office since June 2019 (7.3 years); Nuevas Ideas; second term since June 2024; seeks a third in the February 28, 2027 election
System	Presidential republic, personalist in practice
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	6.39 million (2026); the 2024 census counted 6.03 million
Land area	20,720 km² (8,000 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 42.7%, evangelical 35.6%, no religion 19.2% (Central American University survey, published 2026)
People	Mestizo 86.3%, white 12.7%, Indigenous 0.2% (2007 census); median age 29; 77% urban

At a glance	As of October 2026
Minimum wage	US$408.80 a month in commerce, industry, and services since June 1, 2025 (the US dollar is the currency)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A coffee oligarchy and military rule produced the 1980-92 civil war, in which some 75,000 people died, most at the hands of US-backed government forces and death squads. The 1992 peace was followed by the rise of the MS-13 and Barrio 18 gangs, which made El Salvador one of the world's most violent countries. Nayib Bukele, elected in 2019 as an outsider, declared a state of exception in 2022 and imprisoned tens of thousands, collapsing homicides to among the hemisphere's lowest, and won a second term, with 85% of the vote, despite a constitutional ban.

Current leadership: Bukele governs with a legislative supermajority that on July 31, 2025 amended the constitution in a single session to allow indefinite re-election, lengthen the term to six years, abolish the runoff, and bring the next presidential election forward to 2027; the electoral tribunal formally called it on September 30, 2026. He is the hemisphere's most popular leader — about 93% approval in a May 2026 poll.

Government structure: Bukele's legislature removed the constitutional court's judges and the attorney general in 2021, the state of exception has been renewed every month since it was declared, and the 2025 amendments removed the last limits; Freedom House cut its score from 47 to 42. More than 91,000 people had been detained under the exception by February 2026, many without trial, and rights groups count about 480 deaths in custody; the prison population, 109,519 in March 2024, is the world's highest per head. A constitutional amendment of March 2026 allows life sentences for murder, rape, and terrorism.

Economy and trade: A roughly $36 billion economy built on remittances (nearly a quarter of GDP), garments, services, coffee, and sugar, dollarized since 2001. Exports are led by clothing, sugar, coffee, and plastics; imports by fuel, machinery, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: the US (dominant), Guatemala, Honduras, and China. Bukele's 2021 adoption of Bitcoin as legal tender was reversed in January 2025 under a $1.4 billion IMF program; his security success has boosted tourism and investment.

Closest partners: The United States under Trump, in a partnership built on deportations, the CECOT prison, and a March 2026 agreement on civil nuclear power; China, recognized over Taiwan since 2018; Guatemala and Honduras; and the Gulf states and cryptocurrency investors Bukele has courted. His model is admired by the region's right from Argentina to Ecuador.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Human-rights organizations, the press, and what remains of the opposition, which face exile and prosecution under the May 2025 Foreign Agents Law, which taxes foreign funding of civil-society groups at 30%; and the question of what happens to a security model built on mass detention when the state of exception ends — or whether it ever does.

5d. Nicaragua

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Co-President Daniel Ortega, 80 — in office since January 2007 (19.7 years); Sandinista National Liberation Front; also led the country 1979–90
Co-president	Co-President Rosario Murillo, 75 — in office since February 2025 (1.6 years); his wife; vice president 2017–25
System	Family dictatorship under the Sandinista Front, with two co-presidents
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	7.10 million (2026)
Land area	120,340 km² (46,460 sq mi)
Religion	Protestant 38.3%, Catholic 28.3% (M&R Consultores, 2025); Catholic 58.5% in the 2005 census
People	Mestizo about 69%, white about 17%, Black about 9%, Indigenous about 5% (estimates); median age 27; 61% urban
Minimum wage	6,188.02 córdobas a month in farming to 13,848.23 in construction and finance since March 1, 2026 (US$169 to US$378 at the fixed 36.62 córdobas = US$1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Somoza family dictatorship (1936-79) was overthrown by the Sandinista revolution, whose government under Daniel Ortega fought the Contras through the 1980s and lost the 1990 election. Ortega returned to power and dismantled democracy: the 2018 protests were crushed with over 300 killed, opposition candidates were jailed before the 2021 election, hundreds of political prisoners were stripped of citizenship and expelled, and a 2025 constitutional change extended terms to six years. Nicaragua is Central America's most closed state.

Current leadership: Murillo, the regime's day-to-day manager, would remain in office without an election if her husband died, and their children hold key posts. Ortega is visibly ill — he vanished from public view for weeks at a time in mid-2026, and the government publishes nothing about his health. On July 19 he said Nicaragua would hold no more elections, a line later softened; on September 1 the Assembly passed what was reported as the first of two votes on a reform lengthening terms to seven years and moving the next election to November 2028, with the second due in January 2027.

Government structure: The 2025 constitution abolished the separation of powers and gave the co-presidents the power to 'coordinate' the legislature, courts, electoral authority, and police. The opposition is imprisoned or exiled, and at least 452 critics have been stripped of citizenship, according to UN experts who in September 2026 called the repression crimes against humanity; the Catholic Church is persecuted; more than 5,600 civil-society groups have lost their legal status since 2018; and independent media operate from Costa Rica.

Economy and trade: A roughly $19 billion economy built on gold (the largest export), beef, coffee, sugar, garments from free zones, and remittances. Exports are led by gold, beef, coffee, and clothing; imports by fuel, machinery, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: the US (dominant, despite the sanctions), Mexico, Guatemala, and China.

Closest partners: Russia, which provides security training and diplomatic cover; China, recognized in 2021 over Taiwan and a source of loans and a free-trade agreement; and Cuba and Iran as ideological allies, Venezuela's support having ended with Maduro's fall. Nicaragua has also served as a transit route for US-bound migrants flying into Managua.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The United States, which sanctions the regime and has ordered a tariff on Nicaraguan goods outside the CAFTA-DR rules that starts at 10% in January 2027 and rises to 15% in 2028; the exiled opposition and the Church; Costa Rica, host to hundreds of thousands of Nicaraguan exiles; and the OAS, which Nicaragua left in 2023 (9c).

5e. The Corridor

The four states of northern Central America have long been the source of the largest migration flow to the US border and the focus of American policy on the isthmus. They have taken four different paths in the 2020s: Guatemala's embattled democratic reform, Honduras's return to a US-aligned right after a disputed vote, El Salvador's popular authoritarianism, and Nicaragua's dynastic dictatorship. What they share is dependence on remittances (1b), penetration by cartels and gangs, and exposure to a Washington that treats deportation and drug interdiction as the whole of its relationship with them (10b).

Module 6 — Southern Central America

Costa Rica, Panama & Belize



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Americas Society/Council of the Americas; La Nación (San José); La Prensa (Panama)

6a. Costa Rica

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Laura Fernández, 40 — in office since May 2026 (0.4 years); Pueblo Soberano; term to May 2030
System	Presidential republic with no army
Freedom House	Free
Population	5.17 million (2026)
Land area	51,060 km² (19,710 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 50%, evangelical 31%, no religion 16% (National University survey, 2025)
People	White or mestizo 83.6%, mulatto 6.7%, Indigenous 2.4%, Black 1.1% (2011 census); median age 37; 84% urban
Minimum wage	373,092.30 colones a month for an unskilled worker since January 1, 2026 (US$816 at about 457 colones = US$1, central bank, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1821, Costa Rica abolished its army in 1948 after a brief civil war and built one of Latin America's most stable democracies and welfare states on coffee, bananas, and later ecotourism and technology. Rodrigo Chaves, an outsider elected in 2022, clashed with the legislature, courts, and press while remaining popular on crime and the cost of living.

Current leadership: Laura Fernández, a former planning minister and chief of staff to Rodrigo Chaves, won the February 1, 2026 election in the first round with 48.5% on a promise to continue his agenda, and Pueblo Soberano took 31 of the 57 Assembly seats. Chaves sits in her cabinet as both minister of the presidency and finance minister — posts that, the Associated Press reported, preserve his immunity from prosecution on corruption allegations.

Government structure: The 1949 constitution enshrines the army's abolition and sets a four-year presidential term without immediate re-election, a unicameral Legislative Assembly, and strong courts and electoral institutions.

Economy and trade: A roughly $95 billion economy, among Central America's richest per head, built on high-tech manufacturing (medical devices, semiconductors — Intel operates here), services, ecotourism, and agriculture (bananas, pineapples, coffee). Exports are led by medical instruments, bananas, pineapples, and electronics; imports by fuel, machinery, and electronics. Top trading partners: the US (dominant), the EU, China, and Mexico. Costa Rica produces nearly all its electricity from renewables.

Closest partners: The United States, its largest partner and the source of the technology investment that built its economy — and, in 2025, of a deportation-transit agreement that drew criticism; the EU; the OECD, which it joined in 2021; and its Central American neighbors, though it keeps its distance from the region's authoritarians.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Costa Rica has no adversaries. Its crisis is the cocaine-driven violence that broke its record of low homicide — a record 905 killings in 2023, then 876 in 2024 and 873 in 2025 — alongside Nicaragua's regime next door.

6b. Panama

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President José Raúl Mulino, 67 — in office since July 2024 (2.3 years); Realizando Metas; single five-year term to July 2029
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	4.63 million (2026); the 2023 census counted 4.06 million
Land area	74,180 km² (28,640 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 65%, evangelical 22%, no religion 6% (national statistics institute survey, 2022)
People	Afro-descendant 31.7%, Indigenous 17.2% (the Ngäbe the largest people); the rest mostly mestizo (2023 census); median age 32; 71% urban
Minimum wage	1.48 to 3.51 balboas an hour by region, sector, and firm size since January 16, 2026 (the balboa is at par with the US dollar, which circulates as currency)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Separated from Colombia in 1903 with US backing to build the canal, Panama was a US protectorate in all but name until the 1977 treaties and the 1989 US invasion that removed Manuel Noriega. The canal was transferred in 1999 and expanded in 2016.

Current leadership: José Raúl Mulino, a former security minister, won in 2024 as the substitute for the disqualified former president Ricardo Martinelli, with a party and ally that hold only 17 of the Assembly's 71 seats. He has governed through the canal crisis with Washington (6d), mass protests over a 2025 pension reform, and the closure of the Darién migration route, and must decide by the end of 2026 whether to let the

Cobre Panamá copper mine restart: a ministerial commission recommended in September a negotiated, time-limited reopening that would end in an orderly closure.

Government structure: The 1972 constitution provides a unicameral National Assembly. The canal is run by an autonomous Panamanian authority under a constitutional mandate of neutrality. Democratic since 1989, with corruption a persistent issue.

Economy and trade: A roughly $90 billion economy, the region's fastest-growing over two decades — 4.4% in 2025 and 5.5% in the first half of 2026 — built on the canal (about 6% of GDP directly, far more indirectly), the Colón free zone, banking and dollarized finance, logistics, and copper — at the Cobre Panamá mine, closed after mass protests, the processing of ore mined before the closure resumed in April 2026. Exports are led by copper, bananas, and services; imports by fuel, machinery, and goods for re-export. Top trading partners: the US, China, Japan, and the EU.

Closest partners: The United States, its historic patron and canal guarantor under the 1977 treaties, whose demands Panama has partly met (6d); China, the canal's second-largest user and, until 2025, a growing partner; Colombia; and Costa Rica.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The United States, over the canal: Trump's demands to 'take back' the waterway, the fee disputes, and the sovereignty questions they raised. China, which warned of a 'heavy price' after Panama took over the Hutchison ports (6d). Domestically, the copper mine, pension protests, and corruption.

6c. Belize

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Johnny Briceño, 66 — in office since November 2020 (5.9 years); People's United Party; re-elected March 2025
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Dame Froyla Tzalam since May 2021
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	429,000 (2026)
Land area	22,810 km² (8,810 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 31.8%, no religion 31.0%, Protestant 29.8% (2022 census)
People	Mestizo 51.7%, Creole 25.2%, Maya about 11%, Garifuna 4.0%, Mennonite 3.8% (2022 census); median age 28; 47% urban
Minimum wage	5.00 Belize dollars an hour since January 1, 2023 (US$2.50 at the fixed 2 = US$1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: British Honduras became independent in 1981 over the objections of Guatemala, which claimed the entire territory. English-speaking, a Caricom member, and the only Central American member of the Commonwealth, Belize is the isthmus's outlier.

Current leadership: Briceño's party won 26 of the 31 seats, its second landslide in a row; the opposition United Democratic Party is led by Tracy Panton.

Government structure: A Westminster-style constitution of 1981, with a bicameral legislature and alternation between two parties; Freedom House docked its score in 2026 over malapportioned constituencies.

Economy and trade: A roughly $3.5 billion economy built on tourism (cruise ships, the barrier reef), agriculture (sugar, bananas, citrus), oil (small), and offshore services. Exports are sugar, bananas, citrus, and seafood; imports are fuel, machinery, and food. Top partners: the US, the UK, Mexico, and Guatemala.

Closest partners: The United States, the UK, Mexico, and Caricom; Taiwan, of which Belize is an ally; and, despite the claim, Guatemala.

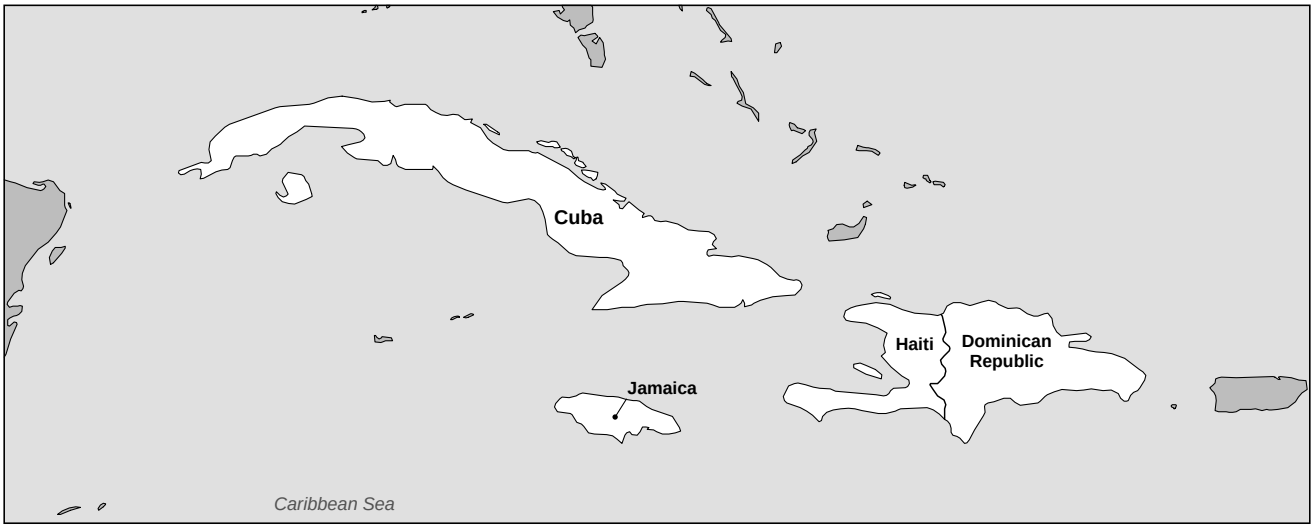
Principal rivalries and disputes: Guatemala's claim to about half of Belize — everything south of the Sibun River, with the cayes and the sea — which the two countries referred to the International Court of Justice after referendums in 2018 and 2019. Hearings are set for February 22-26, 2027, followed by Belize's separate case against Honduras over the Sapodilla Cayes, in which the court let Guatemala intervene in March 2026. In September 2026 Belize accused a Guatemalan military aircraft of entering its airspace with its transponder off, which Guatemala denied. Otherwise Belize has no adversaries; drug transit and hurricanes are its exposures.

6d. The Canal and the Ports

Trump's 2025 demands on Panama — that the canal was under Chinese control, that fees were excessive, that the United States should take it back — were the hemisphere's first test of the revived Monroe Doctrine. Panama's response was to give enough: it left China's Belt and Road in 2025, its comptroller audited Panama Ports Company, an April 2025 agreement allowed rotating deployments of US troops, and American warships were promised priority passage — while Panama refused to concede sovereignty. Then its courts went further than Washington had asked. On January 29, 2026 the Supreme Court declared the ports concession unconstitutional, and on February 23 the state took over the Balboa and Cristóbal terminals, now run under temporary concessions by the terminal arms of the shipping lines Maersk and Mediterranean Shipping Company (MSC) while Hutchison pursues arbitration. Hutchison's sale of its ports outside China to a consortium of BlackRock and MSC, agreed in principle in March 2025, was still unsigned in March 2026, when talks resumed on a deal without the Panama terminals. The crisis set the pattern the rest of the region has followed — accommodate the specific demand, protect the principle — and the ruling settled the specific demand for now.

