



Offshore gas flashpoints in Egypt and Lebanon

Pages 8,13

What role for culture ministries in the Arab world?

Page 22

British tourists return to Tunisia

Page 11



Syria enters new post-ISIS phase with massive US, Israeli strikes

Thomas Seibert

Washington

Almost exactly seven years after the start of the Syrian civil war, the country is experiencing a dramatic surge in violence with unprecedented Israeli and US strikes.

As regional and world powers compete for territory, influence and natural resources within the war-ravaged state, the US and Israeli strikes could complicate the plans of Iran and Turkey in Syria and the rest of the region, as the war on the Islamic State (ISIS) comes to an end.

Israel's massive air strikes that pummeled Syrian air-defence positions and Iranian targets on February 10 came on the heels of US attacks on forces loyal to the Damascus regime in Deir ez-Zor in the Euphrates Valley.

Israel's raids occurred after its reported interception of an Iranian drone over its territory and the shooting down of an Israeli F-16 fighter jet.

Israeli military spokesman Lieutenant-Colonel Jonathan Conricus called the drone intrusion "the most blatant and severe Iranian violation of Israeli sovereignty in the last years."

Israel has often expressed resentment of the military presence of Iran and its proxies in Syria and Lebanon but this was the first direct confrontation between the two arch-foes since the start of Syria's war. Israel confirmed hitting four Iranian military targets during its raids on Syria.

Beyond escalating tensions with Iran, Israel's strikes will cause ripple effects in Syria and Lebanon, increasing friction with the pro-Iran Hezbollah.

A few days before the Israeli raids, the United States carried out air strikes against pro-government Syrian forces in Deir ez-Zor. Wash-



New phase. Israeli soldiers take positions in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights near the border with Syria, on February 10.

(AFP)

ington seemed to be warning its NATO ally Turkey and other players in the Syrian drama, especially Iran, that it intended to play a major role in shaping the future of the war-torn country. More than 100 of the 500 pro-government Syrian fighters were killed, US officials said.

The United States rejected calls by Turkey to withdraw from Manbij, a strategically vital enclave in northern Syria under the control of US-backed Syrian Defence Forces (SDF), which include Kurdish and Arab militias.

The US raids raised questions about relations with Russia in Syria. The line previously drawn to delineate zones of influence of the United States and Russia showed signs of breaking down following the US air strikes. The United States and Russia last year agreed that the Euphrates would be a dividing line between their forces in Syria. However, the

defeat of ISIS means that conflicting priorities of Washington and Moscow could now come to the fore.

US Secretary of Defence James Mattis called the push of the pro-Syrian troops over the Euphrates "perplexing" but was careful not to blame Russia. The US defence chief insisted the fighting in Deir ez-Zor did not indicate a deeper American involvement in the Syrian conflict. "We are not getting engaged in the Syrian civil war," he said.

The clash, however, followed the announcement by Washington of an

● The US and Israeli strikes could complicate the plans of Iran and Turkey in Syria and the rest of the region, as the war on ISIS comes to an end.

open-ended US military presence in Syria. One declared goal by the United States is to make sure that ISIS does not make a comeback. Another is to prevent Russia from winning back all of Syria for its ally, Syrian President Bashar Assad, and block further expansion of Iranian influence in the country.

Washington is bound to face criticism at home over its continued presence in Syria. "I am gravely concerned that the Trump administration is purposefully stumbling into a broader conflict, without a vote of Congress or clear objectives," US Senator Tim Kaine, a Democrat from Virginia, said in an Associated Press report.

The US administration's determination to stay engaged in Syria and to keep backing and – if necessary – protecting the SDF is causing fresh tensions with Ankara. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan said his

troops would march towards Manbij next, a city approximately 100km east of Afrin, to drive out the People's Protection Units (YPG) from there as well and has called on the United States to withdraw its military units from the city. In response, two high-ranking US generals visited in a demonstration of support for the Kurdish fighters there.

In a bid to mend the growing rift with Ankara, US national security adviser H.R. McMaster and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson prepared for separate visits to Turkey and Mattis was to meet with his Turkish counterpart, Nurettin Canikli, in Brussels.

Thomas Seibert is a Washington correspondent for The Arab Weekly. Simon Speakman Cordall contributed to this story from Tunis.

P2,12

Viewpoint



Tallha Abdulrazaq
is a researcher at the University of Exeter's Strategy and Security Institute in England.

Having the polls together means it is likely that the groups that dominate the national vote will control provincial councils.

As Iraq elections loom, Abadi's coalition is disintegrating

Since announcing in January that local and national elections would both be on May 12, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi has faced a series of political disasters, leading many to doubt whether he is charismatic and strong enough to hold his newly created list together before the candidates are tested in the polls.

Abadi harmed his credibility as a unifier after forging a political alliance with the sectarian Shia-dominated Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) and spending much of the battle for Mosul assuring Iraqis that no militants would field candidates in elections without first disarming. Abadi named his new electoral list the "Victory Alliance," seeking to capitalise on the perception that he was instrumental in the defeat of the Islamic State (ISIS).

However, less than 48 hours after the announcement, the

pro-Iran PMF announced it would be splitting from the Victory Alliance and contesting elections separately under its own "Conquest List" against the prime minister. Essentially, by allying with the PMF, Abadi ensured that the group would have grounds to proceed with fielding its own candidates but failed to calculate it would abandon him once it got what it wanted.

A little more than a fortnight later, the incumbent suffered another blow to his prestige when senior Shia cleric Ammar al-Hakim announced he would also be parting ways with Abadi. Hakim, scion of an influential Shia clerical family, declared he would set up his own "Wisdom Alliance" to contest elections against the prime minister, declaring he would try to work with Abadi "for the shared benefit of the country."

Despite the positive-sounding rhetoric, reports suggest that Hakim threatened to walk out on

Abadi soon after the departure of the PMF's Conquest bloc. As Abadi was unwilling to guarantee better political positions should the Victory Alliance claim victory in May, Hakim decided to weaken Abadi by leaving the list and creating his own.

Aside from Abadi's position appearing increasingly weaker, criticism has been levelled at the decision to have local and national government elections on the same day. Having the polls together means it is likely that the groups that dominate the national vote will control provincial councils.

This may be problematic as, ordinarily, midterm local elections act as a barometer for the people's level of contentment with the national leadership. By bringing the votes into synchronicity, the federal government has essentially erased that opportunity and is attempting to consolidate power at both the local and national levels.

With Abadi's allies abandoning him in droves, it probably came as some relief to him that his rival and former prime minister, Nuri al-Maliki, would probably be sidelined in favour of the incumbent. Reports in Arab media said Tehran and Washington were in agreement that another Maliki premiership would be disastrous for their agendas in Iraq and they would, therefore, throw their weight behind Abadi.

However, Abadi cannot rest on his laurels. He may well win the elections with Iranian and American backing but those same backers will ensure that he never has full control over parliament. After all, both Hakim's Wisdom Alliance and the PMF's Conquest list are Iranian proxies, with the latter directly armed, funded and backed by Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps.

As Abadi is about to find out, with such friends, who needs enemies?