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ABOUT INTEGRITY UK

Integrity UK is an organisation committed to preventing extremism through innovative approaches to promoting integration, cohesion and social reconciliation within the MENA region and the UK.

SYRIA INTELLIGENCE REPORT

3rd July 2018

Pro-Government news sources reported on Tuesday that the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) slowed down its operations in Daraa Province amidst reports of continued negotiations between the Syrian Government and Opposition. These reports correspond with a statement issued by the Southern Front coalition of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) announcing that they would re-enter negotiations. The statement indicated that southern Syria is represented in the negotiations in a “complete way”, suggesting that the Daraa Revolutionary Civilian Council has either re-joined the negotiations or has been replaced by another civilian representative. Meanwhile, the towns of Saida, Mayatheen, Nassib (where the border crossing into Jordan is located) and Taibah announced that they will reject any calls to surrender in its current form.

The reports of renewed negotiations come amidst continued calls from the United Nations for Jordan to open its borders and allow displaced Syrians into the country. The UN Human Rights Commission spokesperson Liz Throssell warned that thousands of refugees have been stranded on the border, with reports of a number of displaced Syrians dying due to heat, lack of water and medical assistance or as a result of wild animals such as scorpions in the region. Jordan, alongside Israel, has so far only permitted the entry of a handful of emergency cases, preferring to dispense aid to Syrians instead.

During an interview with the CBS, John Bolton, the National Security Adviser of the United States' President, Donald Trump, commented on the upcoming meeting between Trump and the Russian President Vladimir Putin. Expressing optimism towards “making progress together”, Bolton warned that Iranian presence is now reaching across Iraq and Syria and into Lebanon. Commenting on the Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, Bolton noted that Iran was the greater concern and, at present, forcing Iran out of Syria took priority over deposing Assad. The position is a significant shift from Bolton who had often advocated intervention in Syria. The shift could provide an opening for Damascus to align closer with Moscow for political expediency, potentially isolating Iran.

The Syrian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates issued a statement on Tuesday, calling on “all Syrian citizens forced by war and terrorist attacks to leave the country” to return to the country. The statement added that the recent successes of the SAA and the continued military “reconciliations” had allowed many areas to return to stability. The statement also emphasised the importance of humanitarian organisations to continue providing support for Syrians in the country. The statement is unusually reconciliatory towards Syrian refugees who were often dismissed at best and labelled traitors at worst by members of the government. It is possible that by linking the issue of refugee return to the stability of the government, Damascus is trying to signal to neighbouring (and European countries) to engage with (rather than antagonise) the Syrian Government.

There have been a flurry of reports indicating that the Syrian Government may also be making inroads in its negotiations with the areas under the control of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), collectively known as the Democratic Federation of Northern Syria. *BBC* reporter Riam Dalati reported on Tuesday that a number of government officials have recently visited Raqqa City to assess the damage, particularly in former government and security buildings. There have also been reports of the SDF in Qamishli City engaging in “major refurbishment for the beautification of the city” which involved the removal of many symbols of the People's Protection Units (YPG) and the posters of Abdullah Öcalan, causing some observers to speculate more is in progress. These rumours were further fuelled by footage of a number of SDF fighters in Raqqa City shouting pro-Assad slogans, although the authenticity of the footage cannot be verified. At present, the primary speculation suggests that the SAA will be deployed in border cities (such as Qamishli, Kobani, Tal Abyad and Ras al-Ayn) in order to prevent further Turkish entry into northern Syria.

Speaking at a press conference with foreign members of the press in Afrin, Turkish Foreign Ministry spokesperson, Hami Aksoy, said that the Turkish Armed Forces (TSK) are getting ready draw down their forces in Afrin, allowing “the people of Afrin” to govern themselves. Aksoy said that life in the city has returned to normal and added that 140,000 people had returned to the city, consisting of Kurds, Arabs and Turkmens. Aksoy noted that the TSK would remain for some time to train local forces. His statements come amidst reports of the Syrian National Army (SNA) in the Ma'betla district handing over security to the newly-created branch of the Free Syrian Police.

The Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) has released a new fact-finding report regarding chemical attacks reported in Aleppo City between October and November 2016. The report concluded that there is no evidence of specific chemicals were used as weapons during the reported incidents, noting that the OPCW analysed samples from the sites of the alleged attacks and biomedical samples taken from the victims. The report suggested that those affected may have been exposed to non-persistent irritants but did not indicate whether this was due to weapons use or incidental. The timing of the report is significant, as the OPCW is in the process of compiling a fact-finding report for the chemical attack that took place in Ghouta in April 2018. With the previous OPCW report confirming that chemical weapons were used (likely by loyalist forces, although the report did not assign blame), the fact that this report broadly exonerates the loyalists of chemical weapons use could be used by the OPCW to reinforce its credentials of neutrality.

Amidst these developments, clashes across Syria have continued. In Daraa, heavy fighting continued around the town of Tafas which appears to be the epicentre of the FSA resistance against the SAA. Pro-Government and pro-Opposition news sources both confirmed that by Monday evening, the SAA offensive on the town had failed, with reports of mounting casualties on the loyalist side. The developments there may have encouraged the negotiations to continue. Although the region remained calmer on Tuesday, sporadic shelling is still reported. In particular, the FSA reportedly shelled the Kashef District of Daraa City and the SAA reportedly shelled the towns of Saida and Taibah.

Notably, there were reports of a large explosion in the SAA-held areas on Tuesday afternoon. The explosion took place either in the town of Izra or Mahajja, with reports suggesting that an Israeli fighter destroyed an ammunition warehouse. However, reports of an Israeli strike were rejected by pro-Government sources, leaving it unclear why the explosion occurred.

The SDF in southern Hasakah continued to make gains against the IS militants since resuming the operations in the region. Reports indicate that the SDF captured Sarajiyah and Qabr Taha, cutting the road towards the town of Tuwaymin. The villages of Muayzilah, Abu Hadid, al-Khabrah, Taraf, Nasib, Rujm al-Hajjanah, Rujm Dar, Hajj al-Hamad, al-Hamzah, Saqqar, Kulaywah, Mulayhan, Tall al-Jabir and Shatnah were also reported captured. With the militants having lost much of the remaining farmlands, there are

reports that the remaining militants are retreating towards the desert. The SDF was also reported to have met with officials of the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) to coordinate developments along the border.

The IS-affiliated news agency Amaq stated on Tuesday that two SDF fighters were killed following an IED blast near the Nour Mosque in the northwestern parts of the city. The attack comes shortly after the SDF ended its security operations against IS cells in the city, announcing the city to be “terrorist-free”.

There were reports of intra-SDF clashes between “SDF elements” (likely the YPG or the Deir ez-Zour Military Council) and the FSA-affiliated Kuwwat al-Nukhba in the town of Abu Hamam in Deir ez-Zour on Tuesday afternoon. The reports did not indicate towards why the clashes took place. However, the incident comes shortly after the YPG fought with the FSA-affiliated Liwa Thuwar Raqqa. The SDF had released the leader of Liwa Thuwar Raqqa, Abu Issa, on Monday evening.

Asayish security forces in Qamishli City reported that they discovered and dismantled a car bomb in the city on Tuesday afternoon. The discovery of the bomb comes shortly after a motorcycle bomb exploded in front of the headquarters of the Sutoro (Assyrian Police) over the weekend.

There were also reports of small clashes between the TSK and the SNA in Afrin. The clashes reportedly started after a Turkish soldier harassed a woman from Ghouta, prompting a reaction from the local rebels. It is unclear if the clashes went on for long. However, some activists reported an explosion near the city centre. Since its capture by the Turkish-backed forces, the Afrin region has suffered from small-scale but constant clashes involving YPG remnants, SNA factions and the TSK.