This document provides complex coverage of global events from 26 February – 04 March 2013 with hyper-links to source material highlighted in blue and underlined in the text. For more information on the topics below or other issues pertaining to events in the region, contact the members of the Complex Coverage Team or visit our website at www.cimicweb.org.

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Iraq

Protesters once again took to the streets of Baghdad on 26 February, demanding that Iraqi lawmakers approve the national budget, according to CNN. The protests, organised by Shi‘ite cleric Muqtada al Sadr, eventually led Iraqi security forces to close the main entrances into the city and block bridges between two main sections of the capital. According to Kurdish lawmaker Mahmoud Othman, the budget approval was stalled over the amount allocated to oil service companies working in Iraq’s semi-autonomous region of Kurdistan. The absence of the Kurdish Iraqi President Jalal Talabani, once a mediating influence between Kurdish factions and between Kurds and Baghdad is creating an atmosphere of uncertainty in the country, reports Reuters. Talabani’s condition has improved after suffering a stroke in December 2012; however, it is unlikely that he will resume his past role in Iraqi politics. On 01 March, Iraq’s Sunni finance minister Rafaie al Esawi told a crowd of protesters he was resigning his position stating, “more than seventy days of demonstrations and this government has not fulfilled our people’s [Sunnis] demands. It doesn’t honour me to be part of a sectarian government. I decided to stay with my people”, reports Reuters. It was the arrest of Esawi’s bodyguards that sparked protests in mid-December 2012. The demonstrations in Sunni-majority provinces have fuelled concerns that the increasingly sectarian conflict in Syria could re-ignite conflict in Iraq. According to Reuters, al Qaeda is believed to be reorganising in the caves and valleys of Anbar province. In other signs of internal unrest, hundreds of Iraqis stormed the West Qurna-2 oilfield in southern Iraq demanding employment, according to Reuters. No one was injured in the security breach. According to an unnamed West Qurna worker, “[p]rotesters were on a rampage. They were asking for jobs. We got scared and left and escaped to other headquarters in Basra”.

In an interview with the Associated Press (AP), Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, a Shi‘ite, warned the international community that a victory for the Syrian rebels could “create a new extremist haven
and destabilize the wider Middle East” while also encouraging sectarian violence in Iraq and Lebanon. Two days following the Maliki’s warning, Iraqi security forces opened fire into Syria on positions of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), according to al Arabiya. Reuters reports that Syrian rebels seized control of half of the north-eastern Syrian town of Yaarabiya, including a post along the Iraqi border. A Syrian rebel commander indicated that the Iraqi army fired at rebels across the border after a Scud missile launched from Syria landed in Iraq. Additionally, some Syrian army soldiers fled into Iraq after rebels took the Rabia border crossing. Reuters indicated that Iraq closed the crossing after the incident. In a later account of events, Arab News asserts that Iraqi troops actually crossed the border into Syria, a fact that the Iraqi government acknowledged.

In other regional news, Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)’s leader Abdullah Ocalan emerged from solitary confinement in Turkey on 26 February to address pro-Kurdish members of parliament, explaining his plans to end the 28-year-old conflict that has killed over 40,000 people, reports Voice of America (VOA). Ocalan has been negotiating a peace deal with Turkey’s government and stated, “we must establish a new democratic republic in line with the new world and the new Middle East”, adding “the Kurdish problem can only be solved with Turkey’s democratisation”.

Reuters reports that militants killed 136 Iraqis in February, fewer than in January 2013, including 88 civilians, 22 soldiers and 26 policemen. Meanwhile, 33 militants were killed by Iraqi security forces. A number of other security events were reported, including those summarised below:

- A car bomb exploded near a public market in Khan Bani Saad, Diyala province, killing five people and injuring ten others on 26 February, according to Kuwait News Agency (KUNA).
- On 28 February, a series of bomb attacks targeting Shi’ites in Baghdad and towns in southern Iraq killed at least 23 people and wounded dozens more, according to Agence France Presse (AFP).
- Three separate attacks in Shi’ite-majority regions on 03 March in central Iraq killed an estimated four people and wounded fourteen others, according to Gulf Today. Sources say the deadliest attacks occurred northeast of the capital in the village of Husseiniya, where simultaneous roadside bombs killed three civilians.
- On 04 March, AFP reports a suicide bomber injured Shi’ite pilgrims at a holy site in Karbala. Ten civilians were injured in the attack.
- In Mosul, Iraqi officials report that a suicide car bomber attacked a security checkpoint in the northern city, killing five policemen and wounding twelve civilians, according to Star Tribune.