Module 7 — The Greater Antilles

Cuba, Haiti, the Dominican Republic & Jamaica



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Haiti reports; Cuba Study Group; The Gleaner (Kingston)

7a. Cuba

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Miguel Díaz-Canel, President and First Secretary of the Communist Party, 66 — in office since April 2018 (8.5 years); party leader since April 2021; second and last presidential term ends 2028
Prime minister	Prime Minister Manuel Marrero, 63 — in office since December 2019 (6.8 years)
System	One-party communist state
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	10.9 million (2026); the national statistics office estimated 9.43 million at the end of 2025, after mass emigration
Land area	103,800 km² (40,080 sq mi)
Religion	Christian about 59%, mostly Catholic; Afro-Cuban faiths such as Santería about 18%; no religion about 23% (estimates)
People	White 64.1%, mulatto or mestizo 26.6%, Black 9.3% (2012 census); median age 43; 78% urban
Minimum wage	3,210 pesos a month since July 1, 2026 (US$4.13 at the informal rate of 778 pesos = US$1, October 6, 2026; the official rates are 24 and 120 pesos and a floating rate near 630 in August)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: A Spanish colony until the 1898 US intervention, Cuba was a US-dominated republic until Fidel Castro's 1959 revolution, which became communist, survived the Bay of Pigs and the Missile Crisis, and endured a US embargo now in its seventh decade. The Soviet collapse brought the 1990s 'Special Period' of hardship; Raúl Castro's succession in 2008 brought limited reforms and the 2014-16 Obama opening, reversed under Trump. Miguel Díaz-Canel, the first leader since 1959 who is not a Castro, faced the largest protests since the revolution in July 2021.

Current leadership: Díaz-Canel presides over Cuba's deepest crisis since the Soviet collapse. Venezuelan oil stopped with Maduro's fall in January 2026; a US executive order that month threatened tariffs on any country supplying Cuba with oil, and Mexico halted its shipments; a second order withdrew the tariff threat on February 20, the day of the Supreme Court's ruling, but Washington has since moved to sanction foreigners in Cuba's energy sector, and the Coast Guard has stopped fuel ships. The grid collapsed island-wide in March, August, and September 2026, with outages of 20 hours a day in places; inflation passed 18% a year by mid-2026; and the economy, which shrank by more than 15% from 2020 to 2025 by the University of Havana's estimate, is contracting again. More than a tenth of the population has emigrated since 2022. Raúl Castro, 95, retains influence, and the party congress due in April 2026 was postponed without a date.

Government structure: The 2019 constitution declares socialism irreversible; a National Assembly elected from single-candidate lists chooses the president. Dissent is criminalized: the 2021 protests were followed by hundreds of long prison sentences, and the 2026 blackouts brought new unrest — in March, protesters set fire to a party office in Morón. Of 51 political prisoners promised release in March 2026, only 19 had been freed four days later. Limited private enterprise has been allowed since 2021, and in 2026 the party widened it and let Cubans abroad invest in businesses.

Economy and trade: A state-controlled economy, with nickel, tobacco, sugar (collapsed), pharmaceuticals, tourism (collapsing), and the export of doctors as its earners. Imports of fuel and food are constrained by a lack of foreign exchange. Top partners: China, Spain, and Russia. The US embargo and the state's refusal of market reform are the structural causes.

Closest partners: Russia and China, providing oil, credit, and rhetoric but not rescue — a Russian tanker docked in March 2026 despite American warnings; Spain and the EU, its largest Western partners; and the diaspora, whose remittances are the economy's lifeline. Cuba says 32 of its soldiers died defending Maduro in the January raid.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The United States, in the hemisphere's oldest hostility: the embargo and the oil blockade (above), sanctions on Díaz-Canel himself in June 2026, and a May 2026 indictment of Raúl Castro over the 1996 shootdown of two exile aircraft. Talks, confirmed by Díaz-Canel in March, have produced 'channels of communication' but no agreement, and Washington has told Havana its president 'has to go'. The isolation has spread through the region: Honduras and Jamaica ended Cuban medical missions, Ecuador expelled Cuba's ambassador, and Costa Rica broke relations in March 2026. At home, a population voting with its feet.

7b. Haiti

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Alix Didier Fils-Aimé, 54 — in office since November 2024 (1.9 years); sole executive since the Transitional Presidential Council's mandate ended on February 7, 2026; the presidency is vacant and no official in the country is elected
System	Provisional government with no elected officials
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	12.0 million (2026)
Land area	27,560 km² (10,640 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic about 55%, Protestant about 30% (estimates, 2018); Vodou widely practiced alongside both
People	Black about 95%, mixed race and white about 5% (estimates); median age 25; 62% urban

At a glance	As of October 2026
Minimum wage	1,000 gourdes a day in the top wage segment since May 6, 2026, and 500 to 900 in the others (US$7.64 at about 131 gourdes = US$1, October 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The world's first Black republic, born of a slave revolution in 1804, Haiti was crippled by an indemnity France extracted in 1825, whose debts it finished paying only in 1947, a US occupation (1915-34), the Duvalier dictatorships (1957-86), and a 2010 earthquake that killed over 200,000. President Jovenel Moïse's assassination in 2021 left the presidency empty, and the last elected senators' terms ended in January 2023; gangs allied in the Viv Ansanm coalition seized most of Port-au-Prince and forced Prime Minister Ariel Henry's resignation in 2024.

Current leadership: The Transitional Presidential Council voted in January 2026 to dismiss Prime Minister Alix Didier Fils-Aimé, then backed down after the United States revoked the visas of four of its members and sent a warship to the capital's waters; Fils-Aimé now governs with American support. Elections promised for August 2026 were reset to December 13 and then, on October 6, left without a date, when the electoral council postponed the campaign and extended candidate registration to October 31; about a tenth of eligible voters had registered.

Government structure: Haiti's capital is up to 90% gang-held by UN estimates. More than 16,000 people have been killed in gang-related violence since 2022 — more than half of 2026's casualties came in security operations, including drone strikes by a government task force working with a private contractor — and nearly 1.5 million are displaced. The 1987 constitution's institutions — presidency, parliament, courts — are vacant or defunct. The UN-authorized Gang Suppression Force received its first 400 soldiers, from Chad, on April 1, 2026 and had about 1,500 by late September, under 30% of its ceiling; the Security Council renewed it on September 29 to March 31, 2027, with China, Russia, and Pakistan abstaining.

Economy and trade: The hemisphere's poorest economy, which shrank every year from 2019 to 2025, with about half the population facing acute hunger and inflation near 30%. Remittances and aid sustain it; garment exports to the US under trade preferences were the main formal employer until gang control of the capital's port and roads collapsed them. Gangs tax nearly every import at their checkpoints. Top partners: the US (dominant), the Dominican Republic, and China.

Closest partners: The United States, its largest donor and the force's main sponsor, whose Supreme Court in June 2026 allowed the end of temporary protected status for about 350,000 Haitians in the United States; the Dominican Republic, which walls it out; Caricom; the troop contributors — Chad, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, and Mongolia among them; the UN; and the diaspora.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The gangs, which the United States designated terrorist organizations in 2025 and which are the state's real rival and in places its replacement; the Dominican Republic, over deportations and the border; and the international community's inability to muster and fund a force large enough to matter. The question is no longer when Haiti holds elections but whether the state can be reconstituted at all.

7c. Dominican Republic

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Luis Abinader, 59 — in office since August 2020 (6.1 years); Modern Revolutionary Party; second and final term to August 2028
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	11.6 million (2026); the 2022 census counted 10.76 million
Land area	48,320 km² (18,660 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 59.2%, Protestant 19.0%, no religion 16.6% (Centro Económico del Cibao survey, 2021)
People	By self-description, indio 34.2%, moreno 26.1%, white 18.7%, mestizo 7.7%, Black 7.5%, mulatto 3.8% (2022 census, ages 12 and over); median age 30; 86% urban
Minimum wage	29,988 pesos a month at large firms since February 1, 2026, and 16,993.20 at micro firms (US$491 and US$278 at 61.10 pesos = US$1, central bank, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Sharing Hispaniola with Haiti, the Dominican Republic endured Trujillo's dictatorship (1930-61), a 1965 US intervention, and Joaquín Balaguer's long dominance before becoming a stable democracy.

Current leadership: Luis Abinader, a businessman, won re-election in 2024 with 57% in the first round. His government has combined economic growth, anti-corruption reform, and a hard line on Haiti: a border wall, the deportation of 379,553 Haitians in 2025, and the continued denial of citizenship to Dominican-born people of Haitian descent.

Government structure: The 2010 constitution, amended in 2024 to put the two-term limit beyond amendment, provides a four-year presidential term, a bicameral Congress, and a democracy that has alternated power peacefully since the 1990s. Institutions are stronger than the regional average; corruption persists.

Economy and trade: A roughly $125 billion economy, the Caribbean's largest and one of the hemisphere's fastest-growing, built on tourism (the region's largest industry), free-zone manufacturing (medical devices, cigars, electrical equipment), gold (the Pueblo Viejo mine), agriculture, and remittances. Exports are led by gold, medical devices, cigars, and electrical products; imports by fuel, machinery, and consumer goods. Top trading partners: the US (dominant), China, Haiti, and Switzerland.

Closest partners: The United States, its largest partner in trade, tourism, and diaspora; Spain and the EU; Caricom, with which it has a trade agreement though it is not a member; and the CAFTA-DR free-trade area. Abinader aligns with Washington on Haiti and migration and joined the Shield of the Americas (9c).

Principal rivalries and disputes: Haiti, in the relationship that defines Dominican politics: the citizenship denials, which international courts have condemned, and the fear that Haiti's collapse spills across the island. Otherwise the Dominican Republic has no adversaries.

7d. Jamaica

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Andrew Holness, 54 — in office since March 2016 (10.6 years); Jamaica Labour Party; third term since September 2025; also prime minister 2011–12
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Sir Patrick Allen since February 2009
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	2.83 million (2026)
Land area	10,830 km² (4,180 sq mi)
Religion	Protestant 64.8%, no religion 21.3%, Catholic 2.2%, Rastafari 1.1% (2011 census)
People	African descent 76.3%, mixed African and European 15.1%, Indian 3.4%, white 3.2%, Chinese 1.2% (2011 census); median age 34; 59% urban
Minimum wage	17,000 Jamaican dollars a 40-hour week since July 1, 2026 (US$107 at about 158.7 Jamaican dollars = US$1, October 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent from Britain in 1962, Jamaica's politics were a violent two-party contest between Michael Manley's democratic socialists and Edward Seaga's conservatives through the 1970s and 1980s, and gang violence tied to both persists.

Current leadership: Holness's party won 35 of the 63 seats in the election held eight weeks before Hurricane Melissa made landfall on October 28, 2025, as a Category 5 storm, the strongest on record to strike Jamaica: 45 people died, and the damage was put at $8.8 billion, 41% of the previous year's GDP, by the World Bank, and at about $12 billion by the government's planning institute. Recovery defines the new term: the World Bank's $150 million catastrophe bond paid out in full, international lenders offered up to $6.7 billion over three years, and the fiscal rules were suspended until March 2027.

Government structure: A Westminster-style parliament under the 1962 constitution; a promised transition to a republic has stalled. Democratic and stable, with a homicide rate among the world's highest, though it fell sharply in 2024-25 under states of emergency and policing reforms.

Economy and trade: A roughly $22 billion economy built on tourism (roughly a third of GDP), remittances, bauxite and alumina, and agriculture. Exports are alumina, bauxite, and rum; imports are fuel, food, and machinery. Top partners: the US (dominant), China, and Canada. Debt fell from 147% of GDP in 2013 to 62% in March 2025 — the Caribbean's fiscal success story — before Hurricane Melissa's costs and a recession pushed it back to about 66%.

Closest partners: The United States, its largest trading partner and diaspora home; the UK and Canada; Caricom, which Jamaica anchors alongside Trinidad and Tobago; China, a major infrastructure builder; and the IMF and World Bank, whose programs made Jamaica a fiscal model and now finance its recovery.

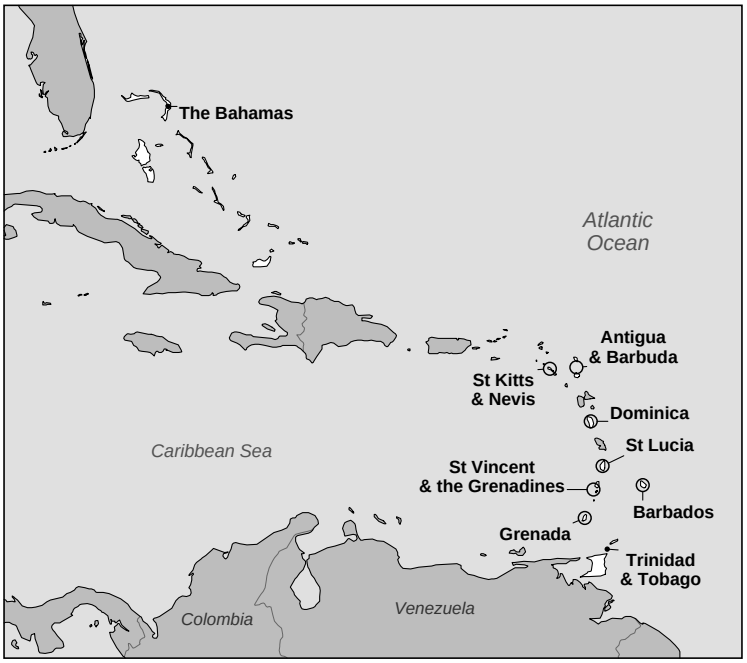
Principal rivalries and disputes: Jamaica has no adversaries. Its disputes are internal — gang violence, the republic question, and emigration — and its exposures are hurricanes and US deportations of Jamaican-born gang members.

7e. Two Failures and Two Successes

The four states of the Greater Antilles contain the region's starkest contrasts. Cuba's regime has survived every crisis since 1959 and is now failing on the basics — electricity, food, fuel — while refusing the reforms that might save it. Haiti's state has ceased to exist as an elected entity, and its capital belongs to gangs. Next door, the Dominican Republic is the hemisphere's growth story and Jamaica its fiscal turnaround, though Melissa showed how fast a hurricane can erase a decade's gains. The two failures and the two successes share the same sea, the same hurricanes, and the same American market; what separates them is governance, and the Dominican wall against Haiti is the region's most literal expression of that divide.

Module 8 — The Smaller Islands

The Bahamas, Barbados, Trinidad & Tobago, and the Six OECS States



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Caricom Secretariat; OECS Commission; Caribbean Policy Research Institute

8a. The Bahamas

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Philip Davis, 75 — in office since September 2021 (5.1 years); Progressive Liberal Party; re-elected May 12, 2026
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Dame Cynthia Pratt since September 2023
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	405,000 (2026)
Land area	10,010 km² (3,860 sq mi)
Religion	Baptist 34.1%, Anglican 11.9%, Catholic 8.7%, Pentecostal 8.0%, no religion 6.2% (2022 census)
People	African descent about 91%, white about 5% (2010 estimates); median age 37; 84% urban
Minimum wage	6.50 Bahamian dollars an hour since January 1, 2023 (US$6.50 at par)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent from Britain in 1973, the Bahamas has alternated power between two parties; Hurricane Dorian devastated its northern islands in 2019.

Current leadership: Philip Davis called an early election and won 33 of the 41 seats, against eight for the Free National Movement.

Government structure: A Westminster-style parliament under the 1973 constitution, governing an archipelago of about 700 islands, the nearest 80 kilometers from Florida.

Economy and trade: A roughly $16 billion economy built on tourism (half of GDP) and offshore financial services. Imports are nearly everything; exports are lobster and services. Top partners: the US (dominant).

Closest partners: The United States, overwhelmingly — tourism, finance, and security; the UK; Caricom, whose community the Bahamas belongs to but not its single market; and China, which has built infrastructure.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The Bahamas has no adversaries. Its issues are hurricanes, Haitian migration, drug transit, and scrutiny of its offshore finance.

