

How long can the regime last?

By: The Economist

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EVEN by the standards of Syrian state television, the gap between fact and fiction yawned unusually wide on July 15th. With street battles rattling Damascus, the capital, for the first time in Syria's 17-month uprising, a roaming camera crew struggled to find a picture of reassurance. "Nothing's happening! It's completely quiet!" a trio of veiled women shouted at the microphone poked through their car window, as gunfire crackled in the background. They seemed anxious to speed off, as did a lone pedestrian waylaid on an eerily deserted boulevard, who briskly agreed that things were "normal—very, very normal".

In the next few days Syria's violently flailing regime dropped all such pretence. Even those blind and deaf to the sight of helicopters pumping cannon-fire into residential districts north-east of the city centre, to the whining growl of reptilian armoured cars on its ring road and the crump of mortars in southern suburbs, could not ignore the news, on July 18th, of the biggest blow yet to President Bashar Assad.

That morning a bomb struck a meeting of the regime's 14-man national security council. The dead included Daoud Rajiha, the minister of defence; Assef Shawkat, Mr Assad's brother-in-law, a former chief of military intelligence and long-time key security man within the ruling family, who was General Rajiha's deputy; and Hassan Turkmani, a former defence minister and éminence grise of Syria's sprawling, 17-agency security establishment. Several other top officials are believed to have been gravely injured, or worse, including the interior minister and Hafez Makhoul, a cousin of the president notorious as the top interrogator in the state security agency and a brother of Rami Makhoul, the Assad clan's billionaire chief financier.

As if the slaughter of Mr Assad's crisis-management team were not enough, opposition sources claimed that a remote-controlled bomb had been placed inside the meeting room by a personal bodyguard of one of the men, helped by other turncoats from within the nizam, as the regime is known. State media insisted it had been a suicide-bombing, implying that it was the work of a jihadist fanatic.

The whiff of high-level treachery fuelled rumours of a surge of desertions by Sunni Muslims, who make up three-quarters of Syria's increasingly fractured sectarian mosaic. There were nastier tales of preparations for revenge by pro-regime snipers and paramilitary gangs known as shabiha, which are dominated by members of Mr Assad's Alawite sect. It was more reliably reported that helicopter gunships and artillery were firing into the largely Sunni working-class districts south of the capital, including Palestinian refugee camps.

If the deadly explosion and the fighting in Damascus that has persisted since July 14th mark the start of the conflict's end-game, most Syrians will be relieved. Even semi-official statistics admit to 17,000 deaths so far, with 112,000 registered as refugees abroad, 200,000 internally displaced, and another 3m needing humanitarian aid. Foreign relief workers put the figures much higher, reckoning that 1.5m Syrians have been displaced within the country, with 250,000 fleeing abroad.

In the past few weeks a civil war has been growing fast in territorial extent and ferocity. Only small parts of the country have been accessible, and only sporadically, to outside observers. But relief workers and displaced people in Syria point to misery and upheaval on a vast scale, including what may be sectarian "cleansing".

The densely populated spine of Syria that stretches 450km (280 miles) along the main road from Jordan to Turkey has become a tattered patchwork of combat zones from which many of the inhabitants have fled. Large towns such as Idlib, Marat Numan, Rastan and Deraa have been gutted by months of sporadic shelling and sniper attacks, punctuated by shabiha forays. Perhaps

two-thirds of the 1.2m inhabitants of Homs, Syria's third city, have fled. Surrounding villages have also been denuded; there are dismally repetitive reports of massacre, rape and pillage.

Directed with seeming purpose against poor Sunnis, such pogroms appear aimed at securing what had been isolated Alawite villages and districts of Homs, a transport hub astride the strategic approach to the Alawite heartland in the craggy mountains that fringe Syria's Mediterranean coastline.

Far to the east, in the Euphrates valley, the large provincial city of Deir ez-Zor has been similarly devastated, as loyalist troops have wielded heavy weaponry, including tanks, artillery and helicopter gunships, to flush out lightly armed opposition militiamen. A three-week assault in June wrecked much of Douma, one of Damascus's largest suburbs. Others, such as Daraya to the south-west, have been ringed by loyalist forces. Shellfire and a severing of power and telephone services suggest it may soon face a similar onslaught.