In economic news, Russian energy giant Gazprom announced the signing of a new production sharing agreement in Iraqi Kurdistan, taking an eighty per cent share of the project, according to Trend. Hydrocarbon reserves at the Halabja project are estimated at 90 to 100 million tonnes.

In humanitarian news, following the 09 February attack on Iranian dissidents inhabiting Camp Liberty, Mujahedeen e Khalq (MEK) called upon the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) on 27 February to provide better protection and relocation assistance for the group’s members living in the camp, according to AP. Also, the British parliament moved to officially recognise the Kurdish genocide on 28 February, according to Hurriyet News. Sweden and Norway have already recognised the genocide which wiped out 4,000 of 4,655 Kurdish villages in northern Iraqi between April 1987 and August 1988. An estimated 250 villages were subjected to chemical attacks by the Iraqi government.

Mali

The French-led offensive in northern Mali dealt a series of blows to jihadist rebels in a string of attacks that targeted and killed high-level members of Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM), according to the New York Times (NYT). On 03 March, Chad’s military claims to have killed Moktar Belmoktar, who masterminded the attacks against the Algerian In Amenas gas plant in January, reports France 24. Belmoktar, who was purportedly ousted from AQIM in October 2012, remained one of the fiercest militants in the Sahel. Although Chadian troops assert that he was killed in a firefight when they attacked and destroyed a rebel hideout in the Adrar des Ifoghas mountains, Reuters notes that French Admiral Edouard Guillaud, the French army’s chief of staff said he was “extremely cautious” about the reported death of Belmoktar.

French and Chadian forces also reportedly killed Abou Zeid, one of AQIM’s most senior leaders in North Africa, on 01 March, reports CNN. Coalition troops bombarded Zeid’s hideout near Aguellhok, a village situated along the Algerian border and frequently used by AQIM. Zeid was elevated to his position as a counter to rival jihadist Moktar Belmoktar. Notoriously brutal, he was responsible for

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1 The Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) is considered a terrorist organisation by Turkey, the United States, the European Union and NATO.

2 Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK) is a group of dissident Iranian nationals based in Iraq. Once considered by the United States as a terrorist organisation, the group was removed from the US Terrorist List in 2012.
the executions of members of Malian civil and security services, as well as targeting expatriate aid workers living in the Sahel. After the French intervention, Zeid fled from Timbuktu to Kidal before finally retreating to Aguelhok. According to the Militant Leadership Monitor (MLM) published by Jamestown Foundation, Zeid was born in Algeria and was radicalised during the 1990s Algerian insurgency. Zeid became something of an expert in smuggling and illicit arms trade in North Africa. After the fall of the Libyan regime, he centralised a network of jihadists and weapons dealers in Libya, even arranging to stay in a mansion built for Gaddafi while he resided in Timbuktu.

France estimates that its military will remain in Mali until at least July 2013, reports the Associated Press (AP). The announcement revised earlier estimates in January and February that suggested French troops would withdraw within a matter of weeks. A senior US State Department official previously warned that a French intervention that succeeds in stabilising the country could actually take years. Mauritanian President Mohamed Ould Abdel Aziz announced his country’s willingness to send troops to Mali on 04 March as part of a UN peacekeeping operation, reports AFP. “We will take on this responsibility as soon as possible”, he told President of Niger, Mahamadou Issoufou. The announcement reversed statements previously made by the Mauritanian government, which was initially opposed to sending its military in support of the French-led intervention. British Foreign Secretary William Hague also travelled to West Africa; on 04 March, he met with leaders from the African Union and European Union in Mali, including the head of the African-led intervention force, to discuss the country’s ongoing political transition.

On 01 March, the United Nations refugee agency (UNHCR) urged the international community to support a broad stabilisation agenda that focuses on peace building and reconciliation while resolving security problems in northern Mali. “UNHCR believes that reconciliation efforts are urgently needed, together with efforts to combat impunity, to encourage peaceful coexistence between communities, to help long-term stabilisation and security and to prevent Mali’s displacement crisis from becoming more protracted”, said Adrian Edwards, a UNHCR spokesperson for Mali. Ethnic divisions in northern Mali continue to complicate reintegration efforts. Arabs and Tuaregs constitute the majority of the displaced population and are in fear of reprisal attacks, according to Edwards. 430,000 people have been displaced since the start of the rebellion in January 2012. Approximately 260,000 are internally displaced while nearly 170,000 fled to neighbouring countries.

