

DECEMBER 2011

JOSEPH HOLLIDAY

## MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 2

# THE STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA IN 2011

AN OPERATIONAL AND REGIONAL ANALYSIS



*Photo Credit: April, 17, 2011—Syrian protesters shouts slogans calling for President Bashar Assad to step down during a protest to express solidarity with Syrian people in front of the Syrian embassy in Amman, Jordan. Photo courtesy of Nader Daoud.*

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## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Joseph Holliday, a Senior Research Analyst at the Institute for the Study of War, served as an Infantry and intelligence officer in the U.S. Army from June 2006 to September 2011, and continues to serve in the Army reserves. During his time on active duty, Joe deployed to East Baghdad, Iraq from November 2007 to January 2009 with the 10<sup>th</sup> Mountain Division, 2-30 Infantry Battalion. From May 2010 to May 2011 Joe deployed to Afghanistan's Kunar Province as the Intelligence Officer for 2-327 Infantry Battalion, 101st Airborne Division. He has a Bachelor's degree in History from Princeton University.

## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 2 | THE STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA IN 2011 | JOSEPH HOLLIDAY | DECEMBER 2011

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This paper provides context for understanding the cycles of violence in Syria. The first section provides a brief historical overview of sectarianism in Syria in order to understand its role in the current conflict. The second section provides a framework for understanding the operations and strategy of the Assad regime. The paper then analyzes regime security operations in seven regions: Dera'a province; Damascus; Homs and Hama in central Syria; the coastal region; Idlib province; the Arab east; and the Kurdish northeast. The paper concludes with an examination of regional and international responses to the conflict.

Sectarian politics in Syria have fundamentally complicated the problems facing the Syrian regime and its opposition. The Assad regime has not seriously considered introducing comprehensive reforms; representative government in Syria would lead to the regime's downfall and the prosecution of the former elite. Given the consequences of losing, the regime is likely to fight to the end.

The scale of unrest in Syria has made it impossible for the regime's security forces to simultaneously garrison all of the country's key terrain. The regime has maintained control over Syria's armed forces, despite limited defections. Therefore, the regime's strategy has been to maneuver elite forces to key centers of unrest and conduct large clearance operations, using selective brutality in an effort to end the crisis.

The regime successfully suppressed demonstrations in Dera'a, where the protests began in March 2011, by conducting aggressive clearance operations. This allowed the regime to focus resources elsewhere as the conflict progressed.

Homs has become the conflict's center of gravity because of its strategic location and its frequent sectarian violence. The regime attempted to quash Homs' dissent in May, but emergencies elsewhere in Syria diverted attention and resources. By the time the security forces refocused on Homs in September, peaceful demonstrations had given way to armed resistance.

Despite large demonstrations in Damascus' northeast and southwest suburbs, the regime's security presence and targeting campaign has successfully prevented demonstrations from overrunning downtown Damascus. The size of the pro-regime population in Damascus has also contributed to dampening unrest in the capital.

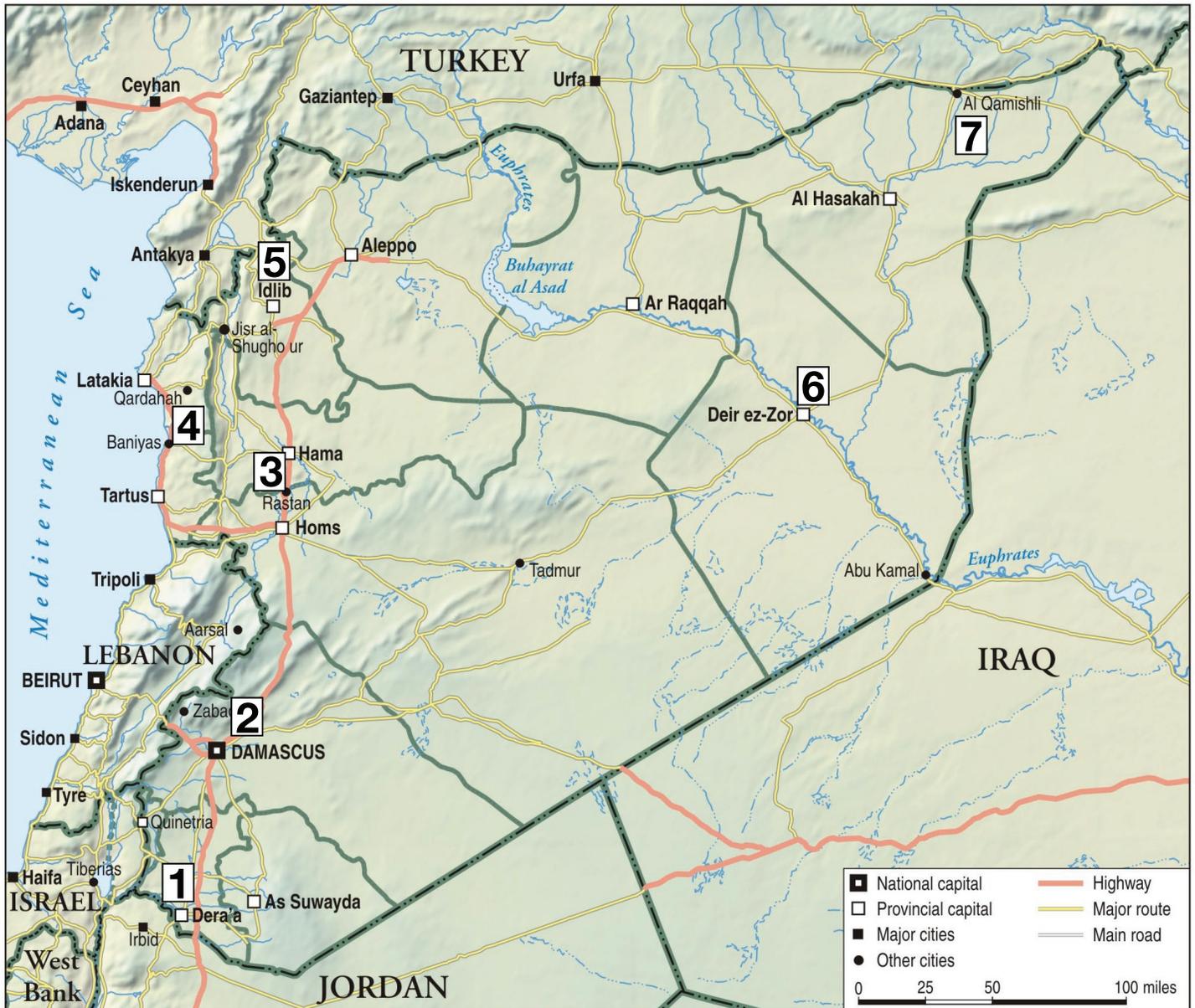
From the beginning of the uprising, the regime has deliberately consolidated its control over the Alawite homeland of Syria's coastal region. Clearance operations in Latakia, Baniyas, and Tel Kalakh targeted Sunni enclaves and shored up regime lines of communication.

The first significant armed resistance of the current crisis was a local insurrection near the border with Turkey in June. The regime successfully pushed resistance forces out of the region that month. However, consistent armed resistance in Idlib emerged in October, possibly under the leadership of the Free Syrian Army.

The regime has been able to assume risk in Syria's east. Security forces have avoided direct confrontation with the Sunni tribes of Deir ez-Zor, while Syria's Kurds largely refrained from joining the opposition movement in 2011.

Iran, Iraq, and Lebanese Hezbollah have supported the Assad regime throughout this crisis with moral, economic, and possibly material assistance. Commercial and military interests in Syria have solidified Russian support for Assad. Turkey, Assad's longtime ally, has reversed its position with a series of measures that have isolated and pressured the regime. The Arab League, led by the Sunni Arab Gulf States, has also strongly condemned the Assad regime's violent response to the protest and enacted sanctions. The United States and European Union enacted comprehensive sanctions against individuals, organizations, and Syria as a whole.

After nine months of conflict and despite mounting regional pressure, the Assad regime has not demonstrated its willingness to step down, let alone abandon its offensive security strategy. The regime's violent operations severely limited the possibility of a negotiated settlement. At the end of 2011, as both sides harden their stance and secure regional support, Syria's slide towards civil war may be unavoidable.



MAP 1 | REGIONS OF SYRIA

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# MIDDLE EAST SECURITY REPORT 2

## THE STRUGGLE FOR SYRIA IN 2011

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### AN OPERATIONAL AND REGIONAL ANALYSIS

By Joseph Holliday

This paper provides a framework for understanding the cycles of violence reported in Syria. After reviewing underlying sectarian tensions, defining the combatants involved in the violence, and considering the regime's operations, the narrative will proceed regionally rather than chronologically. By scoping down the larger issue to different regions and objectively describing the Assad regime's operations, this synopsis should provide the perspective necessary to contextualize daily reporting and better understand how the conflict has unfolded across Syria.

