

Syria's Army Is Key to the Country's Future

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Brief Analysis

If current trends persist in Syria, the regime may be forced to deploy army units that are unable or unwilling to continue the brutal crackdown.

The Syrian armed forces have long played a critical role in propping up the Asad regime. In 1970, they helped Hafez al-Asad assume power, and from 1979 to 1982, they suppressed a major bout of anti-regime violence. They will be similarly essential if Damascus hopes to weather the current wave of protests.

So far the regime has relied primarily on select, largely Alawite security forces and regime protection units for violent suppression actions. These units have functioned as "fire brigades," rushing from one hot spot to another. Regular army units appear to have played a more limited supporting role -- the army's sectarian makeup more closely reflects that of the general population, so the regime is likely concerned about its willingness to use lethal force against civilians.

Given that the security and regime-protection forces have been unable to suppress the demonstrations and mounting civil resistance, the regular army may eventually be called on to play a greater role. This scenario raises a number of questions. Would army units obey orders to use violence against demonstrators, or would they fracture, leading to large-scale defections and/or civil war? Alternatively, would the army disintegrate in the face of a growing, increasingly confident popular opposition movement?

The Regime's Response Thus Far

The popular uprising began on March 18, inspired by the unrest in Tunisia and Egypt. The regime reacted harshly

to the protests from the start, spurring further acts of largely peaceful popular resistance. The clashes gradually spread across the country, encompassing both rural and urban areas -- though Damascus and Aleppo, Syria's two largest cities, have been substantially less affected. As the government toughened its stance, the demonstrators' demands escalated from calls for political reform to calls for regime change.

At the tactical level, the government's approach evolved as resistance spread. In the early stages, the regime deployed police along with the four main components of the security forces (i.e., Military Intelligence, General Intelligence, Air Force Intelligence, and Political Security). These forces used tear gas and live ammunition, resulting in numerous fatalities and mass arrests. It tried to isolate, intimidate, and terrorize the opposition, while at the same time offering token conciliatory gestures such as firing the mayor of Deraa as a scapegoat, increasing government salaries, and promising to consider repeal or revocation of the emergency law. By the end of March, the government was deploying regime-protection and regular army units as reinforcements, resulting in further civilian casualties. Cities in which resistance was prominent (e.g., Deraa and Latakia) were sealed off by security forces and regular army units and subsequently stormed by these security forces and regime-protection units. It is not clear what, if any, role regular army units played in the actual assaults.

As protests spread, the regime offered additional blandishments such as releasing political prisoners, sacking unpopular officials, and promising reform. And when violence and mass arrests were deemed ineffective in certain towns and cities, the regime would sometimes withdraw its forces in an attempt to reduce or contain the bloodshed.

Beginning in late April, Damascus appeared to adopt a more aggressive approach, conducting a rolling campaign targeting southern and western cities that were scenes of major unrest. This effort began in Deraa, and then moved on to Homs, Baniyas, Hama, and Talkalakh, producing significant refugee flows into Lebanon. Throughout the campaign, the regime used tanks, infantry fighting vehicles, and artillery to overcome any resistance.

By early June, security forces had withdrawn from some cities, including Hama. They had then redeployed northward to Jisr al-Shughour following the death of scores of government troops there, possibly in clashes with soldiers who had defected to the opposition or with armed insurgents. The regime employed helicopter gunships in this campaign, reportedly for the first time since the uprising had begun. The fighting produced significant refugee flows into Turkey. By early July, Jisr al-Shughour had been pacified to some degree, and security forces and regime-protection units once again surrounded Hama and entered parts of it to intimidate the population and arrest dissidents.

Past Lessons, Current Challenges

The regime's success in dealing with the 1979-1982 uprising was facilitated by the largely localized nature of the opposition, the army's ability to isolate anti-regime hotspots (Aleppo in 1980, Hama in 1982), and the utter ruthlessness with which Damascus pursued and crushed the resistance. Given the sporadic nature of opposition activities at the time, the relatively small number of units deployed by the regime were sufficient for the task. These included the praetorian 569th Division/Defense Companies, the regular army's 3rd Armored Division and 47th Independent Mechanized Brigade, several special forces regiments, and pro-regime militias called the "Fursan."

None of these conditions obtains in the current situation. Today's opposition is broad-based, lacks recognizable leaders (at least at the local level), and has been able to sustain its activities. The regime's response has vacillated between conciliatory gestures that lack credibility and lethal force sufficient to inflame the opposition but not quash the unrest (except, perhaps, in towns such as Talkalakh and Jisr al-Shughour, where much of the population has fled the country). "Hama Rules" -- the scorched-earth tactics employed to put down the 1982 Muslim Brotherhood uprising in that town, killing more than 10,000 civilians -- cannot be applied in 2011 without risking a massive international response, which Damascus wants to avoid.

