



# **NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION**

## **MASHREQ STRATEGIC TRENDS**

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## **Executive summary**

The Syrian crisis continues to spill over into the neighbouring countries, while signs of a shift in the US policy are emerging as Mr Kerry, Secretary of State, announced the delivery of non-lethal aid to the armed opposition.

Extremism is spreading across the region, as the Islamic State of Iraq, al-Qaeda's Iraqi wing, claimed responsibility for the killing of 48 Syrian soldiers and 9 Iraqis in an attack carried out in the Anbar province.

While the northern city of Raqqa has fallen and the rebels captured the governor, Hassam Jalili, the opposition group "Martyrs of Yarmouk" seized 21 UN peacekeepers in an effort to hold back the troops loyal to Assad from a rebel-held village near the Golan Heights.

The opposition groups abroad continue to be ineffective, while all rebel forces continue to be uncoordinated. Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, the head of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), announced his resignation and Ghassan Hitto has been elected as the new leader, but without the support of the military wing.

In Israel, Netanyahu reached a deal to form a coalition with Yesh Atid (There is a Future) led by Yair Lapid, Hatnua (the Movement) headed by Tzipi Livni and HaBayit HaYehudi (Jewish Home) of Naftali Bennett. Since the settlers and their supporters have secured key positions in the new government, Netanyahu will not be able to restart peace talks with the Palestinians.

US President Barack Obama made the announced trip in the Middle East. The US reaffirmed its commitment to defend Israeli security and achieved some collaboration in principle to jointly address the Iranian nuclear issue. As Obama was leaving Israel, Prime Minister Netanyahu apologised to his Turkish counterpart for the loss of nine lives on the Mavi Marmara incident in May 2010. Israel also announced it will resume the monthly tax transfers to the Palestinian Authority.

In Lebanon, Najib Mikati resigned as Prime Minister and the June parliamentary poll could be postponed, since rival political parties have not reached an agreement on the electoral law. Cross-border Sunni-Shiite fighting in the Northern Beqaa region is causing serious concern over a full scale sectarian conflict in the country.

Jordan closed the Jaber border crossing with Syria's Southern Deraa province. The Kingdom is sheltering more than 450.000 Syrian refugees and President Obama announced an aid of \$200 million to cope with the situation.

## **Situation report**

### ***Syria***

The 1<sup>st</sup> of March, US Secretary of State John Kerry arrived in Ankara for his first visit to the Middle East. The Syrian crisis has been the focus of the meeting with his counterpart Ahmet Davutoglu. The day before, during the “Friends of Syria” conference in Rome, Mr. Kerry, said the United States would provide direct assistance to the rebels in the form of medical supplies and food (the military Meals Ready to Eat - MRE). Kerry also promised an additional aid of \$60 million to the opposition Syrian National Coalition in order to provide governance in the areas controlled by the Free Syrian Army.

In the Western Iraqi province of Anbar, an armed group killed 48 Syrian soldiers and 9 Iraqis in an attack the 4<sup>th</sup> of March 2013. A total of 65 Syrian soldiers had previously crossed into Iraq after opposition fighters took over the Yarubiyah border post. The troops were being escorted back to Syria through another border crossing in the Anbar province, when they were ambushed: 17 Syrians survived. The 11<sup>th</sup> of March, al-Qaeda’s Iraqi wing, Islamic State of Iraq, claimed responsibility for the killing in a statement posted online.

The northern city of Raqqa falls to Syrian rebels (5/3/2013) and the crowd toppled the statue of the late President Hafez al-Assad, while the opposition fighters captured Hassam Jalili, Raqqa’s governor and senior ruling party official. By the 28<sup>th</sup> of March Jalili was still reported prisoner of the opposition.

The 9<sup>th</sup> of March, after three days of negotiations, rebels from the “Martyrs of Yarmouk” brigade released 21 Filipino UN peacekeepers to Jordan forces. The opposition group captured the UN observers on Wednesday, March 6, in an effort to hold back loyalist troops from Jamla, a rebel-held village near the Golan Heights (the disputed region between Israel and Syria). The Free Syrian Army has condemned the capture of the peacekeepers.

Ahmed Moaz al-Khatib, the head of the Syrian National Coalition (SNC), announced his resignation (24/3/2013). The day after, US citizen Ghassan Hitto was elected to lead the SNC but its military wing, the Free Syrian Army, said it would not recognize him as leader.

### ***Israel***

The 2<sup>nd</sup> of March, Israeli President Shimon Peres granted Prime Minister Netanyahu a two-week extension maximum in order to create a new government.

