



NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

MASHREQ STRATEGIC TRENDS

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Executive summary

The 24th of June, the most serious sectarian incident since the conflict in the neighbouring Syria erupted in April 2011 occurred in the port city of Sidon, after the Lebanese police arrested a member of an anti-Hizb'Allah political group. The powerful Shi'ite group Hizb'Allah is explicitly showing its links to the Syria-Iran axis, rapidly switching from the role of a Lebanese national movement to the wider one of staunch supporter of the Shia cause.

Significant sectarian implications could result from such a change, not only in Lebanon but also in the other Arab countries.

The 5th of June, Syrian government forces and their Lebanese Hizb'Allah allies launched an overnight offensive against the town of al-Qusair and finally seized control of the town, a strategic logistic hub near the Lebanese border. The fall of this strategic place could eventually change the dynamics of the Syrian conflict.

The 21st of June, after just two weeks in office, the freshly appointed Palestinian Prime Minister submitted his resignation to President Mahmoud Abbas, because of a "conflict over authority" with other Palestinian officials. The resignation of Mr Rami Hamdallah underscores the internal disorder affecting the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority and the instability dominating the Palestinian political arena.

The 24th of June, militants from the Palestinian Strip of Gaza fired at least six rockets against southern Israel, ending the six-month cease-fire between Israel and Gaza. The Israeli military responded with airstrikes against a seemingly Hamas' weapons storage in the south of Gaza.

The 9th of June, a 12-day military air defence, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance exercise involving 8.000 personnel from 19 countries, called Eager Lion, began in Jordan. The joint military exercise has been focused on maintaining regional stability.

Situation report

Israel

The 7th of June, the Austrian government decided to withdraw its 380 UN peacekeepers from the UN mission in the Golan Heights, after the injury of a Filipino soldier during clashes between Syrian forces and rebels over control of a border crossing in Quneitra. "The uncontrolled and imminent danger to Austrian soldiers has reached an unacceptable level", said a statement issued by Chancellor Werner Faymann.

Since the Syrian civil war threatens to spill over the border, Israeli officials reacted to Austria's decision, a move that was seen as a betrayal of the United Nation's commitment to regional security.

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Palestinian Territories

The 3rd of June, Mahmoud Abbas, President of the Palestinian Authority (PA), has replaced former Prime Minister Salam Fayyad with Rami Hamdallah, a political independent and president of an-Najah National University in Nablus. Obviously, his appointment was not recognized by Hamas.

The 21st of June, after just two weeks in office, Mr Hamdallah submitted his resignation to President Mahmoud Abbas, because of a "conflict over authority" with other Palestinian officials, namely Mohammad Mustafa, the former chairman of the Palestine Investment Fund and economic adviser to President Abbas, and Ziad Abu Amr, a former foreign minister and recently appointed as Deputy Prime Minister of the PA.

The 23rd of June, President Abbas has accepted the resignation.

Syria

The 3rd of June, during a combat between Syrian opposition forces and Hizb'Allah fighters in the town of Baalbek, in the Beqa'a Valley, caused the death of 12 rebels and one Hizb'Allah militant.

The 5th of June, after weeks of fierce fighting, Syrian government forces and their Lebanese Hizb'Allah allies launched an overnight offensive in al-Qusair and finally seized control of the city, a strategic hub near the Lebanese border. The opposition rebels had controlled al-Qusair for over a year.

The 11th of June, two suicide bomb attacks rocked the commercial district of Marjeh Square in central Damascus, killing 14 people and injuring 30. The same day, the Syrian army repeatedly attacked the rebels' positions in the northern province of Aleppo and shelled the Mannagh air base, after opposition fighters took partial control of it.

The 12th of June, Syrian rebel fighters launched a violent attack in the predominantly Shi'a village of Hatla, near Deir al-Zour, in eastern Syria, killing dozens of Shi'ite Muslims. Reportedly, many of the fighters were from Jabat al-Nusra, an al-Qaeda associated group operating in Syria. Moreover, the attack appeared to be a retaliation for a raid on a nearby rebel position carried out by people from Hatla the day before.

The 13th of June, since the government troops were attempting to regain rebel-held parts of Aleppo, the top Syrian rebel commander, Salim Idris, issued a desperate request to the Western governments for ammunition rounds, antitank missiles and anti-aircraft weapons, in order to prevent the fall of the city, a rebel stronghold in the north west of Syria.

The same day, U.S. White House officials cited allegedly clear evidence that the troops of Bashar al-Assad have used chemical weapons (i.e. nerve agent Sarin) killing more than 150 people. Thus, the Obama Administration has decided to supply Syrian opposition rebels with small arms and ammunition. The CIA, Central Intelligence Agency, will coordinate the direct military assistance to the rebels.

The 17th of June, a car-bomb attack against a military checkpoint near Damascus killed 20 people and, the following day, at least 60 Syrian soldiers died in truck-bomb attack near Aleppo.

The 19th of June, opposition forces launched an attack on the northern M5 highway, a main road that goes through Aleppo to the Turkish border, in an attempt to cut off a key supply line for governmental forces.

Lebanon

The 5th of June, the Lebanese army was deployed to the northern city of Tripoli, after violent clashes between Sunni residents of the Bab al-Tabbaneh neighbourhood and Alawites from Jabal al-Mohsen had caused the death of eight people.

The 10th of June, in Beirut, a Lebanese citizen who protested against Hizb'Allah's role in the Syrian conflict outside the Iranian Embassy was shot and killed, while several others were injured. The embassy is in the predominantly pro-Hizb'Allah district of Bir Hassan, in the southern part of Beirut. During the day, three rallies organized by the Lebanese Option Party took place in the streets of the capital to protest against the strong involvement of Hizb'Allah's militants in the Syrian war. Meanwhile, another anti-Hizb'Allah rally took place without incidents in the streets of Sidon, the third-largest city of Lebanon.

