

# SYRIA/IRAQ: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 24 JAN 2018

## (1) US STRIKES

The US removed 150 ISIS fighters during strikes in As Shafah. 20 Jan 18.

## (2) TURKEY

Turkey claims to have killed more than 260 Kurdish and ISIS fighters during Op OLIVE BRANCH. 23 Jan 18

## (3) SYRIA/LEBANON

15 Syrian refugees have been found frozen to death attempting to cross the mountainous border. 20 Jan 18.

## (4) EASTERN GHOUTA

A chemical attack reportedly killed 20 civilians 22 Jan 18.



## (5) RESTRUCTURING IRAQ

Baghdad hopes to secure international funding at an international conference in Kuwait in Feb 18.

## (6) BAGHDAD

Iraqi Security Forces repelled an attack involving two suicide bombers and a gunman linked with ISIS. 23 Jan 18.

## (7) OIL

BP has signed an early agreement with the Iraqi Government to resume production at Kirkuk oilfield.

**ASSESSMENT:** (1) The operation reduces the likelihood ISIS will regroup to challenge Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) holding ground in the mid-Euphrates River Valley. The strikes were conducted with assistance from the Kurdish-led SDF, contrasting with Turkey's active targeting of the US ally. (2) Turkey has resumed shelling on Afrin for the 4<sup>th</sup> day under Op OLIVE BRANCH, which aims to establish a Turkish "safe zone" approximately 19 miles within Northern Syria. The US has condemned the targeting of Kurdish factions, urging Turkey to focus on ISIS. Turkey views the Kurdish Protection Units (YPG) as terrorists linked with the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey. (3) Lebanese discovered the bodies following a storm. It is likely the group, including children, were abandoned by their smugglers in adverse weather. Lebanon hosts more than one million Syrian refugees. (4) The regime reportedly used chlorine gas against the besieged rebel held area, killing 20 civilians. The Regime is also accused of a sarin gas attack in Apr 2017 in the village of Khan Sheikhun, killing 80 civilians. Despite UN led international condemnation, Russia has continued to veto any further investigation into the incidents. The US condemned Russia, Assad's ally, for shielding the regime from international investigation for alleged chemical weapons attacks in Syria. (5) Details of the conference have not yet been made public. The UN, US and Saudi Arabia have backed the initiative as a means of showcasing the investment opportunity in Iraq post ISIS. Investors are likely to be wary of the continued security threat from an ISIS insurgency and the growing influence of Iran. (6) The attackers were intercepted approaching the North of the city, their eventual target is unknown. A second separate suicide attacker was intercepted in an agricultural area North of the city. A further attack killed 3 near al-Yusifah, South of Baghdad. The frequency of attacks and number of civilian casualties continues to undermine the perception of security since Government of Iraq announced the defeat of ISIS in late 2017. Arguably, ISIS has shifted to an insurgency focused on disrupting the capital Baghdad with political and economic cost. Baghdad must increase the number of attacks intercepted prior to the 2018 elections, likely to be heavily targeted by ISIS. (7) The initial agreement aims to increase production at the oilfield to 750,000bpd. The site currently has a capacity for 450,000bpd with production as low as 150,000bpd at present. It is likely an increase in oil production in Northern Iraq will cause a decrease in production in the South as Baghdad reduces efforts to compensate the deficit in the North.



