

# Media Disinformation: The Protest Movement in Syria

Western Media Coverage of the Events in Daraa

By [Prof Michel Chossudovsky](#)

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*This article was published when the unrest started in Syria in March 2011. It challenges the Western mainstream media narrative which claims that the protests started peacefully and then turned violent. As you can see in the reports below, armed gunmen were part of the protests in March 2011, proving that they were violent from the outset.*

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*Presented below are four reports of the same protest movement in the Southern Syrian city of Daraa, Associated Press, The Guardian, Israeli National News, Ya Libnan (Lebanese News).*

Spot the difference.

What the AP and Guardian Reports fail to mention.

1. Seven policemen were killed according to the Lebanese and Israeli reports, which suggests that several of the demonstrators were not demonstrators but armed gunmen who were shooting at the police.
2. The AP and Guardian reports do not mention the terrorist acts committed by several demonstrators including the torching of the courthouse and the Baath party headquarters as well as the attacks on the communications headquarters and the hospital. These occurrences are acknowledged by both the Israeli and Lebanese reports.

The two Western reports convey the impression that the demonstrators in Daraa were peaceful and non-violent as in Egypt. The fact that there were demonstrators with firearms involved in an armed attack on government buildings including acts of arson is not mentioned.

The protests took place in a small town of 75,500 inhabitants within 10 km of the Jordanian border [the AP report states that Daraa has 300,000, that is the population of the province not the city]. The press reports do not address the important question. Who was behind the acts of violence in Daraa?

Associated Press report, March 22, 2011

15 dead in new clashes in southern Syria city Syrian police launched a relentless assault Wednesday on a neighborhood sheltering anti-government

protesters, fatally shooting at least 15 in an operation that began before dawn, witnesses said.

By BASSEM MROUE; Associated Press Published: 03/22/11 11:47 pm | Updated: 03/23/11 1:08 pm

The violence in Daraa, a city of about 300,000 near the border with Jordan, was fast becoming a major challenge for President Bashar Assad, who tried to contain the situation by freeing detainees and promising to fire officials responsible for the violence.

The Syrian government said Thursday that it would consider sweeping reforms in a gambit to appease protesters, who gathered by the thousands after security forces in one southern town killed at least 15 people in a week of demonstrations.

DARAA, Syria — Syrian police launched a relentless assault Wednesday on a neighborhood sheltering anti-government protesters, fatally shooting at least 15 in an operation that began before dawn, witnesses said.

At least six were killed in the early morning attack on the al-Omari mosque in the southern agricultural city of Daraa, where protesters have taken to the streets in calls for reforms and political freedoms, witnesses said. An activist in contact with people in Daraa said police shot another three people protesting in its Roman-era city center after dusk. Six more bodies were found later in the day, the activist said.

Inspired by the wave of pro-democracy protests around the region, the uprising in Daraa and at least four nearby villages has become the biggest domestic challenge since the 1970s to the Syrian government, one of the most repressive in the Middle East. Security forces have responded with water cannon, tear gas, rubber bullets and live ammunition. The total death toll now stands at 22.

As the casualties mounted, people from the nearby villages of Inkhil, Jasim, Khirbet Ghazaleh and al-Harrah tried to march on Daraa Wednesday night but security forces opened fire as they approached, the activist said. It was not immediately clear if there were more deaths or injuries.

Democracy activists used social-networking sites to call for massive demonstrations across the country on Friday, a day they dubbed "Dignity Friday."

U.S. State Department spokesman Mark Toner said Washington was alarmed by the violence and "deeply concerned by the Syrian government's use of violence, intimidation and arbitrary arrests to hinder the ability of its people to freely exercise their universal rights."

Heavy shooting rattled Daraa throughout the day, and an Associated Press reporter in the city heard bursts of semi-automatic gunfire echoing in its old center in the early afternoon.

The London-based Syrian Human Rights Committee reported on its website, quoting sources in Daraa, that Syrian authorities shot and killed soldier Khaled al-Masri for refusing orders to take part in storming al-Omari mosque. The report could not be independently confirmed.

State TV said that an "armed gang" had attacked an ambulance in the city and security forces killed four attackers and wounded others and was chasing others who fled. It denied that security forces had stormed the mosque, but

also showed footage of guns, AK-47s, hand grenades, ammunition and money that it claimed had been seized from inside.

A video posted on Facebook by activists showed what it said was an empty street near al-Omari Mosque, with the rattle of shooting in the background as a voice shouts: "My brother, does anyone kill his people? You are our brothers." The authenticity of the footage could not be independently verified.

