This document provides complex coverage of global events from 19 – 25 March 2013 with hyperlinks 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**

In a meeting with US Secretary of State John Kerry, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki rebuffed US calls to stop Iranian planes from transporting weapons to Syria through Iraqi airspace, reports United Press International (UPI). Kerry told Maliki that Iranian arms shipments to Syria were undermining US efforts to end the Syrian civil war. A US official stated that the sheer number of Iranian over flights indicates that “can’t possibly be only humanitarian”. Maliki’s concern that the overthrow of Syrian President Bashar al Assad could further embolden dissatisfied Iraqi Sunnis and fuel instability could be driving his toleration of Iranian shipments, writes the New York Times.

A wave of bombings and assassinations killed an estimated sixty people on the tenth anniversary of the US-led war in Iraq, according to Associated Press (AP). The bombings occurred in the predominately Shi’ite neighbourhoods of Baghdad while other attacks occurred in the northern city of Mosul and Babil province in southern Iraq on 19 March. The powerful Shi’ite cleric Muqtada al Sadr threatened to join with other factions boycotting Maliki’s Shi’ite-led government, citing the government’s inability to ensure citizens’ safety. On 20 March, Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) claimed responsibility for the anniversary attacks, signalling the groups’ growing strength in Iraq, according to NBC News. AQI stated, “[w]hat has reached you on Tuesday [19 March] is just the first drop of rain, and a first phase, for by God’s will after this we will have our revenge”. Since January 2013, suicide attackers have struck nearly twice a week, a rate that Iraq has not experienced in several years.

The Iraqi government has postponed provincial elections scheduled for April 2013, citing security concerns in the wake of a string of bombings and assassinations, reports Associated Press (AP). A candidate for Fallujah city council and member of the Iraqiya block Ahmed Jihad was assassinated by unidentified persons on 20 March, according to Turkey’s Anadolu Agency. The same day, yet another
assassination occurred against Sheikh Athrowi al Koriz al Shimmari, a leader of the Shammar Bedouin tribe in Mosul while he departed a mosque. On 24 March, Iraqi authorities report gunmen killed five soldiers in Mosul and assassinated Salah Khabat, a political candidate for the upcoming provincial council elections, in Baghdad, according to AP.

Ten years after the US-led war in Iraq toppled Iraq’s President Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi economy is growing by 9 per cent per year, yet most Iraqis indicate they have not benefitted from the economic upturn, noting high food prices and the government’s failure to rebuild roads and utilities, according to Voice of America (VOA). While the constitution stipulates that Iraq must transform to a capital market country, the government still dominates the economy and hinders reform. After a two month decline in oil output, Middle East Online reports that Iraq’s oil exports increased from 2.36 million barrels per day (BPD) in January 2013 to 2.54 million in February. Also, Iraqi Oil Minister Abdelkarim al Luaybi announced the government plans to invest USD 173 billion in energy infrastructure over the next five years.

After months of Sunni protests largely centred in Anbar province, Sheikh Hamid al Shuka, head of the Anbar tribal council announced, “we [tribal leaders] have agreed to form an opinion body from among those protesting in Ramadi (the capital of Anbar province)”, according to Asharq al Awsat. Shuka stated, “[t]he first task of the opinion body will be to negotiate with the government on the protesters’ demands”. The opinion body comprises 26 members including 8 tribal elders, 6 religious leaders, 6 intellectuals and 6 youth demonstrators while excluding politicians. In a major announcement, jailed Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK) leader Abdullah Ocalan ordered a cease-fire and withdrawal of fighters from Turkish territory, according to the Reuters. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds gathered in the regional centre of Diyarbakir, cheered and waved banners of Ocalan. Addressing the crowd, Ocalan said, “Let guns be silenced and politics dominate”, adding “The stage has been reached where our armed forces should withdraw beyond the [Turkish] borders...It’s not the end. It’s the start of a new era”. According to the article, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan faces risks by opposing the conservative establishment as he extends cultural and language rights to Kurds in an effort to facilitate peace talks with the PKK.

