

# Regional Overview: Middle East 15 December 2019 – 4 January 2020

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Over the last three weeks in the Middle East, the assassination of Iranian Major General Qasem Soleimani in Baghdad, Iraq was the main escalation in regional tensions and has affected a number of countries. In Syria, fighting continues in the northwest and a number of unidentified attacks occurred against regime sites; these are speculated to have been carried out by Coalition and/or Israeli forces. Meanwhile, in Yemen, the delayed implementation of the 'Riyadh Agreement' has resulted in increased fighting and Southern separatists have withdrawn from the implementation committees of the agreement. In Lebanon, Hassan Diab's nomination as Prime Minister has been met with mixed reception from the general public and has done little to contain the protest movement.

In **Iraq**, demonstrations further intensified on 22 December, following another missed deadline for the nomination of a new prime minister. This anger was further compounded by the nomination of a candidate with ties to Iran, who was categorically rejected by the demonstrators ([VOA, 23 December 2019](#)). The passing of the new election law and the death of a prominent activist led to increased violence as demonstrators burned down several political party headquarters, particularly targeting those affiliated with Iran. President Barham Salih announced on 26 December that he was ready to resign following pressure to nominate a candidate from the Iran-backed al-Binaa Alliance, the largest bloc in parliament, which brought the country to a political deadlock ([Al Monitor, 28 December 2019](#)).

However, this was soon overshadowed by the escalation of rocket attacks against bases hosting Coalition and US forces. These attacks initially began in early 2019 and were alleged to be launched by Iranian-backed groups, mainly the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and specifically the Kataib Hezbollah (KH). The latest attack hit the K-1 military base that hosts

US forces in Kirkuk governorate. It reportedly killed one US contractor and injured several other US and Iraqi personnel. This prompted a retaliatory attack one day later by the US, that targeted three KH targets near the Syrian border, reportedly leaving at least 25 KH fighters dead, including a KH regiment commander and aide to the 45th brigade commander, Abu Ali al-Khazali ([Al Monitor, 30 December 2019](#)).

These attacks further fueled anger on the streets in Iraq, as demonstrators mourned those killed and called for the exclusion of Iraq from any escalation of tensions between the US and Iran. Simultaneously, a demonstration largely made up of angry PMF fighters took place at the US embassy in Baghdad ([DW, 31 December, 2019](#)). The two-day demonstration escalated into an attack on the embassy where demonstrators were able to breach the outer wall of the embassy. Embassy guards responded with stun grenades and tear gas to disperse demonstrators.

On 3 January, the US carried out a strike killing Qasem Soleimani, Iranian Quds forces commander and one of the most powerful figures in Iran, and the PMF's deputy commander al-Muhandis in Baghdad ([The New York Times, 03 January 2020](#)). The US also deployed over 3,000 troops in anticipation of Iran's response. Iraqis quickly turned their attention to mourning the commanders killed, and some demonstrations saw calls to keep Iraq out of any regional tensions. By the end of the first week of January, the Iraqi parliament had voted to expel US troops from Iraq amidst claims of a new US strike on a PMF target in Taji area near Baghdad, which remains unconfirmed from both sides. This burgeoning outright conflict between Iran and the US could wreak havoc for Iraq, which has already been reeling from demonstrations. Additionally, during this period, the Islamic State (IS) has only grown stronger and has been carrying out systematic attacks against Iraqi forces and civilians, particularly in Kirkuk and Diyala provinces, in addition to bombings in Baghdad. The suspension of Coalition operations could be the perfect opportunity for IS to regroup under the guise of turmoil caused by the tensions between Iran and the US playing out in Iraq.

The killing of Soleimani has resulted in rising tensions regionally. Demonstrations were held in **Iran** and **Bahrain** following his death.

In **Syria**, four strikes by unidentified military forces were carried out against regime sites, infrastructure, and pro-Iranian militias. There is speculation that some of these attacks were conducted by Coalition forces and others by Israel coinciding with the wider escalation between the US and Iran in the region.

Meanwhile, in the past three weeks, regime and allied forces made territorial gains in northwest Syria from areas in southern Idlib due to intense fighting with opposition forces and Islamist factions. Regime forces also besieged the Turkish observation point in Sarman. The regime is still pursuing its primary objective of capturing the M5 highway, however, clashes decreased in intensity in recent weeks coinciding with the Turkish Foreign Ministry

delegation's visit to Moscow on 22 December 2019 ([Anadolu Agency, 23 December 2019](#)). The regime and allies' onslaught against the greater Idleb area, together with violence targeting civilians, resulted in over 150 civilian fatalities reported over the last three weeks.

In **Yemen**, the delayed implementation of the 'Riyadh Agreement' has resulted in an unstable situation in areas controlled by pro-Hadi and pro-Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces. Significant infighting has occurred between the anti-Houthi forces that the 'Riyadh Agreement' attempted to bring together in Shabwah, Aden, and Abyan governorates. Much of this fighting has occurred between STC-affiliated forces and allied tribal forces against pro-Hadi and pro-Islah forces. As a result, the STC announced its withdrawal from the implementing committees of the agreement ([Reuters, 1 January 2019](#)). The majority of shelling in Yemen continues to take place in Hodeidah, despite the creation of five ceasefire observation posts by the UN Mission to Support the Hodeidah Agreement (UNMHA).

Furthermore, Ad Dali has been the site of significant fighting as anti-Houthi Southern forces continue to fight pro-Houthi forces extensively in the northern parts of the governorate. Additionally, a campaign of attacks against international aid organizations in Ad Dali by supposed Salafist fighters allegedly aligned with the UAE has resulted in the cessation of aid provision in the area. This comes as major fighting has displaced thousands of people in Ad Dali over previous months ([ReliefWeb, 11 November 2019](#)).

Pro-Houthi forces ended their partial unilateral ceasefire with Saudi Arabia dating from September 2019, with a small but increasing number of clashes and attacks taking place around the border regions. Pro-Houthi forces also attacked a military graduation ceremony of Security Belt Forces in the city of Ad Dali with a ballistic missile, reportedly killing military units and civilians.

Meanwhile, in **Lebanon**, Hassan Diab was nominated to become Prime Minister by Shia parties, Hezbollah and Amal, as well as President Aoun's Maronite Christian party, Future Movement (FM). Diab has promised to form a government of independent experts by January, complying to one of the main demands of the protesters. However, many protesters do not feel that Diab represents them and see him as a representative of the ruling elite ([Guardian, 28 December 2019](#)). The demonstrations came to almost a complete halt toward the end of the month, likely a result of the holidays and bad weather conditions. Several clashes took place at banks after people were unable to cash checks or to withdraw money. Lebanon is facing a liquidity crisis as part of the economic crash. This has resulted in the limiting of US dollar withdrawals, which are sometimes restricted to \$100 a week ([Arab News, 3 January 2020](#)).



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