



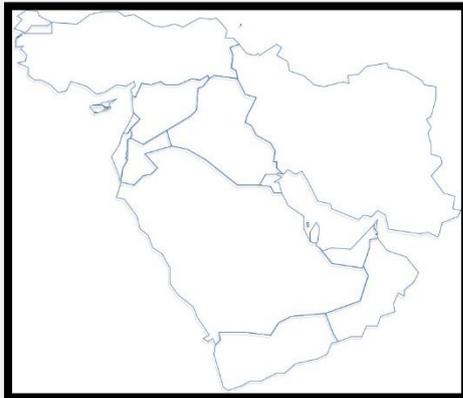
TALOS REGIONAL REPORT – NOVEMBER 27, 2020

Weekly highlights

Israeli airstrikes continued this week to target Iranian-backed forces in Syria, while tensions between the US and Iran continued to manifest themselves in the form of rhetoric and symbolic military gestures. Iran maintains a cautious approach, highlighting a discrepancy between rhetoric and action.

The Israeli Prime Minister reportedly met with Saudi Crown Prince bin Salman in Saudi Arabia, in a meeting arranged by the US. Neither side confirmed the meeting but the encounter highlights intent on both sides to deepen covert cooperation against Iran.

The Yemeni Houthi Movement targeted a Saudi oil facility in Jeddah with a new cruise missile. The attack caused material damage and aimed to demonstrate increased Houthi capability to strike critical Saudi targets in the context of ongoing developments in the region and on the peninsula.



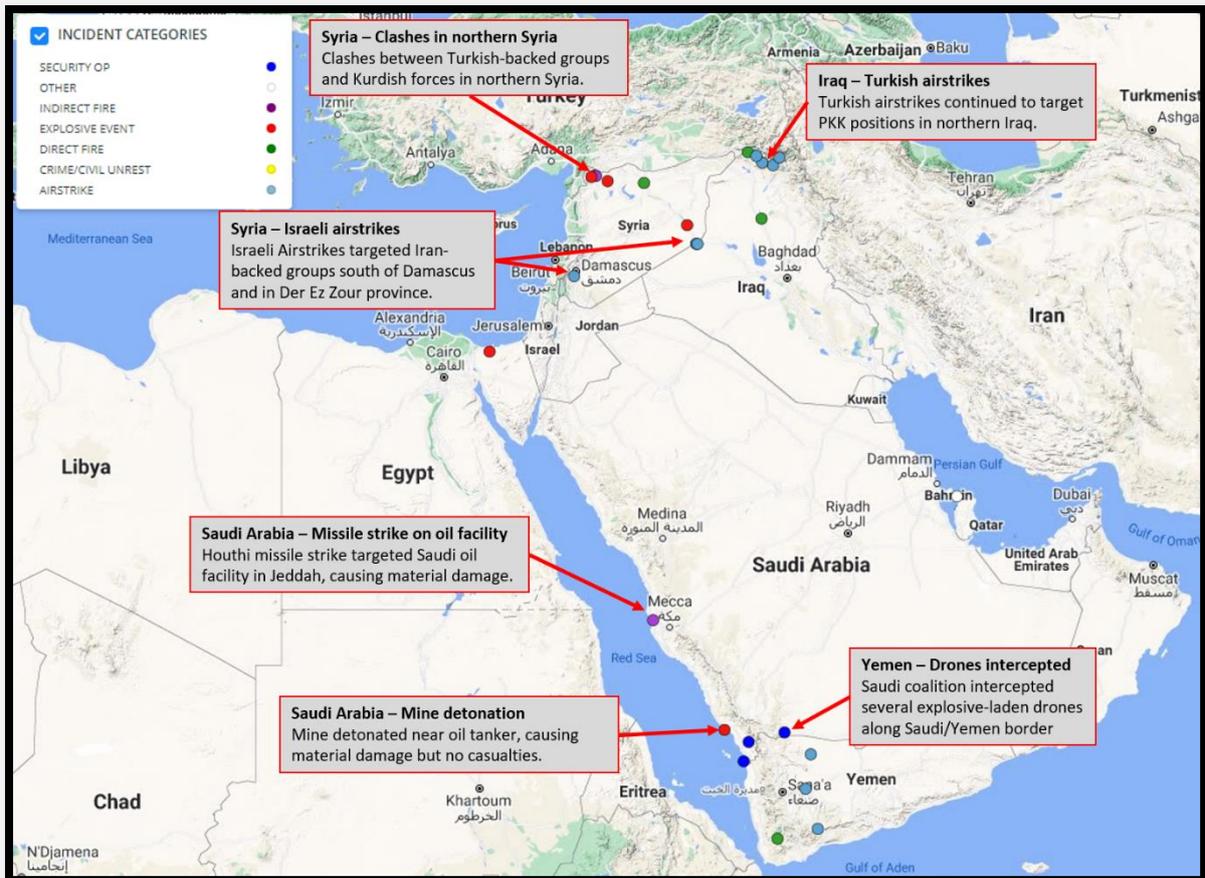
The Talos Regional Report offers a weekly summary and analysis of the main strategic security developments in the region, with a focus on Turkey, Iran, Syria and the Gulf region from a regional perspective. The report is complementary to Talos' Iraq coverage which offers unrivalled insight into Iraq security, political, economic and social developments. Reports are accessible through a secure online portal with interactive mapping and client-driven analysis.