Moreover, the regime lacks sufficient numbers of reliable (largely Alawite) units to confidently secure broad areas, and it seems reluctant to use regular army units for this task, due to doubts about their reliability. As a result, it has had to rely on rolling campaigns to stamp out unrest in one area, and when units then move on, demonstrations often reignite

Despite these limitations, the regime has employed the same template used in 1979-1982, dealing with the unrest by relying on largely Alawite units that have regime protection as their primary or secondary mission. These reportedly include elements of the regime's premier praetorian unit, the Republican Guard Division (though much of this unit has probably remained in the capital area to defend against a potential coup), along with the security forces, key regular army units such as the 4th Armored Division and elements of the 14th Special Forces Division, and pro-regime militias called the shabbiha.

The regime is likely using regular army divisions in primarily supporting roles such as to help cordon off centers of resistance and control the border. Although it reportedly attempted to use elements of the 5th Division in the siege and assault on Deraa, that led to desertions, insubordination, and clashes with regime loyalists. Moreover, most regular army units have not been trained or equipped for internal security missions and crowd control (although the regime-protection units may not have much training in this regard either).

Despite its limited role, the army has shown increasing signs of strain. Some personnel have refused to shoot protestors and subsequently deserted, perhaps contributing to the mutinies and incidents of intra- and inter-unit conflict that reportedly occurred around Deraa and Jisr al-Shughour. Nevertheless, both the regime-protection forces and regular army units that have been tested so far have held together for the most part, remaining responsive to orders.

Should regular army or regime-protection units begin to crack, several indicators would stand out, including reports of desertion, insubordination, or mutiny by large numbers of soldiers. More serious signs would include desertion or insubordination by field- or flag-grade officers, mutinies by entire units, and significant clashes within or between units. Such signs would most likely show up within regular army units first. And if the units that the regime is depending on most began to reduce their operational tempo or withdraw from operations, that would be an indicator that they were wearing down.

Iranian Advice and Assistance

Tehran has apparently counseled the Asad regime and transferred riot-control equipment and internet surveillance technology to Syria. And some reports contend that Hizballah and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps personnel have become directly involved in repressive actions within Syria.

Given the Iranian regime's success in putting down the unrest that followed the June 2009 presidential election, Tehran is apparently convinced that it has mastered the methods for dealing with such challenges. These methods include

- resolute action in the form of a massive show of force;
- proper training and equipment;
- restraint in the use of live fire, to minimize casualties that might energize the opposition;
- mass arrests followed by the maltreatment and mass release of detainees, to cow the population into submission;
- show trials of key opposition figures, to demoralize their followers; and
- control of the internet, either using it to identify and arrest activists or temporarily blocking it to prevent the opposition from organizing.

Yet the Asad regime has not applied many of these lessons. Although it has effectively exploited the internet to identify activists and carry out mass arrests, its forces lack the training, equipment, and numbers needed to deal effectively with the uprising. Moreover, it has vacillated in its dealings with the opposition, while the tactics employed by the army and security forces have frequently exacerbated the situation.

Outlook

The Syrian government's defiance of much of the country's population, along with the general thrust of developments elsewhere in the region, give a too easy impression that the Asad regime is running against the tide of history. In fact, whether or not it will survive depends on a multitude of factors, including the opposition's endurance and the cohesion and resilience of the regime-protection and regular army units that have borne the brunt of responsibility for dealing with the unrest.

For its part, the regime must hold its units together in the face of stress and fatigue generated by continuous operations. That will not be easy given that the unrest is already approaching its fourth month and shows no signs of abating. The continuing crisis also raises the possibility of foreign humanitarian intervention -- whether by Turkey or others -- which could further increase the challenge to the regime.

Under these circumstances, several scenarios could unfold depending on the conduct of Syria's army and regime protection units:

- Key commanders, despairing of their prospects against growing popular opposition, could abandon the fight and leave the regime and its supporters to cut a deal with the opposition, melt away, or fight to the death.
- Regular army units, exploiting the overcommitment of key regime protection units, could mount a coup against Asad. This might fail, however, perhaps precipitating a civil war.
- Syria could descend into civil war as Alawite-Sunni hostilities mount, the opposition increasingly resorts to violence, and the military fractures along sectarian lines.

These scenarios will increase in likelihood if current trends prevail. As the situation stands now, the opposition seems to be gaining strength, the regime has few additional resources to call on and lacks the flexibility to adapt, and strains on the security forces and military are only increasing with the passage of time.

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