



Scott Wilcox Middle East

Management & Advisory Services

Syria Report: 26 July – 01 August 2012





Key Judgements

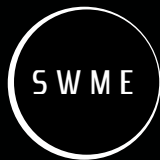
- The creation of the Council for the Syrian Revolution, a splinter group of the Syrian National Council (SNC), shows that deep political rifts remain among the opposition's political leadership. While these rifts may cause some hesitation among western nations in offering overt political support, material support for the opposition will continue regardless.
- The threat of PKK militants establishing a de facto Kurdish state in the northern border area between Syria and Turkey remains highly unlikely, however, it may be used in the coming weeks as a pretext for a limited Turkish incursion into Syrian territory to establish a buffer zone.
- The aid forecasts for Syria are likely to continue to rise, however the OIC has a strong track record of meeting demand, and is likely to do so considering the strong support among Arab states for the Syrian opposition.

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

Syrian opposition fractures with creation of new political coalition: On 31 July, the Council for the Syrian Revolution was launched by a group of 70 exiled Syrian activists at a news conference in Cairo. The head of the new coalition and former judge, Haitham al-Maleh, said he would begin a dialogue with all members of the opposition, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA), about the formation of a transitional government. Maleh commented that the new alliance would act as an alternative to the SNC, which he said 'had failed to help the Syrian revolution,' and that the new group would get more help to the rebels inside Syria. Maleh, a long-standing dissident against the Assad family's four-decade rule, resigned from the SNC in March, saying he had given up trying to make the group more effective. Maleh specified what he meant by 'help for the rebels' by saying, 'we are not asking for military intervention, such as an invasion, but international protection, such as stopping Syrian planes.'

Council for the Syrian Revolution comes under attack by FSA and SNC: The new political opposition groups, the Council for the Syrian Revolution, has come under attack this week by the head of the FSA Colonel Riad al-Asaad, who said on 1 August that the politicians who formed the new coalition, 'were hit by a fever of acquiring positions which led them to announce the founding of a transitional government ... but in reality they are trying to revive the falling regime of Assad by taking a decision without returning to the people who have shed blood and tears to achieve their independence.' Reacting to the formation of the new group, head of the Syrian National Council (SNC), Abdelbasset Seida said, 'the process of forming a transitional



government is difficult and needs consultations with all members of the Syrian opposition ... if each group came out alone announcing the formation of a new government without talks and research, this would end up in having a series of weak governments that don't represent anyone.'

UN General Assembly to meet this week, vote on Saudi-drafted resolution: On 31 July, the UN General Assembly announced that it will hold a meeting on the crisis in Syria on 2 August and will likely vote on a Saudi-drafted resolution that condemns the UN Security Council for failing to take action against Damascus. The Saudi resolution also has the assembly 'expressing grave concern at the Syrian authorities' threat to use chemical or biological weapons.' The draft text urges both the government forces and rebels to stop the violence, though it focuses its criticism on the Syrian government. While UN General Assembly resolutions are non-binding, there are also no vetoes and only a simple majority is required to pass them.

Turkey's PM Erdogan and US President Obama discuss Syrian transition plan: On 31 July, according to officials working for the Turkish prime minister, Tayyip Erdogan, and Barack Obama had a lengthy conversation over the phone to discuss the political transition in Syria. According to Erdogan's office, 'they took up the coordination of efforts to accelerate the process of political transition in Syria, including Bashar al-Assad leaving the administration, in addition to the meeting of the Syrian people's legitimate demands.' Furthermore the released statement signalled coordination of efforts regarding refugees, stating that. 'Prime Minister Erdogan and President Obama agreed on the coordination of efforts to help Syrians forced to flee to Turkey and neighbouring countries.'