The 12th of June, rockets launched from Syrian territory hit the eastern Lebanese town of Hermel, a Hizb'Allah stronghold, while the troops of Bashar al-Assad struck the Lebanese border town of Aarsal.

The 19th of June, the Lebanese army deployed 400 soldiers in Abra, an eastern suburb of the southern coastal city of Sidon, after violent sectarian clashes had taken place between supporters of Sheikh Ahmad Assir, a fierce critic of Hizb'Allah, and the Resistance Brigades, a pro-Hizb'Allah group.

The 24th of June, the most serious sectarian incident since the beginning of the conflict in Syria occurred in the port city of Sidon, after the Lebanese police had arrested a follower of Sheikh Ahmad Assir at a checkpoint. An estimated 17 Lebanese soldiers were killed and 35 wounded. Presence of foreign fighters, including members of Jabat al-Nusra, was reported.

Jordan

The 9th of June, a 12-day military air defence, disaster relief and humanitarian assistance exercise (Eager Lion) involving 8.000 personnel from 19 countries, began in Jordan. The exercise focused on “*issues such as integrated air and missile defence and humanitarian assistance to address current and future conflicts’ security issues,*” said Gen. Awni al Adwan of the Jordanian army.

Previously, the 3rd of June, U.S. Defence Secretary Chuck Hagel had already approved the proposal to leave two anti-missile Patriot batteries in Jordan, after the military joint exercise. In January, a set of four Patriot batteries was deployed by NATO along Turkey’s border with Syria.

The 13th of June, the Jordanian Parliament approved a treaty with Britain that would allow the deportation of Abu Qatada (real name Omar Mahmoud Mohammed Othman), a radical cleric convicted with terrorism charges in 1999. Currently detained in Belmarsh prison, in London, Qatada is also being investigated by Scotland Yard over the detention of extremist material.

The 17th of June, U.S. President Barack Obama announced \$45 million in new humanitarian aid to help Jordan cope with the 192.000 refugees who have fled the war in Syria.

The 27th of June, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry landed in Amman for his fifth trip to Middle East. In an effort to revive the peace process, Mr Kerry held separate talks with the Jordanian King Abdullah and Palestinian President Abbas in Amman and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in Jerusalem.

Strategic trends

The powerful Shi'ite group Hizb'Allah is explicitly showing its links to the Syria-Iran axis, rapidly switching from the role of a Lebanese national movement to the wider one of staunch supporter of the Shia cause. Significant sectarian implications could result from such a change, not only in Lebanon but also in the other Arab countries.

Hizb'Allah is likely to play a key role in the Syrian conflict by giving a strong support to Bashar al-Assad troops, as the battle for al-Qusair has clearly revealed.

The fall of this strategically important city could eventually change the dynamics of the two-year long Syrian conflict. The capture of al-Qusair ensures control of a cross-border supply route with Lebanon through the central province of Homs, linking at the same time Damascus to the regime's coastal strongholds. Since the Syrian army has achieved significant gains in the military field, some rebels are carrying out a desperate attempt to stop the governmental advance. This could be the meaning of the mid-June bombings in Aleppo and Damascus.

In addition, the opening of a new Lebanese front is a real option in the Syrian war. The military commander of the Free Syrian Army, Gen Selim Idriss, has expressed his desire to confront Hizb'Allah fighters inside Lebanon, posing a threat of a wider regional conflagration.

There are clear signs of increasing military operations in Northern Lebanon. Attacks against Shi'ite areas have risen in recent weeks. Since Hizb'Allah militias openly joined the Syrian army to fight the rebels, the predominantly Shi'a areas of the country are suffering frequent attacks by Sunni and Syrian rebels as well.

The tensions in the coastal city of Sidon resulted in the most significant sectarian incident in the recent years and underscored the fragility of Lebanon's society. The population has still fresh memories of the Lebanese civil war, lasting from 1975 to 1990 and fears an increasing sectarian instability.

The involvement of Jabat al-Nusra fighters in the recent clashes within Sidon has confirmed that the jihadist group has extended its presence and influence outside Syria and Iraq.

The active role played by Islamist and jihadist groups in the conflict has posed many concerns about the future of a post-Assad Syria and has delayed the U.S. decision to arm the rebels. But even now, with the decision to supply lethal aid, the U.S. government remains divided about whether to change the course of the war. At this point, the shipments of arms to the rebels may be too late.

Meanwhile in neighbouring Jordan the Eager Lion exercise has nothing to do with a possible direct U.S. military intervention in Syria, while its goal regards regional stability instead. Although some aspects of the exercise might have been planned thinking about Syria, the participation of U.S. soldiers aimed mainly to demonstrate the commitment to the regional stability.

In Jordan the situation is gradually deteriorating since the economic indicators worsen and the drama of Syrian refugees is growing day by day (the kingdom is hosting now nearly

500.000 people). Abdullah II is facing domestic demonstrations and political uncertainty, but probably his kingdom is not likely to collapse in the short term, given the support of international donors.

The resignation of the freshly appointed Palestinian Prime Minister underscores the internal disorder affecting the Fatah-led Palestinian Authority and the instability dominating the Palestinian political arena. In the medium term, the resignation could undermine international confidence in the PA, facing continuous financial strictures. As an immediate consequence, the resignation could negatively affect the peace effort of U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry.

After several weeks of relative calm along the Israeli-Gaza border due to a six-month cease-fire, there have been clashes between HAMAS and Israeli forces. Although there is no indication that the situation would precipitate into a broader confrontation between HAMAS and Israel, the incident may have been caused by an internal dispute among opposite Palestinian factions.