



MANOHAR PARRIKAR INSTITUTE FOR
DEFENCE STUDIES AND ANALYSES
मनोहर पर्रिकर रक्षा अध्ययन एवं विश्लेषण संस्थान

Strategic Digest

Vol. 6 | No. 4 | 16 February 2024

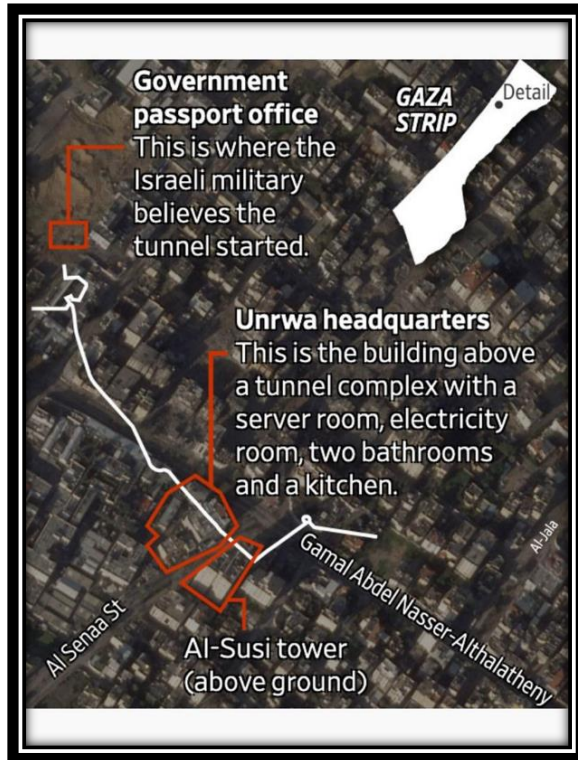
Israel-Hamas Conflict Drags On; UNRWA Under the Radar

US strikes Iran-backed Militia

A Hung Parliament in Pakistan: Challenges and Implications

Israel-Hamas Conflict Drags On; UNRWA Under the Radar

The Israel-Hamas conflict showed no sign of ending any time soon with the Israel Defence Force (IDF) continuing with its ground, air and sea operations against Hamas targets all across the Gaza Strip. The (IDF) continued to expose the Hamas tunnel network in areas such as the southern Gaza neighbourhood of Khan Yunis. It even found a tunnel network underneath Gaza's Bani Suheila cemetery near Khan Yunis on 29 January.



On 11 February, the IDF stated that it found a tunnel shaft with multiple blast doors and large quantities of explosives near a United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) school, with the shaft leading to the UNRWA's main headquarters in the Gaza Strip. It even charged that the electrical infrastructure of the tunnel was connected to the UNRWA headquarters and noted that the electricity to the UNRWA HQ was being supplied by the fuel provided as humanitarian aid.

In the past month, Israel also charged around 12 UNRWA employees of being directly associated with the horrific 7 October 2023 Hamas strikes. Philippe Lazzarini, UNRWA Commissioner-General in a statement on 27 January noted that the contracts of those alleged to have been involved were terminated and added that investigations will be launched to hold anyone responsible accountable, including through criminal prosecution. Israel though accused the UNRWA of being the 'political tool of the Hamas' which was perpetuating the Israel-Palestinian conflict as it has 'terrorists in its ranks'. Meirav Eilan Shaha, its representative at the UN in Geneva charged that the UNRWA was 'not fit for its purpose'.

In response to these allegations, the United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres launched an internal UN probe as well as appointed a panel chaired by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, and three European research organisations - the Raoul Wallenberg Institute in Sweden, the Chr Michelsen Institute in Norway and the Danish Institute for Human Rights. The panel will submit its report by the end of March with recommendations for 'improvement and strengthening' of the agency's mechanisms.

The US, UK, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands and Switzerland were also among 16 countries that temporarily suspended their funding to the agency, stated to be worth at least \$450 million or half of the agency's 2024 budget. The Biden administration indicated that it would wait for UN investigations to conclude before it would resume its aid even as it insisted that it remained committed to

providing humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people. The Trump administration had earlier in 2018 suspended funding to the UNRWA, in the aftermath of which many countries increased their individual contributions to help sustain the work of the UN agency. India, for instance, increased its annual contributions to more than \$5 million from the \$1.5 million it was giving to the UNRWA till then.

The US, along with Germany and the European Union, are the three biggest donors to the UNRWA. The US contributes more than \$300 million annually, accounting for nearly 30 per cent of the UNRWA's budget. Lazzarini met with EU officials in Brussels on 12 February and termed the \$88 million contribution due from the EU in March 2024 as 'absolutely critical' without which the Agency's cash flow will drastically reduce. The EU on its part was insisting on the appointment of additional independent auditors to scrutinise the work of the UNRWA and was also insisting on the screening of all of UNRWA's more than 10,000 employees before it released the funds. Reports noted that such a process could take many weeks and may not be sustainable given the dire humanitarian situation in the Gaza Strip.

