Developments in the Middle East region last week included a drop in conflict events in Palestine, surges in demonstrations in Turkey and Bahrain in response to violent events, territory gains by Houthi forces in Ad Dali governorate in Yemen, and the 12th round of Syrian peace talks in Astana. Meanwhile, the Islamic State (IS) insurgency continues to be a key trend across multiple countries in the region, although to an increasingly lesser degree.

Last week in Palestine, there was a notable drop in violent conflict of all types, yet this reduction in the number of events is unlikely to remain permanent. Between 18 and 27 April, Israeli forces closed both the West Bank and Gaza due to security concerns over the period of Passover. Israeli military closures of the Palestinian territories are common during Jewish holidays as a means of preventing surges in violence, and this may account for last week’s relative ‘peace’. Another potential explanation for the reduction in violence is an alleged agreement reported by Hamas in which Israel had agreed to a number of concessions during negotiations between the two groups. Some of the reported clauses include: allowing the entrance of many items previously banned from Gaza, an increase in electricity supply to the Gaza Strip, the employment of 8,000 Gazans in UN projects, an extension of the permitted fishing zone around Gaza to 15 miles, and the re-opening of the Karni and Beit Hanoun industrial zones (Arutz Sheva, 21 April 2019). However, a number of upcoming events — including the anticipated release of the so-called ‘Deal of the Century’, Israeli Independence Day, and Nakba day — have the potential to reverse this downward trend in conflict. Additionally, political analysts and diplomats have reportedly voiced concerns that the instability of the Palestinian Authority (PA) and its leadership, along with tensions between the PA and Hamas, greatly increase the likelihood of a major outbreak of violence this summer (Haaretz, 23 February 2019).

Elsewhere in the Middle East, demonstrations have been growing in response to violent events in the region. In Bahrain, demonstrations broke out following the Saudi execution of 37 men on charges of attacking security officers and installations as well as cooperating with ‘enemy organizations’. Most of the men were Shiite and maintained their innocence until the end (Al
Jazeera, 27 April 2019). This event struck a chord in Bahrain, where the Shiite majority is often at odds with the Sunni Al Khalifa regime over their unpopular relationship with Saudi Arabia and their persecution of Shiite clerics. This has manifested into ongoing, and often violent, agitation since 2011. In Turkey, meanwhile, protests across the country took place on 22 April following the violent attack a day earlier against the Republican People's Party (CHP) Chair, Kemal Kılıçdaroğlu. Kılıçdaroğlu was attending the funeral of a Turkish soldier who was killed during clashes with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Hakkari when he was assaulted by a large group of people accusing him of supporting the PKK. Protests led by CHP branches across the country condemned the partisan violence. The CHP filed a criminal complaint against the Interior Minister, Süleyman Soylu, for failing to keep Kılıçdaroğlu safe and actively provoking hatred against him (Turkish Minute, 27 April 2019). Last year, Soylu said CHP politicians should be barred from attending the funerals of soldiers and has also said that Kılıçdaroğlu's contacts with The Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP) made him a target (Ahval, 23 April 2019).

In Iran, protest movements that were active until Norooz celebrations in March and massive flooding have now resumed at full intensity. Prominent protest groups in Iran include teachers and other labour groups, as well as defrauded investors. In Turkey and Lebanon, demonstrations were held in commemoration of the Armenian genocide.

In Syria, exchanges of shelling continued between regime and rebel/Islamist factions — mainly Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) — in and along Greater Idleb's DMZ. This activity comes in conjunction with increased Russian airstrikes in the northeast of the country, which has reportedly led to a number of civilian casualties. Last week, the 12th round of peace talks took place in Astana with the goal of addressing the situation in Idleb, among other topics. In this regard, representatives from Russia, Turkey, and Iran agreed to increase coordination in the region through the establishment of joint patrols along the DMZ's border (Kazakhstan Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 26 April 2019). Those present at the talks also condemned the recent U.S. decision to recognize the Israeli claim to the Golan Heights (Al-Monitor, 30 April 2019).

Meanwhile, IS militants remained active in a number of countries in the region, although their presence has been decreasing since losing territory in Syria last March. In Syria, IS sleeper cells carried out a number of attacks last week against regime fighters, Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD), and civilians, mainly in the southeast of Deir-ez-Zor governorate. Attacks also occurred to a lesser degree in the adjacent Homs and Ar-Raqqah governorates. In Idleb, the Islamist group HTS clashed with IS fighters during a raid on their hideout in the Mseibin area. In Iraq, meanwhile, joint security operations have been increasing recently in an attempt to target and destroy IS hideouts across the country. Many of these have been led by the country's Counter-Terrorism Service and are supported by the Global Coalition. Among the operations last week were cleanup operations in the Shay Valley of Kirkuk, and an airdrop mission in the Hamrin Mountains of Diyala during which the IS head of security for that province was reportedly killed. In Yemen, IS claimed responsibility for a suicide bombing that hit a commercial store in Dhi
Kalin Asfal village of Al Bayda governorate. Eight civilians were reportedly killed by the explosion, although IS stated that the attack was targeting elements of the Yemeni Army and Al Qaeda (AQAP).

Elsewhere in Yemen, clashes between pro-Houthi and anti-Houthi forces loyal to the internationally-recognized government continued to rage across several fronts, with heavy fighting reported in the governorates of Ad Dali, Al Bayda, Hajjah, Sadah, and Taiz. Fighting in Ad Dali has shifted to the southwest as Houthi forces attacked tribal militias, UAE-backed Security Belt fighters, and pro-Hadi military troops in the Azariq and Husha districts. Sources from both sides reported Houthi territorial gains in the region. Meanwhile, anti-Houthi forces backed by Saudi Arabia continued to push southward, taking control of Al Udhnab mountain range, which lies near the Saudi border in Baqim district.

![Political Violence & Protests in the Middle East](image)

**Key Numbers**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Same Period 2018 vs 2019</th>
<th>2018</th>
<th>2019</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Number of Events</td>
<td>15,031</td>
<td>12,810</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reported Fatalities</td>
<td>28,384</td>
<td>16,814</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
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