

SYRIA/IRAQ: WEEKLY SITREP 20 DEC 2017

(1) UN PEACE TALKS

The 8th round of UN brokered peace talks in Geneva ended on 14 Dec 17 without resolution.

(2) RUSSIA/SYRIA

Russia delivered a number of military vehicles to Syria 19 Dec 17 despite President Putin's announcement of a partial withdrawal 11 Dec 17.

(3) EASTERN GHOUTA

The International Community of the Red Cross warns the situation in Eastern Ghouta is in crisis. 18 Dec 17.



(4) SULAYMANIA

6 killed during days of violent protests over unpaid civil servant salaries. 20 Dec 17.

(5) BAGHDAD

Baghdad announced the beginning of a strategy to bring all weapons in Iraq under state control. 20 Dec 17.

(6) OIL/SECURITY

Baghdad increasingly intends to use drones to inspect oil pipelines moving into 2018. The US Navy has agreed to provide a limited number to the Iraqi Navy 20 Dec 17.

ASSESSMENT: (1) Talks to establish dialogue between the rival factions failed to establish meaningful negotiations. UN Mediator Staffan de Mistura cited the Syrian Regime's unwillingness to commit to negotiating, urging Russia to apply pressure. Regime reticence is a reaction to the opposition demand that President Assad stand down. The opposition may accept minor compromises to this demand, exploring ways of holding free and fair elections which may include Assad. The Regime delegation is unlikely to waiver, given the strength of the coalition between Russia, Iran and Syria. What happens following the stabilization of Deir Azzor in early 2018 will be crucial to talks as the Regime refocuses on gaining control of the Highway connecting Aleppo and Homs to Damascus in rebel held territory which may derail dialogue. (2) The Russians delivered vehicles to the Port of Tartus, destined for Regime forces. The movement demonstrates Russia's continuing investment and presence in Syria despite a supposed partial withdrawal. Russia will not reduce its support during this crucial military and political phase. (3) The ICRC warns up to 500 civilians must be evacuated for emergency treatment as winter intensifies, shortages of medicine, food, water and fuel are exacerbating the humanitarian crisis to a "critical point". 400,000 remain besieged by Regime forces in the final rebel stronghold in the capital. (4) 6 civilians were killed during violent protests with 70 injured as tensions mount over unpaid civil servant salaries in Rania, Sulaymania. The Kurdish Regional Government has suffered financial crisis since 2014 when the relationship with Baghdad broke down due to a controversial oil transport deal between the KRG and Turkey. Baghdad has continued to reduce the annual budget to the KRG intensifying the financial crisis and stoking internal tensions. (5) Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi and Senior Shia religious figures made separate speeches encouraging the integration of powerful Shia militia, the People's Mobilisation Units (PMU), with legitimate state armed forces to unite under Baghdad control. While the move would enable greater centralised control under the Baghdad administration, it would likely result in an increase in Iranian influence in Baghdad politics as deep rooted anti-Western sentiment among the Shia militias would isolate the US. (6) Iraqi Oil Minister Jabbar al-Luaibi announced the plans to deploy drones to inspect pipelines to increase security in a move which may help to stabilise oil prices in the second quarter of 2018. Iraq is seeking suppliers of drones for the first quarter of 2018.

