

# Mounting Pressure on the Syrian Army

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Brief Analysis

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**Unless the army finds a way to relieve growing pressure on its capabilities and cohesion, it will likely collapse, sweeping away much of the regime in the process.**

**T**he Syrian army is Bashar al-Assad's main prop -- without it, his regime would soon fall. So far, the military has withstood the stresses associated with months of combat against an increasingly capable opposition force, the steady geographic expansion of its mission, and a stream of defections and casualties. Yet these pressures are mounting, and the army likely cannot resist them indefinitely. At some point it will break, disintegrate, or withdraw to the Alawite heartland in order to preserve remnants of the regime. Alternatively, some units may move against the regime in order to save themselves. To increase the pressure and accelerate the process, the international community should provide additional military assistance to vetted and effective armed opposition forces.

## THE CHANGING NATURE OF THE WAR

**S**yrria's internal war, pitting regime forces against the armed opposition, has been unfolding for a year now, and the nature of the fighting has evolved from intermittent, scattered clashes to more or less sustained combat across broad areas of key governorates. Fighting occurs nearly every day in Idlib, Aleppo, Homs, Hama, Deir al-Zour, Deraa, and the Damascus countryside. For example, daily clashes were reported in Deir al-Zour between June 10 and June 18, and in Rif Damascus between June 14 and June 18.

Overall, last month saw fighting in more than eighty locations across the country, up from seventy in May, with dramatic increases in Latakia and Deir al-Zour governorates. The pace of conflict between regime forces and the opposition Free Syrian Army (FSA) is accelerating, with June featuring the greatest number of clashes since the beginning of the conflict. Over 250 clashes were recorded by the opposition Local Coordination Committees and the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR) in their June reports.

## THE CHALLENGE TO THE SYRIAN ARMY

**T**he army faces four major stressors as the war intensifies:

*Growing opposition capabilities.* Syria's armed opposition forces are becoming more formidable. Despite their lack of unity and limited firepower, they have maintained support among the Sunni population, fought effectively in both urban and rural environments, employed an ever-greater number of formations with more and better weapons, created larger organizations and more effective command-and-control structures, and learned how to fight both the army and the *shabbiha* irregulars.

*Geography.* Syria is a large country with complex urban and rural terrain. In some places, lines of communication (LOCs) are long, restricted, and vulnerable to attack. For example, Damascus is around 190 miles from Aleppo, and Homs is around 225 miles from Deir al-Zour. Regime forces moving north from Damascus or east from Homs face long road marches, and LOCs are vulnerable even when distances between key points are shorter, as evidenced by the many destroyed vehicles seen along the road system. In addition, the government cannot consistently control the entire country. If regime forces are not present or nearby, FSA elements can move relatively freely in both rural and urban areas. Indeed, this is a "360 degree" war -- fighting occurs across the length and breadth of the country, and the regime must defend everywhere.

*Tempo of operations.* The regime has stepped up operations since mid-May, and armed opposition elements are increasing their activities as well. The sustained nature and growing intensity of the fighting have placed greater demands on regime forces. In the past several weeks, the army has had to send brigade-size or larger armored reinforcements to Aleppo and Deir al-Zour, where local forces have been unable to suppress growing resistance. Moreover, a major regime operation appears imminent in Aleppo.

*Attrition.* The army is facing increased attrition in men and equipment due to combat action, defections, and desertions. According to SOHR and Syrian government reporting, regime forces suffered some twenty to twenty-five personnel killed per day in June, with probably another eighty or so wounded. The Alawite-led army also suffers from what can be called "loyalty casualties," that is, Sunni soldiers it cannot trust. Some of these personnel are disarmed or detained, while others continue to undermine the army from within. Psychological attrition is no doubt a factor as well: some personnel likely do the minimum they are ordered to do or even less due to lack of identification with the regime.

## **THE ARMY'S PROSPECTS**

**T**he army's fate hinges on several questions. First, can it win using the strategy it has employed thus far, which focuses on wearing down the opposition? After a year of combat, that seems unlikely. The armed opposition is in fact growing in numbers, scope of action, sophistication, and intensity of operations.

Second, can the army adapt by finding new ways to use its resources? Here too, its ability seems limited. This is partially a function of the regime's approach to the conflict as a whole, which rules out a meaningful counterinsurgency strategy -- no "hearts and mind" campaign would stand a chance of separating the majority Sunni population from the FSA. Another reason lies in the nature of the army itself. With effective command in the hands of loyalist generals and regime thugs, there is not much prospect for serious analysis of the challenges and implementation of realistic solutions. Operations and tactics appear stale and unimaginative, and many actions are poorly executed. The army wins by mass and firepower, not by adroitness.

Nevertheless, some factors are still working to maintain military cohesion. Both the army and the regime retain the loyalty of Alawite personnel, very few of whom are known to have defected. Loyalty to the regime is a factor among soldiers of other persuasions as well, whether based on personal commitment or benefits in the form of position, privileges, or pay. Others fear the consequences of regime change or desertion and are therefore more motivated to remain united. In addition, because the war is not yet definitively lost, many soldiers -- especially those with a stake

in the regime -- may still believe Assad will win.

The army has also taken steps to reduce the strain. It has used the largely Alawite *shabbiha* to support its operations, decreasing the stress on infantry and armored forces and on the loyalty of the largely Sunni rank and file. It is reportedly rotating certain combat brigades as well, allowing some to rest while others fight.

Moreover, even amid increasing pressures, the army has not yet used its full capacity for military violence. Although it has routinely employed field artillery against civilian and military targets, it could use such weapons much more widely and intensely. No place in Syria has witnessed the kind of artillery bombardment that the army is capable of inflicting. Specifically, the regime has not employed its heaviest artillery, including 180-millimeter guns and artillery rockets ranging from 220 to 333 millimeters. It could also decide to commit its fixed-wing combat air forces -- the regime has 275 aircraft designed for a ground attack or strike role, plus others that could be outfitted for such purposes.

The regime could even decide to employ chemical weapons. This step seems unlikely because of the international storm it would cause, but it cannot be ruled out. In any event, such a move would signal the regime's death throes.

## OUTLOOK

Supportive factors and escalatory capabilities aside, the corrosive processes at work on the Syrian military are accumulating and accelerating. If the army cannot address these challenges, it will likely collapse, though precisely when is difficult to determine. The end could come in a rush or, more likely, through gradual disintegration.

Improving the FSA's planning, intelligence, combat, and command-and-control capabilities would presumably speed this process even further. The endgame in Syria is likely to be messy and violent in any case, but accelerating the regime's fall could limit some of the damage. Beefing up the FSA's capacity would also put it a better position to deal with the post-Assad transition. Much of the regime will be swept away if the army breaks, and the opposition must have something ready to replace it.

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