Israel launched its most intense aerial assault against Syria and their allies, after targeting a drone in their airspace and losing an F-16.

Tensions between re-elected President Kenyatta and opposition leader Odinga continue to dog Kenyan politics, dividing the nation.

The recent intensification and increase in terror attacks points towards a possible power struggle between the Taliban and the Islamic State.

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ISRAEL AND IRAN COME TO BLOWS IN SYRIA

By Donnelly McCleland

Israel launched its most intensive air strikes yet against Iranian forces in Syria on Saturday [10 February] after intercepting what it said was an Iranian drone and the rare downing of an Israeli F-16 warplane. The incidents marked the most serious confrontations in Syria between Israel and Iranian-backed forces that have established a major foothold in the country while fighting in support of President Bashar al-Assad in a nearly seven-year-old civil war. (Reuters)

Israel’s ‘red line’

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu confirmed Israel’s resolve to his Cabinet on Sunday: “We made it unequivocally clear to everyone that our rules of action have not changed one bit. We will continue to strike at every attempt to strike at us. This has been our policy and it will remain our policy.” Since the start of the Syrian war, Israel has largely remained on the side-lines of the conflict – their airstrike have generally been limited to suspected weapons shipments believed to be headed for Lebanese Hezbollah (the Iranian and Syrian-allied militant group). Hezbollah and its backers in Iran do not recognise the Jewish state and have sworn its destruction.

Israel has long warned of the growing presence and threat of Iran in Syria, especially along their northern border and the disputed Golan Heights region. Israel fears that Iran could use Syrian territory to stage attacks or create a land corridor from Iran to Lebanon that could allow an easier transfer of weapons to Hezbollah. Saturday’s retaliatory strikes, which were said to have successfully hit air defence and Iranian targets, marked the toughest Israeli aerial assault in Syria in decades.

According to European officials who spoke with Channel 4 news, Mr Netanyahu spoke a number of times in recent weeks with German chancellor Angela Merkel, French president Emanuel Macron, and UK prime minister Theresa May, warning them of the Islamic Republic’s aggression in the region. In those conversations, it is reported that Mr Netanyahu stressed that Israel preferred a diplomatic solution to the problem, but that if that did not work, it would be forced to use military means.

International reactions

The weekend’s confrontation brought a variety of responses. The downing of the Israeli aircraft was hailed as a symbolic triumph by forces loyal to the Syrian government. Hezbollah called the incident “the start of a new strategic phase” that would aim to limit Israel’s air superiority in the region. These comments came despite reports that Israeli airstrike killed six Syrian and non-Syrian members of President Assad’s regime, according to the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, and inflicted damage to Syrian air defences.

Tehran insisted that Iranian personnel are only in Syria to advise the government of Bashar al-Assad and that Iran has no conventional armed forces in the country. It also denied it had sent a drone into Israeli airspace. According to Iran’s semi-official Tasnim news agency, Ali Shamkhani (the secretary of Iran’s supreme national security council) was quoted as saying: “The ‘Zionists’ [Tehran’s terminology for Israel] failed to inflict damage on the Iranian-Syrian bases.” Hossein Salamai, the deputy head of Iran’s Revolutionary Guards, warned: “Iran can create a hell for the ‘Zionists’.”

In a phone call with Mr Netanyahu, Russian President Vladimir Putin (President Assad’s ally in the Syrian war) stressed the need to avoid a “dangerous escalation”. Russia also called on...
The White House issued a statement backing Israel's "right to defend itself from the Iranian-backed Syrian and militia forces in southern Syria" and called on Iran and its allies to "cease provocative actions". White House National Security Council spokesman Michael Anton said Israel should have no doubts about the US stance. “We support Israel’s security, and the idea that we are ‘on the side-lines’ when its security is threatened is very far from the case,” Anton said. “We have a very close relationship with our Israeli national security counterparts at all levels.”

A Western diplomat in the region said: “My impression is that it seems to be contained at this point. I don't think anybody wants to escalate further.”

**FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

Israeli restraint (and the lack of civilian casualties) is one of the most glaring observations from the weekend’s confrontation, which has received very little coverage in mainstream media. Syria and its allies celebrated the downing of the Israeli jet, with absolutely no mention of civilian casualties from Israel’s retaliatory strikes, reportedly the “toughest in Syria, in decades”. One can be sure that had there been, they would have highlighted it to the world. In what has been a ferocious war – with innumerable cases of civilian casualties, incidents of chemical warfare and towns laid siege to the point of starvation – Israel’s precision attacks on only military targets stands out like a beacon. War is brutal, but how a nation wages war says a lot about that nation.