After nearly six weeks of negotiations, Netanyahu reached a deal to form a coalition government the 14<sup>th</sup> of March 2013, which includes the centre-left Yesh Atid led by Yair Lapid and Hatnua led by Tzipi Livni, as well as the far-right Jewish Home party of Naftali Bennett. Israel began its first government without an ultraorthodox participation since 2003.

The leader of Yesh Atid, Yair Lapid, is the new Finance Minister, while Naftali Bennet has been appointed as the Minister of Industry and Trade. Israel’s new Defence Minister is Moshe Yaalon, the Israel Defence Forces (IDF) chief of staff during the second Palestinian

intifada and one of the potential successors to Benjamin Netanyahu within the Likud. The Construction and Housing Ministry is Uri Ariel, a leader of the settlement movement from the Jewish Home party. Tzipi Livni is the new Justice Minister and Chief Negotiator with the Palestinians, supported by a ministerial committee that includes Netanyahu and Yaalon. The Minister of International Relations, Intelligence and Strategic Affairs is Yuval Steinitz from the Likud party.

The 20<sup>th</sup> of March, US President Obama arrived in Israel for a two-day visit, the first time he came to the country and the first overseas trip of his second term. In a press conference with Netanyahu, Obama said that United States will work closely with Israel to prevent Iran developing an operational nuclear capability. Obama and Netanyahu also announced the extension of the defence assistance agreement (that gives Israel \$3 billion a year for defence purchases) between the US and Israel, due to expire in 2017.

At the end of Obama's visit, Israeli Prime Minister apologised to his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, for the loss of nine lives on the Mavi Marmara in the May 2010 incident. Obama joined the call at one point.

### ***Palestinian Territories***

The 21<sup>st</sup> of March the US president Barack Obama arrived in Ramallah, West Bank, to meet with the Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Prime Minister Salam Fayyad. During a press conference, Obama reaffirmed his commitment to a two-state solution regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although local observers start to doubt about the feasibility of this option.

Meanwhile, two rockets from the Gaza Strip hit the Southern Israeli border town of Sderot, breaking a three-month cease-fire. There were no reports of casualties. Obama did not travel to Gaza, which is ruled by Hamas, a group designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the US Department of State.

Successively Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu announced Israel will resume the monthly tax transfers of about \$100m to the Palestinian Authority, which were suspended as a punitive measure following the November 2012 statehood recognition vote at the United Nations (25/3/2013).

### ***Jordan***

Khaled Toukan, chairman of the Jordan Atomic Energy Commission, declared that a consortium led by Russia's Rosatom and another headed by Areva of France and Japan's Mitsubishi are competing to win a contract of €12 billion for 2 one-gigawatt nuclear reactors near the capital Amman, about 100 kilometres south of the Syrian border (7/3/2013).

The 22<sup>nd</sup> of March US President Obama had a bilateral meeting with King Abdullah II of Jordan followed by a press conference. The main topic of the meeting was the ongoing crisis in Syria, including the huge impact on Jordan's stability. Since the country is

sheltering more than 450.000 refugees, Obama announced an aid package of \$200 million to help Jordan to cope with influx.

Three days later Jordan closed the Jaber border crossing with Syria's Southern Deraa province, after two days of fighting between rebel fighters and Syrian forces.

## ***Lebanon***

During March there were increasing reports of cross-border fighting in the mixed Sunni-Shiite area lying West and South of the Syrian city of Homs, along the Lebanese-Syrian border. Sunnis and Shiites support their respective communities. In Lebanon's Beeqa Valley, Shiite Hezbollah militants are fighting Syrian Sunni rebels nearby al-Qusayr. The deputy secretary-general of Hezbollah told that his party supports Shiites living in Syrian border communities. On the other side, resident of Lebanese Sunni village of Aarsal are supporting the Syrian rebels against Hezbollah operations.

The 22<sup>nd</sup> of March, Lebanon's Prime Minister Najib Mikati resigned as his government failed to form a supervisory electoral committee for the 2013 polls. Mikati was also unable to overcome the resistance from Hezbollah vis-à-vis extending the term of Gen. Ashraf Rifi, the general director of the Internal Security Forces. The Lebanese President Sleiman suspended the government and accepted Mikati's resignation. Binding consultations are expected to be launched the 2<sup>nd</sup> of April 2013.

## Strategic trends

There are clear signs of a shift in US policy on Syria, since the crisis has been a central issue in John Kerry's trip to Europe and Middle East and the US Secretary of State announced non-lethal aid to the armed opposition. Nevertheless, aid through SNC may not reach fighters on the ground and more concrete action may be needed.

