

Hidden Origins of Syria's Civil War

Exclusive: In the early months of the Syrian civil war, the West's mainstream media presented the conflict as a simple case of good-guy protesters vs. bad-guy government, but the conflict was more complicated than that and the one-sided version only made matters worse, writes Jonathan Marshall.

By Jonathan Marshall

Since the Syrian civil war began in 2011, nearly a quarter million people have perished and fully half of the country's inhabitants have been forced from their homes, creating the worst refugee crisis in the past quarter century. Meanwhile, the continuing advance of brutal Islamist factions, which a leading CIA officer in 2013 termed the "top current threat to U.S. national security", makes the chances of restoring peace and human rights seem more remote than ever.

Many parties are to blame, but certainly among them are interventionists in the United States and its allies who rationalized supporting the Islamist opposition, and refusing to embrace serious peace negotiations, on the grounds that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad is a uniquely evil dictator. That image of Assad grew directly out of his regime's brutal response to civilian protests that began in early 2011, soon after the start of the Arab Spring.

Summarizing the conventional wisdom, the International Coalition for the Responsibility to Protect notes that "The crisis in Syria was prompted by protests in mid-March 2011 calling for the release of political prisoners. National security forces responded to widespread, initially peaceful demonstrations with brutal violence. From summer 2011 onwards, Syrian President Bashar al-Assad refused to halt attacks and implement the meaningful reforms demanded by protestors. In July 2011, accounts emerged from witnesses, victims, the media, and civil society that government forces had subjected civilians to arbitrary detention, torture, and the deployment and use of heavy artillery."

That August, following critical reports about the regime's crimes, President Barack Obama joined European leaders in demanding that Assad "face the reality of the complete rejection of his regime by the Syrian people" and "step aside." Washington imposed new economic sanctions, prompting Syria's U.N. Ambassador Bashar al-Jaafari to assert that the United States "is launching a humanitarian and diplomatic war against us."

But the convention wisdom, that "the protest movement in Syria was overwhelmingly peaceful until September 2011", is wrong, or at best incomplete. In fact, opposition to the government had turned violent almost from the start, and was likely aimed at provoking a harsh reaction to polarize the country.

Although nothing justifies the myriad crimes committed by state forces then and since, facts ignored by most media and government accounts suggest that responsibility for the horrors in Syria is widely shared. The facts undercut the rationale behind inflexible demands for “regime change” from Western and Gulf leaders that closed the door on serious negotiations and opened the way to mass slaughter and the rise of today’s Islamist-dominated opposition.

A Violent Start

The city of Dara’a, near the Jordanian border, was the epicenter of protests that triggered Syria’s civil war in 2011. Anti-government sentiment had been growing due to a recent influx of angry and desperate families dispossessed by what one expert called “the worst long-term drought and most severe set of crop failures since agricultural civilizations began in the Fertile Crescent many millennia ago.”

In early March 2011, police in the city arrested and severely beat several high school students for painting anti-government graffiti on a wall. No doubt inspired by the Arab Spring, protesters gathered at a local mosque and began to march for political rights and an end to corruption, chanting “God, Syria, Freedom.” Syrian police reportedly responded with water cannons, batons and even gunfire to disperse the marchers, killing three protesters. The government news agency claimed that “infiltrators” among the marchers had smashed cars, destroyed other property and attacked police, causing “chaos and riots.”

Matters went from bad to worse when demonstrators fought back. As one Israeli journalist reported, “In an uncharacteristic gesture intended to ease tensions the government offered to release the detained students, but seven police officers were killed, and the Baath Party Headquarters and courthouse were torched, in renewed violence.” Around the beginning of April, according to another account, gunmen set a sophisticated ambush, killing perhaps two dozen government troops headed for Dara’a.

President Assad tried to calm the situation by sending senior government officials with family roots in the city to emphasize his personal commitment to prosecute those responsible for shooting protesters. He fired the provincial governor and a general in the political security force for their role. The government also released the children whose arrest had triggered the protests in the first place.

Assad also announced several national reforms. As summarized by the UN’s independent commission of inquiry on Syria, “These steps included the formation of a new Government, the lifting of the state of emergency, the abolition of the Supreme State Security Court, the granting of general amnesties and new

regulations on the right of citizens to participate in peaceful demonstrations.”

His response failed to satisfy protesters who took to the streets and declared the city a “liberated zone.” As political scientist Charles Tripp has observed, “this was too great a challenge to the authorities, and at the end of April, a military operation was put in motion with the aim of reasserting government control, whatever the cost in human life.”

The Assad regime reacted ruthlessly, laying siege to the town with tanks and soldiers. Security forces cut water, electricity and phone lines, and posted snipers on rooftops, according to residents quoted by The New York Times. At the same time however, according to another report, unknown gunmen in Dara’a killed 19 Syrian soldiers.

Meanwhile, protests had begun spreading to other towns, fed by social media campaigns. By late April, government forces had reportedly killed several hundred protesters. Dozens of their own were killed as well.

In early April, for example, nine Syrian soldiers on their way to quell demonstrations in Banyas were ambushed and gunned down on the highway outside of town. Western news media suggested they were killed by Syrian security forces for refusing to fire on demonstrators, a fanciful tale that was analyzed and demolished by Professor Joshua Landis, director of the Center for Middle East Studies at the University of Oklahoma.

An opposition leader based in Paris, who urged local demonstrators to remain non-violent, told Landis that he had been approached by three groups “to provide money and weapons to the rebels in Syria.” They included “several pro-American Syrian opposers” whom he refused to name. He declared that anyone providing money and weapons to the rebels was “pushing them to commit suicide,” a prescient warning.

