

How did the Syrian war begin? Clearing the Confusion

By Jay Tharappel

The topic of how the Syrian war began has been covered by a number of independent writers including Dr. Tim Anderson (my PhD supervisor), Sharmine Narwani, Prem Shankar Jha, and Michel Chossudovsky to name a few. This article draws upon the research they have conducted in order to construct a broader argument about the nature of the conflict. This is my contribution to the topic, and I encourage readers to be as critical as possible about the substance of this article.

There are many claiming to oppose the Syrian government (or the “Assad regime” as they call it) who subscribe to the narrative that the Syrian government responded to peaceful protests in Dara’a by gunning down the protesters, which in turn provoked defections from the army, erupting in a war by insurgents to overthrow the Syrian state. However, piecing the evidence together suggests a different narrative. Initially there were two separate ‘oppositions’ to the Syrian government, one calling for peaceful democratic reforms, and the other seeking to overthrow the state by violent means. The government has largely addressed calls for democratic reform while predictably resisting all attempts by the insurgency to overthrow the Syrian state.

The [first armed confrontations](#) with an insurgency happened on the 17 and 18th of March 2011 in Dara’a. They resulted in, the deaths of 4 protesters and 7 police officers, and a few days later on the 21st of March, the burning down of the Ba’ath party headquarters and courthouse (will be covered in greater depth later). That more police officers were killed than civilians (here ‘civilian’ means a non-state actor but not

necessarily a non-combatant) suggests an armed confrontation between two sides, and not the violent suppression of an unarmed crowd. The international media, led by Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya, pounced on these events to accuse the Syrian government of firing on peaceful protesters often citing the claims of anonymous “opposition activists”.

The Army (SAA) was immediately called into Dara’a because those police officers had reportedly been killed by snipers; what followed were gun battles that [led the Army to the Al Omari Masjid](#), where [according to video footage obtained from Syrian state TV by the Daily Mail UK – shown below] they seized a stash of Kalashnikov rifles, semi-automatic pistols, hand-grenades, and large quantities of Syrian currency.

It should be noted that the Al-Omari Masjid is known for its extreme theocratic ambitions, and also for its infamous blind preacher Sheikh Ahmed Siyasanah, who spoke at a [Hezb ut Tahrir conference in Lebanon in 2012](#), denouncing the government with a rant about the evils of secularism, and referring to the Syrian government as “a regime that has made war against Allah, and war against Islam for many decades”. The blind Sheikh also claimed that government soldiers had entered his Mosque in Dara’a and desecrated copies of the Quran by scribbling “do not make sajdah [prostrate] to Allah, but make sajdah to Bashar” on them, that too in Farsi (the language of Iran, a staunch ally of the Syrian government).

We now have reason to believe the FSA, Free Syrian Army, or at least the forerunners to the FSA, carried out false flag attacks against Mosques bearing the names of Islamic figures revered by Sunnis (i.e. Abu Bakr, Uthman, and Aisha) by vandalising them with graffitied slogans like “God, Syria and only Bashar” in order to stir up hatred against Shia Alawis (who they accuse of controlling the government), and also to convince Sunni government soldiers to defect. A former Tunisian anti-government fighter admitted to carrying out these false flags in a TV interview. Had the interview been

conducted in Syria, skepticism over its legitimacy would naturally be raised, but this was on Tunisian TV (published online in March 2014) by someone claiming to be a returned fighter who goes by the alias or *kunya* Abu Qusay.

See the interview here.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2pkTPbQt8dw>

Abu Qusay's claim that the FSA carried out false-flag attacks designed to intensify sectarianism, a tactic that relies on the element of surprise during the formative stages of a conflict, is *corroborated* by the sensational claims of the blind preacher, and by the fact mentioned earlier that as early as March 2011, the government had seized stockpiles of cash and weapons from Siyasanah's Mosque – the al Omari Masjid – where the Syrian government arrived after fighting the first battle of the war against presumably the forerunners to the FSA which was later officially formed in July 2011.

Given the deeply entrenched ideological commitment to inter-faith harmony that Syria has a well-known reputation for having instilled in its people, it would seem out of character for those in the army, who are themselves socialised by the secular nationalist ideology of the state to carry out such an attack (let alone scribble blasphemy, specifically in Farsi, a foreign language), and finally, conveniently enough, Siyasanah is completely blind so he would have needed to rely on the testimony of others to issue this accusation, which adds credence to the possibility that he was misinformed and manipulated. The latter is possible if the claims made by former Saudi Major General Anwar al Eshki are true, namely that the stockpiling of arms at the al Omari Masjid was done *against* the wishes of the "blind Sheikh". In April 2012 al Eshki gave an [interview with the BBC](#) in which he heavily implied that the Saudis were funding the Islamist insurgency from the very beginning in Dara'a, March 2011.

