



Scott Wilcox Middle East

Management & Advisory Services

Syria Report: 11 - 17 July 2012





Key Judgements

- The UNSC remains deeply divided over the consequences potentially imposed on Syria for its failure to implement mandates, however recent rebel successes may soon sway the minds in Moscow and Beijing to more aggressively support a transition plan as President Assad's leadership becomes increasingly untenable.
- The bomb attack at Damascus' national security headquarters shows the improving capabilities of rebel forces in both their intelligence and deployment capabilities. The FSA's ability to infiltrate and threaten the inner sanctum of the Assad regime is a major development that may see an uptick in defections, and possibly high-level regime members fleeing the country.
- The low wheat harvest numbers in Syria will place greater strain on aid delivery agencies like the WFP and FAO, however without increased international funding, these organization will be unable to meet their stated goals of feeding 850,000 for the month of July.

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

UN Security Council delays vote on new Syria sanctions: On 18 July, the UN Security Council delayed a vote on a Western-backed resolution that threatens Syrian leaders with more sanctions. International envoy Kofi Annan had requested that the vote, which was planned for 18 July, be postponed because he wanted to 'ensure all efforts were made for the UN Security Council to speak with one voice and agree on concerted pressure.' The draft resolution specifically threatens Syrian authorities with sanctions if they do not stop using heavy weapons and withdraw troops from towns and cities within 10 days of adoption by the Security Council. In addition to further sanctions, the UNSC needs to decide the future of the UN observer mission before its mandate expires on 20 July. While Britain, the US, France and Germany want the council to threaten President Assad's government with sanctions in a bid to halt the violence, Russia and China remain defiant against such moves. Russia, in particular, has refused to engage in negotiations on the Western-backed resolution that would extend the UN observer mission for an additional 45 days, as well as place Annan's peace plan under Chapter 7 of UN Charter. Russia has said it would block the Western-backed resolution because it does not believe it should be placed under Chapter 7.

Syria refusing visas for Western aid workers: On 16 July, UN aid official John Ging told a group of reporters in Geneva that Syria is refusing visas to Western aid workers, thus hampering UN efforts to expand further its humanitarian operation to meet the growing needs inside the country. Ging referenced some 1.5 million people who require assistance in Syria and a 'political failure' to resolve the crisis. Ging, who works at the UN Officer for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, stated that 'we have a number of visas pending for international staff from



a number of Western countries including the United States, Canada, the UK and France that are refused their visas because of their nationalities.' The UN currently has 60 expatriate staff in Syria where UN officials reportedly take up the key issue of blocked visas 'on a daily basis.' The UN has opened offices in 7 locations and is delivering aid mainly via the Syrian Arab Red Crescent and others to people in all 15 provinces affected by the conflict.

Iran offers to host Syria crisis talks: On 15 July, the Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi stated that Iran was ready to host talks between the Syrian government and opposition groups, however members of the opposition quickly rejected the offer. Foreign Minister Salehi was quoted by the Iranian Student's New Agency as stating that 'we are ready to facilitate and provide the conditions for talks between the opposition and the government.' Samir Nashir, an executive board member of the exile Syrian National Council, turned down the offer, stating that 'we will not participate in any meetings or talks with the regime as long as Assad is in power. Assad does not need talks, he needs to go to the International Criminal Court for the massacres he's committed.'

Morocco expels Syrian envoy, Damascus retaliates: On 16 July, Morocco ordered the Syrian ambassador to leave the country, causing Damascus to retaliate by declaring the Moroccan ambassador in Syria 'persona non grata.' Furthermore, earlier that day, rumours circulated that the Syrian ambassador to Morocco, Nabih Ismail, had also defected to the rebel side, however a Syrian embassy official denied this but had no further comment. Morocco's Foreign Ministry did not immediately explain the timing or the reason for its decision to expel Ismail but said in a statement that the situation in Syria 'cannot remain as it is.' Morocco's ambassador Mohamed Ikhssasi was quickly declared 'persona non grata' in response to Morocco's calls for 'a political transition towards a democratic setup.' Morocco had already recalled Ikhssasi in November 2011 and this most recent decision was the latest in a series of diplomatic expulsions that have only increased President Assad's international isolation.

