

Syrian protests spread against Assad regime

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At least 28 protesters were killed Friday, as security forces opened fire on what were the largest demonstrations since political unrest first gripped Syria four months ago. The protest movement has escalated in defiance of the army's brutal crackdown.

Hundreds of thousands reportedly turned out in the central city of Hama, demanding the ouster of the regime of President Bashar al-Assad. The renewed protests follow the withdrawal of troops and security forces from the city at the end of last month, after the particularly bloody suppression of protests when 73 were killed on June 3. It is unclear whether the withdrawal was due to divisions within the armed forces—only a proportion of the mainly conscript army are believed to be reliable—differences within the ruling elite, or an attempt to calm the very tense situation. The protests have been growing, with young people flocking to the main square, renamed Tahrir Square, every night.

Assad responded by sacking Hama's governor, Ahmad Khaled Abdel Aziz, only appointed last February, and by agreeing to peaceful protests as long as no property was damaged, in an effort to defuse the tension. In the early 1980s, the city was at the centre of the opposition led by the Muslim Brotherhood to Hafiz al-Assad, the current president's father. His suppression of Hama in 1982 left about 20,000 dead and encapsulates the utter ruthlessness of the Ba'athist regime.

Tens if not hundreds of thousands took to the streets in Damascus, Aleppo, Latakia and Homs. The turnout in the two major population centres of Damascus and Aleppo, which together account for half the population, was particularly striking as thus far, the blanketing of the cities with security forces has largely ensured that demonstrations have been suppressed before they could begin.

Security forces responded by firing on protestors, killing eight people in the industrial city of Homs and another two in Qadam, Damascus. Sixteen people were killed in the towns and villages of the northern province of Idlib near the Turkish border. Over the last weeks, tanks and armoured personnel carriers have brutally suppressed angry opposition centred in the city of Jisr al-Shighour, causing thousands to seek refuge in Turkey or with relatives in other parts of the

country.

This has displaced a predominantly Sunni population, in a region close to the heartland of the minority Alawite sect, from which the Assad regime has drawn its support—stoking concerns of ethnic cleansing and communal strife in a country characterised by numerous social, communal and sectarian divisions.

The death toll is now thought to number about 1,350 civilians and 350 security personnel, while at least 12,000 people have been arrested. The regime claims that at least 500 security personnel have been killed and continues to claim that violence is primarily directed against the government, not carried out by it, fomented by external forces.

The growing protests reflect the bitterness and anger at the desperate poverty facing millions, as well as the regime's intransigence. They demonstrate the increasing isolation of the ruling clique, despite its efforts to maintain control with its orchestrated pro-government rallies last week in Damascus and Aleppo and unprecedented hosting of a conference of oppositionists in Damascus, June 27.

With Assad's promise to hold a "national dialogue summit" starting July 10, to discuss the proposed new laws on political parties ending the privileged status of the ruling Ba'ath party and possible elections in August, the regime is searching for reliable figures to give it political cover. The conference of oppositionists was the largest of its kind for decades, with 150 dissidents—largely discredited veteran "opposition" figures from the urban middle class and former regime supporters who have spent time in prison. They denounced the regime's brutal suppression of the protest movement and demanded a peaceful transition to democracy.

Unsurprisingly, the meeting commanded little respect or interest from the mainly young and unorganised street protesters—largely based outside Damascus—who view these "oppositionists" as only too willing to compromise with the regime.

As with the movements in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen and Libya, the protests are fuelled by fundamental democratic and social grievances that the Assad regime is incapable of

resolving. Like these other movements, however, in the absence of an independent socialist alternative, the United States, European and regional powers are seeking to shape popular demands for “regime change” in their own interests.

Syria, which borders Israel, Lebanon, Iraq, Turkey and Jordan, has wider regional influence because of its support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, as well as its crucial alliance with Iran—which in turn plays a key role in US-occupied Iraq. Washington, London and Paris are keen to use the crisis facing the regime to target Tehran, either by pressing the weakened and vulnerable Assad to abandon his longstanding alliance and adopt a more conciliatory foreign policy, particularly towards Israel, or by removing him from office.

Last week, the Obama administration used its unsubstantiated claim that Iran has helped Damascus to suppress the protest movement to issue sanctions against Iran’s national police and Syrian security forces for human rights abuses. It has come out more and more openly against Assad. Last week, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said she was “disheartened” by the violence, and that Assad was running out of time and would face increasingly organised opposition if it did not undertake reform.

The US is shifting away from earlier fears that the departure of the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad would fan instability across the Middle East and is preparing to ramp up sanctions against Damascus, particularly in the energy sector.

The *Financial Times* commented, “Although the Obama administration has publicly called for President Assad to embrace reform or ‘get out of the way’, after more than three months of brutal repression of popular protests, officials are signalling that there is no meaningful prospect of the Syrian leader carrying out reforms and that the only solution could be his departure.

“They are also putting greater emphasis on the geopolitical benefit of political change in Damascus, which would be a significant blow to Iran, Syria’s close ally.... ‘It is increasingly clear that President Assad has made his choice’, Hillary Clinton, US secretary of state, wrote in a recent article in the Arabic language *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper. But while continued brutality may allow him to delay the change that is under way in Syria, it will not reverse it”.

Ramin Mehmanparast, a special advisor to Iran’s foreign minister, publicly rebuked Washington for its imposition of sanctions, asserting that the intention was to split Syria and Iran because the “interests of America and its allies are endangered in the region”.

Britain and France have sought a United Nations Security

Council resolution against Syria that could serve as the basis for foreign intervention similar to that against Libya. This prospect has been vigorously opposed by Russia, which maintains a naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus. Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, speaking at a press conference in Moscow Friday with French Foreign Minister Alain Juppé, expressed Russia’s support for Assad and urged Damascus to hold a dialogue with the opposition.

Despite denials, there is an identifiable sectarian element in the leadership of the movement centred on various Sunni clerics. These are being given support by the Sunni regimes in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States. The Egyptian cleric Yusuf al-Qaradawi, who is linked to the Muslim Brotherhood, has called for all Arabs to rise up against the Assad regime on his *Al-Jazeera* programme, portraying it as a heretical oppressor of the Sunnis and a supporter of Iran, in a clear appeal to Washington.

More importantly, Turkey, which had in recent years improved diplomatic and economic relations with Syria, has openly condemned Syria’s bloody crackdown—with Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan describing the Syrian response to protests as “savagery”. The newspaper *As-Seyassah*, published in Kuwait, reported June 27, “Turkey informed Britain, France, Italy, Germany and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) leadership of the possibility that it would launch an offensive in...Aleppo, Homs, Hama and Latakia”, citing unnamed British officials as its source. The report was officially denied.

Lebanon’s daily *al-Akhbar* claimed that Iran had threatened Turkey, saying that if it were to be used as a platform for NATO action against Syria, then Iran would bomb US and NATO bases in Turkey. This too was denied by Iran’s Foreign Ministry. But such reports underscore the degree to which the events in Syria have the potential to trigger a wider regional conflict and how, in the absence of revolutionary leadership and an independent political movement of the working class, popular opposition in Syria, as in Libya, can be misdirected and exploited by the major powers and their regional allies.



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