



Scott Wilcox Middle East

Management & Advisory Services

Syria Report: 04 - 11 July 2012





Key Judgements

- Vladimir Putin's major foreign policy speech on 9 July is a signal that Russia is seriously considering a transition that would see President Assad step down from power. However, key to such a transition is for Russia to secure their interests (maintain port at Tartous, defence agreements etc.) with opposition leaders that would potentially form any post-Assad government.
- The spillover of fighting from the Damascus suburbs into the city centre is a major concern for the Assad regime as insecurity in the capital may make more high level defections more common as more members of his 'inner circle' no longer feel insulated from the conflict.
- The cancellation of medical treatment for Syrians in Lebanon is more of a political decision rather than a fiscal one, and is likely to be resolved once new standards for treatment can be negotiated in parliament.

This report assesses political, security and economic issues that have arisen over the past week. For a detailed record of security incidents occurring in Syria, subscribers should refer to Scott Wilcox Online information System (OIS).

Political Situation

Competing resolutions over UN monitoring mission: On 10 July, Russia proposed a draft resolution to extend the UN monitoring mission (UNSMIS) for three months, however the United States and European council members are instead calling for a different resolution under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter, allowing the council to authorize a range of actions including military intervention. According to Germany's UN Ambassador Peter Wittig, 'we think it's a mistake to focus just on UNSMIS in isolation. We want compliance with the decisions of the Security Council [and] see a stop to heavy weapons.' China, however, is in support of Russia's position for a 'rollover of UNSMIS.' The UN Security Council must decide the future of the UNSMIS mission before 20 July when its initial 90-day mandate expires. It approved 300 unarmed military observers to monitor the 12 April ceasefire that failed to take hold. UN chief Ban Ki-moon has recommended a shift in the emphasis of UNSMIS' work from military observers, who suspended most of their monitoring activities on 16 June, to roughly 100 civilian staff focusing on a political solution and issues like human rights.

Syria's ambassador to Iraq defects: On 11 July, Syria's ambassador to Iraq, Nawah al-Fares, defected in protest over President Assad's brutal crackdown on the 16-month uprising. According to a video statement posted on Facebook, the ambassador declared, 'that I have joined, from this moment, the ranks of the revolution of the Syrian people.' Ambassador Fares had close ties to Syrian security and is the first senior diplomat to have quit the government thus far. Though Fares was a Sunni, he held senior positions under the late president Hafez al-Assad, and is from Deir al-Zor, the eastern city on the road to Iraq which has recently seen a fierce onslaught by Syrian military forces. There has been no comment from Damascus or Baghdad, however the opposition has hailed the defection as a sign of President Assad's crumbling support.



Russian diplomats meet with opposition, send mixed signals: On 11 July, Syrian opposition talks with Russia on a political transition in Damascus ended contentiously with ex-SNC leader Burhan Ghalioun accusing Moscow of prolonging the bloodshed by supplying arms and vetoing UN Security Council resolutions. However, another SNC member also expressed new hope for Russian support for ending the conflict, stating that Russia was 'looking for a genuine solution.' In a bit of frustration, the SNC member said that Russia was sending mixed signals by saying 'they are not holding on to Assad so strongly but then another minute saying 'you guys must sit down and talk,' so they contradict themselves every few minutes.'

Analyst's comment: Moscow has increasingly shown its determination to play a role in ending Syria's upheaval and stepped up its diplomatic efforts this week in particular. The Russians held talks with various opposition groups this past week and their evolving dialogue has revealed changing attitudes in Moscow. For example, originally the Syrian opposition made talks with the government conditional on President Assad relinquishing power, an assertion Russia outright rejected as unacceptable and not part of the international peace plan laid out by Kofi Annan. However, on 9 July, in his first speech outlining foreign policy goals, Russian President Vladimir Putin said both sides in Syria must be forced to talk to one another. Moscow is now quietly considering solutions in which its interests will be maintained even without President Assad in place. Furthermore, helping resolve the crisis peacefully could help Moscow increase its international clout and keep a foothold in Syria and the Middle East, in addition to preserving Russia's world view that conflicts should be resolved through diplomacy, not force, and should involve the United Nations. According to Fyodor Lukyanov, editor of the journal *Russia in Global Affairs*, 'the situation is changing and no one in Russia is naïve enough to expect Assad to stay long.'

