

The Houla Massacre Revisited: “Official Truth” in the Dirty War on Syria

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This article examines and documents the Houla massacre of May 2012, a terrible incident in the Syrian Crisis which came closest to attracting UN intervention. The analysis here seeks to include all relevant evidence, both from witnesses and on the UN processes. A series of appalling civilian massacres during the conflict helped set the tone for another round of ‘humanitarian intervention’ or ‘responsibility to protect’ debates. The killings at Houla deserve close attention. However, because of NATO’s abuse of the ‘no fly zone’ authorisation for Libya and the wider geo-politics of Syria, Russia and China would not allow a similar UN Security Council authorisation of force. Big power intervention therefore remained indirect, through proxy militias. While the Syrian army attacked those militias and many Islamist groups carried out public executions, attempts to blame the Syrian Army for attacks on civilians remained hotly contested.

The context to this was two very different narratives. Western propaganda attacked Syrian President Bashar al Assad, claiming that he, through the Syrian Arab Army, was repeatedly ‘killing his own people’. From the Syrian side this was always a proxy war against Syria, with NATO and allied Gulf monarchies backing sectarian terrorist gangs, with the aim of ‘regime change’. The western line maintained that a peaceful protest movement, after many months of ‘regime brutality’, transformed into a secular (later ‘moderate Islamist’) ‘revolution’. The western popular media reinforced this line, with calls to arm the ‘civilian protestors’. One such article claimed ‘We will pay a high price if we do not arm Syria’s rebels’ (Slaughter 2012). In the first few months of western reports there is very little admission of an armed insurrection, except by suggested ‘civilian self-defence’ measures.

The Syrian Government, on the other hand, said the political reform movement and the sectarian Islamist attacks were quite distinct, the latter taking cover under the former. Armed sniping attacks on police and civilians began in March 2011. In fact, arms shipments were intercepted on the Syria-Iraq border a week before the first violence broke out (Reuters 2011) and former Saudi military official Anwar Al-Eshki would later confirm to the BBC that his country had armed Islamists at the al-Omari mosque in Daraa (Truth Syria 2012). Many Syrian citizens back their government’s explanation, saying that the early protests were not linked to the armed attacks, which made use of Islamist slogans. The protest movement was effectively driven off the streets by the armed conflict (Eva Pal 2014; Haidar 2012). It has emerged that both sides played down soldier deaths in the early weeks, as ‘the government did not want to show they are weak and the opposition did not want to show they are armed’. Yet 18-19 soldiers were massacred in Daraa in late March and another 88 were killed across Syria in April (Narwani 2014).

A similarly polarised view developed over how to characterise the violence in Homs over 2011-2012, when the first groups calling themselves Free Syrian Army (FSA) brigades attempted to hold parts of the old city. The Farouq and Khalid bin Walid brigades were the main occupying groups. Western sources characterised Farouq, if not exactly secular, then as 'moderate' Sunni Muslims. One US report, while recognising Islamist 'jihadis' amongst the fighters, claimed that 'the vast majority of the [FSA] opposition fighters are legitimate nationalists ... pious rather than Islamists and are not motivated by sectarianism' (Benotman and Naseraldin 2012). The Washington-aligned International Crisis Group similarly noted 'the presence of a strong Salafi strand among Syria's rebels', but spoke of 'a moderate Islamic tradition', suggesting that the Farouk and Khalid bin Walid brigades might be pious rather than Islamist (ICG 2012). The Wall Street Journal also called Farouk 'pious Sunnis' rather than Islamists (Malas 2013). The BBC called them 'moderately Islamist', suggesting they exaggerated their Islamism by dress and beards 'to attract financial support from the Gulf' (Marcus 2013).

Yet many Homs residents were terrified by the sectarian-genocidal slogans of 'Christians to Beirut, Alawites to the tomb' (Eretz Zen 2012; Adams 2012; Wakefield 2012). Reports of these slogans appeared in the US media as early as May 2011 (Blanford 2011). They did indeed drive Christians to Beirut. The Orthodox and Catholic churches blamed Farouq for the large scale ethnic cleansing of more than 50,000 Christians from Homs (CNA 2012). They began to impose an Islamic tax (Spencer 2012). A local analyst concluded most of Farouk were sectarian Salafis, armed and funded by Saudi Arabia; while 'Khalid Ibn al-Walid remained loyal to and supported by the Muslim Brotherhood' (Mortada 2012). Such ethnic cleansing would hardly have come from 'moderate' religious people, let alone a secular revolution.