Iranian foreign minister calls Syria power transition 'an illusion': On 29 July, Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Salehi said at a news conference with his Syrian counterpart, Walid al-Moualem, that the idea of a managed transition of power in Syria is an 'illusion,' while he continued to express Iran's commitment to Kofi Annan's peace plan. The Iranian foreign minister said that, 'thinking naively and wrongly that there is a power vacuum perhaps in Syria and if there is a transition of power in Syria, simply another government will come to power, that I think is just a dream.' Syria's foreign minister said Syria was able to defend every inch of its soil from what he called a conspiracy by armed terrorist groups that served Israel's interests.

Deputy police chief in Latakia defects to Turkey: On 30 July, according to a Turkish official, the deputy police chief of Syria's coastal city of Latakia (an Alawite stronghold), defected and fled to Turkey with 11 Syrian officers. The police commander, who is also a brigadier-general in the Syrian military and a Sunni Muslim, ranks as one of the most senior police officers to quit Syrian President Assad's security apparatus and joins scores of other military officers who have defected and are now in Turkey. There are now more than 20 generals and scores of other officers sheltering in Turkey from where they direct rebel operations inside Syria with logistical help from their hosts. Most of the higher-ranking officers live in a highly-guarded camp in Apaydin, in Turkey's Hatay province near the border.



Analyst's comment: The launch of the 'Council for the Syrian Revolution' marks the latest effort by Syria's divided opposition to forge a political alternative to President Assad. The Council comprises 70 opposition figures and will supposedly be based in Cairo, with branches in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and Iraq. While the SNC has been an international voice for the opposition, activists on the group have complained that the exiled leadership has little connection to what is happening in Syria. Interesting, however, is the harshly worded condemnation from FSA leader Riad al-Asaad which indicated that the new coalition does not have strong links on the ground in Syria either and that the FSA leadership has seemed to have firmly aligned itself with the SNC despite some scepticism about the opposition government from forces on the ground in Syria. At the end of the day, such rifts in the opposition leadership are damaging to the prospects of a smooth transition in Syria, however, it is unlikely to affect outside support from western and Arab partners which has been forthcoming regardless.

As for the UN General Assembly vote, western diplomats say they hope a strong majority vote for a resolution condemning Syria and the Security Council would increase the pressure on Russia and China to stop shielding President Assad from sanctions. Syrian UN Ambassador Bashar Ja'afari has repeatedly accused Nassir Abdulaziz al-Nasser of Qatar, current president of the General Assembly, of using his position to push the Qatari national agenda.

Security Situation

Syrian rebels seize key outpost to northwest of Aleppo: On 31 July, Syrian rebel fighters won a key victory for control over a strategic outpost in Anadan just 5 kilometres to the northwest of Aleppo along the main road to the Turkish border. After the 10-hour battle, the Syrian rebels captured eight tanks and ten armoured vehicles as well as mortars and other ammunition which they have now used for the shelling of an airbase in Azaz, another strategic location connecting the commercial hub of Aleppo with Turkey. The outpost was a restaurant outside of Anadan that had been commandeered by government troops and fortified as a military base.

Turkish military staging tank exercises near Syrian border: On 1 August, Turkey's army staged military exercises with 25 tanks in the Nusaybin district of Mardin province, just 2 kilometres from the Syrian border. The manoeuvres were conducted by the local Mardin 70th Mechanised Brigade. The motive for Turkey's action is not simply limited to the unrest in Syria however, as concerns in Ankara have been raised over Kurdish militants associated with the PKK exerting control over areas in northern Syria. Turkey has warned that any attack emanating from a PKK presence in northern Syria could give it reason to intervene, a serious threat given Ankara's repeated bombings in Kurdish-run northern Iraq where the PKK maintains camps. Intense clashes have occurred recently between the Turkish military and the PKK further east around the town of Semdinli, right on the mountainous border with Iraq and Iran with over 40 PKK militants killed there in the past week. Turkey's Supreme Military Council will convene for a four-day meeting beginning 1 August during which this topic will take centre stage.