8b. Barbados

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Mia Mottley, 61 — in office since May 2018 (8.4 years); Barbados Labour Party; third term since February 2026
Head of state	President Jeffrey Bostic, about 65 (64 in September 2025; exact date unpublished) — in office since November 2025 (0.8 years); ceremonial; elected by parliament
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	283,000 (2026)
Land area	430 km² (166 sq mi)
Religion	No religious affiliation about 45% of those counted in the 2021 census, up from about 21% in 2010; Anglican the largest church (23.9% in 2010)
People	African descent 92.4%, mixed 3.1%, white 2.7%, East Indian 1.3% (2010 census); median age 41; 32% urban
Minimum wage	10.71 Barbados dollars an hour since January 21, 2026 (US$5.36 at the fixed 2 = US$1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Britain's 'Little England' for three centuries, Barbados became independent in 1966 and a republic in 2021, removing the British monarch.

Current leadership: Mia Mottley, the Caribbean's most prominent leader internationally, called an early election and won all 30 seats for the third time running, on a turnout of 42%.

Government structure: Westminster institutions, with a bicameral parliament and a strong democratic tradition, though the House of Assembly has no elected opposition.

Economy and trade: A roughly $7 billion economy built on tourism, offshore financial services, and rum. Imports are nearly everything. Top partners: the US, the UK, Trinidad, and China. Barbados restructured its debt in 2018-19 and pioneered climate-linked debt instruments.

Closest partners: Caricom, which Mottley leads in climate and finance diplomacy; the UK, the US, and Canada; the EU; and China. Her Bridgetown Initiative has made Barbados a voice in global forums beyond its size.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Barbados has no adversaries; its issues are debt, climate exposure, and the dominance of a single party.

8c. Trinidad and Tobago

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Kamla Persad-Bissessar, 74 — in office since May 2025 (1.4 years); United National Congress; also prime minister 2010–15
Head of state	President Christine Kangaloo, 64 — in office since March 2023 (3.5 years); ceremonial
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	1.51 million (2026)
Land area	5,130 km² (1,980 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 21.6%, Hindu 18.2%, Pentecostal or evangelical 12.0%, Anglican 5.7%, Muslim 5.0% (2011 census)
People	East Indian 35.4%, African 34.2%, mixed 22.8% (2011 census); median age 39; 54% urban
Minimum wage	20.50 Trinidad and Tobago dollars an hour since January 1, 2024 (US$3.03 at about 6.76 = US$1, October 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1962, the twin-island state built the Caribbean's only industrial economy on oil and then gas, under governments that have alternated between the People's National Movement and the United National Congress and its predecessors.

Current leadership: Persad-Bissessar's party won 26 of the 41 seats in April 2025, against the People's National Movement's 13. She is the Caribbean leader closest to Trump: she backed the US strikes on drug boats and on Venezuela, hosted an American radar on Tobago from November 2025 to March 2026, joined the Shield of the Americas, and supported the US-Israeli strikes on Iran.

Government structure: A republic since 1976, with a bicameral parliament; Tobago has its own assembly. States of emergency against gang violence ran from December 2024 to April 2025 and again from March to September 2026.

Economy and trade: A roughly $28 billion economy, the Caribbean's energy state, built on natural gas, LNG, petrochemicals (a leading exporter of ammonia and methanol), and oil, with declining output driving a search for new gas, including across the maritime border with Venezuela; the fertilizer maker Nutrien began closing its Trinidad plants in October 2025. Exports are LNG, ammonia, methanol, crude oil, and iron and steel; imports are machinery, food, and vehicles. Top partners: the US, the EU, and Caricom.

Closest partners: The United States, its largest partner and, through its licenses, the gatekeeper of Trinidad's hopes to import gas from Venezuela's Dragon field — a license revoked in April 2025 and reissued in October; Caricom, which Trinidad and Tobago anchors economically; the EU; and India, its cultural partner. In September 2026 the prime minister met Venezuela's acting president, Delcy Rodríguez, in New York, ending a year of hostility with Caracas.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Trinidad and Tobago has no state adversary, but it has fought with its Caribbean partners: Persad-Bissessar derided the bloc's call for a 'zone of peace' as siding with Maduro's 'narco-government' (9b).

8d. The Six OECS States

Antigua and Barbuda

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Gaston Browne, 59 — in office since June 2014 (12.3 years); Antigua and Barbuda Labour Party; fourth term since the April 30, 2026 election
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Sir Rodney Williams since August 2014
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	95,000 (2026)
Land area	440 km² (170 sq mi)
Religion	Protestant 68.3% (Anglican 17.6%, Seventh-day Adventist 12.4%, Pentecostal 12.2%), Catholic 8.2% (2011 census)
People	Black 91.0%, mixed 4.4%, white 1.9% (2001 census); median age 38; 24% urban
Minimum wage	11.50 Eastern Caribbean dollars an hour since April 1, 2026 (US$4.26 at the fixed 2.70 = US$1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1981, Antigua and Barbuda was governed for most of its first three decades by the Bird family's Labour Party, which under Gaston Browne won the latest election with 15 of the 17 seats.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2 billion economy built on tourism and citizenship-by-investment. Top partners: the US and the UK.

Partners and disputes: The US, the UK, and Caricom; citizenship sales draw EU and US scrutiny, and Barbuda's land rights are a recurring domestic dispute.

Saint Kitts and Nevis

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Terrance Drew, 49 — in office since August 2022 (4.2 years); Saint Kitts and Nevis Labour Party
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Dame Marcella Liburd since February 2023
System	Federal parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	47,000 (2026); the 2021-22 census counted 51,320
Land area	260 km² (100 sq mi)
Religion	Anglican 17%, Methodist 16%, Pentecostal 11%, Church of God 7%, Catholic 6% (2011 census)
People	African descent 92.7%, mixed 2.2%, white 2.2% (2001 census); median age 38; 32% urban
Minimum wage	12.50 Eastern Caribbean dollars an hour since July 1, 2025 (US$4.63 at the fixed 2.70 = US$1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The smallest sovereign state in the Americas, independent in 1983, with Nevis holding a constitutional right to secede that a 1998 referendum narrowly failed to invoke, the vote for secession falling short of the two-thirds required.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1.2 billion economy built on tourism and the world's oldest citizenship-by-investment program. Top partners: the US and the UK.

Partners and disputes: The US, the UK, and Caricom; Taiwan, an ally; the citizenship program faces EU visa-waiver pressure.

Dominica

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Roosevelt Skerrit, 54 — in office since January 2004 (22.7 years); Dominica Labour Party; the longest-serving head of government in the Americas
Head of state	President Sylvanie Burton, about 61 (58 when elected in September 2023; exact date unpublished) — in office since October 2023 (3.0 years); ceremonial; the first Kalinago president
System	Parliamentary republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	66,000 (2026)
Land area	750 km² (290 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic about 58%; evangelical, Seventh-day Adventist, and Pentecostal churches among the next largest (2001 census and estimates)
People	African descent about 75%, mixed about 19%, Kalinago 2.9% (2001 census and estimates); median age 38; 73% urban
Minimum wage	9.00 Eastern Caribbean dollars an hour since December 1, 2025 (US$3.33 at the fixed 2.70 = US$1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1978, Dominica is the Caribbean's 'nature island', devastated by Hurricane Maria in 2017.

Economy and trade: A roughly $700 million economy built on agriculture (bananas), ecotourism, and citizenship by investment. Top partners: the US, the EU, and China.

Partners and disputes: China, which built its infrastructure and hospital; Venezuela, until Maduro's fall; and Caricom. The opposition boycotts elections and contests Skerrit's long rule.

Saint Lucia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Philip J. Pierre, 72 — in office since July 2021 (5.2 years); Saint Lucia Labour Party; re-elected December 1, 2025
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Acting Governor-General Felix Finisterre since August 2026
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	180,000 (2026)
Land area	610 km² (236 sq mi)
Religion	Christian 77.4%, mostly Catholic (61.5% in 2010); no religion 14.4% (2022 census)
People	African descent 85.3%, mixed 10.8%, East Indian 2.2% (2010 census); median age 36; 19% urban
Minimum wage	6.52 Eastern Caribbean dollars an hour, the country's first minimum wage, since October 1, 2024 (US$2.41 at the fixed 2.70 = US$1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1979, Saint Lucia has alternated between two parties and produced two Nobel laureates, the economist Arthur Lewis and the poet Derek Walcott. Pierre's party took 14 of the 17 seats at the last election.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2.5 billion economy built on tourism (the largest earner) and bananas. Top partners: the US, the UK, and Caricom.

Partners and disputes: The US, the UK, Caricom, and Taiwan, an ally; no significant disputes.

Saint Vincent and the Grenadines

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Godwin Friday, 67 — in office since November 2025 (0.9 years); New Democratic Party
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Stanley John since January 2026
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	99,000 (2026); the 2023 census counted 108,764
Land area	390 km² (151 sq mi)
Religion	Pentecostal 26.4%, Seventh-day Adventist 11.6%, Anglican 10.5%, Baptist 9.9%, no religion 14.0% (2023 census)
People	African descent 71.2%, mixed about 23%, Indigenous (Kalinago and Garifuna) 3.0% (2012 census); median age 36; 55% urban
Minimum wage	A floor of 50 Eastern Caribbean dollars a day since March 1, 2024, with higher rates by sector (US$18.52 at the fixed 2.70 = US$1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1979, Saint Vincent was governed for 24 years by Ralph Gonsalves, the Caribbean's most durable left-leaning leader, until Godwin Friday's party won 14 of the 15 seats.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1 billion economy built on tourism, bananas, and agriculture, and set back by the 2021 La Soufrière eruption. Top partners: the US, the UK, and Caricom.

Partners and disputes: Taiwan, an ally; Caricom; the US and the UK; no significant disputes.

Grenada

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Prime Minister Dickon Mitchell, 48 — in office since June 2022 (4.3 years); National Democratic Congress
Head of state	King Charles III, 77 — in office since September 2022 (4.1 years); ceremonial; represented by Governor-General Dame Cécile La Grenade since May 2013
System	Parliamentary constitutional monarchy
Freedom House	Free
Population	117,000 (2026)
Land area	340 km² (131 sq mi)
Religion	Protestant 49.2%, Catholic about 36%, no religion 7% (2011 estimates)

At a glance	As of October 2026
People	African descent 89.4%, mixed 8.2%, East Indian 1.6% (2001 census); median age 36; 38% urban
Minimum wage	A floor of 60 Eastern Caribbean dollars a day since January 1, 2024, with higher rates by category (US$22.22 at the fixed 2.70 = US$1)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1974, Grenada's 1979 Marxist revolution ended in a 1983 internal coup and US invasion. Democratic since, it turned to a younger generation with Dickon Mitchell's victory.

Economy and trade: A roughly $1.3 billion economy built on tourism, nutmeg and spices, and St. George's University's American medical students. Top partners: the US and Caricom.

Partners and disputes: The US, Caricom, and China; no significant disputes; recovery from Hurricane Beryl (2024) is the priority.

8e. Caricom's Small States

The nine states in this module have a combined population under three million and exclusive economic zones many times their land area. Their politics are Westminster-style and stable — every one has changed government by election — and their economies are tourism, offshore finance, and, for five of them, the sale of citizenship. Their foreign policy runs through Caricom, which gives them a collective voice on climate, debt, and Haiti, and through a calculated relationship with the United States, the UK, China, and Taiwan, three of whose remaining allies are here (1c). Washington's military campaign in the southern Caribbean has divided them (9b).

Module 9 — The Alliance Map

The USMCA, Caricom, the OAS, the Monroe Doctrine Revived & China

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Inter-American Dialogue; Wilson Center; Caricom Secretariat

9a. The Trade Blocs

The USMCA binds the three North American economies, and its first joint review, on July 1, 2026, ended without the renewal Canada and Mexico sought: the United States declined to extend its term, so the agreement now faces a review every year. Washington wants stricter rules of origin, the exclusion of Chinese content, and leverage on migration and drugs; it holds bilateral rounds with Mexico while waging a tariff war with Canada (3b). Below it, the CAFTA-DR agreement and Caricom's single market organize the smaller economies, all of which depend on American market access that tariffs have made conditional.

9b. Caricom and the Islands

Caricom — a single market, a shared climate and debt agenda, and, since October 2025, full free movement of people among Barbados, Belize, Dominica, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines — is the region's most developed institution after the USMCA, and its members' collective voice is far louder than their individual weight. It brokered Haiti's transitional council, coordinates on hurricanes and finance, and has been the platform for the Bridgetown Initiative (8b). Its limits showed in 2025-26. It could not compel Haiti's gangs or resist American pressure, and it split over the US strikes: most members called for the Caribbean to remain a 'zone of peace', while Trinidad and Tobago backed Washington. Persad-Bissessar then refused to accept the February 2026 reappointment of the secretary-general, Carla Barnett — her country pays about a fifth of the budget — and proposed asking the Caribbean Court of Justice to rule on it. Saint Lucia's Pierre took the rotating chair at the July summit, and two French territories, Martinique and French Guiana, became associate members in June and July 2026.

9c. The OAS, the Summit, and the Shield

The Organization of American States has declined on the questions that matter: it could not act on Nicaragua, Venezuela, or Haiti, and the United States, which owes half its regular budget, paid only about three-fifths of its dues in 2025 and 2026 and requested nothing for it in its 2027 budget. Under Albert Ramdin of Suriname, secretary-general since May 2025, it still acts at the margins: on October 2, 2026 its foreign ministers adopted by consensus a resolution demanding free elections in Nicaragua and the release of political prisoners, with Mexico standing aside and Brazil and Uruguay registering reservations. The Summit of the Americas that the Dominican Republic was to host in December 2025 was postponed without a new date, and in its place Trump gathered the leaders or envoys of twelve mostly right-leaning governments at his Doral resort in Florida on March 7, 2026 to launch the Shield of the Americas against the cartels — Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guyana, Honduras, Panama, Paraguay, and Trinidad and Tobago — while Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico went uninvited; Colombia's new president has since said he will join. The region's practical multilateralism now runs through sub-regional blocs and Washington's bilateral leverage — the Monroe Doctrine's revival in institutional form.

9d. China, Taiwan, and the Outside Powers

• **China** — a growing trading partner everywhere, though second to the United States nearly everywhere: ports (Panama's, until the 2026 ruling), infrastructure, loans, and diplomatic recognition won from Panama (2017), the Dominican Republic (2018), and El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Honduras (5b-5d). The revived Monroe Doctrine is aimed at exactly this presence, and Panama showed the US will act on it.

• **Taiwan** — the region is the last bastion of its diplomatic recognition (1c) and the target of Chinese inducement state by state.

• **Russia** — Cuba's and Nicaragua's patron of last resort (7a, 5d); Venezuela's fall has removed the region's other anti-American sponsor.

• **The UK and the Commonwealth** — the constitutional link for nine realms, a development and security partner in the islands, and a diminishing presence.

• **The EU and Spain** — Caricom's development donors and growing partners for Mexico and Canada as both diversify from the United States.

Module 10 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Latin America and Caribbean reports; Americas Society/Council of the Americas

10a. The Tariff and USMCA Fight

The region's central economic conflict is between the United States and its two largest trading partners, fought on two fronts: a treaty now reviewed year by year (9a) and a tariff war with Canada (3b). Canada and Mexico have answered differently — Canada with nationalism, counter-tariffs, and diversification, Mexico with visible cooperation and no retaliation (4b) — and both have learned that the treaty does not protect them from a president who treats it as leverage. The outcome will decide whether North America remains an integrated economy or becomes three economies with a dominant one. To watch: Canada's next round of retaliation or settlement, the bilateral rounds with Mexico, and whether the American truce with China (2a) is extended.

10b. Migration and Deportation

The American deportation campaign has reshaped the region: removals at the fastest pace in more than a decade (2a); third-country deportation deals (2b); the end of temporary protected status for Venezuelans, Hondurans, and Nicaraguans in 2025 and for Haitians (7b); a 1% tax since January 2026 on remittances sent in cash; and pressure on every government to accept flights. Remittance-dependent economies face the loss of workers and income (4a), and governments face the return of deportees, some with gang ties. The corridor's states have become Washington's enforcement partners whether they chose to or not. To watch: Haiti, where the end of protection meets a state that cannot receive its returnees.

