



Weekly



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MENA Weekly Summary - March 11-17, 2026

Highlights of the Week

This report reviews notable events in the Middle East and North Africa this week. These include the killing of Kataib Hezbollah’s security chief and spokesperson in **Iraq**, **Israeli** ground operations in southern **Lebanon**, the dismantling of a Hezbollah-affiliated cell in **Kuwait**, the killing of **Iran’s** National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani in an Israeli strike, and an increase in the transit of non-Iranian flagged vessels via the **Strait of Hormuz** in recent days.

Strait of Hormuz/Persian Gulf

Current Situation:

1. According to a March 17 report by a maritime intelligence firm, eight non-Iranian-flagged vessels transited the Strait of Hormuz via Iranian territorial waters in recent days.
2. A separate maritime tracking service recorded nine vessel transits between March 15-16, compared to five between March 13-14.
3. A March 17 report indicated that the UAE is holding discussions to join a US-led effort to secure the Strait of Hormuz.
4. On March 18, US forces employed 5,000-pound deep-penetrator munitions against hardened Iranian facilities housing anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs) near the Strait.

Assessments & Forecast: The shipping data supports our [prior](#) assessment that Iran is willing to permit controlled, permission-based transits for select vessels. This reflects a growing trend among shipping operators to prioritize risk mitigation by coordinating transits with Iranian authorities, which can provide comparatively safer passage. However, this pattern likely applies primarily to vessels operated by countries relatively friendly with Iran, such as India and China, as well as other operators willing and able to engage with Iran. Western-affiliated and Gulf-linked shipping are unlikely to adopt such rerouting under current conditions. Through this dynamic, Iran is also consolidating its role as a de facto overseer of maritime traffic while projecting itself as a responsible actor. The absence of reported maritime attacks in recent days supports this assessment. This emerging pattern is unlikely to be acceptable to the US, as it does not guarantee freedom of navigation and instead increases Iran's authority over the strait, which will sustain or even intensify Washington's resolve to further degrade Iran's capabilities to disrupt maritime traffic, as seen by the recent CENTCOM strikes. Concurrently, Washington will continue seeking international backing for a coordinated maritime security framework, potentially leveraging support from countries such as the UAE, which are willing to contribute without appearing overtly confrontational toward Iran.

Source: [Reuters](#) ; [AlJazeera](#)

Iran

Current Situation:

1. On March 17, the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) announced that it had eliminated **Iran's National Security Council Secretary Ali Larijani** and **Basij Commander Gholam Reza Soleimani** in a strike in Tehran.

Assessments & Forecast: The assassination of Ali Larijani is a highly notable development, given that Israel assessed him to be the de facto leader of Iran after the killing of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei. This is particularly amid suspicions over the status of his replacement, Mojtaba Khamenei, who still has not been seen in public after he was reportedly seriously wounded in earlier Israeli strikes. Additionally, Larijani was an experienced figure with strong connections to both clerical circles and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). This lent him credibility that could stabilize the

government and decision-making, sustain Iran's retaliatory posture in the war, and facilitate the continuation of its military policies in the long term. His assassination is therefore a significant blow to Iran, and a strategic success for Israel, while also underscoring several important aspects of the current conflict. Firstly, it highlights Israel's ability to still gain and utilize actionable intelligence to eliminate some of the most senior Iranian officials. Secondly, the assassination also underscores Israel's intent and continued "gloves off" approach, which is aimed at eliminating important decision-makers in Iran's political elite and destabilizing its foundations. The assassination of Larijani and senior Basij figures, who played a critical role in crushing the Iranian protest movement in January, underscores Israel's intent to remove key obstacles to pave the way for a resurgence of protesters. This is aimed at serving Israel and the US's war objective of facilitating regime change. Israel will continue its pursuit of opportunities to eliminate other high-ranking officials, such as Parliament Speaker Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf and Head of the Judiciary Gholam Hossein Mohseni-Ejei. This will continue to challenge decision-making in Iran, which may become increasingly unpredictable.

Source: [IDF](#)

Iraq

Current Situation:

1. On March 16, Kataib Hezbollah announced the death of its security chief and spokesperson, Abu Ali al-Askari.
2. On March 16, a reported US/Israeli strike killed at least five members of the Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF).
3. On March 16, a UAV was intercepted en route to the US Victory Base, while another struck the al-Rasheed Hotel without causing casualties. The US Embassy in Baghdad reportedly faced its most intense assault since the onset of the conflict in the form of rockets and at least five UAVs. One UAV hit the compound, causing a fire.
4. During the night hours on March 17, rockets and UAVs were reportedly launched at the US Embassy in Baghdad.