## SYRIA/IRAQ CONTROL MAP: 24 JAN 2018

### The Fate of Syria's Kurdish Factions

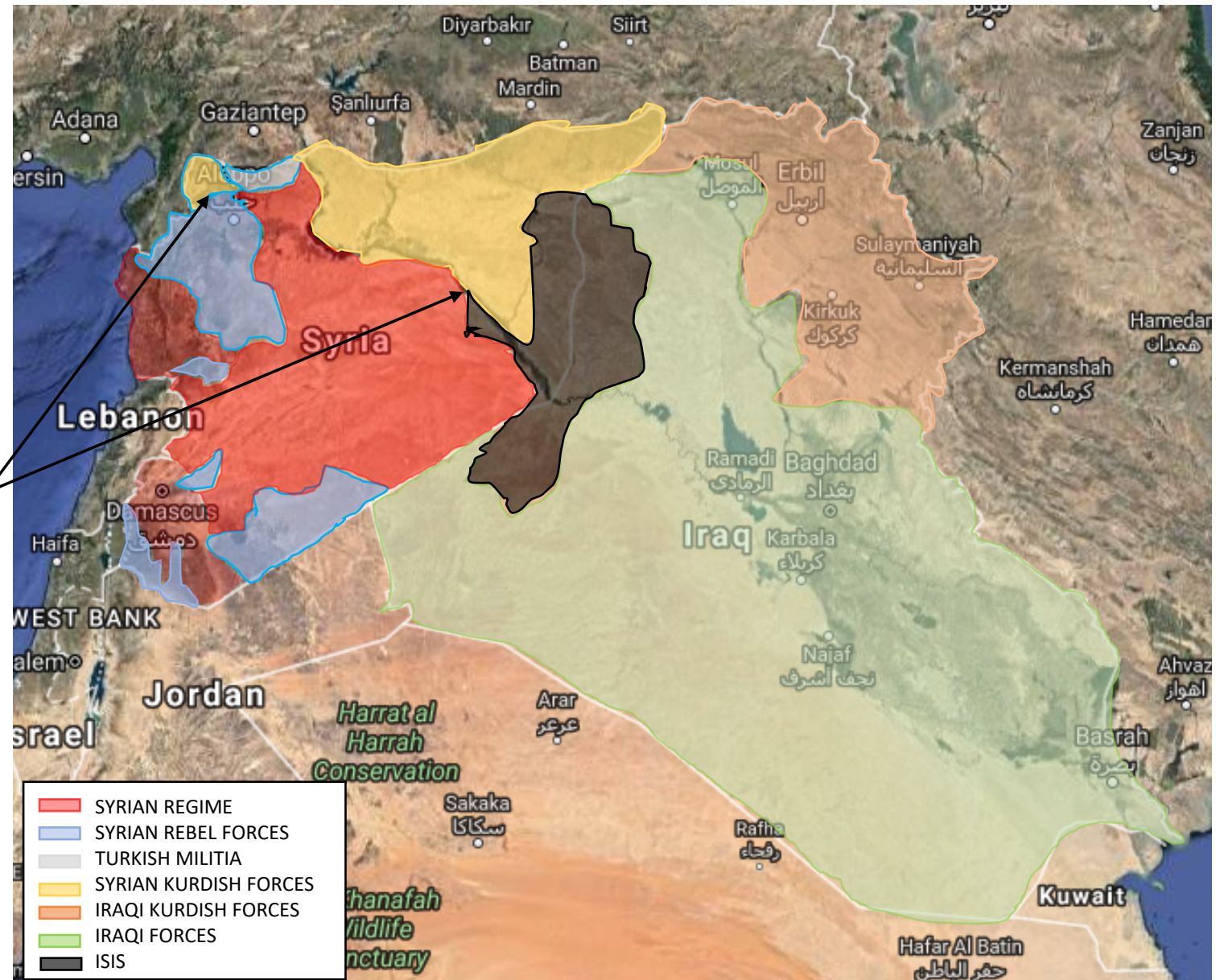
The divergence in foreign policy strategy towards the Kurds is likely to play a crucial role in the Syrian conflict in 2018. The Kurds have proved an effective ground force in dislodging ISIS from both Iraq and Syria, but as the ISIS presence dwindles so too has international favor for the Kurds. With US backing for a 30,000 strong mainly Kurdish border force along Turkey's southern flank in the face of a Turkish led military operation to ensure that very eventually does not happen, what will happen to the Kurds in 2018?

Nowhere is the competing of policies more evident than Northern Syria. Turkey continues its fourth day of shelling the predominantly Kurdish village of Afrin in an effort to dislodge "nests of terror" under Op OLIVE BRANCH. The operation aims to dislodge the Kurdish Protection Units (YPG) from a 60 mile stretch between Afrin and Manbij to secure a "safe zone" approximately 19 miles from the Turkish border.

In a sharp contrast, the US conducts air strikes targeting ISIS in the Euphrates Valley with the assistance of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). The SDF is a predominantly Kurdish led opposition group, the most effective ground force without Islamist extremist links.

What does this mean for the Kurds? In the short to medium term, it means their fate rests on the presence of the US. If the US withdrew support to the SDF in Syria it is likely they would increasingly come under not only Regime pressure from pressure from Turkey and other ethnic and religious groups within Syria.

The West cannot alienate its NATO ally Turkey by increasing pressure to cease operations in Afrin, resulting in quiet, toothless condemnation. A wedge between Turkey and the West could result in a closer relationship with Russia and Damascus. The effects of the alienation of the Kurds will undoubtedly undermine the UN led negotiations in Geneva, with the Kurds likely to pull out of talks.





# NORTH AFRICA: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 24 JAN 2018

## (1) TRIPOLI

Mitiga airport reopened following 5 days of closure after violent clashes. 20 Jan 18.

## (2) UK/MIGRANTS

UK forces have been training Libyan coastguard forces but a Cambridge University study undermines strategy. 24 Jan 18.

## (3) SHAHAT

The Mayors of 109 Libyan municipalities threatened to form a rival administration at a meeting in Shahat. 22 Jan 18.



## (4) BENGHAZI

Twin car bombs have killed 33 worshippers and security forces outside a mosque in Benghazi. 24 Jan 18.

## (5) OIL

Wintershall is to restart oil production at As Sarah oilfield following the closure in Nov 17. 22 Jan 18.

## (6) SUDAN

The African Union announced an investigation into videos reportedly showing Sudanese nationals subjected to torture in Libya. 22 Jan 18.

