Throughout the Middle East region last week, there was a drop in battles, explosions/remote violence, and demonstration events. This trend can partially be attributed to the recent conclusion of major military operations against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria, natural disasters in Iran and Iraq, and a ceasefire between Israel and Gazan armed groups. As a result, reported fatalities have also decreased for the first time since the beginning of March 2019. Despite this, however, election-related conflict events have risen in both Israel and Turkey, with violent clashes between party candidates and supporters occurring in the latter.

As Israel approaches legislative elections on 9 April, an above average number of demonstrations were reported last week throughout the country. Israelis demonstrated outside the homes of Yair Lapid and Naftali Bennett against the anticipated US Middle East peace plan — the ‘Deal of the Century’ — which is expected to be released following the elections. Protesters also gathered in front of Prime Minister Netanyahu’s residence to protest against any land concessions that may be part of the plan. On Sunday, the Kerem Shalom crossing with Gaza was reopened as part of the ceasefire negotiations with Hamas; the next day, demonstrators from the Union of Right-Wing Parties blocked the passage of trucks through the crossing to demonstrate against its re-opening. Israel's response to Gazan border violence has been a key issue during this election cycle; last week, residents from border communities near Gaza erected protest tents on Rothschild Boulevard in Tel Aviv to demonstrate against the lack of security in Israel's south (for more on issues likely to affect the election, see this recent ACLED infographic)

In Palestine, Israeli airstrikes continued in Gaza targeting Palestinian groups launching incendiary devices into Israel and reportedly injuring two of them. Israeli forces also shelled three Hamas posts on Sunday despite the ceasefire, but did not conduct any airstrikes against Hamas targets. Along the coast, there were multiple reports of Israeli forces opening fire on Palestinian fishing boats and, in a rare event, Egyptian forces also opened fire on Palestinian fishermen and detained four of them. Meanwhile, last Friday, around 10,500 Palestinian
demonstrators took part in the Great March of Return demonstrations along the Gazan border and at least 84 Palestinians were reportedly injured by Israeli forces during clashes. Palestinian media reported that Israeli forces used a new kind of red gas against demonstrators last week which caused temporary suffocation and a feeling of lethargy (IMEMC, 6 April 2019).

In the West Bank, two deaths were reported as a result of Israeli-Palestinian violence. An Israeli settler reportedly opened fire and killed a Palestinian south of Nablus near Huwwarah checkpoint. Some sources stated that the Palestinian was attempting to carry out a stabbing, while other accounts said that the shooting was unprovoked. A second Palestinian was reportedly killed during violent clashes that broke out during an Israeli raid of Qalandia Refugee Camp. In another incident, dozens of teachers and students suffered from tear gas after Israeli forces fired live ammunition, rubber coated bullets, sound bombs, and tear gas canisters at the Hebron elementary school for unknown reasons (Ma’an News Agency, 2 April 2019).

In Lebanon, demonstrators voiced dissatisfaction with the government and called for overdue funding to be released to Bekaa municipalities and for an end to interruptions in the supply of drinking water to Markaba. Additionally, there were multiple demonstrations in Riad al Solh square, Beirut, on Friday for various reasons, mostly in support of civil labour issues, and against the construction of the Bisri Valley dam.

Demonstrations in Jordan, meanwhile, focused on strained relations with Israel and small sit-ins were held in response to labor issues. Dozens of Jordanians blocked a road in the Manshiyeh area of the northern Jordan Valley to demonstrate against damage caused by the excavations for the Israeli gas pipeline. In Amman, medical degree holders, journalists, and website owners held sit-ins to draw attention to problems with accreditation and licensing for their respective fields.

In Iran, the country continued to deal with a national flooding crisis throughout the week, leading to several instances of both peaceful and violent demonstrations against the government’s relief response. Many of the demonstrations were aimed specifically at the release of water from major dams that are near overflowing – something that threatens to destroy homes, farmland, and livestock. On Wednesday, one person was reportedly killed after the security forces opened fire on rioters who were trying to stop the destruction of a levee and the diversion of floodwaters into their farmland (VOA News, 4 April 2019). In a second incident, an angry crowd surrounded and stoned the vehicle of an Iranian army commander who was coordinating relief efforts along the Karun River in Khuzestan province. Demonstrators accused Rouhani’s administration and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps of having mismanaged the relief response (RFERL, 4 April 2019).

In Bahrain, a handful of demonstrations took place against the normalization of ties between Bahrain and Israel. The recent agitation followed remarks made by Ayatollah Sheikh Isa Qassim – the leading Shiite cleric who is currently in Iran – denouncing the Bahraini regime for planning
to host an Israeli delegation at the Global Entrepreneurship Congress later this month (Press TV, 3 April 2019).