The Houla massacre

After the Syrian Army had driven the FSA groups out of Homs, and on the eve of a UN Security Council meeting on Syria, a dreadful massacre of more than 100 civilians took place at the village of Houla, on the Taldou plains just north-west of Homs. The Houla massacre (25 May 2012) is important to 'Responsibility to Protect' discussions, because it formed the basis of a failed attempt to authorise UN intervention to protect civilians, based on the claim that the Syrian Government had massacred civilians. Evidence to back that claim, however, was hardly clear.

The governments of Britain, France and the USA immediately blamed the Syrian Government. In what has been called the 'western and Arab media narrative' the victims were killed by army artillery (Correggia, Embid, Hauben and Larson 2013). The Syrian Government, in turn, accused the foreign-backed terrorists, in particular the groups that had been driven out of Homs. Syria's Foreign Ministry said the army clashed with 'hundreds' of armed men who committed Friday's massacre. The killers used knives, which they said was a 'signature' of Islamist militant attacks (Reuters 2012). The Government told the UN 'the victims were reportedly killed by terrorists numbering between 600-800, who had entered Al-Houla previously from the villages of Al-Rastan, Sa'an, Bourj Qaei and Samae'leen, among other locations'. The General Command of the armed forces held an inquiry (HRC 2012a: 6).

Allegations of Islamist 'false flag' provocations had been made before. Mother Agnes-Mariam de la Croix, the mother superior in charge of an ancient monastery in Qara, south of Homs, had observed the ethnic cleansing of Christians in Homs, and had grave suspicions

about who was behind the killings at Houla. She had said publicly that Syrian Christians had been pressured to join FSA groups, had been used by the rebels as human shields and that Christian homes had been taken over by Sunnis. She denounced their 'false flag' crimes in 2011 (SANA 2011; AINA 2012), pointing out that the Catholic Media Centre had a list of names of hundreds of murder victims, many of whose images had been later used in [FSA] media setups (SANA 2011).

Western media reports, however, generally dismissed statements from Damascus. Several governments expelled Syrian diplomats, in moves designed to isolate the government. The UN Security Council said it:

'condemned in the strongest possible terms the killings ... in attacks that involved a series of Government artillery and tank shellings on a residential neighbourhood ... [and] also condemned the killing of civilians by shooting at close range ... [this] constitutes a violation of applicable international law and of the commitments of the Syrian Government' (UNSC 2012). France's representative at the UN, Martin Briens, said: 'Tanks and artillery cannons from the government shelled residential areas killing civilians' (RT 2012). Britain's envoy Mark Lyall Grant said 'there is not the slightest doubt that there was deliberate government shelling against a civilian neighbourhood' (Cowan 2012).

These accusations were premature, betraying prejudice. Russia insisted on a UNSC briefing by UN Special Mission (UNSMIS) head, Norwegian General Robert Mood, who told them the victims included 49 children and 34 women, most of whom had been shot at close range or had their throats cut. Russian diplomat Aleksandr Pankin summarised: 'very few of the people who died in Houla were killed by artillery shelling' (RT 2012). From then, culprits in western media stories shifted to pro-government militia (shabiha). Britain's Daily Telegraph blamed 'Assad's Death Squads'. The paper suggested a sectarian motive, from an opposition source: 'They would fight for Bashar to the death. It is natural - they have to defend their sect' (Alexander and Sherlock 2012).

The certainty of the British and French governments, and of the anti-government 'activists', was not evident in the statements of the head of UNSMIS. Mood's group visited the massacre site and heard two distinct stories. The general's public comments three weeks after the massacre deserve attention, given that the UN did not release the report to which he refers:

'We have interviewed locals with one story and we have interviewed locals that have another story. The circumstances and ... the facts related to the incident itself still remain unclear to us ... we have sent [statements and witness interviews] as a report to UN headquarters New York ... if we are asked [to assist] obviously we are on the ground and could help' (Mood 2012).