10c. The Cartel War

The terrorist designations of the cartels, the strikes on drug boats and on targets ashore (2b), and the Shield of the Americas (9c) have militarized the drug war beyond anything since the 1980s — although Pentagon and drug-enforcement officials concluded in mid-2026 that the strikes had not reduced the flow of cocaine. Mexico's sovereignty line is the flashpoint (4b): an American strike there would rupture the relationship that anchors the region's economy. To watch: whether the boat campaign, reorganized in August 2026 under a new joint task force for the hemisphere, strikes ashore beyond Venezuela and Ecuador, and whether Honduras and Guatemala follow El Salvador's model of mass detention (5b, 5c).

10d. Haiti and Cuba

Two states are failing at once at the region's center. Haiti's is a state whose reconstruction depends on a force still far short of its strength and on elections without a date (7b). Cuba's is a regime that persists while the country empties and the lights go out, under an American oil blockade meant to break it (7a). Both send

migrants north, and both are problems the region's institutions have shown they cannot solve. To watch: whether the Gang Suppression Force reaches strength before its next renewal, whether Haiti's electoral council sets a date, and whether the contacts between Washington and Havana become a negotiation or the blockade becomes a collapse.

10e. Panama and the Venezuelan Spillover

The canal remains the test of the revived Monroe Doctrine; the ports ruling has eased the pressure (6d), and the copper mine's restart decision is the next test of whether Panama can satisfy investors, protesters, and Washington at once (6b). Venezuela's crisis reaches this region through the American military presence in the southern Caribbean, the strikes that split Caricom (9b), Trinidad and Tobago's gas plans (8c), the migration that touches every island, and Cuba's lost oil (7a). The Caribbean has become a theater of American combat operations on a scale unseen since the Cold War.

10f. The Votes Ahead

The next tests are electoral. The American midterms will decide whether the president's agenda faces a hostile House (2a). Alberta's referendum and Quebec's new sovereigntist government will show how far the pressure has strained the federation (3c). El Salvador votes on Bukele's third term (5c) and Guatemala on Arévalo's successor (5a); Haiti may or may not vote at all (7b); and the International Court of Justice hears Guatemala's claim to Belize (6c).

10g. The Last Word

The throughline of all ten modules: this is the region where one power's domestic politics are everyone else's foreign policy, and where that power has decided, since 2025, to use its dominance — on trade, migration, drugs, and sovereignty — more coercively than at any time since the Cold War (1a). The responses have varied: Canada's nationalism, Mexico's calculated cooperation, Panama's accommodation, Bukele's embrace, Cuba's defiance, Trinidad and Tobago's alignment, the islands' collective voice. Most of the region's states are democracies whose governments change by election, with three exceptions (1e). The question the course leaves open is whether the revived Monroe Doctrine produces a hemisphere aligned with Washington, or one that learns to extract what it can from a demanding patron while quietly building alternatives — and whether American voters change what the patron demands.

Key Points

North America & the Caribbean

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Dominica	Roosevelt Skerrit	Prime Minister	54	January 2004	22.7
Nicaragua	Daniel Ortega	Co-President	80	January 2007	19.7
Antigua	Gaston Browne	Prime Minister	59	June 2014	12.3
Jamaica	Andrew Holness	Prime Minister	54	March 2016	10.6
Cuba	Miguel Díaz-Canel	President and Party First Secretary	66	April 2018	8.5
Barbados	Mia Mottley	Prime Minister	61	May 2018	8.4
El Salvador	Nayib Bukele	President	45	June 2019	7.3
Dominican Rep.	Luis Abinader	President	59	August 2020	6.1
Belize	Johnny Briceño	Prime Minister	66	November 2020	5.9
St. Lucia	Philip J. Pierre	Prime Minister	72	July 2021	5.2
Bahamas	Philip Davis	Prime Minister	75	September 2021	5.1
Grenada	Dickon Mitchell	Prime Minister	48	June 2022	4.3
St. Kitts	Terrance Drew	Prime Minister	49	August 2022	4.2
Guatemala	Bernardo Arévalo	President	67	January 2024	2.7
Panama	José Raúl Mulino	President	67	July 2024	2.3
Mexico	Claudia Sheinbaum	President	64	October 2024	2.0
Haiti	Alix Didier Fils-Aimé	Prime Minister	54	November 2024	1.9
United States	Donald Trump	President	80	January 2025	1.7
Canada	Mark Carney	Prime Minister	61	March 2025	1.6
Trinidad	Kamla Persad-Bissessar	Prime Minister	74	May 2025	1.4
St. Vincent	Godwin Friday	Prime Minister	67	November 2025	0.9
Honduras	Nasry Asfura	President	68	January 2026	0.7
Costa Rica	Laura Fernández	President	40	May 2026	0.4

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's continuous tenure in the current office. Presidents lead the presidential republics; elsewhere the prime minister leads, under King Charles III, represented by a governor-general, in Canada, Belize, Jamaica, the Bahamas, and the five realms of the eastern Caribbean, and under a ceremonial president in Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, and Dominica. Cuba's president is also first secretary of its Communist Party, which leads the state; Nicaragua has two co-presidents, Ortega and his wife Murillo; Haiti has had no head of state since February 7, 2026. Trump was also president in 2017–21, Holness prime minister in 2011–12, Persad-Bissessar in 2010–15, and Ortega led the country in 1979–90.

The Takeaways

• One power's domestic politics are everyone else's foreign policy in this region: Washington's 2025-26 turn — tariffs, the deportation campaign, the cartel designations and boat strikes, the aid cuts, the seizure of Venezuela's president, the annexation talk — reached every state from Ottawa to Port-au-Prince.

• The United States is the region's power and its own democracy's test: the presidency expanded against courts that struck down the emergency tariffs and the birthright-citizenship order; debt passed $40 trillion

and the deficit reached $2 trillion; the Fed raised rates against the Iran war's oil shock; and the November 3, 2026 midterms, with Democrats favored to take the House, are the first national verdict.

• The tariff arithmetic lands on the integrator too: about $166 billion of struck-down tariffs is being refunded, but the metals and car tariffs stand, the USMCA was not renewed at its July 2026 review and now faces annual reviews to 2036, and a 50% tariff has hit much of Canada's trade since August 22.

• Canada was revived by the threat: Carney's Liberals came from far behind to win in April 2025, gained a majority in April 2026, and lead by double digits in the tariff war — while Quebec elected a sovereigntist government on October 5 and Alberta votes on October 19 on whether to start down the road to separation.

• Mexico, the most US-integrated large economy on earth, answers coercion with cooperation under a president with two-thirds majorities and 70% approval: 92 cartel figures sent north, tariffs on Chinese goods, no retaliation — while growth stalls near 1%, homicides fall, and judges are now elected.

• Northern Central America lives on remittances and migration: Guatemala's Arévalo replaced his obstructive attorney general but sits at the bottom of the region's approval polls; Honduras's Asfura won a disputed count after Trump pardoned his party's former president; El Salvador's Bukele seeks a third term in February 2027; and Nicaragua's ailing Ortega shares power with his wife.

• On the southern isthmus, Costa Rica elected Chaves's chosen successor in the first round and kept him in the cabinet; Panama's Supreme Court voided the Hong Kong-owned ports concession at the canal; and Guatemala's claim to half of Belize reaches hearings at the International Court of Justice in February 2027.

• Cuba is collapsing without a transition — island-wide blackouts, an American oil blockade, more than a tenth of its people gone since 2022 — and Haiti has no elected officials, a capital up to 90% gang-held, an international force far short of its strength, and elections without a date.

• The Dominican Republic deported 379,553 Haitians in 2025 and remains the region's growth story; Jamaica, its fiscal success, took a Category 5 hurricane that did damage worth two-fifths of its GDP; and the small island democracies split over Washington's strikes, Trinidad and Tobago for them and most of Caricom for a 'zone of peace'.

• The region's 2026 lesson is that a hemisphere can be run by consent or by coercion, and the year chose the second: the Monroe Doctrine spoken aloud, Venezuela's president seized, two neighbors tariffed, the OAS starved — and the checks on it, so far, are American courts, American states, and an American election.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. What happened at the USMCA's first joint review on July 1, 2026?

A) All three members extended it to 2052
B) Canada withdrew from the agreement entirely
C) Mexico was suspended until it excluded all Chinese parts from its exports
D) The United States declined to renew it, so it now faces annual reviews

2. What did the US Supreme Court rule on February 20, 2026?

A) That the president may remove Federal Reserve governors at will
B) That the emergency-powers law does not authorize tariffs
C) That the order ending birthright citizenship was constitutional
D) That the strikes on drug boats required a vote of Congress

3. Under what authority has a 50% US tariff applied to much of Canada's trade since August 22, 2026?

A) The USMCA's safeguard clause
B) The International Emergency Economic Powers Act
C) Section 338 of the Tariff Act of 1930
D) A joint resolution of Congress passed in July

4. What did Quebec's October 5, 2026 election produce?

A) A Parti Québécois minority government pledged to a sovereignty referendum after January 2029
B) A Liberal majority government
C) A second majority for the Coalition Avenir Québec
D) A Conservative-led coalition with the Liberals

5. What does the tenth question on Alberta's October 19, 2026 ballot ask?

A) Whether Alberta should leave Canada at once and apply to join the United States as a state
B) Whether the province should abolish the federal carbon tax within its borders
C) Whether Alberta should create its own pension plan and police force by 2028
D) Whether to begin the legal process toward a binding vote on separation

6. How has Mexico sent cartel suspects to the United States since 2025?

A) Only through court-approved extraditions
B) In three mass transfers of 92 people, outside the extradition process
C) It has refused to send any
D) Through a 2025 treaty that lets American agents make arrests inside Mexico

7. Why was Honduras's former president Juan Orlando Hernández free in 2026?

A) He completed his sentence
B) He escaped from a US prison
C) Trump pardoned him two days before the 2025 election, and a Honduran judge later dismissed a fraud case against him
D) An appeals court overturned his conviction

8. What did El Salvador's July 2025 constitutional amendments do?

A) Allowed indefinite re-election and six-year terms
B) Restored the two-term limit
C) Created a parliamentary system with a prime minister
D) Abolished the state of exception and freed most detainees

9. What did Panama's Supreme Court do on January 29, 2026?

A) Ordered the Cobre Panamá copper mine to reopen
B) Voided the canal ports concession
C) Ruled the 1977 canal treaties invalid and void
D) Barred American warships from priority passage

10. Who holds executive power in Haiti in October 2026?

A) Prime Minister Fils-Aimé, alone
B) An elected president
C) The nine-member Transitional Presidential Council
D) A UN administrator appointed by the Security Council

11. What cut Cuba's oil supply in 2026?

A) A hurricane that destroyed its main refinery
B) Russia's decision to cut its exports
C) Maduro's fall and Mexico's halt to shipments under US pressure
D) A strike by oil workers at the Matanzas terminal that lasted much of the year

12. Which hurricane struck Jamaica as a Category 5 storm in October 2025?

A) Beryl
B) Dorian
C) Maria
D) Melissa

13. How many of Taiwan's twelve remaining diplomatic allies are among this course's states?

A) Two
B) Four
C) Six, half of the twelve
D) Nine

14. Which of these governments were left out of the Shield of the Americas summit in March 2026?

A) Argentina and Chile
B) Ecuador, Paraguay, and Panama
C) Honduras, El Salvador, and Bolivia
D) Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico

15. Which leader in this course has held office the longest without a break?

A) Daniel Ortega of Nicaragua, co-president
B) Roosevelt Skerrit of Dominica
C) Gaston Browne of Antigua and Barbuda
D) Andrew Holness of Jamaica, in his third term

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. D 2. B 3. C 4. A 5. D 6. B 7. C 8. A 9. B 10. A 11. C 12. D 13. C 14. D 15. B

South America

Figures current as of October 2026

South America — the twelve states from Brazil to Suriname: leaders, governments, economies, partners, and the rivalries and transitions of a continent that swung right in 2025-26.

MODULE 1 — Foundations: A Continent Swinging Right

Goal: Establish the geography, the 2025-26 electoral cascade, the commodity economy, and the disputes that recur.

Covers the Andes-Amazon-Atlantic structure, the right turn across six elections, China as the largest buyer, the membership map, and the recurring disputes.

MODULE 2 — Brazil

Goal: Profile the continent's dominant power in its own module, between the two rounds of its election.

Covers Lula's bid for a fourth term against Flávio Bolsonaro, who led the first round; the imprisoned former president; American tariffs; and the fiscal trap.

MODULE 3 — Argentina

Goal: Profile the hemisphere's model of the new right.

Covers Milei's chainsaw, the fall and stall of inflation, the American lifeline, and the reforms after the midterm victory.

MODULE 4 — Venezuela

Goal: Profile the state whose president the United States removed, in its own module.

Covers Maduro's capture, Delcy Rodríguez's acting presidency, the earthquakes, the oil deals, and a transition without a date.

MODULE 5 — Colombia & Ecuador (the Northern Andes)

Goal: Profile the two states that turned to security-first presidents.

Covers de la Espriella's narrow victory and the end of 'total peace', and Noboa's war on the gangs after his referendum defeat.

MODULE 6 — Peru, Bolivia & Chile (the Southern Andes)

Goal: Profile the three states that swung right in 2025-26.

Covers Fujimori's narrow win and Peru's new Senate, Paz's fuel shock and float, and Kast's first months.

MODULE 7 — Paraguay, Uruguay, Guyana & Suriname

Goal: Profile the continent's four smaller states.

Covers Paraguay's Colorado dominance, Uruguay's model democracy, Guyana's oil boom and the Essequibo case, and Suriname's coming oil.

MODULE 8 — The Alliance Map: Mercosur, the Right-Wing Axis, China's Buyers, and the Revived Monroe Doctrine

Goal: Pull the profiles together into the continent's blocs.

Covers the EU-Mercosur agreement in force, the axis of the right, China as the largest buyer, and the United States after Venezuela.

MODULE 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch: The Live Flashpoints

Goal: Close with the active disputes.

Covers Venezuela's transition, Brazil's runoff, the cocaine war, Essequibo, and the durability of the right turn.

Who's Who

The groups, parties, institutions, and terms this course names

The parties, institutions, and abbreviations the modules rely on are defined here, before Module 1. The first column gives the country or countries each one belongs to or concerns, or 'Region-wide'; an abbreviation's full name follows it in parentheses.

Institutions, Alliances, and Agreements

Country	Name	Who or what
Five of the 12	Mercosur (Southern Common Market)	The customs union founded in 1991 by Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Uruguay.
Three of the 12	Pacific Alliance	The free-trade bloc of four Pacific states of Latin America, founded in 2011.
Region-wide	Union of South American Nations	The political union of the continent's states, founded in 2008.
Guyana, Suriname	Caricom (Caribbean Community)	The economic and political union of fifteen Caribbean members.
Brazil	BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa)	The bloc of large emerging economies its five founders formed in 2009-10, since enlarged.
Brazil	Group of 20	The forum of the world's largest economies, whose leaders meet each year.
Chile, Peru, Uruguay	Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership	The free-trade agreement of eleven Pacific Rim economies and the UK, Chile and Peru among them.
Region-wide	Shield of the Americas	The US-led coalition against drug cartels, formed in 2026 with like-minded governments of the hemisphere.
Region-wide	IMF (International Monetary Fund); World Bank	The two Washington-based lenders to governments: the first for balance-of-payments crises, on policy conditions, the second for development.
Region-wide	International Court of Justice	The UN's court for disputes between states.
Argentina	World Health Organization	The UN's agency for international public health.
Region-wide	Freedom House	The US-based research group that rates every country each year as Free, Partly Free, or Not Free, with a score out of 100.

Governments, Parties, and Courts

Country	Name	Who or what
Brazil	Workers' Party; Liberal Party	Lula's left-wing party, founded in 1980, and the right-wing party of Jair and Flávio Bolsonaro.
Brazil	Centrão	The loose bloc of centrist and conservative parties in Congress that trades its votes for posts and spending.
Brazil	Supreme Federal Court	Brazil's highest court, which also tries cases against senior officeholders.
Argentina	La Libertad Avanza; Peronism	Milei's libertarian party, founded in 2021, and the movement founded by Juan Perón that dominated Argentine politics after the 1940s.
Venezuela	United Socialist Party of Venezuela; Chavismo	The party Hugo Chávez founded in 2007, and the movement of Chávez and his successors.
Venezuela	Foro Penal	The Venezuelan human-rights group that counts political prisoners.

