



Suicide Bombings - Syria



Syria maps¹

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US Army TRADOC G2

TRADOC Intelligence Support Activity (TRISA) – Threats



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Purpose

- To inform Soldiers, deploying units, scenario developers, and trainers about the recent suicide bombings in Syria.
- To discuss the possible motivation(s) behind these bombings.
- To identify TTP related to these suicide bombings.

Product Caveat: *This presentation has been developed from multiple unclassified sources and is primarily intended for use as a training product for the Department of Army. This briefing should not be considered a finished intelligence product, nor used in such a manner.*



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Executive Summary

- Provides an overview of the unrest in Syria.

- Describes the 23 December 2011 and 06 January 2012 suicide bombings in Damascus.

- Discusses the possible perpetrators of these bombings.

- Assesses possible motivation(s) for the bombings.



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Syria Overview²

- ❑ **The Alawite-controlled pan-Arab Baath (Renaissance) party took control in 1963 and is still in power. (Alawites are a Shia Muslim sect who venerate Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, and consider him divine.)**
- ❑ **Bashar al-Assad became President after his father, President Hafez al-Assad died in June 2000. Assad instituted a brief period of openness and cautious reform. Political prisoners were released and restrictions on the media eased. Political debate was tolerated and calls for freedom of expression and political pluralism were made.**
- ❑ **The army, the Baath party, and the Alawite minority (Syria's population is 74% Sunni), perceiving a threat to their influence and fearing instability, acted not only to slow the pace of change, but to reverse the changes.**
- ❑ **Following the successful "Arab Spring" uprisings against authoritarian rule in Egypt and Tunisia in early 2011, demonstrations were held in Damascus and several other cities, leading to bloody repression by Syrian security forces. President Assad accused protesters of acting on behalf of Israel.**



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Timeline³

- April 2011: Assad made some concessions to the demonstrators by lifting the state of emergency that was in place since 1963 and dismissing the government.**
- May 2011: Protests continued and Syrian armor units entered Deraa, Banyas, and Homs suburbs of Damascus.**
- June 2011: The government announced that 120 security force personnel were killed by “armed gangs” in Jisr al-Shughour and besieged the town, prompting more than 10,000 people to flee to Turkey.**
- July 2011: Military defectors form the “Free Syrian Army” to coordinate opposition to President Bashar al-Assad's rule.**
- August 2011: Syrian Revolution General Commission founded.**
- November 2011: The Arab League voted to suspend Syria and followed this with sanctions.**
- December 2011: The United Nations said that over 5,000 people were killed in Syria since the unrest began.**



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Parties relevant to the conflict⁴

- ❑ **President Bashar al Assad: his Alawite-dominated Baath (Renaissance) party government rules Syria.**
- ❑ **Free Syrian Army (FSA): formed in July 2011 and composed of Syrian military defectors; this group coordinates armed opposition to Assad's government.**
- ❑ **Syrian National Council: formed in October 2011, this group represents internal and external activists opposed to Assad's government. It is a coalition of earlier-formed opposition groups, including The Damascus Declaration, Local Coordination Committees in Syria, the Syrian Revolution General Commission, and the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood.**
- ❑ **Abdullah Azzam Brigades: named after al-Qaeda's co-founder and Osama bin Laden's mentor, this Lebanese al-Qaeda affiliate claims to have conducted attacks in multiple countries. They deny involvement in the Syrian suicide bombings, despite not being accused of the bombings.**



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23 December 2011⁵

- ❑ **Two SVBIEDs exploded near state security buildings in Damascus. At least 44 people were killed and more than 150 injured. The explosions occurred shortly after the arrival of Arab League observers in Damascus.**

- ❑ **Within minutes of the detonations, the government-owned al-Ikhbariya al-Suriya television channel announced that two suicide bombers driving vehicles packed with explosives attacked the General Security Directorate and another branch of the security services in the Kfar Sousa district, south-west of the city center. "Preliminary investigations showed al-Qaeda was responsible," the al-Ikhbariya al-Suriya broadcast stated.**

- ❑ **Al-Ikhbariya al-Suriya said the first SVBIED exploded outside the offices of an unspecified security agency. When guards at a nearby compound housing the General Security Directorate went to inspect the aftermath of the first blast, the driver of another SVBIED rammed the main gates and detonated.**



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23 December 2011⁵ (cont.)