To subscribe to Talos products, or for a free trial access to the Talos reporting please contact Talos Director Ellen Pope at ep@talos-iraq.com. For more insight into Talos please visit www.talos-iraq.com/welcome-to-talos

Every effort is made to provide accurate and complete information, however TALOS LLC does not warrant that the information in this document is complete, true, accurate or correct. TALOS LLC accepts no liability arising out of or in connection with the comments made or information provided in this report and is not responsible for any decision made in reliance on this report. TALOS LLC does not accept any liability if this report is used for an alternative purpose from which it is intended, nor to any third party in respect of this report. This information product is graded as Commercial in Confidence and should be transmitted, communicated, stored and secured accordingly.



Weekly regional snapshot



To access detailed interactive map, [click here](#)

Iran

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei dismissed the idea of returning to the 2015 nuclear deal, saying attempts to get sanctions lifted “got us nowhere” according to Iranian state TV. Separately, Foreign Minister Zarif and his Russian counterpart Sergei Lavrov stressed the need for “all participants” to return to the deal during a phone call. The German, British and French foreign ministers also discussed the prospects of restoring the nuclear deal this week, expressing hopes that the new US administration will “breath new life” to the accord.

The UN adopted a resolution proposed by Canada that expressed “serious concerns” about Iran’s human rights record and called for the release of protesters arrested during the 2019 demonstrations in the country. The Iranian Foreign Ministry condemned the resolution and accused Canada of harbouring “financial criminals”, referring to Canada’s refusal to extradite Iranian citizens accused by Tehran of corruption.



Syria

President Bashar al-Assad appointed Faisar Mekdad as the new Foreign Minister of Syria, replacing Walid al-Moallem who passed away on November 16. Mekdad, a career diplomat and close ally of Assad, served as Syria's Permanent Representative to the UN between 2003-2006 and was appointed Deputy Foreign Minister under al-Moallem in 2006.

Additional Turkish military and logistical convoys entered into Idlib province this week, increasing Turkish presence in areas of southern Idlib recently targeted by Syrian missile and Russian airstrikes. Separately, clashes escalated this week between Turkish-backed and Kurdish forces in northern Syria. Two VBIED attacks also targeted areas controlled by Turkish-backed Arab forces, with the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) accused of being involved.

