

Car bombing in central Damascus kills 53, injures more than 200

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USPA News - A massive car bomb blew up Thursday on a busy highway in central Damascus near the headquarters of Syria's ruling Baath Party, killing 53 people and wounding more than 230 others, officials and activists said. A second car bombing at the scene was averted.

Footage from the scene showed a crater in the middle of the road near a pedestrian bridge and surrounding buildings. A number of vehicles were on fire while bloodied or heavily burnt bodies were strewn across the gruesome scene, which is located near the headquarters of the Baath party and close to the Russian Embassy. Health Ministry officials said 53 people were killed while 235 others were taken to public and private hospitals, where an unknown number of people remained in a critical condition on Friday. Health Minister Saad al-Nayef said the ministry was working to provide the best possible medical care to those who were injured. The state-run Syrian Arab News Agency (SANA) said many of the victims were civilians such as pedestrians, school children, and people who were driving their cars. The powerful explosion also damaged al-Hayat Hospital, Abdullah Bin al-Zubir school, and minibuses at a nearby bus station. Education Minister Hazwan al-Wazz said three teachers and 20 students were among those injured, but it was not immediately clear if any children were among those killed. Al-Wazz said the Damascus Examinations Department and a building belonging to the Education Ministry had also been damaged. A spokesperson for Russia's Foreign Affairs Ministry strongly condemned the attack, which happened a short distance from the Russian Embassy. "Russia urges those who can influence Syrian extremists and radicals to demand that they end terrorist attacks," the spokesperson said. Embassy officials said the building had suffered damage but none of the embassy's staff members were injured. A short time after the blast, police stopped a vehicle near the scene of the deadly attack, state-run media reported, adding that tons of explosives were found inside. The would-be suicide bomber was arrested but it was not immediately known where the attacker had planned to detonate his explosives. There was no immediate claim of responsibility following Thursday's attack, but a letter from Syria's Foreign Ministry to the United Nations (UN) accused al-Qaeda-linked armed terrorist groups of being responsible for the car bombing. The Syrian government frequently refers to its opponents as terrorists. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed his condemnation in a statement released by his spokesman. "[Ban] reiterates his firm conviction that resorting to violence and military means will only lead to more suffering and destruction, and that a political solution is the only way out," the statement said. "The Secretary-General renews his call on all parties to end the violence and respect international humanitarian law." The crisis in Syria began as a pro-democracy protest movement in March 2011, similar to those across the Middle East and North Africa. The Syrian government violently cracked down on the protests, setting off an armed conflict between pro-Assad forces and anti-government forces. A number of jihadist groups have since joined the fight against Assad's regime. The United Nations estimates that more than 70,000 people, many of them civilians, have been killed and more than 1.2 million others have been displaced since the start of the uprising in 2011. Opposition groups estimate the number of deaths is far higher, but those figures cannot be independently verified.

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