

SYRIA/IRAQ: WEEKLY SITREP 03 JAN 2018

(1) OP INHERENT RESOLVE

US conducted 47 strikes against ISIS in Eastern Syria since 22 Dec 17.

(2) IDLIB

Regime airstrikes kill 9 as violence escalates in Idlib. 31 Dec 17.

(3) REGIME RESHUFFLE

A Regime reshuffle replaced the ministers for Defence, Information and Industry. 01 Jan 18.

(4) EASTERN GHOUTA

Regime air strikes in defense of Harasta Base kill 34. Meanwhile, medical evacuation complete. 01 Jan 18.



(5) YAZIDI REVENGE ATTACKS

Reports claim up to 70 Arab civilians have been killed by Yazidi armed forces 01 Jan 18.

(6) KRG/BAGHDAD

Iraqi President to meet with senior Kurdish Officials next week to resolve rising tensions. 02 Jan 18.

(7) BAGHDAD

Three separate bombs wound 3 Iraqi Security Forces personnel in the capital 02 Jan 18.

(8) OIL

Iraq's Southern oil exports reached a record 3.535bpd in Dec 17.

ASSESSMENT: (1) The US conducted 47 strikes against ISIS in Eastern Syria since 22 Dec 17. While pressure on ISIS is crucial, the US must consider how it will support opposition forces clashing with Regime forces in Idlib Province as the war migrates West. Idlib is a complex network of extremist and moderate opposition forces presenting a challenge for the US who must not directly engage the Regime but also ensure material support does not end up in the hands of extremists. The US may instead prioritise holding ground in the East to afford the opposition a seat at the negotiating table. (2) The Regime and its allies have refocused efforts in Idlib, targeting extremist group Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham and opposition forces. The increase in violence has displaced more than 6,500 civilians towards the Turkish border likely to spur a greater Turkish presence in Idlib likely to bolster the Regime. (3) It is unclear why Assad would reshuffle his government at a time of Regime strength. Gen Ali Ayoub, former Chief of the General Staff, is the new Defence Minister, replacing Jassem al-Freij. Ayoub is an Alawite and an experienced military commander with strong ties with the Iranian Revolutionary Guard. (4) Human rights groups report 35 civilian deaths, and up to 29 Regime deaths as the Regime sought to counter opposition gains which surrounded Harasta military site. Opposition forces attempted to seize the base but have been met with heavy aerial strikes. (5) Yazidi survivors accuse Arab neighbours of assisting ISIS in the kidnapping, killing and enslavement of up to 12,000 Yazidis in 2014. The issue is symptomatic of a lack of faith in Iraq's criminal justice system as almost half of the Yazidi women enslaved remain missing, and threatens to exacerbate the deep ethnic and religious divides. (6) The Iraqi President has urged KRG Prime Minister Nechirvan Barzani and Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi to meet next week to resolve disputes over border control and oil exports. The KRG has shown flexibility which may facilitate de-escalation if Baghdad softens its characteristically staunch opposition to concessions. (7) The attacks are likely to have been conducted by ISIS who have increased attacks against the capital since losing much of their caliphate in 2017. The attacks took place in a busy market North of the capital, a military patrol east of the capital and in Western Baghdad highlighting the freedom of movement allowing ISIS to conduct attacks across the capital. (8) The record highs noted in the South are a result of Iraq's attempts to offset the halt in oil from the Kirkuk oilfields seized in mid-October 17. Production will continue to increase until resolution is reached in Kirkuk

