

Monthly Global Security Briefing – June 2013

SYRIA: DETERIORISATION OR COMPROMISE?

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Summary

Military progress by the Assad regime, the likelihood of US and/or European aid to the rebels, as well as Russia's attitude, all complicate the possibility for negotiations on the situation in Syria. However, neither side can win outright, and so, a compromise is necessary, if further years of conflict with further heavy casualties are to be avoided. The Iranian election result may be the only positive element in a deteriorating regional security environment. This may well have opened up an opportunity to address one level of the proxy war in Syria, that of Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

Introduction

Previous briefings (October 2012, February and May 2013) have focused on the evolving civil war in Syria, not least the proxy elements. Given further deterioration of the conflict, and with an estimated 93,000 people killed and several million more internally or externally displaced, this month's briefing seeks to identify key elements in the current evolution of the conflict and whether they have a bearing on a possible compromise outcome.

Relevant Factors

- Rebels now hold significant territory in those parts of north-east Syria that have a strategic relevance, stemming from the location of hydroelectric plants and the presence of oil resources.
- The rebels strongest in these areas are primarily drawn from Islamist militias, which have proved amongst the most competent of all the rebel groups. Many come from elsewhere in the region and have previous combat experience, including in Iraq, and though these groups are composed of a number of militias, they readily work together.
- The Islamist rebels tend to bring a rigorous order to the towns and villages they control, in contrast to other rebel groups with which looting and other forms of disorder are common.
- Non-Islamist rebel groups have suffered significant reversals in the past three months, to the extent that the Assad regime is now in its strongest position in over a year. Unless rebel groups obtain substantial supplies of advanced weapons, especially anti-aircraft and anti-armour weapons, they are likely to suffer further reversals, especially in and around Aleppo.
- If they do obtain such weapons in quantity, the Assad regime will most likely gain further weapons from Russia via Iran.

The regime is also aided by the increased role of Hezbollah militias, fighting alongside elements of Assad's Syrian Arab Army (SAA), which now has more than two years of combat experience.

It is unlikely that the Assad regime can regain control of the whole country in the coming months, but it continues to have sufficient confidence to make it unwilling to accept even a temporary ceasefire, let alone substantive negotiations. This position is made possible by continuing aid from Iran and Russia, with the Maliki government in Baghdad also an ally through its willingness to facilitate Iranian access to Syria.

The difference in the regime's position compared with late last year is striking – only a few months ago, Iran was helping to fund, arm and train militias that would ensure Iran's continued influence in a post-Assad Syria, thus assuming that the regime would not long survive. The changes in fortunes of the regime depend partly on external support, but there are other relevant factors:

- The regime's morale is being boosted by Putin's recent statement that Russia would prevent the establishment of a no-fly zone.
- The establishment of a National Defence Force by the regime, comprising local militias engaged in local protection, is beginning to prove effective, especially in releasing regular SAA units for direct action against rebel forces.
- The SAA has become more effective in conducting combined operations utilising helicopter gunships and strike aircraft in support of army units.
- The SAA is some way from exhausting the range of equipment available, with little use made so far of the Fatah-110 solid-fuelled surface-to-surface missile.
- The rebels appear to have made a serious error in seeking to maintain control of al-Qusayr by using substantial forces engaged in regular rather than guerrilla operations. Their determination to prove they could control territory using only light arms against the SAA proved disastrous, with as many as 400 rebels killed.
- The increased effectiveness of the more Islamist-inspired elements among the rebels is serving to enhance support for Assad from confessional groups fearing an Islamist ascendancy in a post-Assad Syria.

When these factors are integrated into a single assessment, it seems that the regime is secure and likely to remain so, even if some rebel groups are further supplied with weapons and munitions. The effect of such supply is likely to increase casualties rather than alter the outcome of the war.

The Changing Regional Context

The May briefing analysed Israeli attitudes and concluded that the Israeli perspective most likely oscillates between wanting the regime to survive and, if it doesn't, then seeing a protracted civil war, which leaves a thoroughly weakened country, as better than a strong Islamist government emerging in Assad's place. It was argued that unless extreme Sunni Islamist groups come to present a direct threat to Israel, its main military actions will be

directed against Hezbollah's connections in the country and are likely to be substantial and persistent. Such foreign military intervention may have untoward consequences, not least in increasing popular support for the Assad regime in the region – dislike for an Alawi regime can readily take second place to support for any regime subject to what is perceived as a Zionist attack.

That analysis of Israel's approach holds good, but another factor must be incorporated into an overview – the Saudi/Iranian dimension.

The Saudi/Iranian Dimension

For the last two years, the Saudi authorities have persistently represented Iranian support for the Assad regime as a dangerous process of Shi'a expansionism. This approach engendered only modest support across the Sunni regimes in the region, with the exception of Qatar, but it has recently been given a substantial boost by:

- the progress of the Assad regime, especially the taking of al-Qusayr and the current move against rebel forces in Aleppo; and
- the role of Hezbollah militias in their substantially increased support for the regime.

As a result, the Saudis are working diligently to represent the Syrian civil war as a move to establish a powerful "Shi'a crescent" stretching from the Mediterranean across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Iran through to the Indian Ocean. New to this narrative is the apparent integration of Hezbollah militias into the Assad regime's forces, a portrayal that is gaining some traction across the region. It is also causing the Israelis some concern because of the Iran/Syria/Hezbollah linkage.

Normally, this would make it more likely that the Saudis could seek to try to influence western states, especially France, but this approach is now complicated by the surprising result of the Iranian Presidential election.

President-Elect Rouhani does not take up office until 3 August, but his victory does alter the political dynamics of the region. What is particularly significant is that he not only gained an outright victory in the first round but that the pragmatist runner-up, the Mayor of Tehran Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf, gained 16.5% of the vote. This means that the four hard-line candidates between them, including Saeed Jalili, could only share 32% of the vote.

While foreign and security policy remains under the control of the Supreme Leader, Rouhani has the power to set the tone for such policy and is already showing signs of doing so. In the context of Saudi/Iranian relations, his election is particularly significant given that he has a past record of maintaining relatively good relations with Saudi officials. Under these circumstances, there is potential for some western states to renew their efforts to work towards a compromise solution in Syria without the persistent risk of Iranian influence countering such efforts.

This is particularly significant at present because of recent evidence that Islamist paramilitaries in Syria are beginning to be supplied with anti-armour weapons, specifically the Russian AT-5 Spandrel. The Chinese-produced FN-6 shoulder-launched anti-aircraft missile, effective against low-flying aircraft and helicopters appears also to be available in limited quantities, but right across the rebel forces, whereas supplies of the Spandrel are reaching

Islamist groups with Saudi assistance. The supply of these anti-aircraft and anti-armour weapons is in its early stages and is dependent on support from Qatar and Saudi Arabia. Increased support of this kind will likely induce more Iranian support for the Assad regime at a time when there are possibilities of a more nuanced policy towards Syria from an incoming Rouhani administration in Tehran.

Conclusion

One of the most important issues at present is the need to foster Saudi/Iranian relations, especially as the Syrian War is now in a phase of violent stalemate with continuing heavy casualties. The Saudi-Iranian element in this unusual two-level proxy war (Saudi Arabia-Iran and West-Russia) is not getting the focus it deserves and the Iranian election result provides an opening that states within and outside the region should be encouraged to enhance. Britain's links across the region lend themselves to such a task.

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