Country	Name	Who or what
Colombia	Defensores de la Patria; Pacto Histórico	De la Espriella's movement, founded in 2024, and the left-wing coalition of Gustavo Petro.
Colombia, Ecuador	Constitutional Court	In each country, the court that rules on whether laws and decrees comply with the constitution.
Ecuador	Acción Democrática Nacional	Noboa's party.
Ecuador	CONAIE (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador)	The Indigenous movement whose protests have helped bring down governments.
Peru	Fuerza Popular; Juntos por el Perú	Keiko Fujimori's right-wing party, and the left-wing party of Roberto Sánchez.
Bolivia	Movement for Socialism; Christian Democratic Party	The left-wing party Evo Morales led to power; and Paz's party.
Chile	Republican Party; Party of the People	The hard-right party Kast founded in 2019, and the populist party of Franco Parisi.
Paraguay	Colorado Party	The conservative party that has governed Paraguay for all but five years since 1947 (2008-13).
Uruguay	Broad Front	The left-wing coalition founded in 1971.
Guyana	People's Progressive Party/Civic; We Invest in Nationhood; A Partnership for National Unity	Ali's governing party; the party the businessman Azruddin Mohamed founded in 2025; and the coalition that governed from 2015 to 2020.
Suriname	National Democratic Party	The party Dési Bouterse founded in 1987.

Armed Groups

Country	Name	Who or what
Colombia	ELN (National Liberation Army)	The Marxist guerrilla group founded in 1964, the largest still fighting.
Colombia	FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia); FARC dissidents	The guerrilla army that fought from 1964 until a 2016 peace agreement disarmed most of it, and the factions that rejected the deal.
Colombia	Gulf Clan	Colombia's largest drug-trafficking organization, descended from right-wing paramilitaries.
Ecuador	Los Choneros; Los Lobos	Ecuador's two largest gangs, allied with Mexican cartels.
Brazil	PCC (First Capital Command); Comando Vermelho	Brazil's two largest criminal organizations, born in the prisons of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.
Venezuela	Tren de Aragua	The Venezuelan prison gang turned transnational criminal network.
Peru	Shining Path	The Maoist insurgency that waged war on the Peruvian state from 1980.

Places, Companies, and Terms

Country	Name	Who or what
Brazil	Selic; Petrobras	Brazil's benchmark interest rate, set by the central bank; and its state-controlled oil company.
Brazil	Banco Master	A private Brazilian bank.
Argentina	Vaca Muerta	Argentina's shale oil and gas formation in Neuquén province.
Colombia	Total peace	Gustavo Petro's policy of negotiating with all of Colombia's armed groups at once, guerrillas and drug-trafficking groups alike.
Guyana	Essequibo	The region west of the Essequibo River, about two-thirds of Guyana, which Venezuela claims.
Peru	Chancay	The deep-water port north of Lima built by the Chinese shipping company Cosco and opened in 2024.
Region-wide	Pink tide	The wave of left-wing governments that took power across South America in the 2000s.
Region-wide	Monroe Doctrine	President James Monroe's declaration of 1823 that the Americas were closed to new European colonization, later read as a claim to an American sphere of influence, and revived by the Trump administration in 2025.
Region-wide	GDP (gross domestic product)	The value of everything an economy produces in a year, converted at market exchange rates.

Module 1 — Foundations

A Continent Swinging Right



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Americas Quarterly; Americas Society/Council of the Americas election coverage; International Crisis Group Latin America

1a. Three Geographies

South America is organized by the Andes, which run its length and divide the Pacific coast from the interior; the Amazon, which fills its center and belongs mostly to Brazil; and the Atlantic coast and southern plains, where its largest cities and economies sit. The Andean states — Colombia, Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, Chile —

share mountains, mining, large Indigenous populations in Peru and Bolivia, and, since 2025, a political swing to the right. Brazil and Argentina, the Atlantic giants, are the continent's economic and diplomatic anchors. The four smaller states — Paraguay, Uruguay, Guyana, Suriname — sit between or beside them. Venezuela, the northern oil state, has been the continent's crisis for a decade and is now its transition.

1b. The Electoral Cascade

In a year South America has changed governments repeatedly, and all in one direction. Bolivia elected Rodrigo Paz in October 2025, ending nearly two decades of the Movement for Socialism; then Chile elected José Antonio Kast (6c), Peru Keiko Fujimori (6a), and Colombia Abelardo de la Espriella (5a) — while Argentina's Milei won his midterms (3a) and Ecuador's Noboa a full term (5b). Brazil's runoff (2b) could complete the sweep. The swing is driven by crime, the exhaustion of commodity-funded leftism, and the example of Milei and of El Salvador's Nayib Bukele — and it has produced an axis of right-wing presidents (8b).

1c. The Commodity Continent

Every state in this course exports raw materials — copper, lithium, iron ore, oil, soybeans, beef, coffee, gold — and China is the largest buyer for Brazil, Chile, Peru, and Uruguay and a leading one for most of the rest. The United States is the largest market for Colombia and Ecuador, and the decisive political partner for most (8d). That divergence — Chinese money, American politics — is the continent's structural tension, and the right turn has not resolved it (8c).

1d. The Membership Map

- **Mercosur (5):** Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Bolivia (a full member since 2024), with Venezuela suspended since 2016 (8a).
- **The Pacific Alliance (3):** Colombia, Peru, and Chile, with Mexico (8a).
- **Caricom (2):** Guyana and Suriname, the continent's two Caribbean states.
- **The right-wing axis (7):** Argentina, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay, Colombia, and Peru (8b).
- **The left (3):** Brazil, Uruguay, and, nominally, Venezuela's interim government — the remnant of the 'pink tide'.
- **Freedom House ratings:** Free (8) — Brazil, Argentina, Colombia, Bolivia, Chile, Uruguay, Guyana, and Suriname; Partly Free (3) — Ecuador, Peru, and Paraguay; Not Free (1) — Venezuela.

1e. The Disputes That Recur

Five issues run through the course. Venezuela's transition after the American removal of Maduro, and what it means for the continent's sovereignty norms (Modules 4, 8, 9). The cocaine economy and the militarized response (Modules 5, 6, 9). Brazil's election and its consequences for the continent's largest democracy and its relations with Washington (Modules 2, 8, 9). The China-US contest over minerals, ports, and alignment (Modules 6, 8, 9). And the durability of the right turn — whether it is a generational realignment or a swing that will reverse (Modules 1, 8, 9).

1f. How to Read the Country Profiles

Each profile opens with an at-a-glance table, dated October 2026: the leader's age and years in office, then the system of government, the Freedom House rating, population, land area, the main religions with their shares, the main ethnic groups with the median age and urban share, and the minimum wage in local currency and dollars. Population, median age, and urban share are United Nations estimates for 2026, and where a recent census or official estimate differs markedly the table gives it too; land area is the World Bank's; religion and ethnicity come from each country's latest census or published estimates, as each table notes; wages are converted at the exchange rate the table states. A brief history and five headings follow: current leadership, government structure, economy and trade, closest partners, and principal rivalries and disputes, and the profiles of Brazil and Argentina add a table of numbers. The Who's Who before this module defines the parties, institutions, armed groups, and abbreviations the profiles rely on, and the Key Points page ranks the leaders by time in office, from Guyana's president to Colombia's.

Module 2 — Brazil

The Continent's Dominant Power, Between Two Rounds



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Brian Winter's Americas Quarterly coverage; Folha de S.Paulo; Wilson Center Brazil Institute

2a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), 80 — in office since January 2023 (3.8 years); Workers' Party; also president 2003–10; trails Flávio Bolsonaro into the October 25, 2026 runoff; the next term begins January 5, 2027
System	Federal presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	213.6 million (2026)
Land area	8,358,140 km² (3,227,090 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 56.7%, evangelical 26.9%, no religion 9.3% (2022 census, ages 10 and over)
People	Pardo (mixed) 45.3%, white 43.5%, Black 10.2%, Indigenous 0.6% (2022 census); median age 36; 88% urban
Minimum wage	1,621 reais a month since January 1, 2026 (US$326 at 4.97 reais = US$1, central bank, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Portugal's colony became an independent empire in 1822 and a republic in 1889, the year after it became the last country in the Americas to abolish slavery. Getúlio Vargas's dictatorship (1930-45) and a military regime (1964-85) bracketed the 20th century; democracy returned with the 1988 constitution. Lula da Silva, a union leader, governed through the commodity boom, was imprisoned on corruption

charges later annulled, and returned after narrowly defeating Jair Bolsonaro, whose supporters stormed the capital's government buildings on January 8, 2023.

Current leadership: Lula finished second in the first round on October 4, 2026, with 45.2% to 47.0% for Flávio Bolsonaro, a senator and the son of Jair Bolsonaro, who chose him from prison as the right's candidate in December 2025; abstention, at 21%, was the highest since 1998. No candidate who led a Brazilian first round has lost the runoff since 1989, and polls taken in the following week gave Flávio 52% to 53% of the valid vote. Lula's age and health — a skin cancer removed in April 2026 and treated with radiotherapy — have been the campaign's other question.

Government structure: Twenty-six states and a federal district under the 1988 constitution, with a directly elected president limited to two consecutive terms, a bicameral Congress dominated by the fragmented centrão, a powerful Supreme Federal Court, and a military that stayed loyal in 2023. The court convicted Jair Bolsonaro in September 2025 of plotting a coup to overturn the 2022 election and sentenced him to 27 years and 3 months; he has served it under house arrest at home in Brasília, on health grounds, since March 2026, and in April Congress overrode Lula's veto of a law that could shorten his sentence. The election remade Congress for 2027: the Liberal Party won 121 of the 513 seats in the Chamber, the most of any party, and will hold 28 of the 81 in the Senate, the largest bloc at the start of a legislature since 1988. In April 2026 the Senate rejected a Supreme Federal Court nominee for the first time since 1894.

Economy and trade: A roughly $2.6 trillion economy, the world's tenth-largest and South America's dominant one, built on agriculture (the world's largest exporter of soybeans, beef, coffee, sugar, and orange juice), mining (iron ore), oil (deepwater pre-salt fields, a top-ten producer), manufacturing (aircraft, cars), and services. Exports are led by soybeans, crude oil, iron ore, beef, and sugar; imports by fuel, machinery, electronics, and fertilizer. Top trading partners: China (largest by far), the US, Argentina, the Netherlands, and Germany. Brazil leads Mercosur.

Closest partners: China, a fellow founder of BRICS; the Global South, where Lula has positioned Brazil as a leader — hosting the Group of 20 in 2024, the BRICS summit in 2025, and the UN climate conference in Belém that November; Mercosur; the EU, through the Mercosur agreement (8a); and, historically, the United States — now its most strained relationship.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The United States under Trump, which in 2025 imposed a 50% tariff explicitly to punish Bolsonaro's prosecution and sanctioned the justice who led the case, Alexandre de Moraes, sanctions it lifted in December. After the US Supreme Court struck down the emergency tariffs, Washington imposed new ones from July 2026 — 25% on part of Brazil's exports and a further 12.5% on forced-labor grounds, up to 37.5% in all — and in May designated the PCC and the Comando Vermelho terrorist organizations. Lula has accused Washington of interfering in the election, in which Flávio is Trump's ally, and in March revoked the visa of an American diplomat who tried to visit Bolsonaro in prison. Argentina's Milei (3a). Domestically, the Bolsonaro movement, which regards the conviction as persecution; Amazon deforestation and the agribusiness lobby; and organized crime, whose factions control much of Rio's and São Paulo's peripheries.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Demography	Fertility about 1.6, below replacement since the 2000s	The demographic window closing by 2040
Growth	2.3% in 2025; 2.0% in the year to the second quarter of 2026; per head ~$10,800	Agriculture and mining a third of exports; South America's largest economy by more than three times

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Prices and rates	Inflation about 4.6% in the year to September 2026, just above the 4.5% ceiling of the target band; the Selic cut five times in 2026, to 13.75% since September 17 — still among the world's highest real rates	The central bank independent since 2021, under Gabriel Galípolo
Public finance	Gross general-government debt 82.9% of GDP in August 2026, the highest since 2021; a nominal deficit of 9.5% of GDP over the previous twelve months	The market's chronic fear; the election's stake
Trade	Exports ~$340B a year; China about 30% (soybeans, iron ore, oil), the US about 12%	The China customer and the American tariff
Military	~$25B (1.1% of GDP); 360,000 active; the Amazon and the Atlantic; the submarine program	A regional power without adversaries
Regime	Electoral democracy	Freedom House 73/100
Energy	Oil about 4 million barrels a day; Petrobras; the fight over drilling in the Equatorial Margin, where Petrobras found oil off Amapá in August 2026; electricity about 90% renewable; ethanol	A winner from the oil shock of the US-Israeli war on Iran, which began in February 2026
The Amazon	Deforestation down by about half from the 2022 peak; the 2023-24 drought; the agribusiness frontier	The physical fact

In depth — the question: whether a country that has just moved its Congress to the right also hands the presidency to the son of a convicted coup plotter — and whether the winner can govern a deficit near a tenth of GDP and a double-digit interest rate with a Congress that sells its votes.

Worked example — The Interest Trap's Arithmetic

Of the deficit in the table above, only 0.6 points of GDP was a primary deficit, the gap between spending and revenue before interest; the other 8.9 points were interest. The trap is in the ratio: interest of 8.9% of GDP on a debt of 82.9% of GDP means the state pays about 10.7% a year on what it owes, while the economy grows by about 6.5% a year in money terms (2% real growth and inflation near 4.5%). When the rate paid exceeds the growth rate, debt rises as a share of GDP even if the budget before interest balances: the gap of about 4 points on a debt of 83% adds over 3 points of GDP a year, and the primary deficit adds more — most of what happened, as the ratio rose from 77.5% a year earlier. The central bank keeps the Selic high because markets fear the fiscal path, and the fiscal path worsens because the Selic is high. The commodity cycle helps at the margin — the Iran war's oil price lifts Petrobras's profits and the state's oil revenue — but does not change the arithmetic, which is why the election is fought over who spends the windfall rather than who escapes the trap.

2b. The Runoff

Brazil's runoff is the continent's most consequential event of 2026. The first round moved the country right well beyond the presidency: besides remaking Congress (2a), the right won most of the governorships decided on October 4 — Tarcísio de Freitas was re-elected in São Paulo with 63%, beating Lula's former finance minister Fernando Haddad, and Sergio Moro won Paraná — and Lula's Workers' Party won only three governorships outright. A Flávio Bolsonaro victory would complete the right turn across the continent, align Brazil with Milei and Trump, and put a pardon for his father on the agenda; a Lula victory would keep the counterweight in place, facing a hostile Congress. The campaign has turned on crime, the cost of living, Lula's age, the legitimacy of Bolsonaro's conviction, and the collapse of Banco Master, which the central bank shut down in 2025 and whose owner's dealings touched both Flávio Bolsonaro and a Supreme Federal Court justice — and it is the first Brazilian election held with the previous president serving a prison sentence.

Module 3 — Argentina

The Hemisphere's Model of the New Right



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Americas Quarterly; La Nación (Buenos Aires); IMF Argentina reports

3a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Javier Milei, 55 — in office since December 2023 (2.8 years); La Libertad Avanza; term to December 2027
System	Federal presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	46.0 million (2026)
Land area	2,736,690 km² (1,056,640 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 62.9%, no religion 18.9%, evangelical 15.3% (national research council survey, 2019)
People	Mostly of European descent; 2.8% Indigenous or of Indigenous descent and 0.7% Afro-descendant (2022 census); median age 34; 93% urban
Minimum wage	391,200 pesos a month since October 1, 2026, set by government decision after unions and employers failed to agree (US$258 at about 1,518 pesos = US$1, September 30, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1816, Argentina was among the world's richest countries in 1914 and has been in relative decline since, through Juan Perón's populism (1946-55), a murderous military dictatorship (1976-83) that 'disappeared' some 30,000 people, the 1982 Falklands defeat, and a century of inflation and default. Then Javier Milei, a libertarian economist, won the presidency promising to take a chainsaw to the state.

