

# Regional Overview – Middle East 9 January 2019

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Bringing clarity to crisis

Instances of political violence have been on an upward trend since 16 December 2018, with both battles and remote violence rising by approximately 25 and 65 percent, respectively. At the same time, demonstrations decreased overall in the latter half of December; however, despite this reduction, unrest against economic and labour conditions spread throughout the region during this period – most surprisingly to Oman where such reports are quite rare. In both Iraq and Lebanon, yellow vests were worn by many demonstrators as part of a movement in solidarity with French protesters. This trend may continue to spread to other countries in upcoming weeks.

In **Palestine**, the West Bank continued to be the centre of conflict events over the past three weeks, with the ceasefire between Hamas/Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Israel holding along the Gaza border since mid-November 2018. Settler attacks on Palestinians and their property continued over this period with a particularly high numbers of attacks on 16-17 December 2018. Around 300 settler youths also clashed with Israeli police on 3 January 2019 during an evacuation of the illegal Amona settlement in Ramallah, West Bank. Over 20 police officers and 10 settlers were reportedly injured. The evacuation of Amona led prominent Israeli leaders to criticize Netanyahu for his “selective enforcement” of Israeli law against settlers, while others blamed politicians and religious leaders for emboldening settler youth to use violence against police ([Times of Israel, 3 January 2019](#)). Political dynamics concerning support for the settler movement will certainly play an important role in Israel’s upcoming 9 April 2019 election.

In the Gaza Strip, the weekly Great March of Return demonstrations continued along the border each Friday; five demonstrators were reportedly killed by Israeli forces over the past three weeks. Meanwhile, relations between Hamas and Fatah were increasingly strained last week, beginning with Fatah accusations that Hamas arrested 500 of its members on 30 December 2018 ahead of the group’s 54th founding anniversary. Hamas also violently dispersed a Fatah rally and raided the homes of journalists. Hamas was initially blamed for a

raid on a Palestinian Authority (PA) media outlet, but the raid was reportedly carried out by employees who had been fired ([Middle East Eye, 5 January 2019](#)). These events add fuel to tensions between the two parties ([Jpost, 2 January 2019](#)).

Over the past few weeks in **Israel**, the national news was dominated by reports of Hezbollah tunnels being built to infiltrate Israel's northern border with Lebanon ([16 December 2018, CNN](#)). Israeli forces began demolishing the tunnels on 20 December 2018, although several were discovered weeks earlier. There were additionally demonstrations by settlers and pro-settler groups against West Bank violence, and by Haredim against compulsory military enlistment – amongst other things – in Jerusalem. In Tel Aviv, hundreds gathered to protest against the high cost of living.

In **Jordan**, protesters continued to gather every Thursday in Amman's fourth circle to demonstrate against worsening economic conditions. There were also reports of hundreds of Syrian refugees returning to Syria through the Naseeb border crossing.

In **Lebanon**, large scale protests occurred over the past few weeks in response to a number of popular grievances, most prominently the delay in the formation of a new government, political corruption, and worsening economic conditions. Political parties in Lebanon have been unable to form a government since May's parliamentary election ([Economist, 21 December 2018](#)). Demonstrations led by Lebanon's Communist Party (LCP) began on 16 December 2018. One week later, thousands attended demonstrations called for by the LCP and Sabaa parties to pressure the government into reaching an agreement. Demonstrations occurred across Beirut, as well as in Tripoli and Nabatiye, with many demonstrations resulting in clashes with the police. At the demonstrations, many wore yellow vests with the Lebanese cedar tree printed on them in reference to the Yellow Vest Movement in France ([23 December 2018, Middle East Eye](#)). A nation-wide general strike supported by General Confederation of Lebanese Workers and other unions was held on 4 January 2019.

In **Iran**, mass protest demonstrations continued throughout the end of December 2018 and into the new year. As before, these demonstrations were led primarily by labour groups, farmers, students, and teachers. Many of these demonstrations have been ongoing for weeks, including those by the Iran National Steel Industrial Group (INSIG) in Ahvaz, where at least 42 workers were arrested during a night raid on 17 December 2018 for taking part in demonstrations. Most of these workers were reportedly released following mass outcry and criticism by Iranian officials that the workers' constitutionally guaranteed right to freedom of assembly had been violated.

The INSIG is among privatized industrial complexes across Iran whose workers have recently gone on strike and are holding numerous rallies to protest the privatization of their plants. Many of the privatized complexes are currently on the verge of bankruptcy and are incapable of paying their employees. Meanwhile, 55 members of parliament in Iran have called upon the judiciary to set up a special branch to look into violations committed in the privatization of

state-owned industries. Critics maintain that nepotism and favouritism were involved in the privatization process, with many formerly nationalized industries being sold back to the private sector for low prices ([Radio Farda, 26 December 2018](#)).

