



مركز الجزيرة للدراسات  
ALJAZEERA CENTER FOR STUDIES

## Position Paper

# Tearing the Regime Forces Apart for Control of Damascus



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The civil war in Syria seems dramatically to have passed the point of no return in September 2012. This development is due to the Syrian regime having lost momentum in its ground assaults against rebel bases in the north, south and central areas. Instead, it started relying on long-range shelling from artillery bases located near urban areas. The army's use of military aircraft and helicopters – which seem to operate outside of normal rules of engagement and unconcerned about minimising human casualties and destruction to property caused by bombs dropped in rural and urban populated areas – also prompted this new trend in the war. Responding to the aerial attacks, the rebels, possessing the initiative, switched from tactics of attrition to taking control of more regime military sites. Further, the rebels are successfully maintaining extensive sieges on the Syrian forces' bases in preparation to take them over at a later stage. Added to that, since late October 2012, there has been an escalation in the pace of the rebels' operations in Damascus and its countryside, placing unprecedented pressure on the political-military force of the regime.

### **The regime forces' decline on multiple fronts**

Events on the ground in the last three months point to a decline in the presence of the regimes forces on most battlefronts – especially in the northern and northeastern areas of the capital and its countryside.

#### *The northern front: (Aleppo and Idlib)*

The most notable events and developments in the military situation in can be described as follows:

- The rebels control most urban areas, the latest of which are Ma'arrat al-Nu'man (9 October 2012), and Saraqeb (2 November 2012), which control movement on the highways of Damascus-Aleppo and Latakia-Aleppo respectively.
- After sieges lasting many weeks, the rebels now control the regime's military bases in Hamisho, Alwees, Salqeen and Harem and continue to besiege bases of Wadi Daif, Taftnaz, Mastouma, Karmeed and al-Mesara.
- Total rebel control of the northwest Syrian border with turkey. That is, from Badama (15 October 2012) to Harem (2 November 2012). In addition, they have taken control of Bab al-Hawa, the main border-crossing with Turkey (15 august 2012).

The most notable events and developments of the military situation in Aleppo are as follows:

- Rebels taking control of most of the Aleppo countryside and building the first refugee camp inside Syria (8 October 2012) – near Atamah on the outskirts of the borders with Turkey.
- Regime military bases taken over by rebels – Ekarda, 46<sup>th</sup> regiment in Atarib – and the continued siege of other bases – Sheikh Sulaiman, Mingh.

- Shifts in the battle of Aleppo with rebels aiming to exhaust the regime's resources in order to deliberately keep the regime from supporting other operations. The battle for Aleppo began on 20 July 2012 and rebels now control about seventy per cent of the city.
- Taking control of all the border crossings with Turkey – al-Salama, Jarablus and Ain al-Arab.

### ***The northeastern front (Deir el-Zour, Hasaka, Raqqa)***

Since the outbreak of the uprising, the northeastern part of the country has been a source of concern because of the water, agricultural resources and oil in that region and because of the tribal, linguistic and cultural ties of the area with the western and northwestern provinces of Iraq, a situation which poses a threat to the regimes in both Damascus and Baghdad.

The most significant military developments in Deir el-Zour are as follows:

- The rebels control the entire countryside, from Bokamal (their control there was confirmed by the fall of the Hamdan Airport on 17 November 2012) through al-Mayadeen (they took control of the military base there on 22 November 2012) to the outskirts of Deir el-Zour.
- Heated battle for control of the city of Deir el-Zour in which the regime has suffered deteriorating military conditions, especially after the success of the rebels in the surrounding countryside.

In Hasaka, a tacit agreement has been reached between the regime and the Kurdish Democratic Union Party (the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) in Turkey) that the latter would maintain order in the province so that regime forces could focus on operations elsewhere. Following this agreement, the rebels managed to take control of the Ras al-Ain border crossing with Turkey (8 November 2012). The province is characterised by a diverse demography comprised of Kurds, Arabs, Turkmen, Assyrians and others. The rebels expanded their operations in the triangular area between Ras al-Ain, Tel Tamer and Aaliyah after taking control of the towns of Asfar al-Najjar and Tal Halaf.