SYRIA/IRAQ CONTROL MAP: 03 JAN 2018

IDLIB: A QUAGMIRE FOR THE US

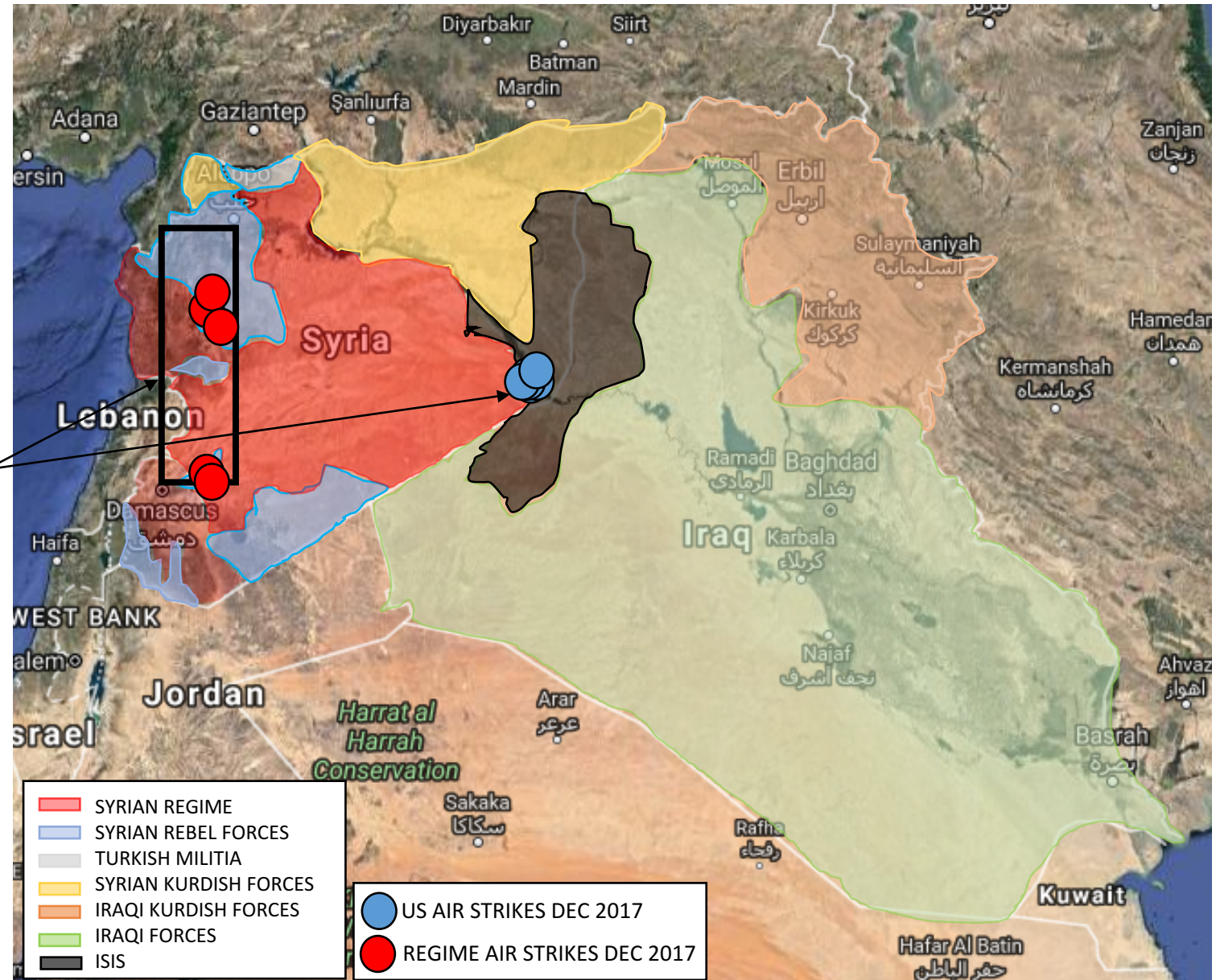
The strategic direction of the Syrian conflict has moved West to Idlib Province in North Western Syria since early Dec 2017. Despite its status as a de-escalation zone, military operations have intensified with mounting opposition and civilian casualties. Human rights groups estimate 6,500 civilians have been displaced since Dec 17 as a result of the escalation in violence.

