

# SYRIA/IRAQ: WEEKLY SITREP 04 OCT 2017

- (1) NORTHERN IDLIB**  
Moscow severely injured leader of the Al Nusra Front (ANF) 3 Oct 17.
- (2) AL QARYATAYN**  
ISIS recapture the town in Homs following counteroffensive.
- (3) PALMYRA**  
Regime temporarily lost Palmyra to ISIS during counteroffensive.
- (4) DEIR AZZOR**  
ISIS video shows two Russian captives.
- (5) DAMASCUS**  
Twin suicide bombs in al-Midan on 2 Oct 17.



- (6) BAKR AL-BAGHDADI**  
On 28 Sep 17 the leader of ISIS released a 46 minute audio praising the bravery of ISIS fighters.
- (7) JALAL TALIBANI**  
The first President of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) died at age 83 on 3 Oct 17.
- (8) BAGHDAD/ERBIL**  
Baghdad closed airspace to and threatened financial blockades in response to the “yes” vote.
- (9) HAWIJA**  
Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) announce final stages of operation to clear ISIS from Hawija.

**ASSESSMENT:** (1) Moscow claims Abu Mohamad al-Golani was severely injured and 12 of his commanders killed at an undisclosed location. If confirmed, this is a serious blow to the ANF who dominate Northern Idlib Province. The loss of tier one and two commanders simultaneously will reduce the effectiveness of ANF in the short to medium term and may also splinter Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, a coalition of jihadist groups led by the ANF. (2) 153 Regime forces were killed, demonstrating ISIS can stage attacks more than 300km from its stronghold in Dier Azzor. (3) ISIS staged a counteroffensive temporarily forcing Regime withdrawal near Palmyra but is unlikely to be able to hold the ground. (4) The captives claim that they were captured during an ISIS counteroffensive in Shula last week. Russia has denied any Russian troops have been captured. (5) The first attack in the city since July was likely conducted by ISIS during a surge of counteroffensives. (6) Intelligence agencies have not confirmed the authenticity of the audio. The first public address by Baghdadi in over a year, it signals desperation in the face of huge territorial losses. The message will boost morale during the small scale counter offensives but cannot reverse the dramatically reducing “Caliphate.” It is likely future messaging will urge terror attacks in foreign countries as ISIS morphs into a global insurgency. The audio includes references to current affairs indicating al-Baghdadi was alive at least several months ago. (7) Talabani was considered a unifying force with Baghdad, his death will create a void in the moderate area of the political arena. (8) Airspace was closed to international flights on 29 Sep 17, likely significantly disrupting the extractives sector who frequently fly employees via Erbil. Baghdad confirmed it will cease trading foreign currency with Kurdish banks to increase economic pressure on the Kurds. Economic embargoes will have significant fiscal consequence for the KRG but marks a significant de-escalation in the the previous military threats from Baghdad and Turkey. (9) It is likely ISF will take control of Hawija in the next 7 days; interestingly ISIS did not stage major counteroffensives in Iraq as it did in Syria suggesting distinct, possibly separate command structures or a prioritisation of Syrian territory. With ISF already in situ in Kirkuk Province, Baghdad may choose to keep ISF presence in the area as a result of the referendum, likely to cause unrest in the mixed ethnic and religious province.

# SYRIA/IRAQ CONTROL MAP: 04 OCT 2017

## COMMENT:

(1) Reports confirm that the Regime, supported by Russian and Iranian forces, have recaptured up to 85% of territory lost to ISIS since 2014.

