

COMMENTARY

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History Repeats itself in Syria

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About a month ago, it was obvious that there would be bloodbaths in Libya and Syria, given the growing protest movements seeking to overthrow their respective regimes, inspired by revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt. Specifically, as both sides dig in their heels in Syria, the regime has unleashed lethal force in the form of snipers, tanks, heavily armed police and security forces, and hundreds of activists have reportedly been arrested, beaten, tortured, and hundreds have already been killed. The numbers of dead and injured are likely to rise.

If Syrian President Bashar Al Assad is anything like his father, Hafez Al Assad, he will not back down. In fact, Syria has the ominous historical precedent of the Hama massacre, when the city witnessed a rebellion to which Hafez Al Assad responded with a scorched earth policy entailing a military-led massacre. Estimates of 20,000 dead are considered accurate. Thomas Friedman famously coined the phrase 'Hama Rules,' referring to the standing policy of the Syrian regime in dealing with internal rebellions. In effect, the term 'Hama Rules' means that any time Syria experiences a mass rebellion, the regime will resort to the scorched earth, leave-no-man/woman-alive policy to literally snuff out any potential for anyone to challenge the regime. What is happening on the ground in Deraa, Damascus, Aleppo, Douma, Baniyas, Latakia, Homs, and other places in Syria today is a repeat of the Hama Rules playbook.

In recent days, the Bashar Al Assad regime has deployed thirty tanks in the outskirts of Damascus alone. Witnesses tell Al Jazeera that 'white buses brought in hundreds of soldiers in full combat gear into Douma.' Thousands of security police armed with machine guns and plain

clothes officers armed with assault rifles have also visibly taken position in various cities. Activists contend that the security forces are the Syrian Republic Guards, who are unshakably loyal to the Assad regime. Moreover, the regime has cut off water, electricity, and Internet capabilities in Deraa and civilian casualties are rising while blood supplies are running low. Security forces are going door-to-door in house searches throughout the major protest cities. Douma and Deraa are completely sealed off, and the Syrian side of the Jordanian border—where Deraa is located—has been closed.

Similar to Libyan forces loyal to Col. Muammar Qaddafi in Libya, Syrian forces have also targeted funeral processions. Just like Qaddafi's claims that Al Qaeda is behind the uprising in Libya, the Assad regime is claiming that 'militant extremists' are inciting the protests in Syria. In reality, the Syrian protesters are no different from the pro-democracy activists in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya, comprising a cross-section of civilians from all walks of life. Similar to the movements in Tunisia and Egypt, the Syrian pro-democracy movement consists of youth activists. One of the main organizers of the Syrian uprising is a dissident and cyber activist on the run in Lebanon. His name is Rami Nakhle, and he is using social networking tools like Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook to run the pro-democracy movement in Syria. Nakhle is one of many in a network of activists. They have been effective, despite all the clampdowns on telecommunication by the Syrian regime. There is no sign of militant extremists among the activists. The regimes seem to use that claim as default pretence to crack down viciously on unarmed civilians.

The death toll six weeks into the Syrian uprising reportedly has reached the 600 mark, and is still climbing. The United States, UN, and EU all have condemned the regime-sponsored violence against unarmed civilians. However, the real test of the West and international community's resolve is their response to the highly emotive word, 'genocide.' One of the Syrian MPs, Nasir Al Hariri, who resigned in protest of the regime's use of brutal force, issued a statement calling on the international community to respond to the Assad regime's attempts at genocide. The term genocide, and the pleas of political and military officials who resigned in Libya to the international community to stop Qaddafi from committing atrocities, paved the path to the NATO response there. How the international community will respond to Syria is yet to be determined; but given the 'conflict fatigue' of NATO members and especially the United States, for now we cannot expect more direct action besides imposing harsher sanctions.

The key question is how long will both sides—the regime versus the pro-democracy activists—in Syria sustain themselves? How long and far is each side willing to go? If Libya provided the formula for international humanitarian intervention to prevent 'genocide' at the hands of Qaddafi, then will the same formula apply in Syria? Sadly, a number of pro-Western regimes in the Middle East have carried out massacres—Bahrain and Yemen to name the most prominent ones—and yet a stronger and more consistent response from Western allies to this bloodshed is critically lacking.

Regardless, the Syrian pro-democracy activists have vowed to 'break the regime,' and without a doubt the regime is determined to break the protesters. The activists have a Facebook page called 'The Syrian Revolution against Bashar Al Assad.' The regime responds with tanks rolling in and repeating history.

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