For the purposes of orientation and analysis, it is useful to divide Syria into seven relatively discrete regions as shown on the map above.<sup>1</sup>

From south to north they are:

1. Dera'a province
2. Damascus and its environs
3. Homs, Hama and the central Orontes plain
4. Latakia, Baniyas and the coastal region
5. Idlib province
6. The Arab east
7. The Kurdish northeast

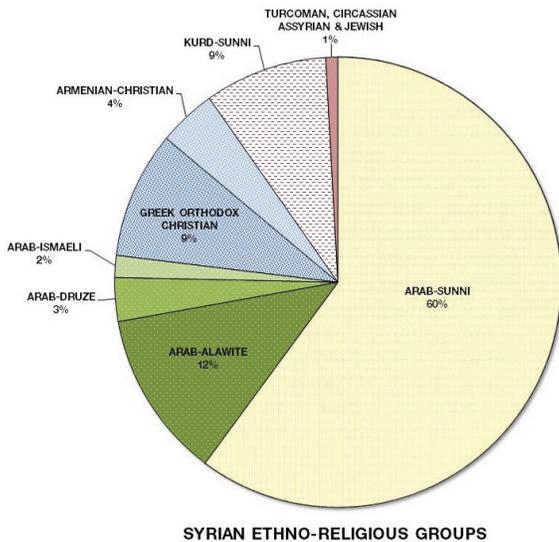
The ongoing propaganda war has marred reporting coming out of Syria; the majority of daily news reports derive either from the statements of opposition and human rights groups or from regime media outlets.<sup>2</sup> In order to mitigate the effects of misinformation, this framework's analytical foundation derives from aggregating a wide range of media sources and disassociating editorial context as much as possible. The citations here represent the most credible news stories and reports. Despite these attempts to mitigate bias, the information presented here is ultimately subject to the integrity of its sources.

### SYRIA'S SECTARIAN CONTEXT

Sectarian politics does not explain everything that has happened in Syria in 2011, but it has fundamentally

complicated the problems facing the Syrian regime and its opposition. From the beginning of the uprising, the Assad regime did not believe that introducing comprehensive reforms was a viable option: representative government in Syria would lead to the regime's downfall because Ba'ath party rule represents a narrow faction of Syrians. The regime has feared its downfall would lead to the prosecution of the former elite and the persecution of its allies. As Dutch diplomat and Syria scholar Nikolaos van Dam put it, "Bashar al-Assad was never going to sign his own death warrant."<sup>3</sup>

Syria's heterogeneous demographics include Shia, Christian and Kurdish minorities encompassed by a sixty-percent Sunni Arab majority. Syria's Shia sects include the Alawites, who constitute approximately twelve percent of Syrians but whose members include the Assad family.<sup>4</sup> The poor, rural Alawites of the coastal Jibal al 'Alawiyyin range have lived in the region since Ottoman times. During the French Mandate of the 1920s, the Syrian Army's ranks filled with minorities and in particular Alawites. The Syrian Ba'ath Party seized power in a 1963 coup by relying on a base of political power rooted in rural, heterodox Shia groups, who then enjoyed increasing enfranchisement in education, military and government positions. As Hafez al-Assad consolidated control of the Ba'ath Party through the 1960s, Alawites received increasingly preferential treatment; however, it is important to note the inherently secular outlook of the regime. Christians have enjoyed a protected status and many of the Sunni urban elite, particularly within the business community, have stayed close to the regime. Despite Syria's Sunni Arab majority, the Assad family constructed a forty-year dynasty on the foundation of Alawites in the country's military and Ba'ath Party political establishment.



Elements of the Assad regime have treated the crisis as an existential struggle for the survival of the Alawite minority and by extension modern Syria. The memory of the 1976 to 1982 Muslim Brotherhood uprising has shaped the regime's view of the current conflict, and they see it as a Salafist conspiracy to regain historical Sunni hegemony over the region. This outlook has cleaved the Alawites to the regime. What historian Hanna Batatu wrote in 1981 is just as true today: "Working for cohesion at the present juncture is the strong fear among Alawis of every rank that dire consequences for all Alawis could ensue from an overthrow of the existing regime."<sup>5</sup>

The Syrian Alawite regime enjoys support from many of the country's other minorities, who are fearful of the possibility of a Sunni Islamist government if the regime falls. Christian leaders have openly sided with the regime.<sup>6</sup> Unrest in the Druze-dominated As Suwayda province and the Ismaeli districts of Hama province, Salamiyah and Masyaf has been limited.

Despite the fact that the demonstrators have maintained a secular message, they are overwhelmingly Sunni.<sup>7</sup> Not only have they failed to attract Syria's minorities in large numbers, but they have failed to articulate what will happen to the tens of thousands of Alawites who work for the security forces and the state if the regime is overthrown. It is not a stretch to say that every Alawite family has at least one family member in the security forces.<sup>8</sup> As the conflict continues it will become harder for the protestors to forgive the Alawite security forces who have killed so many. As Van Dam wrote, "A scenario of reconciliation South African style does not seem possible."<sup>9</sup>

Given the consequences of losing, the regime is likely to fight to the end; however, it does not have enough trustworthy security forces to simultaneously garrison every major city. Therefore, the regime has adopted a strategy of selective brutality in an effort to end the crisis. While the regime's operational capacity will contract with an economy faced with increasing international isolation, the state of the Syrian economy will be unlikely to stop operations altogether. Meanwhile, the demonstrators have faced violence long past most analysts' expectations. The insurgency has enough of a foothold to continue operations, and the opposition does not want its victims to have died in vain. While it is unrealistic to expect Assad's fall in the near term, a full return to status quo is equally unrealistic. After seven months of grinding, bloody conflict, there is no end in sight.

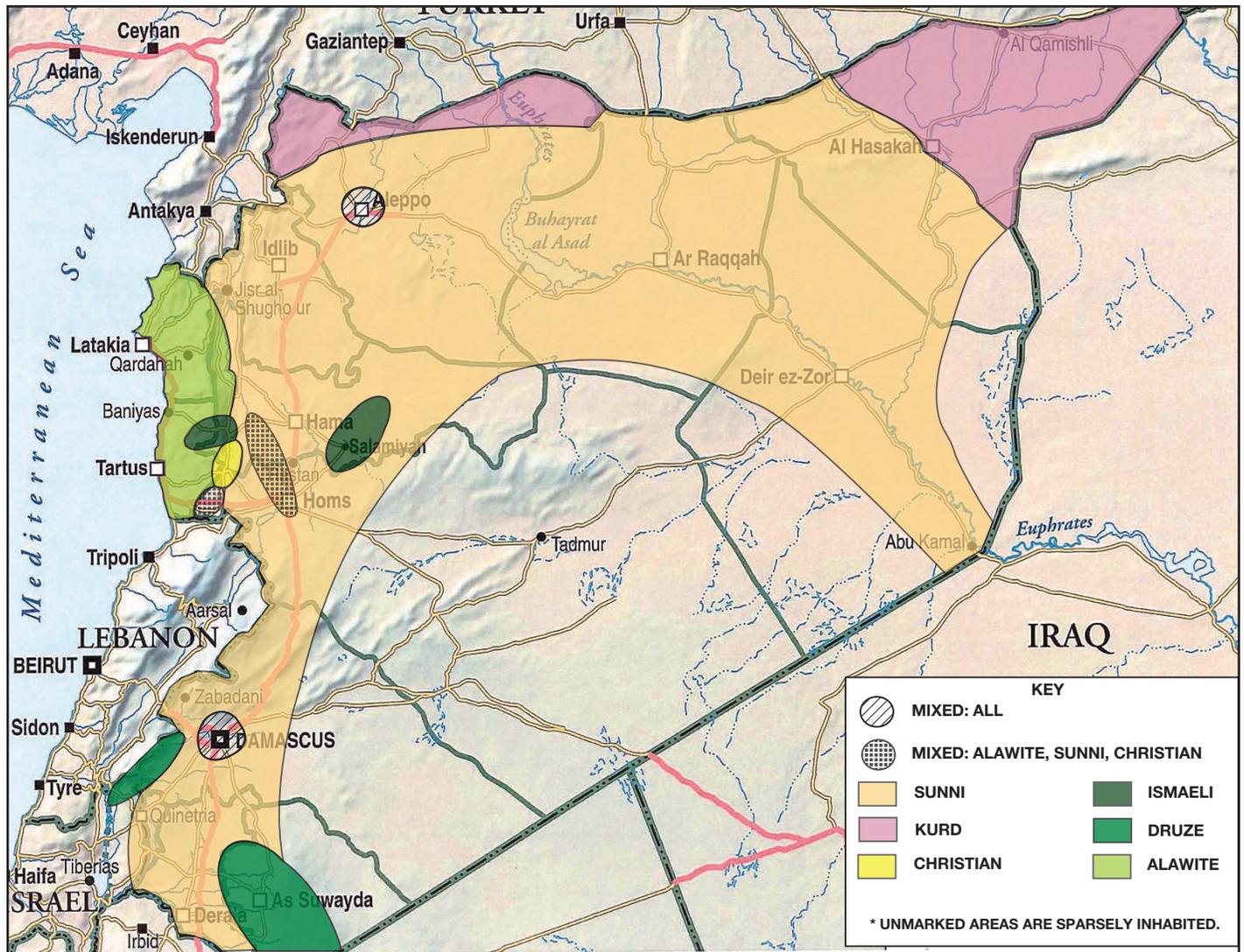
## THE ASSAD REGIME'S OPERATIONS

### Key Terms

The term *security forces* is deliberately generic, considering the complexity of the Assad regime's security apparatus and the difficulty of attributing responsibility for actions to specific units based on open source media. Each province retains its own police and intelligence services, and the purview of the regime's overlapping national intelligence agencies includes security operations. The Assad regime has a General Intelligence Directorate, Air Force Intelligence Directorate, Political Security Directorate and Department of Military Intelligence, and each enjoys a purview that exceeds typical intelligence agencies' jurisdictions. Air Force Intelligence in particular has vastly expanded missions and capabilities that date back to Hafez al-Assad.

