

A Willingness to Kill: Repression in Syria

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Brief Analysis

The Asad regime's actions against protestors appear to fit the definition of war crimes.

Extrême violence is at the heart of the Asad regime's response to popular protests in Syria. Its use against the population is brutal, systematic, and lethal. The regime is willfully attacking unarmed people with forces, tactics, and weapons meant to be employed on a modern battlefield -- methods that fit the definition of war crimes. Of the resistance efforts targeting the regime, only a small component appears to be armed.

Instruments of Repression

The regime has many instruments of repression available through its security apparatus, beginning with the police forces -- both uniformed and plainclothes -- that have been employed to break up demonstrations and make arrests. But two other instruments are even more powerful: the intelligence and security services, and the army.

The intelligence and security services include the General Security Directorate, Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, and Political Security Directorate. These entities, represented in virtually every Syrian village, town, and city, are employed directly against the political opposition and demonstrators, engaging in arrests and shootings alike. It appears that Military Intelligence and Air Force Intelligence have been particularly active agents of repression. In March and April of this year, for example, Military Intelligence was reportedly involved in repression operations in Deraa, and in July, killings by Military Intelligence personnel in Dayr al-Zawr contributed to the outbreak of serious demonstrations in that city. Also in July, Air Force Intelligence agents were reportedly involved in arrests in Homs and Dumair. Leaders of these organizations either belong to or are close to the regime's inner circle.

As for the Syrian army, nine of its divisions (or components of divisions) have been identified, at least tentatively, as having taken part in repression operations. These include the Presidential Guard Division, 4th Armored Division, 14th and 15th Special Forces divisions, and the 5th, 7th, 9th, 11th, and 18th divisions. Of these, the 4th Armored

Division and 11th Division were reportedly involved in the recent operations in Hama. Operational advantages offered by the army include readily available units garrisoned near major urban areas. In addition, the army's strategic mobility allows certain elements to be deployed over considerable distances to deal with unrest. Army troops also can be dispatched in substantial numbers to assist local security forces. But perhaps most important is the massive firepower that the army brings to the streets, overwhelming any possible response by unarmed demonstrators. Adding to the army's might, in a recent development, is that of the Syrian navy. This past weekend, the navy was reportedly employed to support security services and army units in their repression operations in Latakia, marking the regime's first use of naval units.

Another tool for breaking up demonstrations, terrorizing populations, and supporting the security forces is the shabbiha, or pro-regime thugs. These work directly with security forces and have been used, for instance, to take over hospitals and deny medical attention to wounded demonstrators as well as other innocent civilians.

All these groups operate together, giving the Asad regime a formidable apparatus of repression. Given the army's participation with heavy combat forces, the scenario may be seen as constituting a mechanization of repression.

Tactical Actions

The Syrian regime engages in repression through a number of tactics, with some intended to snuff out opposition before it manifests itself publicly and others targeting overt acts of opposition, primarily mass demonstrations. In situations in which the government is losing control of a city, as in Dayr al-Zawr in July, or has lost control, as in Hama prior to Ramadan, the full panoply of tactics is unleashed.

In deterring and suppressing opposition activities, the security services threaten individuals, families, and whole communities. Such threats are backed up by arrests of opposition leaders and those involved in demonstrations based on lists of names compiled by the security services. As for the arrests, groups can be detained en masse or the security services can take part in clandestine or targeted actions. Reports of torture against opposition leaders and members have been widespread, with cases documented by human rights organizations. And at largely peaceful demonstrations, the Syrian police employ riot control tactics, including the use of water cannons, batons, tear gas, weapons both into the air and directly into crowds to disperse demonstrators.

The Syrian military has its own set of tactics for repression operations, as follows (organized from least to most violent):

- Isolation of areas where anti-government disturbances have arisen or are occurring. Such areas range from neighborhoods to entire cities, with the military surrounding these entities, severing communications and services, and preventing entry and exit. Such actions are often the prelude to a direct assault.
- Compartmentalization of areas of unrest. Dividing and, as noted before, isolating problem areas help prime them to be more easily raided or assaulted.
- Random, directed, and sustained shooting, using tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and heavy anti-aircraft weapons. These acts are aimed at terrorizing the population and driving people off the streets.
- Use of armed personnel (police, security services, army troops, thugs) on the streets and from high points such as rooftops and water towers to fire on demonstrators and other civilians.
- Raids by heavy combat forces, including forcible entry into the targeted area. Such actions are accompanied by arrests, terrorizing of the population, and seizing of key points, followed by withdrawal, as has been seen in Homs, Dayr al-Zawr, and in the suburbs of Damascus.
- Assault and occupation of areas of unrest. Such actions feature significant reliance on direct gunfire by heavy weapons, crew-served weapons, and small arms, and the seizure of key points such as bridges, road junctions,

hospitals, and government buildings. These are full-scale military operations in terms of planning and execution, scale of forces, and scheme of maneuver. Such an operation occurred recently in Hama and appears to be underway in Latakia.

Military operations are conducted in conjunction with intelligence services, police, and irregular elements with the aim of driving political opposition off the streets, reasserting regime control, killing or arresting opposition figures, and breaking the will of the demonstrators.

The Regime's "Self-Defense" Narrative

The regime justifies its operations with claims of "self-defense," arguing that the state and its forces are under attack by armed bands of terrorists and saboteurs bent on disrupting life, attacking property, and killing government personnel. The deaths of security personnel are occasionally reported, with media coverage given to funerals for those killed "defending" the state. Evidence, such as videos of dead soldiers, casualty counts, and testimony by security personnel, has been provided to back up government claims. While casualties have almost certainly occurred among security service personnel since the uprising began in March -- and the toll to regime operatives will likely rise if the opposition turns violent -- the principal casualties in the current struggle have been members of the opposition, as indicated by overwhelming evidence from videos, eyewitnesses, simple observation, and military logic (i.e., who has the heavy weapons and is using them heavily).

Implications and Conclusions

Not only is the Asad regime willing to kill broadly, heavily, and frequently, but its acts of violence against the Syrian people have been directed, organized, controlled, and methodical. The regime's repression operations and implementing tactics demonstrate a totalitarian apparatus at work. The scale and scope of operations, the participation of multiple agencies of the Syrian government, and the planning, command, and logistics efforts involved all indicate that the operations are guided, coordinated, and executed by the highest levels of the regime. Furthermore, the violence is neither indiscriminate nor the consequence of "mistakes" by security forces, as sometimes claimed by the regime. It is purposeful and intentionally lethal, with the goal of crushing dissent directed at the regime.

Some regime elements may be concerned about the effects of violence on external opinion and unit loyalty, with such sentiments possibly reining in the most extravagant forms of violence, such as airstrikes and artillery fire. But effectively, the regime has few limits on its ability to kill people. For the United States and other countries, the regime's murderous behavior should add to existing pressure to act quickly and strongly to stop the bloodshed.

Jeffrey White is a defense fellow at The Washington Institute, specializing in military and security affairs. ❖

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