Regime operations focus South East of Idlib on the border with Hama. Since Aleppo was recaptured in 2016, the Regime will prioritise control of the Highway connecting Damascus to Aleppo, a vital strategic and economic asset that would create an artery for military and trade logistics ensuring long term control.

Idlib represents one of the final bastions of revolution but is also host to extremist faction Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS, formerly al-Qaeda affiliated al Nusra Front). HTS offers the Regime, Russia and Iran legitimacy under a counter-terrorism campaign, which secondarily aims to dislodge the moderate opposition forces whom the Regime does not distinguish from terrorists.

The US faces a difficult situation in Idlib where it must finely balance support to opposition forces while countering extremism and avoid engaging with the Regime. It is unlikely the US will conduct aerial strikes in support of the opposition to the same degree as they did in Deir Azzor under Op INHERENT RESOLVE, whose ambit is limited to countering ISIS. ISIS, a mutual target for both opposition and the Regime, allowed vital air support to assist opposition ground forces but in Idlib the US cannot risk targeting Regime forces operating as part of a counter terrorism campaign against HTS.

It is likely the US will offer material support to the opposition in Idlib, likely to be heavily criticized by the Regime, Russia and Iran as funding extremists. The opposition will likely lose ground in the face of a concerted Regime campaign, shaping 2018 as a year for utmost importance for negotiation in Geneva and humanitarian effort.



NORTH AFRICA: WEEKLY SITREP 03 JAN 2018

(1) SABRATHA
Following the removal of Ahmed Dabbashi from Sabratha, migrant numbers have significantly fallen in the city. 01 Jan 18.

(2) MIGRANT FIGURES DROP
Italian authorities report 119,000 migrants arrived in Italy in 2017. 01 Jan 18.

(3) 19,370 MIGRANTS RETURNED
The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) returned 19,370 migrants to their country of origin. 02 Jan 18.



(4) NATIONAL COMMISSION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS IN LIBYA
NCHRL reported 433 people had been killed in Libya in 2017. 02 Jan 18.

(5) OP DIGNITY
Gen Khalifa Haftar's Op DIGNITY will support upcoming General Elections in Libya 18. 02 Jan 18.

(6) AS SIDR
A feeder pipeline was destroyed by an explosion on 26 Dec 17.

ASSESSMENT: (1) Clashes between rival militias in Sabratha in late 2017 drove warlord and migrant smuggler Dabbashi out of the city, reducing the number of migrants using Sabratha as a node to travel to Europe. The skirmishes were sparked by the murder of Dabbashi's cousin in Sep 17, allowing the anti-ISIS Fighting Room to seize control and reroute migrants to detention centers elsewhere. The group have demanded support from Tripoli to hold the city as Dabbashi remains a threat to the city, regularly posting threats on social media. (2) The Italian Government claimed the reduction in migrants from 181,000 in 2016 to 119,000 in 2017 was due to the increased efforts from Libyan authorities such as the Libyan Coastguard in the latter half of 2017. The tactics used by the Libyan authorities have been heavily criticized by the international community. Reports of violence, bribery, sexual exploitation and slave auctions taint the . (3) The IOM and Libyan authorities have assisted over 19,000 migrants return to 27 African nations and several Asian countries in 2017. The repatriation program is an important element of the effort to reduce migrant numbers travelling to Europe but also an important mechanism to reduce the pressure on failing detention centers in Libya where conditions remain an issue. (4) The report claims 201 extrajudicial killings took place in Benghazi, Tripoli and al-Zawiya among others. 157 civilians were killed by IEDs in Benghazi, Sirte and Derna. 186 Kidnappings were also reported across the country where the Rule of Law has been seriously undermined. Of note, the high number of migrant deaths were not included in the report which would have made a significant increase in the overall death toll. (5) A spokesman for Khalifa, Ahmed al-Mismari announced that the Libyan National Army welcomes the planned General Elections for which registration has already begun. The announcement contrasts sharply with the opposition registration efforts faced in Eastern Libya in late 2017. the LNA will reportedly provide security to polling stations, raising serious concerns that freedom and fairness will be impossible. It is likely the elections will require significant international support in the form of monitoring to ensure any result is deemed legitimate. (6) Waha Oil, A Libyan Oil Company, was forced to cease pumping crude to Libya's largest oil terminal, As Sidr, following the explosion causing oil prices to surge as production fell by up to 100,000bpd. The effects of the explosion are unlikely to be felt until mid January due to high levels of stock, meanwhile repairs are reported almost complete. While no further details is known regarding the explosion, the area was linked to ISIS until 2016.

