

# Syrian army casualties rise as West inflames civil war

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As the US and its allies among the NATO powers and Persian Gulf monarchies step up their campaign for regime change, the number of soldiers killed in Syria has risen sharply, even as over-all casualties have fallen.

As many as 100 soldiers were killed in the suburbs of Damascus and in Idlib province over the weekend according to the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights (SOHR), a London-based outfit reportedly funded by the Saudi and Qatari regimes.

The group claimed that it had confirmed the names of 80 of the dead troops with local medical sources.

The Observatory said that 57 Syrian soldiers were killed in clashes on Saturday, by far the largest military death toll since the beginning of civil unrest in Syria in March 2011.

“Troops are vulnerable to heavy losses because they are not trained for street battles and are therefore exposed to attacks,” Sami Abdul Rahman the head of the SOHR told the AFP news agency. These attacks have included car bombings, assaults on trucks carrying troops and attacks on checkpoints.

The latest reports of troop deaths dovetails with an analysis by David Enders of McClatchy Newspapers indicating that, while overall violent deaths have progressively declined since the initiation in April of the cease-fire plan brokered by United Nations envoy Kofi Annan, the number of military personnel killed has risen sharply.

Citing figures compiled by the Syrian Network for Human Rights, Enders reports that overall violence has fallen off by 36 percent compared to March.

Enders reports, “According to news articles posted on the government news agency’s website, 953 police offices have died since March 11. Of those, 404 or 42 percent were killed in May alone.”

The increase in the killing of members of the Syrian security forces suggests that the Western-backed effort to arm and train anti-government militias calling themselves the Free Syrian Army has been significantly escalated. The Syrian government has reported interception of increasing arms shipments, particularly across the Lebanese border. Both Saudi Arabia and Qatar have declared their intention to finance and arm anti-government forces.

The fact that attacks on government forces have escalated, even as the overall level of violence has dropped off, has been entirely overshadowed by the co-ordinated media propaganda campaign surrounding the May 25 massacre of 108 people in Houla. While no conclusive evidence has emerged as to the responsibility for the killings, both pro-government and anti-government forces have carried out similar atrocities.

The Syrian state-run news agency, SANA, reported that an Islamist group calling itself Jabhat al-Nusra (Al-Nusra Front), which claimed responsibility for last month’s bombing in the Syrian capital of Damascus that killed 55 people, had posted a statement on its web site saying it had carried out the killings of 13 civilians who were found last week with their hands tied behind their backs and shot in the head at close range in the eastern desert province of Deir Ezzor.

Like most atrocities carried out by the Syrian “rebels,” this mass execution received scant attention in the Western media.

In a speech Sunday, Assad denied that security forces had carried out the killings and questioned the attempt to attribute it to “pro-state militias”. “[W]ho is the beneficiary ... did the state or the pro-state persons perpetrate that act before the visit of Annan to make it a failure?” Assad asked.

In the wake of the Houla killings, the Western powers and their allies in the Arab Gulf States expelled Syrian diplomatic personnel and escalated demands for regime change in Syria. Anti-government forces inside Syria have followed suit.

Reuters quoted a spokesman for the Free Syrian Army as saying that Western-backed insurgents are giving up any pretense of supporting the Annan ceasefire plan.

“We have decided to end our commitment to this (ceasefire),” Free Syrian Army spokesman Major Sami al-Kurdi told the news agency. “We have resumed our attacks but we are doing defensive attacks which means we are only attacking checkpoints in the cities.”

Kurdi also called for the UN to change its operation in Syria into a “peace-enforcing mission,” and that outside powers should impose a no-fly zone and a buffer zone on Syrian territory to help bring down Assad. This is essentially a call for a replay of the NATO war for regime change in Libya.

Public threats of military action have risen sharply, while Washington and its European allies have stepped up pressure on Russia to drop its opposition to outside intervention for regime change.

“Assad 's departure does not have to be a precondition, but it should be an outcome” of any political solution of the Syrian conflict, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton declared at a press conference in Stockholm on Sunday.

Recounting an earlier telephone conversation with Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, she added, “My message to the foreign minister was very simple and straightforward. We all have to intensify our efforts to achieve a political transition, and Russia has to be at the table helping that to occur.”

Clinton announced that she will meet later this week in Istanbul with key members of the “Friends of Syria”, including France, Britain, Germany, Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia and Jordan, to discuss proposed actions.

In Berlin on Monday, French Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius and his German counterpart, Guido Westerwelle said that both their governments were pressuring Russia to alter its stance on Syria.

European leaders met in St. Petersburg Monday with Russian President Vladimir Putin for discussions in which Syria featured prominently. After the summit,

Putin acknowledged that Syria had been discussed, but made no comment on Russia’s position. European Council President Herman Van Rompuy said that Russia and the 27-nation bloc have “some divergent assessments.”

Meanwhile, press reports have indicated intensified preparations for direct military intervention.

The *Christian Science Monitor* reported on stepped up US military planning, including preparations for using cyberwarfare to neutralize the country’s air defenses.

The British tabloid, the *Daily Star*, citing Whitehall sources, reported that “SAS troops and MI6 agents are in the country ready to help rebels if civil war breaks out.”

“Safe havens would be an invasion of Syria but a chance to save lives,” the paper quoted an unnamed senior Whitehall sources as saying. “The SAS will throw an armed screen around those areas that can be set up within hours.”

Speaking over the weekend to the Arab League, UN envoy Kofi Annan warned that Syria is moving ever closer to “all-out war”, with the danger that its internal conflict will extend to other countries in a regional war.

“The specter of all-out civil war, with a worrying sectarian dimension, grows by the day,” said Annan.

This is precisely the outcome that Washington and its allies have deliberately sought to arrange, in a bid to effect regime change in Syria as a means of furthering US imperialism’s grip over the oil-rich Middle East and preparing for a larger confrontation with its main rival for regional hegemony, Iran.



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