The Failure to Report

As Landis concluded, “Western press and analysts did not want to recognize that armed elements were becoming active. They preferred to tell a simple story of good people fighting bad people. There is no doubt that the vast majority of the opposition was peaceful and was being met with deadly government force and snipers. One only wonders why that story could not have been told without also covering the reality that armed elements, whose agenda was not peaceful, were also playing a role.”

He also accused the Western press of similarly misreporting a massacre of government security forces in early June, 2011, in the city of Jeser al-Shagour, a Muslim Brotherhood stronghold near the Turkish border, where some 140 members

of the police and security forces were slaughtered.

Several Western news accounts uncritically recited claims from local activists that the victims had mutinied against their commanders and been killed by government forces. But video footage of the fighting was “fairly conclusive in corroborating the original government version of events: the soldiers stationed in the town were overrun by armed and organized opposition,” Landis noted.

In the city of Hama, another video emerged, showing rebels dumping the bodies of soldiers off a highway bridge. As CNN reported on Aug. 2, 2011, “One prominent anti-government activist, who asked not to be named because of the dangers that could arise from the release of the information, told CNN the state TV account was correct. The bodies are those of Syrian secret police killed by Syrian fighters from Iraq who have joined the anti-government fight.”

The same activist insisted that such anti-government violence was the exception, not the rule, but admitted that it gave “credence to the Syrian government’s assertion that it is targeting ‘armed gangs.’”

Shortly thereafter, an analyst at the private intelligence firm Stratfor warned colleagues not to be misled by opposition propaganda: “The opposition must find ways to keep the Arab Spring narrative going, and so the steady flow of news relating to regime brutality and opposition strength is to be expected. Although it is certain that protesters and civilians are being killed, there is little evidence of massive brutality compared to . . . other state crackdowns in the region. Stratfor has also not seen signs of heavy weapons being used to massacre civilians or significant battle damage, although tank mounted .50 caliber weapons have been used to disperse protesters.”

That August, just days before Western leaders called on Assad to quit, Landis rightly predicted that the regime would not simply step aside quietly and let the opposition take over:

“Syria’s divisions are too deep. The fear of revenge and ethnic cleansing will galvanize those who have backed the present order for decades. Had the Syrian leadership been willing to hand over power peacefully or establish some sort of constitutional convention, it would have done so already. The poverty and loss of dignity for so many Syrians is a crushing part of Syrian reality. . . .

“Syria is filled with people who have little to lose, who have little education, and few prospects of improving their chances for a better and more dignified life. The potential for violence and lawlessness is large. Most worrying is the lack of leadership among opposition forces.”

But rather than heeding such advice and seeking to promote dialogue and

reconciliation, the United States and other Western powers, along with their allies in Turkey and the Gulf states, chose confrontation and a deepening civil war. As former CIA intelligence analyst Philip Giraldo warned in December 2011,

“Americans should be concerned about what is happening in Syria, if only because it threatens to become another undeclared war like Libya but much, much worse. . . . NATO is already clandestinely engaged in the Syrian conflict, with Turkey taking the lead as U.S. proxy. . . . Unmarked NATO warplanes are arriving at Turkish military bases close to Iskenderum on the Syrian border, delivering weapons from the late Muammar Gaddafi’s arsenals as well as volunteers from the Libyan Transitional National Council who are experienced in pitting local volunteers against trained soldiers, a skill they acquired confronting Gaddafi’s army.

“Iskenderum is also the seat of the Free Syrian Army, the armed wing of the Syrian National Council. French and British special forces trainers are on the ground, assisting the Syrian rebels while the CIA and U.S. Spec Ops are providing communications equipment and intelligence to assist the rebel cause, enabling the fighters to avoid concentrations of Syrian soldiers.”

What to Conclude?

What should one make of these facts? First, even if opposition propaganda sometimes inflated the case against the Damascus regime, there can be no reason to doubt the many reports by United Nations and private human rights organizations that government forces, accustomed to decades of authoritarian rule, “committed the crimes against humanity of murder and of torture, war crimes and gross violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law, including unlawful killing, torture, arbitrary arrest and detention, sexual violence, indiscriminate attack, pillaging and destruction of property.”

However, the deadly provocations against Syrian government forces put an entirely different cast on the origins of the conflict. Furthermore, some human rights organizations also acknowledge that armed opposition forces began committing crimes against civilians by the summer of 2011. In March 2012, Human Rights Watch sent an “open letter” to leaders of the Syrian opposition, decrying “crimes and other abuses committed by armed opposition elements,” including the kidnapping and detention of government supporters, the use of torture and the execution of security force members and civilians, and sectarian attacks against Shias and Alawites.

Western media did not ignore such reports, but significantly underplayed them, no doubt wanting to maintain focus on the larger (and simpler) narrative of

Assad's evil. (In much the same way, Western media sympathetic to the Ukrainian opposition underplayed the role of rightist violence in the putsch that ousted President Viktor Yanukovich in February 2014.)

In choosing to cite human rights selectively as their rationale for regime change, Western governments, including the Obama administration, followed longstanding double standards. Many of the U.S.-backed states involved in the anti-Assad campaign, including Saudi Arabia and Israel, have also committed gross human rights violations and war crimes, whether at home or in neighboring territories and states such as Gaza, Yemen and Lebanon.

In Syria as in Libya and Iraq, human rights became a convenient bludgeon for supporting the longstanding ambition of U.S. neoconservatives to topple critical Arab regimes as part of their grand plan for remaking the map of the Middle East. The worthy cause of saving lives perversely enabled a much greater sacrifice of Syrian lives.

History shows that war itself is the greatest threat of all to human rights. Surely our common "responsibility to protect" should start with efforts to limit the start and expansion of armed conflicts, not to inflame them in humanity's name.

[For Part One of this two-part series on the Syrian crisis, see "The US Hand in the Syrian Mess."]

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