In Turkey, political violence surged on Sunday as local elections took place across the country. For the most part, these involved clashes between mukhtar (neighbourhood leader) candidates and their supporters in various provinces, particularly in the southeast. In several instances, one or both sides were armed with knives or guns. Elsewhere, members of various political parties were attacked or detained last week by either unidentified persons or members of the security forces. Notable was the reportedly fatal shooting of two Felicity Party (SP) ballot box observers in Bolunmez, Malatya province.

The results of the local elections have led to tensions between the ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) and opposition parties, especially in Istanbul and Ankara which were taken by the Republican People's Party (CHP)-led alliance. However, last week President Erdogan and the AKP demanded a recount of the Istanbul vote from the High Election Council, which had earlier been refused. It remains to be seen to what extent the President can assert his will on the election board, which some say is likely to eventually accept the request (NY Times, 9 April 2019). Many opposition parties had worked together this election in an attempt to oust AKP mayors from key cities. Of note was the covert support of CHP candidates in major western cities by the Kurdish-majority Peoples' Democratic Party (HDP), who chose not to run a candidate in Istanbul and allowed their voters to side with the CHP (Daily Sabah, 6 April 2019). For more on the HDP's role in Turkish politics, see this recent ACLED infographic.

In the southeast, meanwhile, Turkish forces continued to clash with Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) militants in Hakkari province, and Gendarmerie forces reportedly seized a truck containing large quantities of PKK explosives in Kilis province, which were bound for Syria. In northern Iraq, a large number of Turkish airstrikes were reported on PKK targets in the mountains of Erbil and Dahuk governorates.

Also in Northern Iraq, a final agreement was struck last week between Iraqi Kurdistan's two biggest parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) and the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP), allowing the establishment of a new central Kurdish government. This comes after months of delay due to disagreements between parties over power-sharing (Rudaw, 3 April 2019).

Further south, major flooding has also affected many regions of Iraq, particularly in the governorates of Sulaymaniyah, Kirkuk, and Sala al-Din. This is likely to cause tension between affected populations and the state, with some already claiming that the government is not doing enough to protect them (Rudaw, 3 April 2019).

In Basra governorate, a majority of Provincial Council members have voted last week in support of an autonomy referendum; an official letter was sent to the Iraqi premier and the Independent High Electoral Commission in this regard (Basnews, 3 April 2019). Basra has been the site of
mass demonstrations – reaching their peak in July 2018 – concerning state mismanagement, corruption, and a lack of local economic development and services despite high profits from the region’s oil reserves (for more on that, see this ACLED analysis piece).

Finally, fighting continued between Islamic State (IS) militants and Iraqi security forces throughout the country, although state forces have been making gains since around November of last year. The group continues to utilize mostly insurgent tactics such as IEDs and ambushes, and is lately most active in the governorates of Anbar and Diyala.

Elsewhere, battles continued to rage across nearly all fronts in Yemen last week, with an increase in clashes between pro-Houthi forces and troops/allied militias loyal to the internationally-recognized government. Particularly intense fighting took place in Ad Dali governorate, with high fatalities reported amid airstrikes, shelling, and coordinated ground operations. Meanwhile, troops loyal to the internationally-recognized government reported territorial gains in Abs district of Hajjah governorate, Haydan district of Sadah governorate, and Nihm district of Sana’a governorate.

Elsewhere, Saudi air defense forces intercepted one ballistic missile over Najran, and shot down two Houthi-operated drones over Khamis Mushayt city, Asir district. Five civilians were reportedly injured by falling fragments.

In As-Sawmaah district of Al-Baydha governorate, a US drone strike reportedly killed three Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) militants. In the same governorate, AQAP and IS fighters continued to clash, with limited fatalities reported.

Clashes, shelling, and some attempted territorial gains were reported every day of the week in Hodeidah, with the most intense fighting taking place in strategic areas of the surrounding Tuhayat and Hays districts.

In Syria, exchanges of shelling between regime and rebel/Islamist groups such as Hayat Tahrir al Sham (HTS) continued in and along the DMZ in Aleppo, Idlib, Lattakia, and Hama governorates. Meanwhile, Turkish patrols also continued along the DMZ, with no violence associated with their presence.

In the east, for the first time in months, there were no reports of clashes between IS and Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD). This comes following the capture of the remnants of IS-controlled territory in Baghuz late in March. Despite this, several Global Coalition airstrikes targeted IS tunnels and fortifications in the mountainous area of Baghuz region, which the militants have recently infiltrated.

In the south of the country, attacks by unidentified armed persons targeting regime forces continued in several areas of Dar’a governorate. These attacks were likely perpetrated by members of the so called Dar’a Popular Resistance, a collection of rebel groups who refuse to accept the regime’s reconciliation agreement and remained in the south as part of sleeper cells.