



NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

MASHREQ STRATEGIC TRENDS

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Executive summary

In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad's forces and militias have made significant gains in recent weeks, recapturing strategically important territories in the Central and Southern Syria. Moreover, the Hizb'Allah's role in the Syrian war is increasingly evident and its commitment to the conflict could eventually affect the course of the military operations, as well as the security situation in Lebanon. The leader of the Shiite organization Hizb'Allah, Hassan Nasrallah, made clear that Hizb'Allah is ready to back its Syrian ally, Bashar al-Assad.

European Union failed to extend the arms embargo on Syria, potentially allowing new supplies of weapons to Syrian opposition fighters.

Meanwhile, Lebanon is struggling with the definition of its own future political balance and the Parliament agreed to postpone parliamentary elections until November 2014.

In Israel, the government coalition reached a deal to abolish military exemption for ultra-Orthodox Jews. According to the proposed law, which will come into effect in four years, the number of seminary students exempted from the military will be limited to 1.800. The end of military exemption for ultra-Orthodox Jews is a break with the Israeli political tradition.

Rival Palestinian groups Fatah and HAMAS have set a three-month timetable to form a national unity government and organize elections. The deal has been reached during a meeting held at the Egyptian security services headquarter in Cairo.

There are signs of gradual improvement of bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey. The visit of a Turkish delegation, led by the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was the highest-level diplomatic mission to visit Israel since relations were frozen.

Situation report

Israel

The 6th of May, an agreement has been reached between Israel and Turkey on compensation payment to the families of the victims of the Israeli Navy's takeover of the Mavi Marmara (2010). The deal has been reached on the eligibility criteria, but the amount for compensation has to be settled. The second round of reconciliation talks took place between the Turkish Foreign Ministry Director General Feridun Sinirlioglu and the Israel's National Security Adviser Yaakov Amidror with former Foreign Ministry Director General Yosef Ciechanover.

The 8th of May, in Beijing, Israel and China signed a \$400 million trade and economic cooperation agreement, in the presence of Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

The 14th of May, the Israeli government passed a two-year austerity budget that will cut spending and raise taxes, erasing hopes of many Israelis for an economic relief. The austerity measures are intended to ease a deficit of \$10.5 billion (4.2% of the GDP). The new budget also includes an increase of 1.5% in the personal income tax and of 1% in the corporate tax. The value-added tax is set to rise to 18% from the previous 17.

The 29th of May, the government coalition reached a deal to abolish military exemption for ultra-Orthodox Jews. According to the proposed law, which will come into effect in four years, the number of seminary students exempted from the military each year will be limited to 1.800.

Palestinian Territories

The 5th of May, the president of the Palestinian Authority, Mahmoud Abbas, visited China for a three-day trip. Abbas and Chinese President Xi Jinping signed cultural and economic co-operation agreements to be developed between 2013 and 2016.

The 14th of May, the rival Palestine groups Fatah and HAMAS have set a three-month timetable to form a national unity government and organize elections, after the Fatah Official in charge of Reconciliation Affairs, Azzam al-Ahmed, met with his HAMAS counterpart Moussa Abu Marzouk. The deal was reached during a meeting held at the Egyptian security services headquarters in Cairo.

The 15th of May, in Ramallah (West Bank) thousands of Palestinians marched in the streets and in some cases clashed with Israeli security forces, marking the 65th anniversary of the "nakba" or "catastrophe", the Arab mass displacement during the 1948 war against Israel.

Syria

The 1st of May, Syrian forces took control of large parts of the strategic Wadi Sayeh district in Homs, after opposition forces' occupation of Syria's third largest city for over a year. Meanwhile, during a rare public appearance, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad visited the Umayyad Electrical Station, marking the international Labour Day.

