

SYRIA/IRAQ: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 14 FEB 2018

(1) US STRIKES KILL RUSSIANS

6 Russian nationals have been killed in Deir Azzor on 7 Feb 18.

(2) FRANCE THREATENS ACTION

President Macron warned France would authorise strikes in Syria if chemical weapons were used against civilians. 08 Feb 18.

(3) ISRAELI STRIKES

Israel launched a significant series of strikes against 12 Syrian following the loss of an Israeli F-16 under Syrian fire. 09 Feb 18.



(4) KUWAIT TO GIVE \$2BN

Kuwait announced it will give \$2bn to Iraq in loans and investments. 10 Feb 18.

(5) NATO TRAINING FORCE

Jens Stoltenberg announced that an expanded NATO training force in Iraq could support stabilisation efforts amidst the US reduction in troops. 11 Feb 18.

(6) SHIA CALLS FOR US WITHDRAWAL

Shia militias and Iraqi media outlets are increasingly issuing threats, calling for a US withdrawal from Iraq. 14 Feb 18.

ASSESSMENT: (1) The US acted in self defence, claiming pro-regime forces, including the Russian nationals, attacked US backed Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Russia has not commented on the deaths, likely due to the status of the nationals as mercenaries rather than Russian troops. The incident is a significant clash between the two competing global powers in what is a complex and crowded battle space, it is likely Russia and the US will increasingly polarize support East (US focus) and West (Russian focus) of Syria. (2) President Macron warned France was prepared to strike the sites in which chemical weapons were being stored or launched from, but caveated the threat by stating it had yet to see proof that the Regime has used such weapons. Russia and the Regime also claim that opposition forces use chemical weapons, creating a difficult issue for western partners. (3) Israeli F-16 jets staged strikes against Regime sites linked to Iranian forces in retaliation for the breach of its border by the Iranian drone. During the strikes, Syrian air defence shot down an Israeli jet which crashed in Northern Israel. The incident marks a significant escalation in the tensions between Israel, Syria and Iran. Israel opposes Iran's growing influence in Syria, posing a direct threat to Israel through its proxy Lebanese Hezbollah. Iran will prioritize an on-going presence in Syria above retaliation which would invoke a further Israeli attack. (4) Kuwait announced the generous loan and investment package in the wake of the Kuwait Conference. Iraq is seeking \$88.2bn in international investment to rebuild the country. (5) NATO echoed calls for increased support from allies to ensure stabilisation in Iraq continues following the military defeat of ISIS in Dec 17. It is anticipated that NATO will begin discussing plans to enhance the NATO presence in Iraq in a training and capacity building role. No details of the size of the deployment or investment have been released. NATO will be keen to prove its relevance following pre-election comments from US President Trump that the organisations is "obsolete." (6) Increasingly Shia militias, including those incorporated into Iraqi Security Forces, have issued threats to US forces remaining in Iraq since the defeat of ISIS. While unlikely the threats will amount to direct action against US forces as this would provide reason for US forces to remain and retaliate, it does not bode well for a increased NATO presence or Western NGOs.