Pro-regime paramilitary *shabiha* militias have been closely involved in the regime's overall security operations, and have committed much of the excessive violence against the opposition. By terrorizing neighborhoods beyond the reach of over-stretched uniformed security services, these paramilitaries have functioned as a stopgap. The central government's degree of control over these pro-regime elements is unclear; however, the *shabihas'* role in the Syrian uprising invites an interesting parallel with the role played by Basij paramilitaries during Iran's 2009 anti-government protests.<sup>10</sup>

Most of the Syrian Army's approximately 300,000 conscripts are Sunni, but as much as seventy percent of



MAP 2 | ETHNO-RELIGIOUS GROUPS

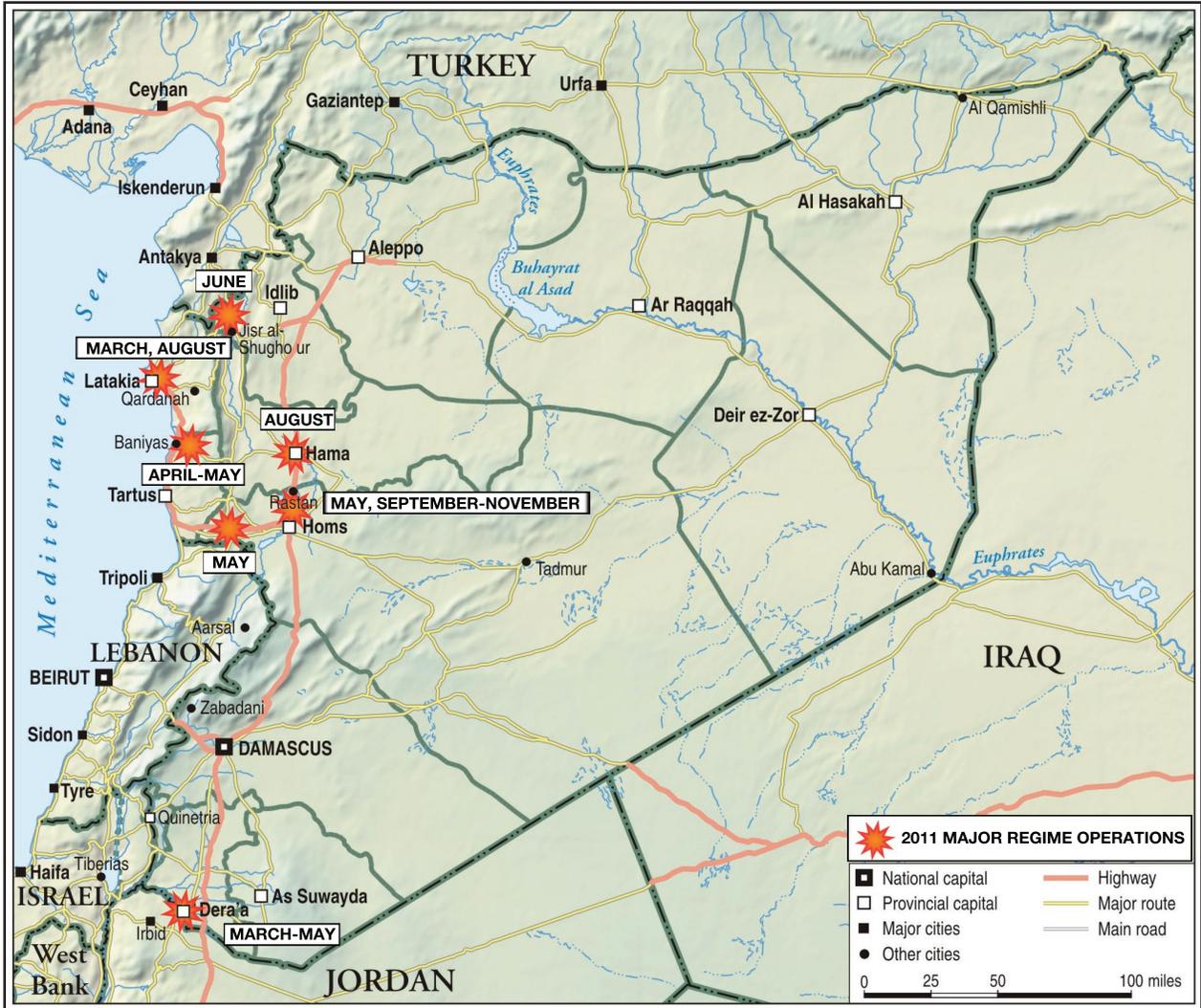
the Army’s approximately 200,000 career soldiers are Alawites, along with an estimated eighty percent of its officer corps.<sup>11</sup> These high estimates seem plausible, considering the history of the Syrian army under the Ba’ath Party. After the 1963 Ba’ath Party coup, the representation of Alawites among newly appointed officers was reportedly ninety percent.<sup>12</sup> This group of young 1960s officers are today’s flag officers and senior defense officials. Even prior to the 1960s, some sixty-five percent of non-commissioned officers belonged to the Alawite sect.<sup>13</sup>

The Assad regime has carefully utilized sectarian tensions to maintain control of its armed forces. Other than the Alawites, loyal minorities such as Druze, Christians, and Sunni Circassians occupy Syria’s key military positions: Bashar al-Assad appointed a Greek Orthodox Christian, General Daoud Rajiha, as Minister of Defense in August

2011.<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, the regime has been reluctant to employ units other than those made up of loyalists, and when it has, security personnel from the Alawite-dominated intelligence agencies have accompanied them.<sup>15</sup>

The terms *armor* and *mechanized* refer to the large numbers of armored vehicles that Syrian security forces have utilized in the conflict. Cited simply as ‘tanks’ in news reports, the Syrian military has nearly 5,000 main battle tanks and an additional 5,000 other tracked, armored vehicles.<sup>16</sup>

The terms *clearance* and *cordon-and-search* refer to the spectrum of offensive operations the security forces have conducted, which international media has typically called crackdowns or raids. A clearance operation consists of isolating, clearing and securing an entire urban area with



MAP 3 | 2011 MAJOR REGIME OPERATIONS

combined arms that include armor, infantry, paramilitary *shabiha*, and helicopters in support. These operations are designed to disperse demonstrations and create freedom of maneuver for the security forces to identify and detain activists.<sup>17</sup> Cordon-and-search operations consist of isolating, clearing and then withdrawing from a smaller population center or a neighborhood within a major city in order to search for and detain suspected activists.

The regime’s opponents inside Syria have been predominately unarmed protestors, but by the end of 2011, armed resistance in Syria became more robust. The terms *protestors* or *demonstrators* refer to the largely young, male, and Sunni throngs of Syrians who have taken to the streets to demand Assad’s ouster through unarmed, if not wholly peaceful, means.

By contrast, the terms *resistance forces* or *insurgents* refer to the growing segment of the opposition that is mounting

armed resistance. Through its media headquarters in Turkey, the Free Syrian Army has portrayed the nascent insurgency as a movement of army defectors; however, most evidence suggests that local militias have played an equal role.

*Strategy*

In order to preserve its rule in Syria, the Assad regime has attempted to maintain control of the country’s key lines of communication. The most important of these is the interior north-south highway that runs from the Jordanian border, through Damascus to Aleppo in the north. Unrest in Homs has significantly disrupted this critical artery, but the line of communication remains intact from a logistical standpoint. Homs’ position on this highway is doubly important because it is the intersection between Syria’s interior and coastal highways. The regime has had more success controlling

this linking east-west and coastal highways through its operations in Tel Kalakh and Baniyas, as discussed in the later section on the coastal region.

The scale of unrest in Syria made it impossible for the regime's security forces to simultaneously garrison all of the country's key population centers and lines of communication. Therefore, the regime's strategy has been to maneuver elite clearance forces to key centers of unrest and conduct large scale cordon and search operations. Although the regime has demonstrated the ability to conduct simultaneous large-scale operations along the inland highway and the coast, it has only been able to conduct one major inland operation at a time. This restriction to the regime's maneuver and its command and control was clearly demonstrated by the slowed pace of operations during and immediately following the regime's response to armed rebellion in Jisr al-Shughour in June and July 2011, as discussed in the section on Idlib province.

Once the regime has cleared major population centers, it has attempted to hold the terrain with local police and security forces. By raising the cost of dissent during the larger clearance operations, the regime has largely succeeded in achieving a modicum of order that local forces have been able to maintain. However, the clearest exception this successful strategy has been the continued unrest in Homs.

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has been considered synonymous with the Ba'ath Party regime and its security forces, but Assad's options have likely been constrained by the influence of the regime's inner circle, many of whom he inherited from his father, Hafez. This possibility of tension at the heart of the regime may help to explain disjointed components of the regime's early response to the crisis.<sup>18</sup> However, as the crisis continued into the summer of 2011, Assad became irreversibly tied to the regime's decisions. In this paper Assad refers not to the president alone but to the regime's inner circle.

## THE STRUGGLE BEGINS IN DERA'A

The city of Dera'a, on Syria's southern border with Jordan, witnessed the first clashes between protestors and security forces in mid-March and galvanized nationwide unrest. Dera'a is the largest city of the southern Hawran plain, a Sunni-majority agricultural region that

stretches from the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights to the Druze Mountains of As Suwayda province. The regime decided to use lethal force in an effort to contain the demonstrators, some of whom had destroyed government buildings in the town. The decisive response successfully dampened later demonstrations and became a test case for the utility of larger clearance operations.

