

SYRIA/IRAQ: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 17 JAN 2018

(1) US/SYRIA
The US is to create a 30,000 strong border force between Syria, Turkey and Iraq. 15 Jan 17

(2) TURKEY
Turkish troops amassed on the border with Syria ahead of anticipated incursion. 16 Jan 17

(3) US/SYRIA
Chief Negotiator for the Syrian Opposition urged the US to put pressure on Russia. 16 Jan 17.

(4) DAMASCUS
Senior opposition figure killed in a hit-and-run attack. 16 Jan 18



(5) EASTERN GHOUTA
179 killed in two weeks, including deaths resulting from a suspected chlorine attack. 15 Jan 18.

(6) BAGHDAD
Twin suicide attacks kill 38 and wound 105 in crowded Tayran Square, undermining security in the capital. 15 Jan 18

(7) OIL
Turkey is disappointed that oil flow from Kirkuk has bypassed traditional Ceyhan terminal in favor of Tehran's Kermanshah refinery. 17 Jan 18.

ASSESSMENT: (1) The US plans to use the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), alarming Turkey who have until now pushed for the US to reduce support to Kurds once Raqqa had been captured. Turkey regards the US backed Kurdish militias as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK). Political relations between the US and Turkey will sharply decline, likely to allow Russia greater influence over the NATO ally. (2) The operation is due to begin imminently, reports of artillery fire on Afrin have already emerged. The target area is likely to be the 60 mile area between Afrin and Manbij, home to Syria's Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG). Turkey fears Kurdish forces could gain footholds along the Turkish border emboldening the PKK in Turkey. Turkey's fears have been compounded by US support to Kurdish factions fighting ISIS in the North East, including weapons which Turkey has sought to limit now Raqqa has been recaptured. The move is likely to spur attacks within Turkey from Kurdish factions who have fought a 30 year war for independence. (3) Nasr al-Hariri welcomes the US' proposal to keep 2,000 US troops in Syria to help end the 7 year civil war but urged increased pressure on Russia. The opposition has encouraged the US to place sanctions on Syria to pressure President Bashar al-Assad into making greater concessions. The last round of talks demonstrated a disinterested Regime contingent highlighting a lack of pressure from Russia to reach political agreement. Russia has derailing the UN's Geneva talks by organizing separate negotiations. (4) Mounir Darwish was a key figure at UN backed peace talks and noted increasing Regime hostility towards his activities. It is unclear if the death was deliberate. (5) The humanitarian situation in Eastern Ghouta has been heavily criticised as a "man made disaster" in which the siege and starve tactics, aerial bombardment and alleged chemical attacks conducted by the Regime continue to cause mass civilian casualties with little tangible response from the UN. In Idlib, 120,000 civilians have been displaced by intensifying violence in a brokered de-escalation zone highlighting the inability to project political force on the ground. (6) While no one has claimed responsibility for the attack, it bore the characteristics of ISIS demonstrating their ability to undermine security in the capital. It is likely such attacks will increase in the wake of elections this year. (7) After the Kurdish Referendum in September 2017, Turkey hoped to benefit from Baghdad's aggression against the KRG but it would seem Iran has gained a great deal more through oil and infrastructure deals.

