

The Syrian Regime's Willing Executioners

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Brief Analysis

Eliminating Assad's chemical arsenal, while somewhat helpful, would do nothing to stem the more potent conventional means that his regular and irregular forces have used to kill thousands of civilians.

This week, the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons reported that the Syrian government has destroyed the equipment it used to produce its chemical arsenal, thus meeting one of its commitments under the process established in September for ridding the country of such weapons. Unfortunately for the Syrian people, however, the regime still has the means and will to continue killing on a grand scale. Over the past two and a half years, Bashar al-Assad's regular and irregular forces have been transformed into an effective, well-resourced, and energetic killing machine, with tens of thousands of Syrians in and out of uniform participating in the slaughter of their fellow countrymen both from a distance and up close.

THE KILLING PATH

From the outset of the uprising, the regime has demonstrated that it will use whatever level of violence is necessary to crush the opposition. A dominant feature of the war has been the steady escalation of regime firepower. From beatings, mass arrests, and small arms, Assad's forces quickly progressed to using tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, antiaircraft guns, heavy mortars, field artillery, artillery rockets, combat helicopters with barrel bombs, fixed-wing combat aircraft with incendiary and fragmentation weapons, surface-to-surface missiles, and, finally, chemical weapons. This escalation has been accompanied by arrests, torture, field executions, and efforts to deprive individuals and entire communities of food, water, and medical services. In short, Assad has waged a total internal war against the unarmed and armed opposition, with horrific results in terms of casualties, damage to infrastructure and economic activity, and dislocation of the population. Much of Syria has effectively become a free-fire zone for regime forces.

The strategic objective of the killing is clear: to destroy rebel forces, eliminate or displace their civilian base of

support, create secure, regime-controlled areas, and foster a climate of terror and intimidation. Although motivations are more complex at the local and individual levels, the regime has succeeded to a degree in dehumanizing its opponents and raising the most primitive passions among its supporters, including "ordinary" Syrians and willing executioners alike.

KILLING ORGANIZATIONS

A broad range of organizations and forces are heavily involved in killing civilians on a routine basis -- not just a few key units close to the regime's core, but numerous regular units of the army, air force, and air defense forces, a broad range of irregular forces, the intelligence and police apparatus, and allied foreign forces (e.g., Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiite militants). Moreover, these forces do not work in isolation. They cooperate and coordinate; there is synergy to their actions.

Regular forces. Syria's regular armed forces have been immersed in the internal war from the beginning. They are crucial to the regime's ability to stay in power and have formed the basis for Assad's response to the uprising. As such, they are widely complicit in violence against civilians. Opposition reporting has identified over sixty regular brigade- and regiment-level formations as being involved in the war. Although unit designator errors and double counting may have inflated this figure somewhat, a substantial portion of the regular military is clearly in the fight. Most of the reported activity by these formations has been bombardment or direct fire against rebel forces and civilian areas.

Videos have shown air force units striking opposition targets with Mi-8/17 and Mi-25 helicopters, MiG-21, MiG-23, MiG-29, and Su-22 combat aircraft, and L-39 combat-capable trainers. In addition, military transport and civilian aircraft are reportedly involved in moving munitions and troops around the country.

The regime's surface-to-surface missile (SSM) forces have played an active role in the war since at least December 2012, when sustained strikes on large-area targets began. The SSM unit most often identified in opposition reporting is the 155th Scud Brigade operating from the Qalamoun area northeast of Damascus. But other units using the SS-21 and Fateh-110 missile systems also appear to be involved in launches. Currently, opposition sources report SSM strikes on a near-daily basis, with multiple attacks on some days.

Regime air defense forces are also involved in bombardment and shooting actions. Opposition reporting frequently refers to strikes on civilian areas using anti-aircraft weapons, at least some of which are said to be fired from air defense facilities. Most of these incidents have involved anti-aircraft guns being used in a direct-fire role, though the use of surface-to-air missiles in a surface-to-surface role has been reported as well.

Irregular forces. The regime is increasingly reliant on irregular forces to prosecute its war. Casualties, defections, and desertions among the regular forces have fueled this transition, as has the presumably limited reliability of some personnel. These irregular elements are capable of any atrocity and are responsible for some of the worst incidents of the war. While the regime's regulars are more or less conventional killers, its irregulars have been among the conflict's "up close and personal" killers.

Today, most irregulars are loosely grouped under the National Defense Forces (NDF), an organization created to bring more order to the regime's sprawling array of militant supporters, make them more effective in a military sense, and connect them to the operations of the regular forces. NDF elements include *shabbiha* fighters, Popular Committees, and local militias. These personnel hail from a wide spectrum of Syrian society, including the Alawite and other minority communities and the urban and rural sectors. As the war has progressed, the NDF has taken on a greater role, with irregulars operating closely with regulars, especially armor and artillery units. Based on reporting by the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, NDF personnel now comprise some 30 percent of regime forces killed in action daily.

