



## NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

### STRATEGIC TRENDS

December 2014

#### **MASHREQ**

##### **Syria**

A report released at the end of December by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) said that three months of US-led air strikes have killed at least 1,171 people, mostly Islamic State (IS) militants, in Syria. However, the US commander in charge of the mission, Lt Gen James Terry, re-stated shortly after that it would “at least take a minimum of three years” to defeat IS.

Most of the US-led airstrikes targeted Islamic State militants in the northern province of Raqqa, Idlib, Hassaka and Bukamal. On December 23, an airstrike near Barghooth struck ISIS oil collection equipment. The Syrian government airstrikes instead mainly concentrated on the southern Daraa province. Meanwhile, fighting has intensified between Islamic State militants and Kurdish forces in Kobani, or Ayn al-Arab, near Syria’s border with Turkey.

Syria has accused Israel of carrying out at least two airstrikes near the capital of Damascus, in the town of Dimas, which holds military bases and a small civilian airport, as well as near the Damascus International Airport on December 21<sup>st</sup>. Israel is believed to have launched several airstrikes against targets in Syria since 2013, targeting primarily weapons transfers to Hizb’Allah. Israel would not confirm or deny the recent reports, but in an indirect response to Syrian declarations Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said Israel vowed to deal with regional “threats and challenges”.

In mid-December the Lebanese paper, al Akhbar, close to Iran and to the pro-Iranian Shia group Hizb'Allah, reported that Russia and Iran had agreed to a new aid package to the Assad regime worth over \$6 billion dollars, including \$500 million in fuel and \$400 million in flour. Sources close to the regime confirm that Assad can also count on the arrival of “important Russian and non Russian arms”.

## **Lebanon**

The Lebanese factions and their regional patrons seem to have agreed to establish an inter-sectarian dialogue in order to find a solution to the political crisis. Iran's Parliament Speaker Ali Larijani said on December 18 that Tehran supports political dialogue between the Shia movement, Hizb'Allah, and the Sunni Future Movement to forge national understanding among all groups in the country. For its part, in mid-December Saudi Arabia hosted Lebanon's Grand Mufti Abdel-Latif Derian (a Shia high-level cleric) for his meeting with the Future Movement leader Saad Hariri, praising the decision to work for the country's unity.

Meanwhile, the Lebanese Prime Minister Tammam Salam, in a speech (19<sup>th</sup> of December), invited the international partners to a greater awareness of Lebanon's strategic situation. ISIS is present in the region of Arsal, on the Lebanese-Syrian border. Lebanon, whose own sectarian divisions have been exacerbated by the Syrian war, fears that Islamist insurgents are trying to expand their influence into Sunni Muslim areas in its north. In particular, the Prime Minister urged France to speed up the delivery of its weapons package, including mainly Mirage jets.

## **Jordan**

Jordan is seriously engaged in the fight against ISIS and its influence within the country. In a statement of the 17<sup>th</sup> of December, ISIS militants revealed an attempt to storm the Iraqi border with Jordan. Three ISIS vehicles opened fire and detonated explosives against Jordan border forces destroying at least six border control posts, before withdrawing. Jordan has in recent months beefed up its troops along the 180-km border with Iraq, where Islamic State fighters have control over stretches of the Baghdad-Jordan highway, a major Middle Eastern trade route.

Jordan has provided a logistic base for the US-led air campaign against the Islamic State in Syria, which is also an intelligence gathering hub against the jihadists. In addition, the Iraqi Defence Minister, Khaled al Obeidi, said on December 22<sup>nd</sup> that Jordan will begin training the first batch of Iraqi army soldiers in early 2015 as part of the international effort to fight Islamic State. The aim is to rebuild the Iraqi army, which

fell apart last summer after Dawla's blitz across northern Iraq during which at least four Iraqi divisions crumbled.

At home, Jordan is in the midst of a crackdown against supporters of ISIS and other extremist groups, that includes also the end of an eight-year death penalty moratorium. In the last few months, more than 600 persons have been detained and 150 charged for declaring support for either the al-Qaeda linked Jabhat al-Nusra or its antagonist IS. Thousands of Jordanians have gone to fight in Syria.

### **Israel and the Palestinian Territories**

On December 10, Ziad Abu Ein, head of the PLO's Commission Against The Separation Wall And Settlements, died while taking part at a protest outside the Palestinian village of Turmus Aiya, during clashes between the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) and protesters. As a consequence the PLO and Fatah decided to suspend security cooperation with the IDF.

Meanwhile Palestinian officials submitted a Jordanian-sponsored draft resolution to the UN Security Council seeking a 12-month deadline for wrapping up negotiations on a final settlement and the end of 2017 as the timeframe for completing an Israeli withdrawal to the pre-1967 lines. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas warned that his administration would "no longer deal" with Israel if this resolution - expected to be put up for vote in the last days of December or first days of January 2015 - will fail.

In a key move, on December 2, Israel's prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu has sacked his finance and justice ministers, triggering a Knesset vote to dissolve itself and an early general election to be held the 17<sup>th</sup> of March 2015. Netanyahu said Yair Lapid and Tzipi Livni had "harshly attacked" both himself and the coalition government. According to the polls, Netanyahu might win again with a more right wing, more extreme coalition. In an early electoral move aimed at gaining favour with hard-line voters, Israel's outgoing government is pumping millions of dollars into Jewish settlements in the West Bank for public buildings and roads.

On the opposite front, HAMAS has begun to rebuild its network of defensive underground tunnels, enabling HAMAS members to move within the Gaza Strip underground, transfer weapons, and coordinate hit and run attacks on IDF units during clashes. Israel is watching closely for signs that it is working on new cross-border offensive tunnels as well.