



Heart of Darkness: Inside Syria's Los Alamos

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The implications were chilling. In the summer of 2012, as murder and mayhem reigned on both sides of Syria's civil war, someone—likely from the opposition—released a list of 32 names on Facebook. These weren't people invited to a wedding; they weren't members of the Syrian national soccer team; and they weren't guests for a weekend jaunt to a fancy seaside resort in Latakia. These were people someone wanted dead.

"This is a last warning," the list read. "If you don't stop executing your criminal projects against the Syrian people and announce your defection from the regime by July 20, 2012, we'll start giving away specific details on each and every one of you to the FSA [Free Syrian Army]."

The details included names of neighborhoods where people lived and the models of cars they drove. "Janan Lhussein," one entry read. "Resides in Assad's suburb and drives a white Kia Forte."

What all 32 people allegedly had in common: They worked for the Scientific Studies and Research Center (SSRC) in Damascus, a Syrian Los Alamos of sorts where the government has produced and developed a vast arsenal of chemical and biological agents for decades. Now these weapons of mass destruction—and the high-tech research lab where they were developed—have become the focal point of an international push to destroy Syria's WMDs and a rebel counteroffensive in Barzeh, a neighborhood in the heart of Damascus, the country's battered capital city.

"The rebels and the opposition don't believe an agreement about chemical weapons actually changes the problem," says Amal Mudallali, a Syria expert and senior fellow at the Wilson Center, a think tank based in Washington, D.C. "Especially if there's not a transition to get Assad out of power."

The SSRC was created in 1971, purportedly as a civilian agency dedicated to science. But the research center reportedly answers only to the upper echelons of President Bashar al-Assad's Alawite government. One top secret SSRC cadre, Unit 450, has reportedly been moving stockpiles of Assad's deadly weapons to more than 50 sites around the country. The goal: to make sure the WMDs are difficult to steal or destroy.

That process of scattering began well before the August chemical attack on a Damascus suburb that killed 1,400 people, including 400 children. The U.S. and other Western governments say the regime was responsible. And though Assad and his allies deny the charge, a recent United Nations report undercut its claims.

It's unclear exactly how many biological or chemical weapons the Syrian regime still possesses. Various SSRC sites have been the target of Israeli military assaults, including one that destroyed a Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007. The Syrian research center and its subsidiaries—including the university that qualifies people to work for it have long been blacklisted by the U.S. And some countries such as Japan and South Korea have followed suit. But the SSRC has received outside assistance from companies, individuals and governments in Russia, Germany, France, Kuwait and Egypt, among others. Now, according to a recent French intelligence report, Damascus has more than 1,000 metric tons of chemicals at its disposal, as well as a variety of missiles, rockets and bombs—with a range of up to 311 miles—with which it can launch these deadly substances. And government agencies on both sides of the Atlantic suspect that may underestimate the regime's arsenal.

As scattered as that arsenal appears to be, U.S. and other Western officials fear those weapons could fall in the hands of militant groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas or even the Syrian rebels. In July, for instance, Israeli warplanes allegedly attacked a Syrian weapons depot in Latakia, killing several of the regime's soldiers. More recently, the main SSRC facility in the upscale Damascus neighborhood of Barzah has become a flashpoint for fierce fighting between the rebels and the regime, and the opposition has invested a considerable amount of blood and treasure to try and attack the SSRC compound. Some analysts say the rebels may be trying to get their hands on Assad's weapons of mass destruction, but the rebels say they're acting in self-defense.

"There are violent clashes in Barzeh between the Free Syrian Army and the regime on a daily basis," says Osama Shamy, a spokesman for the FSA in the area.

"The SSRC isn't a direct target...but we at least want to prevent [Assad] from continuing to kill civilians."

Either way, taking control of the SSRC will be a tough task. Shamy says the research center is a fortress located inside of a mountain and surrounded by tanks and artillery.

To make matters worse for the rebels, earlier this month the White House put its plans for a targeted bombing on the back burner, in favor of a Russian proposal that Assad hand over his arsenal.

Some experts are tentatively optimistic, so long as the Security Council drafts a binding resolution in case the Assad regime doesn't cooperate. "Syria's already sent a letter to the U.N. secretary general [saying] that it plans to fulfill its promise to relinquish its chemical weapons," says Kelsey Davenport, a nonproliferation analyst at the Arms Control Association, a think tank based in Washington, D.C. "I think that shows the Assad government is taking steps in the right direction."

Other analysts remain wary; they think Assad is only buying time. As Michael Doran, a Middle East policy expert at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., puts it, Assad is playing the "same cat-and-mouse game that we saw that Saddam Hussein played with U.N. inspectors with weapons of mass destruction will play itself out in a Syria context."

The rebels, for their part, aren't taking any chances. In a recent posting on a rebel Facebook page, someone posted another SSRC kill list. This one included the names of Syrian SSRC officials allegedly involved in the August chemical attack. Yet if the previous hit list is of any indication, most of these scientists are likely to keep their heads. Thus far, the rebels have managed to kill only one of the 32 people.

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