This report was delivered to the UN Secretary General (UNSG 2012); yet it seems it was not received by the Security Council (Hauben 2012). Mood's ambiguity may have been disconcerting for those wanting clear findings against the Syrian Government. On 1 June the Human Rights Council (three against and two abstentions) blamed the Houla killings on the Syrian Government ('wanton killings ... by pro-regime elements and a series of Government artillery and tank shellings') before calling for a 'comprehensive, independent and unfettered special inquiry' (HRC 2012c). UNSMIS had its activities suspended and was

disbanded in August.

Circumstances and timing were certainly important. As the Syrian Army drove Farouq from Homs and into surrounding towns, Syrians turned out for the 7 May National Assembly elections. Those sections of the opposition aligned to the FSA called for a boycott, and armed groups threatened to enforce this (al Akhbar 2012). In the event, the ruling Ba'ath party won 60% of the vote and their allied parties another 30%, though turnout was only 51% (Zarzar and al-Wahed 2012). There was reason to suspect enforcement of the threat, as reprisals against those who had participated and so lent legitimacy to the state and the government.

Yet that line of inquiry was not pursued by the second UN inquiry. With three of the UNSC permanent members openly backing regime change in Syria, the debate was heavily politicised. The Houla massacre inquiry was taken over by a Human Rights Council Commission of Inquiry, co-chaired by US diplomat Karen Koning AbuZayd (HRC 2012a; HRC 2012b). Appointing a US delegate was a mistake, on the part of the UN. Karen Koning Abu Zayd had worked for the UN for many years, but was explicitly listed as a USA delegate to the Commission. The US Government had, by this time, publicly blamed the Syrian Government for Houla, demanding that President Assad resign for 'killing your fellow citizens' (AP 2012) and, with Turkey, had 'stepped up' what it called 'non-lethal aid' to rebels in Syria (Barnard 2012). By any standard Washington was a belligerent party to the Syrian conflict. On principles of independence and avoiding conflicts of interest the Human Rights Council should not have incorporated a US representative.

Unlike UNSMIS, this Commission did not visit Syria. A review of evidence was carried out and eight additional interviews were conducted, at a distance from Syria. The interim report reflected some of the ambiguity of the UNSMIS team: '[We are] unable to determine the identity of the perpetrators at this time; nevertheless ... forces loyal to the Government may have been responsible for many of the deaths' (HRC 2012b: 10). This was an injudicious statement. The report blamed both government forces and anti-government groups for crimes of war, but came in more strongly against the Syrian government, relying on the formal duties of government to 'prevent or punish' violence, as well as not commit it (HRC 2012b: 23). That is, a 'catch-all' argument had it that the Government was ultimately responsible for all violence on its territory.

The Commission's 15 August report firmed up against the Syrian Government, removing most of the earlier ambiguity, but without identifying perpetrators. They wrote:

'The commission conducted eight additional interviews, including with six witnesses from the Taldou area, two of whom were survivors. They looked at a range of statements from 'various sources', including 'international human rights NGOs' (HRC 2012b: 64-65).

All statements, they said, were consistent with deaths being caused by government shelling and unidentified 'shabiha' forces. Even though they had heard evidence that the Al Sayed and Abdulrazzak families (the main groups of civilians killed) were government supporters, they concluded that the unidentified killers of those families 'were aligned to the government' (HRC 2012b: 67). They discounted evidence that FSA groups had committed the murders, claiming 'apart from two witnesses in the Government report, no other account supported the Government's version of events' (HRC 2012b: 10). The Government 'was

responsible for the deaths of civilians as a result of shelling', they said; while as regards the 'deliberate killing of civilians, the Commission was unable to determine the identity of the perpetrators ... [but] it considered that forces loyal to the Government were likely to have been responsible for many of the deaths' (HRC 2012b: 10).