In post-war Iraq, specialists are seeking the cause of rising birth defects, according to ABC News. Samira Alani a doctor in Fallujah specialising in birth defects states, “it’s common now in Fallujah for newborns to come out with massive multiple systemic defects, immune problems, massive central nervous system problems, massive heart problems, skeletal disorders, babies being born with two heads...really, really, really horrific nightmarish types of defects”, reports the Huffington Post. Al Jazeera correspondent Dahr Jamail reports that the current rate of birth defects in Fallujah has surpassed those of Hiroshima and Nagasaki after the nuclear attacks in World War II.

Mali

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A suicide bomber killed a Malian soldier in Timbuktu and wounded eight others near the historic city’s airport on 21 March, reports the Associated Press (AP). The attack marks the first of its kind in Timbuktu, raising security concerns in a region that French forces claimed to have liberated weeks earlier and fueling fears that the country will return to the control of militant Islamists when French troops depart. At least seven people were killed in GAO between 24-25 March during a French and Malian military operation tasked to “clean up” the city. According to Oumar Wahab, a leader for the Movement for the Oneness and Jihad in West Africa (MUJAO), nine mujahedeen slipped through a French checkpoint to successfully attack a Malian army camp, reports Agence France-Presse.

France hosted talks last week to discuss the post-war development and capacity-building initiatives that might stave off future attacks by West African militants in the fragile country, reports BBC. Meeting in Lyon France on 19 March, French and Malian officials addressed the key issue of local governance. The parties agreed on the need to reinforce Mali’s weak state institutions. Additional priorities include public health, rural development, water and sanitation. National Public Radio reported that France continued its push for a UN peacekeeping force in Mali last week. The Security Council will consider the issue on 27 March.

The United States officially declared the extremist group Ansar Dine a terrorist organisation on 21 March. The Washington Post writes that the designation highlights a broader counter-terrorism policy pursued by the Obama administration in the Sahel and North Africa. The US established a drone base in neighbouring Niger in February. According to the Post, “The Predator drones in Niger, a landlocked and dirt-poor country, give the Pentagon a strategic foothold in West Africa. Niger shares a long border with Mali, where an al Qaeda affiliate and other Islamist groups have taken root. Niger also borders Libya and Nigeria, which are also struggling to contain armed extremist movements”.

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

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Reports surfaced on 20 March that Philippe Verdon, a French national kidnapped from his hotel in Hombori, Mali on 24 November 2011 was executed by Al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) on 10 March. According to Mauritania’s ANI news agency, AQIM announced that Verdon was a “spy” and said, “The French President Hollande is responsible for the lives of the other French hostages”. French President Hollande summoned his top defence officials, Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius and Interior Minister Manuel Valls to a meeting after AQIM claimed to have beheaded Verdon. On 25 March, Fabius told France 24 the government had no proof of his death, but officials consider Verdon “comme décédé” (as dead).

The Malian crisis continues to jeopardise cattle herders across the Sahel, reports All Africa. Pastoralists from Niger traditionally move into the Gao region between December and February; however, last year the conflict trapped many further south in Burkina Faso. Moreover, Malian herders compounded the predicament by crossing into Burkina Faso. The influx of Nigeriens and Malians has strained resources in Burkina Faso, where as many as 52 per cent of refugees are food insecure. The migration has also resulted in local level skirmishes. Oxfam, an international humanitarian organisation, estimated Malian refugees transported 100,000-200,000 livestock animals into either Niger or Mauritania, placing citizens on both sides of the border at risk of food insecurity and inadequate protection. Rene Alfonse, who leads several herding organisations in Mali, said “About 50 percent of Malian cattle are under threat of being destroyed”.

Displacements continue in western Mali, according to Reuters, where as many as 20,000 Malians have crossed into Mauritania since mid-January 2013. Many Arabs and Tuaregs cited fears of “ethnic reprisals” committed by Malian government officials as retribution for the initial Tuareg-led rebellion in January 2012. Refugees travel to Fassala, on the Malian side of the border, before moving into Mauritania and registering at the Mbera camp, which now houses 75,000 refugees. According to the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF), Mauritania struggles to provide adequate food and protection to the refugees, largely due to the drought that swept the region in 2012.

