

Syria's 'false flag' terrorism, Houla and the United Nations

By Tim Anderson

On top of the tragedy of the violence in Syria we have the tragedy of a deeply biased United Nations, a malignant bias which is encouraging 'false flag' terrorism. That is, the fundamentalists murder civilians, blame this on the government, then use these crimes as a pretext for greater foreign intervention.

The serious student of Syria will have worked out by now that the violence of the secular Syrian state has been overwhelmingly aimed at crushing a fundamentalist and foreign funded (by the US, Britain, France, Saudi, Qatari) rebellion. Even greater ruthlessness was used in the early 1980s when the previous government of Hafez Al-Assad definitively crushed an armed uprising by the Muslim Brotherhood.

The violence of the 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA), on the other hand, is both anti-state and sectarian. On the one hand it aims to overthrow the secular state (not just the government), but can only do so with substantial foreign assistance, as occurred in Libya. At the same time it is driven by the most fanatical sects within Sunni Islam (e.g. salafis), which make a holy war against Shia Islam (including the liberal Alawis) because they are 'not really Muslims'. They also attack Sunnis 'in the middle', a majority who will not join in or collaborate with their holy war.

The fundamentalist-dominated FSA, backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, is in alliance with US-funded exile groups, in particular the Syrian National Council (set up like the exile Iraqi National Council and the exile Libyan National Council). These groups provide logistic and foreign support; nevertheless, it is the FSA that is directly engaged with the Syrian Army.

The salafist slogan 'Alawis to the grave, Christians to Beirut' flags FSA genocidal and ethnic cleansing aims, which were partly implemented in Homs and Aleppo, before the Syrian Army drive the FSA out. Donations for these lovely activities are now tax-deductible in the USA (Giraldi 2012; NRP 2012). The FSA these days incorporates more foreign 'jihadis', local salafists and mercenaries than army defectors.

The large numbers of foreign fighters have been welcomed by the FSA (if not by the Syrian people) because the sectarian mandate has nothing to do with national politics. Religious leaders authorise them to kill in the name of God. The peaceful demonstrations and the domestic political reform process have been sidelined. Indeed, this sectarianism has wider roots in the oil-rich Gulf monarchies' fears of Shia Islam's influence from Iran and Iraq through to Syria and the Lebanon. The US is deeply worried about this, too. That is why the Saudis, with US support, funded Syria's armed uprising from the beginning of the violence, in March 2011 (Salt 2011, Queenan 2011, Truth Syria 2012b; Abouzaid 2012).

The US and NATO - used to having their way at the United Nations after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 - entered into their alliance with the most sectarian of Islamic groups for the same reason big powers always form alliances: to divide and dominate the region. They did something similar in Afghanistan back in the 1980s, in Iraq during and after Saddam Hussein, and they are doing it in Syria today. They not only want to control the oil resources of the region, but to strategically contain the influence of the other powers, notably Russia and China.

This strategic view is necessary to understand the attacks on Syria (which has very little oil) and the apparent contradiction between the big powers' stated aim of suppressing the most radical, sectarian forms of Islam (e.g. 'Al Qaeda'); and the big powers' current alliance with those same groups. The real issue is not religion but imperial strategy. How else do we explain Washington's silence at the ethnic cleansing of Christians in Homs (CNA 2012a; CNA 2012b)?

The United Nations Security Council, created to prevent war, was dominated by the US and NATO for twenty years, from 1991 to 2011. Only with the Syrian conflict has opposition re-emerged, mainly from Russia and China (two of the five nations that hold veto powers), backed by large sections of Latin America. Nevertheless, big power dominance continues to distort UN processes, in particular UN investigations. Partisan statements from the Security Council, backed up by Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon and Human Rights Commissioner Navi Pillay, generate pressure for findings of some extraordinary reason to increase intervention, and to move against the government.

Making good use of the corporate media, the big powers seek to de-legitimise the Syrian government to justify more open intervention and so bring about 'regime change'. The sectarian FSA, for its part, desperately needs foreign assistance to make ground against the powerful Syrian Army. Despite their powerful backers, the FSA has not yet come close to winning any major confrontation with the Syrian Armed Forces.

Here we can see the root of a special feature of the sectarian violence in Syria: the ruthless Salafis are already prepared to kill civilians as part of their 'holy' war. On top of this, if they can blame their own murders on the government, this adds to the international foment that might bring them outside military support. They already have the great advantage that the western media listens almost exclusively to their versions of events. The FSA's military weakness can thus be bolstered by a 'false flag terrorism' which they can turn to their advantage. They have done this many times.

For example, deaths from rooftop snipers in Daraa and Homs were routinely blamed on the Syrian government. In the corporate media these killings were usually reported as 'regime atrocities', even though extensive video of FSA rooftop snipers had been posted on YouTube (see Anderson 2012).