In the Raqqa area, the rebels have taken control of the border crossing of Tal-Abyad (19 September 2012), thus completing an arc of control which includes all the border crossings with Turkey except Kasab in the far west of Latakia province.

Rebels also control the strategic town of Solouk and their forces are expected to completely control the rest of the province and the vital locations in it such as al-Thawra embankment and the city of al-Tabaqah.

## Battle of Damascus: the last round

At the end of July 2012, the Syrian regime announced it had regained control over all districts in the capital and most of its countryside after an unsuccessful attack by rebels mid-July. However, rebels initiated a new round of clashes at the end of October, prompting the regime to use its elite 4<sup>th</sup> Armoured Division, the Republican Guard and members of the Special Forces from the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> divisions. Military aircraft were also used to bomb targets inside the capital for the first time since the outbreak of large-scale battles, in Jobar neighbourhood on 30 October, for example.

The most significant military developments in Damascus are:

- The rebels made crucial gains in the southern districts of the capital (al-Qadam, Hajar al-Aswad, al-Asali, al-Tadamun) and in neighbouring towns (Babila and Yalda) took over entirely the town of Sayeda Zainab.
- The regime also lost control over the cities and towns in the eastern Ghouta – from Douma in the north up to al-Maliha in the south, close to Damascus International Airport.
- Rebels attacked communication lines connecting the capital with the centre of the country, with the east, with the north (across the eastern Ghouta), with the south (Damascus-Dara'a and as-Suwayda-Damascus highways) and the highway heading to Quneitra.
- The rebels seized a number of military targets such as air defence bases, the most recent being the Bala base (15 November) and al-Rahbi base (25 November). The airport of Marj al Sultan was also seized (24 November 2012) and rebels are currently battling to take control of the international airport.

Along with these three fronts, clashes on other fronts are draining the regime's strength, thus indirectly bolstering the rebels in the battles on the three main fronts. The other fronts include:

- From March 2012, the battle over Homs turned into a battle of attrition, despite the siege and daily artillery shelling and airstrikes on the cities of Homs, Talbeesa and Rastan, as well as the support the regime's forces are enjoying directly through troop reinforcements and indirectly through shelling by Hizbullah in and around the Qusayer area.
- In Latakia, the rebels seem focused on cutting supply lines (especially the Latakia-Aleppo and Latakia-Kasab lines) to the provinces in the north where battles are taking place in the Turkmen and Kurd mountains, especially in the villages of Rabia, Salmi, Qastal-Ma'af and Kansaba.
- Rebels are taking control of new areas in Dara'a and Quneitra provinces. Their objective is to achieve total control over the southern border crossings with Jordan while consolidating their presence in the towns and villages of the Golan adjacent to the demilitarised zone.

## The regime's major mistakes

A close survey of the state of operations on the ground indicates that the areas under the regime's control are shrinking. It also shows that the regime has lost the capacity and will to regain the areas it has lost. Furthermore, it shows that the rebels are taking the initiative on all fronts, including the capital, thus exposing a disruption in the regime's command structures at the political and military levels. This can be linked to a number of mistakes resulting from the manner in which authoritarian regimes such as the Syrian government assess the state of play and make strategic decisions.

