

Why Syrians support Bashar al Assad

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By Tim Anderson

The sudden reversion of Washington to a 'war on terror' pretext for intervention in Syria has confused western audiences. For three years they watched 'humanitarian intervention' stories, which poured contempt on the Syrian President's assertion that he was fighting foreign backed terrorists. Now the US claims to be leading the fight against those same terrorists.

But what do Syrians think, and why do they continue to support a man the western powers have claimed is constantly attacking and terrorising 'his own people'? To understand this we must consider the huge gap between the western caricature of Bashar al Assad the 'brutal dictator' and the popular and urbane figure within Syria.

If we believed most western media reports we would think President Assad has launched repeated and indiscriminate bombing of civilian areas, including the gassing of children. We might also think he heads an 'Alawi regime', where a 12% minority represses a Sunni Muslim majority, crushing a popular 'revolution' which, only recently, has been 'hijacked' by extremists.

The central problem with these portrayals is Bashar's great popularity at home. The fact that there is popular dissatisfaction with corruption and cronyism, and that an authoritarian state maintains a type of personality cult, does not negate the man's genuine popularity. His strong win in Syria's first multi-candidate elections in June dismayed his regional enemies, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Turkey; but it did not stop their aggression.

Syrians saw things differently. Bashar was thought to maintain his father's pluralist and nationalist tradition, while modernising and holding out the promise of political reform. Opinion polls in Syria had shown major dissatisfaction with corruption and political cronyism, mixed views on the economy but strong satisfaction with stability, women's rights and the country's independent foreign policy. The political reform rallies of 2011 - countered by pro-government rallies and quickly overshadowed by violent insurrection - were not necessarily anti Bashar.

The Syrian Muslim Brotherhood and other sectarian Islamist groups did hate him, along with the secular state. Yet even these enemies, in their better moments, recognised the man's popularity. In late 2011 a Doha Debates poll (created by the Qatari monarchy, a major backer of the Muslim Brotherhood) showed 55% of Syrians wanted Assad to stay.

Armed Islamists went further. In 2012 Reuters, the UK Guardian and Time magazine reported three 'Free Syrian Army' (FSA) leaders in Aleppo saying the Syrian President had about '70 percent' support; or that the local people, 'all of them, are loyal to the criminal Bashar, they inform on us'; or that they are 'all informers ... they hate us. They blame us for the destruction'. Unpopularity, of course, is fatal to a revolution; to a religious fanatic it is merely inconvenient. All three FSA groups were Islamists on good terms with al Qaeda.

None of these revelations changed the western media reliance on Muslim Brotherhood-aligned sources, 'activists' or 'moderate rebels'. They relied, in particular, on the UK-based Rami Abdul Rahman, who calls himself the 'Syrian Observatory of Human Rights'. Such sources kept 'Bashar the Monster' alive, outside Syria.

Central to the Bashar myth are two closely related stories: that of the 'moderate rebel' and the story that conjures 'Assad loyalists' or 'regime forces' in place of a large, dedicated national army, with broad popular support. To understand the Bashar myth we have to consider the Syrian Arab Army.

At over half a million, the Army is so large that most Syrian communities have strong family links, including with those fallen in the war. There are regular ceremonies for families of these 'martyrs', with thousands proudly displaying photos of their loved ones. Further, most of the several million Syrians, displaced by the conflict, have not left the country but rather have moved to other parts under Army protection. This is not really explicable if the Army were indeed engaged in 'indiscriminate' attacks on civilians. A repressive army invokes fear and loathing in a population, yet in Damascus one can see that people do not cower as they pass through the many army road blocks, set up to protect against 'rebel' car bombs.

Syrians know there were abuses against demonstrators in early 2011; they also know that the President dismissed the Governor of Dara for this. They know that the armed insurrection was not a consequence of the protests but rather a sectarian insurrection that took cover under those rallies. Saudi official Anwar el-Eshki admitted to the BBC that his country had provided weapons to Islamists in Dara, and their rooftop sniping closely resembled the Muslim Brotherhood's failed insurrection in Hama, back in 1982. Hafez al Assad crushed that revolt in a few weeks. Of the incident US intelligence said total casualties were probably 'about 2,000' including '300 to 400' members of the Muslim Brotherhood's elite militia. The Brotherhood and many western sources have since inflated those numbers, calling it a 'massacre'. Armed Islamists posing as civilian victims have a long history in Syria.