Analyst's comment: Diplomats say Iran has been in indirect contact with some opposition members but most see the opposition as viewing Tehran with much distrust, particularly given its support for Assad's crackdown against anti-government protestors and armed opposition groups. Some Western diplomats consider that there may be individuals who might consider dealing with the Iranians, however, such a plan will not appeal to the broader group and will likely be rejected. The statement by the Iranian foreign minister appeared to suggest a possible shift in the Iranian leadership's approach. Over the course of the uprising, Iran has repeatedly accused Western and regional powers of meddling in Syria's internal affairs through backing extremist militant groups, however the tone of Iran's message seems to reveal a shift in Tehran's thinking. Salehi's comments follow two high-profile defections from the Syrian government and a massacre in the town of Tremesh, which opposition activists say left 220 people dead. The timing hints that Tehran may be trying to distance itself from the on-going bloodshed. However, it may be too late as Samir Nashir's comments were quite unequivocal, stating that, 'we will not speak to any mediators whether they are Iranian, Syrian or Russian.' The uptick in violence, as well as reports of participation of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps in the conflict in Syria have likely hardened the stance of the Syrian opposition against any Iranian mediation efforts.



Security Situation

Damascus bomb attack kills Defence Minister and President's brother-in-law: On 18 July, Syrian Defence Minister, Dawoud Rajha, and President Assad's brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, were killed in a Damascus bomb attack, marking the most serious blow to the President's inner circle during the 16-month uprising. Hassan Turkmani, President Assad's crisis management chief, was also killed. Other leading figures, including the interior minister, Mohammad Shaar, and the intelligence chief, Hisham Bekhtyar, were wounded and are being treated in Damascus' al-Shami hospital. The bomber, who is reported to be a bodyguard assigned to President Assad's highest ranking officials, struck during a meeting attended by ministers and senior security officials in Damascus. Defence Minister Dawoud Rajha, 65, was a former army general and the country's most senior Christian government official. Within hours, Syrian State TV announced that Brig. Gen. Fahed Jassim el Friej would replace Rajha. President Assad's brother-in-law, Assef Shawkat, served as deputy head and then chief of military intelligence before he was appointed as deputy defence minister. In response to the attack, Fahed Jassim el Friej remained unwavering, stating that 'this cowardly terrorist act will not deter our men in the armed forces from continuing their sacred mission of pursuing the remnants of these armed terrorist criminal gangs.'

Heavy fighting reported in Damascus: On 18 July, in the aftermath of Thursday's bomb attack, intense clashes were reported in the capital's central districts of Mezze and Kafar Souseh, while a police station in the Hajar al-Asward had reportedly been lit on fire. The army shelled the capital from the surrounding mountains during the night of 18 July as government troops fired machineguns into the city from helicopters in an effort of massive retaliation for the bomb assassinations. Over the course of these intense clashes in Damascus, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov was quoted as saying that 'the decisive fight' was under way in Damascus. A surge of government forces was reported later on the 18 July with Syrian state media broadcasting footage of men in blue army fatigues ducking for cover and firing, marking the first time official media has shown clashes in the capital. Government troops used heavy machineguns and anti-aircraft guns against the rebels in the residential neighbourhoods, still mostly armed with small arms and rocket-propelled grenades.

US warns Syrian officials on chemical weapons: On 17 July, the White House warned the Syrian government that it would be held accountable for safeguarding any chemical weapons it possessed. The warning came after reports that chemical weapons were quietly being shifted from storage sites, however it remains unclear whether the operation was a security precaution amid the escalating conflict or some kind of mobilization. Some analysts say President Assad's government may be shifting some of its stockpile to keep the weapons from capture by an expanding insurgency, and to deprive Syria's Western foes of an excuse for intervention on the grounds of securing dangerous materials gone astray. The Syrian government denies carrying out the operation. Syria's undeclared stockpile, believed to be the largest of its kind of in the Middle East, reportedly includes sarin nerve agent, mustard gas and cyanide.



600 flee to Turkey, including two generals: On the night of 18 July, two Syrian brigadier-generals were among some 600 Syrians who fled to Turkey, bringing the number of Syrian generals sheltering in Turkey to 20, including a retired general. According to a source inside Turkey, a number of lower-ranking soldiers accompanied the defecting generals, bringing the total number of Syrian refugees in Turkey to some 43,200.