Mobile phone connections to Daraa were cut and checkpoints throughout the city were manned by soldiers in camouflage uniforms and plainclothes security agents with rifles. Anti-terrorism police wearing dark blue uniforms were also out on the streets.

An ambulance was parked on the side of a road leading to the old city, its windshield smashed.

The witness said hundreds of anti-terrorism police had surrounded al-Omari mosque.

The activist in Damascus said six had been killed in the raid on the mosque, which began after midnight and lasted for about three hours. A witness in Daraa told the AP that five people had been slain, including a woman who looked out her window to see what was happening during the operation.

The activist said witnesses saw the body of a 12-year-old girl near the mosque late Wednesday afternoon. Another man was fatally shot by police after a funeral for one of the slain, the activist said.

And four more bodies were seen laying near the offices of a security agency but no one dared to come and pick them up, the activist said.

U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon condemned the violence against peaceful demonstrators in Deraa and called for "a transparent investigation into the killings" and for those responsible to be held accountable, U.N. spokesman Martin Nesirky said.

"He reminds the Syrian government of its obligation to protect civilians, and of its responsibility to address the legitimate aspirations of its people through a purposeful dialogue and reforms," Nesirky said.

Daraa is a province of some 300,000 people near the Jordanian border that has suffered greatly from years of drought. It has been generally supportive of President Bashar Assad's Baath party, said Murhaf Jouejati, a Syria expert at George Washington University.

He said Daraa had a "conservative, devoutly Muslim" population that has traditionally been a main pillar of support for the ruling party. The fact that they have been protesting in the streets "means that the Baath party is in trouble."

The grip of Syria's security forces is weaker on the border away from the capital, Damascus, and Daraa hasn't benefited from the country's recent years of economic growth. Meanwhile, its main city has absorbed many Syrians from nearby areas who can no longer farm their lands because of increasing desertification.

"You have a combination of feelings of being excluded and neglected, and growing internal tensions from environmental refugees," said Steven Heydemann, a Middle East expert at the United States Institute for Peace.

The unrest in Daraa started with the arrest last week of a group of students who sprayed anti-government graffiti on walls in Daraa, some 80 miles (130 kilometers) south of Damascus.

Demonstrations calling for the students' release swelled into calls for political freedoms and security forces killed at least seven people in attempts to quash them, according to witnesses and activists.

The Syrian government fired the governor of Daraa province but failed to quell popular anger and on Tuesday the protests reached the village of Nawa, where hundreds of people marched demanding reforms, activist said.

So far, none of the slogans used by protesters have called for the ouster of Assad, who became the head of Syria's minority Alawite ruling elite in 2000 after the death of his father and predecessor, Hafez.

Daraa, like most of Syria, is predominantly Sunni Muslim.

On Wednesday, Abdul-Karim al-Rihawi, head of the Arab League for Human Rights, said several prominent activists have been arrested in the past two days, including well known writer Loay Hussein. Hussein had issued a statement calling for freedom of peaceful protests and expressed solidarity with the Daraa protesters. [15 dead in new clashes in southern Syria city | AP Latest Headlines - The News Tribune](#), March 22, 2011)

The Report in The Guardian [in full]

Syrian police seal off city of Daraa after security forces kill five protesters

Cordon aimed at suppressing spread of conflict following demonstrations and funeral processions

Syrian police have sealed off a southern city after security forces killed at least five protesters.

Residents of Daraa were being allowed to leave but not enter the city, said prominent Syrian rights activist Mazen Darwish.

The cordon seemed aimed at choking off any spread of unrest after earlier clashes and emotional funeral processions for the dead.

President Bashar Al-Assad, who has boasted that his country is immune to the demands for change that have already toppled leaders in Egypt and Tunisia, sent a delegation to the southern city to offer his condolences to families of the victims, according to a Syrian official.

Serious disturbances in Syria would be a major expansion of the region's unrest. Syria, a predominantly Sunni country ruled by minority Alawites, has a history of brutally crushing dissent.

Security forces launched a harsh crackdown on Friday's demonstrations calling for political freedoms. Protests took place in at least five cities, including the capital, Damascus. But only in Daraa did they turn deadly.

Accounts from activists and social media say at least five people died in the gravest unrest in years in Syria.

A Syrian official acknowledged only two deaths and said authorities would

bring those responsible to trial. The official said that even if an investigation shows security officers were guilty, they will be put on trial “no matter how high their rank is”. He spoke on condition of anonymity in line with regulations that bar him from being identified by name.

Another government official said Syrian leaders held a meeting in which they decided to form a committee to investigate the circumstances and punish those responsible for the deaths in Daraa.

“The Syrian president categorically rejects the shedding of any Syrian blood,” the official said, also on condition of anonymity.