Quite a number of Syrians have criticised President Assad to me, but not in the manner of the western media. They say they wanted him to be as firm as his father. Many in Syria regard him as too soft, leading to the name 'Mr Soft Heart'. Soldiers in Damascus told me there is an Army order to make special efforts to capture alive any Syrian combatant. This is controversial, as many regard them as traitors, no less guilty than foreign terrorists.

What of the 'moderate rebels'? Before the rise of ISIS, back in late 2011, the largest FSA brigade, Farouk, the original 'poster boys' of the 'Syrian Revolution', took over parts of Homs city. One US report called them 'legitimate nationalists ... pious rather than Islamists and not motivated by sectarianism'. The International Crisis Group suggested that Farouk might be 'pious' rather than Islamist. The Wall Street Journal also called them 'pious Sunnis' rather than Islamists. The BBC called them 'moderately Islamist'.

All this was quite false. Syrians in Homs said Farouk went into the city with the genocidal slogan: 'Alawis to the grave, Christians to Beirut'. Shouting 'God is Great' they blew up Homs hospital, because it had been treating soldiers. The churches blamed Farouk for the ethnic cleansing of more than 50,000 Christians from the city, and for the imposition of an Islamist tax. Journalist Radwan Mortada says most Farouk members were sectarian Salafis, armed and funded by Saudi Arabia. They later happily worked with the various al Qaeda groups, and were first to blame their own atrocities on the Army.

Let's consider some key accusations against the Syrian Arab Army. In May 2012, days before a UN Security Council meeting set to debate possible intervention in Syria, there was a terrible massacre of over 100 villagers at Houla. Western governments immediately blamed the Syrian Government, which in turn accused the foreign-backed terrorists. Western officials at first blamed Army shelling, changing their story when it was found most had died from close quarter injuries. One UN report (UNSMIS) was shelved while another (CoI), co-chaired by US diplomat Karen Koning AbuZayd, blamed un-named pro-government 'thugs'. No motive was given.

Although the Houla massacre did not result in a Libyan-styled intervention, because of opposition at the UN from Russia and China, controversy raged over the authors of this atrocity. German and Russian journalists, along with the Mother Superior of a Monastery, managed to interview survivors who said that a large Farouk battalion, led by Abdul Razzaq Tlass, had overwhelmed five small army posts and slaughtered the villagers. The gang had sought out pro-government and Alawi families, along with some Sunni families who had taken part in recent elections.

One year later a detailed, independent report (by Correggia, Embid, Hauben and Larson) documented how the second UN Houla investigation (the CoI) was tainted. Rather than visiting Syria they had relied on Farouk leaders and associates to link them to witnesses. They ignored another dozen direct witnesses who contradicted the 'rebel' story. In short, they tried to bury a real crime with identified perpetrators and a clear motive. As Adam Larson later wrote, the 'official' Houla massacre story was shown to be 'extremely ambiguous at best and at worst a fairly obvious crime of the US-supported Contras'.

Houla set the tone for a series of similar 'false flag' massacre claims. When 245 people were murdered in Daraya (August 2012), media reports citing 'opposition' activists' said that 'Assad's army has committed a massacre'. This was contradicted by British journalist Robert Fisk, who wrote that the FSA had slaughtered kidnapped civilian and off-duty soldier hostages, after a failed attempt to swap them for prisoners held by the army. Similarly, when 120 villagers were slaughtered at Aqrab (December 2013) the New York Times headline read 'Members of Assad's Sect Blamed in Syria Killings'. In fact, as British journalist Alex Thompson discovered, it was the victims who were from the President's Alawi community. Five hundred Alawis had been held by FSA groups for nine days before the fleeing gangs murdered a quarter of them. Yet, without close examination, each accusation seemed to add to the crimes of the Syrian Army, at least to those outside Syria.

Another line of attack was that there had been 'indiscriminate' bombing of rebel held areas, resulting in civilian casualties. The relevant question was, how did they dislodge armed groups from urban centres? Those interested can see some detail of this in the liberation of Qusayr, a town near the Lebanese border which had been occupied by Farouk and other salafi groups, including foreigners. The Army carried out 'surgical attacks' but, in May 2013, after the failure of negotiations, decided on all-out assault. They dropped leaflets from planes, calling on civilians to evacuate. Anti-government groups were said to have stopped many from leaving, while an 'activist' spokesman claimed there was 'no safe exit for civilians'. In opportunistic criticism, the US State Department expressed 'deep concern' over the leafleting, claiming that 'ordering the displacement of the civilian population' showed 'the regime's ongoing brutality'.

As it happened, on June 5 the Army backed by Hezbollah, liberated Qusayr, driving the remnants of Farouk FSA and their al Qaeda partners into Lebanon. This operation, in principle at least, was what one would have expected of any army facing terrorist groups embedded in civilian areas. At this point the war began turning decisively in Syria's favour.