Turkey

Turkey's Foreign Ministry condemned an intervention by the German navy to stop a Turkish cargo ship carrying supplies to Libya. The EU said the intervention was made to uphold the Libyan arms embargo. In a separate but related development, Germany's Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said the EU would likely impose sanctions on Turkey unless it halts "provocations" in the eastern Mediterranean.

Iraq

The Turkish air force carried out airstrikes in northern Iraq on a near-daily basis during the week, targeting positions and camps operated by the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK). The vast majority of the operations were carried out in northern Dohuk province, causing electricity disruption and destroying homes of local residents.

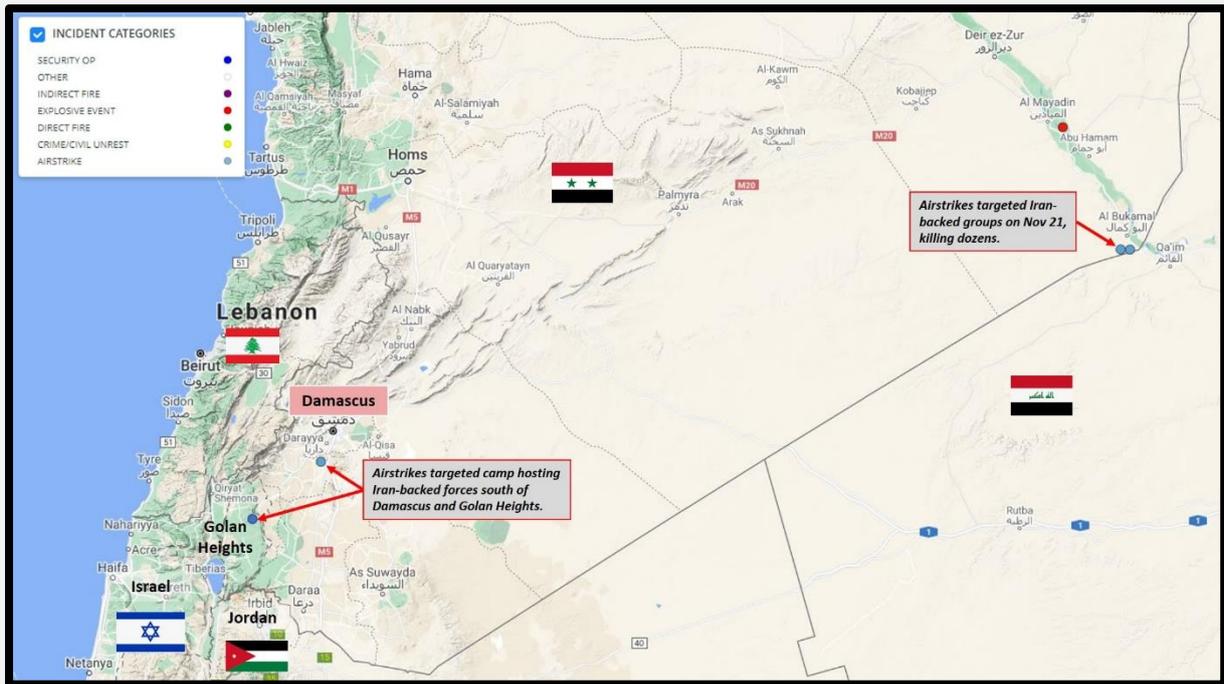
The US extended the sanctions waiver to import Iranian gas and electricity by another 45-days. The waiver, which has been extended consecutively for Iraq since the imposition of US sanctions on the Iranian energy sector in 2018, was reduced from 60 to 45 days and will expire shortly before President-elect Joe Biden's inauguration on January 20.

Gulf Region

The United Arab Emirates signed a 'strategic partnership' agreement on defence and foreign policy cooperation with Greece, during a visit by the Greek Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis to Abu Dhabi. Details of the agreement were not provided but both countries share issues with Turkey over its activity in the eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Saudi King Salman spoke on the phone with President Erdogan of Turkey. The rare phone call took place on the eve of the G20 summit hosted in Saudi Arabia this week and reportedly discussed ways to improve bilateral ties which have deteriorated after the killing of Jamal Khashoggi in 2018.

