

Syrian government widens crackdown

By Jean Shaoul
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The Ba'athist government of President Bashar al-Assad has expanded its military crackdown and mounted a campaign of intimidation against opposition to the regime. It is determined to crush the ongoing anti-government rallies that are now taking place not only after prayers on Fridays, but also during the week.

The BBC reported on Wednesday that troops were heading for the industrial city of Homs, in central Syria. A thousand people were rallying in support of the people of Dera'a, where soldiers have arrested hundreds of men in house-to-house searches. Other security forces were deployed inside the city. One banner on the demonstration said, "No to violence, no to sabotage, no to unemployment".

Dera'a, where the uprising began six weeks ago, has been under siege by the army for nearly a week, with movement in and out of the city tightly controlled under a virtual curfew, and food and medicine running low. While utilities and telecommunications had been shut down, electricity and water were restored in most parts of the city. The International Red Cross Committee's spokesperson in Damascus urged the Assad regime to lift restrictions on access to casualties in Dera'a.

Gunfire was reported on Wednesday along with more arrests of men aged between 15 and 40, who were taken to a stadium in the city for interrogation. About 800 arrests have been made in Dera'a. The state news agency SANA reported that security forces had found rebels' arms caches in the city. The ongoing repression and the siege of Dera'a has sparked sympathy protests in a number of poverty and drought-stricken towns and villages.

When 3,000 demonstrators in the coastal oil city of Baniyas called for the army's blockade of Dera'a to be lifted, the government deployed troops around the city, and sealed it off, saying that it was a "centre of Salafist terrorism".

Protests in Damascus suburbs were dispersed by tear gas, sound bombs and baton-wielding security forces, while Douma remains under army control. The *Guardian*

reported that eyewitnesses from Midan, Damascus, assert that pro-government armed gangs were terrorising the neighbourhood long after the demonstration had been dispersed.

Amnesty International has issued a statement detailing "first hand reports of torture" from detainees and called on the regime to halt its brutality.

Security forces broke up a protest by 1,000 students at the University of Aleppo using tear gas and live ammunition. While there were no reports of deaths and injuries, dozens of students were arrested, their mobile phones and laptops were seized.

The BBC said that some 2,843 arrests throughout the country had been confirmed in the last few days, although some activist groups claim that the number could be as high as 8,000. According to the Syrian Centre for the Defence of Prisoners of Conscience, the number includes two veteran opposition figures, 81-year-old Hassan Abdel Azim in Damascus, and 85-year-old Omar Qashash in Aleppo. Other activists said that security forces arrested 11 women who were part of a silent all-women demonstration in Salahiya on Saturday, a central neighbourhood in Damascus.

This latest crackdown comes after the killing of 65 people, mostly in Dera'a, during last Friday's "day of rage" in various parts of the country, including some towns near Damascus. At least 560 people have been killed since mid-March, according to most estimates. But these reports are difficult to verify as the Assad regime has prevented foreign reporters from leaving Damascus city centre, and many stem from activist groups based outside Syria, some of whom are funded by Washington and Riyadh.

Reporters Without Borders say that Syria has detained a number of journalists, including Fayeza Sara, a Syrian journalist and writer who was arrested on April 11, Mohamed Zaid Mistou, a Norwegian journalist arrested on April 7, and Kamal Sheikhou, a Syrian blogger arrested in March. Al Jazeera says that one of its journalists, Dorothy Parvaz, has been missing since her

plane landed in Damascus last Friday.

The Assad regime has accused Qatar-based Al Jazeera, Al-Arabiya, which is based in Dubai and part owned by Saudi and the Gulf States, and Britain's BBC of broadcasting information that they know to be untrue.

A prime mover behind the protests is Syrian Revolution 2011, the Sunni Muslim web site, backed and run by the Muslim Brotherhood. Its Facebook statement said that "we will only kneel before God". It has urged people to rally every day and demand that the government lift the blockade of Daraa, Douma and all the "besieged towns", setting out a schedule of protests for the week. The Muslim Brotherhood has now openly called for people to support the anti-government protests.

Despite these calls, and the widespread and very real social problems that have been fuelling the protests, the rallies have been relatively small and largely away from Damascus and Aleppo, the two largest cities which account for half the population. This is, in part at least, because of fears about the forces behind the protests.

The Syrian authorities, for their part, estimate that around 128 people have been killed, including 78 soldiers and security personnel. While the regime attributes the unrest and civilian deaths to "extremists", "terrorists" and "armed gangs" and a conspiracy against Syria backed by foreign forces, such claims cannot be entirely dismissed as the high number of security force casualties indicates at least some of the demonstrators must be armed.

On Monday, the Assad regime threatened an even more stringent crackdown, setting a deadline of May 15 for people who had committed "unlawful acts" such as bearing arms, attacking security or spreading lies to surrender and hand in their weapons. It said that people who "supply information about saboteurs, terrorists and arms caches... will be spared any subsequent legal consequences".

In line with its policy of promising concessions to assuage the widespread social grievances, Prime Minister Adel Safar's newly appointed government has announced that it is looking at a comprehensive set of political, security, judiciary, economic, and social reforms.

While the major and regional powers were quick to condemn the Gaddafi regime in Libya, and back the so-called rebels, some of whom were paid CIA operatives, there has been less agreement both within and between each country as to how to proceed against the Assad regime.

The Obama administration, which has faced calls from the neo-cons and other right-wing forces for action to

unseat Assad, does not as yet favour the downfall of the Assad regime, as it fears that this would destabilise the entire region. It was forced to water down its original proposal for an official commission of inquiry to win a majority vote in the UN Human Rights Council.

The four Arab countries represented on the Council—Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Bahrain and Qatar—absented themselves from the UN vote, rather than adopt a public position.

Russia and China, which view the ongoing NATO war against Libya as designed to keep them out of the Mediterranean, have opposed any interference in Syria where they have substantial and growing interests. Russia has a naval base in Syria, and China, which has growing commercial interests in the region, has its eye on Syria's as yet unallocated off-shore gas fields in the Eastern Mediterranean.

The major European powers have so far limited their opposition to condemning the violent crackdowns and proposing sanctions on Syrian leaders. Only Germany has called for immediate sanctions against Syria—it has little trade with Damascus—although Britain and France have threatened that they may change their minds if the violence persists.

But in Israel, which like Washington has been cautious about supporting the overthrow of the Assad regime in recognition of the stability it created on Israel's borders, there appears to have been a shift. Defence Minister Ehud Barak said that the "brutality" of the regime's response would lead to its downfall.

"I think that Assad is approaching the point where he will lose his internal legitimacy," Barak said in a television interview. He continued: "Even if he stops the bloodshed, I don't think he can restore his legitimacy. He may recover, but in my opinion it won't be the same, and he is destined to meet the same fate as the leaders of other Arab countries shaken by uprisings."

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