Assessments & Forecast: These developments indicate a sharp escalation between Iran-backed militias and US forces in Iraq, likely triggered by the reported killing of Abu Ali al-Askari. As a key figure within the Iran-aligned network, his death prompted a significant retaliatory response. This included a surge in aerial attacks targeting the US Embassy, marking the most intense assault since the start of the conflict, alongside expanded targeting to include the al-Rasheed Hotel, which hosts Western-linked entities such as the EU Mission in Iraq. The inclusion of civilian infrastructure highlights the increasing willingness of Iran-backed groups to conduct broader, relatively indiscriminate retaliation against Western-associated targets in response to US actions. Despite Iraqi PM al-Sudani's pledge to find those responsible, the escalation in Iraq highlights the government's inability to rein in Iran-backed militias, many of whom operate within the state-affiliated

PMF. This is particularly given statements in recent days from PM al-Sudani, which suggest that many of the attacks are launched from inside the capital, where the government would presumably exercise greatest control. Overall, this intensified retaliatory dynamic between the US and Iran-backed militias will continue over the coming days, resulting in the deterioration of the security environment in Iraq.

Source: [INA](#)

Israel & Lebanon

Current Situation:

1. On March 16, Israeli Defense Minister Israel Katz stated that ground operations in Lebanon will continue until Hezbollah no longer poses a threat to northern Israel.
2. He added that, alongside Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, he had instructed the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) to destroy villages near the Lebanese border, similar to operations conducted against Hamas in Rafah, Beit Hanoun, and Gaza's tunnel networks.
3. On March 17, the IDF announced the deployment of the 36th Division to Lebanon, which has begun conducting targeted operations alongside the 91st Division to reinforce forward defensive positions in southern Lebanon and expand buffer zones so as to secure northern Israel.

Assessments & Forecast: The deployment of the IDF 36th Division follows the transfer of Golani Brigade forces to Northern Command and the completion of their preparatory training on March 13. Combined with the reported positioning of the 98th and 146th Divisions in northern Israel, this signals a clear intent to sustain and expand operations against Hezbollah in Lebanon. These deployments will enhance the IDF's ability to conduct clearing operations targeting Hezbollah infrastructure and personnel while maintaining control over recaptured areas. This approach reflects Israel's assessment that the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) have been unable to sufficiently enforce Hezbollah's disarmament south of the Litani River, despite claims by Beirut that the process has been completed. As outlined by Defense Minister Israel Katz, Israel will likely pursue the establishment of an expanded buffer zone in southern Lebanon to reduce perceived threats from Hezbollah. IDF statements that the 36th and 91st Divisions are strengthening defensive positions further suggest efforts to push the line of Israeli control northward. Despite international pressures for de-escalation, Israel is likely to proceed, combining ground operations with intensified airstrikes, particularly south of the Litani River. This will likely trigger retaliatory strikes by Hezbollah targeting northern and central Israel in the near term.

Source: [IDF](#)

Kuwait

Current Situation:

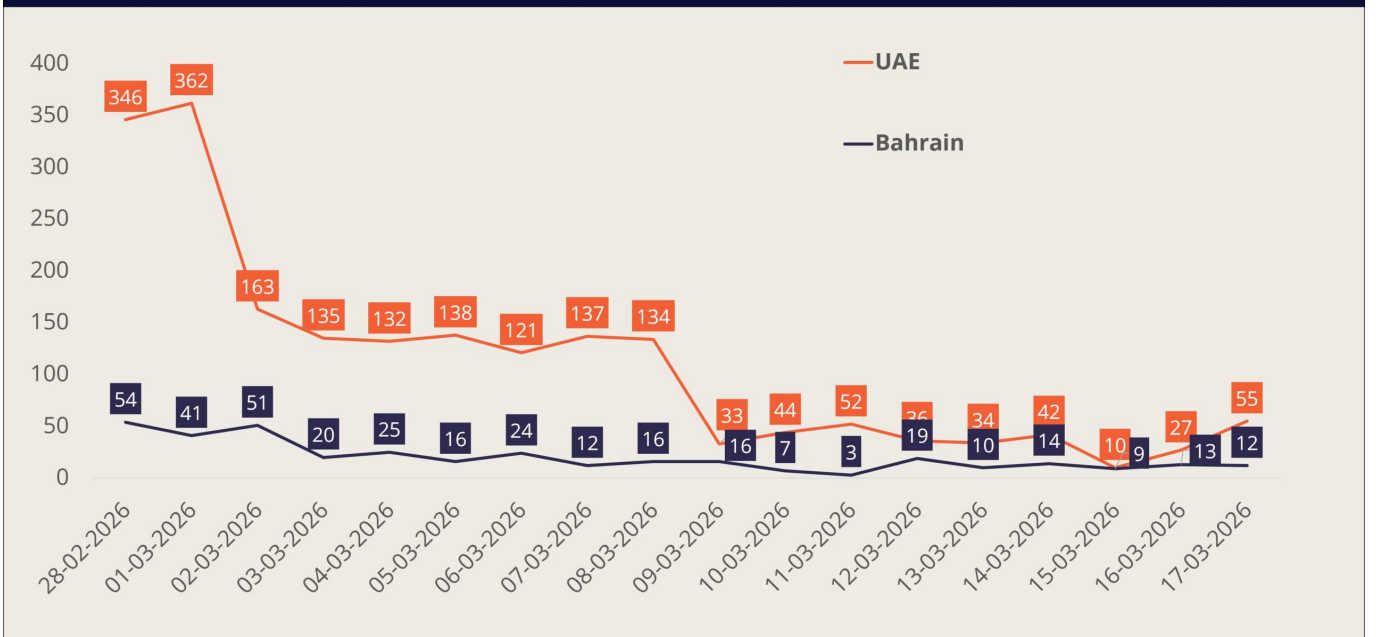
1. On March 16, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) announced that the authorities had dismantled a Kuwait-based cell affiliated to Hezbollah, which sought to undermine national security and recruit individuals to join the group.
2. During the security operation, the authorities arrested 14 Kuwaiti citizens and two Lebanese nationals and seized an unspecified number of weapons, drones, ammunition, narcotics, and encrypted communication devices.

