

# Media Lies Used to Provide a Pretext for Another “Humanitarian War”: Protest in Syria: Who Counts the Dead?

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Global Research, November 25, 2011  
25 November 2011

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

Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

In-depth Report: [SYRIA](#)

According to numerous reports from the Western media, human rights organisations, as well as the UN, countless peaceful civilians have been killed by the Syrian forces since the beginning of the unrest in the country in mid March. But where do the numbers come from?

Many media reports on the alleged deadly repression by the Syrian government fail to mention the sources of their information, which are very often referred to solely as “human rights groups” or “activists”:

**“Rights groups said** Sunday that troops cracking down on pro-democracy protesters **killed eight people** in northern Idlib province and four more in central areas near Hama. ([Syrian Forces Kill 12 as ICRC Head Visits Damascus](#), Voice of America, September 4, 2011.)

These protests are an unprecedented challenge to President Bashar al-Assad — and his family, which has ruled the country for more than 40 years. The cost has been high: **at least 200 dead, according to human rights groups**, and many cyber activists have been jailed. (Deborah Amos, [Syrian Activist In Hiding Presses Mission From Abroad](#), NPR, April 22, 2011.)

**At least 75 people have been killed** today in Syria during mass protests, **local human rights activists told Amnesty International** [...]

**Thirty were killed** in the southern town of Izzra', **22** in Damascus, **18** in the Homs area and the rest in other towns and villages, **activists said** [...] ([Scores killed in Syria as ‘Great Friday’ protests are attacked](#), Amnesty International, April 22, 2011.)

Although the necessity to remain “anonymous” where dissent is said to be life threatening may under certain circumstances be understandable, this stance inevitably raises suspicions: The “numbers” can be used to demonize the government, as part of covert operations by any state or organisation looking for regime change in Damascus. It is no secret that the overthrow of the Syrian regime has been a long-sought goal by several foreign powers, including the U.S. and Israel.

The reliance of the mainstream media on information emanating from anonymous groups provides a biased understanding of the Syrian protests, which in turn supports the broader objective of destabilizing the Syrian regime.

When information from unknown sources pertaining to the death toll is published either by a mainstream media or a recognized human rights group, it is invariably picked up and considered as “factual evidence” by other news sources or think tanks, without further verification. Moreover, in the process the information is subject to further distortion. Here is an example of this phenomenon:

**Rights group Amnesty International said on Friday that it has recorded the names of 171 people killed** since the first protesters died in Daraa on March 18.

The group based its tally on information received from **rights activists, lawyers and other sources and said the majority appeared to have been killed by live ammunition fired by the security forces.** ([Protesters killed in southern Syria](#), Al Jazeera, April 9, 2011.)

The above news article is based on the following statement by Amnesty International:

**At least 171 people are believed to have been killed** during three weeks of unrest in Syria, Amnesty International said today after at least eight more fatalities during protests.

**The death toll** from today’s clashes **could rise significantly, according to reports from human rights activists in the country.**

**Amnesty International has recorded the names, via information received from sources including human rights activists and lawyers, of 171 people killed.** ([Death toll rises amid fresh Syrian protests](#), Amnesty International, April 8, 2011.)

The original information from Amnesty international (AI) is that “171 people are believed to have been killed”, a statement showing that although “it has recorded the names of 171 people killed”, this information could not be confirmed. Al Jazeera fails to report this “uncertainty” and by doing so makes it a fact rather than an assumption, that 171 people were killed.

Here is another example of blatant distortion:

Despite a pledge to end its crackdown, Syrian security forces continued to suppress anti-regime protestors, **killing at least eighteen on Thursday in the city of Homs (al-Jazeera).** (Jonathan Masters, [Assad’s Broken Promises](#), Council on Foreign Relations, November 3, 2011.)

This is an analysis from the Council on Foreign Relations, the famous and extremely powerful U.S. foreign policy think tank. It is based on the following article from Al Jazeera where the information related to the killing is markedly different:

“Dozens of people **have reportedly been killed** in the flashpoint city of Homs, as Syrian security forces bombarded residential areas with tanks.

The **reported deaths** occurred in the Bab Amro district of Homs on Thursday, the **Local Coordination Committees of Syria, an activist group monitoring the country’s uprising, said.** ([Syria “violence defies peace deal”](#),” Al Jazeera, November 4, 2011.)

Al Jazeera’s wording “reportedly been killed” and “reported deaths” shows the deaths have not been confirmed. The Qatari media also mentions that these claims come from one

source only, namely from an activist group called Local Coordination Committees of Syria (LCC). The article from the CFR changed Al Jazeera's allegations into concrete facts.