See the interview here, decide for yourself.

To state the glaringly obvious, sectarianism of the kind that encourages citizens to judge each other by their religious sect has never been in the interests of the Syrian government, whereas the FSA has repeatedly demonstrated that calling upon Sunnis to defect and wage war against the state is quite obviously a part of their strategy. Indeed six years ago in July 2012 the [UNHRC reported](#) that an “FSA soldier” told them “that Alawite soldiers [of the government] are normally killed immediately upon capture, while soldiers from other sects are offered the chance to join the FSA”, however, despite these open admissions many people who still harbour illusions in the “revolution” still maintain that the old FSA were the good rebels, the apparently non-sectarian ones.

Gunning down Protesters?

From the very onset of armed conflict in March 2011 prominent news agencies such as [Al Jazeera](#) and [Reuters](#) alleged that the Syrian government was violently cracking down on peaceful protesters who then *responded* by launching an armed insurgency. These allegations shaped global public opinion into believing that the violence in Syria was primarily being committed by the state against unarmed civilians. However, at the time that these allegations were initially raised, they turned out to be provably false.

The earliest allegation that the state was gunning down “protesters” came on the 23rd of March 2011, just six days after the initial outbreak of violence in Dara’a in a report by Reuters correspondent Suleiman Khalidi.

The [report](#) reads:

“President Bashar al-Assad made a rare public pledge to look into granting Syrians greater freedom on Thursday as anger mounted following attacks by security forces on protesters

that left at least 37 dead...The main hospital in Deraa, near the Jordanian border, had received the bodies of at least 37 protesters killed on Wednesday [the 23rd of March], a hospital official said. That brings the number killed to at least 44 in a week of protests."

[According to a very well-respect Indian political analyst Prem Shankar Jha](#) who also worked in Syria many decades ago and therefore has a degree of familiarity with the country:

"Suleiman Khalidi, the local correspondent of Reuters, reported on March 23 that 37 bodies had been brought to the Dera'a hospital till then. The number was intriguing because all news reports had been unanimous that 13 civilians had been killed till March 23, so where did the other 24 bodies come from?"

As it turned out the other 24 bodies were SAA soldiers who were killed in an ambush. According to a detailed investigative report titled '[The Hidden Massacre](#)' by journalist Sharmine Narwani, this massacre was carried out by insurgents ambushing a truck of SAA soldiers who had been called to enter Dara'a after the initial violent incidents on the 17-18th of March, 2011. The lack of coverage about this massacre was actually because the Syrian government made efforts to conceal this from the media. According to Syria's Deputy Foreign Minister Dr. Faisal Mekdad it was for the following reason:

"this incident [the ambush killing 24 SAA soldiers] was hidden by the government and by the security for reasons I can interpret as an attempt not to antagonize or not to raise emotions and to calm things down – not to encourage any attempt to inflame emotions which may lead to escalation of the situation – which at that time was not the policy."

Even though the majority killed were SAA soldiers, Khalidi's article nonetheless alleges that the 37 killed were "protesters", which was picked up by other news outlets, especially Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya, and used to characterise the conflict as having began with Syrian government shooting innocent protesters.

Ok so that's 24 out of 37 deaths accounted for, what about the other 13? Well, on the 22nd of March, a [Ya Libnan article](#), citing Xinhua reporters stated, "Seven policemen were killed during clashes between the security forces and protesters in Syria" while an [Israeli National News reported](#), "Seven police officers and at least four demonstrators in Syria have been killed". So, 7 police officers, and 4 protesters? That adds up to the other 13.

In other words, 31 of the 37 killed (83%) were from the army and police, whereas the initial reports led people to believe that 37 people had been gunned down by Syrian security forces. The obvious question therefore is, who shot at the army and police? Were they also peaceful civilian protesters? Well, according to Syrian journalist Alaa Ebrahim who visited the places in Dara'a where all these incidents took place in April 2011, the shooters were a third-party – neither protesters nor state forces:

"There are many questions unanswered about Dara'a which was the place that started the whole crisis in Syria. Up till today the four people who were killed in the first protests in Dara'a, I've interviewed protesters who went along with them, I've interviewed security officers and policemen who were at the scene. Actually stories don't always match each other but something that all the people I have interviewed have agreed upon is that they don't know who shot at the protesters who were killed the first day. Protesters have told me that the shooting took place from a high place over a water-tank in the city and they couldn't identify the people who were shooting"

Watch the interview for yourself.

Later on in April corroboration of these claims emerged when the Associated Press released footage of unidentified gunmen in Dara'a shooting apparently at crowds from a distance – this footage can be seen at the end of the above video.

When the the allegations accusing the Syrian government of firing on demonstrators originally surfaced, the corporate media refused to accept the Syrian government's explanation that that armed groups were attacking state forces, as such, all state violence was assumed to have been unleashed on the civilian population.