Syria

Jihadists are increasingly dominating the Syrian opposition, according to the Wall Street Journal (WSJ). Groups such as Jaibat al Nusra have long been the Syrian opposition’s most organised fighting force. Al Nusra, led by al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) veterans, is reported to have 10,000 fighters in Syria. Seth Jones, a RAND Corporation al Qaeda expert, states, “As this war drags on against Assad and as long as they [extremists] are able to build up their capabilities, it’s going to make it all the more harder to target them once the regime falls”. Jones suggests that al Nusra recently helped rebels capture a major air defence base in a strategic region of southern Syria near Jordan and the Golan Heights. Experts contend that al Nusra and its allies already control much of northern Syria. The Washington Post says al Nusra “runs more than half of Aleppo” and has indicated that the group will fight any post-Assad secular government in their quest to impose strict Islamic law in rebel-controlled regions of the country. The Christian Science Monitor reports that Colonel Riad al Asaad, a top military leader of the Free Syrian Army (FSA) suffered injuries from a car bomb on 25 March in the eastern town of Mayadeen,; he was transported to Turkey for treatment. His injury is described as a blow to FSA morale. Prominent pro-government Sunni cleric Saeed Ramadan al-Bouti and an estimated forty people died following a suicide attack inside the imam’s Damascus Ummayyad Mosque, according to NPR. In response to the attack, President Assad vowed to purge his country of “extremist forces”, according to the Hurriyet Daily News. On 22 March, US President Obama expressed concern over Syria’s future, stating, “something has been broken in Syria, and it’s not going to be put back together perfectly immediately, even after Assad leaves”, adding “the outcome in Syria is not going to be ideal”, reports The Guardian.

The top US military commander in Europe, Admiral James Stavridis indicated that NATO has prepared contingency plans for potential intervention in Syria, according to AP. According to the report, US forces are prepared if called upon by the UN and member countries. Stavridis stated discussions with NATO member countries focused on a range of topics, including enforcing a no-fly zone, providing weapons to opposition forces and imposing an arms embargo. US Assistant Secretary of State for Population Refugees, and Migration, Anne Richard noted the Obama administration was not optimistic about a negotiated settlement in the crisis. According to Business Insider, the US Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has stepped up efforts to support non-radical Sunni rebels to counter jihadist groups engaged in the conflict. The CIA is now providing intelligence to secular-leaning rebels to use against Assad forces in a campaign to influence which group will dominate in a post-Assad Syria. European Union (EU) foreign ministers continue to be deeply divided over whether to arm Syrian rebels, as the UK and France continue to push for easing of an EU arms embargo.

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according to AP. British Foreign Minister William Hague argued that the EU non-lethal equipment policy to the Syrian National Coalition must end if Syria’s primary opposition forces topple the Assad government. Meanwhile, the other 25 EU ministers continued to show support for the cautious views of German’s Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle, who asserts that sending weapons to Syrian opposition forces would likely result in “unintended consequences”.

Newly-elected Syrian opposition Prime Minister Ghassan Hitto said Syrian opposition groups will not engage in dialogue with the government of President Assad, according to Arab News. Opposition leaders indicated that the regime cancelled the opportunity for talks when the opposition moved to elect an interim premier and establish a government. Since the election of Hitto, the Syrian National Coalition has plunged into disarray, according to AP. On 24 March, President Mouaz al Khatib resigned. Soon thereafter, the coalition’s military chief, General Salim Idris refused to recognise the newly-elected prime minister of the interim government. Five other coalition members resigned from the opposition group earlier in the week thus signalling the current discord in this deeply divided coalition.

In the aftermath of an alleged chemical weapons attack in Syria on 19 March, Syria has asked the United Nations to investigate the incident, reports AFP. The Syrian opposition, Western nations and Russia have simultaneously called upon the international body to investigate the attack near Aleppo. Opposing sides both deny accusations of using banned chemical weapons. On 20 March, US President Barack Obama warned that if Syria let “the genie out of the bottle” by using chemical weapons, it would result in an international response and indicated US officials were “deeply sceptical of Syrian claims that rebels’ had used chemical weapons,” reports Bloomberg.

