

# Clashes follow Friday prayers in Syria

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2 April 2011

Syrian security forces fired on a small demonstration calling for freedom after Friday prayers in Douma, a southern suburb of Damascus, reportedly killing four people and injuring others. Police also used tear gas to break up demonstrations in Dera'a and Latakiya calling for the speedy implementation of political reforms. At least four people were killed and 30 injured in Sanamin, a village near Dera'a.

There were also demonstrations in Qamishli and Hassakeh in the northeast of the country, a region that is home to Syria's Kurdish population. Responding to accusations that they are seeking to foment a Kurdish secessionist movement, the protestors chanted, "Neither Arabic, nor Kurdish, we want national unity."

In the capital Damascus, security police and plainclothes intelligence officers were out in strength, with hundreds stationed around the main mosques, particularly the Umayyad mosque, whose doors were closed to prevent protests. The BBC reported that people were locked in at the al-Rifai mosque, where there were chants of "The one who kills his people is a traitor," and "We are all Syrians."

Security forces had been mobilised all over the country to prevent demonstrations and crack down heavily on those who responded to social networking sites calling for a Day of Martyrs in response to the killing of scores of people in Dera'a and Latakiya over the last two weeks.

The protests in those towns were triggered by the March 6 arrest of 15 school children for writing anti-regime graffiti. The demonstrations in Dera'a and Latakiya sparked protests in other parts of the country.

The latest killings and crackdown follow President Bashar Assad's long-awaited speech to Parliament, which appealed for national unity without making any concessions to demands for political change, in particular, for the end of the emergency laws under which Assad's Ba'athist Party has ruled since it came to power in a coup in 1963.

Assad blamed the unrest that has centred on the southern city of Dera'a on "conspiracy," "plots" and "sabotage" by outside forces targeting Syria. Dera'a, he said, was on "the frontline with the Israeli enemy, and it is the first line of defence for the hinterland." He continued: "Daraa, al-Qunaitra [on the Golan Heights], and part of rural Damascus defend the other parts of Syria which lie behind them. No one can be in a position defending the homeland and at the same time conspiring

against it. This is impossible and unacceptable."

Assad was referring to Israel's repeated wars with Syria—in particular, the 1967 war when Israel seized the Golan Heights, which it has incorporated and colonised with settlements. He said that "the objective was to fragment Syria, bring down Syria as a nation to enforce an Israeli agenda."

While he acknowledged the demand for and need for reform, he gave no timetable or announcement of any changes.

At the same time as he employed anti-Israeli and anti-imperialist rhetoric to give a veneer of nationalist legitimacy to his right-wing regime, Assad presented himself to the imperialist powers as a safe pair of hands.

According to Ayman Abdel Nour, a former Ba'ath Party member and now editor of All4Syria news agency, Assad postponed his speech for two days until it was clear that the army had control of Dera'a and Latakiya.

The speech came one day after the cabinet resigned. It was followed by the announcement that there would be an investigation into the deaths of the protestors. A legal committee would look at legislation to "guarantee the country's security and the dignity of Syrians and to combat terrorism," which would pave the way for lifting the emergency laws. A further investigation would look at the grievances of the Kurds and address the denial of citizenship to 300,000 of them following the 1962 census.

The government had already announced a wage increase for public-sector workers, who account for 25 percent of the formal sector, the withdrawal of legislation reducing or ending subsidies on basic commodities, and the release of some detainees and political prisoners, although there have been reports of further arrests and re-arrests.

Such promises have been made and broken before, and it is unlikely that the newly announced measures will assuage the anger over poverty, social inequality, official corruption and brutality, and the death toll in the recent protests. More than 100 are believed to have been killed, with hundreds more injured.

At the same time, there is considerable public suspicion about the protests. While the social networking site, Syria Revolution 2011, called the Day of Martyrs rallies on Friday and claimed to have received more than 100,000 responses, the demonstrations were small. This contrasts with large pro-government demonstrations, which were orchestrated by the

government and largely consisted of public-sector workers who had been given the day off as well as school children.

The low turnout at the anti-regime protests reflected not just fear of repression at the hands of the army and security forces, notorious for their abuse and torture, but also concerns about who the organisers are, as they remain anonymous.