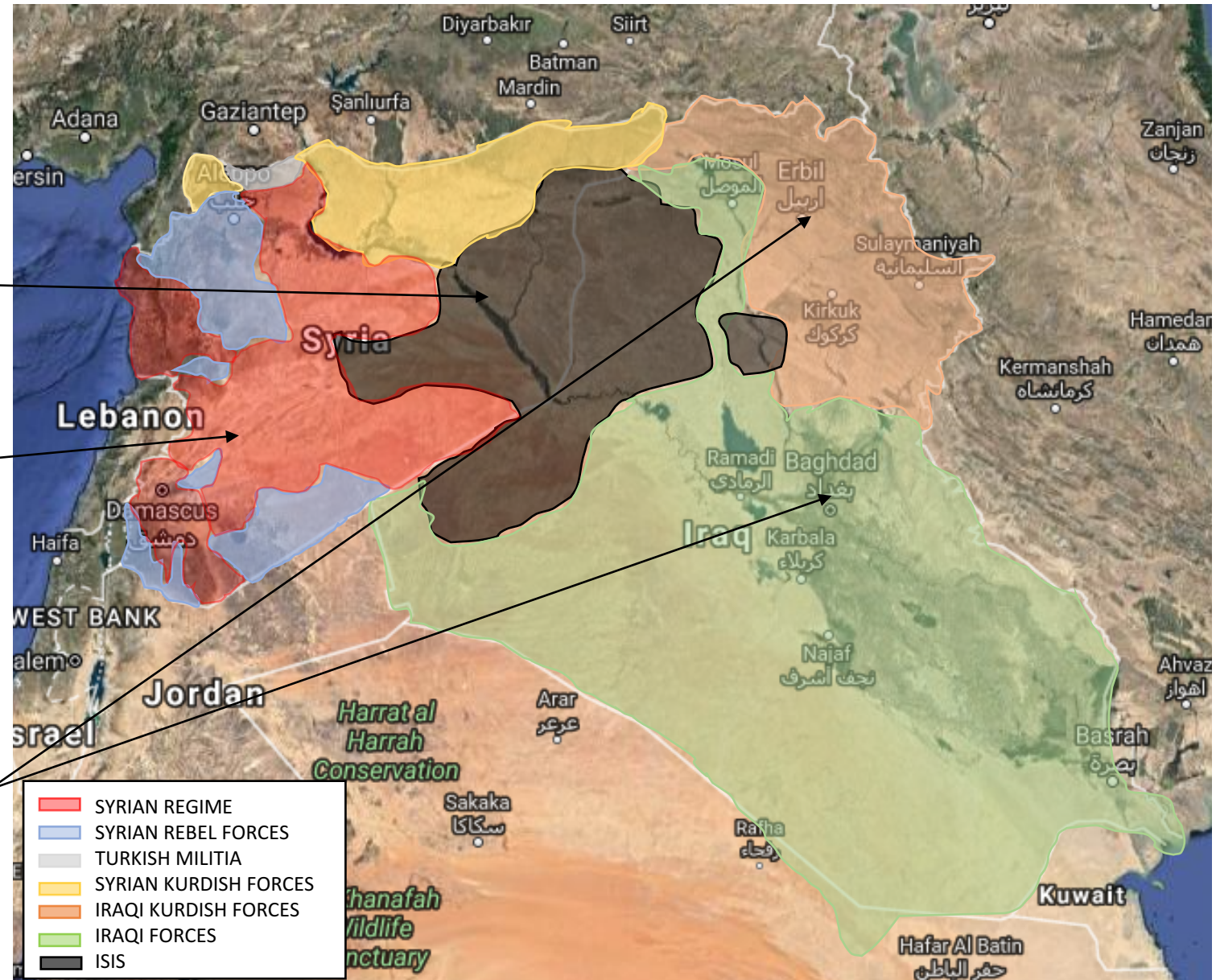
(2) Tensions between the US and Russia have risen sharply in the last 7 days reporting period as Russia accuses the US of duplicity of strategy and of undermining Regime efforts to defeat ISIS. Despite Washington and Moscow agreeing a line of de-escalation along the Euphrates, air strikes have crossed the line causing deaths and casualties to each sides' proxies on the ground as Dier Azzor becomes an increasing hot bed for conflict between competing geo-political ambitions.

(3) ISIS notably increased counteroffensives in Syria this reporting period, likely to coincide with al-Baghdadi's audio. It is unlikely they will hold ground recaptured in Homs, realistically prolonging the inevitable. Notably, counteroffensives did not occur in Iraq.

## Kurdish Sanctions following Referendum

Baghdad closed airspace to international flights bound for Erbil on 29 Oct 17 following the Referendum on 25 Oct 17. Military, humanitarian and diplomatic flights were exempt but it is likely the embargo will significantly disrupt the extractives sector.

With elections due to take place in April 2018, Baghdad is unlikely to reduce pressure on KRG. The death of Jalal Talabani, President Barzani and President Abadi are two polarized forces that will find meaningful talks difficult. With ISF clearing ISIS from Hawija, Baghdad may seek to keep forces in Kirkuk to exert control in the contentious oil rich region likely to inflame tensions.



# NORTH AFRICA: WEEKLY SITREP 04 OCT 2017

## (1) UK/LIBYA

Theresa May faces calls to sack Boris Johnson over insensitive Libya comments made 4 Oct 17.

## (2) HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

The fragile Italian deal to curb migrants crossing the Mediterranean is in danger of collapsing.

## (3) SABRATHA

The violent power struggle in Sabratha continues into its third week.



## (4) MIGRANTS

138 Nigerian refugees returned from Libya on 4 Oct 17.

## (5) BENGHAZI

Benghazi Port reopened on 1 Oct 17 following 3 years of closure.

## (6) US AIRSTRIKES

A second wave of US airstrikes targeted ISIS south of Sirte.

## (7) OIL PRODUCTION

Sharara oil field has restarted production after a 3 day halt from 1 Oct 17.

