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Syria: Is a Substantive Change in the Balance of Power Emerging?

Orit Perlov and Udi Dekel

With the war in Syria in its fifth year, a number of developments are likely to upset the status quo and change the balance of power between the Assad regime and the supporting Shiite axis on the one hand, and the rebel groups, most of which are in the Sunni camp, on the other. The significant battles underway on the various fronts suggest possible scenarios concerning the future of Syria. This article maps these developments and analyzes the internal and regional ramifications of the emerging trends, both in general and for Israel.

The Situation: Four Fronts, Four Armies

Battles have been underway recently on four main fronts (not counting the Kurdish forces), with a dominant rebel force opposing the regime of Bashar al-Assad operating on each of the fronts. Facing the rebels are the forces supporting the regime: the disintegrating Syrian military, the Iranian Quds force (Tehran is the patron of the crumbling Assad regime), Hizbollah fighters (about 5,000 of whom are fighting on Syrian soil), and thousands of volunteers who have poured into Syria and joined the Shiite militias. The fronts include:

- a. The eastern front: The main force operating on this front is the Islamic State/ISIS, which has completed its conquest of eastern Syria and the border crossings between Syria and Iraq, and last week also captured the city of Tadmur (Palmyra).
- b. The northern front, centered on the city of Aleppo: The most prominent rebel organization on this front is Jabhat al-Nusra. The organization was involved in the formation of an umbrella framework, called Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), consisting of numerous Syrian Islamist rebel factions mainly active in the Idlib Governorate and Jisr al-Shughur, located on the axis linking Aleppo to the coastal Latakia – an area controlled by the Alawite community, to which President Assad belongs.
- c. The central front: This stretches along the central Hama-Homs-Damascus road. The main rebel force on this front is also Jabhat al-Nusra, which is fighting against Hizbollah in the Qalamoun mountains for control of the Syrian-Lebanese

border, the border crossings, and the supply route between Syria and Lebanon, as well as for control of the main route from Damascus to northern Syria and the coastal area.

- d. The southern front: The area between Damascus and Daraa in the south, as-Suwayda in the east, and Quneitra in the west. The southern portion of this area is dominated by the Free Syrian Army. In the Damascus neighborhoods of Douma and Eastern Ghouta, the rebels have created a joint force in this theater – Jaysh al-Islam (the Army of Islam), which is a coalition of multiple Islamist and Salafist groups. The group, part of the Islamic Front., currently controls most of the territory surrounding Damascus and has managed to halt the counteroffensive launched by a combined force of the Syrian army, the Iranian Quds force, and Hizbollah fighters. The Army of Islam is trying to consolidate its hold while gaining control over strongholds identified with the Assad regime.

The Unification of the Rebel Forces and the Supporting Sunni States

Along with the change in the battlefronts and the readiness of the Sunni rebel groups to coordinate and unite forces (at this stage, on a temporary and regional basis) with the Army of Islam and al-Fatah Army frameworks, a change has taken place in the interests of the countries supporting the rebel forces. Saudi Arabia and Jordan have reached understandings with Turkey and Qatar, which support the Muslim Brotherhood (and indirectly, the Islamic State as well), on a unification of forces and efforts for the purpose of overthrowing the Assad regime first, while postponing dealing with the challenge of the Islamic State, and thereby dealing a blow to the regional Iranian hegemony. The four countries have agreed on training and arming the rebel armies on Jordanian and Turkish territory with the help of Saudi and Qatari financing. At the same time, efforts are underway to persuade the Sunni rebel forces – which include mainly parties identified with the Muslim Brotherhood and al-Qaeda – to work under the same umbrella. The aim is to form a single rebel army under a united leadership that is acceptable to most of the groups fighting against the Assad regime. These forces rely on the strongest of their organizations, Jabhat al-Nusra, a local branch of al-Qaeda. The Sunni countries are therefore trying to “gentrify” them by establishing a united military force with a specifically Syrian identity, while “whitewashing” al-Qaeda’s footprints and increasing the chances that the US will support them.

Disruption of Iranian and Hizbollah Plans

Until approximately two months ago, it appeared that the scales in the war in Syria were leaning toward Iran-led axis, with a high probability that their forces would succeed in taking over southern Syria, the Golan Heights front, and the border between Syria and Lebanon. Under Iranian guidance and led by Iranian Revolutionary Guards commander Qasem Soleimani, Syrian army forces were deployed along with Quds forces, Hizbollah fighters, and foreign militias operating under Iranian influence in order to create a critical mass for conquering southern Syria and the Golan Heights from the rebels. Hizbollah

leader Hassan Nasrallah announced a “geo-strategic union of southern Syria and southern Lebanon,” and declared that “we no longer accept the separation of the battlefronts.” This combined effort by the Iran-Syria-Hizbollah axis failed, however, because the rebels took advantage of the opportunity created by the concentration of the Shiite axis forces in the Golan Heights and southern Syria area to strengthen their efforts on the other fighting fronts: Idlib and Aleppo, the Qalamoun mountains (the border crossings and supply routes between Syria and Lebanon), eastern Syria, and even eastern Damascus, where the Islamic State attacked the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp. In fact, signs of coordination between the rebel Sunni forces and parallel efforts by them on the various fighting fronts were already evident.

