

Syria cracks down on growing unrest

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24 March 2011

Syrian security forces have cracked down on growing anti-government protests in the southern city of Dara'a with increasing brutality. State forces firing tear gas, water cannon and live ammunition on unarmed protesters have killed at least 11 people, including a young boy, since last Friday.

Early Wednesday morning, after cutting the telephone lines and turning off the electricity, police broke into the compound around the Omari mosque in the Old City where protesters had set up camp. They used tear gas, bombs and live ammunition to clear demonstrators, killing at least six people, including a doctor who had gone to help the injured. There were reports that the police were preventing ambulances going to the mosque.

Protesters, who had been calling for political freedom and an end to corruption, had said that they were going to remain in the mosque until their demands were met.

The latest killings follow four days of demonstrations that broke out after Friday prayers, when relatively small groups of protesters took to the streets in Damascus, Dara'a, Homs, Baniyas, Aleppo, Qamlishi and Deir el-Zour, chanting, "God, Syria and Freedom". In Damascus and Baniyas, the police, armed with batons, broke up the demonstrations and made dozens of arrests.

In Dara'a, protesters called for the release of 15 schoolchildren arrested on March 6 for writing slogans on walls saying, "The people want to overthrow the regime".

They also chanted against Rami Makhlof, President Bashar al-Assad's billionaire cousin, who controls Syriatel, Syria's mobile phone company, and other major business concerns. Security forces responded with tear gas and fired live ammunition into the crowds, killing at least five people and injuring many more. They closed the city, preventing people from entering Dara'a.

On Saturday, when a crowd of 20,000 joined the funeral procession in Dara'a for two of Friday's victims and demanded that those responsible for their murders be put on trial, the security forces again used tear gas to disperse the demonstration. There were reports of angry clashes in

Damascus, Deir el-Zour, Homs and other cities.

The following day, rioting spread. Thousands of people took to the streets of Dara'a in protest against the country's emergency laws that have been in place since 1963 when the Ba'ath party seized power, an end to corruption, and the release of political prisoners believed to number in the tens of thousands. Protesters set fire to and looted the ruling Ba'ath party headquarters in the city, government buildings, the courthouse and the Syriatel building. The security forces again used tear gas and live ammunition, killing one person and injuring dozens more.

On Monday, the angry protests grew despite the large presence of riot police and heavily armed soldiers when it became known that an 11-year-old boy had died from gas inhalation the previous day. Thousands of people marched through the city chanting, "no more fear", with some calling for "Revolution, revolution. Rise up Hauran [the Hauran plateau close to the border with Jordan]," behind the funeral procession for two of Sunday's victims.

The protests spread to Jassem, with reports of demonstrations in other cities throughout the country, calling for freedom.

"We want bread, but also freedom," a resident of Dera'a told Reuters, where wheat yields fell by a quarter last year due to a four-year-long drought that has hit the northeast and south of the country—leaving hundreds of thousands dependent upon the United Nation's World Food Programme.

Since the revolutionary upheavals in Tunisia in January, there have been sporadic small demonstrations calling for the release of political prisoners and hunger strikes, which the police broke up by beating people with batons and making dozens of arrests. Assad told the *Wall Street Journal* in January that there was no mass discontent in Syria because Syria's leadership was "very closely linked to the beliefs of the people" and its opposition to Tel Aviv and Washington's brutal policies in the region gave it Arab nationalist legitimacy.

In reality, Syria has been ruled for more than 40 years

by an oligarchy made up of military and Ba'ath party officials and a small layer of businessmen from the minority Alawite sect around the Assad family, which has ruthlessly suppressed all opposition. This clique rules by emergency laws set in place in 1963 after years of wars with Israel, unrest, and near civil wars that continued until the brutal massacre of up to 20,000 Islamists in Hama in 1982.

The present ruler, Bashar al-Assad, then 34 years old and with no official position, came to power in June 2000 on the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad. Madeleine Albright, US Secretary of State, welcomed the transfer of power even before the formalities had been gone through, in the name of “ensuring stability”.

As Assad has sought to get closer to Washington, Europe and France, he has opened up the economy to foreign investment, privatised some of the banks, and attempted to reach a peace deal with Israel to secure the return of the Golan Heights, which Israel captured in the 1967 War. He also agreed to renew intelligence assistance to the US and Britain, jailed Syrians for attempting to smuggle arms into Iraq, stepped up security along the long border with Iraq and arrested hundreds of alleged insurgents in an attempt to placate Washington.

Washington has in recent times been keen to bring Syria in from the cold, as part of its wider project of isolating Tehran in order to secure its domination of the region. To this end, it has exerted constant pressure on Damascus, which has long been on the State Department's list of state sponsors of terror. Given the shifting sands of Middle East politics, it cannot be excluded that a shift towards confrontation will be made by the US—just as attempts to cultivate Muammar Gaddafi's regime in Libya have given way to military hostilities.

Syria faces the same social problems as the rest of the Middle East—rising prices, poverty, growing social inequality and high youth unemployment. In the coastal town of Baniyas, tensions were further raised by the closure of an Islamic school, while in the northeast, which has withstood the worst of the drought, longstanding grievances among Syria's Kurdish population have fuelled the protests. Reports that Syrian armed forces had been helping Gaddafi suppress the opposition in Libya—Syria along with Algeria opposed the Arab League's support for a no-fly zone—were denied by the government but further inflamed tensions.

The Assad regime's response to the growing unrest in the region has been twofold. It initially announced some cosmetic concessions, increasing wages in the public

sector, which employs 25 percent of the workforce, by 20 percent. It rescinded measures that would have cut subsidies to basic commodities, and conceded that some of the protesters' demands were valid, including the need for reform and a clampdown on corruption. It sent government representatives to the cities to calm tensions, promising to investigate the murder of the protesters on Friday and punish those responsible, dismissed Dara'a's governor, and released some high-profile political prisoners and the 15 schoolchildren arrested earlier in the month.

At the same time, the government has accused the protesters of being Israeli agents and infiltrators and accused the regime's enemies—Assad's exiled family members and political enemies and oppositionists in Paris and London—of whipping up the demonstrations. It has brought in the army, setting up roadblocks, and is preparing to close down the Internet and telecommunications.

As in Libya, the UN, the US and the European Union have all condemned Syria's crackdown and called for the release of those arrested. Their selective moral outrage is being used to hijack social protests in their own geopolitical interests. Worse repression in Bahrain and Yemen, where the major powers have more direct and friendly relations, has elicited only muted, pro-forma criticism.



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