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Momentum Shifts in Syria, Bolstering Assad's Position

By BEN HUBBARD

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Not long ago, rebels on the outskirts of Damascus were peppering the city with mortar rounds, government soldiers were defecting in droves and reports circulated of new territory pried from the grip of President Bashar al-Assad.

As his losses grew, Mr. Assad unleashed fighter jets and SCUD missiles, intensifying fears that mounting desperation would push him to lash out with chemical weapons.

That momentum has now been reversed.

In recent weeks, rebel groups have been killing one another with increasing ferocity, losing ground on the battlefield and alienating the very citizens they say they want to liberate. At the same time, the United States and other Western powers that have called for Mr. Assad to step down have shown new reluctance to provide the rebels with badly needed weapons.

Although few expect that Mr. Assad can reassert his authority over the whole of Syria, even some of his staunchest enemies acknowledge that his position is stronger than it has been in months. His resilience suggests that he has carved out what amounts to a rump state in central Syria that is firmly backed by Russia, Iran and Hezbollah and that Mr. Assad and his supporters will probably continue to chip away at the splintered rebel movement.

“Assad is powerful now, not as a president who controls a state but as a warlord, as someone who has more and more sophisticated weapons than the others,” said Hassan Hassan, a Syrian commentator at the Abu Dhabi-based English-language newspaper The National. “He is not capable of winning back the country.”

The civil war has Balkanized the country, with an array of armed groups controlling different areas. The government retains its grip on the capital and has been solidifying its control over a string of major cities to the north. Rebel groups hold large swaths of land in the country’s north and east, though they are far from unified, with militias competing for resources, imposing their own laws and sometimes turning their guns on one another. The Kurds, Syria’s largest ethnic minority, control their own areas and often fight to keep the rebels out.

Over all, about 60 percent of the Syrian population lives in government-controlled areas, while the rebels effectively control 60 percent to 70 percent of the actual territory, said Andrew J. Tabler, a Syrian expert with The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. That is because the rebels are strongest in less populated rural areas, he said.

But a stalemate that has divided the country for months has begun to shift as Mr. Assad’s forces — bolstered by regular support from his allies — have rolled back rebel gains and eased the pressure on the capital.

Even fighters who had hoped that Mr. Assad would end up deposed, dead, jailed or exiled like other autocrats singled out in the Arab Spring uprisings have begun to acknowledge the emerging reality.

“If the revolution continues like this, the people will revolt against us,” said a rebel commander from the central city of Homs, where Mr. Assad’s forces have made gains in recent days.

The commander, who wanted only his first name, Ahmed, used to protect his family, criticized his fellow rebels for putting the interests of their brigades ahead of the wider anti-Assad struggle and accused them of hoarding powerful weapons or selling them for a profit. That lack of unity has prolonged the war and made their mission harder, he said.

“If a regular Syrian comes and asks me what we have given him, I don’t know what to say,” Ahmed said.

Throughout the more than two years of fighting, the military prowess on both sides has been heavily linked to the reliability of their international backers. Mr. Assad has received continuous military and financial support from Russia and Iran as well as added muscle on the battlefield from Hezbollah, the Lebanese militant group and political party. While he has come to rely more heavily on local militias, the clear command structure of the army and Mr. Assad’s status as a unifying figurehead have kept his forces together.

Meanwhile, the many rebel groups have had to compete for irregular bursts of support from Saudi Arabia, Qatar and a range of private funders, each with its own ideological interests. This has exacerbated tensions among the rebel groups, as a win for one is seen as a loss for others. The rise of Qaeda-linked groups like the Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria has

further splintered the cause, with some Syrian fighters resenting international jihadists who have joined the battle to serve their own ends.

The United States and its Western allies have pressed for Mr. Assad to leave power and talked about arming select rebel groups. The European Union lifted its arms embargo on Syria, which rebels expected would lead to weapon supplies.

But rebels say none have arrived so far.

“They do not want the fall of this regime; that is why they are not helping,” said Gen. Salim Idris, the head of the Free Syrian Army, a loosely knit umbrella group that has been soliciting aid and that is supposed to funnel it to vetted groups while keeping it from extremists.

General Idris accused the West of delaying with endless meetings, summits and requests for new “guarantees” that extremists would not get arms, and said this left the rebels at a huge disadvantage against Mr. Assad’s forces.

“They have Russia and Iran and Hezbollah,” he said. “But these democratic countries that call for freedom, when you have people seeking freedom from dictatorial, oppressive regimes and need help, they do not give any aid.”

But in recent months, the rebels have also failed to consolidate their victories, plan and execute new advances and provide basic services to civilians in areas they control.

Nearly a year after launching the battle to take Syria’s largest city, Aleppo, the city remains damaged and divided. Many residents blame the rebels for bringing the destruction.

Farther south, government forces with help from Hezbollah seized the town of Qusayr last month, depriving the rebels of a key pathway for arms and fighters from Lebanon into central Syria.

Since then, the rebel movement has shown signs of internal disarray. Clashes among battalions are on the rise, and many who welcomed international jihadists for their battlefield skills have turned against them. Last week, extremists killed two rebel commanders in separate episodes in northern Syria.

All of this has given Mr. Assad a new level of confidence, said Assem Kansou, a member of the Lebanese Parliament and the local branch of Mr. Assad’s Baath Party whose children grew up with Mr. Assad and who has visited him frequently throughout the crisis.

Mr. Assad appeared worried months ago when rebels on the outskirts of Damascus often fired shells at downtown, said Mr. Kansou. But his mood appeared better last month, after the army took Qusayr and pushed the rebels farther from the capital.

“Now you sit with him and you see that he is at ease, ” Mr. Kansou said. “He’s a person who is very confident in himself, working bit by bit. All needs to be fixed, but he has a sense that this crisis will pass with all of its consequences.”