When it comes to counting the dead, the LCC is very often cited in the mainstream media as a source for reports on killings committed by the Syrian authorities, as we can see in the examples below:

Another **opposition group, the [Local Coordination Committees](#)**, said it **could not corroborate the Syrian Observatory's account of the military casualties**, though it **also called Monday one of the uprising's bloodier days, with at least 51 civilians killed**. "We don't have any confirmation of what they're claiming," said Omar Idlibi, a spokesman for the Local Coordination Committees. (Nada Bakri and Rick Gladstone, [Syria Faces New Threats as Opposition Seeks Allies](#), The New York Times, November 15, 2011.)

**According to the opposition network, the Local Coordination Committees, at least five people were killed during the military offensives** — three in the central province of Homs, one in the eastern border town of Tal Kalakh and one in Idleb along the Syrian-Turkish border. (Roula Hajjar, [Syria: Activists report manhunt for defectors and protesters](#), Los Angeles Times, September 5, 2011.)

**Secret police opened fire and shot teargas to disperse more than 10,000 protesters** in Deir Ezzour, in Syria's tribal east, **an activist from the Syrian Revolution Coordinators Union (SRCU) told Al Jazeera. Ten protesters were wounded and around 40 were arrested**, he said.

The SRCU is the name given this week to one of Syria's grassroots opposition networks. **The SRCU works alongside the Local Coordinating Committees (LCC)**, another grassroots opposition network. ([Al Jazeera Live Blog - Syria](#), June 3, 2011.)

**At least 2,200 people have been killed in Syria since the beginning of the unrest, by the United Nations' count**. An activist group, the **Syrian Revolution Coordinating Union, said on Tuesday that 551 people were killed** during Ramadan alone. **The group said 130 others were killed** on July 31, the eve of Ramadan, in an attack on the city of Hama, which was also the scene of a ferocious crackdown in 1982.

On Tuesday, **four people were killed in Hara and two others in Inkil**, two towns in Dara'a Province, **according to the Local Coordination Committees**, another group of activists who document demonstrations. (Nada Bakri, [Syrian Security Forces Fire on Worshipers as Ramadan Ends](#), The New York Times, August 30, 2011.)

The above article mentions a "UN count" as if it were an independent source of information. However, according to one of its reports, the UN also relies on the same sources of information, the LCC, and it mentions in a note that it is unable to confirm if the information given by the LCC is true:

"At the time of writing, **the mission had received more than 1,900 names and details of persons killed in the Syrian Arab Republic** since mid-March 2011; **all are said to be civilians [26]**

26. **This information is compiled by local coordinating committees active within the Syrian Arab Republic** in documenting the names and details of victims. **The mission**

**is unable to verify independently this information.**” (United Nations, [Report of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights on the situation of human rights in the Syrian Arab Republic - A/HRC/18/53](#), September 15, 2011.)

### **What are the Local Coordination Committees (LCC)?**

According to the Christian Science Monitor, the [LCC](#) is part of the non-elected Syrian National Council (SNC). Even though most of its members are in exile and its members in Syria are unknown, the SNC is presented as the legitimate Syrian authority, and has been recognized by the National Transitional Council of Libya, another non-elected body recognized by Western powers as a “pro-democracy” representative of the Libyan people.

“Syrian opposition leaders meeting Sunday in [Turkey](#) formally created the [Syrian National Council](#), bringing together most of the disparate groups **seeking to unseat Syrian President Bashar al-Assad**.

**The council includes the [Local Coordination Committees](#), which has organized most of the protests across the country;** the Syrian [Muslim Brotherhood](#); and Kurdish groups; among others, [the Associated Press reports](#). **Almost half the members are from inside the country**, according to the Washington Post, overcoming a key concern that the council would rely to (sic) heavily on exiles. (Ariel Zirulnick, [Syrian oppositon groups formally unify](#), overcoming key hurdle, October 3, 2011.)

The LCC are somewhat “anonymous”. They refused a telephone interview, but agreed to answer some questions by email. They stated that for security reasons they could not reveal how many members the LCC includes, but claim 13 members of the LCC are in the SNC. “We have enough people to run demonstrations on ground, for media and relief action.”



LCC Logo

## **لجان التنسيق المحلية في سوريا Local coordination committees of Syria**

The members allegedly come from different backgrounds and are from all age groups; some are active inside Syria, the others outside the country. The LCC says that their members, in and outside Syria, have been threatened, arrested and tortured by the Syrian authorities. When asked how they became a source of information for the foreign media, the LCC says it is because they provide credible facts.