SYRIA/IRAQ INDEPTH: 14 FEB 2018

THE KUWAIT INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE FOR THE RECONSTRUCTION OF IRAQ

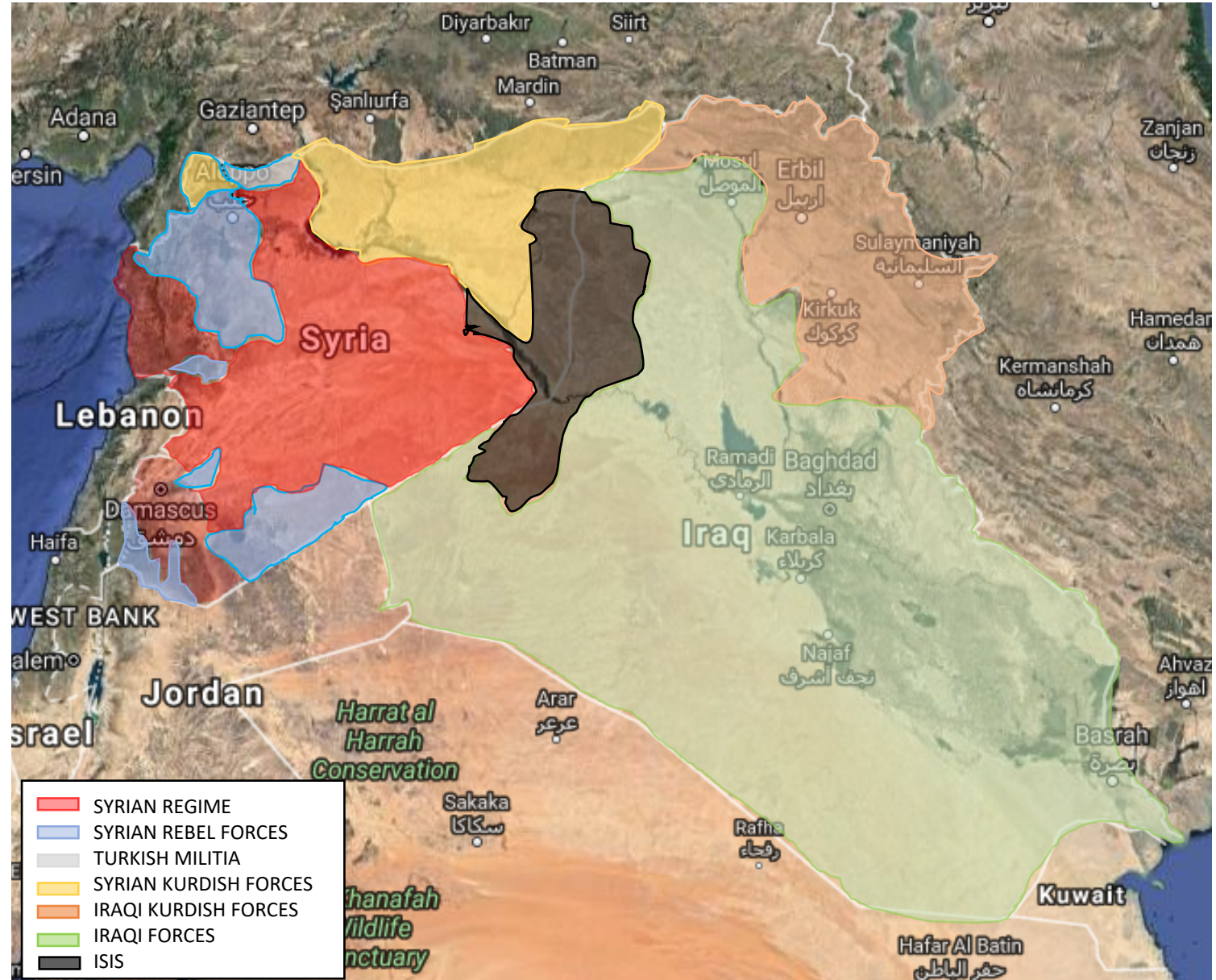
The Conference gathered together world leaders, senior politicians and key stake holders to encourage international investment in Iraq to rebuild the country post-ISIS. Iraq aims to secure \$88.2bn in investment and loans to rebuild the country following almost 17 years on consecutive conflicts.

The host, Kuwait, announced during the event that it would invest \$1bn and loan a further \$1bn in the interest of supporting stability in the region. The investment marks a significant thaw in relations following the invasion of Kuwait on 2 Aug 1990, less than a generation ago. Turkey pledged \$5bn in loans and investments while Qatar announced \$1 billion in a similar package. Saudi Arabia also pledged \$1bn in investment and \$500 million to support Iraqi exports.

The US is to extend a \$3bn line of credit to Iraq, and urged coalition partners to take an active role in investing in the rebuilding of the nation devastated by ISIS. Canada pledged \$12 million to support reconstruction projects.

Iran has also pledged to provide investment to Iraq, irking Arab and Western investors who oppose the growing hold Iran has on both Iraq and Syria. Iran has yet to announce the specific details of a monetary package, likely waiting to assess the wider contributions made.

Iraq currently ranks 166th of 176 countries in the corruption index conducted by Transparency International. It is likely that given the amount of investment required and growing Iranian involvement within Baghdad institutions, Arab and Western investors will carefully review the progress on projects. With a general election pending in 2018, Iraq must improve the perception of institutional corruption to secure the \$88.2bn in funding it seeks. 2018 could mark a turning point in Iraq's recent history, improving stability could provide attractive investment opportunity but it will require international state investment to encourage commercial entities to engage the inherent risks still prevalent in Iraq.



NORTH AFRICA: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 14 FEB 2018

(1) UN WARNING

UN reports indicate political settlement is unlikely in the short to medium term despite intensive efforts. 13 Feb 18

(2) LIBYA LOSES UN VOTE

Libya has lost the right to vote for the third time due to unpaid dues to the UN. 14 Feb 18.

(3) MITIGA AIRPORT

A rocket shell hit Mitiga International Airport causing disruption to flights. 13 Feb 18



(4) BENGHAZI BOMBING

Two people have been killed as a result of two bombs at a Mosque during Friday prayers. 08 Feb 18..

(5) MIGRANT SMUGGLING

Experts revealed most armed groups conducted smuggling activities in Libya have links to the country's official security institutions. 08 Feb 18.

(6) SIRTE

IS conducted a suicide car bomb attack against an OP DIIGNITY site in Eastern Sirte, wounding 3. 10 Feb 18.

