Regional Overview: Middle East 5-11 January 2020

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Primary developments in the Middle East last week were around US-Iran tensions in Iraq, the downing of the Ukrainian plane in Iran, and the 'Riyadh Agreement' in Yemen.

Last week in **Iraq**, tensions between the US and **Iran** once again took center stage. This is following Iran's response to the killing of Soleimani by firing more than a dozen ballistic missiles at military bases in Ain al-Asad, northwest of Baghdad, and in Erbil. While there were no reports of casualties, these attacks are only further stoking the fire for a confrontation between the US and Iran, playing out in Iraqi territory. Furthermore, the Iraqi parliament voted to oust all foreign soldiers, including the US. In response, US President Trump has threatened Iraq with sanctions, which could leave the country in financial ruin (DW, 5 January 2020).

Meanwhile, the protest movement is moving further away from international headlines, yet are far from dying down. Last week, thousands of Iraqis demonstrated in several southern cities, calling for the dissolution of the government and chanting against foreign influence (Rudaw, 11 January 2020). Several of the demonstrations were met with violence and arrests by the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and security forces, leaving reportedly at least one demonstrator dead and several others wounded (Middle East Eye, 10 January 2020). This can be seen as an extension of US-Iran tensions as the PMF is citing demonstrators' refusals to grieve Soleimani as an excuse to attack them (The Associated Press, 14 January 2020). In response, demonstrators torched several PMF offices. The continuation of these rifts between the demonstrators and the PMF is not only pushing demonstrators further away from their intended goals, but also could lead to an increase in the number of fatalities.

In **Iran**, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) shot down a civilian aircraft headed to Ukraine on 8 January, killing all 176 people onboard according to reports (<u>Washington Post, 14 January 2020</u>). The majority of passengers were Iranian and Canadian. Making matters worse, the Iranian government denied responsibility and publicly speculated that the plane crashed due to a technical failure (<u>BBC, 14 January 2020</u>). Three days later, the government admitted that the IRGC had mistaken the commercial airliner for a US cruise missile. Several protests broke out as a result, many of them at Iranian universities, where protesters chanted anti-regime slogans.

Anger in the region against the US remains high after the killing of Soleimani. Last week, protests in **Bahrain** and **Turkey** continued against the US.

In **Yemen**, the 'Riyadh Agreement' has been belatedly and partially implemented in parts of the South. Pro-Hadi and pro-Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces in the South agreed to a timetable for withdrawals and relocation according to the 'Riyadh Agreement.' A prisoner exchange between pro-Hadi and pro-STC forces also occurred under the auspices of the 'Riyadh Agreement,' a significant step in its delayed implementation. However, clashes between pro-Islah and pro-STC forces were reported in Abyan and Shabwah governorates. These clashes are major obstacles to the implementation of the 'Riyadh Agreement.'

Furthermore, Ad Dali has been the site of significant fighting as anti-Houthi Southern Resistance forces continue to fight pro-Houthi forces extensively in the Qa'atabah district in the northwest of the governorate. Government forces have recently been making progress in the area and claimed to have gained territory. 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).

Air raids from the Saudi-led Operation Restoring Hope forces have continued to decrease significantly. Only a few airstrikes were reported this week, among them one on pro-Houthi forces in Ad Dali. Houthi fighters increased attacks on Saudi-affiliated forces in the border region. Islamic State (IS) forces were reportedly active in Yemen as well, as they claimed an IED attack against Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in the wider Qayfa area.

Meanwhile, violent events decreased throughout **Syria** in the past week, particularly in the northwest where the majority of fighting is taking place. A counter-offensive was launched by opposition and Islamist factions that briefly achieved territorial gains before a ceasefire brokered by Turkey and Russia came into effect on 9 January (<u>Al Jazeera, 10 January 2020</u>).

In **Lebanon,** the demonstrations against the political system across the country continued, with clashes taking place in the Akkar region. Frustrations are high among demonstrators due to delays in government formation, rejection of Hassan Diab who is set to become the new Prime Minister, and infrastructure issues. Severe power rationing leading to lengthy

electricity cuts have aggravated the public. Water and gas has also been rationed (Asharaq Al-Awsat, 10 January 2020). Meanwhile, banks are being increasingly targeted by demonstrators as anger mounts over restrictions.

In **Jordan**, thousands demonstrated on Friday in several cities against the Jordan-**Israel** gas deal. Protests began the week prior after the import of gas began on 1 January, though were initially focused in the capital, Amman. Last week, with increased support from Islamic political groups, the protests were larger and occurred in multiple cities (Al Ghad, 10 January 2020).

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