Assessments & Forecast: The dismantling of a Hezbollah-linked cell, while not unprecedented, reinforces the persistent presence of Iran-aligned networks in Kuwait. The composition of the cell is particularly notable. With most members identified as Kuwaiti nationals, this incident indicates Iran-aligned groups' relative success in recruiting locals. This suggests a shift away from reliance on external operatives toward domestically rooted networks, which are inherently more difficult to detect and disrupt, as locally embedded individuals are better positioned to operate discreetly. The range of seized materials, including firearms, UAVs, encrypted communication devices, maps, and training tools, points to a multi-functional cell capable of intelligence-gathering, planning, and facilitation, with potential capacity for low-scale attacks. Although no imminent plot has been confirmed, these capabilities align with Iran's broader strategy of maintaining deniable, pre-positioned networks that can be activated during periods of escalation to target US-linked or other strategic assets in the region. Kuwait's public disclosure of the arrests aligns with recent measures to curb Hezbollah financing and reflects a broader regional trend of Gulf states adopting a firmer stance against Iran-linked activity. In the near term, Gulf countries such as Kuwait are likely to intensify surveillance and security operations, while also enhancing intelligence coordination to counter clandestine Iran-linked networks.

Source: [MoI Kuwait](#)

Infographic of the Week

NUMBER OF AERIAL ATTACKS ON UAE, BAHRAIN SINCE FEBRUARY 28



Other Developments

Algeria: The Ministry of Defense announced that the People's National Army (ANP) neutralized seven terrorists in two operations in Tebessa on March 12 and 13. Clashes also resulted in the death of three ANP soldiers.

Bahrain: On March 15, the Ministry of Interior (MoI) announced that authorities arrested five individuals accused of collecting and transmitting "sensitive information" to Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC).

Bahrain: On March 17, the Bahrain Defense Force (BDF) announced that the country's air defense systems intercepted 129 missiles and 233 UAVs since the start of the regional conflict on February 28.

Egypt: During the fourth Joint Ministerial Meeting of Egypt and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) on March 12, Foreign Minister Badr Abdelatty called for the activation of the Arab League's 1950 Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation Treaty and the formation of a joint Arab force.

Oman: According to March 12 reports, Foreign Minister Badr bin Hamad Albusaidi reiterated that Muscat will continue attempting to advance negotiations to end the conflict. He argued that the US-Israeli campaign "aims to weaken Iran" and promote regional normalization of relations with Israel.

Saudi Arabia: On March 13, the US-based credit rating agency S&P Global Ratings affirmed Riyadh's credit rating at "A+/A-1," citing the agency's assessment that Riyadh "will be able to weather the ongoing regional conflict."

Syria: According to March 14 reports, a member of the Ministry of Defense was killed in a suspected Islamic State (IS) attack in Idlib's al-Bara region. This would reportedly constitute the first IS attack in Idlib in 2026.

Yemen: According to unconfirmed March 14 reports, a senior Houthi military commander stated that the closure of the Bab al-Mandeb Strait would be one of the group's primary options in assisting Iran in its conflict with the US and Israel.

The Upcoming Week

- **March 19-21:** Eid al-Fitr is expected to fall on one of these dates. It is a public holiday in most of the **MENA** region, marking the end of Ramadan.
- **March 20:** Nowruz, representing the Persian and Kurdish New Year, will be celebrated as an official public holiday in **Iran** and **Syria**.
- **March 21:** Mother's Day will be a public holiday in **Syria**, and, while not being an official holiday in **Lebanon**, some schools and businesses may be closed in the country.