



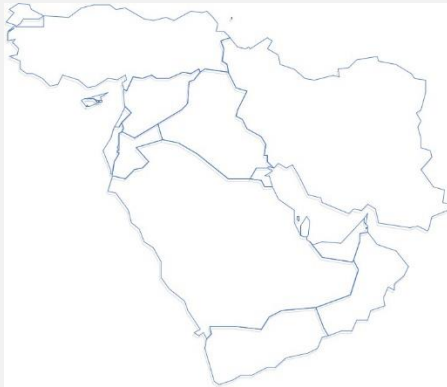
TALOS REGIONAL REPORT – 26 FEBRUARY 2021

Weekly highlights

The Biden administration formally notified other signatories this week of its willingness to commence negotiations with Iran to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The statement coincided with several minor yet symbolically significant measures aimed to reduce tensions and facilitate negotiations.

Reactions in Tehran were muted, with the Iranian Government reiterating its refusal to roll back nuclear activities unless US sanctions are lifted. Iran also proceeded to implement the Strategic Action Plan, albeit with a ‘technical understanding’ with the IAEA which allows necessary inspections to continue.

A diplomatic row over the killing of 13 Turkish hostages and related tensions over the US support for the YPG, highlighted challenges facing the US-Turkey partnership. Subsequent reconciliation attempts show intent to preserve strategic relations, yet Turkey’s acceleration of its campaign against the PKK is set to test the new US administration as it attempts to formulate a coherent policy towards Ankara.



The Talos Regional Report offers a weekly summary and analysis of the main strategic security developments in the region, with a focus on Turkey, Iran, Syria and the Gulf region from a regional perspective. The report is complementary to Talos’ Iraq coverage which offers unrivalled insight into Iraq’s security, political, economic and social developments. Reports are accessible through a secure online portal with interactive mapping and client-driven analysis.

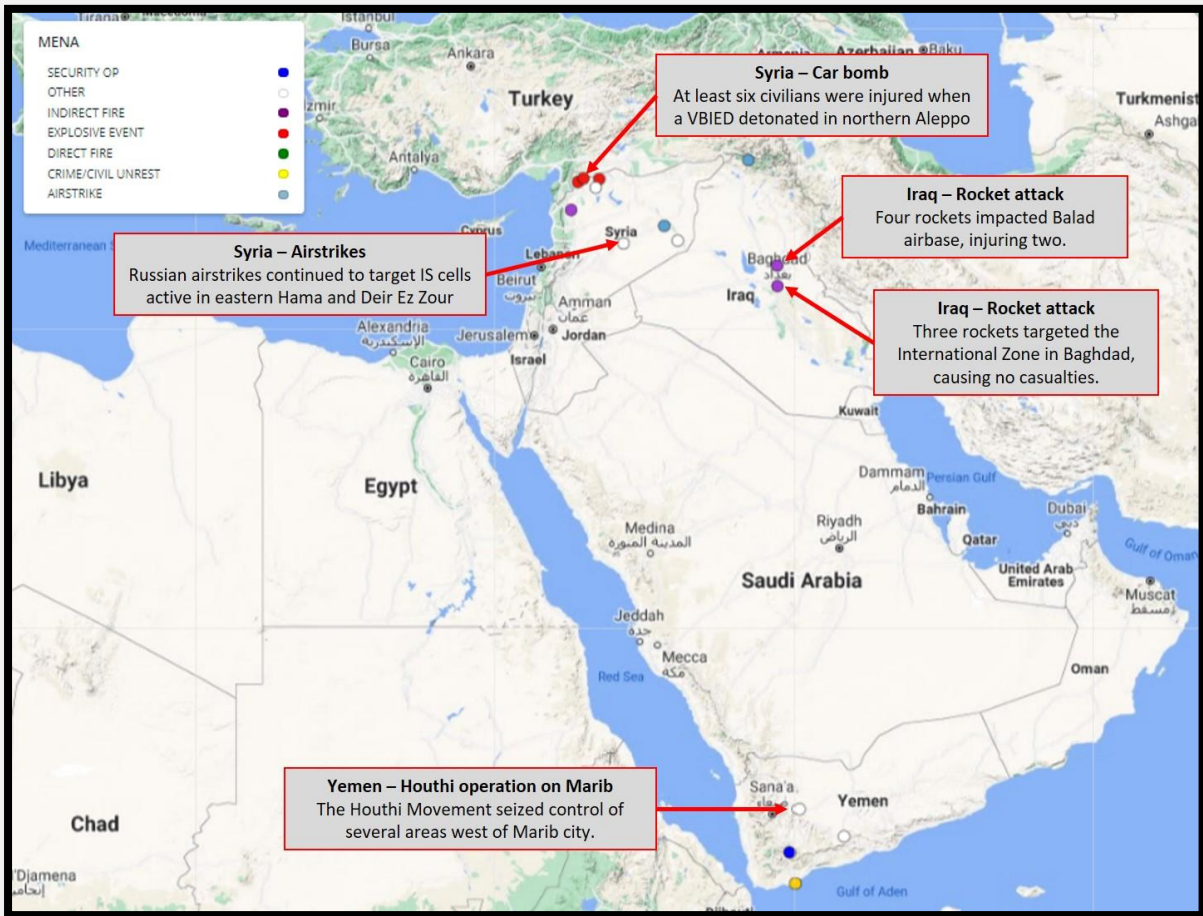
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Weekly regional snapshot