- The Syrian Revolution General Commission, a coalition of 40 opposition groups, accused the government of orchestrating the bombings. Omar Idilbi, a member of the opposition group the Syrian National Council, described the explosions as "very mysterious" because they happened in heavily guarded areas difficult to reach by car. The Free Syrian Army denied responsibility for the attacks.**
- The Abdullah Azzam Brigades, an affiliate of al-Qaeda in Iraq that operates throughout the Middle East, released a statement on jihadist Web sites on 27 December denying responsibility for the suicide attacks. "The mujahideen, in all their groups, have no connection to these vicious bombings, and accusing them of it is falsehood and lies," the statement said.**
- There were unconfirmed reports of roads being closed before the blasts and a lack of reaction by security forces.**
- No group claimed responsibility for the attacks.**



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06 January 2012⁶

- ❑ **A suicide bomber detonated explosives near buses carrying policemen at a traffic light in the Midan area of south Damascus. The attack killed 26 people and wounded 63 more.**
- ❑ **As with the suicide bombings on 23 December, no group claimed responsibility for the attack.**
- ❑ **"The explosion in Damascus today is the work of the Syrian intelligence because they had information that a massive protest was planned in the al-Midan district," said Lt. Col. Mohamed Hamado of the Free Syrian Army. "The FSA does not conduct operations of that kind that may kill civilians, and we are in direct contact with Col. Riad al-Asaad, head of FSA, before executing any attack. We have confirmed information that the intelligence is funding and has formed units that perform terrorist operations under names of Islamic extremist groups and issue statements on the Internet, so that the government proves to the West that Islamic extremists are a threat and may take over if the regime is toppled."**



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06 January 2012⁶ (cont.)

- ❑ **"The SNC had previously warned that the regime was planning to carry out bombing attacks in several areas in Syria. Today's bombings, in the area that has experienced the largest of the anti-regime demonstrations, clearly bear the regime's fingerprints," the Syrian National Council said in a statement.**
- ❑ **"The regime orchestrated the explosion in Damascus, as a fake message to the monitors that there are so-called terrorists conducting operations," said Abdel Karim Rihawi, head of the Cairo-based activist group the Syrian Human Rights League.**
- ❑ **"This is a second step in the plan by evil American forces and those under its control in our region to punish Syria for its firm support of resistance forces against the Zionist enemy (Israel) and the West," Hezbollah stated on its Web site, blaming the U.S. for the attack. Hezbollah receives support from the Syrian government.**



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10 February 2012⁷

- ❑ **Two SVBIEDs exploded at government buildings in Aleppo, Syria's most populous city, killing at least 25 people and wounding at least 175 others. The blasts struck the military intelligence directorate and a police headquarters.**
- ❑ **State media claimed the bombings as proof that the government is opposed by terrorists, rather than a popular uprising.**
- ❑ **Capt. Ammar al-Wawi, a spokesman for the Free Syrian Army, said the FSA was not involved in the suicide attacks. He accused the Syrian government of staging the attacks to "distract the world's attention from the massacres in Homs."**



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Motivation⁸

- ❑ **President Bashar al-Assad blames the U.S., Israel, and al-Qaeda for the 23 December and 06 January suicide bombings in Damascus.**
- ❑ **No group claimed responsibility and the primary groups opposed to Assad, the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council, not only deny involvement but accuse Assad's government of staging the attacks.**
- ❑ **Al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri encouraged Syrian protestors while implying al-Qaeda was not involved with them, stating "God knows that if it were not for the raging war with the New Crusades in which we are engaged ... my brothers and I would be at your side today, in your midst defending you with our necks and chests."**
- ❑ **Al-Qaeda-affiliated Abdullah Azzam Brigades voiced support for Syrian protestors but denied involvement in the suicide bombings, stating, "The one truly responsible for them is he who is benefiting from them, and it is the regime of al Assad and his intelligence agencies."**
- ❑ **"If the Sunnis in Syria had called for Al-Qaeda's help, Al-Qaeda would be everywhere in Syria," said Salafist cleric Sheikh Omar Bakri.**



