



NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

STRATEGIC TRENDS

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LEVANT

The Syrian conflict

News from the Syrian conflict point to the gains of the regime both at a military and a political level. On February 8, the regime started a wide-scale battle that it dubbed “the battle for a settlement”, in the countryside of Dara’a, south of Damascus, with heavy participation from Lebanon’s Hezbollah and Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The military objective is to extend the regime’s control over the areas located in a strategic geographic triangle linking Dara’a, Quneitra and Rif Dimashq. It is an attempt to separate these cities from each other, to prevent the infiltration of the opposition fighters and to fully secure the capital, Damascus.

Interestingly, the militant groups there, known as Southern Front, are affiliated with the Free Syrian Army and apparently draw on a nationalist rather than religious dimension, while there is a limited presence of Jabhat al-Nusra, (or Al-Nusra Front), the official Al Qaeda franchise in Syria. This makes Dara’a rebels perfect targets for the Syrian regime, that by eliminating them, reduces the revolutionaries to extremist Islamist organizations, serving the logic that turns the revolution into a war against terrorism.

Forty-eight hours after the start of the battle, the regime has achieved a quantum leap by shifting from a defensive to an offensive. However, being the area very difficult to defend, the outcome of the “battle for settlement” is still open.

The privileged position of the regime generates widespread suspicion regarding the implementation of the Aleppo freeze plan outlined by UN special envoy to Syria Staffan de Mistura.

For one thing, the announcement on February 17 that Mr. Assad was willing to suspend its aerial attacks on Syria's most populous city for six weeks came the same day that government forces, backed by allied militia, advanced north of Aleppo in an attempt to cut off the rebel's key supply route and encircle the city. Furthermore the rebels' trust of Mr de Mistura and the West is jeopardised after comments made by the UN envoy, in which he called President Assad "part of the solution for the reduction of the violence", and following Assad's declarations in a February 15 interview with the BBC that his government is receiving messages, through third parties, from the US-led coalition battling ISIS (also known as Daesh or Dawla).

Predictably indeed the opposition National Coalition has not yet accepted the truce arguing that the government may use the freeze to redeploy troops in Dara'a for the "battle of settlement" and also because its main backer, Turkey, dreads a scenario in which the Syrian army captures Aleppo and opposition fighters retreat en masse in its territory.

The fight against ISIS.

The issue of foreign fighters, streaming into Syria and Iraq at unprecedented numbers to join the Islamic State or other extremist groups, has been a key one during the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism that kicked off on February 17. During the Summit, US intelligence officials have released a report indicating that at least 20.000 people from around the world, including 3.400 from Europe, joined violent extremist groups. In Syria these fighters gain combat skills, violent extremist connections and possibly become persuaded to conduct organized or 'lone-wolf' style attacks to Western interests or in the West, as already happened in January with the terrorist attacks on the satirical Charlie Hebdo magazine and a Jewish supermarket that left 17 people killed in Paris.

Indeed as the phenomenon is particularly strong in Europe, new measures on tightening control – such as passport confiscation - and managing the come-back of the fighters – i.e. through de-radicalization measures - have been debated and introduced in Europe in the past month. Preventing more decisively the flow of foreign recruits to Syria and Iraq might seriously weaken ISIS, for whom new recruits are a key way to ensure its resilience.

On the ground, the Anti-ISIS Coalition had an eventful month. Jordan stepped up its role in the coalition as protesters in Amman demanded revenge for the killing, announced on February 3, of Mu'ath Al

Kassasbeh, a young Jordanian pilot captured by the militants in December when his F-16 crashed near Raqqa, Syria.

So far, the Jordanian response has been limited to intensifying airstrikes, but analysts believe that Amman's special forces could wage commando-style operations against selected targets as well, perhaps in coordination with the Iraqi army and Kurdish peshmerga. The Jordanian government has so far pushed aside the idea of a land offensive, which has also been rejected by Syria's foreign minister Walid Moallem. Indeed Jordan has been an important staging zone, logistics site and operations centre for U.S.-backed rebels seeking to overthrow Assad, a fact that has long enraged Damascus. Furthermore, the Syrian foreign minister accused Jordan of training and facilitating "terrorists", indicating with this term Al Nusra Front, which has positions in southern Syria close to the Jordanian frontier. The Front, a rival of ISIS, also regarded as a terrorist group by Washington, has not been a target of the U.S.-led bombing campaign in Syria. A hypothetical Jordanian land offensive, a little more realistic in Iraq, is very unrealistic in Syria where it could not take place without some form of coordination with the Assad regime, especially given that no other coalition partner would be keen on joining the offensive.

Finally, the fate of the young pilot shed light on tensions between the US and the United Arab Emirates. Indeed it has become known that the UAE suspended its airstrikes in December after the capture of the Jordanian pilot, while calling for the US pilot-rescue teams to be shifted from Kuwait to northern Iraq, where it could be deployed for quicker reaction. However, following to the assurance by the Pentagon that the search-and-rescue aircraft was to be moved closer to the battlefield, the UAE announced on February 10 that a squadron of F-16 multirole attack aircraft had been sent to Jordan to resume airstrikes alongside the coalition. Overall, these events underlined the necessity of stressing cohesion and finding compromises among the different strategic priorities within the Coalition, if it has to fulfil its original purpose, which is not only military but intrinsically political.