To access detailed interactive map, [click here](#)

Iran

In a phone call with President Erdogan, President Rouhani reportedly expressed Iran’s willingness to enhance bilateral ties and emphasized the need for solidarity between countries targeted by US sanctions. For his part, Erdogan reportedly expressed Turkey’s “wish for the new US administration to abandon unilateral sanctions” and reiterated support for the JCPOA. The phone call notably followed Foreign Minister Zarif’s earlier criticism of Turkey’s policies in Syria and Iraq in an interview with Iranian state media.

South Korea announced that it would release “a part of” the Iranian foreign assets currently frozen in the country under US sanctions. The funds reportedly amount to between \$7bn and \$10bn, with reports indicating South Korea agreed to release \$1bn. Earlier this month, Iran agreed to release the crew members of a South Korean vessel seized by Iran in January, and the South Korean announcement coincides with symbolic steps taken by the US to restart nuclear negotiations.



Syria

The International Coalition denied that there has been an increase in US troop levels in north-eastern Syria, following reports indicating plans to construct a new military base in the region. In a tweet on February 21, spokesperson Col. Wayne Marotto wrote the mission “hasn’t changed” and that “troop levels and bases haven’t increased.”

Turkey

Turkey’s Technology and Industry Minister Mustafa Varank congratulated the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on its successful mission to Mars. Writing on Twitter, Varank claimed “each new discovery in space has the potential of increasing international cooperation” and furthering “world peace.” The statement is a sign of rapprochement amidst UAE-Turkey tensions and strategic competition in North Africa, East Africa, and the Eastern Mediterranean Sea.

Iraq

On 18 February, [NATO ministers agreed to significantly expand the mission in Iraq](#) from around 500 personnel to around 4,000 personnel. This move followed several months of deliberations between international military forces and the Government of Iraq. The decision was supported by government officials yet was predictably criticised by Iran-aligned factions. In the days following, Shia-militia groups launched rocket attacks against Balad airbase and the US Embassy in Baghdad, with three injured in Balad.

Iraq and Saudi Arabi announced steps to open a third border crossing in Najaf province. According to Najaf Governor Luay al-Yasiri, the province will commence construction of a road to the border, with a view to increase bilateral trade and facilitate the movement of pilgrims.

Saudi Arabia & Yemen

The White House announced that an unclassified US intelligence report regarding the murder of Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi will be released “soon”, without specifying the timeline for the release. The report is widely expected to reveal additional details about the murder, with the potential to test Saudi Arabia’s relationship with the US and Turkey.