The 2nd of May, clashes were reported in the port of Baniyas, on the Mediterranean coast. Moreover, regular forces and pro-regime militias stormed the Sunni coastal villages of

Baida and Maqreb, after rebels had attacked a bus of pro-Assad militiamen, known as shabiha, killing at least six and wounding 20.

The 4th of May, Israel carried out a powerful air attack against a weapons depot at Damascus International Airport, that it believed kept Iranian Fateh-110 missiles to be forwarded to the Hizb'Allah in Lebanon.

The 6th of May, Israel launched airstrikes into Syria for the second time in three days. Israeli jets hit a Republican Guard base, a long-range missile warehouse, and the military research centre of Jamraya. Even if the attack destroyed several critical military facilities and killed dozens of presidential troops, Israeli officials declared that the airstrike was done only to prevent the transfer of weapons to the Lebanese militants and was not intended to weaken the army of Bashar al-Assad.

The 12th of May, the Islamist opposition rebels Martyrs of Yarmouk released four Filipino U.N. peacekeepers that they captured during the previous week in the Golan Heights. The same group was responsible for the capture of 21 Filipino peacekeepers in March (released after three days).

The 13th of May, Syrian government forces took full control of Khirbet Ghazaleh, a strategically important town in the Southern Syria, near a highway linking Damascus with Jordan, in a major effort to drive rebels out of Southern Syria.

The 16th of May, the U.N. General Assembly voted a non-binding resolution (introduced by Qatar) calling for an "inclusive" political transition in Syria. The measure passed by 107 votes against 12, with Iran, China, and Russia opposing it.

The 20th of May, the Syrian army pushed into al-Qusayr, a strategic city near the Lebanese border, inflicting a serious setback to the opposition. Hizb'Allah have backed the Syrian army during the combats.

The 21st of May, Israeli soldiers and Syrian forces exchanged fire in the Israeli occupied Golan Heights. Israeli troops responded to shots that damaged a military vehicle.

The 28th of May, European Union failed to extend the arms embargo on Syria, potentially allowing new supplies of weapons to Syrian opposition fighters. British Foreign Secretary William Hague said the expiration of the ban "*gives us the flexibility to respond in the future if the situation continues to deteriorate*".

Lebanon

After being officially named new Prime Minister in April, the Sunni leader Tamman Salam still faces the challenge of forming a cabinet since Lebanon's two largest political parties support opposite sides in the war.

The 1st of May, the leader of the Shiite organization Hizb'Allah, Hassan Nasrallah, made clear that Hizb'Allah is ready to back its Syrian ally, Bashar al-Assad. Until now, Hizb'Allah has kept statements on Syria relatively subdued. But after the Hizb'Allah-led government was dissolved in March, the support to Bashar al-Assad is worth the domestic political costs.

The 31st of May, Lebanese Parliament agreed to postpone parliamentary elections until November 2014. The 17-month extension comes after two months of failed negotiations

over a new electoral law, with Prime Minister designate Salam unable to form a new cabinet.

Jordan

After the U.S. Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, announced last month that the United States will send 200 troops to Jordan, a few thousand protesters took the streets to demonstrate against the deployment, expressing opposition to foreign intervention in Syria.

The 8th of May, the lower House of Jordanian Parliament called on the government to expel Israeli Ambassador Daniel Nevo, and to recall Jordanian Ambassador to Israel Walid Obeidat. The non-binding vote came after Israel limited the entrance of Muslim worshipers to the Temple Mount and allowed Jews to enter during the celebration of Jerusalem Day (a day that marks the reunification of the city under Israeli sovereignty in 1967).

Strategic trends

In Syria, President Bashar al-Assad's forces and militias have made significant gains in recent weeks, recapturing strategically important territories in the Central and Southern Syria and marking a shift from the indiscriminate operations in the early stage of the conflict. Now the Syrian army's first goal seems to be the connection between the heart of regime in Damascus and the Alawite-dominated coast.

Moreover, the outcome of the battle over al-Qusayr could determine the control of important supply lines, and if opposition fighters lose the town, they will probably lose all of Homs province to the regime.