A prominent witness presented by the anti-government side was 11 year old boy Ali Al Sayed, who says many members of his family were murdered. In an online video little Ali says:

'There were tanks in the street, they shot at us with machine guns ... soldiers came out ... they fired 5 bullets on the door lock ... arrested my brother ... [and] my uncle ... then my mum screamed at them ... they then shot her 5 times, they shot her in the head ... then he went to my brother and shot him ... some of them were dressed as military, some had regular clothes, had shaved heads and beards, shabiha' (Marchfifteen 2012).

He pretended to be dead, and thus escaped being murdered. Later he saw news on state television of his uncles having been murdered. His story is not consistent in several respects (Larson in Correggia, Embid, Hauben and Larson 2013: 20-28) and, at the end, with the help of some leading questions, he gives what appears to be a tutored appeal for foreign military intervention:

'I demand that the international community stop the killing in Syria and in Houla ... we are being killed ... the international community is sitting, just talking and not doing anything ... the people must fight for us, do what they say and protect us' (Marchfifteen 2012).

Whatever the strengths and weaknesses of the boy's story, Ali's was hardly the only eye-witness account of the massacre. Further, it was quite false for the UN Commission of Inquiry to suggest that only 'two witnesses ... supported the Government's version of events'. By that time there was public evidence from at least fifteen witnesses, broadly consistent with the account by the Syrian Government. Russian journalists tried to present their interview material to the Commission and apparently met with a lack of interest (Janssen 2012). The Commission claimed that the Russian reports 'relied primarily on the same two witnesses as the Government's report' (HRC 2012b: 66). Yet a simple reading of a summary of evidence from the latter's witnesses shows this to be false. Below is a summary of evidence from witnesses the UN Commission ignored. These accounts of 'rebel' culprits are broadly consistent with the account of the Government and often quite specific. Several gunmen are named.

Inconvenient Evidence

First, the Syrian news agency reported two unidentified people who feared for their safety. The first said the gunmen were locals plus a larger group from other areas. The locals assembled after noon prayers before attacking check-points. They then selected pro-government people, those who participated in elections or 'didn't give the gunmen money'. One was Haitham al-Housan. The bodies shown on television were of 'people murdered by terrorists along with the bodies of the gunmen killed in the initial conflict' (SANA 2012). The second witness, a woman, saw the larger group attacking a check-point. They heard of people from Tal Dahab, Aqrab and al-Rastan. A man called Saiid Fayes al-Okesh fired a

mortar and police responded; he was shot in the leg. Another gunman was Haitham al-Hallaq, who led a group of about 200. The victims belonged to the al Sayed family, with Muawiya al Sayed 'a police officer who didn't defect' and others related to Meshleb al Sayed, who 'recently became Secretary of the Peoples' Assembly'. Other targeted groups included four households of the Abdelrazzaq family (SANA 2012).

Syrian television news showed interviews with two distressed male witnesses. The first man said:

'The terrorists are from this area and all the areas around ... a huge number of them, hundreds. They started to use shells and RPGs ... hitting the houses with guns, machine guns ... They killed people in their houses ... some bodies have been burned' (Syria News 2012: at 6.47). The second man said: 'A man, his brother, and nephew were killed in front of my sister ... [another] was able to run away and hide ... the United Nations, those observers, what are they doing while shells are hitting us?' (Syria News 2012: at 7.35).

German journalist, Rainer Hermann, who speaks Arabic, interviewed witnesses from Houla within days of the massacre. His sources included Syrian opposition members who had rejected violence, whose names he withheld. They said Islamist rebels had attacked three army checkpoints. His sources told him:

'The massacre took place after Friday prayers ... dozens of soldiers and rebels were killed ... [in fighting of] about 90 minutes ... those killed were almost exclusively families of the Alawite or Shia minorities ... [including] several dozen members of a family which had converted to Shia Islam in recent years ... and the family of a Sunni member of parliament, because he was considered a collaborator ... after the massacre, the perpetrators filmed their victims, presented them as Sunni victims and spread their videos' (Hermann 2012).

Hermann gave names to the gang leaders:

'more than 700 gunmen under the leadership of Abdurrazzaq Tlass and Yahya Yusuf [Farooq leaders] came in three groups from Rastan, Kafr Laha and Akriba and attacked three army checkpoints around Taldou. The numerically superior rebels and the soldiers fought bloody battles ... the rebels, supported by the residents of Taldou, snuffed out the families ... [who] had refused to join the opposition' (LRC 2012).