In a meeting with an EU delegation in Riyadh, the Secretary General of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) Nayef Bin Falah al-Hajraf, urged the EU to pressure the Houthi Movement to “stop attacks” on the Saudi mainland, and urged Iran to abandon its “support for various terrorist groups.”

UAE & Gulf Region

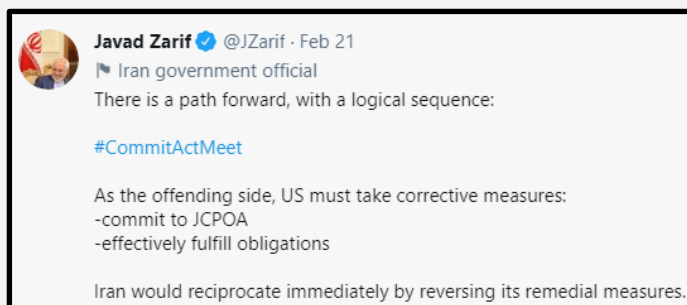
Qatari officials held separate meetings this week with delegations from the UAE and Egypt to discuss the implementation of the al-Ula agreement and bilateral ties. The meetings were the first held since the start of the Saudi-led diplomatic blockade in 2017 and follow the restoration of diplomatic relations in early January.



Iran reaffirms stance on nuclear issue despite US signals

The Biden administration formally notified other signatories this week of its willingness to commence negotiations with Iran to restore the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). On 19 February, State Department Spokesperson Ned Price confirmed that the US “would accept an invitation” to “attend a meeting of the P5+1 and Iran to discuss a diplomatic way forward on Iran’s nuclear program.” The administration previously rejected negotiations unless Iran comes back into compliance, with the statement representing the first formal step towards the US reentering the JCPOA.

The statement coincided with several minor yet, in the current context, symbolically significant measures aimed to reduce tensions and facilitate negotiations. US acting Ambassador to the UN, Richard Mills, informed the UN Security Council that the administration will withdraw a pending demand, submitted by the Trump administration, for UN sanctions to be reimposed. The US also eased previous restrictions imposed on the movements of Iranian diplomats accredited at the UN.



Despite these symbolic steps, the official US position remains unchanged. On 19 February, a White House Spokesperson reaffirmed that the US has “no plan to take additional steps” in response to Iranian demands for sanctions to be lifted. Tehran’s responses were likewise muted as

Government officials reiterated their refusal to roll back nuclear activities unless US sanctions are lifted. Foreign Minister Zarif voiced support for rescinding snapback UN sanctions, while reaffirming that negotiations will only commence once “all US sanctions are lifted.” Likewise, Khamenei tweeted that Iran will not accept any limitations on its nuclear activities, adding that it will enrich “to any extent necessary.”

As previously announced, the Iranian government also proceeded to implement the Strategic Action Plan and accordingly to withdraw its commitments under the Additional Protocol. In the days prior to the announcement, officials from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) arrived in Tehran for an emergency meeting, followed by an announcement that a “technical understanding” was reached with the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran (AEOI) that allows the IAEA to continue “necessary verification and monitoring activities for up to three months.”

According to the understanding, the AEOI – which under the Additional Protocol is obligated to provide the IAEA with data and surveillance footage on a monthly basis - will allow IAEA surveillance of nuclear facilities to continue but will withhold releasing the data for a period of three months unless sanctions are lifted. The head of the IAEA Rafael Grossi described the agreement as a temporary solution to “salvage the situation” while allowing political consultations to continue at other levels.

Overall, the developments this week are consistent with the challenges facing US and Iranian governments as they try to balance mutual intent to restore the JCPOA with political pressure to



avoid unilateral concessions and political backlash. Rhetorically, both sides reaffirmed their uncompromising stance on the core issue, yet the simultaneous undertaking of symbolic steps suggests pragmatic intent to alleviate pressure and facilitate negotiations. As previously discussed, both sides can be expected to tread carefully to avoid political repercussions.

