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LEVANT

The Syrian conflict: weak signals

The strategic balance of the Syrian conflict has been subject to several small but potentially significant changes this month, both in terms of developments on the ground and in terms of political choices at an international level.

ISIS fighters are since the 21st of May in full control of the ancient city of Palmyra and have entered the site containing prized ruins. The governmental forces responded by conducting airstrikes against ISIS-held Taqba air base near Raqqa and retook a number of Assyrian Christian villages in the northeast of the country that ISIS had held since February.

The Army of Conquest (Jaish al-Fatah, JaF)), the Qatar-Turkey-Saudi backed Syrian rebel coalition including Jabhat al-Nusra (al-Nusra Front) as well as more moderate elements, seized Ariha, the last holdout of Assad regime forces in the Idlib province on May 29th. Meanwhile, allegedly under pressure from Qatar, JaN is doing a PR campaign to change its perception in the West: in a rare television interview, JaN Commander Abu Mohamed al-Jolani vowed not to use Syria as a springboard to attack the

West and said he would be willing to protect minorities. The campaign is however not likely to make a difference in the Western political establishment.

At a domestic political level, Assad's position has been noticeably weakened. The regime army, loyal to President Bashar al-Assad, appears to be exhausted after four years of fighting and no longer able to hold some contested ground, as the provinces of Idlib and Jisr al-Shughur.

Unprecedented problems also seem to emerge among Assad's praetorians. Gen. Ali Mamlouk, one of the intelligence chiefs of the inner circle (the chief of the Maktab al-AI al-Qawmi, the National Security Bureau of the Arab Socialist Ba'ath Party), was reported to have been placed under house arrest in Damascus following an allegedly failed coup d'état. On the 14th of May specific footage of the state Syrian TV showed him next to the president while the official SANA wire service (13/5/2015) mentioned him significantly together with the Iranian ambassador, Mohammad Reza Raouf Sheibani. Apparently one of the figureheads of the old guard is still retaining the president's favour and his important post.

This development follows the recent death of Gen. Rustom Ghazaleh, former chief of the Syrian Political Security Directorate (Idarat al-Amn al-Siyasi) and one of the most notorious proconsuls of Assad during the occupation of Lebanon.

According to unconfirmed information, Gen. Ghazaleh, the last Sunni holding a high-level position within the regime, had started questioning the level of influence exerted by Tehran and its militias in Syria. This might have brought him to a serious clash with Gen. Rafiq Shehadeh in March, the then chief of Military Intelligence Directorate (Shu'bat al-Mukhabarat al-'Askariyya). Following this confrontation, Ghazaleh was hospitalised and died two months after.

Shehadeh was demoted instead, so that the Political Security Directorate is now headed by the former deputy Nazih Hassoun, while Mohamed Mahalla (former head of the Branch 293, Internal Affairs) was elevated to the top post of the Military Intelligence Directorate.

Meanwhile some game-changing developments in the geopolitics of the Syrian conflict might be underway. Qatar, Saudi Arabia and Turkey, whose relationship is now strengthened thanks to the new Saudi monarch King Salman, have allegedly been cooperating in trying to make contacts with people from Assad's Alawite minority who could potentially lead the country during a transition. If confirmed, this would be a major novelty, indicating that a new pragmatism is emerging within the leading backers of the Syrian opposition.