

Syria: how the violence began, in Daraa

By Tim Anderson

'The claim that armed opposition to the government has begun only recently is a complete lie. The killings of soldiers, police and civilians, often in the most brutal circumstances, have been going on virtually since the beginning.' – Professor Jeremy Salt, October 2011 (Ankara)

There is no doubt that there was popular agitation in Syria in early 2011, after the events in Egypt and Tunisia. There were anti-government and pro-government demonstrations, and a genuine political reform debate. However the serious violence that erupted in March 2011 has been systematically misrepresented, in line with yet another US-NATO 'regime change' agenda.

For many months the big powers and the corporate media pretended that armed opposition in Syria did not exist at all. All violence was government forces against 'peaceful protestors'. In the words of the US-based Human Rights Watch (strongly linked to the US Council on Foreign Relations), 'protestors only used violence against the security forces ... in response to killings by the security forces or ... as a last resort'. This was a dreadful deceit. Washington and its allies (Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Turkey and some elements in Lebanon) were sponsoring armed attacks within Syria from the very beginning.

With the revelations of foreign Islamist fighters in Syria, engaged in kidnappings, torture and executions, we can see a 'revised imperial line'. These 'jihadis' or 'Al Qaeda' groups are said to be 'on the fringes' of the rebel 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA), which is said to be led by defectors from the Syrian Arab Army. An alternative line is that the genuine 'revolution' is in danger of being 'hijacked' by the fundamentalists.

Daraa: the killings begin

In February 2011 some anti-government demonstrations began. They were met in March with even larger pro-government demonstrations. In early March some teenagers in Daraa were arrested for graffiti that had been copied from North Africa 'the people want to overthrow the regime'. It was reported that they were abused by local police. *Time* magazine reported that President Assad intervened, the local governor was sacked and the teenagers were released.

What followed is highly contested. The western media version is that protestors burned and trashed government offices and that 'provincial security forces opened fire on marchers, killing several' (*Time*, 22 March). After that, 'protestors' staged demonstrations in front of the al-Omari mosque, but were in turn attacked. The western media exaggerated the demonstrations, claiming crowds of up to 300,000, with 15 anti-government 'protesters' killed (*AP* 23 March). Daraa is a border town with 150,000 inhabitants.

The Syrian government, on the other hand, stated that armed attacks had begun on security forces, killing several police, along with the burning of government offices. There was corroboration of this account. While its headline blamed security forces for killing 'protesters', the British *Daily Mail* showed pictures of guns, AK47 rifles and hand grenades that security forces had recovered after storming the al-Omari mosque. The paper noted reports that 'an armed gang' had opened fire on an ambulance, killing 'a doctor, a paramedic and a policeman'.

Israeli and Lebanese media gave versions of the events of 17-18 March closer to that of the Syrian government. An *Israel National News* report (21 March) said ‘Seven police officers and at least four demonstrators in Syria have been killed ... and the Baath party headquarters and courthouse were torched’. The police had been targeted by rooftop snipers.

Al Jazeera (29 April), owned by Qatar’s royal family, implied the rooftop snipers in Daraa were government forces. ‘President Bashar al Assad has sent thousands of Syrian soldiers and their heavy weaponry into Deraa for an operation the regime wants nobody in the world to see’. However the *Al Jazeera* claim that secret police snipers were killing ‘soldiers and protestors alike’ was both illogical and out of sequence.

The armed forces came to Daraa precisely because police had been killed by snipers. Once in Daraa they engaged in more gun-fire and stormed the local mosque to seize the guns and grenades stored by ‘protesters’. Michel Chossudovsky wrote: ‘The deployment of armed forces including tanks in Daraa [was] directed against an organised armed insurrection, which has been active in the border city since March 17-18.’

Saudi Arabia, a key US regional ally, had armed and funded extremist Sunni sects (Salafists and Wahabis) to move against the secular government. From exile in Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Adnan Arour called for a holy war against the liberal Allawi Muslims, who dominated the government: ‘by Allah we shall mince them in meat grinders and feed their flesh to the dogs’. The Salafist aim was a theocratic state or ‘caliphate’. Sheikh Muhammed al Zughbey said the Alawites were ‘more infidel than the Jews and the Christians’. The original North African slogan was rapidly replaced by a Salafist slogan ‘Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the grave’. They would soon act on these threats.

Saudi official Anwar Al-Eshki later confirmed to BBC television that arms had indeed been provided to groups within Syria, and they had stored them in the al-Omari mosque.

While the Syrian Baathist system has been authoritarian, it has also been secular and inclusive. The Saudi-Qatari and US-NATO backed armed insurgency aims to derail the reform program led by President Bashar al-Assad. If a more compliant government cannot be formed in Damascus, the big powers will probably settle for a country mired in sectarian chaos. That is, after all, what we see across the border in Iraq.

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