

SYRIA 90-DAY STRATEGIC FORECAST: THE REGIME AND ALLIES

PRO-REGIME OBJECTIVES

Grand Strategic Objectives:

- *[Syrian Regime]* Preserve the rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad in a post-war Syria encompassing the entire pre-war Syrian state
- *[Iran]* Preserve a viable Syrian regime led by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad as a key member of the 'Axis of Resistance'; achieve strategic positioning against Israel
- *[Russia]* Preserve the Syrian state – not necessarily Syrian President Bashar al-Assad – as a key foothold in the Middle East and an ally against terrorism
- *[Hezbollah]* Prevent the spread of the Syrian Civil War into Lebanese core terrain

Strategic Objectives:

- *[Syrian Regime]* Maintain Syrian territorial integrity through an 'army in all corners'; consolidate Syrian civilian population in regime-held areas; bolster international and domestic legitimacy as ruler of Syria.
- *[Iran]* Position against Israel in southern Syria along the Golan Heights; preserve access to supply lines from Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon; develop network of Syrian proxies to maintain Iranian influence if regime falls
- *[Iran/Russia]* Enable Syrian regime to defend core terrain along Syrian central corridor
- *[Hezbollah]* Secure Lebanese border region against incursion by militant groups

SYRIAN REGIME AND ITS ALLIES: CURRENT CONDITIONS

The Syrian regime is constrained by a pressing shortage of manpower (and to a lesser extent military equipment) which severely restricts its ability to conduct major offensive operations or adequately defend all of its outposts across Syria as part of its 'army in all corners' strategy. The rapid fall of the urban centers of Idlib City, Jisr al-Shughour, and Palmyra over the March 2015 to May 2015 time period in the face of separate offensives by JN-led rebel forces and ISIS highlighted the degree to which the Syrian Army is overstretched. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad later gave a public address on July 26 which admitted a "shortfall of human capacity" among regime forces and stated that the Syrian Army has been forced to prioritize

the defense of some "critical areas" at the expense of others. These circumstances have left the Syrian regime increasingly dependent on support from its foreign backers, namely Iran and Russia.

Developments on the international stage have also set conditions which will affect the calculations of the Syrian regime and its backers. The implementation of the Iranian nuclear accord signed on July 14 will provide tens of billions of dollars in sanctions relief to the Iranian government. This windfall will likely enable Iran to expand its military and financial support to the Syrian regime in response to recent battlefield setbacks. Meanwhile, Russian activities in Ukraine suggest that Moscow remains willing to undertake a high degree of risk in order to secure its geopolitical interests, one of which is the preservation of the Syrian state as its only

foothold in the Middle East. Overall, the conclusion of the nuclear deal with Iran has also opened a new phase of international diplomacy aimed at ending the Syrian Civil War which has generated incentives for Iran, Russia, and the Syrian regime to achieve optimal political and military positioning in Syria in order to improve their leverage over any negotiations. Recent reports of increased deployments of Russian personnel and equipment to the Syrian Coast suggest that the foreign supporters of the Syrian regime intend to pursue these interests through means that include direct military intervention.

90 DAY FORECAST

Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)

The coming three months will likely constitute a period of retrenchment for the Syrian regime given the strain of its manpower shortage and the current momentum of anti-regime actors. The regime remains unlikely to conduct any major offensive operations which would drive a strategic shift in the Syrian Civil War in the absence of a dramatic increase in outside support. Although both Iran and Russia have recently demonstrated their willingness to expand their involvement in the Syrian Civil War, the expected

pace and scope of this mobilization over coming weeks appears calibrated towards preserving the Syrian regime and preventing Western intervention rather than driving rapid or fundamental change in the conflict. At the same time, the regime remains unlikely to voluntarily withdraw from its outposts in the ‘army from all corners’ strategy given the imperative to preserve its control over terrain in advance of any international negotiations. Pressure from ISIS or other anti-regime actors will nonetheless likely force the Syrian regime to cede at least one of these positions over the next three months, particularly the besieged Kuweires Airbase east of Aleppo. The loss of more strategic positions such as the Deir ez-Zour Military Airbase or the Jazal Oil Fields in central Syria, however, would likely prompt the Syrian regime to conduct operations to reclaim these positions at the expense of other objectives.

