

SYRIA/IRAQ: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 21 FEB 2018

(1) TURKEY/SYRIA

Turkish forces fired on pro-regime forces in the Kurdish enclave of Afrin. 20 Feb 18

(2) EASTERN GHOUTA

3 days of intense Regime bombing has killed more than 250 civilians in the rebel enclave, according to humanitarian groups. 21 Feb 18.

(3) ISRAEL/IRAN

Tensions between Iran and Israel continue to rise since last week's clashes as an Iranian drone entered Israeli air space. 21 Feb 18.



(4) FOLLOW UP: KUWAIT CONFERENCE

Iraq will hold a meeting in March to bring together nations who pledged support to rebuilding the country post-ISIS. 21 Feb 18

(5) ISIS ATTACK SHIA MILITIAS

ISIS conducted a deadly attack against a group of Shia militias near Hawija, killing 27 on 18 Feb 18.

(6) IRAQ/LEBANON

The President of Lebanon visited Baghdad for the first time, discussing ISIS and the reconstruction of Iraq. 20 Feb 18

ASSESSMENT: (1) Syrian state television showed Shia pro-regime forces entering Afrin to aid the Kurdish militias facing OP OLIVE BRANCH. Turkey conducted strikes against the pro-regime forces, announcing it had pushed “pro-regime, terrorist groups” away from the border. The complex battlespace, where international powers clash for influence, continues to get ever more complicated. The Regime and Kurds maintain an uneasy relationship of economic and military benefit, which could lead to political benefit for the regime post-conflict. Iran likely spearheaded the pro-regime forces who aided the Kurds. (2) Humanitarian organisations and the UN have called for a halt to the bombardment of Eastern Ghouta, the worst bombardment since 2013. Damascus denies the reports, claiming it conducted “precision strikes” targeting only sites attributed to rebel activity. Assad is likely intensifying pressure on Eastern Ghouta to retake the final rebel enclave in Southern Syria, at a very high human cost. (3) Last week's incursion by an Iranian drone incited a backlash from Israel which was unprecedented. Israel openly targeted Iranian military sites near Damascus, while Syrian forces shot down an Israeli aircraft – the first to be shot down since 1982. However, social unrest in Iran =, driven by costly foreign policy initiatives in Syria and Iraq ill likely prevent Tehran from openly escalating violence in a bid to maintain political consensus. (4) Baghdad noted that the Kuwait Conference was not the final step, but the first step in attracting international investment to Iraq indicating a series of meetings and conferences in 2018. Baghdad praised the conference, stating the number of companies in attendance was much greater than expected and secured more than \$30bn for Iraq – considerably short of the \$88.2bn Iraq had hoped for. (5) The attack was reportedly conducted by sleeper cells as ISIS tactics morph from the ground force holding territory we saw in 2014 to an insurgent group focused on undermining security in 2018. ISIS will likely increasingly use surprise attacks using suicide bombs against security forces operating in Sunni areas were they retain freedom of movement. (6) Lebanese banks and commercial entities have made clear their interest in investment in Iraq in 2018, it is likely the state visit by President Aoun is an extension of this interest which will be expressed at the 6 Apr 18 Paris meeting, where Lebanon's economy and investment opportunities will be discussed.

