ANALYSIS

Protest in the face of Syria's tanks

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Eric Ruder looks at the Syrian government's latest effort to crush the popular revolt amid a widening revolt.

THE REGIME of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is carrying out a bloody offensive against the four-month-old popular uprising in the hopes of dealing it a lethal blow at the beginning of the monthlong celebration of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month.

The ferocity of the latest assault shocked Arab public opinion and was rebuked around the world. The offensive began July 31 and took 75 lives in the town of Hama, the same city where Assad's father ordered a mass slaughter nearly three decades ago.

In all, more than 150 people were killed by security forces throughout Syria on the eve of Ramadan, making it the bloodiest day yet in the government crackdown on dissent that has claimed more than 1,600 civilian lives so far and wounded many thousands more, according to pro-democracy and human rights organizations.

Since June, Syrian security forces had largely retreated from Hama, a city of 700,000 about halfway between Damascus and Aleppo, allowing residents to enjoy some degree of autonomy. In early July, some 250,000 of the city's residents took to the streets to demand the ouster of the Assad regime.

About a month ago, government forces surrounded Hama and began preparing for the assault. In anticipation of the confrontation, city residents erected barricades made from cement blocks, sandbags and other miscellaneous materials.

But on July 31, those barricades quickly succumbed to the treads of tanks and armored personnel carriers as they bore down on the town from every direction before dawn. The assault then paused and resumed the following day. Mortar fire pummeled residential areas, and soldiers fired on unarmed protesters in the streets. Horrifying footage of the assault appeared on YouTube and elsewhere on the web [1], even as troops continued their massacre of unarmed protesters and plunged the city into smoke-filled chaos.

"The assault on Hama is an indication of loss of control," said Bassma Kodmani, head of the Paris-based Arab Reform Initiative. "They crossed the threshold. They want to show that they can raise the level of repression to the whole country."

"What has been clear is that the government is prepared to use force without limit," Middle East commentator Rami Khouri said. "But this is not solving the problem. Instead, it is making the rebellion more robust."

Hama was the site of a far greater massacre 29 years ago—systematic killings ordered by Hafez al-Assad, the father of the current president who essentially passed political power to his son when he

died in 2000.

In 1982, Syrian security forces were carrying out an offensive against the armed wing of the Muslim Brotherhood, and Hama was turned into a warning to any other city, town or political current that might consider defying the regime. Survivors of the massacre still live with terrifying memories of those days, in which up to 30,000 Syrians were killed.

A Reuters report from a month ago recounts some of their stories [2]:

"Hama's community of survivors in Lebanon, Jordan and the Gulf say they cannot forget the blood-spilled streets, the unattended corpses, the raped women, nor the death squads who dragged youths to execution grounds nearly 30 years ago."Twenty-four young men were sprayed with bullets in front of my own eyes including a child who was 12 years old. And in five minutes they had picked up the bodies and (only) the shoes and hats were left. The ground was a pool of blood. The women came out, and one was screaming 'This is my husband' and the other shouting 'This is my son,'" said Umm Omar, 53, as she sobbed.

Abu Rahman al-Asfar, from the Baroodiah neighborhood of Hama, recounted how his neighbors tried to breastfeed a baby for up to nine days after its mother died, as there was no food available."

This history of resistance lives on in Hama, and it explains why the government is desperate to unleash its superior military force before the start of Ramadan.

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SINCE THE beginning of the Arab Spring earlier this year, protests have often emerged from the gatherings for Friday prayers, as youth leave the mosques and take to the streets. In fact, since government security forces regularly crack down at the first sign of political dissent, Friday prayers have often provided the only opportunity to bring masses of people together.

For this reason, rulers throughout the Middle East have looked with dread on the approach of Ramadan this year. According to an Agence France Presse report [3]:

"Arab governments are bracing for increased tensions during the Muslim holy fasting month of Ramadan, which this year comes amid a wave of unprecedented uprisings sweeping the region."

"Throughout history, Ramadan has been the month of revolutions and victory," said Abdullah al-Amadi, director of the Qatar-based Islamic website IslamOnline. "I think it will inspire the youths of the Arab Spring to complete their struggles against injustice and tyranny," he said.

In Syria, tens or even hundreds of thousands of people have taken to the streets after Friday prayers in recent weeks. Now, during Ramadan, when observant Muslims fast during the day and then gather nightly for prayer and to break their fast, pro-democracy forces in Syria are planning to transform every night into a Friday prayer-protest night in order to ratchet up pressure on the government and the military, which is already showing signs of strain.

According to experts on Syrian military affairs, the Syrian military is held together by a fiercely loyal officer corps, drawn from the minority Alawite sect that forms the backbone of Assad's ruling Baath Party. However, the rank-and-file troops are primarily made up of Sunni Muslims, who make up the majority of Syria's population.

So far, the military has been able to send its most loyal units to crack down on one hotbed of resistance, and then redeploy to the next center of rebellion. But if the military faces an ongoing

mobilization in several larger cities and towns simultaneously, it could be stretched to the breaking point.

