

SYRIAN REVOLT SPREADS TO RULING ALAWITE TRIBES. CITIES SEALED. EXECUTIONS IN ARMY

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The popular uprising against Syrian President Bashar Assad is still spreading. Tuesday, April 12, one of the Assad family's own Alawite tribes and the key Sunni city of Aleppo joined the movement demanding the president and his kin's removal. Assad fought back against the expanding threat to his survival by mobilizing all his military and security resources, including the loyal young thugs of the shabbiha gangs. *They have orders to shoot to kill and not permit ambulances to collect the wounded.* Tanks seal the most restive towns of Teraa, Bania, Latakia and Hama.

Alawite unrest centers on the impoverished Knaan tribe centered in the village of Bhamra in the mountains of northern Syria. A second immediate danger to the regime comes from Aleppo, Syria's commercial hub, where for the first time more than 10,000 protesters marched. The Druze mountain inhabitants are up in arms. So too are the Kurdish towns of the north such as Kamishli and the Shammar tribes of southeastern Syria around the border town of Abu Kamal.

Damascus University has been under siege for four days, although security forces have not been able to breach it.

A grave humanitarian crisis is spreading with the unrest. Army outposts and roadblocks have cut off main roads linking the north to southern and central Syria, as well as telephone and internet services and even food deliveries in many places. Mass arrests of thousands take place nightly including, according to debkafile's sources, members of the Syrian ruling establishment for the crime of appealing to Assad to abandon his violent methods of repression and meet some of the protesters demands for reforms. Some are journalists who support the regime but who wrote articles to this effect. They were not published.

For the first time, debkafile's sources report that the protesters began returning the fire against security forces on Monday, April 11, in a number of places, especially Deraa in the south and Baniyas in the north. A well-laid ambush was laid on the main coastal road linking Latakia and Baniyas and nine Syrian officers and troops killed.

debkafile's Middle East and intelligence sources report a three-way shooting war currently in progress in Syria, in which the army and security forces, the protesters, and the shabbiha gangs are taking part. The and bloody mayhem is such that the number of casualties is almost impossible to assess.

The troops open fire at protesters as soon as a few people gather in the street without waiting for a demonstration to form. The wounded are denied medical care and allowed to die in the streets as a deterrent to protesters. Tuesday night, the White House finally issued a harsh denunciation of the Syrian "government."

The statement read: "We are deeply concerned by reports that Syrians who have been wounded by their government are being denied access to medical care. The escalating repression by the Syrian government is outrageous, and the United States strongly condemns the continued efforts to suppress peaceful protesters. President Assad and the Syrian government must respect the universal rights of the Syrian people, who are rightly demanding the basic freedoms that they have been denied."

debkafile's sources in Washington say that the language used in this statement from the Obama administration continues to skirt the protesters' most pressing demand for the Syrian president to step down, because of the still unresolved internal debate on how to handle Assad.

Despite the mounting brutality of the Syrian ruler's methods to crush the revolt against his regime, some White House circles in Washington are warning that Assad's fall would open the door for radical Muslim elements to take over, even suggesting that this would put Israel in "mortal danger."

This argument was never heard in Washington when Hosni Mubarak was toppled in Egypt. And it by no means relates to the Assad regime's eight-year long record as primary accomplice and abettor of radical Muslim organizations such as Al Qaeda, the Lebanese Hizballah and Palestinian Hamas. Starting from the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, Damascus gave sanctuary and launching-pads for Muslim groups to strike American forces fighting in Iraq, including training camps and logistical aid for smuggling weapons and explosives for that purpose. Syria also facilitates the passage of arms and other support to the Hizballah radicals.

The extreme measures to which Assad has resorted as the revolt against him enters its fourth week have led to firefights within the army. Many cases are now reported of Syrian officers opening fire on other Syrian officers, killing them when they refuse to shoot protesters. There have been incidents of Shabbiha gangs shooting two ways – on demonstrators and at times on army forces. In one such incident in Ras al-Naba'a, a quarter of Baniyas – the irregulars appeared to be goading the soldiers into using more force to disperse the protesters. In others, these pro-Assad street gangs appear to be shooting from demonstrations to make it look as though the protesters were killing the soldiers.

Contrary to the image the Assads have always presented that "the Alawites are the ruling class in Syria," it is worth pointing out that they in fact rule Damascus, while the rest of those minority tribes, which number 1.4 million (8 percent of the 26 million population) live in abject poverty with no electricity or running water in their villages and no ties to the Assads. The paradox is that though lacking influence in the capital, their revolt against the regime could be the last straw for Assad.

These villages are now rising up for fear of being stigmatized, however unjustly, by the Sunni majority of collaboration with the Assads and targeted for revenge. In any case, they are so penurious and neglected that they have little to lose by the regime's fall.

The Shabbiha: This well-armed, roughly organized group derives most of its 9-11,000 members from Assad clans within the Alawite community and its allies. Their fighting skills were imparted by the Lebanese Hizballah or Iranian Revolutionary Guards instructors, but their loyalty to the Assad family is undivided. As smugglers, their strongholds are mostly along the coastal region, some of whose communities rely on the Shabbiha for their livelihood.

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