

Regional Overview: Middle East 12-18 January 2020

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Bringing clarity to crisis

Last week in the Middle East, developments occurred in the implementation of the 'Riyadh Agreement' in Yemen and the ceasefire agreement in Syria. Widespread demonstrations continued in Iraq, Lebanon, and Iran.

Implementation of the 'Riyadh Agreement' has begun to occur in parts of the South of **Yemen** despite delays. Last week, mutual withdrawals of pro-Hadi and pro-Southern Transitional Council (STC) forces, which were agreed to following additional negotiations the previous week, began to be implemented. A number of pro-STC forces withdrew from their positions in Abyan and Shabwah governorates under the supervision of Saudi Arabian forces, which have been deployed throughout Abyan, Shabwah, and Aden.

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), significant fortifications have been built by both pro-Houthi forces and National Resistance Forces in the governorate. Furthermore, Ad Dali has been the site of significant fighting as anti-Houthi Southern Resistance forces and pro-Hadi forces continue to fight pro-Houthi forces extensively in the Qatabah district in the northwest of the governorate. Additionally, international aid organizations re-entered Ad Dali after ceasing operations within the governorate in mid-December due to a series of attacks on their operations ([Aden al-Ghad, 13 January 2020](#)).

Importantly, air raids from the Saudi-led Operation Restoring Hope forces have been limited so far in 2020 with only four airstrikes reported on pro-Houthi forces. Notably, pro-Houthi forces allegedly fired an unidentified ballistic missile at a government military base on the outskirts of Marib city on Saturday. At least 111 soldiers were killed and 66 wounded,

according to the pro-Hadi Health Ministry ([Asharq al Awsat, 20 January 2020](#)). The attack represents the first major escalation in 2020, following a consistent decrease in reported fatalities toward the end of 2019.

Yemen is not the only country that faced obstacles in the implementation of an agreement. In **Syria**, the ceasefire agreement in the Greater Idlib area once again fell through. Regime and Russian forces intensified their aerial campaign, particularly in the western countryside of Aleppo, ending months of relative calm in the area. The resumed violence in northwestern Syria during the past week resulted in at least 45 civilian fatalities. Meanwhile, the Islamic State (IS) claimed nine attacks in eastern Syria, twice the number of attacks from the week prior. This may indicate the tentative reformation of IS in eastern Syria as IS takes advantage of the general disorder across the border in **Iraq**.

In Iraq, IS continues to pose a threat as attacks on security forces on areas bordering Saladin and Diyala provinces persist. Rocket attacks on military bases hosting US forces also continued last week with no claims of responsibility. As the Iraqi government struggles to take on these issues, one unintended consequence has been a rise in violence against civilians with several attacks on civilians by unidentified armed groups reported last week. Meanwhile, demonstrations once again turned violent last week, primarily due to the perceived stalemate in implementing their demands ([Al Jazeera, 21 January 2020](#)). This frustration is also compounded by the continuing attacks on activists. Several demonstrators were reportedly killed in heavy clashes with Iraqi security forces. A general sense of instability endures in the country and is felt by both the demonstrators and the government. While the demonstrators fear that their demands will be eclipsed by geopolitical concerns, the Iraqi government is facing fire for both its internal and external affairs.

Demonstrations against the political system in **Lebanon** reignited once again last week as part of the 'week of rage,' which began Tuesday. The anger of demonstrators was directed mainly at the financial situation in Lebanon as demonstrators attacked many banks and ATMs in Beirut, Tripoli and other cities. Clashes with police forces left scores injured on both sides and led to demonstrations outside police stations where demonstrators demanded the release of those arrested.

In **Iran**, dozens of anti-government protests were held again last week in response to the downing of a passenger jet by Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps forces (IRGC). More than half of the protests were organized by students. Police used tear gas to disperse many of the protests and arrested protesters at a number of locations.

Last week in **Israel** and **Palestine**, four rockets were fired from Gaza toward southern Israel. Two rockets were intercepted by the Iron Dome while the other two fell in open areas. Israeli forces retaliated with helicopter and drone strikes targeting Hamas

infrastructure and weapons. Additionally, there were also reports of incendiary device balloons launched from Gaza into southern Israel for the first time since October 2019.



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