Meanwhile, hundreds of farmers from across the Isfahan province gathered in the provincial capital on 2 January to protest against the government's failure to address the mismanagement of water sources during a drought that has plagued the region for more than a decade. The farmers are demanding monetary compensation from the government. Many of them have not cultivated their lands for the past few years since the water from the Zayanderud River has been diverted to Yazd province, depriving regions to the east of the city of their traditional share of water for irrigation ([Radio Farda, 2 December 2018](#)). Riot police reportedly shot tear gas and bird-shot to disperse the demonstrators.

In **Bahrain**, riots and protests continued over the past three weeks to a similar degree as in previous weeks. Spikes in violence and demonstrations occurred around certain commemorative days, including in the lead up to Martyr's Day on 17 December 2018, and during the first week of January 2019 as part of the third death anniversary of Shiite cleric Sheikh Nimr Baqir al-Nimr, who was executed by the Saudi government. Demonstrations in Bahrain are often violent, from burning tire road blockades to Molotov attacks on security forces – who often lead violent dispersal efforts themselves. While Shiite Muslims make up a large number of those involved in demonstrations, non-denominational anti-regime groups such as the February 14 Youth Coalition have been active on a weekly basis since the Day of Rage uprising in 2011.

Meanwhile, in a rare event, multiple protest demonstrations were reported in **Oman** last week – specifically in the cities of Muscat, Salalah, and Al Mazyunah – where people were demanding that the government create more jobs. Two journalists who were covering the protest in Muscat were reportedly arrested. In response to the demonstrations, the government announced the establishment of a National Centre for Unemployment, which aims to address the persistent high unemployment among young Omanis ([Middle East Eye, 3 January 2019](#)).

In **Turkey**, labour demonstrations continued over the past three weeks, mainly by former public workers dismissed following the coup attempt and by members of labour unions like the Confederation of Public Workers Unions (KESK) against the rising cost of living and increased inflation. At the same time, violence decreased over the past few weeks, possibly due to severe weather conditions in the southeast where the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) is most active. A standout event was the Turkish siege of a large cave in Ovacik district of Tunceli which lasted nine days. The cave, which allegedly held over 20 cornered militants, was eventually destroyed with an airstrike on 21 December 2018. It was not clear whether the militants inside were killed. PKK militants also attacked Turkish forces in the village of Aralik, Igdir, near the border with Iran early in January 2019, and conducted an explosive drone attack in Semdinli district of Hakkari around the same time. Meanwhile, Turkish airstrikes into northern Iraq continued in the Amedi district of Dahuk governorate, reportedly killing nine PKK militants during two separate engagements on 19 and 28 of December 2018.

Also in **Iraq**, the country officially entered its first year following the 'defeat' of the Islamic State (IS) in December 2017. While IS violence has continued throughout the country since then, the group's tactics have shifted to that of a guerrilla movement – with IED attacks and small scale ambushes making up the majority of events (for more on that, see [this ACLED piece](#)). Meanwhile, Iraqi and Global Coalition forces have increased their destruction of IS tunnels and hideouts in recent weeks, arresting militants and confiscating weapons at the same time. These operations were most prevalent in the governorates of Sala al-Din, Kirkuk, and Diyala; in Anbar governorate, U.S. forces established two new military bases, reportedly in an attempt to thwart IS infiltrations from Syria ([Press TV, 25 December 2018](#)).

Meanwhile, demonstrations continued in the southern governorates – particularly Basrah – to demand better services and jobs. Two such demonstrations turned violent in late December 2018 and were dispersed by riot police. Such demonstrations have also been a characteristic of post-war Iraq, with unrest in the South having peaked in July of 2018 (for more on that, see [this ACLED piece](#)). At the heart of these demonstrations is a feeling of frustration with the state of affairs following the war and new parliamentary elections. Despite being an oil rich state, citizens of Basrah rarely experience the benefits of the industry ([Future Directions, 13 December 2018](#)). As in Lebanon, several demonstrators were seen wearing yellow vests, a sign of solidarity among protest movements.

In **Syria**, clashes among opposition groups was reported in the rebelled-controlled enclave of Idleb over the last few weeks, as well as in the western countryside of Aleppo governorate. In the latter, Hayyat Tahrir Al Sham (HTS) launched a wide-scale offensive against Harkat Nor Al Dein Al Zenki (HNDZ), a group which operates under the umbrella of the National Liberation Front. As a result, HTS forces managed to expel HNDZ out of their territories in Aleppo and effectively gain control of the entire western countryside.