And what is the ultimate goal of the LCC? **“Our goal is to change the regime in Syria, and as the first step, to end the mandate of the current President, who is now politically and legally responsible for the crimes committed by his regime against the Syrian people and a safe transfer of power in the country.”**

Basically, the LCC wants regime change in Syria and it seems to be the major source of information for the western mainstream media and human rights organizations. This opposition group claims to provide “credible facts”, however there is no way to verify these facts. The so-called facts could well be propaganda intended to discredit the actual regime and galvanize public opinion in favour of the regime change the group aspires to implement.

Although the LCC spokesperson refused to disclose the names of its members, some have appeared in the mainstream media. One of their members, or collaborator, is Rami Nakhle, a cyberactivist living in exile in Beirut, Lebanon.

“Today, after 98 days of protests, he is living in denial,” says **Rami Nakhle, a Syrian working in Beirut with the Local Coordination Committees, a clearinghouse for Syrian opposition protests and activities** “It has become clear to everybody that Bashar al-Assad cannot change. He doesn’t realize that Syria has changed forever but he’s still the same president we heard last time, in April.” (Nicholas Blanford, [Assad’s speech may buy time, but not survival](#), The Christian Science Monitor, June 20, 2011)

The activist has a privileged relationship with Al Jazeera, according to NPR:

When the Arabic channel Al-Jazeera broadcasts the latest news, **the images come from Nakhle’s network**. (Deborah Amos, [Syrian Activist In Hiding Presses Mission From Abroad](#), April 22, 2011.)

It should be noted that [Al Jazeera played a key role](#) in promoting the regime change in Libya.

[CyberDissidents.org](#), a website [presented by the Bush Center](#) as a “Voice of Freedom Online”, offers a brief portrait of Nakhle, which is not unlike the other portraits found in the mainstream press, which describe him solely as a cyber-dissident, as if he never had any other occupation:

“Rami Nakhle is a 27 year cyber-dissident. His use of social media to spread information about the Syrian Revolution caught the attention of Syrian authorities, causing him to flee to Lebanon in January 2011. For the past three years, he has been working under the pseudonym Malath Aumran. Although the Syrian secret police have discovered his real identity, he continues to use this pseudonym to retain recognition from his online followers.

Despite these threats from the Syrian government, Nakhle continues to work in hiding, continuing his campaign for freedom through Facebook, Twitter, and full-access interviews with prominent news sources like BBC and The New York Times. ([CyberDissident Database](#))



Portrait of Rami Nakhle on [CyberDissident.org](#)

The U.S. government and NGOs [doing CIA work](#), such as Freedom House, are major sponsors of cyber-dissidence:

**“Political dissidents** from China, Iran, Russia, Egypt, **Syria**, Venezuela and Cuba will travel to Dallas to **join with Fellows of the George W. Bush Institute, experts from Freedom House**, Harvard’s Berkman Center for Internet and Society, the **U.S. Government and other leaders** in the field **to discuss the successes and challenges of Internet-based political dissident movements** around the world.

The George W. Bush Institute today [March 30, 2010] announced it will co-host a conference on cyber dissidents with the human rights organization Freedom House on April 19, 2010. ([George W. Bush Institute and Freedom House to Convene Freedom Activists, Human Rights and Internet Experts to Assess Global Cyber Dissident Movement](#),” Business Wire, March 30, 2011)

Rami Nakhle doesn’t hide his interests in American organisations. On his Facebook page, he lists the following as “interests”: National Democratic Institute (NDI), chaired by Madeleine Albright, Human Rights Watch and the U.S. Embassy Damascus.

Nakhle’s interest in these organisations clearly shows which side he’s on, just like SCN member Radwan Ziadeh, former fellow of the National Endowment for Democracy, another organization well-known for its [links with the CIA](#).

In an [interview with the Guardian](#), the cyberactivist claims to be harassed by the Syrian secret police, on his Facebook wall. It might be true, but it would be a rather unusual tactic for a secret police, which usually, as its name says, acts secretly. Such harassment is more likely to be black propaganda — people opposed to the regime trying to make the Syrian authorities look bad. A kind of “cyber false flag” on Facebook, for everyone to see.

The “Syrian uprising” seems to be a copy and paste of the “protest movement” in Libya, which was conducive to a NATO invasion and regime change. The mainstream press has once again one principal source of information – the opposition groups. The media neglects military casualties and fails to report that armed gunmen, 17 000 according to a [report from the International Institute for Strategic Studies](#), are among the protesters. A non-elected body, the SNC, ironically is upheld as a democratic movement and is offered “credibility” as well as extensive mainstream media coverage.

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Julie Lévesque is a journalist and researcher with the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG), Montreal. She was among the first independent journalists to visit Haiti in the wake of the January 2010 earthquake.

In 2011, she was on board "The Spirit of Rachel Corrie", the only humanitarian vessel which penetrated Gaza territorial waters before being shot at by the Israeli Navy.

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