

Syrian Army Shows Growing Signs of Strain

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Brief Analysis

Although the Syrian army has shown signs of fraying for some time, the potential for more serious fissures is beginning to emerge.

As Ramadan commences, the Syrian government is stepping up efforts to suppress unrest, with special emphasis on the cities of Hama and Dayr al-Zawr. The regime has faced serious challenges in these areas and reportedly killed tens of people there during operations over the weekend and into today. These and other ongoing internal security efforts are placing serious strain on its forces, particularly the army.

Regime Response

The government's response to the demonstrations since March has involved isolating areas of disturbance; arresting protestors, movement leaders, and uninvolved civilians; terrorizing the population with "disappearances" and shootings; conducting raids against centers of resistance; and, when these measures have proven insufficient, carrying out assaults with tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and helicopters. At the core of these tactics has been a willingness to use major violence against largely peaceful and unarmed demonstrators. This weekend's operations in Hama and Dayr al-Zawr are typical of this pattern.

Yet the demonstrations are widespread, persistent, and growing in size, forcing the regime to conduct a "360 degree defense." No area of the country seems secure except perhaps the Alawi heartland in the northwest. With the important exception of Aleppo -- Syria's second-largest city, which has seen only isolated protests -- disturbances have erupted in more than fifty localities so far, including Homs, Latakia, Deraa, Qamishli, and Abu Kamal. Prior to this weekend, Hama had essentially passed out of government control and Dayr al-Zawr threatened to do the same. Even in Damascus, the center of regime power, recurring demonstrations and security operations have been reported in neighborhoods and suburbs.

The opposition's center of gravity is increasingly moving to the cities, which means regime forces must operate in more complex environments. Subduing restive urban populations is a demanding and troop-intensive task, one that

will become more difficult as demonstrations grow in size and as protestors or defectors take up arms. More forces will be required, and without adequate training, they are more likely to resort to violence early. More opportunities for violent, casualty-producing incidents will emerge as well. This was reportedly the case in Hama on Sunday, as tanks and infantry fighting vehicles encountered protestors armed with sticks and stones.

The regime is also increasingly concerned about the borders, as it seeks to prevent refugees from leaving Syria and arms and opposition personnel from entering. The flow of refugees into Turkey has been an acute embarrassment to Damascus, and both Lebanon and Iraq are potential sources of arms and fighters. The regime has moved swiftly to solidify control on this front, but the borders are long, porous, and historically prone to smuggling and other unsanctioned activity.

The government must also guard against sabotage of national infrastructure. The past few weeks have seen several attacks on oil facilities and one train derailment, all of undetermined origin. If such incidents mount in numbers and seriousness, the regime will have to stretch its forces even thinner to protect key facilities.

Signs of Strain

The challenging and dynamic environment that the Syrian army is caught up in has begun to produce serious signs of strain in its capacity, loyalty, and cohesion. So far, the regime has retained the allegiance of its large and formidable internal security apparatus, giving it considerable but not limitless security resources on which to draw. These resources include the General Intelligence Directorate, Military Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, the Political Security Directorate, the National Security Bureau, the Baath Party security apparatus, riot police, and the armed plainclothes shabbiha. In addition, some elite army components -- namely, the Republican Guard, the 4th Armored Division, and the 14th and 15th Special Forces Divisions -- have remained strongly loyal.

These organizations give the regime a security presence through the country, but their capabilities vary, and the scope and duration of the requirements currently being placed on them are unprecedented. Signs of strain in capacity include the temporary loss of control over Hama, Syria's third-largest city, as well as near loss of control in Dayr al-Zawr and disputed control in Homs, Latakia, Deraa, and other areas. The security forces have not been able to permanently secure any area and have had to shuttle personnel from one flashpoint to another, sometimes over considerable distances. As disturbances have spread, additional divisions and brigades have been pulled into the struggle.

In general, the government still seems reluctant to order regular army units to fire on demonstrators, though it has done so in some cases where regime protection forces were inadequate. This was apparently the case in Dayr al-Zawr and Abu Kamal in eastern Syria, producing breakdowns in loyalty and cohesion among the army units so ordered.

Indeed, the loyalty of the army, one of the regime's pillars, is increasingly in doubt. As a conscript force in which largely Alawite officers lead largely Sunni soldiers, the army has traditionally been marked by a difficult relationship between officers and enlisted personnel, making it ill suited for the internal security missions it is now being given. There are signs that army units are increasingly identifying with protestors, especially where security forces are employing violence against unarmed demonstrators. The 5th Division showed signs of such problems as early as April in Deraa, and more cases have been reported since, including clashes between army personnel and regime security forces in Jisr al-Shughour, Homs, Abu Kamal, and Dayr al-Zawr.

Other reported problems include the formation of a so-called "Free Syrian Army" under a former colonel, the defection of a brigadier general at the Homs military academy, the killing of at least one colonel for refusal to obey orders, and the continuing desertion of junior officers and enlisted men. These reports cannot be confirmed, and the exact scale of desertions is difficult to determine. Yet current trends suggest that the army's loyalty and cohesion are

not just fraying, but beginning to tear.

Although the regime's forces are not defeated and the army's potential tears may prove to be small, the dynamics for greater problems are in place. Given the widespread nature of the disturbances, the regime cannot mass personnel in more than a few places. The continuing pressure of the demonstrations, which are liable to swell during Ramadan, will stretch the army still thinner, with more defections likely given the regime's increasingly violent tactics. As the army becomes less reliable, strain will increase on the regime protection forces, stretching them further and tiring them faster. Clashes within army units and between army and security forces may increase as well. And escalating regime violence will likely provoke a more violent response over time, fueled by armed defectors.

Conclusion

Repression alone is not working for the regime. Damascus does not have a viable political formula for swaying the protestors, much less ending the turmoil. Given the regime's track record, the opposition no longer believes its promises of a better future. The most likely outcome, then, is escalating conflict with increasing violence.

In particular, the opposition will likely take on an increasingly armed aspect in the face of brutal repression, and as growing numbers of soldiers defect and join its ranks. Although the demonstrators have shown remarkable forbearance so far, few people will allow themselves to be shot down with impunity indefinitely -- some protestors will take up arms. And the reported violence between army personnel (whether individuals or units) and regime protection forces will likely expand rather than decline as the government employs greater violence and asks the army to participate more extensively. Taken together, these prospects augur a much more violent future for Syria and its people.

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

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