German journalist Alfred Hackensberger spoke with a man who had been given refuge in the Qara monastery headed by Mother Agnes Mariam. This man called 'Jibril' said:

'The fighting began around noon, when the rebels, coming from Ar-Rastan and Saan, attacked the checkpoints ... the rebels went to the hospital and killed patients there ... several teams targeted and went in selected houses and started to shoot all of the inhabitants. He knew the Sajid's personally. 'They were Sunni Muslims, like all of us', he says. 'They were killed by them because they have refused to join the revolution. They've even murdered a Member of Parliament who ... had refused the boycott of the FSA'.

Asked about the 'regime loyalists' claims, Jibril responded derisively:

‘Nonsense ... Houla is in rebel hands since December 2011 ... the Army would like to reclaim Taldou, but it has not been done ... many people know what really happened ... who’s there ... can only replay the version of the rebels. Everything else is certain death’ (Hackensberger 2012).

The Arabic speaking Dutch writer Martin Janssen constructed his view from three sources: the Catholic Fides news agency, information from refugees at the Qara monastery and the accounts of Russian journalists Musin and Kulygina. He questioned the shabiha story because many victims were Alawi, who are almost all pro-government. Fides had reported that ‘large groups of Syrian Alawites and Christians were fleeing to Lebanon to escape the violence of armed gangs’, after the events at Houla (Janssen 2012). The Qara monastery told him witnesses said the army was absent in the region, with ‘Rastan and Saan ... under full control of the Free Syrian Army’. The armed groups attacked the al-Watani hospital and killed the guards. ‘Then they invaded the hospital where armed rebels killed all present and ... put the hospital on fire’ (Janssen 2012). At Tal Daw, near Houla, armed groups murdered all the Alawite families. The report from the monastery described the area around Qusayr as ‘in turmoil’ and wracked by sectarian violence (Janssen 2012).

Those Russian journalists, Marat Musin and Olga Kulygina from the Abkhazian Network News Agency ([ANNA-News](#)) had a camera crew in Houla on 25 May and took a number of witness interviews. Their sources make it very clear the murderers were Islamist ‘rebels’. An old woman called

‘The grandmother of Al-Hula’ said: ‘Checkpoint positions were attacked ... All the soldiers were killed, then they attacked our villages, torched a hospital ... Bandits killed our pharmacist ... [because] he had treated a wounded soldier Nobody but the army will help us ... They say there have been airstrikes! Lies, lies, lies. Liars, all of them come from Ar-Rastan’ (ANNA 2012).

Taldou resident Syed Abdul Wahab, said: ‘The terrorists want to come here ... to take power. We have always lived in peace. We cannot leave the house’. A local woman from Al-Gaunt, next to Al-Houla, said ‘Nine terrorists killed my relatives in the field. The bandits set fire to our houses and we fled ... we have a martyr, who was burned alive. Why, by what law did they die? Is this Islam? Is this justice?’ (ANNA 2012).

Another woman from Taldou they call Arifah told them she listened to the radio chatter from the ‘bandits’, before the massacre (Musin 2012a). They began by firing at the main checkpoint while a group from the al Hassan clan, led by Nidal Bakkur, attacked a ‘second checkpoint’ outside the village. The bandits lost about 25 people but after about two hours they had taken over both check-points. ‘They then proceeded to murder the Al-Sayed family which lived across the street from the police station’. Three families including about 20 children were murdered, along with another 10 from the Abdul Razaq family. That afternoon Abdul Razak Tlas, leader of the Farouq Brigade, arrived with 250 men from Ar-Rastan, Aqraba and Farlaha (Musin 2012a). The city of Ar-Rastan had been abandoned by most civilians for some time, taken over by Islamists from Lebanon (Musin 2012b). Arifah said that by 8pm the murdered civilians and dead bandits had been taken to the mosque. They then filmed for the Qatari and Saudi television stations. On Saturday morning, when the UNSMIS observers arrived, ‘The fallen rebels involved in the action were presented as civilians, while the conquering rebels dressed in army uniforms posed as defectors. They were surrounded by their family members who told the story of a government attack with

heavy shelling and posed as victim's relatives, while the relatives of the real victims were nowhere to be seen' (Musin 2012a).

