



# Syrian American Council

Phone: (630) 642-0026 | Address: P.O. Box 371, Willow Springs, IL 60480 | Email: [sac@sacouncil.com](mailto:sac@sacouncil.com) | Website: [www.sacouncil.com](http://www.sacouncil.com)

## Human Rights in Syria

### Testimony

#### Louay Safi

Chairman, Syrian American Council

#### **Statement before Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission of the House of Representatives Washington, DC**

**July 12, 2011**

Chairman James McGovern and distinguished Members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission. I would like to thank you for holding this important and timely hearing on the human rights conditions in the Syrian Arab Republic. I ask that my full statement, and the written testimony, be made part of the record.

Mr. Chairman, I do appreciate the opportunity to testify on the rampant violations of human rights in Syria. The human rights condition -- which was bleak under the dictatorship of the late Hafiz Assad and remained poor when his son, Bashar Assad, took over the regime -- has deteriorated tremendously in the last four months.

On March 15, a crowd of courageous Syrians organized a small demonstration in downtown Damascus calling on the Assad regime to open up the tightly controlled political system, chanting for freedom and dignity. The words they chanted became later the slogans of the ongoing Syrian revolution including such phrases as "freedom, freedom," "our rallies are peaceful," and "all the people of Syria are one." The latter was intended to counter the regime's claims that the protests harbored sectarian sentiments and objectives. Three days later on March 18, the small demonstration of few hundred protestors in Damascus was transformed into large rallies in the city of Daraa, attracting thousands of protesters who called for political freedom and peaceful reform.

The large demonstrations in support of political freedom that erupted in Daraa and spread to every town and village caught everyone by surprise. No one thought that the Syrian people after four decades of systematic repression and political indoctrination would be able to challenge a security regime that has a track record of using brutal tactics against opponents. The record includes a 1982 massacre in the city of Hama in which the Assad regime killed thousands of civilians who opposed the dictatorship. The exact figure is not known, but estimates run from 15,000 to 40,000 slaughtered.

From the beginning of their protests, the people of Syria were determined to replace the dictatorial rule of Bashar Assad with freedom and replace the favored slogan of the Assad supporters, "God, Syria, Bashar, and nothing else," with the slogan "God, Syria, freedom, and nothing else."

And from the beginning, the Assad security regime was determined to use excessive and lethal force to suppress protests. Over the last four months, the security forces have fatally shot over 1750 Syrians, have arbitrarily arrested over 14,000, subjecting many of them to brutal torture and detention. The

Syrian Observatory for Human Rights has put the number of casualties since the unrest began at 1,400 civilians and 350 security and military forces.

The regime has not spared anyone from its iron fist policy against critics, not even children. The Daraa protests were triggered by the detention and torture of 15 young boys accused of painting graffiti slogans calling for the downfall of the regime on the wall of their school. The security forces are targeting even the wounded, firing on ambulances, and have imposed a siege on several towns depriving their populations of basic commodities and services.

The nature and scale of the human rights violations has been documented by many local and international human rights organizations, including Human Rights Watch ("We've Never Seen Such Horror: Crimes Against Humanity by Syrian Security Forces") and Amnesty International ("Crackdown in Syria: Horror in Tell Kallakh"). Their reports show that the abuses are systematic and part of a state policy. They all conclude that the abuses qualify as crimes against humanity.

Despite the Syrian government's claims that the protests are led by violent criminal gangs, all eye witness accounts insist the protests have been peaceful, "with demonstrators often carrying olive branches, unbuttoning their shirts to show that they had no weapons, and chanting 'peaceful, peaceful' to indicate that they posed no threat to the security forces."

Eye witness testimonies have been corroborated by video footage that shows that protesters have been peaceful, and that violence erupted in very few instances and only against the security forces and government property in response to unprovoked killings.

The Assad regime's actions that qualify as violation of human rights and possibility crimes against humanity fall into five categories:

1. Systematic killing of peaceful protesters
2. Looting and vandalism of private property
3. Abuse of relatives of protesters
4. Mass arbitrary arrests
5. Torture and humiliation

### **Systematic killing of peaceful protesters**

The Syrian security forces have used live ammunition to disperse protesters since day one. There is plenty of evidence that the killing is systematic and deliberate, as security forces have used snipers to target protesters. Many of those who were killed received fatal shots in the head and the chest.

There is also evidence of mass execution-style killing of civilians. A Human Rights Watch (HRW) report cites eyewitnesses who testified that the security forces executed 26 detainees during the siege of Daraa. The discovery of mass graves in Daraa on May 16, after a two-week siege of the city by security forces, has reinforced the eyewitnesses' claims. Five bodies were identified as members of the Abazeid family. "Syrian government officials denied the existence of a mass grave, but al-Watan, a Syrian newspaper closely affiliated with the government, acknowledged that five bodies had been found," according to the report.

