



PolicyWatch 1971

Syria's Summer War and the Fate of the Regime

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As the Syrian conflict intensifies, the area under full government control continues to shrink; the question now is the speed of the regime's descent.

Syria's internal war has increased dramatically in intensity and scope over the past three months. Reported clashes between regime forces and the armed opposition doubled in May, then again in June, and yet again in July. Last month was the most violent of the war, with some 552 clashes reported and an estimated 1,100 regime personnel killed or wounded. Although the armed rebels also took casualties (estimated at 624 in July), their strength in men and combat formations appeared to grow. Meanwhile, the dramatic July 18 assassination of four key officials in Damascus, though not a fatal blow, exposed the regime's vulnerability at its innermost core. Similarly, its loss of territory in the northwest along with certain border crossings exposed its weakness on the periphery. These developments demonstrate that the regime's strategy for dealing with the rebellion is failing, despite its decision to employ very high levels of violence, go ever deeper into its arsenal, and rely more heavily on irregular forces.

THE WAR COMES HOME

Now that the fighting has moved into the cities of Damascus and Aleppo -- the centers of the regime's political, military, and economic power -- the nature of the war has been transformed.

The battle for Damascus. The battle for the capital is connected to the fighting in Rif Damascus, the province that surrounds the city. These outlying areas serve as a base for both the regime and the rebels, with supplies and personnel for the fighting in Damascus moving through or coming from the province.

Fighting in Rif Damascus escalated in June and even more dramatically in July, coincident

with fighting in the capital. This indicates the presence of strong rebel forces in both areas and suggests a degree of coordination among them.

Damascus saw its first major fighting of the war beginning on July 15, with clashes that continued for five days. Combat was widespread across the city, though of varying intensity. An average of sixteen clashes per day were reported in twenty-four different locations during this peak period, which included the deadly July 18 bombing operation against the president's brother-in-law and other top officials.

The regime responded forcefully to these challenges, moving combat forces into the city and employing heavy weapons indiscriminately, including attack helicopters. By July 20, most rebel elements had been compelled to withdraw from combat.

The battle for Aleppo. Clashes in Aleppo province greatly accelerated in July. Through the middle of the month, much of the fighting focused on the countryside, especially along the line of communication between Bab al-Salam (a crossing point on the Turkish border) and Aleppo city. Rebel forces gained control of a number of towns along this route as well as the border crossing, and regime forces were substantially driven or pulled out of much of the countryside. This in turn helped the opposition move forces into the city and sustain them during combat in subsequent weeks.

The battle for Aleppo city began in earnest on July 20, though some preliminary skirmishing occurred earlier. The southwestern Salah al-Din district quickly became the focus of sustained fighting that endured until August 9, when regime forces using air and artillery strikes pushed most rebel units out of the area. Since then, the regime has attempted to drive the rebels out of other strongholds in the city, so far with limited success. Fighting continues in the city as of this writing, including in Salah al-Din.

The regime's limited success in Aleppo has come at substantial cost in terms of casualties, diversion of forces from other parts of the country (e.g., Idlib and the Damascus area), and international opprobrium against the air and artillery offensive. It has also re-energized discussion of no-fly zones among Syria's international opponents.

The battles for Aleppo and Damascus demonstrate the opposition's growing ability to organize, marshal, and sustain forces, as well as the regime's willingness and capacity to respond with massive force to threats against its centers of power. Although Bashar al-Assad may cede territory in some areas and settle for stalemate in others, there are places where he will commit whatever resources he believes are necessary to suppress resistance.

THE BATTLE FOR SYRIA'S SPINE

The western provinces of Deraa, Homs, and Hama all witnessed sharp increases in fighting in June and July. Idlib saw a slight decline in clashes, likely reflecting the regime's loss of territory to rebel forces and transfer of combat units to Aleppo to deal with the crisis there. These four provinces, along with Rif Damascus, form the regime's "spine," and it can ill afford to lose any of them. The line of communication from Damascus to Aleppo is already subject to frequent rebel attacks, especially in Idlib province.