In Iran, conservative reactions to the ‘technical understanding’ with the IAEA were predictably negative. In response, parliament proceeded to draft a report declaring the agreement a “clear violation” of the legal requirements stipulated by the Strategic Action Plan and announced the suspension of debates on the draft national budget submitted by the government. Conservative rhetoric was likewise strong, with opposition MPs and conservative media accusing the government of showing signs of weakness, and - by failing to implement the Strategic Action Plan - undermining Tehran’s key instrument of leverage.



AEOI Director Ali Akbar Salehi and IAEA Director-General Rafael Grossi in Tehran

To what extent the IAEA understanding violates the Strategic Action Plan is subject to interpretation, however, the government views the IAEA suspension as essentially providing a snapback option by temporarily withholding data without contravening the plan itself. Accordingly, government officials were quick to reaffirm that the Strategic Action Plan will be implemented in full. More importantly, the joint understanding with the IAEA is a carefully calibrated solution that successfully negotiates the need to appease domestic hard-line pressure and abide by the requirements of the Strategic Action Plan, while providing space for further negotiations amidst continuing US recalcitrance.

The conservative pushback is typical of domestic atmospherics, reflecting hardline convictions that US concessions can be obtained by exerting pressure, both through ramping up nuclear activities



and utilizing proxy militias. Following the Erbil rocket attack on 15 February, Iran-linked factions conducted additional attacks this week against [Balad Airbase](#) and the [US Embassy in Baghdad](#) on 20 and 22 February, respectively. Both attacks were limited to no more than four 107mm rockets, and only three injuries were recorded. Even so, following the Erbil attack these incidents represent a clear escalation in proxy activity patterns and an end to a previously announced ceasefire.



Aftermath of rocket attack in Baghdad, February 22

Although primarily assessed in the context of Iranian opposition to US troop presence – following last week’s [announcement to expand the NATO mission in the country](#) – the attacks likewise reflect IRGC intent to maintain pressure on nuclear negotiations. Assuming Tehran’s approval of the operation, the attacks were undoubtedly considered in the context of ongoing diplomatic overtures. Iran denied involvement but refrained from any notable pushback. This remains consistent with a two-pronged pressure campaign involving proxy activity and the implementation of the strategic action plan, collectively aimed at forging additional US concessions.

Meanwhile, the Biden administration is facing pressure to avoid politically charged accusations of pursuing a policy of appeasement and weakness. Additionally, legitimate strategic concerns pertain to the risk that regional adversaries will be incentivized by such perceptions to adopt a more assertive posture against US interests. The announced intent to restart negotiations was undoubtedly the result of weeks if not months of deliberation and policy consultation. However, the timing of the announcement only days after the killing of a coalition contractor in Erbil, will be

construed by many as concessional to Iranian proxy aggression. Similarly, the decision to revoke the FTO designation of the Houthi Movement was followed by the start of the Houthi offensive on Marib and an increase in drone-attacks targeting the Saudi mainland.

Beyond condemning the attacks, the US response was initially muted, yet airstrikes targeting Iran-linked facilities in eastern Syria on 25 February is indicative of a strategic approach combining



State Department Spokesperson Ned Price

diplomatic engagements with punitive efforts.¹ Commenting on the rocket attacks in Iraq on 22 February, State Department spokesman Ned Price said the US “will hold Iran responsible for the attacks and by the provocations of its proxies,” but that it will not “lash out” and contributed to “their attempts to further destabilize Iraq.” The limited airstrikes subsequently carried out in Syria were calibrated to signal a message while limiting political pushback in Iraq.

On one level, this mixed response indicates the administration is still evaluating its long-term policy. At the same time, the absence of a clear policy and the administration’s demonstrated intent to apply a combination of diplomacy and military operations has negotiation value. Conflicting messages could potentially challenge Iran’s approach. Likewise, a lack of clear US policy in the region leaves room for manoeuvring in other negotiations, both for the US as well as regional governments attempting to establish leverage.