SYRIA/IRAQ CONTROL MAP: 17 JAN 2018

TURKEY'S ANTICIPATED INCURSION

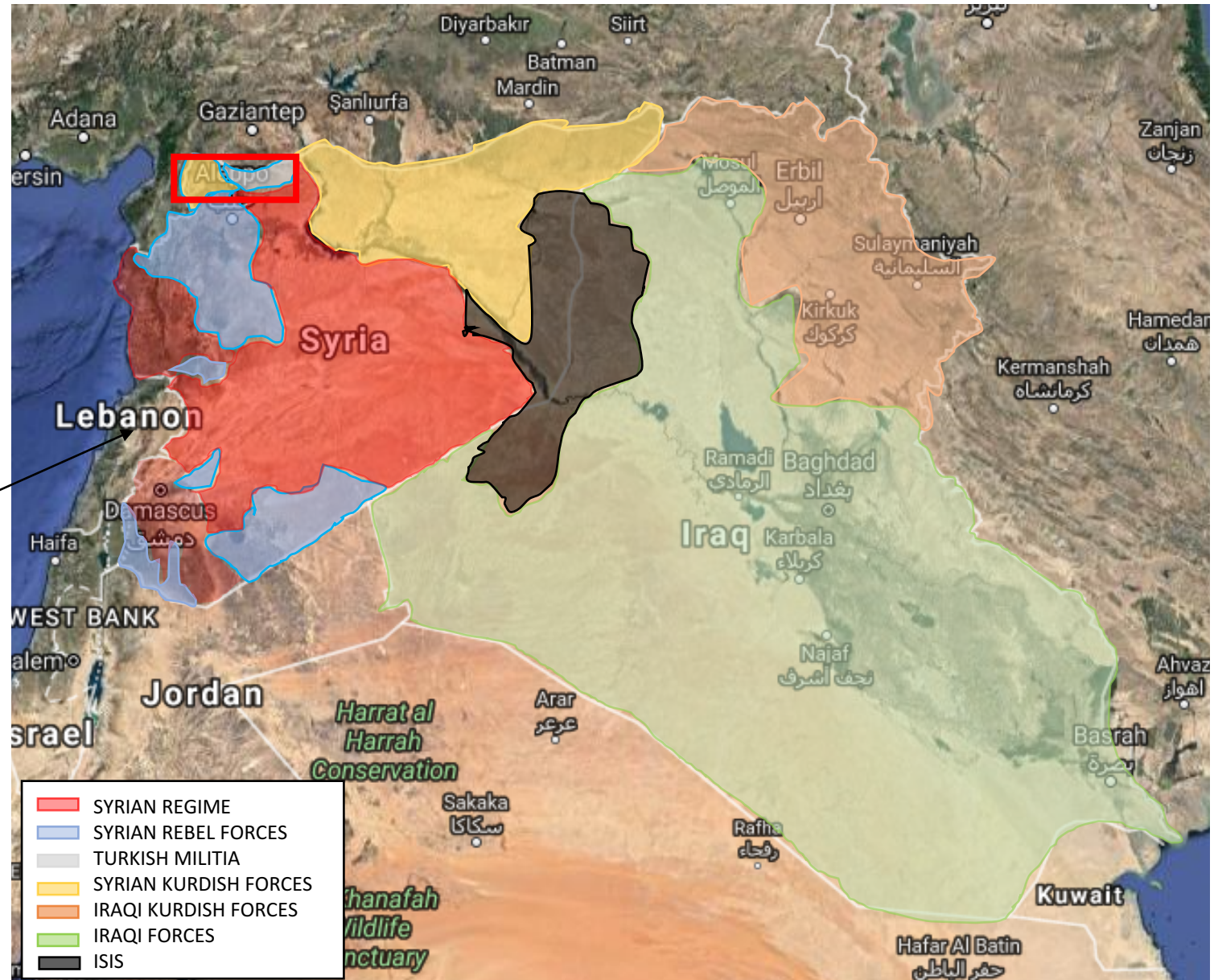
Turkey has responded decisively to the US announcement of the creation of a 30,000 strong border force comprised of the Kurdish-led SDF. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan announced on 13 Jan 18 that Turkey was to launch a military operation into Syria to dislodge the armed Kurdish faction, the YPG, in Afrin and Manbij in Northern Syria.

Turkey considers the Syrian militias as an extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party which has been staging a 30 year lethal bid for independence in Turkey. The creation of the border force would enable a "Kurdish Corridor" posing a threat to Turkey's Southern border. The US has supported the YPG, providing material support in the form of weapons as well as aerial support during ground operations to combat ISIS viewing it as one of the most militarily capable organisations on the ground.

Turkey had hoped that once Raqqa had been captured from ISIS, the US would reduce material support to the Kurds. The US has instead sought to empower the Kurds in the North and North East of the country, to ensure no return of ISIS but also likely in a bid to cement the opposition's place at the negotiating table in Geneva with some sort of coherent military force.

Operations have reportedly begun with more than 36 artillery rounds fired into Afrin in an effort to dislodge the Kurdish militias. Erdogan warned that preparations to move Turkish troops, artillery and vehicles to the border are complete and an operation is imminent. The operation would likely focus on the 60 mile stretch between Afrin and Manbij. However, without Russian support in terms of aerial assistance the ground operation, reportedly to be supported by opposition forces, may prove bloody.

Turkey previously staged Operation Euphrates Shield, an 8 month operation which ended in March 2017 which sought to eradicate ISIS and dislodge Kurdish forces between Azaz to Jarablus. The operation was met with protests within Turkey, but also in European nations such as Germany as Kurds protested against the Turkish crackdown in both Turkey and Syria.



NORTH AFRICA: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 17 JAN 2018

(1) TRIPOLI

Mitiga airport remains closed following clashes that killed 20, injured 68 and caused damage to several aircraft. 16 Jan 18.

(2) TRIPOLI

360 migrants were rescued in two operations off the coast near Tripoli and at Zuwara. 17 Jan 18.

(3) SOUTHERN LIBYA

Gunmen kidnapped three humanitarian workers working for the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). 15 Jan 18.



(4) TURKEY

The Turkish Embassy in Tripoli was forced to investigate claims that a ship leaving Turkey intended to ship explosives to Libya. 12 Jan 18.

(5) OIL

Algerian Sonatrach and the Libyan National Oil Corporation will work together to exploit a number of oilfields on the border of the two nations. 17 Jan 18.

(6) OIL

An oil facilities manager has been released following abduction for non-payment to forces loyal to Khalifa Haftar. 17 Jan 18.