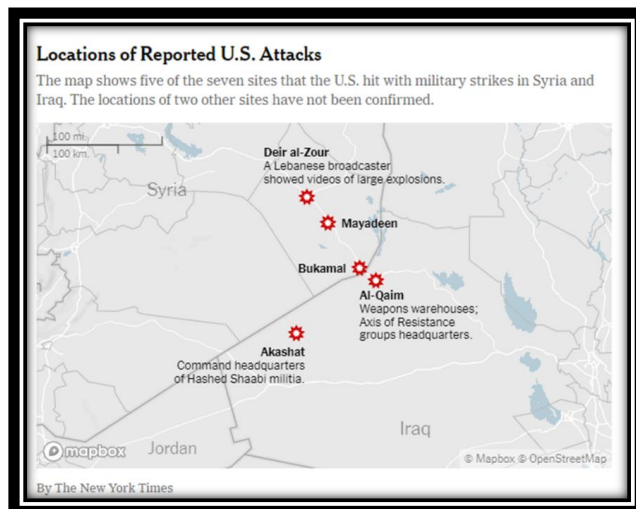
The UNRWA in its latest situation update on the conflict on 14 February noted that 156 of its colleagues have been killed in the ongoing conflict, while 1.7 million Palestinians have been internally displaced. It stated that only six out of the more than 20 health centres under its watch were functioning and that Israeli military activities in the Gaza Strip neighbourhoods like Rafah risked further humanitarian disaster, given that the locality was housing more than 1.5 million people, six times the number that was present before 7 October 2023. The IDF launched air strikes on Rafah on 12 February that killed more than 100 people. The Rafah border crossing also remained closed while the number of Palestinians killed as of 12 February stood at 28,340, as per UNRWA.

The IDF also suffered one of the biggest losses of its soldiers in a single day on 23 January when 24 soldiers were killed in a southern Gaza neighbourhood after a two-storey building collapsed in an explosion caused by an RPG fired by the Hamas militants. The IDF Chief of Defence Staff Lt Gen Herzi Halevi on 8 February 2024 asserted that the IDF operations will continue and noted that 'when we talked about dismantling Hamas, we did not think it would be in a week It's peeling off layers ... it won't happen without military pressure'.

US strikes Iran-backed Militia

On February 3, at around midnight, US Air Force bombers took off from the United States and struck over 85 targets at seven different locations in eastern Syria and western Iraq. The planned missions had been anticipated since a drone strike on January 28, carried out by Iranian-backed militias in Iraq, resulted in the deaths of three American soldiers and the injuries of numerous more at a remote outpost in northeastern Jordan, close to the Syrian border. Notably, the airstrikes occurred two days after US President Biden warned that "multiple actions" were likely in retaliation for the attack on US troops. The strikes are intended to show America's resolve without provoking direct war against Iran.

The targets of attack included command hubs; intelligence centres; depots for rockets, missiles and attack drones; as well as logistics and ammunition bunkers and other facilities connected to the militias or the Quds Force, the expeditionary unit of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). Among the locations America bombed were Al-Qaim, an Iraqi border town and Al-Bukamal, on the Syrian side of the border with Iraq where Iranian-backed militias have a big presence. The attacks also hit a border crossing known as Humaydiya, where militia cross back and forth between Iraq and Syria



These were perhaps the biggest raids America has ever carried out against Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) and its allies outside Iran, both in the number of bombs (more than 125 precision munitions) dropped and the number of locations hit. As per the Pentagon, striking targets in the Mideast with aircraft launched from the continental United States and refuelled midair indicated the global reach and capability of the US military.

Iran's foreign ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani said in a statement the attacks represented "another adventurous and strategic mistake by the United States that will result only in increased tension and instability". Iraq summoned the U.S. charge d'affaires in Baghdad to deliver a formal protest. An Iraqi government statement said the areas bombed by U.S. aircraft included places where Iraqi security forces are stationed near civilian locations. It said 23 people had been wounded in addition to the 16 killed. As per reports, the strikes killed 23 people who had been guarding the targeted locations in Syria.

On February 4, The United States and Britain launched a barrage of strikes against Houthi targets in Yemen from fighter jets and warships in the Red Sea. The strikes hit 36 Houthi targets in 13 locations, according to the U.S. and U.K. militaries. Houthi targets in Yemen were struck again on February 5.

The US officials have said that these strikes had twin objectives. First, to send a clear message to Iran and its proxies that the U.S. will not tolerate attacks on its troops or assaults on cargo ships in the Red Sea. Second to degrade the capabilities of Iranian proxies to attack American military assets.

The attacks from Iranian-backed militias have continued, even after the strikes ostensibly meant to deter them. Since February 4, Iranian-backed militia have staged at least two attacks on sites where U.S. forces are in Syria. Houthi forces armed by Tehran have also vowed to continue their assaults on commercial vessels off the Yemeni coast. As per reports, Iran is continuing to provide weapons and intelligence to its proxies.