AF/PAK: WEEKLY SITREP 03 JAN 2018

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

1 US soldier killed in action in Nangarhar. 01 Jan 18.

(2) NANGARHAR

Suicide attack kills 15 civilians at a funeral in Jalalabad. 31 Dec 17.

(3) KABUL

An ISIS suicide attack on a Shia cultural center killed 41. 28 Dec 17.

(4) ECONOMY

The Finance Ministry announced annual national growth of 2.6% in 2017, surpassing targets. 01 Jan 18.



(5) PAKISTAN/US

US threatened to withhold \$255million in aid to Pakistan in 2018

(6) ISLAMABAD

Ousted Pakistani Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif appeared at an accountability court 3 Jan 18.

(7) QUETTA

5 Pakistani security forces among 12 injured during an attack on a police checkpoint in Quetta. 02 Jan 18.

COMMENT: (1) The area has been particularly deadly in 2017, of 15 US fatalities in 2017, 8 were in Nangarhar and 7 were a result of enemy fire. It is unclear if ISIS or the Taliban are responsible, both are prominent in the hostile Province. (2) The suicide attack targeted the funeral of a local government official, killing 15 and wounding 14. No group has claimed responsibility. The deteriorating security situation has also resulted in high incidents of criminality and kidnapping, causing school closures and disruption to aid and medical provisions. (3) 80 Shia civilians were injured during the attack consisting of 3 explosions at a lecture marking the 38th anniversary of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Secondary explosions targeted emergency responders. The 7th suicide attack in the capital conducted by ISIS since Oct 17, security in the capital is deteriorating as ISIS increasingly competes with the Taliban. As Shia fatalities mount it may spur Iran to increase their presence, complicating the strategic battlespace for the coalition. (4) The growth is encouraging but grossly inadequate to counter the fiscal effect of the dramatic reduction in international funding expected in 2020. The Afghan national budget equates to \$5.1bn for 2018 with 55% from international aid. With national infrastructure and the war against terrorism dependent on international aid it is unlikely the international community will significantly reduce aid as planned. With a wealth of untouched natural resources, investment in this sector may bolster the tentative economy but will require improved security and stability. (5) US Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley announced the withdrawal of \$255 million of US aid as a result of the “double game” being played by Pakistan as the US continues to accuse Pakistan of harbouring terrorists. The tensions may build between the uneasy allies, but it is unlikely Pakistan will dramatically alter its stance on terrorism in Afghanistan continuing on a course of self preservation with an internal battle against terrorism on the Afghan border. (6) Sharif, his daughter and her husband face multiple corruption charges following removal from office 28 Jul 17. The court will make a decision within 6 months. Pakistan remains 116th of 176 countries according to the Corruption Perceptions Index 2016, the prominent case is important for improving this perception and attracting foreign investment and aid. (7) Two attackers were killed by security forces in the area close to the 17 Dec 17 attack on a Christian church which killed 9 and injured 50, claimed by ISIS Khorasan. The Pakistan Taliban claimed responsibility for the latest attack, demonstrating the dangerous presence of the rival groups likely to increase sectarian attacks and attacks against security targets in 2018. Pakistan will continue to focus on its internal issue with terrorism.