

Largely Unseen, Syria Carries Out Arrest Campaign

By Deborah Amos, NPR News

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President Bashar Assad's regime has launched a new and sweeping arrest campaign of opposition activists and intellectuals in the past few weeks, according to Western analysts and diplomats.

The growing tally of arrests has gone largely unnoticed, overshadowed by the daily violence that threatens to jeopardize the U.N. peace plan. But in combination, both are undermining the already faint hopes of peace.

"It's a political decapitation," says Chris Doyle, director of the London-based Council for Arab-British Understanding. Doyle is monitoring the arrests and believes the regime aims to eliminate negotiating partners from what he calls "the rational opposition."

An Accelerating Campaign

Most analysts say the campaign began with the arrest of Mazen Darwish, a prominent human rights worker and the director of the Syrian Center for Media and Freedom of Expression. Darwish was jailed in February after a raid on his offices in the capital. Arrests have accelerated in recent weeks in what a U.N. Security Council diplomat terms a new phase in Syria, as the regime winds down an intense military campaign.

According to Syrian activists, the most recent arrests include Mahmud Issa, an opposition lawyer and activist from the coastal city of Tartous. In Damascus, Ahmad Mouaz Al Khatib, a moderate religious leader, was jailed in early May along with Salameh Kaileh, a noted leftist and a political commentator.

Last week, the two sons of Fayez Sara, founder of the Association of Syrian Journalists, were arrested after a 6 a.m. raid on Sara's house by security police, according to his lawyer. Sara had been part of a "national dialogue" sponsored by the regime last summer in an earlier attempt to open talks with the opposition.

"They are arresting left, right and center," says a Damascus-based analyst who asked not to be named for his own safety. Military operations in the central city of Homs, which has seen some of the heaviest fighting in recent months, have eased, at least for now. But the analyst said there is an accelerated security campaign.

"They are cracking down on everything," he added. "Not just humanitarian aid networks of doctors, but those who distribute toys to refugee children — these people get arrested, too," he says.

Dim Prospects For Negotiations

The arrests appear to be part of a new phase in the government's battle against the opposition. Government critics see the arrests as an attempt to undermine the peace plan spearheaded by U.N. envoy Kofi Annan. While the plan has not stopped the violence, some U.N. monitors are in Syria, and more are set to arrive soon.

"They are trying to detain, arrest and kill anyone they have differences with ahead of the U.N. monitors' arrival so they can better manage this national dialogue, which is outlined in the Annan plan," says Andrew Tabler with the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

"These are the people of civil society, those not associated with the protests. It is a campaign of intimidation," says Doyle, describing the arrests. One of the detainees, Salameh Kaileh, is a 57-year-old Marxist intellectual reportedly suffering from leukemia. He may not seem to be a threat, but Doyle says his arrest sends a message: "Even if he's sick, nobody is beyond their reach."

In a public letter to Annan, the president of a newly created political group in Damascus called the Syrian State Current warns that "the authorities have been recently targeting famous nonviolence figures," and with all these detentions, "the political process that you are trying to build will find no partner outside the prisons."

The limits of Annan's plan for a cease-fire, and especially the vague outlines for a political dialogue, have been clear from the start. The government and the armed wing of the opposition have both declared they are committed to a cease-fire plan, but neither side is actually observing it. Both sides blame the other for violations and offer videos to support the claims.

In the meantime, the Assad regime appears to be maneuvering to ensure that any political negotiation does not create the conditions for the ouster of the regime.

"They are motivated by imposing their will and restoring the fear factor and dictating changes," says Tabler.

Familiar Tactics

According to Tabler, it's a familiar tactic from a playbook that has proved successful for Assad and his father, Hafez Assad, who ruled for three decades until his death in 2000. But this time it's not working, he said.

"You have this headless opposition carved out of the youngest population in the Middle East. It's just a tornado against the Assad regime," says Tabler. "They won't be able to negotiate with anyone that could actually clear the streets and tell everybody to go home."

But the regime seems to be working from another calculation, says historian Roger Owen, of Harvard University. "A lot of what the regime is doing is trying to keep its base intact; quite a lot of those people are still sitting on the fence."

From the regime's point of view, the Syrian military can contain a low-level insurgency, while a full return to large-scale protests on the streets presents a more difficult challenge. A double bombing in a Damascus suburb on Thursday, which killed more than 50 people, has been blamed on unnamed "terrorist groups," and underscores the regime narrative that anti-government violence is the work of jihadists backed by the West and Gulf states.

"It is a narrative that the regime feels would put them in a better position with their main international backer, Russia, and their supporters," says Randa Slim, an analyst with the New America Foundation.

After the massive suicide bombing on Thursday, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov echoed Syria's state media. He condemned the suicide attack and accused outside nations of instigating violence.

"As long as they have Russia and 40-50 percent of the population," Slim says of the Assad regime, "they feel they can keep this conflict going long enough to eventually force a political settlement to their liking."

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