The Events of Idlib: The Exception Not the Rule

On the 11th of June 2011 an article by Hala Jaber, an Arabic speaking British journalist, writing as a correspondent for the Sunday Times newspaper, [documented an incident in the town of Maarat Al Numaan in the Idlib governorate](#) where she had visited (the original article has been pay-walled but the report has been uploaded on this website), where peaceful protests were infiltrated by violent extremists, which in turn produced a predictable violent response from state forces.

She describes an anti-government protest by the townspeople who were enraged by the actions of the Mukhabarat (Syrian intelligence) a week earlier who had shot and killed four protesters for blocking the highway between Aleppo and Damascus. The government then reached an agreement with the townspeople resulting in, according to Jaber, "four hundred members of the security forces" being withdrawn from the town in return for orderly protests leaving only "49 armed police and 40 reserves" who were "confined to a barracks near the centre of town". Five thousand "unarmed marchers" protested in the main square but this time were "joined by men with pistols".

The article reads further:

“At first, the tribal elders leading the march thought these men had simply come prepared to defend themselves if shooting broke out. But when they saw more weapons – rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers held by men with heavy beards in cars and pick-ups with no registration plates – they knew trouble lay ahead. Violence erupted as the demonstrators approached the barracks, where the police had barricaded themselves inside. As the first shots rang out, protesters scattered. Some of the policemen escaped through a rear exit, the rest were besieged. A military helicopter was sent to the rescue. “It engaged the armed protesters for more than an hour,” said one witness, a tribal leader. “It forced them to use most of their ammunition against it to relieve the men trapped in the building.”

In all documented cases of violent clashes between state forces and civilian demonstrators, armed insurgents have always been present. The notion that the Syrian state simply shot peaceful protesters thereby instigating a full-blown insurgency is not only factually inaccurate but also illogical on the grounds that the western media narrative completely ignores the reality that the Syrian government actually went to great lengths addressing the various political and economic grievances of the peaceful protesters, while predictably resisting the armed Islamist insurgency seeking to topple the secular republic in favour of a theocracy.

What Did the Actual Peaceful Protesters Demand?

In early 2011 and prior to the onset of armed conflict there had been a series of protests across Syria relating to a range of political and economic grievances without calling for the government to be overthrown. According to an Al Jazeera article published on the 9th of February 2011, protesters demanded an end to the state of emergency, which granted

police the right to detain suspects on spurious grounds (this particular law was repealed in April 2011), as well as constitutional reforms to end the Ba'ath party's political monopoly (which ended after the 2012 constitutional referendum). The main grievances however were economic, focusing on corruption, unemployment, and cost of living pressures, especially the rising cost of diesel fuel, and also regarding more specific issues such the monopoly of Syria's mobile phone networks. The popular demand specific to Dara'a was the protesters' [opposition to existing land laws](#) that imposed restrictions on the sale of land in border areas ostensibly on the grounds of border security.

What follows is a rough timeline showing the evolution of political to military struggle:

- 17th of January, 2011: Prior to the anti-government insurgency, and in response to popular pressure, the government ["increased the heating oil allowance for public workers by 72 percent to the equivalent of \\$33 a month"](#).
- 9th of February, 2011: [The government lifts its ban on Facebook, Youtube, and Twitter, which had been in place since 2007.](#)
- 13th of February, 2011: The government, through its newly established National Social Aid Fund, begins [offering transfer payments to help Syria's 420,000 poorest families.](#)
- 15th of February, 2011: The government ["reduc\[es\] duties on a range of basic foodstuffs including rice, tea, powdered milk, coffee and bananas. It also lowered taxes on vegetable oil, margarine, unroasted coffee and sugar"](#).
- 17-18th of March, 2011: [The insurgency is launched in Daraa marking the beginning of the war.](#)
- 23rd of March, 2011: After sending a delegation to Dara'a to investigate events, President Assad sacks the

unpopular Governor of Dara'a, Faysal Kalthum, and [orders the release of the fifteen teenagers](#) who were detained for graffitying anti-government slogans.

- 20th of April, 2011: The [government repealed the forty-eight year old state of emergency](#) that had given police sweeping powers to carry out pre-emptive arrests and detain suspects.
- 20th of June, 2011: President Assad [announces a national dialogue to begin a process of constitutional reform](#). One of the major demands is for an end to the constitutional privileges afforded to the Ba'ath party.

What did the constitutional reform process achieve?

According to the [old constitution](#) the Ba'ath party led a coalition of political parties known as the 'National Progressive Front' (1973: Art.8), which could legally contest elections for the People's Council, meaning that candidates from outside these parties had to run as independents. This front was formed in 1972 and initially featured the following secular, leftist, and nationalist parties; the Syrian Communist Party, the Arab Socialist Union, the Arab Socialist Movement, and the Organisation of Socialist Unionists.