Some Arab countries, including the United Arab Emirates, are reportedly increasingly restricting the U.S. from using military facilities on their soil to launch retaliatory airstrikes on Iranian proxies. These restrictions imposed limits on US retaliatory strikes against attacks in Iraq, Syria, and the Red Sea. US Pentagon has disputed the premise that there is tension between the U.S. and the Emirates over U.S. military basing. However, strikes on the Houthis since January have been conducted by U.S. Navy F/A-18 fighter jets from the nearby aircraft carrier in the Red Sea rather than assets based at Al Dhafra Air Base in UAE.

US officials have said the U.S. strikes that began February 4 are just the beginning of a multi-front response that could continue for weeks, and defence officials say the campaign will gradually weaken the proxies' capabilities over time. While US officials concede that Iran has continued funnelling weapons and intelligence to its proxy groups even after the US strike, they argue that the effort is not indicative of Iran seeking a broader war because Tehran has long engaged in such activities in an attempt to push U.S. forces out of the region.

Some experts have argued that America's struggle to enforce deterrence against Iran and its proxies stems from deeper contradictions in its Middle East policy. The US desires to pivot away from the region while simultaneously keeping troops in it. It is maintaining a military presence big enough to present a menu of targets but too small actually to constrain its adversaries.

A Hung Parliament in Pakistan: Challenges and Implications

Pakistan has a history of controversial general elections often marred by allegations of large-scale rigging in favour of one or the other political party. The February 2024 elections are no exception. Despite an all-out effort by the security establishment to rein in Imran Khan and politically finish off his Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf (PTI), the people of Pakistan foiled the attempt by delivering a hung parliament with PTI backed independent candidates emerging as the single largest group. Out of 266 directly contested seats for the National Assembly, PTI-backed candidates have emerged victorious on as many as 92 seats, whereas the



establishment's favourite Pakistan Muslim League-Nawaz (PML-N) secured 79 followed by Pakistan Peoples Party Parliamentarian (PPPP) 54 and Muttahida Qomi Movement Pakistan (MQM-P) that secured 17 seats.

Frontline religious political parties received a thorough beating from the voters throughout the country. Maulana Fazlur Rahman's Jamiat-e-

Ulema-e-Islam (JUI-F) got four seats and Majlis Wahdat-e-Muslimeen (MWM) supported by PTI managed to open its account. The PTI turncoats, including a former Chief Minister and a former Defence Minister during Imran Khan's tenure, who ditched the party at the last moment in the wake of mounting

pressures from the establishment, faced the wrath of the people and fared badly. Pervez Khattak led Pakistan Tehreek-e-Insaf-Parliamentarian (PTI-P) failed to open its account, whereas Jahangir Tarin's Istehkam-e-Pakistan Party (IPP) could win only two seats. Interestingly both, Pervez Khattak and Jahangir Tarin badly lost all their contested seats to PTI-backed candidates.

As none of the political parties including PTI-backed independents have come anywhere close to the simple majority mark, the government formation at the federal level is going to be extremely tricky. Both PTI and PML-N have claimed to be the single largest party. Interestingly, as the results were trickling in, Nawaz Sharif appeared to deliver what many terms as some sort of a victory speech in which he asked Shehbaz Sharif to get in touch with Asif Ali Zardari to cobble up a coalition to form the next government. Later, Imran Khan's AI-generated victory speech appeared on social media in which he congratulated people for winning the elections and took a potshot at Nawaz Sharif for making a victory speech despite falling behind 30 seats. He went on to claim that PTI was winning 150 seats before the rigging and as per the data of form-45, we are winning more than 170 seats.

PTI has made it clear that it would not talk to PML-N, PPPP and MQM-P would not even sit with them for the formation of the government. Of late, PTI announced that its winning candidates will join MWM to stake claims in Punjab and at the federal level. It appears to be a strategy to acquire reserved seats for women and minorities that are to be distributed to political parties in proportion to their seats in the National Assembly and Provincial Assemblies.

Situations like this often leave enough room for the establishment to exercise its influence to bring uneasy partners together. While congratulating winning candidates, Army Chief Gen. Asim Munir said that the nation needed stable hands and a healing touch to move on from the politics of anarchy and polarisation. As per the ISPR statement, Gen. Munir suggested political leaders and their workers to rise above self-interests and synergise efforts in governing and serving the people.

It is believed that the establishment pushed PML-N and PPPP to get in touch and sort out the modalities to form a coalition government at the federal level. As a result, a flurry of meetings took place in Lahore and Islamabad resulting in the emergence of a "Coalition of Willing" that agreed to stake claim to form the next federal government. As per the agreed formula, PPPP decided to back the PML-N-led government from the outside. With no clear majority in sight and PPPP sitting outside, Nawaz Sharif has now excused himself and named Shehbaz Sharif for the premiership. In the hard bargain, PPPP is expected to get the position of Speaker in the National Assembly, Chairman of the Senate and President of Pakistan.

Given the possibility of a weak coalition government and a strong opposition in parliament, Shehbaz Sharif would find it difficult to manage the affairs of the state smoothly. Be it the economy, political cohesion, national security or foreign policy including relations with India, he would end up relying on the security establishment. The government would survive as long as it follows the diktats of the security establishment. This in no way is a good sign for the nation as well as the region.