Current leadership: Milei governs with a mandate strengthened by the October 2025 midterms, in which La Libertad Avanza won 40.7% of the vote. With allies he can now pass laws: in February 2026 Congress approved his labor reform, which a general strike opposed, and lowered the age of criminal responsibility from 16 to 14. Vice President Victoria Villarruel is estranged; his sister Karina runs the government's politics; and a 2025 cryptocurrency scandal and bribery allegations around allies dented but did not break his standing.

Government structure: Twenty-three provinces and the city of Buenos Aires under the 1853 constitution, with a directly elected president limited to two consecutive terms and a bicameral Congress in which Milei governed by decree and veto until the midterms. Provincial governors hold real power over spending. The judiciary is independent; Milei's confrontations with Congress, governors, the press, and universities — in April 2026 he expelled the press corps from the Casa Rosada, the presidential palace — have defined his style.

Economy and trade: A roughly $650 billion economy built on agriculture (soybeans, corn, wheat, beef — the world's largest exporter of soybean meal), lithium (a top producer), shale oil and gas (Vaca Muerta), and manufacturing. Exports are led by soybean products, corn, cars, beef, and oil; imports by machinery, vehicles, and fuel. Top trading partners: Brazil, China, the US, and the EU.

Closest partners: The United States under Trump, Milei's ideological patron and financial rescuer — the swap line, IMF backing, and a trade agreement signed in February 2026 that cut tariffs on most goods; Israel, which Milei treats as a model and alongside which he backed the war on Iran; El Salvador's Bukele and the regional right; and, transactionally, China, which buys the soy and keeps a currency swap Milei has not canceled. Milei turned down membership of BRICS, has begun Argentina's withdrawal from the World Health Organization, and expelled Iran's chargé d'affaires in April 2026.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Brazil's Lula, with whom Milei has traded insults while Mercosur trade continued; the Peronists, still the largest opposition force; the unions and provinces resisting austerity; and the Falklands question with Britain, dormant. The structural dispute is between the stabilization and its costs: recession, poverty, and a strong peso that hurts exporters.

In depth — the numbers:

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Growth	A rebound in 2025; slower growth in 2026, which the economy minister acknowledged in October; per head ~$14,000 at the official rate	What voters will judge in 2027
Prices and the peso	Inflation 33.5% in the year to August 2026 (1.7% that month), down from 289% in April 2024 but no longer falling; the peso in a band whose limits have moved with inflation since January 2026, trading at 1,517 to the dollar on October 9, about 21% below the ceiling; most currency controls lifted	The stabilization's core number
Public finance	A primary surplus since 2024, the first in over a decade; the IMF's $20B program of April 2025, about $15.8B of it disbursed by May 2026, when the Fund approved its second review despite a missed reserve target; the US Treasury's $20B swap of October 2025; the central bank has bought over $14.7B of dollars in 2026, and gross reserves reached $48.65B	The chainsaw's ledger
Markets	Country risk 589 basis points on October 9, from over 2,000 in 2023	Above 600 in early October, the year's high
Military	~$3B; 80,000 active; the F-16 purchase (2024)	The smallest of the large states

Measure	Figure (2026)	Note
Regime	Electoral democracy	Freedom House 85/100
Energy	Vaca Muerta's shale oil and gas rising fast; the Iran war's windfall; lithium's brine triangle	From energy importer to exporter

In depth — the question: whether a stabilization built on a swap line, an IMF program, and a shale field survives inflation stuck at a third a year and the next reversal in any of them — and whether the 2027 election makes it a settlement or an interlude.

3b. The Chainsaw and the Lifeline

Milei did what Argentine presidents had promised for decades and never delivered: he cut spending by about a third, fired public employees, eliminated ministries, deregulated, and drove monthly inflation from 25% in December 2023 to under 2%. The cost was a deep recession in 2024, poverty above 50% at its peak, and a currency crisis in 2025 that only an American intervention — the first rescue of its kind for an ideological ally — averted before the midterms. The vindication at the polls bought reforms but not the end of inflation (3a). The result is the hemisphere's most-watched economic experiment: a country that has defaulted nine times betting that shock therapy plus American backing can break a century of decline.

Module 4 — Venezuela

The State Whose President the United States Removed



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Venezuela reports; the Washington Office on Latin America; Reuters and Foreign Policy coverage of the 2026 transition

4a. Profile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	Acting President Delcy Rodríguez, 57 — in office since January 2026 (0.8 years); United Socialist Party of Venezuela; ordered by the supreme court to assume the presidency on January 3, 2026, the day US forces seized Nicolás Maduro; vice president 2018–26; no election date set
System	Provisional government of the ruling party
Freedom House	Not Free
Population	28.6 million (2026)
Land area	882,050 km² (340,560 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic majority; evangelicals a large and growing minority (estimates range from a fifth to a third)
People	Moreno (mixed) 51.6%, white 43.6%, Black 3.6%, Indigenous about 2.5% (2011 census); median age 31; 89% urban
Minimum wage	130 bolívares a month, frozen since 2022 (US$0.15 at the official 872.39 bolívares = US$1, October 6, 2026), topped up by bonuses worth US$240 a month since May 2026

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent under Bolívar in 1811-21, Venezuela was a military-ruled oil state until 1958, then a two-party democracy that collapsed in the 1990s. Hugo Chávez, elected in 1998, built a socialist state on oil revenue and died in 2013; his successor Nicolás Maduro presided over the largest economic collapse

in modern peacetime history, the exodus of nearly eight million people, and the theft of the 2024 election, which the opposition's Edmundo González demonstrably won.

Current leadership: Rodríguez, the regime's chief administrator, governs in close coordination with Washington. The two countries restored relations in March 2026, and the US embassy reopened; an amnesty law in February freed hundreds of political prisoners, though 322 were still held in October by Foro Penal's count; a January reform ended the state oil company's monopoly; and the US energy secretary, Chris Wright, stood beside her in Caracas on September 2. Trump met her in New York on September 22. Asked that month when Venezuelans would vote, she answered, 'I don't set dates.' US-backed talks with the opposition have reportedly excluded María Corina Machado, the opposition leader and 2025 Nobel Peace laureate, who left in December 2025 for the prize ceremony and says she has been blocked at least seven times from returning.

Government structure: The government has no settled constitutional basis: the supreme court treated Maduro's absence as temporary, and the Chavista state's institutions — the National Assembly, led by her brother Jorge Rodríguez, the courts, the electoral council, the armed forces — remain in place, purged of some of Maduro's loyalists; Vladimir Padrino López, defense minister since 2014, was replaced in March.

Economy and trade: A roughly $100 billion economy — a fraction of its 2013 size — that holds the world's largest oil reserves but produces a fraction of its potential: output averaged 1.08 million barrels a day in 2025, the first year above a million since 2019, and has stayed just above a million in 2026. Exports are crude oil (to the US under restored licenses, China, and India), gold, and iron; imports are food, fuel products, and medicine. Since Maduro's removal sanctions have been eased and foreign companies have returned: a US-brokered deal at the end of August 2026 covered 17 oil fields, and Chevron announced on September 2 that it would more than double its Venezuelan output, to about 600,000 barrels a day. The economy's recovery is the transition's central test.

Closest partners: The United States, which recognizes her government, shapes its choices, and coordinates with it on strikes such as the one that killed the leader of the Tren de Aragua in June. India, whose prime minister she met in June, and Turkey, courted as oil buyers. China and Russia, the former regime's patrons, sidelined but present. Colombia's new government and Brazil, as neighbors managing the transition and the migrants; and Suriname (7d). Cuba has lost its oil lifeline and its closest ally.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The Chavista hardliners and the military factions that lost with Maduro; the opposition, which demands elections and regards Rodríguez as illegitimate; the emigrants whose return depends on the outcome; and Guyana, over the Essequibo claim (7c).

4b. The Capture and the Transition

The operation that seized Maduro was the most direct American intervention in a South American state in modern times, and its consequences are still unfolding. For Venezuela it changed the leader but left the state in place, under a successor whose standing derives from Washington rather than from the voters. Then nature struck: twin earthquakes of magnitude 7.2 and 7.5 on June 24 killed 6,438 people by the official count of August 17, most of them in La Guaira, and the World Bank put the damage at $19.6 billion; the United States sent search-and-rescue teams and $150 million. For the continent the capture established that the revived Monroe Doctrine includes removing heads of state: the right-wing governments welcomed it, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, and Uruguay joined Mexico and Spain in rejecting it, and all of them noted the precedent. Maduro himself awaits trial in New York, set for June 2027, and on October 8 prosecutors added charges of torture.

Module 5 — Colombia & Ecuador

The Northern Andes



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group Colombia and Ecuador reports; InSight Crime

5a. Colombia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Abelardo de la Espriella, 48 — in office since August 2026 (0.2 years); Defensores de la Patria; single term to August 2030
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	53.9 million (2026)
Land area	1,109,500 km² (428,380 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 57%, other Christian 18%, no religion 20% (Latinobarómetro, 2024)
People	Mostly mestizo or white, categories the census does not ask; Black, Afro-Colombian, Raizal, and Palenquero 6.7% to 9.3% depending on the count, Indigenous 4.3% (2018 census); median age 34; 83% urban
Minimum wage	1,750,905 pesos a month since January 1, 2026, plus a transport allowance of 249,095 (US$545 before the allowance at 3,209.78 pesos = US$1, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1819, Colombia has had South America's longest continuous electoral democracy and its longest internal war: the FARC and ELN guerrillas, the cocaine cartels from the 1980s, and paramilitaries, in a conflict that killed over 260,000. Gustavo Petro, a former guerrilla, became the first left-wing president in 2022 and pursued 'total peace' talks that largely failed.

Current leadership: Abelardo de la Espriella, a right-wing lawyer and media figure who had never held office, led the first round on May 31 with 43.7% and won the June 21 runoff over Iván Cepeda, the candidate of Petro's left, by 49.7% to 48.7% — fewer than 252,000 votes. Petro alleged fraud without evidence and stayed away from the inauguration, which de la Espriella moved to Cali; Trump had endorsed him, and Milei, Kast, and Noboa attended. In office he has ended every 'total peace' negotiation — with the ELN, the FARC dissidents, and the Gulf Clan — resumed airstrikes on armed groups, and promised mega-prisons, aerial spraying of coca, a 40% cut in the state, and a revival of oil and gas, fracking included.

Government structure: The 1991 constitution provides a bicameral Congress, an independent Constitutional Court, and a decentralized structure of departments. Petro's Pacto Histórico won the most seats in both houses in March 2026 but no majority, and de la Espriella's movement is a minority that governs with parts of the traditional right; former President Álvaro Uribe failed to win a Senate seat, the first defeat of his career.

Economy and trade: A roughly $420 billion economy, South America's third-largest, built on oil and coal, coffee, flowers, gold, and services. Exports are led by crude oil, coal, coffee, gold, and flowers; imports by machinery, fuel products, and vehicles. Top trading partners: the US (largest), China, Mexico, and Brazil. Cocaine is a shadow economy larger than coffee. Two of the three rating agencies rate Colombia's debt as junk; under Petro the fiscal rule was suspended and the minimum wage rose by 23% for 2026; the new government has dropped Petro's tax reform.

Closest partners: The United States, its historic security partner, strained under Petro — who clashed with Trump over deportation flights, the US strikes on alleged drug boats, and Venezuela, and was sanctioned by the US Treasury in October 2025 — and now restored: Washington intends $1 billion in security aid, and Colombia joined the Shield of the Americas (8b) in August. Yet in September 2026 Washington again listed Colombia as having 'failed demonstrably' in counternarcotics, blaming 'the previous far-left government'. The regional right — Ecuador (5b), Argentina, Chile, Paraguay, Bolivia; and Israel, with which he promises to restore ties.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The ELN, the FARC dissidents, and the Gulf Clan, whose combined membership nearly doubled between 2022 and July 2026, to about 28,800 by one think tank's count; the coca economy, which reached a record 261,000 hectares in 2024, about two-thirds of the world's crop; and Petro's movement, in opposition.

5b. Ecuador

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Daniel Noboa, 38 — in office since November 2023 (2.9 years); Acción Democrática Nacional; second term since May 2025, to 2029
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	18.4 million (2026); the 2022 census counted 16.94 million
Land area	248,360 km² (95,890 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic about 74% and evangelical about 10% of the population (national statistics survey, 2012)
People	Mestizo 77.5%, montubio 7.7%, Indigenous 7.7%, Afro-Ecuadorian 4.8%, white 2.2% (2022 census); median age 31; 66% urban
Minimum wage	US$482 a month since January 1, 2026 (the US dollar is the currency)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1830, Ecuador cycled through instability — three presidents ousted between 1997 and 2005 — before Rafael Correa's decade of leftist rule (2007-17). Since 2020 it has become one of the region's most violent countries, as cocaine routes shifted to its ports and gangs seized prisons and cities. Daniel Noboa, elected in a snap election, declared an internal armed conflict against the gangs in January 2024.

Current leadership: Noboa, heir to a banana fortune, governs under his declaration of internal armed conflict, with curfews and some 75,000 troops and police deployed in the worst-hit provinces. In November 2025 voters rejected all four questions of his referendum — on foreign military bases, a constituent assembly, a smaller Assembly, and ending public funding of parties — with 54% to 62% voting no. The violence has not broken: 2025 was the deadliest year on record, with 9,216 homicides, 51 per 100,000 people, and the first seven months of 2026 were only 8% less deadly.

Government structure: The 2008 constitution provides a four-year term with one re-election, a unicameral National Assembly, and a Constitutional Court that has checked Noboa's emergency powers.

Economy and trade: A roughly $125 billion economy built on oil, bananas (the world's largest exporter), shrimp (a top exporter), cocoa, flowers, and mining. Exports are led by crude oil, shrimp, bananas, and cocoa; imports by fuel products, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: the US, China, Panama, and the EU. Gang violence and the cocaine trade through Guayaquil are the economy's shadow; since July 2026 a 10% American tariff applies to its goods.

Closest partners: The United States, with which Noboa has aligned closely (at his request American aircraft struck a camp of Colombian FARC dissidents near the border in March 2026); Israel, with which he signed counter-terrorism agreements in August 2026; the regional right; and China, a free-trade partner since 2024 and a buyer of its shrimp. Relations with Colombia recovered after a tariff war: in early 2026 each imposed 30% duties on the other's goods, and Noboa lifted Ecuador's on June 1 after a call with de la Espriella, who was then a candidate.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The gangs — Los Choneros, Los Lobos, and their Albanian mafia partners — which control prisons, ports, and neighborhoods; CONAIE, which has paralyzed the country before; the Constitutional Court; and Cuba, whose ambassador Ecuador expelled in March 2026.

5c. Security First

Colombia and Ecuador are the two states where the cocaine economy has most directly produced political change. Ecuador's descent into gang violence (5b) made Noboa's war on the gangs a national consensus; Colombia's record coca harvests and the failure of Petro's peace talks made security the axis on which de la Espriella won. Both have aligned with Washington's militarized drug policy and, after their tariff war, with each other. The question both face is the one El Salvador's model poses everywhere: whether force alone can hold down an economy that pays better than the state, and what happens to institutions along the way.

Module 6 — Peru, Bolivia & Chile

The Southern Andes



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Americas Society/Council of the Americas; Americas Quarterly; International Crisis Group Bolivia and Peru reports

6a. Peru

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Keiko Fujimori, 51 — in office since July 2026 (0.2 years); Fuerza Popular; term to 2031; Prime Minister Luis Galarreta is also her first vice president
System	Presidential republic with a powerful two-chamber Congress
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	34.9 million (2026)
Land area	1,280,000 km² (494,210 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 76.0%, evangelical 14.1%, no religion 5.1% (2017 census, ages 12 and over)
People	Mestizo 61.8%, Quechua 17.2%, white 9.0%, Afro-Peruvian 6.0%, Aymara 2.0% (2025 census); median age 32; 80% urban
Minimum wage	1,230 soles a month since October 1, 2026 (US$358 at 3.435 soles = US$1, central bank, October 6, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: The Inca empire's heartland and Spain's South American capital, Peru became independent in 1821, endured a war with the Shining Path (1980-2000) that killed about 70,000 people, and Alberto Fujimori's authoritarian presidency (1990-2000), which defeated it. Since 2016 Peru has had nine presidents, with impeachments, a failed self-coup by Pedro Castillo in 2022, and deadly protests.