The [new constitution](#) introduced a multi-party political system in the sense that the eligibility of political parties to participate isn't based on the discretionary permission of the Ba'ath party or on reservations rather on a constitutional criteria. As such, the new constitution forbids political parties that are based on religion, sect or ethnicity, or which are inherently discriminatory towards one's gender or race (2012: Art.8) – this means the Syrian Muslim Brotherhood is still banned.

What hasn't changed is the constitutional requirement that half the People's Council be comprised of 'workers and peasants' (1973: Art.53 | 2012: Art.60), which in practice

means that the ballot paper contains two lists, one with candidates who qualify as 'workers and peasants', and another one with other candidates. Assuming the 'workers and peasants' quota isn't filled, the next closest candidates would be prioritised for election. From a working class perspective, this is one specific feature of the Syrian constitution that is arguably more democratic than most western countries that make no such reservations for popular classes.

There were also major changes to Syria's presidential system. According to the old constitution the Ba'ath party was the "leading party in society and the state" (1973: Art.8), which in practice allowed the Ba'ath party to propose their own Presidential candidate to run in an uncontested yes or no referendum, and if this candidate, hypothetically, failed to receive a majority of votes, the People's Council (Syria's unicameral parliament) would have the right to propose another candidate (1973: Art.84).

In the new constitution all references to the Ba'ath party have been removed. To qualify as a candidate, the applicant must have the support of 35 members of the People's Council (2012: Art.85), and must have lived in Syria for the past ten years (2012: Art.84) . If hypothetically only one candidate qualifies within these rules, the Speaker of the People's Council's must call for these qualifying procedures to be repeated. This is what allowed for Syria to hold multi-candidate presidential elections in 2014, which President Assad won because as much as the western media suppresses it, he is actually quite popular, and anyone who has visited Syria will tell you that (I visited in July 2015).

Al Jazeera, which is owned by the very Qatari monarchy that has financed the anti-government insurgency, is no friend of the Syrian government, especially given its documented history of lying in ways that undermine the Syrian government's reputation. There is now a [Wikipedia page dedicated to documenting Al Jazeera's controversies](#), the most extreme case

being when [Al Jazeera host Faisal Qassem effectively called for the genocide of Alawites](#), which is the sect to which the Syrian President belongs, and who comprise roughly 10 percent of the Syrian population. Despite Al Jazeera's current reputation (as the propaganda wing of a unelected monarchy that still practices slavery) the article admitted that the public perception of President Assad was of a leader keen on reform, but restrained by entrenched political structures.

[According to one Syrian student:](#)

"The president knows that reform is needed and he is working on it...As for me, I don't have anything against our president. The main issues which need to be addressed are freedom of speech and expression as well as human rights...Also, many things have changed since Bashar came to power, whether it has to do with road construction, salary raises, etc. Even when it comes to corruption, he is trying hard to stop that and limit the use of 'connections' by the powerful figures in Syria. However, he won't be able to dramatically change the country with the blink of an eye."

As a result of the demands raised by such students, the Ba'ath party no longer enjoys constitutional privilege. Presidential elections are contested between multiple candidates, and are no longer referendums seeking the electorate's binary (yes or no) approval for the Ba'ath party's internally nominated candidate. The participation of political parties is based on an objective constitutional criteria, not on the arbitrary powers of the executive to permit or exclude them. Finally, the Supreme Constitutional Court is significantly more independent.

Conclusion

All of these democratic and economic victories were won by the Syrian people from their government through demonstrations and mass mobilizations, however to claim that this movement

morphed into the actual armed insurgency which by 2012 was being rapidly monopolised by the Al Nusra Front, Syria's Al Qaeda franchise, is an insult to those very people, especially when it's used to justify overthrowing the Syrian state that they worked so hard at reforming, which if it collapsed, would only give way to the seizure of power by extremist gangs whose objectives are the very opposite of what those peaceful protesters wanted. The peaceful protesters wanted democratic reform, whereas the armed insurgency is dominated by militias that denounce democracy as an affront to their theocratic aspirations. Suggesting that President Assad sent troops in to murder protesters, who then abandoned all their democratic aspirations, and morphed into the Islamists seeking to establish a theocracy ideologically similar to Saudi Arabia amounts to conflating the two "oppositions" against the Syrian government. The above article acknowledges certain injustices carried out by Syrian government forces, however the point is that just because one believes that a certain level of injustice *justifies* the violent overthrow of the state, that doesn't mean the actual attempts to overthrow the state are *directly and solely caused* by the outrage against those injustices, especially given the role of *external* states in arming, funding, and recruiting foreign fighters to fight the government.