THE REBEL CHALLENGE IN THE EAST

Fighting has also increased in the eastern provinces of Deir al-Zour, Raqqa, and Hasaka, though not as dramatically as in the west. Regime forces are stretched thin along the Euphrates Valley, with essentially one division operating from Raqqa to Abu Kamal, a distance of some 150 miles.

Deir al-Zour province is a particular challenge for the regime. Fighting is a daily occurrence in Deir al-Zour city, and clashes have been reported in at least six other locations in the province. A number of towns and villages are reportedly under rebel control, and on July 20, the regime lost control (at least temporarily) of the Iraqi border crossing at al-Qaim.

Raqqa province reportedly saw rebel activity in seven different areas as well, albeit significantly less than Deir al-Zour. A small but growing number of incidents was also reported in Hasaka, where the regime appears to be relying on Kurdish loyalists to suppress resistance (though some regime security forces are active there). A rebel threat to key east-west lines of communication is also developing, with an armed opposition presence in Tadmur (in eastern Homs province), al-Tābqa and Raqqa city (in Raqqa province), and Maskanah (in eastern Aleppo province).

UNRAVELING PROCESSES

The regime's recent difficulties highlight a number of processes whose cumulative effects are wearing it down:

- Escalating clashes in nine of fourteen provinces in July
- Growing attrition in personnel and equipment from combat, defection, and assassination
- Signs that its forces are losing the will to fight (surrenders, abandoning of positions, failure to press attacks)
- Operational and tactical failures, including the loss of territory and positions
- Loss of the infrastructure of control due to seemingly well-conceptualized rebel attacks (e.g., on police stations, checkpoints, border posts, intelligence and security offices, the headquarters of the Baath Party and the regime's "Popular Army" militia)
- Improving rebel military capabilities in terms of organization, numbers, and weapons
- Attacks on state-run or associated media facilities and personnel, undermining Assad's ability to control people and territory

IMPLICATIONS

The intensification of fighting this summer and its movement into the heart of the regime indicates that the war has reached a critical stage. Given the recent battles in Damascus and Aleppo, the regime can no longer be confident of securing even the most critical parts of the country.

The fighting also demonstrates how far the armed opposition has come, and how difficult the regime's military position has become. From a small number of isolated, indifferently armed, and ill-trained "battalions," a much more competent armed opposition has emerged -- one capable of challenging the regime in critical areas despite its own persistent faults. For the regime, the war's trajectory is essentially downward. The speed of this descent is still in question, but not the process itself.

Going forward, the regime will likely begin breaking into pieces in the not too distant future. It will fight hardest to hold Aleppo, Damascus, and the Alawite heartland, but in doing so it will lose other regions. The portion of the country fully under government control is shrinking and will shrink more. This does not mean the war is over -- the regime has fought back and registered occasional, if incomplete, successes (e.g., the July fighting in Damascus), and it may yet succeed in driving most rebel forces out of Aleppo. But its control has been shaken in both cities, and its efforts there are weakening its hold elsewhere in the country.

Meanwhile, the opposition's relative success has also brought challenges for the rebels. As they gain territory, they must govern and defend it. And when the regime moves to retake such areas, it is essentially unconstrained in its operations, applying air and artillery forces fully and without regard to civilian casualties.

In light of these circumstances, imposing no-fly and/or no-drive zones in Syria would be a major boon to the rebels -- such a move would have the strongest and most immediate effect on the military and political situation because it would strike key weapons from the regime's hands, bolster rebel morale and effectiveness, and give the regime a clear signal that its end is approaching. Failing that, the rebels could be given the means to offset the regime's advantages, especially air-defense, antitank, and indirect-fire weapons. They have already demonstrated the will and ability to fight -- better means would help them win that fight sooner.

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