



Syria's uprising

Bashar's pyrrhic triumphs

BEIRUT

The Syrian regime is winning battles, but losing the war for its survival

PRESIDENT Bashar Assad has enjoyed certain comforts during the year-long uprising against his rule. His enemies, both in the Syrian opposition and in foreign chanceries, have been in perpetual disarray, never able to gather critical force. His allies have proven loyal, shipping in arms and fending off action from the UN Security Council. Violence has largely spared Syria's two biggest cities, Damascus and Aleppo, which together hold nearly half the country's population, allowing the regime to maintain a veneer of normality.

Mr Assad's brutal tactics against more rebellious parts of the country have also brought pyrrhic relief. Government troops showed no qualms about killing hundreds of civilians last month to crush armed rebels in Baba Amr, a poor Sunni district of Syria's third-largest city, Homs. Since then the loosely organised rebel force that calls itself the Free Syrian Army has repeatedly withdrawn from other restless towns to spare them devastation. The rebels have yet to prove they can hold out against government troops long enough to secure any territory.

Mr Assad's strategy has, in other words, seemed effective. Yet, fast as he can stitch, the fabric of his rule is unravelling. His diplomatic isolation is growing, with his ally Russia now voicing impatience. At the Security Council on March 21st, Russia shift-

ed firmly to the side of Mr Assad's detractors, endorsing a unanimous, albeit non-binding statement that demands a swift end to the fighting and access for humanitarian aid, threatening "further steps" if Syria fails to comply. Even Hizbullah, the Iranian-backed Shia militia in Lebanon that has fervently parroted regime propaganda, now calls on "both sides" in Syria to seek compromise.

On the ground, the army's tactical victories against bands of poorly armed rebels seem simply to prompt the hydra heads of revolt to sprout elsewhere. Despite the merciless battering it has endured, Homs remains rebellious. Just as fighting has dwindled in a ravaged zone around the northern town of Idlib near the Turkish frontier, it has popped up in the hitherto quiescent town of Raqqa in the centre of the country, and all along the Euphrates valley to the southeast.

Central Damascus is no longer immune, either. On March 17th, powerful car-bombs hit intelligence facilities in Damascus and Aleppo, killing 27 people. Two days later an intense gunfight broke out in an upscale district of the capital that sits in the shadow of Mr Assad's cliff-top palace.

The government's hold is slipping in other ways. Arrests of currency traders, for example, have not stopped the Syrian pound from losing half its value in recent

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months, fuelling a frightening surge in inflation, amid widening shortages.

Mr Assad's grim obstinacy has had another effect. Amid the pervasive violence—some 8,000 civilians and 2,000 security men have died so far—it grows increasingly hard to identify culprits. Grassroots protest groups do well at policing their own communities, which in many parts of Syria have the feel of zones liberated from military occupation. Yet armed rebel gangs have increasingly opted for ugly vengeance against regime supporters. Executions and torture are just some of the crimes that have been documented by Human Rights Watch, an American lobby group. "It is no longer a matter of two sides but of something bigger, and out of our control," says a Damascene dissident with a furrowed brow.

Particularly worrying is the growing involvement of Islamist extremists, who profit both from experience in Iraq and supply lines to Iraq's lawless Sunni regions. They had initially been marginal to Syria's uprising, but locals now echo American diplomats' suspicions that their foothold has widened. Last month a newly formed Jihadi group, Jabhat al-Nusra (the Salvation Front), released a professional video claiming past bombings against security forces. The attacks appear to have been carefully timed and skillfully executed.

Some liken the situation to the early 1980s, a tumultuous period of bombs and assassinations that Mr Assad's father, Hafez, outlived through ruthlessness. As members of the Syrian National Council (SNC), the main opposition group in exile, continue to bicker, security forces rounded up a handful of moderate dissidents from two home-grown opposition groups which had hitherto been tolerated. "This is

- **proof that the regime is not sincere about negotiating,"** says Rim Turkmani, a London-based member of a movement whose members were arrested.

This bodes ill for the UN'S plans. Kofi Annan, the Arab League and UN envoy, for want of a better solution, hopes to coax the regime into opening talks with the opposition. Mr Assad has said he is willing, but lacks a recognisable partner to talk to. His claim is not entirely spurious. The S N C has burned up much of its energy trying to unite the myriad factions thrown up by an already sectarian society that has been further atomised by decades of authoritarian rule. Mr Assad's opponents plan to meet on March 26th to try and heal rifts. "We've been waiting in the station for passengers to board, but the train must now move," warns an S N C spokesman.

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