The Damascus slum of Nahr Aisha, in the south of the city, has become a temporary haven to hundreds of families from the stricken provinces. Seated on the floor in the home of a local benefactor, a group of refugees from Homs and surrounding villages recount disturbingly similar stories of violent dispossession. "It is systematic," says Abu Omar, still shaken, a week after a shabiha shot his best friend dead in front of him and his four-year-old son. "First they shell you to chase you out, then the army goes in to loot the lightweight stuff like jewellery and mobile phones. Then the shabiha come in, slaughter anyone who has stayed behind as well as all the animals, including chickens. Then they steal the heavier stuff, down to taps and doorknobs, and set houses on fire. The last wave is the Alawite women, who carry off the fanciest bits of clothing."

The mounting government offensive, with its increasingly indiscriminate use of firepower, comes in response to a growing threat posed by the rebel militias. Most of these are a local mix of defecting soldiers and volunteers. The total manpower of this so-called Free Syrian Army may be 40,000; no one really knows. Their efficiency and equipment vary markedly. Those that are close to smuggling routes into Turkey and Lebanon are better armed, though they all grumble that foreign promises of weapons and cash have rarely been fulfilled; most equipment has been bought from local arms dealers, often purloined from army stocks, with donations from wealthy Syrians. Abu Toni, a Damascus volunteer, reckons that in the capital there is only one "Roosi", or AK-47 rifle, for every three rebel fighters. These now cost \$1,500 each on the black market, a fivefold jump since the crisis began. Reliable bullets fetch up to \$2 each. This paucity of arms proved deadly to scores of fighters in the face of an all-out army assault on the village of Tremseh, near Hama, on July 12th, which left as many as 200 dead.

Even with meagre means the FSA has itself exacted a rising toll. Estimates of the loyalist dead range from 3,000 to 7,000. Hit-and-run tactics account for most of them, but in recent months FSA fighters have mounted a growing number of carefully planned operations, including the kidnap of senior officials in the capital, among them the businessman son of one of Mr Assad's closest aides. Increasingly, the rebels are relying on a network of informers inside the nizam. "We know before they do where the army is about to deploy, and some of the checkpoints in my district can be relied on to let us through," says an FSA fighter in Damascus.

Aside from defections and informers, Mr Assad's 300,000-man army is handicapped by the unreliability of many of its men. Although a member of the UN observer mission reckons that loyalist forces include at least two combat brigades that have been held in reserve, apart from fixed-wing bombers and chemical weapons, activists report that much of the Sunni rank and file is in effect idle. "My brother has been locked inside his base for the past eight months," affirms a refugee from Homs. A large maximum-security jail at Sednaya, just north of Damascus, is widely reported to be filled to capacity with officers suspected of aiding the rebels.

The regime's escalation of violence has produced a backlash against it. The influx of refugees into Damascus and Aleppo, Syria's second city, has spread awareness of the regime's brutality

even among households that had long turned a blind eye to the suffering caused, according to the government's stubborn account, by "terrorists". Among minority groups such as Christians, Palestinians, Druze and Kurds, as well as the prosperous Sunni urban merchant class, far fewer now view the state as a bulwark against extremism. "We all know it is a criminal regime, and that they deserve what they will get," says an Armenian shopkeeper in Damascus's Old City. "We would have preferred a peaceful revolution, and we are scared of Islamist extremists, but it is the government that has stirred all the hatred." Prominent Alawites, some of whom have joined the opposition, voice growing alarm at the danger of being saddled with collective guilt for the regime's excesses.

No one looks to the UN any more

As the military balance and popular feeling run against the government, international diplomacy seemed increasingly irrelevant. All but the regime's most fervent supporters and a clutch of hopeful members of the opposition still at large view the efforts of Kofi Annan, the UN-appointed mediator, as doomed. Most of the exiled opposition, echoing sentiment inside the country, have long been unwilling to negotiate with Mr Assad. Mr Annan's mandate, that began in April, is due to end on July 20th, though the UN Security Council may extend it. With even Damascus now looking insecure, it is hard to see how UN people can maintain an effective presence of any kind. "Everything is up in the air at the moment," conceded a UN man forlornly, in the aftermath of the big bomb.

Only the influence of Russia, Syria's main ally and arms supplier, has so far insulated Mr Assad from firmer international sanction. Yet even the Russians may begin to see their support as self-defeating. As the regime enters what may be its death throes, it is increasingly difficult to see how world leaders, with or without Russia, can interpose themselves to solve the crisis.

Should the regime crumple suddenly or fall back to its Alawite heartland, Syria's divided opposition will have a hard time picking up the pieces. Many hope the end will come swiftly. Some are preparing for the worst, fearing a spree of lawlessness, as in Baghdad after its fall in 2003. "We are putting together a unit to protect the national museum, the central bank and especially Alawite districts against revenge attacks," says a rebel in Damascus. "There is still no shortage of volunteers even for that, thank God."

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