Massacre in Tremseh leaves 220 dead: On 12 July, more than 200 Syrians, mostly civilians, were massacred in a village in the rebellious Hama region when it was bombarded by helicopter gunships and tanks and then stormed by militiamen. The incident marks the worst single incident of violence over the course of the 16-month uprising. According to the Revolution Leadership Council of Hama, the Sunni Muslim village of Taramseh was subjected to a barrage of heavy weapons fire before pro-government Alawite militiamen swept in and killed victims one by one. Syrian state news said three security personnel had been killed in fighting in Taramseh and it accused 'armed terrorist groups' of committing the massacre. According to one local resident, there were '60 bodies at a mosque, there are more bodies in the fields, bodies in the rivers and in houses.' UN observers who responded to the area saw one Mi-8 and two Mi-24 helicopters and witnessed one of the Mi-24 helicopters firing air-to-ground rockets. A report issued by the UN mission stated that attempts were made to get a local ceasefire and allow the evacuation of civilians, but attempts to contact the Hama Governorate chief of police did not succeed.

Analyst's comment: The morning attack on the headquarters of Syria's national security council in the al-Rawda area was the most audacious yet by anti-Assad rebels, who have been fighting sporadically in parts of the capital for the past four days. The death of two of the Assad regime's most senior operation commanders could seriously dent the effectiveness of the Syrian army as it fights increasingly intense battle across the capital. Shawkat, married to President Assad's sister Bushra, was one of the most feared figures in the president's inner circle and had won the support of the clan's influential matriarch, Anisa. He was one of three central figures in the regime crackdown, along with Assad himself and his brother, Maher. As Syria's overall security chief, he had key input into all military and intelligence operations.

In addition to weakening the army command, the killings are bound to heighten a sense of paranoia and mistrust among the president's top ministers and officials, especially because the attack is unlikely to have been planned by just one person. President Assad's moves in the immediate aftermath will be critical – failure to appear in public, or at the funerals of the two men will most likely be seen as a sign that the regime is weakening. One possible consequence of the attack may be a harsh and impulsive response from the regime. In the immediate aftermath, one Assad supporter was quoted as saying that 'people are traumatized at the fact that the opposition managed to assassinate these people ... government supporters want the government to be firm and show it is still in control.' In response to this concern, US Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta expressed grave concern in a press conference, saying that Syria was now 'rapidly spinning out of control.'



Economic Situation

US Treasury issues sanctions on 29 top Syrian officials: On 18 July, the US Treasury Department ratcheted up efforts to restrict the Syrian government by adding 29 officials to the list of those facing sanctions. The US also designated five companies linked to the Syrian government agency responsible for non-conventional weapons programs, and one company controlled by Rami Makhlef, who the Treasury statement called a 'corrupt crony' of President Bashar al-Assad. According to a statement made by the Treasury's undersecretary for terrorism and financial intelligence David Cohen, the US is 'unwavering' in its commitment 'to pressure the Assad regime to end the carnage and relinquish power.'

UN official states Syria's wheat harvest will fall by more than 700,000 tonnes this year: UN aid official John Ging at the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs made a statement in Geneva on 16 July that Syria's wheat harvest would fall by more than 700,000 tonnes this year, citing the result of a survey carried out by two UN agencies, the World Food Programme (WFP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), due to be issued soon. Ging issued the statement now because, according to his remarks, 'that is something we need to be prepared to cope with because there will be less wheat on the market.'

Analyst's comment: Syria consumes 4 million to 5 million tonnes of wheat a year, but harvests over the last six years have fallen short of that, partly due to drought, forcing the country to import wheat. The majority of the relief effort inside Syria for food security is run by the WFP, whose food rations are distributed by the Red Crescent, and have the ambitious goal of feeding 850,000 people in Syria in July, up from 500,000 in June. However, sparse funding is the main factor holding these two programs back, causing UN aid officials like John Ging to appeal for increased funds. Two separate UN appeals of \$180 million for humanitarian needs inside Syria and \$193 million to help Syrian refugees who have fled abroad, are currently only 20 percent funded. Some 112,000 Syrian refugees have now registered with the UN refugee agency in four countries – Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq.

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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