Accusations of 'indiscriminate bombing' recur. In opportunist questioning, more than a year later, British journalist John Snow demanded of Syrian Presidential adviser Dr Bouthaina Shaaban why the Syrian Army had not driven ISIS from Aleppo? A few questions later he attacked the Army for its 'indiscriminate' bombing of that same city. The fact is, most urban fighting in Syria is by troops on the ground.

The most highly politicised atrocity was the chemical attack of August 2013, in the Eastern Ghouta region, just outside Damascus. The Syrian Government had for months been complaining about terrorist gas attacks and had invited UN inspectors to Damascus. As these inspectors arrived 'rebel'

groups posted videos of dead children online, blaming the Syrian Government for a new massacre. The US government and the Washington based Human Rights Watch group were quick to agree. The UN investigation of Islamist chemical attacks was shelved and attention moved to the gassed children. The western media demanded military intervention. A major escalation of the war was only defused by Russian intervention and a proposal that Syria hand over its chemical weapons stockpile; a stockpile it maintained had never been used.

Saturation reporting of the East Ghouta incident led many western journalists to believe that the charges against the Syrian Government were proven. To the contrary, those claims were systematically demolished by a series of independent reports. Very soon after, a Jordan-based journalist reported that residents in the East Ghouta area blamed 'Saudi Prince Bandar ... of providing chemical weapons to an al-Qaeda linked rebel group'. Next, a Syrian group, led by Mother Agnes Mariam, provided a detailed examination of the video evidence, saying the massacre videos preceded the attack and used 'staged' and 'fake' images. Detailed reports also came from outside Syria. Veteran US journalist Seymour Hersh wrote that US intelligence evidence had been fabricated and 'cherry picked ... to justify a strike against Assad'. A Turkish lawyers and writers group said 'most of the crimes' against Syrian civilians, including the East Ghouta attack, were committed by 'armed rebel forces in Syria'. The Saudi backed FSA group Liwa al Islam was most likely responsible for the chemical attack on Ghouta. A subsequent UN report did not allocate blame but confirmed that chemical weapons had been used on at least five occasions in Syria. On three occasions they were used 'against soldiers and civilians'. The clear implication was that these were anti-government attacks by rebels. MIT investigators Lloyd and Postol concluded that the Sarin gas 'could not possibly have been fired ... from Syrian Government controlled area'.

Despite the definitive nature of these reports, combined, neither the US Government nor Human Rights Watch have retracted or apologised for their false accusations. Indeed, western government and media reports repeat the claims as though they were fact, even falsely enlisting UN reports, at times, as corroboration.

When I met President Assad, with a group of Australians, his manner was entirely consistent with the pre-2011 image of the mild-mannered eye doctor. He expressed deep concern with the impact on children of witnessing terrorist atrocities while fanatics shout 'God is Great'. The man is certainly no brute, in the manner of Saddam Hussein or George W. Bush.

The key factor in Syria's survival has been the cohesion, dedication and popular support for the Army. Syrians know that their Army represents pluralist Syria and has been fighting sectarian, foreign backed terrorism. This Army did not fracture on sectarian lines, as the Takfiris had hoped, and defections have been small, certainly less than 2%.

Has the Army committed abuses? Probably, but mainly against the armed groups. There is some evidence of execution of foreign terrorists. That is certainly a crime, but probably has a fair degree of popular support in Syria, at the moment. The main constraint on such abuses seems to be the army order from 'Mr Soft Heart', to save the lives of Syrian rebels.

However, despite the repeated claims by sectarian Islamists and their western backers, there is no convincing evidence that the Syrian Army has deliberately bombed and gassed civilians. Nor would there be a motive for it. Nor does the behaviour of people on the streets support it. Most Syrians do not blame their army for the horrendous violence of this war, but rather the foreign backed terrorists.

These are the same terrorists backed by the governments of the USA, Britain and France, hiding behind the fig-leaf of the mythical 'moderate rebel' while reciting their catalogue of fabricated accusations.

The high participation rate (73%) in June's presidential elections, despite the war, was at least as significant as the strong vote (88%) Bashar received. Even the BBC could not hide the large crowds that came out to vote, especially those that mobbed the Syrian Embassy in Beirut.

Participation rates are nowhere near as high in the US; indeed no western leader can claim such a strong democratic mandate as this 'dictator'. The size of Bashar's win underlines a stark reality: there never was a popular uprising against this man; and his popularity has grown.

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