

Regional Overview – Middle East 14 May 2019

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Developments in the Middle East region last week included a surge in conflict along the Gaza border and increased demonstrations in Turkey and Iran related to current political events. Meanwhile, there were several updates in ongoing armed conflicts in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. In Israel/Palestine, there was a flare-up in violence last week along the southern border. Sunday, 5 May, was the second day of a large-scale exchange of rockets and airstrikes between Gazan armed groups and the Israeli military. It was also the most active – and reportedly most lethal – day of the 48-hour flare up. Before an Egyptian-brokered ceasefire was agreed to on Monday, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) fired nearly 700 rockets into Israel. Rockets notably hit a number of Israeli cities and towns including Ashdod, Ashqelon, and Beersheba despite the deployment of the Iron Dome missile defense system, which intercepted around 240 of the rockets. In prior rounds of rocket fire, direct hits to residential areas and Israeli fatalities have been uncommon. On Sunday, four Israeli civilians were reportedly killed by rockets and many were injured. Israel retaliated by targeting 350 sites, reporting that they were all PIJ and Hamas locations. However, Palestinian sources reported that a number of non-militant sites were hit as well, including residential buildings and the offices of Yardimeli Association, a Turkish aid organization. Yardimeli reported that five residents of the building were killed in that airstrike alone. At least 25 Palestinians were reportedly killed over the 48-hour escalation. While some fatalities were reported to be militants, many were reported to be civilians, including two pregnant women and two infants. 57 housing units were completely destroyed or rendered uninhabitable. This resulted in 28 families so far being internally displaced (OCHA, 14 May 2019). Meanwhile, protests continued through 8 May in front of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) offices in Gaza where demonstrators whose homes have been destroyed by Israel requested rental subsidies to help cover their expenses. United Nations (UN) officials have also warned that Gaza is on the verge of crisis, stating that one million Palestinians in Gaza who receive food aid may go hungry, and 2,000 of the Gazans who have been shot by Israeli forces may lose their limbs due to the UNRWA funding crisis (The Independent, 9 May 2019). Elsewhere, there were surges of demonstrations in a number of countries. In Turkey, demonstrations in support of thousands of hunger striking prisoners took place across the country, many of which were led by family members and opposition parties. Police forces intervened in the majority of them, dispersing and arresting participants. The hunger strike has been ongoing since November 2018, focused on the treatment of political prisoners, in particular the Kurdistan Workers Party (PKK) leader, Abdullah Öcalan. At the core of the movement is the continued isolation of Öcalan, who two weeks ago was allowed to meet with his lawyer for the first time since 2011 (Ahval, 6 May 2019). In Iran, supportive demonstrations also erupted in response to President Hassan Rouhani's recent announcement on a partial withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (CNN, 8 May 2019). This comes amid growing tensions between the U.S. and Iran, most recently characterised by both countries declaring their others' military forces as terrorist groups. While the nuclear deal was supported by the majority of the Iranian public, hardliner factions have continuously opposed it and accused the government of having made too many concessions to the West. Meanwhile, ongoing armed conflicts continued in several countries. In Yemen, clashes continued between anti-Houthi troops and pro-Houthi forces in Ad Dali governorate, with Houthi forces being forced out of the recently captured territory by the newly-arrived Presidential Guard and UAE-trained Security Belt forces. Similar clashes occurred in Zahir district of Al Bayda governorate, with Houthi forces losing some territory following the arrival of Giants Brigade reinforcements. Further west, Houthi forces continued to clash with anti-Houthi forces in Taizz governorate, with little territorial change. In Taizz city, a number of assassination attempts targeted military leaders of the 170th Air Defense Brigade who were stationed in the city amid the withdrawal of Abu Al-Abbas fighters and shifting power among local Islah-affiliated forces. Finally, early in the week, Islamic State (IS) militants conducted a suicide bombing against Al Qaeda (AQAP) positions in Wald Rabi, Al Bayda, claiming to have killed a local Emir. However, AQAP denies this claim. Both AQAP and IS are active in Al Bayda and have periodically conducted hit and run attacks against each other over the past few months. IS militants were also active in Iraq, where they continued to target security forces and civilians with sniping, ambushes, and IED attacks. Despite successes by the state to limit the group's post-war activity, the threat of an IS resurgence remains