The regime’s primary operational objectives are defensive:

- Secure Defensive Perimeter for Latakia Province
- Buffer Syrian Central Corridor Against ISIS
- Clear Rebel Presence in Damascus and its Vicinity

Syrian Regime Operational Objectives & MLCOAs for 90 Days	
September 9, 2015	
Operational Objective	Most Likely Course of Action (MLCOA)
Secure Defensive Perimeter for Latakia Province	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure and fortify the al-Ghab Plain in northwestern Hama Province against JN-led rebel forces (ongoing) • Launch limited operations to set conditions for recapture of Jisr al-Shughour and northeastern Latakia Province
Buffer Syrian Central Corridor Against ISIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure and hold the major oil and natural gas fields between Homs City and Palmyra (ongoing) • Conduct limited operations to contest outskirts of Palmyra and force ISIS into defensive posture (ongoing) • Reinforce and hold the strategic T4 (Tiyas) and Shayrat Airbases to buffer against ISIS incursion
Clear Rebel Presence in Damascus and its Vicinity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eliminate rebel presence in the besieged town of Zabadani in conjunction with Hezbollah (ongoing) • Continue limited operations and sieges against rebel-held pockets in Western Ghouta and southern Damascus • Escalate against rebel-held Eastern Ghouta, potentially using reinforcements drawn from Zabadani (ongoing)

The Syrian regime’s MLCOA for the next 90 days is detailed in the chart above.

The Syrian regime will pair these delineated operational objectives and MLCOAs with actions which exploit opportunities opened by the courses of action pursued by other actors on the ground. In Aleppo Province, the Syrian regime will likely seek to leverage a major ongoing escalation between ISIS and rebel forces as well as efforts to install an “ISIS-free” zone along the Turkish border in order to pursue its objective of encircling the rebel-held districts of Aleppo City. The Syrian regime will also likely use any conflict between ISIS and JN-led rebel forces in Idlib Province in order to achieve opportunistic advances and expand its buffer zone around the Syrian Coast.

As noted above, the operational objectives and MLCOAs pursued by the Syrian regime will also be heavily shaped by the extent of military assistance received from Iran and Russia over the 90-day timeframe. Both countries have dedicated significant amounts of military resources on behalf of the Syrian regime and appear likely to increase this support further over the next twelve weeks in order to bolster the regime retrenchment within its core terrain, particularly the regime heartland along the Syrian Coast. However, the deployment of a quantity of troops sufficient

to dramatically shift the current momentum on the ground and open major opportunities for the Syrian regime would require a level of investment that surpasses the current trajectories of expanded Russian and Iranian aid in Syria.

Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA)

As noted above, the Syrian regime remains highly limited in its ability to conduct operations which achieve a significant non-linear impact on the course of the Syrian Civil War. Nonetheless, there are at least two potential most dangerous courses of action (MDCOAs) under current conditions which do not directly rely on the offensive capabilities of the Syrian regime. The regime might contract uncontrollably into an Alawite rump state, not of its own choosing but under pressure from its adversaries or from internal schisms. Alternatively, Iran could conduct an offensive along the Golan Heights border with Israel in order to regain control over that terrain and pursue its objectives against Israel.

The regime’s primary operational objectives will include:

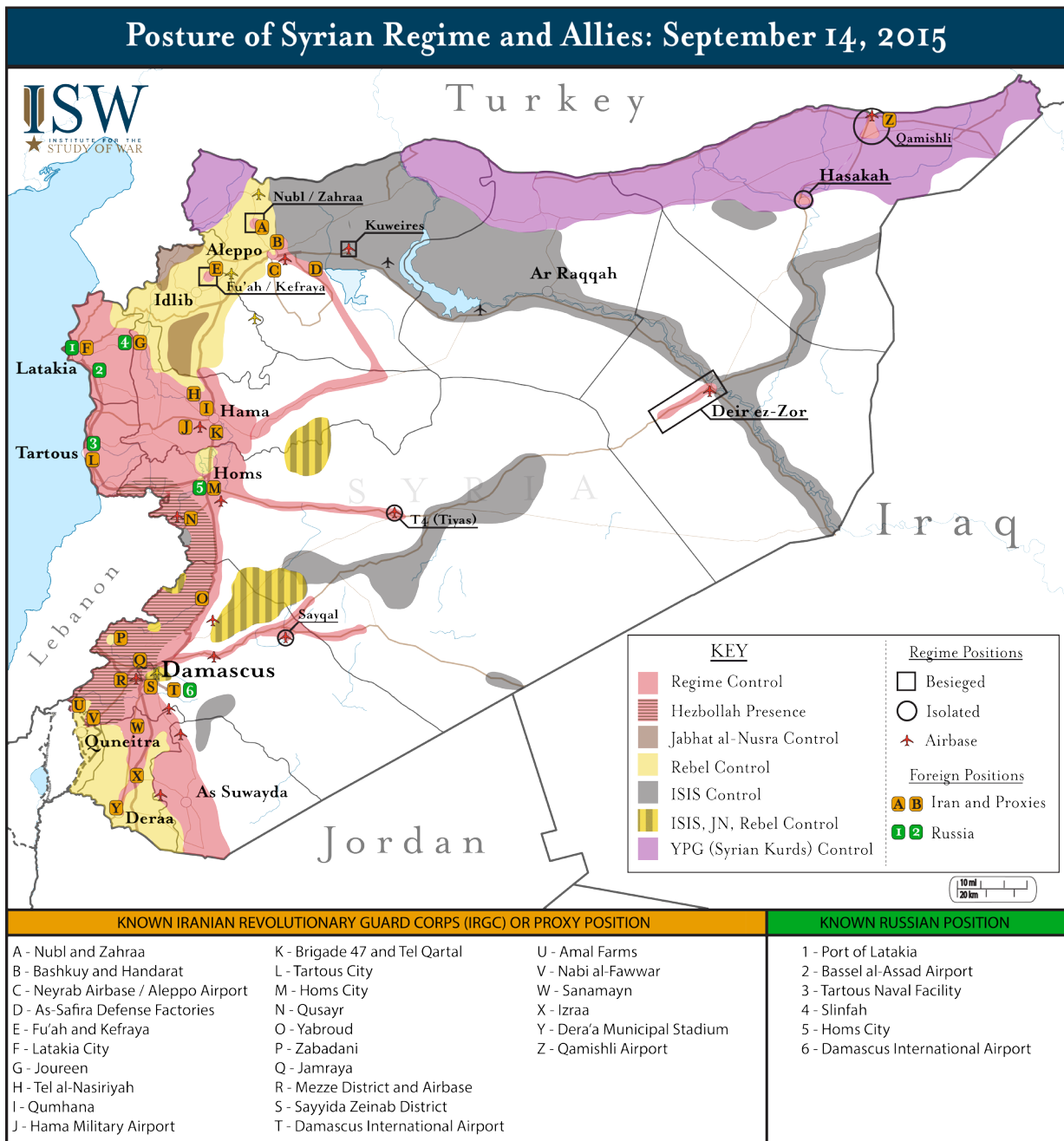
- Establish Defensive Perimeter for Latakia Province
- Buffer Syrian Central Corridor Against ISIS
- Clear Rebel Presence in Damascus and its Vicinity