Security Situation

Syria tests missiles against coastal attack: On 8 July, Syria's navy fired live missiles from ships and helicopters over the weekend in an exercise aimed at, according to Syrian state media (SANA), showcasing its ability to 'defend Syria's shores against any possible aggression.' According to the SANA report, 'naval forces conducted an operational live fire exercise on Saturday (7 July), using missiles launched from the sea and coast, helicopters and missile boats, simulating a scenario of repelling a sudden attack from the sea.'

Syrian army takes northern rebel stronghold, battle rages in Damascus: On 6 July, Syria's army took control of the rebel stronghold of Khan Sheikhoun in northern Idlib province after an assault on the town backed by helicopters. According to rebel spokesman Abu Hamam, 'the Free Army (FSA) withdrew from the town (Khan Sheikhoun) last night after it ran out of ammunition. Assad's army is in control of it. They are burning the houses, I see the smoke covering the sky from where I am now.' Khan Sheikhoun, a town of more than 70,000 people in rural Idlib province, straddles the western highway linking Damascus to Aleppo. Fighting also erupted between FSA rebels and Syrian troops in the Kfar Souseh quarter of central Damascus after security forces moved in to stop a protest near the Nouaim mosque. The district is home to major intelligence and secret police installations. Explosions were heard from fields near the



mosque and at least two armoured vehicles moved to the area. Government intelligence and secret police installations in the Kfar Souseh district are now ringed with concrete barriers and walls, and local residents are reporting a surge in fighting in the area in the past two weeks.

Russia sends Black Sea warship to Syria: On 10 July, Russia dispatched a destroyer-class warship to Syria, and according to a source in the Russian Navy, four more Russian ships are en route to Syria as well. According to Interfax, the ships are carrying marines on a training mission, as well as food, water and fuel for Russia's naval maintenance and repair base at Tartous. The destroyer, *Smetlivy*, which patrolled the waters off the coast of Syria in April and May, left the Black Sea port of Sevastopol on the morning of 10 July, and will be followed by three landing ships and an anti-submarine destroyer from Russia's Northern fleet, which left from the port of Severomorsk.

Russia to suspend new arms to Syria: On 9 July, Deputy Director Vyacheslav Dzirkaln of the Federal Service for Military Technical Cooperation was quoted as saying that Russia will not deliver fighter planes or other new weapons to Syria while the situation there remains unresolved. The refusal may cause friction between the two governments over a reported \$4 billion in outstanding contracts that includes fighter jets and air-defence systems that were slated for delivery this year. The shipment of jets includes 36 Yak-130 fighter planes. According to Ruslan Aliyev, an expert on the Russian-Syria arms trade for the defence think-tank CAST, 'Russia has stopped signing new contracts with Syria and is delaying the shipments of already signed contracts. It's basically a political decision based on Moscow's view of Syria.'

Cyprus prepares for up to 200,000 Syrian refugees: This past week, Cyprus announced it has drawn up plans to take in up to 200,000 refugees from the fighting in Syria after the crackdown by the Syrian military further intensified. Cyprus's deputy Europe minister Andreas Mavroyiannis commented that 'we do not know what will happen in Syria, but in our planning we have estimated up to 200,000 refugees could arrive.' While the figures are a worst-case scenario, the number is equivalent to a quarter of the population of the Republic of Cyprus.

Analyst's comment: Russia's waning support for Syria is unlikely to have a material effect on the conflict in the short term, however the intense fighting on the outskirts of Damascus, shows that the Syrian military is under increasing strain as they attempt to shield the capital from fighting in order to maintain some semblance of support for President Assad. Thus far, the major economic centres of Damascus and Aleppo have remained relatively free of conflict with the exception of some intense fighting in the suburbs surrounding the cities. However, the violence in Damascus is beginning to spill over into part of the city centre, which could have major implications for the resilience of President Assad's support network. Cracks are beginning to show in the president's inner circle with the defection of Brigadier General Manaf Tlas (who some speculated was slated to be the next Minister of Defense), and now the defection of the ambassador to Iraq, and these high level defections are likely to continue if the president is not able to maintain some semblance of security in these two major city centers where many of the families of Assad's inner circle reside.