constant. Last week, the Iraqi army reached an agreement with 50 villages in Nineveh governorate to arm them and allow for local defense (Bas News, 9 May 2019). This comes amid rising IS activity in Nineveh, especially in the districts of Mosul and Tel Afar. In Syria , following months of shelling and airstrikes in and along Greater Idlib's DMZ, regime forces and pro-regime militias – supported by Russian airstrikes – launched a wide-scale offensive against rebel and Islamist factions in the governorates of Hama and Lattakia. The offensive was launched from two directions: in one, regime forces attacked through the northwestern countryside of Hama, managing to gain control of several towns and villages, including Kafar Nabutha and Madiq Castle. A second assault targeted the northern countryside of Lattakia, where Islamist factions, including Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS), managed to repel several attempts to advance and control the Kabani area. Further east, several demonstrations took place in Shehil village of Deir-ez-Zor following a recent airdrop mission by Coalition and Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD) in the village. Seven civilians were reportedly killed during the operation, which aimed to capture a former IS leader. QSD forces opened fire in the air during the protests in order to disperse the demonstrators and reportedly killed one. In response, demonstrators attacked the QSD headquarters in town and set fire to a number of military caravans. © 2019 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). All rights reserved. Regional Overview – Middle East 14 May 2019 Tom Hart Tom Hart is a Middle East Research Manager with the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), and a part-time brewer and genealogist. He received his BA in International History from Carleton University in Ottawa, where he focused on colonial relationships, intercultural interaction, and geocultural perspectives. Mr. Hart is currently based out of Ottawa, Canada, and is fluent in English and French. Lauren Blaxter Lauren Blaxter is the Middle East Assistant Research Manager at ACLED. She has been responsible for coding Israel, Palestine, Lebanon and Jordan since May 2017. Ms. Blaxter holds a BA in Human Rights, a Graduate Diploma in Law, and a LLM in International Criminal Law. Her work focuses on law and forensics in armed conflict. Tagged on: Iran Iraq Israel Palestine Syria Turkey Yemen Tom Hart and Lauren Blaxter

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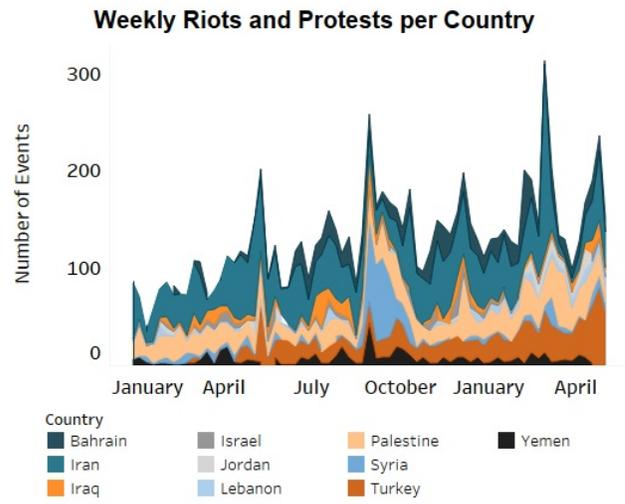
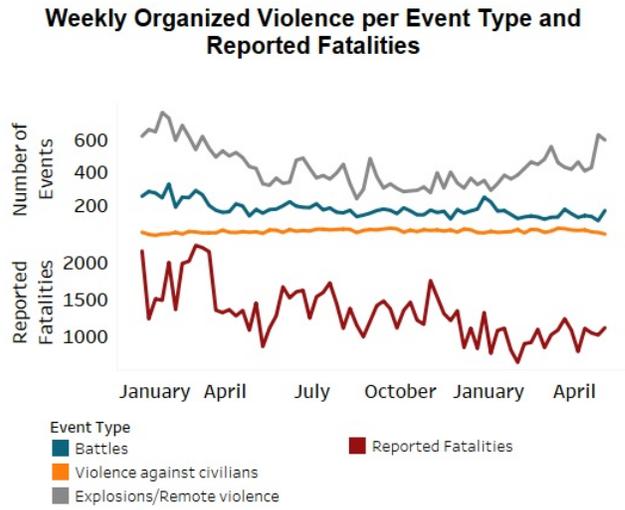
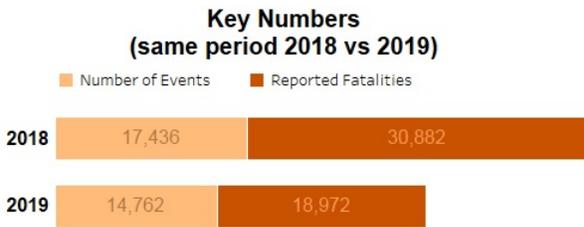
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