Consequently, instead of developing an offensive effort in southern Lebanon, the Shiite axis forces had to defend and reinforce their units on the other fronts. The Syrian army withdrew its forces to Damascus and the Idlib-Jisr al-Shughur region, and Hizbollah was compelled to withdraw 85 percent of its forces from southern Lebanon, move forces from southern Lebanon to the central front, and redeploy for the battle in the Qalamoun mountains. Evidence of the growing pressure on Assad’s supporters was reflected in Nasrallah’s statement, “If Assad falls, Hizbollah will also fall,” which he immediately qualified by adding, “There is no chance that Assad will fall.” Since then, Hizbollah has focused on the campaign in the Qalamoun mountains, recruiting soldiers and money, while concealing the number of its soldiers who have been killed. This front is especially important to Hizbollah, because control is essential for blocking the spread of the Sunni-Salafi groups, particularly Jabhat al-Nusra and Islamic State, to Lebanese territory; defending the supply routes from Syria to Lebanon; and maintaining control of the essential supply route from Damascus to Homs, and from there to northern and western Syria.

Has the Assad Regime Reached a Tipping Point??

At this stage, it appears that the forces supporting Assad are having difficulty stopping the offensive by the more organized rebel forces. At the same time, Iran and Hizbollah will likely do their best to prevent both Damascus’ fall to the Sunni opposition groups and the end of the Alawite regime, their ally in Syria. Although there is no Shiite majority in Syria, like Baghdad, Iran regards both Beirut and Damascus as essential strategic elements of the Shiite crescent. From Tehran’s perspective, similar to the role of the Shiite militias in Iraq, Hizbollah’s job is to defend these elements. Therefore, even if the momentum of the Sunni rebel forces’ success in Syria continues, Iran and Hizbollah will presumably wage an uncompromising struggle to prevent Damascus from falling into rebel hands.

Even if with the help of the axis Assad manages to retain his hold over Damascus, he in fact controls only about one quarter of Syrian territory and is incapable of restoring the familiar borders, substituting them for the new borders formed on the ruins of his

country. The Islamic State will concede neither its grip and control in eastern and northeastern Syria, nor its territorial contiguity with western Iraq. For his part, Nasrallah has expressed his vision of a Greater Lebanon that will include the strongholds of Assad's regime, from Latakia southward along the Syrian-Lebanese border, up to Damascus and the Syrian Golan Heights. As far as southern Syria is concerned, it is hard to envision a situation in which Jordan and Israel accept a takeover and the deployment of Iranian and Hizbollah forces in the area. Both Jordan and Israel, albeit without actually saying so, prefer that control of these regions, which Assad has lost, be exercised by a Sunni force uniting the opposition organizations, under the assumption that a unification of forces will increase the pragmatism of radical Islamic extremism – a development that could contribute to stability in the region, together with the emergence of a single responsible address, instead of a collection of disparate elements fighting among themselves.

Future Directions

The unification of the rebel Sunni forces, along with the understandings reached between the supporting Sunni countries that hope to see the Assad regime overthrown, has effected a change in the balance of power in the Syrian civil war and has broken the deadlock that characterized the fighting over the past year. At the same time, it is still premature to conclude that the Assad regime is on the verge of collapse. Bitter and all-out fighting between the rebel Sunni forces and the Shiite axis forces can be expected. Moreover, while diplomatic initiatives, either international or regional, to bring about an end to the fighting in Syria are not impossible – the warring parties may agree to reach some kind of understandings concerning a transition period – the respective forces should not be expected to concede their achievements on the battlefield. This means that Syria will be broken apart into four separate sections – the Kurdish area in the north, the eastern section controlled by the Islamic State, the central Damascus-Homs-Latakia axis, controlled by the forces supporting Assad, and the rest of the territory, controlled by the rebel Sunni forces.

A key feature of the war in Syria until now has been the tendency of the rebel groups in Syria to combine in cooperative efforts and split from each other on the basis of local needs and immediate interests. The differences and rivalries between the various opposition groups make the achievement of long term military and political unity difficult. At the regional strategic level as well, it is hard to foresee the formation of a long term coalition of Sunni countries against the continuation of President Assad's rule and Iranian domination in Syria and the region in general. In order to institutionalize cooperation between them, they will have to put aside their profound ideological, religious, and political differences on a range of issues. The party profiting from the prolonged and increased intensity of the fighting is the Islamic State, which will take advantage of every opportunity to seize control in areas where the Assad forces and rebel forces have exhausted each other.

In view of the emerging trends in Syria and their uncertain consequences, it is best for the Israeli government to continue avoiding direct assistance to the rebel forces. On the strategic level, on the other hand, Israel would do well to work toward coordination with the axis of Sunni countries, particularly in order to avoid negative developments and the spillover of events along Israel's borders in the Golan Heights and southern Lebanon. In this framework, Israel should continue its aid to Jordan, and with Amman's help aim at strategic understandings with Turkey and Saudi Arabia on thwarting the expansion of Iranian hegemony in the region. At the same time, care must be taken to prevent a situation in which the Islamic State takes advantage of the developments in Syria to extend its control and influence.

