

Syrian regime continues to use lethal force against protests

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President Bashar al-Assad's Ba'athist regime persisted in its lethal crackdown on all dissent over the weekend, killing six people on Friday and a further four on Saturday, despite promising that troops would not fire on protesters.

While the death toll was lower than on previous Fridays—reportedly 100 three weeks ago, 70 two weeks ago and 22 last week—the protests too were fewer and smaller. This follows the regime's military clampdown on the cities of Hama and Homs, the coastal town of Baniyas and the southern city of Dera'a.

Nineteen people were killed earlier in the week, and the security forces made hundreds of house-to-house raids, searching for weapons and arresting people. Amnesty International said it had firsthand reports of torture and beatings of detainees.

This was aimed, in part at least, at intimidating people from joining protests after prayers on Friday and on Saturday. Some people were released after signing pledges not to protest further, and rearrested later.

Security forces also occupied some mosques and the central squares in towns and cities and blocked off major roads in key flashpoints around the country in order to stop protesters from gathering in central locations. In most places, they dispersed demonstrations using batons, tear gas and water cannon.

Four people were killed on Friday in Homs, where five small protests took place despite the strong military presence in the city, which had been shelled by tanks earlier in the week. On Wednesday, a fierce gun battle had left at least 11 people dead, including two soldiers.

Protestors chanted, "O Bashar, your turn has come, O Bashar, leave, leave." At first, the troops fired into the air to disperse the crowds, but when this failed they shot directly into the crowd.

This provoked a large turnout of 8,000 people for the funeral procession on Saturday for one of those killed,

with mourners calling for an end to the military blockade of Homs, Baniyas and Dera'a.

There were small protests in Zahra, Mezzeh, Muhajirin, Barzeh, al-Qaboun and Saqba, suburbs in or near Damascus. In al-Qaboun, an impoverished neighbourhood in the north of the city, demonstrators chanted, "We want the overthrow of the regime." After clashes broke out with pro-government supporters, plainclothes security forces fired on the antigovernment protestors, killing two people.

Five thousand demonstrators took to the streets of the mainly Kurdish town of Qamishli in the northeast of the country, with similar numbers in the neighbouring towns of Amouda and Derbasiyeh.

In the central city of Hama, which troops had occupied on Thursday, protestors carried banners calling for freedom, with some calling for the downfall of the regime.

There were demonstrations in and around Dera'a after Friday prayers, despite the military presence, and one person was killed in a village nearby.

On Saturday, four people were killed, 19 were injured and hundreds arrested in Tall Kalakh, a town in western Syria in the Homs province near the Lebanese border, after troops and dozens of tanks entered the town and surrounding villages, which have been local flashpoints.

Hundreds of people crossed the border into Lebanon to escape the violence. Over the last few weeks, thousands of Syrians have sought refuge in Lebanon.

The troops had moved in early Saturday morning after protestors, including those who had resigned from the ruling Ba'ath party, called for the fall of the regime on Friday.

State TV has repeatedly claimed that the protests are the work of foreign terrorists, armed gangs and Salafi Muslims bent on sedition. While estimates of the numbers killed vary between about 600 and 1,000, the government

provides no overall numbers. It states that at least 100 military and security personnel have been killed, and that this vindicates its claims of an armed uprising.

Some of the activist groups organised on social media web sites acknowledge that some protestors are armed. The region is awash with weapons coming in from Iraq and Lebanon, where the price of light and medium weapons and ammunition has shot up in the last two months.

The Assad regime is incapable of meeting the social and economic needs of the Syrian people, 30 percent of whom live on less than \$2 a day, and is determined to stay in power.

Just last week, Rami Makhlouf, the billionaire cousin of Assad whose corrupt dealings have been the target of some of the unrest, gave an interview to the *New York Times* saying that, if need be, the regime would fight on to the end. He said, “We will not go out, leave on our boat, go gambling, you know. We will sit here. We call it a fight until the end.”

The government believes that it is managing to reassert control, particularly as the protests in the key cities of Damascus and Aleppo have as yet been small. It has announced that it is withdrawing the army from Dera’a and Baniyas, although residents say that troops are still there.

In a move aimed at appeasing some of the regime’s opponents and dividing them from angry workers and youth struggling to make ends meet, Information Minister Adnan Hassan Mahmoud said there would be a “national and comprehensive dialogue” about the unrest in all provinces next week. Assad would meet “popular delegations” from different parts of the country to hear their views, he said, although the makeup of these “popular delegations” was unclear.

Thus far, at least, Assad’s chief advisor, Buthaina Shaaban, has met with discredited opposition forces such as Michel Kilo and other people associated with the Washington-backed Damascus Declaration group.

Assad faces pressure from the imperialist powers, concerned at the implications of the regime’s crisis under conditions of increasingly bitter social protest and instability across the region. These fears are the Assad regime’s trump card and it is playing it for all its worth. As Makhlouf warned the *New York Times*, “They should know when we suffer, we will not suffer alone.”

Currently, the major powers are seeking to utilise the unrest to force Damascus to sever or curtail its relations with Tehran and its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon,

Hamas in Palestine and opponents of the US-backed regime in Iraq as the price for staying in power.

The French foreign minister, Alain Juppe, blamed Assad for the deadly repression. France, the former colonial power in Syria and one its major trading partners, has issued a warning against all travel to Syria, a move calculated to increase the economic pressure on the country, since most of the tourists and language students upon whom Syria depends for jobs and foreign currency come from France.

France and Britain are pushing the European Union to impose tougher sanctions against the regime, including against Assad himself.

A sign of the hardening of Washington’s line is its lobbying, along with some of the European powers, of the United Nations nuclear watchdog to formally accuse Damascus of secret plans to build a nuclear reactor. This could lead to a UN Security Council motion of censure and possibly sanctions if Syria fails to provide the International Atomic Energy Authority (IAEA) with information about its nuclear activities, including the facilities near Deir al-Zour, bombed by Israel in 2007.

Damascus has repeatedly denied charges that it was building a secret nuclear plant there.

With Russia, China and other countries refusing to agree to UN action against Syria, the IAEA is increasingly being seen as another medium for exerting pressure on Damascus. One European official familiar with these discussions told the *Wall Street Journal*, “We’re looking to increasingly isolate Assad. The IAEA is one of the routes.”

The *Journal* quoted a European official as saying, “We used to think we could break Syria’s relationship with Iran through diplomacy. Now we’ll need to do so through pressure.”



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