Israeli airstrikes continue amidst US-Iranian tensions



Assessed location of Israeli airstrikes targeting Iranian backed forces on Nov 21 and 23.

The Israeli air force continued this week to target Iranian-backed forces in Syria, in line with developments seen in recent weeks in the country. On November 21, at least ten airstrikes targeted locations belonging to an Iranian-backed militia group in the vicinity of Albu Kamal in Deir Ez Zour province in eastern Syria. According to Syrian opposition sources, the operation targeted members of Zainebiyoun Brigade, an Iranian militia predominantly comprising Shia Pakistani and Afghan individuals, with a dozen members killed. Further operations were reported two days later in Syria-controlled parts of the Golan Heights, and a military base hosting pro-Iranian militia members in Jabal Mane Heights south of Damascus.

Combined with increased interactions between senior US and Israeli officials in recent weeks, the airstrikes suggest continued Israeli assertiveness to reduce Iranian influence in the region; a policy likely approved and encouraged by the outgoing Trump administration (see Talos Regional Report November 20). Meanwhile, tensions between the US and Iran continued this week to manifest themselves in the form of rhetoric and symbolic military gestures.



Pictures released by IRGC of new military vessel

On November 19, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) unveiled a new “domestically-built” vessel capable of carrying aircraft, drones and “advanced” missile systems, with senior IRGC commanders stressing Iran’s ability to defend itself “aggressively” in response to external threats during the ceremony to unveil the vessel.



IRGC Brigadier General Ismael Qaani

Two days later, the US Central Command (CENTCOM) announced the deployment of B52 aircrews to the Middle East, adding that the “short notice, long-range mission” is conducted to “deter aggression and reassure” allies in the region. The timing of the deployment is significant, in light of indications that outgoing President Trump considered and backed off a unilateral strike on Iran before the end of his term (see Talos Regional Report November 20). With the US already maintaining a significant air-force capability in the region, the deployment is assessed to be a gesture to maintain pressure on Iran with the threat of military force.

For their part, Iran has maintained a cautious approach despite continuing Israeli airstrikes and the threat of a US unilateral strike. Tehran has reportedly notified groups in the region to be on “high alert” in response to potential US action but, with the exception of last week’s IDF attack in Baghdad, Iran-aligned groups have not conducted further operations, highlighting a discrepancy between rhetoric and action. Notably, within 24hrs of the IDF attack in Baghdad on November 17, senior IRGC commander Ismael Qaani reportedly arrived in Baghdad to meet with senior militia leaders. The meeting was reportedly hosted by Hadi al-Ameri, leader of the Badr Organisation, and attended by members of Asaib Ahl al-Haq, Kataib Hezbollah, Nujaba Movement and several members of the Iran-aligned State of Law and Fatah Bloc.

While the content of the meeting remains unconfirmed, press reports citing militia sources suggest the meeting was arranged with the explicit aim of avoiding further provocation, with Qaani instructing those in attendance to observe the ceasefire ordered by Ayatollah Khamenei in October and not to carry out attacks against US interests for the remainder of President Trump’s term. Local Talos sources also corroborated accounts of militia members told to “stand down” until President-elect Joe Biden takes office.

If confirmed, this indicates Iran’s awareness, despite rhetoric, that it has little to gain at this point from provoking a military response and is therefore more likely to use political means to expel US troop presence and reduce US political influence in the region. As evidenced by [Ashab al-Kahf’s attack in Baghdad’s International Zone on November 17](#), the vulnerability of Iran’s strategic reliance on proxy actors is that it remains at risk of being derailed by rogue factions who fall outside the formal chain of command, with similar attacks in the coming weeks raising the outlook for further escalation.