Syrian rebels disrupting government troop movements with roadside bombs: On 29 July, rebel commander, Mohamad Baree in the northern town of Korcanaya, announced that his fighters successfully disrupted a tank column in route to Aleppo with the use of roadside bombs. According to commander Baree, ‘we used five or six self-made bombs and destroyed two of the tanks ... the other 18 returned to Idlib.’ The attack occurred during the early hours of 29 July with the bombs set off remotely by rebels hiding along the route. The commander, a pharmacist who spent seven years living in Ukraine, said he personally lacked the skills to make bombs, but that a ‘professor of chemistry’ was aiding the rebels, and that other members of his unit who had served in the Syrian military possessed bomb-making skills. In addition, Baree said, ‘we also take bombs from army bases ... they are better than ours.’

Syrian rebels hold pro-government prisoners in elementary school: This week it emerged that FSA forces have turned an elementary school into a prison holding captured Syrian military personnel as well as ‘shabiha’ militiamen. Months ago, rebel forces from the Tawheed (Unity) Brigade converted this school into a makeshift detention centre that now houses at least 112 detainees. The prison warden is a former employee of the Agriculture Ministry called Abu Hatem, who praises the conditions at the school as being far better than at government detention facilities. While the rebel forces operating the prison claim there is no torture occurring there, reporters who have seen the inside indicate that some of the prisoners had endured beatings, while not nearly to the same extent as reported in Syrian government prisons.

Analyst’s comment: The fighting in and around Aleppo this week has yet to produce a clear victor with the rebels proving themselves to be an increasingly well-organized and formidable fighting force capable to blocking government offensives and successfully capturing strategic locations. One northern rebel commander provided insight into the structure of the rebel forces, stating that each FSA region has its own five-member ‘war council’ to determine strategy and targets. Each region has typically about 150 militia volunteers, including medics, information officers and activists who video battles. The commander also confirmed that the rebels are receiving arms from outside Syria, but that the shipments are inconsistent with his unit receiving nothing thus far. However, units in primary strategic locations like the suburbs of Aleppo seem to be extremely well-armed. FSA commander Mohamad Hadeti said this week that the FSA rebels in control of Aleppo’s southern and eastern suburbs are ‘super strong’ and are reported to be in use of 14.7 mm anti-aircraft guns. Furthermore, the rebels have been able to establish a growing number of enclaves in northern Syria and are in control of much of the main western highway from Aleppo.

Economic Situation

OIC says Syria needs \$500 million in aid: On 31 July, the head of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, stated in an appeal to donors that the humanitarian crisis in Syria has worsened to the point that at least \$500 million in aid is required to meet the need of the Syrian people. In Mr. Ihsanoglu’s statement, he called, ‘for increased humanitarian



efforts and cooperation between international and regional organizations in order to deliver urgent humanitarian aid to the people in Syria and in neighbouring countries.'

Analyst's comment: Aid projections in Syria have been on the rise due to the intensification of violence in the population centres of Damascus and Aleppo in addition to the rise in displacements and cross-border refugees. Last month the United Nations refugee agency doubled its forecast for the number of refugees who will flee Syria this year to 185,000 and said it would need \$193 million to help them, a figure more than twice the amount of the original estimate. In response to growing needs in Syria, Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah launched a nationwide fund-raising campaign last week to help the people of Syria, collecting 440 million riyals (\$117 million). The OIC, of which Syria is a member, has collected aid in the past to help its member states, such as for Somalia last year when the group pledged \$350 million in aid to fight famine.

Travel Advisory

Attacks on buses occurring in the North near borders with Lebanon and Turkey: Various 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.



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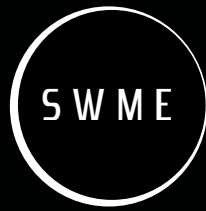
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- Avoid the Ar Ramtha border crossing to Jordan and the Tal Kalakh/Hdaideh crossing in to northeast Lebanon. Do not attempt to enter Iraq via the Syrian border, which is subject to restrictions on both sides.
- All dollar payments and dollar bank accounts 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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