Unarmed but destructive demonstrations in Dera'a prompted the Assad regime to respond with violence. The incarceration of several youths in Dera'a triggered demonstrations on Friday, March 18, 2011 that escalated until the following Monday, when security forces fired live ammunition against a mob that had succeeded in burning down the Ba'ath Party headquarters and other public buildings.<sup>19</sup> The regime responded decisively, driving straight to the heart of the protest movement, the Omari Mosque. The mechanized unit that seized this landmark has been frequently identified as Bashar al-Assad's brother Maher's elite 4<sup>th</sup> Armored Division, which opened fire on unarmed demonstrators and killed as many as fifteen protestors in the two-day assault.<sup>20</sup>

When protests erupted across the country on March 25 as demonstrators emerged from mosques packed for Friday prayers, the scale and breadth of the demonstrations seemed to take the Assad regime by surprise. Just one week after the first protests in Dera'a, significant demonstrations had erupted in six of twelve provincial capitals and many more towns and cities. Whether responding to the widespread protests by backing off or resetting in order to maximize flexibility, the mechanized troops withdrew from Dera'a that day. As they pulled back, security forces killed ten demonstrators in Sanamein, halfway between Dera'a and Damascus.<sup>21</sup> The clash squandered any respite Assad may have hoped to gain by withdrawing from the city and instead triggered fresh demonstrations throughout the Dera'a province's Hawran plain.

Mounting unrest in Dera'a throughout April prompted the regime to reenter the city in a bid to crush the protest movement there once and for all. On April 25, after establishing isolation checkpoints, cutting off water and electricity, troops and tanks stormed Dera'a and reoccupied the Omari Mosque after a five-day offensive. Security forces detained hundreds of suspected activists and killed as many as forty-five protestors.<sup>22</sup>

The second Dera'a operation showed the regime that it could raise the costs of dissent to a point where it could



MAP 4 | CENTRAL SYRIA

more easily maintain a modicum of stability. After a week of operations in Dera'a, mechanized forces once again withdrew from the city on May 5.<sup>23</sup> The regime did not feel the need to conduct another major operation in Dera'a for at least six months.

This is not to say that clashes between demonstrators and security forces have ended. In particular, the towns just north of Dera'a have faced repeated cordon-and-search operations.<sup>24</sup> By mid-November, an uptick in casualties suggested the regime may once again have reason to focus on Dera'a province.<sup>25</sup>

Be that as it may, the regime felt comfortable leaving the security of the city's government buildings in the hands of local security forces for at least seven months following the early March Dera'a clearance. Therefore, a key lesson the Assad regime may have taken from the Dera'a campaign is that violence could restore stability, a conclusion that may have led to the regime's critical miscalculation in Homs a month later.

## CONFLICT ESCALATES IN CENTRAL SYRIA

Syria's fertile central plain, where Homs and Hama straddle the Orontes River, has emerged as the conflict's center of gravity, having experienced the largest protests, most aggressive regime operations, and stiffest armed resistance. Unrest in Homs, and to a lesser extent in Hama, has separated the country physically and exposed deep ethnic rifts. The regime was able to quell the uprising in Hama through force, just as it had in Dera'a; however, offensive operations in Homs have only succeeded in encouraging armed resistance and sectarian violence, which have provided further justification for the regime's use of force.

Unrest in Homs and Hama threatens a critical line of communication that connects Syria's two most populous cities and largest economic centers, Damascus and Aleppo. A messy combination of insurgent and sectarian attacks has disrupted travel on the primary north-south highway, meaningfully degrading the country's connectedness. Additionally the majority of Syria's petroleum products traveling by pipeline from eastern

oil fields converge at the oil refineries in Homs before continuing through the Homs Gap, between the Jibal al 'Alawiyyin and the Anti-Lebanon mountain range, to the port of Tartus.

The region's role in the debate about whether the current conflict will evolve into a sectarian-based civil war has been as critical as its geographical significance. Homs and Hama are wrestling with the demographic challenge resulting from the policies of the 1960s and 1970s that encouraged Alawite families to migrate from the coastal mountains to the central plain, where they either settled in rural areas around the cities and in the southeast neighborhoods of Homs city itself.<sup>26</sup> Since the start of the uprising, many Alawite families have moved back to Latakia and Tartus provinces; others have banded together in rural, Alawite-majority towns such as Rabia, ten kilometers west of Hama.<sup>27</sup>

Hama was not a significant site of opposition activity until early June 2011, but the scale of the demonstrations in the city that month must have rattled the regime. Hama's late entry into the conflict is understandable, given the city's last bout with the Assad regime, in which tens of thousands were killed in the 1982 Hama Massacre at the conclusion of the Muslim Brotherhood Uprising. In early June, a significant uptick in violence left more than thirty protesters dead in the city.<sup>28</sup> After months of military occupation, troops and armored vehicles withdrew from Hama at the end of June, sparking what many called the largest demonstrations of the conflict.<sup>29</sup>

In a month-long tactical pause tanks stayed out of downtown Hama through July, as the Assad regime put a halt to all major operations across the country. Perhaps the security forces needed to reset after three grueling months of operations, such as the June clearance operations around northern Idlib province's Jisr al-Shughour (discussed in a later section). Perhaps the regime's leadership paused to take stock of the success of its strategy up to that point, particularly in light of some defections that had occurred. Whatever the reason behind this restraint, the scale of the protests that resulted from leniency on the part of the security forces may have once again reinforced the lesson that stability required offensive security operations.

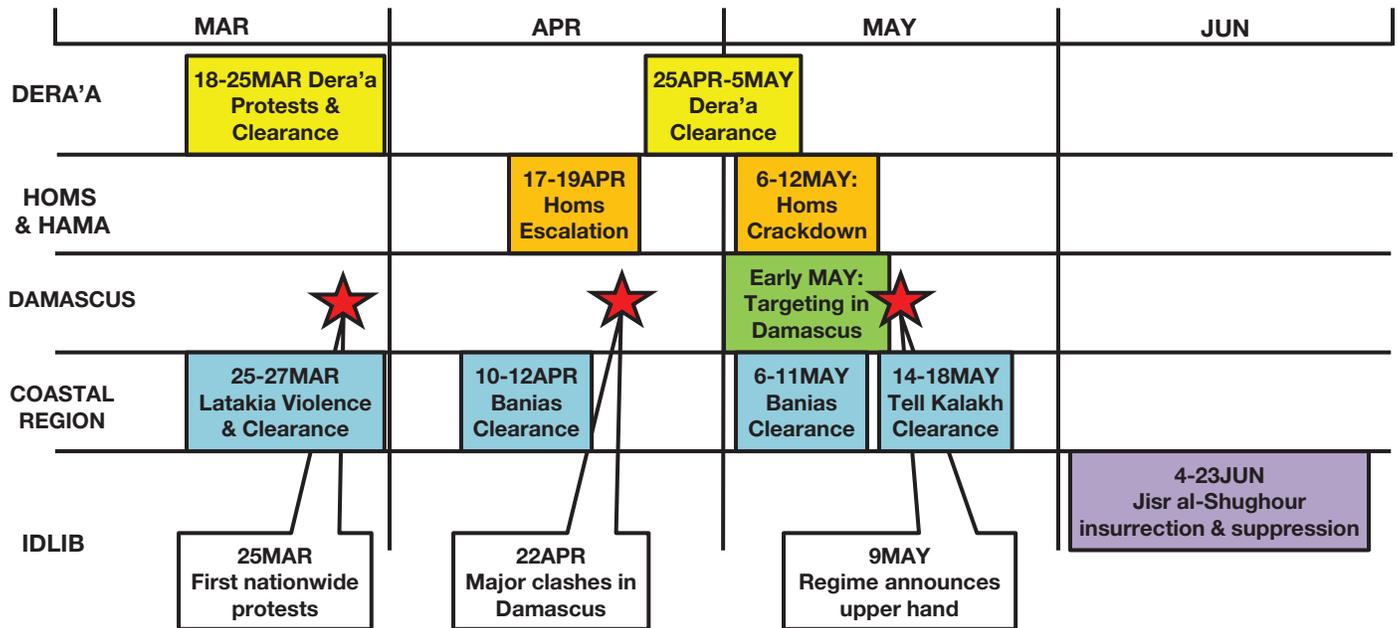
At the end of July, after a month of relative restraint, troops and armored vehicles stormed Hama in an operation timed to begin at the start of Ramadan. During the first three days of the operation, security forces

shelled the city before taking central Assi Square at the cost of an estimated 200 dead protestors.<sup>30</sup> Syrian news agencies reported the deaths of at least eight soldiers, but the operation met little armed resistance as compared to Homs.<sup>31</sup> After two weeks of clearance operations in Hama, security forces once again withdrew. The regime did not have to conduct another major operation in Hama for at least three months, once again reinforcing its perceptions of the success of the clearance strategy.

While offensive operations tamped down demonstrations in Hama, Homs became more violent with each offensive. Homs led the uprising from the outset: March clashes in Dera'a sparked unrest, but it was the April escalation in Homs that fanned the flames. On April 19, after days of clashes, the regime decided to violently disperse protestors staging a sit-in in Homs' Clock Tower Square, the day after President Assad pledged to end the hated emergency law.<sup>32</sup> The situation in Homs seemed to harden regime resolve to quell the protests. After unsuccessful attempts to break up the demonstrations, the Interior Ministry bluntly forbade protests "under any banner whatsoever," and security forces violently broke up the protests by firing into the crowd from rooftops around the square and following up with the riot police's cudgels.<sup>33</sup> The intensification of violence in Homs elicited a nationwide reaction, and on April 22, a day opposition organizers called "The Great Friday," security forces killed more than 100 demonstrators across the country, marking the bloodiest day of the first six months of conflict.<sup>34</sup>

The Assad regime may have hoped to quell the uprising in Homs just as it had in Dera'a, by thoroughly clearing the city, detaining suspected opposition members, holding key terrain, and firing on anyone who resisted. On May 6, immediately on the heels of the second Dera'a operation, the armored units that had isolated Homs for one week cut all communications in the city and entered with tanks, tearing down roadblocks and arresting scores of military-aged males.

