

# Friday demonstrations in Syria met with violent repression

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Syrian security forces killed at least 30 people in a crackdown centred in the central city of Homs and in Hama Friday following demonstrations and marches after midday prayers.

Friday has become the main day of protests in Syria, where meetings and demonstrations without government approval are illegal.

The Facebook site Syrian Revolution 2011, which is backed by the Muslim Brotherhood and religious forces in Saudi Arabia, had called for rallies throughout the country as a “Day of Defiance”. But Friday’s demonstrations appear to have been smaller and less widespread than previously, coming in the wake of the brutal pre-emptive clampdown by the regime of President Bashar al-Assad, designed to stop the unrest from spreading.

On Thursday, the government had ordered troops to be deployed in the Damascus suburbs of Saqba and Douma and in the town of Tel, north of the capital. Soldiers arrested scores of people in house-to-house raids in Tel and Saqba, the scenes of angry protests last week. These measures were aimed at preventing demonstrators from converging on Damascus city centre.

There was also a heavy military presence in Homs, Rastan and Baniyas, where there were violent clashes in demonstrations earlier in the week. The Assad regime claims it was facing “an armed rebellion staged by armed groups affiliated with Salafi organisations, especially in the cities of Homs and Baniyas.”

A witness said that security forces had cordoned off Douma, a suburb of Damascus where there have been armed anti-government protests, to prevent anyone from entering or leaving.

In the event, on Friday, several hundred people rallied in the capital outside the al-Hassan mosque in Midan, near the centre of the city, chanting, “The people want the downfall of the regime” and “To heaven we go, one million martyrs”. Security forces responded with tear gas

and live ammunition.

A number of people were arrested including Riad Seif, a prominent businessman, former legislator and opposition leader, who has spent much of the last 10 years in jail for opposing the Assad regime.

There were also protests in Saqba and Tal, where there were reports of live ammunition.

In the coastal city of Baniyas, there were reports that 5,000 people carrying olive branches and Syrian flags were calling for regime change. There were also protests in the Kurdish northeast of the country, including in Qamishli and the small town of Anuda, where there was a rally with people chanting, “The Syrian people are one” and “Freedom, freedom, peaceful, peaceful”.

On Thursday, the government announced that it would “gradually” pull its troops out of the southern city of Dara’a, where armed protests erupted after the detention of 15 schoolchildren for daubing anti-regime graffiti. A military spokesman said that the army had completed its mission to “chase elements of terrorist groups...and to restore security, peace and stability”.

State television showed what it said were confessions of terrorists arrested in the city and caches of weapons it said were seized. The government has insisted that the anti-government protesters were not peaceful demonstrators calling for reforms, but armed religious insurgents with overseas sponsors that sought to create sectarian strife.

While it was unclear when this pullout would take place, the situation in Dara’a has eased, with utilities and telecommunications restored. Supplies are now getting through, and the government has allowed the International Committee of the Red Cross to send in a medical team with humanitarian goods and medical supplies.

But the heavy presence of the military, plus the scores of people killed and the hundreds of arrests there over the last seven weeks served to deter any further demonstrations on Friday.

Syria is facing continuing external pressure, which appears to be aimed at changing Assad's foreign policy rather than removing his regime as in the case of Libya. Syria and Libya are the only two Mediterranean states that have not been brought into the NATO sphere of influence.

Behind this is Washington and Israel's unspoken, but widely understood, demand that Damascus terminate its close relationship with Tehran. A further objective is to forestall China's entry into the eastern Mediterranean, where oil and gas reserves have been discovered. Syria's port of Tartous is one of Russia's only two overseas naval bases. The implicit promise is that they will not intervene if Damascus changes course.

The Obama administration has stopped short of calling for Assad to go. Mark Toner, spokesman for the State Department, said, "We abhor the violence there," and that the US would continue to "press Assad's regime to desist in its violent behaviour".

Last month, the White House ordered new and more stringent sanctions against Syria, albeit largely symbolic as the US has little trade with Syria, and called on the European powers to follow suit.

On Friday, the European Union, led by France, which has extensive interests in Syria, and Britain, which is home to a number of Syrian exiles, agreed on an asset freeze and travel restrictions against 14 leading Syrian officials responsible for crushing anti-government protests. It is not clear if the list includes Assad himself. This follows last weeks' agreement to ban the sale of arms and equipment to Syria that could be used against protestors.

The EU has also withdrawn its long-stalled partnership agreement with Syria. The EU provides the Assad regime with €210 million in annual assistance. It is discussing whether to suspend €1.3 billion in investment from the European Investment Bank that includes funding for power plants and other infrastructure, and other punitive economic measures.

There has also been increasing pressure from Turkey, one of Syria's closest allies in the region. Turkey's intelligence chief went to Damascus to urge Assad to make concessions to end the uprising. Even more importantly, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, the Turkish Prime Minister, issued a statement saying that if al-Assad did not implement reforms, "he may be overthrown in the same manner as other totalitarian rulers who were toppled by popular uprisings in other parts of the Middle East" this year. This follows similar comments by Israel's

defence minister, Ehud Barak, last week.

The Assad regime is also facing pressure on the economic front. The UN Development Programme announced that it was suspending assistance to Syria for the next five years, while Qatari utilities companies cancelled an agreement to build and operate two power stations in Syria, which is desperately short of electricity, with power cuts even in central Damascus a frequent occurrence.

Damascus was forced to launch a string of measures to curb the flight of foreign currency triggered by the unrest. According to the Union of Arab Banks, up to 8 percent of deposits in Syrian bank accounts had been converted into US dollars.

The central bank raised interest rates by 2 percent to 9 percent in order to shore up the Syrian pound and is permitting for the first time savings in dollars and euros. It also lowered the banks' cash reserve ratio from 10 percent to 5, and cut retail dollar withdrawals from 10,000 to 5,000.

These measures follow the downturn in Syria's economy, largely due to the fall in tourism—May is the peak season—which accounts for 13 percent of jobs. The Syrian pound has fallen by 10 percent in the black market, and the Damascus Stock Exchange by 20 percent in the past six weeks. The International Monetary Fund has downgraded Syria's economic growth rate from 5.5 percent to 3 percent this year. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development lowered Syria's credit risk rating by one notch to 7, the lowest.



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