The growing casualty count and the persistent threat to the regime have led Assad's allies to commit significant forces to the fighting as well. Hizballah, Iraqi Shiite fighters, and perhaps some Iranian combatants have become a progressively more important component of regime forces, especially during offensives in Homs province and the Damascus suburbs. These elements conduct combined operations alongside regime regular and irregular forces; in fact, Hizballah personnel have become the regime's elite infantry.

Assad's internal security apparatus is also involved in routine killing. This includes the intelligence services and the police, who continue to detain, torture, and execute civilians.

The organizations and units that produce and employ the regime's chemical weapons have contributed to the killing as well. These include the Scientific Studies and Research Center (responsible for research, development, and production), Unit 450 (responsible for the security and movement of chemical munitions), and certain artillery and air units of the regular forces. Although this collective is now constrained -- a victim of its own success -- it has made a substantial input to the war's civilian casualties.

Finally, several supporting mechanisms make it possible for the regime to carry out violence on such a grand scale. These include the command-and-control apparatus, and the logistics organizations responsible for maintaining equipment and weapons as well as transporting forces and materiel.

KILLING MEANS

The regime routinely employs a wide array of measures against its opponents, ranging from sophisticated conventional weapons to simply depriving individual prisoners or whole populations of the necessities of life. This array, more than any individual weapon system, has produced the tens of thousands of dead in the war so far.

Based on data collected by the opposition's Local Coordination Committees (LCC), the regime is carrying out an average of 440 air, artillery, and missile strikes per day. Over 90 percent of this fire comes from artillery guns, rockets, and mortars. Indeed, direct fire and bombardment with artillery-type weapons have been the main killing mechanisms. Direct fire -- that is, shooting directly at targets with small arms, light anti-aircraft weapons, and other military-class weapons -- is killing some 320 people per week, based on September data collected by the Violations Documentation Center in Syria (VDC). And bombardment with heavy anti-aircraft weapons, field artillery weapons, rockets, mortars, and tank guns is killing 174 per week.

According to LCC data, the regime also conducts an average of 41 airstrikes per day, including strafing and bombing with high-explosive, incendiary, thermobaric, and fragmentation munitions. Bombardment by helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft accounts for about 52 killed per week according to VDC data. Although air-based attacks represent a relatively small percentage of overall regime strike activity, they cause significant casualties because of the size and types of munitions delivered.

Surface-to-surface missiles account for a still smaller number of strikes (about fifteen per week) but can produce significant casualties as well. For example, Human Rights Watch reported that four ballistic missile attacks killed 141 Syrians during the week of February 22 alone. SSMs are mostly used against area targets and urban neighborhoods, though some have had direct military applications such as striking rebel centers of resistance and headquarters.

Regular and irregular regime forces are also killing Syrians face to face. This includes massacres of civilians and prisoners of war, field executions and other extrajudicial killings, deaths during detention and under torture, and direct executions in prison. According to VDC data, some 300 Syrians died by a combination of these means in September, or approximately 12 percent of the monthly death toll.

Systematic deprivation of food, shelter, and medical care has taken a toll as well. Regime forces have besieged rebel-

held urban areas in al-Qusayr, Homs, and certain suburbs of Damascus, among other areas. They have destroyed crops, livestock, and bakeries, and targeted medical facilities in opposition areas. Poisoning of water supplies has also been reported. These activities have produced famine and made medical treatment difficult to come by -- all part of the regime's plan to reduce support for the opposition and force population displacement from rebel-held areas.

Finally, chemical weapons, while producing horrific casualties, have contributed only a small fraction of the total death toll, probably less than two percent. Eliminating the regime's CW capability is important to ensuring that this number does not grow, but it leaves Assad's forces virtually unconstrained in their use of other killing means.

CONCLUSION

In the course of its effort to violently suppress a popular uprising, the regime has drawn a substantial portion of Syrian society into its killing organizations and processes, whether directly or indirectly. It has matched the Sunni-majority revolution with an Alawite/Shiite minority counterrevolution. This significantly widens the scope of complicity and clouds any notion that the state can be rebuilt on the foundations of its old institutions. Given the amount of blood that regime forces have shed, those fighting against them are unlikely to accept a continued role for them in postwar Syria.

For their part, Assad and his circle have never shown any sign of considering a different path -- they have been utterly cynical and ruthless about conducting the war in this manner, buttressed by steady political, military, and economic support from their allies abroad. It is therefore difficult to see how the regime could be considered a legitimate participant in any future negotiating process. And even if the Syrian people and the international community were willing to countenance that scenario, the regime could hardly be expected to participate meaningfully in negotiating itself out of existence.

Jeffrey White is a Defense Fellow at The Washington Institute and a former senior defense intelligence officer. ❖

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