**ASSESSMENT:** (1) Remarks that Libya only had to “clear the dead bodies” to be a destination for investment attracted criticism but strongly suggested the UK’s intent to facilitate foreign investment in Sirte in cooperation with the municipality of Sirte, though such investment is unlikely in the medium term. (2) Fighting continues in Sabratha as a power struggle between militias intensified, undermining the Italian brokered deal to curb migrants reached with militias including the Dabbashi Clan in Sabratha to stem human trafficking. The deal reduced the flow of migrants to Italy by up to 80%. (3) The power struggle between the Dabbashi Clan, the ISIS Operations Room and the al-Wabi has resulted in over 26 deaths, 170 casualties and thousands of displaced persons. The Italian deal involving cash payments to the militias has been cited as a key catalyst to the fighting. Gen Haftar, leader of the Libyan National Army criticised the deal, likely in an effort to promote the LNA as the only answer to Libya’s security issues. (4) 138 Nigerian migrants returned to Nigeria with the assistance of the International Organisation for Migration due to deteriorating conditions in Libyan detention camps. As Italy announced an 80% reduction in migrants reaching Italy this summer, a sharp decline in the conditions in Libya’s detention camps became apparent as they struggled to cope under the increasing backlog of migrants returned from the Libyan coast. The returnees mark the second large wave of Nigerians to be returned by the IOM. (5) The port closed in 2014 along with Benghazi Airport (which reopened in July 17) as a result of violence between rival militias in the city. Prime Minister al-Thinni of the internationally recognised Government of National Accord travelled by sea to officially open the port. The port will not export oil or gas but will import goods which will reduce the elevated price of commodities in Eastern Libya. Crucially, the reopening of infrastructure demonstrates the improving stability of the city under Gen Haftar who declared victory over the city in June 17. (6) Following US airstrikes against ISIS IVO Sirte last week, the US conducted further strikes targeting ISIS 100 miles South East of Sirte killing 10 militants. The US led strikes will likely succeed in dispersing ISIS to the desert, ensuring they cannot recapture Sirte. (7) Libya’s output is expected to return to 1 million barrels per day within days of the re-opening of its largest oil field. Internationally, oil prices have stabilised at \$50 as a result but it is anticipated further closures will disrupt prices as security remains an issue.

# AF/PAK: WEEKLY SITREP 04 OCT 2017

## (1) Op FREEDOM'S SENTINEL & RESOLUTE SUPPORT MISSION

The US has relaxed its Rules of Engagement (RoE) to help US troops combat the Taliban and ISIS.

## (2) FARAH

5 ANSF were killed in a Taliban attack on a police checkpoint on 29 Sep 17.

## (3) HELMAND

An Afghan airstrike killed up to 10 Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) in a friendly fire incident 1 Oct 17 in Gereshk.



## (4) KABUL

A suicide bomb at a Mosque killed 5 and wounded 29 Shi'ites 29 Sep 17.

## (5) KABUL

Denmark has pledged a further 55 troops to Kabul following attack on a Danish military convoy.

## (6) URUZGAN

The Taliban continue to shut down medical clinics established to treat civilians.

## (7) KANDAHAR

12 ANSF were killed during a Taliban attack on the Maruf District Governor's compound 28 Sep 17.

**COMMENT:** (1) The changes to the RoE mean US troops no longer have to wait to be fired upon before engaging the enemy and relax proximity requirements on airstrikes. It is likely the relaxed regulations will facilitate greater US action as troops have a greater scope to engage a visible enemy, but the concern is that a greater number of civilians could be harmed as a result which ultimately undermines ANSF control of the country given the frequent incidence of friendly fire and civilian deaths. Long term, the change of policy does nothing to address the underlying issue which is that ANSF cannot sufficiently hold ground against the Taliban. (2) Additional ANSF reinforced the police checkpoint but took several hours to arrive, with Afghan Air Force (AAF) airstrikes reportedly denied Taliban vehicles after the incident. The attack shows the uncoordinated way in which the ANSF respond to attacks, likely a result of the rural location, lack of training and spread of forces. Without improving TTPs to curb attrition in rural areas, the Taliban will continue to expand on its 40% control of these Provinces. (3) The airstrike, conducted by the AAF, killed 10 ANP officers in what was possibly the result of poor intelligence. AAF airstrikes have been heavily criticized, yet incidents such as this show nothing has been done to improve targeting or execution of strikes which often result in civilian deaths. In July 17, 16 ANSF were killed by a US airstrike in the same area. (4) The attack targeted Shi'ite civilians leaving Friday prayers two days before the Muslim Holy Day of Ashura in another attack against the nation's Shi'ite minority. While no-one has claimed responsibility, the TTPs suggest ISIS are likely responsible given their recent history targeting Shi'ite minorities in Mosques in Kabul including a deadly attack in Sep 17. (5) Reports suggest the Taliban have shut clinics in order to use them for the treatment of fighters. Estimates suggest 46 of the 49 clinics in the Province have been shut down, putting significant strain on the remaining clinics as civilians struggle to find treatment centres. The Taliban claims the clinics were closed due to poor service and will be replaced by them in time, demonstrating the difficulty the Government of Kabul has in administering rural provinces. (6) The additional 55 troops will bolster the 97 troops already stationed in Kabul in response to the suicide bomb which targeted a Danish Convoy 24 Sep 17. (7) The Taliban stormed the compound belonging to the Maruf District Governor, killing 12 ANSF and wounding 4. ANSF regained control of the area but reportedly lost a number of weapons and quantities of ammunition to the retreating Taliban.