

SYRIA/IRAQ: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 07 FEB 2018

(1) OP OLIVE BRANCH

7 Turkish troops killed in Afrin. 06 Feb 18.

(2) RUSSIAN PILOT SHOT DOWN

A Russian Sukhoi-25 aircraft was shot down over Idlib by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. 04 Feb 18.

(3) UN CEASEFIRE

The UN declared an “unprecedented” crisis, demanding temporary ceasefire. 06 Feb 18.

(4) UN CHEMICAL INVESTIGATION

The UN is to investigate 04 Feb 18 suspected chemical weapons use in Idlib and Eastern Ghouta. 06 Feb 18.



(5) US PRESENCE IN IRAQ

Baghdad announced US troop numbers will reduce in Iraq as part of a “shift in focus” to be proportionate to the threat from ISIS. 06 Feb 18.

(6) EMERGING MILITANT GROUP

“The White Banners” are a newly emerging militant group in the areas surrounding Kirkuk estimated to be 500 – 1,000 strong. 07 Feb 18

(7) OIL

ISF launch an operation to clear ground along the planned oil transport link to Iran. 07 Feb 18.

ASSESSMENT: (1) The total Turkish death toll stands at 14 since 20 Jan 18. Turkey retaliated with heavy aerial strikes. 900 Kurdish Protection Unit (YPG) fighters have reportedly been killed since Jan 18. It is likely the violence will cause political unrest in Turkey and Western countries with Kurdish populations, such as Germany and London. The situation highlights the complexity of the situation in Syria as NATO allies, the US and Turkey, adopt opposing foreign policies. (2) Former al-Qaeda affiliate HTS responsibility, using a shoulder-launched surface-to-air missile. (SLSAMs). Russia and the Regime retaliated with the heaviest aerial strikes recorded this year. (3) The UN has urged participants in the conflict to lift the blockade of aid to its three major population centers, under a ceasefire. The UN is almost powerless to help the dramatically deteriorating humanitarian situation as the Regime granted only 27% of access requests in 2017. As violence escalates in Eastern Ghouta, Idlib and Afrin the number of people internally displaced is rising with some 300,000 fleeing Idlib province alone. (4) The UN received multiple reports of chemical weapons use in Saraqeb (Idlib) and Douma (Eastern Ghouta). Russia vetoed a UN Security Council statement condemning chemical weapons, leading to fierce criticism from the US. Previous UN investigations have failed to result in action against the Regime for chemical weapons use against civilians. (5) The reduction in US troops is a response to Iraq’s declared victory over ISIS in Dec 17. Baghdad announced a new focus on policing, capacity building and border control with US support as ISIS shifts towards an insurgency capable of staging urban attacks. (6) The White Banners (so called because of their white flag bearing a lion’s head) are not linked to ISIS or the Kurdish Regional Government and are reportedly comprised mainly of displaced populations during the Iraqi take over of Kirkuk. The group was linked to indirect fire against ISF in Tuz Khurmatu in Dec 17. (7) The operation marks the beginning of the planned transportation of oil from Kirkuk to Kermanshah Refinery, Iran. Overland transport via truck was expected to begin last week but has been delayed likely as a result of security concerns, prompting this operation. The security forces include Kurdish Peshmerga and Shia Popular Mobilisation Units, essential to the success of the operation in a complex and diverse ethnic and religious population along the Kurdish border.

NORTH AFRICA: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 07 FEB 2018

(1) UN WARNS OF ISIS GROWTH

UN warns of ISIS growth if the far South of Libya, capitalising on smuggling groups for revenue. 07 Feb 18.

(2) EU FUNDING

EU Ambassador to Libya announced funding to Health and Education projects in Libya amid criticism of Operation SOFIA. 07 Feb 18.

(3) SABHA CLASHES

10 killed in 7 days during ongoing tribal violence between Tubu and Awlad Sulaiman tribes. 07 Feb 18



(4) DERNA

Operation DIGNITY continues several days of shelling against Derna in preparation for a wider operation to liberate the city according to residents. 07 Feb 18.

(4) BENGHAZI

Libyan National Army senior commander, Mahmoud al-Werfalli surrenders amidst ICC arrest warrant. 07 Feb 18.

(5) OIL

IS fighters attacked security forces near Dhahra Oilfield in the South East. 03 Feb 18.

