

Assad's Response to the Annan Plan: Violence as Usual

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May 29, 2012

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Brief Analysis

In light of the Houla tragedy and other indicators of growing violence, the UN observer mission in Syria will likely be withdrawn, spurring the regime to escalate its offensive operations even further.

The massacre of over 100 civilians in Houla last Friday has focused attention on the Syrian regime's conduct during the ceasefire brokered by UN envoy Kofi Annan. President Bashar al-Assad agreed to Annan's overall plan, but since its "implementation" on April 12, his forces have systematically ignored its provisions, which include a ceasefire, suspension of troop movements toward population centers, withdrawal of forces from these areas, and a ban on using heavy weapons against them. Instead, the regime is increasing its violent campaign against the opposition -- actions such as armored raids on centers of resistance, violent suppression of demonstrations, and bombardment of civilian areas with artillery and attack helicopters were on the rise before last week's massacre and have shown no sign of slackening since.

Thus, while the Houla attack was unusual in the number killed, it was standard operating procedure for Assad's forces. The regime has essentially reverted to its preceasefire behavior, and the several hundred UN monitors on the ground are little more than a speed bump for violence against the people.

Military Operations

The regime has continued military operations throughout much of the country during the so-called ceasefire, though with special emphasis on the traditionally restive provinces of Idlib, Aleppo, Hama, Homs, Deraa, Rif Dimashq, and Deir al-Zour. Its tactics have included the following:

- Attempts to eliminate areas of rebel control (e.g., Rastan and parts of Idlib and Aleppo provinces) and destroy Free Syrian Army (FSA) formations there.
- Attempts to isolate centers of opposition/resistance by cutting essential services (water, power, and communications), severing road access, establishing fire bases from which to bombard these areas, and other

methods.

- Bombardment of civilian areas, including Rastan, Hama, Homs, Khan Sheikon, Jisr al-Shughour, and multiple parts of Aleppo, Rif Dimashq, and Deraa provinces.
- Attempts to choke off smuggling routes and illegal crossing points along the border with Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, producing clashes with FSA elements and smugglers as well as incidents of cross-border fire.
- Efforts to reassert control of contested areas through large deployments of regular, irregular (*shabbiha*), and security forces (intelligence, police) and the establishment of fixed and mobile checkpoints.

Regime operations have relied on the use of heavy weapons within and against urban areas. The presence and use of tanks (T-72, T-62, T-55), BMP infantry fighting vehicles, mortars, and artillery in and around cities has been well documented since the Annan plan went into effect, with the regime modulating their employment to reduce their exposure to observation. In particular, it has avoided using heavy weapons when UN monitors are present, holding fire when they arrive and resuming when they depart. This tactic has been seen most recently in Rastan, where the government is trying to break rebel control with a combination of siege, bombardment, and direct assault.

The regime has also reportedly increased its use of combat aircraft in the past two weeks. Attack helicopters in particular have been firing on towns and rural areas, especially in Idlib and Aleppo provinces, but also in Latakia province. For example, opposition sources claim that more than fifty helicopter-fired "missiles" (probably rockets) hit farms in the Jebel Zawiya area on May 23.

The regime has accompanied these operations with a deception campaign aimed at reducing the visibility of its forces and confusing observers about their activities. To evade direct observation, it has disguised personnel and vehicles as police or paramilitary forces and hidden heavy weapons behind walls, berms, and overhead cover. It has also conducted operations away from UN monitors. When observers have discovered heavy weapons, the regime has sometimes attempted to portray them as ambulances, as disarmed systems, or as "not heavy."

Suppression of Dissent

The regime routinely employs a range of violent measures to intimidate the opposition, break strikes, deter/disperse demonstrations, and disrupt the organizational and support base of the armed and unarmed resistance. These measures include: indiscriminate fire on civilians from checkpoints and snipers; disruption of protests using live fire, tear gas, and physical assault; breaking strikes by forcibly opening closed shops, looting them, and beating their owners and employees; and systematic attacks on medical personnel and facilities that provide care to possible rebels. The regime has also attempted to prevent opposition supporters from meeting with UN personnel; when such meetings do occur, it has sometimes retaliated with shelling and arrests.

Arrests and detentions are widespread as well, with sweeps, raids, and targeted arrests a daily occurrence. In some cases the regime has detained and threatened relatives or associates of known opposition figures in order to compel wanted individuals to turn themselves in. Torture of detainees has also been well documented.

In addition, the government is increasingly employing scorched-earth operations in areas of dissent, such as burning and looting homes and businesses, torching farmlands and olive orchards, and killing livestock. These and other repressive actions do not draw the same attention as some of the larger-scale military operations, but they are part and parcel of the regime's violent response to the rebellion.

Information Operations

The regime has sought to impose its narrative on the situation -- namely, that it enjoys the support of the people, that it is fighting "armed terrorists" supported by Western and jihadist agents, and that Syria's minorities are at risk. Toward this end, it has publicly exploited the major terrorist-type attacks seen in Damascus and Aleppo in

order to smear the opposition. It has also conducted a farcical parliamentary election to "prove" that the people back the government. And in the case of the Houla massacre and other incidents, it has sought to justify its military and security operations by depicting the armed opposition as the primary cause of violence. Damascus has been aided in these efforts by allies Russia, Iran, and Hizballah, who typically repeat the regime's propaganda line.

Implications

As the Houla tragedy makes clear, the Assad regime is prepared to use whatever violence it deems necessary to suppress the opposition, and the UN mission has not fundamentally changed the military dynamics of the situation. Damascus clearly views the UN monitors as simply one more tactical obstacle to be circumvented as it works to break the revolt. The armed opposition has responded accordingly, with clashes between regime and FSA units on the rise and now approaching the levels of early April. The rebels are specifically tying their actions to regime attacks, including Friday's massacre.

Going forward, the regime will likely escalate its military action even further. Since the Annan plan came into force, Assad's forces have been killing forty or more people daily, according to data from the opposition's Local Coordination Committees and the Syrian Revolution Martyr Database. Although this is a substantial reduction from the estimated ninety deaths per day before the ceasefire, when the regime was pressing a broad offensive against the opposition, it demonstrates Assad's continuing use of violence on a large scale. Armed rebels contribute to the violence, but the regime and its forces are the mainspring of the killing.

As a result, the Annan plan will likely be rendered meaningless by increasing casualties, and the observers withdrawn. Once that happens, the regime will almost certainly escalate its offensive operations, resulting in even greater casualties. The names of other massacres will probably be added to that of Houla.

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