

Baba Amr falls to Syrian regime

Marcus Halaby Thu, 29/03/2012 - 09:17

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The Syrian regime is scoring some important victories, but the revolution is not defeated yet, writes Marcus Halaby

THE CITY of Homs, Syria's third largest, is today a city under a military occupation, one imposed on it by the government of its own country. After four weeks of merciless siege, which saw the Syrian army launch hundreds of shells and rockets at it in a way that bears direct comparison to Israel's 2009 bombardment of Gaza, Homs is now divided by checkpoints and dependent on outside aid for the essentials of day-to-day life.

Baba Amr, a working-class district where hundreds of armed fighters – mainly defectors from the Assad dictatorship's own army – had taken refuge amongst tens of thousands of civilians, has been largely flattened by artillery, its residents either dispersed as refugees, subjected to arbitrary arrest, detention or summary execution, or warily waiting for their fate.

This is not yet the end of Syria's uprising. The rebel Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters who vacated Baba Amr on 1 March to spare its population have reportedly decamped to Qusayr, the nearest town on the road to Lebanon's Beqaa region, from where they may yet return. Only two days after their tactical withdrawal, reports emerged that government troops were facing armed resistance in other districts of the city. And other sporadically 'liberated' zones like Baba Amr continue to exist elsewhere in the country, most notably in the small northern city of Idlib, where rebels are bracing themselves for a government offensive, and in the rural region around Damascus and its satellite town Douma.

It is, however, undoubtedly a setback for the revolution. Anyone who had hoped to see Syria's uprising develop into a military struggle for control of territory would have set their sights on Homs. Close to the Lebanese border – and therefore to potential sources of arms, aid and strategic depth from a friendly population – and dividing the capital Damascus from Syria's populous coastal region and its second city Aleppo, Homs would have been well-placed to act as Syria's Benghazi.

The fall of Homs has deepened divisions within the opposition, with twenty secular and Islamist members of the 270-member Syrian National Council (SNC) forming a 'Syrian Patriotic Group', to advocate increased reliance on and coordination with the FSA. It has also hardened attitudes against negotiations, with SNC president Burhan Ghalioun denouncing UN envoy Kofi Annan's warnings against the 'militarisation' of the conflict, as well as Annan's calls for 'dialogue' with the Assad regime.

It has, however, also produced signs of dissent within the regime. Four senior officers, including Brigadier General Adnan Qassem Farzat, have now defected to the FSA, the most senior to do so since Brigadiers General Fayez Amro and Mustafa Ahmad al-Sheikh in January. The deputy oil minister Abdo Hussameddin has also announced his defection on video, urging the Syrian people to abandon a 'sinking ship' and declaring that he was 'joining the revolution of the dignified people'.

What should now be clear is that Assad's regime will only be brought down by force. A regime that is willing to launch missiles built to bring down jet fighters at civilian homes will not simply abandon its figurehead as it did in Egypt. But the plight of Homs ? and the failure of a Syrian army weakened by poor morale to split decisively in protest at this onslaught on its own people ? continues to illustrate the limitations of a purely military strategy to bring down the Assad regime.

Possessing only such arms as they can take with them or smuggle in from Lebanon, the military defectors remain hostage to the whims of the great powers. And despite the occasional prodding of their Saudi and Qatari allies, the Western states are in no mood to offer Syria's revolution even the self-interested and destructive ?aid? that they offered to Libya's rebels.

US President Obama has explicitly rejected military intervention, while UK Defence Secretary Philip Hammond has ruled out arming the Syrian opposition, instead advocating pressure on Assad's Russian and Chinese allies to promote a political solution. And it is not just Russia and China's continued backing for Assad that worries them, but the sheer unpredictability of what might come after him. They fear the consequences of his revolutionary overthrow, more than they might hope to profit from it.

The Assad dictatorship's days are numbered. But if the Syrian workers, peasants, youth and urban poor want to avoid the inconclusive outcome of Yemen's uprising ? where men with blood on their hands continue to remain in place ? then they must act to shape its outcome themselves. A revolutionary general strike ? and the forms of coordination necessary to bring it about ? remains essential to paralyse the regime, and win over the mass of Syria's conscript army to the side of the people.

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