Meanwhile, Hizb'Allah's role in the Syrian war is increasingly evident and its commitment to the conflict could eventually affect the course of the military operations, as well as the security situation in Lebanon and the Shiite group's confrontation with Israel. A clear sign is the speech of Hassam Nasrallah, who committed his group to defeating the rebels and preserving the regime of al-Assad.

Hizb'Allah is playing a key role in the regime's employment of effective irregular forces, by providing also training to local militia groups and giving the regime new offensive and defensive capabilities. The Syrian army will quickly restore its ability to conduct major offensive operations and redeploy some troops elsewhere in the country.

Consequently the consequences for Lebanon could be very important and affect the internal security, as cross-border struggles and the involvement of Sunni Lebanese in the Qusayr's battle are increasing, alongside Sunni-Shiite clashes sparked inside Lebanon.

With regards to domestic politics, Lebanon is already struggling with the definition of its own future political balance. Currently, the amendment of the electoral law seems to be the priority for all political parties. With the current electoral system, none of the sides will be able to obtain the majority needed to govern. However, an agreement seems to be very distant and the postponement of parliamentary elections until November 2014 certainly prolongs the Lebanese political impasse.

In the regional scenario dominated by the Syrian crisis, there are significant implications for Israel too. Preventing arrival of heavy weaponry and advanced systems to Hizb'Allah is a top priority for Tel Aviv, since the Iranian Fateh-110 (a missile with a 200-mile range and precision guidance systems) is more effective than most of the existing ones in Hizb'Allah's arsenal. Such weaponry would be a so called "game-changer" in the conflict with Hizb'Allah.

For this reason, Israel will act whenever its national security will be threatened, in order to prevent by all means the Syrian government from transferring strategic weapons to Hizb'Allah, one of its most dangerous enemies. Furthermore, retaliatory attacks against Israel by Syria or its (Lebanese or Iranian) allies are unlikely and Israel's most strategic ambition with respect to Syria remains a stable peace. Once more, the airstrikes carried out by Israeli Air Force were focused on the destruction of weapons depots, and they did not give any indication of further intervention in the conflict.

Another important trend emerging from Middle East politics is the improvement of bilateral relations between Israel and Turkey. The visit of a Turkish delegation, led by the Undersecretary of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was the highest-level diplomatic mission to visit Israel since relations were frozen.

Although a return to the intimate Israeli-Turkish alliance is unlikely, the level of hostility is decreasing and bilateral trade is growing. Cooperation between Israel and Turkey would be important to avoid the destabilization of the broader region. Perhaps, a first step toward a renewal of military cooperation could be the information and intelligence sharing on the Syrian issue, a crisis that simultaneously affects the two countries.

There is some good news also in domestic politics for Israel, after the end of a long struggle between a secular majority and the ultra-Orthodox minority in the country. In effect, the end of military exemption for ultra-Orthodox Jews is a break with political tradition. Nevertheless, the new legislation could also enhance militancy in an ultra-Orthodox community whose state welfare benefits are facing a serious threat.

But for the first time in a decade, with no ultra-Orthodox members in the ruling coalition, Netanyahu has a real chance to enact reforms under the slogan of "sharing the national burden" and strengthen the cohesion of his government in front of a new wave of social protests, since a vast movement already rocked the nation in the summer of 2011.

On the Palestinian side, after he has been re-elected in April, Hamas' leader Khaled Meshal has almost achieved reconciliation with the opposing group of Fatah, a top political priority for the movement ruling the Gaza Strip. By implementing the deal with Fatah and leading the Palestinians to general elections, Hamas will certainly gain full international recognition from the Arab countries. Meshal has already replaced his alliances with Syria and Iran and built solid relations with powers such as Turkey and Qatar. After the Qatari emir visited Gaza in October, Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan plans to visit the Strip as well.