Meeting between Netanyahu and Saudi Crown Prince

According to Israeli media sources, citing Saudi and Israeli officials, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman on November 22. The alleged meeting is the first ever between Saudi and Israeli officials and was reportedly arranged and attended by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in the Saudi city of Neom. Neither side confirmed the meeting, with Saudi officials denying that the meeting took place and the Israeli government declining to comment. A statement issued by the US State Department said Pompeo met with the Crown Prince and other Saudi officials but omitted any mention of Netanyahu or Israeli officials being present. Despite the denial, no serious attempt appears to have been made to conceal the visit, with open source flight data suggesting a private jet flight from Israel to Neom was made with transponders turned on and Israeli officials, speaking anonymously, subsequently informing Israeli outlets about the meeting.

According to a Saudi source cited by international media outlets, the discussion focused on possible normalisation of bilateral ties and deepening cooperation on Iran ahead of President-elect Biden's inauguration. The timing of the meeting and the leaked reports about the topics discussed indicate potential concerns of a change in US policy under Biden, who is widely expected to attempt to restore the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, reassess relations with Saudi Arabia and adopt a more conditional stance towards Israel (see Talos Regional Report November 06). The nomination this week of Antony Blinken, a former Obama-administration official who has called for a withdrawal of US support for Riyadh's intervention in Yemen, is consistent with this expected trajectory of foreign policy for the incoming administration.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Mossad Director Yossi Cohen

The meeting also raises the outlook for closer ties between Israel and Saudi Arabia who, despite not having formal ties, have maintained covert cooperation on areas of mutual interest. The meeting was reportedly attended by the director of Mossad Yossi Cohen who is largely credited with deepening Israel's covert cooperation with Saudi Arabia and his attendance in the meeting is a potential sign of deepening defence and intelligence cooperation, especially over Iran.

A full normalisation of ties - similar to that of other Gulf allies - remains unlikely, however, Saudi Arabia can be expected to maintain its current official stance which conditions normalisation on an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal based on the Saudi-led 2000 Arab initiative and the establishment of a Palestinian state. Furthermore, Riyadh's reluctance to embrace normalisation or officially adopt closer ties with Israel will likely remain due to political reasons, as it would risk undermining

Riyadh’s relations with other Sunni Muslim majority countries. With domestic opposition to Israel high, the move would further risk a popular backlash at home. That said, covert cooperation between the two countries, with the potential for a further deepening of ties, is expected to continue, with President-elect Biden having signalled his support for the Trump administration’s efforts to encourage rapprochement.

Houthi missile strike targeted Saudi oil facility

On November 23, a cruise missile fired by Ansar Allah (Houthi Movement) in Yemen reportedly targeted and struck an oil distribution facility run by the Saudi oil company Aramco north of Jeddah. The attack took place in the early hours on November 23 and no casualties were reported.



Satellite imagery showing damage to oil tank following missile strike on November 23.

A spokesperson for Aramco later confirmed that the attack damaged one of thirteen oil tanks at the facility but said customers had not been affected. Shortly after the attack, a Houthi spokesperson warned of further operations and the US consulate in Jeddah issued a statement calling on US citizens to “review immediate precautions” and “stay alert in case of additional future attacks.”

The timing of the missile attack, which took place at approximately 0350hrs, indicates intent by the Houthi movement to demonstrate capability

to target strategic interests and critical infrastructure within Saudi Arabia rather than kill or injure civilians. In a tweet after the attack, Yahya Sare’e, the Houthi military spokesperson, said the attack was conducted with a Quds-2 type winged missile which has recently entered service following “successful operational experiments”.