Syria

Encouraged by recent rebel advances, Brigadier General Salim Idriss, commander of the Free Syrian Army (FSA), indicated he was ready to meet with Syrian army officers and “discuss how to keep order in the country” should Syrian President Bashar al Assad give up power, a clear indication that the FSA is preparing security plans to stabilise Syria in a post-Assad scenario, according to The Daily Star.

A shipment of advanced weapons reached Syrian rebels via Turkey, aimed at narrowing the arms gap between Assad forces and the rebels, according to Reuters. The shipment included shoulder-held missiles, anti-aircraft and armour-piercing weapons, mortar bombs and rocket launchers, along with money to pay fighters. The supplies were being distributed through a new command structure which centralises control over rebel units and facilitate monitoring of Islamists linked to al Qaeda. To date, rebels have largely relied upon light weapons smuggled from neighbouring countries, often financed by Gulf States. The Syrian National Coalition (SNC) received its latest boost of foreign support on 28 February when the US announced its decision to provide USD 60 million in non-lethal aid directly to the rebels, according to The Daily Star. Syria’s opposition leadership indicated that US assistance was not enough, requesting weapons, equipment that could remove rubble, and search and rescue canines to assist the opposition with locating survivors of regime attacks, reports National Public Radio (NPR). FSA leader Colonel Abdul Jabbar Akaidi dismissed US concerns that arming rebels would be tantamount to arming jihadists. According to Akaidi, he is willing “to sign a piece of paper that will take me to any court-martial anywhere in the world if these weapons fall in the hands of ‘terrorists’”.

Syrian pro-Assad online activists claimed responsibility for hacking a Twitter account of the French news agency Agence France-Presse (AFP). The “Syrian Electronic Army” hacked into the AFP account on 27 February posting images of the Syrian conflict. The group has previously claimed it successfully hacked into the websites of Sky News Arabia and al Jazeera Mobile. A number of other security events were reported, including those summarised below:

- Assad forces claim to have successfully retaken a strategic highway leading from Hama to the Aleppo international airport landing a major blow to rebel efforts, reports The National.
- In Damascus, fighting between Syrian and rebel forces raged near the twelfth century Umayyad Mosque in the walled Old City on 27 February, reports AP. On 28 February, The Peninsula reported that rebels had finally captured the mosque.
- On 02 March, fighters of the al Nusra Front, a jihadist group, claimed it had seized control of a checkpoint on Syria’s border with Iraq, according to Middle East North Africa Financial Network (MENAFN).
Amateur video obtained by Reuters suggests that FSA fighters successful downed a government helicopter near Aleppo on 02 March. It is the second time in recent days that rebels have shot down a helicopter.

According to AFP, hundreds of Syrian and rebel soldiers were killed in a battle for a police academy located in the northern province of Aleppo this week.

Al Arabiya reports that Assad forces launched a major assault to recapture rebel-held portions of Homs. Also in the northern city of Raqa, located near the Turkish border, fighting was reported between Syrian forces and rebels.

Human Rights Watch investigators visiting Aleppo have concluded that the Syrian government fired at least four ballistic missiles into civilian neighbourhoods in recent weeks, killing more than fourteen people, according to Reuters. Also, on 02 March, MENAFN reports that Syrian opposition leaders accused Assad forces of carrying out the mass execution of 72 people and burning their bodies in the town of Sfeira, in eastern Aleppo province.

In diplomatic developments, Turkish Foreign Minister Ahmet Davutoglu met with NATO Secretary-General Anders Fogh Rasmussen in Rome on 28 February, in advance of the Friends of Syria Group meeting, according to Trend. Turkish diplomatic sources say that their discussions focused on an upcoming NATO visit to Turkey, the latest developments in Syria and NATO’s air-defence mission in Turkey. Davutoglu suggested that the international community should play a more effective role in the Syrian crisis and that the Syrian people were in dire need of assistance. On 01 March, Reuters reports that US President Barack Obama and Russian President Vladimir Putin both expressed agreement on the “need to advance a political transition” in order to end violence and stressed the importance of US Secretary of State John Kerry and Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov’s continued engagement on the crisis. Meanwhile, the six Gulf States criticised the inaction of the international community over Syria while at the same time condemning Iran’s interference in the conflict, according to AFP. However, UK Foreign Secretary William Hague signalled that the UK could start arming Syrian rebels if the death toll and humanitarian crisis continued to worsen, according to The Guardian. Hague noted, “I don’t rule out anything for the future. If this is going to go on for months, or years, and more tens of thousands of people are going to die, and countries like Iraq and Lebanon and Jordan are going to be destabilised, it is not something we can ignore”. On 02 March, Iranian officials announced that Syrian President Bashar al Assad “will take part in next year’s presidential election” underscoring the Iranian position that it was up to the Syrian people to choose their own leader, according to AFP.

UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) head, Valerie Amos, says the Syrian fighting is “completely stretching the UN’s capacity”. Amos explained that the pace at which the crisis is evolving is much faster than the pace UN agencies are capable of responding and expressed concern over the rising costs of assistance. “We asked for USD 1.5 billion for our response for the next six months…those figures are already out of date, given the projections we had at the end of last year and where we are now”, said Amos. UNHCR official Udo Janz said, “We might be reaching a moment of reckoning in the region”, because of the refugee crisis. Janz explained that the number of refugees in Lebanon and Jordan could reach 400,000 respectively while Turkey could see 300,000 and Iraq 100,000 refugees. On 02 March, Syrian rebels hanged two Palestinian refugees living in the Yarmouk refugee camp outside Damascus on accusations of aiding the Assad government, according to AFP. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights indicated that hangings of people suspected of working for Assad have also been reported in Hama and Aleppo.

Spill-over Violence
Fierce fighting between Lebanese Hezbollah and Syrian rebels inside Syria has escalated tensions on both sides of the border, reports The Washington Post. A report presented to the UN Security Council by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed “grave concern” over the number of Hezbollah members fighting in Syria as well as Lebanese Sunnis fighting against Assad forces in Syria. Observers say that one misstep by Shi’ite or Sunni militants in Lebanon could ignite a crisis. Timur Goksel, a former senior adviser to the UN monitoring team in Lebanon stated, “[Lebanese Hezbollah] are involved in the war on the other side [of the border], but they are trying not to bring it to Lebanon. The problem is this thing can collapse at any moment”, indicating the possibility for a “very serious outbreak of violence” in Lebanon. Reuters reports on 04 March that Lebanese and Iraqi Shi’ite fighters have joined fellow Syrian Shi’ite gunmen to defend a holy Shi’ite shrine south of Damascus.

Today’s Zaman reports that the massive influx of refugees has created significant security concerns for Jordan’s police forces. Police Commissioner Lieutenant General Hussein al Majali states, “[t]he major challenge for us is the Syrian issue”, referring not only to the huge exodus of displaced persons but also from the potential spread of extremism and fanaticism that has begun to take root in Syria. The overcrowded Zaatari refugee camp has been the site of a number of violent incidents in recent months. Brigadier General Muhammed Habashnek, who commands Dunibh and other checkpoints in northern Jordan, indicated that he had just received 4,605 refugees in a single night. Habashnek said there was some shelling across the border into Jordanian territory, but this was unintentional, noting, “[o]nly if there is hostility against Jordan are we authorized to respond”.

In an unprecedented incident, armed men from Syria carried out an ambush in Anbar province, western Iraq, killing 48 unarmed Syrian soldiers and nine Iraqi guards on 04 March, according to al Jazeera. The Syrian soldiers had crossed into Iraq, fleeing fighting

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1 The six Gulf Cooperative Council (GCC) countries are Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and United Arab Emirates.
from the Yaarabiya border-crossing on 01 March. Iraqi Prime Minister Nour al-Maliki’s spokesman Ali Mussawi said the ambush “confirms our fears of the attempt of some to move the conflict to Iraq, but we will face these attempts by all sides with all of our power”.

IED & Demining

The CFC publishes a weekly IED and Demining Events map. This global compilation identifies and links to articles pertaining to IED events and demining efforts. (This report covers 26 February to 04 March 2013).

GLOBAL NEWS

Mali: A car bomb exploded in the northern Mali town of Kidal on 26 February, killing seven people, according to BBC. The attack is thought to have targeted a Tuareg-manned checkpoint.

Thailand: Two security officials were killed and a dozen wounded when a bomb-laden motorcycle detonated in Yala province on 02 March, reports AFP. The motorcycle attack followed twin bombings on 01 March in Narathiwat province.

Ireland: An estimated one hundred homes were evacuated in North Ireland’s second city Londonberry after four mortar bombs were found in a van in a residential area on 04 March, according to Reuters.

For more IED & Demining news click here or click on the map above.