Israel has often borne the brunt of worldly criticism and condemnation, but seldom, if ever, are they credited when they show restraint or wage war in an ethical manner. From a Christian perspective, one could applaud the way in which Israel dealt with the incursion and subsequent loss of their jet – their response was measured and precise. Christians often identify closely with Israel because of their Judeo-Christian history; how much more so when Godly virtues are displayed in action, whether or not the world saw it.

**KENYA’S TENOUS POLITICAL SITUATION**

Kenya’s 2017 presidential election was something of a rarity in Africa. Not that elections are not held elsewhere on the continent, but it was rare that irregularities in the vote lead to an election re-run, with two presidents being sworn in: Uhuru Kenyatta as legitimate victor, and Raila Odinga sworn in by the opposition as the “people’s president”. What makes the Kenya election so unique is that President Kenyatta allowed the ‘treasonous’ act of swearing in an illegitimate president to pass without punishment – apart from filing treason charges against the lawyer who illegally swore in Odinga.

As with almost every election campaign in the world, the final months before election day were marked by opposition parties clashing with one another. This was not the first time Odinga stood as the opposition against Mr Kenyatta, and it’s also not the first time he lost against Mr Kenyatta. During the 2013 elections, Odinga, after losing, challenged the results of the vote. Odinga lost the 2017 election by 44.94% to 54.17%, and once again Odinga challenged the results. But after a re-run of the election (which Odinga boycotted), Mr Kenyatta won again.

Tensions between Mr Kenyatta and Odinga go as far back as Kenya’s independence, when Mr Kenyatta’s father, Jomo Kenyatta, was Kenya’s first elected president, after gaining independence in 1963. Odinga’s father, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga, was the country’s first vice-president. The elder Odinga later became an opposition leader and his son, after failing three attempts at the presidency, continues to bear this mantle today.

**Pray >** For Israel’s leaders as they continue to defend their borders > For influential leaders in the region to make wise decisions regarding their relationship with Israel > For believers in the region to demonstrate Christ’s love across barriers.

**Kenya vs. Odinga**

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The world’s most powerful operational rocket, SpaceX’s Falcon Heavy, blasted off on its highly anticipated maiden test flight, carrying CEO Elon Musk’s cherry red Tesla Roadster toward an orbit near Mars. About two minutes into the flight, the two side boosters peeled away from the centre core and made their way back toward Earth for an upright landing. Both rockets landed side by side in unison on launchpads.
A military offensive launched last month by Congolese troops against Ugandan militants in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo is likely to force nearly 370,000 people from their homes, the United Nations said.

President Donald Trump has said he will expand and update the US nuclear arsenal in a departure from nearly 50 years of US policy. Mr Trump said the move was a response to other countries' decision to increase their nuclear stockpiles – a likely reference to North Korea, which has been testing nuclear weapons and missiles at a surprisingly rapid rate.

The current tension has again brought the country to the brink of civil war, and if history is any indication, Kenya could be in for darker days. In neighbouring South Sudan, conflict between President Salva Kiir and Vice-President Riek Machar led to a civil war that has to date claimed the lives of more than 300,000 people and displaced up to 3.5 million civilians. Could this be Kenya's future?

**FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE**

If one considers the hypothetical scenario, where civil unrest in Kenya leads to civil war, analysts raise two crucial questions: together with civil war in South Sudan, what would another war in East Africa mean for the future of democracy, and would Somalia's al-Shabaab (and other Islamic terrorist organisations) take advantage of the chaos as happened in Syria? Putting it simply, with the civil war in South Sudan already claiming the lives of thousands, would Kenya become the 'Syria of Africa', if war breaks out?

We asked INcontext International's East Africa director, Aron Mwasile, to help us understand the major implications of Kenya’s post-election tensions.

**TERROR GROUPS' POWER STRUGGLE IN AFGHANISTAN**

An unholy war of words has broken out among Vatican and Catholic officials over the Holy See's rapprochement with Communist China. The exchanges came as the Vatican and China moved closer to an accord on the appointment of bishops in what would be an historic breakthrough and a precursor to a resumption in diplomatic relations after 70 years. Any deal was bound to be controversial because of concessions the Vatican would have to make to a government that has kept religion under its thumb.

**By Conrad Bornman**

The Islamic State group and the Taliban are competing to take credit for a horrific spike in violence in Afghanistan over the last month, and analysts say both insurgent groups are growing in strength as security forces wither under their relentless attacks and a feuding government struggles to win over citizens. (Associated Press)

**Recent attacks**

More than 130 people were killed in four separate attacks over a two-week period in Afghanistan. The Taliban claimed two of the attacks and the Islamic State (IS) claimed the other two. The Taliban's siege of the Intercontinental Hotel in Kabul resulted in at least 22 people dead, and two days after the attack on the hotel, an ambulance packed with explosives was detonated at a busy checkpoint in the city, killing more than 100 people.