### **Media blockade and banning of journalists**

The Syrian regime insists that the killing is done by armed gangs affiliated with protesters and is outside the control of the regime. The government has, however, failed to back up these claims except with forced confessions of detainees. These claims also run contrary to a preponderance of evidence in the form of video records presented by the protesters that seems to back the opposition's claim that the

armed gangs move freely and frequently accompany security personnel. The government account has been further weakened by its failure to open the Syrian borders to human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International as well as to international journalists and other independent observers. The Syrian government has also refused entry to a team assigned by the UN Human Rights Council on 29 April 2011 to investigate all alleged violations of international human rights law and crimes committed against civilians in Syria.

### **Looting and vandalism by soldiers and security personnel**

In a report documenting human rights violations, Amnesty International documented eyewitness accounts of government forces looting and vandalizing many houses and shops on May 16 and 17 after the government deployed security forces to in Tell Kalakh. Amnesty International cited testimonies by displaced families in northern Lebanon, including testimony by a woman who fled her neighborhood on May 15 and decided to stay at her daughter's house in a safer neighborhood. "She decided the following day to risk returning to her home to collect the family's identity cards." When she reached the downtown district, she saw military vehicles and soldiers and noticed that houses and shops were being vandalized. She decided to quickly leave and return to her daughter's home. On May 19 she went again to check on her home, only to find that the interior of her house was vandalized and many of her appliances were destroyed by sharp objects.

### **Abuse of relatives of protestors**

Security forces often kidnap those they suspect of actions against the regime, and their parents frequently learn about the deaths of their sons from the office of the mayor or local police. Human rights organizations show systematic abuse to the families of detainees. Families often receive contradictory information about the fate of their children and the location of the bodies, adding to their distress. In addition, family members are subjected to verbal abuse when they go to identify the bodies of their slain relatives. They are additionally pressured to say that their relatives were killed by "armed gangs" and are often forced to agree in order to receive the body. No information about the circumstances and causes of death is given.

Amnesty International reported that two families were forced to submit written statements saying that opposition armed elements had killed their relative as a condition to receive the bodies. Others testified that they were told to keep the number of mourners at funerals under 10, and to remain silent during funeral processions and refrain from chanting religious slogans that may suggest that the deceased died as a martyr.

### **Mass arbitrary arrests**

Many of the arrests since March have been arbitrary and on a mass scale. HRW documented in a campaign of mass arrests in the providence of Daraa after the city came under siege on April 25. Witnesses described sweeping operations conducted by security forces resulting in hundreds of arbitrary arrests. Meanwhile, security forces continued their usual targeted arrests of activists and their family members.

HRW reported that people arrested in Daraa "were initially held in various ad hoc detention facilities before being transferred for interrogation in military intelligence or political security departments in Daraa. Many were then sent to Damascus."

Similarly, Amnesty International reported that on May 16, 17 and 18, Syrian troops conducted house-to-house searches in Tell Kalakh, arresting scores of male residents, including men older than 60 and boys younger than 18. All of them were "arbitrarily detained and some tortured or otherwise ill-treated at the moment of arrest or in detention, including during interrogation."

## **Humiliation and torture**

Torture is the preferred tool of the Assad regime for forcing confessions. Many of those who were detained testified after their release that they were subjected to various forms of torture and degrading treatment. According to a HRW report, torture methods “included prolonged beatings with sticks, twisted wires, and other devices; electric shocks administered with tasers and electric batons; use of improvised metal and wooden ‘racks’; and... the rape of a male detainee with a baton. Interrogators and guards also subjected detainees to various forms of humiliating treatment, such as urinating on the detainees, stepping on their faces, and making them kiss the officers’ shoes. ...”

## **Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey**

There are about 19,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Turkey who fled their towns and villages fearing the Assad regime’s retribution for voicing their opposition and calling for freedom. The refugees in Turkey feel safer, as the Turkish government has provided security forces for their protection and built several camps to accommodate them.

Refugees in Lebanon have experienced more uncertainty, as the Lebanese military forced some of the Syria refugees back to Syria despite the great risk they face upon return. Some of those forced back were military personnel who fled Syria after refusing to fire on protestors.

## **Recommendations**

The Assad regime is implicated in the most egregious violations of human rights and needs to be held responsible for the crimes against humanity it has committed. The Obama administration has implemented a policy of targeted sanctions that has put pressure on the Syrian regime, but they need to be broadened and increased.

The courageous people of Syrian have placed tremendous pressure on the Assad regime from within the country, but the regime still feels that it can continue to kill with impunity as the outside world has stopped short of calling it to account. The United States should take the lead in isolating the Assad regime diplomatically and should work to bring the regime principals to the International Criminal Court (ICC) through a UN Security Council resolution.