ASSESSMENT: (1) A panel of UN experts delivered the damning report to the UN Security Council, claiming political settlement given the complex and conflicted array of military and political entities was “out of reach.” The UN claims efforts to stabilize the country have reached a stalemate and blame the wider regional instability for the situation in Libya. Corruption, lack of governance, lack of security and public services have led to a situation where the population do not trust the political institutions, undermining the prospect of general elections in 2018. (2) Libya has been suspended from voting in the organization due to outstanding arrears amounting to more than \$6 million. The incident highlights Libya as a failed state whose political capability both internally and internationally continue to suffer since the fall of Gaddafi in 2011. (3) The shell fell on the runway, causing limited damage. Flights were temporarily suspended and redirected to Misrata airport. No one has claimed responsibility for the attack which follows heavy clashes at the site between the Special Deterrence Forces and Brigade 33. (4) Media reports claim 2 have been killed with a further 55 wounded. Benghazi has increasingly hosted attacks such as these producing mass civilian casualties. General Khalifa Haftar took control of the city in 2017, his military, the Libyan National Army, continue to be the focus of attacks in the city. It is likely the LNA will seek to tighten their grip imposing stricter military control of the city. The attack follows a double car bombing which killed 33 on 23 Jan 18. (5) The UN report revealed the assessment to the UN Security Council, claiming it is a driving factor behind the relative impunity which the smuggling operations enjoy. Interviews with former migrants revealed that upon being detained by the Special Deterrence Force affiliated with the internationally recognized government they were then handed over to smuggling groups. The UN is likely to investigate the reports of collusion between government controlled institutions and illegal smuggling networks. (6) The attack took place 90km East of Sirte, the captured stronghold of IS forces in Libya. The resident Al-Bonyan Al-Marsous Operation Room has issued a warning for forces to be on high alert and reports increased enemy forces in the surrounding area, likely to be IS. IS was expelled from Sirte but continues to pose a significant threat having regrouped in small numbers in Southern and Central Libya. It is likely IS will continue to conduct opportune asymmetric attacks against military targets in Sirte to undermine their presence.

AF/PAK: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 14 FEB 2018

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

The Afghan Air Force now conducts double the number of sorties the US does in Afghanistan. 08 Feb 18.

(2) NATO

NATO announced an expansion of troop numbers from 13,000 to 16,000 in 2018 focusing on training Iraqi Security Forces. 13 Feb 18

(3) KABUL CONFERENCE

Senior military leaders from Central and South Asia and the US met to discuss security in the Region. 14 Feb 18.



(4) UK STRIKES IN PAKISTAN

Two separate US strikes targeted the Taliban and Haqqani Network in Pakistan. 09 Feb 18

(5) TEHRİK-E-TALIBAN PAKISTAN

The group confirmed the death of their Deputy Commander, Khalid Mehsud during a US drone strike. 12 Feb 18.

(6) US ACCUSATIONS CONTINUE

Director of US National Intelligence, Dan Coats, claims Pakistan is not fully cooperating with the US to combat terrorism emanating from its territory. 13 Feb 18

COMMENT: (1) The Afghan Air Force (AAF) conducted an average of 40 sorties per week targeting the Taliban in 2017, making the Afghan led sorties twice that of the US in the same period. It is anticipated the number of sorties will increase in 2018 as the AAF recruits further pilots and purchases more aircraft. The AAF announced it would receive UH-60 Blackhawks in May 18. The increased pressure on the Taliban and its revenue streams are likely to reduce the operational capability of the militant group, but must be used in concert with ground forces to secure territory. The air support will have little impact on deteriorating security within Kabul. **(2)** Key themes at the conference included the training and funding of Afghan National Security Force (ANSF) and the fact that the Taliban did not achieve any of their publicly stated battlefield goals. The meeting appeared positive, claiming the "Taliban cannot win" but failed to highlight the realistic prospect that neither can the ANSF without US support. Crucially, Pakistan was included in the event alongside US forces, demonstrating they are considered pivotal in the war against the Taliban. **(3)** **(4)** The US strikes targeted a militant compound in Northern Waziristan thought to house the Haqqani Network's local commander Qudrat Ullah, although it is unclear if he was present at the time. While Pakistan opposes US strikes within its borders, it is likely Pakistan's approach may soften to encourage a lift on the suspension of US security aid. The strikes follow several meetings between Pakistani and Afghan officials aimed at highlighting the terrorist activities emanating from Pakistan which threaten Afghan stability. **(5)** TTP confirmed the death of Deputy Commander, Khalid Mehsud as a result of a US drone attack in Northern Waziristan on the Afghan border with Pakistan. There remains confusion regarding the exact location of the strike. The death of Mehsud weakens TTP, compounding the effect of the Pakistani military operations which have driven them from several of their strongholds in Pakistan. Mehsud was an influential figure within TTP, demonstrated through his defiance of leader Mullah Fazlullah following the death of former TTP commander Hakimullah Mehsud. It is likely the loss of a capable, experienced commander will reduce operational tempo for TTP in the short to medium term. The group were responsible for the Dec 17 attack against a Pakistani college in Peshawar, killing 9 civilians. **(6)** Coats acknowledged recent Pakistani military efforts but claimed these were for show to reflect limited cooperation and did not signify an increase in pressure on militant groups.