In the first of two IS-claimed attacks, IS militants stormed the offices of British aid agency, Save the Children, in the eastern Afghan city of Jalalabad. At least four people were killed, and dozens injured. They also claimed responsibility for the attack on the Marshal Fahim Military Academy base in the centre of Kabul. This recent spike in attacks has raised concerns of a possible deadly competition between the two terrorist groups. Authorities say both terror groups are growing in strength and renewed popularity in Afghanistan. The success of the US and its allies in driving IS fighters out of Iraq and Syria has pushed many towards Afghanistan.

**Power struggle**

The recent intensification and increase in terror attacks points towards a possible power struggle between the Taliban and the IS, using different methods. Analysts also point to different goals: the Taliban, with its nationalist thrust, tries to continually remain in the forefront of Afghan consciousness through prominent attacks; IS, meanwhile, has a more international approach, often specifically selecting foreign-influenced targets. This trend of outdoing each other could see attacks escalate and become more violent. Both groups aim to destabilise the US-backed Afghanistan government and attempt to impose a strict version of Islamic Sharia rule. The two groups have, on occasion, clashed on the battlefield. In April 2017, IS militants attacked the Taliban in the northern Jawzjan province, with heavy casualties on both sides.

**Winning “hearts and minds”**

A culture structured along ethnic and tribal lines, Afghanistan has traditionally been very hostile towards foreign powers and influence. Winning the “hearts and minds” of Afghani locals is something
that even the Afghan central government has failed to accomplish, perhaps because of their close cooperation with foreign powers. If the Taliban and IS, who both have similar goals, are competing to win local support, it is important to consider the differences between the two insurgent groups, which cause them to compete rather than cooperate.

The Taliban grew out of the traditional Pashtun tribal way of life in Afghanistan, and they practice a form of Sunni Islam called Deobandi. Taliban means ‘student’ in Arabic, and it is widely speculated that the group first emerged from religious seminaries that preached a strict variation of Sunni Islam. The group enforces extreme laws that its members are expected to adhere to. Women over the age of 10 are prohibited from receiving an education, and televisions and social media are banned. IS was established in Iraq and Syria (after 2014), and only became a force in Afghanistan when Taliban commanders defected and swore allegiance to IS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. The renegade commanders were mostly those who had grown dissatisfied with the leadership of Mullah Mohammed Omar (leader of the Taliban at that time).

Although both groups practice extreme versions of Sunni Islam, they vary in degree, with the Taliban slightly less extreme than the Wahhabi-Salafist tradition practiced by IS. The Taliban predominately engages in guerrilla warfare, making them extremely difficult to face using conventional combat techniques, while IS is far more structured and similar to a conventional army. IS has also managed to harness the power of social media in ways no preceding terrorist group has.

It is clearly evident that both the Taliban and IS remain grave threats to the development of democratic institutions in Afghanistan, together with other active terror groups like al-Qaeda. Added to the complexities, the US under President Trump’s administration has also committed more soldiers and resources to Afghanistan.

FROM A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

While much of the mainstream media coverage has focused on the wars in Syria and Iraq, together with the rise and fall of IS in these two countries, the tide in Afghanistan was slowly turning away from the fledgling democratic government, back towards extremism.

It has never been easy for the Church in Afghanistan, which has faced persecution almost from the outset, but in a sense, this has worked to their advantage. The Church in Syria and Iraq has suffered huge losses under the relentless, severe persecution of IS, since it was a visible Church. The ‘underground’ Church in Afghanistan, is not as easily targeted by the terrorist groups. But the surge in attacks in Afghanistan has certainly made the operation of the Church logistically more challenging. One leader stated: “Unfortunately the security of Afghanistan becomes worse every day, and this has an influence on our ministry. Not long ago we could travel between provincial towns by car, but now there are Taliban and IS military checkpoints everywhere. We are forced to fly.”

The ideology of radical Islam cannot and will not be defeated by any military intervention or weapons – it is a spiritual battle, and the deception of Islam can only be exposed by the Truth of the Gospel. The Church in Afghanistan may be small and ‘underground’, but they are there, and they need the larger Body of Christ to continue upholding them in prayer and encouragement. As the same leader says: “We do our ministry in Afghanistan and God keeps our staff safe. We are always in prayer and ask that you pray for the security of [our] country and the house churches in Afghanistan.”

PRAY > For the Afghan government to experience breakthrough in the many issues the nation faces > For Afghan church leaders as they travel throughout the country, training and strengthening believers > For believers to continue growing in maturity and boldness

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