Al Jazeera, owned by the Qatari government, a financier of the conflict, also promoted 'false flag' murders. For example early in the conflict, on 10 April 2011, the Qatari station showed a photo of Nidal Jannoud of Baniyas badly beaten and covered in blood. Al Jazeera said he was a victim of pro-government 'Shabiha' (thugs) who were brutally attacking and killing peaceful protestors in Baniyas. Two days later Nidal's dead body was found near a gas station; it emerged he was a vegetable seller and a government supporter (Truth Syria 2012a; Dirgham 2012). Al Jazeera then claimed Nidal was himself a 'Shabiha'. Four Aljazeera staff resigned over the station's anti-Syria bias.

More systematic evidence was collected by Homs-based nun, Mother Agnes Merriam al-Saleeb. She pointed out, in November 2011, that the Catholic Media Centre had a list of names of hundreds of murder victims, many of whose images had been later used in [FSA] media setups which claimed that security forces had killed them (SANA 2011).

The Houla Massacre

The precedent for false flag terrorism in Syria was thus well established by the time of the dreadful Houla massacre, on 25 May 2012, just days before a UN Security Council meeting. This appalling crime involved the murder of 108 civilian villagers, including 34 women and 49 children, around the time of a fire-fight between the FSA and three guard posts of the Syrian Army. This massacre of civilians took place just days before a UN Security Council meeting, set up to discuss Syria. The Security Council immediately condemned the Syrian Government.

From the start there were two conflicting stories: that the Syrian government or its agents had killed the villagers, or that FSA groups had murdered them. In the first case the killings were said to represent blind, indiscriminate violence from the 'regime'. In the second case it was said to be a calculated move by the FSA (i) to eliminate pro-government and Alawi groups from a predominantly Sunni area and (ii) to create an incident which would inflame opinion and so influence the Security Council to intervene, in favour of the FSA.

By any standards the Security Council condemnation of the government was premature. Nevertheless, it led immediately to the expulsion of Syrian diplomats from several countries. The Security Council said it:

'condemned in the strongest possible terms the killings ... in attacks that involved a series of Government artillery and tank shellings on a residential neighbourhood ... [and] also condemned the killing of civilians by shooting at close range ... Such outrageous use of force against civilian population constitutes a violation of applicable international law and of the commitments of the Syrian Government.' (UNSC 2012)

France's representative at the UN, Martin Briens, said that 'Tanks and artillery cannons from the government shelled residential areas killing civilians'. Britain's envoy Mark Lyall Grant said there was evidence of 'deliberate government shelling against a civilian neighbourhood'. However the Syrian Government denied shelling civilian areas and, very quickly, UN observers reported that the villagers had been mostly killed at close range. Norwegian General Robert Mood reported that 'very few of the people who died in Houla were killed by artillery shelling'.

Following this, the western media story shifted to one of plain clothes government militia (Shabiha) carrying out the murders. Britain's Daily Telegraph blamed 'Assad's Death Squads'. As to motive, this paper quoted an opposition source: 'They would just break people's arms and legs. They would fight for Bashar to the death. It is natural – they have to defend their sect' (Alexander and Sherlock 2012).

A warning bell should have sounded here. The Syrian government is strictly secular, and almost obsessively avoids reference to peoples' religion or ethnicity. Both the Government and the Baath Party have members from all groups, even if Alawis (notably President Assad, whose wife is Sunni) have had important leadership roles. The Salafis, on the other hand, are genuinely obsessed with religious affiliation, only recognising certain Sunni sects as 'real Muslims'.

A UN investigation was then carried out but, despite the great pressure of the Security Council 'finding', was inconclusive. Some witnesses had pointed out that those killed included many Alawi and Shiites, and just a few Sunni people who had been pro-government. Delivering an interim report on 27 June, the Commission presented some rather contradictory conclusions:

'the commission concluded that the government was responsible for the deaths of civilians as a result of shelling the Al Houla area and, particularly, Taldou village ... with regard to the deliberate killing of civilians, the commission was unable to

determine the identity of the perpetrators. Nevertheless, it considered that forces loyal to the Government were likely to have been responsible for many of the deaths.' (HRC 2012: 10)

The UN report did blame armed anti-government groups for some crimes but came in much more strongly against the Syrian government, relying on the formal duties of government to 'prevent or punish' violence, as well as not commit it (HRC2012: 23).

However the problem here in attempting to blame the government, when the perpetrators had not been properly identified, was not simply the risk of error. This course may have appeased the big powers, which had set themselves against the Syrian Government. The more serious risk – if they were in fact wrong – was that the UN would directly encourage more 'false flag' terrorism.

The bias in the UN commission's approach to investigation did not go unobserved. Not only was there tremendous pressure from premature statements by UN officials (Secretary General Ban Ki Mon had regularly attacked the Syrian Government) and Security Council members, the Commission was relying mainly on opposition sources, helpfully organised by the US funded exile groups, for its sources.

In late May Italian anti-war activist Marinella Corregia asked UN Commissioner for Human Rights, Rupert Colville, what sources his group was using to investigate the Houla killings and this exchange followed:

MC: So which witness sources do you have and how did you speak with them?