Current leadership: Keiko Fujimori, the daughter of Alberto Fujimori, won on her fourth attempt after losing runoffs in 2011, 2016, and 2021. She led the first round of April 12 among a record 36 candidates with 17.2%, and won the June 7 runoff over Roberto Sánchez of Juntos por el Perú by 50.13% to 49.87% — 49,641 votes — after a count both camps contested; Sánchez conceded on July 6. She has promised an 'iron fist' on crime, with the armed forces leading security operations, a mega-prison on El Salvador's model, and the deportation of undocumented migrants, and has asked Congress for 120 days of power to legislate by decree. Her approval stood at 53% to 60% after a month. Interim President José María Balcázar handed over to her.

Government structure: The 1993 constitution, written under her father, provides a directly elected president who cannot serve consecutive terms and, since July 2026, a bicameral Congress again — a 60-member Senate and a 130-member Chamber of Deputies — which can remove presidents by 'moral incapacity' votes and has done so repeatedly. Fuerza Popular is the largest party in both houses but holds a majority in neither, with 22 senators and about 40 deputies. The party system is fragmented, the judiciary politicized, and Congress the least trusted institution.

Economy and trade: A roughly $290 billion economy built on copper (the world's third-largest producer), gold, zinc, fishmeal (the world's largest), agriculture (blueberries, grapes, avocados), and services. Exports are led by copper, gold, natural gas, and agricultural products; imports by fuel, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China (largest), the US, the EU, and Canada. Political chaos has coexisted with macroeconomic stability — growth near 3.5%, public debt about 30% of GDP, and a central bank whose president, Julio Velarde, Fujimori reappointed to a fifth term — though inflation rose to 4.4% in August 2026, above the target band.

Closest partners: The United States, whose Trump administration welcomed her win; the regional right, whose presidents attended her inauguration; China, whose port at Chancay she has pledged to keep; and the mining companies.

Principal rivalries and disputes: The left and the rural south, which voted against her and regard her narrow win as suspect; Congress; illegal mining and crime; and her father's legacy, whose victims protested in Lima on the eve of her inauguration. A coastal El Niño, given odds of 62% or more for the coming summer, is the year's physical threat.

6b. Bolivia

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Rodrigo Paz, 59 — in office since November 2025 (0.9 years); Christian Democratic Party; term to 2030
System	Plurinational presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	12.7 million (2026); the 2024 census counted 11.37 million
Land area	1,083,300 km² (418,260 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic about 65%, Protestant or evangelical about 20%, no religion about 8% (estimates)
People	38.7% identify with an Indigenous people or as Afro-Bolivian, the Quechua and Aymara the largest (2024 census); most others are usually described as mestizo; median age 26; 72% urban
Minimum wage	3,300 bolivianos a month since January 2, 2026 (US$276 at the floating official rate of about 11.97 = US$1, October 7, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1825, Bolivia had more coups than years of stable rule for much of its history, and a large Indigenous population excluded from power until Evo Morales, an Aymara coca-growers' leader, took office in 2006 and governed for 14 years on a gas boom. His 2019 bid for a fourth term ended in fraud allegations, his flight, and a year of interim government; his Movement for Socialism returned in 2020 under Luis Arce, then split between the two men.

Current leadership: Paz, a center-right senator and son of former President Jaime Paz Zamora, beat former President Jorge Quiroga in the runoff with about 55%, after the Movement for Socialism's candidates were eliminated in the first round. He ended fuel subsidies in December 2025 — gasoline prices rose 86% and diesel's 162% — and kept the increases through a general strike in January and a wave of blockades from April to June in which 17 people died, annulling a land-credit law and declaring a 90-day state of emergency on June 20. On June 29 he ended the boliviano's 15-year peg to the dollar, a devaluation of about two-fifths, and in September the Assembly approved a $1.9 billion IMF loan.

Government structure: The 2009 'plurinational' constitution, written under Morales, provides a five-year term with one consecutive re-election, a bicameral Plurinational Legislative Assembly, and recognition of 36 Indigenous nations. Paz governs without a legislative majority.

Economy and trade: An economy of roughly $50 billion at the old exchange rate, in crisis: natural gas has run down; foreign reserves are nearly gone; fuel and dollar shortages are chronic. Exports are led by gold, gas, soybeans, zinc, and silver; imports by fuel (it is now a net importer), machinery, and food. Top trading partners: Brazil and Argentina (gas), China, and India. Lithium — the world's largest resource, in the Uyuni salt flats — has never been commercially developed.

Closest partners: The United States, with which Paz has restored relations after two decades of hostility under the Movement for Socialism; Argentina's Milei and the regional right; Brazil; the IMF; and, cautiously, China and Russia, which hold lithium agreements his government has reviewed.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Evo Morales, barred from office and evading arrest warrants among his coca-growing base, who led a march on La Paz in May 2026 and called for early elections; and the unions and the Movement for Socialism's remnants.

6c. Chile

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President José Antonio Kast, 60 — in office since March 2026 (0.6 years); elected for the Republican Party, which he left before taking office; single term to March 2030
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	19.9 million (2026); the 2024 census counted 18.48 million
Land area	743,532 km² (287,080 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 54%, no religion 25.8%, evangelical or Protestant 16.3% (2024 census, ages 15 and over)
People	Mostly mestizo or of European descent; Indigenous 11.5% (Mapuche 8.8%), Afro-descendant 0.9% (2024 census); median age 38; 88% urban
Minimum wage	553,553 pesos a month since May 1, 2026 (about US$607 at 912 pesos = US$1, August 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1818, Chile was Latin America's most stable democracy until Augusto Pinochet's 1973 coup began 17 years of dictatorship that killed over 3,000 and imposed a free-market

model. Democracy returned in 1990, and Chile became one of the region's most prosperous states. After mass protests in 2019, Gabriel Boric, elected in 2021 at 35, governed as a moderate left.

Current leadership: José Antonio Kast, a hard-right conservative who defends parts of Pinochet's legacy, won the runoff of December 14, 2025 over the communist Jeannette Jara with 58.2%, on crime, migration control, and deregulation. Since taking office he has suspended 43 environmental regulations, moved 1,500 high-risk prisoners to a single complex, and passed a reconstruction law that cuts the corporate tax from 27% to 23% — but 45 officials, three ministers among them, had left by September, unemployment stood at 9.5%, the central bank cut its 2026 growth forecast to 0.25-0.75%, and his approval fell to 34% in mid-September.

Government structure: The 1980 constitution, heavily amended after attempts to replace it failed in 2022 and 2023, provides a bicameral Congress and strong institutions. The right's two lists hold 76 of the Chamber's 155 seats, two short of a majority, with the Party of the People holding the balance, and the Senate is split 25-25. Chile is one of the region's most stable democracies, and its 2019 protest moment has given way to a security-first consensus.

Economy and trade: A roughly $350 billion economy, one of South America's richest per head, built on copper (the world's largest producer, about a quarter of global supply), lithium (the second-largest), fruit, wine, salmon, and forestry. Exports are led by copper, lithium, fruit, salmon, and wine; imports by fuel, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China (largest, buying most of the copper), the US, Japan, and Brazil. Chile's state lithium strategy and its copper dependence are its strategic questions.

Closest partners: The United States — though Washington put a 12.5% tariff on Chilean goods in July 2026 on forced-labor grounds; the regional right (Milei, Paz, Noboa, de la Espriella) and the Pacific Alliance; China, which Kast has not challenged; and the EU and Japan.

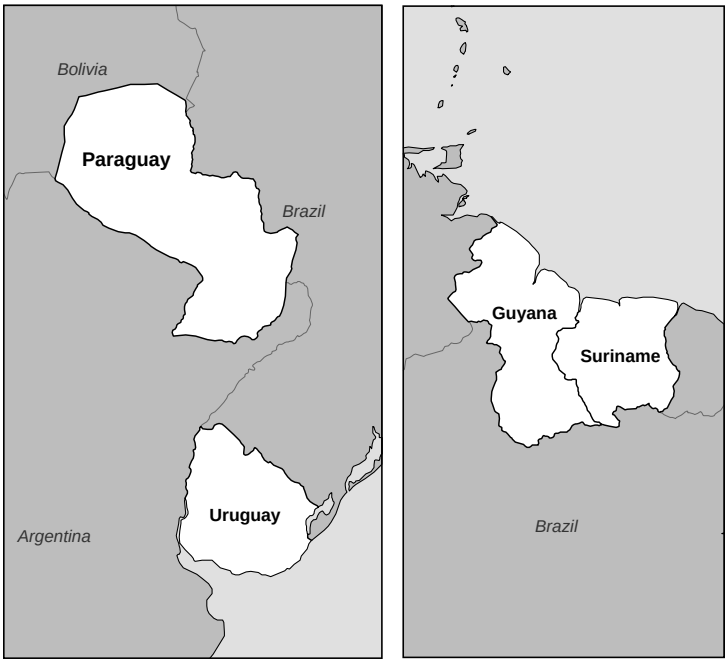
Principal rivalries and disputes: The left, in opposition; migrants, especially Venezuelans, whom Kast's policies target; the Mapuche conflict in the south; and the tension between his Pinochet-adjacent politics and a country that has spent more than 35 years building a democratic consensus.

6d. The Andean Swing

Three Andean states changed direction within eight months: Bolivia (6b), Chile (6c), and Peru (6a). Each was driven by crime and economic exhaustion; each new president has aligned with Milei and Washington; and each governs with a divided legislature and a mobilized opposition — Paz has already survived a deadly protest wave (6b), and Kast's approval has fallen (6c). Peru's result is the reminder that the swing is a swing — half the electorate voted the other way — and Bolivia's Morales and Peru's rural south show where a reversal would come from.

Module 7 — Paraguay, Uruguay, Guyana & Suriname

The Continent's Smaller States



Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Americas Society/Council of the Americas; Stabroek News (Georgetown); El Observador (Montevideo)

7a. Paraguay

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Santiago Peña, 47 — in office since August 2023 (3.1 years); Colorado Party; single term to August 2028
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Partly Free
Population	7.10 million (2026); the 2022 census counted 6.11 million, and the statistics institute estimated 6.42 million for 2025
Land area	397,300 km² (153,400 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic 88.3%, Protestant 6.8%, no religion 2.6% (Latinobarómetro, 2018)
People	Mostly mestizo; Guaraní is spoken by most of the population alongside Spanish; Indigenous peoples about 2% (estimates); median age 28; 64% urban
Minimum wage	3,044,000 guaraníes a month since July 1, 2026 (US$535 at 5,694 guaraníes = US$1, central bank, October 9, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent in 1811, Paraguay lost more than half its population in the War of the Triple Alliance (1864-70) and endured Alfredo Stroessner's 35-year dictatorship (1954-89).

Current leadership: Peña, a former IMF economist and finance minister, governs as the protégé of Horacio Cartes, the former president who chairs the Colorado Party and whose US sanctions for corruption were lifted in October 2025. In the municipal elections of October 4, 2026 the Colorados won a record 187 of 263 mayoralties but lost the capital, Asunción, which the independent Soledad Núñez won by under two points, and failed to retake Ciudad del Este from the opposition.

Government structure: The 1992 constitution provides a bicameral Congress that the Colorados dominate. Institutions are weak, corruption pervasive, and the Cartes faction's hold on the party is the real power structure.

Economy and trade: A roughly $49 billion economy built on soybeans (a top exporter), beef, hydroelectricity (the Itaipú dam, shared with Brazil, and Yacyretá with Argentina), and re-export trade. Exports are led by soybeans, beef, electricity, and corn; imports by fuel, machinery, and goods for re-export. Top export markets: Brazil, Argentina, Chile, Russia (beef), and the US; China is the largest source of imports. Low taxes and cheap power have drawn cryptocurrency mining and Brazilian manufacturers.

Closest partners: The United States; Taiwan, of which Paraguay is South America's only ally; Israel, where Paraguay reopened its embassy in Jerusalem in December 2024; Brazil and Argentina, its Mercosur partners; and the regional right.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Paraguay has no adversaries. Its issues are organized crime in the tri-border area with Brazil and Argentina, and the pressure from its soy and beef exporters to switch recognition from Taiwan to China.

7b. Uruguay

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Yamandú Orsi, 59 — in office since March 2025 (1.6 years); Broad Front; single term to March 2030
System	Presidential republic
Freedom House	Free
Population	3.38 million (2026); the 2023 census counted 3.50 million
Land area	175,020 km² (67,580 sq mi)
Religion	Catholic about 42-46%, no religion or believers without a church about 40%, other Christian 9-15% (surveys, 2008-14)
People	With more than one answer allowed, white 88%, Afro-descendant 10.6%, Indigenous 6.4% (2023 census); median age 38; 96% urban
Minimum wage	25,383 pesos a month since July 1, 2026 (US$632 at about 40.2 pesos = US$1, October 9, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Independent as a buffer state in 1828, Uruguay built Latin America's first welfare state in the early 20th century and has been its most consistently democratic country, apart from a 1973-85 military dictatorship. The left-wing Broad Front governed from 2005 to 2020, legalizing cannabis and same-sex marriage, and the center-right's Luis Lacalle Pou from 2020 to 2025.

Current leadership: Yamandú Orsi, a former provincial governor, won the November 2024 runoff. He made a state visit to China in February 2026, meeting Xi Jinping — Uruguay used language rejecting Taiwanese independence, and Taiwan protested — and made Uruguay the first country to ratify the EU-Mercosur agreement (8a).

Government structure: The 1967 constitution, as amended, provides a bicameral General Assembly and the region's strongest democratic institutions — with a Freedom House score of 97, the highest in Latin America.

Economy and trade: A roughly $80 billion economy, among the continent's richest per head, built on beef, soybeans, cellulose (pulp from large Finnish-owned mills), dairy, rice, and services (finance, software). Exports are led by beef, cellulose, soybeans, and dairy; imports by fuel, machinery, and vehicles. Top trading partners: China (largest), Brazil, the EU, the US, and Argentina. Uruguay generates nearly all its electricity from renewables and has Latin America's lowest country risk; growth has slowed to under 2%.

Closest partners: Brazil and Argentina through Mercosur, though Uruguay has long sought the freedom to negotiate its own trade deals and has applied to join the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, which opened Uruguay's accession process in November 2025; China; the EU; and the US, which has nonetheless put Uruguay on its list of 75 countries whose immigrant visas are paused. Uruguay is the region's diplomatic moderate.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Uruguay has no adversaries. Its issues are Mercosur's constraints, crime driven by the cocaine trade through Montevideo's port — a homicide rate of about 10 per 100,000 in 2025, far above Chile's and Argentina's — an aging population, and the tension between its left government and the regional right turn around it.

7c. Guyana

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Irfaan Ali, 46 — in office since August 2020 (6.2 years); People's Progressive Party/Civic; second term since September 2025
System	Presidential republic with a prime minister
Freedom House	Free
Population	841,000 (2026); the preliminary count of the 2022 census was 878,674, and the statistics bureau estimated 956,044 at the end of 2024
Land area	196,850 km² (76,000 sq mi)
Religion	Hindu 24.8%, Pentecostal 22.8%, other Christian 20.8%, Catholic 7.1%, Muslim 6.8% (2012 census)
People	East Indian 39.8%, African 29.3%, mixed 19.9%, Amerindian 10.5% (2012 census); median age 28; 28% urban
Minimum wage	60,147 Guyana dollars a month in the private sector since July 1, 2022 (US$288 at 208.50 = US$1, October 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: British Guiana became independent in 1966 and was governed for two decades by Forbes Burnham's authoritarian socialist state. ExxonMobil's discovery of enormous offshore oil in 2015 turned one of the hemisphere's poorest countries into the world's fastest-growing economy.

Current leadership: Ali's party won 36 of the 65 seats in the last election. We Invest in Nationhood, whose founder, Azruddin Mohamed, is under US sanctions, took 16 and displaced A Partnership for National Unity, with 12, as the main opposition. Prime Minister Mark Phillips was reappointed.

Government structure: The 1980 constitution provides a president elected on a party list and a unicameral National Assembly. Politics divides largely along the line between Guyanese of Indian and of African descent; the 2020 election took five months and international pressure to resolve. Oil has raised the stakes of every dispute.

Economy and trade: A roughly $27 billion economy in 2025 — up from $5 billion in 2019, and projected at $34 billion in 2026 — built on offshore oil: output averaged about 900,000 barrels a day in the first eight months of 2026, and a fifth production ship, which arrived in August, will take it past a million. Exports are led by crude oil (over 90%), gold, rice, and bauxite; imports by machinery, fuel products, and food. Top trading partners: the US, the EU, Trinidad and Tobago, and China. Managing the windfall — a sovereign fund, infrastructure, inflation — is the government's task.