Over the course of two weeks, the regime conducted major operations in Dera'a, Homs, and coastal Baniyas (discussed in a later section), and it announced on May 9 that it had gained the upper hand over the opposition in Syria.<sup>35</sup> After one week of operations in Homs, the last tanks withdrew from the Bab Amr neighborhood, just as they had withdrawn from Dera'a a week earlier. The regime's use of force may have quieted Dera'a and Hama, but in Homs it had the opposite effect. As the



conflict dragged on, the opposition increasingly resorted to armed resistance, particularly in the towns in Rastan district to the north of the city.

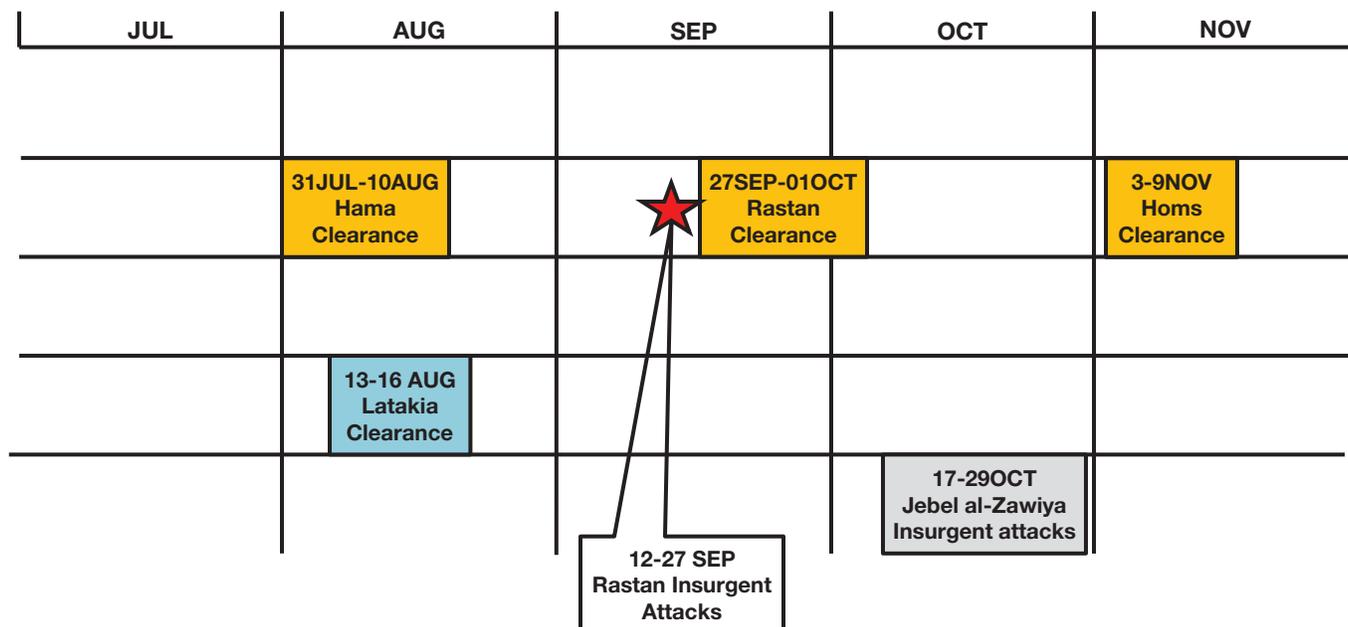
The fact that the regime conducted sequential operations in Dera'a and Homs, and a simultaneous operation in Baniyas may illuminate its command and control capabilities and restrictions. The tanks that pulled out of Dera'a on May 5 clearly did not participate in the May 6 Homs assault, 250 kilometers to the north. Therefore the security forces chose to conduct these operations one at a time, despite the fact that enough forces were available for both. On the other hand, the regime initiated major clearance operations in Baniyas while it was engaged in Homs, suggesting not only that it had enough assets for both, but also that it entrusted at least one of the operations to a subordinate command.

Two weeks after the early May 2011 Homs clearance, insurgents killed three soldiers during a series of raids in Rastan district, but the regime was not able to consolidate its gains around Homs.<sup>36</sup> The early June crisis in Jisr al-Shughour (discussed in the section on Idlib province) diverted the regime's attention and resources, underscoring its maneuver and its command and control restrictions. Once the security forces completed these operations in northern Syria, and after the July tactical pause the security forces spent August focused on operations in inland Hama and coastal Latakia. Therefore, the regime was unable to refocus on Homs until September.

By September 2011, the Rastan district of Homs province had become the center of the maturing armed resistance against the Assad regime. The strategically located and Sunni-majority Rastan controls a chokepoint between Homs and Hama where the inland highway crosses the Orontes River. Former Defense Minister and Assad confidant Mustafa Tlas is from the city, and many fellow Sunni military officers hail from the district.<sup>37</sup> Rastan's military membership supports activists' claims that the backbone of the resistance movement is made up of deserters from the Syrian Army who had refused to kill demonstrators. Around Homs, these deserters formed the Khaled bin al-Walid Brigade of the Free Syrian Army. Starting in mid-September, the resistance had overrun the home of the city's spy chief, conducted two lethal ambushes on the road north of Homs, and even captured a Syrian Army colonel from Qardahah, Assad's home town.<sup>38</sup>

Starting September 27, the security forces besieged and captured Rastan in an operation that required 250 armored vehicles and lasted four days. According to one activist, the resistance forces in Rastan numbered approximately 100 defectors and 600 other men under arms.<sup>39</sup> Regime military spokesmen stated that seven soldiers and police had been killed and more than thirty injured during the operation, but despite this resistance the security forces retook the city.<sup>40</sup>

While the Rastan operation demonstrated the size of the insurgency in central Syria, it also showed its weakness.



The armed Syrian resistance has lacked fundamental characteristics that the rebels who overthrew President Muammar Qaddafi in Libya relied on. Critically, the resistance has not been able to hold terrain from which it can operate and organize, unlike Libya's rebels, who enjoyed a liberated Benghazi in which to organize. In addition, Syria's armed resistance has been made up of only small units of deserters and local insurgents, all of whom have been lightly armed, whereas whole units of Libya's army defected.

Homs became a focal point in another significant way: stories from Homs have more than anywhere else introduced the specter of sectarian bloodshed. While security forces focused on rooting out defectors and insurgents in Rastan in late September, a string of assassinations took place in Homs that included a number of academics and doctors, none of whom had clear ties to the protestors or were directly involved in the regime's suppression of dissent. Speculation as to the perpetrators ranges from the regime's standard "armed gangs" to regime loyalists attempting to stoke sectarianism.<sup>41</sup>

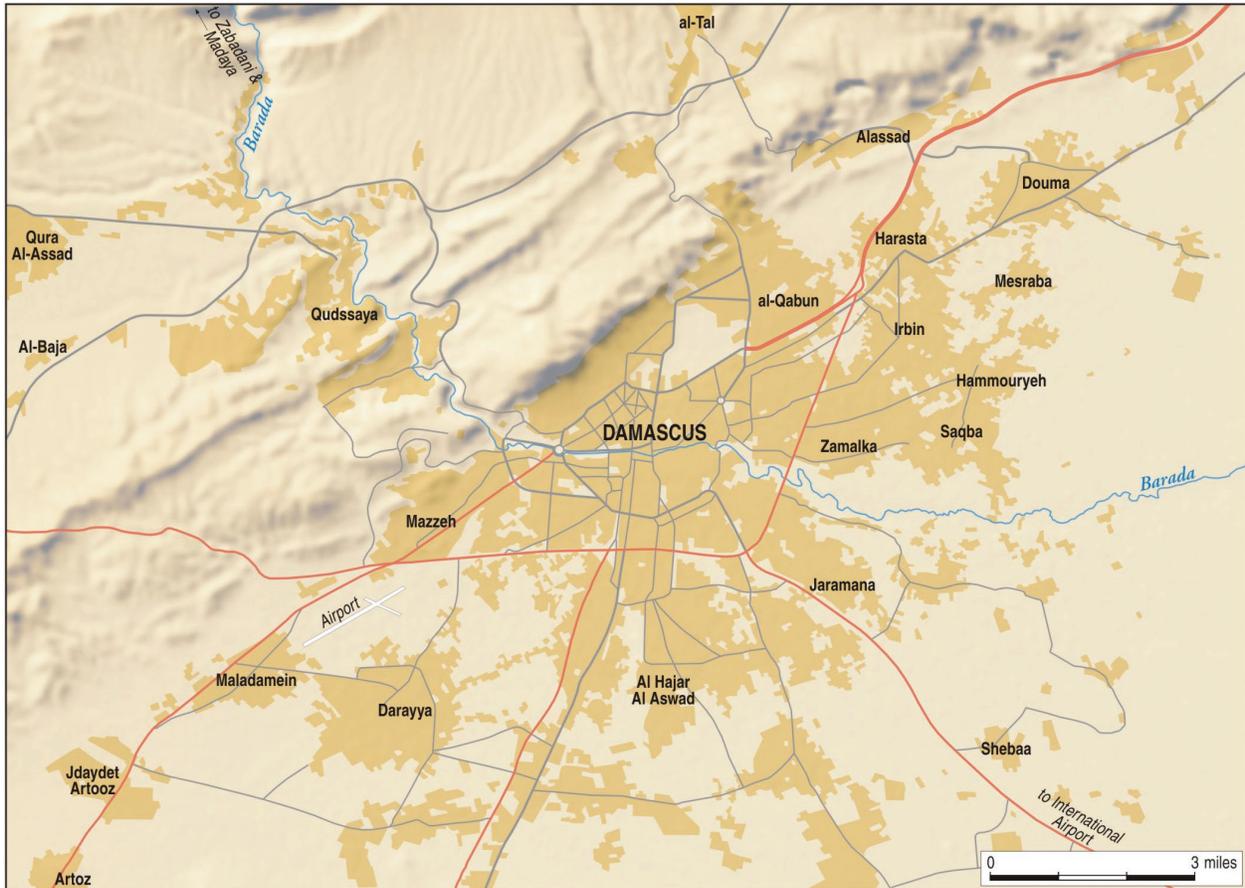
Sectarian tension similarly gripped the towns around Homs. Journalist Nir Rosen recounted his conversations with residents in the isolated Alawite-majority town of Rabia, whose ranks swelled as neighboring Sunni villages expelled Alawite families. The people of Rabia avoided driving near Sunni towns for fear of being stopped at a rogue checkpoint and killed.<sup>42</sup> These fears have been well

founded. In early November 2011 unknown assailants stopped a bus on the road north of Homs and executed nine Alawite passengers. The following day, thirteen Sunni factory workers were similarly pulled from a bus and executed in the same area.<sup>43</sup>

