

Monthly Global Security Briefing – October 2012

THE IRANIAN AND SYRIAN CRISES: THE DANGERS OF LINKAGE

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Introduction

The two most recent briefings in this series have focused on the jihadist element in the conflict in Syria (August) and the significance of the Fordo underground nuclear complex in Iran in the context of the risk of war between Israel and Iran (September). There have been significant developments in relation to both of these subjects, and this briefing updates the analysis.

Two elements are particularly significant:

- Firstly, there is a need for more modest and sustained Western engagement with Iran, given Tehran's growing capacity to withstand an Israeli attack and to even launch cyber counter-attacks against Israel and the United States.
- Secondly, it is important to seek to limit the extent to which Syria is seen as a route to putting more pressure on Iran by some policy-makers in Washington.

Conclusions of Previous Briefings

Syria (August briefing): With over a thousand foreign and Syrian dedicated jihadist paramilitaries fighting the regime by August, their presence was becoming a major factor in the conflict. The conclusion was that, even if the Assad regime was to collapse soon, the jihadist element in a post-Assad Syria was likely to be influential. Moreover, this could form part of a trend towards a re-birth of the al-Qaida idea.

Iran (September briefing): Although the Fordo Fuel Enrichment Plant (FFEP) is relatively small compared with the much larger Natanz uranium enrichment plant, it is by far the best protected of Iran's known nuclear facilities. It is very unlikely to be vulnerable to destruction in an Israeli attack, although it may be vulnerable to multiple strikes by the US air force's new Massive Ordnance Penetrator (GBU-57A/B), an initial tranche of thirty of these weapons entering service in recent months. The FFEP is seen as a key part of Iran's post-attack recovery planning, and our September briefing stated that "Iran has already succeeded in altering the balance of advantage". Pointing to the risk of an Israeli attack prior to the US Presidential Election, "it would therefore be wise to encourage much more modest and sustained engagement (with Iran) in the coming months and years, with more limited expectations of agreement".

Developments in Syria

The war continues with little prospect of any settlement, and prospects for any kind of country-wide ceasefire, however temporary, are poor. Recent clashes on the Syrian/Turkish border have most likely stemmed from middle-ranking Syrian Army officers trying to curtail cross-border smuggling of arms, since the Syrian actions have been in the vicinity of known crossing points. The strength of the Turkish reaction, in retaliatory raids, in taking the risk of forcing down a passenger jet and in banning Syrian commercial flights in its air space, indicates

growing concern in Ankara at the resilience of the Assad regime. While Turkey may further aid the rebels there is a strong presumption against becoming directly involved in the conflict, but these are crisis circumstances, where the "AIM" factors (accidents, incidents and mavericks) can all too readily come into play.

Four other issues are of concern:

- There has been a marked decline in the rate of defection from the Assad regime's armed forces across to the rebels. This suggests that many of those who would have defected have already done so, but it also indicates that there is a degree of confidence among the loyal forces (especially the substantial number of elite units) that the regime can survive for many months and indeed years to come.
- The regime is receiving substantial support from Iran, and this is greatly facilitated by the ease of movement through Iraq, including unimpeded over-flights. The willingness of the Malaki government to assist Iran in aiding the Assad regime is a further indication of the collapse of US influence in Iraq, one of the most unexpected outcomes of the termination of the Saddam Hussein regime.
- The opposition remains deeply divided into numerous militias and these include secular and confessional groups as well as internally organised leaderships competing with expatriate groups. The lack of a unified opposition has created considerable problems for US and Saudi support for the rebellion, but has not stopped a substantial flow of resources, especially from Saudi Arabia.
- The war in Syria may have many of the features of a civil war, but it is hugely complicated by the existence of an unusual double proxy phenomenon. Closest to the conflict are the conflicting roles of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The former will work hard to avoid the collapse of the Assad regime, whereas the latter seeks precisely that. Beyond this proxy, is the wider issue of the Russia/United States axis, the main impact of this being to limit any effective UN action.