Assad's claims of outside interference in Syrian affairs cannot be simply dismissed, given the long-standing enmity of the United States, France (the former colonial power) and Israel towards the Syrian regime. It is now clear that the imperialist powers and their agents have played a central role in hijacking anti-Gaddafi protests in Libya and fomenting a civil war so as to provide the pretext for a military intervention, the aim of which is to install an outright stooge regime in Tripoli.

There is every reason to believe that similar efforts are underway to exploit popular opposition to the corrupt Syrian dictatorship to install a more pliant regime in Damascus.

On Thursday, the Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* carried a report from the Syrian Champress Internet site of a US-Saudi plan to destabilise Syria and overthrow the Assad regime. The plan was allegedly formulated in 2008 by the Saudi national security advisor and long-time ambassador to Washington, Prince Bandar bin Sultan, and Jeffrey Feltman, a veteran US diplomat in the Middle East and assistant secretary of state for Middle East Affairs. Its aim was reportedly to foment ethnic and sectarian tensions and use the military to overthrow the regime and establish a new government that would end Syria's relations with Iran and Hezbollah.

The public stance of the Obama administration and of Israel appears to be for a continuation of relations with Assad, with the aim of distancing Syria from Iran. But there are powerful voices within the US urging a shift towards confrontation—a policy also endorsed by French President Nicolas Sarkozy.

Elliott Abrams, deputy national security adviser to former president George W. Bush, wrote in the *Washington Post* that "Syria is next." He said, "We must be clear that we view Syria's despicable regime as unsalvageable... we [must] do all we can to help the Syrian people free themselves of that evil dictatorship."

Senator John McCain, the top Republican on the Senate Armed Services Committee, and Independent Senator Joseph Lieberman, who chairs the Homeland Security Committee, both declared that it was time to back protesters against Assad's rule. "A new Syria strategy is now needed—one that aligns the United States with the legitimate demands and aspirations of the Syrian people for their future," they said.

The 1996 "Clean Break" memo, prepared for incoming Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu by prominent neo-conservatives, famously depicted the overthrow of former Iraqi president Saddam Hussein as one crucial step in a larger strategy designed to destabilise Syria.

Three US citizens have been arrested for inciting protests

against the regime, although one has since been released. According to Syrian state television, one is an Egyptian national with a US passport who had been working in Syria after a secret visit to Israel.

Despite repeated denials, the movement against the Ba'athist regime has a distinctly sectarian element—centring on exploiting Sunni discontent at the Alawite leadership of Assad. The Alawites are a minority sect of Shiism.

The Egyptian Sunni cleric, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, has called for all Arabs to rise up against the Assad regime and portrayed it and that of Muammar Gaddafi as oppressors of Sunnis. He links both regimes to Iran in a clear appeal to Washington. Al-Qaradawi has a programme, "*Shariah and Life*," broadcast on Qatar's Al Jazeera channel, and is affiliated to the Muslim Brotherhood. He describes Shi'ites as heretics and gave a sermon in Qatar stating that "the train of revolution has arrived at a station that it was destined to reach, the Syrian station."

Qatar is playing a prominent role in supporting the US war against Libya. Al-Qaradawi's sermon called for a fatwa against Gaddafi, urging Arab nations to recognise the Transitional National Council and "to confront the tyranny of the regime in Tripoli."

Bahrain protests, in contrast, were deemed "sectarian in nature. The Shias are revolting against the Sunnis."

The *Washington Post*, which has editorialised in favour of confronting the Assad regime, nevertheless published an article by Leila Fadel noting that the "sectarian tension" behind "some of the passions now exploding in Syria... also explains the apprehension being voiced by many Syrians uneasy about where a struggle for power might lead."

She continued: "Religious minorities worry that if the Sunni majority came to power, Syria could become a repressive Islamic state. They would rather continue to live under the current system, sacrificing their freedoms in a secular and repressive state, than risk what might follow if Assad is ousted... an undercurrent of sectarianism is slowly bubbling up."

The *Post* concludes, "The chants of mourners last week in Daraa, the center of the burgeoning unrest, revealed the majority's anger at being ruled by a minority religious group, and at their leaders' close ties to Shiite Iran and to Hezbollah, the Shiite militia in southern Lebanon."



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