



NATO DEFENSE COLLEGE FOUNDATION

STRATEGIC TRENDS

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MASHREQ

Syria

While airstrike campaigns, carried out both from the US-led coalition and the Syrian army, as well as ground combats continue across the country, Syria remains a deeply divided country with no major shifts in territorial control, and not much progress towards achieving a political solution.

The US and its Arab allies have been executing air strikes on ISIS positions in Raqqa, the capital and stronghold of the so-called Caliphate, and elsewhere in northern and eastern Syria since September. Meanwhile, the US (and CIA) committed to train some 5.000 moderate Syrian rebels a year, with the help of regional allies such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Jordan and Qatar. As a matter of fact, Qatar seems to be already covertly training some rebel groups near the Al Udeid base, with US help, to fight both President Bashar al-Assad and ISIS. However only training is being provided, while rebels repeatedly asked their trainers for more advanced weaponry and techniques, such as building improvised explosive devices (IEDs), requests which were always denied.

In addition, moderate forces are not easily found, since the interdiction of their supply routes into Aleppo by the regular army and hardliners such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS have begun fighting them with superior weaponry and guerrilla skills. The group with the strongest links to the US – but stronger links to Turkey - seems still the Free Syrian Army, whose fighters allegedly are being trained on Turkish soil by American and Turkish instructors since the end of December 2013.

This is a significant considering that Turkey is reluctant to enter the fight against the Islamic State without receiving assurances from the US that it will help topple the government of Syrian President Bashar Assad, which still is the priority for Ankara, Doha and Riyadh. On the contrary, Washington has reportedly pledged that air strikes against the ISIS would not target Syrian army targets and has refused to step up its commitment in Aleppo, crucial to the mainstream opposition's military viability as well as its morale, because it would be seen as a direct attack against the regime.

Meanwhile the Syrian Foreign Minister Walid al-Moualem met with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov in Moscow on November 26. Following to the meeting al-Moualem that Russia would be ready to deliver advanced weaponry to the regime, after a suspension decided last September due to pressures from Western powers and a special ad-hoc visit from the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

With its influence in the Middle East weakened and relationship with the West under increasing strain over Ukraine, Moscow is trying to prove it is a relevant player, proposing to restart Syria talks that collapsed in Geneva last February. However the suggestion is not likely to go through as there is profound disagreement over the destiny of president Assad and over the identification of the legitimate opposition.

It would seem equally difficult to pursue the plan outlined in the very first days of November by the new UN envoy to Syria, Staffan De Mistura, who proposes to initially freeze the fighting in Aleppo and create a humanitarian corridor, thus providing proof that the on-the-ground narrative can be shifted from a military one to a political one. The Free Syrian Army (FSA) has rejected the UN truce proposal, a day after the government hinted at considering it, arguing that the plan only serves the regime of President Bashar al-Assad.

Lebanon

The country has been in a political stalemate for months. The Iranian-backed Shi'a factions, led by Hezbollah, and the Saudi-backed Sunni factions, such as the Future bloc, have been unable to reach an agreement to elect a new President to replace Michel Sleiman whose term ended in May 2014. A government formed in February with Saudi-Iranian blessing has spared Lebanon a complete political vacuum at the top, but that government has struggled to take even basic decisions. The parliament, barely functioning, voted in mid-November to extend its own mandate until 2017, arguing that it would have been too risky to run parliamentary elections without a president, but in fact prolonging the stalemate. On November 23, both Hezbollah leader Sayyed Hasan Nasrallah and Future Movement leader Saad Hariri have announced their intentions to hold dialogue to resolve Lebanon's presidential crisis. However, without a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, decision-making in Lebanon is likely to remain stalled.

In the meantime the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) are fully engaged in fight against Sunni extremist groups, mainly ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra throughout the northern Bekaa Valley, which stretches along the Syrian border, and in the coastal city of Tripoli. On the other hand Hezbollah militias have gone one step further, reportedly sending experts into Iraq to back the army in its strategic planning against ISIS. The authorities still fear that these clashes could draw in local fighters, who actively supported opposite forces within the Syrian conflict, and drag Lebanon back into civil war.

The scaling-up of military operations has determined the competition between the big powers to provide military aid to the LAF. A deal signed on November 4 will give the Lebanese Armed Forces US\$3 billion worth of French weaponry, paid for by Saudi Arabia who has pledged an additional US\$1 billion. The United States, which remains the Lebanese army's most generous ally, while trying to stay out of the political quagmire, has stepped up a long-standing programme of military assistance and training. Finally, even Iran has offered to arm the LAF, sparking a significant controversy over whether to accept the offer.

