

Regional Overview: Middle East 9-15 February 2020

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Last week in the Middle East, key developments include: increased Islamic State (IS) activity in Yemen and Iraq; ongoing protests in Iraq and Lebanon; demonstrations around political anniversaries in Iraqi Kurdistan and Bahrain; and continued fighting in Syria and Yemen, taking a heavy toll on civilians.

In **Yemen**, major clashes continued between pro-Houthi and anti-Houthi forces in six governorates: Ad Dali, Al Jawf, Hodeidah, Marib, Sanaa, and Taizz. Most frontlines remained static, with anti-Houthi forces claiming to retake some territory northeast of Sanaa and in western Marib. Saudi-led air raids continued throughout Yemen for the second week straight, with nearly 50 airstrikes recorded by ACLED. The raids mostly targeted positions along the frontlines in Ad Dali, Al Jawf, Marib, Sadah, and Sanaa governorates. While the greatest number of direct ground clashes took place in Taizz and Ad Dali, Hodeidah continued to experience significant levels of artillery fire. For the second week in a row, no clashes were reported in Hajjah governorate, on the northwestern border with **Saudi Arabia**. The implementation of the 'Riyadh Agreement' between the Southern Transitional Council (STC) and the pro-Hadi government has not changed, with both sides accusing the other of violating the deal ([Aden al Ghad, 9 February 2020](#)).

Furthermore, on 14 February, a Tornado fighter jet belonging to the Saudi-led coalition was reportedly shot down by pro-Houthi forces in Al Jawf governorate. During what was described as a search and rescue operation the next day, Saudi-led coalition airstrikes reportedly killed at least 30 civilians ([The Guardian, 16 February 2020](#)). The downing of the coalition jet comes days after the US Navy claimed to have intercepted a shipment of Iranian-made anti-tank and anti-aircraft missiles in the Arabian Sea destined for pro-Houthi forces ([Asharq al-Awsat, 16 February 2020](#)).

Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State (IS) forces maintained high levels of activity for the second consecutive week, mostly in the Abyan and Al Bayda governorates. The two groups clashed in northwestern Al Bayda, but most AQAP activity focused on Security Belt Forces, including the destruction of a Security Belt commander's house in Al Mahfad. Conversely, most IS activity focused on pro-Houthi forces in Al Bayda.

In **Iraq**, following a week without any attacks on bases hosting US forces, two attacks were reported: an unidentified rocket targeted the K1 military base hosting US forces in Kirkuk province, and an unidentified bomb targeted a US convoy carrying military contractors south of Baghdad. No injuries or fatalities were reported during the attacks, but they clearly indicate that tensions remain high between the US and the suspected perpetrators of these attacks: Iran and Iranian-backed militias. Additionally, IS activity continues to increase across the country. Attacks were reported last week in Babylon and Ninewa provinces, indicating a shift from the group's previous strategy of targeting mainly Anbar, Saladin, and Diyala provinces, and also signifying the potential expansion of IS activity.

Major demonstrations also continued across Iraq last week. Thousands of Iraqi women took to the streets in the cities of Baghdad, Amara, Hilla, Kut, and As Samawah in defiance of statements made by prominent Shiite cleric Muqtada Al Sadr regarding segregation at protest sites ([MENAFN, 14 February 2020](#)). Sadr said it was immoral for men and women to 'mix' at protests. Violent demonstrations also continued in both Baghdad and Nassriya where at least two demonstrators were reportedly shot dead and at least 23 others were reportedly injured by Iranian-backed Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF) and riot police ([Yaqein, 15 February 2020](#)).

Also, across Iraqi Kurdistan, thousands of Kurds protested in commemoration of the 21st anniversary of the arrest of the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan, denouncing his detention and demanding his freedom. Across the border in **Turkey**, a number of grenade attacks and instances of property destruction were claimed by primarily Kurdish local vengeance units of the Peoples' United Revolutionary Movement (HBDH) and the Civil Protection Units (YPS) in Izmir, Van, and Istanbul provinces. The majority of the targets were vehicles and factories whose owners are allegedly tied to the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) of President Erdogan. Turkish police forces were also targeted in the attacks in Van on 12 and 13 February.

In **Syria**, the regime and its allies secured the M5 highway and advanced further into the Idleb and Aleppo countrysides. Gaining control of the strategic M5 highway is a major victory for the regime. Running through Idleb and Aleppo, the M5 was previously a major commercial route connecting Aleppo to Dasmascus and southern Syria ([Al Jazeera, 12 February 2020](#)). The moving frontiers resulted in further escalation in tensions with Turkey, as Turkish positions continued to be surrounded by regime forces. Despite the strained relationship between the two countries, Turkey continued doubling down on its military

presence in the area, raising the stakes for Turkey's coercive strategy in northwest Syria. The ongoing war of attrition with Russia will ultimately force both actors once more to the negotiating table over northern Syria. Until then, further advances by the regime, civilian casualties, and mass displacements towards the Syrian border with Turkey are likely to continue.

Meanwhile, the humanitarian situation in the country continues to deteriorate. The UN announced that since the resumption of this latest round of hostilities in December 2019, 900,000 people have been forced to flee ([France24, 17 February 2020](#)). Many had been previously displaced to Idlib ([BBC News, 17 February 2020](#)), and the already overcrowded IDP camps along the border are not able to accommodate the rising number of IDPs, particularly in harsh winter conditions. There have been reports of babies freezing to death without adequate shelter or medical facilities ([Anadolu Agency, 14 February 2020](#)). Women and children make up more than 80% of the internally displaced population ([Al Jazeera, 18 February 2020](#)). High Commissioner, Michelle Bachelet, from the OHCHR, said that regime forces have been targeting civilians and civilian infrastructure ([Al Jazeera, 18 February 2020](#)). ACLED records over 70 civilian fatalities in northwestern Syria just last week, resulting primarily from regime and Russian airstrikes and shelling. Additionally, four schools and four medical points were targeted or damaged by airstrikes in the Greater Idlib area.

In **Bahrain**, dozens of demonstrations were reported commemorating the ninth anniversary of the Bahraini uprising on 14 February 2011.

In **Lebanon**, despite continued demonstrations, the Lebanese cabinet that was formed by Prime Minister Hassan Diab was approved on Tuesday by a Parliamentary vote of confidence.



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