All these elements indicate that the regime is unlikely to fall in the near future and that rebel forces will continue to be supported to the extent that the regime cannot gain full control. In these circumstances, there is abundant evidence that more radical jihadist paramilitaries are increasing their influence, the most recent example being the substantial double suicide bomb raid on the Air Force intelligence and security centre earlier in the month. There is also evidence that Saudi sources, though not necessarily the government, are persistent in their support for jihadist groups, which may now number in excess of 1,500 fighters.

In short, there is now a balance of forces because of powerful supporting actors pointing to a long war with increasing jihadist influence. This, in turn, should be taken together with the wider trend that al-Qaida, although primarily a potent idea, is experiencing a new lease of life. There may be set-backs in Somalia and some in Yemen, but developments in Nigeria, Mali and Syria all aid the spread of the idea. As a movement, it may be moribund, but the idea most certainly is not, and its most violent expression is in Syria. Indeed, reliable reports from US and Middle Eastern sources report that the majority of all armaments now being sent to rebel forces in Syria are going to jihadist groups.

Developments in Iran

There does remain some risk that Israel may attack Iran before the US Presidential Election but that has now greatly diminished. This is despite the fact that neoconservative groups within the Republican Party are calling loudly for their candidates to take a much harder line in the closing days of the US election campaign. Israel's changing calculus is partly based on the uncertainty of the US election result, a lack of support for an attack from parts of the Israeli military and intelligence services, and the political diversion of the recently announced general election.

The September briefing pointed to Iran's decreasing vulnerability to attack, and there have been further developments. In spite of a very difficult domestic economic situation, Iranian sources appear confident in the face of a possible attack and have been, for example, outspoken in their comments on the recent Hezbollah-launched drone flight over the Negev, which was within 30km of the Dimona nuclear plant before it was shot down. More specifically, Iran has moved to improve its security and its post-attack recovery capability in a number of ways:

There has been an upsurge in cooperation with North Korea in numerous science and technology areas with large numbers of North Korean personnel travelling to Iran.

- Iranian IT specialists have learnt from the problems created by cyber attacks, such as *Stuxnet* and *Flame* and are creating an internet-independent IT network. Much of the capability is being provided by the Chinese Huawei corporation and major military and government agencies will be connected into the system by the end of October.
- There are indications that Iran's military cyber-corps, founded only last year, may have been responsible for the *Shamoon* virus that recently affected 30,000 computers within Aramco, the Saudi-owned (and world's largest) oil company. While Iran's offensive cyber capabilities are well behind those of Israel and the US, the *Shamoon* incident suggests a determination to meet attack with attack. Moreover, the involvement of a major Chinese company in developing Iran's cyber defence capabilities may aid Iranian IT specialists in Iran's *Passive Defense Organisation* as they seek to develop attack capabilities.

Implications and Policy

In the month since the last briefing, Iran has moved further towards a greater resilience to attack. This reinforces the conclusion that western policy should be redirected towards a longer time frame and a greater willingness to compromise. In parallel with this, the war in Syria seems likely to become protracted and increasingly bitter, with neither side nor their international supporters likely to be defeated in the short term.

One consequence of these parallel trends may be that, since Iran is less vulnerable, there will be a more marked move to focus on Syria on the part of the United States in an effort to ensure the defeat of the Assad regime. This is more likely if Romney is elected next month, in which case there will be strong calls for more direct aid to the Syrian rebels, including direct military aid. The thinking here will be that if Iran cannot be attacked directly, then the loss of its important regional ally, Syria, will further weaken its geopolitical position, putting more pressure on the current regime. At the onset of the Iraq War in 2003, neoconservatives were

fond of arguing that, if Iraq was brought into the western fold, then Iran would be quiescent. Thus it was said, “the road to Tehran runs through Baghdad”. It is possible that the road to Tehran will now been seen to run through Damascus.

The developments in both countries reinforce the conclusions of recent briefings:

- The importance of encouraging more modest and sustained engagement with Iran in the coming months and years, while arguing powerfully against military action.
- The need to encourage and support any diplomatic means available to highlight the dangers of the current double proxy in relation to Syria, encourage the difficult task that UN-Arab League envoy to Syria, Lakhdar Brahimi, has embarked on, and seek to limit the extent to which Syria is seen as a route to putting more pressure on Iran.

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