

Syria slides toward civil war

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Amid continuing protests, mounting state repression and escalating pressure from the US and the European powers, there are growing signs that Syria is sliding toward civil war. Already, with thousands of refugees flowing from northwestern Syria into Turkey and threats of Israeli intervention, the crisis of the Baathist regime is having an increasingly destabilizing impact on the entire Middle East.

The United States and its European allies are cynically seeking to exploit the popular uprising against the regime of President Bashar al-Assad to either break Damascus from its alliance with Iran or move toward a policy of regime-change. Even as Washington, London and Paris rain down bombs on Tripoli and other Libyan towns, killing and wounding thousands of civilians and soldiers, they sanctimoniously denounce Assad for killing his own people.

On Friday, Syrian state television announced that a military action had been launched against the rebellious town of Jisr al-Shughour in the northwest of the country 12 miles from the Turkish border. Up to 5,000 troops and dozens of tanks reportedly massed on the outskirts of the town, normally occupied by 50,000 inhabitants but now largely abandoned in advance of the expected assault. Some news sources said Syrian security forces were arresting some 3,000 men who had remained in the town.

Last Monday, the government claimed that armed men had killed 120 security personnel in the town the previous day and promised to retaliate. Many reports, however, indicate that there was shooting between forces loyal to Assad and a substantial number of police and soldiers who refused to fire on protesters and mutinied.

The Sunni town, located in an area with Christian and Alawite Muslim villages, has a history of opposition to the Baathist regime, which is dominated by members of the minority Alawite sect, including the Assad family.

Some reports say that Sunni police began the rebellion by refusing to obey orders to fire into crowds of protesters from their Alawite officers.

In 1980, Bashar al-Assad's father, Hafez al-Assad, sent troops into Jisr al-Slughour to put down an uprising led by the Muslim Brotherhood.

In advance of the government crackdown, a growing number of residents of Jisr al-Slughour and the surrounding region have sought refuge across the border in Turkey. Turkish media reported Friday that nearly 4,000 people had entered Turkey. The Turkish government on Thursday authorized the construction of two refugee camps that could hold up to 10,000 people. There are reports that Ankara fears the flow of refugees could turn into a flood of as many as 1 million Syrians.

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan said Thursday he would continue to allow Syrian refugees to enter Turkey and, in a marked shift from his previously close alliance with Assad, denounced the regime for "savagery" and suggested he might support a United Nations resolution condemning its actions.

More ominously, Turkish officials have refused to deny a report by the veteran journalist Robert Fisk published May 30 in the British daily the *Independent* that the Turkish military has drawn up plans to send several battalions of Turkish troops into Syria to carve out a "safe area" for Syrian refugees inside Syria itself. The plan is reportedly aimed at preventing a flood of Syrian Kurds into Turkey's Kurdish region in the southeast of the country.

The assault on Jisr al-Shughour coincided with widespread anti-regime protests following Friday prayers, which were once again met with violent repression. At least 28 people were shot dead at rallies across the country.

The most deadly crackdown occurred in Maarat al-Numan, a village near Jisr al-Shughour that lies 33 miles south of Syria's second city Aleppo on the

highway to Damascus. Syrian helicopter gunships reportedly fired machine guns to disperse large anti-government protests, in the first reported use of air power against three-month-old uprising.

The Associated Press reported that Assad's forces also fired tanks shells into the town after thousands of protesters overwhelmed security officers and burned the courthouse and police station.

Four people were reportedly killed by security forces in the Qabun district of the capital Damascus, while two more were slain in the Bosra al-Harir neighborhood of southern Daraa province, where the unrest began. Another five demonstrators were reported to have been shot dead in the coastal resort of Latakia and eleven killed in Idlib province.

Small demonstrations in Aleppo were reported for the first time since the unrest began.

In a sign of possible disarray, security forces pulled out of the central city of Hama overnight Thursday, allowing tens of thousands of protesters to overwhelm its downtown Assi Square. Last Friday, troops killed 67 protesters in Hama in one of the bloodiest incidents of the uprising.

Meanwhile, the Western powers stepped up their pressure on the Assad regime on two fronts. France and Britain, supported by Germany and Portugal, continued to push for a resolution in the United Nations Security Council condemning Syria for its repressive measures. The resolution, drafted by Paris and London, calls for the Syrian regime to carry out political reforms and release political prisoners, but stops short of calling for either military action or additional sanctions.

It does, however, demand "humanitarian" access to Syrians threatened by violence, a provision sufficiently broad and vague to serve as a pretext for future intervention.

With the support of Washington, the French and British are evidently seeking to obtain passage of a resolution that could be used as a wedge for further and more direct action. They face public opposition from two veto-wielding members of the Security Council, Russia and China. In addition, Brazil, South Africa and India have expressed reservations.

Meanwhile, another UN agency, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), has weighed in against Syria. On Thursday, the IAEA governing board voted to report Syria to the Security Council over the

country's alleged attempt to build a secret nuclear reactor in its eastern desert.

The 35-nation board approved a Western-backed resolution accusing Syria of violating its nuclear treaty obligations by building the Dair Alzour reactor, which was destroyed by Israeli warplanes in September 20007. Rejecting years of denials by Syria, the IAEA concluded in a report last month that the site was "very likely" a partially constructed nuclear reactor intended for making plutonium bombs.

The resolution opens the way for UN sanctions or other punitive measures. The 17 to 6 vote reflected widespread opposition within the board of governors. The six "no" votes included those of Russia and China. Eleven countries abstained, while another was not in attendance.

While the US has to date stopped short of demanding Assad's resignation, it has in recent days edged closer to that position. In line with recent statements by President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, US Defense Secretary Robert Gates told a seminar in Brussels, "Whether Assad still has the legitimacy to govern his own country, I think is a question everyone needs to consider."



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