SYRIA/IRAQ CONTROL MAP: 20 DEC 2017

REGIME GAINS IN DEIR AZZOR

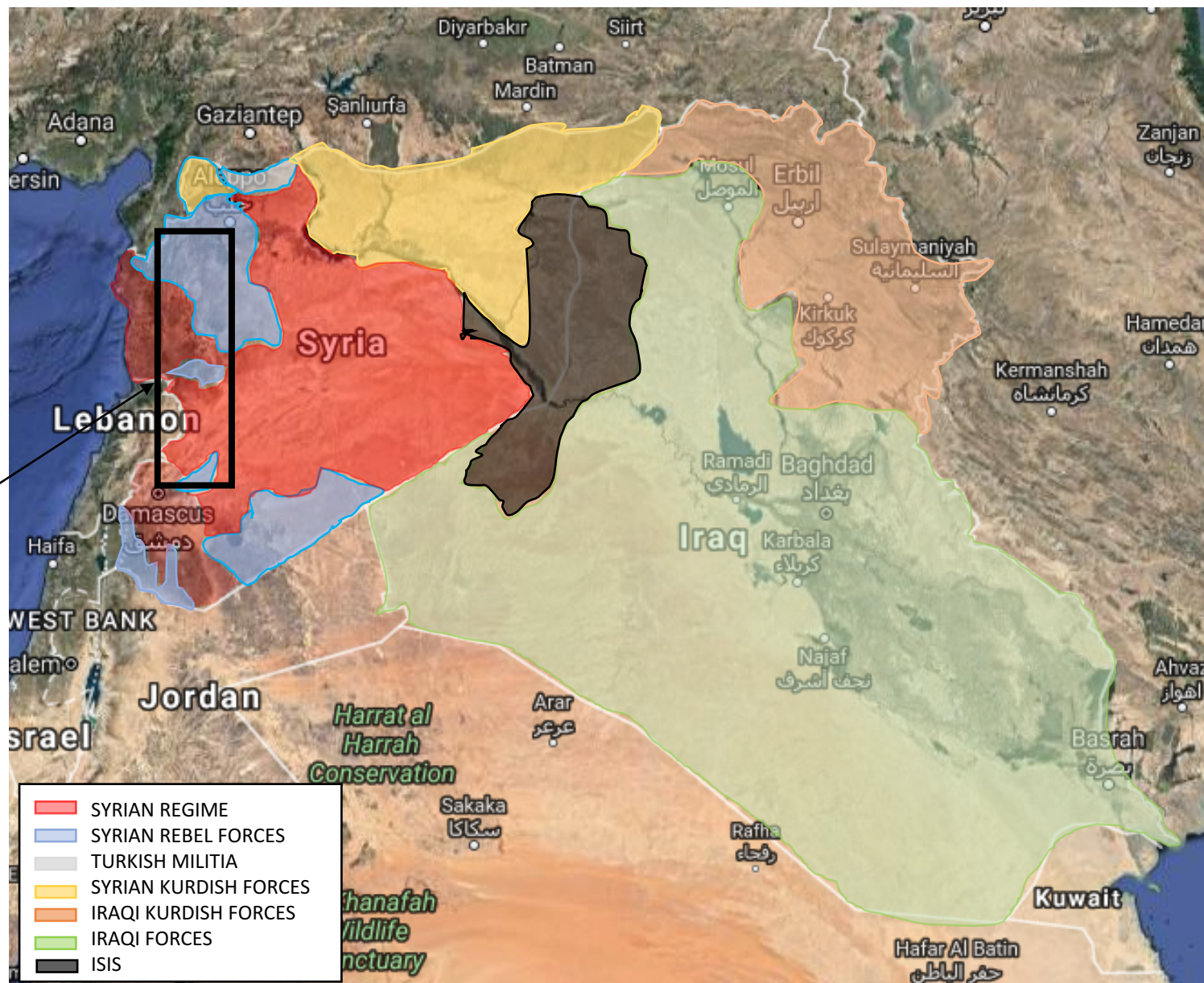
As Syrian Regime forces continue momentum in Deir Azzor, bolstered by Russian air support, military victory in the oil rich province is in sight. Crucial to the future of talks, the conflict will change shape in 2018 to revert towards the original civil war between Regime and Opposition forces.

It is likely that with ISIS significantly weakened in the East, the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) will refocus on Western Syria. In particular, the SAA will likely focus on securing the Highway connecting Northern Syria to Damascus where it has relatively little presence.

The Highway connects Aleppo to Homs through countryside dominated by the extremist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham(HTS). It is likely the SAA will prioritise targeting HTS as part of an on-going counter-terrorism campaign, with the secondary benefit of securing one of Syria's key trade routes. Both Russia and Turkey have targeted HTS as a key threat in Northern Syria, it is likely Russia will increase air support in the area while Turkey may bolster troop numbers during shaping operations before a significant SAA deployment likely to be seen in early 2018.

The Highway intersects opposition held territory, as the Regime does not distinguish between opposition forces and extremists it is likely they will take the opportunity to use military force to weaken the opposition with significant consequence for the UN Peace Talks in Geneva throughout 2018 given Assad's siege and starve tactics and reported use of chemical weapons.

Simultaneously, the Regime is likely to increase pressure on Eastern Ghouta to remove the final pocket of opposition in the capital. The humanitarian situation is reaching a "critical point" which may mean opposition forces are forced to cede the area in the interest of the 400,000 civilians suffering medical, food, water and fuel shortages.



NORTH AFRICA: WEEKLY SITREP 20 DEC 2017

(1) UN TO MOVE 10,000 MIGRANTS

The UN plans to move 10,000 migrants trapped in Libya to relieve the worsening humanitarian situation in detention centres. 20 Dec 17.

(2) MISRATA

The Mayor of Misrata was killed during a kidnap attempt by unknown gunmen. 18 Dec 17.

(3) LIBYAN PARLIAMENT

A new Governor for the Central Bank has been appointed 20 Dec 17.



(4) LIBYA INVESTMENT

Forbes Magazine declared Libya the second worst place in the world to do business. 20 Dec 17.

(5) DERNA

Clashes erupted between extremist militias and the Libyan National Army around Derna 19 Dec 17.

(6) LIBYAN POLITICAL AGREEMENT

Following the expiry of the Libyan Political Agreement (LPA) 17 Dec 17, pro-Haftar factions called for protests against the Tripoli administration. 17 Dec 17.

