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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

25th July 2018

On Tuesday, the Co-Chair of the Syrian Democratic Council (SDC), Riad Darar, offered more insights to his organisation's plans for negotiating with the Syrian Government. Darar stated that the most immediate matters of discussion relate to the provision of services and related issues. Darar said that such an approach would create mutual trust between the two sides, allowing other, more sensitive issues to be discussed, eventually leading towards a full negotiation for a political solution. Darar added that he hoped such a political solution would involve a more decentralised model for Syria that would allow for greater democracy. While Damascus is unlikely to accept the SDC push for a more decentralised model across the country, the SDC's approach of building trust through practical and quantifiable issues before moving onto a political solution seems to be the most expedient and viable path for both sides. Such an approach would not necessarily end the risk of conflict between the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) and the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) but it would bode well for the reduction of this risk. The SDC approach also lines up with the reports of the talks taking place between itself and the Syrian Government regarding the control and maintenance of oil wells and dams in SDC-governed areas.

Teachers working in the Zaatari Refugee Camp in Jordan report that the camp administration has told them to look for new jobs on grounds that they will soon be made redundant by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF). The decision will impact some 1147 teachers, 675 of which are Syrian. The drawdown and gradual closure of the schools was accompanied by the cutting of a number of subsidies including food, financial aid and fuel. With the Nassib Border Crossing due to open on the 1st of August, these developments have led activists to speculate that the Jordanian Government is preparing to shut the camp down and force Syrians in Jordan to return to Syria. Jordan is the third biggest recipient of Syrian refugees after Turkey and Lebanon. In recent months, the country has witnessed an uptick of xenophobia amidst rising economic anxieties and protests.

Amidst these developments, clashes across Syria have continued. On Wednesday morning, a series of suicide bombings targeted the districts of Maslakh and Souk districts of Suweida City. The attacks, which were claimed by the Islamic State (IS), were followed by a series of assaults, raids and offensives on the city, as well as on the towns and villages in the central and northeastern countryside of the Suweida Province. During the initial offensive, the militants managed to capture Rami, Duma, Basir, Matounah and Tarba Kusaib. Heavy fighting was also reported in Sharihi, Shabki and Gaydat Hamayel. The offensive was reportedly facilitated by a large number of loyalist troops being rerouted to Daraa, allowing IS cells around Suweida to regroup and launch the attack. However, by Wednesday afternoon, there were reports of the SAA, as well as militias belonging to local Druze forces, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and the National Defence Forces (NDF) securing the villages captured from the IS and repelling the attacks on those under attack. There were also reports from Suweida City, Matounah and Sharihi of local civilians attacking IS militants and, in certain cases, lynching them. The Suweida Health Directorate announced that

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147 people have been killed and 200 have been injured. However, the numbers have been rising steadily over the day and some sources are reporting that as many as 160 people have been killed and over 350 have been injured. Either way, the attack represents one of the bloodiest single IS attacks to take place in Suweida and, indeed, the entire country. In addition to highlighting the threat the IS continues to represent, the attack also signifies the dangers of letting the continued existence of an IS pocket and directing military forces elsewhere. The IS pocket in northeastern Suweida has been static since early June. Furthermore, it was well known that the area under de-facto SAA control was still riddled with many IS cells. It is likely that the SAA will focus its attention on the pocket next. Indeed, there have already been a number of airstrikes in the region on Wednesday.

The SAA in Daraa continued to push against the IS militants in the Yarmouk Basin. On Wednesday, pro-Government sources reported the SAA took control of the villages of Abu Mandara, Sayda al-Golan, Khan Sayda, al-Luwbayd, al-Muqaziz, Ain Dhakar and Abu Hartayn along the northern axis of the IS pocket. Further southeast, there were reports of the SAA capturing the town of Jilleen and the “Libyan Company” complex nearby. Over the course of Wednesday's clashes, there were reports of air defence sirens in the Israeli-controlled Golan Heights activating, leading to fears of yesterday's incident (where a Syrian Su-22 was shot down) being repeated. However, the activation appears to have been due to unintentional mortar fire from the Yarmouk Basin.

Meanwhile in Quneitra, the surrender process continued. On Wednesday, the rebels in the villages of Burayqah, Qahtaniyah, Raqqadiyah, Hamidia and the mostly-abandoned Quneitra City began handing their weapons over in preparation for the signing of a “reconciliation” agreement or an evacuation.

The SDF operations to clear the Iraqi Border appear to have gained full momentum. The group announced that over the course of the recent gains, its fighters have captured the villages of Ismail, Aqra, Bir Mazal, Bir Dahamad, Jarjari, Halluni, Bujari, Abud al-Jadan, al-Khinzir, Bir Zuqum, Bir Oum Ghurba, Qarat al-Moutab, Oum al-Rus, Sabkhat al-Sahil and Kisham. There were also reports of the SDF gaining control of the Malah, Galban and Harija Oil Fields from the IS. Although some sources reported that the SDF has total control of the Iraqi Border now, in reality, the group continues to control a small chunk of land along the southern parts of the border.

Bombings and assassinations in Idlib continued. On Tuesday evening, a suicide bomber linked to the IS blew himself up at a Hayy'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) checkpoint in the Bailon Road in Idlib. Two HTS commanders by the name of Abu Mahdi al-Shami and Abu Abbas Tanfizi were shot by unknown gunmen near Sarmada. Five people were killed in the town of Tamana'a when a car bomb exploded on Wednesday morning, targeting the headquarters of the local council. In turn, the HTS announced that it attacked an IS headquarters near Jisr al-Shugour, killing the group's local deputy, Abu Saeed Shishani, and capturing another militant by the name of Abu Aisha Sahili. The HTS also announced the arrest of five of its militants after they arrived from Daraa. The militants were accused of working for the Syrian Air Force Intelligence agency.

On Wednesday, there were reports of trucks carrying large concrete slabs entering Idlib, moving towards one of the Turkish observation posts in the region. The slabs, resembling walls, led to speculation among observers that Turkey was preparing to wall off the Idlib region from the SAA-held area, referring to the process as “Gazafication”. Turkish sources rejected these claims, suggesting that the slabs were delivered to bolster the defences at the observation posts. The Gazafication theory has been gaining traction among the supporters of the Opposition with regards to the plans set out by Turkey and Russia as the ultimate fate of the rebel-ruled province.

The People's Protection Units (YPG) announced on Wednesday that its forces killed nine Turkish soldiers and three rebel fighters over the course of attacks between July 11 and 15. According to the statement, the attacks took place in the villages of Basela, Kimarah, Basrawi and Qatma. In addition to the

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Turkish Armed Forces (TSK), the Hamza Division and Faylaq al-Sham were also targeted. The YPG also accused the TSK of targeting civilians during its operations in Serekaniye, damaging homes and injuring two civilians.

The people in the city of Manbij went on strike on Wednesday in protest of two members of the Bani Said tribe being killed during an altercation with the Manbij Military Council (MMC). Images on social media showed much of the city centre deserted during the day, with most shops shuttered. This is not the first time locals in the city went on strike. The Bani Said tribe pushed for similar strikes in the past. Strikes also took place against the conscription policies of the SDF.