Syrian Regime Operational Objectives & MDCOAs for 90 Days	
September 9, 2015	
MDCOA #1: Uncontrolled regime contraction to a ‘rump state’	
MDCOA #2: Iranian-backed offensive along Golan Heights border	
Operational Objective	Most Dangerous Course of Action (MDCOA)
Establish Defensive Perimeter for Latakia Province	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secure and fortify the al-Ghab Plain in northwestern Hama Province against JN-led rebel forces (ongoing) • MDCOA #1: Conduct major operation including chemical weapons, airstrikes, and Iranian proxies to secure northeastern Latakia Province
Buffer Syrian Central Corridor Against ISIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MDCOA #1: Reinforce outskirts of Homs and Hama Cities, and violently clear of suspect populations through massacres, chemical weapons • MDCOA #1: Withdraw from the T4 (Tiyas) and Shayrat Airbases as well as the oil and natural gas fields between Homs City and Palmyra
Clear Rebel Presence in Damascus and its Vicinity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MDCOA #1: Conduct major operation including chemical weapons, airstrikes, and Iranian proxies to violently clear rebel-held pockets of Eastern and Western Ghouta • Eliminate rebel presence in the besieged town of Zabadani in conjunction with Hezbollah (ongoing)
[Iran] Secure Golan Heights Border	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • MDCOA #2: Conduct major operation through Iranian proxies to seize terrain along Golan Heights

- Clear Rebel Presence in Damascus and its Vicinity
- [Iran] Secure Golan Heights Border

First, the overstretched posture of the Syrian regime sets conditions for a possible rapid collapse in its military and political institutions which would empower ISIS, JN, and other malign actors in Syria. Current setbacks for the Syrian regime have been managed in a gradual series of phased withdrawals which contain any potential for an exponential expansion in disorder. Nonetheless, an unmanaged transition prompted by a major or unexpected operation targeting the Syrian central corridor – such as a successful ISIS offensive

against Homs City or Qusayr – could prompt the Syrian regime to undergo a sharp contraction to a ‘rump state’ centered in Damascus and the Syrian Coast, enabling major territorial gains for ISIS and JN. The Syrian regime and its allies would likely further escalate the use of indiscriminate violence in order to quickly secure the bounds of this ‘rump state’ through the employment of chemical weapons and massacres of perceived anti-regime populations. A breakdown in the Syrian regime would also further empower Iran and its network of proxies inside of Syria while eliminating the potential for a negotiated transition that would end the conflict. Similar outcomes could also be produced by a substitute MDCOA in



which Russia or Iran heavily expand its military support for the Syrian regime beyond the bounds currently anticipated in the MLCOA. Foreign reinforcements sufficient to enable major offensive operations by regime forces would likely be leveraged to pursue the same lines of effort detailed in the above scenario, including violent and indiscriminate action to clear core regime terrain in the Syrian Coast and Damascus. Directly intervening on behalf of the Syrian regime would likely push other regional actors to expand their own support to the Syrian opposition, exacerbating the conflict and enabling militant Islamist factions in a manner which fuels regional disorder.

An Iranian-driven offensive along the border of the Israeli-held Golan Heights constitutes a second possible MDCOA under current conditions. Iranian proxies – including Palestinian militants, Afghan Shia militiamen, and Lebanese Hezbollah – have been increasingly active along the Golan Heights border in recent months and have conducted several attacks against Israel or the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF). Iran may calculate that a direct operation along the Golan Heights will be necessary to secure strategic positioning against Israel given the recent setbacks of the Syrian regime. Advances by anti-regime actors, including ISIS, JN, and the Syrian opposition, which sufficiently weaken the Syrian regime could pressure Iran to pursue this course of action and prioritize its own efforts within the country. This escalation would likely constitute a component of a broader Iranian decision to move to a new phase of direct engagement in Syria. In any scenario, such a move by Iran would likely prompt a military response from Israel, which has conducted multiple airstrikes against Iranian-backed forces in Syria and recently engaged in military exercises focusing on a limited operation into southern Syria. Events along the Golan Heights border could thus escalate into a broader struggle between Israel and Iran along with its proxies which threatens the stability of the region.

ENDNOTES

1. For more, see: Christopher Kozak, “An Army in All Corners”: Assad’s Campaign Strategy in Syria, April 2015, <http://understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/An%20Army%20in%20All%20Corners%20by%20Chris%20Kozak%20I.pdf>
2. For more, see: Christopher Kozak, The Assad Regime Under Stress: Conscription and Protest among Alawite and Minority Populations in Syria, December 2015, <http://iswresearch.blogspot.com/2014/12/the-assad-regime-under-stress.html>

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