Jordan’s King Abdullah II warned on 20 March that a jihadist state could result from the Syrian conflict, reports AP. “The most worrying factors in the Syrian conflict are the issues of chemical weapons, the steady flow or sudden surge in refugees and a jihadist state emerging out of the conflict,” the King said. Despite these concerns, Abdullah continues to oppose foreign intervention in the conflict. The massive influx of refugees seeking safety from Syria has stressed Jordanian resources. It costs the cash-strapped country USD 550 million annually to host an estimated 500,000 Syrian refugees, equal to approximately 9 per cent of the country’s population. King Abdullah also stated concerns that agents linked to Assad or allied Hezbollah have formed sleeper cells in Jordan in efforts to destabilise the country. VOA reports that US President Barack Obama pledged an additional USD 200 million to Jordan for refugees.

In other regional events, Assad forces routed rebels near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights. The skirmish ended with 35 rebel deaths as the rebels sought to overruns the Quneitra region along the cease-fire line between Syria and Israel on 23 March, reports AP. The clashes raised Israeli concerns that Islamic extremists could dominate the front line with Israeli troops and gain a strategic staging ground for attacks on the Jewish state. Then on 25 March, the Daily Star reports Israel fired into Syrian territory and destroyed a machine gun position in the Golan Heights that had targeted Israeli soldiers. The Syrian Observatory for Human Rights stated, “fighters loyal to al Nusra Front, al Yarmouk Brigade, al Mutaz Billah Brigade and others took control of al Rai military checkpoint” adding, “The fighters seized the site after regime forces retreated. The 25 kilometre area located between the towns of Muzrib [near the Jordanian border] and Abdin [in the Golan] is now out of regime control”. According to Jewish news source Haaretz, the Israeli Defense Forces are now adjusting their focus and training efforts on Lebanon rather than Syria. With the weakening of Assad forces, Israel is concerned that Iran and Lebanese Hezbollah are gaining access to a “treasure trove of weapons in Syria”. Additionally a UN report indicates that Israel has doubled its over flights of Lebanese airspace in 2013 compared to last year, reports the Times of Israel.

The Golan Heights

In neighbouring Lebanon, three people died and at least eighteen more wounded in violent clashes in Tripoli, according to Reuters. Machine guns and rocket propelled grenades were used against adjacent districts in the city where residents are linked to opposing sides of the Syrian conflict. The conflict has also manifested in the capital Beirut and along the Syrian-Lebanese border. Lebanon’s government fell on 22 March when Prime Minister Najib Maqati announced the resignation of his 30-member cabinet, according to The Guardian. Mataqi’s government failed to decide on the extension of a security chief’s role and the composition of an election commission required for the June 2013 election. Following three days of sectarian clashes in the northern city of Tripoli, fighting ceased on 24 March after Lebanese President Sleiman deployed the army to the city, according to the Daily Star. Meanwhile, hardening sectarian positions in the country have exacerbated Lebanon’s instability.

United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) Antonio Guterres described the humanitarian crisis in Syria as “dramatic beyond description” and that the devastated country could take years to recover, even under the best of circumstances, according to the Washington Post. Registered refugees in neighbouring countries have reached 1.1 million; there are at least 500,000 additional

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unregistered asylum seekers. Guterres said the influx of refugees into Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey will have an “unimaginable impact on the economy, the society and the security of these countries”.

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 19 to 25 March 2013.

GLOBAL NEWS

Ireland: A foiled car bomb attack in Northern Ireland was intended for the hotel which will host the June 2013 G8 Summit, reports United Press International (UPI). A group called “Oglaigh Na hEireann” claims responsibility for the thwarted bomb attack.

Mali: A suicide attack has killed a Malian soldier in the historic city of Timbuktu, according to the BBC.

Turkey: Turkey’s Justice Ministry and the offices of its ruling AK Party were attacked with homemade bombs and a shoulder-fired missile in Ankara on 19 March, according to Reuters.

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