Violence continued after the UNSMIS visit. Musin and Kulygina later interviewed two wounded soldiers, a wounded policeman and another resident, who gave more detail of 'rebel' sniper attacks and murders, and of the 'rebel' escorts set up for the UN observers. They continued to identify attackers and victims. A group from the Al Aksh clan had been firing mortars and RPGs at the checkpoints. All checkpoint prisoners were executed: a Sunni conscript had his throat cut, while Abdullah Shau of Deir-Zor was burned alive (Maramus 2012; Musin 2012b). The police officer said 'the attackers were from Ar-Rastan and Al-Hula. Insurgents control Taldou. They burned houses and killed people by the families, because they were loyal to the government' (Musin 2012b). The resident saw the clashes from the roof of the police station. 'Al Jazeera aired pictures and said that the Army committed the massacre at Al Hula ... in fact, they [the gunmen] killed the civilians and children in Al-Hula. The bandits ... steal everything ... most of the fighters are from the city of Ar Rastan' (Maramus 2012; Musin 2012b). The second UN inquiry ignored these 15 witnesses, who told of specific perpetrators with clear political motives. An outline of major reports and their associated evidence is below.

TABLE Houla massacre (May 2012): significant reports

| Source/report | Method and conclusion |
|--|---|
| Mother Agnes Mariam | FSA had previously attacked Christians and was engaged in 'false flag' attacks, falsely blamed on the government |
| Most western media reports | Massacre by 'Assad's death squads' |
| British and French government | Massacre resulted from Government shelling of civilian areas; later changed this to 'regime thug' attacks |
| UN Special Mission on Syria (UNSMIS), Gen. Robert Mood | Went to massacre site, heard stories that blamed both sides. Could not resolve the two versions. |
| UN HRC Commission of Inquiry | Interviews in Geneva, co-chaired by US diplomat; witnesses selection assisted by anti-government groups; Commission blames pro-government 'thugs' (shabiha) |
| FSA video, on Al Jazeera and elsewhere | Show young boy Ali al Sayed, he blames 'shabiha' in army clothes with shaved heads and beards. |
| Syrian Government, state news agencies and television | Four direct witnesses say attacks were by armed gangs, who killed security and targeted pro-government families |
| German journalist Alfred HACKENSBERGER | Interviews refugee 'Jibril' at Qara monastery - massacre carried out by FSA gangs on pro-government families |
| German journalist Rainer HERMANN | Interviews anti-violence opposition people - they say local gangs and FSA killed pro-government families |
| Dutch Journalist Martin JANSSEN | Notes large outflow of Christian and Alawi refugees from Houla; refugees at Qara blame FSA gangs |
| Russian journalists Marat MUSIN and Olga KULYGINA | Eight witnesses blame FSA-linked anti-government gangs, victims pro-government families |
| Correggia, Embid, Hauben and Larson | Critical review of evidence and UN reports - say the Commission report is not credible. |

Dissent at the UN

The partisan report clearly influenced UN discussions. Although the HRC passed a motion with a strong majority, condemning the Syrian Government, the dissenting comments were significant. Russian representative Maria Khodynskaya-Golenischv (UNTV 2012: 7.00 to 8.10) said

‘We cannot agree with the one-sided conclusions put out in the resolution concerning the Commission on the Houla tragedy ... We believe that the question of guilt is still open. An investigation should be carried out thoroughly ... unfortunately some states are de facto encouraging terrorism in Syria therefore we have no doubt that the episode in Houla has definitely been whipped up in the media and has been used to carry out force against this country. The delegate from China (UNTV 2012: 13.25 to 15.50) also flagged that country’s intention to vote against the resolution, as there was a need ‘for a political solution ... [and an] immediate end to violence ... putting pressure on one party for the conflict will not help solve the problem’. The Cuban delegate (UNTV 2012: 16.05 to 18.50) said ‘there are parties that are interested in not fostering the path of dialogue and understanding ... [some saying clearly they want] regime change, and even promoting the idea of military intervention with the use of force to impose on the Syrian people decisions that are being taken outside the country’. The Indian delegate (UNTV 2012: 19.00-21.30), who abstained, said India had given ‘unqualified support to the joint missions’ but urged the Human Rights Council to ‘always act with complete impartiality, in order to maintain its credibility and retain the trust and confidence of all ... [there is a need for] a balanced and impartial resolution that can help start a meaningful political process in Syria’

