

Regional Overview: Middle East 10-16 September 2022

ACLED Analysis

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ARAC International Strategic Communications - In the Middle East, political violence reached some of its highest levels in Yemen since the start of the UN-mediated truce in April 2022, as UAE-backed forces continue their operations in the south of the country. In Syria, the Islamic State (IS) increased attacks against regime forces, pro-regime and pro-Iran militias, and Syrian Democratic Forces (QSD). In Iraq, Baghdad city and its adjacent districts experienced a spike in armed clashes and IED attacks. In Turkey, militants affiliated with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) killed a police watchman during an armed clash in Istanbul province. In Palestine, an Israeli officer, two Palestinian militants, and one Palestinian rioter were killed during multiple violent clashes in the West Bank. In Lebanon, depositors – some armed – stormed nine banks demanding access to their money, while armed clashes between clan militias left six people dead

Yemen

In Yemen, UAE-backed Security Belt forces affiliated with the secessionist Southern Transitional Council (STC) continued to deploy in Abyan governorate last week after launching Operation 'Arrows of the East' in August to combat Houthi smuggling routes and Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (Al Omana, 11 September 2022). AQAP launched a counter-campaign in response, entitled 'Arrows of the Truth,' which was accompanied by a surge in AQAP operational claims (Twitter @Dr_E_Kendall, 15 September 2022). AQAP conducted attacks against Security Belt forces in Al Wadea, Khanfir, Madiyah, and Lawdar districts. AQAP activity was also recorded in neighboring Shabwah governorate last week, where STC-affiliated Shabwani Defense forces launched Operation 'Arrows of the South' to "cleanse the governorate from terrorist organizations" (Al Omana, 10 September 2022).

Backed by UAE drone strikes, Shabwani Defense forces clashed with AQAP in Al Musayniah region of As Said district. This made last week one of AQAP's most active weeks in Yemen since January 2015, contributing to the 1,020% and 107% increases in weekly violent events in Abyan and Shabwah, respectively, over the past week relative to the weekly average for the preceding month, as flagged by ACLED's Subnational Surge Tracker.

In Taizz, Houthi forces clashed with forces of the Internationally Recognized Government as they launched offensives on fronts outside of Taizz city last week, continuing to stifle progress on the reopening of roads in the governorate. While the office of UN Special Envoy Hans Grundberg did not issue any communications on developments related to the truce last week, the UN Security Council released a press statement urging "both parties to intensify engagement with the Special Envoy" (UN, 12 September 2022). Ahead of the truce expiration date on 2 October, US Special Envoy Tim Lenderking also called on the Houthis to "cease actions that jeopardize the truce, cooperate with the UN, and support an expanded truce agreement" (US Department of State, 15 September 2022).

Syria

In Syria, IS targeting of regime forces, pro-regime and pro-Iran militias, and QSD positions in the Syrian Desert surged last week after several months of decline. The attacks resulted in the killing of eight QSD and Asayish fighters and at least 10 regime and militia fighters (Asharq Al Awsat, 16 September 2022). IS attacks against regime forces and pro-regime militias contributed to the 140% increase in violent events in Homs last week relative to the weekly average for the preceding month flagged by ACLED's Subnational Surge Tracker, which also warned of increased violence in Homs during the preceding four weeks. Likewise, shelling and armed clashes between regime forces and opposition and Islamist factions along frontline areas in northern Syria increased significantly last week (SOHR, 10 September 2022). Separately, Turkish and rebel shelling of QSD- and YPG-controlled areas continued at a similar pace to the week prior. Violence in the region has increased intermittently since Turkey threatened to launch a new military operation against QSD and YPG in northern Syria in May 2022.

Iraq

In Iraq, Baghdad city and adjacent districts experienced a notable increase in violence last week compared to the week prior, partially driven by a spike in IED attacks by unidentified militants targeting businesses (National Iraqi News Agency, 13 September 2022). Additionally, clashes erupted between unidentified armed groups in the city. Less than half of these were motivated by tribal disputes, while the driver of the remaining clashes is unknown. These trends contribute to the 165% increase in weekly violent events in Baghdad in the past month relative to the weekly average for the preceding year flagged by ACLED's Subnational Threat Tracker. The Subnational Tracker also warned of increased violence in Baghdad during the preceding four weeks. The spike in violence in Baghdad comes after weeks of protest by Sadrist Movement supporters that culminated in clashes between rival Shiite militias in the city two weeks ago.

Elsewhere, violence more than doubled in Ninewa province. This increase was primarily driven by the resumption of violence between state forces and IS (Shafaq News, 13 September 2022). However, Turkey also resumed airstrikes targeting the PKK and its allies in the province, contributing to the 140% increase in violent events in Ninewa over the past week relative to the weekly average for the preceding month, as flagged by ACLED's Subnational Surge Tracker.

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Turkey

In Turkey, PKK-affiliated militants killed a Turkish policeman in an ambush last week. Militants from the Peoples' United Revolutionary Movement (HBDH) – an umbrella organization of anti-government armed groups headed by the PKK – attacked a patrol in Istanbul's Sile district, killing one police watchman in a rare attack in the capital city. This is only the second time that such an attack has been recorded this year; also, this attack further cements HBDH's escalation of their urban campaign (Militant Wire, 24 April 2022).

Palestine

In Palestine, deadly clashes between Israeli forces, Palestinian militants, and Palestinian rioters continued in the West Bank. Israeli forces and two Palestinian militants from Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade – the armed wing of the Fatah Movement – exchanged fire in the vicinity of the Jalama checkpoint in Jenin, leaving an Israeli officer and the two militants dead (The Jerusalem Post, 15 September 2022). Meanwhile, Israeli forces killed a Palestinian during riots that erupted after they raided Kafr Dan village to map out the family homes of the two Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade militants killed in the abovementioned clash. Violence between Israeli security forces and Palestinian armed groups has increased significantly over the past months in Jenin in part due to the Israeli security campaign 'Break the Wave,' which was launched in March following a string of attacks by Palestinians in Israel (Al Jazeera, 14 September 2022).

Lebanon

In Lebanon, depositors — both armed and unarmed — stormed nine commercial banks to demand the release of their trapped savings in US dollars. The storming of banks came as the national currency sank to an all-time low against the US dollar (Middle East Eye, 19 September 2022). This type of event was first recorded by ACLED last month when a man was arrested for holding up a bank to demand access to his savings, sparking demonstrations across the country demanding his release. Meanwhile, multiple armed clashes between clan militias were reported last week, causing six fatalities (for more on worsening violence involving clan militias, see ACLED's mid-year update to the 10 Conflicts to Worry About in 2022). ACLED's Conflict Change Map warned of increased violence in the country during the preceding four weeks. The worsening security situation in Lebanon comes ahead of upcoming presidential elections that are legally required to take place no later than 31 October (Al Jazeera, 31 August 2022).

Source: Armed Conflict Location and Event Data (ACLED) project

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