A Syrian lawmaker from Daraa, Khaled Abboud, blamed Islamic extremists for the violence.

“There is a group of Islamic extremists, they have a private or foreign agenda,” he said. He did not elaborate.

Darwish, who said he was in contact with residents of Daraa, said four of the dead were buried in the city . Thousands of people took part in the funeral under the watch of large numbers of security agents but there was no violence, he said.

An activist in Damascus also in contact with Daraa residents said security forces fired tear gas at mourners chanting: “God, Syria and freedom only.” He said several people were detained and others suffered from tear gas inhalation. He spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of reprisals.

The London-based Syrian Human Rights Committee said that during the funerals security forces raided some homes and detained people. Citing residents in the city, it added that troops were in full control of the streets.

Syria places tight restrictions on the movements of journalists in the country when it comes to security issues and state-run media, and officials rarely comment on such sensitive matters.

A video of the clashes posted on YouTube showed a bloodied young man, who appeared to be dead, being carried by several people. Shortly afterward, shooting is heard and crowds scatter. The authenticity of the footage could not be confirmed.

In Washington, a National Security Council spokesman, Tommy Vietor, said: “The United States strongly condemns the violence that has taken place in Syria.” He added that the US calls on the Syrian government to allow demonstrations to take place peacefully and for those responsible for violence to “be held accountable”.

The violence was the worst since 2004 when clashes that began in the north-eastern city of Qamishli between Syrian Kurds and security forces left at least 25 people dead and some 100 injured.

Although Assad keeps a tight lid on any form of political dissent, he also has considerable popularity for being seen as one of the few Arab leaders willing to stand up to Israel.

Assad told the Wall Street Journal in February that Syria is insulated from the upheaval in the Arab world because he understands his people’s needs and has united them in common cause against Israel.

Abdul-Karim al-Rihawi, head of the Arab League for Human Rights, said 10

women who were detained on Wednesday after protesting in front of the Syrian Interior Ministry in central Damascus have begun a hunger strike.

Citing relatives, al-Rihawi said the women were being held in Douma prison on the outskirts of Damascus, adding that one of them is suffering from a "serious condition".

The women were among 33 people, most of them relatives of political detainees in Syria, detained on Wednesday. They were charged by a prosecutor on Thursday with damaging the state's image.

Separately, Syria said it was reducing compulsory military service by three months, making it 15 months for educated males and 18 months for those who have not completed primary education. The state-run news agency said the new legislation will go into effect by June.

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The Israel National News Report on the same event

(Israel National News, Arutz Sheva, not particularly pro-Syria)

Syria: Seven Police Killed, Buildings Torched in Protests

by Gavriel Queenann

Seven police officers and at least four demonstrators in Syria have been killed in continuing violent clashes that erupted in the southern town of Daraa last Thursday.

The clashes came amidst growing political tension in the Muslim nation, whose Presidents and many senior officials have always come from Syria's influential

Shia Alawite minority, when twenty students were arrested for spray-painting anti-government graffiti on a wall.

On Friday police opened fire on armed protesters killing four and injuring as many as 100 others. According to one witness, who spoke to the press on condition of anonymity, "They used live ammunition immediately — no tear gas or anything else."

At the funerals of two of those killed opposition leaders handed authorities a list of demands, which included the release of political prisoners. In an uncharacteristic gesture intended to ease tensions the government offered to release the detained students, but seven police officers were killed, and the Baath Party Headquarters and courthouse were torched, in renewed violence on Sunday.

The latest clashes occurred after unconfirmed reports that two more protesters had been killed began to circulate. According to witnesses, Syrian security forces have encircled Daraa to impede more protesters from reaching the city. Anti-government protests are rare in Syria and have traditionally been brutally put down, but Daraa is not the only town where protests have occurred. [Syria: Seven Police Killed, Buildings Torched in Protests - Defense/Middle East - Israel News - Israel National News](#), March 21, 2011)

The Lebanese report on the same event

Seven policemen were killed during clashes between the security forces and protesters in Syria, Xinhua reported. They got killed trying to drive away protesters during demonstration in Dara'a town in which people demanded for reforms in Syria, Damascus Press news website reported.

The clashes erupted Sunday between the Syrian police and protesters after two young men reportedly killed by the security forces in the town. An eyewitness told Xinhua that the Syrian police had surrounded the town, to prevent people from entering it.

Dozens of protesters attacked the communication centre and the national hospital.

Al-Jazeera TV reported Sunday that the protesters also burned the headquarters of the Baath Party and the court house in Dara'a. [Ya Libnan » 7 Syrian policemen killed in Sunday clashes, report, March 21 \(Lebanese Press\)](#)

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