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Motivation⁸

- ❑ **Andrew Tabler, a Syria expert at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, author of “In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria,” and a man who knows Bashar al-Assad personally, offers valuable insight into the relationship between Sunni extremist groups and the Syrian government. “... the Assad regime is a master at using such groups ruthlessly and even cynically to justify its grip on power and achieve its objectives in neighboring states. It’s one of the most overlooked parts of its foreign policy because backing such groups seems to clash with its basic Baathist secular tenets at home.”**
- ❑ **“The regime blasts on Al-Qaeda, while the opposition blames the regime for staging the attack,” says Tabler. “The truth is likely much more complicated: The Assad regime loses or loosens its control on such groups; they carry out suicide attacks in Syria. The regime has plausible deniability and they use the attacks to rally people around the regime.”**



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Motivation⁸

- ❑ **Syrian state television announced within minutes of the 23 December SVBIED attacks that they were the work of al-Qaeda. The extremely fast reporting and assignment of blame suggests that, at the least, guidance was given to the media to assign blame for any such attacks to al-Qaeda. It might also indicate prior knowledge the attacks would occur.**
- ❑ **Martin Chulov, a journalist with *The Guardian*, stated in a report on 23 December 2011, “Not one defector I have spoken to in the past six months has seen or heard of any member of al-Qaida or a jihadi organisation inside Syria since the revolt began. To them, the regime's insistence of a foreign-backed insurgency manned by highly mobile jihad groups who consistently outmanoeuvre the Syrian army is pure self-serving fantasy.”**
- ❑ **According to a *McClatchy Newspapers* article, anonymous U.S. officials confirmed al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) carried out the suicide bombings in Damascus with authorization from Ayman al Zawahiri, al-Qaeda’s leader. The U.S. officials reportedly said that AQI and Zawahiri apparently see the Syrian conflict as an opportunity to reassert themselves.**



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Analyst Comments⁹

- While there is no direct evidence that the Syrian government is responsible for the 23 December 2011 or 06 January 2012 suicide bombings in Damascus, circumstantial evidence suggests this may be the case.
- According to Syria expert Andrew Tabler, it would not be out of character for the Assad regime to utilize such a tactic to garner support .
- In the case of the 23 December SVBIEDs, government-controlled news services announced the bombings within minutes and assigned blame to al-Qaeda.
- Al-Qaeda expressed support for the Syrian protestors but implied al-Qaeda was not involved with them. The al-Qaeda-affiliated Abdullah Azzam Brigades explicitly denied involvement in the bombings.
- No group claimed responsibility for the suicide bombings and the primary groups opposed to Assad, the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian National Council, not only denied involvement but accused Assad's government of staging the attacks.



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Analyst Comments¹⁰

- ❑ It is possible the suicide bombings were conducted by members of the Syrian opposition who made no claim of responsibility. Executing a suicide bombing against government forces and subsequently accusing the Syrian government of perpetrating the attack would allow the opposition to use the tactic while avoiding the stigma associated with it.
 - To admit using suicide bombings risks negative responses and a possible decrease or loss of support from the public, media, and foreign governments.
- ❑ *McClatchy Newspapers* cited anonymous U.S. officials as stating that U.S. intelligence reports confirm al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) was responsible for the suicide bombings in Damascus and is likely responsible for the suicide bombings in Aleppo. The U.S. has not officially stated who it believes to be responsible for any of the attacks.
- ❑ Interestingly, the suicide bombings seem to have done little to further the cause of either the Assad regime or the opposition. Neither side appears to have benefited significantly, nor does either side appear to have been negatively impacted.



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Training Implications

- Suicide bombing events can be utilized in a training scenario to exercise many elements of a command staff, such as the Provost Marshal, G2, G3, Public Affairs, Information Operations, etc.**

- A training scenario could employ suicide bombing events to exercise analysts by using various sources to provide pieces of intelligence that, when combined, may lead them to the perpetrator(s). The same intelligence could also be used to establish a connection between government officials and insurgent/terrorist cells in a particular operational environment.**

- Incorrect conclusions by trainees as to the suicide bomber's motivation and/or affiliation to OPFOR organizations and/or a government could be used to branch into additional scenario events.**



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