

Eyewitness to the Syrian Rebellion: Late Father Frans Denounced a Violent “Opposition, Instigated and Paid by Foreign Interests”

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Global Research, April 22, 2014

[The BRICS Post](#) 19 April 2014

Region: [Middle East & North Africa](#)

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#), [US NATO](#)

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The Syrian Civil War has devastated entire cities and towns as fighting between the rebels and Syrian Army spreads from neighborhood to neighborhood [Xinhua]

An examination of texts published by Father Frans van der Lugt in 2011 and 2012 shows that the late Dutch Jesuit priest had a dim view of the Syrian rebellion, which he held to be the work of a violent minority, and favored a process of political reform in Syria to be implemented by the current government under President Bashar Al-Assad.

Father Frans was murdered under still unclarified circumstances in the embattled Syrian city of Homs earlier this month.

Opposition sources have blamed the Syrian government for his death. But it is widely believed that Father Frans was killed by hard-line Islamist members of one of the rebel factions that have taken control of his Bustan al-Diwan neighborhood in Homs.

The texts of Father Frans, who had lived in Syria since 1966, provide an eyewitness account of the origins of the anti-Assad rebellion and the gradual hardening of the front between opposing rebel and government forces in Homs.

In many respects, the Father’s observations contrast sharply with what has become the standard view of the rebellion in Western media.

Perhaps most notably, whereas the rebellion is typically held to have been sparked by the violent repression of peaceful protests, according to Father Frans, the “protest movement” contained an armed and violent element “from the start” and the violent opposition quickly gained the ascendancy over the peaceful opposition.

Thus, in [a letter published in January 2012](#) on the Dutch-Flemish *Mediawerkgroep Syrië* website, Father Frans wrote:

From the start, the protest movements were not purely peaceful. From the start I saw armed demonstrators marching along in the protests, who began to shoot at the police first. Very often the violence of the security forces has been a reaction to the brutal violence of the armed rebels.

In the same letter, Father Frans insisted that what was occurring in Syria could not be described as a “popular uprising,” since the majority of Syrians do not support the opposition and “certainly not” its armed component.

Already in September 2011, Father Frans had made similar observations in [a guest post on a Belgian blog](#), going so far as to accuse armed opposition groups of blaming the regime for their own acts of violence.

Having noted the splintering of the opposition among Islamists, “liberals and democrats”, communists and so on, Father Frans continued:

Moreover, from the start there has been the problem of the armed groups, which are also part of the opposition....The opposition of the street is much stronger than any other opposition. And this opposition is armed and frequently employs brutality and violence, only in order then to blame the government. Many representatives of the government [regeringsmensen - Father Frans might also be referring to supporters of the government] have been tortured and shot dead by them.

“Personally,” Father Frans concluded, “I expect little good to come from the opposition, which, moreover, has been instigated and paid by foreign interests.”

Favoring political reform



The Syrian Army was the only force preventing an all-out civil war between Sunnis and Alawites in Homs, says Father Frans [Xinhua]

Faced with a choice between an opposition as so described and the current Syrian government, Father Frans clearly favored a process of political reform undertaken by the latter and not the “regime change” that has been favored by the West.

“Personally,” he wrote in September 2011, “I think this government has to stay, despite all difficulties, and proceed along the path of reforms.”

In his January 2012 letter, he outlined a similar course of action, noting that the current government is “perhaps more democratic than possible replacements.”

In particular, he regarded the current regime as the best guarantee against the spread of sectarian violence in Syria.

Whereas Western press reports have emphasized his efforts to promote understanding among Christians and Muslims, Father Frans identified the main sectarian fault-line in Syria

as that running between two Muslim communities: Sunnis, who make up the majority of the population, and the Alawite minority, which is not only associated with the current regime but whose members are regarded as apostates by radical Sunni currents.

In January 2012, Father Frans warned that the Syrian army was the only thing standing in the way of a full-fledged civil war between Sunnis and Alawites in Homs.

