

What's the endgame in Syria?

Contributed by Sal Gentile, PBS
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Military defections are key to turning the tide, analysts say

Will the Syrian regime's depravity be its downfall? The government of Bashar al-Assad has crossed new thresholds of ruthlessness in its desperate bid to cling to power, spraying bullets indiscriminately into funeral processions and returning the mutilated body of a 13-year-old boy to his horrified parents. Human Rights Watch puts the death toll in the Syrian uprising at about 1,300 people, and with tanks rolling into towns such as Hama and Jisr al-Shughour, the crackdown shows no signs of slowing. As The New York Times reports, Assad may now be turning to his brother, Maher, to intensify the army's brutal repression of protesters in the dusty agricultural towns and coastal cities that have been the scenes of the most intense fighting. So what, if anything, will break the government's tight grip on power in Syria, given the regime's apparently insatiable penchant for barbarism? Mass defections of Syrian soldiers, experts say.

Unlike in Egypt and Tunisia, where peaceful protests eventually overwhelmed weakened governments, or Libya, where ragtag loyalists have been bombarded by western air power, the Syrian regime shows no signs of relenting in its suppression of unarmed dissent. Peaceful protesters, no matter their numbers, are unlikely to overrun a disciplined and well-organized army with strong political ties to the Alawite regime. Mass military defections, then, will be key to turning the tide in Syria, according to Wayne White, a former senior official with the State Department's intelligence agency and adjunct scholar at the Middle East Institute. "So far, the regime's militaries remain surprisingly coherent," White said. Even the most optimistic reports from activists, which are difficult to confirm, put the numbers of military defections in the low hundreds. Nonetheless, the protesters have remained defiant, even in the face of mass atrocities, raising the question of what the endgame will be. One possibility is that the government will simply outlast the decentralized opposition, or that sectarian strife will engulf the pro-democracy movement and allow an opening for the regime to subdue the protests. "They would have to really consistently batter the opposition, and keep the opposition so battered that it doesn't win any rounds on the ground, and is increasingly running into costly and demoralizing losses," White said. "That's a tough slog." What's more likely, he added, is a degeneration of the conflict into "more widespread fighting in which we could see larger elements of the military defecting, finally, under the pressure of seeing many of their own hometowns being besieged, shelled and the casualties increasing." Already there are videos circulating among Syrian opposition activists of soldiers renouncing the regime's brutal tactics and describing their horror at having to train their rifles not on armed gangs or insurgents, as the government has made the dissidents out to be, but unarmed protesters — neighbors and family members, even. Those stories, however, don't amount to more than a trickle, White said. The regime has at its command several key battalions — the elite Fourth Division and Republican Guard among them — that remain ethnically and politically linked to the Assad regime, and are unlikely to break ranks. What's more likely, White said, is that the protesters will wear down those units, forcing the regime to call in divisions that are less disciplined. Demoralized and over-taxed, those soldiers could be susceptible to the kinds of mass defections that would weaken the military and bolster the popular resistance. "We need divisions to desert, regiments to desert. We need large formations to desert," White said. "The more you throw regular Syrian divisions that are not so politicized into the mix trying to contain this, the more you do risk having a decent amount of desertions," he added. "But unless there are these desertions that drain the military and build up the strength of the opponents, we're not going to see a critical mass take form in the rebellion against the regime." The only alternative — outside intervention — seems unlikely. NATO powers are bogged down in Libya, and countries such as China and Russia have signaled their willingness to block any international campaign against the Syrian regime. Britain and France are drafting a United Nations resolution condemning the violence in Syria, but already Russia and China have both expressed strong opposition to such a move. Perhaps only an armed resistance by the protesters themselves, bolstered by mass defections of Syrian soldiers, will overcome the regime's bloody crackdown, White said. As commendable as non-violence may be, he added, "In a situation like this, the only thing that's going to carry the day is being violent, is taking up arms against the regime."