The role of armed resistance and sectarian bloodshed has been critical in Homs as it has helped the Syrian government justify its violence against demonstrators both internally and internationally. When the Arab League proposed a plan for returning stability to Syria in late October, the Assad regime renewed its offensive in Homs, pointing to increasing armed resistance in the area.<sup>44</sup> The regime's decision to conduct another Homs clearance operation in early November demonstrated its unwillingness to reform, but it also represented a deliberate response against armed resistance.

## THE REGIME CONTROLS DAMASCUS AND ITS SUBURBS

Despite the scale of protests in the northeast and southwest boroughs of the Syrian capital, the opposition has been unable to overrun the government offices of downtown Damascus. One reason Damascus protests have not been decisive is that the large population of disenfranchised Sunnis has been matched by the large population of security forces, namely the Republican Guard, which has managed to suppress dissent. The



**MAP 5 | DAMASCUS**

regime has coupled its strong presence in the city with detention and targeting operations that have successfully undercut the opposition's ability to organize. Aside from the security forces, large segments of the Damascus population have continued to support the Assad regime, which has also contributed to dampening unrest.

Damascus joined the rest of Syria in protest over the Dera'a operation on March 25, 2011, but the protests in its suburbs intensified after the mid-April escalation in Homs. Security forces did what they could to preempt a nationwide call for protest by locking down sections of the city. Despite these measures, the scale of the demonstrations on April 22, "The Great Friday," led security forces in Damascus to fire on demonstrators in the Ma'adamia, Zamalka and Douma neighborhoods.<sup>45</sup>

The security forces then initiated a more proactive targeting and detention campaign in the city. For example, on May 5 tanks and troops isolated the Saqba neighborhood, cut off communications ahead of a house-to-house roundup in which the security services detained scores of military-aged males.<sup>46</sup> Simultaneously,

intelligence officers arrested leading opposition figure Riad Seif at a demonstration, as well as an elderly politician who had recently criticized the regime, and a prominent religious leader.<sup>47</sup>

The regime's targeting capabilities derive from deeply entrenched and effective intelligence agencies, but some reporting has suggested the Syrian regime has also used electronic eavesdropping and communications jamming techniques to target the opposition.<sup>48</sup> This signals intelligence (SIGINT) technology may be a good example of the type of equipment Obama administration officials have accused the Iranian Qods Force of providing for the Syrian government's use.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, the regime has shown the ability to target and jam opposition's use of social networking sites.<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, it is reasonable to assume the regime gleans further intelligence from torturing detainees, many of whom die in custody. As of mid-August, Amnesty International had recorded details of fourteen deaths in custody in Damascus alone, and most of the recovered bodies showed signs of torture.<sup>51</sup>

The number of regime supporters in Damascus has also

had a dampening effect on the success of major protests in Damascus. Nir Rosen related how an opposition demonstration in early July in the wealthy Mazzeh district brought the locals out to attack the demonstrators.<sup>52</sup> On October 26, 2011 tens of thousands of regime supporters packed central Umayyad Square in a rally that rivaled the largest anti-government demonstrations. While these rallies were clearly staged by the regime, as journalist Robert Fisk pointed out, these thousands of people fully supported Assad, even if out of the fear of a Syria without his regime. “But if they were coerced, it was by stories from further north,” Fisk wrote, “I spoke to twelve men and women. Five spoke of relatives in the army killed [by insurgents] in Homs.”<sup>53</sup> In mid-November, crowds of regime supporters even stormed the Qatari and Saudi embassies in Damascus after these Arab League leaders voted to suspend Syria’s membership.<sup>54</sup>

In a surprising mid-November development, Free Syrian Army forces staged a coordinated attack on the Air Force Intelligence Headquarters in Damascus’ northwest Harasta suburb.<sup>55</sup> September and October reports of defections and armed resistance in the Zabadani valley, thirty kilometers northwest of the city, indicated the possibility of an emerging insurgency in the Damascus area.<sup>56</sup> In the November attack, the munitions used and coordination required to successfully conduct an attack so close to the capital may indicate that the maturing insurgency receives external logistical support.

## ALAWITES SECURE THE COASTAL REGION

The coastal Sunni population within majority-Alawite provinces of Latakia and Tartus was under pressure from pro-regime *shabiha* militia and security forces since the first stages of the 2011 conflict. Seventy-five percent of Syria’s Alawites live in Latakia and Tartus, and over the past forty years of Assad family rule, the Alawites increasingly moved down from their historic mountain strongholds, such as the Assad clan’s Qardahah, to populate the rural coastal plain.<sup>57</sup> By contrast Sunnis have dominated the coastal cities since Ottoman times. The 1950s influx of Sunni Palestinian refugees into the Ramal neighborhood of Latakia city only exacerbated ethnic tensions.

This ethnic dynamic helps to explain why the cities of Latakia and Baniyas were the focus of many of the Assad regime’s first clearance operations. It is difficult to

determine whether the regime implemented a deliberate plan that included using *shabiha* militia to stir up conflict with Sunni populations or whether the violence erupted between these groups naturally. However the violence began, when uniformed security forces moved in to restore order they sided with the *shabiha*. It is plausible that some members of the Alawite establishment have hedged against the possibility of a post-Assad Syria by consolidating the Alawite hold on Syria’s primary port. Either way the result has been the displacement of Sunnis away from this Alawite-majority area.

On March 25, 2011 the Friday after the initial escalation of the conflict in Dera’a, Latakia became the second city to receive the Assad regime’s attention when *shabiha* violence preceded major clearance operations. The security forces established checkpoints, isolating Latakia and, according to some reports, began to bus in regime supporters from the surrounding countryside.<sup>58</sup> Over the next two days, armed regime supporters clashed with protestors and armed resistance in the city. The Syrian government blamed the violence on fundamentalists and Palestinian refugees from southern Latakia’s Ramal neighborhood, but residents accused the pro-government gangs.<sup>59</sup> Before the violence escalated on both sides, the uniformed security services moved in and established a modicum of control over the city but opened fire on unarmed demonstrators in the process.<sup>60</sup>

The displacement of Latakia’s Sunni population, particularly its Palestinians, continued through the summer, as former residents moved inland to Sunni-majority areas. As early as June 5, 2011 large numbers of Latakia’s Sunni residents were fleeing north into Idlib province and Turkey’s Hatay province.<sup>61</sup> In mid-August, immediately following the brutal Hama operation, security forces conducted another major clearance operation to suppress Sunni dissent in the Ramal neighborhood. The Syrian government said security forces fought extremists, while activists claimed the regime used unwarranted brutality, including naval gunfire.<sup>62</sup> While naval gunfire is likely to be an exaggeration, the end result was the wholesale displacement of the Sunni Palestinian Ramal neighborhood, as much of the population fled for Idlib province.<sup>63</sup>

The city of Baniyas, forty kilometers down the coast from Latakia, also faced early militia violence and security operations. In early April, even before violence escalated in Homs, security forces massed armored



MAP 6 | NORTHWEST SYRIA

vehicles outside the city ahead of a coordinated clearance. Judging by the low casualty figures, the operation met relatively little resistance from demonstrators, but the assets committed so early in the unrest underscore the importance the regime has attached to Baniyas. During the operation both *shabiha* and security forces directed intense fire against the suburb of Bayda before beating and detaining scores of military-aged males.<sup>64</sup> Like Latakia's Ramal neighborhood, Bayda is a Sunni enclave surrounded by Alawite communities.<sup>65</sup>

During the early April operation, nine soldiers were killed in what opposition sources described as execution for refusal to fire on crowds; however, considerable evidence suggests otherwise. As Syria scholar and long-time observer Joshua Landis showed, news agencies cited opposition reports and questionable YouTube footage purporting to show that the soldiers had been killed for refusing to fire.<sup>66</sup> The balance of evidence points to a true ambush by anti-regime forces.<sup>67</sup> It is important to remember that the Assad regime's often questionable "armed gangs" refrain is based on at least a grain of truth.

