



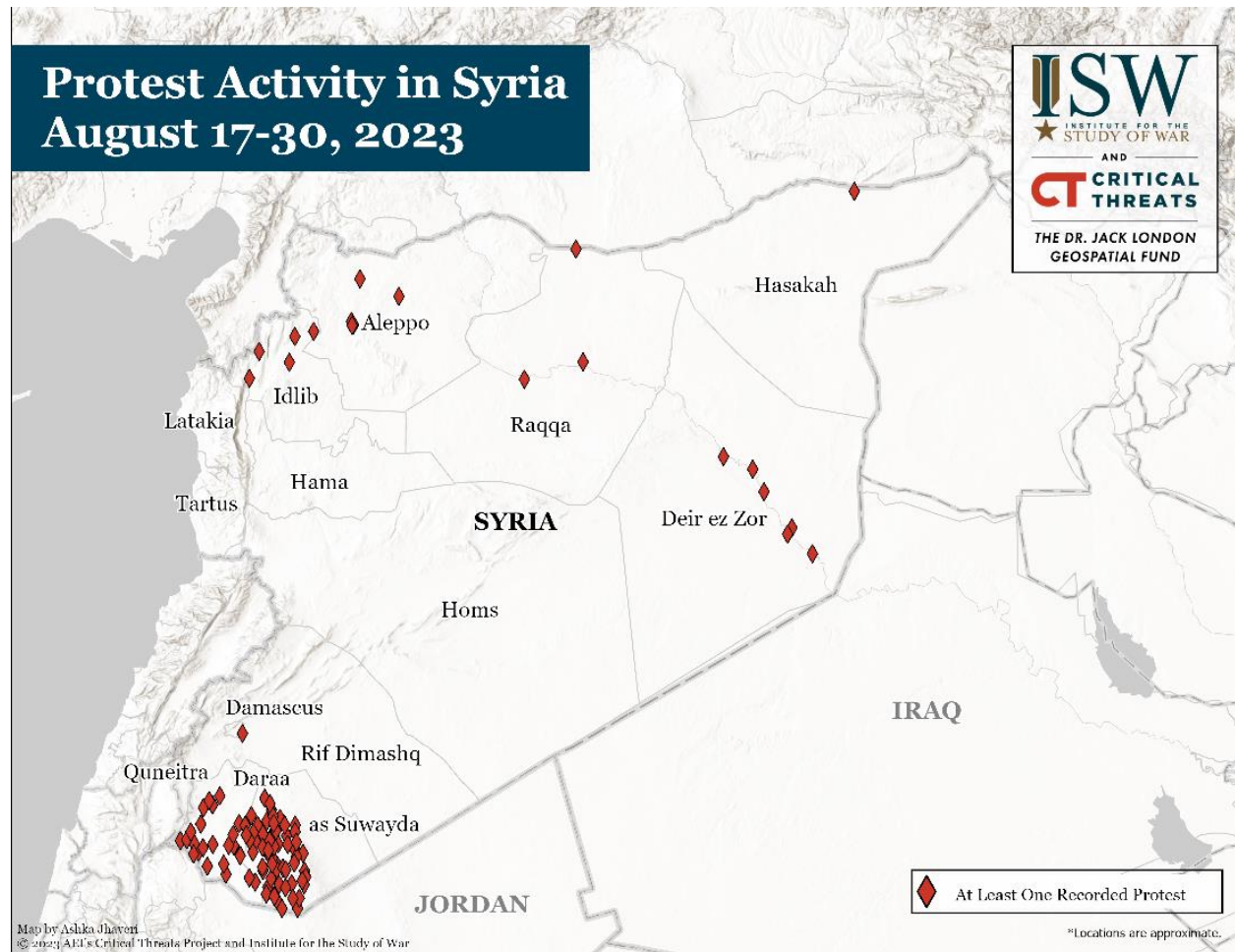
Syria: Anti-Regime Protests Risk Crackdown