SYRIA/IRAQ INDEPTH: 21 FEB 2018

Eastern Ghouta: The Human Cost of Conflict in Syria

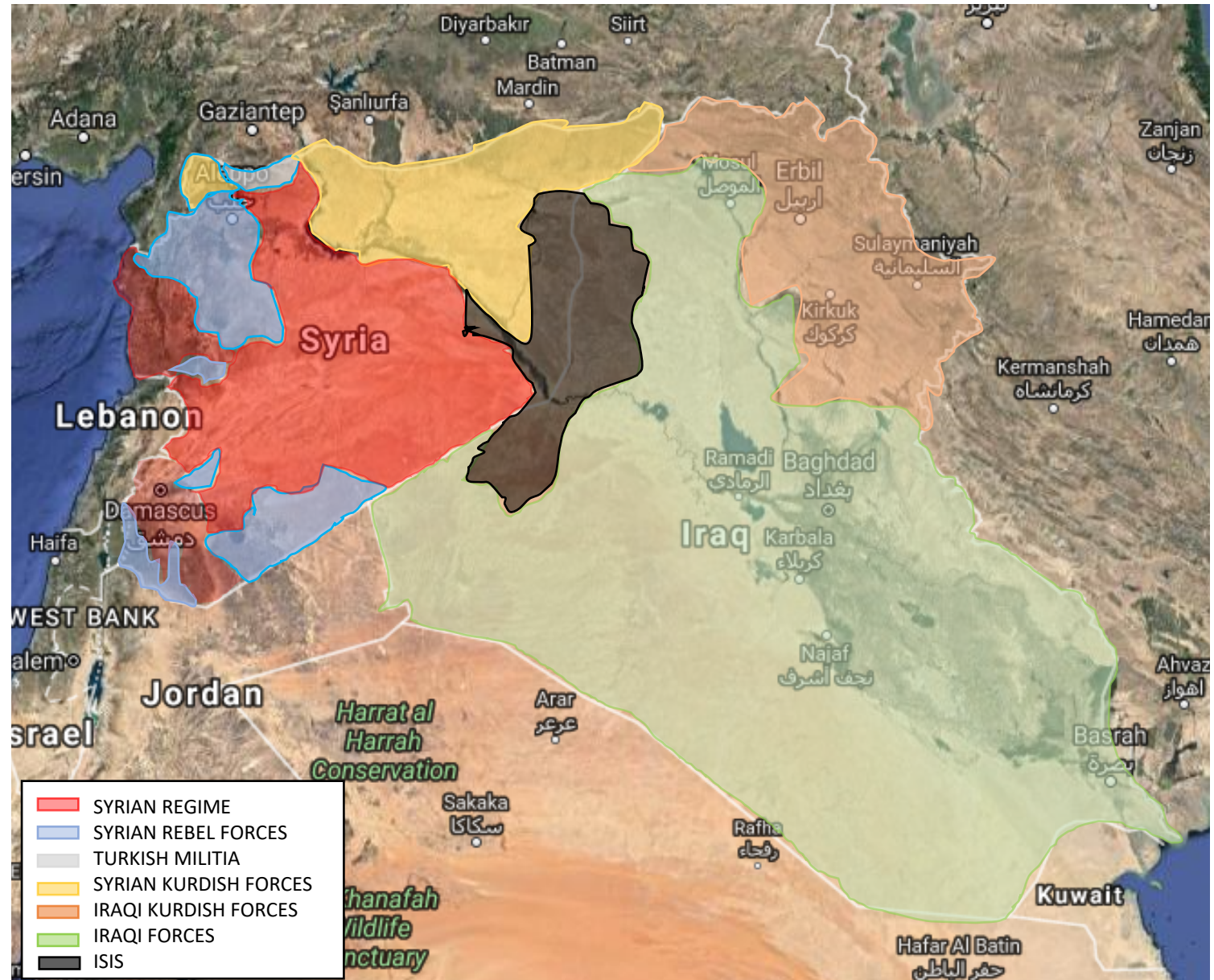
Following three days of intensive bombing by the Syrian Regime, the death tolls has reached a reported 250 and continues to rise. Human rights groups report up to 50 children are among the dead.

The UN has condemned the recent wave of violence, the worst since 2013, calling for a ceasefire to allow aid to reach the besieged area. The UN has made several unsuccessful pleas to the Regime for access to the area, host to the country's worst humanitarian crisis. Only one convoy has been granted access since Nov 2017 where bread costs an average of 22 times the national average.

Activists report the Regime targeted several hospitals across numerous villages in the Eastern Ghouta area, rendering many inoperable. It is difficult to confirm if the sites were deliberately targeted given that the Regime often drops munitions from helicopters, making precision targeting impossible in an urban area.

It is unlikely the Regime will relent this renewed focus on the last remaining rebel stronghold in the vicinity of the capital, Damascus. President Assad is likely determined to secure final victory over the area, a pivotal moment in the conflict which marks the end of an era of war against ISIS towards a return to the civil conflict between the Regime and Opposition.

While the violence is largely conducted by aerial bombardment and shelling at present, it is likely that in the medium term Regime forces will conduct a ground operation to secure the area similar to operations to secure Aleppo. In the short term, the Regime will continue to pressure the opposition by besieging the area and bombarding with munitions. The cost is paid by neither the opposition nor the Regime, it is the civilian population. The scenes in Eastern Ghouta are likely to spread throughout Idlib, with some 300,000 civilians displaced since Dec 17, as the Regime seeks to assert control in 2018.



NORTH AFRICA: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 21 FEB 2018

(1) MIGRANTS

More than 300 migrants were intercepted while trying to leave Libya on two boats. 21 Feb 18.

(2) NATIONAL OIL CORPORATION OF LIBYA

The budget allocation to the National Oil Corporation of Libya has been delayed, likely to cause issues for the nation's oil production. 21 Feb 18.

(3) SOCIAL UNREST: TRIPOLI

The "Voice of the People" movement protested against economic conditions. 21 Feb 18.



(4) BENGHAZI UNREST

OP DIGNITY forces and armed civilians led protests against the decision from Gen Haftar to dismiss Wanis Bukhamada. 21 Feb 18.

(5) NATIONWIDE CELEBRATIONS

Libyans celebrated the 7 year anniversary of the revolution which overthrew Dictator Moamar Gaddafi. 17 Feb 18.

(6) LIBYAN DINAR

A 40% appreciation in the Libyan Dinar has reduced food prices according to a REACH report. 21 Feb 18.

