

**Pro-Assad Cleric Killed in Blast in Damascus**  
**By Hania Mourtada and Rick Gladstone, New York Times**  
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BEIRUT, Lebanon — A large explosion killed at least 42 people inside a central Damascus mosque on Thursday, including the top Sunni cleric in Syria, one of the major remaining Sunni supporters of President Bashar al-Assad's embattled government in the civil war.

Syria state news media called the explosion at the Eman mosque a suicide bombing carried out by "mercenary terrorists against the Syrians," and it appeared to be one of the worst attacks on worshipers since the war began two years ago. The main armed insurgent group, the Free Syrian Army, denied responsibility, saying it would have never targeted a mosque.

News of the mosque explosion overshadowed, for the moment, an escalating propaganda battle over whether chemical weapons had been used in the Syrian conflict this week. Mr. Assad's government and the opposition have accused each other of firing a missile laden with chemicals in Khan al-Assal in Aleppo Province. On Thursday, the United Nations secretary general, Ban Ki-moon, announced he had authorized a formal investigation.

There has been no confirmation that any chemical weaponry has been used. But Mr. Assad's forces are known to have stockpiles of internationally banned chemical arms, and the United States has repeatedly warned that any confirmed use of these weapons would constitute a "game changer" that could lead to American military involvement in the conflict. President Obama reiterated that warning while visiting Israel on Wednesday and Thursday.

The official Syrian news agency, SANA, said at least 84 people were wounded, some critically, in the mosque explosion, and published photographs on its Web site depicting the aftermath, with large pools of blood, shattered glass and splintered furniture littering the mosque's interior.

The cleric who was killed, Sheik Mohammad Said Ramada al-Bouti, 84, was one of the most senior figures in Sunni Islam and was easily the most important religious figure to die so far in the war, in which more than 70,000 people have been killed. His early support for the government in the conflict was considered crucial to Mr. Assad's legitimacy because the insurgency has drawn largely from Syria's majority Sunni population.

Mr. Assad is a member of the minority Alawite sect, an offshoot of Shiite Islam, and his closest advisers and loyalists are Alawites, but the president still claimed credibility as a unifier of Syria's religious sects partly because of the backing of prominent spiritual figures like Sheik Bouti.

"He was the most important Sunni clerical supporter of the Assad regime," said Joshua M. Landis, the director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma and the author of the Syria Comment blog, which has tracked the conflict's progression from a peaceful political uprising to a sectarian-tinged civil war. "It is a great blow to the regime and the remaining Sunni supporters of the president."

Mr. Landis said the sheik had been reviled by some Syrian revolutionaries when he came out early in the conflict to denounce the uprising. He was known for having a prodigious memory, was the author of at least 40 books and was ranked 23rd on a list of the most influential 500 Muslims in the world.

There was no immediate claim of responsibility for the explosion. But the SANA report blamed armed insurgents. "This massacre adds to the crimes perpetrated by the mercenary terrorists against the Syrians," the agency quoted Mr. Assad's Baath Socialist Party leadership as saying in a statement. "They target everything, including the mosques and houses of worship."

The agency quoted the Ministry of Religious Endowments as saying that Sheik Bouti had been “martyred while giving a religious lesson” in the mosque. “The malicious hands of traitors killed the great Scholar because he was the voice of Syria, the right of Syria and the image of Syria,” it quoted the ministry as saying.

Residents in the mosque’s neighborhood said they were shocked, partly because the area has been one of the most heavily secured in the capital, near the headquarters of the Baath Party and military command.

Abu Anas, 50, who lives behind the mosque and attends nightly prayers, said he had rushed there after hearing the explosion around 6 p.m. but was blocked by cordons of security men and police. Mr. Anas said he knew Sheik Bouti had staunchly supported Mr. Assad, but was still surprised that he had been targeted. “It is very bad and sinful to kill someone inside a mosque whatever his background,” he said.

Some Syrian fighters and anti-Assad activists reached by telephone said they would not be surprised if the government were responsible for the mosque explosion. “I expect the regime to be involved in this assassination,” said Abu Tamam, a member of an insurgent group called the Jundilla Battalion. “He is just a religious figure and not a state figure. He used to have influence, but today he’s an extra burden on the regime.”

But others expressed strong doubts Mr. Assad’s operatives would have killed the imam or bombed a mosque in the heart of Damascus. “The regime will never get rid of such an important figure,” said an antigovernment activist in Turkey. “He’s like the spiritual father to Bashar.”

At the United Nations on Thursday, Mr. Ban told reporters the chemical weapons investigation would begin “as soon as practically possible.” He exhorted all sides in the Syria conflict to permit “unfettered” access to an investigations team.

Susan E. Rice, the American ambassador to the United Nations, issued a statement saying that the United States welcomed the investigation, emphasizing that “any and all credible allegations” should be pursued.

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