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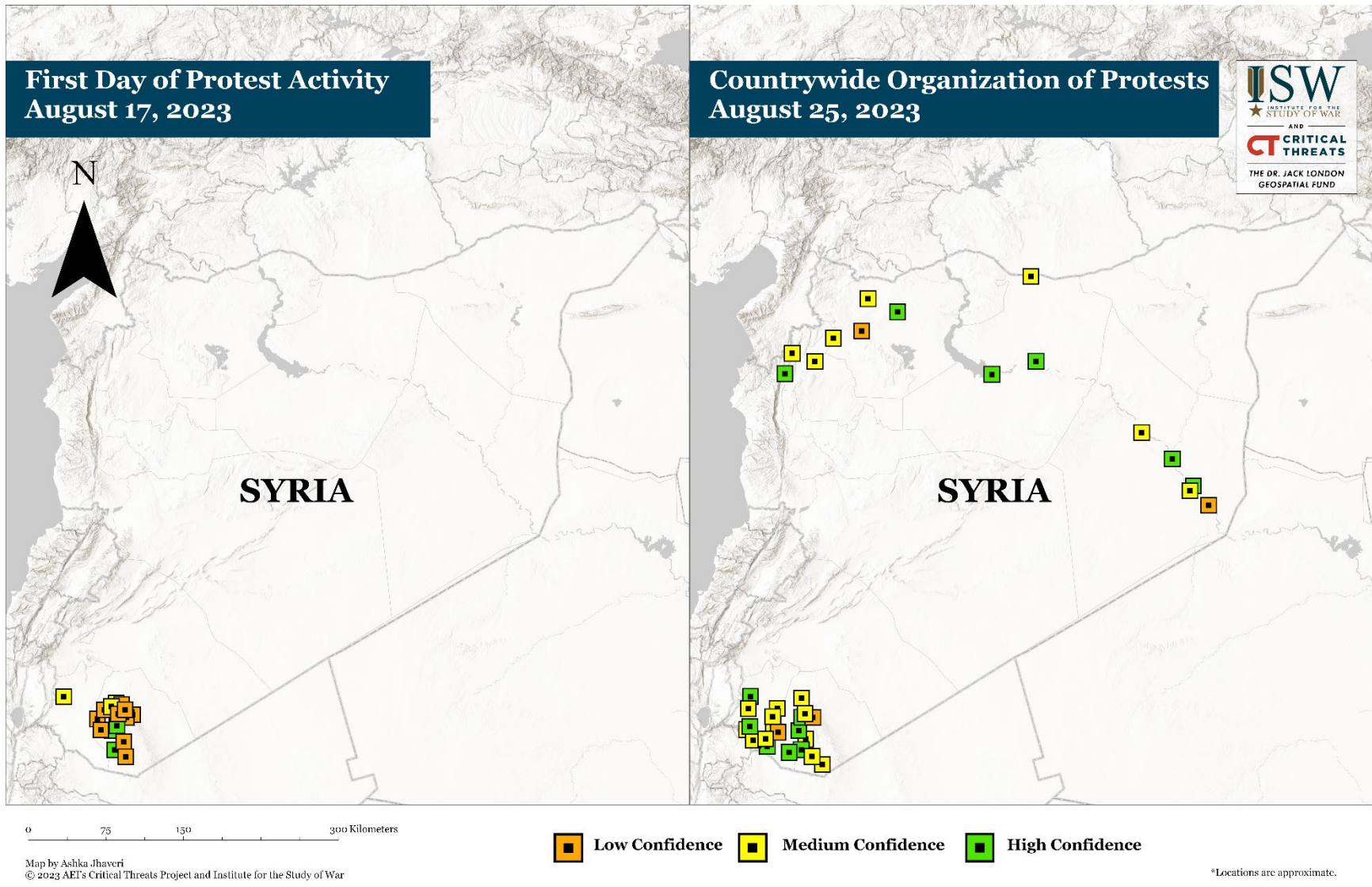
Anti-regime protests are gaining traction in Syria with demonstrators calling for the overthrow of the regime, and the protests could expand during the coming weeks. Syrians began demonstrating on August 17 after the Assad regime raised fuel prices, which exacerbated the economic crisis that the country already faced.¹ Protest demands quickly escalated from economic grievances to call for the removal of Bashar al Assad from power.² The Syrian regime has taken steps to crackdown on the protests that have not deterred the demonstrators.³ The regime also has not prevented the protests from spreading through security force deployments, limiting travel to protest areas, and arresting demonstrators.⁴ High temperatures did not stop the spread of the demonstrations. Protesters have gathered in squares in August despite temperatures over 100 degrees.⁵



- The protests have centered in Suwayda Province (southeast of Damascus) but also are occurring in Aleppo, Daraa, Deir ez Zor, Idlib, Raqqa, and Rif Dimashq provinces.⁶ Disaffected Syrians in all provinces have shown support for the movement on social media and in anonymous acts of civil disobedience.⁷ The protests have paralyzed economic, political, and social life in southern Syria by blocking roads, disrupting countrywide exams, and closing government offices and businesses.⁸
- Demonstrators across the country are using anti-regime chants from the 2011 uprising and have flown the flag from pre-Baathist Syria, a symbol that conveys an anti-Assad message.⁹ Protest signs also include demands for the United States, Iran, and Russia to leave Syria.¹⁰
- Regime security forces used live fire to disperse protests in Aleppo, Daraa, and Suwayda provinces on several occasions in August.¹¹ Regime forces also fired artillery shells at protesters in Daraa Province on August 22.¹² Protests have continued, nevertheless, with local-level leaders and online activist networks driving mass awareness and facilitating communication and organization among protesters.¹³