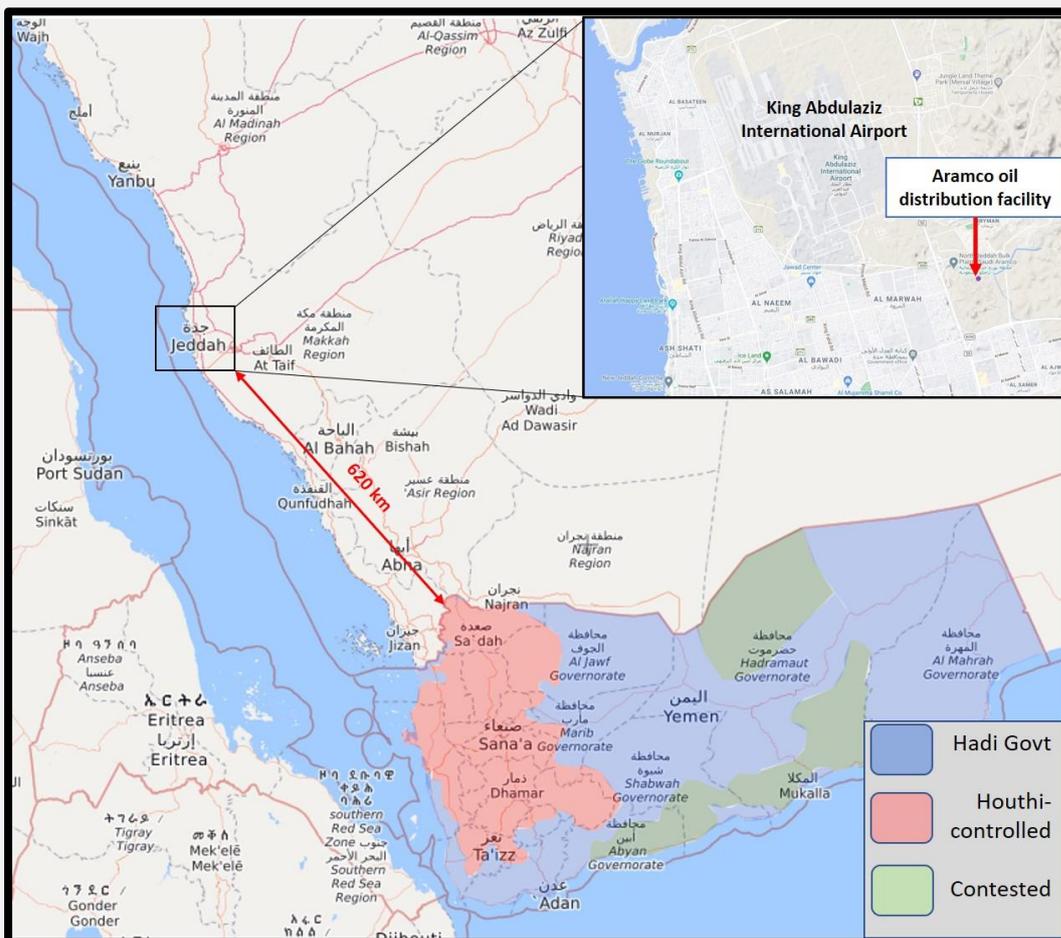
Iranian state and Houthi-affiliated media similarly hailed the attack as evidence of increased capability. Previous Houthi attacks targeting Saudi oil facilities and civilian targets – including the Abha Airport in June 2019 - have involved the Quds-1, a (likely Iranian-manufactured) 700-km range missile similar to the Iranian Ya Ali cruise missile. The range of the Quds-2 is not confirmed, but the facility targeted is located over 620km from the Yemeni border, suggesting at minimum a similar range to the Quds-1.

Capability aside, the attack further demonstrates Houthi intent to escalate operations against Saudi Arabia in the context of ongoing developments in the region and on the Arabian Peninsula. The attack took place shortly after the end of the G20 summit hosted by Riyadh and the alleged visit by Benjamin Netanyahu. While the attack may well have been timed to coincide with the end of the G20 meeting, it is unlikely that the Houthi movement had knowledge of Netanyahu’s visit at

the time of the missile strike. The attack also comes in the context of reported efforts by the Trump administration to designate the Houthis as a terrorist organisation, which if successful will likely prompt a Houthi response directed against Saudi Arabia. The strike may consequently have been intended as a warning of possible consequences should the US proceed with the move.