The most prominent of these mistakes have been:

- *Conventional warfare*: the regime is attempting to vanquish insurgency through conventional warfare which utilises massive strikes against heavy land mechanical formations, supported by artillery fire and airstrikes, in open battlefields away from urban areas. This strategy does not usually succeed when the enemy is using the guerrilla tactics in dense urban areas where movement is limited. Furthermore, this enemy is using modern communication tools which facilitate communication and help to prove its accomplishments while exposing the violations of the regime which might approximate war crimes and crimes against humanity. The regime seems, however, unable to change its behaviour for several reasons, including its seemingly unalterable strategic thinking and the fact that the military leadership is unable to communicate with the political leadership as matters unfold on the ground.
- *Retaining all areas*: the regime considers its control of the main cities as an indication of cohesiveness and of its having control of the situation across the country. It thus does not give importance to the rural areas and countryside which have drained the regime's military resources and hindered military formations from providing mutual backing to each other because of their being dispersed. The rebels benefited from this by managing to expand and control the countryside, and using it as a way to besiege and even invade the urban areas (as in the case of Aleppo from late July 2012).
- *The strategy of long-range firing*: the excessive concentration of regime forces in urban centres, resulting in it lacking the intensity required to end the battles in those areas, especially when they also lack strategic supportive reserves, have forced the regime to resort to heavy use of long-range fire. This was to compensate for a lack of forces and in an attempt to hinder the progress of the rebels and to reinforce local attacks by regime forces. The strategy also took the form of deliberate shelling and airstrikes against civilians in retaliation for their support of the uprising. This resulted in wastage of air fire power, and reduced the readiness of aircraft to thirty per cent. In addition, rebels have shot down dozens of jet fighters and helicopters and taken over several military bases where

they have destroyed or captured weapons. The indiscriminate firing also resulted in human and civilian casualties that were considered by international organisations as war crimes and crimes against humanity.

- *Increased use of irregular combatants* to compensate for the severe shortage of human resources in the regime's army due to a disruption in the system of compulsory military conscription. The conscription system has become ineffective due to sectarian considerations besetting the conflict (Sunni recruits are viewed with suspicion by the regime) and to the high death rate among fighters (over fifty people are killed daily). The regime has been relying on sectarian militias (Shabbiha) and other pro-regime militias (so-called popular committees) that are responsible for cleansing areas controlled by regime forces. This opened the door for terrible atrocities – killings and lootings – that have been regarded as war crimes (for example, Houla on 25 May 2012, al-Qubeir on 6 June, Tremsah on 12 July and Daraya on 21 August 2012).
- *Calling on external armed support*: the regime has called on regional forces whose capacity and sectarian affiliation allowed them to provide direct military support and widen the scope of responsibility for internationally condemned practices. Iran provided some such support. The commander of Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps, General Muhammad Ali Jafari in September acknowledged the presence of members of his corps in Syria. Hezbollah is also thought to be deploying forces into Syria territories to support the regime's operations. Hizbullah admitted, for example, the killing of one of its commanders, Ali Husain Nasif, in Qusair in Homs province. Hizbullah has also provided artillery backup from Lebanon in an attempt to cut supplies to the rebels. Thus the Syrian regime has given the conflict a sectarian nature, causing the entry of more Sunni extremists into the conflict on the rebel side.

There are several factors that help explain how the regime has managed to survive despite the deteriorating conditions on the ground and despite its military mistakes. The main factor is the tenacity and cohesion of the narrow circle of officials who are tightly holding onto the ruling Asad family. Also, the regime's military forces have not yet reached the point of implosion. The rate of defectors ranges from seven to ten per cent of the total military forces. In addition, the fact that the Alawi sect is, in general, opposed to the popular uprising also contributes to the regime's steadfastness. Finally, the political divisions within the opposition (despite some remarkable gains seen after the establishment of the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces in Doha on 11 November). This in turn has led to a delay in the process of forming a united military force.

From a political perspective, an analysis of the future would indicate that, due to growing international recognition of the National Coalition and to the military achievements of the

rebels, the regime is undergoing a process of rapid deterioration in terms of its military and political capacity to survive for much longer. How long it will survive will be determined by whether it is able qualitatively to change the balance of forces on the ground; by the willingness of international powers to intervene militarily; and by the regime's readiness to end its state of denial and to commence negotiating its departure so that it might stem its losses and avoid having to account for various actions that might qualify as crimes against humanity.

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