Jordan

The Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan is currently under considerable pressure due to the repercussions of the multi-layered, multi-polar conflicts inflaming the Mashreq region.

Increasing strife between the Israelis and the Palestinians over Jerusalem's holy sites of Temple Mount and Al-Aqsa Mosque - a shrine under the custody of Jordan - plunged relations between Israel and Jordan into crisis in the very first days of November, with Amman recalling its ambassador for the first time since the countries' 1994 peace treaty.

The most immediate consequence of the dispute has been the threat to wreck a \$15bn, 15-years gas deal under which Jordan would import Israeli gas from the Leviathan field. The deal, which would end Jordan's reliance on patchy supplies from Egypt and reduce its annual energy bill by an estimated \$1.4bn, is meeting increasing opposition among civil society groups and politicians. However, Jordan's leadership has so far privileged the more direct interests of the country over purely political matters, strongly aligning its stances with Western ones. It is likely that this is going to happen again, as suggested by the fact that following a summit in mid-November convened by US secretary of state John Kerry, Jordan's King Abdullah and Israeli leader Benjamin Netanyahu agreed undisclosed measures that cooled tensions over al-Aqsa.

Declarations released after the meeting clarify that the fight against ISIS is identified as a priority by all parties who are incline to put aside other controversies for the time being. Jordan is taking part in the US-led airstrike campaign against ISIS in Syria and apparently even discussing if to deploy ground forces.

At the same time, to counter the ideological spill overs from Syria, Jordan is moving to co-opt its Muslim clerics and has amended the country's anti-terror law, which however, has so far hit only the Muslim Brotherhood, the country's strongest opposition and the most influential with the Jordanian people. A close ally of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, Jordan may be considering whether to take its allies' stances against the Muslim Brotherhood, as the arrest on November 20 of the Jordanian MB-leader Zaki Bani Irshid would suggest.

Israel and the Palestinian Territories.

Over the past several weeks, tension and violence have risen steadily in Jerusalem, culminating in several clashes at al-Aqsa/Temple Mount and the stepping up of security measures across the territories.

The dynamics of all accidents were very similar, with seemingly leaderless individuals and groups of, attacking each other. On November 5 a Palestinian driver run into people in Jerusalem, killing two of them, and is then shot dead by police. On November 18, four Jewish worshippers are killed in a synagogue in Jerusalem and two Palestinian assailants are then taken down by police. In the West Bank, one Palestinian has been killed and two others injured after being run over by an Israeli bus.

However, the parties expressed the belief that attacks can be contained, as a consequence of the close and intense security cooperation that has been fostered between the Palestinian Authority security forces, Israel's internal security agency (the Shin Bet) and Israel Defence Forces (IDF). The West Bank security apparatus has arrested dozens of Hamas and Islamic Jihad militants and on November 26 Israel's Shin Bet halted an alleged Hamas cell planning to carry out a series of attacks in Jerusalem. One member of this cell, Ibrahim al-Zir, was charged with heading a terrorist cell that planned to assassinate Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman during Operation Protective Edge in order to stop the war in the Gaza Strip.

Meanwhile, tensions between Hamas and Fatah continue. The Palestinian prime minister, Rami Hamdallah, cancelled in early November a planned visit to the Gaza Strip after a wave of blasts targeted Fatah party officials. Fatah has blamed Hamas for the blasts - but the group has denied responsibility. The two groups formed a unity government in April, but it has never been implemented on the ground.

This complicates the resumption of direct peace talks advocated for by the new EU foreign affairs chief Federica Mogherini, as a response to resolutions passed by the British and Spanish parliaments, an official decision to recognise Palestine by the Swedish government, and the intention of the European Parliament to hold a symbolic vote in December.

Some argue these developments suggest that Israel's ability to influence key matters is at an unprecedented low, citing the negotiations over Iran's nuclear programme as an example. Israel did not hide that, had the P5+1 (the five permanent UN Security Council members and Germany) and Tehran signed the agreement under discussion on November 24, Israel would have felt that its security concerns had been neglected. Finally, the credibility of Israel's military option (which formally still exists) has decreased in the eyes of the United States and Iran, and its tense relationship with US President Barack Obama's administration makes things no easier.