**ASSESSMENT:** (1) International flights to the airport had been redirected to the eastern city of Misrata for 5 days following heavy clashes as militias sought to free prisoners from a prison located within the airport, the attacks resulted in 21 deaths and 69 injuries. Incidents such as these show the fragile security situation surrounding key infrastructure in Libya which may dissuade foreign investment and casts doubt over the security situation prior to the Libyan elections. (2) The UK aims to intercept refugees at sea, targeting smuggler “kingpins” to remove the facilitators of the often brutal trade. A study conducted by the University of Cambridge suggests this strategy is doomed to fail, based on intelligence studies the university has found that there are no central kingpins to target. The author, Dr. Paolo Campana suggests targeting the symptoms of migration across the region would result in greater success but conversely would likely be the politically most difficult. The EU has extended the mandate for the naval operations until Dec 18. (3) At the first forum of municipalities of Libya, 109 mayors demanded that UN Special Envoy Ghassan Salame speed up the political process to stabilize Libyan politics. It is likely the threat is political rhetoric designed to pressure Salame into proposing measures at the next meeting of the municipalities in Tripoli. (4) A further 50 were wounded during the attacks. The attack involved an initial explosion targeting worshippers in central Al Salmani district. A secondary device was detonated 15 minutes later, targeting security and emergency services attending the scene. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack. The city has been host to several explosions targeting mosques. The city is controlled by forces loyal to General Khalifa Haftar who continue to battle with Islamist groups for control of Eastern Libya. (5) The German oil company Wintershall was forced to close the site following pressure from local communities to employ more local workers and other conditions. The Libyan National Oil Corporation denounced the decision to close the site as a breach of contract, costing the oil economy \$281 million. (6) The shocking videos were released 3 days ago on social media platforms and have been circulated by activists pleading for Sudanese nationals, along with international humanitarian organisations, have demanded a probe into the alleged human rights abuses.

## AF/PAK: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 24 JAN 2018

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

Increased air support arrives in Afghanistan to increase pressure on Taliban revenue streams in 2018. 24 Jan 18.

### (2) KABUL

22 killed during a Taliban attack on the luxury Intercontinental hotel in Kabul. 20 Jan 18.

### (3) JALALABAD

Gunmen, likely linked to ISIS, stormed the offices of Save the Children, killing 2 and injuring 12. 24 Jan 18.



### (4) DAPA MAMOZAI

US strikes reportedly killed two members of the Haqqani Network in the Federally Administered Tribal Areas. 24 Jan 18.

### (5) QUETTA

Two polio vaccinators killed during vaccination drive in Quetta 22 Jan 18.

### (6) ISLAMABAD

The sanctions monitoring team of the UN Security Council arrived in Islamabad to check progress being made against Jamaat-ud-Dawa 24 Jan 18.

**COMMENT: (1)** An additional squadron of A-10 Thunderbolt II ground attack aircraft arrived in Kandahar Airfield 19 Jan 18. The Squadron will join the increased targeting effort against Taliban fighters, revenue sources and logistics nodes. Since Nov 17, more than 30 strikes have targeted Taliban narcotics facilities resulting in a loss of more than \$20 million in revenue. **(2)** 6 Taliban gunmen stormed the Intercontinental Hotel, dressed in military uniforms resulting in a 14 hour battle. 14 foreigners, including 2 Americans were killed in the attack. Security at the hotel was provided by a private security company who had won the contract just three weeks prior. The attack demonstrates the instability in Kabul, following last year's attacks targeting a cultural center and the bombing of the German Embassy in May, which combined killed more than 191 people. Kabul lays the blame with the Haqqani Network, likely to increase US rhetoric against Islamabad. **(3)** At least 3 gunmen stormed the offices in Jalalabad at 09.10 local time after a suicide bomber detonated at the entrance of the site. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack, with both ISIS and the Taliban active in the area. It is likely ISIS will claim responsibility in the coming days, the Taliban have issued statements denying responsibility on Twitter. Save the Children operates 6 sites across the country, reaching more than 70,000 children in urgent need of care. Aid agencies continue to be targeted by insurgent groups, often accused of spying. **(4)** Gunman killed a mother-daughter vaccination team near Quetta while they administered drops to children. Polio drives reduced the number of reported cases to 8 in 2017, similarly attacks on vaccinators decreased causing security to be less vigilant. Islamist extremist groups believe the vaccinations are harmful and the vaccinators may be spies, though such attitudes have reduced in recent years. **(5)** It is unclear if the strikes relate to the terror attack at the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul on 20 Jan 18. Two missiles targeted a house belonging to Ahsan Khorai and Nasir Mehmood, members of the Taliban affiliated Haqqani Network. US strikes in the mountainous regions of Pakistan peaked in 2010 but have gradually increased in 2017/18 as Trump takes an increasingly hardline against Islamabad for doing little to stop terrorism within its borders. **(6)** The UNSC sanctions team will check the progress made in implementing sanctions against prescribed terrorist organisations, including Jamaat-ud-Dawa. Pakistan is accused of failing to target terrorist groups within its border who project attacks in Afghanistan, likely to increase in light of the Kabul attack.