

Israel sees Assad's fall as certain, worries about al-Qaida in Syria

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JERUSALEM — The head of Israeli military intelligence told his country's parliament on Tuesday that Syrian President Bashar Assad won't be able to defeat the armed uprising that's spread throughout Syria and that the conflict there has allowed what he called "radical Islam" to gain ground on Israel's northern border.

Maj. Gen. Aviv Kochavi told a closed session of the Knesset that he didn't know how long Assad could remain in power, but that his fall was a certainty. "It may take more time — I can't give you an exact number — but it will happen," Kochavi said, according to notes taken during his testimony and shared later at an official briefing that was overseen by an Israeli military censor.

Kochavi, who displayed satellite photographs of Syrian artillery batteries during his testimony, described the Syrian military's tactics against the armed rebel groups as "brutal" and said 500 to 700 people were dying each week in the fighting. He warned of a growing presence of Islamist fighters. "We can see an ongoing flow of al-Qaida and global jihad activists into Syria," Kochavi said, according to the version shared with reporters.

His assessment came as diplomats in New York continued to debate whether to extend authorization for United Nations monitors to remain in Syria past Friday, when their original mandate expires. A Security Council vote on a resolution to extend their mission could come as soon as Wednesday, though sharp differences over the proposal remain between the United States and Great Britain on one side and Russia and China on the other. Any of those countries could kill a resolution with its veto.

The most contentious issue is the insistence by the United States and Great Britain that a renewed U.N. monitoring mission be authorized under Chapter 7 of the U.N. Charter, which could be used to permit the use of international military force to resolve the Syrian situation. China and Russia have said they oppose any resolution that could be used to authorize a Libya-style use of outside military force. On Monday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov charged that the United States was using "blackmail" to force the Chapter 7 approach by refusing to extend the monitoring mission otherwise.

On Tuesday, U.N. Syria envoy Kofi Annan met with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow. Afterward, Annan expressed hope that the two sides could resolve their issues and agree on extending the U.N. monitoring mission.

"I would hope that the council will continue its discussions and hopefully find language that will pull everybody together for us to move forward," he said.

The effectiveness of the U.N. monitors has been debated sharply since a six-point peace plan that called for a cease-fire was to have gone into effect in April. Violence initially dropped when the plan went into effect, and the number of people killed, according to the Syrian Network for Human Rights, a London-based human rights organization, declined in April and May from its high point in March.

But neither side ever honored the cease-fire completely — rebel attacks on Syrian government positions increased during those two months, according to a recent study of rebel activity by the Washington-based Institute for the Study of War — and the unarmed monitors suspended their activities in mid-June, saying it had become too dangerous to visit the conflict zones.

Few of the Annan plan's other provisions have been implemented, including a call for each side to appoint negotiators to begin talks on forming a transition government. Assad named a representative last week in talks with Annan, but the opposition has refused to name someone and has said it won't talk to Assad's appointee.

Members of the Syrian National Council, the opposition group that the United States considers the umbrella organization for the anti-Assad uprising, said Tuesday in New York that they opposed any resolution that didn't include the Chapter 7 provisions.

"If the message is that we can't get anything done at the Security Council, then we will explore other options," Syrian National Council member Najib Ghadbian said at a news conference.

Ghadbian said those options included asking members of the international community for unilateral support, something that's already occurring. Saudi Arabia and Qatar have funneled money to the rebels in Syria and are rumored to have helped provide weapons. The United States has said it's providing nonlethal aid to the rebels.

In an interview published July 7 in the French newspaper *Le Monde*, Annan complained about that aid. "What strikes me is that there are so many commentaries about Russia (and its support for Assad), while Iran is less mentioned, and that, above all, few things are said about other countries that send arms, money, and affect the situation on the ground," Annan said. "All these countries claim to want a peaceful solution, but they undertake individual and collective initiatives that undermine the very meaning of the Security Council resolutions."

Meanwhile, violence is spreading. For the first time, the Syrian government is shelling rebels in the capital of Damascus, and the opposition and the government have reported three days of fighting in the city that at times has closed major roads and seen Syrian armored vehicles deployed in residential neighborhoods.

Fighting also continued in Homs, which has seen some of the worst violence of the past 17 months and where faith in the U.N. peace plan has vanished.

"All of the humanitarian organizations have lost their credibility to us," said Saif al-Arabi, a spokesman for the Revolutionary Command Council in Homs. "We in the revolutionary council of Homs have declared that Kofi Annan and Gen. Mood are unwelcome in Syria. We consider them as partners to the regime in killing the Syrian people."

Gen. Robert Mood is the head of the observer force in the country.

In Israel, Syrian developments are being watched closely, officials told McClatchy Newspapers this week.

One senior intelligence official based near Israel's border with Syria said Israeli intelligence was gathering details of the fighting and sharing it with unspecified "partners."

"We know, down to the names of the battalion commanders, what is happening in Syria," said the official, who spoke only on the condition of anonymity because he wasn't authorized to discuss Syria publicly. "That is information we are sharing with the relevant partners."

The intelligence official expressed a similar concern over what he said was the increased presence of hard-line jihadist fighters in Syria.

"To have these groups, the kind of groups who affiliate with al-Qaida, right on the border with Israel is very worrying," the official said. "It is worrying for Syria and for Israel."

Another Israeli official who also spoke anonymously because he wasn't authorized to comment publicly said al-Qaida-related organizations were responsible for at least a dozen suicide bombings in Syria. He said the groups worked independently of the Free Syrian Army, the loosely coordinated main rebel network.

In a report published this week, a Tel Aviv-based research center with ties to the Israeli government said the foreign jihadist fighters were coming from Iraq, Jordan, Egypt and most recently Kuwait.

The report by the Institute for National Security Studies named the groups as Jabhat al-Nusra and its offshoot, Kataib Ahrar al-Sham, which the institute said was based in Idlib in northern Syria.

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