

Syrian regime intensifies repression as protests mount

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The besieged regime of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has threatened to carry out a military crackdown against the town of Jisr al-Shughour in the northwest of the country near the Turkish border, after claiming Monday that “armed gangs” killed 120 members of the security forces there over the weekend.

The government statement on the events in the impoverished province of Idlib followed a new and expanded wave of anti-regime protests last week, culminating, according to reports, in 200 separate demonstrations on Friday. These included a march involving tens of thousands in Hama, the site of a bloody assault on Islamists carried out in 1982 by the current president's father, Hafez al-Assad, which is believed to have killed between 10,000 and 40,000 people.

Jisr al-Shughour, a Sunni town in a region that includes Christian and Alawite Muslim villages, (Assad and the leadership of the ruling Baath Party are mainly Alawites), was, like Hama, a center of the Muslim Brotherhood in the 1970s and was itself subjected to military attack in 1980.

The regime has responded to the escalation of protests, which began in mid-March in the southern town of Daraa, with intensified repression. It has increasingly unleashed helicopters and machine gun-mounted armored vehicles against largely peaceful demonstrators. Last week, it reportedly killed at least 70 protesters in Rastan and on Friday it opened fire on demonstrators in Hama, killing scores of people.

After a general strike shut down Hama on Saturday, the government, without explanation, pulled its military forces back from that city.

Amnesty International said that 120 civilians were killed in all over the weekend.

The events in Jisr al-Shughour are murky, in part

because the regime has enforced tight censorship on the international press, but it is known that snipers perched on rooftops killed dozens of people participating in a funeral march Saturday for protesters shot over the previous days. Amnesty International claims it has the names of 54 people shot dead by security forces in the town over the weekend.

On Monday, Syrian state television said 120 security personnel were killed by “armed gangs,” including 80 at the town's security headquarters. Syria's *al-Watan* newspaper said a “security operation” would be launched in Jisr al-Shughur.

Interior Minister Mohammed Ibrahim al-Shaar warned that the authorities would retaliate. “The state will act firmly, with force and in line with the law. It will not stay arms folded in the face of armed attacks on the security of the homeland,” Shaar declared in a statement read on television.

Anti-regime activists, however, claim that the deaths of police and soldiers were the result of a mutiny by some soldiers who refused to fire on protesters. According to their accounts, Syrian officers ordered soldiers and police who refused to fire into the crowd to be shot. There are also reports of more widespread fighting between different groups of soldiers.

Other accounts cite residents who say some local opponents of the regime have armed themselves and fired back at troops and police after days of bloody repression. The *Washington Post* on Tuesday quoted a person identified only as a “witness” who, according to the newspaper, said that “several Syrian soldiers had been killed by protesters who took up arms to defend themselves against an onslaught of attacks by tanks and warplanes. He said the killings had taken place Sunday, when Syrian troops staged a major offensive against the town, which was repelled by armed protesters.”

The newspaper went on to quote the witness as saying: “We do not deny shooting back, but you must know that we only shot back after they started killing us... We killed some. The others were shot in the back for trying to defect... We shot and killed some. But not 80. They killed many more than we did.”

There are also reports that the town's residents have largely fled in advance of an expected government assault. Many have reportedly sought to cross over into Turkey, some 20 miles distant.

An alleged army deserter, who identified himself as Lt. Abdul Razak Tlass, appeared on the Al Jazeera television network Monday night and denied that the regime was fighting armed groups. The officer, believed to be from the extended family of former defense minister Mustafa Tlass, who was one of the closest allies of Hafez Assad, called on army officers to stand with the protesters.

Whatever the precise details of the events in Jisr al-Shughour, there is no doubt that a significant number of government security forces were killed, suggesting that Assad's grip on power may be weakening.

The evident upsurge in popular protests coincides with increased pressure on the regime by the United States and other imperialist powers. French President Nikolas Sarkozy is leading the drive for a United Nations Security Council resolution condemning the regime's repressive tactics, and a vote could come as early as this week. Both China and Russia, permanent Security Council members who wield veto power over resolutions, have up to now opposed such a move, but the resolution being formulated will stop short of demanding Assad's resignation.

On Tuesday, British Foreign Secretary William Hague told parliament that the European Union was considering escalating sanctions against Syria. He said as well that the UK was working for a resolution by the UN Security Council.

Washington has up to now resisted adopting a policy of regime-change in Syria. Prior to the revolutionary events in the beginning of the year in Tunisia and Egypt, the US had adopted a more conciliatory posture toward the Assad regime, seeking to break it away from Iran and Iranian-supported forces such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza.

The Obama administration is also concerned about the destabilizing implications of a sudden end to the

40-year Baathist regime in Syria. Its orientation since the outbreak of anti-Assad protest in March seems to have been to use them to force the regime to accede to its demands, rather than to bring it down.

In recent days, however, the US has edged closer to a policy of regime-change. Last Thursday, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton told a press conference in Washington, “The legitimacy that is necessary for anyone to expect change to occur under this current government is, if not gone, nearly run out.”

Two days previously, Clinton dismissed Assad's pledges to undertake reforms and described his regime's position as "less tenable" every day. She noted that President Obama had given Assad the alternative to lead a transition or “get out of the way.”

“Every day that goes by,” she declared, “the choice is made by default.”

These remarks coincided with a conference of mostly exiled Syrian opposition figures held last week to demand the resignation of Assad. A statement adopted by the 300 delegates, who met in the Turkish beach resort of Antalya, called on Assad to hand over power “immediately” to a deputy so as to pave the way for the creation of a transitional council.

Many of the more prominent spokesmen of the Syrian opposition have long-standing ties to Washington, Paris and London, and include in their ranks former officials of the Baathist regime as well as CIA assets. The conference in Turkey included representatives of the US-backed Damascus Declaration.



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