RC: Our local network, whom we spoke on the phone. I cannot say more; I have to protect them ... Our local contacts in Syria say they were Shabbiya. Try to be less cynical.

MC: But no doubt from your side? It seems that many of the children were from Alawite pro-government families...

RC: We are asking for an investigation. I don't say we are certain.' (Valiente 2012)

The second report on the UN's inquiry, released on 15 August, firmed up on the pro-Government militia (Shabiha) line. The UN report said:

'The commission conducted eight additional interviews, including with six witnesses from the Taldou area, two of whom were survivors ... Forty-seven interviews from various sources were considered by the commission. Interviews were consistent in their depiction of events and their description of the perpetrators as Government forces and Shabiha. Apart from two witnesses in the Government report, no other account supported the Government's version of events' (HRC 2012: 10),

i.e., that FSA groups had committed the murders. The problem is, numbers of interviews mean little if the selection process has been poisoned by bias.

The UN inquiry group apparently did not consider the interviews carried out with eyewitnesses by German, Dutch and Russian journalists, nor of the refugee from Houla, interviewed and protected by Sister Agnes-Mariam of Homs. Sister Agnes Mariam had observed for herself the FSA's ethnic cleansing of Christians in Homs, and had grave suspicions of who was behind the killings at Houla. She had said publicly that Syrian Christians had been pressured to join the FSA, had been used by the rebels as human shields and that Christian homes had been taken over by Sunnis. She had also denounced 'false flag' crimes, back in 2011 (SANA 2011; AINA 2012).

German journalist Rainer Hermann interviewed witnesses from the Houla area, within days of the massacre. Hermann speaks Arabic and is a scholar of modern Syrian history. His

account in the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung (FAZ) painted a very different picture to that of the UN inquiry. He noted that Sunni rebels had attacked three army checkpoints around Houla, which had been set up to protect Alawi villages from jihadis in the surrounding Sunni area. Those killed had been:

'nearly exclusively families from the Alawi and Shia minorities in Houla ... several dozen members of one extended family which had in recent years converted from Sunni to Shia belief were slaughtered. Also killed were members of the Alawi family Shomaliya and the family of a Sunni member of parliament who was considered [by the FSA] a government collaborator' (MOA 2012).

This account was partly contradicted by some interviews done by a journalist for another German paper, Spiegel Online (Reuter 2012). Most of these witnesses were Houla area Sunnis, introduced to the outsiders by FSA collaborators.

Another German reporter questioned the emerging 'official' story. Alfred Hackensberger pointed out that those killed had been Shiites, identified as enemies by the FSA and mostly pro-government. Hackensberger spoke with one witness, Jibril, who had taken refuge with Mother Agnes-Mariam at the monastery of St James. He had witnessed the atrocities and informed the monastery. Jibril said the rebels had driven the soldiers from the area, then went to the hospital and killed patients there. They also killed some Sunnis who refused to join them and had participated in the May elections, in face of the FSA boycott (Al Halabi 2012).

Rainer Hermann defended his story, quoting the only known survivor of the Al Sayyid family, an eleven year old boy Ali, who said the attackers 'were shaved bald and had long beards' in the Salafi style. The boy only survived because he pretended to be dead. Hermann names who he says were the criminals:

'more than 700 gunmen under the leadership of Abdurrazzaq Tlass and Yahya Yusuf came in three groups from Rastan, Kafr Laha and Akraba and attacked three army checkpoints around Taldou. The numerically superior rebels and the (mostly also Sunni) soldiers fought bloody battles in which two dozen soldiers, mostly conscripts, were killed. During and after the fighting the rebels, supported by the residents of Taldou, snuffed out the families of Sayyid and Abdarrazzaq. They had refused to join the opposition' (LRC 2012).

The Russian journalist Marat Musin (who works for the newsagency Anna) was in Houla on May 25 and 26 and corroborates Hermann's version. So too does the Arabic speaking Dutch writer Martin Janssen (MOA 2012b).

The UN group, on the other hand, relied for their witnesses mainly on surviving Taldou residents, many of whom are said to have collaborated with the FSA in the murders. The UN identified no particular criminals, only repeating the claims their sources had made about un-named 'Shabiha', and how unlikely it was that FSA groups could have reached the villages because of the army's security. Yet according to the other independent witnesses, those on the army posts had been killed or driven out by the numerically superior FSA forces.

The UN report (HRC 2012) has not provided any satisfactory explanation as to why pro government militia ('Shabiha') would enter a strong Sunni area to slaughter Alawi and other pro-government villagers. Nor have they properly explained their own selection of witnesses, in particular the reliance on pro-FSA Taldou residents, in the face of the accusations of bias. Nor have they (unlike the German writers) identified any particular perpetrators. Not only is this UN version of events unsatisfactory, it seems likely to prolong the violence. The rebels are not blind to the political advantages of false flag terrorism.

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