In the east, Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD), supported by Coalition forces, achieved significant advancements against IS over the past few weeks in the Hajin enclave of Deir ez Zor governorate. The period ended with QSD forces controlling approximately half of the enclave after capturing Al Kashmeh and securing Hajin town. These advancements have reduced the IS controlled areas to only two main towns – Sosa and Shafa – as well as to the villages surrounding them.

Meanwhile, Turkish forces and Turkish-backed rebels continued to prepare for an expected offensive against QSD controlled areas in northeastern Syria. Reinforcements so far have been massing on the Manbij frontline; however, it seems that the sudden U.S. decision to pull out troops from Syria had an impact on the timing of this operation, and its commencement will depend on upcoming agreements made between the major powers ([Washington Post, 28 December 2018](#)).

Lastly, several developments unfolded in **Yemen** over the past three weeks. In Hodeidah, both sides (pro-Houthi and anti-Houthi) have made efforts to expose each other's violations of the ceasefire brokered in Sweden. Breaches to the ceasefire were reported daily in the outskirts of the city and in the districts surrounding the port of Hodeidah, with most incidents involving

shelling and indiscriminate machine gun fire. Despite the large number of violations, combat clashes with the intent to gain territory as seen before the ceasefire do not appear to have returned.

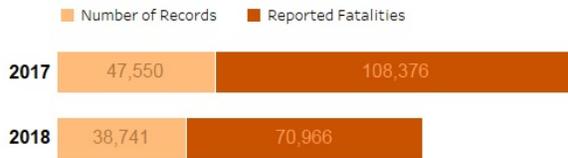
Meanwhile, a surge in conflict activity was recorded on the battlefronts in Sirwah and Nihm, northeast of the capital Sana'a. Pro-Houthi forces have reported major advances into Sirwah district, along with high fatality counts. Likewise, high fatality counts were also reported in Nihm district throughout the period as a result of intense clashes, but with little territorial change. In neighbouring Shabwah governorate, UAE-backed elite forces clashed with local tribesmen in Merkhah district, with an Emirati Blackhawk helicopter becoming involved and reportedly causing seven civilian fatalities.

Clashes continued to be fought between Al-Qaeda and IS fighters in Al Bayda throughout the past two weeks, resulting in a number of fatalities. In addition to the presence of local pockets of Islamist militants in Al Bayda, Yemeni army troops have long been fighting along with local militias against the Houthis in several districts of the province.

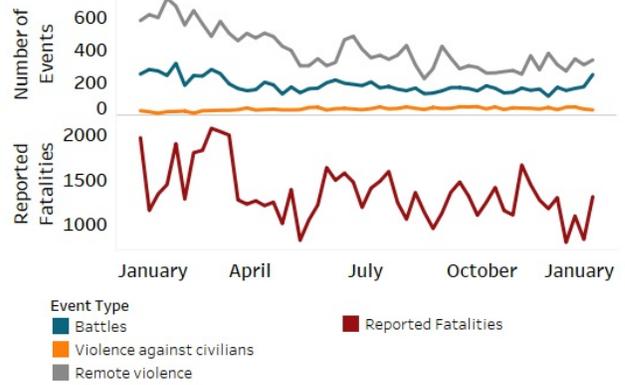
In late December, Saudi-backed troops also resumed military operations to clear the northern district of Khabb wa Ashaf, located near Sadah province and across the border with Saudi Arabia. Pro-Hadi troops were reported to be battling Houthi forces several kilometers south of the Saudi border. In the northwest of Sadah, it appears that the Baqim offensive stalled as strikes were reported but no major battles were detailed in the reports issued last week. Saudi-backed troops, including the Yemeni army, local militias, and coalition troops, also reported further territorial advances in Harad district, northwestern Hajjah province.



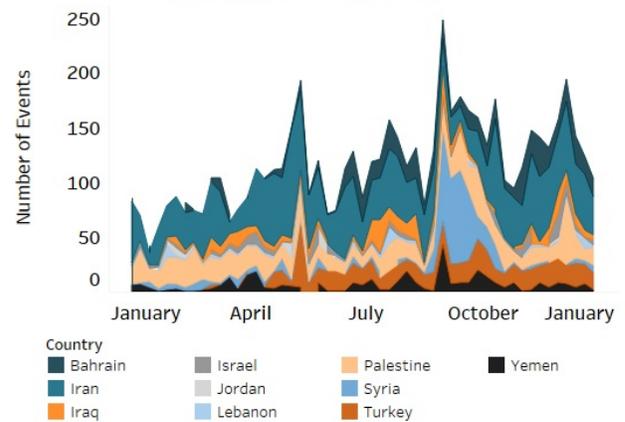
### Key Numbers (2017 vs. 2018)



### Weekly Organized Violence per Event Type and Reported Fatalities (1 Jan 2018 - 5 Jan 2019)



### Weekly Riots and Protests per Country (1 Jan 2018 - 5 Jan 2019)



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