

Syrian opposition accused of “human rights abuses”

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A report by Human Rights Watch on abuses committed by the Syrian opposition cites eyewitness accounts of kidnappings, torture, forced confessions and summary executions of security personnel and civilians.

None of this will come as a surprise to anyone who has followed events in Syria. Some of these atrocities have been videoed and appear on YouTube. In reality, many more such crimes have been carried out since the very beginning of an insurgency that had an armed character from its earliest stages.

Earlier official Syrian reports cited over 2,000 security personnel having been killed, and that figure must be higher after weeks of violent confrontations.

There are, moreover, numerous media reports highlighting the sectarian character of the conflict, with Sunni forces targeting Alawites, Christians and other minorities, and of government loyalists reciprocating in kind. In addition, the well-known presence in the opposition of al-Qaeda style Salafist forces, backed by Saudi Arabia and Qatar, has become an acute political embarrassment to Washington.

That is why the HRW report now admits to a tiny fraction of what has taken place. But it does so only in order to make an appeal to the Syrian National Council and the Free Syrian Army to better police its constituent elements and to make a better job of suppressing information of what is being carried out on the ground in the ongoing campaign to destabilise the regime of Bashir al-Assad.

The report is framed as an “Open Letter to the Leaders of the Syrian Opposition”, and is Cc’d to Colonel Riad al-Asaad, commander of the FSA, Dr. Burhan Ghalioun, president of the SNC and General Mustafa al-Sheikh of the SNC’s newly established Military Council.

HRW couches its criticisms in claims that excesses have been generated by “widespread violations by Syrian government forces, including disappearances, rampant use of torture, arbitrary detentions, and indiscriminate shelling of neighborhoods”, that it has “repeatedly documented and condemned”. It also stresses that the groups animated by “anti-Shia or anti-Alawite sentiments” “do not appear to belong to an organized command structure or to be following Syrian National Council orders.”

Even so, the reports constitute an unintended indictment of the media propaganda that for month after month skewed coverage of events in Syria by focusing exclusively on the suppression of what they insisted was an entirely peaceful anti-government movement.

Among the examples cited is a report by “Mazen,” an activist who speaks of three government loyalists kidnapped and tortured to death.

FSA supporter “Samih” of Saraqeb reports members of the Al-Nur battalion, a Salafist group, as well as other members of the FSA kidnapping civilians for ransom. “Marwan”, an Alawite resident of Karam el Zeytoun, spoke of the capture and execution of his parents, with their bodies shown on YouTube. HRW also acknowledged that there was no evidence that any of seven Iranian nationals captured and not yet released by the FSA were spies, as accused, and that some were definitely civilian energy contractors.

Of most concern for HRW is the existence of “at least 25 videos on YouTube in which Syrian security forces or their alleged supporters confess to crimes” with clear evidence of having been tortured and other videos and verbal information showing “that members of armed opposition groups have executed people”. This includes one posted February 4, showing “a man hung from a tree by his neck in front of several armed fighters” and another of a person identified as a member of Air Force Intelligence based in Homs who has been badly beaten: “Written statements accompanying the video state that it was filmed before his execution, and the interrogator in the video, amid curses, asks him for his final request before dying.”

HRW appeals to the SNC Military Bureau, created on March 1, 2012, to “condemn and forbid these abuses”.

One could add to this list of crimes the three car bombings that have claimed the lives of over 50 people and injured hundreds more. But one thing is clear from these limited admissions: nothing can be taken at face value when it comes to the coverage of Syria by the media and the official proclamations by the United Nations and the governments in Washington, London and Paris.

In order to legitimise any and all actions taken to bring down Assad, all evidence of the true character of the insurgency is routinely suppressed.

Among the most notorious examples is the concealing of the report drafted by the Arab League observer mission to Syria that acknowledged that the ruling Baathists were faced with an armed insurrection.

The report cited, among other things, “an escalation in violence perpetrated by armed groups” in Homs, “believed to include some 3,000 individuals”, and “armed groups committing acts of violence against Government forces, resulting in death and injury”, witnessed by observers in Homs and Dera’a, including “the bombing of a civilian bus, killing eight persons and injuring others, including women and children”.

Another interesting feature of the report is its statement that media “reports of ever-rising casualty figures and atrocities that generally originate with the London-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights” were not to be believed. Reports of specific acts of violence “were unfounded”.

A recent report in Lebanon’s *Al Akhbar* by Sharmine Narwani throws additional doubt on the casualty reports emanating from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, based in London and allegedly funded by Qatar, which are most often cited by the media and the United Nations.

She examined the list of deaths for December 2011, naming 77 registered casualties with no identifying information provided in a total of 260 unknowns on the list.

“Around that time, I had come across my first list of Syrians killed in the crisis, reportedly compiled in coordination with the SOHR, that contained the names of Palestinian refugees killed by Israeli fire on the Golan Heights on 15 May 2011 and 5 June 2011 when protesters congregated on Syria’s armistice line with Israel. So my first check was to see if that kind of glaring error appears in the SOHR list I investigate in this piece.”

“To my amazement,” she writes, “the entire list of [29] victims from those two days were included in the SOHR casualty count. ... It also didn’t take long to find the names of well-publicized pro-regime Syrians on the SOHR list and match them with YouTube footage of their funerals.”

Exaggerating casualty numbers gives the impression of a bloodbath perpetrated by security forces on the innocent, as does the practice of declaring them all to be civilians rather than armed combatants. If the list of deaths is significantly smaller and includes far more insurgents—as well as the victims of the insurgents, civilians included—then the response of the government would automatically appear more proportionate.

These are the political considerations animating Human Rights Watch in offering its friendly advice to the SNC and FSA on behalf of Washington. They want the propaganda campaign for regime change to better withstand scrutiny, even as additional arms are being flooded into Syria by Saudi Arabia and Qatar.

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