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Assad faces life or death choice

By Victor Kotsev
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Amid significant rebel advances and indications that a partition of Syria might happen in the next months, the government army reportedly readied chemical weapons for use last week. The United States and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) alliance responded with harsh warnings and by approving the move of multiple Patriot missile batteries to southern Turkey, something that could further tip the balance in the country. The Syrian civil war seems to have entered a critical phase, with President Bashar al-Assad facing the choice of either stepping down or fighting to the end, by all means available.

To be fair, there are no specific indications that the Syrian government intends to use weapons of mass destruction against its own citizens, and its spokespeople vehemently denied on Monday any such possibility. These weapons could play different roles in several scenarios, including as a bargaining chip for Assad on his way out of the country, a deterrent against foreign intervention, or a way to cover his potential withdrawal to a rump state centered around territories inhabited by his Alawite sect.

Some reports claim that Assad is exploring the possibility of seeking political asylum in Latin American countries such as Cuba, Venezuela or Ecuador. Though the Syrian president has denied any such intention and has vowed to "live and die in Syria", his recent military and diplomatic fortunes have turned more toward dying, and he could be expected to reconsider.

The threat of chemical weapons, on the other hand, could win him a measure of immunity and an offer of more favorable conditions for an exit (of course, only as long as he doesn't use them).

Along the same line of thought, the influential intelligence-analysis firm Stratfor speculated that the recent defection of Syrian foreign ministry spokesman Jihad Maqdisi was meant to facilitate "diplomatic efforts to negotiate a safe exit for the family and guarantee the security of Syria's Alawite minority".

Still, there are reasons to worry, as recent statements by US President Barack Obama and other Western leaders indicate.

"The use of chemical weapons is and would be totally unacceptable," said Obama on Monday, rhetorically addressing Assad in an interview with the New York Times. "If you make the tragic mistake of using these weapons, there will be consequences and you will be held accountable." US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton called Assad "desperate" and said this could lead him to use weapons of mass destruction.

Meanwhile, Wired magazine reported that the Syrian army has begun weaponizing sarin gas, a deadly nerve agent. "Physically, they've gotten to the point where they can load it up on a plane and drop it," an unnamed American official told the magazine. [1]

Some unconfirmed reports go as far as to claim that assembled warheads had been moved toward the north of the country, perhaps toward the city of Aleppo. There the situation is particularly bad for Assad: another influential global analysis firm, Oxford Analytica, forecast that "loyalist troops are likely to lose most of their strategic strongholds in the north in coming months, paving the way to the establishment of a largely-contiguous rebel area by mid-2013."

The government's failure to recapture Aleppo, Syria's largest city and a northern commercial hub, alongside other indicators such as ever-increasing reliance on air power, underscores its shortage of manpower. Much of the army is made up of Sunni Muslim conscripts whose loyalty is uncertain and who could defect if sent against members of their sect, a majority of the Syrian population, and reportedly the government can draw only a limited pool of soldiers for most operations.

"Ali, a 28-year-old Alawite living in Lattakia, the regional capital, said Alawite villages he recently visited had been nearly emptied of men after the regime enforced conscription for any member of the Alawite sect aged between 18 and 50," the Global Post reported. [2]

Though Assad may fight for a while longer, he clearly appears to be losing the war. This is true even in the capital Damascus, where the rebels have also advanced in the past few days. They are fighting pitched battles with government forces in the city's outskirts and have caused a shutdown of international air traffic and other disruptions.

The fact that Lebanese Druze leader Walid Jumblatt urged Syria's Druze to join the rebellion carries considerable symbolic significance. Jumblatt, whom Foreign Policy Magazine recently called "the weathervane", is known for aligning himself with the powerful of the day, and claims to look out always for his sect. [3]

Internationally, Assad's isolation is growing as well. "A senior Turkish official said that Russia

had agreed on Monday to a new diplomatic approach that would seek ways to persuade President Bashar al-Assad to relinquish power," the New York Times reported.

According to The Atlantic, Israel twice recently sought Jordan's "permission" to bomb the Syrian chemical weapons, but was turned down. [4] On Syria's northern border, meanwhile, a novel idea of a no-fly zone "lite" may be in the making. While traditional interpretations of a no-fly zone include establishing complete air superiority and taking out anti-aircraft defenses, the Patriot missiles due to arrive in southern Turkey could effectively drive off Syrian military aircraft within 100 or so kilometers from the border. By negating the Syrian regime's crucial air advantage in these areas, this step could contribute to the establishing of a rival rebel regime and the eventual defeat of Assad.

The Syrian leader appears to have his back against a wall. Whether he chooses to step down or to fight on could be literally a matter of life or death for him - and for thousands of Syrians of all sects and stripes. As the death toll in the nearly two-year uprising tops 40,000 people and the United Nations is scaling down aid operations in fear for its staff, a sense of desperate urgency hangs over the country.

Notes:

1. Exclusive: US Sees Syria Prepping Chemical Weapons for Possible Attack, Wired, December 3, 2012.
2. Are Syria's rebels about to win?, Global Post, November 30, 2012.
3. The Weathervane, Foreign Policy, October 5, 2012.
4. Israel Asked Jordan for Approval to Bomb Syrian WMD Sites, The Atlantic, December 3, 2012.