In the short-term nuclear deliberations can be expected to continue, with the IAEA understanding assessed to alleviate immediate pressure over Iran’s nuclear activities. This will allow the administration some additional space to test its negotiation approach and formulate a coherent policy. Any significant breakthrough in the short term is therefore unlikely, yet the US may entertain further symbolic steps and signal moves to further the process.

¹ Production for this feature was completed before the airstrikes on 26 February. A more thorough evaluation of the operation will be included in next week’s regional report.



US-Turkey tensions highlight strategic challenges

A diplomatic row over the killing of 13 Turkish hostages and related tensions over US support for the YPG, highlight the continuing challenges facing the US-Turkey partnership. Subsequent reconciliation attempts show intent on both sides to preserve strategic relations, yet Turkey's acceleration of its campaign against the PKK is set to test the new administration as it attempts to formulate a coherent policy towards Ankara.

Diplomatic tensions between Turkey and the US increased in February, resulting from the US response to conflicting claims by Ankara and the PKK-linked People's Defense Units (HPG), over the death of 13 Turkish citizens during Turkey's Operation Eagle Claw-2 in Iraqi Kurdistan. The HPG maintained the victims were killed as a result of a Turkish airstrike, while a Turkish statement claimed that the 13 Turkish nationals were held hostage and executed by the PKK. The US State Department's response condemned the incident, but called into question the veracity of Turkish claims by stating "if reports of the death of Turkish civilians at the hands of the PKK, a designated terrorist organization, are confirmed."

Reactions in Ankara were predictably strong, with President Erdogan accusing the US of "standing on the side" of terrorists and Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu calling out the West's "double standard" on terrorism. The Turkish Foreign Ministry also summoned US Ambassador David Satterfield to convey "in its strongest possible terms" its objections to the statement. The US subsequently backtracked its earlier ambiguity, with Blinken calling Cavusoglu on 15 February to express condolences "for the deaths of Turkish hostages in northern Iraq and affirmed our view that PKK terrorists bear responsibility."

Efforts to reduce tensions were reciprocated by President Erdogan who this week reaffirmed his support for the US-Turkey partnership, by saying that Turkey seeks a "win-win" relationship with the US. Erdogan also reiterated that the "common interests" between the two countries "far outweigh any differences." The President acknowledged that relations had been "seriously tested" but said the strategic partnership has overcome "all kinds of difficulties."

The row and ambiguity evident in subsequent reconciliation attempts highlight a continuous struggle for both governments to formulate a coherent policy that maintains cordial relations on a strategic level despite conflicting objectives on the ground. For the US, this involves the pledge to maintain support for the YPG-dominated SDF, as part of a wider effort to retain a footprint in Syria, while retaining the US-Turkey partnership and preserving NATO cohesion. For Turkey, the challenge likewise entails preserving relations with the US and the West more broadly while furthering regional efforts to reduce PKK presence.

However, the potential for associated tensions is set to increase given Turkey's demonstrated intent this month to accelerate anti-PKK operations in the region with the launch of Operation Eagle Claw-2 and an associated increase in threats to eliminate PKK-presence in the Sinjar district. This coincides with an accelerated crackdown on suspected PKK-supporters in Turkey, related pressure on the pro-Kurdish HDP Party and a visible increase in anti-YPG rhetoric in government-affiliated media.



So far, these developments do not directly trespass upon areas of US strategic importance in the region, yet each is set to indirectly test the new US administration which has yet to formulate a coherent policy on Turkey and Syria – two separate but inextricably linked matters. In this context, Turkey’s accelerated campaign in Iraq during February and its strong reactions to the US statement over the PKK killings show intent in Ankara to clearly communicate to the new US administration its zero-tolerance policy against the PKK.

Likewise, Turkey’s posturing over Sinjar is set to indirectly test US policy in north-eastern Syria, given Turkey’s long-term plan to establish a strategic triangle of influence along the Iraq-Syria border to encircle and intensify pressure on the YPG-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces. This week, coalition spokesperson Wayne Marotto notably denied recent reports of an increase in coalition support in north-eastern Syria, following earlier reports that the coalition intends to construct additional bases and increase troop levels in areas within this ‘strategic triangle.’