ASSESSMENT: (1) The boats were intercepted leaving the Western port town of Zuwara, which continues to be the main hub for migrants hoping to make the journey to Europe. The Libyan Coastguard noted that increasingly, Tunisians and Libyans are joining migrants from Sub Saharan Africa to make the perilous journey. 3,500 migrants have successfully made the crossing to Italy in 2018, a 62% reduction since Jan-Feb 2017. **(2)** The Finance Ministry has delayed budget payments to the NOC, which threatens to reduce oil production below the crucial 1million bpd threshold according to NOC's chairman Mustafa Sanalla. Libya produced 1.083million bpd in Jan 18 during a month of relatively steady production in the nation normally marred with stoppages and outages due to violence. While unlikely the delays will have serious impact, concern mounts for the possibility of severe disruption in the wake of General Elections due to take place this year. **(3)** The rise of prices, instability of banks and crash of the Libyan dinar prompted several small movements to protest in Algeria Square, Tripoli. The protests remained peaceful but highlight to growing social unrest surrounding the long queues at banks, high price of living compared with low wages which have resulted in deteriorating living conditions. **(4)** Bukhamada was the Head of Security in the Op DIGNITY cell within Benghazi, he was reportedly dismissed last week and replaced with Abdelrazik Al-Nathori. The protests is one of several staged by forces loyal to Haftar indicating a degree of rebellion against his tight control over Eastern Libya. Haftar must keep firm control of the Libyan National Army and associated militias, particularly prior to the General Elections later in 2018 which Haftar challenges. **(5)** The celebrations passed peacefully, as Libyans marched into town centers and squares to mark the occasion. This is likely to remain an annual event, while peaceful it is likely to disrupt travel on main roads and through population centers. The gathering of large crowds of people in soft areas presents an attractive target for ISIS who may not be able to capitalize on the opportunity in 2018 but may seek to do so in later years. **(6)** The appreciation is likely attributable to the Central Bank of Libya's decision to deliver a family dollar allowance allowing each Libyan family to buy 500 USD at an exchange rate of 1.350 Libyan Dinars per US Dollar. Economists also report increased oil production and increasing oil prices in concert with a 14.6% reduction in food prices. The living conditions in Libya have deteriorated in the 7 years since the revolution, raising standards is crucial for stability amid rising social unrest.

AF/PAK: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 21 FEB 2018

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

(2) AFGHAN SPECIAL FORCES
Afghan Special Forces allegedly conducted unlawful summary executions during raids in Kandahar in early 2018. 21 Feb 18.

(3) UNITED NATIONS ASSISTANCE MISSION TO AFGHANISTAN
Report notes Afghan security operations resulted in 61 civilian deaths in 2017. 20 Feb 18.



(4) KABUL
The commander of the Quick Reaction Forces of Kabul's reports Kabul is less safe than ever. 21 Feb 18.

(5) UN INFANT MORTALITY RATES
Pakistan is the riskiest country for newborns with 46 of every 1,000 children dying. 21 Feb 18.

(6) PAKISTAN WARNED IT COULD BE ADDED TO TERROR LIST
Pakistan has been given three months to intensify efforts targeting terrorism within its borders. 21 Feb 18.

COMMENT: (1) NSTR (2) Human Rights Watch alleges that an operation on 31 Jan 18, Afghan special forces units supported by US air strikes killed more than 20 civilians fleeing the scene of strikes. Witnesses claim residents were dragged from their homes and killed by the forces. The National Directorate of Security denies the allegations, claiming 50 Taliban fighters were killed and 38 men detained. The Chief of Police in Maiwand, who spearheaded the operation, has been accused of systematic human rights violations previously. HRW is calling for a full investigation. (3) UNAMA reported that search operations conducted by the NDS Special Forces units caused 61 civilian deaths and a further 25 injuries in 2017. The report noted the forces operate outside the main NDS command structure and this often results in a lack of accountability. It is unlikely to Afghan Government will open investigations into the allegations, likely to respond with a public statement defending the NDS who continue to successfully intercept would-be attacks in Kabul amidst the carnage of Jan 18. (4) The warning comes following the bloodiest wave of attacks to hit the city in Jan 18. The police are successfully intercepting attacks, such as last week's interception of a truck laden with explosives destined for a spectacular attack in the city but the likelihood of further attacks is high given the intensifying campaign against the Taliban. The UN reported that more than 10,000 people were killed or injured during 2017, demonstrating the lack of security gripping the country. (5) The majority of the deaths are preventable, sparking renewed concern for Pakistan's children amidst the Government crackdown on foreign aid workers. UNICEF claims up to 3 million infant lives globally could be saved each year with investment in maternity care. (6) The US has reportedly given Pakistan 3 months to prove it is doing enough to target terrorist organisations, such as the Haqqani Network, that operate within its borders and pose a serious threat to regional stability. The list is currently being composed by the Financial Action Task Force in Paris. Pakistani Foreign Minister Khawaja Asif announced the deadline on social media without confirmation from the task force. It is likely Pakistan is being considered by the Task Force, particularly given President Trump's renewed pressure on Pakistan to act against the extremists factions within its borders who directly threaten stability in Afghanistan. Pakistan recently took action against Hafiz Saeed, an extremist currently wanted by both India and the US for his role in founding Lashkar-e-Taiba, the militant group responsible for the 2008 Mumbai attacks.