In the same letter, he noted that most Christian leaders in Syria support Assad, “because they are convinced that they would be worse off with another solution.”

In his critical observations on the Syrian crisis, Father Frans did not spare the Western media, which he accused of distortion and bias.

In September 2011 he wrote that he was disturbed by Western coverage of the Syrian crisis because there was “never a good word” published about the current government.

He said that Western media blamed the Syrian government “for things that it had not done”. He went on:

Our experience with the government has not been so negative. In my case, they always helped my projects and supported my idea of being of service to Sunnis and Alawites. They wanted an ever greater separation of church and state and were enthusiastic about projects that were non-denominational.

According to [the Dutch daily de Volkskrant](#), the help provided by the Syrian government to Father Frans included a grant of over 100 acres of land for the Father’s agricultural projects.

Lords and masters



Father Frans said that the rebels (seen here in the city of Idlib) were better equipped and organized by March 2012 [Xinhua]

Ironically, by March 2012, Father Frans found himself living under siege by the forces of the very Syrian government he supported. In the meanwhile, rebel forces, which had briefly taken control of Bustan al-Diwan in September 2011, were back again and this time they were there for the long-term.

Now, as Father Frans noted in [an eyewitness report for the Flemish monthly *Streven*](#), the rebel forces were “much better organized” and “called themselves ‘the Free Syrian Army.’”

“They had an abundance of food,” he continued, “and they also distributed it to poor people. They are financially and militarily supported by foreign interests.”

“For now,” Father Frans concluded, referring to both the Bustan al-Diwan and Hamidiyeh neighborhoods of Homs, “the Free [Syrian] Army is lord and master of our Christian neighborhoods....”

In late March, Father Frans’s own car was destroyed by a missile or mortar fired into Bustan al-Diwan by the Syrian army. “The army was aiming for a restaurant not far from us where the FSA has its headquarters,” he explained to [the Swiss Catholic new agency APIC](#).

“There is a Greek Orthodox church right next door, which was also damaged.”

Father Frans told APIC that ninety percent of the Christian population of Homs had already fled the city, because of the fighting.

“They were not chased out by the Sunni militias,” Father Frans took care to add, “This needs to be emphasized! The Syrian army was first driven from the neighborhood by the FSA and now it’s the FSA that is being bombed.”

In his contribution to *Streven*, Father Frans wrote about the futility of the army’s bombing campaign and its disastrous effects upon the remaining Christian population:

...[T]he only result is that many Christian homes and also churches...have been bombed and partially or wholly destroyed, while the soldiers of the Free [Syrian] Army remain unharmed. The latter hide in the cellars of the Christian homes to protect themselves from the bombing.

Nonetheless, Father Frans remained clear about where he believed the ultimate responsibility for the disaster lay. “There is no excusing the fact,” he wrote, “that the Free Syrian Army has taken the Christian neighborhoods in order to use them as a battlefield for combating the government army.”

But not even the experience of siege and bombardment by government forces could shake Father Frans’s conviction that distorted, one-sided coverage of the Syrian crisis in the media was itself a major obstacle to peace.

Reflecting on the way forward in the conclusion to his contribution to *Streven*, Father Frans warned:

In the first place, it has to be said that it is very difficult to provide a nuanced and objective account of what is happening. Many journalists fall into describing matters in black and white. For them, good and evil are not interwoven, but are clearly separated. They demonize the one side and glorify the other. Thus, for example, it is not true that our [the Syrian] government has only bad sides and the opposition only good ones. But because the US, Europe and certain Arab countries support the opposition, they endeavor, whether consciously or unconsciously, to idealize it as much as possible, without engaging in any careful analysis of the real situation. Certain interests are obscuring our view of the real situation and contaminating the description of it.

The author of this article John Rosenthal is a European-based journalist and political analyst who writes on European politics and transatlantic issues. His articles have appeared in such publications as Al-Monitor, World Affairs, The Wall Street Journal Europe, Les Temps

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