

Fighting and bombings in Syrian capital

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Gun battles broke out in a western suburb of Damascus Monday morning, following a double car bombing Saturday that killed 27 people and injured more than a hundred. The incidents were among the bloodiest in the Syrian capital since demonstrations against the government of President Bashar Assad first erupted one year ago.

There were conflicting accounts of the street fighting in the al-Mezze district, home to many foreign embassies, security offices, and Assad's brother-in-law Maj. Gen. Assef Shawkat, deputy chief of staff for security affairs.

Heavy machine-guns and rocket-propelled grenades were fired, and there was extensive damage to buildings, as well as casualties among both pro-government and anti-government forces, although the exact number was unclear.

US-backed opposition groups, based in Lebanon and Turkey, claimed that they had launched an attack on regime targets to demonstrate that they had the capability to strike back after Assad's military forces successfully took control of the cities of Homs and Idlib, routing lightly armed rebel forces in both places.

A spokesman for the Free Syrian Army, one of the main US-sponsored groups, told the *Wall Street Journal* that the attack had been launched against security forces buildings "to tell the regime that the FSA is able to reach any point in the heart of Damascus."

The attack may have been intended to disrupt ongoing talks between a United Nations delegation led by former secretary-general Kofi Annan and the Assad regime. Annan met with Assad in Damascus last week and reported back to the UN Security Council March 16. He then dispatched a five-member technical team that was to arrive in the Syrian capital Monday to discuss a proposal to deploy international monitors.

Saturday's car bombs hit two government buildings

in Damascus near the Old City in the heart of the capital. Syrian officials said the aviation security and criminal security buildings were struck. Health minister Wael al-Haliki gave the casualty toll as 27 dead and 140 wounded, and state television broadcast footage of the devastation, including many corpses and images of the wounded.

A third suicide bomb was reported by SANA, the official news agency, at a Palestinian refugee camp, but only the two bombers were killed.

The next day another car bomb exploded in Aleppo, Syria's largest city and business capital, near a state security office. Two people were killed and 30 wounded, SANA reported, adding that the death toll was reduced because intelligence agencies were tipped off in advance.

Two pro-government newspapers accused Qatar and Saudi Arabia of instigating the bombing attacks, the first time that the Syrian regime has charged other Arab states with such an attack.

Both the Assad regime and the anti-government groups have publicly condemned previous bombings in Damascus and Aleppo, which were said to be the work of Islamic fundamentalists linked to the Al Qaeda organization.

While the security situation was visibly deteriorating in the country's two main urban centers—the twin strongholds of the Assad regime for the past year—there were mounting signs that the campaign of destabilization and armed subversion, backed by the Saudi monarchy and the US government, was intensifying.

All six monarchies in the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Saudi-led group that also includes Kuwait, Qatar, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates and Oman, announced last week they were closing their embassies in Damascus, after previously withdrawing their ambassadors.

This gang of tyrants has hypocritically denounced Assad's repression of anti-government protesters, although Saudi Arabia is an absolute monarchy that suppresses all opposition, and sent troops into Bahrain last year to bolster that government's crackdown on pro-democracy protesters.

There have been persistent press reports that one or another of the Gulf states has begun to secretly arm the Free Syrian Army and other forces engaged in attacks on the Assad regime. On March 12, the Syrian National Council, a US-backed umbrella group for the anti-government camp, announced it would begin arming the FSA with the help of unnamed foreign governments.

The French news agency AFP reported March 17 that Saudi military equipment was being routed through Jordan to FSA forces being trained there in preparation for incursions across Syria's southern border.

France, Britain and the United States have so far publicly opposed arming the FSA, while encouraging the Gulf states to do so and giving the green light for mercenaries and special ops soldiers to provide military training and intelligence.

The real aim of both the Gulf monarchies and the imperialist powers is to topple the Assad regime in order to deal a blow to Iran, Syria's major strategic ally.

Kofi Annan, the UN special envoy on the Syrian crisis, warned Friday of the potentially grave consequences of a military intervention. "Some people have a tendency to compare it with Libya or other situations," he said. "But I believe Syria would be much more complex." He noted that once it began, an escalation towards war could have an impact throughout the region.

Russia and China have so far blocked efforts to push a Libya-style resolution through the UN Security Council to open the way to military intervention. Russian Deputy Foreign Minister Mikhail Bogdanov denounced the efforts to isolate the Syrian regime as "counterproductive," and called for proceeding with the talks initiated by Annan.

Turkey, Syria's northern neighbor, has also officially opposed arming the FSA, concerned that this could spark a border war. At the same time, Turkish Prime Minister Tayyip Erdogan suggested March 16 that his country might set up a "buffer zone" to contain the

large number of Syrian refugees fleeing the fighting.

Some 1,250 refugees fled into Turkey from northern Syria March 16-17, after the collapse of the rebel-held position in Idlib province in the face of a government offensive. The Turkish Red Crescent said that 16,000 Syrians are now in refugee camps in Turkey, but projected that the number could soon swell to 500,000.

Erdogan said that Turkey would halt all consular services at its embassy in Damascus March 22, and he urged all Turkish citizens to leave Syria for their own safety.

Turkey will host a meeting April 2 of the "Friends of Syria," a US-led group of more than 60 countries that has become the vehicle for coordinating imperialist pressure on the Assad regime. China, Russia and Iran, which have the closest economic and security ties to Damascus, were not invited to the first "Friends" conference in Tunisia last month.

Meanwhile, a survey by the Pew Research Center found overwhelming opposition among the American people to a Libyan-style intervention by the United States against Syria. Only 25 percent supported such intervention, while 64 percent opposed it. Only 29 percent backed sending arms to the Syrian rebels.



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