In terms of local dynamics, the strike follows an overall increase in cross border attacks since the end of a temporary ceasefire earlier this year. This escalation – and the missile strike on November 23 - suggests Houthi intent to increase pressure on the Saudi-led coalition which has signalled willingness to reduce its commitment in Yemen following limited operational progress and reduced regional support.

On November 17, reports surfaced that Riyadh offered to accept a UN proposal for a ceasefire in exchange for the establishment of a buffer zone along the northern Yemeni border. While unconfirmed, this would mark a significant concession in comparison to previously stated objectives and may be interpreted by the Houthis as a sign of weakness that could encourage further attacks with a view to extract further concessions in negotiations. With the UAE recently withdrawing its forces and the incoming Biden administration expected to reduce US support – which is operationally significant given US logistics and intelligence capabilities – the ceasefire offer may signal Saudi Arabia’s intent to accelerate negotiations while still in a position of relative strength.



Yemen territorial control map, November 27 2020



Weekly Key Incidents: Please see Interactive map detailing these incidents [Here](#)

Egypt	On 19 November, an explosion occurred at the Al Arish-Al Qantara gas pipeline near Bir al-Abd in North Sinai governorate. No casualties were reported. Local authorities stated the ensuing fire was extinguished without disruption to gas supplies. Islamic State (IS) militants claimed responsibility for the attack.
Syria	On 19 November, an IED detonated against two military vehicles of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) near Theban town in eastern Deir ez-Zor. Five SDF militants were reportedly killed.
Syria	On 20 November, local sources were reporting Turkish rocket fire targeting Kurdish-controlled areas near the village of Maranaz in the northern Aleppo province, in addition to clashes between Turkish-backed and Kurdish forces near Maranaz, Belawoniya and Ain Daqneh.
Syria	On 21 November, local sources were reporting rocket fire by Turkish forces, targeting Kurdish-controlled areas surrounding Menagh military airbase in northern Aleppo province. No casualties were discussed.
Syria	On 21 November, unidentified aircraft conducted up to ten strikes near Albu Kamal town, Deir ez-Zor province, targeting Iranian-backed militia positions.
Syria	On 22 November, Syrian Observatory for Human Rights sources claimed that unidentified aircraft, likely to be Israeli, conducted up to ten strikes against Iran-backed militia positions near Albu Kamal town, eastern Deir ez-Zor province, on the Iraqi border. Several military vehicles were destroyed.
Syria	On 24 November, Israeli aircraft reportedly conducted strikes in the Syrian-controlled parts of the Golan Heights and areas south of Damascus. According to official Syrian sources, the strikes were launched shortly before midnight against targets in the Quneitra province. Additional sources indicated that the strikes targeted a military base hosting pro-Iran factions in Jabal Mane Heights near Kiswa, app. 15 km south of Damascus. According to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, up to eight militiamen were killed.
Syria	On 24 November, a vehicle-borne IED detonated near the Qabaseen Junction on the outskirts of Al Bab, north-east of Aleppo, killing five people and injuring 20 others.
Syria	On 24 November, a vehicle-borne IED detonated near the Kawa Roundabout in Afrin town, killing at least three civilians and wounding 16 others.
Syria	In the early hours of 24 November, according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, Syrian Democratic Forces carried out an attack on the positions of Turkish-backed factions in Mu'alaqah village near Ain Issa, northern Raqqah. Local sources cited as many as 27 militiamen killed as a result.
Iraq	On 18 November, Turkish aircraft conducted airstrikes against alleged PKK locations in the vicinity of Shahe and Bamishmish villages in the Akre district of Duhok province. A number of houses sustained material damages, causing panic amongst the local population.
Iraq	On 19 November, Turkish aircraft conducted airstrikes against suspects PKK locations in the Chamanke sub-district of Duhok. Local sources reported this included impacts as close as 2 km from Chamanke town. No casualties were reported.
Iraq	On 21 November, according to the PKK-affiliated media, PKK fighters attacked movement of Turkish Army units on Tal Suybsta in Haftanin, northern Duhok province. One Turkish soldier was killed and another was wounded.
Iraq	On the evening of 21 November, IS militants conducted a complex attack in the Baiji district of northern Salah ad Din province. The attack was initiated by an IED detonation that affected a civilian vehicle travelling north of Baiji city along the Makhoul Mountains. The detonation reportedly killed one civilian and three off-duty PMF personnel, and two others were wounded. IS gunmen using sniper fire subsequently ambushed responding forces comprised of 51st Tribal