In early May, as security forces prepared to enter Homs, the regime leveraged whatever capabilities it could muster for a renewed clearance of Baniyas. Activists reported that as many as 100 armored vehicles deployed to the southern outskirts of the city and that the regime jammed not only cellular and landline phones but even satellite phones.<sup>68</sup> Entering the city at dawn on May 7, security forces killed demonstrators and captured hundreds in the sweep, once again targeting the Bayda suburb.<sup>69</sup> According to the testimony of army defector Ali Hassan Satouf, the uniformed security forces were as involved in the intimidation and detention campaign as the *shabiha*. When his unit was sent to defeat "armed fighters with sophisticated weapons," he found only unarmed civilians. The soldiers broke into houses, stole property, and arrested dozens of men, which prompted women to throw stones at the convoy. The unit responded by opening fire and killing four women.<sup>70</sup> This and other instances of violence in and around Baniyas led many Sunni enclaves in the city to relocate elsewhere as they did in Latakia.

As the regime consolidated its control of the coastal region during the spring, security forces also cleared the town of Tel Kalakh in mid-May. The Sunni enclave sits on the major highway that links the primary north-south highway to the coastal highway, less than five kilometers from the predominately-Sunni areas of northern Lebanon and is surrounded by Alawite villages. According to an Amnesty International report, regime marksmen killed a young man near the village center, prompting an exodus that security forces and militia countered with detention checkpoints and ambushes at the town's outskirts. Many fled into Lebanon and scores of men were detained, many of whom died in custody.<sup>71</sup>

Three factors may explain what prompted this large and thorough clearance operation. First, a clash in Tel Kalakh at the beginning of May had left police officers dead. Second, it is possible that Tel Kalakh was being used as a weapons smuggling hub for arms moving out of northern Lebanon destined for the resistance in Homs. Finally, elements of the Alawite regime may have been eager to displace a Sunni enclave that occupies a chokepoint on the only highway linking Syria's coast to its interior. The long recognized significance of this east-west corridor known as the Homs Gap led the 12<sup>th</sup> Century Knights Hospitaller to construct the now famous Krak de Chevalier, just ten kilometers north of Tel Kalakh, in order to control the flow of goods and people from the Mediterranean coast to the interior.

Whether underlying ethnic tensions caused the violence or some element within the Assad regime deliberately planned this outcome, operations in Latakia, Baniyas and Tel Kalakh shored up regime lines of communication and consolidated Alawite population centers. The consolidation of minority populations on the coast has been accelerated by the approximately fifteen thousand Alawite, Ismaeli and Christian families who have left the volatile Homs area and moved to Tartus.<sup>72</sup>

## ARMED REBELLION BEGINS IN IDLIB PROVINCE

The northern Idlib province is a Sunni stronghold that has offered significant armed resistance to the Assad regime. In early June Sunni militiamen, probably in concert with army defectors, killed a large number of regime security forces in Jisr al-Shughour in the first instance of armed rebellion against the state. The insurgency has been alive and well in Idlib province, even

after Homs became the center of armed resistance.

Idlib shares a jagged mountain border with Turkey's Hatay province in the northwest, but the majority of the province sits on high plateau above Hama province's fertile al Ghab valley. At the north end of al Ghab, the city of Jisr al Shughour enjoys relative isolation and controls the northern route to Syria's coastline. The highground that dominates the area between the highway to Aleppo and al Ghab is known as Jebel al-Zawiya, where a capable insurgency emerged in the fall of 2011.

The early June 2011 outbreak of armed rebellion in Jisr al-Shughour represents a major inflection point in the escalating struggle for Syria. On June 4, regime security forces positioned on the roof of the main post office fired at a funeral demonstration, leading angry mourners to set fire to the building, killing eight security officers in the process.<sup>73</sup> The violence quickly spread as the demonstrators overran and seized weapons from a local police station.<sup>74</sup>

As violence escalated in the days that followed, a portion of the security forces defected. Secret police and intelligence officers accompanying army units reportedly sparked defections when they executed soldiers who had refused to fire on civilians.<sup>75</sup> Shortly afterward Syrian news reported that twenty soldiers were killed in an ambush en route to relieve beleaguered security forces inside the city.<sup>76</sup> Hours later they reported many more deaths when the security headquarters was overrun.<sup>77</sup> Whatever the final body count, the regime suffered its first serious setback.

While the opposition eagerly underscored the role of defectors, the regime maintained that "armed groups" were responsible for the violence. In the case of Jisr al-Shughour both are almost certainly true. A series of accounts support the claim that soldiers did defect in Jisr al-Shughour, and the degree of casualties inflicted on security forces there lends credence to the story.<sup>78</sup> Moreover, the event may have encouraged others to defect. Days later, a Lieutenant Colonel defected with a number of his soldiers in nearby Bdama as security forces closed in on Jisr al-Shughour from the west.<sup>79</sup>

However, it is also likely that local militia played a role in the violence. Jisr al-Shughour was the scene of similar violence in 1980 when residents destroyed the Ba'ath Party headquarters, chased off the police, and

seized weapons and ammunition. Shortly afterwards, the security forces seized the town and executed more than 100 of the town's residents.<sup>80</sup> Jisr al-Shughour had a score to settle with the regime.

In the face of a renewed uprising, the regime brought significant military assets to bear against the town. Isolating the western approaches, the military moved in from the East and South with some 200 military vehicles and helicopter gunships in support. While there may have been some clashes and roadside bombs at the town's entrance, the display of combat power sent the rebellious population running for the hills of the Turkish border.<sup>81</sup> Syrian military forces continued in pursuit of the defectors and insurgents, rolling tanks into Bdama a week later and into a makeshift refugee camp in Khirbet la-Jouz a week after that. The net result was that as many as 10,000 people fled across Turkey's border.<sup>82</sup>

By late October 2011, signs of an increasingly capable insurgency began to emerge in the Jebel al-Zawiya area. On October 17, activists reported that suspected army defectors had blown up a military vehicle near Ehssem, killing an officer and three soldiers.<sup>83</sup> The next day a sniper killed a military intelligence officer close to the Turkish border, and suspected insurgents destroyed an oil pipeline east of Saraqib.<sup>84</sup> Insurgents also attacked a heavily fortified checkpoint outside Ma'arat al-Numan, killing seven soldiers in late October.<sup>85</sup> Days later, on October 29, insurgents ambushed a military bus, killing ten security officers near the village of Kafr Nabuda.<sup>86</sup>

While an operational relationship between the Free Syrian Army headquarters in Turkey and armed resistance in Homs would be unlikely due to communications and logistics restraints, such a relationship is plausible in Idlib. A *New York Times* article published shortly after this increase in insurgent activity suggested a link between Colonel Riad al-Asaad's Free Syrian Army in refuge in Turkey and these attacks.<sup>87</sup> While there is little hard evidence to suggest that the Free Syrian Army is anything more than a media outlet, the Assad regime has long alleged that militants have been transporting weapons from Turkey.<sup>88</sup> Given the proximity to refugee camps in Hatay to Jebel al-Zawiya, logistical and even operational relationships seem at least plausible. This connection has been bolstered by the fact that Colonel al-Assad, the leader of the Free Syrian Army, is from this area.<sup>89</sup>

Despite the fact that clashes between protestors and

security forces have continued in Idlib's major cities since the outbreak of unrest, the distinguishing characteristic of this northern border area has been armed rebellion, from the Jisr al-Shughour insurrection in June to the hit-and-run guerrilla attacks that started in the fall. Like the resistance in Homs, these insurgents have been made up of both army deserters and Sunni militiamen. Because Idlib does not share Homs' combustible ethnic makeup, the insurgency there did not share Homs' degree of sectarian complications.

## THE REGIME ASSUMES RISK IN THE EAST

Regime security forces in eastern Syria have largely preferred to keep the Arab tribes living in the oil-rich areas along the Euphrates River around Deir ez-Zor at arm's length.<sup>90</sup> Rather than risk full-scale confrontation with this deeply tribal and relatively well-armed population, the security forces positioned mechanized capabilities at the city's outskirts starting in June, particularly after the defections in Jisr al-Shughour.<sup>91</sup> Assad may have feared that escalating violence in the region could encourage tribal confederates from Iraq's Anbar province to join in the resistance. Indeed, the regime has accused Iraq-based Sunni insurgents of contributing to the violence since April.<sup>92</sup>

Despite the desire to avoid escalation in the east, security forces have ventured into Deir ez-Zor and Abu Kamal, on the Iraqi border, for brief clearance operations and more targeted raids in an effort to tamp down protests, particularly during the month of August 2011. Secret police even arrested, tortured and killed key tribal leader Sheikh Nawaf al-Bashir in a move that triggered a short-term backlash in Deir ez-Zor but has not fundamentally changed the region's dynamic.<sup>93</sup>

Syria's Kurdish northeast has been a traditional source of unrest but has not experienced the levels of violence found elsewhere, either because the regime has avoided confrontation there or because the Kurds have waited to see how the broader conflict develops. In March 2004, the fall of Saddam Hussein encouraged the Kurdish autonomous movement, and Kurds in the northeastern border town of Qamishli started a riot after a football match, raising Kurdish flags. The violence escalated as the rioters burned local Syrian Ba'ath party offices, and the local security forces killed seven and wounded many

in the crowd.<sup>94</sup> The regime then deployed thousands of troops and helicopters to quash the growing rebellion. In March 2005 and again in March 2008, violence erupted as demonstrators marched in memory of the 2004 clash.

