



Unrest Prevails in the Gulf; Uncertainty Looms around Idlib, Syria

Iran

President Rouhani threatened to suspend two of Iran's commitments made under the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. This implies that Iran would no longer limit low-enriched uranium stockpiles to 300 kilograms or heavy water stockpiles to 130 metric tons. Second, Iran would give the remaining parties in the JCPOA (Germany, France, the United Kingdom, the European Union, Russia and China) 60 days to fulfill their commitments to the oil sector and banking sector cooperation that Iran understands to be integral to the deal's implementation.

The United States reacted by piling on even more sanctions on Iranian metal exports: steel, aluminum, copper and iron. Both sides are preparing in case escalations lead to conflict. U.S. officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity, said four B-52s would be deployed to Arabian Gulf, though that number could change. The United States has regularly maintained a bomber presence in the region, and B-1 bombers were there as recently as last month. The B-52 is a long-range, nuclear capable bomber.¹

The USS Abraham Lincoln carrier strike group, which consists of the carrier and its powerful carrier air wing, as well as one cruiser and four destroyers earlier, was sent to the region.

On 15 May, Saudi tankers were attacked in Fujairah emirate, just outside the Strait, a narrow waterway separating Iran from the Arabian Peninsula where a fifth of global oil consumption passes from Middle East producers². UAE refrained from accusing Iran directly and described the incident as sabotage. Two days after Yemen's Houthi rebels carried out multiple drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities.

Syria

The situation in Idlib is passing through a period of dramatic deterioration as armed confrontations continue between government forces and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham. The Russian-backed

¹ (Reuters) <https://reut.rs/2Vkv6mU>

² (Reuters) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-oil-usa-iran-security-analysis/tanker-attacks-near-uae-expose-weaknesses-in-gulf-arab-security-idUSKCN1SL1BD>

Syrian forces captured five villages and the human cost was quite extensive.³ The incursion took the lives of around 120 civilians and led to the displacement of more than 150,000 people.⁴ Identifying a political solution doesn't seem within reach as both sides appear determined to continue these rounds of retaliation.⁵ Notably, Idlib's confrontations continue to violate the Russian-Turkish Sochi Agreement that stipulated an evacuation of terrorists and heavy weaponry from the region. Moscow enunciated that it intends to support the efforts made by Damascus to 'retaliate' against terrorist violations transpiring from Idlib.⁶ On the other hand, Ankara perceives the incursion as a threat to the Russian-Turkish cooperation.⁷

Yemen

The past week witnessed intermittent withdraws from key ports in Yemen. The Houthis relinquished their control over Hodeida, Salef and Ras Issa ports to the coast guard.⁸ These measures represent part of the agreement that was stipulated in Stockholm. However, the warring parties remain engaged in armed confrontations, thus accumulating a heavy challenge on the success of the Stockholm Agreement.⁹ This was further exacerbated after the Houthis claimed responsibility for conducting drone attacks against Saudi installations.¹⁰ These installations remain unknown; however, Saudi Arabia later clarified that two pumping oil stations were suffered damage as a result of drone attacks.¹¹

Iraq

In end of April, Blackwater founder Erik Prince has registered a subsidiary of his Hong-Kong based company in Iraq's city of Basra located in Iraq's oil-rich southern region, close to the border with Iran and Kuwait¹². Iraq will soon finalize a large-scale, long-term deal for the development of oil

³(Military.com) <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/05/13/syrian-troops-capture-5-villages-last-rebel-stronghold.html>

⁴ (Reuters) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-northwest/rebels-launch-counterattack-in-northwest-syria-statement-idUSKCN1SJ218>

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ (SANA) <https://sana.sy/en/?p=165224>

⁷ (France24) <https://www.france24.com/en/20190514-erdogan-accuses-syria-regime-undermining-turkey-russia-deal>

⁸ (BBCNews) <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48276769>

⁹ (NYTimes) <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/15/world/middleeast/yemen-government-houthi-fighting.html>

¹⁰(Reuters) <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-saudi/houthi-run-tv-says-yemeni-group-targeted-vital-saudi-installations-idUSKCN1SK0I4>

¹¹(Aljazeera)<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/05/yemen-houthis-target-saudi-installations-reports-190514075133749.html>

¹² (BaghdadPost) <https://www.thebaghdadpost.com/en/Story/38890/Blackwater-founder-registers-new-company-in-Iraq-s-Basra-reports>

fields in the South with Exxon and PetroChina. The 30-year contract will involve investments of US\$53 billion and potential returns for Baghdad of as much as US\$400 billion over its lifetime¹³.

US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made an unscheduled, fleeting visit to Iraq, amid growing tensions with Iran. Mr. Pompeo cancelled a trip to Berlin to meet Iraqi leaders during a four-hour stop in the capital Baghdad. He told the leaders that the US did not "want anybody interfering in their country" and asked them to protect US troops in Iraq. The State Department of USA has ordered all "non-emergency U.S. government employees" to leave Iraq amid soaring tensions with Iran, which backs proxy forces there.

¹³ <https://bit.ly/2Yfmgse>

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