ASSESSMENT: (1) A UN Committee released a report to the UN Security Council urging caution over the growth of ISIS in Southern and Central Libya. It is thought ISIS is seeking to grow relations with human traffickers across the South to generate revenue and capitalize on porous borders for the free movement of fighters and weapons. Despite the group's defeat in Sirte in 2016 it continues to operate in swathes of Central and Southern Libya, a trend likely to increase in 2018 following military defeat in Iraq and Syria. IS is likely to threaten oil facilities and humanitarian assistance groups operating in South and Central Libya. (2) The EU is key to Operation Sofia to combat illegal immigration off the coast of Libya, but has faced international backlash regarding the inhumane conditions facing returned migrants. The EU has made efforts to address the humanitarian situation through initiatives such as these, although they are generally less publicized. (3) 10 civilians have been killed during violent clashes between the Tubu and Awlad Sulaiman tribes in Sabha. Reports of shelling between the tribes extends into the city center, marking a spread in the violence. Routes in the city and connecting with surrounding areas are likely to be unsafe as a result of the volatile clashes. The tribes met to discuss a ceasefire 07 Feb 18, it remains to be seen if the talks can calm tensions. (4) Operation DIGNITY is the name given to the campaign led by General Khalifa Haftar in 2014 to target Islamist extremist factions in Eastern Libya. Derna has been encircled by Op DIGNITY forces since July 17, making civilian life in the city difficult. Air strikes and shelling of the city have resulted in civilian casualties, the most recent shelling of the Western entry points have spurred calls for the UN to intervene to protect civilians. (5) Al-Werfalli is a senior commander within General Khalifa Haftar's Libyan National Army (LNA), specifically a special forces unit thought to be responsible for summary executions. The International Criminal Court issued a warrant for his arrest in Aug 17 following videos of him conducting multiple summary executions. Al-Werfalli is in LNA custody, the UN urged his immediate extradition. (6) Libyan security Forces killed 3 suspected IS fighters during the attack at the site run by Waha Oil, two security guards were killed and 5 injured. The Oil Protection Force guarding the site is aligned with the Eastern Government and operates in an area associated with IS since they lost control of Sirte in 2016.

AF/PAK: COUNTRY ASSESSMENT 07 FEB 2018

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

The US has expanded air strikes in Afghanistan to include targets affiliated with the Taliban and the East Turkestan Islamic Movement. 06 Feb 18.

(2) KABUL

Following deadly attacks in the capital, 7 senior Afghan Army Officers have been fired. 06 Feb 18.

(3) KABUL

Afghan security seized 2 tonnes of materials linked to improvised explosive devices. 06 Feb 18.



(4) ISLAMABAD

A Pakistani court has sentenced a man to death and passed life sentences to 5 others for murdering a student falsely accused of blasphemy. 07 Feb 18.

(5) KARACHI

Unidentified gunmen shot at two Chinese nationals, killing one of them. 05 Feb 18.

(6) US SUSPENSION

The US may reverse suspensions on assistance if Pakistan takes steps to target terrorism. 06 Feb 18.

COMMENT: (1) The US conducted 24 precision strikes in 4 days targeting the insurgent groups in Wurduj District, Badakhshan Province. In addition to targeting the Taliban, the US has actively engaged the East Turkestan Islamic Movement who have been affiliated with al-Qaeda since 2002 according to the UN. The group seek to carve an independent state spanning several border regions, including Northern Afghanistan. **(2)** The attack on a military base in Kabul conducted by IS which killed 11 soldiers and wounded 16 raised serious concerns for the ability of security forces to secure both themselves and residents of the capital city. President Ghani is under pressure to act to improve security following a particularly deadly start to the year in which some 100 people have been killed by the Taliban and IS in spectacular attacks in Kabul. The city is undoubtedly braced for further attacks. **(3)** The National Directorate of Security (NDS) intercepted a truck carrying 2 tonnes of materials likely to be used in the manufacturing of explosive devices in the capital. The city remains on high alert for future attacks from both the Taliban and IS. **(4)** Mashal Khan was badly beaten before being shot and killed in Apr 17 following false accusations of blasphemy. 25 others have been convicted of lesser offences relating to the murder. The incident has attracted condemnation of Pakistan's hardline blasphemy laws and a spotlight on dozens of murders as a result of blasphemy. **(5)** The two Chinese nationals were working for a shipping company and were travelling through an upmarket area of Karachi by car when the gunmen shot at the vehicle. Two Chinese nationals were killed in Quetta in Oct 17 by IS. There are thousands of Chinese nationals living in Pakistan as part of a \$54bn project, the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor, to upgrade infrastructure and transport links yet China does not seem concerned regarding the incidents, issuing support to Pakistan's efforts to address security. **(6)** US Deputy Secretary of State John Sullivan reported to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee that if Pakistan undertook decisive and sustained action against militant groups operating within its borders the US would lift the suspension on security assistance funding amounting to \$900 million. In particular the US wants Pakistan to adopt a tougher stance towards militant groups the Afghan Taliban and the Haqqani Network who continue to undermine the security and stability of Afghanistan while taking refuge in Pakistan. Pakistan rejects the criticism that it does not do enough to tackle terrorism, this is an opportunity to take small steps for great gains.