Key trends in the Middle East last week included an increase in Israeli demolitions in East Jerusalem (and accompanying regional backlash), as well as labour demonstrations by state employees in multiple countries. Elsewhere, Islamic State (IS) insurgents were involved in several high-profile battles in Iraq and Syria, while in the latter there were notable key developments concerning rebel and resistance groups in the north and south. In Yemen, battle lines shifted somewhat as both pro-Houthi and pro-Hadi forces claimed territorial gains. Recent trends in political violence remained consistent in Palestine last week with periodic clashes in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. However, there was a significant increase in Israeli demolitions of Palestinian homes and property. While home demolitions were reported across the West Bank, the majority took place in East Jerusalem. Israeli authorities recently began a campaign to demolish Palestinian homes in the Wadi Yetzol neighbourhood under the pretext that they were built without permits some 30 years ago. Israeli courts granted the municipality the right to demolish all of the houses in the area — which lies between Silwan and Abu Tor in East Jerusalem — including 60 buildings in which 500 families reside (Haaretz, 17 April 2019). Concurrently, marches took place across Jordan in support of King Abdullah II's recent statements on the importance of safeguarding Jerusalem and of Jordan's role as protector of the city's holy sites — a movement which has recently gained serious momentum. King Abdullah II has emphasized that Jordan supports a lasting resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that includes the establishment of a sovereign Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as its capital (MEMO, 30 March 2019). The largest of these marches involved thousands of participants at Mu'tah University. Israel has also been at the center of controversy in Bahrain, where demonstrations against the normalization of political ties with Israel have been ongoing for weeks. Last week, demonstrations continued through 18 April in Bahrain's Northern and Capital districts. On 14 April, an Israeli delegation reportedly cancelled its trip to the country, citing increased security concerns; however contradictory statements made days later claim that the delegation did in fact visit and held several business meetings in Manama (Jerusalem Post, 18 April 2019). The initial announcement was a reaction to not only weeks of demonstrations, but also disapproval by the Bahraini parliament, and the recent release of a video by a militant group depicting the bombing of the hotel where the delegation planned to stay (Times of Israel, 15 April 2019). Elsewhere, demonstrations led by government employees were a common theme across Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq. In Lebanon, retired Lebanese military and security personnel blocked roads throughout the country on Tuesday, and some burned tires to demonstrate against potential cuts to their end-of-service benefits. A day later, Lebanese teachers, employees and civil servants also demonstrated in Beirut against potential cuts to their salaries and benefits due to the country's budget deficit. In Turkey, former public workers who were dismissed by legislative decrees during the attempted coup held almost daily protests in Ankara, all of which were dispersed by police forces. In Iraq, employees of the General-Directorate of Culture and Art in Sulaimani protested salary delays and a decision by the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) to increase working hours for employees across the Kurdistan Region. Similar demonstrations by state employees to demand unpaid wages occurred in March 2018 after the KRG established a salary saving system as part of austerity measures. While state employees led the demonstrations to a large degree last week, protests concerning the poor management of state services have been a continuous theme throughout the region; notable is the recent popular reaction to poor flood management in Iran. In Iraq, Islamic State (IS) activity has been on the rise since the end of March 2019, possibly in response to increased efforts by Iraqi state forces to target the group's remaining hideouts. Two weeks ago, IS appeared to have launched a new offensive with their Amaq Telegram channel referring to a "battle of revenge for the blessed state of Sham". However, a series of targeted state operations since — including intelligence-based air drops by counter-terrorism units — has seemingly halved the number of attacks by the group. In Syria meanwhile, IS launched a series of high-profile attacks on regime forces and loyal militias in a number of locations across the desert area between Homs and Deir-ez-Zor governorates. In one particularly large battle, IS militants attacked regime and allied fighters in Al-Koum, near Palmyra, leading to a high number of reported casualties over two days of battle. While last month's recapture of the remaining IS-held territory by Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD) was a significant blow to the group, sleeper cells continue to operate throughout the region using more discreet tactics (for more on that, see this ACLED infographic). Elsewhere in Syria, several attacks by local resistance groups targeted regime/Ba'ath Party and allied personnel in the governorates of Rural Damascus and Dar'a. Among the perpetrators was a newly formed group called Saraya Qasioun, as well as members of the Dar'a Popular Resistance. These attacks hint at the possible re-emergence of violent opposition against Assad within the regime-controlled southern regions. Further north, Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) and Hurras al Deen fighters both launched separate attacks on regime fighters in the suburbs of Aleppo. These attacks come in conjunction with continued regime and Russian airstrikes across the Greater Idlib region. In Yemen, meanwhile, Houthi forces launched major counter-attacks against pro-Hadi troops along several fronts last week, successfully regaining control of key areas in Damt town of Ad Dali governorate, as well as in Dhi Na'im district of Al-Bayda. Local sources reported that local tribal militias were able to halt the Houthi advance following intense clashes. At the same time, anti-Houthi forces also reported small territorial gains against Houthi positions in the Abs and Midi districts of Hajjah governorate, as well as in Kitaf district of Sadah. While daily shelling and small-scale attacks are reported daily in Hodeidah port city and surrounding districts, the most intense fighting has now shifted into the central and northern parts of the country. © 2019 Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED). All rights reserved. Regional Overview – Middle East 23 April 2019 Tom Hart Tom Hart is a Middle East
Key trends in the Middle East last week included an increase in Israeli demolitions in East Jerusalem (and accompanying regional backlash), as well as labour demonstrations by state employees in multiple countries. Elsewhere, Islamic State (IS) insurgents were involved in several high-profile battles in Iraq and Syria, while in the latter there were notable key developments concerning rebel and resistance groups in the north and south. In Yemen, battle lines shifted somewhat as both pro-Houthi and pro-Hadi forces claimed territorial gains.

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