According to analyst Firas Abi Ali [4]:

"If they don't have enough loyal units to take Hama, they don't have enough loyal units to take on much bigger cities like Homs, Aleppo or Damascus…I don't think they have enough of these units to crack down in a major way on multiple cities at the same time, at least not without seeing defections and without risking expanding the scope of the protests."

In fact, the repression has already served to reinforce the resolve of the resistance and provoked outpourings of solidarity with the besieged people of Hama. And the regime's use of naked force to ensure discipline within the ranks of the military [5] is an indicator of how the regime's control is balanced on a knife's edge:

"Syrian exiles, citing accounts from relatives, say that in cases where Sunni troops are deployed on the frontline, they are coerced into firing on demonstrators because security agents positioned to their rear will shoot them if they disobey orders."

"If you don't kill, you will be killed," said Ahmed Hussein, originally from the eastern city of Deir al-Zor, demonstrating against Assad outside the Syrian embassy in London.

"Anyone who is Sunni and has a capacity to do anything is carefully watched," said [Andrew] Terrill, [a professor at the U.S. Army War College]. "You would not want to defect if you were afraid you did not have much of a chance."

U.S. and European heads of state—as well as the government of Israel—were initially restrained in their criticism of Assad. They preferred his continued rule to the possibility of another revolution in the Middle East. But the scale and savagery of the regime's crackdown have compelled them to issue stern warnings to Assad to stop the butchery. But even if some in Washington might wish for military strikes against the regime [6], the reality of U.S. deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan and NATO's ongoing assault on Libya mean such talk is pure bluster.

According to the *Christian Science Monitor*:

"William Hague, the British foreign minister, also said that military action was not even"a remote possibility."Instead, he said that the European Union would issue a second round of sanctions against Syria in the coming week."…It is a very frustrating situation—the levers that we have in this situation are relatively limited, but we should be frank in admitting that and working with the ones that we have,"Hague said."

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THE PROTESTS in Syria are driven by the same forces at work throughout the region—high levels of unemployment, the rigidity and authoritarianism of the regime, a surge of youth into political activity and the inspiration of victories in Tunisia and Egypt.

President Assad accuses the protesters of acting on behalf of foreign governments and seeking to cripple Syria's leadership in the Arab world by sowing chaos throughout the country. Assad is clearly hoping to discredit the resistance by appealing to Syria's reputation as a thorn in the side of U.S. and Israel and their aims in the region.

But Syria's support of resistance forces in Lebanon and Palestine shouldn't give it a free pass to

crush the legitimate aspirations of its own population, according to Middle East commentator Ramzy Baroud [7].

"*Although the official Syrian narrative claims that [U.S. and Israeli targeting of Syria] alone should justify the army's harsh crackdown on pro-democracy protests, the rationale is challenged by a history of regime hypocrisy, doublespeak, brutality and real, albeit understated willingness to accommodate Western pressures and diktats...*

It seemed that Syria wanted to be involved in the region only so much as to remain a visible player, but not to the extent of having to face violent repercussions. It was an act of political mastery, one that Hafez crafted in the course of three decades and which Bashar cleverly applied for nearly 11 years. In essence, however, Syria remained hostage to familial considerations, one-party rule and the sectarian classifications initiated by colonial France in 1922.

True, Syria was and will remain a target for Western pressures. But what needs to be realized is that these pressures are motivated by specific policies concerning Israel, and not with regards to a family-centered dictatorship that openly murders innocent civilians in cold blood."

In fact, the Syrian opposition insists that the uprising in Syria is not only in solidarity with the broader revolt in the Middle East, but that victory in Syria will help the Arab cause more generally, including the Palestinian cause specifically.

According to Burhan Ghalyoun, professor and Syrian opposition figure in exile [8]:

"Syrians will determine the fate of Syria...The Syrian people are closest to the Palestinian people, and they are more protective of the Palestinian cause, the Golan Heights and Arab solidarity than the current regime whose leaders have made the country feudal and do not care for anything except for protecting their own interests and existence."

As the regime continues its crackdown, it will be important to seek out opportunities to demonstrate solidarity with the just ambitions of the Syrian revolt.

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P.S.

* From Socialist Worker (USA).

Footnotes

[1] http://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/08/01/in-middle-east-a-restive-first-day-of-ramadan/

[2] http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/07/us-syria-hama-idUSTRE7665R620110707

[3] http://www.google.com/hostednews/afp/article/ALeqM5i-OCBkX-inmb08onvFP9wDj_GMQA?docId=CNG.ca9856a55a66273f7b0e121b91f0fa92.341

[4] http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/02/us-syria-army-idUSTRE7713FK20110802

[5] http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/08/02/us-syria-army-idUSTRE7713FK20110802

[6] http://www.foxnews.com/opinion/2011/08/01/us-silence-on-syria-is-deafening/

[7] http://www.onislam.net/english/politics/middle-east/453304-competing-narratives-in-syria.html

[8] http://www.jadaliyya.com/pages/index/2203/the-syrian-people-will-determine-the-fate-of-syria