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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

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## **Syria's Widening Protests: Assad increasingly Beleaguered**

By James M. Dorsey

### **Synopsis**

*The protests against Syrian president Bashar al Assad's regime is spreading to the country's business community and middle-class residents of Damascus. There is also mounting international pressure on Assad to halt the crackdown while the US and EU prepare to impose new sanctions on Syrian oil exports.*

### **Commentary**

THE FIVE-MONTH long uprising in Syria is spreading to middle class neighbourhoods of the capital Damascus while international pressure mounts on President Bashar al Assad to halt his military crackdown on protesters in Hama and other cities.

The calls from the UN Security Council, Arab League, Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Russia show the international community acting in unison for the first time since the start of anti-government protests in March. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain have followed Qatar in withdrawing their ambassadors from Syria in protest. Adding substance to symbolic sanctions, the United States and European Union are poised to target Syria's oil exports.

### **Widening cracks**

These actions compound the cracks among the constituencies that have supported Assad. Giving voice to the uprising, worshippers at a mosque in the wealthy Damascus suburb of Al Roumaneh recently chanted the slogan "The people want to topple the regime" following Ramadan prayers. That was the first time that members of Syria's middle class and business community, concentrated in the capital and Aleppo, have come out in support of the uprising. It was also the first time that the protests have moved from the suburbs of the capital to neighbourhoods whose support for the regime is crucial for Assad.

The spreading of the protests and the mounting international condemnation followed the regime's assault on Hama, Syria's fourth largest city, for the second time in three decades. Although the death toll of some 150 people in last week's attack on Hama is a fraction of the 10,000 killed in the 1982 attack on the city ordered by Assad's father Hafez al Assad, it was still a significant repetition of history.

Similarly, the estimated 2,000 people killed in the past five months was 2,000 too many for the international community. In a symbolic nudge of the West towards oil sanctions, protesters staged their biggest post-Friday prayer demonstrations in the eastern oil- and gas-producing province of Deir El-Zoor. In response, the Syrian military attacked the town killing some 50 people.

## **Oil sanctions implications**

By targeting oil exports, the US and particularly the EU would deprive the Assad regime of up to a third of its revenues. It would compound the financial problems of a regime already struggling with decreasing tax receipts and exports, the loss of US\$8 billion a year in tourism revenues, depleting government coffers, dried up foreign investment, and the country's currency dropping an estimated 17 per cent. As a result, Syria's economy could start to contract, making it increasingly difficult for the regime to maintain subsidies of diesel fuel and other goods and pay off patronage networks.

The EU, Syria's main Western trading partner, would have a key role to play in the imposition of oil sanctions because companies in Germany, Italy, France, and the Netherlands are the major refiners of Syria's heavy crude. Britain would have to ensure that Gulsands Petroleum, a specialist in extracting heavy oil from depleted fields, halts its Syrian operations. To make the sanctions stick, the US and EU will also have to get cooperation from multinationals like Royal Dutch Shell, Total, India's Oil and Natural Gas Corporation (ONGC), and China's National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) and Sinochem.

## **Tightening the screws**

In a bid to worsen the economic crisis, the West is targeting Syria's business community, which so far has either remained on the sidelines of the conflict or maintained its support for the country's president. The aim is to persuade the community that its survival depends on the president either embracing political and economic reform or being forced to resign. In an acknowledgement of concern, Assad warned in a recent speech that the Syrian economy was collapsing. To quell the protests, Assad had earlier this year restored fuel subsidies, increased public salaries and raised wages for the security forces on whose loyalty he depends. An oil boycott would put at risk Assad's ability to fund those efforts.

This week's condemnation of the crackdown by the Arab League and the GCC, as well as Turkey's warning that it had lost patience with Assad and could no longer remain a bystander, opens the door for Ankara to join the US and EU in imposing meaningful sanctions. Turkey's Foreign Minister Davutoglu's visit to Damascus this week to read Assad the riot act has particular significance.

Turkey fears not only a further influx of refugees but is also concerned that Assad's crackdown will drive Syrian-based fighters of the outlawed Kurdistan Workers' party (PKK), many of whom are born in Syria, back into south-eastern Turkey. A recent report by Turkey's National Intelligence Organisation (MIT) charged that Syria had halted its cooperation with Turkish anti-terrorism efforts and that Iran, Syria's foremost ally, was refusing to share intelligence about its own anti-Kurdish operations.

## **Beginning of the End for Assad?**

Oil sanctions coupled with mounting international criticism and the spreading of the protests could well signal the beginning of the end of Assad's regime. The stepped up violence suggests that Assad is desperately looking for a way out.

However, the problem Assad faces is that there is no longer an immediate alternative that would allow him to save face and ensure that he can hold on to some degree of power. Even if he were to halt the crackdown and demonstrate that he is serious about political and economic reform it's too late. He would effectively be handing the protesters victory on a silver platter; that would inevitably lead to his downfall. Consequently Assad's strategy of taking the offence as his best defence will only dig a deeper hole for himself.

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