

The Assad Regime Winning by Inches?

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Brief Analysis

The regime's recent military successes are by no means sweeping, but its incremental gains in Aleppo and Damascus belie perceptions of stalemate and could shift the war's direction in its favor.

The fighting in Syria is frequently described as either a stalemate or a war of attrition -- there are few dramatic movements and no decisive actions, even though both sides repeatedly declare that they are winning and the other side is losing. And some have suggested that there is "no military solution."

But stalemates can be broken to one side's advantage, and wars of attrition can be won. Currently, hundreds of military actions are occurring every day across twelve of Syria's fourteen provinces, ranging from Scud missile and barrel bomb strikes to minor ground clashes involving small arms and handfuls of troops. Indeed, the Assad regime is working hard to ensure that its operations lead to a favorable military solution. And it is having some success, at least for now.

REGIME STRATEGY

The regime does not appear to accept the notion of stalemate, and it does not appear to be confused about how to prosecute the war. It has goals and a military strategy for achieving them, and it conducts a range of military operations to implement this strategy.

The regime's political goals are to remain in power, restore its control over as much of Syria as it can, and render the political opposition an irrelevant exile movement. Its military goal is to reduce the armed opposition to a manageable terrorist threat. This does not imply that the opposition has to be completely eliminated or that every inch of lost ground has to be recovered. Yet the regime has never shown any intention other than to fight, and it fights essentially everywhere in Syria. It does not negotiate with the opposition, and it does not give up on any province.

The military strategy to achieve these goals entails use of all elements of military power (air, ground, missile, and irregular) to secure important areas and regain territory lost to the rebels. Specifically, the regime aims to keep its

grip on loyal provinces (Tartus, Latakia, al-Suwayda), maintain a presence in key parts of contested provinces (e.g., Damascus city, Deir al-Zour, Idlib, Deraa), and regain important lost territory (Damascus suburbs, Aleppo city, Qalamoun). This approach allows the regime to conserve forces in less important or mostly secure areas while concentrating forces for offensive action in places it deems critical.

The regime conducts four types of operations to implement this strategy. *Offensive operations* are carried out to regain territory or restore a deteriorating situation. *Defensive operations* are aimed at preventing important territory or positions from falling into rebel hands. *Population-control operations* (sieges, sustained bombardment, negotiated "truces") are employed to erode the rebels' support base by causing civilians to flee, pacifying populated areas that support the opposition, and reducing local assistance to rebel forces. *Security operations* (sweeps, arrests, detentions) aim to prevent the emergence of rebel activity; they are primarily conducted in regime-held areas.

Together, these operations give the regime a flexible toolkit for prosecuting the war and account for the diverse range of actions it takes every day. Application of these tools is constrained only by the resources available to the regime and the opposition's ability to resist.

THE BALANCE SHEET

The regime's situation varies across the country; in most provinces, it falls into one of four rough categories: firm control, slow offensive progress, successful defensive action, or losing ground.

Regime control is not seriously threatened in three provinces: Tartus, al-Suwayda, and to a lesser extent Latakia. There, the regime manages armed threats using its nonmilitary security forces, irregular forces (organized under the National Defense Forces), or relatively small regular military forces. In Latakia, the rebels are largely contained in the northeast; when they have become more threatening, as in August 2013, the regime conducts offensive military operations against them.

The regime is making slow progress against the rebels in three other areas. The Qalamoun-Yabroud area north of Damascus is key terrain -- located astride the Damascus-Homs highway and along the sensitive Lebanon border, it has been a rebel bastion for some time. The regime is conducting a slow offensive there, relying on heavy firepower, regular and irregular forces, and allied forces (Iraqi Shiite militants and Hezbollah) to grind down armed resistance. It is also attacking civilians in centers of resistance such as Yabroud city with its full range of weapons. A combination of rebel units operating under the direction of the Qalamoun "operations room" has offered strong and sustained resistance but seems to be slowly losing ground. Barring a significant change in rebel capabilities, the regime will likely push this offensive to a successful conclusion, although not quickly and not without significant losses.

The regime began another slow offensive in Aleppo province last summer. Since then, it has opened the southeastern approaches to Aleppo city and now threatens to encircle rebel-held portions of the provincial capital. It is using a similar combination of firepower and regular, irregular, and allied forces in this offensive while striking the civilian population with air, missile, and artillery weapons. Progress has been slow and costly, but the regime keeps pressing the rebels back and is threatening their supply lines. If it can isolate the city, it will likely subject it to siege.