The US nominally intends to increase support for the YPG but has yet to announce or demonstrate clear policy preferences. In the short term, associated ambiguity raises the potential for the Turkish government to adopt a more assertive stance, test limits and capitalise on current conditions to further regional objectives.

Weekly incidents

Please see full interactive map [Here](#)

Country	
Iran	On 23 February, at least two people were killed and several injured when Iranian security forces opened fire on individuals involved in fuel smuggling in the Saravan, southeastern Iran.
Iraq	On 20 February, four rockets impacted Balad Air Base, southern Salah ad Din province. Several US defense companies including Sallyport are contracted to support Iraq’s fleet of F-16 fighter aircraft at the base. Reports indicate one Iraqi citizen employed with Sallyport sustained a minor injury that did not directly result from the impact. Additional reports indicate another contractor may have sustained superficial injuries.
Iraq	On 22 February, three rockets were launched towards the International Zone, targeting the US Embassy. No casualties were reported but at least four vehicles parked outside the HQ of the National Security Agency, west of the US Embassy, were damaged. No group claimed responsibility for the attack.
Iraq	On 22 February, according to unnamed Turkish security sources, Turkey’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT) purportedly neutralized three senior PKK members in an airstrike in the Metina region of northern Duhok province.
Iraq	On 24 February, an IED planted inside a car detonated in Afrin, wounding three civilians.
Syria	On 18 February, a large number of Russian airstrikes were reportedly conducted south of Deir Ez Zour. The operations targeted areas around al-Malha and al-Tarwani in an effort to eliminate IS cells active in the area.
Syria	On 18 February, an officer in the Syrian National Army was killed and several others wounded when a suicide vest detonated in Tal al-Hawa, eastern Aleppo countryside.
Syria	Daily artillery strikes were reported in the southern Idlib countryside between Syrian government and opposition forces. Casualties reported on both sides. No change in the territorial control of terrain.



Syria	On 20 February, several members of Iran-linked Fatemiyoun Brigade were killed and injured in an ambush conducted in the Arak region, east of Palmyra.
Syria	On 19 February, members of the IRGC were reportedly targeted in an ambush in Ghariba village, eastern Deir Ez Zour. At least four casualties were reported.
Syria	On 20 February, a vehicle borne IED reportedly detonated in the village of Sajoo, northern Aleppo countryside. At least six civilians were wounded in the attack.
Syria	On 19 February, clashes were reported near the town of Tadif, south of al-Bab, near the line of contact between Syrian Government Forces and Turkish-backed opposition forces. No reported changes in the territorial control of terrain.
Yemen	In the second week of the Marib operation, the Houthi Movement continued to make incremental progress towards Marib, with clashes concentrated east of Sarwah, Raghwan and east of Madghal. The Houthi Movement reportedly took control over several areas, including the Marib Dam, Dahan and the Kholan area, following a general retreat by pro-government forces. However, actual frontlines remain subject to conflicting reports, with pro-government and Houthi-affiliated media predictably issuing differing accounts of events. Meanwhile, the Saudi-led coalition launched a large number of airstrikes in response, which is reportedly slowing the progress of ground operations.
Yemen	On 17 February, two buses reportedly carrying government reinforcements towards Marib were assaulted by unidentified gunmen in Ataq, Shabya province, with multiple casualties reported. Limited reports claimed the assailants were affiliated with the Southern Transitional Council
Yemen	On 21 February, according to pro-government media, the 'southern resistance' forces carried out a successful, pre-emptive operation against Houthi forces in al-Dahle, killing several Houthi members and seizing equipment. The operation was reportedly carried out upon the receipt of credible intelligence suggesting an impending Houthi attack.
Yemen	On 21 February, a high-level security official and commander in the Hadi-led government was kidnapped inside his home in Aden.