Economic Situation

Lebanon suspends funding treatment for wounded Syrians: On 11 July, Lebanon's relief agency announced it is suspending funding treatment for wounded Syrians who cross into the country due to rapidly rising costs. According to local aid and medical workers, Lebanese hospitals will be closing their doors to wounded Syrians who are not in critical condition. They have yet to determine where the wounded would be taken instead or who would pay for them. The UN Higher Council for Refugees (UNHCR) says some 30,000 Syrians have fled to Lebanon since the uprising began. The head of Lebanon's Higher Relief Council (HRC), Ibrahim Bashir, said the cost of providing medical care for Syrians had ballooned to over \$1 million a month from around \$200,000 a few months ago. HRC head Bashir says the group will resume healthcare once a new budget and new standards for treatment could be agreed upon by the government. The director of Lebanon's government hospital in Tripoli said life-or-death cases would not be ignored.

Analyst's comment: Activists say the decision will endanger Syrians wounded in the conflict, who are smuggled into neighbouring countries such as Lebanon and Turkey for fear of retribution or arrest if they go to state hospitals in Syria. However, according to HRC and overseeing minister Wael Abu Faour of the Ministry of Social Affairs, costs are being inflated by Syrians seeking secondary care such as cancer and diabetes treatment. An average of 10 wounded Syrians are smuggled across the border each week, many of them critical. According to one activist Abu Raed, there are currently 250 wounded Syrians in Lebanese hospitals. The issue of treatment for Syrians in Lebanon is ultimately a political issue with the government set to establish standards of treatment before any further investment is made. The issue could be mired by disputes in the Lebanese parliament where it's not uncommon for sessions to be boycotted or dismissed over political squabbles.

Travel Advisory

Attacks on buses occurring in the North near borders with Lebanon and Turkey: Various attacks have occurred against buses travelling near the northern border area with Lebanon and Turkey. On 7 April, gunmen fired on a Lebanese bus from the Syria side of the border at the eastern Al-Jusiyeh crossing, killing seven and leaving dozens injured. In November of last year, Syrian soldiers stopped a Turkish bus at a checkpoint just across the border in Syria. The soldiers ordered the passengers off the bus, and when some of them fled, they were fired upon leading to a number of injuries. Checkpoints and border controls in this area are very tight due to concerns regarding the influx of militants and weapons coming across these borders. Avoid travelling by bus in this region if possible.

Travel restrictions issued for males age 18 to 42: In a sign of growing anxiety about the security situation, Syrian authorities have banned men of military age from leaving the country. The restrictions, issued on 24 March, require men between the age of 18 and 42 to get permission



from military recruitment and immigration departments before travelling. Border traffic at the main crossing between Beirut and Damascus has fallen by 60 per cent since the regulation. The move may impact the flow of thousands of Syrian workers who go to Lebanon for agricultural and construction projects, a major source of income in rural areas already hit by economic hardship.

- All travel to the Syrian Arab Republic is ill advised as it is highly unlikely embassies will be able to provide normal consular service in the event of increased violent civil disorder. Likely communication and travel restriction would make evacuation options limited.
- The Arab League has agreed to sanctions on airline travel to and from Syria with a 50% percent reduction in flights from 15 December 2011. Commercial aviation services are currently operating, but the security environment has the potential to deteriorate rapidly, potentially affecting your travel options.
- Make sure you have valid exit stamps on your travel documents if you need to leave Syria. Arrests have been made at border crossings even with proper documentation.
- Violent protests have taken place in front of a number of embassies and consulates in Damascus, Aleppo and Latakia and in some cases buildings were attacked. Exercise extreme vigilance and avoid crowds.
- Avoid the Ar Ramtha border crossing to Jordan and the Tal Kalakh/Hdaideh crossing in to northeast Lebanon. Do not attempt to enter Iraq via the Syrian border, which is subject to restrictions on both sides.
- All dollar payments and dollar bank accounts in Syria have effectively been frozen; it has become very difficult to withdraw dollars and Euros, and most cash withdrawals are limited to Syrian pounds.





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