ASSESSMENT: (1) The former military air base is now the capitals only functioning international airport. Flights have been rerouted to Misrata in the West following an attack by militias associated with Brigade 33 of Tajura likely in a bid to free militiamen held in a detention center at the site. **(2)** Continued migrant rescues dominate headlines in Libya in 2018, including the death of 100 feared drowned on 10 Jan 18. However, Italy announced that 19,000 migrants had been returned to their country of origin under a voluntary returnee program. Italy has allocated \$18million to combat the smuggling networks in Libya and improve conditions for refugees in detention centers amid harsh international criticism of brutality and inhumane conditions. Furthermore, Italy has pledged support to the relocation of up to 10,000 migrants trapped in Libya to European countries and Canada during 2018. **(3)** Two of the workers, of Libyan descent, were rescued during an operation led by Libyan security Forces. The third worker was released to tribal elders two days after the rescue of her two colleagues near Sabha following negotiations brokered by local tribal elders, Southern Libya. Kidnapping for ransom in Libya remains a key threat to humanitarian workers operating in the country, even those of Libyan descent. The gunmen responsible are reportedly local youths involved in criminality rather than motivated by extremist ideology. **(4)** The Tanzanian flagged vessel left the Turkish ports of Mersin and Iskenderun bound for Libya. The vessel was intercepted by Greek authorities, revealing the cargo consisting of explosives and materials used to make improvised explosive devices. The Turkish Embassy claims the ship was bound for Ethiopia not Libya but failed to comment on the nature of the cargo. **(5)** Sonatrach had halted all operations in Libya in 2014 following the chaos after the removal of Muammar Gaddafi in 2011. The agreement is a positive step, as part of a wider initiative to encourage foreign investment in Libyan oil. **(6)** Faraj al-Abdali, manager of Al-Rahlia Oil Services Company in Benghazi was detained by Battalion 106. The militia, loyal to Khalifa Haftar reportedly kidnapped Abdali for refusing to pay a significant sum from the company's revenue. Incidents such as these are frequent and actively discourage foreign investment in Libya where the threat from kidnapping and criminality remains high.

AF/PAK: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 17 JAN 2018

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

US and Afghan air forces conducted more than 455 airstrikes in December 2017. 17 Jan 18.

(2) KABUL

The UN Security Council reiterated support to the Afghan Government during a visit to Kabul 15 Jan 18..

(3) EARTHQUAKE

An earthquake measuring 5.4 on the Richter scale caused minor trembling in Kabul. 15 Jan 18.



(4) ISLAMABAD

A radical anti-US cleric has been released from prison on health grounds in a move likely to irk the US. 15 Jan 18.

(5) ISLAMABAD

More than 1,800 Pakistani clerics have issued a Fatwa denouncing the use of suicide bombs. 16 Jan 18.

(6) PAKISTAN/INDIA

4 Pakistani soldiers have been killed in a mortar attack allegedly conducted by Indian forces in Kashmir. 16 Jan 18.

COMMENT: (1) Traditionally winter hails a lull in operational tempo for both the Taliban and the coalition. However, in December 2017 the US and Afghan forces broke with tradition to launch 455 aerial attacks against Taliban and IS targets in a remarkable increase from the 65 reported strikes in December 2016. 2,000 strikes were conducted in the final quarter of 2017, almost as many as the total dropped in 2015 and 2016 combined. The increase in strikes is likely to be the direct result of a change in rules of engagement adopted by the Trump administration. (2) The UN representatives publicly praised Afghanistan's efforts to restore peace and stability to the country in the face of the Taliban insurgency. The representatives reiterated the need for meaningful negotiations between the Afghan administration and Taliban leaders and tribal groups to find a peaceful solution to the conflict. The visit, the first since 2010,, is likely to be part of wider political shaping operations prior to the Kabul Process Meeting in February to solidify efforts to achieve peace. (3) No reports of casualties as a result of the minor earthquake, whose epicenter was in Badakhshan.300 were injured two years ago during an earthquake in Afghanistan and Pakistan. (4) Sufi Muhammad, 93 led the pro-Taliban group Tehreek-e-Nafaz-e-Shariat-e-Mohammadi that assisted the Taliban in fighting the US in Afghanistan. He is also the father-in-law of Mullah Fazlullah, leader of the Pakistani Taliban. It is likely the release will further strain already tense relations between Islamabad and Washington, bolstering the US' narrative that Pakistan harbors terrorists. (5) The announcement made by a significant number of Muslim clerics across Pakistan is likely to be welcomed by the international community, particularly the US who continue to accuse Pakistan of inaction against terrorism. The Fatwa has also been endorsed by a number of anti-western clerics and supporters of the Afghan Taliban who claim suicide bombs breach the key teachings of Islam and are forbidden. Fatwas such as this have produced little reduction in suicide attacks in other nations in the Middle East. (6) The Pakistani troops were reportedly conducting routine maintenance on communication lines in Kotli, a village along the Line of Control in Kashmir Region. A mortar detonated, killing 4. Pakistani troops responded to the attack reportedly killing 3 Indian soldiers and wounding several more according to the Government of Pakistan's social media account. Tensions between the neighbours continue to escalate amid accusations from India that Pakistan facilitates terrorists transit through Kashmir into India.