The Syrian delegation (UNTC 2012: 24.33-35.30) came out hardest against the resolution, saying that the Commission of Inquiry ‘didn’t even visit Syria’ and had ignored the Syrian inquiry. Referring to some ‘Arab co-sponsors’ Syria said they had no right to ‘give advice’ because they were ‘directly involved in the killings of Syrian people, and criminals cannot be judges’, imposing sanctions and then ‘shedding tears about the humanitarian situation’. The refusal to condemn terrorism in Syria reflected badly on the Council. Nevertheless, the big powers had the numbers, with 41 voting in favour, three against and three abstentions. The resolution was adopted but no UNSC action was possible because of opposition from two of the five permanent members of the Security Council, Russia and China.

The unsatisfactory UN process does not negate the fact that strong prima facie evidence emerged against particular groups and individuals. Witnesses identified as perpetrators four local gunmen (Haitham al-Housan, Saiid Fayes al-Okesh, Haitham al-Hallq and Nidal Bakkur) along with groups from two clans (the al Hassan and the al-Aksh), plus a large Farouq group led by Abdurrazzaq Tlass and Yahya Yusuf. Their motive was to punish pro-government villagers, in particular the al-Sayed and Abdulrazzak families, then to set up a scene to falsely blame the government for their own crimes. The Houla massacre did not result in a Libyan-styled intervention, but false accusations afforded temporary impunity to the killers and created a great risk that military intervention could have been set in play.

The Aftermath

Houla set the tone for a series of similar ‘false flag’ massacres. When the August 2012 massacre of 245 people in Daraya (Damascus) came to light, western media reports quickly suggested that ‘Assad’s army has committed [another] massacre’ (Oweis 2012). However that story was contradicted by British journalist Robert Fisk, who observed that the FSA had slaughtered kidnapped civilian and off-duty soldier hostages after a failed prisoner swap (Fisk 2012). Similarly, the 10 December 2012 massacre of 120 to 150 villagers in Aqrab (less than 15 kilometres from Houla, and also at that time under ‘rebel’ control) was also blamed by ‘activists’ on the Syrian Government. The New York Times suggested ‘members of Assad’s sect’ were responsible (Stack and Mourtada 2012). In fact, as British journalist Alex Thompson (2012b) later reported, from the tightly corroborated evidence of survivors, the FSA (including foreign fighters) had held 500 Alawi villagers for nine days, murdering many of them as the army closed in and the FSA fled. In this case those of ‘Assad’s sect’ were the victims, just as the victims at Houla had been mostly government supporters and their families.

The Houla massacre illustrates great dangers in the practice of the ‘Responsibility to Protect’ doctrine, when the big powers have proxy armies in the field. The idea that almost any sort of atrocity could be blamed on the Syrian Government, with little fear of contradiction in the western media, must have played heavily on the minds of Islamist armed groups. Farouq in particular was very media savvy, regularly producing videos for the television networks of Qatar (Al Jazeera) and Saudi Arabia (Al Arabiya). Up against a superior national army, which was not disintegrating along sectarian lines, Farouq and the others were in desperate need of military backing. Inflaming moral outrage against the Syrian Government just might bring in NATO air power, as it had in Libya. In the meantime, they could carry out major crimes with impunity.

The failure of UN processes to recognise the UN’s own role, in fomenting both impunity and escalation of the violence, further discredited the ‘no fly zone’ idea, which had been cynically exploited in the Libyan intervention. After Houla, while the propaganda war continued, there was no real hope of Security Council authorised intervention in Syria. The next major incident, involving the use of chemical weapons in ‘rebel’ occupied East Ghouta, more than a year later, would have as its reference point a unilateral ‘red line’ decree by Washington. Houla in many respects marked the collapse of UN-sanctioned ‘official truth’ in Syria.

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