	PMF Brigade and Musahhak Police personnel. As a result, one PMF member and four policemen were killed, two PMF members and one ISF member were wounded, and two civilian bystanders were wounded. The total number of fatalities had risen to 10 after a civilian succumbed to his wounds overnight.
Iraq	On 22 November, Turkish aircraft bombed suspected PKK targets in the Batifa sub-district in the Zakho district of northern Duhok province, which caused electricity disruptions in Upper Banka and Lower Banka villages.
Iraq	On 22 November, the Turkish Ministry of Defense stated that Turkish forces killed PKK fighters who were prepared to attack in the Avshanin region of northern Iraq.
Saudi Arabia	On 18 November, the spokesman of the Saudi-led coalition stated that an explosives-laden drone was intercepted in an unspecified location in southern Saudi Arabia. "Joint Coalition Forces have intercepted and destroyed this evening (Wednesday) a bomb-laden UAV launched systematically and deliberately by the terrorist Houthi militia to target civilians and civilian objects in the Southern Region."
Saudi Arabia	On 20 November, the spokesman of the Saudi-led coalition stated that an explosives-laden drone was intercepted in an unspecified location in southern Saudi Arabia.
Saudi Arabia	At approximately 03:50 on 23 November, according to the Saudi Ministry of Energy, a rocket struck an oil products distribution station north of Jeddah. No casualties were reported, while the resulting fire was extinguished shortly afterwards. "The terrorist, Iran-backed Houthi militia has been positively identified as the culprits of this cowardly terrorist assault," Saudi-led coalition spokesman said. According to a Houthi military spokesman, the attack involved a Quds-2 type winged missile. GCC, the Arab League, UAE and Yemeni government issued statements condemning the attack.
Saudi Arabia	On 24 November, the Saudi-led coalition announced destroying five Houthi mines in the Red Sea.
Saudi Arabia	On 25 November, the Saudi-led coalition confirmed that a commercial vessel suffered minor damages from a detonation on the Red Sea, in what it described as a foiled terrorist attack. Additional reporting cited that a Greek-operated tanker was damaged by a mine detonation near a Saudi Arabian terminal on the Red Sea near Al-Shuqaiq, north of the Yemeni border
Yemen	On 17 November, according to the Emirati Red Crescent, unidentified assailants attacked one of its mobile clinics in the Mukha district, Taiz province. A vehicle was reportedly damaged by gunfire but no casualties were recorded.
Yemen	On 20 November, local sources affiliated with the Houthi Movement claimed that the Saudi-led coalition conducted 18 airstrikes in the Nataa district of Bayda province.
Yemen	On 25 November, local sources affiliated with the Houthi Movement claimed that the Saudi-led coalition conducted multiple airstrikes in Marib province, with at least 12 strikes near Madghal, and one in Majzar. Two strikes were reported in Khab Washa'af district, and one other in al-Dhahra area of Jawf. The day prior, 24 raids were reported in Sa'ada, Marib, Hajjah and Jawf provinces
Qatar	On 25 November, three Qatari coastguard vessels reportedly intercepted two Bahraini boats returning after a maritime exercise. The vessels were subsequently released. Bahraini authorities issued a statement that the incident was considered as "inconsistent" with GCC security agreements.