The Syrian regime's response to the protests and the ability of the demonstrators to sustain momentum will likely determine the trajectory of the protests beyond the next few weeks. The Syrian regime is unable to meet the protester's economic demands. The Syrian regime has limited economic control over some areas of Syria and relies on Iranian oil imports and investment to provide public services.¹⁴ Assad has not indicated the intent or willingness to step down, nor has he publicly acknowledged the protests.¹⁵ This leaves the regime with the option to stop the protests via a crackdown or wait them out.

- Assad has attempted to rectify Syria's economic situation by doubling public sector salaries, releasing members from conscription, and prioritizing wheat delivery to areas of unrest.¹⁶ He has also sought additional foreign investment from Iran and the Gulf States this year.¹⁷ These actions have not improved Syria's economy, however. Other regime policies exacerbate the economic drivers of the protests. This includes raising fuel prices again on August 27.¹⁸
- The Syrian regime has previously stopped demonstrations with crackdowns. Regime security forces stopped protests in Suwayda Province in December 2022 in a show of force that resulted in the death of one protester and injury of eighteen.¹⁹ The regime's protest suppression in 2011, however, spiraled into a civil war.²⁰
- Temperatures have historically declined in September, making mass gatherings more feasible.²¹ Community and religious leaders also are supporting the protests, which provides social backing to continue demonstrations.²² The prohibitive costs of getting to work deter labor force participation and partially blunt the appeal for protesters to return to work.²³



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The expansion of the anti-regime protests could prompt the Syrian regime to initiate a crackdown to stop the demonstrations. Syrian regime supporters have called on the regime to crack down on the protests “with an iron fist.”²⁴ The spread of protests to pro-regime strongholds, such as central Damascus, Latakia, and Tartous presents the risk of undermining the Syrian regime’s traditional support bases. Protests that disrupt key industries and state functions would also pose a more serious threat, especially given the already perilous state of the economy.

The regime very likely would require assistance from state allies, such as Iran and Russia, to implement a crackdown in all the areas where the protests are occurring. The protests have occurred across the country in 126 locations in 8 provinces.²⁵ The regime does not control all areas where protests occurred. Demonstrations supporting Suwayda occurred in territory held by opposition, Kurdish, and Turkish-backed forces.²⁶ The regime would require assistance from state allies, based on the number of areas in Syria where protests are occurring.

Iran probably would deploy its proxy militias to aid the Syrian regime in implementing a crackdown. Iran deployed forces to Syria in 2011 to support to the Syrian regime during the Arab Spring protests.²⁷ Iranian forces remain in Syria today to command operations that Iran’s proxy militias conduct in the country.²⁸ ISW has some indications that Iran has deployed proxy militants to support the regime in Damascus. The Iranian regime is expecting and preparing to deploy security forces in response to domestic protests in September, which would constrain its ability to support a crackdown in Syria.

- Iran sent Afghan, Iranian, and Iraqi snipers to Damascus from Iraq on August 27 and 31, according to opposition media.²⁹ Iranian-backed militants suppressed Iraqi protests with snipers in 2019.³⁰ The Iranian regime also has a long history of using violence to impose social control domestically.³¹ Iranian security services have used snipers against protesters in most major protest waves in Iran in recent years.³²
- Iranian officials have expressed concern about the resumption of anti-regime protests on September 16 in recent weeks and are trying to deter anti-regime activity.³³

Russia almost certainly will not contribute personnel to assist in a Syrian regime crackdown. Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine and the death of Wagner financier Yevgeny Prigozhin present several force bandwidth issues to support the Syrian regime. Russia reduced its military footprint in Syria in 2022 following the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022.³⁴ 97 percent of the Russian army is fighting in Ukraine, according to the UK defense minister in February 2023.³⁵

- Russia has not committed forces to assist in previous crackdowns of anti-Syrian regime protests. Russia continues to work with the Syrian regime’s military to push back rebels, however.³⁶
- The Russian Ministry of Defense is attempting to sideline Wagner since the attempted rebellion in Russia which creates an unclear command-and-control structure for Wagner in Syria and limits Russian bandwidth.³⁷

Endnotes

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