Closest partners: The United States, which has backed Guyana militarily against Venezuela and whose ExxonMobil leads the consortium that produces its oil; Caricom, whose secretariat Guyana hosts; the UK and Canada; Brazil, its southern neighbor; and India, its diaspora partner.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Venezuela, over the Essequibo and the waters off it, which Maduro claimed by referendum in 2023 and which Rodríguez defended in person at the International Court of Justice's hearings on the merits in May 2026; a judgment is pending, and she has said Venezuela would not abide by one against it. Domestically, corruption.

7d. Suriname

At a glance	As of October 2026
Leader	President Jennifer Geerlings-Simons, 73 — in office since July 2025 (1.2 years); National Democratic Party; the first woman president
System	Parliamentary republic with a president elected by the National Assembly
Freedom House	Free
Population	645,000 (2026)
Land area	156,000 km² (60,230 sq mi)
Religion	Protestant 23.6%, Hindu 22.3%, Catholic 21.6%, Muslim 13.8% (2012 census)
People	Hindustani 27.4%, Maroon 21.7%, Creole 15.7%, Javanese 13.7%, mixed 13.4%, Amerindian 3.8% (2012 census); median age 30; 67% urban
Minimum wage	61.25 Suriname dollars an hour since July 1, 2026 (US$1.62 at about 37.8 = US$1, central bank, October 8, 2026)

As of October 2026; ages and years in office as of October 6. Population, median age, and urban share: UN estimates for mid-2026; land area: World Bank. Religion and ethnicity: latest census or estimates, as marked. Wages converted at the exchange rate shown.

Brief history: Dutch Guiana became independent in 1975; Dési Bouterse seized power in a 1980 coup, was later convicted of the murder of 15 opponents in December 1982, and returned as elected president from 2010 to 2020 before evading his sentence and dying in hiding in 2024. Chan Santokhi governed from 2020 to 2025 and died in March 2026.

Current leadership: Jennifer Geerlings-Simons, a physician and former speaker of the National Assembly, leads a coalition headed by her party, the largest in the May 2025 election; her vice president is Gregory

Rusland. In September 2026 she hosted Venezuela's acting president, signing agreements on oil training, air links, and fishing.

Government structure: Under the 1987 constitution the National Assembly needs a two-thirds majority to elect a president, failing which a larger United People's Assembly decides; coalition politics are organized by ethnicity, and institutions are recovering from the Bouterse era.

Economy and trade: A roughly $4 billion economy built on gold (the largest export), oil (small onshore output now, with the $10.5 billion GranMorgu offshore field, operated by TotalEnergies, due to start in 2028), and agriculture. Exports are gold, oil, and rice; imports are fuel, machinery, and food. Top trading partners: the United Arab Emirates and Switzerland (gold), the US, the EU, and China. A 2020 default led to an IMF program, and a 2024 law sends mineral revenue to a savings fund.

Closest partners: The Netherlands, the former colonial power and a major partner; Caricom; the US; China, a major creditor; and Guyana and Brazil as neighbors, with French Guiana on its eastern border.

Principal rivalries and disputes: Suriname has no adversaries. Its issues are debt and the offshore oil that could repeat Guyana's transformation.

7e. Four Small States, Four Models

The continent's four smaller states offer four different models. Paraguay is a dominant-party state in democratic form, its politics owned by a former president. Uruguay is the region's model democracy, alternating power on schedule. Guyana is a petrostate born in a decade, its institutions racing to catch up with its revenue. Suriname is a small multiethnic democracy about to receive the same windfall. What they share is exposure to their larger neighbors — Brazil and Argentina for the first two, Venezuela and Brazil for the second two — and, for Guyana, an American guarantee against Venezuela's claim (9d).

Module 8 — The Alliance Map

Mercosur, the Right-Wing Axis, China's Buyers, and the Revived Monroe Doctrine

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: Inter-American Dialogue; Americas Quarterly; Mercosur documentation

8a. Mercosur and the Pacific Alliance

Mercosur (1d) is the continent's trade bloc and its most durable institution, and its agreement with the EU, concluded in December 2024 after 25 years of negotiation, is its largest achievement: Uruguay, Argentina, and Brazil ratified it in February and March 2026, and it took provisional effect on May 1. Its members are ideologically divided — Lula and Orsi on the left; Milei, Peña, and Paz on the right — and Milei has threatened to leave; it has functioned anyway. The Pacific Alliance (1d), the free-trade alternative to Mercosur, has been dormant in recent years. The continent has never had a lasting political institution: the Union of South American Nations emptied out within a decade of its founding.

8b. The Right-Wing Axis

The right-wing governments (1d) behave as an axis: attending each other's inaugurations, aligning with Washington on Venezuela and drugs, and coordinating against the remaining left. Five of them — Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Ecuador, and Paraguay, with Guyana alongside — sent leaders or envoys to the summit at Trump's Doral resort in Florida that launched the Shield of the Americas in March 2026. Milei is the axis's center, Trump its external patron. Brazil's runoff will decide whether it becomes a continental majority including the largest economy, or whether the left (1d) remains the counterweight.

8c. China's Buyers

China's position (1c) rests on what it buys — the continent's copper, soy, iron ore, and beef — on what it builds, from Peru's Chancay port to power and mining projects, and on what it lends. The right turn has not changed this (3a, 6a, 6c). The revived Monroe Doctrine's demand that the region reduce Chinese presence runs into the arithmetic of who buys, and the axis's answer has been political alignment with Washington and economic continuity with Beijing.

8d. The United States After Venezuela

The removal of Maduro made the United States the continent's decisive security actor for the first time since the Cold War, and the right-wing governments have accepted that role — as have, more quietly, Brazil and Uruguay. The instruments are tariffs (Brazil's, 2a, and 'forced-labor' tariffs of 10-12.5% on Chile, Colombia, Peru, and Ecuador), financial rescue (Argentina's swap), endorsements and threats in elections, military operations from the Caribbean to the Ecuador-Colombia border, and the designation of criminal groups as terrorists. The region's governments have concluded that Washington will act, and are positioning accordingly: the right to benefit, the left to survive.

Module 9 — Where Things Stand, and What to Watch

The Live Flashpoints

Recommended Reading / Reference

Reference: International Crisis Group, CrisisWatch; Americas Society/Council of the Americas; Americas Quarterly

9a. Venezuela's Transition

The continent's central unresolved question. Whether Rodríguez's government yields to an election the opposition can win, or consolidates a Chavismo without Maduro under American license, determines the fate of the emigrants, the oil recovery, the Essequibo claim, and the precedent of a head of state removed by foreign capture. Every government in the course has a stake, and the transition's terms are being written in Washington as much as in Caracas. To watch: an election date, Machado's return, and the reconstruction after the earthquakes (4b).

9b. Brazil's Runoff

The runoff (2b) will decide whether the right turn reaches the continent's largest economy. To watch: whether the first-round leader's unbroken record holds (2a); what the winner does about Jair Bolsonaro's sentence, and how he governs with the new Congress (2b); and the central bank's next decision on November 4, after the vote.

9c. The Cocaine War

Colombia's coca, Ecuador's killings, Peru's and Bolivia's coca fields, the gangs of Brazil's cities and Paraguay's border, and the ports of Guayaquil, Montevideo, and Santos — the cocaine economy is the continent's largest shadow and its most consequential security problem, and the new right has answered it with El Salvador's model: emergency powers, mass detention, mega-prisons, and alignment with Washington's militarized approach. To watch: whether Colombia's return to war with the armed groups (5a) and Peru's promised mega-prison (6a) reduce violence where Ecuador's emergency rule has not (5b).

9d. Essequibo and the Oil Frontier

Guyana's boom and Suriname's coming one have made the northern Atlantic coast the continent's newest oil frontier, and Venezuela's claim to the Essequibo is the dispute that could turn it into a conflict. The court has heard the case and not ruled (7c), and the government that defended the claim in The Hague is the one Washington now works with — so the American guarantee that deters Caracas runs through a government Washington itself shaped. To watch: the judgment, and whether Caracas accepts it.

9e. The Durability of the Right Turn

The right turn (1b) rests on narrow ground: several margins were razor-thin (5a, 6a), Bolivia's left split rather than lost, Chile's right lacks a majority in either house (6c), and every new president faces a mobilized opposition. The left governed most of the continent two decades ago and lost it to the same forces — crime, corruption, commodity busts — now working for the right. Whether the swing is a realignment or a cycle will be visible in Brazil's runoff and in the Andean capitals within two years.

9f. The Last Word

The throughline of all nine modules: this is a continent that has changed direction fast, in an environment shaped by two external facts it did not choose — a China that buys what it sells and a United States that has decided to act, up to and including removing a president. Its twelve states have responded by dividing into an axis that aligns with Washington and a remnant that resists, while all of them keep selling to Beijing. Its democracies are real: most are rated Free (1d), power alternates, and the courts convict former presidents. Its problems are real too: the cocaine economy that overwhelms institutions, the commodity dependence that has never been escaped, and the pattern by which each swing devours the government that rode it. The course closes two weeks before Brazil's runoff and leaves the question the continent's year has posed: whether a region's alignment is chosen by its governments, or by the powers that buy from it and act upon it.

Key Points

South America

The Leaders, Ranked by Time in Office

Country	Leader	Title	Age	In office since	Years
Guyana	Irfaan Ali	President	46	August 2020	6.2
Brazil	Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva	President	80	January 2023	3.8
Paraguay	Santiago Peña	President	47	August 2023	3.1
Ecuador	Daniel Noboa	President	38	November 2023	2.9
Argentina	Javier Milei	President	55	December 2023	2.8
Uruguay	Yamandú Orsi	President	59	March 2025	1.6
Suriname	Jennifer Geerlings-Simons	President	73	July 2025	1.2
Bolivia	Rodrigo Paz	President	59	November 2025	0.9
Venezuela	Delcy Rodríguez	Acting President	57	January 2026	0.8
Chile	José Antonio Kast	President	60	March 2026	0.6
Peru	Keiko Fujimori	President	51	July 2026	0.2
Colombia	Abelardo de la Espriella	President	48	August 2026	0.2

Ages and years in office as of October 6, 2026, counting each leader's continuous tenure in the current office. Every state but Guyana and Suriname elects its president in a separate popular vote; Guyana's president is the candidate who heads the winning party list, and Suriname's National Assembly chooses its president. Delcy Rodríguez took over when US forces seized Nicolás Maduro on January 3, 2026 and was sworn in as acting president on January 5. Lula was also president in 2003–10; the winner of Brazil's October 25 runoff takes office on January 5, 2027.

The Takeaways

• South America changed direction in a year: the left lost Bolivia after nearly two decades, Chile elected Kast, Peru Fujimori, and Colombia de la Espriella, Argentina's Milei won his midterms, and American forces seized Venezuela's Maduro on January 3, 2026 — and Brazil's October 25 runoff decides whether the swing completes.

• Brazil's first round put Flávio Bolsonaro ahead of Lula, 47.0% to 45.2%, and moved Congress and the governorships sharply right; his father serves a 27-year sentence for plotting a coup, at home on health grounds, and Washington replaced its struck-down 50% tariff with new ones of up to 37.5%.

• Brazil's trap is fiscal: debt of 82.9% of GDP and a deficit of 9.5%, almost all of it interest, with the Selic at 13.75% even after five cuts — whoever wins inherits arithmetic the commodity cycle cannot fix.

• Argentina is the decade's stabilization case: inflation down from 289% to about a third a year, a primary surplus, a $20 billion IMF program and a $20 billion American swap, a midterm victory and reforms — but inflation has stopped falling, and the 2027 election will decide whether the program is a settlement or an interlude.

• Venezuela is a leader change without a regime change: Delcy Rodríguez governs with Maduro's apparatus in close coordination with Washington, has set no election date, has opened the oil fields to American companies, and buried 6,438 dead after the June earthquakes, while Machado is kept out of the country.

• Colombia elected de la Espriella by under a point, and he ended 'total peace' within weeks; Ecuador's Noboa fights the gangs under emergency rule after losing his referendum, in a country whose 2025 homicide rate was a record.

• Peru elected Keiko Fujimori by 49,641 votes as its ninth president since 2016, with a new two-chamber Congress; Bolivia's Paz ended fuel subsidies and the currency peg through a deadly protest wave; Chile's Kast cut taxes and saw his approval fall to a third.

• Guyana pumps about 900,000 barrels a day and awaits the International Court of Justice's ruling on Venezuela's Essequibo claim; Suriname's oil arrives in 2028; Uruguay is Latin America's freest democracy, and Paraguay South America's last Taiwan ally.

• China buys the continent — soybeans, iron ore, copper, oil, lithium — and America acts: tariffs, the Argentine rescue, the Venezuela operation, the terrorist designations; every government sells to the first and answers to the second.

• The 2026 lesson is that the region's direction is set by ballots and by Washington — and that the commodity cycle, generous this year on China's demand and the Gulf's war, funds whichever government it finds in office without fixing the fiscal trap any of them inherits.

Quiz

Fifteen questions on the region

1. Who led the first round of Brazil's presidential election on October 4, 2026?

A) Lula, by two points
B) Tarcísio de Freitas, narrowly
C) Flávio Bolsonaro, with 47.0% to Lula's 45.2%
D) Jair Bolsonaro, after a court lifted his ban

2. By how many votes did Keiko Fujimori win Peru's runoff on June 7, 2026?

A) 49,641
B) Fewer than 1,000, after a recount
C) About 10 points over Roberto Sánchez
D) A landslide of 2.4 million

3. What did Bolivia do with its currency on June 29, 2026?

A) Adopted the dollar
B) Pegged it to the Brazilian real
C) Introduced a new currency backed by lithium
D) Ended its peg to the dollar

4. How did Delcy Rodríguez come to lead Venezuela?

A) She won the 2024 election
B) The supreme court ordered her to take over after US forces seized Maduro
C) The opposition chose her
D) A military council named her

5. What happened in Venezuela on June 24, 2026?

A) Maduro escaped from custody
B) Machado returned to Caracas
C) Twin earthquakes killed more than 6,400 people, by the official count
D) Chevron left the country

6. Which party won the most seats in Colombia's March 2026 congressional elections?

A) Centro Democrático
B) Defensores de la Patria
C) The Liberal Party
D) Pacto Histórico

7. What did Ecuador's voters do in the November 2025 referendum?

A) Rejected all four questions
B) Approved them all
C) Voted to recall President Noboa
D) Approved foreign military bases but nothing else

8. What changed in Peru's Congress in July 2026?

A) It was dissolved
B) It became a two-chamber Congress again
C) It gained a Fujimori majority
D) It lost its power to remove presidents for 'moral incapacity'

9. Who chairs Paraguay's ruling party and saw his US sanctions lifted in 2025?

A) Santiago Peña
B) Former President Horacio Cartes
C) Soledad Núñez
D) Former President Mario Abdo Benítez, who left politics

10. Where was Colombia's new president sworn in?

A) Bogotá
B) Medellín
C) Cali
D) Barranquilla, his promised alternate capital

11. What has Argentina's annual inflation rate done in 2026?

A) Stuck near a third a year
B) Fell to 5%
C) Returned to the 289% peak of April 2024
D) Turned negative for the first time since 1990

12. About how much oil did Guyana produce a day in the first eight months of 2026?

A) About 100,000 barrels a day
B) About 3 million barrels a day
C) Nothing; production stopped
D) About 900,000 barrels a day, with a fifth ship to take it past a million

13. Which party holds the balance in Chile's Chamber of Deputies?

A) The Communists
B) The Party of the People
C) The Republican Party, which Kast left
D) The Christian Democrats, after a split

14. What do Kast, Fujimori, and de la Espriella have in common?

A) All won runoffs on security platforms
B) All recognize Taiwan
C) All lead Mercosur members
D) All won first-round majorities without a runoff

15. Which country has Latin America's highest Freedom House score?

A) Argentina
B) Costa Rica
C) Uruguay
D) Brazil, at 73

Answer Sheet

Answers to the course quiz.

1. C 2. A 3. D 4. B 5. C 6. D 7. A 8. B 9. B 10. C 11. A 12. D 13. B 14. A 15. C