ASSESSMENT: (1) The operation will include the return of migrants to their country of origin but also includes a series of agreements between European countries and Canada to take a number of the refugees. There are more than 44,000 registered refugees in Libya, with many more likely to arrive in 2018. The operation does not address the issues creating the migrant issue but may offer an incentive for further migrants to enter Libya in the hope of reaching Europe or Canada. (2) Misrata was considered to be one of the more stable cities of Libya under the leadership of Mayor Mohamad Eshtewi. Eshtewi returned to Misrata from Istanbul, when attackers ambushed the vehicle and kidnapped the Mayor before his body was found. Misrata constitutes a fragile balance of power between several powerful militia factions which is likely to be significantly tested by the attack, particularly following the 3 day mourning period. If the investigation fails to find and persecute the assailants quickly, suspicion and accusation may translate into tensions and violence. The Mayor faced growing opposition in the city from key figures within the Military Council who had tried to remove him from power but the city has also been the stage of ISIS attacks. The Mayor of Misrata is key to ongoing dialogue moving towards a peaceful solution in Libya which is likely to be set back by the attack. (3) Mohamed el-Shukri is now a leading figure in the control of Libya's oil revenues as the new Governor of the Central Bank following the removal of Sadik el-Kabir. (4) Libya came second to Afghanistan as the worst place in the world to do business in what is a strong indicator of the perception of the security situation in the resource rich country that was once on of the wealthiest in Northern Africa. Crucially, corruption was cited as a particular issue in Libya. If a unified, internationally recognised government could be established in the long term, Libya would likely enjoy an economic resurgence as international investment spurred by political stability increased. With talks failing to produce results, this prospect is as far away as ever. (5) ISIS continue to harrass LNA in Derna with little effect. (6) Gen Haftar, despite assuring the Italian Government otherwise, has continued to assert the expiry of the LPA to undermine the legitimacy of the rival Government of National Accord (GNA). Supporters of Haftar called for mass protests in Libya's Eastern cities which provide Haftar's base of power. In the West, protests were limited to a small number of protestors in Tripoli's Martyr's Square in a clear demonstration of the deep East and West divide in the country which has proved difficult to overcome. Haftar remains a divisive character in Libyan politics but his military strength ensures a seat at the negotiating table and a necessary ally in the fight against extremism in Libya.

AF/PAK: WEEKLY SITREP 20 DEC 2017

(1) Op FREEDOM'S SENTINEL & RESOLUTE SUPPORT MISSION
ANSF Op MAIWAND NINE targets Sangin Taliban. 17 Dec 20.

(2) KABUL
Jamiat-e Islami threaten to withdraw support to Afghan Government. 20 Dec 17.

(3) KABUL
ISIS claims attack against training facility 18 Dec 17.

(4) KANDAHAR/HELMAND
The Taliban staged an attack against a NATO convoy. 17 Dec 17.



(5) PAKISTAN: HUMANITARIAN
The Pakistani Government has ordered a number of foreign humanitarian charities to leave Pakistan. 18 Dec 17.

(6) QUETTA
ISIS suicide attack on a Christian Church killed 9 and wounded 50. 17 Dec 17

(7) ECONOMY
The World Bank has approved a loan package of \$825 million to improve financial management and electricity infrastructure. 18 Dec 17.

COMMENT: (1) Op RESOLUTE SUPPORT reports a high operational tempo throughout Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) Op MAIWAND NINE aimed at increasing security conditions ahead of elections next year. Crucially, the operation is designed to show the ANSF the effectiveness of dynamic offensive action versus the traditionally defensive static positions adopted by ANSF. (2) The attack took place near to an Afghan National Directorate of Security (NDS) training facility in Afshar, Kabul. ISIS has claimed responsibility for a number of attacks in Kabul demonstrating its ability to project into the capital which poses a serious risk to the elections scheduled for 2018. (3) Ghani removed Atta Mohammad Noor as Governor of Balkh Province, causing Jamiat-e Islami to threaten to withdraw support to the Government unless he is reinstated. The political tension with the Afghan Government casts serious doubts over the elections scheduled for 2018. Ghani faces growing opposition from Abdullah Abdullah, a senior Jamiat figure. The root of the conflict, while on the surface political, can be traced to ethnic tensions between the Pashtun Ghani and the primarily Tajik Jamiat party. Political tensions are worsening in the wake of elections, likely to increasingly fracture both the Government and the Jamiat party. (4) Coalition forces confirmed no service personnel were injured in the attack. The Taliban staged a number of attacks on 17 Dec 17, including a series of attacks on police checkpoints in Lashkar Gah that resulted in 11 ANSF fatalities. Clashes intensified in the North as ANSF attempt to reverse Taliban gains. (5) The Pakistani Government has adopted a tougher stance against foreign humanitarian aid organisations, ordering 29 to leave within 60 days. Pakistan is deeply suspicious of charities being used as modes of espionage and have previously expelled such groups for alleged espionage, including Save the Children in 2015 and more recently expelling Medecins Sans Frontiers from the Afghanistan Border. Given Pakistan's history of arrest and detention of suspected spies there is real concern for the safety of foreign humanitarian workers and the locals they employ. (6) ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack, claiming two suicide attackers infiltrated security. Christian families protested at the lack of security protecting the site, given the increasing frequency of targeted attacks against minority religions in Afghanistan and Pakistan security is likely to increase around key sites. (7) Following the devaluation of the Pakistani Rupee last week, the World Bank has approved a financial package designed to improve energy infrastructure in a bid to revive the economy.