As a long time US ally in the region, Turkey can play an active role in supporting the rebels. Turkey has been already involved against Syrian forces of al-Assad during the conflict and is thought to be providing arms to the Free Syrian Army. In addition, a *Patriot anti-missile* battery is *installed* at the Diyarbakir military airport in South-Eastern *Turkey*.

Meanwhile, the émigré opposition continues to be ineffectual and central coordination among rebels remains a problem. The capture of 21 Filipino UN peacekeepers carried out by the "Martyrs of Yarmouk" has been widely criticized by the Free Syrian Army, indicating that the loosely connected rebels units act on their own initiative.

On the military side, weapons shortages and logistic inefficiency are strongly limiting the rebels' ability to sustain operations. While the opposition Supreme Military Council is not able to exercise any command on the ground, the cohesion of al-Assad regime is propped up by arms shipment from Iran and Hezbollah, which is also providing a large numbers of militia and auxiliary forces.

Moreover, increasingly cross-border Sunni-Shiite fighting in north Beqaa region has exacerbated existing tensions. The daily shelling of Lebanese border areas by Syrian forces is increasing concerns over a full scale sectarian Sunni-Shiite conflict in Lebanon.

Since Lebanon's rival politicians have not reached an agreement on the electoral law and Mikati's government collapsed, the June parliamentary poll could be seriously delayed. In addition, the internal rift within the Sunni community between Mikati and Hariri makes more difficult to form a new government. Under Lebanon's constitutional law, the prime minister must be a Sunni Muslim, the president a Maronite Christian and the speaker of parliament a Shiite Muslim.

Not only in Lebanon but also in Israel there are concerns over the deteriorating security in the Golan Heights area, after the capture of the 21 UN Filipino troops. The inability of peacekeepers to preserve stability in the 80-kilometres buffer zone could give tactical advantages to jihadists currently fighting in Syria. If Damascus falls, a huge flood of refugees is expected to reach the border zone, thus allowing the militants to cross the border as well and posing a rather concrete threat to Israeli security.

The regional spill over is affecting almost all the countries and Jordan seems to be most affected. In the border areas with Syria, the troops of the Assad regime and the Free Syrian Army are regularly fighting to control crossings. In the clashes, many refugees have been wounded or caught in the crossfire. Jordan's forces are probably the next to be involved in the fight. Already committed to stem the flow of refugees, Amman is also fearing that some Syrian fighters could eventually establish contacts with the Islamist opposition in Jordan.

Spreading of Islamist extremism is another serious risk emerging from the regional crisis. The killing of 48 Syrian soldiers and 9 Iraqis in the Anbar province suggests potential

coordination between al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and its allies in Syria, such as Jabhat al-Nusra. Syrian and Iraqi insurgencies seem to have liaisons, since the majority of the al-Nusra Front militants have Iraqi nationality.

Other facts are relevant in this situation, namely the formation of the Israeli government, the three-day trip of President Obama and the Turkish-Israeli relations.

In Israel, the new coalition has a 68 over 120 majority in the Knesset. The new government is likely to carry out domestic reforms, while Netanyahu reaffirmed the priority of protecting the security of the state and its citizens.

As Finance Minister in the new government, Yair Lapid has gained wide control over the country's budget and he will try to end subsidies to the ultra-orthodox.

It is also unlikely that Netanyahu will be able to restart peace talks with the Palestinians, since pro-settlements politicians have secured the defence and housing ministries. With the Jewish Home Party controlling the Economy and Trade and the Construction and Housing Ministries, the far-right militants are able to provide financial resources to the settlements.

The US President Obama's visit to Israel did not seem to produce any diplomatic breakthrough, but U.S. and Israeli strategic view on Middle East seems to be the same. Both Obama and Netanyahu need a better coordination to jointly address the Iranian nuclear issue and both have an interest in preventing the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, whose President Mahmoud Abbas is eager to achieve a diplomatic result since the reconciliation between Fatah and Hamas does not reach a positive effect in re-engaging Israel in talks.

Not surprisingly, a progress in the peace process could bring some political results also in Jordan. The focus of President Obama's visit was Syria and the significant social and economic impact of the refugees' influx. But King Abdullah knows that a peace process would help him to mitigate the risk coming from the Palestinian majority in Jordan and, at the same time, avoid a coalition of Islamist and tribal opposition against himself.

Barack Obama's trip to Middle East has achieved a concrete – perhaps a major – outcome: the Israeli-Turkish rapprochement. Netanyahu spoke with Turkish PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan just as President Obama was departing for Jordan. Restoring ties between the two leaders has long been a U.S. objective and now a resumption of diplomatic relations is more likely.