In and around Damascus city, the regime has used a combination of offensive and population-control operations to regain territory in the southern suburbs and press rebel forces in the eastern suburbs. As in other areas, it is relying on heavy firepower, combined forces, and full-scale attacks on civilians, including siege operations against neighborhoods that have supported the rebels. These actions have produced a number of local "ceasefires" that have reduced popular resistance. While much of the area in and especially around Damascus remains contested, the regime is slowly gaining there.

The regime conducts largely defensive operations in provinces where it is unwilling or unable to carry out significant offensives. In these areas, it focuses on defending key locations such as major cities, airfields, and important military installations (headquarters, major unit garrisons, weapons and ammunition storage). From there, it conducts military actions to harass, wear down, and disrupt rebel activity while controlling the civilian population. The regime presence in the provinces is buttressed by an extensive network of strong points (the so-called "barriers"), which serve as artillery fire bases, help to secure lines of communication, and broaden the regime's area of control/influence. These kinds of defensive operations have been largely successful in Deir al-Zour and Raqqa provinces in the east and Idlib in the north.

The regime is losing ground in some provinces, including Quneitra and Deraa in the south and Hama in the center. In these areas, regime forces are not strong enough to protect their network of positions and appear hard pressed to hold even some important towns. Nevertheless, much of the rebel success in these areas has been over less important territory, with the regime retaining control of key military facilities and major cities. When rebel success becomes too significant, the regime steps up its military activity via small-scale reinforcement, airstrikes, artillery bombardment, and other offensive actions.

The situation is more difficult to characterize in some provinces. In Homs, the regime has largely reverted to either defensive or population-control operations after its successful spring 2013 offensive around al-Qusayr and Talkalakh. At the same time, however, it is carrying out a slow offensive against rebel-held towns on the Lebanon border. And in Hasaka province in the east, the regime seems satisfied to let the Kurds of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) do most of the fighting against Islamist rebels, though it still maintains and occasionally employs its own regular forces there. As a result, the province is not under regime or rebel control at the moment.

REASONS FOR REGIME SUCCESS

A number of factors have contributed to the regime's recent successes. First, the presence of allied forces is crucial, especially in offensive operations. The involvement of Hezbollah forces and Iraqi militants is not a guarantee of success, but it significantly increases the regime's chances.

Second, offensive and defensive actions are more successful when the regime is able to mass its forces and firepower, control the situation (i.e., isolate the battlefield and employ siege tactics), operate against weak rebel forces (i.e., units that are small in number, lightly armed, and/or poorly coordinated), and sustain operations. In other words, it is successful when it deems the situation important enough to invest significant resources.

Terrain and casualties are influential factors as well. Syria's rugged terrain and urban areas favor the defender, and both the regime and the rebels have exploited this fact. The regime must also be concerned about the casualties it is taking. The number of regular and irregular personnel killed and wounded appears to be increasing due to the heightened intensity of the fighting and the emergence of better armed and coordinated rebel forces. Damascus cannot ignore losses among its allies either, especially Hezbollah, which has a domestic support base in Lebanon to worry about. Hezbollah and Iraqi militant units appear to be taking significant casualties in the Qalamoun-Yabroud fighting, even when rebel claims are significantly discounted.

OUTLOOK

The Assad regime's recent successes are by no means sweeping -- its offensive operations sometimes progress very slowly or fail altogether, and in some places it has lost ground. But it is having incremental success on key fronts in Aleppo and the Damascus area. If it prevails there, the war's real and perceived direction would shift strongly in its favor -- Bashar al-Assad and his allies, buoyed by success, would press their "military solution" harder and become even less inclined to negotiate.

Accordingly, many are concerned about the rebels suffering potentially substantial defeats in Aleppo and Damascus. While this is unlikely to happen overnight, there is always the possibility of a quick collapse of resistance through the cumulative effects of casualties, logistical problems, loss of will to fight, and declining popular support. The rebels have fought long and hard on many fronts, but their determination may not last indefinitely. It is an open question whether they can respond effectively to the regime's challenge without greater internal unity and significant outside military assistance, including arms, training, advice, and intelligence.

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