In 2011, a number of factors have contributed to dampening the Kurdish resistance movement. The October 7 murder of prominent Kurdish activist Mishaal Tomo sparked the largest protests in Qamishli to date, but the estimated 50,000 protestors were only a small percentage of the Syrian Kurdish population which numbers around two million. One reason for this is that in early April Bashar al-Assad has promised to grant citizenship to some 300,000 Kurdish refugees from Turkey, discouraging Kurdish political parties from joining the opposition.<sup>95</sup>

Furthermore, the Kurdish Worker's Party (PKK), a violent separatist movement that has repeatedly attacked Turkey, has operated from northwest Syria and has not been eager to jeopardize its safe-haven. The existence of this armed group has both encouraged Assad to treat the Kurds more carefully and dampened Kurds' willingness to join the peaceful opposition movement, for fear of being unfairly conflated with the PKK. Meanwhile the mainstream Sunni Arab opposition may have been afraid of association with the PKK because the Assad regime could point to this as justification for his violent campaign.<sup>96</sup>

## REGIONAL IMPLICATIONS AND INTERNATIONAL CONCERNS

Syria lies at the heart of the Middle East. Because of this central location, states in the region have watched developments closely and have sought to affect their outcome. Concerns about regional involvement prompted Bashar al-Assad to underscore the risk in a late-October interview with London's Sunday Telegraph: "Syria is the faultline. If you play with it the whole region will erupt."<sup>97</sup> The regime's practice of blaming Syria's unrest on "foreign conspiracy" is questionable, but the conflict in Syria should be understood in the context of regional competition between Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf States.

The Assad regime is a vital ally for Iran, made doubly significant because of its role as the primary line of

communication to Lebanese Hezbollah. Though Iran tempered its public support for Assad in September, privately it is committed to ensuring the survival of the regime.<sup>98</sup> Iran's Qods Force has likely helped to advise and equip the Assad's security forces with electronic eavesdropping, jamming, and crowd control equipment and techniques. Lebanese Hezbollah has continued to affirm its support for the Assad regime since the beginning of unrest in Syria.<sup>99</sup> The opposition believes that fighters from Iran and Hezbollah have participated directly in the regime's security operations.<sup>100</sup> In a rare December 2011 public appearance, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah even accused the United States of seeking to destroy Syria "to make up for its defeat in Iraq."<sup>101</sup>

Meanwhile Iraq's Shia-led government has increasingly aligned itself with Iran in support of the Assad regime, concerned that the downfall of Assad may embolden the Sunni tribes of neighboring Anbar province to resist the central government and make for an unfriendly Sunni-dominated western neighbor. In early December, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki offered his clearest support to the Assad regime when he said, "The killing or removal of President Bashar in any way will explode into an internal struggle between two groups, and this will have an impact on the region."<sup>102</sup> In late November, Sunni groups in Anbar province began to claim responsibility for attacking Iraqi Shia militia and Iranian Qods Force trainers on their way to assist the Assad regime's security operations.<sup>103</sup> If these claims are true, it would suggest that Iraqi support for the Assad regime has been not only moral but also material.

On the other hand, Turkey has aligned against Assad. After years of deepening relations with the Assad regime, Turkey reversed its policy shortly after the conflict began. Turkey assumed a leading role against the regime by allowing both the diplomatic and military arms of the opposition to organize in the country. Ankara imposed an effective arms embargo in September and announced a broad sanctions package in early December.<sup>104</sup>

Meanwhile, the Gulf States may see an opportunity to curtail growing Persian influence through their leadership of the Arab League. Though these monarchies hesitated to condemn an authoritarian regime, their calculus changed as unrest continued. In early November 2011, when Assad proved unwilling or unable to enact the Arab League's plan to end unrest

in Syria by renewing offensive operations in Homs, the League moved forward with measures to isolate the regime.<sup>105</sup>

This regional divide over Syria emerged through hardening Turkish and Arab statements against Assad while Iran, Iraq and Lebanese Hezbollah continued to support the regime. The November Arab League decisions to suspend Syria's membership and impose sanctions highlighted this widening rift: only Syria, Lebanon and Iraq did not vote for these measures.<sup>106</sup>

The United States and European Union enacted comprehensive sanctions against individuals, organizations, and Syria as a whole. The U.S. sanctions package did not fundamentally change the sanctions that pre-dated the uprising, but by mid-November, Europe's ban on Syrian oil reduced production by as much as seventy-five percent in an industry that represents up to one third of the Syrian economy.<sup>107</sup> This pressure has been particularly damaging when combined with the economic contraction that came with the end of Syria's robust tourism industry.<sup>108</sup> However, as U.S. policy toward Iran has demonstrated, sanctions may hobble the regime, but they will not topple it. More critically, these sanctions have not demonstrably changed the regime's calculus or its conduct.

The United Nations Security Council has been unable to take action against the Assad regime due to Russian and Chinese vetoes. While China has been hesitant to condemn what they see as the internal matter of another state, Russia has actively supported the Assad regime with diplomatic and material measures. The Syrian regime continues to purchase Russian arms and abide by its existing agreements regarding petroleum exploration and naval basing, earning Moscow's allegiance.<sup>109</sup> The Moscow Times reported that Russian investment in Syria amounted to \$19.5 billion as recently as 2009.<sup>110</sup> In late November 2011, Russia took steps that demonstrated willingness to block the possibility of NATO military options by sending its flagship carrier group to Tartus and selling Yankhont anti-ship cruise missiles to Syria.<sup>111</sup>

## CONCLUSION

After seven months of conflict and despite mounting regional pressure, the Assad regime has not demonstrated its willingness to step down, let alone abandon its offensive security strategy. The strategy of offensive clearance operations that Syrian security forces first employed in Dera'a has succeeded in limiting the scale of demonstrations throughout the country. These clearance operations became critical to the regime's strategy because it did not have enough loyal forces to simultaneously garrison all of Syria's key terrain. The regime's targeting campaign and use of pro-regime militias further undercut the unarmed opposition's ability to organize within Syria. Operations conducted in the coastal cities consolidated regime control over Alawite population centers. The insurgency in northern Idlib province has been problematic, but it has not represented an existential threat to the regime's survival.

On the other hand, the insurgent and sectarian violence around Homs exposed the limits of the regime's strategy. Unrest in Homs has divided the country physically because it lies on the Damascus-Aleppo highway and controls access to the coast. Furthermore, sectarian violence in Homs shored up domestic support for the regime but it also demonstrated Syria's potential for civil war.

U.S. Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Jeffrey Feltman recently explained that "an orderly transition that removes Assad from power is in our national security interests," and this is the right objective.<sup>112</sup> U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has also reiterated the Obama administration's intent to see Assad's depart.<sup>113</sup> However, the struggle for Syria derives from fundamental obstacles to this transition. First among them is the fact that the Assad regime and its loyal security forces have demonstrated no intention of relinquishing power, regardless of the regime's international isolation. Sanctions and moral support alone will not achieve this objective, but military options are likely to perpetuate extended sectarian warfare.

At the end of 2011 the stalemate in Syria seems likely to continue for months if not years. No credible threat to the Assad regime's survival has emerged, despite crippling international isolation and increasing armed resistance. While the Assad regime probably will not survive in the

long run, it has proven its ability to sustain its crackdown and resist international pressure. Demonstrations and sanctions are unlikely to force the Assad regime to step down or make meaningful reforms. The poorly armed resistance will not defeat the regime's intact military, but it will strengthen Assad's argument that he is fighting a Salafist insurgency.

On the other hand, as states in the region continue to become increasingly involved in both sides of the conflict, what began as a peaceful opposition movement may transform into an armed struggle in Syria. The introduction of material support to the armed resistance could lead to a capable insurgency that would allow the regime to justify even greater force and draw the Alawites even closer together.

The fate of Libya's Muammar Qaddafi in October 2011 encouraged the Syrian opposition to continue its struggle, but it also underscored the costs of losing for the Assad regime. The regime's violent operations severely limited the possibility of a negotiated settlement. Protestors calling for reform at the beginning of the uprising in March have gone as far as demanding Bashar al-Assad's execution in November.<sup>114</sup> At the end of 2011, as both sides harden their stance and secure regional support, Syria's slide towards civil war may be unavoidable.

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# NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Stability in Aleppo is critical to the survival of the Assad regime and deserves its own consideration; however, protests have not reached the point where they threaten stability in this northern metropolis.

<sup>2</sup> Major media outlets have most frequently cited the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and the Damascus-based Syrian Arab News Agency.

<sup>3</sup> Nikolaos van Dam, “The Struggle for Power in Syria,” *The Montreal Review*, October 2011.

<sup>4</sup> Nikolaos van Dam, *The Struggle for Power in Syria: Politics and Society under Asad and the Ba’th Party*, (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2011), p.1; “Background Note: Syria,” U.S. Department of State, March 18, 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Hanna Batatu, “Some Observations on the Social Roots of Syria’s Ruling, Military Group and the Causes for Its Dominance,” *Middle East Journal*, Vol. 35, No. 3 (Summer, 1981), p. 336.

<sup>6</sup> Bastian Berbner, “The Tolerant Dictator: Syria’s Christians Side with Assad out of Fear,” *Der Spiegel Online*, November 30, 2011; F. Allafi and M. Eyon, “Patriarch Laham Calls for Unity in Face of Fierce Campaign against Syria,” *SANA Online in English*, December 6, 2011.

<sup>7</sup> Nir Rosen, “The revolution will be weaponized,” *Al Jazeera English*, September 23, 2011.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see anecdotal observations in Robert Fisk, “Syria slips toward sectarian war,” *The Independent Online*, October 27, 2011, Nir Rosen, “Assad’s Alawites: The guardians of the throne,” *Al Jazeera English*, October 10, 2011, and Nir Rosen, “Assad’s Alawites: An entrenched community,” *Al Jazeera English*, October 12, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> Nikolaos van Dam, “The Struggle for Power in Syria,” *The Montreal Review*, October 2011.

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